Shards To A Whole

by KerylRaist

Summary

Some things will make you re-evaluate your life. Getting blown up, thinking you're fine, and then looking down and seeing a hunk of glass sticking out of your body is one of those things. Tim decides it's time to put his life on track. Novel length McAbby erotic romance.
A Shard of Glass

Book I: The Lover

Chapter 1.

There haven't been a whole lot of watershed moments in Tim McGee's life.

The shift from bio-medical engineering to forensic computing, that was one. He never quite fit in with the bio-med kids. Sure, he got the basic ideas, and he was good at them, but while they were in love with creating new tech to extend life, he was more into the puzzle of how everything fit together. He felt like a physicist in a room of mathematicians. He spoke the same language, used the same tools, but he didn't want to do the same things with them. So, one night, long, long after the regular students had gone to bed, hung over or still drunk from epic parties, the sort he never attended, he was talking with another gamer, the conversation started with the pros and cons of tabletop role playing versus MUDs and whatnot and moved from there into what you could really do with a computer. That conversation pointed him in a new path. He began to fiddle with the computer he used mostly for gaming, took a few CS courses, and graduated with a 4.0. But, the night before graduation, he sent a note to Columbia, telling them he was declining the position he'd earned in their Biomedical Engineering combined Masters/Doctorate program.

That summer he started playing with a computer in a new way. He put the games down and began to program. It was the late '90s, hackers were the bleeding edge of geek culture, and he found a new home. He took a year "off," programmed until his eyes felt like they'd fall out of his head, and applied to MIT.

He fit in with the hackers at MIT a lot better than the bio-med kids at Johns Hopkins. Obsessive personalities with a penchant for fantasy made up the majority of his new peers, and for the first time in his life, he wasn't a minority.

When he finished his masters in forensic computing, the CIA, FBI, NSA, and IRS all courted him. He thinks it was just sheer perverse cussedness, and maybe a desire to get his father to actually notice he was alive and stop seeing him as a massive disappointment that got him to pick NCIS.

And it was there, during his first year at NCIS, that he really began to understand what he was doing. The shift from forensic computing as a cool way to prove to other hackers that he was better and brighter than they were to seeing it as a way to solve crime and help real, live, tangible human beings was, up until this moment, the watershed moment of his life.

But now, he's standing in front of his desk, sweltering, his head still ringing from the explosion, staring at the chunk of glass sticking out of his FREAKING BODY, and Gibbs, unflinching, unflappable Gibbs is looking worried, and touching him tenderly, which actually scares him more than THE GLASS STICKING OUT OF HIS ABDOMEN, he's thinking that this is actually the watershed moment of his life.
And it's time to see about making some changes.

Assuming he gets the chance to do so. Gibbs, gently, gets him sitting down, back against the surprisingly intact wall of his desk, tells him to stay put, and runs (RUNS!) off to get an EMT.

Tim looks at the glass again, and finds himself thinking that he's never properly told Abby he loves her, then he realizes that he doesn't know if she's okay... No, she has to be okay, Gibbs wouldn't have been just wandering about if Abby wasn't okay... and then everything sort of grays out and goes sideways.
At the hospital, they very gently peel off his jacket. The nurses in the emergency room don't bother to try to take his shirt off; they just cut it off. Then, with the glass still in his side, they wheel him into a dimly lit room with an ultrasound machine.

The ultrasound tech, who, he's sure, is gently using the wand to see how bad it is, but it feels like he's being pounded by a red-hot hammer, asks him about the tattoo on his left deltoid. She's probably just looking for a way to take his mind off of what she's doing or how much it hurts. Maybe trying to help him not think about the fact that they've got no idea how deep the glass is, and if the only reason he's not bleeding out is because it's still inside him.

He answers on automatic, barely paying any attention to what he's saying, "It's a bit of code I came up with a long time ago."

Tim's a geek. Tim has always been a geek, and he always will be a geek. That's just who he is. But, he's a geek who had already significantly rewritten his life twice by the time Tony, Abby, Kate, and Gibbs came onto the scene, and he had been looking for something to commemorate that. Because, though he was sure he'd continue to find new hats and adventures (for example, adding best-selling author to his list of accomplishments) computer guy is his core identity now.

So, on his shoulder, is a bit of code he wrote for his Masters Dissertation. It's in Python, and though it's not exactly cutting edge now, it was when he came up with it. It was that bit of code that allowed him to show his professors how to sort through literally millions of data points to find the pattern they needed to predict where certain sorts of crimes would happen. Sure, other people had written code to do that before, and others did later, and better. But Tim was the first guy to turn thousands of lines of C++ into three tidy lines of Python, and he was the guy who took it from being a job that took days into a job that took minutes.

Every third sailor has Mom tattooed on his ass. That was the first, quickest lie he could think of when he told Tony because he was sure Tony would have scoffed at what he really got done. (And later, when Tony did actually see his tattoo, he did scoff, asking if it was part of his Elf Lord persona, because for all Tony knows about code, or elves for that matter, his tattoo could have been in Elvish.)

And, he didn't get the tattoo just to impress Abby, though that was certainly the final push in that direction. He'd been thinking about it for months at that point. But it did impress her. Which he was very thankful for, because, well, Tim's never been what he would call a fine example of male physiology. He's not now, or ever, been known for rippling, sculpted musculature, and even at his fittest, he's tended toward pale and skinny, not buff. And he was not, by about 40 pounds, at his fittest the first time Abby saw that tattoo.

And well, half-naked with a beautiful girl he really hoped to impress isn't exactly Tim's strong suit either. So, yes, when she saw it, shortly after taking his shirt off and stopped everything to spend twenty minutes discussing it with him, not only was it a way to impress her that didn't involve sucking in his stomach and desperately trying to look like he'd worked out at least once in the previous year, it also helped him to relax, and both of them had a better time in the long run because of it.
In the movies, they might just yank out the piece of glass after discovering that it doesn't appear to be piercing anything vital, slap a few stitches on the wound, and the hero goes back to work, gently oozing blood, saving the day, and winning the girl.

But Tim's not in a movie.

The Ultrasound Tech now has a surgical nurse with her. The nurse eases out the glass, and the tech reports back that there are still something like fifteen little bits of glass in the wound.

The next three hours are a haze of pain, very powerful pain-killers that seem to be making everything in his world distort into drippy colors, and occasional updates as to what is going on with the rest of the team.

When everyone is reported alive and accounted for, he dozes.

At some point, Abby shows up, listens to what the doctor says about his post-recovery care, and takes him home. He half-dozes, half-gazes at her as she drives to his place.

They didn't so much break up as just wander apart. Nothing acrimonious, though to some degree Tim doubts anything that involves Abby can get that way. She's just so... Abby... that the idea that she'd be involved in a messy and hurtful break-up just doesn't fit in his world view.

They dated for a few months, slept together a dozen times, and then the cases kept coming, and they were working together more and more, and suddenly they were working together full-time, and then they were friends, which worked out pretty well, because at first glance they look like the perfect couple, but they aren't, or weren't, not really.

Goths and gamers go together like peanut butter and chocolate, like Venn diagrams and Facebook updates, but, and it took a while for Tim to figure this out, Abby isn't a Goth, not the way most of the Goths he met before were.

For most Goths, it's a lifestyle. A specifically chosen mode of dealing with the rest of the world, a set path and series of rules for carving out an identity, weeding out those who won't mesh well with oneself, and defining one's interactions with the people around them.

It's a layer of fantasy that protects the inner person, removing those who are likely to hurt or disappoint, by keeping them at arm's length.

Tim needs that fantasy shield. He's got several of them. Elf Lord, Thom E. Gemcity, half-a-dozen online personas, Probie, they're all variations on Timothy McGee, and allow him to experience life with a protective layer in place between him and it.

But Abby isn't a Goth in that sense. The clothing, the make-up, the coffin, they aren't shields for her, (at least not in that sense, issues of mortality are a different story all together) they're just her. And when they were dating, he didn't quite get that about her, nor did she really get that he couldn't just be the Elf Lord or Thom or whomever.
The Goth

But that was nine years ago, and in the intervening almost decade they've learned each other well enough to see the real person there.

And in the intervening nine years, he's always assumed, that eventually, they'd get back together. Tim and Abby. Abby and Tim. That's the default setting. Right now they're off messing about with other settings, trying them out, seeing how they work, but when it comes down to it, they'll go back to where they're supposed to be. After all, they have plenty of time.

Tim gently pokes the bandage on his side.

He's thirty-four. Abby's thirty-eight. (Though he's not supposed to mention that, and she's got most people believing she's perpetually 28.) And, as the pain from poking himself slowly registers through the haze of his medication, he's realizing he's not going to live forever. She's not either. And if I-love-you means let's-get-married-and-have-kids-and-grow-old-together, doing something about it while you're still young enough to have the kids and growing old hasn't already happened is necessary.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I know cannon Abby is younger than that. (Something like 32-34.) And I get the people who run NCIS like the idea of keeping the characters permanently young.

Fine.

But if Abby's 32ish now, that means she somehow graduated college, got a masters, worked in someone else's lab for at least a few years, and ended up in charge of her own lab by the age of 22. Ummm... nope.
Pho and Gchat

Tim wakes up to clicking sounds. He's not at all surprised to see Abby sitting cross-legged on the side of his bed, a bag that smells yummy next to her, a laptop in front of her, open to gchat, and, he squints a little, Palmer chatting with her.

"Hey."

"You're awake."

He rubs his eyes, and sits up, slowly. It feels like his entire left side is on fire.

"How's Ducky?" He's a little fuzzy on what exactly happened between saying, 'It feels warm in here,' and now, but he does remember hearing that Tony and Ziva had been located, and Ducky had had a heart attack.

"Alive. Jimmy says he'll be fine, as long as he doesn't do anything stupid."

"Good." He closes his eyes and relaxes back against the head board. The sound of Abby typing dies down, and he hears her close the computer.

"I brought food." She's not as perky as usual. Not chattering away. He knows that means she's unhappy or scared, but he figures both are fitting for right now, so he doesn't press.

"Thanks."

"The doctor said you're supposed to take it easy today and tomorrow. Nothing too heavy to eat, either. Clear broth for you. They don't think the glass got through your abdominal muscles, but just in case, they don't want to risk anything too strenuous for your intestinal tract. So I got us Pho. You get the soup part, and I get the noodles."

"Sounds good." She stands up, picking up the bag. "Abby?"

"Yeah."

"I love you."

She smiles sweetly at him for a moment and kisses his forehead, but he can still see the fear in her eyes. "I love you, too, McGee. Let me get this set for us."

And, okay, that wasn't 'I love you forever, let's get married, have bunches of kids, grow old, and die together,' let alone, 'I love you, let's start dating again,' but it's a start, a good first step, and it felt really good to say it to her.

And there'll be time for more than that it the future.
The pain meds wear off slowly. He's lying in bed, and she's still next to him, holding his hand.

He knows she's not sleeping.

And he knows there's nothing sexual or romantic about this. He's hurt. She's scared. They're best friends. So, it's dark, and it's night, and they're both in the same bed, not sleeping.

Just being near each other is enough.

For now.

He's told Abby he loves her before. In fact, he's told her three or four times a year for probably the last five years.

Sometimes it happens when she's broken the case and he's feeling grateful. Usually, it happens when he just wants to let her know how she's his best friend and how happy he is to have her in his life.

The first time, after Cassidy was killed, was a little awkward, but after that, it's just flowed. Between his dad and Gibbs, McGee has spent more than enough of his life around strong silent types who don't express emotion. He's got no desire to be that guy himself.

Though he suspects that even Gibbs manages to regularly tell Abby he loves her. Maybe not in words, but he tells her. Because she's lovely and because she's just makes people want to be happy, and spread the happy around. Even Gibbs has to melt in the face of how warm Abby is.

He squeezes her hand gently, and feels her squeeze his in return. Eventually, he drifts off to sleep, Abby holding his hand, by his side.
Moving from, I-love-you, you're-my-best-friend to I-love-you-let's-spend-forever-together is a somewhat more daunting task in the light of day.

Abby's gone by the time he's up and moving.

It takes him longer than usual to get showered and dressed. Just finding plastic wrap, and getting his midsection wrapped up so he can get a shower without getting his bandage wet is an adventure that slows him down by ten minutes.

In the shower, gingerly soaping up, he thinks about how he should actually go about doing this, because showing up with flowers and asking her to dinner tonight just isn't his style. Deliberation, planning, knowing what he's going to do, how he's going to do it, and making sure he's explored all possible variations of how he might do this before settling on a plan is his style.

For the last nine years, he and Abby have been coasting along. They're in a safe, comfortable space. And since they work together, and since everyone around them also depends on their ability to work together, a warm friendship makes a lot of sense.

After all, a disastrous break up for two people who spend no professional time together isn't a huge deal. Yes, it's personally painful, but it's not like people will die.

He and Abby have a flaming break-up, and people might die. Anything that slows down their efficiency at catching the bad guys can result in more dead people. And, on a personal level, he might die. If he screws this up and hurts her, Gibbs will kill him, and not in the traditional pissed-off-dad sort of way, but in the literally-dead-and-never-seen-again sort of way.

For Tim McGee, rule number twelve isn't just a matter of keeping his work life functional; it's also about not pissing off the scariest man he knows.

So, this is going to take planning.

Fortunately, Tim is good at planning.

Tim is also cautious, much to the eternal chagrin of his father. Who, by his age, ran his own ship, who eventually made Admiral, and who was deeply troubled by a small boy who enjoyed make believe games and then video games, and didn't appear to have any killer instinct or interest in the Navy, at all.

So, rinsing off, he's not planning on admitting his undying love to Abby tonight, or tomorrow night, or for that matter, any time this week and possibly month.

He is thinking a good first step is making sure he's ready to be in a real relationship. Because if this is going to crash and burn, and he's aware it might, it isn't going to happen because he's pulled some sort of Tony-esque fear-of-commitment, run-away-from-an-adult-relationship-like-a-little-boy routine.

That in mind, he goes back to work, brushes off his co-workers' concern for him, making light of the injury that's still throbs whenever he moves, and immerses himself in Mission: Get Harper Dearing.
Advice

Tim has never had a problem asking for advice when he needs help.

So that's not the problem.

The problem is finding someone to ask.

He's scoured his own mind to try and remember how his last real relationship went, but he was still in grad school the last time he had a girlfriend for more than a year, and the man he is now is so much different from the boy he was then, that it doesn't seem to be a good comparison.

Sooo... who to talk to?

Gibbs is good at helping you see straight, in that silent, you sit next to him, drink some, and epiphanies hit sort of way, but Gibbs has also been divorced a million times, and the closest thing Abby has to a dad. Plus, if he's trying to keep this quiet to avoid getting tripped up on Rule Number 12, talking to Gibbs about it isn't a brilliant plan. So, he's out.

Ducky—who, Tim is secretly afraid of turning into, the man with the thousand stories and no one at home to tell them to—may have a tale for everything, but has even less practical experience on this than he has. And, while he's sure Ducky will have many fascinating bon mots on the subject, he's also sure that he'd like to talk to someone with a clue as to how to keep a long-running relationship going.

He could talk to his grandmother, but, well, ewww... Penelope's more likely to want to talk him through the intricacies of the Kama Sutra than help him get into a good headspace for a real relationship. Plus, even if he could get her off of sex, and onto relationshiping? relating? whatever, she'd likely tell him something like stop thinking so much and just do it. Not advice he wants to hear, let alone advice he'd know how to act on.

The idea of Tony enters his mind, and then does an abrupt about face and marches right back out again. Getting advice from a guy whose A: Last successful long-term relationship was an undercover mission. B: Made out with his ex-fiancee back around Valentine's Day, while C: In love with his partner, while D: Being completely unwilling to admit that he is in love with said partner, does not in any way strike Tim as a good idea. Add in the fact that Tony can't keep a hot bit of scuttlebutt to himself, and talking to Tony is a disaster waiting to happen.

Thinking of Tony makes him think of Ziva, who has the advantage of being able to keep a secret, and on top of that, is a woman, so she might have a better idea of what it's like to be the female half of the equation than Gibbs or Tony, but Ziva has the worst relationship track record he can think of. Sure, Gibbs might not be a huge fan of his ex-wives, but unlike Ziva's exes, they aren't responsible for killing anyone, or trying to kill anyone, like, you know, Tony.

Director Vance actually has a functional relationship, one that has lasted years, but the mental image of asking Vance for advice literally won't form in Tim's mind. He can't make himself imagine it, and if he can't imagine it, he's really unlikely to be able to do it in real life.

It takes him two full days to figure out that he does know someone to talk to. Someone his age. Someone who is married (barely). Someone who loves Abby, knows her well, and would be willing to keep a secret if said secret would work out well for her.

It's time to talk to Palmer.
Dinner With Jimmy

Of course, talking to Palmer, alone, without attracting the attention of Tony and Ziva is a bit of an issue. But with the office completely upside down during the reconstruction, Tim finds an excuse to wander down to Autopsy.

The door slides open, and for a moment Tim doesn't see anyone, besides the bodies, and then Palmer hurries out, way too many folders clutched in his arms. Tim jogs to him.

"Here, let me help."

Jimmy sags with relief as Tim grabs the folders that are about to spill out of his arms. It occurs to Tim that if you call someone fried when they are stressed out, that Palmer is one of those little orphan french fries that get stuck in the fryolator and end up cooking for a full day. He's not fried; he's not burnt; he's charcoal.

"I never realized how much Dr. Mallard does around here," Jimmy says to him.

"We felt that way when Gibbs left. Tony did fine, but we could all see the cracks forming. And you're doing fine, too. It's just not as smooth."

Palmer laughs, bitterly. "Going for understatement of the decade, Tim?" Tim shrugs. "So, who wants what?"

"I want dinner." Tim nods at the clock, showing it's already eight. "I know you've been here until midnight every night for the last week, so how about we get some real food?"

"I can't leave. Too much to do here. Every minute I'm away is another minute later that I get home."

Tim thinks about that. He wants to talk to Palmer, but he doesn't want to rob him of time at home. "If I brought you food, could you take a break for a bit?"

"Probably. What's going on?"

*How to phrase it...* "Would you believe that I want to talk to you?"

Palmer looks startled. He and Tim get along well. Common interests, similar personalities, but they don't just hang out all that often.

"What about?"

Tim thinks about how to phrase this, too. "It's personal. And, I'd really rather not see this get spread all over NCIS."

Jimmy puts down the folders. "I'm interested." He looks at the clock. "Who am I kidding? I'm not getting this done tonight. Every paper I fill out spawns ten more. Let's go."

There's a burger joint a quarter mile from the Navy Yard, so they head there. In a matter of minutes they're seated, with drinks, and Palmer is looking much more relaxed. He fires off a text to Breena, who is fortunately working late tonight, so she doesn't mind him being away.

They settle into a booth and Tim asks, "How do you like being married?"
Jimmy's eyes narrow. He looks angry and frustrated. "How would I know what it's like? I've been married for seven days, and haven't been home before midnight on any of them." Tim blanches a little, not realizing that was going to be a sensitive question for Palmer. Jimmy sees it and tries to back off feeling annoyed. It's not Tim's fault he's here instead of on his honeymoon. "I'm sorry, Tim. I miss Breena. I miss being home. I miss the honeymoon we were supposed to be on right now. I should be in a hotel room with a balcony overlooking the ocean with my wife. I should be eating room service and forgetting what it feels like to wear pants."

Tim gives him a *I don't quite understand what you mean, or maybe I do and don't want to* look, and Palmer gets flustered. "You know, no pants because..." And then he stops and shakes his head. "Tim, if you didn't get it, I don't need to explain."

"I get it. That's actually sort of related to why I wanted to talk to you."

Jimmy looks utterly perplexed. "You want to talk to me about sex? Haven't you ever... I mean you and Abby... right?"

Tim rolls his eyes. "I've had sex. And no, I don't need to talk about sex."

Jimmy grins. "You sure? I'm good at sex."

"I didn't need to know that, Palmer."

Jimmy shrugs. "Your loss. So, what, instead of sex, but related to pantslessness, is on your mind."

Tim looks around. Ten minutes from work means this place often has other NCIS personnel in it. But he doesn't see anyone he knows or any badges that look familiar. "Okay, look, I do not want this getting out. You cannot say anything to anyone about this."

"All right." Palmer leans in close, his expression showing that he's enjoying the idea of a great conspiracy.

"I love Abby." Tim says it softly, practically mouthing the words. He expects some sort of shock from Palmer, or at least a bit of startle. But the look on Palmer's face is best described as the kind of expression one wears when told it's sunny outside at twelve noon in the middle of summer. He's never looked less shocked in his life.

"Tim, that's the worst kept secret in the history of secrets. Lee and I was more of a secret than you loving Abby, and everyone found out about that. Everyone knows you love Abby."

Tim winces slightly at that. It's been forever since they dated, and he didn't realize it was still all around the office. "I want to do something about it."

"Oh. That's..." Palmer spends a moment looking at Tim in confusion. The waiter shows up with their food, and he chews a bite of his salad, still looking intently at Tim, confusion not abating.

"Stop looking at me like that."

"Okay, it's just that... Well... Scuttlebutt has it that you and Abby have been doing something about it, for, like six years. I... um... thought you were doing something about it, too."

"We've both dated other people in that time!"

"Scuttlebutt has it you've got an open relationship."
Tim sits there for a few minutes, unable to even think of what to say to that. Finally he comes up with this, "Let me get this straight, there's gossip that, not only do I have Abby, but every now and again, I go on horrendously uncomfortable dates, often resulting in physical harm to my person, just, what, for kicks?"

Palmer blushes. "Ummm... no. Scuttlebutt has it that you let her go out with other guys to keep her happy, and every now and again you fake a date so that it doesn't look too lopsided."

Tim's mouth, literally, falls open.

"So, I take it that's not true?"

"No, it's not true!

Tim's appalled by the idea that... that might have been going on.

"Not any of it?" Jimmy's watching him closely, seeing he's floored by this idea.

"NO!"

"You two didn't date at all?"

Tim sips his drink. "That part's true. Nine years ago."

"But not since?"

"NO. Nothing since."

"Okay. So, now, nine years later, you want to get back together with her?" Jimmy looks like he's got all the pieces laid out and he knows how to put the puzzle together.

"Yeah."

"So, why are you talking to me?"

"You actually figured out how to build a relationship that survives our work. You know and love Abby, too, so you won't give me idiot advice, and I trust you to keep this quiet, because you know she'll be bummed and everything will be weird if it doesn't go off right."

Palmer thinks about that while Tim takes a bite of his burger. "You're right. Okay, how can I help?"

"How are you doing it? You missed your own wedding for this, and she's, what, understanding?" Tim cannot begin to imagine how, 'Dear, let's skip our wedding, so I can deal with a terrorist threat' went over.

"Yes, she understands. And that'll help with Abby, too, she pulls even later nights than you do."

"Okay. So, advice number one, pick the right girl."

"That's advice one to ten thousand and on from there. It won't work with the wrong girl, and no amount of trying will make it work with the wrong girl. I saw the way all of you looked at me when I said I had broken up with Lee. She was way out of my league, and none of you believed it."

"Palmer, all of your girls are way out of your league."

"And Abby isn't out of yours?"
"I know she is, hence nine years of not dating."

Palmer seems to think that's a good point. "Okay, the point I was making was that Lee wasn't the right girl, and I knew she wasn't the right girl. She and I were never going to work because Lee wasn't the right girl. Breena is the right girl."

"How do you know?"

Jimmy thinks about that for a second, trying to put it into words, but they aren't coming so he says, "I just do."

"Aren't you worried about long-term?"

"You mean, like divorce, or something?"

"Yeah. Or the spectacularly messy breakup."

Jimmy shrugs a little. "I pretty much got to enjoy the most spectacularly messy post-break-up ever, and honestly, it wasn't that bad. Not saying I'd want to do it again or anything, but... No, I'm not worried about breaking up with her. Everyone talks about pre-wedding jitters, but I was way more nervous about postponing the reception than the actual vows. Once I was holding her hands saying the words, I knew they were true. How do you feel about Abby?"

"I love her."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

"Not being able to keep it going."

Jimmy laughs at that, not unkindly, but like Tim's just said something very funny. "Let me get this straight, you've been in love with her for nine years, without dating, and you're afraid that once you actually start dating that you won't be able to keep loving her?"

Tim sighs, realizing how that has to look from the outside. "It sounds kind of silly when you say it that way."

"Yeah, it does. So what are you waiting for?"

"Damned if I know."
Waiting

It turns out, what he's waiting for is Abby to get out of mourning.

He works on being a good friend, and as a good friend, who's spending more, quite a bit more, time than is strictly necessary in the lab, he's noticed she's a wreck.

It's true that Abby's Goth isn't about keeping people away. It's not a shield the way his Geek is. If you ask Abby if she's a Goth, she'll tell you no, she's a scientist. He didn't get what she meant by that back the first time he heard it. But he does now. Her Goth is about containing death, and keeping it in a tidy box where she can deal with it, and lately it's gotten out of that box, and it's completely freaking her out.

He knows her parents died in a car accident when she was sixteen. He suspects that's when she dyed her hair, put on her black, and got her Goth on. Maybe if she could immerse herself in death, maybe if she could make friends with it, show it she is a beautiful person, full of love and kindness, it would stay away.

Of course, it doesn't. She keeps up her end of the deal, but it doesn't. It can't.

He wonders sometimes what she was like when her hair was blonde and her clothing unbedecked with skulls and bones.

She's working full out, all the time, keeping her mind busy with cases, trying to keep death away. He works more too, looking for excuses to be in the lab, but he goes home most nights achy and bleary from tiredness, leaving her still in the lab, alone.

So he judges that now is the time to be a good friend, and trying to do anything more than that would be very bad timing.

And so, he waits.

"Abby."

"Hmrhg?" She's slumped on her desk, and he wasn't sure if she was entirely asleep, or just close to it, but either way, actually laying down would help.

"Come on, it's time to go home. Or at least time to crash in your office."

She looks up at him, eyes bleary, face so sad. "I've got work, McGee."

"Nothing that needs to be done right now. It's after twelve."

"Then why are you still here?"

He can see her getting defensive, and decides right now that she won't react well to the idea that he's been keeping an eye on her and is worried, so a not-too-far-from-the-truth lie is in order. "I went out with Tony for dinner and then came back here to finish up paperwork. I just got done, was on my way out, and saw your car. Come on, I'll take you home if you're too tired to drive."

"I don't want to go home."
"Why not? You've been working late a whole lot lately." This would be a massive understatement. She's been working non-stop lately. He knows she's freaked out from the bombing. And he's been leaving encouraging words to Ziva, because, if any of them know how to get through something like this, it's her. If he says something about going on after a bombing rips your peace apart, it's mostly just him being hopeful. If Ziva says it, it's personal experience.

She doesn't answer, and begins poking at her computer. He moves to her side, and turns her chair toward him. "Come on, talk to me."

"I can't. If I talk it becomes real, and if it's real, it can get me."

He pulls her close, wrapping her in a warm hug. "When was the last time you got a full night's sleep?"

"Since before the..." She doesn't finish that sentence.

He kisses the top of her head. "And you're not going to sleep tonight, are you?"

"No."

"Then, if you can't sleep, let's see if we can get you some rest and relaxing. Come on." He tugs her gently to her office, and lays out the mat she sleeps on in there, putting Bert at the one end to act as a pillow. "Lay down, boots, lab coat, and collar off, and I'll give you a back rub."

He turns his back, not sure why, she's not taking off anything particularly interesting, but still, privacy and all.

Bert's flatulent bleat let him know she's on the mat. He turns and finds that she has taken off her shirt.

"Oh."

Her eyes are closed. "It's not a problem is it?"

"Nah. I've seen your back before." In his dreams, when he closes his eyes, during a decent percentages of his fantasies. Yeah, he's seen her back, and he loves it dearly. "Do you have any oil or something like that?" If she's going to take her clothing off, he might as well do a good job of it.

"I've got some hand lotion in my desk."

"Okay. I'll get that." He rummages through the top drawer until he finds a bottle of Jergen's Original Scent. Then he heads over to her stereo. Her iPod is in there, and he takes a moment to sort through it for something soft and soothing. Nothing is really jumping out at him as fitting the bill, until he sees The Airborne Toxic Event. Another minute has a playlist set. Sure, it's sad and wistful, but at least it's not a hard thumping beat best played on maximum volume.

The Graveyard By The House kicks off the playlist. It certainly seems like an Abby song, and it touches on why he's here, even if he can't say it out loud, yet, so why not?

Tim sits on the floor next to her. If they were dating, he'd straddle her hips. But they aren't dating, so he sits next to her, and twists, a little awkwardly, squirting some of the lotion onto his hands.

He'd call it artificial cherry scented. Not unpleasant, but it's not that distinctly Abby scent either. It's probably a note in the scent he thinks of as Abby, along with the tang of Caf-Pow, the high, perfumy scent of her fabric softener, a mellow, artificial-cucumbery scent that's her hair conditioner, and a dark, black roses and gun powder, scent that he knows is her perfume.
His hands know the routine. Granted they haven't done this, skin on skin, in years, but he's certainly given her back rubs, and received them many times over the years. With the sorts of hours they work, getting time for R&R is hard to do, so they work on each other. He's worked on Ziva, and though he'd never admit it, Tony, on occasion, as well. The only one who never seems to need any back work is Gibbs, and Tim suspects that's because Gibbs isn't technically human.

"You know, I've never given Gibbs a backrub." It probably seems like a random opening line, but if he's going to just keep his voice lulling away in a sort of cloud of white noise, it's not a bad start.

"I think you'd have to shoot Gibbs with a tranquilizer dart before he'd let a guy give him a backrub."

She sounds a little sleepy as she says that. He hopes it's a good sign. His hands slide over her skin, long, soft strokes designed to encourage sleep.

"You're probably right about that. Though maybe Fornell...

Abby giggles a little, and he's happy to see her do that. "There's an image. The two of them giving each other backrubs and complaining about their ex-wife."

"How did they both end up married to the same woman?"

"I think, and I don't know for sure, because Ducky won't give me all the details, but anyway, I think she was married to Gibbs, and things weren't going so hot. So somehow, she met Fornell through Gibbs. Maybe they were working a case together or something."

"You know they're friends, right. I mean, real friends. Tony tells me he's run into Fornell at Gibbs' place a whole bunch of times. They hang out and have dinner at least once a week."

"Interesting. So maybe he's invited his buddy over for dinner. Maybe it happened a lot. Somehow Mrs. Gibbs falls for Mr. Fornell, and rapidly becomes Mrs. Fornell."

"She left Gibbs for Fornell?"

"I think so. And if not, it looks like there wasn't too long between the divorce and starting things up with Fornell."

"Huh." A Letter To Georgia starts to play. Soft, sweet, slow, and melancholy. Just about perfect for this. "I love this song," Tim says while he leans more of his weight into her back, stretching her spine.

"I didn't know you liked Airborne Toxic Event."

"You were playing them down here a while back, and I liked it, so I downloaded it when I got home. I got The Indelicates and Stars from you, too."

"So you've raided my soft rock collection."

"Not sure I'd call it soft rock."

"Okay, not 'soft rock', but my not-so-hard music."

"Yeah."

They talk like that, random gossip, little bits and pieces of fluff, for almost an hour. Tim keeps trying to let the conversation drift off, but Abby keeps bringing new things up. When the music finally stops, Tim rests his hands on her shoulders, just letting them sit there for a moment.
"I was kind of hoping you'd fall asleep."

"I know."

"If I tuck you in, will you at least try?"

"If I sleep, I'll dream, and if I dream..."

He waits for her to finish that sentence, but it doesn't seem like an end is coming. "What'll happen if you dream?"

"My nightmares will come back."

He stands up and turns his back to her again. "Put your shirt back on."

A few seconds later she says, "Okay."

Abby's sitting up on the mat, twisting her neck, and flexing her shoulders. Tim sits down next to her.

"When I was a kid, there was a series of novels I loved. One of the characters had chronic nightmares. He'd wake up, night after night, screaming. And his brother, who loved him dearly, would offer to stand watch, and keep the nightmares away." He pats Bert. "Lay down, get some sleep. I'll stand watch and keep the nightmares away."

"You'll be Caramon?"

"You've read them?" His eyes go wide. Sure, a lot of people had read the DragonLance books, and Abby is likely to be the kind of person who had done that, he just didn't think she'd still remember them thirty years later.

"Of course. I wanted to be Tika, but I always had a soft spot for Raistlin."

"Everyone did."

"Who were you?"

"Riverwind." Not really. He's picking Riverwind for his back story, not for who he most closely identified with.

"The man who went on the eight-year-long quest to win the woman he loved."

"Something like that." He squeezes her hand, signaling he knows this is more stalling. "Now, lay down. Tonight I'll be Caramon and guard your sleep."

Hours later he jerks awake. He's sitting, back against Abby's desk, his legs draped across hers. He rubs his eyes, twists his very sore neck, and looks up to see Gibbs is standing over him, finger to his lips signaling quiet. Abby's laying on the mat, sleeping.

Tim doesn't see an easy way to get up without waking her. He's got to get his legs off of hers, and spending the night sleeping sitting up against her desk means that everything below his hips is asleep. Gibbs puts the Caff-Pow on Abby's desk and offers Tim a hand, levering him off the floor.

He limps out of her office after Gibbs.
Gibbs slides the door to her office shut. "Whatever it was you did to get her to sleep, thanks."

Tim's wincing as he turns his head to the left. "Broke my spine, I think. But, yeah, she needed the rest."

"You did good, Tim."

Tim nods, feeling very happy to hear that. "Thanks, Boss."
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Things begin to shift when Wolf shows up. Tim's hopeful that maybe Abby might start talking to Wolf, because, from what he can see, she's not talking to anyone. And she needs to talk to someone. Which isn't to say that Tim, personally, wants to talk to Wolf.

He's in the conference room with someone who calls him "The Pensive Academic" and wants see how he's coping since the bombing. It's not exactly Tim's idea of comfortable, let alone fun.

He's getting ready to fill the hour with generalities when something occurs to him; Wolf might be useful for getting more advice about being in a good place for a relationship. Since actually moving forward on the relationship issue is currently stalled out, he's been doing all he can to try and be ready for a relationship. Maybe Wolf can help with that.

"This conversation is confidential, right?" Tim asks.

"Right. Nothing you say leaves this room. In fact, I barely keep notes, just a few lines to let myself know what is going on, like Dr. Cranston's 'Tribal Names.'"

"Hmmm..." Couldn't hurt to bounce this off someone who studies humans and how they interact for a living. "Well, then... I was frantically downloading the contents of my computer because, apparently, I'm a moron. I could have picked it up and carried it out of the building faster than putting it on a thumb drive." Wolf looks like he's about to say something, and Tim shakes his head, letting him know this is backstory. "Then I was picking myself up off the ground, looking around at the destruction and thinking how amazing it was that I was alive, and apparently unhurt.

"It was kind of funny actually, I was thinking about how my neck was sore, like I might have pulled it when I fell. And how Tony and Ziva were going to tease me about how I got blown up, and all I ended up with was a sore neck. And then Gibbs was there, and we were talking, and then he was looking really worried, which scared me, because Gibbs is never worried. I looked down saw the glass, looked back up at Gibbs, and he had sort of cupped my face in his hand, and put his other arm around my shoulders, like a hug. It was really tender and gentle, and I almost wet my pants at that point because... well... Gibbs hugging me... If you're a guy and Gibbs is hugging you, you're about to die, so it had to be pretty bad.

"He got me down on the floor and ran off for help, and I decided it was time to stop coasting through life. Time to start moving toward the things I really wanted."

"And what do you really want?" Wolf asks.

"Abby. A family. Are you married?"

Wolf holds up his left hand, a gold band glints on his forth finger. "For a little over a year now."

"You like it?" Tim watches him carefully, the way he does suspects, making sure Wolf doesn't just BS him.

"Yes. I do."
Looks honest. "How did you know you were ready for it?"

Wolf seems to think about that. Tim gets the idea that he rarely gets asked questions like this. Romantic advice probably isn't something that comes up too much being a crisis counselor for NCIS.

"I woke up next to Lisa one morning, and I realized I never wanted to wake up in a bed that didn't have her in it."

Tim nods. "Is that how you knew you were ready to get married, or ready to be with her?"

"They aren't the same thing?" Wolf seems genuinely intrigued with where Tim is taking this.

"My parents are divorced. Gibbs has been divorced three times. Tony's longest lasting relationship is with Ziva, and I think the reason that's true is because they won't let themselves be in love. I'm sure Ducky has half a dozen grand romances, but he's alone now. I don't have a lot of role models who have managed the whole married thing. Everyone I know has been in love, even Tony, but keeping it going seems to be an entirely different thing. Palmer tells me finding the right person is the key ingredient, but I'm worried it might not be. I'm trying to make sure that I'm in a good place to do the forever thing. It seems like forever takes more than just I-love-you, and I don't want to mess this up."

Wolf smiles at that. It's a very pensive academic way of thinking about relationships. "And have you drawn any conclusions from watching the people around you?"

"Almost. I'm thinking you can either be married to your work, or married to your spouse, but not both, because both doesn't work. But Vance is married, and happily from everything anyone can tell, and he's here all the time, too. Plus, even if being married to your job in general is a bad thing, Abby works here as well, so when I'm here, I'm near her. When I'm not in the field, I spend about half my time working in her lab. I reliably see her five days a week, for at least an hour or two a day, and we eat dinner together a few days a week on top of that."

Wolf isn't expecting that. "So, why haven't you two ever--"

"We did. When we first met. It didn't end badly or anything. We never formally broke up. Of course we were never formally dating, either."

That gets another nod. Wolf's more than familiar with the many nuances of not precisely formal relationships. "So, basically, one day you stopped having sex, and pretty much everything else about your relationship stayed the same."

"We didn't spend as much time together in the beginning. Though we spend more time together now than we did then. And we're much better friends now. Know each other way better now."

"But you did stop having sex?"

"Yeah. Nine years ago."

"Any relationships since then?"

Tim sighs and slouches a bit. "Nothing I'd call a relationship. A few catastrophes. A disaster. The inspiration for a horror story I wrote a while back. A few hopeful false starts that crashed and burned like the Hindenburg. These days, when a woman is interested in me, she's more likely to be a suspect in a murder we haven't found yet, a spy for a different government, Tony, or some other mess just waiting to happen."

Wolf ponders that for a moment, and Tim can see either of the two directions he's going to take this.
Is he sabotaging his relationships so nothing lives up to Abby, or is he fixating on Abby as the only relationship in recent memory that wasn't a disaster.

"Are you sure you aren't clinging to the idea of Abby as a safe haven?" Choice number two.

Tim thinks about that for a long time. "That's not impossible. But she was the first thing I thought of when I realized I was hurt. She was the one who drove me home from the hospital, and held my hand that night, and when Palmer got engaged, and when other people have talked to me about love, or being in love, she's always the one who comes to mind. We didn't get to go to Palmer's wedding, and he hasn't gotten around to the party, yet, but even before all this, I had planned to get a few dances in with Abby."

Wolf seems to think this makes sense. "So, what have you been doing about this?"

"Nothing romantic. I spend more time with her. But she's hurting, badly, and the last thing she needs is me putting the moves on her. I can wait until she's feeling better."

"You'll think she'll get better?"

"Yeah." He nods, because that's something he's sure of. "It's part of who she is. Kate died. Jenny died. Franks died. The world turns upside down, and we lose people we love. She takes a while to deal with it, cries on Gibbs' shoulder, and eventually comes through it. But, I'm hoping this is the last time Gibbs is the one she cries on."

Wolf thinks about that for a few seconds, about who Gibbs is in relation to Tim and Abby. "Are you jealous of Gibbs' relationship with Abby?"

"No." Tim's amused by that idea. The idea that he could be jealous of Gibbs and Abby is not anything he's ever thought of. "He might as well be her dad. And she might as well be Kelly." Wolf doesn't appear to know who that is. "Gibbs did have one good marriage. But his first wife and daughter were killed. Kelly was his little girl. Abby was very close to her father, and he died when she was sixteen. She and Gibbs found each other. He needs to be a dad. She needs a dad. So they just work. No, I'm not jealous, just hoping that the next time we have to mourn someone, that I'll be her number one man."

Wolf watches him for a while. "Tim, I think you're going to do just fine."

"Thanks. I can't say getting blown-up was fun, but I think it's been useful."

"How about professionally?" After all, he's the crisis counselor for NCIS, and the reason he's doing this to see if Tim's ready and able to work. "Did getting blown up do anything about that?"

"Not really. I'm where I want to be, doing what I want, with people I love. A few months ago, Vance offered me head of Cyber-Crimes in Okinawa, and I turned him down. Gibbs will hit mandatory retirement age in a few years, and we'll have to break up then, but for right now, holding onto what we've got makes a lot of sense."

"You're willing to give up career advancement to stay with the people you love?"

"Yes. I don't do this because I have to. I make enough writing to support myself. I do this because it's important and because I'm happy here."

Wolf smiles at that. "You may just be the sanest person I've talked to all day."

"Thanks." Tim thinks about who else Wolf has talked to today. "I think."
I think Wolf refers to Tim as being "almost disturbingly well adjusted," but if I've muffed the quote, just pretend the right one is the title of this chapter.
One-upsmanship, Borin, and '80s Cover Bands

Tim had been planning on spending the night gaming, maybe write a page or two more on the latest novel if gaming did a good job of getting his head clear, and then turning in early. It'd been a long day, and a good night's sleep sounded excellent right about now.

The knock on his door isn't entirely unexpected, nor is it entirely welcome.

Everyone has been dealing with the explosion in their own way. Ziva's stopped holding herself so rigidly. Tim would use the phrase, 'let her hair down,' but that isn't precisely right. Let her hair curl? More accurate, but not exactly a well-known turn of phrase. Abby hadn't been sleeping, though, thank God and her brother, as of last week she finally is. Gibbs has started building something huge. Director Vance is still walking on eggshells. Ducky is fuming with boredom, and Palmer's running around trying to keep his head above water.

And Tony... Tony is suddenly... well maybe not suddenly... this isn't entirely out of the blue, growing up.

From the looks of it, growing up entails not chasing every woman he sees, and spending more time with Tim. Tim isn't sure if this is about avoiding temptation—Tony can't be hitting on women if there aren't any around—or if this is about avoiding rejection—Tony can't get turned down if he's at Tim's.

Either way, he's at Tim's, pacing around, poking delicate computer equipment, complaining about the lack of cool things to do.

"Tony, sit down." Tony flops on the sofa. Tim tosses Tony a PS3 controller and points to the screen. "This is Call of Duty. Those guys are the bad guys. The people running next to us are on our team. In about five minutes, we'll wrap up this mission. Then I'll let them know I've got a noob, and we'll play with them."

"You want me to play—"

"You've got a noob, McTim?" The voice of SandyAUKKG leaves Tony silent.

"Yeah, Sandy, never played before. He's not even holding the controller right."

"Oh My God! This'll be so much fun. I'll get the girls."

"Girls play this?" Tony whispers urgently to Tim.

"Yeah, Tony, they do. KKG stands for Kappa Kappa Gamma, and AU stands for American University."

"Sorority girls." Tony's voice is hushed and reverent.

"Sorority girls who are going to kick your ass!" Sandy adds with a giggle. "Let's play!"

Tim's not entirely sure how the thing with Borin started. He and Tony one upping each other certainly had something to do with it. And there was some sort of weird vibe going on with Ziva and Tony, which, honestly, if the two of them would just get over it and start dating, this would be so much easier. But maybe that's why Tony is at Tim's all the time these days. Maybe he too is trying to
get his head right before making a big change.

The idea that that may be true, and that Tony would choose to spend time with him in order to help do it makes Tim laugh.

"What?" Laughing while Tony is getting him tickets to a concert so he's got some ammo for asking Borin out was the wrong thing to do.

"Nothing," Tim replies

"You were laughing," Tony says pointedly, looking up at him, away from the computer screen.

"You were playing Call of Duty last night. I'm getting my geek claws into you. That's funny."

Tony doesn't seem to buy it, but he does hit enter on his computer and the tickets are purchased.

"Okay McGee, you're all set up for asking Borin out. Eight o'clock, next Tuesday, you, her, The Generics. Love is in the air."

Tim flashes a self-depreciating look. "If it's anything like my last five dates, she'll be trying to kill me before the curtain call. What are you going to do?"

"I think I'm going to let you have her."

"Let?" Well, there's a snag in the plan. The idea was Tony would ask her out too, and Tim would just stall until after Tony asked, she'd pick Tony, and he'd be out of this with his honor intact and concert tickets. Concert tickets that are already paid for, and it'd be a shame to let them go to waste.

"You're right; she's too much like Gibbs. It's enough to have him as a boss. I don't need to date him —"

"Date who, DiNozzo?" Gibbs asks as he sweeps in, looking for updates on the case.

"Nobody, Boss." Tony's already got the computer screen on something work-related and starts filling Gibbs in on what he's found.

So, while it's true that Tim is not entirely sure how he got into the thing with Borin, he is however, sure about how to end the thing with Borin. And better yet, how to end it and maybe, if he plays his cards right, end up with a date with Abby, who is perking back up nicely.

There was, unfortunately, no way to get out of this with his honor and dignity intact, so, he flubbed it. Badly. And everyone expected him to do it.

Tim is socially awkward, but he's also not an idiot, or seventeen. He can ask a woman out. He's even done so on numerous occasions, and ended up with a collection of, frankly, scary dates. Mostly though, he's shy. He usually doesn't ask women out, which is why he rarely gets shot down.

But, by making himself look like a twit, in front of everyone, he's managed to get tickets to a concert next week, and an excuse to take Abby along without raising suspicion of taking her on a date. Eighties cover bands might not be her favorite music, but he can't think of anyone who will have more fun getting into the spirit of it than she will. Excuses to get dressed up, listen to loud music, and have a nice dinner out is Abby's idea of fun, and his, too, for that matter. So, why not have fun together?
Thus, a few hours after getting horrifically shot down by Borin, he heads to the lab, a spring in his step and a grin on his lips.

"Hey, Abby, wanna go to a concert with me?" he shouts over Abby's music.

She looks up from the computer and turns the music down. "Who's playing?"

"The Generics. They're an '80s cover band."

Abby looks confused. He knows what sorts of music she likes, and '80s cover bands aren't exactly the top of that list. "You think I'd want to go see an '80s cover band?"

"Not precisely." He shrugs a little at that, also acknowledging that he knows they aren't her favorite music, or his for that matter. "I think you'd find getting dressed in '80s clothing, going out, having dinner, and bopping around for a night fun."

She smiles for a moment, because she would find that fun, and then her eyes narrow slightly. "Didn't you just ask Borin to do this?"

"Yep." Tim grins at her. Big, wide, happy grin, not the look of a man who just got his heart ripped out or his dreams trampled. He's trying to get the message *Please go out with me, I love you, but we have to do this kind of quiet across with a look.* "But I don't think she gets how fun it is to get dressed up and be someone else for a night. But, I think you would."

Abby studies him for a moment, and he can see she's aware that his look means something, but not precisely what it means. Likewise, she's more than smart enough to figure out that last sentence means he picked something she might like, but Borin wouldn't. Eyes still slightly narrowed she says, "The way Tony tells it, you had your foot so far in your mouth by the time she left, only your knee was visible."

Tim's still grinning at her, looking very pleased with himself. "I'm sure that's how it looked, to Tony."

"McGee." Her eyes have unnarrowed and she's starting to sound suspicious. Tim's enjoying it. She might not have all of the unspoken context here, but she's creeping up on it.

"Yeah?" He's still smiling, looking like he just cracked a case wide open.

"You're grinning. You don't look like you just got shot down." He keeps grinning. "Are you asking me on a date?"

Tim inhales sharply at that, looking mock shocked. "A date... Hmm..." He sees a grin start to spread over Abby's face. "Don't you think it'd be kind of, I don't know, tacky, to ask one woman on a date a few hours after being shot down by another one?"

"Yes." She looks at him for a long minute, getting a good sense of the game he's playing, and looking like she's enjoying it. "You're still grinning, McGee."

"Yes, tacky, very, very tacky." He shakes his head forlornly; that grin trying to peek out. "But, asking a friend to go out with you, to do something that that friend would probably enjoy, something the original girl would probably run screaming away from, even if she hadn't been approached by someone with the social skills of, say, a retarded turtle, would in no way violate rule number twelve."

A smile spreads across Abby's face, she's got it now, and is also looking very pleased. "Uh huh. So, two friends going to a concert and dinner together."
He leans forward and kisses her on the cheek. "Exactly."

She turns into the kiss, her lips barely brushing his as he's pulling back. "Yes, I would like to go out with my best friend and see a concert, bop around, and have some dinner."

He doesn't think the grin could get any bigger, but it does. "Wonderful."

Later that night, he's on eBay, gchatting with Abby, coordinating looks, hunting for a Member's Only jacket, while she looks for hot pink Converse High Tops.

Yeah, this'll be fun.
Nothing looks less like a clandestine date than getting dressed up at work, and then openly taking your date out, while inviting everyone else around you to come along, knowing the activity you have planned is so far outside their comfort zones that the merest mention of it is enough to make them want to run screaming away. Short of taking Abby to DragonCon, he can't think of anything Tony or Ziva or Gibbs would be less interested in attending.

Tim has on a pair of cream colored slacks, a turquoise polo shirt, collar up, a cream-colored Member's Only Jacket, and matching turquoise Top Siders. He's halfway between Michael Jackson and Don Johnson.

"Sure you don't want to come, Tony?"

"No, McCrocket," Tony's looking at Tim's outfit with... it's too mild for horror, but he's definitely feeling second-hand embarrassment for Tim. "I have no interest at all in... whatever unwholesome activity it is you and Abby are going to do tonight."

"This from a man who dressed up like John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever and did the voice. We're going to see The Generics. You know, the concert tickets you got for me?" He turns toward Ziva. "Ziva? I don't want any hurt feelings about not being invited."

"My feelings are not hurt." Ziva steps in front of him, studying his outfit. "Why is the collar up?"

"I have no idea. It's just how they wore them back then."

"Ready, McGee?" He turns from Ziva to see Abby. He'd, of course, heard about the outfit, they'd talked about what they'd be wearing, but seeing it is an entirely different thing all together.

Abby had found the neon-pink Converse high tops she'd been looking for. She'd added them to a look of black leggings, a flouncy, neon-pink lace skirt, a wide studded black leather belt, black t-shirt with, and this is a modern twist, a neon-pink skull wearing a bow. A black denim jacket finishes off the clothing. She let her ponytails down, curled her hair, and topped the outfit off with a big, floppy, and, of course, neon pink, bow in her hair.

He feels the grin break out over his face, and is glad that Ziva and Tony are behind him and can't see it. Tim is certain it isn't the sort of smile you give someone you're just happy to see.

"I'm ready."

The concert was a blast. Sure, it wasn't anything either of them was listening to these days. Abby loves Industrial and Punk, and Tim's on a Mumford and Sons kick with a side of fairly obscure Indie-Brit Bands when he's not listening to jazz. But, the Generics were good at capturing a feeling of the semi-naughty, mostly innocent mid-eighties rock and roll. They knew all the songs well enough to sing along, and just about everyone in the audience, themselves included, sang themselves hoarse and bopped around to the tunes.

By the end of the concert, neither of them want to go home. They're in his car, heading back to the Navy Yard and Abby's car, when he says, "Want to split a milkshake with me?"
Abby smiles at that. "I think you're mixing up your decades."

"I don't know." He glances away from the road to her, and her fluffy skirt. "The fifties and the eighties have a lot in common. Slightly restyle the outfits and we're Gibbs on his first date."

Abby laughs at that. "I don't think Gibbs is that old," she says with a smile.

Tim grins at her. "Okay, we're Ducky on his first date."

She laughs again. "Do you think they had 'the '50s' in Scotland? Or was it just an American thing?"

"I'm sure if you don't mind a half-hour long discourse of the socio-economics of post-World War II Scotland, we can find out."

"I can probably skip that."

"Me, too."

She sits quietly for a moment, and then asks, "What flavor shake?"

"You pick."

"Okay. Take us to the milkshakes."

The hole in the wall diner Tim takes them to could have been transported directly from the fifties without any of the intervening years touching it. A gleaming aluminum counter divides the kitchen area from the booths.

He points out a booth in the back, and walks with her past the other diners, who look at the two of them with raised eyebrows. She slips in, and he surprises her by sitting next to her, instead of across.

"Easier to share if we're next to each other." Which is true but not the reason he's sitting next to her. He wants to be near her, smell her perfume, feel the heat of her body next to his.

Abby inclines her head. "Makes sense."

The menus are already on the tables, sandwiched between the napkin dispensers and the salt and pepper shakers. He hands one to her and waits patiently while she looks over the options.

"Any that are really good?"

His favorite is the double espresso with whipped cream and a coffee bean on top, but he knows she doesn't like coffee, so he says, "I like the dark chocolate, almond, and cherry one." He reads the menu over her shoulder, seeing that the options are all modern takes on old classics. So, time hasn't entirely passed the place by.

Abby snaps shut the menu. "That sounds good." As she does it, a waitress in a blue uniform comes over. She goes through her spiel telling them about the specials, sounding bored but looking amused at their outfits. Tim thinks she's old enough to have worn this sort of clothing the first time it was popular.

Abby orders, and Tim just nods.

A few minutes later, she returns with a tall fluted glass, filled to the brim with ice-creamy goodness, a
swirl of whipped cream and cherry on top, and a tall metal glass half-filled with even more.

Tim grabs the straws out of the dispenser on the table, and puts two of them in the milk shake.

Abby takes the cherry off the top, and slides it into her mouth. There's nothing overtly sexual about this, it's just Abby eating a cherry, but Tim is watching, fascinated.

Abby sees the way he's watching her. "Tim, what is going on?" He knows she's serious. She rarely uses his first name, and when she does she's either feeling tenderly toward him, or annoyed. He's very pleased to see she doesn't look annoyed.

He takes a sip of the milkshake, closes his eyes, and sighs. He's playing up how good it is, a little. It's really good, but maybe not quite that good. "You remember how I was really skinny a while back?"

"Yeah?" She'll let him go on this digression, but her expression tells him she wants a real answer soon.

"I gave up carbs, most meat, ate all organic pretty much all the time. And I lost a ton of weight. But you know what? I like meat. I love sugar. And since the explosion," he shakes his head, "I've wanted to spend my life doing the things I love with the people I love. I'm done with avoiding or putting off things that are important to me so that I can look better, or more like everyone thinks I should look."

"That sounds very healthy, McGee."

"Thanks." He takes a deep breath, and focuses his eyes on hers. "I love you, Abby. And I want to be with you. I want to wake up with you and go to sleep with you, and if that means getting an extra-wide coffin, so be it. And I know this is probably the wrong way to do this, that I'm going too fast, but... I don't want to waste any more time. It's been nine years, and for at least six of them, I've known you're the love of my life, and I'm hoping that I haven't just made a huge fool of myself and that you love me, too. So, anyway, having said all of that, would you like to be my girlfriend?"

For a second, it looks like Abby is somewhere between laughing and crying, and then she's wrapped around him, kissing him, and he's kissing back, lips soft and a little awkward (they haven't done this in a long time) on hers, happier than he's been in a very long time.

After a few minutes, he pulls back, staring into her eyes. "I've missed you."

"You see me every day." She smiles widely, lipstick smeared a bit, and then bends forward and daintily sips from the milkshake.

He leans forward, his lips brushing her ear. "I've missed touching you." Then he places a warm kiss on her ear, and takes a sip from his straw.

Tim's writer sense, the almost outside himself narrator that likes to look at things and see how they are and how they'll fit into his stories, can tell that right that second they're ridiculously cute. They're fluffy kittens tangled in balls of yarn playing in a meadow while unicorns frolic under rainbows cute.

And he doesn't care, because life is good when it's this cute.
Always Be Prepared

Tim McGee likes sex, a lot. He doesn't get to have nearly as much of it as he'd like, at least, with other people, but the fact that he's not hitting on every woman nearby doesn't mean he's not interested.

But he's also not DiNozzo. Plain, vanilla sex doesn't precisely bore him, but it's not what he's after, either. And, when it comes down to it, an unending string of one-night stands doesn't allow enough time to learn your partner well enough to get into the more interesting variations of sex.

Abby likes sex too. And his guess is that she's gotten a lot more of it over the years than he has. But, still, the whole first few dates thing tends not to lead up to particularly interesting play. And he doesn't think she's gotten much beyond the first few dates in the last nine years either.

But when you've known someone, basically, forever, and you got those first few dates out the way a decade ago, then it's not a big deal if, say, you like being able to stretch your partner out on the bed, tie their hands and feet down, write poems on them with black ink and a Japanese calligraphy brush, pillow book style. Or, if say, one of you has a slight necrophilia kink, then laying perfectly still becomes a very interesting challenge in submitting your own desire to move to her desire for motionlessness. And, if say, both of you happen to enjoy certain costumes, and say, maybe, knot play, and possibly a little D/s, and occasionally all of those things wrapped up in a role-playing encounter, then life is awfully good.

But for right now, all of that is in the future. Right now is a flavor of sex Tim sort of, vaguely remembers from his grad school days. It's true he hasn't been celibate the last nine years, but it's also true that he hasn't been in love with anyone he's slept with either.

Right now, there's a delicious sense of teasing and anticipation. They finished the milkshake, and even spent a good twenty minutes lingering over it, exchanging soft words and quick, or not so quick, Abby's fingers kept drawing obscure patterns on the inside of his thigh as they sat next to each other, touches and kisses.

He dropped her off at her car—going out together is one thing, coming back to work together the next morning is an entirely different story—getting out, walking her the five steps to her door, keeping his distance, because they both know there are cameras in the NCIS parking lot. But the camera can't pick up words, so it misses her saying, "I'll see you back at my place. Bring a condom..." she pauses and thinks about that for a second. "Bring a pack."

He breaks into a massive grin and says. "See you there."

Being able to focus on traffic is proving to be something of an issue. He's having a difficult time keeping his mind clear enough of the erotic images filling it to even see the oncoming cars. Lucky for him, he doesn't have to try to remember where the nearest drug store is. The GPS on his phone takes care of that.

He spends almost a minute standing in front of the condom display, debating between a three pack and a six pack and what exactly each may say about his intentions before he realizes that this is just slowing things down, and that he certainly hopes to have sex with her on a regular basis, so he grabs a twelve pack of assorted styles, a bottle of lube, because everything works better with lube, and is out of there in a one more minute.
The drive to Abby's is long enough to wilt his erection, which he appreciates because he doesn't enjoy wandering about with that visible. Though compared to the fact that the bag from the drugstore is translucent, and the box is too damn big to fit into his pocket, a hard-on hiding under the drape of a jacket is fairly inconspicuous.

He thinks about remedying his blatant condom carrying situation as the car slides across the miles to Abby's home.

At one stop light, he tears open the box, tossing the ribbed, flavored, and glow-in-the-dark condoms aside. They may all be fun, but they're not for tonight. He snags the two ultra-thin condoms and sticks them in his trouser pocket. He tucks one of the extra-sensitive ones in his sock, after all, his pants might not be within easy reach by the time he wants a condom, so making sure he's got at least one stashed elsewhere is a good idea.

At the next stoplight, he tucks the rest of them into his jacket pocket.

One more stoplight, a long one, gives him time to get the lube out of the box, open—Why would anyone put one of those heat sealed plastic wrappers around the lid of something, and then stick a tamper evident seal under the lid? Let alone on an insanely small bottle likely to be fumbled around with by someone half-mad with horniness? Lucky for him, rule number nine means he's well equipped to take care of that.—and tucked into the opposite pants pocket.

He's as ready as ready can be. It occurs to him that this is probably not what his Scout Master meant by always be prepared.

Tim's also less than a minute from Abby's place. He pulls into the parking garage, circling around. This late, anyone who doesn't have a reserved place, namely him, and other visitors like him, end up exiled to the very top level. He passes Abby's car as he heads up, and sees she's still in it. She smiles and waves, and he continues up, looking for a space to park.

Tim just about jogs down to her, erection returning as he watches her across the expanse of gray concrete and parked cars.

She's out of her car now, leaning against it, waiting for him. The ever-present security conscious part of his mind wants to scold her for doing something so dangerous. The part that really, really wants to have sex decides that maybe now isn't the best time for that conversation. And the little bit of his mind that's aware of the fact that he's actually a fairly dangerous guy reminds him of the facts that A: He's armed, and B: She's less than two hundred feet away from a guy who loves her dearly and can get six out of six head shots at fifty meters, with a handgun, anytime he's at the range.

He stops less than a foot away from her. She's looking into his eyes, smiling, and he appreciates how she's almost as tall as he is.

"How many did you get?"

"Twelve."

She smiles with approval. "Ambitious."

"I wasn't plan—" He realizes she's teasing, so he pulls her close, kisses her deeply, his hands cupping her rear, rubbing against her, letting her feel exactly how hard he is. "And we're trying a different position to go with each one."
The first time is fast. He knows they kissed and petted all the way to her door, and he was entirely wrapped around her as she got her key into the lock. A very long half minute later, the door bangs open and they just about fall into her apartment.

"Oh, God, Abby!" is the last thing he remembers saying when she lands on top of him. Panting moans, shivered groans, and soft breathy sounds replace words and punctuate soft, rhythmic slap-squish sounds.

Later, it amazes him how fuzzy the details are. He wasn't drinking, so he should be able to remember everything, but whose hand was where when, let alone in any coherent chronology, just isn't in his memory.

Instead he remembers feelings and almost snap-shot quality images:

Pulling the collar of her shirt to the side so he could nuzzle and kiss her neck. Her hair in his fist, and the silky thinness of the underside against his palm and the almost-crunchy, overly hair-sprayed curls of the top between his fingers. Abby naked above him, head back, hair wild, her fingers clenching on his shoulders. The snug slip and impossible hotness of her body sliding onto his. Sitting up, her in his lap, holding her close so they can look into each other's eyes and kiss as they rock against each other.

He can remember the feel of her heartbeat and breath, and the incredible, almost bubbly joy that arced through him as they made love.

As they speed up, as pressure and pleasure and tension crest, he isn't sure if he wants to laugh or cry, and might be doing both, but until that moment, he's never been happier to be with or in another person.

Later, he wakes on the floor, her hair tickling his face. They've dozed off, spooned together. He looks up, and sees they're less than seven feet from the front door. It makes him giggle. The fact that she's naked, and he's still got his pants on, well, on the one leg, makes him laugh, too.

He has no idea where his shirt is. Hers is currently doing pillow duty for Abby. He sees one half of her bra to their left, and the other to the right. He doesn't remember ripping it, but he's never been good with bras, and he really doubts she ripped it off herself.

He's on his side, head on his right arm, the left arm wrapped around her. The floor is a bit on the cold side, but he's got no interest in getting up to grab a blanket.

Tim toes off his left shoe, still on his foot, and, frankly, a bit uncomfortable there, and kicks off his pants.

He tries to figure out the time, but that's hard to do where they are. Abby keeps her blinds closed, so there's no light from outside to give him a clue. From his location on the floor, he can't see into the kitchenette, where one clock lives, or the living room, where there's another.

As long as it isn't eight yet, the time he normally gets to work, it's all good. And he doesn't think it's anywhere near eight, not yet. With that, he tucks her hair under her neck, rests his face against her shoulder, enjoying softness of her skin and that uniquely Abby scent, and falls back to sleep.
He's feeling surprisingly awake and alert when Abby jogs his shoulder, saying, "McGee, time to get up."

Her hair's lopsided, half of the curls have either fallen out or been crushed by her sleeping on them, the other half still held in perfect frozen loops by whatever product she had used. And last night wasn't precisely kind to her makeup; it's coloring parts of her face it was never intended to go near, and not a bit of it matters because she's still the most beautiful woman he's ever seen.

"You're beautiful." She smiles at him, even more beautiful yet. He flexes and stretches, his back, neck, and shoulder less than thrilled at sleeping on the floor. "What time is it?"

"Bit after five."

He nods and sits up. That's early for him, but not horrendously so.

"Wanna get a shower?"

He stands. "Yeah, that'd be great." Tim follows Abby into her room, toward the bathroom when he sees something that stops him dead.

"You got a bed!" It's a huge bed. And he's not sure where she found a lace-trimmed black comforter decorated with tiny skulls, but it's very her, and very cool.

"Yeah." Her fingers trail over the comforter. "I'm tired of being alone. And you know what? Coffins are one to a customer."

Tim isn't sure how to process all of that, so he turns and kisses her. "I'd have shared a coffin with you."

"You're sweet. But how about you try sharing a bed with me?"

"I'd like that. It's nice to have room to stretch out." He remembers sleeping in the coffin, and even though hers had a mattress in it, it wasn't precisely comfy for two people to sleep in. It was too narrow for both of them, really, and there wasn't any good place to put his arms that didn't involve Abby sleeping directly on top of one of them, or his hand ended up flopping out of the side, which resulted in waking up with it completely asleep.

"Yeah. It's pretty comfortable, too." She pats her pillows, smack dab in the middle of the bed. "I kept falling out of it the first two days. It took a while to get used to something that didn't have sides. But, once I had sleeping in the middle of it down, it's been great."

Then she looks to the bathroom, heading toward the shower. Two more steps has him in her bathroom, too. She turns on the water, and while they wait for it to heat up, they brush their teeth. Tim decides not to ask why she's got an extra toothbrush. He doesn't really want to know.

Abby finishes and sticks her hand in the shower, testing the water. Tim leans against the sink, watching her body, the way it moves, appreciating the glorious, long expanse of milky white, inked skin in front of him.

"You coming?" Abby asks, turning to face him, half in the shower.

"I certainly hope so." Tim grins at her and realizes he still has his socks on, so he pulls the condom out of the one and takes them off.

"You had a condom in your sock?" Abby sounds disbelieving as she says that, staring at the condom
"I thought there was a decent possibility I'd want one, and my pants would be nowhere nearby." He take a step closer to her, his erection, which has been leading the way this whole time, brushing her hip. "And, look, here I am, no pants, and definitely hoping for sex."

She laughs, kisses him, and steps fully into the shower. He follows a heartbeat later.

Abby's bathroom has one of those combination tub/shower things. It's true Tim isn't much for baths, it's also true that he appreciates the fact that there's more than enough room for both of them in there. But more than that, he's appreciating that it's well lit, and with Abby's scrubby in hand, he's got a good excuse to look at, and touch, all of her.

He likes looking. She's standing under the spray, her head back, eyes closed, the water dancing down her skin. It's a fabulous image, and the sort of thing he often dreams of. It's good to see it live again. Then she turns to face the shower head, her back to him.

Most of her skin is familiar. But she's had some work done over the years. The cross on her hip is new. It's about six inches long, ornate, and he can easily imagine it being made of cast iron. He looks at it more closely and notices the letters CT twined amid the roses at the center of the cross.

"Is this for Kate?"

"Yeah. I got it right after she died." He thinks about that for a moment, while squeezing out the sponge, watching the suds slither down her leg.

"Is the one on your back for your parents?"

"Yes."

"Are they all memorials?" he asks, standing behind her, fingers and scrubby lightly tracing over the cross on her lower back.

"Just the crosses." She turns to face him, her hands coming to rest on his shoulders. She glides them down his skin. Her lips ghost over his deltoid, caressing his tattoo. Then her fingers skim his scar, still red after five months.

"I was really angry at you when you got hurt. I was sitting on the sidewalk, with an EMT checking me out, and then I saw them run you to an ambulance on a gurney. Gibbs told me you were going to be fine, but he looked really worried, and I was just so mad at the idea that you stayed in that building and got hurt."

She's never said anything like that to him before, and for a moment he's not even sure what to do with it. Finally he says, 'I'm sorry. It was really stupid. I know that now. Next time, if there ever is, someone says 'evacuate,' and I'm getting the hell out. There's nothing on my computer worth dying for.'"

"Good," she says it quietly, her voice intense.

They're almost the same height, so it doesn't take much of a nudge to get her looking into his eyes. "You were the first thing I thought of when I realized I was hurt." His finger slips from her chin to her cheek and he kisses her gently. "I was thinking that I hadn't told you I loved you, not properly. And I was wondering if you were okay, but decided you had to be because there was no way Gibbs would just be walking through if you weren't. Then I kind of passed out. Somehow I ended up in the ambulance, and from there things were pretty foggy until I woke up at my place and you were sitting..."
next to me in my bed." He's staring into her eyes, holding her gently. "I love you. I really do."

She dips her forehead to his shoulder, and spends a long minute holding him, her hands meeting each other at the small of his back. He rests his chin on her head and enjoys the closeness.

Eventually she says, "No new ink for you?"

"I had thought about putting the first line of Deep Six on my shoulder..." He steps back and touches his left shoulder blade, and then begins to rub the scrubby along her neck and breasts, enjoying the play of suds on her skin, the way they trickle down her flesh, between her breasts, and along the hollow of her stomach. It occurs to Tim he's staring, and hasn't finished the sentence. "...When it made the New York Time's Bestseller's list, but that just seemed too self-congratulatory."

"'L.J. Tibbs never used words when an action would do, so, as he leveled the barrel of his Sig at Avi Wazari, words were supremely unnecessary.' It's a good first line, McGee."

"You remember?" He pulls his gaze away from the suds to look at her eyes.

"I've read all of your books. Even the two you've written as T. M. Gee."

His eyes go wide. Those books are a cross between The Dresden Files and Laurel K. Hamilton and star a not very modified version of Abby.

She looks at him as the water streams over them, her fingers caressing his face. "McGee, are you blushing?"

"Ummm... probably. No one was ever supposed to know I wrote those. My picture isn't on the cover. I went through a different agent, and a different publisher. Hell, T.M. Gee has a fake biography, and is technically a woman. How did you find out?"

She smiles. "I have my ways... But you shouldn't be embarrassed about them. They're beautifully written and scorching hot."

"Well, um... yeah... thanks."

"You should have told me you were using me as a main character, though." There's a little bite there, but not too much.

He smiles, looking chagrined. "I wasn't sure if you'd like being the main character in a series of urban fantasy-mystery-lesbian erotica books." Left unspoken is But I wanted to write them so I did anyway.

"I like lesbians." Tim groans at that, blood rushing toward his dick. "That might be the single hottest thing you've ever said."

Abby smirks at him. "And I thought you loved me for my mind."

He kisses her hard, tongue stroking and slipping against her lip, then kneels, tracing his lips from her knee to hip to belly, then standing, kissing her breasts, collar bone, neck and lips, hands tracing the path of his lips. "God, Abby, I love your mind, I love your body, I love the fact that you aren't freaked out about those books. I just love you."

"Good. You should love me." She smiles as she says that, and he laughs, kissing her again.

Abby takes the scrubby from him, lathering him up all over. He's definitely hoping this results in sex.
Her fingers on his skin, the hot water, the sight of her, kneeling in front of him, are all combining to make sure he's hard as a rock.

She looks up from scrubbing his left foot, her face inches from his erection. She turns a bit, so she's looking right at it. "That looks like it wants some attention."

"Yes, please!"

She stands up and reaches for the shower soap, adding even more lather to her hands. Then she steps so that she standing next to him, her full body pressed against his left side. For a moment, she stands there, kissing him, then she takes him in hand. He rests his forehead against hers, groans deeply, and then looks down to watch her fist him.

"God, that looks so good."

"Looks good? How does it feel?"

He cups his hand around the back of her neck, kissing her deeply, mouth open, tongues dancing, and then says, "It feels amazing. Feels so good it shouldn't be legal." His hand traces down her back, slips along her butt, and settles between her legs, fingers slipping along wet, slick skin. "It feels as good as that does, I hope."

Her eyes close, and she sags against him. "It's good, McGee, really good."

"And this?" He moves a little faster, a little harder.

"Yeah. Just like that."  

"Just like that?" He turns her so her back is to the wall of the shower. "How about this?" He kneels in front of her, lips and tongue replacing fingers.

"Better." Her fingers clench in his hair. "That's... Oh... Fuck, Tim! Don't stop that!"

He almost says, "Never, baby." but he'd have to stop to do that. So, he doesn't. He wishes he could tell her how good she tastes, and how beautiful she is, but well, he's got better things to do with his tongue right now, so he does them.

Abby climaxing is one of the supreme joys of his life. In this, like everything else, she's entirely her own. There's no pretense, no hiding, no fear that a sound she's making might be undignified, or that the way she's moving might look odd. She's supremely self-confident, and watching a woman like that, knowing that he's giving her that sort of pleasure, rocks Tim's world.

She comes down slowly, and for what feels like a long time, he kneels before her, face resting against her thigh, fingers idly tracing along the crest of her hip, water streaming down them.

He's just about gotten to the point where he's thinking that she must have one hell of a high capacity hot water heater when she says, "How did you get so good at that?"

He looks up at her, grins, and says, "Lots of practice."

She kneels next to him, and gently tugs at him until he's lying in the tub, back against the slanted back rest. "Really?" She's grinning as she straddles him, and reaches up to the shelf where the shower gel, shampoo, conditioner, and condom are.

He's immensely pleased to see she grabbed the condom.
"No, not really. Remember that scene in Revenge of the Nerds, where the sorority girl asks how the
nerd is so good at sex, and he says nerds spend all their time thinking about sex?"

"Yeah." She laughs. "Thinking about that a lot?"

He groans a little as she opens the wrapper. Tim is intensely wired into certain sense memories, and
his brain associates the sound of a condom wrapper opening, along with that slightly manky smell of
condoms with very good things happening.

"Probably my third favorite fantasy." He groans again as she slips the condom onto him. Sure, he
knows most guys don't like condoms, that they cut down on the sensations, but since he's never had
sex without one, he's got nothing to compare it to. And, since he loves to watch, he also loves seeing
her hands gently smoothing it onto him.

"What are the top two?" She eases onto him, slowly inching down, wrapping him in snug, slick,
warmth.

He exhales a slow "ohhhh..." and holds her flush against him, reveling in the feel of her on him.
"God, that's both of them. Sex in general, and sex in specific with you."

She smiles brightly, and begins to rock against him. He meets her thrust for thrust. "So, all those
years, when you're alone in your shower, you've been thinking of me?"

He could quip, something like, 'How do you know I'm in the shower when I do that?' But he's
having a pretty hard time focusing on anything besides the sensation of her sliding against him and
how much he loves it. So, instead, he says, "Yesss..." and it slurs into a groan as he pulls her tighter
and closer to him.

From there, things slide into a vivid awareness of the sight of her body above his and the feeling of
her slipping along him. He's not sure if his time sense slows down, or if they just take a very long
time, but it feels like it goes on forever, like in some way he's trying to make up for all the lost hours
of making love to Abby in one long, exquisite fuck.

Or maybe that's just his writer sense trying to provide meaning and context for what's happening.

Either way, when they're done, when he's lying blissed-out and limp in her bathtub, he's happier than
he has been in almost a decade.
"You're late, McGee. Have fun at the concert?" Tony asks as Tim heads to his desk.

"Yeah, Tony, it was fun. Ran later than expected." Which was technically true. He'd expected it to be over at ten, but a double encore meant it went until 10:20. "And we got shakes after, so all in all, kind of late night."

Of course, it wasn't the late night that had him running late. It was the fact that it was close to seven when he got out of Abby's tub. (Really, he has to find out what sort of water heater she's got, 'cause the water was still running hot when they got out.)

So, he drove like a maniac back to his place. Grabbed a very fast shower. He was plenty clean after Abby's, but he also smelled like her soap, shampoo, and conditioner. One fast change into something that Don Johnson wouldn't have worn to work on Miami Vice, and that got him to eight, the time he normally gets to work.

Bolting down some breakfast while driving back to the Navy Yard, once again, like a maniac, means he got there only half an hour late. The sort of thing that could be explained by whacking the sleep button one time too many after a late night out with a good friend. Not like he, or Tony for that matter, have never done it before.

The adrenaline of driving like a maniac is a good thing, because it killed his I-just-got-laid, blissed-out, ultra-relaxed mood that Tony can spot from a mile away.

So, he doesn't have Tony hounding him about his sex life. And besides a few polite questions about the concert, everything seems to be going well on the stealth romance front.
Evidence and Red Lace Up Stockings

Strictly speaking, Tim's not supposed to be in the evidence lock up. But once he tells the computer what to do, he can't make it go any faster by sitting next to it. Likewise, once he's got his computer, his second computer, and his back-up, auxiliary computer (located in Abby's lab) all looking for things, there's not much he can do besides wait for answers to pop up.

So, he's "officially" down there to offer Abby some help.

But mostly, he's down there enjoying the view. And, God, what a view!

The black stockings with the red laces up the back are his favorite. They are, without a doubt, the single sexiest piece of clothing in the history of clothes.

And he thinks, just possibly, she knows that about him, and he also thinks, just possibly, that's why she's wearing them, and that delicious red dress, without a lab coat on top of it.

Which is why Tim's been smiling all day.

"McGee," Abby says, looking at the Ferrari she's processing.

"Yeah." He's staring at her from across the lock up.

"You're distracting me."

"Sorry." He tries to keep his face straight, but his voice sounds happy.

"No you aren't." She looks up from the Ferrari to him.

"No, not really." He shakes his head and grins at her.

She's on the opposite side of the car from him, and once again, there are cameras watching. The evidence lock up has 24/7 surveillance. And once again, there's no sound on the cameras, so he knows he can't do anything that looks out of the ordinary. Two colleagues having a conversation and goofing around is nothing out of the ordinary. There are literally years of footage of the two of them doing that. So, he can't act in any way out of the ordinary, but he can say whatever he likes.

"Speaking of distractions, do you know what those stockings do to me?" She looks amused, leans forward against the car, her arms together, pressing her breasts up and toward him. His eyes trail over her body, devouring her curves. "God, or that dress?"

Abby's eyes are sparkling as she turns deliberately and walks, slowly, her back, and the backs of those stockings to him, each step flexing her legs and swinging her hips in a way that shouldn't be legal. She grabs something from the other side of the room, a clipboard maybe. Her head turns, and she says over her shoulder, "What do they do?"

Abby returns to the car a few seconds later, clipboard in hand. She holds it in front of her, and he looks at it, then looks at her, realizing what she's doing.

He's now got an excuse to stand close to her and "read" whatever's on the clipboard. He scuttles to the other side of the car, stopping just behind her.

Theoretically, it might look like he's standing behind her, reading over her shoulder. Standing right behind her. God, this is a thousand miles out of bounds and if anyone ever looks at the tape of this
they are so busted. And he really doesn't care. She's flush against the car, and he's right against her back, feeling the heat of her skin and the slight friction of her body against his as she breathes, his chin resting on her shoulder, his hands to either side of hers on the cherry-red metal of the car.

He keeps his voice low. They may be the only two down there, but who knows who might be heading in their direction. Just because most people take the elevator, doesn't mean everyone does. His eyes stay on the clipboard, so at least he, sort of, looks like he's talking about whatever's on the page.

"They make me want to bend you over this car, pull them off with my teeth, lick my way back up to your pussy, and then fuck you until we're both senseless."

There are certain words Tim basically never uses. Fuck and pussy among them. They only come out during certain extremely intimate or emotional occasions. And while it's true he doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would be great at dirty talk, he likes how he feels when he says things like that, and he really likes how Abby responds when he says things like that.

She closes her eyes and moans a little, fingers growing tight on the clipboard. He risks very quickly touching her hand, slipping the thumb that's next to her hand along her knuckles, and then strokes his fingers over the car.

"It's a shame this is evidence. Can you imagine leaning against it, gorgeous ass of yours right here," he taps the edge of the car with his thumb, "one leg over my shoulder, as I eat you out? I can. I can taste you on my tongue, and see that luscious, stocking clad leg against my face and over my shoulder. I can feel your heel, poking me in the back.

She shivers at his words and lightly rubs her butt against him.

He wants to grind into her, but he keeps control of himself, mostly, his head dips a few centimeters further toward her throat, so she can feel his breath against her skin. "Or how about in the front seat? You in my lap, naked except for those stockings. Me deep inside you. You could lean back against the dashboard, and I could use my fingers."

He looks around, sees no one, and says a quick prayer that no evidence goes missing today so there's no need to check the footage. Then he takes his hand, drags it up the back of her leg, and cups her pussy in his hand.

"But what I'll have to settle for is getting you soaking wet. And knowing that you're walking around today, counting the minutes until we can get off work, go for a drive in my car, and try everything I just said." He kisses her neck, and pulls away, his phone buzzing, letting him know that one of his computers has found something.

"You're evil." Her cheeks are flushed, she's breathing a little faster than normal, and all he wants to do is pull her to him, hitch her skirt up, and get to it, right here, right now.

He smiles. "And you love me."

She's staring at him, eyes warm with more than just the flush of hot sex. "Yes, I do."

That stops him dead. She's certainly said I love you before, but it sounds different this time.

"Really?"

She steps up to him, pressing against him. "Really."
Cameras, other people, work, his phone buzzing with new evidence be damned. He pulls her even tighter to him and kisses her. For what feels like a long time nothing holds his attention besides the feel of her body on his, but the bonging sound of the elevator forces them to spring apart like matching poles of two magnets. He grabs the clipboard, in need of something to hold strategically, and heads for the stairs, thinking taking the long way back to his desk is a good idea.
Quickies Up Against The Door and Love Poems

Chapter Summary

The belated Palmer wedding reception.

A long time ago, when he and his sister still lived in California with their parents, Tim started reading Dave Barry. He remembers one of the books, *Marriage and/or Sex*, maybe? Probably... Anyway, in one of the books Dave was talking about how people behave differently before they have an affair and during. Before, they joke, and flirt, and play up the sexual tension. After, they suddenly become all courteous and professional, doing nothing even remotely out of line, and by suddenly acting that way, they might as well post on Facebook that they're sleeping together.

This thought is going through his mind because he's getting dressed for Jimmy and Breena's belated wedding reception.

It's a Saturday, and they have the day off of work. If it had been a work day, he probably would have given Abby a lift, and then "dropped her back at her car." But it's not a work day. And he lives nowhere near Abby. So he's not giving her a ride.

In fact, he's giving Ziva a ride, because she lives ten minutes from his place, and carpooling makes sense.

But Abby will be there, and he's trying to figure out how he would have acted before they started sleeping together, so he can do a good job of mimicking that. He's fairly certain he wouldn't have spent the entire night dancing with her.

They've been to Christmas parties before, and memory has it that they'd usually dance with each other about a third of the time. He'd get more dances than the rest of the co-workers, but not all of them, or even most of them. And he's also fairly certain that there were no soft, slow, cling to each other sorts of dances. Let alone the sort of fast, sexy, make out with your clothing on sorts of dances.

And, of course, this is a wedding reception, so the music might be a tad less... constrained... there's a good word, than what gets played at work Christmas parties. So there will probably be options for fast, sexy dances, and slow cling to each other dances, and honestly, he doesn't want to sit them out.

But he can't for the life of him think of a good way to not sit them out, and keep his relationship with Abby a secret.

He pulls his tie snug, and slips into his jacket. He wonders what Abby will be wearing. The original wedding was formal, and she was supposed to wear some sort of strapless black gown.

But the reception isn't as formal, and he doesn't know what she'll have on, but he's enjoying imagining the possibilities.

His phone chirps, telling him it's time to get going.
The ride to Ziva's is fast. Fortunately, there's not too much traffic this time of day. Late afternoon on a Saturday means Silver Springs is pretty dead, and fortunately, when they get into DC it should be pretty slow, as well.

He knocks on Ziva's door and waits for a moment. She comes to the door, pulling a coat over a flouncy purple dress with a deep v-neck.

"Hello, McGee."

"Hi, Ziva. You ready?"

"All set."

"You look nice." And she does. The color works with her hair and skin, setting off her brown eyes. The cut of the dress is showing off her curves in a way that Tim does indeed appreciate.

Tim's always aware of the fact that Ziva's a very beautiful woman. But, like sunsets and mountain ranges, her beauty is something he appreciates on an aesthetic level from afar. There's a certain edge a woman needs to have for Tim's libido kicks in, and while Ziva's got edge a plenty, she doesn't have the edge he responds to. Basically, she's gorgeous, but not his type.

"Thank you. You do, too."

He tilts his head, acknowledging but brushing off the compliment as they head for his car. "I'm wearing pretty much the exact same thing I wear at work." Sure, he doesn't do a full suit all that often anymore, but his current get up of a dark gray suit, with a maroon and gray striped shirt and black tie isn't really all that different from how he usually looks.

Ziva looks down at herself. "I once wore something kind of like this to work. I was undercover as a cabaret singer."

"You can sing?" He thinks he knew that, but it's not the sort of thing that's part of his image of Ziva.

"I can sing."

Tim smiles and gets the door for Ziva. He doesn't usually do that at work, but they aren't at work, and his parents made sure he had good manners. "Cool. Why were you pretending to be a cabaret singer?"

"You did not hear this story?" she asks once they're both in his car and buckled in.

"If I did, I've forgotten it."

"I think you'd remember it..." Ziva begins to tell him about her last operation for Mossad, and after about ten minutes, when she gets to the infiltrating part Tim starts nodding. That part he's familiar with. By that time, they're well on their way to the Adam's House Hotel, favorite haunt of Tony DiNozzo Senior, and location for the Palmer wedding reception.

They chat about random bits as they thread through the maze of streets that make up downtown DC: the last case (Captain Wescott), slightly belated Thanksgiving Dinner at Gibbs' house (who knew Fornell could cook?), and her mystery date (the opera for her sister.) That gets them to the parking garage.

As Tim parks Ziva says to him, "I always love weddings. There's such a sense of hope."
"Yeah, I suppose so." Tim's okay with weddings. He doesn't actively avoid them or anything, but he doesn't have any real feelings one way or another attached to them.

"There's so much possibility at a wedding. So much that can happen." She's looking intently at him, and he's flummoxed, not sure what she's trying to tell him.

"I like weddings. Don't get to go to a lot of them, but I like them." Whatever it was, he didn't get it. He can see that from how she's looking at him as he pulls his key out of the car.

"It's good you like weddings. I hope this will be a good one, for both of us."

Yeah, she's definitely trying to tell him something. And for a second he almost says, 'Do you mean with Abby?' but he can't quite say that, even if it does look like she's hinting in that direction. Instead he says, "I think it'll be a good one. Food should be good. Palmer's got decent taste in music. Abby's going to give the Best Man's toast, so that should be amazing to see. We'll get to spend a day relaxing with people we love. There are a lot of worse ways to spend a day."

She squeezes his hand and smiles. "Yes, there are."

On the way in, it occurs to Tim that this is a hotel. As a hotel, it has rooms. And if it has rooms, at some point he and Abby could be in one of those rooms, either sneak away or maybe spend the night. Sure, he has to get Ziva home, but he can come back later...

"Bob!" he says brightly and waves at one of the guys at the front desk. The guy looks surprised, probably because his name isn't Bob and he's never seen Tim before, but waves back. "Ziva, you go in without me. I'll be there in a minute. I know him from high school."

Ziva stares at him, looking like she isn't buying that at all, and then nods. He heads over to "Bob" and asks for a room. Five minutes later, he's got two key cards tucked into his pocket.

Finding the ballroom isn't too difficult. There are two on this floor, but only one of them has a horde of NCIS employees milling about outside of it.

Apparently, they're a little early. And, apparently, a little early is a common trait among NCIS employees because he sees about twenty people he knows. He drifts over to Ziva, Tony, and Gibbs, apparently Ducky and Abby are off somewhere with the rest of the wedding party, doing God alone knows what.

"So how does this work?" Tony asks. "Is it a wedding? Or a party?"

Tim knows the answer to this, having listened to Abby talking about it. "They're re-doing their vows for everyone who wasn't at the wedding, but skipping all of the readings/songs/church stuff. Which means we don't have to listen to Palmer sing 'Wind Beneath My Wings' to Breena. Then there's dinner, dancing, cake cutting, party stuff. And after that they're finally heading off for their honeymoon."

"Where are they going?" Ziva asks.

"Abby tells me Aruba. Apparently they both like to snorkel."
"Huh. Didn't know that about Autopsy Gremlin."

"Me either," Ziva adds.

"It's like a different world under there. All green and blue and cool. Everything is soft, rippling, fluid. Sometimes the fish come right up to you and nibble on your fingers."

All three of them stare at Gibbs in amazement when he says that.

He shrugs. "I've been on a lot of honeymoons. Snorkeling is a popular honeymoon thing to do."

The doors open, saving the three of them from having to come up with a response to that.

---

Jimmy, Breena, her maid of honor, and sister (maybe, she looks an awful lot like Breena), as well as Ducky and Abby are standing in a small semi-circle in the middle of the dance floor.

They wave everyone over to come join them.

Tim thinks he should be looking at the Palmers. He really should. But he's not. Abby's wearing a little slip dress. It's white, or light pink maybe, with a sheer black overlay. Pink lace trims the knee-skimming hem and neckline. Her hair is up in one long ponytail. She's wearing what he thinks is a black pearl necklace and bracelet, instead of her usual collar and wrist cuff. It's very soft, and very pretty, and he can't pull his eyes away from her.

Several minutes go by while more guests file in and come to stand around Jimmy and Breena.

And, after a few more minutes, Ducky begins to speak. Just like Tim's not watching the Palmers, he's not really paying attention to Ducky. He's getting the basic idea: that the point of a wedding is a public declaration of the vows. It's not just about the 'til death do us part' bit, but about letting the entire world know you intend to do it. Since the first time they did this, Ducky and Breena's parents were the only witnesses, they were going to re-pledge their vows to each other and in front of all of their family and friends as a sign of this as something everlasting and public.

The vows are long and flowery, and, honestly, sweet enough to inspire diabetic coma. Tim's not paying too much attention to them, either. Love, honor, cherish, forsaking, forever, that's really what it all comes down to. Tim stares at Abby, and condenses it down further, making the promise in his own mind as her eyes catch his. As long as I draw breath, I will be here and I will love you. She smiles at him, and he doesn't know if she's got an idea of what he's thinking, or just noticing how intensely he's watching her. Either way, he smiles back. He's about to mouth, I love you, when Breena finishes her vows, the Palmers kiss, and everyone cheers.

---

To the surprise of just about everyone, himself included some days, Tim actually can dance. He's not particularly good at anything that requires fast, unexpected physical dexterity, but anything he can study and practice, he can pick up, and quickly. So, yeah, he was a bad dancer at first, and a bad shooter, and he sucks at most computer games for the first two hours if he can't customize the command keys, but once he knows what happens when, he's golden.

So, yes, if you drop him in the middle of a mosh pit, or say, most clubs, Tim will flail around with the spastic grace of an octopus being electrocuted. But, if you happen to have music that's in the
range of speeds he can process easily (4/4 time or slower) or happens to be a dance he knows (Waltz, fox trot, rumba, swing, or salsa: he took ballroom dance for his gym credits at Johns Hopkins.) Tim is actually a decent dancer.

And well, a family wedding tends to have music in the range he can cope with, and occasional songs that are attached to actual formal dances.

Jimmy and Breena start off the dancing right away and then vanish with the wedding party for photos. The dinner is a buffet, so everyone can eat or dance as they see fit, and in the first hour Tim mostly bounces between the buffet and friendly dances with Ziva, a few other co-workers, and two women he thinks are Breena's sisters.

Then Palmer came around, collecting him, Ziva, Tony, and Gibbs, for more photos. And sure, it could be the fact that if she's wearing heels (which she is), that Abby's the same height Tim is that has them standing next to each other, often with his arm around her, in all of the photos, or it could be something else, but somehow the photographer keeps sticking them right next to each other.

Which he doesn't mind.

He makes a mental note to ask for a copy of the goofy one where he's holding Abby, Jimmy's holding Breena, and Tony has Ziva, and they're all making faces at the camera. And, even though he isn't in it, he also wants a copy of the one where Gibbs has his arms around Abby and Ziva. He doesn't remember the last time Gibbs looked that happy. And yeah, it probably isn't the stealthiest move, but the photographer wanted one of him with Abby and Ziva, so he's got an arm around Ziva, and he's kissing Abby's cheek, both of the girls grinning. He categorizes it under flirty stuff he'd do if he wasn't sleeping with Abby.

Finally, the photos wind down, and he accompanies Abby back to a table. "Here, you sit down. I'll get you something to eat."

"Thanks, my feet hate these shoes."

He looks at the little black satin pumps. "They're cute."

"They are, but they pinch."

"Well, sit down, let your feet rest, and I'll be back with food in a minute."

And while it's true that he's being nice getting her some food and letting her sit down for the first time in two hours, he's also got an ulterior motive. He fishes one of the keycards out of his jacket pocket, and palms it between his hand and her glass.

He hands her the glass carefully, and she takes it, slipping the key into her purse almost like they had practiced it.

"Four seventeen." He mouths it to her, not adding any sound, knowing that she can read lips well enough to get what he's saying. She nods minutely and mouths back, "Thirty minutes," before saying out loud, "What did you get me?"

He points out the things on the plate, naming them. Okay, Chicken Marsala is probably hard to identify by sight, but she can probably figure out broccoli without him expounding on the concept, but he does anyway.

Jimmy and Breena come over, and exchange small talk with them. A song Tim knows he can dance to comes up, so he asks Palmer's bride, "May I have this dance?"
Breena lights up in a wide smile. "Of course."

He's pretty competently swinging with Breena to 'In The Mood' when she says, "Jimmy tells me that you're working on starting a relationship with Abby."

"Yes." He's a bit surprised to see that not only did Jimmy mention it, but that Breena's asking him about it.

"How's it going?" she asks with a smile.

"Started up and going well." He's watching Abby chatting with Jimmy at their table.

"Not dancing with her is driving you crazy isn't it?"

It's possible he looks a little wistful as he says, "I'll get some dances in with her, too. Just, not the ones I want."

Breena nods at that. "You know, there's a hallway behind this ballroom. You can hear the music, but there's no reason to be back there, unless, say, you wanted a moment or two alone."

Tim smiles at her. "You're a natural at this secret romance thing."

"Thanks. You two should join us for lunch some weekend."

"I think we'd like that." And while it's true that Tim's never given much thought to socializing with Palmer on his off time, that's sounding like it would be fun.

The song wraps up. The DJ starts blathering away about this next one being dedicated to all the lovebirds out there. "Head back there, and she'll be waiting." Tim looks around and realizes that Abby isn't sitting at their table talking to Jimmy any longer.

'I'm Amazed By You,' by Tim McGraw is certainly a wedding song. It just isn't one Tim's expecting to be gently reverbering though the back hallway, but as slow, romantic songs for dancing with Abby go, it's a fine one.

"Hi." He smiles at her, seeing her leaning against the back wall, hands behind her back, waiting for him.

"Hi, back." He steps in close to her and kisses her. She kisses him back and then breaks away, keeping a few inches between them. "Palmer's your partner in crime?"

Tim shrugs a bit. "He's good with secrets."

Abby looks amused by this, and Tim's wondering what exactly Palmer said to her while they were chatting. "And apparently he and Breena thought we might want one romantic song to ourselves."

"And they were right." He looks her up and down, wanting to pull her flush to him. "Would you like to dance with me?"

She grins, a wide, bright Abby smile, one that makes him feel light and bubbly from his toes to his ears. "Yes, I would."

He offers her his hand. She takes it, and he pulls her to him. His fingers twine with hers and settle
against his chest as his other hand anchors at the small of her back. Her free hand lands on the back of his neck. She's ditched the heels, so she's a few inches smaller than him now. Just enough so that her head can rest against his shoulder, and he can rest his cheek on hers.

There's nothing particularly fast or complicated about this. They're mostly two stepping. Tim's humming along with the music, only half-aware that he's doing it, but it seems fitting somehow.

It's a fairly short song, and it wraps quickly, leaving them alone in a hallway with some loud peppy music blaring away.

He looks up and says, "You know, unless I'm mistaken, that's an elevator over there."

She looks over, still pressed against him. "That does look like an elevator."

"I bet it could get us to the fourth floor."

She smiles. "I'd imagine it could do that."

He's got an especially wicked grin on his face. "Wanna go upstairs?"

Another huge smile. "I've got to give the best man speech in twenty minutes." He's still grinning at her and kisses her forehead. She pulls his head down to kiss her lips. "This is so naughty. Yes!"

The elevator takes approximately forever and a half to get down to them, and then get them back up to the fourth floor. And of course, their room is on the opposite side of the hotel. They hurry through the hall, holding hands, his index finger rubbing against her wrist.

He slips his key into the door and swings it open. It's a suite. He didn't pay much attention to that when he reserved it. Mostly he was just thinking, *place to get naked with Abby*, and all other details were rather moot. They're in a sitting room. There's a sofa, tv, minibar, coffee table, no bed.

And then that doesn't much matter because he's back against the door with Abby pressed against him, kissing intently.

"How long do you think we can stay?"

She looks away for a second to find a clock. "Ten minutes? I've got to get down there for my speech soon."

"I can do ten minutes." Tim grins.

"Somehow, I figured you could." She unzips him, shoving his pants to his hips, while he turns them. This'll work a whole lot easier if she's back against the door.

He kneels in front of her, pushing the skirt of her dress up. Tugging off her panties off with his teeth, lets him use his hands to grab a condom and get it on. He stands quickly, lifting her, pressing her back against the door, and slipping into her.

If it wasn't for the fact that the searing pleasure of doing it has wiped all thought out of his mind, he'd be pretty proud that he managed to pull that off in one easy move.

It's not a position he can hold for long. She's smaller than he is, but she's still a good hundred and thirty pounds, if not more. Her legs are wrapped around his hips, and his hands are holding her under
her ass. They're kissing frantically, moaning, and his thrusts are slamming her into the door. Anyone on the other side can figure out what's going on in this room.

All of that adds to the pleasure of her body on his. It's got to be fast. It's dangerous and exposed and just, as she said, so, so naughty. Her feet are digging into his back, and her hands clinging to his shoulders, her teeth nipping his lips, making him feel wicked and sexy and just gloriously fine.

He knows he'll be done in less than a minute, and he suspects she's not that close, yet, so he speeds up, goes full out, letting his orgasm sear through him, and bare seconds after his body stops pulsing, he drops to his knees again, tonguing her, fingers replacing his dick, pressing her g spot, knowing that's his fastest option for getting her off.

He's awfully glad she's not wearing the shoes, as she climaxes the foot she has on his shoulder twitches hard, her heel pounding into him. With shoes he'd be looking at a ripped jacket and maybe a lacerated shoulder. Having to miss the best man's speech to get stitches would have done wonders for the whole "stealth romance" concept. He's smiling about that as he gently licks her a few last times, savoring her taste and the soft flutters of her pussy against his lips.

When she stops quivering, he stands up again, leaning against her, still breathing fast. "I've got the room all night, and tomorrow. Feel like spending the night with me? Get room service breakfast? Lay around in bed all day? Watch trashy TV and make love until we can't stand up anymore?"

She kisses him, hard and long. Licking herself off his lips. He kisses back, sucking her tongue, reveling in her on him, and how ridiculously sexy it is that she's willing to do it after he goes down on her. Then she pulls back. "I'd like that."

"Good."

"I've got to take Ziva home, but once I do, I'll come back, and we'll have the rest of tonight and all of tomorrow together." He pushes back, and leans against the wall, resting, his knees are feeling wobbly. Abby starts to straighten her dress, slipping on her panties. He watches, appreciating the little flash of her tush as she pulls them up. "Dresses are a lot easier than suits. You just shimmy a little, and you're back to normal."

"Sometimes it's good to be a girl." She checks her makeup in the mirror and touches up her lipstick. "Presentable?"

He stands up and kisses her, gently, lips barely brushing hers. "Perfect."

"Okay, gotta get back down there and find Jimmy. Almost time for me to toast the happy couple."

"I'll be down in a few more minutes. Don't start without me."

"Never. I want you to hear it." Abby looks over her shoulder, blows him a kiss, and heads into the hall. Tim pulls off the condom, knotting it tidily and tossing it in the wastebasket. He wipes off, rights his clothing, makes sure he's not covered in her lipstick, and notices something. There's a table next to the wastebasket, and next to the phone on the table is a notepad.

For Tim, writing is as much a tactile experience as a mentally creative one. It's an entirely different headspace than the rest of his life, one centered on the merging of a creative mind and a physical effort. He works on a keyboard pretty much all the time. He keeps his notes on his phone. Almost his entire life revolves around manipulating digital information, so when he writes, he goes old school, totally divorcing that part of his life from his work life.

The feel of the keys moving under his fingers, the rhythm of hitting the return lever, manually
advancing paper are all part of putting him in the place he needs to be to create fiction. It's a physical meditation that binds and encourages narrative flow.

But for poetry, he goes another level further back. For free writing, for associative verse, thoughts and phrases that depend as much on sound as meaning, for that, he goes for pen and paper.

He wasn't planning on writing when he got to the reception. But as he's tucking his shirt back into his pants, he's feeling like he might want to at some point, so he grabs the pad, and heads back down to the reception.

It doesn't look like anyone noticed he was gone. He gets a drink, a glass of chardonnay, and settles in at the table his crew claimed as their own. He's the only one sitting at it right now. But, as Abby stands next to Palmer and Breena, gently clinking her ring against her glass, getting the attention of the other guests, Gibbs, Ziva, and Tony drift back and sit down.

"I understand it's normal for the best man's speech to take a few kind-hearted shots at the happy couple, but... Jimmy was just too easy a target, and I couldn't narrow it down to just a few. So, instead this'll have to be sincere." She turns to face Breena. "The day after your first date, Jimmy walked into my lab and said, 'How do you know if you're in love?' I told him, 'Can you imagine the rest of your life without her?' and he said, 'No.' So I kissed his cheek and said, 'Congratulations, you're in love.' About a year after that, he floated down into my lab one day, all glowy, and told me that you loved him, too." She catches Tim's eye, holding it long enough for him to know this bit is for him, too, and then puts her arm around Palmer. "And since then, Jimmy's been a glow. You walked into his life, and it changed for the better. You've brought him a sort of happiness I don't think he even imagined could exist. We're pretty close knit at NCIS, and by loving our friend, brother, you've made him happier, and you've made all of us happier as well." She kisses Breena's cheek. "Thank you. And welcome to our large, somewhat bizarre, family."

Everyone claps.

Then the caterer brings the wedding cake over to them, and Palmer and Breena cut into it. He feeds her a piece nicely, no cake shoving. And she places a small piece between her lips and kisses him with it, much to the delight of everyone in the crowd.

Abby returns to their table a few minutes after that. Tony and Gibbs praise her speech. Well, Tony praises her; Gibbs kisses her forehead as he stands up to get some more bourbon. But for Gibbs, that's praise.

The caterer brings around cake, and all of them eat, chattering away about the wedding, the food, the music, how happy Palmer and Breena look. Traditional wedding chatter. Tim stays quiet, content to eat and watch, enjoying being surrounded by people he loves.

Abby finishes, and the music kicks back up. She heads off to dance, and the rest of the crew drifts off.

Tim watches them, makes sure they are all busy, and then he leans back, takes another sip of his wine, and settles in to watch Abby and write.

For Abby: Dancing
Everyone else is busy right now.
Ziva and Tony are dancing with each other.
Gibbs is trying to fend off Jimmy's father-in-law.
Ducky's telling a story.
Jimmy's dancing with Breena.
Vance is dancing with his wife.
And you're dancing, too.
None of you are watching me
which means I can sit back, sip my drink, and watch you.

You're dancing like you own the music,
like the reason music exists is to bow down and worship at your red tipped toes
(I know you think I don't notice details like that
but I do)

Ducky joins you, and you're both swinging through a fast song,
setting the floor alight.
For a guy who had a heart attack less than half a year ago,
he can really move.
You both look happy.
He's grinning.
You're laughing.
And I watch.
I might be a little buzzed while I write this—
not from the wine—
from watching you move
and the sense memory or your skin on mine.

The music slows down, easier, classic, and Gibbs cuts in.
He loves you so much.
He holds you like you're his north star,
like he's the father of the bride, giving her away.
(What do you think? Maybe a year or two from now?)
Lyrics: Yes you're lovely, with your smile so warm, and your cheek so soft, there is nothing for me
but to love you, and the way you look tonight.
Is it terrible that I want to cut in?
That I want this song with you.
Because you are lovely
and I love you
and the way you look tonight
and I want to hold you close, cup your face in my hand, and look into your eyes
while swaying through a slow song like this one.
Tony and Ziva are heading over,
so I have to stop,
but I promise, next time we dance as lovers, it won't be in secret.

He folds the paper in half quickly, tucks it into his pocket, and gets himself back into small talk mode.

"What are you writing?" Tony asks as he sits next to Tim and takes a drink of his beer.
"Code. I just thought of a way to improve search efficiency by about ten percent when I go hunting through our archives."

Tony shakes his head and slumps back into his chair. "Here we are, at what is likely to be the romantic highlight of our year, surrounded by beautiful women—" And with that he turns to Ziva and looks her over. She slaps his shoulder gently. "—and you're writing code?"

Tim shrugs. Gibbs and Abby come back to the table, and for a few minutes they just talk. Then 'Mambo Number Five' comes up, and Tim decides this one is fast enough that he can dance it with Abby without arousing any suspicions.

He takes her hand. "Come on, dance with me." And leads her out. "Can you salsa?"

Abby can hack any dance she's ever tried, but, to date, salsa is not something she's ever tried. "I can learn."

He rests his hands on her hips and talks her through the steps, showing her with his feet, and then they go for it. Sure, it's a little clumsy and a bit off beat, but it's fun and they are giggling by the end of it. The music stays fast, 'Dashboard' by Modest Mouse (Tim wonders idly at the DJ's playlist, but it's working, so he's not going to complain.) so they keep at it, and a minute or two into that song, Ziva bops out to join them. She apparently does know how to salsa, so she stands behind Abby, Tim in front, and the three of them dance together.

Gibbs joins them, spinning Ziva off in a quick and low dip followed by some footwork that, frankly, leaves both him and Abby stunned. Ziva rises to the challenge, and she and Gibbs leave Abby and Tim in the dust.

"And that's what happens when he actually swallows the alcohol." Tim laughs. "I can't believe he can dance."

"I can." Abby's still watching Gibbs and Ziva cut the proverbial rug.

"You'd believe he could fly."

Abby looks back to Tim, happiness pouring off of her. "I would if he did it in front of us."

He smiles at her, wanting to kiss her very much.

An hour later, Breena tosses the bouquet and a minor scrimmage occurs among her various female relatives over it. From there, things are starting to break up. Tim excuses himself and scoots back up to the fourth floor. They didn't make it to the bedroom the first time, so he has to open a few doors before he finds the one that leads to it. Once he does, he writes Abby's name on the poem, and places it on the pillow for her.

Then he heads back down and finds Ziva, getting her coat. He grabs his own coat and heads over to her. "Time to head home?"

"Yes, I think so." She looks around for a moment, and sees that Tony and Gibbs are heading out together, backs toward them.

"You know, I can get a taxi home," she says, voice low.
Tim's in the middle of tucking his arm into his coat, and stops, surprised. "Why would you want to do that? That's a what, hundred dollar ride?"

Ziva nods, acknowledging that sounds about right. "Just, if you wanted to stay late. You don't have to give me a ride home."

He knows he's busted, but he tries to bluff his way out, anyway. "Why would I want to stay late?"

Ziva stares at Abby, who is heading to the elevator. Tim turns and sees what she's looking at.

_Yep, busted._ "That obvious?"

Ziva's smiling gently at him as she says, "Most people look at the bride and groom during the vows, not the best man."

"Wonderful." If Ziva noticed, everyone else probably did, too. "We're trying to keep this quiet."

"I know, and I will keep your secret. I doubt anyone else noticed. I doubt anyone else thought to look."

That makes Tim happy. And then leads him to wonder about why she was looking, and why she was talking about weddings being hopeful earlier. "Why did you?"

"A few weeks ago, you and I were driving to go get a suspect. I noticed you smelled like Abby. Then I thought about it and realized you had been in the lab right before we left. So, I decided to keep watch. The next two times you came up from visiting Abby alone, you smelled like her. But when you came up from visiting her with someone else, you did not smell like Abby. Obviously it was not just a matter of being in the lab. You had to get very... close to her to end up smelling like her."

He thinks back and though he doesn't know which ride tipped her off, he does know that he and Abby had been "close" several times in her lab. "Thank you for keeping quiet. We don't want everyone talking, not yet, at least." He hands Ziva his car keys. "She can give me a ride back to your place. No need for you to get a cab."

"Thanks."

"I'll be by Monday morning."

Ziva's eyebrows rise, and she looks pleasantly surprised. "You and I will talk about this again?"

"At some point. Without Tony."

"Agreed." He's in the process of turning toward the elevator when she says, "McGee?"

"Yeah?" He turns back to Ziva.

"Were you really writing code?"

He snorts a quick laugh at that. "I'm at a wedding, watching the woman I love dance, you think I'm gonna write code?"

"No."

He nods. "Monday then?"
"Monday."

Abby doesn't expect him for close to two hours. That gives Tim a little time to plan. For example, he's already used the only condom he had on him, so restocking, which he would have done if he had driven Ziva home and then come back, is definitely in order.

He calls room service and orders breakfast for the morning, and champagne, roses, and chocolate covered strawberries for now. He knows he's going overboard, but he's enjoying it. He's never had a girl waiting in a hotel room for him, let alone in a four star hotel when he's had enough money to spoil her. But right now he does, so he intends to pull out all the stops.

They didn't get enough time to dance with each other, so doing something about that seems like a good idea, too.

He heads to the hotel bar, orders a scotch, usually he's a wine guy, but right now he wants something with a little more attitude. He doubts he's going to drink all of it; he's already feeling pretty mellow, but he's not the kind of guy who can take up a seat in a bar and not buy a drink. Tim sips his drink, letting it buzz through him, and then takes out his phone. He spends a good twenty minutes setting up a play list for the weekend. Well, a series of playlists. There are sex songs, dancing songs, and just stuff to listen to in between.

He heads over to the gift shop and finds what he needs: toothbrushes, toothpaste, condoms, lube, and a razor.

The cashier smirks at him when she sees his purchase, and though he'd normally be flustered by this, the fact that he's completely anonymous here means that he doesn't care. He shrugs at her and says, "It's gonna be a good weekend." She giggles while sweeping his credit card.

"Have a good night, sir."

He smiles. "I plan to."

Tim heads up, and lets himself into the room quietly. Room service has already come and gone. He sees the champagne and chocolates are on a tray on the coffee table in the sitting area. The roses aren't there.

The door to the bedroom is open, and Abby's shoes are tidily sitting next to the door jam. He toes off his own shoes, leaving them next to hers, and drapes his coat and jacket over the sofa. He peeks into the bedroom, sees the flowers on the pillow, her dress, panties, and bra hanging on the closet door, and the poem is missing. He hears water running and sees the door to the bathroom is open, as well. Three steps and he places the bag from the gift shop on the bed as he heads to the bathroom door.

She's sitting on the edge of a tub big enough for them and three of their best friends, naked, back to him, the fingers of one hand testing the water, the other hand holding the poem, as she reads it. Bubbles foam on the water, kissing her fingers.

He loosens his tie, undoing the top button, leaning against the door jam. She's angled so he can see her face in the mirrors behind the tub. He settles in to watch her respond to the poem.

Abby's smile comes slowly, spreading across her face, gently. Her eyes are soft, a look of tenderness in them. He thinks he knows which one of the lines makes her close her eyes and inhale quickly. A few seconds after that, she folds it closed and places it on edge of the tub, still smiling.
"You are so beautiful."

She jumps a good two inches when he does that. "McGee, don't creep up on me like that!"

"I wanted to watch you."

"Like what you see?"

He crosses the few steps to where she is and kisses her gently. "Yes, very, very much."

She kisses him back, fingers unknotting his tie, and undoing the buttons on his shirt. "Did you mean that?" she nods toward the poem.

"Every word."

She nods again, kissing him again. "Then yes, I think it's a good idea."

He knows what she means, so he cups her face in his hand, looking into her eyes, and says, "I'll ask you properly one of these days."

She smiles up at him, skimming his shirt off. "You're early."

"Ziva knows." She helps him strip out of the rest of his clothing while he explains what happened. He steps into the tub, and a moment later she's in his lap, touching his face, looking at him with a deep, gentle tenderness that makes him want to melt.

His left hand cups her neck, and the right rests on her hip. For a moment, he sits there, cuddled quietly with her in warm water and soft foamy bubbles. "It's funny, you know?" he says, breaking the silence, trying to let some of the feelings flowing through him out, "I'm good with words. I mean, I get flustered, you've seen that, but I can usually find the one I need when I need it." He traces her lower lip with his thumb, which she nibbles gently. "But I can't find one big enough, grand enough to explain how this feels."

She kisses the tip of his thumb. "Then tell me you love me, and it will have to be enough."

"I love you so much, Abby." He kisses her, trying to push the feelings into his touch. "So, so much."

She kisses him, and he feels that same desperate hope to push feeling into a tangible action in her touch. "I love you, too, Tim."
The great thing about Ziva is that she gets up before dawn, so if you need to head over to her place around six in the morning to pick up your car, you don't have to worry about waking her up.

Abby stops her car in front of Ziva's building, and he kisses her, lips lingering on hers, debating seeing if he can get her to call in sick with him and spend another day in bed. She pulls back and smiles at him. "See you in a few hours?"

"Yeah." One last, fast kiss and then he's out of the car, heading up to Ziva's apartment to get his keys.

He's in the elevator when he gets a text. *Wrapping up run. Will be there in a minute.*

If you were to ask Tim, prior to last weekend, to describe himself, the word sexy would not have crossed his lips. If anything, he's always assumed that he could be nice and friendly and maybe women would get to like him enough as a person that they might then decide to sleep with him, and having done so, figure out that he's actually kind of good at this sex thing.

But the idea that someone might want him, just off the bat, for sex, was nowhere in his self-concept.

It is now. After thirtyish hours of sex, napping, food, and more sex, after making Abby climax so intensely she scratched his back bloody, bit his chest so hard it bruised, and then blacked out, he's feeling like he might indeed qualify as sexy.

And it shows.

He's leaning against Ziva's door as she comes down the hall. She waves, and he waves back, languidly. She pauses mid-step, and looks him over intently. "McGee, you cannot go to work like that."

He rubs his face; he is a bit whiskery. He's got the top three buttons on his shirt undone, and the tail end of his tie is hanging out of his pocket, but he was planning on changing his clothing and getting a shower before going to work. "I was going to shave and change after I got my car."

"That is not what I mean. You look like the cat that ate the canary."

Tim's not sure that's the right phrase. "Cat that got the cream?"

"Either way, you look like a big, fat, sassy cat that just ate something it really enjoyed and was not supposed to. You have practically got feathers sticking out of your mouth."

He grins. "It was a good weekend."

"I can see that. And so will everyone else. You need to act more itchy."

"Itchy?"

Ziva thinks about that. She's fairly sure it's the right word, but decides to try another one that might be closer. "Twitchy? You usually look like you're afraid you're about to get caught doing something you shouldn't. Or like a gazelle in one of those nature shows about lions. Right now you look like one of the lions."

He grins again, liking the idea of being one of the lions.
She shakes her head. "Tony will take one look at you and know. You practically have, I HAD SEX tattooed to your forehead."

That gets through. She opens her door, and waves him in. He tries to look a little less relaxed and confident and muffs it entirely.

"A little more itchy, not paranoid schizophrenic."

Tim sighs. "I don't think I can do this."

"You are going to need to do something, or else your secret won't be a secret any longer." She hands him his keys.

"I'll tell him I let you drive my car. That should keep him distracted until Thursday, at least."

She laughs at that. "It is a nice car. I had never driven a Porsche before. It handles very nicely at over 120." Tim blanches. Ziva smiles, and he hopes she's kidding. "So, shall we talk now? No Tony around."

"Sure." He follows her into her kitchen area. She pours them both coffee. Ziva's not quite as picky about her coffee as Gibbs is, no one is, but she's pretty close. Hers is a lighter roast, and he thinks it's got some sort of hazelnut and cinnamon thing going on. Whatever it is, it smells good and wakes him all the way up.

"So, you and Abby are together again."

"Yes, about six weeks now."

Ziva nods. "And you are keeping this a secret. You know you can't do that forever."

"Yeah, we do. I doubt we'll keep this under wraps to Christmas, definitely not Valentine's Day. But for right now, the secret is sort of fun."

She smiles. "I understand that." Then she takes another drink. "So why don't you want Tony to know?"

Tim sighs, there are a lot of reasons, and condensing them down takes him a moment. "It'd be nice to enjoy this without mocking for a little while. Look, this is serious. We're not just fooling around, and, it... it really matters to me. I don't want to get constantly teased about this. And he'll tease like crazy because he won't know how to deal with it. We're all single, and he's comfortable with that. It's part of his idea of what we all are."

"He was fine with Gibbs dating."

"Gibbs is the Boss, and on top of that, Gibbs dating doesn't threaten the team. He's not going to go off, get married, and start a family. He has a family, and it's us."

Ziva drinks deeply and looks at Tim with a very warm and gentle smile on her face. "You really are serious about this."

"Yeah." He nods, voice soft and earnest as he says, "I really am. I love her. This is get married, buy the house in Alexandria, have a few kids serious. It's us going off on our own, doing something he won't be able to be part of, not the way he likes to be part of us. It will change things, and I... I don't know how he'll deal with that."
"What about Gibbs?"

"Assuming he doesn't out and out kill me, I think he'll be fine with it." Tim thinks about that for a moment. "He'll be fine with it. Sometimes, I think he sort of expects it. And I will tell him. When we go public with this, he'll be the first to know."

"If he doesn't already." Ziva says, both hands on her cup, soaking in the warmth.

"Do you think he knows?" Tim's honestly curious as to who has noticed what, especially after the wedding.

"I can't tell. He seems to know everything that goes on with us, but I don't know if he has twigged to this, yet. After I figured it out, I watched how he watched you two, but I could not tell if he was seeing the same things I was."

Tim nods. "Palmer and Breena know, too."

"Palmer?"

"I wanted to talk to someone who managed to successfully fall in love and stay in love. Not a lot of people I know have done that."

"That makes sense. So, what happens now?"

"I go home, get presentable, and go to work. Hopefully when I get there, Gibbs'll tell us to gear up and there'll be something besides me and Abby for everyone to focus on."

Ziva sips her coffee. "And in the longer term?"

"Eventually we tell everyone. I bring her home to meet my mom. She introduces me to her brothers. Then ring hunting, a wedding, kids, grow old and die."

Ziva smiles at him. "Get going then, I would not want you to be late."

Standing in front of his mirror, shaving, brings back memories. He had shaved at some point on Sunday, but he doesn't know when. He was stubbly enough that he was starting to leave marks, so they ended up in the bathroom, him shaving, Abby sitting on the counter between the sinks, watching.

He was wrapping up when she stood up and very gently touched the bruise on his chest, just above and to the left of his left nipple.

"I really bit you, didn't I?" Abby looked concerned.

He turned his back to the mirror and looked over his shoulder at the eight red lines paralleling his spine. "Scratched the hell out of my back, too."

"Sorry." She lightly kissed one of the scrapes.

"Oh no. No sorries from you. I earned these, and I'm proud to have them. I've got the memory of you climaxing so hard you blacked out burned into my skin, and I want it that way."

He blinks and refocuses. He's in his own bathroom, alone, getting ready for work.
Tim rapidly notices—as his mind wanders off while he's eating his breakfast (Abby sucking him off), pulling his car out of its parking space (Abby naked, sleeping spooned up behind him), driving toward the Navy Yard (trailing his fingers down her back as she napped), basically anytime he's not actively forcing it to think of something else—that he's going to have a very difficult time paying attention to anything that happens today.

At the same time, like Ziva noticed, he feels very calm, very relaxed and satisfied. Like right this moment there's nothing in the world that he wants that he doesn't have. There's an almost Zen feel to it, and he's enjoying that.

He gets into work. Ziva's at her desk, doing paperwork. "Morning," he says to her, the same way he would have if they hadn't just seen each other two hours earlier.

"Good morning, McGee." He settles into his own chair and looks around, hoping Gibbs will waltz in soon and get them moving, otherwise it's a paperwork day.

Gibbs' team has an unusually high rate of closed cases, but that still works out to about thirty cases a year. Some years more, some less. They get that many closed cases by using the Gibbs method, which works something like this: find body, work full out, non-stop until someone confesses or dies, then shift into cleanup and paperwork mode. So all in all, they actually only spend about sixty or seventy days a year in the field, talking to suspects, trailing people, etc. The rest of the time they do paperwork, or they prepare for court, or they testify in court, or they give depositions, or do more paperwork.

The average day at NCIS is much more likely to involve sitting at his desk filling in forms than sitting in a car with Tony on a stakeout.

Gibbs sweeps in, folders in hand, and begins to fill out his own paperwork.

So, no case.

Tim settles back, relaxes into his chair, winces a little bit when the scrapes sting, smiles a bit as he remembers again how he got them, and shifts into a comfortable position, feet on his desk, (Gibbs raises an eyebrow at that, but Tim doesn't notice.) and takes his phone out of his pocket. Gibbs writes his notes on a pad. Tim writes his on his phone. This has the advantage of making his paperwork a lot faster.

When he's taking notes he uses a text-English-hybrid that has the advantage of being fast and practically illegible to anyone who isn't him. (Say a defense lawyer who might want to subpoena his notes.) So, his paperwork days usually begin with grabbing his phone and translating his notes into real English, then uploading them into his computer, and from there cutting and pasting them into the forms.

Gibbs wanders off to refuel with more coffee as Tony comes in. He stops dead between his and Tim's desk and stares at a very relaxed McGee working on his paperwork.

"You had sex!"

Tim looks up from his phone and decides that since there's no way he can pull off convincingly denying it, to go for straight out honesty, and hope no one but Ziva noticed what was going on with him and Abby.

"Yes."

Tony's eyes go wide, and he almost drops his drink as he hurries over to lean on his desk, facing
Tim.

"Oh my God, you did!"

"Yeah, Tony." Tim rolls his eyes a bit. "It does happen, you know?"

"No, it doesn't!"

Tim smiles and wiggles his eyebrows. "It did."

Gibbs returns with a fresh coffee and that stops the conversation. Tony keeps shooting glances at him, but Tim stubbornly works on his notes.

One of the perks of keeping everything on his phone is that he can flash a quick text to Ziva and look like he's working. Good way to handle it?

Yes. He just about swallowed his tongue.

:) What's he doing now?

He keeps staring at you trying to figure out who it was.

Think he can?

I do not think he will.

Good.

An hour later, Gibbs goes off for more coffee, and Tony practically springs over to Tim's desk.

"Who was it? Delores from accounting? Breena's hot sister? You were dancing with her at the wedding."

Tim shakes his head. "No one I met at the wedding."

"But it was after the wedding?"

"Yeah. And during. Tim feels a cocky grin spread across his face.

"Oh, God. Just look at him, Ziva! Our little Timmy finally popped his cherry."

Tim rolls his eyes and flashes his annoyed but tolerating it look at Tony. "I've had sex before."

Tony's shaking his head oh no you haven't clear in his expression. "So you say. But you don't look like it. You look like a man who just discovered the joys of women."

Gibbs comes back, fresh coffee in hand. "Now that we've determined that McGee's lost his virginity, —" "Sixteen years ago," Tim adds under his breath. "—do you think we could get some work done around here?"

A quick chorus of "Yes, Boss," and "On it," ends the discussion again. At least, until Gibbs needs a fresh round of coffee.
At lunch, Tony says, "So, really, tell me."

"I don't kiss and tell, Tony."

"No, but you should."

Tim's shaking his head. "No, really, no, bad idea!"

"Oh, you're killing me."

"Why are you so interested?" Yeah, Tony's always asked about his sex life when it looked like he had one, but he's usually not this insistent.

Tony thinks about that. "Probably because my own sex life is so depressingly empty right now."

Tim's really startled by that because it sounds distressingly honest, but Tony smirks it off. "Really, just curious. It must have been one hell of a night. You look really different."

"It was the best weekend of my life."

Tony's eyes go wide again. "The whole weekend?"

Tim shrugs. "Most of it. It was so good, I let Ziva drive herself home in my car."

Now his eyes are wide with a different form of amazement. Tim treats his car like a holy vessel and only other Dudley Dorights with no points on their license are allowed to drive it. "You let Ziva drive the Porsche?"

"Yeah, Tony."

And with that Tony scuttles away to interrogate Ziva about the Porsche.

Tim wanders down to the lab a bit after lunch. The downside of paperwork days is that he's got no good excuse to go hang out with Abby. When they're actively investigating, he usually gets his main computers working, and then heads to the lab to work on hers as well, but he only needs one computer for paperwork.

But, excuse or not, he's heading down. She looks up at him as he walks in, a huge smile on her face. "So, rumor has it you got laid."

He laughs a little. "I heard that."

Abby giggles, kisses him quickly, and then looks at him for a moment. "Yeah, you look like it."

Tim smiles, a little sheepish. "It's probably a step past rumor. Tony flat out asked, and I said yes."

"Stealthy." She's still grinning at him, so he kisses her one more time.

"Oh yeah. There was absolutely no chance of me pulling off a lie, so I decided going with the literal truth and just being misleading about it was a better idea."

"And how is that working?"
"Tony should be down here any minute to find out if you know anything about my mystery hook-up. On the upside, he has no idea who I might have been with. And, okay, it's mean, but I'm enjoying this way too much. It's like perfect payback for every annoying thing he's ever done to me. Not knowing is absolutely torturing him."

Abby's happy to torment Tony for a bit, too, so she wants to make sure she knows what Tim's saying. "So what did you tell him?"

"That yes, I had sex, no, it wasn't my first time, and it wasn't with someone I met at the wedding, and it was the best weekend of my life. How's that for vague?"

"First time?" Her eyebrows shoot high at that idea.

He rolls his eyes. "Apparently, I was looking awfully laid back this morning. 'You look like you've just discovered the joys of women.' Granted, Ziva said basically the same thing."

"Best weekend of your life?"

"Yes!" he answers, eyes warm and mischievous. They hear the bong of the elevator, and Tim lets his hand, which had somehow, without him noticing, twined itself with hers, drop.

"Abby! Tell me you've gotten it out of him!" Tony says as he sweeps in, Caf-Pow in hand.

Abby makes the sign for zipping her lips sealed and tossing away the key. "I keep secrets with my life, Tony, and this one... You'd just explode if you knew."

"You told her!"

Tim shrugs. "She knows everything about me."

"You know McGee and I have no secrets."

"Please, please tell me. I'll provide you with hand delivered Caf-Pows for life. Think about it, you'll be ninety and I'll be rolling into your nursing home in my wheelchair, Caf-Pow in hand." He offers her the cup, and she takes it.

Abby laughs at that and looks at Tim. "You know, that's a very tempting offer. Can you give me a better one to keep the secret?"

"Yes." He leans forward and whispers in her ear. "Honestly, I don't have anything off the top of my head, but doing this will drive him insane, so please play along, look really shocked, and agree that this is totally worth it."

Abby pulls back, eyes wide. "McGee! Sold. You're secret is safe with me."

Tim smirks at Tony and heads back up to his desk, thinking that perhaps he too has a spring in his step. In the elevator, he begins texting. Is he still trying to wheedle it out of you?

Of course. I'm hinting it's a guy.

What!

Oh, come on, this is so much fun. I'm going to toss in a few other false clues too. You might come out of this with a date with Dornaget, though.

NOOOOOOO
I'm kidding. Dinner?

Yeah, I hope so.
And then things go massively wrong.

Tim was happily sitting in the lab, next to Abby, watching the train wreck happen, and then he's in the middle of it.

The absolute last person he wants in his home is Gibbs and Fornell's ex. Okay, maybe not the absolute last, if it's a question of say, Diane or his father, Diane wins hands down, but still, she's way, way down on his list.

She's bossy as all get out, which isn't something Tim really likes in a woman, hell, in people, because generally if you tell him to do something, he'll go do it. He likes making people happy, and being stuck in a room with a very unhappy person, who's also very scared and ultra-bossy is just not his idea of fun.

But, she said listen, so he listens. She wanted a shoulder to cry on, so his gets cried on.

And, categorized under the heading of "no good deed goes unpunished," he gets to wake up to the two scariest human beings he's ever known glaring down at him, with the single bossiest woman he's ever met, in his arms.

Not his finest hour.

Then he gets to work, after Fornell made it pretty clear that if he's ever alone with Tim again, he's going to shoot him, and God, the stories... Seriously, does no one at NCIS have anything better to do than speculate on his love life? And why on earth does everyone assume he's the submissive one? He's not always, or even usually, the submissive one. Most really dominant people in real life prefer the submissive role when it comes to sex. Really, who on Earth would think that Diane was attracted to Gibbs or Fornell because she likes men she can dominate?

And why does everyone always assume he's into kink? Not that he isn't, but why assume that? Okay, sure, under the right circumstance, and here he's thinking of with Abby, he really wouldn't mind being tied up, gagged with a stocking, though, really, stockings are ridiculously bad for that sort of thing, they're so stretchy it's hard to tie them properly, and if you do get one tied, it's impossible to untie one, you have to cut it...and... okay... probably better to stop thinking about doing that with Abby before he ends up embarrassing himself.

Palmer pulls him aside a few hours later and thwacks him, not very gently, upside the back of the head. "You know, one of the best techniques for maintaining a long-term relationship is not sleeping with other women!"

"I did not sleep with... Okay, I slept, but nothing else happened."

He thinks Palmer believes him and was just teasing earlier. But right now it's hard to tell because the expression on Palmer's face is very serious. "Doesn't matter. It's not about sex. Well, it is, but it's not just about sex. Most women I know don't appreciate it when you spend the night lying next to another person, pressed up against them, listening to their stories. Hours of horizontal touch are for you as a couple, and no one else."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Jimmy gives him a curious look. "Sooo... how are things going with Abby? Breena gave me an
update after the reception. Apparently you two were 'absolutely darling' dancing in the hallway."

Tim shrugs. "Either they're going fine, or I just completely destroyed them. I'll get to find out in a few hours when I can get into the lab on my own."

"Well, let me know. You doing anything for lunch tomorrow?"

"Don't think so."

"Good, you, Abby, and I will get something."

"Assuming she's talking to me, that sounds good."

_Better to seek forgiveness than ask permission._ That's repeating over and over in his mind as he trudges his way to Abby's lab. She had been teasing him about having the Ex-Mrs. Gibbs-Fornell in his home, and couldn't wait to find out what gossip he had. But that was last night, and this morning...

"McGee." She doesn't sound particularly pissed at him, but it's possible she hasn't heard yet.

"I am so, so, so sorry." He stops a few feet away from her, and she doesn't step in to him. Could be this is about maintaining a decent distance, which is something they try to do at work, especially in the parts of the lab that are easily visible from the door. Or she could be about to eviscerate him.

She grins at him, and he's on the verge of relaxing, but part of him thinks this might be the trap about to snap down and break his leg in two. "What are you sorry about?"

"Sleeping next to Diane."

"Diane? Huh. You're on a first name basis now? I suppose that happens when you sleep with someone."

Spooiing, snap, yes, he's in the trap. He feels nauseous. "I am so sorry."

Now Abby's looking worried, and sounding appalled. "You told everyone else you just slept."

"We did just sleep! You know I wouldn't..." He licks his lips, hurting all over, thinking he's blown this. "She wanted to talk about her marriage, she cried on me some, and then we fell asleep."

Now Abby's looking confused. "Then why are you apologizing?"

"Errr..." That leave McGee completely flatfooted. "I'm supposed to?"

"Tim," and finally she steps up to him, close but not touching, "you're a teddy bear. You're soft and warm and cuddly. You're a good listener. I am not in any way surprised that a sad woman, who is clearly still in love with Gibbs, and maybe her husband, a little at least, and possibly Fornell, would want to spend a night hugging you."

He feels like a million pounds just lifted off of him. "Thank you."

"Besides, if you want to keep us quiet, I can't think of anything likely to cause more talk than you sleeping with Diane."

"I was in Autopsy... God... The stories..." He rolls his eyes.
"I started five of them." She beams at him.

He looks startled. "Why would you do that?"

"It was fun." She's smiling brilliantly. "The stories everyone else was making up were just so blah... You woke up on the sofa with Diane, completely dressed. Like you'd be on the sofa or dressed if you two had been at it!"

"We've done it on the sofa," he says with a knowing look and some very good memories in his mind.

"Yeah, but we certainly weren't dressed after, were we?"

He smiles at that. "Good point."

"Just because the ex-Mrs. Gibbs-Fornell... Gorbell? Fibbs?... looks at you like a big, warm, asexual teddy-bear, doesn't mean I do. And I will never, ever be mad at you for comforting a hurting person."

Tim takes a half-step closer to her, leaning his back against her desk so he can see the doorway. From there, he takes her hand in his, and whispers in her ear, "So, how do you see me?"

She kisses him quickly, you never know when someone, like, say, Gibbs, will manage to get into the lab without making a sound. "You are big and warm and cuddly. But you definitely aren't asexual." Her free hand gently ghosts along the front of his trousers, and he sighs at the brief contact. "You're the ex-Boy Scout who's forgotten more about knot tying than I've ever known. And you're the guy who is never scared to play games. You, McGee, are a whole lot of fun." He smiles at that. "And it's Diane's loss that she'll never get to find that out."

"Abby..."

"Yeah?"

"How would you feel about not keeping this quiet anymore? I think we've tortured Tony enough with my mystery woman."

"Rule number twelve be damned?"

"Yeah."

She thinks about it for a while. "I'd like that. But not right this second. Maybe wait a little while for the scuttlebutt on you and Diane to die down."

"I can do that. Jimmy wants to have lunch with us tomorrow."

"As long as no one else gets killed or kidnapped I think that can be arranged."
Lunch With the Palmers

On Saturday, they meet the Palmers for lunch.

"So, does this count as your first real date?" Breena asks after they order.

Tim looks at Abby, feeling a little perplexed at the question. It occurs to him that he's not even sure what would constitute a 'real date.'

Breena smiles. "You know, first time out in public as a couple?"

"Nah. Anyone who saw us in that diner knew we were a couple," Abby replies. The hour or so they spent talking and making out wasn't what anyone would call subtle. "But this is our first time out with someone else as a couple."

"Well, congratulations anyway. And thank you for taking Jimmy into your confidence." Tim's amused that Breena would thank him for that, but it pleases him as well. This whole trust thing has some nice side effects. One of which is being at a decent restaurant with Jimmy and Breena, getting to know Palmer's bride.

Tim can see why Palmer loves her. She's warm, friendly, beautiful, and as the four of them get talking shop, smart as a whip. In some ways, she puts him in mind of Abby. They have similar joyful personalities if very different aesthetics.

At one point, when the girls excused themselves, Tim says to Palmer, "We are insanely lucky men."

Palmer smiles and nods. "Trust me, I know it. So, the rest of the world going to learn about your luck anytime soon?"

"Yeah, I think so. I'll let you know when it's not a secret anymore."

"Good." Jimmy takes a bite of his omelette. "What do you think Gibbs is going to do?"

Tim give him a not sure look. "I think he'll be fine with it. He might already know, but Ziva's not sure about that."

"Ziva knows?" Palmer's surprised by that. He didn't know Tim had let anyone else in on the secret.

"She caught us at the wedding."

That gets a satisfied and cocky smile out of Palmer. "Not that hard to do. Take a hint from someone who's done this a few times, don't wear cologne if you're planning on a secret quickie upstairs. Actually, for as long as you want to keep this a secret and can't keep your hands off her, skip your cologne."

"Hell." That's what Ziva noticed, too. He doesn't think his cologne is that strong, but apparently it's making a mark.

"Yeah." Palmer's nodding and smugly smiling. "She hugged me and Breena right after her toast. And you were busted!" Jimmy beams at Tim as he says that, enjoying this way too much.

Tim gives Palmer a somewhat guilty smile and shrugs. "It was fun."

Jimmy laughs at that. "I'll bet. Anyway, Ducky danced with her right after that and noticed, too. He
asked me, and I didn't say anything, and then the thing with Diane happened, and he was really pissed at the idea that you might have been fooling around on Abby, so I let him in on what was going on."

Tim's eyebrows come together at that. "Wait. You're all lecturing me about the horrifically kinky tales of my adventure with Diane, and he and you know what's really going on?"

"Pretty much."

He didn't let on that he knows, at all."

"He's good at that. Think about it, he's known Gibbs forever, and do you know anything about Gibbs from before you started at NCIS?"

Tim does think about it. "Only the bits I could get out of Tony."

"Exactly. You want someone who will take a secret to the grave, go to Ducky."

"Huh." That's nothing Tim's ever thought about.

"Hey, what are you two gossiping about?" Breena asks as the girls come back.

"The excellent secret keeping skills of one Dr. Donald Mallard," Jimmy says with a smile and then proceeds to fill the girls in on the increasingly less secret nature of Tim and Abby's affair.
"You look chipper, McGee." Tony asks as Tim gets settled at his desk.

"Thank you, Tony."

"So, what is it that has you in such a good mood this morning?"

The one thing Tim absolutely isn't going to say is the truth: any day that starts with sex is likely to see him in a very good mood. And any Friday that looks like it's going to end with him at Abby's for the weekend is even better.

"I'm just having a good day. Toast came out perfect. No traffic. As of this point," Tim looks around and speaks quietly, not wanting to jinx it, "no one is dead."

"Uh huh..." Tony's not buying it, at all. "Your good mood wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that you weren't home three times this month."

Tim's taken aback by that. "What, are you having me followed?"

Now Tony's flustered, apparently in whatever mental script he set up before starting this, Tim didn't react that way. "I... wait... no... Stick to the script, McLiar, we're talking about your mysterious disappearances."

Tim rolls his eyes. "Tony, I do have a life beyond entertaining you."

"No you don't!" Tony sounds very certain about that. "You were home every night I came over for five years in a row. Suddenly you're gone. What's happening?"

"I have not been home every time you've come over!"

"Yes, you have. Every night, for five years. Best I can tell, you never go out. Suddenly, a month ago, you start going out. What's up?"

"Really?" Tim thinks about that and comes to the distressing conclusion that Tony may indeed be right about that. Not that Tim never goes out, but if he is going out it's usually during the day over the weekend, and Tony usually drops by on weeknights. It's entirely possible that he has been home every single time Tony's come over in the last half-decade.

"Really. So, what gives?"

Tim rolls his eyes again. "You don't want to know."

"Yes I do! Is it a girl? Your mystery wedding woman?" Tony looks very excited at this prospect.

"No, Tony, it's not a girl." Tim stalls, thinking of a good lie.

"Then what is it that has you away from home all of a sudden?"

"Seriously, Tony, you don't want to know."

"God, McGee, you're killing me. What is it?"

Tim gives Tony his long suffering I'll tell you because otherwise you'll never shut up sigh. "Table top
role playing. I've been hanging out with a few guys playing old school D&D."

Tony looks disappointed. "You're right; I didn't want to know that." Then he thinks about it for a moment. "Is it fun?"

"Yeah. I like it."

"Could I come?"

Tim looks at Tony with horror, simultaneously dealing with the fact that now he needed yet another lie, and that Tony might be bored and lonely enough to want to play D&D.

He touches Tony's forehead. "You don't have a fever. Who are you, and what have you done with Tony?"

"Look, the Call of Duty stuff was actually pretty fun. So, maybe it's not impossible that the other stuff you like might be fun, too."

"Unfortunately for you, Tony, the reason I'm in such a good mood today is because we wrapped up our campaign last night. And you're right, it was a lot of fun. But it's done now."

"Oh." Tony's looking disappointed again, and Tim's starting to get concerned. "Wanna get some pizza tonight?"

"No, not really. I want to go to Abby's and have dinner with her. But if Tony's this lonely, doing something with him is a good plan. "How about we all go out? Bring Ziva, Abby, and the Palmers along. Let's not end up with any unhappy co-workers. Hell, if you want to try something fun, let's do Laser Tag. We'll put Ziva on one team, and the rest of us on the other, and she'll still probably win, but it'll be fun."

"McGee, we're cops. We run around with people shooting at us in real life. Why would we want to do a fake version of it?"

"It's a lot more fun when no one is shooting bullets."

"How about it, Palmer? Pizza, beer, laser tag? Show off our manly fighting prowess for the girls?" Tim's asking, and Tony is standing next to him, looking like he's vastly too cool for this and trying to figure out how the hell he ended up involved in it.

"You mean get our collected asses kicked by Ziva," Tony adds.

"That, too." Tim nods in agreement with that.

Palmer grabs his phone and fires off a text. A minute later, he gets one back. "We're in."

Tim texts the address of the pizza place and the laser tag building to Palmer. "Eight at Del's?"

"We'll be there. Need anything special for laser tag?"

"Wear sneakers. Make sure Breena's got something to tie her hair back with."

"We can do that."
Ducky comes into view. "And what has you three conspiring?"

"Run Ducky, run. They're getting their geek claws into me, and if you stick around, they'll get you, too!" Tony says with a laugh.

"Just making dinner plans. Pizza, beer, laser tag. You're welcome to come if you like," Tim says.

"Alas, Timothy, I already have plans for tonight, but thank you for the invitation. Perhaps another time?"

"Anytime you want to come." Tim offers, and he and Tony head back up to their desks.

As the door to autopsy is closing he hears Ducky say to Palmer, "Mr. Palmer, what, pray tell, is laser tag?"

For once, he's home before seven. A Friday where work ended up early, traffic didn't kick his ass, and he has good things planned. Tim's pleased.

Okay, so dinner with everyone wasn't precisely what he'd been hoping for. He'd really been looking forward to heading to Abby's, but still, this works, too.

And once again, he's carpooling with Ziva. This time he's waiting for her to pick him up.

He changes into a t-shirt, slipping on his sneakers. Not that he looks all that different from his usual work self, it's a tidy t-shirt, Venetian Snares logo on the back, but if he's going to be running around, jumping about, ducking, weaving, and shooting, he might as well wear something really comfy.

He tosses a jacket on top, and is ready to go.

His phone buzzes, a text from Ziva letting him know she's waiting. *Down in a sec.*

Time to go play.

It's been a while since he played. Like just about everything, laser tag's just not all that much fun without the right group of people, and the group he used to play with kept getting married and having kids, and next thing he knew six months could go by without a game.

So, he isn't entirely expecting to be recognized when they go in, but he is.

"Hey, Tim!" Seth Allane owns the place, and the two of them had been friendly. "It's been a while, where you've been man?"

"Just busy, Seth. These are my friends; we were hoping to play."

"Sure. Ten is open. They know how to do this, or should we do the safety routine?"

Tim waves him off. "I think I can get them through it just fine."

"Great." Seth hands them a bunch of clipboards. Usually he's required to go through the for-your-safety regulations and whatnot, but he knows Tim knows what he's doing, so he'll give him some
leeway. "You know the drill, fill 'em out, grab your vests and guns, and out you go."

"Sounds good."

"I can't believe I agreed to this," DiNozzo says as he tugs on the vest.

"Just go with it, Tony. If you can get over what you think you look like, you'll have a lot of fun," Tim says, tightening his own vest. He turns to the girls. "Need any help?"

Palmer is already helping Breena with the top straps. Not that she needs it, but he's enjoying the touch. He kisses the back of her neck gently while he snugs the velcro into place.

Ziva grins, wide and happy. "Sure, McGee." She turns her back to him, and he does a competent job of getting her strapped in.

"Abby?"

"I'm good." She's already in her own vest, and playing with her gun.

Palmer and Tony look ready, too.

"Okay, this is pretty easy." Tim picks up the gun. "Hold the gun like so." One hand under the stock, one on the trigger. "Point." He levels it at Palmer's chest. "Pull the trigger." And one of the five lights on Palmer's vest flares. "All five light up, and you're dead. When you're dead, your gun won't work. You just sit where you fell until the game is over and we reset." Tim points to a switch on the panel in the middle of the vest. "Okay, see, there are four settings here, so we can set up teams, or play one on one on one on... You get the idea."

"Ohhh boys versus girls!" Breena chirps, looking vastly more excited by this idea than Tim thinks is warranted.

"Fine. Guys puts yours on 1. Girls on 2. That way you can't shoot your own teammates. There's a switch on the side of the gun that does the same thing. Get it set. It'll be dark and loud and smokey with flashing lights in there, so you might be a little disoriented at first."

"It'll be a rave. No problem."

"A rave where you shoot people, Abby," Tim adds.

She grins at him. "Who says that's something new?"

"Come on, let's go!" Breena says, bored with the safety stuff and ready to play.

"One more thing," Tim says, "we get in there and the clock will count down from ten. Once it hits zero, it's go time."

"Great, let's go!" Breena's more or less dragging Palmer toward the door, eager to get playing.

The girls are killing them. After the fun with Chip, Gibbs made sure Abby was rated with every gun he is. Apparently Breena's father is under the impression that good daddies take their daughters
hunting, and that girl can shoot. And then there's Ziva, who in addition to being deadly with a spoon, let alone any form of firearm, has some of the best tactical training, especially for situations like this, that a person can get.

The three guys are pinned behind a large rectangle of foam. Smoke, flashing lights, and a pounding soundtrack add to the confusion.

"What I wouldn't give for Gibbs right now. He'd be up there." Tim points to a catwalk over them. "Somehow invisible, and picking off the girls."

Palmer looks up at the ceiling. "I've got an idea. I'm going to run out there like a maniac."

Tony's not impressed. "This is different from your five other plans how?"

"Shut it, Tony, and listen. Look, I know I can't shoot for shit. I'll stay on this side, weaving, dodging, flinging shots left and right. That'll bring Ziva out of hiding, because she's their best distance shooter. While I'm running, Tim, head right. Tony, go left. Keep an eye on the far side. Ziva will pop out, to take me out, and when she does, you guys light her up.

"Once she's out, I think you two can take Abby and Breena."

Tim nods. "That's not a bad plan."

Tony thinks about it and begins edging to the left. "Ready when you are."

With a deep, full throated-yell, Palmer goes running out from cover. Weaving, dodging, shooting anything and everything, hell, he even executes a decent roll at one point.

"When did Palmer turn into Rambo?" Tony asks as he skitters to the next cover.

"Doesn't matter, he's flushed out Ziva. Shoot, Tony, shoot!" Tim yells back.

"I hate to say it, but that was fun," Tony says as they relax over beer after.

"Yes, it was. I am surprised how much fun that is when they do not shoot real bullets." Ziva says, leaning back in her seat.

"I can't believe you can shoot like that," Breena says to Ziva. "How did you learn that?"

"That is a long story, and it's late. It's getting onto 02:00. "Maybe next time?"

"Yeah. I want to hear that story," Palmer says. "How about we do this again the weekend after next?"

"I'd like that," Tim replies, fishing in his pocket for his wallet to cover his portion of the bill. "Ziva, you ready?"

"Sure. See you on Monday."

When they get into Ziva's car she asks, "Are you going home?"

"Yeah, she's heading back to my place after this."
"How much longer will you be hiding?"

"Not long, a week or two at most. Just waiting for the Diane debacle to die down."

Ziva smiles at that. She seems to like 'the Diane debacle.' "What actually happened? She had told me she wanted to do something exciting, stupid, and reckless, and then would not tell me if she had succeeded."

Tim shakes his head. "She wanted reassurance, and I was the closest male around. Maybe it was a good thing she was at my place. I'm pretty certain I'm the only one of the guys who would have only slept next to her."

"Really?"

"What does Tony do when a beautiful woman cries on him and wants to be told she's beautiful?"

Ziva nods. The likelihood of Tony refusing in a situation like that was more or less non-existent.

"And obviously Gibbs and Fornell found her attractive enough to marry. And the way they were trying to keep her out of their homes made me think both of them knew it'd end up in bed, and that would be a very bad thing."

Ziva nods at that.

"I wish she had gone to your house instead."

"I think he was testing you."

"Ziva?"

"You asked if I thought he knew about you and Abby, and I think he does. After your 'I had sex' morning, he knew. I think he was testing you. Because there is no reason why he shouldn't have sent her home with me. That's standard operating procedure. Females in protection only go to a male agent's home if there are no other options."

That sounds like a very Gibbs way of handling things. "So, did I pass or fail?"

"Passed?" Ziva shrugs. "He does not appear angry at you, mostly amused, so maybe it wasn't a train wreck."

"Fornell wants to kill me."

"Fornell looks at you like a puppy who had the gall to pee in his territory. Gibbs knows you're an adult and Diane isn't his."

"Small graces." Tim watches the street around them passing by, thinking they're done with this.

Or not. "So, the story about you and her and the blindfold, handcuffs, strawberry oil, and melted candles..."

Tim groans, rubbing his forehead. "Ugh. That strawberry goo is just nasty." He can't believe Abby added that detail. She knows he hates that crud. Real strawberries, he loves. They're probably in his top five foods. Probably why that pink goo is such a disappointment.

Ziva's looking at him like she found that comment to be very strange, and it occurs to him that for most people the strawberry oil would be the least objectionable thing on that list.
He smiles a little at her, and sees her look him up and down for a moment, like she's seeing him in a
different light. So he says, quickly, "Anyway, Abby made that one up. Actually, any of the ones that
don't go like this: Gibbs picked my lock, walked in, stared at us, Fornell showed up, started cursing,
and then we woke up, completely dressed, and I nearly wet my pants because he was going to kill
me, Abby made up."

"So, she was not worried about what might have happened?"

Tim shakes his head. "No. She trusts me."

Ziva looks away from traffic to him. "Marry that girl, McGee. You are never going to do better."

"I know."
"This is it?" Abby asks, eyes wide.

"That's it." Tim nods.

Abby stands in front of her Christmas tree, a tall, wide spruce, boxes of ornaments next to it, staring at the one, lone ornament in Tim's hand.

"You have one Christmas tree ornament?" She takes it out of his hands and looks at it. It's an abstract spire of red and clear glass, with 2012 on it. "And it's from this year."

"Yes." He nods. "Got it on the way over." Abby wanted to decorate her tree. She'd asked him to bring his ornaments, too. So, on his way to her place, he stopped at a Hallmark store and grabbed the first ornament that wasn't horrendously cute.

"I thought the idea was we'd decorate the tree with our ornaments."

"And we are. They'll just mostly be yours. This is the first year I've ever bought one."

Abby seems puzzled by this. Of course, previous to this year, what Tim might or might not have been doing for Christmas was pretty much entirely private. Sure there's It's A Wonderful Life and dinner at Gibbs' place, but beyond that, she's never asked and he's never told.

Might as well ask now. "Don't you celebrate Christmas at all?"

Tim nods. "I send out emails and presents. A Wonderful Life at MTAC. Open the presents I get Christmas morning. Call my mom, sister, and Penny around lunch. Christmas dinner at Gibbs'. But, no, I don't decorate or anything." He's never seen any point to it. Not like he spends enough time at his place to make decking the halls worth it.

"No stockings by the hearth?"

"No hearth." He's looking at Abby, slightly irked. She knows he doesn't have a fireplace, or for that matter a good place to stick a Christmas tree.

She's looking just as irked, back at him. "No childhood ornaments?"

"I think my mom still has them."

Abby sighs. "I was kind of thinking the idea was decorate the tree, talk about Christmas memories, sharing stories that go with each ornament."

"I'll listen to your stories." And he will, happily. He's curious as to what her Christmasses were like. Obviously good enough that she loves covering everything in oodles of Christmas cheer as soon as the leftover Thanksgiving turkey's been put in the fridge.

"None of your own?"

He shrugs, sheepish. He doesn't much like talking about his childhood, even to her. "How many variations of 'My dad was on a ship somewhere, and Santa never brought him home' do you want to hear?"

"Oh." She winces a little. "I'm sorry."
He shrugs that off. "That was my childhood. Or how about during my teen years when he was home and we'd end up fighting because I wasn't turning into the perfect little sailor I was supposed to be? Or the massive, flaming, screaming argument the Christmas I turned down Annapolis and sent in my acceptance to Johns Hopkins?"

She stands behind him, wrapping her arms around him, and resting her head against his back. "I'm sorry."

She's still holding his ornament in the one hand, so he twines his fingers with the fingers of her free hand. "That's long past. But, no, I don't have any Christmas ornaments, and I don't have a lot of happy, warm, fuzzy Christmas memories."

She holds him a little tighter.

He squeezes her hand. "So tell me about your Christmasses. You and Luca, and stockings by the chimney with care, right?"

Abby pulls back from him, ornament in hand, and lays it carefully on the table by the tree. "We'd always start with the lights. That's how Christmas began, the first Sunday of Advent, finding the box full of lights..." And while they wrap the lights around the tree, Abby tells him about midnight mass, Reveillon Dinner, Papa Noël, bonfires on the levees, and opening presents with her brother on Christmas morning while her parents sipped coffee with chicory.

Each ornament has a story. Tales of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and great grandparents, many of which Abby had never personally met, make blown glass orbs come to life.

She talks about the family she no longer has, and here and there Tim remembers some of his own better memories and starts to tell her about them: laying under the tree, looking up at the lights, eating candy canes with Sarah. The Christmas he was fifteen his dad was once again afloat, so their mom took them to the mountains, because they were stationed out of San Fran, and there's no snow in San Fran, so they went up to Northern California, in a cabin, watching the snow fall and drinking cocoa.

The tree looks pretty done to Tim, but his ornament is still lying on the table.

Abby looks it over, critically eyeing their work. "The last one is yours. Where does it go?"

One of the higher up branches appears fairly empty, and it's near the ornament that was Abby's favorite as a child, so he reaches up and hangs his there.

"It's like a family tree of memories. Not names or dates so much, but ideas, and bits of histories, and traditions," she says while wrapping an arm around him. He gazes at her, brushing his palm against her cheek. "You belong on my tree, McGee."

"Thanks."

She reaches up to kiss him. "You don't have to thank people when you come home to them. Home's where you belong. And you belong here."

"Yeah, I do."

Midnight Mass isn't precisely something Tim's eagerly anticipating. Not the least because Tony was late with It's A Wonderful Life, so it's already 11:30, which means driving straight to St. Sebastian's
on his own, instead of heading over to Abby's, hanging out for a bit, and then going together.

But Midnight Mass is part of what makes Christmas for Abby, so he's driving across DC, hoping that the place isn't so packed that he can't find parking.

The last time he went to church for anything that wasn't a wedding or funeral was years ago, when Ziva was asking about how Christmas was celebrated, and they were telling her, and she asked, "Is there not some sort of worship service?" A quick survey of DiNozzo, Sciuto, and McGee rapidly found that yes, church was often involved, and given this particular group, that church would be Catholic.

So, that year, Abby, the only one of the group with a church she regularly attended, took them all to Mass, and they talked Ziva through the Christmas service. They ended up finding out that there are pretty large differences between Tim's Irish Catholic background versus Tony's New York Italian Catholic, and Abby's New Orleans Creole Catholic.

Then, later that evening, during dinner at Gibbs', after several glasses of wine, they got him talking about growing up Lutheran in small town PA, which was an entirely different set of traditions, followed by Ducky talking about a proper Presbyterian Christmas in Scotland.

The one thing they all agreed on was large quantities of food would be involved as well as some sort of evergreen and lights.

He pulls his car into a spot, luckily not too far from the church, and heads for the door. He's feeling horribly under-dressed. Mass with The Admiral always meant wearing a suit, but Abby's promised him that he's fine in jeans, a jacket, and a nice button down.

"Sister Rosita says God doesn't care about what you're wearing," she had said, "just as long as you come."

He sees Abby waiting by the door for him. She takes his hand, and begins to lead him in. She's heading toward a front aisle seat, and while he's got nothing against the front, he knows communion is going to be an issue if he's sitting near the aisle, so he steers them toward the far edge, where an entire pew full of people won't have to step over him to get to the Host.

They sit. "Why are we over here?" Abby whispers.

"I don't take Communion, and this way no one has to trip over me to get to it."

She nods. He's guessing she's about to ask why he doesn't take communion, but the lights go down, the priest comes forward, and suddenly they're in a softly glowing candle-lit chapel, filled with beautiful music.

It's true that Tim doesn't have a lot of use for church. He thinks that might even be true if weekly attendance hadn't been a sticking point for the Admiral. Hard science degrees at Johns Hopkins and MIT weren't exactly kind to religious faith, and his own need for logic and rules to explain what happens, why, and how don't particularly mesh well with mysteries and taking things on faith. But he's also old enough and has seen enough to believe that grace, whether human or divine, does indeed exist. So, these days, he considers himself a confirmed agnostic.

But it's also true that Tim understands the value of ritual, the need for magic, and the aesthetics of the sacred.

And sitting next to Abby, singing the hymns, kneeling when kneeling is called for, in a room decked with sweet, cold smelling pine, lit by candles, and filled by people celebrating love and family, he
certainly understands the beauty of this, and the desire for it.

After the service, Abby introduces him to her pet nuns. An immensely serene woman, Sister Rosita, clasps his hands, smiling, and says, "You're Abby's McGee! We've heard so much about you over the years. I hope we'll be seeing you again."

And while it's true this isn't something he would do on his own, he's feeling very sure this is something he will be doing again, so he says, "Yes, I think you will."

She leaves the Christmas tree lights on. So, as they settle into bed, her room is lit by the faint glow of hundreds of tiny white lights in the next room.

He's on his side, spooned up against her, snug under warm blankets, feeling extremely content and peaceful. His right arm is under her neck, the left draped around her waist, hand clasped with hers, curled under her chin.

Abby kisses the tip of his index finger and asks, "So, why don't you take communion?"

He thinks about how to put that into words. Better yet, words that sound like something more intelligent than 'I don't want to be my father.' He kisses her shoulder, buying himself a few more seconds.

"Symbols should matter. If you're going to get up there and partake, it should be important. Maybe you don't have to literally believe that the bread and wine turn into the body and blood of Christ, but the idea behind that should matter to you. It should be important to who you are and how you understand the world. It shouldn't just be an exercise in going through approved motions to look like everyone else in the herd."

"And those symbols don't matter to you?"

He hopes this doesn't bug her too much, because he knows those symbols matter to her. "No. Not for a long time, if ever."

"Then why go at all?"

That's a good question. He thinks for a few seconds, about what he's doing and if he intends to do it again, and then says, "They matter to you. And going with you is another symbol, one I do believe in, that I'll be there for the things that are important for you."

He can't see her face, but he can feel her smile at that. She kisses his fingertips again.

"What symbols do matter to you?"

He has to think about that for a while. Sure, like any good role-playing geek, he did design his own crest, with symbols that mattered to him, but that was back in junior high, and he's a somewhat different person now. Eventually he says, "My badge. The idea that I'm part of the line between order and chaos. That there's an agreed upon idea of how we'll interact with each other, and I'm part of what protects the people who follow the rules from those who don't. That I'm a gun or knife, an instrument of violence, but bound by honor, in the service of justice, for the protection of others. That matters to me."

"Words... They're the tool we use to try and expand the universe we know and see. How we share it
with each other."

She squeezes his hand. "They're good symbols, McGee."

"Thanks."

He's dreaming of sixty-nining with Abby. It's lazy and slow, and so so good. It's the kind of sex he can only have in dreams, the sort where he's completely focused on how good it feels, but still able to pay enough attention to what he's doing to keep her happy, too.

He loves sixty-nine, but in real life it's an either or sort of thing. He can either pay enough attention to what he's doing to get her off, and miss a lot of what she's doing to him, or he can lay back and just enjoy it, which results in some less than coordinated tongue work on his part.

But in the dream, he's more or less swimming in sex. Her body is all around him, wet, fragrant, and beautiful. He can taste, see, feel, smell and hear sex. And it's perfect.

Sliding out of the dream takes a while. Probably because at least half of what he was dreaming about was happening, so he was having a hard time sorting out what was real and what was imaginary.

But eventually he figures out he's in bed, Abby sucking away on him, doing wonderfully erotic things with her tongue. He sighs and says, "Best possible way to wake up."

She lets go of him, running her tongue up his dick in one long sweep, and says, "Merry Christmas," with a wide grin.

"Merry Christmas. Is this my present?"

She's kneeling between his legs, holding his dick, her mouth less than an inch away from it, and smiling at him. He can't think of anything he likes more than that. "One of them."

"I love the way you do Christmas presents." She licks him again. "Flip around?"

She sits up, shimmies out of the mistletoe bedecked boxer shorts she had slept in, keeping on the dark blue flannel pajama top she'd stolen from him, and flips around to straddle his shoulders.

He sighs again when his lips make contact with her pussy. Regular sex happens kind of far away from the parts of him he experiences most of the world through. Oral sex means that all of his sense organs are up close and involved in making love. Add in her going down on him at the same time, and it's full body, full brain, sex.

And it's also clear that this is going to be done a whole lot sooner for him than it is for her. She likes going down on him, enjoys it, but it doesn't turn her on the same way going down on her turns him on. She's just getting warmed up by the time she's got him on the edge of getting off.

So he relaxes back into it, letting it flow over him, licking and sucking because he enjoys it. Because the taste of her on his tongue, the sight of her pussy against him, and the smell drive him wild.

A few minutes later, when he's breathing normally again, he starts to work on her in earnest. This time focusing on her isn't an issue, so he knows exactly where his tongue goes and how fast it should be going when it gets there. He adds his fingers to the mix, because stretch, slide, and pressure are always a good thing, too.
And when she's crying out on top of him, high-pitched breathy sounds of pleasure, he's thinking this is definitely the best Christmas morning of his life.

Abby's stirring the roux while he chops onions and talks to his mom on the phone. She just about shrieks with joy at the idea that he's spending Christmas with his girlfriend, cooking at her place, getting ready for the yearly dinner at Gibbs'. Likewise, his sister and Penny take the news well. Sarah seems especially amused by this, probably because she heard about Abby the first time they were dating, and has paid more than enough attention to Tim to notice that he's been sweet on Abby for years.

A bit later, while the aromatics brown, Abby calls Luca and tells him about Tim, which isn't much of a big deal, and about Kyle, which involves a two hour long conversation. Among other things, she's going to be sending Luca a few swabs and some sterile packaging, so she can find out if the three of them are biological siblings, or just her and Kyle.

Meanwhile he's rolling little balls of cookie dough, getting them ready to bake for that night.

Tim doesn't remember exactly when the first Christmas Dinner at Gibbs' happened. He knows it was the year the first day of Hanukkah and Christmas were the same day, but he's got no idea which year that was. Ziva was new enough that she hadn't had an American Christmas yet, but had been with them long enough to have gone from an outsider to family.

The first year, it was just the six of them. And the tradition of doing it pot luck, each of them bringing something that meant "Christmas" to them was born. (Okay, Ziva brings Latkes, and now, in what is probably an ironic turn of events, it's not really Christmas for Tim until he's had a few Latkes.)

Tim makes cookies. Mostly because, while he's not a bad cook, he's also not a great one, but he can make really good cookies. They're just like chocolate chip cookies, but instead of chocolate chips he uses chopped up Andes mints. And, if they aren't anything that was part of any sort of traditional McGee Christmas, they're tasty, everyone likes them, and they travel well.

It's not Christmas for Abby without Jambalaya, so that's gently bubbling away on the stove.

Gibbs is always in charge of the turkey. It's his house, so he gets main course duty. (And often most of the side dishes.)

Tony usually brings mulled wine and cider.

Ducky brings shortbread and the traditional Mallard Christmas Carrot and Coriander soup.

And for two years that's how it went. Then Jenny joined the dinner. And eventually the Franks clan joined in. Leyla and Amira still come. Fornell, some years with Emily, some years without, started attending four years ago. Three years ago Palmer started to attend and last year he brought Breena. The year before last, Gibbs senior started to make it. This year LJ and DiNozzo Senior will be in attendance, as well.

It is, in all the best possible ways, a packed house.

Tim pulls up to Gibbs' place. Cars line the road and the driveway. He's not the last one there, but he's
probably close. Heading from Abby's all the way across town back to his place (so he could pick up one of his own plates to put his cookies on, plus get some fresh clothing for today and another change for tomorrow) and then all the way back again to Gibbs', which is about fifteen minutes from Abby's, is annoying. He's thinking killing this whole stealth romance thing sooner rather than later is a very good plan. This weekend, definitely.

He walks in and notices one major change from previous years. This year, it looks like an entire grove's worth of mistletoe has been scattered about the place. Tim suspects that Senior had something to do with that. Not that he really needs an excuse to kiss the girls, but he probably likes it. Or maybe he's working on setting something up for Tony... The way he had looked when Ziva said she had never been to Tony's place certainly indicated he has plans for his son and Ms. David.

Tim's fairly sure that when Gibbs is in charge of decorating on his own there are just lights and a tree. But, like with the food, over the years the decor has changed, as well. Different members of the family coming over earlier and earlier to add to the atmosphere.

He knows Abby was here last week, adding her own touches to the place. He wonders idly if there's some special shop online that sells Goth Christmas gear, because he frankly doesn't know where she got the little grim reaper in a Santa suit that she's got on Gibbs' mantle.

It sounds like the party is in full swing, the buzz of many happy voices echoing out of the living room and kitchen. Tim threads his way through people, offering hellos and the occasional hug of greeting as he heads toward the kitchen. These days there are too many people for seated dinner, so it gets served buffet-style out of the kitchen, with everyone grabbing plates and nibbles.

Gibbs is carving the turkey in the kitchen, while Fornell stirs the gravy. Tim adds his plate of cookies to the piles of food on the table and says, "Anything I can do to help?"

"Green platter under the sink," Gibbs says, looking up and smiling a hello at him. Fornell sort of grunts something that could be taken to mean *Hello*, or *I'm still pissed you slept with my wife*.

He grabs it, and takes the white one, now covered in turkey, putting that on the table and setting the green one next to Gibbs.

"Anything else?"

"Let everyone know food's on in five."

"I can do that." And he does.

He's leaning against the archway between the entry and the living room, talking with Ducky, feeling especially fine and mellow, (he's already had a few cups of Jackson Gibbs' addition to the menu: eggnog) when Abby walks by him.

"I think, Timothy, tradition must be served."

Tim gives him a questioning look, and Ducky points up at the mistletoe. It occurs to Tim that not only does Ducky know about the two of them, but he's had a few eggnogs as well.

His hand reaches out, fast, well before his brain got involved in the matter, and snags Abby by the wrist, dragging her back a few steps.
"McGee?" He's still holding her wrist, his index finger gently stroking the skin just above her wrist cuff. He's thinking that a little playful wickedness is allowed at a Christmas party. Not like he's going to take her upstairs for a quickie in Gibbs' bed. Although... NO! NO! NONONONONO! Bad Tim, stop that! He'll headslap you with a brick if you do that. Plus you don't have a condom. Don't need one for oral. She's got those little red lace panties on under that plaid skirt, you could just—Really, stop that, she's staring at you, and you haven't answered her.

"Ducky thinks we have traditions to uphold."

Abby smiles at Ducky, and he beams back, a very mischievous glint in his eye.

Tim looks at Abby, a small smile on his lips, tilts his head a little and raises one eyebrow just a bit. She smiles at him, so he leans over and kisses her on the lips. It's just a kiss. Not making out or anything like that. He's not hugging her or rubbing up against her. The only places they're touching are their lips and the hand he has on her wrist. It's just two sets of lips touching for a few seconds, and okay hers might have been slightly open, and it's possible that his tongue might have snuck out and given her a very fast lick, but still, there's nothing obscene about it. Long enough to appreciate the contact, not so long as to cause talk. And then he pulls back, lets go of her wrist, and continues talking to Ducky as she goes on her way, both of them acting like this is entirely normal.

A second later, Tony's standing right next to him. "Woah, McHotlips! What the hell was that?"

He grins at Tony, enjoying this way too much. "Mistletoe, and if you don't want to get kissed, you should take a step back."

Tony takes a giant step back. "That wasn't just a friendly peck on the cheek. You got Ziva earlier tonight and Breena, too, and there was no lip on lip action."

Tim smirks. Yeah, this is way too much fun. Push him further? Oh yeah. "Got a somewhat different history with Abby." Tony's just staring at him, looking like he's not buying this. So, Tim calls out, "Hey, Abby."

"McGee?" She looks over at him from talking to Amira and Emily. Gibbs had made Amira a chess set, and she's showing the girls how to play.

"I ever kiss you before?"

She laughs. "Yeah, couple of times." And goes back to talking to the girls like nothing just happened.

Tim gives Tony a happy and satisfied look. Tony continues to stare at him, and then says, "What's gotten into you?"

Tim looks at the cup in his hand. "About three of these eggnogs. I think I've figured out the Gibbs family secret ingredient. Bourbon to go with the rum."

"Bite your tongue, boy," Jackson says, joining them. "It's whiskey and nothing but!"

"Yes, sir." Tim nods. "And it's delicious."

"As well it should be! But even if it wasn't, anything that gets you kissing pretty girls is worth drinking!" Jackson says with a wicked smile.

"Indeed!" Ducky says, and the two of them begin talking about their younger years of lying in wait at Christmas parties, hunting the pretty girls. DiNozzo Senior wanders over, and from there the
conversation gets fairly bawdy, which Tim is actually enjoying, but mortifies Tony, who scuttles away at the first opportunity.

He's lying in Abby's bed again. This time on his back while she cuddles against his side, her head on his shoulder. His fingers are idly petting her hair, and she's gently stroking his chest.

"Good Christmas?" she asks.

"Yeah, that really was." He takes her hand in his, slipping his fingers between hers, watching the way they fit together. "How about on Friday, after work, I tell Gibbs about us, and then we take this full-on public?"

"I'd like that. It'd be nice to show up at a party with you, leave with you, and really kiss you while we're there."

"Yeah, it would." He smiles and kisses the back of her hand. "Friday then?"

"Friday."
So, on Friday, instead of driving to his own home, Tim turns his car toward Gibbs' place.

Gibbs' basement is one of the most male places Tim's ever been. And he's been in a lot of guy-only places over the course of his life. One of the things he likes about Gibbs' basement is that it's not aggressively masculine. It's not his dad's office, which was covered in images of things that kill people, awards for killing people, citations, praises, and headlines for killing people.

Gibbs kills people, too. In a more up-close and personal way than his father ever did. And Tim understands the necessity of it, the value of men who are willing to end life, as well as protect it. After all, he is one of those men. But there should be more than that. And, for Gibbs, there is. Here, in his basement, in the space where he does what he loves; he builds things. Here, in this basement, is masculine energy that creates, that tames chaos, and coaxes beauty out of everyday objects and the will of man.

Tim likes to think of his writing that way, as well.

Though Gibbs and his father are similar when it comes to the being the calm, quiet, deadly type, Tim prefers that Gibbs creates in his off time, while his father works on new ways to destroy.

He stands on the bottom step for a moment, watching Gibbs work a plane over a piece of wood.

Part of him wants to fluster and bluster and hide from this. Another part knows that Gibbs will respect blunt and to the point a lot more than any flowery words or excuses.

"Abby and I are dating again."

Gibbs looks up, and, like Palmer, he couldn't have been less surprised if he tried. "Yeah."

Tim waits for a minute, wondering if there'll be anything else. But Gibbs is just looking at him, almost daring him to break into a long, flustered chain of words.

"That's it?" Tim asks.

Gibbs nods.

"Nothing about rule twelve, or possibly breaking up the team or..."

Gibbs puts down the plane. "McGee, DiNozzo's your partner. You two start dating; I'll have something to say about it. Abby's the love of your life. Now, quit wasting time with me, and go see her."

"Yes, Boss."

"Tim."

"Yeah?"

"Make her happy."

Tim smiles at that, feeling warm from all over from Gibbs blessing. "Will do, Boss."

He's half-way up the stairs when two thoughts occur to him. One he decides to save for a little while,
namely, if he's Tony's partner, who is Ziva's? The second thought is more personal.

"Boss?"

Gibbs had picked the plane back up, but he puts it down again. "Yeah, McGee?"

He turns and goes down the stairs, leaning his elbows against the railing.

"May I ask you a personal question?" Normally this is so far away from something he's allowed to do that he'd never do it, but especially after that very long chat with Diane, he's thinking that Gibbs might have some real insight into this. He half expects Gibbs to give him that back off look, but Gibbs gives him that look that says go ahead. It occurs to Tim that it's likely the only reason he's getting the go ahead is because this is related to Abby, and a lot of Gibbs' walls fall when it comes to Abby.

"When you got married the second, third, and fourth times, did you mean your vows?"

Gibbs looks very startled and quite annoyed by that.

Oh shit! Tim quickly adds, "I'm not calling you a liar, it's just..." He can feel himself blushing and wants to sprint up the steps to get out of this, but he wants the answer more, so he powers on through. "Look, you're a good guy. You're brave and loyal, and you put yourself on the line for other people all the time. From everything I can see, you're the definition of an honorable man. But you've got three ex-wives, all of whom you promised to love forever. Did you really love them, and did it just go wrong? Or did you know it wasn't right from the start?"

Gibbs gives him a look Tim can't read, goes to his work bench, and pours two glasses of bourbon. He gestures, and Tim comes closer. He hands one of them to Tim.

Tim holds his glass, waiting to see how, or if, Gibbs will answer. Gibbs shoots his back. Maybe some things can only be said slightly drunk.

"Truly loving someone is..." He lets that trail off, maybe he doesn't have a good way to explain what really being in love is, or maybe it really is just too personal to say out loud. "And when it's gone, you crave it. Not having it carves a hole so deep inside you; you'll do anything to make that go away. I made some awfully bad choices trying to ease that ache. And every time I got up there to say my vows, I meant them, heart and soul... just not to the woman standing in front of me.

"Did I know? Not then. But I know now. The thing is, you love someone like that, there'll never be another person to fill that hole. There are other people, who could be perfectly good partners, who could make you happy, but it can't happen if you keep trying to turn them into the person you lost."

Tim sips his drink. "I'm sorry you lost her."

"Me, too. So, now, take my advice, quit wasting your time. You and Abby aren't getting any younger."

"Yes, sir." Once again halfway up the stairs, he has to add another question. "Boss..."

"Yeah, McGee?"

"Who is Ziva's partner? I mean, if I'm Tony's..."

Gibbs smiles. "I am. And maybe one of these days DiNozzo will get up the nerve to ask me that for himself."
"Probably sooner rather than later. He's over at my place two-three times a week now."

Gibbs nods and then, finally, Tim leaves.
Something Hinky

Normally, Tony wouldn't do this. But, to quote Abby, something "hinky" is going on with McGee, and as a good friend and a good partner, it's his job to get to the bottom of it.

Tony is standing outside of McGee's apartment. He knows McGee is home, because his car is parked in its normal spot. But it's not supposed to be in that spot. He's supposed to be "out" tonight.

He knocks, and there's no answer. Not that he expects one. McGee told him that no, they couldn't get together tonight, because he had some sort of unnamed errand. Something quote, "Really, Tony, you don't want to know," about.

Third time that's happened in a month. Fourth time he's been over and McGee hasn't been home. It's got to be a woman. And really, honestly, it worries Tony. This isn't just a matter of curiosity. If McGee's lying about it--Tony didn't buy that D&D crap for a minute. McGee always gets that panicked look on his face when he lies.--then something's really wrong, and between his own personal experience on how badly everyone involved can get hurt with a secret romance, and McGee's unerring ability to hook-up with psychos, a secret romance has all the ingredients for them to end up hunting down McGee's killer.

Plus, they're partners, and okay, yeah, he'll tease McGee about a girlfriend, or hell... boyfriend?—Oh, God, is that why he keeps saying it's not a girl? Okay, some of Abby's hints sort of leaned that way, and if anyone would know, it's Abby. Is that why McGee thinks he really doesn't want to know? Oh well, no biggie if it is. Unless he's about to walk into something he'd really rather not see. Tony winces at the idea of stepping into a McBoyLoveFest—but he should be honest about stuff like this.

He knocks one more time—maybe McGee's in the head or something—and two more minutes go by with no answer.

Lock picking isn't his best skill. Usually he's got Ziva or Gibbs around for doing that. But not his best skill and can't do it at all are not in any way the same thing. So, yeah, he's not setting any records for getting into McGee's apartment, but eventually the door opens.

He shuts it behind himself quietly, and is about to yell out "Hello" when he realizes what he's hearing. Sex. Fast, hard, and from the sounds of it, hot, sex. Sex loud enough that he's sure no one in that apartment heard him knock. Tony's honestly embarrassed that it takes him a few seconds to identify the sounds. Obviously he's been on the shelf too damn long if he's actually got to think about it to figure out what he's hearing. He is pleased to see that last moan is a woman's voice, though.

He supposes he should turn around, walk out, and then verbally beat the hell out to McGee tomorrow for not telling him, but his feet are pulling him toward McGee's room. Really, he should leave. It's one thing to break into a guy's home to prove he's lying to you. It's a whole other thing to treat his sex life as your own personal peep show.

The fact that he's thinking that has in no way altered the path his feet are taking. It's like his brain is sitting in his head, giving orders, but nothing below his ears is paying attention to it.

The door to McGee's room is open, and he steps through it.

The sight before his eyes is so shocking to him that Tony cannot process it. He literally cannot attach people he knows to the image in front of him.
It's beautiful, artistic, and ridiculously erotic.

The girl, he can't wrap his mind around the idea that this might be Abby, so he thinks of her as 'the girl' is on top of a waist high dresser, wearing black stockings with red ribbons lacing up the back. Her legs seem impossibly long, one of them wrapped around 'the guys,' hip—Once again, his mind refuses to attach the identity of McGee to what he's seeing, so he thinks of the male as 'the guy.'—the other stretched straight up, along his chest, her foot, clad in a red stiletto heel, near his ear. Her back is arched, her head back, long black hair lightly brushing the top of the dresser with each thrust.

The guy is naked. He has one hand on her hip helping to steady her, the other on the calf near his ear. His face is turned toward that leg, kissing it. He's moving fast, nothing slow or gentle about the sex, but the look on his face is intense and reverent.

From Tony's place next to the door, he can see there's some sort of red rope, it looks soft and shiny, across the girl's back, just below her shoulder blades. Each strand of the rope extends up her arms, crisscrossing, mirroring the lacing of the stockings, until her hands meet above her head, and the ropes come together, securing her hands to each other. From there the rope twists around itself, terminating in a fairly complex, and very secure-looking, knot on a hook in the ceiling.

Tony can see the girl is in front of a mirror, so the guy can look at her in front of him, and see her back at the same time.

The mirror. Tony's looking at this in the mirror and he realizes that both of them have their eyes open.

The guy is looking at him. Not slowing down, not stopping, not acting flustered or embarrassed. He's just staring at Tony, saying nothing, and fucking like a porn star.

And that's when the fact that this is McGee and Abby snaps into Tony's mind.

"Oh my God." He whispers it the first time. "Oh my God!" The second time is in a regular voice. "OH MY GOD!" He thinks he might have shrieked it as he trips over his feet running out of McGee's apartment.
The Four Pillars of Romance

Tim's never been to Tony's place, but it doesn't take long for him to find out where it is. After all, the guy who can hack the CIA doesn't have any problems getting into the NCIS human resources database.

He debates knocking, but decides not to. Tony broke into his house last night; last thing he needs to do is be polite.

It's a matter of a minute to pick Tony's lock. The fact that Tony has a chain on his door stops Tim, though. Two thoughts occur to him, one he should get one of those for his place. Two, now he has to be nice and knock.

Another minute and Tony answers. He looks tired and maybe a little hung over. He doesn't say anything; he just stares at Tim, like he'd never seen him before, and it occurs to Tim that Tony never really has seen him before. He's seen an image of Tim that fits his own ideas and prejudices of who Tim should be.

"I told you, you didn't want to know."

Tony's too rattled to bluster. "I was worried about you."

"I get that. But I can take care of myself."

"Yeah. So... um... you and Abby?"

"Yep. If you had minded your own business, we were going to tell you tonight."

Tony thinks about that. "Aren't the Palmers going out with us tonight, too?"

"Yeah. They already know."

"Wait, you told Palmer? Before me?" Tony sounds hurt by that.

"Yeah, Tony. I told Palmer. I'm not just fooling around here. So, before this even got started, I asked him for advice."

"What sort of advice could Autopsy Gremlin have?" Tony's beyond hurt and gone to insulted and disappointed right now.

"I don't know! What could our married friend possibly know that might be useful to me?" Tim's still miffed about being walked in on, so he amps his sarcasm. "Hmmm... Maybe he'd know something about how to actually create a relationship that works?"

"Cut the sarcasm."

"You picked my lock and walked in on me having sex with Abby! I think I deserve a little sarcasm," Tim says, voice hot.

"I'm sorry I did that." And Tony does sound sorry.

"Good."

They stand there, quiet for a moment. Finally DiNozzo says, "So, you really are serious about this?"
"Yeah."

"Why didn't you talk to me?" Again, he's looking mainly hurt.

Tim could talk about not wanting to get teased. He could talk about how he doesn't want to deal with any sort of emotional vulnerability when it comes to Tony because that never goes well for him. But he's not going to. The guy who picks the lock to get into his house after being told to stay out of it doesn't get a kind answer. So, Tim goes on the attack. "Seven hundred hook-ups in the last three years does not make you the guy I go to for relationship advice. I don't need advice on how to hook-up. I don't want a hook-up. They bore me."

"Yeah McKinky, I got that." Tony rolls his eyes. "But that's not what I meant. We're partners, supposedly friends, we talk about important things."

It's not like Tony's got a bad point with that, but Tim's still too annoyed to deal with that. "McKinky? Tony, on a one to ten scale of kink, that was a two five maybe three." Tony's very open right now, and Tim doesn't want to engage with it, but he can't avoid it entirely. "And as for why not say anything, you can't keep a secret to save your life. This matters to me, and if it didn't go right, I didn't want to be mocked. I certainly didn't want you telling Abby or worse, Gibbs, about it before anything got going."

Tony closes his eyes, shaking his head. He also knows that Tim's got a point there, because that's exactly what he'd do, and he doesn't want to get into it, either. "A three? God, McGee, I didn't need to know that about you."

"Yeah, well, I told you, you didn't want to know. Why did you assume I was wrong about that?"

Tony shrugs. "I wanted to know on a general level. Like, 'Hey, Tony, I don't want you in my apartment all the time because I'm doing horrifically freaky things to Abby.'"

Tim's eyes go wide at that. That's more of a shot on this than he expects of thinks is warranted, and if sex started as a way to keep away from any really deep feelings about this, it's rapidly going there. "Seriously, you have no idea of what horrifically freaky is. How on earth is it you've slept with every woman in the greater DC area and you're so sheltered?"

"Just, stop. Okay." Tony looks genuinely hurt. "This isn't about my sex life."

Part of Tim feels like he should pull back, let it lie. Part of him wants to know what's really going on here. And part of him knows that if they don't have this out properly it'll just sit there and fester, and he doesn't want that, so he says, "Really? Okay. We're partners. We talk about important things. Why are you at my place all the time these days? Why, after hearing, because you had to be able to hear what we were doing, after all, I don't see any reason to be quiet when I'm having sex in my locked apartment, did you walk into my room? What's going on with you?"

Tony looks deeply uncomfortable. He sighs and gestures to the sofa. Tim sits down. "You want a drink or anything?"

"I'm good." Tony vanishes into the kitchen and comes back a moment later with a beer. "Beer? It's ten in the morning."

"It's a beer conversation." He sits down heavily on the piano bench. "And I'm still trying to kill the brain cells that remember what I saw last night. How am I ever going to look Abby in the eyes again?"

Tim shrugs. "You're looking at me."
"You weren't the one tied up like a—"

"The ropes, that's what has you freaked?"

"No... It's just...Okay... I don't look at Abby like that. She's my asexual little sister."

"She's really not."

"Yeah. I know that, now. But I didn't want to know that. I could have, very happily, gone my whole life without ever knowing that. Think about it, do you want to know what your sister gets up to with her boyfriends?"

"Ergh..." Tim winces. There are some things he'd really rather not know about his sister. "No, which is part of why I never walk in on her unannounced. And once again, I told you, you didn't want to know."

"Yeah, and if you ever tell me I don't want to know something again, I'll listen."

Tim laughs at that. "Yeah, right. So really, what's going on? Why are you at my place? Why did you walk in?"

"I don't know." Tony's staring at the beer, like it might somehow have the answers to all of his issues. "It's just... lately... I don't know, the chase isn't doing it for me. It's hollow and empty and... I guess I want something more."

Tim smiles, looking amused, he knows now probably isn't a great time to tease Tony, but he can't resist. "And you're looking for it at my place? I'm flattered, but I think after last night it's pretty clear I don't swing that way."

"Yeah. I get that." Then it hit's Tony what Tim's really said. "I'm not gay! I enjoy being with you, okay? We're friends, and spending time with you isn't cheap or hollow."

"So, you're looking for a deeper human connection—"

"You sound like Oprah when you say it that way."

"You got a better way to put it?"

"No."

"And you're hanging out at my place..."

"Not just yours. I'm spending a decent amount of time with Gibbs."

Tim raises an eyebrow. "And Ziva?"

"No. Not Ziva."

"Uh huh." Yeah, who Ziva's partner is should start to matter really soon if it doesn't already. "So, you're lonely. And to remedy lonely, you're hanging out with your guy friends."

"Yeah."

"Instead of chasing women."

"It's not working anymore."
Tim leans back on the sofa. "sounds like you need a girlfriend."

"I've had girlfriends."

"no, not a hook-up. not a series of hook-ups with one woman. do you remember what being engaged felt like?"

"Yeah." and tim can see by the way Tony's looking that he does, and that he misses it. "That's part of what prompted this."

"You know, when I told Gibbs about Abby and I—"

"You told Gibbs, too? Did anyone besides Ziva and I not know?"

"First of all, of course I told Gibbs! Between his relationship with Abby, and his relationship with me, I wasn't about to spend too long going behind his back. You walk in on the two of us and it's uncomfortable. He walks in, and I get killed."

Tony nods at that and takes another swig of his beer. "good point. can you imagine dating his daughter?"

"I sort of am. which is another reason for not telling everyone and seeking advice on how to run a successful, long-term relationship. Pissed off Gibbs avenging Abby is really low on my list of people I want to spend time with."

"Okay, yeah. Got that."

"Anyway, when I told him, I asked about rule number twelve, because, well, you know, Gibbs... and he said something interesting. 'McGee, DiNozzo is your partner. You start dating him, and I'll have something to say to you.'"

"Of course I'm your partner."

"Right." Tim sits there, expectantly, waiting for the light to dawn on Tony. Tony sits there stubbornly not getting it. "Tony, if I'm your partner, who is Ziva's?" The light dawns and Tony's eyes grow wide. "Exactly. Look, you don't have to be lonely, but you do have to figure out how to deal with a woman as a sexual person and not freak out about it. You can't just have two columns, hook-ups and sisters. If you don't want to be lonely, you have to figure out how to value sex as part of a person, and enjoy it as something you do fully with someone else."

Tim thinks for a moment, and then gets up and grabs a beer. Some things really are just too damn hard to say without some alcohol to dull the part of your brain that keeps you quiet.

He drinks down half of it fast, hoping it'll catch up to him soon, and sits back down on the sofa, elbows on his knees, leaning toward Tony. "You know why I don't like hook-ups?"

"You're bad at them?"

Tim flips him the bird and takes another deep drink of the beer. "Because they're basically masturbation, and I've been doing that for myself just fine for a good long time. Tony, you're not seventeen, hell, you aren't thirty-seven anymore. You've jerked-off enough. Time to find a partner and figure out what's involved in real sex."

Tony does not appear particularly impressed by this bit of advice, but he's also not arguing with it.
Tim takes one last drink, finishing off the beer. "Now, here's rule number one for my place: Unless you think I am in mortal peril, do not ever just walk in. If I do not answer the door or my phone, turn the hell around and leave. If you thought what you walked in on was disturbing, what happens when Abby and I really get going would make you wet your pants."

Tony looks deeply disturbed by that idea, but he doesn't say anything.

They sit quietly for a few minutes. Tim is on the verge of saying something like, 'You know this really is a nice apartment', but curiosity gets the better of him. If you asked him, he'd say the beer went to his head, and that's why he asked. And, if you asked Tony, he'd tell you that's why he answered, in fact, Tony would blame this entire conversations, including the parts that happened before he was drinking, on the beer, but really, neither of them is such a lightweight that one beer will get them talking if they don't want to talk.

"So, why did you go in? I mean, I know we weren't being quiet, and even if it's been a while for you, you still remember what sex sounds like. What were you expecting to see?"

Tony shakes his head. "I don't know. Something sort of awkward and romantic? Candles, flowers, missionary position. Not ropes and tattoos and sharp pointy shoes."

"What we were doing didn't look romantic to you?" Tim expects the awkward bit. And he knows what he was doing was kinkier than anything Tony'd imagine him doing. He is surprised by the romantic part. He thought they were having a romantic night in.

"No, it looked like porn. Strangely artistic porn."

Tim can see that. What he doesn't see is why that might not be romantic. "Tony, what do you think romance is?"

Tony seriously thinks about it for a moment, but doesn't say anything.

"Why do women like candles and flowers and chocolates?" Tim hopes the extra question will clarify what he's getting at.

"They just do?" Tony says, kind of listless. He doesn't really want to be talking about this.

"There's part of your problem, part of why you're lonely. It's not really romance if you're not enjoying it, too. Romance has three parts: effort, showing that you've paid attention, and trust.

"So, effort: they don't sell satin ropes at the corner hardware store. I had to go to three craft stores before I found a place that had the right stuff in the exact same color as the laces on Abby's stockings. But it wasn't strong enough to support her weight, so I had to braid it into something that could do that. Twice, because I needed two ropes. I had to measure to make sure it was the right length. I had to find the joist in my ceiling and then sink the hook into it. Then I had to move the dresser and the mirror that goes over it, and also find the exact angle where the mirror on my closet door would let Abby see what was going on.

"Oh, and by the way, there were candles and flowers, and I got dinner, too, but apparently you didn't notice that.

"Paying attention: I know Abby likes knots. I know how she likes to be tied up. I know she likes to watch. And I know she likes roses in red, white, and black, so that's the colors I got. I know she prefers spicy scents to flowery ones, so the candles are a cinnamon-vanilla mix.

"Trust: Do you have any idea how much trust it takes to let someone tie you up like that? Let alone
"take pictures."

"Oh God, you took pictures?" Tony sounds appalled by that.

"Did you not see how hot that looked? Of course, I took pictures! And I had a blast doing it, setting
the whole thing up, getting shots of it, and playing with her after I put my phone down. But that's
beside the point. Tony, that might not have looked like your idealized hearts-and-flowers-Hallmark-
card-Valentine's-day, but trust me on this, you've never seen anything more romantic than that in
your life."

"Huh." Tony shrugs limply, mostly suggesting that he doesn't want to argue it. "I've never thought
about it like that."

Tim jumps on that as an olive branch. "I get that. And I've got nothing against missionary style,
straight-up sex. It's good for talking to each other."

"You talk during sex?" Tony's looking really surprised by that. McGee's not a big talker when he's
doing talking type things, talking during sex... He doesn't get that at all.

"Sometimes. You don't?" Meanwhile, Tim can't imagine not talking to the person you're having sex
with.

"Like, kinky talk?"

"Sometimes." That gets a dirty smile out of Tim. "Get her mind involved in the sex, and you'll both
have a better time for it. But no, not always. Sometimes we just talk."

"Weird." Tony's trying to wrap his mind around the idea of just talking during sex. "Like, about
what?"

"I don't know." Tim shrugs. "Just, whatever. You think talking to someone who is letting you into
her body is weird?"

"I think being able to come up coherent sentences when you're in someone else's body is weird. I can
barely remember my name when I fuck." Tim kind of shrugs to indicate, that, yeah, he gets that.

Tony shifts a bit, putting his beer on the floor, really looking at Tim. "So, let me see if I get this, you
two, you're having dinner, maybe a bottle of wine, talking about whatever it is you two talk about,
and then at some point, you just chirp up with, 'Hey, Abby, how about I tie you up and fuck you
blind?'"

Tim nods a little. That wasn't exactly how it happened, but it's close enough. "We'd planned on it a
few days ahead of time, but yeah, that's the basic idea."

"You plan sex?"

Tim's eyebrows furrow. He knows Tony plans sex, too. At least, he's pretty sure that if you buy the
lingerie and honey dust ahead of time that counts as planning ahead. "How long do you think it takes
to braid two thirteen foot long ropes? Of course, we planned it ahead of time! That's not the sort of
thing you excuse yourself for and whip up in five minutes. Here's lets add a fourth plank to romance:
anticipation. If you plan ahead of time, you get to anticipate what comes next."

Tony sighs and shakes his head. "Nerd sex."

"Nerd sex is a lot of fun."
"So you say." Tony doesn't sound sold on that idea.

"I was right about Call of Duty and Laser Tag."

"You were."

Tim looks at Tony meaningfully for a long moment, and then says, "So, this is a really nice apartment."
Eight hours later, they're out, getting pizza before their bi-weekly Laser Tag game. Abby walks over to DiNozzo and slaps him upside the back of the head, quite a bit harder than Gibbs does it. These days, Gibbs barely makes contact, just the swipe of his hand up the back of Tony's hair is more than enough to get the idea across.

Abby does not appear to have grasped that nuance in how Gibbs handles them. Or she's just really pissed.

"Owww..." Tony gently rubs the back of his head.

"It's polite to knock." She's glaring down at him.

"I knocked!"

The glare intensifies. "It's polite to wait for someone else to answer."

"Yes, Ma'am. Will wait for someone to answer next time."

Abby stares at Tony, but he's looking properly contrite. "Good. Dinner's on you tonight."

Ziva watches the exchange with an amused smile on her face. "What happened?"

"Tony picked McGee's lock and walked in on us last night."

Ziva stands up and smacks him upside the back of the head, as well, and, damn, she does it harder than Abby. "What's that for?" he asks, rubbing his head again.

"Not respecting their privacy."

Tony's staring at Ziva, but she's not surprised by this at all. "Did you just miss what she said, 'Walked in on us!'"

"I heard, I knew."

"Everyone knew but me?" He looks around the table at five very unshocked people.

"Looks like it, Tony,' Jimmy says as he lifts a bite of his salad to his lips. (It's pizza and beer night, but Jimmy avoids carbs most of the time. That works better with his diabetes. He's having beer tonight, so no pizza.)

"And you didn't tell me?" Tony asks Ziva.

"What's to tell? You could see it just as easily as I could."

"Apparently not." He stops rubbing his head and pulls a slice off the green pepper, onions, and pepperoni pizza in the middle of the table. "Meanwhile, I keep telling you I'm worried about McGee's mysterious disappearances..." And he had, like four times, and she'd done absolutely nothing to reassure him that McGee was okay.

Ziva takes a dainty bite of her veggie pizza. "And I kept telling you to mind your own business, that he'd tell you when it was time."
"Which was supposed to be tonight," Tim chimes in.

"So, everyone knows we're dating?" Abby adds.

"Vance," says Ziva.

"Ducky?" asks Tony.

"Figured it out at the wedding," Palmer answers.

"At the wedding?" Tony's sounds wounded by that. "So, for the record, you are the mystery woman?"

Abby smiles. "Yeah."

"How did I miss that?"

"You were busy hitting on my sister," Breena says. "She thinks you're cute, by the way, and wouldn't mind if you were to call her at some point."

Tony nods. "Glad to see someone's been appreciating me."

"We love you, Tony" Abby hugs him, "and if it wasn't for the fact that all of you are much too observant for your own good, the Palmers and Gibbs would have been the only ones to find out before you did."

Ziva shrugs at that while Palmer says, "If Tim wasn't making rookie mistakes, it would have been harder to tell."

Breena gives Jimmy a long look, something that seems to say, _And what precisely would you know about running a clandestine affair?_ Jimmy blushes in response, some stories Breena hasn't heard all the details of.

"So, you do have to tell Vance," he says by way of getting off that topic. "It's policy. You've got to tell your immediate supervisors."

"Oh... I'm not looking forward to that," Tim adds.

Breena looks at both of them. "Can't you just send him a memo?"

"Yeah, NCIS, at least our team, doesn't work that way. I wasn't kidding about the family thing. Leon's sort of a distant and imposing Great Uncle, but he's still part of the family, so no matter how uncomfortable it is, you've got to tell him in person," Abby replies.

"Yay! Monday morning." Tim says sarcastically. "I think you should tell him."

"Why me?"

"He's your direct supervisor, not mine. And I already told Gibbs."

"There is that," Abby says.

"Really?" Breena asks.

"Really. She outranks all of us except Ducky. She outranks Gibbs," Tim says, enjoying this.
Abby shrugs. "It'd be a bigger deal if I had employees or something. But, the lab is mine, which means I'm head of my own department. So, below Vance, equal to Ducky, above all of my very favorite special agents."

"How did you end up in charge of the lab?" Breena asks, and from there the conversation flows about how Abby ended up with her science kingdom in the basement at NCIS.

"Give me a lift home, Tony?" Ziva asks at the end of the game.

"Sure." She had carpooled with Abby and McGee on the way there, but having gotten there and seeing how Tony is doing, she wants some time alone with him.

"You've been very quiet all night," she says as she gets into his car.

He nods, turning on the ignition and shifting into reverse.

"Talk to me?"

"None of you trusted me with it."

Ziva can see there's more than his usual curious, need to know everything going on. He looks like he's feeling hurt about not being in the loop. "Would you have kept quiet? Could you have not teased McGee about it?"

"Yes, I would have kept quiet. I'm not going to screw up his chances with Abby. And no. Teasing McGee is like breathing, I can't not do it."

"But you're still bothered he didn't tell you earlier."

"He told Palmer before me. Palmer? They're barely friends. He doesn't work ten hours a day with Palmer. Palmer doesn't have his back."

"Palmer is married."

"Yeah. So what? He's supposed to tell me things like that. I'm his partner, Ziva."

Ziva squeezes his hand. She completely understands Tim's desire to keep his heart to himself, and she utterly understands Tony's disappointment and hurt at not being chosen for this secret.

"Does he know Wendy left you?"

"No."

"Did you ever tell him the whole story about Jeanne?"

"No."

"Any of it?"

Tony shakes his head. "You, Jenny, and Gibbs knew I loved her. That was it."

Ziva nods. She doesn't have to say any more about that. Tony's gotten the message. So, she shifts topic a little to something else she's been noticing. "Do you miss her sometimes?"
"Yeah. Sometimes."
"Especially lately?"
"Yeah."
"You could try looking her up again. Enough time has passed, maybe you could..."

"No." He shakes his head. "That bridge is burned. I don't want to go back, not to her, not to Wendy." He looks at Ziva sitting next to him, seeing her in the orange glow of halogen street lights. "Just not sure how to get to where forward is."

"You'll find it Tony, just give it some time."

"Sure."
Stakeout

Five days later they're on a stakeout and Tony says, "So, if you're my partner, who is Ziva's?"

Tim doesn't look away from the building they're surveying as he says, "According to Gibbs, it's him."

"Hmmm..."

Tim glances to Tony for a heartbeat. "Why are you asking?"

"Just, thinking about it."

"Okay. Can I suggest something?"

"Suggest away McSuperfreak."

"Before you do anything beyond think, talk to Gibbs."

Of all the things Tony doesn't want to do, having a chat with Gibbs about Ziva is pretty near the top of the list. So, if he doesn't have to... "He was cool with you and Abby?"

Tim nods. "His exact words were, "DiNozzo's your partner. Abby's the love of your life. Now go make her happy."

"Sounds like he was cool." And if he's cool with McAbby McAbbing, he'd be fine with him and Ziva, right? Stands to reason, doesn't it?

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean he'll be cool with you and Ziva," Tim says popping Tony's mental bubble. "He trusts me not to screw this up. I don't know if he trusts you with that, not yet."

Tony's eyes narrow at that. "Why wouldn't he trust me with this?"

"Because you've got a horrible track record with women."

"And you don't, McLonelyheart?"

Tim rolls his eyes. "Not the same kind you do. I pick the wrong girl. Stop picking the wrong girl, and I'm an ideal boyfriend. I remember birthdays and anniversaries, I send cute texts in the middle of the day, and pick up little presents just because I like making her smile, besides my insane job schedule--"

"And the fact that you spend hours gaming away, Elf Lord."

Tim glares. "You're emotionally closed off and treat women like objects. I'm a little awkward but loyal and respectful. Back on track. Gibbs loves us." Tony doesn't look like he buys that. "You didn't see the way he looked at me when he thought I was hurt, or the way he was asking about you and Ziva when you were missing. He loves us. But we're boys. So, we get treated like sons, you know, hands off, not too protective unless we really need it. But Abby and Ziva, they're his girls. And if it's one of us or one of them, they win. Hands down. You screw things up with Ziva, and he will kill you."

Tony looks amused by that, which surprises Tim. "Like he'd get the chance. She'd kill me so dead so fast he'd just be standing there with the tape to mark where my body had been."
Tim nods in agreement with that. He was underestimating Ziva some on that. "Good point. Still, talk to him first. He'll appreciate it, you know in an old-fashioned-calling-on-my-daughter sort of way."

They sit there, staring at a brownstone, waiting for someone, anyone to go in or come out.

"You want me to get us some lunch?" Tony asks.

"Sure, that sounds good."

Tony comes back to the car with two hamburgers, fries, and drinks about twenty minutes later. Tim pops a fry into his mouth. "Ahh... stakeout food. Yum!" His tone is about three quarters sarcastic. He likes burgers and fries, but they've been on stakeout for a while, and they're getting repetitive.

Tony's fiddling with his burger, not really eating it.

"What's wrong, Tony?" Tim's expecting more Ziva stuff.

"Nothing."

Tim knows that's BS, if Tony's not eating, something's wrong. "You sure?"

"I'm... Okay, no, not nothing. The thing with the ropes, how does that work?" There's an edge to Tony's voice as he asks, one that immediately sets off Tim.

"They're ropes, Tony. You tie knots in them. It's not rocket science." Okay, that came out a bit more sarcastic than was probably warranted, but the way Tony's looking at him has him feeling defensive. Tony's looking at him like he doesn't like what he sees when he looks at Tim.

"I know how to tie knots," Tony shoots back, just as sarcastic, tapping his tie. "I tie knots all the time. I mean... why? Is it a power thing? You're low man on the totem pole at work, so you get to be in charge at home? She's tied up and can't leave so you get to do whatever you want? Your little inner rapist gets to play?"

Tim pulls back against the seat of the car, his eyes going wide, and his burger drops out of numb fingers. He's never been more insulted by anything Tony's said to him. "Tony, what the hell is wrong with you?"

Tony looks really disturbed and very confused. "You don't have to tie them up if they like you! If they like you, they're happy to stick around and fuck."

Tim's mouth opens and closes again and again before he manages to get out, "I don't have to tie Abby up. I like tying her up. She likes being tied up. And she does it to me just as often as I do it to her. I like getting tied up. She likes tying me up. No inner rapists." He slaps Tony's shoulder. "It's a game. It's fun. I don't get football; that doesn't mean that I think you want to go run around and assault people."

"I just don't get it." Tony's looking at his burger, but that expression of disgust aimed at Tim has eased off. Some.

Tim takes a deep breath and tries to think of how to explain this. "Okay, ropes. If you're using a rope, it's for the aesthetics." He grabs his phone and clicks on a hidden file. This is where he keeps his super secure items, mostly pictures of Abby, but bank statements, his password folder, stuff like that is in here, too. A screen pops up asking for the password. If you type anything into it, it destroys the phone, and not just in a wipes the memory sort of way, but shortly after watching Sherlock Season Two, he wired a tiny explosive into it as well. Type a password in and the phone goes boom.
You have to wait a full minute for the password request to vanish. The screen goes black, it looks like it just powered down, then you type in the password. It's one letter: J. Type in the wrong letter, boom. Type in more than one letter, boom. Take more than five seconds to type in the password, boom. Open the phone, boom. It's probably the most secure phone in the western hemisphere.

He sorts through the images, keeping them out of Tony's view. Even though Tony's already seen this, since he stood there for a good, long minute before running out screaming, he doesn't want to share most of the images with him.

Just the one of Abby's forearms and hands. "Look Tony, take a moment and really look at it. It's beautiful. The red of the rope, the sheen of the satin, the way the knots make her hands and arms look so long and delicate. Look at her fingers, and the way they're twined in the rope. Look at her nails, crimson nails on scarlet rope. Look at the contrast between her skin and the rope. White skin, black ink, red satin ropes. The Japanese call it Kinbaku-bi, the beauty of tight binding. In Japan the rope would usually be jute or hemp, but they're sharp and itchy, so I go for silk or satin. This has a long tradition, and there are a lot of words to go with it. Shibari is a more common one, but doesn't indicate the same level of emotional attachment Kinbaku-bi does.

"Some people are really into this. Lots of specific knots, lots of tradition. Some of them like pain to go along with it, but that's not Abby or I, so I always make sure the knots are comfortable, once again, no hemp ropes. But for the most part, with a rope, it's about how it looks.

"Just look at it, Tony." He flicks to the next pic, this one just of her hands holding the rope. "Look at her hands, look at how they caress the rope. Look at how erotic and expressive just that image is. It's just two hands and a rope, but they tell a story, and it's beautiful. There's nothing hurtful or painful or scared or non-consensual about that."

Tony's face is pointed toward the image on the phone, but he doesn't seem to be seeing it. "That's how you see it. I see bound hands clenched against a rope, and that looks like pain to me."

"Okay, not that picture, but when I was... there..."

"Oh." **Fuck!** Tim rubs his eyes, taking a moment to think about what that might have looked like if you didn't know what you were seeing. "I wasn't hurting her Tony. You know that, right?"

Tony rolls his eyes. He knows, but... it didn't look comfortable to him. "Yeah. But..."

"It looked painful to you?"

"That hard, that fast, her hands clenching the rope... Yeah."

Okay, **how to explain this...** "You ever really watch a woman's face when she gets off? She looks like she's in pain."

Tony looks horrified by that idea. "No she doesn't!"

At this point, it occurs to Tim that either the kind of woman he sleeps with is in some way fundamentally different than the sort Tony sleeps with, or their techniques are so radically different as to produce very different results. Either way, this isn't the road to take. "Okay, fine. She doesn't."

Tim picks up his burger, and flicks the crumbs off his trouser leg. "That's gonna stain."

"You're just gonna leave it at that?"
"I'll bow to your superior experience in this matter. I've only seen three women get off."

"Three?" Now Tony's looking a bit happier.

Tim can feel him warming up for some serious teasing, so he gets ready to shut him down. "Yeah, three. I had one steady girl in grad school. My next two longest relationships have been with the same woman. I haven't hooked up with every woman in the metro area. And you can't see her face if it's too dark, your eyes are closed, you're behind her, you're going down on her, or she doesn't get off." That last bit makes Tony scoff. "Oh stop that. Eighteen-year-old virgin Tony did not get his first girl off, either."

"I was fifteen, and you're probably right about that."

"Probably?" Tim gives him his cut the bullshit look.

"Okay, yes, you're right about that. So, you do it because it's pretty?"

Okay, this is better. Tony's looking more curious than bothered right now. "We use the rope because it's pretty. If it's just about not moving, well, I've got handcuffs for that, and they're a lot faster."

And that shot curious to Hell. "Oh God, am I ever going to be able to look at your cuffs without imagining—"

"I don't use my work cuffs for that."

"Thank God." Tony's staring at his cuffs. "But you do use cuffs?"

"Sometimes. You know, for when we don't plan things out days in advance, but still want to do something different."

"Sounds rapey."

"Rapey?" Tim puts his head in his hands and groans in frustration. Then he looks up again as something that had literally never occurred to him springs to mind. "You've never actually done anything like this with a girl, have you?"

Tony looks defensive and annoyed at that idea. "No! If I come at a girl with handcuffs, she's gonna run away, because that's a sign things are about to go very wrong."

Speaking of fundamental differences between the women Tony sleeps with and Abby... "That's because you don't get to know the women you sleep with! Okay, Binding 101: trust. Her good time is, literally, in my hands... or mouth, I guess..." Tony's getting that disturbed look again. Tim flashes him an exasperated look. "Please, you cannot possibly be that vanilla."

"I'm not. I like doing that just fine. Second favorite thing ever. It's the image of you doing it I'm not loving."

Tim gets that. He's not particularly interested in imaging Tony going down on any of his hook-ups, either. "Fine. Anyway. She's trusting me to treat her right. She's letting me control everything, and putting her body in my hands for our mutual pleasure. Can you get how big of a deal that is?"

Tony shrugs. He actually can get it, and it scares him to some degree.

"Maybe it can't be explained. Either you get it or you don't. I get it. Abby gets it. And honestly, beyond the fact that nothing is happening that she doesn't want to happen, you don't need to get it."
"I want... Damnit... You're my best friend, and I want to get it. I don't want to think of you doing bad things to your girlfriend." Tony looks shockingly earnest as he says that, and it freaks Tim out on several levels.

"It's not bad!" And it's not, and he hates the idea that Tony might think it is. He's used to people thinking he's weird. That's more or less his default setting. But, with the exception of his dad, no one he's cared about has ever thought his interests were 'bad.' Granted with the exception of Abby, no one else has ever really known about this particular set of interests.

"So you say."

"God, you are such a prude!" And yeah, that was probably mean, but he's feeling very defensive right now.

"I'm a prude because I don't like whips or chains? Because I don't get off on hitting girls?"

Tim's got no idea where that's coming from, but whatever it is, it's not anything he's doing with Abby. "No whips, no chains, what the hell are you talking about hitting? Nothing even remotely like that happens. ... Just. No. Nothing like that, at all! You're a prude because you can't get over the idea that if you don't like something no one else is allowed to like it either! Seriously, do you think Gibbs or Ducky or Palmer would be freaking out about this?"

"McGee, just, yuck, okay. I don't want to know what sorts of things Autopsy Gremlin gets up to with his wife, and I'm sure Ducky has an at least 3,000 word long monologue about the art of erotic knot tying, but I don't want to hear it, and Gibbs wouldn't freak out, he'd just calmly kill you if he knew what you were doing to Abby."

"With Abby, not to her, and no he wouldn't! He'd just get that exasperated look and file it under 'stuff McGee likes I don't understand' and leave it at that. And you should, too. It's just another sort role playing, sexy D&D for grown-ups. Shove it in your own 'stuff McGee likes I don't understand' file and let it go."

"It's creepy. Spending hours braiding a rope so you can tie your girlfriend up is weird!"

Tim tries very hard not to roll his eyes and ends up looking at the roof of the car as a result. He sighs. "Okay, Tony, what sort of sex should I like?"

"I don't know, plain, normal, American sex!"

"The kind of sex you like?"

"Yes!"

"Meaningless casual encounters with women who won't remember me more than two days later? Why would I want that? Why should I like the same kind of sex you do? I'm not having sex with you!"

"Thank God for small favors."

Tim glares at that. "Look, I don't like the same movies you do. I don't like the same books. I only like some of the same foods." Tim stares at Tony for a while, getting the sense that this is close to something important, but not really there. He's having a hard time getting it just by looking so he switches from the DiNozzo in front of him to the version in his stories, and tries to figure out what would be motivating Tommy if he was freaking out like this. "Is it the idea that of the two of us, you're not the most sexually experienced, is that what's bothering you?"
Tony's literally stupefied by that idea. "Not the most... Every girl in the greater DC area! They've got to ship 'em in from Baltimore and Richmond to find women I haven't slept with."

Tim does roll his eyes at that. "Having exactly the same encounter with seven hundred different women doesn't count as variety or experience."

"Bullshit!"

Tim thinks he's got Tony with that, and he keeps going. "This isn't about me or Abby. It's you. You've got this idea of yourself, worldly, experienced, sophisticated, and you walked in on something you've not only never done, but being done by me, someone you consider naive. You expect that if I've done it, you've done it too, a thousand times over, and probably better. No, that's not right. You couldn't care less about most of the stuff I've done, you aren't angisting about novels or code; you never expect to do it. If I've done something that matters to you, you assume you've done it, too, a thousand times over, and better."

Tony doesn't say anything, but Tim can see from his expression he's thinking about it. Out of the corner of Tim's eye he catches something moving. "We gotta go; the guy in the blue jacket just left the house."

And with that the conversation ends as they begin tailing a suspect.
Gibbs' Team

Gibbs expects certain things to happen with his team. McGee and Abby, he's been waiting for that for years, and he's honestly surprised that it took them that long to get 'round to it. DiNozzo and Ziva, he's got a feeling where that's going, and it worries him.

But whatever the hell that's going on with DiNozzo and McGee has him boggled. McGee dating Abby should not be sending DiNozzo into a sulk. He feels like he knows both of them inside and out by now, and this tension where they're snapping at each other left and right isn't anything he imagined. Something happened, and now the two of them aren't working together properly.

So it's got to get fixed.

He's in the car with McGee, driving to question a suspect, twenty minutes to kill until they get there. "What's going on with you and DiNozzo?"

McGee shrugs, looking out the window, away from Gibbs. "He saw something he shouldn't have, and it's got him rattled."

"Unrattle him."

"I can't. It's all about him on this one."

"This is why you tell your partner about what is going on in your life."

McGee sighs, looking away from oncoming traffic to Gibbs. "You're my boss. You're pretty much Abby's dad, and for that matter, mine. So, no I was not going to tell Tony before I told you. It would have been disrespectful."

Gibbs digests that, feeling very proud and a bit surprised at that moment. But, he's got to get this back on track. "You told Ziva and Palmer."

"I asked Palmer for advice. I want to do this right, and he's the only guy I know and can talk to who's married. Ziva caught me. Otherwise she would have found out after you, too."

Gibbs thinks about that, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. Tony always gets antsy if he feels like he's being left out. "Is that why DiNozzo's sulking? You went behind his back, and he was last to know?"

"No. Literally, he saw something he shouldn't have. I told you Friday night, then went home, Abby was over. We had plans with Tony, Ziva, and the Palmers for Saturday, and we were going to tell him then. I had my door locked, but he broke in and then walked into my room when he should have turned around and left. And if he had just turned around when he heard what was up, I assume he'd be fine with this. But he walked into my room and saw, so he's rattled."

Gibbs can see from the way McGee is looking at him that he hopes that's enough to get the idea across that fixing this is outside of his hands. Gibbs thinks about it. If DiNozzo saw something that really freaked him out, it's possible that McGee might not be able to fix this. His eyes scanning the road in front of them, he slips the car into the next lane of traffic which looks like it's moving a little bit faster.

"You should get a chain on your door." Not the issue at hand, but he's still chewing that over, and this is useful advice.
"Already installed it. And one at Abby's. And on my bedroom door, too." Gibbs nods at that, appreciating the thoroughness. "Though, honestly, I don't think he's walking in again anytime soon, and I hope, for that matter, you and Fornell aren't, either."

Gibbs smiles.

"You know nothing happened with Diane, right? I'm not going to screw your ex-wife, and I'm never fooling around on Abby."

Gibbs gets that exasperated look. "McGee, do you think I might know what Diane looks like in the morning after having sex?"

"Yeah."

He gives McGee the *leave it alone* look.

"So we never have to talk about that again?"

Gibbs nods. "If you can't fix this thing with DiNozzo, what can?"

McGee has that especially frustrated look he gets when he runs into something he doesn't know how to even being dealing with. "I don't know. We talked a few times, but I think that might have made it worse. You could try talking to him. He's got an idea of himself, and he saw something to challenge that, and doesn't know how to deal with it."

Gibbs' look is questioning. Unfortunately, if he's going to fix this, he's got to find out what actually happened, and right now, he really doesn't want to know. McGee can see his first idea of what might be going on and shakes his head. "No, not like he saw Abby naked and suddenly he's madly jealous. Nothing like that."

"What then? I need you two working together."

"Fine. Okay." McGee's blushing from his forehead all the way down his neck but he sounds more exasperated than embarrassed. "He basically found out he doesn't have the biggest dick, and he can't handle it." Gibbs' eyes go wide, that wasn't on the list of things he thought might have been going on, and McGee has the satisfaction of seeing him utterly dumbstruck. "Not literally, well, maybe he did, I don't know, and I don't want to know. But I'm using it as a metaphor, 'cause honestly, you don't need to know what precisely he saw."

If anything Gibbs' eyes get wider, but then it seems to click, and he settles further back into the car seat. He nods, getting a plan together for dealing with this.

"You gonna talk to him?" McGee asks.

"Yeah."

He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, opens them slowly and turns to face Gibbs. "Look, if the words 'doing freaky things to Abby' come up, before you kill me, I'd like you to remember, Tony thinks it's freaky, not me or Abby, and it's *with* Abby not to her."

Gibbs massages his temples and sighs. This might not be why he wrote rule number twelve in the first place, but it's certainly proving to be yet another excellent reason for it. Rule Number 12A: Do not walk in on your partner having sex.

But McGee is staring at him, looking a bit worried, so he's got to get the man in his car calmed
down, and then he can get the next one taken care of. "Tim, you make her cry, I might kill ya. You break her heart, and I will. But I'm not going to do anything to you for something you both want to do."

"I told him that. But... look, no matter what he says, I'm not hurting her."

Gibbs is suddenly feeling very old and very unhappy to have to get that far into McGee and Abby's private life. "I didn't want to know this."

"Yeah, well, talking to you about this wasn't on my list of dearest hopes, either." Gibbs looks at McGee as he says that and smiles, liking that response very much.

Hours later, he's in the car with DiNozzo.

Usually DiNozzo is the easier of the two them to deal with. A few quick words, the occasional slap upside the head, and he's good to go. But right now McGee seems pretty firmly wrapped in a blanket of confident, 'I'm in the right,' and DiNozzo doesn't look like he knows what to do with himself.

"What's going on with you and McGee?"

DiNozzo continues to stare out the window, not answering.

"Come on, out with it. I need you two working together."

"Talking about it won't fix it."

"Why not?" Okay, sure, Gibbs is in favor of not talking issues to death and just letting them fade away. But this is his team, and his boys don't work that way. They need to talk, get things out, deal with them, and then move on.

DiNozzo shakes his head.

Time for the big guns. "Fornell and I didn't talk for two years." Which was exactly as long as they needed to not talk about it to let it fade into an annoying chapter of their mutual history that they can both occasionally poke each other with.

"Whoa, Boss, McGee's not sleeping with...or... wait... Where the hell are you going with this?"

"Tobias slept with mine, and that hits you hard, hits your idea of being a man."

"Oh God, you talked to McGee first." DiNozzo sounds disgusted at that.

Gibbs looks says, Well, that's obvious, now, isn't it?

"Look, he's got this crazy idea..."

Gibbs' look shifts to, Really? Crazy?

"Okay, maybe it's not totally insane, but that doesn't mean it's right."

"Then get over it."

"I'm trying."
"Try harder. I don't want my team going to hell, and you're going to regret spending years not getting along with McGee over something as silly as sex."

"It's not sex, really. It's... I don't know... It's what sex represents? What if Tim's not the guy you think he is?"

**Good Lord, what the hell did DiNozzo walk in on? He worked vice for God's sake, nothing's new to... Oh... And Gibbs suddenly gets it. DiNozzo worked vice. DiNozzo worked homicide. He's seen everything, broken up domestic disputes, and like most cops probably beaten the hell out of a few guys when their wives or girlfriends wouldn't press charges. He's seen everything at least once, everything done by bad guys to hurt women. But McGee's a computer guy who likes to get dressed up, pretend to be someone else, and play games. Hell, it's possible that McGee doesn't even get the idea that for some people things like this aren't a game. Gibbs can see it: McGee and Abby were playing. For them, whatever DiNozzo walked in on was just a game: fun, innocent (or at least as innocent as whatever they were doing can get) and a little (or maybe not so little) kinky. For McGee this is some sort of indecipherable issue where DiNozzo's just being really weird. For DiNozzo this is something he used to arrest scumbags for.**

Then Gibbs gets the next level of it. DiNozzo's already had one partner who seemed like a decent guy but was screwing around behind his back.

**Shit!**

Gibbs makes sure he's got eye contact with DiNozzo when he says, "Tim's exactly the man I think he is."

"Are you sure about that?" And he can see that DiNozzo is deadly serious in the question and desperately wants Gibbs' answer to erase his own doubts.

Gibbs stops the car. Right now he's got to have enough certainty to wipe out the memory of DiNozzo's last partner and enough conviction to override however many years DiNozzo might have in his head of seeing guys who do things like whatever they were doing as perverts.

"Yeah, Tony. He is. No matter what he's doing with Abby, he's still a decent, honorable, hardworking, trustworthy man. He's still a damn good agent. He still has my back and yours. He is still the man who will take a bullet for you, or put one in someone else for you. He's still our family."

DiNozzo sighs and seems to relax a little. "What if I'm not the guy I think I am?" Gibbs feels mildly surprised to see there was more under that top layer and settles in, sure they aren't going anywhere for a while, because he's got the feeling this one is going to go deep.

"You are. No matter what McGee's doing, you're still the guy you think you are. No matter what you're doing, he's still himself. Measuring yourself against him won't help."

"I know." DiNozzo flashes him a limp smile. "He's smarter than I am. Fine, that was never a big deal. And he's better with computers. Great, he can compute all he wants. These days you need a geek on the team to do the job right. But I'm supposed to be better with women. But I'm alone, and he's got a girl who adores him. I'm supposed to be more experienced... and then I see him... Just... ugh... I just never expected him to be doing something like that."

"I felt the same way about Fornell romancing my wife." Gibbs smiles dryly.

"Yeah, but it bit Fornell in the ass a few years later."

Gibbs smiles at DiNozzo again. They don't say anything for a moment, and Gibbs is thinking this...
might be done so he reaches for the keys.

"McGee says you're Ziva's partner."

Gibbs nods, dropping his hand.

"He says you're cool with him and Abby."

Gibbs nods again. Because he is. Has been since they were dating the first time. DiNozzo sat McGee down and explained rule twelve to him, after he broke up with Abby. Gibbs never said anything about it to McGee, because he didn't want to scare McGee off of Abby.

That McGee will treat Abby the way she deserves to be treated is something Gibbs is certain of. That McGee would grow up enough to be able to handle Abby; that he hadn't been certain of, though it looks like that has indeed come true. But that he'd ever hurt her? No, that has never been something Gibbs worried about.

"He's not sure you'd be cool with me and Ziva."

Gibbs sighs. It's easy to forget how much McGee sees about the world around him. And he thinks he sees more of what McGee missed about why DiNozzo's in a funk.

"I'm not sure if I am."

"What, McGee's good enough to be your son-in-law, but I'm not?"

Oh yeah. Not just sex, but favorite son status as well. How did McGee manage to hit all of DiNozzo's insecurities in one move? Gibbs spends a moment looking for how to say this so it won't sound like a comparison between Tim and Tony.

"It's not about you. Ziva needs this job. She has to protect people. She has to find the bad guys and hunt them down. You don't. You want to do it, but she has to do it. And I do, too. That's why she's my partner. In a few years they'll make me retire, and while you'll end up in charge of the team, she'll be the one who keeps it going. She gets in early, stays late, and rarely rests while we're on the hunt. And you're lonely right now. I get that. Been there. Done that. Got three ex-wives to show for it. But she might not be the person who can give you the attention you want. She's married to the job right now, which means she can't be married to you."

Gibbs thinks what he's saying is getting through, but there's also a level of knee-jerk defensiveness that always comes to the fore when getting to close to Tony's inner emotional life. "Who's talking married?"

Gibbs decides to not bring up DiNozzo's son-in-law comment. "I am. And here's the re-written version of rule number twelve for you concerning Ziva, and, if she ever asks, for her concerning you. If you aren't willing to marry her, do not date her. You know her more than well enough at this point to figure out if it's an option, and if it's not, don't date her. You two fool around, and it doesn't work out, it will kill our team."

"So, you're worried about Ziva blowing this, not me?"

"No, Tony, it's not about anyone blowing anything. She just might not be the answer to the question you're asking."

Tony sighs. That makes a distressing amount of sense and mirrors some of the thoughts he's had in his own mind lately. "And that's not an issue for McGee and Abby?"
"No, it's not. Give it a few years and they'll have little McGees running around a house in the 'burbs."

"They will, won't they? Tiny baby McGees in pig tails and black diapers."

"Yeah. Three years, they'll force me to retire, and when that happens Vance already has McGee pegged to take over DC Cybercrime. Norfolk is closing down and consolidating with us in the next two years, so Abby'll have lab help soon. They'll have regular hours. McGee'll have desk job. Abby won't be dreading the day you show up at the end of a hunt without him."

"Living the dream," DiNozzo says, quietly.

"Yeah."

"I want the dream."

"Then you've got to find someone who can dream it with you. Or you've got to change your version to fit hers."
The Funeral

Tim was right, the next time they gathered together to mourn, he was the one she turned to.

And he had been hoping that it would have been later rather than sooner.

But it happened, because nothing holds death at bay for good. It's always there, waiting to jump out.

She leaned against him and cried at Mrs. Vance's funeral, and they made food for Ziva, kosher jambalaya, because it's a mitzvah to feed those who mourn, and took it to her, something to eat for the flight home.

Hours later, when she's in the air, he says to Tony, who looks like he might be contemplating doing something stupid and romantic, "Tony, I want you to remember something, she's an orphan now. She's thirty and has outlived both parents and both of her siblings. She's hurting. She's vulnerable. And if you don't want to screw this up, you'll pull back, lay low, and be a good friend."

"When she cries, I want to hold her."

"Then hold her. But for right now, shove her in the sister column and keep her there."

Tony nods, remembering Ziva getting on the plane.

"We okay?" Tim asks.

"Yeah."

"Good."

"Tim?" This must be serious, Tony never uses his first name.

"Yeah?"

"I am happy for you and Abby."

"Thanks Tony."
For Abby: Lying Naked In My Arms

It's a sheet of heavy, good quality stationary, folded in half, and propped on Abby's keyboard. On it is her name in Tim's handwriting.

She opens it and finds, also handwritten:

For Abby: Lying Naked In My Arms

You're sleeping right now
and I'm not about to wake you to tell you this
so, I'll write it, if I remember, when I wake
(Looks like I did.)
but I feel like
with you curved into my arms
that you were made for me.
I know that's not right.
You were made for no one but you.
So maybe it's coincidence,
(though we don't believe in coincidence)
or possibly luck, amazingly good luck
(because we do believe in luck)
that your neck is the exact right length for my arm to fit under it,
or that your back snugs perfectly against my chest,
and that our legs tangle together seamlessly.
I lie here, in what's rapidly becoming our bed,
feeling you breathe against me,
smelling the cucumber perfume of your hair,
and I know what peace is,
and blessed is suddenly more than a trite syllable to express fortune,
and I drift off, never wanting to sleep alone again.

—Tim
McSciutos

They're lying on Abby's bed during the hour or so between brushing teeth and going to sleep. She's on her side reading, wearing a pair of black boxer shorts and the top of her black men's pajamas with the little sleeping skeletons in night caps on it. He's on his stomach, wearing a pair of red and black flannel pajama bottoms, propped on a pillow and his elbows, typing away on his laptop.

One change that having a relationship wrought on Tim was switching from the typewriter to a word processor for his fiction. He certainly prefers the process of writing on the typewriter, but he's also gotten so far behind his deadline by only writing at his place, that he has to change because lugging his typewriter to and from Abby's just isn't practical.

Meanwhile, his editor is just about jumping for joy at having an actual electronic document to work with.

Abby looks up from her book, marking the page with her finger.

"I was thinking..."

His fingers don't stop typing. "One sec, I'm in the middle of a thought." He winds down three minutes later, and takes his ear buds out, silencing the jazz that's been accompanying his thoughts. "Thanks. They never come out quite right if you stop in the middle. Okay, I'm all yours, what are you thinking?"

"How would you feel about both of us getting tested and then ditching the condoms?"

For a second, he doesn't say anything. He's quite surprised and very happy. "I'd really like that." Then he thinks a moment longer. "Are you thinking of going on another sort of birth control, or are you thinking babies?"

She laughs at that. "I was thinking it'd be nice to feel your skin on mine, and not having to stop and fetch them. Not much beyond that. So, yeah, starting up on Depo or something."

"Okay. Yeah, I'd really like that."

They sit there without saying anything for a long minute. He's looking at his screen, but not typing, that turn of conversation more or less derailed any thoughts of what Tibbs is about to do next. She puts her book down, rolls onto her stomach and scoots a few inches closer to him, her right shoulder against his left. "Do you want babies?"

Tim meets her eyes and then leans forward, kissing her lips. "I want babies with you."

She appears pleased, a little startled, and there might be a hint of fear in her eyes. "Now?"

He smiles. "Now's good. Later is good. Whenever it happens is good."

"What if I don't want babies?"

He thinks about that for a long time. Being a father is certainly something he wants, but it's not integral to his self-concept. "If you don't want them, I'll skip them. But I'd like to make some McSciutos with you."

Now she looks amused. "McSciutos? Plural? How many are you thinking?"
"Two? Three?" He shrugs as well as he can lying propped on his elbows. "We still haven't settled on if you want them at all, so maybe it's a good idea to get that figured out first. Do you want them?"

It's her turn to think. For a few seconds, her head rests on his shoulder, and he can feel her hair brushing along his naked back. "Yeah. I think I do. I guess I never really thought much about it, beyond knowing I didn't want to do it alone."

He kisses her again and then pulls back, squeezing her hand. "If we do this, as long as I'm alive, you'll never be alone."

She kisses him, eyes closed, enjoying the promise of those words. "Yes. McSciutos." She starts to smile, the idea becoming more real. "But not right now. I'd like to enjoy just being us for a while longer."

He grins, a wide, happy gesture that beams off of him. "I like that idea, too."
Two days later, they're in Abby's lab with Palmer and needles.

"I hate needles. I really hate them," Tim says, staring at the tray with the syringes on it sitting in front of Abby's computer.

Abby squeezes Tim's hand. "You'll be fine."

"I'm good at blood draws. None of my patients ever complain," Jimmy says with a smile, soaking a cotton ball in alcohol.

"Jimmy, your patients are dead," Tim says.

"Minor point. Roll up your sleeve and let's get this done."

Tim is starting to think that doing this in Abby's lab isn't the best idea ever. First of all, neither of them knows how to wield a hypodermic, which means getting Palmer or Ducky involved, and well, if it's going to be one of them, Palmer's the obvious choice. Secondly, he's wondering if Director Craig is going to end up down here curious why NCIS ordered two STD panels as well as two HIV tests.

Tim rolls up his sleeve and looks away. There's a tiny pinch, a minuscule burning sensation, and Jimmy says, "Flex your fingers."

"That's it?" Tim stares at the syringe in his arm, the vial slowly filling with his blood.

"I told you I was good at this. You forget, I'm a doctor, which means I worked with live patients before becoming a medical examiner. I spent six months working out of a clinic where 95% of the cases I saw involved blood draws of one sort or another. I can do this blindfolded in my sleep."

Tim wonders a bit what having Jimmy Palmer for a doctor must have been like. "Why does Ducky call you Mr. Palmer?"

"Because I wasn't when I started here. But by the time I had my MD, the name stuck, and he's been calling me Mr. Palmer ever since."

"Huh." The idea of Jimmy finishing up medical school while working here is nothing that's ever occurred to Tim. "You have hidden talents."

"I'm a good cook, too," Jimmy says with a satisfied smile.

"Is there anything you can't do?" Abby asks.

"I'm a terrible ice skater. Can't stay up on skates to save my life. That's why the idea of naked ice hockey was so terrifying," He swaps out one of the tubes for another one. "You're almost done; then we can get Abby."

A minute later, Tim is holding a cotton ball to the crook of his arm, and Palmer is taking Abby's blood. A minute after that, Palmer hands the last tube to Abby. "Here you go. Good luck on the results."

"Thanks," she says.
"It's pretty cool you're getting tested together," Palmer says while disposing of the sharps. "I had to do that quietly, on my own."

"Breena didn't get tested?" Abby asks.

"She waited until we got married. I had some skeletons in my closet that I had to make sure hadn't bit me, but she didn't."

Abby and Tim just stare at Palmer for a moment, then Tim says, "So that's what you meant about expectations being high."

He smiles a little sheepishly. "Yeah."

"I am really sorry you missed your honeymoon," Abby says.

"You have no idea!"

"I'm starting to get one. So, really, not until your wedding?" She seems amazed by the idea.

"Technically not until a week after." Palmer says a few extraordinarily rude things about Harper Dearing under his breath that makes both Tim and Abby's eyes go wide, followed by, "Longest two years of my life. But so worth it, you've got no idea what releasing that kind of build-up is like."

Tim looks at Abby, quickly kisses her, and says to Palmer, "Nine years. I've got a clue."
The Sort of Virgin

And then there's waiting. Waiting for the results, four hours. All is good on that front, much to no one's surprise. Depo Provera, or any hormonal birth control, for that matter, isn't the sort of thing you can just fetch and start using as soon as you like. So there's waiting for Abby's period to show up, to wander off, for the doctor's appointment that last day, and then one more day for it to fully kick in.

Okay, so it wasn't nine years, or two for that matter, and it wasn't like there was no sex at all, but Tim is really looking forward to saying goodbye to the condoms.

Finally, after a day of work that seemed to go on and on and on some more, he's back at his place, on his sofa, with Abby in his lap, kissing her intently. She pulls back and unzips his pants, and he looks up at her, kissing her again. "So, the thing is, this might be really fast."

"McGee?"

He looks a little chagrined. He's got pretty good control, but he's also never done it like this, and from everything he's ever heard/read/seen without a condom is a lot different and a lot better. "I've never done this without a condom."

"Never?" Abby's looking thrilled by that admission.

He shakes his head. "Never."

"You're a virgin!" she says, glowing with happy excitement.

"I guess, sort of... I mean... It's not that different, right?"

Abby shrugs. "How would I know?"

She's got a point there. She's not equipped to really feel the difference between condom/no condom. "Anyway, I understand it's a lot more intense without one, so..." he's looking very sheepish, "things might be faster than usual."

"I can deal with that." She stands up, smiling gently, and he looks at her, question in his eyes. "Come on, if we're gonna deflower you, we might as well do it right, you know, in bed." She holds out her hand to him, and begins to loosen one of her pigtails with the other.

"Candlelight, flowers, and love poetry, too?" he asks, standing up, taking her hands.

She giggles. "Don't press your luck."

He sticks out his tongue at her. "I write you love poems."

"You're a writer," she says while they walk into his room. "The next time you want romantic lab work done, I'm your girl."

"What would romantic lab work be?" he asks while unbuttoning his shirt. She faces him, kissing his throat, and chest, shooing his hands away, taking over removing his clothing.

"I have no idea." Her tongue draws a little heart around his nipple. "Hearts on your computer keyboard?"

He smiles and kisses the side of her neck that doesn't have her hair falling down on it. "I'll hold you
to that. I want little black hearts on my keyboard."

"Black?"

"Somehow I don't see you putting little pink ones on my keyboard."

"Prepare to be amazed, McGee. I shall romance you in the lab beyond your imagination." Her hands drop to the waistband of his pants, unbuttoning, finishing what she had started a few minutes ago. He kicks off the pants and toes off his socks, while Abby slowly draws her shirt over her head.

She has on the little red bra. It's all lace with demi cups, and he adores how she looks in it. His hands span her back and pull her close. "Keep the bra on?"

"I can do that."

He unbuttons the fly on her jeans and skims the red and black plaid fabric down her legs, pulling them gently over each foot as she balances on one and then the other. Tim kisses her thighs, her belly, and over her panties, also red and lacy.

"I love you in red. You look so amazing like this."

Her lips spread into a wide, pleased smile. "Thanks. Maybe I'll do my hair red one day."

Tim stands, pulling her flush to his chest, and grinds against her. "You feel how much I like that idea? Not saying I don't like your black hair, but I'd love to see you with red." He kisses her, sweetly this time, "I'd love to see your real hair color, too."

She strokes his face, fingers skimming cheekbones and eyebrows. Then she squirms out of her panties and gracefully falls back onto the bed.

He all but leaps after her, landing next to her, making the bed creak in protest. He's on his side, and so is she, his penis between her legs as they kiss and pet. Talking a little, making love a little, enjoying each other and not hurrying.

He likes being cradled between her legs; it's warm and soft and snug, and he can thrust a bit to keep things focused properly. This time though, she hooks her leg over his hip, scooting down an inch so he's right against her, wet pubic hair tickling him, enticing him, and he sighs, knowing he doesn't have to roll over and fetch a condom.

Abby rolls him on top of her.

He props himself on his elbows while she squirms encouragingly against him. "Missionary?" It's definitely on their rotation, but not one of their everyday positions. He likes ones where he can see more of her, and she likes easier access to her clit.

"Thought you might want to be able to control your speed and depth."

"Probably a good idea."

She reaches between them and gives him a little help on getting the right angle. For a moment, he just waits because for the first time he can actually feel what it's like to be touching her and anticipate slipping in. She's wet and hot, and the softest thing he's ever felt, and just being against her feels better than he thinks anything possibly could.

She kisses him sweetly, and pushes her hips at him. "It's even better inside."
He nods, biting his lip, looking into her eyes, and eases forward. He inhales sharply, almost whistling and exhales a long "Oh..." He settles into her, holding still, not too afraid of getting off instantly, but he definitely wants to enjoy this. He wants to fully feel it, so he can remember all of it.

"You're so beautiful right now," she says, stroking his face, and he smiles at her.

"God...That's... really nice."

"Really nice?" She's grinning, looking like she's enjoying watching him.

His eyes close, and he tries to focus. He's having a hard time talking. Tony's comment about not remembering his name would spring to mind if he could remember it, but he can't. "Ask me later, when I can think."

She kisses him, and he begins to move, tentatively. Mostly just getting used to how hot and wet and slick she is. With a condom, there's just the sensation of warmth, pressure, and glide. And warm and pressure and glide are nice, really nice, but this is... This is beyond words good.

Her legs wrap around his hips and he can slip in a little deeper, and yeah, that's even better. He tries a few really fast strokes, and decides for right now that's too much of a good thing. Slow gives him time to really feel, and he's enjoying that.

He lowers himself fully onto her, knowing he can't do that for too long without squishing her, but for right now he wants her whole body against his.

He's not really moving, he's just lying there, in her, feeling her on and around him.

He kisses her again, murmuring, "I love you, Abby," against her lips.

"Love you, too, Tim."

He thrusts again, slow, feeling her body clinging to his, sliding wetly along him. "God, this is so good. Love you, Abby. Love this. Just... fuck... love."

She kisses him again, and he rolls her on top of him.

"Want to see you, all of you, as well as feel you."

She straddles him, his hands on her hips, giving her a good idea of what speed he wants, still slow, and she begins to finger herself, which is almost too much erotic input at one time. He takes her hands in his, kissing them. "Promise, you can do that later, but I'll get off if I watch you do it now."

"I don't mind if you get off."

"I do. I don't want this to end."

He sits up, holding her hands behind her back, face to face and belly to belly with her. "Want to touch all of you, too." He turns them a little, so he can see them in the mirror over the dresser.

He holds her close to him, kissing her, staring in her eyes, and periodically looking at her in the mirror. "Love this, I can feel you all over and see you at the same time."

"Love you, too."

They say that, a lot, and move slowly, for a long time, a very long time. And eventually he does lay back down, his hands on her hips, her fingers on herself, and he watches and thrusts and feels
enveloped in an almost glowing light of an orgasm. Like she was transmuted from flesh to light, and rising and falling on him became pure soul, and Tim might not be a terribly religious or spiritual man, but right that second he believes in angels with all of his heart.

Later, as she snuggles up next to him, and he discovers the highly overrated joys of laying on the wet spot he says to her, "That was worth waiting thirty-four years for."
He should be sleepy. He's usually sleepy after sex, unless it's morning sex, but that's a different story all together. But, even though that had been one amazingly, mind-blowingly intense orgasm, he's feeling mostly just relaxed and peaceful.

Tim checks the clock. The fact that it is nine thirty might have something to do with the lack of sleepy.

He kisses Abby, gets up, and grabs a towel from the bathroom. He folds it neatly over the wet spot, and then snuggles back in next to her. She curls onto her side, facing him.

"What was your first time like, the real one?" she asks.

He smiles widely. "You remember, you were there."

For a second, she stiffens and her eyes go wide. He keeps grinning, and she pokes him, hard, in the ribs. "Don't do that!"

"Apparently I'm a Horus. I've got an inexhaustible supply of virginity." He kisses her quickly, and then adjusts the pillow a bit. If they are going to talk, it'd be good to be comfortable. Then he takes her hand in his, kissing it as well, and settles back down, pulling the blanket over them.

"So, really, how was it?" Everything about her is radiating a sort of relaxed but intense curiosity he's never before seen.

"Amazing, the world stood still, time went backwards, and the angels wept." He shakes his head. "I was nineteen and desperate to give it away. There was exactly one girl in my Cellular Bio-Chem class and she was my lab partner. I guess she took pity on me. We went out three times, and on the third time, we got together. And, honestly, it was fast. I think I was more excited by the idea of having sex than the sex itself. I remember thinking, 'Oh, yeah, that's...' and we were done. It wasn't precisely the crowning glory of my sexual history."

"Did you love her?"

He's honestly not sure. "I think I had a crush on her. Or maybe I just really wanted to have one on her. Or it might have been she was a girl, kind of attractive, and willing to touch me. I was pretty disappointed when she wouldn't see me again."

Abby kisses him. "I'm sorry she didn't take you seriously."

Tim shrugs. "Long time ago. How about you? How was your first, I mean besides in a cab?"

She smiles, very pleased to see he remembered that. "I was kidding about the cab thing. "Not nearly fast enough." Tim looks confused, when it comes to things women want, a real speedy ejaculator usually isn't on the list. "I was seventeen and had been dating this guy for about six months. Both of us college freshmen, and he was... Well, it felt like he was packing a cannon, but it probably wasn't that big. Just, first time and all. So, I remember being extremely eager, very, very turned on and then OUCH. I was crying, but trying to be quiet because it was his first time, too. It took a minute or two before he noticed and stopped."

"That sounds horrible!" Tim feels a visceral flash of wanting to hit Abby's first guy, hard, several times for not noticing.
She pets him, and he doesn't know if she has an idea of what he's thinking or not, but she does seem to be trying to relax him with that touch. "I've had better times. And it did get better. We dated all of freshman year."

Tim really doesn't know what to say to that, so he nudges the topic a bit. "I loved my first time with you."

She smiles. "That was a really good first time."

"I was so nervous; my hands were shaking when I began to unbutton my shirt. Afraid you'd get my clothing off, take one look at me and go, 'Nope, too fat, too vanilla.'"

"Too vanilla? That was you, last week, who put the collar you had made specifically for me around my neck, bound my hands behind my back, had me kneel in front of you and get you off with my mouth alone, and then stood me up, freed my hands, supported my weight with your body, told me to get myself off while you pulled the collar tighter and tighter and tighter so that when I got off I saw stars, right?"

Tim smiles. That's a good memory. Not the kind of thing they do often, but oh yeah, lots of fun.

"McGee, have you ever seen a vanilla bean?"

"In real life?" He's seen pictures. There's a drawing of a vanilla bean on the bottle of vanilla extract he uses to make his Christmas cookies.

She nods.

"Nope."

"They're about this long," she holds her hands about six inches apart, "and dark, dark brown or black. The really good ones have these tiny little crystals on them, so between the oils and those crystals they almost shimmer. McGee, if you're vanilla, you're one of those Tahitian vanilla beans, dark and shimmering, smelling sweet and perfumy with undertones of forbidden pleasures and desire. I like vanilla, real vanilla, not whatever it is they put in McDonald's ice cream, and you are real vanilla."

"Dark and delicious?"

She giggles a little at that. "In a pale and mostly blondish sort of way."

He runs his fingers through his hair. The longer he wears it and the more time he's in the sun, the lighter it gets, which is why it's pretty much entirely dark brown now. "I haven't been blond in years."

She strokes the hairs that began in the center of his chest and trail down. "These still are."

"I hadn't really thought of that." He supposes those are sort of blondish, maybe, in the right light. Mostly, they're just thin and few.

"Nope?"

"Since they came in, and I realized I was never going to be hairy, I haven't spent too much time pondering my pubes. These days they're just sort of there."

She laughs at that, and he laughs with her.
"The first time I saw you, I thought you were a vanilla bean. Still green, but there was a lot of potential there."

"Green?"

"They're the seed pods of orchids. They start out green, and then they do something to them, fermentation, drying, roasting, all three? I'm not sure, but somehow they turn black and delicious." Tim nods. "I saw you and I just knew that under that suit and nervous exterior there was something tasty."

He lightly licks her bottom lip. "I'm so glad you decided I was worth tasting."

"I am, too."

They lay there, holding hands, he's stroking her fingers, feeling the long slender taper of them, the slightly rough spot on her index fingernail where it broke recently, and the small callous she has on her right thumb from capping the lids onto the specimen test tubes for Major Mass Spec.

"Which tattoo was your first?"

"You know the P on my wrist?"

"Yeah." His thumb slips down to touch it.

"I was fourteen, and my best friend and I hitchhiked to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. We went out to party and drink, and we both had fake IDs. So, we're in the Quarter, having a blast and she said, 'Let's get tattoos.' It seemed like a really good idea, so off we went. Her name was Paulette, so I got a P on my wrist, and she got an A on hers."

"That's so cute."

"The next year we got the smiley faces on our fingers."

"Awww..." He kisses the smiley face.

"And the year after that we got the angels. I'd be looking over her, and she'd be looking over me."

"Did you get all your tats with her?"

"No, that was the last year. The next Mardi Gras, I was seventeen, in college at LSU and she had gone to Ole Miss. We lost track of each other over the years."

"You ever want to find her again?"

"Sometimes. I've looked a few times, but no dice."

"I bet I could find her for you. I am a cop, and kind of handy with a computer, you know?"

She smiles wryly, "Yeah, I noticed that. The badge was a tip off. But... If I can't find her because something happened to her, I'd rather not know. I don't want to know that I live in a world that doesn't have her in it."

He lifts her hand to his lips and kisses it. "I can understand that. One of my grade school buddies died three years ago. And it wasn't like we were close or anything. Not even Facebook friends. But I'd think about him every year or so, wonder how he was, and now... Now I know. I never thought I'd have to know he wasn't around any longer."
“Yeah. I don't exactly miss her, but I like to think of her as happy.”

He kisses the tiny smiley face on her middle finger. "And getting new tats and new adventures."

"Yeah, maybe telling someone special about how she got hers." She's touching his fingers now, mapping them by feel. "So my vanilla bean, how did you get into this?"

"This?"

"You know. Most guys don't just wake up one day and think, 'Collars. I really like collars. And maybe, if you put one on someone, and tighten it during sex, that might result in a really intense orgasm.'"

"Gotcha. And no, it wasn't like I woke up two months ago and out of the blue thought, 'Abby needs another collar. One from me. Ohhh and some wrist cuffs to go with it.' Well, I mean, yeah, two months ago I was thinking that, but it wasn't out of the blue. So, do you want to know about how I got into"—Tim doesn't much like using the word kink to explain what they do. Firstly, because it's not quite right. It's a kink if you can't get off without it, so for him and Abby it's more of a hobby than a kink, but there's not a really good other word for this.—"all of this in general, or collars in specific?"

"I was thinking in general."

"You'll laugh."

"Maybe, if it's funny. But if it's funny, you'll laugh, too."

He smirks a little at that and flashes her a self-depreciating smile. "Okay, so, it's 1998, I'm a junior in college, and this internet thing is really starting to attract some attention. And I was really, really into the X-Files. I had just started writing then, and I was writing X-Files fanfic."

"Good place to start."

"I thought so. Anyway, generally if you write a fandom, you also read it, and that's when I noticed there were people out there who had a much wider definition of sex than I had imagined could exist. Sex-ed as taught by my grandfather was... functional, and that's it. I was reading, and I noticed that I really, really liked some of the things I was finding."

"Really?" She's teasing him a little, but he's enjoying it.

"Yeah, really. Imagine this: I didn't have my own computer yet—"

"There was a time you didn't have a computer?" she sounds genuinely surprised by that.

"Shocking, but yes, that's true. I didn't have my own until senior year. Anyway, I had to use the school's computer labs to get online. So, there were times I'd be in there late at night, reading away, and end up jerking off in the men's room, thinking about Mulder tying up Scully or Scully doing it to him."

She closes her eyes and does seem to imagine that for a moment. "That's so hot."

He pulls her close and kisses her for a long time. "I love you."

"I might just have to find a red wig."

"Ohhh... God, that is so hot!"
"Call you Mulder." He closes his eyes and sighs. "You wear a suit and tie. I think I've got something that'll pass for the sort of clothing Scully wore. I'll handcuff you to a chair, and explain in vivid detail why you need to ignore the search for the truth for at least one night."

"Yes, please!" He kisses her again, thinking his current lack of erection is a testament to how intense the last orgasm was, because in any other circumstance this conversation would make him hard as a rock. "You're the first person I got to do any of this with."

"Really? After that first time, you never seemed nervous. I thought it was just doing it with a new partner, not that it was all new."

"I had figured out that I liked it, but there wasn't a lot of opportunity to do anything about it."

"No steady girlfriend?"

"I had one at MIT, but I think it would have freaked her out, and not in a good way."

"There's a good way to be freaked out?"

"Oh yeah. That little bit of fear when you're doing something scary, but you really know you're safe. Like a roller coaster."

"Okay."

"So, I was with Tony, and you were on the video monitor, and I saw you and just about swallowed my tongue. You were so beautiful, and dark, and dangerous looking, and already wearing a collar, and just... I was thinking that if I could get up the nerve to talk to you, that maybe you'd get to like me, and if maybe you'd get to like me, you might decide sleeping with me was an option, and if that happened, just possibly you wouldn't run screaming away if I suggested tying you up."

"And I didn't run away, did I?"

"No, I think your exact words were something like, 'I've got some ribbons in the top drawer.'"

"Something like that."

"They were black, and silk, and about as long as my arm."

"Yeah. I used them for tying bows around my pig tails."

"I almost lost it, seeing you kneeling in front of me, holding your hands behind your back, waiting for me to tie you."

"Is that your favorite image of me?"

"One of them."

"One of them?" She smiles. "How many do you have?"

"A lot. But seeing you do that... It's the closest I've ever been to coming in my pants."

She smiles kindly, but he knows the next words will be teasing. "Control's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I've been enjoying it. Still, you've got to remember, I was barely twenty-four when we met, less than three months out of the academy, and you utterly rocked my world."
"God, I had forgotten how young you were. Now I'm feeling like a cradle robber."

He kisses her, grinning, and she knows the next thing he says will be teasing, as well. "My very favorite cougar."

"Hey, I'm not that old!"

"Just old enough."

She smiles at that. "So... A Scully costume. I've got a black pencil skirt and a plain white blouse, think that'll work..."

Four days later, he's sitting in front of his computer, wearing a suit, jacket off, tie loose, top button undone, and sleeves rolled up, looking at a report on crop circles, and eating sunflower seeds.

"Mulder, it's after midnight."

He doesn't turn. He wants to turn. He's dying to see how she looks, but Mulder is obsessed, and not with Scully. Mulder stares at the screen. Mulder might indeed dream of sleeping with Scully, but he doesn't act on it, and he certainly doesn't think anything out of the ordinary is going to happen tonight.

"I'll sleep when I'm dead, Scully. Did you know..." and he's blathering on about cow mutilations occurring near crop circles in Oregon.

Abby walks up behind him, leans over his shoulder, turns off the monitor, and then turns his chair to face her. She's wearing a sensible business skirt, low heeled shoes, some sort of knit shirt, and a black jacket, she's even got Scully's little gold cross. But what rivets him, what he can't take his eyes away from is the chic red bob circa season six. Sure, it's a wig, but he's just staring.

"Who said anything about sleeping, Mulder?" She leans over him, pinning his wrist to the arm of the chair.

God, he loves this woman!
"Is that my favorite image of you?"
You ask me.
One of them...

How does it look?
You don't ask
But I wish you could have seen it from my eyes
You knelt before me
Face up, staring into my eyes
Hands behind your back, left wrist in right hand.
Did you know, when you do that, the shape of your back is a perfect violin?

I kneel behind you, black ribbons trembling in shaking hands
Every fantasy I'd ever dared to dream
about to come real in black silk on your white skin.

I dropped the ribbons.
Did you know that?
Scrambling to pick them up fast, so you didn't notice.
Your skin was so warm,
And your wrists so tiny in my hands
And I want to do this right
So scared I'll screw it up and you'll leave
or worse
laugh

I press your hands together
Palm to back
And you lace your fingers like you can read my mind
I wove the ribbons between your fingers, and over your wrists,
tying everything into a tidy bundle,
And for a long time, I just looked.
Finger's trembling, afraid to touch
Afraid that like any dream, as soon as I tried to touch I'd wake.
I'd never seen anything that looked like that
White skin crisscrossed into diamonds by black silk.

And then I stood in front of you.
You knelt there and smiled at me
Huge, wide smile.
I step forward, hand on my belt,
And you licked your lips.
And I almost died.
You stared up at me
Smiling
Lips wet
Naked
And I realized it was okay
You were happy to have me here
This was just a game
(And I'm good at games.)
One you wanted to play with me
(And God, I fell in love with you so hard right then)
So I slipped the belt through its buckle,
playing up the slide of the leather through metal
really feeling the way it moved
Seeing in your eyes that you wanted this
that you wanted me
the button was snug moving through the fabric
fighting me a little
but the zipper was easy
and your eyes dropped from mine to see what was under it.

That time I wasn't nervous.
Getting the shirt off was hard
the pants, no problem.

You grinned and said, "Nice, McGee."
Then leaned forward and licked me.
Just the tip
like a soft serve ice cream cone.
And then sucked me down, and my knees almost buckled
My eyes wanted to roll back it felt so good
And I couldn't let myself close them because you were the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen.

How's the song go?
"I'm a bitch
I'm a tease
I'm a goddess on my knees?"
Well, you aren't a bitch
And sometimes you tease
But you are a goddess on your knees
(and standing up and lying down, too.)
And if I was an atheist when I walked in that night
I believed in the divine before I left.
"Did your grandpa ever explain how to get this stuff out of your hair?" Tim asks.

They're in his shower, and rapidly finding out that Grandpa Sciuto's pomade may have been a world beater when it came to proving stable hair that stayed in any position for as long as you wanted it there, but it is proving to be extremely stubborn when it comes to removal. It's laughing at his organic, moisturizing, super gentle for dry hair shampoo.

"Will you hate me if I say lye soap?" Abby says, looking sheepish.

"Oh God! You're not sleeping on my pillow cases tonight."

Abby turns and pouts at him.

Tim kisses the tip of her nose, and then points her face away from him, fills his hand with yet another dollop of shampoo, and works it through her hair.

"I still think it smells better than burnt computer equipment and failure."

"You're absolutely right." She is. There's a somewhat pleasant tang to this, well, at least compared to fried computer equipment. "That doesn't mean I want it on my sheets."

"Pretend it's lube. Getting that on the sheets never bothers you."

"Getting lube on the sheets is a lot more fun than killing evidence we needed, plus lube washes out. If I can't get this out of your hair, it's not going to get out my sheets, either."

Abby sighs. That's true, and at this point, three washes in, she is starting to get a bit concerned about getting this stuff out. "We could get new sheets."

"I like my sheets, they're soft and snuggly and..." That sentence trails off as it occurs to him that she said, "we" not "you."

His fingers stop rubbing the shampoo into her hair. His hands drop to her hips, and she turns toward him. "We're not just talking about sheets are we?" he asks.

She was, but the way he's looking at her gets her thinking about more than just thread counts. "I don't think so. I got my credit card statement today. You want to guess how much I spent in gas this month, driving from your place to my place to work and back again."

Tim nods. "I've got a pretty good idea." His own statement showed up two days ago, and let's put it this way, he can get some sheets made out of gold for what he's spending on gas.

Tim lives in Silver Springs, Maryland. This is located at the far north end of the Metro DC area. Abby lives in Alexandria, Virginia, at the far south end. And while a drive straight through town isn't horrendously long mileage wise, (about seventeen miles from his place to hers) no one in their right mind tries to drive directly through Washington DC.

So, by the time the somewhat less direct route's been worked into the equation, they live about an hour apart. The Navy Yard is somewhere in between, closer to Abby's than his place. So, say he
wakes up at her place and wants to go to his place. He drives an hour to get from her place to his, then half an hour back to the Navy Yard.

Most people who work in DC and live in the metro region cope with this by using the Metro (public transportation) which would be fine, if it didn't close down at midnight, i.e. before they get done with work a lot of nights.

So they drive. A lot. But if they didn't have two homes, they wouldn't have to do quite so much driving.

Tim's thinking that's where she's going with this, and it certainly makes sense to him to go there. His fingers start rubbing the shampoo back into her hair again. "How long do you have on your lease?"

"Until August. You?"

"December. Can you sublet yours? Unless I'm willing to pay a pretty big fine, I can't break my lease."

"How big? I've got money, McGee." Abby runs the lab, and though it's easy to forget because of her perky appearance and demeanor, she's equivalent in rank to Ducky, and makes about three times McGee's salary.

"I know. I've got money, too. Just don't like wasting it. Rather buy nice sheets with you than pay three months' rent upfront."

"Okay. I can sublet, if I can find someone to take the lease. But my place is bigger and closer to work."

"True. And you've got a better kitchen." He's noticed that, when he's got someone to actually cook for, he enjoys it. This has resulted in both of them getting a bit plumper lately, but her less so than him.

"There's not really a good spot in my place for your computers."

He nods at that. "Or my typewriter. What are you paying in rent?"

"$1850."

"I'm paying $1675. You know, we could get a really nice two bedroom for less than $2500."

"We could. We could probably find a nice three bedroom for less than we're paying combined right now. Put the money we're saving on gas and rent into savings for a down payment on a house."

"Do you want a house?" His fingers are stroking up and down the back of her neck as he asks.

"Eventually."

"I've got 400k in the bank." Tim doesn't have a lot of secrets, but that's one of them. He almost never talks about money.

Abby turns to face him, eyes wide. "What? Last I heard your money vanished into a hedge fund, never to come out."

He shrugs a little. "Yep, vanished into thin air. Then I wrote four more books and made some more. They're paying me pretty well for the Deep Six books."
"How well?" She's noticed that he's got some nice things, but nothing about his lifestyle says he's got that sort of money.

"Do you know how advances and book contracts work?"

"No." She's staring at him intently, and he's forgotten her hair for the moment.

"Okay. They pay me a chunk of cash when they get the first draft of the book, and another chunk when it's finished, and a third chunk when it goes live. That money represents slightly more than what they think my take of the total sales of the book will be over the next three years. So for the first Deep Six they paid me ten grand, and if Deep Six had sold like every other first mystery, ten thousand copies or so, they would have basically gotten complete ownership of the book at the end of those three years. But Deep Six earned out, which means it sold more copies than they paid me for, so every quarter they have to send me my percentage of the sales. So, for the sequel they offered me more money. Deep Six: Black Rock earned out, too. So once again, each quarter I get another check. But they don't want to pay me quarterly. They want to make sure that advance is so big that at the end of the three years they own the book and can do what they want with it. So the advance for Foreign and Domestic was three hundred thousand dollars, which they're pretty sure won't earn out, and so am I. Fairy Fire and Nymph Nights didn't earn out, so I made about fifteen grand for each of them. And, so, yeah, I've got some money."

She's shaking her head. "Yeah, some. Wow."

"So, anyway, if you wanted to get a house... I mean... I've got down payment money."

"You've got buy it outright money!"

He shrugs a little at that as well. "I'm contracted for two more Deep Six books after this one."

"How much will that work out to?"

"Five books in total. Call it a million one all said and done, with a steady sixish thousand dollars a quarter from the two that earned out. And there's an option for three more after the current five, that'll run at 750K if I take it."

"Remind me not to distract you from your writing."

He smiles. "So, you're okay with that?"

"What, I put up with you poor, but now I know you've got money, so you've got to go?"

"Something like that. Ten minutes ago I was a wage slave, and now I'm not."

"I can deal with you having money, McGee. Kind of like it actually. Though, really, freaking out over less than 6k to get out of this place?"

"Okay, yeah, it's silly, but... I watched my net worth go from over 150k to the two thousand dollars I had in my checking account in less than a week six years ago. So, I'm a little twitchy about my cash."

"I can understand that."

She's standing there, facing him, water beading off her hair like a duck's back, and Tim rests his arms on her shoulders. "So, do you want to get a house? Or find an apartment for us?"
"How about an apartment for now, and we'll get the house when we get serious about making some McSciutos."

He's grinning. "That sounds really good."

She looks up, kisses him soundly, and then sprints out of the shower, water droplets flying behind her. For a second, he stands there looking confused, and then she's back with a bottle of dish soap.

"Dawn! They use it to get oil off the birds in an oil spill, so it should get the pomade out."

She hands him the bottle, and he squirts some into his hand. A few minutes of sudsing seem to be making a difference. Her hair is still goopy, but much less so.

"So, it looks like your hair can be saved, and you will be granted permission to sleep on my pillowcases. Given that, do you still want to get some new sheets with me?"

"I like your sheets, McGee."

Chapter End Notes

In case any of you are interested in careers in writing, the way Tim describes it is how advances work. The added fun is that for most authors any sort of promotional expenses (like say book tours) are supposed to be paid for out of that advance.
Abby likes holidays. And Abby likes presents. So for the last nine years Tim has gotten her some sort of small, cute, often funny valentine. Like a little skeleton in a top hat with a tiny bouquet of flowers, or a Caf-Pow in the special Valentine's Edition pink cup. Stuff like that. Nothing big. Nothing expensive. Nothing romantic. Just something cute and small that she'd like.

And once again Valentine's is looming near, and he's thinking this is not the year for cute or small. Vast, grand romantic gestures seem like the idea for this year.

He knows, ideally, what he'd like to get.

He's just not finding it, or anything like it, at all.

"Palmer, what do you think of this one?"

He's standing next to Jimmy in Autopsy, supposedly getting a report to bring back up to Gibbs. Jimmy looks at the image on his phone and says, yet again. "Tim, you know just as well as I do, there's not a diamond ring on earth that's right for Abby."

"Yeah." He shuts down the image of a princess cut diamond in platinum and tucks the phone back into his jacket.

"I've got six days and nothing."

"Then don't do it for Valentine's. Do something that is right for her, and keep looking for the ring in the meantime. Nothing says romance like proposing under the fireworks at Fourth of July."

"God, I hope it doesn't take that long to find the right ring."

"Tim, don't kid yourself, the right ring for her is something you're going to have to get made. There's not going to be anything on a shelf."

Tim sighs. "I think she'd like something vintage."

"You're going to be vintage by the time you find the right ring for her. Get one made."

Tim picks up the report and fires off a sardonic salute to Jimmy. Time to get back to work.

Something right. Something her. Something grand and expansive...

Something...

She's getting dressed, and he's lying in bed, staring at her back as he thinks this.

Oh... Um... Yeah... She might go for that.

He hops up and goes hunting for paper, a pen, and a ruler. Sketch time. He's handy with math, very good with spatial relationships, and he can imagine things in 3d space easily. And he likes knots. He likes knots a lot. And Abby likes knots, especially knots he's tying on her.
He returns to bed, sitting cross-legged, stack of printer paper in front of him.

"What are you doing?" She's staring at him as he starts plotting out two straight lines.

"Super-secret romance stuff." He looks up and grins. "Off to work with you."

Her eyes narrow, and she stares at the paper. Just two long, straight lines right now, but he's starting to add hashmarks at each quarter inch.

"Are you designing something?"

"Maybe." He grins again, putting down the pen. "Shoo..." He waves toward the door. "It doesn't get designed if you stand there hovering over me."

"Mysterious."

"Oh yeah." He winks, stands up, kisses her, and then pushes her out of his bedroom. "Bye!"

It takes him close to three hours to get it laid out, which means he's facing yet another day of driving like a maniac to get to work just fairly late instead of wildly late. But to work he gets, three minutes before he has to vanish into the conference room to be deposed for a case.

The deposition goes long, way long. He has to go over how he had known about Khan's MIT background several times, apparently, 'I was at the same school studying forensic computing while he was hacking the damn place" wasn't enough. Something about the defense lawyer might want to try and pin the hacking on him or something to attack his credibility.

Eye roll. Sigh. It'd be nice if someone in legal knew more about computers than how to send email.

So, it's well after two when he gets out, and Tony sidles on over to his desk.

"Another good morning?" He asks with a grin. These days Tony finds Tim coming into work late vastly amusing.

"Yes, but not the kind you're thinking of. I finally figured out a Valentine's day present for Abby."

"Ahhhh... There's something I don't miss about having a girlfriend. The yearly hunt for a trinket to show affection."

"We're a bit past the trinket phase."

"That's even worse. Now you've got to get something that means something. And if you don't get it right, she pouts at you. I hate Valentine's day."

"Yeah. So..." He stares at Tony and debates. It's Monday. Valentine's is Thursday. Can Tony keep hold of the secret? Will the idea of it freak him out again? Will showing him what it is help to rebridge the trust between them?

"Just show him, McGee." He hears Gibbs say. Then Gibbs looks at Tony and says, "And if you wreck the surprise, I'll kill you myself."

Gibbs walks over, leans against his desk, and says, "Come on, she's likely to sense this and come up here any second, so show us."

Tim's very surprised to see Gibbs this interested in his Valentine's Day present. Then he realizes what Gibbs is expecting him to pull out. He takes out the sketch and unfolds it. Gibbs squints at it,
looking puzzled, it's not what he was expecting. Tony stares, too.

"You're getting her lines?" Tony says.

Tim folds it back up and tucks it into his pocket. Gibbs' 'she'll sense it and show up' comment has enough truth to it to make him nervous.

"No. It's a Celtic knot tattoo that I designed for her myself. And, when someone who can really draw gets a hold of it, it'll be a lot more swoopy."

"Swoopy?" Tony asks.

"It'll look like ribbons woven in and on each other."

"Oh."

Tim points to just below his right deltoid. "It'll go here, on both of us."

Tony thinks about this, and he doesn't seem too freaked out. "So you're getting her matching tattoos for Valentine's Day?"

"Yeah. That I designed for her myself."

Tony is nodding, looking like he doesn't really know what to think about that. Gibbs is still staring at him, and Tim thinks he knows what that look means.

"I couldn't find exactly what I was looking for, so I did this instead. I'm still looking though, for the first thing."

Gibbs nods. "She'll love it."

"That's the idea."

Abby is, by general accord, the best informed member of Team NCIS. People tell her things. Lots of things. And she has a secret weapon. Gibbs tells her things, if she asks, and he sees everything.

So when Thursday morning rolls around, and she still doesn't know what her Valentine's present from Tim is, she's feeling, well, nervous. Since she has no idea what he's getting her, she's not sure if her own gift, a collection of bootlegged improvisational jazz recordings from his five favorite musicians, live shows that were never supposed to be recorded, so Tim's never heard them before, is appropriate. She knows he'll love them, but with the way the guys keep smirking at her, or smiling, or just sort of glowing in her direction, she's not sure if it's big enough.

She was able to get from Tony that Gibbs had ordered a personal fatwa of death on anyone who spilled the beans, which explained her inability to get a hold of any details, but did not get her any closer to what the mystery object might be.

Tim was drawing it... Maybe... Could be some sort of strange poem? She knows back in his college days he did experimental writing where the shape of the poem was as important as the words. So...

But would that be enough to cause Gibbs to order silence? And bigger question, is that the kind of thing Tim would show anyone?

She walks into her office, turns on her computer, and sees a card on the keyboard. Her name in Tim's
handwriting is on the envelope. He had to get one of the others to help with this, because they came into work together this morning, and he hasn't had time to get this down here.

Gibbs probably helped. He'd trust Gibbs with whatever was in that envelope and to make sure it got where it had to go. She sniffed the envelope, there's the faint smell of Old Spice that anything that spends time in Gibbs jacket pocket acquires.

Sooo, Gibbs and Tim working together.

She slits open the envelope and takes out a thick piece of paper, thinking it's another poem. A business card falls out as she removes it, which makes her think twice about the poem idea. She lets it lie, wanting to see what's on the paper first. Unfolding it, she finds a sketch of herself. It's a bust, her right arm across her chest, head turned away in quarter profile. Behind her is Tim, holding her, right arm cradled under hers, face mostly hidden behind hers. She's got on some sort of little tank top, but he's shirtless. Both right arms are prominent, the focus of the sketch, and it takes her a second to see what's different about the sketch.

Then her fingers fall to the cuff tattoos. A 3D knot, strands of red ribbon woven between white skin outlined in black to look like a lattice. It almost looks like carved ivory woven with scarlet silk. Under the picture is one word in his handwriting: Yes?

She flips over the card that fell out of the envelope. It's an appointment with a tattoo artist she knows for Saturday morning.

Tim is in the car with Gibbs, heading toward a dead sailor, when he gets a text. He looks at it, smiles, types quickly, and puts his phone back in his pocket.

Gibbs glances away from traffic toward him.

"She liked it. That was yes in all caps with about twenty exclamation points next to it."

Gibbs nods.

"You were expecting me to pull out a ring, right?"

Gibbs nods at that, too.

"Talking to Jimmy?"

This time the looks says, No. Why? Should I have been?

"I am looking for one, but I'm not buying until I can find the one that needs to live on her finger. It can't just be some sort of generic diamond. It's got to be Abby's ring. If that takes a while, it takes a while."

Gibbs nods at that, too, thinking about how much easier this was when he did it the first time. Go out, find the biggest rock you can afford, put it on the girl, and six months later,"I Do." 'Course the pressure to move fast is probably somewhat less intense if you're already having sex and practically living together.

Tim doesn't have that glazed and frustrated look he suspects he had most of the time he was courting Shannon.
"You moving to her place, or is she moving to yours?"

"We're getting a new one all-together."

He nods at that, too.

"Next time you go ring shopping, take Ziva. She'd like it, and she can keep a secret."

"Am I taking her because she'll be useful to me, or because it'll get her thinking about possible long-term life changes?"

Gibbs smiles, downshifts, and parks. "We're here."

"So, what'd she get you?" Tony is asking as they walk back into the bullpen.

"I don't know, yet." He sees a pink conversation heart on the escape key on his keyboard. Next to it is a package of Nutterbutters, with a bow and some sort of small card attached.

He sits down at his desk. The conversation heart says, 'I luv you.' He smiles a little at that and opens the card.

8:30 in the lab.
-Abby
(No snooping!)

"Nutterbutters?" Tony's looking at the cookies, astounded. "I mean, I know you like them, but... really? You design her a tattoo, and she gets you cookies?"

"Just part one." He holds up the card.

"That looks promising."

"Yeah."

Gibbs walks to his desk, scowling at them. "And it's also not going to happen if you two don't find me something useful."

"On it, Boss."

"What do you have for me, Abbs?"

"Besides this?" She walks up and hugs him. "Thanks for delivering Tim's card."

Gibbs nods. "The case?"

"The single least talented killer, ever?" Abby shrugs. There are slam dunks, and there are slam dunks, then there's this case where the hoop's been lowered to three feet off the ground and widened to seven feet around and the guy playing is standing right next to it. "I've got ballistics. I've got the gun. I've got fingerprints. I've got blood. I've got DNA. I've got gunshot residue. Either this guy is dumber than cement, or you've got someone who's been framed into oblivion."

Gibbs sighs. "Dumber than cement. Found his wife fooling around, killed her and the guy with her,
and then ran." He looks at her secondary computer, seeing a few little black hearts on the keyboard, which he doesn't think were there before, but no Tim. "Isn't this usually when McGee tells me he's got a trace on the guy's phone?"

"Probably. I'm making him work upstairs."

"Do I want to know what's going to happen down here?"

"I doubt it, but if you want to know, I'll tell you."

Gibbs sighs and shakes his head, turning to go back upstairs.

"So how is it, I try to get married, and NCIS gets blown up, terrorists come crawling out of the woodwork, and everything falls to pieces, meanwhile, for your Valentine's Day treat, you get a case that's wrapped up by 6:00?" Palmer asks Tim as he's heading out.

"I don't know. Cupid likes me? Besides, you're out of here early tonight, too. Breena'll like that."

"Yes, she will. Though with my luck, the car'll blow up on the way home or something."

"You'll be fine. Go home and have some fun."

"I intend to. 'Night, Tony, Ziva."

"How about you two, any plans tonight?" Tim asks.

Ziva looks at him and raises one eyebrow. "Do you think we'd have plans with each other for Valentine's Day?"

"I was more thinking in general, but now that you've brought it up..." Tim smiles at them.

Tony glares at him. Ziva smiles. "I am going home, having some dinner, and getting a long hot bath with a good book."

"Sounds good. Tony?"

He's looking at Ziva, and Tim guesses he's imagining what a long hot bath with a book looks like. Then he jerks a little, and says, "No idea. I'll figure it out when I get home."

"Well, if neither of you have plans, I've got two hours to kill, so want to go grab a drink or something with me?"

"Sure."

"Okay."

8:27 and he's standing outside the door to Abby's lab.

That's the first hint that something interesting is up. The door is shut. The door is never shut when Abby's in there. She only closes that door when she leaves at the end of the day.

He's not sure if he should knock or just go in, and decides that either way, he can wait three minutes
for it to actually be 8:30.

Long damn three minutes.

He can't hear anything going on in there. No music. And he can't see any light coming from the underside of the door, though he's not sure if he would, the hallway is pretty bright and he doesn't remember if the lab has one of those little sweeper things on the bottom of the door to make sure nothing gets out.

At exactly 8:30, the door opens. He knows it's 8:30:00 because he's looking at his watch. He looks up at her and smiles, realizing she had to be standing on the other side of the door, watching the clock, as well.

He hasn't seen her since this morning. Hasn't texted since she sent him that extremely excited message saying YES!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! to the tattoo. And it's not like they never go a day without seeing each other, but it's rare.

She takes his hands and pulls him into the lab as he's saying, "Hi." She steps behind him and locks the door, then looks up at him, very pleased with herself, very amused, and smiles.

He kisses her hello and looks around. The lab looks, well, exactly like it did when he was in there yesterday.

Almost. She's got paper taped up over the windows between the lab proper and her office.

"What's in there?"

"Your surprise."

"Am I gonna like it?"

"I certainly hope so." She tugs him gently toward her office, clicking the button that opens the door.

Candles, that's the first thing he notices. Lots and lots of candles. Besides the floor and her computer every horizontal surface in her office has at least one of them.

Then the music hits him. He knows it, Instrumental No. 7, but it doesn't quite sound the way he expects it to.

"Is this Henneger?"

"Yeah. Take off your shoes. Sit down." She points to the soft and fuzzy nest she made on the floor. Four white sheepskin rugs are overlapping into a large circle, and a few plush, satiny looking pillows in rich, violet-tinged red sit around the edges. There's a small table in the middle, maybe one and half feet by one and half feet, and about a foot tall. On it, he can see a selection of sushi and a bottle of sake. And next to the black lacquered chop sticks is an MP3 player.

He slips off his shoes, and then his socks, as well. Soft fluffy rug will feel good on his feet. He points to the side with the MP3 player and she nods. Then he sits.

She sits across from him. "Pick it up; look at what's on it."

It takes him a minute to figure out what he's scrolling through. At first look it's a fairly standard catalog of some of his favorite musicians doing their most famous songs, then, as he gets deeper into it, and notices some very non-standard songs, and as the recording currently playing fades into
applause, he realizes he's looking at some extremely rare recordings of live shows.

His jaw drops when the next song starts. That's Eric Clapton's voice. He's heard about it. Everyone who loves Henneger has heard about it. One night in Chicago back in '93, Clapton had been in the audience, but somehow he ended up on stage with Henneger, and the two of them had come up with a thirteen minute long version of Instrumental No. 13, with Clapton coming up with lyrics on the fly. Clapton played guitar. Henneger played sax. Both of them moving back and forth with the main theme, taking it places no one ever thought it could or would go. It wasn't supposed to have been recorded, but he's sitting in the lab, listening to it.

"How did you get this?"

"Friend of a friend is a really hardcore Jazz musician, and he was willing to let me make copies of some of the things he played backup on and some of the shows he had been to."

He wants to babble about how happy this is making him, and he wants to be silent and absorb it. Abby sees his look, and how he's torn. She grins, kisses him, and moves the table over.

"Lay down, listen to it with me. We'll eat later."

He kisses her back, hand cupping her cheek, grinning widely, eyes warm and happy, and then lays back, closes his eyes, and lets the music wash over him.

She lays down next to him, holding his hand.

He's forgotten how much getting a tattoo hurt. It's not the end of the world or anything, but it certainly isn't comfortable, either. And this one is a lot bigger than the last one.

His first one had taken about half an hour to do. This one'll take four.

He'd enjoyed walking in with Abby. She, of course, looks like she belongs in a tattoo studio. He looks a little out of place. The girl working the counter, who hadn't been there when he went in to see about getting his idea made into a tat, stared at them in open wonder.

She got Abby. She didn't get him with Abby.

And being the guy who got Abby, even if he is kind of mild-mannered looking, wearing a pair of nice jeans, a casual button down, blazer over it, and loafers, while she's out in a short skirt, one of his button downs rolled up at the sleeves and top two buttons undone (one thing you don't want is a tight t-shirt rubbing against a new tat) over a tank top, and a pair of knee high boots, tickles him to no end.

He opened the door for her, arm around her waist, very clearly signaling MINE to anyone who might want to look. And the girl looked, and did a double take.

And Tim smirked.

Turns out Abby knows Sam, the artist. They chat while Sam gets Tim ready. Business is slow so the girl comes back to see what they're getting done.

She looks at the knot, looks at Abby and says, "That's yours? Sam told me we had a custom piece coming in. It's beautiful."

Abby smiles. "It's mine in that I get to wear it. He's the one who designed it."
The girl looks at Tim, and he gives her a wide and happy smile, seeing her actually see past his clothing for the first time. He's got his shirt off, and Sam is smoothing the transfer onto his arm. She moves to his left side and says, "That's Python, right?"

"Yeah, that's my master's dissertation."

"Kind of old school."

"It was 2001." Less than a year after Python 2.0 had come out, and barely seconds behind the absolute bleeding edge of programming tech when he did it.

"Oh. Cool."

"Thanks. I just figured out the over under and where the strands went for this one. Sam's the one who made them art." He turned them into whorled swirls of ribbons, spaced them out further, took advantage of the negative space, and ended up with a design that made the black strands look almost carved out of the arm, while the red ones wrapped around and through.

Sam nods, and begins to load up the black ink. He actually puts Tim in mind of Gibbs. Not a lot to say. Warms up significantly with Abby around. His portfolio is his main selling tool, though he took the time to really get what Tim wanted and sketch it out, and then draw the second sketch for Abby.

And then Tim zones out for the next four hours. A lot, maybe not most, but a decent percentage of people with tats like pain, they get off on it, or get off on getting through it. Abby gets off on getting through it. But he's not one of them. He wonders about that sometimes, because he knows that a lot of the things he enjoys do often go along with getting off on pain.

The knots he likes... In Japan they are tied in hemp, often on bare skin, and they leave abrasions and sometimes welts. Dom/sub stuff doesn't usually just end with 'do what I tell you to.' And those stories he told Abby about, the Mulder/Scully ones he enjoyed so much, he ended up exiting out of a lot of them when they took a turn for knives or burns, whips and flails.

Maybe it's like bungee jumping (which no, he doesn't even like to think too hard about, let alone do) he wants the feel of falling but not the splat at the end.

He looks at Abby, who knows he's checked out and is talking with the counter girl and Sam, and pulls his mind away from what feels like an avenging mini-sewing machine having its way with his arm.

He goes into plotting mode and spends the next four hours working out the main ideas for Tibbs' next adventure.

Watching Abby get hers is significantly more interesting to him than getting his own.

For the first minute she's clutching his hand going, "Ow ow owowowowowowowowowowowoww. Damn, McGee! I always forget this part."

"Yeah, me too." It really is kind of a shock how much your memory dulls things like that. And he's got a suspicion that his mind has also dulled down how much they itch when they heal as well.

"Look at me."

So he does, and she holds his eyes with hers. He sees her take a deep breath, let it out slow, and her
eyes slide shut. Two more deep breaths, and he feels her hand relax in his. Her shoulders go soft, and her head settles back.

"Okay, found it."

"Found what?"

"The spot in my mind where it can just all flow around me."

"So, it doesn't hurt?" He shut it out, built a wall between him and the pain and filled it with meticulous details of his next plotline. The idea that she can experience it but not focus on it is intriguing to him.

"It does, but it doesn't matter. It's just there. I'm here with you. I'm safe. Nothing bad is happening to me. So the pain doesn't matter."

And he understands why she gets so freaked out sometimes, when she can't find safe, everything stops flowing, it stops working properly and leaves her stuck in a river of too much so she curls into a little ball, trying to get away from it. Because that's him, he pulls himself in tight to let it all go away when it gets to be too much, too.

He holds her hand, watching Sam mark her with a knot he designed, something she'll wear on her skin until the day she dies and feels the sore burn of that exact same mark on his own skin.

A matched pair, even if, on the outside, they don't look it.

He kisses her cheek. "Happy Valentine's Day."
"You know, I kind of miss the coffin," Tim says as they get ready for bed.

"You miss the coffin?" Abby doesn't look like she ever expected him to say that.

"Well, I miss what we did in the coffin. The... ummm... hinky thing we did in the coffin." Tim blushes a little at that. They did the hinky thing once, and then never talked about it, or did it, again.

So, the hinky thing... Okay, now, if you were to ask him, Tim would totally blame the hinky thing on the booze. It was maybe two months after they started dating the first time, and it was also right after one of Tim's more intimidating first cases. And he was pretty convinced that Gibbs was going to kill him, or worse, get him fired. So anyway, after work, looking to burn off some serious nervous tension, he got some sushi and sake, and went back to her place.

The thing about sake is that it tastes a lot milder than it actually is. By the time your brain has realized you've ingested something with some real alcohol in it, you're pretty much soused.

And kicking a three-quarters full bottle of Reisling after the Sake ran out didn't help.

Yeah, so, he was pretty drunk. At least by Tim standards. And Abby has an even lower alcohol tolerance than he does, so she was completely gone.

Anyway, hard day at work, lots of alcohol, and sex was in the offing. They had gotten to the coffin (Box sofa she had called it, and he went along with it, but come on, he's not blind, and sure, the first time the lights were off, but he woke up in it the next morning, so the gig was kind of up at that point. But if she wanted to call it a box sofa, well, he wanted to get laid, so a box sofa it was.) and she said, "Do you want to play a game?"

Tim was always willing to play Abby's games, so he said yes.

"Okay, here, put on your jacket, get in, and stay really still."

That sounded like an odd request to Tim, but, sure, he did it. He lay in the coffin, dressed in a suit, and stayed still. Abby followed him in, also fully dressed, and he remembers this pretty clearly, she was wearing a plaid skirt, thigh high socks, no shoes, a black t-shirt with a skull on it, and a choker, but not one of the spikey ones.

It wasn't until she folded his hands over his chest that he figured out what was going on. Honestly, he was a little freaked out by it. But she unzipped him, took him in her mouth, and he decided he could deal with a little freaked out if it meant he was going to get a blow job.
It was good. It was insanely good. Maybe because he was a little freaked out. Maybe because he was still dealing with the emotions from the case. Maybe because it was only the third he'd ever had in his life. Either way, he was insanely turned on when she put the condom on him, leaned up, pulled her panties to the side and slid down on him.

He kept his eyes open, which was probably out of character, but there was no way he wasn't going to watch her do him.

Now, there's pretty much one thing all guys want to do when they have sex, and that's move. It's not necessarily all about deeper, harder, and faster, but still, thrusting, increasing the friction, that's the goal. Sure spinning things out is interesting and makes for a more intense climax, but spinning things out and entirely surrendering to your partner are different things.

He got into it as a submission game. The struggle of doing exactly what your partner wants and trusting in her to make it worth his while.

And it was so worth his while. Not moving at all took a tremendous amount of concentration. He'd continually keep tensing up, getting closer and closer, feeling himself all but begging her to move faster or harder, and then he'd have to force himself to relax again.

Abby kept a steady, slow pace. The sort of stroke that gets her wet and ready, but can't get either of them off.

Each minute passed by, his tension increasing with each thrust, constantly forcing his muscles to relax again and again. She flipped the skirt up, so he could watch her finger herself. And, God, that was so hot, so impossibly hot. And it was the first time he'd ever seen a girl do that, which made it more intense. She kept moving slowly, up-down, back-forth, her body growing tighter on his as she got closer and closer.

It was the tightness that did it, that eased him over the edge. It was like falling slowly into an orgasm, or being eaten alive by one. It crept over his whole body, like, because he couldn't move, every single muscle in his body decided to get in on the release.

And it was, at that time, the single most intense orgasm of his life.

And after it happened, they cleaned up, and never talked about it again.

Abby sits next to Tim on the bed. "The hinky thing? Which hinky thing?"

"The," he gives her a knowing look, "hinky thing."

"Oh." Her eyebrows rise. She knows what he's talking about.

"Yeah."

"You want to do that again?" She sounds surprised by that.

"If you do." Now he's thinking that maybe it wasn't as much fun for her as it was for him, but she's watching, waiting for him to say more, and doesn't seem bothered by the idea. "I mean, maybe not exactly the same way. I'd really like it if you were naked and I could see all of you, but yeah, I really liked it."

"It didn't freak you out? I thought it freaked you out, 'cause you never said anything about it again."

"You didn't, either." He's flashing her a pointed look, then he shrugs a bit. "I was a little freaked out
at first, but... best orgasm of my life until month before last, so I got over being freaked out."

Abby laughs at that. "You are such a guy."

Tim shrugs. "Not much I can do about that. So... ummm... do you want to do that again?"

She smiles, stands up, and begins to brush her hair. "You're just feeling lazy today and want me to do all the work."

"Lazy? Do you have any idea how hard it is to not move at all?"

"I could find out." She's smiling again and now it's his turn to think.

"That could be interesting." He'll admit that's not pressing any special buttons for him, but if she likes it, he's game.

He pats the bed next to him, and she lays down. He's nuzzling against her neck, enjoying the way she smells, and thinks about how if this isn't fun, if it does turn out that her playing dead is freaky, he can just tell her that, and they'll do something else.

He leans up on his arm, looking at her face. Her eyes are closed, and she's got a little smile on her lips.

"Abigail." That's his safeword. If he ever calls her that, play stops and they're out of the game. Most of the time something like that gets used to indicate too much pain or freaking out. But right now he wants to indicate something else. Because any game like this, anytime when they're actively playing, anything he says is in character, which means he's free to say anything, everything he wants. It's fun, but not real, and he wants this to be real.

She opens her eyes and looks at him.

"McGee?" She's worried, he's almost never used his safeword. The last time it happened she was accidentally grinding one of his toes into a bloody pulp under her boot and couldn't feel it through the platform heels.

He smiles, letting her know nothing bad is happening. "Just, I love you, so much. I love that this is fun. That it's not some sort of if-it-isn't-perfect-egos-get-shattered-and-we-walk-around-on-eggshells-pretending-we're-okay-so-we-don't-hurt-each-other sort of thing." He kisses her sweetly.

She kisses back, her fingers trailing down his arm, and he jerks back.

"Case in point. Ouch!" He shakes his right arm, hoping that'll ease the itching burn her fingers on his new tattoo just started.

"Sorry. It's easy to forget it's there." The tats are healing up nicely, but they're only four days old, so healing up is not nearly the same thing as healed.

He straddles her, taking both of her hands in his, stretches her arms up, over her head, and pins them to the bed. Then gently, slowly, keeping up eye contact, leans down, and blows on her new tattoo.


He lets her hands free and kneels back on his feet, laughing. She sits up, her legs still between his, smiling, very lightly rubbing the tat, trying to ease the itch.

"Distraction is good for itching." He leans in, kissing her. She kisses back, squirming in a much more
encouraging sort of way.

"I like it when you do that," she says as she breaks the kiss.

"Which part?"

"Pin my hands like that."

"Why?" He knows why. It's part of any submission game they play where he's the dominant one, but he still loves hearing her say it.

"Because it makes me feel small, and safe, and completely in your hands. Because it's so male, and... I don't know... I just like that. Because of how your arms, and back, and thighs look when you do that. These," this time her one hand trails down his left arm, and while the other skips over the new tattoo on his right, "bunch up and look very strong, and my wrists both fit in one of your hands. And when you do it, a lot of your weight is on your legs or back, so they look incredible, too. When my legs are on the outside," because he's the one straddling her right now, "I like to hitch them up and just feel that strength and hardness against my inner thighs."

It's possible McGee made a small growling sound at that point, but he'd likely deny it if asked. It's also probably worth mentioning that at this point in their pre-bedtime routine he's wearing his boxers, and she's in a chemise and boy shorts panties.

What is certain is that within about two tenths of a second Abby is flat on her back again, with her hands pinned above her head and McGee kissing the absolute daylights out of her.

He's kissing her, supporting his weight on his legs and right arm, and realizing that they're both awfully dressed right now for where he'd like this to be going. There's just not a good way to keep holding her hands down and get them undressed.

It's time to get creative.

The fact is, Abby's less than three inches shorter than he is, so if he's holding her hands at full extension, he's not got a lot length to maneuver with, at least, that's true if they've gotten to the point where they're actually having sex. But right now he's straddling her, and they're both still dressed, so he can move up her body and keep her hands in his.

He does, nuzzling and kissing her arms, being careful to avoid the new tat. He's switches holding her hands to his right hand, gently nibbling her fingers, and furiously searches his bedside table with his left.

Because, as per rule number nine, he always has a knife, though, granted when he's in bed, the knife in question is in his nightstand. His hand closes around it. It's just a simple folding knife. Short blade, about two and a half inches long, and to date the only thing he's ever used this one for is cutting off those obnoxious little plastic tie things that keep the tags on clothing.

Still, it's sharp, and he's never done anything like this, but he thinks she'll go for it.

And if not, they'll play a new game.

He shifts again, still pinning her hands, most of his body lying next to hers. He drops the knife to the pillow above and behind her head, where she can't see it.

"You know I love those panties, right?" he asks, using his free hand to stroke over them, white boy shorts, little black skulls wearing pink hair bows printed on the cotton, and tiny black ribbons on the
hips. He traces the crest of her hipbones, and warms her pussy with his palm, pressing gently against her mound with the heel of his hand.

She hums something that could have been a yes and arches into his touch.

"But right now," he tugs at them, demonstrating the fact that he doesn't have enough reach to get them much past her hips unless he lets go of her hands, "they're in the way."

He picks up the knife and holds it where she can see it. Abby looks intrigued.

"Trust me?"

She grins, anticipating where this is going. "Absolutely."

He flicks the knife open, and very carefully slips the blade, sharp side facing away from her skin, under the side seam of the shorts, pulling upwards quickly and slitting the one side of the panties, and then doing it again on the other. He closes the knife and tosses it away from the bed, wanting no chance of either of them accidentally cutting themselves, and then yanks the panties off.

"That's better. Those little shorts might be hot, but your naked skin is so much better."

His free hand settles back onto her mound and begins to tease, fingers slipping on hot, wet skin. He presses against her side, mouth on her breast, kissing and nipping gently around her nipple through her chemise while his fingers play.

She's rippling under him, hips undulating in a beautiful wave arc pattern. He's rubbing against her hip, well aware of the fact that if you're going to have sex without taking off your underwear, boxers with a fly is the best possible option. He's already sticking out of the fly, hot, hard flesh rubbing against her suede silk skin on one side and the somewhat nubby flannel cotton of his undies on the other.

He knows that nine out of ten times, he can't get Abby off with sex alone. Just penetration won't do it. And he also knows that stretched out like this he just doesn't have the manual dexterity to get her off while fucking. But the other thing that he knows is that if he times this right, he can get her almost off the edge, slip into her, and then grind with his pelvis while he goes full out and get both of them off in a matter of a minute or two.

He can feel her getting close. Her body is tight and wet and she's making a soft, high-pitched breathy sound that indicates oncoming orgasm.

He sucks on the nipple in his mouth, hard, knowing she feels what he does to her nipples in her clit as well and moves his hand to her side, to take his weight while he shifts from her side to between her legs.

He uses his hand for a little help on the angle and then thrust in, hard, setting a breakneck pace. Her legs wrap around his hips, and she arching against him, a steady stream "God, Tim, yes, like that, fuck! Don't stop! FUCK!" ringing in his ears and making him want to climax at once.

He finds her nipple with his free hand, rolling it between his fingers, pulling gently on it, working it like a less sensitive clit, while he kisses her feverishly.

All he can focus on is how she feels on him. Hot skin, wet sliding flesh, tight, soft grip, and then she starts to ripple and pulse around him and he's gone, orgasm ripping through him.

Several minutes later, when they're both breathing normally again and he he's let go of her wrists,
Abby says, "I can't believe you cut them off me."

"Too much?"

She catches the trace of worry in his voice, and shakes her head emphatically. "No, that was amazing!" Her fingers trace over his left arm, back, and thigh. She yawns, snuggles in closer, sniffing his skin, kissing his chest lightly. "Strong, very male, yes, I liked that a lot."

He smiles, kisses her forehead. "Good."

And, so they didn't end up playing the game he thought they would. And, yeah, no one was motionless, but they certainly had a good time. He thinks, a few days later when his mind wanders back to this, that that's why they work so well. It doesn't matter what the game is, they're both happy to play it with each other.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so there's chapters one through thirty-six. I've got twenty thousand more words of this written, but not all in order. More updates, more smut, more wodges of McAbby romance is in the offing!
"Hey, Breena," Abby says, with her best perky voice, cell to her ear.

"Hi Abby, what's up?"

"Could you come to the lab?"

"Sure. Why do you need me at the lab?"

"It's a surprise."

"Okay, I'll be there in half an hour."

Abby feels sick to her stomach as she hangs up. She hates lying. She's bad at it, too. But she wants Breena driving happy, relaxed, alert, and paying attention to the traffic, not in a blind panic worrying about Jimmy.

Two minutes ago, the Team had headed out to go get Jimmy and Ducky, and she knew that if Jimmy did come back, Breena would want to see him right that second, and he would want to see her. And if he didn't, she'd want someone to hold her and cry with her, and for that matter, so would Abby.

There is no way she's going to let Breena sit at home, wondering where Jimmy is, watching the clock get later and later, waiting for the knock on the door... Well, no, Breena wouldn't be worrying about that knock. Jimmy's a medical examiner, not a cop. But ME or not, that knock could be coming.

But it won't, not like that at least, because Abby's going to make sure Breena's here, with her, with family, not having to face the wait alone.

Breena gets there half an hour later, and Abby can tell by the way she's dressed, cute top, flirty skirt, heels, that she's thinking this is some sort of anniversary surprise Jimmy's come up with.

And she can see, just as clearly, that look of pleased curiosity fall apart as she lays eyes on Abby and sees the fear in her eyes.

She wraps her arms around Breena and says, as carefully as she can, because she doesn't want to start crying, "Jimmy and Ducky went missing a few hours ago. Gibbs and Tim and Tony and Ziva found them half an hour ago, and they're out getting them back."

She feels Breena stiffen, feels the shivers start, but she doesn't cry, she just asks, "Missing how?"

"Someone kidnapped them."

Breena looks up at the ceiling, takes a very deep breath, lets it out slowly, and begins to pray. And that doesn't sound like a bad idea to Abby, so she joins in.

Two and a half of the longest hours in the history of time passed before her cell buzzes. Four words, from Tim, and they fell better than almost anything he'd ever told her.

*Got them. Everyone's fine.* She shows that to Breena, who begins to sob as soon as she sees them.
They head up to the Bullpen to wait for them to come home. And it's another very slow two hours before the elevator pings, and Breena runs to it, waiting right in front of the doors. Before they open all the way, she rushes into Jimmy's arms, clinging to him, and he's holding onto her for dear life, face pressed against her shoulder, babbling about missing their anniversary, and finally she pulls his face up, and kisses him soundly. Then she stops, looks at him for a long time, kisses him again and says, "It doesn't matter. You're alive." Everyone else files out of the elevator, around them, Gibbs providing an arm for Ducky to lean on, and the doors shut, giving them some privacy.

No one says anything when Tim walks straight up to her, wraps his arms around her, while she rests her face against his chest, her hands rubbing his arms, and waist, the sort of touch that seems to be testing, making sure he's really there.

They usually aren't any more affectionate at work than they were before they started dating. Mostly because it's work. But today no one looks, and no one snickers when she kisses him hard and frantic, and then takes his hand and leads him to the stairs, toward the parking lot, less than a minute after they got back.

They don't talk, because the best he can say to her is, "Today, it wasn't me," and that's not good enough for either of them.

If sex is a language, and she's fairly sure it is, what happened when they got home, barely in the door, is mostly an expression of fear, and reminding yourself that another day has passed without the worst happening.

They aren't strangers to the up against the wall quickie. Likewise, fast and hard isn't something new either. But today's terrified edge is new. She hadn't realized how scared she was until Tim had gotten back, and she hadn't realized the fear wasn't just for Ducky and Jimmy until he was walking across the Bullpen toward her.

And right now, the only thing easing that fear is touching all of him, as much and as quickly as possible, and feeling him touch her, knowing that hands and lips, cock and tongue, all on her, are real and alive and him.

In bed after, wrapped around each other, still awake, is in many ways more intense than the sex. Sex makes your body produce happy chemicals that help shut down fear and sorrow.

There's still nothing they can say to each other. No good reassurances that will mean anything, or even begin to approach true. Comforting lies aren't, not when both of you can do the math.

Palmer's nine month anniversary also means it's the nine month anniversary of the explosion. And especially with Palmer and Ducky going missing today, the danger of their jobs, his more than hers, but hers certainly isn't safe, is fresh in both of their minds.

She can feel the weight of all the people they've buried together over the years, and the fact that there is no magic protective shield that will keep any of them safe, and as that settles into her mind, she begins to tremble, and cry.
Tim holds her tighter, still not saying anything, but eventually she notices the tears she feels aren’t hers alone.

In the morning, they get up and force fear into the background, because there's nothing that can be done besides pushing it aside and moving forward.
A Husband's Job

Chapter Notes

Fantasy f/f/m threesome. Skip the second half if that is icky for you.

"Okay, I've got four super large Caf-Pows, your tooth brush, toothpaste, enough junk food to last for the next three weeks, and No-Doze. You know you shouldn't take that with the Caff-Pow, right?" McGee asks as he walks into the lab, carrying the box filled with the supplies Abby requested.

It looks like an explosion of evidence in there. "My God, you've got to get through all of this?"

An extraordinarily perky guy bops up to him and grabs the box. "Yep, all by tomorrow. Don't worry about the No-Doze Caf-Pow cocktails, Abby and I are pros." He puts the box down and hugs McGee, who is standing there very stiffly. "You're McGee, right? Abby said you'd be here in a few minutes."

"And you are?" he asks the complete stranger hugging him.

"Ramsey Boone."

This is not providing him with the information he's actually in search of. Fortunately less than two seconds later, as he's extricating himself from Ramsey's hug, Abby heads in.

"Hey, McGee," Abby breezes back into the lab. "This is Ramsey." She explains who Ramsey is, how they know each other, and more or less tells him that tonight is about to be a cross between a BFF's sleepover party and evidence-palooza.

"So, there's no shot of you coming home tonight?" He tries not to sound too disappointed.

She kisses him. "Nope."

"Okay, then I'll see you in the morning." Boone is standing there grinning at them. Tim isn't used to having anyone staring at him while he's kissing Abby, so he gives her a quick kiss, instead of the longer, deeper, make her wish she's going home tonight kiss he normally would have given her, and then heads home.

Tim's fairly sure that, less than a year ago, he used to do this every single night. Go home, eat something, mess around some, and then go to bed. Every night he got to go home, he did that. But now, as he's sitting in his boxers and t-shirt on the exact same bed he's slept in for the last eleven years, he's feeling so lonely.

*Just one night.* Part of him is tempted to head back to NCIS and offer to help. He's not utterly useless in the lab. And the never-ending slog of paperwork is still there. He could just grab a quiet corner and fill out forms."

"And be a walking Zombie tomorrow." He sighs. No voice answers his. "Come on, bedtime." He
gets up, brushes his teeth, snags one of the melatonin pills he keeps on hand for nights he has a hard
time sleeping, and goes to bed.

As he pulls the blankets up, his bed feels odd. Shifting around, remembering how he sleeps on his
own (on his back or stomach instead of spooned up against Abby) takes a few minutes. His last
thought before drifting off is that this is very much no longer his bed. It's their bed, and that's how he
likes it.

"So, he was your roommate in college?" Tim asks as he slips into his shoes Friday after work.
They're in Abby's office getting changed to go out.

"Yeah." She's slipping out of what she wore to work, into something a little less formal? More
formal? It can be hard to tell with Goth clothing. It's black and lacy. He's getting more dressed up
because they're celebrating nabbing the Dead Rose killer.

His eyes narrow a little. "What kind of roommate?"

"Are you jealous?" Abby asks with a smile.

He sends her his are you kidding me look. "In ten years, have I ever not been jealous of your
boyfriends?"

She nods; the only boyfriends that haven't bothered Tim are the ones he hasn't known about. "The
kind that spent full nights studying with me, and after we'd both aced the test we were studying for,
we'd go to a bar and pick up guys together."

Tim smiles. He guessed that was true about Ramsey, what with the hug and the clothing, but he
wasn't sure about it. Abby's friends tend to be extremely flexible in their interests. "The kind of
roommate I like."

She laughs. "Yeah, the kind of guy you're perfectly happy to have hang out with me. I mean, don't
get me wrong, we've had sex, but there was always another guy with us."

Tim winces. "I probably didn't need to know that."

"Just you know, if you might be interested in a threeway, Ramsey would be so into you." She grins,
very pleased with that double entendre.

Tim's rubbing his eyes, shaking his head.

"Don't you ever think about a threeway?"

He looks up at her. "Okay, well, yes, but not with another guy."

"Double standard much?" She's less than thrilled with him right this second.

"Yes!" He nods sharply. "Absolutely. Guys don't do anything for me. I have absolutely no desire to
see another guy naked, and I really don't want another one watching me have sex, let alone touching
me. And honestly, I don't care if it makes me a jerk, but I don't want to see another guy touching
you, either."

"Fine." She straightens his tie, humoring him. "So, who do you think about threeway with?"

"Could we maybe do this after dinner?"

"Why?"
"Because either I'm going to end up with a hard-on from talking about it," which makes her smile, "or you'll hear who it is and be unhappy with me, and either way, I'm not interested in sharing that with Ramsey and... Is he bringing a date?"

"Yeah, Kevin. They've been together for two years now." She looks non-plussed. "Back on topic, have I ever been annoyed with one of your fantasies?"

"No." And he's told her about some of the wilder ones, too.

"Think I'm about to start?" She's looking very eager and reassuring, which he appreciates.

"I really hope not." He's still not sure he wants to say. Ten years of being jealous of each others' boy/girlfriends means he's wary of naming an actual person.

"Tim, honestly, there's not another person on earth who would annoy me."

"Really?" That's pretty reassuring.

She flashes a wicked smile at him. "You could tell me you want to share me with Gibbs and it'd be cool."

He winces again, a whole lot of mental images he could have happily spent the rest of his life without hitting him. "Oh God, that's so wrong. That's wrong on more levels than there are levels to be wrong on."

Abby laughs at that. "Every girl has a little bit of a daddy fetish."

Tim's still wincing. "I needed to know that even less than I needed to know you've slept with Ramsey."

"The point is, I'm not going to freak out. Any woman you like enough to think about sleeping with, I'm probably going to like, too."

"You do like her."

Abby looks up, eyes bright.

"Really?"

He smiles, a little sheepish. "Yeah, really."

"Even better." She licks her lips, and Tim can feel his dick twitch a little at the idea of telling her about this.

"Okay, good. And that's where this conversation stops, because I'm not going to dinner with your ex-roommate, especially with your gay ex-roommate, with an erection. When we get back, I'll tell you all about it."

Dinner with Ramsey and Kevin is fun. Tim feels a little odd being the only straight guy in the mix, by which he's not thinking sexual orientation so much as the only person at their table wearing what most of the rest of society would refer to as "normal" clothing.

He's in jeans, loafers, a dress shirt, tie, and navy blazer, more or less the poster boy for casually dressed up thirty-something male. Ramsey's got on a green blazer, pink shirt, rainbow bow tie, and
corduroy trousers. Kevin's clothing isn't too far off of Tim's. He's got a vest instead of a blazer, his tie is... Hell, Tim has no idea what Kevin did to that tie, but he wants to google it when he gets home because it looks really cool, and his sleeves are rolled up to show off both arms covered in tatts from the wrists up.

Abby and Ramsey do a lot of the talking, finishing each other's sentences, filling in the blanks for the evidence hunt. Then moving backwards, talking about school and some of the things they used to get up to at LSU.

Eventually they get to the part of the night where the boyfriends talk about themselves. Kevin's a photographer. He's got work in a few galleries, but makes most of his living doing weddings. Tim finds the fact that Abby's basically showing him off like a trophy to her friend amusing. She's bragging about his writing and police work. Both of the guys are properly impressed by the fact that Tim manages to be a full time cop and write.

And eventually, things wrap up, and promises of getting together again are made, and they head on their way back to her place, which is closer to where they ate.

They've gotten in the door, haven't even closed it yet, when Abby's looking at him, "So, tell me?"

Tim's staring at the door. "Did you get a new lock on your door?"

"Yeah. Gibbs put it in on Monday." She's irked that with all the sex they could be having, he's staring at her door.

But Tim is staring. That's very much a new lock, and he's not the guy who put it up. "Why is he installing locks at your place?"

"Is the stress on he or locks?"

"He and your." Tim's still staring at the lock. The lock he should have put in.

"He was doing it for the same reason why he was doing it."

He looks away from the door to her and says, "You lost me on that."

"Murdering psycho out there, and my very favorite gun-toting super special agent isn't always here. You were on all night, so he made sure I got home safe and took care of the door."

That's a deluge of information he hadn't known. He knew she was scared, but not that Gibbs had seen her home, let alone installed a lock for her. "Were you even going to ask me to do your lock?"

Abby's looking at him curiously. "Have you ever done one before?"

"Yes."

"Then next time I'll ask you to do it."

Tim's staring at the door, again. "Next time it'll be my house, too."

"True. I found some more places to check out on Sunday."

He's still staring at the door. Which is when Abby starts to get this might be a lot more serious than she thought.
She touches his shoulder. "Does it bother you that I asked Gibbs for help?"

"Yeah." He looks at her, and she can see he's really upset about this. "I'm here three nights a week. You're at my place just as often. The only nights we don't sleep together are the nights where one of the two of us doesn't get to sleep. If you don't feel safe here, go to my place, or ask me to secure your door! That's my job now, not his."

"And when you're working, and he's here, and sees the deadbolt I bought during lunch, and offers to put it in for me because he knows I'm scared, should I say, nope, that's McGee's job?"

"Yes."

The look she's giving him clearly says he thinks he's insane.

"Look, there are things that are my job now. Keeping you safe. That's number one on the list. That's what a husband does."

The you're insane look melts away. It's replaced by something a lot softer, and a lot sweeter. She steps in closer to him and touches his cheek.

He's staring into her eyes, looking determined and worried. "It's my job to be here. It's my job to be the man who keeps you safe."

"And when you aren't here?"

His eyes close, open slowly, and focus on hers. "I don't know. I should be here."

"But you aren't, not always. Keeping a lot of other people safe, that's you job, too."

"I know."

"And you love your job."

"I do." He rests his head on her shoulder and sighs.

"If it's not going to be you, is there anyone else you'd rather I turned to than Gibbs?" she asks, petting his hair.

"No." But she can see he's thinking, hard, about this. She tries to nudge it back into the background and help get them moving forward into the weekend, instead of back to work. "Tonight you are here, and I'm here, and the job isn't going to change or go away, so how about we go to bed, and you tell me about your fantasy threesome?"

They're brushing their teeth, and he's still on edge. Finally, he puts the brush down, leans against the sink and pulls her to him, his hands on her hips, pelvis to pelvis and forehead to forehead. "You say the word, and I will be here every night."

"Tim?"

"I don't want you scared and alone. Ask me to, and I'll have a desk job with regular hours in ten minutes."

"I can't ask that."
"Why not?"

"It's not fair. It's not fair to you. I won't be home every night. It's not fair to rip you away from a job you love for the three nights a year I've got the willies. It's not fair to Gibbs or Tony or Ziva. It's not fair to Vance or, God, poor Dornaget; he'd end up being Tony's new Probie all the time. And it's not fair to the hundreds of people you'd save or avenge or give some peace by catching the bad guys. I'm a grown woman. I'm armed, and you know I can shoot. I've got a door you'd need a battering ram to break down. I can take a few nights a year on my own."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Go shooting with me tomorrow?"

"Okay."

They're in bed when she says, "So, come on, tell me."

"I'm not exactly feeling wildly sexy right now."

"But you will be if you start talking to me. Here," she sits up, "take off your jammies and roll onto your side."

He sits up and shucks off the sweat pants and MIT T-shirt he had on and rolls onto his side. "I'm starting to think pajamas are overrated. We put them on, and most nights take them off less than an hour later, and then put them back on again. Seems like a waste of energy."

"Facing away from me." He flips so his back is to her, and she settles in behind him, her hands brushing his neck. "It gets cold in here."

"We could get another comforter."

"That'd probably take care of chilly." She begins to rub his neck and shoulders. "Still, getting them off can be a whole lot of fun."

Okay, yeah that's true. "Then wearing them can be a signal that's the sort of fun one of us wants."

Her thumbs press up into the top of his neck, just below his skull, and he sighs. "That's good."

"Yeah, you're really tense right now."

"The door thing freaked me out."

"I noticed." She's kneading his neck, rolling tight muscles under her fingers.

"My dad was gone three hundred days a year some years."

"Oh."

"For something like five years he would be on his ship for six months, have two with us, and then six months on board again."

"My mom's dad was great. He was always there for us. He would have installed a deadbolt if my mom wanted one. He was the one who brought my mom and Sarah home from the hospital when
she was born, 'cause the Admiral wasn't anywhere around. He taught me how to drive. I loved my grandfather, and I miss him like crazy sometimes, but I don't want Gibbs to be that guy for you. I don't want him to have to be that guy for you."

"It's not the same thing." Her hands go still, just holding his neck, keeping it warm.

"Isn't it? You want or need something, and I'm not here for it."

"You want to be here, right?"

"Yes."

"Did your Dad?"

Tim has to think about that, and while he does she moves onto his shoulders. Trapezius, he thinks, feeling the sharp almost burn of too tight muscles fighting relaxing. He takes a deep breath and tries to make his shoulder let go of the tension.

Finally he feels the muscles start to melt, and finally he comes up with an answer. "No. He didn't. Not really. He was always on edge at home. He wanted to be on a ship."

"You planning on leaving for ten months a year?"

"No. I'd resign before I'd take afloat at this point."

She kisses the nape of his neck, not needing to say anything more to that. She spends a few more moments rubbing his back as he continues to relax into it. He's quiet while she does it.

"What are you thinking?"

"Latissimus dorsi, erector spinae," her hands move down his back, along his spine and cup his hip, thumbs pressing into the muscles, "illiac crest, gluetus medius, deep hip rotators. Ow. Don't Rolf me."

"Sorry. You're really tight. Body work wouldn't be a bad plan. So, you're just naming the muscles I'm working on."

"Not really, I'm just aware of where your hands are."

"Okay."

She scoots a little closer, so she's pressed up against his back. He can feel she's still got her jammies on, boxers and a T-shirt, but off the top of his head, he can't remember which ones she's wearing. They're at her place, so they're probably not his, but that's about as well as he knows. Her arm snakes around him, and begins to rub his chest. It's not so much erotic as relaxing. More of what she had been doing to the back of him. He sighs.

"Feels good."

"Your shoulders get that tight, it'll affect your pecs as well."

"Yep. Physiology 101. Anything that gets side A will also affect side B."

She kisses his shoulder, and licks it lightly.

"That feels good, too."
"Good. Are you sleepy?"

"A little. Looking forward to sleeping in with you tomorrow morning. Really hoping we don't get a call out."

"I'm not feeling one."

"Your gut is telling you no call outs?"

"I call them psychic vibes, but gut works fine, too."

He laughs a little. Inhales deeply, and lets it out slowly. He's starting to feel a lot more relaxed and a bit on the playful side.

"So, you really want to know about my fantasy threesome?"

"Yes!" Suddenly that hand that had been massaging his pec was now gently stroking his nipple. "So, who are you thinking of?"

"Usually or most recently?"

She sounds a little surprised. "You think about it that often?"

"Probably number eight on the top ten fantasies."

"So, really, who, usually?"

He takes a breath, hoping he's not about to shoot himself in the foot. "Breena."

"Breena? That's who you're so worried about? I'd do her." He can imagine the look she's giving him based on the way her voice sounds. She's right; this is very much not a big deal to her.

"Really?"

"Sure." She kisses his shoulder again. "She's not gonna do us. Especially not without Jimmy. The girl who waits twenty-seven years until her wedding day probably isn't interested in a threesome without her husband."

"Probably isn't interested in one with him, either," Tim adds, sure, Breena's a lot of fun, but she's really traditional about some things.

Abby nods. "So, why did you think I'd be bothered?"

"We actually know her, for one."

"Rather you were interested in sleeping with friends than strangers."

He thinks about that for a moment. "Why?"

"Sex should at least be friendly. And if you like a beautiful woman, I'm gonna think there's something wrong with you if you aren't interested in having sex with her."

"Huh. I'm a jerk if that isn't a two way street, aren't I?"

"What? You don't want me wanting to have sex with all my guy friends?" There's a decent dollop of sarcasm in her voice.
He nods.

He feels her shrug. "Not a jerk, you're just a guy. It's your biological imperative versus mine. You want to make sure the babies you're providing for are yours. So, you want to keep me away from other guys and get as many girls as you can. I'm designed to make sure those kids grow up, so forming relationships with whomever can help that is good for me. So, what's number two?"

"Number two?" He lost her somewhere on the biology bit. Not that he didn't understand the evolutionary stuff she was talking about, just that the number two thing didn't seem to go along with it.

"You said 'we know her, for one'... That suggests number two."

"Oh, yeah... She's just so..." He tries to think of a way to put this into words. "Wholesome?"

She presses up tight against his back and squeezes him. "Baby, if I hadn't figured out by now that you get off on forbidden fruit, I'm not paying attention. The perky, blond, virgin-until-her-wedding-day wife of your best married friend couldn't get any less forbidden. Of course you're going to want her."

He can't even begin to put into words how reassuring it is that Abby's not freaking out about this. "Want you more, baby."

"And you should. Tell me what you fantasize about the three of us doing?" The hand that had been playing with his nipple strokes down his body, and curls around his dick.

"We're on my sofa."

"Just hanging out?"

"Yeah, talking, maybe having a drink or something. You're in the middle. I'm on your right; she's on your left."

"Where's Jimmy?"

"Not with us. Beyond that, I have no idea. He's just not there. In my fantasy world, Jimmy basically doesn't exist."

She laughs at that. "So how do we know Breena?"

He turns to look at her. "Are your fantasies that detailed? Mine tend to get straight to the sex."

She kisses him, and then gently nudges him back to facing away from her. "Then by all means, let's get to the sex." He feels her giggling as she says that, and the hand on his dick releases. Her fingers begin just ghosting along the head, soft, feather light touches that he can barely feel.

"She says something, and we're laughing, and no, I have no idea what she says, the laughing part is the important bit, because we're having fun. And we start to calm down, and I lean in and kiss you, and you kiss back, and for a moment that's all that's going on. But I have my arm around you, so I feel it when she strokes your arm.

"It's soft, tentative, like she can't believe she'd do this, but wants to anyway. Like she can't not touch you."

"So, in your fantasy, I'm the one in the middle?"
"Ish."

"Ish?" She sounds intrigued by that.

"Just let me tell it."

"Okay." She takes her fingers away, does something, sucks on them he guesses, because when she returns to petting his dick her fingers are wet and slippery.

"Mmmm..." That feels good. His eyes slip shut and he relaxes further, getting into a storytelling frame of mind. "You pull back from my lips when you realize my arm is on your shoulder, so the hand stroking down your arm isn't mine. You turn to her, and she's staring at you with wide eyes, just really looking at you, her hand on your wrist. She drags her fingers down your hand, really lightly, and I can see the goosebumps rise on your skin.

"You flip your hand over, and she traces along your palm, and then slowly up the inside of your arm."

"Am I wearing a short sleeve shirt?"

"Tank top. She's wearing a little, sleeveless blouse thing, with buttons, and you're both wearing skirts."

"What are you wearing?"

He shrugs. Honestly he's never paid any attention to what he's wearing in the fantasy. He couldn't care less about the clothing on him. "It doesn't matter. By the time I'm naked in the fantasy, I'm just naked."

"We don't undress you?"

"You're busy."

"Jeans. You've got on jeans. Black belt. We're home, hanging out, it's probably a weekend, so, t-shirt, and if you've got on a t-shirt you're wearing sneakers."

"I don't wear my belts with t-shirts."

"No belt then."

"Okay, so we're all dressed and on the sofa. Do you want any other scene setting?"

"How's the lighting?"

"Night. Overhead light and kitchen light are on."

"Okay. I've got it in my mind."

"Good. What was happening?"

"Breena was feeling up my arm."

He resets the story in his mind. Taking time to set the stage had jerked him out of it. "She brushes her hand up your arm, and you squirm a little, because it's soft and tickly. She holds the arm that's wrapped around him out for a moment and trails his hand up the inside of her arm, tips of his nails causing sharp, tingly sensations to race through her."
"She's got those long, pink fingernails, and I'm watching them slip up your skin. And as you squirm, the side of your breast rubs against the back of her knuckles. She blushes when that happens, and starts to pull back, but you stop her, you take her hand in yours, and use your other hand to stroke up the inside of her arm."

"You get off on arm petting?" Abby sounds like she didn't expect and can't believe there's this much arm petting in his fantasy threesome.

"It's character development. This is Breena. She's got to be coaxed, gently into this."

"So, Jimmy just doesn't exist, but there's an entire backstory for the seduction of Breena?"

"Yes."

Abby laughs.

"Anyway, you're trailing your hand up her arm, stroking it lightly, almost more brushing the hairs on her arm than the skin, and she's still just staring at you. Like you are the most beautiful, most desirable person ever. And as you reach her shoulder she's leaning toward you, wanting more, but there's still some fear in her eyes, she doesn't know if this is okay, if she's allowed to have you.

"You lay your hand on her shoulder, cupping it, and gently pull her toward you. She comes to you, easily, sitting right next to you, her leg pressed against yours.

"You reach out with your right hand, and stroke her face. She turns into your hand, opening her lips a little, eyes slipping shut, sighing at the touch.

"Your thumb drags across her bottom lip and she lightly, with just the tip of her tongue, licks across the pad of your thumb. You moan a little at that."

"Have I ever moaned when you've licked my thumb?"

"Okay, I moan a little at that."

"Better."

"Your fingers slip down her neck, and flick open the top button of her shirt. She feels you do it, and grabs both of your wrists, holding them in front of her, and then lowers your hands so they're lying on her lap. She leans in and kisses you. And it's really slow, and soft, and lots of lip and tongue action, and honestly I can run this part in my mind for a pretty long time."

"So, do you actually do anything in this fantasy, or do you just watch?"

"We'll get there." Her fingers lightly stroking his dick and the image of Abby and Breena kissing combine, start to make him hard.

"She starts to whimper, soft, breathy, needy sounds. She wants more than your lips. She lets go of your wrists, and her one hand's closing around you knee, and the other snaking around your back. She jumps a little when she does that, because by doing that she touches me, and for the first time she seems to notice I'm still in the room.

"She breaks the kiss, pulls back, looks at both of us, and asks, 'Is this okay?'

"You nod, and I manage to choke out, 'Yes!'"

"I shift so I'm kneeling on the floor in front of both of you. She's still staring at us, and you're
grinning at her, unbuttoning the top button on her blouse.

"I lean in and kiss you, quickly, mostly just showing you how turned on I am, making sure this really is cool with you. Then I turn to her, and gently touch her face, and stop, waiting for permission. She nods, and I lean in to kiss her. And again it's soft and wet and open mouths and lots of tongue and I can taste you on her, and smell her perfume mixed with yours.

"Her one hand closes around mine, and the other is still wrapped around your waist. You're nibbling my ear while you unbutton her blouse."

Abby's light petting and talking about kissing means he's good and hard now. She wraps her fingers around him and begins to slide her hand up and down. "This is what you do when you think about this, right?"

"That's awfully close."

"What do you do differently?"

"I'm usually in the shower, but if I'm not, I use some lube."

She lets go of him, and his back feels cold as she rolls over to the nightstand to grab the lube. But then her hand is wrapped around him, and it's slick and tight, and he's perfectly happy with that.

He sighs, hips slowly rocking. "That's really good."

"So, the shower, huh?"

He shrugs a little. "Easy clean up."

"Sometimes it's really nice to be a girl."

"You can get off as often as you like, don't have to worry about making a mess, and don't have to worry about everyone seeing when you're turned on. Yeah, I'd say that's nice."

"Wet panties aren't all that much fun if you've got to wear them for too long."

"I'll take your word for it."

"So... we're all kissing..."

"And you're unbuttoning her blouse. That's another really clear image, your long fingers slipping buttons through their holes, and each new inch of naked skin.

"I pull back to watch. One hand on her hip, one on yours, as you slip your hand into her blouse, fingers lightly stroking her chest and breast. She's got on this small, white, lace bra, and your fingers skim over it, lightly pulling it down, so I can see one of her breasts. You were kissing her, but you pull your head back, and lick down her neck to that breast, and I watch you roll your tongue over her nipple.

"She gasps at that, half-surprised you're doing it, half-surprised at how good it feels to have a soft, wet, female mouth on her.

"She's thinking about how pretty it looks, your mouth on her, the way your tongue just glides over her skin."

"She's thinking it?"
"Well, I am, really, but she is, too."

"And what are you doing while I'm licking Breena?"

"In the fantasy I'm just watching. In real life I'd probably have a hard-on so hard that lack of blood to my brain would have caused me to pass out."

Abby laughs at that, kissing the back of his neck, and stroking him a little faster.

"Does she do anything to me?"

"She will. She cups your neck in her hand, and pulls you up for another kiss, her hands finding the hem of your shirt, and pulling it up and off of you.

"You're not wearing a bra. For a moment, she just watches you, then she tells you to stand up, so you do, and she tugs off your skirt. You've got on those little red lace panties. The ones I got you with the rose on the hip." She nods, knowing which ones he's talking about. "She stands up too, and she's shorter than you are, so she arches up on her tip toes, runs her fingers through your hair, and kisses you long and hard, pressing up against you.

"Your hands are slipping all over her, under her shirt, over the skirt, and I'm thinking she's wearing entirely too much clothing, so while you kiss, I slip her skirt off. She lets go of you long enough for me to get her shirt and bra off.

"I press up behind her, lifting her hair out of the way, kissing her neck and back, while you kiss her lips. I stroke my hands over yours, up your arms, skimming them over the sides of your breasts and down your sides to the panties, and then slip them off of you, kissing my way down Breena's back and leg while I do it."

"Nicely coordinated."

"Thank you." He grins for a moment at that, and she adds a very pleasant twist to what her hand is doing. "As I stand back up, licking my way up her leg, she stops standing on her toes, and begins kissing her way down your jaw and neck. Her tongue traces along your collarbone, and down to your breast. She's licking you all over, her hand cupping you, while her other hand drifts down your stomach and stops right above your pubic hair, not touching, yet."

Her hand, which had been slipping over him in a steady slow rhythm stopped, and just held him. "You really like girl on girl foreplay, don't you?"

"I wrote two lesbian erotic novels. What do you think? You want me to just skip ahead to the part where you put on the strap on and we both do Breena?"

He couldn't see if her eyes went wide when he said that, but her voice sounded like they might have when she asked, "You go there in this fantasy?"

"I could."

"Wait, how much of this is your usual fantasy, and how much of this is you telling me a sexy story?"

"About fifty-fifty by this point."

"How about you stick to the regular fantasy?"

"If you want me to."
"Yeah, I want to hear what you like, not what you think I like."

"Okay, I step behind you, kissing your neck and shoulders, and take her hand in mine, and lead it down, showing her how you like to be touched. Guiding her fingers with mine, making you moan and gasp. And you're so wet and slick; I can't not fuck you, so I nudge your foot, and you know that means I want you to spread your legs, so you do, and I slip inside you." Her hand tightens on him as he says that and speeds up.

"So, you're naked now?"

He doesn't answer for a second, just feeling her hand moving on him. "Yep, just like magic."

"I'm not moving too much, mostly just enjoying being inside you," and her hand slows down, but stays tight, "and keeping you and Breena from falling over. You're leaning into me, and she's pressed up tight against you, kissing you hard while her fingers go to work.

"She's a pretty quick study. You're hips are rolling, eyes half-closed, face and chest flushing."

"How can you see that?"

"Third person omniscient narration. I can tell you what Breena's thinking if you like."

She licks his ear and giggles a little, and then begins to slide her hand over him the same speed her hips move when they roll the way he's talking about.

He sighs. "Yeah, just like that... Mmmmm... So she shifts over a little, straddling your leg, riding it, moaning gently. And you know what she wants, taking one of your hands, slipping it into her panties, and begin to finger her.

"She stops you, steps back, takes the panties off, and then crushes back up against you, fingers moving faster and faster as you thrust between us." Abby's hand matches his narration, moving faster, tighter, less coordinated, against him.

"She's kissing you, rubbing her breasts against yours, as her hand flies over your clit, and I grind into you, making sure to get that angle you love, and you're making that soft, breathy, I'm-gonna-climax-in-two-strokes sound. She sucks your bottom lip, hard, and you're gone, twitching and pulsing, hand clenched in her hair as you get off." She squeezes her hand as she strokes it up and down him fast, and then just holds him, giving him soft, easy, and non-rhythmic squeezes.

"We hold you for a few minutes, letting you come down." Her hand went soft and snug around him, not moving.

"When you do, you slip off of me, and away from Breena, pushing her in towards me. I grab her hips, pulling her flush against me, grinding against her stomach, while you stand behind her and play with her breasts.

"The two of us kiss, hot and hard. I'm tongue fucking her while you start with your fingers, and after a minute, she breaks away from us, taking each of us by the hand, and says, 'Sofa.'

"She has me sit on the sofa, then straddles me, facing you, pulling your head down to kiss while she eases onto me." Abby's hand tightened and began to slip down him.

"And she's soft, and hot, and wet, and different. Not tighter, but just different. Really good. My hands are on her hips, not guiding her so much as just touching her, and she nudges you down, so you're kissing her breasts, and then you look at both of us, and smile, pure, happy, wicked, sexy joy
in your eyes, and you lean further down, and begin to lick her pussy.

"You're being careful about it, not touching me, just getting her clit, and she moans while you do it, thrusting into your mouth, trying to get more pressure from your tongue, but you pull back, kneel in front of us, and hug both of us, and then lean over her shoulder and kiss me.

"I'm licking her off your lips while she rocks on my cock... And it's almost too much... It's like being swallowed by sex." His hips are moving faster, meeting the firm and fast stroke of her hand. His breath is coming faster, and his balls are starting to pull up.

She stops stroking. "This is a really long fantasy. How long does it take you to masturbate?"

That derails his train of thought. His eyes snap open and he looks over his shoulder at her. "How long? I've never timed myself. Long enough to get it done. Usually though, I don't have someone interrupting me every...You're doing this on purpose!"

"You think I might be drawing this out, frustrating you, on purpose?" Her hand begins slowly stroking over his dick.

"You are!"

"I wouldn't do that, would I?" She kisses the tip of his nose and grins.

"You're evil, you know that?"

She kisses his shoulder, nudges his head so he's looking forward again, tightens her hand and gives him a few fast pumps followed by a few soft, gentle, slow ones.

"And yet you love me anyway. Keep talking."

He closes his eyes and tries to get back to where they were. "Okay," he says with a sigh, bringing the image, scent, taste, and feel back into his mind. "You break the kiss, and I lean back on the sofa, Breena riding me. You sit on the floor, cross-legged, and begin to lick both of us. I can hear you lapping against her, and every few strokes, as I pull out, I feel your tongue drag down my dick, and then you go back to her, switching between us randomly enough that neither of us knows where you're going to go next." She's pumping him fast, and he's not having a hard time getting back into it. "I reach down, spread her lips farther apart, and begin to finger her, because I want to feel her come on me. You lick my balls for a minute, and I squirm happily while you do, then you move my finger out of the way and take over on her.

"Then she's crying out... Coming on my cock... Your tongue driving her mad."

He's thrusting fast against her hand, and realizes he's got to draw this back some if he doesn't want to get off before she gets into the action. He takes her hand in his and stops her.

For a few seconds, he holds her hand, letting himself slide back from the edge. "Don't get me wrong, I love what you're doing, but if you don't back off, I'm going to be useless for the rest of the night."

She squeezes him a little tighter and pumps him fast. "Finish the story. Your fantasy, you get to get off. Tomorrow morning, we'll even up the score."

That sounds really good. "Okay, then grab some tissues for me. Mess on the bottom sheet is easy enough to deal with. Don't want to get cum all over the top sheet."

"Roll onto your back. I've got you for this."
He does, and she shifts, moving so she's kneeling between his legs. Then she bends and takes just the head between her lips, holding the base of the shaft in her fist.

"Ohhhhh..."

She stays perfectly still, hand and mouth not moving.

That takes a bit more of the edge off, tones down the need to climax. He waits for a few more breaths, to see what she's going to do, and just as he's about to ask, she pulls back and says, "You keep talking, I keep moving. Stop talking and I go still."

"Okay. She slips off of me, and says, 'On the floor.' So I lie down on the floor.

"Each one of you is kneeling next to me, and you're both kissing each other, and your hands are twined around me, sliding up and down. I'm thrusting along with it, enjoying the feel of it, loving seeing you two do it together.

"Then Breena breaks the kiss. She bends down, licking me while you stroke. She lets go, but you keep jacking me while she laps at the tip." Abby starts to mimic what he's saying. "Oh, God, yeah, like that..." His voice trails off, and as it did so, her hand and mouth move more slowly, coming to a stop.

He starts talking again with a quick breath, "Yeah, licking. She's licking. The tip of her tongue rubbing against the underside. And your hand is moving nice and slow, driving me crazy." And once again she mimics what he's saying.

"I grab you, pull you up to my mouth, and roll onto my side. You get the idea, my head cradled on your leg as I lick and suck you. And Breena is still sucking me, but she hasn't quite gotten how this works, so you tell her to lie on her side and hitch her leg up. And she does, and you go down on her.

"And there's no middle, or we're all in the middle..." Abby's hands and mouth speed up and he's breathing hard enough it's making it difficult to talk.

"And I'm...licking you... pussy on my mouth... feeling... tasting... You're all over me... Taste so good...

"And she's...oh...fuck...yeah...sucking...just...like...shit...that. Oh fuck. God, baby... can't talk... please don't stop." And Abby doesn't. She keeps up the suction, using her hands to stroke along with her tongue and lips, and in a few strokes he's shuddering, pleasure tingling through all of him. He feels her swallow, gently suck a few more times, swallow again, and release him.

"C'mere." He wraps his arms around her and kisses her deeply. It's not that he's particularly fond of the taste of his semen, but he does love the taste of him on her. After a minute's kiss he says, sounding sleepy, "I so owe you tomorrow."

"Yeah, you do."

"You'll have to tell me yours."

"Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"Your favorite one with another girl."
He can feel her smile at that idea.
Tim's lying on his cot, not sleeping. Sleeping would be a hell of a lot easier if he wasn't on a cot, two feet away from Gibbs, in fucking Afghanistan, where he most decidedly does not want to be.

His phone is on silent, but he feels it buzz.

Bedtime? It's a text from Abby.

About twenty minutes ago. You just getting up?

Yeah. Check your email.

He does. There are ten new emails from her. He opens the first one, and it's a picture she took of herself snuggled into his bed, on his pillow. He smiles a little at that, and then goes to the next one. The next one takes a second to open. It's got some sort of mild encryption on it. Same basic pose, her in bed, laying snuggled up with his pillow, but this time the comforter is back enough so he can see she's wearing the cobalt blue silk teddy with the white lace trim he got her a few days earlier.

He opens the third one, and this one takes a few seconds to open. A little more encryption. This one's a panties shot, and yes, she's wearing the panties that go with that teddy. Her hand is splayed open against her inner thigh, thumb on her mound, index finger just dipping under the hem at her leg, but what really gets his attention is the tiny, probably dime-sized, wet spot on the crotch.

He hasn't gotten that hard that fast without a girl actually touching him since he was fourteen.

He shuts down email really fast and finds another text from her.

Like what you saw?

You are evil. Gibbs is sleeping two feet away from me!

Then you'll just have to be really quiet.

I'll have to just be really frustrated. I'm not jerking off with him right next to me.

Why not? You can be quiet.

Not that quiet.

So go to the head.

Communal showers, communal head.

No stalls?

No.

Yuck.

Yeah. No privacy, at all, until Germany, two days from now.
Poor baby. Did you look at all of them?

Just the first three.

There's some really good stuff in there.

He grits his teeth, wanting to groan, not wanting to wake up Gibbs as he images what really good stuff might be.

This is not helping with being frustrated.

How about this: I won't touch myself until you get back, and when you do, we'll tear each other's clothes off and fuck like bunnies.

I'm sensing you do not grasp the concept of how male sexual frustration works.

Maybe not. ;) But I certainly get teasing and anticipation. And it's not like four days of no sex is a record for you.

True enough.

So I'll be home, in your bed, wearing the frilly lacy things you've bought me, not touching myself, waiting for you to get home.

You are killing me.

:P So what is your record?

On my own or with a woman?

Both

Seven days on my own, eighteen months with a woman. You?

Six weeks on my own, ten months with a guy.

Six weeks?

Gave it up for Lent once.

Huh. I had the flu for the seven days.

LOL He can imagine the look on her face as she laughs at that. So, lack of sex aside, how is it going?

Hot, dry, people want to kill us, same old, same old. You?

Lot better than that. How's Dex?

He's a Labrador in a war zone with a job to do, and Gibbs is doting on him. He's happy as a clam.

You ever want another dog? German Shepherds live ten to twelve years, and Jethro was already six when he got him. He had died last year.

No. Loving something I was going to outlive by fifty years once was enough.

I get that.
How about you? The new place will let us have one, you want a pet?

A kitten?

I'm allergic to them.

Ferret?

Eat your computer wires.

Bunny?

See Ferret.

Chinchilla?

You can't get them wet.

Why would you want to get a chinchilla wet?

I wouldn't. But if they get wet they get sick.

That makes no sense. They're animals that live outdoors, in the jungle, where it rains. He can feel the look she's got to have aimed at him right now, confused and disbelieving.

Look, that's what my mom told us when my sister wanted one. They make bad pets because if you get them wet, they die. He waits, but no new words pop up. It occurs to him that just possibly his mom wasn't telling the truth about that. She wasn't exactly a pet person, and didn't want any sort of small furry thing living in their home. Are you laughing at that?

No. Just couldn't figure out what to say to it. Anyway, I don't think we're getting a pet.

Probably not.

So, Gibbs is sleeping?

He's laying down, his eyes are closed, and he's snoring. If he's not asleep, I don't know what asleep is.

What I'd give to see that. Take a picture?

No!

Come on. You know you want to.

Fine.

He rolls onto his side and aims his phone, and without opening his eyes Gibbs says, "Take a picture and die, McGee. Tell Abby goodnight and go to sleep."

Apparently, I don't know what asleep is. I've been ordered to go to tell you goodnight and go to sleep.

Goodnight

Love you.
Love you, too.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay, I absolutely adored Seek. Best episode of the year. I loved the fact that we get confirmation that Tim still writes, and the look on his face when Gibbs says they're going to Afghanistan is priceless. And you can see Gibbs is enjoying taking him way too much. (More on that in a later chapter.) That's exactly the way I would have written that scene, but they did it for me! YAY!
Before his relationship with Abby, Tim got off about four times a week. And "about" had a lot to do with the caseload, how often Tony showed up at his place, how the writing was going, stuff like that. The busier he was, the less interested in sex he tended to be.

But most mornings, if he had a little time, his shower didn't just involve getting clean. (Or you could say some parts of him got *very* clean.) And, once again, assuming work complied, at least once a week he had a date with himself, and he'd take the time to really work himself over.

Since Abby, that number has jumped to seven. And he really likes seven. He especially enjoys the fact that it's seven, and he's not doing himself. Not that he's not good at doing himself, but even a plain, vanilla up, in, out, and done quickie is a whole lot better when she's doing it with him.

But right now, with the exception of when he's been sick, he's in the longest complete dry spell of his life, and even five minutes alone with his left hand would be paradise compared to what he's got right now. So, he's not exactly relishing Afghanistan.

By day three of no orgasms, he's getting something of an edge. His tolerance for stupid mistakes and minor annoyances is dropping. By the end of day three, he's come to the conclusion that Gibbs never jerks off. That's his best bet for why he's always so intense, because Tim's starting to feel it himself. He's not nearly as laid-back or mild-mannered as he usually is. But Gibbs is just the same as he always is, if anything, he's a little more laid-back than usual, because apparently being in a war zone where there are snipers, IEDs hidden all over the place, and people want to kill them is relaxing to him.

So, by the middle of day three, when they are getting ready to finish this, Tim is majorly looking forward to getting home.

Then Dex gets shot, and that means he's stuck in Afghanistan even longer than they had expected.

Day four, when he should be on a plane heading home, but isn't, because Dex can't travel yet, he's getting turned on by stupid things. Supposedly there are women around here somewhere, but he hasn't seen one. Instead, he's noticed the arched doorways on the local mosque look a little like a stylized vagina, and that's getting to him.

Day five, there's not much to do. Tony and Ziva have taken care of the stateside part of the case. They've got their end wrapped up. So all they've got to do is wait for Dex to get stable to travel. It's not a terrible wound, but they want to make sure all of the anesthesia is out of his system before putting him on a plane. So, mostly, he's sitting around, trying to keep himself from fantasizing too much about the last time he and Abby made love.

He'd taken the picture of the pendant, put it into Google Image Search, and came up with who it belonged to in about eight minutes. He looked at her and said, "So, all night, huh?"

"We'll just have to find something else to do for the next ten hours," she replied with a smile.

And so they did, putting those fuzzy white lambskin rugs in her office to good use.

Day six, Gibbs keeps giving him these looks, and he doesn't exactly know what those looks mean, but between the looks and getting shanghaied into this trip in the first place, he's almost pissed off enough to hit him for it.
Why would Gibbs bring him to Afghanistan? It's not like he relishes this kind of thing under the best of conditions and super-hot girlfriend at home does not equal best of conditions. Plus Tony and Ziva both like to travel; they enjoy dangerous places and roughing it. Meanwhile Tim wants Abby, a soft bed, and a hot shower.

18:00 (DC time) on day six and Dex is cleared to travel. Finally, they're on an airplane heading towards Germany, and in less than twenty hours will be home, where Abby is.

Where Abby is naked, in bed, wet and wanting, and not touching herself, waiting for him to come home and... And he forces himself not to think about that, or the pictures on his phone which he's been aching to see, but has not seen because if architecture is giving him a hard-on, porn starring his favorite person on earth is going to kill him.

In Germany, there's privacy. So, of course, in Germany, they're more or less running from one packed plane to the next. He has literally enough time to pee and nothing else before getting on the next plane.

He tries to sleep in the air. Trying to get himself closer to his normal schedule. And it works, sort of. He can't really sleep on a troop transport. Unlike Gibbs, he never acquired the ability to sleep anywhere, anytime, at the drop of a hat. So he falls into a dreaming three-quarters doze.

He's aware enough of where he is to pull out of the dream of fucking Abby in her office on those fuzzy white lambskin rugs before he gets off.

Gibbs just grins at him when he wakes up, and he growls a little, wondering if he was talking in his sleep. He was talking in the dream, saying some really fabulously, exquisitely, just full on filthy things to her while she rode him. He's hard as a rock and thankful that because of the position he's in and his jacket on his lap, no one can see that.

He's more thankful that he woke up in time and won't have to spend the next however long in slowly drying shorts, with Gibbs, who is full on smirking at him and enjoying this way, way too much, as a seatmate.

Dex stares up at him, big brown puppy eyes, and he pets him. Dex settles his head on his paws and yawns, falling back to sleep.

That's not a bad idea, so Tim goes back to sleep, and this time, doesn't dream.

---

It's 3:30 when they land, and Gibbs says, "Go home."

So he does.

He texts Abby when he gets into his car. *Just landed. Hour from your place.* Her apartment is closer to Andrews than his is, so that's where he's heading.

A minute later he gets one back. : )

*You wearing a skirt?* He types when he gets to the next stoplight.

*Yeah*
Take your panties off before you get home, unless you want me to rip them off of you.

His phone buzzes, another text, but he's driving so he forces himself to ignore it. Forces himself not to let the image of her in a tiny, little skirt, no panties, legs wrapped around his hips as he fucks her through the wall distract him from the cars around him.

At the next stoplight, he picks up the phone.

I wasn't wearing any. Haven't for two days. Got a Brazilian wax day before yesterday.

He groans at that. There's another text.

Got an erection?

He types quickly. Since Germany. Am driving. Getting on 95 in a minute. Gonna make you come so hard you see stars.

The light is just changing to green when his phone buzzes. He's four cars back so he reads the text.

Just once?

He types fast. As many as you can take.

And then he's got to drive again.

When he gets to her place, he scans the parking garage but doesn't see her car. He growls a little at that, but grabs his bag and heads up to her apartment. He tosses his things into the living room and stands there, waiting.

Just got home. Where are you?

He paces around the living room, not sure what to do with himself.

Finally, after three minutes his cell buzzes. Five minutes out. You still dressed?

Yeah

What are you wearing?

Blue button down, green cargo pants, black jacket, sneakers. He'd packed for four days and ended up out for six, so this clothing is on its second wear.

Undies?

Black knit boxers.

Everything off.

Yes!

He strips down and wonders how fast he can get a shower. Hasn't had one in close to thirty hours and the clothing he's been wearing isn't exactly fresh.

But, she'll be home in three minutes, and he's not that fast. In three minutes, all he can get is wet. And she knows he's been on a plane for more than twenty hours, and that the trip lasted two days longer than it was supposed to, so it's not like he's had the chance to get a shower recently or has an
overabundance of clean clothing. She would have told him to get a shower if she wanted him to. He's fairly sure of that.

He's pacing the living room, naked, phone in hand, waiting to see if he'll get another text. An idea hits, he can look at the pictures now. He opens his email and begins to look. He'd had thousands of ideas of what might have been in those pictures and most of them were wrong, and none of them were nearly as good as seeing what she had sent him.

He's on the seventh shot, her naked, fingering herself, eyes closed, back arched, chest flushed, looking like she's about to come, when he hears her hand on the doorknob. He puts the phone down, fast, and yanks open the door.

He looks at her, eyes hungry, body aching for her, breath fast and chest flushed, cock leaking, and pulls her close. He registers that she does have on a little tan plaid skirt, a white tank top, and her nipples are hard, and then he's kicking shut the door and lifting her into his arms, as she wraps her legs around his hips.

Her lips and tongue meet his as his cock sinks into her. He groans, loud, almost pained, so happy to be back in her.

"Fuck! Tim!" Her voice is breathy, and she locks her feet together on the small of his back while wrapping one arm around his shoulders and tangling her hand in his hair.

He savors being fully in her for a few seconds and then takes two steps, backing her to the wall.

"Gonna fuck you through the wall."

"Please!"

There's nothing even remotely soft, or tender, or gentle about what comes next. Just fast, hard, licking, biting, touching each other as much and as fully as they can, all at once, firework sex. And like a firework, it's over a lot faster than either of them really would have liked.

He's leaning against her, breathing hard, still holding her up, feeling, honestly, embarrassed. He grins sheepishly. "Okay, that wasn't quite how I had planned that."

She smiles gently and kisses him, stroking his face. "How did you plan it?"

He lightly licks her bottom lip. "Among other things, I envisioned you getting off and me lasting for more than thirty seconds."

She laughs and kisses him again, looking amused. "Good thirty seconds?"

"Fast thirty seconds. I missed you." He kisses her, lips slow and lingering.

"I noticed." She kisses him back, another slow lingering kiss. "I missed you, too." She squirms a little. "I'm noticing something else."

"Yeah, me, too." He's not going soft. And he's not feeling much of what could be called any sort of desire to pull out or go to sleep. In fact, he's still feeling awfully turned on. He thrust against her again, and yep, that feels really good.

She sighs as he does that. "That's nice."

"That's a fucking miracle."
"I'll take it."

"Me, too!"

He thrusts a few times, enjoying it, making sure he's not going to go soft, and when he's feeling pretty sure that he's good to go, he puts her down and drops to his knees.

He unzips her boots and takes them off, sure he'll forget about them if he doesn't take care of them now, then tugs off her skirt and just looks. She's perfectly smooth and hairless, pink lips peeking out between soft white skin. "Ohhh..."

"You like that?"

Tim looks up at her, impossibly wide grin on his face, then kisses her mound, tongue tracing over skin that he'd never seen before. "That's at least a quarter of getting off in thirty seconds." He licks again, fingers following the path of his tongue. "So soft." His fingers slip down further, caressing over the now hairless outer lips, feeling her silky smooth and wet.

His tongue starts to follow. She pulls on his hair and he looks up at her again.

"You sure?"

That stops him. He's staring up at her, a very puzzled look on his face. Okay, yeah he doesn't particularly like going down on her when she's on her period, but she stopped menstruating when she went on Depo, so that shouldn't be an issue. "Why wouldn't I be?"

He watches her slip a finger between her lips, and if it's possible, that makes him even harder, and it comes back wet with his cum.

"Oh." Hmmm... Yeah... That... Screw it, naked and impossibly soft and, God, naked Abby pussy in front of his mouth. No way he's not going to kiss her. "You've swallowed enough of it over the last year. Doesn't seem to have done you any harm." And then he sucks her finger into his mouth.

She lets out a startled half-moan, half-laugh at that, and when he lets go of her finger and begins tonguing her clit that sound morphs into all moan.

It isn't like he's never tasted his cum before, though the lingering traces of it on her mouth after she's gone down on him is somewhat different from licking it off her skin. It isn't bad, doesn't taste like much of anything, really. Sure, he's not saying he wants to drink a glass of it, but it isn't poison, either.

And there is something deliciously kinky about licking it off of her. About spreading her legs, seeing it dribble down her thigh, knowing it's his cum, on her, in her, and he's getting to lick it off. That hits a few buttons he didn't know he had.

There certainly is a thrill at how slippery and wet she is, how open and inviting, and how his fingers can just slide in, stroking her mercilessly, because by the time he's gotten them involved in the action he wants to get her off as hard and fast as he can.

The sounds she's making hit him straight in the dick. The sweetest, hottest music ever, dancing through his mind as he licks and strokes, feeling her get tighter and move faster against him.

Her hands clench in his hair, pulling him closer, letting her fuck his mouth, letting him feel how much she's missed this, wanted it, needed it.
Her thighs begin to tremble, and with a sharp, sudden spasm, he knows she's done. He holds her, tongue pressed gently against her, feeling her body shake, and grins.

He lets her come down for a minute, until most, but not all of the quivers have stopped, and then pulls back, standing up, kissing her, deeply. He thinks about her apartment and the furniture in the living room-kitchen area. The table isn't very stable. The sofa's too low for what he wants to do next. The kitchen counter on the other hand...

"See stars?" he asks.

"Yeah." Her voice sounds soft and dreamy as she says it.

"More?"

She nods, smiles, and kisses him again.

He doesn't break the kiss, but begins to head them into the kitchen. She does break the kiss.

"Kitchen?"

"Yeah."

"What are you thinking?"

"Putting you on the counter and fucking you blind."

Two steps later, they're in the kitchen and a second after that he does have her on the counter. And it's just about hip high on him. Perfect.

He slips into her, fast, and slides back out, slow. She leans back on her elbows, legs wrapped around his hips, as he strokes her breasts through the tank top. It's almost perfect.

"Sit up."

She does, and he takes off the tank top.

"Perfect," he says kissing her shoulder.

"Perfect?"

He pulls back to look her in the eye. "God, yes, I can feel you and see you, and," he thrusts hard into her, "you feel so fucking amazing. Missed you, missed this, so much."

She arches up to meet his thrust, sighing as his hips slow down even further. He's softly gliding against her, pulling out until only the tip of him is touching her, and then easing all the way back in.

Abby leans back on her elbows again, and he follows her, kissing and nipping at her nipples. Gently stroking with his tongue and then pulling with his teeth. She's rocking against him, eyes closed, mouth slightly open, breathing fast and hard.
"Wanna make you come slow."

"Oh."

"Just gonna keep doing this, nice and slow." His thumb is moving over her clit, firm, focused, but not fast, and his cock keeps easing in and out. His mouth moves back to hers, and with his free hand he pulls her up so they're chest to chest, lips to lips.

"I want you to feel every inch of me. Feel how hard you make me. Feel how much I want you. Feel how every single night I was dreaming of you. Dreaming of you wet and tight on me. Dreaming of your taste on my lips." He licks his lips, still able to taste her, and then kisses her, also wet and slow.

He can feel her body growing tight on his, and she's squirming, because in this position she can't really thrust or increase the speed. Though she can use her legs to pull him into her faster, and does.

"Slow, baby. Just let me do you." He strokes his right hand through her hair, knotting his fingers in it, holding her head still, and kisses her again, deep and soft. "Promise, I'll make it worth your while."

And if tied up and spun out is what gets him off harder than anything else, this is what does it for her. Long, slow, achingly slow strokes, the sort that take control and patience, and right now, he feels like he can do this all night. He can go as long as she might want him to.

So he does.

She falls back to her elbows, head back, mouth open as she moans a little with each breath. He shifts her left leg over his shoulder, so he can slide in a little deeper.

"Oh, God, Tim. Fuck baby." Her cheeks and chest are pink, nipples hard, face looking like she's somewhere between exquisite pleasure and sharp pain.

"Please!" Her hands and feet are clenched, and he slows down a little more, thumb barely moving, more pressing against her than any sort of friction. He doesn't stop moving, but he goes so slowly she eventually starts to relax again.

She's moaning now, and it's not precisely a happy sound. It's more a I-was-a-second-from-climaxing-why-did-you-stop-this-is-torture sort of sound.

He's kissing her leg, right hand stroking her nipple, left starting to speed up again, going back to that slow, firm grind. "I've got you, Abby. Gonna make you come so hard it'll be worth a seven day wait."

The last time he did this, the last time he had the control to do this, was after Palmer's wedding. He'd already gotten off three times and felt no sense of urgency, so he wanted to see what would happen if he just went slow on her. And she bit him black and blue, and scratched his back bloody, and came so hard she passed out.

He can feel his own arousal building, so he knows he doesn't have the control to spin this out as long as he did then, but he can probably get pretty close.

He can feel her tense up again, and again he slows way down, barely moving, but keeping pressure on her clit and nipple. And if she wasn't supporting her weight on her elbows, he's fairly sure she would be clawing his back to ribbons, and he'd be enjoying every second of it.

And again she relaxes.
He starts to slide against her again, long slow strokes, all the way in and all the way out. She's moaning with every breath, and skin pink from her stomach to her forehead.

Her eyes are closed, so he watches himself fuck her. Watches her body, wet and glistening, take him in, and drag against his as he eases out.

He's starting to moan with each stroke, feeling his balls creep up and his thighs tense. He forces himself to keep going slow, he'll wreck it if he starts thrusting like crazy, so he keeps pulling all the way out, pushing all the way in, and rubbing his thumb in firm slow circles.

He changes the angle a little. Getting his knees into the motion. Pushing up as well as in.

"Fuck!" she more breathes it loudly than speaks. She pulls her head up, opens her eyes slowly, and stares at him.

That starts to undo him. She's so tight against him, and her eyes are glazed with lust, pupils wide with excitement. He eases back in again, getting that angle again, and begins to move his thumb just a hair faster.

"Don't stop!"

"Not this time."

He speeds up just a little, jaw clenched, shoulders and thighs and back tight, he probably looks like he's in pain, too, but it feels so mind-blowingly good.

She makes these little fast inhaling sounds, followed by a harsh shuddering breath. He flicks his thumb just a little faster and feels her go very tight, and then slip over the edge, her body rippling and twITCHING around him, moans verging on sobs slipping from her lips.

And that does it for him. This time is slow burn fireworks, blowing their way up his spine and down his legs, through his balls and centered on his cock, and this is the homecoming fuck he'd been dreaming about.

The bad thing about a mind-blowing fuck on the kitchen counter is you can't exactly collapse in a boneless heap with your lover after.

He ends up on the kitchen floor, back against the cabinet the pots live in, her foot on his shoulder, his forehead and lips pressed against her calf, as they both just sort of lay around and rest.

Eventually, she feels like moving and ends up on his lap. They sit there, snuggling, his fingers petting her hair, her head on his shoulder, neither of them talking, just enjoying touching.

And eventually, the kitchen floor is cold and hard, and the cabinet isn't very comfy, the handle poking him in the shoulder, and his feet are starting to fall asleep because she's sitting on his legs, so he says, "I should get a shower."

She sniffs him, nose wrinkling. "Not a bad idea."

He laughs, and she stands up.

A few minutes later, they're in the shower, and he's groaning with pleasure again. "I love hot water!
Oh... God! I don't know who invented the hot water heater, but he was a genius!

"No stalls, no privacy, no hot water," Abby says, fingers on his hips, watching him throw his head back and let the water flow over him.

He wipes the water out of his face, and steps a little forward, so it's mostly hitting his back and shoulders. "Yeah, I don't recommend Afghanistan for vacationing. Dex and Gibbs had a much better time than I did."

"Dex got shot."

He looks right at her and says, "Exactly," with a perfect dry inflection.

She looks up at him, eyes narrowing a little, thinking. "You're bad luck for dogs. Jethro got shot. Dex got shot."

"Dogs are bad luck for me, too. Jethro got shot because he was trying to rip my throat out." He touches the four tiny scars on his throat, turning his arm so she can see the ones on his forearm as well. "If he had played nice, I would have, too."

They'd been over that, a long time ago. She hadn't realized how badly bitten he'd been until she brought Jethro over to check out his new place with McGee, and saw him in a t-shirt, without the bandages on his neck or arm. Abby doesn't apologize a lot, but the apology he got was long, sincere, and involved a handmade get well soon card and cupcakes.

She shakes reaches for the shampoo. "Turn around, I'll do your hair."

He does, and sighs happily as she starts to rub her fingers through his hair.

"What's the plan for tomorrow?" Abby asks.

"Back to work. Taking Dex home. Hopefully it's a paperwork day."

She nods at that.

"You?" he asks.

"Probably paperwork. Deposition at two."

They spend the next half-hour like that, talking, getting clean, Tim enjoying his first hot shower in a week.

They get out of the shower and dry off. He's getting ready to start shaving, but she stays his hand. "Tomorrow's soon enough. I like you stubbly like this, not really a beard, but long enough so it's not prickly. It feels nice."

He smiles and puts the razor down. It's been maybe five days since he shaved last. And yeah, it's a little itchy, but if she likes it, twelve more hours won't hurt.

In the bedroom, he slips into a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt, enjoying how soft and comfy they are. Nothing about Afghanistan is soft, and he likes soft. She wraps up in her robe, it's long and
black and silky, covered in white and pink cherry blossoms. He spends a long minute just watching her. Skin pink from the hot water, hair down, curling a little because she's towel dried it but not brushed it out yet.

He sits on their bed, relishing the easy intimacy of this moment, and the overwhelming comfort and rightness. Rule number eight: Never take anything for granted. And right now, he isn't.

"Is there any food?" he asks, looking in the almost empty fridge. He's not feeling much interest in salad dressing, left over Caf-Pow, or turkey slices that are probably a few days past their prime.

"Ice cream," Abby says, opening the freezer, chin on his shoulder. "That's about it. It's lonely eating here without you, so I ate out."

He nods. Grocery shopping tomorrow. But for tonight, ice cream for dinner will do. It's Chocolate Moose Tracks, which is probably his second or third favorite, but since she doesn't much like his top two, (Coffee and Strawberry) and he's not huge fan of her favorite (Cherry Sorbet), it's what they usually get.

They settle onto the sofa, one container of ice cream, two spoons, and the remote. "Did you watch the Walking Dead while I was away?"

"I had to do something to pass the time."

"Was it good?" He's queuing it up on the DVR.

"So good."

"Okay, don't spoil for me."

She feeds him a bite of the ice cream, and then curls up against him as he wraps his arm around her. And that's how they end the night, snuggled on the sofa, sharing ice cream, watching the Walking Dead.
A/N: So, I liked Squall. But kind of like Hit and Run (which I also liked) cannon Tim and Abby aren't in the same place Shards Tim and Abby are. Sooo... I'm snagging some details from Squall, and ignoring others. (See post story note for more on that.) Anyway, this chapter might not precisely match up with what you saw on Tuesday night.

Tim guesses it was bound to happen sooner or later. For some bizarre reason, Fate seems to enjoy tossing their dads at them, and since his dad actually is in the Navy, the odds of running into him were even higher than say two separate cases involving Tony's dad.

Doesn't mean he's happy about it.

Doesn't mean he couldn't have happily gone for the entire rest of his life without running into that man.

But it doesn't matter, because there's a job to do, and he's got to do it.

He stands in the doorway and watches Abby stab the dummy with a syringe over and over. Part of it is just for comfort, getting to watch someone who doesn't think he looks terrible and won't make a snide shot about his love life. (He knows Penny told The Admiral about Abby, and he very clearly remembers being thirteen and his dad chewing him out about being fat and how he'd never keep a girl if he stayed that way, so he's sure that crack about his love life was a reminder that if he didn't shape up he'd be losing his girl.) Part of it is just liking to watch her work. She looks like she's enjoying this, but somewhat frustrated at the same time.

And part of it is wondering how much she knows about what happened today. He's guessing she already knows about The Admiral being on the ship, because, if the look on Palmer's face when he realized what was going on was anything to go by, Jimmy had his phone out and was texting like mad the moment Ducky pulled the ME's van out of the parking lot at Norfolk.

She stabs the dummy again, and he's been lurking long enough. Time to get moving.

He and Abby don't argue. Not really, not about important things. Sure, fussing over what they'll watch on TV or what's for dinner happens, and she can get snappy and he gets sarcastic, but for big things, it just doesn't happen. They walk away, take the time to get themselves right, and then go back and talk.

And that works, for both of them.

Because they both need that quiet time in their own heads before they can let someone else in. And they both respect each other enough to let them have that quiet time.
So, when she said he needed to stand up to The Admiral, that there were things he had to say to him, he walked out of the lab.

And it's not that she's entirely wrong. There are things he wants to say to the Admiral. But what she is wrong about is that it would make any difference. He doesn't need liberation; he cut himself free years ago; he needs acceptance and appreciation. His dad isn't going to give him what he wants, and since that isn't going to happen, spending more time yelling at him won't serve any purpose.

It's not that he needs to say the words, he has, and he backed them up with action. He needs his dad to hear them, and change because of them, and that just isn't going to happen.

Tim doesn't go straight home after work. For an hour, he drives around, not really paying too much attention to where he's going, just letting the miles slide by.

This isn't just about him and his dad, it's also about Abby and hers.

And it's about empathy, and understanding the dad shaped hole in her life is a whole lot different than the dad shaped hole in his.

He gets to a stop light and fires off a text. Are you at your place or mine?

Yours. You ready to talk?

Yeah. Home in twenty minutes.

Have you eaten?

Not yet.

I'll order something for us.

Okay.

They eat first. Just getting it out of the way. Not really talking, a few words here and there on incidentals, like making sure the new place gets the deposit check, and how she has to remember to file her taxes this weekend, and that it's Easter on Sunday, and she'd like to go to Mass early. Little things like that.

And when the leftovers are packed up, and the silverware washed, he leads her to his bed, because this is a bed sort of conversation.

They don't undress. Maybe this is a naked sort of conversation, too, but right now he wants clothing, he wants an extra bit of a shield between him and these words.

He lays on his back, on his side of the bed, and pats hers. She follows him, laying on her side, head propped on her hand.

"Have at it," he says to her. 'Cause honestly, he's not sure he can start this one.

"He's your dad, Tim. You'll miss him, miss the chance to have had him in your life. I don't want you to regret this."
"He's not my dad. If I've got a dad, it's Gibbs or my grandfather. He's just the guy who got my mom pregnant."

"I think he did a bit more than that."

"I don't think shitting all over my life counts."

He stares at the ceiling for a moment, and then turns to her, looking into her eyes as his hand caresses over her stomach. "If you're going to do this, it should be important to you. It should be like breathing." He rolls her onto her back and kisses her stomach, and then looks up at her, resting his chin against her hip. "If you're going to make a baby with someone, that someone and that child should be the most important thing in your life. It should be your joy, and the reason you get up in the morning and the reason why you want to come home at night, and not just some massive disappointment.

"And as far back as I can remember I have been a disappointment to that man. As well as I can remember, my mom and I were never, ever important to him."

He's staring at her, eyes and voice earnest, as she pets his hair. "And I have been standing up to him my whole life. I didn't go to Annapolis. I'm not in the Navy. I'm a Federal Agent. I'm a best-selling author. I've hacked every secure system that matters. I've killed people to protect others, and I've put killers away, and when none of that made me good enough in his eyes, I shut him out because I don't need someone who will never approve of me in my life.

"I know you loved your dad. I know you still love him. I know you miss him, and I know you wanted more time with him. And I get how important he is for your life, but my dad is toxic, and I don't want him in mine."

She pets him and smiles, gently, at him. "Then why did you call him after you saw Penny?"

"How did you know I did that?"

"You were sad for days after, wouldn't talk about it. So, I did some checking around, found an interesting phone number, and went with it."

"Oh."

He's quiet, not sure what to say; he's honestly not entirely sure what made him dial those numbers last year. She waits, gently petting his hair, letting him think about it.

"Hope." That's his best guess as to what that feeling was when he dialed those numbers. "We hadn't talked for seven years. I'd gotten onto the best Major Case Response Team. On the job less than a year, and I was on Gibbs' team. I called to tell him, thinking maybe that might..." His voice trails off, remembering that call. He'd been so proud, and The Admiral shot him down in less than three minutes, cussed him out for wasting his life. "But it didn't. He just got on me about wasting my time and potential. And that was it. I was done with him. But Penny said he loved me, though evidence for that is awfully thin on the ground, and I was hoping that maybe seven years gave him some perspective. Maybe being gone would have made him decide he wanted me around." Tim offers up a lopsided smile and rolls his eyes.

"It didn't. I crack a case that saves hundreds of thousands of lives, protect his mom, my grandmother, and he's still pissed I'm not in the Navy. Pissed I'm not the guy designing the sort of weapon we stopped.

"He doesn't love me. He's never loved me. He was in love with an idea of who I was supposed to
be, and when I didn't want that role, he got my mom pregnant again, but Sarah was a girl, so obviously she couldn't do it, so he doubled down on me. And by seventeen I was done. I quit Junior ROTC, I turned down Annapolis, ripped up my acceptance letter in front of his eyes, and said yes to Johns Hopkins. I left his home and never looked back.

"I've mastered more skills than most people dabble at. I've got credentials out the ears. I've excelled at everything I've put my will to. And eight years ago I figured out that he was never going to pet me for it. I picked NCIS for him, the CIA and FBI both gave me better deals. NCIS was an olive branch, a compromise, but it wasn't enough. Being the best at what I liked was never going to be good enough for him."

She strokes his cheek, and he closes his eyes, then scoots back up to lie face to face with her as she rolls back onto her side.

"I hate this. I'm thirty-five, but he shows up, and suddenly I'm fifteen again. I'm nervous and jittery just because he's around. I won't be the man he wants me to be, and I hate feeling how disappointed he is in me. Every single time he looked at me it was all over his face, NOT GOOD ENOUGH."

She drapes her leg over his, and kisses him. "He's a moron."

He looks at her, smiles a little, it's a self-deprecating look, not a happy one. "Be nice if he was. But he's not. He's smarter than I am, probably than Penny."

"Then he's an asshole, which is worse."

He shrugs. "That's true, but... well, just like your body needs one, the world seems to need assholes, too."

She laughs at that. "Yeah. I suppose it does. He's good at what he does?"

He sighs. "They don't just hand out flag rank to anyone. So, yeah he's good at that. An appallingly bad husband and father, but he's good with a fleet of battleships."

She takes his hands in hers. "And you were supposed to be good with them, too?"

"Yeah. I'm supposed to have command of my own ship by now. I should have an Annapolis ring, preferably one commemorating beating the crap out of Army in football." He holds up a hand that's completely ring free. "He didn't want a son; he wanted a clone." She kisses his hand.

"What would I want with a ship?"

"No idea."

"I'm the only Omega in a long and glorious line of Alphas."

"Penny's an Omega."

"I'm the only Omega male in a long and glorious line of Alpha males. Girls can be Omegas or Betas or whatever. He's fine with Sarah. She can be a writer. She gets a poem published in the school lit journal, and he's got it tacked onto the wall of his cabin. I'm a fucking New York Times best-selling author, three times over now, and I'm not living up to my potential." He shakes his head, feeling his anger cresting. "God, I hate this. See, fifteen all over again. He sticks around too much longer and my skin is going to start breaking out."

"It's okay."
"No, it's not. It's really not. It's just the way it is, and it's not changing."

Her leg drapes over his hip. "Would you want it to? Be the man he wants you to be, or make him the man you want him to be?"

"No on the first, definitely no on that. And sure, who doesn't want their parents to love them?"

"Penny says he loves you."

"Penny loves me. And Penny loves him. So, I think she thinks he has to love me. But I don't think he does. I mean, your dad loved you, you know that, you felt it. He ever call you a waste of fucking life?"

Abby shakes her head horrified. She knew John and Tim didn't get on. She didn't know it ever got that bad.

"Even if he did love me, what does it matter if he can't be in the same room with me without disappointment radiating out of every pore?" A short bitter laugh escapes his lips. "I'd rather he was just mildly fond of me, but proud of who I am. Like Gibbs those first few years, he didn't get me, at all, but he at least noticed I was useful. I'll take that over being a disappointment any day."

Abby kisses Tim. "Nothing about you is disappointing." He smiles a little at that as well, but it's still not a happy look. "And anyone who isn't full on insane knows that."

"And yet he is. My great grandfather was the first McGee at Annapolis, and that was a big deal then, because it was during the Irish Need Not Apply days, but his dad was hooked into the Boston political machine, so he got in. He was a sub commander in World War I, basically the most dangerous job in the Navy at the time. He never made admiral because the Germans blew him to pieces in 1918. But my dad has his medals, and there are a ton of them, on display in his office. My grandfather was a First Lieutenant, three years out of Annapolis when Japan hit Pearl Harbor. He was there, one of the first men to get to a gun and shoot back. His ship sank, but didn't roll over, so he kept firing until there were no more shells, water up to his knees. He finished the war a Captain, but that wasn't enough, so he became a naval aviator. Between World War II and Korea, he was one of the men learning what to do with aircraft carriers. Landing on them, designing them to work better. He was an admiral by the end of Vietnam. And when he died, back in the '80s, all nine hundred of his metals and flag ended up in my dad's office, in a display case, next to my great-grandfather's."

Tim pauses, remembering his father carefully polishing those medals. "You ever see Ferris Bueller's Day Off?"

Abby nods.

"If I had had a Ferris in my life, I would have tossed those fucking medals off a cliff." Tim shakes his head, half-trying to imagine what his dad would have done if he had done that. He guesses the odds were fifty-fifty that he would have gone hot and beat the ever living shit out of him, or gone cold and tossed him out of the house.

"He loved the fact that I was good at math and computers. Had visions of me working on artillery or something, coming up with new and better ways for the Navy to kill people. He hated that I was so 'soft,' and decided it was his job to spend the parts of my childhood when he was home 'toughening' me up.

"The summer I was fourteen, he took me on a boat every single day. Trying to beat the seasickness out of me, like being seasick was something I was doing just to piss him off. Ten hours a day on the weekends. I lost something like thirty pounds that summer, I was so sick. I'd be throwing up, and
he'd be drilling me on trajectory arcs. Threw up so many times I had to get a few teeth filled. My mom put a stop to it in August when she was buying a second set of new, smaller clothing for me. Why would I even want someone who does things like that in my life?"

And if 'fucking waste of life' worried Abby, that story is making her hair stand on end. "I'm sorry."

He tilts his head a little, lifting his eyebrows, his expression saying _nothing either of us can do about it._

"You know what really terrifies me?" he asks.

"What?"

"That he did it, and I'm going to have to testify against him. His lawyers will rip me apart, angry kid getting even with his dad. They'll rip you apart, fixing the forensics because you're my lover."

Abby looks deeply non-plussed by that idea. She has yet to meet a defense lawyer she couldn't chew up and spit out, so she takes the conversation in a slightly different direction.

"You think he did it?"

"Not really. I'm not feeling it."

"Good."

They lay there quietly for a few breaths. Her fingers trace down his arm, gently stroking his palm. She kisses him, and he sighes, enjoying the comfort of that touch.

"What was your dad like?"

She smiles, Thomas Sciuto's been gone long enough that she can enjoy the good memories without puddling up. "He was sweet and gentle. He'd put you in mind of Palmer a little. Curly, brown hair, sometimes inappropriate stories, glasses. He loved cars. They ran a car salvage/junkyard, and when something cool came in, he'd snag it and rebuild it. Deaf, so the house I grew up in was either really quiet, or very, very loud. Music and movies loud enough to feel them, that sort of thing. Or long conversations done entirely by hand." She signs at him for a few seconds, getting the point across. "He had a really expressive face. Lots of looks, like Gibbs. Both he and my mom could read lips and talk, but if it was just the two of them, they preferred to sign.

"I rebuilt the roadster, and the Harley, and he was the guy who taught me how to do that.

"I was a little girl in the south in the '70s and '80s, so I was supposed to be pretty and polite and find myself a husband right out of high school, and he told me that was complete crap. His girl was going to college and making a life for herself. I didn't have to be a blonde debutante. I could be as weird as I wanted to, and he loved me for all of it."

Tim smiles at her. "That's the kind of man I am going to be for our kids."

"I know."
Pizza and laser tag just isn't as much fun without Ziva.

They all want to make sure she has space and time to mourn. But it's been three months, and she keeps saying she's fine, but she hasn't been coming to play, and they miss her. And even if they aren't dating, yet, it's not like Tim, Abby, Jimmy, or Breena can't see where this is going to go eventually.

So, it's fairly natural when four sets of eyes turn to Tony, after Abby asks him, "So, what is Ziva busy with?"

"I don't know," Tony answers.

"You don't know?" Jimmy asks, stunned that Tony doesn't know.

"She's not talking to me about it. She's just busy" Tony says with a shrug. He doesn't know, and he has, intentionally, not pressed.

"Do you have an idea?" Abby asks, taking a bite of her pizza.

Tony doesn't answer for a moment. His expression looks guarded. "Yes." And that idea is why he hasn't asked.

Once again, four sets of eyes are staring at him, so he keeps talking. "She said she wanted revenge. She has not gotten revenge. I'm going to assume getting revenge is what's keeping her busy."

The four of them are quiet for a while, it's not like that idea is much of a surprise. Anyone who's even marginally familiar with Ziva can do that math.

No, what has them quiet is what to do with it. Finally Breena says, "You mean, she's tracking down the man who killed her dad so she can kill him?"

Tony nods.

"Then we should help." This time the four sets of eyes include Tony's and are staring at Breena. She's sitting at the table, very cute, wearing this little pink sweater and a ponytail, her makeup is cute, she's daintily nibbling her slice of pizza, and apparently, calmly contemplating helping out on a murder.

Tony looks like he's about to say something, then he doesn't. He stares at Tim as well, who also looks like he's about to say something but can't make his mouth form the words. Because while it's true that, should the need arise they will help Ziva with something like this, they don't TALK about it.

Finally Abby says, nodding at Breena, "We should."

Jimmy stares at the girls, and then at Tim and Tony. He also seems to get the whole, for-God's-sake-we-don't-talk-about-things-like-this concept. He swallows and says, "If we're going to talk about this, I'm thinking in public is a bad idea."

Tim nods at him, really fast, eyes wide and emphatic.
Tim and Abby drive back to Jimmy and Breena's. They don't live particularly close, but if anyone has a secure space to talk, their backyard is probably it.

On the ride, Tim thinks about something that's been hinted about, but he doesn't know for sure. He's fairly certain what the answer is, and he thinks Abby does know.

"Gibbs killed the man who killed Shannon and Kelly, right?"

She doesn't answer, but the expression on her face as she looks away from the traffic at him says it all.

"That's all I needed to know."

They get to the Palmers' place about twenty minutes later. Tony, Jimmy, and Breena are already on the back porch. Honestly, it's a bit cool to be out there, but unless someone has a directional mic on them, and that doesn't seem likely, it should be safe to talk.

For a long minute, they all stare at each other, and then Tim says, "Just, for the record, we're cops, so we're not even supposed to be thinking about this, let alone talking about doing it."

"Tim, we're family, and if she needs help, we're gonna give it," Breena answers.

"I'm good with that. I went to Somalia to get her back; I'm in on this, too. I want you to know how serious this is. We"—He gestures to the four of them.—"are all officers of the court, so just talking about this can get us at least fired or tossed in jail. We have a legal obligation to not look the other way when we see someone breaking the law or planning to, and conspiring to murder someone is way off in break the law land."

"Assassinate," Tony says. "This is personal for us, but it's political as well. We do this, it's an assassination."

"Fine, still completely illegal," Tim replies. "Breena, you get caught talking about this, and almost nothing will happen to you. Jimmy gets caught, and he goes to jail. You two still think this is a good idea?"

Breena and Jimmy look at each other. "We're in."

"Great," says Tony dryly, and Tim can see him thinking that Jimmy and Breena aren't exactly the first people he'd call in for help killing someone. Though, as Tim's thinking about it, they're more or less the poster couple for good alibis, and that's always useful. And Breena has access to a funeral home with a crematorium, and that's probably better than an alibi. "But the thing is, I don't think Ziva wants help. She's not talking to me about it. She's telling everyone she's fine. Happy as happy can be. Frolicking about in meadows of pleasantly busy."

"Does she know that help, real help, is not only available, but on offer?" Abby asks.

"I've already offered."

"How did you offer?" Breena asks.

"I told her whatever she needed, I was in for. She told me she needed revenge, and then we didn't get Bodnar, so no revenge. She hasn't said anything about it, or anything along those lines, since."
"Which probably isn't a bad idea. You want to do something like this, and get away with it, not having anyone else helping is a good plan. Especially if you're Ziva. If anyone knows how to do this..." Abby says.

"Yeah, but she has to need some sort of help, right?" Breena says. "If nothing else, she's got to find this guy. And having someone cover those tracks," she's looking at Tim as she says this, "would be good."

"I'll check her computer, make sure anything she's got on it is clean and impossible for someone else to find."

Abby looks at Tony. "Gun or knife?"

"I don't know. Gun?"

"If she goes with a gun, I can make sure, that no matter what, it's never traced to her or the bullets."

"If we get his body, anything incriminating will vanish," Palmer says.

Abby shakes her head. "No body. A guy as connected as Bodnar needs to just vanish. You and I'll make sure nothing of him is ever found."

Jimmy nods at that.

"Which leaves you with the hard work," Breena says to Tony. "You're the one who gets to tell her we're here for her, and convince her that if she's going to do this, to not do it alone."

Tony stares at them and says one word, "Gibbs."

"If we do this, we'll bring him in. He'll understand," Abby says.

"Vance," Tim says it.

"Will want to help, too. Hell, that's probably her plan. Her and Vance. Two people who are really good at what they do. She'll be the knife, and he'll provide the cover. Rule Number Four," Tony replies.

"Rule number four?" Breena asks.

"Best way to keep a secret, keep it to yourself. Second best way, tell one other person. There is no third best," Tim answers.

"So, should we be letting her keep her secret?" Jimmy asks.

Tony sighs, they're all looking at him again. "For now. I'll find out what's going on, and if need be, we'll back her up."

The others nod.

They're getting ready to go, when Tim decides that secret or not for right now, Ziva's not all that great with a computer. "Tony, would you give Abby a lift to my place?"

Both of them look at him.

"No matter what, if we actively help or ignore it and let her do it on her own, she needs someone covering her digital tracks. I've got to get into her computer. Depending on how she's looking, she
might be letting Bodnar know she's on his trail."

"I'll come with you," Abby says to him.

"It'll look weird enough if I show up at work at 1:00 AM on a Saturday when we're off. You show up too and..." his words trail off. They could be going there because having sex at work is kinky and fun. Except he should get on Ziva's actual computer to do this, not the lab computers, and they'd be in the lab if they were going to do that. "Home. It'll work better if you're at home."

"You sure?" He can see she's thinking of the same cover he is.

"Yeah. I shouldn't do this from the lab."

"I fit under her desk."

Tony looks really bothered by that, while Tim says, "Even we don't play that far out of bounds."

Abby nods. Yeah, there's already enough scuttlebutt about the two of them without tossing extra gasoline on the fire. "Okay. I'll see you in a few hours?"

"I hope so." He kisses her, and turns towards his car. After two steps he stops and turns back to her.

"You know the burner phone I keep on my workbench?"

"Yeah."

"Go home, attack my work computer with it. Then kill it and get rid of it. That'll be my excuse for going in at one in the morning, making sure all of our computers are safe."

"On it, Boss." He smiles when she says that, and heads off.

One in the morning at NCIS is not nearly as deserted as he would have hoped. It's not that it's crowded, but there are people around.

He gets into the bullpen and turns everyone's computers on. If his computer got "hit," then he'll make sure everyone else on his team is secure, too.

He runs a fairly advanced sweep on all of their computers. Making sure everything is nice and tight. Abby had hit his computer with a pretty nice little worm. Enough that if it had come from someone else, it would have gotten his attention. Not so much as to get into anything interesting.

Then he sits down at Ziva's desk and gets to work.

She's leaving tracks like an elephant charging through a cornfield. It's not that she's particularly bad at this, it's just that there are so many people who are so much better at it.

It takes him close to three hours to get it all wrapped up and hidden.

He's standing up, stretching, turning off her computer, when he hears the elevator open. Shit.

It's Vance. Fuck!

"McGee?"
"Director Vance."

"Working late?"

Lie or assume he's in on it? The knife and the shield. He can't quite read Vance's look, but he thinks Vance knows he's not here at four in the morning for kicks. "Security sweep, sir. Someone tried to hack my computer tonight, so I'm making sure we're all good."

"Uh huh." Vance does not appear to believe this, and he's wondering if he really is that bad of a liar. "And Agent David's computer was in need of extra security?"

"I worked on all of our computers."

"That doesn't answer my question, McGee."

He stares Vance right in the eyes and puts his trust in the idea that Vance is the shield for this op. "Yes. Badly."

Vance smiles, slightly. "Then I'm glad you were willing to come in on your off time to tend to it."

"Thank you."

"Are you done, McGee?"

"For now."

"Then I'll see you on Monday."

It wasn't until he was in his car, driving back to his place that he began to wonder why Vance would be in the office at 04:00 on Saturday.
And If We Can't Protect, We Avenge

Tony drops Abby off at Tim's and then heads toward Ziva's place. He's not sure what to say to her when he gets there. Not entirely sure if he wants her to be there when he gets there.

He parks, sees her car, knows this has to be dealt with, and hopes she'll let him in enough to help.

He knocks on the door. It takes a few minutes but he hears her moving around in there.

She opens the door, in her bathrobe, and he can see pajama pants under it. She's looking sleepy and confused that he'd be there.

"Tony?"

"Can I come in?"

"Yes." She steps out of the way, and he enters her apartment. "What is going on?"

"Just wanted to see you." She doesn't look like she believes that. It's been a long time since he's come over just to hang out. He flips on the TV and pops the first DVD he finds into the player. She's staring at him, wondering why he'd be doing this. He knows it's unlikely her place is bugged. But it's not impossible, and Bodnar is at least as good as she is at this kind of stuff, so he's not tipping his hand.

"You missed our date night," he says, turning up the volume while sitting on her sofa and patting the cushion next to him, hoping she'll sit down next to him and just talk.

By now she's got an idea of what he wants to talk about, but she doesn't want to talk about it. Not to him. Not to anyone. "Do we have to do this at one in the morning?"

"Yes."

She sits down next to him, looking exasperated. "I'm fine, Tony."

"Are you?" His eyes are soft as he asks. "Fine Ziva hangs out with us and plays laser tag and kills Palmer nineteen times in the first twenty minutes. Fine Ziva eats pizza with us, and laughs when we make jokes, and rolls her eyes with me when McGee and Abby get too cute." He leans in close to her, lips an inch from her ear, voice very low. "And fine Ziva doesn't shut us out when she's planning on killing someone."

He can see her understand why he's got the movie on now, and why the volume is on high.

"Tony." Her voice is soft, and she's staring him in the eyes. He's not sure if that look is angry, sad, or pleased.

His hand finds hers, and squeezes gently. "You are not alone. No matter what you do about this, we've got you. McGee is taking care of your computer right now, making sure your tracks are covered properly. Abby and Palmer are ready to make sure that when you're done with Bodnar, no trace of him is ever found. Breena will give all of us an alibi and access to a crematorium if need be. And if you want, I will hold him down while you kill him."

"Tony, you can't..."

"I can, and I will. I meant it, whatever you need, I am here for. And if you want this to be just you
and Vance, we'll do it that way, too. But we can't help if you won't talk to us. So, please, talk to me.”

And she did.

When Tim got home, Abby was still up.

"All done?"

He looks at her curiously and mouths the word, "Bugs?"

She shakes her head, no. After attacking Tim's computer, checking to make sure his place was safe was the second thing she did.

"For now." He sits down on the bed next to her.

"You're good with this?" she asks, holding his hand in hers.

He nods. "Yeah. He hired someone to spray bullets into a residential neighborhood during dinnertime on a Friday night to try and stop a peace deal. He killed Mrs. Vance. It was only luck the kids weren't there. Only luck a stray bullet didn't hit someone else. And he was trying to start a war by doing it. Thousands, maybe tens of thousands of dead people if that had happened. We can't try him without an international incident and possibly war breaking out. I'm fine with this."

"Okay." Her eyes search his, making sure.

He shrugs. He's as fine as he can get with something like this. "You?"

She shrugs, too. "Yeah. Look, I know Ziva's dad wasn't a saint. I know he screwed her over badly, more times and in more ways that we probably know about, and honestly, if it was just him, I wouldn't be fine with this, but Mrs. Vance... That's over the line. We protect our own, and if we can't protect them, we avenge them."

He nods at her.

"What'd you do?"

"Mostly just made it harder for anyone to see what she's doing. She won't tip him off if he's keeping watch on who is watching him. I didn't totally wipe her tracks clean. I'm thinking that when we catch him, she's going to keep looking for him, for at least a year, and periodically after that, that way if anyone better than me does get a hold of her computer, they'll see her hunt for him didn't stop when he vanished."

"Makes sense. Anyone gets a hold of her computer, they'll know you did it."

"Sure, but I don't think it'll matter. Hunting for him isn't illegal. She can claim she was working the case. I can claim I was helping. And, yeah, she's not supposed to be on that case, but I am, and as long as we're trying to bring him in, we're still on the right side of legal. And as long as she doesn't stop looking for him when he finally vanishes, that'll make it harder to pin killing him on us."

She nods at that. He gets up, gets ready for bed, and snuggles in next to her. And, while it's true that both of them understand the need for this, that on an intellectual level both of them know this is right, it's also true that both of them were still awake when the sun rose three hours later.
April 21, 2013 was the last time anyone saw Ilan Bodnar alive. He'd been in hiding for months at
that point, but he came up on the facial recognition software on a traffic cam in DC.

April 22, 2013, a safehouse in DC, abandoned by Mossad in 2006 when it was compromised,
burned to the ground. The official report showed that faulty wiring and years of neglect combined to
cause the fire.

April 23, 2013 The Slater Funeral Home and Crematorium cremated one unrecorded customer,
along with three bags of clothing, a tarp, a roll of duct tape, the carpet and upholstery of a van, and a
knife.

No one ever asked any questions. And after it was done, no one at NCIS ever talked about it again.
"Am I going to see anything I don't want to?" Tony asks as they pack up Tim's stuff.

"As long as you don't open any of the boxes labeled Bedroom, no, you won't."

"Good." Tony's piling boxes onto a hand cart. That's the first, only time he's mentioned anything about Tim's sex life beyond a bit of light, generic teasing about some mornings being better than others, since January.

"Thanks for helping with this."

"No problem. I ever move; you'll be helping me lug, too."

"Yes. I will." Tim puts one of his boxes on a pallet. He's got it worked out so it should only take them one trip for the boxes and then three more trips for the furniture.

"It's a good day for it."

May 23rd, 2013 had dawned beautiful and promised to be warm and sunny. "Yeah. The new place has a patio, and we've already got a grill set up for the after party."

"So how is it Abby gets Ziva, Autopsy Gremlin, Mrs. Gremlin, and Gibbs to help her move, and it's just you and I over here?"

Tim shrugs. "She's got more stuff than I do? Does a better job of looking helpless? They like her better? No idea. But I'm glad you're here."

Tony puts a box that says Books on it onto his cart. "I thought you had more books."

"I only kept the ones I really love in hardback. All the rest are on my Kindle."

Tony nods. "So, three bedrooms, huh? You know what happens when you get three bedroom?"

It wasn't that they needed a three bedroom place. There had been some pretty nice two bedroom ones they'd thought seriously about. But, when it came down to it, he felt pretty weird having an office all to himself—which he needs, he's a lot happier writing alone, with his music, than with an audience, even if that audience is her—if she didn't have a space of her own, as well. And since they could afford three bedrooms, they got them.

Granted, they aren't entirely sure what she's going to do with her room. But, they'll figure that out as they go along.

"I don't trip over Abby's stuff, she doesn't trip over mine, and neither of us has to use earbuds to listen to our music."

Tony seems to think that's a good answer, but it doesn't exactly get to what he's fishing at so he keeps talking. "That, too. Babies happen when you get an extra room. Well known fact, if you've got a space for them, next thing you know you've got one to put in that space."

Tim smiles, loading up a box of clothing. "Wouldn't mind if it happens. But I think the plan is to get married, or at least get a house, before she gets pregnant."

Tony stops loading and focuses on Tim. "You're not freaked out at all about this, are you?"
"Nope." Tim still smiling. He's the antithesis of freaked on this.

"It's not if you get married, it's when." Tony shakes his head a little at that. "You and her and the rest of your life and kids and... nothing... not freaked at all..."

"Nope!"

"Forever, really?" Tim's wondering what exactly is going on here, because the look on Tony's face isn't so much disbelief as trying to figure something out.

"Really."

"Seriously, a tiny person, entirely dependent on you for everything, and that doesn't freak you out?"

"She's not pregnant now, okay? And yeah, when it's real, I might get a bit freaked out by that, 'cause, yeah, tiny person entirely dependent on you is kind of scary, but right now, it's an idea, one I like. Abby pregnant with my kid, that's all kinds of good. A little girl with her smile and my eyes, I like that idea, too. Watching Gibbs with grandkids... Just take a moment and imagine that."

Tony laughs at that. "He'll turn into a puddle of goo or have them ready for the Marines by the age of seven."

"And possibly both."

Tony shakes his head again. "Gibbs making toys for your kid. Yeah, I can see that."

"Someone will have to teach them to sail." And then he looks at Tony for a long moment. "And how to dribble. I can't do that to save my life."

Tony looks very pleased by that, then glances away and grabs one more box. "I think this is ready to go."

Tim nods. "Yep. Service elevator is down the hall on the left." He tosses Tony a set of keys. "It's the Ryder truck right next to the loading bay."

"So, how did last night go?" Tim asks an hour later. They're disassembling his workbench, which is too big to get out of the door in one piece.

Yesterday had been Tony and Ziva's first official date. He had been expecting Tony to talk about nothing else today, he'd talked about the planning for it almost non-stop yesterday, and his silence on it seems off. Tony's also not behaving with his usual, I-just-got-laid attitude, but Tim's well aware that there's a huge difference between 'laid' and 'just slept with the love of my life for the first time.'

Hunting Ilan broke the wall between Tony and Ziva; Tim could see that. But he could also see that while there was a new intimacy between them, (Of course, that was true for the rest of the group, too. You can't do something like that and not completely have each others' backs.) nothing romantic appeared to be happening until about two weeks ago when Tony started planning last night's date.

"Good." He doesn't elaborate or look up from unscrewing one of the legs of the bench, which Tim takes to mean that things were either so incredible that Tony hasn't been able to get his head around it, or she slapped him silly and left before dessert.

"You got a Phillips head?" Tony asks. (He hadn't been making any progress on that leg using the
wrong screwdriver.)

Tim looks around on the floor—"Yeah"—and hands it over.

They continue disassembling. Tim waits. Tony will start talking about something soon. And if the date is still too personal to talk about, he's not gonna press.

"She slept over."

Tim nods, getting how big of a deal this is to Tony. "At your place, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"First time you've had someone do that?"

"Since Wendy."

"You like it?"

Tony nods. "I need a bigger bed."

Tim smiles, feeling really, really happy for Tony. "Good."

"So, this forever thing, what happens if it doesn't work?"

Tim looks confused at that as he puts his end of the dresser on the pallet. "What do you mean? Like, I get bored and leave? Not gonna happen."

"No."

And then it hits Tim, and he feels intensely stupid for not putting this together sooner. Tony's mom died. The first woman Tony ever loved left him. Suddenly he gets something else, Wendy left Tony. He just knows that. Kate left him. Jeanne left. EJ just vanished one day. All the women Tony's ever really loved have left.

Tony's standing, forearms on the top of his dresser, leaning into it, not really looking at Tim. "She was sleeping next to me, spooned up close, 'cause there's not really enough room in my bed for any other position, and all I could think about was what the hell was I ever going to do with myself if something happens to her?" Tony's staring at the wall behind Tim. "Lonely might be better than this. I'm so scared of something happening to her. I don't know if I can even work with her anymore, 'cause if she's in danger, I'll do something stupid to try and help, put everyone at risk."

Tim doesn't know what to say to that. He awkwardly pats Tony on the shoulder.

"You know... Gibbs might be really good to talk to about this."

"Yeah." Tony shrugs. "Or he might tell me that that's a big part of why Rule Number 12 exists. That getting stupidly in love with Jenny made him decide dating his partner was a really bad idea."

"Maybe. But, the worst happened to him, and he's still here."

"Yeah. You ever wonder what he was like, you know, before?"

"Yes. Sometimes." Tim's going to assume that Tony only read the first LJ Tibbs book all the way through because the final version of Black Rock had a really long Tibbs flashback which covered exactly what Tim thought Gibbs might have been like before.
"I don't think he's really still here. Sure, there's a guy named Gibbs, and he's got a lot of history with
the guy he used to be, but I wonder if Shannon's husband and Kelly's dad crawled into the ground
with them and never came out."

Tim shrugs at that. It certainly could be true. Though he thinks there's still a lot of the old Gibbs left,
probably more of him each year as time goes by, but he doesn't know. None of them do.

"Maybe the next time Jackson is in town, you could talk to him?"

"Yeah... Maybe." Tony shakes his head. "But it wouldn't help. It won't keep her safe." Tony sighs.
"Come on, it's not gonna move itself... Tim?" Tony's staring right at him, making sure he knows that
he's dead serious.

"Yeah?"

"When we're out there, if it's ever me or her, the right answer is her."

"I know, Tony."

Two hours later, they're doing the one last sweep through his apartment, making sure nothing's been
left. It's as empty as it was the day, almost ten years ago now, when he moved in.

"I think you're set to go," Tony says.

"Looks like it. Just gotta hand in my keys. Meet you at the truck?"

"Sure."

They've been on the road for about two minutes, pulling up to a light, when Tony says, very
carefully not looking at Tim, "So, if I wanted to learn more about ropes and... things... What would
you suggest?"

Tim almost rear ends the car in front of them he's so surprised by that. Once he has the van fully
stopped, he says, "Why do you want to learn?"

"I think Ziva's tastes might be broader than mine."

"Ahhh..." Tim smiles at that. "Okay. You already trust her with your life, so trust her with this, let
her know you don't know everything, and just ask her what she likes. You'll have a much better time
playing with her than you will trolling online."

"I keep hearing about this book that they're making into a movie soon—"

"NO! Do not go read Fifty Shades of Gray. It's not an instruction manual. It's not even particularly
good smut. I can hook you up with better stuff than that if you want it, but not until after you talk to
her and get something more specific than 'ropes and things' for what you might want to do."

Tony finally looks at Tim, curiosity in his eyes. "How do you know it isn't good smut?"

This is the part where Tim is not about to say that Breena gave Abby a copy after Breena read it to
Jimmy, and suggested he and Abby might enjoy it, as well. He and Abby had read it, and enjoyed it,
but probably not the way Palmer and Breena had. They'd read a few chapters and ended up rolling
around, laughing so hard they couldn't breathe. "I read Tony."
"You're grinning," Tony says, pointedly.

Tim smirks a bit, enjoying this. "Abby and I read it, and that was fun, but the book's terrible."

Tony looks perplexed by this. "How can it be fun and terrible?"

Tim rolls his eyes a little. "It's supposed to be sexy, and we ended up laughing so hard we almost hurt ourselves."

"Oh."

"And it's bad. It's bad on a general level, and it's bad in specific for you because you aren't dating a 21-year-old-submissive who's never so much as touched herself, let alone kissed a guy. It's bad because if I understand you and Ziva right, you're not the dominant one." Tony looks bothered by that. Tim shakes his head. "Oh, come on, it's not like I've just met either of you. And I'm not saying she's a Dom and you're a sub, you're probably both switches, just she leans more Dom than you do."

Tony's just staring at Tim. He finally says, looking a little disturbed, "You really do read, don't you?"

Tim flashes him a look that says, Duh. "Anyway, and more importantly for Fifty Shades, unless I'm really mistaken, neither of you gets off on pain."

Tony nods.

"So, anyway, bad book. Spanking and nipple clamps do not equal orgasms unless you're with someone who's wired that way. Hell, maybe Ziva is, I don't know, and I'm not ever going to know. But you're better off flat out asking her than just trying it one day with no warning." He thinks about that. "Okay, if you think she might like stuff like that, you could suggest reading it with her... But really, if you're gonna do that, tell me, and I'll find you something that's actually worth reading."

"Is a nipple clamp what I think it is?"

"Probably." Tim nods with a little cringe on his face.

Tony winces. "Yuck."

Tim says, "Yep."

The light turns green and they continue toward his new place.

The new place is in Arlington. It's closer to work than either of their previous places, and should such days arise as they'd be reliably home by midnight, it's right near a Metro stop.

It is also on the third floor, and there is no elevator.

"Trust you to get a third floor walk-up." Tony says as he's helping Tim get his dresser up the stairs.

"Think of it this way, we kept Abby's sofa, not mine, so the five of them moved that."

"Good point. You kept her bed, too."

"Right. Palmer, Gibbs, Abby and Ziva got to lug that." Abby's bed is a huge four poster. It's beautiful, but, and this is Tim guessing facetiously here, weighs two thousand pounds. "Dressers, mirrors, two desks, a workbench, which is in pieces, a recliner, four book cases, and a ton of
computer equipment and tools, and that's all of my stuff."

"So, you're saying we got off easy?"

"Let's put it this way, I'm working on convincing myself of that, and if I'm lucky, I'll get you to believe it, too."

They get up the second flight of stairs and start to hear familiar voices coming from an open door down the hall.

"So, you gonna kiss her?" Tim asks.

"Huh?"

"You know, when you walk in and see her for the first time since this morning. You gonna kiss her?"

That stops Tony. "Thanks, McGee, now I've got to think about that."

Tim grins. "I'm gonna kiss mine."

"You always kiss Abby. You're practically weasels in heat the way you two go at each other."

"Weasels in heat? You've been spending way too long with Ziva."

Tony's looking thoughtful. "Yes."

"Yes?" Tim doesn't follow where that yes goes in the conversation and looks alarmed. "No, not too much time with Ziva! More time with Ziva is the idea."

"No. Yes, I'm going to kiss her."

"Oh. Good."

By dinnertime, all of the furniture, boxes, and various home accouterments had migrated from Abby's home and Tim's home into their home.

And, by dinnertime, a good third of them had found new homes. All of the furniture had been reassembled and put into place.

And, by dinnertime, no one wanted to do any more unpacking or moving, which meant it was time to fire up that grill, open some beer, and sit back and relax.

Gibbs takes one look at Tim and the grill and shakes his head. "You've got good steaks, McGee, let's not kill them." He starts rearranging the charcoal into a tidy pile up against the one side of the grill. "Pile it up like this." He points to the deepest part. "This part'll be real hot. Steaks start off here, get a nice sear on 'em." He points to where the coals are only one deep. "Then they go here to finish off. Cook 'em gently."

"Thanks, Boss."

He's standing next to Gibbs, both of them on the patio, dousing the charcoal with lighter fluid, ("Not so much, McGee. No need to torch the place.) and watching Tony and Ziva tease each other.
"They look really happy," Tim says.

Gibbs nods.

"Is this cool?"

"Yeah."

"He's really scared."

"I know." Gibbs lights the coals, and they burst into a huge ball of flame. He shoots Tim a See, way too much lighter fluid look, and Tim nods.

"Less lighter fluid next time," Tim says, watching the flames dance.

"Good."

"Is she?"

Gibbs watches them. Ziva's sitting in Tony's lap on one of the kitchen table chairs. (They've only got four of them, and since Ducky's over now, they've got eight people in their place.) He's gently stroking the back of her neck with two fingers, and she's smiling as she talks to Abby, who's slicing up cucumbers for the salad.

"Not anymore."

It's so late that it counts as early when Tim collapses into bed next to Abby. For a while, they just lay there, neither of them moving or wanting to move. After their friends left, they spent the next four hours unboxing their stuff and finding new homes for it.

Then he rolls to his side and kissed her gently. "We're home."

She kisses back. "Yeah we are."
Clubbing

"I was thinking," Palmer says as he puts his beer down. They're wrapping up dinner and getting ready to head out for Laser Tag. "We're all couples now, so we could do something less platonic than laser tag. How about next time we go clubbing?"

Tim's eyebrows rise and he smiles at Abby. They go out every month or so, and it's usually fun.

"I'm in," Abby says. "I'm thinking since Tony and Ziva just started dating, they should get to pick where we go."

Ziva nods, smile creeping over her face. "I know a place. Two weeks from today, we go dancing?"

Tony grins. "That'll be fun."

Aesthetics. Tim appreciates aesthetics. And while Tony might not agree, he has a very definite sense of style, as well. Not like the collars on his jackets pop themselves, and it's not like he does it because his neck gets cold.

It's true that the second thing he did when he got some money was get some really nice clothing. And while he's not a clothes horse, he is picky about what he wears. It's also true, that, after having spent close to two thousand dollars on a jacket to have it destroyed less than five hours after wearing it out for the first time, he doesn't wear his good clothing to work.

So, given the information that they are going to a club with an upscale casual dress code and the music is world hip hop, he's taking the time to come up with a decent outfit.

The jeans are Rock and Republic, light blue, intentionally worn looking, not frayed, the t-shirt is dark blue, slight v-neck, the jacket is leather, dark brown, almost black, Armani.

Abby's smiling at him. He can see her behind him in the mirror over his dresser as he slips on his watch. He's thinking she's amused because it's taking him longer to get dressed than it took her.

Of course, she has it easy. For girls, going clubbing is simple, find dress, put dress on, doesn't matter what sort of dress it is, any one will do, (Okay, no that's not literally true, but that's how it looks to him, and he's more than smart enough not to say that out loud. He knows, at best, saying that'll get Abby laughing so hard she cries, and at worst he might get head slapped.) apply makeup and heels, and you're ready to go.

She's wearing this little black and pink thing. It's got a halter top, and a very low back, all of her back tattoos are visible, and a swingy, mid-thigh length, pleated skirt. When she's standing, he just sees a black dress, but the insides of the pleats are bright pink, so when she moves he catches flashes of pink.

Her hair is down and even curled a little, or waved. He's not sure where the line between curly and wavy is. It's whatever happens when she lets it dry naturally without brushing it under the hairdryer. And whichever it is, he likes it.

He takes a moment to play with his hair a little. It's a slightly messier version of how he usually wears it.
She steps up behind him and turns him to face her. Then she presses up close for a long, open mouth kiss, running her fingers through his hair, rubbing up against him in a manner that's making him think being late for dinner is a particularly good idea. After a minute, she pulls back, grins, and says, "I think that's the look you were going for."

He looks at himself again and adjusts his pants. "Ruffled hair, half-hard, thinking about sex. Not a bad look for me."

She giggles and puts on a pair of knee-high black patent leather boots. "Not a bad look at all."

They meet for dinner first. Palmer and Breena are already at the restaurant when they get there, but no sign of Ziva and Tony.

They've been there just long enough for him to give Breena a hello hug, when Ziva and Tony show up. Tim stares at the three couples, and yeah, style.

They might be best friends, but there are some seriously different aesthetics going on here.

He looks at Palmer: brown suit, British librarian cut, red striped shirt, maroon bow tie, then points to himself. "Nine." He points to Tony: navy suit, sharp cut, white shirt, blue tie, red pinstripe. "Ten." And then points to Palmer. "Eleven."

Tony looks confused, Abby's smiling, Breena seems to get it, and Ziva looks intrigued.

Palmer grins. "You think you're Nine?"

"I'm the one in the jeans, leather jacket, and t-shirt."

Jimmy looks him up and down, not exactly seeing it, but he doesn't appear to think it's completely out of the question. "I suppose so. But really, Eleven? I don't look anything like Matt Smith."

"The suit." Tim stares at Jimmy's tie. "The bowtie?"

"Speaking of which..." Ziva pulls it off of Jimmy and hands it to Breena. "Not for where we're going."

"Oh." Jimmy undoes the top button of his shirt. "Okay. Still, when it comes down to it, I'm Four."

"I can see that," Abby says.

"Are you guys done with whatever massive geekery this is?"

"Sure, Tony," Tim answers.

Breena says to Tony, "You just got compared to David Tennant."

"Who?" Tony asks.

Tim's mildly surprised that Tony doesn't know who David Tennant is, but then again, he hasn't been in any of the sorts of movies Tony likes.
"Exactly," Abby replies, grinning widely. "So, if you're Nine, he's Ten, and Jimmy's Eleven, which ones of the Companions are we?"

"I'm Rose," Breena says. Beyond the blond hair, Tim's not seeing that at all. He can't imagine Rose in cute, knee brushing, spaghetti strap dress in a fawn colored brown with tiny pink roses all over it. Ziva in tight gray pants, he's not sure if they're denim or suede and isn't about to get close enough to find out, and a sort of swoopy-necked, spaghetti-strapped, tank-top looking-thing with little sparkles all over the neck line puts him more in mind of Rose.

And, while he might not see the resemblance, he does know what to do with it. He holds out his hand to her, smiles, and says, "If you want to see the universe, come with me."

Breena laughs, takes his hand, and lets him kiss her cheek before stepping back to Jimmy.

Jimmy, not to be outdone, says to Abby, "Amy?"

And she steps in close and lets Jimmy kiss her cheek as well.

Tony groans. "What is this, the mating dance of the geeks?"

The hostess turns to them and lets them know their table is ready. "Thank God!" Tony says.

By the time they had gotten through the appetizers it's likely Ziva has been convinced to start watching Dr. Who. Tony, though regaled with the joy that is Dr. Who, is entirely unmoved by the idea of watching it.

One of the side effects of dating Abby is that Tim's gone from being a competent dancer to a fairly decent one. And not just for the bits of music that are inside his comfort zone. They go out clubbing about once a month. Not too much dancing at the Jazz clubs he likes, they're more of a sit, listen, and drink sort of space, but the Goth/Industrial ones she likes are the sorts of places they expect you to dance.

So, with practice, and with getting used to not just how she moves, but how the music moves her, he's getting better at dancing, especially with her, and his range of moves is increasing dramatically.

Of course, there's better at dancing, and then there's being dropped in a World Hip Hop/Techno club, featuring the kind of music Ziva likes.

A few thoughts occur to Tim as they're walking in. First off, there's eighteen years age difference between Breena and Tony, fifteen between Ziva and Tony.

Ziva and Breena are awfully comfortable here. This might not exactly be Breena's favorite kind of music, but it's close enough to her idea of go out and party that she's fine.

He and Palmer are about five years too old for this. December 14, 1977 was a big day for both of them. (He's four hours older than Palmer.) So for them grunge and raves is part of whatever minuscule bits of party culture they picked up.

Abby... well, she's been at this a long time, and didn't stop, so she's got a wide and well-varied level of experience. And sure, she's a lot more Goth than anyone else around, but she gets the music pretty
easy. The instruments are different, the lyrics are...well... actually Tim has no idea what the lyrics are. They could be as dark as what Abby likes, but since they aren't in English, he doesn't know. They sound perkier though. The music however, has a similar sort of feel, all beat, lots of percussion, this is grab you by the heart and hips and make you move music.

Like Abby, Tony's prime party days lasted a pretty long time, but he's got the whole frat party vibe thing going on, where the only reason there is music is to get the girls to rub up against you. And this is very much not a frat party.

Tim's getting the sense that if they get to pick the club again, Tony's going to insist on somewhere swanky and cocktail lounge-y.

The other thought that occurs to him as they walk in is that there are about nine thousand twenty-something guys here, all but drooling over his girl, and he's not about to be out-danced by any of them.

"How's the ring hunt?" Jimmy asks as he and Tim bring drinks back to their table.

"Nothing yet. Still looking."

"Promise me, if you haven't found anything by Fourth of July, you'll talk to a jeweler?"

"Why are you so interested in me doing this fast?"

"You have a fascinating definition of fast, Tim. It's June, you've been ring hunting for four months without finding anything."

"Not answering my question."

Jimmy shrugs a little, causing a bit of Breena's drink to slosh over the side of the glass. "Because if you two are engaged before Labor Day, I win the pool."

"Who's in the pool?" Tim's a little surprised he hasn't heard about this before now.

"Who isn't? Gibbs had money on before Memorial Day. Ducky has Christmas."

"Who's got money on Halloween?"

"Last I checked, no one."

"Idiots. Place a bet for me?"

Jimmy glares a little at him, but it's a mostly joking look. "I am not placing a bet for you on when you get engaged, and I'm sure as hell not doing it so that if you win, I lose."

"When does Tony have?"

"Fourth of July."

"Ziva?"
"She had Abby's birthday."

"What's the pool up to?"

"Fifteen hundred dollars."

"I expect a killer wedding present from you."

Jimmy grins. "Any day between July 5th and Labor Day and you'll get one."

He's dancing with Abby, close and fast, and it doesn't take him long to notice she's edging them further and further away from the crowd.

By the end of the song, they're against the far wall. She takes his hand and leads him toward the back of the club. "I noticed something when I went to the bathroom."

"What?" Tim asks, letting go of her hand to put his arm around her shoulders.

"There's this nice, little," and she nudges him behind a tall stack of liquor boxes, "alcove here."

It's definitely tight quarters, barely enough room for both of them. And, unlike the clubs she likes, this doesn't seem to be the sort of place where people run off and have sex in the back. (The fact that there's no one back there already would seem to indicate that.) Which means this is all sorts of right up his alley.

He's a little drunk, so they're not going to set any speed records, but she's usually pretty happy for that.

He presses her against the wall, facing it. It's a pretty nice wall for the back of a club, no graffiti or cum stains. (It occurs to him the kind of places he goes to with her are a lot different than the kind of places Tony and Ziva go.) For a moment, he just looks at her. All of her back tattoos are visible, and he's going to kiss each and every single one.

His hand traces over her hair, knotting in it, lifting it, and then he places a soft, wet kiss on the nape of her neck, just above the top of her dress. He kisses down her neck, over to her shoulder, getting the first angel, then to the other, and she sighs, pressing back into him, squirming encouragingly.

He licks to the top of the cross, and drags his tongue over the lines, tracing it into her skin, stopping to nibble gently when he gets to the base of it, then slowly eases his way back up to press tight into her back. His fingers trail down her arms, settle onto her hips, and he grinds against her.

He's inching her skirt up as he asks, breath hot on her ear, tongue teasing her neck between words, "What do you want?"

Her eyes close, and she sighs again. His hands, now touching skin, go still on her hips, waiting for her to answer him.

She turns to look over her shoulder, and kisses him, tongue soft and wet, sliding against his. She breaks the kiss when she feels him go hard against her ass.

Her hands snake between them, undoing his belt, starting on the button while she says, "One hand on my clit, the other on my nipple, while you fuck me from behind."

"Yes." He bites very gently on her shoulder while she finishes with his pants. He uses his foot to
nudge her legs a little further apart, giving him better access.

His left hand pulls her panties to the side, holds them there, and starts on her clit while his dick just slides between her lips for a few strokes. His right hand slips under her top, finding her breast and nipple easily.

She reaches down, gives him some help with the angle, and he slides in deep and sweet, gently swearing against her neck as her body slips wet and tight against his.

It's true that a little drunk slows him down, but it speeds her up, so it's not long before she's got her hands clutched into the hair at the nape of his neck, shuddering against him. He doesn't stop while she gets off, just slows down, face pressed into her shoulder while he continues to pet her.

When her body stops twitching, he stops, too, pulling out. "Turn around. Wanna see you, wanna kiss you, want you to see me come."

She does, grinning at him.

They're rocking against each other, enjoying it, this is good music to fuck too, nice, steady beat for it, and it's certainly not slow, but it's not too fast, either. Her eyes are on his, lips and tongues encouraging each other toward more pleasure, when her eyes slide to the left.

She's not looking at him anymore. She's looking over his shoulder. He stops kissing, stops moving, wondering if they're about to get tossed out of the club, really hoping they aren't about to get arrested.

"Hi, Jimmy, Breena," she says with a bright smile.

His head falls to her shoulder, and he starts to laugh. Of course, Jimmy would home in on this, too.

He can hear the smile in Abby's voice. "Give us..."

He realizes she's expecting him to provide a time frame. "Five minutes," he says, kissing her shoulder, very much not turning to look behind him.

"Fine," Breena chirps, also laughing. He feels a small hand gently pat him on the ass, and then hears, "Have fun."

He looks at Abby, eyes wide, giggling with amazement. "Did that just happen?"

She smiles at him, "Yeah I think so."

"She gets really flirty when she drinks."

"She hasn't been drinking, Tim."

"Huh?"

"Five minutes?" she asks him, redirecting the conversation. "You that close?"

"I was before they walked up."

She smiles. "Five minutes it is, then." And then pulls him in for a deep kiss.
Four and a half minutes later, they're dancing again. They don't see Jimmy and Breena for close to an hour, which suits Tim just fine. He knows that if he sees Palmer he'll burst out laughing hysterically, and he's not sure he wants to explain this joke to Tony.

Okay, dancing with Abby against his front and Ziva at his back is a kick. He's thinking he could get used to the idea that they do this on a somewhat regular basis.

He's also happily imagining what would happen if they were to take the other four to the kind of clubs Abby likes.

Breena'd go for it in a heartbeat, and Jimmy probably would too. Ziva... He's imagining her Gothed out, and likes the image. Tony... that brings a smile to his face.

Yes, going dancing is a good idea.

And even with an hour, when Jimmy does come to sit next to him at their table, (the girls are dancing with Tony) his hair a little messed up and his shirt not quite as well tucked in as it had been before, Tim does burst into hysterical laughter.

Jimmy holds his face straight for, oh, nine maybe ten seconds, and then joins him.

Finally he says, "Think Tony got laid?"

Tim watches him dancing with the girls. "Nope. He'd be a lot less keyed up if he had gotten laid."

Palmer smirks. "Hard to do when your girl is wearing pants."

Tim raises an eyebrow at that. "Hard to do some things if she's wearing pants. Not so hard to do others."

And then they both break into giggles.

The music slows down a little. Easy dancing song. He's done with his drink, and Jimmy's looking done with his, too. So they both begin to stand up to join their girls, and then stop dead, and sitting back down again, quickly.

Ziva and Tony had paired off for the slower music, and so had Abby and Breena.

Abby had pulled Breena close to her, one hand on Breena's waist, the other on her shoulder. Breena's head was on Abby's shoulder, her hands on Abby's waist. And mostly it's just cute, the two of them swaying with each other. There's nothing overtly sexual about the way they're dancing with each other.

At least, there was nothing overtly sexual on their end of it. The way Tim and Jimmy respond to watching them snuggled in close and swaying with each other is entirely sexual.

"Oh God," Jimmy whispers it, eyes wide, gaze riveted to the girls.

Tim exhales a long breath, also incapable of pulling his eyes away.

Abby turns them so both of the guys can see her back and Breena's fingers just teasing the skin of her low back below the hem of her dress.
"I think they're making sure we'll be up for another round," Tim says when he finally gets his words back.

Jimmy shoots back the rest of his drink. (The drink that was already empty.) "I sure as hell am."

Abby slide her hand slowly down Breena's arm, stroking her fingers between Breena's, and Tim groans quietly.

He stands up, and Jimmy grabs his arm, yanking him back down into the booth. "No. You do not cut in on them!"

"But..." That sounded significantly more needy and less manly than Tim might have liked, but in a second Jimmy's in exactly the same sort of Oh-My-God-We-Talked-About-This-Hottest-Thing-I've-Ever-Seen boat as Breena slides her foot along Abby's leather-boot-clad-calf, mesmerizing both of the guys with the sight of her small, shapely foot in a cute tan and white high-heeled sandal against the sleek black leather of Abby's boot.

"I don't care how badly you want to touch her. You do not stop this!" Jimmy isn't sounding particularly in control as he says that.

So Tim sits and watches.

There's no kissing. No really obvious petting. No making out. Just four minutes of the two of them dancing, chest to chest, and occasionally touching in a way they knew would drive the guys crazy. It takes Tim a minute to figure out that if the arm petting on Abby's part is deliberate, that Breena's foot lazily sliding up and down Abby's boot has to be, as well.

When the song ends, the girls go to them, both grinning madly. As soon as they got near the booth, Jimmy tosses a hundred on the table, grabs Breena, kisses the ever-living-daylights out of her, bending her back as he pulls her flush to him, his lips almost attacking hers, for a very long minute, and then heads off.

Tim sits in the booth, Abby on his lap, her fingers lazily stroking his skin below the collar of his jacket as the two of them watch Jimmy and Breena kiss. And, okay, Jimmy still isn't going to be showing up in any of his fantasies about Breena, but he certainly had not minded seeing that at all.

Abby kisses his ear, lips wet and soft, sucking gently. "You like that?"

He inhales shakily. "Fuck, yes."

"Home or here again?"

"Neither of us should drive, and I want way more time than we can get here. There's a hotel three blocks down."

"Good."

Abby stands up, and he tosses his own bills on the table, more than ready to go somewhere private.
Lazy Saturday at home when they aren't on call. The kind of day where they can take the time to really play with each other. Tim's favorite sort of day.

They'd slept in, laid around, he'd gotten some good writing done, and she'd gone to see Kayla Vance, school's out, but they still keep seeing each other for a few hours every week.

After that, dinner at home, a little TV, and then bedtime, early bedtime. (Okay, obscenely early bedtime, it's seven thirty.)

Black silk rope. His favorite sort of game.

The rope starts at the upper left post on the bed. It's black silk, the sort of thing used to tie up baroque curtains. (Tim had found it at a decorator's supply store. They'd been looking for fabric for curtains, didn't find any they liked, but did end up with a supply of new ropes in a lot of interesting colors.) Its one end is tied firmly and allowed to dangle into a soft and shiny tassel. From there it loops around McGee's left wrist, also tied firmly. He grasps the few inches of slack rope between the bed post and his hand. It spirals down his arm, around his chest and stomach, snaking from the small of his back to his right leg, spiraling from there down to yet another secure knot around his ankle, and one last knot tying that ankle to the lower left bedpost.

Besides the black of the rope, and the black leather collar he's wearing, he's completely naked, and very happy to be that way.

He's waiting. Abby tied him up and left. She's been gone about fifteen minutes, so probably getting into costume, or maybe just making him sweat a little, possibly both.

Doesn't matter, he's comfortable, eager, and feeling good.

His right hand is free, so he's slowly stroking himself. Not trying to get off or anything, just keeping his interest level high. Of course, tied up in bed waiting for sex, not like there's much shot of his interest waning.

She comes back, and he smiles at her. She's in heels, stockings, a black silk corset, and a lace choker. Her hair's back in a bun, and she's got her eyes painted black and smoked out.

She's not smiling. She reaches down and slaps his hand, hard. "Bad, McGee. I want your dick touched, I'll do it myself."

A second later, his right hand is handcuffed to the right bed post, and he's stretched out as far as he goes. This is less comfortable, quite a bit more exposed, and he really likes it. He hopes she'll take pictures. He can see the dichotomy of the silk and the cuffs in his mind, but because of his position on the bed he can only see one arm at a time, and he'd like to see the whole thing laid out at once.

She kneels between his legs, one hand on each of his hips, and slowly, delicately, the flat of her tongue flush on the inside of his leg, licks from the crease of his knee to his left testicle.

His eyes close and a long slow breath escapes. She's mouthing it, rubbing her lips and tongue over him, and then takes it in her mouth to suck gently. He's trying to thrust, but can't really, not with the
way she's pinning his hips.

So he's squirming in a very pleased sort of way, watching her through heavily lidded eyes, tingling all over from the pleasure, and she pulls back, grinning. Her fingers rest lightly on his hipbones.

"I want your hips to stay still."

His hips go still.

She stands up and fetches a pillow and the bottle of lube. Placing them next to his hips. Oh yeah, he knows where this is going and his dick twitches in anticipation, looking forward to her wet, soft mouth on it.

She doesn't get back on the bed. Instead she walks around it to her side, and her nightstand. He knows what lives in there, and his eyes light up even further. She gets one of the vibrators. It's a small, fairly slim one, so, oh yeah, she's going to use it on him.

Vibrator, lube, pillow under his hips. Just thinking about that is making him even harder.

"Hips up."

He complies and she tucks the pillow, folded in half, under him. Then she trails her fingers down his left leg, nails scraping gently, tickling his foot.

"Can you keep this leg still?"

He thinks about it. If she wants his hips still, he'll have a much easier time of that with both legs tied. But if part of this is about the challenge of it, then keeping it free ramps that up further.

"Is the vibrator going to go in me or on me?"

"Both."

His mouth goes dry at that, and he swallows hard. That's something they don't do all that often, maybe once every six weeks, but when she does do it to him, it gets him off so hard his whole body shakes for minutes after. "Probably not."

Abby kisses his ankle and smiles at him quickly, and then fetches another rope to tie his left leg down. When she finishes, he tugs a little at the binding, and it's good and secure. He's not going anywhere.

She climbs onto the bed, looking sleek and dangerous, perfect in Gothic black. For a moment, she just kneels there, between his legs, letting him look at her, corset tight, breasts high and round, legs in silk stockings and no panties.

He wants to talk, but she hasn't said he can, so he just looks, and hopes his eyes get how much he's enjoying this across.

Then she shimmies up his body, stroking his legs, hips, thighs, testicles, skipping over his dick, to rub his stomach and chest. She licks his neck, nibbles his ear, and says, "I don't remember saying that you were allowed to start without me."

True enough. She also hadn't said he couldn't either. But, moot point. This is all part of the game, and he's eager to play.

She rises up on her knees, balancing her weight on one leg while the other straddles his neck and
hooks under his shoulder and arm. Her weight shifts, settling her pussy inches from his mouth.

He wants to lick, wants to suck, wants to revel in her taste, but she hasn't told him to yet, so he holds still. He inhales deeply, enjoying her scent, and keeps his eyes open so he can look. Nothing on earth more beautiful than Abby's pussy. *Nothing.*

"Like what you see?"

"Love it."

"Want to taste?"

"Yes. Please."

She lowers herself, just brushing against his lips, teasing him with her body and her control. He doesn't move, because she hasn't told him to, yet, but he wants to.

"You may kiss me."

*Thank you.* And he does, lips stroking along her skin, tongue skimming wet flesh. She's rolling gently against him, a slow easy stroke that he's got no problem keeping up with. He matches his speed to her hips, taking his cues from how her body moves, and wishes he had at least one hand free so he could add his fingers to the mix.

But he can't, so he doesn't. He rolls her clit with his tongue, keeping up a steady pressure and speed, letting her set the pace.

She's moaning, rich, easy sounds, almost lazy, definitely not sated.

She leans back, grabs the vibrator, and begins to use it on herself while he licks. Using it the way he'd use his fingers, adding some slide, some stretch, a little pressure to the g-spot. She doesn't turn it on, which he appreciates because having his tongue buzzing would be distracting.

Her eyes drift shut, and she plays with one nipple while stroking herself, and he licks, pressing harder, keeping up as her hips roll faster. Her breath, moans, pitch all increase, and he enjoys it, feeling her get wetter, move faster, more turned on against his mouth, making him harder, making him want to thrust along, though he doesn't. He keeps his hips still, and refocuses on his lips and tongue, on getting her off hard and fast and pleasing his lady.

She's moving faster, jerking, less coordinated, and he's having a harder time keeping his tongue where it belongs. But he does, or well enough she doesn't complain, and in a minute he hears her switch from moans to a soft, *Ohhh* sound, one he knows means her orgasm is seconds away.

And then her body is rippling against his tongue as her thighs twitch. He stops licking and just presses his tongue to her, holding still, knowing how sensitive her clit is right after she gets off.

She rests for a few seconds, and then shifts off of him, leaning down, kissing him, licking his lips, tasting herself, and then passing that taste back to him. "*Thank you. That took the edge off nicely. Now, McGee, what to do for you...*"

She kneels between his legs and starts by just tracing her fingers up his inner thighs. He wants to sigh. What she's doing feels nice, but he still hasn't been given permission to make noise, so he stays quiet.

She starts to lick, soft, wet, hot, up his left thigh. And he wants to move. He wants to sort of roll his
hips, nudge her just a bit to... *Oh, yeah, there.* She's cupped his balls and pulled them a bit to the side, tonguing the crease where his leg meets his body.

He wants to thrust, to press up against her, just get a little more pressure and maybe, if he could get her just an inch over, because, right there, under his balls, *oh god, yeah, that's just God please Abby just right there!*

It's the most perfect frustration ever. That whole area is exquisitely sensitive, but it's not his dick. He wants to ripple and roll against her, pull her mouth onto him, fuck her frantically, thrusting hard and fast. And he can't. He's keeping his hips still as she laps at his perineum and strokes his balls.

"Talk to me; tell me how you feel."

"If you don't fuck me, I'm going to die!" Okay, he's not quite there, yet, but part of the fun of the game is being able to say whatever he wants. And he wants to say things like that, wants to put himself entirely in her hands.

"Not yet, baby, not yet." Her hands stroke over his hips and thighs. "You can take more of this. In fact..." He hears the click of the lube bottle opening, and knows what's coming next.

"Oh, God, please, yes." That might do it. He figured out years ago, after a lot of reading, that exploring certain less easily accessible areas of his anatomy might result in very good things. And result in good things it did. What he doesn't know is if he can get off from prostate stimulation alone. He's never tried.

But right now, as she's gently slicking him up, and slowly stretching him out, he's really hoping it can, because if he doesn't get off soon, he's going to go mad.

He doesn't love this part of it. He's tight, that's just how he's built, so loosening up isn't something that comes naturally, but what comes next, that's worth it, well, well worth it.

And, God, her tongue, lapping gently on his balls, making them try to crawl into his body, making him want to come so hard, and her fingers, gently easing the way, slipping and sliding into him, making sure this won't hurt, he's so ready when he feels the cool plastic of the vibrator slip into him.

She sort of swirls it, angling up and gently pressing. His head is back, and he yells, "Fuck! Oh God, please, fuck!" He can feel it all the way from the base of his spine to his balls and down both his legs.

"Abby!"

"You're okay. I'm gonna take care of you."

And, oh God, he's never ever been this turned on and not come.

Her tongue is fast. The vibrator is slow. Slowly easing in and out, slowly buzzing in him. Slowly, or maybe not too slowly, driving him into a wet puddle of insane lust.

He realizes he can't get off if no one is touching his dick. He suddenly knows this for a fact. She can spin him out as long as she wants, keeping him just on the verge of getting off, but as long as she doesn't touch him there, there's no shot of accidentally getting him off.

"Oh, God, Abby, you're killing me."

She holds her hand just above his dick, and he can feel the heat of her palm. *Don't move your hips.*
And he doesn't, but he's certainly trying to see if he can get that little muscle at the base of his pelvis
to twitch hard enough to at least brush against her palm.

"That's the idea, McGee."

He twitches and almost touches her. She shakes her head. "Bad, bad, Timmy. Nobody's touching
your dick anytime soon, I'm afraid." She leans over and blows on it. Hot, moist air, making his hands
and feet clench.

Oh, God, that was almost enough. "Please, do that again."

"No. Just trust me; I won't push you further than you can go. But you can go for a good long time." She
twists the vibrator, upping the speed, runs slick fingers over his perineum, and goes back to
sucking his balls. He wants to buck up at her, thrust into anything, hell the air, just move, just feel,
just make that little wand move faster or harder, or just a little more something, anything to get him
off.

"Please, Abby, please, please. Just touch it, just a little, please, baby!"

Tim is an excellent submissive, especially for someone who isn't one by nature. Some people need to
have someone else take charge, make all the decisions, control the encounter, and take care of them.
But Tim doesn't need that, he just likes it. He loves laying back and letting Abby take charge. Putting
his pleasure entirely in her hands is a treat. But, he also likes being the one in charge, and if anything,
he actually leans more to the dominant side than the submissive one.

So, the fact that, as of this point he has never, ever broken a command is something he's proud of. If
this was baseball and he was a pitcher, he'd have a perfect no hit career.

But right now all he can think about is how, if he could just move his hips a little, if he could just
possibly thrust just the tiniest bit, he could maybe rub up against her nose or hair or something and
just please, God, please, get off.

He's pulling hard on the ropes and the cuff, trying to divert that desire to thrust to his arms, yanking
on the bed, anything to try and hold his control as she swirls her tongue around him and turns the
speed on the vibrator up even faster.

"God, baby, you're really going to kill me. Just please, touch it, just a little, please!"

"Oh, I think you can take a little more."

"Noooo..." he moans.

Abby stops. That sounds enough like real pain that she's worried. She scoots up, takes his face in her
hands, and says, "You still remember your safeword?"

He nods. He doesn't smile, can't quite smile right now because, God, he wants to come, and that's
pretty much shot his ability to reassure her to hell and gone. But he's still got his safeword in his
mind, and he knows he can stop this anytime. Just say her name and it'll be done. But he won't. He
can do this. He trusts her not to push him further than he can go.

She kisses him sweetly and then slides back down his body. She's sucking his testicles gently as her
fingers press his prostate from the one side and the vibrator gets it from the other.

God what she's doing makes him feel like he's coming, but he's not. There's a small pool on his
stomach from the drops of pre cum she's coaxing out of him, and his cock's so hard it feels ready to
burst, and she still won't stroke it.

Head back, groaning, he pulls on the bedposts again, past words, past any thought but the desire to come.

Then she touches him. Wet, slick hand, two strokes and he's gone, climaxing so hard he can't see, riding an arc of pleasure that feels like it's going to consume him.

He hears a loud pop and suddenly everything on his left arm goes loose. For a second, he thinks he might have dislocated his shoulder, but nothing hurts, and once he figures that out, nothing else matters. He just lays there, limp, boneless, completely exhausted and twitching.

She gets the vibrator out of him fast. What feels excellent before getting off is really painful once he does. And a few seconds after that, she's cut the ropes and uncuffed him. He curls into a little ball on his side, something that always feels good after he comes hard, tied spread eagle, and continues to shudder.

She curls against his back, and soothingly strokes his arm and leg.

"You okay?"

He nods and lets her hold him, quietly waiting for his body to recover. He stops shaking after a few minutes. Something about this combination does that to him. It has to be tied up, spun out, and anal, any two of the three doesn't result in him curled in a cum spattered ball, exhausted, shuddering, and high as a kite on endorphins. But all three together... Well, asking if he still remembered his safeword wasn't an idle question, he's been far enough gone in the past that he's forgotten it.

When he stops shaking and begins to uncurl, Abby sits up, untying the rope from his wrist, unwinding it from his arm. He doesn't feel like sitting up, so she doesn't bother to try and get it off his torso. She undoes the knots on both of his ankles, and comes back with a warm damp washcloth.

He lays there, eyes closed, not sleeping, but very peaceful as she wipes his hair, neck, shoulder, and chest.

"That feels good."

"You're definitely going to want to wash your hair in the morning."

"Thanks for aiming this time." The first time they had done this, he'd ended up giving himself a facial, which wasn't a turn on for either of them. "Right when I got off, something popped. What was it?"

"You broke the bed."

That gets Tim to open his eyes. He turns to look at the left bedpost and sees that it's indeed no longer attached to the bed, and that Abby propped it against the wall when she got the washcloth.

For a second he just stares at it, and then says, "You didn't say I couldn't move my arms."

"True." She smiles, looking at joint where the bedpost came free from the bed.

Tim sits up and fingers the break. "I would have thought the rope would have gone before the bedpost."

"Apparently it's a good rope. Not so good bedpost."
"Looks like the screw pulled loose and it broke from there."

She nods. "Wrought iron for the next bed?"

"Are you going to do that to me again?"

"I intend to." She grins, and he grins back.

"Yeah, wrought iron. Steel if they make them." He untangles the rope from the rest of himself, and grabs the washcloth, he can feel there's a wet spot on his shoulder that she didn't get, and a long smear on his knee and thigh from when he pulled into a ball. He debates getting up and really washing off, but right now all he really wants to do is just lay there and tingle, floating on a cloud of oxytocin.

So he does.

Abby undresses, takes her hair down, and curls into his right side, head on his shoulder.

"Thank you."

"For what?" he says. If anyone is going to be giving thanks, he figures that it should be him.

"Letting me do that to you. Letting me see you like that. You look so amazing when you come."

He smiles a little, eyes drifting shut. He kisses the top of her head, inhales deeply, enjoying her scent, and the feel of her breath on his shoulder.

"It looks really intense."

If he had been a little less post-orgasmic-blissed-out, he might have caught on sooner as to where this was going, but he feels like his brain is only tangentially attached to the rest of him at that moment, so he doesn't quite get where this might be going.

"Yeah, it really is." He kisses the top of her head again. "Made me see stars. Literal stars. Vision blacking out and white pinpricks." He's breathing deeply. Not on the verge of sleep, this is more like meditation than sleep, but his mind is pretty blank right now, so sleep probably isn't all that far off.

"You really like it?" she doesn't sound like she's on the verge of sleep. She's sounding really curious.

"Usually sore the next day or two after something like that, but yeah. Really, really, words can't describe it, good."

She rolls a little, her chin resting on his chest, looking up at him. He can feel her do it, imagine it in his mind, because his eyes, stubborn little things, just aren't getting around to opening.

"Would you like to do it to me?"

"What do you mean? I've done this to you." And he has. He's spun her out so hard she's been sobbing before she gets off.

"Not all of it."

His mind flails around for a moment, trying to find the missing piece, and finally, with a grinding clunk of a gear crashing into place, he figures out what she's talking about.

"I've honestly never thought about it."
"No?" she sounds really surprised.

He shakes his head, or at least thought about it. It's entirely possible it moved a fraction of an inch. "You don't have a prostate, and, at least for me, the penetration part ranges from pretty uncomfortable to just blah. Never thought it'd be worth it for you."

"Oh."

She's quiet, thinking about that. He feels like his brain is starting to wake up a little, but his body doesn't have the energy to do much besides lay there and breathe.

"Wouldn't you like to be on the doing end of it?"

Well, if she's offering... "Wouldn't mind, but, just, never something I thought much about. You let me tie you up, spin you out, touch every inch of you, worship your body, and you do the same for mine, so... um... yeah, it's just not something I've really spent a lot of time thinking about. If I've got a list of things I fantasize about, that's awfully low."

"Oh."

"But, if you want to, I'm game... Well, not right this second. I don't think I could get an erection if my life depended on it right now, let alone move, but say next weekend..."

"Yeah, I'd like that."

Chapter End Notes

McGee is a lefty, hence he's starting with his left hand tied.
Two Aspirin in the Morning

So, the thing is, Tim reads, a lot. This was especially true back around 2002 when he didn't have much of a social life and he was still plotting potential first novels. And no, he doesn't read guy on guy smut; it doesn't do anything for him. But over the years trios have been getting more play, and some of them have involved two guys, and sometimes the girl isn't in the middle. And if he's following a story, he's not just going to stop reading because two of the guys are playing with each other.

Though he will start skimming.

But even skimming certain... ideas... wandered into his head, and he began to think that some exploration of this whole prostate thing might be in order.

And, well, he liked what he found. Good things, many, many good things.

But like most of the things he really liked, he was fairly sure this would be something he could do for himself for a special treat now and again, and that would be it.

Pegging, (or bend over boyfriend, which is a term he hates) as he learned it was called, tends to go along with a sphere of Femdom he doesn't much like. He's not into pain, doesn't like humiliation, and would prefer no one ever call him a filthy slut while more or less raping him, even if it is a game.

But having a beautiful woman tie him up and respectfully bugger the ever-living daylights out of him, while, say, blowing him, (or teabagging apparently) that hits just about all of his being done to fantasies in one sweep.

So, maybe it was his subconscious trying to get this set up in real life. Maybe just his innate trust in Abby. But three weeks after they started dating again, when they were going through his toys, looking for something for the weekend, he didn't hide the butt plug.

She picked it up,—and well, if you know much about male anatomy, it's pretty obvious that it wasn't designed for use on a girl—looked at him curiously, and said, "You have one of these?"

He looked her straight in the eye, hoping this wouldn't freak her out, and said, "I like them. They feel good."

She smiled and said, "Cool. You'll have to show me how you like it."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"It's not weird?"

"Does it get you off?"

"Oh, God, yeah."

"Then who cares?" She stopped and thought for a moment, her gaze shifting to a different flavor of curious, like an idea that had literally never occurred to her before had just wandered into her mind. "You aren't bi, are you?"

"No." He shook his head. "I like girls, just girls. I just like that, too."
"Okay. Just, straight guys don't usually know about stuff like this." She seemed to realize how that might have sounded and quickly added. "I mean, I'm not calling you a liar. Just it's not a problem if you are—"

"But I'm not." And he's not. At all. He can never remember if 1 or 5 is completely straight on the Kinsey Scale, but whichever it is, he's there. The only way a guy is getting anywhere near Tim's prostate is if that guy has an MD from a damn good medical school.

That weekend he did show her what he did with it, and she tried a few variations on that theme, and he found out that tied up, spun out, and anal meant he'd get off so hard he'd spend several minutes after shaking. Which actually scared both of them, but a bit more reading suggested it was, well, not exactly normal, but not wildly uncommon, either.

But, with all that, from the fantasy stage to yesterday, the idea of doing it to Abby just hadn't hit him. He's certainly read about that too, and he's all in favor of hotter and tighter, but, even after a lot of prep, slowly, and with a lot of lube, he often finds the insertion part pretty uncomfortable, so he didn't see any reason why he'd want to do it to a woman.

But Abby wants to do it.

That is one of the first thoughts to hit him as he wakes, along with What the hell did I do to my left arm? Damn that hurts! Oh yeah. Hmmm... Bed's still under warranty. Can you possibly imagine explaining why you need it fixed? No. New bed then? Guess so.

Abby's still sleeping, so he gets up slowly, untangling himself from her and heads to the bathroom. A hot shower sounds like an excellent idea right now. She might have mopped the semen off of him, but he's still crusty with sweat, sticky from dried lube, and sore all over.

He reaches for his toothbrush with his left hand, and rapidly decides he'll be babying that arm today, if not longer. It's bizarre how doing something with your non-dominant hand is so ridiculously different from doing it with your dominant hand. Tooth brushing isn't difficult, but since he's using his right hand he's actually got to think about how to do it.

Brushing his teeth, he spends a moment really looking at himself. There's a stiff and spiky swath in his hair. Abby was right, that is definitely going to need to be washed. His hair is dry enough that most mornings it just gets a rinse, but today is going to be a shampoo day. His right wrist, the one she had cuffed, has a black bruise from where he was pulling on it, the left, from the rope, has a purple-blue one. And while his left shoulder isn't red, it does look a little swollen.

Well and truly fucked. He smiles a little at that, finds the aspirin, dry swallows it, and gets into the shower.

Two aspirin and hot water helps with being sore. He might not have dislocated that shoulder, but he's certainly sprained it. Explaining how he hurt himself isn't anything he's relishing for Monday. If they had done this three weekends ago, he could have blamed it on the move, but they're all settled in now, so...

He can think of a good lie later.

He soaps up, right-handed, which is a little awkward because he's actually got to think about that, too, and makes sure he's gotten all the lube off. He notices that bit of him is sore, too. Not as bad as his shoulder, but he can feel what he was doing last night there, too. And, since Tim is familiar with the gate theory of pain (you only really feel whatever it is that hurts worst) he's wondering if his body just isn't sending him all of the sensations it could.
"Wouldn't you like to be the one doing it?" He remembers her asking him that while he washes himself off, very gently.

The vibrator is slim, about two inches around. And while he's well aware his dick isn't going to set any size records, it's still at least twice that size. Abby might not be tiny, but she's still smaller than he is...

Well, he doesn't have to use his dick. He's got fingers, and the vibrator, and a few other toys that would work. Though, "Wouldn't you like to be the one doing it?" seems to indicate that she's expecting him to use his dick.

She slips into the shower behind him, and rests her head on his back.

"Good morning."

"Hi," he says, reaching behind with his right hand to squeeze hers.

"You were looking pretty pensive there. What's up?"

"Pretty sure I sprained my shoulder when I broke the bed."

"Ow. Okay, mental note, don't spin you out quite that long."

"Nah, that part was fine. I think the bed breaking was the problem. You can pull pretty hard on something without hurting yourself, but if it finally gives, you can end up hurt."

"Still, don't want you getting hurt."

"Yeah, I was just thinking about that." He turns to face her, and turns them so she's in the water. "Have you ever had anal sex before?"

"Nope." She says with a big smile.

He's pretty surprised by that. "And you want me to do it with you?" He'd get her wanting to do it with him if she'd done it before and liked it, but if she's never done it, that sounds to him like something she's just not all that interested in.

She rubs up against him, looking up into his eyes. She certainly looks interested. "Yes."

"I'm afraid I'll hurt you."

"If it hurts, we'll stop."

"Endorphins lower your ability to feel pain." He shows her his wrists, and she kisses them gently. "I'm sore as hell this morning, and I certainly wasn't last night."

"Was last night worth it?"

He doesn't have to think about it. Given the option the only thing he'd change is using an extra rope or two to make sure the bedpost stayed attached to the rest of the headboard. "Yes."

Her look says it all.

"I'll do some research."
"McGee." Gibbs' voice from behind the partition next to his desk.

"Yeah?" He looks up at Gibbs, sees him standing there, jacket on, ready to go home. Another long day of paperwork in the can.

"Waiting for Abby?"

"Yeah." It's late, NCIS is almost empty, and Tim's actually up to date on his paperwork. Abby's wrapping up a test and will be up in a few minutes, so with a little time to kill, he's looking at beds online.

Gibbs sees what's on his screen, a wrought iron bed frame, the sort with an arched headboard and lots of posts to tie things to, and then looks at Tim, who realizes that three weeks ago Gibbs helped Abby move their bed, so he knows how very unlikely it is they would have moved that bed if they had been thinking about getting a new one. Gibbs eyes flick from the screen and settle on the shoulder he supposedly hurt by tripping on the stairs up to their place. (Which Tony has been teasing him mercilessly about. "Super-stealthy McNinja" being the least of the jibes.) His gaze switches to Tim's wrists, which he's been very carefully keeping his cuffs over all day. Last thing he wants to do is explain to Tony, after that long conversation about nothing being rapey, how he ended up with two bruised wrists and a sprained shoulder.

But Gibbs is looking at his wrists, and he's suddenly wondering if he managed to keep his cuffs down all day.

Tim can feel that gaze on him and begins to blush.

Gibbs shrugs, comes around his desk, half-sitting, half-leaning against the corner closest to Tim, and takes out his pad.

"Wood, McGee. You want wood. Metal's only as strong as its welds, and for furniture that's not all that strong. My daughter and one of her friends managed to break a metal bed by jumping on it. Look" he begins to sketch. "You want the headboard to end in a flange like this. That flange goes into a slot in the post. They get glued, sandwiched together, and then pegs get driven through it. Same thing on the cross pieces. You build a bed like that, and you can drop it out of a tenth story window and it'll still be in one piece after it lands."

"Uh... thanks, Boss."

Gibbs writes three names on the bottom of the page. "They make good furniture. The sort of thing that'll last forever. No matter what you might do to it."

"Okay. They make your bed?"

"No. I made it. Wedding present for Shannon. You could hit it with a truck, and it won't break."

Tim's not sure what to say to that. "Good to know," seems safe and appropriate.

Gibbs reaches across Tim and takes his right hand in his. Tim jerks a little at the contact, but Gibbs holds on. He turns it, wrist side up, pulls back the cuff of his sleeve, and pushes his watch up a little. Tim blushes furiously as he does that.
"Pad the cuffs. Wrap your wrists before you put them on. Washcloth folded in thirds. Everyone you work with knows what sorts of marks struggling against handcuffs leave." He lets go of Tim's right hand and then checks his left. "Your watch is doing an okay job of hiding your right, but borrow one of Abby's wrist cuffs and wear it on your left until you heal. The last thing any of us want is DiNozzo harassing Abby for hurting you."

The idea that that could happen leaves Tim stunned. That it would screw things with him and DiNozzo he gets; the idea that it would make him treat Abby differently was nothing he'd ever thought. He makes some sort of noise that certainly could have been ascent, but probably sounded mostly like "Urgh."

"Don't ever leave a bruise on her that shows. You show up bruised, and people'll think you two got carried away. She shows up bruised, and even if you don't end up in jail, no one will ever look at you, or her, the same way again."

In a flash, Tim gets that. No matter what either of them might say, a bruise on Abby says she's a victim and he's an abuser. That idea, that he could hurt her, or that she'd be the woman who stays with a man who does that, completely short circuits Tim's brain and a long flustered string of half-started sentences flow out of him. The content boils down to 'I've never hurt her, and I'm not going to.'

Gibbs doesn't smile, but his voice is warm, and Tim can feel there's real affection and likely a tinge of fear in this warning. "I know, Tim. I know you, and I know her. But some things other people, and that includes DiNozzo and Ducky, cannot ever see, no matter what."

"Yes, Boss."
He's at the stove, finishing up dinner when he hears the door open. She had court today, and some
days that means she beats him home, others it means she doesn't. And while there's not a ton or
rhyme or reason to who gets home first, whichever one of them does ends up in charge of dinner.

"Hey."

She walks in and kisses his cheek. "Smells good."

"Thanks." He puts the spatula down, turns from the stove and kisses her hello properly. "How'd
court go?"

"Pretty well. Can't say much beyond that because you're on the witness list for Friday."

"That case."

"Yeah." Witnesses usually are not allowed to watch each other testify. That way they can't take notes
and support or deconstruct each other's testimony. Somewhere in the tens of hundreds of pages of
evidence, depositions, and disclosures NCIS hands over at the beginning of each trial, there's a
clause about how the two of them are living together now, but, so far, no lawyer has tried to bring
that into play.

He's got his sleeves rolled up, something he usually does when cooking. Her fingers trail over the
cuff he's wearing on his left wrist. "I really like this on you."

He looks at it and shrugs. It's the plainest one she had, just black leather imprinted with an arabesque,
with silver snaps. He's not a jewelry kind of guy, but he does kind of like it on him. It's a somewhat
subtle signal that maybe he's not quite as mild and buttoned up as his clothing would suggest. "I'm
liking it, too. When this heals up," The bruise on his left wrist was a yellowish ghost of its former
self. "I think I'll keep wearing it."

She smiles. "Sexy. If you're going to keep wearing one, I think we need to get one specially for
you."
He kisses her again. "Thanks. I like this one; I like the fact that it's yours."

"Awww... That's so cute." She gives him a quick pat on the tush. "How long before it's ready?"

He looks at the salmon, pokes it gently. "Five minutes?"

"Okay, I've got to get out of this. I'll be back soon."

Part of him wants to go watch her get out of her court suit. The rest of him knows she hates that outfit and doesn't want anyone, let alone him, to see her in it. So, he grabs some glasses and pours their drinks.

She comes back to their kitchen a minute later in her bathrobe, a long, ornate black kimono with white branches and cherry blossoms on it. She's holding a small, black bottle labeled Spunk in her hand and staring at it.

She's found the newest addition to their toy box.

"McGee?"

"Yeah?"

"What is this?" she asks, eyebrows high.

"Lube." He grins.

"Uh huh..." She's still staring at it like it's some exotic specimen she's never seen before.

"So, I was doing some research, and I think I might know why it hurts when I do it. Apparently glycerin based lube can dry out pretty fast. It's fine for straight sex or the inside of a condom, but the anus doesn't make any of its own lubrication, so you end up sore."

"Okay..." That seems to make sense to her, but... It's called Spunk, that means it's got to be targeted at a fairly specific market. One Tim's not, from everything she can tell, part of.

"So, I started researching silicone lubes. And this was the highest ranked one I could find."

" Ranked by whom?"

"I checked out a few gay sex sites. I figured if anyone would know..."
She laughs at that, envisioning him googling away.

He smirks at her, enjoying this part of the story quiet a bit. "I did it on Tony's computer."

She's really laughing at that, then opens the top and drips a little on her finger, then rubs it between them. "It's nicely slippery."

"Yep."

"Have you tried it out, yet?"

Tim shakes his head. "Did the same thing you just did, but nope, waiting for you to get home to play with it."

"Didn't want me coming home and finding you jerking off with something called Spunk?"

The expression on his face is somewhere between a smile and a smirk. "Something like that."

She's giving him a playful look, and he can feel the teasing subtext to it.

"I'm really not bi."

She's still staring at him, then looks at the dribble on her finger. It looks exactly like what a lube called Spunk should look like.

"And I don't have a bukkake kink."

She smiles and laughs at that.

"Really, highly rated. Lots of guys love this stuff."

"Did any women love it?"

He smiles. "People claiming to be women wrote very pleased reviews on the website. And they sell the stuff in gallon jugs, so someone's gotta love it."

"Gallon jugs?" Her eyes are wide as she stares at the lube on her fingers.

"Yeah. I honestly don't want to think too hard about what you're doing if you need gallons of it."

She licks the finger she'd dripped some of it on. "No taste."

"I specifically looked for that. If I'm going to be licking you, I want to taste you, not whatever artificial flavoring they dump in."

"You like how I taste?"

He steps closer to her, sniffs where her neck and ear meet, and kisses gently. "I'd bottle it and use it to flavor lube for when I'm alone if I could."

Her eyes narrow a little, the way they do when she's curious, not angry. "What exactly do you do when I'm not here?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" He grins and then takes the salmon out of the pan, putting it on plates.

He's just starting to pick up the plates, but she takes his wrist in her hand, catching his eye. "Yeah. I would."
He gives her a little eye roll. In this case the truth is pretty boring. "Honestly, these days, not all that much. If I jerk off, I'm less interested in sex after, sometimes for as long as a day or two. So, since we've been together, unless I know for a fact I'm not going to see you, like, say, Gibbs drags me to the other side of the planet again, I just don't. I'd rather spend the night horny and wake you up with a smile."

"You're saving up for me?" She looks very touched, and very pleased by that.

"Yeah. Not nineteen anymore, so I can't get it up six times a day, and I'd rather not waste it."

"I don't know, after Jimmy's wedding would argue otherwise."

He grins. That day had been a personal best for him with six times in thirty-four hours. "I was feeling extremely motivated that day. I can't usually, or often, do that."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Got home the Tuesday after, thought about jerking off, 'cause we had a case starting up and I didn't know when we'd have time together again, and lots of good memories for it, but my dick just looked at me and said, 'You're kidding, right?'"

"It talks to you?"

He laughs. "Sometimes."

She smiles at that. "So, after dinner, you want to put this stuff through its paces?"

"Oh yeah."

Chapter End Notes

Spunk is real, and my gay buddies swear by it.
Weekend Sex (Almost)

For Tim, there's weeknight sex and weekend sex. For the most part, ropes, toys, anything that takes serious prep is weekend sex.

Pretty much, they sleep in on Saturday, rest, put the rest of the week behind them, and go at it fresh.

So, first time anal with Abby is definitely weekend sex.

Well, Friday night sex. "Research" and playing with the Spunk has certainly gotten Tim significantly more interested in the idea of being on the doing end of the equation. And waiting another day...

There is such a thing as too much anticipating and not enough doing.

Plus, this isn't going to be much of a props night. He's wary enough about accidentally hurting her, so he's sure as hell not tying her up for this.

Tonight, she's in charge.

They're starting out in the shower, first off because it's fun, and also, hygiene and all. He'll happily lick any part of Abby that might want to be licked, but, especially for this, he'd also like to know it's clean first.

So, this is, without a doubt, the most thorough shower she's ever gotten. He's enjoying just touching her all over. Stroking from her scalp to her toes. Kissing where the suds have rinsed free.

He holds her flush to him. Her back against his chest, and lightly, gently, trails his index finger down the curl of her ear, over the plane of her neck, and the slope of her shoulder, down her arm to her hand, taking it is his, twining his fingers with hers, and then lifting it, kissing her palm.

She relaxes against him as he does that, her head against his.

"So, how do you want to do this?" he asks, kissing her temple.

"Haven't decided. Debating between reverse cowgirl, with you propped up against the headboard, so you're sort of sitting and I'm in your lap, or basic spoons."

Good options. He likes both of them. "You'll have more control in cowgirl."

"Yeah, but I'll also need more control. Only so deep you can go spooning."

"True. Only one angle that works at, too." Best he can do spooning is about three inches. Though for this the angle will be a bit steeper, so, maybe three and a quarter, three and a half.

"You have a preference?" she asks.

"Probably spooning. That works well, we can pretty easily shift into cowgirl."

She nods. Spooning is usually morning sex. Slow, gentle, sleepy. Something to get them both ready for the day. But slow, gentle, and sleepy doesn't always end that way. Spooning has been a launch pad to some fairly impressive sex.

"So..." She leans over and turns off the shower. "You ready?"

He smiles. "If you are."
They get out, and he dries her off, watching the soft, fluffy cotton towel stroke along her skin and devour droplets of water.

He's kneeling in front of her, blotting her calves, drying her off more thoroughly than she's ever been dried off before, when she strokes his cheek, signaling for him to look up at her. "You really okay with this?"

He half-smiles. "Nervous."

She nods. "I really want to."

"I know." He holds her hips in his hands, looking up into her eyes. "I'm terrified of being the asshole who makes you cry and doesn't notice for two minutes."

She kneels next to him, smiles, and kisses him gently. "You aren't him."

"You'll tell me if it hurts. I mean, at all."

"I will. I've never done this with anyone else because I've never trusted anyone else enough to do it. I trust you. If it's not fun, we'll stop. That's how we play, and this won't be different."

"Good."

He stands up, and she quickly dries him off. "Come on, bedtime."

He nods. "Yes."

While it's true that the research he did had about a thousand different ideas for what to do once you actually achieved penetration, they all pretty much agreed on the before and during part. Very relaxed, very turned on, very slow, lots and lots and lots of lube.

She'd had wine with dinner, which was step one on relax. He'd skipped it. He didn't want anything that would dull his sense of touch, or lower his control or motor skills. And he's already got the massage oil sitting on the bedside table, next to the lube, because to the degree it's in his control, she is going to be relaxed, and massage helps with that.

He's been debating about getting her off before and during the sex or just during. Getting her off will certainly help with relaxed. But, while it's true that she can get off over and over, he knows that building her up slowly, spinning her out, and then getting her off results in a higher level of arousal than a whole bunch of fast orgasms.

He'll just have to play that one by ear.

"Lay down on your stomach." And she does. Laying down gracefully, head to the right, so she can see him.

June in DC means it's very pleasant out. They've got the windows open, enjoying warm breezes that smell like the promise of summer. He keeps the lights off. They're on the third floor, so there's not a whole lot of chance of anyone seeing in, but keeping it dark'll make sure no one does. Besides, the street lights from the parking lot provide a steady yellowish glow.

He sits down next to her, and gently gathers her hair off of her shoulders, tucking it next to her neck.

She makes a pleased sound, which grows louder as he trails his fingers down her back. He strokes them over her rear, and down her legs, trailing just the tips of his fingers against her, raising
Abby’s skin. It amazes him how much he can enjoy something as simple as gently touching her skin. Amazes him how she squirms against his touch, and how seeing her skin respond to him makes him feel happy. His hands hover over her back, not touching, just letting the heat build-up between his palms and her skin, and then he strokes them over her, just brushing the almost invisible hairs along her skin.

"Mmmmmm..." He loves hearing that, loves knowing how something as simple as his hand on her back makes her purr.

He straddles her, settling just below her hips. Then drips some of the oil onto his hands and sweeps it along her back. Doing this naked is always a treat. Not just the pleasure of her stretched out below him, not just the smooth pull of her skin under his hands, but if he’s naked, and like right now, not hard, the tip of his penis drags along the backs of her thighs when he moves, and that sends welcome murmurs of pleasure through him, and makes her shiver.

He presses his thumbs into her shoulders, finding those tense spots, and rolling over them.

"Mmmmmmm..." She wriggles against him as she moans happily. "That's good."

Yeah it is. Her bottom squirming against him is starting to take care of the whole not hard issue.

He keeps working on her shoulders, kneading and stroking, feeling the tension start to melt under his hands. From there he slides further down, working her back, finding those stiff points along her spine and coaxing them to loosen.

She twitches when he hits one of them, so he slows down, dribbles a little more oil there, and concentrates on that spot. He ripples his knuckles over it, then soothes it with his full hand. When he can press full into it without her jerking, he moves to the next spot, slightly further down.

He finishes with her back and scoots a little further down, nudging her legs apart with his knee.

"Spread your legs." And she does. He starts by cupping her thigh in his hands, stroking his palms down her leg, then leans forward and kisses the small of her back.

His hands land at her sacrum, just below the bottom of the cross, and from there he begins to knead her buttocks while he kisses his way up the cross.

He leans back, settling between her legs, and continues to massage her legs and rear. He's trying to do a good job of it, but he's getting distracted.

The streetlight glow might not be too bright, but between it, the moon, and the fact that they've been in here long enough for his eyes to adjust Tim can see pretty well, and what he's looking at is Abby's pussy. And seeing beautiful, glistening folds of skin, he wants to touch. His fingers ghost against her, just enough contact to make her shiver a little.

He touches the back of her leg, presses gently, and manages to get across the idea that he wants her to hitch that leg up a bit. She does, which gives him a bit better access, and a much better view.

Her whole sex is visible to him, and he has to touch, make real contact. His fingers slip along her clit, down her lips, teasing, briefly against her vagina, getting slick and slippery, to then stroke her anus.

She groans when he does that, and he knows that sound means she's liking what he's doing, so he does it again. No penetration with any of these touches, just petting, slipping, sliding along her.
He pulls her into doggy position and starts to lick. And he knows he's definitely going to get her off before and during the sex, because this is just too good not to. She's making extremely pleased sounds while his tongue explores, so he begins to use his fingers, too, slipping them over her clit while he laps at her anus.

She's making the noise that means oncoming orgasm, so he pulls away for a second and slips into her — because nothing on earth feels like her coming on him and he's not about to miss that— thrusting slow and sure, feeling her arch back against him, rippling and twitching, and God it feels good. He's kissing her neck and shoulder, trying to pay more attention to his lips on her skin than on what his dick's doing because while her getting off right now is a good time, him getting off spoils their plans.

She recovers quickly. That was a take-the-edge-off sort of orgasm, not the lay there unmoving for the next two hours sort. She's lying in his arms, her side against his chest.

They kiss, lips soft, wet, gentle, the slide of tongue on tongue, enjoying wet slip with minimal friction. His fingers find her nipple and begin to play. Eventually, she rolls away from him, snuggling her back against his chest, drawing her top leg forward, and he figures that's a pretty clear sign that she wants him to get on with it.

He reaches behind himself, finds the lube and dribbles it onto his fingers, making sure they're all very slick, then pours a little more into the palm of his hand to spread on her.

He starts with the first finger, and as he's pressing in gently with it, feeling her body slowly giving around him, the idea of exactly what tighter means is starting to hit him. This is one finger, going very slowly, and it's the tightest, hottest thing he's ever had that finger in. And sure, he's done this to himself before, and he's got a degree in Bio-Medical Engineering—he's forgotten more anatomy than anyone on the team, save Ducky or Palmer, has ever known—so he's aware on a very intellectual level of what two rings of muscle means, but for the first time what exactly that means in a sexual sense is hitting him.

Specifically, it's hitting him that that's going to be wrapped around his dick soon, and his dick is extremely interested in having that happen. But not yet. Because right now it's only one finger and he's not about to rush this. He knows three fingers are just slightly smaller than his dick. (Of course he measured. How else was he supposed to know how many to use to stretch her out? Sure everyone says three fingers, but why? So he checked.) So, absolutely nothing involving his dick is happening until all three fingers have gotten inside her and she's nice and relaxed around them.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, Tim. It's good. Different, but good."

"Not hurting?"

"Tight. Not hurting, though."

He kisses her neck and shoulders. "Touch yourself while I do it?"

She shifts her leg, hooking it back over his hip, and he feels her fingers brush his. When her hips start slowly rolling, he figures that means she's feeling turned on enough to try the second finger.

He eases that one in, and she goes still while he does it. "Still good?"

"Yeah. Burns a little, but it's not bad."

He knows that sensation, felt it more than a few times, not a huge fan of it. "Want me to stop?"
"No! It feels like... there's something after the burning, or through it maybe, that I really want."

He knows that sensation, too. But he's also, literally, got something beyond the burn that likes to be touched. "You sure?"

She grinds back against his fingers and he gets that message loud and clear.

"Okay. Just hold up for a sec." He grabs the lube and adds more to his ring finger. When she starts to move again, he begins with that one, and once again, while he's easing it in, she goes still.

She sighs, and he feels her relax against him. She wriggles a little, touching herself slow and easy, and once more her hips start up that long slow roll.

"Feels good, Tim. Really intense, but good."

"Good. Ready for more?"

"Yeah. I think so."

He lubes himself up, and taking his fingers out, adds more lube to her as well. And yeah, the angle is a bit different, and it he's concentrating so hard on going slow that he misses a lot of how slipping in really feels, but once he's set it's amazing.

It's one of the most intense sensations he's ever felt. Hot and tight, okay he was expecting that, but this is like a tiny mouth slowly pulling him in and he's never felt anything like this before. It's slick, but not wet, and if you had asked him half an hour ago if such a thing was possible, he'd have said no, but right now he can feel the difference and it's really amazing.

Right now, he completely gets why this is Tony's favorite I-Got-Laid brag, and he's also getting why he's heard so many guys talking about trying to beg their wives/girlfriends into letting them do it.

He's starting to feel afraid that he'll lose it and start thrusting too hard and too fast because he knows that he'd like nothing better than to just go full out right now and really take advantage of how this feels.

Tim goes very still, not wanting to do that. He lets her set the pace and depth, pressing back against him. She's rocking against him, shallow thrusts that feel like hot, slick gel wrapped tight around him.

He reaches around, fingering her clit, looking to get her off, and as he does that she begins to move faster.

"God, Tim, I want you to move!"

"Yes!"

"Here." He pulls out and shifts so he's kneeling, butt on his feet, facing the headboard. He pats his lap and she gets the idea. Modified reverse cowgirl. She'll face away from him, so he'll have easy access to her whole front. She can brace against the headboard for better balance. And they can both thrust.

She straddles him, and slowly slips down on him. And this time, because she's in charge of the motion, he can just relax and let himself feel it.

His head drops against her shoulder. "It's insane how good that feels."

"Yeah." She pulls up on him, and he meets her on the downstroke. Slow, liquid thrusts, the sort that
feel like silk unraveling in oil. His finger slips over her clit, also slow, and he knows how this is going to go. Long rich thrusts, the sort that feel like they don't end or begin but just move through continuous arcs of slippery friction while setting sparks up his spine and making his thighs clench.

Her hands are clenched on the headboard and her head's dropped forward to rest against it. He kisses her neck and back, one hand on her nipple, the other still sliding, over and over, on her clit.

He can look down and see it, watch her body take him in, and that always kills him. He's moving faster, losing control, but she's tightening against him, arching back, meeting every thrust, increasing her speed, as well.

He's never heard her sound like this, it's almost keening, as her whole body spasms against him.

And that's enough for him. One more fast, burying thrust and he's gone, orgasm racing through him.

A bit later, he's got no idea how long, a minute? ten seconds? anyway, she's resting on his lap, back against his chest, and he's holding her gently while she shakes. He's feeling pretty shaky himself, but not shuddering. He strokes her arms and legs, feels her twitch as he does that, and murmurs something soft and soothing sounding.

Eventually she stops shaking. "You all right?" he asks.

"Yeah. I'm really all right." After a minute, she slips off of him and heads to the bathroom. He cleans himself up a little, and when she gets out, he goes in and finishes up.

Shortly, they lay together in their bed, and he spoons behind her, arms wrapped around her, and one leg over hers, holding her in a full body hug.

"You're really okay?"

"I'm really okay."

"You want to do that again?"

"Oh yeah." She sounds very relaxed and blissed out. "That's definitely going into the regular rotation. And next time, I want you to tie me down and spin me out, too."

He moans at that, pressing his hips against her, even though he's completely limp right now, that action gets across that really likes that idea.
When the Fourth of July came and went, Tim finally did come to the conclusion that Jimmy was right. The perfect ring for Abby did not, in fact, exist and he needed to find someone to make it for him. All joking about the betting pool aside, it was time to get moving.

And he figures that if he is going to get a ring made, the first step for that is finding a stone, or stones...

He thinks about Gibbs mentioning taking Ziva along but feels a little uncomfortable at that idea. He doesn't want Ziva thinking he's bringing her along because of Israeli stereotypes. Getting an entire ring is one thing, shopping for a gem...

Well, if the gem isn't a diamond...

And it wouldn't be, would it?

At least, not a white one...

*I love you in red.* He remembers saying that, and ideas start to form.

Hours later, Tony and Gibbs are off talking to a suspect, and he's got a minute alone with Ziva. "If the case is wrapped up, would you go shopping with me on Sunday?"

"What are we shopping for?"

"A ruby, maybe some garnets."

"For Abby?"

He nods.

Ziva looks very happy about this, and then curious. "Why do you want me to come along?"

While it's true that Tim's number one rule is do not lie to Gibbs, he does not have a similar rule for Ziva, so his answer is not entirely honest. It's honest enough, but just not all of the story.

"You're a woman, and when we find one that makes you suck in your breath fast and go quiet, I'm thinking that'll be a good place to start."

Ziva chuckles at that. "Have you ever shopped for gems before, McGee?"

"Nope, you?"

"No."

"Then we'll go together and learn something. Come with me?"

"Sure. Tony will want to know what we're doing."

"You can tell him... I might have to get Gibbs to set another death threat on him though, because he'll have to keep it secret for however long it takes to get a ring, and then for me to ask her."

"I think he will keep this secret." Tony had seemed to be better at that lately. He seems to be
developing interests beyond spreading gossip around. Possibly his own life is getting interesting enough he doesn't feel the need to vicariously mess about in other people's lives. "And what are you going to tell Abby?"

"Nothing. She's got a conference for new Federal forensic standards this weekend. She'll be out from six to six both days."

"Good timing."

Tim smiles. "Thank you."

Ziva doesn't live ten minutes away any longer, but he still has the route to her place memorized. Bright and early Sunday morning, he's at her place, waiting for her to come down.

"Do you know what you want?" she asks as she gets into his car and buckles her seatbelt.

"Red. I want something red. So, rubies, garnets, carnelian, onyx, whatever, it's got to be red."

"She does wear white. You could go for diamonds."

"I spent five months looking at diamonds and not buying them. Palmer's right; there isn't a diamond ring on earth that's right for Abby."

"Speaking of Palmer, are we going out next weekend?"

"I hope so, but he keeps saying Breena isn't up to it."

Ziva nods. "Breena hasn't been feeling up to going out for almost four weeks now."

"Yeah. He's been saying something about allergy season, but who has allergies in July? Even I never had allergies in July."

"Who indeed?"

He's got the feeling that Ziva means something by the way she's asking, but whatever it is, he's not getting it. "So, just the four of us?" he asks.

"I think so. Maybe though, you should have a chat with Palmer at some point."

"We have lunch at least once a week."

"I know, but still... Allergies in July. Allergies that make you not want to play rough and running around games or dancing..."

He looks away from the road to her. "Ziva, if you had ever had allergies, you'd know you don't want to do much of anything with them. You lay around feeling sleepy and blow your nose all the time."

"Ah." She gently whacks Tim upside the back of the head. "You are such a man. She is pregnant."

"What?" Okay, that thought hadn't occurred to him at all.

"Yes. Allergies might stop you from the active part of our bi-weekly gathering. She'd still be able to drink beer and eat pizza or go out to dinner somewhere nice. Pregnant and morning sickness stop you from that."
"Oh." He thinks about it. Palmer has seemed a bit more twitchy than normal lately. "I think you're right about that."

"Of course I am right." She shakes her head. "A baby for Palmer. You and Abby getting engaged. Tony and I dating. We are growing up."

"Yeah, we are."

"So, am I going to be a bridesmaid or a groomswoman?"

"Abby's already claimed you, Breena, Gibbs, and Palmer for her side."

Ziva laughed. "You are picking teams?"

"Something like that."

"Then you get Tony and Ducky."

"Exactly."

The thing about shopping for gems is that in real life, they're awfully tiny. When he looks at them online, especially on Tim's home monitor, the pictures are all huge. But in real life, they're these tiny little things all sort of glinting at him.

And on top of that, Tim's got no idea how big a carat is. He knows it's a weight, but he also doesn't know what that means in relation to the size of Abby's finger, which is the only ratio that matters to him.

The dealer is looking at Tim like he's an idiot because he doesn't know how big of a stone, let alone what shape, or for that matter, precisely what sort of stone he wants.

Apparently, "red" isn't the kind of information most buyers come armed with.

Lucky for Tim, Ziva is there, because while the dealer might be looking at him like he's just another clueless, idiot groom, no one disrespects Ziva.

"Do you have a pad of paper?" Tim asks.

The dealer messes around for a moment under the counter and produces one, humoring Tim, talking to Ziva about Tel Aviv.

Tim sketches out a small square. He knows how big Abby's ring finger is, and he knows pretty well how big he wants the ring to be. So that little square represents biggest the stone can be.

"It's got to be red, and no bigger than this."

The dealer looks intensely underwhelmed by Tim, but goes to fetch a selection of stones. He comes back a few minutes later with a tray and about fifteen loose stones on it.

Honestly, none of them are rocking Tim's world. They're nice enough. Very red. But none of them feel like Abby. He glances at Ziva, who is also not looking stunned by anything. She gives her head a minute shake, and he says, "Not on this tray."

The dealer heads off to find more red stones that are smaller than the tiny square Tim had drawn.
Ziva drifts off as well to go look at some of the other displays. He's waiting, tapping his finger against the display case, looking at the diamonds under the glass below his fingers. Maybe he could do one of them... They do look different in real life, all shiny and sparkly...

"McGee!"

He looks at her, and she waves him over. "This one!"

Ziva's pointing straight down. He walks over and looks, and she's right. It's perfect. Round cut, dark red with glints of amber, gold, and orange. He has no idea what it is or how much it costs, but right now it doesn't matter, that's the heart of Abby's ring, so it's coming home with him.

"What about this one?" Tim asks the dealer.

The dealer puts the tray of new stones down and takes Abby's stone out to show him. "It's a hessonite garnet. A little over three quarters of a carrot. It's a flawless, passion cut stone."

"How much?"

"Twenty-five hundred dollars."

"Sold." Now Ziva's looking at him like he's an idiot. Apparently bargaining is part of this whole gem buying thing. Meanwhile the sales clerk seems to think Tim is now his newest, bestest friend and has warmed up considerably. Apparently, idiot groom with money is exactly who this guy wants in his store.

Tim holds it over the square he sketched, and then holds it over his pinky as well. It's a little smaller than he was hoping for. It's the heart of her ring, but it needs some company.

"Do you have any black diamonds?"

"Yes."

"Triangle shaped ones smaller than the garnet?"

"Let me get them."

Finding two little, sparkling black teardrops to go with garnet was pretty easy. Less than half an hour later, he tucks a tiny bag into the pocket of his jacket. "That was easier than I expected. Thank you, Ziva."

"You're welcome. All you have to do now is find a ring to put them in."

"Monday night, I've got a meeting set up with a jeweler."

"Good. Then what?"

"Then... 'Marry me?'" He's amazed at how it feels to say that, even to Ziva. Two words that bring a flush of pleasure all through him, and the image of saying it to Abby... That's even more intense. Though... "I'm still bouncing proposal ideas around. Nothing seems quite right, yet. If you were Abby, what would you want?"

"I am not Abby. And I cannot even begin to guess what she would like."

Tim smiles a little. "Okay, if on the off chance someone is ever bouncing proposal ideas off me, what would you like for you?"
She grins at that and shakes her head. "Oh no. He is not getting off that easy."

"No hints at all?" After all, as Tony's presumptive Best Man, he needs to be watching his future Groom's back.

"I like sapphires," Ziva says with a sparkle in her eyes.

"Good to know."

"So, Ziva's thinking Breena has the sort of allergies that might start getting better in a few weeks," Tim says to Palmer the next day.

Palmer nods. "Uh yeah, the Doc says she'll probably be feeling better in a month or six weeks."

Tim gives him a long look, and then breaks into a grin. "And how are you dealing with her 'allergies'?"

Palmer shakes his head, a little rueful, but mostly amused. It's hard to keep secrets when all your friends are cops. "When I'm not feeling seventeen feet tall and ready to start crowing about how proud I am, I'm on the verge of throwing up because I'm so scared."

Tim nods. "You're going to be a great dad."

"I hope so. It's just really intense right now, because it's this big secret. And, okay, do not ever say anything about this to anyone, 'cause, I mean this is the sort of caveman kind of thing we aren't supposed to like, right? But, God, she's mine. I mean, really mine. My woman. My child growing inside of her. And it's scary how strongly I'm feeling that right now."

"I get that. Every time I go out with Abby, I see the looks other guys give me. The whole 'How did you get her?' thing. And I just smile, because I did get her. She's mine."

"You've got a ghost of it. We're in the grocery store and this idiot almost bumped into her with his cart. He didn't actually hit her with it. She jumped out of the way, but I was going to hit him. Seriously, my fingers were in a fist and my arm was coming up when she put her hand on it and said, 'I'm fine.'"

"Stick that ring you keep dithering about on her finger and get her pregnant, and it'll knock your socks off."

Tim smiles. "Which is part of why I'm down here. Check this out." Tim gets his phone out and shows Palmer the picture of the stones.

Palmer grins, nodding. "Better. Much better. Got someone to make it into a ring?"

"Yeah. Supposedly, you and I are having dinner tonight."

"Really?" This is the first Palmer has heard of their dinner date.

"Uh huh."

"Okay. And this dinner, are you actually attending?"

"Nope. Neither are you. Got a meeting with a jeweler."
"Finally! And if your beloved were to ask, where did we go, and what did we have?"

"Rick's. I got my usual burger. You got your usual Caesar salad. And we talked about Breena's mysterious allergies."

"Okay. Bring me back pictures of the sketch. I want to see what I'm covering for."

"Will do. When is she due, anyway?"

"Early February."

"Good." Tim thinks about it for a second, and figures Palmer won't react badly to it. So, he hugs him, quickly, and then pulls back. "I'm really happy for you two."

"Thanks, Tim. Me, too. I mean, I'm happy for you, too. Getting engaged...not that Abby's pregnant...Is she?"

Tim smiles. "Not yet."

"Yet?" That catches Jimmy's interest.

"I don't think your kids will be all that much older than mine."

Palmer smirks. "Are you at least going to try to marry her first?"

"Gonna try."

A/N: Wanna see Abby's garnet? It's up on my blog. http://charactersaremyheroine.blogspot.com/2013/04/shards-to-whole-ncis-fanfiction_9.html (I understand there's a way to get pictures up on here, I just have no idea how to do it. If any of you have directions, I'd really like them. Thanks!)
One Thursday, toward the end of July, Tony says to Tim, "You doing anything after work tonight?"

"Going home, dinner with Abby."

"Would she mind too much if we had dinner?" Tony's staring at him, looking like he wants to say something important.

"You wanna just come over to our place?"

"I'd rather just talk to you."

That's got Tim's interest. "No problem. She'll understand." He fires off a quick text to Abby letting her know what is up.

"Good."

Five hours later, they're digging into some Chinese food.

"So, what's going on?" Tim asks, wondering what Tony might want to talk about without the girls. He's half wondering if Tony's getting ready to propose, but that seems a hell of a lot faster than Tim expected him to go, and also, why wouldn't he want Abby around for that conversation?

"I talked to Ziva last night... about ropes and things."

Okay, that's a decent reason for guy only conversation. "Cool. So, what? You want me to find some good reading material for you?"

"Maybe. Look, she used to like ropes. But she doesn't now. But she would like to like them again."

Tim is staring at Tony, completely not getting this. "I'm not following you."

Tony looks at him like he's intensely stupid and says one word, "Somalia."

And with that Tim feels intensely stupid. "Did they..." He doesn't finish that sentence, not sure he wants to.

"You know what they did to us, and they only had us for a day and a half. I don't imagine they were any gentler on her, and with four months, I'm sure they got creative." And while that's not precisely yes, the look on Tony's face confirms it.

"Shit." Tim wants to go back and kill them all over again, slowly, with as much fear and pain as he can muster.

Tony's nodding, a grim look on his face. "Yeah." One word covers a whole lot of territory there.

Tim takes a moment to pull himself out of kill people mode, because that won't be useful for Tony, at all.

Tony sees him do it, and continues, "So we're talking about ropes, and she's the one who brought it
up, but she said to me 'I used to enjoy being tied up, and I always hoped I'd find someone who could help me enjoy it again,' looking really expectantly at me, and I said, sure, I'd be all over that, but not right that second because I was sort of tired and that sounded like something you want to do when you're well-rested. There's only so long I can claim to be tired, and I am scared as hell at screwing this up.'

"I'd be scared, too." And he would, that's way more than he'd be comfortable dealing with if it was his first time tying someone up.

"Great. What do I do?"

"Let me think." And Tim does. So many possible angles on this. "First off, tell her you're scared. Does she know you've never done anything like this?"

"No."

"Tell her that, too. Even without everything else, that'd be something good for her to know. Do you know what it is she liked about being tied up?"

"No." And Tony's got that look in his eye that he gets when running into something that's a lot bigger than he expected it to be.

"That'd be a good question to ask. Want to hazard a guess?"

Tony shakes his head. "Not really. Didn't know there were multiple reasons why you might like to get tied up. You said it was pretty."

"For me, tying up a girl, it is. For me, getting tied up, it's different. I still like how it looks, but, there's more to it than that." Tim stops there, not sure he wants to go into why he likes getting tied up, and then thinks about Tony and Ziva. "What were you going to use?"

"Only thing I had on hand, neckties."

"Probably a good choice. Until you know what she's hoping to get out of it, I'd stay away from actual rope or cuffs or anything even remotely like—"

Once again, Tony is looking at him like he's an idiot. "Even I could figure that part out for myself."

Tim nods. "Does she have any silk scarves? I don't think I've ever seen her wear one."

Tony thinks about it for a moment. "I don't think so."

"Where were you thinking of doing this?"

"At home!" Tony says sharply. "I'm not going to take her out in public to tie her up!"

"Not what I was asking. Bed? Chair? Piano?"

"My bed has little posts at the corners."

"You've got a king now, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." More thinking. He's trying to see it in his head, and also not see it in his head because this is Ziva and Tony's sex life, and he doesn't need to be making his own mental porn of it. "So... get her
five really nice, and long, silk scarves. Wrap them up all pretty, and when she opens them, ask her to show you what she wants to do with them."

"Why five?"

"Blindfold."

Tony seems to think about that before asking, "Won't they rip?"

Tim fiddles a little with the leather cuff he wears on his left wrist. The bruise is gone, and has been for quite a while at this point, but when it faded the cuff didn't come off. "Silk is amazingly strong."

"Huh. Didn't know that."

"Yeah, you aren't going to rip it. You might be able to put a finger through it or something, but if you twist it up, the bed'll go before the silk does."

Tony's sitting there, chewing a bite of his food, just staring at Tim, and Tim is staring back, wondering why, given what he just said about Ziva showing him, the tensile strength of silk is what Tony would ask about.

Finally Tim says, "Did you understand what I meant when I said, 'have her show you'?"

Tony's eyebrows go close together as he thinks for a moment. "I assumed you meant, she'd tell me what she used to like."

"Yeah. Ummm... No. That's not what I meant. I meant have her do it to you."

"Tie me up?" Tony looks considerably more disbelieving than appalled, so Tim's thinking that's probably a good thing.

"Sure. It's fun. You tell her you've never done this, that you're scared of screwing it up, and that you want to know, first-hand, what she likes. She'll be in charge, so if it's a trust or fear thing, that won't be an issue, and you'll know exactly what she's looking for. Once she's done it to you, you can get a good handle on what to do with her."

"Okay..." Tony's playing with that idea, looking like he likes it.

"Look, my guess is she wants you to be in charge and completely take care of her, but I'm not sure about that, and if I'm wrong, that'll screw things up. So, let her do you, see what she does, how she treats you, and play it from there."

"So, what, she ties me up, and I just lay there?"

Tim shrugs. "Probably. Depends a lot on how tied up you are. Depends on what she's hoping to get out of it. Sometimes struggling is the fun part. Sometimes it's submitting. Sometimes it's the one turning into the other. Sometimes it's about keeping you still so she can control when you get off. Sometimes it's just about trust, laying back, and letting her get you off the way she wants to, knowing she'll do you right. The big thing is you pay attention to what, and more importantly how, she's doing you, so you can do it back."

"And if she wants me in charge?"

Tim shrugs. "Then be in charge. Take care of her. You've done that before, right?"

Tony rolls his eyes and leans across the table to punch Tim in the shoulder.
"Tony, that wasn't a shot. Have you ever been completely in charge?" Tony doesn't say anything. He's staring at Tim, and Tim is thinking they're probably having one of those moments where Tony's speaking Italian and he's speaking Klingon, and no one's got an interpreter, but... well... he's got to try. "You tie her down, and it's all up to you. She can't scoot a little, or use her fingers, or whatever it is she might do if you aren't quite doing it for her."

"I do just fine." Tony's clearly giving him a *you think that wasn't a shot* look.

"Good, glad to hear it." *It wasn't because I am honestly trying to help you here.*

Tony squints at that last look.

He's still not sure Tony's getting what he's trying to say. He probably is, but... "If you're in charge, getting her off, more than once usually, is the point of it. You getting off is like the epilogue..." Tony's not a reader, and he's staring at Tim like he's insane. "If you're in charge, you getting off is... Okay, like the previews... They might be fun and interesting, but it's not the reason you bought the ticket. And if the previews are the best part of the movie, you end up really disappointed and don't want to go see anything by that director again. If you get off, great. If you don't, there's always tomorrow. But if you're the one in charge, it's not about you anymore. If she's going to give you her body for the night, you've got to play nicely with it."

Tony's just staring at him and then finally asks, "You've had sex where you didn't get off?"

Tim shrugs. "It happens. Usually, it's more like, I don't get off during the first round, but then we rest, and she returns the favor after. Or, I get off fast, and then I've got the focus to really go to town on her."

Tony's staring at him like he doesn't know what to do with him. "You two just fuck all weekend long, don't you?"

"No." Tim smiles. "Well, not usually."

Tony shakes his head. "She ties you up?"

"Oh yeah. Anything with us is a two way street. I won't do it to her if I'm not willing to have her do it back to me."

"Anything?"

"If it's anatomically possible to do it to both of us, it's happened."

Tony's eyebrows shoot up. "Really?"

"Yeah." Tim nods.

"Even..." Tony's somewhere between titillated and horrified.

Tim's fairly sure he knows what Tony's asking here, but even if he's wrong his answer is still likely to be true. "Makes you come so hard you can't see."

"Huh." Tony seems to be thinking about that, and this pleases Tim, not in a weirded out sort of way. "That can really happen?"

"Oh yeah. Ever run so hard the color drops out of your vision?"

"Yes."
"Just like that, only a hell of a lot more fun." Tim smiles at many good memories. "Look, you let her control you, and you might not be getting off anytime soon, but it'll blow your mind when you do."

Tony's got an especially dirty grin on his face. "Not usually my mind I'm hoping to get blown, but..."

Tim laughs. "Good point. Anyway, go play with her; come back to me if you need more help."

Tony raises an eyebrow. "What would I need more help with?"

Tim just smiles.
It had been a really good morning. Abby had gotten home after he'd fallen asleep, but he'd woken up spooned around her, her body soft and warm against his. She slipped her leg over his, and that was all the invitation he needed. And while there was nothing particularly energetic or acrobatic about the sex that morning, they both were in an awfully good mood by breakfast.

Breakfast had come out just right. Bagels perfectly golden-brown and crispy. Bananas the exact right stage of ripe.

The new place didn't have nearly the hot water heater capacity as Abby's old one, but there was still enough hot water for both of them to get a somewhat snuggly and longer than normal shower.

Traffic cooperated and the ride to work only took twenty minutes.

All in all, it was the perfect morning. Which should have been a red flag that something was about to go very wrong.

Tim's heart is beating a million times a minute and he can barely catch his breath, but he sees something, and knows that's the best they're going to get.

"Follow me!" he yells, firing fast at the men running after them.

In a second, all four of them are with him in walk in freezer.

"This is your plan? McGee, we're in a freezer full of Sarin!" Tony is not pleased with this at all.

For the moment, the men chasing them seem to have fallen back. At least, Tim can't see them anymore.

"That's the point, DiNozzo," Gibbs says. He got why Tim headed them this way. "They won't shoot at us in here, and as long as we can make sure the door stays open we're-"

"Fucked more slowly than we would have been otherwise." Tony finishes Gibb's sentence. "No one knows we're here!

"Forty minutes. We've just got to hold out forty minutes," Tim says, back against the door, eyes scanning every possible approach someone could be using to sneak up on them.

"McGee?" Ziva asks, taking up a position at the side of the door, so she can keep the warehouse in view.

"Abby knows. Before my phone blew, it sent her a text with where we are."

"What?" Gibbs asks.

"After Palmer and Ducky went missing, I got a new phone and rewired it so that if it ever lost power, or like you saw, someone messed with it so it blew up, that it would send her a message, letting her know where we are and that we're in trouble. Tony and Ziva, I programmed your phones to do the same thing, but it sends the message to Vance. Boss, yours is too damn old for it. The cavalry is coming; we just got to live long enough for it to get here. So, forty minutes."
Gibbs nods, planning. "Bullet count?"

"Five," Tim said

"Six." From DiNozzo

"Two," said Ziva.

"I've got three. McGee, on the left, covering right. Ziva right, cover left. Head shots. They're wearing vests, and we can't afford to wound them. There's six of them for every one of us, so we are going to make getting close to us so goddamn expensive they won't try it. Ziva, I've got a Baretta, DiNozzo's got a SIG, whose gun do you want?"

"Tony's."

"McGee." Gibbs hands Tim his gun.

"Boss?" He can't believe Gibbs is giving him his gun.

"If it was a rifle and they were half a mile away, I'd keep a hold of it. But you're better with a handgun than I am, and Ziva's better than Tony. You've got eight bullets each; I want to see one of them dead on the floor for each bullet."

And so they settle in to wait. Gibbs and Tony in the freezer. Ziva and Tim in the doorway. All four of them watching for anyone coming toward them.

The walk in freezer stands along the back wall of a packed warehouse. It faces into a maze built of crates piled almost to the ceiling. Lines of sight are poor because of those crates. The crates are packed with shells, and the freezer they're standing in is packed with what would make those shells so terrifying. There is, and Tim is thinking this is conservative estimate, enough Sarin behind them to take out the entire eastern seaboard. And enough ordinance in front of them to take out at least a few square kilometers. Put the two together, and things could get very, very bad, very fast.

The good thing about the freezer is that they can't be flanked. It's steel, so they can't shoot through it. It's filled with poison, so unless one of the terrorists is a sniper, and a damn good one, they aren't going to be willing to fire into them for risk of hitting a gas canister. And to make it even harder for them, Gibbs is piling boxes of the canisters up in front of them for cover. Someone shoots at them and misses, and everyone dies.

The bad thing is it's twenty by twenty, and all one those bastards has to do is shut the door, and they'll be locked in a zero degree room with finite air.

So that's the job, kill anyone that goes for that door, and pray to God that more than sixteen of them aren't willing to die for this.

"Ziva, eleven thirty," Tony says, pointing up slightly. The man he spotted is trying to come over a stack of crates.

Her eyes narrow slightly. Her finger curls into the trigger. And the man she shot is dead before he hits the floor.
Ziva's already shot three times, which means they've gotten the idea that coming up on the left is a really bad plan. The first one of them comes into Tim's line of sight.

He's staring at the man, willing him to get a little closer, because he can't miss this shot.

*One of us is going home today.* He pulls the trigger, feels the kick of the gun, sees the man's head snap back and a spray of blood and brains spatter the crate behind him. *It's not you.*

"Boss, when I'm out, get Tony's gun from Ziva and give her yours."

"McGee?"

"I'm left-handed, and Tony's clip will fit in my gun. The rest of you are righties and I don't want to mess around with a different gun, not for this."

"Ziva?" Gibbs asks.

"One."

"McGee?"

He fires. "Out."

"How long was that?" Gibbs asks.

Tony checks the time. "Thirty-five minutes."

Gibbs looks around, sees there are two guys, one coming from each side, and even Ziva isn't a good enough shot to hit two guys on opposite sides of her with one bullet. He hands her his knife. She is good enough to take the shot and kill the other with a thrown knife. "Ziva, cover Tony. Tony close the door. We won't freeze that fast. And if they've got any brains they'll just leave us in here, let the cold do the job for them."

They're standing in the freezer, huddled together, Ziva in the middle. She would have preferred a place on the outside, or taking turns in the middle, but the three guys shot that down. And even if Tim hadn't been able to give a quick lecture on thermodynamics to back up the one of them in the middle staying in the middle, none of the guys would have let her be on the outside.

Burying two of their girls was two girls too many. It's not gonna happen again. If any of them are getting out of here, it's Ziva.

"How much air do you think we have?" Tony asks.

"Enough so we'll freeze first," Tim answers.

"That's cheery."

Tim shrugs. This really isn't the place for cheery.
They hear the sound of gunfire. "They're here," Ziva says, and Tim feels the relief wash through all of them.

"How long was that?" Gibbs asks.

Tim checks Gibbs's watch. His arm is around Tim's waist, and within easy view. "Thirty-nine minutes."

"Think they'll blow the place rather than surrender?" Tony asks.

"Speaking of cheery thoughts," Tim says.

Time moves very, very slowly when you're standing in a freezer, unable to know what is going on around you, straining to catch bits of noise that might, hopefully give you a clue.

"How long before they figure out we're in here?" Ziva asks.

"Can't imagine it'll be too long after the shooting stops," Tony says.

"I haven't heard a shot in close to three minutes," Gibbs adds.

"So they sweep the place, and in what, ten minutes we get warm again?" Tony asks.

"I really hope so," Tim finishes.

"What the hell did we run into?" Tim asks them a few minutes later.

"One thing is certain, this is not just a weapons theft ring."

"Ya think, Ziva?"

"Homeland Security was beyond asleep at the switch on this one. I mean look at this, this is more Sarin than you need to kill everyone on the East Coast!" Tim adds.

"How did the intel miss this?" Tony asks.

"I don't know. But I will as soon as we're out of here," Gibbs says, eyes hard. Anyone they catch alive is going to have a very bad day, and Homeland Security, who foisted a case about someone stealing shells off battleships to them, is about to have a very big problem.

"Did your phone really blow up?" Tony asks an agonizingly long minute later.

"Yeah," Tim answers.

"Why?"

"I wired an explosive into it."

Tony's giving him the, you're completely insane look, but Gibbs is interested, and Ziva looks intrigued.
"You carry a phone," Tony says, "packed with enough explosives to take a man's hand off, in your front left pocket." "Two inches from your dick" is left unspoken, but none of them miss the implication.

"Okay, put that way it sounds a little crazy. 'Course, I carry my gun on my left hip, too."

"And why did you feel the need to wire your phone to explode?" Tony asks.

"I've got stuff on there I don't want anyone seeing."

Tony snorts. "You'll blow a guy's hand off to keep those pictures of Abby a secret?"

"Among other things," Tim says dryly. "Look, it's not gonna blow if you drop it. And you've got to be as good with a computer as I am to even find the file that'll trigger the explosive without the right password. That's why I had to talk that idiot into opening it on my phone. The only other way to make it go off is to try and open the case."

"So, what is it you did to our phones?" Tony asks, helping them all stay distracted as they wait.

They're all shivering, but Tim's starting to get worried about Tony because Tony feels cool pressed into his side. Gibbs on his left is warm. Ziva in front of him is warm. Tony on his right is cool.

He and Ziva had been the warmest while shooting, because they were right in the doorway. Tony was behind them, in the freezer, spotting for Ziva, and Tony's dressed for summer. They all are. But for him and Gibbs that's not dressed all that different from how they dress in the winter. Tim skipped his usual jacket, but Gibbs has on his. Tony's in a light, short-sleeved button down and linen pants. Ziva's in cargo pants and a light t-shirt, but she's in the middle. So, he's not too worried about her.

But Tony's getting cold.

He realizes he's got a question to answer, and anything that distracts them from the cold is good.

"Modified the power relays a little. It'll hold a charge for a second after you disable it. Just long enough to send a help message along with GPS coordinates."

"And you did not mention this?" Ziva asks.

"I only got it done on your phone yesterday."

"McGee?"

"Yeah, Boss?"

"Tomorrow, you're taking me shopping for a new phone."

"Certainly, Boss."

"And when you're done with it, it better take a man's hand off if he messes with it."

"On it, Boss."

Tony laughs. "This is all Kevin's master plan. We'll get out of here, find out this was all staged to make sure Gibbs got a phone that isn't from the Bush administration!"

Even Gibbs laughed at that.
They hear yelling, Vance, and other familiar voices looking for them. They scream back, loud as they can, voices echoing viciously through the freezer.

"We're coming to—"

The explosion cut off all sound. They feel it, and hear it, and for a second, wonder if they had, in fact, died.

But they aren't dead.

After an extremely long minute, Vance yells back that they had booby trapped the place. "We're coming for you, just hang on."

The power cuts out. Leaving them shivering in the dark.

"We cut the power." Vance's voice again. "It'll stay cold, but it won't get any colder. How long have you been in there?"

"What time is it?" Gibbs yells back.

"16:42."

"Fourteen minutes."

Cold hurts.

Tim's been cold before. Who hasn't? But there's digging your car out of the snow and then there's feeling like you've been dropped in a vat of liquid nitrogen and it's slowly flaying your skin off.

This is full body pain. Everything that can hurt does. His eyelashes hurt. They're huddled as close in to each other as they can get. Ziva's temple is against his lips. Tony's cheek is pressed to his. He doesn't know where Gibbs' face is, pitch black means he can't see, but he can feel the faint warmth, smell the coffee Gibbs had been drinking as they drove here, each time he exhaled.

Tim wonders idly which one of them is going to drop first. It'll be him or Tony, he knows that. He's bigger than Tony, so more surface area to lose heat from. Tony's too underdressed, so the air can steal his heat easier.

If they could get outside, it's August, hot, sticky, humid, god awful, he's never ever going to complain about the heat again, August.

He's calculating how fast they'll lose body heat, but since he doesn't know how cold it is in here, it's useless, so he gives up.

Two things are scaring Tim. Tony's stopped talking, and Gibbs has started. Gibbs is talking about Afghanistan. Hot, hot, hot Afghanistan. Clothing drenched in sweat, gulping down salt tablets with water that goes hot as soon as you take it out of the cooler, Afghanistan. Asking Tony about it, slowly dragging answers out of him. But Tony is losing focus, not answering fast enough, and some of the answers he's coming up with are not even remotely related to what Gibbs is talking about.
"Let me out of the middle and let Tony in," Ziva says, fear adding a dangerous edge to her voice.

Tony's not shivering anymore. And he's barely talking, even when Tim or Gibbs shake him to get the answers out.

He feels Gibbs squeeze him and knows what he's telling him. And he doesn't need Gibbs to do it, he'd do it anyway, but he's glad Gibbs is on the same page.

"Can't do it, Ziva. We all freeze faster if you two switch places. Put you on the outside, and two of us lose your heat. You lose the heat from your back. And we all lose more heat from our fronts because it'll go into warming Tony up. And it won't make any difference because he can't get any warmer than any of us are right now." He never thought studying thermodynamics would mean he'd get condemn one of his friends in the hope of giving the other two enough heat to get them out alive.

He can feel Gibbs move, and knows he's getting ready to take off his jacket and give it to Tony.

"Don't do it, Boss. It won't help him, and it will hurt you. All your jacket can do is slightly slow down the rate he's losing heat; it can't warm him up, which is what he needs. Taking it off will speed up the rate you're losing heat, and moving so you can get it off means all of us lose more heat when you disturb the little bubble of warmer air around us.

"Plenty of people freeze, and get warmed back up again, and come out of it just fine." It's not that he's lying, it's just that the sort of thing he's talking about is on par with falling out of a fifty story window and surviving. Sure, it happens. Just not often. "Sometimes, if you get hurt certain ways, they'll put your body on ice to slow everything down, so they can get the time to fix you." This is true, too, just awfully rare.

He realizes he's speaking very slowly, and feeling extremely sleepy. That's the first step of freezing to death. You fall asleep.

"Don't let him fall!" Gibbs voice pulls him out of the half-dream of snuggling under a heated blanket with Abby.

Tony was starting to collapse backwards. He and Gibbs get him, lean him further into Ziva, and if possible push even closer into each other to support him.

"Wouldn't we be better on the floor?" Gibb's asks.

"Floor's solid." His words are slurring, not a good sign. "It'll suck the heat out of us faster than the air is."

He realizes he's not cold anymore. That's a worse sign.

"Ziva." Tony's voice is barely over a whisper, and it slips out of him slow and rough.

"Tony?"

"I love you."

She kisses him quickly and says, "Oh no, we are not dying today. You tell me that over a nice
dinner, a nice, warm dinner, a nice warm dinner in the bath, with hot water, lots and lots of hot water, and bubbles, and candles, when Gibbs and McGee are not with us. You do not tell me that now."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Tony?"

She's shaking him, and he's not answering.

Tony's not breathing.

Tim's knees are going. He can feel it happening in slow motion. His hold on standing is slipping away as his knees unlock and he starts to collapse. Gibbs is holding him tight, trying to keep him up, but he can't hold both of them, and Tim knows that if he falls he'll take the other three with him.

And if they fall, they're dead. They won't be able to get back up any more than he will, and the floor will kill them. It'll suck the heat out and that will be it.

He can't see Gibbs, but he knows he'll get it. He takes his hand off of Gibbs' back first, giving him a second to take more of Tony's weight, and lets go.

And then there is nothing but scalding light.
They won't let Abby onto the scene.

Ducky and Jimmy are holding her in the ME's van, and not in the sense of locking her in, but in the sense of Jimmy has one arm around her waist, tight, and Ducky is holding her hand, also tight, making sure she stays back.

She's babbling about being as good, if not better, of a shot than most of the agents slowly creeping up on the building, and Palmer's agreeing with her, but as Ducky is pointing out, she's also not a cop, not wearing body armor, and if she gets any closer to that building than she already was, both Tim and Gibbs will double team them and kill them very, very slowly, and no one wants that, at all.

She jumps when the explosion sounds. And it's a good thing Jimmy has a firm hold on her and is very strong, because she bolts for the warehouse when that happens, and it's only the force of his hold on her that keeps her in the van.

"You can't go in there," he's saying it over and over as he holds her in place with Ducky, feeling her struggle and hearing her whimpering about her boys being in there. Jimmy can see it, the fear, the desperate need to do something. Her dad and husband are in there, and it doesn't matter that Gibbs wasn't there for the first twenty-eight years of her life or that she and Tim aren't married. The two most important men in her life are in a building that just rocked with an explosion.

Two of her best friends are in there as well, and that's not making things any better.

People are running out of the building, grabbing bags, and tools, and then slowly moving back in. And no one comes over to tell them what is going on.

They see the power go down. Hostage situation? Cutting the power is something like move number three if they're being held hostage. Bombs need electric? Maybe. Planning on storming in, night vision goggles on? Possible.

Now Palmer is holding onto her for a different reason.

She's pulling against him, trying to get to Vance. "I've got to ask. Vance is just standing there, telling people what to do. He can tell me."

"No you don't." He turns her face away from the warehouse and to his, making sure her eyes are on his. "When did you call Breena?"

"After they went to get you."

"Why?"

"Because every minute one of us was comforting her was a minute we weren't finding you." She sags against him as she says that.

Jimmy holds her and kisses the top of her head. He doesn't have to say anything after that. They just sit there, holding each other, waiting.

A million years later, Vance is in the van. "I need an answer. They're in a freezer. We've cut the
power, so it's not getting any colder, but it's cold. The warehouse is booby trapped and filled with enough explosives to take out ten city blocks. How long do we have to get the traps cleared?"

"How long have they been in there?" Ducky asks.

"Fourteen minutes."

"How cold is it?" Abby asks.

Vance isn't looking at her. He's staring at the warehouse. "We don't know. They're using it to store Sarin."

"Give me a computer," Abby says, voice dead. She knows this is Vance giving them something to do. They aren't going to risk blowing up downtown DC and poisoning millions of people to get four agents. They'll take exactly as long as it takes to get to them safely, and if it happens before they freeze, all the better.

A few minutes of googling, a few more minutes of math, and the memory of what Tim was wearing this morning gives her something close to an answer. She trims five minutes off of it, just to be safe. "Seventy-five minutes from now."

"We'll have them out in seventy. Next question, if we need to, can we go through the wall?"

Ducky fields that one. "Can you cut through it, and the wall of the freezer? Certainly. They make saws and torches that can do that. Can you get one of them and get through in less than an hour? Maybe. I'm sure one of the underwater demolition teams out of Norfolk can be flown in here in time, and they could probably handle it. Can you be sure you won't accidentally crush, cut, or in some other way open one of the containers of Sarin? No, Director, you can't." She can see it in Ducky's face. He loves every single person in that freezer and he is telling Vance not to do it. It's not worth the risk. A drop of Sarin the size of a pin head will kill a person just by touching their skin. A freezer full of it...

It doesn't matter who is in there, the math is on the side of caution.

"Abigail." Ducky is holding her arm, petting her hand. "Come. We have preparations to make. Heated blankets. Warm drinks. Luke warm water. We'll need to be ready to warm them up, gently." Ducky turns away from the Director and digs around in the back of the van. Finally he locates his prescription pad and scribbles a few words on it. Then he rips off another sheet, flips it over and begins writing.

"Mr. Palmer, painkillers, coffee, thermal blankets, heating pads. I believe we passed a Walmart on the way. Take Abigail. You should be able to find all of that there. I want you back here in forty-five minutes."

Jimmy nods, snatches the list, grabs Abby's keys from her, and they run to her car.

Thirty-four minutes later they are back, and Ducky oversee the creation of a quick and dirty hypothermia trauma center/triage. And for anything he couldn't handle, there are two ambulances waiting.

Twenty-nine minutes and forty-two seconds later, eight agents, Dornaget and Vance among them, carry them out of the warehouse.
You All Came Home

Tim can't stop shivering.

He watches them run Tony to a gurney, packing him in heated blankets. An EMT starts a line of heated saline and the ambulance roars off. But they aren't breathing for him, and they aren't pumping his chest, so he's alive.

And right now that's all that matters.

He's so cold, and the shivering just won't stop.

And the heated blankets, the coffee, and Abby wrapped around him hasn't stopped the shivering.

Vance wants answers. Ducky told him, and this blew Tim's mind once he realized it happened, about three minutes after Ducky had said it, "Director, bugger off. All three of them are frozen, and in no condition to do anything besides warm up and rest. Tonight, they rest. Tomorrow, they rest. Noon, day after tomorrow, that's the soonest you get to talk to any of them. And I do not care if the President himself is breathing down your neck for answers, those are my orders, and when it comes to this, my orders trump his."

Ducky checks them for frostbite, and amazingly enough, he doesn't have any. Gibbs does. His feet are white. So are the tips of his fingers. But he and Ziva don't, probably because they were at the door, shooting for the first half hour.

As soon as Ducky says she doesn't have frostbite, Ziva wants to go to the hospital after Tony, but she's not warmed up enough to fight Palmer, who is holding onto her. "Ziva, we're going home. And as soon as you're warmed up, I will take you to Tony. But right now you've got to get warmed up."

Ducky then spends about ten minutes explaining to Abby what they are supposed to be doing. He says they could go to the hospital, but really there's no need for it. Tim can warm up just as easily at home as he can at the hospital. Though Ducky does give her a long list of issues to look out for and explains that if any of them do happen, to call him immediately.

Tim's floating through it, not really aware of much of anything besides his body shaking and the glorious, scalding, hot of the air and blanket.

Palmer goes with Ziva, Ducky goes with Gibbs, and Abby guides him to her car.

He's expecting her to take him home. She doesn't. She drives into town, and pulls up at the Adam's House.

"Abby..." He's having a hard time talking, relaxing his jaw enough to speak just means his teeth chatter uncontrollably.

"Jacuzzi hot tub."

He nods. That sounds really good right about now.

They have a tub at their place, but it's like four feet long. He can lay back, and have most of his legs sticking out. Or sit down, and have his upper half out. Either way that's not full immersion in
lukewarm water, which Ducky recommended.

She parks and leaves him in the car, heater on, seat heaters turned on high, and he just sits there and dozes as well as he can with his whole body shaking.

Eventually she's back, arm around his waist, his arm over her shoulders, pressing in close and leading him to a room. And if people wondered about the man wrapped in a blanket, shivering, in the middle of the worst of August heat, he didn't notice.

She's already gotten the bath started. It's a good six inches full by the time he's standing next to the tub. He doesn't even try to get himself out of his clothing. He's shaking too hard to work a zipper, let alone the buttons on his shirt.

Tim stands there while she undresses him.

He can see himself in the mirror. It's been at least an hour since they got out, but his lips, fingernails, nipples, and toenails are all still blue. His skin is tinged with it.

He sits, slowly, on the edge of the bath, slides his feet in, and screams, jerking them out of the water, falling backward, unable to coordinate well enough to catch himself before he topples over.

She gets him before he hits the floor. Breaks his fall, and lowers him, gently, the last few inches.

"What happened?" she asks, fear in her voice.

"Burned."

He doesn't have frostbite. He's just cold, very, very cold. And Ducky had said something about keeping the water lukewarm at first. He didn't mention that if you put a very cold part of your body into warm water, it'll burn you.

Abby gets him sitting up, wraps him back up in the blanket, and cranks the cold water. Obviously what had felt lukewarm to her is still way too hot.

A minute later, she drips some water on his foot. "Better?"

He nods.

"Okay, let's try this again." And once again, he gets in the bath, and this time it doesn't burn. It's just pleasantly warm, so he lays there and dozes, letting the heat slowly soak back into his body.

He half-hears her voice saying, "I don't care if it's August, I want two pitchers of hot chocolate up here, now!"

He smiles a little at that. Back in... March maybe, it was a freakishly late storm for DC, they went out to play in the snow, and after, they came in, shivering, and he made them hot chocolate, telling her about how much he loved it on cold days.

She's leaning against the side of the tub, petting his hair. He turns and leans into her hand, though his eyes don't open.

"Hi."

"You really here, now?" she asks.

"Enough. You mind adding some more hot to this?"
"No."

She turns on the hot tap for about ten seconds, and then swirls the water around him. "That's good. How warm is it?"

"Seventy-eight? Eighty-two? Cold swimming pool temp."

"Shit."

"Yeah, you're cold."

He opens his eyes to look at his fingers and toes. The color is slowly starting to come back. "Can't believe I didn't get frostbite."

She kisses his forehead, resting with her lips against him, not moving.

A minute later, there's a knock on the door, and she goes to answer it. He reaches up with his foot, nudges the hot water tap. More of it starts to dribble into the tub.

She comes in, holding a mug full of hot chocolate in one hand, and a coffee carafe full of it in the other.

She hands him the mug. "Drink."

He does, and it's absolutely delicious, and way too hot. It burns on the way down, and the mug burns his fingers, but he doesn't care. Just because it feels hot to him doesn't mean it really is. While he drinks, she puts the carafe on the shelf with the scrubby and soap, and then takes off her own clothing.

"Scoot forward a bit."

He does, and she slides in behind him. A minute after that, he's resting in warm (ish) water, his back against her chest, his head on her shoulder, as she holds him tight with both arms and legs.

Eventually, the shivers stop. Eventually, the water's steaming hot.

Eventually, he can talk. She doesn't ask questions, doesn't nudge him for this, she just holds him and lets him warm up, safe and wrapped in her body.

Abby knows that he'll talk when he can. That's how he is. Press him too soon, and it's useless, he'll just shut down, walk away. But if she gives him the space he needs for this, he won't hold onto it, either. All she has to do is stay there, holding him, and eventually, he'll tell her what happened.

"We'd gotten the intel on that warehouse, but when we got there Ziva noticed a van in front, and the van was being loaded. Tony ID'd the driver and one of the guys loading as Jamison and Hacker, so we decided that instead of running in and grabbing them to follow and see where they were going with the shells." At that point in the op they knew about the shells. That's how they got this case, Homeland Security had a case where someone was stealing shells off of battleships. And who better than NCIS to get into that? The Sarin was the surprise twist.

"We followed them. Which is how we got to the second warehouse, where you guys found us. We'd followed them, but apparently they'd followed us as well." It was supposed to be a small group. Four, maybe six guys, tops. And all six of them were in view, so they didn't pay too close of
attention to who might have been behind them. Homeland Security had files on Jamison and Hacker, knew they were working together, thought they were selling the shells to different radical groups.

"When we got out of the car to see what was inside that warehouse, they grabbed us. Took our guns and cells, and herded us into the warehouse." Which was where they found out four-six guys was closer to thirty. And the theft/sale ring was some sort of terrorist organization that, judging by the body armor and the way they were all together, was about to go and attack something.

"I watched him kill each phone, and I know what can happen if he messes with mine. So I start babbling about I want to live, how I've got three kids at home, and how I've got some really important info on my phone and I'll trade him the password for getting out of there. Hoping the lies about who's at home let Gibbs and Tony and Ziva know that we're about to get the only distraction we'll get, so in a second we need to bolt for the guns and run.

"And he's being a dick about the phone, taunting me about what I could possibly have on it that he'd want. And Tony's on the same page I am less than a second later, calling me about not letting that info go, complaining to Gibbs about how computer geeks are useless on a field team. Gibbs is staring at me like he's never been more disgusted in his life. Ziva actually got free and hit me to make me 'shut up,' and when they grabbed her again she was three steps closer to the guns. I kept babbling about how we knew about them and if he wanted to see all the intel on them he'd open that file. And then I fed him the wrong password, and it blew his hand off, and we grabbed our guns and ran like hell. Twenty guys between us and the doors, so into the warehouse we went.

"I saw the freezer, saw what was in it, and I led us to it. And as long as no one closed the door, we could use it for cover and hold out until you guys came."

Tim closes his eyes and goes quiet. He can still feel his heart pounding, the claustrophobic feeling of being closed in between too high crates filled with shells, and glint of stainless steel on the far wall. She gives him a gentle squeeze and strokes his face, bringing him back to a hot bath in a perfectly safe hotel room.

He swallows, starts to talk again. "I killed seven men today. Maybe more. I fired ten times while we were running. Not sure if I hit anyone then. I maimed one. My phone took his hand clean off. Might have killed him, too. I don't know if they got the artery clamped in time. But when we were in the freezer, I had seven bullets. I couldn't miss, so I didn't."

"How did you have seven bullets?" His gun holds fifteen bullets, hence the question.

He opens his eyes. "Five from mine, two from Tony's."

"Tony let you use his gun?"

"No. Ziva picked his gun. Gibbs gave me his. But I couldn't miss, so I didn't want to switch guns, so I got Tony's magazine when I ran out, and Ziva got Gibbs' gun. Ziva and I guarded the door, picking them off as they kept coming, trying to shut us in, while Tony and Gibbs stayed behind us, in the freezer, spotting the next target for us." And while that's a little vague, and she's not entirely following him, she's not about to ask for more clarification, not right now. It makes sense to him, and that's enough.

"Targets." He closes his eyes, feeling the hit of his gun snapping into his palm as it fired. "They weren't people." He starts to shiver again. "That's never been true before. Before it's always been a person. But today they were just...the things trying to keep me from going home to you. If I was going to keep breathing, they had to stop, and I stopped them. I didn't miss. Seven bullets, seven head shots, seven dead men."
He's not crying. He's shivering, and his voice is rough, but he's not crying. Abby squeezes him a little tighter, kisses his temple, trying to comfort him with her touch.

He inhales deep and ragged, still shaking. "Tony's a person. He's my best friend, and I talked Ziva into letting him freeze. She was in the middle, and that's just the way it was. Nothing else was going to happen. We didn't even have to talk about it. As soon as the door shut, we snuggled in around her." Abby's gently rubbing his chest, her lips pressed against the side of his head. She can feel his control slipping away from him, feel him slipping away from her, back into the frozen dark in his mind.

"But Tony was already cold at that point. He was losing heat faster than the rest of us. He should have been in the middle, he needed the heat more, but we just couldn't do it. If anyone was going to be in the middle, it was Ziva. We put Kate and Jenny in the ground, and we couldn't do it for her. So Ziva was in the middle."

And now he is crying, clutching the hand that was stroking his chest. "He stopped talking. He stopped shivering. And she wanted to change places, and I talked her out of it. And if I couldn't have talked her out of it, Gibbs and I would have held her in place. Gibbs was wearing his jacket, and he tried to take it off, give it to Tony, and I talked him out of that, too. It couldn't have saved Tony, and it would have killed Gibbs that much faster."

She's petting him as he takes a deep breath, trying to get the crying under control, because he needs to get these words out.

"Tony understands, Tim."

"I know. He approves even; he and Gibbs would have done the exact same thing for me if you were in the middle. And Gibbs was right with me on it. But that doesn't make it better, doesn't change it. I talked them out of it. I told the lies that made Ziva stay still."

"You all came home."

He nods. Still crying, and shifts so he's on his side, holding onto her, head against her chest. She kisses his forehead. "He fell over, and we caught him, made sure he stayed standing... He told Ziva he loved her... and then he just stopped... Ziva was shaking him... and he didn't move... I was holding him... and I couldn't feel him breathe." He's inhaling fast between each phrase, gulping air, and shaking from head to toes with his tears. "And by that point I was swaying on my feet, too, just about ready to drop... and he's not breathing... Ziva was crying... and she's trying to slap Tony, but she can't because we're too pressed in against her... And Gibbs is holding on to us, like our lives depend on it... and they do... and I can feel it... my knees are going... and Tony's dead... and if I take them down, Gibbs and Ziva are next, and I start to collapse, and he can't hold both of us up, so I let go... and then the door opened and they carried us out and we were in scalding light and hot air... but..." And he can't form words, for a moment he's just shaking and crying.

Abby holds him, rocking him gently. "You all came home."

"He wasn't breathing!" He's sobbing, curled into a ball on his side, head on her chest, clinging to her. "I put him in that room, and he wasn't breathing when he came out."

"He is now." She holds him tight, arms cradled around his head and shoulders while he sobs on her. And it doesn't matter that today is the second worst day of her life, because this is the worst day of his. She finds her calm center, pushes her own panic away, the absolute white hot arc of fear at hearing he had let go, and holds him, making gentle, almost shushing sounds, because right now he needs the comfort more than she does.
Alive

The next morning they head to the hospital. Ducky, Jimmy, and Breena are on vigil in the waiting room.

"How is he?" Tim's asked that about nine times now. On the phone when he called Jimmy for an update. Of Abby each time she checked in over the course of the night. And now of Ducky, who is sitting with Jimmy and Breena, looking to be in a good humor.

"He'll be fine, Timothy. They're keeping him here until tonight, maybe tomorrow morning, just to keep an eye on things, but he's going to be fine."

Tim nods. "Where's Gibbs? In with him?"

"No. Jethro is home. Once I had him thawed out, I called Fornell and told him to hold a gun to his head if necessary, but to make sure he rested and stayed off his feet, and then I came here."

Tim smiles a little at that image, and adds going to visit Gibbs to the to-do list. "Can we go in?"

"They were resting when we left, but yes, I think you can go in," Ducky says. "Room 211."

They head down the hall, and find the room. The door is shut, and Abby knocks softly. They hear Ziva say, "Come in."

Tony's sleeping in the bed. For someone who is going to be just fine, there are a lot of bandages on him. His fingers and ears are wrapped in soft white gauze. But there are no tubes in him, he's breathing, and his color is good, so maybe he really is going to be okay.

Ziva's laying on her side, next to him on the bed, her hand on his chest.

She gets up slowly and gently when she sees it's them. As soon as she's clear of Tony, Abby wraps her in a massive, and quiet, hug. Tim hangs back for a second, hoping she's not pissed at him, either for treating her like a doll in need of extra protection, or for not doing more for Tony, but she looks at him over Abby's shoulder and gestures for him, and in another second he's wrapped around both of them, too.

After a few minutes, Ziva pulls back and looks at him. "You are all right?"

He nods. He's as all right as he can be. "You?"

"Yes."

"Has he woken up?" Tim asks.

"Yes. They have him on strong pain medication, and it's making him sleep."

"Okay." Abby sees him staring at Tony, and knows what he needs.

"When was the last time you got something to eat?" she asks Ziva, who looks exhausted.

"I do not know."

"Come on, let's get you some food, and we'll pick up an extra-large whatever you think Tony would like."
Ziva sees Tim watching Tony, and agrees to go. Abby leads her out, arm around her waist.

He drags the chair, quietly, next to the bed. He'd take Tony's hand, but they're covered in bandages, so he gently holds his wrist.

He can feel Tony's pulse under his fingers, see the slow rise/fall of his chest, and for the first time since Tony said, "Yes, Ma'am." Tim really believes he's alive. He sighs at that, starting to really relax.

"Ziva?" Tony doesn't open his eyes when he says that.

"Abby took her to get some food."

"McGee?" He turns his face toward Tim, but still has his eyes shut.

"Yeah."

"You've got really soft hands."

Tim smiles a little. "Thanks."

"Is Gibbs here?"

"Ducky tells me he's got Fornell holding a gun to his head, forcing him to stay home and rest. His feet were pretty badly frostbitten."

"Yeah. They tell me I'm short a few toes, now, and the top of my right ear."

"Shit." He needs to have a chat with Ducky as to what constitutes "fine." Missing body parts is not "fine."

"She says she's fine. Is she, really?"

"I think so. No frostbite, and Palmer wasn't going to let her come until she was warmed back up."

"You don't think she killed Palmer and came here anyway?"

"He and Breena are in the waiting room."

"Good."

He sits there, holding onto Tony's wrist, not sure what, if anything, to say.

Tony opens his eyes and looks at Tim. "I kind of remember you telling her not to switch places with me."

"Yeah."

Tony's eyes are half closed, and not very focused, but his expression is intense, and Tim knows whatever he says next, he means with every fiber of his soul. "Thanks."

"I hated doing it." He doesn't wipe away the tear that's creeping down his cheek.

"I know." Tony's eyes slide shut again.

"Tony."
"Yeah?"

Tim squeezes his wrist. "I'm really glad you're alive."

"Me, too."

Tony drifts back to sleep after that, and Tim sits there holding his wrist. He dozes a little as well, but he hears it when the door opens, and turns to look.

Gibbs is standing there, pale, in pain or high as a kite on painkillers,—Tim can't tell which from this far away.—and swaying a little.

He stands up fast and goes to Gibbs, wrapping an arm around him, letting him rest his weight on him, trying to get it off his feet. "You shot Fornell, didn't you?"

"He's okay?" Gibbs is staring at Tony as Tim basically carries him to the sofa on the side of the room.

"Ducky says he is. But he's lost some toes and part of his ear."

Gibbs nods, letting Tim put him on the sofa, feet up. Tim really looks at him, and decides high as a kite on painkillers is the correct answer. His eyes are dilated and not focusing well.

"You should be in bed."

"Had to see him."

"I know, me too."

Gibbs stares at Tim for a long time. He's laying on the sofa, and Tim is standing next to it, watching Tony.

"C'mere."

Tim sits on the edge of the sofa and Gibbs sits up and hugs him, tight. "You got us all home, Tim."

He thought, after last night and this morning, that he was cried out, but apparently he wasn't. Tim hasn't been hugged, not like this, not by a dad, since his grandfather died, and he'd forgotten how good it felt and how much he needed it. And eventually he feels Ziva and Abby join them, wrapping around the two of them, and it feels so very good to have people to hold when you're hurt and scared.
They go home about 2:00. Tim's having a hard time staying awake, and sleeping in the chair next to Tony just isn't a good plan.

He hadn't really slept the night before. He kept swimming through exhausted half-dream/memories of the men he killed, Tony not breathing, and falling, slowly to a floor colder than ice, colder than he was, but in the dream, the door didn't fling open and Dornie wasn't immediately running in and picking him up.

Abby gets him home, and he crashes into their bed, still in the clothing he almost died in, asleep less than a minute after his head hit the pillow.

This time, he doesn't dream.

It's dark, and he's hungry when he wakes up. The clock says it's 8:42.

Tim heads toward the kitchen, wondering where Abby is, and then hears water running in their second bathroom, which is weird. They don't really ever use that bathroom, don't really need it. And Abby rarely gets a night-time shower. Not like it never happens, and it's true they didn't get one this morning, but why wouldn't she be in the bathroom off of their bedroom?

He knocks and hears a muffled, "Yeah?"

So he goes in, and stops dead.

She's sitting on the floor, back against the tub, tap and ventilation fan on, arms wrapped around her knees, sobbing.

He's right next to her, arm around her shoulders less than half a breath later.

She looks at him, face puffy, eyes red and bloodshot. "I didn't want to wake you up, but I couldn't keep it in any longer."

Tim suddenly gets that she's had an absolutely horrific two days as well, and that she's been being strong for him, making sure he had someone to cry on when he needed it.

"Hey." He's petting her hair, and gets her settled between his legs, snuggled into his chest. "I've got you."

This time he holds her while she sobs, letting her tears soak into his shirt, trying to soothe her by just being there.

Eventually the sobbing slows and she turns around, still crying, straddling his thighs, staring into his eyes. He's expecting sad and scared, but furious is there, too, and it takes him by surprise.

"You do not get to die on me." Her voice is low, soft, raw from the crying and shaking with anger.

He nods. She punches him, hard, on the shoulder, and he rubs it gently.
"You do not get to dangle this perfect fantasy life in front of me: married, house, kids, grow old together and then take it away by dying on me! You don't get to make me want that, need it, and then take it away!" She takes a fast, shuddering breath. "You don't get to make me need you and then go away." She's blinking as the tears stream down her face. "You don't." That's almost a whimper, her hands clenching on his shoulders.

His hands wrap around her back, and he kisses her. "I'm not going anywhere."

Wrong answer, though he's not sure if anything he could have said would have been right. She hits him on the shoulder again, and once again, this isn't just a little annoyed tap, there is rage and terror in this hit, and it hurts. "You don't know that! Kate went out there and never came home. Jenny didn't come home. Mike didn't come home." Another fast, hard, shuddering breath. "My mom and dad didn't come home!"

"I'm here now."

She's sobbing again, whole body shaking in his arms, but she doesn't want to curl into him, he can see that. "You let go! You let go of Gibbs and Ziva and Tony. You were going to lie down and die!"

He's too close to it, the memory of letting go of Gibbs is still too fresh, and he can't keep his own voice or tears under control as he says, "If I had kept holding on, we all would have died."

"You didn't know that!" She hits him again, both fists slamming into his shoulders, and he takes her wrists in his hands, holding tight, accepting that she's furious and terrified, but not willing to let her beat it out on his skin. "You don't get to let go! You don't ever let go! As long as you are breathing, you will hold on. And if it's you or Ziva, or you or Tony, or you or Gibbs, you pick you!" She doesn't yell the last bit, her voice drops and goes soft, but he knows she has never, ever been this angry at anyone before, and she has never meant anything the way she means that.

He doesn't say anything to that, not sure what he could say. Tony, Ziva, Gibbs, they're his partners, and he'd throw his life in front of theirs without thinking about it. But if he does that, she'll be here, alone, and Tony and Ziva and Gibbs aren't him, they aren't the life, the love she's come to count on, they aren't the future they both desperately want.

He can remember telling Wolf that you can be married to the job or married to your spouse, and he can see from the way she's looking at him a choice is coming up.

"You said say the word, I'm saying it. Get the desk job. I'm not sitting there again, watching our life fade away, powerless to do anything about it."

He kisses her forehead. "I'll talk to Vance in the morning."

She stares at him for a moment, breathing hard and fast, not looking at all relieved by him agreeing to do it. He can feel from the way she's trying to move her arms that she wants to hit him again, but he's not going to let her do that, so she throws her head back and screams.

He hopes the water and the ventilation fan is enough to at least muffle that sound. Now would be a very bad time for the neighbors to call the cops.

But it seems to help. She's still crying, but looks calmer when she says, "Don't talk to Vance. Without you in the field, they all would have just vanished, and..."

And they both know how badly things could have gone if they hadn't shown up in time to stop those guys. She can do the math as well as he can, but being handed a flag at the end of a funeral, no matter how many lives you save by dying, doesn't make saying goodbye any easier, and it doesn't
make the loss of the one you love best any less painful.

For a long minute they sit there, watching each other. He doesn't know what he can say to her, not sure if there is anything. Because, like when Jimmy and Ducky got kidnapped, the best he can say, the best he can ever say is 'Today it wasn't me,' and especially right now, that's just not enough.

Eventually, enough time passes and she relaxes a little. He lets go of her wrists, and she wraps her arms around his neck. He touches her face gently, and she turns into his hand and kisses his fingers. Her eyes close, and for another minute she just breathes, slowly, getting herself under control.

Then she opens her eyes. "The first time we dated, after you gave me the first poem, I was lying next to you in the coffin, watching you sleep, and I could feel it, if I let myself, I'd fall in love with you, and not just the so-happy-I-like-having-you-around-love, but the my-life-melts-into-yours-and-you-become-just-as-important-to-me-as-breathing-love, and I couldn't take it."

He, obviously, doesn't remember that part of it. But he does remember waking up with her staring at him, and smiling at her, loving having her near, reaching up to kiss her, and watching her more or less jump out of the coffin, run into the shower, and then tell him about how she didn't want anything beyond friendship and sex when she got out. "That was the morning you told me you didn't want anything serious."

She nods, and he strokes her shoulders and arms. "Yeah. I loved my parents like that. And Ziva's right, you don't get over it. You just get through it. But losing it breaks you. I'm not the person I was before they died. I wasn't going to let that happen again."

"Why'd you change your mind?"

She smiles a little. "Kyle. He has a girlfriend he adores and a lot of really deep, intense relationships; he reminds me of who I used to be before they died. And I liked that version of me. And keeping a wall between me and really loving something wasn't working. It didn't keep fear away. It didn't make life better. It didn't make it hurt any less when Kate or Jenny died. It didn't make burying Mike any easier. It just made my life shallower because I didn't get to really enjoy them."

"And you asked me out, and I realized I didn't want shallow with you. That of everyone in my life, you were the one I didn't want shallow with. I bought my bed the next day, because I wanted a place for you in my home, in my life."

He kisses her gently. Lips stroking over hers.

She pulls back after a few seconds. "But I can't lose this. I can't lose you. And I am not okay with you almost dying. A bullet comes out of nowhere, and there's nothing you can do about it, fine. That's fate. That's the speeding car going the wrong way. And if it happens, it happens. But you promise me, no matter what, if it's in your control, you come home! You do not ever let go again."

And that's the change. He's not Tony's partner anymore, he's Abby's. She comes first. Honor, duty, love, all of these have bound him to Tony, Ziva, and Gibbs, but now she has first claim on them. 'Family first,' Gibbs says, but he had to lose his to get to the point where he could live that. And now, above and beyond the others, Abby is family. And he's not entirely sure how to balance his work and her, but he's certainly going to try to figure it out.

So he kisses her, gently, and holds her face in his hands while he says, "If it's in my power, I will come home. As long as there is breath in my body, I will fight to return to you."

Her eyes close as he says that and she inhales deeply, and opens them slowly, holding his gaze with
"Make a baby with me? So, that, if something happens, if you ever aren't here, you're still here."

There's an electric rush that goes with her words, a full body thrill that's unlike anything he's ever felt before. It's not pleasure. Pleasure is part of it, but this is more intense than that, it's more real, more meaningful. This might be ecstasy, in the original, religious sense, or as close to that as he'll ever feel.

"Yes!"

Her lips crush against his, both of them fighting with their clothing, tearing at it, with an almost frenzy of desire to get naked fast. God, please, yes!

The thousand feelings of the last two days distilled into her body on his and the smooth, hot, tight roll of her hips against his, all of it moving toward life.

Yes. Life. Fuck. And again, yes! Her body on his. Her soul under his hands. Love and terror, agony and joy wrapping into each other and thrusting towards life stretching into forever.

And if death is eternal, and if you can't cheat or win, this at least pushes it off a little further. This motion, this joy, this white-hot electric pleasure rising and falling like breath puts extinction off just a little further, buying life a generation more.

If there's anything that does a better job of letting you know you're alive than sex for the purpose of making a child, Tim doesn't know what it might be.

She's warm and soft in his lap. He holds her close, lips on hers, his left hand buried in her hair, right on the small of her back, her arms wrapped around his shoulders. She broke the kiss, head falling back, and he licked her throat, kissing greedily, feeling her pulse under his mouth.

And right that minute he's never been more alive, and has never been more grateful for that fact.

---

Hours later, a thought occurs to him as they're in the kitchen wolfing down a large plate of scrambled eggs. Both of them are famished and neither had felt energetic enough to make anything even remotely complicated.

"Wasn't your last Depo shot like, two weeks ago?" He sounds disappointed as he asks, because he knows it's true, and that shuts down a lot of the post-sex, maybe-baby glow.

She thinks about that, sees the look on his face, and then grins at him.

"Get me pregnant ten weeks from now?"

He feels the smile spread across his face, wide and happy, the first gesture of unalloyed joy in two days. "My pleasure."
"Hey," Tim says, walking down the steps to Gibbs' basement.

Gibbs is working on... he's still not sure what it is. Probably not another boat. At least nothing in there looks like the skeleton of another boat to him, but still, what else would he need a stove and curved bookshelves for? Not like he's going to build a cabin in his own basement.

Well, knowing Gibbs, maybe he would.

"What's on your mind?" Gibbs asks as Tim stands on the bottom step.

"First off." He hands Gibbs a new phone. "I don't have it wired up yet. I want you to get used to using it before I do that. Don't want you accidentally blowing off your own hand."

Gibbs nods, staring at the smartphone, feeling the surprisingly solid weight of it in his hand. There are no buttons on it, and he's thinking this is going to take some getting used to. He looks up at Tim an says, "Next up?"

Tim sits down on the second-from-the-bottom step. He takes off his badge and looks at it.

"Abby's my partner." Gibbs sits down next to him. "And I'm not willing to die for this, not anymore. I love you, and I love Tony, and I love Ziva, but I won't throw myself in front of a bullet for you, not anymore. I can't. I'll kill whoever needs killing, but I won't die for you. I have a woman, and eventually children, who depend on me. At the end of the day, I have to come home."

He looks at Gibbs, who for once doesn't have an expression that wraps everything up nice and tidy, and looks at his badge again. "Is it time to ask for the transfer to Cybercrime?"

Gibbs shrugs. Tim searches his face and can see Gibbs doesn't know the answer, or maybe he does, but like Tim, he's got two different ones. No, he doesn't want the team he's spent ten years building ripped apart. Yes, this is exactly who he wants for Abby's husband, the man who will value her and their children above all other commitments.

"How did you handle being married and a Marine? Would you have hesitated to save someone at the cost of your life? Was it there in your mind that if you died, she'd be alone, crying?"

Gibbs shrugs again, and gets up to pour both of them a drink. This isn't or, at least for him, can't be, a cold sober conversation. He drinks his, and Tim holds his, not really feeling like drinking right now.

They sit there quietly for a long time. Eventually, Gibbs says, "I always told myself it was for the greater good. I was saving lives, protecting people. And that was true. And she believed in that, too. She knew I loved my job, she knew it was important, and she supported me in it. We were married for twelve years, and in twelve years she never complained to me about the job. And after she died I hated myself for that job. I hated all the lost years. I missed five years of her life. I missed three of Kelly's nine years. Shannon kept a journal, and after... I read it. And she was scared, and she was alone, a lot.

"I wasn't there to protect them. I wasn't there to save them. And in the end, I wasn't there to comfort"
them. They died alone." Gibbs blinks hard at that. And he has to swallow twice before he can speak again.

"I failed both of them. And that will always be with me. What we do, it's a shit substitute for having been there, but knowing I help others, keep other men out of my position, it was the only thing that let me sleep." Gibbs shakes his head, and Tim gets the sense that "sleep" is a euphemism for "kept me from eating my gun those first few years."

Gibbs sees Tim get it. Sees him understand why he has to be the best, has to push them harder, has to put more guys away faster than anyone else, why this team and this job is his life, and he continues, "I won't lie; I want you on my team. I want you working for me, finding the pieces that save lives and put killers in jail. You are a damn good agent, and whoever takes your place won't be nearly as good. But if you want Cybercrime, and you want to be there for Abby, every day, every night, I will understand and approve.

"She's your wife, Tim," and his look says, even if you are taking your sweet time on getting 'round to actually marrying her. "And she should come first, and when you two have kids, they'll come first, too. We'll take second for as long as you can give it. But when it's time to go, I think you'll know. It won't be a question; it'll just be a fact."

Tim closes his eyes, sighs, and takes a drink.

"I don't think it's time, yet."

"Good."

"I don't want to be the man who breaks her heart."

"I know. And I know she's not cut out for this, not for the rest of your lives. Shannon was alone and scared, and she never said anything about it to me because she believed in it just as strongly as I did. She was willing to lose me to protect others. But Abby isn't Shannon. Shannon never had to put her life back together around the hole a loved one leaves."

Tim nods.

"I saw you writing to her at Palmer's wedding. And I knew you'd both grown up enough to be with each other. And I knew that meant we'd lose you. Tony and Ziva do too, even if they aren't saying anything about it, yet."

"I don't want to screw you guys, either."

"I know, Tim."

"It's a lot easier to just live for yourself."

Gibbs smiles a little. "Yeah, it is."

Tim fiddles with his glass. "You mind if I just sit here for a while."

"Nope."

Gibbs stands up. "You want any more?"

Tim looks at the barely touched bourbon in his hand. He sips a little. "I'm good." Gibbs pours himself some more and sets the glass on his workbench.
"She was really angry at me when we got home."

Gibbs nods. When he'd gotten his first Purple Heart, Shannon had been extremely displeased that he'd earned it. "She still angry?" That might be why Tim is here instead of with Abby.

"Not so much right now. But I think we both needed a little time on our own."

Gibbs nods at that, too.

"She pushed it aside to be there for me."

"She's a good woman, Tim."

"I know." He shakes his head a little. "Just feel like a jerk. I didn't even occur to me she was having a hard time until after we got home from the hospital and I woke up and found her crying."

"I doubt she'll hold it against you. You're allowed to be a little self-centered when you almost die."

"I guess." He drinks a little more and sits there quietly. Gibbs goes back to his project and begins working.

Tim watches him sanding something. There's a gentle, soothing sound to it, soft and raspy. He can easily see how this might get you into a good headspace.

It's maybe twenty minutes later when Tim says, "You knew I was writing to her at Palmer's wedding."

"Pen and paper. Unless you're filling out a form, I've never seen you use pen and paper."

Tim nods at that. "When did you figure out we were together?"

Gibbs looks up. "Borin. Even you aren't that bad at asking women out. You had someone in mind for those tickets, but not her. Two hours later, you've got a date with Abby. I'm not a genius, but I can do that math."

Tim smiles at that. "You didn't say anything."

"What would I have said? Hey, McGee, get your ass in gear and marry that woman."

Tim looks amused. "You really loosen up when you drink, don't you?"

Gibbs smiles, sips more of his drink.

"You could have said, 'Hey, no need to sneak around. Rule twelve doesn't apply here.'"

"When you transferred to my team, you were dating Abby, right?"

"Yes."

"Did I say anything to you about twelve then?"

"No."

Gibbs stares at him for a long moment and then says, "Wanna guess why?"

"Oh." In retrospect, that made a whole lot of sense.
"Yeah. Have I ever said anything to you about twelve?"

"No. Tony filled me in on that one."

Gibbs just looks at him again. Tim sips his drink and says, "Huh."

"If I couldn't be there for Abby, who did I send to take care of her?"

"Me."

"Whose home did I have her stay at when she needed protection?"

"Mine."

"Who do you think got you sent to Mexico with her?"

"You."

The flavor of the look Gibbs is giving him shifts, more formal, more work related. "I'm not saying twelve is just a guideline or made to be broken. Twelve is there for an awfully good reason. But twelve is something I've never worried about with you."

"Tony's a different story?"

Gibbs looks irked by that. "I'm a different story. Wrote twelve years before I met Tony. But you seem pretty good at not letting your balls do the thinking."

Tim nods.

Gibbs takes another drink. "What I couldn't figure out was what the hell was taking you two so long."

Tim shrugs. "We'd already broken up once. Didn't want to risk our friendship if it was going to happen again."

Gibbs seems to think about that. "You were going to marry her, back the first time?"

Tim shrugs again. "Probably. But it wasn't just up to me."

"No it wasn't. And you two needed the time apart, maybe not that much of it, to get your heads straight."

"Yeah." Tim takes another drink. "Was the thing with Diane a test?"

Gibbs smiles.

"Did I pass?"

Gibbs smiles wider. "I didn't let Fornell shoot you, did I?"

Tim shakes his head and rolls his eyes a little. "How did you end up married to her?"

Now it's Gibbs' turn to shrug. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Were you drunk?"

The look Gibbs gives Tim indicates he's not the only one who loosens up when drinking. Then he
glances at Tim's glass and notices he's had about two teaspoons of bourbon in the last hour, so it's not
the alcohol. Gibbs gets a very satisfied look on his face, enjoying Tim actually being relaxed enough
around him to let loose.

"Not the whole time." Gibbs looks at the empty glass next to him. "Drinks to relieve his Messianic
complex?"

Tim holds out his hands in a placating gesture. "They don't let me write the blurbs on my books.
Some guy in marketing does that. The words 'Messianic complex' do not occur anywhere inside the
book."

"Uh huh." Gibbs' look now says Cut the bullshit.

"They really don't."

"And the guy in marketing came up with that out of the blue?"

"Nope, my editor gave him a quick write up, which I did write, and the words 'Messianic complex'
might have been in that." Tim smiles, a little.

Gibbs just looks at him.

"Please, you three were Probie-ing the ever living shit out of me. It was fun to get some back."

"Good."

Tim takes another drink, and Gibbs puts down his tools, leans against his workbench facing Tim,
looking like he's actually expecting to talk for a while.

"Why did you take me to Afghanistan?"

Gibbs smiles at that, and Tim's not entirely sure, because he doesn't think he's ever seen this
expression before, at least not on Gibbs, but that might be salacious joy in his eyes. "Because coming
home from Afghanistan is a hell of a lot of fun."

Yep, he'd read that expression right. "That's what those looks were about."

"What looks?" Gibbs asks.

"You pretty much spent all of the last day smirking at me. I almost hit you."

Gibbs laughs and shakes his head. "Never seen you that keyed up. Didn't think you could get that
keyed up. And I knew what was going to be waiting for you when you got home."

Tim raises an eyebrow at him. "You took me half way around the world so I could get laid? I was
doing just fine on that on my own."

"If all you got was laid when you got home, you're not doing it right," Gibbs says dryly.

Tim shakes his head and laughs. "Okay, not just laid. And yeah, getting home was a lot of fun."

"And next time the job takes us to the other side of the world, I'll take Tony and let him have a real
homecoming."

Tim thinks about that and smirks. "That's the single dirtiest thing I've ever heard you say."
"That's 'cause you didn't know me when I was on active duty."

Tim looks at him curiously.

Gibbs shrugs. "I wasn't born this old, ya know?"

Tim nods.

"So what is taking so long on the you two getting married? Last I heard you had the stones picked out."

"Picked out, purchased, taken to the jeweler, ring designed, and now the guy is taking forever to get it done, but supposedly he'll be done by the end of the month."

"So, go be a hard ass and speed him up."

"What, did you get a new date in the pool?"

"No. Just be nice if you'd get married before I'm too old to walk her down the aisle."

"Well, unlike my mechanic, who is replaceable, this guy isn't. You want filigree work, really good filigree work, you go to him. And if you want it done right, done perfect, you wait until he gets done."

Gibbs looks doubtful about the idea that this might not be an appropriate situation for a judicious application of hard-ass, but he'll trust Tim on it. "This better be one hell of a ring."

"I can show you a picture of the sketch if you like."

"Nah. When you get it'll be soon enough."

Tim nods and stands up. It's not exactly late, but he'd like to get home before dinnertime. "I should get going."

"Okay."

"You want to come with me? Abby'd be happy to have you over for dinner, too."

"Sure."
Tim wakes with a jerk. His heart is pounding, his body covered in sweat, and the spike of adrenaline from the nightmare makes sure he's not going to fall back to sleep anytime soon.

He checks the clock. 4:17. That's later than he's managed to sleep any night in the last week.

"You okay?" Abby asks.

"I will be," he says gently. "Go back to sleep."

He hasn't figured out how to get himself out of the nightmares without waking her up. The first night she had gotten up with him, but really, he just wants to be alone after he pulls out of those dreams.

She'd taken it pretty well when he explained that. She wants to be there to comfort him, but right now he needs the space to be in his own head, and she's willing to let him have that space.

So she goes back to sleep, and he gets up, pulling on a pair of pajama pants and heading for his office.

He doesn't actually remember what he's dreaming of, there are no images that go with the heart pounding terror, just the fear. Hell, that might be the entire dream. It might just be blackness and cold fear. Not like he didn't just do that.

He detours to the kitchen, grabbing a glass of water, and then flicks the light on in his office.

Light helps. It pulls him the rest of the way out of the dream. It's not that he's afraid of the dark these days, it's just that his whole mind, whole body knows he's not in that freezer if there's light.

He sets the glass on the window sill and opens the window. Muggy August air flows in, and he stands in front of the window, head bowed, thumbs pressing into his eyebrows, letting the humid, late summer heat soak into him.

He'd talked to Wolf yesterday. Talking to the crisis counselor is mandatory after you almost get killed. Short talk, about twenty minutes of what he'd been up to lately, mostly how his life has changed in the last ten months. Wolf listened to him, asked a few general questions, and then took one of his cards out of his pocket, filled it in with a date and time (10:00 AM September 25, 2013) and said to him, "I know you need the time to get it right in your head before you can talk to me about it. Take the time. Six weeks, we'll talk again."

Tim nodded. That sounded better than staring at the clock, trying to fill an hour with meaningless blather.

"I want you to think about something between now and then," Wolf said as he was leaving. "Last time you almost got killed, you dealt with it by putting your life in order. And that was good. That was constructive. Your life is in order now. You've got just about everything you've ever wanted, and are moving towards the things you don't yet have. So the question is, now that you don't have something to chase to keep fear away, how are you going to deal with it?"

And the answer is, he doesn't know.

He could see that Wolf knew he didn't deal with the fear the first time, didn't even try to. He pushed it aside as fast as possible, and threw himself into getting the life he wanted, and he didn't let it touch
him.

He rubs his shoulders, staring at his reflection in the window, listening to the birds starting to wake up. May 12, 2012. August 6, 2013. Too many close calls too close together.

He turns, takes a few steps, sits at his writing desk, and stares at his typewriter. Then shakes his head and gets back up. Burrowing into McGregor is just another way of not dealing with it. Then he looks at the typewriter again, maybe not. Writing the next chapter is a way of not dealing with it. McGregor isn't dealing with anything like possibly dying; he's off hacking the CIA to wrangle the intel they need.

But McGregor is a safe way for him to deal with the things that happen to him, a way to give himself the space to think about it, and while there's no place for this in the current novel, there's no reason why McGregor can't have a short story, or that this can't be a theme in the next novel. Hell, worst comes to worst, he can write his own damn fanfiction. Not like he's the only author who occasionally wants to play with his characters in a way that doesn't fit with the cannon.

He pulls the page out of the typewriter, and finds a fresh one.

He's ten pages into it when Abby knocks on the door.

"Hey?"

She pokes her head in. "You going to work?"

He blinks. "What time is it?"

"7:10."

As late as he can push it and still get a (very) fast shower, shave, breakfast, and in the car in time to get there by eight.

"Yes, but I'll be in late." Tony's not back until tomorrow. Gibbs hasn't been cleared for anything other than desk duty. And Ziva's still ducking Wolf, so she isn't cleared to be in the field, either. They won't mind if he shows up late or takes a half day. Hell, if he gives these pages to Wolf, he'll get cleared for active duty before the rest of the team. That might win him some brownie points from Gibbs. "I've got to get this out."

"Okay. You want some coffee?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

She's back a few minutes later with a mug of coffee, just the way he likes it, and kisses his forehead while he types. He nods a little, and smiles when she does it, but his mind is on the page, in McGregor's head, or his own, hard to tell right now where the line is, but that's the point of this.

He doesn't hear it when she heads out.

By 10:00 he has twenty-five pages next to him, and is feeling... better? Probably. More sure of himself, yes. Somewhere around page thirteen he fully shifted out of McGregor and into himself, and that is a good thing.

And he also knew what he needed to do. He's not putting fear aside by this. He's not hiding from death. He's preparing for it. If the first step of being a real grown-up was getting a life worth living, the next step is accepting you won't always be here, and making it as easy as possible on the ones
you leave behind.

He stands up, stretches, notices the empty coffee cup next to him, and gets a refill along with a bagel and a banana.

Then he heads back to his office, and this time to his computer. Most of this won't take too long. He gets online, logs into his bank, and sets Abby as his next of kin and beneficiary. He does the same for his IRA, for his money market account, for the 401K, and his investment account. She'd been his medical proxy since 2006, so that isn't an issue. He goes to the NCIS human resources benefits page, and names her the beneficiary on his life insurance and pension.

One last thing. He calls in to the NCIS switchboard and asks to be connected to Legal. They can see him at 11:30.

He texts Ziva, letting her know he'll be in after lunch.

By two, when he's back in the Bullpen, his will is done and will be filed before end of business that day.

Once he gets to his desk, he packs up the pages he'd written in one of the red interoffice mail envelopes, put Wolf's name on it, along with a note saying he wants those pages back eventually.

Gibbs and Ziva watch him do it, but don't ask any questions. And right that moment he feels the lack of Tony in the desk next to them very acutely.

He'll be back tomorrow.

And then he settles in for three hours of paperwork.

After dinner, he take Abby into his office, gave her all of his passwords, a copy of his will, and takes her through all of his accounts.

He wasn't sure how she'd take it when he was doing it. Beyond setting up a joint checking account for rent, food, and utilities, they'd kept their finances separate. He hoped she wouldn't be annoyed that he put her on all of his accounts without asking first.

And she isn't.

She's sad. Not that he had done it, but that it needed to be done at all.

She half-smiles at him, trying to lighten the words, and says, "No happy endings."

He shakes his head. "Not in real life. Eventually it'll be just one or the other of us."

"I never thought I'd envy my parents."

He looks at her, confused. From everything he's heard about them, there were a lot of great things about Gloria and Thomas Sciuto, things worth envying.

"The way they died. Didn't have to deal with any of this."

"Oh." Her parents had died together. "I'm not sure leaving your young kids behind counts as the happy ending, either."

"Not for us, at least." She sighs. "I'll see the guys in legal tomorrow, get my stuff in order."
"Thanks. I was thinking, since we don't have any family nearby, how about asking Jimmy and Breena to be the guardians for our kids?"

She smiles, eyes tearing. "I think they'd be a really good choice."

"Yeah."

It certainly hadn't been a light or fluffy evening. But when they get to bed he's feeling easier than he had in ten days. And that night, he sleeps until morning, waking up at his usual time.
Labor Day

Labor Day weekend, a Federal holiday, a day for kicking back, relaxing, picnics, the last beach weekend of summer, and, best of all, Team Gibbs isn't on call.

Which is why three quarters of Team Gibbs, Abby, and the Palmers are planning on doing all of the above, on the beach in the Outer Banks.

Three weeks earlier, as they had wrapped up what normally would have been Pizza Night, but was actually Thank God We're All Alive Celebration Night (grilling at Gibbs' house), Breena said, "Jimmy tells me you aren't on call for Labor Day."

This was met by nods and versions of, "Yep."

"My dad has a place in the Outer Banks." This was where Tim could feel himself, Tony, Ziva, and Abby all frantically thinking of excuses to get out of this, because while they love Breena, her dad is a whole other story. "He and my mom usually go there for the weekends during the summer. But they'll be in Tennessee for Labor Day, so the house will be empty, and Jimmy and I were wondering if you'd all like to come down with us for the long weekend?"

Tim looked at Abby to answer. He's not a huge beach kind of guy, not that he doesn't like it, he spent a lot of most of his summer vacations at the beach, but he'd rather do mountains than shore. Still going sounds fun to him. Abby, on the other hand, isn't so much allergic to sun as not its biggest fan, so he's not sure if she'd like to spend a weekend more or less laying about in it.

And while Tony and Ziva were jumping on a beach weekend with both feet, Abby gave him a little nod, so he said, "Sure, that sounds like a lot of fun."

Later that night, as they were getting ready for bed Tim asked, "Do you even own a bathing suit?"

Abby shoved him gently, grinned, went to her dresser, and pulled out a black tankini. He stared at it for a moment, happily imagining her in it. "How about you?"

It occurred to him the last time he had gone swimming he weighed thirty pounds less than he does now. "Yeah, but it's too small." He reached over for his phone, and seven minutes later he put it back down. "And now I have one that fits. Or, at least, I will in about three days when it gets here."

"It must be so easy to be a guy. You need clothing, and in less than ten minutes you've got it. I need clothing, and I need to remember which size goes with which brand and how they cut everything and they've got the torso long enough for me..."

Tim listened to her go on about women's clothing for a moment, agreeing with her that sometimes it is nice to be a guy.
"So, come on, romantic beach weekend, romantic beach weekend Breena and I more or less set up precisely for this. You, her, waves gently lapping on a moonlit beach." Palmer's wigging his fingers, mimicking the waves rolling in. "You gonna do it?" They're walking out of NCIS at the end of a not too long day, heading to their respective homes.

Tim sighs. Waves gently lapping on a moonlit beach actually sounds pretty good to him. "Ring still isn't done."

"Still?" Palmer looks disbelieving. "My God! What is this guy doing, mining the ore and smelting it himself?"

"Probably. Last I heard titanium just doesn't do this sort of work well, and he had to melt the whole thing back down again, mess with the alloy some, and begin from scratch."

Palmer rolls his eyes. "Damn it! I doubled my bet."

Tim stops, looks at Jimmy, and sighs. "Anyone have Halloween yet?"

"Nope, not yet."

"Idiots. Take Halloween."

"Okay."

"Really, it better be an awesome present."

"Pool's up to four thousand dollars. It will be."

"I am in the wrong career," Tony says to Ziva on Friday night as they get out of her car and looks at the house in front of them. "I mean, who knew there was this sort of money in funerals?"

They're standing in front of a sprawling blue house on the beach. Literally, on the sand, water about two hundred feet away, glinting in the moonlight, dunes to the left and right, the nearest house a small rectangle of light on the horizon. It's on stilts to deal with possible flooding, and a huge porch wraps around the first floor.

They beat the Palmers and... "You think she'll take his last name?"
Ziva looks at Tony with a question in her eyes.

"I was just thinking, with the way you drive, we beat the Palmers and... Tim and Abby? The McGees? McGeek and his Gothic Princess? McGoth? McAbby?"

Ziva thinks about that while taking her bag out of the trunk of her Mini. Tony eyeballs the bag.
"Awfully small bag."

"I do not have a lot of clothing in it." And then she smiles at him, eyes warm and playful. "And the clothing that is in it is tiny."

"Oh, you are so bad."

She smiles again, kissing him quickly, and then hands him his bag. "I think she will take his name. Do you think he'll ask while we're here?"

"No. Palmer says the ring's still being made, and with this much time invested in it, he's not gonna ask without it."

Abby's roadster pulls up, which kills that topic of conversation.

They get out, and Tim grabs their bag. Abby stares at the house and says, "Wow."

"Yeah," Tony nods. For a moment, they just stand there and appreciate the view.

The sound of one more engine lets them know Breena and Palmer have arrived. They get out, and Breena says, "It's even nicer inside."

---

Saturday morning: Six people playing on the beach, splashing about in the waves. Three of them guys. Three of them girls.

It isn't too hard to figure out which of the girls goes with which guy. Of course, for Tim and Abby there were the matching tats. And even if they hadn't had matching ones, they're the only ones sporting any skin ink. And even if there hadn't been the ink, both of them in black bathing suits, and the wrist cuffs would have been a hint.

Palmer and Breena radiate a sort of sweet, innocent, deeply-in-love, fun that looks like it came right out of a 1950s beach movie. Okay, sure if it had been a 1950s movie, Breena wouldn't have been wearing a bikini four months pregnant, but her tiny baby bump doesn't really mar the vibe. And Jimmy, in a pair of fairly short and tight swim trunks and an open Hawaiian shirt, certainly fits the 1950s beach movie look to a T.

Tim remembers Jimmy's comment about forgetting what it felt like to wear pants, and realizes Palmer's working on forgetting what it feels like to wear shirts this weekend. Granted, he doesn't often get a chance to show off in front of Tim and Tony, and flashing his abs all over the place just might be him doing that.

And Tony and Ziva, tanned, athletic, un-selfconscious and playing in the sand, look just right with each other.
Saturday afternoon: Breena’s parents had decorated the porch with two double wide recliners festooned with soft cushions and pillows, surrounding a bronze fire pit.

Tim and Abby are camped out on one of them. He’s got his laptop and is writing, all goes well he might just wrap this one up this weekend. She’s curled, back against his side, on her right, reading a forensics journal. Both of them have earbuds in, listening to their own music.

Jimmy and Breena are on the other one. He’s also reading, an actual novel, while she naps next to him. Tim half-notices that from time to time, Jimmy will stop, spend a moment watching his wife, and pet her stomach.

He catches Jimmy’s eye the next time he does it. Jimmy smiles at him, and Tim pulls out his earbuds.

"I can feel her moving," Jimmy says quietly.

"It's a her?"

"I think she is. Won't know for sure for a bit."

"So, you're going to find out?" Tim asks.

"Yeah. What are you working on?"

"Deep Six book four. I'm about ten-thousand words short of finished."

"And am I dreaming of sleeping with dead people in this one?" Jimmy says, deadpan.

Tim flashes him a guilty smile. "Ummm... no. Pimmy Jalmer had an unfortunate accident in chapter two and died. The new assistant ME, James Relamp, is proving to be a very capable member of the team and has found the link between all the bodies, thus helping Tibbs and his team home in on the killer."

"Finally. Relamp?"

"I'm bad with names."

Palmer's look says, *Well, obviously.* Then he says, "Necrophilia," snorts, and shakes his head.

"Hey, you've had sex in the morgue."

Jimmy looks startled. He didn't think that was common knowledge. "Well, okay, yeah, that's true. But not with any of the bodies!"

"Breena got what that scene was really about."

Jimmy's just staring at him.

Tim shrugs. "Fine, my editor said, 'Sex it up,' so I did."

"Tim, if that's where your mind goes when someone tells you to 'sex something up,' you are one sick, sick, sick puppy."

"It was that or make you Ducky's boy toy."
Saturday night. Palmer and Abby had done the shopping. Tony and Breena cooked. Which means Tim and Ziva are on dishes.

Which suits Tim just fine. 'Round about an hour earlier he had noticed something. Ziva was holding beer, she was playing with beer, she even lifted the beer to her lips, but the one thing she wasn't actually doing was swallowing beer.

So, as he washes the dishes and she dries, he says, casually, "I noticed you aren't drinking." She smiles a little at that. "Any reason for that?"

"Maybe. I do not know yet, but—"

"You aren't taking any chances."

"No. I'm not."

He looks from their place by the kitchen sink across the dining room to Tony standing next to the TV in the great room, expounding upon their movie options for the night. He grins, remembering the insane rush that went with trying to get Abby pregnant right after he thawed out. That Tony and Ziva might have felt that way too was pretty cool. His eyes wander to Breena, four months pregnant, and he does a little math, wondering if she and Jimmy had come to the same conclusion right after he got kidnapped, and it had just taken a few cycles, or like he and Abby, had to wait for the birth control to get out of her system.

Tim's looking at Tony as he says, "I wouldn't have thought he'd almost die and decide he wanted babies."

"He does not know, and I'd appreciate it if he doesn't know."

Tim whips his gaze back to Ziva. "How can he not know?"

"I had an oops." He feels a little stupid at that, remembering that not everyone plans every baby in advance. Ziva continues, "Remember the Dawber case?"

"How could I forget?" It was their first real case after Tony got back on duty, and they had worked flat out for almost four straight days.

"I got so tired I forgot to take my pills."

"Oh. You're probably okay. I think you actually have to have sex when you've missed the pill for it to be a problem."

The look she gives him says very eloquently that she knows that.

"When did you even find the time..." And that trails off when Tim remembers that he and Abby had found time for the quickest quickie in the history of quickies during the third night.

They traditionally work days. But if a body gets found before they leave, they end up on the case. The first sailor, John Dawber, was found at 4:30 on Monday. They worked through Monday night and most of Tuesday. Normally they would have gone home to rest at that point, but the next body, Ian Mannin, was found at 4:30 on Tuesday, so they worked through that night. Wednesday, 4:30, all
of them but Gibbs shuffling about like tired zombies, found them with yet a third dead sailor.

Midnight on Thursday, he and Abby had done everything they could. Every computer he had access to was looking for something, anything to connect the victims. Major Mass Spec was sorting through yet another batch of trace.

"We need sleep."

She nodded and laid out the lambskin rugs. He looked at them and realized he'd hit the point where he was so tired he couldn't sleep. Too many hours up and his brain had gotten stuck, it needed something to help shift the chemical processes, let it know it was turn off time. In the past, had he been single, he would have quickly jerked off in the men's room and crashed at his desk, taking care of the problem for himself in a matter of five minutes.

So he told her that and wrapped up with, "And if you aren't interested, I completely understand. I can take care of this myself. But if you are, I'd certainly appreciate a hand."

Abby looked at him, shrugged, and said, "I've had seventeen Caf-Pows today. I could use something to take the edge off."

And so, on the soft, fluffy lambskin rugs, there was four minutes of the most functional, least erotic or romantic sex of his life. (And yes, he was counting all twenty-two seconds of his first time on that list.) Followed by both of them crashing like a Fokker in a nosedive with the pilot dead at the stick, sharing Bert as a pillow, and sleeping like the dead for almost three hours.

He woke to Gibbs crouching in front of them, Caff-Pow in hand, jogging Abby's shoulder saying, "Talk to me Abbs," as Major Mass Spec beeped in the background.

He tripped over his feet and staggered to his computer, so tired that his eyes were barely willing to focus. He was half aware of Abby reading the results to Gibbs (basically, nothing in this batch is even remotely useful) and slowly his brain woke up enough to see what was on the screen.

"I got it, Boss."

Gibbs turned away from Abby to him. "What?"

"Their ID numbers are all prime factors of 13 and 23. I can't tell you who the killer is, but the next victim is one of these four sailors."

"Good job, Tim." He even got patted on the shoulder. And as Gibbs headed up to the bullpen to tell Tony and Ziva, he looked over his shoulder and said, "McGee."

"Yeah."

"Zip your fly before you come up."

Tim, tired into utter silliness by that point, giggled, snapped into something that only looked like attention to someone who hadn't personally been in the military, fired off a salute, and said, "On it, Boss."

Tim realizes Ziva is staring at him, and he's just holding a dish under the running water. He smiles a little. "Thursday morning in the lab."

Ziva shrugs. "Tuesday night in the elevator."
Tim looks really surprised at that, and Ziva smiles. "Gibbs is not the only one who can switch off an elevator."

"Uh huh. So... are you going to tell Tony?"

"Only if there is something to tell. I do not think it would be kind to tell him unless I know for sure."

"You're probably right about that. So, if you are, is this good news?"

She shrugs again. "It would be for me. I do not think it would be for him."

He squeezes her hand quickly, not sure what to say to that. She squeezes his back, understanding his touch.

A minute later they finish the dishes, and join the other four. He catches the tail end of Palmer saying, "...homoerotic wank-fest."

"Wank-fest?" Tony says, disbelieving. "Okay, I get that you idolize Ducky, but, Jimmy, you aren't British."

"There's not a good American term for that."

"Circle jerk? Homoerotic wank-fest is more or less the definition of that," Tim adds, sitting on the sofa next to Abby, wrapping an arm around her. "What are we talking about?"

"Tony brought James Bond movies, but they're all the ones with Daniel Craig. Hence, homoerotic wank-fest."

"Au contraire, my sadly misguided Autopsy Gremlin, if it was just the three of us, you could accuse me of that, but you are forgetting, half of our group is female, and at least Ziva prefers Craig."

Ziva shrugs. "I prefer him out of the Bonds. He is the most believable spy out of the men who have played Bond. He looks ready to kill people."

"Connery," Abby says. "Craig's just too...Grrrr... Like Ziva said, ready to kill people. He's pretty enough, but he never looks like he's having fun. Like, you know how they talk about the guy who more Americans would like to have a beer with wins the Presidency? Okay, well, Connery'd be more fun to have that beer with. Plus that accent!"

Breena's nodding at that. "Brosnan. I like 'em tall, dark, and handsome. And that scene, in the Thomas Crowne Affair, where he's dancing with Renee Russo..."

"Noooo... The Thomas Crowne Affair starred Steve McQueen and no one else. That remake was an abomination." Tony looks pained at the idea of the remake. "Still, Palmer, if your masculinity is so delicate that it can't take Daniel Craig in a bathing suit, I did bring more than just Bond."

"I can take Craig. Skyfall was pretty good, even if he spent more time naked in the movie than any of the girls. I'm just wondering about why, out of all the Bonds, you'd pick him."

"Okay. Fine. I wasn't planning on saying it until tomorrow, but now's as good a time as any. I'm gay. Ziva's been my beard for the last four months. Gibbs and I are running away to New York to get married next week."

Tim's not sure if he's ever laughed that hard before.
Tim spends a minute before bed looking at himself in the mirror over the dresser, while Abby finishes up in the bathroom. He's naked except for the wrist cuff, he only takes that off when he showers. It had only taken two nights of sleeping sans PJs to decide he preferred it that way. So this time of night, when he's waiting for Abby to get done with her pre-bed routine, he's always naked.

He's certainly been in worse shape in his life, but he's thinking it might be time to rein in his love affair with sugar a bit.

It's not that he's been feeling particularly self-conscious about not wearing a shirt on the beach, (amazing how a regular diet of really good sex can help make you feel comfortable in your skin) it's just, well, next to Palmer's somehow zero percent body fat physique and Tony's you can still see that he used to be an athlete body, he's thinking that maybe it's time to get into somewhat better shape.

He doesn't need to be skinny again, let alone cut, but maybe few less pounds around the middle would be a decent goal. And he's thinking that basically, if he were to cut the snacks out, the amount of sex he's getting should take care of that.

Abby comes out, also naked, presses up against his back, wrapping her arms around him, resting her chin on his shoulder, and looks at him in the mirror. He twines his fingers with her, and she kisses him on the neck.

"Whacha doin?"

"Debating ending, or at least toning down, my love affair with sugar."

She runs her hand over his chest and stomach. "Wouldn't be the worst idea you've ever had."

He appreciates the delicacy of that answer. Not calling him fat, not demanding he do it, but supportive as well. "Nope. Not by a longshot."

"So, I saw you talking to Ziva while washing dishes. Did she tell you?"

He turns to face her, leaning butt against the dresser, his hands wrapping around her waist, pulling her hips flush to his. "You knew?"

"Sure." Abby wraps her hands around his neck and quickly kisses him. "She told me the day after she realized she had three more pills than she should have had. That's the kind of thing girls tell each other. You notice something like that, it's awfully scary, so you want to have someone to talk to. Breena probably knows, too."

"You ever have a scare like that?"

Abby shakes her head. "When it comes to birth control careful is my first, middle, and last name. Just like your first time with no condom was with me, when the Depo wears off, my first no birth control time will be with you."

He smiles at that, feeling ridiculously pleased at that idea.

They stand there for a minute, holding each other, his forehead against hers, both of them enjoying the comfort of another body, a different skin, next to their own.

She lightly licks his lip, and then turns to look at the clock. He follows her gaze, 11:53. "I was
thinking, Breena's asleep by now."

He nods, not exactly sure where this is going. But Breena was sleeping about ten minutes after the movie began, curled on the sofa, head in Palmer's lap, so now, three hours later, after he carried her up to bed, the idea that she'd still be sleeping makes an awful lot of sense.

"And if she's sleeping, Jimmy probably is, too."

"Okay." That makes sense, too.

"And I bet Ziva and Tony are in their room." They'd certainly headed in that direction when the movie was over.

"Probably."

"And their room doesn't overlook the beach."

"Also true." He's getting an inkling of where this might be going and starts to smile.

"Wanna go skinny dipping with me?" Abby asks, huge grin on her face.

"Yeah." He nods as he says that, feeling a little wicked and fine all over, and leans over to grab his jeans.

Abby's eyebrows furrow. Jeans aren't part of her concept of skinny dipping. "What are you doing?"

"Naked on the beach is one thing. Naked walking through the house where there's four other people, something else all-together."

She laughs at that, and steps back from him while he pulls on the jeans.

Abby stares at him for a moment, eyes tracing up and down his body. "I like that."

"What?"

She hooks her thumbs into the belt loops on his jeans. "You, wrist cuff, tattoos visible, jeans, low and still undone, bare feet. We might be doing more than swimming."

He smiles. "You mean there was a chance we wouldn't have?"

She grins. "No."

She lets go, and he watches her head to the door, hips swinging with each step, his eyes glued to the lovely little jiggle of her ass as she walks. "Aren't you going to put something on?"

She looks over her shoulder, grins wide and happy at him, her own fine and wicked gleaming off her skin and eyes, grabs the towel that's hanging on the door knob and slings it over her shoulder. "Nope."

He laughs and follows.

There are four bedrooms on the top floor. (As Breena said, one for her and each of her sisters, and one for her parents.) They've got the one furthest down the hallway. It shares a bathroom with the room across from it, but no one is in that one.

Tony and Ziva are on the other side of the hall, and walking quietly past their room, they hear
nothing. The Palmers are in the master bedroom, right next to the stairs, and Tim giggles silently as he hears soft voices gently saying nothing with words.

Abby mouths at him, "Or not sleeping," a huge smile on her face.

He nods, grinning, as they hear a quiet moan.

He's two steps further down the staircase when he comes to a stop. The voices he's hearing now are very much not Jimmy and Breena, though from the sound of them, something pretty similar is occurring.

Abby stops right behind him, pressed against his back. Also hearing the same thing he is.

The door is fifteen steps (eight down, seven forward) in front of them. The great room is right next to them, but right this second, still shielded from view by the wall of the staircase. He can imagine, based on what he's hearing, where Tony and Ziva are. The sofa or one of the recliners. They might, depending on what position they're in, be facing away from the staircase.

If the front door was open, this would be a fairly easy decision. Just walk quietly out. But it's not open. It's closed and locked. So getting out will take at least a few seconds and make a little noise.

He turns to her, question in his eyes. After all, he's not the one who's naked.

She whispers into his ear. "Not like he hasn't seen me naked before."

"Yeah, but Ziva might not appreciate the audience," he whispers back.

"If she didn't want the chance of an audience, they'd be in their room, like Jimmy and Breena."

He nods. There is that. Though, at least in his experience, the chance of an audience is a lot more fun than an actual audience.

He takes two more, quiet, steps down and peeks around the wall. They're on one of the recliners, and from what he can see, they're both naked. Ziva's straddling Tony, rising and falling against him, her back toward them. If his eyes were open, Tony could see the door, but they aren't.

Screw it. If they see, they see. He'll stare Tony in the eyes and say something like 'Payback's a bitch, right Tony?' and head right out the door.

He gets to the door, quietly, and it seems like they haven't noticed. Getting it open makes what feels like a very loud clicking sound as the bolt slides out of the lock. He holds the door open and Abby shoots down the steps and out onto the porch.

And if Tony or Ziva noticed, they did a good job of not letting them know.

Once they get to the water, Abby drops the towel and wades into the surf. As he's shucking off the jeans he finds himself thinking that Abby was made for moonlit beaches. She's beyond lovely bathed in soft, milky white-blue light, skin wet and shining.

He's never made love outside before, or in water. Well, not ocean style water. The shower and the bath, sure, but water that moves on its own, that rocks and slips around and almost through you, that's different.

By the time they're shoulder deep, they're past the breakers, so there's just a sort of gentle rolling motion, and balancing with her wrapped around him is fairly easy.
Salt flavored kisses, water that supports, caresses, Abby's legs around his hips, her head back, skin sparkling with moon and starlight, and he's thinking maybe he does like the beach better than the mountains.

The girls are playing in the surf with Palmer while Tony and Tim mess around with the grill.

"Have a good swim last night?" Tony asks.

Tim grins. "Yeah. Catch a late movie?"

"Something like that." Tony laughs a little and then rips open the bag of charcoal, pouring the coals into the grill.

"So, you two ever get around to ropes and things?"

Tony nods.

"You like it?"

Tony smiles and changes the subject. "That looks better than I thought it would," he says, looking at Tim's tattoo as Tim piles the coals the way Gibbs had showed him.

When Tim had designed the tattoo, it was a fairly standard Celtic knot. Once Sam got ahold of the idea, he spread the strands out a bit, and used the negative space to make it look like the black lines were carved out of the skin, and the red ones wrapped around his arm. The final result made his arm look like carved ivory wrapped in red strands.

"Thanks. Amazing what someone who can actually draw can do with an idea."

"Yeah."

"Did it hurt?" He's kind of surprised Tony would ask that.

"Yeah. It hurt. It's like... like someone poking you with a needle tens of thousands of times."

"And you've got two of them." It occurs to Tim that Tony does not, at least to the best of his knowledge, have any tattoos.

"Yep."

"For her?" Tim's getting the idea that this is going somewhere beyond skin art, but he's not sure where Tony wants to take it.

"The first one was mostly for me, she was just the final push that got me moving. The second one was for her."

"What's with the wrist cuff? You don't take it off."

"Abby gave it to me." True enough, even if that isn't the whole story.

"You are turning into such a Goth."
Tim looks at himself, black swim trunks, which he would have worn no matter what, black is his
default color for swimwear, and a gray t-shirt, a skull with a rose coming out of one eye in black over
a white arabesque across the stomach, chest and one sleeve. (Gift from Abby, but he really likes it.)
Black leather wrist cuff with a silver snaps. The sleeves on the t-shirt are short enough that the
bottom of the cuff tattoo is visible, even though the Python one is hidden. This is probably who he
would have been in college if he’d been confident enough in himself to do it.

He shrugs, looking at Abby in her black tankini, actually playing in the sunlight. Sure, he had spent
several happy minutes rubbing SPF 70 sunblock on her, but, to the best of his knowledge, this
weekend is the first time in years that she has been out to play in the sun.

"Not turning, it's always been there. But more of mine is coming out, and hers is taming down a bit."

"By which you mean she hasn't spent the entire day in the shade?"

"Something like that." Tim looks Tony over and thinks he might know where this conversation is
supposed to go. "Besides the bigger bed, any changes you're making for Ziva?"

"I spent four hours researching what's involved in converting to Judaism last week."

That stuns Tim. It's vastly more serious than anything he thought might have been going on with
Tony, of course, almost dying probably did get him thinking some serious thoughts. It certainly had
for Tim. "Yeah, I'd say that qualifies as a change. Does she know you're thinking..."

"Not yet. That's the sort of thing I'd like to have my own mind made up on before talking to her
about. Think God'll forgive me if I sneak the occasional bacon cheeseburger?"

"I doubt He'd mind." He's never talked religion with Tony, not in any real detail, and honestly isn't
sure how much he believes or doesn't. But in that Tim, at his absolute best, most reverent can get to
the point of admitting that he just doesn't know if there's a God, he feels fairly comfortable in the idea
that a likely non-existent God doesn't care about bacon.

Tony lights the grill, and they watch the flames. "Not so sure about the circumcision thing."

That really startles Tim. "Ummm weren't you already..." Yeah, he's been in the men's room with
Tony, and they've shared a hotel room, and bathroom more times than he can count, but he's never
looked. One thing straight guys do not ever do is look. But since most American guys are, the idea
that Tony might not be has never occurred to Tim.

"Yeah, but they still want a few drops of blood, from, you know..."

"Okay..." That's something Tim doesn't want to think too hard about.

"How long did that tat take?"

"Four hours." Okay, in light of that, feeling a bit queasy about a drop or two of blood was probably
silly. Still the idea of anyone with a knife getting that close to his privates makes Tim feel squirmy.

"How long to heal up?"

"About three weeks."

Tony seems to think about that as well. "And you got it for her?"

"With her. A sign, one that can't be taken off or changed, that I'm hers and she's mine."
Tony nods.

They were sitting on the porch, just having finished dinner, talking about something. Tim doesn't remember what, now. He was sprawled on one of the lounges, Abby's laying down, her head on his lap, feet dangling off the side. Ziva sat on the floor between Tony's outstretched legs, leaning against his chest. Breena was laying on her side, Palmer sitting behind her, his hand gently resting on the curve of her stomach.

It was fun. It was happy and peaceful. And of course, it didn't last.

Palmer's phone rang first. Tony's a hair behind it. By the time that happened the other four of them were already starting to pack up.

Tim was in their room, stuffing clothing into their bag. Abby's phone was less than a foot away when it began to buzz.

"We're on our way."

"McGee?" Director Vance on the phone, not expecting to hear Tim's voice.

"Yeah. What's going on? Tony and Palmer have already gotten their calls. Abby's dousing the grill, so I picked up for her."

"Train versus troop transport north of Richmond. The train won. How long until you can get there?" Leon asks.

"Four hours?"

That seems to make Vance think. "Are any of you sober?"

"Ziva is. And the rest of us will be by the time we get there."

"Okay. Put your lights on and get moving."

"I don't think we have any."

He can feel the look Vance must have on his face. "Why would you not have flashers?"

*For the same reason we don't have guns or badges, we're on vacation! "We just don't. We're not dressed for it either. Make sure someone has extra coveralls and boots for us."

"Fine. What are you driving?"

"We'll be in Palmer's car, since we've all got to get to the same place. Abby'll take hers to the lab." He doesn't add that Breena will likely end up driving Ziva's Mini home, because that's nothing Vance needs to know.

"Okay, I'll get a BOLO out on your cars. Floor it. No one is going to slow you down."
Getting through the police line was a bit of a challenge. No badges, no guns, and the four of them dressed for the beach. Finally a nervous looking junior agent radioed in and got the permission for the four of them to enter.

Entering, they found it was exactly as bad as you'd expect a train crash to be.

"Watch your step," Palmer said staring at millions of shards of glass and twisted metal. "We'll get our feet cut to ribbons if we aren't careful."

They found Ducky first. "Mr. Palmer, you are underdressed," Ducky says, looking at Palmer in a swim suit, Hawaiian shirt, buttoned for the first time all weekend, and flip flops.

"I'm dressed exactly the way I should be for what I'm supposed to be doing." Jimmy says as he steps into a pair of coveralls. "We were supposed to have today and tomorrow off. Even with Ziva driving" — And she had gotten frighteningly close to setting the land speed record for the trip from the Outer Banks to north Richmond. Twice they had seen flashing blue lights in the rearview mirror, to see, a minute later, those lights turn off.—"going home to get more appropriate clothing would have added two hours to the trip. I assumed you'd prefer I was here fast rather than in a tie."

"Correct." Ducky nodded.

"I'll grab some boots from the transport and be ready to go in a sec," he said, heading toward the body transport, grumbling about how every time he tries to take a vacation the world conspires against him.

Gibbs just looked at them, Tim and Tony in t-shirts and swim trunks, Ziva in a pair of shorts and a bikini top, all of them but Tony in flip flops, quirked one eyebrow, and then got them up to speed as they too hopped into coveralls and borrowed boots. Troop convoy heading from DC to Norfolk. The first transport went through the intersection, the second one got clobbered by the train, and no one could figure out why the guard rail didn't go down.

CSX was claiming the guard rail was working perfectly and that the signal was, according to their computers, down. The driver of the first vehicle and the third said it was up. The conductor said he was blasting the horn, but neither the first or third driver claimed to have heard it.

No one knew if it was a malfunction, sabotage, suicide/homicide by train, or if the drivers really just hadn't noticed.

What they did know was that twenty-four Marines had been on that transport, and as of right now, only three of them were still alive.

Every NCIS agent out of the Navy Yard was on duty, along with ten from Norfolk and another ten from Baltimore. It was time to get to work.

Forty-two hours later, the case was closed and they were standing in Vance's office. He had gathered them around the conference table, where there was a map of the east coast, with a circle around the DC area extending to Baltimore in the north and Richmond in the south.

Leon stared at each of them, rubbing his eyes. He looked just as exhausted as they all felt. They'd had just enough time to run home and change, grab a little food, but that was it. Everyone had been
working full out for almost two straight days.

"I have checked with Legal, and they tell me that your off time is your own. That I cannot, in fact, order you to do anything when you are off duty. So I am asking you, as a personal favor, that when you decide three quarters of my best Major Case Response Team, half of my Autopsy department, and my entire Forensic lab should all go off on vacation together, that you please stay within an hour and a half of the Navy Yard." Leon points to the map. "There are many fun and interesting things to do in the greater DC area. Please, do them!"

Several quite versions of 'Yes sir' issued out of the five of them, then Leon dismissed them, and they went to their respective homes to drop from exhaustion.
"Have you talked to Ziva?" Tim asks as he steps into the bathroom. "Oh, God, that smells like toxic waste. How can you stand to have that on your head?"

Abby looks up from rubbing the dye into her hair.

"You get used to it after a few times, and for me, a few times was back in the mid-nineties."

"Okay..." He opens the window. "So, have you?"

"I talked to Ziva today."

"And..." It'd been a week since they got back from the beach and he doesn't want to be constantly badgering Ziva, but he is certainly curious.

"No baby."

He sighs with relief. "And Tony dodges the invisible bullet."

"Something like that."

"Is she going to tell him she might have been?" he asks.

"I don't know. I didn't ask. You aren't, are you?"

"NO! The idea of you pregnant just about freaks him out. Ziva pregnant is probably a full on, curled into a ball, rocking back and forth, whimpering panic attack."

"Me pregnant?" Abby looks curious as she works more of the dye into her hair.

"Yeah. We talked about it a little when he helped me move. He seemed pretty freaked out. He'll be a friendly grown-up for Palmer's kid. But he'll be an uncle to ours, and that's already one degree of separation too close for him right now."

"Why do kids frighten him?"

"I don't know. I've never asked."

"Maybe you should."

"Maybe. Could make for an entertaining next stakeout."

"If she had been, you think he would have been okay?"

"Eventually. And if he needed something that scared him more than a baby to get him right, I would have held a gun to his head until he was."

Abby starts to smile, and then notices that Tim isn't joking.

He shrugs a little—No way in Hell he'd let Tony walk away, no matter how scared he might be—and reaches for his toothbrush, ready to change the subject. "I got my yearly email from human resources telling me that if I don't use up some of my vacation days, I'm going to lose them."

NCIS does allow you to save up vacation days. It does not allow you to save them for more than
three years at a go. So, in that he's never used up a full year's worth of vacation days, each year for the last six years they've sent him an email telling him his days from three years previous are about to expire.

"I've got forty-three vacation days saved up, and I'm willing to bet you've got even more. How about we use some of them to go somewhere?"

"What is this vacation thing of which you speak?"

"It's this crazy idea that you take a little time, and don't go to work. You go do something fun. How about it? You, me, somewhere where the leaves change colors and fall actually happens."

She thinks about that for a minute. "I'd have to give them enough notice to find someone to cover the lab for me."

"So, say, I don't know, a week, maybe two, just you and me, in October."

"You think we could actually take ten days off?"

"I don't think it's impossible." By which he means that they'll both have their computers and likely end up working at least some. "Think about it, Tony and Gibbs used to solve crimes with only Kate. They can probably get along for two weeks without me. And if they can find someone who's half decent with the lab—"

"Simmons out of Norfolk is pretty good."

"Like Simmons, then maybe you could leave for a while, too."

"Where would we go?"

"I was thinking Texas. I'd like to introduce you to my mom and step-dad."

"Taking me home to meet the parents?"

He smiles and puts the toothpaste on his brush. "One parent, one step-parent, and I've never lived in their house, so it's not precisely home, but yeah, that's the general idea."

She smiles at that. "I'd like to meet your mom and step-dad." She thinks about it. "If we got two weeks off, we could swing by New Orleans and you could meet Luca, Melody, and Harper."

"That sounds good."

Four days later, he's on a stakeout with Tony, staring at yet another building where absolutely nothing is happening.

"So, what is it with you and kids?" Tim asks.

"That's out of the blue," Tony replies not looking at Tim.

"Thinking about Palmer, and baby Palmer. And wondering if you can get all the way through the christening without a panic attack."

Tony glances at him, looking slightly fed up by the question. "I'll be fine."

"Good." Tim sits there quietly, watching the building, hoping Tony will take the opening and just
"Talk about it, because he's not going to ask again."

"They don't bug me as much as they used to."

"That's good. You still looked pretty creeped out seeing Breena's tummy."

"She's got a person in there. It's creepy."

"We're mammals, Tony. That's just how it works."

"I know that. Doesn't make her having a kid in there any less weird."

"I suppose."

Tony's staring out the window, using the binocs, not that he needs them really, the curtains are closed, so they can't see in.

He doesn't put them down or look away when he says, "They're loud and messy and always sort of damp or sticky. And you never know what one of them is going to do, so you've always got to be watching."

"True enough." That matches his memories of when Sarah was little pretty well, but he's fairly sure this is just Tony warming up to getting to the real reason.

"They smell bad, too."

Tim shrugs. "Sometimes. All people do."

"Kids need you."

Tim nods. And there is it.

"They really need you. All the time, no matter what. You don't get sick days or vacations. If you get bored or scared, you can't leave because they still need you."

Tim nods at that, too.

"Get bored and leave, get scared and leave, that's sort of my MO. I don't like being needed. That's part of why Ziva and I work. She doesn't need me. She loves me, she wants me, and if I screw this up, it'll hurt, but it won't break her. But you leave a kid, and you break them."

Tim thinks that Tony might be selling himself short on that, but he's not sure, and figures that by this point Tony knows Ziva better than he does. "You need her."

"Yeah, I do, and that scares the hell out of me, too. But we're talking kids, right?"

"Yeah."

"If either of our dads had given a crap about us, do you think we'd be so tied to Gibbs?"

Tim shrugs, he knows for a fact that needing a dad is a big part of why he's still at NCIS, and definitely why he's still in the Major Case Response Team. "Abby adores him, and her dad was around."

"But he's not anymore."
"True. At least your dad is trying."

"Yeah, he is. That scares me, too."

Of all the things Tony might say about his Dad trying to patch things up, that's one Tim would have never expected. "Why?"

"He's seventy-eight. And if we get close, that means one day I'll have to say goodbye to him for real."

Tim's eyebrows wander back down from the way they had jumped up at that. It's true, just... not the sort of thing he's ever given any thought to. "It'll hurt, no matter how it happens. Ziva hadn't even seen her dad in two years when he died, and we both saw her when..." He lets that trail off, the memory of Ziva weeping over her father still bright in his mind. "You might as well try to get something you can enjoy now."

"Probably. But anger would be easier than sorrow." Tony lets that idea linger for a moment and then says, "Every time I see him lately, I see the man I'm afraid I'll become. It's not like I don't see the similarities. Not like I look at him and can't feel the part of me that's like him."

"How do you mean?"

"I know my mom was the love of his life. And I know he fucked around on her."

Tim looks surprised, best he knows Tony was nine when his mom died, and that's the sort of thing you hopefully don't know about until you're older. "How do you know that?"

"I caught him, once. At the time, I was too young to know what I had seen, and him telling me that his secretary was helping him find something under his desk made sense, but once I got older, learned what a blow job was, I figured it out."

"Eww." Tim winces.

"Yeah, that was nasty. A new step-mom every three years didn't much help with that, either. And he fucked around on them, too. I don't want to be him, but I can feel it. I'm out with Ziva, who is the most beautiful woman anyone has ever seen in real life. I mean, come on, who gets a Ziva in real life? Zivas exist on TV and in movies so that we can dream about them. And, though only God alone knows why, she loves me. But when I'm out with her, I still look. I still find myself thinking about the women around me. I go out with you and Palmer, and you aren't looking. You're all wrapped in clouds of eternal devotion and fidelity or whatever, and I feel like a horny idiot because I'm checking out the waitress."

Tim pulls up his sleeve and takes his watch off. Then he takes Tony's hand—Tony looks especially startled by that.—and places his fingers on his pulse. "Feel that?"

Tony nods, looking really disturbed.

"I am devoted, but I'm not dead, let alone blind. I check out the waitress. So does Palmer. Hell, so does Abby if she's hot enough."

Tony takes his hand back as his eyes go wide. "Abby likes girls?"

Tim smiles. "Some of them."

Now Tony's looking really curious. "Have you two ever..."
Tim waves that off. "Nah. Just the two of us, and it'll stay that way. She tells me she's okay with a
girl joining in, as long as I'm okay with a guy, and..." Tim shrugs. "Well, I'm not."

Tony nods. "Yeah, that'd be a deal breaker for me, too."

Tim nods and puts his watch back on. "Anyway, the point is, we all look, we all think, we don't all
do. It's just part of being alive. Though it's nice to know I'm subtle enough at it you haven't noticed
me doing it."

"I feel like I'm out with a couple of married, Mormon, Boy Scouts when I'm with you and Palmer."

"Jimmy and I spent high school and college getting shot down. And if you're pretty sure a girl is
going to respond to you checking her out by slapping your face, you get really good at looking and
not getting caught.

Tony laughs at that. Sure, he's gotten slapped for looking (metaphorically speaking, literally speaking
he's only been slapped for inappropriate touching) but he got smiled at a whole lot more often than
he got slapped, so he always made sure the girls knew he was looking. "So you're saying your
stealth ogling technique is self-preservation?"

"Something like that. A woman catches me looking, it's because I want her to. So, these days, only
Abby catches me."

Tony thinks about that, seems to appreciate it.

"Still, I also try to limit temptation. Like, okay, I haven't been in the break room for a while, because
that's where the cookies and candy are, and it's a whole lot easier to not eat the cookies if I don't see
them."

"Makes sense."

"Okay, so girls are the best, tastiest, most fun candy ever. So, I don't go to bars by myself. I don't flirt
with anyone other than Abby. All of my female friends that I spend time alone with are married or so
close it doesn't matter. And sure, I'm still looking and still thinking—You might think pregnant
Breena is creepy, but I sure as hell appreciated her in that bikini.—but I'm not going to do anything
about it, and that's all that matters."

Tony's giving him the are you insane look. "Breena in the bikini?"

"Oh yeah!" Tim nods enthusiastically.

Tony shakes his head, dismissively. "You are one sick puppy."

"Did you somehow not see her boobs?" Tim is gesturing as he says this in a way that gets across
exactly what about said boobs impressed him.

"You like them big?" Tony's always thought Tim was an ass man. He didn't know he much liked
what was up front.

Tim sniggers. He knows exactly what Tony thinks he likes, and Tony's right, but that has never
stopped him from appreciating the front view, too. "Big, small, in between, they're all good. I have
yet to see a breast I didn't like. And I noticed hers were especially fine in that little green bikini."

Tony inclines his head slightly, remembering. "Okay, yeah, that was nice."
"All of her is nice. And so is Ziva."

"Yeah, she really is. Wait, you were checking out Ziva?" Tony's eyes narrow slightly at Tim checking out his woman.

Tim rolls his eyes. "Not blind, not dead." He shakes his head a little. "Super-hot Israeli assassin turned Federal Agent playing in the surf in a wet bikini in front of me, let alone screwing on a recliner, and, yeah, I'm looking. You gonna tell me you weren't looking at Abby naked on the beach?"

Tony looks smugly superior. "I did not look at Abby naked on the beach. Mostly because Ziva was standing right next to me. I did, however, look at Abby, naked, sprinting down the steps, and I most certainly looked at Abby in a bathing suit on the beach." Tony smiles. "I didn't know she had that many tattoos."

"I think there's fourteen of them."

Tony looks puzzled. "You don't know?"

Tim shoves him gently. "I know exactly what she has on her skin, but like, she's got the two little angels on her shoulders, they're a matched set she got at the same time, so is that one tat or two? Or the stitch marks on her arm, there are nine of them, one tat or nine?"

"Got ya."

They sit there quietly watching the house.

"You ever wonder if you have any kids?" Tony asks.

"Rarely. Every woman I've slept with has known how to get a hold of me if she wanted to. And I've always been careful."

Tony nods. "I do. More than enough women who didn't know how to get a hold of me later, not always careful, and even careful doesn't work all the time."

"Condoms work something like 98% of the time, and you've been dodging that bullet for years?"

"That too."

More quiet. Tim gets the idea that Tony's half-hoping someone will move in that house and kill what he's saying, and half-hoping to get it out.

"I see kids, and I think about how many I may have failed. How many brown-haired, hazel-eyed people are out there without a dad? My first time, I was sixteen, snuck into a frat party, hooked up with a girl, both of us drunk, no condom, never got her name, never saw her again. For all I know, there's a twenty-eight-year-old out there somewhere with my eyes."

Tim shrugs, not sure how to be comforting for something like this.

Tony shakes his head. "Hell, I've been at this long enough it's possible I have grandkids. In college, my team made it to March Madness all four years, final four two of them. Girls all over the place. Two, three a night if I wanted them, and trust me, I did. Spring break, more orgies.

"Anyway, I was with Jeanne, and she took me to a baby shower for one of her girlfriends, and there were kids all over the place, and that's when it finally hit me: sex makes babies. And babies are a ton
of work. Dumb, right?"

Tim nods a little, not unkindly, but aware that Tony would deal better with a little teasing to break
the intensity of this. "Yeah, I had that figured out by the age of nine."

"And since then, kids have scared me, I've been much more careful, and my dad sleeping with every
woman he can catch disgusts me. Because, for all I know, I've got a dozen half-brothers and sisters
all over the world, also all without a dad.

"So that's it. That's the thing with me and kids."

Tim nods. If this was Palmer, he'd probably give him a hug. But it's Tony, and Tony would think
that was weird, so he doesn't know what to do besides hope that someone moves out of that house
and gives them a way to get out of this.

Maybe God's listening, maybe it's just luck, either way a blue Suburban pulls up and three guys get
out, which means he and Tony have something else to think about.
Sunday mornings. Tim likes them. Okay, he likes Saturday mornings better, because they don't have anything scheduled on Saturday mornings, but Sunday mornings with a slow, easy, wake-up-whenever vibe, followed usually by sex and breakfast out are awfully good, too.

Granted, Mass usually comes after breakfast, and that's not his favorite thing ever. They make it about two or three times a month, and sometimes when work interferes in too many weekends in a row, end up at Wednesday night Mass instead of Sunday morning.

Tim doesn't resent going to Mass. He meant it when he told Abby that being there for the things that are important to her was something he was going to do. It's just not his favorite thing. Mostly he treats it as a combination of a chance to people watch and just think. An hour or so a week where he can just run his book or whatever niggling bits of whatever case they're working on through his mind is a good thing, so he takes advantage of it. Sure it's not as comfortable as doing it at home in his jammies, (he doesn't sleep in them anymore, but they're still comfy for lounging) but it's still good.

They don't exactly fit into a tidy group within the St. Sebastian's demographics. There are couples their age, but they tend toward married with multiple children. There are unmarried couples, but they tend to be younger or much older. He's spotted a few engagement rings, which he figures is the group they most readily fit into, but like with the rest of the unmarried couples, they tend to be in their twenties, and some of them are barely out of high school.

So, he has noticed they get the occasional curious glance. Though how much of that is Abby being Abby and him being him—usually in a suit, and yes, Sister Rosita says casual is okay, but it feels weird for him to be there in jeans.—and how much is the fact that they are clearly together, clearly lovers, and very clearly not wearing wedding rings, he doesn't know.

He's been going since Christmas. Which is long enough to get to know, at least well enough to nod and chat for a moment, each of the four priest assigned to St. Sebastian's. 'Round about New Year's Father John—Who he actually rather likes. The man is very pleasantly mellow with a nicely dry sense of humor.—came to chat with him. He understood the point of the first conversation. Abby really is part of this church; it's part of her extended family, and John was giving him a very laid back version of 'you've brought a new boyfriend home to meet the parents,' wanting to know who he was, how he fit with Abby, what his intentions were, and when that wrapped up he started of a short lecture on the value of receiving instruction in the Catholic faith which Tim stopped short by saying he had been confirmed back in '85.

Which then started the 'Why-don't-you-take-communion? Everyone-is-welcome.' conversation.

Which then started the current situation where every six weeks or so one of the priests drifts over to him to chat with him about it.

So, as Mass wraps up and they're heading toward the exit of St. Sebastian's and Father Peter wanders over to say hi, he knows what's coming next. Peter will casually nudge him away from Abby and the rest of the congregation for a little chat.

It'll be polite and gentle. No hard sale tactics here, just a nice little reminder that they're always here for him should he feel the need to talk or pray.

But he figures with as close to dead as he was last month, if he hadn't felt the need for faith then, it was remarkably unlikely to just show up now.
So, he's preparing his usual polite brush off, when Father Peter throws him for something of a loop. "I was wondering if you and Abby had given any thought to marrying."

He's giving Father Peter a wary look. "Yes."

"Good, good. It sends the wrong message when a couple like you, so clearly in love," though he gets the sense that what Peter really means is *so clearly sleeping together,* "don't marry."

"The wrong message? Seriously?" If this was anyone else, he probably would have answered with "I'm getting the ring made as we speak, and intend to be engaged by the end of the month," but that approach just hits him wrong. It was too close to too many arguments with his dad. "Anyone who's here often enough to have noticed how 'in love' we are, is also here enough to notice that I come two-three times a month entirely because it matters to Abby. If you aren't blind, you've noticed I don't take Communion, so the fact that I'm here at all should speak pretty loudly about my intentions. And if messages matter, that one should be loud and clear."

"It is, but there's more than just a message here..." And Peter gets going on the sanctity of marriage and the importance of the Sacrament, and well, Tim's sure he's not doing it on purpose, but he manages to hit just about all of his arguing-with-dad-buttons.

Tim takes a breath and calms himself down. He hasn't spent hours arguing with Peter, and it's not his fault that he's got unpleasant history with authority figures trying to make him jump through hoops for symbolic but empty gestures. And it's not even that he disagrees with the main thrust of what Peter is saying, he believes wholeheartedly in the value of binding your life to your woman's and being there for the long run, he just doesn't see how a Priest saying words over them magically makes them any more committed than they already are. He also doesn't think words make a commitment. If words alone could do it, sitting in the bathroom, promising to come home was the moment it happened. But it's not the words, it's the actual coming home, day after day, year after year, that does it.

He's not sure how to, or if he really wants to, explain that his dad and mom said the words, and had the Priest bless them, but it didn't matter because his dad didn't come home. So he decides to stay on the general side of the idea, rather than specific to him.

When Peter winds down on the beauty of a true commitment and the need for that, Tim says, "You've officiated what, hundreds of weddings?"

"Thousands probably."

"Okay. How many divorces? How many?" and Tim looks over at a few couples who by their body language are clearly still together out of spite. "A third? A half?"

Father Peter thinks about it, and Tim appreciates the fact that the man is trying to be honest with him. "Between a quarter and a third."

Tim nods. "Once upon a time, just declaring yourself married was enough. You spoke your intent to be husband and wife, to live together for the rest of your life, and that did it." Peter looks ready to interrupt, but catches Tim's look, and doesn't. "You see that tattoo on her arm?" Abby's laughing with her nuns. She sees him and smiles. Tim smiles back and realizes that with Abby 'tattoo on her arm' is not a terrifically specific statement, she's got a ton of tattoos on her arms, and the little pink sundress she's wearing shows all of them off. "The black and red one on her right arm?"

Peter nods.
"That's my mark. I designed it. It's on my arm, too. That'll be on both of us for the rest of our days. Married isn't, or at least, shouldn't, be just about one day of I-dos. It's not the words, it's the living. Anyone can say the words. That mark, that's the first promise binding my life to hers. And one day, soon, I will make that promise to her again and seal it with a garnet and diamonds. I'll re-make that promise again, and seal it with a my name and kiss. I'll remake it every time we make a baby, and when I'm there for each one of those children's first breaths. I will live that promise every day for the rest of my life. And if Jesus doesn't like whatever order we end up doing that in, I honestly could not care less. We'll do it however we do it. And if I don't care what Jesus has to say about that, you can imagine how little I care about what anyone else does, either."

Peter thinks about that. Tim gets the idea that he rarely has this much trouble with potential grooms who aren't doing things the way they're supposed to. Of course, potential grooms who are here as often as he is are usually significantly more receptive to the 'God wants you to do this a certain way' sort of message as well.

Peter stares at Tim, looking like he might respect Tim's answer, but it's not good enough. Finally, he says, "If you really feel that way, why aren't you married?"

"I think a better question is, in what way aren't we married?"

Peter raises an eyebrow, asking if Tim is serious in that question. Tim nods very slightly, so Peter replies, "Legally and religiously. In the eyes of man and God, you're just shacking up. If something happens to you, what about her, and those children you may have?"

Tim's got an answer for that. "We've been each other's medical proxy since 2006." When Gibbs left, Abby had switched from him to Tim, and with his mom in Texas, and his sister only at Waverly during the school year, it made a whole lot of sense to have someone to act as Next of Kin for him nearby as well. So they set it up. "My will, life insurance, and pension are also set so that if something happens to me, her and any children we may have are taken care of. She's the second name on all of my bank accounts, and has access to my retirement accounts. So, if something happens to me, she'll be devastated, but financially, even if she didn't have a better paying job than I do, she'll be fine."

Peter didn't appear to be expecting that answer, and the look of wary respect grows, but he's not satisfied. "That's not enough. It's not about the cash. You can say it to each other all you want, you can make any promise you like and chose your own symbols, but until you stand before everyone who has ever mattered to you and swear on your life and hers that you will be there until you die, all you're doing is playing."

Tim shrugs. He remembers Ducky saying more or less the same thing at Palmer's wedding, and though he doesn't agree with it, he respects it none-the-less. "Engagement ring is supposed to be done in the next few weeks."

"Then I expect to see both of you here for pre-marital counseling sometime in November."

Tim looks a little startled at that. Peter smiles. "Six one hour-long sessions. It's required to get married here. And I'm going to assume, since she's been a member for thirteen years, that Abby wants to get married here."

"We haven't spoken about it specifically, but probably."

Father Peter smiled. "Good."
Vacation

Sixteen days all to themselves. Ten work days and six weekend days. And yes, they pretty much had to swear a blood oath to be reachable at all times. And Tim would not be shocked if his car got bugged somewhere along the line so Gibbs can keep track of where they are.

The somewhat vague idea of meet the families morphed into load up the car and drive cross country since they have the time and neither of them much likes flying.

Sixteen days' worth of gear for Tim takes up one bag. Granted, he's assuming they'll be able to do laundry at Luca's and his Mom's place. So he doesn't have a ton of stuff.

The computer stuff takes up one more bag.

This leaves half of the trunk for Abby, which, well, let's put it this way, it's a very good thing that both of them are good at spatial relationships, because getting Abby's stuff in there practically required a bag of holding.

But, by 10:00 Saturday October 12th, the trunk was full, the tank was full, and they were heading south, New Orleans in mind.

They were about an hour south of DC when he says, "I've never been to New Orleans."

"Nawlins."

"What?"

"Nawlins. If you call it New Orleans," She mimics his pronunciation, one that enunciates all the vowels and the r. "You might as well tattoo 'I'm A Yankee' to your forehead."

He shrugs a little at that. "I am a Yankee. Born in Maryland, raised mostly in California, school back in Maryland and Massachusetts." He thinks about that for a moment. "Why don't you have an accent?"

"I have an accent, everyone does."

He flashes her his mildly exasperated look. "Does everyone in Nalins—"

"Nawlins."

"I honestly cannot hear the difference."

"You need to sound like you know the letters are there, and just sort of smooth them out and blur them together."

"Nalins."

She shakes her head and sighs. "Just keep calling it New Orleans. You just killed that."

"Fine. Does everyone in New Orleans" he stresses his Yankee pronunciation, "sound like you?"

She thinks about that. "Not anymore. The way I used to speak said I was well-educated and white. So, that was a whole lot closer to the way you talk than, say, Louisiana Bayou speech. Add in the
prejudice against a pronounced drawl—" She sees him looking like that's never occurred to him. "How you speak is directly correlated to how intelligent people think you are, and a thick Southern accent says ignorant hick to a lot of the world."

"Really, you think that?"

"You went to two top tier schools, how many Southern accents did you hear?"

He thinks for a moment. "Almost none."

"Any western or mid-west accents?"

"Not really."

"Everyone more or less sounded like they came from California, like you?"

"A lot of them. Lots of Asian accents, too. MIT had a decent number of Brahmin accents."

"Brahmin?"

"High class Boston."

"Okay. Do you think almost no one at those schools was from the south, west, or mid-west?"

He's got a mild suspicion that very few of the people he went to school with were from the south or mid-west, but he's not sure if bringing that up is a good idea. "Good point."

"Anyway, even at LSU or Georgia State, sounding like you're an extra from Gone With The Wind means people don't take you seriously. So, by the time I had my Masters, my accent had gotten pretty generic Hollywood-speak."

"Hollywood-speak?" Tim's never heard what he considers the generic 'American' accent called Hollywood-speak.

"Yeah, everyone sounds like they're from California now because that's where all the actors are, and we're all watching TV, movies, and listening to them in bands."

"Hmmm... Never thought about that." And so, for the next fifty miles, they talk about accents and how the internet and movie age have been changing them.

They stop in Atlanta the first night, and it's there that it occurs to Tim how traveling is going to test his diet resolve.

Not snacking on the road is easy enough. They'd stop for gas, he'd pump it, not go into the convenience store, and not feel like he wanted a candy bar. No problems. She'd come back with coffee for him, a Caff-Pow or whatever the local equivalent was, and off they'd go.

Eating less at meals is trickier. There is all this lovely food, all over the place, and most of it is the sort of thing they don't have in DC so, if he doesn't eat it now, he isn't going to get a shot at it later.

And while it's true fried Okra didn't rock his world (kind of slimy), the fried pickles did, and not eating the whole basket of them is something of a challenge.

To make matters worse, he loves barbecue, and they are going to spend the next week driving through all different sorts of it. And he wants to try them all. The little side-of-the-road shack they
found in North Carolina, where the pulled pork was mustardy and vinegary was excellent. And it looks like here in Georgia everything is hot and smoky and sweet.

He'd said goodbye to six pounds between Labor Day and today, and he has the sinking suspicion a bunch of them are going to come back, possibly bringing buddies, before they get home.

---

Sunday morning driving is perplexing to Tim. First off, the traffic. There's tons of it. Secondly, for some reason a lot of the trucks/campers they're passing have some sort of very large, cylindrical, black things on pallets riding behind them.

"Okay, what is that?" he finally asks when they pass the third one.

Abby looks at it for a second. "Auburn versus 'Bama I think."

"Huh?" That answer means literally nothing to him.

"College football. Those are smokers, and they're heading to the game for tailgating followed by football."

"People bring their own smokers to football games down here?" Okay, he's familiar with bringing a cooler with drinks and stuff, but a smoker? That thing on the pallet whizzing by them looks big enough to handle a whole pig, not just a few burgers and hot dogs.

"And races."

"Why?"

Abby looks like she can't believe he doesn't know how this works. "It's fun. You go, you set up camp, get cookin', you eat, then watch your team do battle. Stadiums for college teams down here seat 100,000."

"People are really into football down here, aren't they?" He was the guy in the Beaver costume at MIT, which means he was about as into college football as a spectator could get, and he never saw anything even remotely like that. Granted, in the Ivy League they tend to play other teams like CMU (The Tartans, and if a Beaver is a less-than-dignified mascot, try being the walking piece of plaid.) or Harvard (Crimson. Seriously, no one in their conference got the whole mascot concept. He kept waiting for the day they'd end up playing a team with a huge fuzzy calculator running around on the other side.)

"Yeah." A few more miles pass by, and she asks, "You ever notice how something like a third of the cars in our parking lot have Tech or Cavaliers bumper stickers?"

Tim nods. Okay, yeah, he's noticed that. It doesn't much make any impact on him. Just one of those things, like having to get a new registration and license, that changed when he moved from Maryland to Virginia.

"Once you get into an area that stops having pro-teams, college football becomes a very big deal. All of those stickers are our neighbors saying which team is theirs."

"Huh." That hadn't occurred to him. "I though we just had a lot of alumnae in our building."

"That, too."
From what Tim can tell, every single person in the state of Alabama is going to that game, which means it takes them close to four hours longer than expected to get to New Orleans.

The building he pulls up in front of looks more like a Victorian mansion than a house. It's a vast, sprawling concoction of gingerbread detailing, huge open windows with wrought iron balconies, surrounded by a gracious porch lined with tables and rocking chairs. From what he can see, it takes up the entire block in front of them.

"Abby, what does your brother do?"

"You're looking at it."

He notices the sign in front of the house a moment later. Richard's 1882.

"It's a bed and breakfast," she says with a smile. "The best in New Orleans. He's been running it for the last six years."

---

Tim isn't sure what to expect from Luca. He's seen pics, certainly heard stories, but never met the man in person.

Still, a rich baritone, curly brown hair, warm brown eyes, and an enveloping hug for Abby, with kissed cheeks while saying, "Chere!" wasn't what he figured he'd be seeing. Not that he knows what he expected, maybe the same "Hey" followed by a hug combination he and Sarah do when they see each other.

Tim offers his hand and gets hugged none-the-less.

"Hello and welcome. I know Abby calls you McGee, but what is your preference? Tim, Timothy, McGee?"

Tim smiles at that. It's nice to be actually asked what he prefers. "Tim or McGee are fine. Just about everyone calls me one of those two things."

Luca nods and seems to see behind Tim for the first time. "Oh, Chere, your boy has beautiful taste in cars. What is that, the '08?"

"The '07," Tim replies, happy that Luca appreciates his car.

"Beautiful." Luca's fingers trace delicately over the silver hood of Tim's Porsche. "Mama and Papa ran a car salvage/junkyard, and when something beautiful and unique came in, Papa would rebuild it with us. He would have loved your car."

While Luca is checking out his car, Tim asks, "Why does he call you cher?"

"Mon Cheri. French. My dear. Everyone from around here speaks at least a little Creole. And Luca was in Paris for five years working as a chef, so for him it's even more pronounced."

"Okay."

---

There are other guests at Richard's. (Ree chards, not Richards. Apparently if he could remember enough of his high school French lessons, he could probably figure out local pronunciations, but, well, he'd probably mangle them anyway. It's not that he found the memorization or grammar aspects of new languages challenging, but the punctuation was always a killer. That's what he means by he
doesn't speak Klingon fluently. He can, however, read it just fine.) But Tim and Abby aren't guests, they're family, and as such, Luca brings them up to the third floor, Luca's private residence.

It's a tidy and comfortable apartment. And for as 1880s as the rest of the B&B is, the lines in Luca's private home are clean, modern, elegant.

"You must be tired, driving all day. Relax, rest. Tonight, dinner."

"Are you cooking?" Abby asks her brother.

"Of course, Chere." Luca smiles. "Of course."

"Luca's the best cook you'll ever meet." She affectionately ruffles his hair.

He shrugs at that. "She is my sister, so she heaps on the praise."

"Emeril said the same thing about you. Is he also your sister?"

Luca smiles, wryly. "Last I checked, no. But with our parents, who were apparently full of many surprises, who can know?"

Abby nods.

"Emeril. The Emeril? The Bam guy?" Tim feels like he's a few turns behind in the game.

"Yes. Before taking on Richard's, I was one of his Sous Chefs."

Tim knows that's got to be some sort of specific job, but he's got no idea what. "I'm sorry, I don't know what that means."

"I ran one of his kitchens."

"Oh."

"Seven years ago, I hurt my knee water skiing, and since then I haven't been able to work as long or as hard as you need to to run one of his kitchens. But when I was hurt, he introduced me to the owners here, and now I run Richard's." As he finishes that sentence, two voices, female, close in on them. Abby lights up in a smile. She turns toward the sound as a tall, blonde woman and a gangly brown-haired girl, teen, really, enter Luca's.

"Aunt Abby!" the teen chirps.

"I told you she'd be here by the time we got home," the blonde says while Abby hugs the girl.

The woman hugs Abby as well, and then offers her hand to McGee. "I'm Melody, and this is Harper."

He takes her hand while Abby says, "This is McGee."

"She calls you by your last name?" Harper asks, looking deeply intrigued by this idea.

Tim smiles, amused by the interest Harper is showing at this idea. "Most of the time."

"And what does she call you when she's not calling you McGee?"

Tim thinks of many of the different things Abby calls him, figures most of the non-McGee things she
calls him are not even remotely appropriate to repeat to her niece, and settles for, "Tim."

"Why do you call him McGee?" Harper's staring up at Abby.

Abby thinks about it for a second. She's been calling him McGee for so long she's got to think about why she does that. "That's what Gibbs and Tony called him when we first met."

Harper nods, she seems to know who Gibbs is. "Does Gibbs call everyone by their last names?"

Tim's about to say 'yes' when he realizes that isn't actually true. "Really, just Tony, Jimmy, and I."

"Domaget."

Tim flashes her his perplexed look. "Did he start that, or is that what we call him because Gibbs calls us by our last names?"

Abby thinks about that. "Huh... I don't actually know."

"So, he calls you Sciuto?" Harper asks.

"No, he calls me Abbs or Abby."

"And he doesn't call Ziva David. And he didn't call Kate Todd, so it's just us guys that get the last name treatment. The girls get called by their first names."

"Weird."

Tim shrugs. "You get used to it. Anyway, people on my team call me McGee. Everyone else calls me Tim."

"And fans call you Thom," Abby adds.

"That too."

"You have fans?" Harper's really interested in that.

"I've written a few books. Some people liked them," Tim says with a small smile.

"Cool."

Melody looks at the two of them, sees the bags at their feet, and realizes they haven't gotten settled in yet. "Come on, she'll happily talk your ear off all night. Let's get you settled first."

"Are you staying in my room, Aunt Abby?"

Tim looks mildly surprised and amused by that idea. It occurs to him that he has no clue how Abby's presumably Catholic brother and sister-in-law feel about him sleeping with her in front of her niece.

"I think your aunt and McGee would prefer to share a room," Melody says.

Tim nods, and Abby smiles.

Harper narrows her eyes and turns to her father. "She gets to sleep with her boyfriend! You won't let my boyfriend sleep over."

"And when you are thirty-nine, already sharing a home with your boyfriend, and bringing him home to meet us because you intend to marry him, you may sleep with him in my home, as well. Until
then, no boys sleeping over!” Luca says with a fond smile.

Harper's expression indicates that she does not find that even remotely fair.

Their room is bright and simply furnished. Good, firm, sturdy bed, which Tim appreciates by lying full out on for a few minutes. He may love the Porsche, but he also loves really stretching out after sitting in it for ten hours a day.

After a minute he sits up, watching Abby standing on the balcony, arms resting on the wrought iron railing, eyes scanning the city around them.

A breeze catches the gauzy white curtains over the French doors, and he gets a picture of her like that, looking away, framed by white fabric, afternoon sun low behind her, New Orleans stretching out in the distance.

It's a really good shot.

Dinner is amazing. He doesn't get the name of everything they are eating, (and is sure he'd butcher the pronunciation of most of the things he did) but he is awfully certain that no matter what it is, if Luca's cooking it, he'll happily eat it.

Harper's been given permission to stay up late and hang out with them, so she does. Mostly asking about their work, what they do and how, and talking about school.

For Luca, morning begins at 4:00, so he and Melody beg off close to nine.

And at midnight, when Tim's yawning, (Abby and Harper are going strong.) they go to bed and sleep soundly.
Faith

Luca had provided breakfast for the next morning, and, while munching upon it, Tim decides beignets and coffee, at least when made by Luca, is the best possible thing on earth, and eating them on the porch, soft and warm fall breezes whispering around them, is even better.

“Think Gibbs would like this?” Abby looks curious as he puts down his coffee cup. “The coffee. It’s different, but good.”

“It’s got chickory in it.”

Tim’s heard of chickory before, but he’s never been sure what it is. “And that would be...”

“Burnt roots.”

“Really?”

“Pretty much.”

“Huh... It’s tasty.”

“Yep.” She looks at her cup. “I don’t know if he’d like it, but he’d probably like the idea that you thought about it.”

Tim ponders that for a moment. “I’m not sure we have the kind of relationship where I get him presents. He’d probably like it from you.”

“Oh no. Your idea. You give it to him. He likes presents.” She says with a grin.

“When has anyone gotten him a present? I mean, besides you?”

“Tony got him that sex dust, right?”

It’s been years since Tim's thought about that. But, he can remember Tony stammering away in the shower about post office mix up, so he says, “I don’t think that was intentional.”

“Rumor has it he liked it, though.”

Tim smiles. “You’re hooked into an entirely different rumor mill from me, aren’t you?”

She winks. “What, Diane didn’t tell you about that?”

He laughs. “I managed to keep her from talking about sex with any of her husbands. I’ve got to work with two of them, and with the way we keep bumping into each other, her current husband will likely come strolling through NCIS any day now.”

“And you don’t want the intimate details of any of their lives?”

“I don’t need to know any more about what Gibbs is like in bed than I already do. I just don’t,” Tim says, shaking his head a little.

Abby looks curious, she might be hooked into a very interesting rumor mill, but intimate details of Gibbs’ sex life are few and far between. “What do you already know about him?”
He flashes her a wry expression. “Mostly that the bruises on my wrists didn’t freak him out, and that he had really specific advice for how to pad my wrists. Also he built a bed that, according to him, you could hit with a truck and it’d still be in one piece, as a wedding present for Shannon.”

“Hit with a horny Marine on leave for the first time in six months, you mean.”

“He said, ‘truck,’ but yeah, that was the subtext. Oh yeah... taking me to Afghanistan was intentional. Something about 'appreciating my homecoming.' And he’s going to do it to Tony as soon as he gets the chance.”

Abby nods, giggling. “So, what do you want to do today?”

Tim shrugs, this is her backyard, so he doesn't have any set plans. “Wander around? Show me your old haunts? See where you grew up? I’m flexible.” She sighs at that and looks sad. “Don’t want to go home without your parents there?” It’s a good guess, it just happens to be wrong.

Abby smiles a little, but it's a sad gesture, just one corner of her mouth rising. “I can’t go home. Literally. It’s gone. Katrina didn’t just wipe out the Ninth Ward, a lot of the development on the coast washed away, and where we lived with my parents washed away with it.”

Tim closes his eyes, feeling like he just kicked a puppy. He opens them and winces. “Oh. I’m sorry.”

She waves that off, not wanting him to feel bad about something he couldn’t have known. “It hadn’t been ours for a long time. After they died, Aunt Gert sold the house and the yard. Used the money to put me through college, and let Luca buy his first restaurant. The only thing that’s back there now is their graves.”

He’s not entirely sure how to respond to that. “Do you want to go see them?” He knows people do that from time to time. He doesn’t entirely understand it, but there are a lot of things in the world he doesn’t understand.

“Yeah, I would.”

“We were hoping to go over to St. Benedicts,” Abby says to Luca when they bring their plates in.

“See Mama and Papa?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you should take my truck. Your beautiful car doesn’t have enough clearance to handle the roads out there.”

Tim was certainly aware of the idea of Hurricane Katrina. He saw lots of coverage, watched it fairly intently, wrote a pretty big check to the Red Cross, and watched how it affected Abby, but with all of that it wasn’t real to him.

It was a bad thing that happened far away almost entirely to people he didn’t know and never would.

It’s a bit over eight years later, and Beneaux, LA is a ghost town. And seeing it, empty buildings, roads half washed out, plants reclaiming the land, Katrina is becoming real to him.

They’re bumping over a road that had likely been paved before the storm, but now was about a fifty-fifty mix between rutted dirt and patches of blacktop.
“It was a pretty tidy, healthy little town until ‘88. But one of the big shrimpers got sold and moved their base about twenty miles to the east. There was a canning plant until ‘90. When those two went, a lot of the town went with them,” Abby says, staring out ahead, eyes flicking over the the scenery around them.

“Luca and I had moved on by then. But we had friends here, people we’d talk to, tell us how things went. People with skills moved on, found new jobs, new homes. Those who didn’t stayed, and kept things ghosting along. A tired and poor little town on the coast, mostly just scraping by on shrimp.

“Then Katrina came, and it got hit from both the Gulf and the lake. By then, I didn’t know anyone who lived here, but we saw the pictures. You could barely tell there was land under the water. It looked like a huge lake.”

She pulls the truck over into what Tim can still identify as a church parking lot, though grass and weeds are eating the gravel paving. The building doesn’t look like it’s in terrible shape, but it also doesn’t look like anyone’s done anything with it in close to ten years.

“Luca says a lot of these places are condemned. Black mold. Water damage. Rot. You can’t go in the buildings. But outside is safe enough, now.”

She gets out, and he follows. For a moment she stands next to the truck, staring at a small, weedy graveyard. He takes her hand in his and waits.

She looks at him and flashes a quick smile. Or at least lifts the corners of her lips, her eyes don’t look happy.

“You really want to do this?”

“Yeah. Haven’t been back in fifteen years. Just getting oriented.”

She starts off, and he keeps pace. “Did you used to come a lot?”

“On their birthdays. On mine some years. Then I got the job in DC, and I haven’t been back here since.”

He nods, somewhat curious as to why she hasn’t come back, but not wanting to press. She’ll tell him if she wants him to know.

She stops them in front of a black granite stone. This one, like a lot of the stones near it, is tidy. The weeds have taken over the ground around it, but the patch right in front, and around the stone, is trimmed. Tim thinks Luca is probably the person who left the small pile of white stones on the corner of the grave and maintains the bit of grass around it.

Gloria Mary Sciuto March 5, 1940-July 17, 1990. Michael John Sciuto June 16, 1942-July 18, 1990. Tim sees the difference in the dates and realizes that her dad must have lingered for a while. That it wasn’t a quick and done affair.

He wraps his arm around her and kisses her hair.

“You’ve never asked me why I go to Mass,” she says without looking at him.

“True.” He looks away from the marker to her. He couldn’t ever think of a good way, a polite way to say, ‘So, come on, you’re a scientist, what gives?’

“I can feel you wonder about it, sometimes. Especially when we have sex Sunday morning and then
go together.”

He nods. “It’s crossed my mind. Not having sex with people you aren’t married to, let alone living with them, was something they spent a lot of time beating into us when I was a teen.”

She half-smiles at that. “Yeah, Sister Murphy was a stickler for that.”

“Father Peter, too.”

She shrugs a little. He had told her about their conversation when it happened. He waits for her to say more than that. She crouches down, her fingers brushing her father’s name. He kneels next to her.

“Everything, everyone dies.”

He nods at that and wraps his arms around her again.

“We all stop. We rot, and we vanish. Eventually even the bones will be gone. The Earth will swallow us whole, leaving nothing.”

He kisses her.

“My parents are dead, Tim. I put them in the ground here almost twenty-five years ago. I’m a scientist. I work with Ducky and Jimmy. I know what happened to them down there. Less than two months ago, I almost put you in the ground. And if there’s no God, then it didn’t mean anything. It just happened, and now it’s over. Them in my memory, in Luca’s... The time we’ve had together. It isn’t enough. If there’s no God, then they’re really gone, and one day you’ll really be gone, and they can’t be really gone, and you can’t really go. I need them to still be there, somewhere.”

He holds her tighter and kisses her again. Feeling her tears on his cheek.

“So, anyway, that’s why I go to Mass. Faith in the promise that love is eternal and we will rise again.” She half-smiles, eyes bright with tears, aware of how silly that might sound to him.

He kisses her again, and wipes away the tears with his thumb. “As long as you need it, I’ll go with you.”

“Thank you.”
Zyphyer

Most of the ride home is pretty quiet, but as they get closer to town, Abby begins to perk back up. They drop off the car and she takes his hand. "Let me show you around."

From what he can see, New Orleans is the land of the Goths. Even when everyone is dressed normally, or at least a lot closer to him than to Abby, the whole place just feels gothic. Mansions, gardens, wrought iron balconies, snippets of Creole accented English or French and air laced with coffee and jazz. It's just gothic, in any and every meaning of that word.

Reality feels different here, like the world is older, richer. Like here, magic actually exists, and ghosts do wander among us. Here, Voodoo isn't just a few syllables and funny superstitions designed to keep the things that go bump in the night away.

Here is a world utterly unlike anywhere he's ever lived, and he finds it entrancing and a little uncomfortable. He's good with sterile and scientific, but this is dirty and beautiful. It's a world where emotion slides into front place and reason slowly lags behind.

He's out of his depths, so he surrenders to it, lets it absorb into him, and enjoys it.

"Were you serious about visiting some of my old haunts?" Abby asks the next day.

Tim shrugs, wondering why his bag is open and every piece of clothing out of it.

"Sure."

"We're gonna need to do some shopping."

"Where are we going?"

"Zyphyer."

"I have no idea what that is."

"Goth club. These," she holds up a pair of black jeans," should work. But you don't have a good shirt."

"Okay." He nods at that. He doesn't have any of his 'goth' clothing on hand, didn't think he'd need it. "Do I have to wear makeup?"

"It's a Goth club." Of course is left unspoken.

He nods. "Then we'll need some of that, too. I didn't bring my eyeliner, and I can't use yours, it irritates my eyes."

She puts the jeans down, pushes him onto the bed, and straddles him, holding his arms over his head, and leans in for a deep kiss. "The fact that you know you can't wear the same brand of eyeliner that I do is insanely hot."

He grins up at her. "Really? Then let's add this to it. Think anyone around here sells black kilts?"

That earns him another wet, hot, and happy kiss. "Baby, we're in New Orleans. Anything you want, you can find here."
Back in DC when they do this, he usually goes for boots, jeans, t-shirt, collar, (And yes, he knows exactly what he's signaling when he wears it. He figures if they're in one of Abby's Goth clubs, it's appropriate.) and wrist cuff. And it works. But he didn't bring his collar, or any of the t-shirts he usually wears, or the boots. So why not start from scratch and have some fun with this?

It's true that standing next to DiNozzo and Ziva can sort of make Tim fade into the background or seem smaller than he actually is. They're neon vibrant and he's more of an olive drab. But he's not a small man. He's 6'1" and, at last weigh in, 203 pounds.

Plus, Goths tend to go for kind of skinny, and he's more than aware enough to know that hasn't been him for years. So, a variation on the theme. Play up the fact that he's big and a man, not a wispy teenager with a death fetish.

Abby got into the idea awfully fast, and really seemed to appreciate the look he was going for.

At least, if the way she's grinning at him as he steps out of the bathroom is anything to go by, she does.

The boots come to mid-calf and are gleaming black leather. The kilt is black, too, though there are silver rivets decorating the waistband. It even has pockets, which he appreciates. With a kilt, the plain gray t-shirt he brought works just fine, no need for a new one. Add in the wrist cuff he always wears, and he's dressed.

Like always, he lets Abby do his makeup. Yeah, he's done his own before. (Live action role playing, nothing weird, thank you very much.) But it's been a long time, and even back in the day he wasn't very good at it. For example, he would have never thought to do his bottom waterline, let alone the top one, in black, or to put it on thin under the eyelashes and then smudge it out.

She's finished up his eyes and is reaching for a lipstick when he says, "Nope. We're done."

They've been having versions of this discussion since the first time she took him to one of her clubs. "Come on, it's black. Nothing girly."

He's shaking his head. "I'm wearing black eyeliner, mascara, and nail polish. I'm done." Some lines even Tim won't cross, and lipstick is one of them.

"Fine." She puts the tube down. "Help me?"

"Sure." She takes off her shirt while he picks up the black corset he had gotten her. It's leather with red laces up the back.

"How tight do you want it?"

"Snug. But I've got to be able to breathe to dance."

"Okay." He begins to thread the laces through the corset.

She steps into a pair of skin tight, black leather pants, and for a moment he appreciates the view, her topless, wearing pants of shiny leather that look painted on. Then something occurs to him. "I'm sensing a snag in our plan."

"What?" She asks, smoothing the zipper up.
"You've got easy access to me," because in proper kilt-wearing tradition he doesn't have anything on under it, "but I'm going to have a hell of a time getting you out of those pants."

Abby smirks at him. "You'll just have to get creative."

He grins. "Last time I got creative getting you out of your clothing, you never got to wear that clothing again."

Abby looks appalled. "Don't you even think about cutting these off of me!"

He smiles even wider. "What if I promise to buy you a new pair?"

"Give me your key ring."

He hands it over, and she takes the clasp knife he keeps on it off, tucking it into her purse. "You get that back tomorrow."

He pouts a little and she kisses him. A moment later, he finishes the laces and says to her, "Arms up."

She does so, and he settles the corset on her, pulling the ties snug.

"Good?"

She inhales deeply. "Yeah. That's good." She starts on her makeup while he messes up his hair.

Five minutes later, they're ready to go. He's reaching for the door when she says, "Hold up. Gotta blot my lipstick."

He's expecting her to reach for a tissue, so when she kneels in front of him, lifts the kilt, and kisses the side of his penis, he's pretty surprised. He looks at it, a perfect, black lip print on his dick. She smiles up at him, drops the kilt, stands, and goes back to the mirror to check her lips one last time, and then says over her shoulder, "You're way too hot in that not to mark as mine."

Luca almost falls off his chair when he sees them come out. He expects Abby to be up for anything, but Tim—the mild-mannered guy, in a nice pair of jeans, button-down, and loafers who walked into their home day before yesterday—in a kilt, boots, and eyeliner floors him.

Luca just looks him up and down and then says, "And now I see why you like this one."

"Love."

"And now I see why you love this one."

"We'll be out late." She smiles at her brother.

"I will not wait up."

Tim tosses Luca his phone. "Get a shot of us?"

"Certainly."

Tim drapes an arm around Abby's shoulders, an expression on his face somewhere between a smile and a smirk as he imagines Tony seeing this shot.
Harper comes in, stares at them for a second, and says, "You are the coolest thing ever!"
Tim laughs. "No one's ever said that about me before."

A man gets out of a Porsche in front of a Goth Club. He's wearing a kilt and eyeliner. He tosses the keys to a valet, and goes to the far side to open his date's door himself.

She is a long, tall, vision of sleek black leather, black ink, and alabaster skin.

People stare.

And Tim enjoys it.

They're dancing, fast and close, and for a moment he's really enjoying the feel of her hand snaking up his thigh, cupping him. She's been doing that, or things similar to it, keeping him half-hard and pleasantly turned-on all night. So he isn't thinking much about it, beyond enjoying it.

And then he realizes that both of her arms are resting on his shoulders, which means there's no way the hand gently tugging his balls belongs to her.

A few thoughts occur to him. 1: There is a body pressed against his back. 2: His assumption that said body was pressed against his due to lack of space on the dance floor is probably wrong. 3: This body is pressed against his whole back, which means this body is at least as tall as he is, which greatly diminishes the chance of this body belonging to a female person. 4: There are two hands attached to this body and both of them are getting quite intimately acquainted with Tim's privates.

He leans closer into Abby. "Do I want to turn around and see who's feeling me up?"

Abby opens her eyes, looks over his shoulder and slightly up,—Which unsettled Tim further. Abby in the boots she's wearing tonight is 6'2" and the tallest woman in the room, so whomever is behind him has to be huge and male.—and says, "Mine!"

And then the hands vanish. Abby smiles at him, kissing him hard and deep. "Told you you were hot like this!"

They're taking a break. Sitting down for a few minutes. Resting. Drinking. She's sitting on his lap, chatting with a friend she hasn't seen for a long time, who's kind enough to take a few pictures of them. The friend gives back his phone and heads off to dance.

Abby pulls his head back and kisses him. Really kisses him, lips and tongue and touch with intent. The hand he has on her knee starts to slip up her leg, caressing her inner thigh as she slowly rolls against him. They aren't the only couple making out. (Making love? fucking? he's sure all of that, and any other variant you could possibly think of is going on around them somewhere.)

And he also knows that if she was in a skirt, or a dress, or hell, shorts with a wide enough leg, he'd be balls deep in her and wouldn't care who could see. But she's not. She's in tight leather pants. Very tight leather pants, and boots that come up to her knees. She might as well be a mermaid for all the access he has to her right now.

The music changes, this one she likes, so she grabs the hand that's gently dragging over the crotch of her pants, and stands, pulling him up.
For the music they've been playing here, this is fairly slow, so they settle into a fairly slow grind, one of his legs between hers. And they've been doing that most of the night too, but this time, she's kissing him, hard, and her hips are rolling in a way they weren't before.

He wonders if she can get off riding his leg, and hopes she can. His left hand closes, gently, on her breast, and slips it out of the corset. He lowers his head to kiss and nuzzle her, while the music speeds up and they move faster against each other.

A few songs pass by, and he can feel by the desperate speed of her hips against his leg that this isn't quite enough to do it for her. She's almost there, but the leather, the lack of focus of the touch, it's not enough.

He licks her nipple one last time, replacing tongue with fingers, and cups his other hand around the back of her neck.

For a long minute, he kisses her deep and hard, fucking her with his tongue, showing her what he'd like to be doing if she wasn't in those pants. She's whimpering against him, clutching his shoulder and ass, grinding her whole body against his.

He breaks the kiss, nipping over her lips, mouthing her jaw to her ear, and then he gently, delicately licks her earlobe.

"You're wet to your thighs, aren't you?" He hopes she can hear this, over, or more likely, through the music, because he's not about to yell it.

She nods. Good she can hear him. If he can't fuck her with his body, maybe his words will do the job.

"Good. I'm going to take you over to that table and bend you over it." He eyes an empty table on the far side of the club, and sees her look at it, but her eyes return to him when he says, "Then this boot is coming off." He nudges her left boot with his foot, his fingers lightly caressing her neck, other hand rubbing her nipple firmly. "Then I'll press right up behind you. Can you feel it, cool wood pressed against your cheek," he grinds his erection into her hip, "hot wood pressed against your ass? I'll unzip you, and get you out of these damn pants." He licks her ear again, sucking on the lobe.

"We are never going to a club with you in pants again. Never! You dance with me like this, and I want to get into you. Not just rub up against you." Her hand that had been on his ass slips under his kilt and begins to stroke him. He groans at that, and then takes her hand away. He's sure she can get him off while he talks dirty to her, but that isn't quite the goal of this. "Later. You can fuck me however you want when we leave, but this is for you. So where were we? Oh yeah, pants off, on the table..."

She moans at that, and rubs faster against him.

"I'll hitch your left leg up on the table, spread you wide open, so everyone can see, and rub my cock against the back of you thigh, getting it wet and slick. Then I'll tease you with it. Stroking you with it, rubbing it along your lips and clit. Can you feel me, hot and hard against you, slipping against your wet skin, dragging, slowly, between your lips, edging just the tip between them, so you can feel just a little stretch before slipping away to rub your clit? Feel it?"

"God, Tim, fuck me, please!" She's grinding hard and fast against his leg.

"That's exactly the idea, baby. You'd be holding onto the far end of the table, and I'd be right behind you, teasing, driving you crazy, and just when you start to whimper, when you're so turned on you're almost out of your mind, I'll grab your wrists and thrust in hard. Feel that?" He grinds hard against
her. "Me, rock hard, inside of you, moving fast, my hands pinning yours, my whole body stretched out against the back of yours."

He licks her earlobe again and pinches her nipple, hard, feeling her back arch and her hips grind against his leg. She's flushed from her forehead to her breasts, and her eyes are glazed. He begins to kiss her, but she pulls back and says, "Don't stop talking to me."

He grins. "Want me to get you off with my words?"

"Yes!"

He kisses back to her ear. "Feel me in you? Feel me fucking as hard as I can? Feel the cool wood of the table against your bare pussy? Feel me deep inside you?" He sucks her earlobe again. "Not deep enough. I grab one of the chairs and sit down, legs spread wide. I pull you into my lap, facing away from me, legs over mine, so you're wide, wide open, and slip in in one easy thrust. I'm balls deep inside you, and my cock's so hard it hurts, and you're riding me. Up and down and hard and fast, and I lean back a bit, so you can too, and we can get that angle that makes you see stars while everyone in the club watches me fuck you, sees that you're mine: my woman, riding my cock. I'll roll your breast with one hand and rub your clit with the other, over it in fast, fast circles. Feel it, my fingers on you, getting that spot exactly the way you like it? Feel me, deep inside you, hitting your g-spot on every down thrust? I can feel you on me, hot and so wet, and you're calling out my name, clenching against me, your body so tight, almost there, so I speed my fingers, press a little hard—"

"Tim!" And then she's twitching erratically on him, head back, flushed all over, and moaning. He stops moving and holds her close, letting her come down against him. He looks around, and it's a Goth club, people are dancing and fooling around all over, no one seems to have noticed Abby climaxing against his leg.

He smiles and kisses her forehead, slipping her breast back into the corset. This is the kinkiest thing they've ever done, and even though he didn't get off, that's still going in his top ten sexual encounters.

She cuddles against him, purring gently. After a minute, she kisses him sweetly, grins, and says, "Let's go."

"Now?" That came out a little less sure than he would have liked. It's possible that he, sort of, squeaked it. He had talked her off, and gotten awfully close to talking himself off as well, and the second she steps away everyone on earth will be able to see that.

"Yes. You said I could fuck you any way I liked once we left. We're leaving, now."

"Okay." Abby's trying to pull away, but he's still holding her tight to him.

"We're not moving." She's looking at him expectantly.

"Yeah." He thinks about it for a moment, and decides that since there's no possible way his erection is going down without some help, and honestly, this feels way too good for a quick toss off, that the best way to handle it is just walk out tall and proud and pretend strolling around with sex flushed girlfriend and a damp, tented kilt is an entirely normal circumstance.

He lets go of Abby's hips, and she steps back, looks down, sees what the issue is, and grins. "That looks promising."

"Good. Let's see if I can get back into the car without blushing."
She strokes him gently. "That's nothing to blush about."

He grabs her wrist and there's some urgency in his voice as he says, "Unless you want me getting off here and now, don't play with it."

She looks straight at him, squeezes gently, and he can see the wicked glint in her eyes. "Do you want me to back you up against the bar and blow you right here?"

He inhales sharply and exhales a low and slow, "Oh." Each one of those words felt like a soft, wet suck to the dick. He looks around the club, and yeah, other people are making out or having sex, but no one is being that blatant about it. Even in New Orleans, even in this club, that's probably enough to get them bounced, and maybe arrested.

"Fuck, yes, please!" He feels her begin to press him toward the bar. "And no, that's a really bad idea. Neither of us wants to explain to Vance how we got arrested for indecent exposure and lewd acts in public."

She pouts a little at that, but steps back, lets go of him, and takes his hand in hers. A minute later, she's got her bag, and they're waiting for the valet to get the car. He's wishing he had parked himself, because he's expected to make casual chit chat with the other people waiting, and really, he's just not able to do that. Though he does appreciate the fact that Abby is standing right in front of him, leaning her back against his chest, shielding most of him from the view of the people around them. He wraps his arms around her, and kisses her neck. She smiles, turns, and kisses him back.

He opens her door for her, gets in, buckles up, and says, "Where to?"

"Anywhere, any way, I like?" She's got a wide, dirty grin on her face as she asks.

He thinks about that for a second. "Not Luca's. I'm too turned on for quiet. If it's a bed, I'll fuck you through it, if it's a wall, I'll fuck you into it. Pick wherever you like, but I don't want to wake up an entire bed and breakfast's worth of people, including your fourteen-year-old niece, and then have to face them in the morning."

She grins, takes his phone out of his pocket, with only minimal caressing of his inner thigh and right testicle, and then gets the GPS set up. In a minute, it's telling him to head to the right, so to the right he goes. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise."

"Okay. How long of a drive?"

"Not too bad. This time of night, the GPS says fifteen minutes."

They're already on the edge of town, so fifteen minutes is either starting to get off the beaten track or was much closer to the Quarter. He doesn't know his way around well enough to tell at first, but as the buildings get further and further apart, he's fairly sure they're heading for off the beaten path.

Five minutes go by without them passing anything. Then he sees it. It's got to be where they're going. He's thinking his previous assessment that this is the kinkiest thing they'd ever done needed to be ratcheted up a few notches.

He pulls in and drives for a moment, looking for a spot where the car isn't visible from the road, finds one, parks, and then turns to her. "We're going straight to Hell for this."

She grins, warm and wicked lust in her eyes. "I thought you didn't believe in Hell."
"I don't." He looks away from her and into the graveyard they just pulled up next to. "But it might start to believe in me if we do this."

She smiles, a little bit of challenge in her eyes now. "You backing out on me?"

He shakes his head, feeling his erection, which had gone down slightly during the drive surge back to life. "Oh no. Any game you come up with, I'll play."

"Good."

There are a lot of things New Orleans is famous for: Jazz, gothic architecture, food, parties, sex, and, of course, graveyards. New Orleans has some of the most beautiful and famous graveyards in the world.

They aren't in one of them. The cops in New Orleans probably bust about ten people a night for fooling around or trespassing in the main graveyards. They're in a fairly small one. But the fact that it's fairly small does not in any way negate the fact that it's creepy as all get out. Mausoleums poking through a misty fog under live oaks wrapped in Spanish moss style creepy.

She unbuckles, and then does his seatbelt for him, too, flipping up the kilt and giving him a teasing little kiss before getting out. He follows her, taking her hand once he's out of the car.

"So, where to?" He's thinking the hood of the car here in the parking lot will work just fine, but he can see her looking toward the mausoleums.

She starts walking forward, turns toward him, and says, "I wanna see if I can make you come loud enough to wake the dead."

He laughs, licks his lips, and gives himself a gentle squeeze. "I'm turned on enough that's possible. Just remember, we wake up a bunch of zombies, and I'm not going to be in any condition to run away from them."

She's grinning from ear to ear as she says, "Then I'll make sure you die happy."

"Can't ask for more than that," he says with a smile.

They don't go very far in, just enough to be out of view of anyone in the parking lot.

She's walking in front of him a bit, looking around, and apparently decides behind a large gray mausoleum is just fine. So she stops, leans forward from the waist, in a long, straight-legged bend, and unzips her boots.

And Tim just watches. Soft, murky moonlight through the mist lighting Abby's ass, looking almost edible it's so delicious. He figures that every blood cell in his body is either in his dick or headed that way. He's hard enough he could fucking pole vault with it, and so turned on he actually feels light-headed. And right this moment he literally can not care less about the fact they're in a graveyard.

She straightens back up and steps out of the boots, bare feet sinking into soft, damp grass.

"Help me with the pants?"

"Yes." He's kneeling in front of her almost before the word travels from his mouth to her ears. She pulls down the zipper, and slips the pants over her ass. He takes over from there, tugging them down her legs. The second they're off, he pulls her to him, licking and sucking desperately.
He pulls back for a second, "God, you are wet to your thighs!" and starts to lap at her thighs, fingers stroking easily on slick flesh.

The smell is killing him. His dick is actually throbbing from it: leather, turned on Abby, grass, mist, his saliva on her skin. He doesn't think he's been this turned on before. It's not like he feels like he's going to get off any second. He's in control. But he wants, wants more, wants harder, than he's ever remembered wanting.

She gets off fast this time, pulling his mouth tight against her, her voice echoing through the almost silent night.

He pulls back for a second, looks around quickly, and says, "No zombies, yet. Gotta do better."

She pushes him back, so he's sitting in the grass, feeling it cool and prickly against his legs. "Oh, I'll do better all right. Or, I'll make you do better."

"Yes. Please."

"Lay down."

He does, feeling the grass on his back, damp through his shirt, and the way it tickles and prickles against the back of his neck and ears.

And in a second, none of that matters. She holds him, firmly, by the base of his cock, making sure there's no shot of him accidentally getting off, and then sucks him to the root in one long swallow.

He yells when she does it. Not pain. Hot, wet, suction all over him, her tongue rubbing the underside while she slowly bobs her head up and down. No, that sensation is most certainly not pain. This is pleasure so sharp that a moan or a groan just wouldn't do it, and if the idea is to wake the dead, he is going to make as much noise as he can, sound off properly, and let her know he appreciates what she's doing.

She sets a slow pace, making sure every millimeter is sucked and licked, and while he certainly appreciates the thoroughness, another minute or two of that is going to turn him into a babbling ball of aching lust.

She hums softly while she does it. He can't hear it, not over the noise he's making, but he can certainly feel it. And he most certainly feels it when she pulls off of him, and then straddles him, sliding down, settling him deep inside her. He definitely hears it when she kisses his ear and says, "Fuck me into the ground."

He's not sure how he did it, (He spends a good ten minutes the next day, thinking through the body mechanics, and he's still not sure how it happened.) but he goes from laying down, Abby straddling him, to him on top, without rolling over. He knows they didn't roll over because her boots were near his head when she started blowing him, and they were at his feet when they got up to go home.

What he does know is that Abby's legs are wrapped around his waist, her hands are on his ass, pulling him into her, she's moaning loud as she can, a long stream of 'God, fuck, yes, Tim! FUCK!' filling his ears, and he is fucking as fast and as hard as he can.

Usually, going full out means he can last about two minutes. Sure, he's not setting any endurance records, but if he's going full out he's also not trying to set any endurance records. What he's trying to do is thrust, as hard as he can, as often as he can, into a very soft, very wet, very hot, and very welcoming woman who is raking her nails over his ass, arching against him, urging him to go faster and making him feel like the strongest, most powerful, and just flat out sexiest man in the history of
sex.

And God, he loves it. This might as well be a drug for how high he is right now.

He thinks he might have made it three minutes, (Could have been five minutes, or maybe thirty seconds, but probably not thirty seconds, his time sense is awfully fried right now, but hopefully not that bad.) before his vision begins to black out and pleasure courses through him, tingling to his fingers and toes.

And when he's able to think again, he says to Abby, who is quietly petting him as he rests against her, "I came so hard I felt it in my hair."

She laughs and kisses him. "Not seeing any zombies."

He smiles at her. "Give me a few minutes; we'll try again."

"Really?" She looks pleasantly surprised.

"Nope. Give me a few minutes, and I'll be asleep."

He doesn't want to move, but he also doesn't want to squash her, so he gets ready to pull out and snuggle up against her, and realizes this would be about the time he'd normally grab a tissue or two for each of them, but they do not have any tissues.

She seems to understand what he's thinking. "This would appear to be the second snag in our plan for the night."

"So, future clubbing dates: you will always wear a skirt or dress, and I'll make sure to have tissues in my pocket."

He pulls out and sits up, taking off his shirt, and hands it to her. Besides his socks, and well, yeah, that's just nasty, it's the only thing either of them are wearing made out of soft cotton. She wipes up and looks at it. "Not wearing that home, are you?"

He wrinkles his nose at it. "Don't think so."

He stands up, knees shaky, and grabs her boots and pants, offering them to her. Then he takes a moment to appreciate how easy the kilt is. He just stood up and is ready to go. That's nice. Actually all of that has been nice, no fumbling, no zippers, no feeling like his pants were going to cut his dick in half when he got hard. No squirming for a more comfortable position. Yes, kilts are a very good thing, indeed.

Abby gets herself dressed, and they mosey back to the car. The whole trip home is at mosey pace. He's too tired and too relaxed to drive fast. So, they get back to Luca's, eventually.

Sneaking in at three in the morning, both of them with grass-stained knees and elbows, his shirt mostly hanging out of his pocket, and wide, half-naughty, half-guilty smirks, is a whole lot of fun.
Ziva flicks on her computer and loads up Facebook. She's having a bite of lunch at her desk. For a few minutes, she just scans her feed, clicking share on a few cute photos, adding a like here and there, not paying too much attention.

And then she just stops and stares.

Her jaw must have fallen open because she feels Tony use one finger to gently shut it.

He stares over her shoulder, looking at the picture on her screen. "Okay, I know McGee's a lot more laid back about this sort of thing than I am, but I can't believe he took a picture of her sitting on some other guy's lap."

The picture in question is Abby, perched on the lap of a Goth in a black kilt.

"Tony," Ziva points at the screen, "that is McGee."

"No!" He looks at the photo a moment longer and sees the tattoo on his right arm. "Oh my God!"

"What are you two staring at?" Gibbs asks as he breezes back to his desk with a fresh coffee.

Tony looks up. "I'm honestly not sure. I think they went home to the Goth mothership."

Gibbs drifts over, stares for a second, tilts his head to the side a little and squints. "Is he wearing lipstick?"

Ziva stares at it. "I think Abby was. He's just got some transfer."

She flicks to the next picture. Abby still in his lap, his one hand on her hip the other on her knee, and her leaning, fingers in his hair, in to kiss him. "Yes, the lipstick is transfer."

Gibbs looks, nods, thinks for a moment what Tim was like ten years ago, and says, "'Man walks down the street in a hat like that, people know he's fearless.'"

Tony stares up at Gibbs, not sure which is more surprising, the words that had just come out of his mouth, or McGee in a dress. "Boss, did you just quote a television show?"

Gibbs shrugs. Emily made Fornell watch Firefly, he liked it, brought it over one night, and then the two of them watched it. Okay, it's not exactly a western, but it's close enough, so they both got into it.

"You did! McGee's wearing a skirt. You're quoting Joss Whedon shows. I woke up in Bizarro world this morning, didn't I?"

Ziva laughs.

That night, while getting ready for bed, Tony notices Ziva looking at her computer. She doesn't usually take her computer to bed. Usually a book goes with her.

He sits next to her and sees another picture of Tim and Abby up.

"Ummm... something you want to tell me?"
She smiles a little. "Do you ever feel the desire to dress up and play?"

He looks at the pic she has up. Tim and Abby, gothed to the nth degree, dancing, his leg between hers, her body plastered to his. He's smiling, hands on her ass, she's got her hands around his neck, head back, laughing.

"Not like that, no." He looks closer. "He's wearing eyeliner, isn't he?" Tony shakes his head, some days he really just doesn't get McGee. Ziva's still staring at him, and he hasn't really answered her question. "But, you, me, a tux, a cocktail dress, and a high end casino. That I could get into."

"And which one of us is wearing the tuxedo?"

"I was thinking you would." He winks at her. "I'd be smashing in a slinky little blue number." He shimmies a little as he says that.

She laughs.

"So, would you like to get dressed up and go play someday?" he asks.

"Someday."

"I've got vacation time to burn, and I bet you do, too."

"Yes. I do. Have you ever been to Monte Carlo?"

Tony grins. That sounds like his perfect idea of fun.
"I know that look. That's your I-don't-know-what-to-do look," Abby says to Tim as they're packing up, getting ready to get back on the road. Twelve days left to go, and Dallas is up next, and after that... well, they haven't yet figured out what comes after that. But there's a whole country with a lot of interesting stuff in it out there.

"I don't."

"So what has you pondering?" He's staring at his bag, open, and all of his stuff spread out around it.

"We don't have enough room to take the new stuff along with us. Something has to get mailed back. I can keep the kilt and boots with me, but I've got to send a pair of jeans and two pairs of shoes back."

"Hmmm... Or send the kilt and boots back."

"Exactly. If we go to Austin and Seattle," they had talked a little about those two cities, "then there will probably be the sorts of places where the kilt might be appropriate. But I'm not exactly swimming in clothing, and not sure if I want to swap out jeans for something I won't wear everywhere."

Abby looks at his things, and then looks at hers. She picks up two of her pairs of boots and puts them on the mail back pile. "Bring 'em. I like you in them."

"Enough to send your boots back?"

"Yeah."

His eyebrows rise. Abby loves her boots, and getting her down to just four pairs of them had taken hours of her debating between them. "Wow."

She smiles and nods. "I really like you in the kilt."

As they're getting closer and closer to his mom's place, Tim is starting to get nervous. His mom was very pleased at the idea of him having a girlfriend, even more pleased about the idea of this being serious and moving toward married and kids, but he's never shown her a picture of Abby, and hasn't exactly mentioned the whole Goth thing. (While the terms "sweet, playful, and brilliant forensic scientist" all got used to describe her, "four years older than me" and "neck tattoo of a spider web" didn't.)

And he's wondering if the woman who set fire to his Mad magazines will greet a Goth soon to be daughter-in-law with grace and open arms. Sure, she's gotten a lot more relaxed and comfortable with life outside proper Navy lines since she divorced his dad sixteen years ago. (She's gotten a lot more relaxed about everything since they got divorced, and he wonders how much of that is due to the fact that she's happy now versus how much of that is not trying to keep the specter of his father happy.) And she wasn't at all bothered by some of Sarah's more interesting boyfriends, which he hopes is a good sign of a warm welcome for Abby, but still, he's a little nervous.

He also hasn't said anything to Abby about this, because if it isn't an issue, he doesn't want to make it one, and he doesn't want her feeling nervous. If his Mom or Ben gets weird about it, they'll be out of there in a heartbeat and onto the next stop.
But he's really hoping she'll like Abby. It'd be nice to have a relationship with at least one of his parents.

Tori and Ben Allister, or as Tim knows them, Mom and Ben, live in what he'd call a McMansion, but there's probably a better word for it. Anyway, it's big, vastly more room than the two of them need, on an itty-bitty lot with seven hundred other McMansions about ten inches away.

It's Ben's development. One of them, at least. He's got properties all over Texas, some of them commercial, some of them residential, and all of them took a pretty hard hit when the market went south. Though by now, things have gotten back to about where they were in '04.

Within seconds of getting out of the car, a tall woman with green eyes and graying dirty-blonde hair is hugging Tim.

"Hi Mom."

She kisses him and then pulls back to give Abby a hug as well, looking her over, a wide smile breaking out on her face. "Oh, Abby! We've heard so much about you over the years!" And Tim feels the nervous tension that had been tightening his shoulders release.

Abby flashes Tim a curious look, and he shrugs a little. "So much about you over the years" isn't how he'd categorize what he's said to them.

His mom sees the look between them and says, "Tim's told us some, but you know him, he keeps his cards close to his vest. Sarah on the other hand..." And it occurs to Tim that while he might not have shown his mom any pics, Sarah, who is on his Facebook feed, probably did. "She was so excited when you two started dating again." Tori takes both of them by the arms. "Come on in, it's too hot to be standing out here."

Tim shrugs a little and opens the trunk, grabbing their bags. "Hot doesn't bother me, Mom." He didn't tell any of his family about the freezer incident. Doesn't think they need to know about it, but he's never going to complain about it being too hot again.

He hands Abby her bag, as he grabs his and shoulders the computer bag, and then they follow his mom into a combination foyer/great room.

"I've got the guest room ready," Tori says, leading them up the stairs and then down a long hallway situated between a few bedrooms, Ben's office, his Mom's office, and then up one more stairway. The third floor in these houses were designed to either be a game room or in-law suite, and Tori and Ben had gone for the in-law suite set up.

So the "guest room" is actually three rooms, a large bedroom, a sitting room, and a full bath. He guesses that when Ben's kids and their families visit, this space is useful. He's only stayed here twice, and both of those times, he'd been on his own, so he'd gotten one of the second floor bedrooms.

"You two just want to unpack and relax?"

Tim nods. Downtime sounds pretty good to him right now. New Orleans to Dallas is about eight hours, not too bad, but traffic had been pretty insane in Dallas and a little decompressing time would be good.

"Okay. Dinner's at seven."

"Thanks, Mom. Ben going to be here for dinner?"
The far wall of the sitting room is something of a shrine to all of the combined McGee and Allister kids and grandkids. It's covered in photographs. And after they get settled, Abby wants to look at them.

She eyes the different shots, most of them involving kids and people she doesn't recognize, but she quickly finds one that looks like it's the key to all the shots around it. It's a picture from Ben and Tori's wedding, one with all of the kids in it. He's standing next to Sarah, his three step-brothers and their wives on the other side of her.

"Who is everyone in this one?"

"You know Sarah and I," his finger hovers over each person as he names them, "and these are my step-brothers, Michael, Seth, and Wes, and their wives, Jill, Gail, and Sarah."

"Two Sarahs?"

"Three." He searches the pictures and then finds one of a little girl, maybe four years old. "She's Sarah, too."

"You have nephews and nieces." Abby looks amazed at that. She's heard him talk about his sister, and his mom, a little, but the rest of his family is a mystery.

"Sort of." He shrugs, nephews and nieces sounds like he's involved in their lives, somehow, but he's not. "I've only ever seen Josh," he points out a tall boy, maybe twelve years old, "in person. That was at Mom and Ben's wedding, when he was four. Really, we have the sort of relationship where I send them Christmas cards and they do the same and we're all on each other's Facebook feeds. That's the only reason I can identify the kids."

"Okay." Another picture grabs her attention. "Who's the baby?" It's a picture of Tim, maybe tenish years old, holding a baby.

He smiles at that shot. His grandfather took it the day Mom and Sarah came home from the hospital. "That's Sarah. I'm nine years older than she is."

She's looking at the shot. "I knew that, but, I don't know, it wasn't really real until looking at this."

"She was nineteen the first time you met her."

"Wow." Her eyes skim to the left. "Oh my God, this is the cutest thing ever!" Abby whips out her phone and takes a quick picture of the shot of Tim in his Wilderness Scout uniform.

"That's going on your Facebook page, isn't it?"

"Oh yeah! I'm practically required by law to post this. It's the girlfriend code, page nine paragraph six, sub paragraph b, ridiculously cute photos of the boyfriend shall be shared with the world."

He half-rolls his eyes. "Thanks. You know Tony's going to blow it up, stick it on a cardboard cut-out, and post it behind my desk."

"Then I'll take it home and keep it."
He looks at her disbelievingly. "What'll you do with it?"

"Hold onto it until our kids are old enough to be embarrassed and then use it to blackmail then into behaving."

He thinks about that for a second, looking at himself, twelve-years-old, chubby, well-scrubbed, in a uniform with every badge that anyone had ever made for Wilderness Scouting on it, and decides it'll be good for that.

"I've heard worse plans."

Abby takes a step to the right. "Which graduation is this?"

He stares at the photo for a second, identifying the honors marks on his robe and the building behind him, his mom, and Sarah. "Johns Hopkins. MIT and high school are around here somewhere."

Abby takes another two steps over, and smiles gently at another of the photos from Ben and Tori's wedding. It's Tim, in a tux, standing next to his mom, walking her down the aisle.

"You gave away the bride?"

"Yeah. Sarah was her maid of honor. Kind of trippy when the Minister asked, 'Who gives this woman,' but it was cool."

"Good wedding?"

He wiggles his hand from side to side, indicating it had it's ups and downs. "I've had better times at weddings, but yeah, it was good."

She looks at him curiously.

He grins. "Not saying it wasn't fun. Just saying I had a better time at Jimmy's." That makes her smile.

She looks through all of the pictures quickly. "No date?"

"June, 2005. Wasn't seeing anyone often enough to travel to Dallas with for a family wedding."

"Am I the first girlfriend you've brought home?"

"Sarah and Penny met my grad school girlfriend, but you're the first one to come home since high school. And in those days... well, every girlfriend got brought home because I lived there."

"You had more than one girlfriend in high school?"

"Yeah. Not a ton more than one, but I wasn't completely anti-social. Here." He starts to look over the wall, half-hoping it's not up there but pretty sure it is, somewhere. And yes, it is. "Senior prom." He grabs her hand before she can get her phone up to snap a picture of that, as well. "I don't care if there is girlfriend law, that one doesn't go anywhere."

"You're so cute!"

"Thanks," he says dryly, "nothing a man loves hearing better than he's 'cute.'"

She's grinning. "You're what, seventeen in that picture?"

"Yeah. Though the reason for pointing it out is, you'll notice there's a girl standing next to me in that
shot. Actual proof of a high school girlfriend."

She laughs. "And let me guess, the reason that this is proof of a girlfriend as opposed to just a date is that there is no way in hell you'd have on a pink bow tie and vest unless said girlfriend demanded it to match her dress."

"It's salmon, not pink, and exactly!"

She smiles and raises an eyebrow. "And did that work out well for you?"

He laughs, nodding, looking pretty pleased with himself. "Hadn't thought about that in a long time, but yeah, it did."

"Just not quite as well as you had hoped?"

"True. The condom stayed in my wallet, but I was pretty happy by the time I got home."

They spend the next fifteen minutes looking at different pictures, Tim giving her little snippets of who is who and what they're doing. By then he's feeling like the last of the nervous tension from wondering how his mom would react to Abby and Dallas traffic is gone.

"So, want to head down and see if we can help with dinner?"

"Yeah."

So, steaks on the gill, baked potatoes, and salad for their first dinner in Texas might be a cliché, but from the way the steaks smell, it's going to be an awfully tasty one.

Tim, Abby, and Tori are standing on the small back porch, waiting to flip the steaks when Ben came through the sliding glass door to meet them. He's not a huge man, he's shorter than Abby, but he's wide and round, and has a big, drawling, Texas sort of voice.

When he steps onto the porch, he kisses Tori first. "Hey, baby."

"Hi." She smiles and kisses him back.

"You were right, they made it!" He gives Tim a warm hand shake. "Good driving, Tim?"

"Yes. The trip was a little over eight hours," Tim says while Ben wraps Abby in an enthusiastic hug.

"Hello!" He kisses her cheek. "He told his mama you were brilliant, but left out you're beautiful! Don't ever leave that out when you describe a woman, son."

Abby grins at Ben, liking him very much.

"How did you two meet?" Abby asks a few minutes later when they're sitting down to eat.

"I was working as a regional sales manager for Lansom Properties. Covering the whole south-west," Tori starts.

Ben grins, he has the sort of face that seems made to grin. "And one of the reasons I'm good at what I do is that I've got no problem swiping the best talent I can find. So, I heard through the grapevine that Lansom's sales are way up over the last two years, which means it was time to go headhunting."
"He walked in, pretending to be a property tax auditor for Texas, wanting to see our records."

"Mostly just wanted to see how she'd handle it."

"And I checked him up and down, booted him out of our office when he wasn't the real deal, and ended up with a job offer before he was out of the parking lot."

Ben smiles, satisfied. "Which she accepted. And from there we got to know each other. I wasn't looking for a girlfriend; my wife had passed a little more than two years earlier and I was still hurting from that, just a manager who could handle anything our work threw at her."

"But we got on." Tori reaches out to touch his hand. "And I noticed I was wandering into his office more often than I needed to."

"And I was giving her more and more jobs, just to be able to talk to her while I did it."

"And eventually we were on an out of town trip...."

"Los Angeles," Ben adds.

"And we decided to stop dancing around each other and see what would happen if we dated."

"A year later we were married. How about you two?"

Abby looks at Tim, and then at Tori and Ben, "It was a bit over ten years ago..."

He's sitting on the sofa next to his mom, waiting for Ben and Abby to come back with what has been promised to be "the best ice cream ever made, let alone that he's ever tasted."

Tori spends a good minute just looking at him, a warm smile on her face. "You're going to marry her?"

"Yeah, Mom." He gets out his phone. He's finally gotten the email saying the ring is done, with photos, yesterday. "Here. Take a look." He's certain about one thing, no matter what, no matter how amazing the final ring is in person, they are not getting their wedding rings from this guy.

She inhales sharply when she sees it, and Tim grins. That's exactly the kind of reactions he wants from Abby's ring.

"Oh, Tim! That's perfect for Abby."

"Thanks. We'll be engaged a day or two after getting home."

"So, are you ready for this?"

He feels so secure at that question, so there's no trouble or pause as he says, "Yes. I am."

She puts her arm around him. "Good. I always worried about you being alone."

"I was never really alone." His mom looks skeptical about that, and he thinks that she's never really gotten the whole team vibe, but it's true. Since he's been at NCIS, he hasn't been alone.

"Okay, worried that your dad and I scared you off of loving someone."

There's more than one grain of truth in that statement. "Scared me cautious, that's certainly true. But
"Good." They sit for another minute. Tim's eyes on the mantle covered with pictures of Ben and Tori, their kids and grandkids.

"Mom?"

"Tim?"

"Why did you marry him?"

His mom smiles a little. "He was brilliant, and funny…” She sees the disbelief on Tim's face. "He had this sharp, dry humor, and a wicked tongue when it came to the sly sarcastic remark."

Tim nods, that he knew all about, unfortunately, because that tongue had been used against him all too often. But he supposes it could be funny if you weren't the target.

"He was driven. Going to save the world, or die trying. And that's appealing. Nothing sexier than a man with a purpose. But in the end, it turns out if you're off saving the world, you're not at home. When your scale of 'important' is global, the people waiting for you don't matter all that much. And when they're determined to be 'important' too, you start to resent them. And that killed anything we might have had."

"You deserved to be important, Mom."

"So did you, Tim." She kisses his forehead. "So, tell me, are you going to learn from the mistakes your father and I made."

"I certainly intend to."

"You have a good talk with your mom?" Abby asks as they settle into bed that night. He's lying on his back, hands behind his head, and she sits, back against the headboard, arms around her knees.

"Yeah. Thanks for the alone time."

She nods. "No problem."

"How are you liking Ben?"

"He's nice. Why don't you talk about him all that much?"

Tim shrugs. He's got nothing against his step-dad, he just doesn't know him all that well. "Probably because I've spent about three days with him since he's been in my mom's life. He makes her happy, which is great, but it's not like I know him."

She seems to be thinking about something, not sure how to bring it up.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks.

She shrugs a little. So he waits, knowing she'll talk eventually.

"My next Depo shot is due for the week after we get home."

"Okay." He keeps waiting, seeing where she'll take this.
"Just… looking at all the wedding pictures, and baby pictures, and... Will you hate me if I want to wait some more?"

He shakes his head. "No. I don't want to rush you into anything. And I don't want fear to rush either of us into anything." Right now, safe, secure, happy, he knows how much fear was in play when they made that decision.

She smiles at him, pleased with that answer. "I want to be married before we have kids."

"Okay. But if you want, I'll marry you tomorrow, or the day after if you want to do it in Vegas."

"Vegas?" She thinks about it, and then grins and shakes her head. "Rumor has it, you've got something planned for me, and I want to see what that is."

"You really are hooked into a different rumor mill than I am."

She laughs.

"So, what else does rumor have to say about that?" Tim asks.

"That I'll be extremely pleased when I see what it is."

"Uh huh... And in this case would your rumor mill be Ziva or Jimmy."

"I'm not telling."

He smiles, and she lays down next to him, on her stomach, propped up on her elbows, kissing him gently.

"You really okay with putting McSciutos off a bit longer?"

"Yeah, I am. Just you and me is a lot of fun. But I won't lie, I really want to see what sort of baby we'll make."

"Me too."

"So, where to next?" he asks. They've gotten stop one and two on the list done, which means they've run out of planned activities and have hit the 'wing it' part of their trip.

"Austin?" she says. "Good music scene. Clubs we'd both like. Kilt friendly territory."

"Sounds good."

"I was wondering," Abby asks, "You got to see some of my old haunts, is there anywhere like that for you? A place that matters?"

He thinks about it. He's not really a place person. "I guess. But we've got to head a few thousand miles east to get to them. There are a few spots in Boston I've got some history with."

"Nothing in California?" He lived there for ten years.

"My grandparent's house is there, but without them in it, it's just wood and stone. Nothing I want to go 1500 miles out of my way for."

That makes sense to her. "I was hoping to see Seattle, never been out there before, and yeah, Vegas sounds good to me." However, depending on where they had lived, their house might not be that far
He reaches for his phone and starts to plot that out. "They lived in Redding, and from Vegas to Seattle, that's sort of on the way."

"Anywhere out there you do want to see?"

"Portland?"

"The dream of the nineties is still alive?"

"Cute. Just never been there, it's supposed to be cool, and two of my college buddies ended up teaching at Reed. Wouldn't mind catching up if you wouldn't mind a night with a bunch of hardcore math/computer geeks."

"I like math and computers geeks."

"Good." He's fiddling with GoogleMaps. "So, say, Austin to Vegas is eighteen hours. Could stop somewhere in between or just drive hard. Vegas to Redding is another ten, Redding to Portland is only another six, and Portland to Seattle is only three. From there, we can figure out how to head east.

She's nodding. "Sounds good."

He puts the phone down, and rolls onto his side, facing her. "One more day here, and then onto the real vacation part of it?"

"I think so." She kisses him again, soft and sweet. "You know what I've never done?"

"Skydiving with Elvis impersonators?"

"That too. But I was thinking, I've never had sex in my boyfriend's parent's house."

"Really?" He's smiling at that.

"Yeah."

"And were you hoping to do something about remedying that?"

"I was hoping to." She flashes him a huge grin and kisses him again. Her hand falls to his waist then slides to cup his dick. "If I could find a boyfriend willing to give me a hand on that."

"Well," he chuckles, "that's not my hand, but I could probably overlook your appallingly bad grasp of my anatomy to help you in your time of need."

"Appallingly bad grasp of my anatomy?" She looks mock insulted.

"That's still not my hand." He laughs.

"Yeah, but I thought you liked my grasp." She pulls gently, letting her hand slide over him.

"Yes." He sighs as she plays with him a little more. "So good." He pulls her tighter to him and kisses her deeply, tongue and lips sliding over her. Then between soft wet kisses says, "Okay, very good grasp. Liking that grasp a whole lot. Appallingly inaccurate grasp of my anatomy."

She lets go, rolls him onto his back, and lifts his hands over his head, and twines her fingers with his,
and leans her weight into his hands.

"Hey, don't let go!"

"If you're going to complain about lack of attention to your hands, I'm going to pay attention to your hands."

"Tease."

"You know you love it!" She scoots up a bit, so she's straddling his chest, using her left knee to keep his right arm pinned, and then take his left hand in both of hers.

She settles back, holding his hand gently, and begins lightly stroking her fingers over it. And yeah, it's nice, kind of sharp and tickly in places, but, well, he's a guy. This isn't going to get him off. Hell, it's not going to get him hard for that matter, not by itself.

Of course, the view, her sitting across his chest, naked, legs wide, so her knee can press into his bicep, that'll do the trick. Yes, that is indeed doing the trick.

So, he's not exactly paying too much attention to what she's doing with his hand. He's paying significantly more attention to the view, and vaguely wondering how good the sound-proofing is on these rooms. He hasn't heard anything from downstairs, but he doesn't know if that's because Ben and Tori are being quiet or because he just can't hear them.

And yes, he's fairly sure his mom knows he's not a virgin, let alone suspects that he has sex with Abby on a pretty regular basis, but they've never talked about it specifically, and there's a difference between knowing intellectually and hearing it happen ten feet above your head.

She bites the ball of his thumb, and he refocuses on her. "Something more interesting to you?"

"Just wondering how good the soundproofing is."

"Oh." That appears to be an acceptable reason for his mind to wander.

"Yeah."

"You don't want them to hear?"

He nods. "Pretty much. There's kinky, and there's way out of bounds, and letting your mom and step-dad listen in strikes me as way out of bounds."

She nibbles her way to the tip of his index finger, then sucks it and his middle finger into her mouth. She licks them, swirling her tongue over the pads of his fingers. That has his attention. Then she slowly pulls back, tongue leaving soft wet licks as her lips release.

"Then we'll just have to see how quiet we can be."

He nods, grinning, eyes warm and flirty.

She trails his wet fingers down her chest, down her stomach, and slips them between her lips, while shifting her leg off of his arm.

He knows what to do with his fingers now, and she sighs quietly, leaning down to his ear. "How's that for giving me a hand?"

He kisses her. "Scoot up a bit, and I'll give you some tongue, too."
She laughs. "Might have a hard time staying quiet if you do that. Got anything to help muffle me?"

He's probably grinning like a dope, but he's just enjoying this so much. "I just might. Scoot up and flip around and we can find out."

He's already licking her gently when he hears her say, "Oh, yes, this will do nicely," then feels her hand wrap about the base of his dick while her lips wrap around the tip.

And yeah, he would have liked to moan. Her pussy on his lips, his tongue pressed against her clit, while she's swallowing him, yeah, that's the sort of thing that makes him moan, loudly, but he keeps quiet, and just sighs a little, squeezing her hip with his right hand, hoping that gets across a silent *I love this! So good!*

And as he licks fast, while his fingers push-pull in and out gently and slowly, he feels the vibrations from her throat, and knows that in any other circumstance, that would have been a loud moan out of her, as well.

And since they're doing such a good job of being quiet, it seems horrendously loud when he thrusts fairly hard and the bed creaks in a way beds only creak when someone is having sex in them. They both go still for a second, and then break apart in giggles. A minute later, he kisses her thigh and says, "Okay, this isn't going to work, where next?"

She scans the room quickly. Hardwood floors might be nice from an appearance point of view, but not so much fun for sex. Overstuffed comfy looking chair in the corner should work.

She nods toward it, and he stands up, taking her hand in his and sits in the chair. She settles herself in his lap, and that's awfully good, too.

And like the bed, that's fine, as long as they keep their movements soft and gentle. As soon as they got really going, it becomes abundantly clear that this chair rocks as it bangs with a loud thwack into the wall behind it and the legs hit the hardwood floor with a sharp crack.

Once again, they stop, laugh, and Abby says, "Your mom is evil, you know that?"

"I'm getting that idea." He pulls her tight to his hips, wraps his hands around her hips and stands up, still inside her.

She crosses her feet on the small of his back and holds onto his shoulders.

It's the first time they've tried this for more than a few seconds without a wall or something to brace against. But by that point he's pretty close and she is, too. Plus all of the walls have picture frames on them, and with the way they've been going they would rattle or fall off and break or something.

So they try standing freeform and find that it works pretty well. (Holding her up long enough to get both of them off is a kick for him. Nothing he'd ever mention, but yeah, especially since he remembers how shaky his arms were feeling after Jimmy and Breena's wedding, when he was holding her against a wall, that feels really good. And judging by the way she keeps petting his arms as they fall asleep, she likes it, too.) And his tongue on hers (or vice versa) does a pretty good job of keeping them both fairly quiet.

And if Tori or Ben hear anything, they don't let on come breakfast the next morning.
They spend a day and a half in Austin, mostly hitting different music clubs, but after lunch on the second day, Tim suggests they go back to the hotel for a nap. Abby wakes about three hours later and finds Tim sitting in front of his laptop looking at some sort of map.

"What's that?"

"Every speed trap on an interstate in the West."

"Every speed trap in the West?"

"On an interstate."

"Okay." She keeps looking at the map, not seeing a need for this information. "And why do we need to know this?"

He turns, grins up at her, and kisses her. "According to Ziva my car handles amazingly at one twenty. I've never had it over ninety. And sitting in front of us is hundreds of miles of pretty much nothing."

"So, you want to get out there and drive like a maniac?"

"Yeah. You me, hundreds of miles of nothing, the moon rising over us, see if we can blow past El Paso in less than six hours, that sound good?"

"Oh yeah!"

Tearing through West Texas, moon rising high in the sky over the desert, music on loud, Abby at the wheel, racing the good ol'boys in pickups goes into Tim's I've-got-to-remember-this-forever file.

"How did you learn to drive like this?"

"Southern boys love their cars, and my daddy was one of 'em. You should see what I can do with a pickup."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah. Someone had to teach Gibbs how to do a bootleggers turn."

Tim looks very startled by that idea, and Abby laughs, cranking the music and flooring the gas.

At the age of thirty-five, Tim McGee thinks he had figured out everything that turned him on. So he is more than a little surprised at how driving insanely fast with Abby by his side affects him. Not displeased by this, mind you, but definitely surprised.

It's only when he's driving. Her driving is lots of fun, but doesn't make him hard. Maybe it's some deep-seated James Bond thing. Something about going insanely fast in a smoking hot car with a smoking hot girl next to him. Or maybe it's just the adrenaline rush flowing through his veins and making his skin buzz; he knows he read something somewhere about danger being an aphrodisiac. Possibly it's because of the focus required to do it. Driving fast is like hardcore coding, while doing it he's entirely in the zone, but this zone included the car, the road, the clutch, gas, gearshift, Abby's left
leg in a fishnet stocking, and her hand on his right thigh.

But eventually, as Abby seems to notice that he's enjoying this a bit more than he enjoyed her driving, that hand drifts further up his leg, under the kilt.

Which is when his foot hits the break. Not so fast as to cause them to skid out or anything, but there is a certain urgency to it nonetheless. While he might indeed be enjoying this, he also doesn't want to die for it. Back in grad school he'd seen Swordfish with a few of his buddies, and came to the conclusion that the odds were probably fifty-fifty that if he had a gun held to his head while getting a blow job that he'd be able to crack the code or die with a smile on his face. He's not thinking those odds have gotten any better, or that he needs to test this theory with his car.

And since he doesn't have to drive as Abby's hand closes around him, he's thinking now is a good time to stop the car.

About two seconds after the car comes to a stop, Abby's in his lap, and a second after that it occurs to both of them that they're just too damn tall to do this with the top up. So a quick break in the action takes place while he gets the roof of the car tucked back, and pulls them off the road.

There's an image, a feeling, he has burned into his mind from this: sitting in the passenger seat, still buzzing from the adrenaline, Abby on his lap, hands on his shoulders, with her head back, moving fast against him, one of his hands under her shirt, on her breast, the thumb of his other hand on her clit, the sun rising behind them, lighting her yellow-pink, cold air and hot sex flushing her cheeks, while they both moan and greet the sun with loud, shuddering orgasms.

Making love in the Porsche as the sun comes up over the desert is definitely a treat.

By the time the sun is full up, they're both pretty relaxed and sleepy, so they ease into Bowie, Arizona at a very relaxed place, and crash for ten hours at the first hotel they come to.
In retrospect, driving through Arizona, at night, in a Porsche, with no lights on is probably a bad idea.

But the moon is edging toward full, the stars are a million miles closer out here than they are back in DC and with the headlights on you just can't see the desert all that well. It's more than light enough to drive, and Tim's got the running lights on so other drivers (not that there are any) can see him well enough.

The only good luck on this is when he sees the flashers in his rear view mirror, he's only going ten over the limit.

The cop who pulls them over looks to be, maybe, and Tim thinks this is a generous assessment, seventeen-years-old.

This is probably what he looked like to Tony when they first started working together.

He rolls down the window and sees the cop, Jeffery, according to his name tag, but for some perverse reason Tim's thinking of him as Opie, do a double take. Whatever he was expecting to see in that car, it isn't Tim and Abby.

He stammers a little. "License and registration."

Tim hands them over, and Opie checks them out. "Excuse me, sir, do you know how fast you were going?"

"Eighty-five," Tim answers calm and easy.

Opie blinks, not expecting that. "And did you know you were driving with no lights?"

"Yes." Tim nods, enjoying, probably not in the kindest way, but he is finding it amusing, how flustered this is making Opie. "You can see better without them."

Apparently that also isn't an answer he's expecting. He stares at the car, sees Abby grinning at him, and says, "Can I check your trunk?"

Tim sighs. "No."

Opie's not happy about that. His eyebrows narrow and he glares at Tim.

There's nothing illegal in the trunk. But he doesn't want this wet behind the ears noob going through his computers or sex toys. Let alone having to deal with getting everything repacked.

He didn't bring his badge or gun with him. It's a crime to use his badge for anything other than ID, like to try and get free stuff, and he's sensitive to how people react to seeing his badge, so unless he's on duty he doesn't keep it on him.

"Do you have a computer in your car?"

That also throws Opie—Jeffrey—for a loop.

"Yes."
"Go onto the Federal Agent Database. I'm Special Agent Tim McGee, NCIS, badge number," and he rattles off the digits.

Opie doesn't like that. "If you're a Federal Agent, where's your badge?"

"Not here, for the same reason you don't get to look in my trunk." Okay, sure that reason would be, *I'm on vacation*, but he doesn't much mind if Opie thinks it's some sort of special op."

"Who's she?"

"Abby Sciuto. I don't have a badge, but I'm in the Federal Employee Database as well, S-C-I-U-T-O, NCIS, Lead Forensic Specialist."

Opie heads over to his computer and twenty minutes later, he comes back. "Okay, you two check out. Please, turn your lights on."

"Fine." Tim flicks them on.

"You can go."

And he drives off.

"Someone better be dead," Tim says as one lone eyeball opens just enough to confirm that yes, Tony is calling him at 5:22 in the morning, or, more relevant, nine minutes after he and Abby went to bed.

"That someone'll be you if I don't have an answer for Vance immediately as to why a LEO out of Dolan Springs, AZ was looking you up last night."

The annoyed look on Tim's face would be way more impressive if Tony could see it. Alas, voice call. "I didn't bring my badge along, and I didn't want Opie looking through the trunk."

"Opie?" He's lost Tony on that one.

"Could we maybe do this when I've had more than three minutes of sleep?"

"Where are you?"

"Vegas."

"Okay. Just give me the really fast version. What happened?"

"Traffic stop. Local LEO wanted to search my car. I didn't want him doing it. Told him I was an officer. He checked. He backed off. And we went on our way."

"Fine. I'll let Vance know, and he can calm back down."

"Good." Tim hangs up and goes back to sleep.

"Are you awake now?" Tony asks.
Tim's watching him on Skype. "Yeah." It's five in the afternoon where they are, eight where Tony is. They'd decided to spend the day sleeping, and then get ready for the evening.

Ziva pops into the picture. "Hello, McGee."

"Hey, Ziva."

"So, what's the story? Why was Opie checking you out?" Tony asks.

Tim tells him and wraps up with, "And that's why you don't drive a Porsche though Arizona at night with no lights on."

"What do you have in your car you don't want a cop going through?" Tony asks.

Tim smiles. "The sorts of things I'm not telling you about, either."

"Why are you driving at night?" Ziva wants to know.

"Better view, no traffic. Oh, by the way, if you thought it was good at one twenty, one forty is amazing."

"You were driving the Porsche at one hundred and forty miles an hour?" Ziva looks stunned, and Tony's jaw has dropped.

Abby, just getting out of the shower, wrapped in a towel, crouches next to the screen. "Hey. No, that was me. He didn't get over one thirty."

He kisses the tip of her nose. "I might have gotten over a hundred and thirty, but you distracted me."

"Okay, that's enough of that!" Tony cuts in, "Did Opie get you going that fast?"

"Nah. We did that in Texas. McGee made sure we knew where the speed traps were going to be so we didn't get caught. But that was the night before, last night we were going kind of slow."

"Yeah, not driving one hundred and thirty miles an hour or more with no lights. I wasn't trying to get out of a ticket. I just didn't want Opie messing with our stuff. We were going eighty-five."

"Pretty zippy, McSpeedracer."

"Speed limit's seventy-five out there. Not too fast."

Abby turns the computer to the side a bit so her getting dressed isn't in view, and Tim moves with it. "Anyway, is Vance pissed?"

"No. There was no complaint or anything. He just wanted to know why you and Abby got looked up last night."

"That's why."

"And you're in Vegas now?"

"Yeah. Figure we'll spend a few days messing around here, then head north and west. Hit Portland and Seattle, then back east again."

"Going to come home married?" Tony asks.
Abby's not dressed enough to get back into frame, but they hear her say, "Oh no, we're making all of you come to our wedding."

"And Gibbs would pout if you got married without him," Ziva says to Abby.

Abby laughs at that idea. "There's something I'd love to see. Gibbs pout." She looks at Tim, smiling. "Think it's worth it?"

"No, because if he's going to start pouting, he's also going to headslap me with a brick. Gibbs likes to spread unhappy all over the place. Plus Jimmy and Breena really would pout."

"Good point." Abby nods.

"And so would Harper," Tim adds.

"Another good point."

"Who's Harper?" Tony asks.

"Abby's niece. Got to meet her in New Orleans."

"You have a niece?"

"Luca and Melody's daughter. She's fourteen. Tim's got three step-brothers and like seven nieces and nephews."

"Really?" Ziva asks.

"Yeah."

"And you have never mentioned them?" Ziva asks.

Tim shrugs. "I've only ever seen one of them. They aren't family so much as a bunch of kids who call my mom, Granma."

"Okay." Tony gets that. He has no idea how many nephews or nieces he might have if he was to count the kids of all his step-brothers and sisters. He shifts the topic, "So, Vegas, then what?"

"Portland, Seattle, thinking North Dakota—" Abby says, popping back into view, wearing a cute, red lace cocktail dress.

"Abby, what on earth is in North Dakota?" Tony asks.

"Cool ghost towns." Ziva and Tony look at each other, both of them silently saying, 'Of course' with their expression. "And then back east again."

"Sounds good. Keep posting pictures, we're enjoying them," Ziva says.

"You should have seen Gibbs looking at the ones from the Goth club. You'll appreciate this, McGeek, he was quoting Firefly."

Tim grins for a moment, then thinks about that. "Tony, why can you recognize Firefly quotes?"

"Palmer held a gun to my head and made me watch it."

Tim narrows his eyes, disbelief in his gaze. "Nope, not buying that."
"Fine. I like movies, and if you like movies you're at least vaguely aware of Joss Whedon, and if you've run into Joss Whedon, then you're more or less required by law to watch Firefly."

"Uh huh… We'll talk more about this later. When we don't have a dinner date," Tim says.

"You have a date?" Ziva asks.

"Yeah, and I still need to get ready." Tim's in jeans and a t-shirt, not quite dressed up enough for tonight.

"Who do you even know in Vegas?" Tony asks.

"Big surprise, talk about it later," Abby finishes, grinning, and switches off Skype.
People Actually Read His Books

Two days later, Tony looks over Ziva's shoulder at her Facebook feed. "You see, that makes sense to me."

Abby in a cocktail dress, leaning over Tim's hand, blowing gently on dice. Tim's wearing what Tony considers a surprisingly nice suit, dice in one hand, the other on Abby's hip.

The next shot, the two of them with Penn and Teller gets a smile of approval from Tony, as well. He's not a huge magic fan, but those two are hilarious. Good to see Tim and Abby got to see a cool show. He wonders a little at how much backstage passes must have cost.

The shot after that, Abby dancing with Teller, has Tony reaching for his cell phone.

"McGee, why is Abby dancing with Teller?"

"Tony?"

Tim sounds sleepy, and Tony realizes that it's 7:00 AM Mountain, 6:00 AM Pacific, and he has no idea which one of those time zones they happen to be in.

"We're looking at Abby's Facebook feed. She's dancing with Teller. How did that happen?"

He can hear Tim sitting up, and waking up a little. "That was our dinner date. He's a fan, Tony. Five years ago he sent me a letter, saying if I ever got to Vegas to look him up. We got there. We looked him up. Saw the show, which was awesome, and had dinner with him, Penn, and both of their wives. It was a blast."

"Huh."

"Can I go back to sleep now?"

"Yeah, sure. Sorry."

He looks at Ziva, completely stunned by that, and then tells her what McGee had told him, wrapping up with, "You know, people really read his books."

"Yes, Tony. I know that. I read his books."

"But the second one was so... undefined."

"It was an unfinished rough draft. Did you ever read the version he published?"

"No."

She gets up, walks to her bookshelf, grabs a copy and tosses it to him. "Give it a try."

Four hours and three quarters of the book later, Tony looks up. "You just like this because you're all super-bad-ass-assassin, killing people right and left and looking mega-hot while you do it."

She smiles a little at that. "I do not mind that. It is a good story, too. And once I got over 'Lisa' and 'Lisa and Tommy' it was interesting to see how McGee understood who I was and am. He doesn't see everything or understand everything he sees, but he does sees different things about us, probably that we don't see, or don't want to see, about ourselves. I do not know if he's right about the things he
writes about Gibbs, but I felt like I understood him better after reading these."

Tony nods; he can see that. "So, there's another one after this?"

"Yes. And he finished the fourth one about a month ago. Abby tells me there'll be a fifth one, and that he's got a contract for three more after that."

"You guys talk about his books?"

"We talk about all sorts of things. But yes, his books as well. Breena's read them, too."

Tony smiles, remembering Pimmy Jalmer. "How'd she take that?"

"She thought it was funny, and enjoyed the symbolism of being intractably attracted to and repulsed by the finality of death, and the futility of trying to overcome it with the actions of life."

"Uh..." He'd read that scene and just about wet his pants he was laughing so hard at the idea of Jimmy wanting to have sex with dead people. He'd completely missed there was anything besides his Probie messing with the Autopsy Gremlin.

"She's a very deep reader. But once she said that, I re-read it, and yes, that's in there."

"Okay."

"And according to McGee, that's what he was going for in that scene, so he was pretty happy that at least one other person read past the sex with dead people into what it meant."

"Kinky bastard."

"That, too. But he's also a good writer."

Tony stares at Ziva, eyes slightly narrowed. Okay, he knows about some of Tim's interests, but how does she know that? It's certainly not anything he's ever mentioned.

"How do you know that?"

Ziva laughs at the way he's looking at her. "I thought you knew? When Vance showed up, and reassigned all of us, McGee and I spent the weekend together, consoling each other. We got to know each other very well."

Tony drops the book. Ziva laughs harder. "I'm sorry Tony, no, nothing like that. When I have lunch with Abby and Breena, the conversation can get a little..." she stops and thinks, "personal. I know a lot about Jimmy, too."

Tony goes white. "Oh God. So they know..."

Ziva smiles. "Nothing you would not want them to know. And just like I've never mentioned what it is that I know about Jimmy or McGee to you, Abby and Breena do not blab to them."

"So, you talk with them about sex?"

"Yes, and I know you talk with McGee about it, too."

"We're guys, talking about sex is something we do."

"We are girls, talking about sex is something we do."
"Yeah, but you don't do the whole, guess how many times I got laid last week, sort of thing."

A small mischievous smile crosses Ziva's face. "Are you certain about that?"

"I was… Do you do that?"

"Rarely, and neither do you and McGee, not anymore."

"Not ever really. It's not fair when one of you is so far above the other. If I come up with three in a week and he's got three in a year, it's just sort of sad."

"Is that why you were so off when he and Abby started dating? You were in a dry spell and he was racking up seven or eight a week."

Tony shakes his head looking incredulous. "Seven or eight? What does he, run on batteries?" Ziva just smiles. He sighs. "No. That wasn't it. He had the balls to say, screw twelve, I'm getting Abby. He was ready to move forward with her. And she was ready for him." He touches her face, gently, "And I was dreaming of you, and neither of us were ready, yet. And it was frustrating. And I was jealous as hell. And none of you told me, which was worse. And he did talk to someone, but it was Palmer. And I didn't notice what was going on, but you did, which made me feel like an idiot. Add in walking in on him and Abby, and it was just a bad week."

She nods. "I'm sorry you found out like that."

He shrugs a little. Not like Ziva didn't tell him to mind his own business. "So, what did I miss? How did you figure it out?"

"Nothing you could have picked up on, at first. Your sense of smell isn't as good as mine. He'd come up from the lab smelling like her, and it only happened when he was down there on his own. Then at Jimmy's wedding, as we were going in, he saw a 'friend' at the front desk and told me to go in while he said hi. If he had seen a friend, he would have introduced me. If he was getting a room, he would not have. He was staring at her during the vows. I don't read lips well enough to know what he mouthed at her, and I'm honestly not sure he knew he was doing it, but he was. They both vanished for about twenty minutes during the wedding, and when we saw him again, he smelled like her and was looking very relaxed. By that point, I was certain enough to tell him he didn't need to give me a ride home. He gave me his keys, I drove the Porsche up to the Blue Ridge Mountains, which was fun, and then we talked about it on Monday when he picked up his car."

He thinks about that and then says, "So, besides talking about sex, what do you and Abby and Breena do?"

"You mean, do we gossip, try on makeup, and do each other's hair?"

Tony seems to appreciate that image, he's certainly grinning happily at it. "Something like that."

"We eat, we talk, we usually split some insanely calorie rich chocolate-based dessert. Sometimes we go shooting."

"Of course."

She smiles. "How else are we going to wipe the floor with you guys every time we play laser tag if we do not practice? You, Palmer, and McGee keep getting better, so we have to as well."
Like with Abby in the graveyard, getting oriented takes Tim a little while. The neighborhood is fairly similar, but landmarks he used to know, like the white house with swing set in the front yard is now blue and the swing set has been replaced by weeping willows, are gone or changed.

But he still knows this neighborhood, knows it in his bones, even if the landscape has shifted a bit. He could just punch the address into the GPS, but he wants to find this on his own. Wants to make sure it's still there, inside him, somewhere.

And it is.

"Haven't been back since '97," he says to Abby as they turn onto yet another residential street in maze of residential streets.

"What happened in '97?"

"Lots of things. My mom and dad finally divorced, and she moved back here for a few months. It was the last summer I came 'home' from college, so I also ended up here for a few months. I hadn't planned on coming back. I didn't summer after freshman year. But Pop was sick, and Mom was trying to get resettled with Sarah, so an extra set of hands was useful."

He pulls up in front of a clearly empty, but cared for, house. It's old. Built around the turn of the last century, maybe a little before. It's light blue with darker blue trim, a large wrap around porch, and Victorian lines.

"My mom grew up in this house. Pop and Gran got it right after World War II."

As they get out of the car Abby says, "What do you think? Maybe some place like this for us?"

He nods. It's aesthetically pleasing, and this sort of structure has good memories of family attached to it in his mind. "We can't go in. I didn't think to ask for a key before we left Texas."

"Don't want to break in?"

"Nah. Didn't bring my picks, either. And there's nothing inside. They've been holding onto it since my grandmother died. Between the market being lousy and this being a fairly nice neighborhood, they keep talking about maybe using it as a summer home after they retire. I think mostly my mom just doesn't want to really let it go. If she sells it, her childhood, and a lot of ours, is really gone."

He sits on the porch steps, and she sits next to him. He points to the far end of the porch. "There used to be a swing there. I'd sit next to Pop, and we'd rock, watch the sun set, talk. A lot of my better childhood memories are of this porch." He points to the spot just behind where they parked and smiles a little. "Got my first driving lesson there." He pats the step right next to her and smiles. "First kiss here."

"How old were you?"

"Thirteen. It was summer. Jessie Malone lived," he points three houses down the street, "there. My dad was away. I'm sure my mom found being in a house with just us lonely. So we stayed up here that summer. Jessie and I were both too smart, too bored, too shy, and liked astronomy. Pop let us
play with his telescope. Spent a lot of nights watching the stars, so nervous I felt like I was going to explode, and floating on a cloud every time her hand brushed mine. Last night of summer, she leaned over and kissed me before running home."

She smiles at that story. "What happened after that?"

"We wrote each other for a while. Then the Admiral got assigned to Alameda, mostly on land, so I spent a lot of time fighting with him, so my letters to her got further and further apart. I didn't like writing about that. And I don't know what was going on in her life, but her letters to me cooled down, as well. Next summer, I came back here, and by then her family had moved."

"Was she pretty?"

He smiles. "Her hair was long and brown, and she'd wear it in two ponytails."

She grins back at that.

He stands up and offers her his hand. "Here. Wanna see something cute?"

"Sure."

Still holding her hand he leads her to the backyard. And while it's true that he hasn't thought of this in years, probably decades at this point, his body knows where it's going. In the far backyard, was an old oak tree with a long branch perfect for sitting on about four feet up.

"It seemed higher when I was a kid." He boosts himself up, and she follows. "I don't think the next level up will hold us, but see that branch there?" He points to one about four more feet above them and she nods. "Okay, look on the trunk about three feet above that."

She does, seeing the heart with TM+JM carved into it, and smiles brightly at him. "You're right, that's so cute."

He smiles. "I really liked her."

"You spend a lot of time in this tree?"

"Yeah. I'd sit up there, lean against the trunk, and read."

They sit there for a few more minutes. He's swinging his feet, something else that brings back memories of being a kid. Finally he says, "We should probably get back on the road if we want to make Portland by sundown."

"Okay. Thanks for showing this to me."

"Not a problem."

"I like having images to go with the idea of you as a kid."

They're about ten feet away when she turns around and takes a shot of the tree, and then as they head toward the car she gets one of the porch.

Once they get in the car she says, "You'd prefer I didn't put this on Facebook, right?"

He nods.

"No problem. I just want them for me, and one day, our kids."
He smiles gently at that, liking the idea of telling their kids about his grandfather.
Portland, North Dakota, Kansas

The dream of the nineties might still be alive in Portland, but neither of them see any proof of that.

What Abby does learn, and granted this is something she has a somewhat firm handle on, but has never really seen in action, is the fact that Tim might be a certifiable genius.

It's not a shock or anything. The guy's a federal agent, bestselling author, and a computer wizard. Tim is not, by any stretch of the imagination, an intellectual lightweight.

But there's the two of them talking geek to each other, which usually leaves the rest of team NCIS in the dust, and then there's Tim with Steve and Dan.

They lived together for a year while at MIT. Tim getting his MS in forensic computing, Steve was getting his PhD in pure mathematics, and Dan was working on a MS in computer learning.

About ten minutes into a mind-blowing dinner (and not just for the conversation. The sushi and sake is beyond excellent. Abby's not the only one who looks like she wants to lick the plate.) the conversation's ranging from Beal's Conjecture to machine learning, to Tim's own sandbox, forensic computing, and back again into esoteric math, with a smattering of string theory, and some astrophysics to round things out before they got into the intricacies of MMORGing.

Abby's no slouch in the science department; she's got brains coming out the ears, and the MENSA certification to prove it. But even she gets a little lost when the three of them get talking about Dan's current project. She understands they all think it's sexy as hell and beyond awesome, and she gets the basic idea, feed the program a problem with a ton of variables. Then the program crunches the numbers in a bunch of different ways. Pretty straightforward. Then it somehow figures out which of the answers are the best. So it combines the programs that get the best answers, mates them with each other to come up with even better answers. And keeps doing that. On its own. Supposedly, eventually coming up with the ultimate version of whatever formula would answer the question it had originally been asked. But when Tim and Dan get talking shop on the actual programming she and Steve just sit there and stare.

Finally Steve says, "They used to do this for hours. I'd finish my homework, they'd be talking and messing with their computers. I'd go to bed. I'd get up the next morning, they'd still be at it."

"Nah, we just did that to mess with you," Dan says. "We'd break off for Warcraft when you went to sleep. That's why we always had better gear."

Tim just smiles, and the conversation slips to life in academia, which Tim and Abby don't know much about first-hand, but don't have any trouble keeping up with.

Finally Dan asks, "So how's being a Fed? Did it work the way they promised?"


Steve just stares at her for a moment and then says, "You're a cop?"

"No. I'm a forensic specialist."

"She runs our lab."

Steve grins. "Good, the world makes sense again. No one as smart and sexy as you should be a
cop."

Abby smiles at Tim, "He's a cop."

"And he's nowhere near as sexy as you are," Dan finishes.

Tim whips out his cell phone. "Lots of sexy at NCIS." And shows them pictures of Ziva and several other co-workers.

"Damn, if I had known all the beautiful women were Feds, I would have taken them up on their offer," Dan says.

"We both got offers from Federal Agencies," Tim adds to explain Dan's comment.

"Machine learning was pretty hot for the FAA and all four branches of the military. But CMU gave me a better deal, so I went with them. I'm still surprised Tim didn't end up with the CIA or IRS, they gave him way better offers than NCIS."

He shrugs a little, Abby staring at him. "The CIA was willing to pay for my doctorate as long as I got it overseas and paid close attention to the people around me while I did it. IRS offered a ton of money and a car."

"Why did you take NCIS?" Abby asks. She knows about the thing with his Dad, and wonders how it actually went down.

"You ever meet Nick Armstrong?" Tim asks.

She nods, he was an agent out of the Mike Franks mold. After he lost an eye and was taken out of field work, he became a recruiter for NCIS.

"He asked me if I was John McGee's kid. I said yes. And he said, 'Screw this behind a desk bullshit. Come with me, you'll put real bad guys in jail, carry a gun, and get the girl, while using your computer skills.'"

Abby looks amused. "Yeah, he would have said something like that."

"It took ten years, but he was right."

"So they do let you carry a gun?" Steve asks.

"Yeah. I'm actually really good with one now."

"Huh." Dan looks really surprised. "We took him shooting once, and he flinched every time the gun fired. He did manage to hit a target, but not his own."

He looks at Abby, "Remember when I told you that Jim Nelson got me through FLETC? That was the help I needed. I couldn't shoot to save my life."

"Not a problem anymore," she says with a little smile.

"Nope."

"If he's showing off, he'll shoot a smiley face in the target at 100 meters."

Dan and Steve just stare at him, and he can see the image of him they have in his mind, twenty-three years old, all three of them at the range, flinching each time anyone fired, and not having anything
that anyone would ever consider a good time.

Tim shrugs. "You get to a point where just head shots aren't very challenging."

Dan's shaking his head. "Wow."

Tim grins. "So tell us about Tokyo, you did a fellowship there, right?"

"Where are you?" Tony asks the next day over the video connection. It always surprises Tim how different MTAC looks from this side of the connection.

"Montana."

"What the hell is in Montana?"

"No speed limits." Tony looks irked by that, but Ziva smiles. "So what's up?"

Tony begins to fill him in on the case and how they'd hit a snag trying to get through the suspect's firewall.

"Okay, let me patch into my work computer. I'll have something for you in a few hours."

"Thanks, McGee."

"Damn, it's cold," Tim says as they step out of the car, facing Amerly, ND.

DC in January has nothing on North Dakota in October. There were a few ghost towns Abby wanted to see, so, since they had the time, and it was in the right general direction, North Dakota went on the itinerary. Real ghost towns, the stuff of so many legends, how could that not be awesome?

But he's not exactly having a grand time. It's too cold, too dead, too ruined, and with the wind howling away, not nearly quiet enough.

As they stood on a windswept plain, flurries dancing around them, a barn, a church, a feed lot, two houses, and a forgotten crossroads all slowly being eaten by the prairie, Abby says, "How about we head south from here?"

"That sounds like a really good idea to me."

They are sitting on a bed in a hotel room in Aberdeen, South Dakota, Tim writing an email, Abby updating their Picasa album, when she says, "I got a good one of you."

He comes to a stop a minute or so later and looks up. "Let me see."

She flips her computer around to him, and he looks. "Not bad." It's not so much of him, as a picture he happens to be in. It's from the second ghost town they had seen, Reslin. Once upon a time, round about 1900, close to three hundred people had lived there. Now it's just wind, a few buildings, and grass that spreads out forever.

He's standing in front of the church, because all of these little towns had churches, and though the homes and barns and farms and schools all slowly fell apart, people kept going to the churches. Every one of those towns they saw, the church was the building in the best upkeep, because it was the last thing abandoned.
But no one had lived in this town since 1952, and even the church was listing about thirty degrees shy of vertical.

He's standing in front of it, the only thing in the shot upright. The church, the ground, rolling in long, soft swells, and the three houses still standing in the background are all at different sloping angles. The wind is whipping around, fast and hard, pulling on his coat. Standing there, staring into what looked like endless miles of nothing that had ever been touched by the hand of another man, he could understand how wind could drive a person mad.

So, it's not any sort of happy picture. It's mostly shades of weather beaten gray and brown, dead grass yellow. His coat is khaki, so he blends into the color scheme. And he's not looking at her as she took it, his face is in profile, eyes far away as he scans the horizon. But, it's a good picture.

"I like it."

She smiles at him. "Thanks."

"Any other good ones?"

She flicks through a few of the other shots, mostly the prairie going on forever and ever with tiny little hints that humans had been there, and vanished, sticking out like wind beaten tombstones.

He goes back to his email, updating Sarah and Penny as to how the trip is going, and hit send. He stands up, stretches, and looks out the window. Downtown Aberdeen isn't precisely a metropolis.

"So, what are you thinking, check out and hit the road, or have some dinner and sleep here?" he asks Abby.

Once they got east of the mountains they went back to driving at night. With the moon only a few days past full, the views of the sky are amazing, even if the actual prairie is a bit dull.

"How about we head on? Maybe make St. Louis by morning?"

"Sounds good." He closes up his computer and begins to pack up his gear. When he finishes, he sits next to her, and sees she still has that picture up on her computer.

She looks at him looking at it and kisses his cheek.

"What time is it?" Abby asks.

He gets her asking, they're tearing along an empty road, millions of acres of dried corn stalks all around, top down, sky wide and bright above them, full moon waning amid millions of stars. Now is not a good time for her to look away from the road to check the clock.

"11:23."

"Good." She hits the break and pulls them over.

"Okay," he says, wondering what's going on. There isn't anything special he can think of for this time of night.

Once the car stops, she unbuckles and crawls into his lap, straddling his legs and wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Hi," Tim says, looking fairly puzzled.
"It's 11:24, October 23rd."

"Yep." He's noding, hoping she'll let him in on what's up soon.

"You have no clue why this is important, do you?"
He's shaking his head. "Not a one."
She laughs. "Think hard."

An idea hits, and he squints a little. "I thought that's next week."

"It's today. This time a year ago, you were telling me you loved me over a milkshake."
He smiles. "Best decision I ever made."

"I'll second that. I have something for you."
"Really?" His eyebrows shoot up.

"Yeah." She tugs her purse out from behind his seat.

"I don't have anything for you. Thought I still had a week."

"You think our anniversary is Halloween?"
He shrugs. "Well, for the sex part of it. I guess the date part happened on the 30th."

She looks like she wonders how he could have lost a week, so he says, "We got dressed up in costumes; we went out. I wasn't paying all that much attention to the date. Paying much more attention to the beautiful woman I was with."

"You are forgiven. For the record, it's the 23rd into the 24th."
Tim gives her a chagrined smile. "Am making a mental note."

She finds her MP3 player. Then takes a moment to disconnect his and hook hers up to the car stereo. A second after that, she notices that it isn't going to play with the key in the off position, so she reaches over to turn it to on.

"It's nothing big. Just... I suck at poems, and this said it better than I did the nine times I tried. So..."

"You wrote me a poem?" Tim's voice goes soft and sweet at that.

"I tried. Then I set them on fire."

"No." He sounds pained at that. The idea that Abby wrote him a poem really appeals to him. "Don't do that. I would have liked to have seen them."

"They were bad, really, really bad."

"They were yours." He pets her face and kisses her.

"They were still really bad."

"So was the first one I gave you."
"No, Tim, it wasn't. It was just young and enthusiastic. And the stuff I was coming up with, it was bad, really bad, objectively bad. Breena and Ziva both told me they were bad, too. And not, oh-that's-so-cute-bad, but oh-god-what-the-hell-is-wrong-with-you-that-you'd-even-try-that-bad."

"I doubt that."

"I bounced the last one off Jimmy, and he winced."

"Ewww." Okay, that probably means it really was bad. "I still would have liked to have seen them."

"If I ever try again, I'll keep that in mind. Anyway, this isn't bad." She shifts so she's sitting across his lap, feet in the driver's seat, her head on his shoulder, his arms around her, and hit the play button.

Music that was very un-Abby eases out of the speakers. Though, as he listens he thinks it's not so much un-Abby as just not something she'd usually listen to. There's a sweetness to it that does remind him of her. Soft piano, gentle and almost tentative sounding. A woman's voice, breathy with a bit of country sound begins to sing.

Inside my skin

There is this space

It twists and turns

It bleeds and aches

Inside my heart

there's an empty room

It's waiting for lightning

It's waiting for you

And I am wanting

I am needing you here

Inside the absence of fear

Muscle and sinew

Velvet and stone

This vessel is haunted

It creeks and moans

My bones call to you

In a separate skin
Make myself translucent
To let you in, boy

I am wanting
I am needing you here
Inside the absence of fear

There is this hunger
This restlessness inside of me
And it knows that you're no stranger
You're my gravity.

My hands will adore you through all darkness and
They will lay you out in moonlight
And reinvent your name

For I am wanting
I am needing you here
I need you near
Inside the absence of fear.

And then the song drifts off, leaving them on a quiet road in the middle of Kansas, a bit of wind and dried corn stalks rustling against each other in the background.

"I still have all of them, you know? Every poem you've ever written me. They all live in that little mahogany box with the jade rim. And I wanted to do that for you, or something like it. I wanted to give you that feeling, that someone loved you enough to find the right words and lay them at your feet. But my own words weren't working, and the harder I tried the worse they got and."

"Shhhh." He kisses her lips, stilling her flood of nervous words. Then he takes the MP3 player from her and hits the repeat button. "It's beautiful. What is it?"

"Jewel, Absence of Fear." She kisses him. "You make me fearless, Tim."

He kisses her. "Thank you." He smiles, glowing at her with the joy of this. "And those are the perfect words."
For Abby: Fearless Under the Stars

We drive at night
Because we belong there.
In cool dark
and gleaming starlight
touched by time eternal
Glistening silver and blue

The stars are fire
Collected and shared with us by the moon
And the car is earth shaped by man
We are water given form and set walking
And the wind dances around us, flows over your skin

We are not eternal
Will not be
Cannot be
Though the light is
Traveling millions of years
Millions of miles
To touch your face

I would be the light for you
Born of a star
Traveling to the end of the galaxy and beyond
To touch your skin

And you the moon for me
Sharing that caress
Letting the rest of the universe see love made light

Together we'll light the dark
And find a few seconds of immortality.

The last day of the trip sees them going over the Blue Ridge Mountains. Sunset into night, a crescent moon hanging over hundreds of miles of flame-colored leaves.

It's a very good way to end the trip.
The downside of vacation is that you get back and find out work didn't stop while you were away. So, walking into the Bullpen, staring at his desk, Tim sees what looks like a literal ton of mail and reports.

It takes four hours to get through it.

And for some reason, Tony and Ziva keep looking up at him and smirking.

"What?"

"Keep looking. You'll find it eventually," Tony says.

"Six or so more inches down," Ziva adds.

He feels a thrill when he finally sees it. There's only one thing that he's waiting for in an FedEx envelope, at least, only one thing he isn't sending to their home.

Tony and Ziva are watching him, and both of them are grinning when he finds that envelope.

"Come on, open it!" Tony says.

Ziva comes over to his desk. If she could have opened that envelope by looking at it, the ring inside would have been in full view.

He stares at the overnighted package in his hands, and looks at them. "You can see it tomorrow. I've got to talk to Gibbs before you two see it."

"Talk to me about what?" Gibbs asks, coffee in hand, heading toward his desk.

Tim puts the package down and shakes his head. "Not here. Tonight, after work?"

"Fine. You two, back to work. Those reports aren't gonna fill out themselves."

He heads down to autopsy at close to the end of business that day. A good six inches of paperwork need to be at least initialed by Jimmy.

"Where are you going?" Tony asks as he got up with the piles of paper.

"Autopsy."

Tony gets up, too. "I've got some, too."

Tim raises an eyebrow at him. Asking him to take his papers down made sense. Going with him, not so much so.

Once they're in the elevator Tony flicks it off and says, "Okay, come on, show me."

"No."

"You took Ziva with you when you got the stones. You showed Jimmy the sketch when you used him as cover to see the jeweler. You can at least let me see the finished ring first."
Tim thinks about that for a moment. It's not that Tony's wrong so much as that he's just not right, either. There's a way these things get done, and Tony's just not the guy who gets to see this first. So, Tim sounds a little regretful as he says, "No. I really can't. Gibbs sees this first." Then he smiles at Tony brightly, "But I can ask you to be my best man and stand up with me when I marry her."

Tony grins. "I'll take that. First thing tomorrow though?"

"First thing."

Tony flicks on the elevator and they continued down.

A minute later, while Palmer's initialing away, he asks, "So, the kilt, is it comfortable?"

"Yeah."

"Not too drafty?"

"Didn't bother me."

Jimmy just nods and keeps initialing papers.

Tony's staring at him. "Don't tell me you're thinking of one."

Jimmy shrugs. "Looked good on Tim. Breena thought it was cool. Everyone tells me they're comfy."

"Who is everyone? McScott over there is the only person I know with one."

"Are you sure about that, Anthony?" Ducky adds, coming up behind them. The ten minute long soliloquy on the history of skirts as menswear and the warrior tradition of kilts, from the Roman Legions to the Scottish troops in World War I wearing their kilts in the trenches was on point, informative, and set Tim to smirking widely at Tony.

"And of course," Ducky begins to wrap up, "with the current, and tragically narrow, American understanding of masculine identity, absolutely nothing says I-have-testicles-the-size-of-cantaloupes like wearing one."

Tony drops his papers. Jimmy and Tim laugh. And Ducky settles into a pleased smirk.

Back in the elevator Tony says, "So they're comfy?"

"Yeah."

Tony's eyes narrow; he's not buying that. "Come on, I've seen you naked. No matter what Ducky says, they aren't the size of cantaloupes, and you don't need that much room to swing around."

Tim gives him a mildly exasperated look that says, _You're missing the point._

"But that's not the whole reason for wearing one, is it? I mean, you're wearing it in like a third of the pictures Abby posted."

Tim flips off the elevator. "Just one of them. First off, kind of short on space. Traveling with Abby and practically a portable MTAC meant that everything I took with me had to be worn over and over. Secondly," He debates how to, or if, he should say something like this to Tony, and decides going too into it isn't a great idea. But in general... "I imagine it's like how you'd feel in five thousand
dollar hand-tailored suit. You wear something like that, you feel good." Tony nods, he gets that. Maybe not how a kilt might make you feel that way, but he certainly gets it for a suit. "Third, you own anything Ziva really likes you in?"

Tony seems to think about that for a moment. Which makes Tim think the answer is no. Because the level of 'likes you in' he's thinking of should not require thought.

But finally Tony says, "Yeah."

"You wear it more often because she likes it?"

Tony smiles, "And Abby likes you in a kilt?"

"Yeah. She does. She really likes me in a kilt. You like Ziva in a skirt?"

"Yeah, who doesn't?"

"Why?"

"Why?" Tony seems deeply puzzled that anyone would ever ask him that. Ziva in a skirt is so obviously a good thing on so many different levels he's having a hard time figuring out how to break that down for Tim. It's like trying to answer why one plus one is two.

"Yeah, what about her in a skirt makes you happy?" Tim adds.

He sounds a tad patronizing as he says, "I like the way she looks in one."

"Good. Anything more than that?"

Tony smirks. Tim considers that answer enough and gives him a meaningful look. "Well, Tony, that works both ways."

Tony seems to think about that. "So, you're saying there's a certain ease of access."

"Yeah. Ever get a blow job when you're driving?"

Tony nods, looking surprised. And Tim's not sure if he's surprised that Tim would ask or that he's had at least one, too.

"What?" Tim raises his hands in a *why are you surprised* gesture. "I do vanilla sex."

Tony shakes his head slowly. "Blow job while driving is your idea of vanilla sex?"

"Not if I'm going over sixty." And Tim is very pleased that he managed to say that with a straight face, because the way Tony responds to it is just perfect.

Tony closes his eyes and sighs, then opens them slowly. "Okay, I'm sure you had a point before that deluge of TMI."

"Just, think about it."

"This really isn't the place to be thinking about blow jobs."

"Not that kind of thinking. The mechanics of it. I mean, it's great, as long as she's really careful, otherwise the zipper gets you. And you can't really spread your legs, so she can't get to everything. Kilts don't have zippers and they don't limit your mobility."
"Hmmm." Tony appears to be appreciating that idea.

"Exactly." Tim looks at Tony for a few seconds, thinking about what Tony's been wearing over the last six months. "What does she like you in? You aren't wearing anything more often than usual."

Tony smiles. "Something you don't get to see."

"Ahhh..."
Since the move, Gibbs' place has been on the way home. It's only about six minutes, round trip, out of his way.

So, he'll be a little late getting home. And sure, Abby probably knows something is up, 'cause it's not like he couldn't have given Gibbs the coffees at work. But as cover lies go, coffee delivery is plausible.

He knocks (Tim always knocks. Yes, Gibbs has an open door policy, but he always knocks anyway. He doesn't wait to be let in, but he also doesn't feel comfortable just walking in unannounced.) and opens Gibbs' door feeling... nervous? Probably not. There's no fear here, just a somewhat pleasant buzz of energy. So, excited? Eager? Yeah, probably eager. He wants to show off what's in the tiny black box in his pocket.

He heads down the steps and waits at the bottom one. Gibbs is doing something with what he thinks is a chisel, concentrating hard, and he's not going to interrupt.

Finally Gibbs looks up. "McGee?"

Tim steps off the bottom stair. "I have something I want to show you."

He slips the box out of his pocket and puts it on the piece of wood in front of Gibbs. "It's for Abby, and since you're practically her dad, and definitely the guy who'll be giving her away, I wanted to talk to you about this first."

He doesn't look up at Gibbs while he says that. He keeps his eyes on the box while he opens it.

The jeweler had looked at Tim's stones and started playing with them. Eventually, he laid one of the diamonds next to the garnet, fat sides close to it, and the other, on the opposite side and down a bit, creating something that looked like a rose with two black leaves. From there he started to sketch a setting: a delicate vine-like filigree of black titanium. And, once it’s on her, it should look like a red rose with black leaves wrapped around her finger.

Gibbs looks at it for a long time, taking it out of the box so he can see all of it from every angle. Tim's on the verge of feeling nervous, until he notices a smile creeping onto Gibbs' face.

Gibbs closes the box and hands it back to Tim. "You did good, Tim."

"Thanks, Boss."

They sit there quietly, while Gibbs goes to get the bourbon, pours them both a shot, and hands him a cup.

"I'm glad it's going to be you."

McGee is prouder of having earned those words than just about anything else in his life.

"Got any advice for me?"

Gibbs laughs a little at that. "Like I told Palmer, I'm the last person you want to go to for marriage
advice."

Tim shrugs, that's probably fair enough. He sips his bourbon. "Got any honeymoon advice then? From what I've heard, you've been on more of them than anyone else I know."

Gibbs laughs full out at that and takes a drink of his bourbon. Then he smiles, looking quite amused, and maybe a little surprised at Tim's last comment. Tim realizes Gibbs might be about to make a joke.

"Leave the cuffs at home, cut your ropes twelve to fifteen feet long, thread them under the mattress or box spring. That'll give you plenty of room to play, and you won't have to explain how you broke the bed the next morning."

Okay, not a joke, but that is definitely good-natured teasing, and after a second's thought, where Tim contemplated how few of the beds they ran into while traveling had any useful bits to tie things to, he realizes that's also awfully good advice.

"I'll keep that in mind." Tim simultaneously shakes his head and laughs. Then he remembers something. "I'll be back in a sec."

He sprints up to the car and grabs the brown paper bag. Abby said he should wrap it, but he's a guy, and wrapping presents for other guys just isn't something he does. In fact, as a guy, he didn't even own wrapping paper until he ended up with a half share in Abby's. Then he runs back down to the basement and hands the bag to Gibbs.

"Here. I don't know if you'll like any of them, but when we were traveling I kept thinking you might."

Gibbs opens it and looks inside, then pours the contents out. Four small vacu-sealed bags of coffee fall out. One is basic coffee with chicory from New Orleans. The next was from a roaster in Austin, he figured something called Black Death was probably a dark enough roast for Gibbs. The other two were from Portland and Seattle. In each city he told the guy at the roaster's that he wanted the strongest, darkest, most stand up and eat the spoon while you try to stir it coffee, which resulted in these two bags.

"They might be terrible. I don't know. I don't like my coffee as strong as you do."

Gibbs smiles at him. "Thanks, Tim."

"Okay, I should get home. If Abby asks, I was giving you your coffee."

Gibbs nods, holding the bag of Black Death in his hand, looking fairly interested in it.

"So..." Tony says.

Tony, Ziva, and Palmer are all waiting at his desk as he walks in the next morning.

"None of you can say anything about this. I'm asking tonight, so no wrecking it!"

"Our lips are sealed," Ziva answers.

"I've been keeping this quiet for eight months, you think one more day is going to break me?" Jimmy says.

"Come on McLovin, show it to us!"
"McLovin?" Tim's sure it's a reference to something movie related, but he doesn't know what.

"Movie trivia later. Get that bad boy out of your pocket and show us!" Palmer says, and then blushes scarlet when Tony begins laughing hysterically.

Tim slips it out of his pocket. He's ditched the box in favor of the small velvet bag it came with. On the off chance, and by chance he means utter certainty, he ends up hugging Abby, he doesn't want her wondering what that small, hard, square thing in his pocket is.

He opens the bag and then slips it onto his own index finger, twisting his hand so they can see it from all angles. "Ta da!"

Ziva does that thing where she inhales sharply and goes quite. Which is exactly the reaction he was hoping for. Tony goes oddly quiet, too, just staring at it.

Palmer nods and takes it off his finger, studying it carefully. "This is beautiful, Tim. She's gonna love it."

"I really hope so."

Ziva takes it from Palmer, and slides it onto her right ring finger, seeing how it looks on a hand. "It's stunning, McGee."

Ziva is staring at it when Gibbs walks up and gently slaps him upside the back of the head. "Wrong girl, McGee. That one's waiting for DiNozzo to get his ass in gear."

Tim laughs so hard he feels like he is going to hurt something, while Tony stares at Gibbs like he's just been stabbed in the back. When he calms down, he takes it back from Ziva, tucks it into the bag, and slips it back into his pocket.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I know I've been teasing you with that ring for a while now. Hope you like it. If you'd like to see the garnet (I found a picture of it.) you can go to http://charactersaremyheroin.blogspot.com/2013/04/shards-to-whole-ncis-fanfiction_9.html Alas, the ring exists only in my imagination, so until my 3d modeling skills get a ton better, I can't post that.
Tim had gone through at least fifty proposal ideas while he waited for the ring to get made. Dinner out? Romantic walk on the beach/mountains/wine country/art museum? (If the ring had gotten done sooner, something along those lines would have been part of his vacation plans.) In bed? Before, during, or after sex? Dinner in? Did food really have to be involved in this? On their anniversary? When the hell was their anniversary? First date ten years ago? God, when was that? Fall? Probably Fall. He could go find the case and look up when that was and from there figure it out. Second first date with The Generics? Would have been great if it wasn’t last week. (He checked the ticket stubs. Yes, he kept them, and yes, Abby was right, it was the 23rd.) First time he met her? In the lab, same place he asked her out the first time? Long declaration of love? Marry me? Say it out loud? Write it down? Sonnet? Blank verse? Text? So many options, and none of them felt really right.

As they were driving across the country, he noticed a lot of Jack o’ Lanterns out, and as they kept passing pumpkins an idea started to form, and as he pondered it, he decided he liked it.

“Do you still have your Marilyn Monroe dress?” Tim asks as they are getting ready for bed that night. He’s leaning against the sink, toothbrush in hand, shirtless, but, at least for the time being, his jeans aren’t going anywhere, because he needs a pocket. Well, he needs what’s in his pocket.

“Yes. Why?” Abby’s still dressed. White t-shirt, black and red plaid skirt, and knee socks. She’s washed off her makeup and is in the process of taking down her hair.

“Halloween is coming up, and I was thinking we might go out together.”

She nods. That’d be fun. “With me as Marilyn?” she turns to face him as she brushes out her hair.

“Yes.” Her expression says she knows something is up besides Halloween plans. Tim realizes he’s probably beaming at her as they talk, and he’s usually naked by this point in their bedtime routine, so the pants are a giveaway that he’s got something planned.

“And who would you be?” That’s exactly the question he wants her to ask.

“Arthur Miller.”

Abby thinks about that for a moment, and he can feel himself grinning, willing her to figure out what her next line is.

“Weren’t they married?”

Perfect! “Yes.” He looks at her expectantly for a moment. Her eyes widen as she realizes what he’s saying, and her mouth falls open as he kneels before her. He’s glad he practiced it, because he’s able to kneel, get the box out of his pocket, open, and in front of her while simultaneously saying, “Abby, will you marry me?”

She stares at the ring, her fingers hovering over the garnet, eyes bright and wide. “Tim?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s so beautiful.”

He’s smiling so widely at that he feels like his face might crack.
“Stand up.”

He does, and she jumps into his arms, wrapping her legs around his hips and her arms around his neck. He isn’t braced properly for it, and they both fall to the floor, which he only half notices because she’s covering him in kisses and making a very happy noise, that could possibly be the word “Yes” repeated over and over very fast in a high-pitched, excited voice.

After a minute, she pulls back, sitting on his thighs, grinning an impossibly wide and happy grin. He sits up, and kisses her again, deeply this time, lips slipping over hers in soft caresses. He notices the ring is still in the box, still in his hand, so he takes it out, and by feel alone, slides it onto her finger.

She breaks the kiss to look at it on her hand. “It’s perfect.”

He grins at her. “You’re perfect. I just had to find the ring that went with that.”

“You did.” She takes it off to really look at it. “What is it?”

“Garnet, black diamonds, black titanium.”

“It’s so beautiful.” She hands it back to him, and holds out her hand, and once more he slips it onto her finger. “It’s like the thing my hand always needed but didn’t know it was missing.”

He brushes his fingers through her hair as she says that, staring into her eyes. He quickly kisses her and then says, “It’s the thing, well, one of them, I’ve always wanted to give you.”

“One of them?”

He brushes his hand, his fingers trailing along her arm, across the tattoo they have in common. “There’s one.” He kisses her again, softly this time, hints of suggestions of touch. His fingers drift back to hers. “And one of these days, I’ll give you a wedding ring.” He lifts her hand to his mouth, kissing the tips of each finger, then the base of her palm, lipping gently over her wrist, and then tracing his fingers lightly up her arm as she shivers and squirms at his touch.

His gaze holds hers as he says, “I’d like to give you my name.”

She’s smiling so brightly now, the kind of smile that always lights him up, and she kisses him, then says, “Abby McGee.”

He can’t hold in how good that feels and just smiling or grinning can’t get it out, so warm, happy laughter bursts out of him. When he stops, he kisses her again, and then guides her hand behind her, and holds her wrist lightly behind her back. With his free hand he traces from her shoulder to her belly, lingering along the side of her breast, before drifting to the hem of her shirt. Lifting her shirt, he rubs his knuckles gently against her stomach. Tim breaks the kiss, holds her gaze and quietly says, “And not too long after that, I want give you a baby.”

“Yes!” Her eyes are gleaming, and she scoots forward a bit, breasts pressed against his chest, body warm and encouraging. He’s holding her left hand in his, but her right is free, so she caresses his face with it, fingers skittering from eyelid to cheek to lips. He closes his eyes and leans into the touch. She kisses his eyelids, the tip of his nose, and then settles on his lips.

A minute later, he breaks the kiss and says, “I want to give you a home.”

She kisses him long and deep, then pulls back, radiant smile on her face and a look of deeply content tenderness in her eyes. “I already have one, Tim. Anywhere you are is my home.”
He smiles, or really, keeps smiling, he’s been smiling this whole time, because he can’t not smile, and lets go of her wrist, spanning the small of her back with his hands, and pulling her tighter to him while lifting her shirt off. His fingers trace over her shoulders, down her arms, raising goosebumps on her skin, as he kisses her jaw and neck.

“I love you, Abby.”

She kisses him again, clinging to him, lips sweet and warm. “I love you, too.”

She begins a slow rolling motion, and he groans softly, then takes her hips in his hands and holds her still. “Okay, if we’re going to keep doing this, we’ve got to move, because these pants are going to cut me in half if I don’t adjust myself.”

She begins to laugh: loud, bright, and happy. Then stands and offers him her hand.

“Then let’s get you adjusted. It’d be a tragedy if you were cut in half.”

He stands up, and as he does so, she reaches for the top button on his jeans. A second later, he’s naked in front of her.

“Better?”

“Almost.” He unhooks her bra, and kneels in front of her, pulling off her panties, leaving on the plaid skirt and knee socks. He smiles widely at her. “Now, I’m a whole lot better.”

“You and your Catholic school girl kink.”

“Me and my you kink. What do I want a Catholic school girl for when I’ve got you?”

“Good answer.”

He stands up, stepping in close, his body next to hers, close enough to feel the heat, and for his penis to rub against the skirt, but the rest of him not touching, and then looks her up and down.

She licks her lips, and he leans down to lick her, stroke her tongue with his.

She sighs as he does that, and moves a fraction of an inch closer, still not touching anywhere other than tongues and penis.

“What do you want tonight?” he whispers to her.

“Take me.”

“Oh yes.” He pulls her flush against him, reveling in the feel of her skin on his and her body tight and quivering in his arms. He kisses her, taking the lead, his lips and tongue calling the dance while she squirms against him, rocking her hips against his. This time, when his hands settle on her hips, it’s to encourage the motion, to pull her harder against him. Without breaking the kiss, he picks her up. She gets the idea and helps, wrapping her legs around his hips as he carries her to their bed. He sets her on the edge of the bed, and stands between her legs. She looks up at him, eyes wide, lips wet.

“You are so beautiful.”

She smiles at that and lies back on the bed, her hips flush with the edge, legs dangling to either side of him.
There were a few careful measurements Tim took before they got their bed made. One of which was how high off the floor the top of the mattress would be. Specifically, it’s exactly the right height for him to kneel and go down on her, or stand and fuck her.

And with her laid out on the bed in front of him, he finds himself eagerly contemplating both happy options.

His fingers trace up the inside of her legs, light teasing brushes of skin on skin. He gets to her hips and flips up the skirt so it covers her stomach and bares her sex.

“I love you. Love looking at you like this. Naked and open for me. Love this so much.”

She sits up, and kisses his erection, licking the tip. “Love you. Love seeing you like this, standing over me, hot and hard.”

He groans at those words, feeling them like a flush of heat through his dick.

He leans forward to kiss her, stroking her tongue with his, feeling her hand wrap around him and pull. He goes with it, enjoys it for a moment and then breaks the kiss and takes her hand away.

She pouts a little at that. “You can do me tomorrow. Remember, you asked me to take you?”

She nods.

“Lay down.”

And she does, a grin on her lips.

He kneels between her legs, kissing his way up her thigh, stroking her calves lightly. He pauses at the top of her thigh, and spends another moment just looking at her. “So, so beautiful,” he murmurs before flicking his tongue lightly over her.

She jerks a little at the touch and then sighs. He settles into it, slow and lazy, not rushing this. His hands continuing to ghost along her thighs while his tongue draws small, firm circles over her clit.

She moans, and he pulls back enough to say, “Like that?”

“God, yes, don’t stop.”

“Not until you’re arching against my mouth and quivering on my tongue.”

“Ohhh...” She rolls her hips against him, and he goes back to licking. He speeds up slowly, keeping her at a slower pace than she would like, but he wants this to take a while, wants her begging him before he gets her off.

He starts with one finger, not in her, just softly teasing. Feather light touches over her lips, barely grazing against her vagina. She growls a little at him, frustration at the teasing lack of penetration.

He continues to just lightly pet, and stops licking just long enough to say, “Tell me what you want.”

She moans again as his tongue slows down, but increases in pressure. He’s just rolling it over her clit, long slow strokes designed to make her squirm.

“Fuck, Tim, get me off!”

His tongue starts to move just slightly faster, and he adds a second finger, two of them slipping over
her lips, stroking her, not entering.

“Little more specific?” He’d grin if his lips weren’t busy, but he’s enjoying teasing her like this.

“Stop fooling around with those fingers and fuck me with them!”

And so he does. He pulls back just long enough to suck on both of them, make sure they are good and wet, and then thrusts them in, fast and hard, while his tongue goes back to licking, this time fast and light.

He can’t see her do it, but he can imagine it. He's fairly sure she throws her head back, arches her back and neck, and clenches her hands in the sheets. He knows for a fact that she starts a long stream of “Fuck baby, yeah, just like that, fuck, oh...” sweet profanity that makes him feel like a sex god.

Then words stop, morphed into a high-pitched, almost panting moan, and her legs wrap tight around his neck and shoulders as her body jerks against his.

He lets her come down for a moment, just long enough to stop twitching, then stands, pinning her hands to the bed above her head, and slips into her.

He hisses at it: hot, wet, slick, and snug all perfect and all at once.

He’s taking his time at this, slow, lazy strokes, enjoying the feel of her on him. She’s arching against him, her legs around his hips, feet crossed over the small of his back.

He can feel it building, feel himself start to move faster, start to give into the pleasure and the desire to thrust. She’s looking at him, kissing him, licking his neck. He feels her teeth on his ear, and her body squeezing tight around him. And that does it, sets him off, small firework bursts along his spine and balls, as he thrusts hard and deep.

A minute or two later, she smiles at him and kisses him gently. Eventually they untangle, and clean up, and then they’re in bed together, relaxing and inching toward sleep. He’s lying on his back, and she’s snuggled into his side, her head on his shoulder, her hand on his chest. He’s stroking his fingers absently up and down hers, feeling the ring there.

“What does an Arthur Miller costume even look like?” Abby asks.

“It doesn’t matter. No one notices the guy standing next to Marilyn Monroe.”

“Marilyn does.” Abby smiles.

Tim thinks about it. “It might involve a pipe. And I think glasses.”
They make a quick detour on the way into work the next morning.

“Gibbs, Gibbs, Gibbs, Gibbs...” She’s skipping into his house. Gibbs looks up from his cereal, meets Tim’s eyes, and Tim nods quickly as Abby bounds into his arms, all but singing, “We’re getting married! You’ll be there right? You’ll go to the church with us and walk me down the aisle and give me away when we get MARRIED?”

He pulls her a little tighter, because she’s been bouncing up and down this whole time, and it’s hard to hug someone who’s bouncing, and kisses her forehead. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Abbs.”

She looks up at him, and he can see hints of fear that there’ll be a repeat of Jimmy’s wedding. “No matter what, Abby, I’ll be there.”

She grins again.

The next detour in the usual get-to-work routine leads them to Autopsy.

If there is ever a good clue that Abby is happy as happy can be, it’s the fact that she walks (okay, skips) straight into Autopsy without even pausing as the doors slide open.

Tim’s a few steps behind, so he hears, “Abigail, what brings—’ Then Ducky sees him behind, takes into account the wide, happy smile on Abby’s face and gathers her into a warm hug. “I assume, congratulations are in order?”

“Yeah, they are, Ducky,” Tim answers.

“Wonderful!” he says, and then pulls out of the hug, motioning Tim closer, and hugs him, as well. Then he steps back and says, “Come now, let me see,” motioning for Abby’s hand.

Palmer heads in as Ducky is saying that. He makes a bee-line for Abby. “Finally. I’ve been waiting since February for this!”

“February?” Abby asks, looking at Tim. He smiles and shrugs a little.

Jimmy takes her hand, looks at the ring on her finger, and kisses her cheek. Then he looks at Tim and nods. “Good job.”

“Thanks.”

“Now, what?” Jimmy says to Abby.

“We get talking details. For example, are you my best man or man of honor?”

Tim doesn’t think he’s ever seen Jimmy look so pleased. After a few seconds, he answers, “As long as I don’t have to wear chiffon, any title you like works.”

“No chiffon. I can handled that. How about taffeta?”

For a second, Jimmy looks really startled because it’s entirely possible Abby isn’t joking, but she is, so he laughs, and finally says, “Only if it’s red, and there better be some killer heels to go with it.”
She kisses him, and he pulls her and Tim into a hug.

Jimmy kisses her one more time before letting both of them go. “Do you want me to tell Breena?”

“We’ve already got a lunch date set. Assuming no case pops up, you’re invited, too.” Then she remembers Ducky is standing there. “I mean, if you don’t need him for anything.”

“As long as we are not called upon to render our assistance for a case, I assure you, Jimmy will be free for wedding planning duties.”

The last stop on the tell everyone tour takes them up to the Bullpen. Gibbs has already gotten there, and is sitting at his desk, but Tony and Ziva are nowhere to be seen.

Tim’s look asks Gibbs if he knows where they are, and Gibbs just shrugs. Tony and Ziva aren’t living together, but they certainly come into work together about four out of five days. And they don’t yet seem to have the *how to do that and show up precisely on time* thing down pat yet.

Tim certainly understands that. It takes a while to work the kinks out of more or less living in two apartments. So he sits down and turns on his computers. Abby settles on the edge of his desk, watching what he is doing.

Three minutes later, when they come in, Tony grumbling about his dry cleaning being on one side of town and Ziva’s place an hour away on the other, he has a pretty good idea of what’s up.

“No clean shirts?” he asks as Tony heads for his desk.

Tony glares and says, “Yeah.”

“They make these things called irons, and if you apply it to a clean shirt, you don’t need to have it dry cleaned.”

“Sure.” During all of this, Ziva’s been leaning against her desk, staring at Abby, and grinning. Abby’s grinning back at her, left hand conspicuously visible. Which is when Tony really notices that she’s sitting there, on the edge of Tim’s desk, where she usually isn’t.

Ziva sees him finally get it and then closes on Abby, both of them hugging. He half hears Abby telling Ziva something about team bride meeting for lunch as the two of them look at the ring.

Tony breaks into a wide smile and gently punches Tim on the shoulder. “You finally did it!”

“Yeah.”

“Good! Stand up.” Tim does and gets hugged again. Which, of course, is still happening when Vance comes in.

“Anything I should know?”

“Wedding soon,” Gibbs answers.

And thus, Abby gets her tenth or so kiss of the day, and Tim’s hand is shaken, and one more layer of congratulations are offered. Which is followed by a fairly gentle back to work from Gibbs.
Halloween

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It turns out that an Arthur Miller costume isn't all that hard to assemble.

The glasses were a little tricky; almost no one sells that style of horn rimmed glasses, let alone without any sort of corrective lens, but Tim has legendary levels of Google-Fu so he found a pair. But a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches, corduroy pants, and the pipe were easy to find. (Among other things, the pipe was sitting in his office, in his top desk drawer, because he likes to play with it while he writes. And the jacket was... in his closet. It's a little too big, but for one night, it'll do the job. As he realized he had the whole outfit minus the glasses, he wonders a bit about what exactly he was doing when he set up his writer image.)

It's even less difficult to put on.

And so he's ready to go not too long after they get home from work on Halloween.

And after getting ready, Abby exiles him from their bedroom, and gets to work on Marilyn.

There aren't a lot of trick-or-treaters in their building, but he fields the knocks on their door. Most of the kids don't even seem to notice he's in any sort of costume. Some of the adults did, and look at him a little curiously.

Between knocks, he looks over the edits he'd gotten back on Deep Six Four, now tentatively titled The Traitor Within. Nothing too drastic so far, but he's also only fifty pages in.

He's really thinking about one comment in the margin, when he realizes she's standing in the doorway to his office.

He looks up at her: platinum hair, red lips, and that white dress, swallows hard, and says, "We might not make it to that party."

"You really like this?" she asks, stepping in, twirling a little. He immediately notices something else, this time, she isn't wearing panties.

"God Abby, yeah, I like that. You know what I did when I got home on Halloween 2006?"

She smiles. "Cried about your missing Ice Queen?"

"Who? Trust me, by the end of that night, she was gone... Wait a minute..." He squints a little, remembering something. "You did that on purpose. We were still at work when we got the call. So were you. You went home to change!"

She smiles and looks innocent. "And if I did?"

"That's just mean. You knew my date was over, and then you dressed like that, and told me I couldn't touch."

"Please, you teased me all the time, too."

"When have I ever teased you like that?"
"Really? This from the man who promised to tie me up and didn't."

It takes him a minute to figure that out, but once he knows what she was talking about he has a comeback ready. "You're right, I still owe you one for that. And Marilyn, you're so gonna get tied —"

His phone rings, followed a second later by hers. And if both of their phones are ringing, that means he has to get it. He picks it up, sees Gibbs on the caller ID. "I hate Halloween." He answers the phone. "Who's dead?"

"Sailor out of Allendale. Texting you the address."

"Great. Be there soon."

He looks at her, and she smiles, nodding as she listens to her half of the call out. Then she hangs up her phone.

"The first time I wore this, you kept undressing me with your eyes, and I kept fantasizing about you and me in my office. I kept imaging you sitting on my desk chair, me in your lap, and the way you'd look at me as I slid onto you." She grins at him. "Looks like we'll get a chance at that tonight."

He's giving her his you're evil look. "Don't say things like that to me now. I'm already going to have a hard enough time focusing on the case."

"Hard being the operative word." She gives him a slow kiss while squeezing him gently through his pants. "See you later." And with those words, and a little skirt flaring twirl, she heads toward her car.

Tony sees him first as he gets to the scene. "I know you're a writer, but this is walking cliché territory."

"It's Halloween, Tony," he says as he begins pulling on the little blue booties that protect the crime scene from his shoes and vice versa.

"You're going out as a writer for Halloween? The idea is to be someone you aren't."

"I don't usually look like this, do I? You'll figure it out when you see Abby. We were getting ready to go out."

"What could Abby possibly be wearing to make that make sense?"

Gibbs looks him over and says one word, "Marilyn."

Tim nods.

Tony looks him up and down. "You're Miller?"

"No. I'm DiMaggio," Tim shot back, perfect deadpan.

Tony laughs and then looks at Tim, genuinely bummed for them missing out on their Halloween plans. "And once again Halloween strikes."

"Yeah."

Gibbs hands him the camera. "Get on it, Miller. Unlike the Ice Queen, Marilyn'll still be there when we're done."
And unlike the Ice Queen, Marilyn is waiting for him when he gets back to the lab. And yes, technically he doesn't have anything to do down here right now. But the computers in her lab work just as well as the ones up at his desk.

And as long as he's doing something at least vaguely related to the case, he's still working.

Okay, so watching her sip Caf-Pow, perfect red lips wrapped around the straw, sucking gently, might not be precisely the definition of doing something vaguely related to the case, but… Fuck it, he's goofing off, there's no good excuse for it, but he's remarkably unlikely to stop anytime soon.

And just as he settles in to watch, as she's grinning at him, lightly licking the tip of the straw, and stroking it between her fingers, he feels the hand connect with the back of his head.

"Less screwing in the lab, more catching killers."

Abby puts her drink down, grins, and says, "Gibbs, I'll have you know, that as a forensic scientist of the highest caliber, I can do both at once!"

Tim just stands there and tries not to blush too hard.

"Fine, Abbs, but what about Miller over there?"

"He's helping me do both at once," she says with a pretty smile. Which is when Major Mass Spec beeped. "Observe, Gibbs, Major Mass Spec is about to reveal to us…" She reads the print out, looks at it like it's wrong, and reads it again. "Weird. The makeup Lt. Hennen was wearing was dosed with Rohypnol."

"Just straight Rohypnol?" Tim asks, also looking like something is wrong.

She hands him the print out. "If there's anything else in there, I'm not seeing it."

He shakes his head. It's a combo of gray face paint and Rohypnol, a lot of Rohypnol. *Halloween*. "Well, that's not gonna work, at all. You have to ingest it. Might explain why his head was bashed with the skillet, Boss. Whoever did this didn't intend to kill him at all, or at least didn't plan to kill him there, but the plan to sedate him didn't work, and they had to grab for whatever was at hand."

Gibbs is already on his phone. "Ziva, search the whole house, I want you to find the makeup the Lt. was wearing." He hangs up. "With me, McGee, you can moon over her later. You—" He shifts focus to Abby.

"I'm already getting samples of everything else he had in his house. Maybe this was supposed to be part of some sort of chemical cocktail. McGee?"

"Chemical cocktail designed by someone who doesn't know anything about biology." Then he notices that's not the sort of comment Abby's looking for. "Yeah?"

"What was the costume supposed to be?"

"Zombie."

She looks over the samples in front of her. "Get me the latex prosthetics, the glue for it, the fake blood, and any other makeup colors he had, and fake teeth if there were any."

Tim's nodding. He knows where she's going with this. "He wasn't finished getting dressed when we found him. I'm guessing something slowed him down, and instead of finding him passed out in
costume, they found him putting his makeup on."

Tim's taking a step closer to Abby, further away from the door and Gibbs when a hand snakes out, grabs him by the back of the collar, and yanks him out of the lab. "Catching bad guys, McGee."

"Yes, Boss."

"Find out what slowed him down and who would have known when he should have gotten home."

"On it, Boss."

He gets down for five minutes two hours later. Though this time it is business, delivering the samples Ziva had collected.

At least, he had intended to be businesslike about it. But she's standing at her computer, long legs on display, curved beautifully from those ridiculously cute high heels, the skirt just skimming along the backs of her knees, and this time, no white outline of '50s style panties.

He places the samples on her work table, and doesn't exactly sneak up behind her, but he doesn't need to be very quiet, her music is on loud, and she's into her work.

She jerks a little when his lips lands on her neck as he presses up behind her, and then relaxes and smiles.

"The last time you wore this, I could see your panties through the dress. This time you aren't wearing any. Are you teasing me more this time or last time?"

Her hand slides from the mouse to his thigh, stroking gently. "Depends, which did you like better?"

"Not sure. I'm liking both options quite a bit. There's something really fine about you in those conservative, white, 1950s panties. And there's something" he inches her skirt up until he can feel skin under his fingers, then his hand slides up her leg, stroking over her hip to caress her pussy gently, "scorching hot about this."

She leans against his chest and sighs as he touches her. After a few seconds, when she moans quietly, he pulls his hand away, kisses her shoulder, and steps back. She turns to face him, once again flaring the skirt, but not holding her hands to her sides, so he gets a quick glimpse of thigh. He takes the two fingers he had been touching her with, and holding her gaze, licks them clean, biting the top of his index finger lightly.

Then he nods to the table and smiles. "The samples you asked for."

"You're evil."

"Thank you." He winks and begins to head for the Bullpen.

"Are you close?"

That stops him. He thinks it's an odd question. She's seen every way he gets off, so she should know what close looks like. But maybe she's setting something up with this, so he grins and says, "Nah, just hard."

She doesn't roll her eyes, but he has the sense she wants to. "The case."

"Oh. Yeah..." It takes a second for him to switch gears. "Think so, Gibbs and Tony have a guy in
interrogation. And in a minute, I'll be back up there looking through every electronic record he's got."

"Well, hurry up."

"On it, Boss!"

He's sitting behind the glass, watching Gibbs and Tony interrogating the guy. His phone buzzes. Text from Abby.

Who's in interrogation?

Gibbs and Tony.

No, who are they talking to?

Jim Sloan, he's called like ten times this week, and was keeping an eye on the vic.

Wrong guy.

???

Unless he's also the guy who sold our vic the makeup, he's the wrong guy.

Nope, didn't do that.

Good. Send Gibbs down soon.

I will.

And while it's true that you don't interrupt Gibbs in interrogation, flashing a text to Tony is completely acceptable.

He sees Tony read it and nod. Then he hands the phone to Gibbs who looks at it, glares at the suspect, and then both of them silently leave the room, leaving Sloan just sitting there, wondering what the hell is going on.

Meanwhile, he heads for his computer, time to tell it to find out where the vic got that makeup.

Three minutes later, Gibbs and Tony are in the lab, and Abby is doing show and tell.

"So, you know, whenever we have a chance at a tampered with product, the first step is to figure out how the tampering happened..." she explains how she took the samples, checked the tubes for any trace of tampering, and noticed the red, the unopened tube, had a tamper proof seal over the lid, which made her think the others would have too.

That got her interest, because makeup tubes like this rarely have those seals on them.

Some googling found that there is no Kyllyn Tyme Monster Makeup.

Then she began carefully taking the tubes apart and found that yes, there is some makeup in all of them, and also powdered drugs.

Major Mass Spec is doing its thing, figuring out what was in each of those tubes, but whatever it is, it probably wasn't intended to be sold to Hennen.
Tim gets there just as she's saying that. He adds, "Credit card purchase this morning. Spirit-Halloween in Allendale. He got the makeup, hair spray, and a few other things. I'm guessing he got a hold of the wrong makeup."

Gibbs nods at him, and says to Abby, "Good work, Abbs."

She smiles, accepting the kiss on her cheek as Gibbs turns to head off. "DiNozzo, take Ziva..."

"On it, Boss."

"McGee, by the time they get there, I want them to know about everyone who works there and who is likely smuggling drugs through the place."

Tim nods and heads for Abby's computer.

"Upstairs, McGee."

"Upstairs main computer is already digging into Rohypnol dealers in the DC area. Upstairs secondary computer is looking into Rohypnol producers, matching formulas to what Abby's found. Don't worry, Boss, by the time they get there, they'll have what they need."

Gibbs just stares at him for a second, the no fucking around look. And Tim nods, turning towards Abby's computer.

It's a half-hour drive with Ziva at the wheel, and on minute twenty-seven he sends Tony the names of three guys who work there, all of whom had sealed juvie records for drug issues. The idea that they moved onto bigger and better things isn't impossible. He also sends the name of the guy who runs the shop, because some fast checking shows that he's in debt up to his eyeballs, and fast, easy money might be very tempting for a sixty-year-old on the verge of losing everything and having to start over again.

And then he turns to Abby, who's behind him, working with the makeup and the rest of the evidence, Marilyn costume covered in a lab coat, gloves on her hands, kisses her lightly on the nape of her neck, and whispers, "Now I'm close," before heading upstairs.

The image of her grinning at him, eyes bright through lab glasses, stays in his mind as he rides the elevator up to the bullpen, heading to his own computers to see if they can link this into a bigger drug case.

It's a little after one when Abby gets the text from McGee. Done. Down in 10.

Which means… fifteen, maybe twenty minutes--twenty-five if he really wants to tease her, but she's hoping he's more interested in quick today, because she's feeling awfully ready--that seven-year-old fantasy of sitting him at her desk and watching his face as she slides onto him can come true.

Watching Tim experience pleasure is one of her great joys.

When something gets to him, it really gets to him, and he doesn't try to hide it. At least, not from her. Like, the first time he bit into a deep-fat fried pickle. He was staring at it warily, not crazy about the idea, because he thought it sounded gross and the fried okra didn't do anything for him. But she nudged his hand, fairly sure he'd like it, and he put it in his mouth, still looking like this whole idea was insane, and bit down. And she got to see it on his face, the way hot, crispy, salty, sour, sweet, and juicy all hit at once. That almost pained expression of How on earth have I gone my entire life not knowing something this good exists? and got to hear the soft, almost moan of a sound that came
out of him as he started to chew.

She doesn't know if he knows that she does this, but sometimes she'll just stand in the doorway to his office, and watch him listen to music.

He never closes the door to his office, so she doesn't feel like she's intruding or sneaking, but sometimes she comes home and she'll hear his music, so she'll go over and watch. And most of the time he sees her and waves her in and they talk for a bit. But sometimes the music just sounds right. And she'd be hard pressed to explain what right is, but she knows it when she hears it, and she knows when she peeks in she'll see him lounging in his chair, eyes closed, head back, just letting it all wrap around him, and those days, when he just lets himself go, lets the pleasure of it take him over, he doesn't notice her, and she can just stand there and watch to her heart's content.

He hums along sometimes, which she assumes means that it's a piece he's heard before. And others he's just silent, index and middle finger of his left hand sort of moving with whatever melody or beat especially has him in its spell.

And she'll stand there and watch, loving that he can get so into the things he loves.

And, of course, watching is a treat, but knowing you're causing that sort of pleasure is even better.

There are perks to running your own department. For example, Abby has the keys to the lab. When she locks up, it's locked.

Since it's high security, the janitorial staff isn't allowed in there. Sure, she has to keep the lab tidy herself, but right now that works especially well for her.

Because right now, she's pulling McGee into her office, and she knows the doors are locked and no one is going to come in.

Technically, it's not Halloween any more. Halloween ended an hour ago. But they haven't slept yet, and she still believes in the idea that it's not tomorrow until you sleep. And it's still Halloween five hundred miles west of here, so that counts, right?

He's kissing her like he's been waiting all night for this, and, well he has, and so has she for that matter, and the only thing not perfect about it is he can't fist his hand in her hair, which she really likes, but his hand on her neck and the other cupping her tush, keeping her firmly pressed hips to hips against him is awfully nice, too.

He pulls back to just look at her, eyes sliding up and down her body, and she smiles at him, loving that. She's always loved the ways he looks at her, and how it's changed over the years. The goofy grin he gave her back in '06, which she just about melted at, is gone. Today his eyes are hungry, confident, and if the term eye-fucking means anything, it's how he's looking at her right now.

He tilts her head back, thumb on her jaw, and lays a line of open-mouthed, wet kisses along her throat down the v-neck of her dress while she's pushing them back into her office.

She's unbuttoning his shirt. Not bothering to take it off, too much effort to take it off, but she wants his skin, the feel of his heartbeat against hers, and his scent. Soap, Degree deodorant, desire, **him**. He's stripping out of his pants, or at least pushing them down to his knees. She's not paying enough attention to that to know for sure.

What she does know is he lands on her desk chair, and a second later she's straddled him, realizing this chair really needs to be a few inches wider to do this properly, but for now, they'll make do. Her
one leg snugs in next to his, and the other ends up over the arm of the chair, and a second after that, she's holding him steady, and sliding down, watching him as she does it.

He doesn't close his eyes. He almost never does. But they're three quarters shut right now, and he's got that look, that this is so good my eyes want to roll back in my head, but I can't not watch it look. And that always kills her. The way it feels so good but he won't shut her out of it. How he never, not when they're having sex, slips entirely into himself.

His head is back, the line of his throat long and laid bare for her, and she wants to lick it, but she can't see him if she does that, and that look, those almost closed eyes, lips wet and red, just barely open, teeth gritted. It's too good to not watch.

The sound he's making is not a moan. Not loud enough for that. A very long, deep exhale? Probably. Followed by a sharp, fast inhale.

She can't lick, not without breaking eye contact, so she strokes her fingers down his throat, down his chest.

His eyes slowly open all the way back up. His pupils are blown, wide and black, a fine rim of olive green around them. She's read about eye color darkening with excitement, but that's fiction. Though he is excited, and his eyes are darker than normal, it's the lighting in here that's doing it. Indoor lighting often makes his eyes look olive drab. Outside, or in good indoor light, his eyes are a sort of slightly warm-toned jade color. Jade of the stone, not the intense blue-green color often called jade, but that light, milky green, a color that makes her think of Asian-style dragons.

"My dragon." She doesn't mean to say it out loud, and he looks a little confused at it, but she just smiles, and he lets it go.

His hips start a long slow roll, more grinding his pelvis against hers than trying to thrust, and that makes her want to close her eyes and throw her head back. And she does, feeling his fingers trace down her throat, along her chest, feathering over her breasts, and settling on her hips, encouraging her to move.

Sitting in this tiny little chair, she's in charge of any sort of vertical motion. She adds a grind of her own, which is mostly for her, and a good, firm squeeze, which is for him, and this time there's no mistaking the sound coming out of him, definitely a moan.

A very pleased moan.

He cants his hips up, that gets a little more friction going, and she starts to ride him properly, as he gets his thumb into the action, finding her clit and stroking in fast, small circles.

This isn't going to take long. Hours of teasing, anticipating, and wanting tends to make for fast orgasms once the actual sex starts.

And there is nothing, nothing at all, like watching Tim McGee come.

He's so amazingly beautiful as he gets off, so intensely present. When he's coming, there's absolutely nothing else going on with him, he's entirely in that moment, with her, and she treasures getting to be there for it. It blows her mind that she gets to see this. Gets him, laid completely open in front of her, every feeling, every ounce of pleasure naked to her.

She watches him come down, basking in her own post-orgasmic glow, as well. Now his eyes are closed. A blissed-out expression and a little smile, on his face.
She thinks about the first time she saw this, and how different it is now.

Ten years ago, he was a sweet kid: a nervous, adorable, occasionally-pouty, but mostly just a ridiculously sweet kid. And sex with that Tim McGee was a treat. A very different treat. That was the joy of showing a man he's desirable. And especially in guys who don't get treated like that a lot, seeing them feel it, seeing them know it, giving them the gift of wanting them, that's amazing.

And Tim... she doesn't know if anyone ever took the time to want him properly before she got a hold of him. She knows he had a steady girl at MIT, but the way he responded to her, the flower-seeing-the-sun-for-the-first-time look she got out of him, that made her think no one ever did.

But he's not that kid anymore. A lot of that sweetness has burned off over the years. Sometimes she misses that. He's still playful, and there's still a very deep gentleness to him, but he's not adorably sweet anymore. He's harder now, sharper than he probably ever could have dreamed of ten years ago. He's confident now. He's the man who can open himself like this, lay himself in front of her and let her in. He couldn't have done that ten years ago. And ten years ago, even if he could have, she wouldn't have known what to do with it.

But now he's a man who trusts not just his own worth, but her ability to recognize and value it.

She kisses him, pulls back, watching his face as he relaxes. "I love you, Tim. So much."

He smiles slowly, stroking his fingers, those long, nimble fingers over her cheek and jaw. "Love you, too."

She twines her fingers with his, looking at the ring he had made for her bracketed by two of his fingers. He sees her looking at it.

"Getting used to having it there?"

"Starting to. It'll catch the light in my peripheral vision, and I'll wonder what that red flash is, and then look and feel all tingly."

He smiles at that, too, looking very pleased. Then he sighs and lets his head drop back. "Going to fall asleep right here if we don't move soon. You want to crash here or head home?"

She's feeling awfully satisfied and lazy right now, not really wanting to go anywhere. But she does want to sleep tonight, and that means unpinning her hair.

"Home. Don't really want to move, but I can't sleep with my hair pinned up like this."

He's nodding, reaching over for the tissues. They clean up, fast, and in a few minutes are heading toward his car. And while it's true the Porsche is still his, and the roadster is still hers, usually whichever one of them happens to get to the driver's side door first ends up driving. They both carry both keys now.

"How about I drive, and you can take your hair down while we head home. That way we can be asleep five minutes after getting in the door."

"That sounds really good."

Half an hour later, they're home, snuggled into bed, him spooned behind her in their usual sleeping position, and she's just about asleep, when he asks, "What were you saying about dragons?"

She thinks for a second. "Oh. Your eyes are jade-colored. They make me think of those carved
Asian style dragons. The Chinese ones with no wings."

"Okay." A long, quiet minute passes, while they both breathe softly and edge closer to sleep.

She feels it when he puts two and two together. "I'm your dragon?"

"Yeah."

He bites her very gently on the shoulder. "Grrrr."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay, so what color are Tim McGee/Sean Murray’s eyes? Here's the link to the shot I was basing my description off of.


Granted, if you scroll through that collection, you'll see what I mean about olive green v. jade. One color they aren't, emerald.
Wedding Planning

Some things about planning the Sciuto-McGee wedding are pretty easy. The date for example. That took all of nine seconds, eight of which are spent looking at a calendar.

Of course it’s a Halloween wedding. When else would the Elf Lord marry his Gothic Wildflower? (Okay, technically it’s an All Saint’s wedding, because Halloween 2014 is a Friday night and a Saturday wedding is easier for everyone.)

And of course, if it’s a Halloween wedding, then it has to be in costume. Many ideas, themes, plans are considered and scuttled. Renfaire wedding: both of them thought that was awfully cool, especially given the costumes, but, then they looked at their friends, and decided that torturing all of them wasn’t the goal of their wedding.

Basically, they had been talking about it, explaining the idea, and then Gibbs visibly winced. And that killed Renfaire.

Which lead to a question that got asked at each new idea before anyone outside of the immediate wedding planning team (Abby, Palmer, Breena, and Tim) got in on it. “Can you see Gibbs in...” killed a lot of the themes. Punk? No. Goth? No.

“A kilt?” Abby asked as they looked at Highland themed ideas.

“You’re kidding, right?” Tim replied.

“He’d look great in a kilt!” Breena added.

“Gibbs, not Ducky,” Tim said.

Breena just stared at him.

Tim shook his head. “Not saying he wouldn’t, just that you’d have to get him drunk and probably roofie him before you’d be able to get him into one.”

Jimmy and Abby looked at each other, shrugged, and onto the next idea they went.

It was Palmer, who had leapt with surprising ease into the role of Abby’s... man of honor? best man? whatever, the guy who holds the flowers during the vows, who said, “How about Steampunk? With like, a Western flare?”

They stopped and thought about that. Gibbs: black stove pipe trousers, black claw hammer jacket, white shirt, navy brocade vest, string tie, boots, Stetson... That worked. That really worked.

“There’s a new Sheriff in town, and his name is L.J. Gibbs. I can see that,” Tim said nodding.

“I’m thinking east coast dandy for me,” Jimmy said. He stared at Tim for a long moment. “You too, probably. And Ducky, oh my God, he’ll be all over this in a heartbeat. Heck, he might even break out his kilt for it.”

They realized Abby hadn’t said anything. “What do you think Abby?” Jimmy asked.

She turned the computer toward them. On it was a silver and black brocade dress, skin tight bodice with a low square cut neck, full skirts flared over a bustle, all of it embellished with ruffles and black piping. A froth of lace spilled out at the wrists. The model’s hair was piled up in high curls, and she
even looked a little bit like Abby.

“What would you think of this in white?”

Tim’s jaw went slack. He stared at it, then stared at Abby. It took a second, but he was finally able to say, “It’s perfect.”

[Image of a woman in a steampunk costume]

“http://romanticthreads.com/neromaango.html

“A what wedding?” Tony asks Tim three days later.

“Steampunk.”

“What the hell is steampunk?”

Tim almost says, “You’ll like it.” But really, Tony probably won’t. At best, he’ll humor him. “Sort of like the 1880s Old West, but with steam powered things instead of the internal combustion engines we ended up with.”

“So, you’re doing your wedding based on one of the worst movies ever?”

“Huh?”

“Wild, Wild West? Will Smith? Kevin Klein?”

“No idea what you’re talking about. I ran into it the first time with Deadlands.”

“What’s Deadlands?”

“RPG that was popular for about seventeen minutes during the nineties,” Tim says absently while googling Wild Wild West. He check out some of the stills and says, “Actually, yes, this looks right.”

“Worst movie of ’99.”

“How bad could something with Will Smith and Kenneth Branagh be?”

“You’d be amazed.” Tony looks over at Gibbs who has been following this conversation without saying anything. “You going to go along with this?”
Gibbs shrugs. “I like Westerns. And it’s certainly better than… What was that thing Abby and Palmer were going on about last week?”

“Renfaire?” Tim asks.

“Yeah.” Gibbs shakes his head and says one more word on that subject, “Tights.”

“No tights for this. Vests, cravats, hats maybe. No tights.”

Tony looks at the pictures on Tim’s phone. Yeah, it’s not his usual style, by like, ten miles, but he can pull that sort of outfit off, and look excellent doing it.

“Steampunk. Hmmm… Well, you’ve certainly had worse ideas.”

“Thanks Tony, that ringing endorsement was all I was waiting for.”
Laundry

Some things get more complicated when you live with someone. Grocery shopping, that gets tougher. Less expensive on a per person basis, but more complicated because suddenly you’ve got two sets of taste buds and nutritional/diet needs to deal with.

Laundry, on the other hand, gets a lot easier.

Well, sort of.

For Tim it gets a bit more complicated. Having lived on his own for quite a while, he had a pretty streamlined system for dealing with laundry. Namely, his washer and dryer were in the bathroom, behind his shower, so every night he’d strip off, dump the clothing into the washer, brush his teeth, put his pjs on, and head to bed.

When it got full, he’d add soap, turn it on, and fall asleep to the swishing sound.

Next morning, toss it in the dryer before hopping in the shower.

And that night, he’d toss in sheets and towels, and iron while watching TV or talking to his mom or sister on the phone.

Add in the occasional dry cleaning run for his jackets and suits when he wore one, and that was his laundry system.

Abby has a significantly more complicated system. For example, in addition to a dry cleaning pile, she has three hampers (whites, colors, delicates) and several different soaps. And she actually uses the temperature settings on her washer. (According to Tim, his washer had one setting, and that setting was “on.”)

So it isn’t long into the two of them living together that a new system of laundry labor division comes into being.

Yes, he can learn how to handle her laundry. No, it wouldn’t have taken much effort. However, it’s a lot easier to just play to their individual strengths. Namely, he memorizes which bits of his clothing go into which hampers (not too hard, he doesn’t own any delicates and hardly any whites), she handles the actual washing, sorting, and putting away, and he irons.

He’s very good at it. Since he wears something that requires ironing every day he’s at work, he gets a lot more practice at it than she does. So adding her skirts and the occasional blouse to his ironing pile isn’t a challenge. And since his non-ironed clothing fits into one of four categories (socks, boxers, pants, t-shirt), sorting it out isn’t much additional work for her.

Sure, he did this every six or so days when he was on his own, and they do it closer to every four now, but it still works out to a bit less work.

And he’s got mad skills when it comes to ironing pleats now.

So, it's two weeks later, while he's ironing, and she's putting the dry cleaning away, that she notices the Marilyn dress and remembers something. “I never did get to hear what happened Halloween night 2006, after you got home from work.”

He looks up from shirt he’s ironing. “Huh?”
She turns so he can see the white dress in the plastic bag, and he realizes where her mind must have gone.

“I still can’t believe you did that on purpose.”

“You spent four days telling me about how hot and blonde your Ice Queen was.”

He gives her a disbelieving look. “So you decided to out hot and blonde her?”

“Yep.” She grins at him. “The original plan was just to wear it to the party and make every guy there fall in love with me. Getting to wear it to work in front of you was just icing on the cake.”

He snorts a little and shakes his head, pressing the cuff on his shirt.

“Don’t snort at me, you loved that.”

“Yeah, I did, but talk about frustrated!”

“That was the point. I hope it was a lot like hearing about how hot and blonde, and did I mention fifteen-years-younger, and cheerleader your date was. You going to tell me you weren’t doing that on purpose?” She sits on the bed and starts to fold t-shirts.

He smirks a little. “Maybe. You’re cute when you’re jealous.”

“And sometimes sexy.”

“Very sexy. And with as many Valentine’s Days as I walked down there and found fifty million flowers all from guys who weren’t me, or as many boyfriends I heard about, and the number of times you wandered around in a tiny little skirt, hugged me, kissed my cheek, pressed up nice and close, and then pulled back to head off and go sleep with someone else, I am not at all bothered by making you jealous when I had a chance.”

“Well, it worked.”

“Good.” He flashes her a satisfied smile.

“They really were mostly friends.”

He’s not looking very convinced by that. “I’ve got female friends. You wanna guess how often I send them Valentine’s Day flowers let alone sleep over at their homes?”

“You always got me a Valentine’s Day present.”

“You think we were friends?”

“Not exactly.”

He nods.

“A lot of them really were friends.”

“Sure.” He’s not buying that at all. If they were friends, they were the same sort of friend he was. “Guys don’t send flowers to women they don’t want to sleep with.”

“Straight guys don’t send flowers to women they don’t want to sleep with.”
Okay, that’s probably a distinction worth paying attention to. So he shrugs a little. “True.”

“And a lot of my guy friends are gay.”

“Okay.”

“Did it really bother you?” She asks, finishing folding up all of his t-shirts, standing up, and putting them in his drawer.

“Yeah!” He goes and hangs up the shirt he was ironing, and grabs a new one.

She shrugs a little. “I’m not exactly sorry, because I kind of really like how it feels that things like that bothered you, but... it wasn’t kind either, and I am sorry for that.”

He flashes her a perplexed look. “Um… thanks… I think.”

“It just feels really good. All those years, you wanted me."

“Yes, I did. Of course, I did.” He thinks about it for a moment. “And yeah, it always felt good when you were jealous of one of my girlfriends. ‘Course would have felt better if you had just dragged me back into your office and made out with me.”

“Okay, the teasing thing might not have been kind, but knowing what you wanted, and knowing what I could give, and still sleeping with you, no matter how cute you were, and how often you looked at me like I was ice cream and you wanted to eat me one lick at a time, and no matter how good you are at that, and how fantastic it would have felt, would have been just downright cruel.”

He thinks about that and nods. “Yeah, it would have been. As much fun as it might have been,” because he can think of at least half a dozen times where they very easily could have tumbled into bed over the years, and a few dozen more where he was giving her that ice cream look, and would have very happily eaten her one lick at a time, “I couldn’t have stood to be your friend-with-benefits.”

“I knew that.” She sits on the bed and starts matching up socks. “So, Halloween 2006. We got to do what I was thinking about that night. What did you do when you got home?”

“You want to do this now?”

“You want to watch Dr. Who and come back to this later?” They often watch TV while handling the laundry.

He checks the clock. And the pile of things to be ironed. And if they want to get to bed in time to actually get some solid sleep in… “Dr. Who will still be there tomorrow.”

She grins at him.

“If I burn myself, it’s your fault.”

“Come on, I know you’re a better multi-tasker than that.”

“Never tried talking dirty and ironing before.”

She laughs. “You know, about ten years ago I got a birthday card, and it was a picture of this really hot, mostly-naked guy ironing. The outside said, ‘You know what’s wrong with this picture?’”

Tim raises an eyebrow.
“The inside said, ‘Nothing.’” And she smiles at him brightly.

“So you’re saying sex and domestic chores together is something of a turn on?”

She laughs. “It’s certainly not a turn off.”

Chuckling a little, looking wryly amused, he pulls off his shirt, tossing it in the colors hamper, along with his socks, slowly pulls his belt from his pants, carefully draping it over the crossbar on the ironing board, and then, holding her gaze, pops the button on his jeans. Then he gives her a long, steady, gonna-make-you-come-so-hard-the-neighbors-complain-about-the-noise look, and says, “You like this, right?”

She grins. “Yeah, I really do.” She gets up from the bed, steps around the ironing board, and gives him a long kiss. “Yes.”

“Ironing might become my favorite chore.”

She steps back, smiling, tracing her finger from his lip, down his throat and chest, settling it just above the zipper on his jeans. Her thumb presses into the fabric just to the left of the zipper, gently stroking him, as she pulls it up to meet her index finger and tug the zipper down.

“Perfect,” she says, eyes tracing over him. “Love you like this.” Then she turns, walks back to the bed, and returns to sorting the socks.

He laughs a little, takes a deep breath, grabs the iron, turns it back on, (it turns off if you don’t move it for a few minutes) and waits for it to heat up.

“So, Halloween 2006. Do you remember the last thing you did that I saw?”

She thinks about it for a moment. “Trick or Treating at your desk?”

“Yeah. Remember what you did?”

She grins.

“I’ll take that as a yes. So, I get home, and all I can see is the way you got the treat from me. Everyone else you asked nicely and waited for them to give it to her. But me, noooo… You step right next to me, lean over me, and reach across my body to the drawer I keep my snacks in, rummage around it, for, what was that, ten minutes? Before raiding my cookie stash. You weren’t wearing a bra, and with the way you were leaning, your breasts were hanging soft and loose right in front of my eyes, and your nipples weren’t exactly hard, but that dress is pretty much translucent, so I could see the shadow of them against the white fabric, and then your ass is about a foot away, and once again, translucent dress, so I can see the white outline of your panties, and you’re leaning over me, which meant I could smell you as well as see you, and your legs in those shoes… Look, I love the boots you usually wear, but they call them fuck me heels for a reason. You have no idea how much control it took not to grab you right there and fuck you on my desk in front of everyone. And honestly, I don’t think any of the guys would have blamed me if I had done it.”

She stares at him in disbelief. “I’m getting trick-or-treats for the five-year-old-girl standing two feet away and you were thinking that?”

“Baby, by the time you were reaching into that drawer, your body was three inches away from my lap. The bullpen could have been on fire, and I wouldn’t have noticed, let alone a little girl a few feet away. No, the main thing I was doing was praying to every and any deity or greater power that you’d pull back without brushing against me, otherwise you would have felt exactly how hard I


was.”

“How hard were you?”

“Could have pole vaulted with it.”

“Impressive.”

“So were you in that outfit, leaning across me.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. So I get home and the one thing I know isn’t going to happen is me falling asleep nice and easy. I was way, way too keyed up and horny for that. Between you and the case, no way in hell I’ll just go to bed and snooze.

“And I also know that I don’t want to just rub one out fast. I want this to take a while, way too many good images in my head for a quick jerk.”

She smiles at that, stands up, puts the socks away, and then returns to the bed and the pile of undies.

If asked, Tim would admit this is his favorite part of watching her sort and fold laundry. Her fingers slipping over little cotton bikini cut panties, let alone wisps of silk and lace, and yeah, he enjoys that. And she’s playing it up. Very carefully tucking her panties into tidy little squares, laying those squares on each matching bra. Teddies smoothed out and folded into quarters.

“Tim?”

“Huh?”

“Do you like that shirt?”

“Damn it.” He jerks the iron back. Okay, good, shirt isn’t burned. It’s just really well pressed in one spot. “So much for my multi-tasking skills.”

“Well, how about you get back to distracting me from what I’m doing?”

“I like watching what you’re doing.”

“And something equally hot to listen to go with it would be nice.”

He grins and shifts the shirt a little. “So, I’m home. And at that point I didn’t know exactly where I wanted the fantasy to go, so instead of picking out anything in specific, beside the lube, I just put my toybox on the bed next to me, figuring I’d grab stuff as I went.

“I got naked, settled back on bed, and started touching myself.”

“How?”

He shoots her his I can’t believe you just asked that look. “I was rubbing my knee. How do you think?”

“Left hand, right hand, both, start off with the lube, add it later?” She holds her fingers in a loose circle and jerks it a few times. “Like that?”

“Why would I use my right hand?”
“I don’t know. Not everyone uses their dominant hand for everything.”

“Left hand, no lube, yet, as for how…” He spends a minute thinking about how to describe that. Then he looks in the closet. He’s got a shirt for tomorrow. “Would you rather just see it?”

“Really?” She’s grinning brilliantly.

He nods. “Yeah.”

“Oh yeah!” She scoops up the folded undies and rushes to her drawer, putting them away fast. He turns off the iron, and then takes the top sheet on the bed, and flaps it, sending unfolded laundry flying to the floor.

“Eager?”

“Not interested in waiting to get this done.”

She’s kneeling on the bed, and he’s standing next to the opposite side of it. He traces his fingers lightly over his hip, just above the waistband of his jeans, then slips it under his boxers, and pulls gently, really enjoying the way her eyes are glued to what he's doing.

“Feel like getting me some supplies?”

“What do you want?”

“Are we still doing Halloween 2006?”

“Yeah.”

“Lube, cock ring, and put some red lipstick on.”

“Red lipstick?” She raises an eyebrow. "I thought I was watching."

He grins. “This might be interactive.”

She smiles at him, and heads to her dresser. She opens the top drawer and searches through her lipsticks for the right one. A minute later, she has it and is smoothing it over her lips. He’s watching her face in the mirror as she finishes and kisses her lips together.

“You know, every time you wear that, every single guy in the room is thinking about your lips wrapped around his dick.”

“Every guy?”

Tim nods. “Every straight guy. They should call that color Blow Job Red, because that’s exactly what we all think when you wear it.”

She laughs.

“I’m not kidding, at all.”

“I know you aren’t. There’s only one reason a woman wears red lipstick, and it’s to make people look at her lips. It’s still funny,” she says as she opens the lid to their toybox. It lives on his dresser, and at a casual glance just looks like a nice, wooden box, maybe the sort of thing you might keep ties, belts, or handkerchiefs in, if you happened to have a whole lot of them. “Leather or silicon?”
“Silicon, no bullet.” They have three cock rings, but the one he wants is the plainest of the bunch. Just a snug ring of silicon, no frills on that one. Beyond keeping him really hard, he doesn’t need it to do anything else.

“Anything else?”

He thinks about that for a moment. Sheets are clean, and it’d be nice if they stayed that way a little longer. “Towel?”

She grins and returns from the bathroom a moment later, lays the things he’s requested on the bed in front of him, and settles into a comfortable position, leaning, back against the foot of the bed, waiting for him.

“Want me to get naked?”

She’s got on one of his button downs and a pair of panties.

“Not yet.”

“Sooo…”

“So, it’s Halloween 2006, and you’ve been teasing me mercilessly all night. And I’m finally home and can do this.” He shucks off his pants and boxers, leaving them on the floor next to the bed, and sits at the head of the bed, pillows piled behind his back, legs spread wide in front of him, cock half hard, hands on his thighs.

His thumbs are making wide circles along the inside of his thighs. And no, this isn’t precisely what he did when he got home that night, he’s trying to make this interesting for her as well, and just jumping on the bed and beating off might be a little more direct than she’d like.

She arches an eyebrow at him. “You did that?”

Or maybe she knows him pretty well by now. His hand snakes up his thigh and wraps around his dick, gently pulling.

“That I believe. What were you thinking about?”

“Your lips. So red, and so pretty, and so wrapped around me.”

She licks them. Pink tongue slipping over them, soft and wet.

“That, too. And there was a really vivid image of your lip print on my dick. Perfect red ring just below the head.”

“Like this?” And she leans forward, pushing his hand down, carefully wrapping her mouth around him, leaving a red lip print just below the head, then pulling them softly up and over, finishing with a few licks to the tip.

He doesn’t realize he's held his breath while she does it until it slips back out when she sits back on her feet.

“Yeah, just like that.” He begins to stroke again, looking at the perfect ring of Blow Job Red, seeing it smear a little on the down stroke.

Tim almost never thinks about what his dick looks like. Not to say he doesn’t love to watch himself fuck Abby, or her sucking him, or, hell, anything she might want to do with his dick. If she’s playing
with it, he wants to see her do it. Watching is always a very good thing. But when that happens he’s watching her on him. Him by himself, not particularly interesting to him, at least visually.

But she’s watching his hand, his cock, like this is the sexiest thing she’s ever seen, and suddenly he’s watching himself as well.

He’s seen more than enough porn to know his dick’s not setting any records. But he also knows, that like the fact that he’s a bit taller and broader than average, he’s also a bit longer and wider than average. And by average he means in the mathematical sense, and by a bit he means that if anyone were to ever call him Python as a nickname, it’d be because of his coding skills and not what lives in his pants.

It’s straight, no curve in any direction, and the tip tends more towards pink than purple, flushing red the closer he gets to coming. He slips his hand down, fairly slow, mostly moving the skin over the shaft, which is usually how this works before lube is part of the equation.

“You like watching this?”

Abby licks her lips again, leans forward, her arms together, pushing her breasts up and forward, and undoes the top three buttons of the shirt, enticing him with a glimpse of cleavage.

“Oh yes, I like watching this. All sorts of good squirminess from watching this.”

“Good.” He settles back a little further and closes his eyes, focusing on the fantasy, because if he doesn’t, he’ll get too wrapped up in her in front of him, and just beat off to that. “In the fantasy it’s your real hair. You’re on your knees in front of me, and I’m back against the desk in your office, holding onto the edge with one hand, the other stroking your hair and face as you pull back and just lick. Lots of wet visible tongue and your red, red lips slowly slipping up and down the tip, just a little suction.”

He’s holding himself with his left hand, and gently tracing the tip of his right index finger over the tip. He feels her move, and then her breath against his glans, and finally her tongue slipping against him, licking his dick and his finger.

“Oh.” He bites his lip and takes a deep breath. “This is going to go a lot faster than it did in real life if you keep helping me.”

“I want to help. You look too good not to taste.”

“Okay.” He swallows, inhaling slow and steady, just feeling her tongue on his dick. On the exhale he starts talking again. "In the fantasy, you teased me for a while, soft and wet and just focusing on the tip. Keeping me really hard and squirming, but not letting me get close to coming. Getting me really wet, and then blowing me dry. Or squeezing firm, pushing all the blood into the tip, and then bobbing your lips over it really fast, and pulling back and stopping, just letting me rest on the tip of your tongue, and very gently scraping your teeth over the tip.”

She follows the things he's saying, while he keeps up a slow, steady stroke over the shaft. He opens his eyes to watch, and of course her hair is black, and it’s not curly, but her lips are still red, and it feels brilliant. “Fuck, that’s so good, baby.”

She pulls back and smiles at him. “What next?”

“Lube.”
She hands him the bottle, and he pours a little in his palm, smoothing it over his whole penis. He sighs as he does that. Dry is good, slick is better.

“And this would be the part where I stopped teasing you?”

“Yeah. Mouth and hand and all the way up and all the way down and—“ He’s stroking steadily, a faster pace, hand tighter.

“Slow down. Let me see what you’re doing.”

He exhales long and slow, thinks about what he’s actually doing, and then narrates the action.

“Moderately tight fist. Keeping my fingers snug enough so I can feel each one as I slip through. I roll my thumb over the tip as it passes through.”

Abby looks away from his dick to his eyes. “That is so hot.”

“Good.” He speeds the pace of his hand, hips rocking into the stroke. “As you suck, you hand gets wet and slick.” His right hand, the one he poured the lube into, gets into the action, rolling his balls a little, pulling them gently, and then slipping behind them, pressing against his perineum. “So you switch to just mouth and use your hand on the rest of me.” He shifts position so he’s half kneeling, butt resting against his feet, knees wide apart.

“I’m watching you suck me. Holding me deep in your mouth, hot, wet suction,” he grabs the cock ring and slips it over himself, sighing a little as he gets it set.

“How does it feel?”

“Huh?” He’s not sure exactly what she’s asking by that.

“I know it makes it more difficult to get off, and I know it keeps you hard, but how does it feel when you’re wearing it?”

“Really full, really big. The closer you are to coming the bigger and harder it gets, so it feels like being on edge. The skin can’t move over the shaft, so you get more sensation out of the friction. Balls can’t creep up, so you can enjoy it longer.”

“Okay. Why put it on now?”

“Because in the fantasy your fingers are about to get into the action, and I want this part to last a while.”

“And what are my fingers doing?”

“Slipping around, pressing into my perineum, and one of them is very gently easing into me.” His left hand goes back to a long, slow stroke, all the way up and down, as his right slips further back between his legs, starting to slip in. He lets out a slow breath and speeds his hand a little, distracting himself, better lube means this a lot more comfortable than it used to be, but it’s still not his favorite thing.

He feels her move again and hears the sound of rustling clothing. He opens his eyes and sees her stripping out of her clothing, facing him, matching the speed of his hands to her own fingers moving over her flesh.

She looks at him and smiles. “Way too hot, can’t not touch myself.”
He closes his eyes again, hearing the sound of her fingers slipping against her flesh. “This is not helping me relax, at all.”

“Poor baby.” He feels her fingers on his lips, smells her on them, tastes them, and fuck it, this isn’t masturbation any more. He opens his eyes, sucks her fingers into his mouth, and pushes her onto her back.

“Tim!” She’s a bit surprised by that.

“Screw the fantasy!” he says a second before dipping into a long, hot kiss, and grinding himself against her stomach.

They keep at that, writhing against each other for a good minute before he pulls back. “Up, on your hands and knees.” His hands stroke over her shoulders and back, cupping her ass, as he kisses down her spine. “Just like that. Most perfect ass, ever.”

He kneels behind her, thrusting in hard and fast. “Oh God! Fuck! Abby!”

The good thing about the cock ring is that it does provide a certain level of artificially enforced control. Yes, he can climax wearing the ring, but it’s a lot more difficult than usual. But feeling on edge, even if you aren’t, means that he’s got a lot less control of the rest of his body. Primary, his fine motor control is shot.

He’s kissing her shoulders and neck, hands stroking her breasts. “Touch yourself, baby. Want to feel you get off.”

She does. He can feel her fingers brush his balls when he trusts forward, and her body growing even tighter on him, and it feels so amazing, hot, wet, tight, and slick, on over-sensitized skin, and his body wants to come, and the ring drags that sensation out. She’s rippling on him, twitching and moaning and that’s even better, a whole level of better, and he forces himself to stop, let her ride it out, relax for a minute.

He pulls out, going to take the ring off, and slip back in and come so hard he sees stars.

She turns to face him. “Stop.”

“Stop? What are you thinking?”

“It takes a lot of extra stimulation for you to get off wearing that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m feeling awfully relaxed right now. Kneel down, butt on your feet.”

His eyes go wide, fairly sure where this is going. “Really?” They haven’t done any stretching for her, and he doesn’t want to take a ten minute break to get her all snug and relaxed on his fingers.

“Yeah. Hold it together long enough for me to get settled, and then you can go full out.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really! We’ve done this often enough you know you aren’t going to hurt me. And, God, I want you to fuck me, right now!”

He swallows hard, and sits back, determined to stay very, very still. She gets the lube, adds more of it to him, and a lot more to her, and then back to his chest, very slowly eases down.
His hands curl into fists, and his feet into whatever the equivalent of a fist is. So hot, so tight, and so, so, so slow. He’s focusing on her back, tracing the tattoos with his eyes, making himself not move, not thrust, not bury himself again and again into her. And since she didn’t stretch ahead of time this takes three quarters of forever and it’s the longest, slowest, tightest, hottest, best-feeling forever of his life.

He knows he’s talking: hot, dirty, sexy words. Probably cursing, too, feels too good not to let it out, but he’s got no idea what he’s saying. The feeling of it, the flex of her back as she eases down, the curve of her hips and ass, but mostly the way it feels, is keeping his mind busy.

She settles against him, still for a good, long minute, breathing quietly. Then she leans forward, arms stretched out in front of her, head resting on the right one, ass high, and says, “Fuck me.”

It’s like an explosion in his brain. Any part of him that isn’t entirely devoted to thrusting and pleasure just vanishes at those words. The whole world shrinks down to the feeling of her body tight and slick and sliding along his.

And when his orgasm starts, he feels it whole body, through his arms and legs and chest and heart, pouring, pulsing through balls and cock, and if fucking fantastic means anything, it means this feeling rushing through him.

They’re on their sides, him still deep in her, when he comes back to himself. He snuggles in closer, sighing happily, kissing her neck, enjoying her next to him.

They drift like that for a little while, just enjoying the endorphins and breathing together. Finally Abby says, “Can you reach the towel?”

He feels around a little and hands it to her. She slips off of him, and he hisses a little at that. Cock ring on means he’s very sensitive post-climax. He takes it off carefully, trying to not touch himself too much.

Eventually they’re both cleaned up and in bed, both sleepy. He’s wrapped around her, and it’s probably the endorphins, but maybe it’s just her, and her being near, but he loves her so much right now. It feels too big to hold onto, too big to keep in just one body, one heart.

He usually sleeps spooned behind her, with his arm around her waist, hand curled loosely around her breast, but he slides it over a little, feeling her heartbeat, and the soft rise and fall of her chest under his hand.

And he feels how precious this life is, how fragile, and how much he wants, needs, cherishes it. And there aren’t words, nothing existing solely of breath of man is big enough for this, deep enough for it, so he doesn’t try to speak it.

He kisses her neck, and her shoulder, pressing his face to her back, smelling her skin and hair, and holds her tightly, trying to get the feeling across with touch, not sure if that’s even possible, but it’s--

“I love you, too, Tim.”

He kisses her one more time, wishing he was a great artist, so he could make something as beautiful as this is, and give it to her.
"What's on your schedule for tonight?" Tony asks him as they're heading toward the elevator at the end of work on a Tuesday a few weeks before Christmas.

"Quick dinner, pre-marital counseling."

"Yuck."

Tim shrugs. Tony knows that it's not his favorite pastime. He'd much rather be spending those hours doing, well, almost anything else. "It's not terrible. It's just... I don't know, designed for people who haven't been together for more than a decade? Last week was about setting goals and plans for the future, and sure, I bet that's useful if you're twenty-two and don't really have a life, but we've pretty much got the next thirty years figured out."

Tony nods. "You mean questions about what your career goals are aren't terribly enlightening?"

"Yeah, what's the big surprise going to be? I'll keep investigating until Gibbs retires or we have kids and then move to Cybercrime? Oh my. Everyone knows that."

Tony stares at him and switches off the elevator. "I didn't know that."

That brings Tim up short. "How did you not know that?"

Tony's look is a bit hot for just annoyed, and a little too cool to be a full on glare. "We can start with you didn't actually say anything about it to me."

Tim nods, realizing he didn't actually say anything. "Oh. I thought—"

"My psychic vibes would somehow suck that information straight out of your head, and you didn't have to actually tell me? You're my partner. You tell me things like this!"

Tim sighs. "I'm sorry I didn't say it. After the freezer... Abby was really pissed about the almost dying thing. When I was talking to Gibbs about it, he said you and Ziva both knew I'd be going eventually."

And they do. They've known for a while, but... There's knowing and there's knowing. "Well, yeah, eventually. A long, long time from now. Not—"

"Not the sort of thing that has an actual end date attached to it?"

"Yeah."

"Well, no set date yet. But, I won't be staying any longer than he does, and depending on how things with kids go, maybe sooner. I'm not going to leave her a widow with a baby. Not if there's anything I can do to avoid it, and there is something, so I'll do it."

"Oh."

"Yeah. She spent over two hours sitting in a van, not knowing if we were alive or dead, waiting, and then watched them carry us out. None of us moving, all of us blue, and she didn't know if they ran you to the ambulance because you were in the worst shape, or if you were the only one still alive. And for right now, she still thinks what I do is worth that, but that won't be true forever. So, I don't know when it'll be time, but the answer is sooner rather than later."
Tony nods at that, too. Tim can see there's sorrow in his eyes, but he makes a joke anyway, "You're going to leave me with two Probies to break in at once?"

"Yes, that's my plan. Make sure you've got two of them so each one takes half of the crap. I figure that's the easiest way to make sure that your next Probie doesn't kill you."

"Like Dornaget would even try."

"Uh huh. How'd you like that audit?"

"That was him?"

"Yeah, Tony, that was him. Don't mess with Dornie. He might look like a cream puff, but he's got some edges in there."

Tony smirks. "And you'd know all about cream puffs hiding razor blades."

"Just possibly." And with that Tim flicks the elevator back on.

"So, you got career goals out of the way. What's this week?" Tony asks.

"Today and next week are conflict resolution, which should be amusing." He rolls his eyes a little. "I'm getting to know Father John better, that's sort of nice."

Tony nods a little at that, too.

"How about you?" Tim asks.

"Schul."

Tony had started taking instruction for converting to Judaism a few weeks ago. "How's it going?"

"I hate Hebrew. These lips were not designed to make those sounds."

"You'll get it," Tim says as the elevator opens and they head toward their cars.

"Sure, sooner or later. I can memorize bits and pieces pretty well. But it doesn't help that Ziva can learn a new language in like, nine minutes, and I'm stumbling around with basic grammar and utterly destroying the pronunciation of anything I've got to actually think about."

"At least she's not getting revenge on you for all those years of corrected idioms."

"Yet. One of these days we're going to Israel, and I'll be doing whatever the Hebrew equivalent of Porcuswine is."

Tim grins. "Karma's a bitch."

"Yeah, thanks. Anyway, Friday night, before sunset, her place. Shabbos dinner."

Tim looks a little surprised at that but says, "Okay. Want us to bring anything?"

"Nah, we got it."

"We'll be there." And with that they headed to their own cars, and from there, home.
during the day, but they only manage to make it at night, so Tim's never seen it in sunlight.

They're on a little sofa; it's not terribly comfortable, and Tim isn't sure if that's on purpose or not. Like, is it just a bit too hard because it increases the stress level of the people sitting on it, just a little, so that the sessions can work a little deeper on breaking through the I'm-so-in-love-can't-think-straight sort of headspace a lot of the other couples who sit on it are probably in? Or is it just not a terribly comfortable sofa?

There's a coffee table in front of them. Tim has a cup of coffee. Abby and John have tea.

John's sitting in what appears to be a very comfortable arm chair, talking a little with both of them about the last week. But he finally gets around to conflict resolution.

"So, tell me about how you handled the last time you both wanted to do something with each other, but neither of you wanted to do the same thing?"

They both look at each other for a minute, digging through the memory banks.

Finally Abby says, "It's silly."

And Tim knows what she's thinking, and yeah, it is. He rolls his eyes a little before saying, "Just, for background, it had been an awful week. Things like this don't usually set us off."

"Four days of this terrible case. Kidnappings are always the hardest. And this one—" Abby's shaking her head remembering it.

Tim fills in details. "Father died protecting his daughter, she got taken, her best friend got killed, turns out the mom and her boyfriend were behind it, it was just a bad, bad four days."

"And any case with hurt little girls is worse, because Gibbs goes bonkers, and there is absolutely no downtime. Kidnapped little girls means you work until you collapse, and then he pokes you until you get up, and you work some more," Abby adds.

"So, end of day four, we've got it wrapped, bad guys are in jail, and we get to go home."

"And after a case like that, we both need down time."

"Yeah. Case like that, you're mentally and physically exhausted. All we want to do is just get home and veg. Put as much space between us and the job as possible. So, dinner, flop on the sofa, and then there's TV. Easy, mindless entertainment."

Abby's nodding, agreeing with that. "We like a lot of the same shows so it's not usually a problem."

Tim says, "I hadn't seen the latest Burn Notice, yet. And we've also got the last Game of Throne on the DVR."

Abby picks up the story. "And well, anyway, about five minutes of arguing over which one we were going to see took place."

"I like Game of Thrones, but it's not cool down watching for me. Because if he's trying to relax, realistic, graphic violence, especially after a case where he had to see a real dead body, is just not the way to go.

"And I'd already seen the last Burn Notice, and a story I've already seen isn't going to pull me away the way I need."
"And after about five minutes, where I'm getting sharp and sarcastic—"

"Making some really snide comments about how watching evil people get horrifically murdered isn't relaxing—"

"And she's getting manic and whiny."

"I was not being whiny!"

He raises one eyebrow at her, and she shakes her head a little as if to say, Fine, I was little whiny. He continues on, "I realized something. I have a computer. She's got a computer. So I pulled a quarter out of my pocket, flipped it, she called it, and then she watched Game of Thrones on the TV. I headed into my office and watched Burn Notice on my computer. Ta da, conflict resolution."

Abby smiles at John. "See, silly. If we'd been a little less fried, or a little more willing to get off the sofa, the arguing portion would have lasted about thirty seconds and gone something like this: 'I want to see Game of Thrones.' 'Okay. I'll go watch Burn Notice in my office.' 'Good.'"

"And how did the rest of the night go? Were either of you hurt or bothered by that?"

Tim looks at Abby, and she smiles. Then she says, "His show is shorter than mine, so he came in laid his head in my lap, and sat with me for the last twenty minutes of mine, not paying attention—"

"Not really awake."

"Just hanging out. Then we had sex and went to bed."

Tim strokes her neck. "No hurt feelings. We're generally pretty good at this sort of thing."

"It's not like we just met. We've got how to deal with each other down pretty well."

"And that's pretty much how you deal with each other? Together when you like, apart when that works better?" John asks.

"Yes," Abby says.

"We're both pretty good with alone space."

"And we're also pretty good at being alone together, same physical space, maybe sharing a word or two here and there, but doing our own thing. We got that from years of working right next to each other on separate but related projects."

Tim smiles. "Yeah when we're home, I can write, she can read, we both listen to our own music, and maybe pet each other on occasion. But she understands that sometimes I really do need to be alone. And I get that she needs that, too."

Father John just looks at them. They've been at this four weeks, and he's feeling like he's wasting their time. Most of the skills he traditionally helps couples with, they've got. "So, is there anything you would like to work on. What can we do that's actually useful for you two?"

Tim and Abby stare at each other. Intimacy isn't an issue. They're really good at sex. They're on the same page when it comes to kids. Sure, she's a believer and he's not, but it doesn't seem to bother her, and if she's angstying over his soul, she's never mentioned it. They've got similar politics. Money's not an issue. Abby may act like a puppy, but she's got the same cat-like need for alone time that he has.
Tim finally says, "My job. Maybe. Figuring out when it's time to go."

Abby's staring at him. "I thought we were good on that."

He smiles a little. "We are. Just thinking more about the timing of it. When you're pregnant? When the baby's born? Now?"

"Not now."

He shakes his head. "Not now. I mentioned leaving to Tony today. Hadn't realized I hadn't actually said it to him."

"Bad?" Abby asks.

"He shrugged it off, but yeah, I could see he wasn't happy about it." He turns to Father John. "Want a relationship you can help with? Let me bring Tony in. Abby and I, we're good. Me and Tony… Not quite so good."

"Was he unhappy about you leaving, or not telling him?" John asks.

"Both, but different flavors of not happy. I tend not to talk to guys about…" he pauses to think about how to explain the wall he's got with Tony in specific and other guys in general.

Abby cuts in, "Everything."

"No, not everything. I talk to Tony about lots of things."

"Yeah, but you talk more about his half of whatever it is."

"His half is easier. His half doesn't get me teased mercilessly."

"He's a lot better about that these days."

"Yeah, he is. Which is why we talk more these days, too. But, anyway, all of the guys I interact with regularly are part of a pecking order."

"Except Jimmy."

"Except Jimmy, who is someone I talk to about my half of this sort of stuff. But the other guys are somewhere on the pecking order, and since I'm usually at the bottom of that order, I keep myself to myself. And especially with Tony, not giving him any ammo is a habit. So, I tend not to tell him things, which bothers him because that's left over from like two years ago, and neither of us are the same guys we were then. But, anyway, he tends to find things out last, and that hurts him." Tim pauses, drinks some more of his coffee. "So, to get back to your question, he's annoyed I didn't tell him, and sad that our team really is going to break apart at some point."

"How about you, does the end of the team make you sad?" John asks.

"Sure. I love who we are and what we do." Tim looks at Abby, and she smiles and squeezes his knee. "But I'm getting something I love better out of this. We're building a new team, and this is part of making sure I'm there to put that first."

"What about Abby's work? When you've moved over to Cybercrime, are you going to be annoyed that she's still on the front line and working ninety hour weeks?"

Tim shrugs. "I don't think so. I won't know for sure until it happens."
"Norfolk's lab is shutting down January 2015. I won't be working ninety hour weeks at that point. Or at least, not usually. And it's not like he'll be moving off the front lines, just fighting on a different front. Cybercrime doesn't get a whole lot of attention, but they do important stuff down there."

Tim smiles a little. "And by a different front, she means way in the back."

"No. Just a whole different war."

"That's a good way to look at it. Whole different skill set, too. If Vance is serious, I'll be the guy in charge down there, and that'll be new."

"Are you looking forward to that?" John asks.

"Actually, yes. I've been the low guy on the totem pole for a decade now. It'd be nice to be the guy in charge. Of course, as soon as that happens, Tony'll start calling me Probie again."

"In front of your team."

Tim smiles dryly. "Exactly."

John looks to Abby. "We know Tim's willing to rearrange his life for your family, what about you? If Norfolk wasn't shutting down, what would happen?"

She thinks about that. And Tim does, too. That's something they haven't talked about.

"I don't know. It would depend on what Leon's willing to do. I'm not interested in being an absentee mom. My own parents were amazing, and I want to do as good a job at this as they did."

"I can't see leaving NCIS. But if I had to, I would. I get headhunted every year. Labs all over want me, so if Leon's not willing to get me help, if he can't figure out how to make sure I'm home on a fairly regular basis, then I will find somewhere else that is."

"But I don't think that'll be an issue. Leon's a single dad. He runs the whole agency and still manages to get home most nights to see his kids. I think, even if we weren't consolidating with Norfolk, that he'd find a way to work with me."

"So, who will be taking care of the kids? You're rearranging things, but you still have a lot of time both of you won't be home."

"Nanny?" Tim asks Abby.

She nods. "I can see taking a while off, maybe even six months or so, but I'm fairly sure all baby all the time would drive me insane."

"I'm not categorically opposed to stay-at-home-dadding. But my guess is that I need to be doing something bigger than that, as well. Just novels and little people won't fill the need to shut the bad guys down."

"And you do need that?" John wants to know.

"I think so. We'll find out for sure when the team breaks up. Either I'm in it for the people and the justice or just the people. It certainly isn't for the money. If it's just for the people, then maybe I will move onto being a stay-at-home-dad, because I can't think of people who will matter more to me. But I think I need the justice, too."

John glances at the clock. It's five 'til eight, which is their usual end point. He smiles at them and
asks, "So, what that a bit more useful than conflict resolution?"
Tim nods. "A bit."
Abby adds, "So next week is the last session?"
"Yep."
"We'll see you then," she finishes as they head out.
They're in the car when she says, "Stay at home dad?"
He shrugs. "It's not impossible. Does that bother you?"
"No. Just never thought about it."
"Until ten minutes ago I hadn't either. But someone has to be with them all the time when they're little. I can work from home, so it could be me."
She's nodding. "It could be. Does it bug you that it won't be me?"
"No. Not like it's a surprise. At no point have I ever imagined you being a full time stay at home mom."
"Me either."
"My guess is we'll have the first one, and you'll take some time off, and so will I, and we'll see how it goes. We'll hire a nanny, and see how that goes. And if we don't like it, we'll figure it out. We've got options and we've got money, so it really is just a matter of what seems to work best."
She smiles. "Yeah, it is."
"Leave NCIS?"
She sighs. "Probably not. I really hope not, at least. I'm sure Leon will work with me on it. But if he doesn't or can't... I'm not going to be your dad, Tim. We have kids, and I will be there for them. Like you said, if you do this with someone, that someone, and those children, should be the most important thing in your life. And you/they are/will be."
"I'd kiss you right now if I wasn't merging into another lane of traffic."
She smiles. "I know."
December 2013 started a new Team Gibbs family tradition: Shabbos at Ziva's.

"Once I had a home filled with the sound of laughing children." Ziva remembers her father saying that, or something close to it. Once…

She's the last of the Davids now.

And she has not done this, not in a home filled with ease and love, since she was a child. Since her Safta lit the candles, and her father laid his hands on each of them blessed them before the meal, and she and Tavi and Ari were young enough to laugh and play between prayers.

And it is true, there are no laughing children in this home, not yet. Though there is ease and love here. And soon, 'round about Valentine's Day, Molly Palmer will join the festivities. And if a little McGee is more than two years off, she'd be stunned. In the years to come, there will be children here.

She looks at Tony as she blesses the bread, breaking the loaf, and prays that one day there'll be a small DiNozzo to pass these traditions onto. A little boy or girl to make Challah with, to teach the prayers, and to bless.

Ducky asks her about each prayer, and what they mean.

And Gibbs smiles at her as she answers.

McGee and Abby watch. Abby seeming to appreciate the faith of this, and Tim getting into the celebration, asking about the day of rest bit, intrigued by the idea of a faith that celebrates its holiest day by praying, visiting with friend and family, studying, and naps.

Tony makes a joke about naps and sex being part of the celebration, and that gets a smile out of everyone.

Jimmy's all in favor of the singing part, though the rest of the crew seems wary. And sure, he's bad at Hebrew, but he and Ziva produce a decent sounding two part harmony. After a few verses, Ducky joins in, and if there's anything that sounds odder than Scottish accented Hebrew, Ziva's never heard it, but she certainly appreciates the effort. Breena adds her voice after that, a soft soprano to go with Ziva's alto, and yes, it's not the Sabbath of her childhood, but it's awfully sweet, and it's a good first step into a new life that remembers and honors the old, but moves forward into the future without fear.

As they're driving home, Tim says to Abby, "I really liked that."

"Yeah, it was fun."

Tim came away from Sabbath dinner thinking that the Jews really knew how to celebrate their faith. Dinner, really good dinner, at home, with all of your best friends and family followed by a day of
napping, studying, and sex strikes him as a really civilized way to tell God thanks for being alive.

Or at least, he certainly prefers it to Mass. Maybe it's because the rituals are new and different. Maybe it's because it was at home, and done with family and friends as opposed to a collection of near strangers. Maybe because the specter of his father is in no way attached to this. Maybe it's because he never quite hooked into any church the way he was supposed to. Or it could have been the wine and really good food.

Whatever it is, he's hoping that Tony and Ziva host Shabbos again.

And if he attends Mass because it's important to Abby, he'll go to Sabbath at Ziva's because he likes it.

He thinks about that as Abby drives. "Is that what Mass is like for you?"

Her eyes dart away from traffic to look at him for a second. "What do you mean?"

"That was…" He's having a hard time coming up with a good word. "Like being home. The way home is supposed to be. Warm and welcoming and just, really comforting and satisfying."

"Yeah, it is."

"Huh." He intellectually knows that she feels different about Mass than he does, but until today he didn't really have a good understanding of how it made her feel.

She's smiling, and if she wasn't watching oncoming traffic, he's sure that smile would be aimed at him.

Chapter End Notes

_A/N: Safta is Hebrew for Grandma._
The Difference A Year Makes

It’s amazing the difference a year makes. Christmas 2013 is here.

Some things have stayed the same. Andes mint chip cookies and jambalaya, check. Though this year they decide to make something together, something to start their own traditions with.

And while it’s true that McGee loves sugar, he’s been doing a very good job of staying away from it, so they decide something to munch on that’s vaguely good for them could be part of this tradition, too. He’s gotten down to 190 and is thinking 185 to 180 is probably where he wants to be. So, one plate of cookies is enough, time for something healthy to go with it.

So this year, next to the plate of cookies and the casserole dish of jambalaya is a bowl of roasted root veggies with curry spices. It's tasty, took almost no skill to make, and means that for once Gibbs didn’t make every single vegetable dish. (Not to disparage Gibbs’ cooking skills, but while the man is handy with a fire and a steak, or an oven and turkey, he has a tendency to cook veggies well done.)

And like last year, the house is bursting at the seams with happy people. Even more this year than last, Vance and his kids, and Gibbs’ “friend” Susan have joined the party. As Tim learned, if you refer to Susan as anything other than a “friend” you get the Gibbs stare of death, and depending on what other than friend you refer to her as, a headslap, too.

She’s the sort of “friend” who makes Gibbs smile. (When he thinks no one is looking.)

And once again, DiNozzo Sr. has decked the place out with every sprig of mistletoe in the greater DC area.

This year, as Tim leans against the door jam between the foyer and living room, and Abby walks by, and his hand snakes out to grab hers, the kiss is soft and open, and he enjoys not having to pretend it’s just friendly.

And this year, he isn’t the only one to steal a kiss (or five) under the mistletoe. Tony and Ziva certainly take advantage of the license offered by the dangling evergreen. And so does Gibbs. When Susan is standing next to the mantle, talking with LJ and Jackson about something, under a sprig of mistletoe, he hands her a cup of eggnog and leans in and kisses her full on the lips, soft and sweet. Much to the joy of both his father and father’s best friend.

And, of course, this year Fornell is glaring at Tim, again, but, and this is nowhere on the list of things he’d ever thought could piss the man off, it’s because he and Abby are engaged.

Well, sort of, it’s not the engagement so much as Emily reacting to Tim and Abby.

Tim is sitting on the sofa, Abby between his legs, leaning against his chest, (It’s not so much about being physically affectionate, because that's a bit more snuggly than they usually are with outsiders present, as it was the lack of seats and by sharing a space they both get to sit, without hogging too much of the sofa.) talking wedding plans with Emily, Kayla, and Amira. And between the ring, and the idea of a costume wedding, all three of them are staring at him like he’s pretty awesome.

He notices a somewhat similar look of wary fear on Vance’s face, too, though he isn’t outright glaring at Tim. And if Mike Franks was still around, he’d probably be offering a similar look on Amira’s behalf.

See, the thing about being the father of a young teenage girl, is that, when said young teenage girls
are at a party hanging out with an engaged woman and her fiancée talking about weddings, is that it gives teenage girls ideas.

The sorts of ideas that their fathers really wish they aren’t having.

And it only gets worse when Jimmy and Breena head over, and start talking weddings and babies. And if there’s anyone in this house doting over his significant other more than Tim is doting on Abby, it’s Jimmy with Breena.

So, it’s not anything specific to Tim or Palmer. Tony’d be getting that same why the hell would you do this to me glare from Fornell if Ziva was pregnant or talking wedding plans.

But she isn’t. And Abby and Breena are.

And Emily is a pretty hardcore steampunk fan, so she’s really, really into the whole wedding planning idea and hanging on Abby’s every word, and they are sketching out a costume for Fornell, talking about him as an aeronaut, with Breena sitting right nearby adding extra help with the detailing. Finally, as they’re getting his hat and gloves designed, Fornell decides it’s time to put a stop to this, because glaring at McGee, who just keeps grinning at him, is not having the desired effect, so he heads over and say, “I’m sure Abby and McGee—“

Which is as far as he gets in that sentence before Abby looks up at him, grinning and says, “Would be completely thrilled to have someone so into steampunk at our wedding. You’re on the invite list anyway, so bringing along Emily isn’t a problem.”

Fornell looks really puzzled. Gibbs mentioned something about it being a family-only wedding, so he did not in any way expect to be attending this thing. “I’m on the invite list?”

“Sure, Tobias. You and Emily, and maybe that boyfriend of hers—“ Emily blushes scarlet and shoves Abby gently. “—who apparently I’m not supposed to mention. And any date you might want to bring, too. You’ll come, right? You’re not going to leave Gibbs all on his own, are you?”

And faced with Abby and Emily, both beaming at him with intense come to the wedding vibes, Fornell finds himself nodding.

Twenty minutes later, he pulls Gibbs to the side and says, “What the hell is steampunk, and why do I have to get dressed up for it?”

Gibbs shrugs. “Some sort of old west-fantasy thing. And you have to get dressed up because I have to get dressed up, and we’re both doing it because girls we love want us to.”

Fornell glares at McGee again. “I should have shot that little punk last year.”

Gibbs just looks at Fornell. That’s my son-in-law comes through loud and clear.

“Fine. This better not be stupid.”

The look morphs to Of course it’ll be stupid, but we’ll do it anyway because we love them.

Fornell shakes his head.

Gibbs looks over, Breena and Jimmy, Abby and Tim, Amira, Kayla, and Emily all sitting on the sofa or coffee table, talking. “They’re talking babies now.”

“Oh God. I’m telling you, Jethro, this is going to kill me.”
“I hear it only gets worse from here,” Gibbs says with a smile.

“Thank you so very much.”

Gibbs laughs. Then says, “Go glare at Palmer, might make you feel better.”

“I suppose I could use this as an object lesson on how it’s supposed to be done: school, job, married, then kids.”

“Might work for that. They’re good men, Tobias. Probably not a bad idea to have her see how good men treat women they love, let alone what a functional marriage looks like.”

Good points. She doesn’t get to see that his home, or, since the reason he’s got her two Christmases in a row is the impending divorce of Diane and Sterling, her mom’s house, either. “I know. It was just easier when she was into Raspberry Rumtart, My Little Ponies, and kittens.”

Gibbs smiles a little, and Fornell realizes how much his friend would have liked to have gotten to the boyfriends and fashion part of this. Tobias squeezes Gibbs shoulder quickly, and says, “They’ve already got a costume sketched out for me for this thing.”

“At least it’s Steampunk. The first idea Abby and Palmer—”

Fornell looks away from Emily to stare at Gibbs in horror. “Abby and Palmer?”

“He’s her... man of honor.”

Fornell sighs. Even with a pregnant wife on his lap, the look on his face is sincerely questioning Jimmy’s heterosexuality.

Gibbs nods. His look answers with a sort of wistfulness for when men knew how to act like men. It’s not that he doesn’t think Jimmy’s straight (or cares one way or the other). After Lee, everyone at NCIS knows that about Jimmy, it’s just... Somehow Jimmy got to be thirty-six without anyone ever mentioning to him that there were certain things men don’t do, and being the maid of honor is one of those things. But Jimmy didn’t get that memo, and he and Abby are having a blast with wedding planning, so it’s Gibbs’ job not to roll his eyes too much, and he’s been doing an... okay... job of it.

“Their first idea was renfaire.”

“What’s that?” Fornell asks.

“The sort of thing we’d have to wear tights for.”

Fornell shudders.

They stay late to help Gibbs tidy up. Well, that's the official reason anyway. Both Abby and Tim are curious to get to know Susan better, and sticking around after the rest of the crowd left gives them a shot to do so.

They’re in the kitchen. Gibbs's loading his dishwasher. Tim’s got drying duty. Susan’s washing up, and Abby, who really knows her way around Gibbs kitchen, is putting the dried pots and pans away.

Tim’s not really talking, just watching. Gibbs at home with a girlfriend is worth watching. Gibbs gets finished with the dishwasher, closes it up, takes two steps to the left, and gently strokes the back of his fingers down Susan’s neck, and smiles at her.
She smiles back, handing Tim another pot, turning her face into a waiting kiss.

As Tim rubs the towel over the sauce pot, he realizes one more change between this year and the last. Last year, this wouldn’t have happened. Well, maybe in front of Abby, this could have happened, but not in front of him.

Last year, he was somewhere in that liminal stage between friend/family/underling. And both he and Gibbs felt those walls, knew where they were, and made sure they stayed in place.

This year, watching the almost goofy smile on Gibbs’s face as Susan teases him a little, he knows those walls are gone. He’s home, with his wife, and the dad he’s always wanted, at ease, and happy.

He hugs Susan as they head out, which feels pretty natural. And he hugs Gibbs too, who looks a little surprised at it, but he seemed to get what Tim means by it, giving him a little squeeze before they head into the cold to go to their own home.

And tomorrow there’ll be work, and Gibbs’ll be the Boss and they’ll catch bad guys, and those walls will be back, because when they’re working they’re useful. But this space outside of NCIS is real now, and forever, and it feels awfully good.
"Have you figured it out, yet?" Palmer asks Tony as he sits down with his lunch.

Tony looks at Jimmy and then at Tim. "Okay, you two have to quit starting the conversation without me and then expecting me to know what you're talking about."

"Hey, I don't know what he's talking about, either," Tim says, biting into a cucumber stick. The five of them are grabbing a quick, guys only, lunch. They do that about once a month, and found they liked it.

Gibbs shows up a second later. "Valentine's day. What are you getting Ziva? Right, Palmer?"

"Exactly." Jimmy shoots Tony the *He knew what was going on, and he wasn't even here for the first question* look.

"It's just flat out creepy when you do that, Boss," Tony says.

"What is 'creepy', Anthony?" Ducky adds as he sits down with his lunch.

"The way he just shows up and immediately knows what is going on."

Tim thinks about that for a moment, and then something clicks. Gibbs knows sign language. "You read lips!"

Gibbs smiles a little. "Ya think, McGee?"

"Yeah, I do."

Tony shakes his head. "Details, McGee. You've been at this more than ten years now, and you're still missing things. He came up behind Palmer."

"Window behind you, Tony, the way the sun's hitting it is making it reflective."

Gibbs smiles, wider this time, looking deeply satisfied, while Tony turns around to check.

"So, have you figured it out?" Tim asks Tony.

"No. Did I mention I hate Valentine's Day?"

"By my count, seventy-four million times since Christmas," Jimmy replies.

"Well, it keeps getting closer, and I still don't know what to get her. Christmas was hard enough, and now I've got come up with something romantic and meaningful, and I've got to do it in the shadow of this dork who went and designed his own tattoo for his first Valentine's Day with Abby."

"Ziva doesn't like tattoos," Tim adds.

"No but Abby does, and I'll have to design my own custom throwing knives… Oh."

"And DiNozzo's out of the dog house," Gibbs says. "What're you doing Palmer?"

"Hopefully walking around with a new baby instead of a very crabby, insanely pregnant wife. If Molly's still not out, I have no idea what I'm going to do because by that point she'll be begging me
for Pitocin, and nothing short of that is going to make her happy. What did you do when Shannon
was insanely pregnant?"

Gibbs shrugs. "Wasn't Valentine's Day when she was at term."

"Thank you, that was remarkably useful. How about you, Tim?"

He winks. "Quiet night in."

Jimmy just stares at him. "Sex. You're giving her sex? You give her sex all the time." Then he seems
to notice the other three are there. "Which we will talk about later."

Tim nods, and then sees the other three are staring at him, looking curious. "Not just sex. And we
can leave it at that. Gibbs, what are you doing?"

"Working."

"It's ten days away, how can you possibly know that?" Tony asks.

Gibbs just stares at him.

Tony thinks about it some more. "Are you 'working' or is this like your own personal Halloween?"

Gibbs just smiles. Then he says, "Duck?"

"Vivian and I have tickets to Roman-style Luprical festival at the Smithsonian."

Tim actually knows about that one and says, "Really? Leather whips, running through the crowds
naked, orgies, ripping apart goats with your bare hands to eat the raw flesh while drunk?"

"Well, you certainly wouldn't want to do that sober, now would you? However, Timothy, you are
thinking of a Bacchanal, and that will only happen if things go especially well." And with that,
Ducky grins, and then goes into a dissertation on the Festival of Luprical, how it was the forerunner
of the modern Valentine's Day, and that yes, there were whips, but they were made of flowers, and
the idea was to lightly tap the ladies with them as a blessing of fertility.

"And will you be properly togaed for this?" Palmer asks.

"Of course, Mr. Palmer, one does not attend Luprical in a suit."

"Quiet night in?" Palmer asks as they head back toward work, the others well ahead.

"Pitocin?" Tim counters with.

"Fine. Mix tape. I recorded some covers of her favorite songs."

Tim scrunches his eyebrows together. "What are you, seventeen?"

"No, I don't mean I went on Amazon and bought some of her favorite songs, I mean I recorded
them, myself."

"Oh, that's right, you sing."

"Yeah, and I'm damn good at it, too."

"That's kind of cool."
"Thanks. So, what does quiet night in translate into."

"Japanese calligraphy brush, dark chocolate, and a poem I've been working on for three weeks now."

"You're going to write it on her?"

"That's the idea. Tell it to her. Lick it off her. It'll be good."

Palmer nods, approving.

"So, how is Breena doing?"

"She hurts all over, has to pee every ten minutes, is so swollen you can leave dents in her calves if you press, and can't sleep. She's miserable."

"Dents?" Tim's never heard of that, not on a living person anyway.

"Give me your arm."

Tim does, and Jimmy pulls up his sleeve. Then he pokes his finger into Tim's arm. "See the dent."

"Yeah."

He pulls his finger away and Tim's arm smooths out. "When I pull my finger away from her leg, the dent stays, for like five minutes."

Tim winces while pulling down his sleeve. "Maybe it is time to write that script."

"I'm so tempted." Jimmy looks very earnest in that desire. "Believe me, but her doc says this is normal, and if she does go past the 15th they'll induce."

"Think she'd like some extra company? We're not busy tonight."

"I'll ask when I get home. Sometimes she's going stir crazy and wants to see people. Sometimes she just wants to rest."

"Let us know."

"I will. Time to get back to the paperwork," Jimmy says as he hits the down elevator button.

"Yep," Tim agrees, hitting the up one.
Tim gets in a little early on Valentine’s Day. Just enough so that he's the first one in the Bullpen, which is getting to be a fairly common occurrence this month.

Apparently, due to spending time with Susan, Gibbs has a tendency to show up, well, not late, but on time, which is a lot later than he usually is.

Tim's not sure if this is serious or not. It's only been going on for four months, but she did show for the Christmas party, so that's a good sign. Once again, there is something of a spring in the bossman's step these days. And, he's a bit mellower than usual. Of course, that could just mean he's getting laid on a regular basis. Or it could be budding love.

He flicks on his computer, watching Gibbs head in, first coffee of the day in his hand, looking, yep, pretty mellow... well, for Gibbs.

“DiNozzo and Ziva?”

“Not here yet.”

It’s 8:02, so it’s not like they’re really late or anything.

“Good Valentine’s Day?” he asks Gibbs, who just smiles a little.

“You?”

Tim’s turn to smile. “Hasn’t gotten started yet.”

Gibbs nods, and with that they hear the bong of the elevator, letting them know that someone else is up.

Someone else is Tony and Ziva. They’re talking about something, sounding happy, Tim doesn’t pay much attention as he starts going through his emails. Then he notices Gibbs stand up, head over to Ziva’s desk, and look approvingly at something.

That gets his attention, so he looks over. Ziva's showing Gibbs her new toy.

Tim’s not a knife guy. For him they’re tools. Useful tools to be sure, but tools.

But Gibbs is a knife guy, and so is Ziva, and they’re both sort of petting the gleaming expanse of razor sharp steel in her hand. And even Tim can appreciate that knife is beautiful.

He looks over at Tony and smiles. Tony leans back in his chair, looking very smug and satisfied. Which lasts all of four seconds because that was when Gibbs’ phone begins to ring, and his phone ringing means one thing: Call out.

They gear up. Ziva slipping the knife into a sheath on her right ankle, and head to a new crime scene.

Tyson’s Corner isn’t the other end of the earth or anything, but still, it’d be nice if they occasionally
got something less than an hour away.

On the way, Tony asks him, “Think Palmer ended up giving her a nicely wrapped IV of Pitocin?”

“I hope not. He told me that if she hasn’t gone into labor by tomorrow, they’ll induce.”

“Good.”

Then they’re there, and it's time to swing into action. Tim grabs the camera, and gets to work cataloguing everything.

He’s been at it for about half an hour, getting the crime scene from all angles, when the ME’s van pulls up. Tim makes sure that the area the gurney will go through has been thoroughly photographed, and then begins to gather the evidence to clear a path.

A moment later, as Ducky and Dornie wheel the gurney in, it occurs to him that Dornie wheeling in the gurney is awfully out of place.

Which means Palmer isn’t here. And a wide, wide grin spreads across his face.

“Where’s Palmer?” Tony asks, also grinning as he notices Ducky and Dornegget with the gurney. They all basically know the answer, but confirmation is a good thing.

“He called me at three this morning, when Breena went into labor. When I left them, they were still at home, but planning on heading to the hospital within the hour. Which is where I will be as soon as my part in this case has been taken care of, awaiting Molly’s arrival.”

And if it’s inappropriate to be walking around a crime scene with a huge grin, there was nothing anyone on Team Gibbs could do about it. Though they do all manage to rein it in when dealing with the witnesses and next-of-kin.

Even Gibbs seems a little distracted from the case. Though not so distracted that he's incapable of handing out the headslaps when Tim and Ziva (Yes, Ziva got a headslap.) keep checking their phones for updates instead of digging through potential leads.

It's a little after eight when Tim and Tony delivered Brim, the suspect, to Gibbs. As they shut the door to interrogation, Tim’s phone begins to buzz. He picks it up, looks at it, grins very widely. Gibbs sees the look, and nods. Nothing much they can do for right now. He and Ziva are on break-the-suspect duty, so Tim and Tony can head off.

“Back in two hours,” Gibbs says to them as Tim is pulling Tony away.

“Come on, Tony.”

“Molly’s here?”
They don’t precisely race up to the maternity ward, but they certainly aren’t walking slowly, either. Ducky's sitting, looking very pleased, somewhat rumpled, no jacket, no tie, his sleeves rolled up, and a bit tired, along with Breena’s parents and one of her sisters in the waiting room.

“We got here as soon as we could. Ziva and Gibbs are still interrogating Brim, and Abby’s on her way,” Tim says breathlessly to Ducky.

“Calm down, Timothy, no one is going anywhere. In fact, they were all sleeping about twenty minutes ago when I came out here. So, settle down, relax, you’ll get to see her soon enough.”

“Breena and Molly are fine?” Tony asks.

“Splendid. Tired, but they came through just fine.”

“Jimmy?” Tim asks.

“Flying colors.”

“Details?” Tony asks.

“Twenty-two inches, eight pounds, seven ounces, curly brown hair, blue eyes. All fingers and toes are accounted for. And Mrs. Slater tells me she is, except for the hair, the image of Breena as a baby.”

Oh, yeah, there are other people here. He and Tony make some congratulatory small talk with the Slaters. A few minutes after that, Abby joins them. She’s so excited she’s bouncing around, rambling about how cool the seeing the new baby is, and he’s got an arm around her, more or less anchoring her, though he kind of wants to bounce around, too.

After an hour, Jimmy comes out. He looks ecstatically happy, and completely beat. Tim doesn’t even know that combination is possible, but apparently it is.

They crowd around Jimmy offering hugs and congratulations, and he leads them back to their room.

Breena’s nursing Molly, and while she doesn’t seem to think it’s odd to sit there and chat with her breast out, both Tim and Tony are looking her very intently in the eyes as they talk. Tim gets why this is happening, if you want to see a brand new baby when she’s awake, pretty much the only time that happens is when she’s eating. So, he gets it. But he’s also carefully not looking.

Abby sits next to Breena on the bed, arm around her shoulders, petting Molly, getting the story of how Molly ended up on the outside, but mostly just looking at her.
Eventually Molly finishes eating, and Breena offers her to Abby, who looks a little nervous at the idea, but takes her in her arms and just stares at her.

“She’s beautiful,” Abby says quietly, her index finger lightly stroking Molly’s cheek, then leans down to kiss Breena, followed by getting up to kiss Jimmy, who is standing next to the bed, watching his wife and daughter, a very satisfied expression on his face.

Tim’s watching Abby hold her, wondering if she’s feeling the same really intense I-want-a-baby-right-now sort of thing he is.

He wraps his arms around her, chin resting on her shoulder, looking down at Molly in her arms, murky blue eyes staring up at them, and kisses her ear. “I love you,” he whispers. She smiles, turns, kisses him gently, and goes back to looking at Molly.

After a minute she says, “You want to hold her?”

“Sure.” He takes Molly in his arms. He hasn’t held a newborn in pretty much forever. Since his sister was brand new, and his grandfather handed her to him. But his body remembers how this works, and the soft, warm weight of a person so small she fits entirely in the space from his collarbone to his stomach.

“Hi,” he says as he snuggles her against his shoulder, feeling a little silly at it, but nothing else sprang to mind. He pats her back gently, and rests his lips on the top of her head, eyes closed. Abby kisses him again.

Tony saying something about them having to get back soon starts to filter through. And how Gibbs and Ziva would be in to visit when they got back.

He opens his eyes and turns to Tony. “You wanna hold her?”

Tony looks startled. “Ummm...”

“Yeah, it’s not hard. You won’t break her.” Tim hands Molly over to Tony, and he gingerly takes her.

He’s staring at her like he’s never seen a new baby before, and it occurs to Tim that maybe he hasn’t.
“She’s really tiny.”

Tim smiles. “Yeah. Just pat her back a little.”

“You know, this isn’t so bad.”

Tim grins at him and sees that Tony is right, they’ll have to drive like maniacs to get back in the allotted two hours. He kisses Breena and hugs Palmer, getting ready to head off. Tony hands Molly back to Breena looking... honestly, pretty relieved, and they start to hurry back to the Navy Yard.

Abby walks out with them, intending to go back to Breena’s side as soon as they head off. She doesn’t have to be back anytime soon. Major Mass Spec won’t be done for at least another two hours.

“You got more trace after this batch?” Tim asks.

“Nope, that was the last of it.”

“Stay here then. I can read the print outs just fine. I’ll call you if I need extra help.”

She nods at that.

They’re in Tony’s car, heading back when he says, “So much for your quiet night in.”

Tim shrugs. Part of the reasoning behind quiet night in is Valentine’s case was a real possibility. “Good thing about quiet night in, it’s not time sensitive. It’ll be just as quiet and just as night in tomorrow or the next day, or whenever. So much for Ducky’s Luprical.”

Tony nods at that. “You’re coming back here after?”

“Assuming Abby’s still here, yeah.”

Tony shakes his head a little. “You should have seen the way you were watching Abby hold Molly. You’re going to get her pregnant as soon as you possibly can, aren’t you?”

Tim smiles dryly. “She wants to be married before the baby shows up. And even if that wasn’t true, we’ve got everything booked now, and I really doubt she wants to be nine months pregnant for our wedding.”

“Good point. Breena did not look at all happy that last month.”

“Yeah. But I’m willing to bet any time after October first is fair game.”

Tony laughs.

“How about you? You didn’t look like you were about to run away screaming when you were holding her.”

“No. No panic at all. That was actually a little surprising, really. Last time I had a kid hug me I felt like I wanted to jump out of my skin to get away.”

“Good. You not freaking out about babies will make Ziva happy.”
“Yeah, it will.” Tony smiles, softly, at that idea. “They say it’s different when it’s your kid.”

“Might be. I like kids, so I wouldn’t know.”

“You’re going to be a great dad.”

Tim smiles at that. “I really hope so.”

“You will. You know what my dad, and your dad, and, hell, Gibbs even, never did?”

“Lots of things.”

“Put the job second. I saw you holding Abby and Molly, and I get it now. I don’t want you to go to Cybercrime, but I get it.”

“Thanks, Tony.”

It’s well after 01:00 when Tim gets back to the hospital. By that point Breena’s sister, Amy, is the only member of her family still there. Abby’s keeping her company in the waiting room. He heads over and sits down next to her.

“Case wrapped?” she asks as he leans his head against her shoulder.

“Just got to fill out the paperwork.”

“Major Mass Spec give you any troubles?”

“Nah, he’s been being nicer to me since we got engaged.”

“That’s because we had a long chat and I told him you were his new Dad and he had to behave.”

Tim looks a little bemused at that, and just says, “Okay. How’s everyone doing?”

“Sleeping right now,” Amy answers.

“Doesn’t sound like a bad idea,” Tim replies, ready to sack out next to Abby on the sofa.

“Not at all,” Amy agrees.

His eye are staring to close when Abby says, “Wait a second, I’ve got something you’ve got to see.” She fishes her phone out of her purse and opens it to a photo. It’s Gibbs holding Molly, grinning in a way Tim had never seen.

“He looks really happy.”

“Yeah, he was.” Then she flicks to the next photo, Ziva with Molly. Ziva isn’t grinning, she's staring, a look of deeply content peace on her face.

Tim smiles at that, kisses Abby, and settles down to snooze.

He's three quarters asleep when she says to him, “You know, it’s nice to go to a hospital and be happy about it.”

“Yeah.”
It's a little after 06:00 when he wakes up, in need of a restroom. Both of the girls are still asleep. He gets up carefully, not wanting to wake up Abby, and goes looking for one.

A few minutes later, he pauses at the door to the Palmers’ room and hears voices, so he knocks gently, and then pokes his head in. Normally, he’d wait for an answer, but he doesn’t want either of them to get up when they don’t have to. “Can I come in?”

“Sure,” Breena’s voice. She’s on the bed, sitting back between Jimmy’s legs, resting against his chest, nursing Molly.

He pulls up a chair, sitting near the side of the bed, once again keeping up strict eye contact.

“How are you feeling?”

“Sore, but better than I was this time yesterday and way better than this time the day before. Tired. Really happy.” She smiles at him, seeing the way he’s maintaining eye contact. “It’s okay if you look. She’s got to eat, and I’m not going to be insulted if you watch.”

His eyes flit from Breena’s to Jimmy’s, who also nods.

So he watches, smile spreading across his face. “Jimmy, don’t take this the wrong way, but, God, that’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, it is,” Jimmy says, kissing Breena’s temple.

He watches them for a while, just enjoying the quiet and being with them for this. Abby comes in a few minutes later, and sits on his lap.

“You’d think a room in the maternity ward would have more chairs,” she says, noticing that there’s a fairly short sofa, and the chair she and Tim are in, and that’s it.

“I think they’re trying to make sure we don’t get overwhelmed with visitors,” Jimmy answers. “It was a little much having all of your family all show up at once.”

Breena shrugs. “First grandbaby/niece, everyone wanted to be here all as soon as possible.”

“The only reason you didn’t get an NCIS stampede was we were on a case and Gibbs would only let us go in shifts,” Abby says.

“Case wrapped up?” Jimmy asks.

“Yeah.” Tim smiles. “You should have seen Dornie. He got roped into the body moving part of your job. Looked like he was going to pass out.”

Jimmy laughs at that. “Poor Dornie. Teach him to be a Probie.”

“He sends his congratulations.”

Jimmy nods.

“Is there anything we can get for you?” Abby asks after another long quiet moment of just sitting with each other.
Breena shakes her head. “Not right now. Real food might be good in a bit, though. We were talking about it before you came in, and I know neither of you are Episcopalians, but, would you be Molly’s godparents?”

That takes Tim by surprise, he’s not sure his agnostic/atheist self is prime godfather material. But Abby’s saying yes before he has the chance to even think about it.

“Are you sure they’ll let us?” Tim asks.

“Yeah, they will. Not like being Catholic is all that different,” Breena answers.

Then Jimmy takes a quiet breath, staring at Tim and Abby, then looks down at Molly, petting her face. “And, we’ve got a more serious question, too. If something happens to us, will you be Molly’s, and any other children we may have, guardians?”

And that one Tim doesn’t need to think about. “Yes. If need be, your children will always have a home with us.” Abby squeezes his hand, nodding along.

Breena smiles, “Good.”

Abby catches Tim’s eye, and he knows what she’s thinking, so he nods. “Back in August, we got our things in order, and back then we’d decided that when we have kids, we’d like you two to be their guardians, as well,” Abby says.

“We were planning on waiting to ask until we actually had some kids, but…”

“Now seems like the perfect time?” Breena finished, reaching out to squeeze Abby’s hand.

“Yeah,” Tim answers.

Jimmy smiles at the two of them, “If they ever need it, your children will always have a home with us.”

Abby takes a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Wow.”

Breena nods, and Tim notices the tears in her eyes about the same time Jimmy does.

“Hey, you all right?” Jimmy asks.

“Fine.” She sniffs a little while Jimmy wipes away her tear. “Just, love you all, so much.”

Abby stands up, kisses Breena, and then Jimmy, “Love you, too.” Then she bends down a little to kiss the top of Molly’s head. “Love you, too, little girl.”

Tim sits back in the chair, huge grin on his face, awash in the amazing contentment and joy of this moment, watching Abby snuggle with Jimmy, Breena, and Molly. He catches Jimmy’s eye, who is also looking deeply pleased to be here right now, and reaches out to squeeze his hand.
"How are you doing?" Tim asks Jimmy, his first day back at NCIS post-baby. He and Abby tried to get over to visit at least a few times between Molly getting home and now, but the last eight days had seen three hot cases in a row, so neither of them had been over to visit in more than ten days.

But today, thank any and every higher power, is a paperwork day, so come the start of lunchtime, Tim's heading down to Autopsy to see Jimmy.

For a long few seconds, Jimmy just stares at him, eyes glazed and dull, and then says, "I've pulled multiple back to back all-nighters. I worked close to twenty hours a day for more than ten days in a row when we were hunting Dearing. I had a full time job with NCIS while doing my residency. And I have never, ever been this tired. It's like she can tell when one of us is about to fall asleep and as soon as it happens she starts to cry. You know how they say do all the fun stuff you like before the baby comes, 'cause you won't get to do it for a while after?" Tim nod, just to keep Jimmy talking, because honestly, no, no one has ever said that to him. "They're lying. Sleep. Sleep every second you can before the baby comes."

"Okay. Besides exhausted?"

Jimmy stares at him, eyes empty, wasted, in the sense of left to rot, not drugged. "There is no beyond exhausted. Everything in the world narrows down to a tiny person who won't let you sleep."

"Jimmy?"

"Yeah."

"How about Abby and I come over tonight and take Molly for a few hours so you and Breena can crash."

"Thank you." That's dangerously close to a whimper.

"As soon as we're wrapped up for today, we'll come over. And bring food. I thought Breena's mom was staying with you."

"She was. Went home last week."

"Okay. Do you want to get lunch, or just grab a nap."

"I'm going to crash in the back."

"Like hell. Abby's got something worth sleeping on in her office. Come on."

He flashes a quick text to Abby, and by the time he gets Jimmy to the lab, she has the rugs rolled out, and two pillows laid on them. Just as he's laying down, Tim gets another text, this time from Tony.

"Damn it!"

"Gotta go?" Abby asks.

He kisses her quickly. "Yeah. So much for lunch. You got him?"

She nods. "Oh yeah."
Jimmy snores.

"I don't think he's going to be a problem."

Tim inclines his head and goes to find Tony.

Forty minutes later, Abby gently pokes Jimmy awake. "Time to get up."

He blinks, looking completely undone, but slowly finds his glasses and puts them back on. "Nap was probably a bad idea. I'm even more tired, now."

"Food'll help." She points to the tray on the floor next to the rugs. "Iced-tea, no sugar, sesame tuna lettuce wrap, edamame."

Jimmy looks at the food for a second, and then back to Abby. "I love you."

She smiles widely. "Thanks. Eat up, then get back to Ducky."

If Palmer looked wasted at work, Breena's whatever comes three or four steps beyond that.

Abby takes one look at both of them while putting the dinner they brought on the counter and says, "Food later. Sleep for both of you."

Tim steps closer to Breena to take Molly, but Breena doesn't want to let her go. She has black circles under her eyes and a half-mad glint in them.

"Have you ever done this before?"

Tim isn't sure which of the two of them she's asking, but since he's the one who can say yes, he answers, "Yes. It's been a while, but yes, I've babysat a newborn before. We won't leave the property. You'll be right nearby if we need anything, but you two need to sleep."

"She just ate, so she should be good for another two and a half hours." Tim pries Molly out of Breena's arms as she says that.

"Then go crash. We've got her."

Jimmy takes Breena by the shoulders and leads her upstairs toward their bedroom.

"You're really good at this," Abby says as he's holding Molly.

"Thanks. I like babies. Or, I like this part of babies. They're cute when they're quiet. Not as much fun when they're screaming."
Which Molly takes as a request. Twenty minutes of patting and shushing doesn't seem to help.

"You wanna try?"

Abby's staring at Molly, looking really disconcerted. "Honestly, no."

"Give it a shot anyway, ours are gonna scream, too. Might as well practice."

He begins to hand Molly over, and Abby says, "Wait!"

He snuggles her in closer and keeps patting her. "What?" A second later, he figures out what Abby's thinking as she begins to unsnap her collar. Her collar and wrist cuffs are studded with small pyramid shaped metal spikes.

"Let me get them off first."

"Good plan. Don't want to explain to Breena how we had Molly for less than an hour and took one of her eyes out."

Abby glares at him.

Once she has her hardware off, he hands Molly over. Abby gets her settled against her shoulder, and begins to pat her while bouncing a little.

"I really don't like this."

He kisses her cheek as Molly howls. "No one does. You're doing fine, just keep bouncing and patting, and eventually she'll fall asleep."

After a minute of that, an impressively large belch echoes out of Molly, and a minute after that, she's fast asleep.

"See?"

Abby switches from a gentle bouncing step to a sort of rocking one. "So, your mom let you watch your sister?"

"Yeah. My dad was, as usual, gone. And we were out of Alameda then, so my grandparents lived three hours away. There were a lot of nights where it was just the three of us. I was still young enough that five AM wake up wasn't an issue, so I'd watch her from five to eight, until I had to leave for school, and let my mom get some sleep."

"That's insane."

"It's the way it was. My grandparents would come down on weekends, and we'd all get more rest."

"How old was she when your dad got back?"

"Four, five months? Something like that? He shipped out right before she was born."

Abby looks at the sleeping girl on her shoulder, petting her hair lightly, and kisses her gently. "So, now what?"

He isn't sure if she's asking him or Molly, but since Molly isn't going to answer, he says, "You could put her in her crib."
"Not sure I want to let go."

He smiles, sits on the sofa, and holds out his arms to her. She snuggles up in his lap, while Molly sleeps on her shoulder.

Eventually Molly starts crying again, and this time she keeps trying to scoot down on Abby's shoulder to get to her chest. "What is this?"

"If memory serves, that's baby for 'MILK!' Even at three weeks old, they can scoot a little to try and find a breast."

"Interesting." Abby stands up and heads toward Jimmy and Breena's room.

She comes down about a minute later. "You want to take another round of this?"

Tim checks the clock. It's a little after nine. "Sure."

"I'll let them know."

When Abby comes back, he's put together two plates of food. "You think they want to eat, or just put the plates in their room so they can scrounge as needed."

"I'm thinking scrounging. Jimmy hasn't moved when I've gone in. I think he's out for as long as we're here."

"Okay."

The second round follows the same pattern as the first. Half an hour of pretty intense crying, massive burp, and Molly conking out pretty quickly right after.

"I kind of remember there being something that helped them burp easier," Tim says when Molly finally fell asleep on him.

"Gas-X for babies?"

"Yeah something like that."

Abby gets her phone out and googles. "Yeah, there is."

"Feel like going on a drug store run? Get them some of it. See if it helps."

"Sure. Back in a bit."

"We'll just hang out here."

She smiles at Tim, and kisses him and Molly before heading off.
Forty minutes later, Abby sneaks back into the Palmers' house. She'd found Mylicon pretty easily, and is ready to show it off to Jimmy and Breena when she takes Molly back in to eat.

"I found..." her voice trails off as she steps into the living room.

She snaps a few pics, and quickly updates her Facebook feed.

Tim asleep, laying on the sofa, stretched out, feet up, Molly on his chest, also asleep, his hand on her back, making sure she stays in place is just way too good not to share.

By the time Tim saw it the next morning, the shot labeled "Uncle Tim and Molly Get A Nap" had 416 likes, 8 shares, and close to a hundred comments.
The Christening

The christening was a week away when Tim finally got some time alone with Jimmy. They were having lunch, mostly just catching up, and as things were wrapping up Tim said, “So… okay… The thing about being a godfather. I don’t really believe in God.”

Jimmy spends a moment just staring at him, looking confused. “Don’t you and Abby go to church like, every Sunday?”

“Oh. But I do it because it’s important to her. It’s not important to me.”

Jimmy just looks at him. “And that would be different from me, how?”

That takes Tim by surprise. “Agnostic. I really don’t know, and evidence seems pretty thin.”

“Exactly. I won’t say there isn’t a God, because I don’t see how you could know that, either. But…”

“Yeah. So, no, it doesn’t bother me.”

“Will it bother Breena?”

Jimmy shakes his head. “She married me, and I’m going to be a bit more involved in raising our kids than you are, so I don’t think it’ll be an issue.”

“Okay. Good point. Am I going to have to renounce Satan?”

“And that would be a problem why?” Jimmy asked, wryly. “Or is this where you tell me that, yeah, you attend Catholic church, but just to swipe the holy water and relics so you can pervert them for Black Mass on Saturday.”

“You’re onto me.” Tim flashed his best evil grin. “Just, I may be iffy on God, I’m pretty sure on the no Satan thing.”

“Me either, but we certainly see more than enough of it. So, I’m comfortable with the idea of promising to renounce it, and if Satan is the term they want to use, fine with me. Anthropomorphic personifications don’t bother me.”

That triggers a million year old memory from Catechism. “The Jesuits would call that mental reservation.”

“Then we will reserve the right to be reserved.”

“That’s the worst pun I’ve heard all year.”

Jimmy smiled. “Thank you. Look, for your part of this, it’s about having you and Abby stand up and promise to help us raise our kids, and as long as you’re on board with that, I don’t care what’s going
on in your mind while the Pastor dribbles water on Molly.”

“That I can do. So, what else is it for?”

“Keep the in-laws happy. Make my mom stop bugging me about it. Show my family and Breena’s that we’ve picked you and Abby. Her parents aren’t thrilled with that. They’d prefer we had picked one of her sisters.”

Tim looks perplexed, not that he knows Breena’s sisters well, but they’re all pretty young and single. “None of them are married or settled.”

The look on Jimmy’s face makes it clear that that’s exactly what he and Breena were thinking and that it’s nice to have some validation on this. “Thank you. Amy’s the oldest and she’s four years out of school. She doesn’t need a baby. Anyway, if it ever comes down to it, there’ll be an entire church full of people who saw that we picked you.”

“Smart.”

“So, we’re good on this?”

“Yeah, we are.”

Spring in DC can be a tricky thing. First of all, it shows up whenever it feels like. And that can be anytime between mid-February and late April, but for 2014, it decided to show up for Molly Palmer’s christening.

Second of all, it shows up fast. It might play around a little, a nice day here, a nice one there, and piles of cold, wet, rainy-snowy crud in between. But once it decides to come, it’s bursts forth over the course of what seems to be two days.

So, while it was true, that Thursday, when Jimmy and Breena were finishing getting the pre-christening party stuff ready, it was cold, wet, and gray, with nary a leaf in sight, by Sunday, when the actual christening was happening, every tree was covered in tiny green leaves and white and pink flowers.

Ed Slater sober is a piece of work. If he’s got a filter between his brain and his mouth, it’s got a really wide mesh. Ed Slater with two beers in him, well, at that point the filter vanishes. One thing Jimmy has privately wondered for years now is how on earth the Slater Funeral Home has managed to stay in business. His best guess is that Jeannie, Breena’s mom, never lets Ed anywhere near the customers.

And by the third snide remark out of Ed about “real” family, Tim can see he and Jimmy are headed for a confrontation, so he keeps his eyes open, ready to head over and help out if need be.

It was two hours into the post-christening party when it happened.

Ed more or less drug Jimmy into the garage, apparently he had enough sense to know you don’t do this in front of everyone. But not enough sense to respect Jimmy and Breena’s decision.

“You should pick family for something like this!”
Tim heard the louder, sharp voices and decided it was time to join in, offer back up. “Hey, everyone okay?”

Ed Slater turned to him. “No.”

Jimmy shrugged and sent Tim an apologetic look. “Ed’s having a fit over picking you and Abby for Molly’s guardians.”

“Look, I’m sure you and your Goth are perfectly nice people, really weird, but nice, but this should stay in the family.”

“Tim and Abby are our family!”

“They’re your friends.”

“Family,” Tim added.

“Really, you grew up with Jimmy? You certainly didn’t grown up with Breena. I was there, and I don’t remember seeing you.”

“I’m here now. Abby’s here now. And we aren’t going anywhere.”

“You say that, but you don’t know it. Amy, Kristin, or Jamie will be here forever. Hell, what about your brother?” Ed said to Jimmy.

“Look around, Ed, Clark isn’t here. He wasn’t at our wedding. He lives in Tokyo and only makes it back stateside three days a year. Amy’s twenty-seven, Kristin is twenty-five, and Jamie is twenty-three. They are barely adults. They don’t have homes. They don’t have their lives set up. None of them are ready to take care of kids, or for that matter, wants to.”

Ed just stares at Tim, disdain on his features. “And those two are? I know what you guys make, and both of them work with you.”

Well, if money was an issue, Tim had a ready answer for that. “I’m Thom Gmcity.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Ed asked.

“It means he’s a best-selling author, Ed, and that if money is the issue, he and Abby make a ton more than Breena and I do.”

“And it shouldn’t be an issue, because even if both of us were working for pennies, we’ve got jobs, we’ve got a home, and we’re ready to take care of a child if need be. We’ll have one of our own in a year or two.”

“Great, you’re ready to be parents. Doesn’t mean you’ll be around in ten years. My girls will.”

“We will be here. Both Abby and I understand that by saying yes to this we basically married Jimmy and Breena. And, as horrifying as Abby and I might find this, that also means you’re now part of our family, too. Because, if something does happen to Jimmy and Breena and we end up raising Molly, you’ll be at all of our Christmas and Thanksgiving and birthday parties for the rest of our lives. And the fact that I’m willing to let a jerk like you into my home because you’re my goddaughter’s grandfather should speak loud and clear on how important this is to Abby and I.”

Ed just blinked at him, scowled a little, and headed off.

Jimmy smiled. “We basically got married?”
“We signed up to be here for you and your kids for the rest of our lives. You got a better way to put that?”

Jimmy thought about it and shrugged. “Not really.” Then he smiled. “So does this mean I can sleep with Abby?”

Tim punched him on the shoulder. “Just as soon as I get a turn with Breena.”

“Get in line.” Jimmy’s shaking his head. “God, he’s such a jerk.”

“He’s probably worried that if something happens to you, we’ll take your kids, and they’ll never see them again. That’s something that won’t be an issue if you had picked one of the girls.”

“Maybe. It probably is the issue for Breena’s mom. I think he’s just a control-freak asshole who wants everything under his thumb.”

“Or it could be that. He really offered you a job? Doesn’t seem like he likes you enough to want to work with you every day.”

“Did I mention control-freak asshole?”

Tim squints a little, obviously that makes sense to Jimmy, but not to him. “Not seeing how that fits.”

“If I work for him, all of our income comes from him. He ends up owning us.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Not going near that job with a million foot poll.”

“Good plan.”

“Why’d you head over?”

“Saw him pull you away, heard the voices, though you might like backup.”

“Thanks. Never thought I’d say this, but I envy the fact you’ve got Gibbs for a father-in-law.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. He’s a terrifying hard-ass, but at least he’s a quiet one.”

Tim laughed. “Come on, let’s get back to the party.”
"Thank God, you're both here!" Abby said rushing to sit down next to Tim and Jimmy. They were grabbing some lunch and hadn't expected her to join them.

"What?" Tim asked, dread in his voice, Abby looked really upset.

"Tim! It's awful! The Adam's House called and they can't get the linens in crimson, ebony, and snow. They've only got scarlet, midnight, and cream. But if we do scarlet and cream that means we've got to change the flowers because they won't look right, but the florist tells me the that cream colored roses don't grow in the late fall, and if we want the roses to match, the linens have to be snow and not cream, and the black cala lilies are more of a warm black, but the midnight linens are a cool black and there's no such thing as a cool toned black lily, and even if they dye them it won't look right, because the underlying tone won't go, and I'm about to laugh so hard I'm going to wet my pants, you should see the looks on both of your faces right now!" And with that Abby did start laughing.

"Everything is fine?" Tim asked once he realized he wasn't about to have to deal with a bridezilla moment. So far there hadn't been any, but both Gibbs and Palmer seemed to think it would happen any day now, and that for all intents and purposes you aren't really married until you've talked your bride out of jumping off a cliff because some stupid screwed-up wedding detail that no man in the history of maleness has ever cared about.

She sat next to him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, kissing his cheek. "April first, baby."

Jimmy sighed, hard. "Don't do that! You just gave me a flashback to my wedding when Breena really did freak out because the flowers weren't going to match the napkins."

"Yeah, she told me about it, which gave me the idea. Don't worry, I know you two can't even see the difference between snow and cream or scarlet and crimson, let alone care about it. Okay, I've got to get back to the lab. Have a good lunch!"

Abby bopped away, and Jimmy looked at Tim. "I don't know if she's evil or the coolest woman ever."

"Coolest woman ever. Have I mentioned she didn't cry when I told her I couldn't care less what color anything was?"

"I was there, sitting next to you, silently begging you not to say it, waiting for her to explode about how you obviously didn't love her if you didn't care about the wedding details."

"Coolest woman ever!" Tim said with a grin as he took a bite of his burger.

Some parts of planning the Sciuto-McGee wedding were going to be a whole lot of fun.

And while it was true that there were aspects of the wedding that Tim literally could not care less about, pretty much anything involving how the place looked for example, there were some things he really did care about.
When he'd explained the idea of what they were going to do to Gibbs, he'd just stared at him in stupefaction. Apparently back when he married Diane (The last time he'd had a wedding. He and Stephanie eloped.) wedding cake came in one flavor: sawdust, and the only decision was how many layers you wanted.

So, on a bright and sunny Saturday afternoon in mid-April they were heading to the bakery to figure out what sort of cake they wanted.

Options, so many options, and all of them so, so good. They were sitting at a small table, with a collection of cupcakes in front of them. They'd already narrowed the twenty or so options from the menu down to four. But going from four to one was a killer.

See, the thing about a family only wedding, and not having tons of family is that you don't need a big wedding cake. Which pretty much limits you to one flavor. And picking just one out of the four in front of them… Black Forrest cake: dark chocolate cake soaked in rum and cherries with a sinfully deep vanilla frosting. Lemon-Raspberry Cake: lemon pound cake, raspberry mousse filling, raspberry gelle, and white chocolate frosting. Peanut butter cake, peanut butter mousse, chocolate ganache. And finally almond cake, chocolate ganache, cherry gelle, vanilla frosting. They sat there, happily munching away, more or less agreeing that all of them were the best thing in the history of cake and that deciding on one of them was impossible.

Finally, Sherri, the baker said to them, "You don't have to pick just one. You need enough cake to feed forty, right?"

Abby nodded.

"That's not a big enough cake to make different tiers a good idea, but we can do cupcakes. The ones in front of you are pretty plain, but we can make them fancy if you like. They cost more, because it takes more work to make and decorate a lot of little cakes, but..." And she let the idea trail off as Tim and Abby stared at the cupcakes in front of them.

Then Abby looked at him, licked a bit of white chocolate frosting off her fork, and smiled.

Tim grinned back, grinned wide. There was one sort of cake he'd been very interested in, but it didn't make the final cut because Abby doesn't like coffee. But if they were going to get a lot of flavors instead of just one, it could go on the list. Tiramisu cake: white sponge cake soaked coffee syrup, whipped mascarpone frosting, chocolate sprinkles. "Can you make the tiramisu cake as a cupcake?"

"No problem." Sherri stood up and was back a minute later, placing small, creamy café au lait colored cupcake sprinkled with cocoa and a chocolate curl propped on the frosting in front of Tim. "It's one of our better sellers."

Tim bit into it, and groaned with pleasure, it was exactly as good as he had hoped it would be. He looks at Abby, smiling, very pleased with this idea.

"How many cupcakes do you recommend for a group of forty?" Abby asked.

"We usually suggest eighty. Though, if you've got a lot of kids in your group, more might be a good idea."

"Not a lot of kids. Lot of hardcore coffee addicts, but not a lot of kids," she said, watching the expression of utter, sublime joy on Tim's face as he chewed his cupcake.

Sherri smiled. "So, would you want sixteen of each? We do a minimum order of six, but anything over that is fine. If you want, we can make them all look the same, cover them with fondant and
whatever decorations you want, or we can decorate them so it's fairly obvious what they are. We can arrange them on a tray or do tiered clusters, so they'd look more like a traditional wedding cake. Pretty much whatever you can imagine, we can do."

And so, by the end of the afternoon, an order for eighty cupcakes, each decorated to show what they were on the inside, displayed on eight black pedestals, each at a different height, with white roses and chocolate covered strawberries strewn about them was placed, and Tim and Abby were one step closer to having a wedding planned and ready to go.
Susan

Tony rubs the back of his head gently as Gibbs storms off. "That's the third time I've been headslapped today."

"I know. And I hate to say it, but you're not any more off than you ever are. What happened with you two?" Tim asks.

"Nothing. He's just in a pissy mood."

Tim isn't buying that at all. "Pissy mood? Come on. Something is going on. You and Ziva okay?"

Tony flashes him his really, you're going there look. "We're fine. Why would you ask that?"

"He'd headslap you if you're pissing her off."

That makes sense, sort of. "If I'm pissing her off, I've done it without her letting me know."

"That's not like her."

"No it's not. So it's him."

They both wince when Gibbs double slaps them. "More work, less gossip."

"If you weren't slapping the hell out of Tony every two minutes, we'd be working. What's going on?"

Gibbs just glares at Tim, so he flashes Tony his talk later look, and both of them get back to working the crime scene.

Two days later, Tim says to Tony, "I feel like I woke up in 2004."

Tony looks up at him like a light just went on. "That's it! We fell into a time warp and somehow we're ten years back in time. How did that happen? Tell me that, Probie."

Tim glares at Tony. "Don't you start. It's not 2004, and I will kick your ass if you start that Probie crap up again."

"Fine. Still, he hasn't been this hard in years. As Senior Field Agent, I'm thinking it's time to do a little investigating."

Tim nods, this sound promising. "Good, let me know how that goes."

"You let me know." Tony smiles, looking satisfied.

Tim's eyes go wide. "Noooo… I don't want to poke into his life."

Tony flashes him his I'm being totally reasonable here, even if you think this is insane look. "I'm not asking you to hack him, just head over tonight and talk."
"Why do you want me to do that?" There are a lot of things Tim McGee is good at, walking up to people, even people he loves, and saying, "So, tell me why you're acting like there's a stick up your ass and you don't want it there," isn't one of them. He's much better at respecting privacy and leaving them alone until they sort it out for themselves.

"'Cause this has gone on long enough. You're free tonight, and I've got Schul."

"Skip it."

"Can't. I missed the last two weeks because of cases. Rabbi's getting annoyed at my attendance."

"Great."

"Besides, I think he'd rather talk to you about stuff like this."

"Stuff like what?" Sure Gibbs is being a bear lately, but Tim hasn't figured out the cause, yet.

"When was the last time you saw Susan?"

"Oh." Tim realizes it has been close to a month. "You think that's why he's so angry?"

"Could be. He wasn't much fun after Hollis left, and I think that was the last one he really liked."

"And he did like Susan, didn't he?" Well, if they had broken up that could explain it. It'd been more than six months, so that could mean the thing with Susan was fairly serious, and she is the only girlfriend ever invited to some of the social things for their group. So, that's another mark in the serious column.

"Yeah. Look, if he's still being a bastard after you talk to him, I'll go see him tomorrow, and pump Ducky for information, too."

Tim shakes his head, sure how that is going to go. "That's not going to end well."

"I'm hoping that you'll talk to him and it'll help."

"Why do you think he'd talk to me about this?"

"You're good at this stuff."

Tim's sending Tony his are you insane look. "What on earth makes you think I'm good with relationships?"

Tony's got the same look on his face, stupefied that Tim would even ask that. "You're getting married in six months."

"I'm good at Abby, which is not the same thing as being good at relationships." An idea hits as he says that. "Abby! She can go talk to him!"

"He won't talk to her, not about this sort of stuff. Broken heart stuff is man talk. Usually involving alcohol and maybe steaks."

"It sounds like you know what you're doing. How about we wait until tomorrow and you handle it?"

"Just get on it."

Tim glares at Tony a little and then flashes a text to Abby about his post-work errand.
Two minutes later he gets back Thank God, it's about time one of you did it! I'll pick up some bourbon for you to bring over.

Wonderful. See you at lunch?

Sure.

Gibbs glances up from his workbench when he hears the steps, feeling mildly surprised to see McGee standing there holding a bottle of bourbon.

"You're supposed to be DiNozzo."

McGee nods. "I agree. But he's at Schul, so," he puts the bottle on the workbench next to Gibbs, "I'm here. Look, I've never done this before. Do we just drink until you're ready to stop being a jerk?"

Gibbs looks at the bottle of Blanton's Original. It's not anything he's ever drunk. The bottle is globe shaped, looking a lot more like some sort of cordial than anything he'd think of as bourbon. McGee doesn't drink hard alcohol much, and when he does, he goes for scotch, so if he picked it out that means he probably went online and looked it up. If Abby did, then that's probably her year bartending showing. He hopes Abby picked it out.

McGee sits there, waiting for him to say something. There's one difference between doing this with McGee versus DiNozzo, McGee, once he gets comfortable, does quiet pretty well. DiNozzo either never really gets comfortable or just can't handle the quiet.

Gibbs touches the bottle, turning the label toward him. "Gonna take a bigger bottle."

"You've got more if this isn't enough. What happened with Susan?"

Gibbs stares at him, looking amused. DiNozzo would have spent half an hour talking about, well, Gibbs isn't sure, he wouldn't have paid much attention to it. Just would have been noise to let the alcohol sink in a bit before getting to the main topic. "You've really never done this, have you?"

McGee shakes his head. "No. The only guy who would come to me with something like this is Palmer, and he's doing just fine with his love life."

McGee pulls up a stool and opens the bottle, pouring a glass for each of them. Then he pushes one of them toward Gibbs.

"Talk to me. It won't hurt. Might help. And if we both still think this is stupid tomorrow, we'll both slap Tony."

Gibbs grins a little at that, and takes a sip. Not bad. Not sweet, but tastes like sugar and orange, or maybe it just makes him think of oranges rather than tastes like oranges. Mostly tastes like alcohol. Nothing he'd pick out for himself, but nothing he minds drinking.

"You aren't drinking."

"I'm pacing myself. I don't want to be hung over tomorrow."
Gibbs takes another drink. "The idea is get so drunk you hurt as bad on the outside as you do on the inside."

McGee shoots his back. "Better?"

Gibbs nods, and he realizes McGee always takes a drink from him, but never has more than a few sips. "You don't like bourbon, do you?"

"No.' Tim's looking at the amber liquor in the bottle. "Though this is a lot better than I thought it'd be. So, let me guess, the other part of both of us drunk is so I don't really remember what you've said?"

"Something like that."

"Won't blab. Won't tell Abby if you don't want me to."

"Abby's fine. The ten million people who read your next book aren't."

"I won't put it in there. What happened?"

Gibbs finishes his, and pours himself another. "Nothing."

McGee raises his eyebrow, very clearly signaling \textit{you've been a complete asshole for a week over nothing?}

"She's sweet, and funny, and beautiful, and sexy, and nothing happens. Nothing ever happens. I can enjoy having her around. I can feel protective about a woman. I enjoy the sex. But that's it. It never gets any deeper."

"You weren't in love with her."

The tilt of Gibbs' head says \textit{Yes.} "At least by now I know to cut out before she gets too attached to me. It took three tries but I figured out that sticking around longer and getting married and hoping isn't going to make me fall in love."

"Why not?"

He just stares at McGee.

McGee sends him his best \textit{I'm not an idiot} look. "Say it out loud, see if it helps."

And after a long, quiet minute, he does. "Because she's not Shannon."

"You ever talk to anyone about Shannon?"

"Mike. A little."

"He handled her case, right?"

"Yeah."

"Talk to me. Tell me about her. How'd you two meet?"

Gibbs stares at McGee, not saying anything, not sure if he can make himself say anything. He was never a big talker, learned early with his Dad that silence was armor, a good way to protect himself, but he started talking again when Shannon came into his life, and when she died, his words went
with her. Too many memories, too many feelings went with words, and keeping them bound and silent let him function.

McGee waits patiently, not in any hurry, a somewhat expectant look on his face.

Then Gibbs gets up, heading upstairs. When he comes down, he's holding a framed photo, and his glass is refilled.

He puts the picture on the workbench in front of McGee. "Christmas 1990. Last shot of the three of us together." It's a pretty standard family portrait. Everyone is smiling at the camera, Gibbs has his arm around Shannon, and one hand resting on Kelly's shoulder.

"They were beautiful." McGee's voice is low as he says that, and Gibbs realizes that part of never saying anything was never having anyone around who really understood how much he'd lost. Most of his friends were bachelors, like Ducky or Mike, never settled on one woman. He watches Tim, and realizes sometime between putting the picture in front of him and now, he switched from McGee to Tim, study the picture, and can almost feel the raw shock of aching sympathy from Tim as he feels, and knows, what Gibbs lost.

"Yeah, they were." Gibbs takes another long drink.

"How old are you in this picture?" Tim looks up at him.

"Almost thirty-three."

"Wow."

"Yeah. Didn't go gray until after. Didn't even notice for something like a year. Had to renew my driver's license. I listed my hair as brown. The DMV lady just stared at me for a minute before grabbing a compact and showing me myself in the mirror."

Tim smiles at that. He looks at the picture again. "She would have been about Ziva's age, right?"

"Kelly was born in '82. So, yeah, same age as Ziva."

Tim looks back up at him. "You love Abby, right? And Ziva? Really love them, not just fond and protective of them?"

Gibbs nods.

"What's different? They aren't Kelly, can't be Kelly, won't be Kelly."

Gibbs shrugs, feeling the alcohol hit, hard. Might taste sweet but there's a real punch hiding in there. "Kelly wasn't mine. You'll realize that soon, I hope. Your kids don't belong to you. They belong to themselves, and, eventually, whoever they give themselves to."

"Shannon was yours."

And while that's true, that's also not the problem. "I was hers." Gibbs sighs and stares at his drink. "I was eighteen, home on leave, and she was at the train stop, and…" He takes out his wallet and pulls out another picture. It's easier to show the pictures than to say the words. "She's twenty in that shot." Shannon, smiling, in a long, simple, white dress, standing in front of a huge scarlet maple, sunset lighting the shot golden pink; her hair's in a long, loose braid, wind blowing tendrils of it behind her, a bouquet of pink and white flowers in her hands.
"That's your wedding, isn't it?" Tim asks, fingers lightly tracing the edge of the photo.

"Yeah. October 20, 1979." Gibbs rubs his eyes, feeling that moment. She was smiling at him. The photographer said he wanted a shot of her by herself, so he was standing a few feet away from the man as he clicked the camera. Ten seconds later he joined her, holding her hands as he snapped more pictures. The words start to come out before he can stop them, before he can feel the desire to shut them down. "She put that ring on me, and I was whole and home and all that other stupid love song crap that isn't when you really love a woman… And I know for you and Abby the ceremony is just… fun. But it mattered to us. We didn't get married an inch at a time. We jumped in all at once, and nothing has ever felt like that before or since."

"She was your first?"

Gibbs closes his eyes and swallows, remembering that as well, thinking of a moment of sublime, ecstatic joy forever tinged with the excruciating pain of having lost that moment. "She was my only, and yeah, my first, too. We waited until we got married, and you do that, and… you say the words, make the promise, put on the rings, and then share yourself like that, feel her body on yours, your one and only and her one and only, and you are married."

He rubs his eyes again. He's not crying, or trying not to cry, or maybe Tim's just doing a very good job of not seeing him cry. And with the tears (or lack of tears) words start to rush out. "She was mine and I was hers and none of it matters because she's not here. She's been dead almost twice as long as we were married at this point. And yeah, it gets better and it gets easier, but she's still gone, and the hole she's supposed to fill is still there, and this house is still empty when I come home, and there aren't any pictures on the mantle of the three of us growing old together, and I don't have grandkids, and I didn't get to give the bride away, or dance with my wife at our daughter's wedding." He pauses, inhales fast and deep. "We aren't getting ready to retire, and we didn't go to the places we were supposed to, and she'll never set foot on this boat, and the future we wanted to build didn't happen. And it's all so fucking wrong!" Gibbs shoots his drink back, and Tim pours him more.

"And every time I try to rebuild, it comes back up again. I'm hers, and she's not here, and I don't know how to belong to someone else."

Gibbs drinks some more.

Tim touches his arm. "Find the right girl, Palmer told me that. It won't work with the wrong girl and no amount of trying will make it work. I'm sure everyone and their cousin has told you Shannon wouldn't have wanted you to mourn her forever, but if you haven't found someone you can fall in love with yet, then you haven't. Maybe sex and friendship is what you can do. Maybe it's all you need."

Gibbs snorts. "Been telling myself that lie for years. It's not. I miss the way love felt. I want it. Chased it. I just can't get it. I should have loved Hollis. Really should have loved Jen. Should have loved the exes. Should have loved Susan. They deserved to be loved. Just, can't do it."

Tim thinks about that while Gibbs stares at his drink, then he asks, "Where's your wedding ring?"

"Upstairs."

"When did you take it off?"

Gibbs almost answers and then stops.

"After Hernandez?" Tim asks.
He figures that it really shouldn't be a surprise that Tim knows that. He half-wonders if Abby told him, but decides Tim figured it out for himself. Abby may have confirmed it, but she wouldn't have told. "Yeah."

"Go put it back on. You're still married. Leave it on until it's actually time to take it off."

Of all the things Tim could have come up with, that's something Gibbs would have never expected. "It's been twenty-three years."

"I know." Tim taps his mug, he's only had the one shot, hasn't poured himself a second. "I haven't had so much I can't do subtraction. You aren't done being her husband, so put your ring back on. Maybe if you go back a few steps, try it again, you can get to where you need to go."

Much to Tim's surprise Gibbs gets up.

"You still have hers?" he asks as Gibbs sets foot on the bottom step.

"No. She was buried wearing it."

"Okay."

"Why?"

"If you had it, I would have suggested put it on, too."

Gibbs nods, that makes sense to him. It doesn't take him long to find. It's been living in his sock drawer, in a small black box with his service medals. Plain gold band, wide, still fits, and looks very right on his hand.

"Feel better?" Tim asks when he returned.

"A little." And he does, which is probably wrong, but… at this point he isn't going to argue with it. He hated having that finger naked, and sticking other rings on it never helped, so why not put the one that belonged there back on?

"Good. So, tell me about her. In my family, when someone we loves dies, we get drunk and tell stories, and we laugh until we cry and then cry until we can laugh again. I'm going to take a wild guess and bet that you never did that for Shannon or Kelly." Gibbs nods. Tim pours another shot into Gibbs' glass, poured more for himself as well. "Tell me some stories."

And Gibbs does.
The Morning After

Tim wakes up with a jolt of adrenaline, wondering where he is. It takes a second before he figures out that he's on Gibbs' sofa. Takes another second to check his watch, see it's 8:30, and figure out the reason his entire body is screaming get up at him is because it's a work day and he's late.

He listens for a moment. The house is quiet, and no one has dropped any water on him or yelled at him to get up, so he's fairly sure Gibbs is still out. It was 5:00 when they kicked the bottle, (round about the halfway point he started spilling as he poured, partly to help sell the illusion that he'd had a lot more to drink than he actually had, partly because while drunk, talking Gibbs was the goal, taking him to the hospital with alcohol poisoning wasn't,) and he dragged Gibbs into his bed before crashing on the sofa.

He checks his cell. Three texts from Abby.

6:32 Guessing you're still at his place

7:47 Telling Leon you both won't be in today

8:22 Let me know you're okay.

That one is ten minutes old. He sends one back, fast. Okay. Just woke up. What's your best hangover cure?

How bad is it?

No idea. I'm not the one hung over. But Gibbs is still asleep, so I'm thinking it'll be brutal when it hits.

4 Advil, Gatorade, hot shower, go back to sleep.

I'll see what I can do.

What happened?

We're both fine. Got enough alcohol into him to get him talking about Shannon. Mini wake. Hope it helped. Tell you more when I see you.

Okay

He looked at the picture of Shannon, Kelly, and Gibbs on the mantle and felt the cold, aching fear of losing everything that matters. I love you, Abby.

XOXOXOXO

He heads for the kitchen, extremely doubtful as to the likelihood of there being Gatorade in there. And he's right. A little bit of food. Not much to drink besides coffee, milk of dubious age, and more booze, and none of them are good plans.

He finds the largest glass Gibbs owns, fills it with water, and rummages around for Advil or some sort of painkiller. Nothing in the kitchen. He tries the hall bathroom, nothing in there either.
He heads for Gibbs' room, very quietly. Doesn't want to wake him up. Though, at this point, Gibbs should still be drunk as opposed to hung over, that still doesn't mean him waking up is a good plan.

Fortunately, it doesn't work that way. He creeps in, puts the water on the nightstand, and heads for the bathroom. Unfortunately, he doesn't have any painkillers in there.

What kind of guy doesn't have at least one bottle of Tylenol in the house?
The guy who never gets sick and probably thinks hangovers are deserved punishment or something.

Screw it.

He finds a pad and a pen and leaves a note next to the glass.


An hour later, he has Gatorade, Advil, and breakfast. Two of the three he leaves on Gibbs' nightstand. The last he sticks in the oven on warm.

While eating his breakfast, he gets a text from Tony.

What did you do to him?

Got him drunk and talking. That was the plan, right?

You got him so drunk he called out?

I got him so drunk he's still asleep. Abby called him out.

He can feel Tony shaking his head as he looks at that text.

What did you do, shoot him with a tranquilizer dart?

Something like that.

Think it helped?

We'll find out.

Then he goes back to sleep. It's a surprisingly comfy sofa, long enough for him to lie full out on, and he's out in a flash. Sure, he can function on three hours sleep, but he doesn't have to, so he won't.

It's after three when he wakes up to the sound of loud cursing and the shower running.

He heads upstairs, finds the Advil and Gatorade untouched, and the door to the bathroom open. He picks up the Gatorade and takes it in.

Gibbs is on the other side of the shower curtain, groaning.

Tim puts the Gatorade on the edge of the tub. "Part of why you're hurting is that you're dehydrated. Drink it."
"Coffee," echos out from the other side of the curtain. Gibbs certainly sounds like he's wishing he was dead.

"Will suck even more water out of you and make you feel worse. Drink the Gatorade. Drink the next one I bring you. Then I'll make us coffee."

Gibbs pulls back the curtain, looking like a drowned rat, a sad, sick, drowned rat, and grabs the drink. He glares blearily in Tim's direction through bloodshot eyes, then snaps the curtain shut again.

Tim goes downstairs, gets another Gatorade, and then makes some coffee.

Gibbs comes down an hour later, looking like he's been run over by a truck. Tim points at the table where there is coffee, water, and food.

"You'll live?" Tim asks very quietly.

Gibbs nods.

"Then I'm going to head home. Keep drinking the water with the coffee. There's a full pot in the kitchen. More food and Gatorade in the fridge. Abby says you should go back to sleep as soon as you can."

Gibbs nods again.

Tim sends a text to Tony while he's waiting for a light to go from red to green. Your turn. Just check in on him, and if he's awake tonight, keep him company.

???

We kicked the bottle, and I only had two shots. He's feeling like crap and probably shouldn't be alone tonight.

Got it.

When Tim gets home, Abby isn't there, yet. But it's a bit after five thirty, so with any luck she'll be home soon.

He pokes around the kitchen, nothing looks ready to become dinner, so he orders them some Chinese. He doesn't really want to cook, anyway.

 Mostly he just wants to curl up with her, hold her close, and devoutly give thanks to the God whose
existence he greatly doubts that she's alive and whole and in his life and that he's not sitting in a house filled only with memories.

Food gets there before she does. But not by much. He's just starting to shut the door when he sees her.

"Hi." Abby smiles brightly at him as she slides in the door.

"Hey." He puts the bag on the floor and wraps around her, head on her shoulder, arms around her waist.

That's significantly more clingy than their usual hello hug. She pets his arms. "You okay?"

"Yeah," he kisses her. "Just not taking you for granted." One more kiss. "I love you."

"Love you, too."

He sighs, his head dropping back to her shoulder. He can feel the fact that she's got a perplexed look on her face, but he's still not moving, still holding onto her, smelling her skin, feeling her warm and in his arms.

"Tim?"

He raises his head from her shoulder and spends a moment just looking at her, eyes wide and earnest, fingers cupping her face. "He was three years younger than I am when she died." He kisses her, soft and gentle, not sexual so much as an expression of thanks, then pulls back and stares into her eyes. "And I need to hold onto you for a while. Is that okay?"

She smiles softly at him. "That's okay. I'm not going anywhere. Other than maybe the sofa, with you. Come tell me about it, and we'll snuggle."

He nods, snuggles sound good.

An hour later, he is sitting with Abby on the sofa, sharing a carton of chicken and broccoli, telling her about Shannon, when his phone beeps.

Text from Tony: McGee, the plan was get him drunk and talking, not married again. What the hell did you do?

He's awake?

Crashed out on the sofa, didn't even twitch when I came in, wearing a wedding ring!

You sent me to do the job, I did the job. Relax. That's Shannon's ring.

Tim can almost feel the disbelief rolling off of Tony, and then a second later, Why would that make
me relax? pops up on his phone.

Because it means he's doing what he needed to do when she died. At least, I hope that's how this works.

What's the plan here? Send him back 23 years, cling to her harder, and just give up on anyone else?

Tim sighs. He supposes that's a possible outcome of this. I really hope not. He got married three times and whatever it was with Jen in less than ten years. Took the ring off right after the funerals. Never said another word about them to anyone for more than a decade. Diane found out about Shannon by going through his wallet, and I don't think he ever mentioned Kelly. He just shut it away. The plan is to actually try mourning and saying goodbye and letting her go.

Think he can?

Yeah.
"How much did Abby's ring cost?" Tony asks Tim as they drive to question a suspect.

"What?" That question is so far out of bounds he doesn't even know what to start doing with it.

"Ziva knows how much you spent on the stones, so I can't get her a ring that costs less than that."

"What?" He's still stunned Tony is asking about this, and staring at him like he's some sort of strange alien that Tim's never heard of before, let alone seen.

"Engagement ring for Ziva, I can't get her less of a ring than you got Abby."

Finally Tim pulls it together enough to say, "This is how you tell me you're going to ask Ziva to marry you?"

Tony shoots him a see, that's what it feels like look. "I thought the fact that I'd do it sooner or later was pretty obvious."

"Okay, yeah it was, still something other than, 'Hey, I intend to outspend you,' would have been nice."

"Fine. I'm going to ask Ziva to marry me, so I need a ring, and because you had the brilliant idea to take her gem shopping when you got Abby her ring, and because C.I.Ray already whipped out a huge stone for her, she's got expectations now, and I can't fall short of them. So, how much was Abby's ring?"

Tim's staring at Tony incapable of wrapping his mind around this idea. "Your main engagement ring goal is to out romance me?"

"No." Tony thinks about it. "Yes. If I don't, then this is just routine for her, something she's already seen."

Tim laughs. "First off, taking her along was Gibbs' idea." Then he laughs again, some edge in his tone. "Secondly, you're screwed, $15,300."

"For a ring!?" Tony's eyes just about fall out of his head at that idea, and he pulls over and stops the car. Once he's got it still he's staring at Tim, the same version of this is a specie I've never heard of before on his face.

Tim shrugs. "Gems came in at a little over 7,000, and the custom design work and materials on the ring was a bit over 8,000."

"You spent three months of your salary on a ring?"

Tim grins at Tony. If he's going to butt in with the inappropriate question, he's going to enjoy rubbing his nose in it. "Five after taxes."

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Nothing! I had the cash. I wanted to get her the perfect ring. That's what the perfect ring cost."

Tony looks to the sky and says, "Why?"
"I did, however, get some intel for you."

Tony's eyes narrow; he looks back to Tim, interested. "What?"

"She likes sapphires. But she wouldn't tell me what sort of proposal she wanted."

"Hmmm..."

"So, besides determining you want to get her a 'better' ring than I got Abby, do you have any ideas?"

Tony sighs. "Shooting you in the head for spending so goddamn much."

Tim snorts. "I wasn't aware I was setting a ring budget for you. And if I had known that... I would have done exactly the same thing. She loves that ring. It is absolutely perfect for her. And she is going to wear it every single day for the rest of her life. So, get over how much it cost. Abby helped Palmer pick out Breena's ring, and I didn't feel any need to compete with that."

"Because you blew it out of the water by a mile before you even got one of your stones picked out."

Tim shrugs. "Really wasn't thinking about it at all. What I was thinking about was spending months searching online looking at pre-made rings and thinking that none of them were right for Abby. But you aren't marrying Abby, you're marrying Ziva, who likes classic, elegant, beautiful things which you can just walk into a jewelry store and buy."

"There is that." Tony might not know what he wants, yet, but he does know that it's not going to take him the better part of a year to find it.

"And I highly doubt Ziva cares at all how much her ring is going to cost."

Tony rolls his eyes a little, because Tim's right. "I care."

"Why?"

Tony shrugs. "I just do. And I don't want my dad looking at it and smirking about it. Man's bought more engagement rings than Gibbs has, so he's got ideas about what they should look like."

"I can take you to where I got Abby's gems, and the guy who's making our wedding rings seems to know what he's doing. The guy who did her engagement ring took three times as long as he said he would, so unless you do want killer filigree work way late, I don't recommend him. So, besides expensive, what do you want to get her?"

Tony's facing in Tim's direction, but not really looking at him. "It should be smooth and strong. She works with her hands, fights with them, so it can't have soft, easily snagged bits on it. But it should still be beautiful and delicate."

"Were you thinking diamonds?"

"I was, but if she likes sapphires, I should probably look at them. Plus sapphires would have the advantage of not looking anything like the ring C.I.Ray got her."

"Good plan."

"Yeah."

Tony thinks for a moment, then he looks at Tim, curiously. "You just had fifteen thousand dollars lying around?"
Tim shrugs, watching traffic speed by. "Yeah."

"Why?"

He turns his eyes back to Tony and squints a little, the sort of gesture that means, *I'll answer this, but don't get to deep into it, okay?* Tony sees it and nods, so Tim says, "First off, it took me almost half a year to even get the stones. That's a good chunk of time to save. Secondly, I do have another job."

Tony's looking a little suspicious at that.

"They actually pay me to write mysteries. It's not just a hobby."

"Oh. Right. McGemcity. Does that pay well?"

Tim shakes his head dismissively; this is what he doesn't want to get too into. Sure, he hadn't been subtle about the cash on the first book, but after losing everything, he's been a whole lot pickier about how he spends his money. Tony's probably noticed he's got a good watch and wears expensive stuff when they aren't at work, and that their apartment is awfully nice, but it's not like he's bought a new Porsche recently. "I'm not Rick Castle, but I do okay. So, you given any thought as to what to do with the ring once you've got it?" he asks, turning them into more comfortable territory.

"Yeah."

"And?"

"And, besides the fact that our year anniversary is coming up, I don't know. Hard though this might be for you to understand, McWordsmith, some of us don't have an easy time coming up with poetry and spilling out perfectly formed verse about why we love our girlfriends."

Tim smiles. "I asked if she still had the Marilyn dress, talked about the two of us going out for Halloween as Monroe and Miller, she looked at me and said, 'Weren't they married?' and I just grinned, whipped out the ring and said, 'Will you marry me?' I left the poetry for other days."

"So, wait, you write her love poems, but didn't to ask her to marry you?"

"She knows I adore her. She's got a box full of poems I've written her. So, no, I didn't feel a need for a long, drawn out, here's all the reasons you're perfect proposal. Of course, I was also holding a designed specifically for her fifteen thousand dollar ring. That might have spoken louder than words." Tim's smirking as he says it. Tony punches him on the shoulder. "Guess you'll just have to keep working on getting your words right."

"You're an asshole."

"Oh come on, Tony! How often do I get to do this to you? If Palmer was here, he'd be smirking at you, too."

"He would. I should ask him what he said to Breena. At least that way I'll know where the outer lines of way too sappy are."

"That's not a bad idea. You wanna borrow Abby for ring help?"

"I might. Or maybe not. I have a feeling she'd think anything I'd like for Ziva would be boring. Breena probably has closer jewelry taste to Ziva than Abby does."

"Might be true. Still take one of the girls, they talk to each other, so she might have more information"
about what Ziva wants than I do. And even if she doesn't have specific information, she'll probably have a better feel for what Ziva wants."
“How was the shopping trip?” Tim called out when he heard the door shut.

He was in his office, jazz playing loud, staring at the proof version of The Traitor Within. He hated this part of it. Writing the story in the first place, lot of fun. Editing, that was pretty good, too, it was always interesting to see what another set of eyes thought was happening. Proofreading? He’d rather watch paint dry. Tim had already seen the book so many times he could barely see what was on the page, and when things did jump out at him, they were usually the sort of change that was so big he couldn’t make it. This point in the journey there were no real rewrites, it was just fine tuning, like spelling issues or turning a comma into a semi colon.

He also didn’t much like this phase because he was fifty thousand words into Deep Six part five and he really didn’t like stopping that dead to go back to Deep Six part four.

“A lot of fun!” Abby said as she came in. “Tony’s got really good taste in jewelry.”

She sat on the edge of the desk, one foot resting between his legs on the seat of his chair, turning him away from the proof and toward her.

“Glad to hear it.” He bent forward and kissed her knee, resting his chin on it, looking up at her. “Good to know one of us had a fun afternoon. Ziva going to be happy?”

“I think so. Unless she was lying about loving sapphires.”

“What’s it look like?”

Abby took her phone out of her pocket. “He made me promise to delete this after you saw it. Doesn’t want her running into it by accident or by snooping on my phone.”

“He thinks she might snoop?”

“I get the sense he didn’t come up with a great excuse for why the three of us were out this afternoon.”

“Why were you three out?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask what our cover story was.”

Tim shook his head. “Amateurs.”

“Breena and I are bad liars to begin with. Everyone is better off if we don’t get asked, than if we end up having to try and cover.” She finished flipping through the images on her phone and showed him the ring.

He stared at it, smiling. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah.”

He looked at it for another minute. Round cut white diamond, some sort of white setting metal, a ring of sapphires around the diamond, and a small, round, white diamond at either side.

“What’s the setting?”
“White gold.”

He nodded, then shook his head a little, wry amusement on his face. “How big is it?”

Abby held up her fingers about a quarter of an inch apart. “Why are you shaking your head?”

“One of his goals was to outspend me on an engagement ring. I think he might have.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Really?”

“That’s what he told me. Ziva went with me to buy the stones, so that was his absolute minimum price.”

Abby rolled her eyes a little. “That’s silly.”

“I told him that, too.”

She looked at the ring on her finger. Then thought about what Tony spent. “Do I want to know how much this cost?”

“Depends,” Tim said with a smile. “Are you going to slap me upside the back of the head if I went a little bonkers on it?”

“No. But by ‘a little bonkers’ do you mean ‘a little’ or ‘full blown insane?’”

He leaned back in his chair, fingers tracing down her leg. “Probably closer to ‘full blown insane’ than a ‘little.’ You like it?”

“I love it.”

He grinned. “Then ‘full blown insane’ was exactly what I needed to do.”

She smiled at him and looked at her ring again.

“Do you want to know?”

“Nah.”
She shifted her gaze to his proof copy and the very few red marks on the page. “How’s it going?”

“Slow.” He stuck out his tongue and rolled his eyes. “Two hundred more pages to go.”

“Yippiee!” Tim truly appreciated the amount of sarcasm she managed to work into that one word. “Exactly. What’s on for the rest of your day?”

“What’s your deadline for that?”

“Nine on Monday.”

Abby looked disappointed. “So you actually need to finish it?”

“Yeah.” The whole paying for the wedding thing would be significantly easier with a pile of cash, and they weren’t going to send him any more of it until the proof was marked up and sent back.

“In that case, Bioshock 3.”

Yeah, it came out months ago, but their game backlog is pretty steep these days. They only got into it a week earlier and it was awesome! He stared at her for a minute, images of sitting next to her, playing it with her in his head. “You’re killing me.”

She smiled widely at him. “You got to play for three hours on Friday while I was trapped in the lab.”

“True.” And because of that she’d be mostly going through bits he’d already done, still… Bioshock!

“You going to be able to break for dinner?”

He checked the clock, four hours until they usually ate. Two hundred pages of careful reading to go. “Yeah. This goes well, we might be able to play together after dinner.”

“Ohhh!”

Being on the other side of the your-buddy-is-getting-engaged thing was pretty cool. First off, it’s always easier to be the sounding board than it is to be the guy coming up with the ideas in the first place. Second of all, and granted, it wasn’t like Abby was going to say no, but still, when you’re the buddy, there’s no risk involved, and that’s pretty nice. Thirdly, he is really, genuinely pleased that Tony’s feeling ready to take this step, and he’s happy about it.

Really happy.

Like having a hard time keeping a straight face happy.

Which might be why Ziva’s a bit suspicious when he more or less wrestled the keys away from her and drove them, very slowly, back from gathering evidence on May 22, 2014.

She “knew” Tony had made reservations to take them out for their anniversary, and Tim, very carefully driving ten miles an hour below the speed limit, making them later and later for that dinner was driving her crazy.

She didn’t know, and Tim did, and why he was driving so slow, is that Tony, as soon as possible, had booked home and was getting their real dinner set up. Sure it was take out, but it was really good take out, and though Tony hadn’t been too specific about his plans with Tim, he’s fairly
sure the whole apartment will be decked out in flowers and candles and all the rest of the traditional Hallmark card/Valentine’s Day style romance that Tony seems to do so well.

So, Tim’s job, as soon to be best man, is to deliver Ziva to Tony’s place as slowly as possible, making sure he’s had time to get everything set up.

And Tim’s doing a good job of it. Even though at this point she’s getting awfully close to threatening to shoot him.

“McGee, if you do not speed up I will… That’s the exit! Why are you driving me past our exit? I have to get back to my car, home, and changed, and Tony’s going to be there in less than half an hour.”

“Relax. Check your go bag.”

She’s glaring at him, but digs through her bag. He looks away from traffic for a second and sees her come up with a pink envelope. She slits it with the knife Tony had made for her, unfolds the paper inside, and reads it quickly.

“It says, ‘Don’t kill McGee.’ Why is Tony giving me a piece of paper with instructions not to kill you?”

Tim shrugged. When Tony told him that once Ziva started asking questions to let her know about the note, he had certainly expected there to be something more than “Don’t kill McGee” in there as well.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Tony’s.”

“And why are you doing that?”

“He asked me to.”

“And did he ask you to drive at this infuriatingly slow pace?”

“Actually, yes, he did.”

She sighed and glared at him again. He grinned at her.

“And what is going to happen when I get there.”

“I don’t actually know.” Sure he could hazard an extremely accurate guess, but he doesn’t, as a matter of fact, know.

She’s watching him carefully, and really listening to what he’s said. “Then what do you think will happen?”

“Not telling. It’s a surprise.”

“Hmmm… And would this surprise have something to do with Abby, Tony, and Breena all vanishing together on Saturday?”

“That’s entirely possible.” And with that Ziva smiled, and began talking about the case.

Fifteen minutes later he dropped her off at Tony’s and as she shut the door he fired off a quick text to Tony. *She’s two minutes away. Hope you’re ready.*
A second later he got a shot of Tony’s apartment, picnic dinner laid out in the center of the living room floor, candles lighting everything gold, along with Look good?

Yeah, looks good. Have fun.

No ‘Good luck’?

You don’t need it.

On Friday, May 23rd, he and Abby headed to the Bullpen, waiting for Tony and Ziva to get in. And yeah, seeing both of them glowing with happiness was a very good thing. Seeing Gibbs kiss Ziva’s cheek while hugging her, and then pull Tony into the hug as well, that was even better.
Some things about planning the Sciuto-McGee wedding required some extra help.

Steampunk for Dummies night is one of those things.

While it’s true that Palmer and Breena both get the idea of Steampunk, it’s also true that the majority of the wedding party has this idea firmly filed under ‘weird stuff Abby and McGee like’ with no concrete ideas of what exactly that means.

With four months to go, it’s time to get some wedding costumes ready, and yes, Abby’s, Ziva’s, and Breena’s dresses have all been designed and put on order quite a while ago, but not all that much had been done for the guys.

Because, while it can take a lot of dressmaking skill to turn out something properly flouncy for a steampunk wedding gown, or bridesmaid dress, for the guys things are quite a bit easier.

So, it’s a quiet Saturday in the beginning of June when the entire wedding party gathers at Tim and Abby’s for grilling and getting the guys costumed.

Or at least getting them set with ideas.

Tim figures that if Gibbs and Fornell watched Firefly, that the rest of the crew can handle it, and when the burgers had been handed out and everyone is comfy in the living room, he queues up Firefly, Shindig, identifying all of the characters, and wraps up with, “If Mal or Simon would wear it, then you can, too.” Then he hits play, and they watch.

He notices that Tony seemed a whole lot more into it than he's expecting, really enjoying the duel at the end, and Ducky seems to be taking notes on what might constitute appropriate garb.

At the end of it, he turns it off. “So, everyone have a pretty good idea of what we’re going for here?”

Nods all around.

“Is a kilt appropriate?” Ducky asks.

“Kilts are always appropriate for anything hosted by Tim and I, anything,” Abby answers. “What colors is your tartan?”

“Gray, tan, burgundy.”

“That’ll be fine,” Tim answers. “Official wedding colors are black, crimson, and white, though that’s a guideline more than a rule. My ceremony suit is gray, though the vest and tie is crimson. Abby’s got all white for the ceremony.”

Tony raises an eyebrow. “You have a ceremony suit?”

“Yeah,” Tim nods. “The ceremony will be formal, at least for the two of us, we don’t expect anyone else to get two suits for this, and the reception a bit more relaxed.”

“How relaxed?” Gibbs asks.

“I’m going from a morning suit to something rakish. There aren’t any real hard rules here, though we’d certainly appreciate something in the spirit of this. Why, what are you thinking?”
Gibbs just smiles.

“Hats?” Jimmy asks.

“I wasn’t planning on one, but knock yourself out if you want to,” Tim answers. “You thinking a bowler?”

“Of course!” Breena smiles at Jimmy and ruffles his hair affectionately.

“What are you thinking, Tony?” Ziva asks.

“Not a bowler. So, basically, this is pretty much like any other suit, just the vest is cut higher and the tie’s a little different?”

Tim nods a bit, that sounds right. “Pretty much. Collar can be squared off or pointed. Jacket’ll be longer.”

Tony nods at that.

Ducky looks back at the television. “Timothy, are there more episodes of this?”

“Yeah, thirteen of them and a movie.”

“I’d be interested in watching more.”

Tim smiles widely at that.
"What are you two doing next Saturday?" Jimmy asks Tim and Tony.

"Nothing planned."

"I'd have to ask Ziva, but I don't think we've got anything going on."

"Good. Molly's finally sleeping through the night, so Breena's parents are taking her for the night as a late anniversary present. We were hoping you'd be interested in getting dressed up and going out clubbing with us." The six of them hadn't been out on a date night since before Molly was born, so that was sounding awfully good.

Tim smiles, clubbing with Abby is always a good thing. "We can do that."

"Even if Ziva has plans, I think she'd reschedule for that."

The plan is to meet up at Tim and Abby's place, because they live closest to everything, and then consolidate into one car and go from there.

It's getting onto seven, and everyone should be there soon. Tim's ready to go, dressed, made up, and looking forward to tonight. Abby's finishing up her hair, she's pulling it back into the two little buns, one on each side of her head, and doing something sort of Lolita Goth, in a little lacy black dress with petticoats and high boots.

He thinks it's ridiculously cute and way too hot.

The bell rings and he heads for the door.

"Hey. Tony... Oh." Tony is in a suit. A really nice charcoal gray suit. With a dress shirt, silk tie, and dress shoes. Ziva's in something emerald green, silky and slinky.

Just then Palmer and Breena show up. Palmer's in a suit, too. Granted, Tony in gray looks like James Bond, and Palmer in brown looks like the professor in charge of the Library Science department at a particularly esteemed liberal arts college. Meanwhile Breena's in a halter dress that shows off a lot of naked back.
Tim looks at himself in a kilt, boots, and T-shirt and sighs. "Next time, I think we've got to define what dressed up and clubbing means. Come in. We'll get changed. Palmer, it's your anniversary, where are we going?"

"Somewhere you can wear the kilt, but you'll need a jacket and tie to go with it."

"Okay."

"Is there somewhere in DC that you are dressed for?" Jimmy asks.

Abby comes out. "Three places." She looks at the other two couples, sighs and heads back to their bedroom. "Give me about ten minutes."

Breena's staring at Tim. "Is that black nail polish?"

He looks at his hands. "Yeah."

She squints up at him. "Eyeliner?"

He nods.

"Cool. When you get dressed up, you get dressed up. Next time, you pick the place."

"Will do. Grab yourself something to drink; we'll be ready soon."

He quickly washes off the eye makeup and brushes through his hair to tame it back down again, but leaves on the nail polish. About five minutes after that sees him in a maroon button down, black suit jacket, black tie, and kilt.

"Really, you think him in makeup is cool?" Tony is asking Breena as he heads out of the bedroom.

She shrugs. "Boys in eyeliner is hot in general, and for Tim in specific, yeah, it looks good. Kind of dangerous."

Tony's staring at her like she's speaking in tongues. "You have met McGee, right?"

"Tony, I'm right here."
Tony looks over at him. "Yeah, but you're not exactly the poster boy for sex, drugs, or rock and roll."

"He certainly looked like him five minutes ago," Breena says with a smile.

Tim smiles back, a little naughty glint in his eyes. "I love sex, didn't like the drugs I tried, and rock and roll is great, but I like jazz better."

"What do you know about drugs?" Tony asks, a very clear image of Tim stammering about pot back in the day in his head.

"I went to college, too, you know."

"Yes, but you spent the whole time studying."

Tim smiles, a little wicked glint in his eyes. "Not the whole time."

Abby comes out, makeup toned down, hair loose around her shoulders, wearing a pretty, and, for her, conservative pink dress and says, "All ready?"

"Yeah," Jimmy answers, ready to get onto the dancing part of the night.

"You really did illegal drugs in college?" Tony asks Tim as they drive into town. Jimmy's at the wheel, because he knows where they're going, and he and Breena are the only ones with a car that seats six. Say what you like about minivans, but if you want to go somewhere with a bunch of your friends, they're convenient.

"You didn't?" Jimmy asks.

"No! Basketball team. Random piss tests. Everyone else around me was playing with coke, but I, and the rest of the team, stuck to alcohol. So, really, you did drugs?"

Tim rolls his eyes a little, surprised that this would get to Tony. "I did a lot of things in college."

"But, illegal, really?"

"Tony, how many felonies do you think I commit a year? In a good year, it's five or six. I've got most of the guys we put away beat by a long margin. And we're not just talking about civil liberties infractions here, I mean, I'm guilty of cyber-attacks on the US government, which is considered terrorism, attacks on foreign governments, which is espionage, and honestly, since I've had orders for some of it from Vance or Jarvis, possibly causus belli should it ever get traced back to us."

That stops Tony, makes him think. Tim knows that Tony knows he doesn't always play by the rules, but he's getting the sense that exactly how far off the beaten path he sometimes goes is just dawning on him. Finally Tony says, "You're not killing people."

"Exactly. And I've got no problem breaking the law to catch the guys that do. And in college I had no problem breaking it to try a few new things that I very quickly found I didn't like, and never tried again." Which might not have been precisely true. Seventeen-year-old Tim McGee, fresh out of his dad's house, rebelling against everything the old guy stood for couldn't have cared less about legal or not. But he didn't want to get into the story of why he did start caring again, and why it wasn't long after playing around with drugs. Not with Tony, anyway.
"What did you try?" Abby asks, and he realizes this is something they've never talked about.

"Pot once. Just made me sleepy. Didn't feel good enough to be worth the money or risk."

"You probably got three quarters oregano with just a little real pot, then," Jimmy adds. In his experience pot was a lot of fun.

"Could be, not like I knew what I was doing. Peyote laced with acid. Didn't like that at all. E."

"I thought you didn't party," Jimmy says.

"I didn't, well not much. Didn't mean I wasn't interested in trying it."

"But you didn't like it?" Breena asks.

"It was better than pot, way better than peyote. I just really don't like being out of control in a way where I can't get it back if I need it. That's also why you've never seen me anything more than mildly drunk."

"No safeword," Abby says.

"Exactly."

"How did you pass the drug test?" Tony asks.

"Six years between doing the drugs and the test. All of that was first semester freshman year."

Tony just stares at him like he'd grown a second head. "You were doing peyote in your freshman year?"

He holds up his index finger. "Once. We were playing Call of Cthulu and the GM thought that each of us taking a button before the game would make it more intense. One of the other players thought lacing them with LSD would be even better."

Abby winces and then covers her mouth with her hands. "Oh, that's the worst idea I've ever heard!"

Tim's nodding at her. "Yeah, it really was."

"What's a Cthulu?" Breena asks.

"Nasty squid demon-god," Abby says. "No wonder you didn't like it."

"Yeah. Good rule of thumb, avoid hallucinogenic drugs and horror role-playing games based on the
idea that you're slowly going insane. It's been almost twenty years, and I still won't read Lovecraft."

"So, wait." Tony's staring at him, looking really confused. He remembers the D&D guys from college, and this is not what he remembers. "You little D&D geeks were snorting down hardcore drugs while you played?"

Tim rolls his eyes a little. "Not usually. Most of the time it was caffeine, cigarettes, and sugar."

"You smoked?" Tony doesn't look like he believed that, either.

"Not really. But if you're in a room with five other guys, and four of them are smoking, taking a drag or two at the start of the night knocks out your sense of smell long enough to make being there bearable." Tim's not interested in getting into this any deeper so he shifts the focus. "Palmer, you're awfully quiet, how about you?"

"Lots of stuff, but Special K was my favorite. I worked in a vet's office, so I could get it easy. Pre-med and bio background meant I knew how much to take for a nice glow."

"Wait, were you selling it?" Tony's staring at Palmer like he's never seen him before, too.

"No, I meant I could buy it easy. I handled the orders, so getting an extra bottle or two a year wasn't an issue."

"Did you like it?" Ziva asks.

"Oh yeah." He grins at the memory. "Unlike Tim, I liked everything I tried. Liked it a lot. Tried a whole lot, too. K was a good way to cool off on the weekend. E was good, too, lot of fun with pot. Then I was twenty, thirsty all the time, just madly thirsty, and one day I was chugging soda, like maybe six liters of it in two hours, trying to make thirsty stop. Two days later, when I got out of the diabetic coma and the doctors explained how close to dead I had been, I decided taking better care of myself was a good idea."

Palmer rolls his eyes a little, glancing away from traffic to the rest of them. "I suppose it's sort of funny. I tried everything I could get my hands on for two solid years, and then I almost died from an overdose of sugar. Anyway, once I was out of the hospital, that was the end of sugar, most carbs, and all the drugs. Started hitting the gym and yoga, and I'm a lot healthier now."

Tony just stares at the two other guys. Then he looked at the girls. "Let me guess," he asks Breena, "you used to shoot heroin?"

"Nope. No drugs for me."

"Ziva?"

"Not recreationally. But my training involved being subjected to some lesser known compounds to get used to them. It's much easier to keep your head if you know what is happening to you."

"Of course it did. Abby?" She smiles. "Like Jimmy, you name it, I tried it at least once. And I got hired before the mandatory drug tests, so that's how I got in."

Two hours later, the girls are dancing with each other. The guys are relaxing at the table they'd
staked out when they got to the club.

Tony looks at Tim and says, "Really, a kilt?"

Tim smirks a little.

"Nail polish?"

Tim looks at his fingernails. All night people have been looking at him like he's pretty cool, and especially because he's standing next to Tony, he's really been enjoying it. "It's black."

"You don't dress up in her clothing when you're alone, do you?"

Tim grins and raises an eyebrow. "If I do?"

Tony shudders a little.

"I'm 6'1" and 183. I'd look dumb as hell in her clothing."

Palmer comes back with the drinks. "Okay, I saw him shuddering. What are you freaking him out with now?"

"I'm not freaked out, it's just weird!"

"The drugs or the kilt?" Palmer puts the drinks in front of each of them.

"It's a skirt."

"So?" Jimmy says.

Tim takes a drink, watching the two of them. It feels pretty nice to have Jimmy not weirded out by this.

"We're guys. Not wearing skirts is like one of the primary defining characteristics of guyness."

"Tim?" Jimmy asks.

"Yeah?"

Jimmy kept his face straight and asks with a completely deadpan expression, "You got balls?"

Tim laughs, hard, leans back against the booth, sips his scotch, and says, "Last time I checked."

And Jimmy just looks at Tony, huge smirk on his face.

"Yeah, but was that before you put the skirt on?" Tony shoots back.

"No, that was about twenty minutes ago when Abby and I snuck off and she was licking them." Tim takes another drink, feeling especially mellow, a little wicked, and just wonderfully fine.

This time, instead of looking disturbed, Tony just grins, shaking his head.

Tim laughs again. "Ease of access."

"You don't need a kilt for that," Jimmy adds.

Tim raises his eyebrow at Jimmy.
Jimmy snorts a quick laugh at them. "Come on, you didn't invent the quickie. Back when twice a year was a good score for you," he shifts his gaze from Tim to Tony, "and you were sticking your dick in any girl that would let you, I was having sex on every horizontal and most of the vertical surfaces at work, including Gibbs' and Ducky's desks. I can get her completely naked, me completely naked, both of us off, and dressed again in ten minutes, eight if I'm in scrubs and she's not wearing pantyhose. And if you think doing it in the back hall of a club is kinky, try sneaking off during one of Ducky's monologues to the storage closet, keeping the door open, having him think those noises you're making are signs of fascination at his topic, and then making it back for the close, without him noticing." Palmer settles back into his seat, takes a drink of his Diet Sprite, and looks immensely smug.

And Tim would have to admit, he's impressed.

Tony shakes his head. "I think I've got it figured out. Neither of you ever got laid in college."

This causes both Tim and Jimmy to bluster.

"Okay, not literally, I know you both got laid a few times. But regularly? Not even close. And to make up for it, you both want everyone on earth to know you're having sex now."

Tim and Jimmy both seem to think about that.

Tim shrugs. "That's probably true."

"I just really like sex," Jimmy says.

"No." Tony points at himself. "I just really like sex. You like sex in public that can get you fired or killed. Gibbs' desk? He'd headslap your brains out through your nose." He turns to Tim. "And you like... Hell, let's not get to into that..."

"What do you like?" Jimmy asks Tim.

Tim smiles, sips his drink again. "Let's put it this way, there's a good shot that standing next to me, you look vanilla."

"Really?" That's got Jimmy's interest. He's staring at Tim, like if he looks hard enough he can figure this out.

Tim thinks about what he knows about Jimmy, and realizes it's equally likely that standing next to Jimmy, he looks vanilla. Gibbs' desk? Sex in Autopsy, with Ducky there? Jimmy's got a pretty hardcore exhibitionism kink. "Maybe. What exactly is it with you and shoes?"

"Okay, can we not talk about that? The shoe thing is pretty creepy," Tony says, staring at Jimmy.

"What? You look at Ziva in that outfit and your eyes stop going down when they hit her ankles? Right!"

"I'm not saying I don't appreciate the shoes. I'm just saying I don't know what designer, what they're made of, or for that matter, what color they are, off the top of my head." Palmer opens his mouth to answer, and Tony quickly cuts in, "And I don't want to know that you know that off the top of your head, either."

Tim decides to get them off of Ziva's shoes. "So, what you're saying is, you think that because the two of us spent so much time being fairly timid introverts that now we're showing off right and left because we can?"
"Yeah. For example," Tony looks away from the other two to watch the girls. It's a fairly fast song and the three of them are bopping around with each other. His eyes trace over Ziva from hair to shoes (they're green) lingering on her curves. He sighs, eyes happy and warm at the sight of her dancing. "I love that outfit Ziva's in. And I certainly want to have sex with her. But I'm not feeling any burning need to do it here. At home, where we've got plenty of room and time, and there aren't two hundred other people, is perfectly fine."

"Oh, we'll do it when we get home, too," Jimmy says with a very wide and happy grin, watching Breena dance, his eye tracking the sway of her skirt on her hips, and the long smooth expanse of naked back. "And probably in the morning, hopefully in the afternoon, as well. Breena's parents have Molly until tomorrow night, and we are going to take advantage of it."

"Too?" Tony looks away from Ziva to Jimmy. "Okay, I know he got in a quickie, when did you?"

"'Bout an hour ago. You guys were dancing with your girls and didn't notice us head off."

"Back hallway?" Tim asks. There were a few good spots back there, and Tim was in no way surprised to find that the sort of club Jimmy and Breena liked had several good spots for a quiet fuck against the wall.

"Top floor." Jimmy points to the second level of the club. "Just looked like we were dancing close and slow. Amazingly enough, the fact that I've got on pants in no way stopped or hindered that."

"What do you do about the zipper? I hate getting caught in them," Tim asks.

Jimmy takes a moment to think about that. "Never really thought about it. Just isn't a problem for me."

"You know how I deal with the zipper?" Tony says, voice low and conspiratorial. He waits a beat for them both to lean in to hear his answer. "By having my pants on the floor about ten feet away from my dick. Works every time."

Tim snorts at him and rolls his eyes, then looks away from the guys to watch Abby dance. Sure, he was a little disappointed to not get to see the Lolita Goth outfit in action, but this little pink number, with the thin straps crisscrossing over her back is awfully good, too.

"So, have you ever had sex in public?" Jimmy asks Tony.

"Of course, back when I was in college. You know, when you're supposed to do stuff like that."

"In college you're supposed to read books, go to class, and study," Tim starts, not looking away from Abby, she's saying something to Breena, watching him closely, and he knows that look means good things are going to start happening soon.

"And occasionally ingest hardcore narcotics," Jimmy finishes.

Tony's shaking his head. "Nerds. How did I end up with two nerds for best friends?" He sighs and points to himself. "Phys ed major. My job in college was to play basketball, party, and get laid. And let me tell you, if they had had an honors program for partying and getting laid, I would have gotten it. I set the standard for partying and getting laid. Young basketball players at Ohio State are still being told of the legendary DiNozzo partying and laid technique, and they seek to reach such heights, but fail. So, yeah, I've done it in public, with three girls, at once, in a room with something like one hundred and fifty other people, while my frat brothers took pictures. But I'm not in college anymore, so I don't feel the need to act like it."
"Plus Ziva isn't going to let you get drunk and hook up with three co-eds," Tim says.

Jimmy's still thinking about that. "What were you doing with three of them? I get two. What was the third one doing?"

Tony wiggles his right hand at Jimmy.

"Oh. Yeah. Didn't do anything like that in college."

"Me either."

Jimmy looks at Tim. "Two at once?"

He looks away from Abby to Jimmy. "Nope. Closest I ever got to that was taking Abby, Ziva, and Lee out undercover. You?"

"No."

Tony takes a drink, settles back, enjoying his turn to look smug, watching the girls.

Tim stares at him, and his eyes narrow. "You know, what? I don't buy it. This isn't maturity. You're just getting old. You were thirty-five when I got to NCIS, right?"

Tony looks at Tim. "Yeah."

"So back then, you and your frat buddies were still heading off to Spring Break in Mexico and trying to relive your college days."

Tony smirks. "And succeeding."

"So, back then, you would have had sex in a club."

"But I wouldn't have done it in a skirt."

"Only because you don't have the balls to wear one."

Tony snorts.

Jimmy finishes his drink. "You should change your wedding outfits to kilts. Make him wear one. You know Ducky's gonna wear one anyway, and you like them..."

Tim smiles while Tony looks appalled.

"You're just saying that because as Abby's best man you're safe from having to wear one."

Jimmy laughs. "Did you not hear Breena? Tim's picking the next club we go to, and my guess is she'll have me coated in makeup and decked out for it."

Tim looks at Jimmy for a few seconds. "You're too skinny for a kilt. Places we go, leather pants, chains, ripped t-shirt, contacts. Breena'll probably do something small and black with the back tattoos again."

"First off, yeah, you are picking the next club. Second of all, too skinny? Tim, you weigh ten pounds more than I do."

"Ten pounds that matter."
Tony watches them bicker about it for a moment before saying, "I think Ziva and I are staying home."

Jimmy grins. "Nope. She'll go for it, which means you can't back out. I mean, unless you want Tim and I to take her out."

"She'd eat you two pervs whole and spit you out."

"There are worse fates," Jimmy says with a huge grin on his face.

Tim smirks at Tony, enjoying this way too much. "Just like laser tag, Tony, once you get over how you think you look, you'll have a lot of fun. Who knows, maybe your thirty-five-year-old self will come back out again. The clubs Abby and I like more or less expect you to have sex in them."

Jimmy's eyes go wide. "You are so picking the next club."
"What are they talking about?" Breena asks Abby as she dances close to her.

Abby grins, watching the exchange. "Sex. Tim and Jimmy are scaring Tony."

Ziva laughs. "What are they telling him?"

"About having sex here."

"You had sex here?" Ziva asks the two other girls, not exactly surprised by this, but it wasn't something she was expecting either.

Breena nods.

Abby says, "Yes, half an hour ago? Something like that." A huge grin lighting her face.

"God, they're so pretty," Breena says, eyes on the boys, wrapping her arms around Abby.

And Abby nods, they really are. This was definitely going on her list of favorite Tim looks. Sure she loves the rock and roll version of kilt wear, but this version of it is awfully fine, too.

He's sitting there, relaxed, happy smirk on his face, back against the booth, right arm draped along the back, left arm stretched forward, fingers on the rim of his glass. Long, smooth fingers, tipped with black nail polish, circling gently around the rim of a scotch neat.

You might need a jacket to get into this club, but he took it off a few minutes after getting here. An hour of dancing means the maroon dress shirt he had under it now has the sleeves rolled to mid forearm, showing off his wrist cuff. An hour of dancing also means that he's undone the top button and his tie is loose.

What they were doing half an hour ago means that his hair's a little more messed up than usual, something she always appreciates. Add in naked legs, strong calves on display, and yeah, she really likes that look.
Tony's in the middle, and like always, he's pretty. And honestly, he looks a whole lot like he usually does. Suit on, pressed, perfect, cool. Her eyes just sort of skim over him, and it's not that she doesn't love Tony, it's more that classically handsome features and style just never really interested Abby. But Ziva, who's eyes just skinned over Tim in almost exactly the same way her eyes skinned over Tony, is watching him, looking like she wants to eat him alive.

Abby knows that Tony's pretty. Knows that he's magazine cover attractive. And while she can appreciate that, it's not the sort of thing she ever really looked twice at.

Jimmy, on the other hand, like Tim, has that sort of different edge that gets her attention. And Jimmy is certainly looking fine tonight, too. He's also taken off the jacket, and his tie wandered off at some point as well, leaving him in brown slacks, a brown vest, and a white button down, with the top two buttons undone.

He's leaning in toward the table, face warm and animated, talking to the guys about Ziva's shoes, which is freaking Tony out a little. Like Tim, he's holding his drink, but Jimmy's the driver, so his is probably Diet Sprite. Unlike Tim, his glass is tall, and he's got his hands touching, fingertips to fingertips, thumb to thumb, with the glass between his palms.

For the first time ever, Abby notices that Jimmy has really nice hands. And she also notices that a wedding ring on a guy is awfully sexy, and is suddenly really looking forward to seeing one, putting one, on Tim.

"Jimmy really likes your shoes," she says to Ziva.

Ziva laughs. "It is good to know someone appreciates them."

"Tony does too, just not as much as Jimmy does."

"No one appreciates shoes as much as Jimmy does," Breena adds, a wicked smile on her face.

Abby lifts an eyebrow. "So what is it with him and shoes?"

Breena smiles and pulls Abby and Ziva close, the three of them dancing together. "He likes the way they feel against him and the way they look when I wear them while we have sex."

Ziva laughs while Abby says, "That's it? We figured he liked to wear them."
"How do you even know about him and shoes?" Breena asks, an amused and somewhat curious expression on her face. Abby's not exactly Jimmy's type, but she's close enough, and if they had gotten together at some point, it wouldn't have shocked her.

Abby reads Breena's look. "Nothing like that. He was the main witness for one of our cases, but he blocked a lot of the memories, so I hypnotized him to get the details out of his head, and it turned out the main thing he was paying attention to was what sort of shoes Ziva and I were wearing. Tim was there and teased the hell out of him for a few days after that."

That makes Breena laugh. "Tim was teasing Jimmy about sex? 'Pot, hello, it's Kettle, you're black.'"

"Yeah. I know. But neither of them knew that about each other at that point. That's part of what they're talking about right now."

"Really?" Breena asks.

"Yeah."

"They look pretty cool with each other," Breena says, eyeing both of them, watching as they double team teasing Tony.

"Yeah, they really do." Abby nods.

And Breena and Abby just stare at each other and smile, both thinking the same general thing.

Ziva dances and listens, feeling a little left out, but not in a bad way. The four of them are getting closer and closer with each other, and being outside of that isn't a bad thing, it's just the way things are.

And it's not something she minds being on the outside of. She loves Tim and Jimmy, but she can also see the way Breena and Abby watch them, and she knows they do not see the same thing she does when she looks.

And she sees something else, something that will never be true for her and Tony, let alone her and Tony and Tim and Abby or her and Tony and Breena and Jimmy, and that's a sexual attraction that's divorced from jealousy. Tony would have a fit if she looked at Tim the way Breena's looking at him right now. And for that matter, she'd be miffed if Breena was looking at Tony the way she's looking at Tim right now. But Breena and Abby are dancing together, undressing their guys with their eyes, flirting with each other and both of the guys, and enjoying it.

Judging from the way both of the guys are watching them dance, they don't have a problem with it either.

Actually, judging from the way both of the guys are watching them dance, the only potential problem is that Abby and Breena might decide to stop dancing, which would probably make the guys pout.

Abby pulls both her and Breena closer, sliding against them as the beat shifts, keeping her eyes on Tim as she does it, and Ziva decides to ask, "Are the four of you sleeping together?"

Abby laughs, Breena blushes, and Ziva's been reading people for way too long to miss the look that flits between the two of them.
"What's making you think of that? Breena asks.

"Both of you are flirting with both of your guys, but not Tony."

Abby grins. "Are we allowed to flirt with Tony?" and though there is a smile on her face, it's a serious question.

Ziva rocks against Abby, Breena at her back, and thinks about the ring newly on her finger, and knows that whatever she says right now, they'll honor. She thinks about years of Tony off hooking up with any girl out there and the amount of change he had to go through to get to a place where he could be monogamous.

"No."

Breena hugs Ziva. "Then we won't. And no, we aren't all sleeping together." Though she notices another look that goes between Abby and Breena, and can see the two of them are thinking about it. "But, okay, last time we went clubbing, Abby and I danced together really close, got the boys wound up and… well, you can see the way they're watching us. Let's just say that night was a whole lot of fun."

Abby nods. "So much fun!"

"That's where you vanished to? We left to dance alone for a little while, came back to the table, found a pile of money, and you were gone."

"We headed home," Breena says.

"You got all the way home?" Abby asks with a half-disbelieving grin.

"Yeah, but I also got off twice on the ride, which was kind of interesting since I was driving. You?"

"Hotel three blocks down, both of us were too buzzed, too distracted, to drive."

"And you are hoping to do something like that again?" Ziva asks.

"Not exactly, since we're your ride home, but watching them squirm is a lot of fun," Breena says, eyes on Jimmy, but occasionally glancing at Tim, both of the boys watching the three of them dance together.

"And unlike Ziva's club, there are a lot of decent hidden nooks in this one," Abby adds, stroking Breena's neck.

"Well, yeah, after we caught you and Tim last time, we made sure to pick a place with lots of room. Didn't want to have to wait or cramp your style."

"Thank you."

Ziva feels like this shouldn't be much of a surprise, there was that whole thing with Jimmy and Lee, and well, sure Tim looks pretty mild, but anyone paying attention knows he's got something of an exhibitionist streak, still… "This is something you regularly do, sex out in public?"

"Is my lab public?" Abby asks.

"Yes."

"Then yes."
Ziva makes a mental note to always make a lot of noise when heading to the lab. Sure Tim had told her about that one time, but she hadn't realized one time was actually a habit.

"Since Molly, it's a treat for us. You and Tony don't?"

"No. I'm not good at… quiet… and it would be off putting to have an audience."

Breena nods and Abby does too, leaning in to whisper into her ear, her hand stroking down Ziva's arm, "Don't want anyone calling the cops?"

"Something along those lines." No, not really, but she doesn't want to explain why having people watch is a problem.

Breena leans closer to them. "Tony just about spit his drink across the table when you did that. Looks like he's enjoying the show, too. You want us to break this up and back off?"

Ziva smiles, looking at Tony, seeing a whole lot of hot, naked lust in his eyes, and then wrapped her free arm around Breena's neck, adding a little grind to the way she was dancing with Abby, and watched his eyes bulge. And well, maybe this was sort of fun if it got him to look at her like that.

"We dance until the end of this song, then let us get our men."

Abby rests one hand on Ziva's hip and the other on Breena's keeping them both pressed up close to her. "Good plan."

The song ends, and Abby stalks toward the table where the boys are. Tim's eyes meet hers as she's a few feet away, and a smile lights his face. She leans down to him, brushing her lips over his in a warm kiss, while wrapping her hand in his tie, gently pulling him up.

"Dance time?" he asks.

"Oh yeah." Though she pauses for a moment to take a sip of her drink. She'd gotten it entirely for the name, a Dirty Girl Scout was just too good to pass up, luckily for her it's tasty, too. Basically it's a grasshopper, minty, chocolaty, and very smooth.

She sets the glass down, grabs the napkins under it, tucking them into his pocket. He feels her do it and grins widely. Since Zyphyer, he has brought tissues every time they've been clubbing, but they also already used the ones he brought.

Yes, that look in her eye was indeed signaling good things about to happen.

The music is loud and hard, throbbing away in a strong, sexy beat. They find an easy pace, pelvis to pelvis, legs entwined, dipping and grinding as the music dictated.

"Like the show?" Abby asks.

He kisses her, lips on hers, sliding down her jaw to her ear. "When don't I?"

She grinds against him, getting what she's asking across. But it's been less than an hour since the last time, and he's had a few drinks, so not much is happening for him on that end. Tim kisses her again, circling behind her, trailing his hands down her sides as he presses in close behind her, placing wet kisses on her throat and shoulder, fingers resting gently on her hips.
"My tongue's always up for another round," he says, flicking it lightly along her earlobe.

She turns in his arms, kisses him back, long and deep. "That's an idea. But what if I want to take my time, get you good and hard for a nice," she bites his lip, pulling it a little, "slow" she punctuates that by dragging her tongue across his lip, "fuck?"

His eyes sparkle at her, warm with sex and good humor, as he brushes his fingers through her hair. "Then keep doing what you're doing, I'll get there sooner or later."

"Good."

He kisses her again, sucking gently on her tongue.

"What were you drinking? It's really tasty."

"A Dirty Girl Scout."

He raises one eyebrow, looking very amused at that idea. "A Dirty Girl Scout?"

"Yeah. Yummy, huh?"

"On so many levels. Were you ever a Girl Scout?"

She sees the gleam in his eye and knows where this is going to go.

"Oh yeah." No not really, but this could be a lot of fun. "Until I was seventeen. Helped out with the summer camps until I was twenty."

His eyes slide over her body as his fingers trail from her shoulders to her hips. "So you'd know something about Dirty Girl Scouts?"

"Maybe. Is that the sort of thing you'd like to hear about?"

"Oh yeah." He kisses her neck, and she turns so her back is to his chest, following the music, letting it dictate their moves. He strokes his hands down her arms, twining his fingers with hers, and then feathering over her hands. "I'm wondering," he says, lips on her ear, "what you looked like when you were seventeen. Mostly like you now? Little shorter maybe? Fewer tattoos?"

"Same height I am now. I weighed a little less. My hair was long, mid-back long, and blonde with purple and blue streaks, and the only tattoos I had were the ones I got with Paulette. So the P, the smiley on my finger, and the angels." He kisses each angel on her shoulders.

"And did you have a uniform?"

"Little green skirt, white button up shirt with green stripes, little green tie, sash with badges, something like that, you mean?"

Tim's imaging that. Seventeen-year-old Abby in a Girl Scout uniform, and part of him is sure that like sex in the graveyard this is another thing that'll be added to the why-he's-going-straight-to-Hell-when-he-dies list, but he likes the idea too much to stop thinking about it. After all, it's not like he's having sex with a real seventeen-year-old. Not like he's got any interest in any real seventeen-year-old. But this image, teen Abby, innocent looking outfit, maybe hiked just a bit too high and unbuttoned just a bit too much, yeah, that's hitting most of his buttons just right.

One thing he's always found interesting is that his brain and his body aren't always on the same page. For example, right now his brain is awfully turned on. That idea, along with real Abby pressed up
tight, dancing against him, the way she feels and smells, and the sound of her voice filling in extra
details (White knee socks! Black mary janes!) about her seventeen-year-old self, all of that means his
brain is in a very turned on sex-right-now-yes!, sort of place. His dick on the other hand, does not
seem to have gotten this message, yet, and it's just lying there. According to it, he could be doing his
taxes or something else completely unsexy.

Oh well, it's not in charge, and as he said, his tongue is always up for another round. And he'll
happily enjoy talking each other off if that's what's on the menu for right now. After all, the club isn't
closing anytime soon, and his dick'll get the message sooner or later.

Abby's talking. "And of course, no boys are allowed anywhere near a Girl Scout camp, so a big part
of being a scout was smuggling them in, and a big part of being a counselor was tossing them out."

"Really?"

"Yeah, gotta find places to hide them, to find a few quiet moments together. And of course, if you're
in charge, you've got to be even better at finding those places. And the summer I was twenty, I was a
counselor, and we were only a few miles down from a group of Wilderness Scouts. They were on
the far side of the lake."

And Tim gets where this is going, and he smiles. This is something they haven't played with, tag
team storytelling. He also appreciates her fast forwarding a few years, because if she's seventeen, he's
thirteen, and well, thirteen-year-old Tim McGee would have been willing to give his left arm to get
laid, but he also wasn't anything anyone needs to be thinking about like that. Sixteen-year-old Tim
was awfully lanky and gangly, but not nearly as… well… young.

"And if there's one thing Wilderness Scouts like, it's Girl Scouts."

"Yeah. So, I was doing my nightly rounds, making sure none of the girls had wandered off in search
of her very own Wilderness Scout."

"Walking around the lake, looking for dallying scouts?"

"Yeah, seeing if I can find anyone taking advantage of the moonlight."

"And you did. But not like that. I would have been sitting at the side of the lake, watching the sky,
taking notes on where the stars were, working on my Astronomy badge."

"'Waiting for someone?' I'd ask."

He can see it in his mind, she'd be standing over him, looking down. "'Ummm…'" Because sixteen-
year-old Tim McGee was not what anyone would have ever called smooth.

"'You're on the wrong side of the lake.'"

"'Sorry.' I'd be scrambling around, trying to grab all of my stuff and probably dropping half of it as I
did it."

"I'd laugh a little, and help you pack up. 'Astronomy?'"

"'Uh yeah… Trees are in the way on our side. Needed a better view.'"

"'Oh. Well.' And you're looking straight at me, nervous and adorable, hair loose, some of it in your
eyes, and I'd reach over and brush it away. 'You can stay, if you want.'"
"'Thanks.' I'd sit back down, not looking at you, blushing from head to toe, rambling on about Pleiades and what I was charting."

"I'd sit down next to you, listen for a bit, watching the stars. 'What's your name?'"

"'Oh, yeah, Tim. Hi. How about you?'"

"'Abby.'"

"I'd hold out my hand to shake yours, half polite, half just wanting to touch you." He pulls her a step closer, kissing her shoulder as they dance. "Wishing I could do something like that, but sure I'm way too much of a geek for you to ever think about me like that."

"But I like geeks, especially cute, young ones on the beach in the moonlight. I'd take your hand, trailing my thumb over your palm, not letting go, and then lick my lips. 'Hello, Tim.'"

He grins at her, desire and amusement lighting his face, watching her lips, and says, "'Hello, Abby.'"

"I don't think you'd be grinning at me like that."

"Well, no. Real-life-sixteen-year-old Tim would have been studying the sand, blushed so hard he glowed in the dark, started stammering about stars, and probably run away. But I don't have to be real-life-sixteen-year-old Tim, that's the fun of fantasy, right?"

"Right."

"And this version of Tim is staring at you like you're the most delicious thing he's ever seen and he wants to eat you, slowly, savoring every mouthful."

Abby laughs. "I like that idea."

"Good. Because I'd lean in toward you, close my eyes, and kiss you, just a gentle brush of lips on lips." And he demonstrated, letting his lips meet hers for a second, before pulling away. "And then I'd look at you, see if you were angry at me—"

"But I'm not. I'm smiling, still holding your hand, giving it a little squeeze."

"I'd scoot a little closer to you, lean in, and kiss you again." And once again he did. A bit longer, more confident this time.

And this time her lips moved against his, stroking gently.

"Seriously, are you two trying to out fuck the Palmers?" Tony asks with a laugh, his voice cutting into their game as he and Ziva danced close to them.

Abby blows Tony a raspberry and looks around, noticing that Jimmy and Breena are also dancing close and necking.

"I don't think it's a competition," Tim answers. "We're just playing."

"Uh huh," says Tony.

"Who's winning?" Abby asks Ziva.

Ziva grins at them, her eyes scanning between the two couples. "I think Jimmy and Breena are a few points ahead." Jimmy's got one hand on the small of Breena's back, the other on her cheek as they
dance forehead to forehead, looking into each other's eyes.

Abby kisses Tim, soft and gentle, and then pulls back and turns to Ziva and Tony, flicking her hands toward the far side of the club. "Then shoo. Let us catch up!"

Ziva winks at them, and edges Tony further away.

Abby kisses him again, and once again it's soft and gentle, and a little tentative. His hands slip down her back, one of them twining with her fingers, the other edging down to the bottom of her skirt and just lightly brushing her leg.

"So, you, me, the lake, night time, kissing," she says.

"Oh yeah. You're holding my hand, and my heart's beating a million times a minute."

She places her hand on his chest, feeling his heartbeat. "And you're so cute when your flustered."

"And I am, because no one has ever just looked at me and liked me like that."

"Idiots."

He smiles and kisses her again, letting his fingers ghost along the side of her face and neck. "I'd pet you, like that. Shocked at how soft your skin is, how good it feels, how good just four fingers against your skin can make me feel."

She closed her hand around his, pressing his fingers to her throat. "Feel that, how fast my heart is, how much my body loves yours touching mine?"

"God, yeah."

She drew his fingers to the dip of her collar bone. "You'd undo my top button."

"You have your shirt buttoned all the way up?"

"I do in this fantasy."

"All right!" His fingers traced two inches further down, very softly, just the barest graze of fingertips on flesh, then paused, hovering.

"'You can get the next button, too.'"

He nods, his fingers sliding another two inches down, to the top of her dress. "Where are your hands?"

She squeezes the one holding his. "The other is on your back, inching under your shirt, petting your skin." She doesn't exactly mimic that. Her hand stays on the outside of his shirt, but it does stroke over his low back, just above where it's tucked into his kilt.

He's loving this slow, gentle touch, and thinking this might be a good game for a time when they are home and alone and have plenty of room and can get completely naked. Though, if they were home, and alone, and could get completely naked, they probably wouldn't play with the idea of this. He'd just peel that dress off of her, and she'd have him naked in a minute, and this slow tentative dance wouldn't happen.

But it is happening, and she's kissing him soft and gentle, and he says, but doesn't do, because they are in the middle of a dance floor and this isn't Zyphyer, "I'd flick open the third button, and slip my
hand into your blouse, skimming over your breast. So soft, and so light, and my hand would be shaking.” And that idea, that image, her sitting on the sand next to him, holding his hand, petting his back while he lightly strokes her breast starts to wake his body up, lets it notice that his brain is thinking sex in a big way.

They're dancing close enough that she notices the slight stirring and grinds against him, encouraging it.

He smiles, kissing her soft and open, letting his lips make love to her, as his body rapidly starts to catch up to his brain.

She slips her hand from his low back to his hip. "I'd start to tug on your shirt. Letting you know I want you to take it off."

"'Only if you take yours off, too.'"

And she grins. "I would. I'd pull back a little, kneeling, make sure you could see me, and undo the last of the buttons."

"I'd reach out, hands still shaking a little, and push it off your shoulders, and then sit there and just stare at your beautiful skin under the moon."

"'Tim.'"

"'Yeah?'"

"'You're still wearing your shirt.'"

"'Oh. Yeah.' I'd yank it off, regretting the few seconds it was over my head and I couldn't see you."

"'You can touch, you know.'"

"I'd lick my lips, and scoot closer to you, pressing chest to chest and kissing you, hard and fast and deep." He presses into her, rubbing his erection against her. "And your skin on mine would have me so hard. I'd be breathing fast and feeling so good all over."

"I'd push you back, so you're lying on the sand, and then straddle you, rubbing against you before lying against your chest and kissing you."

"And this is why fantasy Tim is better than real life Tim, because real life Tim would have lost it right there."

"Really?"

"Half-naked girl rubbing up against me, oh yeah. Of course, real life sixteen-year-old Tim could get it up again in about four minutes, so it wouldn't have been that big of a problem, besides the whole wet and sticky thing."

"Yeah, but I've got plans for fantasy Tim, and they don't involve being wet and sticky, yet."

"Yet?"

She grins and kisses him, then pulls back, letting her hand ghost gently across the front of his kilt, giving him a quick squeeze before resettling on his neck. "Yet. Fantasy Tim isn't going back to the Wilderness Scout Camp a virgin."
"Fantasy Tim is completely on board with that plan and wholeheartedly agrees with your goals," Tim laughs as he says that, and she giggles, too. His hands settle on her low back, and her other hand joins the one at his neck.

He can feel it, soft, cool sand at his back, her weight on his body, naked back under his hands, her hands on his neck, as they kiss.

He shifts one hand from her back to her leg, once again just below the hem of her dress, warm skin on skin, and she rubs her leg against his, drawing it up and a slow, firm slide.

"I would have been wearing shorts, and the kilt's pretty close to that. Love feeling your skin on mine."

"Yeah, this is good." Her leg slips back down his, and for a few beats they just dance, kissing a little, feeling the press of each other's body and the throb of desire and loud music.

"I'd roll us over, and lean back a little, weight on my right elbow. Never seen real live breasts before and I want to look and touch and kiss."

"You would."

He runs his hands over her arms, and then begins to stroke the tip of her index finger with his left hand, letting her feel how he'd be touching her. "Oh yeah. Love your breasts. So soft and perfect. I'd be nuzzling, licking the one, petting the other. Seeing what sort of touch makes you squirm, what makes you gasp or moan."

She presses her face into his neck, licking his earlobe. "That. That light, gentle lick. The way you're just rolling your tongue around my nipple, all wet, soft, and tickly. That gets me moaning. And I'd want to make you sound like that. Want to hear you. So my hand would slip down to your dick, and give you a squeeze."

He kisses the top of her ear, and quietly moans for her. "Just like that, baby."

She looks at him and grins. "Love hearing you like that."

"Love the fact you make me sound like this. Want to make you cry out, make you scream my name.' I'd kiss my way down your chest, down your stomach, get to the top of your skirt and start to tug it off."

"I'd lift my hips, give you some help getting me naked."

"You're so pretty."

"Pretty?"

He stops dancing, wrapping his fingers in her hair, and pulls her head back a little, kissing her throat, and then looks deeply into her eyes while saying, "Absolutely fucking gorgeous. Moonlight made flesh. Flesh made desire. Desire driving me crazy, making me want to bury my tongue and fingers and cock in you all at once, make you come a thousand times, calling my name, arching against my body, wet and hot and slick and tight, and sex and love and fuck and all of it made flesh and real and my body on and in yours, and yours on mine, and both of us slipping against each other, rocking toward ecstasy, riding higher and higher on the pleasure of skin on skin."

"Fuck," she breathes it, holding his gaze with hers, reveling in the feel of those words and the heat in his eyes. "No more fantasy, Tim. Let's get off the dance floor."
"God, yes!"

Back room, private room, ladies room, nook behind a door, storage alcove, back alley, he's got no idea where they are and could care even less. There's no one right nearby and that's all that matters.

"Sit down," Abby says.

And he does, legs in front of him, back against the wall, noticing the floor is a little cold, but she settles onto his lap, face to face, hiking up the kilt enough to get access to him, and slips onto him.

He bites his lip as his head falls back against the wall. "Fuck, baby!"

She groans softly, snuggling into him, spreading out her skirt a little. They could be, if you didn't look at their faces or missed the slight rocking motion, just taking a break, snuggly and close.

He wraps his right arm around her, a gesture that did look tender and protective, while his left scoots under her skirt, finding her clit.

His lips press against her shoulder, and she turns a little to kiss his temple.

"Slow?" he asks.

"Yeah."

So his thumb begins a soft, languid dance, barely moving over her skin.

"So good." She gives him a quick and firm squeeze, and he groans. "I was wondering, can you get me off hard enough, slow enough, to get you off without anything else?"

His eyebrows rise. He's always loved riding her orgasm to his own, and he's certainly gotten her off long and hard before, but without any friction, especially on a second round... "Don't know, but I'm up for trying."

She squeezes him again. "I thought you'd be."

"You keep doing that and it'll be a lot easier." Sure friction works better than pressure, but pressure is good, too. And the pressure of her clenching around him, as his thumb rubbed in slow, firm circles, faster to get her closer, stopping dead when anyone walked by them to spin it out, letting the music dictate his pace, yeah, that was awfully sweet.

Apparently the correct answer is no. Just pressure, sweet, hot, slick, pulsing pressure isn't enough. Not on a second round, not after two scotches. Maybe if they had done this first, but they didn't, so it's not enough to get him off.

It is enough to get him so frustrated he wants to cry. It's enough to keep him rock hard, begging for any friction, at all, because by that point even the suggestion of friction would do it for him, let alone any real friction.

And it's enough that once she calmed all the way back down again, she made sure to have a good firm hold on the base of his dick as she pulled off because he would have gotten off otherwise.

And it is more than enough to make sure that once she had him standing, all she had to do was slip her mouth down his dick once, and his head was thrown back, and he was shaking, trying not to yell at how good that climax felt.

And maybe he does have an exhibitionist streak, and maybe in ten years waiting to get home will
make sense, but right now, he's with the sexiest woman on earth and he loves her more than life itself and he's high as a kite on all the happy chemicals flooding through his body and this feels so damn good that he can't imagine not doing it.

They stand there, leaning against the wall and each other, relaxing, kissing gently, and this is just all sorts of fine.

On the ride home, he catches Palmer's eye, and knows that Jimmy gets this, and he suddenly feels really sorry for Tony that he was hooking up with nameless strangers for all those years and missed out on it.
The Middle Path (Or Why Tim Doesn't Like Maggots)

Hours later, they're back home and in bed, tired, but not quite ready to sleep yet. Abby lays next to him, her leg draped over his hip, and he rests there, relaxing against soft sheets and her warm body. It's dim in their room, but the lights in the parking lot provide enough of a glow that he can see the half-amused expression on her face when she says, "So, really, you, your buddies, peyote, LSD, and Cthulu? What on earth made you guys think that was a good idea?"

He looks up at the ceiling a little, trying to get across the idea that sure, now, he knows that was the dumbest idea in the history of dumb ideas. "Eman, the DM, tried it with Vampire and had a lot of fun. And well… okay, the first part of the game was excellent. I mean, we were in that game. No more characters, no rolling, just straight in it."

"We were playing the 1920s version of it, so it's all roaring twenties and speakeasies, hot jazz and cool blues, pocket flasks, bath tub gin, tommy guns, flappers, and demons, and it was fucking amazing." He shakes his head, remembering how awesome that first half of it was. He smiles a little, too, this is the first time he's been able to think about it without automatically flashing to the end of that night. "But, in Cthulu, every time you run into something creepy you get a little more wisdom about what is really out there and a little less sane, and well, that part of it was working, too. Nothing too big at that point, there was this guy who kept talking to me, and no one else could see him, but his advice was pretty good, so I kept listening. Kept getting a bit less sane every time I did. And every time you get less sane, the harder it is to not make decisions that'll knock your sanity down even further.

"I have never been that deep in a character. Not before. Not since. Not when I write. Not when I game. Never. But that night I was Stephen Brent, demon hunter. Tim was just gone. I can still smell the leather jacket and feel the whip in my hand and the fedora on my head."

"Whip and fedora?" She's grinning at him, liking that idea.

"I may have based Stephen a bit more on Indiana Jones than was strictly necessary."

"Ah."

"Anyway, I sat through the whole first act of the King in Yellow…"

He can see Abby doesn't know what that is. "It's a play, supposedly filled with the secrets of the universe, but watching it drives you raving insane. And by the end of it I was convinced I was being slowly eaten alive by maggots the size of my fingers. I could see the bones sticking out of my hands and feet, unable to move and get them off while they went to work on my arms and legs."

She cringes at that and pets his chest.

"They had to gag me to keep the screaming quiet enough so we didn't get busted. Apparently I had taken enough that the effects lasted ten hours, but since LSD also screws your time sense, it felt like three days to me."

She winces again, and then kisses him, stroking his face. "God, baby, I am so sorry."

He nods, also wincing. "Anyway, that's why I don't like maggots. I probably would have done it again if we had just quit at the midpoint, but we were all having a great time, so we didn't stop, and then I was in a theatre, watching the play, and these white faceless flesh eating blobs were slowly crawling all over..." He stops and shakes his hands, trying to flick off invisible maggots. "Sorry, it's
still a really vivid sense memory. Anyway, tried E a month later, and it felt a whole lot different, pretty nice really, but by then I also couldn't handle not having an off switch."

She kisses him again, her hands holding his. "I can understand that. I've only tripped twice. Once after a Bill Hicks show."

"Who?"

"Awesome comedian. He was a big fan of peyote and how it could hook you into the universal consciousness. And it was really nice. Peaceful, beautiful colors, enveloping love. Really good. Of course, he ended his shows talking about how energy and love were all connected and we were all one, so I was primed for a good trip. Second time was a few months later at Burning Man. Sitting outside in the desert at night watching the fire dancers high as a kite was awesome."

"I can imagine," he says with a little smile, part of him wondering what it would be like to try that with someone you love, safe and comfortable, in a good headspace, maybe while making love.

The smile on her face makes him think that she knows what he's thinking. "After we retire?"

Yeah, she does. He nods.

For a long minute she's staring at him, feeling his fingers between hers. "You used to peek at your Christmas presents, you fought with your dad all the time, and skipped out on Annapolis, did some fairly serious drugs first semester of college, but by the time I met you, you were awfully follow-the-rules, what happened?"

He kisses her fingers. "Every time I broke them I got burned pretty bad. Driver's Ed. What's the first thing you learn? Get in a new car, figure out what everything does, then turn it on and drive. So it's my sixteenth birthday, it's the most beautiful car ever, and I hop in, drive a few blocks, hit a bug, end up with a nasty smear on the windshield, and then get hit by a fucking bus while messing around with the windshield wipers. And to make matters worse, it was my left arm that got broken, so I got to spend the next two months fumbling around with the wrong hand. That's why I can mouse left or right handed.

"What'd they beat into us in school? Drugs are Bad! Stay away from Drugs! I get to college, trip once, and it was beyond terrible. I was a pretty nervous kid, especially when my dad was around, but college was great. I was free. He couldn't even pull the 'as long as I'm paying for you' crap because I earned my scholarships. And that trip shot it to Hell. I spent the next two years scared and wondering if I really was losing it. That's part of why I didn't go home summer after freshman year, my mom would have noticed something was wrong with me.

"Don't have sex before you get married, let alone with someone you're not in love with. They beat that into us in church. Broke that one, and not only wasn't it great, and not only did she never see me again, but she let all of her girlfriends know I was a lousy fuck."

"That's horrible! You didn't mention that before."

"Not exactly my favorite part of that story."

"I'm really sorry."

He shrugs a little. "Anyway. It didn't take too long to figure out that going really straight arrow provided me with a decent comfort zone, gave me some control. You met a guy who was starting to get his feet under him again, looking for the middle ground."
"Was dating me part of that?"

"Yeah. Hoping I wouldn't get smacked too hard for trying something against the rules again."

"I was against the rules?"

"Girl like you, guy like me, oh yeah. So was the tattoo. I'd been thinking about it for a while, fairly sure I'd screw it up and best case scenario end up with something spelled wrong, worst case Hepatitis. But I got it and fate didn't smack me, and you decided to go out to lunch with me, and it looked like maybe I didn't need quite so straight or narrow of a path."

"And you've been branching out since?"

"A little at a time. I think I might wear the kilt to the next family gathering."

She smiles wide and bright. "Shabbos at Ziva's. Can't wait to see that."

"Something along those lines. Tony was pretty funny. Ten years ago I would have never guessed he was so conventional."

"Ten years ago, I don't think he was. Or it might just be the fact that you're wearing it."

"Yeah, that's always part of the interaction. Felt really good that Palmer was cool with it."

"Jimmy's cool with a lot of things."

"Apparently. Actually, if feels really good that nothing I do freaks Jimmy out. He just sort of looks at me and rolls with it."

Abby strokes his face. "Baby, that's what having friends is about."
He saw the house the second week of July.

They hadn't even really been looking for one, not yet. But there it was, two streets down from one of Tim's crime scenes.

And driving past it, toward a dead body, he just caught sight of it out of the corner of his eye. In and out of his vision. It didn't make much of an impression. A house. For sale. Kind of, sort of, Victorianish. Big wrap around porch. Tidy yard. Probably three or four bedrooms.

And then there was a dead sailor, and pictures to take, and a case to solve.

Three days later he was back taking witness statements, interviewing the neighbors, seeing if anyone heard anything. (No.) When the third one told him that no, he'd heard nothing, saw nothing, that as far as he could tell a ghost wandered into Sergeant Jamis' house, Tim started asking some non-standard questions. How were the schools? Quiet neighborhood in general? Traffic good at rush hour?

Tony pulled him aside the second time he did it. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Research."

"For what?"

"1721 Kendal St. About half a mile that way." He pointed behind them.

"You're house shopping?"

"Sure. Not like we're getting any closer to solving the case by talking to these people, so I might as well get something useful out of this."

Tony rolled his eyes. But for Tim, who was liking the answers he was getting, this was proving to be very interesting.

"I was thinking..." Tim said to Abby as they sat down to eat dinner.

"Yeah."

He smiled at her, spooning some salsa on his fish taco. "I want to show you something. It'll be a wedding present if you like it."

She looks curious and a little disbelieving, adding some salt to hers. "You want to show me my wedding present before you get it for me?"

He nodded. "Yeah. 'Cause if you don't like it, I really don't want to pay for it."

Her expression shifted to curious and pleased. "What is it?"

"For right now, a mystery." He took a bite and chewed quickly. "But, if you're free tomorrow around two, we can go see it."
Tomorrow was a Saturday, and he knew she didn't have anything scheduled for two.

She took a bite of hers. "Ohh… yeah, hake was a good choice, we're definitely making this again." She took one more bite, chewed, swallowed. "And yes, I'm free, and will happily go see your mystery present with you."

They were ten minutes away when he stopped the car.

She looked around, and of all the things she could have expected, this was nowhere on the list. "We're in a Starbucks parking lot. You're getting me coffee for a wedding present. You do know I'm not Gibbs, right?"

He laughed, leaned over, and pulled a scarf out of his pocket. "Blindfold."

That got an amused and skeptical look out of her. "Blindfold?"

"Yeah, you'll know what it is when we get close, and I want to keep the surprise as long as I can."

She shook her head, but then turned away from him so he could tie the scarf around her eyes.

"Good?" he asked.

"Yeah. Just tight enough and I can't see."

"Okay. About ten minutes to go."

"So, do I get any hints?" Her excitement was starting to peek out, and he was enjoying it.

"You know where we are, at least within ten minutes, and you know it's a big enough expense I don’t want to just hope you like it."

"So, we're in Falls Church… And it's expensive..." He was fairly sure her eyes would have gone wide if she wasn't blindfolded. "It's a house, isn't it?"

"Maybe." He laughed.

"It is! You're taking me to see a house."

"Possibly."

"What's it like?"

"I haven't said it's a house, have I?"

"It's got to be a house."

He thought carefully for a few seconds wanting to make sure he said this right. "If it is a house, and I'm not saying it is, then telling you what this hypothetical house may be like would make the blindfold counter-productive."

"Hmmmp." She's facing him, and even with the scarf covering half her face, her expression of pleased frustration came through loud and clear. "Wasn't your last case out here?"

"Depending on where here might be, the answer to that could be yes."
"Trying to trick answers out of you is a pain in the ass."

"Well, lucky for you, you'll know for sure in two minutes. So, if this thing I am taking you to see was a house, what would you like it to be like?"

"Big enough for us and kids. Trees. Lots of trees. And a porch, has to have a porch. And the sort of front room that has one of those windows you can sit at. And green. Green would be good. I love the idea of a green house."

"Uh huh. Anything else?"


He pulled into the driveway and stopped the car. "You stay put. I'll open the door and help you get out."

"Okay." She was grinning at him.

He got out and went around to her side, opened the door, and took both of her hands, helping her out. Then he pointed her toward the house and took off the blindfold.

"It's blue, but we could paint, and there's no tower or copula, but it's got pretty much everything else you wanted. What do you think?"

She just stared at it, eyes wide. "It's really a house."

"Yeah. Do you like it?" He was starting to get nervous, not sure what her expression meant.

She started walking toward it. "Can we go in?"

"Realtor will be here in five. Until then, we can see the outside."

She headed for the backyard and stopped once it was in view. There actually were rosebushes along the sunny side of the house. Half-wooded lot in the back, back porch with space for a grill and table, and a swing set with a slide. She stopped, looking at it for another long minute while Tim felt more and more nervous.

"If you don't like it, it's not a big deal. I just thought—"

And then she was in his arms, kissing him, lips soft and happy against his. She pulled away when they heard another car drive up, and said one word, quietly, to him, "McSciutos!"

And, he had to admit, that sounded awfully good.
And like a year and some earlier when Abby went on Depo in the first place, going off of it isn't just something that happens quick and easy. It's not like a light switch that you just flick off.

Granted, this time she was only eight days away from her next shot, so they didn't have to wait that long to get into the "no birth control" part of life.

But, well, there's no easy way to tell when it stops working. Obviously, there's a really visible sign that'll show up eventually, but, if you're trying to get pregnant as soon as possible, and if you succeed, that sign doesn't show up, and if you don't want to be taking a pregnancy test every morning, then you need to have an idea if you even had a target to shoot at, let alone hit it.

So, even before her last appointment should have been, Tim and Abby swung into research mode.

And they're good at research. They're in bed, each with their own computer, learning the intricacies of ovulation.

He's reading away, and looks up, "You know, this really should have been part of the Sex Ed stuff in health class."

Abby nods. "Yeah. That would have been useful."

"I mean, who knew the cervix moves around depending on where you are in your cycle, let alone opens and closes?" Honestly, Tim's finding all of this pretty cool. The idea that her body does all of this stuff and they can pay attention, record data, and use it to make a baby faster and easier makes his inner science wonk really happy.

"I didn't. I knew about the temperature thing, but not the cervix thing."

They read some more.

"Think they have an ap for this?" Tim asks.

"Huh?" She looks up from her computer screen to him.

"Just seems like a waste of time to have to print out a chart, take your temperature, write it down, and keep track of it manually." He's googling. "Huh… Yeah. Not seeing anything. I mean, sure you can't make a device to check the other stuff, but how hard can it be to make a thermometer that'll keep track of your temperatures, and then upload it to your phone on its own?"

Abby shrugs. "You'd be better at answering that than I'd be."

"You know, it really shouldn't be that hard to make." He's grinning.

"You've got a project for this weekend, don't you?"

"I think I do."
Three digital thermometers, a selection of chips, the internals of a few old phones, a soldering iron, some duct tape, and a few hours on Saturday took care of the having to manually record temperature information aspect of this. Sure, it wasn't the prettiest thermometer ever, but unlike the ones at the drugstore, this one would automatically upload Abby's information to the program he wrote anytime it was less than twenty feet away from her phone.

And that was pretty cool.

And unlike the rest of this, it was part he could actually help with, so that was cool, too. (Apparently being turned on messes with getting good baselines for cervical position and vaginal fluids, so though he was more than willing to help with keeping track of that, his involvement would have been counter-productive.)

And so, first thing Sunday morning, Operation: McSciutos began.

Chapter End Notes

I know that one was pretty quick. Big chapter tomorrow! Happy Thursday everyone.
This time a year ago, he was practically freezing to death. Which must be why this year he's on the verge of heat stroke.

Camp Lejeune in Jackson, NC, aka Hell, is where they've been for the last four days, and with the way this is going, probably three more, and while Tim used to be awfully sure he'd never complain about being too hot again, he's getting to the point where that's unlikely to be true all that much longer.

It's a man hunt. An infuriatingly frustrating (and hot) man hunt.

Matthew Toph killed his wife and his wife’s best friend. Then he ran. And finally he made a call on his cell, and they traced it. That was stupid. Unfortunately, that's where stupid stopped.

Apparently, he decided that the best place for a Marine on the run to hide out was a place filled with thousands of other Marines. There are so many stationed at Lejeune that no one knows everyone else. Wear the right uniform, do something useful, look like you belong, and no one is going to notice you. Add to that the fact that at any given time there are hundreds of Marines being shipped into and out of Lejeune, and blending in, hopping a transport, and getting far, far away from his dead wife and her buddy isn't going to be a problem.

At Lejeune he's just one more Jarhead in an endless sea of Jarheads.

They were able to get the base shut down as soon as the call got made, so they know, sort of, where he is, and they know he hasn't left.

But they still have to find him, and there are over 150,000 people at Lejeune. So it's not like they can just call the CO and have him find the guy.

They've got to really hunt for him.

Through every single building.

In what is approximately 100% humidity, 110 degree heat, and with blood sucking mosquitos the size of helicopters bearing down on them every time they go from one building to the next.

By day three, Tim's starting to think he might have had a better time in Afghanistan.

On the upside, with over 150,000 people and over 11,000 acres to search through, they did get some help. It's not just the four of them out there, so that makes it a bit easier. And on top of that, as the senior team, they each have a team of their own, sort of.

Gibbs, Ziva, and Tony are all running agents, making sure the search happens.

Tim's on logistics. Which means, for all practical matters, he's in charge of the hunt. Somehow Vance got the idea that good-with-computers equaled logistical-expert, so he's the guy who's making sure they don't keep going over the same ground again and again. And while computer expert does not in fact equal logistical expert, he does realize his skill set has the most overlap with logistics, so it's not too far outside the bounds of reasonable that he'd be in charge of this.
They've also only got twelve men, so he's running the logistics from his phone and laptop, while also searching.

Which is, honestly, nerve wracking. He screws this up, and the likelihood of looking like a good choice for head of Cybercrime is going to be shot to pieces.

But he's got the perimeter secured. Plenty of Marines around to take care of that. He can't stop traffic from coming in and out, people have to eat, and Marines need to get to where they're going, but, once again, lots of warm bodies around who can be put on search duty, making sure Toph hasn't hopped a ride out with an empty supply truck.

Next up was tracking down anyone at Lejeune that Toph knew, all 318 of them. They all got shoved in an auditorium, while their places were searched. No sign of Toph, but the dogs got a hit on him in one of the rooms, so there was a lead.

He put Gibbs on interrogating Blen, the Marine who's room Toph had been in, and let the dogs chase down the scent, feeling like maybe this was really going to be done soon.

Which came crashing down when it came out that Toph had been stationed here for six months three months ago, and the reason the dog caught the scent was because Blen and Toph had roomed together back then.

Any scent trace was useless. No way to tell a dog that yeah, he's got the right scent, but we need the new scents, not the old ones. He kept the dogs at it, no reason not to, but got used to the idea that it wasn't likely to be turning up anything useful anytime soon.

Which left searching piece by piece and pulling the perimeter tighter and tighter, hoping to catch Toph in his net.

Day two and three he got every civilian who can leave out. Last thing he needs are big crowds this guy can hide in, let alone someone easy to grab and use as a hostage. But sorting through all of them, making sure Toph didn't toss on some civies and just walk out, took a lot more manpower.

Then he locked down anyone who didn't have any vital business and made sure that every person in lock down was accounted for. Between those two moves that got 110,000 people out of the search pool.

Which still left a ton of people and a lot of ground to cover.

Tim's staring at the map, chewing on a pen, willing ideas for how to do this faster to come to him.

He jerked a little when he felt a hand on his shoulder, then looked up and saw it was Gibbs.

"You're doing fine, Tim." He noticed that shortly after talking about Shannon, Gibbs stopped calling him McGee when they're alone or off duty. He kind of likes being Tim, but it's still a little unsettling. Sometimes he wants to look behind himself and see who Gibbs is talking to.

"Wish I was doing this faster."

"You and everyone else."

"So, what do you have for me?"
Gibbs marked off a large square of the map, the wilderness training area. "Dogs are done with this. He's not in there."

"Good." Tim had been hoping to use infrared to search for people in the wilderness areas, but there are close to fifty men who were in the middle of a month long, out of contact, wilderness survival training run, and the CO was extremely displeased at the idea of trying to yank them out. So they went in with the dogs, looking for Toph.

He grabbed his cell and flashed a text to the man in charge of maintaining the perimeter. Tim lets Lt. Grener know that he can move his Marines to the south and east sides of the wilderness area. The net around Lejeune is slowly getting tighter.

He rubbed his eyes and checked his watch. Eight thirty, sun would be gone any minute, and that would end any outdoor searching they could do.

He checked the map again, noticed that the mechanical bay, a huge complex designed to take care of literally tens of thousands of vehicles and hundreds of thousands of other tools and equipment, was right next to the western perimeter.

"Once the sun is down, switch your guys to the mechanical bay. Take Ziva's and Tony's too. Let's get that completely done tonight, and then we'll quit for the night."

Gibbs nodded, grabbing his cell, taking a moment to get it to the right screen and then slowly texting his team. It's been a year, but Gibbs was getting the hang of his smart phone. He looked up from his cell, slipping it back into his pocket. "On it, Boss."

Tim shook his head. "That's just flat out wrong."

"On it, Tim."

"Better."

It took two hours, but they got the mechanical bay searched, and found something useful. Back in one of the storage areas there was a cot, a few changes of clothing, and Toph's gun.

Finally, something to go on.

First thing in the morning. Yeah, they'd all like to do it sooner, but the dogs have to sleep. Just like you can't tell them find new scents not old ones, you also can't tell them, "I know you worked all day, but now we need you to do all night, too." Well, you can, and they will, they're dogs after all, and really eager to make their handlers happy, but if you want good results, you've got to let them rest. And Tim has no interest in blowing this because the dogs didn't get enough rest.

So, whenever it is they wake up, they'll be back at it, and hopefully this time, with a hot trail, they'll find Toph.

Because Lejeune is the Marine training ground, it's also where a lot of Marine graduations happen, too. So there's a ton of fairly decent motels and hotels nearby. That's the upside of being away from home, at least he's in a decent hotel: comfortable beds, soft sheets, AC works, wifi is reliable, and the coffee maker is functional.
Downside, he's sharing a room with Gibbs, again.

Upside, this one has a bathroom, with a door, with a lock, and functional hot and cold water, all of which Tim appreciates.

Sure, Tony gets to snuggle up with Ziva every night, and yeah, he's jealous of that. (Really jealous. Almost slapped Tony upside the back of the head when he sauntered down to breakfast, big I-got-laid-this-morning smile on his face.) But he's got some privacy and can at least text Abby every night.

Still, by night four, it's worn thin.

"Problem?" Gibbs asks as they walk through the lobby and he heads to the front desk to get his own room.

"Yeah. You snore and get up before the crack of dawn to do calisthenics in our room. I want sleep." And yeah, all of that is true, but…

Gibbs just stares at him, then grins. "Sleep?"

Tim rolls his eyes.

Gibbs smirks. "Tell Abby I said hello."

"Quit smirking. You would have done the same thing if you could have."

That gets a raised eyebrow as they walked toward the room they share.

"Don't give me that. If texting had been around in the '80s, you'd be able to do it as fast as you speak and one handed."

Gibbs laughs and opens the door. "Letters. We wrote letters back then."

"I'm sure you did," Tim says, shouldering his go bag, handing Gibbs the second key card to his room. It's standard procedure to have someone else on your team have a key to your room. "See you in the morning."

"Night."

Skype is the bestest friend of the man away from his sweetie.

Yes, indeed.

He sent Abby a text. Skype, 10 minutes? And then hopped in the shower. Cool water rinsing away the day's sweat feels awfully good. When he gets out, his computer is chiming at him. He hit the answer button, while drying himself off.

"Hey."

"Hey yourself," she says. He can see her face and upper body, she's got on one of his gray t-shirts and is sitting up against the headboard of their bed. The square in the bottom where his picture goes is still black. "Where's Gibbs?"

"In his own room, on the other side of the hotel. He says hello." Finally the picture of him, sitting
against the headboard of the hotel bed pops up. He's got the computer on the bed next to him, so she can see him from his knees up.

"Good!" She grins at him, eyes traveling over his body. "Ohhh… naked and wet! What's on your mind?"

"You." He's toweling off his hair. "Getting home as soon as possible."

"How's it going?" She asks while standing up and moving out of view.

"Not bad, might have a lead. Where are you going?"

"Didn't know you were on your own when I made the call. Getting into something more interesting. What kind of lead?"

He likes the sound of more interesting. "We found where he was hiding out. And whenever the dogs wake up, we can set them on tracking him again."

"That sounds good." He hears a drawer open, and the sound of clothing hitting the floor. "So tomorrow night, maybe the day after?"

"Yeah, maybe. If we're lucky. If he hasn't vanished. If the dogs can trace him. They keep getting caught up on all the different scent trails of this guy."

"You'll get him."

"God, I hope so."

"You will. You guys always do."

"Never run a manhunt before. And this one… he could slip through so easy. I've got to trust that over 2000 people are all doing exactly what they're supposed to be doing."

"They are. And you will get him." And with that she slips back into view.

For a long minute he just stares at her, then he says, "Oh God, baby, I really like interesting." She moves the computer a little so her whole body, kneeling on the bed, is in the shot, and he drags his eyes from her feet to her head. "Yep," he's nodding his head, eyes glued to her image, "love interesting."

Interesting was a scarlet corset, with black laces, black garter belt with red ribbons and those black stockings with the red laces up the back, and a black lace choker with red beads. With the way she was kneeling he couldn't tell if she was wearing panties or not, and he was enjoying the anticipation of not knowing.

"I thought you might. So… what would you be doing if you could get your hands on my interesting self?"

He grins, hand drifting to his lap, wrapping around his dick. "You know, that's the best question I've had all day."

"Really? Sounds like you had a pretty depressing day."

"It's getting better by the second. So…" His eyes continued to drift over her. "I think I'd be kneeling behind you, then gently shift your hair over to your right shoulder," she did as he said, gathering it up in her fingers and slipping it over, "and start kissing your ear, down your neck, and then tug on the
collar a little with my teeth. That sound good to you?"

"Yeah. I'd twist my fingers in your hair, and run my right hand over your thigh."

"Mmmm…" Yeah that sounds like a good start.

"What would your hands be doing?"

He thinks about it for a second. "On your hips, finding out if you're wearing panties."

She shifts a little, so he can see the unbroken line of naked skin from the top of the stocking to the bottom of the waistband on the garter belt.

"No panties, then," he says with a grin.

She smiles widely at him, and he loves that look, all beautiful joy and wicked sexiness, and it's just so good, and the fact that it's aimed at him feels even better. "Nope. Didn't think I needed them."

"Not today." He licks his lips and pulls a little on himself, watching her trace her fingers from the top of her stocking to the crest of her hip. "Anything you want me to do with your interesting self, today?"

"Lots of things."

"Like…"

"Like getting me out of this outfit, laying me out, getting me off with your tongue, fingers, and cock."

He grins and sighs. "God, baby, if I could…"

"I know. I've been really turned on today. Everything is getting to me, and I want you, here, in our bed, in my body, right now!"

"Good. Want you too. Want you so much. I'd be kneeling behind you, kissing your neck and shoulder, and then I'd start unhooking the corset." It's got laces up the front, but they just provide fine control for the size. About twenty hook and eye closures up the back actually open and close the corset. "Kiss my way down your back as I got it unhooked."

"That sounds so good." She turns so her back is to the camera, and unhooks the corset. Takes her longer to do than it would have taken him, but he would have been able to see what he was doing.

"Run my fingers over your tattoos. Really light, the kind of touch that makes you shiver." He can see her ghost her fingers along the angels at her shoulders. "Follow my fingers with my tongue and teeth, just dragging them over your skin, making you squirm."

"Talking about it is making me squirm."

"Yeah, and doing it'd be better." He rubs his hand over his dick a little more firmly and wishes he had brought lube with him. Nothing he can do about it. Not like he's never gotten off with just a hand and spit before. "I'd settle against the headboard, like I am now, and pull you to sit between my legs, back against my chest, your legs over mine."

She shifts around so she's back against the headboard, computer in front of her, legs wide.

"God, you're so beautiful." And he's not sure if it's four days away or something else, but right now
she's just so fabulously delicious. Everything about her is just screaming sex at him, and he wants her so bad.

She smiles, then slips her index finger into her mouth, licking the tip of it, and then sucking on it.

He groans and squeezes himself.

"I'd lick your earlobe, nipping at it a little, and my hands would find your breasts, soft, slow strokes." His right hand mimics what he'd be doing, while his left continues to slowly stroke his dick. She grins and starts to touch her breasts, pleasing herself with her touch, making him harder as he watches.

And he likes watching, loves seeing her fingers on herself, and he hopes she's enjoying seeing what he's doing. He spreads his legs a little wider, cups his balls, gives them a gentle tug, and watches as her hips start a slow roll to go along with the way she's moving.

Her nipples are hard, pink, begging to be licked, sucked, and he can't do that, wants to, but can't, so he takes the story somewhere else.

"Get you off with my fingers, cock, and tongue, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then scoot up a bit, and slide onto me." Abby shifts from sitting to kneeling, spreading her legs, spreading her lips with her fingers, and letting him watch as her middle finger slips over her clit.

"Fuck, baby! That's one of my favorite sights. You wide open with me deep inside you. We'd have the mirror in front of us, and I'd have one hand on your breast, the other on your clit, rubbing you off while you ride me."

He spits on his hand, getting it wet and slick, and goes back to stroking himself, long and slow, eyes glued to her fingers on her body, staring, savoring every detail.

"Wanna watch you get off."

She bit her lip a little, and rubbed faster.

"So beautiful, baby, watching you makes me feel so good. Love this, love you all hot and wet. I'd be right up behind you, fingers moving light and fast, rolling your nipple, pulling it a little, kissing your ear and shoulder, and talking you off, just like this."

Her head drops back, and she's got that intense expression, the one that would look like pain to a stranger but he knows means she's about ten seconds away from getting off.

"God, Abby, can't wait to feel you come on me. Want to feel your body pulsing against mine. Feel you slam down on me, squeeze me tight, and call out my name."

"Fuck! Tim!" Her hips were moving fast, jerking, and her breath was coming in fast panting moans.

"You look so good, want to eat you, want to feel you, need your body rippling on mine like I need air."

Her chest was flushed pink, and her whole body twitched, hard, and he knew that was it. He let his own hand relax, forced it to stroke slow and light as she slumped back on the bed, panting.

"Watching you get off will never get old."
She opened her eyes slowly and grinned lazily at him. "Glad to hear it." Then she looked at him more carefully. "You don't look done."

"I'm not. You said you wanted to get off on my cock, fingers, and tongue. That's cock and fingers. Catch your breath a little, and we'll get to tongue."

"That sounds good."

"Glad to hear it." He stops stroking and just holds himself. "If I was there, you'd be slumped against me, breathing softly, and I'd have my face pressed against your neck."

"Yeah. I'd turn my head and kiss you, long and sweet."

"Yes, please."

"Run my fingers through your hair, hold your hand in mine, and suck your tongue like a candy."

"Oh!" His hand starts to stroke again.

"And I'm thinking, if you're going to be getting me off with your tongue, I should return the favor. So how about you scoot down, lay on your side, and let me put my mouth to good use, too."

He scooted down and laid on his side like she said, shifting the computer so he was in view from his hips to head. "Good?"

"Yeah, I can see everything I want to."

"What, no foot porn?"

"Ummm… Do I look like Jimmy to you?"

"No, baby, you really don't. And I can't even begin to explain how good of a thing that is."

Laughing, she lay on her side, one leg propped up on their headboard and angled the computer so he could see her from her neck to knees.

"Like that?"

"Any chance of your face getting in the shot?"

"Maybe." She sat up, and for a moment he had a very up close shot of her bosom as she messed around with the computer and then lay back down. This time all of her was in the shot.

"Much better." He went back to stroking his dick, waiting to see what she'd do next.

"I'm thinking I'd start fast, suck you all the way down in one long pull, and then slide back get my lips really wet, keep them tight, and then slip them over the head again and again."

He groaned a soft, "Oh fuck," spit on his hand again, held his fist tight, and began to work just the tip.

"Good?"

"Shit, yes, good. Before I lose it, I'm taking your stockings off. You told me to get you naked, and I will. Gonna slip them down your legs, using my fingers and kissing as far down as I can."
"Do you actually know how to work a garter belt?" She's worn one before, but he's never taken it, or the stockings, off.

"Yeah."

She's just staring at him, looking amused and a little disbelieving. And that sort of broke the rhythm. He rolls his eyes a little. "Tony's not the only one who watches movies. I saw Bull Durham."

She doesn't look like she believes that at all. "You watched a baseball movie?"

"I watched a sex movie with some baseball in it. I was fourteen and one thing my Dad was happy to let me do was watch sports type stuff. So, I grabbed a bunch of movies that were at least somewhat sports oriented, and only watched the good parts."

Abby laughs.

"So, yeah, I haven't actually done it before, but since I watched the good parts about nineteen million times, I've got a pretty good idea of how a garter belt works."

He mimics the finger motion involved in releasing a stocking, and Abby grins, she traces her fingers up her leg slowly, and then flicks off the clasps, and eases the stocking down her leg.

He watches her ease them off, eyes devouring the supple curves of her legs. "What I wouldn't give to be able to kiss you right now."

"I know. Have you here, wrap my legs around you and kiss you deep and slow."

"Oh yeah." He's stroking himself, hand moving faster, watching her fingers slip along her thigh, then gently easing over her pussy. He can see the shine on her fingers as she lifts them to her mouth and sucks them. "I'd suck you just like that. Lick my juices off your cock. Taste me on you, lean down and pass it back to you."

He inhales slowly. "So hard, God, you've got me so hard. I'd slide down you, kissing and licking your chest and breasts and stomach, then settle between your legs, slip your lips apart and kiss you right. Soft and deep with lots of tongue and my fingers inside you and my tongue on your clit, sucking and making you writhe against the bed and push your hips up against me for more."

He's watching her pussy, her fingers circling her clit, one finger slipping inside her.

"God, baby, that is so hot. You're all pink and wet and taste so good and feel even better, and God, I'd fuck you so hard right now, make you come over and over, make your whole body shake and clench around me."

She adds a second and third finger pumping in and out and he groans, then shifts his computer so she's got a better view of his hand flying over his dick. He stops for a second, spitting on his hand, wanting this to be wet and slick, like her body would be, and then he thrusts slow and hard, keeping his hand tight, rippling the fingers a little, eyes glued to her pussy on the screen.

She slows her own hand, matching his pace, long deliberate strokes, the kind that pull every last second of sensation out of each motion, and he sees her body go tight and then start to twitch against her fingers, and hears her moaning, high pitched and breathy, and with his right hand he manages to shove the computer over a little because cumming on the keyboard would just be a mess, and with a few more strokes he's squirting into his hand, feeling the tingles through his whole body.
He rested for a few seconds, enjoying the last few soft pulses, and then grabbed for his towel and wiped up, then re-angled the computer so she could see all of him.

"I've missed you."

"I know. Miss you, too."

It was well after midnight by that point, and between the long days and the orgasm he's beat.

"I'm gonna fall asleep in a minute. I love you."

"Love you too, baby. See you tomorrow, I hope."

"Me too."

And with that he flicked off Skype, moved just enough to get under the blankets, and crashed into a deep sleep.

4:45 his phone was buzzing. It took a few tries before he managed to grab it. "McGee."

"Dogs are awake."

He rubbed his eyes, feeling like he was mired in sleep. "Get on it. We'll be there soon." He sent a text to everyone's phones, letting them know it was wake up time, and then rolled out of bed, cranked the shower to icy, and hopped in, hoping the shock of it would actually get his eyes open.

It worked, a little. Mostly it just made sure he was cold, cranky, and sleepy.

Gibbs was sitting on his bed, holding a coffee when he got out of the shower. How that man functioned on no sleep was something Tim was never going to understand.

"Dogs up?"

Tim nodded, taking the coffee, drinking down a third of it before it occurred to him he was naked. *Screw it.* He headed to his go bag and started to get dressed, slipping on his boxers. Not like Gibbs never saw a naked guy before. Granted, when they room together Tim changes in the bathroom, but he's too tired for modest and doesn't have the energy for scuttling about hiding his privates, plus Gibbs would probably see that as a sign of weakness, and just, well, *screw it.* Guy walks into your room without waiting for you to answer, he deserves what he gets.

"I thought you had three of them."

Tim's so sleepy he has no idea what that means.

"Three what?"

"Tatts. You told DiNozzo you got one on your ass."

"Oh. Yeah." He rubs his eyes again. "Didn't want to explain the one I really got." He touches the code on his left delt. "Didn't think Tony'd ever see the real one." He sucks down more of the coffee and pulls on his shirt. It's his last clean one.
"Think they've got laundry here?"

Gibbs shrugs. "Hopefully won't need it."

"Amen."

"So, what's the plan?"

"Let me get my map." He opens his laptop and boots it up. "Okay. I'll put Ziva and her guys with the dog team. Have them on hand if the dogs find him. Tony and his guys'll take the south west corner. Your team is going to go through the warehouses in the north east corner. I'll tag along with Ziva's guys today, keep sending updates on what we've got, move you guys around as needed."

"Sounds good."

At six thirty, while he was sucking down his third coffee of the morning, he felt his phone buzz.

*Any chance of you getting home tonight? From Abby.*

*It's not impossible, why?*

*Temp dropped this morning.*

He just stared at the phone for a moment before it clicked that she was ovulating, then fervently cursed any and every fate that had him stuck in this godforsaken chunk of mosquito infested hell instead of home with her.

"McGee?" Ziva's voice, really startled. She's staring at him like she never imagined hearing, let alone had ever heard, any of those words come out of his mouth, and it occurred to him that she probably hasn't.

"I'm fine."

She just stared at him for a moment, but then backed off.

Tim wrote. *If my luck holds, that just ensured we're not home for at least two days.*

And hold it did. There's only so fast the dogs can go, and August in North Carolina means rain. Lots of rain.

They got five hours of tracking Toph, found out that he'd been watching their perimeter and from the looks of it, trying to find a way to get through it, and then the heavens opened up in a massive downpour, thunder, lightning, and gallons of rain sluicing down, washing away everything.

They were hunting through the kitchens when an idea occurred to Tim. He flashed Gibbs a text: *Dress whites, you only get one set, right?*

A minute later he got back. *Normally. You can buy more if you want them, but most Marines only get one set.*

*Good.*
He checked his map, and yeah, the warehouse that held the uniforms was on the outside of the perimeter.

Five minutes later, General Phelp, commander of Lejeune, was staring at him like he was insane. "You want me to order what?"

"Everyone into their dress whites."

"No. They're for formal use only. It'd be an insult to the uniform to wear them for regular duty."

There's a wall in Tim's mind. It keeps the part of him that wants to yell at people for being idiots, his own fears, most of his anger, and a lot of his other emotions nicely contained and allows him to function in a pretty efficient manner without making too many enemies.

And sitting there, in the commander's office, looking at a guy who could be a clone of his dad, a clone of his dad staring at him with that exact same you're-an-idiot look his dad used to give him, placing greater value on a uniform than on catching a killer, let alone the fact that getting home fast has never, ever mattered more to him than it does right now, and that wall broke into a thousand pieces.

Phelp had been sitting down, had invited him to sit, too, so he had, but as that wall cracked he stood up, placed both of his hands onto Phelp's desk, and leaned so he was towering over the man. His voice went low and stayed soft, but there was an edge to it that very rarely made its way out of him. He made sure to stare Phelp in the eyes for a good thirty seconds before he said, "Look, asshole, the uniform doesn't care. You can't insult it because it's a piece fucking fabric. I've got a killer to catch, and if you order your guys into white, my guy'll finally start to stick out. He's been using the fact that he looks like every other fucking Marine in this god-forsaken hell hole to his advantage and it ends now. If I tell you I want them all to paint themselves blue, you will get on that fucking phone and order it because as soon as Toph decided to hide here, SecNav put me in charge of this base. Now go and do it!"

Phelp just stared at Tim, and in retrospect Tim figured he must have been looking pretty scary, and it was possible one of his hands ended up on his gun, because when Phelp picked up his phone and gave the order, Tim stood all the way up, noticing that both of his hands weren't on the desk anymore.

Tim listened, nodded, and calmly said, "Thank you. Let them know that if anyone can't find their whites to contact us immediately."

He got a phone call from Vance an hour later. "SecNav put you in charge of Lejeune?"

He really doesn't want to do this, so he sounds pretty testy as he says, "You put me in charge, he put you in charge, it's close enough."

"I put you in charge of the logistics of the hunt."

He's gritting his teeth, very temped to tell Vance off, too, but Vance actually is his boss, and more than that, he's someone who's earned his respect. "You want me to find Toph?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you wasting my time?"
And suddenly he just knew that Vance was smiling. "Because hearing you cussed out the commander of the largest Marine base in the US was the best laugh I've had all week, and I would have happily paid money to see it."

"Thank you, sir."

"Go get him, McGee, and if Phelps gives you any more shit… Well, actually, it looks like you already know what to do."

"On it, sir."

Shifting everyone to whites helped. It meant that Toph couldn't move. The civilians were off base, so he couldn't just toss on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Anyone in drab immediately got grabbed for questioning, so he couldn't show himself in the uniform he had been wearing.

Finally, they weren't hunting a moving target.

But helped and captured weren't the same thing at all.

At five thirty he sent a text back to Abby. \textit{Not gonna happen. Even if we grabbed him right now, I'm still eight hours away.}

\textit{Damn it}

\textit{Yeah.}

\textit{Still working?}

\textit{Yeah.}

\textit{We'll talk later then?}

\textit{Yeah.}

He closed up the text window and grabbed some food, unable to even begin to try and put into words how disappointed he was because it doesn't matter how good you are at Skype sex, you can't make a baby with it.

Gibbs walked with him back toward his room, he waited for Tim to open the door and followed him in.

"You do know we aren't rooming together anymore? Right?"

Gibbs sat on the edge of the bed. "Ziva said you got a text, started cursing, and then wouldn't tell her what was wrong. You okay?"

Tim sat down next to him. "Yeah, I'm okay."

Gibbs sent him the \textit{cut the bullshit} look. "Vance told me you cussed out Phelp, too."

Tim flashed him a somewhat self-depreciating and amused look. "I'm thirty-six, Boss, and work for the Navy. My dad's a sailor. I grew up on Navy bases. It's not like I've never heard, let alone said,
the word fuck before.”

Gibbs smiled dryly. "Not where any of us have been able to hear you."

Tim laughed a little at that. "I suppose not."

"What's wrong? Everything okay at home? Something happen with the house?"

That was a good guess. It just happened to be wrong.

See, Tim had thought that if he walked into a bank and said, "I've got a 65% down payment," that they would have been very happy to see him and offered him a loan for the rest on really great terms. But, as the rather unhappy and embarrassed banker explained to him, if you've been the victim of identity theft five times, and if you paid off your student loans within two years, bought your car outright, and then paid all your other bills every month on time, therefore never carrying a balance, you ended up with a credit score of 542. Then he got to sit there and listen to said very embarrassed banker explaining how unfortunate it was that he didn't have what banks were traditionally looking for in the way of a credit history and 17% interest was the best he could possibly do for him.

So, for once, he and Abby not being legally married actually came in handy. Sure, the terms for the mortgage in just her name weren't ideal either, but they were way better than in his name. And it wasn't like they were going to hold the mortgage very long. He was hoping to have it paid off shortly after he got the last of the advance money for Most Precious. Still, it took a little while to get it worked out, but after three weeks they had the financing set up, and at least as of now, things were going smoothly and they were just waiting to get the inspection report back. Which was supposed to happen today or tomorrow, but since Abby hadn't mentioned it, tomorrow looks like the correct answer.

Tim sighed. "Not the house. Last I heard that was fine." He wasn't sure if what the problem actually is is something he wants to talk to Gibbs about. Palmer, sure. He could see talking with Palmer about this, but Gibbs… He thought of some of the things Gibbs told him about Shannon, and that gets him talking.

"The only thing that's not okay about home is that I'm not there. We're trying to get pregnant, and today was ovulation day."

A smile was tugging at the corners of Gibbs' lips, and Tim was fairly sure that's him being happy about them working on having a baby, not laughing at him for being away from home.

"It's not the end of the world or anything, but, it's... just really disappointing."

Gibbs nodded and squeezed Tim's shoulder.

"Been waiting forever to start a family and we're finally getting on it and... I'm here, so there's another month of waiting."

Gibbs nodded again.

"And, I get it's not a big deal, not really, but, she's forty, Boss, almost forty-one, and we don't have all the time in the world."

"Nope."

"So, yeah, just, frustrated and disappointed. And less than four hours of sleep doesn't help. And Phelp was being a dick, standing there talking about insulting a uniform. And I just watched him for
a second and felt that little thing inside me that kept me from killing Tony all those years break. And when it did, it hit me, I'm not under his command, and I can say whatever I want to that man. He doesn't like it; I don't care!"

Gibbs laughed. "Good. Less time caring about what other people think is the way to happiness."

"If you say so. Look, it's late. I want to talk to Abby some, and I've got to see if they have a washing machine and dryer anywhere around here. See you in the morning?"

"Sure."

Gibbs got up, and when he was standing at the door, Tim said, "The coffee this morning was really nice; I appreciated it, but tomorrow, wait for me to answer the door first. I don't feel like giving you anymore peep shows."

"Don't flatter yourself; you aren't that pretty."

"Abby thinks I am."

Gibbs smiled and left.

10:47 the next morning Toph gave himself up.

And Tim considered it the height of self-control that he didn't beat the guy into a pulp for not doing it twenty-four hours earlier.

Though two weeks later, when Abby's period showed up, he was awfully sorry he didn't.
A huge, and Tim knew from experience, very heavy box, was waiting at their door when they got home from work on September 10th.

“What is that?” Abby asked, looking at it.

Tim grinned at her, even though the return address was hidden on the underside of the box, he knew what it was. “Half my favorite part of being an author, half debilitating finger cramps.”

“So, it’s not a wedding present?”

“Oh.” Huh. That was a possibility. “I was thinking it’s the finished copies of The Traitor Within. They send me a few hundred of them to sign.”

“A few hundred fit in that box?”

“No, more boxes are coming. But you’re right, this might be a present.”

She opened the door, and he bent down to pick it up, and grunted as he lifted it. “It’s the books. No one is getting us a present this heavy.”

He carried it into the house, put the box on the kitchen counter, and grabbed his knife to slit through the tape.

He’s smiling as he does it. This is familiar enough that he’s not shaking the way he was the first time he slit open a box filled with copies of a book he wrote, but he’s still excited. Still feeling the rush that goes with knowing something he made, something he lived and breathed and made real is about to go live and get shared with the rest of the world.

Abby’s standing right next to him, feeling the excitement of this moment. And sure, she’s seen all of the mock ups for the cover art, and the more or less put together version that was the proof copy, as well as the ARCs that went out to the reviewers, but this is the first time either of them get to see the real, finished, going on the market October 15th, people have already pre-ordered it on Amazon version, and she is bouncing a little at it.

Like all of the other Deep Six books the cover is a sort of menacing indistinct blur of mostly red on white. (This one looks sort of like a heart.) It feels nicely solid in his hand (this is the first hard bound copy he’s seen). And it smells the way a new book should, paper, glue, slight tinge of ink.

One of the perks of selling a lot of copies of your book is that your publishers are often willing to cater to some eccentricities on the part of a successful author. And Tim’s already got a reputation of being eccentric with a capital E. But, with handing in actual electronic documents, instead of making them deal with his typewritten pages, he got some wiggle room for a new bit of oddness.

Specifically, though he’s been through several edits, a proof copy, a mock up, and an ARC, up until this point the dedication page has never been in any of the copies that were sent to his home.

Sure, he wrote it and had it done the same time as the rest of the book, but he wanted it to be a surprise for Abby.

Deep Six had been dedicated to Penny, because she was, without a doubt, the most supportive person in his world when it came to his writing. She’d been his first reader for years when he was
younger, always happy to lend her eyes to his work, and so he didn’t have to think about it when it came time to write the dedication for Deep Six.

Sarah got Black Rock. She’d spent hours helping him beat the plot into submission when his editor handed the first draft back to him and said, “Great characters, the stuff with Tommy and Liza is wonderful. But you don’t have a mystery here, and your readers, they want a mystery.”

Gibbs got Foreign and Domestic. Well, in a ‘round about sort of way. He wasn’t going to flat out write: For Leroy Jethro Gibbs, because without you I don’t have a story. And he wasn’t about to refer to Gibbs as his muse. That would be, well, weird, and not in a good way, but in a get headsplashed sort of way. So Foreign and Domestic got dedicated to all Marines past and present, and if he was only really thinking of one Marine when he wrote that, oh well.

He watches Abby flip through the pages of Traitor Within. She’s read it already, so it’s not like what she’s seeing is a shocking new plot twist or anything.

“Why so many copies?” she asks, still flipping through.

“So I can sign them. Collectors like them. They send me a five hundred copies, I sign them, and they ship them to the bigger bookstores. They’d like me to do actual book signings and tours, but, not going to happen.”

“Why not?”

“First off, I’m supposed to pay for a tour out of pocket. Theoretically that’s part of what my advance covers. Secondly, I’m a big enough name that the books sell, but not so big that people will line up around the block for me, so a book signing means sitting in a book store, just waiting around for people to show up and chat with me. I’ve got better ways to spend the day. Third, the only way the tour makes sense is if I push everything into a few weeks around when the book comes out, and spending three weeks around release time traveling everywhere isn’t my idea of fun, let alone what I want to do with my vacation time. I don’t like planes to begin with and hopping between three cities in one day, no. Finally,” he opens a copy to the dust jacket and the picture of him on it, “the more people associate this,” and it’s certainly him, just a very well photographed version of him from 2010, “with Thom E. Gemcity, the more I can be Tim in real life.”

She’s nodding like that makes sense, and he sees her flip to the front of the book, looking at the title
Then she flips to the next page and sees it. He feels a wide smile creep across his face as her eyes scan over the dedication page.

For Abby:

The sun who lights my world.
The home at the end of my journey.
The life that makes mine whole.

“Tim?”

“Yeah?”

And she was in his arms, kissing him, book forgotten on the counter.

He thought of something an hour later, as they were making dinner. “Do you want to be in my biography?”

“Huh?”

“I’ve got a Wikipedia page, and Twitter, and Facebook, and a website, and all of them have some sort of personal section about me. I keep it pretty short because...” And he let that trail off, they both remember exactly how insane his fans can be. “Right now mine has that I’m a federal agent, that I support Wounded Warrior Program, and I’m the older brother of Sarah McGee.” Sarah’s first novel had come out two years ago, and the fourth one was due out in two months. She was a lot faster at getting them written than he was, but she was also writing young adult paranormal romances full time.

Abby’s eyebrows were high as she stopped cutting up celery and looked at him. “You have a wiki page?”

“Thom does.” He pulled two pork chops out of the fridge. “You didn’t know that?”

“No.”

“Come on.” They head for his office, dinner on hold. He turned on his computer and brought up the page. It was a fairly standard bio. There was the traditional shot of him, same one from the cover of his books, along with one of him with his sister in the personal section. “My publisher set it up originally, but every month or so I check it and change it if need be. So, do you want to be on here?”

“Can I pick the picture of us?”

“Sure, if you want. Or no picture.”

“Oh no. If I’m going to be on this thing, there has to be a picture.”

“You want me to update all of my stuff.”

“Sure.”
He watched her mess with her phone. She was staring at something. “You tweet?”

He looked over her shoulder and sees she’s just followed Thom on twitter.

“Rarely. There’s a guy at the publisher’s office who does most of it. Usually when I’m doing it it’s something like this.” He took out his phone, and headed for the kitchen, quickly signed the first book, snapped a shot of it open on top of the other books in the box, and fired off I down 499 to go.

He heard her laugh from the office, and went back to join her.

“How about stick a spoiler in there for Most Precious about McGregor and Amy getting married?”

He shook his head. “Can’t. Not allowed to leak things like that.”

“Really?”

“Yep. That’s part of my contract.”

She didn’t look like she believed that. Not that he was lying to her, but that someone at his publisher would think to put that on paper and get him to sign it. “Your contract is that specific?”

“Yeah, it is. I’ve got a list of things I can ‘let slip’ and major plot points aren’t on the list.”

“Huh. Then, sure, kind of bland is good.”

He shifted over to the edit page, and started typing. She flipped through the pictures of them on her phone. “How about this one?”

It was a shot from the last Shabbos at Ziva’s. She was sitting on his lap, arm around his shoulder, and he had his hand on her back. They were both laughing at the story Ducky was telling, and Breena had snapped the pic of them.

“That’s a good one.”

She sent it to him and he uploaded it.

The next morning he had seventeen congratulatory emails from different fans in his Gemcity account. And one somewhat cranky one from the publicist who worked for his publisher and was assigned to him, wanting a formal engagement picture, as well as a blurb about the wedding, and once they got married a wedding picture so they could do a press release and take care of this properly.

He was staring at his computer screen, wishing this hadn’t just bit him in the ass that hard, and hoping Abby wasn’t going to be annoyed with this.

Tim headed into the kitchen, saw Abby eating her breakfast and said, “So… um… yeah…”

She’s staring at him, looking nervous. “What, new delay on the house?”
“Oh. No. At least not that I know of.” The current owners hadn’t expected to sell so fast, and now they were scrambling around trying to find a new place of their own. They’d ended up with the closing set for the middle of October, which they didn’t much like, but at least it made getting their apartment sub-letted easier. “Nothing like that. I hope. No. I got an email from my publicist—“

“You have a publicist?”

“I share her with about twenty other authors.”

“Really?” Once again, Abby looked surprised. It occurred to him that he might keep the author part of his life a little too quiet if even she had no idea of how involved it was.

“Yeah, really. Jennifer Manz. She’s in charge of making people want to buy my books, and keeping me in the news whenever a new one comes out. We’re not exactly good friends because she wants to splash me all over the press, and I want to hide. Anyway, she’d like a formal engagement portrait of us to send out in the press release.”

Abby just stared at him.

“Apparently it’s pretty standard that if you’re going to let the world know you’re engaged to then make sure everyone knows. So, she wants to do a release, and would also like some wedding pictures and something about how we met and...” And he let it trail off because she looked like she was about to burst out laughing.

“It’s not a big deal, Tim.”

“Really?”

“Really. I like the idea of an engagement portrait.”

“It’s not too invasive?”

“I don’t mind if the entire world knows we’re getting married.”

“You sure? This is like, blurb in People Magazine, public.”

She grinned at him.

He smiled. “Cool.”
The First Dance

Some things about planning the Sciuto-McGee wedding weren’t so easy.

One thing Tim had really appreciated about Jimmy and Breena’s reception was that they did the first dance right away, so everyone could just party as they saw fit, instead of having to wait around for it.

So, they had decided to do that for their wedding as well.

And promptly ran into a brick wall.

Both Abby and Tim liked music. She was more into it than he was, but he liked it quite well. Basically her tastes were narrower, but deeper, and his were broader but less intensive. The issue was that the circle of music she liked and the one he liked, there was just not much overlap.

And to make matters worse, they couldn’t find a good song that had it all. It needed great lyrics and you had to be able to dance to it. Abby had tons of great music from a dancing perspective. Not so great on the whole love you forever and ever front. Tim had music with fabulous lyrics, especially for a Halloween wedding; he’s almost sure The Airborne Toxic Event somehow crept into their life and wrote The Graveyard by the House for them, but you can’t dance to it. Likewise, Mumford and Sons The Ghosts That We Knew, and the ‘bury my heart next to yours’ line seemed especially appropriate for a Halloween wedding, but once again, you can’t dance to it.

For about three minutes, he thought Heaven by Bryan Adams (and yes, that’s how far back in his music collection he went) might do it. Great lyrics, perfect lyrics, okay, maybe not the best dancing beat, but it would work. She listened to the first thirty seconds and said, “Eighties anthem rock?”

“Our second first date was an eighties cover bands.”

She gave him a I can’t believe we are so desperate for music you came up with this look. “Yeah, but, it’s not dance music. This is stand in an auditorium waving around a lighter music.” Which she demonstrated, sans lighter.

So they went looking for something else.

They even had a great second dance song. It was too raunchy for a first dance, but You Shook Me All Night Long was a perfect second dance. Somewhat naughty lyrics, good beat, fast enough to move to, yes, perfect second dance song.

But that first dance... That was a killer.

They’d been sitting on the floor of the living room, listening to their different MP3s, playing songs for each other, when Tim finally found something that might, sort of, kind of, if you squinted a little, work.

“How about this?”

He stood up, held out his hand to her, and she stood as well. He settled his right hand on the small of her back, hit the play button, and laced his left hand with her right.

Guitar, drums, fairly steady and slow beat. Okay, that worked. A basic box step melded into the music easily.
“What is this?” Abby asked.

“You’ll recognize in a second.”

_I feel it in my fingers, I feel it in my toes._

She grinned at him, knowing what this was.

“Little sappy?” she asked.

“We’re getting married; we’re allowed to be a little sappy. Besides, this is the original version, not the remakes. How sappy can Classic British Invasion Rock be?” He pulled her tighter to him, his face near her ear, and sang along with a low voice,

_Your love is all around me, and so the feeling grows._

_It’s written on the wind, _Violins in the classic wedding march add to the guitar and drums. _It’s everywhere I go_

_So if you really love me—_

“What’s this if stuff?” Abby said.

“Okay, it’s not perfect, but keep listening.” He spun her away from him, and then pulled her close again as the beat shifted. “At least this one has decent lyrics and we can dance to it.” He kissed her and then went back to singing along when the lyrics picked back up.

_You know I love you, I always will, my mind’s made up by the way that I feel_

_There’s no beginning, there’ll be no end, ‘cause on my love, you can depend._

A few more beats sans lyrics, and they were moving pretty comfortably together to this.

_I see your face before me, as I lay on my bed._

_I kinda get to thinkin’ of all the things you’ve said_

_You gave your promise to me, and I gave mine to you_

_I need someone beside me_

_In everything I do._

Abby was smiling at him, maybe this song would work. Maybe the hunt was done.

Once again the guitar tripped over beats in an almost percussion-like manner, and it was very clear these were the same guys who did Wild Thing. As those notes sounded, he dipped her low, and pulled her back up to continue the rather slow box step.

The second half of the song was exactly the same as the first half, just repeated. So no new territory there.

_It’s written on the wind, it’s everywhere I go_

_So if you really love me, come on and let it show_

_Come on and let it show..._
She kissed him as the music wound down. “Not loving the end. All in all pretty good, and if we can’t find anything else, then, yeah, I like it.”

“You think we’re going to find something else? We’ve been at this for two months, and the DJ wants a song list soon.”

“True. Okay, play it again.”

He did, and they danced through it, figuring out where their feet went and how to slip along to the music.

She was nodding by the end of it, and he took a minute to set it up with You Shook Me All Night Long right after.

“How is it we’re going to end up with a classic rock wedding?” she asked as he dipped her low at the end of Love Is All Around.

He shrugged, pulling her back up, hands settling on her low back, starting to move to You Shook Me. “It’s halfway between Jazz and Industrial?”

She grinned. They’ve already danced to You Shook Me many times, so her body knows where to go when, and his does, as well. This was a lot sexier, a lot more playful than Love Is All Around, and both of them liked it.

He kissed her, and sang against her lips, ...was the best damn woman I had ever seen... then winked at her and grinned as she pulled back and shimmied a little in front of him.

He held the beat for a few lines, and then ran his hands down her sides to end up on her hips and pull them against his. She told me to come, but I was already there.

Her head dropped back and they both happily danced to it, fast, and for the most part not too close. But when they got to the chorus, she pulled him close, her right leg sliding up his left, and sang along, You shook me all night long. His hand dragged down her arm as she stepped back, looking at him with sex in her eyes when Workin’ double time on the seduction line hit, then he pulled her back into him, curling her into his arms, her back against his chest, adding a grind, and a kiss to her shoulder and neck. She pressed his hands to her hips and shimmied against him.

Both of them were smiling when that song ended.

She turned back around to face him. “Okay, yeah, that works.”

“Good. So we can tell the DJ what the first two songs are?”

“I think so.”

He pulled out his phone and fired off a text. “So we don’t change our minds.”

She laughed. “So, now what?”

“We’ve got envelopes to address.”

“I’m starting to think your idea of just sending out emails was a good plan.”

“Too late for that. We bought the invitations, might as well use them.”

And so, music picked out, they settled down to address envelopes.
The plan wasn't to have move in day and ovulation day be the same day.

That just happened to be the way it worked out.

After Abby's temp dropped in August, three weeks after her last Depo shot, they were both pretty pleased at the idea this might be easy. But all of September came and went and nothing happened. And okay, yeah, that's not wildly unusual. It can take a while for all the artificial hormones to work their way out, and for a woman's body to get back on a regular cycle.

But Tim would be lying if he said he wasn't at least starting to get concerned about the fact that Abby's forty now, and this is probably just the Depo wearing off, but it might not be, and if it's not then they've got some big things to talk about.

But he wasn't thinking about that as he brushed his teeth that morning.

Mostly, he was thinking about how the moving truck was going to be there in less than an hour, and that he's really hoping this is their last move for a good long time because he's not a huge fan of moving, while trying to remember if they had already packed up the coffee maker, hoping they hadn't because some coffee would be good, and then Abby skipped in, thermometer in hand and said, "Ninety-seven four."

And that killed all thoughts about coffee and moving. (Okay, almost all thoughts, he's still aware of the fact that the movers are going to get there at eight, so there's something of a hard deadline here.)

The rational part of his mind knew that sperm could live in a woman's body for up to seven days, so the rational part knew that, since they've had sex every day this week, they've got this covered. In fact, it was entirely possible one of them had already hooked up with the egg and baby McSciuto could already be in the works.

But the rational part of his mind also ran off about two, maybe three tenths of a second after what she said registered. And the Yes-Sex-Now-Make-Baby-NOW! part took over.

He was already wearing his boxers and jeans, but before he'd even gotten his toothbrush put back he was unbuttoning them, and the look of pure sex Abby was shooting him as she carefully put the thermometer down confirmed that she was on the same page he was with this.

And like their first time? Second first time? Like after their 80's cover band date, he doesn't have any very clear memories of the sex. No good chronology, he couldn't tell you how many times they kissed, or if she took his jeans off or if he did, but the way it felt, that burning sense of all-consuming NOW; the overwhelming importance of each thrust, and the immense awareness of life, of her heart beating and his and both of them possibly making another heartbeat with this; the vivid feeling that this was love made real, a verb sliding into a noun, and that sex had never, ever mattered more to him than it does now; that he remembers.

And he remembers after, sitting on the bathroom floor, her in his lap, his face pressed against her shoulder and throat, her chin against his temple as they both rested quietly, breath slowing, calming down. She was holding his hand, and he had his other hand on the small of her back. He traced his fingers up her spine, settling his index, middle, and ring finger on her throat against where her pulse throbbed, and felt each exhale of her breath against his ear, and he just felt lost in how very alive they both are, and how important and amazing that is.
Sure, a quickie in the bathroom wasn't the most "romantic" sex ever. But he's not going to complain, because that was definitely some of the most intense sex they've ever had.

After a few more minutes they broke apart, cleaned up, and got ready for the day, because in ten minutes the movers were going to be there and the real world doesn't stop existing, and there's always stuff you've got to do. Like loading boxes into your car, and making sure all your furniture ended up in the right rooms, and packing up the last-minute items. No matter what else you're doing, that doesn't go away.

Granted, every time he saw her over the course of the day, he'd look at her and grin, and she'd grin back, and a few times they both just broke into happy giggles, causing the movers to look at them like they were crazy. Which made both of them giggle even more.

Sometimes happy is too big to stay inside. Sometimes it has to burst out, and right now, watching Abby unpacking the plates, looking up at him with a big happy grin, it came out in giggles instead of tears.

They would have liked to have been able to move in a bit before October 23rd. By that point, the wedding was barely a week away and moving in and getting ready for all of that was more than they'd been hoping to do all at once.

But between the late closing, and the fact that the inside of the house had needed some work the first week they had it was spent painting, refinishing the floors, and installing new carpets, so the 23rd was the earliest they could move in.

It's true that having real movers mean that this time it was a lot faster than the last time they moved. But faster and fast aren't the same thing, and it was a very full day.

So they were both pretty tired at the end of that day. But not so tired that, when he spooned up behind her, she didn't rub up against him, and not so tired that he didn't take advantage of it. And yeah, it was pretty relaxed and lazy, slow burn sex, not firework sex.

It wasn't as intense as the first round, but that extra edge of life and the idea of real sex was still there, still setting his blood on fire, pulling extra depth and pleasure out of each touch, each move.

And after, as they spooned together, ready to spend their first night in what would hopefully be the home they shared for the rest of their lives, instead of his hand settling against her chest, it pressed gently against her belly. She squeezed it. Neither of them said anything, but they were both thinking, wondering.

Her breathing was slowing down, edging toward the easy in out of sleep, and some sort of niggly little thing was chewing on the back of his mind, not letting him rest. It took a minute, but he finally got it.

"Abby."

"Mmm…"

"Happy anniversary."

She laughed a little, kissed his hand, and snuggled in closer to him. "Best two years of my life."

"Yeah, mine too."
She pressed his hand back to her belly. "Next one'll be better."

He kissed her shoulder. "Yeah."
Vows and Rings

October 26th

He's sitting at his desk in his office, pad of paper in front of him, good pen in hand, and a nice blend of tea that Ducky gave them as a house warming present in a cup next to him.

They moved in three days ago, and this is the only room in the house that's completely unpacked and ready to go.

Two desks, one with his computer set up, the other, which he's sitting at now, with his typewriter. His bookshelves didn't take too long to put back up again, and filling them with books and computer gear took him about an hour.

His workbench ended up exiled to the garage, which he doesn't mind. It's kind of nice to have a separate space for his different sets of tools.

The rest of the house is in various levels of unpacked, but this one room is done.

And the reason it's done is staring him in the face. A piece of almost blank paper sitting in front of him. It's been almost blank for a long time. And as part of procrastinating on getting it less blank, he got his entire office set up.

He's got one word written on the top of it: Vows.

Writing your own vows is a brilliant idea, until you've got to actually sit your ass down, put pen to paper, and come up with the little bastards. Then it's suddenly every bad dream you've ever had about public speaking wrapped around having to bare your heart to everyone you know.

To make matters worse (and this was something Tim never anticipated biting him in the ass) he's a writer, so his vows should be smooth, elegant, polished. They should be profound and beautiful, haunting even.

And he'd rather shoot himself in the foot than end up sounding like Palmer, saccharine sweet words that puddle into a mush of Hallmark Card romantic goo.

Even if Abby is the wind beneath his wings (which is true), he sure as hell isn't about to say it.

Not like that.

So this almost blank piece of paper has been sitting in front of him for months, taunting him with something worse than writer's block. This is fear that the words won't do the job, that they can't be strong enough, beautiful enough. Failure, writ large, about the only phrases that have ever mattered this much to him.

He's got pages of free writing from this, (mostly variations on the theme: I won't be my dad, and here's why.) and even a few bits he likes, but something that works, a draft he can shape further, nope.

He stares at the paper some more, knows inspiration isn't going to strike right this second and wanders into their bedroom to do some more unpacking.
October 27th

While choosing the wedding rings is not the sole province of the groom, fetching them once they are ready and keeping custody of them until the wedding is.

So, it's lunchtime and he's on an errand, time to fetch wedding rings.

With Palmer and Ziva, who are both claiming that it is their duty to go with him and oversee the pickup operation so they may report back to Abby on the suitability of said rings. (She's in court today. They've already testified; he's scheduled for tomorrow, so he can't go see her at the courthouse today, while they can.)

Because, you know, the entire six hours between lunch time and both of them getting home for dinner is just too damn long to wait to see them.

The jeweler, not the same one who did the engagement ring, spends a moment looking for his order, and then places a small white box in front of him.

Tim opens it and picks up the rings. Ziva and Palmer looking over his shoulders.

They're wide for wedding bands, but they're supposed to be wide, it makes it easier to see the pattern on them.

He doesn't remember how he found mokume gane metalwork for wedding rings. But he does know that once he saw it that that was right for them. The technique, laminating layers of metal together, and then folding them over and over to produce a finished product that looks like it has a wood grain has been around forever in Japan, but is fairly new in the States.

Their rings are black titanium, steel, and platinum. Mostly black with whorls of gray and brilliant silvery metal.

Ziva and Palmer are standing next to him, looking at them, saying nothing. Tim slips his out, and puts it on, for a second he's just checking to see if it fits properly, but that fades into the feeling of having it on his hand.

He rolls it around on his ring finger, feeling how right it is there.

"Ziva, can I borrow your hand for a moment?" Ziva's smaller than Abby is, but her right index finger is pretty close to the same size as Abby's ring finger.

He puts it on her finger. "Feel good? Fit nicely?"

"Yes, McGee. It's good."

He takes it back off and slips it onto his ring finger, though it only goes to the top of his second knuckle. He smiles looking at them.

Putting Abby's back into the little box wasn't too hard, but he found himself feeling reluctant to take his off.

Palmer sees it and says, "Saturday. Not too much longer."

"Nope."
The rings are sitting on top of the piece of paper, right next to what is still the only word he's got written on it.

Vows:

He plays with them a little. Slipping hers onto the tip of his index finger, and spinning his. It glints gently as the light hits the little whorls of platinum.

The rings were easy to get made. Black titanium, because they both like it. Because the tats and the wrist cuff are black. Because her engagement ring is black. Because black is them, even if he doesn't wear as much of it as she does. Steel because it's hard and strong and useful. Platinum, because it's bright, shiny, beautiful and rare.

He knows there's a language of flowers (even if he doesn't know how to speak it) and thinks there should be a language of metals. Gold, for classicists and tradition. (Ziva and Tony's rings, even though they haven't picked them out yet, will be gold. He's sure of that.) Silver for purity. Steel for strength. There's something in him that really likes the symbolism of steel in a wedding ring, because love should be like steel, strong, hard, able to withstand what comes at it, and a good foundation to build on. Titanium for... the future and forever. Platinum for light made liquid and then frozen into form.

"Hey." Abby pokes her head into his office.

"Hi. You just get home?" He waves her in. He's noticed she won't go in his office without express permission, and though he's told her she's always welcome, he also really appreciates that there's a space in their home that's his and his alone.

"Yeah." She comes in as he slides his chair a bit further away from the desk. She sits between his legs and holds out her hand. He puts them in her palm. She slips hers on her ring finger and just stares at it.

He squeezes her, and her head comes to rest on his shoulder.

For a while they just sit there, cuddling. He's got one arm around her back, but his free hand finds hers, and touches her ring finger, feeling the cool metal on warm skin.
"Put mine on me?"

She looks up and grins at him, wide, happy, eyes bright and shining with tears.

"Are you crying?"

"A little."

He looks a little disturbed by that. "Good crying?" Crying Abby is a pretty rare thing. Crying happy Abby is… well best of his knowledge this is the first time it's happened. Part of him wonders, hopes this is the first sign of a pregnancy. And part of his is aware of the fact that this whole getting married thing is pretty damn emotional, too. He knows he's been feeling everything really intensely these last few days, and doesn't think it's going to go away until after the wedding, so there's no reason she wouldn't be in a similar boat.

"Oh yeah!" She slips it onto his finger, holding his left hand in hers, looking at the matching rings. "Jimmy and Ziva told me they were beautiful, and I couldn't wait to get home and see them, try them on, feel it on my finger, see it on yours, and there it is and it just feels so good! I mean, look at them, on us, wedding rings. We're getting married on Saturday!"

He kisses her. "Yeah. We are."

She plays with the ring on her finger. "I don't want to take it off."

"Me either."

"Ziva said you needed a crow bar to get it off to take it home."

He smiles wryly. "It wasn't quite that bad. Still… What do you say? Go out, elope tonight? Take it off for an hour and then let me put it back on you for the rest of your life?"

She shakes her head, fast. "Oh no. Everyone is getting dressed up and partying with us."

"We can still do the party."

"You're just trying to get out of writing your vows." She laughs gently, looking at the remarkably blank piece of paper in front of them.

"It'd probably be easier if it was just the two of us and a Justice of the Peace."

"No performance anxiety?"

"Something like that. If I get up there and say something stupid, Tony will beat me with it until the day I die."

"You aren't going to say anything stupid."

He shrugs. He's fairly sure he's got a well-nigh infinite capacity for embarrassing himself. "How about yours? If I could read them…"

"Uh uh." She kisses him quickly and smiles. "You get to hear them when we get married. They're a surprise." He sighs. "You'll like them."

"I'll love them."

She looks at him seriously for a moment, and then takes off her ring and his. "We already live
together. We've been having sex for years. And maybe..." she rests his hand on her belly. "I'd like something to be... I don't know, different, about getting married. Something new. Something you haven't seen me do over and over. I want to stand up there and give you something you'll remember for the rest of your life. I want this to be more than just a fancy party."

He pets her face and nods, understanding that.
"Earth to Tim!"

He jerked a little at the sound of Jimmy's voice, sloshing his coffee.

"You're a million miles away. Thinking about the wedding?" T-minus two days, and his last day at work until the middle of November.

No, not really. Thinking about Abby, wondering if the pregnancy test would turn positive, wondering about a baby, flashing between images of a little girl and an little boy.

He shrugged a little, said, "That, too," and returned to stirring the cream into his coffee.

Jimmy nudged him over a few inches so he could get to the creamer and began to doctor his own coffee.

"Nervous?"

"Eh." He shrugged at that, too. No, he's not nervous about getting married. His vows are another subject all together, though.

"Vows still killing you?"

Tim turned to lean back against the counter in the break room and face Jimmy. "Yeah. I'm a writer. I'm a good writer. People pay me money to put words on paper and express thoughts. I've got a book's worth of poetry I've written for her. And yeah, some of it's dumb, but none of it is bad, and she loves all of it. This shouldn't be so hard."

"So, what's the problem?" The only issue Jimmy had had with his own vows was cutting them down. He could have happily gone on for a good half hour, but Ducky had, after reading them, gently suggested that he needed to cut at least half and better yet seventy-five percent of what he had, because no one, not even Breena, wanted to stand there for that long.

"How do you wrap up a life in, at most, a minute?"

"You're not writing a eulogy, Tim. This is a wedding. You live the life, and your vows are just the broad outline of how you're going to do it. Stick the pen in your hand, think about how much you love her, and let yourself go."

Tim blinked slowly, remembering Palmer's vows, and sighed. "Jimmy, I say this as someone who loves and respects you immensely, but you have no filter between your brain and your mouth, and you really needed one for your vows. You went on for six minutes, and yes, Breena loved them, but everyone else was silently begging you to get done. And if I take your advice and just let go, I will sound like a moron, blathering away Hallmark Card style in trite, and likely rhyming, verse, and it will be a disaster."

Palmer raised one eyebrow and took a sip of his coffee, then said dryly, "If the reports I got from Ziva are right, you have no idea what my vows were because you were only paying attention to Abby."

"I caught enough of them. What was the thing about butterfly kisses?"
"She loved that!"

Tim nodded, that was true. Sure, he hadn't been paying much attention to Jimmy or Breena, but even he noticed the fact that Breena had been staring at Jimmy, completely enraptured as he said his vows. "Yes, she did. Everyone else cringed, but she loved it."

Jimmy smiled smugly. "And when it comes to your vows, that's all that matters."

Tim sighed, fairly sure he can't make himself ignore everyone else at his wedding the way Jimmy did. "When we're alone together, I may indeed, actually, probably will let go and blather away and be happy as a clam about it, but not with forty other people watching."

"Okay, Tony."

Tim rolled his eyes and drank some of his coffee. "Don't start that."

"Stop acting like him if you don't want me to rag on you. He's too cool to say what he really feels. Fine. News flash, you aren't and never have been. I'm not either. And no one expects either of us to be cool about getting married. We're allowed to be soft and romantic and sappy about it."

Tim thought about that for a moment; that actually was a pretty good point. "You might be. You go off blathering away and what happens? Nothing. Ducky shrugs a little at you, and starts talking about the history of wedding vows. I've got to work with Gibbs and Tony and Ziva."

"Come on, what's the worst that happens? He calls you McRomeo for a few days, and Gibbs slaps you upside the head during the reception? Like that's a problem."

That was probably true, but when it came down to it, it was an excuse. "It's a problem for me, okay? I want it to be beautiful and meaningful, and..." he looked around for a moment, trying to find the right word for this, "real. It's too important to be mushy and sappy. And it's got to deal with the fact that there's darkness here as well as light. That it's not all going to be good times, and I'm still going to be there. That this is me, laying my life at her feet, giving her my everything, and building a life with her forever."

Jimmy smiled, warmly. "That sounded just fine to me."

Tim snorted. "I'm not marrying you."

"Thank God." Palmer sipped his coffee. "You said, 'too.' What else has you standing in front of the creamer just staring at it for two minutes?"

Tim thinks about it for a second, but decides Abby won't mind him talking to Palmer about this. "Did you and Breena plan to get pregnant?"

Jimmy grinned at him. "Oh." He laughed a little. "Yeah, I remember this. The only time in your life where you're sitting there thinking, 'Come on period, show up faster!'"

"More like, 'Don't show up at all,' but yeah, that's the basic idea."

"You know they have tests now that'll tell you a week before her period's due."

"Yep, got one sitting in the bathroom already."

Jimmy laughed. "How long have you been trying?"

"Six days."
He rolled his eyes and slapped Tim on the shoulder. "Please. Took four shots before we got Molly."

"You two start right after you got kidnapped?"

"Month before actually, but that certainly added some… intensity to it."

Tim grinned. "Intensity, there's a good word for it. If she hadn't been on Depo last summer, we'd probably have a kid by now."

"It's what we're built for, you know? Make more life, and nothing sharpens that need more than almost dying. We didn't even get into the house the first time. We were in the car, in the garage, and nothing mattered more than that at that second."

"Yeah, I remember that. Hell, you almost getting killed got both of us thinking along those lines…” He remembered the frantic up against the wall sex when they got home that night. Smirked a little at the idea that Palmer was doing pretty much the exact same thing at the exact same time, and then pulled his mind away from sex to what sex does. "I can feel it every time I'm not really thinking about something else. Is she pregnant? Did we just make a baby? Am I about to be a dad?"

Jimmy squeezed his shoulder. "I've done this twice now, and I can say getting surprised is a lot easier to deal with than planning it out." For Labor Day, Team Gibbs was on call, so they had gotten together at Jimmy's for a cook out. No calls came in, and shortly after everyone had sat down for dinner, Jimmy and Breena announced they were expecting a second baby in May.

"New baby was an accident?"

"Not exactly. Not really trying yet, but not really doing anything to prevent it either. But since we weren't charting, there wasn't any sort of waiting with baited breath, trying to make the calendar go faster sort of thing."

"Okay." Tim gets that and could see how that would be appealing. And really, they have sex often enough that it's not like there's any shot of missing an ovulation unless he gets sent away again, in which case it wouldn't matter.

Maybe, occasionally, there's something to be said for low tech.
Of course, when you are waiting with baited breath, there's also something to be said for high tech.

Friday morning, Halloween, Abby said, "Why would they wrap them up like this?" She pulled at the plastic wrap on the box, trying to find an edge to slip her fingernail into.

"Here." Tim took it from her, whipped the knife he kept on his keychain out, and slit through the plastic and the box under it. He gave it a yank, harder than he intended, he's a bit excited, ripping it open and flipping two six-inch-long wands and an instruction/information pamphlet out.

He bent down to pick one of the wands off the bathroom floor. They only need one right now, and it's not like this is rocket science, so he's not feeling a need to read the directions.

"Rule number nine always comes in handy," Tim said as he cut the pregnancy test out of its protective covering. He handed it to Abby, and stood there waiting, expectantly.

She looked at it in her hand, and then stared at him. "Shoo, McGee."

"What?"

"I'm not peeing in front of you. Out of the bathroom, now." She gestured to the door.

He walked out, shut the door, and stood back to it, staring blankly at the boxes in front of him. Night before last they got the bedroom fully unpacked, but the boxes were still piled in the corner. "I've seen you do almost everything else."

"And this is one thing that gets to stay in the mystery category."

"You've seen me pee."

"And when you take the pregnancy test, that'll matter."

"Fine."

A very slow minute goes by. "Are you going to keep calling me McGee?" She didn't do it nearly as much as she used to, but, especially at work, he's still McGee.

"Huh?"

"As of tomorrow, it'll be your name, too."

"Hadn't thought about that."

He heard the toilet flush, and waited another minute for her to open the door.

She did, and he looked expectantly at her. "Well?"

"I haven't looked. I wanted us to see it together." He saw it sitting on the back of the toilet, readout side down. He took two steps and reached for it, but she grabbed his hand before he could pick it up.
"It might not be able to tell, yet. The box said as early as seven days before your period. Today is the first day it could possibly tell."

"If it's negative, we can do this tomorrow."

"Or the day after. We might be busy tomorrow."

He smiled. "Yeah, we might." But he was sure that no matter how busy they might be tomorrow, if need be, they'll find the time to do this again. "You ready to see?"

"Yeah, I am."

He flipped it over, and felt electric joy arcing through him, making his knees go weak, and a dopey grin spread across his face. She was squeezing his hand hard as they just stared at the tiny gray on gray readout: Pregnant.
No one tells you that part of a wedding is running ten million errands the day before.

And no one tells you how hard it is to give a damn about them when you found out you're going to have a baby less than an hour earlier.

What Tim would like to be doing is sitting at home with Abby, probably making love, definitely basking in the we're-pregnant glow.

What he is doing is running back and forth to different airports. Sarah moved to New York three years ago, and she and her boyfriend Glenn are coming into Dulles at ten. His mom and Ben are coming into Reagan at one. Luca's family is coming into Dulles at three. It's his job to get them all picked up, to the Adam's House, and settled in in time for the rehearsal tonight.

And in between that, he's also got pick up his suit. Sure, he had to put his reception suit together on his own, that's not the sort of thing he could rent, but the formal morning suit he's wearing for the ceremony, that he could and did rent, so he's got to go get it.

Which means he's spending a lot of time in Jimmy's car (Tim switched cars with him, since neither he nor Abby has a car with a backseat.) enjoying the glorious joy that is DC traffic, and mostly just stuck in a sort of blank headspace where the only thing really going on is the immense shock of BABY.

It feels really weird. There's this huge, everything in his life is about to go sideways immensity to it, but there's also this sort of gentle null quality, too.

Part of him wants to jump around and tell everyone. Even strangers. He's chatting mindlessly with the guy waiting next to him at the luggage carousel that's been assigned to Sarah's flight, doing the usual, glad-the-flight's-on-time, who-are-you-waiting-for thing, and the guy next to him congratulates him on the wedding, his voice is polite, but he's signalling he doesn't want to talk, but Tim's feeling this desire to just tell everyone.

He keeps it in check. With the exception of Gibbs, they aren't planning to tell anyone until after they get back from their honeymoon. Won't tell most of the world until the first trimester is over. Because if something happens… He quickly shuts that train of thought down. Just the idea of it makes him feel sick to his stomach, and he really doesn't need that right now.

A crowd of people are heading toward the carousel, and it takes a moment, but he spots Sarah and waves. She waves back and a minute later he's hugging her, and a few seconds after that she's introducing Glenn, who Tim probably should have paid more attention to because this is the first of the boyfriends he's been introduced to, but he's kind of distracted.

Fortunately, as the groom, everyone expects him to be distracted.

As he's driving them towards the Adam's House, Sarah mentions that they're moving back to DC shortly after New Year's, and that does get Tim to start paying attention to this Glenn guy, because obviously his sister must be serious about him if she's not only living with him but moving to a different city with him.
Apparently he's giving Glenn a pretty good version of his interrogation technique, because Sarah sends Glenn to the front desk to get their key cards, pulls Tim aside, glares at him and says, "What are you doing?"

This is where it occurred to him that, just possibly, he hadn't been making polite, introductory small talk. "Talking?"

"Like hell, you're acting like Dad."

Tim stares at Sarah, one eyebrow high, looking exasperated. "Please. Like The Admiral would even notice you've got a boyfriend, let alone take any interest in the guy."

"He met Glenn when he was in New York for Fleet Week and likes him."

That yanks the metaphorical rug out from under Tim's feet. "What?"

Sarah calmly says, "He visits when he's in New York."

"When did that start happening?"

"When didn't it happen? He always drops by when he's within 100 miles."

Tim sighs, shoulders slumping. "Of course he does. And let me guess, he has signed copies of all of your books in his office next to the flags and medals."

Sarah looks a little chagrined at that because the answer is yes, and she's heard Tim talk about how their Dad always refers to his books as a massive waste of time and talent.

Tim grits his teeth a little and reminds himself that it is not Sarah's fault that their dad is an ass, and that she doesn't owe it to him to cut their dad out of her life, especially since, besides never being around, he's always been nice to her. "And how is he?"

"He's Dad. As long as you don't expect him to be anything other than Dad, he's fine."

"Great." He and Sarah talked about that before. He's fairly sure Sarah and Penny have as well. If there is one thing he and his dad have in common, it's the fact they both wish the other one was someone else.

"I take it we aren't going to see him tomorrow?" Sarah asks.

"Not unless something goes horrifically wrong."

Glenn catches the tail end of that as he heads back with the keys. "What's going horrifically wrong?"

Sarah takes his hand in hers. "Nothing. Just our Dad."

"Is he okay?"

Tim's a little surprised to see that Glenn looks genuinely worried, and his opinion of the guy rises.

"To the best of my knowledge, he's as okay as he ever is. Let's get you settled in. Then we can grab some lunch and go get Mom and Ben."

"That sounds good," Sarah says, and they head up toward their room. "So, tell me about the house? You all moved in now?"
And that gets them on a comfortable topic.

Chapter End Notes

Just a friendly reminder that this story went way AU at Squall, and John McGee is alive, well, and still being a complete asshole.
At the rehearsal dinner, Tim notices something. Contrary to how general demographics work, he is sitting in a group with three elderly single guys, and only one single woman.

And while it's true that usually only members of the wedding party and out-of-town guests go to the rehearsal dinner, Penny is in attendance, as well, because she wants some extra time with Tori and Sarah.

And she is getting that extra time, and also, a lot of extra attention.

Which she appears to be enjoying.

For the most part, Ducky hangs back. He'll catch her eye and smile, or wink, but he keeps his distance. Tim knows from talking to Penny that though the two of them hit it off, had gone on a few fairly promising dates, but their combined schedules meant that they rarely got to see each other. They'll go out for drinks, have a pleasant time, make plans to see each other again, and then Ducky catches a case, then she has a lecture in Europe, and he catches another case, then he has a lecture series, then she's teaching a seminar in Georgia, and so forth and so on.

Given the pace of their schedules, they've decided to be friends, and Tim decided that he is quite happy to believe that they just like to get together for a pleasant dinner now and again and nothing else happens.

And if Ducky appears to be in an especially fine mood after the two of them get together, well, Penny is a lovely and brilliant woman, and spending time with her is fun, and Tim has absolutely no interest in knowing anything else on that topic, thank you very much.

Jackson tries a less direct approach, as well. Specifically, he lets Senior head in, charm blazing, smile amped to 11, and then comes to Penny's 'rescue' a bit later.

Tony is standing next to Tim, watching Senior chat up Penny, and says, "So, they hit it off and get married, what does that make us? Step-brothers? No… I'd be your uncle, right? Uncle Tony."

"God, that's a horrifying thought," Tim says.

Then Jackson swoops in, drink in each hand, and neatly cuts Senior out of the picture as Penny smiles. "Her and Jackson, that'd make Gibbs-"

"Still your boss."

The three of them watch Jackson flirt with Penny, which she handles with a pleasant smile, grace, charm, and a fairly definite brush off. Tim looks across the party and notices Ducky appears smugly pleased.

"You think those two…" Tony asks.

"They're friends," Tim answers, probably a bit quicker than is strictly necessary.

"Uh huh," Tony says. Then Ziva catches his attention, waving him over to her and Breena and
Abby.

He and Gibbs watch the party for a little while, and then Gibbs says, quietly, "Can we talk in private?"

"Sure." Tim looks around, wondering what Gibbs would want to say to him without an audience, hoping this isn't the *hurt my daughter and I'll kill you slowly and messily* conversation, because, honestly he thought they were past that. He notices that there is a small area behind the bar where they can talk without too much attention being paid to them.

He nods in the direction of the bar. Gibbs sees it. And they head over.

Tim waits for Gibbs to start, and eventually, he does. "Tim, I know Abby's family would normally pay for this, or at least help out, and..." he slides a check into Tim's hand.

Tim unfolds it, very surprised by the offer, and then even more surprises. It takes a moment before his mind can make the numbers on the paper in his hands make sense, but, finally, ten thousand dollars registers.

His first response, which he acts on, is to wrap Gibbs in a massive hug. Gibbs handles that by going stiff, looking confused, but then he sort of melts into it and hugs Tim back. Tim finds himself thinking of this as the Godfather exception to the no hugging guys rule. On his daughter's wedding day, (okay, rehearsal dinner day) the Godfather will grant hugs.

Tim steps back and says, "This is the sweetest thing anyone has done for us, thank you. Really, thank you. But... look... I've got to be honest, we aren't hurting for cash."

Gibbs looks like he expects that response, and he's ready for it. "Weddings are expensive." By which Gibbs means this particular wedding looks God-awful expensive because Tim and Abby aren't pulling any punches on this. From what he can tell, Abby's ceremony dress (because she's got one for the ceremony and one for the reception. Something about dancing in hoop skirts and corsets...) is more expensive than his last two weddings combined. "You just closed on a house, and I know what you make."

Tim nods. "You're right. This is expensive. And look, this isn't a I'm-too-proud-to-accept-your-help sort of thing. If we needed it, I'd take it in a heartbeat. But I don't want you thinking we'd do something we couldn't pay for. We're not going into debt for this."

Gibbs doesn't quite believe that, but he's also confused because he can tell Tim isn't lying. Apparently it shows on his face.

Tim reads the look, and pulls Gibbs a bit further away from the rest of the wedding party. "Yeah, my pay grade isn't too impressive. I know that. But... okay, I don't like to talk about this. Abby knows, but I'd rather no one else did... So, anyway, the advance for *The Traitor Within* was three hundred thousand dollars. Right before we closed, I got the first draft of *Most Precious* in, so they sent me the first third of that advance." Tim smiles a little. "We're good on cash."

Gibbs stares at him, disbelieving. He does it for a full minute, which feels like forever to Tim, and makes him want to squirm. Finally Gibbs says, "They pay you hundreds of thousands of dollars to write about me?"

Tim shrugs. "All of us really. *Foreign and Domestic* was mostly about Ziva. Palmer had a lot of action in *The Traitor Within*. *Most Precious* is mainly Abby and me."

"Why?"
Tim resists the urge to say, "I'm a good writer," and comes up with, "People like these stories. They like reading about us. You've got fans. Lots of them. Some of them even write further adventures for you. If you were to go online and search Deep Six fan fiction, you'd find over fifteen thousand stories."

Gibbs looks somewhere between intrigued and horrified. "What do they write about?"

Tim thinks for a moment about what they actually write about, mainly Gibbs and Tony screwing each other silly, and decides that he's willing to break, or at least seriously bend, his don't lie to Gibbs rule on this one.

"New adventures, new romances…"

Gibbs just stares at him, waiting for more clarification.

"Many of them like you with Ziva," he says it fast, voice low. Intrigued vanishes and utterly horrified replaces it. Tim decides not mentioning the stories with him and Tony was a good idea.

"They write about me and Ziva…"

Tim feels the blush creeping up his cheeks. "Yeah, together, like romantic and... explicit."

Gibbs shakes his head, and Tim decides to get back to the topic at hand. "So, look, this is amazingly generous, and if you mean it as a gift, we will happily take it, but if it's about helping us out, it's still amazingly generous, but well, I know what you make, too, and I don't want you putting yourself out for us." He's holding the check, looking at it, trying to figure out a way to get out of this with some sort of grace.

Gibbs takes Tim's hand and closes it around the check. Then he hugs Tim, who is utterly surprised by this.

Abby bops over a second later, looking amused and slightly annoyed. "You told him, didn't you?"

"No, Abby." Tim shakes his head a little. "I swear, I'm leaving it to you."

"Then why are you guys hiding way over here, and why is he hugging you?" she asks Tim, but she's looking at Gibbs.

Gibbs shrugs, smiles a little, and pulls Abby in for a hug. He has an arm around her when he asks, "What do you think Tim told me?"

She looks at Gibbs, beaming at him, unadulterated rays of Abby joy bathing him, and says, much more calmly than both he and Tim are anticipating, "We found out this morning. We're pregnant!"

"And you tell me you don't need this?" Gibbs eyes the check in Tim's hand as a huge grin spreads across his face, the sort Tim's never seen on Gibbs before, but if he had to guess, he'd call it pure happiness.

"We don't, Boss, but there's nothing in the world we want more than a crib made by you."

Gibbs hugs both of them, kissing Abby on the cheek. Abby cries. Tim pretends he isn't crying. And Gibbs pretends he doesn't notice as he holds both of them close.

Chapter End Notes
Okay, I couldn't resist the meta. ;) And, well, I'm kind of excited about these next chapters, too, so they'll be coming a bit faster than usual.
“Tony, that’s a strip club,” Tim says as Tony stops the car in front of a large square building with neon images of naked women on it.

Tony looks at Gibbs, who just shrugs. Then he turns toward Tim. “Of course it’s a strip club. I know you may be rusty on what a good time looks like, but this is part of it.”

“I don’t want to go in there!” Palmer says. “I’ve got a woman a thousand times hotter than anything dancing on that stage, just pregnant enough to have incredible breasts, who I don’t have to pay to give me a lap dance so hot it’d be illegal if I wasn’t married to her, and who will then have sex with me, really, really, mind-blowingly great sex, after the lap dance. Why would I want to go in there?”

Tony sighs and stares at the ceiling of the car. Trust Palmer to miss the point of this. Then he says to Gibbs, “Do not let either of these two plan my bachelor party.”

Gibbs smiles at him.

Tony turns toward the backseat where Tim and Jimmy are sitting and speaks slowly, as if explaining a very simple concept to two especially dull children. “This is a bachelor party. This is supposed to be one last night of drunken debauchery and orgiastic excess before we hand our buddy over to be shackled to one woman for the rest of his life.”

Tim gives Tony his dryly amused look. “Tony, I haven’t sex with anyone other than Abby in more than three years. You’re a bit late on the last night before shackling rescue.”

“Four and a half for me.” Palmer blushes a little when he hears what he’s said and starts to bluster, “Four and a half with Breena, not Abby. Not that I’ve ever had sex with Abby. I mean, well, there was that one time, but that was years ago, and it doesn’t really count if you only do it once, right?”

Tim’s eyes almost fall out of his head, he has them open so wide. And then Palmer suddenly loses his embarrassed bluster and just smirks at him, punching him lightly on the shoulder.

“Just kidding. God, you should see the look on your face. That was for the necrophilia thing in your book. I’ve never had sex with Abby. Some hugs, a few kisses on the cheek, the full-body Rolfing when she was going for her certification in that, and, let me add, that really hurt, and the one blow job in the lab.” He sees Tim look like he’s going to explode at that and laughs again. “God, Tim, you are so easy. What’s with you tonight?”

Gibbs is looking very amused and appears to really approve of what Jimmy is doing.

Tony’s staring at Palmer like he’s seeing him in an entirely new light. “You’re really mean, Jimmy. Remind me not to piss you off.”

“Sex with dead people, Tony. Sex with dead people I had to explain to my wife because once she met Tim, she decided she needed to read his books, and Pimmy Jalmer just wasn’t quite different enough from my own name to throw her off the track. Just a shame it took this long get an opening like that. Oh and don’t worry, Tony, I’ve got plans for you. One day…” Tony starts to look really disturbed by that, but Jimmy just keeps blithely talking. “Anyway, perfectly hot woman at home, thank you. Not interested in watching skanks gyrate for money. Beer and laser tag?”

Tim just sits there, staring at Palmer, slowly unclenching the fist that had formed without his brain getting involved in the matter in the least, and nods. “Ummm... yeah... ditto on the hot woman at...
“Actually, none of us have hot women at home right now. Right now we’ve got hot women off doing whatever it is they do the night before one of them gets married.” Jimmy and Tim just stare at him. Tony sighs again. “Fine. We will be models of virtue and forgo the hot women we do not live with, and go off in search of beer and laser tag.”

Gibbs finally says something, “What’s laser tag?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be good at it,” Tim answers.

It hadn’t been a ton of beer. Just a decent amount. Enough so they could feel it, not so much Tony couldn’t drive, enough to plausibly excuse a somewhat indelicate question.

“So, my married, once married, and soon-to-be married friends, how often do you get laid?”

Tony’s expecting pretty straightforward answers, somewhere in the range of two to five times a week. Instead he sees both Tim and Jimmy think about it.

“How are we defining laid?” Tim asks.

Gibbs raises an eyebrow at that, and Tony takes over on responding verbally, “McGee, you’re getting married tomorrow, shouldn’t you already know that?”

Tim shakes his head. “Like if we do it once, get a nap, and then do it again, do we count that as once or twice?”

“Did you leave bed in between?” Jimmy asks.

“Who says we’re in bed?” Tim shoots back.

“Good point.” Jimmy nods.

“Why are you getting a nap if you aren’t in bed?” Tony asks, realizing he is way out of his depth here. He’s also noticing Gibbs doesn’t seem to think this conversation is nearly as far out of bounds as he does.

“Sofa’s comfy,” Tim says and then smirks at Gibbs, who looks a little startled. “But say it’s just the basic idea, have sex, sleep, have sex again, is that once or twice?”

“Short nap?” Jimmy asks.

“Does it matter?” Tim responds.

“Probably. Like if we’re talking about do it once, go to sleep, wake up the next morning and do it again, that’s different from do it once, crash, snooze, and do it again.”

Gibbs is nodding, and so is Tim. “True. Call it a short nap, say an hour.”

Jimmy appears to be really thinking about this. “I’d say that counts as once. What about oral?”
“I think that should count,” Tim says.

“Oral always counts,” Gibbs adds with a smile, and all three of them spend a moment just staring at him. “What? You think you’re the only guys to notice pussy tastes great? Guess what? That secret got out a long time ago. Even Ducky knows that.”

All three of them continue staring at Gibbs for a moment. Then Palmer grins. “Really, I think if we’re going to get good numbers here, a straight orgasm count would make more sense.”

“Just the ones with her, right?” Tim asks.

“You’re still doing yourself?” Jimmy looks curious.

“Not often enough to really change the count, just making sure we know what the rules are.”

Palmer’s nodding, that, and apparently this whole conversation, seems reasonable to him. Tony’s realizing that he should never, ever ask two nerds a numbers question. Those two are analyzing the snot out of this, and Gibbs is sitting back, smirking, and enjoying it.

“And just yours. Not hers. Not everyone,” and here Palmer is looking at Tony in a way that’s making him wish he had never asked this, “can tell when his girl gets off.”

Gibbs just sits there smiling. He pats Jimmy on the shoulder. Laid back, slightly drunk Jimmy is a lot of fun.

“Hey, I can tell,” Tony says indignant.

Palmer just nods. “Sure you can.”

“Have you met Ziva? Do you think she just moans a little and shivers?”

Jimmy thinks about that for an uncomfortably long time. Tony whacks his shoulder and says, “Mind out of the gutter.”

Jimmy grins at him. “Just saying, seventy-five percent of women say they fake it at least occasionally, and only ten percent of men think it’s happened to them.” And once again Palmer just stares at Tony.

“Quit looking at me like that. Go stare at him.” Tony nudges Tim.

Palmer looks at Tim, shrugs, and then looks back at Tony again. “Breena read all of Tim’s books. And told me about them, read certain bits of them to me. I know he knows what he’s doing.”

Gibbs starts looking at Tim. Though he wouldn’t admit it, he’s got signed copies of all of the Gemcity books, and, yes, he’s read them. (This is why the fan fiction idea was intriguing to him, but... Okay, he might read other adventures, but he’s sure as hell not doing it if there’s any shot of running into a love scene starring him and Ziva.) They’re straight up mysteries. Sure there’s some sex, but not a lot, and none of it featured anything he’d consider particularly impressive technique.

“Well I do, too,” Tony says.

Palmer’s look clearly says, If you say so, but I don’t buy it.

Then Tony notices something, Gibbs is really staring at Tim, so he replays the last few lines of the conversation in his mind and comes up with. “McGee’s books are sexy?” Okay, yeah, there had been that scene where “Tommy” and “Liza” had been making out at the end of Deep Six, and that
was pretty hot, but he wouldn’t have called the book sexy.

Jimmy grins. “Some of them are.”

Tim’s glaring at Jimmy. After Jimmy had given them the copy of Fifty Shades, Abby had decided Breena and Jimmy might like some of Tim’s books, and handed them over.

Jimmy grins back. “Payback’s a bitch, Tim. He writes under T.M. Gee as well, and those books are pure smut.”

“Hey, they’ve got plot and character development!” Jimmy’s not wrong, they are pure smut, but they’re *good* smut. So Tim protests the categorization.

“Here’s the plot: let’s get laid. Here’s the character development: how many different ways can I get laid? There’s a three page long sex scene every four pages in those books starring Abby with every other girl Tim’s ever had a hard-on for.”

At that, Gibbs starts laughing out loud.

“You write lesbian smut?” Tony asks, disbelieving.

“Not recently. So, why are you asking, Tony?” Tim asks, desperate to get off this topic.

Tony just stares at him for a long time and then says, “Everyone says you get less sex when you get married. I’m curious. You are married, you were married, and you’re close enough it doesn’t make a difference.”

“You’re getting married in April. Isn’t that the sort of thing you should be asking about before you get engaged?” Tim asks.

“Look, I’m going to marry her, no matter what, I just want a better idea of what happens after.”

Jimmy answers, “Getting married was great for sex. Lots and lots of sex. Then she got pregnant. First and third trimesters were awful for sex. Second almost made up for it. And the first four months of a new baby you go back to being best friends with your right hand, which, honestly, you don’t mind because you’re so tired you can barely breathe, let alone fuck.” Palmer takes another drink, and Gibbs nods at him, silently echoing Palmer’s sentiments. “Okay, look, honestly, it’s like everything else with her. You don’t want to be with her twenty-four hours a day seven days a week three hundred and sixty-five days a year. You just don’t. So, yeah, there’ll be times when get on each other’s nerves, or you’re too tired or she is, or you just aren’t in the mood for it, or she isn’t and you phone it in to make the other one happy. Even Tim over there, who writes smut and by the way he’s grinning looks like he’s about to come up with a number so ridiculously high we will all be forced to smack him upside the head and call him a liar, doesn’t get laid every single night, or want to.”

Tim grins at Tony says, “Forty-two,” and flashes his eyebrows at him.

And Palmer does whack him upside the head and says, “That’s the meaning of life, the universe, and everything, not how often you get off in a week.”

Tim, still grinning, says, “Getting off is the meaning of life, the universe, and everything!”

All four of them laugh at that, and when they quiet down Tim says, “Seven. That’s my weekly average. I don’t think getting married is going to suddenly change that.”

“Yeah, if she likes having sex with you, I don’t see why she’d suddenly stop once she got married.
It’s not like Ziva’s doing the whole, use every skill she can to get a man and then treat him as an income stream once she’s got him thing,” Palmer adds.

“So, what’s yours? You asked but didn’t tell?” Tim asks.

Tony takes a long drink of his beer. “Depends on the week, but three to five times.”

“So, you’re doing a sex count and Tim’s doing an orgasm count?” Jimmy clarifies.

“Look, I don’t know what the two of you do, but for me a sex count or an orgasm count is going to be the same.”

Tim nods and looks at Jimmy. “The difference between thirty-six and forty-five.”

Jimmy shakes his head. “Poor Ziva, stuck with an old snot like you. You know, if you ever need a hand, we’ll,” Palmer gestures at himself and Tim, “be more than willing to help out.”

Tony glares at Palmer. “Poor Ziva, huh, well, how about you? You haven’t answered.”

“Okay, just remember, eight-month-old baby at home, and my wife is eight weeks pregnant so she’s exhausted and nauseous a lot of the time. These days the average is about two. Before Molly, the average was closer to ten.”

“Ten?” Tony asks. “You are a liar.”

“How do you think I’m going to end up with two kids less than a year and a half apart?”

“You suck at birth control?” Tony asks.

Jimmy grins, looking like he was about to fire off something along the lines of Tony should talk, but apparently he catches Tim’s frantic DON’T GO THERE look, and just flips Tony off.

“Gibbs?” Jimmy asks.

Gibbs takes a sip of his bourbon. “Which time?”

Good question. Jimmy looks at Tony, since he’s the guy who started this.

“Shannon,” Tony says.

“Like Tim, seven. But you’ve got to remember, I was away six months a year.”

Tony’s got a really perplexed look on his face. “When did you ever have time to do anything else?”

Gibbs smiles. “You spend that long away, you prioritize when you’re home.”

Two hours later, when he and Palmer go to get another round, Tim says, “You didn’t... with Abby... not really, right?”

Palmer, pretty buzzed, takes a minute to figure out what Tim’s talking about and shakes his head. “Nah. Not saying I didn’t try. We’ve all tried, right? Ducky probably tried. Hell, Gibbs probably tried. But no, never more than friends.”

Tim relaxes when he hears that. He understands guys wanting to sleep with Abby. He figures that all
of the guys who have worked with Abby have at least tried. Hell, even Domaget probably tried, not very hard, mind you, but he still probably thought about it once. Or at least wished Abby was a guy.

Still, having to work with someone else who had, that’s not something he’d relish.

His woman, with his child inside her. No, that’s nothing he wants to share. He thinks about this whole marriage thing, and how it’s supposed to be a sign of just that.

He thinks about his vows. The day before he’d come up with something... not terrible. But he doesn’t love them, not yet.

They get back to the table and Tim asks, “Can we cut this short? I’d really like to head home.”

He can feel Tony’s getting ready to tease him, but he doesn’t. He just looks at Tim and says, “Sure.”
Perspective

His house is dark when he walks in. He flicks on the light, tosses his keys and cell onto the little table near the front door where keys, mail, change, small electronics, and any other bits of whatever get tossed when they come in, and sticks the bucket they'd put the Halloween candy in on the floor under it. He looks at it for a second and wonders if the first kids to their house cleaned it out, and then smiles a little at the idea of how a year from now, he'll be handing out the treats with his three-month-old baby.

Then he shakes his head and gets back to why he came home early.

It's a little after eleven.

He walks into his office and looks at the now considerably less blank piece of paper on his desk and crumples it up.

Start fresh.

A thought hits, and he acts on it. He knows he's a little drunk, which is probably a good thing, because he doesn't think he could do this cold sober, but at the same time he's feeling like this is probably where the block is coming from. This is what has to be dealt with before he can get the words to flow the way they should, the way they want to.

So he goes back to that table, grabs his phone and calls Penny.

She sounds sleepy when she answers.

"Tim? Are you okay? Shouldn't you still be out?"

"I'm fine. Just got home. Can you give me Dad's phone number?"

He hears her pause, feels her think about that. Finally she says, "Let me text it to you."

"Thanks."

He gets another beer from the fridge. *Might as well.* He'll be a lot more likely to actually dial those numbers if he's well lubricated. He took a deep drink, and then dialed.

Two rings, and then "Hello?"

"Dad."

"Tim?" His father sounds only mildly surprised by this. Like they talk regularly on say, Tuesdays, and he's calling on a Monday, instead of this being the first time they've talked since the March before last, and the first time he's called in almost three years.

"Hi Dad."

Nothing. And this has always been part of the issue. Barking orders, his dad is fine, just talking, not so much.

Finally. "Is everything all right? Is Sarah okay?"

That's a fairly plausible reason for why he'd call. "Sarah's fine." More quiet. "I'm getting married
tomorrow."
"Penny told me."

No congratulations, no why are you calling, just quiet.

"We're having a baby in the summer."

"She's pregnant already?" He can feel the disapproval over the thousands of miles.

"Yeah, Dad. Just found out today."

"Is that all?"

"Married, baby, first call in years, sure that's all." Why was he doing this again? As a focus. Break the block, let the word free. "Why did you marry mom?"

"Tim?"

"Obviously, I wasn't there, but Mom was, and Penny was, so I heard how it happened. They've shown me pictures. Traditional Catholic ceremony at the Annapolis chapel. You stood up there, in front of God and everyone who had ever mattered to you, and promised to love my mother until the day you died. Love, honor, cherish, hell, forsaking. Forsaking all others. What did that mean to you? Just not fucking around? Did you even manage that? You were gone three hundred days a year, new port every month. Did you have a woman in each of them?"

"Are you drunk?" His dad sounds like he can't believe Tim would ask any of this.

"A little, but that doesn't answer my question. Why did you marry her? What did it mean to you? Why have kids when it was patently obvious you didn't want them."

"Why do you think I don't want you or your sister?"

Now it was Tim's turn to not say anything. That his dad would ask that has him stupefied. Eventually he said, "Really? You have to ask that? Thirteen out of seventeen birthdays, you missed them. All four of my graduations. Twelve Christmases. I was in a building that blew up two years ago, and you didn't call. Penny called and visited. Mom called. Sarah visited. I know you knew what happened, everyone in the entire Navy knew."

"I had a whole fleet I had to secure."

"Bullshit! Ziva, one of my partners and best friends, her dad ran Mossad, and I don't mean he was one of the higher ups, I mean Eli David, Director of Mossad, within an hour of the bombing had called to see if his daughter was all right and offered the power of his whole organization to help us. He could do that, while running security for the entire country of Israel. But you were so busy with your fleet that you couldn't take five minutes to find out if I was still alive?"

"I checked the casualty report."

Tim takes a deep breath. Of course he'd do that.

"And when you saw my name on it, what the hell did you do?"

His father doesn't say anything to that. He's quiet for a full minute, probably hoping Tim'll change the subject or hang up on him, but Tim doesn't, so he says, "I made sure every ship on my roster was under constant watch, and that every person on those ships was accounted for and accountable."
"Of course." Deal with what you can change and help, ignore everything else.

"You could have called me, Tim."

"I was busy getting stitched up and then actually catching Harper Dearing. You know, making sure that none of your ships or your men got hurt."

"Which is what you should have been doing. Duty comes first."

"Yeah. Duty. What about your duty to us? Seriously, why marry mom if she had no claim on you? Why make vows you knew you wouldn't keep?"

His father doesn't answer. Tim holds the phone, hoping for... he doesn't know. He knows there isn't any answer that will make his relationship with his Dad better, but he hopes there might be one that will help crystalize the nebulous thoughts whirling around in his mind.

Finally his dad says, "I never lied to your mother. She knew the Navy came first, that it would always come first, and when we got married she seemed fine with that. Eventually she changed her mind, or stopped lying to herself, I don't know which. I married her because I wanted someone to come home to when I wasn't at sea. I wanted someone to look forward to my return, but not miss me too much when I was away. I wanted someone to raise my children, and I trusted her to do a good job of it. It was a Catholic ceremony because we're Catholic. We got married because it was 1974 and you didn't just shack up with a woman and have kids with her back then."

Tim closes his eyes and sighs. "You wanted a whore and a nanny."

"You stop that right this second! You do not disrespect your mother!"

"I'm not disrespecting her. I'm disrespecting your idea of her!" His father doesn't say anything to that, either.

Finally Tim says, "Thanks, Dad."

"For what?"

"Perspective."

He puts the phone down, hangs up, grabs his pen, and starts to write. This time the words knew what they needed to do and why, and so they did.
Saturday Noon:

Gibbs helped Palmer lug what felt like six hundred pounds of wedding apparel into the suite the girls' team had claimed, and then got the hell out of there.

Breena had walked in, taken two minutes, checked out both rooms, and claimed the bedroom as the one "with the good light," and started to get set up for hair and makeup and God alone knew what else. And it made him feel, honestly, a little claustrophobic. Snipers, death squads, terrorists, and drug dealers, bring 'em all on, Gibbs is willing and ready. Three girls doing hair and makeup for a wedding, two of them pregnant, even if one of them is only barely, and Palmer hanging around being a modern, sensitive version of Ducky, and well, that scares Gibbs.

So he volunteered to go get snacks, check on the set up, and check on the guys.

He headed down from the suite and poked a head into the ballroom. It looked the way he supposes it should look. Dance floor, five tables, lots of flowers, unlit candles all over the place, cupcakes over on a table on the far side with even more flowers. He heads over and inspects the cupcakes a little closer. Right after they had picked them out, he ended up with one of the coffee ones on his desk, a present from Tim, and well, he doesn't have much of a sweet tooth, but that was awfully tasty, and he was pleased to see a decent number of them were waiting for tonight.

He checked the ballroom off his list.

Go see the church next. It's not exactly between The Adam's House and McGee's but it's close enough. He pulled in, noticed the McGee-Sciuto Wedding signs were easy to spot. Not that there were going to be a ton of guests who were likely to get lost, but still, signs help.

He headed in, and again everything looked right. Basket with pamphlets on the wedding, check. (He knows they're got some other name for them, but it's not coming to mind.) Flowers on the pews, check. He stopped and looked at them a little longer, realizing that yeah, one flower is more or less the same as any other flower to him, but Abby wanted specific flowers, and if he comes back saying they're fine and they're not, he'll be in trouble. He takes a moment to remember what they're supposed to be: white roses with red edges, mixed with a few red ones and a few black ones. Yep, they are. Flowers, check.

Priest, and there he was, at the altar, doing something, waving at Gibbs, check.

He headed over and said hello.

"Everything in order?" Father John asked Gibbs.

"Think so. Just checking up."

Father John smiled. "Getting away from the Bridal party for a few minutes?"

Gibbs laughed. "That, too."

"Well, tell Abby the sisters and I have done right by her. Everything is ready to go on our end."

"Good."
Heading over to the guys was up next. They're at McGee's. Only a twenty minute drive from St. Sebastian's. He'll head over, get any snack orders they may have, and then get everything in one fell swoop.

He pulled up and noticed both Tony and Ducky's cars in addition to Tim's. Looked like Team Groom had managed to assemble on time.

It's a good house: sturdy, well built, large enough you won't always be in each other's way, small enough you can't get lost in it, extra bedrooms for future small people, and a small, tidy yard. He'd call the style, sort of Victorian-ish. Victorian as built by someone who had heard about it, but never seen it.

He walked into Tim and Abby's, noticing they also seem to always keep the door unlocked. Ducky and Tony were sitting in the living room, highlights from the night before's World Series game on the TV, no Tim in sight.

"Tim?"

Ducky nodded toward a closed door. Tim's office. "Timothy is taking a few moments for quiet contemplation."

"Can I go in?"

"Yes. I think he'd appreciate a visit from you, Jethro," Ducky said.

Gibbs knocked and heard, "Yeah?"

He poked his head in and saw Tim sitting at his desk, typewriter pushed to the side, paper in front of him, and from the looks of it, writing away. "Can I come in?"

"Sure, Boss." He was tapping the back of the pen against the page.

Gibbs leaned against the desk, in front of Tim, and looked at the paper. He could see the first two words: For Abby, and decided he doesn't need to know what's on the rest of that page.

"You doing okay, Tim?"

Tim looked up at him and sort of smiled. "Yeah. It's just... you know... big day."

Gibbs smiled back. "Yeah, it is."

Tim stared at him, eyes wide and earnest, looking impossibly young, ran his fingers through his hair, took a deep breath, and said, "I became a father yesterday," he half-laughed, half-shook his head, looking entirely like he can't wrap his head around that. "In..." he looked for a clock, "three hours and twenty four minutes, I'll be a husband, and it's all just sort of... big, ya know?"

_The difference between the night before and the day of._ Gibbs remembered that well. "Yeah, Tim. I know."

Tim sighed. "But, yeah, I'm okay. I really am."

Gibbs stared at him. He figured that by now he'd seen every emotion Tim has, and, yeah, he is okay. This is intense and scary for him, but not in a bad way. "Can I suggest something?"

"Sure."
"Tell DiNozzo about the baby before he figures it out for himself and ends up pouting about no one telling him anything."

That made Tim chuckle. "When we get back from the honeymoon. We'll tell him and Ziva and Jimmy and Breena. Then no one else until the second trimester. And he'll crack a joke about me knocking her up on the honeymoon, and I'll smile and say something like 'Not on the honeymoon', and he'll get that disturbed look on his face." Tim took another deep breath, looking slightly to the left and behind Gibbs. "It's real, isn't it?"

"Yeah, Tim, it is."

He closed his eyes and shook his head a little. "I kind of want to jump around," he looked at the pen tapping against the paper, seeming to notice for the first time that he was doing that. "Or jitter like crazy."

"It's normal. Been married four times, felt that way before each wedding."

"No offense, Boss, but I really hope I won't be doing this again."

"I hope you never do, either." Gibbs stood up. "You need anything? I'm going on a snack run."

"Would you read something for me?"

"What?"

"My vows."

Gibbs felt a little uncomfortable about that. Vows aren't his specialty. "You really want me to read them? I don't have a great record with marriage vows."

Tim nodded. "Yeah. I want... Just... If you knew your time with Shannon was going to be short, is this what you would have said to her?" He removed a piece of paper from his pocket and unfolded it, smoothing it out carefully before handing it over.

Gibbs read, eyes scanning the page quickly, and then, for what felt like a long time he just held the paper, not really seeing it. He remembered his own wedding, feeling so nervous and so happy and having a hard time standing still, and then seeing her walk toward him and how the entire world narrowed down to her, and how right, how amazingly perfect hearing those words come out of her mouth felt. He remembered her smile, and the way she looked up at him as he said his vows.

He touched his ring, and, God, he wished he'd had the sense to say something like what he just read to her, let alone live it with her.

Tim was looking up at him, expectantly. So he nodded. "It's close enough."

"So, they're good."

"Yeah." His voice was a lot rougher than normal as he said that, so he cleared his throat. Time to get into more comfortable territory. "Snacks?"

" Nope, but, if you'd wait a minute or two, I'll finish this, and you can give it to Abby."

"Take your time."

"Thanks, Boss."
"Tim."

"Yeah?"

"You can call me Jethro. Or Gibbs, like Abby does."

Tim nodded. And the next thing Gibbs knew, he had two arms full of Tim hugging him. He was shaking a little, so Gibbs patted his back. "You're okay, Tim."

After a minute, Tim pulled back, but Gibbs still had one hand on his shoulder, steadying him, and Tim seemed to appreciate the contact. Tim wiped his eyes, and said, "Yeah, I am. Really. It's just..."

"Big. I know. Trust me, I know. I remember getting married the first time. I was so nervous I almost threw up, so excited I couldn't stand still. I remember the day Shannon told me she was pregnant. I wanted to run and jump around telling everyone, and I was so scared that..." He let that go because his worst fears for Kelly did come true, and today is supposed to be a happy day. "I can't imagine wrapping both of those things into one day. You're doing fine, really. Just, don't lock your knees when you're up in front of everyone, and make sure you've got a handkerchief in your suit, and you'll be fine."

"What happens if you lock your knees?"

"You pass out mid-vows and feel really stupid when you come to." Gibbs smiled dryly, remembering one of his best buddy's weddings.

"Okay, yeah, thanks... Jethro." It sounded a little awkward, but felt very right. "Let me get this wrapped up, and then..."

"I'll give it to her. What is it?"

Tim smiled a little, looking amused. "Something even Tony would consider romantic."

"Ahhh..." And with that, Gibbs headed out, grabbing the pad he's got in his jeans pocket as well as his pen, and began asking what Ducky and Tony want.

For Abby: Four Hours To Go

In our living room, there's a small pyramid of boutonnieres in boxes and our suits are hanging from the bathroom door, the rings are in my pocket (I'll give them to Tony after we get changed.) the shoes are shined.

So, I guess that means this is real. Tony's trying to talk to me, but Ducky's pulled him away. "I think Anthony, that Timothy needs time for quiet contemplation."

I love him so much right now.

I wonder what you're doing. Time's inching by, moments per second. And I want to see you.
Funny, huh?
It’s been less than two hours since you
vanished into Palmer’s van while Breena tutted about seeing each other before the wedding.
Like we need luck when we’ve got love.
And Palmer saw her before the wedding, and look, two and a half years later,
happy as larks, and a second baby due in the spring.
(Think they’ll be surprised when ours shows up in the summer?)

God, I still can’t quite wrap my head around that.

Right now, you’re probably starting to get ready for our wedding,
and right now, there’s a tiny person, the size of a grain of rice
(Okay, smaller, really)
that’s you and me,
growing inside you.

Blows my mind.

Abby McGee
That’s blowing my mind, too.

Feels so good.

Maybe it’s some sort of weird possessive kink,
but I love the idea of marking you with my name.
Maybe it’s just a Y chromosome thing,
but right now, you with my name
my child—

God, Abby!

Can’t even begin to turn that feeling into words.

Gibbs is here.
I can hear him talking to Ducky.

-----

Back again.
He popped in, wanted to know if I was okay.
Top of the world, Boss!
Getting married today!
Became a father yesterday!
Good day!

I think he’s worried I’m about to freak out and star hyperventilating.
Or maybe he just remembers what this feels like,
and how hard it is to hold it in.
(Okay, I might have cried on him
a little.)
Anyway, he’s getting ready to go see you.
So I’ll wrap this, and give it to him to give to you.

3:17 now.
Love you, Mrs. McGee.

Saturday: 1:30

Gibbs headed back to the hotel rooms the girls had claimed, and found himself in the middle of an impromptu make-over party.

The female McGees, (well, McGee, Allister, and Langston) had joined Team Bride, and were enjoying the pre-wedding fun.

Tori and Sarah were cooing over the dresses, and flowers, showing off their own costumes. Penny and Palmer were talking about something science-y. And Breena appeared to be in charge of the whole thing, directing traffic while setting Ziva's hair in curlers.

Abby looked up at him as soon as he came in and smiled at him. Everyone was being pretty loud, and she had some of her music going, so the chance of being heard was pretty slim. He signed to her, *Got a present for you.*

*Really?*

*From Tim.*

She smiled and headed over to him. He passed off the envelope while unloading a bag filled with snacks. He figured he had everything covered: salty, sweet, hot, vegetable, chocolate, and crunchy. It'd been a while since he'd fed a room filled with women, especially pregnant ones, but like riding a bike, it came back pretty easy.

He also had, as per his instructions from Abby, two super big CafPows, each with a half-caff, half-decaf mix.

He'd been a little surprised when she asked for that, back when Shannon was pregnant caffeine wasn't on the forbidden list, hell, cigarettes were barely on the forbidden list. But she had asked, so he provided, and she looked awfully happy to be getting at least some caffeine into her system.

"Doing better?" he asked as she sucked down a long slurp, a look akin to ecstasy on her face.

"Oh, God, yes. Quitting this is going to kill me."

Gibbs smiled. "You'll make it."

She nodded, put the CafPow down, and headed to find a quiet corner to read Tim's note. And with this party, quiet corner didn't seem to really be an option, because two seconds after she opened it, Sarah was by her side, asking about it.

She said something, shooed Sarah off, and sat down to read, her eyes going soft and a warm smile spreading across her face. Then she folded the paper and tucked it into her pocket.

"Okay, Ziva, you're done for the time being. Abby, you're up next," Breena had spoken, so Abby headed over to the chair in front of the mirror.

Gibbs drifted over to Palmer and Penny, who appeared to be doing the least girly thing in this room, but he watched as Breena did something that put red streaks into Abby's hair.

Penny offered her hand and he shook it. "Have you met Tori, yet?"
"Yes, last night, briefly. Tim introduced us." They had talked for a few minutes at the rehearsal before Gibbs got called in to do his part.

Penny nodded and then looked at Gibbs for a long moment. "You're calling him Tim now?"

Gibbs smiled.

"Good. He needs more male friends." Though Gibbs caught that what she meant was she was very pleased to see him step into the long vacant father role for Tim.

Jimmy added, "There's Gibbs and I, and two more of them over at Tim's."

"Good, that's really good." She thought about that. "Two more? Is Ducky over there?"

"Yeah. He and Tony are standing up with Tim."

Penny smiled.

---

Saturday 2:45

"You know, this isn't nearly as bad as I thought it might be," Tony says, standing in front of the mirror in Tim and Abby's room.

"Did you think Abby and I would pick something that made you look like a dork?"

Tony doesn't answer that, he just looks at Tim in the mirror, and grins, then goes back to messing with his hair.

Tim's honestly a little surprised at how well Tony was doing with this. Not that he'd think Tony would look bad in Steampunk, sure Tim's not particularly interested in men as objects of beauty, but he's spent more than enough time watching women react to Tony to know that he's objectively attractive. So he didn't think Tony would look bad in a black suit, high cut crimson vest, squared off collar, white dress shirt, and black cravat, he just didn't think Tony would look so comfortable in it.

Tony looked at himself in the mirror, fussing with his cravat. "Why couldn't you have just done a tux like everyone else?"

"Because I want to be able to tell my wedding pictures from yours at a glance."

"Ha ha."

"You look fine." Tim finished righting his gloves. For the ceremony, he'd gone for the full on morning suit. The coat was dove gray, trousers charcoal with a dove pinstripe, and he finished the look off with a crimson waistcoat and charcoal ascot. "Scoot over." Tim looked himself over in the mirror. From his spats to his tie pin he looked good. He looked ready. "Got the rings?"

"Just like the last seven times you asked, I've got the rings. They're in my right breast pocket." He pulled them out and showed Tim. "See, not going to lose the rings."

"Good." Tim opened his boutonniere, and began to pin on the red tipped white rose.

"So, last chance to back out. We gonna run?"

"What?" Tim cannot believe Tony would say that.
"Wedding's in less than two hours, my tank's full of gas, and I can have us to Philadelphia before they notice we're missing. This is our last chance to get out of here. We running?"

Tim stared at Tony in horrified stupefaction. "You're my best man, it's your job to nail my ass to the ground if I try to run."

Tony winked at him. "You're ready."

Tim rolled his eyes, and threw the box with Tony's boutonniere in it at him.

Gibbs came in a moment later, while Tim was fussing with his hair. He'd let it grow out a bit, and was in the process of slicking it back. Nothing looked less steampunk than very short hair.

Tony looked at Gibbs. It was less than an hour and a half to wedding time, and Gibbs was still in his usual off work jeans, t-shirt, and USMC hoodie. "Okay, I know you told us you were going to keep what you were wearing a secret, and I know McGee said we didn't need to be completely formal, but I didn't think you'd go this casual."

He shot Tony his, 'very funny' look. "You two ready?"

"Once Marty McFly gets done with his time travel hair, we'll head off."

"You got the rings?"

"Why do you all assume I'm going to lose the rings? They're right" he pulled them out of his pocket, "here."

"Good."


Ducky adjusted his sporran slightly. "A morning suit with kilt is the traditional formal Scottish wedding attire. The Mallard tartan has been worn proudly through four hundred years of Mallard weddings. Why my mother..." And off Ducky went on the history of weddings, family tartans, honeymoons, and love in general. Tim didn't pay much attention to his words, though he found the gentle burr of lightly Scottish accented noise soothing. He wasn't nervous, buzzing with excitement, yes. He wanted to pace, or maybe go for a quick jog, something to burn off the energy. But not nervous. Not anymore. He'd watched Gibbs read the vows, and if they choked him up, they were ready to go.

Gibbs caught his eye and smiled at him. A look that said, 'I know how you're feeling, and it's normal.'

"DiNozzo, Ziva gave this to me, wanted you to have it."

Gibbs handed Tony a small, rectangular, white box. Tony took it and just looked at it. "What is it?"

"How would I know? I'm just on delivery service today. And Tim, whatever you wrote for Abby, it was a big hit. I'm supposed to give you a kiss in return—"

"Not necessary."

"Didn't think you'd want it." Gibbs checked the clock. "An hour twelve 'til showtime. I'm gonna go meet back up with the girls. See you at the church."
Tony opened the box and grinned, then he pulled out a pair of red sunglasses with small, round lenses. He pushed his hair back a little, and slipped them on.

"Oh my!" Ducky grabbed his camera. "We must have pictures of this." He arranged Tim and Tony together and began snapping away.

Saturday 2:55

"I have never been more glad to live in the present than I am now," Ziva said as Jimmy pulled on her corset strings. "Why are we wearing corsets?"

"Realism Ziva. The dresses won't look right if you aren't properly laced into them."

Okay, sure she didn't have to be wearing a dress with a corset. In fact, with the exception of Abby, who was already laced into hers, and currently in the other room, having Breena work on her makeup, no one else was wearing a real corset. And Ziva wasn't planning on wearing this for very long, just for the ceremony. See, the thing she didn't much like admitting was how, well, pretty all of this lacy, fluffy girly stuff was. And she really wanted to wear some of that pretty. Just for a little while, at least. So like Abby, she had a ceremony dress and a reception costume, happily letting both halves of herself play.

"I can't breathe in this." Jimmy let the strings out a bit. "Jimmy, how did you get the job of ladies' maid? Isn't that supposed to be something another woman does?"

"Usually," he said as he tied the strings. "But Breena's doing Abby's hair and makeup, and I've got more upper body strength than any of you."

"Are you sure about that?" Ziva asked.

"I can bench 180."

Ziva looked over her shoulder at Jimmy, shocked. "Why can you do that?"

"I move corpses around for a living. There's no magic fairy that moves them from the ground to the gurney and from the gurney to the table and the table to the cooler. That's mostly me and that takes strength."

"Okay, you have more upper body strength."

"So, as man of honor, I'm on corset lacing and dress lugging duty. Now stay still, I've got to finish getting this tied."

When Ziva looked in the mirror, she had to admit the effect looked amazing, looked as good as she had hoped it would. Her posture was perfect, and her torso was shaped into a perfect hourglass. It felt like crap, and all she wanted to do was slouch, but it looked fabulous. She couldn't wait to see Tony react to this, couldn't wait to see him react to the reception costume, too. And in order to get to enjoy his reaction in full, both outfits had been kept top secret.

"Okay, petticoat next." Jimmy held it open, and she stepped into it. She could tie it herself and did so while he got the hoop ready.

"Okay, Steampunk," Jimmy said, and she stepped into it. She could tie it herself and did so while he got the hoop ready.

Of course, liking the idea of how this looked and coming face to face with all seventy layers of clothing was a somewhat different thing. "You had to suggest Steampunk."
Jimmy smiled. "Steampunk is a lot of fun. Have you seen what Breena's gonna be wearing?"

Ziva nodded. Breena hadn't gotten dressed yet, since she was on makeup and hair duty and she didn't want to risk getting anything spilled on her dress, but Ziva and Abby had been there for her last fitting, so they had seen that she had gone for a long flow of silk, asymmetrically falling from her right shoulder to just above her knees, color bleeding from white to crimson with every shade of pink in between, cinched tight (ish, she's two months pregnant after all) with a black corset. A crimson choker, black stockings, and crimson ankle boots finished a look more or less designed to make Jimmy swallow his tongue when he saw it.

"At least I won't be in this too long." For the reception, Ziva had gone for a long black leather coat, fawn colored leggings, black boots, a crimson blouse, and black leather vest, holster slung low on her hips, tied down gun fighter style (she had asked Gibbs for help with the costume) and a replica Colt.

"Not too long. Okay, let's get this set." He tied the hoops around her waist and then added the bustle. "Shirtwaist next."

"Did they really use so many buttons? There has to be thirty of them."

"If it's going to be properly tight, and you live in a world that doesn't have elastic, you end up with lots of buttons. I can help if you want."

"I can button my own shirt."

And Ziva did, until she realized the four buttons at each wrist. As Palmer was closing the last button, Ziva realized there was absolutely no way she'd be able to do up her own shoes.

"I think shoe buttoner just got added to your to-do list, Jimmy."

"Not a problem. I've got the little hook they used to make that easier."

"They had special hooks for buttoning shoes?"

"Have you seen the buttons on those shoes? They're miniscule."

"And are you planning on being around to help get me out of this?"

"I think Tony can figure that out on his own, but if he's having trouble, feel free to call me. It occurs to Ziva that only Jimmy could say that without any hint of salacious intent. "Okay, I've got your skirt set. Arms up."

Getting the skirt on took close to three minutes. It wasn't just that you had have it draped over you, and then tie it closed, it was getting it arranged and draped over the bustle properly.

They had just about gotten it set when Abby and Breena stepped out of the next room.

Both Jimmy and Ziva stopped dead and stared.

Abby's dress was white, mostly. Pure, pristine white. Practically the mathematical ideal of white, but like the roses in her hair and bouquet, that perfect pristine white was edged in deep, beautiful red. At her wrists, and at the edge of each flounce on her skirt was a line of crimson. And on her neck, resting just above the dip of her collarbone was a pearl choker with a black on red cameo.

The bodice clung to her exactly the way it should, not a hint of gap or wrinkling as it skimmed down
her upper body before flaring into a collection of ruffles over a hoop skirt. Her posture was straight and regal. Breena had started her hair by clipping in several red streaks, and then set her hair in perfect Gibson girl style, mostly black with occasional red, curls piled atop her head, accented with pearls and miniature roses. The makeup was fresh, glowing, playing up the natural contrast between the white dress and Abby's dark hair and lashes.

"You're beautiful," Ziva and Palmer said in almost perfect concert.

"My best work, ever," Breena said, arm around Abby. "You know, it's a lot different doing the makeup on a live person." Jimmy nodded and kissed his wife, feeling very proud of her at that moment. Then he kissed Abby's cheek.

"He's so going to cry when he sees you," Jimmy said with a laugh.

Abby smiled, enjoying the way they were looking at her.

Gibbs took that moment to come in and felt his breath catch in his chest. He forced himself to exhale. "Oh, Abby." If he'd ever been on the verge of tears, this was it. He remembered Tim crying on him, and damn if he didn't feel like he might cry, too. His beautiful girl, one of them, anyway, was getting married today. And, like Palmer a minute before, he kissed her cheek, carefully, not wanting to smudge anything, and held her close, feeling swamped with how much he loved her right that moment.

"I told you, you'd like it." She squeezed him back.

He kissed her again, and went to hug Ziva. "You're beautiful, too." And she was, her own dress, a deep blue-red ruby trimmed in black, went perfectly with her skin and hair.

Breena got a hug and a kiss as well.

"Palmer." He nodded at Jimmy.

"It's okay, I don't need a hug." Gibbs gave him that somewhat bewildered look, the sort he often ends up sending to Jimmy when he says something so far outside what'd he consider the rules of normal behavior that he doesn't know what to do.

That got Gibbs back on track. "We're due downstairs in twenty-seven minutes. The guys sent me to make sure Jimmy and I were dressed in time."

Jimmy looked down, seeming to realize for the first time that he was still in a button-down, jeans, and sneakers. And Gibbs, of course, was still in jeans, a sweatshirt, and t-shirt.

"You're right, we should get changed. Let me just help Ziva get the bodice on. The sleeves are designed so the girls can't move their arms much."

"Still think this was a good idea, Abbs?" Gibbs asked the bride fondly.

She was staring at herself in the mirror, almost like she can't believe this is really her. "Tim's gonna cry when he sees me. Oh yeah, this was a good idea."

Gibbs kissed her one more time, for some reason he can't seem to stop doing that. "Yeah, he is."

Jimmy smoothed the sleeves of the bodice down Ziva's arms. "You got the buttons for yourself?"

"Sure. And if not, Breena or Abby can help me with them."
"Okay, I'll be on shoe duty in a few minutes."

Gibbs looked at Palmer, curious. "Shoe duty?"

"You try putting on shoes with twenty buttons when you can't bend at the waist."

Gibbs nodded. That didn't sound too easy.

3:05 Saturday

The girls headed into the "good light room," giving Jimmy and Gibbs a little privacy for getting dressed. Okay, giving Gibbs some privacy for getting dressed, at this point all three of them know Jimmy well enough that seeing him in boxers isn't an issue.

Gibbs hadn't gone for the Stetson. In fact, with the exception of Jimmy, who was absolutely rocking the ever-living snot out of a bowler-who looked like he'd been waiting his entire life to wear one, who for all practical purposes appeared to have been born for the 1880s and the combination of the double breasted black frock coat and vest he was wearing along with the bowler and a crimson cravat-none of the guys opted for hats. Sure it wasn't precisely in tune with the style, but they're modern guys.

And Gibbs hadn't gone for the western sheriff look, no matter how fitting it might have been.

He had, like Tim, gone for a dark-gray morning suit, with full on waistcoat and ascot. To mark himself as father of the bride, his waistcoat and ascot were white, and matched with a white rose boutonniere. It occurred to him that he has never, ever dressed up so fancy in his life. Not even for his own weddings did he don clothing like this. The things you'll do for your kids. He thought while shaking his head, pinning the flower into place.

He drew the line at the gloves, though he noticed Tim had been wearing them. Silly, he'll be taking the damn things off about ten minutes into the wedding to put the rings on. He'll figure that out soon enough.

He's pulling on his shoes, listening to Jimmy natter away, marveling at how much Jimmy is turning into a junior version of Ducky, and also how, in costume, dressed one hundred and thirty years out of time, Jimmy looks completely comfortable. Like, somehow a costume lets him be his real self.

He straightens the pin that goes through his ascot, and thinks about how he'll be doing this again, though in a regular tux, Thank you DiNozzo!, in five months.

And he thinks about a third wedding, one that will never happen, and how he had, from the day she was born, dreamed of giving that bride away. He focuses on the present and enjoying the people he has, and trying to not miss the ones he's lost, too badly.

He's here, alive, and getting ready to give the bride away. Soon, he'll be a grandpa, or close enough it won't matter. Which boggles his mind, and not only because of how much he's looking forward to holding Tim and Abby's baby.

The dreams you build with the people in your life don't die when those people do. That's the horror of dreams, they linger and taunt you with a future that's gone. But, given time, some awfully sweet new dreams could come along, and they could quiet some of the pain of missing the old ones.

Jimmy's still talking, but he's finished tying his cravat, so he looks done to Gibbs. "Come on, let's let
the girls know we're ready."

Saturday 3:16

When the girls return to the main room, Ziva’s hair is out of the curlers, pulled toward the back of her head and allowed to cascade down her back in a long flow of gentle curls, and like Abby, her makeup is light and glowy.

Palmer doffs the hat, bows low, offering the three of them a courtly gesture and kissing hands. That he would do it, and look natural at it, has Gibbs flabbergasted.

Breena's still not dressed. "Jimmy?"

"Yeah."

"I need some help."

Jimmy grins, looking like he was really going to enjoy 'helping.' "And help is on its way, my lady." He picks the shoe hook off of the dresser and tosses it to Gibbs. "Looks like you're on shoe duty."

Gibbs looked at the hook in his hand and said, "Who's up first?"

Abby pulled up her skirt. "Mine are already on. I put them on before the corset."

"Good thinking," Ziva said.

"I've worn a corset before. I'm guessing you haven't."

"No."

"Let's get you in your shoes." Gibbs waited for a beat, expecting Ziva to sit down, and then another thought occurred to him. "Can you sit in this?"

Abby smiled. "Yes, it just takes some practice." She carefully sat on the edge of the bed, showing them how to move to make it work.

Ziva sat down, and a minute later, Gibbs started on shoe buttoning. He expected more chattering out of Abby, but she seemed happy with quiet. So a long minute stretched in comfortable, content quiet while he wrestled with Ziva's shoes.

They could hear Palmer and Breena softly giggling in the other room.

Another minute passed, and he finished up with Ziva's shoes.

As he was standing up, both of his girls hugged him. Both of them, so different, so perfect, so his, and in his arms, broke Gibbs, and he felt the tears slide down his cheek and the grin he just couldn't stop spread across his face. He kissed both of them again.

Abby smiled brilliantly at him. "I love you, too, Gibbs."

He kissed her forehead one more time.

Palmer and Breena came out and joined the hug, after a minute Jimmy pulled back and wiped his own eyes. "So, we ready to head off and get you married?"
Abby nodded. "Yeah, Jimmy, we are."
A formal Catholic wedding wasn’t anything that mattered to Tim. But it did matter to Abby, and so he’s standing there, on the front steps of the St. Sebastian’s, chatting with Father John, who he rather likes, greeting the guests as they wander in.

Getting married at St. Sebastian’s had required two things, first for him to be Catholic, and, at least on paper, that’s true. And six weeks of pre-marital counseling, which he hadn’t been thrilled about, but at least it gave him a chance to get to know the man marrying them. And, as an added bonus, Father John took a very gentle approach to trying to bring Tim back into the fold.

He thinks Father John took one look at him, and decided that if there was any shot of turning Tim back into a believer, brow beating him about the need for eternal salvation wasn’t the way to do it.

And he agreed with Tim that if he didn’t feel he could take Communion, that he shouldn’t. He’d serve Abby, not make a big deal of Tim just sitting there, and then offer the rest of the guests the opportunity to partake.

Tim’s honestly somewhat curious to see how that’ll work. This isn’t a very Catholic intensive group. Luca, Harper, Melody, Abby, and her pet nuns, maybe Fornell and his daughter? Maybe not, Fornell’s divorced. This time last year, Tony would have taken Communion, but since he’s Jewish now, that’s not going to happen. Tony’s dad? Like Fornell, he’s divorced, a whole bunch of times over. Tim doesn’t mind the idea of the Mass part of the ceremony being short, and less than a third of the guests taking communion will speed it up.

Honestly, he’d happily skip all of the ceremony but the vows.

Tony joined them. “Just got the text from Ziva. They’re five minutes out.”

“Almost show time. I’ll go meet them, get your lady into the bride’s chamber, and soon we’ll get you married,” Father John said, heading through the entryway.

Tim smiled. “Soon.”

Vance and his kids showed up a few seconds later, and Ducky swooped in, wrapping Kayla’s arm around his, washing her in a stream of gentle words about how lovely she was looking in her costume, while leading her to their seats.

Sister Rosita showed up a minute later, kissed him on the cheek and wished him well.

And a few minutes after that Kyle and his girlfriend came in, and by Tim’s count, that meant the whole party was there.

Father John came back a few seconds later. “Is that everyone?”

“Yeah,” Tony answered.

“Okay then.” He turned to Tim. “Got a handkerchief in your suit?” Tim nodded. Then to Tony he said, “Got the rings?”
Tony patted his jacket. “Got the rings.”

“Doctor Mallard, do you have the readings you’ve selected?”

Ducky touched his breast pocket. “Song of Songs is ready to go.”

“Well then, gentlemen, I think it’s time for you to line up, and head on in. You know where you’re supposed to stand, so get over there.”

Tim took a deep breath, let it out, and forced his hands to stop jittering. Go time!

Tony saw him do it, grinned, and then gently squeezed his shoulder.

And then he walked to the front of the Church, turned to face the aisle, and waited for the first glimpse of his bride.

Tim and Abby had decided on a family-only wedding. It amuses Gibbs to see who qualifies as family. His dad is there, in full on Western gambler wear, as is Tony’s, in perfect bespoke cut-away, ascot, top hat, and silver tipped cane. Tim’s dad isn’t. But his sister, sister’s boyfriend, mother, stepfather, and grandmother are. Luca’s family is here, and so is Kyle and his girlfriend. Vance and his kids are here. Fornell is here, with his daughter as his plus one. There are a few cousins that Gibbs doesn’t recognize, half a dozen nuns, and that’s it. Thirty people, tops.

He’s supposed to be hiding out in the Bride’s chamber, but the photographer wants shots of the girls together, so he drifts over to Fornell, looking at a very plain, almost military style uniform in navy blue topped off with a buckskin duster and a something he’d call an 1880s style cavalry hat with goggles and gears on the band.

Fornell looks him over and smiles, vastly amused. “What are you supposed to be?”

“Father of the bride. I should ask you the same thing.”

“I have no idea. Ever since Christmas she’s been messing around with this costume, doing research, sketching, sewing. She kept muttering about dirigibles and aeronauts, and sketching more and tossing sketches away and starting over, bossing me around and nagging about buying more fabric and things to stick on the costume.” Fornell sighs. “As soon as I said yes to her and Abby, I lost any control I had over this.” Gibbs looks over at Emily Fornell. She’s sitting in a pew, playing with her phone, taking pictures of everything, and chatting with Kayla Vance and Harper Sciuto. Emily and Kayla are in outfits he’d call dance hall-girl-wear designed by someone who had to get her father’s permission to leave the house in it. Harper’s in leggings and a corset covered with a knee-length gold brocade coat. All three of them appear to be having a blast.

“She’s taking lessons from her mom?”

“I think she’s teaching them.”

Gibbs shakes his head. “Dirigibles?”

“Like the Hindenburg.”

“Uh huh.”

“Yeah.”
Vance joins them. He’d gone for the Western Sherriff look, and was, with the exception of a cobalt vest and tie, and his Texas Ranger style badge, in head to toe black. He looks Gibbs over and smiles, and then says to Fornell, “Why are there gears on your hat?”

“I have no idea about that, either. But I’ve got them on my gloves, too.” Fornell shows both of them a pair of cavalry gloves he has folded and tucked over his belt, also bedecked with gears on the cuffs. “Almost everyone here has commented on how ‘cool’ I look. I’ve got nuns telling me I’m cool. I’m not sure I like being cool.”

“Your cross to bear, Tobias,” Gibbs says dryly.

“You ready to do your part?” Vance asks Gibbs.

Gibbs nods and checks his watch. “Yeah. I should get back over there.”

“Okay.”

How many photographs does one wedding need?

Gibbs is fairly sure that the guy with the camera has taken more shots of him with Abby and Ziva than were taken of him as the groom in all four of his weddings combined.

Fortunately Father John came in and put a stop to that. “Everyone is here, and the guys are in place. It’s wedding time.”

Gibbs silently thanks God, and the photographer heads off to set up in the Church somewhere to get seventeen million more shots.

They’re waiting in the front hall, lined up, ready to go. Ziva’s going in first, then Breena, followed by Jimmy, and then the two of them.

The doors open, and some pleasant, mostly piano, music echoes out. Ziva smiles at them, looks forward, and takes her first step down the aisle.

And suddenly Gibbs is really hoping the photographer got a shot of Tony’s face as he saw Ziva because the utter shock at Ziva in a concoction of fluffy, lacy red, combined with the look of a man so deeply in love he doesn’t know what to do with himself was priceless.

With Ziva halfway down the aisle, Breena gives Jimmy a quick kiss, and she’s off. Then he turns to Abby, kisses her cheek again, squeezes he hand, whispers, “I love you” in her ear, and follows his wife down the aisle.

It should only be thirty seconds before they go, but it feels longer.

“You doing okay?” Gibbs asks as they wait to walk down the aisle. Palmer’s almost all the way down. He was expecting Abby to be bouncing around all over the place right now, but she’s not, she’s beautifully calm, composed, and radiant.

“Yeah. I am.” She takes a deep breath. “I think this is the difference between happiness and joy.”

Gibbs smiles, gives her a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. The music changes, her bridal march. They wait for a beat longer, as everyone stands up. “You ready?”

She squeezes his hand, and he wraps her arm around his. “Yeah, Gibbs, I am. Let’s go.”
He found himself grinning. “Let’s go.”

Tim didn’t cry when he saw her. He was actually pretty proud of that.

He couldn’t have named the emotion going through him as he watched Abby walk towards him, radiant in white and red, Gibbs at her side, with a week’s worth of time and every thesaurus ever written.

But, if you were to ask him to describe it, the best he’d be able to do would be this: it was like every good feeling, every great feeling, love and hope and joy and bliss and contentment and peace and ecstasy and more love on top of that, all jumping around trying to burst out of every pore.

So, instead of crying, he stood there, beaming, huge smile plastered on his face, forcing himself not to fidget, watching her smile back at him, burning every detail of this into his memory.

They stood there, just a few feet away, and Tim wanted to reach for her, take her from Gibbs, but it wasn’t quite time for that yet.

The Priest began his part, and Tim waited, willing it to go faster.

“Who gives this woman...”

“Her brothers and I do.” Gibbs hugged Abby for a long minute, then kissed her cheek, and gave her hand to Tim, squeezing both of their hands as he did it and headed to his seat, next to Luca.

Tim held Abby’s hand. She was so excited she was trembling, and he was too, and he had no idea what Father John was saying, couldn’t care less. The perfection of this moment, of Abby in front of him, hands in his, washed everything else away.

He tuned in just enough so he didn’t mess up. Father John was going to ask some questions, and he can’t just sit there, staring at Abby, memorizing how the red strands entwine with the black of her hair, or the curve of her ear, or the luscious slip of the pearls of her choker against her throat each time she breathes.

“Do you Tim take Abby to be your wife – to live together after God’s ordinance – in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, in sadness and in joy, to cherish and continually bestow upon her your heart’s deepest devotion, forsaking all others, keep yourself only unto her as long as you both shall live?”

Time to talk. “I do.”

She smiled, eyes so happy, whole being suffused with joy as he said that, and he felt all lit up, seeing her respond to two simple words.

“And, do you Abby take Tim to be your husband – to live together after God’s ordinance – in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, in sadness and in joy, to cherish and continually bestow upon him your heart’s deepest devotion, forsaking all others, keep yourself only unto him as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.” He heard her say that and knew how she felt half a moment earlier, the intense high of words that feel better than almost anything else in the world.
“What token of your love do you offer?” Tony got the rings out of his pocket. “Would you place the rings in my hand?” and handed them to Father John.

John held the rings in his upturned palm. “May these rings be blessed as the symbol of this affectionate unity. These two lives are now joined in one unbroken circle. Wherever they go – may they always return to one another. May these two find in each other the love for which all men and women yearn. May they grow in understanding and in compassion. May the home which they establish together be such a place that many will find there a friend. May these rings on their fingers symbolize the touch of the spirit of love in their hearts.”

He handed Abby’s ring to Tim. “Tim and Abby wanted to expand on those ideas, add something more personal to them, so they’ve written their own vows to go along with the exchange of rings. Tim…”

Tim held the ring in his right hand. He took a half-step closer to Abby, raising his left hand, realizing he’s got the glove on and taking it off quickly, this touch needs to be skin to skin, and then rested his palm against her jaw, fingers by her ear, thumb gently stroking her cheek.

He held her gaze, reveling in the green of her eyes, the black of her lashes, and the sublime beauty of her smiling at him. He took a deep breath and began to speak. “Every day, we go out, fight the bad guys, and make the world a better place. We use our time and our energy to do important things.” He was smiling, but he could feel the tears starting, and hoped his voice would hold for this. “And I promise, from today until I take my last breath, to remember that you and our children are a world unto yourselves, filled with important things, one that I am privileged to belong to. Today, I pledge my life to putting that world first.

“I love you, Abby, that’s my bedrock. It’s the foundation of my life.

“Above and beyond anything else, I am the man who loves you.

“I love you. That’s the catalyst of my life becoming our life.

“I love you. And from that love, and from our life, comes new lives.

“I love you, and from this breath to my last, I will live that love in everything I do, valuing it above and beyond all other commitments, knowing that it’s both my honor and my duty to do so.”

He swept away her tears with his thumbs, and felt his own on his cheek, and it didn’t matter that the priest hadn’t said he could do it, words like that need to be sealed with an action, so he leaned in and kissed her.

For a good ten seconds there was nothing but silence while they kissed, her lips sweet and warm on his. Then the priest cleared his throat, causing Tim to pull back.

Father John made some sort of half-hearted joke about getting an early start in, which caused the guests to giggle a little, but mostly served to tone down the intimacy of his words and dull the force of them on those who had assembled to witness this.

Tim quickly wiped the tears off his cheek, took her left hand in his, grinned at her, and slid her wedding ring onto her finger.

“And now for Abby’s vows.”

She smiled at him, already holding his hands, but he felt her give him a little extra squeeze, and then took his hand, lifted it to her lips, and kissed the palm.
“You told me once, that symbols should matter. And you live that. You wear me on your skin,” her hand caressed his arm where the tattoo was, and brushed over the wrist cuff he only took off to shower, “and carry me in your heart. And today is a symbol of that, but it’s more than just the symbol; it’s also action. It’s ideas made real. It’s a promise, and a hope, and the first step of something familiar, yet new. Today is both of us taking on a new symbol, and pledging to live up to it, to make it matter. I love you, Tim, and I promise to be worthy of this symbol. I will be worthy of your life, your heart, and your name. I will treat you with care and respect, with love, and with the joy having you near brings me. From now until you lay me to rest, I will be at your side, traveling through this world with you, and anywhere with you will be my home.”

She slipped the ring over his finger, holding his hands, thumb stroking over it, grinning brilliantly at him. He was starting to lean in to kiss her again when Father John started talking, reminding him they weren’t alone.

Tim tuned back out again, focusing on Abby and not what Father John had to say. But, since he was focused on her, he caught the slight shift in her expression which meant start paying attention.

So he noticed when Father John said, “You may now kiss the bride.”

And so he did.

Chapter End Notes

Reception tomorrow, followed by honeymoon-y goodness. Hope the vows lived up to the hype.
"Ziva's going to want to get changed, too," Abby says as they walk into the bedroom of the suite at the hotel.

The plan is finish up the formal photos, head back to the hotel, get changed into the less formal reception costumes, and then party time. Palmer and Breena had been nice enough to give Tony and Ziva a lift, and the wink Palmer gave Tim made him pretty sure they'd drive slow, which meant Tim and Abby had had his car to themselves. And he probably set the land speed record from the church to the hotel.

Tim grins at her, shutting the door to the bedroom, or as Breena had called it, 'the good light room', locking it, pressing her against it, saying, "They can wait. I've got you all to myself, Mrs. McGee, and I intend to take advantage of it."

"It or me?"

"Both!"

He steps back, and turns her away from him, kissing her neck, and starting on the line of tiny buttons down the back of her dress.

"I get why they call them bodice rippers. This is impossible!"

Her eyes are wide as she looks over her shoulder at him. "Don't rip it! I really like this dress and want to keep it."

"Then you better hope I can get this off in the next two minutes, because I'm going to go crazy if I can't." He's nipping wet kisses down the part of her back he has managed to get exposed, about the top three inches.

She reaches behind her, cupping him through his trousers, and gives him a firm squeeze. "God, Abby, that's not helping my concentration."

She laughs, joy and happiness bubbling out, gently squeezes him again, and then lets go, starting on the buttons on her sleeves.

His fingers yank at the buttons, forcing them through their holes fast, and in less than two minutes he does get the bodice off. Tim tosses it aside, pushing the straps of her shift down, kissing her shoulder while he starts on the knots holding up her skirt.

"Who tied this for you?"

"Palmer."

"Palmer is evil. Pure unadulterated evil."

"Why?"

"Screw this." Tim grabs the small knife he's got in his key chain and begins to cut through the ties on the dress and bustle. "Triple knots. Tiny, little, impossible to untie, triple knots."

Abby giggles as her skirt falls to the floor. The bustle and hoops join it a second later.
For a moment, Tim stops to just look at her. White, button-up, high-heeled ankle boots, pure white stockings, a white shift skimming from her thighs to her shoulders, and a white corset, embroidered with tiny, blue roses. His eyes drift to the tattoo he put on her arm, and the ring on her finger, and to her stomach, still flat under the corset but not for all that much longer, and that insane rush of MINE that Palmer had talked about hit him like a hammer to the skull.

His hand draws up her leg, urgent, looking to tug panties off, and finds bare skin.

"Oh, that's so hot!"

She grins at him. "I thought it was possible we might find a time to do this."

He hooks her leg over his hip, fingers caressing virginal white stockings tied with light blue ribbons. "God, I love you."

"I love you, too." She kisses his bottom lip. "Now quit fooling around and fuck me!"

"Yes!" He drops his pants and slips into her. "Oh. Fuck baby, you're glorious!"

"Damn right I am!"

It's fast. It has to be, Ziva and Tony are going to be up soon, and while the potential to get caught adds to the thrill, actually getting caught isn't something either of them want.

And happy. They both keep laughing between hot, wet kisses and soft, muted groans.

Tim thought he'd seen every version of Abby's orgasm face, but this one, a mix of smile and pleasure so sharp it almost hurts, blows him away.

He's standing on shaky legs, breathing hard, enjoying his own post-orgasmic tingles and the soft aftershocks of hers, forehead on her shoulder when he looks up at her and says, "We should make a habit of this."

"This?"

Another kiss. "Up-against-the-wall quickies at weddings. Definitely need to slip off during Tony and Ziva's."

"I'll be five months pregnant then."

"Oh God, you will." His eyes light up as he imagines her five-months pregnant. "You'll be all soft and round and curvy. And we will definitely have to do this. Tony and Ziva's wedding, no panties for you!"

She giggles at that. His hand closes on her breast and he kisses gently, then her shoulder and neck.

"I can just see it. Soft round breasts, soft round belly, God, you'll have to beat me off with a stick to keep me away from you when you're five months pregnant."

"Beat you off with a stick? We've never tried a stick before, but I suppose I can do that. What are you thinking, a long thin rod, like a pointer, or a branch from a tree?"

He laughs, head back, eyes closed, joy just bubbling out.

"We can figure that out then." He leans his forehead against hers. "You know what?"
She kisses the tip of his nose. "What?"

"We got married!"

She's smiling, eyes bright. "Yeah, we did." They hear the door to the suite open, followed by Tony and Ziva's voices. She kisses him again, arms around his neck. "And now we've got to get changed and act appropriate."

He twists and reaches, just able to grab the box of tissues on the dresser. "There's one thing to be said for condoms," he says, voice quiet. "The clean-up for this last time was a bit easier."

"Yeah, but this time you'll know that I'm wet with you for the rest of the wedding."

His eyes go wide. "I hadn't thought about it. But now I am. I'm going to have a hard-on in all the wedding photos."

"Creative cropping should take care of that."

He starts to giggle again as he wipes up, and she heads to the bathroom.

Tony knocks on the door. "You two decent?"

"Almost." Tim opens the window, realizing the room has to smell like sex. Oh well, they notice, they notice. Not like they didn't just get married.

He doesn't have a whole lot of changing to do. He pulls up his pants and tucks his shirt back in, making sure the vest is straight, then swaps out his ascot for a loosely tied black cravat and his spats for boots. A black frock coat replaces the morning jacket, and though he intended to mess up his hair, Abby's already taken care of that. Gloves off, post-sex glow, mussed hair: he looks properly rakish.

Abby comes out of the bathroom a minute later and turns her back to him. "Help me out?"

"Oh yeah." He unties her corset, and she slips out of the shift, leaving her naked, save for the stockings and boots.

He's stroking her back, pulling her closer to him when she says, quietly, "They're in the next room."

"Then don't make a lot of noise," he whispers, grinning, turning her in his arms, and kneeling down. He lightly kisses her belly and then inches lower to her pussy, for a soft, wet, and much too quick kiss. "If I have to walk around knowing you're wet with my cum, you get to know that you're on my lips."

She pulls him up and kisses him soundly, licking herself off of him. Granted the groom doesn't get kissed nearly as often as the bride does, but still, he's likely to be kissing other people tonight, and that's a bit too much of an advertisement of what they've been up to. "Come on, we need to get dressed."

The white stockings stay. So do the boots. She steps into a ruffled black and white skirt that falls from mid-left thigh to her right calf. Over that goes something that looks like a cross between a tank top and a corset. It has shoulder straps like a tank, but the snug fit, light boning, and lace up front of a corset. And, this tickles Tim to no end, it's leather, white leather. She adds a small white top hat, with a tiny white lace veil, pinning it to her hair, and checks her makeup, swapping out the light pink lipstick she had worn during the ceremony for a red stain finishes her look.
"Ready?" she asks.

"I think so." He checks himself in the mirror one last time, making sure he doesn't have any lipstick on his neck or a semen stain on his trousers, but he appears to be all put together.

His hand is on the door when she says, "Wait!"

"What?"

"Garter."

"Oh." She heads to one of the bags on the bed, shuffles around in it for a moment, and finds a circlet of red lace and black satin. She tosses it to him. "Put it on me?"

"Thought I was supposed to take it off."

"You'll do that, too."

He grins, promises of sexy fun in his eyes. "Oh, yes, I will."

She holds out her right leg, and he slips it up, making sure it's nicely snug around her thigh. "Good?"

"Yep." She kisses him one last time.

So, about five minutes after Tony and Ziva got there, he opens the door, both of them looking significantly more playful, relaxed, and mildly flushed than they had half an hour earlier when they had last seen Tony and Ziva last.

Tony takes one look at them and says, "You've been married for five minutes! You couldn't have waited until after we needed to use that room?"

Which causes both of them to collapse into a giggling heap.

Five minutes later, while Ziva's getting changed, and Abby and Tim are sitting on the sofa, snuggling, the rest of the wedding party finds their way up to the Bridal suite.

Jimmy grins at them. "Gibbs finally shot the photographer with a tranquilizer dart, and we were able to get free. The guests are downstairs, munching away and mingling. DJ says that as soon as we're ready for the grand entrance, he is, as well."

"Just waiting on Tony and Ziva," Abby answers.

Which was when Ziva steps out, looking sleek, cool, and dangerous in her gunfighter costume. "Not anymore."

"For the first time in public, Mr. and Mrs. Tim McGee!" The DJ's words echo through the ballroom, followed by the first notes of their first song together. Tim wraps Abby in his arms, feeling her body, soft and warm against his, letting the music move through them, and the rest of the world slides away
as they dance.

He's singing along and doesn't care how stupid he might have look doing it. She's smiling at him, eyes warm and filled with joy, and he's just so exultantly in love at that moment.

When the music shifts to You Shook Me (All Night Long) and the other couples join them, some of them looking pretty shocked at this music choice, he begins to laugh, just to let the joy out. She laughs with him as they dance close and sexy, and he thinks this might be the heart of love, the ability to laugh together while wanting each other. That sex and joy and humor should all be one big ball of good.

Or maybe not.

But it feels really good, so he isn't going to argue with it.

One of the ways Tim can tell nervous from excited is that nervous makes him want to eat all the time and excited kills his appetite.

There is food. It smells good. He ate about two bites of it. It was likely tasty, but he didn't really notice.

But eating gives everyone a chance to just settle back, relax, focus on something pleasant.

He feels very outside himself. He's enjoying watching everyone he loves having a good time, but there's a very deep surreality to it.

Like, he sitting there, chatting with Palmer for a few minutes, almost feeling normal, and then it would come back in a massive wave, they just got married, and he'd have to touch Abby, kiss her, find the ground again, and then there'd be another few minutes of normal while he watches her eat, or listens to Tony tease Ziva, or something like that, and then he'd feel the ring on his finger or see the one on hers, and another swamping wave of married would hit him.

She sees it hit him, and takes his hand in hers gently, caresses his face, and leans over to kiss his ear and whisper, "I love you, Tim."

He kisses her back. "Love you, too."

Then she takes her fork, pierces a piece of the salmon on his plate, and feeds it to him. "Have you eaten a real meal today?"

He thinks about that and shrugs, honestly not sure.

Once more, she leans over to whisper into his ear, "I've got plans for tonight, and they aren't going to happen if you pass out from low blood sugar. Eat."

So he does.

When a soldier gets married, he uses his dress saber to cut the cake. Tim supposes the equivalent for
him would be shooting the cupcakes with his service pistol, but that would just be messy. And besides, they're cupcakes, not too much reason to cut them.

He knows which sort of cupcake she likes the best. The almond-cherry ones. And they are awfully tasty. He finds one of them, the pale, cream-colored frosting with two almonds and a cherry on top let him know he has the right kind, peels back the paper, and feed her a bite of it.

She licks the frosting off her lip, finds a tiramisu one, and like him, peels back the paper, and offers him his cupcake.

He takes her wrist in his hand and kisses the fingers holding the cupcake, then takes his bite.

Abby's dancing with Gibbs when Tony comes over to him and says, "You're ghostwriting my vows."

"No!"

"Please. I will never, ever sound that good on my own."

"Yeah, and it just about killed me to come up with them. Get your own vows."

"I'll pay you."

"You can't afford me!"

"Try me."

Tim's almost tempted to actually tell Tony how much he gets paid to write, (At one point, while he was procrastinating, he worked out, based on his hourly rate, how much his vows cost. $3,472) but decides against it. "No. I've plotted out entire novels in less time than it took me to come up with them. I don't have hours to sit around thinking about your vows."

"Look, I'll end up sounding like Palmer if I do it on my own. Worse, I'll sound like the stuff Palmer cut out of his vows because it was too goofy."

Tim's singularly unmoved by that plea.

"If I write a rough draft, will you at least help?"

Tim smiles. "That I will do."

A thought occurs to Tim as the DJ announces the garter toss. Abby isn't wearing panties. She sees the quick flash of panic on his face and grins at him, sitting down, quickly crossing her legs, and then extending her right leg, toe pointed.

That works. He grins back up at her, kisses her knee, eases it off, and then whips it right at Tony's
head. Sheer reflex alone meant Tony catches it before he's even aware of the fact it's coming at him.

For a second, he just stares at it in his hand, and then he breaks out laughing, folds it up carefully, and tucks it into the pocket of Ziva's coat.

Jimmy gets him alone as the party's starting to wind down.

"You don't ever get to rag on me about being too sappy again."

Tim raises one eyebrow.

"You were singing along to her with your first dance."

"Singing along to The Troggs, quietly, in her ear, not serenading her with Bette Midler's greatest hit."

Jimmy grins and shakes his head. "The only reason you weren't serenading her is because you can't sing."

"Un huh. Keep telling yourself that. I was doing fine with the Troggs."

"The Troggs can't sing, either. Wind Beneath My Wings is technically challenging and actually requires vocal skill. And if you could have done something like that you would have."

Tim laughs, aware of the fact that Palmer is probably right, but not about to say it. "No, I wouldn't have, because they'd have to tap me every spring to let the sap out if I did."

"Says the guy who was writing a love poem ten hours ago."

Tim smirks. "A non-sappy love poem."

Jimmy half-snorts half-laughs, and sings, "I feel it in my fingers..."

"Classic rock is not sappy."

"The addition of guitars and British accents does not lessen the sap factor. 'I feel it in my toes.'"

Tim shoves Jimmy a little. "I nailed my vows."

Jimmy smiles. "Yeah, you did."

"And there was nothing even remotely sappy about the second song, so that balanced things out nicely."

"If you say so."

They stand there for a moment, watching Abby dance with Jackson, and Breena with Ducky. "So, I noticed that Abby didn't actually drink any of the champagne after Tony's toast."

Tim nods.

"When did you find out?"
Tim grins. "Yesterday morning."

"You get it now?"

Tim nods again. "Yeah, I do. I almost killed you last night. And you're right, it's completely insane. My hand was in a fist, ready to hit, just at the idea that you might have... And at no point did my brain have any input on the subject. It was just sitting back and watching like it was a TV show. Never even imagined I could feel this way about someone."

Palmer smirks happily at him. "It'll get worse when you can actually see her body start to change. And, from what I can tell, it doesn't go away."

Tim thinks about that. "Breena's pretty much been pregnant or nursing for the last year and a half. So I think that's sort of what you're designed to do at this point. Protect your woman and kids."

"Probably. So, who all knows?"

"You and Gibbs. Maybe Ziva. If you noticed Abby not drinking, she probably did, too."

Jimmy shakes his head. "Both of the girls have to know. No way they went out last night and they didn't notice."

"Good point."

"But you told Gibbs"  

"Yeah, yesterday."

"How'd he take it?" Jimmy asks.

"He hugged me."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

"He hugs guys?"

"He does today. Ducky hugged you when you told him about Breena, right?"

"Yeah, he did, both times. But he's not... Well, he's not Gibbs."

Tim inclines his head in agreement. "True. When did you tell him? I mean with Molly." Tim had been there when they made the announcement for the new baby, and honestly, just about everyone hugged both of them, though if he remembers correctly Gibbs did slap Palmer on the back rather than hug him.

"About two hours after we found out. He had to ask me for a scalpel three times, and I still hadn't given it to him, so he finally turned to me and asked me what was so pressing that I could not be bothered to pay attention to the poor murdered man on the table, so I told him, and he seemed to think being distracted was an appropriate response."

"I'm really glad I'm not on duty for two more weeks. That's enough time to get used to this, a little at least."

Jimmy just grins at him. "A little."
Talking with Jimmy made Tim realize that if he didn't get a move on, Tony was, once again, going
to be left out of their big news, and probably wouldn't be happy about it.

He cuts in on Abby dancing with Luca, and lets her know what's going on.

She rests her head on his shoulder, not only is it comfortable, and sweet, but it also lets her speak to
him easily, without everyone seeing what they're talking about.

"Yeah, told Breena and Ziva last night. Had to. We had planned to go dancing and drinking, and the
drinking thing wasn't going to happen."

His lips are pressed to her temple. "Okay. I'd like to tell Tony, so he doesn't feel left out."

"Good idea."

They continue swaying together through the rest of that song, and the next one, (Can't Help Falling
in Love, the original Elvis version) and then he breaks off to find Tony.

He's talking with Gibbs, good. Tim doesn't have a plan for what to do if, say, Senior or Luca or
someone had been there.

"Hey." He's almost feeling nervous as he starts this conversation.

Tony stares at him. "You're looking really serious."

Tim smiles. He's been doing it so much today his cheeks are sore. "Not serious, well, I guess it is,
important mostly."

"What?"

"This is just for the immediate family: you guys, Ziva, and the Palmers. Don't want it getting spread
around, yet."

If the grin on his face is any hint, Tony knows what's coming next.

"Abby's pregnant."

Next thing Tim knows, he's being hugged, pounded on the back, and Tony's saying, "This is great!"
Then he pulls back, turns, and stares at Gibbs, who finds his wallet and hands Tony a hundred dollar
bill.

Gibbs shrugs. "He didn't think you'd make it to the wedding. I did."

Tim snorts and then full-on laughs. "This is what you two do when I'm not around?"

Gibbs smiles. Tony says, "Among other things."

The bouquet toss at a wedding with three adolescent girls is something to behold. Kayla, Harper, and
Emily are intensely interested in ending up with that bouquet. *Intensely.*

Sarah stands a few feet away from them, next to Penny, and Luca's girlfriend. Penny's saying something about patriarchal marriage expectations, but allows herself to be dragged over by Sarah none-the-less.

Tim doesn't know if Abby intentionally tosses the bouquet at his grandma. But he does know it's a good thing the old lady is a great catch and fast on her feet, because she was able to snag the flowers out of the air before they hit the ground and side-step Harper Sciuto who almost tackled her in her effort to get them.

And he didn't miss the way Ducky winks at her as she stands there holding them, looking like she can't believe she's got them.

Eventually it's getting onto ten. Not terribly late, especially not for them, but it's been a long day, and as Abby said, they've got plans for the night.

They leave the hotel under a shower of bubbles and head for his car, and from there, home and life as Mr. and Mrs. McGee.
The Wedding Night

In almost any situation, if given the option, Tim will take real candles over the fake ones with the LED lights. He just prefers how fire works, how it looks, and the general feel of it.

But, tonight was an example of the only situation he could think of where he preferred the LEDs. Namely, before they left for the church, he set up their house for tonight, and if he had done it with real candles, he would have needed someone to sneak in and light the damn things, or left her waiting in the car while he got them all lit (and it would have taken forever because he's got 75 of them).

Abby walked next to him up to the porch, holding his hand, and he unlocked the door, then picked her up, kissing her as she giggled, and carried her over the threshold, up the stairs, and down the hall to their bedroom, each step of the way lit by little LED tea lights in small crystal globes.

He'd put them on each step, clusters of them in the hall, and set collections of the different sized pillar candles all over their room. The whole house was suffused with softly glowing gold.

The softly glowing gold lit a bedroom where the sheets had been changed out, their usual soft, nubby flannel replaced with cream colored 1600 thread count cotton. The comforter had been folded back to show off the new sheets. He'd thought about sprinkling rose petals all over the place but decided against it. He had no idea what the shelf life of rose petals yanked off the rose was, but didn't want them to be getting brownish and dry by the time they got home.

But there were roses, whole, beautiful, sitting on her nightstand, and ready to be played with.

He placed her on the edge of the bed, kissed her long and soft, and then pulled back.

"Gotta close the door, and grab the rest of the stuff I got set up earlier."

She smiled at him. "Got a few surprises of my own, too." She checked the clock. "I want you back up here in fifteen minutes, okay?"

"I can do that."

He had a plate of strawberries, cream for whipping, and chocolate in the refrigerator. He'd planned on strawberries and champagne, but yesterday changed that plan. Bottled water would do.

He'd gotten the idea for the strawberries over the summer. They'd been out with Palmer and Breena, some sort of farmer's market thing, and Breena had grabbed a big box of them.

And later that afternoon, while he and Jimmy played with Molly in the baby pool, he was watching Abby eat them, really enjoying it, probably with a pretty stupid smile on his face the whole time. Finally she had said to him, "What?"

He just grinned. "The man who doesn't appreciate watching a woman eat strawberries is gay or has no imagination, and since neither of those things are true about me…" and then he pulled her, giggling, into his lap, splashing water all over both of them, (and Jimmy, and Molly who grinned a two-toothed, six month-old-baby smile, decided splashing was the best thing ever, and spent the next twenty minutes at it) and kissed her.
And since then, whenever they've had strawberries, she's given him something of a show when she

eats them.

He took the blender out of the fridge, set it up, and whipped the cream. And that really was easy.

He'd been planning on spooning some Cool Whip into a bowl, but a few minutes before they were
going to leave for the wedding Ducky had put the left over snacks in the fridge, seen the Cool Whip
next to the strawberries, and then came out of the kitchen, tub of Cool Whip in his hands, looking at
Tim with disgust.

"Timothy." Ducky sighed, and held up the Cool Whip. "This atrocity has no place in your home, let
alone any plans you might have for your wedding night." Ducky tossed it into the trash can. "Real
whipped cream takes less than a minute to make and is vastly better for anything you might want to
do with it. Watch." He took the cream Tim uses in his coffee out of the fridge and poured it into the
bowl of his blender. "Oh, that's convenient," Ducky said, looking at the measures on the side of the
bowl. He added a little sugar. "Do you have any vanilla?"

"Yes." Tim pointed to their cupboard. "It's kind of old." He only uses it to make Christmas cookies.

Ducky opened it, sniffed, and poured a few drops into the cream and then put the lid on the blender.

"The secret to great whipped cream is making sure that everything is very cold when you do the
whipping. By the time you get back tonight the cream, the bowl, and the blade at the bottom of the
blender will all be thoroughly chilled. Just set it up, hit the whip button a few times, and you'll have
whipped cream."

"Oh."

And standing there, spooning a nice, cold, fluffy mass of what does indeed taste significantly better
than Cool Whip, and honestly, has a better texture, too, into a bowl, he realizes the old man was
right.

He popped the chocolate into the microwave, forty-five seconds in there and a quick stir would take
care of it.

Tim checked his watch, four minutes down, eleven to go.

He headed for the powder room and looked at himself. He's sure Abby's up there doing something to
make herself look sexy... She's already sexy. Sexier... He swallows hard at the idea of what that
might be. So some effort on his part would be a good thing.

Sometimes he wishes that lingerie for guys didn't look so goddamn stupid. He's not adverse to
costumes and playing or anything like that, but for whatever reason little silky things on him always
look dumb as hell. (And yes, he does know that from first-hand experience; it's not just conjecture on
his part.) He's read that a man in a good suit is for women what a woman in something small and
lacy is for men, and he agrees with that, because from his experience (and from what Breena, Abby,
and Ziva have agreed with) men in lingerie just makes them giggle.

Of course, Abby prefers him dressed up, but a little undone.

He took his jacket off, unbuttoned his top button, loosened the cravat a little more, and rolled up his
sleeves. She likes to be able to see the wrist cuff. He stood there and debated unbuttoning his vest,
but eventually came down on the side of it looked better on. He took his watch off; it makes the cuff
on his left stand out a little more if his right wrist is bare. Tim took his boots and socks off, not so
much because it looked better now, honestly, now it looks a little strange, but he doesn't want to
mess with the boots later, and black socks and naked isn't a good look for any guy.

Which left him with eight minutes to kill.

He wandered back into the kitchen, and messed around with the strawberries a little, rearranging them in the bowl, trying to make them look prettier.

Then an idea hit. The whipped cream is mostly for him. Abby's not a huge fan of it, so he was thinking of licking it off of her. But she does like chocolate mousse, and though he's not a great cook, he's fairly sure chocolate mousse is basically melted chocolate (in bowl A) and whipped cream (in bowl B). Twenty seconds of googling, a minute long youtube video, and he's folding the cream into the chocolate, well, not like a pro, but like someone who's very eager to make some chocolate mousse, quickly.

And with a minute to go, he was heading up the stairs, strawberries, water, and chocolate mousse on a tray, very eager to see what she's been up to.

It had taken Abby a while to figure out what she wanted to do tonight, after all, it's their wedding night, so it's got to be special, really special.

In all honestly, she'd probably spent longer bouncing ideas around for this than it took to come up with the idea for the wedding.

Granted, she didn't have Palmer and Breena helping her plan this.

Well, not Palmer. Some ideas did get bounced off of Breena and Ziva, but none of them really loved the ideas she was playing with.

In the end, it was mostly a matter of chance. The lady who made her dress was a costume designer, and her Etsy page had a lot of interesting things on it, mostly period dresses, but one thing she had on there had been custom designed for someone else, and was just being held on Etsy to make it easier to pay for.

It was a beautiful, calf length, 1950s Hollywood style peignoir in peacock blue with a black lace trim. And when Abby saw it, the idea started to form. Judging by how Tim reacted to her in the Marilyn get up, both from the it-didn't-look-like-anything-she'd-usually-wear side, and from the it-was-just-really-pretty side, she figured this should hit a bunch of his buttons, as well.

Seeing how into the first-time-at-the-lake-girl-scout fantasy Tim was solidified the idea.

And so, picture in hand, she asked if Jennie (the costume designer) could make one for her, but for a wedding night. In white, pristine, virginal white. Jennie looked at her, and suggested that a cream lace trim would make it look better, add just a little contrast, and make sure the white didn't wash her out. Once she saw the colors against her skin, Abby agreed.

It was also the lightest, sheerest silk Abby had ever felt. It was like wearing the idea of lingerie. Hints of her nipples and tattoos were visible through it.

That would certainly get his attention.

She took her hair down. In order to have enough of it to put it up properly, yesterday she'd had extensions added in. And Breena had put in the red streaks. Which meant right now, she had a long, fluffy spill of black hair with red highlights curling down her shoulders and back.
Abby washed off her makeup, and then redid her eyelashes and brows. She didn't want anything that would feel (or worse, taste) like makeup on her skin, but darker, longer eyelashes are always a good thing. The red lip stain she'd put on before the reception had faded a bit, but still left her lips darker and fuller than normal.

She patted her hair a little, and fluffed the roots a little higher.

That done, she opened the bathroom door, and stepped out.

He was putting the tray with the food on it on the nightstand when she opened the bathroom door.

And it was a good thing he had it almost all the way down because his hands went slack when he saw her, so he dropped it the last inch. For a long minute he just stared, saying nothing, looking his fill at this amazingly beautiful woman in front of him.

It's a white nighty. The kind the looks a little like an old-fashioned slip. And she's looking up at him, a little shy, catching his eye, then looking away, biting her lip.

"It's just, I've never done this before, and I'm a little scared."

His eyes went wide and his breath caught in his chest. That's a game they've never played before and it sears into him, making his dick go hard so fast he felt light-headed.

He licked his lips, taking a moment to figure out what to say to that. What would be in character? What works with the clothes and the setting and their wedding night, and it hits him, and he smiles.

"Me either, and I'm a little scared, too, but we'll figure it out together. We're good at that."

She grinned, eyes lighting up with joy at that response. And he feels so happy he doesn't know what to do with himself.

They stepped toward each other, meeting in the center of the room, in front of their bed. His hands hovered over her shoulders for a second, letting the heat build between them, before gently slipping down her arms, his fingers twining with hers.

"We'll take it slow, see what we like, and play it by ear."

She smiled at him, still nibbling her lip, looking so amazingly adorable and sexy. "That sounds good."

They're both in bare feet, so she raises on her toes, and pressed into him for a long, slow kiss. It's soft, easy, gentle, just lips on lips, exploring. He can feel her wedding band, and gives her hand a gentle squeeze, then lets her hands go and traces his fingers lightly down her back.

She shivered a little at that, so he pulled back to ask, "Good?"

"Yeah."

"How about…" He twisted one hand into the mass of her hair, lifting it off her neck, as she rested her head on his shoulder, and scraped his fingernails, once again, lightly, from the nape of her neck to the top of her peignoir.

She purred gently and pressed in a little closer, as he played the tips of his fingers over her neck and shoulders.
Part of him was wishing this really was his first time, though he's fairly sure that he couldn't do this if it was. Not so much just the experience of it, knowing her body well enough to read each touch and response, but the patience of it. He's pretty certain that if they had never done this before, he'd be way too turned on and keyed up to just relax into this and enjoy each touch.

A starving man can't savor the meal in front of him, and he wants to savor this.

Abby reached for his cravat and untied it, slipping it out of his collar, and then touched the base of his throat, fingers resting on the dip of his collar bone, and in any other situation that's not a touch he'd find particularly erotic, but right now, at the start of a long, steady build, he's enjoying it immensely.

He took a half step back, her fingers still on his throat, and cupped her face in his hands, thumb tracing over her bottom lip. "Did I tell you you're beautiful?"

"Not today." She kissed his thumb.

He shook his head. "Sorry. You are so beautiful. Every minute of today I've been thinking about it. That you're beautiful: your body, your mind, your kindness, and your joy, and all of it together is just so beautiful, and I love you so much that I can't begin to find words big enough for it. I don't think there are words big enough for it. I love you, Abby." He stepped closer to her again, and kissed the top of her ear. "Love your ears." He kissed her jaw. "Love your jaw." Kissed her shoulder. "Love your shoulders." Kissed her chest, and each breast. "Love these." He smiled up at her, nuzzling against her right breast. "Really love these." She grinned down at him, petting his face, and he turned his lips to her palm, for another kiss. "Love your hands."

Then he slipped a little further down, and kissed her belly. "Love your tummy." He slid his lips a few inches below her belly button, and slipped out of the game to whisper, "Love you, too, baby," before inching his lips to her hip, and tracing his way down her leg with kisses and cherishing words.

The slit on the peignoir came to mid-thigh. He kissed her knee, and then placed his fingertips on her leg, just below the cream colored lace edging the fabric, gently playing them over her skin, circling down to her knee and tracing back up again within the bounds of the slit. For a moment he just looked at it: his fingers, wedding band on the fourth one, on her leg. He looked up at her, and saw her watching his touch as intensely as he was.

"You're so soft."

She smiled, and he let his whole hand caress her thigh, reveling in the feel of her skin under his hand, and the immense intimacy of touching her like this. His woman, his wife, and he gets to put his hands on her, he alone gets to enjoy the pleasures of her body, and yeah, it's not pc, but that feeling of ownership hits him hard, and the feeling that she's given herself to him hits him even harder.

He wrapped both hands around her thigh, and traces them down her leg, slipping over her calf and cupping her ankle. He kissed her knee, and then gazed up at her. "You chose me. And I am going to spend the rest of my life making sure you're always glad you did that."

She knelt in front of him, fingers twining in his hair, and kissed him, slow and deep, lips lingering on his, tongue easing against his. Then she pulled back. "Timothy." Her safe word, and he's never heard her use it before, so he stopped everything and just looked at her.

"Nothing bad. I don't want this to be a game. Not tonight."

He took her left hand in his, kissed her ring finger just above her wedding ring, and stroked his
fingers lightly down her arm, goosebumps rising in their wake.

"It's not. Just because I've felt it before, doesn't mean I don't marvel at how soft your skin is, let alone how good it feels against mine. And, you'll probably think this is dumb, but the fact that you're mine, really mine, and that I'm the only one who gets to do this, is hitting me so hard it's making me giddy."

"You think I don't feel that about you? My husband. My man, now and forever, wearing my ring. Yeah, I get it." She kissed him again, harder this time, deeper. "Mine!"

There's a visceral thrill that goes with that word, a palpable rush, and he pulled her closer to him, returning her kiss, putting all of his feelings into his touch.

Eventually she pulls back, stands up, letting him know to stand as well with a gentle tug on his hands. As he does she begins to unbutton his vest, fingers moving quickly over the buttons. A second later it was tossed on the floor, and she started on his shirt, taking her time this time, kissing each bit of chest or stomach as she undid each button.

When she got done she pulled the tails of the shirt out of his pants, but left the shirt on, and then stopped to just look at him.

He's not breathing hard, yet, though he was breathing faster than normal. His eyes moved over her body, and the expression on his face was a mix of hungry lust and transcendent joy.

Her fingers traced lightly, just the barest brush of the tips across his chest and stomach, and he inhaled quickly, small goosebumps raising on his skin, nipples going tight.

"Have I told you how much I love watching you like this?" Abby asked him.

He shook his head, and she pressed forward so he was sitting on the edge of the bed. She hiked up the skirt of the peignoir and straddled his thighs, resting her hands on his shoulders, leaning in to kiss his throat.

"I always have. You, half-dressed, hard, ready to make love to me, it's my favorite sight."

He grinned, hands settling against her hips.

"Part of it's the anticipation. I know what goodies are under that clothing, and enjoy seeing what we're going to get up to." She pushed his collar aside, and ran her tongue lightly over his right shoulder. "Part of it's the fact that you're drop dead sexy when you're half dressed. I've never seen a man do just a little skin better than you do." She pushed the other sleeve down his left arm, and bit gently on his shoulder. "But mostly it's that when you're like this, your face, your eyes, they're completely open. Everything you're feeling, everything you're thinking, it's on your face. You never shut me out when we make love, and I love that, cherish it."

She kissed his lips, and he wrapped his hand around the back of her neck, and from there he lost the details. He remembers the light on her skin, and the all-encompassing feeling of being adored, and he knows it was slow, that they took their time, undressing, kissing, making love with mouth, hands, and words.

And eventually he rolled onto his back, and she followed, straddling him. Her eyes were on his as she held him in place, pausing for a moment, waiting for him to nod, before sliding all the way down in one long, slick moment of exquisite contentment and joy.

She lay forward on his chest, and he wrapped his arms around her, both of them still and reveling in
the completeness of it. He kissed her forehead, nose, and lips.

"I love you so much."

And like everything else this night it was slow, focused, pulling as much sensation and depth out of each stroke as possible.

He kept his eyes open, watching her, lit gold, hair wild, rising in falling on him, hands twined with his, head back, chest flushed, gasping with pleasure, clenching around him: his wife, best friend, partner, the mother of his child, and he felt so gloriously loved and so intensely whole and home.

"I love you, Tim, now and always, this life and the next, forever…” The words, the feeling of it, the pleasure of this, all crested in a rush of golden-white ecstasy blended with even more love and bliss.

When he came back to himself, she was lying on his chest, gently stroking his ring finger and wedding band.

Her forehead was within easy reach, so he kissed it. She kissed the bit of his shoulder that was under her mouth. And they didn’t speak, just laid there, and enjoyed feeling that moment.

And eventually she pushed up, stretched across the bed and grabbed a few tissues, because no matter how perfect a moment is, it's still a moment, and the next moment has to come. So they cleaned up, and snuggled into each other, enjoying the fact that 1600 thread count sheets are insanely soft, and fell asleep.

And the next morning they found out that chocolate mousse and strawberries made a pretty good breakfast.
He was putting the last bag into the trunk of Abby's Roadster when a familiar Minivan pulled up.

"Good, we didn't miss you," Jimmy said while getting out. Breena hopped out, holding a small, green gift bag in her hand. Molly was dozing in her car seat.

"What's up? We leave something at the hotel?" He didn't think that had happened, let alone that Palmer would end up with it, though if memory serves, they did stay at the Adams House last night because Breena's parents took Molly, and they wanted a night out, but he couldn't think of anything they might have left.

"Nah. Where's Abby?"

"Right here," she said, stepping out of the house, purse over her shoulder, locking the door.

Breena handed her the bag, when she got to them. "I couldn't not do this."

Abby stared at the bag, looking confused. They'd already gotten a wedding present, a really high end grill with all of the goodies, from the Palmers.

"Come on, open it!" Breena is grinning at them, beaming happiness in a way that puts Tim in mind of Abby in an especially good mood.

Abby did, and felt the smile start as she pulled apart black tissue paper. Tim was looking over her shoulder and also felt a grin creep over his face. It was a onesie. A tiny, black, skull covered onesie. Under it were little black shoes with green and purple spider webs.

"I knew if we waited, all of the Halloween baby gear would be gone, so we had to do it fast." Then Breena wrapped both of them in a hug. "Congratulations. Okay, we're not going to keep you from heading off, just had to give you that."

As Breena pulled back, Jimmy hugged both of them as well. "Have fun!"

Tim's grinning, just insanely happy at that moment. "Thank you."

"No problem," Palmer said, stepping back.

At least he looked like he was going to step back. A second later Abby was hugging both him and Breena, and babbling about how cool this was and how much she loved it.
So there are things people usually do on their honeymoon. Sex. Sex is always on the list. Nice restaurants, that's usually part of it. Sight-seeing, sure. Snorkeling, according to Gibbs, that's popular, though they're heading toward Charleston, SC, which isn't exactly a snorkeling sort of place. Spending lots of time cuddled up, yep, very popular.

Downloading every pregnancy book available on Kindle and reading a bunch of them, well... That might not be common, but Tim sincerely doubts they're the first couple doing it.

And, while they had planned to do honeymooning type things while driving around the south, checking out Charleston, Savannah, Atlanta, back up to Richmond, and then home, something else needed to happen first, something that wasn't going to be pleasant, and until it happened, nothing else was going to be fun, at all.

See, the thing is, caffeine is a drug. And like nicotine, withdraw isn't pleasant.

And while caffeine and pregnant isn't forbidden, the amount of caffeine that's considered safe for a pregnant woman is about what Abby gets in two or three swallows with a CafPow.

At first, as they were driving down, and Abby was getting more annoyed and irritable, Tim was thinking that pregnant mood swings were kicking in a whole lot earlier than he would have liked, and he was starting to get scared. She was viciously jabbing the iPod, looking for new music, complaining about there being nothing worth listening to on it, and he gets they don't have the same musical tastes, but it was her iPod loaded with her music.

If she was this emotional five days before her period would have shown up, later on was going to be insane.

They had stopped for gas, and he'd gotten their usual driving fuel, gas for the car, CafPow for her, coffee for him, and then she burst into tears while rambling about poisoning their baby and torturing her with what she wasn't allowed to have, and he suddenly got what was going on.

She went to hide in the bathroom for a little bit. He got her a Non-CafPow, filled it two thirds full, and topped it off with CafPow, booked a few extra days in Charleston, bumped Savannah back, and cancelled Atlanta, fairly sure they weren't going to be doing much of anything the first few days.

He was waiting in the car when she came out, about ten minutes later.

She looked at him, eyes red, and half-smiled, looking sheepish. "Sorry, I lost it."

"Have you had any caffeine today?"

"No." It was three in the afternoon, about the time she would normally be on her third or fourth CafPow.

"Cold turkey is a bad plan." He handed her the cup. "It's two thirds decaf one third caf. When we get to Charleston, we'll do some research and figure out how to do this without killing you."

"Okay." She gulped down the not quite as CafPow, and sighed happily. "I can feel it tingling through me." She petted the cup. "Oh, I've missed you, my love!"

He looks at her, shakes his head, and says, "It's gonna be a long nine months."
The good thing was it was a really nice hotel suite. Comfortable, attractive, good view of the historic district from the one side, and French doors that opened onto the piazza overlooking a lush green garden surrounding a fountain on the other. Tim had a pretty good suspicion they were going to be spending a lot of time in there, and unfortunately, not in a sexy-we-didn't-get-out-of-bed-fucking-right-and-left sort of way.

They got there in time for dinner, had some, and started reading.

And yeah, cold turkey wasn't going to be easy, or pleasant, but given how much caffeine is supposed to be safe for a pregnant lady, and how long it would take to get Abby down to that level if she eased off at a rate that wouldn't hurt, well, let's put it this way, it's likely Abby would be wrapping up her maternity leave before she got down to the recommended maximum of 25 mg a day.

So, cold turkey it was.

And, for a good five minutes Tim thought about doing it with her. He's a good husband (or will die trying to be one) and a supportive pregnant father, so quitting caffeine with her seemed like a good plan.

Until he actually thought about it and then decided that if she was going to be irritable, in pain, and insanely craving a drug, there was no reason for him to be all those things, at the same time. Sure, he's not as hooked as she is, but he drinks six 20 ounce cups of coffee a day. To say he's got a major caffeine habit is not an exaggeration. He just looks like a piker because he lives with Abby and works with Gibbs.

He's going to have a much easier time being a good husband if he's not jonesing for a fix. When it comes down to it, he's thinking both of them insane at the same time is a bad plan.

So for right now, he can taper down a bit (maybe get down to four and a half, okay five, twenty ounce cups), and once she's off it and sane again, and probably after they get home because he's not seeing much reason for him to be annoying to everyone when they're on their honeymoon, he'll cut it out, too, because he is a good husband and a supportive pregnant father and it doesn't seem fair to him that she has to quit and he doesn't.

If there is anything lonelier than sitting alone on your honeymoon, Tim doesn't know what it could be. And yet, here he is, alone, on one of the swinging benches overlooking the harbor, reading the kindle version of What To Expect When You're Expecting, willing time to move faster.

Once they figured out cold turkey was the detox plan, all the rest of their plans got pushed back, and lay around and rest became the major goal for the next few days.

He'd been fine with the lay around and rest plan. Abby was hurting, caffeine withdraw causes headaches, and she was having a near migraine level experience, so she didn't want to move. He was just sitting in bed next to her and reading or writing. He thought that was going fine.

About two hours into it, she rolled over, looked at him and said, "Tim, I love you, I always will, but I'm a little insane right now, and just hearing you breathe and click the next button on your Kindle is pissing me off. Get out of here. Do something interesting. Come back with dinner and tell me about it six hours from now."

He was about to say, "Are you sure?" but she was already glaring at him pretty hard, so he scooped
up his stuff, got dressed in the sitting room, and went out.

And while it's true that Charleston is filled with cool things, they're cool things he wants to do with her, not on his own.

So, he kind of failed on the do interesting things part of the assignment, but he figures he can make something up if she asks him about it.

He opened the door quietly. It's dim in their bedroom; the sun's not quite down yet, but it's close, and she doesn't have a light on. But he sees her roll over when he opens the door.

"Hey," he says, sitting down on the side of the bed.

"Hi."

"You feeling any better?"

She sat up slowly. "Yeah. Still crabby and headachy, but it's not as bad as it was earlier."

"Good. I brought us dinner. You want to eat?"

"Yeah." She stands up, heading toward the sitting room. "What did you get?"

He followed her out, pointing to the large collection of bags on the coffee table. "A little bit of a lot of different things. I wasn't sure what you might want, and wasn't sure if we'd be going out again soon. So..."

Part of the reason for picking Charleston is that it's a great food town. There's a little bit of everything there, and most of it is supposed to be good. On the way back to the hotel, he'd more or less popped into any restaurant that looked even remotely interesting and ordered something to go. He had everything from Asian fusion to soul food.

And doing that allowed him to come up with something of a version of what interesting thing he might have done, because he didn't bother to use the GPS to find his way back to the hotel, and got a little lost. So he can tell her about wandering around Charleston.

Opening all of the boxes and grazing through what he had brought seemed to perk her up. A thought occurred to him. "Did you eat anything today?"

They'd had breakfast, but she booted him out around what should have been lunch time.

"No."

It's true that most of the time they just sort of grab food whenever they can. Breakfast is pretty constant, but eating during the rest of the day tends to happen whenever, and both of them miss meals right and left, often making up for them with coffee or CafPow.

"Mental note, if you aren't constantly sucking down CafPows, you need to eat real food."

"I wasn't hungry."

"I don't get hungry when my blood sugar drops, either. But I do get crabby, and I'm guessing that was part of my kindle annoying you."
"Maybe." She shrugged and took a bite of a sandwich. "Oh, God, Tim, this is the best thing ever! What is this?" She holds it out, and he takes a bite.

"I have no idea, but you're right." He looked at the box it had been in, and then the bag the box had been in, and hoped that it would trigger a memory of ordering it, but it didn't. He took another bite. It was salty, sweet, crispy, savory, buttery, meaty, and just mind-meltingly good. He snagged one of the fries that were in the box with it. They were long and very thin and crispy and also amazingly good.

"When you feel up to going out, we'll go back and figure it out. Have you had one of these fries?" He held one out to her, and she ate it from his fingers.

"Ohhhhh!" She took another bite of the sandwich. "It's duck. I can taste that."

"Okay, I remember now. It's duck confit with blueberry honey, on whatever sort of bread that is, apparently buttered and grilled crispy, with Belgian style fries."

"Oh my god! We have got to go back there."

He took the bag the food came in, folded it up, and put it in the pocket of his jacket. "So we can find it again." Then sat down next to her, and took another bite of the sandwich.

She leaned her head against his shoulder, chewing happily. "So what did you do today?"

He told her about walking through Charleston, sitting at the Harbor, and watching the butterflies. It's not so much that he's got a thing for butterflies, but November in DC is basically winter, and down here it's getting cooler, but it's still warm, and the flowers are still in bloom, and there are butterflies everywhere flitting from flower to flower. And watching them flutter around, along with the palm trees, was just a really vivid sign that he was nowhere even remotely like home.

Honestly, he's having a hard time believing they're in the US. It's just so tropical here. He tells her about the brightly colored buildings and the way everything feels like the Virgin Islands or the Bahamas.

They finished the sandwich and fries, and he poked around in the bags until he found the one that had the bread pudding with hard sauce in it, and that was awfully good, too.

So, they were sitting on the floor, in front of the coffee table, backs against the sofa, feeling comfortably full, and well, Tim was in a pretty good mood, but Abby was starting to get irritable again, and he could feel her tensing under the arm he had around her shoulders so he said, "Let's go to bed, you lay down, I'll give you a massage."

"Are you trying to get sex?" She's giving him the don't even try it look. Which up until this point he's never seen in relation to sex. Messing with Major Mass Spec, touching her computer while she's got it working on something, let alone unpacking her doll collection (he's not allowed to touch it, at all), but not sex.

He rolls his eyes and flashes her his Really? look. "Yes, but not tonight. Sooner this crap is out of you, the sooner you'll be happy and fun and interested in sex again, and I think we'd both like that. So, even though you're all prickly and doing your best impression of a pissed off porcupine, I am offering to rub your entire naked body, slowly, and with a lot of care, because doing that will help your body produce endorphins, which it probably needs, and help you flush the caffeine out faster, and then, even though, as I said, you'll be both naked, covered in oil, and I will have been touching you for at least an hour, I will not expect any sex from you."
And for the first time since their wedding night, Abby laughed.

"I love you."

He smiled, quickly. "You damn well better. On the bed, now!"

She got up, pulling off her clothing as she headed to the other room, and lay down on the bed on her stomach, still smiling. "What if I want sex after you get done?" she asked as he fiddled around with their luggage looking for the oil.

"Then you better be nice to me. We're married now, so I'm not just some booty call for when you're feeling frisky."

She laughs again. And he's very happy to see she's starting to come back.

"Did we bring massage oil?"

"I remember packing some. I think it's in the bag with the toothpaste, shampoo, and soap. Not the toys."

"Why would it be in there?"

"Because it can spill. The lube is in there, too."

"Okay, that makes sense." He heads into the bathroom and locates both the massage oil and the lube, and also sees some Tylenol, and bring all three of them out. No he's not thinking there's going to be sex tonight, but he doesn't see any reason to make two trips, either.

He sits next to her. "So, what still hurts?"

She sighs, posture slumping. "Everything. Headache's the worst part, but I hurt all over. It's like a full body headache. Like... you know how you ache when you have the flu?"

"Yeah."

"Like that."

"Yuck!"

"Yeah."

He rests his hand on her shoulder. "I'm really sorry you're hurting."

"I know."

"Want some Tylenol?"

"It's got caffeine in it."

He got up and put the bottle back, saying, "Why would they do that?"

"Who knows?"

A few seconds later he was back, straddling her hips. He poured the oil into his right hand, and then rubbed it between his palms, warming it up. He laid both hands on the back of her neck, then slowly slipped them down her shoulders and arms, a long, gentle stroke designed to just feel good. He's
great at working the kinks out, the kind of touch that hurts good, but that's not what he's aiming for tonight. Tonight he's just petting her, letting his hands soothe over her in slow, gentle-firm strokes, starting at her neck and working his way down her body.

And after an hour of it, when he lifted his hands off her feet, she was asleep.

So he got up, brushed his teeth, debated jerking off, because naked, oil covered Abby stretched out under him as his hands rub all over her body has him pretty hard, but doing that on his honeymoon is so terribly depressing that he doesn't care how horny he gets, it's just not going to happen, so he snuggled around her.

This really wasn't how he thought their honeymoon was going to go.

He kissed her shoulder, breathing in her scent, remembered why they were doing this as his arm wrapped around her, smiled, a little, and went to sleep.
Day three Abby woke up, looked at Tim, still sleeping, and felt really good. Really, really good. Like, the kind of good she had felt when she woke up on their wedding day. She smiled, a wide happy grin, slipped out of bed, and went to brush her teeth and use the bathroom.

Okay, so the honeymoon hadn't gotten off to the sexiest start, but she had some things planned, and it was high time to start doing them.

She hadn't let him touch one of her bags because that's where her goodies were. As he slept, she quietly grabbed it and took it into the bathroom.

The first of the goodies in it, which she had intended to surprise him with on the first night, but hadn't because the headache was pretty awful by that point, was the next step in the theme of things Tim didn't usually get to see her in. She has lace teddies. He's bought them for her. So she knows he likes them on her. But this one, in light, sheer baby pink, with a matching g-string and thigh high stockings, also in baby pink, is a whole lot frillier and more femme then what she usually wears or what he'd get her.

She brushed out her hair, and then wet the roots and fluffed it up a little. Bedhair, just slightly more attractive than real bedhair.

And then she waited. She stood, leaning against the doorway to the bathroom, staring at him.

Part of her wants to get back in that bed, run her tongue from his earlobe, down his neck, to his arm, kissing the tattoo on his right arm, the one they have in common.

Part of her wants him to see her in this before they touch.

Part of her is just enjoying watching him. Abby is a connoisseur of Tim's body types. She's seen just about all of them and enjoys them all, too. Which is not to say she doesn't have a preference when it comes to the different shapes of Tim. And the way he's been looking the last six months or so is definitely her favorite. Apparently, cutting most of the sugar out of his diet did result in a very fine looking Tim. But this time he didn't go overboard, he's not the scary skinny he was a few years ago, but he's quite a bit leaner than he was when they started dating the second time.

And from the looks of it, her eyes trace down his back and arms, a lot of sex is good for upper body development. He's not cut, no washboard abs like Jimmy, (Of course, she knows how much time Jimmy spends at the gym to get that body, and if she's got a choice between Tim with her and a less developed body, or Tim at the gym and ripped, she'll take Tim at home.) but he's noticeably stronger than he was when they started dating, and she certainly appreciates the fact that he can pick her up and keep her up long enough to fuck her senseless, let her come down from her orgasm, and then go for another round after that. And really, that's all the upper body strength as any guy needs.

She's grinning at him, thinking about licking down his spine, biting gently on the crest of his hip, which is just peeking out from under the blanket, when he opens an eye and looks at her. She sees that eye travel from the top of her head, down to her toes, and back up again. A smile spreads on his face as he pushes himself up.
He stands up, pulls her out of the doorway, quickly kisses her cheek and says, "Two minutes," before vanishing into the bathroom himself.

She kneels on the bed, hands on her thighs, arms pushing her breasts up and out, waiting for him, and two minutes later he's back out again, looking at her like she's the most delicious thing he's ever seen.

He stands in front of her, naked, half-hard, eyes raking slow, hot trails over her skin. If there was ever a man who understood how to eye fuck, it's Tim.

"I take it you're feeling better."

She grinned, raised up on her knees, wrapping her arms around his neck, and kissed him long and hard.

"Yeah."

"Good!" He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her tighter to him as he kissed her back with just as much enthusiasm as she had shown him a few minutes earlier. He pulled away for a second. "You're all dressed up, anything in specific you want?"

"Lots and lots of things, but we've got lots of time, too."

"Then what should we start with?"

She wiggled encouragingly against him, feeling half-hard perk into full hard, then leaned back in his arms, and began to rub her breasts, through the pink lace, keeping her movements slow and deliberate, using her whole hand as she cupped, lifted, stroked and rolled, knowing that watching her do that would drive him crazy.

His eyes were glued to her hands and breasts as she said, "Maybe it's just my imagination, I mean, it shouldn't be happening this soon, but they just feel really full and sensitive today, and you know how when you play with them, I feel it in my clit, too? And I'm wondering if you can get me off by playing with them."

His eyes lit up and rose to meet hers, while he grinned wildly and said, "Let's find out!"

His right hand stayed firmly against her back, giving her something to lean into, while his lips trailed down her neck and shoulder. He tugged gently on the shoulder strap of the teddy with his teeth, causing the lace to rub against her breast.

She hadn't thought the lace was particularly rough, but it's not smooth either, it isn't satin or silk, so there's a definite friction to the way it's sliding over her skin.

And it's a friction she's appreciating. She wasn't lying when she said they felt bigger and more sensitive. There's a sort of pleasant heaviness that's just craving touch right now, and this light, rough, almost scrape is making that more intense.

She feels his fingers on her belly, slipping up from under the teddy, feathering over the skin on her ribs, tickling a little, making her skin heat, and drawing her attention to her torso, but not touching where she's craving his hands.

"That's not my breast."

He let go of the strap, and that was unfortunate, because the tugging stopped, but the wet of his lips
on her collarbone as he said, "I know," felt pretty fabulous, too. "I'll get there. As you said, we've got lots of time."

His right hand stayed on her back, but in a heartbeat his left was hooked under her knees and she was on her back on the bed before she even knew he was thinking about doing it.

Tim hopped onto the bed, stretching out beside her, resting his head on his right hand, and used his left to stroke the edges of her teddy, getting the scoop of the top, the straps along her shoulder, and the lacy frill along her stomach.

"I like this color on you," he said as his forefinger began a long, slow circle of her nipple. He bent the finger, so his nail caught and rasped along the lace, adding an almost stutter-y quality to the touch. "It's really pretty."

He raked all four fingers lightly over her breast, across her sternum, to the other one, pulling the fabric tight in the process, tugging it a little further on her breast, more gentle friction across her nipple.

"You know what's even prettier?" he asked, between wet soft kisses on her shoulder and arm.

"What?"

"The way you squirm when I do this." He laved his tongue along the scoop neck of the teddy while giving her nipple a quick flick with his middle finger. And she did squirm when he did it, arching into the touch, trying to get more pressure, because this teasing was sweet, but it wasn't nearly enough.

"Tim!"

"Yeah?" He traced his tongue over her collar bone, slipping it down to just dip between her breast, and back up to her lips for a kiss as his fingers went back to that long, slow circling.

"Fuck," she breathed it as he sucked on her lower lip, his whole hand cupping her breast, squeezing it gently, pulling his fingers over the flesh to caress her nipple.

He pulled back and grinned. "I certainly hope so." He moved quickly, yanking the g-string off, settling between her legs, ending with his weight on his elbows, lips on hers as he brushed his chest against the tips of her nipples. Abby wished she wasn't wearing the teddy, she could feel the heat and pressure of his chest, but not the smooth slide of it, and she wanted the slip of his skin on hers.

Of course, it wasn't just his chest that was touching her. The tip of his cock was also slipping along her, gently nudging her lips, rubbing against them slick and hot.

"So, how specific were you thinking on the 'get you off by playing with them' thing. Like, if I do this..." and he thrust into her while closing his lips over her nipple and sucking hard, "does that count? Or..." and he pulled out slowly, as his teeth grazed the wet fabric, 'were you thinking just touching your breasts?"

"God, Tim!" That's too much of a good choice. He's slowly rocking into her, while he blows on her nipple, hot breath over wet fabric and needy skin.

"Or maybe..." He pulled all the way out and slid the length of his penis along her clit while licking slowly over her nipple.

"Show off."
He grinned at her. "Of course." And then rolled back to her side. "Sit up."

She did, and he pulled the teddy off, tossing it on the floor.

"I thought you liked it."

"I do. And when you ask me to get you off playing with your ears, I will happily let you keep wearing it."

He sat back against the headboard and patted his lap. Abby straddled him, gently rubbed against his dick, slipping her pussy along it, but not letting him in, and then sat on his lap, leaving it pressed against her.

"I guess that answers my question."

"For now." She rose on her legs an inch, rubbing her clit against him as she did it. "Though I may change the rules at some point."

He settled back, shifting the pillows some, and then spread his legs a little further apart, spreading her a little further, "In case you decide to change the rules soon." And then bent forward to kiss her breast.

When she's sitting in his lap, Abby's nipples are right at lip level. His left hand cupped and stroked the right one, while his lips blanketed the right with wet, open mouthed kisses. He kept his eyes on hers, making sure she's watching him as he sucked her nipple between his lips, mouthing along it wet and gentle, pulling back to lick it delicately, just the tip of his tongue circling it, followed by a firm bite to the underside of her breast.

Watching him is driving her crazy, the way he's looking at her, hot sex in his gaze, while his tongue rubs and his lips pull, and she caught the wicked little glint in his eye right before he bit, and that sharp contrast to wet and soft made her jerk.

He groaned when she did that, arching against her, while squeezing her breast, laying his tongue against where he had just bitten, leaving a wide, wet patch, and the blowing it cool and dry.

Then he switched, hand on her left, mouth on her right. Like always when he plays with her breasts she could feel him do it, feel the deep satisfaction of his touch in her chest, feel her breasts go heavy and ache with a heady pleasure, and at the same time she feels it in her clit. No sensation of touch, just the sensation of the pleasure of touch. Her head fell back, and her hips started a slow roll, adding direct contact, multiplying the effect, pressing against him in a way that made her whole body feel hundreds of shades of golden perfect.

He nibbled over her breast and said, "Turn around."

While she did so, he scooted a bit further away from the headboard, so he could lean back. "On me, cowgirl style."

She did, sliding down him, very glad for the extra sensation. She was about half way down when his hands closed on her hips. "There. Lean back. Your back on my chest."

"Ohhhh… fuck…" That position, angle, and depth meant one thing. And then he started to do it. Short, shallow thrusts that got her g-spot over and over, as his fingers twisted and stroked her nipples.

God, it was good! All sorts of good. His cock hitting at that exact right angle, and his fingers pulling,
making her gasp each breath, body tightening on his, seeking more sensation.

And then he stopped, just holding the thrust, keeping up the pressure, but ending the friction, as his fingers went to light, feather touches over her nipples.

She was squirming, trying to get him to move, finding her own friction if he wasn't going to do it for her, and he bit her shoulder lightly.

"New trick." Tim sat up. "Off of me." And straddled her, and for a moment she thought he was going to press her breasts together and rub off between them, but he didn't. Instead he took the tip of his penis and circled her nipples with it, stroking her with that soft, wet, hot flesh, making both of them very happy with that sensation.

A minute later he was licking that wetness off. Lapping at her. Murmuring about how good she tasted as his cock rubbed against her hip, and his fingers stroked her pussy, deliberately avoiding her clit.

He's told her about being so hard he could feel his pulse in his dick, and she gets it now. She's never been more aware of her clit than she is now. And it does feel like it's pulsing, like every touch to her breasts is ramping up the desire another notch.

Never in a million years would Abby have ever thought about Tim using his eyelashes on her breasts, but by that point they were so hard, so flushed, so sensitive, that the light fluttering of his lashes against her nipples was incredible. But it wasn't enough. It was like the ghost of a touch. Or maybe the memory of one.

It was enough to make her squirm, make her moan and arch and beg to get off, but it wasn't enough to do it

He pulled back, bit her nipples, hard enough to really get her attention, not hard enough to mark, and then sat back against the headboard and pulled her into his lap.

She slid down him with a very loud groan, at least she thought it was loud, it was hard to tell because he was louder, but the fullness, the added stretch and friction made her teeth clench and her hands fist, and this: wet, hot tongue on her nipples, teeth pulling them, cock filling her, the long slip of slick friction, and his thumb on her clit, set her off and made her see stars.

When she came back to herself she wasn't sure if he had gotten off or not. He still felt pretty hard but it takes him a few minutes to lose his erection. She was really wet, of course, she was also really wet when she slid onto him.

"Did you?"

He kissed her gently. "Yeah."

"Good. I got a bit fuzzy there at the end and wasn't sure."

He grinned at that, looking pretty smug.

She poked him.

"Hey, you just told me I made you come so hard you couldn't tell if I got off." He giggled at that, still looking smug and very pleased with himself. "And, since me getting off isn't exactly subtle, that just makes my day."
She laughed, too, and then kissed him, and reached for the tissues. "So, what do you want for breakfast?"

"Pussy."

She rolled her eyes, smacked him gently on the chest, chuckled, and slipped off, handing him a tissue while wiping herself up. "After. I need some real food."

"Okay. Room service?"

"You planning on keeping me occupied until the food shows up?"

There was a huge grin on his face as he said, "I might be."

"Nope. Shower, out, food, show me at least one interesting thing you saw yesterday, and then all the pussy you can eat for lunch."

"I can get on board with that plan."

Strolling around Charleston, pretty Goth wife by his side, arm around her shoulder, her parasol shading both of them from the bright, late fall sun, morning sex putting a spring in both of their steps, Tim found himself thinking that this was exactly how he had been hoping his honeymoon to go.
It took them a few days to work the kinks out of the care and feeding of a now decaf (and slightly pregnant) Abby.

Regular food became very important. She couldn’t skip meals, and tended to be happier with a somewhat constant stream of small snacks. Which made sense, after all it wasn’t Diet CafPow she was sucking down every day. Fortunately, Charleston being a good food town meant they didn’t have any issues in finding a steady stream of yummy things.

Afternoon naptime really helped, too.

By dinnertime at the end of the first “good” day she was dragging around, feeling pretty crabby, and the headache was back. So the next day they dialed down the sightseeing, hit the aquarium, had lunch, went back to the hotel for some sex, and a nap, and noticed that by dinnertime she was still feeling pretty good. So naptime went onto the list of things to do, and that seemed to help a whole lot.

Neither of them was sure if the sleeping twelve hours a day was just a side effect of no more caffeine, or if it was a sign that their little dude was indeed on board, but it made Abby feel better, and Tim certainly didn’t mind a schedule rich in sex and naps (which also made it easier for him to cut back on his own caffeine consumption), so they both did well with it.

And there were a few points where she was staring longingly at his coffee, which if you consider how much Abby doesn’t like coffee, was a very strong sign that she really wanted a fix, but she didn’t drink any, and he did a fairly good job of remembering not to drink it in front of her.

So by the morning of the last day in Charleston, she was feeling pretty good, and was fairly certain she’d keep feeling fairly good, so another of the “treats” in her bag of goodies came out.

When Tim woke up, she was wearing her collar.

Granted Abby in a collar isn’t anything new. She wears a collar all the time. But this one, that he gave her for Christmas, is special. And while it looks a whole lot like most of her other collars, (As a matter of fact, this is the collar that goes with the wrist cuff he wears on his left wrist. Since she didn’t buy them as a set, it took hours of concerted effort and mad google fu to find it.) this is the one she wears when she wants him to Dom.

There’s being the dominant partner in whatever game they’re playing, and then there’s actually Doming, which is very different.

He smiles seeing her waiting for him. They haven’t done it in months, but it’s one of his favorite games.

She’s kneeling at the end of the bed, waiting patiently for him. He kisses her for a long minute, and then pulls back, taking another moment to get into the right mindset for this.

“Come here.”

She does, settling on the spot on the mattress he patted.
“Did you bring your butterfly?” That’s something else he got her, though that one wasn’t a Christmas present. It’s a bullet shaped vibrator that fits into a soft silicon sheath in a sort of harness that looks, honestly, a little like a jock strap. It keeps the vibrator on her clit, but doesn’t block his access to her vagina or anus. And it has a wireless remote.

She nods.

“You may speak when I ask you questions.”

She nods again.

“Go get it.”

She hops off the bed and returns with it a moment later. He takes it from her and places it on the bed, next to his hip.

“Have you had a shower, yet?” Her hair isn’t wet, but he also doesn’t know how long she’s been awake.

“No.”

He stood up and offered her his hand. She took it, and he led them to the bathroom.

Part of the reason they haven’t done this in months is because, while it’s fun, it’s a mindset that Tim doesn’t have an easy time switching into and out of. Actually, that’s not true, getting into it isn’t an issue. He can usually get into it in less than a minute. Getting back out of it is the issue. Which is a polite way of saying he really likes it, but he also knows that always being in charge isn’t a good plan for his long term happiness and continued employment at NCIS. For example, he knows he can dominate Tony and Ziva, because if there were ever people who did well with: have high standards, explain what you want, pet the person when they meet those standards, spank them when they don’t, it’s Gibbs’ team. And Tim’s good at that, and he’s got a few more tricks than Gibbs does when it comes to the petting part of the equation. (And no, when he’s thinking of Tony and Ziva, he’s not thinking of that, just that he’s more willing to show he’s pleased when people do a good job than Gibbs is.)

But if he were to do it, it’d topple the apple cart, screw up the team dynamics, and make things tense between him and Tony again, possibly make things awkward between Tony and Ziva, and probably mess things up with him and Gibbs (because Gibbs is the Dom for their team). So, since he can’t slide out of this on a moment’s notice, they don’t do it unless he’s got a few days between Doming and work.

And of course, he’s not due back to work in over a week. Plenty of time to get back to being Tim again.

So he smiles, turns on the water, and waits for it to warm up, Abby standing next to him, waiting for him to make the next decision.

It has not escaped Tim’s attention that Abby suddenly has ten more inches of hair than she used to. He’s been appreciating how she looks with that long spill of black and red hair down her back. Really enjoying it. However, since he’s appreciating it, he’d also like to keep it nice for as long as possible, and he has absolutely no idea of how to do that. One of his pet joys is washing her hair, but he doesn’t want to mess this up.

“Kneel.”
She did so, head bent, and he proceeded to pet her hair at his leisure, really exploring how it feels. The extensions are soft, warm, and feel like real hair, and also a little oddly nubby when there meet up at her scalp. He’s not loving that texture, but if that’s the cost of long hair on Abby...

“How do you take care of this?”

“Just like normal hair. Be gentle when you wash it, don’t rub too hard on the scalp, extra rinse time to make sure all the soap gets out.”

“Okay.” He reaches his hand into the shower, and the water is feeling nicely warm. He kneels behind her, lifting her hair off her neck, and gently kisses her nape above and below the collar, then unsnaps it (like his cuff it’s got two silver snaps for the closure). He’s done this enough times to have mastered unsnapping it, letting it fall so that it drapes over her shoulder, and then slowly dragging it off, letting it slip over her throat and shoulder, and every time he does that, she shivers. Today was no exception.

“Into the shower.”

She stands, gracefully, and slips in. He unsnaps his cuff, places both of the leather goods on the sink, and follows her in a second later.

Tim couldn’t tell you why he likes washing Abby’s hair, but he’s got some pretty good guesses. There are some pretty obvious reasons, like the way she moans when he does it. That’s on the list. It’s time where he get to touch her while she’s wet and naked, both of which are very good things. He thinks the heart of it might be that it’s a very caring gesture, comforting, very intimate. It’s not the sort of thing you do with someone you’re just casually with.

“Cross-legged, on the floor.” And she complies. “Any sounds you want to make, you may.” They’ve done this where he didn’t give her permission to make noise, just to see what it was like, and really, a good third of the thrill of making love to her is hearing her respond to him. Her silent while he went down on her was like a pretzel without salt, not bad, but bland.

The only time silent is fun is if there’s someone else nearby, and when that’s true silent gets overwhelmed by don’t-get-caught.

He pours a little of the shampoo into his hand and gets to work. A big part of how he usually does this is his fingers squirming on her scalp, rubbing into the skin, and pressing his thumbs into the tight muscles where her neck and head connect. He can still do that part of it, though the scalp rub just got a lot less intense.

But she still makes that very pleased, deep, satisfied moan when his thumbs go to work on her neck, and like always that sound settles in his dick, perking it up, getting it very interested in seeing if more sounds like that might be coming out of her anytime soon.

And they do. He rubs and kneads her shoulders while hot water beats down on both of them, and she makes soft little sighs and deep happy moans, and he’s fairly sure that what he’s doing doesn’t feel quite that good, but he doesn’t much care if she’s just doing this to turn him on because that’s all sorts of good, too.

By the time the last of the conditioner has rinsed free of her hair, he’s completely hard and thinking that her sitting on the floor of the shower puts her mouth in an awfully good position.

It’s true that the first time he did this, he blushed so hard he thought his head was going to burst into flame. Growing up with Penny and dating a sociologist who focused on gender roles in pre-industrial
cultures at MIT meant that he’d had some fairly intensive training in how to treat women properly, and saying “Get down on your knees and suck,” was more or less on the top of the list of things that a well-trained feminist guy just didn’t do. But it’s also true that the idea of saying ‘Get down on your knees and suck,’ made him so hard he could feel his pulse in his dick.

And for a long time he felt bad about that, and never, ever did it, let alone suggested doing it, until the first time he and Abby dated, and she asked him what his kinkiest fantasy was. When he explained why he was blushing so hard, she rolled her eyes, pointed to the door to her bedroom, and said, “Outside that door, you get bonus points for understanding privilege and gender bias, but that stays on the other side of that door.” Then she kissed him and asked, “Does it make you feel bad when I tell you to eat me out?”

“No.”

“Do you think getting on your knees and licking my pussy is demeaning?”

“No! Of course not!” He looked, and was, horrified by that idea.

“I tell you to do it, does it mean I don’t respect you, or see you as an object?”

“No. Just means you like oral and want me to do it for you.”

“Then why should you feel bad about liking the same thing?”

When that clicked, he got a whole lot happier about his interests.

Abby’s sitting in front of him, waiting patiently, so he smiles at her, caresses her face, and leans against the back wall of the shower, legs spread shoulder-width apart.

“Suck me.”

And she does. Eyes open, looking up at him, mouth soft, and red, and wet, and so insanely good.

He settles in to watch her do him. There’s nothing else like this, getting to feel her and watch her do it. She holds him by the base of his cock and spends a good five minutes just licking, sucking, and playing with the tip, keeping her lips tight and letting him slip between them, providing the feel of that first tight, shallow thrust of sex, knowing how much he loves seeing her mouth on his dick, her lips slipping over it, and her tongue wet and hot rubbing against it.

She moans while she does it, and it’s a little hard to hear over the water and the fact that he’s not exactly being quiet either. But he can feel it, and that adds to his pleasure.

“Deeper, no hands.”

He loves her hands on their own. Loves when she blows him and uses her hand at the same time, even more. It’s all wet and slick and sucking and tight, it’s all so good. And that’s why he’s said no hands. Just mouth takes longer. It’s a slower build, more diffuse, less friction, but when he comes it’s more diffuse, too. He gets to feel it all through his body.

Her hands rest on his knees, and she pulls him deeper into her mouth, sucking harder, her tongue rubbing the underside of his dick. His hands clench and his head falls back against the wall of the shower. He’s cursing softly, letting her know in explicit and obscene detail how good it feels.

Her molars add a little sharp scrape to the smooth wet of her mouth, and he loves that sensation. It’s like fingernails down his back while fucking. It’s just brilliant on so many levels, and he feels really sorry for the guys who are so sensitive they can’t take this.
Her hands are clenched on his knees, and he notices that, so he says, “You can touch yourself if you want, but no getting off.”

He feels her right hand leave his knee, but he can’t see her play with herself with it. Her sucking him is in the way, and while it’s true that Abby playing with herself is one of his favorite sights, her sucking him off is even better.

He watches, breathing hard, jaw clenched, thighs tight, riding his body’s pleasure at her touch.

The one thing he isn’t doing is thrusting. He wants to, would love to, but he’s not. Part of being a good Dom is knowing what the sub wants, what she can take, and where her boundaries are, and he knows that if she’s not using her hands it’s way too easy for him to choke her, and neither of them are going to be happy if he gags her.

So he doesn’t. He lets her set the pace, and while he’s touching her face, hair, and shoulders, he’s just touching, he’s not grabbing or forcing or anything like that. He gets the idea of breath play, but he’s not comfortable doing that unless he’s completely in control, and his dick in her mouth isn’t conducive to completely in control.

He watches her do it, seeing if she looks like her jaw is getting sore. There’s only so long she can do this, and he doesn’t want to push her too far, especially since this is just the opening round for today, but he’s not catching the tell-tale tension in her face, so he says, “Slower, all the way down. You can use your hand to get the right angle.”

Abby can deep throat, though this isn’t a great position for it. (Sixty-nine works way better for that, but that also tends to shoot his concentration to hell and gone.) But she takes hold of him, pulling his dick down a bit, and then slips it, slowly all the way into her mouth, and he groans so loudly she blinks and smiles. (At least as well as she can with her mouth open wide. Her eyes look really amused.)

He can feel himself starting to fall apart. A slow orgasm is a thing of joy and beauty, and the feeling of just easing over the edge is glorious, but he’s not quite there yet, and he’s debating if he wants her to swallow or if he wants to cum on her.

It’s not something she really likes. In fact, in the shower is pretty much the only time he’s allowed to do it. (From what he can tell, it’s the only one of his kinks she’s not enthusiastic about.) And until getting back from Afghanistan, he didn’t know he liked it. But there’s something about seeing it on her skin that just does it for him.

And if there was ever a time where it’d be okay…

His touch on her shoulder lets her know that he’s going to turn so his body blocks the spray from the shower. She figures out where this is going, winks, lets him know it’s okay, and turns with him.

“Finish me with your hands. Want to cum on your chest.” He never gets her face. He knows from his own experience that if it gets into your eyes it burns.

So she did, a few fast strokes, and he was humming with pleasure, feeling it spark through his whole body, making him shake and twitch, as he watched his cum land on her in thick, drippy stripes.

When his heart calmed back down, and his breathing was closer to normal, he pulls her to her feet, and kisses her long and hard, petting her hair and back, then whispering sweet words of how happy he is with her and how much he loves her and what an excellent job she’s done at making him come.

She purrs at him, quivering in a pleased sort of way, and he turns her into the spray of the shower,
letting it rinse away his cum, and then he gets down on his knees and kisses her properly.

She’s wet, and hot, and very turned on, and he makes sure to do a good job. He keeps his tongue soft and light, the sort of touch that just hints of better things to come, an almost exploring touch, while his fingers hold her wide open.

And when she’s thrusting against him, hands clenching in his hair, loudly groaning between a chorus of “Fuck Tim! Just like that!” he stops and stands up.

He kisses her mouth, whispering against her lips, “I promise, you will get off, and it will be glorious, but not yet, not now. We’re going to go out, see Charleston, maybe see a movie, and I am going to play with you all day. And when you are so turned on you can barely breathe, when you are shaking from head to toe, sobbing for release, when every muscle in your body is so tight it could snap, when every thought in your head is devoted to getting fucked and getting off, then I’ll plunge deep into you, fingers rubbing your clit hard and fast, and make you come so intensely you’ll pass out on my cock.” He kisses hot and wet on her ear. “And then I’ll do it again.” Another kiss, sucking her ear lobe. “And maybe, if you’re good, and if I haven’t gotten off yet, I’ll do it one more time.”

She’s quivering against him as he says that, arms wrapped tight around his neck.

He gives her one last, quick kiss, this time on her lips, and says, “Let’s get out of the shower and dressed.”
The Nature of The Dom

Tim stood in front of their luggage looking at what they had brought.

Abby sat on the bed, smiling, wondering what he'd pick out.

It had taken him a while to get to the point where he was really comfortable doing this, but once he got there… Well, she's never been disappointed at how wickedly creative he can be when he sets his mind to it.

And with the butterfly on the bed next to her, and the way he's sorting through her clothing, and debating the kilt or a pair of jeans, she's pretty sure that today is going to be a whole lot of fun.

The first time Tim Dommed, back the first time they dated, it took Abby a little while to figure out what was going on.

It was the fourth time they got together, after 'the hinkey thing,' which had been excellently hinkey, and she was looking for a way to say thank you, because he was the first guy who didn't completely freak out about the play-dead-in-the-coffin thing, so they'd been on her sofa, making out, and she asked him what his kinkiest fantasy was, because no matter what it might be, she was game for it.

He stopped kissing her, blushed scarlet, and tried to brush it off.

That just got her more curious because this was the guy who tied her up the first time they had sex, so if he was blushing like that it had to be way out in left field, and curious slid to even more turned on, so she kept whispering questions about what it could be, suggestions, each one hotter than the last, and just talking about it had him majorly turned on.

Finally he closed his eyes, bit his lip, and took a really deep breath, held it, and let it out.

"You really want to know?"

"Yeah." By that point she had images of hot wax, breath play, and maybe some cross dressing in mind because he kept saying no to all the things she was coming up with.

His shirt was off but he still had his pants on. He stood up, a few inches in front of the sofa, where she was lying, and said, "Sit up and face me."

"Okay." She sat up, turned, tucking her knees between his legs, and just looked up at him, licked her lips, smiling, waiting, which he seemed to like.

Then he said, voice low, little nervous, "Unbuckle my belt."

So she did. Slipping the leather through the metal, and then through his belt loops. He was tenting his pants, though he was also blushing so hard she wasn't sure how he had enough blood in his body to keep him that hard and that flushed.

When she finished with his belt she looked up at him and grinned.

"Take your bra off." She reached back, grabbing the fabric. "Slowly." So she did it slowly, easing it down her arms, holding the cups in place before slipping them away.

He spent a long minute just staring at her, then closed his eyes, took another deep breath, opened them, looked her in the eye, and said, voice steady, low, hot, "Take my cock out and suck it."
Which was fine by her. Though she was wondering if he was just making something up on the fly, because as kinky fantasies went, it was kind of a dud. She'd given him blow jobs before, and yeah, he really appreciated them. (She had a sinking suspicion that his previous girlfriend had been awfully stingy in the oral sex department, but didn't ask about it until years later, after they had finished dating, when they had been hanging out and talking about exes with Jimmy and Tony, too, and yeah, she had been right. Helen had only done it once over the course of the year they dated, and then spit. Which made Abby want to go find her and smack her upside the back of the head, because that's no way to treat a man, and was especially no way to treat her McGee.) But, no matter how rarely he got them, a blow job wasn't precisely kinky, let alone worth blushing so hard he looked like he might pop a blood vessel.

It wasn't until he was telling her how to do it, that it finally occurred to her what the kink was. He was telling her what to do. He wasn't asking, he was telling, and he was standing, all 6'1" and two hundred and ten pounds of him, towering over her, and she was on her knees, doing exactly what he was telling her to do, there entirely for his pleasure, and it had him so turned on he was leaking and trembling.

When he got off, he came so hard his knees buckled. And Abby swallowed. She always swallows, (She doesn't want a guy acting like she tastes nasty, so she's not about to do it to a guy.) but this time she made a little show of it, purring and milking him, letting him know she liked it.

After a few minutes, when he had calmed back down, he held her, and petted her hair, and told her how much he liked what she had done, how pleased he was by what she had done, and how he liked to do nice things for girls who made him happy, and then went down on her, and yeah, he wasn't great at it at that point, but he was enthusiastic, and attentive, and it was an awfully nice orgasm.

As they got ready for bed, she could see his embarrassment come back. So when they were both naked and sleepy in her coffin, she explained that it was okay for him to like to tell her what to do.

He looked really relieved, and like he didn't quite believe her. Because, like most guys who are into Domming but aren't assholes, he had a hard time getting over the deeply ingrained idea that nice guys don't do things like that. Nice guys ask. Nice guys always ask. Nice guys don't get off on telling a woman to do things, and they certainly don't have a little part inside that likes the idea of making her do something, and a nice guy really doesn't get off on the idea of a woman on her knees, head bowed, worshiping his cock, there entirely for his pleasure. That's the kind of sex that's in porn, and nice guys know that that's icky and objectifying, and they're supposed to feel ashamed about getting off on it, because it's demeaning to women.

Nope, nice guys don't go for that, at all. They're in it for safe, mutual, sanitary, and above all respectful (i.e. female directed and initiated) sex.

She's always hated seeing guys who do like Domming feel so bad about it. But especially in Tim, who genuinely is sweet and gentle and cares, seeing him feel like there was something bad about wanting to be in control just made her mad.

And maybe she's not a nice girl, but she always got off on seeing the aggressive, dominant side of him. Always liked it, always responded to it with a faster pulse, hotter breath, hard nipples, wet panties, do-that-again, and-do-it-fast, sort of way.

After that case in the women's prison, after he inspected his car, made sure it was done exactly the way he had liked it, he headed to the lab, stood very close behind her, and quietly said, with a voice that let her know exactly what he wanted, a voice that sent shivers down her spine and felt like his teeth on the nape of her neck, "Have dinner with me."
She turned to face him, and the look he was giving her was hot enough to melt her panties. What she wanted to do was bow her head and say, "Yes. Yes to anything and everything you want to do tonight. Yes to your voice in my ears telling me what you want. Yes to my body for you to play with. Yes to any and every sort of sex you want. Yes to my legs around your hips, my nails down your back, and licking your cum off my lips. Yes."

But what she actually said was, "I'm sorry, I want to, but I can't." Because no matter how good that night would have been-and watching him check his car, hearing his voice, seeing that look, she knew he had learned some new tricks since the last time they had slept together, and that night would have been amazing-the morning would have been complicated and unhappy, and she couldn't take him looking at her, disappointed, wanting more than she could give.

He saw the look on her face, understood everything she meant by it, nodded, and left.

The second time they did it was less than two weeks after they started dating again.

He was a lot more confident and comfortable with it. No blush in sight as he tied her hands and told her to unzip him with her teeth. No waver in his voice as he talked her through blowing him. And when he untied her hands and told her exactly how he wanted her to play with herself so he could watch, his eyes stayed on hers, and he looked dead sexy doing it.

But there was still a tinge of nervousness.

Not about doing it, not about liking it, but there was that hint of fear of is-this-the-time-I'll-whip-something-out-she-won't -like.

Is this the time I'll go too far?

She thinks she had Maxine to thank for that fear. She knew they had been dating, getting along well, and Tim had been happy and hopeful, then suddenly they weren't. And while he had been willing to tell her about issues with other girlfriends, all he would say about Maxine was, "I never told anyone any of your secrets, and I'm not going to tell you hers."

So Abby left it alone. But she still hated to see that bit of uncertainty in his face, and swore to herself, that no matter what he came up with, she'd treat him with care and never make him feel bad about the things he liked. She might not be willing to go along with it, but she'd never embarrass him or belittle him for it.

And, eventually, as time passed and he came up with new games, and she was interested in all of them, that nervousness eased, and since he shared the Breena threesome fantasy with her, it's been gone.

A long time ago, she had been sitting at Kate's, they'd spent the weekend together, awash in a tidal wave of girliness, and just having a really good time.

And by the time the bottle of wine was almost done, Kate finally asked her about Tim.

Well, asked might have been the wrong word.

"I don't get it," Kate said as she put her wineglass on the coffee table. They were lounging on her sofa, finishing off a bottle of Riesling.
"What?"

"You and McGee."

"He's cute!" Abby's voice got a bit loud and emphatic as she said that.

"Sure, he's cute. He's a big, adorable Labrador puppy of epic geek cuteness, but don't you want…"

Kate didn't look like she quite knew how to finish that, but finally came up with, "Don't you need someone who can challenge you? Who can stand up for himself?"

Abby looked at her curiously. "Are we still talking about McGee and me?"

"Yes."

"You sure? 'Cause that sounds a lot like you and Gibbs."

Kate rolled her eyes. "Gibbs and I is beyond dead on arrival."

"He likes you." Abby might not have been a trained investigator, but she wasn't blind either, she saw the way Gibbs looked at Kate when Kate wasn't paying attention. And she knew Kate had something of a crush on her boss.

"Not enough to get over his rules, and even if he was, I'm not crazy enough to date a man with three ex-wives. Let alone come onto my boss, who has a girlfriend. So, you and McGee, don't you want some sort of challenge, you know, a guy who won't just… do whatever you tell him to?"

Abby giggled. "Look, I like a guy who will do exactly what I tell him to, and you don't even want to know how good McGee is at that. And he'll stand up for himself, too. He was telling me exactly what to do last week and, yeah, he was nervous at first, because, well, when isn't he? But he got into it, and it was a blast."

Kate didn't look like she believed that, at all. "McGee?"

"Yeah."

Kate was really curious, the kind of curious she only got when enough alcohol was in her system to shut down her Catholic School Girl reserve. "Like what kind of telling you what to do?"

Abby sipped her wine, remembering, wicked little grin on her lips. "Like the kind where you say 'Yes, sir. Please, sir,' but don't salute."

Kate's eyebrows shot up so fast and so high they looked like they were trying to migrate into her hairline. "McGee? Tall guy, good with computers, works out of Norfolk?"

"Yeah, McGee." Abby smiled smugly at her.

"Really, McGee? The guy who blushes and stutters when you look him in the eye and ask him a question."

"You have no idea. That boy has a mouth on him like you wouldn't believe—"

"Yeah, I know, he's cute." Kate looked a little exasperated at Abby's crush.

Abby smirked at her. "Not what I meant by mouth, but seriously, he does have the cutest lips ever. The little pouty thing with the bottom one…" Kate just stared at her, obviously not seeing what Abby saw in Tim. "Anyway, once he gets comfortable that stutter-y, nervous exterior goes away
and… just… McGee is a whole lot of fun and up for *anything* you can think of."

Kate had looked very pleased by that. "Huh… maybe there's some hope."

"Hope for what?"

"Hope that there's a guy who can drag your heart out of that lock box you've got it hidden in. Letting yourself love someone would be good for you, and if he can make you say 'Yes, sir,' maybe he's the guy to do it."

Two weeks later, after a night of really good sex, where Tim showed her that he was just as happy to get tied up as he was to do the tying, Abby realized that Kate was right, he could do it, so she broke up with him, terrified of what would happen if he did drag her heart out into the light.

Abby watched Tim continue to mess around with the things they had brought, picking up her clothing and putting it back as different ideas percolated through his head, and she wished Kate could have seen that she was right.
Tim stood in front of his luggage and debated. The kilt would provide significantly easier access. And while it was true that what they did in the shower means he's not going to get a hard on anytime soon, he's going to take her out and play with her all day, so at some point his dick will wake back up again, and the kilt is terrible for keeping that under wraps.

His jeans, on the other hand, keep everything fairly well concealed, but they're a pain in the ass (pain in the pubes, really. Getting a few of them snagged in the zipper'll kill a good blow job in a second.) to have sex in.

He decided to kick that down the road a bit, went to her luggage, and started sorting through. He noticed she hadn't brought any pants and approved of that whole-heartedly. Yes, he liked her in jeans, but he adored her in skirts or dresses, especially the short ones that come just to mid-thigh.

And from the looks of it, that was all she packed.

The little black dress with the cherries on it was in there, and so was the scoop neck t-shirt and the black skirt with the white stripes down it… Choices… choices.

He went for the t-shirt and skirt, the collar looks better with them, and then began to sort through her undies. No panties, that was a given, but what about a bra?

The t's pretty thin and tight, so… Ooh… black satin demi cups with the front closure. He loved that one. It was really pretty, easy for him to get her out of, and provided some awfully nice shaping.

Bare legs or socks or stockings… He found his phone and checked the weather. Highs in the mid-seventies… too cool for bare legs. Too cool for stockings. White above the knee socks with little vertical black stripes it is. Plus, with the socks he could to see that little four inch strip of naked skin between the socks and her skirt, and even though he wasn't particularly into hentai, he really appreciated that look.

Boots or mary janes? Mary janes, he wanted to be able to see the curves of her legs.

He was lying the socks on the bed next to her when he noticed that she looked a little sad. That really wasn't the direction he was hoping this was going to go, and he couldn't think of anything in the last five minutes that would have set her off.

"Are you all right? We don't have to do this if—"

She turned to look up at him, sorrow still in her eyes. "Yeah, I'm all right. Yes, I want to keep doing this. I was just thinking."

"About?" he asked as he sat next to her.

"Kate thought maybe you were the guy who could drag my heart out of the lock box I had it hidden in."

He smiled at that.

"I wish she could have been at our wedding."

He wrapped his arm around her and kissed her shoulder. "I would have liked that, too."
Then Abby started to tear up and snuggle into his arms, quietly crying. Part of him was feeling pretty alarmed by that, and wanted to say something like, "Hey, none of that, sex and fun, remember?" But he figured that would probably be worse than useless, so he held onto her and stroked her back, hoping this passes quickly.

And it did. After a few minutes, she pulled back, wiped her eyes, and smiled at him.

"Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize about missing your best friend."

"Thanks. I really don't like this think-about-something-kind-of-sad-for-ten-seconds- and-burst-into-tears thing."

Tim nodded. "It's a little scary."

"Yeah." She wiped her eyes again, and looked at the clothing he'd put next to her. "That looks promising."

"Good. You ready to play?"

"Yeah." She smiled.

"Go wash off your face, then do your makeup, out here, no lipstick."

She nodded and went to the bathroom. Cool water splashed on her face helped with the puffy redness around her eyes. When she was looking normal again, she grabbed her cosmetics bag and headed back into the bedroom, then, standing in front of the mirror over the dresser got to work.

Tim watched her for a moment, wondering if she was really all right, but she seemed okay as she rubbed sunblock onto her face, neck, and shoulders. So he relaxed, focused on sex again, enjoying the sight of her fingers rubbing over her skin. Then he began to look through her cosmetics. He loved the way Abby looked with lipstick on. Her lips dark red just made his day.

Her lipstick on him, unless the part of him in question is his dick, was a different story. And he was pretty sure that her lipstick would be all over him by the end of today if she was wearing any.

But he also knew she had something on that was deep red and didn't smear all over the place for their wedding, and he was wondering if she brought it. Though why he thought he could just look through her cosmetics and figure out what that was he didn't know. So he put the bag down and asked, "Did you bring the red stuff you were wearing on your lips at our wedding?"

"Yes."

"Wear that, too."

She smiled, pulled out something that looked like every other red tube in the bag, and put it on the dresser while she darkened her eyebrows. He picked it up and made a mental note; it was called lipstain, and looked like a red magic marker.

As she did her face, he came to the conclusion that he had pushed back figuring out what he was going to wear as far as he could, so, time to get dressed.

Part of being a good Dom is balancing the tasks you set for your sub with the rewards you give her. The idea is to make your sub want to please you, make her crave the attention and petting she gets
for good performance.

And the only way to do that is to actually get to know your sub well enough to know what she wants. (Part of the reason Tim and Abby found 50 Shades of Gray so funny was that apparently in addition to being a billionaire, hyper-competent executive, Christian Gray was also a mind reader, because that's the only way those two could have clicked so quickly.)

But by this point, Tim is a very good Dom, so he knows what Abby wants, knows what she likes, and knows just how to pet her.

Abby had already done a very good job of pleasing him today, and she preferred the kilt to jeans, so on the kilt went. And if everyone in Charleston ended up seeing he wanted to fuck his wife, oh well. If he didn't want other people to see, they could stay at the hotel.

He dressed quickly: kilt, t-shirt, and socks. Boots and jacket'll go on later. Then he headed back into the bathroom to grab his cuff and her collar.

She was smoothing the lipstain on as he came back out. He thought that was the last step of getting her makeup on, so he waited. And when she finished, he handed her his wrist cuff. "Put it on me."

She was holding it, reaching for his wrist, when he stopped her. "The lipstain, does it have to dry or get blotted or anything?"

"Yes. It takes a little while to set up, and before it does it can smear or leave lip prints."

He smiled. "Kiss my wrist."

She smiled back, and then left a perfect, red lip print on his wrist. Abby blew lightly on it. "Don't want it to smear."

"Thank you." He waited a moment, then ran his thumb over it, and it stayed put. He nodded, and she closed the cuff around his wrist. "Maybe I'll get that tattooed on."

She raised an eyebrow at him and looked very pleased at that idea.

"Maybe I'll put a few more on you, too." He lifted her now damp hair off her shoulders, and kissed just below and behind her ear. "My lips right here. And," he took her hand in his, lifting her right arm up and out, and kissed the crease of her elbow, "right there. Here." His lips settled on her mound, just above where her labia came together. "Definitely here."

He kissed her one more time there, soft and wet. Then he pulled back, licked her, and said, "Maybe not there. Tattoo artist would have to see you there to do it. So..." He slid his lips down her leg, gently nibbling, and kissed the back of her left knee. "Right here. And one more..." he kissed the top of her foot, just above her toes. "You covered in my kisses, head to toe. I like that."

He stood back up and circled behind her, holding her collar in his right hand. With his left, he lightly scraped his fingernails down the back of her neck, along her spine to the small of her back. Then he followed that path with his lips and teeth, soft, wet kisses and sharp, light bites. She shivered as he did it, moaning softly.

"Feel good?"

"Yes."

He straightened up, reversing the line of kisses up her back, lingering on the nape of her neck, just below her hairline, enjoying the feel of her skin breaking out in goosebumps under his touch. He
kept his lips just above her skin and whispered, "Bow your head," his breath caressing her wet flesh. She did, and he fastened the collar around her throat.

"Turn and look at me." She did, standing before him, naked, face done, hair damp, and because it hasn't been brushed through, wavy, draping over her shoulder, covering her left breast. He feathered his fingers over her face, throat, and shoulders, down her arms to her hands, his eyes following the path of his hands, tracing further down her body, and back again to her face. "You are so beautiful."

He kissed her lips, soft and slow, his hand on the back of her head, fingers tangled in her hair, and he kissed back, lips warm and welcoming. He didn't pull back as he murmured against her lips, "And you'll be even more beautiful flushed head to toe, nipples hard, moaning my name as you ride my cock, coming so hard you see stars."

He stepped back and got the butterfly.

One thing a lot of guys don't know about vibrators is that if they keep running, eventually the person under them goes numb. In fact, they were originally designed for anesthetic purposes, but eventually a doctor figured out they were a lot faster at treating, "feminine hysteria," than the hands on method, and shortly thereafter no one used them for anesthetic purposes.

Tim can't remember what got Ducky on that tangent, but he does remember blushing pretty hard about it, while Tony slapped him on the shoulder and made a lame joke. Still that did turn out to be useful information, because it made him realize that women might not use vibrators the same way men would, so he did some research, and well, much to the delight of the three women he's done this with, he's awfully good with one.

So, as he was slipping the butterfly up Abby's legs, petting and kissing his way up, using his fingers and tongue to make sure he's got it set exactly right, he was not planning on just letting it run. That'd be counter-productive. (In fact, he had never gotten a girl off with a vibrator. If he's going to get a girl off, it's going to be his fingers, cock, or tongue doing it.)

The point of the butterfly is the anticipation of never knowing when then next little jolt comes. The idea is to keep Abby focused on sex, keep her arousal level high, remind her that today he's in charge of her body, in charge of her arousal. He's the one who gets to choose when she comes.

It's got five speeds, and he's never used any higher than three, which is, according to Abby, a nice, steady hum, the sort that feels good, but can't get her off.

Once he got it set, he said, "Lay down."

So she did, on the bed. "Legs wide."

And she did that, too. He started at her ankle, sucking, open-mouthed kisses, purposely wetting the skin, blowing on it gently to add to the sensation, all the way up her leg, listening to her purr as he did it. When he got to her pussy, he placed her foot on his shoulder, and began to lick, tongue flat and broad, over her lips, while he pulsed the vibrator on the lowest setting. No more than a few seconds of buzz at a time while she writhed against him.

He got his fingers into the game, slipping in and pressing up, pulsing along with the vibrator, feeling her body start to tense around him, starting the build toward orgasm, which stopped him. He pulled back and away, biting gently on the soft curve where her leg and buttock met.

"Let's get you dressed," he said, grinning at her, holding her gaze as he carefully licked his fingers clean.
Tim loves watching Abby dress, especially when she's feeling playful and makes a show of it. And today she was feeling playful, smoothing her socks gently up her leg, stroking her fingers over her skin as she did it, lifting her foot higher than necessary, 1950s pin up style, flashing him.

He sat in the chair in the corner, watching. His dick was still asleep, but he certainly appreciated the show. Her in thigh high socks, the butterfly, and collar, bending over to pick up her bra and slide that on was beyond beautiful. He spread his legs, hiked the kilt up and stroked himself, and no, he wasn't hard, and no, it wasn't going to make him hard, it had been less than twenty minutes since the last time he got off, but it still felt nice.

And he knew she liked to watch, liked knowing that he was just as affected by this as she was.

He got his pleasure at her across in his look, keeping his eyes hot and on her the whole time she was dressing.

When she finished, she came to stand in front of him. He stood up, and held her close, her forehead against his lips. He kissed her softly.

"I love you, Abby. You make me happier than I ever had any right to expect to be happy. You are my joy." He lowered his lips to hers for a long hot kiss, tongue stroking hers, his hands cupping her rear, pulling her close to him.

He didn't step back, though he did break the kiss to look at her and say, "And you are the sexiest woman alive. Let's go out and play."

In addition to being a good food city, and music city, and just an achingly beautiful place to be, (Seriously, how does the sky get so blue here? Tim's never seen blue like that.) Charleston is also a great art city. There are full streets filled with small galleries of all sorts.

And art galleries are a remarkably good choice of places to go when you're so turned on you can't see straight. No one really expects you to make conversation. The other patrons are looking at the art, not you, and there's often enough background noise that if something is making a slight buzzing sound, it's hard to hear.

For the most part Tim and Abby just wandered from gallery to gallery, looking at pretty things, lots of landscapes/cityscapes and occasionally he'd give her a quick buzz/kiss/say something insanely dirty to her.

Then they found the gallery with the nudes. And, no he hadn't planned it. Didn't know it was there. Hadn't seen it when he was wandering about looking for the way back to the hotel. But the opportunity presented by a wall covered with absolutely gorgeous black and white nudes, mostly women, was too good to pass up.

One was a shot of the curve of a woman's shoulder, back, and buttocks. And for the moment no one else seemed to be in the place, so as they looked, he traced his hand over the same curve on Abby, quickly slipping his hand under her skirt, grazing his fingernails over her butt and the top of her leg, and then shifting over two steps to stand directly behind her and kiss the curve where shoulder became neck.

He turned the vibrator on its lowest setting. "Have I told you that's one of my favorite views?"

Granted, Tim had a new favorite view roughly every third day, but yesterday afternoon was inspiring this current one.
"No."

"When you're on your hands and knees, and I'm balls deep inside of you, your back arches," he lightly ran his hand along her spine, "and your head drops, and I can enjoy the perfect curve of your body. Your shoulders and spine flex a little as you rock back onto me. Your hips and the small of your back are just perfect for grabbing." His hands came to rest on her hips, and he pulled her to stand against him. "And your bottom's high," he added a little grind of his hips against her, and nudged her foot over a few inches with his own, "so I can see everything, see myself sink into you," he slid his hand up the inside of her thigh, "see your gorgeous pink pussy go tight around me as I slide in," he slipped a finger into her, "and cling to me when I slip out." And pulled it back out. He stroked her neck with that finger, and then licked the wetness off her throat. "Love that."

Abby's eyes slid shut, and she inhaled quickly. He rested his chin on her shoulder and wrapped one arm around her waist, fingers quickly slipping under the waistband of her skirt, lightly stroking her tummy. "Open your eyes. Look at that one."

The next shot over was the curve of a woman's leg from hip to foot. She was laying down, knee bent, foot flat on the floor.

He kept his voice very low, partly because his mouth was less than an inch from her ear, partly because should someone come in, he doesn't want anyone to overhear this, mostly because he knew that voice made her quiver. "When we get back to the hotel, I'm going to put your leg just like that, and then kiss my way up it." He dropped his hand to her side, fingers coming to rest just below the edge of her skirt, then he lightly stroked just the tips of his fingers over her bare skin. "Lick every inch. Then I'll hook it over my shoulder, spread you wide, and eat you out. I'm going to feast on your pussy, licking every single bit of it, over and over, savoring your smell and taste. I'll nibble on the lips, just a little light scrape of tooth, just enough to pull a little bit, tug slightly. I'll suck on your clit until you're flushed, shaking, screaming my name, and begging to come." He turned the speed up a notch on the vibrator, seeing the flush creeping up her cheeks and down her throat. "Then I'll point my tongue and rub your clit in long, slow circles," his tongue flicked out and caressed her earlobe, "just sort of rolling over it, nice and slow and gentle, while my fingers slip in and out of you." He clicked the vibrator off, and she whimpered, inhaling long and shaky trying to keep control of herself. "Taking you down a bit, spinning you out, making sure you're good and ready to come before I get you off."

As he whispered that to her, his dick finally noticed something interesting was going on. Something really good, something it really wanted to get involved in. He rubbed against her again, letting her know that his body was back in the game as well. Abby grinned and rubbed back.

And though there were other shots, and he was sure he could come up with some good commentary to go with them, he was also not interested in talking both of them off in an art gallery. Time to ease back, and find something else to do.

As they were walking out, he noticed the pockets in the kilt weren't anchored. So, if he had something of a inconveniently conspicuous hard-on, and he wasn't feeling like wandering around with that visible to anyone who cared to look, he could just put his hand in his pocket, reach over a little, and hold it down.

And it just looked like he was walking with his hand in his pocket.

Added benefit to that, since his hand was already in his pocket, Abby never knew when he was going to turn the vibrator on.

It was about ten thirty at that point, so as they're walking out, he said to Abby, "I think it's time for a
snack. Is there anything you'd like?"

He probably should have expected the answer. He did ask the question less than a minute after turning the vibrator off, and was holding down the hard-on he'd been rubbing against her. Still, it took him a bit by surprise when she said, "Cock."

A flush of hot pleasure coursed through him, and he may have squeezed himself a little harder, because, yeah, that sounded really good.

And there is a practical benefit to letting her do it. It is significantly easier to be a good Dom if you aren't so turned on you can't think. A huge part of the game is balancing your desires with your sub's desires, and, like with anything else, it's much easier to be aware of, and attentive to, the needs of someone else if your own needs have been met.

The goal, then, of a good game, is to get everyone's needs met. The sub by meeting her Dom's expectations, and the Dom by providing expectations the sub wants to meet.

In a really good game, it's a perfect circle of gaining pleasure by giving pleasure. And that's why, though the Dom runs the game, the sub sets the rules. Almost anyone can enjoy the Dom part of the game, but the pleasure through service aspect of the sub is harder, so she gets to set the rules, create the atmosphere most conducive to wanting to please, to getting off on the Dom's pleasure.

But for a good Dom, the pleasure comes from pushing the sub beyond what she thought she could endure, taking her farther and higher than she's ever been, providing a safe space to fully relax and fall apart, and then holding the sub as she comes back together again. The challenge is finding that line of just far enough without breaking the comfort that comes from being taken care of.

And for a good Dom, watching that/doing it is a massive turn on. But doing it takes control. Which can be hard to keep a hold of if you're too turned on.

So, Tim seriously thought about it. His desire was distracting to him, and he didn't want to miss a cue as to what is going on with her. But at the same time, his arousal was a big part of what was feeding Abby's desire. And he didn't want to cut into that.

Then the fact that they have really different subbing styles also occurred to him. When he subs, he'll do exactly what she tells him to, never pushing the bounds, because he gets off on the not being in control. She, on the other hand, likes to challenge him a little, see how he'll respond. She pushes him a little, so he'll push her a little. For her it's about testing the boundaries, seeing how far they really can go. In the end, both styles work, very well.

So, he smiled indulgently, and said, "It's mostly protein, won't keep your blood sugar up. But, if you're good, and eat nicely, then you might get a taste. And if you're very good, and eat beautifully, you'll get a mouthful. Now, what would you like for a snack?"

She smiled at him. "Vanilla soft serve ice cream."

"Very good choice."

He'd noticed one the first time he was wandering around, but it hadn't meant anything to him. Family rest room. He knew for a fact that the men's room had a line of stalls, and he had a suspicion that was what the ladies' room has, as well. But he'd never been in a family rest room before, sooo…

He opened the door and pulled Abby in quickly. Nice. He locked the door behind them.
It looked more like a powder room in a house than a public restroom. Granted the ones in homes tend not to have changing tables bolted to the wall, let alone toddler-sized potties to go with the adult one, but the lack of stalls lent it a more personal feel.

But more importantly it was private, had a door that locked, and looked clean enough for surgery.

"You did very well with your snack, Abby."

And she had. If that ice cream cone could have come, it would have, hard. And if it was possible to get Tim off by eating an ice cream cone in front of him, he would have come, hard.

"You definitely get your mouthful." He nodded at the ground, and she sank to her knees as he lifted the kilt.

Normally, she'd lick him first, but the whole mouthful thing instead of a taste meant she took him in hand, opened wide, and sucked him down in one fast move.

"Oh shit!" Tim gasped, jerking away from the searing, wet, cold of her mouth. It was like dipping his dick, his very hard, very hot, excruciatingly sensitive dick into a slightly melted snow drift.

She looked up at him, worried. Him jumping back and rubbing himself was not the response she was hoping for.

He saw the worry in her eyes, and was still holding his dick as he said, "It's okay. I didn't realize your mouth would be that cold. That was a hell of a shock."

He watched her bite her lip, smile tugging at the corners, and look down, shoulders shaking.

"You're laughing, aren't you?"

She looked back up, trying to keep it together and not doing a great job of it. "Yes."

"It's okay."

Abby giggled hysterically, snorting a little.

He started to laugh, too. "Well, that took care of my erection. Not the way I was hoping for." But being sucked into an ice cold mouth had indeed wilted him. He sighed and let the kilt drop. "You need to use the restroom?"

"Wouldn't mind."

"Okay." So he headed back out, and noticed a few people staring in his direction. Apparently, the 'Oh shit!' was fairly loud. He just smiled at them, tried to look harmless, and waited for her to get done.

There's a point where a body is going to get off. You back off, no more stimulation, to try and get away from the edge, and then start up again too soon, and no matter how light the touch, how whisper thin the stimulation is, your body decides it's had enough and boom, orgasm.

He's accidentally done that to himself a few times, and honestly, those aren't great orgasms. Not bad. No such thing as a bad orgasm. But still, if you accidentally trip into one, you end up with your body just sort of surrendering, limping over the line, twitching a few times, and giving up.
And with this much build up, the absolute last thing he wants is to screw this up by just going a little too far, just a little too soon.

The main downside of doing this out and about was that Tim has a much harder time figuring out how close to that line Abby is. If he was lying between her legs, tongue on her clit, fingers inside her, he'd have a really good handle on what's going on and could play her like Chopin with a nocturne.

But she was not naked. He was not that close to her. And he didn't want to accidentally push her over the edge. Which, judging from the way she's flushed and breathing, might be a real possibility.

So after ninety minutes of… Hell, he doesn't know. They walked around and had long-distance eye sex while he said more hot/sexy/dirty things to her, buzzing her now and again, hugging, petting, and kissing when appropriate. There were touristy things in the background; he didn't pay any attention to them. One nice stranger gave them a tube of sunblock and suggested they get inside because they both appeared to have gotten too much sun. (Good thing about doing this outside, sex flush is easily mistaken for sunburn.) And he certainly enjoyed the excuse to very carefully, very thoroughly apply more sunblock to Abby, and have her do the same to him.

But he'd gotten to the point where he knew if he didn't stop this soon, just holding onto his dick to keep it from poking out was going to get him off, and since he's not the one getting played with all that much, she has to be even closer to the edge than he is.

So he found the place that did the duck sandwiches, and they had lunch, and for an entire hour he said and did nothing even remotely sexy.

And yes, the first ten minutes or so involved a fairly decent amount of squirming from Abby, but she eventually got the idea that nothing was going to happen, so she relaxed as well, and her flush went down, and they had a nice lunch, oohing and ahhing over the meal.

After lunch he was feeling pretty well back in control again. Erection had wilted, he could focus on sex without feeling like he was on the edge of climaxing, and while it's true he didn't say or do anything sexy while they ate, it didn't mean he wasn't planning the next phase of the game.

Naptime.

He kept them to neutral topics as they headed back to the hotel: dinner options, the walled gardens, flowers, and houses around them. Pretty much a steady stream of white noise. The restaurant was only a mile away from the hotel, so that was a fairly comfortable twenty-minute walk.

Two more minutes got them to their room.

Once there, he said, "I want you to take off everything but the socks, bra, and collar. Shoes first, then shirt, then skirt, and finally the butterfly."

He turned the vibrator on as he said that, and sat in the chair to watch her undress.

She sat on the bed, knees drawn up to her chest, and unbuckled the first shoe, slipping it off her foot, following it with the other one.

It always amazed him how girls take off shirts. Abby did that thing where she crosses her arms, holds
the bottom of the shirt, and slowly eases it over her torso, stroking her ring and pinky fingers over her tummy and breasts as she did it. He'd seen her do it hundreds of times, and he still couldn't figure out how it worked, he even tried it once and came to the conclusion he'd rip the shirt before he managed to get it off like that.

The skirt came next, and he moaned a little as she eased it over her hips. He upped the speed on the butterfly and she moaned as well, kicking the skirt aside.

He sat there, gently, slowly stroking himself as she began to loosen the straps on the butterfly, and gave himself a firm squeeze as she shimmied out of it. Almost naked, she stood in front of him, waiting for the next command.

He let his eye run over her body, taking in every inch, savoring the sight of her. He noticed the shine on both of her thighs from how wet she was.

"Look at how wet you are. That can't be comfortable. Come here." She did, standing in front of him. "Foot on the arm of the chair."

She did that as well, which put her pussy just inches in front of his mouth.

He rested his lips on her thigh, inhaling deeply. "You smell so good." He licked a long wide stripe from her thigh to her pussy, sucking one of her lips, squeezing himself, hard. "God, you taste even better!"

His hands came to rest on her ass, pulling her closer, as he made good on the promise he gave her in the art gallery.

When she was grinding against him, hands clenched painfully in his hair, almost sobbing his name along with a long steady stream of "Please, God, Tim, please, baby, please!" he pulled his tongue back, pried her hands out of his hair, and put her foot back on the floor.

He held her hips, and gently kissed her belly, stopping as much for his sake as for hers. He knows that he can get off from going down on a woman, granted he hasn't done it since grad school (and he was lying on his stomach when it happened) but he's turned on enough it's a possibility, and he'd prefer not to repeat that performance. After two minutes, when his cock stopped throbbing, he slipped his lips up to her breasts as he stood, unhooking her bra, easing it off, and took a moment to slowly kiss and suck each nipple.

Then he let go of her, said, "Back in a sec," headed to the bathroom, grabbed a washcloth and a towel. He wet the washcloth, making sure it was nicely warm.

A moment later, he stood in front of her. "Legs apart." He carefully wiped her pussy and thighs with the wet cloth, and then just as carefully blotted her dry.

"I bet that feels better, doesn't it?"

She growled at him, and he smiled.

"Nap time. I want you to undress me. Kilt's not very comfortable anymore." And honestly it wasn't. It wasn't constricting which was nice, but the head of his dick was so sensitive the cotton fabric felt like sandpaper.

He could see some challenge in her eyes as she awaited his next instruction. "Boots first." They're basic black leather work boots, and she did a competent and not particularly erotic job of taking them off. Of course, since he isn't Jimmy, he's not sure there was any way she could take them off that
he'd find erotic. And peeling off his socks wasn't much of a show either.

"Shirt next." He thought that was when she got the idea that if she could get him so turned on he couldn't see straight that maybe he'd finally get her off, because he was fairly certain that having her breasts rubbed all over his chest/face wasn't really required for getting his shirt off. Which was not to say he didn't appreciate it.

Oh yes, soft warms breasts rubbed against any part of him is a treat, and the little moaning sounds she was making as she did it just ramped that up a few more notches.

The kilt is actually one long piece of fabric that wraps around and clips together. Getting out of it is awfully easy, just undo the two clasps at the waistband and it falls to the floor. If she could have undone those clasps with her teeth, she would have. But they just don't work that way, so she stood a half step in front of him, slipped her hand down the front of kilt, cupping protectively over his dick (Which he also appreciated, loudly and sincerely, and not just from a it felt fucking fabulous perspective, but as was previously noted, with as sensitive as he was right that second, having the kilt slide down his dick would actually hurt.) and used her thumbnail to pry open each clasp.

A second after that, Tim was naked save for his wrist cuff.

"Thank you." She stood there, smiling up at him, her hand starting to move a little. He grabbed her wrist. "Stop that. Nap time. Lay down, get comfy. We are going to get a rest. Then fucking, lots and lots of fucking." He pressed up against her, dick against her stomach, and had to bite his lip at how good that felt, and said, "And once you get your nap, I will fuck you until you come harder than you ever have before. I'll make you come so hard, you'll forget you've ever gotten off before."

Abby lay down on the bed with the enthusiasm of particularly recalcitrant two-year-old being sent off to naptime, but got into her normal sleeping position.

Tim lay down behind her, snuggling up carefully, making sure his dick was pressed up against the small of her back, because he knew that if it was between her buttocks he was going to lose his control and just start to thrust.

He wrapped his arm around her waist, kissed her shoulder, and said, "Go to sleep."

The plan was lay down, snuggle up, and well… not go to sleep. The plan was he'd lay there quietly for five or so minutes, and then make his move.

But she beat him to it.

He's laying snuggled up behind her, comfortable, very turned on, counting to three hundred, (he got to 109) when he noticed her rocking, gently, against the pillow between her legs.

She usually sleeps on her side with a pillow between her knees, and she sort of hugs it, too. Normal enough. But he could feel the way her hips were moving, and that wasn't normal.

She was rubbing off on the pillow.

"Abby, you're being a very bad girl. I said, go to sleep."

"Too turned on."

His eyes narrowed for a second. Either he's pushed her so far, kept her turned on for so long, she's
forgotten her safeword, and has hit the point where she can't take it anymore. Or she's playing with him, seeing how committed to this he is.

She felt him pause, think, and looked over her shoulder, flashing him a quick smile. She was just messing with him.

"On your hands and knees."

She scrambled into position, grinning.

"And do you know what happens to bad girls?" Tim asked, kneeling behind her, pushing Abby onto her knees and elbows, ass high in the air, legs wide, tracing her labia with his dick.

"No." Her voice was quivering with anticipation.

"They." He pushed in just the barest hint of an inch, hissing at the hot and wet of her body, forcing himself to stay in control and edge in just enough for a tiny bit of stretch. "Don't." He slipped his dick over her clit (so hot, so slick, so smooth). "Get." It trailed over her pussy (more hot, slick, smooth, and God he wanted to plunge into her hard and fast and over and over and fuck until he came so hard he passes out). "Fucked." And then he stepped back.

"Tim!" Abby's voice was halfway between a whimper and a moan.

"Lie down, on your back." He found the ropes they brought and tied her hands to the headboard, loosely enough so that she could move them into any position that was comfortable, above her waist. But try as she might, she couldn't get them lower than her belly button. Then he tied each ankle to one of the bed posts, leaving her spread wide open, so she couldn't get off squeezing her legs together.

"Go to sleep. I'll be back in one hour."

Longest damn hour of his life.

The downside of being the Dom is that if your sub starts getting sassy, you need to make her behave, and while the thought has crossed Tim's mind that his tattoo-covered wife might not be adverse to getting spanked, first off he doesn't want to do it, (He's never hit a woman, and isn't about to start with Abby.) but even if he did, even if that was part of their usual play routine, he sure as hell wasn't going to do with her pregnant.

So he's got to get more creative on the make-your-sub-behave side of the spectrum because he won't just let fly with pain.

Well, physical pain. (Abby less than twenty feet away, wearing only thigh high socks and her collar, tied to the bed, while he's this turned on is god-awful mental pain.)

At least on her part. (Once again, on the physical pain side, he certainly hoped this was just as much mental torture for her as it is for him.)

He hoped. He'd never heard of anything along the lines of blue balls happening to women.

He was a whole different story. His dick and balls ached, and not in a I'm-so-turned-on-you're-driving-me-crazy-and-it'll-be-all-sorts-of-worth-it-soon sort of way. (Though he kept remind himself that was true. And it will be. Oh God, it will be!) This was more the low, dull, got-kicked-in-the-
If he thought he could trust himself not to jerk off, he'd grab something cold out of the mini-bar and ice himself down. That had been amazingly effective before. But he was fairly sure that if he touched his dick with anything right now, he wouldn't stop. On top of that, he's so sensitive right now, if he were to get something cold onto his balls, he'd probably scream, and not in a good way.

So, he was sitting on the sofa, making himself watch something completely non-sexy on his kindle, not thinking about her tied spread eagle in the next room (too much) because if he goes in there on a hair trigger, and let his own pleasure overtake hers, this won't be worth the build-up.

59:59 he opened the door. And, while he was absolutely certain she did not, in fact, nap, her eyes were closed as he headed in.

She opened her eyes slowly, and he smiled at her.

"Good rest?"

"No. Frustrating."

He tilted his head and shot her a serves you right look. "Behave and we won't have to do this again. I was only going to make you wait five minutes."

"Yes, sir."

"Ohhh… I like that." He circled around the bed, looking at her. "I'll have to admit I do like this, too. You spread out and tied up like this is so beautiful." He scraped the sole of her foot with his index finger, "So many possibilities…" and then stepped back to the dresser, picking up his phone.

"Got to get some pictures of this." And he did, muttering to himself about composition and lighting as he snapped shots of her full body, and his favorite bits. He took one extremely graphic close up of her pussy, and then put the phone back down. "Want to be able to see you like this, whenever I like."

Tim sat on the bed next to her, gently hovering his fingers over her belly, and kept them just a hair's breadth over her skin, ghosting down between her legs to touch the sheet under her. "You've left a little puddle on the sheet." Then he spread her juices over the crest of her hip, and slowly sucked it off.

Her body jerked as his lips came in contact with her skin.

"Have you been thinking about this? Getting yourself hot and wet while I was in the other room?" he asked while licking over her belly.

"Yes."

"And what were you thinking?" he gazed into her eyes while he asked.

"'Bad.' And you slammed into me, dick hot and hard, spreading me wide. 'Girls.' Pulling back out, slipping it along my lips. 'Get.' Adding more lube. 'Fucked.' Slowly sliding it into my ass, all the way, while you finger my pussy and clit. My hands tied, above my head, kneeling, you riding my
ass, hard and fast, while the butterfly buzzes my clit on high."

He bit his lip, inhaled so sharply he whistled, and felt a drop of pre cum ooze out of his dick as she said that.

"Next time. Don't have the control for that today." His hand caressed over her pussy, making sure he got his fingers very slick, and then he gently stroked around her anus, working just the tip of his finger in, feeling another drop of pre cum ooze out of him at the feel of her around his finger. "I'd lose it long before I got all the way in that beautifully tight ass of yours." He pulled away and kissed from her hip, over her ribs, skirting around her breasts, up her chest, over her collar bone, slipping his lips over her throat to lick along her jaw, and then settled in next to her for a long, wet kiss, his lips on hers, tongues dancing.

It was good, really good, her body soft against his, her lips slick and wet, sliding over his, but the position was a little off, her arm was in the way, and he either has to keep himself up off it, or lay on it, and that can't be comfortable to her. So he broke the kiss and shifted so his knees were between her legs, his body propped on his elbows, keeping himself up high enough so that only his lips and chest hairs were touching her.

He wasn't sure who the sensation is more intense for, him, the slight movement of the hair sending soft, sharp whispers of pleasure through him, or her, arcing up, trying to get more friction on her nipples, as those silk fine hairs brushed against her breasts.

Either way, they were both moaning, loud.

If he was a little less turned on, his dick would be rubbing against her stomach, but the more turned on he gets the higher it rises, and right now it's bumping against his own stomach, gravity be damned. Which was probably a good thing, because he wasn't sure if he could take it rubbing against her.

"If I untie you, will you behave?"

Her eyes were glazed, face flushed, and voice needy as she said, "God, yes, please, anything you say, I will do."

"Good." He settled back on his knees and then scooted back a little, tracing his fingers down her chest, down her belly, across her mound, and down her slit, caressing each lip, pulling them wide. "Don't come." He bent his head and flicked his tongue over her clit, fast, focused, firm strokes because he wants her almost out of her mind by the time he lets her up.

She's writhing on the bed, hands clenched in the ropes, toes curled, legs quivering, body tight, but not getting off.

"Very good. Very, very good." He sat back up and untied her legs. Then he crawled up, straddling her chest, and leaned over to get her wrist. He untied the right and felt her breath on his dick.

"Suck my dick while I untie your left hand."

She did, and he closed his eyes, head dropping back. "Fuck." It was so good, hot and wet and tight. Her mouth wrapped just around the tip of him, tongue lapping at the pre cum, sucking another drop out of him. He fumbled with the rope, fighting with it, before it occurred to him that he couldn't get the damn thing untied unless he opened his eyes and looked at it.

A few seconds after that he had her untied, and as soon as the rope fell away she let go.
"Excellent," he managed to choke out.

He sat back against the headboard. "I want you to straddle my hips, facing away from me." She did, starting to sink onto his dick. He took her hips in his hands. "Stay up, you get to sink down when I tell you." He let go of her hip and began circling her clit with his left hand, small, firm, focused, and fast circles. The kind that had her throwing her head back, moaning, past the ability to make anything that sounded like a word. With his right hand he stroked his dick over her whole pussy, arching up just a little every few seconds to add some stretch but mostly just providing a hot slick slide to go with small focused circles.

He doesn't think he's ever seen her this turned on before, even her back is flushed. Of course, he's never drug it out this far before either.

When her whole body was shaking, her thighs and shoulders tight, the sex flush down to the small of her back, he wrapped his right hand in her hair, tugged lightly, and said, "Down!"

The fingers on her clit sped over her as her fire hot skin slipped over his. "FUCK!" he shouted at the feel of her on him, so hot, so wet, so tight, and so fucking amazing it took every last functional brain cell he had working to choke out, "You can come, baby."

And she did, whole body convulsing on him, as she screamed his name.

If one could win an Olympic Gold Medal in not getting off, Tim would have had it, by a wide, wide margin. She almost got him off. Her body, wet and hot and shaking on his as she screamed and moaned for what seemed like forever had him so turned on he felt like he was going to explode. Literally. Like each and every single cell of his body was on the edge of the most epic climax ever.

And the only reason he can think of that might have kept him from tumbling over with her is that maybe, like subspace, there's Domspace. Maybe there's a mindset that gets you through whatever situation you put yourself in, so you can be the Dom you promised to be.

And he promised to get her off twice, and maybe a third time.

So somehow he rode it out, didn't clutch her tight and come with her. Somehow, he was still hard, still holding it together when she stopped twitching and collapsed, utterly boneless against him.

He doesn't know if she actually passed out. But her eyes were closed, she wasn't moving beyond ragged breathing and gentle orgasmic aftershocks, and her body was dead weight on his.

So he shifted them around a bit, got them spooned on their sides, and held her close, one arm under her neck, his lips on her shoulder, her body still wrapped around him, and he waited, very gently stroking her nipple.

Eventually her breathing slowed, and her heart rate with it. Eventually she laced her fingers with his.

"Mmmmm..." Her eyes didn't open, but she did smile a little.

"Good?"

"Fuck baby, if good was a grain of sand, that was the Sahara Dessert."

That made him grin. He kissed her shoulder, touched her nipple a little more intensely.
"Mmmmm." She shifted and stretched a little, rolling her hips. "Feels like you aren't done."

"Not nearly. That was round one. Still got two and three."

She lifted his hand to her lips, sucking lightly on his index finger. "Timothy, I can take two, don't think I can handle three."

He kissed her shoulder and throat, understanding the use of her safeword, and how this was a hard boundary, not just part of the game. "Got ya. Once more, soft and gentle, just light, little touches to finish us both off."

"Sounds really good."

He shifted her leg over his hip, and twisted his pelvis a little, slipping his leg over hers, to get a deeper angle than they can usually do spooning. He thrust, reveling in the friction, the smooth, tight, silky slide of her body on his. "Fuck baby you feel so good." He thrust again. "So good." Another thrust. "Been waiting all day to feel you like this, all tight on hot on me."

They were on their sides, her body curled into his, rocking gently, and by that time only two things were going through his mind, the desire to feel her get off, and the overwhelming urge to follow her over the edge.

When her body tightened and rippled, he let himself go, let the razor-sharp pleasure crest through him, sear into every nerve, drop the color out of his vision, then steal his sight, leaving him shaking and gasping, drowning in ecstatic joy.

Then they got their real nap. Neither of them even shifted until well past dinner time, when Tim moved just enough to roll over and order room service. Twenty minutes later he somehow mustered enough energy to throw a towel around his hips and answer the door.

They finished the night curled together in bed, Tim hand feeding Abby breakfast in bed for dinner.
They were getting dressed the next morning, their last day in Charleston, when Abby asked, "Were you serious about getting my lip print tattooed onto your wrist?"

Tim pulled up his jeans and buttoned them. "I wasn't really thinking about it, just sort of going with the moment. But I could be." He's not feeling a burning need for another tattoo, but he doesn't mind the idea either.

"I really liked that idea. My lips on you, your lips on me."

He thought about it some more, smiling at the idea of his lips on her. But as he thinks, he notices there's something of a snag for hers on him.

See, there's this thing in the NCIS dress code, namely you aren't allowed to have visible tattoos. Sure, Abby has them, like with the rest of the dress code, Abby got a personal exemption from the rules from Jenny for the length of her employment. But he's not Abby, and at least while it healed up, he wouldn't be able to wear his wrist cuff.

And, well, the wrist cuff is him already pushing the edge of the dress code. He's seen Vance look at it a few times. Since it's not usually visible/looks like a watch if you aren't paying attention, he's never said anything, but it's not office casual approved, and Tim wouldn't be shocked if Vance didn't mention it to Gibbs, and Gibbs didn't give him the 'leave it alone' look.

"If we wait to get home, I can't do it. Can't be walking around work with a lip print visible on my wrist for a week. Down here works, but we don't know anyone down here." Of course the other thing about tattoos is that you generally don't want to just wander into a studio you don't know and let them have at it.

Abby squeaked with excitement, grabbing her phone. Less than a minute later she put it down. "I put the word out, should have a list of good places in Charleston and Savannah in less than an hour. Let's get some pictures." She was rummaging through her cosmetics bag, and came out with two tubes.

"You want mine in red, right?"

He nodded, recognizing the tube of blow-job red lipstick. "Does that stuff have a real name?"

"Yeah. Dragon by Chanel."

"Okay." He unsnapped the wrist cuff as she slicked the crimson lipstick over her lips.

Once it was on exactly the way she liked, she bounced over to him. Her fingers found the waistband of his jeans and popped the button. "Sure you want it on your wrist?" she asked with a wicked smile.

For a second, he just cringed at the idea of what getting a tattoo there would feel like, but finally he pulled it together enough to say, "Depends, do you ever want to have sex again?"

"Yes."

He held out his wrist and smiled dryly. "Then aim for my wrist, and if there's any lipstick left on you after that, you can blot it on my dick."

"Actually…” She unzipped him and slipped him out of his pants, then gave him a quick, light kiss,
just around the tip of his dick. Abby stood back up, and pressed her lips into his wrist. "You get a better print with a little less lipstick on." She looked critically at his wrist. "Very nice. Don't go anywhere."

"I'm standing here with my dick out, where am I going to go?"

"Nowhere. The detail's really nice, so I don't want you accidentally smearing it."

Two seconds later she had her phone again and was snapping shots of his wrist. "Perfect. Let me get a few high def shots, too. If we can find anyone even remotely good at this, he won't have a problem making a good likeness. Now you." She put the phone on the dresser behind him, and conjured another tube of lipstick from somewhere.

"What's that?"

"Black lipstick." He's glaring at it a little, realizing what he just walked into. Years. She's been trying to get him into lipstick for years now. "After all, can't get your lip print without something to, you know, print it with. If you want, we can find a pink that matches your lips, but you'd have to try a bunch of them on to find the exact right color."

"You'll get another tattoo to finally see me in lipstick?"

She turned her hands palm up and tilted her head a bit, looking innocent. "You're the one who came up with the idea in the first place. This is just the logical consequence of that idea."

"Uh huh… Black. Not pink." He'd already been to Sephora twice, hunting for eyeliner that didn't irritate his eyes, which he thinks she had way too much fun with, no need to go back for lipstick.

"Just think of how much fun you'll have getting it back off again."

He nodded, that was true, leaving lip prints he could see all over her didn't bother him at all.

"Fine. No pictures of me wearing it."

"What is it with you and lipstick? You'll wear eyeliner and mascara."

"I just don't like it on me. Makes me feel like Tim Curry in the Rocky Horror Picture Show."

"Oh my God, you'd look so—"

"No!" He pointed at her, looking stern. "Do not even think about finishing that sentence."

She pouted at him and then grinned, enjoying teasing him, but not wanting to push too far. "You'll be the one using the camera when we get the shots of your lip prints."

"Good."

He held out his hand for the lipstick. She just looked at it, very amused by the idea of him putting it on himself, then glanced up at to his eyes and shook her head. "Tim. I love you, and I know you're great at a whole lot of things, but, not this. Any kind of dark lipstick requires a steady hand and a clue as to what you're doing. Sit down, I've got this."

He tucked himself back into his pants and sat on the edge of the bed. Then she straddled his legs. "Just hold your lips the way you usually do." He did and she got to work. "Open your mouth." He wanted to say something along the lines of this seemed to be a whole lot more complicated than it should be, but that's one of the few things he really can't do right now. Then she got a little brush and
did something else, that really tickled, and he was having a hard time keeping still. But finally she
pronounced him done.

Abby held out her index and middle finger. "Blot, just like I did on you."

He looked at her, rose one eyebrow, and said, "You're enjoying this way too much."

She grinned, kissed his shoulder, leaving another red lip print, and said, "You like me in lipstick;
why shouldn't I like the same thing?"

He didn't have a good comeback for that, so he made a show of opening his mouth, sucking her
fingers gently into it, flicking his tongue over the tips of them while he lightly pressed his lips around
them. Then he let go, pulled back, and asked, "All done?"

"Yeah. I think so."

He didn't look at himself in the mirror as he picked up her phone. Tim's not really interested in seeing
what he looks like in black lipstick. He's fairly sure he doesn't actually look like Tim Curry in drag,
but that's still the image he can't shake when he thinks about him in lipstick.

"I kissed you all over yesterday. Where do you want this?"

"Just below and behind my ear. I want other people to see it, know they're yours."

He felt a flush of pleasure at those words. "You know exactly what to say to me."

She smiled at him, and he stepped to stand behind her.

When he kissed her yesterday, he'd done the side of her throat with the spider web, but he's thinking
the fact that it's a lip print probably won't be immediately recognizable from any real distance away,
and a black blob right over the spider web might end up looking more like something the spider
caught, wrapped up, and killed than a lip print.

So he turned her to the other side, gently lifted her hair out of the way, and carefully laid a kiss just
below and behind her ear. The sight of it, his lips, in black, on her neck just got to him. He was
actually pretty surprised by how hard that made him.

"Hold your hair out of the way."

She did, and he got several shots of his lip print on her neck, each one making him feel more turned
on.

"It's insane how much I like that," he said to her as he put the camera down. "You'd think the
engagement ring, wedding ring, tattoo, my last name now yours, and pregnant with my kid would be
enough, but, nope, my lips on you just hits that MINE! button all over again."

"Anywhere else you want to see your lips?"

"God, yes!" And she was right, he had a blast getting the lipstick off, laying black kisses all over her
body. (To the point where it's likely he could be pretty easily convinced to wear it again. In fact, it's
possible he might reach for the lipstick on his own, because this is a lot more fun than hickies.) And
he certainly didn't mind her red ones on his. (Though Abby kept them pretty concentrated in one
area.)

And the shower after, washing them all away, was a whole lot of fun, too.
By the time that was done, Abby's assorted Facebook friends had provided several suggestions for places in Charleston and Savannah to get a tattoo. Along with an introduction to a friend of a friend who got rave reviews among her buddies.

Five o'clock that evening, Abby and Tim were picking out the exact right shade of red, and shortly thereafter he was once again remembering that getting a tattoo hurts like a son of a bitch.

But an hour after that, looking at his new skin art, watching the artist start to ink Abby, feeling an insane rush of love and belonging and MINE, he was more than sure that the pain was well worth it.
Flexible

They got to Savannah three days later than they had intended to, fortunately, Abby had made her plans for day four.

"So what are these mystery plans you've got for us tomorrow?" Tim asked as they walked into their hotel room.

"Spa day."

His eyebrows furrow, and he just looked at her. For a moment he tried to think of something to say, but no words were forming.

"You look really perplexed by that."

He took a breath and nodded. The image of green goo on his face and cucumber slices over his eyes won't go away, and he found it really unnerving.

"Why?"

His mouth opened, but words still didn't come out. So she waited patiently for whatever weirdness was happening in his head to pass, and finally he said, "Abby, you've known me twelve years now, at any point during any of those years have I ever done anything to indicate I'd like a spa day?"

"You mean, besides the Femme Glow?"

He rolled his eyes.

"And the manicures?"

"I haven't..." It's been years since he did that, and his cuticles kept catching on things and bleeding and it hurt and he didn't like it.

"Tim, touch your toes."

"Huh?"

"Put a few of your fingers on one of your toes. Like this." And she bent from the waist, legs straight, and placed both of her palms on the floor. Three inch platform boots made that feat even more impressive.

He flashed her his *this is stupid but I'll humor you* look, and was able to touch the middle of his calf.

Once he was standing up again, she pressed in close, her pelvis to his, hands on his hips, and looked into his eyes. "You have the tightest hips, low back, glutes, quads, and hamstrings of anyone I've ever met. Tomorrow night, I'm going to tie you down, spin you out longer than I ever have before, and make you come so hard you pass out, but tomorrow morning, in preparation for that, you're getting a good, long professional massage to loosen you up, then some hot tub time. I want you all soft and bendy before I get my hands on you. See, my dick's plastic and straps on, so you having the tightest ass on the east coast doesn't do anything for me, and is probably part of why you end up so sore after. Plus, from everything I've read, the looser you start, the more intense the contractions are when they hit. So tomorrow morning, you, me, spa day."

He was smiling at that, because if there are two things Tim really likes, sex and massages are
definitely on that list, and hot tubs are fairly high up, too. Then the smile faded as a thought related to sex and massages hit him.

"So, wait, someone else will be rubbing my ass?"

"Yes, that's the point of this."

He looked really disturbed. And why he's looking disturbed slowly dawned on her.

"Have you ever had a massage by someone other than me before?"

And that sort of got to why he's looking like that. Yeah, he has had massages by other people, okay, women, (Cracking Tony's back is the closest he's come to a massage from or for a guy.) before, but he can count the number of massages he's had that didn't lead to sex on one hand, which is a big part of the problem.

She was still staring at him so he said, "Sure. Maxine, Amanda, Helen, Joan…"

"Someone you weren't dating?"

"Ziva, Kate."

Abby stepped back for a moment, looking really shocked. "Kate gave you a massage? She didn't tell me about that."

For a second there, he's not sure if her expression is based on Kate poaching on her monopoly on him, or for him poaching on her monopoly on Kate, or if it's just that neither of them ever mentioned it, but he's fairly sure that a good chunk of it is that she's thinking of something significantly more intimate than what actually happened.

"It wasn't much of anything. On one of my first cases, I was holding her up so she could get some pictures, but it was a tight space, and I had to keep my right foot in a weird position to do it, and that gave me a charley horse. And the perp kept moving, so I kept holding her so she could get the shot, and by the time she did, it hurt so bad I was crying and so cramped up I couldn't get it stretched out myself, so she helped."

"Oh."

"Yeah. At first she was making fun of it and me, Probie-ing the snot out of me, really, but once she saw how cramped up it was, my foot was curled up like a fist, and realized I kept holding her up with that bad of a cramp, she apologized and helped me work it out. That was the first time she ever looked at me like I wasn't a complete idiot. First time anyone on Gibbs' team made me feel like I might make it as a field agent."

"She didn't think you were an idiot, just… green and young. Really young."

He shrugs. He was young, twenty-four when that happened. "Anyway, yes, I've had massages by people other than you, other than girlfriends, but never by a stranger, and never… well… there."

"And the idea makes you feel uncomfortable?"

"Yeah. The person doing this, the masseuse-"

"Massage therapist is usually the preferred term these days."

"Okay, the massage therapist, guy or girl?"
"Woman, two of them, it's a four handed massage. I figured you'd be uncomfortable with a guy."

"Yeah, that's true. But… well, okay, I know how I react when you rub my ass, thighs, and back, or for that matter when any other woman's done that and…" He was blushing a little.

She smiled at him. "You just said Ziva's given you a massage."

"Twice. And I laid on my stomach the whole time, and no one can make me admit that anything other than me falling asleep happened while she worked the kinks out of my back after two horrendously long cases."

Abby laughed, and then her smile went from amused to kind. "Remember when I got my rolfing certification?"

"Yeah."

"Day one, lesson two: working on guys. A: They will get a hard-on; it happens to all of them. B: It just means the limbic system is working. C: Ignore it. Day one, lesson three: effective draping technique. We spent a good two hours learning how to use the sheets so that you don't end up feeling like the support for a pup tent.

"Most of the other people in that class were professional body workers, and I'll admit, I thought lesson two was kind of funny, but the people I talked to said that it's standard for any bodywork. You can't do good work if the guy on the table is embarrassed, cause he'll tense up and fight what you're trying to do. And if he's the kind of client who understands what services are on offer, he's not looking for a happy ending, so he's likely to be embarrassed about getting hard, because it's not supposed to be sexy, but his dick just hasn't gotten that message. So a good therapist will get your body soft and loose and happy, and keep you covered so you don't feel exposed, and ignore it so you don't get embarrassed. We're going to the highest rated spa in Georgia tomorrow, and the people who work there are very good at what they do."

"Okay."

"Plus, it's a couples massage, so I'll be about two feet away the whole time."

That stopped him again. "I'm going to lay there, two feet away from you, with two women rubbing me all over, while two more women rub you all over?"

"Yes."

"Are you trying to kill me?"

"Well, just a little," she grinned, liking that double entendre and finished, "but much later that night. The plan for this part was to just get you relaxed enough so you can really bend. Look, when you've got my leg over your shoulder and do that little up thrust thing with your back and knees, you can hit my g-spot really well, and I know the anatomy isn't exactly the same, but it's pretty close, so that sort of move should work really well on you, but the one thing I know I can't do is get your leg over my shoulder the same way you do mine because you aren't flexible enough for it. So, nice long massage, melt that tension away, get your quads and glutes and hip rotators all nice and soft, and then completely mind-blowing sex."

He was looking pretty unsure of himself, but willing to go along on this, after all, he was all in favor of mind-blowing sex. "It's really not an issue?"

"Really not. Happens to every guy."
He sighed.

Tim had to admit, this was awfully nice.

It was a four hand massage, and there had been some sort of mention of hot stones and something
called Lomilomi, but for right now, he was mostly aware of the fact that he was lying down on a
really comfortable table while one therapist worked on his head and another rubbed his feet, and
yeah that was a little tickly at first, but after the second time his foot jerked out of her hand, she
shifted her technique, and well, if he was a cat, he'd be purring, loudly.

He wasn't even aware of the fact that it was possible to have tense feet. But apparently his were.
Shelly, the one working on his feet, kept asking him questions along the lines of "Does this hurt?"
and suggesting that maybe some yoga or meditation would be a good plan.

Beth, the therapist working on his head, was rubbing small, firm circles into his scalp, and that felt
excellent. Unlike his feet, he knew his head could get tense. Like his feet, he didn't realize how much
stress he'd been holding there until his body started to let some of it go.

"Wedding a little more stressful than you thought?" Beth asked him. Abby had been chatting with all
four of the ladies, telling them about the wedding and move. And he hadn't thought it was
particularly stressful, hours of sitting in front of that piece of paper willing himself to come up with
vows aside, but yeah, he's tense.

"Apparently." And from there he just sort of drifted, letting them work him over, enjoying the way it
felt, whatever they were rubbing him with smelled excellent, and the music was pretty nice, too. And
yeah, his dick did take note of what was going on, and it certainly approved of this and was a bit
disappointed when they stayed away from it. But the sheets they had on him did seem nicely snug so
there was no tenting, and he kept his eyes closed, so if they were looking or giggling, he didn't
notice.

At one point one of the ladies, (he doesn't remember which) started talking about doing some
stretching, so he went with it. It burned a little at first, but he was pretty amazed at how bendy they
got him. Apparently if you stretch once, then ease off, press into the position the therapist is holding
your leg, and then let her stretch you again, you get a lot of range of motion pretty quick.

And eventually they had him flip over, and began to work on the back of him, and yeah, not all of it
was particularly comfortable, and frankly some of it hurt, (Some of it really hurt. Shelly did
something to his left shoulder and for what felt like a whole minute he could feel pain all through his
shoulder, down his arm, into his jaw, and through his chest, then whatever the hell she was pressing
on sort of twitched and rippled, and suddenly that dull pain he'd had in his shoulder for, oh, fourteen
years at that point, vanished. She did something like that to his neck, and the low headache he
thought was just how his body worked went away, too. This is also where it occurred to Tim that
while he's in much better shape than at any other time in his life, that he's probably not yet in good
shape.) but by the time they were done he's feeling like a cooked noodle, and he's fairly sure he
could touch his toes. (Okay, his ankles, they're massage therapists, not miracle workers.) By then he
was coming to the conclusion that this whole professional massage thing would be worth doing
again.
It's true that he didn't pay all that much attention to the bed in their room when they first got there, but the whole tie you down make you come so hard you black out thing certainly aimed his attention in that direction, get relaxed enough to really bend heightened it, and Abby standing in front of him, scarlet corset, hair long and loose, black and scarlet masquerade mask, black silk opera gloves, holding four black silk ropes, and he's suddenly very aware of the possibilities the four post bed this hotel offered.

The one snag was that, of course, his left wrist can't get tied. He's still at least a good month away from being able to do that. And for that matter, you aren't supposed to do anything particularly stressful with any part of you that just got a new tattoo, so his challenge for the night, besides relax, submit, and get fucked, is to keep his left hand on the bedpost.

And yeah, he didn't know he could get his leg there, let alone what could happen to him if Abby tied his leg there but holy fuck! That angle was way more than worth it. If that little knee bend, thrust, up angle thing with her leg over his shoulder feels even half as good to Abby when he does it to her as it does to him when she does it, he was a fucking genius for figuring it out!

The whole muscle-contractions-are-more-intense-when-you-start-out-relaxed thing, that was totally true. He hadn't been anticipating that he'd be able to feel them through his whole body. He'd heard of full body orgasms, and thought he'd had them, because he assumed they referred to the tingles (Which is awfully nice, and he really likes). What he didn't realize was he could come so hard his ears would twitch.

But they did, and so did everything else.

That was the last thing he remembered clearly. Sharp pleasure through his whole body, feeling like he'd never, ever been that tense or that primed to go off, and then everything pulling just a fraction tighter and releasing all at once.

Abby wasn't kidding about the 'make you pass out' part of that. When he was aware again he was so blissed out on endorphins and oxytocin that the entire world seemed to be shimmering in glowing shades of perfect.

He grinned, big, probably stupid smile on his face, at Abby and said, "This is what people are chasing when they get high." He kissed her long and soft. "You're the best drug ever, and I am so addicted to you."

"If you say I'm your heroin, I'll have to slap you."

"Don't tempt me, I'm goofy enough right now, I just might." Then he giggled a little. "You know, I am pretty pale."

"But you don't sparkle."

"I feel awfully sparkly right now."

That made her laugh.

The next morning, when he noticed that yes, he's a little sore, but he's only a little sore, he asked Abby about maybe doing some yoga with her, because she does it most mornings, and while it's true
that he appreciates watching her do that, he's never joined in.

And yeah, he's clumsy, and it's a lot harder than he thought it would be, but the view is nice, and everyone has said that some sort of exercise beyond occasionally running down suspects/away from dogs would be good for him.

Plus, this whole flexible thing seems like it might have unexpected side benefits that are worth cultivating, and he's rapidly developing some suspicions as to why Jimmy spends an hour every other day at the gym doing some sort of yoga thing.

Though he's fairly sure this isn't something he'll ever be comfortable enough with to do in public.
Charleston or Savannah?

When they told the Palmer’s about their honeymoon plans, Breena smiled at Jimmy and said, “Charleston or Savannah?”

Tim looked at her, eyebrows scrunched together. “Both, that’s part of the point of this.”

Jimmy shook his head, and Breena said, “There are two kinds of people in this world, Charleston people and Savannah people. I was wondering which sort he thinks you two are.”

“Not sure. Probably Savannah, it’s more gothic, but Charleston’s got the whole pirate vibe thing going…”

Now, Tim knows the answer. Savannah. He’s a Savannah person. Yes he likes Charleston, but Savannah just hits him right.

It might be because Charleston is a port city, a very tropical looking port city, and Tim’s not especially tied to the water. (Though Savannah, like home, is a river city, so maybe the water thing isn’t it.)

Could be good memories left over from Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, and while he wasn’t getting into Savannah enough to tell if it really is Gone With The Wind on mescalin, he does enjoy the feel of the place.

Something about the massive oaks draped in Spanish moss. In Charleston the beauty is architectural, or fleeting glimpses of green oases hidden behind masonry walls and wrought iron fences. Here it’s ancient and green and all over the place.

High buildings, cobblestone roads right next to the river, and tiny cafes with seating practically on the street appeal to him too. The four days they spent there were much too short, and getting back definitely went on the to-do list.

Richmond, which rounded out their honeymoon felt a whole lot more like home than Charleston or Savannah. Part of it is that November in Richmond, is, like November in DC, just about winter. Their coats came back out for the last three days of their honeymoon.

Actually, it felt a lot more like Annapolis than DC.

Which means it clicked with Tim in a way that felt like home. He’s got pretty good memories of Annapolis.

The fact that they stayed in the Fan, a neighborhood of Victorian town houses peopled with college students and ultra-wealthy history buffs intensified the college vibe.

Granted, like with Charleston and Savannah, they saw more of the inside of their hotel room than anything of the city.

But that’s the point of honeymoon, right?
"You're back!" Ziva seemed pretty happy to see him as Tim strolled into the bullpen.

"I am back."

Ziva hopped up out of her seat and wrapped Tim in a long and enthusiastic hug.

"I'm happy to see you, too, Ziva." He's flashing Tony the *what the hell is going on* look, while patting her back.

Ziva pulled back looking him deeply in the eyes. "Do not ever leave again!"

"Uh…"

"She was on phone records, financials, and emails, the whole time you were gone," Tony added, sounding amused.

"How do you do it? It's so boring."

Tim rolled his eyes. "You were looking through by hand weren't you?"

"Yes."

"And Gibbs kept yelling at her for being too slow. Search faster, Ziver! It only takes McGee half an hour to do this!"

"I've written programs to automate most of the searching."

"That's what you do over there?"

Tim smiled. "Some of it."

"You're looking good. Did you get some sun?" Tony asked, leaning against Ziva's desk.

"Little bit. Spent a lot of time walking around Charleston and Savannah." Turns out that pink skin wasn't entirely sex flush. Mostly sex flush, but yeah, they both got a little sunburned.

"So…" Tony said.

"So… what?"

"Come on, show us!"

Tim got his phone out and began to flick through photos.

"Not that. Abby posted photos of the trip. The new tattoo."

"Who says I got one?" Abby had posted the who's a great tattoo artist question, and she posted shots of her new ink. Tim preferred to keep his under wraps. So she didn't post pics of it.

"Come on McInked, we didn't just meet you. Show us number four!"

"It's number three, Tony. I didn't actually get the heart with Mom in the middle."
"I knew that. She didn't."

Ziva laughed. "You think I didn't know that."

"Why would you know that?"

"Once again, I talk with Abby and Breena."

"You guys talk about my tattoos?"

"We talk about everything. But Breena thought the idea that you would get one to impress Abby was really romantic, and that's how we got talking about your tattoos."

"How did she get the idea that I got a tattoo to impress Abby?"

"You didn't?" Ziva is looking at Tim curiously and then glanced at Tony.

"No. Not entirely. It was mostly for me. I'd been thinking about it for months before I got it." Now Tim's looking at Tony.

"You spend the whole day watching her, asking about her, acting like she's a perfect medium rare steak and you're starving. I tell you she likes guys with tats. Two minutes later you've got one. It was a pretty obvious assumption."

"Rule number eight." Gibbs said as he joined them. "Good to see you back, McGee."

"Thanks. Thought eight was never take anything for granted."

"That, too." Gibbs just stares at him, expectantly.

"How do you even know? You aren't on Facebook."

Gibbs smiled. Tim rolled up his sleeve and unsnapped his wrist cuff, showing off the Dragon-red lip print.

"You got a wrist tattoo?" Tony was puzzled by that.

"It's a good place for it." He resnapped the cuff. "The first place she suggested I put it hurt too much to think about, let alone do." Tony and Gibbs got what he meant and cringed slightly at that idea. "It didn't hurt too bad. I don't use my wrist for much, so healing up isn't an issue. Which, you know, matters when you're talking about a flesh wound during your honeymoon. I know it's there but it usually isn't visible, so I'm still in line with the dress code. And her lips fit nicely there. All around win. Why, you think it's too girly?"

Tony nodded. "Wrist tattoos are pretty girly."

Tim quickly glances around, but right this second it's just the four of them. "Then I'll be kind of girly. I'm a cop with a pregnant wife. My masculinity is proven at this point. Catch me up on this case you've had Ziva staring at a computer screen for days on."

He'd been at his desk for three minutes. Literally, he'd just sat down, turned on his computer, and opened the records Ziva had been wading through, when Abby came bouncing up.

"Look!"
So he looked.

Nothing looked new. Yeah, her hair was still long. (And long, red-streaked ponytails were almost painfully cute.) Yes, she had a new tattoo, but since he'd been with her the whole time since she got it, that wasn't much of a surprise. Sure he hadn't seen her in a lab coat in a bit over two weeks, but that didn't seem trip-up-to-the-bullpen-grinning-like-the-Cheshire-Cat worthy.

"What am I looking at?"

She unclipped her ID badge and held it out to him like a trophy.

Then he saw it and grinned, too, feeling a flash of pleasure: new pic of her, taken today, and under it, Abby McGee.
Sleep

The pregnant sleeping thing was kind of scary, at first. They’d been home from their honeymoon for three days, and caught the first case back at work.

So, long day. It was well past two when they got home. They were both dragging by that point, but she got in the door, stood in front of the of the stairs, stared at them, and then just sat down.

“Abby?”

“Got to rest a little.” He was giving her his you’re worrying me look. “I’m okay, just really tired, and those are a whole lot of stairs.”

He eyeballed them, and sure he’s not planning on bounding up them or anything, but there’s only twelve, not like they’ve got more than two floors. “All right. Let me get your coat.” So he took both of their coats, turned his back to her to hang them up, and turned around and found her slumped against the banister, asleep.

This left Tim in something of a quandary. Wake her up? Let her sleep on the steps? (That can’t be comfortable.) Pick her up? Okay, that worked, so he carefully picked her up and took her to bed, becoming more disturbed by the fact that she didn’t wake up when he did it, or when he put her on the bed, or unzipped her boots and took them off. By that point he was starting to get really worried, so he put the blanket over her, and raced down the stairs to call Jimmy.

“Tim?” Jimmy didn’t sound very awake.

“She didn’t wake up.”

He could hear Jimmy rubbing his eyes. “I’m gonna need more than that. What is going on?”

“We got home, she fell asleep on the stairs, I picked her up, put her in bed, took off her boots, and she didn’t wake up!”

He can’t see Jimmy’s expression, but he’s fairly sure it’s screaming, I can’t believe you woke me up for this! “It’s normal, Tim. She’s pregnant, coming off a massive caffeine addiction, and been awake for nineteen hours. Even without that last one, she’s going to sleep hard, for at least the next three months. Sometimes Breena would fall asleep in the middle of conversations at the end of a long day. I’m surprised she didn’t drop off in the car on the ride home.”

“She was driving.” The silence on the other side stretched for a good thirty seconds until Tim said, “You’d be headslapping me if I was in range, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes. From now until the baby shows up, you drive home from work, got it? And get used to her being sleepy.”

“She’s okay?”

“She’s breathing, color looks good, heart beating, all the rest of that?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s just tired. It’ll get better around Valentine’s.”

“Thanks.”
“No problem.” Jimmy hung up, and Tim headed to bed.

Then it got kind of cute. Up until this point, Abby’s needed about thirty-five minutes of sleep for every hour he needed, so he almost never got to watch her sleep. Yes, they went to bed together, and they fall asleep together, but sometime in the middle of the night she’d usually get up, do stuff, and come back to bed later, and then, in the morning, they’d get up together.

But now, with Thanksgiving looming, Abby falls asleep pretty much every time she stops moving, and he actually likes the fact that he can just watch her.

He finds it especially cute when they settle down to watch TV, and she falls asleep in his lap.

She’ll be laying there, and he can watch and pet her to his heart’s content.

He just has to be gentle about it, because one time he did pet her a bit too hard, and woke her up, and okay, this isn’t literally true, but it’s true enough, she almost bit his hand off and made it exceptionally clear that “unless the fucking house is on fire and you are pinned under a beam and cannot carry me out” she is not to be woken up.

Then it got really cute. If you’re known for being high-beam perky, bounding about with endless energy, and suddenly, less than a month after your honeymoon, you start falling asleep in your lab, and well, even with a lab coat on it was kind of obvious that Abby’s shirts were a whole lot tighter than they used to be, anyway, the scuttlebutt that raises is awfully accurate.

And the anonymous presents of goth-oriented baby gear are awfully cute, too. Apparently just the rumor of pregnant Abby flipped some sort of chemical switch among the assorted employees at NCIS, rendering them incapable of not buying little onesies, shoes, pacifiers, and hair bows all decked out in black with tiny little skulls on them. (Official NCIS consensus: judging from the number of pink skulls/skulls with hair bows/hair bows with skulls Baby McGee is a girl.)

But since she isn’t “officially” pregnant yet, these present just appear on either his or her desk, usually with no note beyond a, “Thought this was so cute, had to buy it for you, hope you need it.”

They still weren’t telling anyone outside of Team Gibbs, and Team Gibbs played along, providing No-CafPow in CafPow cups, and no one outside the team knew Tim had switched to decaf for his coffee, though the three days he was biting the heads off of anyone who got too close to him caused some eyebrows to rise, but the rumors kept flying around.

And then it got a little annoying. Not to Tim, he still thought it was cute, but to anyone else who say, wanted to get the results back from some sort of trace, it was… less welcome.

“Talk to me Abbs,” Gibbs said, strolling into the lab on the last Tuesday in November, and stopped short, seeing only Tim down there. “Tim?”

Tim took the No-CafPow out of Gibbs’ hand, sipped it, and then shuddered. “This stuff is nasty. I don’t know why you’d drink it if it didn’t have any caffeine in it.”

Gibbs stared at the decaf coffee next to Tim, his expression saying exactly the same thing about what Tim was drinking these days. “Where’s Abby?”
He nodded at Abby’s office, and Gibbs took two steps to the right, and saw her curled up on those fuzzy rugs she keeps in there, fast asleep.

“What do you need?” Tim asked.

“A functional forensics lab.”

“’Round about Valentine’s she’ll stop sleeping eighteen hours a day. Meanwhile, Major Mass Spec doesn’t like me setting him up, but I can read his print outs as well as anyone else. And he’ll be done in—” And Major Mass Spec beeped. “Now.”

Tim grabbed the print out and read over it. “Anti-freeze.”

“Anti-freeze?”

Ducky and Palmer had been able to ascertain the vic had been poisoned and sent the samples to Abby. Abby had set them up with Major Mass Spec and set it running. A bit after that Tim wandered down to use the downstairs computers to run down financials and phone records, noticed Abby drooping, and told her to get a nap, he could keep an eye on Major Mass Spec.

“I guess it makes sense. It’s green and sweet and if you mix it with alcohol and put it in a glass, a drunk person would probably drink it without noticing anything was up.”

“Anything else?”

Tim shrugged. “If we can find the bottle it came from, we can link it to the stuff in the victim.”

Gibbs looked significantly less than thrilled. “Great. How many millions of bottles of anti-freeze do you think are in the greater DC area?”

Tim stared at the print out a little longer. His chemistry was a bit rougher than Abby’s but he thinks he’s on the right track. “Forget about the bottle. This came out of a car. If we can find the car, we can match it to the victim.”

“Better.”

“I’ve also got the vic’s phone records and financials done. Nothing interesting in there. I’m about a third of the way through his emails, might have something there, but still got to sift through a lot of data.”

The door to the office opened, and Abby walked into the lab, rubbing her eyes. She held out a hand, and Tim gave her the print out. She glanced at it. “Anti-freeze from a car. Older model. High-end European brand, probably a BMW or Audi. They use that pink stuff, which is pretty rare in this country.”

Abby got a kiss on the cheek from Gibbs. “Good work. Find anything else before your nap?”

She stretched, looking sleepy. “Nope. Looks like a pretty straight forward poisoning. The stuff under the vic’s nails was grease from his job. No interesting fibers on his clothing. The only finger prints on the glass were his and the bartender’s.”

“Bartender’s got an Audi, Boss.” Gibbs notices interesting antique cars; Tim notices high-end European ones.

Gibbs smiled, turned, and headed up. Tim looked at Abby and shook his head, “Not the bartender.
Our cases never get wrapped up that fast. Someone siphoned it out of his car.”

She nodded. “Probably. So, go clear the bartender.”

He winked at her. “On it, Boss.”
"How is it even possible for t-shirts to not fit?" Tim just shrugs at Abby as she keeps tossing her shirts out of the closet. It's the last Monday in November and they're getting dressed for work. "None of them fit! How can they not fit? How, Tim, how?"

"I assume you want something beyond, your breasts are bigger than they used to be?"

"I've only gained three pounds."

Tim's staring at her chest, and it's entirely possible that she has indeed only gained three pounds. But if that's true about three more have migrated from somewhere else up to her bosom.

She pulls another one on over her head. "They're supposed to stretch."

He's sitting on their bed, his own socks forgotten as he stares, smiling, and licks his lips. "That one looks nicely stretchy."

She turns and glares at him. "You are not helping."

His smile spreads wider. "Your bras don't really fit anymore, either. Is that helpful?"

"No!"

He pulled her to sit next to him on the bed and kissed her shoulder. "I have a credit card, an internet connection, and in less than five minutes we can be buying you new t-shirts and bras."

"Better." She turned to stare at the pile of t-shirts on their bed. "But we still have to get to work and no one delivers that fast."

"You're welcome to any of my t-shirts that you like."

"Too big."

He looked at her with an irked expression. "You wear them around the house all the time."

"Yeah, they aren't too big for lounging. They're perfect for lounging. I love them for lounging because they're soft and comfy and smell like you. They're like a hug I can just wear around all day. But they're too big to go with anything else I own that's even vaguely work appropriate. I can't just show up in one of your t-shirts and a pair of flannel pajama pants."

That was probably a salient point. Sure, she wears t-shirt, but they're all sort of snug and she tucks them into her skirts, and his won't look right, they're too... And then he remembered. "I've got a few t-shirts left from when I was really skinny."

That made Abby smile. "That's useful. Why do you still have them?"

He stood up, heading to his dresser. "I have no idea. They aren't cool or anything. Just basic cotton."

"As long as they don't make me look like I'm trying to see if it's possible to make a shirt rip by stuffing too much breast into it, they'll be fine."

Tim went hunting through his t-shirt drawer. "Here you go: gray, blue, and blue-gray."
"Wow, you really went above and beyond the call of duty on these."

"You mean my three for six bucks pack of t-shirts is less than the level of fashion you like."

She pulls the gray one on. It's still too big, but it's not nearly as too big as his other shirts are. "Normally, I'd say yes, but right now this is so comfortable I don't care. Okay, I can take a deep breath without fear of ripping my clothing again. So, yeah, shopping. Can't do the bras online, not until I've been measured, no idea what I'm wearing now."

Tim sits back on the bed and returns to putting on his socks. "34 D."

Abby just stares at Tim for a long minute. "And you know that how?"

He looked up at her, surprised she's finding this surprising. "I'm really good with spatial relationships and 3D images. And it's not like I'm unfamiliar with your breasts. Just trust me on this."

She kept staring at him.

He gave her an *of course I know this* look. "Have I ever gotten you the wrong sized underwear?"

"No."

"Have I ever asked you what size you wear?"

"No."

The expression on his face says, *Well…*

"I always figured you just looked in my drawer and checked."

"I did, originally, but as you've mentioned, every single women's clothing line sizes their clothing slightly differently, and you'll notice, I've still never gotten you the wrong sized undies. Even if that does mean that I have had to send some of them back before you saw them."

"Really?" She's looking puzzled by this. Wondering where he gets these packages sent, because she hasn't seen any of them.

"Yeah. I buy them online. But I can't tell what size they really are until I see them. I've taken good advantage of Amazon's return policy."

"Huh. In that case, why haven't you ordered me new bras?"

He smiles again. "Who says I haven't?"

"Have you?"

The look on his face is pure mischief. "You'll find out soon enough."

The he looks at the pile of shirts on the bed. "You know, none of your dresses fit anymore, either."

Abby sighs. "Yeah. I know. I thought the idea was you grew out of your pants first."

"Apparently not." Tim, now fully dressed, stood up and very gently kissed the top of each bosom, through the t-shirt. "I'll admit, I'm not minding this at all."

She rolled her eyes, shoved him a little, and went hunting through her skirts for something to wear to work.
For all the Goth-oriented baby gear they were accumulating, you'd think there would be Goth oriented pregnancy wear.

But apparently Goths reproduce via adoption.

It's not that there's nothing out there, it's just that... there's not a whole lot of it. (And though this is utterly bizarre, there's more goth pregnancy gear for Second Life characters than there is for actual real-life women.) and it seems to be primarily aimed at women who are a whole lot more pregnant than Abby.

T-shirts for big girls, that they could find pretty easy. But that's the same issue with wearing Tim's t-shirts. She wants shirts that are cool, have the right aesthetics, and fit, which means they need to be clingy in the right sort of way, snug along the chest and stomach. And right now snug along the stomach translates into way too tight over the chest.

And don't get her started on pants. Five days of searching online has convinced Abby that once she grows out of her pants until she gives birth and probably a bit after that, she will not be wearing pants. There is not a single pair of decent maternity pants in existence.

There were (thank God) some cute dresses that would do for both now and later. And she noticed that there were a fairly good selection of sort of modified vintage early 60s late 50s Donna Reed style dresses that actually fit really nicely. (Apparently large breasts and a small waist was the go to look back then.) And sure, that's not precisely her look, but the shaping works, and she's got a sewing machine so shortening the skirts isn't an issue. And she's not adverse to the application of dye, so though some of those dresses stayed their original pastel colors, most of them suddenly got a new coat of significantly more vibrant colors or black.

Finally, for the days when nothing fit right, (which seemed to be happening more and more often) there was what became her fall back outfit. Skirt, leggings, and one of Tim's button downs rolled up at the sleeves, top two buttons undone.
As Abby's style changed, and she kept coming into work in Tim's button downs or her 1950s dresses, more and more anonymous baby gifts kept appearing.

In fact, if it wasn't for the fact that the handwriting and the messages kept changing, he'd be thinking that maybe Ziva was just going a little bonkers on the getting ready to be an Aunt thing. But the handwriting does keep changing, and the messages keep shifting, and apparently Abby is the single most popular person at NCIS because everyone wants to drop off little gifts for them.

And, of course, some not so anonymous gifts from the family showed up, as well.

Gibbs had kept Kelly's high chair. So as the team gathered at their house for Thanksgiving, (Thanksgiving used to be at Ducky's but since his mother died, Abby took over hosting, and now it's at the McGee's house. Christmas is at Gibbs' place. Fourth of July/Labor Day (depending on if they're on) is hosted by the Palmers. Shabbat is at Tony and Ziva's.) Gibbs brought with him her highchair, and a few of the toys he had made for her. Nothing very complicated, they're baby toys, old baby toys. But a set of well-loved blocks, a top, and a small rocking horse, all joined the collection of presents.

After dinner, as Tim was taking the high chair up, Gibbs grabbed the other presents (By mutual accord, they would rather cut their own throats than allow Abby to lift anything heavier than an evidence sample while pregnant, and both of them will go far out of their way to accommodate that.) and followed him upstairs.

"We're thinking this room for the nursery," Abby says, having gone ahead of them and flicking on the lights. "It gets good light, and is close enough to our room we'll be able to hear everything easily."

They have four bedrooms, one of which is mostly just sitting around waiting for new occupants. One's set up as a guest room, ready for anyone who might want to crash at their place to do so. This one is empty save for the collection of presents on the floor, and now a high chair, rocking horse, blocks and top.

Gibbs looked around at the room as he put the rocking horse down. "Gonna keep it like this?"

It had been a child's room before they moved in. The walls were a light, bright blue, somewhere between robin's egg and sky. The trim was white. And, like the rest of the house, the carpet was new, light gray.

"Sort of," Abby said. "Trees. I'm going to paint trees on the walls, and grass near the baseboard. And maybe some fairies or dragons. At least a few butterflies. Maybe some clouds and more sky on the ceiling if I can get a good match on the wall paint. Our little elf is getting her own forest."

Gibbs smiles at that, and Tim does as well. They hadn't talked about what they were doing with the nursery yet. But he likes that idea.

"Dragons between the trees?" Tim asks.

"Yeah. I mean, if I can do one that looks decent."

"You've done cartoon version of me easily enough."
"I think I can do dragons, too, but if it looks dumb, I might just settle for trees and butterflies. I know I can do that."

"Okay."

Gibbs looked around the room. "Abbs, dragons and trees is..." and he's not entirely sure how to finish that sentence, because while it's true it's something he'd never do, it's also very in tune with the family McGee. "It'll take forever, and unless this is going to be your only child, come baby number two, he'll be sitting in a plain room with a few coats of paint, and baby one will have a hand-painted mural."

"Oh. Good point." Tim gets that in a heartbeat. Mostly because of decades of his dad playing favorites, and he doesn't want that for his children.

"I've been thinking about the crib." And Gibbs had. He'd been playing with ideas, not getting too set on anything. Just because his gut says Baby McGee is a girl doesn't mean she actually is. "And that could have a place for a smaller mural. If the top of the back was fairly high and wide, that'd give you room. The dragons and trees could go there."

Tim nodded along at that idea, and added. "I bet we could find or make a mobile with the fairies on it."

Gibbs isn't sure if Tim is so set on the idea that the baby is a girl that fairies sound great for to him, or if he's just so gender neutral he doesn't mind the idea of fairies in his son's room, but he decides he doesn't need to know the answer to that.

Gibbs looked around the room one more time. "I still have Shannon's rocking chair. It's not fancy. But you'll want one... Abbs!"

She flung herself into his arms, sobbing.

Gibbs gently patted her back, staring at Tim in horror, no idea what set Abby off. Tim's looking back at him with a pretty similar expression on his face.

Meanwhile Abby snuffled and sobbed, saying something that neither of them could make out.

Finally, Gibbs caught, "Shannon's chair! The one you made her, and she nursed Kelly on!"

"Yeah, Abbs. That chair." He said, patting her back some more. What he doesn't say, but Abby appears to instinctively get, is that when he made that chair he had images of his children, grandchildren, and great grandkids in that chair. He built it to last forever and to be passed down.

And damn if that didn't make Tim's eyes water, too. Though he kept control of his voice, so he sounded fairly steady when he stepped over to Abby, rubbed her back a little, and said to Gibbs, "Don't you want it?"

"I don't use it, Tim. It just sits in Kelly's room. Though, it's got some strings attached. It goes to Tony and Ziva when they have their first baby."

Tim smiled at that. "No playing favorites between your girls?"

Gibbs rubbed the back of Tim's head. "No playing favorites between my kids."
Holiday Spirit

If you were to ask him, Tim would tell you that Abby is one of the most capable people he knows. You need something done, Abby will shift heaven and earth to get it done.

That this is true has in no way negated the fact that he took one look at her with several hundred feet of Christmas lights, a lighting schematic, seven wreathes, (six little ones for the front windows, one big one for the door) a twenty foot ladder, and the tools necessary to attach said items to the house, and immediately took all of those things away from her and declared that he'd decorate the outside of the house.

It's not that he's feeling any burning need for a decorated house, let alone one bright enough to be seen from space. (First Christmas in the new house, and Abby's pulling out all the stops.) But there is no way in hell his pregnant wife is getting up on a ladder to drape lights all over their snow and ice encrusted house.

No fucking way!

Which is also not to say he's particularly enjoying the experience. It snowed twice last winter and twice the winter before that, so to make up for 2012 and 2013, 2014 was steadily dumping inch after inch of snow on them.

And in specific it's dumping inch after inch on him as he hangs more and more lights on the house.

And, though he wouldn't say it, while he was putting them up, he was sure this was going to be tacky as hell. The newest addition to the 'let's ogle homes decorated by people with too much free time and no taste' tour. (Okay, sure, they don't call it that, but every year Tony goes on the tour and brings back photos of the most incredibly tasteless Christmas decorations in the DC area.)

But once it was actually up, and he walked back to the edge of their property, it looked pretty good.

In fact, the house outlined in small white lights, wreaths in all the windows, circling a glowing candle (on the inside, Abby must have gotten them up while he was on the roof), more lights circling porch railing and posts, and, well, yeah, that looked really good.

He shot some photos of it, and, softly glowing house through a haze of thick, downy snowflakes was pretty damn close to a Hallmark Christmas Card house.

Abby came out a minute later, SLR in hand. (Yeah she takes a lot of photos on her phone, but her art shots are done on an old SLR, film, camera. If you've got three hours, she'll tell you all about how she did the artwork in her lab.)

"It's perfect!" She sounded a little breathless as she said it, rapidly shooting pics.

"Thanks." He smiled a little. Not moving anymore means the cold is staring to really settle into him, and he knows in a minute his teeth'll be chattering.

"I've got hot chocolate on the stove."

"Thank you!" That sounded significantly more heartfelt than the previous thanks. "I'm frozen!"

"Thought you would be." She took half a dozen more shots. "It's really beautiful." She kissed him, pressing in as close as she could with both of them fully bundled for winter.
"You designed it. I just put it up."

She smiled at that. "Still, I want you to know I appreciate you spending two hours in the snow, which I know you don't like, putting them up for me."

He nodded, and they headed in.

He was laying on the sofa, savoring the hot chocolate and reading.

"How is it?" Abby asks, basket of holly in her arms.

"So good!" It's super dark chocolate, laced with chocolate liquor, rich with lots of milk, spiced with cinnamon, and piled high with whipped cream. He hasn't had any chocolate since their honeymoon, and this is so good it hurts. He's pretty good about the no sugar stuff, but occasional treats make life worth living.

Abby was decorating the living room, literally deck the hall with boughs of holly.

Tim put down What To Expect When You're Expecting, took another sip, and said, "Books says this is about when morning sickness usually starts."

"Not gonna happen," she said as she draped holly over their mantle.

His eyebrows rise. He was mentioning it because maybe adding saltines or something like that to the grocery list might be a good plan, but she's sounding awfully certain. "Abby?"

"Kelly and I had a chat, and I explained that I save people's lives and put killers away, and being tired all the time was already slowing me down, so I can't be tossing my cookies on top of that. She told me she understood, and thus, there will be no morning sickness."

"Okay." A few thoughts hit Tim, but he figured he could wrap most of them into a one word question. "Kelly?"

She turned toward him and grinned. "Kelly McGee. She's gonna have dark blond hair, green eyes, and love games."

That was a mental image he could get behind. (Okay, that was a mental image that made him ridiculously happy.) Then one more thought hit him. "Is Jethro going to be okay with that?"

Abby looked perplexed. "Why wouldn't he be?"

"I don't know, salt in an old wound? Every time he sees her, she won't be his Kelly."

"Oh." Abby thought about it. "Then we'll ask him first."

"Okay."
The OB's appointment was the first Friday in December. Abby was irked at the getting it set up thing; the different people at the doctor's office kept asking for the first day of Abby's last period. But that was in August, and unlikely to be of any help.

Abby kept telling them she knew what day she ovulated on, and likely conceived, but they didn't want that date.

Finally, she just made one up. Officially the first day of her last period was October 9, fourteen days before she ovulated, and about when it should have been.

Their doctor, Andrea Draz, wanted to see them at six weeks. Which was the end of November, and the middle of a hot case, and neither of them could make it.

Which meant December 6, 2014, they were both sitting in a pleasant office, filling out forms about their insurance and Abby's health, waiting for the first baby checkup.

It blows Tim's mind how different this is in real life.

He's heard about it. Go down to Autopsy and not only is there a rather large collection of photos of Molly pinned up behind the computers but there's six shots of the new baby (who Jimmy and Breena are calling Sammy, not because they intend to name him/her that, but because it's pretty gender neutral and they know they aren't going to call the baby any variation of Sam, so it'll be easy to drop once they do have a name.) at six weeks along, and shortly after New Year's there'll be a new collection of shots of Sammy at 20 weeks.

And Jimmy is more than happy to talk anyone-who-might-ask's ear off about the whole thing.

He wrote about it. McGregor and Amy had been friends with benefits until about halfway through The Traitor Within, when things got more serious, and Most Precious started with them seeing the ultrasound of their baby. (The need for said ultrasound being what kicked them from friends with benefits to real lovers. Little known fact, yes, Tim bases all of his characters on people he knows, but that doesn't mean they lead the same lives. He likes to take the core people and then imagine what they'd do in different situations. Let all of them live somewhat different lives.)

But actually standing there, holding Abby's hand, looking at the small, grainy, white on black read out, watching that tiny heart thrum, hearing the fast woosh, woosh, woosh, just… blows his mind.

The ultrasound tech is pointing out leg buds and the tiny little beginnings of hands, and how the baby has a tail right now, but that'll go away soon, and all of the details she's talking about are sort of washing over him, blurring into a drone of white noise centered on that image of their child.

Their baby, about half an inch long, the size and shape of a small shrimp really, but theirs, and alive, and real.

And there aren't words for it. He thought there were. Thought he could find them, thought he had found them, but like how he feels about Abby, there's just… an approximation. It's the difference between reading about the sun setting over the ocean through storm clouds, gleams of red, amber, and fire orange through black and silver, and actually seeing it first hand, feeling the wind on your skin and the cool of the water between your toes as the sun vanishes.
In general, Tim and Abby are both fairly positive people. And part of that comes from the fact that both of them have a certain coping mechanism that allows them to sort of shut out/gloss over/ignore unpleasant facts.

So, while it's true it wasn't a shock that Abby automatically gets considered a high risk pregnancy just because of her age, it also wasn't the sort of thing either of them had been dwelling on. (Beyond both of them being very aware of Abby taking very good care of herself.)

And, it's also not a shock that the risks for just about every possible thing that could go wrong with a baby get higher when you start out older, but that's also something they haven't been thinking about.

But, armed with a huge stack of information, and their OB suggesting that it would be a very good idea to see about having every sort of genetic testing available done soon, it's kind of hard to shut that away. So they made an appointment for Nuchal Fold testing (see if the baby had Down's Syndrome or a host of other issues) promised to read up, and pretty much stuffed the pamphlets not directly related to the care and feeding of a pregnant woman/baby in to Abby's purse, and tried to ignore them.

It was much easier to look at the ultrasound pictures again than it was to think about what might be wrong.

They went straight from the OB appointment to Shabbat at Tony and Ziva's place. Fridays where they aren't on call that weekend and haven't caught a case tend to end pretty early for Team Gibbs these days. (Though it'll even out again in the summer when the sun stays high until after eight.)

Gibbs pulled into the parking space next to theirs just as they were shutting the doors to Abby's car.

"Gibbs! Gibbs, Gibbs, Gibbs!" Abby bounded over to him, wrapping him in a huge hug, almost before he's all the way out of the car. He's looking at Tim over her shoulder with a it's great that you're glad to see me, but we just saw each other two hours ago sort of look, but Tim's grinning and pretty bouncy right now, too.

Abby finally pulls back and whips the copies of the ultrasound out of her purse. "Here, you have to see them! Look!"

Gibbs had his arm around Abby as she holds up the first of the shots, and Tim watched as a very deep, very satisfied smile spreads across Gibbs' face.

He closed on both of them, pressing up against Abby's other side, as she pointed out arm and leg buds and how the baby's the size of her thumbnail.

Gibbs kissed Abby's temple, not taking his eyes off the picture. "She's beautiful Abbs."

"We don't know if she's a she yet."

Gibbs just smiled and squeezed Tim's shoulder.

The rest of the crew cooed appreciatively over the scans once they got up to Tony and Ziva's place.
"So, what are you going to call her, you know, until you know for sure she's a she?" Breena asked.

The tradition of a temporary name took hold when Molly was still on the inside and it turned out that no one in their family liked calling a baby it. Tony had actually started it by calling her Golf Ball after Jimmy said that about how big she was.

Which resulted in Jimmy declaring no kid of his was going by Golf Ball (so Tony kept calling her that for roughly the next four months, though Autopsy Baby, Baby Gremlin, Little Gremlin, and Palmlette, all got rotated through, as well). Breena came up with Gabe, which they both liked as a placeholder for until they knew more about their baby. (Like, for example, Gabe was a girl. In the two months between finding out Gabe was a girl and finally settling on Molly, Gabe became Gabrielle.)

Abby looked at Tim for a good tenth of a second, just long enough for him to nod. "McSciuto. After that, probably a family name. Got to make sure she's really a girl first."

"Family name, like, Gloria, right?" Breena asked.

"Glory McGee…" Tim cringed while Abby said it. "Wow… um… no. I mean, yes, that's my mom's name, but no… Don't like that at all."

"We'll pick this up later. It's time to light the candles," Ziva broke in. They gathered around the dinner table. It's traditional to have at least one candle per person at the gathering. The two main ones were on the table, the others scattered around the dining room. And while Ziva lit the two main candles, Tony turned off the lights, and lit the others.

Ziva said the first of the blessings, and then turned it over to Jimmy and Breena.

The Shabbat celebration starts with a general prayer of thanksgiving. Thanks for this day of rest. It's followed by a blessing for each child present, given by their parents.

Jimmy held Molly as Breena laid her hands on Molly's head, saying:

"Y'simcha elohim ksarah rivkah rahel v'lei'ah
Y'varech'cha adonai v'yishm'recha
Ya'eir adonai panav eilecha vihuneka
Yisa adonai panav eilecha v'yaseim l'cha shalom."*

Tim watched, standing just behind Abby, his chin on her shoulder, hands on her hips, fingers lightly rubbing over her belly. This time next year, they'll be doing this, too. And he knows he's smiling, knows it probably looks stupid, but he doesn't care. He kissed Abby's neck, holding her close to him, thinking the blessing along with Breena, and it doesn't matter that he's not sure about the whole God thing, let alone Jewish, he deeply appreciates the value of this, and the vast respect visible in the idea of taking time out each and every week to tell your children you want the best for them and appreciate them.

He wonders idly if things could have been different with his dad if he had grown up in a culture that made time every week to bless your children, if his dad had grown up with that idea and been expected to pass it on. Hell, if he had grown up in a culture that expected you to put the working world aside one day a week and spend it resting with the people you loved. He catches Tony's eye and has the feeling that Tony's thought the same thing, maybe not right this second, but he's wondered it.

Probably wouldn't have mattered. Theoretically Catholics take Sundays off. His dad didn't. Tony's
didn't either. Eli David did grow up in this culture; it didn't seem to do much for him. Not that John McGee or Tony DiNozzo Sr. were any prizes when it came to the dad lottery, but Eli David wasn't so much a different level of bad dad, as an entirely different category. Though, in trying to be fair, Tim doesn't know what Eli was like before Tali died, his family shattered, or Ari turned on him. Ziva doesn't talk about that much.

But as he pets Abby's stomach, he knows he will be a man who makes the time to be with his kids. And that the tiny person growing inside Abby is going to know that every single day of her life, she's been loved.

*May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah/May God bless you and keep you/May God's presence radiate upon you and grant you graciousness/May God's presence be with you and grant you peace.*
He was prepared for food cravings.

Of all the traditional pregnant dad jobs, being the provider of whatever food has to be eaten right now was something he was ready, willing, and able to do.

He was kind of surprised when there really weren't all that many of them.

Mostly it was just frozen wild blueberries.

He's got no idea what's in frozen wild blueberries that Kelly might want, (Yeah, they call her McSciuto in front of the others. They aren't planning on asking Gibbs about Kelly until they know for a fact she's a she, but when they're alone they call her Kelly.) but whatever it might be, she really, really wants it.

A lot of it. All the time.

They got a Costco membership for one reason and one reason only, they're the only place nearby that sells five-pound bags of frozen wild blueberries. And yeah, they get some curious stares when they're in line with only three bags of blueberries in the cart.

And they need them because Abby's going through about two pounds of blueberries a day.

Which isn't to say there's not the occasional I have to have (insert name of food here) right this second or I will go insane. There's been some of that. (Three days earlier when Abby had a melt-down because there were no candy bars with nougat in the vending machine caused everyone to just sit and stare at her in utter, speechless shock.) But for the most part, as long as Abby has a CafPow cup full of frozen blueberries and a spoon handy, she's good.

"I'm not helpless!" Abby said, standing next to the trunk of her car, glaring at Tim as he grabbed every single grocery bag in it.

"I know," Tim said, groceries piled high in his arms.

"Then let me take some of them in," she said as she slammed the trunk of the roadster shut.

"Nope. Though if you felt like getting the door for me this would be a lot easier." Yeah, he can carry the whole load in one go, but he can't do that and open the door to their home.

"You look like an idiot trying to get all of them in one trip."

"Then I'll look like an idiot. If I don't grab them all, you grab them."

"Because I can get them. Carrying a few grocery bags is not an issue."

"Do you want to stand out here in the cold and argue with me about this, or do you want to open the
door so we can argue about it inside where it's nice and warm?"

Abby glared at Tim, again, but did head over and open the door, because honestly it's pretty damn cold out there. Rumor has it that the thermometer might get to the low 30s today, but he's fairly sure that isn't going to happen.

"Thank you," Tim said, stomping snow off his boots on the porch and heading into the kitchen, relieved to be able to put the groceries down, because honestly, it was too much to take in one trip.

"You pull your back doing that, and I'm not rubbing it."

"I can hold you up for a half hour, the groceries aren't going to be a problem." And they aren't from a too heavy perspective; it's just awkward to try and hold a whole cart's worth at one time.

He headed back to the foyer, hung his coat up, and put his boots away.

"I don't like being treated like I'm made of glass." Abby sat on the bottom step and unzipped her boots.

"I know."

"So why are you doing it?" She took her coat off and handed it to him. He hung it up.

Tim shrugged. "Because I can. Because you're the mother of my child and I want to protect, pamper, and baby you. Because this is the only time I'll get to do this. Next time you're pregnant, we'll have an actual baby to baby. And because, if you slip on the damn ice because you were carrying a grocery bag and couldn't see the path or something, not only will Jethro slap me upside the back of the head with a two by four, a two by four that Jimmy will go out and buy for him for precisely that purpose, I'll deserve it because there's only one job a pregnant father has and that's keeping his wife in good shape."

"And if I slip on the ice and fall and you can't catch me because you're carrying every grocery bag all at once?"

Tim stared right in the eye and said, voice dead serious, "I'll catch you. Eggs'll get broken, but you won't hit the ground."

It's possible that Abby could have rolled her eyes harder, but it's not likely.

He shrugged and sighed at that. "Look, just chalk it up to insane pregnant daddy stuff, and leave it there. Jimmy did it for Breena. Jethro did it for Shannon. Tony's going to do it for Ziva until she pulls a knife on him. It's what we're designed to do. Seriously, there's only one reason men exist and that's to keep their women and kids alive and well. If we were hunter-gathers, it'd be my job to kill the wooly mammoths, bring their bodies to you, and then fight off the wolves. The least I can do is drag some groceries in from the car."

"Uh huh." This line of argument was not impressing her. "Do I need to pull a knife on you?"

"I'd really rather you didn't." He's leaning back against the door to the coat closet. "Is it that annoying?"

She's sitting on the bottom step, arms crossed over her chest, looking angry and defensive. "It's pretty damn annoying! I'm a grown woman. I've run my own lab for over a decade. And as Chip found out, I can handle myself. And it's not just you. Suddenly Gibbs has also decided that anything involving any physical effort is just too much for me and I can't be allowed to do it."
"Gibbs failed!" His voice was quiet, but very intense as he said it.

"What?" That completely derailed Abby's anger, and confusion replaced it. She wasn't following where he was taking this.

"His woman and child didn't make it, and if you ever pump enough alcohol into him to shut down his defenses, like I have, he'll tell you that. He failed at the job that mattered the most to him. He ran into your lab, in front of a bomb, to get to you because either both of you were going to die or neither of you, but he wasn't going to bury you. He can take grief. Jenny, Mike, Kate, that was grief. But if he fails another daughter, and these days that's you and Ziva, or another child, that's our Kelly, and it'll break him for good. He'll crawl into that basement and eat his gun. So, no, he's not about to let you do anything that might carry even the slightest risk of anything happening to you when he's around. And God have mercy on all of us when Ziva gets pregnant because her on anything other than desk duty will drive him insane. He's failed as many times as he can take; he's not going to do it again!"

"He didn't fail. No one could have… He didn't fail!" Abby looked utterly horrified at not just that idea but that Tim would say it.

He knelt in front of Abby, his hands on her shoulders, looking her in the eye, sounding heartbreakingly earnest. "We're designed for one job and one job only: protect your woman and kids or die trying. Rule Number 44. You're supposed to outlive us; that's the point of it; that's the goal. And if your wife and kids are dead, and you're still breathing, you failed. And no, it wasn't his fault. No, there was nothing he could have done to change it. It was completely out of his control. But he still failed. I know it, Jimmy knows it, Tony knows it, any man who was ever worth a damn knows it. And Gibbs knows it, feels it every single day.

"I've been with him for twelve years now. I sat in his basement and actually got him to talk. I've seen some of the pictures of Kelly and Shannon. And I know exactly how broken he is, and have a good idea of how broken he was, and the idea of being him scares the living hell out of me. So, look, I'm sorry this bugs you, but, just, please, take pity on me and let me do this." She was softening, but wasn't entirely convinced. And he was staring at her eyes wide, breath coming fast, sounding anything but calm or collected. "Okay, on a rational level, I know that you carrying in the groceries, or putting up the Christmas tree, or driving us home at night isn't a problem. Yeah, the sane part of me knows that. But I'm still scared, and doing things for you gives me something I can control, because there's seventy million things out there I can't control." His eyes close at that and he remembers everything he read in the high risk pregnancy pamphlets. Usually he's pretty good at not thinking about it, but right now it's very fresh in his mind. "I can't make sure she doesn't have Down's Syndrome. I can't make sure she's healthy. I can't keep your or her heart beating. But I can carry in the fucking groceries, I can shovel the snow, I can get up on the ladder to put the Christmas lights up, and I can drive us home from work, so, just, let me, okay?"

She wrapped him in her arms and held onto him for a long time, until his breathing went back to normal and he felt calm to her. Her head rested on his shoulder, lips against his throat, feeling his heart slow back down to normal. "Okay." She pulled back and kissed his forehead, then smiled, trying to lighten things. "So, does carrying in the groceries extend to putting them away?"

He caught her desire to shift the mood and played back with her. "Nope. That's totally your job." He winked at her. "I just lugged the damn things in. You can put them away." She snorted a laugh, and he kissed her quickly on the lips. "Come on, let's get them put away."

"Sounds good. Lunch after?" she asked as they headed into the kitchen.

"Sure, maybe some Supernatural after that?"
"For you," Abby began taking food out of the bags. "I'll be asleep before the first person gets murdered. Is it murder when a monster or spirit does it?"

"Probably not. It's got to be illegal to be a murder, and the law doesn't cover monster and spirits." Tim held up the package of chicken breasts. "For dinner?"

"Sure. Stir fry 'em with the broccoli?"

He nodded and located the broccoli, setting them aside.

"Okay, I'll be asleep before the first person gets killed."

"Then you can nap on me, and I'll watch Supernatural."

Chapter End Notes

Rule 44: First things first, hide the women and children.
Occasionally, Tim does believe in God, and when he does he often finds himself thinking that He’s got a pretty perverse sense of humor.

The reason he’s thinking this is Abby’s breasts.

He’s always appreciated them. Okay, that’s an understatement. He loves them. Loves the way they look, feel, smell, respond when he touches them. Everything there is to love about a pair of breasts, he loves about hers.

And right now, Pregnant Abby breasts are even better than Regular Abby breasts. They’re so soft and round and big and sensitive and he would very happily spend hours playing with them.

Which is where God’s perverse sense of humor comes in. Nine weeks pregnant Abby is, without a doubt, the most beautiful, sexy, hits all of his buttons so hard he’d be walking around with an erection all the time if he was still sixteen. (And honestly, at less than a week past thirty-seven, he’s adjusting himself a lot more than he used to, and appreciating the fact that his jeans just don’t allow enough movement for him to really embarrass himself when, say, Abby’s at work in a short skirt and one of his button downs, gaping just a bit, and she sort of bends a little.) incarnation of Abby he’s ever seen. So, of course, nine-weeks pregnant Abby also sleeps eighteen hours a day.

So, in addition to having to live with, sleep next to, and work with the hottest woman in creation, the amount of sex in his life has dropped significantly.

It’s Saturday afternoon, and they’re on the sofa, watching Supernatural. (How they didn’t run into it sooner, he has no idea, but on the upside they’ve still got five seasons to go through before they catch up.) And while he’s happily watching Sam and Dean snark their way through middle America killing demons right and left, her head lands on his lap and ten seconds later she’s asleep.

The episode was over, and now there’s this soft, pleasant weight in his lap, and for a moment he was just gently petting her hair, (Which is also fabulous these days. She had the extensions taken out a few weeks ago, but it’s still longer, fuller, glossier, wavier, and softer than ever before.) looking at her, thinking about how beautiful she is, mostly in an innocent, look-how-pretty sort of way, when he notices that the t-shirt she’s wearing (one of the new ones) is cut kind of low, so he can see the tops of her breasts, and it’s pretty tight, and kind of thin, so he can see her nipples through the fabric, too.

Soft, round, full breasts, pressed up gently against each other, and big enough that he could rub between them, which is something they can’t really do normally, and the idea of what all that beautiful soft skin wrapped around him would look like, let alone feel like, settles in his dick, making it harden.

But she’s asleep. Warm breath easing in and out against his thigh. He pets her hair again, watches his left hand ease down her throat, and he diverts it and makes it rest on her shoulder. He’s not sixteen, and no matter how horny he is, and how much he wants to suck each nipple, see if he can get her off by doing it, (she’s more sensitive now than she was on their honeymoon) and then lube himself up, straddle her, and rub off between her breasts, he’s not the guy who molests his pregnant wife while she’s sleeping. He’s especially not the guy who does it after being flat out told not to wake her up.

He hits the play button, tearing his eyes away from her breasts, and of course, there’s like one sex scene per season on Supernatural, so somehow he ends up watching the two episodes with back to
back sex scenes. And Sam and Dean each get a girl (okay, technically one of them is a demon) and the girl with the red hair and the white bra sliding all over Dean in the Impala is not helping at all with the whole so-horny-I-want-to-explode issue.

And Abby just sighs a little and snuggles into his lap closer, rubbing her head gently against his erection, killing him slowly, and settles deeper into sleep.

He’s wishing he was wearing the kilt, because if he was, he could just scoot like an inch to the right, jerk off, and take care of the issue without waking her up. And yeah, it’d have to be pretty slow, because her head is on his left leg, and he’d have to do it with his right hand, and, well, okay, they don’t have any tissues nearby, but he’s got socks on so that could take care of the mess, but it doesn’t matter because he’s in pajama pants and the way she’s laying on them is keeping them pretty tight, and it just isn’t going to work.

She rolls over, facing him and not the TV, somehow finding a position where her breasts are pushed together even more firmly, and she’s twisted so the flannel pajama pants she has on are pulled tight over her ass, dipping low so he can see the small of her back, and she’s got it stuck out just a little, and, like her breasts it’s so soft and full and curvy and warm and somehow her head’s turned and he can feel her breathing on his dick through the soft cotton of his jammie pants, and he is biting his lip, cursing that the single hottest woman in the history of womanhood is on his lap, exhaling moist, hot air against his very hard, very sensitive dick and sound asleep.

He’s clutching the remote like he’s about to beat it to death for mortally offending each and every single member of his entire family, staring at the TV with grim resolve that he will not reach down, slip his hand under her shirt, and begin to stroke her nipples. He’s thirty-seven, he can control himself. And she needs her sleep. She’s made it very clear that unless the world is about to end, she does not want to be woken up.

So he’s not going to do it.

He’s going to sit there and be the most sexually frustrated pillow ever.

She shifts a little more, and now her mouth is pressed against his dick.

He closed his eyes, refusing to look, because if he looks, he’s going to touch, and if he touches he’s going to wake her up.

“God, Tim, what am I going to have to do to get you to touch me? Pull it out and suck it?”

“You’re awake?”

“Ish.” Her eyes haven’t opened, but she’s definitely lipping his dick through his pants.

It takes about thirty seconds, but he’s out of his pants and lying on the sofa spooned up behind her, nuzzling her neck and cupping her breast in his hand. “All you have to do is let me know you aren’t sleeping.”

“I’m not sleeping.”

“Thank God!”

“You don’t believe in God.”

“Then thank you.”
“You’re welcome. Help me get out of these pants.”

“Yes!”

About another thirty seconds later she’s kicking them off as his hand snakes under her shirt to stroke her breasts.

“Been staring at them for hours,” he says, whole hand lightly circling over her breast. “Been thinking about licking them, sucking on them, just grazing my teeth over them.”

“Hours?”

“Yeah, you’ve been snuggled up in my lap for three Supernatural episodes, and I don’t know what this shirt’s made out of, but it just clings to you,” he’s tugging on it, trying to pull it up, but the fact that she’s lying down makes that a little less effective than he’d like. If he had a knife anywhere nearby he’d be really tempted to cut it off of her, one of her few decent fitting t-shirts or not.

But he didn’t. She rolls him onto his back, then sits up, straddling his hips, and pulls it over her head.

“God, you’re so beautiful.” His hands land on her hips and he holds her in place while he sits up, twists around, and gets them sitting with his back against the sofa. “Perfect.” Like this her breasts are right at mouth level on him, and she can ride him at whatever pace and depth she likes.

As they found out last week, at an especially inopportune moment, these days too deep really hurts. Which means these days he’s pretty nervous about any position where he controls the depth.

She slips down onto him, and he hisses at how good it feels. Tight, wet, hot, and wrapped around him, so so good.

She’s moving slowly, not much up and down, mostly just rolling her hips, but with every roll her breasts jiggles a little, and he’s watching them, mesmerized, fingers very gently feathering over her nipples, tracing the newly visible veins along her chest.

He takes her nipple into his mouth, alternating soft, light sucks with pulling gently with his teeth. Her hands clench in his hair as she throws her head back and moans, so he figures she likes that.

“Good?”

“God, Tim, don’t stop!”

He rolls his tongue over her nipple as he lightly strokes down both sides of her breast with his fingers. “How about this?”

A long, deep moan is his answer.

He uses his fingernails to scrape, lightly, on one nipple while he went back to the soft, wet sucks on the other. He’s settling into what he considered a nice, steady rhythm, alternating soft and sharp sensations when Abby suddenly tightens on him, holding his head against her chest, high-pitched moans coming faster and breathier, and then she sort of lightly twitched all over, her pussy softly rippling against him.

She relaxes against him, catching her breath, and he kisses her shoulder.

“Ummm… was that?” Not that he’s unfamiliar with what Abby getting off looks, feels, tastes, sounds, and smells like, but that was a whole lot faster and gentler than normal.
She gives him a sort of sleepy, satisfied smile. “Oh yeah.”

“Wow.” Sure, they’ve done quickies before, but that was like, three minutes, and he wasn’t touching her clit.

“Increased blood flow to the pelvis is pretty nice.”

“So it seems.”

“Everything is a whole lot more sensitive.”

He nods. “So, sensitive like, stop touching me, or sensitive like, two or three more rounds seems like a really good idea?”

Her smile widens. “At least one more round.” She squeezes against him. “Can’t be done yet, you haven’t gotten off.”

“There is that.” He grinds against her, and she sighs, pleased. “So, would you like it if I got down on the floor, spread your legs wide, and saw how fast I could get you off by licking your clit?”

She kissed the tip of his nose, looking very pleased. “I could go for that.”

He pulls her face down, and kisses her long and slow, his tongue making explicit promises of what’s to come, then breaks away to say, “What if I wanted to see how long I could lick it before I got you off?”

That got a hot look and a long, hard tongue-trusting kiss from her. “That doesn’t sound bad, either.”

“And after that, I want to go back to your breasts. I want to straddle you and slide between them.”

“That sounds good.” She slips off of him, and scoots down so her hips are even with the edge of the sofa.

Their sofa probably wasn’t designed with sex in mind. Probably. Who knows? But it’s sturdy, offers good back support, (the reason they kept her sofa and not his. His sofa might have been okay for napping, but wasn’t nearly firm enough for anything friskier than spooning.) and is the exact right height for Abby to sit on it while Tim knelt in front of her and slipped in, or stood and she blew him.

What it isn’t great for is oral where he’s on the giving side of the equation. It’s about two inches too low for that. (Well, the seat’s two inches too low. The arm’s about three inches too high, and doesn’t offer good leg support for her. And the back… well… yeah… let’s just say that while this sofa is sturdy, it wasn’t designed to handle a large load on the back vigorously bouncing around, and that if you do something like that it tips over, and well, that just wasn’t much fun, at all.)

But, well, the occasional sore neck is a minor price to pay for the sublime joy of Abby coming on his tongue. And after all, if you aren’t willing to sacrifice for your art, what kind of man are you? (Writing? Writing is his hobby; it’s a craft. He bangs out solid, satisfactory mysteries with an occasional really great line or scene. But fucking Abby, that’s his art. The feeling that gives him, the passion going into doing it, that’s the reason art exists. If he were a painter, her body would be his favorite canvas. If he was a musician, she’d be his favorite instrument. And as a poet, her moans and cries are his favorite verse.)

And even with the idea of slow, she’s on enough of a hair trigger right now that he was only able to spin her out for ten minutes.
Ten very good minutes. Ten minutes of light, slow, gentle licks, just bare hints of the tip of his
tongue ghosting over her, while she squirmed and moaned and cursed, pulling on his hair, begging
him for harder or faster.

He didn’t go faster, Abby gently slipping into a slow climax is amazing, and he loves watching it. He
did go harder, rolling his tongue over her in focused, firm circles, increasing his pressure as she
arched her hips against his mouth.

This time he’s expecting it. He felt her body tighten, heard her moans go higher pitched, felt her
clench and twitch, body shaking against him.

He rests his face against her thigh, letting her come down, enjoying hearing her post-orgasmic
purring, as she lightly petted his hair.

After a few minutes she says, “So what’s this about my breasts?”

He looks up at her. “I was thinking that if you were to sort of kneel.” She starts to shift, but he keeps
her still, his hand on her hips. “Not yet. We’ll need lube for this, and I don’t feel like getting up and
going to the bedroom for it, especially not when,” he kisses her pussy, wet and soft lips and tongue
slipping along her, “you’re right here and very wet and slippery. Anyway, if you were to sort of
kneel, sit with your feet under you, and lean back against the sofa, and if I were to straddle your legs
and kneel, I’d be at just the right height to rub off between your breasts.”

“And you want to do that?” He’s never mentioned being interested in that before, so she’s a little
surprised at it.

“Been dreaming about it for hours now. You were lying on your side, and they were pressed up
against each other, and all I could think about was what it would feel like to slip between them.”

She grins, and then presses her breasts together and up. “Sounds good.”

He leans forward to kiss each one. “So beautiful.” Then he shifts from sitting to kneeling, and thrust
into her, reveling in the feel of her body on his, watching himself fuck her. “This is awfully nice,
too.”

She sits up and kisses him. “Don’t get distracted.” Then pulls off of him, settles her feet under her,
and uses one hand to hold her breasts together.

He takes in the full image of her, kneeling on the sofa, breasts together, waiting for him. “Oh… That
looks so good.”

“Bet it feels better.”

He hops onto the sofa, her legs between his, and scoots a little closer, slipping his dick between her
breasts. “Oh, FUCK!” And yeah, it looks exactly as good as he thought it would and feels about a
thousand times better. “I really hope you like being pregnant because I’m keeping you this way as
long as I possibly can.”

She giggles at that, dips her head, and licks the tip of him as he thrust up.

“Oh…” His teeth clench as he watches her do it. “That’s even better.”

He set a fairly quick pace, grabbing the back of the sofa for balance, not wanting to stretch this out
any further. A few strokes in she says, “Bet I can make this better.” He feels her hand on his balls,
rolling them, tugging gently, and yeah, that is better, that is so better, that is all sorts of better, and he
actually growls at her when she takes that hand away.

“Hush.” She grazes her teeth over the head of his dick. “You’ll like this.”

He can’t see what she’s doing with that hand, but he has a general idea of where it has to be, between her legs, and he isn’t sure if she’s rubbing herself off or not, because the only thing he’s looking at is his dick slipping between her breasts, plump white flesh wrapped around him, and her tongue lapping at the tip as it pokes out from between them. But he certainly feels it when a slick finger slips behind his balls and starts to ease its way inside of him. And fuck that was… just… She twists it, finds what she’s looking for, and presses forward.

“Oh, God, shit! Abby!” Fuck that feels good, and he’s so close that the only thing keeping him from cumming all over her is the fact that she doesn’t like it, and it occurs to him he didn’t think this part through very well, and “Fuck!” she twitches her finger just a little more, rubbing his prostate, and, “Oh God!” she bends her head, takes the tip of him into her mouth, sucks hard, and he’s just gone, riding the pleasure coursing through his body.

When he’s paying attention again, he notices her gently nuzzling his belly. This is also when it occurs to him that he got her naked, but he’s still in his t-shirt and socks.

“You liked that?” she asks.

“Oh yeah!” He sits back on the sofa, next to her and looks at the back of it. “Left grip marks on the sofa.”

It’s made of that microfiber suede-style stuff that shows where and how you touch it. It feels really nice, but if you ever touch it, it leaves marks.

She giggled at that, and got up to wash off. A minute later she was back with a warm, wet washcloth and he took care of himself.

She’s up, doing something, and he’s just sort of laying around, dozing on the sofa.

“Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“C’mere.” He holds out his hand to her, and she takes it. He tugs her back onto the sofa and spoons up behind her.

“I’m going to fall asleep if I lay down again.”

“So? I’m going to fall asleep, too.”

“Be nice to get something done besides sleeping today.”

“We got groceries and had sex. Eventually we’ll make dinner, maybe have more sex. That’s a full day.”

She laughs at that.

“I’ll get cold.”

He reaches behind himself, grabs the blanket from the back of the sofa, and tosses it over them. “I’ll keep you warm. Get a nap with me. Then we can stay up late tonight.”
“Okay.”
"Hey Gibbs."

"Abbs?"

Gibbs stepped away from his boat and looked at her, really surprised to see her in his basement. She supposed that made sense, she hadn't been here for a one on one since…

Kyle.

Since before she started dating Tim. Since before Gibbs stopped being the most important man in her life. She made a mental note to visit more often. She didn't think Gibbs had been feeling neglected, but still…

"You okay?"

"Oh, yeah." She stood next to him, noticing how in her boots she's taller than he is. Then she said, "This is for running into a bomb blast for me." And she kissed him on the cheek, wrapping him in a warm hug. "And this." She slapped him upside the back of the head. "Is for running into a bomb blast for me."

"Abby?" Gibbs looked really surprised. It's been two and a half years since that happened. It's beyond old news. And he can't for the life of him figure out why she'd be thinking about it now, let alone come over to his house to slap him about it.

"I didn't know you were in the clear and came back for me. I thought you were in the building and got the warning and came for me. I didn't know…"

He just shrugged, of course he'd go to her. Bombs, bullets, fire, or knives, as long as he's alive, he'll go to her. As he said to Tomas when he was wondering if Gibbs might have been his dad, there are no second chances. What's done is done and can't, won't come back. But Abby was as close to a second chance as he'll ever get, she's the chance he can't lose. She's his lifeline, and it's not a coincidence that every year she's been in his life, he's been getting closer and closer to who he used to be.

She watched his face, saw it in his look, saw Tim was right, and then wrapped him in a tight hug and started crying.

He patted her back, rubbing his hand up and down it in a soothing manner, still feeling really perplexed about this whole thing.

Eventually she cried herself out, and pulled back a little.

"So, you going to tell me what this is all about?" he asked while wiping away her tears with his handkerchief.

She nodded and sat down on the second from the bottom step. Gibbs smiled a little, she sits in the same place, same posture as Tim does. He sat next to her, keeping is arm around her shoulders.

"I got into a fight with Tim." Gibbs looks disturbed by that, and she sees it and keeps going. "Maybe not a fight. An argument? Yeah, that's better. He's been treating me like glass lately, and so have you." She glared at him. "And I was telling him how annoying it was. I'm not a baby, and I can carry
"Okay." He had the look on his face Abby had categorized as *Danger! Rocks ahead!*

"And he was talking about how it's a man's job to protect his wife and kids or die trying."

Gibbs nodded. He agreed with that wholeheartedly, but was more than a little fuzzy on what that had to do with who carries the groceries, but obviously this makes sense to Abby, so he skipped the grocery bit and got to the heart of it. "He wouldn't be on my team if he didn't feel that way. Wouldn't have let him anywhere near you. Man who doesn't believe that doesn't deserve a wife or kids."

"And he said you failed, and…"

And Gibbs finally thought he had the pieces put together, or at least enough of them to have a clue as to what was going on. Tim was probably trying to explain what was going on. Abby was mad, and he was explaining. Because that's what he does, he explains. He doesn't just shrug and go quiet. No, he puts everything into words, and now he's got a crying girl in his basement because her husband had to explain.

"God you think you did, don't you? I was hoping he was wrong. But he's not. You didn't fail, Gibbs. No one could have done anything better or different or…" Her tears started again and she sniffed loudly, wiping them away, keeping talking. "And it breaks my heart to think that you've been carrying that around, or that you might think you could ever fail me."

"You could never fail me, Gibbs. When I was seventeen, I was sure I'd never have a dad again. That there'd always be this huge, gaping hole where he used to be. And, don't get me wrong, I still miss him, every day I wish I had had more time with him. But I've had fifteen years with another dad because of you."

"And you didn't fail Kelly. I've seen dads who failed. And you aren't one of them. Eli failed. He left Ziva to die. John failed. He screwed up his relationship with Tim so badly that Tim won't talk to him. But not you. You didn't fail."

He sighed and rubbed her back some more, tried to turn the subject. "There's still hope for Tim and John."

She shook her head. "He doesn't want it. He's been hurt enough by that man. But that's the point of it. You didn't do that. You didn't fail Kelly or Shannon, and they wouldn't think you failed them, either. You just… weren't lucky."

He shrugged that off. Everyone he was still talking to after they died told him that. Didn't make it feel any better. Didn't change the fact that he re-upped for five years in January of '91 so he could get his twenty years in, didn't change the fact that he asked for a tour in Desert Storm because he couldn't stand to be home and safe while other men were putting their lives on the line, didn't change the fact that he couldn't convince her not to testify, and it didn't change the fact that he didn't go AWOL the second he heard there had been threats made against them. He let someone else protect his family and because of that, they're gone, and he's still here.

"I didn't put them first, Abbs. Rule eight. I took the idea that they'd always be there for granted."

"Oh, Gibbs!" That was followed by ten more minutes of sniffling and crying against his chest, more back patting, and Gibbs sincerely wishing that whatever the hell it was Tim said, that he hadn't said it. Because, as he said to Ziva once, he's also 'not good with the women and the crying,' and it doesn't matter that this is one of his two favorite ladies on earth, she's still a crying woman in his
arms, and he hates that because he can't fix it. He's just got to sit here, useless, and get battered by her distress.

Finally she stopped crying, again, and pulled back, again, to look at him, eyes red and puffy, skin blotchy from her crying, and her voice rough from the sobbing. "Look, something happens, there's another bomb, I want you to run your ass away from it!"

Gibbs looked her in the eyes and nodded, as solemnly as he can. He's lying, of course, but he's got no compunction about lying about this. Do not upset the pregnant lady if you can avoid it was the original Rule Number 12.

"Don't give me that."

"Didn't say anything."

"Yeah and I know what you're not saying. What you're not saying is first hint of danger and in I go to save the day. You want/need to protect me, fine, but I want you to erase the words 'or die trying' from the end of that sentence. You are my dad, you're Tim's dad, you're McScuito's grandpa, you're Ziva's dad, you're Tony's Ducky and Ducky's best friend, you're Molly and Sammy's Uncle Jethro, you're Amira' godfather, you're LJ's godson, and you're Jackson's son. You are precious to a lot of people, and maybe when you were all alone the idea of 'or die trying' made sense, but it doesn't now. Like it or not, you're our clan's patriarch, and that requires you to be around. You've got kids and grandkids who need you, so none of this 'or die trying' shit. You can die succeeding. But none of this trying stuff. No suicide runs so you don't have to face the next dawn. We're all here, and we're all together, and we will get each other through whatever comes next. So you make sure you're here for it!"

Gibbs nodded and kissed Abby's forehead.

She stared at him, decided that that was about as good as she could get out of him, and said, "Better."

Eventually he said to her, "You and Tim okay?"

"Huh?" She looked genuinely surprised at the idea that he'd ask that. Then it clicked. "Oh, yeah, argument. Yeah, we're fine. Over yesterday. I didn't realize the babying me was a coping mechanism for him. Yeah, it's still annoying, but him feeling scared and helpful is better than him feeling scared and helpless, so I'm biting my tongue and letting him do it."

Gibbs smiled at that. Of course, the explaining thing might have benefits on occasion. Some of the bigger arguments he'd had over the years with different wives have boiled down to an unwillingness to say the words, "I'm scared."

She sat next to him for a few minutes, head resting on his shoulder, just soaking up the quiet. "I love you."

"Love you, too, Abby." He kissed her forehead.

"You're going to be an awesome grandpa."

He nodded at that, smiling. "Gonna teach that baby girl of yours how to sail on this thing."

"Yeah, you are."
"Ducky, can I borrow Jimmy?" Both Jimmy and Ducky look up at him as Tim heads into Autopsy and saying that.

It's a paperwork day, so grabbing Jimmy for coffee shouldn't be an issue, but it's still a good idea to ask before grabbing.

"Certainly Timothy, though, were you to return with hot water for tea as well as Jimmy, it wouldn't go amiss."


They're in the elevator, and Tim stops it as Jimmy asks, "So what's going on?"

"I want to ask you a medical question."

That relaxes Jimmy a bit. He can see being spirited off for a private conversation for something like that. "Fire away."

"It's about Abby."

Jimmy shrugs a little. "Tim, I'm not an obstetrician, I'll give you the best answer I can, but… I might not be the right guy to ask."

Tim stares at him, looking nervous and desperate. "Well, since I'd rather not ask our sixty-year-old, female OB this, how about I ask you as guy who pays attention when he has sex with his pregnant wife? And if you don't know, I'll google the hell out of it on Tony's computer."

Jimmy's staring at him like he's insane.

"It's personal. And I still need to get him back because he thought it'd be fun to download a ton of Elf porn on mine last week."

"Elf porn?" Jimmy takes his glasses off and rubs his eyes.

Tim rolls his eyes. "Yeah, for as vanilla as he is in real life, he's got no problem coming up with some fairly nasty kinks when he's pranking me."

Jimmy's still just staring at him, waiting for Tim to get to the point.

Tim reads it as waiting for more explanation as to what Tony was doing. "Stuff you never, ever wanted to see Legolas doing."

"Which one is Legolas?" Yes, Tim's read everything JRR Tolkien wrote, and all the commentary to go with it. But Jimmy got about a hundred pages into The Fellowship of the Ring before deciding it was painfully boring and putting it down. He's seen the movies, and liked them, but was still kind of fuzzy on who was who.

"Orlando Bloom."

Jimmy looks really surprised at that. "He found porn staring Orlando Bloom?"
Tim shakes his head. "No, it was animated. But, let's put it this way, there was a really unhealthy level of attraction between him and his arrows and quiver."

"Ullgh..." Jimmy shudders and winces. "Splinters?"

"I'd assume so."

"Yuck!" Well, there's an image Jimmy's never getting out of his head again. Time to get away from that. "So, what's up?"

Tim rubs his lips together, then asks, "She... tastes different, is that normal?"

Jimmy smiles. "Less acidic?"

"Yeah."

He smiles even wider. "Her body's Ph changes when she's pregnant. Everything else the same?"

"Yeah."

"Fluids clear?"

"Yeah."

"Still tastes good to you?"

"Uh huh."

"Don't worry about it. Because of the shift, she can get yeast infections easier than usual, but as long as things still taste and smell good, and stay clear, she's fine."

"Thanks." Tim looks sincerely relieved.

Jimmy nods. "I can see not wanting to ask the OB that." That's certainly not a conversation he'd want to have with their OB.

Tim isn't exactly blushing, but his face certainly shows discomfort at the idea of having this chat with their obstetrician. "Yeah, I mean, obviously, we have sex, that's the whole reason we're there, after all, but..."

"Yeah."

"Anything else I should know about?"

Jimmy grins, big smug smirk on his face. "All of her pink parts'll get redder, usually more sensitive. That's normal, too."

" Noticed that." Tim smiles, remembering Saturday.

"Yeah, a pregnant wife, assuming you can keep her awake and not throwing up long enough to have sex, is real a treat."

"So far throwing up isn't a problem."

"Yeah. For you... Awake on the other hand..." Jimmy's delivered more than a few samples to a sleeping Abby over the last month.
"Yep."

Tim flicks the elevator back on.

Jimmy flicks it back off. "So, you actually watched the elf porn long enough to find out what it was about?"

"Errrr..." Tim looks horrifically embarrassed by that. "He had it labeled Hobbit Trailer/Concept Art. And he's a movie guy. And it was two days before my birthday, so it wasn't impossible he was trying to do something nice for me."

"Uh huh..." Jimmy's giving him the *are you really this gullible?* look.

"Anyway, it took me a few seconds to figure out what was going on. And I'd already called Abby over to see it, and she wanted to know what it was, and well, if I scrambled around trying to turn it off on a second's notice, she would have laughed at me, so I kept it playing, and... there are some things you just can't unsee. Worst use of fletching, ever." Tim shudders.

Jimmy laughs for a good long minute at that. Then he says, "So, since googling is out, what are you going to do to get him back?"

"I'm thinking of sending his Rabbi a Bacon of the Month Club subscription as a Christmas gift in his name."

Jimmy's jaw drops. "Oh... That's terrible!"

Tim looks very satisfied at that reaction. "Thank you."

"Though if you want to be able to go to his wedding, which since you're the best man is kind of important, let alone not get accused of a hate crime, you might want to rethink that plan."

Tim winces, realizing that yeah, that probably was a few steps too far. "Good point. I'll figure something out. He's not too hard to fluster if you know the right buttons to push. Might send Gibbs some more of that honey dust stuff..."

"What?"

"You didn't hear that story?"

"No!"

Tim flicks on the elevator and fills Jimmy in over their coffee break.
Christmas Eve

Technically Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are NCIS holidays. And just like all other NCIS holidays, the different teams rotate through being on and off duty for them. The fact that Team Gibbs has worked every Christmas Eve since Tim’s been there, has been Gibbs making sure their team has Christmas off, really off. In twelve years, they’ve never had a Christmas on call. Which doesn’t mean there haven’t been Christmases they’ve worked, but when that happens it’s spillover. Case that went hot before Christmas.

But this year, something else went hot, or cold, really, on December 23rd, and was still howling along at full speed come December 24th.

Tim wonders if they’re going to start naming winter storms. This is the third winter in a row that a massive snow storm has shut the federal government down, and short of a body getting found/someone being kidnapped, NCIS is closed.

Which he isn’t minding at all. It’s the middle of the week, they’ve, provisionally, got today and tomorrow off, and since there’s nowhere to go, he doesn’t have to try and shovel the foot and a half of snow that’s fallen since last night off the driveway. (And he’ll admit that part of putting it off, and hoping he gets to keep putting it off, is that he’s awfully sure his main Christmas present is a snow blower. And no, he hasn’t peeked.)

So, he’s enjoying his snow day immensely. He’s gotten a solid five thousand words in on the next Deep Six novel and is taking a break, gaming away, happily smiting evil right and left, (he’s playing a paladin, so he’s literally smiting) while Abby naps.

Then the power goes out. One second he has his hand out, holy might coalescing, ready to utterly destroy the vampire before him, the next he’s in a dim room staring at a blank screen.

Thank all that’s good and holy, they have natural gas heat, hot water, and range, so they can keep warm, shower, and cook without having to use any power.

Though, as he notices the sudden lack of any sounds in his house, like for example, the sound of the blower on the heat, he realizes that the thermostat, which tells the heater to turn on, requires electricity.

This is when the idea of getting a generator started seeming like a really good plan.

He heads over to the table his phone lives on, picks it up to check the weather, and runs headlong into the issue of no wifi.

It still works as a phone, though.

“Hey, Tony.”

“What’s up, McGee?”

“Power’s out. How long is the blizzard supposed to last?”

“Let me check.”

A few seconds of silence passes. Then he hears Tony tell Ziva what’s up, followed by the sounds of the TV clicking on.
“Supposed to stop snowing around midnight.”

“How much of DC is without power?”

“Damn it!” The sound of the TV in the background cut off, and he hears Ziva’s voice sounding annoyed about something. “About three quarters, and us now, too.”

“So, it’s not coming back anytime soon?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Okay. I’ve got to see if I can rig my thermostat to run on batteries.”

“Good luck on that.”

“Thanks. If I’m really lucky it won’t cost an arm and a leg to make it work on the house current again when I’m done.”

Tony laughs at that. “You’ve got a fireplace, right?”

“Yeah. And three of those compressed wood logs that burn for three hours, look pretty, and do absolutely nothing to keep you warm. How about you guys?”

“Gas fireplace. It’s not great, but we won’t freeze.”

“Good. Okay, got to get working while I’ve still got some light. The only thing less fun than trying to do this with no power is doing it in the dark.”

It really isn’t that difficult. Wire clippers, a nine volt battery, some duct tape, and a flash light held between his teeth (Tim never noticed before that even in the middle of a sunny day the hallway the thermostat is on gets no light, what with being located smack dab in the middle of the house. During a blizzard, being able to see what he's doing without extra light is hopeless.) got the job done. It’s ugly as sin, but the heat kicks back on, and that’s what matters.

Meanwhile a thermostat that has a back-up battery goes onto his to-get list.

Fortunately, due to his honeymoon prep, they’ve got a ton of little LED candles. So he sets them up around the house, checks on Abby, still asleep, checks the stove, beef stew is still stewing along, notices that the oven needs power to turn on and regulate the temperature, so their plan for biscuits to go with the stew probably isn’t going to happen.

Then he heads outside with a bucket, fills it with snow, and packs it into the empty spaces in their fridge and freezer.

He figures that's about all he can do, so back to the typewriter he goes to work on Deep Six some more.

About an hour into that, as Tibbs, MacGregor, and Tommy were alone in the high desert at night, forced by darkness to stop chasing down a suspect, and for the moment, camping, one more thought occurs to him.

Back to the phone he goes.

“Hey, Jethro.”

“Tim?”
“Yeah. If I wanted to make biscuits without an oven, how would I do it?”

“Power out?”

“Yep. I’ve got a functional stove and a fireplace. Beef stew’s cooking just fine. I remembered Lonesome Dove begins with Gus making sourdough biscuits over a fire, and I figured if anyone I knew knew how to do that, it’d be you.”

“Do you have a dutch oven?”

“Maybe. What is it?”

“Big, thick pot with a tight lid you could put on the coals.”

“Sounds like what we make the jambalaya in.”

“Probably. Stick the biscuit dough in there. Put it on low coals. Stick more coals on the lid. Let it sit. When they smell done, they probably are.”

“Think I can do that on the stove?”

Gibbs is quiet for a moment. “Do you have a cast iron frying pan?”

“Yeah. Luca made sure we had one.”

“Put it on the burner, turn the heat low, make sure it’s good and hot, then put the dough in, stick the lid on another burner until it’s good and hot too, put the lid on the fry pan, it’ll probably work.”

“Thanks. You have power?”

“Only if I feel like turning the generator on. Don’t need it for sitting in front of the fireplace reading.”

“Okay, stay warm. We’ll see you tomorrow if we can.”

He assumes Gibbs nodded at him, then the line disconnects.

Abby wakes up feeling really good. She’s warm, comfortable, and for once, well-rested. She doesn’t remember the last time she woke up and didn’t want to immediately go back to sleep. Obviously it used to happen, but it’s been a while.

Granted, warm, comfortable, and well-rested with a warm, and better yet, hard, Tim cuddled up next to her would have been even better, but it’s the middle of the day, so he’s off…

Which was when it occurs to her that she can’t hear anything. Usually Tim amusing himself has a soundtrack: game noises, music and battle sounds, or writing, which goes with loud jazz and rattling typewriter keys. Even reading Tim isn’t silent; there’s always some music to go with Tim having a good time.

She opens her eyes and sees that their room is glowing with ten or so of the LED candles. For a second, she’s wondering if this is some sort of romantic Christmas treat when she checks the clock to see how late it is and realizes they don’t have any power.

Silent Tim suddenly makes a whole lot more sense. If he doesn’t have a good idea of when they’ll
get power back, he isn’t going to burn through the charges on his devices just for something to listen to.

She heads to the window to try and get a better handle on how late it is, but that doesn't help. It's dark enough outside that she can’t tell if it's late afternoon and the storm is blocking the sun, or if it's already night.

She never realized how much artificial light their neighborhood uses. But now, staring out the window at softly edged dark, she could almost believe they’re the only two people on earth.

Kind of cool, really.

She’d been wearing a comfy t-shirt and flannel pants for napping, but decides candle lit dinner for two during a blizzard on Christmas Eve deserves something a little snazzier than that.

Abby grabs a few of the candles, gets them all settled on her dresser, and goes looking for the white and cream peignoir. That, under her black kimono will do the job nicely. She brushes her hair up into a high ponytail, and decides to head down and see what else is going on.

Halfway down the stairs, she hears the rattling sound of Tim typing at full speed.

All the way down, she notices that he put the little candles all over the house, but there's no fire in the fireplace. So an idea begins to form.

The good thing about writing Tim, (sometimes, occasionally it’s annoying, but right now it’s working out well for her) is that when he hits his stride, you can pretty much run a gang of naked Hells Angels through the room he’s writing in, and he won’t notice.

When he’s in his story, he’s in it, and usually pretty happy to be there. (And like how Abby gets grumpy when she gets pulled out of nap these days, Tim pulled out of his writing is awfully grumpy, too. Yes, he’ll deign to pay attention to you if you demand it, but you’re much more likely to get the sarcastic version of him.)

So, she doesn’t head into his office. Judging by the speed he’s typing, he’s well into the story.

Instead she heads back upstairs, grabs their pillows, and the comforter off their bed, and takes them back down to make a little snug nest on the floor in front of the fireplace. Off to the linen closet she goes next, for more blankets, comforters, and pillows.

By the time she's done, they have a very comfortable little space for dinner, sex, and post-sex snoozing.

She rearranges some of the candles, sticking more of them in the living room, on the mantle, making sure it’ll be fairly light in there, and then goes to find some of the logs for the fireplace.

Tim hits a lull in his writing, and comes out of the story with a jerk. The biscuits!

He didn’t smell anything burning, but he also has no idea how long he’s been sitting there, working on a scene where McGregor, Tibbs, Tommy, and Liza were defusing a bomb; he has no idea where it’ll go in the next story, or even if it’ll go in the next story. He’s got a box full of scenes that haven’t made it into stories, yet. But he’s thinking this might be the climax to the current story. It’ll all jell once he’s got a bad guy in mind.
He jumps up, sprints toward the kitchen, and is very pleased to notice that he still doesn’t smell anything burning.

Checking the biscuits shows him the edges closest to the pan seemed to be nicely brown. The tops are still pretty white. And poking them a little makes him think they aren’t done, yet. He debates trying to flip them over, and decides that’s probably a bad idea.

So he puts the lid back on the burner, heats it up again, turns the heat almost off on the biscuits, while the lid heats, and hopes that’ll would take care of getting them cooked all the way through before the bottom burns.

“Why are you cooking the lid?”

He turns toward her, and sees Abby leaning against the archway between the kitchen and dining room, kimono loosely belted over the white nighty, watching him with a smile on her face.

“Would you believe that Gibbs told me to?”

“Yes.” She closes on him, and wraps her arms around his waist.

He kisses her, long and gentle. “Hi. Have a good nap?”

“Yeah, woke up feeling rested.”

“Been a long time since that happened.”

“Yeah. So…”

“Even distribution of heat. Trying to get the tops of the biscuits cooked before the bottoms are burned.”

“Okay. And heating the lid means you get heat from both sides.”

“Yeah. Just remember, you need a hot pad if you’re going to touch any of this.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. When did the power go out?”

“Two hours ago? Three? If I had my watch on, I’d know, but I don’t.”

“Any idea on how long until dinner’s ready?”

“No. Are you hungry?”

“These days, always. But I’m mostly asking so I can make sure the log’s burning bright and steady by the time we sit down to eat.”

He raises one eyebrow, and she pulls him through the kitchen, through the dining room, and into the living room. When he sees the nest she made, he grins. “It takes about ten minutes to get them really burning, so…”

“So, light it up. We’ll eat in ten minutes, and if the biscuits aren’t ready… They’ll be good for breakfast.”
Ten minutes later, the log is blazing away, instrumental Christmas music is playing, (Abby’s computer had been completely charged, so she’s willing to burn some power in order to have music.) and she’s laying on her side, propped up on one arm, kimono loosely draped over her, gaping a bit at the chest and hip, so the white and cream negligee under it is visible.

“Hey, you rea…” The question dies on Tim’s lips as he stands in the archway between the living room and dining room, staring at her.

Abby sends him a hot, sexy look, slowly slipping her top leg up the bottom one, shifting so the slit in the peignoir falls open, silk slithering over her leg, leaving them bare, and then grins. “Tim?”

“Yeah?”

“Dinner?”

He tears his eyes away from her legs and says, “Oh, yeah, dinner, right!” scurrying back into the kitchen.

A minute later he's back, a tray with two bowls, filled with savory, steaming stew, rich with red wine, rosemary, and garlic, a plate piled high with golden biscuits, and two mugs of cider, in his hands.

“They look great.”

He smiles. “Let’s hope they taste that way.”

It's sheer dumb luck he actually had the recipe on his phone. Normally, he’d have googled it before making the biscuits, but he needed it to get the ingredients, so he actually saved it, and could get to it without wifi. Still, he was, well, fuzzy, on what exactly is involved in cutting butter and shortening into flour by hand, so… yeah… he’s hoping they taste good.

The stew is fabulous. They’d gotten it, and a bunch of other recipes from Luca, as a wedding present. The biscuits are… well, given the challenges involved in making them, pretty good, but yeah, they’ve both had better.

And sharing a meal, warm and comfortable, lit gold by fire and candle light, soft touches and hot looks interspersed between playful words and savory food while the storm raged outside, that's excellent.

“All done?”

Abby licks the back of her spoon, getting the last drop of the stew. “Yeah.”

“Dessert?”

“Do we have anything?”

“Ice cream, frozen blueberries, everything you need to make cookies, but no actual cookies, and no oven to make cookies with.”

“And let me guess, you aren’t going to let me eat raw cookie dough?”

“I’d really prefer you didn’t. Though I suppose I could make it without the eggs…” He looks like he
might have been seriously thinking about it, and right now she wants him seriously thinking about her, not about cookies.

“Later.” Nothing on that list is making her think that she has to have food right this second. Tim in jeans, a button down, sleeves rolled-up, top two buttons undone, and bare feet, on the other hand, that is definitely sparking some cravings. Her eyes, and fingers, tracing down his body get that idea across.

“Okay, let me get this cleared away.”

Judging by how fast he's back, *cleared away* translates into *put into the sink to soak*, as opposed to actually washed up and put back.

---

He lies down next to her, and she scoots a little closer, wrapping her leg over his hips, pulling lightly on the top button on his shirt as he kisses her.

His hand finds her shoulder, easing it’s way under the kimono, shifting it aside so he can kiss her skin. He tugs at it again, not having any luck getting it off.

Abby, gently pushes him onto his back. She straddles his hips, keeping her body high, only her calves touching his hips and thighs, and he takes the end of the tie to her kimono in hand.

“Pretty bow,” he says, his fingers ghosting over the tidy bow at her waist.

“Always put a nice bow on a present.” She grins at him as he tugs on the tie, and tugs again to pull the kimono off, seeing it fall to a black silk puddle over his hips and her legs.

“Are you my Christmas present?”

“Always. But maybe it’s just that I like being unwrapped.”

He twists his hand a few times, snaking the kimono up around it, and then tosses it aside. Tim places both of his hands on her calves, just below the hem of the peignoir. “I was always very good at unwrapping presents.” He slides his hands up her legs and takes the lace edging in hand. “Of course there are a lot of ways to unwrap presents. There’s the quick, impatient, rip all the paper off as fast as you can.” He gives her a wicked look, watches her eyes go wide, *do not rip this* clear in them, and gives the lace a quick tug, hard enough to get the idea across, not hard enough to rip. “But I always thought that lacked finesse.”

He lets go of the lace, and traces his hands, under the silk, all the way up to her hips, stroking over her legs, rubbing the backs of his knuckles gently over her thighs, and then quickly undoing the button and fly of his jeans. “And of course, some people prefer lifting a corner of the paper, so they can just peek.” He takes his dick out and lightly rubs it against her pussy, stroking over her mound, circling her clit with it, enjoying the look of pleasure on her face, and the flush slowly spreading across her chest. Then he tucks himself back in (a lot more difficult than getting out of his boxers in the first place). “Then they retape the paper. But I never thought that was very satisfying.”

Her eyes close, and she swallows hard, a pained look on her face. His hands return to her calves, skin on skin, and he traces them up her sides, lace and silk slipping up her skin with them. “And then there’s carefully, slowly, taking the paper off. Teasing yourself a little with the reveal.” She raises her arms over her head, as he sits up, pulling the peignoir off, tossing it behind them. “That’s the one I always liked best.” He kisses her lips, her throat, her shoulder, propping himself with his hands flat
on the floor behind him, and begins to nuzzle and suck her nipples.

“I always preferred to rip the paper off as fast as possible,” Abby says as she makes short work of the buttons on his shirt. “Might not involve a lot of finesse.” She pushes his shirt down his arms, and settles in close on his lap, rubbing her breasts against his chest. “But sometimes there’s something to be said for fast.”

He grins at the feel of her naked skin on his. “Indeed.”

She scoots back on his legs, getting a good grip on his jeans, and he lifts himself up so she can pull them off quickly.

Abby looks him over, eyes tracing him from toes to forehead, a wide, lusty smile on her face. “But really, when it comes down to it, I never much cared about the wrapping one way or another. I wanted what was under it.”

He pulls her close to him, sitting on his lap, chest to chest, lips to lips.

“And what do you want the present to do?” he asks, gently pulling her bottom lip with his teeth.

She rolls him on top of her, and he braces himself on his elbows and knees. “You sure?”

She knows he's worried about thrusting too deep. “Yeah. Just don’t hike my leg over your shoulder, and we’ll be fine. Besides, right now your chest rubbing against my breasts feels fantastic, and we won’t be able to do it like this for all that much longer, so yeah, I’m sure.”

He rocks into her, sighing at her body around his, chest skimming over hers, and she moans at the feel of his skin sliding over hers.

“Good?” he asks with a kiss.

“So good.” Her hands settle on his ass, pulling him forward.

He thrusts again, getting his whole body into it, rubbing all of himself against her.

“Yeah, Tim, just like that.”

He cups her face in his hands, kissing her soft and sweet while they rock against each other. Eventually her hands find his, presses them flat to the floor, her fingers twanging with his. And while this is a position they often start in, it’s rarely one they finish in. Being able to kiss her and look her in the eye while her body goes tight on his, let alone while feeling her fingers clench between his, is a real treat. Spilling over the edge with her, watching her eyes lose focus as his world goes blurry around the edges is another. And falling asleep as the embers died out in the fireplace, wrapped in each other and the soft, fluffy comforters is the icing on the cake.

Though waking up the next morning to functional electricity and the sound of a snow plow clearing the two and half feet of snow off their street was pretty nice, too.
“Penny?”

His grandmother sweeps him into a warm hug seconds after she gets into Gibbs’ house, Ducky at her side.

“What are you doing here?”

She grins at him. “I knew I was going to be in DC for the holidays, and Ducky thought this would be a pleasant surprise.”

“Ducky?” Okay, yeah, they’re friends, but Ducky’s never brought a “friend” to their annual Christmas party before. Granted Penny’s in town, and she is family…

Ducky smiles up at Tim and takes Penny’s coat from her to hang up on the hooks at the door. “Yes, I’m between campuses right now, he’s been kind enough to let me stay with him this week. After the third, I’ve got a spot as a guest lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania for their next semester.”

Or they’re not just friends, and his ability to pretend they’re just friends has just been shot to hell and gone so…

“Uh huh.” Tim’s giving Ducky a look best described as just because you’re almost eighty doesn’t mean I won’t kick your ass if you hurt my grandma. Ducky lays a gentle hand on his arm and nods.

“Abby!” Penny wraps her in an enthusiastic hug, then pulls back, hands still on Abby’s arms, and spends a moment really looking at her. A slow smile spreads across her face. She looks at Abby, looks at Tim, and quirks an eyebrow.

Tim quickly glances at Abby, sees her minuscule nod of affirmation and quietly says to Penny, wrapping his arm around her, kissing her cheek, “Yes, in July. Ducky’s probably got a copy of the sonogram picture on him.”

“You don’t?”

“Of course I do, but we haven’t told everyone yet, and if I whip one out, it’s pretty obvious. Ducky does it and everyone’ll assume it’s Sammy.” He pulls back from Penny and takes Abby’s hand.

“Oh.” The fact that Penny knows who Sammy is makes him think her relationship with Ducky is probably quite a bit further along than he suspects. The fact that she didn’t know about their baby reminds him that Ducky is an excellent keeper of secrets.

“How long are you in town?” he asks.

“Until the second.”

“Unless we catch a case, Shabbat is at Ziva and Tony’s tomorrow, I bet they’d be happy to add an extra chair to the table.”

Tony comes over, kisses Penny on the cheek, and says, “She’s already been invited.”

“You knew she was here?”

“Of course, hence the invite. When it looked like this party might be snowed out we made plans to
shift this Christmas surprise to our place for tomorrow.” He nods toward Gibbs’ living room. “My
dad and L.J. are in there somewhere, I’m sure they’d like to say hi.”

“I’ll find them in a sec.” She hugs Tim one more time, kisses his cheek, and says, “You’re looking
really good, Tim. Being married agrees with you.”

“Yeah, it does.”

Tim has always been vaguely aware of the fact that for a lot of people, the real kick of Christmas is
having small children to give presents to.

And while it’s true that Amira, Emily (who was with her mother this year), Kayla, and Jared fill
some of that need, they’re all sort of old for it.

But this year, it became absurdly clear that the extended Gibbs clan is a group of people who are
craving grandbabies, and suddenly there’s a ten-month-old baby girl with big hazel eyes, curly brown
hair, and a wide, drooly grin, just waiting to be doted on.

Molly Palmer, of course, won’t remember this Christmas. But everyone else notices that Ducky
especially, but Gibbs and Senior as well, went a bit bonkers on the Christmas presents. And the fact
that LJ and Jackson also showed up with presents for a baby girl, might suggest that there’s a pretty
strong hankering for great-grandbabies, as well.

So, Molly sits, adults cooing over her, basking in their attention, laughing baby laughs, and grinning
a six toothed grin, as Breena and Jimmy open most of the presents, and she plays with the boxes,
chews on the wrapping paper, snuggles the stuffed corgis (presents from Ducky), and has as much of
an absolute blast as a ten-month-old can.

Senior is holding Molly with one arm and has the other one wrapped around Ziva. He stares right at
Tony and says, “This! This is what it’s all about.” He kisses both of the girls. “Wife, children,
family! And you aren’t getting any younger. Fifty’s just around the corner, Junior, and if you don’t
want people mistaking you for your kid’s grandfather…”

Tony rolls his eyes and mumbles something along the lines of, “Yeah, Dad.” As Senior continues on
about wanting grandbabies and how a pregnant woman is the most beautiful thing on earth—flirting
very heavily with Breena as he does it, and eyeballing Abby in a way that strongly suggests that he’s
noticed her breast size is larger, and he knows exactly why that happened—and how if Ziva's
pregnant come wedding time she’ll be so beautiful people would go blind by staring directly at her.
Eventually he winds down on that, and then his gaze drifts over to Tim and Abby, and he says, grin
on his face, “How about you two, any plans in this direction?”

Abby’s standing in front of Tim, leaning against his chest. She turns to toward him, the expression on
her face clearly signaling Now? They’ve been talking about how to announce it, and so far the mass
email/Facebook update seems awfully impersonal, but would spread the news really fast. She’s
eleven weeks along, so trimester two is right around the corner, and a better opening isn’t likely to happen anytime soon.

Tim kisses her shoulder, then says, “Yeah, we do.” He raises his voice, “Hey!” That gets the attention of the crowd. “All yours, Abby…”

She twines her fingers in his, seeing everyone watching them. “We’re having a baby in July!”

Granted, this isn’t news to a lot of the crowd at Gibbs’ Christmas party, and for that matter, it isn’t precisely news to a bunch of the people who weren’t supposed to know about it, either. (Vance is looking remarkably unshocked, for example.) But there are still lots of hugs and congratulations along with the traditional questions: are you going to find out if it’s a boy or girl (yes), what are you hoping for (girl), name ideas (yes, but they keep that under wraps and leave it with the somewhat vague ‘family name’), and a decent amount of commentary about how this place is going to be hip deep in babies next year.

For once, Fornell isn’t scowling at him.

Now, maybe part of that is that Emily is with her mother this Christmas, which means Fornell isn’t trying to protect his now fourteen-year-old daughter from the idea that romance, men, and babies are a whole lot fun. (Fornell is firmly convinced that a career as a nun is a really good choice for Emily. Those ladies get a great education, go on to do important things, usually actively making the world a better place, and stay way the hell away from men. Both Emily and Diane laughed in his face when he said that to them.)

Of course, it could be that the reason he isn’t scowling is hanging on his arm, sharing a cup of eggnog with him, and laughing with Gibbs about something.

Wendy Eccles is warm, pleasant, fun to be around, and for the life of him, Tim can’t understand what she sees in Fornell.

But whatever it is, he appears to be responding well to it, because Fornell’s been smiling all day, and actually congratulated him about the baby.

Still, the idea of Fornell with a girlfriend, let alone one who isn’t some version of acid-tongued Diane, is just a whole lot for Tim to wrap his mind around. And the idea of Fornell flirting, which he thinks is what’s going on as the two of them share the cup of eggnog, let alone being affectionate, (Yes, that is Fornell’s hand resting gently on Wendy’s hip.) really blows Tim’s mind.

Amira asks Breena and Abby, “Is it weird?”

“ Weird?” Breena replies.

Amira, now ten, and starting to look like she might share Mike’s long, lean build, stares at Breena’s tummy. “Having a person inside you? All squirmy and stuff.”
Abby shrugs. “She’s about the size of a golf ball. The docs say she moves around all the time, but I can’t feel it yet. So mostly, for me, I’m just really tired all the time.”

“I am so glad to be past that. More glad to be done throwing up.” Breena pats her tummy. “Sammy’s pretty quiet. Molly felt like she was training to be a gymnast in there, but Sammy’s just chilling out. Really, it doesn’t get weird until the end, when you can see them moving around. That’s kind of weird. Like, you’re on the sofa, and then your stomach suddenly bulges and shifts. That’s almost creepy.”

Jimmy kisses Breena’s neck, handing her a cup of punch. “Not creepy at all. You get to feel her scooting all over the place, but if you’re the dad half of it, it’s not really real until you can see that little elbow or whatever poking out. And toward the end, you can sort of play little games with them, tap on the stomach and see her kick back. That was so cool.”

Amira just stares at Jimmy, eyes wide. “That’s weird.”

Abby puts her arm around Jimmy. “Yeah, but we love him anyway.”

“So, how far along are you?” Wendy drifts over and asks Breena.

“Nineteen weeks.”

“Wow! You look amazing! I would have guessed closer to sixteen weeks. I know with my second boy about ten minutes after the pregnancy test turned positive I was in maternity jeans.”

Breena half-smiles. About ten minutes after the test had turned positive she had gained five pounds. Two months later they and ten of their buddies were gone. “I had morning sickness so bad I was throwing up twice a day even on the anti-nausea drugs. I’ve only been feeling good for the last month.”

Wendy winces, and Amira looks like she is seriously reconsidering ever having children. “I’m so sorry. I remember being sick like that. Not fun at all.”

“Yeah. Only upside is that I look great. Losing ten pounds over the course of the first trimester’ll do that. So, how old are your kids?”

“Trevor’s twenty-six, Dave is twenty-four. We had them over at my place last night.”

“Any grandbabies?”

“Dave has a little girl.”

The girls continue to chat about the soon to be babies McGee and Palmer, and get to know Wendy Eccles a bit better.

“You got it done?” Fornell asks as Gibbs leads him into the basement.

Gibbs flashes Fornell his of course I have it done, I wouldn’t have brought you down here if I didn’t look.
“Good.”

Gibbs hands him the intricately carved rosewood jewelry box. Three months ago Tobias had asked him if he could make one for him. It's small, delicate, a rose carved into the top, and inside there's a space for the ring that is currently sitting in Tobias’ sock drawer, waiting to be put into a box worth giving to a woman you want to marry. “When you going to ask?”

“New Year’s.”

Gibbs smiles at his friend. “I like this one.”

“You liked the last one, too.”

Gibbs smirks. “I think you should marry this one.”

“Me too.” Fornell grins. “Let’s get back up there before they notice we’re missing.”

“I’ve got to ask, McGee, did you get taller?” Senior asks.

“It’s the boots; he always wears those things with the skirt, Dad.” Tony hands his father another cup of Jackson’s eggnog.

“No, it’s not the boots,” Penny adds. “By the way, I really like the kilt, Tim.”

“Thanks, Penny.”

“It’s always good to see your playful side come out, and even better to see a man who doesn’t feel pressured to conform to patriarchal societal norms of the gender binary.”

Tim's not sure what to do with that, so he says, “Uh… thanks. And no, I’m not taller. Just have better posture. Started doing some yoga with Abby, and I’ve been standing straighter because of it.”

“Yoga!” Penny’s grinning about this, and he’s really hoping she’s not about to start asking about Tantra, while both Senior and Junior DiNozzo look really surprised by that.

“Yeah. It’s… um… a lot harder than it looks, but it’s good exercise.”

“Exercise?” Tony doesn’t buy it. “No, no, no. Exercise involves moving around, fast, heart pumping, sweat pouring down your body. Exercise is not twisting yourself into a pretzel and breathing deeply.”

“I didn’t say it was a sport.”

“That’s because you aren’t totally insane,” Tony says with a smirk.

Palmer heads by, plate of goodies for Breena in hand, and stops. “What’s not a sport?”

“Yoga.” Senior says.

“Duh.” Jimmy's eyeing Tim, wondering if he's trying to make that argument. Tim shakes his head.

“It’s also not exercise,” Tony adds.
And suddenly Jimmy gets the argument. “Really, Tony?” Jimmy's looking really cocky.


“Uh huh. Here, hold this.” He hands the plate to Penny and does something. All Tim knows is that it was graceful, elegant, slow, and then Jimmy's doing a handstand, feet in the air, supporting himself on his forearms, and from there he gets into a one-handed handstand, and then, once again, slowly, gracefully gets himself back out of it, then hops back up, takes the plate from Penny, and says to Tony. “If you aren’t sweating, you’re doing it wrong. Gotta give this to Breena.”

Tony and Senior just stare at the place where Jimmy had been. Penny blinks slowly, then says to Tim, “Can you do that?”

He shakes his head, eyes wide. “Nope, and even if I could, I certainly wouldn’t in a kilt.”

That gets the other three laughing.

Things are starting to wind down, getting quieter. Because of the snow, most of the crew decided that heading home earlier than usual is a good plan. Tim's helping to wrap up some of the food when he looks over and sees something that makes him smile. He gets a quick picture of it, and then goes to find Gibbs.

“Hey, you want a copy of this?”

He shows Gibbs the shot of Jackson on the easy chair, Molly sleeping on him, sucking her thumb, snuggling one of the stuffed corgis, as he pats her back.

Gibbs nods.
It's not a secret that Tim is jealous of Abby's past lovers and that she feels similarly towards his. During the years they didn't date, they didn't strenuously object about each other's "friends," and they both genuinely wished the other happiness, but neither of them was particularly thrilled about the other dating someone other than themselves.

Sort of a if-I-don't-get-to- have-you-no-one-else-does-either vibe.

Now, for Abby, this is not a big deal. Sure, Tim has ex-girlfriends, but not a ton of them, and he tended to date outside of their social/work set. So, it's possible that they might run into one of his exes, but it's unlikely.

For Tim, this is a somewhat thornier problem. Abby has probably four exes to every one of his, and she has dated people they work with, at least on occasion.

And she's remained friends with a decent number of the guys she dated.

So, running into one of her exes was bound to happen sooner or later.

At least, he thinks the guy standing in Abby's lab, in a lab coat and vaguely hipsterish outfit is one of the exes.

He's watching her the way an ex would. Eyes hungry and staring, devouring her curves under her lab coat, lingering on her lips, undressing her with his eyes.

Tim's been in the lab for, oh, nine seconds, and he already loathes the guy in front of him.

Abby looks over at him, grins, and says, "Tim, this is Greg Sanders. Greg, Tim McGee. We met at a forensics conference back in..."

"'01." Greg smiles at him and offers his hand. Tim smiles back limply, while shaking.

"So, which lab are you out of?" Tim asks.

"None anymore, I'm a CSI out of Vegas now. I started in their lab, but got into field work a few years later." Tim feels himself drifting closer and closer to Abby with each word Sanders says. By the time Greg's done with the sentence, he's holding her hand.

"So what brings you so far from home?" Get the hell out of my wife's lab and go back to your own!

"My publisher has me giving a seminar on true crime writing, and since I was in town, I thought I'd look Abby up."

"Really. You write? Who are you with?"

"Harper Collins." Tim nods, impressed against his will. They tend to make good books.

"True crime?"

"Yeah, I write about Vegas during the mob days. It's a hobby."
Great, he's standing there, leering at Abby, eye fucking her, or trying at least. She's not returning those looks. And he's a writer. And he's a cop. And he's about the same age Tim is, maybe a tad younger. Certainly cooler. Tan. More handsome. In slightly better shape. Tim wraps an arm over her shoulders, eye narrowing, and growls, very, very softly. But Abby notices and turns to him.

She does not look particularly pleased by him at this moment. "Anything you need, McGee?"

"No, Mrs. McGee. Just wanted to tell you the OB called, our appointment got moved from ten to ten-thirty."

This tells Abby that Tim's on the verge of a melt-down of some sort, because that appointment had been almost a month ago, and though he may call her Mrs. McGee on occasion, (like when they're having sex) he's never done it like that before.

Greg looks up at her and smiles. "You're pregnant?"

"Yes, we're having a baby in July," Tim answers.

That couldn't have backfired worse on him if he had tried. Greg grins at them and pulls Abby into a tight hug, and since Tim already had his arm around her, that means he more or less got hugged by Greg, too. Then Greg shook Tim's hand again—which Tim responds to by not breaking his hand, though he wants to—and says, "This is awesome! Can I take you out to dinner?"

"No," Tim says it, voice flat.

"But I'm free for lunch tomorrow," Abby quickly replies. "How about noon?"

"That sounds great!" Apparently Greg finally got the clue that he didn't need to be in the lab anymore, and left.

Before he's all the way out of the door, Tim had pulled Abby even closer to him and was kissing the daylights out of her. She lets him, for a minute, and then puts her hands on his arms and pushes him back.

"Could you have been more rude?"

"Yes." Tim's nodding emphatically. "And I would have enjoyed it!"

She rolls her eyes and looks exasperated. "Okay, what is going on?"

"Insane jealousy. I mean, Palmer told me about it, but it really is insane. Look, I trust you. I absolutely know that nothing is ever going to happen with that Sanders guy. But the way he was looking at you was just... And I was watching it... And just... Insane."

"Okay, so you know what you did was completely not cool."

"Yes."

"Are you going to apologize to him?"

Tim shrugs. "I'd really prefer not to. I'm not in any way bothered about being rude to him. He deserved it."

"Do you trust me?"

He kisses her again. "Utterly. Nothing is going to happen. He was all but fucking you with his eyes,
and you didn't even blink at him. You and me, we're good. He's a fucking weasel."

She's giving him a look somewhere between amused and annoyed. "So, it's not about trust."

"No." He's shaking his head. "Trust you absolutely. It's more about wanting to wipe that smirk off his face, preferably with a lot of force and a good deal of pain, and make sure it's tattooed into his brain that you are MINE."

"Pissing contest?"

"Yes." Tim's nodding emphatically at this, too.

"Eye fucking?" If you were to ask Abby what that encounter looked like, she would have told you it was two friendly colleagues chatting with each other. Sure Greg's attracted to her. What guy isn't? Especially now, pregnancy boobs are insane. But there was absolutely nothing he was doing that was out of line.

Tim, on the other hand, is glaring at the memory of Sanders watching Abby. "He was staring at your breasts, like he really wanted to see them, again, and your lips, like he knew exactly how delicious you are and what you can do with them."

Her eyebrows shoot up as he says that. "You think we've—"

"I know how I used to look at you, and that looked awfully similar to me."

"Huh." Okay, yeah, of course she and Greg slept together, but she didn't see any of that in how he was looking at her. But if Tim noticed it...

"Have you two...?" he asks, looking like he can't believe he let those words come out.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Only if the answer's no."

She looks him straight in the eye. "No. We've never slept together."

He nods, takes a deep breath, and kisses her quickly. When he pulls back he says, "Eventually, when I'm sane again, I might ask again, and that time, tell me the truth?" It's not that he's calling her a liar, not exactly. It's that he knows that she knows that right now any other answer isn't a kindness. And the little sane voice in the back of his head knows that asking her that, and then telling her that he can't handle the answer really isn't fair.

"Sure."

He kisses her again. This time softer, and longer, and more of just touching her to touch her, less about marking her as his. And this time she lets him until he finishes.

"Can I go to lunch with him without you having a fit?"

"Yeah. As long as I'm not watching him eyeball you, I'll be fine. He knows we're married, right?"

"Well, if he didn't before, he does now. That Mrs. McGee thing wasn't subtle. The fact that I introduced you as Tim McGee when that's the same name on my ID badge, and the name on my Facebook profile, you know, the way he let me know he was going to be in town, might have also tipped him off. Or, since he's a cop, he could have noticed the matching wedding rings, and if he's really sharp, he could have possibly noticed that this," and she touched the lip print on her throat,
"matches your lips."

"Okay."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, that is Greg Sanders from CSI, and yes, he has been chosen for a specific reason. More on that later. Happy Friday everyone!
Help!

He goes to Gibbs’ place after dinner that night.

For once, Gibbs isn’t in the basement. He's in his dining room, with Fornell, settling in for dinner.

“Tim?” He looks up, a bit surprised to see Tim in his living room.

“I need help, Jethro.”

“He calls you Jethro now?” Fornell appears deeply amused by that.

Gibbs shrugs a little, while Tim says, “I do for calls like this.” Taking a seat at the table, and shaking his head at the pro-offered manicotti, Tim explains what happened that afternoon and wraps up with, “Look, I don’t want to be the jerk who has a fit each time his wife talks to someone else. Help!”

Fornell laughs, the bite of his dinner forgotten on his fork. “You want help from him? He beat the ever living shit out of me after Diane.”

Gibbs stares at Fornell long and… honestly Tim’s not entirely sure what that look means. Then he quietly says, “You got her pregnant while I was married to her.”

Fornell shrugs. “I didn’t say I didn’t deserve it. Just saying, you might not be the best guy to ask about how to hold your temper.”

Tim’s eyes go wide, and he stares at both of them for a very long minute. Well, that's the answer to what happened with the three of them. Abby's going to be so happy to get that information. Abby. That gets him back to his own problem. ‘Look, I’m fine with Abby. I can see she’s completely not interested in this guy. But I can see that he is. And I don’t want to go to jail because I lose it and hit him for looking. Got it?’

“Make him throw the first punch,” Gibbs says.

“Huh?”

Gibbs can see that's an idea that has literally never occurred to Tim, and without him voicing it, never would occur to Tim. “If you can’t control it, control him. Get him to start the fight. Tony and I’ll help if need be. Then you can be the bigger man and not press charges. We’ve got your six.”

“Oh.” Gibbs watches Tim think about it for a while. And for a while, he it looks like he really likes it. Then something a bit colder dawns on him. “Abby probably wouldn’t like that.”

“Ya think, Tim?” Gibbs smiles.

“Yeah.”

“Then you’ll have to come up with something she’ll like.”

“I understand woodworking is soothing,” Fornell adds with a smirk.

Tim rests his head in his hands. “How did you deal with this? You’ve both had kids. You did the pregnant wife thing. Palmer said it was insane, but...”

“The guy who is dumb enough to hit on the pregnant wife of a twenty-four-year-old Marine while
he’s with her deserves what’s coming to him. Back in ‘81 and ‘82, when Shannon was pregnant, there wasn’t a cop alive who would have disagreed with that. Hell, back then most cops would have whacked the guy a few times just to make sure he understood how things worked. When I was with Shannon, everyone was properly respectful.”

Fornell flashes at look at Gibbs, indicating he knows there’s more to the story than he’s telling. Then he adds his own story. “Antacids and a lot of time at the gym or firing range. Diane thrived on having guys look adoringly at her. And the more pregnant she got, the better she looked, the more attention she wanted. By the time Emily showed up, I was in the best shape of my life.”

Gibbs looks at Tim, knowing he spends at least an hour or two a week at the range, but isn’t much for the gym, and tries to come up with something useful for Tim. “That yoga stuff you’re doing with Abby and Jimmy might be good, or you can murder him in your next book.”

Tim hadn’t realized that Gibbs knew about the yoga. “I do that with Abby, was just talking about it with Jimmy, and it’s just not good for this.” He’s getting better at the stretching and the poses. The calm, mellow mindset, on the other hand, is already horrifically illusive and trying to add seething, insane rage to the mix isn’t going to make it any easier to find. “Writing about it, though…” A really nasty smile spreads across Tim’s face. “He can be the first red herring, the guy who looks promising but turns up dead in chapter five.”

“There you go.”

“Might be a lot of red herrings in the next book.”

“Write one about a serial killer who frames each victim for the murder before.”

Tim nods, a very disturbing smile on his face.

Gibbs’s looking at Tim, hoping that’ll do it. But if it doesn’t... The fact that Tim probably doesn’t have a lot of experience at feeling like he wants to hurt someone just for the sake of doing it, let alone handling that feeling, hits Gibbs.

“You need us, we’ve got you. Me and Tony, anytime, just call.”

Tim's touched by that. And he's also aware of the fact that if he doesn't get home soon, Abby's going to want to know what he's been up to. “Thanks. Okay. I should get home.”

Fornell watches him leave, and then asks, “How did he ever become a cop?”

“You know, I don’t know that.” And Gibbs realizes he's never asked why Tim became a cop, let alone a field agent. Probably a good question for the next time they’re on a stakeout.

“I know he’s good at it, now...” The first few times Fornell met McGee, he thought Gibbs was insane to have him on his team, but, as the years have passed, and McGee's both grown up and the computer stuff keeps getting more important, he's had to change that opinion. "but that’s the gentlest kid I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah. Tim and killer instinct don’t exactly go hand in hand.”

Fornell stares at Gibbs for a moment. “You actually behave when Shannon was pregnant?”

Gibbs shakes his head. “The MP who got called in was one of my buddies. He slapped that idiot upside the head, too. You?”
“After I beat the snot out of the first guy for ogling Diane when she was pregnant, I joined the gym.” Fornell remembers that for a moment. “You should have told her you’d had a vasectomy.”

Gibbs rolls his eyes a bit. There are a lot of things he should have told Diane. “Didn’t see a need to. She would have asked why, and I would have had to go into how difficult Kelly’s birth was...” Gibbs shakes his head. “I would have had to tell her who Kelly was. She knew I didn’t want any more kids when we got married. That should have been enough.”

“When was anything ever enough with that woman?”

Gibbs nods along with that.

"I didn’t know she was pregnant when she wrote you.” He and Gibbs have never really talked about this. It happened. Gibbs got home six months later, found him, beat the sh*t out of him without saying a word, and left him bleeding on the street, still without saying a word. Three years later, they pretended not to know each other when they ended up on Air Force One at the same time.

“You weren’t supposed to. I think she thought a baby might have saved our marriage.” Gibbs shrugs, and Fornell knows him well enough to know that if he hadn’t had that vasectomy, if there had been any chance at all that Emily was his, he would have stayed. And he knows that because he was the guy Gibbs called after he got that letter, and he was the guy who suggested he make sure that his vasectomy still worked before doing anything rash. Fornell remembers the excitement in Gibbs’ voice when he recognized that it might have healed was a possibility. And Fornell was the guy who wanted to shoot himself in the head after he hung up, knowing he’d just, literally, fucked things up beyond all belief.

“And I was around and convenient.”

“Yeah.”

Fornell shakes his head. “Lord, that woman is a piece of work.”

“You got a beautiful daughter out of it, Tobias.”

“Yeah, and I don’t regret that at all. But you were right, I shouldn’t have married her. Not sure how I would have done as a single dad with a newborn, but...”

“Water under a lot of bridges there.”

“Yeah.”
Palmer showed up at Tim's desk a little after lunch the next day. "Get some coffee with me?"

"Sure."

"I crashed Abby's lunch date."

Tim was giving Palmer a very confused look. He hadn't even told Palmer that was up. And suddenly he got what Gibbs meant by "We've got your six."

"Did Gibbs send you?"

"Yeah. He figured it'd look more natural if I did it than if Tony did."

"Good thinking."

"Okay first of all," and here he gently smacked Tim upside the back of the head. "Sanders is a puppy. And not like a pit bull puppy, which might, eventually with enough time turn out to be an issue, but like, what are they, those tiny, little dogs girls buy to cuddle with?"

"Chihuahuas?"

"No, the ones with the hair they put in bows, that, you know, grow to be maybe eight inches tall." Palmer was gesturing with his hands to get the size of whatever that kind of dog is across.

"Sounds an awful lot like a Chihuahua."

"Chihuahuas have short hair and big ears. The thing I'm thinking of is really fluffy and looks like a dust mop. Some kind of terrier. Anyway, what the hell is wrong with you, man?"

"He was watching Abby, undressing her with his eyes, and just—"

Jimmy just nodded, looking really smug, and put his hand on Tim's shoulder consolingly. "Okay, you're full on pregnant daddy insane. I get that. But seriously, nothing even remotely out of line happened."

"Good. I think they slept together back when they first met."

"You think?"

"I asked; she said no."

Jimmy rolled his eyes and smacked him upside the back of the head again, this time hard enough to sting. He held up two fingers, back of his hand to Tim, and Tim wonders idly if Jimmy knows he's using the British gesture to flip him off. "Two things you never, ever ask, because if you ask you are making her lie to you. One," And his index finger curled down. Tim's feeling awfully sure that at some point Jimmy picked up some rude gestures from Ducky. "Have you had sex with him? Two," and he curled his middle finger down, so possibly this might be another of those moments where Jimmy's lack of mental filter is showing, "was he better/longer? Never, ever ask. How long ago was it?"

"Thirteen-fourteen years ago."
"Then it's fairly safe to say that's not his kid in her belly, and nothing else really matters."

Tim sighed. "Okay, you're right, I'm insane. Great. Now what?"

"Work on coping."

"I'm trying. She went to lunch with him; I did not freak out."

"Good."

"How are you handling it?" Tim asked Jimmy. Senior had been flirting pretty hard with Breena during the Christmas party, but besides Jimmy's eyes narrowing a little and a slight clench to his jaw, nothing happened.

"It's like sex."

Tim stared at Palmer, eyebrows furrowed. "I'm not following you."

"After the first time I wanted to beat the hell out of a guy for being too polite to Breena, and she just stared at me like I was a complete jerk, I figured it out. It's like sex."

The furrow between Tim's eyebrows got deeper. "Still not following."

"Look. You're fooling around, who's gonna get off first?"

"She is."

"Right. Why?"

"Uh..." He was staring at Palmer like this is conversation is twenty million shades of wrong.

"Just go with it, okay?"

"Fine, she gets off first because things pretty much end when I get off."

"Go deeper, Tim. Why is that an issue?"

"Because I want her to have a good time, too."

"Closer." Jimmy was looking expectantly at him.

"I don't want her to think I'm the asshole who gets off and then falls asleep immediately after."

"Exactly." Jimmy beamed at him.

Tim shook his head wondering what on earth could possibly make Jimmy think this made any sort of sense whatsoever. "I still have no idea why you've brought this up."

Jimmy was flashing him the you can't possibly be this dumb look, and begins to explain in a very patient sounding voice, "Right, so you're screwing and you want to get off, but she's not done yet, so you don't. You control it. You put what she wants first, so she doesn't think you're a jerk."

Tim nodded; that was right. And he was finally seeing where Jimmy was going with this.

"But sometimes, she wants you to get off first. Sometimes she's doing it for you. And sometimes, she's not there at all, and you can do it however you like. And sometimes she does something and you just lose it, but it's okay because you don't do that a lot."
"True."

"Okay, Timmy, same sort of thing with this. Most of the time you're doing it for her. She's around, so you take your cues from her. She's not annoyed by the guy, so you've got to control it and just let it flow by, let her see you aren't a jerk. Every now and again, he does something that just pisses you off, so you go a little bonkers, but she forgives you because you don't do it too often. If she is annoyed at the guy, you get to be the jerk you want to be, and at least verbally beat the hell out of him. And sometimes, she's not there, so you can do whatever you want." Jimmy smiled at that last one.

"Why are you getting defensive if she isn't there?"

"I'm sorry, that was you, right-I mean, it looked a whole lot like you-telling me about how you almost hit me when I was joking about sleeping with Abby?"

Tim nodded. "Got you. And her being annoyed by the guy, that's the equivalent of when she's doing you for your sake?"

"I think so. Anyway, anger and orgasms are a lot alike. Use whatever technique you use not to get off to keep control of your temper. It'll work."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Yeah, well," Jimmy had a pretty smug see I'm not insane expression on his face as he said this, "I didn't figure it out at first, either, but then it just sort of clicked."

"Huh." Tim thought about that for a moment. "Doesn't she wonder why you're suddenly not really there?"

"Yeah, but when she asked, I told her, and she seemed to think it was better than me getting pissed off at every guy near her."

Tim nodded at that, then looked at Palmer for a minute and decided what the hell, this was already a weird conversation. "So what do you do?"

Jimmy grinned. "Pick a letter and recite every bone in the body alphabetically from there. Backwards if I really need the distraction."

Tim nodded again. That requires attention and is not even remotely sexy.

"You?"

"Replay whichever level of whatever game I was most recently playing."

Palmer nodded. Then stopped, thinking about that more carefully. "You might want to come up with something other than that to control your temper."

"Good point, beating the hell out of something electronically might not be a good choice."

Tony joined them. "What are you two talking about hiding over here?"

Tim was on the verge of saying, "You really don't want to know" when Palmer, with a big, happy smile beat him to it and said, "Orgasm delay techniques. What do you do?"

Tony stared at them in stupefaction and finally said, "What are you, girls? I leave you alone for five minutes and you talk about this?"
"Sure." Jimmy nodded. "Not that we're girls, but that we're talking about this." Palmer thought about it for a moment. "Tony, girls don't need orgasm delay techniques. It's not anything they do."

Tony took a deep breath and stared at Jimmy like he's some sort of alien. Then he shook his head, sighed, and said, "Movie quotes. If I need the big guns..." and here he paused, looked around, lowered his voice, and said, "Gibbs in a Speedo."

Both Jimmy and Tim looked stunned. Finally Tim said, slowly nodding, "Yeah, that'd do it."

Jimmy stared at Tony, disbelief all over his face. "The idea is to not get off, no go completely soft and end up curled into a ball whimpering."

"Look, if I'm..." and once again he looked around, paused, looked around again, and once again Gibbs was nowhere nearby, "thinking about that, Ziva's got me so hard I could drive nails with it and I'm so close the tingles have all but started."

"Okay, so extreme emergency situations," Palmer said, the look of disbelief not entirely gone, but it eased up.

"Yeah, for when she needs like one minute more and I'm almost insane."

"That makes sense," Tim added.

"So, do I want to know why you two were talking about this?"

Jimmy shrugged, and Tim rolled his eyes, orgasm delay techniques he came up with in a second, but why they might be talking about it was something Jimmy's willing to see if Tim actually wants to share with Tony.

"Jimmy suggested using the same technique to control my temper so I don't beat the hell out of the next guy who eyeballs Abby."

"Oh, right, Gibbs mentioned that. So, it's bad?"

"Tim was getting ready to beat the hell out of a guy, who from everything I can tell is gay, because he was," and Jimmy did the quote hand gesture to go with the next two words, "'checking out' Abby."

Tim turned on Jimmy, voice hot, and pointing as he spoke. "Look, he's not gay, and you were not there! He was undressing her with his eyes, and looking at her lips, imagining the best blow job ever, and I had to stand there and watch him do it."

"Uh huh." Palmer nodded, then looked at Tony Tim's insane clearly on his face. "So gay! On the overreaction scale of one to ten, Tim blew a fifteen."

"Fifteen is when I actually shoot the guy." Tim shook his head. "My wife, pregnant with my kid, I'm allowed to get overprotective."

Jimmy smiled at him. "Told you it was insane."

"Yeah, it is."

Then they both turned to Tony, and smirked.

Tony backed up a little. "Oh no. Do not sit there and smirk at me. I'm not joining your insane, overprotective daddy club anytime soon!"
"Uh huh." Bullshit Jimmy's expression clearly said this time.

"Two years." Tim added.

"We're not even married, yet."

"Please, that's four months off," Jimmy said.

"Didn't stop Abby and I. And your dad is right, people might go blind by looking directly at Ziva made up for her wedding and a few months pregnant."

Jimmy's voice got serious. "Think about it, you wait two years to have a kid, not start on one, but to have a kid, and you're going to be seventy-two when he graduates college. You want to be young enough to do dad stuff with your kid-"

"I needed to start ten years ago, so it's a moot point. There's not a huge difference between seventy-two and seventy-four, and since the youngest I could possibly be is seventy I'm not feeling any need to rush."

"Okay, how about this, you want to be alive to see your kids get married? Want to actually walk your daughter down the aisle, instead of hobble?"

"My dad's eighty and doing fine. Grandad made it to 88. Great-grandfather made it to 90. DiNozzos are hard to kill off."

"If you say so," Jimmy said. "Just keep it in mind."

"Thanks. Anyway, we need to get back to the bullpen. Gibbs and Ziva are due back with the suspect any minute and you know how he gets when he gets back and we don't have something to report the second he walks in."
"Hey, you ready to head home?" Tim asked as he headed into Abby's lab.

"Yeah. Just got to shut everything down."

"Okay. Want me to help?"

"Sure."

He headed over to her desk computer and began the shut-down routine. "What are you thinking of for dinner?"

"I really want pizza. Like two hours ago a pizza switch turned on in my head and now I just want it!"

"We'll get pizza. Eat out, or order some, head home, and eat in our jammies in front of the television?"

"Jammies sounds good." Yeah, she can still wear her usual skirts and pants, but those days are numbered, and those numbers have hit single digits, low single digits, just waiting for the boxes to show up at their door, single digits.

First thing that happens when she gets home now is stripping off, and hopping into something with an elastic waistband, and it's even better if it's Tim's.

He got his phone out. "Usual?"

"Yeah."

He punched their usual order in, checked the clock, and told them to deliver it in an hour. "Okay, only an hour more to wait for pizza."

"Good. I've got all my stuff done."

He turned off her monitor. "Got this one." Then he took her coat off of the hook it lived on, and held it open for her.

Five minutes later they were in her car. He was driving. She was messing with the iPad, looking for a good song. Once she found one she said, "So Jimmy ran into us during our lunch date."

"Yeah, he told me that. And smacked me upside the head for being an idiot."

"Uh huh. And did you tell him to crash my lunch date?"

"Nope."

He's looking pretty innocent, because he honestly didn't ask. But there might be some smirk in his face anyway, because she follows up with, "Okay, did you ask him to crash my lunch date?"

"Didn't do that, either. I said absolutely nothing on the subject to Jimmy. In fact, I didn't see or speak to Jimmy about anything between you making that date and him showing up at my desk and saying, 'Get some coffee with me.'"
"So, what, he was just there?"

"No. Gibbs sent him."

"Why would Gibbs do that?"

"He's got my back. And I did tell him about the lunch date." His hot Fornell/Gibbs/Diane gossip more or less caused both of them to forget to talk about the rest of what happened when he was there.

Abby laughed at that, shaking her head a little. "And did Jimmy report back that everything was fine."

"Yes. He tells me that Sanders is gay."


"Abby, that's not comforting."

"Sorry. Gay. He's really gay. Gayest guy you've ever seen. He's moving in with his partner, Nick Stokes, in the next few weeks and was telling me all about it. They have a June wedding planned."

"That's overkill."

She grinned at him. "What do you want to watch while we eat pizza in our jammies?"

"Supernatural. Season five finale is the next episode and I've been looking forward to it all day."

"Sounds good."
December 31st, 2014

At 11:59:59, as 2014 was shifting into 2015:

The bullpen was silent. For once. It’s rarely silent. Technically there’s someone at NCIS every single hour of every single day of the year (emergency weather cancelations excepted.)

And then it wasn’t. Ralph Simmons has been the night janitor at NCIS for twenty years, and of all the teams at NCIS the four that fill the bullpen are the ones he knows best. Not only have they been there the longest (as a single team unit) they also work later than most of the rest of the NCIS employees. He knows them best because they’re the ones he sees most often.

As he emptied Gibb’s trash he noticed a few new pictures on the back of his wall. (Holidays almost always mean new pictures, and he always enjoys seeing them.) There are the now familiar ones from McGee and Abby’s wedding. (He can’t believe they all got dressed up like that.) And two new ones. One’s a blurry black and white shrimp-looking thing (but Ralph isn’t having a hard time figuring it out, scuttlebutt’s had it for months that Abby’s pregnant and a few days ago the official email went out.) the other is an older man who looks a lot like Gibbs, similar build, same blue eyes, but probably twenty-five or thirty years older, sitting on what looks like a comfortable arm chair with Palmer’s daughter in his lap.

He heads to Ziva’s desk. In the trash there are four wedding invitation mock ups. Ones that didn’t pass muster apparently. He looks at them and shakes his head. Yeah, not right for them. Sure they both have that classic elegant thing going, but that doesn’t mean anything with lacy little curly cues is a good plan.

She’s also added a new shot to her computer, Tony lighting the first candle on the Menorah, just below the one of the two of them dancing at McGee’s wedding.

DiNozzo’s desk looks just about the same as it always does. Though he does notice there’s a men’s formal wear catalog open. Apparently someone is looking for suits for his wedding. He looks at it closer and sees McGee/Palmer? written next to one of the suit styles.

McGee’s back wall also has the same black and white shrimp up. Just below the skull photo. (Ralph wonders why he’s got that. It’s been there for years, but it’s never made any sense to him. Granted McGee’s married to Abby, so maybe he just likes skulls.) And next to his wedding picture. (McGee kissing Abby after the vows.)

He empties out McGee’s trash and heads to the next cubicle.

At 11:59:59 Leon Vance was counting down with his children. He and Jackie had decided they were old enough to stay up for New Year’s five years ago.

It still hurt, not having her next to him while they did this, not kissing her a second from now, but it was getting easier to remember how happy this made them, and how much fun it was.

He hugs his kids and hopes this new year will be better, easier than the last.

At 11:59:59 Jimmy and Breena Palmer were asleep. At six weeks shy of her first birthday Molly
Palmer (who is also, thankfully, asleep) does not grasp the concept of sleeping in. She’ll be up at five thirty no matter what, so they went to bed at their normal time. In the morning, they’ll joke about how once upon a time they greeted the New Year’s Dawn by staying up all night, not by waking up early, and how, on that once upon a time, they were naked and sipping champagne, not swathed in flannel and feeding Cheerios and bananas to an almost one year old.

And Jimmy will kiss his wife, remind her that Molly’s morning nap is only three hours away, and he’s certainly in favor of both of them getting naked then.

She’ll kiss him back, jerk a little from a round of especially energetic kicking from Sammy, and both of them will be thinking that life is pretty sweet, even if there is a certain lack of late-night-naked-champagne-sipping time.

At 11:59:59 Tim was saying, well gasping really, “Oh, God, Abby, just! Fuck! ABBY!”

At 12:04, she was cuddled into him, saying, “I told you I’d show you fireworks.”

He was breathing deep and slow, lazy, satisfied smile on his face. “You did.”

“And look, no driving, no cold, no trying to find parking.”

“I will never suggest we go out into the cold to see New Year’s fireworks again.”

At 11:59:59 Gibbs was sketching out plans for the inside of the Shannon. The hull was built, and though he’d had a general idea of what he was going to do with it when he started it, he has some new ideas now. Like, if, for example, he’s hoping to take grandkids sailing at some point, maybe having a few extra berths squeezed into it would be a good plan.

At 11:59:59 Tony and Ziva were yelling “One!” as showers of glittery confetti, streamers, and balloons cascaded down around them. And before the first of the balloons hit the floor, Tony had his arms wrapped around her, and lips on hers, warm, soft, and playful.

He pulled back a few seconds later. “You know what I was thinking?”

She rubbed up against him. “Going home soon sounds like a good plan?”

He gave her another kiss, a very long, very hot look, and then flicked his tongue against her bottom lip. “Yes. I was thinking something else, too.”

“What.”

“This is the last New Year’s I’ll spend with a girlfriend. This time next year, I’ll ring in the New Year with my wife.”

A wide, pleased smile spread across her face.

At 11:59:59 Dr. Donald Mallard was having a late supper with Penny Langston PhD.
They were having a somewhat serious conversation about his and possibly their future.

There are certain things that Ducky is quietly aware of, one of them being that he will be eighty in the spring, has already had one heart attack, and that when push comes to shove, Jimmy is doing more and more of the work around Autopsy.

He’s been debating having a conversation with Leon about this, and is bouncing the idea off Penny first. He’s not ready to retire, not yet. But he can see the point where he won’t be up to lugging bodies around, and where his vision won’t be good enough to catch the details the way he used to. And it’s not nearly as far off as he wishes it was.

When that day comes, he’d like to partially retire. He’d stay on as a forensic psychologist. Continue to help the team by profiling, adding what he can, but hand over running Autopsy to Jimmy. He’ll need a new space (“That cubicle next to Tim’s?” Penny asked. He nodded; that would work.) so Jimmy wouldn’t feel like he was hovering, and so he wouldn’t feel like Autopsy was still his.

She nodded at him, thinking that sounded like a solid plan, and asked him, “And if you were partially retired, what would you do with all of your new free time?”

He smiled at her. “I would like to spend it with the people who are precious to me. I know it’s certainly late in the game to be thinking about this, but I’d like to work on being a better family man. I have a feeling that in the not wildly distant future there will be a rather large crop of young people who have never heard any of my stories, and I’d like to share them. And that their parents wouldn’t mind me taking said young people out for walks in the park or the like to tell them those stories.”

In fact, he’s been enjoying spending time with Molly Palmer more than he thought he possibly could. He’d never felt any special desire to engage with infants before, but if he doesn’t get to see her regularly, he gets grumpy. One of his favorite Sunday afternoon (when they aren’t working) pastimes is taking her out for walks. From what he can tell, she seems to approve, as well. And while she doesn’t have all that much more to add to the conversation than the bodies in Autopsy do, she is a much more enthusiastic listener. And he has a very deep suspicion that he will also deeply enjoy spending time with Sammy and McSciuto. (To the point where he’s been googling three seat strollers so he can take all three out at once.)

“And I was thinking, that if I weren’t working all the time,” he took her hand in his, “that I’d be able to make dates with you on a significantly more regular basis, and actually attend them, and I was wondering if you’d welcome that.”

Penny smiled at him, squeezing his hand in hers.

“And if that worked out well?” she asked with an amused glint in her eye, enjoying the formality of how he’s addressing this. Yes, Penny is an old-school second-wave feminist, she burned her bra with the best of them and fought her way through a man’s world that didn’t know what to do with a brilliant scientist who happened to be female, but she also appreciates Ducky’s old-world gentility, knowing that it’s based in a deep respect for who she is and who she hopes to be.

“I’ve been enjoying having you here this last week, quite a bit, and maybe, if things continued to go well, eventually, you’d see fit to share a home with me?”

“Are you asking to court me, Dr. Mallard?” she asked with a playful tone. This is serious, but it’s also fun, and she intends to enjoy it.

He smiled at her. “In a manner of speaking. I’d imagine that at this point in our lives, a marriage would only complicate things for both of us. But a dear companion to share the winter of one’s life
with is something I think I would like very much.”

A very warm smile spread over Penny’s face. “I think I would, too.”

At 11:59:59 Tobias Fornell was on the back porch of Wendy Eccles’ apartment, which had a great view of the fireworks exploding over the Potomac, on his knees, holding an open ring box in front of him, as Wendy grinned at him, saying, “Yes!”
Ziva's Problem

Ziva David had a problem.

Not a huge one or anything, but still, it was something that had to be resolved, and soon.

In only slightly more than four months, on April 5th, 2015, she was getting married.

And she still didn't have a matron of honor.

Tony had picked Tim as his best man, well, before they got engaged. She's not even sure Tony formally asked Tim, or if it was just understood that that was how it was going to go. But she hasn't picked between Abby and Breena. They've never pressured her to decide, never even asked, but it's still there, in the back of Ziva's mind, at least.

Abby and Breena have both been helping with the wedding. They both swung into planning mode at a moment's notice. No matter what she wants an opinion on, they're willing to help with. They were both there when she picked out her gown. (Picking out their dresses has been put on hold until much closer to time, what with both of them being pregnant.) They've been helpful every step of the way.

She loves both of them dearly.

She's extremely grateful to have both of them in her life.

But they aren't Tali.

That had been the first dream. The little girl's fantasy wedding. That one day she'd hand her bouquet to her sister, who would stand tall and proud next to her at her wedding.

But that dream was beyond dead. Tali will not be there to stand up next to her. Her father cannot give her away. Her mother will not walk beside him to do it. Ari won't give her husband-to-be a stern talking to, let alone help lift her aloft during the dancing. Her chuppah won't be in an olive grove. Her wedding feast won't be outside, air scented with olive blossoms and lemons. Her wedding won't be in Hebrew.

Literally nothing of that dream, save for the white dress and the gold wedding band, had survived.

And they aren't Jen. Granted the version of Ziva that met Jenny Shepard on a mission in Europe wasn't thinking wedding bells, let alone much of anything beyond getting the job done. But Jenny had made a way into Ziva's heart.

Jenny was fierce, driven, sharp and dangerous, and broken but functional. Jenny got Ziva, got her in a way that no other woman ever had.

And it was really nice to have a female friend.

So, no, she hadn't thought of Jen as the woman who would stand beside her at her wedding, because she wasn't thinking she'd ever get married then. Didn't much think about the idea that she'd ever live past thirty then. But when she conjured an image of a woman who had her back, who would go to the wall to keep her safe, that woman had red hair, a slight build, and an easy, warm smile.

And since Jen's been dead, there's been yet another hole in her world.

She knows Abby felt that, too. That for her there was a Kate-shaped hole at their wedding. And it
isn't any disrespect to Jimmy, it doesn't mean she didn't love him, but he wasn't her first choice.

He was the choice that was left.

And of the choices she has left… She's known Abby longer, but is probably slightly more fond of Breena. But Breena will be eight months pregnant at their wedding, and if Sammy decides to show up early…

Ziva picked up her phone. "Hello, Abby…"
So, I don't normally do this, but this might be some really rough reading for some of you, so here goes. Shards is going to be very dark over the next week. This is a real, non-glossed over, non-prettied up for the movies, look at a stillbirth. Yes, we'll all have the buffer of seeing it through Tim's eyes, but this is going to be very hard reading for some of you. So, there's the warning. If you want light and fluffy and steamy hot sex... well, we'll start to get some light back in a week.

"It's Breena!" They'd all been waiting for this call. Up until two hours ago, when they caught this case, Jimmy had been planning on going with her for the 21st week ultrasound, but Simpson Wallen was found dead, and Jimmy's on, so instead of finding out with Breena if Sammy is a girl or a boy, he's here, helping Ducky bag up a dead Marine.

They watched his face fall as he absorbed what was being said to him. And that sent a thrill of fear through all of them. Jimmy should be grinning. He should have a huge, beaming grin, the sort that lights up his eyes and makes everyone near him happy.

But he didn't. His voice was shaking as he says, "Yeah... uh huh... Is Breena all right? ... Yes... As soon as I can get there." Palmer was white as a sheet as he hung up his phone. "Dr. Mallard, I have to leave."

"What's wrong, Jimmy?" Ducky's fear clear in his voice.

"There's... Sammy... I have to go."

Ducky gave Jimmy a hug, and then nodded at him.

Tim caught Gibbs' eye, and Gibb's nodded. He handed the camera over, and followed two steps behind Jimmy.

"Let me drive. Last thing Breena needs is you getting in an accident on the way. Where is she?"

"Mercy General."

"Okay." He punched it into the GPS on his cell, tossed the car into reverse, pulling away from the crime scene, fast. "We'll be there in an hour. Molly at daycare?"

"Yeah."

"I'll drop you off, call them, and watch her. Don't worry about getting home at any given time."

"Good."

Tim took Jimmy's hand in his and gave it a squeeze. Jimmy held onto him, hard.

"Did they tell you..."
Jimmy nodded, tears streaming down his face. "There was no heartbeat."

They don't say anything on the ride over. Jimmy cries quietly, and Tim holds his hand. It's a very long hour and the only thing allowing Tim to hold it together is that he's got to pay attention to the road and get Jimmy where he needs to be.

"Give me your cell and keys," he says once he stops the car in front of the hospital.

Jimmy just looks at him blankly as he unbuckled.

"You shouldn't have to tell everyone. We'll make the calls for you. And I need your keys to unlock your car and grab Molly's car seat."

Jimmy handed over the items and headed in to the hospital, too out of it to close the door behind him.

The Navy Yard was only a few minutes out of the way between Mercy and Molly's daycare, so Tim headed there first. He'd sent their team a text: *Abby's ten minutes.* Then he sent one more to Gibbs. *Go see Abby, now.* And then called her to give her the heads up first.

"Hey. What's up? Did you guys find out, yet? I haven't heard anything."

He hasn't tried to say anything since Jimmy left, and he's not sure how well his voice will hold.

Finally he gets a hold of himself and says, "Is Gibbs down there?"

"Just walked in. What's going on? You're scaring me. He's looking like grim death and just wrapped me in a hug."

"I just dropped Jimmy at the hospital. They did the ultrasound, and Sammy's heart wasn't beating."

For a long second he heard nothing, and then the sobbing started.

A second after that Gibbs said, "I've got her."

"I just pulled into the parking lot. I'll be there in five minutes."

When he got into the lab, everyone else, including Vance, was there. Abby was crying, and Gibbs was holding onto her.

He walked over to them, and just held Abby, wanting to get down on his knees and thank God or anything else that they're crying for Jimmy and Breena and not themselves. He feels bad about that, but it's still the first thing that hits him as he sees Abby. Gibbs patted him on the back, so he swallowed, took a deep breath, and pulled back a little, but kept holding onto Abby.

Tim's never wanted to say anything less than he wants to say this, but the words have to be said, "They did the ultrasound, and the Sammy's heart wasn't beating." They were all expecting something like this. Coming down and finding Gibbs holding a sobbing Abby had to be confirmation that
nothing he was going to say was good, but the words still hit like a blow.

Tony winced. Ziva physically flinched away from it. Ducky hunched in on himself, Tim could see him physically forcing himself not to cry. Gibbs was behind him, so he didn't see his face, but he can feel the hand on his back rubbing gently. And Vance just nodded slowly, swallowing hard.

He turned to Vance. "Jimmy's not going to be in for a few days, at least." He looked around at the rest of them. "I'm not, either. I told him I'd get Molly and watch her."

Abby broke away from them, heading toward her coat. "I'll come with you."

Ducky stopped her, gently. "Abigail." His voice cracked on her name, so he took another deep breath, and steadied himself before saying, "I know you want to help, but right now... Right now you might be the last person Breena wants to see."

"Oh." That sunk in, and... yeah... They don't know if that's true or not. He wants Abby to go with him, wants to keep her in his sight as much as he possibly can, but he'd also rather chew off his own arm than do anything that might make this any worse at all for Jimmy or Breena when they get home.

Tim took Jimmy's cell out of his pocket and handed it to her. "I told him we'd make the calls for them. That they shouldn't have to spread the word themselves."

Abby nodded, took a deep breath, and forced her voice to grow calm. "I can do that."

"Okay. I've got to get Molly." He wrapped around Abby again, head on her shoulder, her head on his. He held her for another minute before pulling back and saying, "If one of you were to meet them at the hospital and drive them home, that'd probably be a good thing."

"I'll be waiting for them," Ducky said.

As he was leaving, he heard Tony say to Abby, "Let's split the list, no one should have to say this too many times."
At a week shy of eleven months old, Molly Palmer is an adorable little ball of curly brown hair, a big, drooly eight toothed grin, and, with the exception of when she's teething, a possessor of a generally sunny disposition.

They spend enough time with the Palmers that she knows Uncle Tim, and lights right up when she sees him. Sure this isn't the usual routine, but time with one of her favorite people, a guy who dotes on her and is insanely good at blowing raspberries on her tummy, is always a good thing.

Tim has no idea of how much she can read/understand of the vibe of the place around her. And explaining why he was picking her up as he showed his ID and was checked off on the list of approved people to pick Molly up, sent the generally perky mood of her caregivers into a tailspin. Still, he doesn't want her getting worried or agitated, so he slaps a painfully fake smile on his face, says, "Hey, Molly-girl," and sweeps her up into a hug and tickles.

"You and I are going to hang out tonight. Get some quality time together. Go easy on me, I haven't done this on my own since you were a month old, and we both mostly slept that time. Your Aunt Abby took pictures of it."

He just kept talking at her, letting her coo and babble back at him. She's not walking or talking, yet, but she's certainly interested in being part of the conversation, and she'll readily scoot toward whatever might be going on as fast as her little self can go.

Tim got her in her car seat, and then they headed back to Jimmy and Breena's.

He didn't really know what to do once he got there. It was barely 4:30, so probably not dinnertime for Molly, yet.

Tim went to the kitchen and found a sippy-cup. He poured some juice in it for Molly, and handed it to her. She seemed to approve, slurping it down.

"Probably a good idea." He got himself a glass of water. Then a thought hit. They'd been getting ready to paint the room that was going to be Sammy's.

"Let's go upstairs." Molly didn't have any comments on that, so up they went. One door down from Jimmy and Breena's room was Sammy's and yes, the door was open. Breena had painted some large swatches of the potential main colors along with different trim colors on the wall. The box with the new crib was leaning against the wall, Molly's old bassinette was in the middle of the room, next to the boxes with the baby clothing labeled nb, 0-3, 3-6, and 6-9. "Let's just close this door. They'll open it again when they're ready for it."

Being a cop, let alone a cop who deals mainly with murders and kidnappings means Tim routinely sees people on the worst days of their lives.

But the fact that you do it often, that it's your job, just makes you numb to it when it's a stranger's pain. When your two best friends walk into their home looking like they've been tortured, you can't shut down the way your own heart breaks for them.

Breena's crying. The kind of deep, distressed crying that's gone through sobbing to exhausted and
beyond. He's fairly sure the only reason she's on her feet is because Jimmy's holding her up. And the only thing keeping Jimmy up right now is the fact that he can't, won't let Breena fall.

The last time he saw someone that wounded who mattered that much to him was when they were bringing Ziva back from Somalia. Once they were back on the plane, free and safe, he finally relaxed enough to really see how she was. And what she was was broken. Huddled in her seat, curled in on herself. Gibbs sat next to her, his hand on her shoulder, looking like he wanted to hold her, and sure that she couldn't take it.

Breena looks like Ziva did that day. Just utterly broken.

He was feeding Molly when they came in, mostly a job of fetching the cheerios she was tossing off her tray. He jumped up and was next to them in maybe three steps and then stopped, not sure if Breena wants to be touched or not.

Jimmy catches the hesitation and nods, and he wraps both of them into his arms. "I'm so sorry."

He holds both of them, crying with them, half aware of the sound of Ducky talking to Molly in the background. Eventually he pulled back a little to ask, "What do you need?"

"Just… keep watching her," Jimmy gets out.

"No problem. We're wrapping up dinner."

Jimmy nods, and they head upstairs to be alone with each other.

He sits next to Ducky at the kitchen table. "Do you know…?"

"No. I didn't press for details, and neither of them wanted to talk on the ride home." Ducky holds onto Molly, snuggling her, keeping her close to him, wrapped in his arms. Then, with a very deep sigh and an even deeper look of weariness on his face, he hands her back to Tim and says, "I have to go back. The autopsy isn't finished."

"Okay."

"Tony and Ziva are going to make sure Breena's car gets here. But they're not going to come in."

That made a certain amount of sense. Right now Jimmy and Breena are too raw for other people.

"Abby, Tony, and Ziva made the calls. They tell me Breena's parents will be coming over."

"I'll handle it."

"Good." Ducky kisses Molly one last time, lips lingering on her forehead in a way that makes Molly look puzzled, squeezes Tim's shoulder, and then puts his coat and hat back on before heading back to work.

As he's wrapping up Molly's leftovers, it occurs to Tim that it's been at least six hours since Jimmy ate last. And while he's sure neither of them wants to eat, Jimmy has to.

He roots around in the fridge, sure nothing he's going to come up with will taste good tonight, but he hopes to find something that'll stay down. At least, he knows he hasn't eaten because he's upset enough he feels like he wants to throw up, so he doesn't imagining Breena or Jimmy are doing any better.
Tim puts together a collection of cold cuts, cheeses, some veggies and fruits. Jimmy and Breena don't have anything he'd call comfort food, but comfort foods in his world are carbs, preferably sweet, baked ones, and Jimmy doesn't/shouldn't eat that.

Tim walks into their room, and finds Jimmy and Breena sitting on their bed, Jimmy holding her, both of them crying quietly.

He put the plate of food next to them, and wraps his arm around Breena. Jimmy pushes the food aside.

"Look, I know you don't want to eat. But you have to." Jimmy takes a half-hearted bite of a cucumber slice.

Tim nods. "Abby's called everyone and started to spread the word." He's rubbing Breena's back, looking her in the face. "She called your parents, and they're on their way. If you want to be alone, I'll keep them downstairs, but they want to see you."

Breena looks at Jimmy, and Tim can see her imagining Jimmy and her dad, and the wave of exhaustion at the idea of dealing with that slumps her shoulders even further. "Just Mom for now."

"Okay. I'll keep Ed busy. Molly's fed, and we'll do bath time soon, and then bed time."

"She nurses before going to sleep," Breena says.

"Okay. You want me to bring her up?"

"Not yet. She..." Breena's voice broke, but Tim thinks he gets the idea. Molly'll start crying if she's being held by someone else who's crying, and Breena can't take any more than is already on her plate.

"Okay, let me get back down to her. She's in the playpen but..." he doesn't need to say that keeping an eye on a ten month old who's getting this crawling thing down is a very good plan.

About half an hour later Ed and Jeannie were standing in the foyer at Jimmy and Breena's, also looking like the walking wounded.

"Where are they?" Jeannie asked.

"Upstairs, in their bedroom."

Jeannie nodded and started up, Ed a step behind her.

"Ed." He put his hand on Ed's wrist, and Ed stopped, turned toward him.

"What?"

"You aren't going up there."

"She's my daughter, and she's just lost her baby."

"I know. But he was Jimmy's baby, too, and if you go up there, you'll say something that hurts him worse than he's already hurting. And Breena can't take you two squabbling. So you don't get to go up there. He'll come down eventually, and you can go up then. So for right now, you and I are on putting Molly to bed duty. I've been telling her that Grandpa is coming over, and he'll read her
stories, and as best as she seems to understand, she's looking forward to it, so plaster a smile on your face and grab Goodnight Moon."

Ed closed his eyes, took a deep breath, steadied himself, and slowly opened them. "He… Did they find out…"

Tim shook his head. "I don't know. Breena thought he was a boy, so I'm just in the habit of calling Sammy he."

"Okay."

Tim realized that Ed was hurting, and that in his own efforts to be protective of Jimmy, he's been a jerk to Ed.

"I'm sorry, Ed. I'm being a jerk. But they're both really fragile right now…"

Ed nodded, forced a fairly sad grin onto his face, and headed into the living room, scooping Molly up, hugging her very close for a long time, and then tickling her.

About an hour later, when tubby and stories were done, and Molly had nursed, cuddled with both her parents, and been put to bed, Jimmy came downstairs. He let Ed know he could go see Breena and then just stood there in the middle of his living room.

He looked around, blankly, "Where's Abby?"

"Our place."

His shoulders slumped further. "Oh."

"She wanted to come, but we weren't sure how Breena'd feel…"

That clicked for Jimmy, and he seemed to think that might be a valid point. He's standing in the middle of the living room, looking so wounded, and Tim suddenly gets why Jimmy would want Abby right now.

Tim stood up. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Outside." He grabbed both of their jackets and held Jimmy's open. Jimmy put it on. Tim had the feeling Jimmy would do pretty much anything he was told to right this moment.

"Why?"

"Because it's private." Tim took Jimmy by the hand, and led him to the picnic table at the back of their property. Once they got there, he cleared a patch of snow from the table, took Jimmy's glasses off, carefully set them down, and wrapped his arms around him, half shielding him from the cold air, half trying to be Abby for him. He felt Jimmy standing there stiffly. "I know you'd rather do this with Abby, but she's not here, and you still need it. We're far enough out Ed's not going to walk in and call us fags, you won't wake Molly if you're loud, and I'm not Breena, so you don't have to comfort me. I've got you, Jimmy."
And Jimmy crumpled into him, shaking and sobbing while Tim held him and rubbed his back. Eventually gasping sobs slowed down, and eventually Jimmy pulled back and sat down on the top of the picnic table. Tim sat next to him, keeping his arm around his shoulder, hoping his touch is comforting.

"They think it was trisomy 13, but they won't know until they do the tests. Something like ninety percent of the babies with it die in utero, and almost eighty percent of the ones who are born die within a year of birth, mostly within a month, and at this point, none of them have made it past six years." His voice was raw and hollow. Shell-shocked, that was the term that comes to Tim's mind.

"We've got to go back tomorrow so they can induce labor."

Those words felt like a punch to the gut and made Tim want to vomit at this new, extra layer of flaying pain on top of a bonfire of agony. Labor meant hours of pain, hours of waiting, meant this isn't just over and done with.

"They gave us a choice. We could do a D&E, which is fast, but…" Tim knows enough about this that he's got an idea of how a D&E works, so he's fairly sure what 'but' means. "Or induce, which is slow… but he'll be whole, and we'll get to hold him…" That set off another round of ragged crying, which slowed after a few minutes.

"Sammy was a boy." Tim squeezed Jimmy's shoulders a little tighter. "They didn't want me to see the scans, but I did the whole, I'm-a-doctor thing. Now I wish I hadn't, 'cause I can't unsee them. No eyes, cleft palate, no kidneys, a hole in his heart, less than a third the size brain he should have had. And she had to sit there, alone, seeing him on the ultrasound, because they were doing the 4d-look-here's-your-baby thing before they shut it down, and I wasn't there."

Tim doesn't say anything, because there's nothing to say. Just hearing about it makes his knees feel week and his stomach clench. He doesn't even want to try to imagine living it. He just sits there next to Jimmy, holding onto him.

"You know what's terrible?"

Tim shook his head, all of this is terrible, but obviously there's somewhere Jimmy wants to go with this.

"I'm relieved his heart wasn't beating. Because if it had been, then we would have had to decide to terminate or not."

"I don't think that's terrible. Having to make that choice is the only thing I can think of that would make this worse."

Jimmy stared at the sky. It's overcast, looks and feels like it'll start snowing any minute. He's working up to saying something, and Tim's fairly sure what it is, fairly sure that Jimmy needs to say the words, to make it real.

"My son's dead." Jimmy started sobbing again, and Tim held him, rubbing his back, crying with him, as the snow began to fall.
An hour later, they're both numb with cold, covered in snow that's melted and frozen into their hair, but Jimmy's finally cried out. For now, at least.

"I should go back in," Jimmy said, voice rough and raw.

"Okay. When do you have to be there?"

"Seven."

"Abby and I'll take Molly for as long as you need."

Jimmy nods.

"Do you think it's okay for Abby to come?"

"Yeah. I think Breena could use some Abby hugs. I know I do."

"Okay. I'm going to stay out a bit longer, give Abby a call. I'll crash here, make sure you're up and out in time. Just, rest, as much as you can."

Jimmy laughed bitterly at that, picked up his glasses, and headed into the house.

He hit Abby's contact on his phone and a few rings later said, "Hey. Did I wake you?"

"No." She sounds really tired, though. "Not going to sleep tonight." Good point. He's not feeling like he's going to get any sleep, either.

"Jimmy wants you to come over."

"I'll be there in half an hour."

There are a lot of things he wants to say to her right now, a lot of feelings, but it's cold, and he should head in soon, and the sooner he's done talking the sooner she's on the road, so he says, "I love you, Abby."

"I love you, too." He can hear that she got what he was trying to say. Then she asks, "Do you have any more details?"

He swallows, forces his voice to stay steady. "Yeah. They think it was trisomy 13, which is apparently a condition where pretty much everything that possibly could go wrong, does. They've got to go back to the hospital in the morning to induce labor."

"Oh God."

"Yeah."

"You're still here," Ed said quietly. He was slumped on the sofa, open beer in his hand, but Tim could see the bottle was still full.
"Where else would I be?"

Ed shrugged. "Thought you left. Where's your Goth?"

"Home. She's ten weeks pregnant and we weren't sure if Breena would want..." Ed nodded understanding that. "Jimmy says it's okay, so she'll be here soon. Spend some time holding Breena, she's really good at hugs. Help me with Molly in the morning. Are you guys going to drive them to the hospital?"

"Yeah."

"You take the guest room; we can camp out on the sofa."

"Okay."

When Abby came in the door, she'd clearly been crying. Clearly been crying pretty much the whole time since he last saw her.

She also had two large bags in one hand.

"What's that?"

"Pads, nursing pads. Her body doesn't know..." Abby didn't finish that sentence and switches to, "She'll give birth, and then her body'll do what it's supposed to do after that. Her milk will let down, and she'll bleed, probably for a couple weeks, maybe as long as a month or six weeks, and I was thinking that they might not want to have to go out and get them."

"Oh." Tim closes his eyes and slumps a little further into the sofa, his heart breaking even more for Breena. It just kept getting worse. A constant reminder every minute of every day for weeks.

"Yeah. I'll head up."

"I think they'd like that."

He jerked when he felt the sofa cushion shift. Abby snuggling in next to him. He hadn't thought he was asleep, but judging from the fact that she had gotten down the steps, across the living room, and onto the sofa without him noticing, he probably had been.

"Sorry. Didn't want to wake you, but I just needed you to hold onto me."

"Yeah. I know." He rubbed his eyes, shifted onto his side, making more room for her, and wrapped around her. "They asleep?"

"Ish. More like they hit the point where they're so exhausted they just dropped."

He nodded, familiar with that feeling. "What time is it?"

"Little after three."

"I told Jimmy I'd make sure they were up and ready in time."

"Shouldn't be a problem, Molly wakes up before they need to leave."
"Good. I googled trisomy 13." Which is part of how he deals with bad things happening. Learn everything he can about them, and once Ed headed upstairs he was just sitting there in their living room, unable to sleep, uninterested in TV, and staring at the wall was useless. So he got on his phone and read everything he could find on it. Then, because the part of his brain that had been doing a pretty good job of keeping him from worrying about this in regards to Kelly had been completely shut down, he researched pretty much any other genetic abnormality he could find, starting with Down's Syndrome and only stopping when the battery died on his phone.

"And?"

"And it's like Down's Syndrome, sort of. Three of the thirteenth chromosome instead of three of the twenty-first. Most of the time it's a random mutation, a one in ten thousand chance. But there is a gene you can carry that passes it on, as well. No way to tell without testing for it. It's bad. Apparently there's a really bad version that's basically always fatal, and then there's a not quite as bad version that's just usually fatal."

"Great."

"Yeah."

"What's it actually do?"

"Brain damage, heart damage, kidney damage, eye damage, palate damage, polydactyl hands and feet, I think there was other stuff, but I'm not coming up with it right now." He lay there, his chin on her shoulder, breathing in her scent, his hand cupped over her belly, like somehow just his hands could be a shield against horrific fate.

She squeezed his hand. There was really nothing to say. "Let's try to rest."

He kissed her shoulder, holding onto her tightly, wishing, like a little boy, that it could be yesterday again.
They got the call from Gibbs a little after nine. "I know you don't want to hear this, but one of the two of you has to show up. I've got a ton of evidence and no one to run it."

"But…" Tim's really not feeling like doing anything beyond watching Molly, and right now his duty to Jimmy and Breena and Molly trumps everything else.

"I know, Tim, but Molly doesn't need both of you watching her, and Palmer and Breena don't know or care if you're both there or not. Vance has someone coming up from Norfolk tomorrow, but we need someone to run the lab today. I don't care which of you does it. I don't care if you show up and it's slow, or Abby comes and gets it done, but it has to happen because I cannot tell Wallen's widow that we are doing nothing to catch her husband's killer. She's grieving too, and it's our job to help."

Abby was listening to the call, so she said, "I'll come in. The faster this gets done, the faster we can both be back here."

"That works."

Molly was getting fussy. She's got no idea what's wrong, but something is. Her schedule is off, she didn't get to nurse in the morning, she's not playing with the ladies at daycare, which seems to happen on a pretty regular basis, but when that happens she's with her mom and dad, and they aren't here, either.

Tim feels like he's a wits end. He's already only about two seconds away from bursting into tears, because whenever he's not actively thinking about anything else, he can see the look on Jimmy and Breena's faces as they left this morning and each time he sees it, it rips him apart. A crabby baby on top of that isn't helping his control.

And of course the fact that he's close to bursting into tears just makes Molly crabbier.

It's like the most perfect vicious circle he's ever seen.

So he bundles both of them up, pops her into her stroller, and realizes that trying to take her for a walk when there's four inches of snow on all the sidewalks is futile.

She's fussing even more, now. Apparently she was in favor of a walk and considered him getting her ready for a walk, stepping outside, and then turning back around immediately to be cruel teasing. So he takes her out of the stroller, pops her into her car seat, and heads toward Jimmy's car.

"Come on. Let's go for a drive. Maybe, if I'm lucky, you'll fall asleep, and I'll get some lunch for us."

She seemed to approve of that. So off they went.

Ducky came by at dinnertime, food in hand, looking haggard.

"News?" Tim asked.

Ducky opened the bag and laid out Chipotle for both of them, putting a bit of carnitas, rice, and guacamole in front of Molly. She grinned and tucked into it. Apparently rice and guacamole is her
idea of very tasty and also a lot of fun to play with.

"Breena was at seven centimeters when I left. They think everything will be done by morning. She'll stay there for at least a day to make sure the infection doesn't get too bad and that she doesn't have any adverse reactions to the antibiotics—"

Ducky sees Tim's look. What infection? is pretty clear on his face.

"Apparently the last time she could remember feeling him move was two days ago. So, they are assuming that's when he died. In cases like this, they automatically administer large doses of antibiotics because—"

Tim's nodding, he doesn't want to hear the end of that sentence. He's seen enough dead bodies to know what happens to one if it spends two days in a warm, wet, bacteria-rich environment.

He looks at his burrito and wraps it back up.

"When was the last time you ate something, Timothy?"

"Lunch. When was the last time you slept, Ducky?"

"The night before last."

"You want to crash here?"

"No. Ed has been on his best behavior, or is just too sad to talk, either way, I want to make sure Jimmy has someone to shield him."

Tim nods at that. "I understand. You safe to drive?"

"Yes. Part of training for both medical school and the military involved going long periods of time without sleep. As long as I eat, rest when I can, and maintain a steady intake of tea, I'll be fine for two days."

"Okay. So, you're going back after dinner."

"Yes, I wanted to check in on you, spend some time with Molly, and then I'll be able to report back to Jimmy and Breena that she's fine."

"She is. Little crabby and unhappy because everything is upside down right now. But we're doing okay."

"Good."

Tim's phone buzzed. He glanced at it, and said to Ducky, "That's Abby, she's done with the evidence."

"Then she'll be here soon."

"Forty minutes."

The official time of birth and death for Jonathon Christopher Palmer was 4:06 AM January 8, 2015.
Jimmy and Ducky came home a bit after dinner. Jimmy didn't say anything, just took Molly and held her close, crying the whole time.

When she started sobbing in response to him, Tim gently took her away, got her calmed down and put to bed.

Once that was done, he headed out of Molly's room. The door to Jimmy and Breena's was open a few inches, and he could hear soft crying and Abby's voice murmuring something. He figured it being open was an invitation to go in, but wanted to check in with Ducky first, so he headed downstairs.

Ducky was sitting on the sofa, a plate with some dinner on it on his lap, eating with a sort of mechanical precision that looked significantly more like a man fueling a machine than one savoring a meal.

"It's over?"

"Yes. Breena's sleeping. Between the pain medication and her exhaustion they don't expect her to wake up until the morning. Her sisters are with her right now. They sent Jimmy and the rest of us home to get some rest, too."

"You think he'll sleep?"

"I put a mild sedative in the coffee I gave him before we left. Between that and how tired he is, it should knock him out."

"When can she come home?"

"Tomorrow, maybe the next day. It was as 'easy'," his voice goes sharp with scorn on that word, "as such things can be, which is to say beyond utter horror, but she'll heal. Given enough time, they both will."

"Did they get to hold him?"

Ducky's eyes tear up, and he nods. He wipes them, sniffs, and says, "We all did. He was ten inches long and weighed fifteen ounces. He had perfect little fingernails."

Tim's crying and nodding. "What happens now?"

"Breena's parents took him for cremation. There'll be a service on Saturday."

"Okay. Are you staying tonight? I can move our stuff out of the guestroom if you want it."

"I am staying. And I am fine on the sofa. I'm a going to finish this, get a long, hot shower, and then go to sleep. In the morning, I'll take Jimmy back to the hospital. Abby, too if you're okay with Molly on your own."

"We'll be fine."

Tim headed upstairs, eased the door open to Jimmy's room, and found both of them on the bed, Abby holding Jimmy. He wasn't crying anymore. Tim wasn't entirely sure if he was still awake, so he crept up quietly.

Jimmy looked up at him, so much for being asleep. "You want me to stay?"
Jimmy nodded, so Tim sat next to him, and wrapped his arms around both of them.

And that's how Jimmy spent his first night home, sleeping fitfully, held by his two best friends.

Breena came home a little after dinner the next day, and Tim and Abby stayed with them until the service after the funeral was cleaned up and everyone else had left.
A Funeral and A Prayer

Of all the funerals they've been to together, this is the one that hurts the worst.

For Kate there was the fact that Ari was dead. Gibbs had killed him. And if vengeance is hollow in the light of grief, it's better than nothing.

For Jenny, at least she went out on her own terms. Instead of wasting away, or letting the bad guys win, she took control and ended things the way she wanted them. Tim's not sure if that really helped or not, he wasn't close enough to Jen to really need the comfort, hollow though it probably was. But in the long run, he doesn't think that helped, much.

All of that was true for Mike, and he had a good, long life to go with it. Though as Tim gets older, Mike's sixty-three years seems less and less like a long life. But it still didn't make standing there with Abby, crying over him, any better.

This is like Jackie Vance's funeral, times a million because Jimmy and Breena are family and Jon, or at least the hope and idea of Jon, was beloved. There's nothing to say, no platitudes that help.

This is the lightning strike, the out of control car that barrels through your living room wall. There's no context that comforts. Nothing you can do to protect yourself from it.

This is the paralyzing horror of random chance, the roll of the die coming up wrong.

And at this funeral, Tim didn't even try to not cry.

They got home and just crashed on the sofa. He pulled his tie loose and popped the top button on his collar as she kicked off her heels.

"I hate this suit."

"Huh?" Abby looked at him with puffy, red eyes, and an air of bone-deep, weary sorrow about her.

He shook his head. "I only wear it to funerals. Haven't worn it since Mike's. Right now I just want to set fire to the damn thing."

She looked at their fireplace, fifteen feet away on the opposite wall. "That would require getting up."

"True."

"Do you want to get up?"

"No." Fifteen feet might as well be the other side of the earth right now.

They just sat there. Tim picked up the remote, turned the TV on, remembered they'd gotten rid of cable in favor of all streaming content a month ago, and turned the TV off. It's not that he wants to watch anything, he just wants some blank, meaningless noise in the background, wants the empty, hypnotic feel of just flipping through the channels.

"You hungry?" Abby asked. There had been food at Jimmy and Breena's after the funeral, but neither of them had felt like eating. Tim wasn't sure if a funeral followed by a... wake he guesses—wakes in his world are loud, usually drunk affairs, with stories and songs, and this was anything but
that—at Jimmy and Breena's made sense, but her parents thought it would help, and well, he figures that if anyone gets the details of the whole mourning thing, it's the Slaters.

"Nope. I'll get you something if you want it."

"Not now."

They just sit there, his arm around her, her head on his shoulder, her legs over his.

The last time they hurt this bad… he shook his head… they've never hurt this bad, not together.

Kate was probably close for her. And that certainly hurt him. Hurt in a lot of different ways on a lot of different levels, but when it came down to it, he didn't love Kate. He liked her. He really liked her. But they'd only really worked together for a year, and he was Probie to her, even if she didn't call him that the way Tony did.

Mike was closer. His death held a similar combination of sorrow and fear. But the intensity is different. This is a thousand times sharper because it happened to Jimmy and Breena, and is so close to their own life.

He kisses the top of her head, hand stroking idly over her knee.

She took her hand in his and dragged it up her leg, his palm on her mound.

"Abby?" They haven't made love since the night before they found out about Jon. He knows he hasn't felt anything even remotely like sexual desire since then, and he was fairly sure she had felt the same way.

She cups his face in her hands. "I just want to not hurt for a little bit."

"Oh." Yeah, it'll work for that. His thumb starts a slow, gentle back and forth, and she relaxes into him.

Eventually she's reaching for his fly, shifting from sitting across his lap to straddling him. He's not even particularly hard. Enough to get it in, and that's all that matters. This isn't about pleasure, it's not even sex as sex, it's barely comfort, just surcease.

It's what you hope to find when you reach for a bottle. But Abby can't do that right now, and he won't.

And in the end they were crying again. And that doesn't help, either. Doesn't make anything better.

There's just clinging to each other, hoping time will be merciful and peace will eventually come.

"Does it help?" Tim asked as he sat on the second-from-the-bottom step in Gibbs' basement. It's well after one AM, and Tim figured that after lying in bed, staring at the ceiling for three hours he wasn't going to fall asleep anytime soon, so he headed to Gibbs' place.

Gibbs poked his head out of the Shannon.

"Does what help?"
Tim shrugged. "Never mind."

"You sure?" You look like you need to talk was on Gibbs' face, but he's also not going to press Tim for words.

"The pastor kept talking about the promise of eternal life. That one day we'll all meet again. You believe that, right?"

Gibbs nodded as he got out of the boat.

"I don't. Jimmy doesn't. Does it help?"

"Sometimes. Not right now. Not this close to it. This close and nothing helps. Later's not much comfort when you need something now. But later, when the pain dulls down some, yeah, it helps. Makes it easier to get through the hard times."

"Abby's been praying."

"Not a bad plan."

"Not sure I like the idea of a God who gets off on dangling the idea in front of you that if you beg hard enough, He might do what you want, but really He's going to do whatever the hell He was going to do anyway."

Gibbs shook his head, sighing, and sat next to Tim, wrapping an arm around him. "Your dad's a real son of a bitch, isn't he?"

Tim snorted at that. "No, he's an asshole. Calling him a son of a bitch is an insult to my grandmother. And yes, he is a complete asshole who gets off on that, too."

Gibbs pets the back of Tim's head a little, shaking his own.

"You pray because it makes you feel better, Tim. God's gonna do what He's gonna do whether you pray or not. You don't do it because if you ask hard enough the hand of God comes down and cups a little protective shield over you and yours. That's not how it works, not for anyone I've ever met. You do it because it helps you see better, clearer, and sometimes it gives you the perspective you need to find some peace. You do it because sometimes you need a place to scream 'This sucks' and 'I hate it' and 'It's not fair' and 'Why me' and 'I'm scared' and all the rest of the stuff the rest of the world calls whining. And you pray, because if you're any sort of decent man, and I know you are, sometimes you heart is so full of love and thanks that there's nothing else that makes any sense to do."

Tim nods, he knows that feeling.

"You pray, Tim, because the world is hard enough, and being alone just makes it that much harder. You pray because you need it. And, look, maybe it doesn't help, maybe nothing changes and nothing gets better, but it feels better, and sometimes you need that to keep you going."

"Sometimes I wish I believed. Wish I could make myself do it."

Gibbs didn't say anything for a long time, but finally he said, "I know they're waiting for me."

"Jethro?"

"My girls, Mike, too. They talk to me, sometimes."
Tim just stared at Gibbs, eyes wide.

"You think I'm insane."

Tim's shocked enough by that he tells the truth. "It sounds insane."

Gibbs smirks a little at that. "Which is why I don't tell people about it."

"Like, voice in your head?"

"No. I see them, too. Been almost dead enough times that sometimes they visit."

"Oh." Tim nodded a little, his eyebrows high, but that sort of makes sense to him, too.

Gibbs squeezed him a little tighter. "It works out, Tim. And in cases like Sammy… Jonathon… I don't know how. Maybe when they're together again he'll be the man he would have been. Maybe not. I don't know. But it works out. I do know that. One of these days, you'll meet my girls, and I'll be damn proud to introduce you."

"God, Jethro." Tim took a long shaking breath, and looked away, trying to stop his tears.

"Hey. Hey." Gibbs said soothingly, rubbing his back. "It's okay to cry when you're having this bad of a day."

"It didn't happen to me."

"Of course it happened to you. Your best friends, your nephew. You're allowed to grieve for that. It happened to all of us."

"No Jethro," Tim wipes his eyes. "It didn't happen to me, to us. She's forty, and there's like a one in seventy chance there's something seriously wrong with our baby… and… it's stupid, and it feels horrible, really, really horrible, but it's almost a relief. A sort of, lightning struck Jimmy so it won't hit us sort of thing. And that's shit, because it doesn't work that way, but there's still a sense of relief."

Gibbs kept rubbing Tim's back. "That's okay, too, Tim. Anyone who's been in combat has felt that. The bullet didn't hit you. He'll never say it, but Tony felt it when Kate died. He felt terrible about it because he's a good man, but it was there and it was real."

"Did you?"

"No. But… especially then, I wasn't as attached enough to my life to feel it."

"Oh."

"I felt it when the bomb went off. Me and mine came through. Those other poor bastards didn't, but we had a few minutes of charmed life. Made it a whole lot easier to go to Dearing's house."

"Oh."

"Yeah. He didn't punch my ticket the first time, so it wasn't going to happen. You take whatever comfort you can find where you can find it, especially for the things where there's nothing you can do. And this especially is something where there's nothing you can do."

"That's not entirely true."

Gibbs expression let Tim know to keep talking.
"Wednesday we've got an appointment for the Nuchal Fold testing. I don't know why Jimmy and Breena didn't have it done, probably because they're 'low risk,' but it tests for trisomies…" Gibbs doesn't seem to know what that means. "What Jonathon had, and Down's Syndrome, and a few other things. And if it's negative you sigh with relief and go on. But if it's positive, they do more testing, and then more, and then eventually you're only left with one choice: stop your baby's heart or not.

"Jimmy said that Sammy's heart not beating was a relief, that they didn't have to make the choice. And now, after eighteen hours of labor, and Breena'll bleeding for weeks, now I wonder if he would have rather known and been done earlier, when Sammy was still small enough for a D&C."

Gibbs shook his head, he doesn't know the answer to that, and doesn't want to imagine it clearly enough to try and figure the answer out. "What about you?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure I want to know. If we don't find out, then I can keep pretending everything is fine."

"Odds are that everything is fine. You find that out, and you don't have to pretend."

"Yeah, I know. But if things aren't… We'll do the twenty week scan no matter what, find out if she's really a she, so we're talking about two more months of not knowing."

"You're talking about pushing finding out far enough back so that no matter what the answer is, the decision is out of your hands."

"Yeah. In Virginia it's twenty-two weeks. If something is so badly wrong that you can just see it on an ultrasound, we'd still have time. But if it's questionable, and they wanted to do more testing, the clock would run out on us."

Tim spent a minute staring at the wall in front of him.

"I feel like such a coward for not wanting to know. Making the hard decisions, that's what being the parent is all about, right?"

"Yeah, Tim."

"You've got to do it, and you can't let the rest of the world do it for you."

"Yep."

Tim exhaled long and slow, and Gibbs sat next to him, keeping a hand on his shoulder, and let him think.
He wasn't sure how to say it to Abby. He was pretty sure she'd agree with him, but they haven't talked about it, and she might not, and, the appointment was coming up, tomorrow in fact, and he had to talk to her about it because just whipping it out in front of Dr. Draz was a bad plan.

So after dinner, as they were settling down to relax on the sofa, he said to her, "No matter what the test comes up positive for… I don't care what might be wrong with her, I don't want to abort Kelly."

Abby gently touched his face. "And if she's sick and hurting…"

He kissed the palm of her hand. "Abby, unless keeping her alive means that she'll be in constant pain or hooked to a machine, unable to survive on her own, I want to keep her. If she's not normal… We've got money, we've got family for support, and I can quit my job to take care of her if need be."

Abby snuggled in next to Tim, laying his hands on her just starting to show belly, and kissing him gently. "Tim, did you think that would be a problem for me?"

"I really hoped it wouldn't. But we haven't talked about what if…"

"We probably should have. Unless she can't survive on her own, I want to keep her. If I'd had any reservations about keeping her, I wouldn't have risked getting pregnant."

"Okay."

"You scared?" she asked.

"Yes."

She nodded at that. "I'm refusing to worrying about it."

He looks at her, and she half-smiles, and they both know that's more a statement of intent than truth. Abby's forty, almost forty-one, and both of them are more that good enough at math to know how fast the Down's Syndrome rates skyrocket at her age.

She gives him that half-smile again. "Either the DNA did what it was supposed to, or it didn't, and either way there's nothing we can do to change it and nothing we're going to do about it besides love our child and give her the best life we can."

"Good. I'm still scared."

"Me, too."

Once again they were in a dim room, staring at a grainy white-on-black screen, trying to make out features as the ultrasound tech scoots the wand around looking for a good view.

Finally she finds it, and the image of Kelly's head, neck, upper back, and arms becomes clear.

She doesn't look much like a shrimp anymore. That's very clearly a baby.

The tech is using her mouse to make different measurements, and Tim wants to pound her with questions, all along the lines of 'is this what it's supposed to look like,' but the tech doesn't know. It's
her job to measure, not diagnose.

When she finishes that, she checks Kelly's heart, which was quickly thrumming away. Tim squeezes Abby's hand as they see the tiny throbbing, almost blur of her heart pumping.

She points out finger buds and gets a shot of Kelly's feet. It's very possible he cooed a little at the two tiny feet on the screen. Abby certainly did.

And after, holding a new stack of ultrasound print outs, he waited for Abby to get dressed, and to then see Dr. Draz, who would look at all the measurements and say if Kelly looked okay.

They sat in her office, looking at the scans, not really talking much, just flipping through them. He took photos of them for his phone, and then sent them to her. And they waited.

About ten minutes later Dr. Draz came in, smile on her face, mouthing the correct pleasantries, which he doesn't have much patience for today. Just get to it.

He's not sure if she read it off his face, or having done with the "How are you?" "Nice day out there." "Blah, blah, blah," she's ready to get to work, but she opens their folder, looks over something, flips through a few pages and says, "Everything looks fine. All of your baby's measurements were within the normal range."

And for the first time in more than a week Tim felt like he could breathe again.
"How are you doing?" Yesterday had been Jimmy's first day back, and also the last day of a hot case, so beyond a quick visit, Tim hadn't had time to get down to Autopsy.

Today they're filling out paperwork, and no one is going to say anything if he and Jimmy take an extra-long lunch. So they do.

Jimmy shrugs a little; his voice is pretty flat. "Not so bad. Everyone here has lost someone and knows what this feels like, sort of, at least. Tony's made some dumb jokes, but that's it, they're dumb jokes, designed to try and make me laugh. Ziva's brought food for us every day since you and Abby left. But 'well-meaning' assholes out there in the rest of the world keep saying horrible things to us.

"Why would you say, 'You'll have other children'? Yeah, it's true. We will, and if the genetic testing says we shouldn't try naturally, we'll adopt more kids, but why would you say that?" Flat is very rapidly being replaced by anger steeped in stupefaction. "If I told you my best friend died, you wouldn't say to me, 'You'll have other best friends.'" Jimmy stabs one of the pieces of chicken in his salad over and over with his fork. "One of the ladies at church said, 'Well, at least Molly's healthy.' You wouldn't tell someone who's mom just died, 'Well, at least your dad is healthy.'

"One of them said to us, 'You've got to trust that God knows what He's doing, and this is for the best.'" He shakes his head, looking so tired. "No, I don't have to trust in that. I don't have to trust in anything. Trusting in a God who builds your hopes up and crushes them just for kicks is really damn low on my to-do list right now, thank you."

The stupefaction in his voice vanishes, replaced by all anger. "I almost hit the woman who said it'd make us stronger. Would have done it if she had been a guy. I was perfectly fine being a cream puff, married to a cream puff, raising a little cream puff, dreaming about a new little cream puff, and I would have very happily lived my entire life never dealing with anything harder than being annoyed with Ed. The idea that it'll make me tougher isn't any comfort." He closes his eyes for a second, makes himself calm down, and then looks at Tim again, who is pretty much just sitting there, across the booth from him, hoping to be useful by giving Jimmy a shot to say whatever he wants or needs to.

"You know why they tell you not to tell anyone you're pregnant at first?"

Tim shakes his head. Sure, he's familiar with the whole so-you-won't-have-to-tell-everyone-if-you-miscarry thing, but he's also sure that's not where Jimmy is going with this.

"It's so the rest of the world doesn't have to deal with your grief. If you don't tell anyone, then when you lose a baby you're just sad on your own, and if someone asks, you wave it away, force a grin on your face, and pretend to be all right. Every single one of those thoughtless 'comforting' words has been about only one thing only, shutting us down. 'You'll have other babies, so don't make me uncomfortable by being sad.'"

"I'm so sorry." Tim reaches across the table and gently squeezes his hand.

"I know." Jimmy shakes his head. "How hard was that? I'm sorry. I wish this didn't happen to you. I know it hurts, and it's not going to be better anytime soon, but I hope you heal quickly. And then shut the fuck up! How hard is that?" He wipes a tear away.

Tim shrugs. I'm sorry and then shut-the-fuck-up has always been his way of dealing with grieving
people. "How's Breena doing with it?"

"Angry, frustrated, sad… We both are… At least I can go to work and deal with the fact that what I do puts killers away. She's just surrounded by dead people."

"She went back to work?" In Breena's shoes, Tim's not sure he'd ever want to go back to work again. Not at a mortuary. Not surrounded by other grieving people.

"For about an hour. Then one of the suppliers asked how the pregnancy was going, so she told him, and he said something about us having other babies, and Ed blew up at him. Apparently ripped him a new asshole, twice." Ed had been at their place when he got home, and seemed to really enjoy giving Jimmy the full play by play on what exactly he had said to that idiot. And for the first time ever, Jimmy completely approved of something Ed had done. "How bad at tact are you when Ed's schooling you in how to behave? Then she went home and spent the rest of the day snuggling with Molly. The only good thing about working for Ed is that he'll let her take as long off as she likes, and if she never wants to see a dead body again, he'll support her in that, too." There are a lot of things that are true about Ed Slater, that he doesn't like Jimmy, has no filter between his mouth and his brain, and values money and the security it buys too highly are all on the list. Him being a bad dad isn't.

"Tim. I really appreciated what you did for us, and for me."

"Jimmy, you're living my worst fear. Whatever you and Breena need, I'm here for."

"Thanks." Jimmy sits there, eats the piece of chicken he's been mauling with his fork, and thinks for a minute. "You guys had the nuchal fold testing, right?"

"Yeah, Wednesday."

"And…"

Tim hadn't been sure how to handle this. My baby's healthy and yours just died is way out of his depth, so he figured this would be another good shut-the-fuck-up topic, so he hasn't mentioned it. But if Jimmy's going to out and out ask, he's not going to lie about it. "And it came up clear. Everything's good, as best we can tell."

"I'm really happy for you." Jimmy looks like he's on the verge of crying again. "Do you have new ultrasound pics?"

"Yeah, four of them. I wasn't sure…"

"I'd like to see them."

"Okay." Tim pulls them up on his phone. Kelly's still too little to tell if she's a boy or a girl, but she's looking a whole lot more like a baby and less like a shrimp.

Jimmy just stares at the first shot, his finger tracing along the curve of Kelly's spine.

"You sure you want to see this?" Tim can see his eyes tearing up.

"Yeah." Jimmy closes his eyes, voice warbling a bit, but he pulls himself together, and then opens them again, looking at Tim. "It hurts, but… I'm still really glad for you guys. And I still can't wait to meet your little girl. And I don't want you feeling like you can't be happy around me. I need all the happy I can get these days. Breena does, too."
"Okay." Tim shoves a smile on his face, and he points out toe buds and finger buds, and how she's about the size of a golf ball, all stuff Jimmy knows, but it's still a big deal for Tim. He shows Jimmy the shot of the two tiny feet, and Jimmy smiles a little at them.

And then he starts crying.

Tim puts his phone back into his pocket and switches seats, sitting next to Jimmy and rubbing his back.

"It's just so fucking unfair!" Jimmy bites out, staring at the ceiling.

"I know."

"And I'm so angry!" He won't look at Tim as he says this, because he's having an easier time keeping himself under some semblance of control by staring at the seat across from him. "And there's nothing to do with it, no one to be angry at, nothing to blame. There's nothing to hit, and screaming at fate is useless." Jimmy takes off his glasses and wipes his eyes.

Anything you need. There's nothing to hit. Tim thinks about that for a second before saying, "I'll fight you if you think it would help."

That get Jimmy to turn and look at Tim. It surprises him enough it breaks some of the sorrow. "Tim?" he asks, putting his glasses back on so he can really see Tim.

Tim shrugs at Jimmy. He doesn't much like fighting, but if it might help, he's game. "There's a boxing ring in the gym. Having something solid to fight might help."

"I don't want to beat the shit out of you."

"I'm not volunteering to be a punching bag; you'd get bored with that too soon. A real fight would hold your attention and give you a shot to work out a lot of the fight or flight chemicals in your system. Won't help with sad, might help with angry. Ziva'd be game, too, if you wanted to go up against someone who's actually good at hand to hand."

Jimmy thinks about that for a moment. He's starting to feel like he might understand how this could help, though he can count the number of times he's wanted to get into a fight before on one hand. And he's starting to understand why Ziva began training right away. "That's part of why she started training again when her father was killed."

"Maybe. Needing to be in good shape for what came after was a lot of it, too." Tim shrugs a little. "We're made to run, physically run, away from the things that scare us, or turn around and try to kill them. You can't run from this, and you can't fight it, but you can fight me or Ziva or Tony, or hell, I'll run with you if you like." He remembers that Jimmy runs, too. Though it's been years since Tim's gone running for anything besides a case. "It certainly can't make things worse, and it might make you feel a little better."

Jimmy thinks about it, getting the idea of how it would feel to really hit something into his head. "What are you doing after work?"

"Dinner with Abby, eventually. Tony and Ziva were going to do Shabbat, but they didn't think the case would get wrapped in time, so that's not on for tonight. You want to do something?"

"Yeah."

"Run or fight?"
"Fight." There's no warble in Jimmy's voice as he says that. He's almost looking eager.

"Okay."
Too Stupid To Live

There is a term that Tim's come in contact with on several occasions. He's never seen it outside of discussions of writing or characters, so he's not sure how common it is outside the writer/reader community, but right now, as he's fighting with Jimmy, it's springing to mind.

That term is Too Stupid To Live (TSTL). It's used when the character in a story does something so ridiculously stupid that you, the reader, start rooting for them to die.

There are times when Tim is pretty firmly convinced that he is indeed TSTL. Usually, he tries to avoid that, but, well, as the title implies, he's too damn stupid to figure out where the problem is ahead of time.

But, as Jimmy's fist goes crashing into his eye, he's rapidly coming to the conclusion that today he is indeed too damn stupid to live.

The idea of helping Jimmy to fight out his aggression seemed like a really good one until the actual fighting started. And then it dawned on Tim that A: he carries a gun for a reason. B: that reason is to avoid having to get into fist fights. C: this really, really hurts.

Part of the issue is that, while Tim has been trying to avoid hurting Jimmy, and it's true that for the first two or three minutes Jimmy was also trying to avoid hurting him, as the fight got going and the adrenaline got pumping, Jimmy's control vanished.

What's also true is that Jimmy has no technique, can't really see because he's not wearing his glasses, is angry on an existential level, hurts worse than anyone has ever hurt, is high as a kite on endorphins right now, and is way stronger than anyone his size has any right to be.

So, to put it nicely, Tim's getting his ass handed to him on a silver platter.

He's also vaguely aware of the fact that there were probably preparations they could have taken besides just changing into sweats. Like, he's thinking that head gear might have been a good plan. (Very good plan, Jimmy just dodged into one of Tim's punches, and Tim's not entirely sure how much of the blood dripping off his hand is from Jimmy's now split lip or his now split knuckles. This is also when the idea of taping up their hands occurs to him.) But, as he manages to sweep Jimmy's legs out from under him, he's fairly pleased that they were at least smart enough to take their shoes off.

Jimmy gets up slowly, and Tim stands there, open, waiting, breathing hard.

"One more round?" Jimmy asks. They're calling a round fighting until one of them goes down. That was, he thinks, the end of number five.

"As many as you need." And yeah, that's probably stupid too, but fight aside, Jimmy actually seems a little calmer now, well, maybe calmer isn't the right word. Less angry? Yeah, that's probably better. Of course, he's also, like Tim, pretty close to exhausted, too, so he might just not have enough energy to be angry.

Jimmy nods and charges him. Tim managed a decent sidestep and got him in the back with his elbow, but Jimmy's already whipping around and punches him in the ribs.

Part of really fighting is that it goes by way faster than it should. If he was doing this with a game controller, hitting buttons, he'd be able to do it fast enough to react to Jimmy and think a few moves
ahead. But as it is, doing this live, means he feels like he's constantly playing catch up.

But the good thing about this going faster than expected is that it's probably less than three minutes later that he's on his back, staring up at the ceiling of the gym, aching from his hair to the soles of his feet, gasping to get his breath back.

Jimmy gives him a hand up, pulling him back into standing up.

"You okay?"

Tim nods, finally able to inhale again.

"More?" he asks Jimmy.

"I'm done."

"Okay."

"Tim," Jimmy's looking at him, eyes wide open and earnest. "Thank you."

"Anytime." And as they head for the locker room, Tim knows he means it. As often as Jimmy needs to do this, he'll be there.

They peel off sweat and blood soaked clothing, ready to hit the showers, which right now sounds really, really good to Tim. He looks at himself as he hangs his towel outside the shower stall and moans softly. He's covered in bruises, and since he knows a little something about how this works, he also knows that they're all going to get worse before they get better.

"Tim." Jimmy's in the next stall over, and likely doing a pretty similar inspection of his body.

"Yeah."

"Cold water. Hot'll feel better, but it'll make the bruising and swelling worse."

"Great." He hates cold showers. Hated them before he almost froze to death and absolutely abhors them now. And right this second the idea of putting his extremely tender, hurts to look at wrong body into icy cold water seems like getting to enjoy a sneak preview of hell.

He still cranks the water all the way to the cold side because Jimmy is right. He remembers enough of his wrestling days to know that if you put hot on bruised, battered flesh you end up even more swollen, stiff, and sore, and if Tim's going to be moving again anytime soon, he can't afford that.

"Did you tell Abby what we were doing?"

"Told her we were working out. What'd you tell Breena?"

"You were helping me deal with my anger."

"They're going to flip out when they see us." See, this is part of the too stupid to live thing. Coming home to a pregnant wife beaten to a pulp is a bad plan. She's going to take one look at him and freak out.
"Yeah." Jimmy sighs. "She's going to yell at me for being stupid."

Tim nods, steps into the water, shrieks when it hits his skin, because God, icy cold water beating down on bruised skin is every sort of horrible he can think of, and says, "Abby's going to do that, too."

He hears a low moan from Jimmy, so he assumes that means he's stepped into the water as well.

"Did it help?"

"Yeah. It did. I may just be too tired and sore to feel it, but I'm not angry right now."

"Good."

The human body is a wonderfully designed machine. For example, when it experiences pain, it produces chemicals that fight that pain. Those chemicals are called endorphins. They act as a pain reliever and mild euphoric.

The fact that Tim knows that is part of suggesting fighting to Jimmy. Endorphins make you feel better, they lift your mood, and that effect can last for hours, days even. That's why they suggest you exercise if you're depressed.

However, the pain fighting aspect of endorphins wears off pretty quickly after you stop doing whatever it was that caused the pain in the first place. And while Tim is well aware of how this works when it comes to certain amounts of discomfort he's experienced chasing an especially good orgasm, he wasn't aware of how fast it was going to wear off in relation to a fight.

Basically, he's only a few blocks away from the Navy Yard when his seatbelt starts to really hurt his shoulder. Which is not to say everything else about him doesn't hurt, too, but as per the Gate Theory of Pain, you really only feel what hurts worst, and the belt pressing into his very tender, very bruised left shoulder really hurts.

He's at a stop light, about ten minutes from home, debating sending Abby a text to warn her that he isn't in quite the same shape as he had been when she last saw him two hours earlier. He could either send that text, and then have her worried about him from now until he gets home, or not send it and shock the hell out of her when he walks in the door.

He sends the text.

Two seconds later his phone is ringing. He sets it on speaker and puts it in the cup holder.

"You got into a fight with Jimmy!? What the hell were you thinking? Jimmy's so fragile right now; how could you possibly start a fight with him?" She continues on that vein for a bit, and he's thinking that texting got into fight with Jimmy, look pretty bad, home soon, explain then is yet another sign of being too stupid to live.

"What could he have possibly have said to piss you off so much, especially right now, that would make you fight him?"
She actually pauses for breath after that one so he replies, "I'm so angry, and there's nothing to do with it, nothing to hit, and screaming at fate doesn't help.' So I volunteered to fight him to help get the angry out."

"Oh." Dead silence. "You couldn't have put that in your text?"

"I should have."

"How bad are you?"

"Lots of Advil and ice packs when I get home."

"Really?"

"Yeah." He's thinking he might try dunking himself in an ice filled bathtub, even though that's even worse than the hell that is a cold shower, because he's coming to the conclusion that Jimmy pretty much treated him like a tough piece of meat in need of pounding to tenderize.

"Did it help him?"

"I think so."

"I'll have the frozen peas ready to go."

"Thanks. Should be home in three minutes."
Too Damn Small

Gibbs has a problem.

What's new about that? He usually has several of them at any given time, and some of them come back over and over. But this is the first time he's run into this particular one.

His basement is too damn small.

He started on the Shannon back in ‘12, when he knew retirement was on the horizon. He wants to get her done in time to sail off shortly after they make him leave NCIS. He figures that'd be the best way to handle those first few months. Get out to sea, away from the job, and just let go, cold turkey, come back a few months later and hopefully find something to do with himself on land.

So, now, as January of ‘15 is coming to a close, with a year to go until retirement, Shannon is getting pretty close to done. He's got a year to work, and about ten more months' worth of work to do on her.

But he's got two more jobs ahead. He needs to have a Chuppa done by April 4, (3rd really, apparently in Jewish weddings there's some sort of ceremony the night before involving signing the contract, and then the next day there's the ceremony he thinks of as a wedding.) and while McSciuto might not be due until July, he wants the crib done by the beginning of May. On the off chance she...it... he shakes his head, she, ends up coming early, she'll need a place to sleep.

So, the question is: try and finish Shannon up fast, or move his shop upstairs, or try to squeeze three projects into a space that was already tight for one...

The Chuppa is primarily lattice work. It's got to be light, beautiful, flexible, and, because it's got to get from his place to the park where they're having the ceremony, collapsible. But it's also got to be strong enough to hold all of the flowers, vines, and lacy fabric that'll get draped around it. Once he's got all of the pieces cut, he can get them screwed together upstairs. But it'll be a two-step finishing process. The real finishing will happen before he gets all the pieces assembled, but he'll need to do a good, solid post assembly clean up as well, and the basement is where he's got his ventilation system for dealing with the dust that goes with that.

Then there's the crib. That'll require real joinery, serious planing, every piece has to be straight and square, and he's sure as hell going to do some carving on it, though he's not entirely certain what.

Since Tim and Abby are talking about a forest theme for the nursery, he knows one thing, the legs of the crib are going to be unshaped trees. He'll take the bark off, mostly because he knows little kids are rough on furniture and it'll get knocked off if he leaves it on. He wants the look of natural wood growing up from the floor. And there'll have to be a space on the back for the picture Abby wants to paint, but beyond that, he doesn't have a set idea, yet.

He's been debating putting off any real design work on the crib for finding out if McSciuto is a girl or boy. Everyone thinks she's a girl. Gibbs does, too. And if he's designing for a little girl, that'll make some of this easier. But at the same time, they don't know yet, won't until the beginning of April, and he's fairly certain this crib is not only going to be used by one child.

'Course, they have more than one kid, he can make more than one crib. And if they are going to have more than one, those kids are going to have to be pretty close together. Abby might look the same age Tim is, but Gibbs knows she's not. So, anyway, McSciuto might still be in this crib when Baby
B shows up.

Gibbs is feeling like he's just talked himself into doing a girl's crib, until he once again remembers that they don't actually know that McSciuto is a girl.

Damn it. Okay, he can pick out the wood. That's a start. And then he can move onto the Chuppa. By the time that's done, they'll know for sure if she's a girl or boy, and then he can go from there.

He's thinking walnut for the slats, dark, almost black stain, and then the cross pieces can be maple, almost white. He sketches that out, quickly, looks at it with the natural tree legs and crumples it up. That didn't look right at all. He spends a few hours fooling around with different ideas, not really liking anything he's coming up with, besides the idea that some sort of small dragon should be crawling up one of the legs, face perched on the top, looking into the crib. He likes that idea a whole lot.

So he puts those sketches aside, and goes to work on the Chuppa.

The Chuppa's easier. That should be oak, strong, solid, slow-growing, but long-lived. He can see the pieces in his mind, some woven together, some on small hinges so they can collapse. He glances over to his band saw, knowing he's going to be ripping a whole lot of wood soon.

Which once again brings him to the problem of not having enough room. The band saw is packed up in the corner, because the Shannon is taking up most of the space.

He stands up, places a hand on her hull. That part is done. Normally his next step would be building the interior, followed by the deck. But if he puts the deck on her first, or at least something to keep the rain out and the hull intact, he can move her out, do his current projects, and move her back in.

And, if he's willing to let go of the secret of how his boats get out of the basement, Tim and Tony will help him do it, which would speed things up even further and make getting her back into the basement once he's done with the Chuppa and the crib easier.

Gibbs checks his watch. It's seventeen thirty on Saturday. So, grab a little food, then come back down here and get four hours of work done. They're on call this weekend, and he's got a feeling something is going to happen, so he wants to get to bed earlier rather than later.

His plan set, and one more problem checked off the list, Gibbs heads up to the kitchen.
Sunday morning, Gibbs eases the door to the McGee house open. It's unlocked, and right now he's wishing those two hadn't decided to mimic him on that. Tim and Abby's cell phones are both on the little table near the door, and he can see Tim's showing the four calls they've given him.

Gun out, he scans the downstairs, looking right and left for signs of trouble, but he's not seeing anything. Gibbs holsters his gun. He's rapidly coming to the conclusion that phone on the front table, and Tim and Abby upstairs in bed probably means Tim didn't hear the call.

Now what? Part of him just wants to find a convenient chunk of wall and pound on it until Tim shows up. Part of him knows that if Tim's sleeping, Abby is too, and while she will have to show up at the lab, she doesn't need to get there for at least three hours, and he doesn't want to cut into her sleep. She's tired enough as is without him waking her up early.

They're all tired. He doesn't think anyone on his team has slept well for almost two weeks now. But the rest of the team is still holding themselves together pretty well because they don't have tsunami sized waves of hormones sloshing around their systems.

Tired, pregnant, mood-swingy Abby sobbing in her lab because something reminded her of Jonathon is something he'd really prefer to avoid.

Which means he needs to go upstairs.

To their bedroom. With them in it. I.E. the last place on earth he wants to be at this particular moment in time.

Great.

He heads up quietly. Last thing he wants to do is get shot by Tim because he thinks the footfalls on his steps are a burglar. Gibbs was up there right before the wedding, so he knows which room is theirs. Top of the steps all the way down the hall on the right.

The door is open. Makes sense, not much reason to close it when it's just the two of you.

He pokes his head in fast, if too much of Abby is visible, he's going back downstairs, getting Tim's phone, tossing it in the room, and then calling.

But they're under the blanket, spooned together, Tim on the outside, wrapped around her, their legs tangled together.

He eases in quietly and pokes what he's hoping is Tim's foot.

Tim jerks, looks around fast, sees Gibbs and relaxes, though Gibbs tenses up when his brain realizes what he's seeing on Tim.

"What are you doing in my bedroom?" he asks quietly, sounding confused.

"Call out. You didn't answer your phone."

Tim rubs his face and then winces when he does it. "Okay, I'm up."

Gibbs stands there, waiting, eyes wide, wondering what the hell happened to Tim. Tim doesn't move. This last for about thirty seconds before Tim says, still quietly, "Remember that peep show
comment from Lejeune?" Gibbs turns and heads out of their room. He's halfway out the door when
Tim adds, "Put some coffee on when you're down there."

Gibbs nods and heads downstairs, shaking his head. Why it is out of all his team members only Kate
could be relied on to wear pajamas?

As he's rummaging around in their kitchen, he wonders why Tim's got a black eye and some really
ugly fresh bruises on his shoulders, arms, and chest. He's really hoping Tim didn't flip out and beat
the hell out of someone, because judging by how bad he's looking, that someone is really likely to
press charges.

But that can't be it, because there's no way Abby wouldn't have called him if something like that had
happened. And for that matter, he really doubts Tim wouldn't have called him if that had been up.

No way to know now, so he lets it go, and finds the coffee, scoffs at the decaf in his hands, there's no
point to coffee if it's decaf, and then sets up Tim's machine to brew.

Seven minutes later, Tim is downstairs, dressed, shaved, and except for the black-eye, looking fairly
professional. His hair's a bit messier than normal, but not unreasonable. He takes the coffee from
Gibbs, sucking it down fast.

"Sorry, Jethro, looks like we can't hear the phone from the upstairs. It'll go on my dresser from now
on."

Gibbs nods.

"What are we called out for?"

"Dead Marine outside of Quantico."

Tim grabs a bagel, writes a quick note for Abby on the whiteboard on the fridge, and says, "Let's
go."

They're in the car when Tim says, "Thanks for not waking her up."

Gibbs nods. "Do I want to know how bad the other guy looks?"

"Eh?"

_Really, you're gonna play dumb with me?_ Gibbs' look says.

"Jimmy'll be fine."

That shocks Gibbs badly enough that he pulls the car over, stops it, and turns toward Tim. "You got
into a fight with Palmer? What the hell happened?"

Tim holds up a placating hand. "Nothing like that. He was telling me about how angry he was, and
how there was nothing to be angry at, nothing to hit."

"So you volunteered to let him hit you?" Gibbs is so shocked he's sounding almost flustered. "I
know you don't spend a lot of time in the gym, but the large bags hanging from the ceiling are there
so people can hit them!"
Tim rolls his eyes. "He'd get bored with a punching bag, or his mind would wander because it wouldn't hold his attention. He needed something to get himself out of his head. Actually fighting does that. Otherwise, I would have suggested using a punching bag, I mean, this isn't precisely comfortable, and getting like this was a hell of a lot less comfortable."

Gibbs stares at him, and Tim's not sure if that look is admiration for stepping up for his friend or scorn for being so stupid about it. He does know that once he got Abby calmed down, which took some doing, (having told her he was in bad shape, and her actually seeing him were two very different things) and explained (again) what had happened (and why) she had an awfully similar look on her face.

"What do you do when you're really angry, Jethro? One of three things, right? Drink, fuck, or fight. He can't drink, not enough. Diabetes means getting more than buzzed is a bad plan for him. Even if he felt like it, and I really doubt he does, fucking's out for at least the next two-three weeks, maybe longer. But I could fight with him. So, we went six rounds, and by the time we were done a lot of his anger was burned off. Maybe not the best way to handle it, but we'll both heal up, and at least as of Friday night, he seemed to be doing a little better."

Gibbs takes Tim's left hand and turns it so he can see how bad he hurt himself, purple-green bruises decorate split knuckles. "No gloves?"

"This isn't something either of us ever does. We don't have gloves. And no, we didn't have tape, either. Or face gear."

"You can see okay out of that eye?"

"I'm fine. Just sore."

"Jimmy's okay?"

"The only things you can see are the split lip and his hands."

"You split his lip?"

Tim's really tempted to roll his eyes again. "I wasn't trying to. I'm not Ziva. This isn't something I'm very good at. I meant to get his shoulder, he dodged into my hand, and I couldn't pull it in time. I think that's how he got my eye, too. We weren't trying to hurt each other. He just needed someone to fight it out with, so I did it."

Gibbs nods at that. "You've been a good friend to Jimmy. And now I'm going to be a good dad, to both of you. Every Sunday from now until your daughter is on the outside, both of you are spending an hour training with me. It's been eight years since I've seen you in the gym for any combat training, and if you're accidentally splitting Jimmy's lip, you're too rusty. If he's accidentally hitting you in the eye, same thing."

"Errr…" Ending up with even less free time was not how Tim had hoped this would work out.

"Both of you need to be in good enough shape to put the Fear of Dad into future boyfriends, so training starts on Sunday. And you're spending an hour with him at the range every week until he's as good as you are with a pistol."

"Ever since he got kidnapped, he hasn't wanted to have anything to do with a real gun."

"He might feel differently about it now. And even if he doesn't, he still needs to know how to use one."
Tim shrugs, and winces, his ribs are pretty sore and that motion hurts. "Could we maybe start this the Sunday after next, when Jimmy and I won't still be eating handfuls of Advil every four hours?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "I'll take it easy on you the first week."

"Great."

"McGee, are you all right?"

"What on earth happened to you!" Ziva sounds really concerned, while Tony sounds shocked.

"I'm fine." Which was as far as he gets before Jimmy and Ducky show up with the gurney.

"Palmer did you…" Tony was probably going to ask something like, 'see what happened to McGee,' but he turns to look at Jimmy, sees the split lip, his chin and jaw bruised up to go with it, as well as bruised hands and says, "Did both of you go out, get drunk, and beat the hell out of someone at a bar?"

"No, Tony, they didn't." Ziva walks over to Jimmy, stares at the bruises on his face, her finger just ghosting over it. "That was done by someone's left hand." And then she goes to Tim and stares at his eye, looking like she knows exactly how tall the person who hit him is just from the bruise. "Do you want to explain this?"

Tim shrugs and looks to Jimmy, his expression letting Jimmy know that he'll keep this as private as Jimmy wants. (Gibbs excepted. Tim's personal rule number one means Gibbs is always excepted.)

Jimmy shrugs, too. "Tim let me fight out my anger. I needed it. He was there. Do you need more than that?"

"Nope," Tony says very quickly. He knows that expression, knows that tone of voice, and knows that's a man who doesn't want to get into whatever it is.

Ziva nods at him. "If you ever need it, I am here, too."

Jimmy closed his eyes and manages a bit of a smile for her. "Thanks, but Ziva, I can't hit you. I know you're tough. I know you're a better fighter than I am. I know you can kill a man with a bar of soap. But you're still a girl, and I can't hit you."

She smiles at him, hoping a little gentle kidding goes over well. "Jimmy, the reason you cannot hit me is because I'm too fast for you."

"That too."

"Seriously, though. I'm good enough at this neither of us will get hurt, and you'll still get a good work out." She steps closer to him, and says quietly, remembering the bruises on her hands when she was training to go after Bodnar, "And if you do need to hit, to land the punches, and to take them in return, I know how to do that and not visibly harm you, and how to not let you hit anything important. Neither you nor McGee can afford to damage your hands or eyes."

"Thanks." He hugs Ziva quickly before hurrying after Ducky.
Bootcamp

Bootcamp with Gibbs was never Tim's favorite thing. Granted, a huge part of not loving this is that he's always been worse at it than anyone around him. He was fairly used to being less physically adept than the guys around him, but having Kate kick his ass right in front of the new boss he desperately wanted to impress hurt on a whole lot of different levels.

And honestly, it never got much better than that.

It's not even that he's terrible at this. He's a cop, was raised by a Navy Captain who was bound and determined that he'd be able to throw a decent punch, and was on the wrestling team in high school. It's not like he can't fight. He's competent.

But all the guys around him have always been way better than competent.

And, sure, it's not PC, but the fact that Kate and Ziva (And probably Abby, though he's never gone up against her, and is perfectly happy to keep it that way.) were/are better than him was a hit to his pride, too. He was eight inches taller and seventy pounds heavier than Kate, sheer mass alone meant he should have won that fight, and she still pinned him.

So for him, Bootcamp was mostly a pile of not fun with a heaping side of embarrassment. Which is why eight years ago when Gibbs stopped demanding it, he stopped doing it.

Jimmy doesn't look like he's relishing this, either. From everything he knows about Jimmy, having his hands wrapped in tape in preparation for learning how to be more effective at beating on someone isn't his idea of fun at all.

But it's Sunday afternoon, and they're both in the NCIS gym, standing in front of Gibbs, who is grinning and looks like he's intending to really enjoy this.

And well, at least one of them should, right?

"The thing you have to keep in mind is that it is your job to keep the boys in line," Gibbs says as he
tapes Jimmy's right hand. "Your wives will say things like, 'He's so cute,' or 'He's only six,'" That gets both Tim and Jimmy staring at him in horror. "I'm not telling you to beat up the six-year-old who has a crush on your little girl, but it is your job to intimidate any boy who gets near her to the point where he knows in his bones that you are the number one male in the family and you will personally kill him if he ever hurts your girl."

Yeah, Gibbs had mentioned putting the Fear of Dad into future boyfriends, but this, both from a this-is-what-we're-doing perspective, and also from a this-is-the-longest-speech-Jimmy's-ever-heard-out-of-him perspective, is completely unexpected.

"Your job is to make sure he treats your girl like a princess and feels like earning your respect is the equivalent of winning an Olympic gold medal."

Jimmy and Tim think about that. That's a plan they can get behind.

Jimmy adds, "That's where Ed screwed up. Sure, he could kill me and get rid of my body really easy, but I couldn't care less if I ever earn his respect."

Gibbs nods at that. "It's a lot harder to do if you're a jerk."

Tim did not actually say, 'takes one to know one,' but Gibbs catches his look and says, "I'm a bastard, not a jerk. There is a difference."

"And that would be?" Tim asks.

"I've got very high standards, but you met them and won the medal. Jimmy can try from now until the end of the earth, and Ed'll just keep raising his standards because he's determined not to approve of Jimmy."

"That sound about right," Jimmy says.

"One day a man will show up, and he will deserve your respect, and he will be worth your little girl, which means you stop being her number one man. Ed's not willing to let that go. So he'll keep being a jerk to you." Gibbs looks at Jimmy's hands and nods, they're properly taped up. He tilts his head a little, and Tim steps up, holding out his left hand to get it taped.

Tim realizes something as Gibbs starts taping up his hands. "This isn't just about our families, is it?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "This time next year, Autopsy'll be yours, Palmer. Can't imagine it'll be all that much later that you'll be in charge of Cybercrime, Tim. No later than the end of '16 you'll both have guys calling you Boss or Doctor. Making them want to win your respect is important, too."

"And we're going to learn how to do that by fighting with you?" Jimmy asks, not seeming to think this is the most effective technique for that.

"Nope. Both of you already know how you're going to be leaders. This is just… the stuff your dads should be passing on to you about how to be a dad. And some of those guys who'll be calling you Boss, they're going to look at you like a dad, at least, if you're doing the job right."

"That's a terrifying thought." Jimmy shakes his head.

"Not right away, but you'll both be in those jobs for a long time." Gibbs flashes them his amused smile. "Get some gray in your hair, and they'll start looking up to you."

"So you mean any day now?" Jimmy asks, dryly, the first of his gray hairs showed up last week and
brought a few buddies.

"You're gonna need a whole lot more than the ten gray hairs you've got, Palmer. But yeah. When Ducky leaves, you'll get an assistant, and he'll be, what? Twenty-four? Gonna look like a baby to you."

"We were both twenty-four when we started here," Tim adds.

And Gibbs just nods, babies clearly on his face. "You're hands are done, too. Okay, Palmer, you can punch hard. You left enough bruises on Tim to prove that. But he told me you weren't aiming for his eye when you hit it."

Jimmy nods.

"You're with me. Tim, see that punching bag?"

Tim nods.

"Beat the hell out of it." Tim heads off to do just that. The sound of fists, elbows, and knees slamming into canvas punctuate the rest of Jimmy's conversation with Gibbs.

"What are we going to do?"

Gibbs heads over to his bag and finds his pads. Then he takes out some duct tape and puts an X on the top of the pad. "I'm gonna move. You're gonna hit the X. And we're gonna keep doing it until both of you can hit the X no matter how fast I'm moving."

"What if I hit you?"

Gibbs look would be best described as if you hit me, Palmer, it's time to bury me because I'm already dead, but he's polite enough to not say that out loud. Instead he says, "Not getting hit is my job." He gets into position, starts circling the pad a bit, and Palmer whales on it, hitting both nowhere even remotely near the X and hard enough that he staggers Gibbs.

Gibbs steps back and straightens up, shaking his head slightly, amazed at how much force Jimmy had just nailed him with. "Stop. Precision, Palmer. Hit the X. Do it as soft and slow as you need to to hit the X. When you swap with Tim and take your turn on the punching bag, then you can hit hard. Again."

He starts moving again, and this time Jimmy spends a good thirty seconds just tracking the motion with his eyes, and then hit, not too hard, but he does manage to get the X dead on.

"Good. Keep it up." After about fifteen minutes, where Jimmy slows down to the point where he can land seven out of ten shots, Gibbs has him switch to his left hand, and starts, at an even slower speed, all over again.

Several thoughts go through Gibbs mind while he's doing this. First of all, Tim is right, Jimmy did, and still does, need to fight it out. There's a ton of anger in there, and it needs to go somewhere. Gibbs knows all about that and is very glad that Tim's offering Jimmy a way to do it that isn't too self-destructive. He hopes hitting the range will be good for Jimmy, too. Secondly, Jimmy's a whole lot stronger than Gibbs thought he was. He tends to think of Palmer as a goofy, skinny kid, but there's a real man in there with some very serious strength. You could fill an especially small thimble with what Gibbs knows about yoga (and still have plenty of room left over), but if that's all the exercise Palmer gets, it must be really good for upper body development. Thirdly, no one ever taught Jimmy how to fight. Yeah, he can make a fist and throw a punch, but the part of the fight where his
brain gets involved was never addressed. He's appallingly bad a figuring out where Gibbs is going to move next, and has a tendency to close his eyes right before his fist hits.

When Jimmy and Tim swap, Gibbs feels like kicking himself for not doing this with Tim more often. Eight years ago when it became clear that Tim was better with a handgun than anyone but Ziva, and that Ziva was going to be sticking around, filling the role of their combat specialist, Gibbs stopped making Tim hit the gym.

There just didn't seem to be much use to it. He always has a gun on him, Tony or Ziva always go out with him, and worst comes to worst, eight years ago, he was good enough that he wouldn't get killed if he had to depend on his fists.

He's not anymore.

Tim's brain knows how to fight. Gibbs can see from the way he watches the X that he knows how to track it and how to anticipate where it'll go. He knows to hit for where it will be instead of where it is. (In fact, if he was doing this with a pistol, Tim wouldn't just be able to hit the X, he'd be able to shoot off each of Gibbs' fingers.) What he can't seem to do is make his fist land where he wants it to. He's reliably within four inches of the X, but rarely nails it. Which isn't a problem if he was trying to hit a guy in the chest or stomach, but does mean he can completely miss someone if he's aiming for his head.

Tim's also, and this confuses Gibbs, equally bad with his left or right hand.

He decides to wrap it up by having them spar with each other, wanting to see how they really fight. It occurs to him as they're sort of limply flailing around with each other that if he's going to have them do this, that starting off with it, instead of putting it at the end when they've been working hard for an hour, is a good plan.

It also occurs to him that Palmer needs contacts, because part of the reason he's got no control when he spars is because he can't see.

When they wrap up, Gibbs is developing plans for next week, and looking forward to it.
"Am I imagining it, or is he talking a whole lot more?" Jimmy asks Tim as they get out of the showers.

"He's talking more. I mean, he does talk when he's trying to teach you something, but he's also talking more in general."

"I think that's the most I've ever heard him say."

Tim nods, beyond their one on one conversations, that's definitely one of the longest stretches of Gibbs talking he can remember.

"Heading home after this?" he asks as he gets dressed.

"Yeah, want to get back to my girls." Jimmy's been spending more time closer to home, wanting to keep Breena and Molly near, and Tim doesn't blame him at all for that. "You?" he asks as he slips on his shoes.

"Groceries. It's Abby's bowling day, so she's out 'til dinner."

When they get out of the locker room, Gibbs is waiting for them, two cups in hand. He hands one to each of them and says to Jimmy, "You did good, Palmer. Next week you're gonna do better."

"Thanks." Jimmy smiles briefly at the praise.

Tim stands there, amazed that Gibbs is saying that to him. He and Ziva sorted through rotting vomit to find a bullet and got less than that. Then he sees the look Gibbs is giving Jimmy and realizes that Gibbs really meant it when he said he was going to be a good Dad for both of them, and right now, Jimmy needs kid gloves and petting, and Gibbs is willing to do it.

Gibbs nods. "Between now and then, get some contacts, and wear them next week. I want you to be able to see what you're aiming at."

"Okay." Jimmy heads off, sipping his drink.

Tim takes a sip of his, expecting coffee, and very surprised to find it's hot chocolate. His eyebrows shoot up. Hot chocolate is a treat; what he rewards himself with when he's done a good job and it's cold out.

"You did good, too." Though Tim understands Gibbs is talking about taking care of Jimmy rather than fighting, because honestly, that was pretty sad.

"Thanks."

Gibbs heads them to one of the tables in the café area. "And you'll do better next week, too. Tell me about Jimmy. What does he like?"

"You've got to narrow that down some, because it's a really long list."

"Got you hot chocolate. Got him coffee because I don't know what he considers a treat."

"When it's cold: one half coffee, one half hot milk, and a shot of sugar free hazelnut or almond syrup. Chai with no sugar is also always a good choice for him. When it's hot: seltzer, ice, sugar free vanilla
syrup."

"Like a cream soda?"

"Pretty much. Breena makes it for him, uses vanilla beans and stevia. It's really good. But anywhere with a half-decent coffee bar should be able to make one up."

Gibbs files that away. He doesn't know what Stevia is, but he can find out. "Where's his dad?" It's true that Gibbs hasn't paid all that much attention to Palmer over the years, but he did notice his dad wasn't at his wedding, Molly's christening, or Jon's funeral.

"Dead. More than ten years now."

"Decent guy?"

"Enough. Jimmy loves him. Like Jimmy he had diabetes, but unlike Jimmy he didn't take care of himself and was dead at fifty-two. I know Jimmy holds that against him. Didn't love them enough to exercise or lay off the sugar."

Gibbs nods, getting a better idea of who Jimmy is and why he's in such good shape. "Brothers, sisters?" Gibbs has seen Jimmy's mom a few times, so she's obviously still part of his life.

"Younger brother, he lives in Tokyo. Gets back here once a blue moon."

"He and Breena gonna make it?" Yeah, it's early on, but in Gibbs' experience how you handle the first few weeks is a pretty good predictor of how the rest of mourning is going to go.

"I think so. They've been doing really well on pulling together."

"Married by blood."

That's more metaphorical than Tim ever expects Gibbs to be, but that wraps it up nicely. "Yeah."

"You're doing a good job with him, but if he gets in deeper than you can help, starts drinking or chasing pain, you let me know."

"I will."

"Good." Gibbs remembers his own walk through the dark, and where he ended up. "We're not gonna let him fall."
Gibbs is, in the immortal words of whoever Tony was quoting on Friday, "Too old for this shit."

And old was the one thing Gibbs never really thought he'd be.

Though maybe 'old' isn't precisely the problem. He doesn't mind the wrinkles or the gray hair. (Though needing glasses, now for both up close and long distance, bugs the hell out of him.)

Out of shape may be more precise.

Gibbs doesn't pay all that much attention to his body. He feeds it when it gets hungry, lays it down to sleep when it gets too tired (gives it coffee the rest of the time), puts glasses on when he can't see, washes it every day, and "clears out the pipes" as needed. That covers most of his bases.

In fact, unless he's got a girlfriend (which is the only time he does pay any attention to his body, well, what she's doing to it), his body is just this thing that moves him around from place to place, a lot like his car, and honestly, he pays more attention to the car.

Another thing that's true is that, unless, once again, we're talking about a girlfriend, he also doesn't pay all that much attention to other people's bodies, either. Sure, faces he watches with a whole lot of intensity, but, below the neck he just glances at to see if anything interesting is going on, and if nothing is, he ignores it.

This is triply true when it comes to male bodies.

Still there are certain things he expects his body to do, or well, be, and one of those things is be in better shape than Tim. But, as he noticed when sparring with the boys, somewhere along the line Tim lost a ton of weight and gained some muscles. (He had sort of vaguely noticed Tim was smaller, just because he doesn't pay attention to men's bodies doesn't mean he's blind. But he hadn't realized Tim had lost that much weight, let alone toned up.) Sure, he's not going to pass for a Marine anytime soon, but he's actually looking pretty good.
Which is causing Gibbs to look at himself in the bathroom mirror and notice posture, haircut, and attitude aside, he's also not going to pass for a Marine anytime soon.

In fact, he's looking a whole lot like what he is, a fifty-six year old cop who doesn't eat all that well, has twenty-five more pounds around his middle than he needs, and has let the younger members of his team handle running the perps down for the last five years.

And that's not acceptable, at all.

He's going to have grandkids to chase after soon, so he can't be puffing away, out of shape. And Tim and Palmer need someone to show them how this is done.

Okay, they don't, not really. Palmer's already good at this, and from everything he's seen of Tim with Molly, Tim's good at it, too.

But that still doesn't mean he can lay down on the job. As Abby said to him, he's the patriarch of their clan, and sure, one day he'll pass that over to Tony and move into Ducky's role of wiseman, but it's not nearly time for that, yet. And if leading the clan is his job, then he's got to be able to lead, no matter what that might mean, and with his particular clan, charging into battle is a definite possibility. So, first thing in the morning he's hitting the gym, and he's going to keep hitting it until he can find his abs again.

It's not that Gibbs is a particularly introspective man, which also isn't precisely true. He doesn't want to be a particularly introspective man, and a lot of the work he does is about not having to be introspective. If he's building, working a case, or drinking, he doesn't have to spend nearly as much time with his thoughts.

But right now, as he's slipping into his pajamas (sweat pants, Marines t-shirt) he's willing to let himself think, especially about this odd little family he's collected over the years.

It's funny, even with years in the Corp, even with decades as a cop, he never really expected to have sons. From the day Shannon told him she was pregnant, he knew he was going to be a dad to girls. And so, his girls were easy. He fell into the role of Abby and Ziva's dad without even really having to think about it. One day they were strangers, the next he had daughters again. Of course, he knows how (wants, needs) to be a dad to girls. Be there. Be useful. Try and be an example of the sort of man you want them to marry (respectful, honest, decent, not fooling around on them). Keep the bad guys away. Encourage the good ones. But mostly, be there.

With as different as Abby and Ziva are, that kept him pretty busy. Being there for Ziva is an entirely different set of skills than being there for Abby. But even with as different as they are, he felt like he had a good handle on what he was doing.

Sons on the other hand…
Sons started with Tony. Sure, he'd been a mentor and big brother before, but Tony needed a Dad, and Tony was the first guy he was willing to step up and do it for. And he's honest enough with himself to see that it's also ending with Tony. Tony's finished growing up. The clown prince of the frat boys is long dead. And while it's true that Tony will always love him, and that he'll love Tony, they're shifting from father and son to friends and equals. How'd Abby put it? He's Tony's Ducky?

Yeah, it's heading there. Though when he thinks about it, there's always been a certain reserve between him and Ducky. Partly because they've always been equals. Partly because so many years went by where he didn't let Ducky in. For almost a decade Ducky knew all about Gibbs' present, but nothing about his past.

Really, he's becoming Tony's Mike. There was never that space between him and Mike. And he likes that idea. Tony needs a Mike, and older, wiser friend who will slap him upside the head when he needs it, but mostly a man who will be there with him to enjoy the good times and make the bad ones more bearable.

Besides, Tony's got a dad. Senior's been stepping up his dad game over the last few years, becoming the man Tony needs in his life, which Gibbs entirely approves of. Both from the fact that the hole Senior cut into Tony's soul when he ran away from him after his mother died is slowly healing up, and from the fact that being there for his son is something Senior needs to do to be a good man, as well.

Especially with a marriage, and likely, kids, in the not wildly distant future, Tony probably needs all the good men he can get surrounding him, and right now, Gibbs is pretty satisfied on that front.
Thinking of the good men in Tony's life brought him to the son he wasn't expecting.

That Tim would be Abby's husband he's known for... about a decade. When they broke up, he figured it was done. When year after year went by with neither of them falling for anyone else, he realized what they didn't: there wasn't going to be anyone else for either of them. So, he was on board with the idea that Tim would be Abby's husband. Eventually he'd pass the role of her number one man to Tim. But Tim was always so self-contained the idea that he'd ever be closer to Tim than he was to Shannon's dad: warm, friendly, respectful, was something he didn't expect.

Honestly, he never expected to have this close of a relationship with any guy. Mike, Ducky, Tony, they all play by the rules. Close, soft, warm, huggy-type things happen with girls. That's why there are girls in the world, because a man needs someone to do that sort of thing with. The occasional affectionate hair ruffling and good job, usually steeped in humor, with very rare hugs, is how guys who love each other behave in the world as Gibbs understands it.

Talking about feelings is something else for girls. Guys don't do that, not with each other. He's had hundreds of chats with Tony over the years, and they've mastered the art of not actually saying what they're feeling, but still getting the basic idea across.

But Tim didn't play by those rules. Tim finally, after ten years, showed up in his basement to talk and the first thing he did was say, "I love Abby," followed by, "Now tell me what love means to you."

So, Gibbs tried to answer him, because he understood that what Tim meant by that was I-intend-to-marry-Abby-and-I'm-in-research-mode, but trying to put words to those ideas, let alone for another guy, felt really weird.

Having Tim tell him that he considered him to be his dad shortly thereafter was even more confusing. Because Gibbs hadn't been doing much in the way of being a dad for Tim, and if Tim's standards for dad-like behavior were that low, something was seriously wrong.

Until he started dating Abby again, Gibbs had never done anything dad-like for Tim. He'd been a great boss and a good mentor, set high standards, taught him everything he knew about being a good cop, slapped him when he needed it, petted Tim when he went above and beyond the call, but they'd never watched a game together, (Hell, he didn't even know until Tony told him about the Beaver thing that Tim even liked any sport, let alone that he was a college football fan.) or hung out over
He didn't know Tim's parents were divorced. He didn't know John had been on a ship for probably seventy percent of Tim's childhood. He found that out by reading through John's file.

And he didn't know until seeing John look at Tim that whatever it was John wanted in a son, Tim wasn't it.

And, while there had been plenty of times where he wanted to slap Senior upside the back of the head for being an idiot, he was really surprised by how intensely he wanted to drag John out of that ship and beat the ever-living shit out of him for not respecting Tim.

Gibbs saw the look on John's face, saw the disdain, and felt his hand clench. If ever a man deserves respect, it's Tim.

In the forty years Gibbs has been a Marine or cop, he's never seen anyone less naturally adept at any skill set go on to master one as thoroughly as Tim did with being a cop. When he got Tim transferred to his team, he never expected him to be anything other than handy with a computer. He knew he needed a geek to do the job, constantly bugging Abby to do the computer work wasn't a long-term solution, and he knew McGee would be good at it. He never, ever thought Tim would make a good field agent. And the fact that Tim proved him wrong won Gibbs' respect.

He was even more surprised by how intensely possessive he felt of Tim after seeing how John treated him. How that one day made Gibbs realize that Tim wasn't just his future son-in-law, but his son.

And thus, the accidental son, the man who earned his respect, who earned the right to say to him, "I am going to marry your daughter." (And it's true that Gibbs appreciates that Tim didn't ask permission. He told him he was going to marry Abby, proving he had gained the strength to be her husband. Just like he appreciates that Tony asked, proving he had gained the wisdom to be hers.) The man who earned the right to say to him, "Talk to me, tell me how you feel," and get an answer.

And while Tim may not play by the rules, at least he appears to know what they are. Gibbs has never had any sense that Jimmy's ever been aware of them.

He watches the two of them, and they put him in mind of Kelly and Maddie, and like with them, he realizes that you end up adopting your kid's best friends. That the people they love become your loves. (It hits him that this is how he got Tim in the first place. He was Abby's pet, and so, when he needed a geek to put on his team, he picked Tim instead of calling down to the new Cybercrime department for one of their guys.)

And, while it's painfully obvious that Tim wants a dad, it's also very obvious that right now, Jimmy needs one. Like Tony, Jimmy needs all the good men around him he can get. And Gibbs, who's walked this road, intends to be one of them.
So, the third son, son of sorrows, the one who doesn't know he's been adopted, yet.

But he will.

And like with Tim, he'll probably end up talking about feelings, and probably handing out hugs, and it's going to be weird, but… he's kind of looking forward to it.

One last thought occurs to Gibbs before he falls asleep, if he had been there from the day they were born, it probably wouldn't feel weird to talk with them about how they're feeling, or hug them when they're hurting. Because a dad does that for his kids, even if they are boys.
The Good Day

It was a really good day.

Tim had been comfortably asleep, warm, snuggled up with Abby, feeling decently rested because they'd gotten to bed fairly early the night before. And, as he was laying there, mostly asleep and very happy to be that way, he slowly started to wake up to the feeling of Abby rubbing against him.

Rubbing against him in a very determined sort of way. In a your-morning-erection-is-very-conveniently-located-and-I-intend-to-take-advantage-of-it sort of way.

Best he could remember the last time that had happened, last time she'd been awake before him to even think about doing this was their honeymoon.

And Tim wholeheartedly agreed that doing this was a very good idea.

"Good morning, Mrs. McGee." He figured that'll get old eventually, but so far calling her that is still a kick.

"Good morning." She shifted a little, hitching her leg over his, giving him a little help on the angle with her hand, and he moaned as he slipped into hot and wet and glorious.

"God, baby, that's a great way to wake up."

"Thought you'd like it."

"You're welcome to wake me up like this whenever you want." He punctuated that with a slow, gentle thrust, as his hand found her breast. "You liking it, too?"

She arched back. "Oh yeah, we're good."

They catch a case, but it isn't a murder.

Paperwork days are boring. Murder cases aren't boring, but they are depressing. (Especially right now.)

Today's case, a kidnapping, is usually the worst, but today's case is also special.

Staff Sergeant Elana Bonsom is being sent to Afghanistan next week. Her daughter, Mandy, is being sent to live with her grandparents, in Montana. Her father, Dan Rogrique, Elana's ex, has taken the girl, and left a note saying he'd taken her.

So, while the hunt is on, there's significantly less urgency than usual because the one thing they aren't afraid of is Mandy getting killed.

Sure, dealing with Elana begging to get her daughter back is unpleasant.

And then it gets worse when they finally catch Dan with Mandy, (Idiot had his phone on and on him. Grabbing them took an hour and a half, one minute of which was spent pinging his phone,
eighty-nine of which were spent driving to their location.) and get his side of it: namely he's got joint
custody with Elana, but she won't let him have their daughter for her year-long deployment and is
sending her to Montana, where her parents live, where he can't afford to go, rather than let her live
with him.

It gets even more complicated when the different lawyers show up, Dan's yelling about how he was
being denied access to his child, Elana's claiming he was an unfit parent because he kidnapped her,
along with Child and Family Services who didn't want either of those two anywhere near Mandy.

So, yeah, by the end of it, Gibbs is ready to smack everyone involved in the case upside the head.
But no one is dead. No one is going to be dead. And it hadn't been boring.

Tim and Tony cut out early. The sound of lawyers squabbling in the conference room a screechy
soundtrack for heading to the elevator.

Tim expects Tony to hit the button for the ground floor, but he stabs the one that takes them to
Autopsy instead.

"We've got the afternoon free, let's grab Jimmy and get you two measured for wedding tuxes."

Tim eyes him. "Don't you need an appointment for that?"

"Made one at lunch when it looked like this was going to get wrapped fast."

"Okay." A few more seconds pass. "Tony, why are we buying tuxes? Not like we're gonna wear
them a lot."

"McGee, there are many things you should rent, if you can, expensive toys, vacation places, stuff
like that. Tuxes are not on the list.

Tim's not getting that. A suit you'll wear, at most, once, seems like the epitome of a fancy toy.
"Sounds like it'd go under the expensive toys category."

Tony just shakes his head at Tim, giving off a very strong older, wiser vibe. Tim's mid-eye roll at
that when Tony says, "You wouldn't rent sex toys would you?"

"No!" That gives Tim the creeps.

That older wiser vibe gets even stronger, and Tim starting to feel less eye-rolly about this. "What do
guys rent tuxes for? Weddings and proms. Do you really want to be wearing a suit that was last worn
by a pimply seventeen-year-old who jizzed in his pants in the backseat of his dad's car 'cause his
girlfriend let him finally round third?" Tony shudders at that. Then he shakes his head again. "Do not
rent tuxes."

That may not have been precisely Tim's Senior Prom, but it was close enough, and for the first time
in almost twenty years he's thinking about that suit and really hoping the rental company sterilized it
when they got it back.

Tony sees that look and just nods at Tim, very smug, as the elevator doors open .

A moment later they head into Autopsy, where Jimmy and Ducky are in the midst of sterilizing every
"Anthony, Timothy, what brings you down here?" Ducky asks.

"I was hoping to grab the Gremlin and see if I can make these two look great in a tux or die trying."

Jimmy looks up from his pipettes, raises an eyebrow at Tony and says, voice bone dry, "I look fine in a tux, Tony, Tim's the one who can't wear one to save his life."

Tony doesn't look like he believes that, and he certainly doesn't sound like it either, as he says, "Fine isn't good enough. This is my wedding, and you are going to look better than fine. So, can the glassware wait until tomorrow?"

"I believe it can, Anthony. Go about your Herculean labors," Ducky says with a smile.

"I really don't look that bad in a tux," Tim adds.

"Uh huh." Tony flashes him a sideways look as Jimmy puts down his pipettes. "You always look like you're about to jump out of your skin when you're in a suit of any kind."

"I didn't say I liked wearing them, I said I don't look terrible in them."

Jimmy's shaking his head no at Tim. "You look terrible in them because you hate wearing them." Jimmy grabs his cell out of his pocket and flashes a text to Breena as they head out of Autopsy toward the parking lot. "Just checking in and letting her know I should be home on time."

"Can't imaging this'll take more than three hours," Tony says. "So why do you hate suits? You used to wear them every day."

"Because it was the dress code, Tony, and I don't hate them, I just don't like them."

"Then why don't you like them?" Jimmy asks. "It's obviously not that they're too hot, you wear long sleeves and a jacket year-round."

"I don't know. I just don't like them."

Jimmy raises an eyebrow at him.

"Fine, I don't like them because my dad used to make me wear them all the time. And looking dumb in them just made it worse. So, where are we going?" Tim asks as they get into Tony's car.

"Dominic Lawson. My tailor."

"You have a tailor?" Jimmy looks utterly shocked by this idea. He's mid bucking up his seatbelt, and stops, just contemplating the idea.

"Part of the reason why I always look great in suits is that I have them made for me. Part of the reason he looks like a twit and you look 'fine' is because you buy off the rack," Tony says as he pops his key into the ignition.

"How much is this going to cost?" Jimmy asks.

"Less than what you won in the 'When are Tony and Ziva getting engaged?' pool."

"You won that?" Tim asks, curious, turning in his seat to look at Jimmy in the back. He's generally not too hooked into the NCIS betting pool, so he hadn't even noticed there was a Tony and Ziva one
"Well, yeah." Jimmy rolls his eyes a little, of course he won it. He's won a good two-thirds of the pools that have been up in the last three years, mostly because he's got nothing against asking whoever it is what they're going to do.

"How?" Tim looks amazed.

"Same way I won yours."

"You cheated?" Tim asks.

"Of course."

"He cheated on yours?" Tony's giving Palmer an exasperated look in the rear view mirror. He'd lost two hundred dollars on that thing.

"He kept asking when I was going to do it, so I flat out told him."

"And that worked with Tony, too." They both just look at him. "What? It was an easy way to finance your wedding presents. I always use the money for a present for whoever the pool is on." Which is probably why no one complains about his unusually high win percentage.

"Speaking of which, you guys going to set up a gift registry?" Tim asks Tony.

"Nah. There's twenty people coming to our wedding, and all of them know us well enough we don't need one. Plus filling out a 'here's what presents to get us' list feels weird."

"Better than getting fourteen blenders," Jimmy says. Even with a registry, Breena's extended family and friends got them duplicate and triplicates of several things, and returning them wasn't either of their idea of fun.

"Still feels weird."

"Speaking of weird," Jimmy says a minute later as they pull up in front of an elegant brownstone in a very upscale neighborhood. "Tony, this looks like a house."

"It is a house. He works out of his top floor," Tony answers as they get out of the car and follow him to the front steps.

"Your tailor works out of his attic?" Tim asks while Tony hits the doorbell.

"He used to have a place out on Jensen, but decided to scale back five years ago."

If Tim has an idea in mind of what a tailor should look like, it certainly isn't the man who answers the door. He'd expected the exquisitely dressed part. That's a given. The looks-to-be-at-most thirty, ebony skin, and Italian accent all take him by surprise. (For whatever reason, in Tim's mental landscape, tailors are old, white, and British.)

"Tony!"

"Dom." They do that wide-armed hug thing that Tim thinks of as being a very Italian sort of gesture.

Dom looks at both of them, smiles, and says to Tony, "You are right. Tall, pale, and skinny, and taller, paler, slightly less skinny. But we'll make them look great. Come in friends!" And thus they're ushered into a posh, that's the best word Tim can think of to describe the place, everything about it is
expensive and oozes class, living room, offered tea, coffee, or brandy while Tony and Dom talk about the wedding plans and how the last suit Dom had made for Tony is working out.

Dom's measuring him, very thoroughly, extremely thoroughly, honestly, Tim's had sex that involved less touching than what's happening right now, (Really, why is this guy measuring around his upper thigh?) chatting away about single-breasted, slim cut, silk wool blend, double vent, cutting the lapels to make his face look less long, (Tim has literally no idea at all what Dom means by that. He's just nodding and smiling at that point, way, way, way out of his depth.) telling Tony that yes, with those two (Tim assumes Dom means him and Jimmy) that vests and ties will look vastly superior to bow ties and cummerbunds, and that given this is a wedding, a satin stripe on the leg and the pocket would probably look good, but without it, the suits will be much more wearable for other occasions.

And Tony's just chatting right back with him, sipping his coffee, completely comfortable, seeming to understand this bizarre onslaught of terms. Jimmy's got his phone out and for a moment Tim thought he might have been googling to figure out what's going on, but he sees Jimmy's thumbs flashing over the screen, so he's probably texting home again.

He holds up his phone and snaps a picture of Tim, trussed up in measuring tape.

"What was that?"

"Breena wants me to document the possibility of you looking good in a suit."

Tim looks at Dominic and says, "I really don't look that bad in one."

Dominic looks at Tony, who shakes his head and mouths the word, awful.

"You buy your suits pre-made?"

"Yeah."

"And that is why you look bad in them. You have a very long body."

"I'm six one."

Dom smiles at him, measuring the circumference of his wrist over his watch. (Seriously, what the hell does he need that for? Tim's half expecting the back wall to vanish, revealing wand boxes stacked to the ceiling.) "You are tall, also. But long and tall are not the same thing. Your body is a series of ovals. Oval face, oval torso, oval legs."

"Okay." He agrees about his face, but isn't seeing it for the rest of him.

"Tony is more square. Jimmy, more rectangular. Suits are made to play up the square shape of a man's body. If your body doesn't have that shape naturally, and the suit is not made properly, it will just sort of lay on the shoulders and hips, looking soft and floppy. Build the suit right, and it will hold the proper shape."

"Uh huh."

Then Dom gets going about shoulder and hip width ratios and how to balance them with height as Tony and Jimmy are snickering about the soft and floppy bit. Tim doesn't quite catch what Tony says to Jimmy, something less-than-complimentary about his masculinity in regards to soft and floppy, but Jimmy outright laughs at it, and best Tim can remember that's the first time in a month Jimmy's full-on laughed, so that makes Tim happy.
All in all, it was a really good day.
Tony's voice trails off as Palmer sits down next to them in the break room.

"What?" Jimmy asks as Tony looks at him, a hint of panic in his eyes.

"Nothing," Tony says, too fast.

"What's he talking about, Tim?"

"Nothing..." Tony says quickly, glaring Tim into silence. "It's just... It's a stupid problem. And you've got enough going on without my stupid problems."

Jimmy sighs, stares at Tony for a moment, and then says, "Tony, there's nothing I can do about my problems, so give me a stupid one I may be able to help with. Nothing's worse than feeling useless. Though feeling like your friends are afraid to say things to you for fear you'll break is a pretty close second."

Tim gives Tony a good long look when Jimmy says that, hoping he'll get back to what he was talking about, but he doesn't. Instead Tony says, "Okay. So, I've got exactly one job when it comes to this whole wedding thing: plan the honeymoon." He does, however, do it smoothly enough that there's no hint that this isn't what he was talking about before, so Tim rolls with it.

Tim and Jimmy are nodding. Though Jimmy adds, "Pick up the rings, and keep a hold of them until wedding time."

"Tuxes," Tim says.

"Okay, I've got three jobs. But one of them is done until the next fitting, one doesn't need to be dealt with now, and this one does. For our honeymoon, I want to find a place Ziva and I have never been. Somewhere cool, lots of good stuff to do, but it's got to be somewhere both of us have never been, somewhere we can explore, together."

"Oh." Jimmy does seem to think that this is A: A stupid problem, and B: He can't really help with it. He sips his coffee.

Tony's nodding along, emphasizing how this isn't something Jimmy's useful for. "Yeah. I've already stolen her passport, both of them, but all that does is rule out three quarters of the interesting places on earth and doesn't tell me about where she's been on her unofficial trips."

"Does where you are matter too much?" Jimmy asks. "When I was planning mine, the main thing I was looking for was how good the hotel room was." Tim's nodding along with that. Sure they wanted to see some interesting places, too, but mostly he was checking out the hotel amenities.

Tony sighs at that. "There's a really big difference between getting married at... what were you, thirty-four?" Jimmy nods. "And thirty-six, and the forty-eight I'll be by the time we tie the knot. So, yes, the room and whatever is in it is certainly going to be a big deal, but in that I can't do it six times a day anymore, we're going to be spending some time outside of it as well, so the room has to be located somewhere cool."

"We liked New Orleans." Tim says, willing to play along with this, but wishing Tony hadn't immediately changed the subject as soon as Jimmy showed up.
"Been there."

"Chicago?" Jimmy asks.

"Been there."

"Seattle?" Tim tries.

"We're not geeks."

"Cape May, New Jersey?" Jimmy offers. Tim just looks at him, shocked at that suggestion, and not in a good way, so he says, "What? It's cool. Beach, Victorian architecture, one of the few places you can see the sun set over the ocean on the east coast."

"New Jersey in April?" Tony just shakes his head at that idea.


"It's supposed to be fun for her, and we've both been there."

"Mexico?" Tim suggests.

"Been there."

"Not the whole country," Tim says as he pulls his phone out of his pocket. "There's got to be a really nice beach nestled somewhere that neither of you have ever been."

"That's probably true for the Caribbean, as well." Jimmy's getting his phone out, too. "Just because you've been to one island doesn't mean you have to cross all of them off the list."

Tim starts googling away. "You want some sort of beach thing, right?"

"That'd be nice. But it's not a requirement."

"What's 'cool stuff'?" Jimmy asks, also googling.

"Good food, good dancing, beaches are a plus, movies are another plus, and Ziva likes architecture."

Tim's punching things into his phone and it comes up with Lebanon. "Well, that's not gonna work."

"What?" Tony's curious, just because Tim's not going for it doesn't mean they won't.

"I googled beaches, night life, architecture, movies, skiing—"

"Skiing? Again, April, McGee."

"I meant water skiing, but forgot water, anyway, it came up with Lebanon."

Tony winces. Yes, Ziva has some good stories about Beirut, before things went insane, but that was years ago, and... "Yeah, that's not going to do it. Last thing I want to do is get arrested as a spy on our honeymoon."

"I've got something," Jimmy says, putting his cell on the table in front of the other two, and standing behind them. "Private island resort in Mexico..." He's showing them pictures of the place. Apparently it's a collection of ultra-deluxe cabins (if you can call something that luxurious a cabin) on several islands off of Cozumel. Close enough you can go to the mainland and party. Far enough
away that if you want quiet time on a beach by yourself that's an option, too. "It's got all the goodies, spa, restaurants, your very own chunk of beach… You know… This looks really nice…"

"You want us to take Molly for a few days and grab a long weekend? Valentine's is next week. You could do a late present for Breena."

"We might." Jimmy's staring at the pictures in front of them.

"Are you helping me plan a honeymoon or taking one yourself?"

"Both. Maybe. Not sure I want to be away from Molly that long."

"Take her with you?" Tim offers.

"Romantic weekend with a one-year-old… Eh… I'm not getting the sense that this place is set up for kids."

"Talk to Breena about it. You want to go; we'll watch Molly, no problems."

"I'll give her a call and get back to you."

"Good."

Jimmy checks the time. "And those beakers should be done with the autoclave. Time to head back." He picks up his coffee and walks back toward Autopsy.

Once he's gone, Tim says to Tony, "You've got to stop doing that. He's your friend, and you can't keep shutting him out of your life."

Tony's calm, happy, in-charge expression vanishes and the slightly panicked one he's had all day returns. "Look, I cannot complain to him about how Ziva's talking kids, and I'm freaked out. I just… I can't do it. Not now, not to him. Last month, sure, but I can't do it now."

"If anyone's going to have sympathy for you being scared, it's Jimmy."

"Yeah, but I'm not terrified of having my heart ripped out. I mean, I may be, eventually, but right now it's this huge lump of can-I-do-this-and-not-fuck-it-up, and right now all he wants is the chance to do it. I don't want to rub his face in that."

Tim nods; that might be a good point.

"How am I going to do this? I can barely take care of a goldfish—"

"You've kept Kate for six years. That's world record goldfish maintenance. Those things die if you look at them funny."

"It's still a goldfish, not a person, and all of this stuff with Jimmy and Breena and Jon and you and Abby and McSciuto has Ziva thinking kids, and I don't want to disappoint her, but this scares me shitless, and if I can't do this…" Tony looks down and rubs his eyes, then looks back at Tim, really scared. "Tim, you don't marry a woman who wants kids if you don't."

That shocks the hell out of Tim. "Okay, stop right there. Yes, you're right, if she wants kids and you don't, you don't marry her. But you love her—"

"More than anything. I really do, and that's terrifying in and of itself. But this last month is making her think 'I want kids' and it's making me think 'I want a vasectomy.'"
"Really?"

"Yeah. Maybe it is fear of having my heart ripped out. I was watching Jimmy when he got the call, and..." Tony doesn't need to say it, they both watched all hint of life drain right out of Jimmy's face. "I don't think I could survive that. I don't know if I'd want to. And look at him, he's calling home every hour, and you know they aren't going to Mexico because he can't stand to have Molly out of his sight for that long. I don't think I can take that."

Tim lets out a long sigh. He knows that part of the traditional best man job is talking the groom off the ledge he's about to jump off of because he's got cold feet. But this isn't a flavor of cold feet he was expecting. "Tony, if you love her, then you step up and have the kids and you do a good job of being a dad because that's the cost of loving her. That's what 'your happiness is more important to me than mine' means. And if she loves you, and if you can't do it, really can't do it, then she'll put it aside because your happiness will be more important than hers. Either way, you've got to figure out if you can't do it or if you're just too scared to think straight."

Tony sighs. "Scared. I know it's scared. I want to make her happy. I want to be a man she can depend on to do the right thing, but what if I'm bad at it? God, what if I end up on my own with this kid? Or what if we lose him?"

"First off, we're not going to let you be bad at it. There's a long line of men here who love you and Ziva, and we will not let you fail her. Secondly, no matter what, you won't be alone. If something happens to Ziva, we'll still be here. We didn't let Jimmy and Breena down, and we won't let you down. Think about it, Gibbs is actually talking to Jimmy to help keep him afloat. You think he'd do any less for you? And lastly, if something did happen to your baby, you'd survive it. Jimmy and Breena are going to make it. Gibbs made it. Worst comes to worst, you'll make it, too."

"I don't want to be my dad."

Tim exhales a long breath at that, remembering that this isn't just a theoretical exercise for Tony. "When your mom died, did your dad have anything like us?"

"I don't know. Not that I remember. Hundreds of people came to the funeral, and then the next day we were alone. Just me and him and a big, empty house that still felt like her. The day after that, he went back to work, in the city, and it was just me and a nanny, all day, every day, until September and I was off to boarding school."

"That won't happen, not to you, not again. Look..." Tim feels a little weird about saying this out loud. Doing it wasn't weird, but talking about it... But Tony's more than grown up enough that he won't tease Jimmy about it, and Tim feels up to handling whatever Tony might toss at him. "The first night Jimmy was back, we slept with him, held onto him, made sure he wasn't on his own. We slept with him and Breena the first night she was home, too. Then stayed at their place for three days after that. After we left, Ducky stayed at their place every night for a week. You know Ziva brought food. And I know you and Gibbs and Ziva took that case and did my job so I could be there for Molly. No matter what else happens, you're never going to be alone again because you're stuck with us."

Tony looks really touched by that, but it fades quickly, his emotional armor slipping back into place, getting him back into a more comfortable mindset. "You slept with Palmer?"

Tim rolls his eyes. "Yeah, and if you're ever hurting that bad, I'll cuddle you, too."

Tony laughs at that, then says, seriously, "Thanks."

Tim thinks for a minute. "So, did you actually need honeymoon help?"
"Nah, booked it last week."

Tim looks at him curiously.

"Johannesburg."

"South Africa?"

"We've never been there. It's supposed to be like California. Great beaches, night life, and safari."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Should be cool."
"I hate guns," Jimmy says, looking at the weapons in front of him. It's Saturday afternoon, and as per Gibbs' instructions they are spending an hour at the range.

"They're just tools," Tim answers. At least, as far as he's concerned, step one of proper gun usage is to not fetishize them.

"Tools for killing people."

"Yep." He's holding his Sig. And it's designed for exactly one thing, putting a bullet in someone. It's not for hunting. It isn't for target shooting. It's for killing people, which is why, as a Federal Agent, Tim's got one.

"I don't want to kill people."

"Yeah, well, it's not exactly my idea of fun, either. Sometimes you have to, though."

Jimmy realizes what he just said to Tim. "Oh. Shit. I'm sorry. I didn't… How many?"

Tim looks at his gun. "One more than I should have."

It takes Jimmy a minute to remember what Tim's talking about. Then it clicks, that case with the undercover cop. "I… I thought you didn't know for sure."

"I don't, no one does, but it doesn't matter. Look." Tim gestures for Jimmy to put on his ear protection as he puts on his and runs the target out its fullest extension. He quickly, steadily empties his clip, and then pulls the target close, taking off his ear protection. All fifteen bullets tore through the head of the target. "I aimed at him. I pulled the trigger. I wasn't any worse of a shot then than I am now. Doesn't matter if it was my bullet or not. I meant to kill him. I shot at him. It's on me."

Tim touches one of the two guns in front of them, changing the subject. "So, this one is a Sig Sauer. It's the standard NCIS pistol. Tony, Gibbs, and I carry one and like them. Ziva prefers her Beretta." He touches the other one. "It's got slightly less recoil, which is nice for getting a whole lot of fast shots off accurately, but the trigger guard's a bit smaller, fine for her, she's got little hands, but I don't think it's as comfortable."

Jimmy nods, staring at them. "Really don't want to do this."

"You've got two girls who depend on you to come home every single night. So, you're going to do it. No more hoping the cavalry shows up in time. You're going to learn how to be your own cavalry."

Jimmy just kept staring at the guns in front of him.

"And for the record, I absolutely refuse to help Abby and Breena bury your ass because you don't like guns. If it ever comes down to you're going home or he is, the correct answer is you."

Jimmy looks away from the guns and up at Tim, looking mildly exasperated. "Tim, I think you're confused on which one of us is the cop."

"One minute later when you got kidnapped, and you and I would have never been more than friendly co-workers. Not gonna happen again. Next time you shoot someone, you'll kill them."
"Wonderful. I'm a doctor, you know. Killing people is the antithesis of my job."

"So's Ducky. You want him to come along next time?"

"This is going to be embarrassing enough without being out-shot by an eighty-year-old."

Tim shakes his head. "Don't worry about embarrassing. It's physically impossible for you to be worse at this than I was when I started."

"I really doubt that."

"Uh huh. You know how you said when you asked Ed to marry Breena that he laughed so hard he cried?"

"Yeah."

"I'm seven-years-old. My dad, who was apparently born knowing how to shoot anything that shoots, took me to the range to learn how to shoot a gun. My dad laughed so hard he cried."

"Ouch."

"Yeah. The only reason I ever got good at it was that Jim Nelson took pity on me at FLET and decided I was too damn smart to fail out because I couldn't shoot. He spent hours working with me on it. I'd drill him on the book work while he got me through my gun proficiency. So, pick them up, find one that feels good in your hand, and let's learn how to shoot it."

Jimmy sort of pokes the beretta. "So, your dad, what, just gave up?"

"Oh no… no… Don't think my dad ever just 'gave up' on anything. "Tim's got a really forced grin on his face and is shaking his head as he says this. "He kept at it for years when he was on land. But when I was fifteen, he came to the conclusion that yelling at me while I had a loaded gun in my hands was a bad idea. Even though I flinched every time I pulled the trigger, I could still hit a guy six inches from my shoulder, leaning over me, calling me a worthless, cock-sucking cunt—"

"What?!" Jimmy looks beyond horrified. He's staring at Tim like he's never seen him before, eyes wide, completely shocked out of any awareness of where they are or why they're here.

"You ever heard the phrase 'curse like a sailor'?" Tim asks, voice very dry.

"Yeah…"

"You think it's a joke?"

"Apparently not," he says, eyes still very wide.

Tim nods. "Part of the reason I usually don't."

Jimmy thinks about that. "Have I ever heard you curse?"

"I'd imagine you have, but no examples are immediately springing to mind. Gibbs and Ziva have, and Abby, of course."

Jimmy takes a step back. "Why are you cursing at her?"

"I don't only do it when I'm angry."
Jimmy looks a little confused by that answer.

"You think I've never talked dirty to Abby?"

"You know, honestly, I don't spend all that much time speculating about your sex life. Mine keeps me more than happy enough."

Tim smiles at him and says, "Anyway, he was cussing me out because I couldn't hit the target. I think the last time we did it, he saw the look on my face, and realized he was one step away from breaking the very thin thread of control that kept me from shooting him."

"Really?"

"Yeah. At least, I know I was thinking about it awfully hard. He'd been gone for six months, and second day home, after yelling at me for only having a 3.92 GPA and not being first string on the wrestling team, he decided we needed to go shooting, and he spent an hour yelling at me about it, and I was standing there, sweating, trying not to cry, hitting other people's targets, the back wall, the ceiling, the floor, but not my target, and I just stopped, stood there, gun in hand, at my side, finger on the trigger, and thought about the fact that I was fifteen, no record, model student, and everyone else in the damn place could hear what he was yelling at me, so they probably wouldn't put me in jail for more than six years, maybe just three, and that was starting to look awfully good.

"He stared at me, took the gun out of my hand, packed it up, saying nothing, and we went home and never went shooting again. So, you're not going to be any worse at this than I was, and I'm not going to yell at you. And I also know you're stalling. Pick one."

"Fine. I'm not just stalling." At least, he's not anymore. Tim being getting chewed out so bad he was ready to kill his father legitimately has Jimmy's full attention. That said, he picks the Sig up, holds it in his hand awkwardly, and says, "I'm honestly curious about your dad, too. You never talk about him."

"And if you want, we'll talk about him, after we shoot. Like this." Tim showd Jimmy how to curl the gun into his right hand and use his left for support. "How's that feel?"

"Heavy. Solid. Like a gun?"

"Good. You sight down the barrel. Once you get it set, keep steady on the inhale, and gently curl your index finger in on the exhale. Slow and easy. Watch." Tim demonstrated his own technique. "Just relax into it. Find your center, block out the rest of the world, and then squeeze the trigger."

They put their ear protection back on, and Jimmy shoots, and hits his target. Granted, it's only twenty feet off, but still, he hit it. He looks at Tim, eyebrows high, a lot of surprise on his face. "It's actually kind of cathartic."

"Yeah. Fourteen more to go. Have at it."

He takes each one slow and easy, nice, relaxed pose, and just curls his finger into it. "You know, it's like yoga with explosions."

Tim thinks about that for a moment and shrugs.

"Really. You find your center, clear your mind, and then make your body do something while you hold the quiet."

"Don't say that to Gibbs; he'll turn you into a sniper."
"Not with my eyesight, he won't. Still, you think they'd let Breena come with us next week?"

They're at the NCIS training range. It's supposed to be personnel only, but… "We can try."

"She already knows how to shoot. Ed taught her. Still, it feels good. And I think she'd like something that feels good."

"Then bring her next week. If we can't do it here; there's got to be another range nearby."

"Abby should come, too."

Tim thinks about that. "I'd want to do some googling on that first. Run it by our OB. I don't think the shockwaves would be a problem, but…"

Jimmy nods, and Tim realizes that Jimmy's never going to smack him upside the head for being too protective of Abby, or their baby, again.

After the range, they decided to grab a quick coffee. At least, Tim figures Jimmy'll hold him to talking about his dad, so something that tastes good to go with that'll make it easier.

Tim brings their drinks to the table, and Jimmy wraps up a text to Breena, then asks, "You still think about it?"

"About?"

"The undercover cop," he says, pocketing his phone.

"Oh." Tim exhales loudly. "Yeah. John Benedict. His name was John Benedict. Not as often as I used to. Not often enough to keep me from feeling guilty about moving on. But it'll be ten years in November, and I did move on, it's not there in the front of my mind anymore."

Jimmy fiddles with his cup. "He was going to kill us. No doubt about that at all. And I fired, hit him, dropped him, and all I wanted to do was throw up and cry."

"Yeah. Felt the same way. And then I found out he was a cop. So I did throw up, and cry. And Tony would tell you something pretty similar about the first time he shot someone." Tim figures that gets the idea across without breaking Tony's trust to never say anything about it.

"And now?"

"Now?"

"You've killed guys since then."

"Yeah. Got nine of them when we ran into the Sarin plot." The official report showed that all seven of the men he shot while defending the freezer had died, as well as the group leader, who bled to death after his hand was blown off, and one other guy who must have caught a bullet when they were running. "I was going home or they were, and it wasn't going to be them. I still had nightmares about it for weeks after."

"But you don't anymore?"
"Not about shooting them. Still wake up in a cold sweat thinking I'm back in that freezer again, feeling Tony pressed up against me not breathing. But that only happens after really bad days when I have a hard time getting out of whatever case we're working on."

"Your dad really called you a," Jimmy's voice drops to almost inaudible, "cunt?"

Tim laughs dismissively, partly amused at the fact that Jimmy says the word like he's afraid it'll bite him, and partly because that's not the worst thing his dad has called him. Being called worthless, failure, and waste of talent bugged him a hell of a lot more than being called a girl or gay. "He learned his parenting technique from a string of really foul-mouthed petty officers. Apparently, if you scream at new sailors long enough, they get whipped into proper Navy shape. He was bound and determined to turn me into a sailor, so he used the same technique that worked for those guys."

"While completely missing the fact that you didn't enlist and were thus not particularly motivated to be a sailor."

"Yeah. I mean, I was, as a little kid. I'd do anything to make him smile at me. Who doesn't feel that way about his dad when he's six? But by the time I was ten perfect was the minimum requirement to not get yelled at, and I only got smiles for going way above and beyond."

"So you've been going way above and beyond ever since, pleasing everyone else around you, looking for the smiles he wouldn't give you."

Those psychological profiling lessons Jimmy's been taking with Ducky appear to be working. "Yeah."

"And you hook up with Gibbs who has pretty much the same set of standards, but who does pet you when you live up to them."

"Yep. And who doesn't take my failings as a personal affront."

"Failings?" Jimmy looks confused. Sure, he knows Tim isn't perfect, but he seems pretty good at his job. At least, not bad enough at anything to qualify as 'failing.'

"I'm six. My dad is taking me out on a boat for the first time. And he's hyped it up as the best thing ever. Nothing better than boats. Every good thing on God's blue earth is involved with boating and we're going boating! Yippee." It's possible that he could have gotten more sarcasm into that yippee, but not likely. "And we're going together, alone. One of the few times I can remember doing anything with my dad on my own. Wonderful." Once again, there's withering sarcasm on that word. "I get on the damn thing and within ten minutes I'm puking my guts out. And the first time he rubs my back, pets me a little, tells me it'll get better when we get further out, and then he makes me spend the whole damn day on the boat, and I spent the whole day feeling so sick I wanted to die. We get home, he tells me it'll get better, that I'll get used to it, and soon boating will be great fun. Shockingly enough, I didn't believe that. And even if it was going to get better, I was absolutely terrified of boats by that point. So, the next week when he tried to take me out again, and remember, I'm six years old, I burst into tears, cried the whole way there, and then spent the whole day, because once again we had to spend all eight hours of that day on that damn boat, throwing up and sobbing. That time he started yelling at me to toughen up."

"You were six?"

"I might have been seven, possibly five. But not eight because we were back east that year, and I know it happened before we spent that year out of Annapolis."
"Why on earth did you ever sign up for anything having to do with the Navy?"

"I really am insane? No. I thought he might… approve, I guess. My last attempt to get a smile. It didn't work. Anyway, first time I'm on a boat with Gibbs, and well, yeah, I'm still sea sick, he tells me to sip some ginger ale and nibble on saltines. As long as I got the job done, it was okay that I was sick."

"Tim, getting nauseous on boats isn't a failing."

"It was in my family."

"Your dad is insane."

"Abby's said that, too."

"He pull a lot of that crap?"

"Enough so we're not speaking. Enough so that I'm dreading Sarah's wedding because he'll be there."

"Sarah's getting married?" That takes Jimmy by surprise, he was fairly sure that was the kind of thing Tim would tell him, though if it happened recently...

"She's not engaged, but I assume it'll happen eventually. She and that Glen guy are moving down here in March."

"That Glen Guy?"

"You met him at the wedding."

"I remember. Just, you calling him that."

"Oh."

"I sometimes forget you're a big brother."

Tim shrugs at that. "Not too involved these days. Short of making sure my agent actually read her first novel, I haven't had to do too much looking out for her. You talk to Clark recently?"

"No. He sent a card and some flowers. My mom says he's too scared to call."

"Scared?"

"Terrified of saying something stupid."

Tim doesn't know if Jimmy's talent for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time is a family trait or just him, so he says, "Maybe saying nothing at all is the better choice then."

"Maybe." He fiddles with his drink and sighs. "Twenty-six minutes."

"Jimmy?"

"That's the longest I can go without thinking about Jon or feeling scared that something might happen to Breena or Molly."

"It'll get better."
"I know. How long before you could go half an hour without thinking about Benedict or the freezer or your dad?"

"When he's around, my dad still freaks me out, pisses me off, makes me feel fifteen and out of control again. I hate having him around. When he's not, months can go by without thinking about him. I don't remember when that shift happened, but it was after I started working at NCIS. After I stopped talking to him. After I moved to DC, changed my number, and told Sarah and Penny not to give it to him.

"It was a good year before I could go a day without thinking about Benedict. I don't remember it well enough to know more specifically than that. But I remember that a whole day had gone by, and then the next, and I hadn't thought of him, and I felt sick about it. So that kept it in my mind for a few weeks, but it kept drifting further and further away.

"The freezer… Which part of it? Nightmares every night for a solid week. Sporadically for months after. And every now and again now. If I don't get the time to fully pull out of work before sleeping, they come back. I couldn't make myself believe Tony was really alive until I touched him. That was a full day. I still hate cold, and I'm fairly sure that if someone ever gets murdered in a walk in freezer our whole team will bow out of that case; I know I can't make myself walk into one of them. Don't like pitch black, either. I get really nervous if that moment where my eyes adjust to the dark takes too long.

"All in all, I'd say it was probably six weeks before I could go half an hour without thinking about something having to do with that case. And the only thing that stopped the nightmares from being a nightly occurrence was writing it all out. I took five hours, wrote everything, staring off as McGregor, because there's a buffer between me and him, and eventually shifted into my own voice, into my own memories, that helped, at least, let me get some sleep. You sleeping any?"

"Yeah, but with help."

"Alcohol?"

"No. Ducky wrote me a prescription. And I'm following the instructions."

"Okay."

"So, you just wrote?"

"I find it easier to deal with things if they're on paper. So, yeah, me, my typewriter, five hours and twenty-five pages later and I at least knew what the next step was."

"What was it?"

"I got all my affairs in order. Made sure that if something happened to me, Abby'd be taken care of." He smiles a little. "Stopped being a boyfriend and became a husband."

Jimmy nods at that. "Yeah."

"You can read them, if you want. Breena, too. They aren't good, but they're real. Give you a better idea of who I was right after than I'm doing by trying to talk about it."

"Has anyone else read them?"

"Abby. Wolf. Writing them got me cleared for active duty."
"I'd like to."

"I'll bring them to Bootcamp tomorrow."
Tears and Guns

Tim noticed two things when he stepped into the house. First off, it smelted great. Something really yummy was cooking away. Secondly, Abby was crying.

From the front door you can see the living room, and the area in front of the TV so, his first hope, that she was just watching something sad on TV, was very rapidly dashed.

Unfortunately, these days crying Abby is a much more common occurrence than he'd really like. Even if what had happened with Jon hadn't happened, she'd probably be pretty weepy. He had figured there were going to be mood swings, and yeah there were.

But then Jon died and whatever emotional reserves Abby had got eaten alive. The ability to say, 'yep, not a big deal, no need to burst into tears,' which had been rendered pretty tenuous by the onslaught of pregnancy hormones, completely vanished.

So, not only is she crying, a lot, which he hates, because if you love a woman, watching her collapse into harsh sobs is torture, but he can't do anything about it. As of this point in time, he's been able to fix precisely zero percent of the issues that have sent her into a crying jag. And to make it worse, these emotional melt-downs are half his fault, because he'd certainly been involved in the whole, let's get you pregnant thing.

The best he can do is be there, get cried on, and provide her with something solid to hold onto.

And he still hates it because he feels so ridiculously useless.

But it's what he can do. So he does. Tim hangs up his coat, takes off his boots, secures his gun, and follows the sound of crying into the kitchen.

She's sitting at the kitchen table, arms folded in front of her, face resting on her forearms, crying.

He rests his hands on her shoulders, and kisses the nape of her neck. "Hey."

She stands up and snuggles in against him. He kisses her forehead.

"I forgot the garlic."

Finally, a problem he can fix! Something he can do. He can go out and get garlic like nobody's business. If garlic will make her stop crying, he'll buy every clove of it in the store. "I can go get some."

She looks up at him with red rimmed eyes. "It's Forty Clove Chicken! How do you forget the garlic for Forty Clove Chicken?"

Which is when he rapidly came to the conclusion that the garlic is a symptom, not the problem, and they are once again in things he can't fix territory. "Everyone forgets things."

"I wrote it down, on the list." There is a list on the table, next to her phone. "I went to the store, got everything else, came home, browned up the chicken, put the whole thing together, wine, tarragon, onions, bay leaf, everything, stuck it in the oven—"

"It smells really good."

She glares at him. Apparently that was the wrong thing to say. Minimizing the impact of forgotten
"garlic is not the right tactic.

"With no garlic in it," she finishes, ignoring his interruption. "It's like my mind decided there would be no garlic in the world. It was on my list. It's in the recipe. It's the name of the damn dish."

"It's okay."

She's looking angry in addition to sad now, and he's feeling really uncertain of what to do next. Not talking at all is starting to seem like a really good idea.

"No it's not! Tim, I forgot. I don't forget. I remember. I do things right. I follow directions and make the right choices and produce the right results. I don't forget!"

"Oh." He thinks fast. "It's normal. The books said it happens. That the hormones—"

"Don't tell me it's the hormones!" And sad vanishes, replaced by all angry. "I know it's the hormones! I'm forgetting things and crying about it. Of course it's the hormones! That doesn't mean it's not real, and that it isn't happening, or that I don't hate it! I'd rather throw up every day for the entire rest of my pregnancy than forget things."

"I'm not trying to dismiss it. Just... it'll get better. Your system'll go back to normal, and you'll go back to being you again."

"What if I don't?"

His eyes go wide, and he really doesn't know what to say about that.

"Lots of women don't go back. They keep forgetting things, and they change."

"We're both going to change. We can't not change. We'll be parents."

She smiles at him a little, and it's clear that's a I know you're trying to cheer me up, and I appreciate it, but it's not going to work gesture. "It's my mind, Tim. I can handle fat and saggy and varicose veins and crabby and tired, but... I can't lose my mind. I can't start forgetting things. That's who I am, not what I am."

He smiles a little back at her, because there's nothing he can say about it, and kisses her again.

"It'll get better."

"You don't know that."

"No, I don't. But I can hope. And you can pray. And you and I will become different people, but we'll do it together, and in the end, it'll be okay. Whatever's coming, we'll figure it out."

She doesn't look too impressed with that, either. But he can tell she's giving him points for trying, even if he's not succeeding at making her feel better.

She sighs, wipes her eyes, kisses him, and then pulls back and asks, "So, how did shooting go?"

And he's all in favor of changing the subject, because maybe that'll at least provide a decent distraction and work on getting her mood better. "Really well. Jimmy said it was like yoga with explosions. He's talking about bringing Breena next time, and if the OB says it's okay, you're invited, too."

"Why wouldn't it be okay?"
"Shockwaves? Remember the episodes of Mythbusters where Kerri's pregnant?"

She nods.

"She went nowhere near any of the explosions or gunfire then."

"Really? That's what's making you think it might not be okay."

"Just making me cautious."

She snorts at him, looking mildly amused by that.

"Think of it this way, it'll probably be the first time Dr. Draz has ever gotten that question."

"That's probably true."

"And it's good to keep her on her toes. Wouldn't want her getting bored."

"Yes, our primary job as patients is to keep her entertained."

"Precisely." He heads to the sink to get himself a glass of water. "I was thinking about something else on the ride home." He pours one, holds the glass out to her, and she nods her head, so he grabs another one and fills it for him. "We've got four guns in this house, and very soon, at least one child."

She nods, that's true. He sits down at the table next to her and hands her one of the glasses. "You want more security for them?" They have two gun safes, one built into the wall near the front door. That's where his service pistol goes. And one in the bedroom where his backup gun and both of Abby's live. And at all times when there's a gun in them, those safes are locked.

"Debating trigger locks."

She thinks about that. "You want one for your service pistol, and that's fine. But if I'm going for the guns in our room, it's because something's gone very wrong, and I don't want anything slowing me down."

"Okay. Good point."

"And I do want all of our kids knowing how to shoot."

He nods. That was something he'd been planning on.

"And I know you don't hunt, but... At least for me, going hunting with my dad and seeing what those bullets did to the animals they hit, that made me respect what a gun could do. Paper targets don't bleed, so you shoot them, and it's a game. You shoot an animal, and you know you've killed something. You know that this is important and dangerous and not a game at all."

"That makes sense. Does Gibbs hunt? I know Tony doesn't, and I know there's more to it than just being able to hit a target." If it was just about accuracy, then he'd be great at it, and taking their kids would be no problem, but he's fairly sure there's some sort of skill involved in making sure you don't scare the deer or turkey or whatever it is off before it gets into place for you to shoot it.

"He used to. I don't think he has in a long time."

"Maybe one of these years, we won't buy the Christmas turkey."

"That would probably work."
"Breena's really ready for this?" Tim asks as he slips on his kilt. (New one. Jimmy and Breena got it for him as a combined Christmas/birthday present. Apparently there is a McGee plaid. Ducky was enlisted to hunt it down. Back in the dark ages, before they decided to try the next island to the west, the MacGhees were Scottish, and as such, there is a McGee tartan. It's hunter, black, navy, and gray, and he really likes it.)

"She says she is," Abby answers. "Molly's a year old today, and she's bound and determined to have a birthday party for her."

Tim nods and begins buttoning up his shirt. Abby has mentioned liking the somewhat dressier kilt look, so he's getting into a white button-down, plaid kilt, and in a few minutes boots, tie, and jacket.

"She's put a lot of effort into this," Abby says as she pulls a knee high sock up one leg.

"What's a lot of effort?"

"She was telling me about the hand-made cupcakes decorated with all of Molly's favorite characters."

"Molly has favorite characters?" He'd spent a good five days with her straight, and hadn't noticed anything he'd call a preference for anything on the television or in books.

"She really likes the Muppets."

"Huh. Wish I had known that. I like them, too."

"Really?" That takes Abby by surprise. She didn't know that about him.

"Not like I've seen them anytime recently. But my first TV memories are watching the Muppet Show with my grandfather and mom. Loved Kermit."

"Apparently her favorite is Kermit, too."

"Next time we babysit, there will be Muppet bonding."

Abby laughs at that. "Anyway, I don't know how 'ready' she is for this, but I do know she's decorated every inch of the house, made cupcakes with Muppets on them, and invited the whole clan, so we're going, we're going to have a good time, and we'll do everything we can to make sure everyone else does, too."

"We'll party or die trying?"

She looks up from her sock and says, "Yes."

"Well, that's not going to be awkward, at all."

"You need to watch a little less Supernatural. You're starting to sound like Dean."

He flashes her a playful look. "Awesome!"

"Way less."
He smiles at her and winks. "Get some pie on the way home?"

"Okay, you're cut off."

"No! I'm half way through season seven. You can't cut me off."

"Then behave." She grins at him. "Zip me up?"

He kneels down and gets the zipper on her boots. At sixteen weeks along, Abby's definitely pregnant. There is an unmistakable baby bump there. And yes, she can still bend well enough to zip knee high boots, but it's also a lot easier to have Tim do it.

So he does, because it's not like an opportunity to rub his hands over her legs is something he minds.

Once booted up, she pulls on a green baby-doll dress with a wide black collar.

And while it's true the McGees might not be fashionable in any traditional sense, they're definitely stylish.

It isn't as awkward as Tim was afraid it was going to be. Probably because if there was ever a group of people who needed a good time, it's them.

So, yeah, Molly couldn't have cared less about the decorations or the presents. (Though everyone else, including Gibbs, told Breena how great of a job she had done. Okay, he smiled at her in a congratulatory manner and kissed her cheek, but Breena understood what it meant.) But she does enjoy being the center of attention, and people cooing over her crawling around and babbling. And she's extremely enthusiastic about ripping into her Kermit cupcake and utterly demolishing it. (How much of it she actually ate as opposed to scattered over the kitchen is open for debate.)

Even Ed's on his best behavior. Though he does stare at Tim, looking really uncomfortable with the kilt for a good five minutes, and when he found out the idea for it was Breena's, he just stares at her, too. (Tim isn't sure what disturbs Ed more: him in a kilt or Breena buying one for him.) But Breena starts telling him about going to the range with Jimmy and Tim and Abby, and that gets them talking guns, which turns out to be fairly pleasant. Ziva and Tony get into it, too. And toward the end, even Gibbs is chatting with them, talking a little about distance shooting, and how back when he started you had to be able to do the math in your head, which got Ducky talking about the history of projectile weapons, and okay, yeah, it's not a traditional topic of conversation for a birthday party, let alone a birthday party for a one-year-old girl, but since by that point, the birthday girl was sleeping in Ducky's arms, (She drifted off when he got talking about ballistae. Apparently his voice is awfully hypnotic if you're a baby.) it works.

The party breaks up not too long after that. It's Valentine's, after all, and granted, Tim and Abby don't have any fancy plans (Quiet night in was a winner last year, and it's likely to be a winner this year, as well.) but Tony and Ziva do, and he knows that Ducky has offered to watch Molly so Jimmy and Breena can go out for dinner tonight.

They stick around to help clean up and make a date for the range the next day, before Jimmy and Tim join Gibbs for bootcamp and then head home.
They grab a light dinner on the way home. It's early enough the restaurants aren't packed, and they are dressed up enough that going out seems like fun to him. Plus, he's been craving khoa phat pu* all afternoon. Sure he's the dad half of the team, but apparently this has not rendered him immune to food cravings.

They're seated and eating when something occurs to him. "You realize, this time next year, Gibbs might be watching Kelly for us so we can go out."

Abby grins at that, a really clear image of Gibbs holding their baby in her mind. Then another very clear image: Gibbs playing with Molly, nibbling on her tummy, doing an astonishingly good Cookie Monster impersonation, while she shrieked with laughter, and then suddenly stopping and giving her to Breena sprang to mind. "You think he's ever changed a diaper?"

Tim thinks about that. Kelly was born in '82, so after guys were expected to do some of the messy work of being a parent, but not all that far after, and he's got no idea how long it took for that idea to filter into the world of Marines. He does know that in '86, when his sister was born, most of the guys on the Navy base they lived on would have rather cut an arm off than change a diaper. And he knows that if his dad ever changed a diaper, it was his, because he certainly never did it for Sarah. But Gibbs never struck him as the kind of guy who was so uncertain in his masculinity that doing 'women's work' would freak him out.

"I'm gonna say yes, but with a lot of doubt."

"Yeah. Did you ever think Ducky would take to being a grandfather the way he has?"

"Nope. Never thought he'd melt into a pile of goo over a baby."

"I was telling him that she's never going to learn to walk if he doesn't occasionally let be her on the floor."

Tim chuckles at that. "He looked ready to wrestle Ed for snuggling rights."

"Ed did really well today. I don't think he said anything that pissed anyone off."

"Yeah, he did do well. Maybe he's finally learning some tact."

"We can hope. It'd be nice to not dread going to family gatherings with him."

"Yeah, it would."

*Thai style crab fried rice.

When they got home, Tim unbuckled his seat belt but left the keys in the ignition. "Out you go, for at least the next two hours."

"Two hours?"

"More if you like. But not less than two hours."

"What are you doing?"
"Last Valentine's Night without kids. I'm preparing for it."

"Okay." Abby grinned. "Hot and dirty?"

"Oh yes!" He flashed her a sexy smile. "With a side of kink, and an extra helping of erotic."

"All right, then! Anything you want me to bring home?"

"You in a submissive mood."

"Ohhh…" Her eyes lit with pleasure.

"Yeah." He flashed his eyebrows at her and got out of the car. "See you after seven thirty."

Two hours is a lot of time to be imagining what Tim could have been planning. All sorts of good things might be in the offing. So, it was with a spring in her step and a smile on her face that Abby headed to his office door. (Music from inside let her know he was in there.)

"Well?" She was grinning and looking around curiously. So far all she could see was that Tim was still in the kilt, though he'd taken off the jacket, boots, and socks, rolled up his sleeves, and loosened his tie.

He stood up, smiled, and pointed up. "Upstairs."

She skipped up the stairs, holding his hands, and dragging him behind her. She flung open the door to their bedroom and…

"Huh?" The expression on her face was really confused.

He just grinned at her. Wide, happy smile on his face, he was really enjoying this.

She walked in and looked up, eyebrows furrowing, obviously there's something going on here, but she's not getting it. Then looked around, and looked back to him. "You got me a plant and rearranged our furniture."

"Yep!" He beamed at her.

She stared around the room again, utterly perplexed. He just grinned like this was the best joke on earth.

She walked beneath the plant and looked up at it. It was a very attractive… something. Abby's not good with live plants. If she had to identify it by its pollen or spores or whatever, it'd be no problem, but a living plant hanging from the ceiling over her head… Nope. No idea.

"Did the words hot, dirty, or kinky get redefined while I was out?"

"If they did, I didn't get the memo."

"Uh huh…" Maybe it was some sort of special aphrodisiac plant. "What kind of plant is it?"

He trailed his fingers down her neck and back as she stared up at it. "Some sort of fern. It's green. It
doesn't need a lot of sun, and supposedly it's pretty forgiving if you forget to water it. The lady at the
plant store said they were practically impossible to kill, so that sounded like a good choice."

"Okay. So, you got me a random plant."

"Yes. But if you look up a little higher, you'll see something else I got you."

She looked up further, and then looked at the rearranged furniture. Abby crossed their room and
closed the door to their bathroom. The door with the full length mirror on it. And suddenly this all
made a whole lot of sense, and yes, hot, kinky, and erotic did not get redefined anytime recently.

"Oh."

He grinned even wider. "Exactly. Go open your closet door."

She did, and found both a new mirror on the back of her door, and a nicely wrapped box sitting on
the floor of her closet.

"May I open it?"

"In a moment. You can take it out and put it on the bed, though. Leave the closet door open." Tim
headed over to the plant and took it off the hook.

The hook was the real present. Well, part of it. Most plant holders are made of plastic or cheap metal,
something that'll hold a few pounds easily, but can't take any real weight. The hook Tim's sunk into
the joist in their ceiling will hold his weight bouncing around on it. (He checked.) He moved his
dresser. His is waist high on him, and very handy for certain positions. Now, it's under that hook.
And by moving his dresser, it's now in front of the mirror on the back of their bathroom door, so, if
say, someone were to tie you up and put you on the dresser, all you'd have to do is look to your left,
and you'd have a great view of what was going on. And if you wanted to see it from a different
angle, there was always the new mirror on the back of Abby's closet door, which would be in front
of you. And of course, there's the original mirror that goes with that dresser, behind you.

So, basically, anything you might want to do in that general area had been set so you can see it from
any angle really easily.

Abby noticed something else. Tim's dresser was now on those little coaster things that make furniture
easy to slide. She smiled at that. So, if they wanted to do something with the hook, but not on the
dresser, that'd be easily arranged, too.

He watched her look around, notice everything he did, and kissed her throat, right on his lip tattoo.

"I was thinking that pretty soon we're going to have kids in this house. And probably a nanny.
Eventually kids' friends. After Kelly comes, we might have visitors in our room. So, if the sex gear
was subtle, that might be a good thing." He moved the present to the center of their bed. "Plus
rearranging the mirrors means," he patted the bed letting her know he wanted her to sit, "we can get
a good view of everything that goes on in our bed as well."

Abby sat on the bed next to the present, noticing that yep, she could see herself in all three mirrors.
He nodded at her in a way she took to mean go ahead, open it, and then pulled the long, black satin
ribbon off the box. "For tonight?"

"Maybe." He grinned.

She slit the paper carefully, unwrapping the box slowly, remembering him saying something about
enjoying being teased by the slow reveal. Granted he knew what's in the box, but she hoped he's enjoying her finding out what's in it.

She lifted the lid, whistles softly, and says, "Oh."

This time the grin on his face was pure sex. "Yeah."

Padded wrist cuffs and from the look of them, they could be used one on each wrist, or strapped to each other, and if the metal rings on them are anything to go by they're designed to be attached to a rope or chain and hung from that hook.

And under them was a collection of glass dilators. Abby saw them and looked up at Tim, pleased expression on her face.

"Want to see if you can get off with straight anal?"

She looked back down at them. "Just anal?"

"Maybe not just… How about tied up from the ceiling, spun out like crazy, slowly stretched as I suck every inch of your body, and then fucked as hard as you like until you're coming on my cock."

Abby licked her lips. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Go get a shower. I'll be out here getting ready for you."

"Getting ready for you" meant pushing the dresser over a bit. He wants her standing for this, so it's got to be out of the way.

It also meant finding the right pair of boots for her, and stockings to go with them. He wanted ones that would make her the same height he is, if not a little taller, and preferably platforms as opposed to a high heel. She needed to be comfortable standing in them for as long as this will take, and these days high heels don't agree with her low back. Fortunately she had a wide selection of boots to pick from.

He headed to his bedside table and fetched the lube, his folding knife, and the black silk rope.

The folding knife neatly sliced the ribbon in half. He's going to tie one ankle to the leg of his dresser and the other to the leg of their bed, so he needed two ropes for that.

He draped the rope over the hook and decided to tie each wrist individually tonight.

He finished up the scene by laying out the dilators on his dresser, where she'll be able to see them. There are six of them, short, three inch long plugs with a ring-shaped base (for easy insertion and removal, even if your fingers are coated with lube) ranging from a little less than an inch around (smaller than one of his fingers) to five and a half inches (slightly smaller than his dick). They're clear glass and almost shine in the light from the lamp on his bedside table.

He liked the idea of the anticipation of seeing them all there. Of knowing that a long, slow, steady build up was coming.

Tim heard the water in the bathroom shut off, followed a few seconds later by a dripping wet Abby standing in front of him, holding a towel.

"Sometimes I forget how good you are at this." When she subs, she really subs. He didn't tell her to dry off, so she didn't. "Go ahead and dry off. Get your hair dry enough so it isn't dripping down your
back, but don't worry about getting it completely dry."

He sat on the bed and watched her do it, enjoying the play of her hands on her skin, the towel rubbing gently over her, and the way the water glistened on her.

As he was watching a new idea occurred to him, and he liked that one even better than the one he had before.

Six dilators. Two arms, two legs, mouth and pussy. One part to play with for each size. Yeah, that idea worked.

She was almost dry. "When you get done with that, I want you to come stand in front of me."

She nodded.

"You can speak or make any noises you like."

"Yes." She stood in front of him.

He picked up one of the stockings and patted the bed between his legs. "Your foot here."

"Okay. You going to tell me what you're going to do?"

He cupped her ankle in his hand, lifting it a few inches. "Hold it." And she did. He slipped the stocking up her leg, stroking over her skin as he inched it upward. "Maybe. Do you want me to tell you, or do you want to be surprised?"

She thought about it as he repeated the gesture with her left leg.

"Little of both?"

"I can do that." He put her leg back down and looked at the boots. "Put them on."

She did so, but didn't fasten them. He knelt at her feet and did up the zipper and buckles.

"I want you to stand here." He showed her the spot in front of the dresser and next to the bed. "Right ankle here, left on there." As she got into position, facing the bathroom door mirror (he wanted her to be able to see everything), standing with her legs wide apart, he said, "I'm going to tie your ankles to the bed and the dresser. Keep you nicely open for me. Then we're going to play."

He knelt on the floor in front of her again, slowly dragging the ribbon off the bed, twining it between his fingers, then pulling gently, letting it slip through them. He wrapped it around her thigh, and once again, gently tugged, letting it slither over her skin in a silk-smooth embrace, and then tied that ankle. Same thing for the other leg, drawing out the experience of tying her, playing with the satin a little, kissing her inner thigh before standing up and circling behind her.

He pressed against her back, kissing her shoulders and the nape of her neck, and then gently turned her head to look at the dilators, keeping his fingers on her throat. He pitched his voice low, because his mouth is less than an inch from her ear, caressing her with hot breath as well as soft words. "Each one of them will go with a part of your body." His fingers trace from her left hand to breast. "Arms first."

She purred quietly at that.

He ghosts them over her lips. "Then mouth."
That got a smile.

His fingers settle just below her hips, scribing small circles. "Legs."

"Mmmm..." she looked very pleased.

His left hand slips over, first two fingers grazing her labia. "Then pussy."

She shivered a little at that, arching her back and rubbing against him. "Then what?"

He let go of her, and took one step over to the bed, grabbed the lube, and circled around to the front of her so she could see what he was doing easily. He flicked open the cap and squirted a bit into his fingers, stepping close to her, kissing her lips soft and light as his hand slid between her legs, smoothing the lube over her. She pressed into his touch, arms wrapping around the small of his back as his fingers stroked slickly over her skin.

He broke their kiss, keeping his lips less than an inch from hers, making sure she could feel his words, breath against wet, sensitized lips. "Then your arms will be tied over your head, legs spread wide, pussy so wet it'll be dripping down them. Then I'll stand in front of you, undress slowly, tease you with it. Then I'll slip my cock into your pussy, fuck you for a minute or two, while I kiss you senseless, getting myself really good and slick. Then I'll circle back around you, lean you into the ropes, slide the dilator out, and slam my cock into you until you see stars."

"Yes." She was grinning and her eyes had that heavy, dark look that went with arousal.

"Good." He kissed her one last time, then stepped away, grabbing the smallest of the toys, coating it with lube as she watched him.

"Pretty small."

"That's the idea. Slow and easy, one little step at a time." He kissed down her spine, licking the outlines of her tattoos, nibbling along the crest of her hip, then slowly worked the toy into her. Just because it's small doesn't mean he's going to rush this. Part of the whole point of this is to go slow, so that when he's done with the last one he can rush.

"Good?"

"Yeah, it's fine."

He smiled, took her hand in his, and began to kiss her fingers. He started at the tip of each one, a soft, wet kiss. Then he brought his tongue into the game with long, slow strokes, the sort of touch he likes when it's his dick on the receiving end of things. That got a soft moan.

He massaged her hand, stretching her fingers, pressing into the muscles, knowing exactly how good it feels to have someone hold your hand and really work on it when using your hands all the time is your job. That got a louder moan, one he recognized as more a signal of that-feels-good than rip-my-clothes-off-and-ravish-me.

Tim eased his way down to her wrist, kissing it softly, scraping his teeth over the pale white skin where her pulse thrummed. He took the first of the cuffs, fastened it around her wrist, and tied her hand high above her head. "Still good?"

She nodded. "Yeah, not too high up."

He smiled, and drug his fingers down her arm. She squirmed when he got to her armpit; that was a
bit on the ticklish side, but the squirming got less defensive and a lot happier as he cupped his hand over her shoulder, gently squeezing those muscles, and a very happy moan joined the squirming as he ran his tongue over her upper arm and shoulder, while his hand found her breast.

Tim kept his fingers light and slow, soft, feathery touches that made Abby try to arch and push against him for more friction. He kissed her nipple, wrapping his lips around it in a wet embrace, then pulled back to blow on it.

Her skin lit with goosebumps.

"So pretty." He scraped his fingernails from her wrist to her nipple, and watched them get harder. He licked her arm, once again blowing on wet skin, enjoying the way her skin responded, reveling in the way she moaned when he did it.

Then a thought hit. Room temperature glass feels cold against warm skin. He picked up the second smallest dilator, it's about the size of his thumb.

"So soon?"

"Not quite. I want to make sure it's nice and warm." He traced it over her nipple and she jerked a little at the touch. "Not warm enough, yet?"

"It's pretty cool."

"Feel good?" He rolled it over her skin, following it with his tongue.

"Yeah."

"Good. How about this?" He slipped it into his mouth, holding it in place, while his fingers stroked over her nipples, pulling along them, after a minute, when it didn't feel cold on his tongue anymore, he took it out and traced it over her skin again, drawing complicated patterns down the inside of her arm. "Nice and warm?"

"Yeah. That feels really good."

"Feel better inside you?"

"I'd think so."

He reached for the lube and slicked it up, circling around behind her, kissing the back of her neck while he slid the first one out, and eased the second in.

She groaned as it slid home, and he smiled, taking her right hand in his and starting to kiss her fingers.

The second hand followed the first one pretty closely. But once both of her arms were tied, Tim decided to change things up a little. He kissed her shoulder and said, "Back in a sec."

"Tim!" She was not looking thrilled about that. He winked and sprinted downstairs to get his phone. He hadn't intended to take pictures, though for the life of him he can't figure out why he didn't think of it. Three seconds later he was back, with his phone in hand.

"You're so beautiful, I can't not get pictures." He got a few distance ones, her whole body spread out in front of him, and several close ups. His fingers trailed over her arm as he shot that. "So amazingly beautiful."
The curve of her shoulder and back caught his eye. He shot that with his fingers ghosting along her flesh.

He kissed her belly and made sure to get a picture of the dual curve of her belly and breast. "So soft and round." He nibbled around her hip and low back, shooting the concave curve of the small of her back and the lush convex of her tush. "Mmmmm..." he hummed as his lips slid over the top of her thigh.

He stood back up, saw the look on her face, and quickly kissed the tip of her nose. The expression on her face was mostly amused. She could take or leave the photographs of herself, but she knew he adored them, and his kiss was a gesture of thanks for humoring me.

"Head back, eyes closed." She followed his directions, and he shot her from both sides. Front shot focusing on her face, breasts, and neck, back shot focusing on her hair dangling over her back. Then he licked her throat, from collarbone to jaw, fisted his hand in her hair, and got a shot of that, light gleaming on wet skin as he held her by her hair.

"God, you are so gloriously hot, Abby."

She opened her eyes and grinned at him. "Damn right, baby!"

"Next size up?"

"Please."

That was the one that went with mouth. Once he had eased it into place, he was left with a very pleasant dilemma, kiss Abby from a step back, focusing all attention on her lips and tongue, or step in close and rub his whole body against hers?

Just lips meant maintaining his own control would be significantly easier. As of this point, only his eyes, mouth, and fingers had been involved in the game, and he's got very good control when it comes to that level of stimulation. But once he stepped in close against her, his whole body would be pressed against hers, and his dick, which has been very aware of what's going on, will get into the game, and it's always in favor of getting to the sex part as fast as possible.

Of course, if he steps in close, that meant the sensation of lips, tongue, heat, pressure, the texture of his shirt, tie, and kilt on her skin. It meant her whole body got into the game, as well, and her whole body ramps things up pretty fast for her.

Yes, of all the dilemmas in the world, this was a very good one to have.

He stepped in close and kissed her. His lips and tongue soft and gentle on hers, but he pressed in tight, grinding his hips into hers, rubbing his chest against her breasts, and she gasped into his mouth as he did it.

His hands settled on her ass, anchoring her against him as he rocked against her, nubby wool kilt rubbing her mound, soft cotton of his shirt sliding over her nipples, and of course, as it does that for her, it does for him as well, and, God, it feels so good to have her tight against his body.

And yes, right now his dick was sending him very happy, let's skip the rest of this, hot, wet pussy right here, right now, come on, go get it, signals, and he was doing his best to ignore them, but the fact that he could feel her wet through the kilt was making his breath come fast and his hips roll in a very deliberate sort of way.

It was when he felt his hand head down to the edge of his kilt to pull it up that he broke the kiss and
stepped back. Because he knew that if he didn't, this wasn't going to end the way he was hoping it would.

She made a soft, needy, half-whimper, half-moan sort of sound when he pulled away, and it was fairly likely he made a sound pretty similar to that, as well. Her eyes trailed down his body. She seemed to be just enjoying the view; he was pretty disheveled looking, rumpled, flushed, very prominent erection tenting the kilt. A smile lit her face. "You get to explain that to the dry cleaner."

He looked down, saw the large wet spot on the wool, and laughed. "Mental note, only fool around in the black one."

"Yep. We can't wash wool here."

That helped turn his arousal down a few notches. Got him back into full control of himself. Three down, three to go.

He snagged the fourth one from the dresser and held it against her lips. "Wanna see you suck it." And as she did, as her lips wrapped snugly around it, pulling it gently into her mouth, he eased the third one out, putting it back on the dresser.

He got a quick picture of that as well. "That's so hot it shouldn't be legal. Your mouth, all wet and pouty wrapped around anything like that. Makes me want to see your lips around me. Makes me want to cut you down, have you kneel, and blow me." He spread more lube over her, using his fingers to gently coat her inside and out, and seeing her sucking it while he could feel her tight on his fingers was almost too much. He closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, and then took the dilator from her, and inched it in, slow and teasing as she moaned, low and steady. "But this is just too good to miss out on."

"Left leg next." He sat on the floor in front of her and pulled her stocking down to the top of her boot with his teeth, fingers following in its wake, scraping delicately over her skin with his nails.

That left his mouth about the middle of her calf, which seemed like a good place to start back up. He trailed open-mouthed, wet, sucking kisses up her leg, circling around to nibble the back of her knee, and continued up her inner thigh.

He got to the top of her thigh and feasted. She was so wet the inside of her leg was slick and tasted fabulous and smelled better, so he went to town on her, long, wet, lapping strokes with his tongue as he made sure to get every drop. When her leg was done he looked over at her pussy, wet, shiny, pink, open, begging him for touch. He very carefully took just the left outer lip into his mouth to suck lightly. He stayed away from her clit, from the inner lips, and made sure that his tongue slipped up and down along it as he sucked.

Abby panted, high-pitched almost whines of sound slipping out of her with each new suck.

"That's not my leg!" she finally got out.

He stopped and sat back on his heels. "Are you complaining?"

"Not exactly. But if you're not going to play with my leg, I've got some other parts that want the attention even more."

"Soon enough baby, soon enough. But how's this for a compromise?" He reached for the fifth one, four and a half inches around, wide enough it probably wouldn't slip out, and slid it between her legs, over her thigh, rolling it against the outer lip, then grazing it over the inner one before slowly nudging it into her vagina.
She whined at that too, a needy, you've-almost-hit-it, so-close, not-quite-there, this-is-torture sort of noise.

"Want me to touch here?" he asked and pressed his tongue to her clt, holding it there, firm pressure, no motion.

"Yes!" Her hips started to rock, and he took them in his hands, keeping her still.

"Nope. Not yet." She groaned at that, feeling his lips move against her as he spoke. "Two more."

Tim pulled the fourth one out, and slipped five in. Too fast. She tensed a little on five, which meant he hadn't spent enough time letting her body stretch and adjust, so for her right leg, he slowed even further down. He took his time removing the stocking, meandered slowly back up her leg again, took a few minutes to trace the outline of Kate's memorial tattoo on her hip with his tongue before settling back down between her legs to lick ever drop of her juice off her skin.

By the time he got to her right lip, she was trying to rock against him, and begging him to fuck her, and the long steady litany of "Please, I want you, feels so good, please, let me come, please!" just egged him on, made him go slower, focus his attention more carefully. One thing he was sure of was that when he reached for the sixth one, she would be more than ready for it.

He twisted the fifth one, wiggling it a little. She sucked in a fast breath and exhaled a long,"Tim, please!"

And that was enough teasing. He reached for the sixth dilator.

One thing he had been doing was inserting them by feel. He's a guy. Guys are visually oriented. He's an especially visually oriented guy, so he didn't watch it. Because he knows how it'll look. And he knows how watching it will feel. And he really didn't want to get too excited too fast and lose his control.

But for the last one, he was already kneeling between her legs, and he was so hard he can feel his pulse in his cock, and all he wanted to do was fuck, so he was going to watch.

And God, it looked amazing. No matter what it was, he loved watching her body take it in. Wet, flushed, pink skin, grasping the toy tight, slowly giving around it, drawing it into her, that sight killed him every time.

He didn't think he could get harder, but he'd been wrong.

"One rule for this part. Don't come." Okay, it was true he's telling her that, but he was also sort of reminding himself, as well. Don't come.

"Tim!" She looked genuinely concerned at that, not sure she can do it.

"You do this to me all the time."

"You're used to it."

He smiled up at her and winked. "Just don't. It'll be worth it."

She whimpered again as he licked one of her lips from top to bottom, and licked back up from bottom to top.

"Have I told you how much I love this?" He sucked gently on her clt, pulling back a second later to
talk some more, as his finger barely slipped into her, circling the entrance to her vagina. "You're so wet, and pink, and swollen." He blew on her clit. "And it's standing straight up." He licked it very lightly, and gave it another soft suck, feeling her pussy clench around him as he did it. "You close, baby?"

"Yes!"

"Don't come." He retreated from her pussy, licking her thighs, gently massaging her hips and ass, trying to get them to relax a little.

And when they did, when he felt the tension melt a bit, he went back to her clit with very soft, very light, barest-hints-of-touch flicks with the tip of his tongue. He kept at it, feeling her get tighter and squirm, breathing hard and loud, reciting the periodic table out-loud.

"Tim!"

He pulled back, stopping dead. "Too much?"

"Yeah, just, give me a minute to calm down, okay?"

He stood up, smiling, lips wet and shiny, and stepped close. "Kiss me."

"This is your idea of 'calm down'?"

"Yep. I want you to taste yourself on my lips and tongue. Then you're going to watch me get naked."

She inhaled long and slow, forcing herself to calm down. "This really isn't easy, you know?"

This time his smile was wicked. "Yeah, I'm vaguely familiar with how hard this is."

"Next time I'm in charge, I'm going to kill you."

"And I'll enjoy every second of it. Kiss me." And she did, lips on his hot and hard, licking and sucking his mouth, moaning into him, feeling the smooth cotton of his shirt against her nipples and the rougher wool of his kilt against her legs and pussy.

When he couldn't taste her anymore, he stepped back, and loosened his tie further, slipping the knot, untying it, and draping it over her neck, so the silk rested against her breasts, over her nipples.

"I can feel it every time I breathe."

"That was the idea." He popped the third button on his shirt (one and two had been undone since he got home). It wasn't much of a strip tease. He's a guy after all, so the extent of a strip tease he's willing to do is mostly just taking his clothing off slowly, and he's also, eager is probably the best word, to get to the main event. Plus, there just isn't a slow, teasing way to take a kilt off when every drop of blood your body can spare from keeping you alive is in your dick. Though, when it comes down to it, he'd probably have had the same issue with pants, as well.

He snagged the bottom of his tie, yanking down, so it slipped over both nipples before falling to the floor. Then he stepped next to her, wrapping his hand in her hair, pulling her head back, kissing her mouth and the curve of her neck as his cock rubbed gently against her pussy.

"You feel so good. So soft and wet." He rubbed the shaft against her clit in long, lazy thrusts. She was whimpering again, eyes closed, so he whispered against her jaw as he kissed and nibbled along
it. "Don't come, baby, hold on just a little longer." He shifted his angle, thrusting into her, hissing at the heat and slick wetness.

And it was true that he's teasing her almost beyond what she can endure, but right this second he's got himself on the edge of losing control, too. He wanted to just thrust like crazy, go full out, burying himself into her over and over until they're both screaming and coming.

Tim slowed himself down, thrusting slow, shallow, and deliberate.

She's flushed from her cheeks to her stomach, nipples hard and swollen, and he can actually feel her clit trailing over his dick as he eased in.

Enough teasing.

He circled behind her, adding even more lube to his dick as he slipped the dilator out. Less than one second passed between putting it down and thrusting into her as hard and fast as he could. Hot and slick and tight and fast and friction stole his breath, and for the first time he could remember he was totally silent as pleasure so intense it's practically pain washed through him.

His hands clenched on her hips, pulling her back onto him, thrusting as fast as his body can manage as she keened with pleasure, body almost breaking point tight on his.

He finally managed to suck in a breath, letting him speak again. "God, baby, fuck, you feel so good, come for me, God, want to feel you wrapped around my cock, coming so hard you can't see." He was reaching for her clit when he felt her body tighten further, pull in, and then release with a short scream.

And that first wave did it for him, sent him tumbling over the edge into throbbing, nerve-searing pleasure, as she clenched around him, crying his name.

She was sagging against him when he came down enough to be aware of the real world. For a minute he was awfully content to just stand pressed against her, holding her up as they both rode the oxytocin high. But after a few minutes the idea that this probably wasn't terribly comfortable for any long bit of time hit him.

"Can your legs hold you?"

She nodded. So he stepped back, pulling out slowly, and reached up to undo each wrist. He found the knife and just slit through the ribbon at her ankles, and quickly undid the boots.

That, and grabbing a tissue to wipe himself off, exhausted what was left of his energy. He collapsed onto their bed, while she headed to the bathroom to clean up.

A minute later she was curled on her side, he was spooned up behind her, and they were both asleep.
It's a blisteringly stupid argument.

The single stupidest argument of his life, and, having grown up with John McGee, that's saying a whole lot.

Tim decides, as he's driving, that the far edges of Mood Swing Abby, happy and sad, he can deal with pretty easily. Both of them just involve being available for lots of hugs, and possibly humor if it's appropriate. It's irritable, which leads to angry, where the landmines lay.

And currently he feels like he's had both legs blown off at the knee.

He's halfway to Jimmy's when he realizes that right now Jimmy probably isn't the guy to go complain to about his pregnant wife.

Sure, Jimmy's made it clear that he finds being treated like he's made out of glass annoying, and Tim gets that, he really does, but he's still not going to go over there and bitch to Jimmy about Abby being insane because she's pregnant.

Not until Jimmy's got at least one more healthy baby in his house is Tim going to say anything negative about a pregnant wife to him, and possibly not even after that.

So he swings through a highly illegal u-turn that would make Ziva proud, and heads toward Gibbs' house.

One of the great things about Gibbs is that he just raises his eyebrows when Tim walks straight over to the workbench, pours himself a scotch, (Shortly after the Shannon conversation, Tim noticed that a bottle of decent scotch ended up in the basement next to the bourbon.) at 8:45 in the morning, and shoots it back.

And for twenty minutes Tim just sits there on the second from the bottom step and calms down.

And Gibbs lets him, not saying anything, just quietly working on the boat, and occasionally looking at Tim to see if smoke is still pouring out of his ears.

After it's clear that he has calmed back down, (Sort of. Okay, no not really, but he's gotten from furious to ready to vent.) Gibbs leans against the back of the boat and says, "So…"

"Toothpaste. I used up her toothpaste last night. By accident. I don't like hers, she doesn't like mine, but they're in almost identical tubes because they're just different flavors of the same brand and sometimes she puts hers on the left of the sink, next to mine. I was half asleep while I brushed my teeth and finished hers.

"And we've got a whole tube of mine. Because last week I noticed I was getting low and got more, but she wanted to wait to get more of hers until she was closer to out. But today, at five in the morning, when she decided she had to brush her teeth right that second, she won't use mine, even though she has like nine hundred times before, but today mine is apparently beyond revolting. So at five fucking thirty in the morning I'm at goddamn Target getting more fucking toothpaste because she's got to brush her teeth right this fucking second and can't use mine."
Gibbs knows where this is going. He's doing a very good job of not laughing, and the smile on his face is kind, if vastly amused.

"And of course I get the wrong damn toothpaste, because as I said, it's five goddamn thirty in the morning, and we worked past midnight last night, and I can barely see straight let alone tell the difference between peppermint and spearmint. She's lucky it actually was toothpaste and not hair gel.

"I get home, and now she's asleep. Which is what I want to be. Which is what I told her to do instead of brushing her teeth, which she told me she couldn't possibly do because her mouth tasted horrible. And I told her that if she went back to sleep for three more hours, I would go out and buy her, with a smile on my face and a spring in my step, all the goddamned toothpaste in entire the fucking store. But, no, she had to have toothpaste right that second. So, even though she was awake, and up, and in possession of not only a driver's license but two vehicles, I'm the one who has to get up and get the fucking toothpaste. So off I went, leaving our nice warm bed and go buy her more of it, slamming the door behind me.

"So, I'm home, with toothpaste, in peppermint, and she's taking up the whole damn bed and has already given me the wake-me-up-and-die warning, so I do not get into our nice, soft, comfortable, and warm bed. I go sleep on the couch, which is not nearly so comfy for sleeping if you haven't just had sex on it, and I'm pissed off, so it takes an hour to get settled, and I finally drop off, and two fucking minutes later she's awake and screeching about how I got the wrong damn toothpaste, and obviously I don't love her because I can't keep track of what sort of toothpaste she likes.

"So I take a deep breath, turn the other cheek, let her yell at me some more, but she was getting really screechy and mean, and look, no sleep, I'd had enough. I'm so angry I could feel my heartbeat in my eyes. So I go into my office and shut the door. And look, she has never, ever just walked into my office without knocking. She always asks permission to go in there, because that's where I go when I need to cool off. And me shutting the door on her should be a loud and clear I-need-my-space-because-I'm-about-to-lose-it signal.

"But she just barged right in, waving the toothpaste around, and I decided what she wanted to do was fight, just kicking me wasn't doing it for her, because who needs to spend more than half an hour yelling at someone else over toothpaste? So I had at her, said some really sarcastic things about how I got her a house, two rings, and had her lip print tattooed on my body, but yeah, toothpaste was the real sign of my everlasting devotion and obviously I was just in this for the sex, an as soon as she got old I was out of there, because otherwise I'd be happy and able to fetch precisely the right sort of toothpaste at five fucking thirty in the morning on no sleep, and she stared at me, dropped to her knees, I mean collapsed like a bag of wet oatmeal dropped from two stories up, and started bawling."

Gibbs winces. "Oh, God, Tim."

"Which was when I realized I had my foot so far down my throat I was kicking myself in the ass with it. And no, what she wanted to do was just yell me some more, not actually fight. I rushed over, apologizing like crazy, and she's sobbing, yelling at me to get out, so I got out."

Gibbs raises his hand to smack Tim upside the back of his head, looks at it, looks at him, shakes his head, lets it drop, and pours him another drink. "When you fuck up, you really fuck up."

"Yeah. Thanks. That was the part of this I didn't need a second opinion on."

"When you go back, make sure you've got the right damn toothpaste."

"That part I figured out on my own, too."
"What do you want a second opinion on?"

"How long do I hide out over here, and what the hell do I bring home besides Tom's Of Maine Spearmint Toothpaste?"

"Do you think I'd have three ex-wives if I knew the answer to that?"

Tim shrugs. "I was going to talk to Palmer, but…"

"Give him a call. Abby probably called him two minutes after you left, and he can give you a better idea of how much trouble you're in."

"But…" Tim's expression gets across why he's wary about doing that, but Gibbs flashes him a little dismissive gesture.

"Being useful is part of healing, part of what keeps you going. Let him be useful to you."

"Good point. Shannon ever completely flip out on you?"

"Yeah, but she had a good reason for it. She was five months pregnant when I got stationed in Nicaragua."

"Ugh."

"Yeah, I wasn't happy about that, either."

"What did you do?"

"Not much I could. They'd throw me in jail if I didn't report. It was only sixty days, but we didn't know that at the time. I did what I could, I made sure she got a letter every single day I was away. Sure, some days I wrote more than one, so I had some back up, 'miss you, very busy, home soon' letters that I could send if I was too busy to write, but the only thing that helped was getting home while Kelly was still on the inside."

Tim gets his phone out and hits Jimmy's contact button.

"You're fucked." Gibbs snorts back a quick laugh when he hears Jimmy's greeting.

"Good morning to you, too. Abby called, then?"

"No. Oh no, not called. She's here, crying on Breena, and Ziva should be here with six gallons of ice cream in about five minutes."

"Oh God."

Jimmy's quiet on the other end for about half a minute, and they hear the sliding glass door open and close, then he says, "Okay, I'm out of the girls' earshot. What the hell is wrong with you? There is exactly one thing you never, ever, ever, EVER! say to a pregnant woman and that's any variation on the theme of 'I'm leaving.' You tell her that yes, she looks fat in those pants because she is fat, you tell her her butt is the size of the iceberg that took down the Titanic before you say that!"

"I was being sarcastic."

More silence on Jimmy's side. Tim's fairly sure he's rolling his eyes so hard they're about to fall out of his head.
"I'm at Gibbs' place. Feel like coming over and joining the how to get me the hell out of this confab?"

"As long as I can bring Molly, it's no problem."

Tim raises an eyebrow at Gibbs, and Gibbs smiles. Little girls are always welcome at his house.

"See you here in half an hour."

Gibbs and Tim head upstairs. While the basement may be the official gathering spot for heart to hearts, it's a really bad place for a twelve month old who is just learning how to walk.

Gibbs spends a few minutes shuffling about, finding some blocks and a few other simple toys he's got on hand for family gatherings. (He's been building little toys when he's looking for a side project since Tim and Abby got engaged, fairly sure that having things for babies to play with at his house would be a good thing. And so far, Molly Palmer seems to have enjoyed them. At least as much as an infant can enjoy wooden toys. She's mostly chewed on them.) He shoves the coffee table to the side, spreads a blanket on the floor, and puts the toys out.

"She's not actually walking yet, is she?" She hadn't been at the birthday party, but he knows little ones can go from crawling to walking awfully fast, and it's been two weeks.

"Not more than three steps at a go. But she's a lightning fast crawler."

Gibbs nods, picks up the coffee table, and puts it on its side, walling off the kitchen. Then he takes two of his kitchen chairs and blocks off the stairs. He surveys the room, and yeah, it's not exactly baby proof, but there are three of them and one little girl, it'll do.

"Coffee?" Gibbs asks Tim.

"You have decaf?"

Gibbs flashes him an are you insane or just really stupid look.

Tim sighs. "I think it's abundantly clear that today the answer is stupid."

Gibbs laughs at that and heads to the kitchen. "How does Palmer like his?"

"One third milk, two thirds coffee, no sugar." Tim follows him in, and sees Gibbs set up his coffeemaker with coffee from a new, full-sized bag of Black Death.

"I take it you liked it?"

Gibbs nods. "Stuff from Seattle was good, too."

"Make Jimmy's half and half then."

Thinking about Jimmy reminds Gibbs of something. "They gonna get the testing soon?"

"Yeah. Blood test on Tuesday." There are two kinds of Trisomy 13, and one of them is just random, and one you can carry a gene for. The blood test will tell them which kind Jonathon had. Trisomy 13 is something no one in their family ever wanted to know much about, but they're all well-versed in it now.
"If they're carriers?"

"They're talking adopting. They want more kids. If adoption isn't an option, because they already have a child or Jimmy's diabetic or whatever, they can do in vitro and test the embryos to see if they've got the trisomy before implanting them. But I don't think they want to do that."

Gibbs nods again.

Twenty minutes later, Jimmy's heading into Gibbs' house, Molly in his arms.

He just looks at Tim, shakes his head, and puts Molly down, unbundling her from her winter gear. Once Molly's been properly hugged and kissed hello by Uncle Tim and Uncle Jethro, Jimmy kisses her head, puts her on the blanket, stacks some blocks up, and says, "Look, Uncle Jethro has toys for you!"

Then he stands up and smacks Tim, hard, upside the back of the head.

"You know what? When you piss your wife off, she comes to my house and cries on mine. You know what happens then? Breena gets pissed at me on Abby's behalf because I've got a y chromosome, too. On Monday, Tony's going to slap you, too, because Ziva's over there now, and all three of them are having a men-suck-and-here's-all-nineteen-million-reasons-why party."

Gibbs smiles and hands Jimmy his coffee.

"Thanks." He takes a deep drink and practically chokes on it. "What do you brew this out of? Burnt roofing tar?" Jimmy heads into the kitchen, pours half of the coffee out and replaces it with more milk. "That'll pry your eyes open in the morning."

"That's the idea," Gibbs says.

Jimmy sits on the floor next to Molly, restacking the blocks she's very enthusiastically knocking down. "First off, if you need that stuff, full strength, you need to start sleeping. That," he eyes the coffee, "Cannot possibly be good for you." Then he turns his attention to Tim. "So the version of the story we got, between whimpering and hysterical sobbing, is that Abby went sort of insane, picked a fight with you about toothpaste, and then you blew up at her, told her you were just in it for the sex, couldn't stand being with someone as flaky as her, and that you were leaving, for someone younger and hotter, and then you left."

"She ordered me out of the house."

"I think you were supposed to stay."

"Great." Tim grits his teeth, getting yelled at even more is not on the list of things he wants to do. "I never said she was flaky."

"Subtext?" Jimmy asks. "Something about her thinking toothpaste was way too important?"

Tim cringes.

"And were you really dumb enough to actually say, 'I'm leaving' let alone 'younger' or 'hotter'?"

Tim sits down on the sofa. Gibbs takes the armchair, watching them.
Tim sighs, rolls his eyes, and hunches a little, making sure his body language lets them know that he's convinced he'd behaved badly and is embarrassed about it. "I think I actually said… and remember, no sleep, and she's been yelling at me for at least half an hour at this point about toothpaste and how I must not love her because I got the wrong kind…" and he sighs, closes his eyes, rests his head in his hand, rubbing his forehead, and says, "The house, the rings, the marriage, the tattoos, the two fucking tattoos, one of which is your lips branded onto my arm, forever, the love poems, the being here every goddamn day, rearranging my entire career so I can be here with you and our child, that's all meaningless shit, I'm really just here for the kinky sex and as soon as your ass gets droopy and your tits saggy I'm trading up for a younger model and getting the hell away from this insanity. And God knows, when I knock her up, and she's being crazy, I'll get her the right fucking toothpaste!"

Both of them just stare at him, eyes very wide.

Jimmy looks at Gibbs and says, "Well, at least you know a good divorce lawyer, right? God! Tim… just…" And Jimmy just sits there, staring at him, looking like he's coming up with different ideas of things to say, but not saying them. "Remind me not to piss you off when you haven't had any sleep. Damn."

"Thank you, Jimmy, that's wildly helpful."

"Look, I've said some dumb things to Breena over the years, but there's dumb and then there's disemboweling yourself with your own tongue and then lighting your own not-quite-dead-body on fire."

Gibbs is still staring at him. Then he stands up and hits him. This time he did smack Tim upside the back of the head, hard, really hard, like minor whiplash, hard.

"Ow!"

"Two years ago, I would have beaten the hell out of you for that."

Tim nods, wincing, rubbing his neck. "How do I fix this?"

Gibbs shrugs. Sure, he's had some awful fights with women, but he's utterly useless at something like this. Granted he's never said anything mean to any of his wives, because saying something mean would have require him to talk when he was angry, and that just didn't happen. So, even if he was good at working out a fight with a woman, which he isn't, this particular version of making up isn't in his wheelhouse.

Jimmy nods at Gibbs, flashes him an I've got this look, and says, "Okay, the only good thing on this is that Abby knows she went insane and picked a fight with you. She's still with it enough that she sort of thinks this is her fault and you went bonkers on the overreacting side of it. But, look, you can't buy your way out of this, no flowers or jewelry on earth is going to help."

"Yeah, I know."

"Good. You want my advice, get a nap! Get a long damn nap because you aren't going to bed anytime soon and you need your brain functional for this. Then you call her and beg her to talk to her, and you explain to her how angry the idea that you might not love her made you, and you explain why the idea that you might not love her makes you angry, and you lay down on the floor at her feet and explain to her how she's your sun and the only thing that keeps you alive is being able to revolve around her, and remember when we were talking about your vows and you didn't want to get too sappy?"
"Time to channel your inner maple tree, Tim. She likes cute and fluffy bunnies, so it's time for you to be the cutest, fluffiest damn bunny anyone has ever seen.

"And then you're going to deal with the fact that she is going to be mad at you, probably for a while, because, honestly that's the worst thing I've ever heard of a guy saying to his wife—"

"Jimmy, you pick up the bodies of wives who get killed by their husbands."

"Let me finish—who isn't a complete and total asshole. And after that you are going to sincerely apologize for ever saying it, let alone thinking it, and make it abundantly clear that you know no matter how sarcastic you were being there are some things you cannot ever say, and that is one of them."

"And then give her the right toothpaste," Gibbs adds. "And make sure she stays stocked with it."

"Good point. And tomorrow, or the day after, better yet next week, once you are both fully calmed down, you are going to pull out all the stops and do something insanely nice for her. Preferably something you don't particularly like doing but she does. With Breena, this would be the point where I'd call in sick for both of us, take Molly to daycare, whip out half a dozen chick flicks, that chocolate covered caramel popcorn stuff she loves that just looking at jerks my blood sugar up fifty points, and we watch lame movies in bed all day." Jimmy shifts his gaze to Gibbs, "And that doesn't leave this room. Ducky does not need to know I haven't actually been sick in three years."

Gibbs shrugs. If Palmer thinks he's pulling one over on Ducky, it doesn't hurt anything.

An hour later, as Tim's laying on Gibbs' sofa, ready for some sack time, Gibbs walks Jimmy and Molly to his car.

Once Jimmy has her strapped in, Gibbs says to him, "You're a good husband, Jimmy. Good father. If you ever want to talk, my basement's always open."

"Uh… thanks. You're doing a good job as a father-in-law, too."

Gibbs nods. "Always hoped I would."

And that's when what Gibbs meant by his invitation hits Jimmy.

"Oh."

Gibbs nods again, seeing Jimmy get it. "Breena's welcome, too. Sometimes it's good to have someone who's been through it around."

Tim wakes up four hours later feeling mostly just tired. But it's getting onto three, and no matter how much hiding at Gibbs' place appealed to him, it's time to bite the bullet, call Abby, and talk to her. So he rolls over, takes his phone off the coffee table, and punches her contact button.

A second later he hears her voice. "Tim."
"Can I come home?"

"Why are you asking?" She mostly sounds tired, too, though there is the rasp in her voice that goes with hard crying.

"You told me to leave. I want to come back, but I won't until I know it's okay."

"You left!" There's a hint of crying about to begin again in her voice.

"You told me to. You told me to get the hell out of our house. Told me you didn't want to see me. But I want to be home, with you. Can I come home?"

"Yes."

Abby's sitting on the floor, in front of the sofa, looking in the direction of the TV, but he doesn't think she's watching it.

He sits down next to her, and she looks at the Target bag in his hand.

"What's that?"

"Tom's of Maine, spearmint, whole mouth care, about a year's worth. And a bag of organic frozen wild blueberries. I know you're low on them. You want me to put them in the freezer?"

She shakes her head, takes the bag, and opens it, popping one in her mouth. "Not low, out."

He watches her chew, seeing the purple-blue stains starting on her fingers.

"I'm sorry. Really sorry."

She shrugs. "Why should you be sorry? You aren't the one who went insane over toothpaste."

"I promised to spend the rest of my life putting you first, and I didn't. I was tired and angry and took it out on you."

She shrugs again and offers him a blueberry. He eats it from her fingers, considering the offer a very good sign. "I was completely bat-shit crazy and you took it longer than you should have had to. I promised to be kind and treat you with respect, and I didn't. You left the room and closed the door behind you to avoid snapping at me, and I kept yelling at you. The worst part was, I knew I was doing it. I knew that it was insane, I mean, it's toothpaste, but I couldn't make myself stop. And I know, everything you went through with your dad, and how you'd try to get away from him and he'd just follow, egging you on. I know that. And I just couldn't make myself stop. I was so angry, stupidly angry, and I wanted you that angry, too."

"Why? Why were you even up at 5:00?"

"Nightmare."

"Oh." He knows she's been having really intense dreams since she's been pregnant. He stands up. "Let me get you a spoon." Eating frozen blueberries with your fingers isn't very comfortable after a few bites. A minute later, he's back with a big bowl and a spoon and sits next to her again.

She pours the blueberries into the bowl and eats a few more bites.
"Want to tell me about it?"

She's staring at the TV again. Very determinedly not looking at him as she says this, "You left. She was young and pretty and normal and you left."

Tim's head drops back onto the sofa cushion as he says, "Shit."

"I was so angry when I woke up. You'd been hiding her, fooling around behind my back, and we were fighting, screaming fighting because you were leaving. And my mouth really tasted bad, and all I could think about was maybe if I could brush my teeth I could get anchored back in reality, but no toothpaste. And dream you and real you were too similar, and I just… I couldn't sort it out. I couldn't block out how angry I was.

"And this little voice in the back of my head was yelling at me, too, telling me it's not your fault that I was dreaming about you leaving, that real you isn't going anywhere, but I was still so angry, and then…"

"I said the worst possible thing at the worst possible time in the history of worst possible things."

"Yeah. And then you walked out."

"You told me to leave. Screamed it."

"I know. You still left."

He nods. "Sometimes I have to leave. But I'm always going to come back, you know that, right? As long as I'm alive, I'm always going to come back. I'll be here to get old and saggy with you. Every single day for the rest of my life, I'm coming back to you. You're my one and only."

"I'm your Shannon."

"No." He looks her straight in the eyes. "Shannon is Gibbs' Abby."

She smiles at that and offers him a spoonful of blueberries. He chews them for a moment, swallows, and kisses her gently. She sighs, closes her eyes, and leans into him.

They sit there, quietly, resting against each other for a moment before another thought hits him.

"Are Ziva and Breena going to beat the hell out of me the next time they see me?"

"Yeah." She nods. That's a foregone conclusion.

"When I finally told them what I said, Gibbs hit me so hard upside the back of the head I think I've got whiplash."

"You actually told them?"

"I wanted help on how to fix it. Can't fix the problem if you don't know what it is."

"Can't believe you told them."

"Just the last bit. Jimmy wanted to know if the words 'I'm leaving, younger, or hotter' actually came out of my mouth."

"Oh." She eats another bite of blueberries. "I'm sorry I was yelling at you. Sorry I picked a fight. Sorry I didn't let you be alone."
"I'm sorry I didn't hold it together better."

"No." She shakes her head at that. "You can be sorry for being mean, or sorry for not just getting in your car and driving off, but no, you shouldn't have to deal with someone yelling at you when you've done nothing wrong. It's not okay for me to take my anger out on you."

"I'm sorry I was mean. I'm sorry I was sarcastic. And I'm sorry I didn't ask why you were angry in the first place. Really sorry I didn't do that."

"That probably would have helped."

He nods. "Are we okay?"

"Yeah."

He puts his arm around her shoulder, and she snuggles into him, offering him another bite of the blueberries. They sit there quietly for a few minutes.

"You know, I've heard good things about make-up sex," Abby says.

Tim raises one eyebrow. Mostly he feels tired and emotionally battered, sex is nowhere on his horizon. "You want to have sex?"

"No. Not really. Just want to sit here."

"Me, too." He thinks about that for a moment and checks the clock. It's still only five in the afternoon. "Later?"

"Yes."
Jimmy's never been in Gibbs' basement. Of course, he's heard about the boats. Who hasn't? But he always sort of figured that, well, they were some sort of exaggeration. Like, he builds model boats, and they leave the word model out. Or they're the little two seat kind you go fishing in. You know, the kind of joke Tony would tell, mild hazing for the credulous.

He didn't really expect to see a full-sized boat sitting in the basement.

And, like with anything else that takes him by surprise, he asks about it.

"How do you get it out?"

"Palmer?" Gibbs sounds a little surprised to see Jimmy so soon, and honestly Jimmy's a little surprised to be here so soon as well. But Gibbs invited him, Molly's asleep, Ziva and Abby are no longer at his place, Breena told him to go, and he needs to talk.

Gibbs climbs off of *the Shannon*. He's just about got the temporary decking done. Another week and she'll be ready for outside.

"It's a boat. And you've got no doors."

"She. Boats are girls. This one's name is Shannon." Though really, he's stalling, debating on whether it's time to give up that secret. Not that he was going to hold it all that much longer, but... *Tell him.* It'll be a good sign that Jimmy's really welcome down here. He points behind himself. "That wall was originally designed with garage doors, so it's not load bearing. Garage doors aren't good for wood working, too drafty, the wood gets too damp or too dry. So I ripped them out and replaced them with drywall. When the boat's done, I rip it out again, take her out, and then put it back up. Only takes about three days, but it keeps my shop in good shape."

"Oh." He looks at the boat and gently traces his fingers over her hull. "Who's Shannon?"

That shocks Gibbs, he thought everyone at NCIS knew that by now. "First wife."

Jimmy nods. He knows that story; he just didn't know her name. Gibbs watches him make a connection in his mind, and then he remembers the boat that came in after Mike got into that gun fight. "The Kelly, that was named after your daughter."

"Yeah."

"How long ago did it happen?"

"Twenty-four years yesterday."

"Oh. Do you... do anything?"

"Not for a long time." Which isn't entirely true. He talks to what he's fairly sure is an imaginary Shannon on the anniversary of their death. But like the version of Mike that shows up from time to time, he's not entirely certain if she's in his head or if he's talking to a ghost. And honestly, at this point, he doesn't care, seeing her makes him feel better, helps to clear his head, and gives him hope. "But I always know when February 28th is. It never sneaks up on me."

Jimmy nods, fairly sure that January 8th will never sneak up on him. "I can deal with the sorrow, and
Tim's right, though I thought it was insane, but fighting helps with the anger, but I can't shake the fear. I want them near me all the time. I've practically bubble-wrapped every surface in our house since Molly's started walking. And I'm just so scared for them all the time."

Gibbs nods back at him.

"Will it get better?"

"Sure. If you let it. But you've got to control it, because otherwise they'll feel smothered by it."

Jimmy nods at that. Breena's starting to get annoyed with the way he's constantly hovering. She understands, she feels that constant fear too, but him underfoot is starting to wear on her, which was a pretty big chunk of her tossing him out of the house, telling him to go talk to Gibbs. "How do you control it?"

Gibbs drags the two stools out from under his work bench and offers one to Jimmy. He also gestures to the bottles on the workbench, but Jimmy shakes his head as he sits, so he doesn't pour for either of them. "Best I can tell, you can't make it go away or tame it, only time does that. Every day you come home and find everything normal and everyone okay, gets you back in the habit of expecting okay, and that'll eventually tame the fear. Right now, all you can do is not let it own you. Right now, all you can control is how you act.

"Being a parent isn't for cowards. Nothing else will ever hurt like this, and nobody who hasn't been there will ever have a clue. And it's normal to want to protect yourself from ever feeling this way again."

Gibbs looks at the bourbon and the coffee cup next to it. Having a drink to go with this is really tempting. But if Jimmy's coping without drinking, supporting that is probably a good thing. So once again, he doesn't pour himself a shot.

"I didn't let myself love anyone for a decade after they died. Intentionally did not have any more children, and stayed away from women who had them. Abby was the first person I let in."

Jimmy just stares at him, and Gibbs is half expecting him to make some off color comment, but all he does is wait, and it occurs to him, that after more than a decade of working with Ducky, Jimmy is probably a pretty good listener.

"And that was dumb as hell. The fear won. It owned me, shaped my actions, and made sure that I and all three of my ex-wives were miserable. I didn't lose anyone during that decade, but besides Mike, I didn't gain anyone, either."

"You met Ducky then, right?"

"Yeah. And we were friends. But I never told him about my girls, never let him into my life until years later. Everyone knew I was a Marine, a sniper, a good cop, dependable in a tight situation, would marry any red-head that crossed my path for about ten minutes, and that was it."

Jimmy looks at Gibbs' left hand.

"You're still scared."

Gibbs rubs his thumb over his wedding ring. "Yeah. It doesn't go away. It never goes away. It does get better. Not letting it own you gets easier, too. But it's always going to be there."

"That's not encouraging."
"If you wanted feel good bullshit, you're in the wrong place."

"I know. I know the everything'll be all right, sparkly unicorns frolicking in meadows under double rainbows is crap. But I want it!" Jimmy looks away from Gibbs and sighs, then looks back at him. "I had as close to it as anyone ever gets, you know? And now it's gone."

"Yeah." Gibbs nods, smiles a little, not happy, but understanding where Jimmy's coming from. "I know. I had it, too, and then it was gone, and you can't go back, but you remember it, dream about it, and you feel like you're still there, and you wake up, and you aren't."

"Exactly."

"You can't go back, and the future you wanted with Jon is gone, but your wife is still here, and Molly is still here, and you're still here. You're never going to be the same man; you'll be scarred for the rest of your life, but you're doing what you need to do to move forward. You're grieving but still being the man your wife and daughter need. You're never going to be the same, but eventually you are going to be all right."

"That's more encouraging."

Gibbs smiles at him. "Give Tim a call. Tell him to take Molly for a long weekend. Go away with your wife and remember why you married her, let her remember why she married you."

"How did you even know about that?"

Gibbs smiles again, giving him the *I know everything* look.

"I'll end up texting every two hours to see how she is."

"You think Tim and Abby will mind? He'll set up that security camera he got you for your wedding at his place if you ask him to. Go. Do something nice for Breena. Don't let the fear own you. I'm never going to tell you to take off work again, so take advantage of it."

Jimmy doesn't look convinced by this.

"You'll go, you'll worry, but you'll also have time where you enjoy yourself and Breena, and you won't be thinking about anything other than enjoying her. You'll feel bad about it when you realize it's happening, but that's normal. Go and enjoy it anyway. And when you come home everything will be fine. Molly will be okay. And you'll have an easier time with her out of your sight because it will be fine when you get home."

Jimmy pulls his phone out of his pocket, stares at it and is just about to hit Tim's contact button when Gibbs adds, "But not next weekend, because Shannon's almost ready to move outside, and on Saturday bootcamp is over here, and you, Tim, and Tony are helping me rip down that wall."

Jimmy nods, still looking up from the phone as he realizes something. "When did you start calling him Tony?"

"When he asked permission to marry Ziva."

"Oh. I prefer Jimmy to Palmer. Especially when I'm not at work."

"Okay, Jimmy. When we're not at work, Jethro is fine."

Jimmy hit Tim's contact button on his phone. "Hey, Tim…"
I Meant To

Tim usually wakes up pretty easily. There's a sort of moment where he switches from dreaming to just lying in bed, and from there a fairly gentle slide into fully awake. And for the most part it's a pretty quick transition, usually a matter of two or three minutes.

Some mornings, and those are mornings he very much appreciates, Abby gives him a hand on sliding from dreaming into fully awake. Occasionally he returns the favor, but most of the time she wakes up before he does, so she's in charge of morning sex. However it happens, making love is definitely his favorite way to go from asleap to awake.

Other mornings, his phone or Gibbs jerks him from dreaming into full on awake. Those mornings he transitions in a matter of seconds. He's significantly less happy about those mornings, but well, it's all part of the job.

So, for the most part, he's pretty good at not getting stuck between dreaming and awake.

But today he can't shake it. The little awake part of his mind knows he's at home, in bed, but the sleeping part of his mind is stuck in the freezer again. He's cold. So cold. Somehow colder than he was when he was there for real, and like when it really happened every single part of his body aches. And to make it worse, Abby's there too, and he's clinging to her, trying to keep her warm, but she's already icy cold, and he can't warm her up, can't warm up at all. He's shivering, hurting, and panicking because he can't get out of it.

"God, Tim..." Abby's trying to shove him off of her, and he's gripping onto her tighter. She had been sleeping pretty comfortably, but suddenly Tim turned into a scalding hot boa constrictor, and she feels like she's going to suffocate or possibly drown in sweat. "Tim! Wake up." She shakes him while trying to scoot further away. "God, baby, you're on fire. Come, on wake up."

That finally breaks through the dream, and he's fully back in bed. But he's still bone-deep cold, hurts all over, tired, weak, and wet.

"Tim?" Abby feels him loosen his grip and assumes that means he's awake. She carefully gets up, tucking the blankets around him tighter while rejoicing at no longer being two seconds away from over-heating.

"Mrgh."

His eyes are glassy and not tracking well. His skin is flushed and sweaty. And she's not sure why she asked, because it's obvious he's sick, but she did anyway. "Are you feeling okay?"

"No." He starts shivering and begins to cough.

"Did you get a flu shot this year?"

He coughs, hard. "I meant to." More coughing. He thinks about it and comes to the conclusion that he'd planned on doing it and ended up getting wedding rings instead, and from there it pretty much slipped his mind.

She heads off for a second and comes back with more blankets, tucking him in further, stroking his shoulders. He curls into a ball, hugging his knees to his chest, and tries to get warm.

"What's your doctor's name?" He opens his eyes. She has his phone in hand.
He thinks about that for a good long minute. He hasn't seen the guy since Jethro tried to eat him alive, and right now he can't come up with his name. "I don't know."

"How can you not know?"

"Besides going to the emergency room, I haven't needed one in years."

"Great." She taps the screen of his phone, and a minute later he hears, "Hey Ducky, sorry to get you up on a Sunday morning… Oh good… Look, I think Tim has the flu, and he's in no condition to get out of bed to go to a doctor's office. Would you be willing to make a house call? ... Thanks, Ducky."

Time goes wonky for Tim after that, but eventually he notices that she's gotten dressed, a shower, and is snuggled up behind him on the outside of the blankets. And with that, something else occurs to him. "If I have the flu, you should get out of here."

"I got my shot this year."

"Doesn't always work. Don't want you getting sick, too."

"I'll risk it."

He tries to roll over to face her, and manages to get his head turned in her general direction, the rest of his body had no interest whatsoever in getting out of the fetal position it's wrapped into. "Get the fuck out of here, now! I do not want you getting sick!"

She smiles in a gently condescending way, pets his hair, and says, "That would have been way more impressive if your teeth hadn't been chattering." He groans, coughs, and shivers some more. She kisses the top of his head. "But it's good to know your fever is so high you've lost the ability to think clearly. I can add that to the list of symptoms to tell Ducky about. Tim, you spent the last… she checks the clock… "eleven hours breathing on me. And last night I had your tongue, fingers, and cock in my mouth. (Turns out make up sex was a whole lot of fun.) And you spent a good twenty minutes licking all of me, too. Either the vaccine'll work or it won't, but the me-not-getting-sick-from-you ship sailed the day before yesterday." She pets him again, hoping gentle stroking feels good on aching muscles, and finishes with, "Ducky'll be here soon, and if you've got the flu, he can give you, and maybe me, I'll have to go look that up, some Tamiflu, and that will help. I'm going to go make some breakfast, do you want to eat anything?"

Yes, that's rational. But that doesn't mean he has to like it. So he sounds a little sulky when he says, "No."

"Drink?"

That gets his attention. A drink means he can get something hot into him, maybe warm up a little. "Hot. Don't care what it is. Hot."

"One steaming hot something will be up in a minute."

It may have been a minute. Could have been an hour. He's got no idea. The only thing he's paying attention to is the way muscles he didn't even know he had were aching and how much he absolutely loathes being cold. When she came back with the cup of… hot chocolate he thinks, (It smells sweet and chocolate-y.) he doesn't want to get out from under the blankets enough to drink it, but he also doesn't want to have something so wonderfully hot sitting so close to him, and not drink it.

It's likely he's sort of pouting at the drink.
He's kind of aware of the fact that Abby must have brought it up, because he can see it on his bedside table, but she doesn't appear to be in their room.

Then he feels the bed dip, (which is when it occurs to him that his eyes are probably closed, which brought up another troubling thought, namely, how is he looking at the hot chocolate if his eyes are closed?) and a straw presses against his lips, and then glorious hot, hot, hot liquid slips into his body, and no it doesn't help the shivers, and he's still bone deep cold, but at least there's a little warmth in the world, and by that point nothing else in the universe mattered.

She's petting his forehead and cheek, and he really wants to rest against her hand, take comfort in her skin on his, but right now her hand feels like ice.

"Abby, you're so cold."

She jerks her hand back. "It doesn't feel good?"

"Not right now."

"Sorry." She gets up, and he hears the sound of water running. A minute later, she's back. "Here."

It's a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel; it's snuggly and warm, so it's beyond brilliant right this second. He purrs at it and unclenches from the little ball he's curled into just enough to be able to hug it, and from there he pretty much checks out.

"Timothy." A soft and once again, really cold, hand on his forehead goes with his name. Tim opens an eye, sees Ducky looking at Abby. "Abigail, do you have a thermometer?"

"Yeah." She heads over to her side of the bed and gets it. Ducky looks at it curiously. Tim's vaguely amused by the idea that Ducky probably hasn't seen one jerry-rigged with duct tape and electronics the way theirs is. Abby sees the way Ducky's looking at it. "We were using it for getting pregnant. Tim modified it so it automatically uploads my temperatures to a program that keeps track of everything."

"Ah. Let's get your temperature, Timothy." He more or less just lets Ducky manhandle him. A few seconds later, Ducky says, "104.2, that's awfully high. Can you sit up?"

He manages it. Tim really didn't want to do it. Most of his body is sending him, What the hell is wrong with you? Do not try to move. Just lay here and shiver signals, but he eventually gets his arms unlocked from around his legs, his legs away from his chest, and his body into a somewhat upright position, but once he does that, waves of scalding cold hit him because getting upright means the blankets are no longer wrapped around him.

So, he is sitting up (and noticing that Abby's keeping him upright. He's suddenly suspicious that without her help he'd be lying down again.) and utterly miserable, shaking, flushed, cursing quietly, and wishing he was dead.

And yes, he does shriek and jump when Ducky presses the stethoscope against this chest. There is
no way he doesn't keep that thing stored in a vat of liquid nitrogen. It's so cold he's expecting to see his skin come off, stuck to it, when Ducky pulled it away. But once he pulls it away, Abby gently eases him back to lying down, Ducky wraps two of the blankets around him, and takes the other ones away.

That involves cursing on Tim's part, as well. At least, he thinks he's cursing. Ducky and Abby are talking to each other, not really paying attention to him. In retrospect, he may have been moaning in a pitiful manner.

Then Ducky kneels down on the floor in front of their bed, making sure he's eye to eye with Tim and says, slowly and carefully, "Timothy, you have a very high fever. I know you don't like the way this feels, but bundling you up further just exacerbates the problem. You're at 104.2 and 104 is when I usually suggest people go to the emergency room. I believe Abigail is right, and that you do have the flu. My hope is that in an effort to avoid chill, you've bundled yourself up so thoroughly that you're cooking yourself. So we are going to see if we can get your temperature down here at home. Which means there will be regular doses of Tylenol or Advil, no more huddling under every blanket in the house, and Abby's going to rub you down with a lukewarm wash cloth."

"No!" And sure, he may not have been cursing out loud, but he's awfully sure that came out loud and clear. Just the idea of a cold, wet wash cloth makes him want to curl into a defensive ball and die.

"Look at me, Timothy. If your temperature isn't at under 103.5 in an hour, you are going to the hospital. If it's not under 103 in two hours, you are going to the hospital. Because if you stay as hot as you are for much longer than that the proteins in your body will start to unravel in response to the heat. That will cripple or kill you."

Tim moans, which isn't exactly ascent, but is about all the response he can muster. Then Abby's holding two pills for him, and he takes them. He thinks he says something about just seeing if the fewer blankets and Tylenol will do the trick, but next thing he knew, she's rubbing something cold and wet down his arm and he's expressing monumental displeasure at that, because right that second, he'd rather have his brain melt than be wiped down with a cool washcloth.

He isn't sure if Ducky sticks around for the sponge bath. He does know it took about seventeen weeks, and that Abby was way more thorough than she needed to be. For example, he really didn't need the area between his toes wiped, let alone any other part of his body. Let alone twice. Or maybe three times. It felt like three times. Whatever it was, it was god awful cold and wet and took forever and he hated every second of it.

It's true that as a general principal Tim's all in favor of nice, new, crisp, clean sheets, but not today. He thought the cold, wet torture was over, (Abby blotted him dry with a towel.) and then next thing he knew he was being rolled around a bit and found himself, slightly damp, on cool, clean sheets.

But it is also true that his head felt a little clearer, and while he wants to pout about being cold, he at least now understands why they were doing it to him, which means there's significantly less cursing coming out of him as Abby drapes a light blanket over him, so he supposes that's a step in the right direction.

She takes his temperature again, and Ducky appears out of nowhere (maybe he had stuck around for the sponge bath?) and declares him at 103.6, which pleases both of them, and probably would have pleased Tim, but in that getting sponged off and yelling about it had completely exhausted him, he falls asleep before she got the read out.
He wakes up again, cold, shivery, aching, miserable in every possible definition of the word. It takes him a minute to figure out why he's awake, but then it registers that Abby is trying to get him to sit up some to take more pills.

He pulls himself up, thinks about taking the cup from her, but decides he'd just slosh whatever's in it all over the place, and lets her feed him the pills and orange juice.

And then he goes back to sleep again.

The next time he wakes up, he wakes on his own. The light is on the other side of the room, so it has to be afternoon. He just lies there for a while. One of the weird things about being sick is that it completely fries his time sense. He has no idea how long he lay there.

He's still awfully cold, and is working up the energy to lift up his head and look for another blanket when he remembers why he only has two of them. The thermometer is still on his bedside table, so he very carefully reaches for it, keeping as much of his arm under the blankets for as long as he can, and checks for himself. 102.9. That's still higher than any fever he remembers having before, but it's lower than it was, and he's not feeling so horrendously loopy.

No, not loopy. Embarrassed as hell, because he's starting to remember what he thinks he might have been saying when he was getting wiped down, and he might not like his dad by any stretch of the imagination, but years of living with the man means that when he puts his mind to it, he can really curse up a blue streak.

"Hey."

"Abby." This is when he notices she's lying on her side of the bed, on top of the blankets, reading, and he reassesses how loopy he is. Obviously, he still isn't all there if he missed that.

"You feeling any better?"

"I think so." Talking is a bad plan, that makes him cough. She sees the thermometer in his hand and checks his temperature.

"It's down, good. You had Ducky and I pretty scared for a little while there. What do you remember?"

"Cold, wet," cough, cough, "saying terrible things," cough, "really cold," cough, "still cold," cough. "Okay, you've got to stop talking. Ducky's still here, he wanted to talk to you once you were awake enough to follow a conversation. Think you can do that?"

Tim nods.

She heads out, and a bit later Ducky's back.

He smiles at Tim, touches his head, and nods a bit. "Better. Not good, but better. I want you to listen to me."

Tim nods again.

"I believe Abby is right and that you have the flu. You've already gotten your first dose of Tamiflu. In an effort to keep your fever down, she's giving you Tylenol every four hours, and making sure you don't burrow under every blanket in the house. Your job is to take your pills, lie in this bed,
drink plenty of fluids, and rest.

"If I see you at NCIS at any time in the next week, I will not only tell the Director that you are unfit to work, I will also personally slap you upside the head for going in, and Jethro for not immediately sending you home. If you get up too soon, you risk coming down with pneumonia. If you get pneumonia, you can give that to Abby. We can treat the flu and keep her from getting sick with it. If you come down with pneumonia, the only way to keep her from getting it is to have her go stay with Jimmy and Breena. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to stay in bed and rest?"

"Yes."

"Good." Ducky stands back up and faces Abby, which is when Tim checks out again. He's vaguely aware of the fact that Ducky's still talking to Abby, but he misses most of it. Actually, he misses most of the rest of Sunday. The main thing he remembers are periods of being very cold and shivery interspersed with taking more Tylenol and sleeping.
He's guessing it's Monday (though it's dark out, so it could be late Sunday) when Abby says to him, "Tim, we've got a case. I've got to go into work. You going to be okay on your own?"

"Yeah."

"I'll be home soon as I can. You've still got a fever so you need to keep taking Tylenol every four hours."

"Okay." He's feeling really sleepy and doesn't want to do anything besides nap. He doesn't cough, hurt, or shiver when he's asleep, or if he does, he's not aware of it, so asleep is currently his favorite thing.

"Your phone is going to buzz every four hours; that's why it's doing it. There's Tylenol and a six pack of water on your nightstand." He looks over and, yes, there is.

"Okay."

"You want me to call and remind you?"

The crabby part of his mind is pretty much ready to snap at her to leave him alone and just let him sleep. The rational part of his mind is realizing that he's likely to forget why his phone is buzzing or sleep through it, so yeah, reminders might be a good plan.

"Yeah."

"Okay. You start to feel worse, you call me, okay?"

"Sure."

It's light, so it has to be Monday now.

Tim's firmly convinced that if Hell does exist, and if he ends up there, it'll be cold. He hates cold. Cold is the enemy to be fought at every and any opportunity and as soon as he's feeling better they're both resigning and moving to Savannah where, on a really brutal day, it gets into the low 50s.

And then they're never leaving again.

He might be a bit on the delirious side again, because it's possible he was telling Abby about their new place in Savannah, he was definitely thinking about it, laying out on a recliner in the backyard, letting hot, humid air and sunshine beat down on him, when Ziva comes in with something that smells good and says, "McGee?"

"Ziva?"

"Abby wanted me to check in on you. I brought you some food. Chicken soup. Who were you talking to?"
"Abby isn't here?"

"No…" She's got a very concerned look on her face, and rests a hand on his forehead to see how high his fever is, and then actually takes his temperature, and from there seems to decide he's still on the right side of 103. (He has managed to drag himself awake enough to take his Tylenol every time Abby's called.) So she says, "Abby went to work ten hours ago. She's running trace. I was on my way to question a suspect, and she asked me to check in on you. Are you okay?"

"Apparently not." He thinks about sitting up, but that seems like way too much effort.

"Do you need anything?"

"I don't think so."

"Okay. The soup is on your bedside table. Try to eat some."

"Is it hot?"

"Yes. Very."

That encourages him to sit up, because you can't eat chicken soup through a straw, and he decides very, very quickly that sitting up is the most intensely stupid thing he's ever done because parts of his body that were under the blankets had to get out from under those blankets to get to the soup.

Ziva sees him looking miserable, shaking, shoulders, arms, and chest flushed and covered in goosebumps.

"Would you like a sweatshirt or sweater?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

He points to his dresser. "Bottom drawer."

She grabs him a MIT t-shirt and a NCIS sweatshirt and helps him get both of them on. The shock of cold clothing on his skin is worse than coming out from under the blankets, and he winces and curses quietly as she gets him dressed. Once dressed, he pulls the blankets up further, over his right arm and shoulder, and begins to slowly eat the soup, being extra careful not to spill it. (A good ninety percent of it ended up in his mouth, but he's still pretty shivery, so some of it isn't quite getting to his mouth.)

"It's really good." By which he means it's really hot. He's honestly not with it enough to have much of an opinion on how it tastes.

"I'm glad you like it, McGee."

He nods and takes another spoonful.

Ziva pets his hair affectionately. "Abby will be home soon. I will tell her you're sitting up and taking nourishment."
Gibbs heads up the stairs quietly. Everyone else is taking a dinner break. Abby asked him to check in on Tim, because if she works through dinner she'll get home that much sooner, and until she does her magic, they're stuck at square two.

So she's in the lab.

And Gibbs is walking up the steps, bag with more chicken soup, some crackers, and a toasted bagel in his hand.

Sunset means there is still enough light to see in Tim's room, so he can see him lying, curled into a ball, shivering, but dead-to-the-world asleep.

He puts the bag on the table, picks up the empty bowl from Ziva's delivery, and tosses it out. The water bottles are empty, so he takes them downstairs and refills them, bringing more water up for him. The Tylenol bottle looks to be three quarters full, so that's fine.

Gibbs sits on the edge of the bed, strokes Tim's hair, and fights the urge to go get some more blankets for him. It's obvious the poor boy is frozen, but it's also obvious that his fever still hasn't broken. And from what Abby's told him, wrapping Tim in every blanket in the house had almost cooked him once, so no matter how much Gibbs wants to tuck him in further, it isn't going to happen.

"Hey, Tim."

He grunts and tries to curl into an even tighter ball.

"Wake up." He's gently petting Tim's shoulder. "You need to take more meds."

Tim jerks a little at that, and uncurls some. "Jethro?" He looks really confused, like he isn't entirely sure Gibbs is real or not.

"Yeah. Abby's still working; she sent me to check in on you."

"Mmm…"

"Take your pills and you can go back to sleep."

Tim feels around, grabs two more Tylenol, and dry swallows them. Gibbs hands him a bottle of water. "Drink some, too."

He has to sit up for that. So he does, with a little help from Gibbs, draining the bottle fast, and flops back onto the mattress and into a tight ball. It's amazing how tiny of a ball a guy as tall as Tim can make.

There's no point to trying to tuck Tim in, he has the blankets wrapped around him as tightly as possible. So Gibbs just leaned down, kisses Tim on the forehead, ruffles his hair, and says, "Get some sleep."

Tim opens one eye and looks up at him, pretty bleary. "Did you really just cough "do that?"

Gibbs smiles and does it again. "Don't talk. Go to sleep."

Tim squeezes Gibbs' hand, and goes back to sleep.
Running trace goes way longer than Abby was expecting. Of course, when your crime scene is a garbage dump, and your team is one man down, you end up with multiple vast piles of crap to sort through, and one less person to help sort. So, while it is true that her general rule is to not actually engage in the sorting through crap, she broke that rule today in an effort to help get things done faster. (Hell, once the Autopsy was done, even Jimmy pitched in on the sorting.) And done faster it was. Given the pile of trace she had to deal with, she set records far above and beyond her own already Olympic-level standards. And now, she's done, and with any luck done for at least the next day or two, as well.

Which was why it's well past midnight when Gibbs drops her off (He took one look at her closing up the lab, snagged her keys and steered her toward his car. The expression on his face indicating that if he let her drive that tired, Tim would get up out of bed and beat the snot out of him, and he'd deserve it.) at home, or, more precisely twenty hours since she got the call out.

She's tired, sore from all the bending down to sort through stuff, and awfully smelly.

So, first stop, the laundry room to deposit her clothing. Yes, she wore coveralls for the sorting, but the smell clung to her skin, and from her skin to her clothing, and honestly, at this point she's about two minutes from cutting her hair off and burning the clothing in an effort to get free of the smell.

Next stop, shower.

A long, thorough scrubbing takes care of the smell issue (and the desire to chop her hair off.)

Next step, check on sleeping husband. He's still way hotter than he should be, but he doesn't jerk away when she touches him, so he's probably getting better. From what she can feel, he doesn't wake up when her hand rests on his forehead.

Next: food. And while it's true Abby isn't a big midnight snacker, between pregnant and dinner seven hours ago, she's ravenous right now.

Once she has some food in her, she begins to feel human again. Well, fairly human. Mostly tired. Not the bone-deep-I-cannot-possibly-move-a-muscle-just-let-me-lie-here-and-die tired of the first trimester, this is just the basic too many hours and no caffeine tired, but right now sleep sounds like a really good idea.

So, back up to bed she goes, hanging her kimono on the back of the bedroom door, and very carefully slips into the bed next to Tim.

He shrieks when she spoons him. She'd been so careful to get in without raising a draft, and he hadn't stirred at all when she slipped under the covers, but as she presses her body to his, he shrieks and practically levitates off the bed.

This is when it occurs to her, that while it's true that her internal temperature is 98ish, she's been up and about and moving around, wearing only a light silk robe, so her skin temperature, especially her on her legs and feet, is probably in the mid-eighties and must feel like being hugged by an ice cube on his fever-flushed skin.

This is when it also occurs to her that when she checked his temperature, she was right out of a hot shower, so her body's sense of hot was off.

She jumps back fast, gets out of the bed, puts a pair of pajama bottoms on along with socks and one
of his long sleeve t-shirts, grabs the thermometer, checks, he's at 102.3, better, but still hot, snags a blanket for her, and then spoons up behind him, on top of the other blankets with one over just her.

Fortunately none of that seems to actually wake him up. He mutters something, grumbles a bit, coughs some, and settles back into what looks like deep sleep.

This time when she spoons him, giving him something solid, and maybe not warm, but not icy cold either, to snuggle into, he does, sighing, sounding fairly content. He even unclenches from the little ball he's been in. Not a whole lot, he's still curled in on himself, but his knees aren't right under his chin anymore.

She kissed his shoulder, noticing that somewhere along the line he got a t-shirt and sweatshirt on, and holds him close.
Tamiflu is the best thing ever. Hands down, no competition, second place is miles behind it.

The last time Tim got the flu he spent seven days utterly miserable and three just pretty sad after that.

It's day three (Tuesday) and he's feeling, well, not horrible at all. Not great, not by any stretch of the imagination, but not terrible either. He's a little sore, a whole lot tired, and the cough is really annoying, but his fever finally broke, so he's not delirious or shivering.

So, all in all, it could be a whole lot worse.

He woke up a bit after eleven, noticed that he wasn't shaking any more, took his temperature, saw it was at the high end of the normal range (okay, yeah 99.5 is technically still a fever, but he's feeling so much better he's willing to consider himself back to the normal range) and very slowly (and carefully, Abby's spooned up behind him, and he doesn't want to wake her up) got up to get a shower.

Shower felt great. Hot water was excellent. He started to feel weak and shaky again before he got done scrubbing everything, so he didn't quite get entirely washed off, but all of him got rinsed, the important parts got scrubbed, and he doesn't smell bad anymore, so that's a victory of sorts, and if he needed to spend five minutes sitting on the bathroom floor after getting out of the shower to rest, well, he does have the flu, and hasn't eaten anything solid since Saturday night.

Eventually he got himself back together enough to get up and brush his teeth (also excellent, toothbrushes are vastly underrated miracles and he never wants the inside of his mouth to taste that way again) and walk very slowly back into their bedroom to put some clean clothing on.

He's still not enjoying the feel of fresh, cold clothing on his skin, but not being in the clammy, damp sweat-soaked t-shirt and sweatshirt was good.

At some point between waking up and now, Abby left their bed, and changed the sheets. He debated between getting back into bed, which sounded pretty good, or going all the way downstairs to get on the sofa, which meant he could watch some TV to go with the napping he had planned for today.

TV and napping won over just napping, so he grabbed a blanket, wrapped it around himself, and slowly shuffled toward the sofa.

He'd gotten himself pretty comfortable on the sofa (lying down, two blankets, remote within easy reach, but TV not turned on. He's thinking nap first, then season nine of Supernatural.) when Abby came into the living room and sat on the sofa next to him.

"You're alive then?"
"Looks like it."

She kissed his forehead. "Good. You feel cooler."
"Still have a little fever, but I'm all here again."
"Very good. You want some food?"
He shrugged; he's not feeling any burning need to eat. Probably a pretty good sign that he's not all better. "Tea? Bagel? I was thinking sleep."

"Okay. You sleep." She was petting him, making sure the blankets were nice and tucked in around him.

He'd closed his eyes, relaxed a little, and was just starting to drift when something occurred to him. "It's Tuesday, right?"

"Yeah."

"Why are you here?" True, they haven't done the whole one of them is sick thing before, so he's not sure what the rules are, but he's fairly certain she doesn't need to take off work just because he's not feeling well.

"Worked twenty hours yesterday. I'm beat. I'm taking off until they need more trace run."

"Okay." He thought about that while coughing. "You aren't getting sick, are you?"

She shook her head. "Just tired. For some strange reason, I can't work all day, grab a three hour nap, and do it again anymore."

He stroked her tummy and coughed again. "Some strange reason, huh?"

"Yeah."

"You wanna nap, too?" He curled onto his side, coughed yet again, and patted the sofa in front of him.

"I'm good right now. Only been awake half an hour."

"Okay." So he rolled onto his back again, and went to sleep.

The next time he woke up, there was tea and a toasted bagel on the coffee table in front of him. Even better, he felt good enough that he really wanted to eat them.

He was happily scarfing them down when Abby came back into the living room. "Thought I heard you up and moving around."

"Yep." He chewed, started coughing, and finally got his breath back. "I love food."

"Glad to hear it."

He reached for her hand, and she let herself be gently tugged onto the sofa, next to him. "I love you, too."

She snuggled into him. "Even better."

"I think I said some really, more coughing, "horrible things to you when you were," and yet more coughing, "rubbing me down."

Abby leaned back a little to look into his eyes. "Baby, you were completely out of your head, and I'm sure being rubbed with something cold and wet felt like torture."
"I'm sorry."

"You say something like that to me when you're sane, then you can be sorry."

"I say something," very harsh coughing stopped that sentence for a minute, "like that when I'm sane," even more coughing stopped him again, "and you should divorce me."

She can see this is serious for him, and he needs to talk about it. She can also see he can say about four words at a time before he starts coughing. "Okay, Tim, we can and will talk about this, but not now. You need to be able to say a full sentence without coughing before we have a real conversation."

He nodded, agreeing with that, but there was one thing he needed to know. "Ducky?"

She got that he was asking how much of it Ducky heard. "Yeah, he was there the whole time. He helped me. You couldn't stay on your side by yourself, so he held you in place, and I rubbed your back down. Same thing with getting the sheets changed."

"Great."

"He's not going to hold it against you."

Tim shrugged a little. He knows Ducky isn't going to hold it against him, but he still doesn't want to explain how he even had phrases like those in his head, let alone that he'd whip them out when his defenses were gone.

"You want more to eat?"

He nodded. There's nothing he can do about what happened with Abby and Ducky, and more food sounded like a great idea.

"Wow!" Abby just stared at the TV.

Tim was lying on his side, spooned behind her, on the sofa. "I didn't see that coming at all."

"Really?" She turned so she was laying on her back, and he scooted a little further back into the sofa to give her a few more inches.

"Yeah. Not at all. Cas and Dean," that was too many words, he started coughing again, but managed to suck in some air to finish, "sure, but Jesus coming back as Bobby?" They'd just finished the fourth episode of Supernatural Season Nine.

"You really didn't see that coming?"

He was trying to flash her an irked look while he coughed, from the way she was smiling, he didn't appear to be succeeding. Finally he said, "No. I really didn't. How did you see it?"

"Okay, Sam and Dean are the parallel characters for Lucifer and Michael. John and Bobby are the parallels for Old Testament God and Jesus. Bobby even rose from the dead after three days."

"Everyone," more coughing, "rises from the dead on that show. Who hasn't risen from the dead?"

"Adam."
"First man. Eternally damned." Even more coughing. "He's never getting out of Hell until the rest of mankind is redeemed."

"Huh..." Abby thought about that for a moment, staring at the paused end credits. "Hadn't thought of that. Anyway, Bobby is the parallel to Jesus, so of course—" Abby stopped dead in the middle of that sentence, her eyes went really wide, and then she grabbed his hand and pressed it to her stomach. "You feel that?"

From context he knew what she had to be talking about, but, nope, he didn't feel it.

"Sorry."

"Here, quick." She let go of his hand and yanked up her t-shirt. "She's still moving."

But even skin on skin, he couldn't feel it.

He shook his head, loving the expression of wonder on her face and wishing desperately he could feel their baby move. "What's it feel like?"

She already had her right hand on his left, so she vibrated the tips of her fingers against the back of his hand, tapping them a little as well.

"Wow."

"Yeah." There was a brilliant smile on her face as she said that. "It's soft, and fluttery, and sort of bubbly."

He's grinning now, too. He scooted down and lifted up on his left arm a bit, so his mouth was hovering over Abby's tummy, and he kissed it gently, then said, "So, did Bobby being Jesus' vessel surprise you, too." He paused to cough for a moment. "Or are you agreeing with Mommy that it was pretty obvious?"

Abby tugged on his hair, and he looked up at her. "Mommy?"

"Uh, yeah. You're Mom. I'm Dad. That's usually how this works."

There were tears in her eyes, a wide, glorious smile on her face, and she gently stroked her fingers over his face. "We're really going to be Mom and Dad."

He kissed her tummy again, and grinned back at her. "Yeah, we are." Then his arm started to shake, letting him know he wasn't healthy enough to lean on it for that long, so he lowered himself back onto his side, and scooted back up to be face to face with her.

She rolled onto her side toward him, her tummy pressed against his, her leg over his hip. "Dad, then?"

"Yeah. I don't see being Pa or Father."

She laughed a little at that. "No. I don't see that, either. 'Course where I'm from we have Mamas and Moms, no one has a Mommy."

"Which do you want to be?"

"I think we'll get something figured out, probably be both depending on what's going on. I know my mom was." He nodded and coughed at that. She kissed the tip of his nose. "No more talking for you."
He nodded at that, too. The coughing was really frustrating. He had no idea how much he talked until every other sentence made him feel like his lungs were trying to explode.

His hand settled on the side of her belly, hoping to feel something.

"I think she went back to sleep, or turning means I can't feel her."

He blinked in a I understand sort of way. It was pretty relaxing to be lying like that. His arm under her neck, her leg over his hip, his hand on her belly, and he'd been awake for a whole three hours at that point, so he was probably due for another nap.

And, like when he usually falls asleep his brain sort of wandered around over the last few things they'd been talking about or doing. It landed on something he really liked, and wanted to say to her, a lot. So his eyes popped back open and he said, "I want us to adopt Jethro," which was followed by more coughing.

She hadn't been party to the way his brain got to that thought, so she furrowed her brow and looked confused.

"Make it official," the coughing after that was fairly mild, "have our kids call him Grandpa or something like that," unfortunately the coughing that went with that was hard enough it strained the muscles between his ribs below his scapula, so he groaned and winced to go along with it.

She put her fingers on his lips. "Really, no more talking for you. I will get your phone and you can text me if you have to talk."

He nodded.

"Did you just pull your back?"

He nodded again.

She untangled herself from him, and got up. A few minutes later she was back with his phone, more tea, an ice pack which he didn't want anywhere near his body, and two Advil. He took the pills, drank the tea, coughed a little, winced because it felt like knives in his chest and back, and glared at the ice pack, typing into his phone. No ice.

"Fine, be sore."

He glared at her, took the ice, and gingerly turned so that it was tucked between his back and the sofa.

"Better."

*Can I have another blanket?* He's fairly sure the fever's completely done now, but even if it wasn't, an extra blanket when you're lying on a bag of ice doesn't seem like an unreasonable request.

"Sure." She went upstairs and came back with one more to tuck around him.

Grandpa?

She knelt on the floor in front of him, and kissed him, a gentle smile on her face. "Yes." Another gentle kiss. "I love the idea of making it official, of him being Kelly's Grandpa…" She thought about that for a moment. "Your mom's dad, the one you were really close to, who was he to you?"

Pop.
"If he likes it, he could be Pop for our kids."

That gets a wide smile out of Tim. **Good.**
Thursday

Thursday morning, he offered to drive Abby into NCIS.

He's not going to work. Between the wrath of Ducky and the fact that he tried to write a little last night, re-read what he came up with, and very promptly concluded that he wasn't nearly with it enough to do any sort of real detail work for more than ten minutes at a time, he's not willing to go near a case. He messes up a few pages of Deep Six, and well, it's annoying, but he re-does them later. He messes up on someone's financials, phone records, or God, worse, trying to break into someone's system, and that's a really big problem.

But he does want to talk to Ducky.

And Gibbs took Abby home Tuesday morning, so if he drops her off they don't end up with both of their cars at the Navy Yard.

Plus he is going a little stir crazy just laying around at home, so getting out for an hour isn't a bad idea. Maybe, if he's feeling really energetic, he'll grab some food.

But mostly, he's going in to talk to Ducky. Get this done with. And if he's talking to Ducky about it, then he needs to talk to Abby, too.

He's turned on the ignition and is pulling out of the driveway when he says to Abby, "I said some really awful things to you."

Abby nods. "Nothing I haven't already heard you say." Tim's eyes went wide, and he looked utterly shocked and horrified. That confirmed something she'd been pretty sure of for almost two years now. "You talk in your sleep sometimes, baby."

His mouth opens and closes a few times but nothing came out. Finally he says, "I didn't know that."

"Yeah, I was pretty sure you didn't remember it. You'll toss around sometimes, start cursing, and I'll poke you. Sometimes you wake up enough you seem to notice I'm there, most of the time you just quiet down and settle back to sleep."

"Oh."

"Okay."

He's thinking frantically, trying to come up with something to anchor this to his understanding of both himself and reality, but he's not coming up with anything. "I don't remember those dreams."

"I know." She stroked his hand. "I'm glad you don't. You don't seem happy while it's going on."

"I'd imagine not." If he's cursing in his sleep, the kind of cursing he was doing on Sunday, he knows what he has to be dreaming about when it happens, and yeah, not happy at all. "Does it happen a lot?"

"Every other month?" She shrugs a little. It happens often enough that it's part of the routine now, and rarely enough that it's not an everyday or every week sort of thing. "It's one of the ways I know
you're stressed. It started after the case where you saw your Dad again."

"Oh."

"It was really… disturbing… the first few times it happened. But you'll notice I've never said anything about you and him patching things up again. That man can rot in Hell for what he's said to you." Her voice is hot and dead serious as she says that.

That's the single most hateful thing Tim's ever heard Abby say about anyone, so he's fairly sure he must be replaying the Admirals' Greatest Hits when he sleeps.

"And I know you're really unhappy about saying those things, but, really, Tim, you weren't in your right mind, and what Ducky and I did was painful for you. So, I'm not going to say it was okay, because we both know there are some things you can never, ever say to people, but it made sense. Look, you were really pissed at me on Saturday, and you had no problem expressing how pissed off you were with a whole lot of fucks and shits, but you still said nothing even remotely like what came out of your mouth on Sunday. When you've got any functional filters in place, those words don't get out of your mouth."

"Yeah." He knows that, still…. "I hate the fact they're in my head at all."

"I know."

"And I hate the fact that I said them to you, called you a slut, whore, and cunt." And those are just the ones he remembers. But he knows it went on longer than that, and he knows there were extremely degrading adjectives that went with them and that they were wrapped in some really hateful sentences.

"I know that, too. But, we're okay. I don't like hearing you say things like that, but I know you don't like saying them, and I really know you didn't like hearing them, either."

"Yeah."

"And look, if you don't want to say anything to Ducky about it, he's not going to think less of you. You want to just let it lie, and it will."

"No. I don't want him thinking that… I don't want him thinking that's the kind of thing I'd just say, especially not to you."

"Tim, really, you were out of your head. It was very obvious that this wasn't the sort of thing you were just coming up with. He could tell you were remembering, not inventing."

"Which is almost worse. He's dating my grandmother."

"You don't need to explain, at all, if you don't want to, and you certainly don't need to cover for her. If he respects her less because of this… well, I know I do."

"Abby?"

"I know you love her. And she's strong, and capable, and lovely, and encouraged you to be who you wanted to be, but she let him do that to you. I don't hate her or anything. I know you spent most of your childhood on the opposite side of the country from her. But she still raised him, and she didn't protect you, not well enough. Same reason why even though your mom is wonderful, I don't adore her, either. They had a duty to protect you, and they didn't."
He doesn't know how to respond to that. He's always thought of his mom as one more soldier in the trenches with him, and Penny was his life preserver. She read his stories, and praised his work, and sent him encouraging letters and the books his mom wouldn't let him read, and helped him find options other than the Navy, and…

And that's more than he's got room in his head for right now.

And, they're also in the Navy Yard parking lot.

"Timothy." Ducky's hand is starting to rise as he stands up when Tim pokes his head into Autopsy.

"Just here to talk. I'm not working," Tim replies as he walks in.

Ducky's eyes narrow, like he doesn't entirely believe Tim.

Tim holds up his hands, and sits down on the desk chair in front of Ducky's computer. "Really, just talk, and then I'm going home to get another nap."

"Good." Ducky sits at the desk next to him and begins to make both of them a cup of tea. "What is so pressing you need to get out of bed to come talk to me about it."

"I don't entirely remember what I was saying when you and Abby were cooling me down, but I remember enough of it, so I know it wasn't pretty."

"No. It wasn't." The look in Ducky's eyes is gentle, but there's no excuse or forgiveness in it, either.

"I don't usually… well… ever, say things like that."

"I know, Timothy." To the best Ducky can remember, until Sunday, he'd never heard anything beyond mild profanity out of Tim, and he's seen him in some pretty tight situations.

"My dad used to say things like that, and apparently it's still in my head."

Ducky nods, suddenly getting what was going on. The gentleness in his eyes deepens, forgiveness, excuse, and a soft, and very weary, sadness joined it.

"And I'm… horrified is probably the right word, that I said things like that. I know it's not okay to ever say things like that, no matter what."

"Which is why you don't ever say things like that." Ducky finishes up with the cup of tea and hands it to Tim. "He didn't just say them, did he? He said them to you, about you?"

"Yeah."

Ducky clasps his hands over Tim's. "None of it was ever true, Timothy."

"I know that, now."

"Good."

Tim drinks some of the tea, fast, and says, "I know you're good at keeping secrets, and I probably don't have to ask… but I'd really appreciate it if none of that ever got out."

"As long as you are my patient, nothing you say or do will ever be mentioned by me to anyone who
isn't you or Abby."

"Thanks."

"But, obviously, it still weighs on you. Maybe talking to someone about it would be a good thing."

Tim shrugs a little at that. A lot of thoughts are bouncing around his head right now, and he's not entirely sure what to do with them all. Once he's had more time to process it, he'll have a better idea of what to do next. "Maybe. Abby and Jimmy know about it, at least in the abstract. Abby's got more details of how and why it happened. Until last week Jimmy had a better idea of the sort of language he used. My mom was, not exactly there, he was pretty good about not usually having an audience when he was going to really curse me out, but she knew it happened. She was there the day I told him I wasn't going to Annapolis, heard that fight. Hell, the whole neighborhood did. Same thing with my grandparents. They didn't have specifics, but they knew it was bad. There was a reason why they let me stay with them any summer he was on land."

"Penny?" And this of course, touches both of them.

"Knew enough that she didn't think twice about offering to let me live with her as soon as I graduated high school. I was on the plane to Baltimore less than twelve hours after I got my diploma. She was teaching at St. John's then, and I was going to Johns Hopkins. I didn't turn eighteen until December, so I couldn't get an apartment in my own name, and the dorms didn't open until the end of August. Anyway, Penny knew he had been very upset about me not going to Annapolis, she knew what very upset meant, and she made sure I had a safe place to land after I graduated."

Ducky nods at that, and Tim adds, "You can talk to her about it, too. If you want. I know that… you're good friends and…" He flounders on that and lets it trail off.

Ducky squeezes his hand again. "Just because he didn't use his fists doesn't mean it wasn't abuse."

That stops Tim for a good minute as an entire paradigm of his life suddenly shifts. Ducky lets him sit there, thinking, and finally Tim smiles dryly, a not even a remotely amused expression on his face. He's kind of talking on auto pilot, thinking through it as he's saying it. "Kids like me don't get abused, Ducky. No one ever says that word, let alone thinks it. 'Kids like me don't get abused,' Ducky. No one ever says that word, let alone thinks it. We get 'toughened up' or 'taught how hard the world is.' Pick whatever euphemism that makes it sound like my dad was looking out for me that you like, and that's what happened to me."

"Timothy—"

Tim cut him off with a shake of his head. "I'm an Admiral's grandson, and at the time a Captain-on-the-rise's son. Everyone in my family knew we fought, a lot of our friends, too. But no one's ever said that word, not even Penny. There have been 216 Four Star Admirals in the history of the US Navy. My dad is one of them, and my grandfather was one of them. You rise that far, you need connections. We're Irish Catholic out of Boston. The Kennedys were Jack and Bobby to my Grandfather, and though we left Boston a long time ago, the connections are still deep. Hell, the Admiral's on the President's task force for drone war tactics. He's probably designing new ones to launch off of aircraft carriers."

"Anyway, when you're that connected, everyone looks the other way, especially if you make it easy by not leaving any bruises. So, yeah, I know it was abuse," and right that second he does, though he's never thought about it like that before, "and he knew that, also." He's suddenly very sure of that, too. "But words don't show. No bruises, no broken limbs, nothing to go in your file or make any problems when you're up for review for the next level up. As long as you've got the perfect family on paper, nothing else matters."
"I'm sorry, Timothy."

"It's long done, Ducky. Long done. Anyway, I'm sorry you had to hear that."

Ducky nods at him. "It wasn't your fault."

He flashes an irked look at Ducky. "When I was a kid, sure. But once I was older? No, Ducky, I chose not to be the man he wanted me to be. I could have been. What I didn't have in sheer talent I could have made up for with brains and drive. I could have laid down, done the things he wanted me to, gone to Annapolis, became a sailor. But I didn't. I earned the words he threw at me. I own them. They're mine, and they're the marks of being the man I wanted to be."

"Ah." Ducky doesn't quite look like he knows what to do with that. "I meant saying them to Abigail and I. You said it was never all right, and I meant to touch on that, not…"

"Oh."

"I'm sure what we were doing to you hurt, and with your history with cold, it had to be terrifying. It was very clear that you did not understand why we were doing it to you. You were too weak to fight, so the last weapon you had, exceptionally crude invective, came out. Since you were in no mindset to be coming up with it off the cuff, we both knew it was something you were remembering. We were sorry it was so traumatic for you."

"Fortunately, I don't remember it all that well, either." Which isn't exactly true, bits and pieces of it are still really vivid, but he's already in really uncomfortable territory and has no desire to make it worse.

"Good."

They heard the woosh of the Autopsy doors opening followed immediately by, "Tim, what are you doing here? You're supposed to be home, in bed!" from Jimmy.

"Which is where I'm going, soon." Talking with Abby and Ducky has left him feeling wrung out and ready for a good long nap. "Just needed to check in with Ducky."

"You couldn't do it over the phone?"

"Gibbs wants us breaking down a wall on Saturday."

"Ahh… yes… your bootcamp assignment," Ducky quickly figured out what their cover was and snapped into it.

"I wanted to know if maybe Sunday…"

"Maybe." Ducky gives him a stern look. "Maybe. Let's see how you are feeling on Saturday and go from there. I'm certain that Tony and Jimmy can help Jethro take down that wall without your help."

"Not just us, actually. Breena wanted me to ask if you'd be up to watching Molly. She really likes the idea of seeing the boat and joining in. Gibbs had told me it was okay if she wanted to come…"

"Certainly, Jimmy." Ducky smiles at that, looking like he's enjoying the idea of babysitting.

"I should get going. Got a nap to take and some Supernatural to watch after that." Tim stands up, and grabs his jacket.

"I'll walk with you," Jimmy adds. They're in the hallway, walking slowly, when Jimmy says,
"Breena pointed out last night that Ohio State made March Madness this year."

Tim nods, he's aware of what that is. And after a second it clicks why Jimmy is telling him this. Tony is a rabid basketball fan and was a Buckeye.

"She knows we still don't have a bachelor party for Tony, and suggested we keep an eye on it. If they get to the Final Four, that would be something cool, that he'd like, and wouldn't involve us taking him to a strip club."

That perks Tim up. They'd been bouncing bachelor party ideas around for a while, without coming up with any ones that Tony would actually like.

"I'll talk to my cousin and see about what you have to do to get tickets."

"Good."

Chapter End Notes

There have been 214 Four Star Admirals in the history of the US Navy. I added two for Nelson and John McGee.
On Friday he was bored.

Bored, bored, bored.

Tim's rarely bored. Best he can remember, the last time he was bored he was on a stakeout. Best he can remember, the only time he gets bored is on stakeout. So, for about, oh, nine seconds it was a kind of novel sensation, and then it was, well, boring.

Between cases, writing, gaming, TV, and reading, he almost never has time where he's got nothing to do when he's on his own. But, while he's feeling mostly better at this point, really, he's just tired, and sore, and okay, he's still coughing a little, which is why he's sore, his brain's not all back yet.

And he knows it. He sat at his typewriter, spent another hour working on Deep Six, looked at what he had, and it was crap.

He played Call of Duty for ten minutes and got his ass handed to him so fast so many times he knew it was time to bow out.

Minecraft didn't hold his attention for more than twenty minutes. Modding for Minecraft didn't last for more than seven minutes.

He read three pages of his book before he lost interest.

Tim thought about jerking off, but he's not that horny and Abby'll probably be home a little early, so might as well hold off and see if she's interested in helping him "recuperate." Okay, some fun ideas on that front held his attention for a good ten minutes, and he's wondering if they've got anything that looks even vaguely like a nurse's outfit. Abby could probably bring some scrubs home from work. He sends her a text about that, and that ate up a pleasant half hour, but eventually she had to get back to work, leaving him, once again, bored.

What he really wants is another season of Supernatural. He's not with it enough to work or write. But something fun and snarky and sexy would be really good about now, alas he caught up with the live show yesterday, so no new episodes for a few more days.

He flipped around Amazon and Netflix, watched half an episode of The Dresden Files, which he's fairly sure he'd normally like (he liked the books), but it's not keeping his interest, either.

Bored, bored, bored.

Bored Tim thinks. That's just how he is. His brain never really goes quiet. It just hops from one thing to the next, processing away. When he's not bored, he has an easy time staying on one thing for a long time. Bored Tim skips from issue to issue, looking for something to catch his interest.

And it lands on Penny, and the Admiral, and some really nasty words, and the fact that trying to not think about that is probably a good half of why he can't focus on anything. Because, when there's something niggling around in the back of his mind, something he's trying to ignore, his brain will try to bring him back to it, and short circuiting his ability to focus on things is one of the ways it does that.

So, he can let it go, keep bouncing from thing to thing, keep blaming the lack of focus on recovering from the flu, or he actually face what's going on back there in his head.
He makes himself a cup of tea, heads to his office, and sits down in front of his typewriter. He's not sure if he'll write about it or not. Sometimes just thinking is enough. Sometimes he's got to get it on paper.

Maybe paper. He pulls the sheet of Deep Six: Shadow Force (It's probably a good thing there are marketing people to help him come up with titles for these things. He's fairly sure they won't be keeping this one.) out and slides a blank one in, and then stares at it.

The thing is, it never occurred to him that his mom or Penny or his grandparents should have done anything more than they did. Sailors curse, it's just who and what they are. Though, as he thinks about it, not wanting to be a guy who said things like that was a big part of not wanting to be a sailor. He's mildly surprised that he's never made that connection before.

Dads yell at their kids when they don't live up to their expectations. Everyone does that, right? That's part of how you let them know you're serious about being disappointed. Sure, he's got no intention of being that guy himself, but the list of things he's intending to do differently with Kelly is about six miles long, so the fact that's on there isn't a surprise. In fact, the only play out of his father's book that he's intending to use (and really, he's taking it out of Gibbs' playbook) is have high standards.

But there's a line between yelling and degrading. And there's a line between having expectations for your kid's own good and wanting to control every aspect of her life.

There's a line between pushing them to do their best and abuse.

He had friends, acquaintances really, who got slapped around. That was over the line. That was considered base and shameful and doing that was the sign of a man who couldn't control himself. And the Admiral never did that.

But he wouldn't have. Because it would have looked bad. He almost never yelled when there were other people around, because that looked bad, too. Technically, he rarely yelled, at least not in the sense of being angry. Loud and scary, yeah, he did that a lot, but he was usually pretty calm about it. He certainly knew what he was doing, and it was intentional.

The only time Tim thinks the Admiral was actually angry, the only time he fully lost it, was when Tim showed him the Annapolis acceptance, handed it to him, waited for the smile, and it happened, wide, bright, happy smile, really, genuinely pleased for once, one of the few times he can remember his dad smiling at him once he was a teen, and then he took that letter back and ripped it, very carefully and deliberately, into shreds and said, "I'm going to Johns Hopkins."

He replayed the words that came next, ran them through his mind. They're far enough back in his personal history and he's done it often enough now that he can just about do it without feeling like he wants to hit someone, hide, or cry.

Until Ducky said it, the word abuse never entered his mind. He hadn't been lying; no one ever said it, no one ever thought it. But once Ducky said it, it clicked, and obviously that's how Abby has to think about it, otherwise she wouldn't be upset with his mom or grandmother…

He was a kid who wanted his dad to pay attention. He wanted his dad home. He wanted hugs and smiles and petting and soft words and laughter and encouragement and time. But his dad wasn't home, and his Dad only smiled when he got everything perfect, and once he regularly got everything perfect his dad stopped smiling because perfect wasn't enough and he needed to do more and better and do it the way his Dad liked it and only the way he liked it.

He was a teen who fought with his dad. More or less constantly when the Admiral was home, but he
wasn't home a lot. By the time he was fourteen, fighting was their default setting. Tim's pretty sure he
started a lot of those fights, well, some of them anyway. He definitely started the Annapolis one.
But… but even if your fifteen-year-old is pushing all of your buttons as hard as he can, because he's
sure he can't get you to pet him, so he'll make you yell instead, you still don't call him fat or ugly or
stupid or clumsy, you really don't call him a worthless failure, and you certainly don't call him an
weak little faggot who needs to be raped by a whole battleship of sailors to learn some respect for the
lessons he's being taught in how to be tough, you just don't.

The idea that stuff like that might actually happen on battleships was also part of why Tim didn't
want to be a sailor, and is also something he's just putting together right now. (The fact that he gets
seasick when he sees a battleship, usually before he actually sets foot on it, let alone can feel it
moving, probably also has something to do with this, and is, yet again, something he's putting
together for the first time right now.)

He was a kid who was abused by his dad.

He lets that sit in his mind for a few minutes. There's a sort of… uncomfortable peace to that, and
he's not sure what to do with that emotion. It feels right, but he doesn't want it to.

If it was abuse, then the other adults in his life had a duty to protect him.

If it was just two guys butting heads, then they didn't.

How much did they really know? Everyone knew they fought… but he was good at making sure no
one really heard what he said…

He pulled out his phone and brought up Penny's number.

"Tim?"

"Hey, Penny, do you have time to talk?"

"Officially, I've got office hours right now, but no one's here, and I don't have another lecture for
three hours. What's going on?"

"That'll do." He doesn't say anything for a few seconds. "Penny, why do you think my Dad loves
me?"

"Timothy…" He can hear concern and confusion in her voice.

"Just lay it out for me, like it's a proof."

"Honey, can you back up a little, give me an idea of why you're asking and what's going on?"

"It's a long story."

"I've got time." He hears her stand up and a door click shut. "Just closed my door. Office hours are
now officially booked. You've got me 'til four. Start at the beginning."

So he did. And he didn't pull any punches or censor himself. He told her everything starting with
getting sick, every phrase he could remember of what he said to Abby and Ducky, as well as a
bunch of others he was pretty sure (really hoped) he didn't say to them, and he told her about hearing
them in the first place, and then told her about talking with Ducky, and how he said just because it
wasn't physical didn't mean it wasn't abuse. He finished with, "So, why do you think he loves me?
What do you see that I don't?"
She was silent on the other end for a long time, thinking about what he said, probably looking very distressed. He's not going to press her to respond, but he can tell by the way this silence feels that he just dropped a ton of stuff she hadn't known on her, (which was a relief for him) and that right now one of her major paradigms is shifting, as well.

Finally, after what was probably three solid minutes of silence, she says, "First off, Tim, Ducky's right, that's over the line. It's never okay to do that to someone else. He is my son, and I love him, and it's still abuse, and it's still wrong, and…" her voice cracked and she sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly before continuing, "I'm so sorry I didn't do more for you. All I can say is I didn't know it was that bad. I knew you fought, and I knew he was angry, but… not that, but I should have, and I should have gotten you out of there a whole lot sooner."

"Why do you think he loves me, Penny? Past can't change, but… I want some more context."

She took another deep breath and tried to answer calmly. "I was there the first time he held you, Tim. You were six days old when he got home. I remember the way his hands shook and the smile on his face. I was there two months ago when we got together for lunch and he asked to see your wedding pictures. I saw the way he looked at them. I gave him the signed copies of your books that he asked for."

"The books he's told me were 'a massive fucking waste of time and talent.' My 'faggy' little mysteries that I needed to 'stop dicking around with and commit to some real work?'"

"When…"

"After that case… You told me he loved me. I called him. We talked for like, eight minutes, and it seemed like it was going okay until I mentioned I was a best-selling author and he went ballistic on my books."

"Oh."

"And it went downhill from there on my career. He was yelling about how I needed to commit to one thing and really do it, and then I mentioned the whole chose not to be in charge of Cybercrime thing, you know committing to my team, and well, a minute into that harangue I hung up. Dereliction of duty was the nicest thing he had to say, and I decided I didn't want or need any of the rest of his comments on my life choices."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah. I'm hearing that a lot these days. So, he likes pictures of me and wants my books on his shelf. He actually read them?"

"I don't know. We don't talk about that."

"Sounds like he wants trophies so he can keep the image of me in his life without having to actually have me in his life."

"Maybe." She doesn't sound convinced about that, but he gets the sense she's not sure about anything in regards to John right now. "One thing I know is that when he doesn't care about something, he can't get angry about it."

"That's not comforting. Anything else?"

"He always asks about you. He asks Sarah for updates, too."
"Still seems like window dressing to me. People know he has two kids, and he wants to be able to give some sort of information on both of them rather than admit that he's not in contact with me. He probably thinks it looks bad if my books aren't on his shelf, especially since Sarah's are. Did he ask for copies of the wedding pictures?"

"He wanted a few, and of the sonogram."

"Let me guess, he's got them up in his office?"

"I think that's true. Last time I was there your and Sarah's books were on a shelf up behind Nelson and Connor's medals and flags. I don't know if he has the pictures up, but he probably does."

"I called him the night before our wedding, wanting to know why he married mom, what it meant to him, and I mentioned that Abby was pregnant, and all he had to say about it to me was, 'Already'?"

"Look, honey, I'm not going to be the person who says, but he really loves you deep down and that makes it okay, because nothing ever makes this okay. But, it feels like he loves you to me. He seems genuine when he asks about you. He looks interested, and like he wants to know. He appears to really regret the fact that he's never met your wife and is never going to meet your children."

"Damn right he's never meeting my kids! He's not getting within a mile of them! And I don't want you or Sarah giving him pictures of them."

"I don't blame you for that, and I won't give him any again."

"Penny, is this how men who love each other act in your world? Did Grandpa treat him like that?"

"No honey, he didn't."

"Does Ducky treat you like that?"

"No, he doesn't. And Nelson didn't, either."

"I was sick, and Jethro came over, brought me soup, helped me take my pills and kissed my forehead. I'm not a child, and I'm not his, but he still did it."

"Timothy, you are most certainly his. I barely know him, but I know that."

"Did he ever did that for me? I can't remember it."

"You were four, and your mom was pregnant, not too far along, but sick with it, and you had… strep throat I think."

"My mom was pregnant?"

"Tim, she miscarried three times between you and Sarah."

"I didn't know that."

"You were three the first time, four the second, and six the third. She never got past ten weeks. They never got to the point of telling you about it because you were so little. But you were sick, and she was too, and I was staying with you to help out, and I remember him lying on the sofa, letting you nap on him because you were feeling so awful."

Tim tried, really tried, but he couldn't come up with it.
"I don't remember it."

"No. You wouldn't. You were little and sleeping. But he really did used to do things like that. He was home most of the year you were three and a half of four, things like that happened a lot then."

"Back when he still saw me as his little sailor."

"Yes."

"Back when he could love a fantasy of who I was going to be."

Penny sighed. "Yes."

He sat there quietly, looking around his office. "You know, it doesn't hurt nearly as bad as it feels like it should. Mostly I'm just tired, done with this."

"Are you done with it, really?"

"I want to be. Besides Sarah's wedding and your funeral, I'll probably never have to see him again."

"No, you don't."

"So, call it six, maybe eight more hours of my life, and he could always be relied on to behave in public. I don't ever have to do more than make small talk with him again."

"You don't even have to do that if you don't want to."

"I guess not."

"So what happens now?"

"Nap, I think. I'm really tired. I'm feeling a lot better, but still get tired really easily."

"Then go get that nap."

Bed is sounding awfully good, but he's not quite ready to put his phone down, yet. "You going to talk to him?"

"Eventually. He calls every few weeks. You want me to bring this up?"

Tim shrugs, genuinely unsure. But she can't see that. "I really don't know. Nothing changed, you know? The past is still exactly the same; it's just got a new label, and some things are making a bit more sense now." He puzzles that for a bit, and Penny lets him. Eventually he says, "I'm sure he still thinks he was getting me ready for the real world, trying to make me as strong and as good as I could be, at least, I think that was true when I was little. Eventually, by the end, he was smacking me for not being who he wanted me to be. I'm sure he's got miles of justifications. I was soft, and clumsy, and fat, and liked girly things, and got the answer wrong sometimes, and wasn't first string on any team, and—"

"And there was nothing wrong with any of that."

"Not to you. Not to Mom or Gran or Pop."

"Not to anyone who loves you." Penny seems to hear what she's just said. Tim can imagine the expression on her face right now, and he's fairly sure her next conversation with her son will be very interesting.
"Yeah. That's what I thought, Penny. If you want to talk to him about it for you, because he's your son and you're horrified at what he said, and what it says about how he feels about women and gays, have at it, it's fine. But not for me. I'm done with this."

"Okay. Go rest up."

"Thanks. You coming down to visit anytime soon?"

"Spring break is next week, and I'm Ducky's plus one for Tony and Ziva's wedding."

"Should I tell Ziva to expect you for Shabbos next Friday?"

"Yes, I'd like that."

"Good. See you then."
Abby wasn't entirely sure what she was going to come home to.

Tim. That was a given.

Tim in what sort of state was what she was wondering about.

She knew he had talked to Ducky yesterday. Two reasons for that, first of all, he told her he was going to talk to him, and secondly, Ducky wandered over to her lab and had lunch with her. And while it's true that he's an excellent secret keeper, apparently when it comes to things like this he considers Tim and Abby to be one person, so he made sure that she knew everything they'd talked about.

Ducky seemed especially concerned that Tim might have thought that he deserved some of the things John had said to him. Abby was fairly sure that something got lost in translation there, because she'd never gotten that sense from Tim, but she'd also seen how blindsided he'd been by the idea that the other adults in his life had failed him, which is making her think that she understands what happened between John and Tim very differently than how Tim understands it.

And when she got home yesterday, it was pretty clear he wasn't his usual self.

Not depressed or in pain or weepy, but he was working extremely hard on not thinking about something, and she had a pretty good idea of what something was.

Apparently he talked to Ducky, got home, took a nap, made a call to see about some basketball tickets, and then watched thirteen episodes of Supernatural back to back, and yeah, he likes that show, but… But that's not Gosh-this-is-so-good-I-can't-put-it-down. That's I'm-keeping-my-brain-active-so-I-don't-have-to-deal-with-what's-really-going-on.

Though, as she thought about it, that probably wasn't all of what was going on there. Supernatural is, at its heart, two brothers surviving after years of abuse or near abuse (it's never out and out stated, but it's hinted at) by their father. Who's name is John. Who's ex-military. Who's training them to be soldiers. Who thinks they're too soft for the war at hand and need to be toughened up to be able to fight it. It's about Dean who stayed, became the man his father wanted him to be, and broke under it. It's about Sam who left, who refused to be the man his father wanted, and got sucked back into it, and broke because he wasn't strong enough for what came later. And it's about Bobby, a new father figure, who loves them no matter what, encourages them to be the men they need to be, and forgives all transgressions.

She wondered if Tim knew why he was binging on Supernatural.

As a general rule, Abby's not really great at just letting things be. She's especially not good at just letting things be when they involve people she loves dealing with things that are painful. So, yesterday, she got home, and for an hour they ate dinner and watched more Supernatural, which was all she could take without flat out asking about it, and he shook his head, not ready to talk, so even though she wanted to bombard him with questions and hugs and petting and comfort and offers to kill his dad, she didn't. She sat next to him, snuggled, and quietly watched six more episodes of Supernatural until Tim was having a hard time keeping his eyes open and they went to bed.

He was still asleep when she had to get up for work, so she let him sleep and headed in to do paperwork.
She was filling out her reports when her phone chimed to let her know she had a text from Tim. A very sexy text. And playing nurse certainly sounded good. It's been six days, and the last time they went that long without sex he was in North Carolina, so that was nice, but she was uncertain where he is mentally, and if desire for sex is genuine or just a way to push thinking about things further back.

She thought it was probably a bit of both. Since he's been sick, she's been sleeping spooned behind him, cuddling him, but if she had been in the front this morning, she certainly would have taken advantage of him. Some morning erections are more impressive than others, and this morning was extremely impressive. She had been very tempted to roll him on his back, wake him up very nicely, and go into work late, but she'd already called out one day that week, and he was out sick, so duty won and she made it work on time.

Besides, he is sick and needs all the rest he can get.

So, basically, as she walks in the door, she's not sure if he's going to be ready to pounce on her for sex, glued to Sam and Dean, in the midst of an existential crisis, or getting a nap.

She was, however, wearing a pair of scrubs she'd stolen from Autopsy on the off chance the answer is ready to pounce.

Abby didn't hear anything as she hung her jacket up, which increased the chances of nap or existential crisis, and took Sam and Dean out of the running. She did a quick circuit of the downstairs. No Tim. That took existential crisis off the list, as well, because anything along those lines happens in his office and usually is accompanied by the sound of typing. (Though she noticed there was a blank sheet of paper in his typewriter and a half filled sheet of Deep Six next to it, so something along those lines at least started…)

In the kitchen, she noticed he did have curry chicken going in the slow cooker, so that was good, and pointed toward nap or sex, both of which he'd probably want to have quick, easy food available for after.

She headed upstairs, quietly, and looked into their room.

Usually Tim sleeps on his side or stomach, but right now he's sprawled across the bed, on his back. She's half-wondering if he heard her come in and is staging this, or if he's really asleep. He looks (position aside) really asleep: eyes closed, face relaxed, mouth a little open, breathing soft and easy.

But, the thing is, he is laying on his back, which he almost never does, and laying on his back means he's in one of the few positions where you can tell that the guy under the blankets is sporting a massive erection.

So, she's not entirely certain about nap, but sex got bumped to the top of the list.

For a few seconds, she plays with the idea that Farewell To Arms is one of his favorite books and about a nurse fooling around with one of her patients, but she can't remember the character names (hasn't read it since high school), and her sense is that it ended badly, so that's probably not a great game fodder.

She wonders if he's naked under the blankets. He's got them up to his chin. (Also suggestive of really sleeping, especially in winter. If it wasn't for the fact that he hates to have anything on his face, he'd sleep entirely under the blankets when it's cold out.) Tim usually takes all his clothing off for nighttime sleep, but both of them tend to nap in whatever they happened to be wearing when the
desire to nap hit. At least, she does. He doesn't get naps all that often, so he doesn't exactly have a 'regular napping routine.' But, at least for this last week, if he's grabbing a nap, he's doing it in whatever he was wearing when he drifted off.

He's also been home alone all day, so it's entirely possible he didn't bother to get dressed at all.

Nah. It's cool enough he'd put some clothing on. He's got no issues with being naked around the house, but he also hates feeling cold, so he's usually got something on if he's not in bed or the shower.

Okay, enough dithering. He's either sleeping or not, naked or not, and there's no way to figure it out by leaning against the door.

She's in scrubs, he'd texted her about playing doctor, and no matter else is going on, his dick is very obviously interested in sex. Time to get to it.

He's got a cup of tea on the bedside table, that'd do for props.

Abby headed over to him, and gently rubbed his shoulder while saying, "Mr. McGee."

He had to be dreaming. She noticed his eyes fluttering quickly and the way he didn't stir at all when she said his name or touched him.

"Mr. McGee…" she shook his shoulder a little harder. He mumbled something disappointed sounding and rolled onto his side.

"Time to wake up, Mr. McGee. Time for your medicine."

He had a very confused and grumpy expression on his face when he opened the one eye. But confused and grumpy rapidly vanished when he saw Abby in scrubs and then he knew what was going on and didn't seem to mind getting woken up any more.

She smiled at him, seeing the realization that the sex he had been dreaming about was about to get switched out for real sex light his face.

Abby helped him sit up, noticed that he at least had a t-shirt on, and handed him the cup of tea. He drank some, just rolling with the game and the "medicine", and handed it back to her.

"Good." She said, lying her hand on his forehead. "No fever. You look like you're starting to feel better."

He nodded. "Yeah. I think I'm almost on the mend. Maybe get out of here in a day or two." For a guy who was full on asleep and dreaming two minutes ago, and judging by how hard he was, dreaming about some really good sex, Tim is phenomenally good at switching into play mode.

"Maybe. I'm glad you're feeling better, but I'll miss seeing you every day." She pressed the back of her hand to his forehead.

"You put it like that, and maybe I'll see if I can stick around longer."

"No. I wouldn't want you to be sick any longer than you have to be. But maybe you'll come back and visit me?" she made sure to sound hopeful as she said that.

"Or maybe we could see each other somewhere other than here?" Tim said, a little flirty tone to his voice.
She smiled at that. "I'd like that." She folded the blanket back. "Arms up. Might as well get you washed off if you're going home soon."

So he put his arms up and let her take his t-shirt off. He appeared to be looking forward to this sponge bath. If the smile on his face was anything to go by, really looking forward to it. She helped him scoot out of his flannel pj pants, and yeah, he'd definitely been dreaming of sex. Abby knows guys get hard-ons when they sleep, that it's just part of the body functioning. But there's everything's just working, and then there's standing at full attention, balls tight to the body, damp spot on the pants, which she knows means Tim was about a minute from coming in his sleep.

She looked up from his penis and grinned. "Looks like part of you is really looking forward to a bath."

He smiled back. "That part of me is always in favor of being handled by a beautiful woman."

She headed for their bathroom, grabbed a wash cloth, soaked it with hot water, and headed back to their bed.

He was laying on the bed in way too good of a mood to be convincingly sick, but she doesn't mind that at all.

She knelt on the bed next to him, stretched his arm to the side, and gently stroked the towel up his arm. Tim purred at that, and then he sort of jerked because she got to his armpit, which was apparently ticklish, and then suddenly he looked like he wasn't having a really great time anymore.

"Abigail." He broke the game with his safe word. "Not this."

"No?" She looked concerned, obviously something was off, this was great two seconds ago, but isn't now.

"No." He's rubbing his arm dry. "It cools off really fast and maybe in August when it's 95 out this'll be fun, but right now, not so much."

"Okay." That made a lot of sense. She put the washcloth on the bedside table, quickly shucked out of the scrubs, and lay down next to him on her side, facing him. Enough games, time to touch.

"Maybe try that game again later?"

"Maybe." He rested his hand on her hip, eyes tracing over her naked body. "God, you're so beautiful." She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed his fingers. Then trailed her fingers down his chest, over his stomach, to trace over his erection.

His eyes slid almost shut, and he sighed happily, watching her hand slip up and down on him. "That feels so good."

"I bet it does."

"You know, I was reading that gentle sex is good for healing up from being sick."

"Really?" Her fingers trailed up from the base of his dick to his stomach and then across his chest, circling his nipple.

"Yep. Endorphins help you feel better, light exercise is good for you, stuff like that."

"Uh huh." Abby leaned in close, her lips a few millimeters from his. "How about rough, wild sex?"
He grinned, kissed her soft and gentle. "As long as we're done in less than a minute, I think I've got the stamina for that."

She giggled. "Gentle sex, then?"

"Well, I mean, if you want to get off, too. It's been almost a week for me, so anything other than slow, soft, and gentle'll be done really fast."

Her hand stroked back down his chest and curled firmly around him, and he exhaled low and deep. "So, you're saying you haven't done anything all week?"

"Nope. Nothing at all."

"Not even this?" Her hand pulled from base to tip.

"Ohhh…" He bit his lip and watched her do it. "Nope, not even that."

"So, how bad do you want this?"

"God. Bad, so bad. If you hadn't woken me up, I would have come in my sleep like a teenager."

"Looks like I got here just in the nick of time."

"Oh yeah." He inhaled a fast, jerky little breath as she lightly scraped her fingernail over the tip as her other hand pulled up. "Ohhhh… God, baby, that's so good."

She bent her head and licked the tip. His hips jerked when she touched him, and she knew exactly what she wanted to do with him. He's too keyed up, too turned on for anything that'll take long, and she's not nearly that turned on. So this round's for him, and later, after dinner, when he's not on a hair trigger, there'll be sex for both of them.

"So, really, nothing?" She let go, rolled over, and headed to their toybox.

He propped himself on his left elbow, watching her, not approving of her letting go of his dick and getting up, so he sounds a little testy when he said, "Been kind of sick lately. Maybe you noticed?"

"And distracted?" Abby asked, looking over her shoulder, a somewhat serious expression on her face. She knows now isn't the time, but she does want him to know she's aware of what's going on.

"And distracted," he agreed.

She found what she was looking for and turned back to him, showing him the wrist cuffs, and suddenly he decided her getting up was a good thing. She opened the drawer to her bedside table and got the lube as well, and the expression on his face was certainly indicating he was all in favor of whatever was going to come next, even if she did have to let go of him to do it.

"When you're ready, I want to talk to you about distracted."

"I know, and it'll be soon, probably dinner. But, please, not right now!"

"No." She grinned. "Not right now. Right now…" She nudged him to let him know to lie down on his back, straddled his chest, threaded the cuffs between the slats on their headboard, and then cuffed his wrists to each other over his head. He groaned while she did it, looking very pleased. He let his head fall back and just relaxed into her taking over.

"Head up."
He did as she asked, and she tucked an extra pillow under his head. "I want you to watch."

"Yes."

She flicked open the cap of the lube and drizzled a long stream into her palm.

"So, nothing at all for almost a week means you're really eager, right?" She slowly rubbed the lube between her hands, letting him watch them slip over each other, enjoying the intense concentration on his face and how his eyes were glued to her hands.

"Oh yes!"

"Good. I want to watch you come. And I want you to watch me do it for you."

"Oh yeah," he breathed.

"I thought you'd like that."

"Yes."

She knelt between his legs. "I'm going to do you nice and slow and steady. Only one rule for you, lay back and watch me do it."

"God, yes."

And she did. She used both hands, kept them fairly tight, slipping over him nice and slow.

He groaned at the pleasure of wet, slick skin on his. His eyelids settled into that three-quarters closed droop they go to when he wants to see what she's doing, but also wants to close them because it feels so good.

His jaw clenched as she pulled both hands all the way up and off him, and then all the way back down again, head of his cock slipping tight through each finger, in one long and slow slide. He rolled his hips in counterpoint, getting a little more friction, and she let him. She's not trying to draw this out, not much at least. Just slow enough so there's some build up and he can really feel it.

He inhaled fast, head back, almost pained expression on his face, as everything shrunk down to her hands and his cock and how good it felt.

"You're so beautiful, Tim." She shifted her position so she could lay on her side next to him. She kept up the long, slow strokes with her right hand, and twined her left in his hair, as she gazed into his eyes. "So beautiful." She lowered her mouth to kiss him, and he exhaled a soft ohhh against her lips.

He inhaled with a hiss, mouth open, body growing tense as he did it. "Keep looking at me, baby."

And he did, eyes glazed, lips wet and open, cheeks and throat flushed, jaw, neck, and shoulders tight.

"I love you, Tim. You look so incredible, baby, so sexy, and I want to make you feel so good. Wanna watch your face as you come." She moved her hand just a hair faster and his body tensed just a little further, not moving, not breathing, just teetering on the edge of orgasm. "God, baby, you're so beautiful, just come for me, please?"

He exhaled a long, silent, shaking breath as his orgasm slipped through him in hot, wet, wracking pulses that pulled his leg and arms tight as his head fell back.
She gently pumped a few more times, pulling every second of pleasure out of him, then grabbed the wash cloth, used it to clean him up, and uncuffed his wrists.

He was laying on his back when she uncuffed him, but he rolled onto his side quickly after that, and she curled into his back, snuggling in close, wrapping her arm under his, letting her hand rest against his chest.

At first, she thought the little shake that went through him was just an orgasmic aftershock. The second time it happened it was a little harder than the first, and that's not how aftershocks work. By the third one, she knew what was happening. She cuddled in closer, kissing the back of his neck.

"I love you, Tim." He shook again, and she knew he was crying.

When she'd been getting him off, she was talking because it was just right. It was that moment and he was so gloriously beautiful falling apart under her hands, and she wanted to say it to him. But now she's a little more focused on the whole picture, and so right now she knows there are things she needs to say, things he needs to hear, so she says them. "I love you for exactly who you are, and who you're going to be."

And she knows that he needs to hear it, and she knows that she's not the person he needs to hear it from, but the person he needs to hear it from won't say it, so she will, over and over and as often as he needs. And it's not the same thing, and it won't, can't fix things, but it doesn't need to.

"I love you. You are an amazing man. You're brilliant and gentle and kind and you are going to be a great father, and I love you so much."

She felt his hand close around hers, holding tight as he inhaled fast, and hard, soft, quiet sobs broke the exhale.

"You're my life, Tim. You're my home. You're the first person I want to see in the morning and the last at night and the person I want to see most through the rest of the day. I love you, baby." She lay there behind him, whispering soft words, holding him while he cried, trying to fill him up with all the praise and adoration he didn't get as kid, knowing she can't do it, but it doesn't matter that she can't fill that hole, he still deserves to hear it.

Until that moment, Abby had thought love and cherish were synonyms. Thought they more or less meant the same thing. But they don't. And this beautiful man in her arms deserves to be cherished every single day of the rest of his life.

She added a silent vow to their marriage, to the list of promises she will keep for him. *I will cherish you.*

After a few more minutes he quieted down, relaxing against her. Finally, he rolled over to face her and said, voice rough, "Looks like I'm not as done as I thought I was."

She flashed him a curious expression, because that didn't make sense to her. He closed his eyes, touched her face gently, kissed her, and said, "Dinner. I'll tell you all about it while we eat."

"Okay."

She kissed him, lips light and encouraging, holding the hand he has cupped on her face.

"I love you, Tim."

"I know."
"Good. Because if anyone ever deserved to be loved fully, madly, passionately, every cell of my body adores every one of yours, it's you."

He smiled a little at that and then sat up. "Dinner?"

"Yeah, I'm starving."
They didn't talk a whole lot while getting dinner ready. She tossed the naan into the microwave to warm it up, and he spooned up bowls of the curried chicken.

In a few minutes, they were sitting at the table in their jammies, food in front of them, Abby watching Tim expectantly, letting him start the conversation. But he didn't. He sat quietly, messing with his food, not actually eating it.

"Do you want to talk?"

He shrugged. "Maybe… I don't know… It just feels… so stupid. So ridiculously stupid. Nothing changed. At all. Not like I just suddenly remembered this. Not like yesterday I thought he deserved father of the year and today he doesn't."

"True."

He continues not eating.

"Tell me what happened?"

"You said they should have looked out for me better, Ducky said it was abuse, and then everything sort of shifted. Like the whole world is three inches to the left today. Everything's exactly the same, but not quite where I expect it to be."

Abby nods, eating her own food. "Unsettling?"

"Yeah. No one ever said the word abuse. I know I never thought it. The kid with the black eye and the broken arm, he got abused. I got yelled at."

"I got yelled at… signed at emphatically… You got terrorized and degraded."

He looks up from the chicken he's been tapping with the back of his fork. "That's always how you saw it?"

"Not always. Before you started talking in your sleep, I thought you and John were kind of like Tony and Senior or Gibbs and Jackson, just rubbed each other wrong. Then you started talking in your sleep and… and suddenly everything, including the fact that you get sea sick but not plane, car, or any other sort of motion sick made a whole lot of sense."

"I really do get sea sick. Always did. Started throwing up less than ten minutes after I got on a boat the first time."

"I know. But even if you didn't, I'd assume you would now."

"What did you hear? At first?"

Abby looks distinctly uncomfortable. He can tell she doesn't want to say the words and is trying to come up with a nicer way of saying it.

"Just say it. Not like I haven't heard it, and it's not like prettying it up will help."

"You were talking about having your ass passed around a battleship to get the fag fucked out of you. That's the one that comes up most often."
Tim nods. "He only actually said that to me once, well twice really… It wasn't quite that the first
time, but close enough. It scared the shit out of me, obviously stuck in my head harder than I thought
it did." He smiles dryly at her, pulling his sarcasm into a protective shield. "And shockingly enough,
it didn't do anything to make a battleship seem like a place I wanted to be, and somehow it didn't
inspire me to want to sign right up to join an organization that might expect me to help gang rape
some poor son of a bitch who ended up at my mercy."

She squeezes his hand. "Twice is about a thousand more times than anyone should ever say that to
anyone else. How old were you?"

"Fourteen the first time, seventeen the second. He was really unhappy when I tore up the Annapolis
acceptance letter."

"And what, he was only mildly displeased when he whipped it out when you were fourteen?"

"No. But I don't remember what set him off on that one… Got a B+ in History? Weighed too
much?" It wasn't so much that he wanted to remember it, but talking about it brought it back, and he
shuddered. "It was the summer of the boat. The summer I was going to get over being sea sick or die
trying. After two weeks of it, I knew not to eat anything before getting on the damn thing, so I was
just nauseous instead of puking, but I was angry, and my blood sugar was way low because I hadn't
eaten anything since dinner, so massively crabby, and he was drilling me on quadratics, wanted me
to do them in my head, and I could, but I didn't want to, so I stopped, told him I was going to be a
surgeon and surgeons don't need to be able to do quadratic equations in their heads, and I was being
sarcastic and snotty and told him if he knew any anatomy beyond ass, cock, and cunt and wanted to
drill me on it, that'd actually be useful, and he went off on a rant about how men broke people and
girls fixed them back up again. 'We break 'em, and girls sew 'em back up.' And then he got on me
with how if I wanted to be a girl he'd let the guys on his ship cut my dick off and fuck a cunt into me,
and I spent a few minutes dry heaving in terror and then did the equations."

Tim's not entirely sure what the expression on Abby's face is. It's whatever comes a step after
homicidal rage. He is pretty sure it's a good thing for the Admiral that he's on a ship somewhere with
a ton of sailors between him and Abby, because otherwise he'd be dead.

It took a few minutes, but finally she seemed to calm down and asked, "Did you tell Ducky you
deserved what happened?"

"No. I told him I earned it."

"Baby, nothing—"

"Not like that. That was the price for being who I wanted to be."

"No one should have to pay that."

He shrugs at that, too. "It's entirely likely that's just part of how I've conceptualized it to make it
easier to deal with. At least with that narrative I'm not entirely the victim of a sadist. There's some
choice and control about it. I picked me over him and got verbally beat for it. I wasn't just a passive
whipping boy."

"Okay." She doesn't look like she believes that, but right now he doesn't entirely believe it either, so
that's okay.

"I called Penny today. Because I was thinking about it, and trying to figure out what they knew, and
I told her, all of it, and she didn't know."
That makes Abby look angry, but a different flavor of it. "She should have!"

"She said that, too. First thing she said to me, 'Yes, that was abuse.' Second, 'I should have gotten you out sooner.' But she didn't know, and I don't think my mom did, either."

Abby really doesn't believe that, at all. "How could your mom have not known?"

"It's not like he said things like that when we had people around. Not usually. Usually if there were people around he kept to sarcasm and back-handed compliments. But everyone heard the Annapolis fight. I got my acceptance letter December 15th. He got home the 23rd. I showed it to him the 24th. He yelled at me until Christmas, but after that was done, once I stepped out of his office, something changed with my mom. He was home until January 3rd, and that whole time I was never alone with him. My mom or Gran or Pop or Sarah was always there. He was gone until June 15th. I graduated on the 17th. On the 18th, I was living with Penny, and two months later my mom had left him and they were divorcing. I really don't think she knew how bad it was until then, and then she did everything she could."

"She should have known."

He shrugs at that, too. "I never said anything."

"Don't make this your fault."

"I'm not saying it was. But… they aren't psychic. You can't know what no one tells you. And obviously he's not going to say 'I called Tim a worthless cocksucker and waste of talent until he cried and the little bastard still can't hit a target with a handgun. I swear to God that little cunt's doing it just to piss me the fuck off!' That never happened."

That step beyond homicidal rage look is back, but Tim watches her take a deep breath, force herself calm, and say, gently, to him, "Baby, you aren't supposed to go out with your Dad and come home crying. Not ever. And from everything you've told me a good two thirds of times you were alone with him resulted in you crying." She got up, found her purse, and grabbed a compact, then brought it back to the table. "And, look, I know you can cry silently, but your face gets all red and puffy, the whites of your eyes go pink, and the irises get really bright green, and you stay that way for at least half an hour, longer if you were crying hard." She flicked the compact open and showed him himself in the mirror. "It's been twenty minutes since we got out of bed, and you stopped crying before then, and it's still obvious in your face. So don't tell me she didn't know something was wrong. She's not blind, so she had to know. Penny lived three thousand miles away for most of your life and you didn't tell her, fine, I'll give her a pass. But not your mom. Maybe with the Annapolis fight it got so bad she couldn't pretend it wasn't a problem. Maybe she finally got scared one of you two would snap and physically damage the other. Maybe he was doing it to her, too and she finally had enough of it, I don't know. But she had to know he wasn't treating you right."

Tim stared at himself in the mirror, and she's absolutely right, it's obvious he's been crying. There's no possible way to miss it.

"I've never looked at myself after."

Abby nods and holds his hand as he keeps staring.

He looked back up at her, if everything was three inches to the left this morning it's about a foot and a half now. He knows he'd be in the car, in the back seat, coming home from whatever it was that resulted in crying. And he'd pull himself together, force himself to stop, wipe his eyes, take deep breaths, calm down, and then walk into the house like nothing had happened. His mom would look
at him, ask how it went, he'd say 'Fine,' and go to his room, hide out there until he was fully in control again.

"I don't know what to do with this. I can't hate her."

"Don't hate her. It's not good for you and wouldn't help anything, either. But it's okay to be really fucking pissed at her."

"I…" he looked at himself in the mirror again. He rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath, shoving that to the side because he can't deal with it, not now, and went to something he could handle. "I started talking in my sleep, why didn't you say anything?"

"Lots of reasons. You didn't seem to remember it. It's obviously painful. You don't talk about it. When you do talk about your dad, you'll sometimes just pause in the middle of the sentence, seem to think about what you're going to say next, and then go on without saying whatever it was. You actively edit yourself when you talk about him, and it shows. To me that says big damn wound, don't poke! You get on great with Penny and your Mom, you adored your grandparents… I figured you were as close to at peace with it as you could get, and you didn't need me dredging it back up again."

"I was. And nothing's changed. That's why this is so stupid. The whole past is still exactly the same."

"How you're thinking about it is different."

"So?"

She scooted her chair closer to his and wrapped her arm around him, her head on his shoulder. She doesn't have an answer to that, so she forks up a bite of the chicken and holds it out for him. "Eat."

He took the bite off the fork, chewing absently. "Ducky was saying talking about it might be good."

Abby nodded. "Probably."

"Would you listen?"

It's a serious question so she gives it some serious thought.

"I will always listen. I don't want you to feel like you've got things you can't tell me. I will carry your burdens with you; that's part of this whole love and married thing, right?" She smiled at him. "But I'm not a counselor, and if you need more than just to tell those stories, I might not know what to do. In fact I probably won't know what to do, and the best answer I have, hunt down your dad and kill him slowly, probably isn't a good plan."

"Might feel good."

"Might. And if anyone could get away with it…" She's only half kidding, and part of this is making sure he knows it's safe to be as mad as he wants to around her. "But… Anyway… The point I was getting to is that I might not be the best person to talk to. But I will listen, always. Anything you ever need to say, and I will listen. And if you want someone to go with you and hold your hand while you talk to someone who does know what he's doing, I'll go with you. Dr. Wolf at work, or Father John at church, Kate's sister, Ducky even, they do know what they're doing, and you could talk to them. Or you can talk to me. Or you can not talk, and see if just letting it lie will let you get back to where you were… If that's what you want. Do you want to get back there?"

"Yes?"
She kissed him. "That sounded really unsure."

"It was. But, the day before yesterday was familiar and comfortable and functional. I had a context that worked for me. My dad was an asshole. My mom and I survived it. Penny was a lifeline. My grandparents provided me and her with a safe haven. My sister was a non-combatant. And all of it was on him for wanting me to be someone I wouldn't be."

"If it works…"

"But it's not real."

"Enough of it is. Your mom should have done a better job protecting you, but that doesn't make him any less responsible. And one thing is absolutely certain, you do not know the whole story of what was going on between them."

"That's true. Penny told me my mom miscarried three times between me and Sarah. I never knew that. Probably never knew a lot of things."

"Probably. And like I said yesterday, I don't hate your mom. I don't adore her, but… I assumed if he was doing things like that to you, he was probably doing it to her, too. Probably would have gotten into it with Sarah if your mom hadn't left and taken her."

Tim shrugs. "From what Penny's telling me, he might be a flat out sociopath."

She gestures with her fork in a tell me more sort of way while chewing, then points at his food, indicating he needs to have more than one bite of dinner.

"According to her, he always asks about me, wants updates and pictures, has signed copies of my books up on his shelf, and seems to really regret the fact that we don't speak."

"What?" That shocks Abby, too.

"Yeah. I don't want to get into what he's said about my books. We've talked about them exactly once, and it wasn't pretty. But he's got them? He asked Penny to get him copies of them? Signed copies? And I don't know if that's part of his everything has to look perfect at all times thing, or if he's just playing Penny, doing things he knows she expects, or what, but…"

"That's insane."

"That's how it feels to me. In what sort of world does he call my books a waste of time and talent and then ask my grandmother to get him signed copies of them?"

"I really don't know."

"And why ask her? Maybe for the first one, because of the penname and all, but if he wanted them... They aren't hard to find. He's got guys who's whole job it is to go do stuff for him…"

"If he wants her to think he cares, it makes sense."

"Yeah. I wonder if he's got Sarah getting him copies as well…"

"Could be. Are you going to ask her?"

"I don't know. She was barely nine when they split up. She basically never lived with him. They always seemed to get along. She loves him. He seems to love her. He even approves of Glenn. Who also seems to like him. I don't want to torpedo their relationship."
"You have no responsibility to cover for him."

"No, I don't. But I do have a responsibility to my sister to look after her and her happiness."

"Warning her your dad is a psycho seems to fall under the looking out for her umbrella."

"If he hasn't tipped her off to that in twenty-eight years, he's probably not going to. Day before yesterday, she didn't know any more than we fight whenever we get near each other. She probably doesn't need to know more than that today, either."

Abby shrugs, and he eats another bite of his dinner.

"Penny told me he does ask for pictures of us, and I am going to tell Sarah that I don't want her giving them to him. Especially not pictures of Kelly and any other babies we may have."

"Okay."

"No matter what, he doesn't ever get to be near our children."

Abby nods vehemently, agreeing with that.

He takes another bite of his food, chews, swallows. He doesn't look at her when he says, "I'm an adult. I'm successful. Beautiful wife I adore. Kid on the way. I feel like this should be done. It's been twenty years since I left his home. I told Penny I was done, and then you're holding me, telling me I'm beautiful and perfect, and it's not done... He was supposed to love me like that."

"I know."

"Penny finally admitted he didn't."

"Does it help?"

"Sort of. It's... honest at least. There's no more doing-it-for-your-own-good, deep-down-he-really-cares, doesn't-express-himself-well crap. That's refreshing... I guess. And it's not a problem with me anymore—"

"It was never a problem with you, Tim."

He deflects that with a shrug and continues on with, "And like you, she's never going to try and encourage me to get in touch with him again, or mend our relationship, so I guess that's good, too."

"But you want to be done, not good."

"Yeah. I want the day before yesterday back."

"You'll get there."

"I know. Got too much going on now to be dwelling on the past." He strokes her tummy and manages to produce a fairly limp smile. "Got too good of a present and a future to let the past ruin it."

"But it's still there because it can't not be there."

He looks at her, tired, sad, frustrated. "Yeah."
Spooning

They talked for hours, and made love again, this time for both of them, and maybe things weren't different or better, but they were closer to normal, so that seemed like a good step.

Tim feels like, at least in regards to the flu, that he's pretty close to healed up.

It's fairly late, they've just had sex, and he's very pleasantly sleepy, but not completely wiped out. He's actually feeling really good, and is just waiting for her to get back to bed so he can snuggle in close and fall asleep.

For the last five days she's been spooning him, which has been nice, he likes getting cuddled, too, but he's ready to get back to their routine.

So he was a little pouty when she slid into their bed and tapped him on the shoulder, indicating she wants him to roll over, back to her.

He did, feeling a little disappointed. "I wanted to hold you."

She scooted up behind him, threading her arm under his. "You've got my arm."

"Not the same thing," he said, kissing her fingers.

"I know. But right now the curve of your back is exactly the right shape and size to support Kelly and it feels really good. Way more comfortable than the pillow." She usually sleeps hugging a pillow, and until last week it had been providing sleep support for Kelly.

He can't exactly argue with that, so he squeezes her hand, and tries to settle down, but he's missing her body against the front of his. "Feels kind of weird."

"Weird?"

"Yeah, you're supposed to be in front of me. My lips are supposed to be on your shoulder, your chest is supposed to be against my arm, I should be able to feel your breath on my hand."

He feels her shrug. "This is really comfortable." He doesn't disagree with that. That's part of why he likes being on the outside, having her to hold onto is really comfortable.

"Okay. Just isn't what I've got in my mind as sleep."

"You'll get used to it. Not like this'll work for much more than another month."

"I know. Just... I miss the way your hair smells."

She thought about that. "Lift your head."

He did, and she flipped the pillow around. "Now you've got my side of the pillow. Better?"

"Yeah." He twined his fingers with hers, pressing them against his chest, and settled into sleeping.

Almost.

He was about three quarters gone, in that stage where he wasn't quite dreaming but was very vividly imagining things when he noticed that sort of gentle rustling feeling against his back wasn't
something he was imagining.

It brought him all the way back up to awake, and he just lay there, holding Abby's hand, feeling Kelly doing whatever she was doing, and suddenly it was really okay that he couldn't smell Abby's hair.

He lay there, awake, feeling Kelly… kicking? Swimming? Getting a little stretch? It's fast and fluttery, and the last two days start to slide into perspective, the past starts to ease back to where it belongs.

The past won't change, can't change, but it can't own him either. He can feel it, two lives, two insanely precious lives pressed against his back. Two lives who depend on him to be functional. Who depend on him for love and peace and home, and he's got to be able to do it.

And maybe the thing with his Dad isn't done. Maybe it'll never be done. That John didn't love him will always be there. Just like losing her parents will always be there for Abby, and losing Shannon and Kelly will always be there for Gibbs.

But just because it isn't done doesn't mean he can't leave it behind him. Doesn't mean he didn't build a life, a good, solid, strong life around that hole.

Nothing changed. Maybe he understands it better, and that's something he'll need to deal with, but when it comes down to it, nothing changed. Time to live like that.

Go forward. Be the husband and father and man his dad wasn't.

Kelly settled down, and he let his mind drift among images of playing with his girls.
But How Do You Get It Out?

The whole crew showed up for Bootcamp. Granted, it got moved to Sunday so Tim could have an extra day of laying around and healing (and he's had strict instructions from Ducky that if he starts to feel dizzy or shaky that he is to sit his butt down and not move again) but it seemed like everyone wanted to see/be involved with how boats get moved out of the basement.

Which means this is going to go a whole lot faster than Gibbs anticipated. It's a three day job when he's on his own. This time he's got six other people helping. (With Ducky providing babysitting assistance so Jimmy and Breena can help with the teardown.)

Most of the outside of Gibbs' house is stucco and half timbers. That is, until you head down the driveway to what used to be the garage doors. There's ten foot high wood siding there, and that's the first job of the teardown.

Get the crowbars out and take off that siding. It's not particularly difficult work: set bar, apply pressure, move bar, apply pressure, siding falls off. It just takes a while. Or it would if there weren't seven people doing it.

He's a little wary about Abby helping out, but she seems to want to do it, and Tim's not bothered, and Jimmy just shrugs when he looks to him, with a question on his face, so he hands her a crowbar, and they get to it. And a job that normally takes him a full half day was done in an hour.

Gibbs makes a mental note that the next time he does this he is definitely dragging them all along to help. At this rate they'll have Shannon out by lunch, and might actually have the wall back up by dinner.

The next part is his favorite. It's true that Gibbs values and loves creating. Precision work takes him out of his own head and into the job in front of him and that's often something he needs. But just beating the ever living hell out of something and breaking it to pieces is a lot of fun.

And that's the next step. Sledge hammers out, and rip that wall down.

So, as soon as they had all of the siding tossed into dumpster, he was really grinning, holding a sledge hammer, ready for some fun. Gibbs took a good hard swing at the wall, demonstrating what they're supposed to be doing, and the rest of his crew followed.

He turned to watch them and saw something that stopped him cold and made his eyes narrow into the Gibbs stare of death. He took three steps and gently, for the first time ever, smacked Abby upside the back of the head.

"No."

Abby gives him a big, innocent smile and says, "What?"

Gibbs shook his head. Prying off siding was one thing; this was something all-together different. "No. Mudding, sanding, laying insulation, you're more than welcome to help with any of that. But I've seen those two fight, and you are not going anywhere near them swinging anything heavy around."

Abby knows bullshit when she hears it. If Tim and Jimmy's aim was really that bad, Ziva and Breena wouldn't be allowed nearby, either. Or more likely, the rest of the group wouldn't have been invited along to help, and they'd be well away from each other, beating on the wall.
"You're afraid I'm going to hurt myself."

Gibbs' expression is a very clear yes.

"I'm not going to get hurt," she says it like it's the most obvious thing ever.

"Because you're going to put that hammer down."

Abby glares at Gibbs.

He looks to Jimmy and asks, "Dr. Palmer, is Abby swinging around a sledge hammer eighteen weeks pregnant a good idea?"

"No. It's not a horrible one or anything, but it's not a great one either." Jimmy turns to Abby. "Come on, you know just as well as I do that if it's something you do regularly it's okay, but no one wants a pregnant woman suddenly adding new strenuous exercise to her routine. Hell, they don't even want you to start jogging if you don't do it regularly, and unless this is way easier than I'm expecting it to be, it's going to be a lot harder than jogging"

She glares at Jimmy and Tim, too. Tim holds up his hands placatingly and says, "I didn't say anything."

"Uh huh. You were thinking it."

"Yes. But you can't prove it." He smiles, takes the hammer from her, and says very quietly, "All your favorite guys doing sweaty, manly stuff. Breena and Ziva'll be too focused on carpentry to enjoy it, but you'll get to watch. It'll be fun."

She thinks about that for a moment, and replies, equally quietly, "True. Take your shirt off?"

He debates that. If it was just the two of them... okay, yeah it's cold out, but if it avoids pouting, he'd do it. But it's not just the two of them, seeing the others staring at them, trying to figure out what he's saying to her, he's suddenly very aware of the fact that Gibbs reads lips. "Not now. Maybe later, if I get hot enough."

She pouts, very well aware of the fact that it's the first weekend of March and the expected high for today is 50. There's literally no chance at all that Tim'll feel so hot he'll take more than his jacket off.

He kisses her ear and whispers against it. "But no matter what, I'll tell you a great story about it tonight."

"Okay." She retreats to Gibbs' car and sits on the hood. "You guys want music with this?"

"We won't be able to hear it," Jimmy says.

"Stop trying to talk that wall down." Gibb picks up his hammer, swings, and starts the tear down.

There is one tricky bit of tearing this wall down. While it's true it's not load bearing, it's also true that his house doesn't exactly appreciate having one of the walls just vanish. There's supposed to be a supporting beam in what would be the space between the garage doors.

So, the last bit down is that beam. It gets ripped out really fast. Usually he hooks the boat to the hitch on his car, and pulls it out, but with this many people, since she's already on wheels, it'll be faster to just push her out by hand.
And they do.

Then a new one of those beams goes back up again, along with four others to make sure everything is nice and solid.

And they break for lunch.

Framing is when this officially becomes bootcamp for Jimmy and Tim. Sure the last three hours have been good exercise, everyone can feel they've been working and they're nicely warmed up.

The girls and Tony get sent to shop for/start on dinner (chili and cornbread) while Gibbs grabs his framing hammer, two back up ones, and a whole lot of nails. The three of them are going to do this together. He wants Tim and Jimmy to have a lot of room to work, and he wants to be able to watch and focus on what they're doing.

"Here's where precision comes in. I want both of you to sink those nails with two hits. One to set it." And Gibbs gave his nail a little tap, just enough to get the tip into the wood and let it stand up. "And one to drive it home." And then he whacked it dead on, setting it smooth into the wood. He hands both of them hammers and nails. "Show me what you've got."

And they've got the kind of skills you'd expect guys who haven't actually hammered a nail into wood since they took shop in seventh grade to have. Namely, they're bad at it. (Tim's muttering under his breath about why couldn't they be wiring something.)

But Gibbs has time, and patience, and, well, a lot of lumber. He's using a framing hammer and connecting the studs to the headers. They've got siding rescued from the dumpster. He'll secure a stud, hearing the sound of hammers hitting wood, nicking nails, quiet swearing in both Tim and Jimmy's voices, and the occasional sweet sound of a solid, dead-on hit, then circle over to see how they're doing.

Like any other precision work, it's just a matter of form and practice. So he keeps showing them the right way to do it, and letting them do it over and over. Eventually, they'll get it.

He's got the first half of the wall almost finished when he realizes he's hearing a whole lot less hammers hitting wood and a whole lot more solid hits. So he finishes with the stud he was working on, and turns to watch the guys work.

Much better. Sure, he wouldn't want to live in a house built by either of them or anything, but they're creeping up on competent, so it's time to get them working on the wall.

"Time to join the major league." They both look up, and at him, and the large wooden rectangle on the basement floor. "First thing first, we pick this one up, and screw it into the floor, nail it into the ceiling. Then we frame the second half."

It's heavy. Not insanely heavy, but not easy to move around either, and it's half a wall so it's not exactly conveniently shaped for easy maneuverability, but between the three of them getting it manhandled into place isn't a problem. Tim's keeping it steady (because he's the tallest) while Gibbs nails it to the ceiling and Jimmy screws it to the floor.

"How do you do this by yourself?" Jimmy asks Gibbs.

"Build 'em in smaller sections on my own."
"So why is Tony up with the girls? He already know how to drive a nail?" Jimmy asks as he places another screw.

"Keeping an eye on two of you is enough. Plus he and Ziva make really good chili."

"Good point," Tim says. "Also, good for us. I talked to my cousin, so I can get us last minute March Madness Tickets, and apparently they've even got a game that's being hosted by Ohio State this year, and one at UNC which is closer to us. What we can't do is get tickets to the final four games because they're April 6th and 7th and Ziva would be really pissed if we pre-empted their honeymoon for his bachelor party."

Jimmy's nodding at that. Gibbs is staring at them, still a step behind.

Jimmy sees the stare. "Breena noticed that Ohio State made March Madness this year and suggested that if we could get tickets to one of the games, preferably one they were playing in, Tony would probably like that."

"And since we're kind of out of non-sex bachelor party ideas that he'd like, I jumped on that as soon as Jimmy mentioned it."

"What dates do you have?" Jimmy asks.

"UNC and Ohio State are both on the 20th. So… it's just a matter of guessing where his team might be, if they make it, or deciding to just go for Ohio State and spend a night with Tony reliving his glory days?"

Gibbs answered that one. "No. I almost strangled him the first time he was going on and on about spring break and college. Get the North Carolina tickets."

Tim took out his phone and started texting.

"You know…" Jimmy said, "Chapel Hill is actually under our jurisdiction. If there were a fictional dead sailor down there, he'd believe it. I bet Vance would let you take the van for the night, especially if there wasn't an actual active case. I could meet you guys there. He wouldn't know what was going on until we got there. Might be a cool surprise."

Tim smiles, he likes that, but he's not sure about Gibbs. Gibbs just nods, looking satisfied. Which was when they heard the car pull back into the driveway. Tony and the girls were back with ingredients and ready to get cooking. Meanwhile, they had half a wall left to frame.

The second half of the wall went faster than the first. Even with Tim and Jimmy not being expert carpenters by any stretch of anyone's imagination, three men framing is still faster than one.

Once they got the studs up Tony and Breena joined them for putting up the particle board. Tim enjoys watching Gibbs' face as he sees that Breena actually knows what to do with a drill and is better than any of the guys with one.

Because she's so cute and traditionally feminine it's easy to miss that Breena Palmer was a tomboy. Sure she liked dresses and long hair and cute makeup and pretty nails, but she also liked spending time with her daddy hunting, building things, and eventually working the family business. And while it's true that Ed's not much fun to be around, it's also true that he has three daughters and he was
bound and determined that they'd be able to do anything they ever needed to do for themselves. So his girls can do everything from sew on a button to change the oil in their cars, to cook a tasty meal to rewire a fuse box.

She's screwing the particle board to the studs, hands sure and steady, and Gibbs just watches and smiles, a very pleased look on his face. Tim realizes that Breena looks a little like Kelly might have if she had grown up, and was about the right age, a little young, but not too much. He wonders if Kelly had a similar personality to Breena.

They'd just about gotten the particle board up when Gibbs asks her, "You know how to put up drywall?"

"Yep."

"Insulation?"

"Sure. Maybe if Vance ever lets all of you out of DC again, you can come to the Outer Banks with us and see the house I helped build."

"Your dad built that house?" Tim asks, stunned.

"My dad, my mom, my grandparents, two uncles, their wives, me, my sisters Amy, Beth, and Jill, my cousins Seth, Wes, Ben, and John, whole family did it. Did the same thing with the place in Tennessee and the one in Maine. My dad and uncles bought land in their favorite vacation spots, and then they helped each other build houses on them. All three of them use the houses, but the Outer Banks one is Dad's, the Knoxville one is Uncle Todd's, and the one in Maine is Uncle Alvin's."

Gibbs nods, looking like his estimation of Ed Slater and the rest of his family just hopped up about six notches. "Good, take Tony, grab Abby and Ziva, and head in. I'll get these two finishing up out here and join you in a few minutes."

Finishing up meant tacking up Tyvek sheeting. Tim took a bit longer on it than was strictly necessary.

"It doesn't take that long to staple up insulation," Jimmy said, noticing the lack of speed on Tim's half of the job.

"I know. But have you ever put up insulation before?"

"No."

"Not fun. Unless you enjoy picking hundreds of tiny glass splinters out of your skin, take a little longer and let them do it."

"Good point."

"I think Jethro just fell in love with your wife."

Jimmy smiles. "I was noticing that. I don't think I've ever seen him look so happy as he did when he handed her the drill and didn't have to explain how to use it."

Tim laughs a little, very slowly and carefully places the staple gun, and finishes the Tyvek.

"And we've taken as long as we can on this."
So they headed inside. Inside Gibbs' house smelled great: warm, meaty, spicy. Tim doesn't even really like chili, and his mouth is watering at the smell.

"I hope they made a ton of that," Jimmy says as they head to the basement.

"Oh yeah."

Five people make really fast work of insulating a twenty foot wall. They were done with it and putting up the drywall by the time Tim and Jimmy joined them.

Gibbs and Tony are holding the drywall in place, and the girls are on screw driving duty. Gibbs looks over his shoulder at them and flashes his, *took you long enough* look at Tim and Jimmy. Jimmy shrugs. Tim smiles.

They both head over and get to work.

"So, once you get her done, what are you going to do with her?" Breena asks Jethro as they all sit down for dinner.

Jethro shrugs. His original plan was to use Shannon as a way to deal with retirement. Hand in his badge and get off land for a few months, but retirement starts in January, and he's fairly sure he's not going to want to be away for months at a time.

"No set plans, yet."

"Island hopping? New beach every week?" Abby asks.

"Maybe." Gibbs nods at that, beaches sound good.

"Be a good way to get out of the cold and snow," Tim adds.

He nods at that, too, he's not exactly a fan of winter these days. But finding a beach somewhere with a little shack and a cantina within easy walking distance brings back too many memories of Mike. He's good with alone, but that's not something he wants to do alone. And it's hitting him that he doesn't want to be alone, not for months or weeks at a time.

"Might look for a place on the Potomac, maybe the James, or the Chesapeake."

"Closer to home," Ducky says with a smile. His own post-retirement plans have shifted with the addition of Molly to his life.

"Yeah, Duck." He stroked Molly's cheek. She was happily tearing through the corn bread. Then he turned to Abby and gently laid his hand on her belly. "Got some girls who might want to learn to sail. And since it turns out you lot aren't hopeless with carpentry, maybe getting a place on the water is something we could do..."
Tim McGee is not a great cook. He never has been, and he likely never will be. He's mastered more than enough skills in his life and isn't feeling any need to go from being a competent cook to an excellent one.

But tonight, he will cook this, and he will absolutely kill it.

And it doesn't matter that it's got about nineteen thousand ingredients or takes hours.

His pregnant wife has been trapped in a courtroom all day, craving this, texting him about it, and he is going to provide it for her or die trying.

Of course, as he's unpacking spices, rice, and fish, it occurs to him that, just possibly, if he actually knew what paella was supposed to taste like, he could probably do a better job of making it.

It also occurs to him, that should he kill this, and not in a good way, that they do have a pretty good Spanish restaurant fifteen minutes from their house.

From everything he read, the bottom of the paella was supposed to be a little crunchy. He's fairly sure it's not supposed to be rock hard, blackened, cemented to the bottom of the pan, and very slightly smoking.

See, while it's true that Tim can and often does multi-task, it's also true that on occasion he gets so into what he's doing (gaming) that he loses track of everything around him.

So, it was the smell of something scorching that jerked him out of Halo 4, back to the real world, and the fact that he had indeed, killed, the paella.

He tosses the pan in the sink, filling it with water, hoping the burned on rice will eventually soften enough to be scraped out, opened the windows to get the smell out, and really hoped he could get paella from the restaurant fast enough to have it home before Abby gets home.

Take-out food is the best thing ever. Take-out food that smells great, looks perfect, and can be easily stuck on your own plates, looking like you slaved away at it, is even better. And, while it is true that if Abby asks, he will tell her what happened to Paella 1.0, he certainly would not mind if she thought he made Paella 2.0 for her.

But in that he was attacking their skillet with spatula in an effort to get some of the less scorched rice off when she came into the kitchen to see what he was up to, the chances of her not asking about Paella 1.0 were pretty slim.

There are romantic dinners and there are romantic dinners. For example, Tim knows that Tony and Ziva prefer the high-end dinner out experience. He knows that these days, any meal that involves both of them together and not scraping food off a one-year-old qualifies as romantic to Jimmy and Breena. For Tim, though, dinner at home, with Abby, preferably with good food, tasty wine (and okay, usually he prefers to share it with her, but for the time being he'll take a glass by himself), low
lights, his music, and a "relaxed" dress code, often lounging on the floor in front of the fireplace is the definition of a romantic dinner.

Sure, it's not an expensive restaurant. And yep, they aren't dressed up. But they are snuggled together, the lighting is soft and low, the music has a tempo suggestive of slow sex, and if they were out somewhere 'nice' the couldn't be anywhere nearly this comfortable. And if they were out somewhere nice, what he did next would have been horrendously inappropriate. (Which wouldn't have stopped him or anything…)

Her hair is still up in the French twist she put it in this morning. One of the good things about Abby being pregnant is that her court wardrobe had to change. And she hates what she calls her Court Barbie wear, but he also knows she intentionally picks horrible court clothing to play up the fact that it's not her real clothing.

So, when she had court, and a tummy that refused to fit into her old outfits, he gently steered her towards some outfits that didn't look like they were designed for a six-year-old's idea of professional. And him demonstrating enthusiastically and affectionately that she didn't look terrible in the new outfits made her feel better about being in them and start just having fun with it. Like it's a new sort of dress up game.

And Abby's good at dress up games. So, now when court appearances come up, she actually plays up the sleek, professional, stylish look, and her hair also reflects the game.

Which is why it was still up in what he thinks is a French twist, but it certainly could have another name, but the important part in regards to what would have likely been highly inappropriate should they have been eating this romantic dinner in an actual restaurant is that her hair is up, the nape of her neck and ears are bare, and he's intending to take advantage of that.

After getting home, and the explanation for what happened to paella 1.0, she had figured out that a romantic dinner was on, and changed into her kimono. Tim's not entirely sure, (she's been teasing him with occasional little glimpses, but he hasn't seen enough to really tell) but either she's naked under there or wearing very sheer lingerie.

He's in his go-to sexy look, jeans, somewhat unbuttoned button down, sleeves rolled up.

They're both on the floor. He's lying on his side, propped on his right arm, and she's sitting sort of on her hip, back against his thighs, her legs folded behind her, her feet on his calves.

She reaches for her glass of water, and the slow pull of her arm against the kimono causes it to slip down her shoulder, confirming that if she is wearing anything under the kimono it's not any larger than panties, and inspiring Tim for the very inappropriate (should he try it in a restaurant) thing he was about to do.

He sits full up behind her, drawing his glass of wine close as well. Normally he's a one glass with dinner kind of guy, but the white Rioja he got with the paella is really tasty, and it'll just go bad sitting open in the fridge, and it's not like he's got to drive home, so he's about a third of the way through a third glass.

"You're trying to drive me crazy, aren't you," he says quietly against her ear.

"Might be part of the plan. You like it?"

"Yes." That was half breath, half word, all whispered against her neck. He felt the fine little hairs on the back of her neck rise up against him, and he blew gently on them again. She shivered a little,
pleased expression on her face.

He hands her his glass. "Hold this?"

She nods and does. "Smells good."

"Tastes good, too." He dipped his finger into the pale gold wine, and brought a few drops of it up, gently stroking them over her lips. Her tongue followed his finger, and she smiled.

"Very tasty." She pulled his finger into her mouth, sucking the last drops off.

"Yes." He slipped his finger out of her mouth, took another drop of the wine and touched it to the shell of her ear, watching it slowly meander along the curve and then licked it off. He kissed the lobe, gave it a tiny nibble and whispered, "Delicious."

He took his index and middle finger this time, and painted a line of wine from the spot where her ear and jaw connect, down her throat and shoulder, to the spot where her arm disappeared under the kimono, following it with his tongue.

He smiled at her, eyes warm and playful, teeth ghosting along the curve of her shoulder. "I want to take you upstairs, tie you down, and play with you until you're begging to come."

And, yeah, that would have just been all sorts of horrendously inappropriate at a nice restaurant.

If Tim thought nine week pregnant Abby was the hottest thing he'd ever seen, it was only because he hadn't yet met nineteen week pregnant Abby.

He didn't particularly think he had any sort of pregnant woman kink. Sure pregnant Breena in a bikini hit his buttons nicely, but it's not like he ever went out of his way to find naked shots of pregnant women, or (Breena aside) spent any time fantasizing about then.

But pregnant Abby, tied up, writhing on their bed, begging to come, Oh God, yes!, that's hitting every button he's ever had so hard he feels light-headed.

There's only a few candles burning for light, and he'd started off with a massage, so the oil on her skin is making her gleam in the dull, gold light.

He's already gotten her off twice, almost gotten off himself, too, because he'd been rubbing all along her back and thighs, and well, she can't exactly lie down on her stomach anymore, but she can sort of kneel, ass high, face and chest on the bed, and, yeah, she was kneeling, and glistening with oil and her own wetness, and he'd been stroking her skin, getting harder and harder each time she'd moan when he hit something good, and there's only so long he can do that and not slip inside her, and even though he had intended to tie her up and spin her out, he ended up on his knees behind her, watching himself fuck her and, well, that's his favorite sight on earth, and as he felt her rippling against him he realized this was going to be done a whole lot faster than he'd intended, so he pulled back and stopped.

He'd promised to make her beg. And that didn't happen that first time. Or the second time, because well, she was still making those really sexy noises, and next thing he knew he'd flipped her over, and was laying on his stomach eating her out. And the whole extra blood-flow pregnant-thing means she gets off a whole lot faster these days and yeah, he's getting better at not accidentally pushing her over the edge, but really, she sounded so good, and he wanted to make her sound better, and next thing he knew she was coming again.
So round two ended with, yet again, no begging.

Which just wasn't acceptable at all.

Because if you look a woman in the eye and tell her you're going to make her beg you to get off, you damn well do it. None of this fooling around with easy fast orgasms stuff.

So, while she was calming back down, he went to get some of the ropes, and spent half an hour tying her arms to the bed, in beautiful, crisscrossing knots of red satin. Then he spent another ten minutes just taking photos, because they haven't done this in a while, and there's no way in hell he's not gonna have keepsakes. Her body, all soft and shiny, full breasts, softly rounded belly, tattoos and red ropes, pussy wet and open, and fuck, yes!, he has to have pictures of that.

He leans on his right side, trailing his left hand down her body, and began very lightly, very slowly, circling her clit with his middle finger.

No penetration. When his finger starts to go dry, instead of slipping it down to pick up some of her lube, he stops everything, slowly gets up, kneels between her legs, and lightly licks her clit to get it wet again.

His body's more or less screaming at him for sex; he'd been achingly close the first time he stopped, but this is just too good to rush. He's keeps gently touching her, slowly ramping up her excitement, but doing nothing that involves any stretch.

And it's working. She is begging. Hard. Hand's clenched around the ropes, back arched, writhing, pleading with him to just do it a little faster or harder so she can get off.

And he just grins, stops, lightly licks her a few more times, and settles back onto his side for more light touching.

He's debating on how to end this for both of them, and rapidly coming to the conclusion that he should have let himself get off earlier and then kept playing with her, because given how she's tied missionary is the easiest option to get both of them off, and it's also off the menu because Kelly's in the way.

Of course… there are other options, maybe less easy, but…

He shifts again to kneel between her legs, sitting butt on his feet, lifting her hips onto his lap. They can't hold that one for too long, baby weight shifts making it harder for her to breathe. But for a minute or two, which is probably all either of them will need, it'll definitely work.

And it does. As soon as he slides into her, hissing at how good soft and wet felt on him, she slipped from begging to the high-pitched, breathy, panting sound that he adores and knows means orgasm soon. It's hard to focus on what his fingers are doing, because her body on his feels so good he's having a really difficult time paying attention to anything else. But her body does clench on his, and her legs squeeze tight on his waist, which was the last thing he clearly remembered beyond hot, pulsing tingles and full body pleasure.

Later, when they were both cleaned up and looking for something to do with the rest of the night. (It was still only 8:45.) Abby said to him, "You know, we're going to break into hysterical giggling when Kelly asks if we've got any pictures of me pregnant."

He does laugh at that. "Yeah, that'll be an interesting conversation. 'Yes, honey, we do, but you can't
"Why not, Dad?" Abby asks, mimicking a young girl.

"How old is this hypothetical Kelly?"

"Why?"

"Because if she's an annoying teenager, I'll be looking forward to horrifying her with the idea that I took naked sexy pictures of you when you were pregnant, but if she's six, I'll probably have a very different answer."

Abby laughed at that. "Maybe take some shots of me with my clothes on?"

"I could probably do that."
"I have been instructed by my wife and yours that I am to take you out and make you do something you consider fun this weekend, at gunpoint if necessary," Tim says to Jimmy as they get some lunch.

Jimmy rolls his eyes.

"Yeah, that's how I responded, as well. So, we have three options. Abby gave me a Groupon for Bikram yoga. She got it before she got pregnant, and had intended to use it with you, but it will expire before she and you can use it. We can do that, and if you think it'd be even more fun than watching just me try to keep up with it, we can get Ziva to make Tony come as well." That idea gets a hint of a smile out of Jimmy. "Or we can go do anything else you might want to. Or I can tell them to shove it. I'm not going to make you go out if you don't want to."

"Thanks."

"No problem."

"I'm driving her crazy, hovering around too much. Checking my email ten times an hour, waiting for the results of the genetic testing."

"When are they due?"

"Any day now, but probably Monday. And she wants me to do something to take my mind off of it. She especially doesn't want me just roaming around the house going bonkers"

"Anything you might want to do, I'm up for."

Jimmy smiles a little at that. "Ziva'd make Tony go, too?"

"Probably. She'd probably be up to going with us, too. I bet she'd love to see him try. I don't think he's ever done any yoga."

"And the way he teases us about it not being real exercise…"

"Yeah." Tim's nodding with a mean smile on his face, but that fades as he notice's Jimmy's attention has slipped away from him. "What are you hoping the results are?"

"I almost wish one of us was a carrier of the trisomy. If that's the case, then whichever one gets sterilized, and we can have healthy babies with an egg or sperm donor. We'd be able to… control it… you know?" He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. "If it was just random chance… The die can always come up snake eyes." He puts them back on again and eats a bite of his salad.

"I get that."
Jimmy reaches for his phone, stops himself, takes a deep breath, and says to Tim, "Sure, Bikram Yoga on Saturday, we'll bring Tony and laugh."

"Good."

"We're doing what on Saturday?"

"Hot yoga."

Tony's very rarely so flustered that he's got nothing to say, but sitting there in the car, heading to question the CO of their latest dead sailor, staring at Tim like he's insane, he's speechless. Then speechless goes away and a sly look crosses his face. "I know what you're doing."

"Getting Jimmy out of the house so he doesn't drive Breena insane."

"Sure..." Tony nods, smug, not believing it at all.

Tim has the sense that Tony's being too clever by half, because he's got no idea what conspiracy Tony thinks is going on. "What do you think I'm doing, Tony?"

"Surprise bachelor party. I haven't heard anything from either about it, and it's got to be coming up."

"Ah." And Tim does look like he just got caught with something, because, well, they do have the surprise bachelor party in the works. He got the tickets yesterday, Jimmy got Ziva into the conspiracy, and Gibbs was supposed to be asking Vance about the van today or tomorrow, but that's not what's happening with this. "Really, Saturday, 10:00 AM, hot yoga, with Jimmy. No surprise party."

That tosses Tony back into stunned, because of all the things they might try to drag him into hot yoga's just so far off the beaten path he's having a hard time wrapping his head around it.

Finally he comes up with, "Why?"

"Like I said, he's driving Breena bonkers, so I've been enlisted to get him out of the house, also because Jimmy likes it, and the sight of the two of us trying this should make him laugh hard enough to rupture his spleen, and he needs that."

"I get it." Tony sighs. While it's true that he's got no problem at all being the clown prince when needed, this involves something a little touchy for him. "You're supposed to do that in bare feet, right?"

"Yeah."

"Think they'd let me wear shoes?"

It takes Tim a second to remember why Tony might want shoes. Takes him another second to remember that since Tony lost those toes Tim's never seen him barefoot. When they hit the beach or pool, he's always got some sort of shoes on.

"I think if you explained that you needed them for help with balancing, that it wouldn't be a problem."
Tony nods.

"Or you can skip them. I mean… We're not gonna look or anything."

"Kind of hard not to." Tony flashes him a self-depreciating expression. "Lost all five on the right and three on the left. It's not a big deal. Not like I can't walk or run, but it looks really wrong."

"You lost eight toes?" Tim's staring at him, utterly shocked. "You said a few! Ducky said you were fine. I'm sorry. I just… I didn't know it was that bad."

Tony shrugs. "Ziva knew. I'm sure Ducky did, too, he was still my medical proxy then. Didn't want it getting out beyond that. You do need them for balance, and I didn't want to find out that NCIS would sideline me for missing toes."

"That makes sense."

"But I can't really hide them in a locker room, or anywhere else I'm supposed to be barefoot."

Tim nods. "Look, Jimmy and I aren't going to say anything about them to anyone. And I'm sure if you tell the instructor you're missing eight toes, shoes won't be a problem. And if you don't want to… Yeah, we were both thinking beating you over the head with how hard yoga really is would be funny, but if you don't want to go, that's fine."

"Oh… it's fine to make fun of me for being clumsy but not for being a cripple?"

Tim flashes him a look best described as *Duh!* "Well, yeah. I thought everyone knew that."

Tony rolls his eyes. "I'll be there."

"Ziva's invited, too."

Tony shakes his head. "Remember when she got that third speeding ticket?"

"Yeah."

"Saturday is driving school for her."

"Oh. Wow."

"Yeah. But if she can manage to not scare the instructor into early gray hair, then she can get some of those points off her license."

"Cool."

Tony pulls into a parking spot. "So, what do I need to bring for this?"

"It'll be hot, like hundred degrees, so something light and easy to move in, but probably not shorts."

"Why not shorts?" Tony always works out in shorts.

"Because you don't wear briefs and if the legs on your shorts are tight enough to keep you from flashing everyone when your leg is up, they're also tight enough that you won't be able to move easily."

"McGee, assuming there will not be people lying on the floor between my legs, I don't think I can get into any positions where the leg of my shorts will result in me flashing anyone."
"Then wear shorts. Bring lots of water. Don't feel embarrassed if you can't get into most or even any of the positions, I probably can't either, just keep trying."

"Great."

Saturday morning they walk into the studio and are greeted by a rush of hot air.

Tony takes one look at Tim and Jimmy and says, "Okay, doing this in a hundred degree room is cheating on the sweating thing. Playing poker in this heat would make you sweat, and that doesn't make it exercise."

"It's hot to help you loosen up and stretch," Jimmy says as he heads to the front desk.

"Uh huh."

Jimmy grins at him. "And trust me, you're going to need all the help you can get."

Tim had told Tony to wear something light, cool, and easy to move in, and then promptly forgot about it because they got to the location of Colonel Phelps and he switched out of weekend mode and into case mode.

So, it wasn't until that morning that it occurred to him that he didn't have any good hot yoga clothing.

Well, that's not quite true. But as he's changing Tony looks at him and says, "Your pajamas?"

Technically the answer to that is yes. He's in a pair of very light cotton knit pants and an MIT t-shirt with the sleeves ripped off. He has, on occasion, slept in them.

Jimmy's in something that looks a whole lot like boxer briefs, and nothing else. It's really tight, pretty short, and Tim, even if he was as cut as Jimmy, could not possibly image ever wearing anything that revealing in public.

Tony's got on gym shorts and an NCIS t-shirt, and from what Tim can tell, is trying to not look directly at Jimmy, who is, for all practical purposes, naked.

"You sleep in that?" Jimmy asks.

"No, I watch TV, lay around the house, and write in this. I sleep naked, unless I'm on a case, which is why he knows these are my pajamas."

"Ah."

Tony's looking at Tim. "I thought this was something you do."

"Yoga is something I do. Yoga in public in hundred degree heat isn't."

"You do it in your PJs?" Tony asks.
"No. I do it at home, first thing in the morning, with Abby. So, it's not like I get out of bed, put clothing on, do it with her, then take the clothing off, get a shower, and go put more clothing on. Unless it's cold in our room, I do it naked."

Jimmy's nodding at that. "Easier to make sure your form is good that way."

And while Tim's sure that's true, that's generally something he's not paying all that much attention to. Naked Abby doing yoga is vastly more interesting to him than what his own body might be doing.

Jimmy looks at both of them and shakes his head. "Leave your shirts. Really, it's going to be hot in there."

While it's true that the front desk area was hot, the actual studio where they'll be doing the yoga is sweltering.

It's really, really hot.

It's like a sauna with good lighting and mirrors.

And Tim's not entirely sure that the sixty-four ounces of water he brought are going to be enough. And Jimmy was right, this is definitely a shirt free zone. And he's certainly debating stripping out of his pants, too. There's a little button on the fly of his boxers… He'd probably be covered enough, and in that his boxers aren't tight, he'll still be more discreetly dressed than Jimmy.

He's reaching for his waistband when two more members of the class walk in. Girls. From the looks of it, they're fourteen and seventeen. So, pants are definitely staying on. And, in what he's thinking of as his first 'Dad' moment, he's feeling a very strong desire to wrap Jimmy in a towel and not let him come back until he's got some pants on.

Apparently this Groupon was for an introductory class, purposely kept small so that each member could get lots of one on one attention, so it's the three of them, the two girls, and the instructor, who is also female and maybe twenty-two.

So, it's not like he can hide in the back or sort of blend in. But Jimmy's looking pretty loose and comfortable as the instructor gives them the little get-to-know-Bikram pep talk, Tony looks ready to die from a combination of heat and embarrassment, the girls keep staring at them (especially Jimmy) and giggling. Tim guesses he's somewhere in between and that's okay.

It's starts off easy enough, even Tony can handle Half Moon pose's easy side bend, but it ramps up pretty fast from there.
There are twenty six poses used in Bikram yoga, and for the vast majority of them Tim is hearing Tony muttering under his breath, "You have got to be fucking kidding me," along with "Ow ow ow ow ow!" and "My God, Palmer, how the hell are you doing this!"

And Tim sincerely agrees with the last of those. Okay, yes, he's only been doing this for five months, and Jimmy's been doing it for years, but still… How? Human bodies were not meant to get into some of these positions and yeah, he can see Jimmy's struggling a little with some of them, this isn't his usual discipline, but all of his moves are slow, controlled, and graceful. And sure he may not have the full range of extension the instructor does, but Jimmy also isn't a twenty-something girl.

Meanwhile Tim's mostly just pleased he hasn't managed to fall on his ass (or in the case of the Standing Separate Leg Stretching pose, his head), yet.

And he's fairly certain Tony's just pleased that he hasn't died.

They're about half an hour into it when Tim notices something else. Yes, this was designed to make sure they all get a decent amount of one on one attention, and yes, the instructor, Jamie, has been working with each of them, and okay, it's true that Tony's worse than the other four of them, but he gets about five times as much attention as the rest of them.

And he's not that much worse than Tim is.

He's bad at it, no two ways about it. And even if he wasn't eight toes down, the fact that he's got all the flexibility of a piece of plywood is not helping things, but even without the toes he does have a decent sense of balance, is generally good at any sort of sport, and is pretty strong. So, there's no chance that he's the worst yoga student Jamie's ever seen.

But he's getting a lot of one-on-one attention and some really intensive encouragement.

After they wrap up, and are heading back toward the locker room, Jamie comes over to Tony, looking up at him adoringly, standing a little too close, and says, "You know, if you ever want some one on one help—"

Jimmy cuts in with "He's getting married in April."

"Oh." The expression on her face falls, and she shrugs and walks off.
Tim rolls his eyes. "You know, I was almost as bad as you were at this, and no hot girls are coming up to me to offer tutoring."

Tony grins at him. "When you've got it—"

"And the it he's talking about is a naked ring finger," Jimmy adds.

"She'd have hit on me even if I was wearing a wedding ring!"

"Uh huh… That's why she sprinted off when I mentioned you were engaged. One thing you're going to have to get used to, women rarely hit on married men. They see that ring and run away. And if you flirt with them while wearing it, they get creeped out."

"You speaking from a lot of experience here, Palmer? Do a lot of flirting behind Breena's back?"

"No, I've got a better source than that. Breena's book club meets at our place every six weeks, and they have a really easy time forgetting I'm around. I listen in."

By that point they're in the locker room, and Tim drifts off, looking forward to, for the first time he can ever remember, a cool shower.

No, it isn't like he'd been planning on looking. He's been in a locker room plenty of times with Jimmy and never looked. Just like in the restroom, not looking at the other guys' privates is part of the guy code, but it's a tiny locker room, so, he's practically changing on top of Jimmy, who is, of course, also naked. Which means when he turns to grab his shirt, he does see naked Jimmy.

And suddenly why Jimmy doesn't have a problem with the zipper on his fly when having sex in public is very apparent. His pubic hair can't be more than a quarter of an inch long, so obviously getting snagged in the zipper isn't an issue for him.

"Oh."

He doesn't realize he's said it out loud until Tony, who is limping out of the shower, says, "What?"

"Nothing." He pulls his shirt over his head and finds his wrist cuff.

"Didn't sound like nothing." Jimmy adds, looking at him curiously, finishing drying off.

Tim rolls his eyes, looks down pointedly, then looks away and snaps the cuff shut. "Just realized why zippers aren't a problem for you."

Jimmy follows what he means and shrugs a little. "A side benefit of not being wild and woolly."

"Side benefit?" Tony asks.

"Well, the main one is that she's not picking my hair out of her teeth, which means her mouth heads down there a whole lot more often."

"Ah." Both Tim and Tony nod at that.

"And well, it makes everything look bigger, which is kind of nice, too."

"I suppose you do what you have to," Tony says as he starts to dry off.
"Oh please, Tony, you're not setting any records." Tim says.

"You've seen enough dicks to know, McGee?"

"Not live, but yeah, I have." Both Jimmy and Tony stare at him. He shakes his head and rolls his eyes. "Don't you two even try to tell me you don't watch porn. Remember, I'm the guy you call when your computers mysteriously stop working after visiting certain sites. I know all your dirty little secrets."

Jimmy just sort of shrugs, and Tony looks really disturbed by that, which Tim finds amusing because, well, Tony has nothing particularly troublesome on his computer (the kinkiest he gets is trios with three girls), but Jimmy's got some pretty wild stuff on his.

"Oh, and on that subject, google whatever it is you like plus Tumblr, and then don't leave Tumblr. You'll end up calling me a lot less often about your computers being clogged with malware."

They nod and go back to getting dressed.

"What's Tumblr?" Tony asks a minute later.

"Fandoms and porn."

"So, geek heaven?" Jimmy says.

"Yeah."

"No wonder you knew about it," Tony adds.

A minute later, while Tim's tying his shoes, Tony asks Jimmy. "Isn't it kind of prickly?"

"Huh?"

"You know, you trim down there, is it kind of itchy?"

"Only if you trim it too short. Shaving is where prickly and itchy becomes an issue."

"You shaved it all off?" Tim asks. Yeah, he knows some guys do that (once again, he watches porn) but he never thought any guy he knew would.

"Yeah. And, the first eight hours after were really, really good. Everything is so soft, and so sensitive, and well, Breena really liked it, and… if she's bare, too…” Jimmy appears to be remembering something he really enjoyed. "Anyway… Until it started to grow back, it was incredible. Then it started to grow back, and imaging wearing skin-tight briefs made of sandpaper, that scrape against you every single time you move, and I mean every time you shift, step, hell, breathe, and it feels that way for like three days."

Both Tim and Tony are cringing at that idea.

"So you never did it again?" Tim asks.

"Not saying that." Jimmy smirks. "Really, those first eight hours, excellent. But I don't do it if I've got work anytime soon. And Breena did find some lotion that makes the hair grow in slower and softer, so that helps. But, ummm… if she's not willing to lick or suck all of you, it's probably not
worth the growing back in period."

Tony nods. Tim does, too and decides he's dressed enough to head out of the locker room.
They got coffee after. Well, they went to a coffee shop, but all three of them got cold drinks. Tim's thinking that even after drinking the whole bottle of water he brought with him, refilling it, drinking that, and spending a good ten minutes just letting cold water run over him, that he's still a few quarts low on his hydration.

"So, Abby got a Groupon for that?" Tony asked as he sat down, heavily, looking like he was fairly sure he was never, ever going to move again.

"Yeah, back before she got pregnant. The original idea was to do it with him. But pregnant means she shouldn't get her temperature over 102, and it's 105 in there."

"We'd go do yoga day once a month or so, Breena usually comes, too." Jimmy got out his phone and showed them a shot of him and Abby posing at the last place, then flicked to the shot of the girls together, and one of the three of them. "This was last time. Haven't done Bikram in years, but that was fun. After McSciuto's on the outside, we'll have to do that again."

"I'm volunteering for babysitting duty right here and now," Tony says, face serious.

"You really hated that, didn't you?" Jimmy says, shaking his head. He'd had a really good time, and managed to go two full hours without thinking about anything Trisomy or Jon related.

"Jimmy, parts of me I didn't know existed hurt on a cellular level right now. Each and every single nerve in both thighs are screaming at me."

"You didn't have to go quite that gung ho on it. Part of the idea is patience and easing into the poses," Jimmy answers.

Tony took a sip of his shake, shaking his head, obviously Jimmy's never spent any time with anyone who was ever serious about competitive athletics. *Ease into it.* Tony sighs and changes the topic a little. "So… Abby and Breena can do that?"

"Some of it," Tim replies. She's not as into it as Jimmy is, and he's got no idea how devoted to yoga Breena is.

"Breena's really bendy," Jimmy says with a fairly dirty smile on his face.

Tim grins. "So's Abby."

"Huh." Tony appears to be grasping some of the reason why you might want your spouse to be into yoga, even if you're under the impression that it's some sort of torture.

"Ziva's pretty flexible, too, right?" Jimmy asks.

"Oh, yeah. She likes… pilates. So, why did you start doing it?" Tony asks Tim. They both know Jimmy started in college after he was diagnosed with diabetes.

"Found out on my honeymoon that there are some benefits to being flexible."

Jimmy sits there, nodding, looking really smug.

"Like what kind of benefits?" At the beginning of the class Jamie had gone over the "benefits" of yoga, and Tony's pretty damn sure neither McGee or Palmer would be looking that smug if they
were thinking about blood pressure, stress relief, or better posture.

"Have sex when you get home, see how it feels," Tim says with a smile.

"McGee, I hurt all over. The last thing I want to do when I get home is move."

"Then don't. Lay back and let her do you. It'll be worth it."

Tony stares at him, eyes slightly narrowed, while Jimmy nods and grins, saying, "The looser you start off, the more you can ramp the tension up, the harder you'll come."

Tim turns to Jimmy quickly. "Wait, Abby said she read that. Did you tell her that?"

"Yeah. She might have read it, too. I gave her some of my books five-six years ago. She finally test that out on you?"

"Uh huh."

"Good?" Jimmy asks.

"I'm doing yoga, and kept doing it even when she was sleeping every possible minute instead of doing it with me. Yeah, it's good."

"How did you even learn stuff like this?" Tony asks.

Jimmy shrugs. "Cosmo. Back when I was dating Melissa," he sees that Tim and Tony don't know who that is, so he clarifies, "in college, I saw one of hers, read something on Tantric sex, decided that was worth looking into further, and well, fifteen years later, I'm pretty good at yoga."

"I thought you started yoga after you got sick," Tony says.

"I did. I was dating her after I got sick. Look, Breena was with us when I said that, and it is true that I got interested in it and started doing it about eight months after I was diagnosed with diabetes. Just, diabetes wasn't precisely the motivating factor for why I started or why I kept doing it."

"You like tantric sex?" Tim asks. He's familiar with the idea, but hasn't felt any need to try it out, too much religion-y stuff to be really attractive to him.

"Meh." Jimmy wiggles his hand to indicate it was so-so. "Tried it, but never got into it much. Don't get me wrong, the positions are interesting, and the increased strength and flexibility are very good things, plus it was the first thing I ran into that really got into the idea of sex as an art, which I really did like, but I don't believe in Chakras, and don't feel any need to try and meditate during sex, I mean, I like to be paying attention to the sex when I'm having sex, so that part of it wasn't doing anything for me."

"Sex as an art?" Tony asks.

"Sure," Jimmy's nodding away at this. "I can't paint, write, or sculpt to save my life, but I'm a damn good lay. And I got that way because I studied and practiced. You weren't just born great at basketball, right?"

"I was born good at basketball."

"And then you really worked at it to get a whole lot better?"

"Yep."
"Well, on raw talent alone, I'm good at sex. And, in some ways almost dying was a very good thing for me, because it helped me figure out what was important to me and what and who I wanted to be. But I was also twenty, so basically, what I really wanted to do was have a ton of sex. And look, I was built like Tim, kind of tall and scrawny—"

"Hey!"

"Tim, you look a lot better than you did this time last year, and a ton better than this time two years ago, but you've got a ways to go."

"No I don't. I'm healthy. I look fine. I get enough exercise to keep me quick and limber and eat well enough to keep me trim. I do not need to be so cut that you can use me as muscular anatomy display."

Jimmy just sort of shrugs. "Anyway, I knew I was always going to be kind of goofy and a little awkward, and that I was never going to be broad shouldered or classically handsome, so I'd never be really hot at getting a woman in the first place, but I also figured that if I got great at sex, and looked really good naked, the chances of a girl deciding to sleep with me a second time would raise dramatically. And having sex a whole lot with one girl would work perfectly for my goal of getting laid a lot. So I read up and practiced. And suddenly, I was getting laid a whole lot more. Especially in college and my early twenties when the rest of the guys my age were still clueless. I've been shot down left, right, and any other direction you can imagine, but since I decided sex was worth studying and learning how to get good at, no girl I've been with has refused a second date."

"None of them?" Tim's kicking himself for not having figured that out on his own. Once Jimmy said it, it was blindingly obvious, but that was an idea that never crossed his mind. Yeah, he did eventually get good, but he was a hell of a lot closer to thirty than twenty, and really it wasn't until he started dating Abby again that he had the opportunity to really learn another person well enough to jump from good to great.

"None. Not saying I've never been dumped, but date one has always lead to dates two, three, four and on."

"So, you really did dump Lee?" Tony asks. Sure, he heard about it. And yes, Lee was using Palmer, but even with all of that, he never really believed that Jimmy ended it.

"Yeah, I really did. Look, I'm not going to say I minded the sex, because, I mean… it was great sex, and who doesn't like that? But I wanted more than to be her weekly booty call. I love sex, but I love women too, and I wanted the whole package. Getting off at work is great, but I was still going home to an empty apartment, and that wasn't."

Tony takes another drink of his shake and just stares at Jimmy for a long minute, like he's really not sure he wants to ask this or not, but finally he does. "Okay, so how do you get good at sex if you don't have any pickup skills? Isn't step one find a woman to do it with you?"

"Nah. Don't get me wrong, you can read until your eyes fall out and you're never going to figure it out without a girl around, but still, step one isn't grab the first available girl. Step one was learn anatomy and some basic technique. Step two was read things girls write for themselves—"

"I told you that!" Tim says to Tony. "He saw me reading Ms and couldn't figure out why I'd do that."

"I told you that if you wanted to get to know more about women, you needed to get to know some women," Tony says.
"I'm close to my mom, sister, grandmother, my best friend was a girl, and one of my partners was a girl. I wanted to know about the stuff they wouldn't tell me."

Jimmy nods in agreement with that. "Women will not tell you that you can't find a clit, even with a flashlight and GPS. They won't tell you your technique sucks. They really won't tell you how they like to be kissed or touched. They expect you to magically know that stuff. What they will do is complain to each other about the fact that you suck at sex. And if you read them complaining, you start to pick up some tips real fast. And if you want expert level tips, go find erotica written for girls, by girls, preferably lesbians, and pay attention. Then, once you've got that set, you go find a real girl, and you start playing, and you pay even more attention to how she responds to what you're doing. I have had women compliment me because I can actually figure out when what I'm doing isn't working, like it's some sort of magic trick, and it's really not difficult, you've just got to get your brain doing the thinking. But especially in college, that made me the wizard of sex."

Tim laughs at that. Back in college and grad school his brain generally wasn't involved in sex at all. It was certainly very interested in it, but tended to check out once the actual sex happened.

"So, you're what, sitting in your girl's room, and you just pick up her Cosmo and read it?" Tony asks.

"Yeah, pretty much. I'd finished my homework, she was still working on hers, I hadn't brought anything else to read, and it's Cosmo, so it's got a three-quarters naked women on the cover next to a headline that reads something like 117 Tips to Make Him Come So Hard His Ears Melt—"

"Those things are always so overrated," Tim adds.

"They really are. I don't think any of the girls who write those things have ever had sex with an actual man."

Tony's just looking at them like they're both some sort of strange insect and he's not sure if he wants to study them or run away shrieking.

But Jimmy just continues on, "So, I was all in favor of coming so hard my ears melted, so I got reading. And yeah, dumb tips, a girl tries to rub my dick between her wrists like she's starting a fire, especially without lube, and I'm getting the hell out of there."

"What?!" Tony says, stunned, holding his wrists in front of him, about two inches apart, staring in stupefaction.

"Really dumb tips," Tim says as he nods. "You know, the 117 Ways to Make Her Come So Hard Her Ears Melt things they have in Maxim or Men's Health might be just as bad." Tim's seen Tony's copies of those magazines, but never been bored enough to read one.

"Nope." Tony's pretty certain about that.

"Nope? You know for sure?" Jimmy asks. Last time he read a Maxim he was in college, and like the Cosmo he thought there were lots of sexy pictures and not much worth reading inside.

"Ziva reads Maxim as well, and she's let me know which ones are good and which aren't."

"Ah. Well, anyway, I'm reading her Cosmo, enjoying the pictures, seriously that thing's like soft porn, laughing really hard at the suggestions, and a few pages later I found the stuff on Tantric sex, and that actually looked good, but it was only three pages long, so off to the library I went, and a few inter-library loans and two weeks later, I had some stuff worth reading, and a girlfriend who was actually pretty interested in seeing what we could do with it."
"Twenty-year-old-you walks up to the counter at the library and asks them to put sex books on hold for you?" Tim asks. Twenty-year-old Tim McGee would have spontaneously combusted if he tried to ask for help finding sex books.

"Twenty-year-old-me was bound and determined to get great at sex. Plus the girl at the counter was a freshman and really cute, so I practiced my flirting technique. She still thought I was a dork, and probably a pervert, but I got the books I was looking for. And then I had a whole lot of fun with them. I wasn't flexible or strong enough for a lot of the stuff in there, so next semester I signed up for the yoga gym class and have been doing it regularly since." Jimmy drinks some of his iced tea and stretches. "I should probably be getting home soon."

Tim checks his watch, it's a little after one. "Yeah. Bootcamp tomorrow?"

"See you then." Jimmy stood and headed off.

Tony took another sip of his shake. "I am so glad I'm not doing that tomorrow. I'm going home, filling the bathtub with cold water and ice, and not moving for a week."

"If you're hurting that bad, your body may be telling you more exercise is in order."

"What it's telling me is that I'm forty-eight and trying to become a pretzel is a bad plan. I don't feel like this after jogging or sparring."

"It was for a good cause. He didn't check his phone once the whole time we were out."

"I know. And I could see he was really smiling when we were talking. After I get back from my honeymoon, we'll bring Ziva and Breena and do it again."

"Good."

"Why couldn't you two be basketball fans? You know, normal guys do things like go to a game."

"This is better for you."

"Yeah." Tony got up very slowly and began limping toward the door.

"Did you really hurt yourself?" Tim asked, yeah, he's sore; he knows he did something that's not part of his usual routine, but he's not aching.

"I hope not."
For their fifth bootcamp, Gibbs ended up with two more kids.

He hadn't been expecting Ziva and Breena to show up, but if they wanted to come, he was fine with it. Plus, having Ziva's eyes and skills would make this more effective for everyone. He'd be able to get input from her for training for all three of them, which would be a very good thing.

He was taping up Breena's hands when he asked, "Are you… should you…" He's tripping over the question because it's kind of delicate and he's never actually had a direct conversation with Breena. Sure he's smiled at her, kissed her cheek, offered hugs when congratulations were in order, and told her to do things when that was necessary, and they've been part of the same conversation, but he's never actually spoken with just her.

But she seemed to get what he wasn't asking. "Do you think he'd let me anywhere near this if my doctor didn't say I'm healed up enough for it."

He nods. "Okay. Molly with Abby?"

"Yep. Rumor has it she and Tony are making dinner for the rest of us. Did Abby invite you for dinner?" Gibbs nods. "I'm thinking it might be just her cooking. When we left, Tony was trying to convince Molly she wanted to play games that didn't involve him having to move because he hurts all over."

Gibbs furrows his eyebrows.

Breena understands that he doesn't know why Tony's hurting. "They did yoga yesterday. Tim and Jimmy are fine. Tony pushed too hard."

He nods at that. He's had a few conversations with Tony over the last year along the lines of Tim and Jimmy are a decade younger than he is, in awfully good shape, and if he wants to keep up with them he's got to take better care of himself. "What sort of fighting have you done?"

"I punched a guy in sixth grade." That was about what he was expecting.

"Make a fist."

She did. It didn't look too bad. Someone, and here he's thinking Ed, taught her how to make a fist, and probably how to throw a punch.

"Ziver?"

"Yes, Gibbs."

He pointed to Tim and Jimmy, who also started pay attention to what he was saying. "Watch those two spar. First round, they do whatever they want. Second round, Jimmy, your job is to focus on following where Tim's going. Figure out where he's going to hit you and block him. Tim work on hitting exactly what you're aiming for, right hand or either foot." Jimmy's accuracy was solid at this point, but he was still having a hard time anticipating where a hit was going to come. Meanwhile, Tim had gotten his accuracy up to one hundred percent with his left hand, but right and feet were still iffy, especially on anything other than the first round. "Ziver, by the time they're done, I want a training plan from you for each of them."
Ziva smiled and led the boys to the ring.

"Okay." Gibbs turned his attention back to Breena. "You sure you want to be here?"

She looked very determined. "Do you think I'm any less angry, less sad, or less frustrated than he is?"

"No." Gibbs shook his head.

"Do you think I shouldn't be able to try and beat it out?"

"No."

"Then why are you asking? Because I'm cute and a girl?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm done sitting at home and crying. Taking down that wall felt good, going to the range felt good, and this might too, and maybe it won't help, but I've got to try."

"It'll help, maybe not enough, but it'll help. Come on." Gibbs led her to one of the punching bags. "Show me what you've got."

She looked at him, eyebrows high, apparently she'd been expecting something else. "Just hit it?"

"Yep. Hard as you like. Right now I just want to see you throw a punch."

So she did. Walloped it. No control. No finesse. Lots of anger, lots of force.

"How's your arm?"

"Shoulder hurts, wrist hurts."

Gibbs nods. "Watch." He made a fist and punched the bag. He didn't tape up his own hands because he didn't think he was going to be doing any punching, so he doesn't put much force into it. Then he put her hands on his hips, which startled her, and punched again. "Feel what I'm doing?"

"Yeah."

He did it again, slowly, very little force, with her hands on his shoulders, elbow, and then his wrist. "Now you."

She hit again, very hard, but this time her form was a lot better.

"Hurt?"

"Not as much."

"Good. Now, do it slow and do it right. When you've got your form mastered on your right arm, we'll move to your left, and once you've got it down, then you can beat on anything you want as hard as you want as long as you want. Until then, soft, slow, easy." He cocks his head at Tim and Jimmy. "Just because those two idiots were dumb enough to beat each other into a pulp does not mean hurting yourself is a good idea."

She smiled a little at that, and then focused on the punching bag and hit it, slowly, but her form was perfect.
Gibbs nodded, small smile on his face. "Keep doing that. I'm going to see how your man's doing."

He stands next to Ziva, who's leaning against the ropes watching Tim and Jimmy intently.

"You suggested she come?"

"Jimmy suggested she go shooting with them. Apparently that went well. Tearing down the wall went well, too. So now she is here. When I heard she was coming, I suggested coming with her so she would have someone to spar with. Neither of them will fight her."

Gibbs kept an eye on them while Jimmy ducked under Tim's punch and got him in the ribs with his elbow. "Probably a good plan."

Ziva watched them spar for another thirty seconds, Tim sweeping Jimmy's legs out from under him, and nodded. "Neither of them has enough control to fight someone without possibly injuring them."

"Yep."

"What sort of training plan do you want for them?"

"Little bit of everything. Started elbows and knees with Jimmy last week. Still working on fist and foot with Tim. He's better on defense. Jimmy's better attacking."

"I can see that. McGee usually wins?"

"Usually. They fight until one of them hits the canvas. Tim wears him down, defending, and then takes his legs out from under him. Jimmy still can't tell when he's not really going to punch and is about to trip him. How about when they finish their next round you and I show them how to really do this?"

"You want to fight me?" Ziva's shocked. They've never sparred before.

Gibbs grinned.

"You sure?"

He nodded.

"Okay. Rules?"

"No eyes, no balls." He didn't expect to be fighting today, so he didn't bring a cup, and he'd really prefer not getting nailed.

"I can do that."

There are a few things Gibbs knows going into this fight, the most important of them is that he is going to lose.

There was a time when he could have probably taken Ziva David.

But that time was twenty years ago, when he was as fast as she is and could use his size to his advantage. Now, he's too slow. He knows it. Has been too slow for a long time. And while it's true
that age and guile beat youth and innocence, age and guile lose when they go up against youth, guile, experience, and superior training.

There's a reason why he's never actually sparred with Ziva before. Kate, sure, he sparred with her, because he knew he could take her, and that was that. But he saw Ziva David walk in, saw her moves and confidence, and knew he couldn't take her down without a gun, and knew that'd look awfully bad for his position.

So they've never sparred. As the Team Leader, part of his job is to be God on Earth, unassailable and unchallengeable. None of the three of them could ever see him go down. When he got to the point where he wasn't entirely sure he could still keep taking Tony down in hand to hand, he stopped making them do bootcamp.

But it's March. In ten months Tony'll be the Team Leader. Tim'll be moving along soon, too. There are other employees around the gym, and it's time to get the word out that the balance of power in the MCRT is shifting.

Ziva's their combat specialist. She's their fighter. And, honestly… he'd almost rather promote her to Team Leader. It's not anything against Tony. He's earned the position many times over and he's a great cop, with very good instincts, but Ziva's a little more focused, more dedicated, and a lot more dangerous. Basically, Tony's the better cop, but Ziva's the better leader. Ultimately, he'd like to see them share the leadership position, and he hopes that's how they'll handle it.

But for now, it's time to pass at least some of it on. And as he thinks about it, he does need to have a long chat with Tony and Tim and Ziva about what's coming up next year. They've got to start looking for replacements, getting a plan in order.

But all of that is for later.

The guys are finishing up. Breena's already come over to watch them, and Ziva wants to know if he'd like to tape up his hands.

He nodded, and she taped up his hands. He looks at her untaped hands, offering to tape her up, and she just shakes her head.

"No eyes." He's seen what she does with her fingers in a fight, and he wants to make sure they're clear.

"No eyes, no balls, and I will not touch your throat, either."

He sighed, sees Tim and Jimmy watching them, looking both amazed and a little scared, and gestures to the ring for Ziva. She headed in, and waited for him.

"Pay attention. This is what it looks like when someone who knows what she's doing fights. Anything she's willing to teach you, you learn." Tim, Jimmy, and Breena all nodded.

Gibbs' time sense slows down when he fights. That's always been true. It's part of what made him a good sniper, he could slow things down, see what was happening and anticipate what would happen next and then pull the trigger. But even slowed down, she is shockingly fast.

He's just trying to keep standing long enough to not be horrendously embarrassed. He got three solid hits on her and a few near misses when she did this thing where she was standing on one foot, kicked at his head with the other, forcing him to dodge back, shifting his weight onto one leg, and
while her foot was whispering a quarter inch from his temple she hooked her forearm behind his weight-bearing knee and yanked hard, toppling him to the canvas.

His ears were ringing a little when he hit, but he was fairly sure the entire gym had gone silent at that. He knows Jimmy, Tim, and Breena were just staring at them, eyes wide and beyond shocked.

Ziva offered him a hand up, and he took it, wrapped his arm around her and kissed her on the cheek, big, fond smile on his face.

"Jimmy, how do you defend against that?" Gibbs asked. If he's going to get his ass kicked, they're going to learn from it.

"Don't get into a fight with Ziva."

That got a dry smile out of Gibbs. "Tim?"

"My Sig. I don't get into fist fights with people who can kick my ass that badly."

"Overkill. Breena?"

"One second you were standing up, the next you were on the canvas. I have no idea what happened in between."

"You're going to learn how to watch a fight so you can see what happened. Ziva?"

"Catch my foot up by your head and push backward. It's possible we both would have gone down. I may have gotten the hold I needed on his knee, but my balance was far enough off that it definitely would have taken me down." She turned away from Gibbs to speak to the other three. "I spent the first minute learning exactly how fast Gibbs is. The kick/grapple combination I took him down with takes split second timing, and after the first minute I was sure he couldn't match that speed, so I was safe to try it."

Gibbs nods at that. "Ziva, you're with Jimmy, you attack, he defends. These two are going to watch. Breena's gonna tell me what's happening. Tim's gonna tell me what to do about it."

"Come on, Jimmy," Ziva said. He ducked under the ropes, looking pretty nervous. "If you have a choice between defending or attacking, you want to defend. The defender has the advantage of responding. This is why, even though it looks like you are actually the better fighter, McGee keeps dropping you…"
Nothing Lasts Forever

Dinner had wrapped up an hour before. Jimmy, Breena, and Molly had gone home. Which meant Gibbs was alone with his core team, sitting around the McGees' living room, and it was time to have a serious conversation.

"We know I'm leaving in January." Gibbs said, and looked to Tim.

"I don't know when, yet. I have to talk to Vance, let him know I want Cybercrime when it's open."

"Is it going to be open?" Ziva asked.

"I've heard enough rumors about Jenner not being happy to think it will be, probably in the next year. And I think if I tell him I want it, Vance will give it to me. He offered Okinawa when it opened up, and that's actually a better team than DC. I don't think he'll have a problem with me taking it when Jenner leaves."

"So, in the next year you're going to make me break in two probies?" Tony asks.

"That's the question, isn't it?" Abby adds.

"We can start bringing in new people now, see who fits. Make sure you don't end up with a new team all at once," Tim says.

"Dornaget." Gibbs says.

"Yeah, I know he's been waiting five years for a spot on our team," Tony said. "And… look, he's not bad, but I'm not sure I want him. He's been in the evidence lock up for years, getting rustier and rustier. I'd rather have someone who took a field assignment than waiting around for us."

"You sure it's not just that he caught you out on the Probie crap?" Tim asks, smile on his face.

Tony gives him a little glare, trying to figure out how to recover from losing half his team is something that keeps him up at night. "I'm losing my tech specialist, half of my precision shooters, my sniper, my connections to three quarters of every organization with initials, my interrogation specialist, my hacker, my only person who speaks Marine, my Gunny, my 'Gut', half of my intimidators, and two men who have my back in any and every situation, can read Ziva and I with a glance, will back any play either of us comes up with, and have been there for me every single day for the last decade. Dornie fills none of those holes."

Gibbs nods, feeling a whole lot better about Tony being in charge of the team.

"You've given this a lot of thought," Tim adds.

"Yes. At a bare minimum I need tech and an interrogator. Precision shooting and intimidation are my next highest skills. Quick enough on the subtle clues to back Ziva and I no matter what comes next. I'll give Dornie a shot, he's earned that, but I don't think he's got what we need."

"Between the two of us, Tony and I have charm, evidence gathering, questioning skills, fighting, leadership, explosives—"

"Two-thirds of my explosives team, too. Forgot about that."

"Lock-picking, precision driving, intuition, and tactical planning. We're short a lot of skills if it's just
"I can find you your hacker," Tim says. "Either out of Cybercrime or fresh out of FLETC."

Tony looks at Ziva. She nods a little. "FLETC. Get me someone young, who hasn't been around long enough to learn anyone else's bad habits. Filling your shoes is going to be almost impossible, but I've only got two slots, and I can't have someone who's just a desk jockey."

"They graduate in May. One of my classmates is an instructor now, I'll see who he recommends."

Gibbs smirks at Tony, and Tony turns to him, "What?"

"You'll be twenty, maybe twenty-five years older than anyone out of FLETC. Same difference between me and Tim."

Tony winces. "Oh God."

Gibbs nods, looking really smug.

"Were you really Tony's age when I started?"

"I was four years younger."

"I thought you were older than God," Tim said, shaking his head.

"And I was. And if you don't want just Probies on the team, ask for the rosters on the Agents Afloat. One of them might want a land based assignment."

"Burley," Ziva said. "Where is he stationed?"

Tony's eyes lit up. He knew they worked well together, they'd all come out of the Gibbs school of criminal investigating, and Burley knew what they were doing.

Gibbs shook his head. "Running his own team out of Pearl. Don't think he wants to come back here and take a demotion. Really don't think his wife wants to move."

"You could ask him if he's got someone who wants to be on the mainland. Borin's moved up at Coast Guard, maybe she can give you a lead on someone who's not happy there but would be a good fit," Abby suggested.

"Maybe, but if you're not a good fit there, you're probably not going to be a good fit for us, either," Tony says.

"Are you kidding? I'd have been miserable with the Coast Guard, but I'm happy as a clam at NCIS. We do really well with round pegs, go ask her who they've got that's not fitting into their square holes."

"Fornell could give you some names from the FBI as well. Guys who don't quite fit in there might work really well for us," Tim suggests.

"So, you're scouting the best and brightest FLETC has to offer. We're headhunting Coast Guard, NCIS Pearl Harbor and Agents Afloat, and the FBI for talent. And for either side, I'd prefer someone who was a Marine or Sailor," Tony said.

"Monday, I'll make the appointment to talk to Vance about moving on, and send Geoff the email about who we want out of FLETC. Hopefully by June I'll have some people who we can start
working with.
Monday morning Tim fired off two emails. One to Vance's assistant asking for an appointment and the other to Geoff Carter, who, once upon a time, had been one of Tim's classmates at FLETC.

These days Geoff taught Civil Rights law to the new Probie wannabes. He made sure they knew what was and what was not legal when it came to dealing with the wider world. Back in the day he'd been one of Tim's study partners.

He asked Geoff if he could get the CVs of two or three guys who were hot on tech/computer skills, preferably ex-Military, young, and with no previous law enforcement experience.

He got one back saying: "Want a unicorn while you're at it?"

That made him smile.

He sent back:

_If you've got one._

_Our team is losing half of its members soon and I need a tech guy who can shoot or ask questions or speak military or something like that. And if he can do all of that, even better._

Half an hour later he got back.

_Does this unicorn have to be a he?_

Tim quickly sent back:

_No. Male, female, undeclared, somewhere in-between, doesn't matter. Knows his/her way around a computer, that does._

Two hours later he'd gotten an email back with some interesting looking attachments. He was just about to open them when Vance's assistant buzzed him and let him know that Vance had some time.

So he shot the email to Tony, said, "Let me know who looks interesting, and I'll set up the interviews," and then headed up.

There was a time when he found dealing with Vance to be deeply intimidating. That time is not now. He's not entirely sure when it changed. Somewhere between taking down Bodnar and his wedding. But no matter how it happened, it did.

Which is not to say he finds dealing with Vance particularly comfortable.

The man is still his Boss, still the head of their agency, and still deeply formidable.

So, while it's true that he doesn't have to give himself a little pep talk or anything, he does pause for a second before opening the door to straighten up and get himself into the right mindset for this.

"You wanted to see me, McGee?" Vance asks as he walks in.

"Yes." Confidence, his job is to tell Vance what he wants, and then make sure Vance knows he's got
the balls to deal with whatever gets tossed at him. A little voice in the back of his mind keeps telling him to channel Gibbs. Talk more than Gibbs would, but project that same air of there's nothing you can throw at me that I can't handle.

Vance gets up from his desk and gestures to the seats at the conference table. They both sit.

"Well…"

"Back in '11 you offered me Okinawa's Cybercrime department. I assume you did that because you knew I could handle not just a team, but a department. I'm better now than I was then. Everyone knows Jenner's not happy here, and when he leaves, I want his job."

"Uh huh…" Vance has that hard to read look on his face, pretty much the only thing Tim knows for sure is that he's not in any way, shape, or form surprised by this. "And what do you suggest I tell William Sumtor, Jenner's second-in-command, who is also under the impression that he'd do a good job with DC Cybercrime and has been waiting for Jenner to leave so he can take his place?"

"That I'll do a better one."

Vance smiles a little at that, which makes Tim happy, then says, "Are you sure?" which is less fun.

"Yes, I know Will, he was down in the basement when you sent me there the first time. He's great. He's competent. He's a really good second-in-command. And he's got the imagination of a bucket of cement. He will follow orders perfectly. He will do exactly what you tell him to exactly the way you tell him to do it. He's probably the most reliable man I met down there. But he can't think outside the box, doesn't innovate, and you know that about him, otherwise you would have offered him Okinawa when it opened up."

"That so?" Vance appears to be amused by this.

It bugs Tim when Vance does this. He's fairly certain that Vance will give him Cybercrime, but this testing thing, proving he's up for it is annoying. Still, as hoop jumping goes, this is child's play compared to his first five years with Tony and Gibbs.

"Yes, Sumtor's a good symbol for DC Cybercrime. Competent, technically skilled, decent at the job, but no spark. LA and Okinawa are high-tech, cutting edge, on the front lines of the cyber battles. We're playing clean up in the back. And it's because there's no one in the basement who knows how to give orders. No one's figured out that we are not supposed to be playing defense, but that it's our job to go out and find the bad guys, catch them at their own game, and tie them in knots."

"And you're the guy to do that?"

"Yes, because in the last ten years you've needed tons of secure systems hacked, you've needed feints, Trojan horses, and decoy systems, and not once have you ever called any of the guys in the basement, whose job it is to do precisely that. You've called me. Because you know I'm the guy who can take an objective, catch the bad guy, and figure out what needs to be done and do it without someone telling me what to do."

"I do. But running yourself is very different than running a department."

"It is."

"And Okinawa, which you are right, is the premier cybercrime division at NCIS is four people. It's a team, and a department in name only. And DC Cybercrime is twelve agents and two support staff. It's a real department."
"True."

"And in fourteen years, you've taken point on fewer than ten operations."

"Also true."

"And for all his lack of imagination, Sumtor is a fantastic bureaucrat. He knows how to manage people."

"I'm sure he does. And I'm sure his paperwork is always perfect. Of course, mine is, too." Tim smiles wryly at that. His is. And so is Tony and Ziva's when he does theirs. In fact, the single biggest change that'll happen when he leaves the MCRT is that the quality of the paperwork is going to drop like a rock tossed off a cliff. "And it's true I haven't taken point often, but the last time I did, I was managing more than two thousand people. But it wasn't keeping all those people on a leash, making sure they did the right things at the right time that ended that manhunt, it was having enough imagination to be able to flush Blen out. It was being able to think outside of the box and then rebuild the box so that he couldn't hide in it. And if you want DC Cybercrime to ever be anything beyond a tech center that plays catch up, then when Jenner leaves, you'll give it to me, and I'll turn it into the best cybercrime division on the east coast."

Vance looks mildly amused by that. "It's the only cybercrime department on the east coast."

"Only one for NCIS, but CIA, IRS, FBI, NSA, and fourteen states all have cybercrime departments here, and if you give me three years, I will have them all beat."

Now Vance looks honestly amazed. That's a whole lot more than he expected Tim to come up with. "And how are you going to do that?"

"By rebuilding the box we all play in."

Leon sits back, steeples his hands in front of him, and smiles. "I like the sound of that."

"I thought you would."

"When Jenner gives notice, you'll be the next head of DC Cybercrime."

"Thank you."

"And when he gives notice, your first job as Boss is to tell Sumtor you're his new Boss."

"Of course."

"And I assume you are helping DiNozzo and David find a suitable replacement for you."

"Trying. Just got started on that this morning. Looking to find someone to replace me and Gibbs."

That got a grin out of Leon. "Good luck on that."

"Yeah."

"Well, don't let me keep you from it."

Tim knew a dismissal when he heard it, so off he went.
When Tim decided to start getting into better shape, he stopped taking the elevator. Sure using the stairs wasn't a ton of exercise, but he figured every little bit helped, and it didn't add all that much more time to getting from point A to point B. MTAC to Abby's lab is four flights of stairs and that's usually about as far as he goes in any given day.

So his feet are more or less on automatic, taking him toward the stairs as he gets out of Leon's office, but he stops, turns and heads for the elevator.

He wants to say it to Abby first. More importantly, he wants another moment where it's just his, and if he takes the stairs, then he has to go through the bullpen to get to her lab, and he knows they all saw him head up, so they'll want to know how it went.

He's going to be a department head. He'll have guys calling him Boss.

Wow. He takes a deep breath, lets it out slow, and tries to let it settle in, then hits the button for the lab.

He’ll be handing in his badge and his gun, sitting at a desk every day, coding until his eyes fall out, and filling out even more paperwork.

He's not going to see Tony and Ziva every day. He won't see dead bodies, either. No more running down suspects, at least, not with his feet, with his fingers will be a whole different story. He won't set all of his computers to searching for something, and then hop down to Abby's lab and use hers as well.

He won't be heading down there for updates on cases (and a quick smooch).

No more stakeouts.

No more long drives to go get suspects, or question witnesses, or talk to C.O.s.

No more bad take out eaten at his desk at ten at night while going over the clues with Tony and Ziva.

No more desk.

No more looking up and seeing the three of them working away on their paperwork.

He let out another long, slow breath.

Hopefully many fewer late nights. And even if he is on a case and it needs overtime, he'll be able to do it from home. Kelly's going to need someone at home, and he'll be there.

No more close calls. In the fourteen years he's been at NCIS they've lost exactly one Cybercrime Agent, and he was killed when Kahn leaked him. Not going to happen on his watch.

The elevator opens and his thinking time ends.

He pauses at the door to her lab, watching for a moment as she dispenses some sort of liquid into the tiny vials Major Mass Spec uses.

Learner's team is working on a drug ring case that got hot recently, so she's probably doing something for that.

She looks up from her pipette, jumps a little when she sees him lurking, and says, "So?"
He heads over to her, gently kissing her lips, and waiting for her to put the pipette down before hugging her. "You're looking at the next head of DC Cybercrime."

She squeezed him tight and shrieked. "When?"

"Whenever Jenner gives notice."

She was doing an excited little bouncing sort of thing, but his voice caught her attention, and she stopped and really looked at him. "You okay?"

He shrugs, holding her close, feeling her head against his shoulder. "I think so. Just, on the way down, I was thinking of all the things that are never going to happen again once I make the switch. And some of them are good and some are bad."

"You regretting it?"

"No!" He shook his head vehemently. "It's just… I won't see them every day anymore. I probably won't see you every day anymore, not here at least. There'll be no reason for me to come down, I guess once I get to Cybercrime, up here to work. It's going to be really different."

"It's going to be really good. You're going to be the Boss."

"Yeah, that's sort of freaky, too."

"Tell me about it."

He nods, understanding her own issues with this. Norfolk was supposed to close its lab in January. That didn't happen, emergency funding showed up from the ethers, but that funding was only going to keep Norfolk going until June. Supposedly, for real this time, come June 1st Abby would have two more forensic scientists working under her. And sure, that worked out really well from a maternity leave perspective, but she was pretty nervous about being the Boss all of a sudden, let alone sharing her lab with new people.

"You want to celebrate?"

"Not yet. Let me actually get the job. Want to keep this quiet. Among other things, Sumtor doesn't know he's not the next Head of DC Cybercrime, and when Jenner gives notice, letting him know that is my job. So, for right now, I want to just keep this in the family."

"No problem." She kissed him, sure that he needs the extra time to let it settle in. Then she kissed him again, suddenly understanding part of why he looks so out of it. "You're still you, Tim."

He nods, seeing her get it. Special Agent Tim McGee is a good third of his core identity, and soon, he won't be Special Agent Tim McGee anymore.

"I know." And he does know it, but feeling it is a different story.

She kisses him again.

"I should probably get back up. Paperwork's not doing itself. And I got Tony a list of guys from FLETC to look at, got to see what he's thinking about them."

"Okay." One last kiss, soft, gentle, supportive, and then he heads toward the stairs.
When he got to the Bullpen all three of them were staring at them. He gave a tiny nod which they all caught, and Tony was about to start asking about it when Tim also shook his head slightly, signaling *not here.* They understood that, as well.

Two seconds later, before he had even gotten all the way to his desk, Gibbs' phone rang.

And they all know how this works, before Gibbs even has the phone put down they're snagging their go bags, saving and closing computer work, stashing paperwork, and by the time Gibbs had the phone hung up they were ready to go.

"Gear up." It's a formality now. It's probably been years since Gibbs has had to say the words.

But like a mantra, or a benediction, those words start a case. They mark the team swinging into action. And today they mark something else, the beginning of the end of Team Gibbs.
"Did you get the results?" Tim asked Jimmy on Tuesday at lunch.

Tim knows the answer is yes. He can see it by the way Jimmy hasn't checked his cell, and the fact that he looks a lot more relaxed. Not necessarily happier, but more at peace, so the results on the genetic testing for the Trisomy 13 gene must have come back.

"Neither of us." He stabs a bite of his chicken breast. "It was just bad damn luck. If we want to do IVF and have the embryos screened ahead of time, we can, but since neither of us are carriers the chance of it happening again isn't any higher than it was the first time."

"So..."

Jimmy shakes his head. "No. We're not going to do that."

"Just gonna close your eyes and jump off the cliff again?"

"Hoping and praying for a soft landing the entire way down? Yeah."

"You sure..." Tim's not sure how to say this delicately, so he goes for blunt as hell, "if it's a money thing... I mean, I know our insurance won't cover that... Abby and I could help." He and Abby talked about, so he knows she's okay with it. It's not the sort of thing he'd just whip out on a whim.

Jimmy just blinks at him. "Uh... wow! That's just... Do you have any idea what that sort of thing costs?"

"Yeah. Which is why I brought it up."

Jimmy's looking at him in confusion. "How would you even know that?"

"When something scary happens to me or anyone I love I research the hell out of it."

"Oh."

"So... ummm... yeah..."

"It's not a money thing. It's a... Neither of us wants to make babies by me jerking off into a cup while pumping her full of hormones to bolster egg production and then suck them out, mix in a pitri dish, let them grow a little, test them, and then put them back in. I mean..." He pokes at his food some more, gathering his thoughts. "It's supposed to feel good. It's supposed to be about joy and love and ecstasy... Making them is the fun part..." Jimmy shakes his head dismissively at that. "Making them is a fun part. Making them is supposed to feel as good as having them, and since it won't really change things, we're not willing to give that up, let alone go broke doing it."

Tim nods. He's not entirely certain how to reply to that. He gets what Jimmy is saying, and completely agrees with it, but "Good luck" seems flip and hollow, "I hope it works out" seems lame, but he does want to say something.

Finally he comes up with, "I can't wait to meet Molly's little brother or sister."

"You and me both."

"You going to start trying again right away?"
"Oh yeah. Tossed the condoms out last night. With any luck it'll be a really exciting Christmas at our house this year."

"I really hope so."

"Me, too." Jimmy took another bite of his grilled chicken salad. "Abby said you had news, too."

"Yeah. Don't want this getting around work, though." Which was probably half of why Abby decided he and Jimmy needed to have lunch out today and set it up. "When Jenner in Cybercrime gives his notice, I'll take his place."

Jimmy smiles at that. "Department head by forty, who knew you were so ambitious?"

"Yeah. Well, assuming Jenner doesn't decide to stick around forever. Scuttlebutt has it he's been job hunting, though."

"You don't exactly look ecstatic."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm happy, but… the badge and the gun and running down bad guys… That's a really big part of who I am. I'm a cop."

Jimmy nods, getting that. "You're a dad."

"Yeah, and husband, and that comes first, and this is necessary to put that first. I can track cybercrime from home. I can sort financials, and hunt down the bad guys with my computer while Ke—McSciuto—"

"Ke—McSciuto?"

"That family name we haven't been telling anyone about."

"Yeah, Tim, I hate to break this to you, but all of your friends are cops, and even if they weren't, they aren't idiots. Absolutely no one hasn't figured out your mystery 'family name' is Kelly."

Tim sighs a little, rolls his eyes a little, and takes a bite of his flounder. "We're still going to wait to see if she's actually a girl, and then ask Jethro to make sure it's cool with him."

Jimmy nods and smiles. "You know, for a guy who'll wear a skirt and eyeliner to Shabbos, you're shockingly conservative about some things."

"I only did the eyeliner once." Which is true. Penny was at last Friday's Shabbos and… he's fairly sure it was fall out from rethinking everything that happened with his Dad, but he went all out on the Goth version of himself. Penny just looked at him when he and Abby came in, smiled, kissed his cheek, and asked what brand of eyeliner he liked, listened to his answer, and then acted like him in makeup was no big deal at all.

That had actually felt insanely good.

"I know."

"Just wanted to freak Tony out and let Penny see what it looked like."

"And you did a fine job of both of them. Last I heard, he was muttering about instituting a dress code, and had told me that if you try to wear makeup to his wedding that I'm to wrestle you to the ground and scrub it off."
Tim laughed at that. "I hadn't been planning on it... Anyway... McSciuto can be sleeping in her crib, and I can be hacking away in my office. I can be home at six every night. Sure, I might be chained to my computer and cell once I get there, and I might end up with three other Cybercrime Agents in my living room, but unlike Abby, my job can come home."

"Yep. You're a dad."

"Yeah. And I want to do it right. But... it still feels weird."

"Feels like you're changing. Like you don't quite know who you are?"

"Yeah."

"Welcome to the club, Tim. Give it a few months, once she's on the outside, you'll get settled again."

"I hope so."
I, Anthony

I, Anthony, take you, Ziva, to be my lawfully wedded wife.

Tim looked at the one line of text in Tony's handwriting on a pad of legal paper, and then looked back up at Tony. At his wedding Tony had talked about the two of them working on his vows. And now, with Tony's wedding not quite three weeks away, they were getting to it.

Though as Tim remembers it, he'd specified that Tony should have a rough draft that they'd work with together, because he was not going to ghost write Tony's vows.

"One line?" He's glaring a little at Tony. Not really angry, but a little frustrated. "The idea was you'd have a rough draft, and we'd work from there."

"It's really rough."

"It's non-existent. This is the part the Rabbi will say for you, and you'll just repeat back!"

"Actually no. The vows are in Hebrew. But… I wanted to write something for her. Something personalized. They don't have to be vows but…"

Oh. So not vows at all. Something different. Something Tony's never done before and probably feels completely lost dealing with. "Are you saying you want help writing a love poem?"

"A vowish love poems."

"Wow!" Tim's got an expression of wonder on his face, possibly with a tinge of teasing condescension as well.

Tony catches all the layers of that look and says, "Stuff it. Since no one in her immediate family is still alive, a 'traditional' wedding is important to Ziva, and she'd never say it, but I can see it, it's that last thread of home and family for her. So I'm fine with doing the traditional Hebrew vows, but… I want to give her something from me, as well. And I don't want to sound like an idiot doing it. So, McPoet, I am asking you for help."

Tim smiles; he understands that completely.

"Hey, can I come in, or is this a guy only party?" Abby asks, sticking her head into Tim's office.

"Please come in," Tony replies. He's sitting on Tim's one desk chair, and Tim is in the other one, so she settles onto Tim's lap. And Tony watches as, apparently, without him even noticing, Tim's hand comes to rest on her belly, while he kisses her neck.

"Good nap?"

"Yeah. I just hate being tired all the time." She turns to Tony. "It's better than it was, but I still need eight to ten hours of sleep a night, and I've never needed that much sleep. It's insane."

"Your body is working hard," Tim says, fondly stroking her tummy.

"And making me sleep hard, too." She looks at the piece of paper in front of Tim and Tony. "So, working on vows?"

"Sort of," Tony answers and then explains what they're doing.
"You want to call Jimmy?" Abby asks.

Both Tim and Tony say "No" in exactly the same tone of voice at exactly the same time.

Abby looks puzzled by this.

"Look, I love Jimmy, but he's terrible at this stuff," Tim says.

Tony's nodding. "The man had his testicles surgically removed when he was writing his vows. 'And each day I will shower you in a thousand butterfly kisses and thank the Lord you were born.' No!"

"Breena loved it! And it was so sweet."

"And if I was getting ready to marry Breena, Jimmy'd be the first guy I'd call for vow help. But, I do not want Ziva bursting into hysterical laughter when she reads this."

Abby takes the pen and crosses out Tony's name. "She doesn't call you Anthony. Only Ducky does. Tony's more personal."

"Okay, see, we're getting somewhere. Is that why you two did Tim and Abby for your vows instead of Timothy and Abigail?"

Tony looks up from where Abby scratched out his name when he notices that neither of them have said anything. He sees the smile on Abby's face is wicked glee, and Tim's looking pretty smug, as well.

Finally Tim says, "Remember the last ropes and things conversations, when you asked me what other help you might want?"

Tony's nodding, looking really disturbed, but he says, "Yes."

"Why you'll never hear me call her Abigail or her calling me Timothy is part of the lesson that comes after our last conversation."

"So you're saying I really don't want to know?"

Abby's grinning very happily right now. "You don't want to know about safewords? So much fun and so many cool—"

Tony closes his eyes and cuts in, "No, I don't want to know that you and McGee have or need them."

Abby shrugs. "I didn't know you were so vanilla."

"When it comes to mental images of McGee naked, I'm whatever makes vanilla look dangerous and kinky. So, can we talk vows, now?"

"Sure. Here." Tim hands Tony the pen, and pushes the pad of paper back to him. "We're going to get something to drink. You're going to spend the next ten minutes writing anything and everything that's comes to mind when you think of being married to Ziva. It doesn't have to make sense. It doesn't have to be vows. Just turn your internal filter off, and put anything that comes to mind on that piece of paper."

Ten minutes later Tim walked back in and saw Tony sitting in front of what looked like a much more
filled in page. Unfortunately, as he got a few steps closer he saw that much more filled in was a collection of little interlocking squares and triangles.

"Do you really want to do this?" Tim asks.

"Where'd Abby go?" Tony replies with, not answering.

"Bowling practice with the Nuns. She'll be back in two hours."

"Oh."

"She also thinks you'll have an easier time of this without her hovering over your shoulder."

"Maybe."

"So, really, either you have no clue what being married is about, or this isn't a good fit for you. What's going on?"

"Look, I know I can be smooth and sweet talk this. But I don't want it to be a line. I don't want it to be… that exterior veneer of 'DiNozzo.' And every time I start to come up with something, it's all smooth."

Tim wrote down:

*With you, for you, I will always be real.*

*I will not hide my mind or heart.*

"Oh, that's good. I like that."

"Good, then translate that into however you'd say that to her."

"It sounds more earnest in your voice."

"And when Ziva comes to her senses and decides to marry me, that'll matter. This might be my wedding present to you, but it's not my wedding present to her, so it better sound like you by the time this is done."

*You make me want to be a better man.* Tony wrote that under the first two lines, and Tim scratched it out.

"What?"

"Movie quote. Don't use someone else's words, find your own." But Tim stopped on that idea. "Actually… you love movies. You love her. Come on." He hops up and drags Tony in the chair to his computer. Two seconds later he's googled Blank Books, and he's got pages of empty books up on the screen.

"Find a beautiful one. Get a good pen. And write them all down. Fill the book with the quotes that now mean something to you because she's in your life. She loves books, so write her a book. You love movies, so fill it with movies. It doesn't have to be your own words; it has to be your own feelings, and if someone else has the words, use theirs."

Tony grins, wide smile stretching across his face.

"That I can do."
"McGee, DiNozzo, gear up. Dead Marine out of Chapel Hill," Gibbs says as he puts his phone down.

"Gibbs?" Ziva asks, perfect inflection of why aren't you bringing me along in her voice.

"Gonna be at least overnight, and I need someone here to keep an eye on things."

Tim glances over and sees Tony grabbing his go bag looking mildly pouty. He's been talking all day and all yesterday about how Ohio State is playing tonight and he can't wait to see it. Stuck in a crappy motel room dealing with a murder is not the way he wants to see that game.

When it hits him that Ziva's not coming, mildly pouty switched to downright unhappy.

"Boss," Tim says, hoping he sounds convincingly whiny. Ziva had gotten her part right, he's got to do his.

"One night alone won't kill her, Tim. Ziva's here, and so is Palmer. She'll be fine."

"But…"

"Head down, say goodbye, and we'll meet you at the van."

He glares a little at Gibbs before grabbing his go bag and heading down to the lab.

Abby sees him and bursts into a huge grin. "Does Tony have any idea?"

"None." The smile that's been trying to break out since Gibbs' phone rang (Palmer calling to let him know he was on the road.) spreads across his face. "We pulled it off perfectly. Utterly clueless. He's silently pouting about missing the game and sleeping alone." He steps in close and kisses her. "Are you going to be okay on your own?"

"Are you kidding? Ziva, Breena, and I have a fabulous night planned. It's going to be an absolute blast. There's a new gay club out on 10th and we are going to dance until our feet won't hold us up anymore. You guys go, have fun. See you tomorrow."

He kisses her again, slow and deep. "Tomorrow."

They were driving past UNC's stadium. Tony eyeing it longingly as Gibbs drove. "This is so wrong. I'm supposed to be at home, with Ziva, watching this game in high def on a sixty inch screen. Cold beer in one hand, Ohio State t-shirt on, cheering my guys to victory. Of all the bad times to get murdered. Where is this guy supposed to be?"

"Tony, check your go bag."

"McGee?" He stopped gazing at the stadium and flashed Tim his annoyed and confused look.

"Just do it."
Tony did, and his eyebrows drew together. He always keeps a change of clothing in there, they all do, that's the point of a go bag, but his has… "My Ohio State shirt?"

"See an envelope in there?" Tim asks as Gibbs pulls into the UNC stadium parking lot.

Tony dug around for a minute longer, and Tim started to get a little nervous, getting everything packed was Ziva's job, and he didn't get a chance to double check and make sure everything was in there the way it was supposed to be.

But Tony came up with it after a minute and looked inside.

For another minute, as Gibbs parked, Tony just stared at the tickets, eyes wide and disbelieving. Finally he looked up at them and said, "Four court side seats?"

"Jimmy's waiting for us at the gate." Tim smirked at him. "Still think you don't want Jimmy or I planning your bachelor party?"

Tony looked back down at the tickets in his hand. When Ohio State made it to the final eight and got slotted into the UNC stadium, he had tried to get tickets, and they were completely sold out. "How did you get tickets to this?"

"Remember, I've got that cousin, and he knew a guy, and… I don't pay attention to basketball, but Jimmy noticed Ohio State made March Madness this year, so we put this plan into action."

Tony turned to Gibbs. "You knew?"

His expression said, of course. "You didn't think they'd take you out to a strip club and buy you lap dances, did you?"

"Well, no. That's why I didn't want them planning this."

"You'd rather be watching strippers?" Tim asked. He'd been hoping Tony'd like this.

That jerked Tony out of his shock. "No. I mean, this is beyond awesome." And Tim can see that's genuine. He just hadn't been expecting anything even remotely like this and it was taking him a minute to get his head out of pouting mode into celebrate mode. "I just… Jimmy came up with this?"

"Yeah, so let's get him so you can say thanks, and then watch this thing."

"McGee, do you even know enough about basketball to follow a game?" And that sounded a whole lot more like normal Tony.

"It's soccer with hoops. I'll do okay."

"Soccer with hoops?" Tony looked appalled and launched into a detailed exposition on the finer arts of basketball while stripping out of his work clothing into his fan clothing. He had half-noticed that Tim and Gibbs had both been a little more casual than usual for work clothing today, but not so much so that it was worth mentioning.

They found Jimmy a few minutes later, looking fairly relaxed, tucking his cell back into his pocket.

Tony smiled at him and said, "Tim tells me this was your idea?"

"Breena's really."

Tony nodded in appreciation of Breena. "You have the coolest wife ever."
"I agree."

"McGeek thinks this is soccer with hoops. Do you need a primer on basketball, too?"

Jimmy looked at Tim like he's a twit. "Soccer with hoops?"

Tim shrugged. "Eleven guys, start in the middle, run to the end, get the ball into the target, don't tackle each other, don't pick the ball up and carry it. Soccer with hoops."

Jimmy sighed and shook his head. "Lord, someone messed up your education. I played in junior high. I wasn't good or anything, but I at least know it's not soccer."

"Good." Tony said with a very wide and happy grin.

By conservative estimate there are nineteen million people in that stadium and they are all rabid UNC supporters. Home team at the home stadium and they are going bonkers.

To say they've gotten a few dirty looks, and some choice verbiage as they head to their seats due to Tony's shirt is an understatement.

But they are courtside, and luck had it they are on the Ohio State side of the court.

They get settled, comfortable, beer and dogs in hand, and are watching the pre-game show when the Ohio State Coach turns around to talk to one of the players and notices them.

"Tony DiNozzo?"

"Mark Ratham?"

Mark came forward and wrapped him in a back slapping hug. "What are you doing here, man?"

"Watching the game." He pulled back from Mark holding his shoulders. "Are you coaching?"

"Yeah, Bob Gilman got hit by a car last night, so I'm up."

Tony looked worried at that. Anything this close to a big game can mess with the cohesion of the team and that's a very bad thing. "Is the team going to be okay?"

"Oh, yeah, he'll be fine, so they'll be fine, but they want to keep him under 'observation' for twenty four hours. Those bastards at the hospital are UNC supporters."

"Oh." Tony nodded along. "Guy driving a UNC supporter, too?"

"Can't prove it, but I wouldn't doubt it. Look, game's starting in five, but if you want me to introduce you at half time to the team, I'd be happy to."

"That'd be great."

Tim, Jimmy, and Gibbs are all giving him the fill us in look.

"Mark was my roommate sophomore and junior year. Seniors got singles in our house, so we split up then, but… yeah… a lot of my better college memories involve him. Wow. Haven't seen him in...
"Spring break in Mexico?" Tim asked.

"Yeah. He got married and stopped coming. He was assistant coach for... I don't remember, some little school in corn country. Looks like he's moved up in the world."

Tim's, of course, heard all about Tony's college exploits. Everyone has. He'll talk your ear off about them. Though Tim has noticed the focus on what Tony did in college has shifted over the years. When he first started NCIS, he heard a lot more about partying and girls, and these days he hears a lot more about basketball.

Actually, these days, he hasn't heard a whole lot about Ohio State, period. It's probably been four years since Tony's brought it up, though he'll mention it when they're talking college type stuff.

Still, there's hearing the stories, which, Tim had figured were about two-thirds bullshit, and then there's seeing the guys on the team stare at Tony like he's some sort of mythological figure stepping out of the book and shaking their hands.

Twenty college kids are looking at Tony like he's some sort of God. One they pray to regularly. And Tony is basking in it.

"Haven't seen you in forever, what are you doing these days?" Mark asks after introducing Tony around.

"Believe it or not, I'm a cop."

"You're a what?" Mark looks like he'd more readily believe Tony was a woman than a cop.

"Work for the Navy. I investigate crimes involving Navy or Marine personnel."

"You became a cop? Tony 'let me see how many laws I can break per night' DiNozzo became a cop?" Mark's laughing like this is the best joke ever.

"Not that many!" Tony's looking a little embarrassed.

"Dude, you didn't turn twenty-one until the end of your junior year, and good two-thirds of those girls were under eighteen." A little embarrassed had morphed to distinctly uncomfortable. Gibbs' eyes narrowed a little, and Jimmy crossed his arms. And Tim is suddenly understanding that there is a very big difference between having a daughter, and possibly having a daughter. Because while he definitely considers fooling around with underage girls a problem, he doesn't appear to be having the same sort of visceral reaction Gibbs and Jimmy are.

"So who are your buddies?" Mark asks, finally noticing there are three other guys here and two of them don't look even remotely happy about him.

Tim grinned. But there's no warmth there, and anyone who knows him knows that's not a friendly gesture, and he's kind of hoping Mark takes the hint to pull back after this. "Two more cops," he gestured at himself and Gibbs. "A medical examiner." Pointed to Jimmy. "And, oh" here he pointed
back at Gibbs. "His father-in-law."

"You're married? You gonna tell me you've got the house, the dog, and the white picket fence next?"

"Not that far along yet, it's my bachelor party. Last I heard, you were married, too."

"Married didn't work out. At all. And, not that we aren't happy to see you here, but this is a lame-ass bachelor party. Hell, bachelor party is the best part of getting married. A bachelor party is the reason to get married! I was still drunk at the reception from mine… and the girls!"

Tim was deciding that Mark was the kind of guy he hated in high school, and fortunately didn't see much of in college. Tim can also see Tony's trying to figure out how to get out of this. There's only a few minutes more of halftime, and then they can get back to watching the game, hopefully without this clod hanging onto them.

"I'm having a great time."

"Oh." There's pity on Mark's face, and he's got a very clear expression of you're so whipped. "You want to come with us after the game? Turn this into a real bachelor party? There'll be pretty little girls begging for attention and booze galore. And I'm sure the boys would love to see you in action."

"Not my thing anymore." Tony flashed his patented DiNozzo charm smile and had stepped back from Mark.

Mark said, "Come on man, your pic, the one with the six girls and the beer bong, is still up on the wall of fame at our frat house." Mark turned toward the Tim, Jimmy, and Gibbs. "This here is the only man who made the wall of fame every single semester he was at Ohio State. There's still a little shrine to him at the Delta Beta Chi frat house. So, come on, relive the glory days with the team? You're a hero, well, a myth, to these kids."

Tony sighed. "Mark, you see these three guys? They love my fiancée, almost as much as I do, and if I fool around on her, they will kill me and lose my body somewhere between here and home."

Tim and Jimmy are nodding and Gibbs is just coolly staring at Mark, very clearly signaling Get the hell out of here before I arrest you for statutory rape, and probably shoot you for resisting arrest along the way.

"Two-thirds of them under eighteen?" Gibbs asks Tony quietly, as Mark backs away from that stare and returns to his team.

The look on Gibbs' face is terrifying, so Tony answers honestly, "Yeah." Jimmy looks ready to hit Tony, too. "It was the '80s. We lived in a party frat. Girls are what make the party fun. ID checks were shaky at best back then and we were famous for never, ever doing it. As long as you were cute enough that the guy at the door liked you, you got in. And Bob never saw a girl he didn't like. And we were all drunk, too. And when you're nineteen the idea that fourteen or fifteen is too young is silly because you still remember being fourteen and all you wanted to do then was get laid, and she's there, rubbing against you, kissing you, tight and tiny little skirt, low cut top, clearly she knew what she was doing, so why not make some sweet young thing's night?"

Gibbs looks at Jimmy and Tim, letting them know they were about to see a practical application of instilling the Fear of Dad in someone, and then says, "You're gonna have girls. And so are they. Daughters and nieces, and they will be the light of your life, and you will love them more than you can even imagine, and assholes like the guy you used to be are going to be chasing after them. I hope you get an ulcer from worrying about them for each and every single one of those little girls you
Tim's heard Gibbs swear before, he's fairly sure Tony has, too, but not sure about Jimmy. But, it's one thing to say fuck and mean *I am irritated by the current set of circumstances and want something to express that* and a whole other thing to say it and mean *I am thirty seconds away from smacking the living hell out of you and the only reason I don't is because I know the man you are is not the man you use to be but so help me God if it ever looks like you are going to revert back to that guy I will kick your ass so hard you will limp for the rest of your very short life.*

And Tim is deeply, sincerely, fervently glad that he's never had Gibbs that pissed at him, and that he's never done anything that will ever get Gibbs that pissed at him.

Tony looks really disturbed and tries to laugh that off. "Come on, you were a Marine, you must have __"

"Stayed a virgin until my wedding night, when we were both twenty? Yeah, I did. And those two weren't fucking any little girls, either."

Tony's a little irked by that. He's fairly certain Tim or Jimmy would have happily slept with a fifteen or sixteen-year-old when they were nineteen if there had been one available. "Those two weren't fucking anyone period."

"Hey! I had a steady girlfriend junior and senior year of high school, and two more in college," Jimmy says. Tim cringes at that, now really wasn't a good time for Jimmy to forget his mental filter.

"Your high school sweetie, was she twelve?" Gibbs asks, eyes on Tony, very intense expression of pissed off not wavering. He's not looking at Jimmy at all.

"What? No!" Jimmy's utterly horrified by that idea.

"You love her?"

"Yeah."

"You go to her house, look her dad in the eye when you talked to him, and treat his daughter with respect?"

"Yes."

He glanced at Jimmy for a second, face relaxing a little. "Then we don't have a problem." Then he turned back to Tony, eyes hot and angry. "You do any of those things, Tony?"

"No."

"You get their names?"

"Some of them."

Gibbs looks disgusted as he says, "You at least make sure they had a good time?"

"Too drunk and too full of myself to ever think they might need more than me just being there."

Gibbs eyes narrowed even further, and Tim can see the muscles in his jaws clenching. "You treated them like blow up dolls and jerked off in them, probably hurt at least a few of them doing it."

Tony nods.
"Get 'em sick?"

"Some of them gave me gonorrhea, crabs, and the clap, and, yeah, I passed them on as well."

"Get 'em pregnant?"

"No one ever showed up with a kid that looked like me, but I know for a fact that I'm not shooting blanks, so I can't believe that I didn't get at least a few of them pregnant."

"Did they say yes?" Gibbs' voice is very low, very dangerous when he says this, and Tim is really hoping that if the truth to that is no, that Tony has the good sense to lie and lie more convincingly than he's ever lied before.

"None of them was ever unconscious or said no. But a lot of them were very drunk."

" Barely walk on their own, don't remember anything in the morning drunk?"

"Yeah."

"So yes, that's a problem."

"I know." And Tim thinks he really does, thinks that's why there haven't been any tales of the DiNozzo Party Machine in years.

"Good! And if need be, we are beating the idea that this is a problem with a two by four into any sons you, or they, may have."

"Yes, sir."

Gibbs looked satisfied that he had properly instilled the Fear of Dad into Tony and nodded. Then sat down in his seat, and looked in the direction of the now wrapping up half-time show.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay, I'm not trying to hate on Tony, but... well... okay, on one level I do want to deal with the massive character changes we've seen in Tony over eleven (and in Shards world 14) years. And I want to spend a little time on what sort of guy Tony likely was in college and as a cop. It gets glossed over now, but Tony was still going to Spring Break in Mexico at the age of 35. That's the land of the drunk, borderline unconscious, underage girl looking for a good time, and he happily took advantage of it. And I guess I wanted to make clear that to honorable men, that's just not cool. And it took a while, but Tony finally got there and became one. I have a feeling the way he treated Kate that first year (like walking into the bathroom while she was in the shower) is likely to come back to haunt him, too. He was the classic, sexually aggressive-harasser who covered it with a lot of charm and good looks, and Kate put up with a lot of bullshit from him that these days would get him fired so fast time would move backward.

Oh well, light, fluffy fun sexy bachelor party stuff tomorrow.
Two quarters of a game to cool down, get their minds off of Tony's past, and relax back into the idea that this is supposed to be fun, and that there's nothing he can do about the man he used to be was a good thing.

And it was a good game. The Buckeyes were evenly matched with UNC, so the game stayed close the whole time, keeping the four of them interested.

And when Ohio State won it with a three pointer that whispered through the hoop less than half a second before the buzzer, they were all shouting (Tony jumping up and down) with excitement.

Late night drinks and barbecue went very well with basketball.

Honestly, it looked like a dive. It's the dive-y-ist dive Tim's ever seen. A ramshackle, beat the hell up, the only reason the health inspector hasn't closed it down is they spend more money bribing him then they do on décor shack of a place. He's honestly nervous about bringing them here, let alone eating anything.

But it also came up over and over again on the list of barbecue joints you absolutely had to go to if you were anywhere near Chapel Hill.

And it smells like absolute heaven.

And they are men, engaging in a sacred male ritual, and sacred male rituals need meat that has been cooked over fire.

And since Tony is convinced that barbecue is hot dogs and burgers on the grill, Tim is considering it his duty, as both his friend and best man, to make sure he gets introduced to the joy that is spice rubbed slow cooked pork.

So it's late. They're in a dive. But the beer is cold and delicious, and the pulled pork and ribs are come-in-your-pants good. Tim loves food. He really does. But this is the first time he's ever honestly considered food to be almost orgasmic experience, and he's also very glad that this place is eight hours from home, because otherwise he'd be 210 again in about six weeks.

Tony is sucking the rib bones it's so good. (He'd tried to follow the rules. He started with the chicken, and that was awfully tasty, but he saw Gibbs' ribs and decided that God would probably forgive him some decadence for his bachelor party. Especially since there were no strippers involved.)

Gibbs, who usually isn't a big eater, has ordered seconds and thirds.

And it's not that Jimmy can't eat sugar, it's just that he has to adjust his insulin levels to do so, and thus usually avoids sugar so he doesn't have to inject himself. But he was happily gnawing away, telling them that this was totally worth the shot.

And, as in the past, when a certain amount of beer has been consumed and the girls aren't around, the conversation turned to sex.

Tony's looking at Gibbs and finally says, "So… not until your wedding? Really? Just, twenty years, seems like a really long time."
Gibbs just shrugs. He was eighteen when he met Shannon, and while it's true he was ambivalent on the yes sex or no sex before marriage issue (He's Christian and his church had been pretty clear about the only with your wife thing, but he was also eighteen, so having sex was something he was deeply interested in.) Shannon wasn't, and once he met her, the idea of doing it with someone else just made him sad.

They wait another beat, but Gibbs doesn't say anything, just eats more of his rib.

Then Jimmy elbows Tony and says, "You can't miss what you've never had. You want to talk about a long time, Breena made me wait until we got married. So, at thirty-two, long after I had thought I was done with terminal blue balls, I was back to being bestest friends with my right hand. That was hard."

"I think you mean you were hard," Tim says.

"That, too." Jimmy smirks and takes a drink. "Anyway, waiting until you get married when you get married before you're even old enough to drink, please."

"Drinking age was eighteen then."

Jimmy flashes Gibbs a you're missing the point look. "Great. Still, no sex to lots of sex, easy. Somewhat regular sex, start dating the hottest, most desirable woman on earth, and knowing exactly how good it's going to be and what you're missing, and because she's evil, making out with her on a regular basis but not having sex, that's har—difficult."

Tony's laughing at that. "I didn't think she was that religious."

"She was deeply religious, but that wasn't why she made us wait. Our first date she said to me, I've known a lot of guys over the years, and one thing I've noticed about all of you is that you're pretty possessive and you like to know that when something is yours it's really yours.' So I nodded at that, because, well, yeah, that's true. So she says, 'Look, I love guys. I love the way they feel and smell and look and touch me. I love kissing and making out and rubbing up against them, but I'm a virgin. I'm not having sex with any guy until I get married. That's my wedding present to my future husband. He'll know, absolutely, that I'm his and only his. And when that ring's on my finger I'm going to absolutely rock his world.' And she just smiled at me, and wrapped her lips around the straw in her drink, took a sip and finished up with, 'If that's not something you respect, well, this was fun. If it's something you do, then I'd like to see you again.'"

"What did you say to that?" Tim asks, smiling.

"You mean once some of the blood got back to my brain and I could form words?"

Tim nods.

"Marry me."

All three of them laugh at that.

"Then she said, 'How about we go on a second date first?' And we did, and it was the longest most sexually frustrated two years of my life. And then because God hates me, Dearing blew up NCIS on my wedding day, and since I'm a decent guy who wanted her to have a good time, too, we waited another week, until I was able to crawl out from under the mile-high stack of paperwork I had to deal with, get enough sleep so I could keep going for more than two minutes, and take the time to do it right."
"It was worth it," Gibbs says, sharing a look with Jimmy, one that understands what waiting for something you desire above everything else and then finally getting it is like.

"Oh yeah." He grins and shakes his head in wonder. "And, yeah, there's a real kick to knowing she's only been with me. It's stupid, because we aren't supposed to feel that way, but... I do. I'm the only guy who's gotten to see her naked. Only one who's ever enjoyed her body. And she was dead right, that was one hell of a wedding present."

Gibbs nods at that, too, agreeing. "It was expected when we got married. You'd be her one and only. And yeah, maybe you fooled around before you got married, but she didn't, or if she did, it was with you. And you didn't feel bad about liking it. Didn't feel like there was something wrong with you if you got a kick out of letting her learn what to do with a guy on you. Didn't feel like it was wrong to say she was yours. Bunch of guys were jerks about it, and that wrecked it for the rest of us, but we all feel it. Hell," he tips his head at Tim and Tony, "those two feel it, even if it's not quite the same."

Tim nods along with that, swallowing his beer and putting the glass down. "Certainly got a kick out of everything I've done with her that no other guy has."

"What have you done with Abby that no other guy has?" Tony asks, rib paused midway to his mouth. Sure, he knows that Tim's not vanilla about sex, but he's also fairly sure that if Tim's ever imagined it, then Abby's done it.

Tim smiles wide and fairly dirty. "Got her pregnant among other things, and 'other things' is all you get to know about that."

Tony, Jimmy, and Gibbs laugh.

"And there's definitely a thrill to everything I've done with her and no one else. It works both ways."

Gibbs smiles at that, eyes the waitress, looking like he might be thinking about fourths, but decides against it. "Yeah, it does."

Jimmy's phone buzzes. He reaches for it, taps the screen, and smiles. "Speaking of the girls who make our lives worthwhile. Breena just sent me these." He turned the screen so they could all see. The first shot was Abby and Ziva, looking like they were taking a break from dancing. The next was Breena with Ziva, putting a little sparkly tiara on her head. There was a dim, grainy shot of all three of them dancing together.

Tim's looking at them, and says, "So it looks like a good time and minor hearing damage has been had by all."

"Yes."

"So, they home, or just taking a break?" Tony asks.

Jimmy flashes a quick text to Breena and thirty seconds later says, "Home. The pregnant matron of honor needed some sleep."

Tim checks his watch; it's 12:48. "She's going to be pissed about that. She hates how tired she is these days."

Tony notices that their waitress is sort of glaring at them. "I think we're overstaying our welcome."

So they settled up and headed to their hotel.
"How are you doing?" Tim asked Jimmy after they got back to their room and began to get ready for bed.

"You mean besides the fact that I'm not supposed to be here tonight because my wife is supposed to be eight months pregnant."

"No. I mean about that."

Jimmy shrugged, pulling his shirt over his head. "I've only texted home three times."

"I noticed. You're getting better on that."

"Yeah. According to Gibbs I can't let the fear own me. So, I'm trying."

"If anyone would know, it's him."

"He always looks fearless."

"Easy to be fearless when you don't value your life."

"Really?"

"Not anymore, not for years. But back when we all started? Yeah."

Jimmy seemed to think about that as he headed to the bathroom. Five minutes later, he was back in a pair of flannel pajama pants that looked very similar to what Tim wore for hot yoga. That triggered the memory of the conversation they had post-hot yoga, so Tim asked, "If I wanted to try shaving it all off, what would you suggest?"

"Tim?"

He rolled his eyes a little, signaling that yes, this was a little silly, but he's curious and comfortable enough with Jimmy to ask about it. "We've got that long weekend after Tony's wedding, and we like to celebrate weddings, so, something special might be in order."

Jimmy laughed. "Why didn't you google it?"

A really wicked grin lit up Tim's face. "Oh, I did. On Ziva's computer. And I left a really obvious trail of breadcrumbs for her to follow. Next time she searches anything that starts with sh it'll pop up."

Jimmy laughed at that, too. "That's your elf porn revenge isn't it."

"Yep, it took a while to figure out the right thing, but I think that'll work really well." Tim looked deeply satisfied at that.

Jimmy shook his head and grinned. "He's going to wet his pants when she shows up with a smile and a razor."

Tim's got a really smug and pleased expression on his face. "That was the plan. So, tips?"

"Do it as close to having sex as you can, and leave at least an hour for it. You shave your face every
"day?"

"Nah. Every other. Don't really get stubbly until the second day."

"That's about where I am. 'Round about a day and a half I end up with a five o'clock shadow. So, maybe you'll have ten or twelve hours where it's not an issue, but it's really going to itch when it starts to grow back in."

"Got it."

"Cotton boxers or better yet, wear one of the kilts after. You've got pubic hair for a reason, and dealing with hot and sweaty is that reason, so keep yourself cool and dry."

"All right."

"Brand new razor, a good one, you want it sharp as sharp can be. Good shaving cream or gel or whatever, not soap." Tim's nodding at that. He doesn't like shaving his face with soap, and can't imagine his privates would be any less sensitive. "Trim first, as close as you can get. And for the love of God, pay attention to the go-with-the-grain thing. I know none of us do it when we shave our faces, but really, do it. First pass with the grain, second across it, no third pass. Pluck anything that's left after two passes, because your skin doesn't want a razor going over it more than that. Wash off, pat dry, spray with a little Neosporin, you're good to go."

"Why am I spraying with Neosporin?"

"Because no matter how good at it you are, you've probably got a few hundred tiny, microscopic cuts, and maybe a few you can see as well, and that's one area you don't want an infection, and between the sting and how it tastes, you don't want to be splashing aftershave on it."

"Good points."

Jimmy stretched out on his bed, hands behind his head, still on top of the blankets. "You going to tell her about it or just surprise her?"

"Not sure yet. Probably a surprise."

Jimmy nodded, looked like he's thinking about saying something, and finally decided to say it. "You tell her about it, and she might offer to do it for you. And… well, that's fun and easier, 'cause, she can see what she's doing better than you can."

"Uh huh…"

"And… you know, she's a whole lot more used to shaving delicate places."

"True. So… you let Breena…"

He rolled onto his side to face Tim, who's sitting cross-legged on his bed, unpacking his go-bag. "Not the first time. But, as she pointed out to me, and I'm pointing out to you, she knew what she was doing, and was in a much better position to do it. I mean, are you good at figuring out how to do something by looking in a mirror? I'm not."

"Actually, yes, I am good at that."

"Okay then. Still, it's more fun if she does it."

"You really get off on danger, don't you?"
Jimmy just looked at Tim curiously.

"Look, I trust Abby with my life. Hell, I let her put eyeliner and mascara on me, she even does the waterline—"

"What's the waterline?"

"The little part the eyelashes grow out of, right next to your eye." Tim pointed to it as he said it. Jimmy winced at that idea, and Tim continued. "But I don't want her holding a razor to my balls."

"Meh." Jimmy was supremely unconcerned about that. "I'm way more likely to slice the hell out of myself than she is. So… do you do the whole makeup thing a lot?"

"Besides that Shabbos, a couple of times a year when we go to one of her clubs. Sometimes when we're playing. Call it ten times a year, max."

"Does it feel weird?"

Tim thought about that for a few seconds, not sure what Jimmy's asking. "How do you mean feel, like physical sensation or emotional?"

"Both, either?"

"First few times, yeah, it felt weird. I kept wanting to rub my eyes. But the first couple times I was in college playing live action Vampire, so by the time I met Abby I was sort of used to it."

"Live action Vampire? Like, you running around sucking people's blood?"

"In a nutshell. Though lots of Vampire politics and intrigue, as well."

Jimmy laughed. "You're the biggest nerd ever."

"Uh huh." Tim just nodded, dryly amused. "You're the one asking me about it."

"True enough. So, you're, what, nineteen, and running around in your vampire costume, complete with cape, fangs, white skin, red lipstick, and eyeliner?"

Tim had a pretty good idea of the kind of vampire Jimmy was thinking of. "You're watching way too much Sesame Street. I looked nothing like The Count. I was seventeen and eighteen, and I played a Brujah."

"That means literally nothing to me."

"Brujahs are anarchist vampires. They started out philosopher warriors and by the time the '90s had rolled around their big thing was destroying the system. Black trench coat, raggedy jeans, t-shirt, wallet on a chain, hair long, scraggly, sprayed black and electric blue, eyeliner, fake tats on face and neck, combat boots, overly fond of Nine Inch Nails. His name was Elijah, and I played the hell out of that character."

"Oh, I remember you guys. Our school had a building called the Campus Center, and it was a cafeteria, meeting space, classrooms, theater, and coffee shop, all in one building. But the middle of it was wide open with these huge staircases, and every Friday nights all the freaks came out and kept wandering around doing stuff in tons of black and makeup."

"Yeah, that would have been us."
"Then on Saturday they'd gear up with homemade nerf weapons, armor, and dart guns and play something that looked like capture the flag. And Sunday was live action chess."

"You had a really serious gamer community at your school, didn't you?"

"I think there was only something like thirty of them, but yeah, they were really gung ho about it. I'd be practicing with the rest of the Choir, and a few of them would come running through, brandishing their weapons, yelling something, and twenty seconds later, three more would follow."

"Yeah, that would have been me. And when the role required makeup, I wore it. And since I started doing it with other gamers, and we were already, as you so kindly put it, freaks, wearing it on didn't feel weird on any sort of emotional level. It was just part of the game, like putting on headgear for wrestling."

Jimmy nodded at that.

"Why are you asking?"

"Breena was really… enthusiastic… about the idea of me in makeup after seeing you wear it."

"Huh." Tim's eyebrows shot up. He supposed that shouldn't be a surprise, Breena does seem to like the more rock and roll look, or at least she's always approved of it when he plays with it.

"Yeah."

"And you didn't do it?"

"It's kind of weird."

Tim rolled his eyes. "Your dick's not going to fall off because you put on mascara."

"Yeah, I know. It's just…" Jimmy kind of looked like he's hoping Tim will cut in so he doesn't have to finish that sentence, but Tim just waited for him.

"Just…"

"Kind of girly."

Tim snorted at that. "Says the guy who shaves off his pubes."

"Guys do that!"

"Last I checked, I'm a guy. Your girl likes you in it, what's the deal? It's fun. She's happy. The sex is good. Who cares if you've got on eyeliner?"

"So, how do you do it and not look like a clown?"

"Are you asking me for makeup tips?"

"A: Yes. B: Nothing about this conversation is ever, ever repeated to Tony. C: You started this."

Tim nodded. Hell, this conversation likely wasn't getting mentioned to Abby, let alone anyone else. "Abby does mine. She's a whole lot better at it than I am. The only thing I do for myself is my nails."

Decades of model building, followed by his different electrical/computer projects mean Tim actually has steadier hands than Abby. So, between that and the fact that she doesn't wear nail polish regularly, he does his own, and on the few occasions she wears it, hers.
"It's not much of a surprise if she does it, now is it?"

Tim laughed at that. "Youtube has videos on how to do everything. There have got to be makeup videos on there. Buy good stuff, because you don't want to end up having an allergic reaction."

“What’s good stuff?"

“I like Urban Decay."

“You have a brand?"

“For eyeliner I do. It's soft, goes on nice, stays put forever, and unlike the stuff Abby likes, it doesn't bug my eyes. First time she did my eyes, we had to skip going out that night because both eyes swelled shut in like five minutes."

"Ew." Jimmy winced, and Tim nodded in agreement.

"Yeah. And it's not impossible that I like Urban Decay because, well, it's a punk brand, so a guy walks in in a kilt and grabs some black eyeliner and nail polish they don't look at me like I'm weird. And, sure this is dumb as hell, black is black is black, but I'm a lot more comfortable buying a color called Perversion, Zero, or Oil Slick, than something called Midnight Orchid or whatever other girly name the other companies come up with."

Jimmy laughs at that, then thinks about it, tries to imagine buying something like Sable Kiss or whatever, and says, "Good point."

"Anyway. Videos, then if you want to surprise her, get your own stuff, or swipe hers, and practice right before you get a shower. Wash off, and when you think you know what you're doing, let your inner rock star out."

Tim grabs his toiletries and jammies and heads to the bathroom. A few minutes later, he's brushing his teeth when a thought hits him, so he heads out of the bathroom. "You know—"

"Are you really having a conversation with me while you brush your teeth?" Jimmy was under the blankets, just staring at Tim, like he couldn't quite believe this was happening.

"That a problem?"

"We're not married."

"Oh sorry. I didn't realize that after talking sex and makeup while we're sharing a room and you're in your pajamas that brushing my teeth in front of you was too intimate. I've shared a room with Tony seventeen million times, and even he can take this. Gibbs'll walk in on you naked, without knocking, and just stand there, talking to you like it's no big deal."

He ducked back into the bathroom to finish up and came back out when Jimmy said, "Why would Gibbs walk into your room naked?"

"No. He'll walk in while you're naked."

"Okay, that makes more sense. So, what great revelation just hit you?"

Tim got into his bed. "Lipstick."

"Lipstick?"
"No matter how Gothed out I go, I don't wear it. I just... really didn't like the idea of it. It took Abby two years to get me into it."

"And you're bringing this up why?"

"Just, I get it. It took a minute, but I get it. That was my bridge too far. The thing that was too girly."

"But you did it?"

"Yeah. Couldn't get that tattoo on her neck without my lip print, and no way to get that without it."

"Eyeliner didn't bother you, but lipstick did?"

"Not saying it wasn't silly, but yeah."

"And am I correct in noticing you using the past tense?"

Tim looked a little sheepish. "I still don't love it. Won't look at myself in it, cause it has to look dumb as hell. I'm not pretty enough to pull off glam. But... she really does like it. And leaving lip prints on her is a lot of fun. And my dick didn't fall off. It was still perfectly fine and had an awfully good time when I was wearing it."

"Uh huh." Jimmy was quiet, and flipped off the light as Tim got settled in bed. Then he asked, "What color?"

"Black the first time, like the tattoo. Then she found this stuff online, Obsessive Compulsive Cosmetics Lip Tars, they're basically lip paint, and you can mix them together to make lots of colors, and they come in a lot of colors, too. So she got like every color you can imagine: blue and green and purple and gold and silver and one weekend we tried them all out, and I covered her in lots of different colors, and she did me."

"That was fun?"

"Yeah. I never got hickies. Never understood why you might want to suck on her so hard you left a bruise. Pain, inflicting it or receiving it, just really doesn't do it for me."

"Says the guy with three tattoos."

"That's different."

"How?"

"I don't know; it just is. Anyway, looking back and seeing all those little marks, knowing I put them there, and that stuff stays on like, forever, if you don't wash it off, that was a kick. Like the tattoos, but not nearly as expensive, you don't need another person, and you can get places you don't want a tattoo gun going anywhere near. That was a lot of fun."

"Huh. So you're saying you had a two person rainbow party?"

"I guess. You ever wonder if stuff like that is real? Or just urban legends. I mean, the girls I knew in high school and junior high weren't doing stuff like that."

"Let's put it this way: when I was seventeen I would have given my right nut for it to be real. Now, with a year-old little girl, I'm hoping it's an urban legend."

Tim laughed a little at that. "You and Gibbs looked ready to kill Tony."
"I love Tony, but… There was just this sense of rage. And there's nothing he can do about it. And I know it was the '80s and the rules were different, but, yeah, I wanted to hit him, really hard. She's going to grow up and there'll be guys out there who'll be aggressive jerks, and it's scary."

Tim nodded.

"It was probably easier when Gibbs was a dad. You could just take a stand: No sex until you get married! Go put that caftan on and enjoy your education at St. Mary’s All Girl School for Extremely Catholic Virgins!" Jimmy stopped and thought about that. "I don't want to be that guy. I don't want to be Fornell. I see the way he watches Emily and how his blood pressure goes shooting up every time it looks like she's getting interested in a guy or sex. I want Molly to have boyfriends and to enjoy them. I just don't want her to get hurt. I don't want her to get sick. I really don't want to be a grandfather any time in the next two decades, and three would be even better. I want her to know about what her mother chose, and why it was a good thing, but I also want her to know about Abby and Ziva and… I want her to own her body, own her sexuality, and I'm so scared some asshole's gonna try and take it away from her or hurt her for making her own decisions."

Tim sighed. "There's nothing you can do about that, not now. But, the good thing is you probably don't have to worry about it for at least a decade. And by then, we'll have our own Fear of Dad razor sharp."

"I hope so. But we'll only be able to scare the ones we know about. We won't always be around."

"Nope. But unlike Fornell, and I'm going to guess a lot of the girls Tony was fooling around with, we are going to be there every day, every night, showing our girls by how we live how a man who loves a woman treats her. Our girls are going to know what respect looks like because we'll live it. And our girls aren't going to be acting out, craving Daddy's attention, because they'll have it."

He can hear a slight rustle from Jimmy's bed, and assumed that was him shrugging.

"And I'll wire them with GPS trackers so we can swoop in and save the day if need be."

That got a laugh out of Jimmy. "Good night, Tim."

"Night."
Once again, they're sitting next to the ultrasound machine, waiting for the tech to show up and start taking pictures.

It's the third time, so it's starting to get a little routine, but there's also the buzz of excitement that comes with finding out if Kelly really is a girl.

"You know, we're gonna feel silly if Kelly's a boy," Tim says, holding Abby's hand, looking at the currently blanks screen.

"You might. I won't."

"Okay. What are we calling him if he's not a girl?" They've been so certain that Kelly's a girl they haven't even talked about boys names.

She thinks about that as they wait for the ultrasound tech. "Not Tony."

Yeah, he can get behind that. Maybe as a middle name, but not a first name. Tony McGee, no matter how much he loves DiNozzo just sounds bad. "Definitely not Tony."

"Sean?" Abby asks.

He thinks about that. "Sean McGee is really Irish."

"Is that bad?" Abby's noticed that Tim doesn't identify as Irish. He's just American. But she's never dug deep enough to know if it's part of him not being his Dad, or if, like the Sciutos weren't Italian in any meaningful sense, the McGees weren't Irish.

"No. Just pointing it out. I kind of like it. Sean James..." He lets that roll around in his mind for a second, the image of a little boy with sandy blonde hair and green eyes clicking with that name.

"Sean James McGee sounds really good," Abby says, and he's thinking she's probably got a pretty similar image in her mind.

"Yeah."

Then the tech came in, and discussion of what Kelly might be called if there was indeed a penis stopped.

And once again they watched as different features revealed themselves. Heart first, thrumming away, strong and steady; veins and arteries doing the jobs they were built for. Liver, kidneys, lungs and brain all looked good. Arms, legs, hands, feet, fingers and toes were all accounted for.

And two minutes later, possible boys names became an entirely moot point as the tech says, "No testicles, that's a little girl."

Gibbs was staring at the ultrasound picture. They'd headed over to his place after work, wanting to show it to him first, and ask him a serious question. Sure, they'd been calling her Kelly when they were alone together, but now was the time to find out if they could keep that name.

For a few minutes, he just looked at the picture. Sure he's seen ultrasounds of babies and they all
look pretty much the same, but this is his little girl, so that adds to it. Doesn't matter that he couldn't pick her out from a collection of other ultrasounds unless he could see the McGee on the upper left corner, it's his girl, and that's what matters.

Abby was sitting next to him on the sofa, leaning her head into his shoulder, (he has his arm around her) looking at the picture with him. Then she started the question. "She's a girl, and we were wondering... Well, Tim was wondering... I was going to just go ahead and do it... But he wanted to make sure it was okay..." Tim notices her eyes are tearing up, and she's putting more and more phrases between now and the actual question, so he squeezes her hand and takes over.

"We'd like to call her Kelly, but we also wanted to make sure it'd be okay with you."

Gibbs smiles, eyes warm, looking at the black and white image in front of him, fingers lightly stroking the tiny white hand on the picture. "Yeah, it's okay."

Abby took Gibbs' hand in hers. "We'd also like you to think about what you want her to call you. Gibbs or Jethro is fine if you like it, but Grandpa or Pop, which was what Tim called his grandfather, or if there's something you really liked, something you imagined your grandkids calling you, that would be even better."

The smile on Gibbs' face grew even wider. He kissed the top of Abby's head before looking at Tim and saying, "I like Pop."

They were on the way home, having grabbed a quick dinner and Abby's maid of honor dress, when Abby said, "Kelly what McGee."

"Huh?" Tim wasn't really paying attention, he was merging into traffic, and an idiot in a blue Suburban kept trying to stay exactly in his blind spot.

Abby can see he's focused on the road, so she waits for him to get into the lane he's aiming for before saying, "Middle name. You whipped James out to go along with Sean in like three seconds flat. What goes with Kelly?"

"Uh..." Tim's drawing a blank. Kelly Ziva doesn't sound right to him. Kelly Sarah., not bad, but he's already got four Sarahs in his family. "Does something have to go with it? I don't have a middle name."

"Nope. But most people have them, usually honoring family or something like that. Like, you know, whipping James out nine seconds after Sean."

"About half of that is honoring Jimmy. A quarter is that James sounds really good with Sean. The other quarter is that Jethro's names are pretty awful so I'm not saddling any boys we have with them."

"Gibbs' names are fine!" Abby looks appalled that Tim would insult Leroy or Jethro.

"Says the woman who only refers to him by last name." And yeah, he loves Gibbs, but well, there are family names and family names, and if someone you love has a god-awful name, you find another way to honor them, like naming your kid after their kid.

Abby sticks her tongue out at him.

"Okay, fine, his names are great," lots of dry sarcasm on that, "for the 1950s. When have you met a
"Leroy or Jethro that was under fifty?"

"Never."

"And you know everyone on the eastern seaboard. So, what do you like for a middle name?"

"I don't know. Elizabeth?"

"Kelly Elizabeth McGee… Not bad. Not in love with it, but it's not bad. Anne?"

"That's Breena and Jimmy's number two girl name."

Tim tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "So you're thinking we shouldn't snag it and leave them looking for a new one?"

"Yeah. With any luck they'll be having a conversation pretty similar to this real soon. Something fiction-y? What girl characters do you love?"

"You mean, besides the ones I've written?"

"Yeah, I do not want Amy, Lisa, or Gail to show up on the list."

"Okay… Willow, Fred, Zoe, Kaylee…"

"Whedon-verse, good first pick. No on Fred or Kaylee."

"I know, I'm just going through the list. And really Kelly Willow doesn't work, either." He glances to the left, the lane is clear, shifts over, and speeds up a little.

"Yeah, not good. Kelly Zoe is too many ee sounds."

"How about you, what girls characters do you love?"

Abby sighs and pets her belly. "Do we need to have that argument about the lack of awesome female characters in the kinds of things I like to read or watch again?"

"No." They'd gotten into a pretty heated argument about whether there were or were not any good strong female characters in recent fiction, with Abby claiming they were horribly rare and Tim saying they were all over the place if you just looked. It wasn't pretty. And probably wouldn't have been nearly as passionate had she not been hopped up on pregnancy hormones or he a writer. The makeup sex was fun, though. "Just, kind of annoying to be told there are no strong female characters out there when every single thing I write has them."

"I know. How about that series you gave me a while back… Autumn. I like her."

"Autumn was a psychopath, and the villain."

"Yeah, but she had a lot of style."

"Because she was a Fairy. Style is sort of a racial trait, what with the whole glamour thing. How about Claire? She was cool."

"Claire was cold. And Kelly Claire McGee… nope. I liked Sarah, too. She certainly fit the kick-ass, take-names strong female mold."

"I was thinking about that. Naming her after my sister is fine, but I've already got four Sarahs in my
family. Probably don't need a fifth."

"Good point."

"Eowyn?"

"Yeah, I'm good with an out there name, but maybe not that far out."

"Leia? Queen of the kick-ass female heroes?"

"Kelly Leia McGee… Eh. Kelly's a really normal name… something too far out on the middle name isn't going to work."

"Probably right. We've got time. Don't need one tonight," he says as he pulls into their driveway. "Really, we don't need one at all. I like Kelly McGee."

"Unless we can find something we both love, we'll skip the middle name." She thinks about that for a moment as they walk in. Timothy McGee… Something was missing there. "Tim, why don't you have a confirmation name? Everyone else I know who got confirmed has one."

He slouches a little, tilting his head to the side and sighing. "I have one. It's just… kind of silly and embarrassing."

"Worse than Teresa?" Abby asks as she sits on the bottom step to take her boots off.

"Teresa is cool. Lots of good Teresas. Which one were you thinking of?"

"The mystic."

He laughs at that, approving. "And I am less than shocked. She ran a convent, and went into ecstatic trances, and was a major player theologically, right?"

"And wrote music and poetry too."

"That's not dumb at all." He unzips his coat and hangs it up. Then holds out his hand for Abby's coat.

"So what was yours?"

"Raphael."

She stops in the middle of taking her coat off and looks at him. "Why would you think that's silly or embarrassing?"

"Probably because these days all anyone knows is the Mutant Ninja Turtle."

Abby smiles at that, handing him her coat. "So, which one was he?"

"The sulky one with the sais."

She adds a little roll of her eyes to go with the smile. "Which angel? I know he's one of the big ones, but I besides Michael being the warrior, I don't remember which ones do what."

"The healer. I still thought I was going to be a surgeon then."

"Then it's a great name."
He thinks about that for a bit while kicking his shoes into the closet. "My dad didn't like it. He never went full out on me for it, maybe because I was seven. Maybe because he was sure I'd actually tell the priest who ran the confirmation class why I'd suddenly decided to change it. So he was just disdainful of it, and really talked up Nicholas and Brendan."

"Why those two?"

"Patron saints of sailors. But Penny and my mom really liked Raphael. And I really liked MASH, thought being a trauma surgeon would be the best thing ever. And since Father Sam kindly told me that no, there was no Saint Hawkeye or BJ, I went with Raphael."

Abby's nodding. "It's a good name."

"Thanks."
"I'm getting so fat!"

"Abby?" Tim had been in the bathroom, brushing his teeth, getting ready for bed. He stepped out and saw Abby staring at her backside in the mirror on her closet door, well, glaring at it in the mirror, but he couldn't for the life of him figure out why.

On the way home from Gibbs' they'd picked up her maid of honor dress, and she was trying it on.

Back when Ziva picked bridesmaids dresses out, she'd had one pregnant bridesmaid and one who had just miscarried, so to say that she had no decent way of figuring out how her ladies would look in a month, when the dresses would be ready, was an understatement.

So, she had pulled all of her tactical thinking skills together, along with all of her fashion skills, and decided that anyone of any shape looks good in a strapless dress with an empire waist and a flowing crepe skirt that fell to just above the knees.

And, Tim would completely agree with that. He thinks Abby looks great in the ivory gown with a band of baby pink beading just below the breasts.

But she's staring at herself and scowling. Shifting from the back view to the side view, and scowling even more.

So he turns to look at her in the mirror. Maybe she looks different reflected. Nope.

"You look great."

"I look fat!"

He stared at her intently for a few seconds. "Nope. I can still see your tarsals, carpals, and clavicles. Not fat. Trust me, I'd know." At least on his body, being able to easily see his wrist, ankle, and collar bones is a very good sign of not having crossed the line between fit and plump.

"I have two chins when I tilt my head down." She says, head down, wiggling the offensive flap of skin.

"So does everyone." He demonstrates by looking down, and then tilts his head up. "You wouldn't be able to look up if you didn't have that skin there."

"My butt is huge!" She's looking at her backside again.

He's realizing that this is not a discussion where rational argument is going to help. They just went to the doctor today, so he knows she's gained fourteen pounds which is exactly where she should be for twenty weeks pregnant. So he retreats to the bathroom, puts his toothbrush back, and quickly rinses his mouth. Then he came out again, (she appeared to be studying her thighs and not liking what she was seeing) stepped behind her, and placed on hand on each hip, and began gently caressing the butt in question.

"It's soft and round and curvy."

"Stop that!" She looks like she wants to sulk, but he's not playing along, not on this. No one calls Abby ugly or fat, not in front of him, not even Abby.
"Nope. You, and this butt that appears to be annoying you, are absolutely delicious." He'd press up tight behind her, but he's naked, and though he's fairly sure his skin is dry and clean, this is a white dress so he can't risk getting any stains on it, so he stays a step back as his hands trace from her butt to her belly and breasts. "You are not fat. You are exactly the shape you're supposed to be right now, and I adore it."

He very carefully unhooked the top of the dress and pulled the zip down, then lifted it off of her, and draped it over her dresser. "Can't risk getting that stained or rumpled."

She's not exactly looking happy at him, but she's not as annoyed as she was a minute ago either.

He closes on her again, and turns her toward the mirror. Under the dress she had on a strapless bra and nothing else. He stood right behind her, and undid the bra, tossing it in the delicates hamper.

Then he pressed in close, erection rubbing against her butt as his hands stroked from her neck down her arms, fingers twining with hers.

"You're beautiful, Abby. And yeah, you're bigger than you used to be, but you aren't fat. You're all round and soft, ripe, succulent, and it drives me crazy because all I want to do is constantly rub up against you." He kissed her shoulder, and stroked her thighs, then ground his pelvis against her. "Feel that? Your body does that to mine." That got a smile out of her. "Half the time I'm in the lab these days, I've got a hard-on from watching you. You in those little dresses or skirts, tummy and breasts all plump and round. If Gibbs didn't have a habit of wandering down every ten minutes when I go down there, I'd have you bent over your desk, panties round your ankles, balls deep inside you, feeling you bite my hand to muffle your screams, my mouth on your shoulder for the same reason, every single day, twice on paperwork days."

She giggles a little at that, perking up as his fingers find her nipples.

"I have noticed that. You come down, and these days within ten minutes he does, too."

"Yeah, well, he's not blind, so he's noticed how good you look. And it's not like he just met me, so he's not exactly having a hard time figuring out how I'm responding to it or what I'm likely to want to do about it. And not to put too fine a point on it, but he was here once, too. I'm sure he remembers what it feels like to have a delicious pregnant wife."

That got another laugh, and she looked at herself again, less critically, but still less than thrilled at her current shape. "Not fat?"

"Not fat. Round, soft, ripe, succulent, scrumptious, exquisite... fertile. Think about it, on its most basic level that's what female beauty is to a man. Signs of fertility." His hands ghost over her breasts, belly, and hips. "Biology means I want to make babies. So you pregnant with my kid is going to hit all of my buttons, hard, fist slammed down on them pressing your full weight into them. Nothing is ever going to get to me the way this does. And it does, it really does, in a pure, balls in charge, brain isn't even checking in, oh god, SEX! YES! level. On a pure biology level, the only reason I exist is to get you pregnant, keep you pregnant, and make sure your and our kid survive. So... I guess what I'm saying is, I'm going to be a really unsympathetic audience for complaining about how you look, because all I see is SEX!, sex, sex, sex, sex, with a side of MINE! My woman. My baby." He kissed her neck, hands cradling her belly. "So, no, not fat. Not fat at all. Perfect. And if you asked Jimmy or Tony or Gibbs they'd tell you the same thing, not fat at all."

"I still think my butt looks huge."

He shook his head. "You're welcome to think that, but I don't."
"And your opinion is the only one that matters?"

"Damn right! My opinion on the subject seems to make both of us happy. Your opinion makes neither of us happy. So let's stick with mine."

She rolled her eyes a little. "I don't look like me."

Ahhh… Identity issues, not just changing body. That makes sense to him. It's something he's facing as well. But it's nothing he's got a set or easy answer for.

He kissed her shoulder, and Kelly took that moment to start kicking. The soft, fluttery sensation beneath his fingers helped him get his thoughts in order.

"I'll hand my badge and gun to Vance, but I'll still be me. You'll get rounder, look less like Abby, but you'll still be you. But you and I won't be the Tim or Abby we were. Just like Jimmy and Breena aren't the people they were before Jon and Molly. But they're still Jimmy and Breena, and we still love them and want to be with them."

She smiles a little at that, wrapping her arms around his neck. "It feels really weird to look in the mirror and have to take a second to realize who I'm looking at."

"I bet it does. I feel that way when I see pictures of myself over the years."

"But not when you look in the mirror?"

"I gained and lost the weight slowly enough that there was never a 'who the hell is that' moment. Okay, once… Remember when I buzzed my hair off?"

"Yeah. I love you, and I will always love you, but please, don't ever do that again."

"I'm not intending to. Anyway, for about a week after that, I kept wondering who that guy with the really round head was. I felt like I looked like Charlie Brown."

Abby laughs at that. "That was a pretty bad look for you."

"Yeah, I know I knew about a third of the way through that haircut, but by that point I was committed." He trailed his fingers down her arm, over her ribs and down to her hip. "I love you. I
love this version of you. I'm going to love the version you'll be in three months, and the version you were three months ago. Kelly comes out, and everything is going to be droopy and saggy and I'm still going to love you."

"Don't remind me of that part. Breena's got horror stories of how bad she looked after Molly came out."

"Breena looked fine after Molly was born."

"You didn't see her naked."

"True. She still looked fine."

Abby turns in his arms to face him, placed a quick kiss on his lips and says, "Tim, besides her nursing breasts, did you notice anything, at all, about Breena after she gave birth?"

He flashes her his innocent look. "I kept up a strict policy of never looking below Breena's neck when she was nursing."

That gets a smile out of Abby. "Liar."

"Yes." He smiles back, and kisses the tip of her nose. "They really were fantastic."

"I agree."

His fingers find her breasts, and gently stroke over the sides. "And I'm going to be staring at yours all the time, too. If what Jimmy tells me about nursing breast being a look but don't touch sort of thing is true, I'll be looking and probably taking pictures, too."

"Horny bastard."

He smiles and kisses her. "For you, always."
Cherry Blossoms and Tuxes

For the second time in six months, the extended Gibbs Clan gathered for a wedding.

But Jewish weddings don't exactly work the same way Christian ones do.

They're a two-step process.

And while in a Christian or secular American wedding the night before is the rehearsal, rehearsal dinner, usually followed by Team Bride and Groom heading off for separate merrymaking, a Jewish wedding begins the night before with the signing of the Ketubah, the official marriage contract.

So, in order to give this ceremony proper honors, they're at the park Gibbs found for them, a little, out of the way place, probably popular a hundred years ago, but mostly forgotten now. But it's in okay (if somewhat wild) shape, it's not filled with other people, and the clearing they're in is ringed with blooming cherry trees, setting up for tomorrow.

The most important part, the chuppah, is up, and mostly decorated. (The girls are doing the flowers with the florist tomorrow.) But for now it's burnished rods of oak, finished to look like all the warmth of the sun has solidified into wood, woven together into four pillars. Gibbs and Breena attached the top supports, while Jimmy, Tony, and Tim dug the holes in the ground to keep the posts steady. Ziva and Abby straightened out the yards of gauzy cream and snow-colored fabric, and then draped it over the supports, weaving it through the posts.

Gibbs and Jimmy have lawn mowers so they're in charge of getting a path to the chuppah, and enough of the space in front of it to hold eighteen people trimmed down so that guests won't have to worry about being eaten alive by the grass and weeds.

Abby and Tony are in charge of posting signs. This place is pretty far off the beaten path so DiNozzo-David Wedding signs are going up. It's not that the GPS can't find it. Punch where you're going into your GPS while you're still in DC and it's got no trouble at all locating the place. It's that for most of them their GPS stopped working about three miles from the park, leaving them driving about on smaller and smaller roads in the middle of pretty rural Virginia, so old fashioned signs need to be set up.

Tim's wiring the lights for tonight. Technically, it's the Sabbath and they shouldn't be working at all, but setting up now works better for everyone's schedule, so they're here. The Rabbi on the other hand, won't be coming until the Sabbath is over, after sunset. So Tim's making sure that when he gets here, they'll have enough light to actually see the Ketubah, read it, and sign it.

Of course, off the beaten path means there's no electricity here, but he's hoping that the car battery he's got rigged to the lighting set up will do the job.

Ziva and Breena are setting up the chairs, putting them in place and making sure the satin covers are secure. Sure, they're probably asking for a freak thunder storm to show up and wreck everything by setting them up today instead of tomorrow morning, but they want to get as much done ahead of time as possible.

It's a small enough group they aren't bothering with a bride's side or groom's side. So they're set in three rows of six.

Two tents, one for team bride and one for team groom for the pre-wedding waiting about finish off the site.
It takes about two hours, but the site is (except for the flowers) all set and ready to go.

The downside of beautiful little park out in the middle of nowhere is that… It's in the middle of nowhere. So they got everything done, and then drove an hour back to DC to get ready for that evening.

The signing of the Ketubah is a big deal, and being invited to witness it is an honor reserved for close family and friends. So, you can't just wear the same grungy jeans, work boots, and button down you had on for setting up the chuppah.

And that downtime in the middle of the day gives Tim a little spot of time to run that last errand he'd been putting off for a week, namely grabbing his tux.

He got home with it while Abby was still damp from getting out of the shower. She's sitting on the bed, toweling off her hair as Tim walks in with the suit bag.

"Do I get to see?"

"Yes." He answers while putting it into his closet.

She flashes and exasperated look at him. "Do I get to see before the wedding?"

That got a grin out of him. "Do you want to see?"

"Yes! When do I not want to see you get dressed up?"

He laughs and begins to unbutton his shirt, pulling it over his head when he got the first three buttons undone. "Everything else all set for tonight?"

"According to my list, you getting a shower and dressed are the only two things left."

He nods, pulling off his socks. "Don't let me forget a pen."

"Good point."

Tim and Gibbs had been chosen as the witnesses to sign the Ketubah. Though many friends and family may be called to witness the signing of the Ketubah and the reading of the contract, two especially close friends are called to sign the contract in addition to the bride and groom. Traditionally the witnesses are men, though Ziva and Tony's congregation is egalitarian, allowing anyone who isn't a blood relative to sign. But when Tony and Ziva sat down to talk it over they chose the two men who had their backs, who would die to protect them, and kill to avenge them. They chose their team, and that's Tim and Gibbs.

Abby gets up, leaving their bedroom for a moment, and returns with one of Tim's pens, tucking it into the breast pocket of the suit he'll be wearing tonight. Once done, she heads to the bathroom to do her makeup.

A few minutes later, as she was putting on her mascara, Tim stood in the doorway to the bathroom and said, "Well?"

Abby turns to him, a wide, pleased, slightly amazed smile on her face, and says, "Oh." She put the mascara wand back into the tube and then put it on the sink, just staring at him. Tim's standing in front of her, expectant look on his face. Her eyes take him in from glossy black shoes to ebony
cufflinks, midnight tie to sable wool-silk blend jacket. She blinked slowly, and exhaled, "Wow!"

Expectant broke into a wide grin.

"If I had known you looked like this in a tux, we might have gotten married with you in one."

He shifts the door, so he can see himself in the full-length mirror. "If I had known I could look like this in a suit, I might wear them more often. I'll say this for Tony, his tailor really knows what he's doing."

Abby's slowly circling Tim, looking at him appraisingly, hand trailing over his low back. "He really does. Yeah, I'm thinking you should do suits on occasion."

See, if you were to ask Tim, he'd tell you that he generally looks, well, kind of gaunt and lanky in suits. (At least over the last year. Previous to that he's looked plump and round in them, and he didn't love that look, either.) And not in what he considers a good way. He's never worn one that he thought really looked good on him. Which is why he rarely wears them. Weddings, funerals, testifying in court, and occasional nice date nights, and beyond that, they live in his closet and collect dust.

He's seen guys who do suits well. Tony, he always looks great.

And now he knows why. Apparently having someone who knows how a suit is supposed to fit go and actually make one for you results in you looking like James Fucking Bond, and not the Daniel Craig version, but Sean Connery.

Though as he looks at himself in the tux, he's thinking he's got more of a Loki in Germany look going than James Bond. A killer scarf and overcoat, and he'd nail it. (Well, at least as close as a guy who bears absolutely no resemblance at all to Tom Hiddleston can… though if he grew his hair out five more inches and slicked it back… Nope, face isn't sharp enough for that.)

The fact that custom clothing has never occurred to Tim seems like a glaring error right this second. His bed was custom made, so were his tattoos, wedding rings, and Abby's engagement ring. And it's not like he's adverse to spending money on clothing. He's got some good clothes that were pretty damn expensive.
And, if three grand on a suit can make him look like this, well… maybe he might want to get another one. Not for every day wear or anything, but maybe a gray one for hot date nights…

"I think you're right about that." He looks at the suits in his closet. He'd been intending to wear the dark gray one for tonight, and suddenly he's really not wanting to do that. "Well, suits made by Dom. My regular ones all look like utter crap now."

"No they don't."

"They don't look like this."

"True." Abby circles to face him, hands resting on his chest, and looked at him more closely. "Did you do an eldritch knot in the tie."

He smiled, a tinge of naughty playfulness pulling at the corners of his lips. "I can't look exactly like Tony and Jimmy, and this is subtle enough Tony won't flip out."

She laughs at that. "I like you in vests, too."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"I bet the top half of this would look great with the McGee tartan."

"I bet it would, but I've already been told that Jimmy will pin me down and beat me into submission if I try to wear makeup or a kilt to tonight or the wedding."

Abby laughs at that. "Kilt, that vest, shirt, and tie, black nail polish, eyeliner, your boots." She looks at him, eyes warm and sparkling, trailing up and down his body. "Damn!"

He's smiling at that idea, enjoying the look of sexual hunger on her face. "Okay, yes, that will happen, but not tonight. I was thinking that maybe we'd do something special on Monday. That could be part of it."

The wedding, like many Jewish weddings, is on Sunday, and barring a catastrophe requiring all hands on deck, team Gibbs is off the Monday after the wedding. "What are you thinking of for Monday?"

"It's a surprise. But I think you'll like it, and that could definitely be part of it."

"I am intrigued."

"Good, and we're gonna be late if I don't get showered and changed fast."

And yes, after the tux, the suit he had intended to wear just looked sad. But he put it on, made a mental note to call Dom about a date night suit, and got ready for the reading and signing of the Ketubah.

They returned to middle of nowhere park as the stars were beginning to prickle through dusk, and found they were the last ones there. (Tim was quite pleased to see the solar switch he set turned the lights on when the sun sank. He'd really been hoping he wasn't going to get here and find everyone using their headlights to avoid wandering in the dark.)

For the signing the usual core group attended along with a few new additions, Senior, his date, and Ziva's Schmiel.
Senior with a date isn't anything new. Senior with a date who appears to be over sixty, a very attractive, polished, self-assured over sixty, but over sixty none-the-less, pleased Tony to no end.

Tony had been dreading meeting Daphine since his father mentioned he'd have a plus one. Probably because he assumed Daphine would be younger than Breena, twice as pretty and half as smart. His father's type. From Tony talking about it, Tim had certainly expected young, pretty, simple, and looking for money. So older, refined, a soft voice accented with something that sounds like French but he doesn't think actually is French, was a pleasant surprise.

One he didn't have much time to ponder.

The Rabbi is waving them forward, and he's still got to grab a hat from Ducky.

Tim doesn't own any hats. Scratch that, he's got one knit one for doing cold things outside in winter, and one super fuzzy furry one for doing really cold things, and unless his ears are in danger of frostbite, they stay in his closet. And he's got his NCIS ball cap, which is required for when he's at a crime scene. He hates the way he looks in hats. But covering his head is a sign of respect. And while tomorrow they'll all be wearing yarmulkes, today he's snagging a fedora from Ducky.

He kisses Penny's cheek, grabs the headgear, sets it on his head, and joins the Rabbi, Tony, Ziva, and Gibbs under the chuppah for the reading and signing of the Ketubah.

Tony whispered to him, "You're late!"

"I'm on time. You're all early."

"On time is late."

"Fine."

Then the Rabbi began the ceremony, explaining what was going to happen and why.

It doesn't take that long. And while the actual Ketubah is in Hebrew (Ziva told him that in Orthodox congregations they're in Aramaic, but their Reform congregation does Hebrew.) the Rabbi reads it in English since most of this group doesn't speak Hebrew.
Basically, there's no point to witnessing a document if you have no idea what's in it.

It's a very… functional is probably a good word… document. It basically lists the responsibilities of the husband (food, clothing, sex), what happens should there be a divorce, what sort of monetary settlements would be made, stuff like that.

In any other circumstance he'd call it a pre-nup. But apparently, since the dawn of Judiasm, the idea that in addition to vague and nebulous concepts of love and cherish (that's part of tomorrow's ceremony) there would also be an actual document stating exactly what is expected of the husband, and precisely what would happen should he not live up to it.

Tim thinks that's awfully cool.

Plus he's very amused by the idea that providing sex to his wife is the husband's duty and he can't just wander off without her permission thus cutting her off. He makes a mental note to mention to Gibbs that he can't just drag Tony off to the ends of the earth without getting Ziva's okay. Then he thinks twice about that, because if Jethro's not taking Tony or Ziva that means he'll take Tim, and he wants to stay close to home, too.

At the end of the reading came the signing. Since it is a Reform congregation, both Tony and Ziva sign it, followed by Gibbs and Tim.

The document was illuminated by hand. What Tim thinks of as traditional Hebrew script, black ink with silver and gold highlights, decorated with cherry blossoms twined together up and down the sides. It's beautiful, and that's intentional. Apparently it's a mitzvah to make things that glory God as beautiful as possible.

Tim's actually a little nervous about sticking his signature on it. Once upon a time it was a fairly tidy collection of left slanting letters, but these days it's messy scrawl with only three legible letters. It's not, even remotely, beautiful.

But it's his, and he's been chosen to put it on there, so he does.

And doing so means this part of the wedding is over, and it's time for dinner, and the party to start.
A party staring Schmiel, DiNozzo Sr., and Ducky is a thing to behold. It's like the world's great story tellers all got together one night to see who could spin the longest, most intricate yarn.

And then they started playing off each other.

Tim watches the three of them and hopes that when he, Jimmy, and Tony are all older than dirt, that they'll be half as entertaining to the people around them, and a quarter as vital.

Middle of nowhere park was located not too far away from a fairly decent bed and breakfast, one that was willing to rent out their entire downstairs (and several rooms) for the party. (Off night, off season, it wasn't too hard to convince them to do a kosher dinner.)

So the twelve of them are around one large table, dinner served family style, but there's an open bar, and cleared space near them. (Tim's thinking the table they are at is probably a few tables together, and the other tables have been removed.) The main course is over, and they're lingering over stories, coffee, and dessert when Schmiel says, "Enough talking, it is time to dance," he stood up and held out his hand to Ziva.

That's greeted by silence, and Ziva staring at his hand. Sure, there's room, but… no music.

Finally Jimmy says, "Breena and I are in, but… music?"
Gibbs with the camera

Schmiel looks amused and irked. "You mean to tell me, with all of your fancy phones, none of you has something that will play music?"

Which caused all eyes to slide over to Tim, the tech guru. "Give me five minutes."

It took three. The proprietor did have a port that would work with his phone, and some speakers she was willing to donate to the party.

Tim figured that with this group, some of his peppier jazz would be a good choice, and set it to playing.

And with that, the party got really started.

He found Jimmy waiting for him after he got out of the restroom an hour later. Jimmy's grinning at him, and for a second he's wondering if he's got toilet paper on his shoe or something. He checked. Nope. Next thought that sprang to mind was whether or not that grin was about his possible long weekend shaving plans, but he doesn't think that's it.

Finally he said, "Okay, you're freaking me out just standing there and grinning. What's up?"
The grin got wider. "We're not telling anyone else besides Ducky, not for a while at least, but, we're pregnant again."

A huge smile spread across Tim's face as he pulled Jimmy into a hug. When he stepped back he said, "I'm so happy for you."

"Yeah, we are, too. Scared…"

Tim nodded, seeing that there's not just happiness on Jimmy's face. Mostly joy, a little tipsy, and a tinge of fear, but mostly joy.

"But really happy."

"How far along?"

"Nine days? Just found out this morning."

"Breena telling Abby?"

"Probably already has."

"No wonder you've been in such a good mood today." Yeah, they're prepping for a wedding, and that tends to result in happy people, but Jimmy's been in a really good mood.

"Yeah." Jimmy's grinning and Tim hugged him again, just so happy to see a smile on his face that lights up his eyes again.
"When do you think you're telling everyone?"

"The earliest they can do the nuchal fold test is week ten day one, so, assuming everything is good, week ten, day one and a half. If not... It'll just be you guys and Ducky."

"Okay. Penny know?"

"She was there when we told him, so yes. Feels a little strange to get used to the idea of Ducky as half of a couple."

"You think that's weird, with the way this is going, he might literally be my grandfather at some point."

"Step-grandfather."

"Close enough."

"Course these last few years he's pretty much been this hybrid grandfather/big brother/boss for me, so I'm kind of used to that."

Tim was nodding absently while he did a little math in his head. "New Year's baby?"

That got another grin. "December 24th actually."

"You and holiday babies."

"Says the guy whose daughter is due on the Fourth of July."

"Once is a fluke, two in a row, that's a pattern."

"Sure." Jimmy wrapped his arm around Tim's shoulders. "Come on, let's get back to the girls."

"Very good plan!"

Tim was dancing with Penny when she said to him, "So, your mom called me."

"Ah." He's been avoiding her. Not that it's too hard what with her living 2000 miles away. But usually he calls once a week and emails a few times, but since he had the flu he's been quiet.

"Seems she hasn't heard from you in a bit more than a month."

"That's likely true. I have sent a few I'm-busy-will-write-more-later emails."

"Yeah, she said that. She's worried. Afraid that becoming a dad is scaring you and you're drawing in on yourself." That's plausible. Given what she knows, that's really plausible, and a very in character way for him to react to something like that. It's just not true.

"What did you say to her?"

"That you're busy. Working hard, getting everything all set for your career change. She hadn't heard about that, so I filled her in on the impending switch to Cybercrime. I told her you were also helping to get a friend married, and no you aren't having a soon-to-be-dad panic attack."

"Thanks."
Penny has a searching look on her face. "You aren't, are you?"

His answering look says *Come on, you know me better than that.* "The only dad issues I'm having these days don't relate to my ability to be a dad for Kelly. Not directly at least."

"Good. You're going to have to talk to her sooner or later."

"I know. Did you say anything to her about…" Penny shook her head. "No. There are things I want to say to her, but you get first dibs."

"Thank you."

"You'll let me know when you talk to her?"

"Yeah. I will. Just, not right now. As Abby pointed out to me, I may be able to cry silently, but not invisibly, so my she-didn't-know rationalization fell apart, and I don't know what to do with that, and I don't want to talk to her until I've got a plan."

Penny smiles up at him. That's a very, very Tim way of handling something.

The song ended and he led her to the front porch, wanting to talk a little longer without everyone else right nearby. There was a comfortable porch swing, and it was unseasonably warm for early April, so it was quite pleasant out.

"Do you know why they got divorced? I mean, in specific, what the trigger was?" He sitting facing the porch, staring out at trees, a garden, and a gently sloping lawn.

Penny takes the other side of the swing, and sits facing him. "No. Just that your mom had had enough of it and was done. Might be that your grandfather finally got sick enough he wasn't attached to the rest of the world. It wasn't a secret he didn't think your dad was a good match for your mom, and he did all he could to convince her not to marry him, but he also believed that once you got married you stayed married, no matter what. He was pretty well gone when she filed the papers, right?"

Tim thought about that, rubbing his forehead. He didn't like thinking about his grandfather's last two years. The only good thing, if it could be called that, was that his Alzheimer's hit hard and fast. They didn't have decades of him slowly fading away. "Yeah. The Alzheimer's had gotten bad enough he didn't know who anyone was any more."

"If I had to guess, that's why it happened then. Even your grandmother and I were telling her it was time to get out, had been for years. No one was happy."

"Were they fighting, the way my Dad and I were?"

"If so, I didn't know about it. You lived with them, what do you remember?"

"Not that. But I was also a kid and pretty self-centered back then. I know she wasn't happy. But my sense was it had a lot more to do with being abandoned, left alone with two kids six to ten months a year."

"That was my sense, too. Your mom wanted a husband, not just a ring and a name." Tim nodded at that.

Abby poked her head out the door at them. "Can I join in?"
"Sure," Tim answered. She scooted into the space between Tim and Penny on the swing, her back resting against his side, his arm draping over her shoulders.

He kissed her neck. "Talking about my mom."

Abby nodded, expecting that was up when they wandered off.

"I was thinking about the Ketubah, a little, too. Liking that it's spelled out that your job is to stay at home with your wife."

"Sometimes you have to leave, Tim." Penny said.

Tim often forgets that for forty years Penny was a Navy wife, forgets that she built weapons, forgets that it was the fall out of that that made her the pacifist he's known his whole life. "I know. Sometimes you have to fight. Sometimes you have to kill. I'm a cop. I get it. You put your life between your home and danger because it keeps them safe. I really do get it. But I don't think he cared one way or another what Mom thought about it, and I'm certain he didn't care what I thought about it." He shook his head. "That's grim." He squeezed Abby's hand. "Did Breena get ahold of you?"

"Yes!" The grin on her face is bright and happy.

"So, what are your psychic vibes saying, boy or girl?"

She thought about it, holding his hand, her fingers playing along his. "Girl, but I'm not getting any strong feeling on it. How about you, Penny?"

"No psychic vibes for me, but I'm leaning girl, as well. Tim?"

"Little boy. He'll be named after his grandpa."

"Thomas? Ed?" Penny asks, which blindsides Tim. Off the top of his head, he doesn't know the name of Jimmy's dad. The fact that Penny pays enough attention to Ducky's pet people to know that sort of thing pleases him greatly.

"Donald."
"You're not up, yet!"

There are many ways that Tim likes to wake up. There are quite a few more that he tolerates. And some he actively loathes.

Tony looming over him less than six hours after he got home, jogging his shoulder, annoyed he isn't up yet and worried about being late, is closer to option C than A or B.

He's still a little fuzzy as to why Tony stayed at their place last night. He caught something about ritual purity, something else about really celebrating the wedding, Breena said something about bad luck, and there was also something about them having a fully functional guest room that didn't have DiNozzo Senior in it. But it was pretty late, and he was feeling awfully mellow (scotch, good news, and a wedding to celebrate made sure he was feeling pretty happy), so he hadn't been paying all that much attention to what was going on, just that Tony was in the backseat of their car as they pulled away.

But now, as he focuses one eye on the clock on his bedside table, and saw 7:05 glowing away on the readout, he's very temped to flip Tony the bird and tell him to go back to sleep.

What he instead did was sit up, rub his eyes, and say, quietly, (Abby's still asleep.) "Tony, you aren't getting married until 5:15. I am assuming you've got things you are going to want to do after that happens. I know for a fact you don't want to be sleepy for them. So, go back to sleep!"

"Too excited."

Tim sighed, very much wanting to go back to sleep himself. "Tony, go back to sleep. Otherwise you'll crash right around dinnertime, which you don't want to do. There's scotch in the kitchen if you need something to take the edge off. If you can't settle down, go run it off. But you need to go back to sleep. I don't want to see you again until you've had at least three more hours."

Until I've had three more hours.
Tony glared at him, but headed out of his bedroom, and Tim went back to sleep.

"You're not dressed!"

Tony is. He's got the suit on, tie perfect, pocket square pointy, hair in pristine shape. The only thing that's missing is the boutonniere, and that's because they're getting delivered to the wedding site. He's ready to go, vibrating with purpose and excitement.

Tim feels like he just did this. Though he knows it's been four hours.

Tim and Jimmy are in jeans and t-shirts, sitting on Tim's sofa, looking very relaxed.

Jimmy flashes him a this is a job for the best man look. Tim takes a deep breath. "We don't have to leave for another four hours."

So, apparently for his wedding, Tim asked Tony something like ninety-seven times in three hours if he had the rings. Fixating on some little detail and going bonkers over it is apparently traditional groom behavior.

Tony's groom-freak-out has been focused on being late.

They're due at the park at 5:00. The wedding is set to begin at 5:15.

They are going to leave at 3:00 to get there with plenty of time to spare.

It's 11:00.

Tony checks his coat for his keys for the eleventh time, and Tim gets up and pours him a scotch.

He finds it vaguely amusing that he doesn't remember this part of his wedding. Obviously at some point on November 1st 2014 he got out of bed, got a shower, brushed his teeth, probably ate some sort of breakfast, definitely had some coffee. At some slightly later point, Tony and Ducky showed up at his house. Eventually Gibbs came over. He knows he talked with Gibbs, wrote Abby a poem, but the rest of that chunk of time between waking up and getting dressed was pretty blank.
Drink.

Tony stares at the proffered drink like he's never seen one before. "I don't want to."

"Too bad. If you don't relax you're going to snap. So relax."

"Can't be late!"

Tim smiles. "Trust me; they aren't going to start without you."

"Can't let her down."

He puts his hand on Tony's shoulder and squeezes gently, trying to get his friend back in touch with the real world. "We are not going to be late, and you are not going to let Ziva down. The only thing that can happen by going now is us showing up while they're still setting up, and then Breena will yell at you for seeing Ziva before the ceremony. So, look, get out of your tux, put some jeans and a t-shirt on, and let's go see a movie."

Jimmy's just sitting on the sofa nodding. "If you don't cool down, you'll pop a blood vessel before the wedding, and that will make you late. As your doctor, I am prescribing you an ounce of forty proof ethyl alcohol. Drink."

"When did you become my doctor?" Tony asks, and shoots back the liquor.

"Day before yesterday. Now, you need to relax, sooo..." Jimmy's got his phone out and is googling what movies are showing and when. "Deadpool came out Friday."

"Ooohhh..." Tim looks pretty excited at that.

Tony rolls his eyes. Tim and Jimmy geeking out seems to have helped focused him on something other than pre-wedding jitters. "You want to take me to a Marvel movie?"

"An NC-17 one that's only showing in one theatre in the greater DC area," Jimmy says looking at his phone. "Got a showing at 11:30. We can grab a fast lunch, watch it, and still have plenty of time to get dressed and to the park."
Two hours later, they're back in the light, Tony is blinking a little, and saying, "That's the sort of stuff in those comic books? No wonder you're constantly reading them."

"Deadpool's something of a special case, Tony. He's not exactly Batman or Superman or Wolverine or Professor X," Tim says.

"By which Tim means this is the only character who constantly breaks the fourth wall, let alone starts the movie by slaughtering everyone involved in making the last movie he was in."

"Gotta admit that Hugh Jackman-Deadpool fight was awfully cool," Tim replies. The guys who made this thing really got Deadpool, it was a massive, meta-breaking, self-referential, no-holds-barred fan-fest. He's fairly sure no one expected to make a cent on it and they did it for the fun of the characters. He does know that he was reacting in a manner that was rather inappropriate for a thirty-seven-year-old man, and that Abby would have probably referred to what he was doing as 'mad fangirl squeezing.'

"Yeah. So are those movies usually that violent?" Tony asks.

Tim laughs. "Nothing says contemplating binding my love to yours for the rest of my life like 220 corpses in the first ninety seconds of the film."

"Yeah, it wasn't exactly just-about-to-get-married material."

"Got your mind off of it, didn't it?" Jimmy says, sliding behind the wheel of his car.

"Talking about movies," Tim says, bucking his seat belt. "Did Gibbs get the book to Ziva?"

"Assuming everything's going right with the girls, yeah. I gave it to him last night."

"Good."

Ziva woke to the sound of knocking at her door. It took her a second to figure out where she was, but then it clicked. She, Gibbs, Ducky and Penny, and Schmiel had stayed at the B&B. Heading all the way back into DC when you didn't want to go home (because home had the empty bed in it) didn't make much sense.

So they stayed.

And at exactly ten o'clock, way after her usual wake up, Gibbs was doing exactly what he told her he'd do, give her a wake up knock.

"I'm up."

He poked his head in tentatively. "Can I come in?"

"Certainly."

"Got some things for you." Things appeared to be a steaming hot mug of coffee and a small rectangle wrapped in white and silver paper.

He sat on the side of the bed, next to her, handed her the coffee, kissed her cheek, and then laid the package in front of her.

"Wedding present?"
He nodded. "From Tony."

That got a smile out of Ziva. "What is it?"

The expression on his face said, open it and find out. So she did. It was a book. A journal really, a nice one, hard bound, black leather, white satin ribbon between the pages. She opened to the marked page and saw the page was covered in Tony's handwriting. She flipped through the pages seeing all of them, every single page of the entire book, was covered in his handwriting.

She returned to the marked page, figuring he had marked it for a reason and read: "Have you never met a woman who inspires you to love? Until your every sense is filled with her? You inhale her. You taste her. You see your unborn children in her eyes and know that your heart has found a home. Your life begins with her, and surely without her it must end." –Don Juan DeMarco.

At first she felt the rush of those words. An almost hot thrill through her body, knowing that he had found them and written them for her, for a second she floated on it, eyes lingering over the curve of his letters, the image of him writing it down, filling her mind's eye.

Then there was curiosity. "Who is Don Juan DeMarco?"

Gibbs shrugged. "I think it's a what."

"A what?" Ziva looked taken aback. Don Juan DeMarco did not sound like the name of a what.

"Tim and Tony were talking about this. Movie quotes. All the ones that make sense to him now you're in his life." He'd been there when the two of them got talking about if they had to be quotes from movies Tony had actually seen. He'd found some he really liked that were in movies he would never voluntarily watch, and they were debating over if it was enough that he just really liked them or if he actually had to have a connection to them. They'd gotten to the crime scene before they finished that conversation, so Gibbs never heard how it ended.

Ziva inhaled quickly, felt the sting of tears in her in her eyes, and exhaled slowly. "Oh."

"Yeah." Gibbs smiled. "Abby and Breena should be here in an hour. Thought you might like some time to read."

Ziva wiped her eyes, nodding, and flipped to the first page. "I love that after I spend the day with you, I can still smell your perfume on my clothes. And I love that you are the last person I want to talk to before I go to sleep at night...I came here tonight because when you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with someone, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible." – When Harry Met Sally

Gibbs kissed her one more time and got up to leave her with her present.

As he prepares for his third wedding in two and a half years, Tim's come to a few conclusion.

A: It is much easier to be the best man than the groom, and easier to be a guest than the best man. This is not to say that he didn't love his own wedding, but he can feel that he was much more 'present' at Jimmy's wedding, and he can feel that's going to be true for Tony's as well. That outside of himself feeling that was with him all through his wedding isn't here today, and he appreciates it, because he can really be in the moment now and enjoy this.

B: He doesn't love public speaking. Which is why guest is superior to Best Man. Though he does
think his speech is pretty good.

C: Small weddings are better than big ones. They had thirty-eight people at theirs, and part of the whole Groom thing was working the crowd, seeing everyone, talking to them, spending some time with them, and honestly, it was exhausting. Which is, once again, not to say he wasn't happy to see everyone, but still, it was tiring. If he and Abby ever renew their vows, it'll be their family and that's it. Tony and Ziva got the guest list down to twenty-two, and Tim's thinking that's a pretty good number of people for a party.

D: He is deeply, profoundly grateful that the people he loves have found their own loves.

In all honestly, McGee and Palmer laughing at him about the whole being nervous about not being on time thing aside (because it's 4:30, the wedding doesn't start for 45 minutes, and now they've just got to sit there and wait), Tony's a whole lot less freaked out right now than he expected to be.

Really, he was fairly certain he'd be on the verge of throwing up right now.

But he's not.

He's sitting in a fairly small tent with McGee, Palmer, Ducky, and Senior, and feeling, honestly, pretty cool. It's like now that he's here he can't mess it up. He owns it, and it's time to get going.

He's ready for this.

He's playing with Ziva's ring. As per the tradition it's a plain, gold band. White gold so it'll go with her engagement ring. It's his, because the gift must be something belonging to the groom. On the inside of it, he had inscribed at lo levad/you are not alone. He'd wanted the symbol of the promise in both languages. Wanted a somewhat nebulous idea that started the day she left for Israel to bury her father and was coming to fruition today, to rest against her skin for the rest of her life.

And in a little over half an hour, it will.

"Can I get a minute with Junior?" Senior asked the others. That surprised Tony, yes, they have been getting along better this last year but one on one heart to hearts are still really rare.
Okay, non-existent. Of course, getting married is not-well, for him at least, Senior's a different story, he thinks his dad was married five times by the time he was his age—an everyday sort of thing.

"Dad?" Tony asked after the other guys had filed out.

"She's a beautiful girl, Junior. She's strong and capable and doesn't take any of your bullshit and loves you dearly and I am so happy you found a woman like that. She looks at you the way your mother used to look at me. So take some advice from a man who had the love of his life and screwed it up: you will be vastly better off if you put her first. There are things you're going to want, things that will bring a quick flush of pleasure or make you happy for a few days, there are things she is going to want that will scare the living hell out of you, and avoiding those things might make you feel good, make you feel safe.

"But that's happiness. And happiness is shallow and easy. But for you, Ziva's the path to joy. You stay with her, you put her first, you be the man I know you can be, and you will find joy and peace and a home and family worth having.

"I screwed things up with your mom. I screwed them up with you. And I spent fifty years chasing happy, because it was easy, and avoiding joy because it was hard and scary. Don't make my mistakes. It looks like you've figured that out, but, I wanted to say it to you. Wanted you to hear it."

"Thanks."

"You're a better man than I am, keep it up, and you'll build a marriage and life that when you're my age, you'll look back at and cherish."

"I intend to."

His father is smiling, a genuine, warm and loving smile. "Good. Everyone talks about the vows, the promises you make her, and they matter, matter more than almost anything, but you also need to make some promises to yourself, promises to support your vows to her. Promise yourself to avoid temptation. Promise yourself that you will commit to lasting joy and not transitory pleasure. And promise yourself to remember that she is what makes your life worth living."

"I will, Dad."

"Good. Okay, enough seriousness." Senior checked his watch. "Ten more minutes to go."

"Almost ready?" Jimmy asks. Having been booted out of the guy's tent he wandered over to see how Team Bride was doing.

From the looks of it the correct answer was, almost done. Abby and Breena are dressed. Gibbs has everything but his tie done. Ziva's almost ready to go, probably just finished her makeup and needs to get into her dress.

They look like they're within five minutes of being ready for show time.

Breena kisses him, twirls a little, flaring the skirt of her dress. "Almost ready. Just a few finishing touches. How are things on your side?"

"All ready to go. Granted, Tony's been ready to go since 5:15 this morning if what Tim tells me is true."
"Should have had him here then. Could have gotten the site finished and let us sleep longer." Schmiel adds.

"And what are they doing now?" Ziva asks as she drapes Gibbs' bow tie around his neck.

"Senior wanted a moment alone with Junior, so off we went. Tim and Ducky are checking in with the Rabbi making sure everything is set on that side."

"Good." Abby says.

"I should probably head back to the guys. Let them know things are all set over here." Jimmy kisses Breena one more time, then heads to Ziva, kissing her cheek, and to Abby for one last smooch. He smiles at Gibbs, wraps his arm around his shoulder and says, "You know, it's a very fine thing to spend your life surrounded by beautiful women!"

Gibbs grins and gently shoves Jimmy toward the entryway.

Tim would say this for Tony and Ziva's wedding, it is, without a doubt, the most beautiful and elegant wedding he's ever seen.

April in DC can mean everything green and pink with cherry blossoms, or it can mean gray and cold.

They got green and soft pink and warm spring breezes.

The chuppah is in a grove of Cherry trees. It's covered in gauzy white fabric and daisy chains of baby pink, cream, and white roses, ivy, and more cherry blossoms.

Team Bride (The girl part of it at least. Abby told him Gibbs and Schmiel are in black.) is in white. Abby and Breena are in cream, strapless, empire waist gowns, each with a light pink band of beading under the breasts, and both of them with more cherry blossoms in their hair.

Team Groom is in black, broken only by white dress shirts and cream rose boutonnieres.
And the festivities are about to begin.

Traditionally, the grandparents would go first. But there are no grandparents, so the procession is beginning with the Rabbi.

He takes his place under the chuppah and is followed by Tim and Jimmy. Usually the groom would be escorted by his parents, or his father and the father of the bride. But this group is short on parents, too. So Ducky and Senior walk Tony to the chuppah and stop a few steps away. Both of them hug him before going to their seats in the front row, next to their ladies. Tony steps beneath the chuppah on his own, showing that he is entering this marriage of his own free will.

In his left hand, Tim's holding a glass in a white velvet bag. For his wedding Tony held the rings. For Tony's he's holding a glass. The objects change, but the job is the same: be the guy holding the thing that says, 'we're married.'

The girls come next. Breena and Abby, and Tim lights up to see his wife, beautiful in white and pink, light breeze fluttering her skirt and the tendrils of her hair. He smiles at her, and she smiles back at him. And he knows they're here for Tony and Ziva, but like with Jimmy's wedding he knows that today he'll make, remake the promises that bind them together.

Thoughts of that are sidetracked by Ziva, escorted by Gibbs and Schmiel.

And it is true that to Tim, Abby is the most beautiful woman on Earth. Heart, mind, soul, and body: she is his definition of beauty.

It is also true that Tim is not blind, and appreciates feminine beauty in its many forms.

And Ziva, in a long, flowing spill of... he's not even sure what color it is, ivory or cream with little silver threads maybe, hair long and loose, decorated with a few cherry blossoms, a translucent veil of shimmering silk skimming over her face and shoulders, is gorgeous.
He hears Tony see her. There's a fast, sharp, almost whistling intake of breath. And he's behind Tony so he can't see the expression on his face, but he sees his shoulders go tight, and his posture straighten up a little further.

The three of them pause about ten feet before the chuppah. Both Gibbs and Schmiel kiss her cheek, then they too go to sit in the front row, Ziva takes three steps on her own, showing that she too comes to this marriage of her own free will. Then Tony joins her, takes her hand, and leads her into the chuppah, a space designed to represent the home they will share for the rest of their days.

He lifts the veil from her face and the ceremony begins.

Once again the Ketubah is read, and this time wine is drunk to go with it, celebrating the union.

Unlike the Christian tradition the rings are not blessed, and the vows are only one line, but as Tony takes Ziva's hand in his, and repeats the Rabbi's words, "Haray ata mekudash lee beh-taba'at zo keh-dat Moshe veh-Israel,/* he's smiling brilliantly, crying a little, and more deeply, sincerely happy than Tim's ever seen him.

The gesture repeats, Ziva placing the ring on Tony's finger, repeating the words, glowing with love and joy, and Tim catches Abby's eye, and tries to send all of the love, all of the joy, all of the contentment and peace and euphoria that life with her has given him in a look, and maybe he didn't quite get it all across, because how could anything get all of that across, but he sees the answering love in her look, and the gentle slide of her fingers across her tummy, and he's not even sure it's possible to accurately sum that feeling up.

What he does know is that if he doesn't stop exchanging googoo eyes with Abby he's going to be late with the glass, and since he's only got one job during the ceremony, he can't mess it up. After all, he doesn't want Tony wishing he'd picked Jimmy for best man. Of course, Jimmy's probably giving Breena the exact same look and is probably paying even less attention to the proceedings that Tim is, because he doesn't actually have to do anything other than stand there.

So Tim flashes her a quick smile, starts paying attention to the ceremony again, watching the two of them kiss with both tenderness and passion, and made sure the glass was where it needed to be so Tony could smash it.

"Mazel Tov!"

Chapter End Notes

* Behold, you are consecrated to me with this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel.
The Yichud

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tradition holds that the bride and groom have a few minutes alone after the ceremony, so as the guests milled about and the photographer got shots of everyone, Tony and Ziva got to actually see each other, alone, for the first time today.

Tony actually feels a little silly. There's this huge grin on his face that won't go away, and he almost wants to babble at her, she's so beautiful and he's feeling so… so something, so much of whatever it is he can't dig individual feelings out of it.

She's smiling at him, brilliant joy on her face.

He stands in front of her, hands on her waist, and for a long second just looks, his eyes trailing from her hair to lashes, lips to throat.

Finally he got it together enough to say, "Hi."

She started to giggle at that, peals of laughter, gasping breath, tears streaming down her face and pulled him close, holding him flush against her, her face pressed into his chest, arms tight on his waist. That set off his laughter, he felt it bubbling out of him.

Eventually they calmed down, and she looked up at him, warm, bright smile on her face.

"Hi?"

He kissed her, lips soft and gentle on hers, eyes sparkling with joy. "Hello, Mrs. DiNozzo."

She brushed her fingers through his hair, and then over his lips. "Mrs. DiNozzo. It's hard to believe it is real."

His fingers found hers, stroked over her wedding band. He took her hand in his and kissed her it. "It's real." One more kiss, to her lips again. "I love you, Ziva."

"I love you," she murmured against his lips.

For a long moment they stood there, holding each other, enjoying the closeness and intimacy the outside world rarely gets to see. They could hear the buzz of conversation outside of the tent, but for a little while longer it would just be them, together, in love, and now, married.

Chapter End Notes

Just a quickie today. More wedding stuff tomorrow!
A Reception

They returned to DC for the reception. The Ruther’s Estate Country Club had the advantage of being located not too far away from everyone’s homes, having a small, intimate space they could eat in, and beautiful gardens (more blooming cherry trees) set with a dance floor.

Which was when it occurred to Tim that there is a downside of a small wedding. When you’re the best man and maid of honor in a wedding with twenty-four people, it’s pretty hard to just slip away for ten or so minutes.

Everyone can tell at a glance if someone is missing.

So you need a distraction.

Unfortunately Tony and Ziva’s wedding seemed to be really short on distractions. Scrumptious food, swing music, beautiful settings (cherry trees wrapped in white Christmas lights, tea lights flickering in crystal vases, and everything decked in white and pink roses and more cherry blossoms), an elegant white on white cake, all of that was available aplenty. Ten minutes where no one was looking for them, not so much.

He’d scouted the terrain two weeks ago when he and Tony showed up to pay the last deposit and make sure the arrangements were all set. The garden was more or less made for trysting. It had about six little alcoves, some even with benches, tucked away from the sight of pretty much everyone else.

He’d found an especially nice one: maybe ten by ten, high stone wall covered in ivy on two sides, hedge on the third and half of the fourth, two weeping willows bracketed a small stone koi pond, and a wrought iron bench sat right next to it. All he had to do was get them there.

Apparently Jimmy was having a similar issue. The girls were dancing with Schmiel and Gibbs, when Jimmy drifted over to him and asked, “How long is your speech?”

Tim thought it through. “Three minutes, maybe a little faster if I talk quickly.”

Jimmy thought about that. “Too fast. What if you talk slow and ad lib some.”

“No! I’m horrible at ad libbing. Talk slow I can maybe get it to five. Why?”

Jimmy smiled dryly. “The same reason you want me to do something to draw attention away from you and Abby.”
Tim laughed at that. “Properly celebrating the wedding?”

“Yeah.” Jimmy’s grinning. “This is so much easier when there’s fifty people around.”

“I’m noticing that.” He thought about something else for a second. “Did you slip off during my wedding?”

“Of course. No one’s looking at anyone other than the bride and groom during the cake part.”

“Good point.” Tim eyes the cake. “That’ll probably take a few minutes.”

“Schmiel tells me singing is traditionally part of celebrating a Jewish wedding.”

Tim nodded. “You could probably get him to sing something with you right after that.”

“I probably could. You could probably get Abby to come up with a quick, off the cuff toast to go with yours.”

“I probably could.”

They’ve both got wide smiles on their faces, satisfaction at having a plan in place.

So, five months pregnant means the traditional up against the wall quickie is out. (Which was why Tim was scouting the territory ahead of time. Every building on Earth has a chunk of wall in a somewhat-less-than-easily-accessible location, finding a place to sit or kneel is more of a challenge.)

But when the MC called everyone together for the cutting of the cake, he took Abby’s hand, whispered in her ear, “Jimmy bought us ten minutes,” and they edged away from everyone else, deeper into the garden.

And like the last two times, it’s fast, and naughty, and so wrong, and feels so good, and he’s just so incredibly in love with this woman.
He’s sitting across the bench, and she’s in his lap, one leg snug between his hips and the back of the bench, other foot on the ground, and that position’s intentional, he wants to look her in the eye, touch her face, kiss her. Face to face sex is getting rarer as Kelly gets bigger, but this still works for the time being.

He’s babbling a little, telling her how much he loves her, how good she feels. But he feels her breath on his thumb as he draws it across her lower lip, and that focuses him, makes him very aware of his own breath, and he remembers a promise he made to her silently at Jimmy and Breena’s wedding, and out loud the day after he almost froze to death, one he modified a little for his wedding vows.

“From this day to my last, I will be here and I will love you.” He kisses her, holding her face in his hands as she stills on him. “This breath to my last and all the ones in between are yours, Abby.”

She’s smiling brilliantly, then kisses him, slipping against him, spreading a flush of pleasure through him. “This life and the next, Tim, I will always love you.” Those words carried him over the edge, and a second later she joined him, shuddering in wet, joyful pulses.

Namaste. They’d been talking about it a few days ago. Abby had gotten a new yoga video. They’d both decided it was time to try some new moves. The video started and ended with that, and he’d been under the impression it was more or less Hindi for hello/goodbye. Abby thought it was a bit deeper than that. Thirty seconds of googling later and half an hour of reading showed they were both right. But, deeper meant something like the (insert good thing here, love, joy, intellect, whatever) in my soul recognizes yours. For the most part for Tim it’s just a word, but right now he feels it.

The love in his soul rejoicing at the love in hers, floating in Tony and Ziva’s, Jimmy and Breena’s, and reveling it. That’s probably as close to metaphysical as he’ll ever get, but that’s fine.

They’re here, together, celebrating the love that makes life rich, vibrant, and glorious.
“And how does it feel to know you have gotten all of your ‘kids’ married off?” Ducky asks Jethro as he sits next to him.

“Not bad at all, Duck, not bad at all.” He’s got a soft smile on his face as he watches Tony and Ziva dance with each other.

“I’d imagine it is satisfying to have all your dear ones settled.”

“Not all of them.”

Ducky sends Gibbs a questioning look.

Gibbs’ gaze lands on Penny, who’s dancing with Tim and Abby. “Might be nice to be the best man at one of these things.”

Ducky smiles at that, then shook his head a little. “I’m afraid best man duty will be confined to Fornell’s wedding.”

Gibbs’ eyebrows shot up. He had thought Ducky and Penny were getting on very well. Ducky sees the alarm in his expression and says, “Nothing like that Jethro. We are old. Our estates and wills are set, and a marriage would only complicate things. Her semester at the University of Pennsylvania will be ending in May, and after that, Penny will be buying half of my home, and we will vest full rights of survivorship upon each other.”

Gibbs nods. That makes sense to him.

“Beyond that, we have comfortable retirements set up. She does not need my money, nor I hers.
However, if you were to feel like hosting an intimate family celebration in our honor come May, I can assure you that would be welcome. If you like, you can even give a speech.” There’s a slightly teasing tone in Ducky’s voice as he says that.

“Just might.”

“Perhaps you’d set the record for the shortest best man’s toast?”

“Maybe.” Gibbs grins.

Ducky watches as Jimmy cuts in, whirling Penny away from Tim and Abby, Breena joining them. He looks away from them to Jethro’s hand, where his wedding band is still on his fourth finger.

“I find it somewhat amusing to think that this late in my life, I’ve found, for all practical purposes a wife, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. I find it more amusing to see how intensely happy it makes me, and how stupid I feel for not having sought it out sooner.”

Gibbs nods, looking away from the dance floor to Ducky.

“Jethro, do not wait until you’re my age to go after it. You’re so close to having what you want out of life. Don’t keep waiting until your days are numbered in years and not decades.”

“I’m getting there, Duck.”

“Good.”

One of the upsides of a twentyish person wedding is that it’s pretty easy to get everyone’s attention when it’s time for the Best Man toast. Likewise, Tim knows everyone in this group, it’s family and close friends, hell, the only person here he doesn’t know is Daphine, so it’s not like this is nerve wracking.

Which is good, because he really doesn’t love public speaking.

But it’s time. The DJ gives him the microphone, which seems a little weird, there’s not a lot of people and they’re in a fairly small room, but messing with it buys Jimmy and Breena, who vanished ten seconds ago, another forty seconds.

Tony and Ziva are watching him, Ziva sitting in Tony’s lap, Tony’s arms wrapped around her, her head resting against his shoulder.

Tim smiles at them and begins. “Sometimes you can look at two people and know. They just fit. Where the one zigs the other zags and you can line them up like the edges of the jigsaw puzzle.” He puts the mic down and twines his fingers together, demonstrating the idea. That being exactly as far as he’s willing to go when it comes to ad libbing. If he goes any further off script, this’ll become a rambling disaster.

“And then there’s Tony and Ziva, who did everything they possibly could for as long as humanly possible to deny it.” Tim had been addressing the room, but he turned to face them. “I’d like to take this moment to say something to both of you, something I’ve been waiting almost a decade to say…

“I told you so!”

Tim was very pleased to see that get a laugh. He’d been fairly nervous that line would fall flat or
they’d take it wrong, but fortunately, like Abby said it would, it went over well.

“Ten years ago my first book came out. And in that book ‘Tommy’ and ‘Lisa’ took one look at each other and fell madly in lust. Two books later it had grown into love. Meanwhile these two were doing everything in their power to pretend that’s just so not happening. To the point of this one,” he pointed to Ziva, “actually called me up, made me come to her home, and hit me upside the back of the head with the book when they first said, ‘I love you.’ Hard!”

He paused again, letting the laughter run down, and heard Tony say quietly, “Hello, Pot, it’s Kettle, you’re black.”

He smiled at Tony and nodded, acknowledging that technically, he and Abby had taken even longer, then continued, “And the only reason he didn’t do exactly the same thing was because he didn’t read that book until after they had hooked up.”

Tim paused again, let the laughing die down, and finished up, “So, I’ll admit, standing here at your wedding, having spent more than a decade watching you two finally own up to the fact that you fit, perfectly, to feeling, well, a little vindicated and a whole lot smug.” Tim grinned, laid his hand on Tony’s shoulder, and kissed Ziva’s cheek, his voice shifting to something less humorous, more sincere. “And I’m also feeling deeply, profoundly grateful that you two did figure it out, and that I am here to see you celebrate your love and your commitment to spending the rest of your lives together, because if there ever were two people who deserved the joy of finding the one who fits, it’s you two.”

Tim lifted his glass. “To Tony and Ziva and the love and life they’ll share.”

They’d all drunk, and he was getting ready to hand the microphone to Abby to stretch it out a little longer when he saw Jimmy and Breena sneak back in. He raised his eyebrow, and Jimmy nodded. Tim smirked, that was, at most, four and a half minutes. He doesn’t know if he should be jealous of Jimmy or pity him.
He got Jimmy alone an hour later. “Four and a half minutes?”

“Four and a quarter, had to get there and back.”

Which made Tim realize that fifteen seconds of getting there and back meant they were literally right outside the dining room, probably about two feet away from the sliding glass door that separated it from the garden, and in full view of anyone who might have walked outside.

“How do you even do that?”

Jimmy grinned, wide, happy, no filters in place, vast wedges of TMI about to come sloshing out, and Tim quickly held up a hand saying, “In general, don’t need specifics.”

Jimmy’s grin didn’t waver. “Practice.”

Tim laughed. “Time to grab Tony and give him his present?”

Jimmy checked his watch: 10:35. They’d probably want to wrap things up sooner rather than later. “Yeah, I think so.”

“I’ll get him. You get it. Meet at my car?”

“Sounds good.”

Tony was dancing with Ziva, and Tim decided to wait for the song to end before wandering over. “Can I borrow your husband, Mrs. DiNozzo?”

Tony’s looking at him curiously, wondering what’s going on. Ziva’s smiling. “And will you return him promptly?”

“Won’t take more than fifteen minutes.”

Now he’s really got Tony’s attention.

“Then you may have him.”

“Good. Come on.” He’s smiling brightly, really enjoying the wary look on Tony’s face as he follows Tim into the parking lot.

“Okay, why are you dragging me out here?” He sees Jimmy leaning against Tim’s car. “Okay, why are both of you dragging me out here?”

“He’s dragging, I’m lying in wait,” Jimmy says.

Tony notices the bag sitting next to Jimmy on the hood of Tim’s car.

“What is that?”

Tim slaps him on the shoulder, and Jimmy laughs, both of them really enjoying this.

Tim starts: “We know you wanted something a lot sexier for your bachelor party, and well, neither of us may be big on strip clubs and lap dances from strangers, but we’re also firmly in favor of you having a hell of a good time with your wife. So…”

Jimmy hands him the bag. It’s a plain, brown paper, Whole Food’s bag, and it’s heavy. “Honeymoon fun pack.”
“Oh God, what the hell is in there?” Tony’s looking halfway between really disturbed and ready to burst out laughing as he looks into it.

“Fun stuff,” Jimmy says, “Lube—“

“Good stuff, lasts forever, won’t dry out,” Tim adds.

“Condoms—“

“Why do I want condoms? What am I, fifteen?”

Tim rolls his eyes, and Jimmy gives him a really, you need us to spell it out look. Tony stares at them and then seems to get what they’re talking about and a very dirty smile spreads across his face as he says, “Oh.”

“More lube that actually tastes good,” Jimmy’s talking, but Tim’s shaking his head no. Of course, he doesn’t like any of the flavored ones just as a matter of principle, but Breena liked the variety pack they got, and Abby said it was good, too. And, well, yeah, he didn’t mind the ‘homework’ that Abby did on multiple brands to see what the good ones were. And he’s assuming Jimmy likewise approved of Breena’s test of lube flavor. Jimmy’s still talking and Tim think’s he missed a few sentences there, but caught back up with, “…Tim added some satin ropes. Cock ring, since you’ve mentioned the can’t-get-it-up-six-times-a-day thing, that’ll help with that. Fourteen little blue pills, too, don’t take more than one of them a day, okay?”

Tony’s stunned by that. “Wait, what?”

“You forgot Jimmy can write prescriptions, didn’t you?” Tim says, while Jimmy just keeps grinning.

“I don’t need—“

Jimmy cut in, “Neither of us think you do. Just, assuming you, or more importantly Ziva, doesn’t want to leave your hotel room, you’ve got back up now.” Jimmy’s having way too good a time with this, his smile is so big his face looks in danger of cracking.

Tony’s staring at him curiously. “Is that what you meant by ‘day before yesterday’?”

Jimmy nods.

Tim takes over on the inventory. “Let’s see, three different vibrators, batteries for them, that’s part of why it’s heavy. There’s an adaptor for the one that plugs in.”

Tony’s staring into the bag. “How many batteries are in there?”


“You guys know I’ve had sex before? A whole lot of sex.”

“Sure. Hence this stuff, you’re going to have to go deep to find new stuff, and we’ve made sure you’ve got everything you need to whip something new out on Ziva,” Jimmy says.

“LED candles for mood lighting.” Tim picked up a small, nicely-wrapped rectangle. It’s even got a bow on it. “What’s this?”

“No idea. Breena stuck it in there.” Jimmy sorted through a bit and came up with another, larger, also wrapped square. Tim recognized the wrapping paper on this one. “Abby added one, too.”
“Huh. We don’t know what the girls thought you’d need, but it’s in there.”

“What is this?” Tony’s holding something that looks like a collection of small to larger spheres on a flexible plastic rod.


“Tim’s idea.” Jimmy adds, clearly signaling wouldn’t touch it with a ten foot pole let alone buy them for you.

Tim catches that and says, “What? They’re fun.”

Tony drops them back into the bag. “If I’ve already got condoms for that, why do I want those?”

Tim looks really cocky, and Tony’s wondering exactly how much he’s had to drink. “Who says they’re for her? I mean, I guess you could use them on her, but she doesn’t have a prostate, so…”

Tony closes his eyes and winces a little. “Okay, that’s way more than I needed to know about you.”

Tim took one last thing out of the bag. “And, this took a little hacking and is not the most strictly legal thing ever, but pack your stuff, put one of these stickers on it, and TSA and whatever they’ve got in South Africa’ll leave them alone.”

“You got me diplomatic clearance for my sex toys?” Tony’s holding the stickers, staring at them, and then burst into hysterical laughter.

“Hey, there’s a reason we didn’t honeymoon anywhere we had to fly to. You don’t want them messing in your stuff,” Tim says when Tony stops laughing.

“Yeah, some of our toys, the expensive ones, got stolen when we went on our honeymoon. I mean, who steals sex toys? I’d assume that’s not the sort of thing you want used,” Jimmy adds.

“Ullg.” Tim replies, shuddering.

“Yeah.” Then Jimmy hugs Tony. “Congratulations. Go have fun.”

Tim joins the hug. “So happy for you. Really.”

Link

He’s dancing with Abby when an idea hit. “How about Dana?”

She didn’t look like she was following him with that. “Dana?”

“Kelly Dana…”

Abby thinks about that for a minute, seeming to hear it in her mind, then something else hit. “How about we don’t name our daughter after a woman you fantasize about having sex with?”

Tim laughs at that request. “You asked me for strong, kick-ass, female characters I love. Guess what? I fantasize about all of them.”

“All of them?”

He’s nodding. “Strong, kick-ass women I love, why wouldn’t I?”
She thinks about that and smiles. “Good point.”

“Kelly Abigail? Name her after the strong, kick-ass woman I love the most?” He kissed her as he finished that sentence.

She’s smiling, pleased by the idea, but it’s not something she wants. “No. One Abby’s enough.”

“It means father’s joy, and that’s certainly true. Sounds good, too.”

“Your right on both of them, and I’m still using my veto on it.”

“Fine.”

Breena came over a second later. “They’re getting ready to go, so time to get the bubbles out.”

Abby nods.

“I’ll get them,” Tim says, they’re in the trunk of his car.

It was well past midnight when they gathered under the cherry trees, blowing bubbles, sending Tony and Ziva on their way.
The Wedding Album

Bits and pieces that didn't quite make it into the story/images with no plot that I wanted to share. All captions have a link embedded and that link will take you to the original source.

*Middle of Nowhere Park before set up.*

*After signing the ketubah.*
Gibbs dancing with Ziva at the reception, the father/daughter dance. Him in a black tux, her in the white wedding dress. He has his hands cupped around her face, kissing her forehead.

Ketubah close up.

At the post-work impromptu David-DiNozzo engagement party.
Picking up the marriage license.

Close up on Tony and Ziva’s face during the first dance, and the look of all-encompassing love in both of their eyes.

Tony and Ziva’s last dance, he’s holding her close, and they’re moving slower, less flirty, much more intense, ready for the next part of the night to begin. His fingers rest against her cheek and lip, and her eyes are open with an invitation to touch more.
Hugs and smooches for the soon to be FIL

After the signing of the ketubah, at the B&B, Senior dancing with Ziva. Her head is back, eyes closed, she’s laughing. He’s got a wicked smile on his face, having just told her a very dirty and completely inappropriate joke.

Schmiel, Ducky, and Senior, sitting at the table, talking about something, all of them happy and laughing.
Ducky and Abby all dressed up for the Ketubah signing.

Ducky twirling Penny away from him on the dance floor. If it was video you’d see him take one step over, and Penny spin under his arm, coming flush to his chest again. The bodies get older and slower, but they remember the moves and the joy of them.

Tim and Abby dancing together at the reception. She’d kicked her shoes off. His tie was loose, top button undone. Her head rested on his shoulder. Both of them had their eyes closed. She had one hand on his shoulder, and he was holding her other one (though you can’t see that in the shot), his other hand rested against her belly.

When he got a copy of it, it went behind his desk, below the sonogram, with “Dancing with my girls” written on the bottom left.
An hour to go, time to head to the site.

Gibbs and his girls. He’s standing in the middle, Abby on his left, arm around him. Breena’s on his right, head on his shoulder. Ziva’s in front, he has his arms wrapped around her. The photographer forgot everyone’s names almost before he’d been told them, but no one corrected him when he called Gibbs “Father of the Bride.”

Tim made sure to get a copy of it. Abby framed it. Come Father’s Day, Gibbs was getting a present.

Gibbs and his boys. He’s got an arm around Tony, his hand on Tim’s shoulder, and Jimmy’s leaning against Tim’s other side.
Tim made sure to get a copy of that, too. It’s also getting framed and wrapped. If Kelly co-operates and shows up a little early, he’s going to get one of Gibbs holding Kelly and Molly to make up a triptych for him.

Full shot of the Gibbs clan. Jimmy and Breena on the left, Ducky and Penny next to them, Tim and Abby, Gibbs next to her, Ziva on his other side Tony beside her, and Senior taking the right.

Bridal bouquet ready to go.

Profile shot, Tim and Jimmy leaning against the bar, drinks in hand, looking away from the camera.

It’s out of the shot, but they’re watching Abby and Breena dance with each other. But it’s very clear on their faces they’re seeing something deeply satisfying that they enjoy immensely.

Abby and Breena dancing. Abby’s leading. Breena has her head on Abby’s shoulder. Both of them are smiling.

About three minutes later, all four of them dancing together.

Tony holding a bite of cake, wide smile, eyes sparkling, Ziva leaning very far back, wary expression on her face, not sure if he’s going to try and smush it into her face or not.

Half a minute later, Ziva kissing the tip of his finger after eating the bite of cake, pleased that he didn’t try to smush it on her.
The garden/dining/dance area
Shaving

It's not until he's attempting to take all of his body hair below his eyelashes off that it occurs to Tim that he has a lot of it.

In fact, until he's standing in the bathroom, trimmer in hand, he'd considered himself to be a very hairless guy.

This is probably the result of having roomed with Tony or Gibbs hundreds of times, and both of them are fuzzy. Tony's practically got a pelt, and Gibbs is certainly covered in hair, too. (Granted, that hair is white, so it's a little more subtle than Tony's, but still, there's a ton of it.)

Meanwhile Tim's got, (or so he thought) about seventy-three chest hairs (three quarters of which are blond and practically invisible) all in the center of his chest, maybe twenty-two more that trail from his navel to his pubes, a fairly small and soft patch of pubic hair, about six stray hairs on his balls, two, small underarm tufts, thin and fine light brown leg hair, and that's pretty much it. Not much hair, at all.

Of course, his self-assessment on this might have something to do with how rarely he really looks at himself in a mirror. Especially looks at himself naked, actually trying to see how much body hair he has.

And, really staring at himself, he suddenly seems to have tons of it. (Seriously, when did he get hair on his feet, let alone his toes? Sure it's like two hairs per toe, but when the hell did that happen? He's fairly sure he didn't always have hair on his toes, but for the life of him he can't remember the last time he really looked at his naked feet.) And suddenly taking it all off seems like an insane idea. He knows Abby can shave her legs in like, six minutes, but as he's looking at his, it seems like it should take a whole lot longer, and maybe he doesn't need to take it all off, he's a guy after all...

On the other hand, her legs feel great after she shaves them… And it's not like there'll be a lot of time for stuff like this in the future… And he's not thinking about making a real habit of it, he just wants to see what it feels like… So…

He fires up the trimmer and gets to work.

Abby is supposed to be out for another two hours. That's the plan. She'd be go out, he'd get himself all hairless and naked, and then they'd spend the rest of the afternoon in bed, get dressed up, head out to dinner, then more sex before the hair starts to grow back in and gets all prickly.

And he is very diligently working away on that goal. He's decided that one pass with the trimmer over everything is a good first step, then he'll get the razors and go to town. He's gotten his legs, under arms, chest, and two thirds of his pubic hair trimmed off when she walks into the bathroom.

A few relevant facts of the McGee household:

A: While it is true that Tim isn't exactly an exhibitionist when it comes to his bathroom habits, he's also not particularly shy, either. He's a guy, and is used to peeing with an audience.

B: Abby, however, is not a guy, and does not appreciate an audience.

C: Since it's just the two of them, they do not lock, and very rarely close, doors.
D: Closed doors mean *do not come in*, and are respected.

E: Tim was alone in the house and thus did not bother to close the bathroom door.

So, he is sitting on the edge of the bathtub, one leg propped up high on the shower wall, trimmer in hand, getting the hair between his leg and testicle. He's covered in tiny, little, just clipped off hairs that he hasn't rinsed away yet, sitting in the midst of thousands more tiny, little, just clipped off hairs, unable to hear much over the buzzing of the clipper.

He does; however, hear it when Abby yelps, "Tim!"

He looks up, startled, (fortunately he doesn't accidentally stab himself with the trimmers) and says, "You're home early."

"Yeah." She's staring at him, eyes very wide. "What are you doing?"

He's assuming this is a rhetorical question because it's got to be pretty damn obvious what he's doing. He's got trimmers in hand and is sitting in a forest of just clipped hairs, not like he's doing his taxes in here.

"I thought it'd be fun." He's smiling, looking a little uncomfortable, suddenly aware of the fact that he's never actually talked to Abby about her preferences when it comes to male fuzziness and that she might actually find this appalling.

But a slow, wide grin spreads across her face, and she says, "Can I watch?"

That isn't something he's expecting. "You want to watch?"

"Oh yeah!" Her pigtails are practically vibrating she's so excited by this prospect.

"Okay." He contorts a little more, suddenly aware of the fact that his pubic hair goes all the way back to his anus, and that's going to be tricky to get, even without an audience, and that this a whole lot less dignified than he'd been hoping. "So… ummm… weren't you supposed to be watching Deadpool?"

"Movie sold out. I messed around a bit, but then decided to head home."

"Ahhh…"

She's noticing he's got the trimmers off and isn't doing anything. "Would you rather I didn't watch?"

"Sort of. Can't figure out how to do this without looking like a porn star."

That gets another wide smile out of her, and he's fairly sure he knows what she's remembering, because he's remembering it too, and yeah, that was a lot of fun. "I like you looking like a porn star."

He grins at that.

"And it's not like I haven't seen, touched, licked, and sucked all of you already."

"Okay, true."

She steps up close behind him, trails her fingers down his spine (one of the few bits of him currently not covered in tiny, little, newly clipped off hairs). "And, I'm guessing, you were kind of hoping I was going to touch, lick, and suck all of you again, otherwise that trimmer wouldn't be anywhere near there, right?"
"True."

"So…"

He nods to the toilet seat and turn the trimmers back on. "Get comfy and please don't distract me."

She grins, and he gets back to work.

---

Rinsing off feels really good. Trimming results in an itchy, prickly, slightly sweaty combination he doesn't much like. Rinsing it all off, on the other hand, means that he's now wet, very naked (Jimmy wasn't kidding about things looking bigger after trimming the hair away, and he's almost embarrassed to admit how much he likes that.) and not smooth yet, but much less fuzzy than he's been at any point in his life since he was thirteen and started growing real body hair in the first place.

Abby tosses him the shaving cream, and he starts to lather up his left leg. On one level, it's kind of weird: he's shaving his leg. On another level, it's soft and foamy and feels pretty nice. So, he focuses on soft and foamy while reaching for the razor.

Abby shaves her legs once every three days, and Tim really appreciates the day she shaves. He's even more enthusiastic about the day after she waxes. Very soft, hairless skin is something he really likes. It feels excellent, and given the opportunity he'll just sit there, petting her, enjoying her skin.

Still, he isn't prepared for how good his skin would feel when he rinses off the last bit of the shaving cream residue from his right leg. In fact, wet, smooth, hairless legs blows his mind, and he's cursing at himself that he didn't figure this out sooner, like, say during all those years he was single, because he really could have had a whole lot of fun with this.

He's standing there, rubbing his left leg against his right, enjoying it, and Abby's giggling at him. "Think you're going to do this again?"

"Depends on how accurate Jimmy was about how it feels when it grows back. But right now, this is awesome."

"Legs growing back in isn't an issue. At least it isn't for me." She stands up and gently strokes her hand over where his pubic hair is now a whole lot shorter, but not yet shaved off. "However, I'll tell you I think waxing it off is more comfortable than having it grow back in."

"Ummm…" That has Tim's attention, and he looks really alarmed because having someone yank his pubic hair out sounds like torture to him. "It's that itchy?"

"Not so much intense as it lasts a few days."

"Errr… Should I do this?"

She just shrugs. "How good to your legs feel?"

He rubs them together again. "Really good."

She just looks at him with a smile on her face. "Want me to lather you up?"
"Yeah."

Okay, having someone rub shaving cream over your pubic hair is actually really nice. And kind of distracting. It takes him about thirty seconds to remember why she's doing that. He remembers Jimmy's comment about having Breena shave him and, yeah, it didn't sound great when he heard it the first time, but right now it's sounding really good.

He pops a new blade onto his razor and hands it to her. "You wanna shave me?"

Her eyes go wide, light up with joy, and a huge, bright smile spreads across her lips. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"Oh yes!" She's sitting on the side of the tub, he's standing in the tub, facing her. "Legs a bit further apart." So he widens his stance and she smiles up at him, turning on the faucet in the tub. Then she seems to realize that she's still dressed, so she flicks off the faucet.

"Okay, hold up, let me get out of this. Because I'm going to guess this is going to involve getting wet and probably foamy."

He's still grinning. "Certainly wouldn't mind if it did. After all this stuff is designed to make a blade slide over skin easily, probably makes bodies slide over each other pretty easy, too."

She's pulling her shirt over her head when he says that. Once she gets it off she says, with a wicked smile, "Down, boy. Let's get the hair off of you before trying that."

Okay, yeah, he likes the thrill of almost getting caught. And yeah, with as hard as he got driving 130 with her next to him, he's sure there's a straight danger kick as well. But it's not like Tim actively seeks out danger for thrills. Sometimes dangerous things just hit him right, and they're awfully fun.

But this is just... *Fuck!*

It blows them all away.

She's holding his dick and balls with one hand, keeping them out of the way (made somewhat more difficult by the fact that he's rock hard) as she carefully runs the blade over his pelvis. After each stroke, she washes the blade under the faucet, carefully cleaning it, and then heads to the next area, making sure to do long, gentle pulls.

It feels amazing. Very soft, very smooth, very dangerous, and *God* he likes it way too much.

Having someone shave your balls is... just... fuck... okay, it doesn't matter how annoying the growing back in is. It could feel like red hot ants are crawling all over his testicles and biting him, and he will still ask Abby to do this again.

And for as much as he didn't love the position he needed to get into for her to get the hairs around his
anus and between his butt cheeks, the way having them shaved off felt... Holy Mother of God! that was all sorts of good.

Then Abby said, "You know, if you're all clean shaven, you should probably do me as well."

And... yep, it's a kick from the other side, though, since she waxes, he was only doing her legs. Still, smooth skin, sharp shiny blades, foamy shaving cream, and lots of hot, wet, nicely-scented skin touching.

It's all kinds of good.

And he did get the grow-back-in-softer-and-slower lotion as well, and rubbing that all over each other was a lot of fun, too.

So, yeah, he's a total danger junkie, and he's got no idea how he's ever going to be able to look at a razor again, let alone use one, without getting a hard-on.

They're out of the bathroom, laying on their bed, and he's more naked than he's ever been as an adult. He trails his fingers over his dick and balls and the skin around them, absolutely marveling at how good that feels. And she's grinning at him, really getting off on watching him enjoy himself.

"Okay, honestly, I could spend a few hours just playing with myself. This is just..." He rubs one of his legs against hers. "God! If I could blow myself..." Cause he knows how much he likes the feel of her bare skin on his lips, so he assumes it'd be just as good on his. He rubs his legs together: soft, silky skin on skin. "Damn!"

Abby's petting him, too. "Wanna make it better?"

"How could this possibly be better?"

"Silk."

His eyes suddenly narrow and the blissed-out look on his face vanishes. "Errr... you mean like..." Because while it's true that he owns a few pieces of silk clothing, he's fairly sure she's not thinking about his tie collection.

She's still grinning away, looking really hopeful. "Like stockings or my kimono or one of the negligées."

Okay, yes, he wears a kilt in public, and makeup when they go out, but that's not cross-dressing. That's just different modes of being a guy. Stockings and her undies, that's very much not just different modes of being a guy. And it's very true that he'd have an extremely difficult time explaining why it was okay to shave all of his hair off and wear a kilt, but not okay to put on some of her clothing, he's also very aware on a gut level that this is a really squirmy idea and not in a good way.

"No."

She can see how uncomfortable that idea is for him, so she just smiles, then heads to her dresser, and
puts on a pair of silk stockings and a silk negligee then comes over and drapes herself all over him, and yeah, she was right, that feels amazing.

"I don't suppose you'd tie me up and just rub all over me?" Because right now, he can't think of anything that'll feel better than that.

"Of course, baby. Tie you spread eagle, get lots of good pictures, fuck you 'till you can't come anymore."

"Oh, God, yes. Please!"

She did get him tied, and got lots of pictures, and started to rub all over him, when it became suddenly very clear that not only can Abby not lie on her stomach anymore, it's not all that easy for her to bend at the middle. Which makes getting to certain bits of him, specifically the bits he's really hoping she'll get to, almost impossible if he's tied to the bed.

So, he was untied, and then retied using the ceiling hook. And maybe that's not quite as easy as lying in bed, but he's pretty sure it'll work out just fine.

And she is rubbing up all over him, hot skin under silk all over his skin, and Tim knows there's a difference between sensual and sexual but right now, this is the perfect combination of both of them.

It's not just that he's so hard he feel like he's going to pass out, though that is true. It's also that all of his skin is so happy it's singing, buzzing with pleasure. It's a surfeit of stimulation on any level his body can take, and it's so good he's just floating through it.

Then it got better.

"Up on the dresser."

He does as she tells him, and it's a little tricky to do without the use of his hands, but he does manage to get seated on top of the dresser while Abby heads to the closet and finds a pair of platform boots.

After all, the dresser is waist high on him, but she needs a few extra inches for that to be true.

She leaves on the stockings, but takes off the negligee, and then straps on her boots.

"You all clean?"

He nods his head eagerly. Tim loves having her eat him out, but since she's been pregnant he hasn't been willing to let her do it unless he's clean inside and out. No orgasm's worth risking her coming down with a nasty bacterial infection, especially when she's pregnant. But he'd certainly been hoping that if he shaved everything off, she'd be willing to lick every inch of hairless skin, so, yeah, he's clean enough for surgery. That was step one in this whole plan.

"Good."

She went to the toy box, got the lube, dilators, and strap-on. "Want the cock ring, too?"

"Abby…"
She looks up from sorting through their toys. "Yeah?"

"I love you."

She takes a step over, and kisses him gently. "Damn right you do!" She grins, and he grins back. "So, cock ring, too? Or you think you've got enough control on your own for this?"

He exhales long and slow. "Choices, choices… Grab it, and if I need it, I'll tell you."

"Sounds good."

She does, and then lays them all out next to him on the top of the dresser. He loves the anticipation of this, he can see them next to him, imagine what's going to come next, as her fingers trail from his lips to his cock, gently stroking over his skin.

"So, pretty little love, what exactly did you hope I'd do with you when you decided to take all your hair off?"

"I was hoping you'd rub all over me." He's sitting on the edge of the dresser, her standing between his legs, and she rubs her body along his, hips between his thighs, belly sliding over his cock, breasts against his chest, lips stroking over his neck and shoulder, as her hands rub over his arms.

He exhales slowly. "God, you feel so good on me. I love your skin."

She continues to slowly undulate against him, keeping up gentle slide and subtle friction. "And was this all you wanted? Just my skin moving on yours?"

"No. But if that's all you want to do, I'm good with it."

"Tell me what you want."

"Pull those two top drawers out a little." The top row of his dresser has three drawers. Pull the left and right ones out and whoever is on top of the dresser has a nice little foot rest. He hadn't been thinking about that when he bought it. He'd been thinking convenient place for boxers, socks, and ties, but it worked out really well for sex, too.

She did, and he propped his heels up. "I was hoping you'd tie me up, lick and suck my ass, then fuck me senseless."

"So, are you saying you want me to work you open with my tongue, then when you're all wet and soft, start with the glass, slipping them in one at a time, until you're wide open, then strap one on and fuck you until your cock's so hard I can see every single vein, and it throbs each time your heart beats?"

He inhales hard at that idea, and his eyes almost slide all the way shut. "Yes!"

"And how should I get you off once I've got you that hard? Pull out and suck you off? Jerk you off while I thrust? Grind against you, belly on your cock while I just keep pressing your prostate with my cock?"

"Grind, please!"

She lays a soft, wet kiss to his thigh, then stands between his legs, lips an inch from his. "And what will you do for me if I do that for you?"

"Anything, at all!"
"Anything?"

His eyes are glazed with lust and pleasure and focused squarely on hers. "Anything." It came out as a soft hot breath against her lips. "Tell me what you want, and I will do it."

She's grinning and then says, "Good. Stay put, I want to get a chair. I'm going to fuck you good and slow so something to sit on would be nice."

One thing Tim has noticed about when Abby's in charge is that she's really good at pacing. He felt the bead of pre cum slip down his cock when he said 'Anything,' but she took her time getting a chair, and that wilted him a little, took the edge off.

And she knows that. Knows that if she starts this with him too close to the edge, he'll slip over too soon and it won't be nearly as fun.

But if she works in little breaks, bits of down time, she can ramp him up so hard he'll be literally unable to see when he comes.

So, by the time she's returned with a chair, he's still very hard, but not quivering or leaking anymore. He's eager, anticipating, and very, very turned on.

She's standing between his legs, eyes sparkling with sex, mischief, and joy, and says, "Where to begin?"

"Rhetorical question?"

"Not necessarily."

He wrapped his legs around her waist and pulled her close for a long, wet kiss. "This is always good."

She returned the kiss, running her fingers through his hair and down his back. "Yes, it is." Her hands cupped his ass and slid over his legs. "Very good indeed."

She began the long, slow trail of kisses down his throat and chest, nibbling and licking the now smooth skin. "Feels so good. Any time you want to do this, and I'm all in favor of it."

"Trust me, this is going into the regular rotation."

She rolled her tongue over his nipple, and he hummed a little at that. It feels okay. It doesn't do the same thing for him that him doing it to her does for her. But it's nice, and certainly looks pretty, and when she pulls it with her teeth while rubbing against his dick with her tummy, that certainly gets his attention.

He hissed at it, and she looked back up at him.

"Good?"
"Yeah, both at once, very good."

That got a grin. "How about this?" She stepped back a little, and then took his cock in her mouth while pulling her fingernails over both nipples.

"Fuck!"

"You like that?"

He's nodding yes, but says, "Maybe you could try it again, just to make sure?"

She laughed at that. "Maybe I could, but probably not today. I think today I'm supposed to be fucking you."

"That could be part of it."

"It could be, but not today," She patted his hip. "Got other places you want my mouth."

"True."

She kissed his knee. "Like here."

"That's good."

She trailed her tongue down the inside of his leg, pausing to carefully lick the crease between his leg and pelvis. "And here."

"God, yes, here is very good." And it is. It really is. His leg flopped over, giving her better access, and he twisted a little, trying to get more of her mouth against him.

She steadied his hips with her hands. "Calm baby, I'll get all of you, eventually." Her breath on wet skin sent another flush of pleasure through him. She caught that, the way he squirmed a little when she spoke, so she licked a wide, wet stripe, achingly close to where he wants her to touch, but not quite there, and then gently blew on it.

"Ohhh…" He arched into it. Silly really, not like you can get more pressure with breath, but his body wants it, so it tried to move into it.

Another soft, wet lick, this one across the crease where leg becomes buttock, followed by a happy squirm-inducing breath.

She nibbles along that line, interspersing little wet licks with tiny not quite sharp bites, and his hands clench against the rope. He leans back, lets it take his weight, pushing his hips a little further over the edge of the dresser, anything to give her better access to his body.

"You're eager for this, aren't you?"

"God, yes!"

She shifted to his left leg, giving it the same treatment as his right, and he whined a little as she got closer and closer without actually touching where he wanted.

"Please, baby!"

"Please what?"
He spread his legs further apart. "Please stop teasing me."

He watched as she laid her hands on the insides of his thighs, hot skin on his, spread him a little
further apart, and lowered her head. He jerked, cursing in a very pleased sort of way, when she
licked from the tip of his tailbone to the back of his balls.

It's a hard position to move in. He can rest his feet in the drawers, but he can't really press down
against them, and he's sort of balanced on his second to last vertebrae, so he can't really thrust, best
he can do is curl his abs, pull up with them, get a little motion. But that doesn't mean he doesn't want
to thrust. He wants to grind into her, feel her tongue go deep and hard, and god, it's wet and squirmy
and feels so goddamn good he doesn't know what to do with himself.

She's pulling him apart with her hands, giving herself better access, and it's all wet, hot, nasty, dirty,
feels so good, and he can't believe she'll do it for him, and it's just so wrong and so right, and nothing
else feels like this, wide open, completely vulnerable, with her tongue lapping away at him, nose and
forehead rubbing his balls, it even sounds dirty, and makes him so hard. And he can't really see what
she's doing, but he can see his dick, and it's rock hard, leaking, vibrating with each heartbeat, flushed
purple he's so turned on, and like anytime she does something like this, he knows it's not enough, it
won't get him off, but it'll drive him crazy with wanting, take him so high he's not all there anymore,
burn off all of him that isn't lust and desire and pleasure and…

"Oh, fucking God, Abby!" she'd switched from lapping to working her tongue into him and that's
just another level of so good all he can do is float on it, suffused with pleasure, glowing and babbling
with it.

He whimpered when she pulled back and said, "Stand up."

He did it, though his legs and abs felt like Jello.

She reached up and untied him. If he was more with it, he'd notice that both of his arms were
completely asleep. But really all he was doing was moaning quietly at not getting fucked any more.

"Lie on the bed, hips flush with the edge, feet on the floor."

He got it together enough to do that. And was finally starting to come down enough to realize his
arms were on fire and his legs and abs knew they'd had a work out.

She stood between his legs, holding the lube and the first, smallest dilator. Lubed glass means almost
no friction, and what she'd been doing with her tongue meant he was already pretty lose, well, for
him, so he barely felt it slip in. Just a tiny bit of stretch, and she went back to licking him.

Her tongue lapping at his perineum, the dilator gently easing in and out, and once again he's so high
there's not a single thought in his head beyond just feeling all of this.

It feels like it's taking forever. Like he's floating in a sea's worth of gently, steadily increasing
pleasure.

She's rolling his balls on her tongue, and he feels like he's wide open, no idea how close to stretched
out he is, but he feels loose and open, wanting nothing more than the feel of her flush on him, hard in
him, riding him higher and higher as his muscles grow tighter, inching toward climax.

There's a little burn to go with the full, stretched feeling as she slides the next (last?) one in.

He's whimpering, head back, hands clenched in the blankets, trying to get her to touch his dick,
desperate for just a hint of friction to get him off, and she stopped dead, flipping around so her
pussy's at eye level.

He grabbed at her ass and hips, pulling her onto his mouth, licking and sucking like he's starving and she's the best meal he's ever seen. She's not touching him anymore. There's just the stretch from the glass and the taste/feel of her on his lips and tongue as she rides his face. And it's almost enough.

Anything would do it for him right now. A well placed breeze would get him off.

Abby moaning, crying as he eats her out, spreads her legs wider, touches with fingers, tongue, lips, and nose, and all of it goes straight to his cock. He's absolutely rigid, leaking, he can feel each drop of pre-cum ooze down the length of his dick, pooling on the naked skin at the base of his dick.

Her legs go tight on his shoulders, and he feels her shuddering over him. He slows, gentles his licks, but doesn't stop. He wants her taste, wants to bury himself in her, revel in the feel of her body hot and wet on his.

She pulls away after a few minutes, and he wasn't exactly on board with that plan, but he let her go, licking her juices off his lips.

"Watch."

So he does. Keeping his eyes on her as she steps into the strap on, pulling it snug over her hips. Sure, it fits a little oddly over her pregnant body, but they're fairly creative, and he's pretty handy, so adjusting the straps wasn't too much of an issue.

It's fairly thin, not very long, and she's stroking her hand over it, smoothing on the lube, and he has to look away because watching her jerk it off is going to make him come.

He's not sure if the fact that her wearing a fake dick turns him on so hard because he knows how what she'll do with it will feel, or if he loves the way it feels so much because of how it looks when she does it. Chicken, egg, no idea. But he does know that if it had been possible for him to get harder, it happened.

And he also knows that he was begging, flat out, no holds barred, pleading, with her to fuck him. Whimpering for it.

She knelt between his legs, and he propped himself on his elbows to watch. She eased the dilator out, and went back to licking him, rimming him, tongue slipping over and in and around in slick, wet, soft, sensations.

He's moaning, completely beyond words, beyond all thought past the need to get off.

Tim feels her shift his leg over her shoulder, and the hard, cold, thick feel of the plastic dick sliding into him. And usually the slide doesn't do much for him. Usually that's just part of getting to the feel of it rubbing his prostate and the gonna squirt, almost cumming feel of that pressure. But he's loose and open enough that it just slides in and that slide is delicious, taking him higher than he thinks he's ever been.

He has one leg over her shoulder as she thrusts up and in, hard, fast, tummy rubbing over his dick with each motion and he can't take much more of this, it's so good and so hot, and he's so hard, so gone in pleasure and violin string tight muscles clenching hard, begging for just a little more friction to spill him over the edge and one more thrust and a sort of grind and Tim was gone, replaced with a burning, sparkling ball of pleasured drenched nerves, twitching, shaking, yelling her name as he comes in long, wet stripes over his stomach and chest and hers.
By the time he's up, showered, and more or less himself again, dinner is looming on the horizon, so instead of a second round, getting dressed and going out becomes the next thing on the list.

When the idea of romantic Monday started to solidify in his mind, he hadn't had anything planned beyond lots of naked skin and sex. But when Abby started talking about the suit/kilt combo something beyond just playing at home went on the menu.

And before Abby left to go out, before he cleaned up or fired up the trimmers, he had made reservations for them to go out to dinner. After all, a good chunk of the fun of getting dressed up is going out wearing whatever it is you just put on.

So, out of the shower, towel around his hips, he's feeling very relaxed, very, very good, and awfully sassy. Kilt and top half of the suit are a must. Rock and roll vibe is definitely going to be part of this, too.

So, first things first, nail polish. He wishes there was a faster way to do this. Or given that it takes him a good fifteen minutes to get it on and properly dry, that he could wear it for more than a day at a time. But, while he's willing to push the edge on the NCIS dress code with his wrist cuff, showing up with nail polish on is a step too far.

Though it occurs to him, when he's head of his own department, he might be able to get some more wiggle room on the whole dress code thing.

Abby's putting her hair up while he waits for his nails to dry, so he asks, "How'd you go about getting out of the dress code?"

She turns to him. "What has you thinking about that?"

"If I'm going to take this much time to get polish on my nails, it'd be nice to keep it there for more than two hours."

"Ahhh… I told Jenny that khaki makes me break out in hives and cried on her until I got a life-long dress code exemption."

He laughs at that. "Somehow I don't see that approach working for me."

"Vance might believe you're allergic to office casual."

"Yes, but he won't care."

"True."

Once the polish is set, comes dressing.

He never wears underwear with the kilt. That's just not how you wear them. So, he's got an idea of how a kilt is supposed to feel, and today it's a rather different sensation. Rough, slightly nubby, it's not bad, but it's not normal either. He's a hell of a lot more aware of the fabric than usual.

Shirt, vest, he's looking for a tie. The black one that comes with the suit is fine, but he's got a hunter
green one that goes with the tartan really well. He's figuring he'll tie it loosely, leave the top button undone and then have Abby do his makeup when he notices she isn't wearing a collar yet and another idea hits.

On her dresser, she's got a t-shaped stand that all the collars, bracelets, and cuffs live on. He spends a moment sorting through them and finds the collar that goes with his cuff. She sees what he's doing and grins.

"Oh… I like that idea."

"Thanks. Let's see if it looks as good for real as it does in my head." He hands it to her. "Put it on me?"

She kisses the nape of his neck. "Anytime you want, baby."

He always likes the way it feels when she puts one of her collars on him. Sure, he knows what it's supposed to be about, and for them it's not really, but there's still the soft weight of it, and the smooth sensation of leather drawing tight on his throat. It's just… nice, in a tingly sort of way.

The collar's fairly subtle. Like the cuff, it's just a strap of black leather embossed with an arabesque. Black on black. It's under his shirt collar, so all anyone can see is an inch or so of a band of black at the base of his throat.

"Good?"

"Yeah, it is." She looks him up and down. "You still have Ducky's hat?"

"Uh… yeah, I think so. Why?" Okay, yeah, he still doesn't love himself in hats, but she'd certainly enjoyed him in the fedora. And a decent dose of enthusiastic compliments and petting as a result of the hat is softening his opinion of how he looks in them. (To the point where he kept it on all night after the signing of the Ketubah.)

"Where would it be?" Abby asks.

"Downstairs, closet."

"Okay. Put the jacket on and push the sleeves up a bit."

"All right."

He's still messing with his sleeves when she gets back up with the fedora. They look good scrunched up a bit, but it's hard to make them stay that way.

It's just a basic black hat, lighter gray hat band. Abby sets it on his head and steps back. "Oh yeah."

He checks himself in the mirror, polished black leather boots, McGee tartan, white dress shirt, top three buttons undone, black leather collar visible under it, black vest, buttoned up, black tux jacket, sleeves pushed up enough so his wrist cuff is visible, black nail polish, and a black fedora.

*Oh yeah.* Is certainly right.

"Eye makeup?" he asks Abby. He's liking this look a whole lot, and doesn't want to venture into overkill land.

She's nodding. "Yeah. Sit down; I'll do it subtle."
He's sitting on the bed and notices the eyeliner in her hand isn't his usual one.

"What's that?"

"Green."

"I thought you said subtle."

"It will be. Look up."

He does, and feels her color his waterline. A second later, she's done the other eye. This is usually when she's finished, but she turns and grabs another pencil and a little brush.

"Okay, what are you doing?"

"It'll look good. Hold still." He can feel the pencil smoothing under his eyelashes, and then the brush slipping back and forth.

"What color is it." It's too close to his eye to focus on, and all he can see is a gray blur.

"Medium gray."

"My eyes aren't going to swell shut, are they?" He is allergic to several popular brands of makeup, among them Abby's preferred brand.

"Nope. Bought these for you."

He hadn't known that. "Thank you."

"No problem. Okay, almost done, mascara."

"This really doesn't sound subtle."

"It will be; it's brown."

Tim's eyelashes, like his eyebrows, aren't actually black; they're dark brown. So when he wears black eyeliner or mascara it's not subtle at all. It's very clear that something is different. Meanwhile, dark brown does draw more attention to his eyes without making a clear "Look, I've Got On Eye Makeup!" kind of statement.

He holds perfectly still for another minute while she finishes up.

"All pretty?" he asks, something of a wry smile on his face.

She kisses the tip of his nose. "You're lovely." Then gets up from his lap. "Go look."

She's right, it's subtle, and he's surprised at this, not very girly, either. His eyes just look bigger and greener.

She's standing behind him with her chin on his shoulder. "You like it?"

He's nodding. "Yeah, I do. It's cool."

"Yes, it is. Now, out of here. I'm going to get dressed and want it to be a surprise."
He whistled when she steps into his office, eyes tracing her body from head to toe. "Oh Abby!"

"A surprise" is a black cheongsam with green and silver dragons worked over the... it can't be silk, it's stretchy over her belly, but it's got a silk sheen and looks silky. Her hair's up in a bun, and she's got black lacquered chopsticks in it. She's done something with her eye makeup so they look more almond shaped than normal. And to top it all off, (bottom it all under?) is a pair of dainty, little, black silk slippers.

He more or less leaps to his feet, closing on her fast, licking his lips, wrapping his hands around her waist.

"God, you're so beautiful."

She grins widely at that, the gasps when he picks her up and sets her on his desk.

"Tim?" she asks as he's kneeling in front of her, pushing the skirt of the dress up.

"Dinner can wait, this can't! Look so good, got to taste you."

So, they're running fifteen minutes late as they walk, (both of them looking awfully relaxed, slightly rumpled, and very sassy) from the Metro stop to the restaurant.

They pause at the door, waiting for the people inside to come out. Tim's barely paying any attention to them, he's looking at Abby. But she is, so she sees who's coming out before he does.

"Sarah!"

Tim's sister looks away from her friend, sees Abby, sees Abby's tummy and says, "Abby, oh my God! Look at you! Tim posts pics, but..." Her hand is hovering over Abby's tummy, waiting for permission. Abby nods. "She's really in there," Sarah says as she feels Kelly moving.

Abby and Tim are grinning at this. "Yeah, she really is," Abby answers.

Sarah's still looking at Abby's tummy as she says, "I can feel her kicking! That's so cool." Then she seems to notice there are other people with them. "Abby McGee, this is Amber Greenwalt, my editor. Amber, this is my sister-in-law." Abby offers her hand and shakes, wondering why Sarah didn't introduce Tim, but that question is very rapidly answered as Sarah says, still focusing on Kelly, "You going to introduce your friend?"

Tim laughs at that, and the sound of his voice causes Sarah to jerk, looking up and really seeing him. "You've known me your whole life, Sarah."

"Holy shit, Tim!" Granted the lighting isn't too bright, and he is wearing a hat, and she didn't really pay all that much attention to the guy next to Abby, having homed in on the pregnant belly, but still, not recognizing her brother feels really weird. "Are you wearing a kilt?"

"Yes. I do get dressed up for date night, you know."

"Oh my god!" Her eyes are on the verge of falling out of her head they're so wide open right now, and he's smiling, a second from laughing.

"Good oh-my-god or the whole-world-is-about-toimplode oh-my-god?"
"Who the hell are you and what did you do with Tim!"

"It's really me."

"No, it's not! Tim tries to be cool and ends up looking like a dork who's trying too hard. Pseudo Tim or whoever you are actually looks cool, thus, who the hell are you?" she says with a wink.

He laughs at that. "So, where's that man of yours?"

She smiles. "At home, this was a working dinner for me."

"Working how?"

"Oh God, sorry. Amber, Tim McGee, my brother. You know him as Thom Gemcity."

He shakes Amber's hand. "Final edits?"

Sarah shakes her head. "Super top secret writer stuff. If it works, I'll tell you about it."

"Uh huh… And when will you know if it worked?"

"Round about Christmas-time. This works out, and I'll have a big announcement for all of you."

"Cool."

She steps back and really looks at him again, nodding. "Looks good."

"Thanks."

They're tucking into some really delicious miso soup when Tim asks, "So, what did you add to the honeymoon pack?"

Abby grins. "Not sure I should tell you."

"Really?" Tim's grinning and very intrigued, soup forgotten.

"Yeah, I'm fairly sure that's not the sort of thing Ziva told Breena and I about to have it blabbed around."

He sighs, exaggeratedly loud. "Well, if you shouldn't tell… You shouldn't tell… But you know, he is the guy who picked the lock to my apartment, heard us having sex, and still walked in on us so he could see the action. He's got a lot of bad privacy karma to work off, you know…"

Her smile widens. "Yeah. I do. Okay, you cannot say anything about this."

He's grinning. "I never do. What was it?"

She takes another sip of the soup, then says, "Everything you ever wanted to know about oral sex. You said it had to fit into the bag, so it's three mini books of basic, intermediate, and advanced technique. He, like a lot of guys, isn't nearly as good at it as he thinks he is."

Tim laughs, really, really hard at that. He's practically crying by the time he calms down. "Tony Motormouth DiNozzo's not all that hot with oral?"
Abby nods.

Tim starts laughing again.

"It's not that uncommon of a problem, lots of guys think they're a lot better at it than they actually are."

That stops Tim cold. He's staring at her, voice sounding very wary as he asks, "What do you mean by *lots of guys*?"

That makes her laugh. "Not you."

His look is questioning.

"Really, not you."

"But you'd tell me, right, if it was me?"

That makes her laugh even harder. "Have I ever had any trouble telling you how to get me off?"

"No."

They stop talking for a few seconds as the server clears away the soup and puts several sushi rolls in front of them. Abby takes that break to switch from sitting across from Tim to next to him. Not only is it easier to share food that way, but they can talk a little more quietly.

Once settled, she says, "Look, back the first time we dated, you mainly had enthusiasm and a willingness to take orders going for you. And that'll get you pretty far. I've yet to meet a woman who wasn't thrilled by a guy who'll dive in and eat pussy like he's starving and it's every favorite meal he's ever had, and who doesn't act like it's a fatal insult to his masculinity to be told that he needs to adjust his technique. But, you might remember, I was telling you a lot of left, right, harder, up, use fingers, sorts of things, too."

He nods, chewing. He does remember the first few times he went down on her that yep, she did give him a lot of directions, and he was more than cool with that, because the idea was get-Abby-off, and anything that made that more likely was something he was in favor of.

"Am I still doing that?"

"Nope."

She picks up a piece of their Tokyo roll. "Between then and the second time we got together, you got some technique to go with enthusiasm, and baby, you give head like a woman… Like a lesbian."

He thinks about that for a second, taking a sip of his sake. "That's a compliment, right?"

"Oh yeah." She grins and nods.

That got both of them thinking, which meant they both started their questions at the same time, followed by a few seconds of you-go-first-no-you, finally they settled on Abby going first.

"So, you didn't really date, not a whole lot, how did you get that good?"

"I didn't get a lot of hands… mouth on practice, but I did research the hell out of it."

"Research?"
"I'm not a woman, and when I wrote the T.M. Gee books I needed to convincingly write one, so... I watched and read a ton of porn by and for women. Lots and lots and lots of it. For a few years there, I had a lesbian porn collection that would have made Tony jealous. Or maybe not, cause it was real lesbian porn, not lesbian porn for men, which is, well, not really the same at all."

She's laughing at that. "And you would know."

He's nodding, grinning. "Oh yeah, I would know! Anyway, lots and lots of lesbian porn and the main thing I learned about oral was: your tongue isn't a dick, so don't use it like one; no woman ever got off from tongue thrusting. If you're a guy, and you're doing that, it's because it gets you off. Also, there's a whole lot more to a pussy than just a clit, so play with all of it, and don't narrow focus until you've hit endgame. Once I had the theory down, practice kind of took care of itself."

"Ah... So, what did you want to ask me?"

He's looking a little sheepish at this, but he is curious, and he's never actually asked... He eats another bite of their dinner, putting it off for another few seconds.

So, the thing is, Tim knows Abby likes girls, at least on a theoretical level. They occasionally check out the same girl at a club, and tag team story telling sometimes involves other women. (Like Breena, for example, or the girl they're both checking out at the club, especially if they happen to be at the club while telling the story.) But he's never flat out asked if she's had sex with another woman, and she's never flat out said.

So he smiles, hopes learning the answer to this isn't going to bite him in the ass, and asks, "How do you know?"

"How do I know what?" She licks a drop of the sauce off the tip of her chopstick.

"That I give head like a lesbian."

Her eyebrows shoot up, and she looks shocked. "Did you not know that?"

He rolls his eyes a little. "Would I be asking if I knew?"

"Practical experience."

He nods, noticing a complete and utter lack of jealousy, files that under interesting things he'll think about later, and says, "So you've had girlfriends, too?"

"Never with one of them long enough to qualify as a girlfriend. Not that I was ever great with relationships before you, but... basically, I like sex with girls and boys, but do friendships better with girls and relationships better with guys."

"So, you really are bi?"

"I couldn't care less about the label. It's just skin, you know? And it feels good rubbing against mine, so if I like the person inside the skin, we're good. And about one out of five times that skin was shaped like mine. I guess whatever you are is your default idea of normal, because, like, I can see you don't like guys, but I can't figure out why."

Tim's never thought about why he's not into guys, just that he isn't. "Just don't."

"Yeah I know." She'll looking a little perplexed by this, but settled at the same time. Like she's talking about a puzzle she's come to terms with never solving. "You love Jimmy. He's objectively
attractive. You're both good at and very enthusiastic about sex. And, nothing, from either of you."

"Yep." Tim's nodding away at that, because, well, yeah, he agrees with it. He's never felt even the slightest desire to do anything sexual with Jimmy even though he does A: love him, and B: as guys go, Jimmy's in really good shape.

"You'd rather watch Breena and I make out, no touching on your part, just frustrated watching, than have him get you off, even though that would actually result in an orgasm."

"Again, yep."

"And somehow that makes sense to you," she says sipping her tea.

Tim shrugs. "I'm not sure it makes sense. It's probably not logical. It just is how it is. I mean, I read things, back in college, about how we're born bisexual, and get shaped into straight or gay, but if that's true, I can't ever remember a time where I felt that way. I can; however, remember being three and having a crush on one of the girls in my preschool."

Abby smiles at that.

"So, yeah, like girls. Love girls. " He strokes her face. "Love you. And yeah, I'm well aware of what we did this afternoon and the fact that I've got on eyeliner, nail polish, no body hair below my eye lashes, and am wearing a skirt as I say this, which means I'm probably the swishiest straight guy you know. I'm certainly the swishiest straight guy I know. But, yeah, no interest in guys. Just, none. And given how my first semester of college went, if I had had any interest in guys, at all, I probably would have been sleeping with them just to piss my dad off."

That makes her chuckle, and he kisses her gently, enjoying this conversation.

"But you don't think it's icky?" Abby asks.

He thinks about that before saying, "Not sure what you mean."

"You got a really uncomfortable look on your face when the idea of putting my clothing on came up."

"Okay, yeah." That does it for him. He knows what she means by icky. "And honestly, I don't know. If I've ever been hit on by a guy, it was subtle enough I didn't notice it."

"You got felt up by one when we were in New Orleans."

"Okay, true, and yeah, I remember that feeling weird. Mostly because it took me so damn long to figure out it wasn't you doing it. But I was also kind of drunk, insanely turned on, and in a serious party mood. Hit me with that sober, and I might not be so cool about it." He thinks about that some more. "Okay, honestly, it was about on par with hugging Diane."

"Gibbs' Diane?"

"Yeah. It was just weird. Someone I didn't want in my personal space pressed against my body. Not fun. It wasn't gross or anything. Like, I think Tony threw up after he kissed that transsexual, and there was nothing like that. I just didn't like it."

"Fair enough. I'm just glad you don't think it's icky that I like girls."

"You know, I don't think that's ever going to be a problem for me. Not sure I want you bringing any
real live ones home…" He thinks about that and the fantasies they tell each other. "Okay, yeah, I want you to do that… But when my dick isn't doing the thinking, I realize that might end up being a lot messier than I'd like."

Abby nods and smiles. "I love you. That's never, ever going to change. If just us is what makes you happy and comfortable, then just us is fine. But, the offer for more is always open. It's just got to be a two way street. Any time you're willing to play with a guy; I'm all for bringing home a girl. Or both at once: Jimmy and Breena would be willing to play with us."

His eyebrows shoot up. He's not entirely sure what the feeling surging through him is. A whole lot of surprise, but there's something else there, too, and he doesn't know what it is. Finally, he pulls himself together enough to say, "You know that for a fact?"

She wiggles her hand a little, signaling sort of. "Breena's interested. Like you, I'm not sure if Jimmy's cool with it. We've talked about it, but I don't think she's talked to him about it."

"Oh." That idea, Breena and Abby talking about the four of them having sex together makes his mouth go dry and his dick twitch. "You two talk about us…" He's not sure what the right word is, not even sure what precisely they're talking about, so he tries a few. "Foursoming? Swapping? Swinging?"

"A few times. And as a foursome. Either all of us or none of us."

The flash of that image, all four of them tangled together in bed is simultaneous very sexy and terrifying. "Like just messing around talking, or like talking?"

Abby's eyebrows furrow, and she eats another bite of her sushi. "I don't understand what you're asking."

"Are you guys serious about it?"

"Enough to have figured out that it would have to be all four of us together. If it's all four of us, well… On the good side, we all get to see and touch and play. On avoiding the bad side: no jealousy, no wondering, we'd all know exactly what the others are doing."

Tim swallows hard, takes a drink of his water, swallows again. He's honestly not sure if he's so turned on he's going to fuck her through the wall here and now, or if he's so scared he's going to wet his kilt.

Abby strokes his face. "What's going on? I have no idea what that expression on your face means."

"Probably because I don't, either. You two really talk about this?" There's a hefty dose of amazement in his voice.

"We talk about lots of stuff."

"Yeah, but… Do you talk with Ziva about stuff like that?"

Abby smiles at that. "No. Though she's the one who got the conversation between Breena and I started. She saw how we were playing with each other to wind you guys up and asked if the four of us were sleeping together."

"When was that?"

"Remember the girl scout fantasy?"
He nods. Yes he remembers that, fondly.

"Remember how we were dancing with each other before that?"

He nods at that, too. Yep, he liked that a lot, as well. All three girls all close up and rubbing against each other. He could be dead, and he'd still like that.

"So, we're dancing, you're looking like you want to eat us alive, and she asked."

"Oh."

"Next day Breena and I got talking with each other about it."

"Huh. That was almost a year ago. You're just mentioning it now?"

"Didn't come up before now. Not like there's any rush, is there?"

"What? No… At least, I don't think so… No. Shit..." He spends a long minute just looking at her, kind of confused, partially wondering if this is a game to wind him up. "Really, you two talk about this?"

"Yeah, we do. Last time was when we were getting Tony's presents. You look really confused."

"That's probably a good word for it." He feels like, maybe, if he could get some more rules in place, some more of an idea of exactly what's going on, he can find his footing again. "So, like a one off thing, or regular, like, just playing or… what, becoming a…" he flounders around for a word that would cover this, "quadruple?"

"We were talking about it as a one off thing, with an understanding that if it was fun, we'd probably do it again."

The fact that Abby and Breena have it this far planned out stuns him. Then he realizes what she said, and he's able to identify part of why this scares the hell out of him. "What if it's not fun?"

She smiles, and he can see that's a concern for her, as well. "And that's why we're not in any rush. That's why we talk about it. Do you think it'd be fun?"

"God, I don't know! Yes? Have your best, hottest fantasy come true, sure, that's good. Assuming Jimmy or I didn't freak out. Big fucking assumption there. I mean, you and Breena and… But Jimmy'd be there too… Really, I don't feel any need, at all, to have sex with him watching. Joking around about it or talking is one thing, doing it with him… I don't know. I mean, yeah, I love Breena and… but…" He's gesturing with his hands like they can somehow fill in the blanks in his sentences. "Okay, the night before we got married, he was joking about sleeping with you, and I almost hit him. Seriously, my hand was in a fist, and I was going to punch the shit out of him. And, I'm not feeling that right now, but he's also not actually here."

Abby nods. "I think when they lost Jon, something shifted with you two."

Tim thinks about that, remembering holding Jimmy as he cried, and realized that that's the most intimate he's ever been with another guy, and not only did it not freak him out, but it felt really right. Same thing with sleeping with him and Breena when they got home. Someone he loved was hurting, and touch is comfort, so it didn't matter that the body in question was male. "I think you're right about that, but… still… that's a huge leap."

"I know. And look, nothing we do is going to upset this. We love them. They love us. We love each
other. They love each other. Anything ever happens it'll be because of that love, not in spite of it."
She touched his face again. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I am. Just, lots to process."

"Well, don't think about it too hard. Still got stuff to do tonight." Her hand slips up his leg. "Oh. Hard might be the operative word. Seems like at least part of you likes this idea."

"Yeah, well that part of me isn't in charge for a good reason. It likes lots of stuff that might not be great ideas."

That gets a laugh out of Abby. She leans in close, licks his ear lobe, and says, "And it really likes the idea of me and Breena, sitting on the sofa, talking about sex with each other and our favorite guys, doesn't it."

He groans at the idea of that. "Oh, fuck yes!"

"Wanna hear more about it?"

"Yes, but not right this second. We took the metro here, and I'm wearing a kilt. Everyone in DC doesn't need to see me with a hard-on."
Surveillance

Having half of your team gone means you spend a lot of time on rotation. Tim and Gibbs are playing backup for the other teams or doing paperwork until Tony and Ziva get back.

And backup means they're sitting in a van on stakeout.

And stakeout is boring enough normally, but today it's god awful torture because it's not interesting enough to distract Tim.

Okay, so by this point in his life, Tim should know that endorphins make him do stupid things. They certainly shoot his ability to determine if immediate pleasure is worth longer term consequences to hell and gone.

God the shaving was so worth it, and they are definitely doing that again. But, as long term consequences go... He's never had any form of VD, but he figures how he feels now has to be close.

Apparently he's squirming because Gibbs finally says to him, "You go roll around in poison ivy again?"

Actually that's a pretty accurate comparison. The last time he felt like this he did have that case of extremely unfortunately located poison ivy. Though, best he can figure, baking soda paste won't help this. (If he was at the Navy Yard instead of in a van listening in on a smuggling ring, he'd try just to see if it would help.)

"No."

"Gotta use the head?"

He's staring at Gibbs like he's insane for asking. "No!"

"Then quit squirming like a barely potty-trained kid."

And for what he thinks is a good half hour, Tim focuses on the case, keeps an ear on the stuff they're recording, but, well, it's boring. Really boring. Yes, this is important intel. Collin's team has been working on this smuggling ring for eight months, slowly building up a mountain of evidence to take at least twenty-five people down, and they're all thrilled to have two extra bodies to keep an eye on things and get them a bit of down time, but God, it's boring!

So, he starts squirming again because he can swear he can feel it growing back in. Every single hair, and by now he's pretty well convinced he's got fifteen million of them on his balls alone, and they are all razor sharp and slowly creeping through his skin.

He feels the hand connect with the back of his head a split second before he hears Gibbs say, "Focus."

"Focusing, Boss."

Unfortunately he's focusing on the hair growing back in.

Jimmy was dead right, this is like wearing a coat of liquid sandpaper. Sharp sandpaper.

But he's trying. He's keeping at least a quarter of an ear on the discussion the mic is picking up, but right now they're talking about getting groceries. Nothing even remotely interesting. Though it does
remind him they're getting low on tea (in addition to everything else, they didn't do their usual Saturday morning grocery run this weekend), so he flashes Abby a quick text about that.

So, all in all, there was a good forty-five seconds he wasn't thinking about it, but as soon as the text is done, there's nothing else to pay attention to, so the scratchy, irritated, squirmy sensation comes back.

Three minutes later, Gibbs stands up, kicks the swivel chair Tim's in so he's facing him, and leans down toward him, hands on the arms of the chair, more or less the only position where Gibbs can tower over him.

"What the fuck did you do?"

Okay, Tim knows that's the Fear of Dad coming out, but he's got no clue why. Okay, yeah, him squirming around is probably annoying, but he doesn't think he needs this.

"Jethro?"

"There's only one reason a guy squirms like that, and it's a fresh case of crabs. What did you do?"

"Whoa! No!" He's pushing the chair back, but can't get any further away from Gibbs because the chair is back against the desk, and waving his hands in front of him in a don't attack gesture.
"Nothing like that, at all! Shaved all my hair off."

Gibbs steps back, looking really confused. "What?"

Tim rubs his eyes, looking horrendously embarrassed, though he'll take this over Gibbs killing him for fooling around on Abby.

"We like to really celebrate weddings, so, Abby and I shaved it all off." He pulls up his pant leg a few inches, showing off a very smooth calf.

"Why would you do that?" Gibbs is somewhere between horrified, stupefied, and Tim thinks there might be a hint of titillated curious in there, too.

"It felt really good." He shrugs a little. "You know how her skin feels really good right after she shaves or waxes?" Gibbs nods. "Well, yours does, too. It's… um… really soft and smooth, and girls really like soft and smooth, too, so… yeah… anyway… Good weekend." Tim sighs. "This part now, growing back in, not so much fun."

Gibbs nods at that, too. "Save it for the beginning of the long weekend next time."

"Yes, Boss."

Another minute passes, and with it the adrenaline spike of Gibbs about to attack. And when that passed, Tim starts to get pissed. He looks at Gibbs and says, "Crabs? Why the hell would you go there? You really think I'd fuck around on Abby?"

Gibbs looks embarrassed, and Tim thinks that's the first time he's ever seen that expression on Jethro's face. "This is why you don't assume. Seen the way you're squirming more than a few times back on active duty, and it was always the same thing. First two guesses were wrong, so…"

"Well, not this time." His eyes are narrowed and he's feeling really insulted. "I love her, you know that, right?"

"Yeah."
"So…"

"Guys do dumb things when they're scared. Even guys in love. Kid on the way, less sex at home, wife's changing. It can be scary."

"I'm fine. Not scared, at all. I love the way she looks right now, and judging by the fact you won't let me be alone with her for more than three minutes when we're at work, I figured you had noticed that, too. As for sex, I'm the most-fucked guy you know. Got laid seven times over the weekend. Friday morning, Saturday night, Sunday morning, at the wedding, and three times yesterday. Tony, who is on his honeymoon with enough Viagra to put him into a coma, doesn't have those kind of numbers. When would I have even had time fuck someone else? Been a bit busy this weekend."

Gibbs nods.

Tim thinks about it. "Did you fuck around on Shannon when she was pregnant? Is that why you thought that?"

That gets the Gibbs glare of death aimed at him.

"And me even asking it is pissing you off, isn't it?"

Gibbs nods.

"Back at ya."

"I'm sorry I asked."

"Damn right."

They're sitting in the van, staring at the monitors, listening to more random chatter.

"Why'd you become a cop?"

"Huh?" Tim isn't paying attention to Gibbs so he misses the question the first time he asked.

So Gibbs asks again. "Why'd you become a cop? You didn't train for it. No one in your family is a cop. You had options that paid better and would have been a lot easier."

"Jethro?" He doesn't know why Gibbs is wondering this. Seems pretty random given where they are and what they're doing. Granted, stakeouts tend to lead to pretty random conversations.

"Fornell asked me a while back, and I realized I didn't know. I know why Tony's a cop. I know why Ziva is. I know why Abby's in her lab, and why Ducky's in Autopsy. I know why I'm here. But I don't know why you are, or Jimmy for that matter."

"Jimmy's here because he really likes it. When he started here, it was a gig to help pay for med school. He stayed when he graduated because he likes it here."

"Oh."

"I'm here because I didn't have the balls to break the law."

"Tim?" It's clear by the look on Gibbs' face that that's not the answer he's expecting.
"I figured out really quick that what I liked about computers was the fact that I was better at them than almost anyone else. It was the first time in my life that was true about anything. And at my level, you don't keep score by money, it's about what systems you can crack, who you can take down. You've got two options, you can be Anonymous, breaking into other people's systems, blowing secrets away, or you can be me, keeping the secrets safe, going after guys like Anonymous.

"I'm a realist. I'm good. I'm damn good. I'm probably in the top 1000 hackers on the planet. And if I did it full time, I'd probably be in the top hundred. But that means there'd still be plenty other guys who could catch me.

"And catching each other is also how to keep score. The guy who takes out Anonymous wins the big prize. And I didn't have the balls for it. But stick a badge in my pocket, and suddenly I can do what I like, and not have to worry about going to prison for it. Sure, there's still a target on my back, but it's pretty small because no one knows who Tim McGee is. But since I've been at NCIS, the number of times our systems get hit has gone way up because they have noticed that someone at NCIS knows what he's doing. Eventually someone will take me down, count coup on me. But I've got a badge, so I'm on the side of the angels."

Gibbs just stares at him, amazed.

Tim shrugged a little. "Eventually, once I got out in the field, started working with you guys, it became about saving people. Originally, it was about not going to jail for doing what I liked to do. That's probably true for a lot of the guys down in Cybercrime."

He smiles at Gibbs. "Like in the westerns. The guy who puts on the badge doesn't much care about law, he just doesn't want to hang for his crimes. And eventually he decides that justice thing is important, and the badge changes him, but that's not why he got it in the first place."

---

Two more hours creep by. Tim's back with fresh coffee for both of them. He's been wondering something, and since Gibbs just asked him about his life…

"Why didn't the shaving thing freak you out?"

"Tim?"

"If I told Tony that, he'd be cracking jokes right and left, watching me out of the corner of his eyes like I'm radioactive, and almost as squirmy as I am. It just rolls off of you. I get the fact that nothing I do bugs Jimmy, nothing bugs him period, but… why doesn't it bug you?"

Gibbs shrugs. The look on his face saying, It just doesn't. The fact he's periodically done his chest and back to make different girlfriends happy has a lot to do with it, too, though he's never gone that far.

"Would have bugged my dad."

Gibbs shrugs at that, too.

He touches the cuff on his wrist. "Those bruises didn't bug you, either."

"Wouldn't say that."

"You know what I mean. You were concerned, not disgusted. Only time I've seen you disgusted
when it comes to sex was Tony using those girls."

"That's disgusting." Gibbs takes a sip of the coffee, gives Tim a pay better attention look, and hands the cup back to him, taking the one Tim was about to drink from.

"Not disagreeing. But get a hundred guys together, ask them which is gross, taking all the hair below your eyelashes off or having sex with a fourteen-year-old who wants to have sex with you and snuck into a frat party to do it, and my guess is eighty or more of them will side with taking all the hair off over the girl."

"Tim, what are you actually asking me?"

Tim thinks about that; he is kind of beating around the bush here. But he's also having a kind of hard time figuring out how to get closer to what he's wondering about. "I'm not sure if I really am."

"Try it. I don't like the question, I won't answer."

"How did you know about padding the cuffs?" Okay, still not on target, but a lot closer.

Gibbs smiles at that. "Became a cop in '91. Worked with guys who came up in the '70s and '80s. Rules were a bit different then, but one thing stays the same, leave no bruises."

"Oh."

"Expecting something else?"

"Yeah."

"Didn't even own my own cuffs until after Shannon passed. The thing with the ropes I learned with her."

Tim raises an eyebrow.

"Her parents had a place in the mountains. We had some good weekends up there. Bed was metal, tended to squeak if you pulled on it too hard, wasn't as sturdy as I would have liked. We tried a few things, and she figured that if you put the rope under the mattress, that worked just fine."

Tim chuckles at that, smiling. "That why you don't get freaked out? Been there, done that?"

Gibbs shrugs at that, too. It's probably related to why it doesn't bug him, though he suspects he's been there and done that because it doesn't bother him, not the other way around. "Always figured bodies were bodies and it didn't matter what you did with them as long as you got the job done. Back in basic, I had a friend, Mattheson, and she—"

"She?" Tim's eye's widen. Best he knows, Gibbs was in basic back in '76-'77, before there were women on active duty.

"Yes. One of the first female Marines. She was a damn good Marine, fast, strong, knew what she was doing, took a ton of shit from the other guys and just kept going. She didn't much like me at first, either, thought I was hitting on her, just being subtle about it—"

"Were you?"

Gibbs shrugs at that, too. "Already loved Shannon. Knew I was going to marry her. But she was far away and letters didn't come every day, and Mattheson was there. I just… liked talking to her."

There's a soft look on Gibbs' face as he remembers his friend.
"Liked the fact she was there and not a guy?"

Gibbs nods.

"I get that." And Tim does. For as much of his life as he's spent in male-oriented activities, he genuinely likes women, and just having them near is nice.

"But, point is, she was a good Marine. And it didn't matter that she didn't have the same kind of body I did. And ever since then, guy, girl, gay, straight, whatever, just didn't matter if you did your job the way it needed to be done."

"What happened with her? She a general somewhere?"

Gibbs shakes his head sadly. "No. KIA."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"I was, too. Got the news two days before leave. Couldn't even tell Shannon why I was so down. My other girlfriend got killed? Finally told her a buddy bit it, never told her the buddy's first name."

"Would it have bugged her?"

"I don't know. Didn't want to risk it. Things were going so good; I wasn't about to do anything that might have messed that up."

Tim thinks there's some warning in that sentence, maybe his conversation with Abby last night has him primed for that, or maybe Gibbs really does know and see all that happens to those he cares about.

"You still talking about you and Shannon?"

"Mostly." For once, Tim's having a hard time reading the look on Gibbs' face.

"You talking about me and Abby, too?"

"Am I?" And Tim gets the sense that he can't read the look on Gibbs' face, because Gibbs also isn't entirely sure what's going on.

"This part of why you were thinking crabs?"

"No. Just a feeling."

*Keep talking*, Tim's expression says.

Gibbs shrugs.

"Okay, this won't work if neither of us talks. What's the gut sensing?"

"Just, not blind. I know you" And Tim understands he means him and Abby, not just him personally, "and the Palmers get on well. Get on a whole lot better than most couples ever will. Saw the way you and Jimmy watch the girls. Saw the way the four of you dance."

Tim nods, drinks some of his coffee, realizes at the wedding was probably the first time Gibbs ever saw the four of them play with each other, and goes back to listening to the feed. *Lots to process* all right.
One of the reasons he loves Gibbs is that Gibbs just lets him think. Sure, he'll pressure Tim for answers, fast, if it's about a case. On the case, he's Scotty, Gibbs is Kirk, and it's his job to get the Enterprise flying in three minutes flat. But if it's personal, he doesn't have to come up with snap opinions and decisions, he can take the time to weigh out what's happening and try to really wrap his head around it.

More than two years ago, when he was getting ready to start courting Abby, Tim hunted down advice to do a good job of it.

And he's not done processing. Lots of thoughts still bopping around. But maybe some advice would be a good thing, too.

"We do get on well. I love Jimmy and Breena and they love us. And I love Abby. She's my world. And we don't want to mess it up. This is beyond really good. It's excellent. Living the dream. Got the happily ever after, you know?"

Gibbs nods.

"We talk about it… With them." Tim's expression silently asks if Gibbs is getting what he's saying.

The look on Gibbs face lets Tim know he's following along without Tim having to be more explicit.

"And until yesterday that was just a game. Hot stories for each other. But, it turns out that Abby and Breena talk about it, too. In a maybe-we'll-actually-do-it sort of way."

Gibbs' eyes widen a little at that, and Tim nods.

"And look, I've got everything, I mean everything, I could have ever possibly wanted. And more than that, I know I have it. I've got the cake, the ice cream, the whipped cream on top, with the cherry and sprinkles, but, it looks like there might be a possibility of coffee to go with it.

"And I do not want to fuck this up. At all. I mean, how often do we get called in because some moron couldn't just be happy with what he had?"

Gibbs nods at that, too.

"But, I'd be lying if I said I don't want it. It's my two favorite women on earth, together… What guy doesn't want that? And if it works… I mean… amazing sex with two gloriously beautiful women who love me… But if it doesn't..." Tim's shaking his head. "You got any advice?"

Gibbs' turn to think, and he does. Tim gets the sense that this is miles beyond the sort of providing fatherly advice he ever expected he'd have to deal with.

But, after about ten minutes he asks, "This wouldn't just be sex, would it? There's a big difference between the girls do something special your birthday, and making this a real relationship."

"I don't know. But, I kind of feel like if we could do it once, then we'd probably want to do it a whole lot. And I feel like if we could do it… then yeah, it'd be more than just a way to blow off steam on the weekends."

Gibbs smiles at that, sighs, and says, "Go slow. You guys become a foursome, none of us are going to care. Have fun, enjoy it. If it blows up, we're all gonna care. It goes sour, and you might rip our whole family apart. And if it goes great, we'll be happy for you.

"Wait until after Kelly's on the outside and you're settled into being parents, and Jimmy and Breena
know the new baby is healthy."

Tim's eyebrows shoot up.

"Any of the girls suddenly stop drinking at celebrations and the gig is up. I take it they aren't telling anyone yet?"

"Just us, Ducky, and Penny. If things aren't right, and they have to terminate; they don't want to have to tell everyone."

Gibbs nods, that makes sense to him. "When'll they know?"

Tim does some quick math. "Middle to late June."

Gibbs seems to file that information and gets back on target. "Biggest problem I can see is you flip out when Abby flirts with someone else, and she does it for you. I can see you're generally okay with her snuggling with him. And I can see she doesn't mind Breena cuddling on you. And I could see both of you were happy as clams at the idea of the girls with each other."

Tim nods at that. He and Jimmy had spent a good five minutes just watching them dance with each other at the wedding, enjoying it a whole lot. Anyone who was watching could have seen that, and apparently Gibbs did.

"So, if you're gonna do this, have him kiss Abby, really kiss her, and you watch. You don't want to deck him; you kiss Breena. He doesn't want to hit you; maybe you can do it. Same for the girls. Make them watch. And then take the time to really think about it. Make sure you're really okay."

Tim gives him a self-deprecating look. "Good to get input from someone who can think about it with his brain."

Gibbs snorts a short laugh at that. "Tim, whatever you do, take your time and don't be stupid about it. You've got good instincts, trust 'em."

"Thanks."
Grocery shopping is traditionally a team sport for the McGee family. There is a very good reason for this: impulse control.

Non-pregnant Abby generally has no problems going into the grocery store, getting what she needs and leaving. Pregnant Abby is a somewhat different story. She has a very difficult time walking past the frozen food aisle and not buying every flavor of Ben and Jerry's. As for Tim, well, a big part of his staying in good shape diet strategy is not being around large quantities of delicious, fatty, sugary foods.

Once again, it is vastly easier to not eat a pack of Nutterbutters if there is no pack of Nutterbutters to eat.

Plus, it's a lot faster to split the list, which Tim has organized by aisle, grab everything on the list, and get out of there.

So, he handles the food on the outside ring of the store, meat, veg, bakery, dairy. She gets the inside area.

Then they meet back up, take the stuff out of each other's carts that they don't actually need, make sure they got everything on each other's list, and out they go, all the food they need for the next week.

It takes about an hour.

It also happens, traditionally, on Saturday morning after breakfast (or lunch, if they had a lay in) when neither of them are hungry.

So, it is with a sense of trepidation that Tim is entering the grocery store, alone, on a Tuesday night, not yet having eaten anything.

With all of the wedding stuff this weekend, they didn't get any shopping done, and while it's true they're not unused to eating out, they're also down to a quarter inch of milk, one serving of decaf coffee, no fruit, and no breakfast food.

So, shopping really does have to happen.

And Abby's got about another hour of work to go. (The upside of long-term surveillance is regular hours. Eight to five for two more days, they'll be sitting in a van.)

So he's grabbing a cart and checking the list, hoping he doesn't go too far off the reservation with this.

An hour and a half later he pulled into the Navy Yard parking lot, and Abby hopped into the car. She kissed him, buckled in, and then looked around in confusion.

"Thought you said you were going to get groceries."

"I did."
Traditionally I-got-groceries in her roadster means grocery bags in the tiny little back seat. She looks behind her to make sure she didn't somehow miss them.

"Trunk?"

"Not exactly."

And suddenly she knew exactly why he's twenty minutes late getting to her. He'd gotten the groceries and taken them home. "Did you get five hundred dollars worth of groceries again?"

"No." He's staring, very resolutely, at the road in front of him.

"Tim?"

"Four eighty-six."

He can feel her roll her eyes. "Oh, Lord."

"You'll like them."

"Not liking the groceries has never been the problem. Not eating all of them over the course of two days is the issue."

"It's mostly organic and healthy."

"Yeah, I remember you shopping organic and healthy last time. Just because it's organic, responsibly sourced dark chocolate-fudge with sea salt ice cream topping doesn't mean we need a ton of it."

He shrugs. They'd run out of that two weeks ago, and yeah, he did get more. No ice cream, though. They don't eat it with ice cream.

When he'd gotten home with the groceries he'd done two things. A: he put some rice on to cook. B: he tossed the cold stuff in the fridge and freezer, and then, having freed up enough space in her car to pick her up, back to the Navy Yard he went.

So, all of the grocery bags were still on the kitchen table when they walked in.

It was an awfully impressive mound of grocery bags.

Abby took one look at it and said, "Oh, God, Tim! What did you get?"

"Stuff we need."

She's staring at the mountain of bags on the table as he grabbed oil, steak, salt, pepper, ginger, and broccoli, and started on dinner.

"What could we possibly need this much of?"

Traditionally, he lugs the groceries in and then gets making whatever they're going to eat next. She puts them away.

He was cutting the steak into small pieces for the stir fry when he heard her open the first bag.

"Oh."

He looked over at her and grinned.
Apparently there are ways to sublimate the desire to buy every snack food in the entire grocery store.

See, Tim has always been vaguely aware of the fact that diapers, bottles, pacifiers, etc. had to come from somewhere. He's even put together the idea that people buy these things and grocery stores sell them. But since he's the guy who does the outside ring of shopping, he'd never actually been in the aisle with the baby stuff before.

And yes, he did get more snacks than were strictly necessary. (They don't actually need five kinds of Pepridge Farms cookies.) But he didn't buy every snack food in the store. He did, however, go a bit bonkers in the baby aisle.

And by a bit bonkers, well, he bought basically two of everything a newborn could possibly need.

He did leave most of it in the bags for her to open up and discover. But there was one thing he had in his pocket, and he wanted to show her special.

"Hey."

Abby looked up from a package of preemie diapers. (Because, just in case, you know. And if they don't need them, they can return them.)

He crooked his finger at her, signaling come here. So she did, big, wide smile on her face.

"I thought you'd like this."

"Like what?"

"It's in my pocket. Don't want to touch it with raw steak on my hands."

So she reached into his pocket, petted him a bit more than was strictly necessary, but he enjoyed it, and pulled it out, and, well, squeed, is probably the right word. It was a loud, very excited, and very cute, joyful shriek of a sound.

He laughed and kissed her forehead as she looked at the tiny, sparkly, pink pacifier with a skull with a bow on it.

"Saw that and couldn't not buy it."

She kissed him, grinning, bouncing. "Looks like you saw that and bought out the baby aisle."

He nods, little sheepish. They probably don't need three different kinds of diaper rash ointment or both baby Tylenol and baby Motrin. But, still, the basics are all in there. "We really will need most of it sooner or later."

"I know. Just, wow, that's a lot of stuff."

"Yeah."

Chapter End Notes
I've been bouncing this idea around for a while, and got some interesting comments along these lines as well... So readers, I'd like to get a better idea of how you understand this story and what you're hoping for how it goes.

How many of you are feeling like the interest in possibly being more than friends with Jimmy and Breena thing has been plucked out of thin air? It's been more than a hundred chapters since Tim and Abby started playing with the idea, but maybe it's been a bit too subtle? Also, polyamory is something I want to play with and explore (in a slow, gradual, nothing's happening for at least a year, yes, I'll do the proper build up, sort of way) but I also don't want a bunch of you unhappy about wrecking a perfectly good two person romance, so comments from the peanut gallery are more than welcome on this subject.
Long, lazy Saturday at home.

Tim sat as his desk, paper in front of him, pen in hand and started writing.

For Kelly:

You are:
love made breath
desire given form
ecstasy set free to walk the earth
From joy you came
and joy you return

He’s staring at it, tapping his pen against the paper. Not really loving the last bit. It’s the right idea, the circle of joy, how it was their joy that made her and how she brings joy to them… but it’s still clunky.

It also doesn’t look right.

He crossed out You are… and spent another moment staring at it. Better.

And joy you bring

Nah.

He snagged a new page, wrote Kelly at the top of it, and circled the other lines around it.

Okay, that looked good. Began and ended with Kelly. He’s still not loving the last bit.

There needs to be something about joy in there. But it needs to be parallel construction with the first four lines.

Kelly
love made breath
desire given form
ecstasy set free
hope made joy

He stares at that, nodding. Then grabs another piece of paper and writes it in a circle. Yep. Much better. Still not right. Too many mades.
Kelly
love into breath
desire into flesh
ecstasy into mind
joy into life

Nope. Maybe not enough mades…

Kelly
love made breath
desire made heart
ecstasy made mind
joy made life

Closer. Not mind… But mind is important. Yeah, but not for this. Breath, heart, life are intangibles. So’s mind. Not the same sort of intangible. Really, heart is less tangible than mind… Okay, not intangible… feeling type things. They’re all feelings into physical representations of feelings. Ecstasy made soul…

Kelly
love made breath
desire made heart
ecstasy made soul
joy made life

He wrote that in a circle and looked at it for a long minute, almost… not quite there.

love made breath
desire made heart
ecstasy made soul
joy made Kelly

He circled that around, looked at it, tapped his pen on the side of the paper, and decided he liked that a whole lot.

He found a paintbrush, warmed up the dark chocolate fudge with sea salt ice cream topping, and
found Abby.

“Can I borrow your tummy for a few minutes?”

She looked up from the Journal of Chemical Forensics. “Okay. Do you need the rest of me as well?”

“Wouldn’t hurt, but you can keep reading if you like. Really just need Kelly.”

Abby eyeballs the small paintbrush and the ice cream topping in his hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Poem.”

“In fudge on my tummy?”

“I could do ink if you like. Thought the clean up on this might be more fun.”

She smiled at that. “You got it on paper or in your head?”

“Head.”

“Tell it to me. I might want it on my skin for more than a few minutes.”

He sat next to her, lifted up her t-shirt and laid his fingers three inches above her belly button. “It’ll go in a circle, here.” He traced the circle on her skin. “love made breath/desire made heart/ecstasy made soul/joy made Kelly. Once written on there, I figured I’d get some pictures.”

That made Abby smile. “Get a Sharpie. I want to keep that. Can I add to it?”

“What do you want to add?”

“Not sure. Let me see how it looks, might be inspired.”

He’s nodding as he heads off in search of the Sharpies.

It’s true that Abby has a five by eight by three jade box that lives on her dresser. It’s true that in that box is a collection of poems Tim has written her. It’s also true that the majority of those poems are words on paper written by hand from him to her. But not all of them. Some of those poems are photos of his words written across her skin.

Some in ink.

Some in chocolate.

But if it’s a photo, the actual poem is also written on the back, pen on paper.

Since they got back together again in October of ’12, he’s written forty-six of them.

They’re overwhelmingly blank verse, though there is the occasional haiku, and one sonnet. They range from very good to okay and sincere to silly. Some have made her laugh, others cry, and they’ve all made her smile.

She loves all of them. And though Tim doesn’t know this, there is only one thing she wants to be buried with, and it’s those poems.
If the house is on fire, the baby and the poems are the two things she’s carrying out.

So, a while back, he’s not sure how far, Tim saw The Pillow Book. He doesn’t even remember why he saw it. But somehow, he ended up watching it.

And it turns out that it was a good choice.

He really liked that movie.

No, he couldn’t tell you what the plot was or the names of any of the characters (though he vaguely remembers Ewan McGregor was in it). What he does remember was how hard the idea of slowly, carefully stroking someone with a calligraphy brush made him, and how much he really wanted to do that/have it done to him.

So, in 2001 he finally had a real girlfriend, someone who was willing to play with him, and he wanted to try it out. Which was when he found out that if you do not, in fact, actually know how to write with a calligraphy brush, you end up with a VERY big mess, and an extremely irate girlfriend who is monumentally less than thrilled by the black ink you got all over her bed.

Eleven years later, he tried it with Abby, this time on the receiving end, and yeah, he liked it, a whole lot.

But Abby can paint. She can draw. She’s good with a brush or a pen or a marker. And if the scene she drew from his ankle to the nape of his neck was a little smudged in some spots when he wriggled because it tickled, well, she didn’t mind.

When he tried it on her, he made a mess.

Which was a problem, because for him, it’s not just the application of ink to skin, but of words to flesh. For him the words mattered, and a drippy, spotty, streaky illegible mess wasn’t the end goal he was looking for.

So the next time he tried, he subbed out ink for liquid chocolate, which had the advantage of being tasty and thick enough that he didn’t drip it all over the place. He can’t make the letters as small as he might like, but still, it worked pretty well, and everyone was happy with the result.

The time after that, he wanted the words to snake across her whole front. Which was when Abby reminded him that chocolate might be tasty, but yeast infections aren’t, so anything with sugar doesn’t go anywhere near her pussy.

But she did have markers.

And markers were good, too. He had better control. His letters were small enough he could get a whole poem on her. Tidy enough they could both read the words. All in all for anything with more than 100 characters they would do the job just fine.

Which is why they own one of those massive, every color they make, Sharpie packs.

He snagged it, drug all 100 markers back to the sofa where Abby was reading, and spent a while contemplating colors.
And, like always, he went with black.

Sometimes, rarely, (okay, once) if he’s feeling really into the work, he might add red highlights. He’s seen enough pictures of illuminated letters to know how that works. And it looked okay.

But really, it’s the words. And they’re clearest, easiest to read in black.

So, the ninety-nine other colors hang out in the pack, and he takes the lid off the black one, kneels in front of Abby, and contemplates the easiest way to do this.

“Think you can lay on your back for a few minutes?”

Last week she started feeling like it was hard to breathe and heartburn-y on her back. According to Breena being able to lie on your back for twenty-one weeks is something of a record, but since it’s the position that feels best for her back after a long day standing, having to say goodbye to it was not making Abby happy.

“How many is a few?”

“I think I can have this done in less than two.”

“I can do that.”

He held the marker between his teeth and gave her a hand getting horizontal. Yes, she can still lie down and get back up again without help, but it’s nice, and makes things easier for her, so he might as well do it. Especially since she’s going out of her way and doing something uncomfortable to humor him.

Once she was down, he got writing, fast. Sure, he’d like this to be a sensual experience, but he’d also like to get it done and let her breathe. So he wrote as fast as he could, while keeping his letters clear, shifting around her to get the angles right, and in less than a minute he had a perfect circle of legible black words slipping around her belly building on each other.

He helped her back up and she looked down, nodding.

“You feeling inspired to add to it?”

She shook her head. “It’s done.”

He pulled out his cell and began to take pictures of her.

“How are you going to give it to her?” Abby asks, looking at the markers.

“No idea. Are we going to do baby books?”

“Uh…” Abby looks alarmed by that thought. “Are you expecting either of us to have time for something like that?”

Tim sighs. “Not really. But we will give it to her, when she’s old enough to understand it. Maybe when we become grandparents?” He grins as he says that and sees Abby start to tear up. “Oh no. Nononononono! We’re not crying about that.” He kisses her, petting her tummy and face. “That’s a happy thought.”

“They’re happy tears.” Abby sniffs a little, kissing his hand which is resting against her cheek. “Thirty years from now, we might be showing her this.”
“Yeah, we might.” His thumb strokes over her cheek, wiping away a tear. He smiles again, and scoots back a few inches. “Let me get a few more shots, make sure it’s clear.”

She nods. “You want to get some new ink to commemorate this?”

Tim looks up from her tummy. “Hadn’t thought about that, really. Like what?”

“Not sure.” She’s playing with the sharpies. “We got tattoos when we got serious, got another when we got married, seems like having a baby would warrant some new ink.”

“Probably right about that. Granted, having a new baby also probably precludes spending hours in a tattoo studio or dealing with the upkeep they need as they heal up.”

“Good point.” She’s picking out the green sharpies, the black one, and a few blues.

“You look like you might be getting an idea.”

“Maybe. It’d be really big.”

“How big is really big?”

“Your whole back.”

“You want me to wander off for twenty hours when we’ve got a new baby and spend a month rubbing lotion on me while it heals up?”

“You could get it before she’s born.”

“Huh.” Somehow that hadn’t occurred to him. “What is it?”

“Get naked, lay down on the sofa, and you can see what I’m thinking,” Abby’s grinning now, looking like this’ll be fun, and well, he’ll happily be a canvas for her anytime she likes. Not like he’s got to be anywhere in the next three hours.

He pulls his shirt over his head while asking, “So, how big are you thinking? Am I getting naked because this’ll be on my legs, too?” He’s got three tattoos now, so he can pretty definitively say he doesn’t want one on his ass or the backs of his thighs. Anything he’s got to sit on is staying ink free.

“Nah. Just want that inch or two of your back below your waistband.”

“Okay.” His pants and boxers hit the floor next to the shirt.

He lays down, and she drapes a blanket over his legs and tush, which he appreciates because it’s a little cool out. April is rapidly warming up, and real spring seems to have come to DC, but that’s still about twenty degrees cooler than what he considers comfortable hanging out naked weather.

They spend two hours chatting, her drawing, him relaxing. He dozes a little, when she’s concentrating hard, enjoying the feel of the markers on his back. Some of it is a little ticklish, but mostly it’s just a very pleasant tingly sensation. She started the drawing up by his right shoulder and finished it by his right hip.

He started to get up but Abby said, “Stay put, just a little longer. Want to make sure it’s good and dry before you go scooting around.”

“Okay. Take a picture, let me see it.”
She did, showing him his back a second later.

It’s a dragon. European style, wings and claws and longer front legs than back ones. The drawing is a cartoon outline type of thing, no shading or shadows, no scales or real details. It’s mostly light green, with darker green eyes and darker green wings. The head is on his right shoulder, and the tail starts on the left side of his back, curling around the dragon’s legs and ending on the right hip. The wings are down, relaxed, and if a dragon can smile, it’s smiling, looking down, at the very small, mostly light blue (she’s got little green wings) dragon sleeping, head on the big dragon’s tail.

He’s propped on his elbows, expanding the picture so he can see it better, and smiling at it.

“I left room for other baby dragons,” Abby says, sitting on the sofa next to him.

Tim nods, seeing that there was extra tail space, room on the neck, and a spot between the front legs where other babies could be added.

“I love it,” he says kissing her. Then adds, “But I thought I was an Asian style dragon.” She’s been working on the headboard for Kelly’s crib, and there’s a sort of stylized family portrait on there. The guys are all dragons, and he’s a jade-green, Asian-style one.

She touches his face, looking into his eyes. “Your eyes are the color of jade. So they make me think of the carved jade dragons. But your back works better with an European dragon shape. More room for baby dragons to play, too. Either way, you’re still green.”

“Am I dry enough to get up and see it in a mirror?”

She tentatively swiped her finger over one of the spines on the dragon’s neck. “Yep.”

“Good.” He heads into their bedroom, opens her closet door, and hops onto the dresser. One other good thing about the mirrors being set for sex is that no matter what part of yourself you want to look at, there’s a way to set the mirrors in their room to do it.

Up close, personal, and a lot bigger, he still likes it. But it’s not something he necessarily wants on his back for the rest of his life. It’s cute, really cute. And big. It does cover his whole back, and that’s just the outline version, colored in and shaded and this would be literally days of tattooing. A few hours is one thing. Days of ink work, something else all-together.

Mostly though, it’s really cute. It’s vastly cuter than anything he wants burned into his skin for the rest of his life.

“Will you hate me if I say that’s way more work than I want done?” Which is both true and doesn’t hurt her feelings about how cute it is and how he just can’t take that much cute on his skin.

“No.”

“Thank you.” He kisses her. “But if that ever found its way to paper. I’d happily mount and frame it and put it up in Kelly’s nursery.”

“I like that.” Abby glances at the clock. “Don’t you have bootcamp in forty minutes?”

He looked over, jumping off the dresser. “Yeah. Gotta get dressed and go!”

Chapter End Notes
Okay, so after getting some input from you guys off in readerland, here's what's going to happen with Shards:

As a professional writer, (*shameless self-promotion*) I'm a firm believer in the idea that a good writer takes account of the likes, dislikes, and desires of the fans and provides them with a product they love.

As an artist, I'm a firm believer in the idea of being true to your artistic vision, exploring the topics you feel need to be dealt with and taking your characters where they need to go.

And as a member of the internet age, I get to do both.

The general consensus of Archive of Our Own readers was: Bring on the McPalmer! More McPalmer! Yay!

But general consensus isn't the same thing as everyone loving the idea, and Archive isn't the only place I post this story. I also post on FF.net

Apparently the general consensus of the readers on FF was: McPalmer! Ick! No! Please, no! Nooooooo!

So, I’ll do both. Here on Archive I’ll post a McPalmer version of the story. They’ll get to that cliff and jump off. On Fanfiction I'll keep the story McPalmer free. (Well, not totally, there'll still be the build up, but they'll decide not to go down that path.)

Now, obviously, I like the McPalmer idea, and since you’ve stuck with me through what is now literally a thousand pages of this story (Seriously page one of this chapter is 1001 on my word doc.), I’ll hazard the guess that you might actually like how I write a story. So, if you don’t find the idea of McPalmer to be disgusting, you might want to see how I do it. (Trust me, I haven’t lead you wrong yet, or taken any of my characters OOC, and I’m not gonna. I will make this work!)

But I also get that for some of you McPalmer a visceral yuck of a storyline, and I don’t want to turn something you enjoy, something you look forward to every day into this: Hey, did you read that Raist story? Yeah. (shudder) Shame the damn thing went off the rails 1300 pages in. It was so good until the author went bonkers.

So for those of you who want a classic romance, off to fanfiction with you.

Those of you who are interested in a less traditional romance, and a deeper exploration of sex/love/orientation/family/position/politics, stay here.

And like when this story went from T to E, I’ll give you lots of warning ahead of time for what’s going to happen.

Meanwhile, we’re at least a year (in story time) before any of this will come to a head.

As for the greater arc… The shards will find their wholes. And we’re getting fairly close to that. The current official last chapter of Shards is set in 2019. Right now, we’re in 2015. We will, before the end of this, meet all of the Palmer, McGee, and DiNozzo babies, and see all of them as parents, finally put Tim and the Admiral to rest, get Gibbs at peace with his past and moving on to better future, and see Tim, Tony, and Jimmy
take on new career rolls.

There is a sequel in the works as well. It will be a whole lot shorter, and set when Tim is 49-45 and Abby 53-58. It’s called Five Years.

And one final short (ish) story that’ll wrap the whole thing up. That one’s set in 2036 or 37 and… well… most of it is written, and I think it’s hilarious and can’t tell you more without spoilers.

Maybe, if I can write it, and I don’t know if I can, there’s one last short story.

This is a story about lovers, fathers, sons, brothers, and friends, the families we’re born with and the families we make. But mostly, it’s about love, in all its colors and flavors and how that intersects with sex and friendship. No matter which version you read, it’ll keep being a story about those things.

Anyway… Thanks for the input.

More good stuff tomorrow or the next day!

Keryl
My Little Dragons

He was only three minutes early, which was, by Team Gibbs standards, two minutes late.

"Hopin' we'll start without you?" Gibbs asks as he drops his bag by the ring and toes off his shoes.

"By all means, you want to have a go at Jimmy, I'll hang out and watch," Tim says pulling out the tape and getting started on his hands.

Gibbs looks at Jimmy and seems to think about it. Then he nods. "Tim, pay attention. Jimmy, you're on defense."

"Again?" Jimmy's getting bored on defense. It's not playing to his strengths, and he finds it frustrating.

"You're on defense until you can figure out how to read someone's moves. You're so used to doing this with Tim you're getting lazy. No more of that."

"So, I'm on defense until I can read a fight. I finally get to the point where I've got a guy I can read, and you sub him out."

"You're not reading Tim. You've memorized how he fights."

"Tomato, tomahto."

Gibbs gives him the *enough sass, get the hell in the ring and let's fight* look. "Tim, watch, pay attention. You're getting lazy, too. You've got a routine, and he's got it memorized, so learn some new tricks."

Tim nods, leaning against the ropes, and settles in to watch and learn.

Having done this for two and a half months now, Tim's come to the conclusion that, as exercise goes, he actually likes Bootcamp. It's not boring. He's honing useful skills. The endorphin rush is nice. It's time with Jimmy and Gibbs, which is good, too. And it burns more than enough calories so he can have some sort of sugary treat after.

Just because he didn't use the dark chocolate fudge ice cream topping for the poem doesn't mean he doesn't have some ideas for it for later tonight.

He's thinking the reason he likes Bootcamp now, because it was just as much of a work out when he started at NCIS, is that he's finally doing it with someone who's about evenly matched to him. Or maybe it's the fact that he's relaxed enough with Gibbs now that he's not terrified of looking like an idiot.

Either way, as he, Jimmy, and Gibbs hit the showers, he's soaking wet with sweat, tired, a little sore, and all in all feeling really good.

Really, he doesn't remember what they were talking about. And by they he means he and Jimmy, Gibbs was mostly quietly listening, adding an occasional word.

But he does know that he pulled his shirt over his head, starting to strip off for the showers when he hears Jimmy say, "That's cute."
Which was when he remembered he had a whole lot more skin art than usual. "Yeah, thanks."

Gibbs looked up from unlocking his locker, but by that point Tim's back was to the lockers. One look from Gibbs got him to turn around. When he turned back, now sans pants and towel wrapped around his hips, Gibbs was shaking his head, looking like he was about to roll his eyes.

"It's not real, is it?" Jimmy asks.

"Abby drew it on me this afternoon."

"This is what you do when you're home alone?" Jimmy's got a sort of cocky my god you're such nerds look on his face.

"I wrote a poem for Kelly on her. We got talking skin ink to celebrate the baby. This was her idea for me."

"That supposed to be you and Kelly?" Jimmy asks.

Tim nods.

"You're so not a dragon."

"Uh huh. Okay, what am I?"

"I don't know," Jimmy shrugs, thinks for a moment, then grins, "a koala?"

"You want koalas, look in the mirror. I'm not that cute or fuzzy."

"Especially not today," Jimmy broke in with smirk. Yes, his body hair is growing back in, and thank all that's good and holy, is past the god-awful itchy phase, but it's still pretty clear he shaved it all off.

"Not ever, really. Cute and fuzzy, that's you and Breena. If Abby thinks I'm a dragon, I get to be a dragon."

"Uh huh…"

Gibbs is still looking at his back. "When Kelly was little she had My Little Ponies." Jimmy's grinning, he knows what they are and where this is going. "That thing on your back is a My Little Dragon."

Jimmy and Gibbs laughed. Tim flashed them a I am so done with you idiots look and headed for the shower.

Twenty minutes later, he's out, drying off (carefully, he doesn't want to smudge the dragons too much). Yeah, they're cute. Sure, he doesn't want them burned into his skin forever. But Abby did spend two hours drawing them on, so he'll do what he can to keep them in good shape for as long as possible.

"So how long would that take?" Jimmy asks.

"Oh, god, no. Not actually getting this tattooed on. Just the outline was two hours with a Sharpie. It'd be even longer with a tattoo gun." He touches the knot on his right arm. "That was four hours and nine minutes, and that was long enough."
Jimmy looks at Gibbs, who is sitting down on the bench, putting his briefs on, and thus, very naked. "Why don't you have any? Getting them is traditional military, right?"

"Nothing I ever wanted burned into my skin."

"Not your unit insignia?" Tim asks.

"Thought about it. Never got drunk enough to do it. Shannon didn't like 'em, either."

"Breena likes them. You ever going to get one?" Tim asks Jimmy, while pulling on his boxers.

"Nope. My body already has a hard time fighting off infections. Last thing I need to do is open myself up to one by getting an intentional flesh wound."

"Good point."

"I liked the way the henna one looked before my skin broke out in hives."

Tim buttoned his shirt. "Sharpies might be an option."

"Got enough on my plate, don't have time for lying around letting her draw on me."

Tim shrugs. "Feels nice. Doesn't have to take hours."

Gibbs is just watching the two of them have this conversation, pretty stunned to see them actually talking about this. It occurs to Tim that this is the first time Jethro's actually worked out hard enough with them to join in on the locker room conversation after.

"How nice?" Jimmy asks, grabbing his jeans from the locker.

"I've got My Little Dragons on my back. How nice do you think?"

Jimmy nods, pulling his pants up. "So, you let her shave you, or you do it yourself?"

"Both of us. And you were right, totally worth it."

Gibbs has a look on his face best described as, mildly surprised but feeling like he should have known Palmer would be into that, too.

Now Jimmy's nodding sagely, slipping on his socks. "You get Abby to tell you what she put in Tony's present?"

Tim smirks, reaching for his wrist cuff, enjoying the memory of that. "Yep."

"Gonna tell?" Jimmy looks up at him, pausing in his dressing to pay attention to the answer.

"Can't. Sworn to secrecy. Breena tell you what she put in?" Tim asks, fastening his wrist cuff.

Big, wide, somewhat condescending but very happy smile on Jimmy's face. "Oh yeah."

"You got sworn to secrecy too, didn't you?" Tim asks as he grabs his jeans out of the locker.

"Yep."

Tim's combing his hair when he notices something, Jimmy's getting ready to leave, with no glasses. Then it hits him, Jimmy wears contacts to fight, and he must have kept them in.
Then something else hit him. "Which do you like better, glasses or contacts?" He wears the glasses at work, but as Tim thinks about it, he's noticed that Jimmy's been wearing the contacts on weekends and off time.

"Why are you asking?"

"Got my eyes checked Friday. Twenty/thirty in the left, twenty/thirty-five in the right. I don't need them yet, but corrective lenses are on the horizon for me."

"Once I could get them in and out fast, I liked the contacts better, but, when I'm at work, I never know what we're going to run into, and I like the extra layer of protection the glasses offer. Plus, I get something on them, and I can get them off in a tenth of a second."

That made sense to Tim. "You don't wear contacts, do you?" he asked Gibbs. They've all seen Gibbs’ glasses for close up work, but he's not sure if Gibbs has distance vision issues yet or not.

Gibbs shakes his head and hands Tim his glasses. He squints through them, noticing that Gibbs is awfully farsighted. "They're trifocals. Top does distance. Bottom close up. Middle's plain glass. And I don't usually wear them because anything further than eight feet and closer than fifty is still in sharp focus."

"Add sniper to the list of skills we're replacing."

Gibbs glares a little at that, not enjoying being faced with the fact that he can no longer hit a target at 3000 meters, but nods because it's true. "We're seeing the first of the FLETC candidates Monday, right?"

"Yeah. Catherine Howard."

"Can she shoot?"

"Don't think so. Not like that, at least. She's the computer wizard."

"The baby out of CalTech?" Before the wedding the four of them had gone through the five names Tim's contact at FLETC had sent over, and decided on three to get to know better.

"Yeah."

Gibbs nods, takes his glasses back from Tim, and says, "See you Monday."

The three of them were dressed by that point, so they headed out of the locker room and went their own ways.
Interviews

Having your team be on the shelf also means you’ve got time to do some interviews. Get to know some prospective new team members.

So, for week two of Tony and Ziva’s honeymoon, between paperwork, and running down leads for other teams, Tim and Gibbs start interviewing possible replacements.

Technically, they’re replacements for Gibbs, since Tim is trying to keep his moving to Cybercrime on the quiet, though they don’t actually know which one of them will go first.

Tim’s handling most of the preliminaries. The get to know NCIS speech, tour the building, explain a little of what they do. He figures it’ll be good practice for when he’s in charge of Cybercrime. In spare minutes, he’s been thinking more and more about how he’s going to whip it into shape. It’s one thing to tell Vance he’s going to turn it into the premier Cybercrime division, and a whole other thing to actually do it. Best he’s got so far, without really getting to see what they’re up to, team building and better hiring are going to be his two main strategies.

Catherine Howard is the first of the interviews. She’s younger than Tim thinks it is possible for a person to be (which he figures is a good sign of his having become middle-aged) but somehow she’s managed to get her Masters in Forensic Computing from CalTech by twenty-two. No military background, but according to Carter, she’s the best hacker FLETC’s seen in, well, ever.

They’re both a little nervous. It’s the first interview he’s given, and he’s got the sense it might be the first one she’s ever had, either.

He tries to remember the last time he had an interview; he thinks it was for MIT. NCIS recruited him out of MIT, more than four agencies got into a bidding war over him, so the nervous, proving he was good enough thing didn’t happen.

Query letters for Deep Six is probably the closest he’s ever come to the traditional apply for a job/interview thing, and that was done entirely by mail. He didn’t have any face time with his agent until after he’d gotten his manuscript accepted.

So, it’s not like this is something he’s familiar with, or has done a lot, but he does know what it’s like to be on the wrong foot, feeling overwhelmed and a bit out of place. And Howard looks out of place, overwhelmed, and like she really wants to make everyone like her.

So, that’s not something he has a hard time empathizing with. Plus he read her thesis over the weekend, and got talking to her about it, which got them both into a pretty comfortable place, and for a fairly pleasant half hour they chatted about smarter search algorithms. And once she seemed settled, or at least started to smile some, he led her to his desk, handed her a thumb drive and said, “It’s a closed case, but here’s all the raw data we had. Have at it. Show me what you can do with it.”

She stared at it. “Here?”

“Yep. These are the tools you’ll have, unless you bring your own.”
“Okay. What am I looking for?”

“It’s a murder. This is everything we found about the vic. The killer’s buried in the data. Go find him.”

She nods. “That’s really vague.”

“Yes. But I picked this case intentionally. It’s one where we caught the guy from the data. Nothing about the scene or how he died was useful. It’s all in there. Find me a killer.”

“Okay. Any parameters for the search?”

“Nope. Do whatever you like with the data, just find the guy.”

Tim’s rapidly coming to the conclusion that Carter is right. He’s used to being... well, not the best and brightest, but he is the guy who can follow what the best and brightest are doing, figure out why they’re doing it, and what they’re going to do next.

He plays damn good computer defense.

He can tell she’s nervous because he’s hovering, watching her, but even with that, her code is simple, elegant, cutting away the chaff in long, clean strokes.

She’s faster than he is. Not as well-trained, no instincts, yet. She’s skimmed over the trouble spot twice now without seeing it, but for pure technical skill, she’s phenomenal.

The question is, can instinct be learned?

He flashes Gibbs a text. Did I have any instincts when you hired me?

Gibbs very slowly texts back: Knew not to piss me off.

He looks up and glares at Gibbs. Seriously. She’s killing the code. I’ve never seen skills like this. But she’s missed the problem three times now. Can’t seem to see it. Trying to remember if you learn instincts or not.

Both. You start with some, and then learn how to use them. Which case is she hunting through?

Salazo.

Weekly meeting with the killer, being blackmailed, ran out of cash, and got killed for it?

Yeah. It’s in his calendar, financials, and email.

And she can’t see it?

If she does, she hasn’t put it together yet.

Then what’s she doing?

Right now, analyzing cell phone data.

That was a dead end, right?
Best I remember.

How long you going to let her work?

I got it in an hour. Gonna give her four.

Okay. Go get a coffee. Stop hovering over her. You’ve seen how she’s working, now let her work.

It takes Howard three hours to find it, but find it she did. He's sitting at Tony’s desk, filling out paperwork when she jumps up, springs, kitten-like over the twelve feet to where he is and says, “Got it! It’s jakeb@brinny.com. Some sort of blackmail thing that went wrong, right?”

Tim nods, smiling. “Yep. What do you do next?”

“Track down jakeb.”

“Good. So, you like doing it?”

“Yeah! That’s so cool.”

“Glad you liked it.”

“Any questions?” Tim asks Gibbs as Howard stares at them, looking, for the first time, fairly pleased with herself and confident.

Gibbs gets up, stands behind her, blocking her view of Tim’s cubicle and says, “Tell me about McGee’s wife.”

All the blood drains out of Howard’s face. “Excuse me?”

“You sat in his cubicle for three hours. Tell me about her.”

“Uhhhh…” They can both see blind panic in Howard’s eyes as she desperately tried to think up anything about the mysterious Mrs. McGee. “I’m sorry. I didn’t notice. Unless you’re married to your computer…” She smiles, hoping that would go over.

“Okay, Howard. Thanks,” Tim says. That is actually a pretty good question. Because it’s not just computer skills they need. The ability to see what’s around you is vital for this job.

“I just totally bombed this whole thing, didn’t I?”

Tim smiles gently at her. “Not the whole thing. You’re great with a computer, any of the Federal Agencies would be glad to have you on their Cybercrime teams. You want to apply for our Cybercrime team, I’ll put in a good word with Jenner for you, but you do need to pay attention to the world around you in this job.” And as he says that, he makes a mental note to keep her contact information. If she doesn't apply for it on her own, he’ll look her up when he was in charge.

Wednesday, Eric Draga comes to visit.
Twenty-eight years old, once a Navy flyboy, honorable discharge when an accident left him with a need for glasses. His vision is more than good enough to be a cop. Not good enough to fly a fighter jet three times the speed of sound.

Tall, relaxed, seems to see everything, asks lots of questions, takes to Gibbs fast, and doesn’t really pay much attention to Tim. Reminds Tim a lot of most of the other soldiers they get in here.

His computer skills are passable. Tim’s are better. Howard’s are much better. But he knows what he’s doing, and he’s got the pattern pulled out in two hours. Tim’s pretty impressed. This one might be a good match for their team. He can see Ziva liking him.

And like with Howard, Gibbs asks Draga, “What can you tell me about McGee’s wife?” when they get to the end of the practical skills test.

“Black hair, tattoos, tall for a woman but not as tall as McGee, pregnant, congratulations by the way, first baby, right?”

Tim nods, impressed.

“She’s his daughter,” he nods at Gibbs, “and it’s your first baby but not his first grandchild, right?”

“Close enough,” Gibbs says, smile tugging at his lips.

“How close?” Draga looks interested in the answer to this.

“None of us are blood, but you’ve got the basic relationships right. How are you figuring first baby?” Tim asks.

“Ultrasound pics, no baby pics, means she’s pregnant but baby isn’t on the outside yet. Little curly haired girl on…” he turns to Gibbs and points to the shot of Molly on Jackson's lap. “That’s your dad, right?” Gibbs nods. “Obviously family, she’s on your wall, but not his, so not his baby. So, she’s one of your grandkids, but not from his wife.”

Draga turns to look at Gibbs’ desk and the cubicle behind it, quickly finding the snap of Gibbs giving Ziva away. (Jimmy had taken it, and Breena made him give Gibbs a copy the day they got back to work.) “She your other daughter’s child?”

“Nope.” Gibbs looks over his cubicle. “Don’t have pics of her parents up. Probably should get some.” He scans Tim’s cubicle and finds Jimmy and Breena in one of the wedding shots. “She belongs to those two.”

“Ahhh…”

“So, do you have any questions for us?” Tim asks.

Draga thinks about it. “Agent Gibbs is retiring, but he’s not the tech guy on this team, you are. So, why are you looking at me for the job?”

Tim and Gibbs smile at that. “Baby’s due in July. I’ll be in and out for a few weeks, maybe longer.”

“You don’t need me for just a few weeks.”

“Nope. But it’s a good place to start. I’m the only one with tech skills. Back in ’02, when I started, that wasn’t a big deal. These days, those skills have to be redundant. Put plainly, I’m tired of being irreplaceable. I went on vacation, and it took Ziva ten hours to do a job I do in twenty minutes
because she was looking by hand.”

Draga looks horrified by that. “By hand?”

“Yeah, sorting phone records by hand.”

“Ugh.”

“Yeah. And from what Carter’s sent me, you can shoot, which is a skill for both of us, pick locks, he’s better at that than I am, you speak Navy, which we lose when he goes, and we’re gonna guess that with a background in aviation, you can probably handle a car well.”

“That’s true. Used to drag race as a kid.” Both Tim and Gibbs get the sense that by ’used to’ he means 'I've never stopped' and 'as a kid' means 'the week before last.'

“You and Ziva are going to get along so well,” Tim says.

“Ziva?”

“His other daughter. She and Tony are on their honeymoon right now.”

“So, wait. I join this team and it’s you, and your brother and sister-in-law?”

“Sort of. It’s me and my partners. We’ve been working together for more than a decade now. They’ve been married ten days.”

Draga thinks about that for a moment before saying, “New man in after that much time together’ll be tricky.”

“Yeah, it will,” Gibbs says. “The question is, are you the guy to do it?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. But if you think this went well, I’d like to meet Agents… DiNozzo and DiNozzo?”

“He’s Tony and she’s Ziva, but yes, the Agents DiNozzo,” Tim answers. He notices Gibbs looking around, realizes neither of them have said Tony or Ziva’s last name, then sees the name plate on Tony’s desk and nods again. Yeah, Draga is winning lots of points on this interview.

Friday they see Shaun Aubrey. The twenty-seven year old former Marine, did one tour, used the GI Bill to go to college, got his degree in forensic accounting then hit FLETC. Carter had said he’d been looking at the FBI and IRS, but seemed intrigued with the idea of NCIS when he mentioned it.

He looks significantly more the traditional geek than Howard or Draga. Not so much clothing, he’s in the more or less required male uniform for an interview, navy suit, white button down, conservative tie, but there’s a sort of fussy air to him.

Tim has a hard time imaging how he survived in Afghanistan in the dirt and grime. He looks like the kind of guy who carries hand sanitizer. If anything, he’s a few steps beyond Tim on the everything needs to be properly organized front.

He’s the first one to look at Tim’s set up after being offered the thumb drive and actually ask, “May I
rearrange it? I’m not left-handed.”

“Sure, do whatever you like to make yourself comfortable. Just put it back when you’re done.”

Ten minutes later, Tim’s workstation is more or less completely rearranged, and Aubrey has subbed out Tim’s mouse and keyboard for his own, which he had brought along with him.

Tim hovers behind, watching him work. Forensic Computing, Tim’s specialty, and Forensic Accounting, Aubrey’s, are not actually the same thing, though there is a large overlap. Tim’s having no problem following what Aubrey’s doing.

When Tim works a case, he starts with phone/email records, then moves onto financials. Usually something in the first two give the others some leads to hunt down, and while they do that, he sifts through bank accounts, looking for more info to connect the dots.

Aubrey starts with the financials, finds the payments, highlights them, then hits email and has the case solved in twenty minutes.

Which, if he had started with the financials and not the cell records, is only slightly faster than Tim would have done it.

Then he took five minutes and put everything back, exactly the way Tim had had it.

He, Aubrey, and Gibbs confer at Ziva’s desk, and Gibbs asks his question: “What can you tell me about McGee’s wife?”

Aubrey shakes his head, looking at Tim. “I noticed you had some wedding pictures up, but beyond that, I didn’t really look. She was in white and red? You were in gray. I think her hair is black… Sorry.”

“It’s okay, you weren’t there very long.”

“I can, however, tell Agent Gibbs the specs for all the equipment on your desk, including the stapler. After all, that was a question to see how well I pay attention, right?”

“Yes. What you see of the things you aren’t focused on. You never know where the clue that tells the real story will be. The body may get all the attention, but sometimes it’s the pictures on the mantle that let you know who the killer is,” Tim replies.

Gibbs keeps staring at Aubrey. ‘You really want to be a field agent?”

“Do I not look like a field agent to you?”

Gibbs shrugs. He’s seen all sorts make it at this.

“I wouldn’t be here if the idea didn’t hold some appeal. I prefer a combination of desk work and getting out in the real world. The Marines was too much field. School was too much desk work. I think NCIS may provide a balance where I’d thrive.”

“Just might,” Gibbs agrees, especially given that Aubrey would most certainly be taking Tim’s place on the team. Even with a Marine background, Gibbs can see this isn’t the kind of guy that’ll automatically command respect from other military men.

“You have any questions for us?” Tim asks.

“What is the field/deskwork balance?”
Tim smiled at that. “With your skills, it’d be about seventy percent desk work, thirty percent field. We all process the crime scene. You’d head back to run the data,” because Tim’s sure that if they end up with him and Aubrey on the team, he’ll be out in the field while Aubrey runs the data, until they could get someone with more of Gibbs skills/Aubrey picked up more field skills to round out the team. “While you run data, we round up leads, deal with the evidence. Few hours later we get together again with the preliminary data, and work up a plan from there. But, until you’d been in the field more, you’d mostly be on crime scenes. Over your probie year, you’ll get out in the field more, start learning interrogation, talking to people, eventually dealing with perps. But at least at first, you better like orange, because you’ll be seeing a lot of it.”

Aubrey smiles at that. “But, eventually, I’ll get out there?”

“Soon as we catch a case, you’ll be out there. Everyone does crime scenes.”

“Good. There’s something more… satisfying about going after killers than tax evaders.”

That gets a smile out of Gibbs.

“Yeah, there is,” Tim says. “I turned the IRS down for exactly that reason.”
Grass

With the exception of the past six months, for the entirety of Tim McGee's adult life, he's been an apartment dweller.

Now, usually this wouldn't be an issue, but with April edging toward May the weather's getting warmer, and he's noticing something: namely he is now in possession of a large amount of grass. A very large amount of grass, and none of the neighbors have knee high grass, so it's probably his job to do something about this before he does.

So, what to do?

There are two ways to handle this. The easy way, namely pick up the phone, make a few calls, and hire someone to deal with it.

But for some reason that's just not hitting him right. He's a homeowner damnit! He might as well mow his own grass at least once.

So he takes the hard way, spending a week researching lawn mowers (between interviews and paperwork. And every day when he gets home from work, the grass is taller.), while Abby gently teases him about nesting, which, well, that's probably true, there's no other reason why he'd suddenly be in a take care-of-grass-or-die-trying mindset.

But the fact that may be true is in no way diminishing his need to manage the grass.

And so, bright and earlyish, because he doesn't want to be the bad neighbor who's mowing at 7:00, he's in their yard, mucking about with the mower, getting ready to embark on his first mowing experience since he was seventeen.

It's not like riding a bicycle. Mostly because it's not a damn bicycle, and the thing he's pushing around right now is about ten light years more advanced than the old push mower his mom had had.

And honestly, this isn't that bad. It's cool and pleasant out, still a little damp from the night. And it's not terrible exercise. Granted, he's not thinking this is ever going to be something he likes, but it's not bad either. Better than shoveling the driveway when it snows.

It takes a lot longer than he expected it to. Until he was pushing the mower back into the garage, he didn't think he had a huge yard.

Walking through the house he smells bacon, and between that delicious smell and the fact that, yeah, he is a bit on the hungry side, he's suddenly wondering what Abby's up to.

He heads into the kitchen. "What are you making?"

"Your favorite."

"Really?" He looks her over from head to toe, she's in a black t-shirt and a pair of loose, drawstring, flannel jammie pants, left over from when he was still heavy, licks his lips, grins, and says, "You're looking way too dressed for my favorite."

She laughs. "BLTs. Ready in about five minutes."

"Oh! Those are good, too. How about ten, let me hop in the shower."
"That works."

He doesn't need to really scrub or anything, he's just rinsing off the sweat and the little bits of grass that are stuck to his legs. So it's pretty quick. When he gets out he changes into a pair of pajama pants and a t-shirt, they aren't going anywhere else today, and heads back down.

She's got the door to the porch open, and is dragging out chairs. He glares at her a little when he sees that and takes the chair from her.

She sticks out her tongue back at him. She's six months pregnant, not helpless. But she'll usually humor him on things like this, because she doesn't like seeing him worry, and he does worry when she does anything even remotely exerting.

"Thought it was so nice, we could eat out."

He nods at that, it is really pleasant out, mid seventies, the porch is shady this time of day, and then goes and grabs some of the folding tray tables they got as wedding presents.

Sitting on the porch, pregnant wife by his side, freshly-mowed grass perfuming the air, it hits him, he's really not single anymore.

He wonders idly if Palmer felt this way. If, like him, there was this second where he just finally realized that yeah, he's not in any way shape or form single. He's a suburban dad, with a beautiful pregnant wife, and a house, and a yard, and hell, the minivan is probably on the way.

He smiles at that, Abby looking at him with a question in her eyes, so he explains, and she smiles, too.

Her hand rests on her belly, and she says, "It's real."

And from that day until Kelly came, the McGees had the best kept yard in the neighborhood.
"You're home!" Tim said to Tony and Ziva as he walked into the Bullpen on Monday morning.

"We are home," Ziva said with a smile.

"Good time?"

Tony smirked. "Oh yeah. You want to see the pictures?"

Tim raised an eyebrow and grinned, "Do I want to see the pictures?"

"Get your mind out of the gutter, McPerv!" Tony says, shoving Tim gently, as Ziva grabbed her phone and started to show off their honeymoon shots.

"Where's Gibbs?" Tony asked. It was nine thirty, an hour and a half after Gibbs usually got in to work. They'd gotten into looking at the pics, (really cool animal shots, amazing views, Tony with a beard, because apparently he can grow one in like, six days, them snuggling, beach shots, they took a lot of pictures) telling stories of South Africa, safari, getting through customs with the diplomatic pouch (No problems, but Tony had been pretty nervous about it.) and the general good time that had been had by all.

Then Tim caught them up with what he had been doing, and how the interviews had gone, and they all confabbed for a time to have a second interview with Draga and Aubrey.

Between those two things an hour and a half had slipped by without them noticing.

"No idea." Tim checked his phone, no messages. "He didn't call you guys?"

"No." Ziva answered, checking her phone. Tony shook his head, nothing on his, either.

It's not that Gibbs never misses work. He's missed, well, at least five days in the last five years at this point, but that he always calls his team to let them know where he is and when he'll be back.

Tim's firing off a text. *Where are you? Everything okay?*

Ziva picked up her phone. She asked for Vance, and then waited, and then asked if the Director knew where Gibbs might be. Her eyes went wide after a minute and she said, "Thank you, Director."

"He's asked for four days personal time."

That sent Tim and Tony into action. Tim pinged his phone, finding out where he is, while Tony called him.

Gibbs didn't answer his phone, but in a minute Tim's got his location.

"He's in Stillwater."

The three of them stare at each other. Jackson is 88. And Gibbs didn't call. And he's not answering his phone. And he's in Stillwater, with four days of personal time.
Tim had Stillwater General hacked in about ten minutes, looking through the medical records. Ziva and Tony were standing behind him, watching what he's coming up with. He's actually pretty glad they're standing behind him, because they can read the screen as well as he can, so he doesn't have to say the words, not yet.

Though in a minute, when he goes down to Abby, he will.

His voice is shaky when he says to Ziva, "Call Vance. We're gonna need some time off."

She nods, tears in her eyes. Tony's already heading toward the elevator. "I'll tell Ducky and Jimmy."

Tim feels like the Angel of Death. Less than four months ago he came down here and told everyone about Jon.

Now it's just him and Abby. Which he prefers.

She's bopping around the lab, music on so loud the computer screens are vibrating. Must be a song she really likes.

He knows where the remote lives, and flicks off the music, seeing her little combo dance/data hunt come crashing to a halt.

"Tim?" Over the course of one word he hears her voice go from irate to afraid as she sees and reads the look on his face.

"Jethro didn't come into work this morning…" He's explaining what happened, what they did, like somehow extra words between now and how this paragraph has to finish will make it easier, or make the pain at hearing this paragraph's end lessen. Or maybe he's giving himself a little more time to work up to actually saying it. But he can see her eyes tearing up, saw her stiffen when he said Stillwater, and he knows the only real question is how bad is it and how fast are they going to get there. And the answer is, it's bad, and they'll get there as fast as they can. Finally he's run out of filler words, stretched this moment as long as he can, so he says the words he doesn't want to say, "Jackson died last night.

"I hacked his medical records. He was in the shop and had a stroke. Dead before the ambulance got to him. Probably before he hit the floor. It looks like it was fast and painless." And he's got no idea if that's true or not. But she's crying, and he's trying to be comforting as he holds her, and even if it is a lie, it's a lie he wants to believe.

He kisses her, soft and gentle, and she cuddles into his shoulder, holding him. They stand there, like that, for a long minute, until they hear Jimmy say, "We'll take my car.

Ziva, Tony, and Ducky took one car. Leaving the Palmers and McGees in the other. With Ziva driving the trip between DC and Stillwater is six hours. With a seventeen-month-old and a pregnant woman, both of whom do vastly better with a break every hour and a half for either the bathroom or to run around, it's a lot slower.

They take turns driving. Not talking much as Palmer's Odyssey eats the miles between DC and Stillwater.
Maybe the others are thinking of their grandparents or parents. Tim knows he's thinking about his.

Nelson McGee died of a heart attack on his ship. He was sixty-four, had been feeling a bit off, but brushed it off as having slept on his shoulder wrong, and in the middle of an inspection tour slumped over and died.

Penny gave permission for him to be buried at sea. He remembers his grandfather talking about how all life came from the sea, and how, for those who were lucky enough, they'd get to return. Penny let his final resting place be the element he loved.

His father was well enough connected at that point to get helio-ed in for the burial, but the rest of them gathered at Penny's home for a memorial service.

Tim doesn't remember it much. He was ten at the time. Mostly he remembers the way Penny looked shell-shocked. Thinking about it now, he realizes that Nelson was probably about a year, maybe three, tops, away from retiring. He realizes that they'd been married for forty years. That they probably had plans for life after the Navy. He realizes that Penny and Nelson must have been very different people, but they built a marriage that survived her becoming a pacifist while he became an Admiral.

And driving north, his turn at the wheel, it occurs to him that Penny never got to say goodbye. One day her husband left for a float, and he never came home.

Pop died slow. Though, from everything he's read about it, actually, all in all, it was pretty fast. Christmas of '94, the Annapolis Christmas, the one where everything went wrong, was when they also first noticed he was fading.

At first it looked like stress. That was a bad holiday for everyone, so if Pop asked the same question a few times, well, who cared? It'd get better when things calmed back down again.

But it wasn't stress. And he didn't get better, and by the time Tim was leaving for college six months later Pop kept calling him Michael, his Mom's brother's name. Summer of '96, he lived with his grandparents, the last summer he wasn't on his own, and Pop was gone.

He spent that summer with them, helping out, trying to be useful, but mostly he was babysitting a 76-year-old who looked like a man he loved, but wasn't. The fire in his eyes, the memories, the life that had enriched all of them was gone, and all that was left was a body too stubborn to die.

When he caught pneumonia that October, Gran didn't seek treatment for it.

And he felt like a coward for it, but Tim claimed he had midterms (which he did) and didn't go home until after Pop had died.

He didn't say goodbye, mostly because he couldn't handle it, but if you had asked him, (and one of his friends did) he would have said there was no one left to say goodbye to.

His mom doesn't talk about that last week, other than to say it was very hard.

Driving to Stillwater, he's thinking that Nelson and Jackson got off easy.

He hopes he does, too.
They found Gibbs sitting on the sofa in his dad's house. Ziva, Tony, and Ducky were already there. Ziva was cuddling with him. Tony and Ducky were just there, being quiet and supportive.

He stood up and hugged all of them when they came in. Molly was asleep in Jimmy's arms, so she got half of Jimmy's hug.

He went back to the sofa. Abby cuddled into his other side. Gibbs kissed her forehead.

Breena sat in front of Jethro and rested her hands on his knees. "Tell me what you want done, and I'll take care of it. I'll make sure he gets sent off properly."

Gibbs nodded, tears in his eyes, not saying anything.

Two days later, Gibbs, Tony, Tim, Ducky, Jimmy, and LJ carried Jackson to rest next to his wife.

And if Jon's funeral was the dull, crushing pain of horrific fate, this was more the sharp, mercifully brief cut of quick and done. It hurts. There are tears here and the ache of not enough time, because when it comes down to it, there's never really enough time, but the shell-shocked, stunned horror of the loss of Jon caused isn't here.

And like with the funerals for both of his grandfathers, after this service, there was a house filled with somewhat inebriated people telling stories, laughing while they cried.

Gibbs listened to stories, smiled a little, cried a little, got a little drunk, didn't talk much. Tim's fairly sure the eulogy was the only time he said more than five words in a row that day. Abby and Ziva more or less kept hovering protectively around him, herding people away from him when it looked like he'd had enough of them.

Breena ran the whole thing, planned it from beginning to end. She'd asked Gibbs the morning after they got there what he wanted, again, and he shrugged, so she kissed his cheek, hugged him, and took over. It was beautiful, tasteful, a little generic, because all in all she didn't know Jackson all that well, though she was able to get his favorite hymns out of Gibbs for the service, and maybe the actual funeral director wasn't thrilled with dealing with her, but the end result was as comforting as a funeral can be.

When the last of the guests left, and the food had been put away, the downstairs cleaned back up, and Molly fed and put to bed, there was just this sort of hollow emptiness. A sort of blank, now what? feeling.

Gibbs got up and headed upstairs, looking determined.

He came back a few minutes later with a Monopoly box, that he laid on the coffee table in front of the sofa. "Used to play with him and my mom and grandparents. Want a game?" His voice broke on the last word, but he was half-smiling, and very carefully counting out the money.

The game lasted 'til three. Ducky won. And no one said anything about the fact that even though they had to scrounge a few pieces (Tim was playing a battery from the TV remote, and Tony had a quarter) Gibbs kept the top hat in his hand the whole time.
In the movies, the story ends when the character dies. That's just how it is.

Or maybe it keeps going, but there's just sadness and some sort of epiphany of the value of life and holding your dear ones close for as long as you can.

And that's true.

Jackson's story is done.

Jethro, Leroy as his dad called him, has been holding his loves close these last two days, literally as well as figuratively. He's spent more time snuggled up to something warm and female then any time since his first marriage.

And it helps, some.

But mostly, now, as the funeral is over, and he's more or less beating his kids back into their cars to get them to go back to DC, there's just this huge pile of stuff.

Literal stuff.

A lifetime of stuff.

Sitting in a house.

And it's his job to deal with it.

Abby and Tim are giving him puppy-dog eyes, offering to stay and help. Tony and Ziva are being cooler about it, but pretty much because they know they aren't cute enough to pull off puppy dog eyes, but just as insistent. Ducky has declared he's staying and helping. The only ones he's not having any problems with are Jimmy and Breena, namely because an open-ended trip with a seventeen-month-old isn't much fun, and for Ducky to stay, Jimmy needs to get his butt back to DC and handle Autopsy.

"Really, Jethro, I can stay—" Tim's saying as he's putting their bags into the back of Palmer's van,

"Maybe I wasn't clear enough the first three times, I do not want Abby a minute farther away from her OB than absolutely necessary. I don't want you five hundred miles away from her, either. And I don't want either of you wasting your off time with me. You're gonna have better things to do with your personal days than help me sort things very soon. Go home. I'll be fine."

"You sure?"

He's staring at Gibbs with big, worried eyes, and Gibbs is wondering if he's been taking lessons in cute from Abby. "Go home."

Tim nodded, hugged Jethro for a long time, and then handed him over to Abby, who'd been pouting at him through that whole conversation. She squeezed him tight.

"You call us. You need anything, you call. Even if not to talk. You don't have to talk. Just to see a friendly face on the other side of the Skype. You call."

Gibbs nodded and kissed her forehead and then firmly guided her into the Odyssey. He shut the door
and said to Jimmy, who had his window open, "Get them out of here before they change their minds and I have to shoot them with tranquilizers to get them back into this van."

Jimmy saluted Gibbs and pulled away.

He felt Tony behind him, in the few seconds before he said, "We've got personal days and vacation days, and don't need to be near a doctor."

"I know, Tony. Go home. You're basically still on your honeymoon."

"Are you certain?" Ziva asked.

"I'm sure. There's nothing in this house Duck and I can't handle. I'll be back in a week or so."

Tony claps a hand on Gibbs' shoulder. "Like Abby said, you need anything, call. We're six hours away, faster if we use flashers."

"I'll be okay."

"I know." Tony hugged him.

Ziva cuddled in as well, reaching up to kiss him. "You will be. You really will."

He rests his head against her dark hair, aware of how, out of all of his kids, this is the one most similar to him, the one carrying many of the same burdens. He kisses the top of her head. Eli David died less than three years ago, and he's sure the memory of doing this, alone, is still very fresh for her.

"We should have gone with you."

She smiled at him and shook her head, understanding what he meant by that. "No. Not then. But never again will any of us mourn alone."

He knows that's true. Driving up on his own, not telling anyone, that was shock forcing him back into the patterns of old. He spent so many years on his own, the idea that there were people who would worry, who would travel five hundred miles just to sit with him, didn't occur to him.

And he didn't know how relieved he would be, how a flash of love and gratitude would spread through him when he heard the sound of a car pulling up, three doors opening and closing, and opened the door to see Ziva, Tony, and Ducky on his father's porch, and to be immediately wrapped in Ziva's arms.

He nodded and kissed her one more time, holding both of them tight, then let go. "I'll call if I need anything."

"Good," Ziva said as they headed to her car.

He watched them drive off, waving, and then walked to the front porch, sitting down on the steps. A moment later Ducky sat down next to him, handing him a cup of tea.

"Where shall we start, Jethro?"
Gibbs put the cup on the step next to him and rubbed his eyes. "I don't know, Duck, I don't know."

They started in the basement. Three piles: donate, toss, keep.

There aren't many things here he wants to keep. The last eight years were better, but this house isn't a bastion of good memories for him.

Ducky kept up a gentle stream of chatter. Mostly talking to himself. Gibbs is only half-listening, but he finds the sound of it comforting.

But it hits him, as he boxes up his dad's dishes, that there will be a day when Ducky's voice goes silent. That one day, he, and he assumes, Tim, will do this for Ducky and Penny, and he has to sit down for a minute to keep from bursting into tears. Ducky sees it, quiets, and just rests his hands on Jethro's shoulders.

He kept the Monopoly game. An old but well-loved baseball glove. Someone'll need to teach those girls how to play catch, and he's not feeling overwhelmingly optimistic on Tim or Jimmy's skills when it comes to that. Two end tables Jackson made, and his dad's tools. Gibbs doesn't have any use for Jackson's tools, his father was a mechanic first and then moved into electronics, but best he can tell, Tim might find them useful.

He kept a bundle of letters. They belonged to his parents. He hasn't read them. Won't read them. Before they head back to DC, he takes a few minutes and buries them with his parents.

He kept his dad's computers. Somewhere in there is his accounts, and he needs that information to handle the business. So they've got to go back to DC, where Tim'll sort through them and find what he needs to take care of the store.

And the rest of it got boxed up and given to Goodwill or tossed in a dumpster.

It took three days to empty the house.

He's not even sure what to do with the general store. He knows his dad owns the building, but it's got to have bills and suppliers and all sorts of things, but he doesn't know what they are. Back when he was a kid, Jackson had tried to get him interested in running the store, but even if they had gotten on back then, he still would have found it painfully boring.

Fortunately the lawyer seems to have an idea of what to do with that, because he doesn't.

It took six days, but when he was done, the house was empty, and up for sale, the store was closed, and also up for sale. He loaded the few things he was keeping into his car, waited for Ducky to get his seat belt buckled and started back to DC.

"Thanks, Duck."

Ducky nodded. "When Mother died, I wanted the quiet of our home to grieve in. Her last few weeks had been so loud and traumatic..." Victoria Mallard lived to 101, which was about five years longer than she should have. That last month, when she was conscious she was out of her head, delirious from the Alzheimer's, often screaming, raging at imagined insults, or drugged into an almost
comatose slumber. The Corgis, all six of them, upset at the strangers, hospice workers who had
descended on the house to help him, spent hours barking. Nothing about their home was quiet those
last few weeks. "That I wanted nothing more than quiet. But I think now that sharing it with a dear
friend would have been a good thing."

"Yeah."

As they pulled out of Stillwater, it occurs to Gibbs that this really is the last time he'll come here. This
chapter of his life is really over, and all that's left is memory.
3:00 AM Fuck In The Lab

It was three in the morning when Tim got done with his part of the case, so he headed, slowly, down to the lab.

Abby was sleeping on the rugs. Even though she's not falling asleep every moment she's still, Tim still doesn't want her driving herself home at night, and she's been kindly humoring his insane overprotectiveness, both of them aware that this was pretty insane. But they work in the same place, so waiting a bit for him to get done to take her home usually isn't a big deal.

And nights like tonight, well, it's not like they haven't slept in the lab before, and it's not like they won't do it again...

And it hits Tim, as he drapes his jacket over her desk chair, that this may be the last time.

He's slipping off his shoes and belt, watching her sleep, when he realizes that once the tiny person inside her gets on the outside, one of the two of them will have to get home every night. They won't be able to work all night, crash, fuck, snag a ton of Caf-Pow, and go back to catching killers.

In two months, and really, one probably, he can't see her doing this nine months pregnant, this chapter of their life will end. And who knows, in twenty years or so, when this kid is out of the house, maybe they'll start doing it again, though he'll be 57 then, and she'll be 61, which is just too hard to wrap his head around.

He lays down next to her. Scooting his arm under her neck and snuggling in close around her. These last two months she usually sleeps through that, but today she stirred a little.

"What time is it?"

"Three."

"Okay. You find what you needed?"

"Yeah. Ziva and Tony are driving to Virginia Beach right now." Just because Gibbs is gone doesn't mean they've let up on the pace they work at. Two days ago they caught a case, what looked like a straight up murder, and after sixteen hours of sorting through the main suspect's tumblr and youtube videos, Tim thinks he's found the actual crime scene. Tony and Ziva are off to process it.

"Good." She rolls over to face him, and kisses him gently. It's soft and sleepy, and he was fairly sure they were just going to sleep, but her tongue slipped out to lick his bottom lip, and that got his attention in a good way.

"How sleepy are you?"

She smiled a little, though her eyes are closed. "Sleepy, but not so much so that I don't want to have sex."

He's stuck between that wired space that happens after more than ten hours on a computer and ready to drop from exhaustion. Sex'll certainly help with that.

"Pretty fried right now."

"You want to just sleep?" she asks.
"No, just letting you know I'm not up for anything energetic."

"Me either."

"Okay." He stood up and pulled off his pants and boxers, while she scooted out of her panties. He smiled at her.

"What?"

"Last of the red-hot lovers."

"Even Don Juan phoned it in at three in the morning after working all day."

He lays down, snuggles up against her back, and kissed her neck, enjoying the comfort of her skin on his, the warm weight of her body against his, and the scent of her hair. He sighed. "Mmmmm…"

Inhaled long and slow, felt her rock against him gently.

His hand found her breast, gently cupping and stroking under her shirt. Her hips set a slow, steady roll, rubbing soft and easy against his dick, and in a few minutes her leg hooked back over his, and he slipped into her.

Quiet moans, deeper, faster breathing, and slow, easy, sleepy motion set them alight and quivering.

A few minutes later, as they were drowsing in the afterglow, still spooned together, Abby asked, "Why have we never done this at your desk?"

That gets a smile out of him. He's certainly thought about it, and sure she has, too. He kisses her shoulder. "Because while I might like the danger of maybe getting caught, actually getting caught doesn't get me off. There's always someone wandering through the Bullpen, and I know for a fact there are security cameras up there."

"There are security cameras down here, too."

His eyes went very wide, and he looked like he was about to start grabbing for his pants.

She kisses his hand and smiles. "No one's gonna watch them unless something goes missing. And I have a feeling right now you're awfully motivated to make sure the lab is safe."

"That's one way to put it. When did they get security cameras down here?"

"After Chip."

So, the entire time they'd been together. Which means NCIS basically has its own porn channel starring them. Might be time to do a little hacking and deleting. After a full inventory of the lab. "Makes sense."

"And right here, we're pretty much out of range. They're focused on the doors, so you can see who goes in and out. I think they can see you from the knees down and my feet."

He thinks for a moment, wondering why she knows exactly what the camera feeds are. Finally he asks, "So what can you see of my desk?"

"The whole thing, from two angles. There's one in the corner behind Ziva's desk, so the front of yours is in plain sight. And there's one above and behind, so you sitting at your desk is awfully visible, too. Honestly, you might just have the worst possible desk when it comes to surveillance."
"Think they're watching me? Making sure I don't hack the Pentagon again or something?"

"Maybe. Or maybe who ever watches these things before archiving them is hoping to see something good."

He smiles wryly. "Then why are only the doors covered in your office?"

"I moved the cameras."

"Really? So, you don't want to get caught, either?"

"Not exactly. We do this often enough that it's not just a treat, so..."

"Okay." He gets that. This isn't just the place for the occasional fast screw. This is, besides their home, this is the most common place they do this.

"And we sleep here. We talk here. We have dinner here some nights."

"This is a private space, or as close as you can get at a place where two hundred people work."

"Exactly."

"I was thinking about that, sort of, when I was getting undressed." She arches an eyebrow, he's still got his shirt and socks on. "Okay, as I was taking my shoes and belt off. We're probably not going to be doing this a whole lot more. Two more months and one of the two of us will have to be home with Kelly every night."

"Oh."

"Yeah. The days of the 3:00 AM fuck in the lab are numbered."

"Maybe kids weren't such a good idea," she says with a smile, so he knows she's joking.

"Yeah, terrible idea." He's grinning too. "If I had realized how badly they'd cut into our sex life, I would have been in favor of skipping this."

She laughs, reaching up for the tissues that for some strange reason always live on her desk now. She hands him a few of them, and slips off of him, both of them wiping up quickly. He pulls on his boxers and pants. Sure he might prefer sleeping naked, but he's not about to do it at work. A quick glance at the clock shows him they've got four hours until the time he's normally up in the Bullpen again.

Abby pulls her panties on, and then snuggles back into his arms. "Good night."

"Good night."
So, part of this whole having a baby thing is that, eventually, the baby comes out, and you need a place to put said baby.

Later that night, after dinner and calling Gibbs, officially to give him an update on the case, but really just to check in on him, they head up to Kelly's nursery and get working on furniture assembly.

Gibbs is making the crib. And had made the rocking chair.

But she needs more than a crib and a rocking chair.

Abby's on décor duty. She's putting up tree and flower decals. Tim's assembling the dresser/changing table combo thing.

"So, hospital or the birthing center?" Tim asks. Because the other thing about having a baby is that you've got to pick a place where you intend to have said baby come out.

"I was thinking about here."

He puts his tools down and stares at her, perplexed, wondering if he heard right. "Here? You mean, here? At home?"

"Yeah. Here, in our home."

He stares at her for a long minute, waiting for her to smile or something to indicate she's kidding. But she's just looking at him expectantly.

"You're not kidding." He can tell from the sound of his voice and the way Abby's looking at him that he'd gone completely white at that idea. He looks down and sees his hands are shaking. And in a sort of disassociated way, he realizes this is fear.

"No. I'm not."

Which is when the disassociation crumbled and he went back to actually feeling what's going on with him. He looks up at the ceiling and tries to think of something more constructive than shouting, ARE YOU INSANE! The whole idea of it terrifies him on a level he can't even put words to, but he's not so far gone he doesn't know that's a bad idea. Finally he came up with this, "You know how we each have veto power over names that we don't like?"

"Yeah."

"Because we respect each other and want each other to be comfortable…"

"Uh huh."

"Okay. If you think I've been insanely overprotective over the last seven months…" He pauses, takes a few deep breaths, because just the idea of this makes him want to yell, and he knows that's not helpful, either. "I will completely fucking lose it if there aren't exceptionally well-trained medical professionals less than thirty seconds away from us when you're in labor. I'm vetoing this."

"Tim…"

"Midwife, doula, water birth, whatever else you want, I'm fine with and will get for you. But not
that. Anything happens and there have to be people who can deal with it around. And not just a twenty minute ambulance ride away. If Kelly needs to come out NOW, someone's got to be there to do it."

She's looking at him like she's being completely reasonable, and he's insane, and she's finding it annoying. But she's the one being sane, so she offers, "What about having Jimmy and Breena come, too? He's a doctor. They've done this before. Twice."

"And they are more than welcome to come. You want them along as labor support, and I'm fine with that, as long as we and them are in a hospital or birthing center. Yeah, Jimmy’s a doctor, and you know what? He didn't deliver his own babies! Ducky came over when Breena went into labor, so there were two doctors there with tons of experience, and that tons of experience told both of them they aren't obstetricians so all three of them went to a hospital where there were obstetricians."

"We go to the hospital and the rate of c-sections and interventions skyrocket."

"They skyrocket because you can only get a c-section in a hospital! It's called cherry picking the data, and you know that. The rate for home birth c-sections is zero because you can't get one at home! The only people who give birth at home are people who are likely to have uncomplicated deliveries, and the only ones who finish at home are the ones who actually have uncomplicated deliveries." This isn't going well. She's on the verge of crying, and he can feel himself getting more scared any angry with each word. "Okay." He blows out a long, frustrated breath. "Tell me why you want to do this here."

"Why do you care? You've already vetoed it." And now she is crying, and he's feeling like a complete asshole.

"Because if I know what you want, we can try and find a better compromise."

"I don't want a compromise! Right now your definition of compromise is do it your way."

Okay, that's true enough that he doesn't have a good response for it.

"Look, I can't do this at home. You will be in pain, and I have a bad time with that to begin with. There'll be blood, your blood, and that's gonna freak me out, too. I'm a firm believer in the idea that you are not supposed to be in pain and all of your blood is to be located inside your body at all times. So, even in a hospital with lots of people who know what they're doing, and the fact that this is all perfectly normal, I'm already going to be in bad shape. I'm so scared I'm yelling at you right now," and he is, with every word his voice has gotten louder and higher pitched, "just at the idea of this, so I think it's fair to say that I will not handle the real thing with any sort of grace!" Another deep breath as he tries to calm down, and his voice was fairly normal when he said, "Just, please, tell me what about here at home it is you want."

The problem of the two them arguing about things like this is neither of them has the emotional cool to just back off. So he gets upset. She responds by getting upset. Her upset jacks his emotions up a few notches. That in turns ramps her up. And him losing it has sent her into blubbering, crying mode.

So her face is red, her eyes teary, and she's speaking between sobs as she says, "I want to be home, with you! I want Jimmy and Breena and Ziva. I want the people I love around me. I don't want to be constantly poked and prodded by strangers. I want to be able to move and eat and not be hooked up to machines. I don't want to be pumped full of drugs. I don't want to get sliced open. I don't want someone else deciding that it should go faster than it is and try to make my body speed up. I'm not sick, so I don't want to be treated like a patient."
"Okay." And if it wasn't for paralyzing fear, all of that would make a lot of sense to him.

"I want to be able to hold Kelly the second she's out. I don't want her whisked away to be poked or prodded either. I want you and me to do this together, and I want all three of us together as much as possible!"

"I want that, too. But if something goes wrong…" He stands up to go over to her, and wraps his hands around her waist, his belly against hers, his forehead pressed to hers. "We're not set up to deal with that here. Even with Jimmy here, we're still not set up for it. Please. I'll scour DC, Virginia, and Maryland for a birthing center that'll get you what you want. And we'll stay home for as much of the labor as we can… But…” his hands cup her belly, stroking gently over their daughter, "If anything ever happened to you… I can't lose you. Everything I can't live without is right here in my arms, and I can't take risking that."

She's staring at him as he says that, and gently touches his face. "Okay."

He takes a very deep breath, lets it out slow, and kisses her. "Thank you."
Closer To Whole

Tim looked at Penny as he loaded a box into the back of Jimmy's van.

It boggles his mind how little stuff she has. Of course, that probably makes a certain amount of sense. When Nelson died, she sold the house and most of their stuff, and got a small place in Annapolis. She gave notice at John's Hopkins (where she'd been a Professor of Bio-Tech. There are reasons beyond his grades and SAT scores why Tim got such a good deal from John's Hopkins, though he doesn't know that and has never suspected it, either. Though the fact that that is true was a source of friction between John McGee and Penny for several years.) and started to travel.

In the military there are grunts, officers, and then there's God's Country, in the land forces, God's Country starts at Light Colonel. In the Navy, get your Captain's bars, and you've hit God's Country, and in God's Country, you and yours are very well taken care of.

As the widow of an Admiral, money, medical care, housing, all of her tangible needs would be taken care of for the rest of her life. So, for three years she just wandered around, saw the world, went the places they had planned to go. Went the places Nelson never wanted to go.

It was fun, but didn't keep her brain as active as she liked.

In academia, there are grunts (grad students), associate professors, and God's Country: the Tenured Professor. Penny had tenure at John's Hopkins. And as a Tenured Professor in a hard science with lots of good publishing creds who also happened to be female, she had absolutely no problem at all getting back into academia. Universities were more or less throwing wads of money and honorary doctorates at her, trying to get her to come join them.

Three years at the University of Virginia reminded her that she liked traveling.

So she found a way to do both.

From 1994 on she became a traveling lecturer. She'd bop from university to university, spend a semester or three, soak up the culture, get to know the upcoming generation of females in bio-tech and work on fostering them.

And now, more than twenty years after deciding to float, she's looking at settling down again. August 24, 2015 marks the start of fall term at American University and what is likely to be her last job at a university.

All of her worldly goods fit in the back of Jimmy's van, with room to spare. Okay, not all of them, she does still have that apartment in Annapolis, and there are a few things in there, but the stuff that matters, the things she uses every day, took Tim four trips to carry to the van.

Four trips where she just stared at him, very clearly signaling, I can handle this for myself.

As he put the fourth box (clothing) into the van, Tim turned to her and said, "We buried Jackson ten days ago. We're all kind of clinging to our grandparents, okay? Jimmy's over helping Ducky get ready for you. Tony's been calling his dad every night. Abby's more or less glued to Gibbs. I know you can do this. I know you don't need me to drive you. I just want the time with you."

"Okay."

"According to Abby, this is also me nesting. Nursery is done, except for the crib. Grass is mowed
and trimmed. House is clean. Got nothing left to mess with in my nest, so I'm working on yours."

"It's fine, Tim. Just don't want you treating me like I'm old and frail."

His looks said, Penny, you're eighty-four. That's basically the definition of old.

"I'm not frail."

"Never said you were."

He closed the rear door on the Odyssey. "Come on. If we want to get to DC before dinner, we've got to get moving."

They get buckled in, and in a few minutes he's south bound on 95, Philadelphia fading behind them, DC inching closer.

"You know, we've got to start paying Jimmy mileage on this thing. Seems like every other weekend one of us ends up borrowing it."

"You could get one yourself." She seems to realize she may have just endorsed buying a minivan, so she backtracks on that. "Well, maybe not a mini-van, you don't need this much space or pollution for one child, but you do need something with a backseat."

"The roadster has one."

"Does it have anything to hook a child seat into?"

"No. Doesn't even have seatbelts back there."

"So, you're saying the backseat is entirely useless for your purposes?"

"Yeah. Been thinking of a hybrid Highlander. The real question is is Kelly going to be the only baby. If so, an SUV should be plenty of room. If not, don't want to get one car and then have to upgrade two years later." There are things Tim likes less than buying a car. Having cavities filled, that's one. Cold and dark places, that's another. But all in all, if he can possibly avoid buying a car, he'll avoid buying a car. And really, once you've gotten your mechanic scared into submission, it's really easy to avoid buying a car.

"You want more than one, right?"

"Yeah, we both do. But we're still on the don't actually have kids yet side of things. Might feel different after we have one. And we might run out of time before we can have another one. We'd both like Abby to be able to nurse for a full year, but a full year puts her at forty-three, and I know that's not impossible, but the chances drop like a rock each year we put it off."

Penny nods at that. "Plenty of people have gotten pregnant while nursing. There's a reason your Aunt Cassie's only thirteen months younger than I am."

"I know. But if memory serves your mom wasn't forty-two years older than you."

"True. She was when your Uncle James was born."

"He's the youngest of the seven of you, right?"

"Yeah."
"Not comforting."

"It was 1944 when he was born. Things were a little different then."

"I know."

She rests his hand on his arm as he drives. "Relax, Tim, whatever happens with this, you've got options. Egg donors and in-vitro, surrogate mothers, adoption, if you and Abby want more than one baby, you'll have more than one baby."

He rolls his eyes a little. "Kind of like making them the old-fashioned way."

She laughs at that. "I like a man tall enough I can look up into his eyes. We don't always get everything exactly the way we want it."

He smiles. "I guess not."

"You still dodging your mom?" Penny asked as they stopped for gas.

"Every chance I get."

"She's worried and badgering Sarah about you, now."

Tim focused on watching the digital numbers rise on the gas pump. "I'm sorry she's worried, but right now, I've got enough stuff on my plate. Don't need to add big, messy confrontation with her."

"You could try not having a big, messy confrontation with her."

He looked at Penny, exasperated. "Hey, Mom, you parenting technique sucked. It was your job to protect me, and you didn't do it. How is that not going to be a big, messy confrontation?"

Penny shrugged. "Just remember, she was trying to do her best for you."

"You saying I shouldn't be pissed?"

"No." And she shook her head at that. "Just that you need to remember there was never any malice on her part."

"Doesn't help. But it is one of the reasons I'm dodging her rather than yelling. Because from her point of view I just suddenly went bonkers. After all, not like anything changed. Just how I think about it. Which means it's my problem, right?"

"Maybe. It's all of our problem, really. And she's your mom, she's been deeply invested in helping with your problems from before you were born."

"Sure." The gas stopped pumping and he put the nozzle back into the cradle. "You want any snacks or drinks?"

"I'm good."

"Gonna get some coffee. Back in a bit."
They'd driven for five miles before he said, "You talk to my dad?"

"Yeah. He's going to be overseeing a joint war game with Israel and Italy and Spain next weekend on Med naval drone tactics, so he called early for Mother's Day."

"How considerate."

"Yes. He's always been good at birthdays and anniversaries. Or his secretary is. Either way, he wasn't thrilled with how that call went."

"Uh huh." Tim's watching the road very carefully. Intentionally not looking at Penny. Part of him want to know how it went, he asked after all. Part of him doesn't. So he's listening, but not looking at her.

"He's under the impression that I am hysterical and overreacting and that's just the sort of thing that happens between guys." She's leaving out the part where John called Tim a pussy for complaining about it, and considered complaining about it proof that it, and likely more, had been necessary. "When I pointed out that his father had never done anything even remotely like that to him, he was less than happy." She's also leaving out the long, self-defending tirade on how Nelson never needed to do anything like that because John got with the program and did what he was supposed to do, and how it was Tim's duty to follow in their footsteps and uphold the family honor, defend his country, and put his life on the line for things that really mattered.

It was a monumentally uncomfortable conversation for both of them, and she's not feeling any desire to talk with John again anytime soon.

"Good."

"I did find out that he has actually read your books and that Lisa is his favorite character."

"How'd that come up?"

"Before we got talking about the other stuff, I told him a new one was due out in the fall, and asked who his favorite character was."

"Oh."

"I wanted to see if he actually reads them, or if he's asking me for copies just to look good. He reads Sarah's too. Though he's not sure what the appeal of a wraith as a main character is, let alone why little girls would find him romantic."

"Great, he reads mysteries and young adult paranormal romances if his kids write them. He's not a complete and utter asshole. Yippiee."

There wasn't much to say after that, so they drove for several more miles in quiet.

"How's Gibbs doing?"

"As well as can be expected. They got home three days ago. Just about everything's taken care of or in the process of being taken care of."

Penny nods. "You're helping?"
"Yeah, I've been going through Jackson's computers and financials. Got everything settled. That was actually a little creepy. He had a note for me in there. Knew I'd be the one doing it for Gibbs."

"Nice note?"

"Yeah. Thanked me for taking care of it. A little gentle poking at Jethro about how he's hopeless with this stuff, though he was glad I got him using a smartphone. Told me to take care of my girls, for my sake and Jethro's."

"Doesn't sound creepy."

"Well, no the content wasn't, just voices from beyond the grave. Nothing in there he couldn't have just emailed me before he died. Not like we weren't Facebook friends."

"Jackson had a Facebook account?"

"For all Jethro hates tech, Jackson loved it. Gibbs brought his tools home, gave them to me. He had some really nice stuff for electronic work."

"Feeling like you lost another grandfather?"

Tim thought about that. "No. Not really. I feel like my dad just lost his dad. I'm mostly hurting for him. But it's not like when Nelson or Pop died. I just didn't know Jackson that well." He glanced away from traffic toward Penny. "Ducky feels like another grandfather… I suppose he is…"

Penny smiled at that. "Are you fishing to see if we're going to get married?"

That got a quiet laugh out of Tim. "I could be. I could also be trying to avoid a discussion of patriarchal marital roles and the comparative value of the labor of females once they marry."

Penny smiled at that, too. Of all the grandkids, nieces, and nephews this is the one who knows her best. "How about a lecture on the absurdity of Navy Pensions, last wills and testaments, and how marrying complicates the hell out of this stuff?"

"I can probably avoid that, too."

"Along those lines, I do have a serious question for you."

"Fire away."

"John's currently the executor of my will, but if I go before Ducky, I'd like someone who gets along with him to handle my estate. Someone who won't try to force a sale of the condo because it's just easier to deal with the finances that way. Would you be my executor?"

"Yeah. I'll be your executor."

"Thank you."

"Ducky's not that fond of John?"

"Shockingly enough, no."

"I know that makes it harder for you, but I can't say that bothers me."

"I know, Tim, and it's okay. I'm not feeling all that fond of him right now, either. "
They were in Annapolis, picking up the last of Penny's stuff. (Three more boxes. Books, the 
originals of each of her publications, a lot of old photo albums, and some small knick knacks. 
everything else was being donated to Goodwill.)

"You talk to Jethro about your dad?"

"As little as possible."

"Why?" Penny seems surprised by that. She figures that if there was anyone Tim would talk to about 
this sort of thing, it'd be Jethro.

"I don't actually like talking about it, you know?"

"Okay."

"I'm pretty good with just you, Ducky, and Abby knowing. Obviously, at some point, I've got to talk 
with my mom, but... I had a good, long time of not dealing with it, and that seemed to work pretty 
well. I could probably happily continue to not deal with it."

"It'll bite you if you leave it there."

"But it's not biting me now. One day I'll get calmed down enough to talk to Mom, and hopefully that 
can be the end of this. Just, go back to normal."

"I don't think it works that way, Tim."

"I know."

When his mother died, Ducky sold the Mallard estate. That left him well off, and in need of a new 
home. He found an upscale condo in Chevy Chase, Maryland. It's less than an hour from work, in a 
very posh neighborhood, requires no maintenance or upkeep from him, and had more than enough 
space for an old man living on his own who occasionally entertains a lady friend.

It is, however, a bit small for two people.

Even if one of them has less than half of a minivan's worth of stuff.

So as Tim and Penny headed down from the University of Pennsylvania, Jimmy and Ducky began 
seriously looking at his home, and figuring out how to squeeze more space out of it.

Jimmy's answer, an iPad, was met with something less than perfect enthusiasm from Ducky. He 
loves his books. He likes his records and CDs. But, as Jimmy pointed out, he's got a room full of 
them, and more of them on the walls, in storage around the place, eating up all his space, so 
upgrading would certainly clear up enough space to have room for Penny's things.

His other solution, namely that any clothing purchased before 2000 could come live at his house, and 
be visited/worn when Ducky felt the need for it, (which is code for quietly dragged off to Goodwill 
or a vintage clothing store when Ducky isn't looking) was even less thrilling for Ducky, but it's true
that he does have a more than a few suits that were purchased during the seventies, eighties, and nineties, and it would be one thing if they were excellent pieces in timeless classic cuts that fit, but these aren't and don't.

So, Jimmy and Ducky are in Ducky's library, sitting amid a huge pile of boxes, loading books into them. Each one Jimmy takes off the shelf, reads the name, Ducky checks to see if it's available in electronic form, and if it is, it goes into the donate box. If not, it goes back onto the shelf.

Not nearly as many as he'd like are going back onto the shelf.

Not nearly as many as Jimmy would like are going into boxes.

It's a perfect compromise, no one is happy, but they're moving toward the goal.

Tim hasn't had an asthma attack in close to six years. He doesn't even have an inhaler anymore. He is, however, sensitive to dust.

So, of course, he walked into Ducky's home, box of Penny's books in hand, inhales once, feels the years of old, dusty, bookishness that's been permeating the house since Ducky and Jimmy began their work close his lungs down tighter than a pickle jar fastened with a wrench, and walks back out again, wheezing.

It's not that Ducky's book and record collection aren't kept clean. It's just, they're books. They sit there, collecting dust and making more dust. Dust mites move in and munch on them and breed, and when you take them out and move them around, you fill the air with dust.

A minute later Jimmy's out sitting next to him. "You okay."

"I will be. Just can't go in there. Too much dust," he coughs as he says that. "And you're covered in it."

Jimmy steps further back, noticing for the first time that he's light gray from head to toe. "Oh, sorry."

"I'll take her boxes out, put them on the front step, and then head home."

"Good plan. Get a hot, steamy shower."

"Yeah, I know."

May 2nd, 2015 Penny Langston and Ducky Mallard officially set up housekeeping together.

Standing in the shower, hot, steamy air helping him breathe, Tim found himself thinking Gibbs was the only one still single, and hoping that maybe one day they'd be helping him make a space in his home for a woman he loved.
"Hey, Jethro." Tim stopped at the second from the last step down to the basement.

Gibbs sort of grunted in his direction.

Tim pulled up a stool and sat down next to Gibbs.

Gibbs kept working on the crib, rubbing something into the legs. He kept it up for a good twenty minutes before saying, "I'm fine, Tim."

Tim nodded. "I know."

"You and Tony don't need to babysit me." He and Tony hadn't talked about it, but since Gibbs got home one of the two of them had come over for at least a little while after work.

"Know that, too."

Gibbs put his rag down. "Then why is it one of the two of you is here every single night? I'd think you'd both have better things to do than watch me build a crib."

"Don't know why Tony's doing it."

"You both just sit there and watch."

Tim shrugged. "Can I help?"

That took Gibbs by surprise. "Can you help?"

"I've never done any woodworking before, but I'm good enough with my hands that your phone is a lethal weapon."

Gibbs nodded, found another rag, and handed it to Tim. "Hand-rubbed oil finish." He poured some of the oil into the rag, and demonstrated what he was doing. Tim took the rag from him and got to it.

"You going to do this for the whole crib?"

"Just the legs." Abby had decided on a forest themed nursery, one with dragons and unicorns and fairies, and all sorts of magical critters. Gibbs, hearing that, came up with a crib that looked like it belonged in a forest.

The legs of this crib were tree trunks, growing out of the floor. The headboard was a collection of mission style slats joined together in a wide curve at the top. The foot was similar, but with a flat top, because that was the side they'd be putting Kelly in the crib from.

Abby had painted trees on the wide curved piece that made the top of the headboard, and then added unicorns and dragons frolicking about between them. One of the dragons was an Asian-style green one with green eyes, standing near another, traditional European one, in silver, with blue eyes. He thinks the red Asian-style dragon next to the unicorn with the blond mane is supposed to be Jimmy and Breena. He guesses the copper-colored European style one is Tony, but that's based entirely on what he remembers about the personalities of Copper Dragons. The unicorn with her head resting on the green dragon's neck had a black mane and green eyes, and the one near the copper dragon had brown eyes and a dark brown mane. There was an owl who looked suspiciously like he had on spectacles and was wearing a bow tie sitting in one of the trees. A fairy with brown, almost black
hair and brown eyes, and beautiful green and gold wings, mostly hidden by the trees, watched all of them.

As family portraits go, he really likes it.

Gibbs pointed to the head piece. "That'll get varnished. Want something to protect Abby's art work."

Tim nodded at that. And for a while the two of them kept working.

He kept one eye on the leg in front of him, rubbing the oil into the wood, matching Gibbs' movements, and the other on Gibbs.

Finally Gibbs said, "I'm really okay. Yeah, it hurts. But it should hurt. I'm not drinking myself unconscious down here."

"I know. That's the same bottle you've had the last two times I was here."

"You sure?"

"Did you get a new bottle and redo the little red hash mark Tony put at the bottom of the label?"

"No."

"Then it's the same one."

"Are you guys measuring how much I'm drinking?"

"No, he puts those marks on them so he knows which year he gave which bottle to you. He alternates through three different brands, and that way he knows which year which one is up."

Gibbs shakes his head a little, that's just way too involved. He goes back to working on the crib, and Tim adds more oil to his rag.

"Things okay at home?"

"Yeah. She's in a porcupine mood, but that's not why I'm here."

"Why are you here?"

Tim doesn't know how to answer that. He knows why he's here. The huge sticky mess of Jackson died and his own dad is gone and Kelly'll be on the outside in eight weeks and the real work part of being a dad will begin, and he just needs time with a dad. With his dad. And even if Gibbs isn't really his dad, he's the man he's chosen for the role, and he needs this time. What he doesn't know is how to put that into words that won't sound stupid to Gibbs.

So he shrugs again. "You want me to leave?"

"Didn't say that." Gibbs put down his rag and looked at Tim. "What's today's porcupine mood?"

"Everything on Earth, including me, smells bad to her today, and I can't help or change it or do anything about it."

Gibbs shakes his head.

"Yeah. I mowed the grass, hoping that would help, that smells good, right?"
Gibbs nods.
"Not today."

Gibbs winced. "She'll be herself again soon."

"And I am sincerely looking forward to that."

They sat there for a few minutes.

"You scared?"

"Sure. Might be part of why I'm here. Whole world, well my whole world, changes soon, and from there it's just going to keep changing."

"You're going to be fine."

"I know that, I really do. But it's still new and scary and different, and…"

"Yeah."

"It's good to have you and Palmer around. Have family who's on the other side of this."

"You do. For whatever it's worth, I'm here."

"It's worth a lot to me."

They kept working for a few more minutes, working the oil into the wood, creating something that would be beautiful, durable, and non-toxic should a small person decide to chew on it.

"Tim."

Tim looks up from rubbing the oil into the crib leg.

"My dad and I didn't talk for almost thirty years. I wish I had had that time now. The last eight years… they weren't enough."

Tim nods. He can see where Gibbs wants to go with this. "Why'd you two fall out?"

"Lot of reasons. My mom died… She was sick, with cancer, and she intentionally ODed on her pain medication, and I blamed him for that. There was nothing he could have done, but I was fourteen and angry at everything, and he was around and easy to be pissed at, because I couldn't bear to be pissed at her. I wanted to join the Marines. He got drafted into Korea and hated the military. And after Viet Nam, he didn't trust it, either. Things got better when I married Shannon, but fell apart again after she died. He brought a date to their funeral and…” Gibbs shook his head. The look he sends Tim clearly says, okay, your turn.

"He ever call you a worthless fag?"

Gibbs looks mildly surprised at that. "Nope."

"Tell you you were a massive fucking disappointment when you got one answer wrong on a spelling test? And how if you kept fucking up like that you'd never become anything?"

"No. They got hung up on the refrigerator."
"Only the A+ with all the extra credit got on the fridge at our house. He tell you you were wasting your life?"

"Told me the Marines would. They'd ship me off to die somewhere."

"Yeah, not quite the same thing. My dad was trying to get me to let the Navy ship me off to get killed somewhere. I watched MASH as a kid, and wanted to be a surgeon, but it turns out I really don't like blood, so that's how I got to biomedical engineering. I was going to build better artificial hearts and lungs and stuff like that. Save lives. Johns Hopkins had the best program in the country for that, and I got a full scholarship for it. That was his definition of me wasting my life."

Gibbs thinks about that for a moment, and Tim can see he's trying to fit this into what he knows about John McGee, and what he knows about Tim and John McGee, and what he knows about both being a father and being a son who is mourning his father.

"It's been a really long time, Tim, things change."

Tim shakes his head. "This doesn't. He's not in my life. He's not going to be in my life. He's not ever seeing my kids."

Gibbs looks a little frustrated at this, and Tim can see he doesn't have enough information to really get it. He's probably imagining something like Tony and Sr., a relationship that's been damaged by lots of disappointment but repairable.

"If he had hit me, would you still be trying to get me to rebuild that bridge?"

"No." And Gibbs starts to really get it. His eyes narrow a little and his hands tighten on the rag he's holding. Classic Gibbs anger signs. "Did he?"

"Leaving bruises would have looked bad. Would have hurt his chances of making Admiral. So he used words instead."

Gibbs nods. Tim can see he's keeping whatever is going on in his head in check, trying to keep Tim talking.

"I know sailors cuss, but… It was over the line. You can be pissed at someone without threatening to tie them down, mutilate them, and have an entire battleship rape them."

Gibbs eyes go wide, and his fist clenches so hard around the rag he's holding his knuckles go white.

"Wanna hear a really not funny story?" Tim feels himself detach from this. He's talking about it, but treating it like a story he read or a dream. He thinks part of that is that if he has a big emotional fit about it, Gibbs will go ape shit and probably kill John, and that's just not going to be good for anyone. But at the same time, he want's Gibbs to get it. He wants his chosen father to understand who his biological father is.

Gibbs nods once more, looking really disturbed and very, very angry.

"So, I'm eleven and he calls me a faggot because I was… I don't remember. Something he thought was too girly. Probably playing D&D or writing or had an allergy attack or something. Turned out he liked that one, called me it a whole lot over the years whenever I wasn't living up to his standards of proper maleness, which was pretty much all the time. Anyway, I didn't know what a faggot was. Probably another sign of not being properly male. Men are born knowing how to cuss, right? So I looked it up, because, that's just me. And the dictionary we had didn't have what it meant, not really. It had the 'real' meaning, a bundle of kindling, and that just made no sense at all to me. He'd been"
pissed, but calling me a collection of sticks was just... dumb, and no matter what else is true about him, he isn't dumb. I thought I might have heard wrong, so I read the definitions of all the words near it, and any other alternate spelling I could think of, but nothing made any sense.

"I was at my grandparents the next weekend, so I asked Pop what it meant because it had to mean something other than that. And he looked really concerned, asked where I had heard it, and I could see the look on his face, so I lied and told him one of the kids at school had said it. And he got really serious and told me there were some guys who had sex with other guys..." Tim stops there, backs up a bit. "I loved my grandfather dearly, and he was a really good guy, but he was born in the twenties and very Catholic, and died in '96... so yeah, not big on gay rights... He told me how that was a really, really, really bad thing, an abomination, and those guys went straight to Hell for all eternity, and that if I ever heard a kid say that again I needed to tell the teacher because that was a very rude word and that kid needed his mouth washed out with soap until he learned some manners.

"And then it made a whole lot of sense."

Gibbs doesn't smile. There's no humor on his face, and Tim gets the sense that he's doing everything he can to control his own emotions because he's trying to keep himself at the same level Tim is. So he swallows hard and his voice is very dry when he says, "Yeah, that's really not funny."

"No. It's not. Maybe it's okay to try and toughen up the guys who enlist. I mean, look, I wasn't that sheltered, I knew how Navy guys talk, we lived on base housing, and even then, I knew what gay was, I just didn't know what a faggot was... But I didn't want to be that tough, I don't want to be that tough, and I certainly didn't need to be that tough when I was a kid."

"No. No one needs to be that tough."

"You were a Gunny. You do things like that to the guys under you?"

"Didn't need to. Mike taught me the," and he very lightly tapped the back of Tim's head, "but I already had something pretty similar to that worked out. Most guys only need a light whack to the pride to get them moving in the right direction. The right look and a few words, in front of the other guys, usually got the job done. I worked with the idea that you didn't want to disappoint me, and you really didn't want to disappoint your team. I made them want to make me smile at them. But there were a lot of guys who worked on the idea that they'd be so scary you'd do whatever you could to avoid getting on their bad side. I always liked carrots better than sticks."

Tim flashes him an are you kidding me look. "You were terrified. The first few years I was constantly afraid you were going to kill me."

Gibbs smiles a little at that. "Made you want to please me, didn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Never cussed anyone out. Not to say that some choice words didn't come out, usually in regards to idiot orders or even dumber officers, but not the kind of thing you're talking about. Gibbs is leaving out the fact that, well, he doesn't talk, and he didn't talk much as a Gunny either. He's also leaving out the three cases where he did have to literally beat guys into doing the right thing. But there's a huge difference between dealing with an eighteen-year-old-know-it-all who is going to get his team killed if he doesn't shape up and your eleven-year-old son who wants to pretend to be a knight or cleric or whatever.

"Yeah, not the same thing at all. Like I said, I grew up on base housing, I remember Army/Navy games where Navy lost. You could hear the yelling through the whole neighborhood. We had this
next-door neighbor when we were in Alameda... after a few weeks my mom wouldn't let me play outside when he was working on his car. I don't think I ever heard him say a sentence that didn't have the word fuck in it."

Gibbs nods. "I remember those guys. Served with a bunch of them. Functional vocabulary of about 200 words and twenty of them were different versions of fuck."

"Yeah." Tim lays down his rag and turns to face Gibbs. "Jethro, I've got you and Jimmy and Tony and Ducky. I've got men who love and respect me for who I am and who I want to be. I don't need him. I don't want him. I don't miss him. I don't wish he was here. I don't even wish things were different, anymore. He's just... gone, and I think that's a good thing. I've got my family, and he's got no part in it."

"Okay."
Gibbs very rarely finds himself in a situation where he doesn't know what to do. Knowing what to do is his job. It's part of his core identity. He's the guy who knows. But this one…

His first instinct is to find John McGee, a nice vantage point a klick or so away from him, and put a bullet through his brain. Then shoot him a few times just to blow off some more steam, and maybe, if he's far enough away from everyone else, piss on the corpse and kick him until his feet ache.

It's not even rage, not the way it usually feels, it's just this cold lump in his heart and mind that wants to wipe that man from the face of the planet, destroy every cell of his body.

But Tim didn't say he wanted his dad dead. And if he suddenly turns up dead, shot in the head by a sniper, not only will their team have to investigate it (unless this happens on the west coast) but Tim will know, without a doubt, what happened.

And he's not sure if John McGee suddenly ending up dead would be a good thing for Tim or not.

He does know going to jail for killing him would very much not be a good thing, for anyone. Of course, if John McGee were to end up mysteriously dead on the east coast, his team would investigate it. And yeah, Tim would have to stay out of it, but he and Abby could make sure it was done clean.

It's a really satisfying fantasy. Maybe set fire to him after kicking him until his toes break. Or acid. Acid does horrible things to a body.

But he's fairly sure it'll have to stay a fantasy. Because Tim has a gun, the computer skills to track where the Admiral will be when, and a forensic scientists to make sure he gets away with it clean, and his dad is still breathing, and if he didn't want him breathing, he could take care of it himself.

But he's still not sure what to do with this. Tim's angry, but he kept himself under control, so Gibbs did, too. But he doesn't want to stay under control. He really, really wants to break John McGee. Not treating your kids properly is a hot button issue for him anyway, add in it happening to Tim…

He's not even sure who he could talk to about this. Tim never mentioned it to him before, which probably means he hasn't said anything to anyone else about it, besides Abby, and the way she refers to John as that man suddenly makes a whole lot more sense.

A thought hits him, and it's not exactly comfortable, but… If there was anyone he could talk to that wouldn't be a violation of Tim's privacy and make it worse…

He finds his cellphone and calls Ducky.

"Jethro?"

"Yeah Duck, can you give me Penny's number?"

"You want to talk to Penny? Jethro, have…" Gibbs is fairly sure Ducky was about to say something like, have you two even had a conversation before, when the light flicked on, and Ducky got it.
"555-028-1863. Would I be correct in assuming you wish to speak to her about Timothy?"

"Yeah, Duck."

He's fairly sure Ducky is nodding on the other end of the phone, thinking about what to say next. "Timothy was my patient not all that long ago, and anything I learned about as a result of that will always be kept in confidence. However, if you were thinking that talking to someone about how to help a survivor of abuse, or how to handle your own feelings about something horrible happening to someone you love, I'm always available to listen."

Gibbs appreciates how delicate that answer is, but he's also frustrated by it, because this isn't delicate and he's not in a delicate sort of mood. "Thanks, Duck, but I'd rather not talk in hypotheticals, and I don't want to put you in an awkward position."

"You'd rather call Penny and yell at her."

"I'd rather shoot John McGee and do violent things to his corpse. I'll settle for yelling at her."

"He doesn't blame her and neither does Abby."

"Someone should."

"Someone does. She blames herself, and his mother, and his other two grandparents, and most of all, John. You could yell at him."

"If I get within yelling distance, I'll kill him."

"Then avoid him, because killing him won't help anything."

"It'd feel good."

"Yes, it would." And the tone in Ducky's voice, icy and dark, makes Gibbs realize that he's probably got a much more detailed understanding of what happened to Tim than he does, and much more detailed makes this even harder to deal with.

"What do I do?"

"Exactly what you have been doing. Be a good father to him. Let him know that if he wants to talk, you will listen. Don't kill John unless he tells you it's okay, and if he does, let the rest of us know, because John McGee is a high enough power target that it'll take all of us to do it clean."

"If we ever do anything, what happens with you and Penny?"

"If we ever do anything, I will never breathe a word of it to anyone, including her. She is deeply conflicted about this. He's her son, Jethro, and she loves him. And she feels like she should have done a better job protecting Tim. He's her grandson, and she loves him, too. She adores both of them and is utterly horrified by the idea that she raised a monster. So, if there is ever a need for me to support her while she mourns her son, I will stand next to her and be her shoulder to cry on. And if there is ever an opportunity to avenge our Timothy, I will happily take it. But, I think this is a moot point, because he does not appear to want that, and if he does not want it, we are not going to do anything about it."

"I want to do something about it."

"Then tell Timothy that, and ask what he wants you to do. But don't just go off and do it. This is
enough of a burden without you adding to it. Keep this in mind, too, John McGee is still his father. Timothy may be done with him, but there are still going to be a lot of complicated lingering feelings there. He still loves his father. Penny tells me that as late as '11 he was still trying to fix things. He still wants his father's approval, even though he's resigned himself to never getting it."

"He never talks about it."

"Jethro, you of all people should understand burying the unpleasant aspects of your life."

"Yeah, Duck, I know."

"And am I correct in assuming he has now told you about it?"

"Enough. No real details. I was stupidly suggesting he try to patch things up with his dad, and didn't take the first three hints he gave me to back off."

"You've just lost your father. It's natural you'd want to see Timothy get as much time with his father as he can. I'm sure he understands that."

"I know. Still…"

"You feel bad for pushing."

"I feel bad for not figuring it out! Think about all the crap he took from Tony, and Kate, and hell, me, and he just kept on going, smiling at us, doing the job, taking more of it. How bad did it have to be that he stopped talking to John? When I found out they weren't talking that should have been a red flag."

"But it wasn't."

"No. I worked with him for eight years, spent every Christmas and Thanksgiving with him, and it never occurred to me that this kid has two living parents and never spends any time with them. Didn't even know he wasn't speaking to John until Penny showed up. I saw the way John looked at Tim back when we caught that case with him, and besides being pissed off at him for not respecting Tim, the idea there was more than that never touched me. How did I miss it?"

"Because Jethro, phenomenal gut aside, you are not, in fact, psychic. He did not tell you. You never saw any bruises. You only saw the two of them in the same room for less than twenty minutes. You knew they had issues, and that's all you could have known."

"I knew about Ziva. I took the time to really see her. I just, didn't, with Tim."

"I think, if you were to study how Timothy behaved before he and Abby started dating again, and since, you'll notice one of the biggest changes is that he is no longer hiding. For the first nine years we worked with him, he had an amazing talent for blending into the background, quietly doing whatever was necessary, rarely drawing attention to himself. Penny believes that's one of his defense mechanism. He's brilliant, Jethro, but he doesn't show it. Even his writing is under another name, and the picture on his book jackets is in profile and looking away, hiding his full face. It's only been since he's been with Abby, and even with that it's really only the last year we've seen the real Timothy come out regularly. Those kilts of his are as much a fashion statement as they are a way of signaling that he's finally comfortable enough with us to be himself."

"Ziva however, saw you, saw a kindred spirit, and let you see the real her. She did not hide from you."
"I think, if Timothy had been less rebellious, he would have ended up a version of Ziva. Their fathers are, from what I can tell, very similar men. Powerful, controlling, focused on a goal and willing to use anything at their disposal to achieve it. Ziva was a tool in her father's box, a tool he spent her whole life honing. Timothy was supposed to be that for his father. He chose not to be, and has been dealing with the fall out of that for thirty years, if not longer."

"Fascinating Duck." And while that's not entirely sarcastic, Gibbs is a little frustrated with Ducky waxing psychological on his kids' birth dads.

"Jethro, what I want you to remember, why I am bringing this up, is the look on Ziva's face when she saw her father dead. Eli David was not a good man, and he was an appalling father. He sent her to die in the desert. He left her in the hands of men who tortured and raped her for four months. He destroyed any sort of 'real' childhood she should have had. He ordered her to kill her brother. He tried to make her a sociopath. And when he died she had not spoken to him in months, not seen him in years, and she had just learned he had murdered a man.

"I want that image, Ziva collapsed on the floor, cuddling her father's body, crying over him, burned into your mind when you feel the desire to hurt John McGee. Talk to Timothy, but no matter what he says, keep that image in your mind, and be aware that under that anger, no matter how well-deserved, there is anguish, disappointment, and a broken heart that loves and wants to be loved in return."

That got through. "Thanks, Duck."

"Are you still going to call Penny? She'll be home in an hour or so."

"Not right this second, but eventually."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So, back a million years ago (or last April, really was it only five months ago?) we got Squall, where we finally got to see The Admiral. Now, I'm fine with Squall. It was a solid episode. And yeah, I get that NCIS is all about troubled father/son relationships getting better. I got it. We're good. But it was OOC for Tim. There's no way what's going on with him and John was as mild as what we saw in that episode, because Tim's core character trait is forgiveness and turning the other cheek. (To the point where I know some people consider him a doormat.) So, yeah, I don't buy that he cut his dad out of his life because he was neglectful and somewhat unkind. I think NCIS pulled the punch to keep with it's core themes and PG rating.
It lives in his gun safe. In the back.

It has its own case. It's black, steel, thin to keep it light, but strong and durable. The case is old. He got it in 1988, when the M40A1 became the standard issue sniper rifle for the US Military.

He picks it up and takes it downstairs, putting it on the coffee table in front of his sofa, and calls Tim.

"Hey, Gibbs. What's up?" Abby's voice on the other end. She sounds pretty perky, so hopefully the porcupine mood has vanished.

"Hoping to talk to your husband."

"Okay, I'll put him on."

He hears Abby moving around, the sound of water in the background and then, "It's Gibbs" along with the water shutting off.

"Jethro?"

"You doing anything right now?"

"Dishes. Why?"

"Wanna come over?"

"Okay…" he sounds a little uncertain. "Ummm… why?" It's true that Gibbs has actually never asked Tim to come over before, let alone less than three hours after he left in the first place.

"Want to talk to you."

"All right." There's definite confusion in Tim's voice. "You want me to bring Abby?"

"Rather just talk to you."

"Okay. You're making me kind of nervous."

"You're not in trouble."

"Okay. I'll be there in half an hour or so. That work?"

"Yeah."

"You want me to bring anything?"

"Just you."

"Okay… See you soon."

Gibbs hangs up, smirking a little at that, a very clear image of the look on Tim's face as he said that. Then he opens the case, leaving his sniper rifle visible.

The talk with Ducky was helpful. The bit about Tim and Ziva's fathers, once Ducky spelled it out for him and he took the time to think about it, very useful.
His fingers trail over the rifle. He and it have a lot of history together.

He hasn't taken it out because he intends to kill John McGee. He's fairly sure that would hurt Tim. But he wants Tim to know, absolutely, in his bones and soul and gut, that there is a man who loves him enough that he would commit murder for him.

Driving to Gibbs' place, Tim's fairly certain that he knows what Gibbs wants to talk about.

Not like you can say to a man like Gibbs, 'Oh, by the way, my dad used to abuse me, but let's pretend it's not a big deal.' Once he made the decision to say it to Gibbs, he knew there'd be more to it than five minutes of conversation in the basement.

Still, he wasn't expecting to walk in, see Gibbs sitting on his sofa, his rifle out in front of him.

Tim sits next to him, eyes wide, looking at the gun. "Haven't seen that since Somalia."

Gibbs shakes his head, fingers caressing the stock. "Haven't seen most of it. The stock, sight, and trigger went to Somalia. The barrel's new."

"Okay." Tim flicks his eyes away from the gun to Gibbs.

"Melted the old barrel down a few years ago. Leon… lost… some bullets and a report, but if they're ever found again, they won't match anything test-fired by this rifle."

"Ah."

"I heard you and Abby talking about a book a while back, something about the ax of my father's father, is it still the same ax if the blade or the handle's been replaced?"

Tim nods, he remembers that, though it was years ago.

"And if I remember right, the answer was yes. It was the spirit of the thing, not necessarily the parts that made it."

Tim nods at that, too.

Gibbs strokes the barrel. "This is the rifle I used to kill the man that hurt my girls. I looked through this sight, watched him drive up, and put a bullet through him. Say the word, and I will do the same thing to the man who hurt you."

A rush of… something, Tim's not sure if it's rage, fear, or joy flashes through him. He finds himself thinking about the fact that it's hot and tingly; that the physical sensation of whatever this is is so strong he cannot name the emotion. But he can see that Gibbs is waiting for him to say something, but nothing is coming to mind, there's just a whirling blank of whatever this feeling is.

Finally he says, "Jethro?"

The look on Gibbs face is somehow loving and terrifying. The love is aimed at Tim, and terror at the imagined version of his father. "A long time ago, I told you you were mine, and I've done a piss poor job of living up to that. But not anymore. You're mine, Tim, and I take care of what's mine, and if you want, I will end him."
Gibbs waits for him, lets the thoughts and feelings skitter around, lets him collect his words which vanished with that flash of feeling.

Mostly there's just the blank of it. A void of… something… whatever it is he can't, maybe won't, process it. But it takes shape eventually, forms coming clearer in the void. Since Tim's been an adult, he's had no desire to do violence to his father. That's the beginning and end of it. He's a man capable of using violence as a tool, but it holds no joy for him. If he ever does something to or about his father, he has to own it, his tool of choice: his mind, his words, something like that.

So, eventually, he says, "No. I mean, it's tempting. It's really tempting. And I'd be lying if it didn't want to see him look scared or in pain or…" and all of that is true, too.

"But he's my sister's dad, too. And she loves him. They've always gotten along. He's my grandmother's son, and she loves him, too. Though she's very much not happy with him right now. And I've seen enough people bury their parents and children… Hell, just helped you with your dad, and he was old and went in peace and… And I don't want to watch two of the women I love best go through that." And that is true, too. Anything he does or has done about his father will reverberate through other people he holds dear.

"And like with Hernandez and your girls, nothing will change. Nothing will get better."

"You'll have justice."

"I'm still alive, Jethro. And with the exception of when he was teaching me how to fight, he never, ever hit me, and even then it wasn't out of line."

"Vengeance then."

"I don't need it. Not like that. And I don't want to risk you going to jail. You came close enough with Hernandez. I don't want them carting you off to prison when you're seventy and some new NCIS team gets called in to check out our cold cases."

"But mostly… If something ever happens to him… I want to be the one who does it. And, I'm not saying I ever will. I think it's probably better for all of us if I don't ever do anything like that, but… If it's going to happen, it's going to be me."

Gibbs closes up the rifle case. The anger in his eyes is, not gone, but held under better control, and Tim knows it's not aimed at him for turning Gibbs down on this. Next to, or through the anger, is respect. "If you ever change your mind, or if you ever want any help with anything you might want to do for yourself…"

Tim nods.

Gibbs looks him straight in the eye. "I am sorry I didn't pay enough attention to see what was going on with you and John."

He raises an eyebrow at Gibbs, and sees Gibbs understand that it's in relation to being apologized to.

"Most of the time, you apologize to cover your own ass or try to minimize the impact of something you've done. You fuck up; you need to own up to it, none of this sorry crap. Usually, I'm sorry is about pretending you didn't understand you were about to fuck up, or trying to deny the person who you fucked up his right to be angry about it. This is none of that. I am genuinely sorry that I did not actually see who you were. I am sorry I didn't look hard enough to see it. That was my job, and I didn't do it."
Tim shrugs. "You weren't exactly in California in 1987 to '95, and since then I haven't been in the same room with him for more than two hours. There was nothing for you to see."

"There was you. You get along with everyone. You get along with people who make a habit of tormenting you. Ziva and Tony super-glued your face to your desk, I let them do it, and you forgave all three of us. But you don't talk to your dad. Whatever was between you was past your ability to forgive. And you tell me he never hit you, fine. But whatever he said to you hurt you worse than years of being hazed by your partners.

"You never go home. You never talk about your parents. You almost never talk about your childhood. Ziva talks about her childhood more than you do. I talk about my childhood more than you do. The only reason I knew you weren't an orphan was because everyone knows who John McGee is. The only reason I knew you had a sister was because she was in that case, and that's the only reason we knew you got those books published. You keep your cards so close to the vest that people don't even notice you're in the game.

"That should have been a red flag to anyone paying attention. No one is that private. And I really should have known because I spent a decade not talking about anything other than my present and my work. I know the signs. I know what hiding something looks like because I did it. I let myself believe you were shy—"

"I am shy."

Gibbs flashes him a cut the bull look. "You're not that shy. And you certainly aren't that shy after years of knowing someone."

"That's true."

"And that's not why you never told anyone but Abby anything about you."

Tim shrugs. "Didn't actually tell her about it, either. Not all of it. She knew about the fighting, but I never got into specifics. She knew details because apparently I started having nightmares after that case and talking in my sleep. And then I was sick, and out of my head, and when they sponged me down to get me cooled off I let fly with a bunch of the Admiral's greatest hits, and... Well, it was let Ducky think I talk to Abby that way, or explain why I've got words and phrases like those in my head. And I didn't want him thinking I'd talk to her like that. I don't mind if everyone knows we're kinky, I mean, that's pretty obvious, but... not that. I don't degrade her. Never."

"So, why don't you talk about it? Not, to the wide world, but to us."

Tim shrugs and shakes his head. "I've got to think about it, remember it, to talk about it. I'm happier not doing that. Before this, years could go by without it crossing my mind. I like my life now. I love it. And I'd rather be living it, now, than stuck in the past. Maybe I took enough psych/read enough to know the right thing to say, but Wolf keeps thinking I'm okay, and I'd rather just be okay."

"How okay are you if you're having nightmares about it?"

"More than okay enough. I don't remember them. The ones about the freezer I do remember, and if I'm going to go up against my past, that'll be the chunk I tackle first, because that's the part that still wakes me up in a cold sweat."

"Still dream about that sometimes, too."

"I know Tony does. I'm fairly sure Ziva does, also."
Gibbs nods. You can't do this job and not end up broken on some level. Every cop he's ever known who was any good at it had at least a few cases that haunted him.

Tim sits up, touches the rifle case, fingers idly tracing over it. "I meant what I said earlier. I have the family I want. When I was younger, Penny used to encourage me to develop attachments with other men. She knew my dad and I didn't work, and after my grandfather died, she thought it wasn't good for me to only have intimate relationships with women. Not that having close female friends/family was bad, but that I needed some men in my life, too. And she was right. Though I'd say neither of us knew why I spent so long avoiding a truly intimate relationship with a guy. But I'm not doing that anymore, so I have them, now. And I'm glad I've got you and Tony and Jimmy and Ducky. It was something I needed. I've been feeling a lot more… I don't know… whole… or real maybe, these last two years, last year especially, and I think it's just going to keep getting better from here."

Gibbs nods, smiles, eyes warm and fond, and rests his hand on Tim's shoulder. The last time he said this to a guy, it was his Dad, and it was years ago, and now he wishes he had done it more often, but that ship's sailed, but this one hasn't.

"I love you, Tim."

"I know."

"Wanted to make sure you actually got to hear me say it every now and again."

"Thanks. That's… ummm…” And that's when Tim loses it and starts crying. It's not the sentiment. He knows Gibbs loves him. Seen it every day for years now, and even if he hadn't, the rifle and the promise attached to it would be a pretty good hint.

No, it's the fact that Gibbs said it. He opened his mouth and gave it voice. He put it in the form Tim responds best to, and offered the gift of it to him.

That's what did it.

Gibbs scoots up closer to him, wraps his arm around his shoulders, and just holds him while he cries.
Carpe Diem

Chapter Notes

A/N: Okay Lovies, today we've got multi-media fan fiction. Off to youtube (or wherever you find free music) and put in Frank Turner Tell Tale Signs (If you do youtube, this is the one I suggest: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgmgfDWfOd4). Okay, got it? Good. Turn that puppy on and get reading!

Come to the lab.

The thing about being an expecting father is that, when your wife sends you a somewhat cryptic text, you end up responding to it almost before you got it.

So, it's roughly forty seconds after Tim gets that text that he is in the lab, nerves jangling with the adrenaline rush. But once down there, nothing looks out of place. Abby's at the computer working away, apparently fine.

"What?" That sounds kind of annoyed, mostly a I ran down here for nothing? sort of vibe.

She turns and smiles at him. "Dance with me."

"What?" This time it's clear disbelief in his voice.

"Found a great song. Want to dance to it. Need a partner."

"We're at work."

"We have sex in here, and you think dancing is going too far?"

"We don't do that during business hours. And it's..." he checks his watch, "1:43. Very much business hours."

"Come on. Anyone asks, you're humoring my insane pregnant hormones."

"You can say that again." He holds out his hand and she takes it, stepping into him and clicking on the stereo.

"This is dance music?" he asks, his hand settling on the small of her back. It's a steady, quiet little guitar riff. Not bad, but nothing making him think, gotta move.

"It will be."

And in a few seconds, when the drums come in, he catches what she was thinking, and begins a slow steady two step. It's a classic slow dance beat.

"Is this a song about self-mutilation?" he asks as a few of the lyrics stick in his mind.

"Shhh... Pretty music," she says, swaying against him.

She's right, the music is pretty, nice steady beat, the singer's voice is pleasant, and British accent is...
strong enough he's not having an easy time following exactly what the lyrics are, and that's probably a good thing.

They're maybe two minutes into the song when he hears, "Agent and Mrs. McGee, what are you doing?"

Agent Tim McGee has a pretty standard response to this, namely leaping back from Abby, blushing, looking embarrassed, and focusing his full attention on Director Vance.

Tim McGee, soon to be head of NCIS Cybercrime, DC Division has a somewhat different one. One that is, hopefully, respectful enough of Leon and his position, but demonstrating he's no longer willing to be cowed by the man: "Humoring my pregnant wife, Sir," he answers Vance without stopping dancing.

Abby slaps him on the shoulder, and he dips her back, gently, can't go too far back seven months pregnant. The two step beat has shifted, so a holding move seems to be worth putting into play.

"Seizing the day, Leon," Abby says when he pulls her back up. "Never know when I'll get my next chance to dance with my husband. We'll be done in about two minutes."

"Fine." Leon looks exasperated, but heads out of the lab.

They're still dancing, but Tim's looking worried. "You said that to him?"

"If anyone would understand, it's Leon."

"Well, yeah, but isn't that rubbing salt in the wound?"

"I hope not. Rumor has it he's dating again. I hope it's a reminder to go for it."

"I hope he takes it that way."

"He will. Now shush. Dancing with your girls, not worrying about Leon."

"Yes, dear."

Abby kisses him gently, smiles, and he smiles back, shakes his head a little, and kisses her forehead, then she rests her head on his shoulder, two stepping away with him as the song wraps up.
May 8th marks yet another doctor's appointment. They had been once a month, but this is the first of the every two weeks appointments, and it, like a few of the others, begins with an ultrasound.

Jimmy asks Tim about that. Best he remembers, seven month ultrasound isn't standard operating procedure.

So Tim tells him what Dr. Draz had told them back at the 20 week ultrasound, Abby's placenta was a bit low, and they just wanted to check on it.

Jimmy's staring at him, confused and amazed, and finally asks, "Why haven't you been freaking out for the last ten weeks?"

That draws Tim up short. "Should I have been? Doc said something like one in three women have that issue at twenty weeks, but they check again later, and it's like one in two hundred by the 30th week. Uterus grows, shifts its shape and it pulls up and everything is fine."

"It's probably not a big deal." But Jimmy's not exactly sounding confident on that.

"Okay, you're starting to freak me out."

Jimmy rolls his eyes. "Yeah, well, I'm a little sensitive on things like this."

"So, is this you being overprotective or was she feeding us happy bullshit because there's nothing we could do about it?"

"Overprotective. She's right, placenta previa is really common mid-pregnancy and almost non-existent by the time you get to full term. They'll check today and see where everything is?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

So, sitting in the ultrasounds lab, Tim's feeling a bit more nervous than he'd like to be. He really didn't like the look on Jimmy's face when he mentioned the placenta was low. Yeah, Jimmy's sensitive to things like this, but…"

The tech comes in and begins the ultrasound. And 4d images of Kelly more or less shut down his ability to worry. Overwhelming awe: that face, those tiny fingers curled into her mouth, they could even see her lips sucking gently on the forefinger.
They're both floating on that image when the tech says, "I'd like to get some more images of the placenta. I can get better quality from a transvaginal scan."

And cute and love and drifting along on clouds of happy baby joy come crashing to a halt.

"Why do you need a better image?" Abby asks.

"It's still low, and we need to know exactly where it is."

They won't let you use your smartphone in the doc's office. This is deeply annoying to both Tim and Abby right this second. They're sitting in an exam room, with nothing but fear to keep them company.

The Ultrasound Tech, Julie, wouldn't tell them anything beyond, 'low.' What does low mean? 'Talk to the doc.' Is this a big problem? 'Dr. Draz'll read the scans and let you know what's going on.' Can you at least tell me my wife and baby aren't in danger of dying in the next five minutes? 'No one's dying today.'

Abby's dressed again, and sitting on the examination table. She's so nervous she isn't moving. He's pacing.

"Fuck it!"

There's a computer on the desk in the office. It's for the doc to use. Not him. Right now, he doesn't care about that, at all.

In less than a minute, he's into it, and searching the internet for whatever the hell a low placenta is and what it means. He's trying to remember, Jimmy called it something, but he's so scared it's slipping his mind.

So he googles low placenta and finds reams of information on placenta previa. He's reading to Abby about how it means the placenta is over the cervix and as the cervix gets softer and opens it can tear the placenta and hemorrhaging can occur.

To say they are both less than thirty seconds away from hysterical fear when Dr. Draz walks in would be a very accurate description.

She sees both of them, hovering next to the computer, skin white, faces tight, Abby clutching onto Tim's hand as they're reading, takes a deep breath, reaches over, turns off the computer and says, "It's not that bad. Sit down, take a few deep breaths, and start to calm down. Abby's not going to be bleeding to death in the grocery store."

She gives them a minute to sit down, both of them on the exam table. Tim has his arm around her shoulders, and she's snuggled into him, gripping his knee.

"Okay, let's start at the beginning. Obviously you both know about worst case placenta previa now. That's not you. Right now, your placenta is at 2.5 centimeters away from the cervix. Anything lower than two centimeters and we get nervous. Basically as the cervix thins and softens the placenta can rip and result in bleeding.

"First and foremost, right now we're at watch and wait. Hopefully, as your uterus continues to grow, the placenta will end up further away from the cervix and this won't be a problem."
"But even if it stays where it is, this isn't something to panic about. We know it's an issue. We're going to keep monitoring it. The biggest thing we're going to be dealing with is how fast your body changes in relation to how fast Kelly grows. If your body stays at full thickness and no dilation, up to 37 weeks, then this will be very easy. We'll schedule the c-section, and one morning come the middle of June you'll come to the hospital and a few hours later, you'll be holding Kelly.

"If your cervix starts to ripen and dilate before that, we'll start something called pelvic rest, no internal exams, no sex, you take it easy. It's not exactly bed rest, but if you don't have to get up to do it, you don't go do it. Pretty much, no jostling the uterus. Thirty-six weeks is officially full term, but we like to see babies get to thirty-seven weeks, the outcomes are a bit better, and their lungs are usually in better shape.

"If you start bleeding before that, we'll use medication to try and make the bleeding stop. If that works, then you go on bed rest." She checks their information. "You live close enough to the hospital that you'd probably be able to go home for that. Bed rest means exactly that, you lay in bed and catch up on your TV and reading. The only thing you get up for is to go pee. You'll stay on bed rest until Kelly hits thirty-seven weeks."

"What if the bleeding doesn't stop?" Tim asks.

"Emergency c-section. The placenta has a lot of blood flow, but it's not an artery. You're not going to bleed out in five minutes if it ruptures, no matter what those morons on the internet say. Sure, now is a bad time to decide to go on a cross country trip. Right now you don't want to be more than twenty minutes from a hospital. But everyone in this practice can get a baby out in less than seven minutes if need be, so no one is going to bleed to death.

"The biggest thing to keep in mind right now is that if you start bleeding, get to the hospital right away."

Tim and Abby are a little calmer with that, but a little calmer and calm aren't precisely the same thing. Abby pulls it together enough to ask, "What do we do to avoid bleeding? I mean, do I need to start pelvic rest now, or…"

Dr. Draz shakes her head. "No. You don't need pelvic rest now. I'm not saying you want to start running marathons or anything. Take it easy. If it weighs more than fifteen pounds, have someone else pick it up. But that's fairly standard seven months pregnant advice, anyway. Right now, while your cervix is full thickness and shut, everything is perfectly fine. Given where your placenta is, the most likely story is that it'll continue to scoot out of the way as your body changes, and by the time Kelly's ready to come out it'll be far enough out of the way to not be a problem. In most cases like this, if we were back in the pre-ultrasound days, we'd have never known there was an issue."

"What does 'most' mean?" Tim asks.

"In my experience, about seven out of ten. I'm thinking we'll keep an eye on it, see how and if it moves, and by the beginning of June we'll make a decision as to whether you want to try and deliver vaginally or if you'd rather schedule a c-section. It's entirely likely that by the time you're at term that it'll be a good three inches away from your cervix and this won't be an issue at all."

"Is there anything I can do to try and… encourage it to scoot up? Stretching or anything? Hang from my knees, inversion table, anything?" Abby asked.

"No."
"Is sex okay?" Tim asks.

"Right now, yes."

"I mean, we have a whole lot of it."

"Good for you. Yes, it's okay. Obviously, don't do anything that hurts, but I'd assume you already know that."

Tim's nodding. "It's really okay?"

Dr. Draz sighs, she's seen this before, knows it's a normal, scared male response, knows that this is basically the only part of this issue that he can control, but well, her sympathy for it is somewhat limited.

"Is your penis a foot long?"

"No." He's looking at her like she's completely insane and says, "Orgasmic contractions are kind of like labor contractions, right?"

Her respect for Tim jumps up about ten notches. Poking the placenta and breaking it is the usual guy fear. He's the first guy she's seen who's put together the idea that orgasmic contractions might move the uterus in a bad way. She smiles gently.

"It's really okay. For right now, and likely the next month, everything is going to keep being exactly the same as it was before. We're just watching more carefully. As the cervix starts to ripen, and we've got a better idea of what is going on, we'll be able to plan from there.

"I'm thinking we'll keep with the every two weeks appointments, but once you start having any contractions at all, we'll move to once a week. You will, eventually, start to have little contractions. They call them Braxton-Hicks, but really, they're all the same thing. It's just your body getting ready to get the baby out. You don't need to sprint to the hospital as soon as you feel them, but once you do, it's time to give me a call and schedule an appointment for the next day. So, we all okay with this plan?"

Tim and Abby nod absently. That's a ton of information, and no, they aren't really ready, or okay. They just aren't in a blind panic anymore, and while that's better than being terrified of breathing wrong for fear of bleeding to death on the way home, neither of them are particularly happy or calm on the ride home.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay, I'm playing a little fast and loose with placenta previa. Most of the stuff you'll see in here will be factually true(ish) or at least not beyond the bounds of possible. Mostly, I'm toning the danger level down a tad. Happy reading all, more good stuff tomorrow!
Being a pregnant father is very different than being a pregnant mother.

And not just on the obvious levels of your body doesn't change and you aren't swamped with hormones that make you insane.

For example: if you are a pregnant dad, other dads, upon finding this out, will occasionally tell you horror stories. These horror stories usually involve things like your wife going absolutely insane in a Jekyll/Hyde sort of way, being forced to rearrange every piece of furniture in the house at 2:00 in the morning as a result of this insane, and how you never, ever get to have sex again.

They very rarely involve stories of how the baby goes from being inside your wife to getting out. (Or that there may, just possibly, be a causal relationship between how this happens and the whole no sex thing.)

This might have something to do with the fact that most guys, especially with casual acquaintances, would rather cut their own tongues out with a pair of chop sticks than admit to being really scared about something.

However, veteran moms seem to have absolutely no issues at all with telling perfect strangers exceptionally gory stories of how they went into labor, dealt with twenty hours of excruciating contractions, had the baby go into distress at nine centimeters dilated, and then had a terrifying emergency c-section that took months to heal up from. But they don't tell those stories when there are men around. So, Tim hasn't heard them. Sure, labor forever, lots of pushing, hurts, yep, he's heard that. Vaginal prolapse, fourth degree tearing, pushing so hard the blood vessels in your eyeballs burst, emergency c-sections where you almost bleed to death, not all of the placenta being delivered and massive infections, nope, those stories don't get mentioned when he's around.

Likewise, there is no 'Labor Olympics' for dads. Dads don't compete with each other over who had the 'best' labor. They don't tell stories of how they didn't need any pain meds and had an all-natural, organic homebirth awash in love and joy and nesting complete with soft focus, glow-y, happy stuff all over the place. (Or if there are guys that do that, none of them are in Tim's social circle.)

Women do. And since she's been visibly pregnant women have been telling Abby one of two stories: the perfect love-fest natural birth, or the went to the hospital and every possible thing that could go wrong did.

Now, it is true, that the birth she knows most about, Molly's, was an uncomplicated hospital birth, where nothing went wrong, no one was treated like an animal about to be slaughtered, followed by a fairly standard healing up time, and Breena has been telling Abby for months now to ignore those cows who get off on scaring pregnant moms, but, it's hard to shut those stories out. Especially when more and more of the keep piling on.

It's also true, that while Tim's been reading The Expectant Dad Guide, What To Expect When You're Expecting, and things like that, Abby's been reading/watching The Business of Being Born, Gentle Birth, Gentle Mothering, and lots of other things that flat out say that if you go to a hospital they'll cut you open at the first hiccough whether you need it or not because the profits are better.
And lastly, while they are both aware of the fact they aren't reading the same things, they are also not aware of how radically different the content of the things they're reading is.

All of this is relevant because, having gotten home from being told by their OB that Abby has what's called a near previa, and googling the ever living snot out of it, they are both coming to some very different conclusions.

For example, Tim's thinking that more or less bubble wrapping Abby from head to toe and keeping her in bed from now until a scheduled c-section at 37 weeks is a brilliant idea. In that he does not have to personally do it, five weeks of bed rest doesn't strike him as a problem.

And sure, Dr. Draz, who he is currently thinking is being insanely reckless with the health of the two most important people in the entire history of the Earth, says they don't need to do that, but the stuff he's reading seems to be indicating placentas are made of tissue paper and can rip at a second's notice if you even look at them wrong, and there's no such thing as a safe previa, and really the only way to deal with this is to keep Abby as still as possible from now until the minute Kelly's lungs are developed enough for her to be on the outside. And just to be on the safe side, they should start doses of steroids at 34 weeks to get her lungs developed that much faster.

Abby, meanwhile, is dealing with having been DQed from the Labor Olympics. (She has not internalized any sort of idea that this might kill her, in this respect she's doing better than Tim at rationally assessing the risks, in other respects, not so much.) She had had an idea of the kind of labor she wanted, and sure, at home was a long-shot, but she'd been taking such good care of herself, and being really careful, trying to get to a low-intervention, no drugs, hands off, doing this naturally, the way her body was designed to, at her own pace sort of birth, and that just got shot to hell and gone.

She likes Dr. Draz, but having her hover around the whole time isn't what she wanted.

And a c-section… from what she's been reading, they're almost never really necessary and have so many bad side effects, everything from massive infections and death, to punctured bladders and permanent incontinence, to babies with weaker lungs and missing out on the all the useful bacteria of the vaginal canal, and it's just a huge mess. (This would be where Tim is doing a more rational job of assessing risk, and Abby's freaking out unnecessarily.)

Of course, a lot of the stories she's been hearing, and things she's been reading, indicate you sure as hell don't want to try a vaginal delivery in a hospital, either. They'll pump you full of Pitocin which means ultra-painful contractions, more or less forcing you to take pain meds, leaving you way too woozy to properly bond with your new baby, and possibly drugging the child, harming her ability to bond with you, followed by an episiotomy (whether you want it or not, because it makes things easier for the docs) and of course that makes the tearing worse and the healing up more painful.

And don't get her started on MRSA and all the superbugs that live in hospitals.

So, Tim is terrified. Abby is sad and feeling hopeless, like all the good options just got yanked away from her. And both of them are thinking the other one is completely bonkers because they're both dealing with this with a radically different set of assumptions about what is going to happen.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: My youngest boy is almost five now. So, it's been a while since I was in the Labor Olympics. (DQed on the first round due to the fact that I couldn't give a crap about how
the kid got out, as long as he did eventually get out.) However, every horror story I listed is something some "kind" person decided I needed to hear about in vibrant, gory detail, because, hell, I don't know why. I mean, why would you tell a woman who is seven months pregnant something like that? It's not like these are cautionary tales designed to help you anticipate pitfalls and avoid them. And I did have strangers come up and more or less tell me I was abusing my kid because I wasn't gung ho on an organic home birth. And I've got buddies online, who are still, years later, mourning the fact that they "failed" to have a "natural" birth.

Okay, not sure why I'm ranting here. Probably annoyed that so many women get so caught up in doing this the "right" way, that they lose sight of the bigger goal.
When they put Molly to bed, and Jimmy still hadn't heard anything from Tim, he goes from nervous to really worried.

So he does something he'd never done before.

Technically Jimmy is a doctor. He's kept up with his continuing education units and made sure to maintain his medical license in Virginia. Mostly it's just a point of pride. He had to finish medical school to be a Medical Examiner, he didn't actually have to do his residency and get his MD. But he did it.

And as a registered doctor in the state of Virginia, he has access to the Federal Medical Database. And sure, the bugs aren't all worked out, and the backlog on old data is about ten years long, but back in January, all new casework, test results, consultations, and notes are supposed to be uploaded so any doctor can get full medical records at a moment's notice.

So, he goes online, registers with the database, and checks.

He spends a good half an hour studying the ultrasounds, reads Dr. Draz's notes, and her suggestions, thinks they're fairly reasonable, and comes to the conclusion that he has not heard anything from Tim and Abby because they are probably at home getting hysterical about this.

Breena sits next to him, reading over his shoulder, looking concerned.

He stands up, kisses her, and says, "I think I'm going to go make a house call. You feel like sending that to Ducky, so I can get them a third opinion, fast?"

"Sure. You want me to have our OB look at it?"

"Might as well. I'm guessing Tim's gonna need to be talked off a ledge, and Abby's probably feeling pretty disappointed."

"Yeah, she was hoping for an unmedicated, home birth."

"At home?" Jimmy's never gotten that. He knows some people do it, voluntarily. But he wouldn't get a cavity filled without pain medication and properly trained medical professionals right next to him, let alone anything longer or more painful than that. And having both delivered babies (he, like everyone else who was a medical intern, had a six week long OB rotation) and been there for the delivery of both of his own children, he's pretty comfortable with the idea that it really hurts, lasts a hell of a lot longer than a filling, and is way more dangerous.

His personal theory, that the whole natural childbirth thing is women being just as macho as men, if not more so, (because he doesn't know any guy, anywhere, ever, who would sign up to spend twenty hours having his testicles stretched to ten times their original size without a ton of drugs) and this is their way of proving who has the biggest dick, is one he hasn't felt any need to share with Breena or Abby, though given that this was something Abby's in favor of, he may decide to share it with Tim.

"I kept telling her that the hospital isn't that bad, and that the drugs are really very nice, but apparently there are a lot of girl in HR and Accounting and a few other departments who came by the lab, dropped off cute little presents, and proceeded to tell her absolute horror stories about how bad their births were. She's pretty scared."
"Okay." He picks up his phone, hit Tim's contact, and before Tim can say anything says, "I'll be there in twenty minutes. Put your computer down, pry Abby away from hers, and go watch a sit-com while you wait for me, okay?"

"Jimmy?" He can hear the fear under the surprise in Tim's voice.

"You didn't call. That meant something was wrong. I stole Abby's medical records, wanted to know what was up before I called, and from there it wasn't too hard to figure you'd be scared. Sit tight. I'll be there soon. We'll go over everything together, and hopefully get you off that ledge your about to jump off of."

"I'm not that bad."

"Sure you're not. Look at your right hand."

"Yeah."

"It's shaking isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Go. Get on the sofa, put something stupid and funny on, I'll be there soon. If you want, I'll grab Ducky on the way, and be there in about an hour."

"Rather have you here alone, faster."

"Sit tight, I'll be there soon." He hangs up and looks at Breena. "He's terrified." Then he hits Ducky's contact button on his phone. "Hey, Ducky, Tim and Abby didn't get good news from the doc today. Breena's sending you the scans and everything. Feel like looking them over and heading to his place?"

Ducky's voice is grave as he says, "How bad?"

"I don't want to prejudice your opinion. Take a look and head over to their place. Tim's terrified. I'm sure Abby's sad and scared. They could use some handholding from people who know how this works."

"Certainly. I'm opening my email." He can hear Ducky messing with his computer. "I'll be there in an hour or so."

"Thanks."

Breena looks up from forwarding everything to their OB, and gestures for Jimmy to come closer. He does, and she kisses him. "Give them my love and a kiss."

"Tim, too?" Jimmy's not looking thrilled at that.

"Especially, Tim. He needs one, and it might shock him enough to help break the panic."

That's a good point. "If he hits me, it's your fault."

Breena smiles. "He's not going to hit you. At least, not until Bootcamp on Saturday. Get over there, talk them off the ledge, and give both of them a smooch from me."

"Okay."
Bedside manner has never been one of Jimmy's strengths. Mostly because of his skill at saying whatever the least appropriate thing for the given moment. But, he's been getting a lot better at that over the years.

And right now, he's got one main guiding principal going: Do Not Scare Them Anymore Than They Already Are.

He's thinking that shouldn't be too hard. He's also thinking that what likely happened was their Doc explained what was going on in a rather soothing sort of way. They both sat there, pretty scared, not really taking it in, and not knowing what sorts of questions to ask. Then they got home, researched the hell out of it, and got really scared, and had no one to ask anything besides the internet which is more or less the worst possible place to study anything that you find personally scary.

Family, especially family that's expected, doesn't have to knock at the McGee house, so he just walks in when he gets there, and sees the two of them following his directions. They are on the sofa, looking in the direction of the TV, and he can hear a laugh track.

He's absolutely certain they aren't actually watching it, though.

"Hey."

Tim hops up to greet him, and Jimmy gives him a hug. Abby starts to get up, and Tim glares at her, so she stays sitting.

It's true that Jimmy will never, ever call Tim out on overreacting about possible dangers to Abby or Kelly. He will never say Tim is being unreasonable, or that he's got no right to be scared. It's also true that he can feel Tim shaking and this level of scared isn't good for either of them. So, arm wrapped around Tim, he says, "Come here, Abby, join the hug."

And she does, looking fairly pleased that he's not treating her like she's made of glass. And now Tim's glaring at him.

"You carried her to the sofa, didn't you?" He gets that out, and then Abby's there, nodding yes, rolling her eyes, so he pulls her close, too and takes a moment to hold both of them, trying to be calming just by being there.

He kisses Abby's forehead, looks her in the eye, and says, "You're going to be fine." He pets her tummy. "Kelly is going to be fine." Then he turns his head two inches to the right, kisses Tim on the cheek, which he looks horrified at, but it does seem to have shocked him out of his fear, at least, he's not shaking anymore. "The kisses are from Breena. She thought you'd need them." He stares Tim in the eye. "Tim, your girls are going to be fine. Come on, let's sit down and go over this. Abby, can you get us some paper and markers."

"I can get it," Tim answers.

"I know you can. But you need to know she can walk around and not break, so Abby's gonna get us the supplies, and you and I are going to sit down and wait for her to do it." When Abby heads upstairs, Jimmy quietly says, "Look, I know you two; your emotions feed hers and vice versa, so you have to keep it together. That's your job: be the man, and that means playing cool, especially if you aren't. You wanna have a full-on freak out with me and Gibbs, that's fine. We will support you through it, and if it takes more than a day, we'll come up with a lie for why you aren't home. But from now until that baby comes out, you absolutely cannot panic in front of her. Scared is fine. Sad
is fine. It's good for her to see this affects you, too. So terrified you're treating her like a light breeze'll hurt her, that isn't! You're just making her more upset, and that makes you more upset, and you end up with a positive feedback cycle from hell."

"What if it was Breena?"

"Then I'd be exactly where you are if not two steps further down the panic line, and you'd be telling me to calm the fuck down and not lose it in front of her because not losing it is my job! Only one of the two of us needs to be sane at any given time, but both of us have to be able to fake it. So, until you can handle this on your own, I'm here to help you stay cool. But you've got to be able to grin and bear it."

Abby heads down, puts a few markers on the coffee table, and heads into Tim's office for paper. Once she was out of earshot again, he asks, "We good on that?"

Tim grits his teeth and narrows his eyes. Jimmy takes that as consent.

Abby's back half a minute later with a stack of typing paper. Jimmy kneels in front of their coffee table, and waves them to come close. "As I told Tim, I stole your medical records, checked the scans, and sent copies to Ducky and our OB, so third and fourth opinions'll be heading your way soon. In fact, Ducky'll probably be here soon, maybe with Penny, and possibly having consulted with a few of his buddies as well."

Jimmy takes the black marker and draws a circle on the paper, then stuck two small, vertical lines right next to each other at the bottom of the circle.

"Okay, this is a really awful drawing of a uterus. Those lines are the cervix. Normally, as the third trimester wears on, those lines get shorter and further apart." He adds arrows pointing right and left.

"Now, usually, the placenta is up here." He adds a red blob at the top of the circle. "And when you go into labor the contractions pull the cervix sort of up and apart." He gestured with his fingers with a drawing up motion.

"Both of you with me?"

They both nod.

He snags another piece of paper, draws another circle, two lines, and a red blob right at the bottom over both of the lines. "That's a placenta previa. As you can see it's lying right over the cervix. Placentas are pretty tough. If you've ever seen one in person, they look like an evil bloody jellyfish from your worst nightmares. They're rich in blood, lots and lots of vascularity, so like your lips, if you cut one it bleeds like crazy. They also don't stretch. So, if one half of the placenta is over here, and the other half is over there," he's circling each side of the placenta pointing out even more clearly that it's straddling the cervix, "you've got a ticking time bomb, because the parts of the uterus it's attached to are moving further and further away from each other. And, not to put too fine a point on it, it's also between the baby and the exit. This is a bad thing."

He grabs another sheet of paper. Draws yet another circle and two lines, and this time puts the placenta blob three centimeters up and to the left of the cervix. "If I'm reading the scans right, and it looks like Dr. Draz thinks this is what's going on, too, this is what your uterus looks like. First and foremost, you don't have the placenta waiting for the floor under it to rip apart and it's not blocking Kelly's way out. So that's the very good news part of this."

Jimmy gestures with the marker while he says, "Okay, so possible trouble comes when everything
thins out and starts moving. The cervix and walls of the uterus move up and back, great. Well, there's this big blob of blood sitting there, and it's attached to that wall, so it sort of smushes as the contractions continue, and that can cause bleeding issues."

He grabs the drawing of the normal uterus. "Also, usually, after the baby's out, you keep having contractions to expel the placenta, and stop the bleeding. Most of the contractions come from up here." He's circling the top of the uterus where the placenta is. "Which makes sense because it's pulling everything up and out. Likewise the hardest, strongest contractions aren't at the cervix end of things, because that's got to be soft and flexible enough to get the baby out." He looks up at Tim and Abby, who are staring at this ridiculously inaccurate drawing like it's the revealed Truth of God. "With me so far?" They nod, not looking away. "So, the mechanism that gets the placenta out and shuts off the bleeding doesn't work all that well because the placenta isn't in place to take advantage of it. So, once again, potential bleeding problems.

"According to Dr. Draz your body hasn't really gotten the message that the baby's gonna come out anytime soon. The uterus is a big, strong, thick muscle, especially at the cervix end, because it's got to keep that baby in there." He draws a quick and dirty, but significantly more accurate, sketch of a female pelvis. "So right now, you've got this pile of muscle, skin, and bones all working together to keep everything inside you in there. So, yeah, you don't want to take up bungee jumping, but for right now, there's not much risk of anything happening. You've got a nice, contained unit, and it doesn't much matter one way or another where your placenta is."

The fact that Abby hasn't just flashed Tim an I-told-you-so look tells Jimmy exactly how scared both of them must be.

"But starting soon, your hipbones are going to spread out. Your uterus and cervix will thin out and spread. After all, the final goal is get the baby out, and that won't happen if everything stays shut tight. And as things spread out, the possibility of tearing gets higher."

"What's higher?" Tim asks.

"I don't know. Not an OB. Dr. Draz had in her notes something like 7 out of 10 women she's seen with your kind of previa do just fine, and I've got no reason to think she's wrong."

"What's fine?" Tim wants to know.

"Not a mind reader in addition to not being an OB, but I'll guess she's thinking that in seven out of ten cases the uterus keeps growing and the placenta moves far enough out of the way to not be an issue."

"Did you ever deal with something like this?" Abby asks.

"No. I delivered twenty-two babies solo, and helped with seventy-three more during my OB rotation. Nothing like this, though. Of course, they don't let Interns work on the high-risk patients."

"But it is a high risk," Tim adds, staring at Abby, terrified, stroking the back of her neck.

Jimmy squeezes his shoulder. "Yeah, but there's a huge difference between high-risk and get-your-affairs-in-order. If it was 1950, hell, 1980, this would be a huge freaking deal. But it's not. Your OB knows this is an issue. You know it's an issue. You go in, you get the c-section, they take everything out in one fell swoop, pump some Pitocin in to make sure the bleeding shuts down, and if it doesn't, they've already got you typed and matched for more blood, possibly your own if you want to do that, pints of it on ice waiting for you, clotting factor at the ready if need be, and if worst comes to absolute worst they can have a hysterectomy done in a matter of minutes. But you don't die. Kelly
doesn't die. Four or five days, ten tops, you're home from the hospital with her and get to see how well you function on no sleep."

And while Tim finds that reassuring, it wasn't the right tact for keeping Abby less scared. "I don't want a c-section, let alone a hysterectomy!"

Jimmy nods, realizing his tactical error on this. Tim's worried about losing the loves of his life, and Jimmy, who is also a husband, and Abby's best friend, is feeling the same sort of thing. Abby's worried about being cut to shreds, mutilated, and losing Kelly. She's not looking at this as a life or death situation for her.

Jimmy tries a different tact. "Look, this isn't likely to happen. Kelly's about two pounds now. She's going to triple in size, maybe quadruple, possibly more between now and when she's ready to come out. Your uterus is going to grow like crazy. By the time you hit regular contractions everything will have likely moved out of the way.

"But if it doesn't, if it was Breena, I'd say get the c-section as soon as they'll do one. But you're not Breena. I've done four c-sections, and yeah, they aren't minor surgery. It's not getting a few stitches. Your abdominal wall does not appreciate being cut open. But, assuming Dr. Draz actually knows what she's doing, and my guess is, since you're still going to her, she does, the risk levels for a planned c-section should be minimal.

"But again, I'm not an OB, I'm not your OB, and it's not my body getting cut open, so I've got a somewhat different take on what's going on here. What I do know is that the last thing you want is the emergency, bleeding all over the place, get-that-kid-out-STAT c-section…"

They all hear the door open, footsteps, and a gentle voice saying, "Dr. Palmer, I concur," at the same time.
At the age of eighteen, Don Mallard, not yet nicknamed Ducky, was a medic in Korea. (Coming into contact with large numbers of American soldiers, who universally called him Duck or Ducky, eventually caused the name to stick.)

As a medic, he became a talented medical jack of all trades. In a pinch he could, and did, take off limbs, tie off bleeders, fish shrapnel out of wounds, debride burns. In many cases he did those things under fire, or during the transport part of moving wounded soldiers from the front to the back.

He also, and this is something most people would assume to be true if they thought about it, but generally don't think about, dealt with delivering (or helping to deliver) a lot of babies.

A general rule of thumb is that if you are located in a place with a very large number of young men, IE an army, and if that very large group of men has limited access to birth control/is unwilling to use said birth control (condoms) you will, in nine months' time, end up with a large number of babies. The fighting part of the Korean War lasted three years, and there were numerous fairly long truces. This resulted in lots of babies, and while it's true that usually, in less medically advanced cultures, the local midwife is in charge of these things, Koreans are (or at least were) pretty well convinced they were the superior race on Earth, and half-Korean/half-Anglo babies and their mothers were scorned and treated horribly, so being a medic, and often the only guy many of the soldier knew with any medical training, he got called in to help with deliveries when the woman's family and village shunned her.

He returned to Scotland after the war. Studied medicine at Edinburgh. Joined the RAMC, and spent the next thirty years in every hot zone the Queen was involved in. Over the course of that time, he's delivered a whole lot of babies.

He's not an obstetrical expert, and he knows that. But he also knows that for many years and in many places he was the only one around who had any medical training beyond that of the local midwife, and when things got hairy, he'd get called in. At the very least he could perform a tidy c-section and make sure the woman didn't come down with childbed fever after.

So it is with this background that he's looking at Abby's scans, Penny standing next to him, forwarding the information to one of her friends, Dr. Gladys Monroe, the current head of Obstetrics at John's Hopkins, (add opinion five to the list) and thinking about how much he enjoys living in a world where you can find this out ahead of time.

The entirety of his baby-delivering career was spent in a world where, should the placenta be badly located the only way to find that out was for the woman to begin hemorrhaging, or depending on the level of badly located, come down with a nasty infection when all of it was not properly delivered.

So, it is true that he's thinking this is not happy or joyous news, he's also greatly relieved to know this ahead of time.

Granted, he's been out of the game long enough that he has no idea what current standards of treatment are. Back in his day the standard was c-section followed by hysterectomy, desperately trying to stop the bleeding in time, hoping and praying the whole way through that the mother came through alive with the (almost always premature) baby written off as tragic collateral damage.

That's why Penny's emailing her friend. If anyone does know what the cutting-edge standard of care is, she will.
So, in this, Ducky is expecting his value as comforter and cooler, wiser head will be what comes into play.

And as such he has two goals, first and foremost to manage Jethro, who will probably be just as scared as Tim, if not more so in that he's already lost his wife, daughter, lover, and pseudo-daughter in Kate, and will feel like he has fewer options in dealing with that fear, because he'll want to be a rock for Tim and Abby. Secondly, no matter what actual medical advice Jimmy comes up with, he'll back that. Jimmy's OB residency was after the invention of ultrasound as a obstetrical tool and Georgetown's Medical School is a more than adequate program. So he's going to agree or defer to anything Jimmy has to say about this.

They head to Gibbs' place before going to Tim and Abby's. Ducky wants to tell Jethro himself, and give him a little time to get himself under control.

Penny stays in the car. While she may think that Patriarchal emotional norms for males are silly, she's also fully aware that that's the operating manual Jethro functions under. He can't allow himself to express any emotions in front of her other than anger or happy. Fear and sorrow, the likely response to this news, is private for him and can only be expressed alone or with very, very dear friends, like Ducky, and certainly not in front of a woman he barely knows.

She also knows, because Ducky told her, that she's on Jethro's "shit list" right now. He has not yet called to yell at her about Tim, but that's probably still in the offing. So she does not want her presence to give him something other than Tim and Abby to focus on, not right now at least. Depending on how scared he gets, having something to get angry at may be useful. (After all, forty years as a Navy wife means she's got a few tricks up her sleeve when it comes to managing scared men who feel like they're not even allowed to feel fear, let alone know how to deal with it.)

So she texts with her friend, sees that Dr. Draz is on the ball and knows what she's talking about, and that right now, wait and see is the wisest course of action.

"Jethro."

"They got you checking up on me now, too?" Gibbs asks, sanding the slats of the crib. This is the last, final sanding, then there'll be some buffing with a soft cloth, but by this weekend (barring a hot case) it'll be done.

"If you mean, have I been recruited into Anthony and Timothy's conspiracy to keep you from spiraling into self-destructive behavior, no. They are 'looking out for you' on their own."

"So, what brings you down here at nine on a Monday?"

"Unfortunate news, I fear." And he explained, calmly and gently, what he'd seen in the scans, what Dr. Draz had put in her notes, and how all of that seemed reasonable to him.

He watches Jethro take it in, the slow realization that not only is this scary, but that there is nothing he can do about it, and unlike running into the radius of a bomb blast, there's no way he can go with her if this goes bad.

It's Abby, his darling girl—because for as much as he loves Ziva, and he does truly love her, and for as rapidly as Breena is becoming his, as well, Abby's his little girl-in danger, and he can't protect her from it.

It is, literally, his worst nightmare.
Jethro's leaning against the crib, clutching the edge of it hard, not looking at Ducky, and Ducky can see he's immediately jumped to the worst case scenario. So he steps closer, puts his hand on Jethro's and says, "Jethro, they are going to be fine. The doctors know about it. They're keeping watch and giving Abigail and Timothy very good advice on how to proceed."

"If it's going to be fine, why are you down here?"

"Because they are scared, Jethro, and should be. Just because it will be fine in the end does not mean getting to the end will be easy or pleasant. And because you are scared and need a friend right now."

"I can't lose another one, Duck."

"I know, and you aren't, not like this."

"You ever deal with something like this?"

"No." A long and varied medical career taught Ducky that if the truth can do no good, if it can only bring pain and worry, then you lie and you lie convincingly and you feel no guilt about it. "First, do no harm," doesn't only mean avoid treatments that will make the case worse. It also means not scaring the patient or the patient's family with out of date information that has no bearing on the situation at hand.

"If they terminated, would she be okay?"

"Jethro! Stop it, right now. Abigail is going to be fine. She's never more than twenty minutes away from medical care. If something happens at work, Jimmy and I are less than two minutes away. At home, they are three miles from a hospital. And I have a feeling Timothy will be unwilling to let her get much further from a hospital than that. She will be fine. This is upsetting and scary, and may involve a rather unpleasant and bloody birth experience, but she will be fine. Kelly will be fine."

Gibbs is staring at the ceiling of the basement. Ducky isn't sure if he's bottling everything up or praying. Probably both.

"Doc says she'll be okay?"

"Her doctor's notes indicate that right now they're just waiting to see what happens next. She's not even on bed rest, Jethro. Jimmy sent me her notes and the scans, and her advice seems reasonable to me. I think he concurs. Penny has emailed everything to one of her friends, who is the head of Obstetrics at John's Hopkins, and should be hearing back soon."

He inhales deeply and says, "Okay," exhales slowly through gritted teeth. "And you're here because we're going over there, right?"

"Yes."

Ten minutes later, (Gibbs drove. Ducky and Penny both have mild whiplash from the speed he was going.) they walked into Tim and Abby's house and caught Jimmy explaining about possible worst case scenarios.

As Ducky said, "Dr. Palmer, I concur," Gibbs headed for Abby, kneeling on the floor next to her, glancing once at the sketch in front of them, and then wrapping around her, kissing her forehead.
Abby hates this. Tim and Jimmy are looking at her like she's being a petulant child because she doesn't want to automatically jump to letting the doc hack her open to get Kelly out.

She can see Jimmy backpedaling, trying to figure out how to manage this, because, of course, he's all 'c-section-no-big-deal.'

Major surgery, bleeding all over the place, maybe never have babies again, maybe instant menopause, no big deal. Ten days and then you're all better. Yeah, he might heal up from being castrated in ten days, too, but that wouldn't mean he was better!

_Fucking men!_

And yeah, Jimmy's pretending he gets it, but she can see he's with Tim on the whole get this kid out as fast as possible, screw the consequences, we'll pump you full of antibiotics and drugs and who cares what you wanted as long as it's taken care of nice and tidy?

There are times when having men for your two best friends is an issue.

Granted, she's not sure Breena or Ziva would be much better right now, either. Breena flat out told her that the whole 'bonding' thing is total crap, and that when you've got a little lamprey eel attached to your boob every three hours, for two solid months, you're bonded. Literally.

And she just has a hard time seeing Ziva getting excited about any particular path for getting a baby out.

But…

Okay, maybe this is a little whiny, but it's not what she wanted!

She's not sick. Pregnancy isn't a disease, it's not a 'condition' to be 'managed.' And she should be allowed to be sad about not getting the fantasy. And it's not insane to think that wait and see might actually mean wait and see so maybe we don't need to schedule the c-section right this minute (Jimmy) or go on bed rest (Tim!).

But mostly, she's scared. She doesn't want a c-section, at all. Twenty to forty percent infection rate. Triple the rate of maternal death. Increased rates of blood clots, heart attacks, uterine embolism. None of that sounds like something she wants to sign up for if she can at all possibly avoid it, and it sounds like this is something she can avoid.

Then Gibbs and Ducky and Penny were there, and Gibbs is holding onto her like she's a life preserver, and she's fairly sure she's never seen him this scared.

Tim's on her right. Gibbs is on her left. And being clung to by 300 plus pounds of terrified male is not helping her composure at all, and if they don't back off and just let her breathe she's going to snap and do something really rash.

This was not going well.
Penny was sure that Jethro could take on a machine gun nest, armed with only a pen knife and Hoorah attitude, without blinking. He'd go, do it, and that'd be that. And if he didn't make it back, then he didn't make it back, and that would also be that.

But he can't kill this. He can't fight it. And it's not danger to him.

She knew from Ducky that he's got bad personal history with this sort of thing, too.

So, it was understandable. It made perfect sense. The problem is, Tim's holding onto not panicking by his fingernails, and scared Jethro next to him is not helping that control at all.

And last but not least, you didn't have to be a forensic psychologist to see that Abby was about to melt down. Pregnant women are rarely known for emotional fortitude, and with two of her best guys one the edge of panic, and the third treating her with kid gloves and lots of concern and she's about to start yelling and crying.

Penny smiled gently at Ducky, and he nodded at her, aware that she's about to do what Grandmas have been doing pretty much since the invention of Grandmas, and that's slapping some sense into people who are being silly.

"Jimmy, could you scoot over a bit?" Penny asked, and then settled in front of them, sitting on the coffee table. She then leaned forward and gently whacked Tim and Gibbs upside the back of the head.

"No one's dying. Not today, not tomorrow, not two months from now. So calm down, both of you." Then she handed her phone to Tim and Abby. "This is from Gladys. She's the head of Obstetrics at John's Hopkins. Which means that she's one of the top five obstetricians in the world. And if I knew any of the other four, I'd have cc'd them on the email, as well. She's thinking watch and wait is good advice. Basically, exactly what your OB said to you. It's a borderline case, and likely won't cause any issues. That little girl is going to double in size between now and when she's ready to come out, if not more than that, so there's a lot more growing that's going to happen, and your placenta will likely be out of the way by the time you're ready to deliver. But no doctor, let alone one in a high risk specialty like OB wants to get sued. Everyone is being cautious because one or two lost cases and jerk your malpractice insurance so high it puts you out of business."

And right that second, Abby loved Tim's grandma more than anything. The look on Gibbs face was worth having to go through this whole thing. No one besides Franks had ever head-slapped him, and he didn't know how to deal with it.

But she was going on like she hadn't noticed the look (Shock, outrage, anger, and mostly more shock, but, and this was Penny's plan, fear was gone, or at least shifted to the side.) he had aimed at her.

"There's only one thing a woman is designed to do, and that's squeeze out babies. And Abby's going to be fine, so is Kelly. I've done it." She looked at Gibbs. "Your wife did it," she turned to Jimmy, "and yours, too. It's not fun. It isn't easy, but it's what we're built for, and these two," she petted Kelly, "are going to come through just fine."

Then she turned toward Abby. "And you are going to stop pouting about a possible c-section and get down on your knees and thank both God and science that they're available because if you need one, it will save your life and your daughter's life. And that's all that matters on this.

"I've done this four times, and I can tell you, there's no magic in doing it any given way. You don't get a medal for no meds or no interventions. Anything that gets you and Kelly out of this in one
"That's not the problem," Abby starts, though it actually is part of the problem, sort of, well, at least, giving up on an ideal is the problem, "it's so much riskier."

"No one's talking about you having one for kicks and giggles. And so much riskier is, according to Gladys, for healthy women without other complications, three out of 100,000. So if your OB says get one, you get it."

"I've seen thirteen out of 100,000."

Penny shoots her an I'm done with this look. "And did you look into the maternal mortality rates for women who need c-sections and can't get one? Did you research how many babies die when they get into distress and can't get out fast?

"You're a scientist, Abby, start acting like one and get into the data. That thirteen number includes all c-sections for all reasons, including the ones where they did the c-section because the mother was dying or already dead. You want Gladys' email, and I'll happily give it to you. You can talk it through with her, but you know that anyone can mess with the data any way they want to make it prove whatever they want. And I want you to get out of panic mode and into data mode and realize thirteen out of 100,000 is about your chances of getting hit by a car driving home from work, which you do every single day without a whimper, so calm down about it!"

The next bit was aimed at Tim and Jethro. "And if the OB says it's okay to try for a vaginal birth, and that's what Abby wants, you two support her in it. A c-section is more dangerous, it's not easy, it can take a long time to heal up from, so avoiding it if at all possible is a good plan.

"So, we all on the same page? Abby and Kelly will be fine. Baby's coming out however the highly trained medical providers you have hired to provide you with their expertise think will result in the best outcome. And we're all done panicking. Right?"

Jimmy smiled, saluted, and said, "Yes, Ma'am."

She's still staring at Tim, Abby, and Jethro.

Jethro nodded first, then Abby, and Tim finally yes, "Yes."

"Good. You get any new ultrasound pics?" Tim rubbed his eyes, got up, grabbed Abby's purse, and found the shots, handing them to Penny.

Unlike the previous ultrasounds these were 4-d and provided enough detail to see what Kelly actually looked like. And unlike the previous ultrasounds, they'd been vastly too scared to really look at them.

Penny gazed at them for a moment, then handed the clearest of the face shots to Gibbs and said, "What do you think, Jethro, Tim's lips and Abby's chin?"

He stared at the shot, his arm around Abby, hand resting on her tummy, feeling Kelly squirming around. He closed his eyes, resting his forehead against her temple. "Yeah, Penny."
After Penny got done with snapping some sense into them, they spent a while looking at the pictures, and by then Tim, Abby, and Gibbs had calmed down enough to start asking more questions, and Abby started showing them what she was reading, and it's not so much that it's factually wrong, (Though Jimmy's pretty sure that's true, too, but he hasn't done the research, so he doesn't actually know.) just really spun in a very anti-western medicine sort of direction.

Jimmy walked them through how a c-section works, which Ducky found fascinating, the last time he did one they still cut straight through everything in one long line down the abdomen. So the idea of multiple crossing incisions to minimize scarring and long term abdominal weakness struck him as awfully cool. He'd certainly seen the technique used for tracheotomies, had done it back when he was a medic, and was feeling intensely stupid that it took so long for anyone to think of using it for a c-section.

Eventually though, the conversation wore down, and just sitting around trying not to be scared was pretty useless, so Penny, Ducky, and Gibbs went home.

Jimmy stuck around a bit longer than that, wanting to make sure Tim was good before he left.

"Walk me to my car," Jimmy says to Tim. Abby's looking at him curiously, wondering what he wants to say to Tim without her around, but he just winks at her and kisses her cheek, saying, "Stupid husband stuff. Don't worry about it."

She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Come on, I know you talk to Breena without me. I know, tomorrow, you're going to call her and complain about how Tim and Jethro went bonkers on you." She shrugged a little and smiled a little at that. "And you'll cry on her about how Penny was being sort of mean, and how the rest of us just don't get it when it comes to this whole natural birth thing."

"Well, you don't!"

"Of course we don't. And you're going to talk to her about it tomorrow. So, give me a few minutes with Tim. He'll probably tell you all about it when he comes back in."

"Fine."

Tim walked him out, and they both stood next to Jimmy's Tuscon. (Yes, they have an Odyssey, this is the smaller, going places without a kid car.)

"So, you okay?"

"No. Gibbs isn't, either."

"I know. You okay to be on your own and not freak out?"

"Yeah." He held out his hand, and it was pretty steady. Not as still as normal, but not as bad as two hours ago. "I'll probably head up, wrap around her, and not let go until Kelly's out."

"She's going to be okay."

Tim flashed him a quit the bullshit look. "You don't actually know that."
Jimmy squeezed his shoulder, smiled weakly, and said, "You're right, I don't. And I know all about rolling snake-eyes on the one in 10,000 chance. But I do know, no matter what happens next, we are here to get you through it. And I absolutely know that by the end of work day after tomorrow at the latest Ducky and I will have everything on hand to deal with an emergency c-section if she needs one at work, let alone whatever it is Dr. Draz recommends for stabilization-type things to get her to stop bleeding long enough to get her to real obstetrical experts.

"And I know that it's okay to be scared about this, because it is freaking scary, but that if you do go up there, wrap around her, and not let go for the next eight weeks she will be miserable. She loves you, but she doesn't want to be your conjoined twin.

"And I know one other thing, when I leave, you need to go back up there and make love to her." Tim's eyes go wide at that. "Look, I know you, and I know you're planning on not having sex with her again until Kelly's on the outside. Bad plan. All that'll do is make both of you miserable, so don't do it."

"I can't risk it." Tim doesn't even know how to begin putting into words how scary he finds that.

"You can and will because it'll make both of you happier, and it's probably the only thing that'll really get it through your head she's not going to break."

"But…"

"No buts, I've seen you walking around in your boxers with morning wood. You're really not that big. But if that makes you too damn nervous, I know for a fact that both of you have mouths, and hers is located nowhere even remotely near her placenta."

Tim looked at him, annoyed. "Why would you jump straight to dick? Dr. Draz did that, too. I'm not a moron. But… muscle contractions are muscle contractions, right?"

Jimmy grabbed Tim's arm and squeezed, hard, really hard.

"Ow!"

"Exactly. In medical terms that's a mild contraction. Usually, you don't even go to the hospital until you can't talk through them and they last for a minute."

"Shit."

"Yeah, they aren't kidding about the whole it-hurts-thing. But, my point is, you're not getting her off that hard."

"I get her off hard enough her whole body shakes for minutes after and she blacks out."

Jimmy just stares at Tim, dumbfounded. For a good minute he seemed to be thinking of things to say without saying them and finally settled on whacking Tim's shoulder and saying, "Well, don't do that! If she blacks out it means you've messed with her heart rate, respiration, and muscle tension to the point where her brain isn't getting enough oxygen. So, just… don't do that when she's pregnant." He spent another minute looking at Tim, shaking his head, exasperated, and then said, "But I'm willing to bet, that if you try really hard, and maybe spend a little while studying, you could, just possibly, locate some middle ground between no sex at all and orgasms so hard you black out. And if push comes to shove, I bet Tony could give you some pointers on how normal sex works."

Tim rolled his eyes and shoved Jimmy. "But you couldn't?"
"Nope. Wouldn't know normal sex if it bit me on the ass." Jimmy smiles at him, looking cocky. Trying to jolly Tim a little, lift his mood some.

"Everyone tells you that sex can trigger labor."

"Bullshit. Labor starts when it starts, and sometimes you happen to have sex before it does. Seriously, we did it every single day for the last three weeks, twice, sometimes three times when Breena was getting really desperate to get Molly out, and nothing. If the first thirty times we did it didn't set her off, that last one wasn't the magic bullet. It just happens, and there's nothing you can do short of pharmacological intervention to speed that up."

"I can't."

"You need to. She's not going to break. And you need to know that."

"Jimmy…"

"Tim, you did not just meet this woman last week. You know she can only take so much overprotective bullshit from you. She's been humoring you for months now, and unfortunately you've already probably cashed in the I'm-scared coupon a few times too often. And on top of that, Gibbs is likely to go all Papa Bear on her. Hell, he's probably already calling Vance to see if the Norfolk guys can be transferred tomorrow or the next day so she'll have help in the lab that much faster.

"Under the absolute best circumstances, she was going to be prickly and annoyed over the next two months. You two hovering over her like she'll drop over dead if she puts a toe out of line will just make it worse.

"So get your ass up there and act like this is the most important person on earth, and that her happiness is more important to you than your comfort. Make love to her, treat her like a woman, like your woman, and not a child. Prove to yourself and her that she won't break."

Tim's staring at the windows of his bedroom, still dark. From the looks of the lights, Abby's still downstairs.

"Come on, you're not going off to face a firing squad."

"Thirty times and nothing?"

"Nothing."

"I don't know if that means you're lame at sex or if it really doesn't work."

Jimmy punched his shoulder. "Really doesn't work. Did her water break the last time you made her pass out? Did she start bleeding? No, she didn't. And it's not going to today, either." He turned Tim to face him. "Look, I don't know if she's going to be okay, I just don't. But I do know that absolutely nothing you are, could, will, or even might imagine doing with her tonight will cause a problem. And I know that because it didn't cause any problems yesterday, and everything is exactly the same today as it was yesterday, you just know about it today."

Tim sighs, looking back at his house, like he could see Abby through the walls. "Story of my life."

"Tim?"

He shook his head. "Long story, not for tonight."
"So?" Abby said when he came in. She was laying on the sofa, on her side, looking at the ultrasounds of Kelly, one hand holding the shots, other one gently resting on the baby bump.

Tim sat on the floor in front of her, kissed her tummy, then leaned so his forehead was resting against it and his arm draped over her stomach and hips. He didn't feel any movement, and figured Kelly was probably napping.

"I'm scared. I've never been this scared in my life, including every time I've almost died, including when Cade was running around killing us, including dragging you out of the lab when it was filled with cyanide, and when that maniac was holding a gun on you, and every bad fight with my dad, and just every shit thing that's ever happened to me or me and you, and this is worse. And Jimmy knows it, because he's been here, and he was reminding me that if I don't want to end up miserable in addition to terrified, I've got to suck it up and not annoy you so bad you want to shoot me."

Abby smiled at that. "Wise man."

"Last week the idea of doing this at home was terrifying, but I'd trade this in a heartbeat for that. And I'm trying not to be a jerk. I'm trying to keep in mind that this was something important to you, in a way that it wasn't to me, and that you just lost that, too."

"Thank you."

"And I'm trying not to be totally insane about this, but I know I'm going to be a little insane."

"You and me, both."

That got a half-hearted smile out of him. "Yeah."

"And Gibbs is going to be a lot insane."

"Yeah. Jimmy's betting he already has Vance on the line and is trying to get Norfolk shut down that much faster so you've got people in the lab all the time, and my guess is that he won't be able to swing it, so my new workstation is down there."

"That's his idea?"

Tim shrugged a little. If Gibbs didn't think of it on his own, he'd certainly agree to it once Tim started moving his stuff down there. "I'd imagine we're both on the same page with this. You're down there on your own for hours at a time. That's a lot of time for something to go wrong before someone might pop in and see you need help."

"This is your definition of a little insane?"

He smiled very dryly, a wild, scared look in his eyes. "Yeah, because I know what a lot insane looks like. I can feel it. Trust me, you don't want to see it."

She petted his face, and he took her wrist in his hand, kissing her palm, feeling her pulse under his fingers. "So, that was Jimmy's pep talk? Don't freak out?"

"Mostly."

"Mostly?"

"It was focused on a pretty specific aspect of freaking out."
"Ahh… And that would be?"

He looked at their sofa. It's really not wide enough for both of them to spoon on anymore.

"Not enough room here." Tim kissed her lips soft and sweet, stood up, and offered her his hand. "Come upstairs with me, and I'll show you."

Sex can be comfort made touch. It can be hot, shuddering, sweaty orgasms. Or sweet, gentle reprieve. It can be pleasure, or anger, or rage, or love.

It's the ultimate shape-shifter, capable of filling whatever vessel it's poured into.

And comfort, reassurance, surcease, all of those are available options.

It's true that Tim's scared enough he wasn't able to get hard. It just didn't happen. His dick was showing some mild interest in what was going on, but it never got past that. Abby certainly noticed, but didn't say anything.

But his fingers, tongue, and lips still worked, and they're all firmly under the control of his brain, so they did exactly what he told them to do, and the results were pretty good.

And yes, Abby arching against his mouth, the taste of her on his tongue, her hands clenching in his hair, shuddering in a very happy sort of way was very good. Nothing besides warm, happy, sleepy feelings after that was better, and Jimmy was right, it did help, and he's thinking that come morning time, he'll be able to get his dick into the game, which would be a good thing.

But at the same time, her body on his, her skin under his, warm and alive and vibrant, the sound of her voice, and the feel of her breath, the pleasure of her body, all of that sharpens how much is at stake. The only person in the world he can't live without is sleeping in his arms, and the idea that he might have to, might need to find the strength to go on without her kept him awake until the sun rose.
Privately, in his own internal monologues, Ducky considers Jethro to be a force of nature. He's retribution and determination made flesh and set on the Earth to go, single-mindedly, after anything that takes his fancy.

Likewise, Penny is a force to be reckoned with, as well. Intellect and determination set loose to break molds and overcome expectations.

What precisely it says about Ducky that he prefers the company of people who are almost larger than life and capable of near super-human feats of determination is something he has not spent much time mulling over.

What he does know, is he's driving a car with Mohammed and the Mountain, and he can feel by the flavor of the silence that it's time for the confrontation, and he's completely unsure of how this is going to go.

But he's also sure that when you've got two massive, rock hard cliffs of personalities about to rub up against each other, it's an awfully good idea not to get between them if you don't want to be ground into a pulp.

So, he says, in a somewhat conversational tone, mostly as a reminder that there are people who would really appreciate it if both Penny and Jethro were to get along well. "Timothy and Abigail love both of you, and the three of us are, for all practical purposes, the only grandparents Kelly has."

And though he added nothing else, nor did he preface that comment with anything to give it any context, neither Penny nor Jethro seemed to have any issue figuring out why he said it.

Penny glanced at Ducky, nodded to him, then half turned in her seat so she could see Jethro more easily. "Have at it, Jethro, I know you're angry."

Jethro's quiet. He doesn't want to talk. He hates talking about stuff like this. He just wants to… glower, that's probably the right word.

Because when it comes down to it, Ducky's right. He can see it. Tim and Abby don't blame Penny. So as angry as he is, and as much as he'd like to kick someone, she's not the person who needs to be kicked.

And yeah, he doesn't love getting slapped upside the head, but it was similar enough to Mike that it got the part of his brain that actually thinks back online and he could see it was exactly what he needed.

Tough love is his job, and he blew it.

He's the guy who's supposed to be the rock. He's the one who Tim turns to when he needs someone calm and in charge and able to keep the fear away long enough to function, and he lost it.

So, yeah, he's angry. At himself for panicking. At Penny for not protecting Tim better. At John for being John. At God, because dammit hasn't he gone through enough danger with his girls? He's got to live with Ziva in the line of fire every single day. Couldn't just this one thing be easy and simple? Is it too much to ask to have at least one of his girls safe and secure and her baby healthy? Really, God is that too fucking much? And all of it together in less than a week, it's just too damn much.
"You didn't protect him," he says it quietly, because in the car, while Ducky's driving isn't the place to yell.

"I know." And that was all Penny said.

"You know? That's it?" What's worse than kicking something when it's not what you want to kick? Seeing it just roll over and lay there, no fight at all.

"What else is there? I failed him. His mom failed him. His dad…" she doesn't finish that thought. "He was one of the sweetest kids I've ever met, and my favorite of the grandkids, the one I was most involved with, and I still failed him. So, you going to yell at me about it? Tell me I should have paid more attention? Gotten him out of there sooner? Done a better job raising John? Go ahead, not like I haven't said it to myself already. Might make both of us feel better."

Gibbs closes his eyes and curses very quietly. Because, no it won't make either of them feel better, not really, because she's not the target he wants or needs for this. So instead of yelling he asks, "When did it start?"

"I think when he was six."

"Six? How do you not notice something like that happening to a six-year-old?"

"Because I lived three thousand miles away and it turns out 'Dad took me sailing, and I hate it!' said during the five minutes we'd talk on the phone each week when he was little actually meant 'Dad dragged me onto a boat for ten hours, I spent the whole time throwing up, and then he did it again every Saturday for the next month trying to get me to like sailing.' No one said anything like that until February, and then it was thirty-one years too late."

"Did you ever live near them?"

"Yes. The year Tim was born, when he was three and four, and the year he was eight. They were out of Annapolis those years. They spent a lot of time out of California, moving from Alameda to San Fran and back again, two years out of Pearl, and a year out of Brisbane when Tim was a baby and John was working on a joint project with the Australian Navy. And he lived with me the summer before college began, but for most of his life we'd visit during winter and summer holidays, talk on the phone, write letters, and email once that became an option."

"And as you know, if something unpleasant is going on in his life, he doesn't talk about it. And that's not something he picked up recently. That's been true since he was little. And maybe it's because no one ever let him complain and people like me would say things like, 'Honey, it's okay, give sailing another try, I'm sure you'll like it if you try again,' not knowing what was really going on."

Gibbs grits his teeth, because that's right and true, and he knows he did it with Kelly when he thought she was being overly sensitive about something, and still he just wants to hit something.

"When did they stop talking?"

"First time was after Tim turned down Annapolis."

"Tim got into Annapolis?" Gibbs tries to wrap his mind around that. Not that he wasn't smart enough for it, and he's sure Tim had the grades, but… Tim's not a sailor, he's not a solidner, and he can't think of anyone who would have been more miserable dropped into the Naval Academy than Tim would have been.

"Yeah. Would have been the fourth McGee in a row there. His spot had pretty much been reserved
since the day he was born. All he had to do was get the grades, and he was in. He was something like twelfth in his class of fifteen hundred. So, he had the grades.

"John made him apply. I know he didn't want to go. I know he intentionally bombed the interview and wrote a terrible essay for the application. But a 3.97 GPA, 1560 SATs, and three previous generations of McGees meant that he was in.

"He'd also applied to half a dozen other schools with great bio tech/medical engineering programs. Got into all of them. I'd been a professor at John Hopkins so he got a good deal there, too. Got a good enough deal that John's if-you-don't-do-Annapolis-we-won't-pay-for-your-schooling,-and-we've-got-enough-money-you-won't-qualify-for-financial-aid wasn't able to scare him into submission.

"So he got in, and then apparently he showed John his acceptance letter and ripped it up right in front of him. And once the fight was over, they didn't speak again until Tim's grandfather died, two years later.

"The second time was right after he got on your team. He was really excited about it. Less than a year at NCIS and a place on the best team. I guess that's when John had to come to terms with the fact that Tim really wasn't ever going to enlist. I think John was gearing up for a huge fight, but Tim just hung up on him and didn't call back for seven years."

"And that call didn't go well."

"Nope."

"But John and Sarah are fine?" Which is something Gibbs doesn't get at all. Tim mentioned it, but he doesn't understand how that could be true.

"Yeah. He never had any expectations for Sarah. Never expected Sarah in the first place. Tori miscarried several times after Tim, and they'd hit the point where they were never expecting to have another child. And she's just as smart as he is, maybe not at as sweet, but smart, sassy, funny. She's a lovely girl… but you've met her, right?"

"Few times."

"John's enough of a chauvinist that the idea that the fourth McGee at Annapolis could be a girl never crossed his mind. Sarah's not tied to his idea family pride or carrying on the name or however he's got that… crap… labeled, so for her whole life, she's gotten to be brilliant and pretty and the apple of her daddy's eye, because anything she's done has been more than good enough for him."

"And nothing Tim did was?"

"No. That's not true. Though I'm sure that's how it felt to Tim. Anything that distracted away from the goal of being the third Admiral McGee was never going to be good enough. Anything that moved him toward that goal was fine. Math camp, science fair awards, anything like that was good. Time spent writing when he could have been studying something else, that wasn't. Wrestling was good. Scouting was good. Roleplaying wasn't. Reading was fine, as long as it was properly 'male' type things, mysteries were fine, Tom Clancy was even better, fantasy, not so much so, but even with that, if it glorified warrior culture, then it was good.

"I talked to John a few weeks ago, and he had this sort of hyper-masculine ideal of who Tim was supposed to be, and anything in line with that was encouraged, but there isn't a whole lot of Tim in line with that. And that was always where the friction came in. He got John to play D&D with him
once, rolled up characters, and of course John's playing this huge fighter with lots of muscles and a sword bigger than I am, but Tim rolled up a wizard, and at first level those guys are more or less useless. You've got to keep them safe, carry them around for a while, and eventually they can wipe the board clean with a spell, but you've got to keep them alive long enough to let them get there. Anyway, John had been hoping that he'd be able to run that like a lesson in combat tactics, and instead it ended up being a massive lecture about strength and power and how men are supposed to act and both of them had an awful time and never played again.

"What John didn't know, and Tim wasn't able to express because he was ten, is that a fighter is a tank, they wade into battle and take out whatever's nearby, relying on force to kill and heavy armor to protect them. A magic user is artillery, raining fire down from a sheltered location. Put both together and you're in better shape than you'd be with two fighters. And if either of them could have figured that out, they could have had a pretty good time, but they couldn't. And then because they couldn't, John poisoned it."

Gibbs thinks about that, realizes that somewhere along the line Penny must have played with Tim, and the something else hits. He latches onto 'anything that distracted away from the goal of being the third Admiral McGee' and mixes that with the few specifics he's got from Tim from what John used to say to him. "He was terrified Tim was gay, wasn't he?"

Penny shrugs. "He was terrified Tim was feminine. Come on, Jethro, you've been around long enough you know gay/straight isn't how it works. Not in the Navy, probably not in the Marines. No one cares if you like boys or girls as long as you 'act like a man.' A mouth's a mouth and it doesn't matter who's mouth it is as long as it's not yours, right?"

Gibbs blanched at that. He'd never, ever expected Penny to be that frank. But she's also right. That's always how it played when he was in. You were only "gay" if you were the one doing the sucking/getting fucked.

"Yeah."

"So, no, I don't think he was ever afraid that Tim liked boys. It's always been blatantly obvious that he doesn't. He fell in love with his first girl when he was three. So, no, not gay. It was entirely about him not being John's idea of a man. Tim walking around in a kilt and eyeliner with his pregnant wife is vastly scarier to John then him sleeping with a new man each week, as long as Tim's the top and he's wearing a uniform when he heads home."

Gibbs doesn't quite know what to do with that. Because he knows that he feels, well, felt, the same way, granted a much milder version of it, but it's definitely there. Male, female, gay, straight, somewhere in between, none of that mattered as long as you weren't 'girly.'

Or as Ziva put it, "I am not good with the crying and the women."

It's not as strong as it used to be, but yeah, that's something that's true about him, and something that used to irk him about Tim and Jimmy.

First time he saw Tim wear the kilt to one of their family gatherings he just sort of sighed. Same thing with Jimmy being a bridesmaid. There are just some things men don't do, wearing skirts and being a bridesmaid are two of them. And they should know that, but they don't seem to, and it's not bad or anything that makes him angry, it's just… kind of weird.

But his identity and hopes and dreams aren't tied into any idea of how Tim or Jimmy are supposed to act. At least, not in that regards. It's tied to them being good husbands and fathers, but that's something he doesn't worry about when it comes to them. So he can sigh, shrug, catch Tony or
Fornell's eye and flash a quick, *What the hell?* look across the room and be done with it.

They're sitting in his driveway, probably have been for a while, but he's finally just noticing it. So he grunts an absent-minded goodbye to Ducky and Penny, thinking about how he would have handled a sensitive little boy, not like John did, certainly, but whether he could have been properly supportive.

He walks into his house, realizing no one said anything about if Abby will be able to have other babies after this, and that suddenly he has no idea if he'll ever get to find out how he'd handle a gentle little boy.

And suddenly he's wishing, praying, that he'll get the chance to find out, because he's bound and determined that Tim's son will have men around him that love him no matter who he chooses to be.

He can't fix or change what happened with Tim and John, but he can be a the tough, old, gruff Marine who loves Tim's boy-and the image of that child, should he ever exist, is suddenly achingly clear in Gibbs' mind-the way Tim should have been loved.
Habit

A case might be a godsend. Or it might been a very bad thing. After all, someone got killed, actually three someones, so there’s a perspective issue and all, but still, something to think about other than Abby and Kelly is a good thing.

Either way, Tim's been in the bullpen just long enough put his go bag down, flick on his computer screen, get a third of his password in, and then Gibbs’ phone rang, and a minute later they're gearing up and heading toward Georgetown.

Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo doesn’t mind at all if most people think he’s something of an intellectual lightweight. In fact, he’s spent years cultivating a personality designed to make people who just casually know him think he’s got about fifty fewer IQ points than he actually has.

This usually works to his advantage, especially as a cop.

People who think he’s stupid slip up. They say things they shouldn’t. They’re less careful about keeping the details of their stories straight. And all of that is a good thing.

And sure, Tim’s smarter than he is, Gibbs is more intimidating, and Ziva’s danger sense is so well-honed she can tell when people are watching her from two hundred feet away behind her, but even with all of that, he's not a moron, and does not appreciate being treated as such, so the fact that Tim and Gibbs are both doing the worst job in the history of worst jobs of trying to act like everything is okay, when it clearly isn’t, but neither of them are talking about why, like somehow they’re managing to pull one over on him, is awfully annoying.

He gets Tim by himself as they’re systematically going through the crime scene. Tim’s bagging. He’s shooting everything.

“Okay, what the hell happened? Yesterday you were all, ‘Yay! New baby pics.’ Today, there are no baby pics, you and Gibbs are communicating entirely in monosyllabic grunts and looking pleased that we’ve got a triple homicide.”

Tim, not saying anything, takes out his phone and shows Tony the pictures.

“They look great! So, what’s going on?”

So, Tim tells him.

And Tony stops bagging and just stands there, looking pale and very worried. “Are they going to be all right?”

Tim flashes him the same haunted look he’s been wearing all day. “Everyone says so. But no one actually knows. And we won’t know until something happens or Kelly’s born.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. So, best case scenario, two months of constant fear followed by an uneventful birth with the
Doc hovering over us the whole time because even if her placenta does move further out of the way, it’s not going to end up all the way at the top the way it’s supposed to be, so she could start hemorrhaging at any moment or not stop bleeding the way she’s supposed to after Kelly’s born.”

“Great,” Tony says with a lot of sarcasm and a sigh. “But, Kelly’s far enough along that if she needed to come out, she’d be okay, right?”

“Probably. She’s tiny, but lots of preemies are born at thirty-two weeks and do just fine.”

“So the real risk is Abby?”

“Yeah.” Tim nods a little. “Jimmy and Penny and Ducky are all saying that she’ll be fine, but you go online and see stories of women who went to do the grocery shopping and bled out before they could get it stopped, and the baby lives… sometimes… but…” Tim shudders, feeling the fear arcing through him again. He stops that sentence, forces it back down, picks up another shell casing, there are tons of them around them, and says, “So, yeah, three dead bodies, lots of leads, huge, heaping stacks of intel to go through, bring it on, Gibbs and I both need something else to think about because otherwise we’ll sit there, hovering over Abby, driving her buggy.”

The single greatest adversary of fear is not courage, nor bravery, not even distraction, not really, it’s habit.

The same thing happens over and over and the worst doesn’t come.

Habit lulls the little, screaming voices, clutching their collective blankets over their heads, trembling at the unknown.

Because, really, the heart of fear is the unknown.

And habit is its antithesis.

Habit is the known, the known so well and so often that without conscious thought or effort actions take place, motions are gone through, and a web of well-known comfort wraps around and supports you through your daily endeavors.

And it’s true that no case is really routine. There are always twists and turns and unexpected bits and pieces, but there’s also a routine to a case, a comforting, lulling pattern of actions.

And, so, it is a case that Gibbs, Tim, and Abby desperately need.

Once they get back to the bullpen, Tim has a set routine of what happens next. First off, phone records and financials, and for this case, that’s times three. Well, technically, two. They haven’t been able to ID the third vic, yet, and no ID means Tim doesn’t have anywhere to start with victim number three.

Tim’s phone records search is set to handle as many variables and databases as he might want to throw at it. So, first hunt, see if the vics were calling each other, if so, how often and when.

Next hunt, any numbers they had in common.
Third hunt, any numbers called more than five times in the last week.

Fourth hunt, IDs on all of those numbers.

He sets his first computer to slicing and dicing the data on that and then moves to his second computer.

Financials are trickier, first and foremost, he’s got to get the rights to go into them. Unlike Verizon and Sprint, most banks aren’t willing to give him blanket permission to go poking around in people’s financial records. So, getting his permissions in place to go in and build the database he needs takes two hours. And proof of death, requisition forms, requests for data, all of what he needs to get those permissions, he can do in his sleep he’s done them so many times.

From there, once he’s gotten into their data, he sets a database of the two IDed vics’ financial records and begins to cross reference them.

Like with phone records, he starts with payments between them, and branches out from there.

Unlike with the phone records, he actually has to look at the financials as well as set his computers on them. So, he loads his data onto a thumb drive and heads for Abby’s lab.

This is not habit. Sitting at his desk, going over the financials while his computers slice and dice, and then heading down for the next part is habit. But, no one says anything when he heads down to the Lab about an hour earlier than usual. He’ll be back up for campfire time, and that’s all that matters.

Spending a moment standing by the door to the Lab, watching Abby bop around as she prepares trace for Major Mass Spec, that’s habit. Stepping in, turning the volume down five notches, (He’s been teasing her for years now about how she’s going to be deaf as a post by the time she’s fifty. She usually signs something back to him, and he thinks it might be rude but hasn’t shown it to Gibbs or looked it up online to see if it is, but one day he will, and he’ll learn something to sign back, because he wants to see the look on her face when he does it.) it’s still loud, but he can’t feel the music anymore, kissing her on the neck, petting Kelly gently, and then heading for the computer on the right of her desk, that’s habit.

“You’re early,” Abby says as he logs in and loads up the financials.

“Yep.” Usually he comes down for the third part of his search. It’s not standard policing technique, but it should be, and that’s social media. That’s a more hands-on search, because while it’s true that he can automate it to a degree (find the vics talking about each other, who are their good friends, what were they interested in, where were they when, who’s been stalking them, etc… etc…) it’s still useful to actually go through by hand to get a better feel for who they’re dealing with. You never know when it’ll come in handy to know the vic was a diehard David Bowie fan. “How’s it going down here?”

“At least three co-mingled blood sources. DNA all over the place. Four sizes of bullets. Two guns. Six unknown substances on swabs from Ducky. It’s peachy!” She grins at him. “You?”

“Just getting started. Three vics, two sets of phone records, two sets of financials. Right now I’m at sit down and see what jumps out on the money trail.”
“Who’s broke?”

“Yep.” He nods. "Then it's Facebook time, and eventually you'll get done processing their phones and laptops and I'll go play with them, too.”

“Any ideas yet?”

“Four sizes of bullets and two guns means someone else had to have been there. But who and when and where… We don’t even have an ID on the third vic, yet. Waiting for you to do your magic with that.”

She points to the computer next to him. “She’s working as fast as she…” and then it beeps, and they get the red flag of doom. Abby goes to the computer, puts in her information and clearances, and then they've got the info.

Tim sits back as he looks at it. “Great.”

“What’s great?” Gibbs asks.

“Seriously, do you have the lab bugged or something?” Tim asks him.

“Just good timing.” He glances at the computer, sending Abby the what's up? look.

“The chances of you seeing your other Abbi.”

Gibbs sends her the tell me more look.

“Your third vic is John Henrids, CGIS. He’s one of Borin’s guys. And she’s probably about to jump out of her skin because her man is way off grid.”

Gibbs nods, pulling his phone out, and heading up the stairs.

Tim’s back at his desk, ready for the campfire; they’re just waiting on Borin.

It occurs to him, the last time he saw her, the four of them were getting drinks, Tony and Ziva were playing darts and Borin asked if he had been serious about going out. After all, she knew about the bet, but going far enough to get tickets was more of a step than she’d expected either of the guys to go, which was making her think that Tim might have actually been interested. And yeah, he did a piss poor job of asking her out, but they’d worked together enough times that the idea that seeing him relaxed and playing was interesting to her.

Since he’d intentionally done the worst job he possibly could have of asking her out, the idea that she might have been interested in saying yes had never, ever occurred to him.

This resulted in him genuinely tripping all over himself, trying to explain what he’d really been doing without sounding like a jerk who was using her, and without Tony and Ziva noticing what was going on.

Fortunately, Borin thought it was amusing and wished him the best of luck.

They haven’t seen her since, because, like many people who have the drive to live a job 24/7, the skill to be good at it, and any political skills at all (unlike Gibbs) Borin got booted up the food chain. She’s now the head of the Chesapeake CGIS office.
The idea that Abigail Borin is mild-mannered or laid back is not something that has ever occurred to Tim. The fact that compared to how she is right now, ready to avenge one of her team, every single time he’s seen her before she’s been a paragon of mellow isn’t shocking, but it is still hard to deal with.

No hello, no chatter, no coffee even, just hit the ground running and find the bastards that did this.

Settling in, working the data, he’s very aware of the fact that no one at NCIS or Coast Guard is sleeping anytime soon.

Murders are like jigsaw puzzles with a missing lid. You start with a mess of pieces, and no idea what goes where. Get one piece in place and it's easier to see the whole picture. Get enough of them, and you’ve got a feel for what you’re dealing with. Eventually, you get enough to see what the picture is, and then it’s just a matter of slapping the last of the little buggers into place.

Getting Henrids and CGIS into place is a major piece of the puzzle.

It’s a smuggling ring.

Cloe (Pvt. First Class, Marines) and Jensen (Petty Officer, Navy) ran the first and second steps of the process. Cloe got the raw opium out of Afghanistan and into the custody of his buddy, Jensen. Jensen made sure the drugs got to their processor in Barbados. Henrids, who was replacing Jensen’s younger brother, was in charge of moving the product out of Barbados and into the States. From there, they had a collection of at least seven other guys who moved it up and down the eastern seaboard in tiny boats, and then fifteen more guys who handled sales and distribution.

It’s a small ring, but there’s not a lot of people who trade in pure heroin.

Borin’s people had been running this with the DEA for close to a month, building a case, and when Jensen’s younger brother died, they found a chance to get their own man into it, so they did.

So, they’ve got motive. They’ve got opportunity. They’ve got a massive mess because the three links at the top of the pyramid are dead, and close to 2000 kilos of heroin are missing.

To say that Gibbs and Vance are less than pleased at the idea that this op had been going on for more than a year at DEA and a month at CGIS, under their noses, focusing on their guys, would be an understatement.

To say that Borin couldn’t care less about that would also be an understatement.

To say that all three are pissed at DEA, who couldn’t even be bothered to send someone to see what was going on is an even bigger understatement.

And when Tim finds the next big chunk of the puzzle, that the reason why no one at DEA showed up is that no one at DEA was actually involved in this, the proverbial shit hits the metaphorical fan and spatters on everyone even remotely nearby.

Really, all in all, it's a very clever plan. “Harkness” and “Milo,” the “DEA Agents” are, in fact, members of a rival smuggling group, who had infiltrated Cloe’s group. Triple agents.
And with as big and unwieldy as DEA is, and how bad it is at actually co-operating with other agencies, it wasn’t hard for two guys to put on some bad suits, get some fake badges, and walk right into CGIS, lay out all the information about this “sting” they’d been working on for over a year, and then, the plan was, give CGIS all the info, wait for them to swoop in and arrest everyone, and then they’d just walk in flashing badges and paperwork, confiscate the drugs and the info on who the processors and producers were, and take over.

The problem is that Cloe and Jensen figured out who “Harkness” and “Milo” are, resulting in a five person fight/shootout in a cabin with Henrids in the middle.

It takes two days, two solid days, two days where the only person who got any down time was Abby, mostly because Gibbs and Tim forced her to rest. (Okay, Tim got a cat nap. She made some very pointed remarks about how if she needed rest he did, too, so he agreed to lay down with her, and as soon as she was asleep he drug himself back up and went back at it.) But by the end of day two they’ve tracked down “Milo.”

Unfortunately, in that he's deader than Marley, (as Ducky says, which gets Jimmy talking about reggae, and Ducky looking at him like he’s a twit, but Jimmy links it back to Dickens and popular media, and from there Ducky takes over, and the rest of the team just stands there, exhausted and dead-eyed watching them chatter away) he isn’t providing any useful information on finding Harkness or the drugs.

At least, he wasn’t until Ducky and Jimmy got him back, got the trace to Abby, Abby got the trace into Major Mass Spec, and from there came the voila moment that breaks the case wide open.

Sometime Tim wonders what it must have been like to try and do this when you couldn’t take dirt samples from the vic’s clothing and find out they’ve been cavorting around somewhere in a ten mile circle of ground on the southwest shore of the Chesapeake where that one particular sort of moss grows.

But, by that point, he's too tired to care much.

They close in on Harkness, a small boat, 2000 kilos of heroin, and this is a nice coup, four of the guys who belong to Harkness’ own drug ring.

Sunday, ’round about noon, both Tim and Abby having slept basically ’round-the-clock recovering from that case, Tim finds that routine helps, work helps, and most of all, nothing going wrong helps.

And it’s not that fear is gone, because it’s not. It’s just living the routine over and over and seeing that the world didn’t end, another day went by and the worst didn’t happen, pushes fear back, increases the expectation of yet another day of just… normal.

And he figures that’s probably about as good as this is going to get.

So he gets up and makes them breakfast, like he usually does on Sunday morning (even if it’s technically afternoon), and the rhythms of life go on.
There are Alpha Males, the leaders of the pack, Beta Males, the followers, and Omega Males, the ones who don't fit tidily into those groups. They don't generally lead, but can if they need or want to. They follow only when it suits them. And, they tend to care very little about whatever it is the rest of the pack is interested in. They're the creators, artists, jokers, misfits, loners, and dreamers.

Omegas range from Steve Jobs and George Carlin to that guy in the back of the bus station in bad need of a shower complaining to himself about how no one understands him and his art. Basically, it's the entire range of guys who never had any interest in being on the football team. (Not the ones who couldn't get onto it, the ones who didn't want to.)

Tim's spent his life slipping between Omega and Beta (depending on the relationship and period of his life, he's currently firmly in the Omega category and unlikely to leave it again.) His whole life he's been surrounded by Alphas and Ascendent Betas (the guys who will take over the pack when the current Alpha leaves).

So, as an Omega, especially an Omega who won't be part of the team for all that much longer, watching Draga, who used to be a test pilot for the Navy, namely someone who is used to being part of an elite team of Alphas, try to figure out where he fits on Gibbs', soon to be DiNozzo's team, is vastly amusing to Tim.

The first time they met, Draga knew how to behave. Gibbs, by virtue of white hair, Marine bearing, and the fact that he just commands respect is The Alpha, and as such Draga knows his place: roll over, switch into Beta mode, and show due respect. Tim, as the Tech Guy, is the Omega, and treated like an equal and potential ally.

But Tony and Draga…

Let alone Tony, Draga, and of course, Ziva, (because the addition of women always makes male pack dynamics more interesting) is, well… Tim's excused himself three times because he was about to burst out laughing in a remarkably unprofessional way. (And he did notice the corner of Gibbs' lip quirk upwards twice.) He did however get video of it, and spent lunch with Abby and Jimmy, all three of them giggling hysterically.

Basically, Tony has, for the first time ever, run into a Geek he finds threatening. He's never met an Alpha Geek before, probably never dreamed any of them exist, let alone a young, strong one with physical courage coming out the ears and decent looks. Tony's default way of dealing with people smarter than he is to focus on the fact that, like Tim, they're usually kind of awkward and less conventionally attractive.

Neither of those things are true about Draga.

The fact that Ziva's being nice to Draga is making it worse.

And on top of that, Draga's ability to see pretty much everything, thus instantly proving he'd be useful to them, means Tony can't just blow him off, either.

Likewise, Draga doesn't know what to do with Tony, either. Tony with strangers is smooth, polished, a little too pretty. Namely, nothing Draga respects. But Tony is the Alpha-To-Be. But he's done nothing to look like he's earned it, at least, not that Draga's seen. And right now, Draga's coming to the conclusion that Tony's a Beta who's getting promoted higher than he deserves because
he's the senior man.

So, Draga's showing real respect for Gibbs, that too polite, pseudo-respect (putting on the Lt.) for Tony, being friendly to Tim, and friendly and charming (without crossing the line, she's married to the guy who'll be his boss if this goes well) to Ziva.

Abby's watching the video, giggling with him and Jimmy, and says, "If they could just pull 'em out and measure, this would be done so much faster."

Jimmy's watching and says, "They'd end up with this passive aggressive being too polite argument about what sort of ruler to use and if the damn things are accurate."

Abby grins wide and happy at that idea. "They so would. Tony'd suggest the ruler, because he's old school. Then Draga'd be all that's not nearly accurate enough, really we should go by mass, looking at Gibbs and saying something about how important accuracy is..."

"And if either of them said anything like that to me they'd get headsplatted so hard their ears would ring." Abby, Jimmy, and Tim all jerk at the sound of Gibbs' voice, looking embarrassed and slightly guilty.

"Got a body out in Faluvia County. Draga's getting some in the field time. Palmer, head up and grab him. Let's see how he does with you and Duck. McGee, get moving."

"Moving, Boss," Tim says.

They're in the van, heading toward the dead Marine that Faluvia PD just called in. Tim's driving. (When they want to talk, as opposed to sit there clutching their seat belts in terror, Tim or Tony drives.)

"What's Aubrey like?" Tony asks.

"Lot more like Tim than Draga is," Gibbs answers.

"Precise, fussy, he's a forensic accountant. Why, you already want to knock Draga off the list? Look, Aubrey might be a better fit, but Draga will be able to hit the ground running."

Tony winces at that. "I can see that. He's not going to take a ton of training. Just... not sure if he'll mesh well."

"You mean you will not be able to Probie him," Ziva says with a smile.

Tony sighs and flashes his *I'm done with you* look at her.

Gibbs nods with that. He gets this in a way Ziva doesn't. By virtue of being female, she's outside the "official" line of command, though Draga, due to deeply ingrained chivalry, will always treat her with respect and if given orders by her, follow them. Tony's not a girl though, and the two of them may have issues. "It's a concern. As long as I'm here, he's not going to give you any trouble. But he's not going to just accept you as the leader. You'll have to prove to him you're worth it."

"Aubrey won't give you any problems along those lines." Tim's sure of that. He probably won't let himself be bullied the way Tim did, but he'll fall into line easily. Tim knows a good Beta male when he sees one, and Aubrey certainly is one.
"So, easy to work with or photographic memory," Tony says.

"Not sure it's a photographic memory, Tony. He's got some serious visual processing skills, but he'd have to be a fighter pilot. More importantly, we asked him if he had any questions, and his first one showed he'd already put together the fact that he's not really replacing Gibbs."

"He's sharp," Gibbs adds.

"I can see that. Aubrey's in day after tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah," Tim nods. He's basically in charge of the whole interview thing.

"He's better with the computer stuff?"

"Yeah. It's what he's trained in."

They pull to a stop in front of long strings of yellow tape and cop cars with flashing lights.

"Work time. I'm on point for this one, and he's with me," Tony says. Gibbs, Ziva, and Tim get out of the van and start gearing up, getting into coveralls and crime scene booties while Tony grabs Draga from Ducky and takes him over to the local LEOs to get the whole story.

"Step one of an investigation, take custody of the crime scene from the local LEOs."

Draga's nodding as they head over to the Faluvia Co. police.

---

Two hours later, they're still bagging and photographing. The body, Corporal Holly Page, has been taken back to NCIS, and Team Gibbs is working with the scene.

Draga's hovering around the edges. He's not allowed to touch anything, but he can look. He hasn't been saying anything, and no one's really paying attention to that. They were all pretty quiet at their first crime scenes. After all, five hours ago (ish) this was a real person, alive and doing whatever she usually did, expecting to have a normal day, and then, from the looks of it, someone broke in and killed her.

As Tim's photographing the foyer, Draga says to him, "None of the witnesses saw the break in, right?"

"Ziva and Gibbs did witness statements, but yeah, I think that's right."

Draga looks at the door more closely, the lock is busted, broken inwards. Looks like the door was kicked in.

"No break in," Draga says.

"Huh?" Tim's still shooting the carpet and stairs.

"No footprint on the door. It's one of those cheap doors, and if you kick one of them you leave a mark. No mark on the wall. Kick a door hard enough to break it in, it swings back and slams into the wall, or…" he kneels and points at the little door stopper at the base of the door, "or that thing does. But nothing. No mark on the door from hitting the door stopper. No mark on the wall from the door
stopper hitting it. The carpet is out of place, and that doesn't happen when you kick in a door. The door got pulled in from the inside, hard enough to make it look like it was forced."

Tim nods. That works, and also works with a bit of the case that he doesn't think Draga's gotten, namely the patio door had been unlocked.

"Good work. Go tell Tony about it."

And Draga does, carefully skirting the edges of the scene, making sure not to touch anything.

Yeah, he may have a hard time with Tony, but Tim's really liking the idea of someone who sees that much, that well, on the team.

Tony has a much easier time with Aubrey. Because Aubrey fit his expectation for a Geek. And because Aubrey knows his role and how to play it.

Tony tries a little mild hazing on him, and Aubrey just looks at him, a long, calm look, up and down, suddenly making it very clear that this man is a Marine, and then turns to Tim and says, "You know, the IRS has been gearing up for ACA compliance officers. They're offering fifteen thousand a year more than you are and a company car."

Tony doesn't haze him after that.

Aubrey shows up on a paperwork day. So they don't get a chance to see what he'd do out in the field.

After lunch, Tony and Ziva take him shooting, wanting to see him handle a weapon. They come back an hour later, and Aubrey is slightly green. Tim looks up at him. "Single biggest threat to anyone on Team Gibbs is Ziva's driving. Congratulations, you've survived the first test."

Aubrey sits down heavily. "How does she still have a license?"

"Cops look after their own. They see the plates and usually won't pull her over."

"Great. Does she usually drive?"

"'Bout a quarter of the time."

"Oh, God!"

Tim hits the enter key, finishing the form he's working on, and stands up. "Come on. Time to head down to meet the rest of the team."

As they're heading to the lab, Aubrey asks, "If I take this job, how much crap will DiNozzo give me?"

"As much as you'll let him, and then just a tiny bit more."

Aubrey shakes his head. "I didn't like that about the Marines."

"From what Gibbs has said, DiNozzo's not exactly on the same level as Marine hazing. More pranks
and nicknames than anything really dangerous, but I have had my face superglued to my desk."

"Great." Aubrey looks like he's seriously reconsidering this job.

"The way you looked at him shut him up a lot faster than usual. Reminding him that you've got other options seemed to work. And he's grown up a whole lot since I was the Probie."

"So, you were the Probie, Gibbs was team leader, and DiNozzo was more or less in charge of training you?"

"Basically."

"So, I join in, Gibbs retires, DiNozzo will run the team, and you'll be more or less in charge of me?"

No. But he can't say that without letting out that he's not going to be around all that much longer. "I think Ziva will be in charge of you."

"Why not you?"

Great question. Tim thinks up a quick lie. "Low man takes the Probie, and that's her."

"Oh." They don't say anything for the rest of the ride down to the lab. Once the elevator doors open, Aubrey asks, "Is it always this loud down here?"

Tim smiles. "Not always. It's usually quieter when I'm down here."

"And you're down here a lot."

"Yeah. Remember when Gibbs asked you about my wife?"

"Uh huh." Aubrey nods, looking slightly confused.

"You're about to meet her."

"Oh. She works here?"

"Yeah." They step in. Abby's back is to them, working on her computer.

"Don't turn it down, Kelly likes this one," she says without turning around, so Tim puts the remote in his pocket, as soon as this song is over the volume is going down.

"Who's Kelly?" Aubrey says to him, not seeing anyone else, as they walk to the computers.

"Our daughter." Which is when Abby turns and Aubrey figures out where Kelly is and why she might require the music this loud to appreciate it. Tim kisses her, and then says, "Abby, this is Aubrey, he's applying to replace Gibbs."

She nods and offers her hand. "Hi. I'm Abby." She gestures around her. "And this is the lab. All the magicky science stuff happens down here."

The song ends, and Tim turns the volume down. "Blowing out your own ears is one thing. It'd be nice if Kelly could hear," he says as a joke.

"Uh huh." She signs at him quickly. But he finally did ask Gibbs what it meant and had prepped a response. Abby's eyes go wide when he signs back at her.
"What was that?" Aubrey asks.

Tim smiles. "You don't need to know." In reality she'd been signing at him, *Then you'll just have to learn sign language*, and he'd finally flashed back with, *working on it*. But he kind of likes the mystery of what they might have been communicating to each other.

"So, how are you liking NCIS, Aubrey?" Abby asks.

"So far, so good. Kind of quiet."

"We tend to work in two modes, everything all at once, pedal to the metal, and laid-back not much going on. Yesterday we closed a case," Abby says.

"Yeah, not much in the way of middle gears here. It's either full-out run or lay around and fill out paperwork."

Aubrey thinks about that for a moment. Then he looks at Tim. "You said you work down here?"

"Yeah, I've got two computers up on my desk, so I set them searching, then head down here to use one of hers, as well."

"So, how will this work? Gibbs retires and…"

"He's not retiring until January, so for the first bit, you'd be covering my leave when Kelly's born. Then there'll be a few months of the five of us. Then Gibbs goes, and we settle into whatever the new normal is."

"All right." Aubrey looks at Tim, and then Abby, and Tim again, but he doesn't say anything. Tim's fairly sure that he's putting together that two plus two isn't exactly the four he's been told it is, but unlike Draga, he's not asking about it.

On Friday, at Shabbos, after dinner is over, they talk through who they are going to offer the job.

Tony still isn't sure who he wants. In the short run, Draga will be more useful. When it comes down to it, they don't know when Tim's leaving, though the discrete ear he's got down in Cybercrime is indicating that Jenner's been interviewing lately, so it'll probably be sooner than later, and the possibility of both Tim and Gibbs gone in quick succession is real. The possibility of Tim gone before Gibbs is real.

And if that happens, someone who can pull his own weight as both a tech and a field agent matters.

But, if Tim's there for another year, having someone who will fit more easily into the dynamics of the team, someone who isn't used to being in the limelight, that'll lend itself to a happier, and maybe, in the long run, more-effective team.

In the end, it's Tony and Ziva who have to make the decision. Gibbs won't be there. Tim won't either.

"So, the guy I have to prove myself to, or the guy who sees but doesn't ask?" Tony says.

The fact that it appeared that Aubrey had also figured out this wasn't about replacing Gibbs, but didn't say anything about it, stuck with Tony. He's not sure he wants someone who plays his cards that close to the vest.
"Looks like it, Tony," Tim says. "If you want, we can call Howard back, too, but… I mean, she's really green."

"And that's saying a lot, coming from you," Tony replies.

Tim doesn't take that as an insult. "Yeah. Do you have the patience to break in another Probie, one that'll make Dornie look sophisticated and experienced?" Tim asks him.

"Ugh." Tony rolls his eyes and shakes his head. The infamous line from Lethal Weapon bright in his mind. "No. Ziva?"

"No." And while it's true that Ziva's not feeling too old for any variety of shit, she also doesn't want to start on square one. "I'll do fine with Aubrey or Draga, and am probably leaning toward Aubrey. Nine years from now, when you run into mandatory retirement age, Tony, I have a feeling he and I will work together well as the core of that team. Draga would challenge me for leadership of the team."

"He won't stick around that long. He's good. He sees everything, and puts it together fast. He'll have his own team in five years," Tony says.

Gibbs sits in his chair, quietly drinking his wine, listening. He sends Tony the *you've made up your mind, stop dithering and go with it* look.

Tony nods. He has, but he's not sure this decision isn't going to bite him later. "He's the better agent, and we're the strongest team at NCIS. I'll send Draga the job offer on Monday."
"Palmer, where's your head at? It's certainly not here," Gibbs asks as Tim sweeps Jimmy's feet out from under him for the third time in seven minutes.

"Sorry, Jethro," Jimmy says, standing up slowly.

"Focus, Jimmy, get your mind here."

"Yes, Gibbs," Jimmy says, voice flat.

Jimmy's not sounding all that good today. Gibbs flashes Tim a quick what's going on? look to Tim, and Tim sends him a quick no clue look back.

"Switch it up, Tim, you defend, Jimmy, go after him, get yourself back into it."

Tim figures out what the problem is halfway through that round. He hasn't been hit that hard, that many times since January, and he's thanking Gibbs that they've been training because he's good enough to at least deflect most of the blows, now.

Finally, he just stops, steps back, holds his hands up, and says, "Look, I need some padding. I am not coming home to Abby looking like I got run over by a truck again. Okay?"

Jimmy nods, breathing hard. "Okay."

That's when Gibbs starts to figure out what's going on. He does a little math that confirms his suspicions, so while Tim gets into some padding, he leans against the ropes and says to Jimmy, quietly, "You want to be here?"

"Here, home, doesn't matter. It's gonna be a shit day no matter where I am. At least this way, I get to work some of it out."

"Okay. Breena all right with this?"

"Yeah. She'd be here herself except…" And Jimmy runs headlong into the fact that they aren't telling anyone other than the McGees, Ducky, and Penny that she's pregnant again.

Gibbs nods, not making him come up with some sort of lame excuse. They all know Breena's pregnant. When pregnancy equals violent, all day long morning sickness from about twenty second after the test comes up positive to about week fifteen, it's really hard to hide. But they all respect them not saying anything about it, yet. So, if Breena's been looking awfully green, skipping out on most gatherings, and occasionally has to excuse herself when she does attend, no one is saying anything about it.

"You got anything other than this planned?"

Jimmy looks down, rubs his forehead, might be tearing up, and then gently, almost reverently, strokes his forefinger over the tiny diamond embedded in the medic alert bracelet he wears. Gibbs had noticed he had a new one. That's not true. He noticed Jimmy kept it on. He usually takes it off when they fight. But today he didn't. Gibbs assumed from the fact that he kept it on, and from the
way he's touching it now, that it's new.

"There weren't a lot of remains. He was… too small for that. And we didn't have a place to scatter
them, no memories of him anywhere. So… there's a company that'll take the ashes and make
diamonds out of them. Carbon is carbon. We got them last week and started wearing them today." He
wipes at his eyes. "Shit, hate doing this with contacts in." He pretty much runs off.

Tim stands next to Gibbs and says, "Jon's due date, right?"

"Yeah, think so."

"I'll go keep him company. I don't know if we're gonna fight again or not."

Gibbs nods at that, too. "I'll wait."

One of the great things about the NCIS gym is that at 2:00 on a Saturday it's pretty empty. The men's
locker room is basically deserted. There's Jimmy, and some guy actually showering, and that's it.

And the great thing about NCIS is that it's small enough, and Jimmy's well-enough known, that if
he's sitting on the floor in the back corner of the locker room sobbing, no one is going to ask him any
questions or give him a hard time.

Tim sits next to him and puts his arm around his shoulders, not saying anything.

After a while, Jimmy calms back down. He looks at Tim, eyes bright red, face puffy and wet. "It was
supposed to be easier than this."

Tim doesn't know if Jimmy means, life, fatherhood, or loving in general, but it's true for all of them,
so he nods. "Yes, it was."

"I'm supposed to be snarking at Breena about how…" his voice breaks, and he can't finish that
sentence.

Tim rubs his back, saying, "I know, Jimmy. I know."

Several more minutes go by. Tim's quiet, holding his friend. Jimmy's crying.

"There was five minutes this morning where I didn't remember. Woke up, snuggled with Breena,
Molly started fussing, so I got her, and we all piled into bed, together, and it was good, you know? It
was really good. Then Breena had to get up, because she was feeling sick, and I turned on the TV,
watch some of the Sunrise show with Molly, and every morning they do the time, the day, and the
date, and for a second there it still didn't click, and Molly's giggling, watching that little squeaky bird,
and then they did the 'Who's having a birthday today?' thing and it did click, and I lost it.

"Molly's scared because I'm crying, so she starts crying, and the last thing Breena needs is both of us
sobbing, but that's still what she walked in on."

"Tomorrow'll be better."

Jimmy takes a deep breath and exhales slow, head back against the locker behind him, looking up at
the ceiling. "Yeah."
"You two want to come over tonight? Don't have to talk or anything, just, not be alone? Snuggle on the sofa, get lots of Abby hugs, eat take out, watch some sort of dumb movie?"

"Maybe."

"Or we can take Molly, and you can really be alone."

Jimmy's shaking his head. "I don't know. The only thing I want is to not feel like this."

Tim nods.

When they come out, Gibbs has packed everything up.

"Tim, you're done. Go home. Jimmy, with me."

Tim's a bit surprised by that, so's Jimmy really.

Gibbs flashes both of them a *it'll be okay* look.

Tim checks with Jimmy, and he nods. So, Tim heads off, reminding Jimmy that if he wants to come over later, or wants them to watch Molly, to let them know.

Jimmy turns to Gibbs. "I'm with you?"

"Yeah. He's not in a good place for this right now. He doesn't need any extra reminders that it doesn't always work out, not right now, otherwise he'd come, too. We're going to my house."

"You gonna tell me what we're going to do there?"

"Say goodbye to dreams that never happened."

That's way more poetic than Jimmy expects Gibbs to be, so for a second he just stands there staring. Gibbs starts off, and Jimmy quickly follows a few heartbeats later.

"What do you drink?" Gibbs asks when they get to his basement. It's empty right now. Kelly's crib got taken to Tim's Tuesday night. He'd been seriously debating opening the basement back up and lugging the Shannon back in, but it's summertime so anything he wants to do he can do outside, and, he's feeling awfully sure he's going to have another project down here in the very near future.

"Girly mixed drinks that actually taste good. Stuff you'd find horrifying."

Gibbs shrugs, that's a pretty accurate read, though he reminds himself he's trying not to be the guy who winces at other guys drinking a… whatever those fruity things are. "And when you don't get a mixed drink?"

"Rum, Gin. Is absinthe a mixed drink? It's just poured over a sugar cube and water."
Gibbs closes his eyes and opens them slowly. *Absinthe,* trust Jimmy to come up with something like that. "Don't have any of that." Though at the rate this is going, he's going to end up with a small bar down here.

Jimmy sits on one of the stools. "You don't need it. I don't need to be drugged to talk. I actually prefer to enjoy myself when I'm drinking."

Gibbs pours himself a bourbon and gestures to the two bottles, but Jimmy shakes his head.

"Maybe one day you'll come down here and drink with me when you're enjoying yourself?"

Jimmy smiles at that. "I hope so."

"Traditional to do this at least a little drunk," Gibbs says, taking a sip.

"What tradition are we upholding?" Jimmy looks around the basement, wondering about what sort of male bonding experience Gibbs is aiming for.

"It's a wake. Back a bit after Molly was born, Tim dragged me down here and poured enough bourbon in me to get me talking. It... helped."

Jimmy sighs. "Been talking, Jethro. I don't bottle things up."

"Yeah, I know. You're... you and Breena... are doing a lot better than I thought you would."

Jimmy nods at that. They're doing better than he thought they would be, too. But there are still bad days, and likely will be for a long time, though he's thinking today, and maybe, January 8th next year, will be the worst.

Though maybe, since Nikki (what they're calling the new baby when talking to each other) is due at Christmas time, they'll be too busy to even notice January 8th when it rolls around.

He can hope, at least. Jimmy takes one of the mugs and pours himself a little of the Scotch, sips some, winces a little. "How does Tim drink this stuff?"

Gibbs shrugs at that, too.

Jimmy takes another sip. "So, are we talking for me, or for you?"

That's a better question than Gibbs was expecting, and he realizes that they are here for both of them.

"Both of us."

Jimmy nods. "The dads sans kids club?"

"Something like that."

"But not exactly. I've got Molly and, we're calling the new one Nikki for now, and you've got Tim and Abby and Ziva and Tony."

"And you and Breena."

Jimmy looks curiously at him. "Didn't realize you were that attached to me."

Gibbs shrugs. "Breena's a package deal. Love her, gotta love you." Then he smiles to show he's kidding, that it's not just fondness for Breena that's binding him to Jimmy, and maybe to underscore
exactly how much he isn't Ed Slater.

Jimmy laughs at that. Then he sobers. "So, tell me what dream you miss most."

"I was going to teach Kelly how to drive. Had been looking forward to it for years. Already started a little. Her sitting on my lap, steering, while I worked the pedals. We were going to get some sort of old junker when she was fourteen and rebuild it. That's the one I still dream about. Kelly, sixteen, seventeen, she'd look like Shannon did when we first met, but brown hair instead of red. Old Mustang or Impala all fixed up. Check the mirrors, put the key in, turn in on, look around, foot off the break, okay, let's go!"

Jimmy smiles at that, nods, eyes tearing. He doesn't say anything for a long minute, then finally gets out. "That's a good one."

Gibbs reaches for a few sheets of paper and one of his pencils. He starts sketching while Jimmy says, "We didn't know if he was a boy or a girl yet, so, not much in the way of dreams yet, not really. Just, images, you know? But… the clearest one was Molly seeing him for the first time. Tim and Abby would have taken her while we were in the hospital, and brought her to see him. I had this image, Tim holding her, putting her on the bed next to us. I'd be holding Jon so that she could snuggle in with Breena, all four of us together, kind of cramped because those hospital beds are pretty small." He bites his lip, hard, but gets his voice back under his control and then says, "But, I'd be the one who got to say, 'Molly, this is your little brother.'"

Gibbs looks up and smiles gently at Jimmy. "Had one kind of like that myself, once."

"What happened to it?" Jimmy's never wondered why Kelly was an only child. Never thought to wonder, either. Now, he is.

"Shannon had preeclampsia. Bed rest at 32 weeks. Trying to keep Kelly in long enough for her lungs to get strong. Moved into the hospital at 34 weeks. And at 35 and one day her blood pressure spiked so high she couldn't see. They got Kelly out in an emergency c-section, but they had to do it so fast there wasn't time for anesthesia. I helped them hold her down while they did it, and both of them came out fine, but before they were home from the hospital, I'd had a vasectomy. Just, couldn't do that again. Couldn't risk it."

Jimmy sighs. That puts a lot of Jethro's response to the previa news into perspective. "No wonder you were white as a sheet when you heard about Abby."

"Didn't help. But before that, before we got Kelly, we'd both been hoping for more than one."

"Never thought of adopting?"

"No." He shakes his head, not looking up from the paper. "Don't know if that was a blessing or not." He erases a line and re-does it. "Jimmy, that story's not for Tim, not now. He doesn't need that image in his head."

Jimmy nods. He knows how bloody a c-section can get, and the image of an emergency one in that sort of rush... No, that's not for Tim, not now. "I get that."

Then Gibbs looks at him, and takes another drink. "Ducky and I, walks in the park with Molly, Jon, and Kelly. Thought he was going to be a boy, and was looking forward to taking him shooting with you and Tim and Tony."

The idea that Gibbs had fantasies of his child hits Jimmy, hard. He's crying at that but eventually says, "We're not taking the girls shooting?"
"We are, but it'll be different. Gotta have some things we do as guys, right?"

"Yeah. Camping."

Gibbs laughs at that. "Is that gonna be just you and me and the kids? Don't see Duck, Tim, Tony on that trip."

"Tim likes camping."

Gibbs' I don't buy it look lights his face. "I've heard him say that, but he can't seem to figure out what the hell poison ivy looks like, and best I know, he hasn't been out in the wood for fun the entire time I've known him."

Jimmy wipes his eyes. "Good point."

Jethro hands Jimmy a sketch of a crib. It's all square corners, somewhat plain, but there's room for change.

"Early Christmas present, say, at your place 'round about Tim and Abby's anniversary. We'll talk more about it when you and Breena know more about Nikki."

Jimmy looks at it, fingers ghosting over the lines of slats and legs. He sniffs a little, and nods. "Yeah."
May 18th is the first of the childbirth classes.

And yes, Tim feels kind of stupid standing there with Abby in front of the elevator at the hospital with two pillows, but it’s kind of obvious why they’re there, so it’s not like he’s some sort of weirdo who just likes sleeping in a hospital.

Privately, he’s feeling like this is probably not going to be a very useful way to spend every Thursday night for the next six weeks.

It’s just, since everyone and their cousin all said, basically: “Don’t worry about it, the placenta will probably scoot out of the way,” he’s got this bone deep feeling that that’s soothing bullshit designed to try and keep him and Abby from freaking out.

If placenta previa really is a problem in one out of three cases at mid-term, and down to one out of two hundred by seven months, and they’re still right next to the danger zone, he’s just feeling like it’s unlikely to suddenly get better when it didn’t before.

But Abby’s still really hoping this won’t be a c-section, so they’re in the hospital, waiting for an elevator that’ll take them up to their OB’s office, where they offer Lamaze classes.

And, as Breena said to him, when he was being a bit of a dick about this being a waste of time, (Not in front of Abby. Jimmy and Breena were there, though.) that even if they don’t use it for actually getting the kid out, the calming, focusing, breathing stuff is all good for the very long time after the kid comes out when you’re so annoyed at her you’re ready to blow your top and you need to remind yourself that you love this tiny creature more than anything on earth, even if you don’t feel that way this particular second because you haven’t slept in a week and are wiping poop off of what was your last clean shirt two minutes before you need to leave the house.

Tim laughed for a second when she said that, and then realized she wasn’t kidding.

And so, Lamaze classes.

Abby had liked the idea of the Bradley ones, but they were a bit behind the eight ball on that, because they take twelve weeks, and Kelly’s due out in six.

The classes aren’t bad or anything.

Their instructor is very perky, and can say things like ‘mild discomfort’ and act like she means it.

And she’s not vehemently anti-pain meds which Tim appreciates. And, okay, maybe this isn’t cool, but he hates the idea of Abby in pain and knows he’ll be using pretty much every coping method he can think of to try and not push meds on her she might not want. (Maybe the Lamaze techniques will be good for that.)

So, they spend an hour talking about focusing techniques, working on centering, which he figures the yoga is good for, but mostly this is a more in-depth discussion of how the baby goes from being inside of your wife to outside of her, and well, he felt like he already had a pretty good handle on how that happened.
Though he did feel a little silly when they passed around a ten centimeter circle and he found himself suddenly realizing exactly how big that is. He knows what ten centimeters is, but somehow no tangible image of a ten centimeter circle had formed in his mind in relation to actually getting Kelly out. Though the fact that Abby also looks mildly horrified at this idea, like she’s also never managed to get that idea into her head makes him feel a little better.

It’s a delicate question, and he’s sure Jimmy won’t mind, but… It is kind of personal…

They’re grabbing a quick coffee, killing a few minutes together during a paperwork day. “So… we’re in the Lamaze class and they were talking about after the baby comes…” Tim can feel himself blushing as he gets ready to ask this, which is kind of dumb, not like he and Jimmy haven’t talked about stuff like this before, but… yeah, really personal. “And… the instructor was saying that sex after is different… and I was wondering… how different is it?”

Jimmy laughs, which makes Tim feel a bit more comfortable. Then he shrugs. “Different. Like first time back at it different or lasting different?”

That there’d be levels to that question wasn’t something Tim had thought of. But he is now, so he says, “Both?”

Jimmy takes a sip of his coffee. “First time back… Okay, look, her body does not want to get pregnant while she’s nursing. So, part of that is that nice, easy kiss her just right and she gets wet and eager, that vanishes. That’s evolution trying to make sure mama and baby have their best chance of survival. So, first time back, even with lots of lube, and slow, and gentle, you aren’t going to rock her world and the only reason she’s rocking yours is because you haven’t gotten laid in months.”

That’s not very encouraging. “How long did you two wait?” Maybe Jimmy and Breena just hopped back into it too fast. After all, Molly was born in February, and Breena was pregnant with Jon in late August.

“Two months, both times.” So much for that theory. “Everything heals up sooner than that, but… she’s still going to be dry, and it’s still going to hurt a little, and you’re both tired, and if she’s nursing you can’t really touch her breasts because they hurt, too, and honestly, if you’re like me and jerking off in the shower every morning you’ve gotten enough sleep to function, those’ll be better orgasms.”

Really not encouraging. “Wonderful.”

Jimmy shrugs. It is what it is, and not all that fabulous is what sex is the first few times back at it after a baby. “It gets better. Just first few times back, treat her like a virgin.”

That’s not helpful for Tim. “I’ve never had sex with a virgin.”

“Never?” Jimmy looks really surprised at that.

“Only virgin I’ve ever had sex with was me.”

Jimmy laughs. “Ah. Well, lots of foreplay, lots of attention, make sure she’s on top and in charge of speed and depth, and if you’ve got the time, and you probably don’t because babies eat every three hours and it takes them an hour to eat, get her off before you get into her.”

Sounds like a decent strategy. Tim makes a note to remember that. “What about looser?” Having held that stupid ten centimeter plastic circle in his hands, he’s now got a very concrete idea of what
ten centimeters is and well… okay… yeah… that’s really pretty big. He’s got a nicely sized dick and all, but it’s not ten centimeters wide.

Jimmy shrugs and then nods. “She’ll heal up. She’s not going to stay that wide open, but you’ll be able to feel the difference. It’s not bad. It’s still sex, you know, sex with her, but if you had hair trigger issues before, you won’t anymore.”

“Not a problem.”

“And likely won’t ever be then.” Jimmy thinks about it. “Look, you’ll get back to it, and you’ll ease into it, and after a few months you’ll catch back up on your sleep and it’ll go back to being great. And, she’ll feel different, but it’s not bad, just different. The biggest thing, the glowing-neon-sign, watch-the-hell-out, danger-ahead, steer-clear-of-the-rocks thing is how she thinks she looks after she has the baby. You look at her and think ‘Yay! Boobs! God, I wish I could touch them!’ Seriously, they’ll be bigger than Kelly’s head at first. It’s really impressive, and you get to see them all the time. That part’s great.

“But she looks at herself and sees droopy skin and stretch marks and spider veins and thinning hair and flab and black circles under her eyes and red-chapped nipples and if we’re been really frank, floppy vaginal lips and hemorrhoids, and wants to shoot herself in the head because she thinks she looks so bad. And do not tell her that her breasts are so incredible that you haven’t looked at any other part of her body because she will hit you, hard, for being an idiot!”

That made Tim laugh. “You did that, didn’t you?”

Jimmy rolls his eyes a little. “I finally got Molly to sleep, and she was in the bathroom, and normally, she’s in there, I don’t go in, but I could hear her crying, so I knocked and poked my head in, and she was looking at herself naked, and she was absolutely appalled.”

“Breena’s beautiful.”

“I know. And I told her that. In very graphic terms. And she hit me and called me a liar.”

“Ow.” Tim winces.

“Yeah, I have no idea how to deal with that and not get hit. Because the one thing you absolutely do not want to do is go, ‘Yep, you look like you got hit by a truck. But it’ll get better, and even if it doesn’t, you can get a tummy tuck.’ I mean, I may have some issues with finding the appropriate thing to say, but I sure as hell knew that wasn’t it.”

“Yeah.” Tim’s trying to think of strategy for this, and so far is coming up with a great big blank.

“I really think it’s an evolution thing. Her body does not want two kids in one year and does everything it can to avoid it. So, for about four months she’s got no interest in sex, thinks she looks revolting, and even slow and gentle with a lot of lube is uncomfortable.”

For Tim, this is a pretty easy formula, if her body’s not into it, wait. “So why not wait four months?”

Jimmy gives him a you’re kidding me, right? look.

“I’m serious. Not like I haven’t gone four months without sex before. Why not wait that long?”

Jimmy’s look has morphed from you’re kidding me to please tell me you aren’t this stupid. Tim’s still looking at him blankly, not getting it. “Just because you became a dad doesn’t mean you stop being a husband. It is your job to walk a tightrope of making her feel desirable, loved, and adored, without
pushing too hard in the ‘I want to get laid’ direction. But I can tell you this, if you go four or six or however many months and don’t make a pass at her, she’s going to think you think she’s hideous, and you aren’t getting any husband-of-the-year awards for that.”

“Ah.” And Tim gets that, really gets that.

“Yeah, and guess what’s the easiest, clearest way to let her know you still want to have sex with her?”

“Yeah, I think I got that one figured out.”

Jimmy grins. “Nothing says I-want-you like an erection.”

Tony stops, stares at them looking pretty disturbed, shakes his head. “Please tell me that was just the worst possible moment I could have walked in on this conversation.”

Jimmy grins at him, too. “Just passing on the wisdom of the veteran dad. Two years, you and I’ll be having this conversation.”

“Oh God.”

“Well, I suppose you could have it with Gibbs,” Jimmy says.

Tony’s eyes go wide.

“Or your own dad,” Tim adds with a smile.

“No! I’m not even sure what you’re talking about, but I do not want to have a conversation about anything involving erections with my dad or Gibbs.”

That gets Tim and Jimmy laughing.
First Time Father

May 22, 2015.

Another doctor’s appointment.

Another ultrasound.

And yeah, the 4d picture show complete with thumb sucking and kicking is awfully cute. There is indeed cooing from both parental units at that. Close ups of little feet and hands result in even more cooing.

But the transvaginal wand comes out again, and the placenta is still “low,” hasn’t moved at all.

But Abby’s still at no effacement and no dilation, so for the time being everything is still, okay.

They make another appointment for June 5th, with the understanding that if contractions start, any of them, at all, they’ll make one sooner.

There is a point in every first-time pregnant father’s life that can best be described as, “Oh Shit! That kid’s gotta come out, and it’s going to happen soon! I don't know what to do. Shit!”

This moment comes in many styles and flavors.

Gibbs remembers it very clearly. He’d gotten home, and found Shannon in Kelly’s room, surrounded by doll clothing. And he just stood there, staring at her sitting on the floor, surrounded by this huge pile of doll clothing, that she had very carefully laundered and was folding up, thinking how absurd it was that a twenty-three-year-old woman, who was about to be a mother of all things, would start playing with dolls all of a sudden.

And he stood there, watching her fold them up, not getting it for a good, solid two minutes, and it slowly dawned on him there was no doll in the room, and that all of that tiny clothing was going to go on a real person, a real person who would be making her way out of his wife’s body, and his knees went weak and he had to sit down or he was going to pass out.

He still feels a little stupid when he remembers it.

But, anyway, he's expecting that sooner or later (and as the weeks go by later got bumped off the menu and all there is left is sooner) that Tim would show up with that scared and determined look he gets when he runs into something uncomfortable but he's going to master it on his face.

And Gibbs is ready for it. He’s been prepping for it since they told him Abby was pregnant. He's bound and determined to be useful and calming for this.

So, of course, that’s not how it worked. Abby shows up in a blind baby’s-coming-soon-what-the-hell-am-I-gonna-do panic.

This, of course, shot his plan to hell and gone. Among other things, step one is offer scotch, and that certainly isn’t going to work.

She’s pacing (well, waddling) around his living room, rambling on about how this kid is going to
come out and she doesn’t know what to do or how to be a Mom and this little girl is going to be entirely dependent on her for everything and nothing’s ever been entirely dependent on her and what if she screws it up because sometimes she does that and it’s not okay to screw things up, she can’t screw it up, Kelly’s gonna depend on her, and Tim does too and she can’t—

Gibbs finally figures out what to do. He gently takes both of her shoulders in his hands, his lips pressed against her forehead, and he just holds her still, stopping the spinning of her mind and body.

When he feels her start to relax, he pulls back a little, smiles, and kisses her forehead.

“You’re gonna screw up. Tim is too. I’m gonna do it. Penny is. So’s Ducky. We’re all going to screw things up with Kelly. But she’ll be fine. And so will you. And so will Tim. I screwed up with my Kelly and so did Shannon. My parents screwed up with me. Yours did with you and Luca. It happens to everyone.”

And Abby bursts into tears.

So, he cuddles her against his shoulder and rubs her back.

It turns out *that* is probably the right answer.
Mom

Tim feels his phone buzz and checks it. One word on the screen. _Mom_.

The call he's been dodging for weeks. He checks his computer, sees the date, okay, technically more than three months.

The conversation he isn't feeling like he wants to have. At all.

On the other hand, it's night, after dinner. He's on paperwork, but Abby's working late, so he's just hanging out in her office.

He has time to take this now. He's not home. No excuse to avoid it, like he could be writing.

He's just not entirely sure he wants to do this. No, that's not right. He doesn't want to do this, but he's also fairly sure that putting it off forever won't make anything better or different.

So, on the third buzz he picks up and says, "Hi, Mom."

"Tim? I thought I was going to get your voice mail again."

"Not today. What's up?"

"What's up with me?" She sounds surprised that he's talking like they just chatted three days ago.
"Nothing new. What's up with you? You've been hiding since before Valentine's Day. Penny says you're busy, but I'm not buying it. You work ninety hours a week, write, have a wife, and before February still managed to talk to me every week. What's going on Tim?"

He sighs quietly, catches Abby's eye, she can see him holding his phone to his ear. He mouths the word 'Mom' and she nods. He heads to the ballistics lab. That way if someone not Abby wanders in, they won't hear/see him on the phone.

"Tim?"

"Just finding a better place to talk. Still at work, waiting for Abby to get done and head home."

"Okay."

He drags a chair in and shuts the door. It's not wonderfully comfortable, but it's probably the most private place at NCIS.

"So…"

He's still not talking.

"Is everything okay with you and Abby?"

"We're good, Mom. Real good."

"And Kelly's fine?"

"Yeah, kicking up a storm." He doesn't want to get into what's actually going on with Kelly and Abby.
"Your friends that lost the baby? Are they okay?"

"Yeah, Mom. Breena's pregnant again."

"Oh, that's so good!" She waits for a few beats, hears Tim very much not saying anything, not volunteering to say anything, and says, "So, everything in your world is fine, but you aren't talking. What is going on? Last I heard, you were looking forward to Valentine's, then you dropped off the face of the Earth."

He sighs, and begins with, "A few days after that I got the flu…" And like with Penny he doesn't censor himself, doesn't pull any punches, and wraps up with, "And since then I've been thinking about it. Well, really trying to not think about it, because mostly, I'm just really fucking pissed at you. You knew. The shit he pulled on me. You knew, and you let it happen. That summer he dragged me on a boat every damn day, you didn't stop it until I had lost thirty pounds. He spent two solid months terrorizing me, and every morning until August you let him take me out and do that to me. And all of those shooting practices. And the constant fighting… And, did you think that was normal or okay or… You're the grown-up. You were supposed to protect me from that!"

His mom is just silent. And he knows this flavor of silence. He's felt it before, been on both sides of it. It's the everything is sideways, the rug just got yanked out from under you but you haven't hit the floor yet, _oh shit oh shit oh shit, keep it together, got to think_, silence.

So, he waits. He lets her think.

And finally she says, "I never thought about it like that."

That's a remarkably not comforting answer. He's not sure what a comforting answer would be, but it sure as hell isn't that. His voice is hot as he asks, "Well, how did you think about it?"

She pauses again, thinking, and then says, "We wanted you to be the best you could be. We wanted you to be strong and tough and capable of doing anything and everything you might want to do. You have so much talent, but you'd second guess yourself or get worried or let other people talk you out of things, and we wanted you to be able to stand up for yourself."

"So, you… agreed with it? He's threatening to have me gang raped by his sailors, and you thought that was appropriate?"

"No. No!" He can hear she's upset, but he's not getting the sense she's surprised. The idea that John might have told her about that makes him feel sick. "That was too far. And I told him that." _Fuck._ It hits with a physical rush of pain. She had known. He can feel his control slipping away, and he's scrambling to hold it. "But we were both afraid that you were so sensitive that life would beat you down. We thought you needed a thicker skin to survive and thrive."

"So you thought letting him do it to me instead was a good plan?" He realizes he just yelled that, and takes a deep breath, trying to stay calm.

Torri's voice is patient. "He's your father. I knew he wouldn't really hurt you. Knew he'd never push too far."

Unfortunately that broke Tim's exceptionally tenuous hold on calm and he's yelling again when he asks, "What the fuck did you think was too far? Actually having me raped?"

"Tim, he never hit you. And the one time I was afraid he might, I made sure he wasn't alone with you."
Tim realizes he's shaking from head to toe and is actually so mad he is having a hard time seeing. So, before he throws the phone against the wall hard enough to break it, he says, "I've got to hang up, throw up, shoot something, and cry." And he hangs up before she can say anything else.

There is a sink in the ballistics lab, and he does throw up in it.

Then he empties his gun into the ballistics tank.

He's crying and looking for something not too expensive to break into a whole lot of very tiny pieces when Abby runs in.

She comes to a short stop, stares at him, eyes wide, and says, "You are not okay! What happened?"

His eyes land on a plastic test tube rack. He's got no idea what it's doing in the ballistics lab, but it'll work. He puts it on the ground, hands still shaking, and methodically stomps it into about ninety pieces.

"Talked to my mom."

"Oh God."

"You see anything else I can break?" he asks, grinding bits of plastic into much smaller bits of plastic.

She looks around, but it's the ballistics lab: there's a tank for shooting bullets, the catch net they use to grab them back out again, a sink for refilling the water in the tank, a desk for taking notes, a shelf with ear and eye protection, several gun safes for holding weapons that are about to be processed or just were processed. Beyond that, it's a seven by ten closet of a room with one tiny window up by the ceiling.

"Back in a sec."

It takes longer than a second, but when she comes back she has two more magazines for his gun and half a dozen glass beakers.

"Oh, good." He grabs a beaker and throws it, hard, against the wall. Having it shatter into seventeen million pieces is satisfying. "Maybe you could go outside for a few minutes? I don't want you to get hit by flying glass."

He can see she's thinking about saying something along the lines of she'd prefer he didn't get cut by flying glass, but he can also see that she knows him well enough to know it's just not going to work, so she heads to the safety glasses, grabs one, puts it on him, and leaves.

He's simultaneously feeling very hot, rage, anger beyond anything he's ever felt before, and very cold, outside of himself. He's having a very precise, very determined, exceptionally destructive but controlled temper tantrum. He shatters each beaker, flinging it against the wall, breaks it into thousands of pieces and then grinds the pieces into dust. Then reaches for the next beaker and does it again.

He's not sure it's really helping, but it feels good—ish. Well, not bad. And short of calling up Jimmy, who is probably sleeping and would likely want to continue to do so, and asking him to fight, which would mean explaining this whole thing, again, and he doesn't want to, he's kind of out of ideas on how to burn some of this feeling off.

When he's down to two beakers he seriously debates shooting them. He's got lots of bullets, but he
decides against it. The walls in here are just drywall, nothing that'll really stop a bullet. So, he goes back to throwing them against the wall.

Then reloads his gun, empties it again, reloads again, and empties that magazine into the tank, as well.

And when he's done, when he isn't shaking anymore and feels like he could probably put together complete sentences, he opens the door, and finds Abby standing in front of it, starring at it, looking more worried than he's ever seen her, holding Bert tucked under her chin.

Her eyes go very wide and she says, "Do not move at all."

Two minutes later, she's back with a small broom, a dust pan, and Ducky with a first aid kit.

Ducky just looks at him, horrified. He swallows hard and says, "Oh, Timothy! Please, hold still."

Tim's feeling like he should probably be a lot more worried about how they're acting, but he's not hurting, and his eyes are protected, so it can't be that bad.

Abby looks at Ducky. "Do I sweep him off, or..."

Ducky's looking him over, and he's just standing there, not really feeling anything. Like he's detached from everything and just watching with a vague, academic interest in the subject.

"Abigail, I think we need a comb."

"I have one in my purse."

"Good." Ducky nods as she goes to get it. "We'll start at the top and work our way down," he calls to her as she moves into the other section of the lab.

Abby's back a second later with her comb and begins to very carefully, very gently comb his hair, saying over and over, "Please, baby, don't move."

It occurs to him that he might still be shaking, but he doesn't think he is. He thinks he's still. Though he's mildly curious why she's combing his hair, but not enough to ask about it. He's also mildly curious about the fact that Ducky has left, come back with scrubs, and is laying out both a lidocaine syringe and sutures.

Finally he asks, "Am I bleeding?"

Abby pauses in combing out his hair. "Yeah."

"Oh."

He almost nods, apparently telegraphs that he's about to do it, and she says, "Stay still."

"Why are you combing my hair?"

"You're covered in hundreds of bits of glass. We're trying to get if off of you without getting you cut to ribbons."

"Oh." She might have just said that he was covered in flour, or cotton balls, it doesn't matter to him, at all. "Shower?"

"Eventually, Timothy. But for right now we want to get the bigger pieces off."
"Okay." He passively stands there, waiting, letting them do whatever they want or need to.

Abby finishes with his hair, which is when he notices that she has thick, protective gloves on. She carefully peels off his shirt, watch, and wrist cuff, gets his belt off, and as this is happening he's aware of soft, gentle tinkling sounds as more and more pieces of glass fall off of him and hit the floor.

Abby stops with his belt. "Can't get your pants off without taking off your shoes."

"That's fine."

"No, it's not, look down."

Hundreds of glass fragments glint up at him from the floor. He also, for the first time, notices the blood dripping down both arms. He'd had his sleeves rolled up in there, and apparently gotten cut.

"Just keep holding still. I'll get this swept up, and we'll move onto the bottom half of you," Ducky says.

"Okay." He just stands there and waits, lets them undress him. The good thing about the bottom half of him is he has on jeans and thick shoes, so a quick glance shows the bottom half of him is fine. Once he's clear of his glass encrusted clothing, he's able to put on the scrub pants, and Ducky has him sit down at Abby's desk.

Abby stands next to Ducky while he carefully removes fourteen slivers of glass from Tim's forearms and hands.

On the fifteenth one, Tim stops counting and says, "This should hurt, shouldn't it?"

Ducky glances at Abby, looking very worried. "Yes, Timothy."

"I can't feel it."

"You might be in shock. As soon as we get your wounds dressed, we'll get you wrapped up and laying down."

"I should probably clean the glass out of the ballistics lab."

"I've got it, don't worry about it," Abby says.

"Okay." He nods a little, sighs, and says, voice very flat and matter-of-fact, he could be reading a weather report out loud, not talking about what got him here, "So, my mom called, and instead of dodging the call, like I did with the last ten of them, I answered." He's not looking at them, not watching Ducky take yet another piece of glass out of his arm. Really, he's not looking at anything at all. He's thinking that if he could see himself, he'd probably have a thousand yard stare. He keeps on talking in that same eerie calm voice. "That was a bad fucking plan. Should have let it go to voicemail." His voice is still very calm as he says this, but he's starting to feel a bubble of hysterical building under that calm, and he's not sure if he should try to tamp it down or let it out. "And I talked to her about it. And apparently all of that crap with my dad was some sort of make-sure-Tim's-tough-enough-to-deal-with-the-real-world thing. Apparently, they were worried I was too soft or sensitive or something."

He watches Ducky ease another long shard of glass out of his skin. He can see his own blood on the glass, and the way his skin pulls against it as Ducky tugs gently with his surgical tweezers.

"Apparently I wasn't hard enough then. You're pulling an inch long piece of glass out of my arm,
and I haven't even winced. You think I'm hard enough, now?"

That's when Abby starts crying. She circles around behind him, pressing her lips to the top of his head, he's guessing that's one of the few places she's not worried about ground glass rubbing into his skin. The sound of quiet sobbing, and the feel of her lips on his body, her tears in his hair, brings him back, snaps him out of the numb, shocked, dead sort of place he'd been.

And first and foremost is the sensation that he's been an utter idiot. It washes over him, blotting everything else out. He's married, with a pregnant wife who could go into labor at any minute, who could start bleeding any second, and the last thing she needs is him having a massive destructive fit. He has a family, and they come first, and he cannot be doing crap like this. Tim looks and really sees his arms and they look like he had to fight his way out of ten miles of thorn tipped vines.

"Oh, God, Abby! I'm so sorry!" He starts to reach up to comfort her, but Ducky holds his arm fast.

"Don't move. We still have a lot of glass to go."

He can definitely feel it now. It looks like his shirt did a good job protecting his arms and chest, there are only a few long scratches on them, but his forearms, hands, and face feel shredded.

Abby's murmuring against his head, "It's okay, baby. It's going to be okay."

He closes his eyes, realizing he's crying, might have been doing it the whole time. "She knew Abby." That bubble of hysterical breaks, and he starts to sob. "She knew and approved."

"Shhhh… You've got to stay still a little longer, baby." She's kissing the top of his head, petting his sides. "Shhhh…"
Aftermath

It takes Ducky an hour to get all the glass out. And though there are long cuts, none of them are deep enough to warrant stitches. An entire box of butterfly bandages and half a roll of surgical tape, but no stitches.

Abby takes him home, holds onto him until morning. He may have slept. Mostly he remembers just hurting all over. Mental pain that hurt so bad his body aches along with it.

They both take that next day off and rest. And he works on trying to heal.

The problem with a big, messy more or less public hissy fit is that it's big and messy and public. And if you get out of it looking like you got into a fight with a ream of paper and got seventy million paper cuts, and you don't want everyone to know why you ended up in that shape, you need some sort of cover lie.

And it's not even so much that he doesn't want everyone to know… Well, that's part of it.

And not everyone. It's just… He's sensitive to the fact that Ziva's dad makes his look like a good guy, and 'Hey your Dad dropped you in the middle of the desert to be tortured and raped and left you for dead,' and 'Mine said mean things to me, and I'm handling it with less than a quarter of the grace you did,' just feels really nasty.

So, he doesn't want to get into that with Tony and Ziva. It's not even that he thinks they wouldn't understand or sympathize, it just feels like he's complaining about a sprained ankle to a double amputee.

And part of it is just not wanting to say it. Not wanting to keep talking about it. Gibbs' quiet seems like a really good plan now. He's liking quiet. Quiet is his friend. It's warm and comfortable and maybe this is a response to not being quiet and then really not liking what talking got him, but right now he's not in a big let's-talk-about-this sort of place.

He takes two days off to let the worst of the swelling go down and the cuts start to heal.

But Abby goes back to work, because officially he was "putting up a mirror," accidentally dropped it, and cut the hell out of himself. And she wouldn't stay home with him for something like that.

Officially, that's a plausible lie.

Officially, no one like Vance is going to say anything or question it. Tony and Ziva might wonder how he got his face cut up by dropping a mirror, but they aren't asking about it. They're probably assuming he was doing some sort of stupid sex thing, like trying to install it on the ceiling or something, and got hurt like that.

It'll hold until they actually see him, and since that's all it's got to do, he's fine with that.

Or, he was until Jimmy comes over.

Jimmy hasn't been in the house long enough to get through his first sentence. "Ducky wanted me to —" And then he sees Tim and stops dead. "Oh God, what the hell happened to you? No way you
did that by dropping a mirror."

Tim, who'd been sitting on the sofa, watching the second to last episode of Supernatural, stops it, looking surprised to see Jimmy in his house. The don't-talk-about-it plan is a whole lot trickier to pull off if people who love you can see how damaged you are. "Why'd Ducky send you?"

"Supposedly to do a wound check, but I'm getting the sense it's not your cuts he wants me looking at. What happened?" Jimmy says as he sits down.

"Long damn story, and I promise, one day I'll tell you, but right now I don't want to talk."

Jimmy's looking him over, voice worried, nervous expression on his face. "Okay. Let me check your cuts."

"I'm fine. Abby's already doused me in Neosporin and changed the band-aids this morning. She'll probably do it again tonight. Neither of us want any of this to scar."

"Good." He pauses, looking at the cuts. "Did you do this to yourself?"

"Yeah."

"On purpose?"

"Not exactly."

Jimmy gently touches his jaw, tilting his head a little to see the long cut across his cheek better. "Might want to see a plastic surgeon on that one if you don't want it to scar."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Ducky and Abby know the full story of what happened?"

"Yeah."

His hands are gentle and competent as he looks over Tim's cuts. Tim can tell part of what he's doing is making sure Ducky didn't miss any glass. His eyes aren't as good as they used to be and glass can be awfully easy to miss. "None of them are very deep. That's good. I'm fairly sure Ducky's sent me over to just be here with you."

"Yeah. He and Abby are sort of keeping watch on me."

Jimmy nods at that, looking pretty disturbed. "You at least want to tell me how you did this to yourself?"

"Broke six beakers by throwing them as hard as I could at a wall less than four feet away from me."

Jimmy's eyes go wide. "You are so lucky you didn't lose an eye."

"Abby put safety goggles on me."

"Oh." Jimmy thinks about that for a moment. "When I needed to do something stupid and violent you were there for me. I am here for you. You need this, you pick up your fucking phone and you call me! You can't/won't talk, fine, I won't press, but you get off your ass and call me, okay?"

Tim nods. "I thought about it. Didn't want to wake you up."
Jimmy raised his hand, like he was about to headslap Tim, looks at all the cuts, and drops it. "Wake me up! If there's ever a next time, you wake me up!"

"I really hope there won't be a next time."

"Good." Jimmy sits next to him for a moment, not moving or saying anything. He looks like he's trying to figure out how to say whatever's in his mind.

"Just ask."

"Are you… hell… I don't know what to ask. I'm scared. And angry. Something hurt you bad enough or pissed you off so hard you did that. I don't want to make it worse by demanding you talk, but I don't know what's wrong, so I don't know how to be comforting, and I'm worried."

"You're here, so that means it's a paperwork day, right?"

"Yeah."

"Call Gibbs and pour me a scotch. Big one. I don't want to do this twice."

Jimmy's back two minutes later with a much smaller scotch than Tim would have liked. "That's a big scotch?"

"You're on pain meds, right?"

"Oh."

"So, yes, that's a big scotch. Much more than that and all Jethro and I'll be doing is tucking you into bed for a nap."

"Might like a nap."

"We don't have to do this. I mean, I want to know, but…"

"I know. Just… might as well." He blows out a frustrated breath. "'Course, 'might as well do it now' is why I'm in this shape, so maybe that's not a great plan."

Jimmy's looking at him, eyes wide and earnest, pain for his friend clear on his face. "Tim, talk to me."

He drinks half of the scotch down. "This should be fully kicked in by the time Gibbs is here. I'll give both of you the whole story."

Gibbs gets to his place in eighteen minutes, which means he's channeling Ziva behind the wheel. Like Jimmy, he checks the cuts, hands gentle and careful on Tim's skin. Abby's already told him why Tim's in the shape he's in, but actually seeing it makes his eyes go wide, and then narrow in anger.

"You've both offered to listen, so here's the story…"

He finishes up by telling both of them about talking with his mom and how he'd spent basically his whole life blaming his dad, pretending his mom had been outside of it... "But she wasn't. Maybe he made the rules, but he was gone all the time, so she upheld them. She knew. She might not have approved of every tactic he used, but she was with him on the general plan of verbally beat the living shit out of Tim until he's tough enough." Disgust radiates off of Tim. "Though God alone knows what the fuck tough enough is. I couldn't get it together enough to ask, and I'm honestly not sure I
want to know."

Tim shakes his head. "In a lot of ways, this is worse than what actually happened. That was anger and pain and rage, and this is… betrayal."

Jimmy and Jethro are just looking at him. There's nothing either of them can do to change or help this, so they sit there, trying to be comforting, and let him talk.

"I don't even know what to do with this. Since… Annapolis… she's been nothing but supportive and encouraging of me. She's not the one who called me names or belittled me. She never was. It was like good cop/bad cop from Hell.

"The Admiral didn't go to any of my graduations. He was pissed about turning down Annapolis, so even though he got home the day before, he skipped the high school one. Mom and Penny were nervous enough about us being together that the day after graduation I was on the other side of the country. He was afloat for Johns Hopkins and MIT. Hated the idea of me at NCIS, so he refused to attend FLETC. She was at all of them. She's got a wall covered in pictures of us kids… I mean, how the fuck do you do that? I get him. I wasn't who he wanted me to be and disappointed the shit out of him, fine. I get it.

"But… I mean, what the hell did she think she was doing?"

Unfortunately, Jimmy and Gibbs don't have the answer to that. And right now, the one thing Tim knows he doesn't want to do is get on the phone and talk to the person who does.

After Jenny died, Ziva had explained the idea of sitting Shiva to them. She had told them, that after everything had gone wrong, after God had ruined Job's life, his friends came to comfort him. They didn't say anything. They didn't try to fill the air with useless words. They just came, saw Job in pain, and sat with him, sharing his pain in silence, only talking when he was ready.

And thus Jews sit Shiva. They go to the home of the one who mourns, sit with him, and only speak when he wants, about what he wants.

When Jimmy told him about the "comforting words" people kept abusing him and Breena with after they lost Jon, Tim thought he got the idea. He thought he understood the power and value of comfortable silence.

But now, sitting on his sofa, between Jethro and Jimmy, both of whom aren't saying anything, because there's nothing to say, because right now words would be hollow, meaningless, almost an insult to the gravity of this pain, he gets it. He truly, deeply understands the gift of silence. Words might make this easier for Jimmy or Gibbs, but it won't for him, and they're respecting that.

Sitting on the sofa, Gibbs' arm around him, they are allowing him the space he needs to grieve, and providing him the safety and love he needs to do it.
An Adult

Usually, Tim checks his email about five times a day, if not more. Due to rule number three, (never be unreachable) he's always got his phone nearby. But, after talking to his mom, he's fairly sure she'll call again or send an email or something. And, maybe get a hold of Sarah or Penny (Though he trusts that Penny will be a dead end for her. Ducky's certainly told her about what happened. The fact that she's in San Francisco this week is probably the only reason she hasn't been over to visit.) to try and reach him.

So, he turned his phone off, put it on the little table beside their front door, and went off the grid for three days. The people he wants to have contact with know where he is and how to get him if need be, and that's enough.

He writes, a lot. Burying himself in jazz and the sound of his typewriter clicking away. Like with being trapped in the freezer he starts as MacGregor, lets himself have the distance he needs and works it out, plot point by plot point. He organizes it, gives it shape, treats it like character backstory.

And, after a few hours of that, and a few confrontation scenes ranging from MacGregor killing all of them in an extremely messy and gory way to just yelling at them, he slides into his own voice and spends most of that day free writing, just letting it out.

He isn't exactly feeling sexy that night, mostly just tired and wrung out, but they go to bed, and Abby wraps him in her body, gently making love to him, reminding him, vividly, that he is adored, and that no matter how bad this hurts, and that she understands that it hurts, that there is still pleasure.

And it helps.

Nothing changed, but it makes him feel good, let him not hurt for a little bit, so that's a step forward.

Saturday morning he opens his phone and begins to go through the huge pile of email, texts, and calls.

Seven from his sister, so yeah, his mom must have called her.

Three from Penny.

But only one email from her.

The voicemails from Penny confirm that yes, Ducky had told her what was going on, and yes, his mom and sister had called her, and that she'd more or less let loose on his mom double-barreled and had told his sister what was going on and that he'd give her a call when he could talk.

He flashes her a quick text. Thank you. Still feeling pretty quiet. Will call you soon.

A minute later he gets one back. I know. Love you. He closes his eyes and sighs.

Then he reads through the texts from his sister, mostly along the lines of: What the hell is going on? Mom's hysterical, you've dropped off the face of the planet, Ben's pissed because she's so upset, and Dad's currently unreachable. What happened? The last one read: Talked to Penny. I get it. Call me when you can.
He sends her one back that says: *Not feeling very social right now. We'll have lunch soon, though.*

He gets back: *With Penny, too?*

Yeah. *Probably a good idea.*

His fingers hover over the button for his mom's email for a good minute. He's not sure he wants to see what's in there. But the subject is *Why* with no question mark, so the only thing he wants to know might be in there.

Of course, knowing might rip the very fragile peace he's got right now to shreds. But not knowing means he can't focus on anything else. So, he hits the button and it opens.

It's a picture of him and Abby. Sarah must have snapped it, though he doesn't remember that. It's the night they went to the Japanese restaurant, him all shaved and kilted, her in the cheongsam. He's holding the door open for her, and she's stepping into the restaurant.

It's a close enough shot that it's clear he's wearing makeup, but far enough back to see the kilt, too.

His mom attached it to a short message that said: *The goal was for you to be strong enough to be a man who could do this. The summer you were fourteen, I didn't step in until it was clear that you wouldn't say no to him. Once it was, I ended it. When you said no to shooting practice, he stopped it. It was always about making you strong enough to stand up for yourself.*

*You needed to be able to stand up for your interests, for your loves, and say no to anyone who would push you around.*

*You had to be strong enough to say no to him.*

*And when you ripped up the Annapolis letter, you were.*

His first response, a flare of hot, blinding rage, isn't very useful. He feels it pulse through him as he reads the email, and then he tries to let it go.

Big, destructive, angry hissy fit isn't good for anyone, and he's got people who are depending on him right now. He forgot that, got too lost in himself and the anger before, and lucked out because nothing bad happened on all the other fronts of his life, giving him the time he needed to heal up. But it would have been so easy for things to just go sideways.

He can't knock himself out of commission. Abby needs him, so he can't be healing up from anything.

And maybe he doesn't do a great job of letting it go. But it's better than last time, so that's progress.

He heads for his computer and writes a reply, a long reply, most of it angry ranting along the lines of how when a guy who has literally hundreds of other guys at his disposal who are all trained to follow orders and kill people, threatens you, voice cold and certain, with having those guys grab you, drag you onto a ship, cut your genitals off and rape you, you sure as hell don't say 'No' to him. You do whatever the hell he wants you to do and you do it exactly the way he wants it done. There was maybe a two page long run about how what stopped the shooting practice was him being three seconds away from killing John and if that was their definition of "saying no" something was very seriously wrong with them. Five pages of see that woman next to me in that photo? Yeah. Think it's easy to be her? Think it takes strength to dress counter culture and act even further counter culture? You know why she could do it? Because she grew up with people who cherished and adored her.

He looks at it, fifteen pages in total, hit ctr-A and ctr-C, puts it into a different document, for him to
keep for himself, and then deletes it from the original email.

Then he writes a shorter note.

_Bullshit._

_It doesn't work that way. Never has, never will._

_I can be that man because I'm surrounded by people who love and encourage me._

_I was not that child. I was scared and nervous and timid because the people I loved most, trusted most, thought it was their mission in life to terrorize me._

_I could have been that child, wanted to be him, curious, fearless, able to be who I wanted, but you and Dad made sure that didn't happen._

_I don't care what you thought you were doing. I'm not interested in any justifications. Who I was should have been good enough, but it wasn't, and you and Dad decided I needed to be someone else._

_Sarah or Penny will tell you when Kelly's born. They'll send pictures._

_We'll talk again, eventually._

_I'll call when I can._

_I am extremely angry._

_I still love you._

_Tim_

He looks at it and knows it's true. He loves his mom. And maybe it's habit, he's used to loving her, so he does. Maybe she doesn't deserve it. But no matter what it is, it's true.

But mostly, he realizes that a huge part of the pain of this is mourning for the fact that they will never get back to normal. The easy relationship, the trust they had is over.

He's lost the ability to hold her blameless, and she's lost the protection of his father being the only bad guy.

And he realizes something else is gone, too. That by holding her responsible for her actions, he's lost the last shred of his childhood.

Seeing things as they are and going from there, at its core, that's adulthood.
Tim bolts out of bed and is in the bathroom before his brain wakes up enough to even know he's moving or why.

Once in there, blinding white light searing through sleep dark eyes, he hears Abby cry, and figures that's what got him up and out of bed.

That sounds a whole lot more like emotional distress than pain, and these days emotional distress can be anything from memories of long distance telephone commercials to a bad case.

"What? Are you okay?" he's saying as his eyes slowly adjust to the light.

Abby's standing in front of the mirror, lights on, crying, clutching the sink, and staring at herself.

She sees the fear in his eyes, because he hasn't been able to burn off all of the adrenaline of bolting out of bed, yet, and says, voice shaky and cracking, "It's broken." She tries a reassuring smile, but it doesn't come off at all, and another sob wrenches out of her.

He doesn't know what she's talking about, at all. But there's no blood, no amniotic fluid, so his first two guesses must be wrong. It takes a good thirty seconds before he sees what she means.

Kate's memorial tattoo on her hip. Three stretch marks, ones he didn't remember being there when they went to bed, crossed the tattoo, breaking the wrought iron cross, splitting the roses, cutting the C in half.

He wraps her in his arms, feeling himself relax, and says, "Oh, Abby."

She's crying on his shoulder.

"Shhhh..." He kisses her forehead, and gently strokes her hip.

"My skin was itching, burning, so I went in to rub some of the cocoa butter on it. I turned on the light and..."

He nods, staring at the broken cross.

"I didn't realize I was so loud until you came bursting in."

"It's okay." He kisses her again. "Kate would laugh at you right now."

She smiles a little. "You think so?"

"Yeah, not in a mean way. She'd be happy your little girl touched how you remember her. She'd like a symbol of life eternal marked by new life forming."

"Yeah, she would. Kelly still needs a middle name."

He knows where she's going with this. "Yeah, she does."

"But not Kate. Kelly Caitlyn sounds wrong. But Kate's middle name was Marie."

"Kelly Marie McGee." That makes him smile. "I like that. I like that a whole lot."
"Good."

It's something he's wondered about for a while now, something he's never been entirely sure if he wanted to know the answer to, which is why he's never asked. And it's also why, though Kate was a glaringly obvious choice for a middle name, he didn't suggest it.

But, he knows she loves him and will always love him, knows it in his bones, in his soul if he has one, and he's pretty sure enough time has gone by that talking about it won't hurt Abby. And hell, this week has been a whole pile of confronting things he doesn't necessarily want or need to know, so why not just toss one more on top of it?

"Were you in love with Kate?"

He's spooned up behind her, so he can't see the expression on her face, but her feels her squeeze her hand.

"Does it matter?"

"Probably not. I'm just curious."

"As much as I could let myself love anyone then, yes."

He nods, kisses the back of her neck. "Is that part of why you and I didn't work the first time?"

"No. We didn't work because I couldn't handle us working. Same thing with falling for Kate. She was basically my perfect woman, straight, Catholic, in love with someone else… I could have her friendship and the fantasy without any fear of it ever going anywhere."

"In love with someone else?" That's gotten his attention. He doesn't remember Kate having any sort of steady guy.

"She had a massive crush on Gibbs."

"Gibbs?" His voice is beyond shocked. That idea had literally never, ever formed in his mind. Whispers of hints of that idea had never formed. Nothing even remotely related to that idea had even considered forming in his mind. It's completely out of the blue.

"Yeah."

"I thought her and Tony…"

Abby laughs a little at the surprise in his voice. "Gibbs did, too. But she didn't like guys who nailed anything that moved. Thought it was a sign of low self-respect, and she didn't think a man could love her the way she wanted to be loved if he didn't love himself properly first. I'm fairly sure Gibbs thought she and Tony would get together because that was a really good way of not having to deal with the fact that he wanted her, too."

Tim smiles at that. "Rule Number 12 exists for a reason. He told me that once."

"Yeah. I think that's one of the reasons why he prefers to work with younger women these days. That way he can just stuff us into the daughter file and not have to worry about it again."

Tim shrugs. "If it works…"
"I don't know if it does, but... I do know he does it."

"What do you think would have happened if she hadn't died?"

"With Kate and I, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"Nothing." She lifts his hand to her lips and kisses his fingers. "Which was a big part of loving her. She wasn't hateful about it or anything, but she was very clear on homosexuality being a sin. It wasn't a problem if I wanted to play with girls or boys or both at once. She really was a good Christian, so she wasn't going to judge me or hold it against me, or treat me with anything but love, but it wasn't something she was willing to do."

"You actually talked about it?" Tim tries to imagine that conversation, and comes up with a blank.

"I kissed her once, and she was cool about it, but very clear."

"When was that?" He doesn't remember any hints of that, either.

"About three months before she died."

"Good kiss?" Okay, yeah, he probably didn't need to sound quite that turned on by the idea, but, well, he really likes that mental image, a whole lot.

Abby shrugs. "Awkward. She was pulling back about two tenths of a second after I touched her." Which squashes turned-on flat. He's got too many memories of kisses like that to feel turned on by it.

"I've had kisses like that."

"Yeah, but she was really great about it. Told me she loved me, wanted to be my friend, but really didn't swing that way at all. And I knew that. I really did. But we were a little drunk, and I wanted to try my luck. It wasn't like I got burned. As long as I respected her boundaries, we were cool, and just went from there like nothing happened."

"Yeah, she would have been like that."

"Yeah, she was. How about you? Ever make a move on her?"

He laughs at that. "No. Not saying I didn't think about it, a lot, but no. She wasn't just out of my league; we weren't even playing the same sport."

Abby laughs at that, thinks it's a very good way to put that. "She thought you were cute and sweet."

"Yeah, like a puppy," he says dryly. "And like I said when you said that to me, no man wants to be thought of as a puppy."

He can feel that's making her smile. "You certainly aren't a puppy anymore."

"Thank you."
In almost any way, Gibbs would tell you the world has been getting to be a better and better place. He firmly believes that, but there are some things he finds… perplexing.

Like, when did it become expected for men to attend baby showers?

He knows it wasn't when Shannon was pregnant. When she was pregnant, it was his job to drop her off at her best friend's house and then come back four hours later and lug presents into the car and into the house, and then assemble any presents that required assembly. That was a job he felt fully capable of doing not just well, but with a certain level of style.

And Tobias (upon hearing he's attending a baby shower) told him it wasn't when Diane was pregnant.

But somehow, over the years, that's changed, and he found himself at Molly's baby shower (hosted by Abby and Tim), and is now in the process of putting the finishing touches on the decorations at Jimmy's place because Breena's having a surprise shower for Tim and Abby, and somehow he and Ducky got roped into setting this thing up.

And it's not that he doesn't love Tim and Abby, let alone that he doesn't love Kelly, it's just that standing on a chair tacking up pink skull bedecked streamers as Ducky arranges little sandwiches on a tray feels really weird to him.

Ducky looks up at him from the tray, and says, "Did you ever think, Jethro, that we'd be here?"

"No, Duck. I really didn't."

Ducky laughs at that.

Breena bustles in with a tray covered in tiny cupcakes with little pink skulls on them. She checks the sandwiches and the decorations. "Good work, guys."

Gibbs shakes his head, bemused. At least he's doing it well.

Goth baby shower probably isn't a contradiction in terms or an oxymoron per se, but like with Goth maternity clothing it just doesn't seem to be something that anyone plans for.

Of course, this isn't a baby shower in the traditional sense. Usually the idea of a baby shower is the same idea behind wedding presents, namely the family all chips in to get the couple the stuff they need, but presumably can't afford because they're young and don't have any money.

Which is, of course, not the case, for Tim and Abby.

So, really, this is more like a birthday party for Kelly. A real first birthday.

Presents are tending toward small and cute. (With the exception of the Bissell Little Green Steam Cleaner Jimmy and Breena got them, which is, according to Breena, the single most useful appliance
Tony pulls Tim aside as the party was winding down. "Look, you don't have to tell me what's going on. If it's private, I'll leave it alone. But, just, don't lie to me, okay? We're worried about you. Both Ziva and I can see you didn't do this to yourself with a mirror."

Yeah, he's healing up, band aids are off, but he's got a lot of fine pink lines/scabs on his face, neck, forearms and hands.

Tim suddenly gets that Tony really will leave this alone. That in the last three years he has grown up enough to be able to do that.

Tim nods at him, saying, "I'm not okay, not on this, but I will be, eventually. It's nothing you can change or help with. And one of these days, when I feel like talking about it, I'll tell you, but not right now. Right now, I just want to let it lie. I've got a lot of bigger, better things on my horizon and I want to focus on them."

"Okay." Tony's voice is serious, and he's looking at Tim like if he stares hard enough he can figure out what's going on. "Everyone who does need to know, knows?"

"Yeah. It's not a secret, it's just, literally," Tim adds a limp half smile, "I don't want to say the words. Don't want to think about it. You can ask Gibbs about it if you like. He'll fill you in."

Tony gives him an understanding half-smile back and puts his hand on Tim's shoulder. "I'll wait for you. It's not anything with Abby or Kelly, though? You guys didn't get more troubling news?"

"No, nothing with them. Right now they're keeping me afloat. Just… stuff I didn't deal with a long time ago coming back and biting me in the ass."

"Okay. Look, you need to go get drunk, or fight, or run, or whatever, give me a call and I'm in."

"Thanks."

Much later that night, after the presents had been put away, and they're settling in for sleep, Tim kisses Abby's neck, hand cupping her breast, body snugged close to hers, very much telegraphing this is not just a good night kiss.

"Not tonight," she sounds pretty tired and kind of annoyed as she says that.

"Okay. Can I spoon you?" Normally, Tim wouldn't ask. Normally, he'd just cuddle up and go to sleep, but since they got home Abby's been in one of her porcupine moods, and his current Rule Number 3 is 'Do not unnecessarily poke the porcupine.'

"Sure."

He cuddles up close, hoping to find a position that lets him snuggle her but also doesn't annoy/make her more uncomfortable.

And, for a few minutes, he thought he had. He's relaxing, fantasizing a little, but planning on just
going to sleep. He likes thinking about sex as something to fall asleep to, tends to lead to good dreams. He's about three quarters asleep, where the line between fantasy and dream is pretty blurry.

"I said not tonight."

That yanks him back to the fully awake side of the line. "And I'm fine with that."

"You're poking me."

He sighs dramatically, and rolls his eyes a bit, too. *Literally, don't poke the porcupine. Stupid body.* "You're warm, soft, naked, and pressed up against me. I'm enjoying that. I'm not intending to do anything with it."

"Better not." Another quiet minute. "Do you want to do something with it?"

That gets a smile out of Tim, and he kisses Abby's shoulder. "Not twelve anymore, when I have an erection it's because I want to do something with it."

"Or you're just waking up."

"Once I'm awake, I want to do something with it."

She laughs a little at that.

"Why are you asking? Want me to do something?"

"No. Not really. I'm tired, irritable, and everything hurts."

"You might feel better after some sex." He can feel her glare. "Not pushing my luck. Just, endorphins, you know?"

She rolls over to face him, a fairly long and complicated procedure, but finally she's laying on her left side. "You really want to have sex?"

"Ummm… yeah. As you noticed, I'm poking you. Or would be if your back was to me." His tummy is against hers, his hand on her hip, and these days that means his dick's nowhere near her body.

"With me?" She's looking awfully doubtful at that.

"You see anyone else here?"

"I'm the size and shape of a killer whale: a stretch-marky, irritable, pregnant killer whale."

He grins and kisses the tip of her nose. "Then add stretch-marky, irritable, pregnant killer whales to the list of things that turn me on."

She laughs.

"Look, I want to have sex with you. No matter what. You may think you look like a whale, but I'm not seeing that. You're all soft and round and that's my kid in there, and I really like that. Come on, you know I get off on other people knowing you're mine, and eight months pregnant with my kid is more or less the ultimate symbol of that."

She nods.

"And I get that you're not all 'Yay! Sex' right now, and that's cool. But whenever you are, for any
kind of sex you want, I'm game. And I will always be game. If I end up a quadriplegic, and you want sex, I will talk to you until you're dripping down your legs and lick and suck your pussy until you're quivering and screaming. No matter what, Abby, I want you, and I want to be with you, and I want to feel you get off just as hard as I do."

She squeezes his hand. "Thank you."

"That's like thanking me for breathing. No matter what, as long as I've got higher-level neural functions, that's going to be true."

He's quiet for a moment, breathing against her. Then he grins. "Sooo…"

"Uh uh." Her head shakes.

"Not a problem. Wanna keep me company while I take care of this myself?"

She smiles at him. "Sure."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So... Baby showers. If, on the off chance, you've got a buddy who is going to be a parent anytime in the soonish future, may I suggest those little steam cleaner spot cleaning vaccuum things as a present? (Most popular brand I know are the Bissel Little Greens.) My boys are seven and four, and we've outgrown, finished, used up all the baby shower presents, but the Little Green one of our buddies was kind enough to suggest as something we had to get is still going strong and gets used at least three times a week and a whole hell of a lot more often when little dudes were really little.
Memorial Day Weekend

On Friday, after the meal, when they were all hanging out at Tony and Ziva's, Abby's sitting, straddling one of the kitchen chairs while Tim rubs her back and hips.

Kelly's due in five weeks, so everything loosens up, and hips and back hurt, but the fact that it's normal doesn't make it feel any better.

Jimmy's watching them while talking with Ziva, but when that bit of conversation wraps, he looks at them and says, "You know, our gym has a pool. It opens tomorrow. We," he gestures to let the rest of the group know this is an invite for everyone, though Abby's the main reason he's thinking this, "could go tomorrow or Sunday or Monday if we don't get called in for a case."

It's Memorial Day weekend. They are on call for this one. Gibbs set it so they'd be off Fourth of July, thinking that it was likely his team would appreciate the off time. After Molly, it was pretty hard to get his guys to pay attention to the work at hand. So, assuming Kelly shows up on time, not having to worry about a case to go with new baby struck him as a good idea.

Okay, that's bull. He set it for him. He doesn't want to have to be worried about a case. Kelly shows up, and he wants to be able to take off and enjoy it. He's planning on being there more or less all the time the first week or so. More and more this is looking like Kelly's coming out by c-section, so an extra set of hands around the house will be a very good thing.

The fact that it works out well for the rest of the team is just a nice side-effect.

Neither Tim nor Abby appears to get why a pool would be a good thing. Tim's looking at Jimmy like he's insane because, while it's true he's got nothing against swimming, cold and wet is still awfully low on his list of fun activities. Abby's thinking about how little she wants to try and get into a bathing suit, let alone waddle around almost naked with everyone looking at her.

Jimmy sees their confusion and he looks at Breena, shaking his head, flashing her a look that says, Amateurs. She grins back at him, veteran parents sharing a kind laugh at the newbies.

Jimmy scoots over to kneel in front of Abby. He looks up into her eyes while saying, "Abby, in a pool you're weightless. Nothing hurts in a pool. And it's cool. No more hot flash."

"Oh." And the light dawns on Abby, and with it a smile of delight spreads across her face.

"Yeah, I would have lived in the indoor pool the last six weeks with Molly if I could have. Feels so good you don't care how you look. Trust me, pool this weekend is a good idea."

"Then take me to the pool!!"

Tony and Ziva are in. Pool sounds great to them. Ducky and Penny decide no on the pool, but they do offer to make dinner for everyone and have them over that night. Gibbs doesn't say anything one way or the other.

'Course, these days, Gibbs isn't talking a whole lot. At least, if he can avoid it. It's been a pretty intense six weeks for him. But as things slide back into a new version of normal, the loss of his dad keeps creeping back to the front of his mind. He's functional but sad. And they get that. If anyone
gets that, it's this group.

But before heading off at the end of dinner, Tim pulls him into Tony and Ziva's kitchen.

"Come with us on Monday."

He does that half-shrug, don't want to commit to anything gesture.

"Sunshine and playing with your girls is good for you. You're spending plenty of time in your basement, time to get in the light for a little bit, an hour, two if you can take it. If you want, you can call it bootcamp and make Jimmy and I swim laps, but come with us. Splash with the girls, snuggle Molly, lay out and suck up some vitamin D. It'll help."

Gibbs sighs. "Fine."

"Good."

"You're both doing laps."

"Of course."

---

It's cold. Really freaking cold. Back when he was a kid, Tim used to listen to Bill Cosby stand-up recordings, and one of the stories he told was about jumping in a lake with water that was like 34 degrees Fahrenheit, and getting into the outdoor pool at Jimmy's gym is reminding him very strongly of that story.

Of course, the rest of the crew seems to be liking it.

And Abby... she's ecstatic. She's been running hot for a while now, and apparently being dropped into a vat of what is basically liquid snow is making her really happy.

"I love the pool! The pool is awesome! You can take me out again when labor starts! I'm not moving 'til then."

That makes Tim laugh. "You want us to get a pool membership?"

"Yes!" she says, ecstatic at the idea.

He smiles and nods at that.

---

Officially, Breena's not pregnant yet. Though everyone in this group has figured out that she is, but those who haven't been told are doing a good job of pretending to have not noticed. Nuchal Fold test is 4th of June. But while the others are playing in the pool, she's lying on a lounge. Looks like she might be napping, but Tim's thinking she might not be. There's a bit too much tension in her face for napping.

Like with Molly and Jon, the Morning Sickness Fairy has come to visit, and is hammering her, hard.

He kisses Abby's ear and says, "I'm gonna check on Breena. I don't think she's feeling well. Offer her a ride home if she wants to go."
Abby nods at that and smiles, also knowing that Tim's looking for an excuse to get out of the water. Just because she feels like her body's running at 101 all the time doesn't mean he finds being stuck in cold water particularly comfortable.

He heads to the lounge next to Breena and starts drying off. His teeth are starting to chatter, because now that he's out of the water, the wind is making him feel even colder. "How are you doing?"

She opens her eyes to look at him. "Blech."

"Sorry to hear it. You want me to give you a lift home?"

She listlessly shakes her head. "Won't be any better at home. The meds I'm on keep me from throwing up, but it doesn't make the nausea go away."

He nods at that and sits on the edge of her lounge chair, wrapping his towel around his shoulders. "Give me your wrist."

"Tim?" she asks, rolling onto her side to face him.

"The summer Ziva was in Israel, Tony took some off time, so it was just me and Gibbs, and we got called onto a case on the Reagan, for a week, in heavy seas. I get sea sick. I get really sea sick. Lost eight pounds over the course of that week." He takes her hand in his, eyeballs the size of her fingers, and finds the spot on her wrist he's looking for, pressing his thumb gently into it. "Trust me, by the end of that week, I knew every nausea remedy on earth. Most of them don't work, but this one was... better than nothing."

"How does it work?" Breena asks, looking at her wrist in his hand.

"Three fingers down, inside of your wrist, between the tendons, gentle pressure until you feel better. There are a bunch of them, and if you want, I'll show them to you, but this is the easiest one to hit."

"And what does better than nothing mean?"

His looks says, didn't do all that much. "Let me get a few hours of sleep every night."

"Better than nothing." She understands that look.

"Yeah. The medic tried to give me some anti-nausea meds, but I had to swallow them and keep 'em down. Didn't work."

"The stuff I'm on is a tablet that dissolves on the tongue. That's pretty nice. And I'm not getting dehydrated, so that's good too, but I still feel awful."

He holds the point on her wrist, talking about the other ones, sympathizing, a little, over how awful being nauseous all the time is. After a minute, that conversation wears down.

"Can I ask you something?" Tim says to Breena.

"Sure."

He takes a deep breath, not entirely sure if he wants to do this, but... he doesn't know the answer, and it's nagging at him, not the sort of thing he thinks about a lot, especially not these last few weeks, but sometimes it'll just sort of creep into his mind, like right now as he's sitting next to her holding her wrist, and he feels like he could get a better handle on this if he gets the answer, so...

"Abby tells me you and her talk about the four of us having sex."
That gets a bright, happy smile out of her. Apparently, Breena likes talking about sex, because it looks like this is perking her up. "Yep."

Tim has a quick and firm mental discussion with his dick about how it is not going to notice this conversation, or the fact that Breena's in a bikini, and it's really not going to notice the fact that she's smiling at the idea of having sex with him or that he's touching her, because unless he wants to shift that towel from around his shoulders to around his hips, all he's got covering him is wet swim trunks, and if there's an outfit that does a worse job of concealing an erection, he doesn't know what it'd be.

He isn't entirely sure if his dick is paying attention to him or not, but it doesn't feel like it's getting past the first flush of thinking about getting hard, (possibly because the pool water was so damn cold it froze him into submission) so that's okay.

"I understand why Abby and I have talked about it. She made it clear very early on that as long as we were both happy and comfortable that anything was on the table. It just had to be fair and both of us had to be part of it. As long as I was cool with another guy, she'd be cool with another girl. And we're both jealous enough, and I'm way more than straight enough that we knew it'd never happen. But we had that conversation, probably, given some of the stuff we like, needed to have it. What I don't get is how you and Jimmy got there."

She has a knowing smile on her face. "You mean, how did I go from 'no sex with anyone who isn't my husband' to 'hey, maybe our best friends would be fun, too'?"

"Um… yeah." He nods a little. Virgin until her wedding day and swinging or swapping or whatever the hell this is doesn't exactly sound like a normal combination to Tim.

"I was fourteen and had a boyfriend I was completely in love with. Loved everything about him. Head to toes. One of the other girls in our class liked him, too, started a rumor that I'd been fooling around on him, and I saw how pissed he got. He beat the hell out of the guy I'd supposedly been fooling around with. Sheer luck, Doug, the other guy, didn't press charges."

Tim winces, but keeps quiet, letting her keep telling the story.

"There were a few good lessons in that. I didn't want a guy who wouldn't talk to me first, let alone one who believed in some rumor instead of the life we had together. But, I also learned there was real power in the idea of MINE. So I watched, and paid attention, and every guy I've met has had a MINE kick. Stronger in some guys, weaker in others, but all of them have it. I decided that there was something I could give my future husband, an act of love that'd rock his world. And I also knew that a guy who would respect me enough to move at my speed, a guy who would put his desire for sex on the shelf long enough to get to know me and make me his wife, a man who would fall in love with me, and not my body, was a man worthy of me. And a man who wouldn't pressure me, wouldn't belittle me, wouldn't try to make me feel bad for wanting to wait, was a man worthy to raise my daughters and the kind of man I'd want my sons to become." She's smiling at that, watching Jimmy, who's gently tossing Molly to Gibbs in the pool. They're all soaked, and Molly is shrieking with laughter.

Her eyes slide away from Molly, Gibbs, and Jimmy, back to Tim. "But it was never a sex is bad or icky or sinful and somehow marriage suddenly wipes it clean and makes it pure kind of thing." She sorts at that, derisive look on her face. "That's the stereotype, right? Frigid Christian virgin afraid to get dirty?"

She's looking at Tim like she expects an answer, so he nods, more signaling keep talking than I agree with that.
"That's not me. Never was. Sure, I'm Christian, and I believe that we're all sinners, all the time, in all things. That's our nature, and through Christ's grace we are able to experience love and joy and peace. And what we do, whatever it may be, if it's an act of love, then it's okay. It's blessed by God because without Him we wouldn't be able to feel that love, because all love is a reflection of Him. Because love is how we know Him.

"And for the four of us, love isn't the problem. We've got love. Best I can see, the sticking point for the four of us is the whole MINE thing. Namely, you and Jimmy have a somewhat different interpretation of how that works than Abby and I do.

"But, from what I can tell, Abby isn't any less yours because she's had sex with lots of other guys. Ziva isn't any less Tony's."

Tim nods; he agrees with that.

"Because it's not sex that makes someone yours." And now he isn't agreeing quite so much, but he is listening. "Because sex may be an act of love, but it's not love. And love isn't something that goes away. It doesn't break into pieces. You don't have less of it to give because you love someone else. You won't love Abby less when Kelly's born, you'll love her more, and you'll love Kelly more than you think you can possibly love anyone, and it all sort of wraps up into itself and makes both loves stronger and brighter."

Okay, that sounds good, too, he's nodding away.

"You don't love Abby less because you love Jimmy. You don't love Jimmy less because you love me or Tony or Ziva.

"And I've gotten to the point in my life where MINE when it comes to Jimmy isn't about sex. Not really. It's about love and trust and the life we've built and our home and family. And you and Abby don't threaten that. You're part of it. He wants to go off on his own and pick up some random 22-year-old with perky breasts and twenty-five inch waist..." Breena's eyes leave his, and he knows she's looking at all of the pretty, young things in tiny bikinis wandering around the pool. "And I'll be pissed, big time, because that would be a violation of that trust and love." Her gaze returns to him, then flicks over to the water where Jimmy and Abby are playing with Molly, while Gibbs talks with Ziva, and Tony's about to leap in, cannonballing next to them. "But you and Abby? You held us when we mourned our son, carried us when the pain was too great to walk, and if there's any greater act of love than that, I don't know what it would be." She blinks, wipes away the tears, steadies her voice, and touches his fingers on her wrist. "Even that's about love and comforting each other. Anyway. If that love is ever expressed as sex, well, yeah, I'd like that." She smiles warm and a little flirty at Tim. "And I know you would, too."

He's about to speak when she gestures with her finger to let him know she isn't quite done.

"I realize that all the love stuff may just be bull. I might be rationalizing this. Might just be horny. Might be curious. You three all tried other people, got to see what it was like. I haven't. But, I do know this, I love Jimmy, body, soul, mind, any way you can love a man, I love him, and I'm never, ever going to do anything that hurts him. So, if he's not completely into this, too, then it's never going to happen. I love you and Abby, too, and I won't do anything to hurt you, either.

"So, maybe this will stay a fantasy. Maybe it'll never go further than Abby and I dancing together slow and close to make you and Jimmy stare at us like you want to eat us alive. Maybe, for the rest of our days, we'll be dear friends who flirt a little too hard, hug each other a few seconds too long, dance a little too close, but we laugh and enjoy it, because it makes us feel sexy and good."
"And if that's all this ever is, that's fine! It's more than fine." She takes his hand in hers and squeezes it. "I never thought I'd have friends like you and Abby. But I do think it's better that we're open about wanting each other, and choose, eyes open, to either explore that further or not, rather than pretend it's not there." She lets go of him, and goes back to watching the rest of the family playing.

"More than a year ago, Abby and I were dancing, and Ziva asked if the four of us were sleeping together, and that got me thinking about it. Jimmy's loved her forever. I liked you. She wanted us. You're hot for me. And, I thought about how that could go. Secret fantasies, jealousy, Abby and I annoyed at each other, thinking we're trying to seduce each other's husbands. Thinking of you while sleeping with him. Jimmy wondering where my mind goes when we're together. More jealousy. Infidelity. Anger."

She turns back to Tim, who is staring at her intently, amazed at how much thought she's put into this.

"And I didn't want that. That's not love. That's poison! So, when we got home that night, I told him a story about the four of us at the club, and it was melt-your-brain-hot! Turned out he really liked the idea of it. And then it was a game. And we were okay. Because thinking about you and him and me and Abby together doesn't mean I love him any less.

"I talked to Abby the next morning. And instead of the usual story of suspicion and anger, I flat out said to her, 'It'll probably never happen, but I would like to sleep with you and Tim and Jimmy. I'm sure he's got tricks Jimmy's never dreamed of, and you've never been kissed until you've been kissed by Jimmy Palmer. The things that man can do with his tongue!"

"And she just smiled at me, you know that smile, the one that makes everything seem good and happy, and then hugged me, and said, 'I don't think the guys'll ever go for it, but if they do, oh yeah! We are so on for that!'

"I don't know, but somehow that seems a lot healthier than constantly watching each other, snide remarks, lack of trust, and worrying that something is going to happen. I know what page she's on. She knows where I am. You're rubbing my wrist, and she's seen it, and she's not bothered or worried, because she knows what's going on. We can both sit here, with you guys, flirt a little, mess around a little, and it's not a problem, because nothing is ever going to happen without all four of us agreeing and wholeheartedly jumping into it."

Tim waits another second, making sure she's done, then leans over and kisses her cheek. "I love you. You and Abby are the most beautiful women on earth. And Jimmy and I are insanely lucky to have you in our lives. And yeah, for me, love and sex and MINE are all sort of tangled together, and I really like the idea of what you're saying, but I don't know if I'll ever feel that way. And, look, completely honest, I've been fantasizing about you since the first time Jimmy showed us a picture of you. If you ever want to sleep with me and Abby, there's always room in our bed for you." He flashes her his sexy smile and very intentionally lets his eyes drag down her body before sliding them back up to meet hers. "And you're right, I've got tricks he's never dreamed of, and Abby and I would make you feel so good!"

Breena giggles at that.

"But she's MY wife. And Jimmy's the sticking point."

"He feels the same way about me and you."

"Of course."

"You guys should probably talk to each other about this."
Tim runs his fingers through his hair and sighs, looking over at Jimmy who is now splashing Tony with Molly's help while Abby and Ziva laugh at them. Talking to Jimmy about this means walking into pretty dangerous territory that he'd rather stay away from right now, but, yeah, it'll have to happen sooner or later, so he answers, "Get enough alcohol into us, and maybe we will. Anyway… maybe one day I'll be able to get over that enough for both of you to come join us. I mean, when she was first pregnant he was joking about sleeping with her, and I wanted to hit him, because she's MINE and he didn't even have the right to joke about it. And I don't feel that now, at least not in regards to him. Some asshole was eyeballing her the other day, and I could feel my pulse in my ears while he was doing it…” Tim takes a breath, he sounds pissed as he's talking about it. "Okay, off topic…”

Breena laughs at little, giving him a knowing look. "Or not so much."

"Or not so much." He shakes his head and switches from holding the pressure point on her right wrist to her left. "But yeah, right now, MINE is attached to sex, really attached to sex, attached to sex the same way I'm attached to my arms. And, like you noticed, that does seem to be a guy thing, and I'm not going to stop being a guy at any point in the future. And I really doubt Jimmy's gonna stop being a guy. So, I guess the question for me is: can Jimmy and I get from MINE to ours? Can we share you with each other? I mean, I can guarantee there is absolutely no shot at all of me ever being cool with anyone other than Jimmy, and there's probably better than even odds I'll never be cool with him, either. But, there's still the idea, I guess… Can you be ours, can Abby be ours, and can I even wrap my head around ours?"

"I don't know."

"I don't either. But I'm thinking about it. Because you're right, the idea is melt-your-brains hot."

That gets a very sexy grin out of Breena. "Good. He is, too."

Tim looks at her wrist in his hand, deciding now is probably a good time to change the topic. "So, is this helping, at all?"

"Tiny bit." Breena smiles, understanding he's changing the topic, letting himself have time to think. "The conversation's good. It's keeping me distracted."

"Yeah, I didn't find it very useful when I was on the Reagan."

"Better than nothing."

"That's true. And you at least feel like you're doing something."

"Yep. So show me the other points."
June 1, 2015 marked the first of the major work changes. The lab was no longer Abby's and Abby's alone.

While it's true that the Navy Yard hosts the premier MCRT and the hub of all of the ins and outs of NCIS, it didn't host the best lab. (Not saying anything about the talent of the Navy Yard lab, just the physical layout and technology.) The best lab was at Norfolk.

And it's not that Norfolk was any sort of a major NCIS hub. Yes, there are tons of Navy Personnel out of Norfolk and Hampton Roads, but not so much as to require their very own state-of-the-art lab with three techs.

What Norfolk's lab did was the processing of any trace for any Agent Afloat floating closer to the east coast of the United States than Europe.

So, when Sequester hit, and Vance had to sit down with the NCIS Accounting Department and find the least painful ways to tighten his budget, one thing that stuck out was he had two NCIS bases less than 200 miles apart. One of them already covered any major crimes that happened in the territory of the other, and while it's true the other had the better lab, he could move the equipment and people to DC, shut down Norfolk, and save fourteen million dollars a year by consolidating.

After all, if you're already floating five hundred miles east of Norfolk, the added half hour of helio time to get your trace to DC instead of Norfolk really isn't an issue.

Plus, since Dearing's bomb more or less went off right in front of the lab, when they rebuilt that area, a few extra storage spaces had been added, and converting them into extra lab space only required knocking down some walls, installing better ventilation and lighting, and moving the lab from Norfolk up to DC.

So on June 1st, six months after it should have happened, (Because one thing politicians are good at is getting their own pet projects funding extensions, and Virginia's senators might not agree on a whole lot, but keeping plush Federal jobs in their state is one of those things, so miraculously additional funding for six more months showed up out of the ethers.) Abby McGee walked (waddled, it's really hard to look particularly dignified and in command when you're so pregnant you feel like the kid is dangling between your knees) into what was no longer her lab, and got ready to start a new job.

Boss.

Zelaz, Corwin, and Benedict have been transferred up. Technically she and Benedict have the same rank, but she's got seniority, so it's still her lab.

But it's also not her lab. It's no longer her space. It's not home away from home. Now it's just the place where she works. And that, along with other voices, the lack of music, and a collection of little dohickies that aren't hers is disconcerting.

And she's no longer Abbs. Not down here. Not anymore. She's not a pet. She's not the NCIS mascot. Not to them. She's… McGee. Which feels kind of weird. She's gotten used to it being her last name, but until today, no one besides Leon (and occasionally Tim when he's feeling frisky) calls her that.

But now… "McGee, where do you want…" "McGee, is it okay…" "McGee, how about we…"
Finally she'd had enough of that. "Okay, all of you, right here." And her new techs (Lab rats? Assistants? God, she hates this.) gathered around.

"Look. I know you all call each other by your last names, but I'm Abby. And, unless you really hate it, I'm calling you three by your first names, too. There's one guy I call by his last name, and that's Gibbs. And none of you are Gibbs, so unless you hate your first names, I'm using them. Plus, my husband works here, and works down here," She points at her second computer, though it's occurring to her that might not be as easy to do, what with three other people down here now. "and everyone around here already calls him McGee, because he's been McGee his whole life and I've only been McGee since November."

They nod. "Okay, Abby." Zelaz… Roger, says.

"Good."

She hates the fact that Roger, Eva (Corwin), and Tom (Benedict) are all lugging and unpacking but she's not. It's not that she's doing nothing, but, in that she can't move anything heavy, and right now, everything is heavy, so instead of moving she's keeping track of the new inventory.

And yeah, it's kind of neat that they're slapping bar codes on everything and scanning them all in, but still, it feels lazy to be the one waving the scanner around when they're all carrying in heavy boxes.

And while she hadn't enjoyed the period while they were getting the storage space up to lab capacity, (they tried to keep the dust under control, but she did end up with a few contamination issues) she would have to admit that the extra space is nice.

And, okay, yeah, it's not exactly painful to admit that Norfolk did have all the cool toys and she can't wait to play with them.

Tim came down in the afternoon, was introduced to everyone, ("Tom, Roger, Eva, this is McGee!") and also came to the conclusion that just popping down to do whatever it was he wanted workwise wasn't going to happen anymore.

Mainly, he'd gotten down there, sat at what he thinks of as "his" computer (after all, it's got the little black hearts she put on the keyboard for him) and noticed that it was already turned on, and working, and running a search.

And, if that computer's already working, then, well… It's doing lab work, for the lab, in the lab, so pre-empting that to do casework isn't cool.

So he looks around at four scientists all mucking about with science-y stuff, and realizes that the days of him being the back-up lab tech are over.

If he's ever down here to read Major Mass Spec, run trace, help with an experiment, or do the computer stuff, it means something's gone very wrong.

And if he's down here doing his job, just sharing the space with her, then one of the other people
down here aren't doing their job.

So he kisses Abby, smiles a little sadly at her, and she sees it, understands, nods and smiles back, also a little sad, and heads up to MTAC, where he'll commandeer one of their computers so he can work faster.

They weren't on an active case, so it wasn't too hard to get out for dinner at a reasonable time. So they were heading toward food (neither of them felt like cooking) when Tim asked, "So, how is it?"

"Honestly, weird with a side of feeling left out."

He doesn't say anything, but his look gets across tell me more.

"I imagine I'm feeling a lot like Draga's gonna feel when he starts up. They're a team. They've got systems and rhythms and know how to read each other and how everyone works. And I'm not part of that."

"You'll get there."

"Sort of. I'll get, at most, a month with them, then three off." NCIS offers twelve weeks of maternity leave, and as of this point, Abby was planning on taking all of them. "By the time I get back, they'll have the new lab all set, and I'll be the outsider, in my own space."

"Sorry."

She shakes her head. Nothing she can do about it. "At least I know none of these guys are psychos."

"True."

"And they do good work."

"Also true."

"And with four of us, we'll have trace processed faster, and I'll be able to get done working at a reasonable time more often."

"Yep."

"So why does this suck?"

He squeezed her hand and gave her an understanding smile. "It'll get better. You all looked pretty happy setting up the scanning electron microscope."

"That was fun. It can actually get micron level detail."

"That's cool."

"Yeah, it is."
June 3rd, Team Gibbs caught a case, and for the first time ever, the new lab set into action.

And, it was bumpy. Abby's used to doing everything, not delegating. At her absolute most collaborative, she works with Tim, the guy she can read at a glance and the only person on earth she can type in tandem with on the same keyboard. Occasionally, she had deigned to allow other specialists into her lab to help her with something, and generally they work on separate parts of a project together.

But breaking down a task, giving everyone a different part, actually delegating, that's not in her skillset.

Likewise, she's got her evidence handling system in place, and to say that it's complicated and works only for her is something of an understatement.

And the worst part is, she can see this isn't working. At all. So it's got to change. She can't just sort of share a space with them, let them handle Afloat business, and her Navy Yard business. They've got to be a team.

"Okay." The other three look up at her. They'd been milling around, sort of watching her, because she wasn't really letting them into the job. "How do you guys do this?"

"Tom's on intake. He makes sure everything is accepted, registered, cataloged, and then sorted into what we'll be doing with it. Eva handles prints and computer searches. I do the testing, and when Tom's done with intake he helps out with whichever one of us needs the help," Roger answers.

"Okay, who does mock-ups, re-creations, blood spatter, and the like?"

The three of them just look at each other. "We don't," Roger answers.

"You don't?"

"No. The medical guys on board handle blood spatter. And we don't do mock-ups or re-creations of the crime scenes."

"Okay. Then I'm on that if need be. How about audio or visual processing?"

"Last time we had any of that, we sent it to you," Eva said.

"Good point. I'm on that, too. So, I'm thinking for right now you guys keep doing it your way. I'll float in and out and lend a hand on whatever needs extra hands, and if we've got any of the stuff you don't do, I'll handle it."

They nod.

"When I get back from leave, we're going to start from the ground up and figure out how to do this the most efficient way. It sounds like you've got a good system in place, but any system can get better, so we'll figure out what that is."

Tom smiled at that. "We like better."

Abby smiled back at him, and yeah, if he knew her better, he'd know that was a forced smile, but she's the boss and it's her job to make this team work. "I like better, too."
June 4th

June 4th Jimmy and Breena had their Nuchal Fold test scheduled for the late afternoon.

Tim and Abby took off for it, too.

If there was bad news, they wanted to be there, able to comfort right away.

And if it was good news, well, that's even better when shared.

So, instead of sitting in their own OB’s office (next appointment, tomorrow afternoon) they're in a different OB’s office.

Tim's thinking there's got to be a warehouse somewhere that sells OB office waiting rooms. The shape's a little different, and the colors are taupe and mauve instead of taupe and cream, but this is pretty much the exact same place, down to the same magazines.

"You'd think an OB's office would have better chairs," Abby says to him.

They're on this little sofa-like thing. It might be a love seat or a settee, Tim doesn't know precisely what the difference between those things is. She's sitting next to him, back to him, as he rubs gently over her low back and hips. They've been hurting on and off all day, and usually sitting down helps with that, but today's just being obnoxious and it's not really helping at all.

It felt like a lot of waiting. It always does.

"You think they're okay?" Tim asks her.

"Yeah." She squeezes his hand, and maybe she's not sounding all that certain, after all, it didn't seem like it took this long when they got their Nuchal Fold test done, but…

They've got to be okay. They just have to. Please!

When Jimmy and Breena came out, all smiles and soul deep relief, Tim felt the grin spread across his face, and saw Abby hop (well, if she was less pregnant it would have been a hop, it was more of a lurch) up enthusiastically to hug them both.

When they got home, after a very happy, very fun, almost giddy dinner out, she flipped on the TV and settled in front of it, kneeling behind the exercise ball, leaning against it, rocking gently.

"I just can't seem to shake this," she said, forearms crossed over the top of the ball, her head against them. Yes, dinner had been a blast, but her back just kept aching. Not all the time, but enough so that it was really annoying.

"You're pregnant."

She just looks up from the ball at him, flashing her so done with you look. "Thanks, that's something I somehow wasn't aware of."
Tim realized that might have been unnecessarily poking the porcupine, so he retreats. "Sorry. Captain Obvious here. You want me to get you some Tylenol?"

"Yes."

He was back a minute later with a glass of ice water and two Tylenol. "What do you want to watch?"

"Don't care. Just want to veg."

"Okay. Want me to rub your back some more?"

"Please."

He sat cross-legged behind her, pressing his palms into her sacrum.

She sighed. "That helps. It's been coming and going all day."

"Umm…” He's not really listening, just hearing her voice, paying attention to his hands on her skin, finding the tight spots and working on them.

"Like…” Her voice trailed off as he hit something especially good. "Oh, that's nice."

He smiled, happy to have found a good spot.

"It's not like it's knives in my back or anything. I mean, when I'd get working or paying attention to something else, it'd kind of go away, but it just kept coming back."

He nodded. He'd had that kind of pain before. Low grade yuck that you can banish to the background by keeping your brain busy and then as soon as you don't have something else to pay attention to it jumps back to the foreground.

"A few times, I'd be loading up samples, and I'd have to stop for a minute, but then it'd ease up, and I'd go back to it… Oh, holy shit…"

"Abby?” He was getting a little worried because that 'Oh, holy shit' didn't sound happy.

"I am too stupid to let out of the house. I'm pregnant. With low back pain. That's been coming and going all day."

Tim's eyes went wide as what that was dawned on him. "You mean contractions."

"Yeah. Sometimes you feel them in your low back."

"Well, how many, how long, when?” He sounded awfully panicky as he says that.

"I don't know. All day?"

He leaped up, getting ready to grab the go bag and head directly to the hospital at whatever the highest rate of speed his car can obtain is.

"I don't think we need to race to the hospital this second."

He looked at her like she's insane. "I think we do. I think we need to be there right now!"

"You remember Dr. Draz saying that eventually I'd start to get some contractions, and that that was
when we should make sure that we had an appointment for the next day?"

Okay, yeah, he did remember her saying that. And they do, in fact, have an appointment for the next day. But he was under the impression she meant something different by 'some contractions' than what Abby's been having, so he says, "Yeah. Braxton-Hicks contractions. That's like one here, one there, maybe a few more and then they stop. Not on and off all day."

Abby thought about that for a second, and seemed to be focusing on how long she's been feeling this way. "Okay, good point, help me up."

"Thank you."

They live three miles from St. Francis Hospital. Normal drive time (assuming you follow the speed limits) is about seventeen minutes. Tim got them there so fast Abby hadn't even gotten off of holding for the OB that was on call with their practice.

So, it was about nine seconds after walking in that chatting on the phone became something of a moot point, because they were able to see Dr. Draz face to face.

"Lucky thing I'm on call for tonight. Tell me what's going on."

So Abby did.

"How often have they been happening?"

"I don't really know. Didn't put it together until five minutes ago. But, maybe three times an hour for like the last eight hours, maybe all day."

"Okay. Let's get you in a gown and checked out."

This time Dr. Draz did the ultrasound herself, and a quick internal exam as well, took off her gloves, then spent another moment feeling Abby's belly.

"You're at negative two station," she said as she helped Abby sit up. "Which means Kelly's as far away from the cervix as she can get. Half-way effaced, so that means your cervix is thinning out, and you're one centimeter dilated. My guess is this is just the starting round. Sort of like when you turn the key and the engine revs a few times but nothing happens. Your placenta is still right near the cervix." She checked her notes. "You're at thirty-five weeks and four days right now, and we'd really like to see Kelly stay in there until thirty-seven weeks, thirty-eight is better."

"Well, yeah, it probably is, but Kelly seems to have a different opinion about that," Abby said.

"And well she might. But my guess, having seen this roughly seventeen thousand times, is that this is going to peter out. Tomorrow there'll be no contractions. Usually the baby's all the way down before your body gets really serious about trying to get her out. This is just a warm up round."

"So what does that mean?" Tim asks.

"It means you're going home. It means you're going to go to sleep. It means…” she flips through her calendar, "that unless the contractions pick up before then, come 8:00 AM on June 18th you two are going to come in here, and I'm going to deliver Kelly."

"It means a c-section," Abby said, very sad.
"Yes. She's probably about four, four and a half pounds now, and your placenta hasn't moved. It's not going to. With where your placenta is, this kind of warm up labor isn't a major risk for hemorrhage. Real contractions, the kind you need to push a baby out, they are."

"Okay, what else?" Tim asked.

"Pelvic rest from now until then. No sex." She looks at Tim and decides that extra clarification is probably in order. "No orgasms at all. No strenuous activity. No mildly exerting activity. If you don't have to do it, don't do it."

"Can I work?"

"Can you do your work sitting down? You don't have to spend all day, every day lying down, but I don't want you up and walking around all the time, too. So, it's an honest question, if you go to work, will you stay sitting down? If you can say yes to that, then you can go to work."

"How much walking around can I do?"

Dr. Draz thinks about it, realizing that if she comes up with a specific number Tim will get Abby a pedometer to measure it, making sure she takes not one step more than that, but if she's vague about it it'll just panic them worse. "Call it a thousand steps a day, give or take a bit. And the lower you can get that number the better, and no, days aren't cumulative. You do seven hundred steps one day, you do not get to do thirteen hundred the next.

"How about the pool?"

"If you mean, 'Can I go to the pool and lay around in the water feeling cool and not hurting?' Yes. Go, do, enjoy. Anything that helps you stay comfortable is a good thing. If you mean, 'Can I dive and swim laps,' no.

"If your water breaks, you come in. If you have more than three hours in a row of contractions every ten minutes, you come in. If you start bleeding, you come in, immediately."

"Okay."

Dr. Draz checked her calendar again. "We've got an appointment tomorrow afternoon. We'll cancel that. We'll schedule for the 8th, if that works for you?"

They both nod. Like either of them is going to say, "Nope, too busy. We'll just skip it and hope for the best."

"We'll do another one on the 12th, and one more on the 17th, and if everything remains on track, 'round about 10:00 AM on the 18th you'll be holding Kelly."

That takes Tim's breath away. Just that level of specific, this is going to happen when and how, hit him really hard. He's holding onto Abby, and squeezes her tight while inhaling fast.

"Wow."

Dr. Draz grins. "Yeah. So get dressed. Go home. Rest. Come back if the contractions get regular. It's not likely, but it's possible this time tomorrow we'll have Kelly out."
The ride home is quiet. Very quiet.

They get to a stop sign and Tim gently strokes her face. She turns into the caress and kisses his palm.

"How's your back feeling?"

"Just regular sore right now."

"Okay."

Two more minutes and they're home. He crosses to her side of the car to open the door for her and give her a hand out, but leaves her maternity bag in the car, not feeling very certain about the whole go to sleep and everything will just keep going on like before thing.

By that point it really was go to bed time. So they headed to their bedroom, and started the traditional nightly routine of settling down.

He knows this flavor of silence. She's scared. Really scared.

They get into bed and he curls around her, holding her close, her back snug against his chest, his arm under her neck, and his other hand resting on Kelly's baby bump. "Talk to me?"

"I'm so scared."

"I know." He kisses her shoulder. Having a pretty deep basket of irrational fears of his own, he's not about to call her out on hers. But he doesn't want her panicked, either. "But it's going to be all right."

"You don't know that! And even if it is 'all right,' we're still defining all right as Dr. Draz slicing me open."

"I know."

There's anger and irritation under the fear when she says, "And look, I know why we're doing this. I get it. I understand that it's safer to go in, get her out, and get everything taken care of fast. I get not wanting to have uncontrollable bleeding. Okay, I get it. I do. But I'm still scared. And I hate being scared because it's stupid, but I'm still scared and it's still my body that's going to get cut open. It's my spine they're going to shove a needle into. Something goes wrong with this, I may never walk again, may never feel anything below my chest. Lots of women end up with pain shooting down one leg for the rest of their lives after a slightly messed up epidural and a really messed up one..." She shakes her head, and he squeezed her a little tighter.

Tim thought for a moment, holding her, stroking her stomach, chin resting on her shoulder. "General anesthetic?"

She sounds annoyed, not at him, mostly at the idea that there really isn't a better option than an epidural. "More risk for Kelly. The epidural is safer for both of us, and I'll come out of it faster... I know that... But I've still got to sit there and let them shove a needle into my spine. And if I'm not perfectly still or if something gets messed up...

"I'll be with you."

"Not for that part. Before and after, yeah. But they don't let the Dad in for the epidural."

"Oh." He hadn't known that, and the idea of having to sit out there and wait while someone sticks a needle into Abby's spine hits him pretty hard, too. He's realizing that's not going to be a fun couple of
minutes for either of them.

She seems to understand him finally really getting that and says, "Yeah."

He's not sure what to say, so he holds onto her, snuggling her close to him, and hopes his touch is comforting.

"At least we know what's going to happen."

She shrugs at that. Yes, that's a bit of a comfort. Instead of a huge host of unknowns, for example trying a vaginal delivery and ending up hemorrhaging is now off the list of potential outcomes, there's a pretty specific list of unknowns, and a good, hard deadline two weeks from now.

"And we know it's not going to happen any later than the 18th."

She nods.

"Get to see her in not more than two weeks. This time, two weeks from now, we'll be in the hospital, holding her. Maybe you'll be nursing. Maybe we'll be snoozing. But this time two weeks from now, she'll be out."

That gets a little smile. "I know. And I want it. And I can't wait. And I'm still scared."

He kisses her again. "I'd make it better or take it from you if I could."

"I know."
Preparations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So, instead of an appointment with Dr. Draz the next afternoon, they ended up having a chat with Leon.

Like every Friday a case hasn't gone hot, they've got Shabbos at Tony and Ziva's so that's soon enough to explain what's going on to the family. Let them really talk about it.

But, since they know maternity leave starts no later than the 18th, Abby talking to her boss about it sounded like a good plan, and for while he's off, Tim has a few ideas of something he'd like to do, but he needed to float them by Vance before doing them.

"Agent McGee, Mrs. McGee, what can I do for you?"

Tim looked at Abby, but she didn't seem to want to talk, so he said, "We had another doctor's appointment last night. So, we now know that no later than 8:00 on 18th, Kelly's coming out."

Leon raises an eyebrow. Abby had let him know that things were not going as smoothly as they had hoped a month ago. So he's not sure if this is good news or not, but whatever it is they're still here and not in the hospital, so it can't be all bad news. "Congratulations. I take it you are up here to revisit your maternity leave plans?"

"Thanks, Leon. And yes. They'd really like it if I didn't move around more than strictly necessary. So unless she decides to head out sooner than expected, I'm thinking the 12th will be my last day. That should give Tom enough time to get a feel for the lab and up and running on his own."

Vance nods at that.

"And we need to re-do the job offer for Draga, hopefully he'll be able to start on the 15th instead of the 1st like we'd agreed," Tim adds.

Vance nods at that as well. "And you're still thinking of taking four weeks off?" he asks Tim.

"Yeah. I've got the time, might be more depending on how things go, but I don't assume I'll be entirely off."

"I thought the reason we hired Draga was so you could be completely off."

"Well, yes, among other things. It's not MCRT work I'm thinking of doing."

Vance looked at him curiously.

"I figure I'll need permission from you to do this. I want to hack Cybercrime. And everyone who works down there. On any device they work with. So, here, at home—"

Vance laughing cut him off.

"Sir? Bad plan? Privacy issues?"

Vance smiled at him and shook his head. "It's a fine plan, and I'll be very interested to see what your results are, however, it's not a plan you are going to execute with a brand new baby in the house."

"Sir?"

Vance smiles, shaking his head, chuckling. "Take it from someone who's done this before, McGee. You're not going to want to do anything more complicated than buying the groceries those first few weeks. So don't. I especially do not want you trying to hack Cybercrime when you're not at your full potential. Wait until you're rested again, then go after it, because I am intensely interested in seeing what you'll find when someone with a real A game goes up against them."

"Yes, sir."

"If I remember correctly, you're the one who built the main protective firewall that NCIS's systems hide behind."

"Yes, sir."

"So, shouldn't that tip them off to who is doing this?"

"If they're paying attention. I'm very interested in who comes to visit you about being hacked by the MCRT."

"And if anyone does?"

"Tell them it's a security check. The only ones who notice I've been there will be the ones who are really on the ball."

"Then I hope to have twelve people come visit me."

Tim highly doubts that will happen but he says, "Yes, that would be nice, wouldn't it?"

He kissed Abby, who headed for the elevator and from there down to the lab, and then went to his desk. He was standing on the landing, leaning, forearms against the railing, looking down at the Bullpen, and something hit him: where were they going to stick Draga?

Sure while he was out, Draga could use his desk, but theoretically he'd come back and it'd be the five of them for at least five months. So, they're going to need a place to put him.

And really, there are only two spaces, next to his desk or next to Gibbs' because it's not like the far side of Tony or Ziva's desks can be modified.

He's thinking that if they take the divider out between Gibbs and the empty space next to him, push the flat screen and printers flush against the back wall, and angle the desk in the empty space toward them, that would give them…

A really awkward work space, and the only good thing about it would be that Draga wouldn't be exiled off from the rest of the group.

Take the divider out between his desk and the next one…

And it's still awkward.

And he likes his divider, damn it. It's got all his stuff on it, and it's not like Gibbs uses his.

Square off Gibbs and Ziva's desks, shove them both closer to the dividers and squeeze one in between them?

No. They'd be tripping over Draga and his stuff and it'd be a mess.
He more felt Tony stop next to him than saw him. "What you looking at?"

"Figuring out where we're going to put Draga. We'll have to stick him somewhere for half a year."

"Good point."

"You gonna take Gibbs' desk again?"

"No. Don't need the symbol of it this time. He'll take yours or his, whichever one of you leaves first."

Tony scans over the space. "Do we really need two big screens? Let alone four printers?"

"What are you thinking?"

"The big screen and printers behind Gibbs's desk. I've never seen us use the printers. And he's got what, a fax machine back there? When was the last time we used that?"

"Good point. Ziva doesn't need that TV behind her desk either. I certainly don't use the one next to my desk."

"Yeah, not like we need it to catch the news anymore. We've all got live streaming on our phones."

"So, get rid of the desk behind his with all that stuff. Move the big screen next to the other big screen. Square her desk off so it's flush against the divider. Shove his desk over a bit toward hers, and stick Draga's desk flush against the divider, facing it?"

Tim thinks about that, it'll do. "Sure. And when Gibbs leaves Draga can fully unpack and just expand into the space."

"He'll be back toward us."

"Nothing's perfect, and it's better than the first four plans I came up with. So, feel like helping me with some rearranging?"

"We don't have to do it now, do we?"

Tim shrugs. "Well, no. I guess not." Draga won't be there for at least two more weeks, maybe, if he can start sooner, he might not. They'd agreed on the first, and he might be busy until then. So, it doesn't have to happen right this second.

Tony looks at him. "You're nesting again, aren't you?"

"Probably. But that's not all of it." They stood there, staring over the bullpen, as Tim told Tony what had happened last night.

"This is good, right? Kelly on the outside, we're all happy and excited, right?"

"I am, or would be, but Abby's terrified, so that's hard."

"Oh."

"Yeah. And I get a c-section is more dangerous." He looks up at the ceiling. "But, it doesn't feel that way to me. Surgeons and precision and everyone knows what they're doing and…"

"You've got a set game plan, know what's going to happen, and there feels like less of a shot of unexpected."
"Yeah. Three incisions, reach in—"

"Okay, you can stop that right there. I do not need nearly that much detail on how this works. Talk to Jimmy about that."

"Jimmy's the one who told me that. He's actually done three of them."

"Of course he has. I'm perfectly comfortable with the idea of being the guy who goes nowhere near the business end of things when it comes to how babies get out."

Tim laughs at that. "Ziva's gonna love that."

Tony bumps Tim's shoulder with his own. "Ziva doesn't want to get anywhere near the business end of things, either."

Tim laughed at that, too.

"Come on, lets let Gibbs and Ziva know what's going on."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So I don't know how many of you have seen the stills that just came out for Anonymous Was A Woman, but the feature McGee in a button down, top few buttons undone, sleeves rolled up, jeans, and belt. (And combat gear!) Anyway, well, if they were going to give me McGee dressed in my go-to sexy outfit for him, then I had to do a little photoshopping.

If you feel like wandering over to:

(And yes, that's my tumblr, feel free to follow if you like.)
There are many things Tim McGee is very good at. And he quite enjoys a large percentage of the things he's very good at. (Cleaning. He's very good at it, doesn't much like it, but his mom made sure he knew how to keep a tidy house.)

And as the first weekend of pelvic rest dawned on them, he was ready to combine the fact that he loves pampering Abby with the fact that he's very good at it, hopefully producing something that is a lot of fun for both of them.

They're on call, but the phone didn't buzz, so they slept in.

Well, he slept in. She dozed and rested. She's hit the point where she has to wake all the way up to roll over, and she's big and uncomfortable enough she can't lie in one position for more than an hour and a half, so, not a lot of solid, deep sleep for her.

But when he did wake up, she was sleeping, so he quietly grabbed some clothing and crept out of the house in search of treats.

An hour later he was back with her favorite breakfast goodies, stuff for lunch and dinner, more snacks, flowers, and some massage oil that smelled good.

He put breakfast on a tray with the flowers, tucked the oil into his pocket, and headed up. He's hoping that he can keep them in bed for a whole lot of the weekend. And he's aware of the fact that spending a weekend in bed without having sex is going to be... difficult, but still, resting is important, Abby's supposed to be taking it easy, so he's grabbing any and everything he can find to make her want to stay in bed.

When he got up there, Abby looked like she was still dozing, so the tray went on his dresser, the massage oil went on the bedside table, and he shucked off his clothing and snuggled back into bed with her.

"Where'd you go?" she sounded sleepy.

"Out, got some goodies."

She started the laborious process of rolling over to face him, and eventually got flipped over and asked, "What sort of goodies?"

"Food." He pointed behind him at his dresser. "Breakfast is over there. Got you hazelnut croissants and chocolate ones for me, some fresh berries, honeydew melon."

That got an excited look out of Abby. She levered herself up to look and smiled. He grinned, kissed her, and rolled out of bed to get the tray.

With breakfast over, he moved onto part two of the plan, movies. Somehow they hadn't managed to see any of the Captain America movies (somehow means Cap is fine, but not either of their favorites, so watching his movies got booted to the bottom of the list, but Black Widow, who Tim does like and Abby really likes, is in Winter Soldier, so, anyway, Captain America movies,) and well, there was likely never going to be a better time to rectify that, so he was ready to swing into action.
But he also knew that right now, hours and hours of lying in bed really doesn't feel all that hot to Abby's back or hips.

So he had a plan, one he thought was a pretty good.

Namely, they don't have the greatest bathtub on earth, but it's big enough for both of them to sit in, especially if she's between his legs leaning back against his chest.

Granted he hasn't checked to see how much water displacement both of them in there with her pregnant will produce, but he's fairly sure they'll be able to get enough water in there to make her feel more comfortable, and that's all that matters.

Meanwhile, his Kindle doesn't have a huge screen, but it's really high def, and they've got a little rack that the soap and scrubby goes on, and that rack should work just fine for movie viewing.

So, he cleaned up breakfast and asked her to run a cool bath for them, which she did, and then surprised her with movies in the tub.

That got them to afternoon nap time. He wasn't feeling very sleepy, and had the sinking suspicion that she wasn't either. So instead of just snuggling up and snoozing he began gently nuzzling along the back of her neck, placing soft, wet kisses just below her hairline.

"What are you doing?"

He kissed her one last time before saying, "Making love." They hadn't been touching each other… Okay, that's not true, several hours of snuggling shows they've been touching, they hadn't been touching each other since the pelvic rest diktat. Part of that is just well, it's really frustrating to get into it and have to stop. But, he's missing the closeness of it. Cuddling is fine, but he'd like to take the time to make her feel good, as good as he can, and if that's not sex, well, it's not sex, but it's still making love.

"Think that's a good plan?" Because she knows how frustrating this might be, too.

"Yeah. Wanna make you feel good. Doesn't have to be sex. We can still kiss and pet and cuddle. Got some new massage oil, though I'd rub you all over, ease the sore bits. It's every woman's fantasy, right? Hours and hours of cuddling. No sex, no having to have sex, just lots of cozy adoration."

She laughed and tugged on him enough to get across the idea that she wants to be facing him, and these days it's just easier for him to scoot to the other side of her than it is for her to roll over. So he did, and she smiled, saying, "Baby, you're good at sex. That's the fantasy of women who hooked-up with men who are bad in bed."

He laughed at that. "We'll get through."

"We'll? I didn't notice Dr. Draz saying you couldn't get off."

"She didn't say I needed to cut caffeine out of my diet, either. I did that. I'm doing this, too. You don't get to get off, I don't, either."

"You're going to give up sex? For twelve days?" Abby looked stupefied by that.

He grins his sexy grin at her. "Unless you want me to give you a show, yeah, I am."
She closes her eyes and seems to be thinking about that, then sighs, and says, "No. Too much temptation, too frustrating." She's quiet for a minute. "Why?"

"Why?" He's not getting why this isn't self-evident.

"Yeah. Why? Last I checked you really, really like sex, and you don't have to do this."

He strokes his palm across her cheek, tangling his fingers in her hair, then trailing his fingers down her throat to her shoulder. "Last I checked, you don't like it any less than I do, and you're right, I love sex! But if you don't get to have it because it's necessary to keep our baby safe, then I don't either."

She smiles at him, sweet and warm, and then kisses him, gently. "You think you can go twelve days?"

"Fourteen really, and two down, twelve to go, and we'll find out. I mean, just because I haven't since… God… 1989 doesn't mean I can't. You think you can make it?"

"I have to. And I have done this before, that one Lent."

"Let me guess, that was a really good Easter for you."

She smiles. "I remember enjoying it."

He laughs at that. "Look, I know exactly what I'm doing that first shower after Kelly's on the outside, but… You're already going through a whole hell of a lot more on this make-babies thing than I am, so, well, I can do this."

She kisses the tip of his nose and then grinned. "Eight days."

"What?"

"That's how long I think you're gonna last."

"I'm not going to cheat!" He looks mocked appalled. He knows that mostly they're kidding around. Though he is going to do this, because he can, and because it matters, and just, well, it's really not fair and it really sucks that she has to do this, so she shouldn't have to do it alone.

"Sure. You're going to sleep naked, cuddled up against me every night, and not jerk off when you're alone."

"That's the plan."

"Uh huh." She's not buying it.

"Your faith in me is overwhelming," he says dryly.

"Hey, you're the one telling me you haven't gone more than a week since you were eleven."

"Well, okay, yeah. But I haven't had any reason to not go more than a week. I've got a reason now."

"Okay."

"So, massage, kissing, petting?"

"Definitely massage. Play kissing and petting by ear?"
He hasn't really made out, just messing around, no expectation that sex would result since... high school. And he's never been a jerk about it, basically his set of rules for sex go something like this: she sets the boundaries, I follow them, and if she set the line at no sex, then he took what she was willing to give and didn't push.

But since high school, he's pretty much dated girls who followed the first-two-dates-expect-kissing-and-if-things-are-going-well-sex-on-the-third rule, and just making out wasn't really part of the experience.

Pretty much, if he got to second base, he was going to slide into home, too.

And for the most part that made him awfully happy.

So, this is different.

And it's not like he and Abby aren't affectionate in non-sex ways. Not like there isn't plenty of kissing and cuddling and petting and it doesn't result in sex.

Or maybe it's like all of it results in sex. Like for them sex is just an ongoing constant with highs and lulls, but all of it is sex.

And perhaps this is a redefining of sex. Abby moaning breathily while he rubs her calves, taking the time to really get into those sore muscles and work on helping the swelling go down certainly feels good to him. And it's not the same sort of good as hearing her moan like that when he slips into her, but... it's not precisely different, either.

It's all pleasure and love and the bond holding them to each other no matter what might come.

He smiles up at her, looking away from her leg, and asks, "When you were in school did they have those lists of like 100 ways to show love that aren't sex?"

She gives him a very perplexed look. "You know, California and Louisiana really aren't the same place at all."

"I'll take that as a no."

"Why would you need something like that? When I was in school they didn't think we needed help to figure out how to express affection without sex."

"Supposedly to help cut down on teen pregnancy and combat STDs or something."

"Did it work?"

"I remember us mocking it viciously, and those of us who could more or less running out to get laid as quickly as possible out of spite."

That gets a laugh out of Abby. "And the next two weeks has you thinking about that?"

"Yeah."

"Any good suggestions on the list?"
"I remember making cookies together and buying diamonds was on the list."

"I'm in favor of cookies. And really, buying diamonds? Because sixteen-year-olds always have that kind of cash laying around."

"I'm not sixteen anymore, got some cash now." He smiled at her on that, and then added, "And yeah, mocked it viciously! It did appear to have been written by people who had never had sex or had never been teenagers, let alone teen males, but, the main idea, that sex wasn't the end all and be all of love, I was thinking about that."

She nods. "And…"

"And maybe there's not really a line. Maybe that's what they got wrong, and why that list felt so stupid. Maybe it's all sex, or all love, or… I don't know." He's having a hard time coming up with words for the nebulous concept bouncing around in his head. "I know this is going to be frustrating, but pulling completely away, not touching at all, not making love, it'd be so lonely." He ran his hand up her leg, rippling his knuckles along the belly of her calf, coaxing another happy moan out of her. "That's so good. And okay, it's not the same good, but it is the same good, right?"

"Different branches of the same tree."

He smiles, liking that idea. "Yeah." She'd been sitting, back against their headboard, and he'd been sitting cross-legged at her feet, one foot in his lap, the other leg bent at the knee as he worked on it. He gently took her foot out of his lap, and scooted around so he could sit next to her, right arm and leg behind her, cuddling her close, left hand on her face, left leg stretched along hers.

"My body craves yours." He stroked his hand along her shoulder and arm. "But it's not just that, not just this," and the way he's touching her leg gets across the idea that "this" means her body, "I wouldn't crave it, wouldn't need it, if you weren't in it. But since you are, I do, all the time."

She traced her fingers over his face, feather light touches across his cheek and jaw, thumb trailing over his lip. He's not a lot taller than she is, but most of the difference is in torso length, so her face is a good two inches below his, but light pressure on the back of his head got across the idea that she wanted to kiss him, so he lowered his face to hers, and she did kiss him, soft and slow and thorough.

And like anytime they really touch he feels it, the gathering of pleasure, the desire for more, the electric joy of her skin on his, the comfort of another heart that cherishes his, all of it is there.

And it is frustrating, because limits are frustrating. But the sweetness of making love to each other is worth the frustration.

"You're staring." Abby says, not opening her eyes. It's hours later, post dinner, post cookies (and yeah, it wasn't sex, but it was fun and awfully tasty), they're lying in bed (again). She's trying to sleep, but the small squirming person inside her is making that difficult, and the feel of Tim's eyes glued to her stomach (he had been writing) isn't helping.

"She's moving."

"I know, I can feel it."

"Yeah, but I can see it, and that's new." His hand lands on her stomach, resting gently. Then his
finger traced down the outside of her stomach as Kelly kicked or stretched or whatever at the same time from the inside. "She's really in there."

Abby smiles a little, filing this under things guys don't really get because it doesn't happen to them, and says, "Yeah, she is."
Sublimation

Sublimation is the ability to divert your desire for something, say sex, into some other action.

Tim's been sublimating the ever living shit out of his sex drive.

He's got protocols set for all of the computer searches he usually runs for when he goes on leave. Draga may not be able to jump into investigating and crime scene work ten minutes after getting to NCIS, but he will be able to run any search Tim usually does. (Actually, with the level of detail Tim's got on these protocols, Gibbs will be able to run the searches.)

He's really going after their case. He's even leaving Gibbs in the dust on occasion, which is actually kind of frightening to Tony and Ziva, because Tim's supposed to be the laid-back one, and right now Tim couldn't locate laid-back with a GPS and a team of skilled trackers.

If they gave out modern, sensitive, caring, doting husband awards, he'd be in the running for gold. (Seriously, the three new LabRats keep staring at him as he continually bops down with little treats for Abby, wondering how he's got time for it all, when they aren't wishing he wasn't trying to teach them how to do their jobs. Yes, Major Mass Spec is tetchy, but they're lab techs, all with multiple advanced degrees in this subject, they do not need some field agent hovering around telling them how to talk to the equipment.)

He's gotten sixteen chapters of the latest Deep Six written.

And he's gotten really obsessed about making the perfect glass of iced-coffee.

And okay, he's not quite as annoyed or tense as he was in Afghanistan, but it's also only day six.

Shower time is the hardest part of the day, and he means that in the sense of both difficult and stiff. Traditionally, if he's still got a hard on by the time he gets into the shower, he takes care if it while washing up.

And he still needs to wash up.

So, it's not like he can just ignore it and let it wither.

And really, it's not like he can just sort of wash around it and hope getting wet is enough. Okay, he could do that, but he's personally fastidious and finds that idea really gross.

So, he's found himself thinking, several times, of the sage advice: that if you shake it more than twice, you're playing with yourself. He assumes that's true for washing off, too. So the application of soap has been somewhat perfunctory, but enough to get the job done. And, he has noticed that he's keeping the water temperature a lot lower than he likes as encouragement to get out of there fast.

Male physiology and female physiology is not precisely the same thing. Specifically women do not have prostates.

And, granted, he's not a women, so he's not sure if there is some sort of female analog to this (though
he doesn't see how there could be) but his body is sending him some very clear signals along the lines of 'Gosh, now would be a very good time to just clear the pipes out' by way of what feels like a very full, very swollen, and very sensitive prostate.

Now, normally, when he's feeling this, it's because Abby's playing with it and he's maybe, at most, an hour or two away from getting off. Usually he's a whole lot closer. And when Abby's playing with him, this is a very welcome sensation because he knows it means he's going to cum like a geyser when he gets off, and that's always a very good thing.

And, look, he read Cryptonomicon and thought that section where Waterhouse didn't get any privacy for six weeks in a row which resulted in him being very aware of his prostate the whole time was really funny.

Living it, feeling this way 24/7 is significantly less funny.

It's also producing some side effects that are highly reminiscent of junior high, and he's really not appreciating the fact that just standing up too fast can result in his clothing rubbing against him in a way that will produce a hard-on.

And while it's true that he's actively sublimating the hell out of his sex drive (or trying at least) it's also true that he's letting Breena and Jimmy head to the pool with Abby, because he'd rather gouge out his eyeballs than do anything disrespectful toward Abby, and well, if he's at the pool, where the girls in the tiny, wet bikinis are, he's going to have to gouge out his eyeballs to avoid that, and really, he needs his eyes.

Jimmy asks him about it on Saturday after dinner. (Nine days down, five to go.) He'd taken the three girls to the pool. Tim stayed home to "write" and was in charge of dinner. After the meal, he and Jimmy take care of dishes while the girls commiserate about how not fun being pregnant is while Molly sleeps in what will very soon be Kelly's room.

"So, really, you stayed home to write?" Jimmy asks, taking a wet pot from Tim and starting to dry it.

"Yes. Been writing a whole lot lately." He scrubbing away on the forks. (Doing dishes by hand also got added to the sublimating to-do list.) "I've got hard deadlines for my books, you know."

"Uh huh."

"And I don't know how much time I'll have for it after Kelly's born."

Jimmy nods. "True."

"So. I want to get as much done as I can."

"Makes sense. Total bullshit, but it makes sense. Come on, why are you hiding?"

Tim puts the scrubby down, and starts rinsing the forks. "Because I'm the idiot who swore off sex when his wife went on pelvic rest, but didn't stop making out with her."

Jimmy laughs. "God, no wonder you're climbing the walls." Jimmy rubs his shoulder, which is still sore from last week, realizing there's a reason why Tim was so… energetic… at Bootcamp last Sunday. That leads to the sinking suspicion he's going to get killed tomorrow.
Tim smiles, appreciating that Jimmy gets what he means by swore off sex. "Just got to make it to Thursday."

Jimmy laughs at that, too. "Nothing says classy like running off two seconds after your kid's born to jerk off. Friday, Tim, maybe Saturday. Trust me, you'll be busy."

"Wonderful." Tim hands over the forks, and Jimmy sticks them in the dishwasher, flashing him a look that says you've got one of these for a reason. Tim rolls his eyes. "I'm suddenly feeling some empathy for Tony. Wonder if he just never takes care of it himself. 'Cause I know I've been looking at all of them, all the time, and thinking about every woman I lay eyes on. Not just the pretty ones, I mean, if there's better than even odds the person in front of me doesn't have a penis, I'm interested."

Jimmy laughs, full out, wiping the tears from his eyes, laughs at that. When he calms himself down he follows the logic of Tim's statement, stares at him, eyes slightly narrowed, as he says, "Wait, you're really watching Breena?"

Tim shoots him a look of bewilderment that Jimmy even needs to ask that. "What, did you just meet me? Of course I'm watching her! And Ziva. Vance's secretary. Gladys in Accounting. All of those nameless girls that wander about the building. And Abby, mostly Abby, but yeah, all of them."

He takes three steps to the left, and drags Jimmy along. There's no direct line of sight from their kitchen into the living room where the girls are. There is a good view of the dining room window which reflects whatever's in front of the TV, and in this case, that's Abby and Breena on the sofa, Breena's rubbing Abby's hips, and they're both in the sundresses they changed into after leaving the pool. Abby's is long and black, but pretty low cut. Breena's is short, pink, with a halter top. Lots of beautiful soft, round, succulent pregnant female anatomy in light-golden tan and rose tinged cream is on display, and it's killing Tim. "You tell me you're not looking at that and liking it, and I will hit you and call you a liar. And if you even try to tell me you spent four hours in the pool with both of them in little, wet bathing suits and didn't look and didn't like looking, then you're not just gay, you're dead!"

Jimmy smiles, looking amused and a little guilty. "Okay, yeah, that was nice. Breena's got a new bikini. Shame you missed it."

Tim groans quietly, eyes closed, trying not to imagine it, which is just as successful as not imagining the pink elephant after someone tells you not to, and finally says, "Yeah, well, unlike you, I'm not getting laid tonight, so I don't need to be any more wound up than I already am."

Jimmy laughs at that, too. "So, nothing at all?"

"Fooling around, but she can't get off, so I'm not either."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh, but…"

"Hey, it's not easy for her, either."

"I guess not." And it occurs to Jimmy that it might not just be being eight months pregnant that has Abby on such a short fuse lately. "So what are you going to do tonight?"

"Pray she goes into labor."

That makes Jimmy laugh, too.
There is a point in every pregnancy, though it differs from woman to woman and pregnancy to pregnancy, where everything becomes uncomfortable.

This point is when pregnancy stops being measured in weeks and starts to be measured in years.

And thus, somewhere around twenty years pregnant, which may have felt like thirty or thirty-four or whatever weeks the day before, everything on earth becomes an annoyance.

Everything.

And clothing, which must press up close against the now multiple years-long pregnant woman's body, is the worst offender. No matter how sheer, how light, how comfortable the clothing looks, wearing it is sheer torture. The item of clothing in question could be a caftan made of spider silk, and it would still be annoying.

And only two things make that torture worse: A: summer heat, which just adds to the general desire to say fuck it, I'll go naked, and B: looking at your pregnant-self naked and deciding you'd rather scratch out your eyes than see yourself like that again.

And fine, maybe not every woman goes through this. Abby's not exactly conducting a scientific poll here, but she certainly is going through it, and Breena certainly did, and that's enough for her to declare that this is a universal constant, and one that sucks mightily.

And if Breena's right, it isn't getting better anytime soon, because, sure Kelly could show up any day, but really, she's still five days off. Or, by the way time is passing right now, eighty-seven years.

Having gotten to this point in the pregnancy, Abby has come to several conclusions: A: She's never doing this again. They want more babies, Tim can figure out how to get himself pregnant. B: Clothing manufacturers are sadistic assholes. C: Summer is evil. D: Their air conditioning is not nearly powerful enough. E: Kelly better hurry the hell up and show up soon. F: Tim needs to stop giving her big, sad puppy dog eyes every time she snaps at him because that just makes her feel sad and guilty on top of mad. And G: EVERYTHING IN THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE SUCKS!

She's expounding on this topic at great length when Breena gives her a long hug, rubs her back a little, and says, "I've thrown up four times today. The pharmacy ran out of my anti-nausea meds, so I'm on the second best version until Monday. It'll get better soon, and it's not nearly as bad as it could be." And that kind of took the wind out of her sails.

Abby looks at Breena, sighs, and says, "I know. I just hate this!"

"Every woman does. This part has to suck otherwise you won't decide that trying to get the kid out, which isn't a walk in the park, is worth it no matter how much it hurts."

The sound of Jimmy laughing hysterically in the kitchen stops their conversation. Breena looks at Abby, shaking her head. "What do you think they're talking about?"

"That kind of laugh? They're talking about sex or making fun of Tony, or making fun of Tony when it comes to sex. Did I tell you Tim laughed so hard he cried when I told him what I added to the honeymoon pack?"

"Yeah. So did Jimmy. Though Ziva told me they had a good time with those books."

"Yay! I didn't hear back on if he used anything from what I added."

"He did. She approved of that, too. Though, I think she told him it was us adding the things we liked
best and thought any guy really needed to know how to do."

"Ahhh… If it kept his ego happy and let her have a good time, it's all good."

"Yep."

A few seconds later, Tim and Jimmy come into the living room from the kitchen. Breena looks up at them, smiling, and says, "Sounded like you were having fun in there."

Jimmy sits next to Breena, wrapping his arm around her and kisses her. "Always. So, we should probably get going. Molly wakes up at six no matter what. She doesn't get the idea of Sunday."

"Sounds good. You wanna go grab her?"

"Sure." Jimmy scoots next to Abby to give her a goodbye hug, and then heads up to get Molly. Breena hugs Abby and Tim, and a minute later they head off, quietly, sleeping toddler snuggled onto Jimmy's shoulder.

Tim sits on the sofa next to Abby, hand resting on her belly. Her fingers lace with his. And as annoying as being pregnant is, as much as everything hurts and five days from now some really scary stuff is going to happen, she can see Molly on Jimmy's shoulder, and the image of Tim carrying Kelly is hitting her really hard. So, she's crying a little, snuggling against him.

He pets her hair, not sure what's going on, but that's not exactly something new these days. She'll tell him when she gets herself under control.

And she does. The c-section is scheduled for the 18th. Assuming it goes well, they'll get to go home on the 21st. Which means eight days from now, Tim will walk into this house with her, carrying their baby cuddled against his chest.

And damn if that doesn't make his eyes tear up a little, too.
It's so good.

She's hot and wet and wrapped around him, and it's just so fucking good. He's standing up and has his arms under her legs, his body and the wall keeping her up, and it's hot and fast and deep, so, so deep, balls deep, buried in her body, every millimeter of his cock in soft, wet, hot, glorious, tight pussy, and they're going full out against the wall and she can kiss him and her hands are clenched in his hair as her lips move over his and her breasts rub against his chest, and it's all so good.

It's better than good. This is just ten million shades of marvelous, and it's better than sex has ever been and he's just so high and tight and turned on and hard, so hard, never been this hard, his eyelashes are hard, pounding into her, and she's riding him back just as fast, moaning his name, scratching his back bloody as she cries against him, coming in hot, clenching waves of pleasure.

She's on her back, missionary style, one leg over his shoulder, the other wrapped around his back, heel on his thigh. It's as fast as he can go, relentless, thrusting over and over, burying himself in her, chasing a blazing orgasm that's barely inches away.

And he feels so incredible. Like his whole body is going to come. Like every cell's about to tingle and pulse.

So tight, she's a hot, slick vise, perfect friction, perfect pressure, so incredibly good, so close, wanting, moving, so hard he hurts, not quite there, almost, almost.

Her hand slides behind him, rubbing, cupping his balls and he's a whole level higher. Didn't think he could get more turned on than he is, but he was wrong. So hot, so hard, so wanting, needing.

Fast, hot, slick, wet, velvet, silk, tight and thrust.

Her fingers find their target, slicking and rubbing, pulsing him from the inside as her body slips over his on the outside. Blinding white hot pleasure pressure to go with fast and hard and hot and slick and tight and it's just the best orgasm ever, he's riding high on wet, thrusting pulses and scorching tingles through his whole body and God he's never, ever felt this good and…

"Tim! Wake up! Water broke!"

He's still three quarters in the dream, aware that something really important is happening, but he's also still coming and between that and sleep he's having a really hard time figuring out what's going on so, blinking at Abby, he says, "Huh?"

Abby pokes him, hard. "Water broke. Kelly's coming. We have to get to the hospital now!"

Okay, that gets the brain re-engaged. "Okay," he's springing into action, hopping out of their bed, crossing over to her side to help her out, when something hits him. Namely, he has a piece of information that Abby, who had also been sleeping, probably doesn't. "How wet are you?"
"What?"

"Is it just your ass and the back of your thighs?"

She thinks about that, seems to be doing a little mental checking. "Yeah."

It's dark in their room so she can't see the fact that he's blushing like crazy. (Of course, even if the lights were on, he's also covered in a sex flush, so she would have missed the blush, but would have seen the cum dripping off of him and figured this out a little sooner.)

"Taste it."

"What?" Her voice sounds like he's completely lost it and she's not appreciating him going utterly insane right this second of all seconds.

"No orgasms. You cheated."

"Huh?" He can't begin to think of what she means.

"No orgasms. You cheated."

"Oh. "I was asleep."

She's not buying that, and he can feel it coming off her skin without her having to say anything.
"If I had cheated, *that* wouldn't have happened. *That* hasn't happened since before I figured out how to jerk off, and trust me, *that* wasn't something that took me long to figure out."

She snorts a quick laugh at that. "Good dream?"

"Oh, God, yes!"

"How good?"

"Well, I got off without any touching, so pretty damn good."

"What were we doing?"

"If I answer that, is that a good thing, or is that a-get-you-horny-and-frustrated type of thing. 'Cause, if I fall off the wagon here, nothing happens. You do, and the results may be more troublesome than wet sheets."

She groans. "Give me a general answer, and then I'll try to go back to sleep."

"Fucking each other so hard we were shaking the paint off the walls."

"Oh." That's a half moan half sigh all *yes I want that NOW!*

"Yeah. One day, soon, Kelly will be out, and you'll be all healed up, and Breena and Jimmy are going to babysit, and we're going to fuck until we can't anymore."

"That sounds go good."

"It will be." He kisses her shoulder. "And, sooner yet, when she's out, and there's no more danger, I will tell you all about it, every, single, scorching hot detail, and that time, we'll go soft and slow and just get used to it again, and that's going to be good, too."

She kisses him back and says, "Soon."

They lay together quietly. He is settling back into sleep again when she asks, "So, how did you figure it out?"

"Huh?"

"How to jerk off. Said it didn't take you long to figure it out. How'd you figure it out?"

He rubs his eyes. "Ummm…" And thinks back. Obviously, there was a time he didn't know how to do it, but the memory of that time is awfully fuzzy. After a few seconds, it clicks. "Oh. Yeah. So, would have been eleven, and…well…okay, look, if you're an eleven-year-old guy, you're basically an erection on legs. It's poking up all the time and anything and nothing at all will cause one. And the whole time that's happening it feels like there's a massive spotlight on your crotch showing everyone on Earth that you've got a constant hard-on."

She laughs at that.

"It really wasn't fun."

"I believe you. Still, I was at a sleepover when I got my first period, with all my friends, and bled all over the place, and of course my friend's mom wasn't home, just her dad, so…for some reason I'm just not feeling overwhelming sympathy to what was, in fact, a not wildly visible problem on your part."
"Fine, you win the puberty sucks contest. Still, wasn't much fun."

"Okay."

"Anyway, eventually, your eleven-year-old-male body takes care of the issue with some fairly intense dreams and waking up, horrified, with your pajamas glued to you. Oh, and yeah, telling your friend’s dad 'I just started my period' probably wasn't fun, but I suddenly had all of this extra laundry, and the person who did the laundry was my mom, my Catholic mom, my Catholic mom, who has never, not once, in the almost 38 years I've known her, mentioned sex in my presence. In fact, the only reason I knew what was going on was one, brief, and horrendously uncomfortable conversation with my very Catholic grandfather about the 'facts of life' and how certain things would start happening to me soon, and that I should really just try to ignore it and channel my energies in 'more constructive directions.'"

"Okay, I'll give you a tie on the puberty sucks award."

"Thank you. So, it's the middle of the night, I'm in wet, sticky, clammy pajamas, and have to do something about it. Can't just shove them in the laundry hamper because she washes my clothing and, well, it's got a pretty distinctive smell, and… yeah… got to figure something out. We were in this little bungalow house and her room and bathroom were downstairs. So, I creep off to the bathroom I shared with Sarah, pushed her tubby toys out of the way, put the pajamas in the sink to soak, and just wiped everything off.

"Okay, another thing about eleven-year-old-boys, they're not great on personal hygiene. They're usually still in the I-hate-baths phase of life. In fact, if I had to guess, this is the moment that ends the I-hate-baths phase of most guys' lives. So, first time it happens I take care of it with some toilet paper and leave it be.

"But I'm a eleven-year-old guy, so this isn't just a one-time thing. Second time it happened, I did sleep through it and woke up, usual time, awfully crusty and literally glued to my pjs. And if there's something you don't want to do, it's yanking PJs that are cemented to your privates off.

"So, second time, into the shower I go. Thinking that if I get the PJs wet I can sort of peel them off. Anyway, I'm in there, slowly peeling the PJs off, and I noticed that felt pretty good, so once they were off I kept messing around.

"And, soap, warm water, hard-on, and yeah, it didn't take too long to figure out that if I was…” he pauses for a second to think of a good way to describe this, "thorough and vigorous in my washing technique that showers were a whole lot more fun, and I stopped having problems with sticky pajamas."

Abby laughs at that.

"And suddenly I no longer needed to be badgered to get showers. I was perfectly happy to do it as many times a day as I could. In fact I was starting to get lectured about using up too much hot water and how washing up three times a day wasn't good for my skin, which decided right about then was a good time to turn traitor and make my life miserable, but that's not really related to this."

Abby laughs at that too, taking his hand in hers and kissing his palm.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"I needed a good laugh."
He kisses her shoulder. "Anytime, baby, anytime. So, how about you? How'd you figure it out."

Abby sighs. "It's a dumb story."

"I like dumb stories."

"Okay. So, I'm eighteen—"

"Hold up. You were eighteen when you figured it out?"

"Yeah."

"You were having sex with other people before you started having sex with yourself?"

"I was eighteen before I got myself off. I'd messed around before that, but didn't manage to do it."

"How is that possible?" He gets up, circles around their bed, and settles in front of her, wanting to have this conversation face to face without making her have to roll over.

Once he's on his side, facing her, she says, "Everything I could find focused on penetration, but that didn't do it for me and no one I knew had any real information about girls getting off."

"Really?" He looks utterly stunned by this.

"No, I'm making this up because I enjoy you staring at me in stupefaction. Yes, really. Quick, off the top of your head, tell me some pop culture reference about a girl masturbating?"

It takes a second but he comes up with something. "That song, 'When I think about you I touch myself.'"

"I was a sophomore in college when that came out, so that's got to be '91 or '92."

"Huh."

"Can you think of anything else, let alone anything that might be specific enough to be useful?"

He really thought about it, but… he was fourteen the year she was eighteen and his mom and dad were awfully strict about what he was allowed to watch or read. Sure, he snuck things, but nothing is springing to mind. "Ummm… nope."

"Yeah, and if there was, I didn't know about it. I mean, we all knew guys did it. Plenty of jokes about that. But, not so much on what to do about if you're a girl."

"Didn't you… get horny?"

"Sure. A lot."

"What'd you do about it?"

"Be really frustrated. Read Anne Rice books, which since I didn't know about the Beauty books, was pretty frustrating too. Probably should have read romance novels or Cosmo or something, probably would have let me know what target I should have been shooting for, but, they just always seemed so dumb, I couldn't make myself do it. Made out with boyfriends, also frustrating. Got some tattoos. Partied with Paulette. Messed around with myself, but didn't find the trick to it. Lots of 'intense dreams' as you put it. Got to college, met a guy, liked him enough to have sex with him and it was, well, okay. But if you're a girl, the idea is that sex, penetration, is supposed to get you off, but
for most of us it doesn't work that way. So, when I was messing around with myself, I didn't know what target I was aiming for.

"But while I didn't have much on female masturbation, pretty much everything agrees that sex is supposed to be a whole lot of fun. And I knew I wasn't frigid. I wanted it to be good. I was certainly eager for it. I knew there had to be a way to make it better. And he did, too, so one day he asked me to show him what I did with myself, and I didn't have an answer for that, because I really wasn't doing myself, which blew his mind, because, like you, he'd been doing himself for years and couldn't believe I wasn't."

"Yeah, well, it's kind of hard to believe. If you're a guy it's like figuring out how to breathe or blink. We're all pretty good with it on automatic."

"Wonderful. I'm taking back the puberty sucks award."

He nods along with that, saying, "And I think it's clear you absolutely deserve it."

She sticks out her tongue at him, and he very lightly licks it.

"Look, I would have gone insane if I hadn't gotten off until I was 18."

She smiles at that. "Yeah, well, I probably wouldn't have had any trouble figuring it out myself if it had been six and a half inches long and sticking straight up in front of me."

He flashes her his self-depreciating look. "I was eleven, not nearly that big then."

"Was it the size of a clit?"

"No."

"I rest my point."

He chuckled a little at that, resting his hand on her belly, feeling Kelly squirm a bit. "So, you're 18. He's asking you for pointers, and you didn't have any."

"Exactly. But New Orleans was only a few hours away. So one Saturday we caught the bus, headed down, found a sex shop and bought out the instruction manuals."

"Jimmy's got a story like that, too."

"Really?" Her eyes light up at that idea. "I haven't heard that story."

"Yeah, though his version of it involves hitting on the library girl while asking her to get the books on inter-library loan."

"Oh, God! I am so going to have to ask him about that. Anyway, we got the books, we read, we tried, and finally knowing what to aim for, figuring it out got a whole lot easier."

"Huh. Never thought about that."

"Yeah, well, when did you figure out how to get a girl off?"

"This might be another difference between California and Louisiana, but Sex Ed class in eighth grade had full-on sketches of the anatomy, what was what, and what it all did. I mean, I didn't know what to do with a clit until I was twenty-one and actually had a real girlfriend, but I knew they existed and why they existed long before that."
Abby thinks about that. She did have health class in eighth grade, and remembered the curriculum being mostly how babies were made, menstruation, and don't ever have any sex at all until you get married because there's his horrible new disease out there and we don't know a whole lot about it but if you get it, you'll die. "Or it could be our age difference showing. For all I know, that might have been standard for eighth grade, when you got there, but that was the year I was a senior in high school."

"Could be."

"So, really, three times a day?"

He smiles at her, chuckling. "More than that sometimes; that's just what I was doing in the shower. All of us have a story about the time we decided snag mom's Victoria's Secret catalog and locked ourselves in the bathroom to see how many times we could do it until we couldn't anymore."

That makes her laugh. "So, if we ever have any boys, I'm thinking they'll be in charge of doing their own laundry about the time they turn ten."

"Yeah, that would have headed off a lot of embarrassment. Or at least not asking them about it if they suddenly feel a burning need to do their own laundry. You ever hear Tony's story about that?"

"Tony's got a story about that?"

"Oh yeah." He's got a wicked grin on his face. That was a pretty late-night (somewhat inebriated) conversation between him, Tony, and Palmer, and it was awfully funny and made Tim very glad he'd never been at boarding school. "Dealing with mom is one thing. Boarding school, where you've got no privacy, and get issued two pairs of pajamas and one set of sheets per week is a whole other story."

That gets another laugh. "Poor boy."

"Yeah."

She squeezes his hand. "I should try to get some more sleep."

"Okay."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So, in Shardsverse Tim would have hit eight grade in the '90-'91 school year, which means Abby got there in '86-'87. The biggest difference between those two years is that Abby would have hit 8th grade at the height of the AIDS panic when basically no one really knew what the hell was going on but lots of people were dying, and Tim hit 8th grade at the beginning of the Safe Sex trend. So, while it's possible she would have gotten information like 'Gay Cancer' and 'We don't know exactly how it spreads, but it seems to have something to do with sex and blood,' Tim was in the class that was putting condoms on bananas.
Maternity leave feels really strange.

Abby's not sick, she's not doing something else like vacation or getting ready for a wedding or taking care of Tim.

She's just home.

Resting.

And it feels really odd.

Like usual, a minute before the alarm goes off she hits it and spends a few more minutes snuggling with Tim, and then they go off script. Usually they both get up, some mornings (depending on how long and intense snuggling was) they get a shower together, some mornings he gets his shower while she handles breakfast for them, then gets hers after they eat. But usually somehow the clock rolls from 6:20 to 7:30 when they leave for work.

This morning, he gets up, gets his shower, and she just lays there, dozing. She's tired. She'd really like to be sleeping, but everything hurts after a few minutes in any given position and getting from one position to another is such an effort that she can't really keep shifting around easily enough to stay comfortable, so she can't really sleep.

She watches him get dressed (always a treat) and he brings her some breakfast, and then heads off to work.

So she's home, alone, with nothing to do, and it just feels really weird.

She thinks about going to the pool, but getting dressed, getting into the car, driving all the way there, and then walking across the parking lot seems like more effort than it's worth. Though that does remind her of movies in the tub, and without Tim in there, she could probably get the water deep enough to float a little, and maybe that would let her get a decent nap.

It's worth a shot.

"The set up right now is temporary. Once Gibbs retires we'll rearrange again," Tim's saying as he shows Draga his new desk.

"It'll work. Now what?"

"Paperwork." Tim already has the stack of mandatory paperwork all new NCIS hires have to fill out on Draga's desk.

Draga looks at it, and cocks an eyebrow. "Let me guess they want everything but my cholesterol count?"

"I think that's on the 55-88-A."

"Purple one, half way down. They also want your resting heart rate, blood pressure, height to waist ratio, and a few other things, something about the Federal Wellness Initiative," Tony adds as he and
Ziva walk into the bullpen. Draga doesn't look like he's sure if Tony is kidding or not. Tony got that line off deadpan enough that if it wasn't for the fact that Tim knows he made up the 55-88-A he'd have bought it. "Everything look comfortable?"

"Yeah. Compared to a cockpit this is tons of space to work in."

Tony nods. "Then get to it. Until those are done, you're not allowed to be on a case."

Gibbs breezes by, clipboard in hand, dropping it on Draga's stack of paperwork. "Bring 'em with ya. Dead sailor in Appomattox."

And like every other time, they all grab their go bags.

Gibbs looks at Tim and shakes his head. "Not you. You're staying here. Appomattox is three hours away." Gibbs hands Tim a sticky note with the vic's name, Robert Simms, on it. "Financials, phone records, you know the drill."

"On it."

Abby gets a text around lunchtime. Gibbs grounded me.

Sent you to your room?

:) Dead body out of Appomattox. They went off to investigate. I'm here running data.

Keeping you close to home.

Looks like it.

Anyway, for once I'm going to have the data dealt with before they even get back with a body. Looks like I've got a pretty good shot of being home for dinner, anything you want?

Not really. Been feeling kind of nauseous all day.

Sorry to hear it.

Yeah.

Contractions?

Nothing worth mentioning. Two in the last hour. It's just often enough to keep me from really sleeping.

All be done soon.

Thank GOD!

Let me know if you think of anything you want.

Will do. XOXOXOXO

Love you.
An hour later, he's flashing a text to Tony. *Simms kept sending texts to a burner phone.*

*What about?*

*No clue. It's a code I haven't cracked. Looks like a book code though.*

*So you want every book in the house, too.*

*Wouldn't hurt. Though if you feel like really looking, narrowing it down to the books that look like they get used a lot would be worthwhile. There's a ton of these texts, so unless Simms had the book memorized, he had to use it a lot.*

*You know, I think you've just found Draga's first real assignment. I bet he'd be good at that.*

*I think you're right on that.*

*Anything interesting in the financials?*

*Still working on it. BofA's being pissy about not having a proper notification of death since Ducky and Jimmy aren't back yet.*

Half an hour later, Tim gets a text from Draga. *Anything to suggest Simms had any connection to Iowa?*

*Iowa?*

*Yeah. I'm looking at a Fodor's Iowa and either Simms was exhaustively researching vacation plans or this is the code book.*

*Nothing in anything I've got suggest any connection to Iowa. Give me the ISBN.*

Ten digits flash up on Tim's phone.

*Thanks. I'll go see if there's a copy locally. Be careful with it, we're going to go over it with a fine tooth comb for trace and prints.*

*No problem.*

He sends the next text to the whole team: *Broke the code. Simms was buying something, a lot of it, and selling it, probably on base. Financials show he had storage unit in Norfolk.*

*Tony: Norfolk?*

*McGee: He's stationed out of Norfolk.*
Gibbs: What was he doing in Appomattox?

McGee: Mom died two years ago. It used to be her house. He inherited it.

Ziva: Any ID on the burner phone?

McGee: Nope. And its old enough I can't even trace where it was sold. Whoever has it bought it like ten years ago.

Draga: Flip phone?

McGee: Maybe or a really old flat one.

Nothing pops up on his screen for several minutes so he sends another one to the whole team: ???

Ziva: Draga noticed that the bystander who found the body had a flip phone.

McGee: Got a name?

Ziva: Alvin Burns

McGee: Send me a picture of him. I'm on it.

Half an hour after that, he knows one thing, whoever the bystander was, his name isn't Alvin Burns. No one even remotely resembling the guy he has a picture of is called Alvin Burns. But he has Tom and Co. in the lab searching the facial recognition software for a match.

He sends his next text to Gibbs. **Guy who found the body isn't named Alvin Burns.**

**Got an ID?**

Not yet. Lab's working on it. He touch anything?

Borrowed Ziva's pen.

We can run prints when you get back.

Good. Go home Tim.

???

Day's done for you. Go home.

Only six, Jethro.

I know. Go home.

On it.
“You want me to stay home?” Tim asks.

Abby shrugs. It’s June 16th, she’s been having annoying contractions all night, one here, another there, three in four minutes, two hours of nothing, six more in an hour, nothing for two more hours, one every twenty minutes, nothing.

Pretty much the only thing that’s happening is she’s not sleeping and she’s irritable and annoyed.

They’re not even hard enough to hurt, not really. Just enough to jolt up the adrenaline, with “Now? Are we ready, now? Is it hospital time, now?” But they always keep petering out before three hours of somewhat steadyish contractions.

“Go. Catch bad guys. No reason for both of us to be sitting here going stir crazy.”

“Okay. You get to two hours of them, let me know.”

“Trust me, if it looks like we’re getting close to go time, I’ll text.”

“Good.” He kisses her, pets Kelly, and heads toward the Navy Yard.

They’re on day two of an active case. Which is kind of interesting because Gibbs won’t let him leave the Navy Yard. To some degree it makes sense, the crime scene is in Appomattox, which isn’t exactly a ten minute drive away. But he’s never been quiet so firmly tied to one place.

So, Ziva and Draga are off in western VA, picking up “Alvin Burns” aka Patrick Harper, their current number one suspect for the guy who pulled the trigger. He’s searching through Harper’s financials, finds something hinky, and then gets to sit there and wait until Gibbs and Tony go fetch Dick Sharpe, who may indeed be the linchpin of this whole thing.

Since he’s the one who found the money trail, he’s the one who’s getting to run interrogation on this one.

Sharpe doesn’t exactly have the hardened criminal look. But Tim doesn’t exactly look like a veteran cop, either.

Pretty much they’re two tech guys, in a small room, with a table between them. Tim’s got what looked like a murder but was rapidly turning into a drug running deal gone bad. Sharpe wants to make sure Tim never gets the confirmation on that.

Time to play.
Time to play.

They spend a good hour of just messing around. Getting their feet wet. Sizing each other up. He’s gotten confirmation that Sharpe does get paid for something, but he’s sticking to the story that he’s an herbologist producing homeopathic remedies.

Tim’s cell chimes.

He pulls the phone out of his jacket, looks at it, hopes that his eyes lighting up looks like excitement about the case, and tucks it back in. Then he stands up, leans forward on both of his hands, towering over Sharpe, stares him right in the eyes, waits a second until he sees the fear, and says, “You are so fucked! Harper broke,” and slowly walks out.

Behind the mirror, Tony falls off the stool he was leaning against.

Tim runs in a second later. “Two straight hours of contractions. Let him sit for an hour, and then hit him with a prisoner’s dilemma. I’m out of here.” And runs back out.

Tony looks at Gibbs, eyes still wide. “Have you ever heard him say that word?”

Gibbs nods, bright, wide smile lighting his face. “Couple times. Never in here, though.”

“I wasn’t even sure he knew what it meant.”

That gets a laugh out of Gibbs.

---

Half an hour later, he’s back at his house, and Abby’s contractions are still limping along at one every nine minutes. The bag is packed. The crib’s set up. Car seat is installed. All that’s left now is actually driving there.

She’s talking to Dr. Draz on the phone as they head toward the hospital. Almost baby time!
For Tim, there’s a very surreal sort of calm to parking and walking in. It’s an intense awareness of this being the last thing they will ever do as people without children.

Standing in front of an elevator, fairly heavy bag on his shoulder, left arm wrapped around her waist, her head on his shoulder, waiting, all of it wrapped in crystalline stillness.

They’d filled out all of the paperwork, all of the consent forms, everything, weeks before. If Abby had needed to get in and get treated fast, neither of them were willing to wait to have all the forms filled out.

So it’s done.

He’s leaning against the treatment table, watching her take her street clothing off. Each thing she takes off he carefully folds and places in the bag.

Then she puts on the blue gown (opens in the front) and they wait again.

“Okay, Abby, you’re at three centimeters dilated, zero station, and Kelly is ready to go. You’re going to get rolled over to the OR, and Dr. Flanen, the anesthesiologist, is going to get you set up with an epidural. Tim’s going to stay here with me, get changed into scrubs, and in about fifteen minutes we’ll all be in the OR getting Kelly out. About ten minutes after that, you’ll be saying hello to your baby,” Dr. Draz says.

One of the nurses hands Tim a neatly folded pile of scrubs, and he’s about to leap off and set the world record for stripping off and getting into surgical scrubs when Abby stops him, holding his hand.

“Not allowed to wear any jewelry in there, right?”

Dr. Draz nods.

She works off her wedding and engagement rings, which takes some effort because her fingers are swollen, and hands them to him. “Keep ‘em warm for me?”

“Yeah.” He slips them onto his right pinky. They’re a little snug, but not so bad he’ll have a hard time getting them off. He kisses her. “Have ‘em back on you in an hour.”

She sighs. “I hope so.”

He kisses her again. “It’s going to be fine.”

“I know.” But her voice is limp with fear.

“It really will.”

“Sure.” She doesn’t sound sure about that. The nurses are waiting to roll her toward the OR, so she reaches up, gives him one last kiss, he squeezes her hand, and pets Kelly gently.
“See you in a few minutes.”

She nods, tears in her eyes, and it’s killing him that she’s that scared and there’s nothing he can do about it.

But they take her away, and he may not be able to make her less scared, but he can get changed very, very fast, so he does. It probably doesn’t help anything, but he’s standing there, outside the OR, a few seconds faster than he would have been otherwise.

A few minutes of standing there later, a cheerful looking woman in pink scrubs with little purple hearts all over them heads out and says, “Mr. McGee?”

He nods. Not like there are any other soon-to-be-dads out here. Of course, one guy in blue scrubs looks a whole lot like every other guy in blue scrubs, so maybe it’s not an entirely stupid question.

“Hi, I’m Beverly Carter. I’m the pediatric nurse here.” She holds out a small strip of plastic then takes his right hand in hers and begins to fasten the id bracelet above his watch. “You, Abby, and Kelly are all going to get one of these. Kelly’s has a little tracker in it. It’ll make sure she can’t leave the maternity ward with anyone other than you or Abby.”

He looks at it, and it’s got Abby’s info on it.

“Everything look right?”

“It’s Abby’s information.”

“Yep. We do everything here based on Team Mom. Yours has a 2 on it, right?”

He looks again. McGee, Abby, 2. “Yep.”

“Okay, good. Abby’s almost all prepped. One of the nurses will head out in a minute or two and fetch you.”

“All right.”

“Hold tight. It’ll be show time soon.”

And after two of the longest minutes ever, another nurse does come out, this one in blue scrubs, like his, and ushers him in.

He knew he was scared. He knew he was nervous. He didn’t realize how bad it was until the wash of relief hit when he sees Abby smiling, and talking, and joking, and actually, she’s in a damn good mood.

“McGee! You’re here.” She’s smiling brightly at him, just absolutely grinning from ear to ear.

He wonders at that for a second, but, she called him McGee for ten years, and judging by the glow-y, euphoric clouds of bliss hanging about her, she’s probably pretty high right now, so if that’s what comes out, it’s what comes out. Not like it isn’t his name.
“Yeah, baby.” He’s standing next to her, petting her face. She’s strapped down on the surgical table, arms extended, tubes all over the place, and if it wasn’t for her smile, that would be making him panic, but she’s in such a good mood she’s giggling, and it’s catching, making him smile.

Another nurse offers him a rolling stool, so he can sit down next to her, so he does. Face close to hers, lips against her temple, hand twined with hers.

“They gave me morphine,” she sings.

“I take it you’re liking it?”

“Oh yeah. This is fabulous. I can’t move anything below my chest, and that was trippy, because I could feel it happen. Like first, I couldn’t move my toes. I kept telling them, move toes, move, but they wouldn’t. And then it was my knees, and then thighs and stomach and that was just really weird, but then everything stopped hurting, and oh my God! This is just sooooooooo good! I forgot how good not hurting was. This is just perfect, and I love it, and I’m going to figure out how to go back in time and slap myself upside the back of my own head because this is so good and I can’t believe I was freaked out about it, I mean how could something that feels this good be freaky? Breena tried to tell me about it, but I was too scared to listen and God scared was dumb—“

“Inhale, baby.”

“Oh right, yeah, probably a good idea. Look!”

He has no idea what she wants him to look at, but the only direction she can see is up, so he looks up. There’s a poster of butterflies above them.

“It’s sooooooo cute!”

“Yes.”

“You know what?”

“What?”

He didn’t think it was possible, but the grin on her face got even wider. “Jimmy can write us prescriptions for more morphine.”

Tim’s getting a little nervous about that. What with the fifteen or so other people in the room.

“Umm… Yeah.”

“He really should, because this is so great, McGee, you’ve got to try it!”

“Okay, Abby. Just, not right now.”

“Oh. Good point. When we retire. We’ll do Burning Man and try everything and it’ll be so much fun.”

“All right.”

“We’re ready to start,” Dr. Draz says. Tim suspects she might have a smile on her face under her mask.

Tim nods, not sure what he’d say to that, but Abby’s happily babbling away about getting this show on the road and how that phrase came to be in the first place and it’s it kind of weird that people say things like that even though there is no show, and he just sits there, lips pressed to her temple, fingers
twined with hers, letting the words wash over him, keeping an ear on the quiet things the docs are saying to each other as well.

“McGee...”

“Yeah, baby.”

“I love you.”

“Love you, too.” He kisses her. “Love you so much.”

She giggles at that. And months of tension break. He feels it just crack. Six weeks of fear and worry and this is it, they’re here, in the hospital, and sure, things could go wrong, but he can feel in his gut that it won’t, the worst is over, the worry is done, and from here on out this is going to go right.

He starts to giggle with her, squeezing her hand, hard.

“You’re laughing,” Abby says.

“Yeah. You were, too.”

“I was?” She looks really confused by that.

That makes him laugh a little harder.

“Yeah, you were.”

“Huh?” she laughs a little more, and he kisses her lips.

“You’re going to feel some pressure now, and we’ll have her out in about a minute,” Dr. Draz says.

“Okay,” Abby’s smiling, then looks startled. “Oh, that’s trippy. I can kind of sense I’m moving, but I can’t feel it. Sort of like my brain knows but my body doesn’t. Oh my God! This is so cool!”

Tim laughs at that, too. Which sets Abby off. When she takes a breath she says, “The first thing Kelly’s going to hear is us laughing.”

He feels the tears in his eyes, and makes himself laugh a few seconds longer, and then stops dead when he hears a small, squeaky cry.

Abby inhales fast and hard, holding his hand, fingers curled tight into his. He looks up from her face, wondering when they’ll get to see her.


“Not quite yet, she isn’t all out. Your little girl’s pretty eager to meet you. One more second... Got her. Time of birth, 14:14.” Then Dr. Draz is holding Kelly where they can see her, over the drape and saying, “Hi Mom! Hi Dad!” She’s kind of grayish and squawking, unhappy about this, and before he can do more than register one very fast image, of a tiny face screwed up and crying, Nurse Carter comes around, takes Tim by the hand, and gathers Kelly up in a soft blanket, taking both of them to the warmer.
Carter’s rubbing the grayish goo and blood off a Kelly, and she’s yelling, staring at both of them, looking really confused, and Tim stands there, staring, astounded that she’s really here, tiny, and bright pink, and loud, and wet, and… just… here.

His hand is hovering over her arm. “It’s okay, you can touch her.” He traces his finger down her arm, feeling how soft and warm and a little damp she is, and that seems to get her attention. His eyes focus on hers, and hers point in his general direction as five tiny fingers close around his and she stopped yelling.

“Hi.”

Her head tilts a little, like she’s taking him, or maybe everything, in.

He wipes his eyes with his free hand, aware he’s crying because he’s having a hard time focusing on her. Then Carter says, “Do you want to cut the cord?”

This strikes his as a weird question because it looks pretty cut to him. There’s like, four inches of it still attached to Kelly, though there’s a clamp right where her belly button will be, and another one at the top of the cord.

Tim shakes his head. His voice isn’t going to hold for saying anything right now, and her hand is curled around his left index finger, so he’d have to let go to cut it.

She’s all dried off, cord trimmed flush with the clamp, and has a little tag on her ankle.

“Okay. We’ve got to weigh her. Did you want to get any pictures?”

That gets Tim’s attention, broke through the feel of her fingers on his, of this first moment of touching his daughter. He gingerly starts to pull his hand away, but she isn’t letting go, so he takes her wrist in his right hand, staggered that it’s the same width as his thumb, and holds her hand in place while he pulls back.

He watches as they weigh her, carefully put a diaper and onesie on, a tiny little cap, and wrapped her into a tidy bundle. Maybe it take two minutes, maybe three, but very soon he’s standing there with a person so tiny her whole body can rest against half of his chest.

He reaches back to pat his pocket for his phone, and realizes he isn’t wearing his jeans, so he doesn’t
have it with him.

He stands there, holding her, not sure what to do next. Carter takes him in hand and leads him back to Abby, skirting the doctors who are stitching everything up and finishing off the surgery.

He sits back down on the stool next to Abby’s head. Her eyes are closed, and she’s humming gently. Red Hot Chili Peppers if he’s right, and absurdly he’s wondering when she would have heard them last, not like they’re on either of their playlists.

He kisses her again, tries to think through the easiest way to do this, because he’s really, awfully, heart-clenchingly nervous about possibly dropping Kelly, but then he remembers that Abby can turn her head to the right, and… yeah, that’ll work.

“Abby, open your eyes and turn toward me.”

She does, looking pretty glazed, but she sees Kelly and lights up fireworks-going-off-on-a-starless-night-bright.

“Oh!”

He scoots close enough so she can kiss and nuzzle Kelly. She does for a moment, and Kelly squeaks at it, then starts sucking on Abby’s nose. That makes her laugh. Makes Tim laugh, too. He gently pulls Kelly back, cuddling her against his chest, and offered one of his fingers for her to suck on, which she did, vigorously. And then he leaned and slouched enough so she's still face to face with Abby.

Carter sees that and says, “Might have a hungry girl there. Once you’re all stitched up and back in your room, I think she’ll want to nurse.”

Tim’s really, really tempted to say, “Ya think?” But he doesn’t. Carter doesn’t need him channeling Gibbs.

Abby’s got her lips pressed to Kelly’s forehead, whispering, “Can’t wait to hold you.”
Eventually, and Tim’s sort of fuzzy on how this happened, and Abby’s really fuzzy on it (if you ask her one minute they were in the OR and the next they were back in their room, and while she’s got a good excuse for that, he doesn’t, but he still doesn’t have much detail beyond that) they were back in their room, having ascertained that Kelly is six pounds two ounces, eighteen and a half inches long, in possession of ten fingers and ten toes, murky blue eyes, and that, once it is dry, her hair (not that there was a whole lot of it) would probably be sort of dark blondish.

It took a bit of manhandling, but the nurses got Abby onto the bed in their room, little bassinette/warmer thing for Kelly to sleep in next to her, explaining to Tim that they’re supposed to keep track of every time Kelly nurses and each diaper they change and that’s what the paperwork under the bassinette is for.

But finally, Abby is settled, sitting up, and he wants to be able to snuggle up and sit behind her for this, let his body support hers, but between the IV tubes, the catheter, the fact that she still can’t feel anything below her chest, that’s not going to happen. So, he hands her Kelly, and kind of half-leans, half-perches one hip on the side of the bed, (It’s not wide enough for him to lay next to her if she’s in the middle, and she’s in the middle.) stroking Kelly’s cheek while Abby holds her for the first time.

Her lips are pressed to the top of Kelly’s head, and she’s inhaling deeply, babbling about how tiny she is, and how warm, and she just smells amazing, and so, so tiny, she certainly didn’t feel that tiny when she was on the inside, and Tim kisses Abby’s forehead, basking in this.

Eventually he pulls back enough to realize that maybe some pictures would be a good idea. So he hunts down his jeans, finds his phone, and begins to take pictures of Abby and Kelly snuggled together.

Kelly starts crying again, which makes both of them a little nervous because now that she’s here they’ve got to figure out what to do, but after about two cries and some fairly determined wiggling from Kelly, the idea that she may want to eat comes through loud and clear.

Tim takes Kelly from Abby while she gets herself clear of the gown she’s in. Which Kelly did not appreciate. Moving further from the food was not something she wanted to do, so the crying gets louder, but a few seconds later, Abby had her breast out, and the pillows Tim had given her arranged into something that would hopefully be useful for nursing, and after that Kelly is in her arms, finds the nipple with no problem, and very enthusiastically nursing.

“How’s it feel?” Tim asks Abby, watching Kelly gulping away.

“Really weird.” She thinks about that. “Ohhh… not sure I like that.”

“What?”
“You know how your foot feels when you sit on it too long and then get up?”

“Yeah.”

“It feels like that.”

Tim winces. “Ow.”

“Not really ow, but, hot and tingly and just weird.”

He snaps a few more pictures. Then notices there are thirty-five messages on his phone, (Five from Gibbs. For a moment he wonders if there’s a Marine Grandpa getting ready to storm the hospital.) so he hunts through the pics he’s just taken, finds one he likes (not a nursing one), and sends that to his entire family list with: Kelly Marie McGee 2:14 6/16/15 6lb 2oz. Abby and Kelly are doing fine. Kelly's having her first meal.

When he looks up from his phone, Abby's gazing down at Kelly, eyes filled with happy tears, gently stroking her very tiny ear, as she suckles away.

Screw it! If half of him ends up hanging off the side of the bed, so be it. He gently got himself onto the bed with them, half-sitting/lying on his side (and yes, his back half was dangling off) but he could rest his lips on Abby’s shoulder, offer his arm as additional support for Kelly, and just hold both of them close.

And eventually there would be the whole: when do we switch sides thing, and does she need to be burped in between, and wake up Kelly, please wake up and finish nursing, you’ve only done one breast, but right now there’s just this golden moment, wrapped around his girls, with no fear and no pain, just awash in perfect, content love.
Family

Gibbs stands quietly in front of the door. He listens carefully and doesn't hear anything on the other side, so he doesn't knock. He opens it, peeks in, and then slips through, walking silently.

They're sleeping. Which he expected. He knows he and Shannon certainly crashed pretty quickly after the excitement was over, and he figured Abby and Tim would, too.

Even without hours of labor, or a terrifying and painful emergency C-section, just the days, weeks of waiting are exhausting.

He walks over to Abby, lying in a hospital bed. Hospital gown, exhausted sleep, IV tubes, all of that looks familiar, but it's the smell, that sweet combination of blood and amniotic fluids with an undertone of Lysol that whips him back in time by more than thirty years.

He blinks, clears his eyes, and kisses her on the forehead. She murmurs something, shifts a little, and settles back into sleep.

Tim's crashed out on the sofa. It's too short for him to lay across it, so he's sprawled out, head lolling on the backrest, both hands protectively clasped around the tiny bundle snoozing on his chest.

Gibbs gently sits next to him, looking at their little girl. Or not snoozing. Two bleary blue eyes are wide open and staring around.

"Hi," he says it very quietly, finger tracing down Kelly's cheek, the feel of her skin under his finger also whipping him back in time, and Tim stirs, opening one eye. "Go back to sleep, Tim. I'm going to take her for a walk."

For a second Tim's hands close a little more tightly around his daughter, and then he seems to realize it's Gibbs, so he mumbles something like, "Okay," and closes his eye again.

Gibbs gently picks up Kelly, cradling her against his chest, and heads into the hallway. Once out there he says, "Let's let your parents get some sleep. They'll need it." He's bouncing her a little as they walk, humming something tuneless.

He's amazed at how this brings him back. It's been thirty-three years since he held his daughter for the first time, and right now he'd tell you it was yesterday.

He kisses the top of her head, memories of kissing his own Kelly like this bright in his mind. "You were named after two incredible girls, Kelly Marie, and one day, when you're a bit bigger, I'm going to tell you all about them."

Right now he's the only one at the hospital. Sometimes it's good to be the Boss. Tony, Ziva, and Draga are still on the case, though at last update Sharpe had fallen for the Prisoner's dilemma, and Tony was just on clean up with his confession.

Meanwhile, once Ziva and Draga got back, they'd have a signed confession to show Harper, so that should break him pretty fast.

Ducky and Jimmy had agreed to both stay at Autopsy. Working together they can finish everything up faster and get here that much sooner, and more importantly, stay that much longer. He hasn't
heard anything from Breena, but assumes she and Molly will be coming soon.

And yeah, it's not Jimmy's meet your little brother fantasy, but meet your cousin will be awfully
good, too.

He identifies the dark-haired woman walking toward him by her stride and attitude before he can
make out the details of her face, after all, his glasses are in his pocket.

Penny.

She stops in front of him. "Is that her?"

Okay, it's a kind of dumb question. Not like he'd be here, walking the hall with someone else's kid.
But it's easy to get rattled when you're excited, and he might have just as easily asked her the same
thing if she'd gotten here first.

"Yeah. They're getting a nap, so we're getting a walk." He stands at an angle so she can see her
great-granddaughter's face.

She pets Kelly, a wide, happy grin that puts him very strongly in mind of Tim on her face. "She's the
spitting image of Sarah."

That confuses Gibbs. He was thinking this is what Abby must have looked like as a baby. He shifts
his hold, cradling her so he can look at her face, finding a place to sit down so he can really look at
her. He slips the little crocheted cap off her head, finding a fine fuzz of blond hair.

"Abby. Abby looked like this as a baby."

Penelope sits next to him, leaning over, staring at her. "Maybe. I still think she looks like her aunt."
She fits the cap back on Kelly's head. "Did you get any details?"

"Nah. They were both asleep when I came in. Got the same text you did."

She smiles at that. "They look okay?"

"As okay as two exhausted, sleeping people can."

That gets a laugh out of Penny.

Gibbs realizes Kelly hasn't been properly introduced. "Kelly, this is your great-grandma." He looks
up from the baby to Tim's grandmother. "What is she going to call you?"

"Penny. They all do."

He nods. "Kelly, this is Penny. And when you can talk, you can call me Pop."

"Can I hold her?" Just like Tim, he feels his hands curl around this little girl, not wanting to let her
go. But he forces them to relax, he's got to share.

"Sure."

Penny cradles Kelly to her shoulder. "God, it comes back. I haven't done this since James was a
baby."

"James?"
"Tim's youngest second cousin. Three years."

"I was thinking the same thing. But thirty-three years for me."

Penny nods. Kelly begins to squawk, and Penny bounces her gently, patting her back, making shushing noises.

"She's been awake a while. I'm thinking it's naptime for her." Gibbs holds out his hands, wanting to take her back, but Penelope doesn't look like she wants to let go.

"You got to carry her out. I can take her back in. Show me where their room is."

"Okay."

Penny stands up, her chin pressed against the top of her head. She pats Kelly's back, walking with a little bounce in her step. Gibbs watches, approving of her technique, and Kelly starts to settle down.

"It comes back easy, doesn't it?"

Gibbs nods at that.

They sneak into Tim and Abby's room. Penny lays her down in the clear plastic bassinette next to Abby's bed. He kisses Abby once more, whispering, "She's beautiful, Abbs," and heads back into the hallway.

A second after the door shuts, Penny's phone buzzes. She takes it, and Gibbs hears, "Hello. Yes… Just saw her… Room 207, but everyone is sleeping now, so maybe an hour or so is a good idea… Uh huh… Call when you get here." And then hangs up the phone.

"Who was that?"

"Sarah. She just got the message. Tim isn't answering his phone, so she called me."

Gibbs nods. "Get some coffee?"

"That sounds good."

They're in the cafeteria, at a table, with no coffee. Several seconds after stepping in and smelling the coffee, both Gibbs and Penny had opted for other beverages.

Gibbs sips his. "Anyone tell his parents?"

"John calls every few weeks. I'll tell him the next time we talk. And I don't know if it's habit or if things are getting better, but he sent that text to Tori, too."

"You're still talking to John?"

Penny shrugged. "Arguing. Yelling. Trying to pound it through that thick, stubborn head of his that what he and Tori did was not appropriate. She got it. Or is smart enough to pretend to get it. Or at least was crying when I got off the phone with her. But she's also never been disappointed in Tim. He's still firmly convinced he didn't go far enough because he couldn't turn Tim into a sailor."

Gibbs feels himself tense at that. "And if yelling doesn't do it?"
Penny's holding her coffee tightly and stares up at the ceiling, then looks back to Gibbs and shakes her head. "I don't know. I'd like to think I know what I'd do. I know what I did in the past. Joining the peace movement could have killed Nelson's career, and he wasn't thrilled about me doing it, but when he saw what we were building... That wasn't warfare. It wasn't honorable, and it wasn't about defending people. He didn't stand in my way, but if he had, I would have gone.

"John's my son, and if he can't... If I need to, I'll let him go."

Gibbs nods at that.

Penny takes another sip of her tea. "This is almost as bad as the coffee smells."

Gibbs sees her change the subject, and since there's nothing else to add, he goes with it, taking a sip of his own drink. He has lemonade, which he suspects has never met a real lemon, or real sugar, and it's entirely possible even the water is artificial. "You think they feed this to the patients?"

"I really hope not," Penny says, getting her phone out and texting.

Gibbs raises an eyebrow at her, and then a few seconds later her phone chimes with a return text. "Doesn't matter if this is what they feed them or not. I've got Ducky and Jimmy on bringing real, delicious, and nutritionally appropriate food for them."

That got a smile out of Gibbs.

The rest of what he's taken to thinking of as the Mallard branch of the family showed up next, without Molly.

He flashed Jimmy a curious look as Penny hugged Breena, and he said, "She's still at daycare. She'll want to hop all over Abby as soon as she sees her, so waiting until all the tubes are out is a good plan. Tomorrow or the next, we'll bring her."

Gibbs nods. Granted, he hadn't thought about that, but it made sense.

"Are they receiving visitors?" Ducky asked.

"Everyone was asleep when we were last in there, but I'd imagine quietly poking your head in to check wouldn't be a problem," Penny replied.

"I'll go." And Gibbs was off, headed toward their room, so he missed the smiles passing between Jimmy and Breena and Penny and Ducky.

This time when he got nearer to the door he could hear quiet crying and voices, so he poked his head in and said, "Feel like some company?"

"Sure," Tim said, mid-diaper change. Which was apparently the reason why Kelly was crying.

"Gibbs! Oh, you're here! Have you seen her, yet? She's beautiful!"

Gibbs paused next to Tim to tickle Kelly's tummy, which didn't stop the crying, but did make her look away from Tim to him, and then took two more steps to Abby, kissing her gently. "Yeah, Abbs. She is beautiful. I was in here two hours ago. You were asleep. Kelly and I went for a quick walk, met Penny while we were out there. She thinks Kelly looks like Tim's sister."
Tim stares at his daughter, and tries to remember back, but the image of what Sarah looked like brand new just isn't forming in his mind. "She might. Can't really remember, right now." Then he finished wiping her off, and got the new diaper on and snug, followed by the onesie, which Kelly seemed to appreciate, because she stopped crying.

"All nice and warm now?" Tim asked her, picking her up and taking her over to Abby. "So who's here?" he asked Gibbs as Abby started getting ready to nurse.

"Penny, Ducky, Breena and Jimmy, Sarah should be here any minute, and whenever they get Harper taken care of Tony and Ziva will be along," he answers, keeping up a very tight line of direct eye contact with Tim. Since Molly, he's been aware of the fact that one of the biggest changes since he was a dad with a baby is that these days the girls will just whip out a breast and nurse babies like it's no big deal.

And on an intellectual level he gets it. First and foremost it's a sign that he's family and part of the inner circle. Because while they will nurse in public, this is a lot less stealthy than how they behave when out and about.

And he can understand that it can't be fun to have to excuse yourself from whatever is going on to feed the baby. And beyond all that, if anyone is going to leave because of nursing, he's the one with the two working feet who didn't just get cut open five hours ago, so he'd be the one to leave the room.

So, yes, he understands this and how it works.

And he doesn't want to leave, but... okay, it's still a little squirmy. So like with when Molly was getting a snack, he is keeping up a very strict not looking policy.

He's staring at Tim, filling him in with how the prisoner's dilemma worked, when Abby said to him, giggling, because apparently everything is awfully funny to her right now, "It's okay Gibbs, you can look. You don't have to pretend I'm not nursing. This is what they're for."

And, okay, looking back his reaction probably wasn't the most mature thing he'd ever done. Or the kindest. And he was aware of the fact that Abby had to be on some sort of painkiller, but it hadn't really hit him that she didn't have any filters between her brain and her mouth.

But he is kind of uncomfortable, and he's awfully good at spreading uncomfortable around. And, honestly, kind of giddy on grandbaby joy. So, still keeping up eye contact with Tim, he very gently smacked him upside the head and said, "If she thinks that's what those are for, you aren't doing your job."

"Gibbs!" Abby sounded utterly horrified. "Oh no you don't! You apologize to McGee right this second! If there was ever a man who knew his way around a breast it's McGee. He's practically a lesbian he's so good with them. Some guys just don't get it, they pinch and twist, like the dials on those old radios, you remember them, right? Of course you do, you're old enough to remember those radios, but not McGee, not that you don't remember those radios, do you? Off topic. He gets that different parts of the breast respond to touch differently, and he knows how to use the texture of my clothing to play with me, and you know nipples respond to touch differently than the flesh around them, and he figured out how to do this thing with his teeth, and how the flat part of the tooth feels different than the sharp part, and since I've been pregnant my nipples have been really sensitive- Do you have sensitive nipples, Gibbs? Anyway, he figured out that he could do this thing with his eyelashes, oh my god, if you've got sensitive nipples, you've got to get someone to try it on you, feels —"
Which was when Tim finally jerked out of the frozen, watching-the-train-wreck-happening-but-unable-to-do-anything-about-it,-blushing-so-hard-his-hair-was-going-to-turn-red space he'd been in to say, "Abby, I don't think Jethro needs that much detail."

"I don't, Abbs. And Tim, I am sincerely sorry I doubted your skill with breasts."

"Uh… Thanks. Let's not ever mention this again."

Gibbs nodded emphatically at that, and then, already in possession of vastly more information than he ever wanted about Abby's breasts, looked down to watch Kelly nursing away. Tim's on Abby's far side, half sitting on the bed, stroking Kelly's head. Abby's cradling her in her arms. And Kelly lay there, eyes closed, blissful expression on her face, sucking away.

"She's a good eater."

"Yeah. I was really afraid this was going to be hard, you read so much stuff about how hard it is, and how babies don't know how to latch on, and how if you have a c-section they end up doped up and too drugged to eat properly, but other than the fact it feels really weird, it's going pretty smooth."

Gibbs strokes her cheek and arm, feeling her tiny fist under his fingers, that too jerks him back in time, to standing like this, next to Shannon watching her nurse their Kelly. He wipes his eyes and after a second to pull himself back to the present he remembered why he'd popped in. "Do you want everyone else to come in?"

Tim looked to Abby for the answer. "Sure, bring 'em all in, time to celebrate, and celebrations are more fun with lots of people."

"I'll go get them."

There are universal constants. Gravity. There are local constants. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. And there are social constants, and how people act upon seeing the new baby is one of those things.

So like in everyone else's family, there are hugs and congratulations and "She's so beautiful!" and requests for the full story of how Kelly got on the outside and speculation as to who she looks like.

Jimmy having a bag filled with really delicious smelling food might have been a little off the beaten path, but it reminded Tim that's it's getting onto dinner and he hasn't eaten since breakfast. Abby's still not feeling very hungry, but she does take a little plain (but yummy smelling) beef broth, while Breena holds Kelly and Penny and Jimmy pet her. (Ducky hovering around, beaming, getting pictures of everything.)

When Sarah got there Penny looked from her to Gibbs and Gibbs sort of shrugged indicating, that, okay, yeah, he can maybe, sort of see the resemblance. (But he still thinks Kelly looks like Abby must have as a baby.)

Eventually Ziva and Tony got there, and Ziva's holding Kelly the way Abby held Molly when she was brand new, and Tony stepped back from slapping Tim on the back and watched Ziva do it, then crossed to her, wrapping his arms around her waist, head resting on her shoulder and whispered to her, "Looks good on you."

And a bit after that, when Kelly was drifting off, and Abby was drooping, the rest of the family headed out to find their places in the waiting room. Like with Jimmy and Breena, the whole of the
next two days will have someone here, ready to leap into action and fetch whatever they may want, or offer whatever help they may need, but they'll retreat far enough back to give them time to rest alone as well.
The thing about morphine is that it feels really good. It's a good painkiller too, which is why they use it for major surgeries. What's not obvious is how much pain it's killing. The other thing that isn't obvious is how much of that euphoric feeling good is because of the morphine.

So, on the day Kelly was born, Abby was feeling super-duper spiffy, and really, was awfully impressed by how great she was doing with this whole just-had-a-baby-thing. Yeah, she was sore. (Especially her right shoulder, that really hurt. They told her that was a side effect of trapped air in her abdomen, but she was on morphine so the idea of air trapped in her abdomen and having to wait for it to be absorbed didn't bother her, at all.) And no, she didn't even want to think about doing anything that involved her abs, but for the most part this was nowhere near as bad as she thought it was going to be.

All in all, really, she was feeling awfully good.

Which is why morphine is an especially nasty double edged sword.

So as the morphine began to wear off, Abby didn't opt for nearly as many of the other painkillers as she should have. Because when the nurse asked about her pain on a one to ten level she figured she was at a two, so she didn't need much to deal with this, right?

Wrong.

By the morning, everything in the universe sucked. There was not an iota of morphine left in her system, whatever they were giving her to combat the pain was fighting way, way out of its weight class, the chemical euphoria the morphine provided had gone, and the tsunami-sized waves of post-partum baby blues hormones were starting to crash into her.

So, in the course of one day, she had gone from everything is as good as good can be, nothing hurts, new baby, wrapped in ecstasy and love to the entire world and everything in it is one horrible drudge of unrelenting physical and emotional pain.

The nurse came in again, once again asking about pain levels, adjusted the dosage she was on, so supposedly soon she'd be hurting less, but then, because apparently this women was utterly insane, she unhooked Abby from all the tubes and asked her to get up and walk around a little.

So, she did, and fucking God that hurt! While she was up, tottering around a little, she got to see the vast, bloody mess that was the pad she'd been lying on, and the idea of exactly how ruined her body might be came crashing into her.

She felt the tears in her eyes, and the nurse smiled at her gently, said to her, "Do you want to get a shower? You'll probably feel a little better when you're all cleaned up."

Abby nodded, numbly, and headed toward the bathroom. Shower did sound good, but as she stood in the little bathroom, slowly peeling off her gown, she got to see how she looked.

And burst into sobbing tears.

She just felt ruined. That's the only word for it. There's an image of a woman she has in her mind, the woman she is, and this beaten down, swollen, bruised, blood smeared, exhausted body staring back at her in the mirror is not that woman.
It's not even a ghost of that woman.

Or her shadow.

It's just the used up dregs of a destroyed vessel.

She's staring at the wreckage of her body, feeling like every shred of her intrinsic Abbyness was gone. She doesn't even smell like herself. There's this cloying, sweetish blood smell that's suddenly making her want to rip her skin off in an attempt to get away from it.

She heard a soft knock on the door, and wanted to say stay away, but couldn't get her voice together well enough to do it, so after a second Tim stepped in, and she winced as his eyes hit her body, not wanting him to see this ruin of who she used to be.

He smiled gently at her, and pulled her into his arms.

Tim heard the crying about a minute after Abby slowly, carefully headed to the little bathroom attached to their room. The nurse had said she could get a shower, and she certainly wanted one, so in she had gone.

And he remembered the thing about baby blues, and even if he hadn't remembered if from their somewhat shortened series of Lamaze classes, both the nurses and Dr. Draz have mentioned it in the last day so he gets that her crying might be normal, but just because it's normal doesn't mean he wants her sitting alone in a room crying.

He looks at Gibbs (who had just come back in. He has a tendency to wander off whenever one of the nurses or doctors is doing anything with Abby) and his daughter and says, "Can you…?" holding Kelly toward him.

"Tim, snuggling a baby girl is never going to be a job I'll turn down. Especially if it frees you up to deal with the crying woman."

"Thanks."

He knocked gently on the door. "Can I come in?"

No answer, just quiet sobbing. He decided that was a yes.

So he eased the door open and found Abby standing in front of the mirror sobbing. "Hey." He took one step to her and wrapped her in his arms, holding her and petting her back.

She cried harder, and he didn't ask what was wrong. His best guess, that she does look like she was hit by a truck, isn't going to be helpful at all. Holding onto her, being there, cuddling against her, that's helpful (or so he hopes.)

After several minutes of that, she starts to pull it back together, calming down a little. He kisses her forehead. "You still want to get that shower?"

She nods.

"Want some company? I'll wash your hair."

She nods at that, more tears starting in her eyes. He lifts her face and kisses each eyelid. "Love you so much." Then he reaches over to turn the water on and quickly strips out of his clothing.
He looks down at the bandage over her wound. "Does that need to come off before you go in?"

"Just the top part."

"Top part?"

"I don't know." She carefully peeled the pad off the incision site. It didn't look nearly as bad as Tim was afraid, about six inches across, two lines of skin pressed closed with a collection of small pieces of tape. It was… surprisingly bloodless. Which given the blood on her legs, the yellow, bruised scabs on her arms and back from the IVs/epidural, the stippled, purple-blue bruises on her skin where they peeled off the tape that had held those tubes in place, the scarlet stretch marks, which apparently decided to come out in force all over her belly and hips and breasts over the last twenty-four hours, and the fact that everything is swollen and puffy, StayPuff marshmallow puffy, (he's actually still wearing her wedding and engagement ring because she's so swollen she can't get them back onto her own fingers) was actually a nice surprise. Good to see at least one of these things wasn't a total horror show.

He tested the water, "It's good," and stepped in, helping her in. It's not like it's a hard climb or anything, but an extra hand is probably useful.

She sighed when the water hit her.

"Good?"

"Yeah. Feels good. I feel like someone beat the hell out of me, and this is good."

"Okay."

For a long minute he stood there, holding onto her, letting the water slip over both of them, just feeling her in his arms. He looked around, didn't see her soap or shampoo, and realized it had to be either on the sink or still in the go bag.

He started to step back, but she followed, so he spent a few more minutes just hugging her, but eventually she said, "Did I forget the soap?"

"I think so. I'll be back in a minute."

"Okay."

Gibbs looked mildly surprised when he hopped out of the bathroom a few seconds later soaking wet with a towel around his hips, but didn't say anything when Tim snagged the go bag, rummaged through it, grabbed a scrubby and three bottles, and vanished back into the bathroom.

"Got 'em."

"Good."

He stepped back in, balanced the toiletries on the handrail, taking the shampoo in hand and pouring some into his palm.

"Wasn't there something you were going to be doing now?" she asked, leaning against him, sighing with pleasure, relieved to see some things, like his fingers rubbing into her scalp, still feel good. Still feel like her.

"Doesn't matter. I'll get round to it sooner or later."
She smiled at that. "Kelly sleeping?"

"Maybe. She wasn't making any noise and was snuggled on Jethro's tummy."

"Okay." Another long sigh from her.

"Feel good?"

"Yeah. Nice to know at least my hair's still mine."

He doesn't quite get that, but doesn't exactly know how to expound on that either. So he lets the water rinse away the shampoo, and grabs the scrubby, "Do your legs for you?" He figures it can't be easy to do anything that involves bending right now, or using her abs, and he's fairly sure washing her legs has to involve one or the other of those options.

"Sure."

Kneeling down, washing her legs and feet, he's coming face to face with what "moderate bleeding" means, and is trying to not freak out about it, because while the docs and nurses have all said this is normal, and the pads Breena brought for Abby were certainly awfully thick, the idea that this much blood might be coming out of Abby is making him want to hyperventilate, and he's fairly sure that isn't a good thing for anyone.

So it wasn't the most thorough wash ever, but he got the job done, stood up fast, and asked, "Did you bring fresh clothing in?"

Abby slumped a little more, just one more layer of everything sucks on top of all of the other ones, and he kissed her.

"Painkillers, baby, anyone would forget."

That got a nod out of her.

And once again, he headed out, wrapped in a towel, grabbed the go bag, and then smiled. Once he was back in the bathroom he said, "At least you remembered to pack fresh clothing. Totally slipped my mind."

That got a little laugh out of her as she stepped out of the shower.

"You feeling a little better?"

"Little. Can you get my legs and feet again?"

"Sure." He gently dried her off and helped her get dressed.

When she was dressed, he said, "Go snuggle with Gibbs, I need a minute," and if she took that to mean he needed some bathroom time on his own, that was fine, that was better than fine.

She nodded and headed out, and he quietly let himself melt down over how much blood there was. Smears of it on her legs, and a pink ring around the drain in the shower, and the wet, red stains on the towel, and it was just a whole lot of blood. And he knows she's fine. He knows they keep checking her iron levels, and he knows it's supposed to happen, but it's still a whole lot of blood, Abby's blood, all over the place, and it's just really, really hard.

He's shaking all over and wants to throw up.
And eventually he got his breathing back to normal, and got over the desire to throw up, got himself dressed again (in the same clothing) and headed out, finding Gibbs on the sofa, little baby girl sleeping on his chest, bigger girl leaning against him, arm around her shoulders, also asleep.

Gibbs looked at Tim, caught the fact that he was feeling pretty low right now, and said, "Go home for a bit, get some fresh clothing. Take Jimmy, I think he's in the waiting room. I've got 'em."

Tim nodded. "You need anything?"

"I'm good."

Jimmy was hanging out in the waiting room, when Tim headed out. He saw the look on Tim's face as he sat down next to him, and said, "What happened?"

Tim shook his head. "Helped her get washed off." He swallowed hard. "It was a lot of blood."

Jimmy nodded, smiled gently, very much understanding the pain of seeing your love hurting, damaged, and unable to do anything about it. "Yeah. I know. It's normal."

Tim nodded back. "Gibbs told me to go home, get some clean clothing."

"Good plan. I'll drive. We'll get some more food on the way back. Bet Abby'll want some real food soon."

"Probably."
"So, how are you doing?" Jimmy asked Tim as he pulled out of his parking place. It's the first bit of time they've had alone since before Kelly was born.

"Besides freaked out by the blood?"

"Besides that. There's something wrong with you if your wife is bleeding in front of you and you're cool with that."


"That's normal, too."

Tim nods, not paying too much attention to Jimmy or the car ride. His mind's pretty firmly back at the hospital with Abby and Kelly.

"When we get to your place, get a nap. I'll check your kitchen, do a grocery run for you, but you get a nap."

"Don't want to be gone that long."

"Trust me, you need it. You'll sleep better in your own bed. And there's absolutely nothing going on over there right now that Jethro can't handle."

"I know but—"

"Doctor's orders. Get that nap. She does the heavy lifting on taking care of Kelly. You do the heavy lifting on taking care of her, and you can't take care of her if you're fried. Besides, I'm the one with the car, so you're stuck there until I take you back. Might as well get a nap."

"Did you and Gibbs plan this?"

"Didn't need to. That sofa in your room folds out into a bed. You're out of it enough you haven't figured that out. That means you aren't safe to drive, and you really need some sleep."

"Fine."

Jimmy's smiling as he watches the road.

"You're looking awfully smug."

Jimmy reached over and squeezed Tim's shoulder. "Just enjoying this. Welcome to fatherhood."

Tim laughed at that.

They got to Tim's house, walked in, and Jimmy pointed up the stairs. "Go, sleep."

And, well, yeah, bed felt good. Laying full out felt good. (He quickly reminded himself to give both Jimmy and Gibbs a heads up for not pointing out the sofa folded out, thus leaving him with a kink in his neck from sleeping on the too short sofa.) And for about a second he noticed that not worrying about needing to leap up and tend to Abby or Kelly was pretty nice too, but only for a second,
because the second after that, he was asleep.

Waking up a few hours later, feeling like he's been drugged and is trying to pull through a murky haze of physical and emotional tiredness, Tim realizes that part of what is happening is that humans are, more or less, diurnal.

And he's adjusting to naps 24/7.

Laying in his bed, rubbing his eyes, he's got no idea what time it is. Daytime, but it could be 10 in the morning or 5 in the afternoon.

But after a moment, he realized the nurse came in in the morning, gave Abby the all clear to get up, so it can't be earlier than late morning. So he finally looked over, saw 2:55 on his clock, and realized he'd been asleep for four hours, and that Kelly was now a full day old.

Jimmy was right, he did sleep better in his own bed. Enough room to actually lie down was good. And that might be part of feeling drugged. He'd actually slept instead of dozing.

But he did slowly get up, and dressed, and snagged clothing for tomorrow. When they'd go home. Together.

He noticed something, he still had on Abby's wedding and engagement ring. He shuffled through her collars, wrist cuffs, and other jewelry and found what he wanted, it's a plain, white gold chain. He worked off her rings, threaded the necklace through them, and then put it around his neck. When he got back she could wear her rings again. One step closer to normal.

He headed into Kelly's room, fingers resting on her crib. Tomorrow, afternoon maybe, she'd be sleeping in here.

He heard the footsteps, but didn't turn until Jimmy put his hand on his shoulder. When Tim turned, he said, "Tomorrow."

"Yep. Feeling better?"

"Nope. Feel like all my joints are glued together."

Jimmy laughed a little. "That'll be true every time you wake up for about two months."

"Wonderful." Tim held up the bundle of clothing he needed to put in his go bag. "I'm ready."

"Let's get you back, then."

Tim turned toward the door and then noticed something. Previously the room had been set with the crib against the far wall, changing table/dresser on the wall to the left, rocking chair in the middle a few steps from the crib. But something new had wandered into the nursery.

It was one of those tray table things they'd gotten as wedding presents from Fornell.

And sitting on it was several bottles of water, some apples, protein bars, a little bowl with nuts, and a bag of M&Ms.

"Jimmy?" He knows he didn't put it there, and he's awfully sure there is no such thing as a snack fairy, which means Jimmy must have done it.
"Nursing mamas need to eat. A lot. Since she won't be able to go up the stairs more than once a day for the first week, when she's up here, she'll be up here, can't sprint down for munchies. And when you're up here, you'll hopefully be sleeping, and won't want to be running down to fetch munchies. So, I stocked up the nursing station for the first shift. Did the same with your sofa. Wasn't entirely sure where'd she want to be, but right now your sofa, right in the prime TV watching spot, is hers."

"Thanks."

"No problem. Breena's mom did it for us while we were still in the hospital. I remembered Breena really appreciated that, so I did it for Abby."

"Molly coming to visit today?"

"Breena's bringing her over with dinner. She's been babbling non-stop about the new baby. Can't wait to see Kelly."

They were in the car when Tim asked, "What'd you get?"

"Stuff you need. Stuff you don't know you need."

"Like what?"

"About six half gallons of ice cream, protein bars, fresh and dried fruit, lots of nuts, eggs, milk, basically lots of fat, calories, calcium and protein, all the building blocks of good milk. 'Course, if Kelly's allergic to any of this stuff, it'll make her miserable, but let's not try to jump that hurdle until you know if you need to or not."

"Great."

"Doubled your store of diapers, tripled baby wipes. Trust me, you're gonna go through them way faster than you think you will. Cloth diapers."

"We weren't going to—"

"Not for that. Use them as spit up bibs/clothing protectors/handy wipes for anything that might come out of Kelly. They're cheaper and more useful than seventy million paper towels. Think we've got like 100 of them and never seem to have too many, and we've never actually used one as a diaper."

"All right."

"Didn't see any nursing pads, so I got them, too."

"Some went with her to the hospital. Rest are in our room."

"I know Breena was going to pick up some nursing bras for her. Can't really get those ahead of time."

"She told me they had that planned. So, what do I owe you?"

Jimmy shook his head. "Year from now, pay it down the line to Tony. Looks like they're gonna be working on a little DiNozzo awfully soon."

"Yeah, it does."
When they got back, Gibbs was walking the halls with Kelly. She was awake, fussing a little, but not full out crying.

Gibbs handed her over without having to be asked, and said, "Just finished eating. The doc's in doing a wound check for Abby." Tim doesn't need an explanation for why Gibbs didn't stick around for that.

He takes Kelly, who decides this is a prime moment to go from fussing to full on crying, and heads back to their room, patting her back, shushing away. "Help me out, is this the I need to burp cry or the I'm sleepy cry?"

She cried louder. It wasn't much help.

"Diaper change?"

Three more steps got them back to their room. The wound care specialist was in, checking Abby over, he caught the tail end of, "...everything looks good but if it gets red, hot, or starts leaking any sort of discharge you need to see your doctor."

"Okay."

The specialist looked up at Tim. "I was just telling your wife that everything looks fine..." and then proceeded to give him the full wound care instructions and things to look out for, as well. "We'll do one more quick check tomorrow morning, but assuming everything looks fine, you're going home tomorrow around lunch time."

It's a bit difficult to have a conversation with a small crying person in his arms, but he's got the feeling the specialist has done this more than a few times before. So he nods, repeats back the instructions, and feels a general sense of pleasure at the idea of getting home with Abby and Kelly.

When the specialist left, he sat on the end of Abby's bed. "Did she burp?"

"Yes."

"Diaper changed?"

"Gibbs got it when she woke up."

Tim grinned at that. "So he does change diapers."

"He does when I give him puppy eyes about grabbing three more minutes of sleep."

He outright laughed at that. Then laid Kelly on his legs, looking up at him, and said to her, "You're fed and burped. Is all this about a wet diaper?" as he began unswaddling her and checked.

"Nope. Dry diaper. Sleepy?" He followed the how to swaddle directions and ended up with a very loosely wrapped baby who could kick her way out of the blankets.

Abby watched his efforts, not saying anything, but after a minute he handed Kelly over, and she did a... better job. Neither of them produced the perfectly smooth and snug bundle the nurses or Gibbs managed.

But, not having managed it, they stumbled onto the issue. Too hot. Babies might in general like having a snug little bundle to keep all their limbs in place, but they also don't enjoy overheating. And having gotten a bit of extra ventilation, the crying stopped.
Abby took her cap off. "It's what, ninety out there?"

"Probably."

"Maybe she doesn't need a hat."

"Maybe not." He noticed Abby was looking awfully sleepy. "I think we're gonna get a walk. How about you get some more sleep?"

"That sounds really good."

He kissed her and headed for the waiting room area. He doesn't know how they set it up, but at any given time at least one someone who wants time with an awake Kelly will be out there.

Sarah. She sees him and smiles, and he goes to sit next to her.

Kelly's laying on his lap, and he's trying to get this swaddling thing worked out. He's guessing a big chunk of the current fussing is based on little arms and legs flailing around and supposedly swaddling is the answer to that. It shouldn't be hard, but for whatever reason the neat, tight little bundle the nurses and Gibbs and Jimmy and Breena can all produce with basically no effort at all turns into an adventure in remarkably ineffective origami when he's in charge.

"You want me to do it?" Sarah asked.

"When have you ever swaddled a baby?"

"Let's see… How about nine thousand times over the three years I was babysitting for the Millers?"

"Oh." He tucked the blanket over Kelly, snugged it in close, and managed to get her into a rather lopsided bundle, but she at least wasn't flailing anymore, and he could claim the hole at the bottom was additional ventilation for her so she didn't overheat. "And no. I don't want you to do it. I need to learn how to do this, and I'm not if you guys keep doing it for me."

"No problem." She sits next to him, gently stroking her niece's cheek. Kelly turns toward her, looking in her general direction, with an expression Tim thinks means, this is nice, where's the milk? But it could also be, feeling sleepy or mild pique.

Understanding entirely non-verbal communication from someone he's just met is tricky.

"So… Mom was pretty happy you sent her a picture of Kelly."

He rose his eyebrows, feeling a little surprised. He hadn't realized he'd done that, but thinking back, he knew she was on the family list and he hadn't taken her off.

"I'm guessing by that look it wasn't intentional."

Tim shook his head. He picks Kelly off his lap and holds her close, his chin on the top of her head, feeling her in his arms, hands really, inhaling that sweet, milky, baby scent.

Sarah watches them, waiting to see if Tim will say anything, but he doesn't, so she says, "What do you want me to do?"

"How do you mean?"
"With mom and dad. Penny filled me in and…" Sarah squeezed his shoulder. "Whatever you want or need. I'm here."

"Oh." They'd never gotten around to that lunch with Penny, so they haven't talked about this, and to some degree he'd rather not. For another long moment he held Kelly, feeling the soft, warm weight of her against his skin, and with that comes a level of clarity. "He held you like this, you know… Well, not exactly like this, you were a few months old when he got back. But mom certainly did…"

"And you did."

"Yeah. We were both a lot smaller then." He sits there, holding Kelly, hearing her breathe and the soft, little chirpy sounds she's making. "This sort of focuses things. They're your parents, and they didn't fuck you over, so… Do what you like. I'm not going to hold it against you or think less of you if you keep a relationship with them. I'm not going to make you pick, me or them.

"Not gonna do that to Penny, either. She did this, too, for him. Felt his fingers close around hers and fell instantly, unbreakably in love." Her hand is out of the swaddle, and his finger strokes over the back of her hand, flits over her fingers, still amazed at how tiny her hand is, and feels four fingers clasp around his.

"What about you and them? Mom was pretty excited to get your text."

"That was an accident. I forgot to take her contact off my family list… I'll forgive her eventually. I'm angry, really angry, but I don't want to cut her out completely. Yesterday was my daughter's birthday and she should be here for this, but..." He lets it trail off. It hurts that she isn't here, in a way he wasn't expecting, but he knows that right now, seeing her would hurt even worse.

Sarah wraps her arm around him.

"Things will stay the same with Dad. Penny tells me that he asks you for updates on me, pictures and stuff… No pictures for him of Kelly or any other kids we may have. He doesn't get to be anywhere near my children. He doesn't get to know them, even second hand. That's something you can do for me."

"I can do that."

"Maybe he'd be okay with Kelly, because she's a girl, but I'm not risking it."

"It's okay. I won't pass anything on. Won't answer questions about you guys anymore."

Sarah's hand rests on his, her fingers between his on Kelly's back. "He did this for you, too, you know?"

Tim closes his eyes, feeling those words, and the sensation, the emotions of this, brand new baby, his child, in his hands, and all the hopes and dreams and fears and love. "Yeah. I do. But it didn't work. He didn't fall in love with me. He fell in love with an idea." He kissed the top of Kelly's head, silently promising her that no matter who or what she wants to be, that he'll be there for her. He looked back up at Sarah. "So, what are you going to do?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Watch him a lot more carefully if I have kids. I don't think he'll get to go on one on one sailing trips."

"Good plan."

"He'll be stateside again in a few months, probably see him then."
Tim nodded at that.

"What about you and him? Glen and I get married, can both of you be at the wedding?"

Tim shrugs. Spending time near his dad's really low on his to do list. Napalming his sister's chance at her daddy giving her away for her wedding also isn't something he wants to do. "I promise you I will not start anything. I can't promise I won't end it if he does. I'm pretty much done with taking shit I don't have to, and he's at the top of the list of guys I'm not taking any more shit from. Last time I saw him we were in the same room for less than five minutes, with Gibbs, investigating a murder, and he still decided to make a few cracks about my weight and love life. I'll play by the rules if he does, but if he doesn't…" There's something else he probably doesn't need to be thinking about.

He shifts the topic, to something a little more relevant right this second. "So, are you and Glen getting married?

Sarah shrugged. "Talking about it, a little. Not entirely sure if he's the one."

"Unless you want to have five or six of these little dudes, I don't think you need to rush."

"Nah. How'd you know Abby was the one?"

"Spending almost a decade dating other people and having them come up short compared to her was a clue. But for that almost decade it didn't much matter because she didn't want the same thing I did, so I did date, and looked at other people, because we were never going to be happy if I kept wanting this," and he kissed Kelly's head, "and she kept wanting a collection of friends with benefits. I lucked out, eventually she decided she liked the idea of where I wanted to go, and agreed to go there with me. But that was just luck. It doesn't work that way for a lot of people, maybe even most of them. So, is Glen the guy, or is there a guy who kind of looks like him that you haven't found yet, or he hasn't become yet?"

"Don't know. Good question to think about."

They sat together for a few more minutes. "You gonna tell me about your super top secret editor's meeting?"

That got a smile out of Sarah. "Super top secret. Like, really, not to be spread around."

"Who am I going to tell?"

"Your agent? Your publisher?"

"I'll keep quiet."

"In December I hand in the last of the Levi books, and with that my contract's over. My editor, agent, and I are breaking off and starting our own imprint."

Tim's eyes went wide. "You're starting your own publishing house?"

"Yeah. Multi-media, all web-based, all social media, podcasts, ebooks, mini-movies. We're going to cater to the tumbl'r fans, and give them everything they want. Tons of content and we'll run it as a subscription service, like cable. We'll let the fans play, too, not just consume. Tons of fan created content. If we can get it off the ground, it'll be awesome. Right now we're setting up the list of authors we're going to headhunt."

"Wow."
"Yeah. You know who Amanda Hawking is?"

"The little girl who wrote those troll books? Sold a million of them on Amazon before she was twenty-six?"

"Yeah. We're studying her playbook, and going to work it, but with professional production values."

"Very cool."

"I really hope so."

"And you're the brand name star?"

"One of them."

"You've got takers?"

"A few."

Tim smiled at that, very happy for Sarah. She stroked Kelly's cheek. "I think she's asleep."

"Then we're going to go lay down."

"Good plan, you look like you need a nap."

This time, he headed back to their room, gently put Kelly in her bassinette and noticed that yes, the sofa did fold out, so he spread it out and got to lie all the way down and that was a whole lot better than trying to sleep sitting down on it.

"Feel like another visitor?" Breena's voice this time, though he's heard a variation on that question from everyone in the family now.

"Sure," Abby says, which was when he really woke up enough to notice she was up and nursing Kelly.

He noticed the scent of egg rolls and broccoli and chicken, and sat up rubbing his eyes. "Visitors with food are especially welcome."

"You have to be really gentle with Aunt Abby and Kelly," Jimmy says to Molly as they walk in. She's in his arms. Yes, she can walk, but these days seems to have two speeds, running like crazy or ambling along at toddler speed, which is really, really slow.

So, assuming they want to get somewhere and not have her get into everything around/bump into other people, Jimmy usually carries her.

Molly's nodding at that, eyes wide, bright smile on her face, Jimmy and Breena's smiles wrapped together and amped through the innocent joy of a life untouched by any real sorrow. Tim felt around for his phone and started to film this, figuring that they'd all want footage of the first time the girls met.

"Baby!"

"Yep. There she is." Jimmy gently put Molly down on Abby's bed, next to Abby, who was holding Kelly. He kept a hand on her, ready to yank her back fast if need be, but letting her get close on her
"Baby!"

"Molly, this is Kelly," Abby said.

Kelly kicked free of the blanket and Molly saw her foot. Thin little foot, narrow sole, tiny toes. She looked at it, very gently, very slowly traced her finger over Kelly's foot, said, "Baby foots," and started to laugh.

Tim felt himself laugh in answer. Abby smiled, might have wanted to laugh, but that hurts too much right now. Jimmy kissed the top of Molly's head, and Breena grinned at her.

"You were that size when you were born," Breena said to Molly.

"No." Molly's shaking her head emphatically. The idea that people change, that she's been changing is just way beyond Molly's 16 month old mind.

"Okay. You've always been this size," Breena said while setting down the food.

Tim almost says something like your little brother or sister will be this size, but remembers that Jimmy and Breena haven't told Molly about the new baby yet. Mostly because she just won't really get it. Plus the idea of waiting six months is another thing completely beyond her sixteen-month-old mind.

Jimmy's taking her shoes off and then holds Molly's foot up to Kelly's foot. "See how much bigger you are?"

That Molly gets. She's about twenty-five pounds now, and compared to Kelly looks like a giant. Though three days ago Tim was awfully convinced that Molly was the tiniest little baby girl on Earth.

Kelly finishes the breast she'd been working on, and Abby holds her up to burp. Molly inches a little closer, standing, little wobbly (Jimmy still has a hand on her, making sure she won't fall into Kelly or Abby) and kisses Kelly's forehead. Kelly twists her head and sort of squints at her.

For a second there, you could feel the collective 'Oh How Cute!' from all the adults.

Then Molly noticed the remote to Abby's bed, and that was the coolest thing ever, which resulted in some less than happy moments while she had a bit of a melt down over not being able to play with it. And Kelly started fussing, having to burp and not burping is uncomfortable and this whole eating thing was a lot easier when the food was just directly deposited through her umbilical cord.

And like with everything else in life, the precious moments are just moments, and parenthood is a whole lot more cleaning up messes and managing the desires of small people than basking in the glow of cute baby joy.

And so, the four of them, now all parents, got to it.
First Day Home

Tim is never, ever going to curse the guy going fifteen miles an hour under the limit out again. Okay, not like he ever walked up to the guy and said anything, but he often had some pretty choice words floating through his mind.

But not anymore.

No, if he's stuck behind a car creeping along, dodging pot hole, with a white-knuckled guy at the wheel, he's going to assume there's some insanely precious cargo in that car, like, say, a two-day-old-infant, and maybe a woman who just gave birth to said two-day-old-infant.

Honestly, he's actually more nervous about Abby in the car than Kelly. The huge stack of regulations for taking care of your just-had-a-baby wife included no driving for two weeks, which struck him as weird, so he asked about it, and well, yeah, apparently Kelly’s in a tiny seat designed to keep her in place and protected if anything happens, but Abby's insides are currently being held in by slowly dissolving stitches and a car accident right now would be a really bad idea.

He's also nervous about the fact that this is a new car. Okay, not brand new, he's had it for a month. But he had the Porsche for almost a decade, and he could drive that in his sleep. His body knew how it moved, understood it's idiosyncrasies. He was one with that car when driving it.

The Highlander is big, way too damn big, and compared to the Porsche really unresponsive, and he's just nervous about it because he doesn't have a good feel for what precisely is going to happen when he presses his foot down on the gas or break or exactly what sort of lag he's going to get between beginning to turn the wheel and the car actually moving.

So, to say that he is driving carefully, bordering on paranoid, is not in any way, shape, or form an exaggeration.

They'd gotten the car seat that supposedly fits all ages, and Kelly looks ridiculously tiny in it. He'd also, finally, gotten a good, tight swaddle on her, just to realize that the little strap goes between her legs, so that she can't be swaddled in there.

So, to add to the general fun of trying to get home with a new baby in the car and a healing wife, he's also got this small person who is complaining, loudly, about the fact that she's got no motor control and these weird things that are attached to her keep flapping around and she finds it just really unnerving and would very much like it to stop, please.

They finally got home. Only took him forty-five minutes to drive three miles.

Gibbs had an awfully smug smile on his face when they pulled in.

When they got home, Gibbs snagged the prescriptions and headed off to fill them, giving them a while at home, alone, just the three of them.

Abby had found the little nest on the sofa that Jimmy had made for her, and crashed into it. Right now if she's not actively talking to you (and sometimes when she is), she falls asleep. (Jimmy says that's the pain meds.) Which left Tim, holding Kelly, standing in his home, not entirely sure what to
do next.

But, after a minute, when it occurred to him that Kelly appeared to be asleep too, that there was something he wanted to do, and hadn't been able to really do comfortably because of the lay out at the hospital.

But he could here.

So he sat next to Abby, snuggled in close to her, (carefully, she's still awfully sore) and held both of his girls in his arms.

And a minute into that, feel asleep, too.

Half an hour later, when Kelly decided it was meal time, he was able to sit behind Abby, support her body with his, really be there with her for this.

Comments with Jimmy about nursing breasts aside, it's not erotic.

Might be eventually. Like if his libido ever kicks back in again. Right now, it just feels unplugged. Best he can tell, he hasn't thought about sex, at all, since the morning before Kelly was born, and that's got to be a record for him. And he does have to admit the fact that each of Abby's breasts are bigger than Kelly's head and that even with her mouth wide open she's still not getting much more than just the nipple blows his mind, but not in any sort of a ohhh sexy sort of way.

Mostly just in a Wow, that changed fast sort of way. With a side of gosh, that can't be comfortable.

So, there's no sense of titillation at watching this, being part of it.

But there is a soul-deep sense of primal satisfaction at his. His woman, his child, both of them wrapped in his arms. He's ready to go off and kill the saber-toothed tigers that may threaten them, and return with food to keep them strong and healthy.

Or since the saber-toothed tigers are extinct and the fridge and pantry are already full of food, he can sit here with them, his chin on Abby's shoulder, his arms under hers, helping to keep Kelly's weight off her abdomen.

He kisses Abby's neck, pets Kelly's cheek.

Like before, he finds himself wanting better, stronger, more powerful words than I love you, but right now, especially with as tired as he is, he doesn't have them.

"I love you."

Abby nods, resting her head against his.

It feels like sleepwalking. Probably. She's never actually sleep walked, slept walked?, no matter, whatever it is, she's never actually done it before, but if she were to assume what it's like, it's like right now.

Time's gone. Just vanished. It gallops by in two hour runs that take up only seconds when she's asleep. It drags out into day long minutes of hyper-aware, nervous worry when she's awake. And then slides away again when Kelly's at her breast or she's trying to listen to something but her eye
slide shut and she's asleep again.

Abby's honestly not sure what day it is, let alone time. Daytime, probably, she can hear rain and it's pretty gray behind the artificial light of their living room, so it could also be evening or morning but probably not the middle of the night.

The only solid thing in her life right now is pain. That's always there. Stronger sometimes, weaker others, but always there, waiting for her to laugh or cough or try to lay on her side or get up or something. Sometimes, for a minute, when she's sleeping, it feels like it slips away, but that's a lie, it's just hiding, waiting for her to get comfortable, so it can jump out and pounce on her like a cat playing with a wounded mouse.

But the cat does that because it doesn't want to get hurt. It has to make sure the mouse is too far gone to really fight when it takes a bite, otherwise it might get bit in return and end up with a nasty infection that kills it.

The pain's just doing it for kicks and giggles.

It likes seeing her almost relax and then jump back out again, reminding her she's not whole. It enjoys rubbing her nose in the fact that she's wounded, damaged, broken, ripped shreds of a pulp of the woman she used to be.

Her breasts ache. They hurt as they get full when she needs to feed Kelly. Then they feel like streaming fire when her milk lets down. Her nipples scream when she nurses. The lactation consultant said Kelly was doing it right, she had a good latch, but that 'it could be a little uncomfortable at first' while her nipples toughened up.

Supposedly it'll get better.

The doctor says the incision is healing up nicely. Supposedly that'll get better, too.

But she doesn't see how it can. Life's stuck in this blurry, eternal gray now. Kelly was born seventeen years ago, or maybe two days, she doesn't really know. She jerked a little, aware of the fact that she'd fallen asleep in Tim's arms, while nursing Kelly, and she can't do that.

Yeah, this time he was there, so Kelly didn't get dropped, but she can't sleep, she could have dropped her, could have broken her, so she can't sleep, if she sleeps then something bad could happen.

Gibbs loomed up out of somewhere, asking what she wants for lunch, and she just doesn't care, at all. Now that Tim's holding Kelly (he was behind her a second ago, but now he's not, now he's standing in the middle of the room next to Gibbs, holding Kelly. God, did she drop Kelly? Did he have to pick her up?) safely out of her reach, she can sleep.

She's half aware of Tim petting her head, saying something about setting some food out, as she slipped out of awake back into sleep.

Tim looked back up at Jethro. "I think the pain killers are really knocking her out."

"What's she on?"

"Toradol in the hospital, and I think you got Percocet for her."

They headed into the kitchen. Tim offered Kelly to Gibbs, but he shook his head, signaling, you
“cuddle the baby, let me learn my way around your kitchen and make you two some food.” Tim nodded at that.

“You want some coffee?”

“Yeah. There's some old stuff with caffeine in it in there, do it a third caff two thirds no caff, I'm thinking I'm going to need some help with the new sleep schedule.”

Gibbs smiles at that, finds the coffee bags and sets up the machines. Then he takes out his phone and adds a note.

“What's that?”

“Reminder to get you some real coffee.”

“Thanks.”

“Got cold cuts. Club sandwich?”

“Sounds good.”

“Thinking I'd make some burgers for dinner.”

Tim nodded, noticing that Kelly seemed pretty droopy. “Think she's almost asleep. I'm going to put her in the crib.”

Gibbs smiled at that. “Good luck.”

He got up the stairs, got her very gently laid onto the crib, and got almost all of the way back out of the nursery before the fussing began.

So, three minutes later, he was back in the kitchen with Kelly, and the little bouncy-seat snoozing thing they had. He set that on the table, put her in it, and she decided to conk out.

“Don't think she likes the quiet.”

Gibbs looks up from slicing a tomato, his amused expression on his face.

“What?”

“Works better if you leave her in there more than thirty seconds. They usually fuss a little before falling asleep.”

Tim shrugged. “Want Abby to sleep, and she doesn't sleep if Kelly's fussing…”

Gibbs nodded at that, too. “Yeah.”

Tim crosses to the dining room door, looking in on Abby in the living room. She's sleeping, but doesn't look peaceful, at all. He wants to go kiss her, pet her some, but he's afraid he'll wake her up, so he heads back into the kitchen.

He tilts his head toward where Abby is. “This is normal, right?”

Gibbs shrugged. “Back when I did this, they didn't let Shannon out of bed for three days. Didn't go home for a week. Kelly did bottle feeds every other feed for the first three days so she could get more rest.”
"Might have to try that. She looks so tired."

"What'd Jimmy say?"

"That this is normal."

Gibbs sent him a *then relax about it* look, and handed him a plate with a club sandwich on it. Tim took it to the sofa and put it on the little table next to Abby. He's thinking that if she doesn't wake up on her own before Kelly’s next meal, he'll feed her himself, and let Abby get six straight hours of sleep. She needs it.
"Okay, Honey, I know it's not Mom's, but she's really tired, so let's try this and see if it'll do."

Gibbs was holding Kelly as he made up the bottle. She didn't appear to be too thrilled with either of them right now. At two days old she knows where the food comes from, and while both of these two might be good for napping on, they are not the provider of food.

But, since the provider of food is still dead asleep and both of her guys think she needs the rest, they're on mealtime for Kelly.

He got settled down at one of the kitchen chairs, Kelly in his arms, bottle in hand, nipple in mouth, and she was sucking away, expression on her face indicating that this was not what she was expecting, but it's not entirely unwelcome either.

Honestly, it's really nice. He's liking this, and can see doing it again, actually looking forward to it.

"What are you doing!" Abby shrieked at him.

He was so startled by that he almost dropped Kelly. He did drop the bottle. Which set off Kelly, who had been appreciating the food, and began to cry as a result of it suddenly vanishing.

"Feeding her." The look on Abby's face is terrifying. She is red hot furious at him right now. "You're so tired… I just… wanted you to get some more sleep."

"You can't do that! It's bad for her! She has to breastfeed!" Abby's trying to take Kelly away from him, crying, saying something about bonding and allergies, and Tim's feeling like the rug just got yanked out from under his feet.

It takes him a second to get his bearings back. "Okay, okay. Go, sit down, get yourself settled, and I'll bring her over to you." He's flashing Gibbs a help me look, but Gibbs is also looking like he just got the rug yanked out from under him, too. Gibbs just shakes his head a little, acknowledging that backfired spectacularly.

Tim flashes back a, yeah, I guessed that, look.

Abby's sitting on the sofa, sobbing, breast out, rambling about how if you bottle feed, even just once, that some babies never go back to breastfeeding and how bad formula is for them and something about micronutrients and how formula feeding means Kelly won't get the benefit of Abby's immune system. Basically it's a huge, hysterical, teary, snotty fit cumulating in trust issues and how could either of them possibly think it was all right to just decide something that immense without even talking to her about it.

Tim very warily approaches the sofa with Kelly, who is also crying, and gently hands her to Abby.

And Kelly, at least, calmed back down again when she got a hold of a nipple and some milk, but Abby's still on a massive crying jag.

He tries to sit next to her, wrap his arm around her, and she flinched away from him, probably still yelling at him, but she lost pretty much all coherence a few paragraphs ago.
So he knelt on the floor in front of her, made sure to wait until she took a breath, and said, slowly, and as calmly as he can manage, "I am very sorry. I didn't know it was that big of a deal. I just wanted you to get some sleep. I will not try to feed her again without talking to you about it first."

That barely made a dent in the crying jag, but he sat there, hands on her knees, looking up at her with an earnest expression, trying to hold his own calm, which very much wants to run away and break into a thousand crying pieces as well, because he's awfully tired and emotional right now too, but that won't help anything, but maybe his touch and just being there can help her find her own calm. Eventually she did calm down a bit, and unfortunately calming down meant she started to see what she had done, and that started another crying jag, this time embarrassed and angry at herself for going off the deep end.

But at least with the second crying jag he could sit next to her, rub her back, and interject occasional comforting sounds along the lines of 'it's okay' and 'this is normal' and 'you're on a lot of drugs.'

The main thrust of the second jag was that, no, he did not need to seek permission to feed his own child. And that it was totally irrational for her to expect that. And that she was a horrible person for even suggesting it, let alone getting mad about it. (He tried to curb that one with extremely limited success.)

When Kelly got done, he was very relieved to hand her over to Gibbs and ask, "What was the last thing you ate?"

Her eyes are bright red, face puffy from crying, and her voice rough. "I don't know."

"Okay, let's deal with that first. Jethro made you a sandwich, and look at all the goodies Jimmy left for you."

"I'm not hungry."

"You've got to eat, baby. Anything you want, at all, I'll get it for you."

"I don't want anything. Just want to sleep. I'm so tired."

"Soon. Just, eat the sandwich, okay. Sandwich, more meds."

"Don't want them, they're making me crazy."

"New meds, not the same stuff you were taking before. This one's an opiate, like morphine."

She just gave up and slumped deeper into the sofa.

"Just a little food, and I'll take you upstairs, you can lay all the way down, and sleep as long as you want."

That got a tiny nod, and she reached for the sandwich.

Tim headed into the kitchen to get a dose of Percocet. Gibbs was walking Kelly around, working on getting a burp out of her.

"Storm over?"

"I don't know." He grabbed a glass and filled it with water and headed back out to the living room. Abby had taken a few bites of the sandwich and was lying against the sofa with her eyes closed.

"Come on, baby, just a bit more food."
She opened her eyes and took another bite, then took the pills and water from him, swallowing them down.

He sat next to her while she silently finished the sandwich. When she did, he asked, "Upstairs?"

She nodded again. He picked her up, carefully, very gently and slowly, and she still winced. "Better walking?"

That got a headshake, so he took her up to their bedroom and laid her on their bed. That got another wince, and it took him a moment but he figured out the problem might be that she hasn't lain flat since... hell, since she was six months pregnant with Kelly, and right now especially that's probably more stretch on her abs than feels good.

"You want pillows to prop up?"

Headshake. The not talking thing is really unnerving to him.

"Can I get you anything?"

Another headshake.

He's flailing around for a question that doesn't have a yes or no answer, but by the time he came up with one her eyes were closed again and she was looking asleep.

So he headed back downstairs.

"That can't be normal! Can it?"

Gibbs shrugged. "Shannon never did that." Tim's getting out his phone. "You got her for a few more minutes?"

"I've got her. Calling Jimmy?"

"Breena."

"Good plan."

He got Breena on the third ring. "Hey, what's up?"

So he explained and wrapped up with, "Is this normal?"

"If it lasts more than a few hours a day or more than a few weeks, no, it's not. Otherwise, welcome to baby blues."

Tim's eyes went wide. "This is baby blues?"

"Yeah, it sounds so cute, right? Oh, you've got baby blues, you'll cry a little and mope. Try full on raving psycho for a little bits of time every day for about two weeks."

"Shit."

"Eloquently said. The first two weeks I was generally okay when anyone else was around, and more
or less sobbed uncontrollably during all the night feeds."

Tim sighs.

"It will get better. And if it doesn't they've got medication for it."

"Wonderful. Okay, what are danger signs of not okay?"

"Not sleeping. Crying more than like three hours a day."

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. "Three hours a day? Three hours a day of this is normal? I really need to read that pamphlet they gave us."

"Yeah, you do."

"Okay, what else do I look out for?"

"If she wants to hurt Kelly or goes the opposite direction and won't let you or anyone else touch her, thinking you're going to hurt her."

"She's not talking."

Breena thought about that. "I'd keep an eye on that."

"And do what with it?"

"Go with her to her post-partum check-ups and make sure the Doc knows about it. When she's a little more healed up, make sure she gets out of the house and some baby free time every day. Right now there's not much you can do, she's exhausted and her body's going bonkers. Just turn the other cheek and deal."

"I can do that."

"Good. She flips out too much, give me a call, and I'll be there. Some things she needs to talk to another mom about."

"Okay."

"What's she doing now?"

"Sleeping."

"Probably the best thing for her."

When Tim got off the phone, Jethro was looking at him expectantly. "Might be baby blues, might be post-partum depression. Won't know for sure for a while. Got to read up."

Gibbs shook his head. "Not right this second. I've got Kelly. I'll put her down. You go get a nap. Part of why I'm here is so that you can sleep during the day, and then help Abby at night. So, go, sleep. I've got this."

"I should…"

"Go to sleep. You'll have plenty of time to research tonight when you're walking her around trying to
coax a burp out of her. Go to sleep."

"Okay."

He woke up to the tiny, cat meow cry of a newborn, took a second to figure out where and when he is, and then hopped up fast, hoping to get her before Abby woke up.

It looked like his mission was successful, he looked back as he headed out of their room and Abby was still asleep.

Two seconds later, he was picking Kelly out of her crib. "So, Pop got you to sleep in here, huh? He made it for you, you know that?" Tim said as he laid her on her back on the changing table. He set about unswaddling and unsnapping her onesie, getting onto diaper maintenance. "I helped, a little, with it. When your eyes can focus more than five inches away, you'll see your mom drew a beautiful picture of our family on the back of it. I didn't help with that." He got her out of the poopy diaper and began the clean-up. It's really not that bad, especially compared to handling one of Molly's diapers. Of course, these days, the biggest challenge with Molly is getting her to stay still long enough to get her clean. (He's seen both Jimmy and Breena chasing a half-naked Molly through the house, clean diaper and wipes in hand.) He's not having that problem with Kelly, she's just laying on her back, kicking around a bit, looking pretty alert and peaceful.

He got her cleaned up, in a fresh diaper, and buttoned back into the onesie. (For her first day home, she had the one that Jimmy and Breena gave them the day after their wedding. The first of the baby presents.)

They usually, if at this point in time anything involving Kelly can said to be usual, feed her right after diaper change, but she's pretty calm, and he hasn't actually had a chance to sit with her in the rocking chair, yet. So he settles down, his baby on his chest, rocking gently, and of course the chair has great action, smooth and easy, and it's very comfortable.

Sitting there, he's feeling very connected to Gibbs, who he just knows is behind him, watching, and this sense of family, and maybe for his line it's not unbroken the way it's supposed to be, but it's his, and it's real, and with Kelly in his hands, breathing gently against his neck, and Gibbs behind him, watching, it stretches through his life to time before him and time after.

"Doing it right?"

He feels the nod, unable to see or hear it, and a second later Gibbs's hand is on his shoulder. Tim squeezes it for a second, then wipes his eyes, and stands up. "Probably a good idea to feed her before she starts crying."

"That's always a good idea."

This time feeding her went without a hitch, and shortly after Jethro sent Tim up for another nap, and since the idea of sleeping during the day when Jethro was there, and then being there for Abby at night struck him as a good plan, he got the nap.

The next time he woke up he didn't hear anything. For a minute he just lay there enjoying not feeling horrendously tired and the fact that he didn't need to leap up and do anything right this second.
But after a few seconds of that, his inborn Dad skills perked up and decided he needed to investigate. Gibbs is down there. Everything is probably fine. But he can't just trust that. So, after checking Abby, seeing she was still asleep, and this time looking fairly peaceful, like she might have dropped out of exhausted sleep and into restful sleep. He got up and headed to the nursery.

No Kelly.

Downstairs.

He found Gibbs on the sofa, stretched out, bare feet, t-shirt and jeans, his usual off work summertime outfit, gently humming something as he stroked Kelly's back while she slept.

He remembered vaguely that he'd had some sort of father's day present planned for Gibbs. (Pictures were put together, wrapped, and delivered to Tony and Ziva, who were not expecting to take a brand new baby home on Father's Day and thus could be trusted to deliver the present to Gibbs without forgetting about it.) And that, if there was time, he wanted to add a shot of Gibbs with the baby girls to it. So he backtracked a few steps, grabbed his phone, and shot Gibbs cuddling Kelly.

Gibbs looked up at him as he did that.

"Hope that's not a' take a picture and die, McGee' moment."

Gibbs shook his head as Tim headed to sit on the end of the sofa. "Want a copy of it."

"You'll get one."

"Good." Gibbs kissed the top of her head. "Shouldn't let her get to used to sleeping on people."

"It's okay."

"You might not think that when the only place she wants to sleep is your chest and you want to do something besides be a pillow."

Tim smiles. "I'll call you. You're good for pillow duty."

Gibbs laughed at that, then checked the clock. "Should get started on dinner."

"I got it; you be a pillow."

Gibbs shook his head and slowly started up. "I'll go back to work soon enough. Let me take care of you guys while I can."

And like speaking of the devil is supposed to bring him near, Gibbs's phone began to ring. So Tim took Kelly, and Gibbs got the phone call. He can tell by Gibbs' posture that it's a work call, likely Tony. He hears the traditional Gibbs on the phone routine of "Yes... Uh huh... Ya think? Go do it..."

Gibbs tucked the phone back into his pocket, and headed into Tim's kitchen. "How fast does your grill heat up?"

"For burgers, about ten minutes."

Gibbs headed out and turned it on, and was back a minute later. "Nice grill."

"Jimmy and Breena got it for us."
Kelly shifted for a few seconds, stretching, and both of them went silent and still, not wanting to wake her up, but she seemed to settle deeper into sleep, so Gibbs got the ground beef, and Tim sat at the table, holding her against his chest, enjoying this.

"Jethro, don't you need to be at work?"

Gibbs looked up from mixing hamburger with A1 sauce, salt, and pepper. "Don't want the help?"

"God! No! Love the help, very happy to have you here, just… It's an active case. I've never seen you take off in the middle of an active case before."

Gibbs shrugs. The reason behind it is… well, kind of touchy-feely, not the sort of thing he's comfortable really saying, but this is Tim, and he does better with words than looks, so…

"It's Tony's team, Tim. I'm just making sure the transition goes smooth. He doesn't need me hanging around, too much. There's got to be life after NCIS. Can't just lay on a beach drinking cervezas."

"Like Mike."

"Mike had more irons in the fire than anyone knew about, even me. Yeah, there was a lot of booze and senoritas, but he wasn't just lying around."

"Okay."

"More to life means having a life outside of work. This," and Gibbs look filled in that he means this family, "is a lot of it. I'll be the anchor. And there'll be other stuff, too. Has to. Don't want you and Abby and Tony and Ziva and Jimmy and Breena getting sick of me. Don't want to be that guy who just hangs on."

"You're not."

"Try that again when I've been retired for a year." He shakes his head, he's getting close to it, but not getting to the heart of it. He can feel the presence of Shannon and his Kelly very strongly, and closes his eyes, because seeing them here would be disconcerting

"Jethro?" Tim sounds concerned.

He opens his eyes, goes back to working on the hamburger patties. "I was supposed to be a dad. Supposed to be a granddad." He looks at the ring Tim got him to put back on. The ring he thinks he's getting closer to ready to take off again. "I'm getting back to being the man I was supposed to be. This, being here, for you and Abby and for Tony and Ziva when they have their babies, providing back up support for Ducky with Jimmy and Breena's, this is being the man I was meant to be."

Tim smiled at that. Over Tim's shoulder he catches a quick glimpse of Shannon smiling at him, too.
Abby woke up feeling, clearer, better, more attached to the real world.

She was still sore, but that unhinged, unteathered feel was gone.

She made a mental note to find out whatever pain meds she had been on and to avoid it in the future, because obviously she didn't get along well with that one.

Then she had to deal with a new challenge. Getting up.

She's been sitting or lying on her back since the c-section, and at first it was brilliant and novel because it'd been months since she'd been able to lay on her back, but now, after three solid days of it, she's sick of it. But (as she found out when she tried in the hospital) lying on her side HURTS.

Getting from her back to her side, HURTS.

So, she's on her back, and needs, wants to get up. She's feeling pretty hungry, her breasts ache, which means Kelly is probably due to eat soon, and she can smell hamburgers and that's making her ravenous, so she has to get out of bed.

She gingerly places her hands on the mattress, tells herself that the more she moves the more functional the scar tissue will be, and slowly, gently pushes up, and… yeah, these are better pain meds because that wasn't nearly as bad as she was afraid it was going to be, but it really wasn't a walk in the park either.

She's really tempted to get a shower as she heads to the bathroom to change out her pad. She hates the smell of blood that just clings to her, but at least right now that wanting to rip her skin off revulsion seems to have passed.

But hungry is winning out over clean, so she heads downstairs, realizing she's walking better, and maybe lying flat out wasn't a comfortable position to get into, but it may have helped make walking easier.

When she got downstairs, Tim was setting the table, Gibbs was on the porch tending the grill, the rain had stopped, (it's not sunny or anything, but at least there's no rain falling.) and Kelly was in the bouncy seat at the far end of the table, snoozing.

Tim looked up at her. "You're looking better. You feeling better?"

She nodded. "A bit. How long did I sleep?"

"Six hours." He hugged her, from behind, very gently. Mostly he just pressed up against her and laid his chin on her shoulder. He didn't need to be told her entire front was really sore. "We fed Kelly, but she'll probably wake up and want to eat again soon."

"Good, my boobs are killing me."

He glanced at them. And they do look really swollen, and hard, and not in a good way, at all. "I'd imagine so."
She headed outside, for a moment standing on the porch just sucking up the early evening air. Gibbs saw her and kissed her cheek.

"Feeling like you again?"

"Feeling like I might be able to pick her out of a lineup."

"That's good enough."

"They smell good."

"Good, made you two, hoped you'd be hungry."

"Yes! I am!"

He smiled at that, flipped them over. "Five minutes."

"Okay." She gently lowered herself into one of the porch chairs and just rested in the warm, honeysuckle and burger scented air, listening to the hum of cicadas and the hiss of fat hitting flame.

Kelly slept through dinner.

Of course she did.

At first that was great. Time to actually eat. Talk a little. Enjoy the fact that Gibbs is really handy with a grill and beef. (He's telling them that once upon a time he was good with chicken and ribs, too, but hasn't done that in forever. Though it seems like Fourth of July might be at his place this year.)

And Kelly slept through it all. Blissfully out of it in the bouncy seat.

She made a little noise, fussed for a second, opened one eye, and looked around, as they were eating dessert (Abby and Gibbs had ice cream; Tim looked at it longingly and had one spoonful of Abby's.) and Abby was feeling pretty hopeful that Kelly would wake up and she could nurse, because at that point she was starting to understand why cows moo when they need to be milked, because she's feeling like moaning, too.

But nope, that one eye closed and back to sleep she went.

And while, in general, she's all in favor of Kelly having a long sleep, she'd A: prefer it was at night, real night, the part of the night she'd like to be sleeping, too, and B: it wasn't right now.

Then comes the quandary. If she's going to be awake, and she's going to be awake, this hurts way too much to sleep, and the idea of getting into any position other than upright, where her breasts would have to move, hurts to even think about, so doing it would be insane. What, is she going to do?

She could pump and go back to sleep. That's tempting. It might not feel good per se, but it would certainly be a relief. But she's almost certain that if she does that, Kelly will wake up two tenths of a second after she pumps and then that'll be another bottle feed and she doesn't want Kelly getting too used to the idea that food comes out of a bottle.

Plus, she doesn't want her body getting out of whack with Kelly's eating schedule. The idea is that boobs swell up, baby takes care of it, and they match each other in a perfect supply/demand curve.
She could get that shower, but like with pumping she's fairly certain that as soon as she's covered in soap, Kelly will wake up screaming for food.

But eventually the kitchen was cleaned up, and Gibbs headed home. Apparently the plan is he'd be there during the day. It's even entirely possible they had a conversation about it, planned it out, but if they did, she doesn't remember it.

And of course, the longer she puts off any decision of what to do next, the more likely Kelly is to wake up while/right after she's done it.

Tim's listening to her dither. "Just get the shower. It'll make you feel better, and it won't kill her to wait the two minutes it would take you to get rinsed off and out of the shower."

"What are you going to do?"

He thought about it, because, yeah, free time… Huh… "Haven't been online in three days. Probably post some baby pictures for the family. Maybe, if she keeps sleeping, I might game a little."

"Ohhh…"

"Yeah, living dangerously." He winked at her.

It wasn't until she was upstairs, in the bathroom, starting to get undressed that she realized that was her one trip up and down the stairs for the day. Anything else she wants or needs from down there either Tim's got to bring to her, or he's got to bring her to it.

Oh well.

She gets undressed, not looking at herself in the mirror. She doesn't want to see herself right now. Yeah, she's healing, but she's also pretty sure she's not looking incredibly different from how she looked yesterday, and she didn't like the way yesterday looked, at all!

So, she's not looking, not looking as much as it's possible to not look at yourself while getting a shower, but right now her breasts do hold a sort of sick fascination for her, so she does look, and… fuck. How does that even happen in three days?

They're the size of grapefruits and just about as hard, too. Covered in veins, which wasn't precisely new, all of the major veins in her chest have been really visible since she got pregnant, and stretch marks, which were. She's really, really hoping those heal up because it's one thing to have stripes on her hips and tummy, but she'd like to be able to wear things that show some cleavage eventually. On the left one she can see… she's not entirely sure what it is, a milk duct, maybe? Whatever it is it looks like a vein, that same sort of vascular appearance, but this one is swollen and not the blue of her blood veins.

She very gently, because she knows it'll hurt, dabs a little foamy soap on, and her boobs responded to that by deciding that was a call for milk release, so it was squirting everywhere. Which is kind of fascinating, kind of horrifying. First of all, it's probably a good thing Kelly's not trying to drink this, because she's at least eighteen inches away from the wall of the shower, and she's squirting it, hard. Her two day old daughter might not need quite that much high pressure milk being poured straight down her throat.

She'd never really thought about how the milk comes out. Apparently the correct answer is take a water balloon, poke a whole mess of holes into one spot, then squeeze. Milk is squirting from all
over the nipple in a whole lot of different directions.

She watched it, amazed, milk still flowing out, for probably a good minute, and then she started to get scared. What if Kelly woke up in the next few minutes, and her dinner was now circling the drain? Any second now, Tim could be bringing her up, hungry, and there'd be no milk for her.

*This is stupid. Each breast is practically bigger than Kelly is. Both of them together have to weigh more than she does. There's more than enough milk in there for you to let off some pressure and still feed her.*

That didn't make her less nervous, and it didn't quell the fear, but it did feel good to hear that little, quiet, *rational* voice and know it hadn't died.

Would have been nicer if it had managed to shut up the panicking baby's-gonna-starve voice. It didn't, couldn't. Rational wasn't so much fighting out of its weight class when going up against new mama hormones, as bringing a knife to a tank fight.

And maybe it would have been better—as she was standing there, crying, trying to figure out how to make the milk stop, to not have had rational sitting there telling her that getting upset about this is stupid and that she's a scientist for God's sake, so stop being stupid—if it had just shut up. But it didn't. So she cried and felt like an idiot for it.

But she's been a mom for two days and is drowning in frenzied hormones. And the little rational voice, in addition to telling her that freaking out about milk production is stupid, is saying that freaking out about milk production is also normal.

Eventually the milk slowed down, and her breasts felt better. Sore, they knew they'd been stretched too far, but that anything-touches-them-I'm-going-to-scream sensation was gone. Eventually she got washed up, and while the blood smell didn't vanish, it did get beaten into submission, so that was good.

Eventually, she stopped crying, put some clean clothing on, (okay, it's Tim's, but it's clean, and soft, and smells like him, so that's good.) and tried to figure out what to do next.

Sleep.

Or not. She was eyeballing the bed (most of the time having it hip high is a good thing, but right now it'd be a lot easier if she could sit down onto it) thinking through what and how exactly she'd have to move to get into it on her own and lying down when she heard footsteps and baby cries.

"Good timing," Abby said as Tim walked in with Kelly.

"She woke up a few minutes ago. Got her all cleaned up and thought she might like some Mom time."

She held out her arms, took Kelly into them, and just having her right against her chest and crying set her milk to letting down. See, plenty of milk.

Tim sees her staring at the bed, holding Kelly, looking a little uncomfortable, and after a second the problem hit him. "Do you need help getting into bed?"

"Probably."
"Not a problem."

He took Kelly from her, and carefully set her smack dab in the middle of their bed. (Just because she's the size of a loaf of bread, can't roll over, and they've got a king-sized bed does not mean he wants her anywhere near an edge.) She squeaked at that, signaling displeasure at once again being teased by being allowed to get close enough to smell the food, and then having it cruelly taken away.

Abby stacked the pillows against the headboard. Then Tim carefully picked her up and set her on their bed. She scooted back a little, turned, winced. Twisting at the waist hurts, too.

"I can get the pillows, too."

"No. The more I move the more functional the scar will be."

"Okay."

She got herself set, and picked Kelly back up again, and a little more juggling, trying to get arms and pillows and baby all comfortable, but eventually, she unbuttoned the shirt (one of the reasons she grabbed one of Tim's, she's awfully low on button-downs of her own) peeled off the nursing pad, accidentally squirted Kelly in the face before she got latched on, (Got a startled look out of Kelly, and a laugh out of Tim as he whipped out a cloth diaper to blot off Kelly. Abby's not sure when they appeared, but suddenly they seem to have a ton of them, and they're really useful.) and finally got into Hallmark card, idealized mama-nursing-baby-daddy-looking-on-everyone-happy-and-blissful-doing-exactly-what-they're-supposed-to-do mode.

Kelly's so tiny, and perfect, and her little mouth is wrapped around Abby's nipple, pulling gently, and it's not even hurting all that much this time. Her eyes are open, looking up into Abby's, really there, with her in this moment. Her skin is so soft. She's just in a onesie right now, so warm little arms and legs are resting against Abby's arm and breast, and one tiny hand is curled around Tim's finger.

Abby's with it enough right now to really see this, really soak in the details. Tiny little lips, shaped like Tim's, and the way Kelly's looking up at her puts her in mind of Tim very strongly, too. (Of course, coming from Tim, she'd call that look mild confusion.) She stroked Kelly's cheek, and nose (probably looks like her nose, but she's not sure about that), finger slipping along her ear. It's a perfect ear. When God designed ears, this is what He had in mind.

She studies the fingers wrapped around Tim's. Kelly's just so little and perfect. Each little fingernail has this minuscule crescent, shaped exactly right, and all of the little wrinkles around her knuckles are there. How can something so tiny have that level of perfect detail?

Abby pets Kelly's hair. She knows she's done this before, but memories of it are all sort of blurry. This time it's sharp. Silk fine hairs, not a whole lot of them, and they're pretty short, blondish brown, or brownish blonde, whatever that in between color is.

Tim's free hand strokes over hers, and over Kelly's head, and he leans down to kiss her head. "Looks like we're gonna have to wait a while before we can put all those little bows we got in her hair."

Then he sat up a little, and kissed Abby, gently.

He pulled back, looking her in the eye, palm of his hand stroking over her cheek. "I love you so much, Abby. Love her so much. Thank you. Sarah was asking me how I knew you were the one, and I was telling her that for a long time it didn't matter if you were the one because we didn't want
the same things… and just… Thank you. Thank you for deciding to do this with me. Thank you for becoming my 'the one.'"

And for what felt like the fiftieth time that day, Abby burst into tears again. Tim held her close. And Kelly continued to nurse.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So, one of you commented about this looking like possible pregnancy mania for Abby... And you guys have also probably noticed that they rate of updates has been slowing down a tad as well. So, here's what's going on. I do want to explore how having the baby isn't always all love and prettiness. I'm working on trying to set up a pretty realistic look at how right after a baby you can be doing fine one minute and the next your mind feels like a rat's nest of snarled badness, and then good again, and back into the dark, and how precariously balanced that is, and how easy it can be to topple over the edge, how hard it is to claw your way back out. But I'd also like to not dump 700 pages of grinding, unrelenting awfulness on you, either.

Some of you know I've got kids. And if you've read my other stuff, you know that in the last seven years I've written about 1.7 million words of fiction, and in those words I've written about pregnancy and having kids but I've never written about that five or so year span that happens right after you have the baby. Why? Because I did about four years of pretty awful postpartum depression.

On the upside, dealing with that gave all of you literal metric shit tons of fiction. On the downside, living through it wasn't much fun.

Anyway, the fiction that's coming out right now has required a lot more editing than usual and a lot more, Do we really need this?

But, anyway, just as a gentle reminder, if in some of the future chapters Abby's acting like she's insane, it's because, for all practical purposes, she is. She's not trying to be mean. It's not that she's ungrateful or doesn't appreciate Tim or love Kelly. She's just unbalanced and may need some help getting back. Or she may not. I'm not entirely sure how far I can take this. I may pull the punch because I can't write the full force of this hit.

We'll all have to sit back and see how it goes.

Happy Saturday everyone.
By the time Kelly finished eating, and got burped, it was nine thirty, so, bedtime. Early bedtime, but right now nothing sounds better to either Tim or Abby then a good long sleep.

So, when he finished burping her, Tim got up and started heading toward Kelly's nursery.

"Where are you going?"

He stopped, looked at Abby, bit surprised. "Putting her in her crib?"

"I thought she'd sleep with us."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Just. I know we didn't talk about it, but getting in and out of bed is awfully hard right now, and if she's right next to me, that'll make nursing easier."

"Good point." So he turns around and lays Kelly in the middle of their bed, she's all swaddled up, and her eyes are pretty droopy, so he's hopeful she'll fall asleep soon. And then stops. Normally, he'd go brush his teeth, strip off, and go to sleep. He looks back at Abby. "Is this really okay?"

"People have been sleeping with their kids since before there were beds."

"Okay, yeah, I know that, but… They've got to sleep on their backs, and they can't have any blankets or stuffed animals or pillows in there because they can get trapped in little CO2 pockets and SIDS and… And in our bed she'll between us, and we're a lot bigger than stuffed animals, and…” he points to their bed, "blankets, lots of blankets, and we've got five pillows."

Abby thought about that while very slowly twisting around and getting out of bed, going to join him on the whole brushing teeth getting ready to sleep thing. She pointed to the bathroom, so they could talk while Kelly drifted off.

He joined her in there, half closing the door, like that would cut down on the noise some.

"I think SIDS rates are supposed to be lower for babies who co-sleep," she said, reaching for her toothbrush.

"How does that work?"

"I have no idea. But you've got several computers less than a hundred feet away, so I'm sure you could go find out if you're really curious."

"Fine." Brush, rinse, swish, spit.

"Are you going to?"

"Not tonight. I got online, and it took me three tries to successfully upload pictures. Brain's not exactly firing on all cylinders today. Probably a good thing Jethro's sticking around during the day, because I know I wasn't aware of how fried I was until I tried to do something more complicated that mix water with formula."

Abby laughed a little at that, then winced, laughing still really hurts, and said, "Leon's don't hack NCIS thing making more sense."
"Oh, God. I wrote the damn firewall, left a path for myself, and I couldn't get through it right now."

She smiled and made herself not laugh at that.

He headed off, giving her some alone time in the bathroom, and began to get ready for bed, namely taking off his clothing. He makes a quick mental note that laundry needs to be done, and that since she's the one who usually does laundry, and there's no way in Hell she's doing laundry tomorrow, that he needs to take care of it.

And having taken note of that, and divested himself of his clothing, another thought hits, Kelly's in their bed. He's naked.

Is it okay to sleep naked with your baby daughter?

"You're glaring at the bed," Abby said as she got out of the bathroom.

"Do I need pajamas?"

"Why would you need pajamas?"

"'Cause it's not just you in our bed?"

"I don't think Kelly will mind."

He flashes her a could you miss my point more completely look. "You're wearing pajamas." Sort of. She's got on soft, cotton drawstring pants (his) and one of his button downs, as well.

"I'm bleeding, my boobs are leaking, and one of the more endearing bits of just having had a baby is night sweats."

"Good points."

"Yeah." She looked down at her feet, realized she still can't see them when standing up, but she remembers how swollen they are, and how each individual toe looks like a little sausage, and how if she pokes herself in the leg, it'll leave a dent. "All of that fluid has to come back out of me again."

"Okay. Just… we're pretty casual about being dressed, you know?" In that either of them is likely to be naked at any given time assuming it's warm enough, that's true.

"Yes." She's standing next to the side of the bed, and once again he gives her a hand into their bed. When he's done, she's sitting up, and staring at the place on the bed where her torso would go if she was lying down with something of a scowl.

"What is it?"

"Psyching myself up to try to lie down."

"Can I help?"

"Nah. Gotta do it on my own."

"Not today you don't, not if you don't want to."

"The less I move the more it'll hurt and the less functional the scar will be." She planted her hands
behind her, rested as much of her weight as she could onto her arms, and slowly lowered herself down, and yes, even with that it hurt. A full, pulling, burning near rip sensation that doing anything that involved her abs these days produced.

"At least let me help you get up."

"I like that plan." She stared up at the ceiling while saying. "That last two months I would have given my eye teeth to lay on my back. Now I really wish I could lay on my side again." Because right now, laying on her side involves her insides feeling like they're going to fall out, and that's not precisely a comfortable.

"Soon."

"Yep." She looked away from the ceiling and back to him. "So, it's not so much sleeping naked with her, as you're looking for what are our we've got-a-kid-now naked rules?"

"Yes. You want blankets?" She nodded, and he pulled them up over her. He sat down on his side of the bed, got under the covers, made sure they were up over him, and Abby, but pushed down in the middle so they weren't over Kelly, and rolled to face Abby, Kelly laying between them, snoozing away.

"I think as long as you're in your own room, you can wear whatever you want and as much or as little of it," Abby said.

"Sounds good. And our bed is in our room, so this is a clothing optional spot."

"I think so. I mean, I don't want Kelly thinking there's something weird or icky about bodies. And I don't want her thinking we're sexless buddies who just share a home."

He smiled at her, a hint of sexual heat, tired heat, but it's there. "We're not going to be those people."

"But, yeah, the days of sex on the living room floor and naked breakfast in front of the fireplace are probably over."

He very gently touches Kelly. "You better be worth that. I really liked naked breakfast."

Abby tried not to laugh, and he smiled at her, trying to figure out how to kiss her over Kelly without moving so much as to wake her up. He settled for squeezing Abby's shoulder.

So, if you tied him up and tortured him, Tim would admit that he wasn't exactly excited about Kelly sleeping in their bed.

Yes, there is a good practical reason for having the kid two inches away from you if you are nursing, because that way you don't have to get up and wake all the way up.

Fine, that's true.

But he's not exactly enthusiastic about the idea.

Part of it's the fact that he's not good at sleeping with other people. The first few times he slept with Abby it took him a good three hours to fall asleep. And he's certainly noticed from three nights in the hospital that anytime Kelly makes any noise or moves he's just about ready to leap up and do whatever it is needs to be done. Basically, he can't relax much past doze stage with her right next to
Part of it's the fact that he wants primary snuggle position with Abby. And even though Kelly cannot roll over, there is absolutely no shot she'd be sleeping on either side of the bed. No, because if there was a massive earthquake or something, she might fall out of the bed if she was on a side (and yes, he feels that just as strongly as Abby does, and no, it's not going away, and yes, it is awfully stupid, Virginia not precisely being a hotbed of tectonic activity, but he's been a dad for three days and is awfully tired so cut him a little slack) so Kelly would be sleeping smack dab in the middle of the bed, between him and Abby, which means in addition to limited daytime cuddle time, all night time cuddle time would also be cut off.

Part of it is the fact that she's smaller than the challah loaves Ziva bakes for Shabbos and he's terrified that if he lies down in bed he might actually fall all the way asleep, roll over, and smoosh her. Yes, the Lamaze teacher said something about that basically being an urban legend, but he knows how hard he can sleep when he's really tired, and he knows he moves around in his sleep, so it makes him nervous.

Part of it is that he's not entirely sure he wants to share his bed with a tiny, incontinent poop machine that spits up all the time.

And part of it is that she's got a perfectly good, hand-crafted, made-specifically-for-her-with-lots-of-love crib and it'd be nice if she got to see the inside of it more than once.

But even with all of those things being true, he's trying to support Abby on this, because really, brand new c-section and nursing wins out over him being nervous.

Whoever came up with the phrase sleep like a baby, has never, ever slept with a baby.

First of all, babies make a lot of noise. Somehow he hadn't really noticed that the first three nights. Tim thought he had. He thought he'd been on edge and aware of all the little chirps and snuffles and grunts, but nope, he hadn't been. Probably because the bassinet had been on the far side of Abby's bed and he'd been on the sofa, thus, about eight feet away, and right now he's about ten inches away from Kelly, so he's aware of everything.

Secondly, because he's ten inches away, he's very aware of the fact that she sleeps in little stretches, then fusses a tiny bit, a few chirps, a little wriggling, and goes back to sleep. But because she's been on the outside for three days and he's never spent this much time this close to her, every time she makes a sound or moves he jerks from dozing to full on awake.

And then, on top of it, he's terrified that if he moves, he'll wake her up. Yes, if the rational part of his mind was functional, it would remind him that she's spent the last nine months inside another person who was moving all the time, and that in fact, moving is generally what lulls babies to sleep and they tend to wake up when things go still, but the rational part of his mind is currently in a sleep-deprived coma and not reporting in for duty right now.

And while it's true that the whole nursing thing, in general, may indeed be easier if the baby is in the bed next to you, first off, Abby can't just roll over and stick a boob in Kelly's mouth right now. Secondly, as an incontinent poop machine, every time Kelly does, actually, wake up (as opposed to that little chirpy, wriggling, not really awake thing) she's in need of a new diaper, so someone (in this case Tim) actually has to get all the way up, take her to the changing table, remove poop and apply a new diaper. Which from the looks of it, takes about as long as it does for Abby to go from asleep to propped up and nursing.
Then post nursing, someone (in this case Abby, because while Kelly was nursing Tim was able to drift all the way to asleep) has to stay in a somewhat upright position to burp her, and then deal with the resulting spit up (Thank you Jimmy, cloth diapers are a blessing.) and then finally, Kelly and Abby and Tim were all in one bed, asleep.

For about nineteen seconds, because as soon as she hit the mattress, Tim jerked out of asleep and back into hyper-vigilant mode.

He's had worse nights of sleep. But never when he was this tired, let alone in his own bed.

Morning doesn't really mean anything when you were more or less awake around the clock. Sky went dark, it got lighter.

Kelly ate at nine, midnight, three and now, again at six.

Tim had just gotten back into bed from taking her for yet another diaper change. He's lying down, begging for sleep, but thinking he's got to say something about this because he's exhausted and Abby's exhausted and both of them exhausted is a really bad plan.

So he rolls onto his side while she nurses and says, "I can't sleep with her in the same bed. Just can't."

Abby's so tired, and is looking at him like he just added an extra fifty pounds to the already much too heavy back pack she's lugging around, and he feels like a jerk for saying it.

She doesn't say anything to him. Doesn't even cry, and he's got the feeling she's past crying, and now he's feeling like an even bigger jerk, but the only other alternative he can think of is him sleeping on the sofa, and if he does that he really will sleep and she'll be on her own for all of it, and that's just not cool, at all.

"I will go get her when she cries, bring her to you, and bring her back to the crib to sleep, you won't have to get up any more than you would if you were nursing in bed... will that work?"

Abby thought about that for a moment and nodded.

He nodded too, closed his eyes, and said, "I'm going to nap while she eats. Just poke me when it's time for her to go back to her crib, and I'll get it."

"Tim, it's morning. After she eats, we want her up a bit."

"Then poke me then, and I'll be up with her, we'll make breakfast or something, and you'll sleep."

"Okay."
Every home has its own patterns and rhythms, ebbs and flows of action, habits, and routine. Tossing a new baby into that home doesn't so much disrupt those flows as knock them over, shake them up, recolor them, and then put them back in the wrong place.

And for as close as Gibbs is to Tim and Abby, he's been to a greater or lesser extent, outside of those rhythms.

But not anymore. With the addition of Kelly to the mix, and him stepping into full Grandpa mode, he's slipped fully into Tim and Abby's home. He's not an outsider anymore, at all, he's home.

And he's very welcome here.

He waited until 0630 to head over. And getting to their house, he crept in, if they were sleeping, he wasn't going to wake anyone up.

Gibbs didn't hear anything, so he hoped everyone was, for the moment at least, asleep.

Then he headed to the kitchen to make some coffee. In there, he noticed nothing that looked at all like breakfast had been attempted, so he started rooting around for something to make them for breakfast.

When he's not eating take out/at the diner, Gibbs is a toast or oatmeal, eggs, and bacon guy. It's not complicated, or for that matter particularly good for him, but it's hot, easy, and he doesn't feel hungry half way to lunch like he does when he tries the 'better for him, low-fat' stuff that various wives and girlfriends have attempted to feed him over the years in an effort to keep him alive longer.

His dad made it 88 years on a more or less all fat, all protein, all caffeine, all bourbon diet, he's figuring it won't do him any harm, either.

Tim wandered down a few minutes later, looking like the walking dead, the naked walking dead. Apparently pants really are optional at the McGee house, or Tim is really so tired that it just didn't click that if he could smell coffee and bacon that someone else had to be in the house to provide those things.

Gibbs smiled at him, chuckling a little, and handed over the cup of coffee (one third caf/two thirds de-caf, good, hefty slug of milk, just the way Tim likes it.) and took Kelly from him.

He held her, noticing she was wide awake, looking pretty perky, and said, "You didn't let Mom or Dad get any sleep at all, did you?"

Tim sort of grunted at him. Took a long drink of the coffee, sighed, seemed to notice he was naked, and headed right back out of the kitchen without saying a word.

When he headed back down, about five minutes later, having not just remembered that conversation
with Abby about shifting their rather relaxed dress code a bit, but also having located some pants, he
found Gibbs in their kitchen, Kelly held securely to one shoulder, while he, one-handed, scrambled
eggs.

Tim had to admit he was pretty impressed by that.

Then he swooped over and grabbed Kelly because no one, not even the all-knowing, all-competent
Gibbs is holding his daughter one-handed near a hot stove.

Gibbs laughed at that, too.

Tim just looked at him and said, "You're lucky I'm not Abby, she would have yelled at you and
cried."

Gibbs nodded at that. "Rough night?"

"Let's put it this way, we are never, ever trying co-sleeping again."

Gibbs rose an eyebrow, not sure what co-sleeping was.

"Baby in the bed with us."

Gibbs winced a little at that. "They don't like sleeping alone. You do that and they'll decide they
want to sleep with you every night until they're seven."

"Is that the voice of experience?"

"I was home when Kelly was born, but got sent to Germany when she was four months old, for four
months. We were out of Lejeune then, and Shannon's family was still in Stillwater back then. So,
little baby, no real support for Shannon, and Kelly was never a great sleeper. Was just easier for the
two of them to sleep together. And of course I get home, and I want my wife back, but my daughter
had other opinions on the subject and wasn't happy at the idea of sharing Mom or being exiled out of
the nice warm bed where Mom was because this strange guy showed up and wanted all of her
attention."

Tim smiles a little at that, holding his Kelly, petting her back.

"Probably four solid years where I'd be off, and then come home, and Kelly was always happy to
see me until bedtime when she was less than thrilled to suddenly have to share Mom. I wasn't
winning any husband or father of the year awards on that one, couldn't have been easy on Shannon,
stuck between us, and I wasn't exactly sympathetic to Kelly wanting bed space with Shannon."

Tim laughed at that. "Rumors about Marines home on leave are not unfounded."

"No, they aren't. Especially since, unlike a lot of the other guys, I wasn't hitting the red light
districts."

Tim rose an eyebrow at him.

"Most of the world isn't too uptight about working girls. Prostitution is more or less legal in
Germany, and it's a less than two hour long train ride, depending on where you are, to Amsterdam
where it was full on legal. Germany's was the staging point for pretty much anything that happened
in the Middle East, where there's no booze, no women, no fun, so yeah, most of the guys partied
pretty hard when they had off time in Germany."
Tim smiled at that, too. Gibbs put two plates on the kitchen table, breakfast for both of them, and set
a third plate in the oven on warm for Abby.

"She's sleeping, right?"

"I really hope so. The nighttime deal we've got is I'm on baby fetching and poop removal duty, and
she does the feeding and burping part."

Gibbs nods, eating a bite of his eggs.

"So right now, with any luck, she's sleeping, and I'm dealing with her." He set Kelly in the bouncy
chair, still on the kitchen table from last night, and she sat there, kicking around a little. Tim's keeping
an eye on her, having her arms and legs free to kick and play is good, but if she gets too much of it,
she'll get agitated. So he's watching to see when she'll want to get swaddled again.

"She doing better from yesterday?"

Tim shrugged. "Pretty quiet this morning. Didn't look happy about Kelly not being in bed with us.
But seemed resigned that if I was getting her, it wouldn't be more work for her. I don't know, maybe
her sleeping with us is the right plan, but I won't sleep if she's in bed with us, and I just don't see
anything good coming out of both of us being exhausted all the time." Then a thought hit him, and
Tim got up, grabbed the plate out of the oven, dropped it back onto the rack, because it was hot,
found a hot pad, and grabbed it again. "She can only go up and down the stairs once a day. Gonna
take this up, that way she doesn't have to come down if she doesn't want to."

"Okay."

He was half way out of the kitchen when Gibbs said, "Fork."

Tim made a u-turn, grabbed some cutlery, and headed back up.

During breakfast, Kelly fell back to sleep. Shortly after that, Tim finished his food and Gibbs sent
him to go sleep some more, too.

Eventually, while Kelly was still sleeping, Abby wandered down.

"Feeling better?" Gibbs asked. He was sitting at their kitchen table, cup of coffee next to him,
reading something on his phone. Abby knew Tim had stuck a Kindle ap on there last year. She didn't
know that Gibbs had ever used it.

Abby shrugged. "Hungry."

"Let's get that fixed." He got up. "Sit, rest, what do you want?"

She shrugged again. "Don't have a taste for anything. Just hungry."

While it's true that Gibbs knows everyone's drink orders, and a few little treats they all like, he's not
getting a drink or a little treat. So, he's sort of floundering here with a request for something as vague
as "food."

Well, he's floundering because he wants to get her something to remind her why she likes eating and
that food is attached to pleasure and pleasure is a good thing. Sure, he can whip up a sandwich and a
glass of juice easily enough, but he wants this to be something she wants but just doesn't know she
wants.

For a moment there, he was thinking now would be a really good time for Tim to wake up and take over, but Tim doesn't have Gibbs' near psychic level of perfect timing, especially when he's dead asleep, so Gibbs is puttering around their kitchen trying to figure out what to feed Abby, who is sitting, quietly, looking awfully listless, at the kitchen table.

"Need more pain meds?"

She nodded at that.

So he got a dose, (had to fish out his glasses to read the dose and directions. That's the real reason he's willing to read on the Kindle app Tim stuck on his phone, he can make the text big enough he doesn't have to use his glasses to see it.) and the glass of cran-raspberry juice Abby likes, and gave them to her.

Finally, he decided that speed was probably more important than taste when it came to feeding Abby, so he used the last of the bacon he made and put together a BLT with lots of thick slices of tomato and three slices of bread.

He knows that part of Tim staying in good shape is not having lot of junk food around the house, but chips are really good with a BLT, and they just don't seem to have any, though he thought the cashews might do pretty well in their place. Crunchy and salty.

Abby tore through the sandwich and nuts, and he could tell from the speed she was eating that that wasn't enough food. There were peaches, and apparently Palmer had bought out every sort of ice cream in the store, so he dipped up a bowl of vanilla ice cream and cut up the peach, serving them up, too.

She tore through that pretty fast, too.

"More?"

"No. Eat too much more, my stomach will start to ache."

"Okay. Want more to drink?" He sort of remembered that nursing was thirsty as well as hungry work.

"Yes!"

He looked at the glass next to her, and then went digging through their cabinets. "Do you not have any Caf-Pow glasses here?"

"Nope."

He filled up three regular sized glasses for her. "That should do you for a little while." Then he made a note on his phone, next to the coffee note, to get some bigger cups. "You wanna go sit on the sofa, maybe be a little more comfortable?"

She nodded, got up, slowly, and headed in that direction. Gibbs took the glasses first, and set them on the little table next to the sofa. Then he carefully picked up the bouncy chair, and took it to the dining room table, where they could still easily see and hear Kelly. She stirred a little when he moved the chair, but didn't wake up.

Then he headed over to the sofa, pulled the recline lever for Abby, so she could lean back easily, and
sat next to her, realizing that part of why she didn't recline it back for herself was that you have to use your stomach and back muscles to push it back, so he pushed it back, wrapped his arm around her, kissed her forehead as she snuggled in, and said, "Talk to me, Abbs."

She was quiet for a long minute, and then finally said, "I feel like I'm splitting in half. Like I can feel the little voice that's calm and rational and knows that none of this is the end of the world and everyone throughout all of history managed to do this just fine talking to me, but it keeps getting drowned out by this huge, scary, emotional, terrified, nervous voice that feels like if I ever close my eyes something horrible is going to happen."

"I know how that feels. As long as it keeps talking, you're still okay. It's when it shuts up that you're in trouble."

Abby looks up at Gibbs, suddenly getting that Gibbs has been far enough gone that little voice completely vanished. "What if it shuts up? I'm so scared I'm going to lose it."

"We're here. We'll help you find it again. We'll keep you and everyone else safe until we do."

"What if I can't find it, what if it just goes?" She's looking up at him with big, scared eyes.

"It won't. It's always there somewhere. Just sometimes it's hard to find. And if you need it, we'll carry you until you can find your way again."

"I feel like, if I stay quiet, I can still, sort of, faintly, hear that little normal voice."

"Then you be as quiet as you need to be." He kissed her again. "Tim and I can deal with it. Wanna go get more sleep?"

"Not worth it. She'll wake up and want to eat soon." Abby looked at Kelly and back at Gibbs. "I swear I know why the cows moo, now. I'm so sore, I'm about ready to start mooing."

Gibbs kissed her forehead, smiled, and said, quietly, "Mmmoooooo."

For a second Abby just stared at him, utterly shocked, then she felt the laugh start. "God, Gibbs, don't make me laugh. It hurts!"

He hugged her a little tighter. "Sorry. Just wanted to see you smile."

"You're making jokes and apologizing? Who are you, and what did you do with Gibbs?"

"Grandpa's prerogative. I'm allowed to be goofy when I'm home with my family."

Abby smiled at him, tearing up. "Yeah, you are."

"Hey, stop that. Don't want you crying over me."

"Too bad. New mommy prerogative. I get to cry when and wherever I want."

He kissed her again. "Yeah, you do."

Eventually, Kelly did wake up, and Gibbs noticed one snag in the set up at the McGee house, changing table and diaper stuff is upstairs.

Abby can't go upstairs.
Tim's sleeping.

So, once again he's on diaper duty, which was never his favorite baby-oriented chore, but small
crying person wants food and feeding her is going to be a lot more pleasant if she's clean, so he grabs
Kelly and heads up to the changing table.

It does shock him how fast it comes back. Before Kelly was born, he's sure he hadn't thought about
the mechanics of a diaper change, let alone for a little baby, in more than thirty years. But his body
remembers this.

His hands know the routine.

It seems like the wipes and diapers are better than they were. More snug. Less leaky. But the basics
are all the same.

He was never a huge music fan. Most of the time it was just there. But humming or quietly singing
something seemed to make his Kelly happy, give her something to listen to, maybe made him feel
like he was communicating with her, when neither of them had much to say.

Shannon had always been a Simon and Garfunkle and John Denver fan. He has very clear images of
her sitting in the rocking chair, nursing Kelly, gently rocking, humming Scarboro Fair or Leaving on
a Jet Plane.

He tended to go back further. Elvis and memories of the days when his parents were happy, healthy,
and getting along.

So, as he's lifting up little legs, and wiping off a tiny tush, he's quietly singing: "Wise men say/Only
fools rush in/But I can't help/Falling in love with you..." Kelly's watching him, squirming a bit,
crying a little, probably doesn't like how cold the wipes feel on her skin.

He smiled at her, looking amused. "Yeah, my Kelly was never very impressed with my singing,
either." But he kept it up, moving to the next verse, wondering where the hell they kept the baby
powder, because he's not seeing any of it, and step three, after remove soiled diaper, remove baby
poop, was apply powder, but if they've got it, it's not here. So he puts the clean diaper on, snaps up
the onesie, and swaddles Kelly nice and snug, holding her against his shoulder.

"Ready for lunch? I know your mom's ready to feed you."

He found Abby on the sofa, watching... something. He's got no idea what it is, but there are two
guys who are very clearly not FBI agents, not even TV's idea of what an FBI agent looks like,
they're both way too pretty, investigating something, asking some really non-standard questions.

He sat down next to her, and handed Kelly over. "All cleaned up and ready to eat. Do you guys
have baby powder?"

"No. Not good for them. They breathe it in, and it's bad for their lungs."

"Of course." He and all seventy-million of his baby boomer compatriots all grew up just fine with
baby powder and all of them managed to keep their kids alive while using it, but if it's bad for babies,
he's not going to argue. (He may, however, mention to it Fornell, who he's sure will sympathize.
And, it occurs to him, Penny might, too.)

He got up, washed his hands, brought down some diapers, wipes, a few blankets, and set up a make-
shift changing table on the dining room table, and sure, it might not be the most sanitary thing ever,
but he's figuring that's the most functional place for him to do it.
Then he sat down next to Abby, wrapping his arm around her, watching her nurse Kelly and basking in this, being home, wrapped around his girls, feeling really, *right*, for the first time in years.

Two days later, Tim gave him a copy of the shot of all three of them snoozing on the sofa.
The Fifth Day

So, in one of the books he read, and no, at this point Tim has no idea at all which one it was in, there was something about how for the first three days babies more or less sleep all the time, and you get to this point where you’re feeling a little cocky about how easy it is to get them to sleep and that just possibly you’ve got this sleeping thing down and really, it’s not that hard.

And then they wake up.

And the universe laughs long and hard at your idiot-new-parent hubris.

And so, on day four, when Tim was starting to feel like maybe he did have a handle on this baby thing, Kelly woke up.

It amazes Tim how one tiny person, a person smaller than the bags of sugar he used to buy for his coffee, can suck the energy out of the three adults currently devoting their time to managing her.

Even Gibbs keeps falling asleep holding her.

It’s like she’s some sort of energy sink. Like the food and sleep isn’t what’s giving her the energy to grow. Psy Vamp, Psychic Vampire, a term he hadn’t thought about since college, like she’s some sort of tiny Psy Vamp draining them of any and every desire to do anything other than sleep.

Or maybe it’s that she slows down time. The constant buzzing distractions of life fade away when caring for a newborn, and with the distractions that keep your mind busy offline, all you want to do is nap.

He’s worked around the clock many times. Worked flat out, just catching cat naps, subsisting on caffeine and adrenaline for days at a time.

But this is different. He can feel his time sense slipping away, not sure if it’s day or night. The fact that it’s been gray and rainy isn’t helping, no sunrise, no sunset, just gray and darker gray and then occasional thunder storms to liven up the dark or not so dark gray.

Life’s slipping into three hour shifts, long, long, long three hours shifts when he’s awake for a full one, dealing with a tiny person who is now very awake and interested in letting everyone in the universe know that, and much, much, much too short when he’s trying to sleep.

And at least he and Gibbs can share them. Abby’s got to get up for all of them, and he can’t imagine how she’s doing this because he feels wrecked, and he’s not the one who got cut open, he’s not the one healing up from major surgery, and he’s not the one who’s providing food 24/7 for this tiny person.

He crashes most of the day, when Gibbs is there. Gibbs heads home to his own place at night, so Tim is on for those hours, and poor Abby’s got to do them all.

She’d been crashed out, utterly exhausted at four AM, so he’d headed down to get a bottle, let her get some more sleep, which she really, really looks like she needs, and she just about bit his head off, because apparently skipping a feed hurts like a son of a bitch, so while he’s got permission to feed
Kelly, apparently it’s not a great plan to actually execute.

“Come on, Kelly, sleeping time. Please, baby, sleep.” He’s pacing around their downstairs, patting her back, begging her to sleep. Done about twenty-five circuits of their floor plan, desperately trying to get her to settle down. Somehow, Kelly decided that her really-active-let’s-play-with-Dad-time would be from 4:00 to 7:00.

She’s alert, awake, crying, for God alone knows what. She’s fed, changed, burped, comfortably warm, and he’s stripped her down twice to make sure nothing was pinching her or uncomfortable.

If she wasn’t five days old, he’d be thinking she’d doing it just to piss him off.

And honestly, he’s awfully tempted to think she’s doing it just to piss him off even though she is five days old.

“Fuck it.” He headed into the living room, booted up the Playstation, turned on Twisted Metal Black, which he hasn’t played in forever, laid down on the sofa, Kelly on his chest, still complaining about life in general, and started to play.

He’s terrible at it. Hasn’t played in years and completely fried to boot, but the music is loud, the controls are easy, and by some miracle (perhaps putting his DNA together with Abby’s means he’s got a proto gamer on his chest) Kelly shut up and in five minutes fell asleep.

He played for ten more minutes, making sure she’s really asleep, then kissed her forehead, turned off the game, and crept up the stairs to put her in her bed and catch a few more hours of sleep.

He hit their bed, almost asleep, and heard Abby say, “Were you gaming?”

“Yeah. Needed some distraction. I was starting to get pissed at her and that’s not good.”

He feels her nod.

“What were you playing?”

“Twisted Metal Black.”

“Old school.”

“Yep. Were you able to sleep at all?”

He felt another head shake from her. Tim’s better at sleeping through a crying Kelly than Abby is, but neither of them are good at it. He looks up and sees it’s 5:55, an hour before Kelly’s due to eat again. “How about you pump now, and I’ll take the next feed, see if we can get you four solid hours of sleep?”

One more nod, then the feel of her getting, very slowly, out of the bed.

Abby’s silence is disconcerting.

He knows she’s more tired than she’s ever been. (He sure as hell is, too.)
But baby blues (he hopes, please let this be baby blues, please let it get better and soon) are hitting her hard, and she’s not talking much at all. She’s sort of ghosting through the day, sleeping every minute she can, not smiling, not laughing, not speaking.

The pain meds probably aren’t helping her mood or sleepiness all that much. Though she’s starting to take less of them. Just two doses yesterday, so that’s good, right?

But… he doesn’t think she’s actually said more than ten words to him today.

He tried to get her to talk a little, but she just looked at him, so, so tired, and headed for bed, where he tucked her in so she could get another nap.

He headed downstairs, to where Gibbs is, and said, “This’ll get better, right?”

Gibbs nods. “Only been five days. And she’s still on meds. Go get a nap yourself.”

Abby and Kelly are, for the moment, sleeping. He should probably be sleeping, too. He’s certainly tired. Really tired. Amazingly tired.

But he’s also pretty smelly. Hasn’t gotten a shower in… Two days? Three? He rubs his face, like that could tell him, but he hasn’t shaved since the morning before Kelly was born, so it’s not like the length of his whiskers is illuminating on this particular subject.

He knows it’s been longer than he likes. A lot longer than he likes. Mostly because, for the last five days, if given the chance, he sleeps, which means he hasn’t been in the shower a whole lot. And Kelly hasn’t exactly been kind when it comes to keeping him smelling good.

So, yeah, he needs to get a shower before he wants to rip his own skin off or knocks Abby out with his funk.

Hot water felt good. Felt really good. Even woke him up a little, helped to shake the sort of round the clock, no sense of time, Zombie shuffle he’s been living in for the last however long.

Soaping up, thoroughly, because it has been a while and he really does prefer to be clean, reminded him that part of his body had certainly wanted some attention lately and he’d just been too tired and preoccupied to deal with it.

But, in that it’s standing at attention, and his hand is curled around it, he’s thinking that maybe he’s awake enough to take care of this, and the whole you-can’t-get-off-I-can’t-get-off-thing is over, so…

Yeah.

Oh, that’s...

And done.

He’s honestly kind of relieved that Abby wasn’t there for that, because at no time did he ever want her to get to enjoy a re-play of his first time with the glorious fun of got off before it was all the way in.

And it did feel pretty good, though mostly in a he’d probably been one day, maybe two, tops from another wet dream, so just dealing with the backed-up, swollen, really dude, get off and do it soon, sort of sensation was awfully nice.
But more than that, just being clean and warm felt good, and getting out, toweling off quickly, and then crashing into their bed for another cat nap, was okay, too. Sure, hours of sleep would have been better yet, but, well, like with jerking off, these days he’ll take what he can get.

When he headed back downstairs, Gibbs was nowhere to be found. Abby was sleeping on their sofa. And Tony was sitting at the kitchen table, initialing his way through a stack of paperwork while Kelly cooed and kicked her feet in the bouncy chair.

He was a bit surprised to see Tony there, and Tony read it on his face. “Gibbs and Ziva are off killing Palmer at bootcamp.”

That gets a little smile out of Tim. He picks up Kelly and tilts his head toward the back porch. For once, it’s not raining: really warm and humid, lots of wind, the sky is still gray, and it looks like another thunder storm is probably due in the next hour. But him and Tony and Kelly on the back porch means more quiet for Abby, so outside they go.

“Working hard?” Tim asked, sitting next to Tony on the bench that’s tucked against the back of their house.

“Signing all my stuff. Signing all his stuff. Forgot how much more paperwork goes along with Team Leader. Looks like you’re napping on the job,” he says with a grin and a little shove.

Tim laughed. He knows exactly how black the circles under his eyes are right now.

“So, how is it?” Tony asked Tim.

“Tiring. Like… running a marathon.”

“When have you ever run a marathon?”

Tim flashed him his exasperated look, and Tony grinned at him, enjoying joking with him. Tim rolled his eyes. “Just go with me. Any given step of it isn’t a big deal. It’s just moving forward. One step. Another step. Two more. And on and on. But you don’t get to stop. And you don’t get enough down time. Gibbs and I can at least swap, but Abby’s on all the time, and she’s so fried.”

Tony nodded at that. When he and Ziva came over to fetch Gibbs and make sure Tim and Abby had someone else in the house, Abby was feeding Kelly, and he’d never even imagined that she could possibly look that tired. His little Energizer Lab Bunny needs new batteries.

“None of this is hard. Some of it’s pretty gross. Been a dad…” he had to think, figure out what day it is, and then count, twice, to figure out how long he’s been doing this, “five days, six if you want to count Tuesday, and I know vastly more than I ever wanted to about all sorts of fluids that I’d really prefer stay located inside Kelly or Abby’s bodies, but it’s not hard. It’s just… twenty-six miles of steps, and that’s hard.”

Tony nodded at that. “Still think it was a good idea?”

Tim kissed the top of Kelly’s head. He was holding her back to his chest, so she can see the leaves waving around. (Well, really, for her, it’s just a dark gray blur, but it’s new and moving, so she’s fascinated.) “Oh yeah. Whether or not Abby still thinks that is up for debate, but assuming she ever gets six hours of sleep in a row again, I think she’ll come around. How about you? How’s team leader?”
Tony smiled a little. “Any given step of it isn’t hard, but all together…”

Tim nodded back.

“I’m ready for it. I know what I’m doing. Draga’s slipping into the groove pretty easily. He’s working really well with Ziva. He still thinks I’m the idiot who’s been promoted above his station, but that’ll get settled eventually, and he’s not actively challenging my control.

“Three instead of four is a little more of a challenge, but not too much more. We’re just a little slower because I’ve got one fewer guy to put on different leads.

“The fact that I’m not actually the team leader and have to keep getting Gibbs’ approval for some things is kind of annoying, and I can see he feels that, too. ‘What’re you calling me for, DiNozzo? You know what to do. Just go do it.’ But I’ve still got to whip it past him, so I do call.”

Tim’s noticed Gibbs wandering off to take the occasional call.

“How’s he doing?” Tony asked.

Tim smiled at that, too. “He’s happy. In a way you’ve never seen him happy. I know he’s going back to work tomorrow, and you’ll have him back again, and he’ll go back to being Gibbs, but, well, he’ll be back for dinner tonight, stick around, see for yourself.” He paused for a second, and then said, “Stick around and meet Pop.”

“Pop?”

“That’s what Kelly’s gonna call him.”

Tony had an especially satisfied looking smile on his face at that. “Happy Gibbs… You mean that smiley, goofy guy we got back from Mexico with the mustache?”

Tim laughed a little. “Times six. He’ll walk her around, singing her Elvis songs, with a big grin on his face. And yeah, I don’t think he’s touched a razor since Kelly was born.”

“Hmm… That some sort of new dad dress code?”

Tim rubbed his own, rather whiskery, face. “I’d cut the hell out of myself if I tried it. You know the biggest difference to life with a kid?”

“Nope.”

“A week ago, a lot of little shit mattered. Stupid, little, niggly things that don’t have any real importance, like shaving or putting the laundry away, mattered last Monday. And today, they just don’t. In some ways, it’s really liberating. The dishes don’t get put away, what happens? Oh, nothing. We take them out of the dishwasher and eat off of them.

“And really focusing. Kelly, Abby, food, sleep, diapers, enough clean clothing to keep us somewhat dressed, and that one might get dropped when Jethro goes back to work, and that’s it. Nothing else, at all, matters.” He laughs a little at that. “Right now, my whole job is keeping Abby rested enough to maintain a fingernail hold on sane. Everything that doesn’t contribute to that isn’t important.”

“How’s she doing?”

“I don’t really know. We get little glimpses of her, so she’s not totally gone, but… She’s had major surgery, so she’s healing up from that, she’s still bleeding—” Tony looks alarmed at that, so Tim
adds, “It’s normal, after you have a baby, you bleed for like a month. Kelly eats every three hours, and it takes almost an hour to feed her. I try to take some of the feeds but not nursing really hurts, so I might get her a few more hours of sleep, but then her boobs start to scream at her. She’s on pain meds, and they make her sleepy, which can’t be good on top of how tired she is. It’ll be another week at least before her hormones even out...

“I’m worried. Breena’s saying this is still normalish, but to keep an eye on it. On Tuesday we’ve got a doctor’s appointments. A final wound check for Abby, so I’ll bring it up then, and see what Dr. Draz has to say about it.”

“Okay.” Tony looks at Kelly, hanging out on her daddy’s chest, watching the oncoming storm clouds, looking pretty calm. “You think you’re gonna do this again?”

“I would, in a heartbeat. Yeah, I’m exhausted, but…” Tim’s got a tired, but soul deep smile on his face. “Nothing else is like this, at all. We made a person. I mean, look at her…” He stroked her face, and she turned toward his hand, sucking on his finger. “This is love turned to life, and my life devoted to nurturing and protecting that. This is… all the purpose I’ve ever wanted or needed.

“But, I’ve got the easy job. So, I think Kelly having a little brother or sister is Abby’s decision.” He looks up from Kelly to Tony, thinking, hard. “Okay, I know my short-term memory is shot right now, but have you actually held her, yet?”

Tony shrugged a little, not signaling that he didn’t know, more an admission that he’s not really comfortable with babies.

“Come on. She’s not gonna bite you. Here.” Tim put the spit up diaper over Tony’s shoulder, and then handed Kelly over.

“Now, be nice. Uncle Tony’s a little nervous,” he said to Kelly. She looked up at her Uncle, that mildly confused look on her face.

Tony looked from her to Tim and back to her. “You look at me like this, sometimes.”

“Abby’s said that, too. Besides the lips, I think she looks like Abby. Jethro does, too.”

“Was he wearing his glasses when he was looking at her?”

“Don’t think so.”

Tony nods at him, reminding him that Gibbs’ up close vision isn’t exactly what most people would call good. “So now what?”

“Just hold her. Hang out. She likes being sung to. ‘Bout five minutes her eyes’ll get droopy, and I’ll take her to her crib and devoutly pray to any and every god listening that I can successfully lay her in the crib and get her to actually close her eyes and sleep in there.”

Tony laughed at that. “Didn’t know you were a praying man.”

Tim smiled back at him, then leaned back against the house and closed his eyes. “I’m usually not. Poke me in three minutes.”

“Not a problem.” He looked at Kelly, and said to Tim, “I’m a bad singer.”

“Neither of us care.”
Ton stood up, Kelly snuggled on his shoulder and sang quietly while pacing, “I can only say these things to you while you’re sleeping/I hear the hum from the wire as the sounds of the morning creep in/I lie awake and pretend you can hear me…”

And Tim caught a three minute cat nap listening to Tony butcher the Airborne Toxic Event.
"Everything still on schedule?" Jimmy asked Breena as he hopped into their car after Bootcamp.

"Tony texted three minutes ago. Abby's awake. Kelly's awake. Tim's awake."

"Good. You got the present?"

Breena rolled her eyes at him. "You think I'm going to forget the Father's Day present when I'm driving to the Father's Day gathering?"

Back in the beginning of June, after they had the c-section scheduled for the 18th, with, supposedly, the day they'd be coming home the 21st, Father's Day, Abby had given the Father's Day present she'd gotten for Tim to Breena, along with a promise to make sure he got it. Abby had been pretty certain that they'd be a bit too pre-occupied to remember it, otherwise.

Jimmy'd been talking to Tony about it. (Tony had asked what his weekend plans were, so he mentioned bootcamp, and that Breena had something special planned for him for Father's Day breakfast, and then over to Tim's to drop off his present.) And Tony mentioned that he and Ziva had the present that Tim and Abby wanted to make sure that Gibbs got.

And from there a plan was born.

It'll be a pretty fast visit. Presents, quick dinner (Penny and Ducky are bringing it), and off again. They don't want to cut too much into Tim or Abby's rest time, or do anything that might stress Abby out, but an hour to exchange some presents, enjoy each other's company, and have a good meal seemed like it'd be welcome.

And, of course, the dads in question do not, (they hope) know this plan is in the offing.

Jimmy shrugged at Breena. "Just checking. Getting her out the door can take a lot of attention, and I know I forget things," he said, looking back at Molly, sitting in her car seat, babbling about going to Uncle Tim and Aunt Abby's house and seeing the baby.

Jimmy flashed a quick text to Ducky, waited a few seconds for the response, and said, "Ducky and Penny are about ten minutes out."

"Okay, and Ziva's got Jethro, no problems?"

"None at all."

"Great. So how was Bootcamp?"

"Fun. Different. I feel like I need instant replay when I go up against Ziva; she's so fast."

Breena smiled at that.

"She tells me Draga would like to join in, but wanted to see how we felt about it first."

"And how do you feel about it?"

"Eh. I'd rather he didn't join in, but can't think of a good way to say it without sounding stupid."

Breena was surprised by that. "Why not?"
"It's just… If it's just us and Gibbs or Gibbs and Ziva, it's… not a pissing match. We're bad at this. Maybe not on a cosmic level or anything, and we're getting better, but, Tim and I, we're still bad at it. And just the three or four of us is fun. It doesn't matter that we're bad and they're better, and… Look, Draga's probably a great guy. Ziva likes him. But I don't need my ass handed to me on a weekly basis by some twenty-nine-year-old flyboy. But I don't know how to say that and not be a jerk."

Breena nodded.

"And on top of it, he's new to DC. His last posting before FLETC was Colorado, so he's not close to any of his friends, and is probably looking for something to do on the weekends, so I get why he might want to come along, but…"

"What'd Gibbs say about it?"

He didn't. Just kind of looked at Ziva and shrugged. I'm sure there was more to that look than I was getting, probably something about their team dynamics and leadership and something with Tony, but Ziva seemed to get it, so I don't think it matters if I got it all or not."

"Okay."

"You sure it's okay we stay for dinner?" Tony asks Gibbs as he and Tim 'start to get ready for dinner.'

"Just making chicken on the grill and salad. Adding two more chicken breasts isn't a problem," Tim answers, though he's the one on salad duty.

Tony heard a car pull up and grins. Tim's talking to Gibbs about Bootcamp, so he missed the sound of car doors opening and closing, but he didn't miss the sound of his front door opening, and Jimmy and Breena's voices, as well as Molly shrieking, "BABY!"

Tim and Gibbs are both looking pretty surprised. Tony put an arm around each of them, steering them out of the kitchen and into the living room. "Or, how about we handle dinner, and you two relax and enjoy your Father's Day."

Of all the things Tim might have expected, surprise Father's Day celebration was nowhere on the list. Sure, he'd decided he wanted to do those pictures for Jethro, but somehow the idea that Father's Day would roll around and he would be a Dad hadn't occurred to him, at all.

But he is a Dad, and he's home, with his family, sitting next to Abby, who's holding Kelly, opening a card, with, ohhh… He really likes that.

It's a tattoo idea. A small green dragon, this one properly fierce looking, not a 'my little dragon.' It'd go on his calf, with a slim knotwork band circling the rest of his leg. If they have other children there'd be room for other bands. Eventually, when they know they're done with babies, they could close it off, with two bands, one above and one below the main design, that would circle his leg completely, one for each of them.

Yeah, he likes that a whole lot.

There's a gift certificate for it, but no set appointment date, which makes sense because he knows this'll take a while and he's got no desire to wander off long enough to get it done, not now. But
eventually… Oh yes.

He kisses Abby. "I really like it."

"Good." She nods, and there's a hint of a little smile on her face. He hugs her tight and kisses her again, trying to get across how pleased he is, and hoping maybe some of his joy could rub off on her and light her eyes back up. But the best he gets is a little glimmer of… something, maybe it's joy.

He passes the sketch around, and everyone seems to approve, though Tony makes a crack about never getting him out of the kilt once he's got something on his leg to show off.

He laughed at that. "No point to having them if no one ever sees them."

Ziva looked at him, amused, cool smile on her face. "I wouldn't say that. Sometimes it's nice to have a secret that only intimate friends get to see."

Tony smiled at that, looking a little cocky, and Breena added, "That's right, you have one, too, don't you?"

Tim takes a minute, thinking about exactly how much of Ziva he's seen, and how he's never, ever seen a tattoo, so where said tattoo would have to be, and laughed a little at that.

"I stand corrected, Ziva. So, what is yours?"

Ziva smiled wide and mysterious. "Like it's exact location, what it is, is a secret."

"This started as McGee's idea," Ziva said as Tony handed Gibbs a nicely wrapped rectangle.

"Then he passed it off to us," Breena added, "Because there was one bit that they weren't able to get for themselves."

"Then we got it for safe keeping and timely delivery," Tony wrapped up.

Gibbs slipped his finger under the pretty silver paper (He's thinking Breena was in charge of wrapping as well as whatever the last bit was, because he cannot imaging any of the boys, let alone Abby or Ziva owning or using silver paper with little pink and white flowers on it.) and carefully ripped it apart at the tape.

Under the paper, he found a three part frame, and in that frame was three pictures. The first one was him with the boys at Tony and Ziva's wedding. The last one was him with his girls, also at Tony and Ziva's wedding. And the middle one, the one Jimmy and Breena must have taken, was from the hospital. He's holding Kelly in one arm, and Molly is sitting in his lap, his other arm around her, looking at her cousin, very gently touching her face.

All the girls got kisses (including the two baby ones), and the guys got some affectionate hair ruffling. He got to Tim last, and looked at him with a combination of thanks and what inspired this?

Tim just shrugged a little, and said, quietly. "You mentioned not having pictures. I know we're not them, but… Thought you might have like having some."

Gibbs nodded, smiling, and sat down, looking over the shots again.

Ducky, sensing this was probably too much emotional touchy, feely stuff for the guys in this crowd to be comfortable with, suggested that they grab some dinner, which seemed to make everyone more
comfortable.

And so, dinner, grilled chicken (not cooked by Gibbs), salad (not made by Tim), watermelon, and cupcakes were had and enjoyed, as well as some adventures in fathering stories from Gibbs and Jimmy.

As they were cleaning up, Tony pulled Gibbs aside and said to him, "You don't need to come in tomorrow."

Gibbs gave him the Really, you sure? look.

"Unless someone turns up dead, I'm good with Ziva and Draga. Stay here, be a Dad, it's good for you."

Gibbs looked from Tony to Ziva, not able to put the idea into words, but still getting across, Tim and Abby aren't my only kids.

"Yeah, but they're the ones that need you right now. I've got work. Someone dies; I'll call."

Gibbs nodded at that.

And of course, less than ten seconds after that nod ended, his phone, Tony's phone, Ducky's phone, and Jimmy's phone all rang at once.

Tony got his first. Dead Marine out at Quantico.

And so, as quickly, and as much of a surprise as Father's Day was to start, it ended. And to Tim it does feel pretty weird to watch them head out, getting ready to go and find the dead man's killer, and not go along.

Breena, Molly, and Penny stuck around to make sure everything got cleaned up. Penny mostly kept an eye on Abby and Molly, keeping the little girl occupied and making sure she wasn't too rough with Abby or Kelly.

Tim was putting away the extra food while Breena rinsed off the cutlery, sticking it in the dishwasher.

"She been like this the whole time?" Breena asked, and he didn't need any clarification that she's talking about Abby.

"Pretty much."

"When's her next doctor's appointment?"

"Tuesday."

Breena nods. "Make sure you mention it to her. This isn't normal."

"Okay."

"She still bleeding heavily?"
"Maybe? Why?"

"If her iron levels are off, that can depress mood."

"I'll mention that, too."

"Good. She's going to get better, Tim."

"I know. But the girl who designed that tattoo's not here right now, and that scares the hell out of me."

Breena nodded. "You gonna be okay on your own tomorrow?"

"If I'm not, I'll call."

"Even if you are, give me a call anyway. After nap time we'll swap. You take Molly, and I'll get Abby out of the house for a bit."

"Please!"

Breena gave him a hug. "No problem."
Help

One of the facts of the funeral industry is that you rarely have off time, per se. Funeral homes don't really close. But, like with any other business, every person has their own specialty, and those take place at different times.

Breena's a mortician. (Her mom is the Funeral Director, so she handles the front of the house, along with her sister. She and her Dad take care of the bodies.) So her part of the job usually takes place over a fairly set number of hours. Usually in the morning.

So most days she works from eight to one, maybe two if they get a lot of people in.

Which means most days she picks Molly up from daycare, they play a little, then nap time, more playing, eventually Jimmy gets home, dinner, and then they have some time with each other once Molly goes to bed.

It works pretty well.

And it also means it's fairly easy to swing by Tim and Abby's once Molly's up.

Because Breena's mommy senses are tingling, hard. Something more than just baby blues is wrong with Abby, and that needs to get nipped in the bud.

Tim's looking awfully glad to see her when she comes over. Abby's nursing Kelly, and Breena goes to sit next to her. She's not talking, not really all there, and it… it just hurts so see her so out of it.

Breena goes to get Abby an extra drink, and Tim tags along. "What sort of meds is she on right now?"

"Tylenol 3, now. It's got codeine in it, but she was like this yesterday on Percocet."

"Okay. She sensitive to opiates?"

"Not that sensitive. Morphine just made her really happy."

"All right. When was the last time she was out of the house."

"Day we brought Kelly home."

"Once she's done nursing, we're going for a walk."

"Sounds good. I'll keep the girls busy."

And so, post-nursing, Breena gently cajoled Abby out of the house, and started a slow amble around the neighborhood.

Once they got out of sight of Abby's house, Breena said,"Talk to me, Abby, come on I've been there, done that, got the milk and spit-up stained commemorative t-shirt."

Abby just shrugged a little, looking awfully listless.
"I'm not Tim. You aren't going to say anything that horrifies me. You probably aren't going to say anything I didn't think myself. Just let it out, because it's never going to get better if you keep it inside."

She shrugged again.

"Come on."

Abby slumped a little, and Breena wrapped her arms around her.

Finally Abby said, "It's never going to get better. It can't get better. This was the biggest mistake I've ever made, and I can't fix it or make it better because she's a person and Tim adores her so if I want him I've got to keep her, and I just don't..." and from there Abby lost her words as she sobbed on Breena's shoulder.

"Hey... It's okay to feel like this. It's okay," Breena said quietly while rubbing Abby's back. "It's okay."

"I don't want anything bad to happen to her. I just wish she was gone. Wish we had never done this. I feel like I set fire to myself. Everything hurts all the time. It's unending, a constant, sucking black hole of never-ending need that I'm feeding myself into, breaking into millions of pieces, and it just never ends."

"It's okay, Abby."

"I'm so alone on this. I can't really sleep, can't really relax because there's just me. If something goes wrong, I can't count on him."

"Oh, honey." Breena keeps petting Abby's back, hating seeing her so gone and desperately hoping they can get her better.

"I can't ever turn off. I don't want her. Don't want him. Don't want me, even. Don't want anything. But I can't turn off, can't relax, can't fail." Abby sounds utterly crushed as she's saying this. "Too many people expect me to be perfect, so I've got to do it. It just never ends. There's no breaks. No free time. I'm trapped, chained to a seven pound person who needs me all the time, and there's nothing I can do about it."

"I felt the same way when Molly was little." No she hadn't, not even close, but right now Breena figures Abby needs someone to talk to who's been there way more than she needs the truth. "This doesn't last forever. You are going to get through this."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. If I have to pick you up and drag your ass through, you're going to get through. Look, you may need medication for this. And that's okay, too, but maybe, first, we could try getting you some sleep?"

"Can't sleep." Her eyes are wasted, dead, staring off into the distance, not seeing the tidy houses and neighbors going about their summertime. "If I sleep something might happen, so I've got to be there and able to deal with it."

"No, you don't. Tim's got this."

"I lay there, eyes closed, trying, but I can't sleep. They think I'm asleep because I'm so quiet, but I can't sleep."
"If you came to my house, do you think you could shut down?"

"I can't go to your house; I've got to feed her."

"No you don't."

"But formula—"

Breena knows they've been over this once, and she knows how Abby got on the c-section thing, so she's assuming this is just a symptom of not having the rational part of her mind in charge. "No. You do not have to breastfeed every single meal. She will not starve, and you need the rest. She's doing a one AM and four AM feed, right?"

"Yeah."

"Those two. You'll do a bottle for them. Tim'll get the first three nights, and if you have to stay at our house to let him do it, we'll do that, but you have to sleep. By three nights your breasts won't be killing you, Kelly won't be expecting to nurse those feeds, and then you two can alternate nights, which means at least three nights a week you'll get eight straight hours of sleep. And with any luck, once you get closer to rested you'll remember why you love Kelly and why you wanted to make babies with Tim in the first place."

"It'll hurt." She just looks so defeated by that. Like one more pain on top of all the other pain is the straw that'll not just break the camel's back, but kneecap it, hamstring it, and then slit its throat and piss on its corpse.

"I know, honey, but we have a breast pump at my house. You pump enough to take the edge off, it takes ten minutes, you go back to sleep. Next night Tim's got milk for one of the feeds and formula for the next, and by the time three days are up, your body is used to it. You need the sleep. You need the down time, and if you have to come to my house to get it, you come to my house. We've got a perfectly good guest room with a very comfy bed and absolutely no little babies that need to be fed every three hours."

Abby doesn't look like she's buying it. But she also doesn't look like she's going to fight with Breena about it.

"Come on, we can't figure out if this is just you so tired you can't see straight or something worse until you get some sleep. And maybe, if you can get that sleep, you'll start to feel like you again."

Abby doesn't look like she's buying that either.

"Tell me about hurts all over. What's going on with that?"

"I just ache, all over. The incision aches. My breasts ache. My joints ache. Hell, my teeth ache."

"Okay, that's not normal. You've got a doctor's appointment tomorrow, right?"

"Maybe."

Breena sees that answer and suddenly gets that Abby has no idea what day it is. "How's the bleeding going?"

"Still pretty heavy."

"How heavy?"
"New pad every two hours."

Breena places her hands on Abby's forehead, but doesn't feel any fever. Of course, Abby's also on Tylenol, so if she did have an infection, that might be stopping any fever she might have.

"You and Tim have to make sure to tell the doctor that. If you've got an infection or if you're getting anemic, that'll mess with how you're feeling."

Abby nods, listlessly.

"Come on, we're going around the block, at least once, getting you some fresh air, some sunshine, and a few exercise endorphins."

Abby shrugs, letting Breena lead her.

When they got back, Tim had Kelly in her crib, sleeping, and was watching the Muppet Show with Molly. Elton John was belting out Crocodile Rock while Muppet Crocks danced around.

Breena walked Abby up to their room, got her settled and said, "Rest. Tonight you come to my place, and we'll get you some solid sleep."

Abby nodded and laid down.

Then Breena headed down. Tim looked at her expectantly.

"She's not sleeping, at all," Breena said to him as Molly hopped into her lap.

"What? She's in bed all the time."

"She might be, but she's not sleeping. She can't shut down. She's on constant alert. But we've got a game plan. She's gonna rest, do the dinner feed and the bedtime feed, then she's coming over to my place tonight, where, with any luck, she'll be able to shut down and sleep. You're on tonight, tomorrow, and the night after, and if she's got to stay at my place to sleep, she will."

Tim nods along with that. "Not a problem."

"If we're lucky she's just so tired she can't find her way anymore. If not this is full on post-partum depression maybe edging onto psychosis, so I want you to take this very seriously. If a few nights of sleep isn't perking her up, both of you are going to the doctor to see about some medication for this. Don't just let this slide, and if she's still not talking to you after a few nights of sleep, I don't care how much she doesn't want to go, you're taking her to the doctor's. Kelly can come to our place, we'll keep watch over her, but you make sure Abby gets whatever help she needs."

"Okay. That, I can do. I will carry her in if I need to."

"Good. She's telling me she's still bleeding heavily and aches all over. Make sure the Doc knows that. She might be anemic or have some sort of low grade infection and that could be knocking her for a loop."

Tim nods, grabbing his phone and taking notes.

Breena checked the clock, 5:30, getting onto dinner time. "Molly and I are going to head home. You bring her over to our place after the 10 o'clock feed, and Jimmy'll bring her back in time for the 7:00 AM one."
"She'll be over at your place around 11."

"When's her appointment tomorrow?"

"One thirty."

"Give me a call when you get back."

"Will do."

And plan in place, Breena gathered up Molly to head home and get ready for dinner time.
The Rollercoaster

This is useless and futile and stupid.

They’re driving toward Breena’s house. Kelly’s in the backseat, asleep. Tim’s not saying anything, and Abby’s drowning in failure.

*Feed the baby.*

Everyone else in the whole damn world manages to do this just fine without going bonkers, but she can’t. Breena didn’t need to run away from Molly to cope with this. She did just fine.

But Abby can’t. Her mind won’t shut down. So instead of lying, tense, in her own bed, watching the gray night get darker and then lighter, and the red glow from the numbers on the clock, and the green glow from the baby monitor flickering away, she’s going to Breena’s so she can spend the night staring at an entirely different set of glowing lights, not sleeping, aching, drowning in overwhelming failure.

And tomorrow they’ll go to the doctor and she’ll get poked and prodded and it’ll just be more futile. There’s nothing wrong with her besides epic failure.

Beside the fact that she can’t do the one thing every woman on earth was designed to do.

Tim drops her off, leaves the engine running, Kelly in her seat, and walks her into Jimmy and Breena’s, kissing her gently, whispering, “Sleep well,” and heading off.

*Like I’m not sleeping by choice. Like all I have to do is just change my mind, and then I’ll be able to sleep.*

Breena takes her upstairs, and yes, the bed is soft, and comfy. And there’s some chamomile tea, which smelled pretty good, and was actually fairly tasty, and…

“She asleep?” Jimmy asked when Breena came back in from checking on Molly and Abby. It’s their pre-bedtime routine, while he’s brushing his teeth she goes and just looks in on Molly. This time she added Abby to the list.

“I think so. What’d you put in the tea?”

“Very mild sedative. Low dose, too. She’s already on pain meds, so I didn’t want anything to mess with that. Just enough to take the edge off and help her brain shut down.”

“Looks like it did. She was saying that she’s not been sleeping, and that everyone thought she was because she’s been so quiet, but right now she’s snoring…”

Jimmy nods, rinses out the toothpaste in his mouth, and says, “Let’s hope that’s a good sign. Breast pump already in there?”

“Yeah, and extra bottles. Hopefully she’s tired enough she’ll sleep right through and just be really happy to see Kelly come morning feed time.”

“Let’s hope.”
Trying to sleep and still be awake enough to get up for each feed is fucking impossible.

Tim is getting very, very clearly why Abby was having such a hard time shutting down. With him being the one who’s got to wake up enough to grab her (because before, when she started to ask for food, Abby would poke him, he’d go get her, get her cleaned up, and then bring her to Abby.) means that every time he hears a little chirp or squeak through the baby monitor he jerks back to full on awake trying to figure out if it’s food time.

He did that straight through the 11:00 to 1:00 AM sleep time.

Finally, at close to 2:00, having just laid down again after the 1:00 AM feed, as he was staring at the flickering green light of the baby monitor, seeing it light up brighter every time Kelly breathes or sighs or makes some sort of little noise, he turned the damn thing off.

She’s less than thirty feet away. Her door is open. His door is open. He will hear her when she cries. He does not need to hear every baby sigh.

And with that he was able to sleep from 2:30ish to 4:00, when, shockingly enough, he was indeed able to wake up at the sound of Kelly requesting breakfast.

 Granted, he was feeling just about numb with tired by the time he had the bottle made up and in her mouth, and he might not have done the most thorough clean up job on the diaper change, but he did get out of bed, get food into her, get her burped, and then got her back into her crib and him back to sleep a bit after five.

And apparently at some point Abby got home, and must have fed Kelly, but he slept through that, waking up at close to nine with a panicked jerk, found Abby in bed next to him, dozing from the looks of it, but she opened one eye when he jerked awake.

“Hi,” he said when his heart stopped pounding.

“Hey.”

“Feeling any better?”

She shrugged. “Little bit.”

“Did you sleep?”

“Yeah. Think Jimmy slipped me a mickey. I was awake. There was tea. Next thing I knew it was 6:30, my boobs were going to explode, and Jimmy was gently poking me to get up.”

Tim smiled at that. “You got home, fed her, and…”

“And we hung out for a little bit after, I had some breakfast, and she went back to sleep about eight thirty.”

Tim’s nodding, that sounds about right.

“You want to go back to sleep? I’m up and on duty now.”

“Gonna try.”

“I turned off the baby monitor. That helped. Maybe we could get you some ear plugs, too.? See if
that makes it easier for when you don’t need to be on?”

“Maybe.”

She didn’t look enthusiastic about that, but it’s also the longest conversation he’s had with her in… maybe two days, so he’ll chalk that up to things moving in the right direction, and headed downstairs to see about getting himself some food.

If you haven’t slept for a while, and then you do sleep, you tend to feel really awful after you wake up. Abby had read something about that’s your body’s way of screaming: ‘Please, give me more sleep. I want the sleep. Sleep is good! More sleep!’

Her body is screaming for more sleep, and maybe it’s because she was able to finally shut down, maybe it’s just left over whatever the hell it was Jimmy stuck in that tea, but, hearing Tim bustling around downstairs, she was able to fall back to sleep again.

And then woke up at noon, feeling still out of it, still mired in hard sleep and sick and aching and God, her boobs really were going to explode, and when she saw the clock there was a stab of utter, blind panic; she’d slept through a feed. Which meant Kelly had to have been crying, fussing, and she slept through it.

Her baby needed her and she slept.

There was a drowning wave of guilt that went with that. A paralyzing sensation of even more failure, and once again, sobbing.

Which got Tim’s attention. She doesn’t know what he’d been up to, but suddenly he was there, holding onto her, petting her back, saying something, she doesn’t know what, doesn’t care. It doesn’t help, can’t break this pain.

Her baby needed her, and she didn’t wake up.

Okay, Tim’s good on the idea that getting Abby more sleep is an excellent plan. He’s right on that one.

He’s not sure if her sobbing uncontrollably on their bed, saying something about Kelly needing her and failing, is good.

She’s making noise, and communicating with him, so that’s… better? Ish? Maybe?

Or that little, quiet voice Gibbs had mentioned to him finally died and she’s full out gone.

Either way, they’re going to the doctor’s in an hour, so hopefully they can put a plan beyond get more sleep into action, and please, please, God, please, find something to make this better.
The Plan

So, when they made the appointment for 1:30, two days after she was born, they didn't know that Kelly would want to eat at 1:00.

Which means, in addition to getting Abby calmed down, there's still the fact that Kelly will wake up soon and want to eat, and it takes her about an hour to eat.

And, if he's understanding the bits of words he's getting between sobs, suggesting formula for the next feed is unlikely to go over well.

If it was any other appointment, he'd say fuck it, reschedule, and just let Kelly wake up and Abby feed her.

But there is absolutely no shot, at all, of them missing this appointment. Come Hell or high water, Abby's getting to the doctor.

So, when Abby inhaled between sobs, he turned her face toward him, and said, "You haven't failed her, at all. She's fine, and right now, we've got to get moving on feeding her again. She's gonna want to eat when we need to be heading to the doc's, so if you could pump now, then you could be feeding her when we're in the car."

He stopped after that, hoping he'd not just set off another wave of massive emotional flailing, but… nope… That seemed to go well. A plan of action seemed to be working for Abby. So he hopped up, found the breast pump and a bottle, and she got to it.

He sat next to her, watching her do it, and, since previously, Kelly had always been on her breast when she's done this, he hadn't seen how it looks from the outside and… Wow. She doesn't even need to pump at first, just petting the breast a little and holding the bottle over her nipple sends milk squirting.

It's really impressive, and he's awfully glad that nothing of his is that full or swollen, because that's some highly pressurized milk.

Abby's not talking again, but at least she's not crying either.

So… Maybe… Worst it can do is fall flat. Probably won't make her cry.

"You taste it, yet?" he asked with a little smile, hoping it might lighten the mood.

That startled her a little, and he can't tell if the you're insane look she's aiming at him is because he didn't just assume she'd tried it, or that he'd even ask if she would.

But after a few seconds of that, she nodded at him and said, "Yes, first day."

"What's it like?"

"Sweet. Doesn't taste like much of anything really." She'd hit the point where it wasn't squirting right out, so she took the bottle away, snagged a drop on her finger and held it out to him.

Tim smiled at that and licked it off her finger. "Yep. Sweet. Not much beyond that. Kelly really likes it, though. When I give her formula, she just looks at me like, 'Nope. Not Mom's. I'll consent to eat this 'cause I'm hungry, but it's not the real stuff.'"
That got a little hint of a smile out of Abby. He kissed her, arm around her shoulders, cuddling close to her.

"You taste the formula?"

"No." He shook his head. "Doesn't smell good to me."

**Mood swings.** That's what the little voice is saying. On one level hearing it again is something of a relief. On another level, she's not feeling much in the way of a need for an extra narrator to tell her she's being irrational.

She knows she's being irrational.

Or maybe not. Five minutes ago…

Well, she knows it now. And, the wasted, despondent, the whole world's awful feeling has passed, so that's good. And at least right now she can also feel that Tim asking about breast milk is kind of funny, maybe, if you squint a little. It doesn't feel funny. She's not wanting to laugh or anything. But at least she's a bit aware of the fact that someone else might consider that funny.

She wipes her eyes again, while Tim screws the bottle into the breast pump.

"I hate this."

He looks back up at her. "I know. We're gonna get you fixed."

She rose an eyebrow at him and said, "Last I checked, I wasn't a puppy."

He almost spilled the milk he hugged her so fast and hard at that. Then he looked sheepish about it, made sure it was secure, and far enough away that he wouldn't spill it, and hugged her more carefully. When he pulled back he said, "It's been a long time since you made a joke."

Abby nodded at that.

As per standard NCIS operating procedure, they are in the doctor's office five minutes earlier than need be.

Trying to feed a baby in the car while getting to said appointment was interesting.

All Tim can say on that is that he's glad he wasn't the one who was doing it.

Kelly found the whole driving, moving, noise, thing unsettling. Add in hungry on top of that, and she was in a less than wildly pleasant mood. Then Abby got the bottle out, and Kelly was under the impression that bottles are a Dad, or maybe Pop, thing and having Mom, giver of milk, offer her one threw her for a loop. A loop she did not appreciate.

But eventually she did get a little of the milk on her tongue, and decided it was the real thing, and went to work on her bottle.

Thus ending up with her madly sucking away, enjoying her meal quite a bit, right when they got to the doctor's office, so there was quite a bit more complaining about having said bottle removed from her mouth while transitioning from car seat to stroller.
So, yes, they did get to the appointment five minutes early.

They were also pretty frazzled.

And Kelly wasn't exactly thrilled with them, either. (Though when Mom picked her up as they were walking through the parking lot and let her finish up her lunch while they headed in improved her mood.)

Janice, the receptionist, took one look at them as they headed in, smiled kindly, and then cooed appreciatively over Kelly, doing a very good job of sounding like Kelly was indeed the most beautiful baby girl in the history of baby girls.

Then she dropped the bombshell on them. "Dr. Draz called in a few minutes ago. She's in a delivery right now, so she's going to be at least an hour late. If you like we can resch—"

"No," Tim said it flat and fast. "We'll see whoever can see us first, and if that's Draz, that's Draz, but Abby is getting seen today."

"Okay. You can wait here, or head to the cafeteria where there's wifi and snacks. If you want to go, we'll text you when someone can see you."

Tim looked at Abby, and she shrugged, very visibly not caring where they ended up. "We'll try down there, maybe head back up here if it's too loud for Kelly."

An hour and twenty-seven minutes.

Okay, it's not the end of the world, but that was a much longer wait than they had been hoping for.

They went to the cafeteria, got some drinks, walked Kelly around a bit (there's a pretty nice garden area right outside of the cafeteria) but by half an hour of that Kelly was asleep and Abby was looking pretty droopy again.

So, back up to the Doc's, and settling into the waiting room. Abby rested. Kelly slept. Tim felt nervous. What if this isn't something with an easy fix? Worse, what if this isn't something that has a hard fix? What if she's just… broken?

But eventually, the nurse called Abby's name, and there was more cooing about how darling Kelly is, which Tim certainly appreciates, but… He knows she's the cutest baby girl in the history of baby girls, what he doesn't know is what's wrong with Abby and how to fix it, so he's not exactly focused on how cute Kelly is.

But the nurse gets them set, and they go through the traditional motions of getting Abby's weight and blood pressure (higher than usual) and asking what's going on, so Tim told her, and the nurse did seem to think this was serious, writing everything down, telling Abby to get into a gown, and that Dr. Draz would be there in a minute.

Getting into the gown was the first time Tim had seen Abby mostly (she kept her bra on) naked since the day after Kelly was born. He's not a doctor. Beyond his first aid badge as a Wilderness Scout and the CPR/First Aid training all NCIS Field Agents are required to have, he has no medical training, but even with all of that, he really doesn't like the way her incision looks.

It's a lot more red and puffy than he thinks it should be.
He touched it, very gently, and yes, it's hot.

"Abby?"

She just shrugs a little.

"Has it been like this the whole time?"

"Don't know. Haven't looked. It's been sore the whole time."

He just nods at that. Part of him wants to yell at her for not taking care of herself, scared and angry and tired all want to bubble up and out at once, but he clamps down on it. First of all, that'll be worse than useless. Second of all, he saw she was sliding away, knew she was drugged, and didn't think to check, either.

"Okay."

Dr. Draz knocked quickly and came in. Since Tim was already looking at the incision, there didn't seem to be much need for hollow pleasantries, so she got right to it, which Tim appreciated.

She checked the incision, and when she gently palpated it, Abby shrieked and almost levitated off the examination table. "I take it it's tender?"

The glare Tim sent her indicated that joking wasn't going to go over well.

She listened to Abby's symptoms, made a lot of notes, nodded a lot, and then said, "You've definitely got an infection. You might be anemic as well. So, in a few minutes Amanda will be back, and she'll get a blood sample. We'll run a full test on it, see how you're doing. You're going on antibiotics when you get home, but the CBC will give us a better idea of what sort. We might give you an Iron booster while you're here. Are you still taking your pre-natal vitamins?"

Abby shook her head. "Don't think so."

Tim knows he hasn't been giving them to her. "No. Should she be?"

"Wouldn't hurt. We'll see how her red blood cell count is." Dr. Draz gently squeezed Abby's knee. "We're going to see what's going on with you, and hopefully some antibiotics and iron will have you feeling better."

Abby didn't smile at that. Tim did.

And then Dr. Draz turned to Kelly, cooed over how big she was getting, how pretty she was, and thanked her for being such a good sleeper so she could have that conversation with her parents without interruption.

By the time Dr. Draz was back with the results of the CBC, Kelly was once again awake, and nursing away (which involved some interesting contortions, because there are no pillows here, no arm supports, and Abby's now got a brand new sore spot on her left arm from the blood draw), because it had been three full hours, and you can't tell a seven day old, now's really not a convenient time to eat, how about in an hour?

So, soft suckling sounds went along with, "We've got the results back, and yes, your white blood cells are high, red cells are low, and your blood sugar is a bit off, too. We're going to give you a shot of iron to get your red cell count up, and for as long as you're still bleeding I want you taking iron supplements and eating high iron food."
"Red meat; leafy, dark green veggies; milk…" Tim said, making sure he's remembering what to get correctly.

"Yeah, if it comes from a cow or Popeye sang it's praises, you're good." Draz fished out her prescription pad. "I'm also going to write you a script for Cipro. If the heat and swelling on your incision hasn't gone down in two days, I want you back here."

Nods from Tim and Abby.

"When was the last time you ate before seeing me?"

"Food, or anything?" Tim asked.

"Real food."

He looked at Abby, she'd mentioned having breakfast, but he knows she slept through when he ate lunch, and then there was crying, pumping, and off to the Doc's…

"Have you eaten anything since breakfast besides that shake?" He'd gotten her a vanilla milkshake at the cafeteria.

"No."

Draz made a note of that. "Okay, hopefully that explains the low blood sugar. With any luck, the iron and antibiotics will have you feeling better and you won't need the reminder, but, you have to eat. Kelly eats every three hours, and you should, too. Some sort of snack, and at least three real meals. You're down twenty pounds from the last time I weighed you, and yes, I know you're holding seven of them and that between the water weight and the placenta, that's most of that twenty pounds, but given how much bigger your breasts are, that means you've probably lost seven pounds of fat. That's too much weight loss too fast.

"Keep eating. A lot. Even when you don't feel like it. Especially when you don't feel like it. If you're nursing and back to your pre-pregnancy weight in a month, something is wrong. As long as you're nursing you should be no less than five pounds heavier than you were pre-pregnancy."

Tim and Abby nodded at that, too.

"I want to see you back here in a week. If you're not feeling significantly better, we're going to start talking about post-partum depression and how to cope with that. I'm not a fan of medicate first and ask questions later, mostly because anti-depressants are very serious medications, so we'll start with lifestyle changes, but if medication is where we need to go to get you enjoying being yourself again, that's what we'll do. Yes, being upset post-baby is normal. Yes, being exhausted is normal. But you're supposed to enjoy this, too. So let's get you back to the point where you can enjoy this."

More nodding. Tim's very much on board with this plan. Abby doesn't precisely look like she thinks enjoying anything ever again is on the menu, but she's also not looking like it's impossible either.

"For now, as much rest as you can get. Your friend who came up with the alternate nights plan, go give her a hug from me; that's a really good idea. Eat. Take the meds. This is a really hard job, and you're doing it sleep deprived, sick, and loopy from pain medication. That'll make anyone feel horrible."
Tim McGee with a plan is a much happier guy than Tim McGee without a plan.

It doesn't even have to be a good plan. Though he certainly prefers good plans to bad plans. But the here's what's-going-to-happen, here's-why, here's-how, and when thing provides him with a very nice and secure safety net.

So, driving home, prescription in his pocket, grocery list on his phone, step by step plan to put into action on Operation: Getting Abby Feeling Like Abby Again he's feeling a whole lot better than he was a few hours ago.

Abby on the other hand, is just really tired.

Right now, for her, everything else is just drowned in joint-gluing tired.

So, he dropped her home, got her settled on the sofa for a nap, hoping that being home alone will let her sleep, and decided today was the day he was going to attempt to run errands, on his own, with Kelly.

There's a story Jimmy has told both Gibbs and Tim, but not Breena, (and certainly not Abby or Ziva, though, should Tony join the Dad club, he will eventually get this story, as well) mostly because he'd appreciate not having his wife think he is a complete and utter idiot when it comes to caring for their children.

But, when Molly was a week old, and Breena's parents had returned to their own home, he found himself in the house with an exhausted spouse and (because this was before the discovery of Mylicon) an extremely crabby baby who had been crying for, basically, every single second she'd been awake that day.

So, in an effort to get Breena a little sleep, he packed up Molly, got in the car, and went to get some groceries.

While driving to the grocery store, Molly did, finally, fall asleep.

Now, at this point in the story, Jimmy always stresses the fact that he had gotten, maybe, six hours of sleep in the previous four days, and he also stresses the fact that it was February, so it wasn't too hot out.

And by the time he's finished stressing these things, most people (by which we mean both Gibbs and Tim, since they are the only ones who have heard this story) have figured out what happened next.

Namely, that with a sort of single-minded determination that only comes from being so tired you can't remember your name, Jimmy got out of the car, carefully shut the door (didn't want to wake Molly), quietly opened the trunk, got the stroller out, set it up, and was three quarters of the way through the parking lot, toward the grocery store when it occurred to him that he did not, in fact, actually have Molly with him, and she was, technically, still located in the car.

Gibbs does not have a story like that. And not because he was so amazingly on top of everything that
he just did everything right.

No, he does not have a story like that because he did not, in fact, go out alone with Kelly until she was eight months old.

Now, part of that was being deployed from the time she was four to eight months old. Part of that was they lived on base, so there wasn’t a huge need to really go places. And part of it was it was 1982, and people didn’t much expect dads to be off, on their own, with brand new babies.

But, by the time he did go off on his own with his Kelly, he was well past the stumbling, blind tired newborn in the house part of the experience, and thus, that first trip to the park with just the two of them went awfully smooth.

So, Tim’s not exactly feeling like he’s got much of a hurdle to jump to do better on his first solo outing. Just doing it in the first place, and then successfully getting her out of the car will rank him above Jimmy and Jethro on this.

He does get her out of the car, into the stroller, and from there into the grocery store. She’s cooperating with this endeavor by sleeping.

Which he’s thinking sounds like an awfully good plan, get home, grab a nap…

Oh.

Yeah.

He can’t get a nap when he gets home. Pharmacy says it’ll be half an hour to get the prescription ready, then check out, fifteenish more minutes to get home again and…

Yeah.

He’ll get them home, and it’ll be nursing time for Kelly again. And while Kelly eats, he’ll need to get food for him and Abby. (He makes a bee-line to the meat counter and stacks as many steaks as he can in the little storage area under the stroller. Then puts half a dozen of them back because he needs to get Abby more than just piles of beef.) Once that’s done, maybe he can get a little rest until the ten feed, and driving Abby to Breena and Jimmy’s. (That reminds him. He checks his phone. Yep, message from Breena, asking what’s going on. He flashes her a quick text back.) So, he and Kelly will probably be home around 11:30, and maybe he can catch another quick nap then, but really, he’s not looking at any solid sleep until… shit… 2:00.

There’s a Starbucks attached to their grocery store, and he’s staring at it as he heads toward the frozen veggies, planning on getting spinach, kale, broccoli… Is broccoli high in iron? He googlesthat on his phone and finds that, well, no it’s not great, but it’s got lots of vitamin C which makes it easier to absorb iron from your other food, so he tosses a few bags on top of the steaks, next to the spinach. Then he checked the spinach, saw it had even less iron than broccoli, and decided that he probably needed to recalibrate what he considers a ‘good source of iron.’ After a minute of that, while another shopper, gently, pushed by him, it occurred to him that he’d completely lost track of what he’d been doing.

Which was not supposed to be standing in the grocery store, thinking that if you can get 6% of your daily iron requirement from a serving of broccoli and 41% of it from a serving of beef that calling broccoli an iron-rich food is insane.
No, he had been pondering applying a dose of caffeine to his system in an effort to get to 2:00 AM. But, as he looks back in the direction of the Starbucks (no longer visible behind the frozen food) it occurs to him that if he does have a real coffee, he's not going to be able to sleep, even though he'd like to be sleeping, for any of those little bits of downtime he might get.

And, more importantly, it's not going to help him focus. He might not feel so tired, but he's not going to be any less scattered.

Still, coffee, black, rich, strong coffee with lots of milk and sugar. He's got the image of coffee beans, the ones dipped in dark chocolate in mind…

Wait… is chocolate a good source of iron? More googling. Fuck! Yes it is, well, maybe not fabulous, but twice as good as broccoli, so, off to the candy section he goes.

He's shoving bars of dark chocolate next to the steaks when something about beans (coffee beans, cocoa beans) triggers a faint memory.

He googles edamame, which Abby not only will eat, but actually likes, and bingo!

And off he headed for more frozen veggies.

Tossing them under the stroller, he's pulling up the number of their favorite Pan-Asian place, ordering beef and broccoli, roasted edamame, and beef lo mein, he can grab that en route home, and have dinner done that much faster.

Okay. So, game plan on.

He's in line, waiting to pay for his food, pretty out of it, kind of just staring into the distance, when he noticed the lady behind him had said something.

"Excuse me?"

She smiled kindly at him, looking pretty amused. "Babysitting?"

He thinks about that for a moment. Jeans, ratty t-shirt, black circles under his eyes, hasn't shaved in a week, or gotten a shower in two days (he's suddenly aware of the fact that he forgot deodorant after his last shower, and isn't sure if he brushed his teeth this morning, so he grabs a pack of gum, popping a piece in his mouth, putting the pack on the checkout belt), God alone knows what his hair looks like (well, God, and everyone else at the market, but he doesn't.), the bottom of his bicep cuff tattoo is visible, so's his wrist cuff, and he's got a black leather diaper bag over his shoulder.

He knows he wouldn't pay anyone who looked like him to take care of a child.

"No. She's mine."

He gets the sense that he's missed some of the context of what the lady behind him had said, because it looks like that wasn't the response she was expecting, but she regrouped and said, "She's beautiful. How old is she?"

"Seven days."

"Letting Mom get some rest?"

"Yes."
Then the cashier was ringing up his purchases, so he grabbed his wallet, dropped it, tried to pick it up, dropped it again, and finally managed to locate his credit card and pay.

Driving home, he thinks he might have the context for what the lady behind him at the grocery store was saying, namely, "This isn't really your job, is it? You're just helping out, so here's a cookie for trying."

That pissed him off enough he wanted to turn around and go find her and yell at her.

This is his job; he's not just helping out, and any bitch who wants to act like he's not really a fucking parent because he's the dad can just go straight to Hell, and God help the next woman who calls him a babysitter, especially if it happens before he gets some real sleep.

Home again home again.

He leaves Kelly in the car while he takes the groceries in. She's sleeping, though probably not for all that much longer, so he doesn't want to disturb her until the last possible moment.

Abby's on the sofa, eyes closed, and… yes, fluttering, good. He's making sure to look really carefully when it comes to checking if she's actually sleeping, because he'd certainly thought she'd been sleeping before.

The food he'd put next to her before sleeping, however, was un-touched, so that didn't thrill him.

Food, sleep, medication. It really shouldn't be that hard, should it?

He brought dinner in. Then carefully got Kelly out of her car seat, but carefully wasn't good enough, she did wake up, and by that point it was close enough to her next meal he didn't think she was going to be going back to sleep until after she ate.

"Okay, sweetie, let's get you cleaned up. Then dinnertime. Sound good?"

Kelly kept fussing.

To change her diaper outside, or take her in…

He circled to the other side of the car, laid out a blanket on the seat, and took care of it in there. Maybe Abby was already awake, but if she wasn't, buying her three more minutes of sleep seemed worth it.

He made a mental note to restock the diaper bag. They'd been out a whole lot longer than expected and were down to one diaper and no wipes.

When they came in, Abby was sitting up, looking awfully sleepy, and rubbing her eyes.

He sat next to her, Kelly in his arms. "Feeling any better?"

"Meh. Hungry."

"Good. I've got food. And you know what?"
"What?"

"Dark chocolate has lots of iron in it!"

That got a smile. A real smile. Sure, not a light up the room, everything feels better smile, but there was actual, genuine pleasure in her look, and it lit him up.

He kissed her. "I love you."

She nodded at that, and squeezed his hand, and said, "Sounds like Kelly's hungry, too."

"Yep."

Abby rearranged the pillows and got into nursing position. Tim handed Kelly over.

"I got us beef and broccoli, beef lo mein, and roasted edamame."

"Sounds good."

"Let me get the groceries put away, and I'll get us dinner, too."

Three minutes later, he was on the sofa, next to her, feeding both of them bites of dinner (Yes, Abby will eventually learn how to nurse one handed, but it hasn't happened, yet.) when Abby asked how the trip had gone, and looked interested in his answer.

And right that second he's just so happy he can barely stand it.
The Path

Breena came over on Friday afternoon.

Abby certainly looked better Tuesday evening, and even more better on Wednesday, but last night was her first night home, her first night on, so Breena wanted to check in and see how it had gone.

When she got there, Abby was up, so was Kelly, and as much as a ten day old baby can play, they were playing.

She doesn't know where Tim is, but guessing by the disjoined, this-is-the-hardest-thing-on-earth, I-can't-believe-people-do-this-on-their-own text she found on her phone Wednesday morning, she's going to guess he's crashed out in their bed, sleeping.

Kelly was looking fairly alert. Molly wanted to be running around and loud, which assuming Tim is actually sleeping probably isn't a great plan, so Breena said, "Let's get a walk."

"What is it with you and walks?" Abby got up slowly. Standing up from sitting down is still a somewhat ouchy proposal if she doesn't do it carefully.

"They're good for you. Come on, time to get out of the house."

Once again, they're moseying along on amble speed. Breena's got Molly's stroller with her, but right now Molly's tearing around, running all over the place. Fifteen minutes from now, though, she'll probably want a ride.

"Soooo…" Breena asks as they get to the end of the driveway.

"Yeah, it's better. Maybe not great, but better."

"Still hurting all over?"

"Just my boobs, and just when it's getting onto feeding time."

"That'll be true for a while longer, and then every time you scale back a feed, too."

"Lovely."

"Eh… Just part of the job," Breena says dismissively. "So, really, you doing okay? You look better, but…"

"I am better, but…" Abby looks up at the sky, then back at her house, but not at Breena. "But I'm not me."

Breena nods at that. "After Jon died… after I got pregnant again… I felt better, but… the woman I was before he died, she's gone. Because I'm not that woman anymore. You aren't the Abby you used to be, either."

"I liked that Abby. That Abby… I don't know… Could hook into a sort of easy happiness. And I still can't find that."

"You might still have some sort of low level depression. Might just be tired."

emotions are still all over the place. Mood swings like crazy."

"But they are swinging? You're getting highs and lows?"

"Yeah. Well, not as high as I used to get, but moderate highs, and none of the lows are as low as they were either, but still crying over stupid stuff."

"That's normal."

"It might be, but it's not normal for me. It's just... I liked the person I was."

Breena shrugs. "I liked the old Breena, too. But both of those women are gone." She thinks about that for a moment. "They were steps to being the women we're going to be. We were girls, and lovers, wives, now mothers. There's a cycle... a path I guess... And each step takes what came before and adds to it, but..."

"But the old steps are gone and can't come back."

"Right." Breena put her arm around Abby's shoulders. "And if the new you is more serious, less playful, we're still going to love you."

Abby leaned her head on Breena's shoulder. "Even Peter Pan had to grow up eventually."

"Huh?"

Instead of a stroller, Abby had put Kelly in the Baby Bjorn so she was strapped to her chest. She tilted her head down and kissed the top of Kelly's head. "Peter Pan was always my favorite. And I had a good, long run of being twenty-eight forever. But I'm forty-two. I'm married, with a baby, and when I get back to work a whole department of people to run. The days of just being me are over. And maybe that's part of this post-baby freak out. There's no aspect of my life anymore where I'm just me. Everywhere I look someone is depending on me."

Breena smiled at that.

"And it's not bad, maybe... Just... Different."

"Responsibility with a great big R."

"Yeah. The one thing Tony and I always had in common, that fear of having to be in charge of anyone else. That's why he's skittish about kids. That's why he's not the team leader."

"He's getting there. On his own path."

"Yeah. And I guess I am there."

"Yep. This is the new you, new life."

Abby patted Kelly's bum. "This is the new life. Me... I guess I'm feeling pretty old right now."

Breena laughed a little at that. "Not that old. Still got Tony beat by five years. She kissed Kelly's head. "And one of these days, she'll decide to sleep through the night, and you'll get rested back up, and you'll feel like playing again. The new you has more responsibility, and the new you is a mom and a wife and a boss and all of that, but you're still Abby, still into black and skulls and music so loud your teeth vibrate. And maybe in the late spring, when this one's getting onto a year," she stroked Kelly's hair, "and this one," she petted her own belly, "is about six months old. You and Ziva and I are going to get all dressed up, and we're going to take our guys dancing, and we're going
to have a blast at it."

That got a smile out of Abby. "It's our turn to pick the club, right?"

"Yeah. You'll finally get to see Jimmy in eyeliner."

That got a small laugh.

"I told you he finally did that, right? Apparently Tim convinced him that his dick wouldn't fall off if he tried some makeup," Breena says with a wide grin. "He's so pretty."

"Don't tell him that; he'll never put it on again."

"I know that. I was… enthusiastic… in my approval of that look," Breena said with a giggle. "Positive reinforcement and all."

"Pavlov's eyeliner?"

"Something like that."

"What color did he pick?"

"He's a guy… Black."

"Of course. Did I tell you I got Tim into some green and gray?"

"No. When was that…"
Tubby Time

Tim's pooped.

Three straight nights of all baby all the time has convinced him of two things: A. He does not ever, for any reason, want to be a single parent. B: It is significantly easier to go for a few days with no sleep and then crash and sleep round the clock for a few days than it is to just get little one hour, two hour long naps for days at a time. Three: He will never scoff at sleep deprivation as a form of torture again, and D: His ability to maintain a consistent train of thought is shot to shit.

So, yes, last night was Abby's night, and he did sleep from basically dinner until right after Kelly's 7:00 AM feed, and then got up so Abby could rest, knowing he was on duty. Mostly he got himself some breakfast, put some more food on the bedside table for Abby, and then spent the next hour dozing on the bed next to her.

And yes, alternating nights is a lifesaver. He's fried. Really fried. But he suspects he was a lot closer to insane yesterday than he is now. (When he saw what he texted to Breena, apparently during Kelly's 4:00 feed on Thursday morning, he decided he was really out of it. Not just because it makes no sense, but also because he has no memory of doing it, at all.)

Round about ten, Kelly started chirping again, so he got out of bed, grabbed her, cleaned her up, and brought her to Abby, who was looking awfully tired, but that haunted, dead, listless look is gone, so he's thinking that is a good thing.

Tim brought Kelly in for her second breakfast. (Who knew having a baby was like suddenly getting a helpless Hobbit? Breakfast, second breakfast, elevenses, luncheon, tea, dinner, supper. Were it not for the lack of furry feet, she'd be ready to start calling Kelly, Merri.)

Abby rolled onto her side (which she can finally do without pain, thank you antibiotics!) facing both of them. Kelly's on the bed, laying on her back, kicking and squirming a little, doing what Abby considers her, I-just-woke-up-let's-move routine.

Rumor has it, there's a way to do this that doesn't involved having to sit up, find pillows, and rearrange everyone. Something about side-lying nursing.

Worth a shot.

She scooted a bit closer to Kelly, got her breast out of her bra, and gave it a try.

And once again, Kelly's giving her that this is different, I'm not sure I like it look. But she's very much in favor of getting fed, so she latches on and gets to it.

Tim's laying on his side, watching them, very gently stroking Kelly's tummy.

"You do that."

Tim looks up at her.

"Huh?"

"She was giving me the I'm not sure I like this, but I'll try it anyway look. Seen that on you a whole
bunch of times. Like, you gave me that exact same look when I was trying to get you to eat fried pickles."

That got a smile out of Tim. Part of him is thinking that he's not the only one who needs occasional extra coaxing to try new things, but he's also actually rested enough to realize that saying that out loud might not be the best move in the history of husband-hood. So, instead he says, "Looks like she's decided this works. How about you? This comfy?"

"Not sure. It's different." Kelly kept sucking away, and Abby lay there, relaxing a little, dozing a little, and eventually decided that yep, she likes this.

"I was thinking…" Tim jerked a little when she said that, apparently he'd been a few steps past just dozing.

"Yeah."

"I can do the 1:00 feed. Still want to swap on the 4:00 one, but I can get 1:00."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm feeding every three hours the rest of the day, and as much as I love the sleep, going from ten to seven without nursing is really uncomfortable. I wake up, and they're rock hard and ache."

"Then I'll fetch Kelly for you for the 1:00 feed. But if you start getting too tired, let me know. It's really scary when you stop talking, so… just… Whatever you need, I'll do, but you do have to tell me what it is."

"Okay. Right now, I need to get into a set routine for this nursing thing, and I think getting that routine will help."

"All right."

"And when I am completely fried, and she's yelling, I will poke you and send you in on feeding duty."

"No problem. But to be clear, it's my night for the 4:00 AM feed?"

"Yep. Every other night, one of us gets six straight hours of sleep in a row."

"I am on board with that. One of the books was saying that usually the 4:00 feed is the one that usually goes first. So, when she starts sleeping that long, you want to swap on the 1:00 feed?" Tim asked.

"Yeah. If it works that way. Breena told me the first feed Molly dropped was the 10:00 PM one. But if she cooperates, let's get at least one of us a full night of sleep."

He stretched a bit, and sat up. "I'm actually feeling rested enough that I might want to do something."

Abby rose an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Well, nothing complicated. I'm still not sure I could type my password in right. But, maybe Kelly and I'll go get some more groceries when she wraps up. You wanna come? Get out of the house for a little while?"

"Tempting, but… If you're going to take her out, I'm going to do something wild and crazy."
"Really?" he asks with a little smile.

"Yeah. Gonna get a shower."

"Ohh… you wild woman." Tim ran his fingers through his hair and cringed at how greasy it was. "I'm thinking I should do likewise. I probably don't need to be quite this scruffy. Don't want strangers calling child protective services on me."

"You don't look that bad."

"Don't look that good, either."

Abby shrugged. Tim stood up, heading toward the bathroom. "Maybe, if the water really wakes me up, I'll shave."

"Skip it," she said as he stepped in.

And having said that he turned around and stepped back out. "Really?"

"Yeah, you've told me part of why you've never done a beard is because it comes in kind of scraggly, and you don't want to look like that at work. You're not at work. Unless you hate it, might as well let it grow in and see what happens."

He rubs his face, and ten days without shaving means he looks like, well, Tony, on day three, sort of. It's long enough that it's not scratchy. The big thing is that while the goatee area is pretty well covered in hair, his cheeks and jaw line has about, from the feel of it, fifty or so hairs, and that's just not a beard, at all.

But he probably could manage a fairly decent-looking goatee between now and heading back to work.

"Doesn't bug you?" he asks. He has thought about growing a beard on occasion, but usually by about day five he gives up because it looks stupid (and he runs out of vacation time).

"Nope. It's not sharp anymore, and especially if you aren't going to be doing your regular every other day shave, you might as well keep it long and soft."

"Then I won't shave."

That got a smile out of Abby.

When he got out, Abby had rolled to her other side, Kelly was still nursing away, and they were both listening to some of Abby's music. Abby rocking gently to it. From what he could tell Kelly wasn't aware of it.

Of course, he's got no idea how a baby would react in a way to indicate it's happy with the music being played.

Laugh maybe? He doesn't think Kelly's laughed yet. Coos, babbles, chirps, cries, and occasionally sounds so much like a cat he wonders if the neighbor's cat somehow got into their house, but no laughing.

It'll come.
She's only ten days old.

He sat on the bed toweling off his hair, feeling a lot better. Clean, somewhat rested, all of his various and sundry basic needs taken care of, and yeah, he's feeling like a real human again.

"While I was in there, I was thinking of something else we could do."

Abby looks up at him. "What kind of something else?"

He smiles at her. "Several, but only one is relevant right now. Her umbilical cord stub fell off yesterday. We could try giving her a real bath. See if we've got a little swimmer here."

"Hmmm… We could do that."

"Yeah, she's getting a little smelly. And she doesn't like getting wiped off." Which is an understatement. She screams bloody murder if you try to apply a damp washcloth to her. Which, on a gut level, Tim sympathizes with. But, they're not letting her get crusty, so she does get wiped off, and just has to deal with it. "So… tubby time?"

Abby flashed a smile at him. "Sure."

Technically, Kelly has her own bathroom. (At least for the time being.) They have their own bathroom attached to their room, and then there's another full bath down the hall between what is now Kelly's room and the guest room.

That's the one with all the baby gear in it.

And in a few months, when she can sit up on her own and play, having a bathroom with all this stuff in it for her will probably make sense, but at ten days old Kelly really couldn't care less if there are tubby toys.

So, post feed, post burp, they're ambling down the hall to that bathroom, slightly nervous (like all first time parents getting ready to give the baby a bath) ready to try out this whole bathing thing.

And like two somewhat nervous people who, just possibly, went a bit bonkers on the child safety gear, they have a wide collection of things located in Kelly's bathroom devoted to getting her wet and soapy in the utmost safety.

And, like two nervous people who have never done this before, they are noticing that, well, the thing with giving a baby a bath in a tub is that, the tub's kind of wide, and deep, and even if you've got this little thing that looks sort of like a recliner for a baby that you can strap the baby into so she doesn't slip into the water, you're still in a really awkward position, and it's hard to get the back wet on a person who's strapped down, and well, this just doesn't work.

They didn't even have to get Kelly into the water to figure that out. Abby had started the water, making sure it was nicely warm while Tim was getting her undressed. She set the tub safety thing up, and just doing that was awkward. The leaning, reaching, twisting thing wasn't comfortable at all, and wasn't making her feel like she'd be in a good position to wash Kelly off, let alone grab her fast if need be.

She looked at it, shook her head, and said, "Yeah, this is just not going to work."
He's holding Kelly against his chest. She's doing her traditional, I'm not swaddled, let's flail around, and seems to be enjoying it right now.

"So…” Tim's wondering what he solution to this is going to be.

Abby just looks him over. Tim realizes that, having finished his shower less than twenty minutes ago, he's not dressed. "Okay."

She takes the baby bath seat out, and he gets in. Water feels good to him, so it's probably okay for her. He's cradling her head in one hand, tush in the other as he gently lowers her in.

"This'll probably feel pretty familiar. You used to spend all your time wet," he says as the back of his hand and her feet hit the water.

She's squinting up at him. Not looking particularly alarmed or displeased, but not sure if she likes this, either. Her feet and legs are in, and she kicks around, sending drops flying, one of which got her in the nose, and that got an indignant chirp out of her.

"Yeah, well, if you splash you're going to get wet," Tim says while Abby laughs. "Your cousin Molly will very happily teach you that lesson over and over when you two get to the pool." Then he finished lowering her so that all of her but her head was in the water. She scooted around a little, which Tim found nerve wracking because she's really slippery and the absolute last thing he wants to do is drop her.

He looks up at Abby when a thought occurs to him. If he's holding her in place, he's using both of his hands, so he can't really apply soap. "Help?"

Abby leans over the side of the tub, cups her hand, and begins to trickle water over Kelly's head. And while Kelly does not appear to mind the water on her body, she's finding the water on her head bothersome and lets them know she's not fond of that sensation by crying and trying to move her head around so she can see what's happening.

Abby speeds it up a bit, rubbing a tiny dab of baby soap into her hair and rinsing it off fast. Then they try to get the area under her chin, which she also doesn't approve of. Her head tilts down fast when Abby tries to get that washed off.

Tummy washing got some cooing. Feet were also deemed to be an appropriate washing venue. Legs were met with approval. Hands went over well. Armpits, not so much.

Which left them with Kelly's back. And it's not like Tim's going to just flip her over, face down, in the water. Nope.

He's been kneeling in the tub, holding her in the water, when something finally occurs to him. He's got legs. And legs might be a more handy version of that baby bath chair they had. So he rearranges himself so his legs are in front of him, bent up a bit so his knees are out of the water, and he set Kelly on her tummy on his legs, looking over his knees, and said, "So, I'd really appreciate it if you didn't poop on me, okay?"

Abby laughed at that.

Then she got more soap, rubbed it all over Kelly's back (also an approved washing area) bum (Tim wonders if that tickles, because she's flailing at it, but doesn't sound unhappy) and legs (happy, baby cooing at that).

A minute after that, she was rinsed off, wrapped in a dry towel, and Tim and Abby were feeling like
they had successfully cracked the case wide open, caught the killer, and won a Nobel Prize for it.

All in all, it was a good morning.
They were in the grocery store, and this time Tim was a bit more focused on something besides all the iron he could stack in the little storage area under the seat in the stroller.

Well, maybe focused isn’t really the right word. Not like he's got any great plan. He's just looking to grab some things to eat and give Abby some quiet time in the house.

But, for the moment at least, Kelly's actually awake, eyes wide, staring at everything, so he's holding her against his chest, pushing the stroller with his foot, ambling forward at about two feet a minute, and more or less showing her everything. A quiet, steady stream of things like, "Look, Kelly, Oreos, you'll like them when you're older. I like them, too. Which is why we don't buy them a lot, because when we have them, I like to eat the whole box," and other little bits of not exactly riveting conversation. But she seems to like it, so he's doing it.

Halfway down the housewares aisle, (They need more trash bags, lots more trash bags) his phone chirped at him, so he fished around for it, found it, and saw from Ziva: *Just wrapped case. Everyone heading home to rest. Shabbos tonight? Sunset is 8:37.*

He sent back. *Shopping right now. Abby's not here. Will ask if she's up for it when I get home. Will let you know then.*

Good. Hope you are coming. Want to see our girls.

What? Not me? ;)

:) We know you're okay. Want to see the ladies.

Then I shall try to bring the girls.

Good. Though I have the feeling see will be the operative word. $10 says Gibbs doesn't let anyone else hold Kelly.

Not touching that bet with a ten foot pole. Don't like setting my money on fire.

:) Let me know when you can.

When he got home, Kelly was napping, and so was Abby, but she was downstairs, showered, dressed, and from the looks of it had eaten, too.

All good.

He carefully put Kelly in her crib, begging her, silently, to stay asleep, and this time she did. So he headed down, put the groceries away, and for the first time in ten days felt… normal. Well, tired normal, but this could have just been any other weekend day after a long week.

That was kind of nice.

A few minutes later, Abby wandered in, yawning, rubbing her eyes, then sat at the kitchen table, watching him stow the grocery bags.

"Ziva wants to know if you want to come to Shabbos tonight?"
Abby thought about it for a few seconds. "Yeah. I think so. Haven't been out in too damn long."

_Amen_, Tim thought. "Sunset's 8:37."

"So, we'll aim to get there around eight?"

"Errr…" Kelly eats at seven, takes her about an hour to eat, forty minute drive to Tony and Ziva's… "Want to try feeding her in the car again, or be late?"

"I'll text Ziva."

Or, at 5:15, after the four o'clock feed, burp, and clean up, they can be in the car, heading toward Tony and Ziva's.

They haven't attempted to take Kelly anywhere that isn't baby friendly before, so, by conservative estimate they've got enough stuff packed into the diaper bag to last roughly six months. But, you know, if you don't bring a whole pack of diapers and five clean outfits you end up with a baby with explosive diarrhea and it'll just be a hideous mess.

Better safe than sorry.

Hugs, kisses, Tony staring at him and saying, "Here, let me get you a wash cloth, you've got something on your face," and Tim wondering for a second if he did have something before realizing Tony meant his facial hair, and then shoving him, maybe a tad harder than was strictly necessary, took care of the first few minutes at their place.

"So, you're what, growing a beard?" Tony asks while Ziva snuggles Kelly (and suddenly Tim understands why they're here early, not only is it a bit easier on the transport, but Ziva doesn't have to wrestle Gibbs for baby cuddle rights.)

"Maybe. See how it looks in a few weeks."

"I like it, McGee," Ziva says.

"Easy upkeep. Sure, we're only talking about saving me fifteen minutes a week, but still—"

"Free time is really important, now," Abby finishes.

"What do you think Gibbs is gonna say you show up to work with that on your face?"

Tim rubs the eighth of an inch long, scruffy goatee he's got right now. "If it still looks like this in July when I'm coming back, I'll shave it off. Don't need the guys in interrogation laughing at me."

Ziva chuckles at that, handing Kelly to Tony, who holds her like she's a bomb with a mercury trigger and if he so much as breathes wrong they're all going to die. He sees Ziva take the challah dough out of the bowl it's been rising in, and says, "I'll get that; you play with Kelly."

She smiles at him, looking amused and cocky. "I am fine with the bread, Tony. Enjoy some quality time with your niece. She won't bite you."

"In fact…" Abby took Kelly from Tony, and he visibly relaxed, and then stiffened back up a second later when he realized she was just draping a spit-up rag over his shoulder, and rearranging Kelly so
she was facing his shoulder. "Okay, just hold onto her, and keep rubbing her back, and in about five minutes you'll have a sleeping baby on your shoulder, and that's awfully nice."

Okay, Tony's never going to admit this to anyone other than Ziva, but yeah, small person sleeping on his shoulder is kind of nice. It's restful and sort of lulling. He could easily see doing this, popping a game on the TV, and just quietly zoning out into a nap.

But, as he knows from that afternoon he was at Tim's place, and all the time with Molly, who will be over in less than an hour, babies don't sleep all the time.

They get loud, and erratic, and sticky, and messy, and... And he's still really skittish about this. Sure, this part right now is going well, and yeah, he'll play with Molly, she likes getting tossed around, and will just light up when he starts to chase her around the apartment. And, yeah, if pressed, he'll say he enjoys it, but...

But it's still freaking scary.

They've been talking about a baby of their own more. The kind of talking that's supposed to have a plan attached to it, not just a 'sure, sooner or later' sort of thing.

And tentatively, they're thinking of starting on baby making in January, when Gibbs leaves. That way he'll have close to a year as team leader to let that get settled in. Draga will have had over a year on the team. Tim'll be... probably gone by then. So with any luck they'll've had their new fourth for at least six months. Draga and the fourth will have had time to learn each other. Ziva will be able to take the time she needs, and he'll be able to take a few weeks at least...

Sort of...

Kind of...

God, it's a mess. If he could get his staffing taken care of... If he knew when Tim's leaving... If he could get his team fully sorted... But if they wait that long, he is going to be seventy when this child goes to college.

Not that sixty-nine is much better.

He's wanted his own team, with his own people, for ten years now. But, of course, as soon as it looks like he's going to have his team, half of it leaves, and the other quarter is talking about having babies, and tearing him between her and it.

Okay, gotta stop thinking about this, because Ziva, and Abby, and Tim are noticing he hasn't said anything in a few minutes, and they're going to start asking what's up soon.

So he hops back into the conversation with, "Abby, did Ziva tell you about what happened in the lab yesterday?"

And Abby, all but visibly leaping to defend her territory, was on that story in a heartbeat.

Gibbs pulled into the parking garage under Tony and Ziva's apartment building, and was pleased to
see the McGees' Highlander there. He'd purposely come a bit early, hoping they'd also be early, hoping to have a little more time with his kids and grandkid.

He smiles at that, locking up, and heading for the elevator.

It's been a long, long time since he got done with a day at work (Tony and Ziva went home, he and Draga stuck around and waded through the paperwork) and found himself looking forward to going home. Okay, technically not home, technically Tony and Ziva's home, but really, home is where your family is, and tonight the family'll be at Tony and Ziva's.

There's this… sensation… right now and he sort of, kind of, vaguely remembers feeling something like this when he'd get home from deployment and have off time. It might be satisfaction. Job's done, bad guy's in jail, all the major paperwork is done. It could be peace. He's not feeling any need to run back to work to hunt down the next bad guy.

He's actually pleased to have down time. Down time means he can have a good dinner, play with the kids, go home, sleep some, probably time to go get the wood for baby Palmer's crib, they'll know if it's a boy or girl soon, right? Maybe see if Jimmy and Breena want to come over at some point tomorrow and talk about designs for it. Definitely going to make sure he gets over to Tim and Abby's for at least some of Saturday and Sunday. And Sunday means bootcamp, got Jimmy and Ziva for that, though maybe if Breena feels like spending some time with Abby, he can get Tim along on that, maybe not, got to see how tired he is…

And as he's thinking that, as he's planning his weekend, it hits him this is the first time in… really, since Shannon and his Kelly died, that he's not focused on the next case. First time he's not chasing retribution. First time he feels like he can really rest.

He thinks about Mexico with Mike, and about how whenever he called, Mike came back, and he feels the difference. When he was in Mexico he bounced from one project to the next to keep himself busy. Yeah, he liked the work, but he wasn't doing it because he liked it, he was doing it to shut his mind up.

And Mike came back every time Gibbs called for the same reason. Sure cervesa and senoritas made Mike happy, but the work gave him purpose. And he needed that purpose. But when the work wasn't right anymore, he couldn't do it. But family comes first, and you always go in when your family needs you, and if Gibbs calling gave him that loophole, he jumped on it.

The door to the elevator opens and Gibbs realizes that his purpose is shifting, he's moving from cop to grandpa, and the need to shut down the bad guys will always be there, that this job is good and useful and… just… right. But it's not his whole life anymore.

And more than that, he's thinking he might like this new life.
Gibbs was right, babies prefer to sleep on other people. They do not particularly like cribs, bouncy seats, car seats, or anything that isn't warm and breathing, with a gentle pulse.

And, of course, during all of Shabbos, Kelly did not get put down once. She napped on Tony, and then Gibbs (and Ziva was right, he was a complete and utter baby hog.), then Penny and Ducky got some cuddle time, Ziva took a round of it, Breena got about two minutes before Molly got jealous about her Mommy playing with the new baby, burst into tears, and spent the rest of the night glued to Breena, and Jimmy rounded out the crew, though Molly was acting pretty territorial about him, as well.

Now, at the time, this was a lot of fun. Tim and Abby got to enjoy real adult conversation, a few hours of not being furniture, the restful sensation of knowing that they didn't have to be on high alert every single second, and everyone else was enjoying baby time, so the idea that this might come back to bite them later was nothing that occurred to either of them.

But right now, at 10:55, as they're driving home, and Kelly is screaming in her car seat, they are rapidly realizing that maybe letting her spend the entire time on someone else, or maybe just that much time out with that many other people, wasn't a great plan.

If they weren't going 70 on the Beltway, he'd be really tempted to pull over, get her out of that seat, and try to figure out what was wrong, but he's got a suspicion, because she had happily nursed, let out a huge belch, then snuggled onto Jethro, and fell asleep in like two minutes, the picture of perfect contentment.

Then Gibbs put her in her car seat, and two seconds later the screaming began.

Her little body noticed the warmth of Gibbs was gone, her eyes shot open, and then there was wailing.

And it didn't stop.

And funny faces, humming, and promises of 'Pop'll be over tomorrow,' did absolutely nothing to abate said crying.

And ten minutes (the longest ten minutes in the history of time) later, she's still going strong.

"Walk me to my car," Gibbs said to Tony about half an hour after the McGees left.

"Sure..." There's a breath while Tony decides if this is personal or work related. He settles on personal, and finishes that sentence with, "Jethro."

Gibbs nods. He guessed right.

They're a few steps out of the apartment when Tony says, "What's on your mind?"

Gibbs tilts his head a little. "What's on yours? You're looking… like you're thinking hard."

"Might be."

"Want to talk?"
Tony reached out, placed a hand on Gibbs' forehead, and said, "No fever. You look like Gibbs, but Gibbs doesn't talk, so who are you?"

_Quit being a smart-ass_ Gibbs' look replied.

"Yeah, who the hell are you? That should have gotten a head-slap."

"You want a head-slap, DiNozzo?"

"Better, Boss."

"Don't have to be Boss on this. Not if you don't want."

Tony shrugged. Sometimes Boss is easier than friend. Friends give you advice, but in the end you have to make up your own mind. Boss tells you what to do, and the responsibility for it lands on him.

They get to the elevator, and Tony absently notices there isn't an off switch in this one.

Gibbs doesn't say anything. Just inviting him to talk is enough, and he'll wait until Tony's ready to say something, and if that's not tonight, it's not tonight.

As they're sliding down the floors to the parking garage, a thought hits Gibbs; he and Tony don't really talk, not in a put thoughts and feelings into words and expressly communicate verbally sort of way. And they very rarely do it about anything personal. Best he can remember, the last really personal conversation he had with Tony was when Tony asked permission to marry Ziva, and that didn't involve Tony having to express any doubts about anything.

So, Gibbs decides to broaden the offer. "Sometimes it's good to have someone who's done it around to bounce thoughts off of. Tim and Jimmy aren't the only ones welcome in my basement. Still got that bottle of bourbon you gave me for Christmas down there, you're welcome to help me drink it."

"You haven't opened it yet?"

"Not saying that. Just it's not done, yet."

"You're slowing down."

Gibbs shrugged at that. "Don't need so much anymore."

"Guess not." The elevator doors opened, and they headed over to Gibbs' truck. For a few seconds Gibbs waited before opening the door, but Tony didn't say anything, so he opened the door, and finally Tony said, "Did you and Shannon plan to have Kelly?"

He turned back to Tony. "Not exactly. Knew we were going to do it sooner or later, and weren't exactly careful. Next thing I know, I've got a letter from home that's making me grin because I'm so happy I can't hold it in, and so nervous I wanted to throw up."

"But you were nervous?"

"I was terrified."

Those words, the unshakable, unflappable, undauntable Gibbs was terrified seem to make Tony start to re-think. Gibbs smiles a little at that. He's been watching Tony with Tim and Jimmy, and noticing that the fact that the two of them took to this whole fatherhood thing so easily, leapt right in, happy as little clams, is disconcerting for him.
Especially watching Tony watch Tim and Jimmy with their girls, the easy, comfortable way they handle the babies, how they both look like they've been doing it forever, and every time he picks up Kelly or Molly there's that second of hesitation and am-I-doing-this-right.

All of that was making Gibbs think that Tony could probably use a reminder that not every guy just hops into this easy. And it doesn't mean you'll be bad at it if you're hesitant. And that it's big and scary and it's okay and normal to think it's scary.

"Before Kelly was born, I'd never held a baby. Most of my buddies didn't have them, and the ones that did... Well, that's what girls are for; they do the baby stuff. At least, back then. First time I held her, I had to sit down. I was shaking all over, and my knees weren't going to hold me up." And yes, Jimmy knows that full story, but like with Tim, who probably could take that story now, he's thinking that Tony doesn't need that one.

But he does think, that even if he hadn't been helping to hold Shannon down for the emergency c-section for the five minutes previous to getting Kelly out, and even if they hadn't handed him Kelly while they were still trying to get Shannon's blood pressure stabilized, that he would have been awfully shaky.

Tony nods at that, thinking. Gibbs gets into his truck. Tony closes the door for him, waves, and heads back to his apartment. Gibbs watches him in the rearview mirror, hoping that was useful.

Kelly's screaming.

That's the only word Abby can think of to describe it. Screaming at the top of her tiny, little lungs.

Abby had been sleeping, for what felt like less than ten minutes, and a quick check of the clock showed that it had been close to two hours.

Kelly's not due to eat again for half an hour, and, thank God, this feed is Tim's so she can go back to sleep, so she pokes him, and realizes that Tim's not there. Which means Tim already has Kelly and a briefly whispered, 'thank God' slipped from her lips as Abby tried to get back to sleep.

Because she's tired.

So tired.

She should have known better, but they were having fun, and a glass of wine with Shabbos dinner is traditional, so she had a glass, not thinking of how completely knocked out she'd be with a glass of wine in her system after not having any for nine months and being this tired.

It hit her, hard. It's hours later and she's still feeling woozy with tired. Like she'd just managed to take charge of the baby exhaustion thing, had gotten a handle on sleeping in shifts, and now she's back to day three of feeling like she's mired in exhausted.

Add Kelly crying straight through from her 10:00 feed to the 1:00 AM feed, so neither of them slept, means she just feels wrecked. So the fact that Tim's got this, that he's got Kelly and a bottle and she does not need to get out of the bed is making her deeply happy.

But she can't sleep.

Because Kelly is screaming.
Part of her wants to jump up and take care of whatever it is.

Part of her wants to stay in bed. After all, the next best thing to sleeping is laying down.

And all of her knows that Tim is a perfectly competent father, and if she wants him to have a decent relationship with their daughter, she has to treat him like a dad, not just a babysitter, and that means letting him do the hard stuff as well as the easy stuff.

Or, as Breena said, 'You might be better at this than he is, but you still have to let him do it. 'Cause A: he's never going to get better if you always swoop in and B: you stop being equals and partners if suddenly everything's got to go through you. You don't want to be the Boss of your house, so don't be the Boss.'

But the screaming is killing her.

It feels like it's been going on for hours. (Quick check, three minutes.)

Okay, she'll wait for fifteen minutes, and if Tim hasn't gotten her settled down, she'll go see if she can help.

After the twelve longest minutes in the history of time she went downstairs to offer help and rapidly assessed not only what the problem was, but began to seriously reassess the whole competent parent thing.

Tim was lying on the sofa, dead asleep. Kelly was lying on her back, cuddled between his arm and side, screaming to the heavens.

And while it's true that Abby's heard babies in general do not care about if their diapers are wet or dirty, she's thinking that since the smell of that diaper is so strong that there are practically visible poop rays emanating off of Kelly, that it is just possible that her diaper is so nasty she is complaining, loudly and emphatically, about it.

And it's true that later, when she was less tired, Abby wasn't exactly proud of what she did next, but she's so damn tired, and if Tim were to wake up, she could get more sleep.

So she kicked him in the hip, and he jerked awake at that, looking like he'd been hit by a truck. (He'd also had wine with dinner, two glasses, and it's probably hitting him just as hard as it hit her.) It took him a minute to figure out what was going on, but once he did he said, "Shit."

She glared at him. "Fix it. I'm going back to sleep."

One second he was warm, comfortable, and thank God, asleep.

He'd spent hours and hours and hours walking Kelly around the house, trying to get her calmed down but she wasn't having any of it. Finally it was food time again, and she fell asleep nursing. Then he took her, put her on his chest, and let her sleep on him because he was too fucking tired to care anymore and anything that resulted in a sleeping baby was fine by him.

The next second he was on the sofa, Kelly was screaming and, from the smell of it, covered in poop. His arm and side are wet, and Abby was glaring down at him. Then it occurred to him, he's not wet with sweat. June baby means you get used to having a damp, sweaty spot where said baby snoozes on you. It's just part of a warm weather baby.
But that's not what's happened. He's very gingerly getting up, holding Kelly, and coming to the conclusion that there has been a catastrophic failure of diaper containment.

"Shit."

His side, Kelly's back, hell it's in her hair, and on the sofa, and…

Abby glares again. "Fix it. I'm going back to sleep."

He's not even sure where to start. And Kelly's screaming.

"Okay. Come on. We're getting a shower." He's rubbing his eyes, wondering how the hell this could have happened. It's all down his arm, and into the waistband of his pants. He didn't think there was enough space inside Kelly to even contain the volume of poop necessary to produce this level of mess.

He gets them into the bathroom, and she's still very not pleased with him, and Abby probably said something very rude when he walked Kelly through their bedroom. (Thus cutting into her sleep time, but right this second he's having something of a hard time sympathizing. She's in bed, and he's not. The next morning when he found out that Kelly had been yelling for fifteen minutes before Abby woke him up, he felt bad about that.)

Once in there, he didn't really know where to start. He's got to put Kelly down, but she's a tiny, screaming, squirming poop bomb, and anything soft in there will end up needing to be cleaned, and he doesn't want to put her on anything hard.

Finally, and it took an embarrassingly long time to figure this out, (he blamed exhaustion for that) it occurred to him that he could take the towel off of the towel rack, lay Kelly on it, take off the poop encrusted onesie, put his own poop covered pajama pants into it, (He's not wearing a shirt, and if he was more awake he might be debating as to whether that's a good thing or not, but really, he's too sleepy to care. At least skin is easy to clean.) and then fold it up into a nice little ball, and once they were cleaned up, he could toss it in the washing machine.

So, he got the towel down, got both of them naked, and turned the shower on. Once the water felt comfortably warm to him, he stepped in, and let the spray wash over both of them. Kelly seemed to like that. Well, she looked really startled and stopped crying.

Which was when he realized this is his shower, so he doesn't have any baby soap in there. And while it's true that he's got the organic, ultra-gentle for dry-hair shampoo he uses on himself in here, and the organic, all natural, hand-made, unscented, castile soap Abby uses sitting next to it, it's also true that he's a new parent and hasn't yet gotten to the point where he realizes soap is soap and that using the stuff he uses on his own skin and Kelly rubs up against every day on her will not result in disaster.

So, sopping wet, but at least no longer covered in poop, he and Kelly headed out of the bathroom, tromped back through the bedroom (More cursing from Abby. Really, he felt like an ass the next morning when he got the whole story.) grabbed the baby body wash, tromped back through the bedroom again, to the shower to finish washing up.

And thus, at ten (eleven? Fuck it, he's too damn tired to figure that out) days old, Kelly got her first shower.

Once they were both clean, he got her into a fresh diaper and onesie, and put her in the middle of their bed to hang out for a few minutes. And yeah, he was less than thrilled to be using the steam
cleaner on the sofa at 3:48 in the morning, but he figured that was probably not a stain they wanted to set.

And running yet more laundry at 3:52 isn't his favorite thing, either. But he moved the wet stuff into the drier, and brought the dry stuff up, not caring about putting it away, just getting it out of the way.

None of that is fun or particularly satisfying. It's just got to get done. But once it was done, he snagged a bottle, filled it with formula and water, and headed back to their bedroom, where Abby and Kelly were.

Abby's lying on her side, eyes closed, looking awfully sleepy, hand on Kelly's tummy, gently rocking her back and forth. Kelly's quiet, kicking a little, looking like she's in a pretty good mood right now. Maybe whatever caused that poop was what had her so unhappy, and now that it's out of her system she's back to being a fairly pleasant person.

Tim lays down next to them, extends his right arm, propping Kelly on his bicep, and Abby scoots a little so her neck is on his forearm. He shakes the bottle one last time, and holds it so Kelly can eat.

And he might not be in the best mood ever, and Abby's not either. Kelly's eating, so she's happy. But it's his girls in his bed, cuddled against him, and that feels awfully good. Abby kisses his arm, and gives him a little smile before closing her eyes and going back to sleep. He gently strokes the back of her neck, and would kiss her, too but he can't do that without dumping Kelly off his arm. So Kelly gets a kiss to go with her formula, and he closes his eyes, resting while listening to tiny gulping sounds.
Eventually, even with a new baby in the house, you start to develop a new set of patterns. Habits reform, and with them a new sense of comfort appears.

Eventually, you get better at determining what has to happen when, and what little bits of life pre-kids are necessary to keep you feeling at least vaguely tethered to sane.

And at two weeks of parenthood, Abby's feeling like she's getting a handle on this.

Showers.

It boggles her mind how much more real and normal and she feels when she gets a shower every, single day.

She'd never felt particularly tied to showers before. It wasn't like it was any sort of ritual for her. But now, twenty minutes a day, usually after the dinner feed, of alone time, of doing something that hasn't changed, of doing something that scrapes off the accumulated crud of being a new mom, because a fourteen-day-old baby means that you've always got something, somewhere on you, that you'd rather not.

After shower time, forty minutes of sitting on her bed, reading or watching something, something not very complicated, while she puts her skin lotion on and brushes out her hair is a must. She has to have that little bit of time where she doesn't smell like milk or baby or blood. That little chunk of time where she can just focus on something completely unrelated to her own life is vital to her.

It recharges the batteries enough to make it possible to get through the rest of the day. And yeah, Breena says that she won't be clinging to that little hour of time like a life preserver for the rest of her life, but for the time being, it's doing its job, and that's all she needs.

For Tim, the pattern that's keeping him sane involves getting Kelly to sleep on something other than a person. Between Abby's c-section and not being able to go up and down the steps the first ten days, and then him being on night time baby fetching duty, he's been in charge of a lot more of Kelly's naps than anyone else.

The pattern, walk Kelly to her room, patting and singing to her, get her to burp, pat and sing a bit more, wait for pacifier sucking to slow down and eyes to get droopy, and then put her in the crib, and walk out again (the hardest part) is, when it works, the best feeling on Earth.

He has never, ever felt more accomplished than when he successfully manages to get her into her crib, still slightly awake, pat her one last time, and then walk back out again without her yelling at him.

It happens about one out of four times.

Sometimes, especially at night, he's sleepy enough that he drifts off while patting and singing. Next thing he knows his neck is sore from sleeping in the rocking chair, and she's looking for her next meal.

The other two times, he puts her down, her little eyes spring open, and suddenly she's annoyed and very awake, so he picks her back up again, gets her calmed down again, and puts her back down
again (hopefully still awake, but not always) and then she just drifts off.

But when it works (and it's working more often today than any previous day) he feels like they will get a handle on this, and eventually they'll get more and more of their life back as she sleeps in her crib on a regular basis.

And for both of them, there's another pattern, the return of which will make a huge difference.

One of the realities of sleeping with a woman who has just had a baby is that, no matter how comfortable sleeping naked might be, it just doesn't happen. Night sweats, nursing, bleeding, all of that means clothing. Panties to keep a pad in place, bra for the same reason, some sort of night gown/jammies to deal with the sweat.

But as he was sitting in bed, waiting for Abby to get out of the bathroom and join him, he noticed something changed when she stepped out of the bathroom. No pajama pants. T-shirt, yep. Panties, he can't tell, the shirt comes down to her thighs, but he still occasionally catches the scent of blood on her, so he's fairly sure she'd have on panties and a pad. Bra, definitely. Her breasts are way too big to be comfortable without the extra support.

She climbed onto the bed, and he smiled at her, then bent down and kissed her knee.

"Hello knee, it's been a while." Then he looked up at her and grinned.

That got a ghost of a smile out of her, so he straightened up and kissed her lips gently. Nothing demanding or forceful, mostly just reminding her that he's something other than the father of her baby.

That got a little smile, too.

A bit more sleep, getting her iron levels up, and antibiotics knocking out the infection means she's acting a bit more like herself. But a thought hits him, and he wonders… she's been complaining about being short on time, and not really feeling like herself, and she wasn't sleeping for so long… The idea of something else that probably wasn't happening hit him. So, he sat back against the headboard of their bed, legs wide, and patted the bed between them.

She sat between his legs and rested against his chest. He cuddled her, chin on her shoulder, holding her close and tight for a moment, and then he kissed her neck, slowly dragging his lips along her flesh, and biting very gently on the little bit of shoulder right next to her neck.

"How long has it been since you got off?"

Her eyes close and she sighs. "Day before pelvic rest."

He kisses her shoulder again. "Oh, Abby. Come on, let's make you feel good."

She looked really alarmed by that.

"Is that okay?"

She's not looking enthusiastic. "It's only been two weeks. What were you thinking?"

"Not thinking sex. Not like that." He thinks he might have an idea of part of why she was looking so
alarmed. "We don't have any birth control do we?"

She shook her head. After all, why would they? It'd been more than two years since they'd used anything that wasn't hormone-based.

"Not a problem. Just want to touch you. Soft and slow and gentle. Want to make you come. Make you remember that your body's good for something besides feeding Kelly." He tilted her face towards his and kissed her long and deep. "Want to remind you you're more than just a mom. Want you to know I adore you and crave you and want you. Want you to know you're beautiful—"

She laughed at that, and he kissed her again. Stopping the laugh with his lips.

"None of that. You are beautiful. You are my wife, my love, my life, and you are beautiful."

She rested her forehead against his, eyes closed, letting him hold her. Then she kissed him, first time she's taken the initiative and kissed him, really kissed him, in weeks. His hand traced over her hair and neck, down her arm, settling on her hip.

"I've missed this," she said, voice quiet.

"Me, too." He twined his fingers between hers, and lifted her hand to his lips, kissing each finger. "At least five minutes, every single day, we do this. Five minutes together, alone, thinking about each other, touching. Might just be snuggling when we're falling asleep, but every single day we need this time."

"Yes." She flipped her hand, so his hand was on top, and kissed his fingers, then trailed her fingers over his, stroking his wedding band. She reached up to stroke his lips, and the goatee around them. "It feels soft on my fingers, but prickly on my lips."

He smiled at that. "Feels kind of itchy to me. Still want me to keep it?"

She tilted her head to the side, and he kissed her neck at that invitation. "For now. That feels nice." He stroked his chin gently along her shoulder and she shivered. "That's good, too."

"If your shirt came off, it could be good in a few other places."

Now she looked very alarmed. "Not my breasts!"

"Wasn't planning on going there. I know they're a look, don't touch sort of thing right now." He started to edge the hem of her shirt up, and she shifted a bit to help him. "But, you'll let me know when I can touch, right?"

"Yeah."

"And whenever you feel like more than just messing around. Well, let's just say, I am ready, willing, and able to hop to and help you out with that. In fact, it's entirely likely that I'd happily drop everything, including a murder investigation, and come running as soon as you call."

That got a little laugh. "So, you're telling me you can't be trusted to hold Kelly?"

"I'm telling you, you should make sure not to say, 'Let's have sex,' to me while I'm holding her. 'Cause I'll be on you in a heartbeat."

"Didn't realize you were that hard up."

He bopped the tip of his finger against her nose, signaling no bad mouthing yourself in front of me.
"It's your gorgeous body wrapped around mine. Of course I'm gonna leap at it." He finished getting her shirt off, and lightly stroked from her ears to her fingertips, making sure to gently scrape his fingernails along her to make her squirm.

"I love you," she said with a kiss. And he smiled back at her.

"Damn right you do."

"You getting sassy with me?"

"Trying, too sleepy for full on sassy, but I want you to feel good all over, and I know you like some teasing."

"Uh huh." She kissed him again, and he wrapped his arms around her waist, enjoying a long, slow, wet kiss, her tongue slipping along his, making him sigh. She pulled back for a second, nibbling lightly on his bottom lip. "Much better use for them than sassy."

He kissed her again, showing her exactly how good he was with his lips when he's not talking, and this time she moaned.

"Favorite sound."

So she moaned again, soft and breathy.

"Want to make you sound like that, a lot." His hands slid to her panties, lightly stroking over them, getting her hips, the bottom of her tummy, he knows she's wearing a pad, so he doesn't think there's much use to trying her pussy, so he stays to the edges.

"I'm still bleeding."

He nodded. "I know. We've fooled around when you were on your period. It's not a problem. I mean, unless it's one for you?"

"No… Just… You looked like you were going to pass out the day after Kelly was born."

"That, you remember?"

"Yeah."

Of course she does, and yes, just thinking about it does make him feel a little shaky, but bringing it up does flash him back to those images. "That was a whole lot of blood. There was enough that we ended up with puddles of it in the shower." And it was running down her legs, and there was that one clot the size of his thumb, and he's got to stop thinking about that or he's never going to get hard again. "If you're still bleeding like that, I think we need to take you back to the doc to get checked out again."

"It's not that bad anymore."

"Okay."

She got up, and he wasn't exactly on board with that, Abby close and warm and in his lap had been a good thing, but after a second, when she returned with a towel, he figured out why she'd left.

"Me between your legs?"

"That's what I was thinking, unless you've got something else you want better?"
"That'll work. Get up for a sec?"

He did and she laid the towel at the head of their bed.

She was standing next to the bed when she asked. "What about you?"

"Let's take care of you. If you feel like giving me a hand after, great. If not, I can handle this," he said, getting back onto their bed.

She's still standing beside it, in her bra and panties, arms crossed over her chest. "I haven't shaved or waxed."

He flashes her a seriously? look and then rubbed his chin. "I know. I haven't, either."

"Yeah, but you not shaving isn't a big deal."

"Abby, I know you have body hair. I know you're bleeding. I know you don't like the way you look right now. I know you hate the stretch marks. I know your breasts hurt. I know you're feeling a bit insecure with your body, and like it's not really yours, and I can't change any of that, or make it better, but I can say this. I love you. You are beautiful. You were beautiful before and you still are. And I can, if you'll let me, make that body you're less than perfectly thrilled with right now feel awfully good."

"I just… feel so fat and flabby and saggy and… just… wrong."

He kissed her forehead, hands settling on her hips. "I know. But you're not wrong to me. I mean… Look, I was 205 the first time we dated. I got up to 220 before deciding it was time to lose weight again. I like this version of me better, and I think you do, too, but I was still me and you still loved me when I was fat."

"You weren't fat!" And she does look indignant at that. "You were big… and cuddly!"

"Uh huh." That was awfully sarcastic. Then he kissed her again, long and slow, kneeling next to her, slipping her panties down her legs. "I see you the same way you see me Abby. The same way." He sat back against the headboard, made sure the towel was between his leg, and then patted it. "Come on, settle back, relax, let me take care of you." She sat between his legs, chest against his back, head resting on his shoulder.

He takes his time, petting her legs and hips, kissing soft and gentle, remembering what Jimmy said about a woman's body not wanting to get pregnant and not really getting into it. And Jimmy didn't exaggerate. Abby's looking pretty happy, her face and chest is flushed, and she's moaning, but by the time he got to her pussy, she still wasn't wet.

Well, lubricated. She's wet. There's blood. But they have done this before when she's been on her period, and yeah, it's been a while, but he knows the difference by feel. So he wipes his fingers off quickly, and sucks them, getting them good and slick, before going back to her pussy, lightly grazing over the hairs that are almost fully grown back in, and yes, he loves her skin bare, but there is something to be said for how hair transmits sensations.

She's rocking against him, arching against him for more pressure, so he finds her clit and settles in for long, slow, focused circles, just rolling over her skin, like they've got all the time in the world. Stroke after stroke, taking his time for a good, steady build.

He takes his cues from her hips, speeding up when she speeds up, slowing when she slows. And eventually she is moving pretty fast, legs tight, head back against his shoulder, eyes closed, mouth
open, gasping each breath, right hand clenched on his, and he sped up just a little more, nibbling her earlobe, and in a second she was crying out and twitching.

Then they both stopped dead, wondering if they'd woken Kelly up. But after a minute with no crying, Abby relaxed against him again, and took a few minutes to enjoy the glow.

"Good?" he asked when her breathing had slowed down.

Her eyes were closed, but she looked awfully happy and peaceful, pretty sleepy, too. "Yeah. I needed that."

He grinned at her. "Good."

A minute later, she squirmed a little, rubbing her back against him, and that felt awfully nice. There may, possibly, be a day when Abby getting off doesn't get him hard, but he's fairly sure he'll be dead before that happens.

"So, can I help you out?"

"Probably."

"Any particular help you were thinking of?"

"Yes… It's a little messy, but… should be quick." And they're both tired enough that quick is a real selling point these days. Especially since, if quick means less than five minutes, they could both get an hour of sleep before Kelly's due for her next meal.

"What are you thinking?"

Tim wiped off his fingers, then leaned over to his bedside table and grabbed the lube.

"I was thinking of both of us on our sides, facing each other, able to see and kiss, my dick between your legs, rubbing off like that."

Abby nodded at that. "I like that idea."

"Just, tell me if your breasts are too sore for it."

"Don't press up against me too hard, and we'll be fine."

She got up and they rearranged themselves, and yeah, getting the lube in place, and him situated was pretty mechanical, but… well… quick…

But once they were situated... Well, soft and wet and slick and hot, and he can kiss her and look into her eyes. God, he'd missed that. Been… probably three months since they've been able to have face to face sex. And it doesn't matter that he's a few inches away from full on sex, this is good, this is warm and close and pleasure and love and being happy with his favorite person, making her happy as well.

And sure, it wasn't the best orgasm he's ever had. But they're together, and it's her body doing it, not his hand, and it's all good.

Maybe it's not what it was, but it wouldn't be, because they aren't who they were. But it was good. And the promise of better is out there. And eventually, as they get more patterns set, they'll find their groove again, and figure out how to be parents and lovers.
"Jethro?" Not that Tim isn't pleased to see Gibbs in his living room, but it's 2:00 on a Wednesday.

"Closed the case. Now it's a paperwork day. Tony's got it."

Tim nods at that, thinking that by 'Tony's got it,' Gibbs means that Draga and Ziva are filling out massive reams of paper, and Tony's making sure they've got a steady stream of wisecracks and coffee to go with it.

"You mean Tony's keeping them in coffee while Ziva and Draga fill out the forms?"

"Draga doesn't drink coffee."

Tim's eyes go wide. "That's not gonna last long."

"He's got these little silver cans… Goes through like ten of them a day."

"You mean Red Bull?" Tim's looking horrified at that.

"Something like that."

Tim whistles softly. "He might like Caf-Pow then."

Gibbs nods, filing that away for possible later use, then he asked, "So, did you mean it when you said you liked baseball?"

"Yeah." Tim nods, trying to remember when he'd said he liked baseball, but he does, so… Oh, yeah, that maniac with the bomb and Ziva going undercover as Ziva.

"Not just spinning a line to keep Tony off your back?"

"I like baseball."

"Good. Which team?"

"Whoever's on. Never hooked into a particular team."

Gibbs grinned. "Even better. Would have hated to hear you're a Yankees fan."

Tim's still feeling like this is a pretty surreal conversation. He was sitting on the sofa, checking his email while Kelly hung out in his lap, (Abby's getting a nap) and then Gibbs wandered in, snagged Kelly out of his lap, and now it's the middle of a work day and Gibbs is asking him about baseball while cuddling his daughter. "Why?"

"Pirates are playing the Mets. It's on in ten. You, me, baseball, sleepy little girl, sound like a plan?"

"Uh… Sure… let me see what I can do."

"Do? You turn the TV on. Should be on ESPN."

"We don't have cable."

"Huh?" Gibbs looks stupefied at that. Even he has cable. (Mainly so he can see ZNN and ESPN.)
"Got rid of it when we moved to the place before this one. Just wasn't worth it. Watch everything on streaming."

"How does that work?"

For a second Tim's tempted to explain how it actually works, but he realizes Gibbs isn't asking him to explain streaming video but is asking how it's working out. "Just fine, everything we want to see is on streaming, and it costs a whole lot less. It's great, as long as you don't want to see live sports."

Gibbs is squinting at him. "How can you like baseball and not watch it?"

"I like playing it. I mean, I'm not good at it or anything, not like Tony, but I liked to play."

"Oh."

"There's a reason I hopped into that catch you had with Ziva about two seconds into it."

Gibbs nodded, he remembered that. Once the boys got over the shock that Ziva did know baseball, and that she had played as a kid, they grabbed gloves and joined in. Tim first, he found one, called out to Ziva, and she fired the ball off to him, and he sent it back to Gibbs, little wide, but not horrible. A minute after that, Tony hopped in, perfect form, very accurate aim, and they got to hear some of his stories about how he played in high school and college before he got his knee ripped out.

"You gonna be a little league coach?"

Tim smirked at that, then headed to his computer to see what he could do. Maybe ESPN offered daily passes or something…

"I think it's softball when girls play."

"Softball coach then."

"Maybe. Let's get her up and walking and talking before planning out her sports career."

Gibbs stares at Tim for a second, and suddenly realizes that in addition to a glorious Navy career his dad probably did have a sports plan set for him from the day he was born, and he probably took a lot of crap for not being good at sports.

And it occurs to Gibbs that Tim probably wasn't terrible at baseball. He was probably okay at it, especially if he worked hard enough at it to get on a team, but he was probably second string, dependable but not fabulous, and that wouldn't have been good enough for The Admiral.

"You play in high school?"

"Nah." He doesn't look up from the computer as he answers. "Little league. Did that for a few years, then we moved again, and I never picked it back up. Didn't exactly have a baseball build as a kid. Football for one year of junior high, then we moved again, and I couldn't make the new team. Wrestled for a year in high school, but didn't like what I and the rest of the team needed to do to make weight. Not healthy, at all. Moved one last time sophomore year, and was on the intermural football team as a Junior and Senior." He fiddled with his computer a little more. Okay, so… this wasn't going to be technically legal, but… one game… They do this more often; he can get cable. "Got it. So, are we rooting for the Pirates or the Mets?"

"The Mets?" The look on Gibbs' face is saying are you really asking me this? "Bite your tongue, Tim. Pirates."
Okay, that makes a certain level of sense. Stillwater was about an hour and a half north of Pittsburgh, so… yeah, he can see that.

"You play as a kid?" he asks Gibbs as he connects the TV to his computer so they can see the game on the big screen.

"Born in '59. We all played. And watched. And listened to games on the radio. And once, twice a year, LJ, my dad, and I would head down to Pittsburgh to watch a game. You ever been to Pittsburgh?"

"Just as a layover, or break points the few times I was up in Stillwater."

"It was a steel town, then, pretty grungy, but… You go in for a night game, and Three Rivers Stadium's down on the point…"

He sees that Tim doesn't know enough about Pittsburgh to get what that means.

"Three rivers come together, shaped like a Y. So the city's the shape of a slice of pie. The tip of the pie is where the business district is. All the high rises, and also where the stadium was. And that part of Pennsylvania is mountains and hills. Pittsburgh's down low, because it's between the rivers. To get there from the north you've got to go through a mountain, the Tunnel they call it, and almost immediately after that, you've got one of the rivers, so through the Tunnel, over the river on a huge suspension bridge, and if you go in at night, it's dark in the Tunnel, and you come out on the bridge with the whole city lit up and sparkling in front of you."

Tim smiles at that, liking the image of Jackson, maybe eight year old Jethro, and LJ, all in the front seat of… knowing Jackson, it was a truck, probably a Ford, and Jethro's eyes going wide at the first sight of the city.

Gibbs nods. "Pittsburgh during the day was gray, and covered in soot, and ugly as sin. It was a steel town, and the sky was smoke all the time. At least then. But at night…" He's been holding Kelly this whole time, and she's been quietly chilling out, enjoying voices and her pacifier.

He shifts his hold so he can look her in the face, "Maybe one of these days, you, me, and your Dad'll go up to Pittsburgh, and I'll show you the view out of the Tunnel, and we'll catch a game."

Tim flipped on the TV. "Let's see if this works."

It did. Not the highest definition ever, but probably better than what Jethro has at home. Definitely bigger, and the sound is good.

They watched for about ten minutes. Sitting quietly on his sofa, but every minute or so, Tim looks over to see how sleepy Kelly is, and now her eyes are starting to droop, and the pacifier sucking is getting slower.

"Jethro?"

"Mmmm…" He's lounging on the sofa, very sleepy baby on his chest, beer in hand, game on in front of him; he's looking really content.

"Gotta put her in her crib. Otherwise she'll be a bear about sleeping on her own for the next two days."

"Okay." Gibbs handed Tim his beer, and reluctantly headed up to Kelly's nursery. She startled a little when he stood up, and fussed a bit as he headed up, also not thrilled with the idea of her nice, warm,
Pop-bed going away. But she's being sung to, (Suspicious Minds) and patted gently, and carefully laid on her back, and she is really sleepy, and…

A minute later, Tim's handing Gibbs his beer again, and Gibbs said, "Did I miss anything?"

"Mets scored three runs."

For a second Gibbs' eyes went wide, then Tim smirked, and Jethro shoved his shoulder. "Smart ass."

Tim quirked his head, smiled a little, took a drink, and settled back to watch a game with his dad.
Visiting NCIS/Director McGee

Three weeks into this whole fatherhood thing, and Tim's starting to feel a whole lot more like himself again. Kelly's reliably (by which he means three out of four naps) sleeping in her crib, and getting six straight hours of sleep every other night helps a lot.

In fact, with Kelly sleeping, and Abby sleeping, he's feeling like, maybe…

Well, he's feeling like maybe messing around with the guys in Cybercrime really, but the two foot high stack of laundry in need of washing, and the dishes that really could use being put away, and no one's vacuumed anything since June and…

So, Kelly's sleeping, and Abby's sleeping, and he's doing chores. But while he's working, he's thinking. He doesn't actually need a computer in front of him to write code. So, he puts clean dishes away, loads dirty ones, and thinks through what he's hoping to do.

Eventually, the downstairs is a whole lot cleaner, and he hears quiet crying from upstairs, and he's on his way up the stairs when he hears Abby moving from the bedroom toward Kelly, so he heads into his office, and starts to put his plan into action.

He's a little nervous about this. Not the plan. He's good with the plan. No, he's a little nervous about bringing Kelly into work.

And not because the whole baby at work thing is unheard of. Yes, it's been awhile since Molly's been in to visit. Molly had been by a time or two in the last year (mostly the basement, because that's where Jimmy is) but not very often because a toddler in Autopsy (or the lab) is not exactly a recipe for great things.

But at this point in her life, Kelly is basically a loud pillow. There is no shot of her getting into anything she's not supposed to get into. (Unlike Molly who has gotten awfully wily about getting away from the grown-ups and into things she's not supposed to be in.)

So, it's not her getting into something, breaking something, or distracting someone that has Tim nervous about bringing her in.

Hell, it's not even anything for him personally. He's already pretty well-known for being soft and goofy. Not like he's trying to maintain a reputation for heartless efficiency.

But Gibbs and Ziva do not have the sort of reputation that involves them melting into little puddles of goo when in the presence of a three-week-old infant.

Gibbs is cold, distant, terrifying. Pop is warm, cuddly, smiley, and kind of goofy, too. Ziva's the Ninja: silent, deadly, able to kill a man eighteen different ways with a paperclip. Aunt Ziva coos at babies, cuddles them, and ends up in silent staring wars with Gibbs over which one them gets primary cuddling rights.

And if Tony was the only other guy in the Bullpen, this would never cross Tim's mind, but he's not the only guy. There's Draga and all the fun that goes with trying to figure out how much of who they really are he gets to see, and all the other co-workers.

But for the plan to work, he's got to go in. And he's got to see Leon. And he needs a reason to see
Leon that does not raise any scuttlebutt and bringing his brand new baby girl in to see work does that just fine.

So, he takes her out of her car seat, puts her in the stroller, and into NCIS they go.

Technically, he's paying a little visit, showing Kelly where they work.

And he did do that. Headed in with the stroller, sleeping baby, walking her around, letting the co-workers coo over her.

Most of them had no problem with exchanging a few words, mostly along the lines of how beautiful she is (for which he always gives Abby all the credit). And he ends up seeing more than a few baby pictures belonging to co-workers he didn't even know had children, so he does his part, too, remarking on how they too have babies who are utterly brilliant, and on his way he goes, heading toward the elevator.

Up into the bullpen.

He'd called in ahead of time, so they know he's coming. Gibbs and Ziva and Tony know why he's there for real. So, if they just sort of nod at him, while he makes the rounds, and exchange a few words, he'll get it. He doesn't expect them to be the people they are at home while they're at work.

So, of course, he gets up there, and they stop everything, crowding around the stroller. (Cause, you know, it's been four days since Ziva last saw Kelly, and two for Gibbs, so they need their baby fix.) Maybe that wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been a paperwork day, but he wouldn't have done this if it was an active case day.

"You're missing us, already, McLayabout?" Tony asks as Ziva carefully takes Kelly out of the stroller, snuggling her close, face against the top of her head, inhaling deeply.

"McLayabout? Can't wait to see you three weeks after your first baby, Tony."

Draga was standing right next to Ziva, looking at Kelly, he catches Tim's eye, silently asking permission to touch, and Tim nods, he gently pets her cheek, and she half opens one eye, then shuts it, snuggling into Ziva closer.

"I was a zombie three weeks after Kevin was born."

Tim's eyes went wide. "You have a son?"

"Yeah, he's four. Don't get to see him as much as I'd like. Anything less than every day isn't as much as I'd like, but... Long story. He lives with his mother."

"Oh." Tim glances at the other three wondering if they knew that, and if they did, why they didn't mention it to him. Gibbs nods at Draga's desk, and he does notice there are several shots of Draga with beautiful, cocoa-colored little boy.

Draga half-shrugs. "It is what it is. Part of why this job was attractive. I'm a hell of a lot closer to North Carolina than I was when I was stationed out of Colorado."

"Yeah. Is she in the Navy?"

"No."
"Ah." The lack of any other comments from Draga makes Tim decide this isn't anything he needs to know more about right this second.

"So, you two getting out of the house and letting Mom get some quiet time?" Draga asks.

"That's the idea. Show her off here, run a few errands, then home again for her next meal."

"I remember those days." Draga pets her once more. "Little guys are a whole lot of work. Whole lot of work and a whole lot of no sleep. Four's a lot of fun, though. Really liking this part. He's still really cuddly, but independent enough to do fun things, and no more afternoon naps so we can go out for the full day."

Gibbs nodded along with that. "Hand her over, Ziver." He got his own cuddles in while saying, "I liked four. Liked all of them really. But, yeah, three and four were awfully sweet." He looks over to Tim. "You were going to show her off to Leon, right?"

"And down to Autopsy, too."

Gibbs nudged the stroller toward Tim, and he just kicks it over to his desk, not like he needs it for heading up to see Leon or a quick visit with Jimmy. "Let's go."

"You're coming?"

"Grandpa's prerogative. I can show her off, too."

They're in the elevator, Kelly snuggled against Gibbs, and Tim spent a second staring at him, and then flipped off the elevator.

"You're carrying a baby around work?"

Gibbs half shrugs.

"Big, bad, terrifying, Leroy Jethro Gibbs is carrying an infant around?"

That gets the death glare aimed at him.

"Just, you're blowing my mind. I wasn't expecting you to act like that."

"What, was I supposed to growl at her?" He holds Kelly up and says to her, "No growling at you. Pop'll bite anyone who growls at you."

"Something like that. Or growl at me for distracting you from work."

That got a little laugh. "Rule Number One."

Tim blinks slowly. "Do we really need six versions of Rule Number One?"

"Six?"

"Don't screw your partner. Don't screw over your partner. One of those is yours. One was Director Shepard's, and I don't need to know the specifics behind why they're almost word for word the same but mean something very different. Never leave suspects alone together. That was Franks', right?"

Gibbs nodded. "Don't lie to Gibbs. That's mine. Don't lie to Abby. That's Abby's. And now whatever this one is."
"No shame."

"What the hell does that mean, and who's is it?"

"Joe Armant."

"I have no idea who that is."

"Mike's first partner."

"We're going that far back on this?"

"Yep. And it means that you can do whatever you want as long as your bold as brass about it. Or as Mike put it, 'Probie, even if yer butt naked with your balls flappin' in the ice-cold breeze, you walk tall, give orders like you mean 'em, look everyone dead in the eye, and tell 'em to go straight to Hell if they don't like it.'"

Tim flipped the elevator back in, laughing a little at that, he can hear Mike's voice through Gibbs' and suddenly wonders what he would have thought of this, probably would have approved, Franks had a soft spot for baby girls. "I bet there's one hell of a story behind that one."

Gibbs smiled. "There is. One day, I'll tell it to you."

"Does it involve you or Mike Franks naked?"

Gibbs' smile morphed into a wide and somewhat dirty grin. "It might."

But the real reason for his visit was waiting for him upstairs.

Apparently, for this sort of visit, or for what this sort of visit looks like, Gibbs does wait to be shown in by Vance's Secretary. He spent several minutes chatting with her about Kelly, and it… amuses and pleases Tim to see Gibbs refer to her as 'our girl.'

But eventually Vance and… SecNav… of course, wander out. And having Jarvis coo over his daughter, and then share a story about his daughter when she was first born was surreal. Having all three of them chatting about being Dads was surreal, too, but eventually work got back on the docket.

Jarvis looked away from Kelly and Gibbs, and said to Tim, "Leon's filled me in on what you're doing here. I'll be very interested to see the report on what you find. And, if you have time," which Tim took to mean, make some time, "I'd love to see a report on the feasibility of rolling out this sort of test on a larger scale for the Navy."

"Thank you, sir. I'll get on that. Has Director Vance mentioned this is a multi-step test?"

"Yes, he has. I don't expect to see anything until after it's done."

"Probably four or five months, maybe longer depending on how they do. Want them to have time to relax between tests."

"I understand."

"Okay. As soon as I have my data set, I'll make sure you get it."
"Good. She's beautiful, Agent McGee. Leon, Gibbs," he nodded at each of them before heading off. They headed into Vance's office, and Tim's getting things set up when he realizes that there's more than just showing off a baby that Gibbs is on top of. Making sure she's tended to while he's doing this is also what Gibbs is doing.

He catches Gibbs' eye as he's getting the show online and mouths, Thanks.

Gibbs nods at him.

And then it was show time.

Tim has Vance's private phone number, though before yesterday, he'd never used it. When he dialed it, little after lunchtime yesterday, Leon was awfully surprised to get the call. (In that he had not personally ever given that number to Tim. And no, Tim isn't telling how he got it because, strictly speaking, it wasn't exactly legal.) But a few minutes into the call, as Tim outlined what he was going to do, and what they'd learn from it, Vance got on board very quickly.

And at 1030, the show began. He'd set things up so that he was not only recording everyone's computers and what they were doing, but he also had the security cameras set so that they could watch what was going on.

"Okay, this is the biggest, dirtiest, least subtle attack I could think of. It's hitting all of their individual computers. Right now, it's saving everything they're working on. Then it's just going to start messing around with their settings. For the next five minutes it'll get less and less subtle. Right now, for example, it's changing their date and time settings. By the time it's over, their fonts won't work, the background will be a different color, stuff like that. It's really visible but completely harmless."

Vance is staring at the big screen in his office, currently showing four different views of the Cybercrime techs.

"Why are we watching this?" Gibbs asked. It's not a great view. They can't see the computers, just the faces of the techs and what they're doing.

"Want to see how they react. Want to see who notices what, when. Like… Oh, that's good. Who's that?"

Tim's watching an Asian female, maybe thirty-ish, staring at the screen, poking the monitor a little, squinting.

He brought up what she was doing with her computer. "Okay, she's trying to figure out what's going on. The rest of them haven't noticed anything is up yet. She's running a basic diagnostic. Because all of her fonts just got a little bigger while the open windows got a little smaller."

A few seconds later, two more of the techs were poking their computers starting up diagnostic sweeps.

Ngyn, the first of the techs to notice something, was bombarding her computer with code, trying to figure out what was going on.

Three more techs started to work on their computers. Which meant as of this point, six of them had noticed something was up.
"What just happened, McGee?" Vance asked.

"Right now all of their margins moved an inch to the right."

Vance just stares at him.

Tim shrugged. "I wanted it to be really visible, mess with them, but not actually damage anything they were working on. That left me with cosmetic issues. The last two steps is their font switches to thirty point Comic Sans and the background color switches to orange."

"You weren't kidding about visible," Vance said.

"Not at all."

"Then what happens?" Gibbs asks.

"Everything goes back to normal. In five minutes, they won't even be able to tell something changed. And if none of them have figured out what's happened in that time, they're going to have a very hard uphill climb figuring it out. While this is happening, I didn't so much leave a trail of bread crumbs as a yellow brick road leading to Kevin Hussein."

"He used to work for us, right?" Vance asks.

"Yes. He's at IBM now, left at the end of '14. Anyway, I let him know what I was doing and he agreed to be a dummy. He'll give me a heads up if anyone tracks him down. I also left a real trail of bread crumbs, subtle but not invisible, leading to me. Next attack there won't even be that. Anyone shows up wanting to know why I'm messing with their fonts..."

"That's classified," Vance supplies.

"That works," Tim answers. "Anyway, once this ends, the brick road, and the breadcrumb trail will vanish. There'll still be some hints of it, but it'll be hard to find."

"You're giving them an out of the blue timed test." Gibbs seems impressed by that.

"Yes. Okay. That's interesting." He pulled up the logs for the tech in the back row. "He just killed his internet connection. Not sure how that'll effect things. He might be able to find the trails I left a lot longer and more easily than anyone else..." Tim kept watching... "Or not, he just rebooted, which'll wipe everything."

Two minutes later, all but one of the techs were messing with their computers, trying to make them stop acting weird.

One of them though, was still working away, appearing to be completely oblivious to the fact that his font was different, his margins were screwed, his background was orange, and the date and time had suddenly shifted. "Okay, who is that?" Tim's searching around through the logs and located Stephen Manner. "He's either got amazing focus or is the worst person I've ever seen when it comes to noticing things. Maybe both." Tim dug through what he was working on. "Wow... Okay, lots of focus. He coded straight through. I don't think he even noticed anything happened."

"Is that a good thing?" Gibbs asked.

"I honestly don't know. Maybe. Depends on what needs to happen. You ever want a guy to come up with code while he's got a gun to his head, this is probably the guy. So, good offense, no defense?"
And now, as the test ended and everyone's computer went back to normal, eleven of twelve techs were messing around, staring at their computers, running scans and diagnostics, but, and this was very disturbing to Tim, not talking to each other. He double checked their computers, shifted the angle of the cameras, they weren't texting or IMing each other, either.

"That's not good."

"McGee?" Vance asked.

"They aren't talking to each other, at all. I mean, look at them, all in their screens, focused on their own computers. I don't think any of them know anyone else got hit, yet. That's not bad teamwork; that's there isn't a team down there at all." Tim cringed, watching them work, still seeing no one talking to anyone else. What was he getting himself into here? Herding cats. "Look, this happens to Tony's computer, and less than ten seconds later, I've got Tony on my desk asking what's going on. Five seconds after that, I'm running diagnostics on all of our computers. Ziva's on the line to tech support. Gibbs is looking annoyed that the stupid thing isn't working the way it's supposed to, and barking at us to get it fixed."

That got a smile out of Leon and a glare out of Gibbs.

"Finally!" One of the techs, he doesn't know which one, but made a mental note to find out who he was, got up to talk to Jenner. Jenner (who had also been hit and had also, on his own, been messing with his computer) looked up, listened for a moment, and then, instead of asking anyone else if they had a problem, changed the way he was searching his own computer to see if the fact that both of them got hit was intentional.

"Well, I think I know why we don't have the premier Cybercrime division here in DC," Tim said, shaking his head. At that point Kelly, who had been snoozing on Gibbs decided it was wake up time, and started to fuss. "And my alarm clock is telling me it's time to get onto the rest of today's chores." He's taking Kelly from Gibbs, while he says, "So, the interesting bit comes later, when they decide what to do about this. Not loving the first brush of teamwork here. And Jenner doesn't seem nearly concerned enough about this. Not too put too fine a point on it, but anyone gets that far through our firewall, even for a dinky little thing like this should cause a four alarm, code red, all hands on deck, response out of Cybercrime. Anyway. That was the first test. Let me know what, if anything, trickles up to you. I'll be keeping an eye on how they respond. Next test'll be in a month or so, and it'll be subtle."

He detours on the way to the elevator. There's a restroom upstairs, and Kelly's in need of a fresh diaper. Gibbs follows, just watching, not offering to help.

Mostly, he's just leaning, back against the door, because it's a small restroom and there's no changing table, so Tim's got her on his little portable changing mat, on the floor, and Gibbs is making sure no one opens the door and hits them with it.

"What are you thinking?" Gibbs asks Tim.

"Men's rooms need changing tables."

"About Cybercrime."

"Wanna know if they don't work together or they can't."

Gibbs nods at that. "Looked like a good test."
"Thanks."

"If they can't?"

"You know just as well as I do that it's almost impossible to fire a federal employee for incompetence. Maybe Accounting and Human Resources could use some computer guys? I don't know. Gonna give them time to try and start working together. Gotta reshape the area, too. They're tucked in little cubicles, hiding away, need to get them facing each other. I do know one thing, after Jenner, they aren't going to know what hit them."

Gibbs nods. Tim finished with Kelly's diaper, gets her onesie snapped back up again. "Okay, got to get her home soon, otherwise she's going to be very unhappy with me."

"Then get going."
No Shame

One more errand before he takes Kelly home. Quick one.

They don’t have any birth control in the house, and while it’s true they haven’t specifically talked about trying for another baby, if or when, or if Abby’s going to want to go back on Depo or something similar, Tim’s thinking that they will, sooner or later, want to have the kind of sex that can result in babies again, and having something on hand would be a good idea for that.

Because, while it’s true that dealing with two back to back babies ten months apart does not bother him, he’s also thinking that likely wouldn’t be a good thing for Abby.

So, en route home, he and Kelly are stopping off at Target to pick up about ten more pacifiers (That being his official errand. What the hell happens to those things? He could swear they had them in every single room, located on most of the horizontal surfaces, but as soon as Kelly wants one, they all vanish. They’ve lost so many of them at this point he’s almost tempted to start thinking that Tony’s gas lighting him.) and a box of condoms.

He knows where the pacifiers are. No problem on that. Feet head on automatic to the baby section, he grabs pretty much all of the ones in the style that Kelly likes, tucks them into the little storage area under the stroller and off they go…

Targets are really big. Somehow that hadn’t occurred to him, because in general, he knows where what he wants is. But right now he doesn’t know, and Kelly’s getting restless, and he’d like to do this fast, sooo…

Probably near the pharmacy. That’d be a logical place for condoms. So he heads in that direction and spends five minutes wandering around the aisles, finally locating them.

They either don’t sell or don’t make the kind he likes anymore. He thinks for a minute and comes to the conclusion that since it’s July that it’s probably been two and a half years since he’s bought condoms. So don’t make any more is more likely than they just don’t have them.

Great.

This isn’t the sort of thing he ever enjoyed shopping for in person. There’s a reason the internet exists and buying things like condoms and porn is the number one reason.

And Kelly, who’s been up since they headed in, decided this was the moment to go from restless to fussing.

So, he’s standing there, fussy baby in his arms, patting her back and humming, trying to figure out which of the nineteen different versions of Trojans are most like the ones he used to get, idly wondering if this is what they’d call situational irony, or just a commercial for why you buy the damn things in the first place.

Finally, like he did when he and Abby got together the second time, he decided that standing there dithering about it was a waste of time, grabbed the variety pack, which would be good enough for the short term, and eventually he and Abby would have a chat about what they’re actually going to do about this.
If he thought having a woman behind him in line call him a babysitter was irksome, standing in line
with a collection of three teen and tween girls, all cooing over how cuuuute! and tiiiiinnny! his baby
is while he’s buying ten pacifiers and a six pack of condoms was a boat load of fun.

Obviously, if you’ve got your three-week-old baby on your shoulder, sucking away on her pacifier,
watching said teen/tween girls intently, you’ve had sex at least once in the last year.

But, still… He has the sense that most people (especially of the teen/tween girl variety) don’t look at
babies, and then look at their parents, and think, Gosh, you had sex. Even very visibly married
parents, like Tim (though it occurs to him that most people can’t read all the marks on him that
indicate married, but the wedding ring isn’t exactly subtle, and just about everyone in America
knows how to read that mark), probably do not inspire the idea of, I bet there has been and will be
lots of sex.

He inches forward in the line, gets to the cashier, so he’s got to actually load the stuff he’s buying on
the belt, which, because he had what he’s thinking are an eleven, twelve, and fourteen year old girls
all riveted by Kelly, paying intense attention to him, he’s been keeping under the stroller and out of
sight.

He has never, ever, in the entire almost thirty-eight years he’s been alive, felt more tempted to
shoplift than he does now. But he knows that if he just puts the pacifiers on the belt and attempts to
walk out of the Target without paying for the condoms, that there will be one of those stupid trackers
in his box, and explaining to Gibbs why he needs to get bailed out of jail will not be fun.

So he grabs the pacifiers, (takes four handfuls, after all, he’s still holding Kelly) and then puts the
condoms on the belt next to them.

He sees all three of the girls notice the pacifiers, not really looking twice at them, then notice what
else he’s got, and three sets of eyes go very, very wide.

He shrugged a little as all three of them suddenly stopped talking and just stared.

No shame. He stared them all in the eye and said, “Want her to be an only child for at least a little
while longer.”

They nodded and broke into hysterical giggles.

He laughed a little, too, and then said hello to the cashier and swiped his card.

He got home a few minutes later, a very hungry and fussy Kelly indicating that she really would
have appreciated not stopping en route home, and that if there was not a breast in her mouth in the
next two seconds she was going to go nuclear.

Fortunately, for both Kelly and him, Abby was awake, downstairs, and from the looks of it, eagerly
anticipating letting off some of the pressure of milk build up.

So, before he’d even gotten the bag put down, or shoes kicked off, Kelly was in Abby’s arms,
rooting away, looking for a nipple, and then as Abby got her breast out, was one very happy little
girl. And Abby was looking a lot happier once Kelly was on her breast, too.

“Test run long?” she asked as he got his shoes put away.

“Not too bad.” He answered, heading into the living room, putting the bag on the coffee table, and
sitting down next to her. "Jarvis sends his congratulations and wants you to know she’s the prettiest little girl ever."

"Jarvis was there?"

"He was Leon’s ten o’clock."

"Ah."

"He also wants to see how this goes, and wants a write up from me, once it’s done, about the feasibility of doing it Navy-wide."

Abby looked pleased at that. “Like a cyber-war-game?”

“Yeah. But when they war game everyone knows it’s a game. They’re all on red alert and ready to go. This would see what happens when they’re sleeping.”

“Sounds good.”

“Yeah. It’ll be interesting.” He thinks about that for a second, then makes a frustrated sound.

“What?” Abby asks.

“We do this Navy-wide, I’ll be the tech geek whipping out a surprise test on my Dad’s men.”

“Oh.” There’s concern on her face. She can feel why that’d be an issue for him. “Is that a good thing?”

Tim shrugs. He’s honestly not sure. “Depend on if I’ve got to do it face to face. Depend on if his guys pass. I mean, this is a good plan. I like… okay, I don’t like what I’m finding out, but I need to know it. And that’s got to be true on a larger level, as well.”

“What are you finding out?”

He filled her in on the test, the complete and utter lack of any teamwork down in Cybercrime, and the fact that, while he was tracking it, no one figured out what had happened. Though talking about that reminded him that he needed to get his computer up and monitoring what was going on down there. He headed off to do that. A few minutes later, he was out of his office again, shaking his head, (Eight of twelve moles were back doing exactly what they’d been doing before. Four were trying to figure out what had happened. At this point he still wasn’t sure any of them knew anyone else had been hacked.) and sitting next to her.

“I mean, look, I’ve hacked their feeds. I’ve got spyware on all of their computers right now. I’ve hacked the security camera feed, and at least as of right now, none of them have noticed.”

“Not good at all.”

“No!” He’s shaking his head. “And they’re the guys who are supposed to be protecting the rest of NCIS from attacks like this. On the upside, I’ve got a very clear To-Do list for my first few months as Boss, and seeing how well they did, Vance was looking awfully convinced I was the right guy for the job.

“Hell, he’s looking so convinced, I’m thinking Jenner might be getting some not so subtle hints about how speeding up that job hunt might be in order.”

“Ew…”
“For Jenner.”

She nods at that.

“How about you? Good couple of hours?”

“She slept. That felt really good. You’re off doing that, and I’m… missing my brain. I had one. I clearly remember that I had one. But right now, I don’t want to do anything more complicated than make dinner, and honestly, by make dinner, I mean order it takeout.”

He smiled gently and stroked her neck, snuggling into her. “I don’t need as much rest as you do right now. It’s not my body feeding her. I’m not healing up from having her. I’m rested enough I’ve got a few spare brain cells to rub together. Though, only a few. You’ll appreciate this. I get ready to head up, and Gibbs comes up, too, which surprised me, but he’s read in, so no biggie. He remembered the one thing I’d forgotten, namely someone needed to take care of Kelly while I was doing this, which had, somehow, completely slipped my mind.”

That did get a little chuckle out of Abby.

“Yeah, running the show would have been a bit tricky with her in my arms.”

“Vance has held a baby before.”

“And if Gibbs hadn’t come up, that might have been how it worked out. Oh, imagine this, Vance, Gibbs, and Jarvis, all cooing over Kelly, Gibbs is holding her, and they’re commiserating, with me, over being new Dads.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. Jarvis and Vance were teasing each other about being grandfathers.”

“Not anytime soon, I hope.”

“I don’t think so. Jarvis’ daughter is sixteen, and Kayla’s…”

“Fourteen right now.”

“Okay. It was a really surreal morning. Oh. Draga’s got a son.”

“Ziva mentioned that on Friday.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” She’s looking at him like she can’t believe he didn’t already know that.

“Speaking of only a few brain cells to rub together. How’d I miss that?”

“I have no idea. We were sitting at the table, eating, talking, and she mentioned it. Apparently there was some sort of messy break up and the custody battle is still going on, made more complicated by the fact that they were never married.”

He looks stupefied. “I completely missed that.”

“Okay, I’m feeling a little better about not being all there.”

“Now I’m getting worried about that test. God, I hope it really did what I said it did.”
“It did.”

“How can you be that sure?”

“Computers means playing to your strengths. Paying attention to second-hand stories about strangers, not so much.”

“I’m a cop; that’s supposed to be one of my strengths, too.”

“Not that tired with two glasses of wine in you.”

“Okay, good point.” He leans back against the sofa, watching Kelly nursing away, his left arm around Abby’s shoulder, right hand stroking Kelly’s cheek.

“What’d you get?” Abby asked after a minute, nudging the bag on their coffee table with her foot.

“Every pacifier in the store, and a box of condoms.”

That got a smile out of Abby. “Feeling hopeful?”

“Feeling like we haven’t talked about this, so having some sort of birth control kicking around the house might not be a bad idea.”

She nodded then detached Kelly. “Come on, baby, time to burp and switch sides.” A bit of patting, a very loud belch, and some rearranging, and Kelly was once again happily sucking away.

“That’s getting a lot smoother,” Tim said.

“Yeah, we’re getting a pretty set pattern down. So, besides hoping to have sex again at some point, what are you thinking?”

“Huh?”

“Condoms. Probably means you aren’t thinking another kid right away.”

He kissed Abby. “Baby, that’s up to you. Yeah, I want more than one, but… I’ve got the easy job.”

Abby’s watching Kelly, feeling her nursing away, Tim snuggled in close, and right this second tons of babies sounds like a brilliant plan. Lots and lots and lots of them. Like, cursing at herself about not jumping Tim seven years ago and starting back then.

Jokes about not having enough brain cells to rub two together aside, she is aware that this could possibly be a side effect of the massive waves of hormones and oxytocin washing through her system right now.

Or it might just be that holding this perfect, tiny person they made together, feeling her whole body snuggled in close to her, knowing she’s a mixture of the two of them with almost infinite possibilities ahead of her, just feels really good, and she’d like to feel it for more tiny people, too.

And while she’s liking the idea of lots of babies, she’s also very aware of not feeling any desire to get pregnant again right this second. (Hell, beyond on an academic level, she’s not feeling any interest in sex, either.) She’d like the time to enjoy this, just one baby, nursing, getting used to this being a mom thing.
But… and there’s always a but… But she’s forty-two. And every month nursing is another month of decreased fertility. And yeah, jokes about Irish twins and all, and she does know that decreased fertility is not the same thing as no eggs at all, but if they want to have more than two, and really, this late, even two is iffy, they need to get on it fast.

Fast enough to make stopping nursing worth it?

Eh… right now, in the middle of the day, when everyone is awake and content, and she’s got a happy little girl gently sucking away, this is really nice. Tonight, when all she wants to do is sleep and Tim’s bringing Kelly in, yet again, maybe not so much. Because if she stopped nursing all together, they could fully alternate nights.

God, that’d hurt so much. Tim was, maybe, four minutes late on getting Kelly home, and her breasts were already starting to ache. She doesn’t even want to think too hard about how much going cold turkey would hurt.

Okay, not stopping nursing.

“You all right?” Tim asks. “She bite you or something?”

“Huh?” Abby looks up from Kelly to him.

“You were wincing.”

“Just thinking about the logistics of another baby. Thinking about stopping nursing and how, well, ouch! that would be.”

“Oh.” Tim’s looking pretty concerned and kind of nervous, like he wants to say something but isn’t sure if he should.

“What are you thinking?”

“Not sure I should say.”

“They’ll be your babies, too.”

“Yeah, but it’s not me getting pregnant or nursing.”

“True enough. Say it anyway, you look worried.”

“I want to have babies with you. I do want more than one. I’ll admit, I love you pregnant, and I can’t wait to meet Kelly’s little brother, and I’d love it if he looks as much like you as Kelly does. But… I don’t know if having them right on top of each other is good for you. And… I want Kelly to be able to nurse as long as she can… And if giving you more time to heal up and get back to normal before doing this again means we don’t have any more biological children, then, we don’t. Doesn’t mean we won’t have other babies, egg donor or adopt or whatever.”

She nods at that, it sounds reasonable, though, there’s something that hurts, really hurts, at the idea of this being their only biological child or never being pregnant again. But at the same time, everyone does say nursing for a year is best for them, and she doesn’t want to rush this, and she’s not all healed up yet, and… “Not less than a year apart.”

“Okay.”

“I was hoping to nurse Kelly for a year, so… use the condoms for the first three months and then…”
if it happens, it happens, and… if I get to forty-four and we aren’t pregnant again, try fertility treatments, and if we get to forty-five with still no baby, get working on adopting.”

He strokes her neck. “I can back that plan.”

“So, what’d you get?”

He grabbed the bag. “Blue, green, pink, yellow, unicorn, frogs, stars, I think this thing’s a sea horse,” he held up a white pacifier with something, that could be a sea horse, or maybe a sea monkey, or possibly some bizarre mythological creature he’s never heard of emblazoned in pastel blue and green on it, “more stars, and kitten pacifiers.”

“You weren’t kidding about buy all of them, were you?”

“Nope.”

“And…”

He held up the box. “Trojan sensitive variety pack. Apparently they don’t make the kind I liked anymore, so back to square one.”

“And let me guess, you’re hoping I’ll help you test them out.”

“Maybe not right this second, like I said, ball’s in your court for that one, I just want to be ready to return it when you are, but testing them’ll be a lot more effective if you help out. Can’t imagine you can feel much of a difference jerking off with them.”

Abby laughed at that. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Me, either. For some reason I’ve never felt any need to try that.”

She shoved him gently, smiling, and he kissed her shoulder, then stood up, “I’m getting hungry. You want any lunch?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m on it.”
Story Tim With Grandpa Gibbs

Technically, Kelly was supposed to show up today. And technically, they're off this weekend. Fourth of July is a Federal Holiday (and supposedly they've got all of them off) but it's on a Saturday this year, so they all got Monday off as well.

Granted, long weekend doesn't mean much to Tim and Abby right now. Tim's not due back until the middle of July and Abby's not due in until the middle of September. But, for Gibbs and the rest of the team, long weekend does mean something.

And Gibbs is taking advantage of it. Cook out. His place. The extended Gibbs clan has been invited. (It's entirely possible he's showing off his grandbaby to LJ and Fornell and co.) Even Senior's in town, so the whole crew'll be there.

Or as Ziva had put it, Christmas in July.

Previous years, the Forth has just been the core group of them, and bounces between the Palmers' or Gibbs' house. It's not much of a big deal. Mostly an excuse to eat something tasty, drink some beer, blow a few things up. (Okay, yeah, technically in Virginia, you're not supposed to have the kind of fireworks Abby makes, but for some reason, everyone turns a blind eye when the party is at a cop's house, attended by a pile of other cops, and the cops who were called out to check the party were given a large quantity of beer, grilled chicken, and some fireworks to take home. And no, that's not a bribe. That's one branch of Law Enforcement showing proper respect for another branch, and bite your tongue for even thinking it!)

But this year is more of a big deal. Well, less of a show up in your jammies and hang loose sort of thing, so Tim's actually shaving. At least, he's getting rid of the stray hairs on his cheeks. The goatee is staying.

He's running the razor over his face when Abby comes into their bathroom and says, "You know Draga'll be there."

Tim nodded. "Ziva mentioned that last night."

"Just, you've got the kilt laid out, wanted to make sure you knew."

"I do. It'll be 93 today, not wearing jeans. Too damn hot for that."

"Okay. You have shorts right?"

"None that fit. Unless you mean my swim trunks. Why? You think it'll be a problem?"

"Just thinking about last night." Last night they'd been talking about how fully into the family they were going to let Draga. He's invited to this, because everyone's invited to this. But just like Gibbs didn't let any of his team see any of his private life until he'd gotten himself good and cemented into Boss territory, Tony's not entirely sure how much of him he wants Draga seeing, yet.

"This is who I am, and I don't care who knows. Not anymore. He thinks it's weird… Well, not like I've got to work with him all that much longer. He's not my Probie."

"Would you wear it if we had a pile of Cybercrime Techs coming?"
"I don't know. Wasn't planning on doing it first day as Boss or anything." Since women can wear skirts, NCIS can't prevent men from doing likewise without opening themselves up to a sexual discrimination suit. Tim's never worn his kilt to work because it's not practical in the field. But behind a desk? He's been thinking about it. "Need to get a feel for them. Never realized until recently how much of 'Gibbs' was about holding control and projecting that image. Not sure how much of that I'll need for my guys. But I do know I don't need it for Draga."

That got him thinking as he finished up with his face.

"You know… I'm going to ask Vance if I can get the dress code revoked for my guys."

Abby looked interested in that.

"Just, I know I want to get rid of a bunch of them. Which means I'm going to need new hires. Can't change my pay scale. Can't offer different benefits. The basement's ugly as sin, so I can't give them a spiffy environment. But, maybe I can at least make it look a bit more like a place where actual computer guys work. And maybe, for some of them, looking more like the traditional tech guy when I'm head hunting will help."

"Good way to think about it." They heard quiet crying coming from Kelly's room. "And I think that's my cue," Abby said, heading off to get their daughter.

Just like at Christmas, the cars are lined up and down the street. Unlike Christmas, most everyone is outside. It's hot and sticky and humid, but the food is on the porch, and so is Gibbs, keeping watch over the grill, burgers and chicken sending delicious smells into the wood-smoke scented air.

They were the last ones to get there. Though he's thinking that Jimmy and Breena probably haven't been over for long. Molly still gets an afternoon nap, and it's not much past naptime.

It's, with the exception of Gibbs at the grill, pot luck, though when he asked what they should bring, Gibbs just glared at them and told Abby to bring Kelly and make sure everyone was awake enough to enjoy the time out. So he doesn't actually have a plate of anything in his hands. (Diaper bag over his shoulder, with baby monitor in it, and one of those little bouncy seat/swingy things for Kelly to nap on when it's time for her to go down. But no food.)

They'd been there for maybe four seconds when Gibbs saw them and headed over, hugs and kisses for Abby and Kelly, (backslap for Tim) then he handed Tim the grill tongs ("Don't let 'em burn.") and swooped up Kelly to go show her off to Fornell.

"Maybe I could put the baby stuff down first?"

Gibbs half-waved in his direction, heading toward Fornell and Wendy with Kelly and Abby

A second later, Draga was over. "Here, let me help." He grabbed some of Tim's baby gear.

"Thanks. Don't know why we need twenty pounds of gear for an eight pound person…"

"But if you ever leave any of it home, you'll need it."

"Yep." After a minute, he had everything tucked into a tidy pile under the table with all the food. "Okay." Tim looks at the tongs. "Apparently, I'm in charge of the grill."

"Apparently. Probably a good plan to get over there before anything burns. Don't think he'd like
Tim nods and heads over. He looks down at the food, and says, quietly, to himself, "Great."

"McGee?" Draga asks.

"Wood fire. Never cooked on this before."

"Just like charcoal. Keep flipping things over and moving them around so the food doesn't burn. Like, that..." A quick flare up sent flames jumping. So, Tim reached over with the tongs and flipped over that chicken leg. When he did, Draga said, "I thought so."

"Hmmm?"

"That you'd have skin ink."

"Oh, yeah. Three of them now. Four soon."

Draga nods. "Figured you would when I met Abby. What do you have?"

Tim's right sleeve was high enough that it didn't take much pushing up to show off the knot around his bicep. "Abby's got one that matches this." Draga nods, and Tim realizes that of course, he's already noticed that. Abby's wearing a dress with no sleeves. He pushed up his left sleeve and showed off the code. "That's my master's dissertation."

"Nice."

"Thanks."

"Here." He handed Draga the tongs and undid his wrist cuff. "That's number three."

"She's got one that matches that, too. On her neck?"

"Yeah. Wedding tattoos." He snapped his wrist cuff back on. "Number four'll be on my right leg. Waiting for a bit more time and a bit more rest before that one."

"Baby tat?"

"Yeah. You have any?"

"Oh, yeah. Wasn't sure..." Tim notices that Draga's wearing a pair of shorts and an unbuttoned Henley with the sleeves pushed up to his forearms. It's got to be warm. Too warm. But if he wanted something that would cover his arms... it'd do the job.

Tim gestures to his kilt. "Dress code's pretty informal here. Pretty tolerant, too. At the office, you can't have ink that shows, but this isn't the office." As he took the tongs back and flipped a few wings, Tim did notice Leon and his family was here, too. "Though I can understand not necessarily wanting to show everything off to not just your new Boss, but to his Boss, too."

Draga nodded at that and asked, "DiNozzo give you any crap about your ink?"

"Not too bad. He was so stunned when I got the first one, he didn't know what to do about it. Calls me McInked every now and again, thinks the one on my wrist is kind of femme, but not much more than that."

"He doesn't have any?"
"If he does, it's new and he hasn't said anything." Tim decides that since Ziva keeps her tattoo under wraps that he doesn't need to mention it. "So, what do you have? No need to show it off if you don't want to."

"They're not going to flip out? You know some people can get kind of…"

Tim nods, he knows. "I've got three. Abby's got sixteen. And we don't exactly dress like everyone else. They're pretty good with people who don't fit the mold. But, yeah, it does depend on what it is you've got. You got something nasty chewing the head off a baby, and yeah, probably keeping that under your shirt is a good plan."

"Nothing like that."

He's not sure if Abby was following their conversation, reading lips, or just noticed him showing off his tats and decided to come on over and join the conversation, but as Draga said that she and Breena edged their way over.

"So, what do you have?" she asked.

A few seconds later, Ziva had wandered over as well as Kayla Vance. Like somehow, by some form of psychic female communication, all the girls decided that something interesting was about to happen on the porch, so they closed in.

Breena's grinning at Draga, and Tim realized he didn't know if they'd been introduced yet. "Do you know Breena?" Tim asks.

Draga smiled at her, offering his hand, and Tim caught sight Jimmy and Tony, who had been tossing a Frisbee around with Jared and Vance, edging closer, as well. Paying close attention to what their ladies' are doing, but not wanting to look like they're feeling threatened. Vance, on the other hand is just coolly staring at his daughter, waiting to see where this is going to go.

"Not directly. I've seen your picture and your little girl's picture down in Autopsy."

Breena smiled back and shook.

"Breena, Draga, Draga, Breena"

"Tim, we're not at work," Breena says to him. "They get so used to calling everyone by last name they forget the rest of the world doesn't usually work that way."

"Draga's fine. Everyone's called me that for the last ten years."

"You ever change your mind, let me know, and Abby and I'll call you by your first name."

"And even if you don't, I'm still going to call you Eric," Abby added. "Only one man I call by his last name anymore, and you aren't him."

"You always called me McGee."

"Yep. You and Gibbs, my two favorite guys, and no one else. But it's my name too now, so calling you McGee is just weird."

He nods as if to say, If you say so.

And Abby turned her attention back to Draga and smiled bright and wide. "Soo... Come on, we like skin ink here."
Draga pulls his shirt off, over his head, and turns his back to the girls. It's a cool design. Stylized wings stretching from bicep to bicep and down his back. The pattern is tribal, Maori in style but not a replica of any of the traditional designs. All of the fliers in his unit got it done when they were stationed out of New Zealand as part of a joint naval aviator Pacific theatre task force.

And he's going on about it, about what it means, how the wings are made out of lines that look like waves, blending sea and air. Ziva, Breena, and Abby are listening intently, and looking intently, and as he's talking about warrior traditions, Ziva gets into the conversation, and they chat about that.

Okay, great. None of that was funny. But Tim's having a hard time not laughing. And he feels like he shouldn't find this so amusing. He really shouldn't. And Abby keeps shooting him, what the hell looks as he tries to keep a straight face, but he can see something she can't, and it's hilarious.

So, no, he shouldn't have been laughing. Draga and Ziva comparing honor cultures is not funny, at all. No, funny started when Tony began to... amble... in a very nonchalant sort of way toward the group of them. He's trying to look cool and failing, badly. Probably because he's glaring daggers into Draga's back. And after a few more seconds of relaxed ambling he does manage to come on over, drape an arm around Ziva, pulling her close to him, flush against his side. "Enjoying the conversation, Mrs. DiNozzo?"

Abby sees it, and he sees her get what he was trying to not giggle at.

Ziva turned to him and smiled. "Yes. Learning a lot about American and Maori warrior culture."

Tony looks at Draga. "Didn't know there were Maoris even whiter than McInked over there."

Tim shrugs at Draga, who with red hair and freckly skin actually is paler than he is.

"You join the cultures that call to you," Draga says, pulling the shirt back over his head. He is pale enough that ten minutes in the sun is probably about as long as he can safely take. "This one called to me. Actually, if you've studied the sorts of marks that my ancestors, and, likely McGee's and Dr. Mallard's, as well, used to wear, you'd see this isn't too far off. Granted, if it was in proper traditional style, they'd be done in woad…"

And somehow the mention of that woad conjured Ducky, and between the two of them ten minutes of the history of tribal marks passed, which, honestly, Tim mostly filtered out.

No, he was paying attention to the chicken, and to Tony, who was, to put it mildly, whipping out his own personal fifteen on the one to ten scale of overreacting.

If you didn't know Tony well, which, of course Draga doesn't, he looks fine. Annoyed, but still within the limits of okay. But Tim can see the clench in his jaw, the slight narrowing of his eyes, the way his hand isn't actually casually draped over Ziva, his arm and hand is tense.

And that's aimed about fifty-fifty at Ziva and Draga.

Tony doesn't like Draga showing off, and he doesn't like Ziva appreciating it.

For a second, Tim wonders about that. Abby was certainly looking at Draga, carefully, she was even very lightly tracing some of the more complicated bits of the work on his back, but he wasn't feeling any… anything about it. She likes skin art. Draga's got cool skin art. She's looking. He's not bugged.

Tony's glaring at Draga, and Tim's wondering if he should be bugged.

He's awfully sure he would be bugged if Abby was showing off, say, her entire collection. And he'd
be quite a bit less than thrilled if she decided Draga needed to see her crosses. But her looking at him isn't bugging him.

It's just not.

But Tony looks ready to rip his head off.

And finally, he figures out why. At least, he develops what he's thinking is a pretty good suspicion.

Draga's young. Draga's attractive. Draga's got dangerous looking ink all over his arms and back. He's in rock-hard Navy shape, probably runs fifteen miles a day and does PX-90 or Insanity or something like that when he gets home.

And these days, Tony's none of those things. Tony's used to being the best looking, fairest of them all, and now he's not.

And it's also why this doesn't bother Tim, and to some degree, he's thinking this is why Jimmy's not flipping out either. (Though it could be that Tony's doing such a good job of it that it's keeping Jimmy in line.) But right now, Tim's in pretty much the best shape of his life. Okay, sure he hasn't worked out in three weeks, but he's tight and trim, and no, he's not cut or built like Draga is, but, he doesn't need to be.

He looks as good as he's ever going to look, and he knows that his wife adores him, and so, if she wants to look at Draga's tats, he's cool.

But Tony doesn't look as good as he ever has. And it's not that he's terribly old or anything. But he's forty-eight. He's got a good ten (fifteen? Tim's bad at estimating things like that.) pounds of pudge around the middle. He's got lines on his forehead and around his eyes.

Pretty much he's a college athlete who kept himself in awfully good shape for a good long time, but that's the thing, it was a good long time, and time is catching up to him.

And right now, his wife, his NEW wife is looking at the NEW guy, who is younger, fitter, and hotter, and Tony's not taking it well, at all. It's not like Ziva was ogling Draga or anything. Okay, that wasn't just polite interest, either. But she wasn't doing anything over the line. She wasn't flirting. She wasn't saying anything inappropriate, and she wasn't undressing the rest of him with her eyes. But, it's also, at least to Tim, pretty clear that she's not really looking at the ink, she's looking at the guy and the muscles under the ink.

Which might be another reason why Tony's flipping out and Tim isn't. Abby's looking at the ink. Ziva's looking at biceps, delts, traps, and lats.

Of course, as Tony's standing there, arm around Ziva, adding a few snide remarks here and there as Ducky talks, one other possible reason for Tony flipping out hits Tim. And if he's right… Well, he certainly flipped out just like this a bit less than a year ago, and back then… Yep. He feels a grin creep across his face, and flips a few more chicken wings before calling out, "Gibbs!"

Gibbs wandered back to him.

"How long have they been on?"

Gibbs gives him his daughter back and hollers, "Dinner's on!"
It's an hour later, before he and Jimmy get a few minutes alone with Tony. But eventually, the sun was starting to sink, the torches were lit, and he, Jimmy, and Tim were all lounging around on lawn chairs in the back corner of the yard.

Jimmy looks at him, amused, takes a long drink of his beer, and shakes his head, clicking his tongue in a *shame on you* gesture.

Tim says to him, very smug, finishing up his burger. "That wasn't cool, at all. So, when's the baby due?"

Tony glared at them.

Jimmy, still grinning says, "It's July, so that'd be what? April? No April birthdays yet."

"Ziva's not pregnant."

Jimmy and Tim flash surprised looks at each other and Jimmy says, "You're saying that you just about walked up and pissed on her to mark your territory because… she was looking at another guy." Jimmy laughs. "She's allowed to look. You look at other women all the time."

Tony glares again.

So, back to his first idea. Tim shakes his head. "Don't think looking's all of it. That's only half, a third maybe. Tony's not the prettiest one anymore." Okay, Tony really is glaring daggers at them right now, and Tim shouldn't be enjoying this so much, but…

"Oh, that's it!" Jimmy says, poking Tim. "Tony, you were never the prettiest. Have you ever looked at me?" Jimmy gestures to himself and his hard, cut, toned body, significantly less of which is hidden under clothing than usual for work. (He's in shorts, flip flops, and a t-shirt.) "Sure, you're cool, but I've got a much better body."

This does not appear to be comforting to Tony. Metaphorical steam was bubbling out of his ears.

Jimmy shakes his head and shoves Tony gently. "You get a pass for being a jerk when she's pregnant. You don't just because there's a new guy who's younger and hotter than you."

*I'm his Boss. She's my wife."

"She's also his partner, and neither of them did anything even remotely out of line." Tim adds.

Gibbs came over, sat down next to them, and handed Tony a beer. "Really sucks when some new young guy shows up and flirts with your wife."

Tony's not saying anything. He's staring at Gibbs, looking pretty alarmed, defensive, and pointing at him. But finally he gets out, "That's why you liked him? Is this twenty-year-old payback?"

Gibbs smiles, relaxing back, popping the cap on his Sam Adams, he's watching Draga talk with Jared Vance. "He's got the makings of a good agent. Payback is just the cherry on top."

"Look, I told you then," Tony says, emphatically, "I did not know she was your wife."

Jimmy holds up his hands, "Whoa, okay, we are stopping right now and rewinding to the beginning of this story."

Tim nods along with that. He very much wants to hear this. He catches Abby's eye, (she's across the backyard, talking with Breena and Wendy about something) and flashes her a little *pay attention to
Tony's looking like the entire universe is out to get him today, but eventually he says, "It's my first week at NCIS. Gibbs and Burley were in interrogation, and I was running down a few leads. This..." and here Tim's expecting words like smoking hot or gorgeous or something but there's just a beat of silence before Tony says, "woman, came up to my desk, looked around and then asked if Agent Gibbs was in.

"I told her he was busy, and she smiled at me, and we got to talking, and I was doing my usual routine, just talking..."

Gibbs' eyes narrow.

"In a somewhat flirty sort of way. And I asked what she wanted with Gibbs and she said, 'Nothing.' I asked if she wanted to leave a message, and she said 'Oh, I am.' And yes, that didn't make a whole lot of sense to me, but she's beautiful and sitting on my desk, and her legs..."

Gibbs eyes narrow even further.

"Were nothing I was looking at. So we kept talking, and she was sitting on the corner of my desk leaning into me, interested in the conversation, and I asked her name, and all she said was 'Stephanie,' and in my defense El Jefe over there had not only never actually said he was married, he had no pictures on his desk and had never mentioned her name. Only reason I knew he had a wife was the wedding band, and it was the same plain gold band twenty-seven million other couples have. And it's possible that if her skirt had been a bit longer, I might have noticed she had a very similar gold band on, but it was a really short skirt, and at that point in my life I was a firm believer in the idea that if you couldn't keep your wife happy enough so that she didn't go out seeking other guys, you got what you deserved. So, she was... um... writing down her number for me, and I had noticed there was a ring, just not what other ring it matched, so I was asking what times I shouldn't call when I heard Burley say, sounding really stunned, 'How long have you been watching this?' and I realized Gibbs had been on the stairs the whole time."

Tim and Jimmy are staring at Gibbs now. Tim looks from him to Tony and back again, and finally say, "It's obvious you didn't kill him, but..."

"She was sending a message. I got it. Not Tony's fault he was a horny idiot caught between the two of us."

"Hey!"

Gibbs just stares at him.

"What message was she sending?" Jimmy asked.

Now Gibbs is just staring at him with a I can't believe you asked that expression on his face.

"Beyond the fact that she wasn't happy," Jimmy adds.

Gibbs is still staring at him.

"You know, teachable moment. Don't make the same mistakes I did... No?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "No."

"All right. So, Tony, you do know what you can take from this?" Jimmy says brightly.
"No. What can I take from this?"

"Your own advice. If she's looking somewhere else, you've got to do a better job of making her happy. Go hit the gym. Sure, you'll never be as pretty as me, but you could probably stand to lose some weight." Jimmy smirked and looked to Tim. "You know, I don't think Draga was flirting with Ziva."

Tim rose one eyebrow. "You say Abby, and we're going to have issues." He's joking about that, because he does want to know how that looked to Jimmy.

"No." Jimmy flashes him an are you kidding look. "It wasn't Abby he ran right up to to offer help. It wasn't Abby he started talking skin ink with. And it wasn't Abby he was offering to show his tats to. She just happened to be there by the time he got to that part of the conversation."

Tony started laughing at that, loud and happy.

Tim thought about it for a minute, cause those are all good points but… "Nah. Didn't feel like that. He spotted me as the only other guy in the group with ink. New guy in the group, it's easier to figure out how to fit in if you can find someone else who looks similar. Same reason I gravitated to Abby when I first got to NCIS. Same reason you did, too."

"You think?" Jimmy asks.

"Did that really look like flirting to you?"

"How would I know?" Jimmy asks. "Haven't been hit on by a guy before."

"I think it works about the same for everyone," Tim said to Jimmy and then turned to Tony, "You fill Draga in on twelve? You know, just in case."

"Four hours in a car with him on his second day, we got them all."

"Good." Tim turns back to Gibbs. "So, speaking of rules. We're all here. Gonna tell us the story of Rule 1: Version Six?"

"Six?" Tony asks as Fornell heads over.

"What are you four cackling about? Gossiping like a bunch of old ladies." Fornell asks as he sits down.

Gibbs smiles dryly at him, and takes a bite of Fornell's cake. "No Shame."

"Hey. Get your own cake." Fornell says, swatting Gibbs' hand and then grins. "No Shame! That's a good one."

"You know this story?" Tony asks.

"Everyone knows this story, DiNozzo!"


"It's the sixth version of Rule Number One," Tim says.

"First," Gibbs says. "This version of Rule Number One is probably older than you are, Tim."

"But the story about how you got it, isn't," Fornell adds.
Gibbs sighs, looks down, remembers Mike, practically able to feel him, smiles a little, looks away from them, to where Kayla and Amira are talking with each other, and then scans the group, seeing Leyla holding Kelly while she chats with Abby.

*Well, Probie, you gonna tell your boys the story, or just sit there lookin' pretty?*

Gibbs smiles at Franks voice. He doesn't turn to his left to see if Franks is there. He's not. Can't be. At least, not in any way anyone else will notice. But he can feel him, see him, even if only in his mind's eye, settling in, sitting back, sipping his beer, ready for the story.

So, he starts the story. "Back in '93, Franks and I were stationed in Okinawa. For enlisted singles that's considered a hardship post. Basically, no women. The Japanese girls aren't terribly interested in catching an American service man. Back then there were probably twenty-five guys for each enlisted woman, and most of those ladies weren't exactly looking for a husband…" Gibbs' look filled in the *if you know what I mean* that followed those words. The boys nodded; they got it.

"But, Japan also isn't too uptight about hookers. So, it wasn't hard to find company if you had extra money and some time off."

Fornell jumped in, aware of the fact that in '93 Tim and Jimmy were still kids, and probably didn't know how this worked. "Japan may not be, but anyone in any of the US Forces stationed overseas had their CO's breathing down their backs about it. The AIDS scare was still going strong, so… no fraternizing."

"But they're soldiers and sailors," Gibbs says, "And soldiers and sailors and hookers get along pretty well."

Tony smirks at that, laughing a little.

"Most of the time, we didn't hear anything about that. They weren't supposed to be doing it. But everyone knew they were, so we'd turn a blind eye.

"One day this Light Colonel shows up at the door, and he wants to have a private chat and see if we can help him out, discreetly."

That got a smirk and a laugh out of Fornell, who of course already knows this story. "As Mike put it, 'This bantam rooster shows up, thinks he's a foot taller than he actually is, feathers in a bunch and squawking like a maiden aunt who's fanny just got pinched.'"

Gibbs smirked a bit, too, look on his face clearly saying Idiot Officer. "He'd found a house that aimed at an upscale clientele. And he got rolled."

"Isn't that the point of going to a place like that?" Jimmy asks.

Fornell shakes his head, amazed at how innocent Jimmy is. And Gibbs can hear Franks saying, *Good Lord, Probie, where'd you find Skippy over there? Kindergarten?*

"Robbed, Palmer," Fornell adds, making sure Jimmy's on the same page with the rest of them.

"Oh."

"Yeah," Jethro says. "He'd gone in, had some tea, started to pick out a girl, and woke up naked on the street."

Tim, Jimmy, and Tony are all quietly laughing now.
"His theory was that since he was American, and an officer, and married, that they'd rolled him, assuming he'd never complain because he'd be hip deep in shit if he did. They stole everything he had, but his wedding ring, so he'd be able to pretend it didn't happen."

_Goddamn stupid son of a bitch. Still can’t believe he came to us. You’re that stupid, you deserve what you get._ Gibbs is feeling tempted to tell Mike to shut up, because having him commenting in the back of his head is distracting. But he doubts it'll help.

"So, in we went to investigate, because you can't just roll an officer and get away with it, even if he was goddamn stupid," Gibbs says. "'Course the first part of a deal like this is figuring out what happened. And, if there was a pattern, it'd be easy enough to spot.

"We needed bait. Someone who could convincingly act the part of a married officer."

"Hoorah!" Fornell says.

Gibbs nods at that, looking amused. "So, I get all gussied up, ring on, and head off to go find a geisha for a night. Supposedly, Mike's got an eye on me. I wasn't wearing a wire because, well, nowhere to put one if you're going to a place where the first step is a bath."

"First step is a bath?" Tony sounds intrigued.

Gibbs looks pleased. "Nice place. Head in, one of the ladies escorts you to the bath, she washes you off—"

"Doesn't sound like this op was a hardship," Tony says.

That also gets an amused grin. "I've had worse assignments. She gets done with you. You're all nice and clean, wearing a robe, then over to the tea room, where there's refreshments waiting, and you tell 'em what you want, and what kind of girl you want to do it."

Tim's staring at him, looking really amused. "So, you're sitting there, in a room, in a robe, and… those little sandals?" Gibbs nods. "With a bunch of girls, actually saying, out loud, with _words_, what kind of sex you want?" Tim asks, trying not to laugh and failing miserably.

Gibbs glares at him _stop being a smartass_ very clear in that look. "You go undercover, you do what you need to. So not only was I doing it, but I was doing it in Japanese."

"Okay, then. I'm officially impressed," Tim says.

"Any redheads?" Fornell asks.

That also got the _smartass_ glare.

"The point of this wasn't for me to get laid, it was for me to get rolled, make sure it's really happening. So, I'm drinking the tea, chatting with the girls…"

"Chatting?" Jimmy asks.

"If you're gonna pay a thousand dollars for a night, you take the time to talk to them."

"Just, never… thousand dollars, huh?" Jimmy says.

"Yeah, high end house. And I was chatting with this very pretty girl, and, no she didn't have red hair. Black hair, went all the way down to her hips. And then I was coming to in the back alley, Mike patting my cheeks, getting me sitting up, naked except for my 'wedding ring.'"
"I want to get some clothing on, but he doesn't want to wait that long. But I don't want to go storming into the place naked, and he looks at me and says, 'Rule Number One: No Shame. Probie, even if you're butt naked with your balls flappin' in the ice-cold breeze you walk tall, give orders like you mean 'em, look everyone dead in the eye, and tell 'em to go straight to Hell if they don't like it. You're a Marine. Now get your ass up, and get in there, and let's get your clothin' back.'"

Always was good at the pep talks, right, Probie?

"So I stormed in, back straight, naked from head to toe, swinging in the breeze, barking orders, and by the end of the hour I had my clothing back and we'd busted the whole ring of them. Been fifteen thefts in the last year alone. They'd been right about the idea that married officers weren't going to complain."

Fornell sighs. "You're terrible at telling stories, Jethro." Fornell turns to the boys. "No one told stories the way Franks did, but I'll try. Jethro's leaving most of the good parts out."

"Most of the good parts?" Tony says.

"Oh yeah." Fornell has a very amused, very dirty grin on his face. He scans the crowd, finds Ducky, and yells out, "Ducky, we need you over here." Then says in his normal voice. "Ducky's heard this story, too, between the two of us, we'll do it the justice it deserves."

Thank God. You really do suck at stories, Probie. Whole not talkin' thing gets in the way.

"Tobias?" Ducky asks as he drags a chair over.

"Jethro's telling the No Shame story, and he's butchered it. I'd called you in for backup."

"Oh." Ducky lights up with amusement, as Jimmy scoots over on his seat, making room for him. "Jethro's first adventure in undercover work."

"That wasn't my first undercover job!"

"It was according to the version of the story I got," Ducky says with a smile.

"Mike's version of the story is at least seventy percent bullshit."

"But it was entertaining bullshit, and it got the point, No Shame, across so much better," Fornell adds. "He left out all the training."

"Oh, Jethro! That's the best part."

Gibbs rolled his eyes, and all three of the boys are staring, very interested in what's coming next.

"Ducky, Fornell, why do you know this story? I mean… I know Franks didn't have a problem with telling a juicy story, but…" Tim asks.

"But this seems a tad inappropriate for a work conversation?" Ducky finishes.

Tim nods.

"His bachelor party… that'd be for Diane, right?" Fornell answers.

"Like you don't remember," Gibbs replies.

"I was there for the one with Hannah, too, and both of those nights are pretty blurry."
"That sounds like a story, too," Tony says.

"Oh, it is." Fornell patted Tony on the cheek. "And one day, when you're old enough, we'll tell it to you. So where was I?"

*That was one hell of a night, wasn't it?* Gibbs feels very tempted to say back, "Like you remember that night. You finished the Tequila on your own."

"Setting the scene," Tim answers.

"Laying down bullshit," Gibbs adds.

"Sure. Bullshit or not, it was fun. So, you've got the basic story, but he's leaving a few details out, like, for example, thousand dollar a night place means that they're not rolling the customers for income. This isn't about making a few extra bucks to keep the pimp off your back. This is something personal about Americans. And honestly, place like that, back then, most of the clients are well-heeled Japanese business men. They might work with Americans, but they also probably don't mind seeing them, especially the ones in the military, get theirs. And when Probie-"

"Mike could call me that, you can't."

Fornell just smirks at that and continues on, "And Mike got in there, they were keeping the uniforms and medals as trophies."

"So you're saying rolling service men might be a selling point?" Tony asks.

"Might have been," Fornell answers. "And often, in a house like that, the proprietress is older, has been around for quite a while, and as I believe Mike said, 'Now, you've got to remember, Mama San's in charge of this joint, and she's old enough she remembers the bomb.'"

"I don't think she was that old." Gibbs says.

"According to Mike she was a crone," Fornell says.

"Because Mike was spinning a yarn. She was maybe forty-five-ish!"

*Hush, Probie. Let 'em tell it. It's a good story.* Gibbs goes quiet and lets them tell it.

"Next up, place that expensive, Light Colonel is about as low on the totem pole as you can get and still afford to go."

Ducky cuts in, "Due to the bizarre American proclivity toward Puritanical values in regards to sex—"

Jimmy hops on that, he was just reading about that a few days ago. "You do know the Puritans weren't actually that uptight about sex…"

Ducky's eyes narrow as he says, "*Mr. Palmer,*" the verbal equivalent of Gibbs' smartass glare, "I believe we can get to that another night."

"*Yes, Dr. Mallard,* tell us more about Puritanical Americans."

Tim nudged Jimmy shoulder and said quietly, "You getting sassy?"

"It's a party, I'm allowed."
Ducky sends both of them a long look. "Whether actual Puritans were particularly reserved in their private behavior with their spouses, they did frown upon prostitution, and the American armed services, unlike every other western military, has kept that tradition. So, while most sensible countries arrange for the needs of the soldiers to be met, and offer condoms to try and limit the damage from meeting those needs, the Americans believe that hard work, cold showers, and moral fortitude will get the job done. So, unlike a British outpost where there would have been entertainment for the enlisted and officers, the American service men were left at the mercy of the ladies of a country that didn't necessarily love them."

"Entertainment?" Jimmy asks.

"They call them red light districts because in World War One the French and British Officers' brothels had red lights. Blue lights for enlisted men. So a red light doesn't just designate a place where there are prostitutes, but also indicates a certain level of comfort, cleanliness, and service."

"New meaning to the Blue Light Special."

"Indeed, Anthony."

Fornell takes over. "Now, Japan doesn't have or need red lights. The price tag on this place weeds out the enlisted, and honestly, if one of them did scrape up enough money to go, Mama San's going to show him the door because he's not the right kind of guy. No, the right kind of guy is at least middle-aged. He's got money. He's got taste. He's done this before and knows the ropes.

"So as Mike said, 'I'm sittin' here with two options: Pure as the driven Probie, who can pull off the Marine part of the job just fine, but he's never been with a goodtime girl, let alone a high class one, or me, and I know my way around a place like this, ya know… past adventures, but I don't look like a soldier, and these girls, readin' a guy, knowing who he is and what he wants in one glance, that's a good third of their job. That's why they get paid the big money.' Fornell attempting to do Mike's accent was making all five of them laugh.

"So, finally, Mike decided that Jethro would be the more attractive mark: 'I can do the Texas Businessman route. Hell, anyone who doesn't sound like they're from New York qualifies as Texan in Japan. But we've got no complaints from them. And hell, I walk in there, they're not going to roll me, they know I'll fuss. No, I walk in, and NIS is out a thousand dollars, and I'm in a good mood for a week. We've got to send Probie in.'" Fornell says, mimicking how Franks told it.

"Can I just add how bizarre it is to hear a story where Probie keeps getting mentioned, and it's not me," Tim says with a smile.

"We could tell the story about you, Probie," Tony says.

"What story about me?"

"You remember, Thom," Gibbs says.

"Oh, come on. That's barely a story."

"Then the digression won't take long." Ducky adds, grinning.

Tim sighs, rolls his eyes a little and says, "Back in what, '06?"

"Probably," Tony says.

"We're hunting a serial killer. He's acting out of an exclusive club. Can't get a warrant. Metro hasn't
been able to get a cop in, none of theirs have been 'hot' enough. So, my first book's out, hitting the New York Times top ten. So, Thom E. Gemcity and his lady friends decide to go clubbing."

"At that point the only link we had was this girl, and the whole point is Thom is going in to get her out of the club so we can question her," Tony adds.

"I get in, we're scanning the place." Gibbs gives him a cut the shit look. "Okay, we go in, we're scanning the place by getting a good spot on the dance floor, and I'm dancing with Abby, Ziva, and Lee. And Abby and Ziva are into it, but Lee's sort of hanging back, clearly never done this before —"

"And you had?" Tony asks.

"Maybe." He gives Tony a knowing look. Because at that point in his life, actually, yes, he had done that before, with Abby the first time they dated. "Anyway, while we're doing that, it occurs to me that Thom isn't a cop and can't just barge on up and arrest this girl, so I ask Probie Mark One over there how to get her out of the club, and you said…"

Gibbs sighed the same way he did when he heard Tim ask him how to get her out and said, "Well, Tim, she's a hooker. Use your imagination."

Fornell snorts a laugh. "You didn't know how to get a hooker out of a club?"

"What can I say, Tobias?" First time he's ever called Fornell by his first name, but as Jimmy pointed out, they are at a party, and he is allowed to get a bit sassy. "Even shy, awkward, and a bit plump, I never had to pay for it. Some women, some older, hot, redheaded women, just dig me." He flashed Tobias his best cocky grin, and Fornell glared daggers at him. Gibbs gave him a quick headslap for that, but it was worth it. "And that's it. My sum total experience with hookers and undercover ops."

"How about the bullshit version?" Jimmy chirped.

"The bullshit version would focus on what Lee, Ziva, Abby, and I did when we got back to the lab. And between you having dated Lee, and Tony married to Ziva, I'm thinking we don't need to get into the bullshit version of it."

"Ah..." Jimmy turned back to Ducky and Fornell. "So..."

"God, okay, where were we?" Fornell asks.

"Still setting the scene," Tim answers.

"You've picked Gibbs as the mark," Jimmy adds.

"Right. So somehow they've got to figure out how to make him look like he's done this before." Fornell is grinning at that point. "And Franks is... giving you pointers?"

Gibbs can hear Franks laughing in his head. He nods. "That's a way to put it."

"What kind of pointers?" Tony asks.

Fornell answers, "I think he said, "God, Probie, if you can't ask me for a blow job without blushin', how the hell are you gonna walk in there and ask Mama San for one while five girls are rubbin' all over you?"

The story stopped for a moment there while the boys laughed hysterically at that.
Gibbs waits for them to get calmed down, and says exactly the same thing he said to Mike, "Mike, I don't want a blow job from you. I'll do just fine with the girls."

Fornell got right back in there, playing Franks' part. "'You're still blushin', Probie. Trust me, you ain't got nothing they've never seen, and you don't want nothing they've never done. No Shame, man. That was Arment's number one rule. No shame. You need to walk in there tall and proud, and if you're doing this job right, you will be tall and proud, and tell them exactly what you want and exactly what kind of girl is going to do it for ya.'"

Once more the story stopped as Tim, Tony, and Jimmy laughed so hard they couldn't breathe.

Eventually, Tim got enough breath back to say, "You're right, Fornell, this is much better version of the story."

See, they appreciate the details.

Tobias nods, looking satisfied, and Ducky takes over. "So, after much coaching on how approach a lady of the night—"

"Or as Mike said, when he told us, 'God, Duck, what I wouldn't have given for you on this op. You'd have done it right without weeks of practice. Couldn't get Probie to stop blushin'."

Gibbs rolls his eyes.

And once again Ducky takes over on the story. "The night in question came. And the newly commissioned Colonel Gibbs was off to get rolled."

"Which I did just fine."

"Indeed. Franks told us that the first Lieutenant Colonel had come to in the alley behind the house, so he stationed himself there to wait. And wait. And wait. He was beginning to get nervous because this was taking much too long. The idea was go in, get drugged, get dropped in the alley, then back in again to bust them. But time is passing, and there's no unconscious Gibbs."

"Girl in the bathroom took a shine to me," Gibbs said with a smile.

"Uh huh," Fornell didn't look like he bought that. "Franks probably underestimated how long the preliminaries were going to take. For all his talk, he never had a thousand dollars to see what really happened in a high class Japanese brothel."

That's what you think, Tobias. Bored servicemen play a lot of poker, and I'm great at poker. There were some mighty fine girls in Japan, and they were worth every penny. Gibbs almost turns to Franks and tells him to be quiet, but he catches himself, Franks isn't really here.

Tim sees him almost turn to his left, like he's hearing something, and files that away with things to ask about later.

Fornell continues on, "For whatever reason, this was taking longer than Franks had anticipated. But he had no way to see what was going on. He can't just barge on in. But if Jethro had fumbled this, then he might be in trouble and in need of real backup. He was pacing up and down the alley, having made the decision that if Gibbs wasn't out there in five minutes he was going to break out the Texas Businessman and head on in."

Four of the longest minutes of my life, worryin' about your sorry ass. I'm thinking you're getting killed in there, and turns out you're playin' hide the sponge. Gibbs smiles.
"Okay, what's that smile for?" Tony asks.

"Like I said, bathgirl took a shine to me."

"That is part of the service you are paying for at that price. Trust me, Jethro, had you gotten past the refreshments, everyone there would have taken a shine to you."

"And you would know?" Jimmy asks Ducky.

"Jimmy, you have not yet even scratched the surface of all the things I know," Ducky says with a grin. "As Fornell said to Tony, someday you may get old enough to hear some of those stories. However, in America, at that price, you are paying for discretion in addition to excellent service. In Japan, where geisha tradition holds that this is part of any civilized business deal, you are paying for enthusiastic service catering to all of your needs and wants. The point of this is not just sex, but to be pampered, coddled, and taken care of on all levels. Food, music, excellent conversation, massage, relaxation, and… how did Mike put it?"

Fornell knows that Ducky hasn't forgotten the turn of phrase, but isn't willing to say it so, he adds Mike's description, "Gettin' your brains sucked out through your dick."

"Ah, yes… is all part of the experience."

"Mike really liked oral, didn't he?" Jimmy says.

 Damn straight, Skippy!

"Like you don't." Tim says, shoving Jimmy a little.

"Not saying I don't just… you know… if you're going to…" Jimmy seems to notice that it's not just him and Tim here so he wraps with, "This probably isn't the time or place."

Tim nods.

"So, eventually I do get out there, and the story stays pretty much the same from there to the end."

"Pretty much," Fornell says. "But the whole thing was about no shame, not just the last five minutes of it. When Franks was telling it, it wasn't just about a two minute pep talk, it was about actually learning how to do it."

Gibbs shook his head and sighed. "Yeah."

Fornell turns to Tony. "DiNozzo, you worked vice, I'm sure you've got a story or two."

Tony grins. "Oh, I do. I've got lots of stories. Some of them might have even made Franks blush."

Yeah, right. Ain't nothing you've ever even heard of that'll make me blush. Gibbs smiles at that, and is tempted to say, "Wanna bet?"

"But in that I am now extremely married, and also not an idiot, none of you are going to hear those stories."

"Come on, just us guys here," Fornell said.

"Abby reads lips, and she's been watching us, keeping up a running commentary for Breena and Ziva. No way I'm saying anything else."
Fornell looked like he wanted to swallow his tongue, and both Gibbs and Ducky look distinctly uncomfortable at that idea.

And less than ten seconds later Ziva was over, in his lap, and saying, "But what if I want to hear those stories?"

"Told you Abby was watching."

"She was. Sooo…"

"Then I will tell you them. When we're alone. But let's leave it at this, no one ever needed to coach me on how to pick up a woman."

Ziva kissed him on the nose and got up. "I'll leave you to your man stories."
Tim quietly eased the door shut behind him, and found Jimmy lurking in the upstairs hallway at Gibbs' house.

"Molly still asleep?"

"Oh, yeah. Two baby girls, right in the middle of his bed, snoozing away."

"Good. One of the neighbors started blasting off with something that was pretty loud. Wanted to check on her."

"Nothing. She didn't notice me singing, or the little chirp Kelly let off when I laid her down, or…" Tim fished out his phone and showed Jimmy a pic of their girls sleeping together.

Jimmy smiled, took Tim's phone, and sent himself a copy of that shot. "Good."

Tim sat down, back against the wall. Jimmy raised an eyebrow at him.

"Always hang around for five minutes or so. Make sure she's really asleep. Nothing worse than get her down, lay down yourself, close your eyes, and boom, she's crying again."

"Didn't take you too long to figure out how to skip that."

"Nope. Put her down, sit outside her room, count to three hundred, and then if she's really down, back to bed."

"That works." Jimmy sat down next to him. "I don't get it."

"Jimmy?"

"Paying a grand for sex."

"Not as enthusiastic about oral as Franks?" Tim asks Jimmy.

Jimmy's look indicates he's a very big fan of oral, so that's not exactly the issue here. "Just… you know… If you're gonna spend a grand you'd want something… exotic, right? Not the same thing you got last Tuesday."

"I get you." Tim thought for a moment. He can't think of anything he wants, exotic or not, that he'd pay a grand for. Hell, he can't think of anything, exotic or not, that he wants that he doesn't already have, or at least wouldn't have once Abby's all healed up again. "What would you pay a grand for?"

"I don't know. That's why I don't get it. I mean… Look, I've got great food, conversation, relaxation, and my brain sucked out through my dick at home. I really can't think of anything I want that I don't already have."

"Yeah." Tim nods. "Like the bachelor party and the lap dance thing. I've already got that."

"Exactly. Of course, Franks and Gibbs were single then. Might have made a thousand dollar blow job more appealing."

Tim shrugs. "Maybe. I mean. I've had the thousand dollar blow job. Hell, I've had the five thousand dollar blow job. And if there is such a thing as a ten thousand dollar blow job, I've had that, too. But,
you can't get that from a stranger. You just can't. Unless a woman really knows your body, and she
wouldn't if it was a once or twice thing, the sex isn't going to be that good. I mean, okay, she's a
professional, she does it a whole lot, so lots of experience, and let's say she's got tons of natural
talent, and okay, I've obviously never done it, but, let's say blow jobs really aren't that complicated,
and that the basic technique is more or less the same for every guy, and the real skill comes in
knowing how to apply that technique, but even with all that she doesn't know me inside and out, and
hell, add a condom on top of that, so it just can't be that good."

"Maybe." That seemed like a good point. Breena can play him like Mozart with a piano. A stranger,
not so much. Jimmy laces his hands in front of him, and looks at his watch. It's a decent Timex.
Looks good, tells time, does everything he needs it to do. It cost about seventy dollars. "Maybe it's
like the shiny, gold watch. It's not that it tells time that much better, it's showing off that you can
afford to buy it."

"Could be. And if usually you'd do that with buddies or business associates, you're showing off how
much money you'll drop on them for their comfort."

"Makes a bit more sense. I'll blow five grand making you happy; you'll sign the fifty million dollar
contract; everyone wins."

"I guess." Tim's not feeling particularly convinced by that, but he's also not the guy who's ever
signed the fifty million dollar contract, and it wasn't like he needed any real persuading to sign the
seven hundred and fifty thousand dollar one for the last three Gemcity books.

"So, you've never..." Jimmy asked.

Tim shook his head. "No. You?"

"Spring break, freshman year of college, the Choir went on tour in Europe, and we spent two days in
Amsterdam. I was still partying pretty hard back then, and stoned off my ass and laid sounded like a
great Friday night."

"And?" Tim's curious about this. Not like he's never thought about it. He's been awfully lonely and
horny in the past, but he's also a cop, and never lived anywhere it was legal.

"And it was."

Tim's silently saying, okay, tell me more.

Jimmy shrugs. "More fun than jerking off, but, honestly, not that much better. Not worth possibly
getting busted for. Got back here, and never tried again. And at least when you do yourself, no one
expects you to get up and leave right after. And, okay, just, remember, I was eighteen, so it's not like
I was in danger of setting any endurance records, so that was probably the fastest hundred dollars I
ever spent."

Tim smirks, laughing quietly. "Well, if you get paid per customer, instead of by the night, you're
probably trying to get it done fast."

"Could be."

"Like you had a thousand dollars to blow back then, but if you had..."

Jimmy thinks about it. "Probably still not worth a grand. Too lonely for a grand."

"Yeah. Maybe it's because I'm not so hard up I'm climbing the walls, but, sex with a stranger, even a
beautiful one who knows every trick there is... seems kind of beside the point."

Jimmy nods, acknowledging that. "So, really, you never..."

"No." Tim shrugs. He doesn't want it to sound like he's standing on some high moral ground here. Sure, teasing Fornell with it was fun, but that's not why he's never done it. "But, I also never lived anywhere it was legal."

"Never been to Europe?"

"Only on work. Got stuck in Germany overnight with Tony," Tim rolled his eyes. "Sure as hell wasn't even suggesting it. Germany again, with Gibbs, and just... no. Mexico, where I managed to poison myself. Mexico a second time, where I was supposed to be looking out for Abby and managed to poison myself, again. Canada I was on my own, sort of."

"Sort of?"

"Not all of the Mounties are male."

"Ah." That got a smile out of Jimmy.

"By the time I got to Nevada, Abby was with me, and we did blow over a grand a night, but together."

"Do anything interesting?"

"Yeah, but not like that. Penn and Teller, Cirque du Soleil. Went dancing. Played the tables. That was fun. I mean," it feels a little weird to say this, but, "we've got the kind of money where we can blow a grand or two a night on fun. Can't do it a lot, but every once and a while, sure. And it was a lot of fun."

Jimmy nods at that. They don't have the kind of money Tim and Abby do, but the occasional lavish night out isn't out of the question.

"So, you're in Vegas and all you did was shows on the Strip?"

"Only there for two nights. We did Cirque the first night and had a date with Penn and Teller the second night."

"Nothing risqué?"

"Cirque was risqué, lot of fun for a date night, but we didn't do anything like a strip club or show girls. You know, I've never actually been to a strip club, except for work."

"It's overrated. I don't know about you, but my idea of a good time isn't looking at naked girls with a whole bunch of drunk guys. I like looking at naked girls just fine, but I don't need a dozen or more other guys with me when I do it."

"Yeah."

"And if it's spend a few hundred dollars on a woman I don't know or on Breena, Breena wins."

"Yep."

"And if you aren't willing to spend that kind of money, you feel like a jerk, because they're dancing for tips. So, I can come home with a present that makes her day, or go spend it on some lackluster
sex where I don't even get to get off. I just don't get why anyone would pick the sex."

"Not everyone has great sex at home."

"I guess. But..." Jimmy squints a little, looking at the wall across from them. "You think that's it?"

"For some guys, sure. Why?"

"I don't get Tony sometimes."

"Join the club."

"Ziva's beautiful. She's smoking hot. I cannot imagine anything involving her is lackluster, and he still tried to take us to a strip club for your bachelor party, when he was engaged to her."

Tim nods.

"And it's not like he just met us, so he had to know neither of us are strip club type guys."

Tim nods at that, too.

"So, was he looking for an excuse to go himself, or was he just going through the motions? This is what a bachelor party looks like, so this is what we're going to do."

Tim shakes his head. "I don't know."

"If she's really not pregnant, I don't get him flipping out on Draga, either."

"She's not. She actually drank the beer she was holding. Two of them."

"You think they're okay?"

"Yeah." Tim thinks about that. He hasn't been paying much attention to anything outside his immediate family right now. "I mean, have you seen anything else?"

"No. Just that."

Tim leans his head against the wall behind him. "They're okay. Maybe starting to feel their way through that space where you realize you're together forever, but there's still a whole lot of attractive people out there."

Jimmy smiled at that. "And you're going to look, and you're going to think about it, but you're not going to do anything about it because you love your wife, and she trusts you, and you're not an asshole."

"Something like that. I know it's something he's nervous about."

Jimmy looks curious.

"Back when they were first dating. He was worried about looking. 'Cause, he's more or less doing it all the time. And maybe it's because looking always used to lead to touching for him. Or maybe he just hasn't gotten to the point where he really gets that Ziva loves him, and that's not going to stop being true, and sure, she might like the view on another guy, but that he's still her world."

He thinks about that for a second and says, "Oh."

"Oh?"
"His mom died. Wendy… he's never said, but I think she left him. Jeanne left."

"Any sane woman in Jeanne's position would have left."

"Not saying you're wrong, but, I'm getting to a point here."

"Okay."

"For months he thought Ziva was dead. EJ just vanished one day. Maybe it's not insane that he can't rest as easy in the idea that she'll be around forever as you and I do with Abby and Breena."

"Good point. I've been broken up with, but, no one ever just vanished on me."

"Yeah. I've been dumped my fair share, and honestly, a few other people's fair shares as well, but, I've only had two serious relationships, and I ended the other one."

"You broke it off with…?"

"Helen. Grad school girlfriend. She didn't want me in law enforcement. Wanted me to be a full time writer. Or if I had to have a day job, the IRS was a good compromise. I wanted to carry a gun and put bad guys away. I wanted it more than her. So I signed with NCIS and headed to FLETC, and she dumped me when I told her I'd taken that offer. Which was exactly what I expected her to do."

"Okay. But, I get your point, a history like that means it's easier not to get worried when our girls look."

"Yeah, at least, I'm assuming that's why you and I weren't flipping out."

"Yep. This time last year, you would have flipped out."

Tim thinks about that. It's not entirely unlikely. Definitely would have been true two years ago. "How long ago for you?"

"Three years? Breena can look at Draga, Abby can too, not an issue. Now, if he had asked to see them…"

"Yeah, that would have provoked major flipping out." Tim checked his watch, ready to get up, but Jimmy stopped him with a question.

"Could you have gone undercover like he did?"

"Huh?" He hadn't followed Jimmy's leap to that question and isn't sure what he's asking.

"The thing with Jeanne."

Oh. "You mean, play Thom, get close to a girl, try to make her fall in love with me, and use her to get close to her dad?"

"Yeah."

Tim thinks about that, and decides there are two parts to that question. "Like play the role, or use the girl?"

"Use the girl. I already know you'd muffed the role a day or two in."

Tim sent Jimmy a quick glare. Not really angry. He would have muffed it.
"Just, you know… She was a doctor. Nice girl from everything I heard. She didn't break any laws. She never hurt anyone. Not like she was running guns for her dad. Just, seems like a real asshole thing to do. I mean, we're supposed to be the good guys, right?"

Tim shrugs. He'd never thought about it like that. "What's got you thinking about that?"

"Just dad stuff, probably. All the guys out there that one day Molly and Kelly, and this new one…"

"Thinking she's a girl."

"Yeah, leaning that way. Get to find out for sure in the beginning of September."

"Anna, right?"

"Yeah, if she's really a girl. Hadn't thought about Jeanne in probably nine years, but you mentioned her, and… I don't get that either. I don't get how you pretend to be someone else and worm your way into someone else's heart. I guess, that's not you paying for sex, that's you being the hooker. But it's not, because if you're a hooker you don't expect the John to fall in love with you. You aren't trying to gain his trust and affection, just get him off."

"Are we still talking about Tony and Jeanne or are we talking about Lee and you?"

Jimmy shrugs. "At least Lee was trying to protect her family. Someone takes Molly, and… I don't know what I'd do… Anything, probably, and God help the poor son of a bitch who gets in my way. So, yeah, for Lee, I was the poor son of a bitch. Wasn't fun, but I get it. But Tony was… what? Advancing his career?"

"Trying to put an awfully bad guy away."

"How? You saying we couldn't have put Jeanne under surveillance and just grabbed her father when he stuck his head out to go visit her?"

"I think he was supposed to get evidence on him. We knew who he was and where he was. Grabbing him wasn't the problem."

"Then that's worse. That means the plan was to get Jeanne so into him that she'd take him home to meet her dad. This wasn't just get close; it was make her fall in love. Make her want the ring and the home and the kids and… And if her dad was that careful, then he wasn't going to just leave things lying around for Tony to find. This was build trust, become part of the family, and then, what? Marry in? Be useful? Hope daddy offers you a job? Three years and a kid later leave with the information they needed to nail this guy?"

"I don't know."

"So, could you have?"

"No. Especially, not after you put it like that. That's not something you do to a person. But a target, for someone who's selling guns all over the place and killed my dad—"

"Killed my dad?"

"That's why Director Sheppard wanted him so bad."

"That's even worse. I'm a damaged daughter, so I'll do it back to your kid? And Tony went along with that?"
"I don't think he knew that. I hope. I think he had a target in mind, and she was beautiful, and fun, and charming. He spent time with her and she became a person, he fell in love with her, and didn't know how to get himself or her out of it."

Jimmy shook his head. "That's grim." Then looked at his watch. Ten minutes. "I'm guessing she's really down."

"Yeah."

"Let's get back to the party."

"Sounds good."

They were heading down the stairs when Tim asked Jimmy, "Did Gibbs look distracted to you?"

"When?"

"During the story."

"Not that I noticed."

"Okay."
Ghosts That We Knew

So, he knows Gibbs mentioned it once, and it's not something Tim thinks about much, because, well, thinking about it too much leads to other somewhat uncomfortable thoughts, but it's twice now in the last few weeks that he's noticed Gibbs looking at/hearing something.

Like he was sure Gibbs was looking over his shoulder that one day in the kitchen with Kelly, but, he knows the layout of his kitchen, and there shouldn't have been anything back there worth looking at, not that intensely.

So, as the party was winding down, and Kelly was getting her last feed in before they go home, he found Gibbs in the kitchen starting to clean up.

He stands next to Gibbs, and helps him load plates into the dishwasher, not sure if he's going to say anything, but he's feeling pretty curious right now, too.

"Out with it, Tim." It was awfully clear to Gibbs that Tim was very much not asking something.

"Wondering about something."

"Yeah."

He quickly scans the room, but it's just the two of them. "You really see ghosts?"

Gibbs looks up at him, pretty startled for a second, and then relaxes as he remembers that he has already mentioned this to Tim. "Yeah."

"Hear 'em, too?"

Gibbs smiles a little. "Sometimes."

"Uh huh… So…" Tim doesn't finish that sentence, hoping Gibbs'll just volunteer the information.

"So? Gotta ask if you want to know."

"How many of us were there for the No Shame story?"

"I'd say seven."

Tim quickly counts in his head and comes up with six. "Uh huh." He nods at that, remembering how Gibbs almost turned twice. "Someone sitting behind you, to the left."

"Felt that way to me."

"Okay." He's not entirely sure what to do with that, other than be glad that he wasn't imagining Gibbs seeming distracted.

"Think I'm losing it?"

Tim slowly shakes his head. "Not touching that."

Gibbs smiles at him, looking very amused by that answer. "So, why are you asking?"

" Noticed a few times you were looking like someone else was talking to you."
"Yep."

"You really think it's a ghost?"

He can see Mike behind Tim, leaning against his kitchen counter, enjoying this. **Well, Probie, am I a ghost?**

Gibbs laughs a little, looking down, shaking his head. Trust Mike to ask. So, he's answering Mike as much as he's answering Tim. "It's as good a word as any. Maybe I just know the story well enough, I can hear his voice. Maybe I just miss my friend. Maybe it doesn't matter."

"Maybe."

And maybe it doesn't matter, but he can see Mike standing in his kitchen, sipping a beer, and Tim's asking him about it so… "Can you feel him, at all?" Gibbs asks. Might be good to at least get a clue if this is entirely in his head.

"No." Tim shakes his head. "I never was that guy. If he's here, Abby might feel it, but not me. I just noticed you noticing him. Just like I can see you keep looking behind my shoulder."

Franks smiles at that. **He's onto ya.**

"But you've got to remember. I also can't tell if someone is lying just by looking at them. I'm better at it than I used to be, but I still don't have your gut. You always seem to know more about what's going on than anyone else around you, and you never have let slip how you do it."

"Good point."

"So…"

Gibbs tilts his head a little, shrugs a little, might as well let it go. "Better hearing than anyone knows. Until a few years ago, great distance vision. I can read lips. With the perps, it's split between reading their faces and a gut feeling. And it always has been. When I was active duty, I usually knew when we were walking into a trap. Was good with that little tickle on the back of the neck screaming danger. Doesn't always fire. Didn't notice the thing with the freezer until we were in the middle of it, but I've always been able to feel when I'm in the crosshairs."

"Ziva can do that, too. Maybe you should ask her if she's got a sense of him."

"Nah. I don't need to know."

"You don't want to tell her about it?"

Gibbs shrugs, that's part of it. Not that it's personal to Ziva, just that this doesn't need to go wide. It already feels weird that someone else knows this, and honestly, kind of nice that Tim's not looking at him like he's completely insane.

He shuts the dishwasher and takes a drink from his beer, mostly just feeling the quiet, Tim's standing there waiting for him to say something, and Mike's in the background looking like this is the funniest thing he's ever seen.

"The day he died, he told me about how we make ghosts. Not just with our guns, but… He looked at me and said, 'You do hear ghosts, Probie.' And he was right, probably heard them himself. ' Mike nods at that. "He was talking about how we fill our lives and spaces with memories, ghosts. How the longer we stay in a place, the more we fill it." Gibbs smiles at this memory, Franks winks at him.
"He said, 'That's why I've always tried to make sure, that where ever I live, the longer I live there, the spaces become filled with memories… of naked women.'"

Tim laughed at that. "Sounds like Franks."

*God, Probie, you've filled this place with me? That's just depressing.*

"I'd told him how I see them, and he walked out of the basement and died in front of my house. We buried him in the box I built for him. I've got his old files, gun, flask, and badge. And he pops up every now and again, been doing it since the day he died." Gibbs takes another drink. "I've never been sure what Mike is. He always played fast and loose with the rules, so, if anyone could do it…"

Franks smiles. Tim nods. "If anyone could… Does it worry you? Not being sure?"

"No."

"Then it doesn't matter. Do you mind if I mention this to Abby?"

Gibbs shook his head. No it doesn't bother him, but it also doesn't seem like something Tim would just bring up. "Why would you?"

Tim smiles a little at that, shakes his head a little, takes a sip of his own drink. (Iced tea. Time to head home soon.) "Haven't believed in anything like that for a long, long time. But if you've got a sense of him, and she does, that'd be… interesting. Not enough to turn me into a believer, but… it'd be interesting."

"What would be interesting?" Abby asked, sleepy Kelly resting on her shoulder.

Gibbs eyes flicked past Tim again, before settling on Abby, and he's got the sense Gibbs is still seeing Franks, so might as well see how it goes… "Who's in this room?"

She stares at Tim like he's insane then looks around at them. "You mean, besides you, me, Gibbs, and Kelly?"

"Yeah."

"Franks is behind you and to the left. He's smiling, looking pretty shocked that I just said that."

Mike did look pretty damn shocked by that. *Your girl's good, Probie, I'll give you that. I didn't think she could do that!*

Tim and Gibbs are looking awfully shocked at that, too. She smiled big and kissed both of them, then said, "Come on, we've got to get her home."

Tim and Gibbs just stood there, staring at her, eyes very wide, jaws dropped to the floor.

Abby smiles big and warm and starts to laugh. "Okay, I can't actually see him, and I've been listening in for the last minute, so I knew what you were talking about, but even with that, I do keep feeling like he's here tonight." She snuggled into Gibbs. "And maybe it's the fact that you keep looking over there, but, yeah, I've got a very clear idea of him leaning against the counter, he's got all his fingers again," And Gibbs notices that he does. "but it's not like I'm seeing with my eyes. And I did feel like he was with us for a few days after he died. He was following you around, right?"

"Yeah."

"So, either he's here, or you're thinking about him so hard that I get the sense of it off of you. Doesn't
matter how it happens. Seems like you find having him around comforting, and that's all that matters."

Gibbs takes a deep breath, nods, and kisses Abby's forehead. Then he very gently takes Kelly from her. "I'll get her in her car seat." Which both Tim and Abby understood meant that he was going to get some baby snuggles in on the way to getting her strapped in and ready to go.

Tim's still just staring at her. So she walked up and pressed against him. "You okay?"

He shook his head, then nodded, and finally said, "Sure. Why not?"

She smiled and kissed him. "Meet at the car?"

"Let me get the stuff from the porch." He stepped out of the kitchen to the back porch, and said, very quietly, "Goodnight, Mike."

They were on the way home when he asked, "Have you ever seen a ghost?"

"Sure."

"Like, with your eyes?"

"Yeah." She nods at that. "Feel them mostly, but I've seen them, too."

"Gibbs told me he does. Sees them, hears them."

"And Mike showed up to help with the storytelling tonight and stuck around?"

"I guess. Gibbs was showing Kelly off to everyone who hadn't met her yet. Franks would be on that list, right?"

"Yeah, he would."

"So, what's it feel like?"

"Phew," she smiled, shaking her head. "Ask me an easy one next time, okay?"

"I'll try."

She thinks for a while as he passes a slow Taurus.

"Okay. There was a way I used to feel when I was with my mom or my dad. Happy, content, love, all of that, but it was still… different… distinct for each of them."

"Okay."

"And, especially since Kelly's been born, I've been feeling that a lot. My mom mostly. Late at night, when I'm nursing, and it's all dark and gray and blue, and there's just that feeling of her nearby. And sometimes I feel like I can smell her. That hint of her soap and shampoo."

"Oh." He drives for another mile, not saying anything.

"What are you thinking?"

"Not much of anything." Which is true. Long day, lots of… stuff. He's just absorbing it. "Just,
knowing it."

"Ah."

"Who did you see?"

"My dad. The day after we buried them I was sitting downstairs in our house, supposed to be packing up, because we had to go, and… and I wasn't. I was sitting on the sofa, staring at the stereo, thinking about how when he'd have it on, the subwoofer would vibrate so hard you could see it. Like really," she waves her hand back and forth, "thumping away. And he came in and sat next to me, told me I needed to get packing, and this was hard for everyone, and me laying around wasn't going to make it any easier. So I got up, put one plate in a box, and he smiled, kissed my forehead, and said it was going to be okay. That as long as I kept moving forward it'd be okay."

"Wow."

"Yeah. Saw Kate after she died. But I told you about that."

"No." He's fairly sure he'd remember something like, 'I just saw Kate.'

"You were in the lab, looking distracted, and I said to you that I felt like Kate was there. I'd been seeing her in the lab all day."

That startled him enough he jerked the steering wheel a bit, and quickly corrected.

"What?" Abby's looking at him concerned.

"I never realized that's what you meant by that. I thought…” But he doesn't finish that sentence.

"You thought…"

"I just… I thought I was imagining it."

"What? Were you seeing her, too?"

"Yeah, and it was… it was just horribly inappropriate."

"What did you see?"

He sighs. "It was so bad."

"Bad as Tony ogling her in a catholic school girl uniform?"

"What?" Yeah, that sounded like Tony, but just… she'd just died. Of course, compared to what he was seeing… "He told you that?"

"No, she did."

That's got him a little worried. "She didn't say anything about me, did she?"

"No. So what did you see?"

He shook his head. "Just her. In the lab. And… No. I had to be imagining it, because there's no way she would have dressed up like Trinity from the Matrix, let alone…"

"Let alone…"
"Nope. That one's private."

Abby looks pretty interested in that, but doesn't press. "She was wearing a long black dress, with long white hair when I saw her."

"So, she didn't look like herself?"

"No. Well, yes. Just not dressed like her."

"Oh."

"So, Trinity?"

"My superhero. All cool and sleek and dangerous."

She smiled at that. Kate would have liked to be the hero. "I like that."

"I wonder if Gibbs did."

"Go to Bootcamp tomorrow and ask him."

"Maybe. See how tired I am." It was getting onto midnight. They'll get home, he'd be able to sleep 'til four (because it was his night for the four AM feed) and from then to ten maybe.

"If you're not too beat, I'd like to go to church."

They hadn't been for a month, so, why not?

"Sure. See how we're feeling."

"Okay."
Bad Day/Bad Month

Tony is not having a good day.

Okay, honestly, he hasn't been having a good month. Three weeks technically. Since Draga showed up, and McGee left. But today should have been a good day. It should have been a great day. Long weekend, not on call, cook out at Gibbs', should have been great.

Last night had been great. Okay, didn't start great, he's been trying to figure this whole Draga thing out, and it's stressful, so he's been stressed by it. They'd been talking about where Draga'd be in the family, how much access he'd get, and talking about it was making him tense, because Draga's not family, and he's already overstepping his lines, but they don't want to shut him out, but bringing him in even closer isn't going to help teach him what the lines are.

First time he's been Boss in almost a decade and it's already going badly.

And he's not sure how to fix it.

So, yeah, stressed. For three weeks.

But after everyone went home, Ziva'd offered to help him relax, and that was excellent. He was awfully relaxed by the time they'd finished with that. He was so relaxed he couldn't have named his problems, let alone worry about them.

So, sleeping the sleep of the very relaxed and extremely satisfied.

And then it's morning. The morning of what should have been a fine and bright day, and fine and bright days tend to start a certain way, but…

But then the thing happens.

Or more precisely it doesn't happen.

And it's never not happened before.

Ever.

And okay, yeah, it's been less than twelve hours since the time before. And yeah, he's forty-eight. And he has been stressed. But, that's never happened before. That's something that happens to other guys. Old guys. Usually, he's awfully reliable in the morning, (cause, sure, that's never happened before, but he has noticed that things are slower than they used to be) and, God, making it worse, she'd taken care of him, and he was planning on returning the favor with great vigor and enthusiasm, and he did, but part of returning the favor didn't happen, and she had to notice, even if she didn't say anything.

So, he isn't exactly dancing about with a spring in his step and joy in his heart that morning.

But, okay, it happens. Eventually. To every guy. At least that's what they say. So get over it. Party to go to. Delicious food to eat. Fun to be had. Maybe by the end of the night Little DiNozzo will be showing signs of life again, and all will be well with the world.

And they get to Gibbs place, and it's going pretty smooth. They're having fun. Tossing around the Frisbee, showing off the fireworks he'd gotten for later, (As residents of Maryland, they can get legal
fireworks, and as cops they had no problem getting them back across the state line to where Gibbs lives in Virginia.) just happily chilling out with his family on the Fourth.

Great.

Leon and his family shows up, and okay, that makes things a little less relaxed, but still good. He might be the Boss but that gets put on the back burner at parties. At least, Leon's always been good about not making everyone toe the line when he's a guest at Gibbs' place. But Tony's not perfectly comfortable with his full goofing-off self when Vance is around. He can't fully relax and be fun and silly the way he likes to be.

But Jared heads over, and he's just shooting up. Kid's got to be fourteen now and at least six feet tall, and even better, he's a rabid basketball fan and player. He has a Wizards t-shirt on, so they get talking. Jared's looking at trying to play for college (has Duke in mind) so Tony is happy to talk about that. After all, if there's anything he knows a whole lot about, it's a good long college ball career.

Senior and Delphine show up a few minutes later, so he spends some time chatting with his dad. That goes well. Though he's confused as to why Senior's in DC right now, chasing some vague business deal, something to do with contracts for the ACA, but usually his dad handles real-estate-type deals, and he's got no idea how that would work into the ACA.

Though maybe he's just looking for an excuse to get together.

Jimmy and Breena and Molly are there a few minutes later, and schmoozing the girls always makes Senior happy, and Molly certainly seems to enjoy the attention, so that works out. (Until Ducky and Penny get there about ten minutes later, and Molly decides she wants her Duck, toddling off to him as fast as her little legs could get her there, shrieking 'Duck-eee!')

Then Draga gets there. And Flyboy's just been looking for an excuse to show off. What sort of single guy brings a cake to a pot luck? A homemade cake. A nicely decorated homemade cake. Single guys bring drinks, chips, and maybe, if they're feeling really frisky pre-made vegetable trays to pot lucks. They do not stand in a circle of the ladies explaining how they like to bake and swapping recipes.

They sure as hell don't do it looking like… like one of the extras from Top Gun, one of the extras about to shoot the volleyball scene.

Fornell's standing next to him, shaking his head, elbows Gibbs and says, "Where do you keep finding these guys? Palmer was a bridesmaid, McGee'll show up in a skirt, and this one bakes?"

"Test pilot for the Navy, Tobias. Flew experimental planes at six times the speed of sound. Off an aircraft carrier. At night."

"I swear they started putting something in the water in 1975 and men haven't been the same since." Fornell shakes his head, and Tony sighs, nodding, exactly on the same page with him. "How's he working out?"

Tony's about to answer that, but Gibbs shakes his head a little and says, "He's settling in."

Tobias catches that shake and looks between the two of them curiously.

So, instead of blowing off some steam Tony just nods and says, "He'll do."

Fornell looks at the two of them, catches something else in Gibbs' look and decides he needs to go check on Emily and see what she and Wendy are up to.
"Not outside the family, Tony," Gibbs says quietly. "Fornell'll likely work with him a time or two before he retires. Don't poison the well."

"Fine." He picks the Frisbee back up. "Toss it around?"

"Gotta get the meat on. Grill's hot enough for it. Bet Jimmy and Jared'd be up for it."

And they are, and that is fun. Tossing around the Frisbee with the guys, while the girls lay around on the porch, chatting with each other, occasionally making appreciative comments or whistling when he or Jimmy made a good catch, that's always good.

The backyard is filling with the scent of very yummy grilled things.

All is well.

Then Draga gets free of Penny. (Who knows what they were talking about, but he, Penny, and Ducky seemed to be having a lovely chat.) And he came over to join the toss. Kayla wings the Fribsee right at him, and he is in the game, laughing with them.

It's not even that Draga's a bad guy or anything. No, he's too damn smart to be a bad guy. He never does anything over the line. He's always helpful. Shows up early. Stays late. Kind of like McGee back in the day. But unlike McGee, he doesn't know his place and won't stay in it.

Speaking of McGee, he shows up, and…

And Draga's not stupid. He's been looking for a chance to show off for Ziva for weeks now, and McGullible fell for it. Like anyone besides Abby gives a shit about his tattoos? No, Flyboy just wants a chance to show his own skin off.

And Ziva twists the knife deeper, staring at him, eyes dragging all over his skin, just about oohing at him, and Tony just wants to smack the living shit out of Draga.

Warrior culture, woad, (what the hell is woad?) tribal marks, sacred honor of trust among warriors, blending the power of sea and sky and the eagle into his skin. Bullshit. Ziva's lapping it up, but he knows it's crap. Draga's just laying it on with a trowel trying to impress her. Probably told that line to a million girls in every port the Navy's ever landed at.

And it's working. She's impressed. He knows what Ziva looks like when she's watching a guy she likes, and she's liking what she sees.

Then, to make matters even worse an hour later the wonder twins are laughing at him over it, saying he's flipping out because Draga's younger and hotter and fuck, okay, that's not wrong, but it's not right, either. He's worked with younger, hotter guys, that's not a problem, no it's the fact that Draga's trying to fuck his wife, that's the problem. But they're just chuckling away 'cause he's not hitting on their wives, so it's all a fucking laugh riot to them.

And Gibbs, who is supposed to understand this, who's supposed to be in his corner, just lays down even more crap, and it is not his fault that Gibbs didn't once mention his wife was named Stephanie, and look, you start dating a new woman while you're still married to the old one, and you're dumb enough to get caught doing it, she is going to get pissed, and she is going to do something about it, and if that means picking up your new hire in front of you, well… you fucking deserve it, asshole.

The No Shame story helps, and he thinks Gibbs knew it would, that's why he told it. And being the only guy to notice Abby is listening in is good, so he starts to perk up. Ziva on his lap being all warm and soft is nice. And maybe there are a few stories he wouldn't mind telling her later that night.
So that's good.

Firecrackers, sparklers, dessert, (And damn it, yes, Flyboy's cake is good. It's really good. It's some sort of white chocolate, pistachio, raspberry mousse thing, and it's delicious, and yes, he had seconds, or he was going to until he remembered Palmer's comment about losing some weight, and damn it if he isn't getting soft around the middle. So he gives Ziva the piece of cake, making it look like he'd grabbed it for her.) and more stories are good. He is starting to feel pretty relaxed and mellow again.

He is relaxing on one of the wooden porch chairs, Ziva on his lap, beer in hand, watching the kids blow stuff up, all is good. Vance and Gibbs get talking about past military adventures. Then Draga adds a few of his own. Ziva starts to talk about her time in the IDF. Fornell has stories from his time in the Army during Viet Nam. Ducky's talking about his time in the Medical Corp. Even his dad has a few stories about Korea, which got him and Ducky talking about it, because they'd both been there.

So, he's on the porch, the only adult (well, male adult, somehow, the wonder twins have vanished) with no military stories to tell. Then Delphine gets into it, with stories of how she used to help sneak people out of the USSR. (Of course she did.) And Penny used to design cutting edge weapons for the military while being married to an Admiral, and when Draga got talking about night landings on aircraft carriers, she asks about it, and turns out Admiral McGee (Nelson, not John) actually was one of the guys who designed the damn things in the first place (and she was the person he showed the designs to first, get a second set of eyes to look and see if it was worth sending up the line), and Senior had been in the Air Force during Korea, so they're all talking daring do with planes and battles and crap, then Gibbs starts adding in some of his Dad's stories, and he's sitting there like Breena and Abby with nothing to say because, something like, 'This one time, I was in Afghanistan, and I was close enough I could hear the battle' just doesn't cut it.

He's a cop. He's saved lives. He's been in gun battles. He should not be feeling inadequate because he hasn't gone off to war.

But he is.

And maybe it's not just about not having served. It's that he's the only one. (Even though he's not. Where the hell are McGee and Palmer?)

And it's that Ziva's sitting in his lap, idly stroking his shoulder, staring at Draga, looking at him with respect. And fuck. That's worse than lust.

Because that's the kind of respect that took him years to earn from her.

The kind of respect he had to go to Somalia to get.

Wrap the party up with the wonder twins finally coming back, and finally he's not the only guy in the group who didn't enlist. But, that's a badge of pride for McGee. So he's not bothered about not having anything to add to story time. He's happy as a clam to sit there with Abby, snuggling her, keeping an eye on the baby monitor. Laughing at the funny stories, and acting impressed at the dangerous ones, asking good questions to keep the stories going.

And Jimmy makes a few sharp remarks in his direction, and glares twice, but wouldn't say what's up when he gets him alone. "Nothing you can do anything about." What the hell does that mean? And if he can't do anything about it, why is Jimmy glaring at him? He was fine before they vanished, and now he's pissed. What, do those two talk about him behind his back?

An hour later, he gets McGee on his own, and asks what the hell is wrong with Palmer, and he says, "Jeanne."
Tony couldn't believe he heard that right. "Jeanne? Benoit?"

"Yeah."

"What?" Of all the myriad things that could be wrong with Jimmy, a decade old case he hadn't even been part of is ridiculous.

"Long story."

"Why are you telling stories about Jeanne?"

McGee shrugs a little, which is completely useless. "That's a long story, too."

"Well, why would he be glaring at me about that? It's been a decade."

Tim's staring at him like he's a moron for not putting it together, but he's not seeing it, at all. And then he did. Jimmy was Jeanne. "Fuck." Someone played Jimmy, tried to get him to love her so she could get access to what she needed. He figured out something was off and broke it off, but it still had to hurt like a son of a bitch when he learned what was up.

"He say anything to you?" McGee asks.

"Just that I couldn't do anything about it."

"Well, you can't." Yeah, that's useful McHelpful.

"It's not like her dad was selling candy. He was a bad guy."

"I mentioned that. Jimmy mentioned there were ways to get him that didn't involve screwing his daughter, literally and metaphorically."

"Fine."

"Talk to him about it. Not tonight, it's getting late, but, eventually."

"Great." Jeanne might not be his least favorite topic, but she's up there. Every cop who's been in it for more than a year has a case he regrets. One that was screwed from top to bottom and makes it hard to look in the mirror.

Jeanne was that case for him.

So, yeah, he is not in anything even remotely approaching a good mood when the party wraps.

And picking the fight with Ziva is stupid, and he knows it while he's doing it, but she's talking about Draga, smiling about something he'd said, talking about how nice he'd been, and he just flips out and starts ranting about it.

"Nice? You think he's being nice. Here's a hint, Ziva, this is what he's actually saying to you: Look at how young and hot and dangerous I am. Look at my tattoo, Ziva! It's huge and blue and commemorates how I used to fly experimental planes for the Navy and kill people in interesting ways, just like you did. Oh, you like motorcycles, I like motorcycles. Fast cars, I love fast cars, did you know I used to drag race? What, you don't know what drag racing is? Oh honey, let me tell you this complicated story about me driving in the streets at 150 miles an hour with nitrous oxide boosted car I built myself. You love driving fast? One day I'll have to show you my really fast car. You can drive it, too! Then we'll have sex, maybe while driving it! Check out my muscles, and the muscles on top of those muscles, and here, let's talk some more about how I've got the biggest dick you've ever
imagined seeing, and I can't wait to show it to you. Bet your hubby's looking awfully limp and soft and boring and old compared to me, right? God, he's so dumb, he's just letting me do this. I don't think he's even noticed. So, wanna hear more about how awesome I am? My shirt's already off, let me get my pants too, look at how cut I am! And maybe after that, you'll suck me."

"Are you done?" she asks, eyebrow high.

"Not really."

Ziva just looks at him, shakes her head, and then shuts the door to their bedroom behind her, very clearly signaling that whatever the hell game he's playing, she isn't interested.

So, he gets back in the car and drives around, eventually finding himself at Gibbs' place, and sure, Gibbs isn't exactly his favorite person right this second, but he'll be awake and he won't ask questions, so, he parks and in he goes.

He'd actually gotten two steps down into the basement before it hit him the lights are off, which means, for the first time ever, he'd managed to show up when Gibbs is actually sleeping.

Since when does Gibbs sleep? Gibbs doesn't sleep. Gibbs lives on coffee, bourbon, and cases.

Except he doesn't now, because he's changed.

Because everything is changing.

And really, when it comes down to it, that's the problem.

Tony doesn't like change. Granted that can be pretty hard to tell since most of the time he's standing next to McSameThingHappensEveryDay and Leroy Jethro Wouldn't-Know-A-Change-If-It-Walked-Up-And-Bit-Him-In-The-Ass-And-Took-His-Leg-Clean-Off Gibbs. Compared to them he's an exciting cauldron of happily bubbling opportunities and change.

You know, in that he hasn't had the same breakfast order for the last ten years. (Okay, two, technically, for McDiet. He's switched twice and is back on his skinny breakfast.) But still, not like he's been getting the same meal at the same diner at the same time on the same day every day since God spoke and diners were invented.

He wanders over to Gibbs' sofa and lies down.

Nine years, ten in September, since he turned down Rota, hoping for his own team, but it had to be HIS team. Not some random collection of strangers.

And he's here again, but it's not HIS team.

He knows Gibbs will have to go for him to move up. That's just the way it works. Can't be the leader if the old leader's still there.

But Tim isn't supposed to go. And Abby isn't supposed to just vanish. And sure, there would have to be a new guy, but the new guy wasn't supposed to give him any crap. The new guy was supposed to do his job and realize that he was the Boss, damn it!

"Can't give me better people." He'd said that to Borin, and he meant it. But his people are leaving.

Because everything changes.
Okay, it's stupid to expect Tim to be his right hand man forever. He got eleven years. That's a hell of a lot longer than most partners last.

But it's not stupid to expect some sympathy about this. It's not stupid to be annoyed at him and Jimmy cackling away, completely missing what's going on, because neither of them are part of the day in day out of this right now.

Sure, they're going to be doing something like this, sooner or later. Tim's already moving in, silently killing Jenner without Jenner having a clue. (It never occurred to Tony that Tim might actually have political instincts. Their team, because Gibbs is in charge, has always tried to avoid the politics. Can't avoid it entirely, but they try to stay out of it. But in one move he watched McGee cut Jenner off at the knees, and Jenner still doesn't know his feet are no longer attached.)

Ducky and Penny sound like they're making the kinds of plans that require more off time than you get at NCIS or American, so, yeah, Palmer'll be stepping up soon, too. So, sure, they're going to be doing this, too, developing their own teams.

But they're not doing this. They aren't balancing their wife with their underlings and dealing with some kid who thinks he knows everything there is to know.

No, they aren't going to get cocky little bastards who used to fly experimental planes and manage to work in how dangerous their last job was into at least one conversation a day, with their wives. McGeek's gonna get twelve little McGeeklets, who may, if they get really frisky, flash him a snide smile while defraging his computer. And Jimmy'll have one guy, who he'll hand pick for this. And knowing Jimmy, it'll be another Ducky wannabe, some quiet, timid guy who'll stay down there listening to the blather while making sure the pipettes are sterilized.

They're not going to deal with asshole adrenaline junkies who couldn't define the word fear if held at gunpoint.

They're not going to have to manage guys who look at them like they're bleeding twerps who don't have enough brains to do a crossword, let alone solve a crime or handle anything particularly difficult. (And worse, they aren't going to deal with guys who see every fucking detail and make them feel like ancient idiots because they can't memorize the entire layout of a crime scene with all the details in one glance. Who the fuck is this guy, Sherlock Holmes?)

They're not going to be sandwiched between a Boss and an underling, with no real place in the team because the slot up hasn't opened yet, and the slot down doesn't know it's down and just

FUCK!

Part of the problem is, he knows he fucked it up the first time.

Part of the reason he didn't take Rota, beyond wanting HIS team.

Handling McGee was easy. He was so thrilled to finally be a Senior Agent that he gave Tony no trouble, and Hell Lee couldn't have picked trouble out of a line up. (Well, okay, she could, but they didn't know that then, and she was awfully meek sitting in McGee's desk, carefully nibbling carrot sticks and making sure every scrap of paperwork was perfect.)

Managing Ziva… Because like Draga, Ziva didn't just roll over and take his orders. She always had
to challenge him. Had to make sure that he knew she was better, stronger than he was.

So he found a way to cope. To even the playing field. A technique that played to his strengths.

It was stupid. It was massively stupid. And he's not sure if she was using him or if he was using her, or if they both used each other, but a campfire turned into movie night. (Because none of the three of them had seen the movie he was using as a reference to help make the case make sense. So he got McGee to put it up on MTAC that night. McGee and Lee watched and went home. Ziva spent an hour talking to him about it, and by the end of that they had a date for another movie.) Movie night turned into movies and beer night, and movies and beer night turned into drunk kissing night, and drunk kissing night turned into 'This isn't a big deal, happens all the time in Israel, helps build trust and teamwork,' night, and he'd almost backed out but she said, "Your team, Tony, your rules."

And it was his team, and Gibbs wasn't there, and…

And his team, his Ziva, was in trouble, and it was his job as the leader to save it, and instead of turning to him, instead of knowing that the team came first, she went to Gibbs.

And Gibbs looked at him, and basically told him to his face that not only had he fucked up, but that he knew how he'd fucked up. Called him McGee, and said that he wouldn't have messed it up, like that. On the fucking case for two damn seconds and he knew.

And then Gibbs was back. And the last thing she said to him about it was, "His team, Tony, his rules."

So, he took the assignment with Jeanne, and purposely let Ziva wonder and worry. Let them all wonder. And God that was a clusterfuck.

And they never talked about it, or Jeanne, or Somalia, or Paris. Not until the night after they killed Bodnar, and he was aimlessly wandering DC, looking for something, and something was her place, and they sat on her floor and just talked. No walls, no bullshit, no… them… covered in head to toe emotional armor. They let it go and just talked.

And things changed, for the better that time.

And they're changing again.

There are things about himself that Tony hates to admit, though he knows they're true.

He's deeply insecure.

He'd rather follow than lead.

He hates change.

He's terrified of failing.

And it's easier to be angry and lash out than to deal with any of the above four.

And Draga's really not a bad guy, and he's not doing anything over the line, and neither is Ziva, but he can be pissed about it, or he can try to deal with the fact that isn't easy, and on top of difficult, it's terrifying.

So he'll be angry and try to keep his head above water, and hopefully figure out how to run Draga
before the whole thing falls apart.

Gibbs is halfway down his steps when he hears snoring. He rubs his eyes and shakes his head a little. Someone got into his house, onto his sofa, and is sleeping on it, and managed to do that without waking him up. Time to get his hearing checked.

He waits for a few seconds, listening, and decides he knows that snore.

Tony.

He turns around and heads back up to his room to get his phone. It's a bit after nine, which is a very late morning for him, but he's sure Ziva's up by now. So he flashes her a text.

_Got your man on my sofa. Everything okay?

Two minutes later, and he thinks it is that late because she's deciding how to respond, not that she didn't get the text, he gets back, _Well enough. Sleeping?

_Yep.

_He can come home when he's done sulking.

_What's going on?

_I don't really know.

This is not, by a long stretch, the first time Gibbs has found a sleeping Tony on his sofa.

It is the first time it's happened since he started dating Ziva.

But they've got a routine for this. And Gibbs knows his role.

So, down to the kitchen. He's not being especially quiet, but he not going out of his way to wake up Tony, either. He gets the coffee going and knows Tony'll be up by the time it's ready.

Back to the front porch, grab his newspaper (he's noticed he's the only guy on the street that still gets one) and back to the kitchen to see what's going on in the world. (Not all that much.)

Tony stirs, seems to notice Gibbs, and turns to face the back of the sofa, settling in for a few more minutes.

The coffee starts to perk, and the scent of it begins to wander through the house. Gibbs has his first cup, and begins putting together breakfast. Nothing fancy, just eggs, but as the sound of them hitting the hot skillet fills his kitchen, he also hears the sound of Tony getting up, and then pouring himself a cup.

Gibbs stirs the eggs in the pan. He's feeding Tony, so he's scrambling them.

"One to ten. How stupid was the fight?"

"Am I judging based on fights with Ziva, or my own personal history of stupid?"
"Doesn't matter."

"Seven?"

Gibbs turns from the pan and stares at Tony. "They're partners. They have to have this. They need to get along. They have to trust and respect each other. They need the in jokes. They need that space between them that you can't be part of. You're the Boss, not the buddy, so you can't be part of it."

"I know. But…"

"But?"

But *I'm better at being the buddy. I know how to be the buddy.* "It was supposed to be Tim."

Gibbs shrugs.

"It was supposed to be a guy I trusted. It was supposed to be someone safe. And it was supposed to be someone Ziva didn't look at…"

"Supposed to be someone she wasn't attracted to."

"Yeah. Tim, Ziva, one other, hopefully a woman. Or a newbie for Tim to latch onto. Let him have the Probie."

"And the Probie was supposed to be a geek, quiet, easily intimidated..."

"At least right now."

Gibbs shakes his head, and dumps some eggs onto Tony's plate. "Like I said, sucks when some new, young guy shows up, thinks he's hot shit, knows everything there is to know, and hits on your wife."

He's flashing Gibbs the *you're pissing me the hell off* look. "I did not know she was your wife."

"And you didn't have to work with her, either. I get it. But you were the young, hot shit punk who thought you knew everything there was to know and that I was a dinosaur you were going to show some tricks to."

"I did not."

"Please. At least Draga knows he's not God's gift to investigating. I had to break twelve years of bad habits from you."

"I was a good cop."

"No, you had the makings of a good cop. Wouldn't have hired you if you didn't. But you weren't when you started with me. You'd been coasting in a sewer of lousy to okay cops and had never actually seen what a really good one looked like until you signed on with NCIS. Now, you're a good cop. You're a great cop. You are going to be a good leader, too. You picked a challenge to start with. And any guy with any spine is going to fight the guy on top."

"He's not fighting you."

"He's not stupid. He knows I'm on my way out."

"McGee never fought."
"He did. Took me four years to figure out he was doing it."

"Jethro?"

"I barely know how to turn the damn computer on. You can send email, and that's it. You think he's spending five minutes explaining what's going on, in front of other people, like Abby or Vance or Borin, because we needed to know? No. He's making us shut him down and admit he's the brains."

"Oh."

"They all do it. Even Jimmy's playing off Ducky now."

"Great."

"Draga's going to be the better cop. Aubrey was going to be the easier teammate. We're the best team. You picked the better man. It was the right decision. Managing him's the new challenge. But eventually, we will hit a case where you will pull out the stops and save his ass, and he will see you. Just like you finally really saw Tim after we got Ziva back. Just like Kelso case."

"Long time ago." That was the first case where he got to see that Jethro wasn't just phoning it in, killing time between bottles of bourbon by showing up at work.

"Yep."

"I didn't think you were a dinosaur."

Gibbs smirks at that. "You thought I had to be some sort of massive burnout to be my age and working as a Navy Cop."

"Jethro, you were."

That got a head tilt, acknowledging that. "Might have been. Still a good cop."

"Yeah." Tony took a bite of his eggs. "What the hell am I going to do with him? Yeah, he's getting along with Ziva great, but he still thinks I'm a fool."

"Don't be the fool. Class clown only works when there's a teacher to play off of. The buddy only works when there's a Boss breathing down your neck."

"I don't want to be you."

"You don't have to be, and it wouldn't work if you tried."

They both eat quietly. Gibbs knows where this needs to go, but he also knows he can't make the suggestion, Tony's got to get here on his own.

He'd finished his eggs, still not saying anything, and is standing up to get another refill on the coffee.

"Jethro?"

The tilt of his head tells Tony to keep talking.

"I can't be the Boss if you're still the Boss."

Jethro nods at that.
"I'm not the Leader if every big decision has to go through you."

He nods at that, too, leaning against the counter in his kitchen, sipping his coffee.

A very long minute passes and he can see Tony thinking about it, getting ready to commit to what has to logically come after that.

"Jethro, I want you to step down as Team Leader."

Gibbs nods, and smiles a little. "Not calling you Boss."

"You don't have to. That's going out with you. Ziva'll break me if I even suggest it, and McGee won't do it, at least, not without a ton of sarcasm."

Gibbs nods at that. "Until Tim gets back, I'll work more on breaking in Draga. Can't and shouldn't keep him away from Ziva, but if half of the time I'm with him, that'll be fine. Tim'll be back week after next, get him into the mix. Draga's doin' okay on the computers but he's not smooth, yet."

"Okay."

And there's the biggest change of all. Leroy Jethro Gibbs has given his last order as the Boss of Team Gibbs.

Tony exhales low and slow, simultaneously terrified and excited at the prospect of Team DiNozzo.
They were getting ready for church for the first time since Kelly was born. Honestly, Tim would much rather skip it and sleep, but Abby wants to go, and he can sort of zone out there, so they’re going.

And zone out he did.

There is literally not one single idea in his head as to what the service might have been about.

But he did notice when Father John came over to pet Kelly, coo over her, and ask when they wanted to do the baptism.

And thus, August 2nd 2015 became the day that Kelly was going to get baptized. They made an appointment to bring in the potential godparents to meet Father John before and get everything set up, and went home.

It wasn’t until driving home that something hit him.

“Abby…”

“Yeah.”

“Breena and Jimmy aren’t Catholic.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Father John’s not going to like it. Godparents are supposed to be Catholic, good Catholics, right?”

She thinks about that for a moment and comes to the conclusion that since the whole point of Godparents is to promise to renounce Satan and sin in the place of the kid and then promise to help raise them Catholic that yes, being Catholic is usually a pre-req for being a Godparent.

He sees her understand that.

“How important is getting her baptized to you?” Because it’s something he could very easily just take or leave.

“Important.”

“Okay. Will you let me try to bluff him? You can get dispensations or something, right?”

“Maybe. What’s the bluff?”

“That if he won’t go for Jimmy and Breena we’ll walk away and not get her baptized. If it doesn’t work, we can… Get Luca and Melody up? Hell, who else do we know? Sister Rosita?”

“Kyle’s Catholic.”

“You both got adopted by Catholic families?”

“We both got placed with Catholic Charities, so, yeah.”

That made sense. “Okay, but he’s not going to work for the same reason my sister and Penny won’t,
he’s living with someone he’s not married to. So, will you let me try the bluff?”

“Sure.” She knows the symbolism of family is more important to him than any of the rest of this. “I’ll back you on it. Maybe, if we’re lucky it won’t be a big deal at all and you won’t need to bluff.”

“We can hope.”

“Abby!”

A second later she’d gotten up and grabbed their daughter from him, holding her at arm length.

It’s possible he could have been more covered in baby pee, but it would have required a concerted effort and likely more than one baby.

“What happened to you?” she asked, trying not to laugh at the look on his face.

“I don’t know. I was putting her down, singing the lullaby, and then we were both soaked.”

Abby broke and started laughing. “How about I finish up with her, and you get a shower?”

“Thank you.”

A few minutes later, she slipped into the shower behind him.

“She’s down?”

“Yeah. Diaper was on backwards.”

He sighed, feeling world-class stupid. “Maybe I am too tired for Bootcamp.”

“Go and hang out. You don’t have to fight. I was just going to get a nap. Bring us home some Thai.”

He nods, rinsing the conditioner out of his hair. “Feels weird to get a shower before Bootcamp.”

“Yeah, guess that’s not how it usually works. Still, don’t want to go covered in pee.”

“Nope. Get smelly enough working full out, don’t need to add baby pee on top of that.” He rested his hands on her hips, and switched them around so she was in the full stream of the shower, and began to soap up.

She’s watching him soap up, rubbing foamy bubbles all over his skin, and he’s not playing with it, not showing off or anything (because Abby knows what getting the job done looks like, and what showing off looks like, and right now, he’s just getting the job done) but it’s occurring to her, in a way it hasn’t since before Kelly was born, that Tim’s an attractive guy, and wet, naked, soapy Tim, hands rubbing all over his own skin, is certainly reminding her that once upon a time, there was this thing they used to do on a very regular basis, and she really liked it, and it might be nice to do that again, and soon.
Though, she’s still bleeding, so, probably wait a bit longer before getting fully back to it, but still, some messing around would be good. They’ve been doing good on making sure to get at least some cuddle time in every day, but it’s been a week since there’s been anything that produces orgasms, and right now, she could certainly go for one.

So, she steps a little closer to him, nipples rubbing lightly against his chest, hands on his hips. “I like how you smell when you work out.”

That got an amused smile out of Tim. He put the soap down and wrapped his hands around the small of her back. “Really?”

“I like how you smell all the time, but hot and sweaty, flushed, working out hard, yeah, I like that. Like all of it.” Her hands trailed up his arms, and over his back, mapping his muscles.

“Huh.” He’s grinning.

“Huh?”

“Maybe I won’t race to the showers after next Bootcamp.”

She smiles and kisses his bottom lip, gently. “Won’t Jimmy and Gibbs wonder what’s up?”

“They might.” He licked his lips. “Of course, if you were to call and ask me to get home sooner rather than later…”

That got a grin out of her. “Some sort of unspecified ‘family emergency.’”

“Some sort of itch that only I can scratch.” His hands, which had been on her hips slipped down to stroke over her bottom.

“I imagine I could think of some need that only you could fulfill. Something that had to happen right that second.”

“You could call with a very specific request.” He kissed her throat, licking her earlobe, and said quietly, “The sort of thing that I’d be willing to drop anything to attend to.”

She looked into his eyes, enjoying the heat and wicked joy lighting them. “Yeah, I think I could do that.”

“Uh huh.” He kissed her lips, soft and wet, and she kissed back, tongue slipping against his, encouraging more depth and pressure.

“Mmmm…”

He wriggled against her, rubbing his whole body along hers. “Good?”

“Oh yeah.”

He traced his hand up from her thighs to her shoulder, and stroked along her chest. “Can I?”

She got what he was asking, and it has been less than half an hour since she finished nursing, so probably okay. “Sure, just, might squirt you.”

He grinned. “Not a problem. Not like I’ve never done it to you.”

She laughed a little at that. “Never from having your nipples played with.” Then his fingers slipped
down, gently mapping out the curves of her breasts, and she sighed, head resting against his shoulder, purring softly. She’d forgotten how good that felt.

“Missed that?”

“Oh yeah.” She met his lips with hers, enjoying his skin on hers, and the delicious things his fingers were doing. Then the familiar, foot fallings asleep tingle that meant her milk was letting down hit, so she took his hands in hers, resettling them on her hips.

“Abby?” He looked concerned, eyes searching hers, afraid he’d done something that hurt.

She pointed down. After all, they’re in the shower, he can’t feel the difference between the spray of the water or a spray of milk.

“Oh.” But he can certainly see it. “You want to stop?”

She kissed him long and hard, rubbing against him, holding his hands. Then broke the kiss to say, “Does that feel like stop?”

“Nope!”

“Exactly.” She took him in hand, stroking slow and firm. He groaned at it, hips moving along with her hand.

“You’re not going to tell me to go get a condom, right?” he asked between kisses.

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

“Okay, I’ve got an idea. Turn around.”

She did, her back to his chest, and he pulled her close to him, his dick between her legs. He started with long, gentle thrusts, rubbing his dick against her, and she sighed at that, rubbing in counter point, keeping everything slow and steady.

It’s not exactly their usual play, but it’s close enough, he can read her body more than well enough to know when just gentle brushing isn’t enough, so his fingers slip between her legs, adding more pressure, more directly applied. And she knows the way he’s moving, feeling the tension in his legs and arms, and thrusts back harder, squeezing her legs a bit tighter together.

She feels the build, his fingers slipping over and over, cock rubbing just right below them, his mouth biting gently on her shoulder as her body goes tighter and tighter, drawing in, focus clamping down to his fingers on her clit and the aching pleasure of being on the edge of spilling over.

God, so close, just a little more, little faster, and it’s hard to move because she doesn’t want to risk losing that delicious slide of his fingers, but it’s not quite fast enough. She can feel him jerking against her, knows he’s on the line or falling over it, and a hot, wet rush hits her clit, separate, different from the spray of the shower, and that was enough, that wet pulse in addition to the slide of his fingers sent her over, tingling and purring.

A minute later, she’s feeling very calm, very happy, and he’s flush against her back, making that soft, almost purr sound which always means she’s got a very happy Tim on her hands.

He gently kissed the nape of her neck. She squeezed his left hand and said, “Yep. Naptime sounds awfully good right about now.”
She could feel him smile at that.

“I’ll admit, I’m not feeling particularly motivated to go anywhere right this second.”

She stepped back, turned, and kissed him.

“Bootcamp not sounding so hot right now?”

“Get pounded on by Jimmy and Gibbs. Snuggle with you in bed…” He smiled at her while snagging the soap again. “For some reason, Jimmy and Gibbs just aren’t winning that one.”

She giggled, and he began to soap up her back.

“Well, it wouldn’t break my heart if you decided to stay here.”

“Good.”
Monday morning. Abby's napping. Kelly's almost checked out. (She's hanging out on his chest for the time being, but he'll be taking her upstairs soon.) So, theoretically he's got time to do some stuff.

Like, maybe take a glance at his computer.

Maybe wade through the mess of emails and data that's been accumulating.

Sounded like a plan.

He has to admit, he thought the baby sling was kind of dumb at first, and was absolutely certain he wasn't going anywhere near it, because wearing something that looked like a baby hammock across his chest and shoulder just seemed silly, but having two free hands to work with while Kelly settled down was awfully nice.

Computer on, booted up, gmail up and… Wow, ton of emails. He runs two fast searches through them. Okay, three of them are interesting. Two from Vance, and one from his editor looking for a clue as to when the next book will be done. He's about to fire off the response to that when he noticed Kelly's awfully still. He looked down. Her eyes were droopy and she's barely sucking the pacifier.

So, taking Kelly to her crib put a pause to handling his email. But getting her down only took a few minutes. While he wouldn't have believed it when she was brand new, he's now starting to agree with Breena that Kelly's a good sleeper.

Kelly down meant he had probably a good two, maybe two and a half hours of free time.

So he got to work. First things first, he sent that response to his editor. He had about twenty-thousand words to go on the next Deep Six, and he's got no idea when he'll get it done. Before October 1st, which is his deadline for the rough draft, but beyond that, no clue.

Next up, emails from Leon. The first one wasn't terribly interesting, just housekeeping stuff, likely written by his secretary, a reminder that they were switching to a new system for handling their paperwork, and that once again NCIS would be hosting Virginia Blood Services and that last year 82% of NCIS had donated and this year, they'd really like to see that number get up to 87%.

Tim made a note of that, if everything was going well, he'd stop in and give blood. So far he's given every year.

The next email was much more interesting.

This one was a personal letter from Vance concerning the information he'd been getting about Tim's test.

At the end of each month each Department Head sends a report to Vance listing what's happened, what needs to happen, how things are going with their departments. As June faded into July he'd been especially interested in the report from Cybercrime. It was, as Vance put it "disappointing." No mention of the test. No mention of all the computers going bonkers all at once. Nothing.

The other interesting bit was that Stephen Manner had asked for an appointment to see the Director, and had asked him why he'd been hacked by "Kevin Hussein." Vance had told him it was a security test, and that between the Port to Port killer getting access to their building, and Dearing's attacks on
Navy weaknesses, he periodically has different branches of NCIS check up on each other. As a former NCIS employee who left in good graces and had a great security clearance, he had "asked Kevin" to run periodic checks on Cybercrime.

Tim tried to remember which one Manner was… Then it clicked. He was the one who programmed straight through the attack. Good. Someone noticed, checked up, and actually found the trail of bread crumbs he'd left.

He kept reading: The thing I found most fascinating about my conversation with Manner was that, from everything I could see, he had no idea that anyone else in Cybercrime had been targeted. Likewise, he appeared to have never thought this was something worth mentioning to Jenner. He took this straight to me.

He left my office under the impression that "Kevin" had chosen him at random.

Hmmm… Okay. No communication at all in that department. He made a note to pay especially close attention to Manner's logs so he could see how Manner tracked his attack, and wondered if he'd noticed he was still being monitored.

He sent that as a follow up question to Leon, along with a few lines about how he was getting ready to wade into the data to see what exactly they'd all done in response to the attack.

Then came all the rest of his email. Tons of it.

He was cruising through it, deleting most of it as stuff that didn't matter, redirecting a few to Tony or Ziva with a quick note about how he'd be back in the office on the 20th.

The two from his mom he hovered over with his mouse and decided not to open.

Not today. He's in a good mood, he's getting useful stuff done, he doesn't need to know what's in those emails. If it was really important, Penny or Sarah would have told him about it.

He was in the process of forwarding another one to Ziva when he took the time to really read it. And really reading it, he smiled.

Ngyn, Cybercrime tech who noticed the attack while it was happening, had emailed him to find out what was going on.

So, he told her a variation of the same story Leon had spun. Namely, as the best guy with a computer outside of Cybercrime, he'd been picked to run the occasional check on them. He didn't elaborate on who'd been checked, but did let her know he was pleased she had noticed she'd been hacked and found he'd done it.

He blind forwarded Ngyn's letter and his response to Leon.

He added her logs to the things he was going to check first, and continued to slog through his emails.

Okay, he's moving a lot more slowly than anticipated, (or maybe there was a hell of a lot more email) or Kelly's not sleeping as long as normal, but the soft cry of a small person looking for her next meal curtailed his progress.

He stood up, got to the doorway of his office, and then heard Abby heading to Kelly's room, so back to his desk.

Data time.
At some later point Abby poked her head in, and he thinks he sort of grunted in her direction. Then coffee materialized next to him, and he was awfully happy to see it. (Decaf or not, the act of drinking coffee is part of the rhythms of how he processes data.) And though he wasn't paying any attention to it, apparently the Magic Coffee Fairy kept providing refills for him because at no point did he reach over and find an empty cup. (Which is usually the trigger that lets him know to get up, walk around, stretch, go to the bathroom, get a snack/meal, do something other than work the data.)

At some much later point he noticed that: A: He was hungry. B: It was dark out. And C: He hadn't gotten any naps and it was his night for the 4:00 feed so he was going to be hurting for sleep.

He wandered out of his office, blinking at the light coming from the living room, and found Abby sitting on the sofa, Kelly in her lap, patting her, must be post nurse burp time, watching some sort of TV show. Abby looked over at him as he flopped onto the sofa and paused the show.

"Haven't seen you that buried in a computer in a while. Good stuff?"

He rubbed his eyes and forehead, and scanned the room for a second, checking the clock. After 10:00, great.

"Yeah. Sort of. Got into the raw data from my test." Kelly decided to punctuate that statement with a burp.

"Here." She handed him Kelly, and he settled her on his chest, in the baby sling. (He was a little surprised to still be wearing it, apparently he didn't take it off after getting her down.) She looked from her mom to him, seeming a little confused at getting shifted all of a sudden. But Abby got up, and gestured for him to follow her. He did, ending up in the kitchen, sitting at their table (where Abby pointed to) and less than a minute later was looking at salad and left over Thai style chicken fried rice from the night before. "Eat, before your blood sugar completely tanks."

He nods, taking a bite. "Thank you."

"I made it up for us, called out to you, you didn't answer, so I headed into the office, said your name twice, you still didn't answer, so I figured I was on my own for dinner."

"Oh, God," he shook his head. "Sorry about that."

"Tonight, it wasn't a problem."

"Maybe not, but don't let me do that. Go in there and poke me. It's not good to be that deep into it."

"House wasn't on fire, you weren't alone, and Kelly wasn't bugging me. We're good."

He exhaled heavily, then ate another bite.

"So, what'd you find."

"Let's put it this way, if there was any little nagging voice in the back of my mind that thought this wasn't fair to Jenner, it died this afternoon."

Abby rose an eyebrow.

"How are you going to track down Cybercrimes and protect people if you can't keep your own department tight?"

"That bad?"
"Worse? I don't know. From what I can tell, Jenner decided the test had to be some sort of prank. Okay, given that everything was saved, and what actually happened, that wasn't an insane take on the subject, but he barely checked anything, just made sure none of their data had gone missing. Two of his guys mentioned that their computers had gone wonky, and he checked them, too.

"No follow up." He grabs another fast bite of the rice, the smell and taste of it reminding him, vividly, that he hasn't eaten since breakfast. "He didn't check in with anyone else. He checked enough to see that the hack had come from NCIS, which was one of the false trails I laid. It didn't actually; I fired it off of my computer here. And then he just let it lie. He didn't even bother to go through and see who'd pulled it. I mean, imagine for a moment that all of a sudden our team had our guns stop working properly. Can you imagine Gibbs looking at them, and then deciding that Tony must have just pulled it as a prank, and then did nothing about it?"

"I can imagine him thinking Tony might have pulled it as a prank, but Tony's head would ring for a week from the force of the headslap."

"Exactly. And you can bet we'd all get slapped for letting him mess with our guns, too."

"Yep. Nothing happened to the techs for letting themselves get hacked?"

"Not that I could see. Now, maybe they do have a prankster down there and things like this have happened before, in which case I picked the wrong damn test case. But… Anyway… No leadership on this. From the looks of it, they aren't talking to each other, either.

"Seven of twelve of them just let it go. Once everything went back to normal on their systems and they realized they hadn't lost anything, they went back to work. Five of them decided to see what was up. All five of them used exactly the same technique for the first three levels. Three of them decided to let it go when they hit enough dead ends. One found "Kevin." He went straight to Vance, and I wonder if he's also got Jenner's job in his crosshairs. The other emailed me directly.

"Ngyn, the one who emailed, also buffed up her internal security. Manner, the one who went to Vance, didn't. Though he might decide to, because Vance told him the test was a sort of internal audit, that he has different branches of NCIS check each other periodically to see how good we are."

"So, you're not taking over the A-Team."

"They may not qualify as the Bad News Bears. I've got to see if I can get into HR and find out how Jenner was hiring."

"Why?"

"Help me figure out if he's just not good at locating talent. Or if it's so bad down there it just sucks the life out of them. Or… I don't know. I just want to know what made him think, hey, you, person who had your entire system go insane for ten minutes and then you did nothing about it, you're the guy I want to put in charge of hunting down criminals."

"I can see that."

He took another minute to just eat and then said, "Next test'll be interesting. Right now Ngyn's the only one in position to even notice it happen."

"Wonderful."

"Oh yeah."
Abby stole one of his cucumber slices. "How good is the security on your work computer?"

"Good, at least, I think it is."

"Might want to buff it up. If you're making them look bad, and any of them figure it out, you might get a nasty surprise."

"Good point. I'll have to add an extra layer of defense or two."

"What's the next test?"

"Once I've finished sorting through the data and what exactly it was each of them did, I'm going to give them enough down time so Manner and Ngyn aren't on edge, maybe a month, and then I'm going in and breaching whichever cases they're working on. Not going to screw anything up, but I am going to snag at least one bit of classified info off of each of their computers."

"After that?"

"After that, I'm going after their personal computers and phones."

Abby squinted at him, thinking for a minute. "That's illegal, right?"

"Probably. Might have to find a way to deal with that."

"Lots of jobs are requiring prospective employees hand over their social media so they can check up. That's considered legal…"

"Good to know. I'll have to send it by Leon. Don't want to end up in jail for testing how good my soon to be employees are."

"Yeah, I'd prefer you didn't end up in jail, either. I mean, I still have the McGee defense fund that I set up back when that guy was sniffing around from you hacking the CIA—"

"Really?" That had to have been close to five years ago now.

"Okay, I've got the bucket I was collecting it in. Remember we went out to dinner after you caught him, I paid—"

He laughed, understanding. "You mean my defense fund paid."

"Yeah."

"Wasn't that take out Chinese?"

"Defense fund had $32.57 in it."

"Great."

"Gibbs put in twenty."

"Even better." He laughed at that. "Good to know that you all were willing to pay the big bucks to keep me out of jail."

"Anything for you, baby." She leaned over and kissed him. "So, what happens now?"

He looked down, checking Kelly, who had been sucking away on her pacifier, adding little burbles
and coos to their conversation, but was looking like she might be starting to think sleepy thoughts.

"Were you planning on going to sleep when she went down?"

"That was the idea."

"Okay, I'm still too wired for that. So, I'm enjoying your company, but if you want to go to sleep now, I'll put her down."

"I could use the extra down time." She stood up and kissed him. He wrapped his hand around her neck, and kissed back, soft and gentle, not sexy, just saying I-love-you without voice.

She was heading toward the stairs when he said, "Abby."

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

He stood up and crossed over to her, resting his hands on her hips, and his forehead against hers. "All of it."

She smiled, pecked his lips, and headed up to get some sleep. He looked down at their daughter and said, "So, feel like hanging out with me while I finish dinner?"

She didn't say anything.

"We keep kind of odd hours here. It'll probably get more regular as you get older, but right now, sometimes I work all night, and sometimes Mom does, too, but we're going to make sure we spend some time with you, when you're awake, every single day."
"So, who are the Godparents?" Father John asked when they met the next Sunday. Once again they were in his office. This time in the daylight. (Tim was right, it did get good light.) He and Abby were on the too hard sofa, Kelly was in her car seat, snoozing.

"Breena and Jimmy Palmer."

"Okay, good. Which church are they with? I'll call their Priest and check up on them."

"St. Mary's Episcopal."

Father John looked up quickly from the piece of paper he was going to write their information on. His expression was disappointed. "That's not a Catholic Church."

"They aren't Catholics," Tim replied.

"Then they can't be the Godparents. One or both of them can be a Christian Sponsor, but you need to have an actual Catholic in good standing for a Godparent."

Tim took a breath; he doesn't like doing this, especially cold, it's a lot easier to do something like this pissed off, but, now or never.

"No. It'll be Jimmy and Breena or it won't happen at all. They are involved in Kelly's everyday life. They are good people. They are her guardians if something happens to us. They're her godparents."

Father John settled back in his seat, smiled gently at them, and said, "I'd like to do it. I met both of them at your wedding. They seem like lovely people. But I can't do it. Cannon law states that Godparents have to be Catholics in good standing. They have to be living role models of what a true Catholic life looks like. To be perfectly frank, if one of my parishioners were to come in and ask if you" he was looking at Tim, "could be godparent, I'd have to turn him down. This needs to be someone who can, by example, show how to live a Catholic life. So, no, it's not enough to be a good person. It's not enough to be a Christian. You have to be Catholic. You have to be dedicated to it. I know some priests don't take this duty seriously, but I do. As you saw, when I get a request for someone I don't know, I call their parish and talk to their priest and make sure they're up for the job. So, I'm sorry, but it can't be Jimmy and Breena. What about your sister? I remember giving her communion at your wedding."

"Anyone else is a moot point. As I said, it'll be Jimmy and Breena or it won't happen at all."

Father John smiled again. "Tim, I understand what you're trying to do here, but it's not going to work. I cannot give you what you want. I wish I could, but I can't. You can find a good Catholic to stand up as a Godparent, and if none of your family will work, I can absolutely guarantee you that Sister Rosita will, and will be happy to take on the job, and Jimmy and Breena can be Christian Sponsors, but that's as far as I can go on this."

Tim shakes his head. "Look, if you can't bend or get a dispensation, that's fine. You'll do what you can do. But there's only so far I can bend on this, too. It's them or it's not at all. Godparents should matter. It shouldn't just be a meaningless title. And if it's anyone other than Jimmy and Breena, it will be a meaningless title."

"You'll put your daughter's soul in mortal danger—" Father John is making that appeal to Abby, but Tim pulls his attention back to him.
"No, you will." Tim stares at Father John, expression cold, but he's feeling pretty jittery on the inside, really he hates doing this when he's not feeling pissed. "I don't believe in souls. That I'm here at all, that I'll go this far, is out of love for Abby." He squeezed her hand, as much to take comfort from her touch as to let her know that he hopes this'll be done soon. "I don't believe in magic water that washes souls clean, and I certainly don't believe in a God that cares about the application of said water, let alone a God who would hold anything I do against Kelly. If all of this is real, I highly doubt he'll blame her for me being an ass, and if He does, He's not worth my faith. But if you believe this, if you want the chance to do your job and save the soul of a helpless infant, you'll find a way to make Jimmy and Breena her Godparents."

John holds his gaze, not looking away, not blinking, and he very calmly says, "Then it won't happen."

Tim can feel there's something… wrong… in the way John says that, but he doesn't know what. He's being played, but he's not sure how. So he says, "Fine."

He looks at Abby, and they got up, and head out of Father John's office, and normally, about now, as they're walking through the church and to the parking lot, is when John should fold but, oh shit, they're getting in the car and pulling away, and yeah, that didn't work at all.

"Shit."

Abby's looking amused. "So, you're officially calling that a failed bluff."

"I'd like to give it a day or two more, but, yeah."

"If it's the rule, and he really can't…"

"I know. There was something hinky in the way he was looking at me, though. Like there's a part of this that I'm not getting."

"There might be."

They drive another mile before Tim says, "Do we have to be Catholic?"

That really surprises Abby. But after a bit, because he does just sit there quietly, letting her think about it, she says, "Is this about not having to fold on that bluff?"

He nods, looking a little embarrassed by that, but he's not going to try and play her. "Honestly, yeah, some. Maybe a lot. No one loves going in and saying, 'I was wrong.' But, it's not entirely about that. Okay, Jimmy and Breena are our first choice. We love them. They're going to be involved in Kelly's life. They're basically her back up parents. Great. But they aren't good enough because they aren't Catholic. Gibbs isn't good enough, because he's not Catholic. My sister and Grandmother who at least live in the area and will be involved in her life, they don't pass muster because they aren't Catholic enough. We've got to pull in your brother-who is a fine man, but will probably spend less than three hours with Kelly in the next five years-before we've got someone who qualifies in our family, because he's a 'Good Catholic.' He won't be there for her. He's not going to be a major part of her life, he won't be an example of anything, because he lives a thousand miles away, but he's okay. And… I just hate this meaningless shit. I hate this it has to look right rather than be right crap.

"And sure, going back and saying, 'I was just kidding, Luca and Melody Sciuto'll do it,' will sting my pride, but when I asked you to back the bluff, I meant that I'd go through with folding if it came to it, and I will, but… Do we have to be Catholic? Maybe we could go somewhere that's more focused on the Christian part of it and less on the doctrine? I mean, Jimmy and Breena's Pastor didn't
give us any crap about being Catholic. He knew we'd be there day in and day out, and that's what mattered. That just makes a lot more sense to me."

Abby thought about that, too, and Tim let her. He's not going to rush this. She's been a member at St. Sebastian's for fifteen years and actually Catholic her whole life. He knows this matters to her, but which brand of Christian they are doesn't matter to him. It's like soda. Since he doesn't drink it often, he doesn't care if the stuff in their cupboard is Pepsi or Coke.

Of course, it doesn't matter to him because that's how he sees them, as brands. His identity isn't attached to it in any meaningful way. But hers is… so, if it matters, he'll go back, and Luca will get the job, but… maybe it doesn't matter.

It was a day later, (Father John hadn't called, looks an awful lot like he knows this is a bluff and he's going to let Tim fold on it) when Abby asked him, as they were eating lunch, "If we weren't Catholic, what would we be? I mean, how do you see this working?"

"I don't know. I mean, I know you're Christian, I know you want to be part of a church, and I know that point isn't negotiable."

She nods at him.

"And I know I've promised to do this with you. That because it's important to you, I will do it. So, I'm certainly not thinking about dropping it all together."

"Good."

"And I know there are things we don't like about being Catholic."

"Also true."

"Plenty of rules we just skipped."

She nods.

"And I was in the car, driving home, and it hit me that I don't know what it means to be Catholic to you. I know what it means to be Catholic to me. It means I'm with you, and you're Catholic, but… We're pro-gay marriage. We've got condoms in the dresser. We're not vehemently pro-life. I mean, neither of us would have blinked if Jon's heart had still been beating and Jimmy and Breena had decided to terminate. And, not to put too fine a point on it, but I've killed people, more than ten of them. We started having sex, lived together, and made Kelly all before we got married. Neither of us like the anti-woman stuff. Sister Rosita's got, what, three master's degrees in different religious topics and both of us think it's ridiculous they won't ordain her. And sure, both of us like Francis, but I can't imagine you think he's infallible. So, just… What does it mean to be Catholic, for you?"

Abby didn't answer that, and he can see she's thinking.

"So, if it was just up to me, Jimmy and Breena's church. Our family is there. Some of them at least. If Gibbs had a church, I'd be fine with his church, too. But that's all this is to me, a place where our family gathers. That's why I slipped into Shabbos so easily, if you were going to ask me to design a religious service, that's how I'd do it. At home, with your family—"
"And good food and wine." She smiles at that.

He nods a little, acknowledging that's definitely part of the draw. "That doesn't hurt. You're never going to have a hard time selling me on celebrations centered on good food. But, I know this is more to you than just a place and family, so, what do you need from this?"

She shrugs. "Still thinking about it."

"Okay.

They decided to head in for the Blood Drive on Wednesday, which worked out pretty well on several levels. First of all, it gave him a chance to drop off a thumb drive with his report and all of the data on it for Leon. Secondly, giving blood is always good. Third, dropping in to say 'Hi' to everyone was good. Fourth, Abby wanted to make sure her lab was still in one piece. And, fifth, it let him bounce an idea off of Ducky.

Abby hasn't said anything else about the baptism or being Catholic or anything along those lines. But he still can't shake the feeling that he's being played and as per Rule 36: if you feel like you're being played, you probably are, so he wants to check up on this.

But he can't spot the con. No idea how it'd work. Obviously there's something in there he can't see, but he can't see it. But if anyone could see it, would know how he's getting played on this, it'd be Ducky.

So, while Blood Services got a hold of Abby, he and Kelly headed down to Autopsy.

Quiet day. No murders on tap, so Autopsy isn't up to much. Several years ago Jimmy had asked to get up to speed on the sorts of psychological profiles that Ducky does, so on quiet days like today, when the paperwork is done, and the bodies are settled, he snags a textbook or two and starts reading.

But an excuse to quit the books and snuggle a baby girl are certainly something he doesn't mind.

And Ducky, who had been drinking his tea, listening to a symphony, and working on a report of his own, certainly didn't mind a diversion.

"Not that we aren't thrilled to see you, Timothy, but what brings you down?" he asked while setting his cup of tea on his desk.

"Thought Kelly needed to see her Uncles." Tim smiled, handing Kelly off to Jimmy. "Well, that's part of it. There's another part as well..." He explained the situation to Ducky and wrapped up with. "I felt like he was playing me, but I don't know how. I figured that since you know everything about everything, that if anyone could spot the con, it'd be you."

Ducky smiled at that. "I appreciate your confidence in me, Timothy, and while it's true that I can 'spot the con' as you put it, I do not actually know everything about everything."

"Well, I suppose it doesn't matter if you can tell me the secrets of the universe, but I would like to know what he's got going on."

Ducky smiled in a manner that seemed to indicate he had more than a few of them on tap, as well. "A formal baptism is not, in fact, required. Catholics, and for that matter, most Christians, believe that any follower of Christ can baptize if necessary. Back in the pre-scientific age, holy water and oil was
part of any midwife's kit. If it looked like the baby wasn't going to survive until the Priest got there, she was empowered to take care of it.

"My guess is that he's planning on taking care of the matter behind your back, because from everything I've seen, he is a good man, so he is not going to leave your daughter in mortal peril because you are being a stubborn fool."

Jimmy shook his head. "How crazy has the world gotten when your priest is planning on conning you?"

Tim nodded absently at that. Good point, but not what he's focused on. "You think I'm being a fool?"

"I think that's how he would understand it."

"Ah." Tim waited a few beats, looking at Ducky, silently suggesting that he's still waiting for the answer to his question.

Ducky smiles gently at him. "I do not think standing up for the things that matter to you is foolish. I do think placing this much weight on something that, in the long run, likely does not matter, might be. And I do think that if this is causing any friction between you and Abby, then it is definitely foolish."

"No friction. We're fine. Just… figuring some things out. Mostly about symbols and how much they matter and… Do you believe in God? I know you and Penny go to church every now and again, but I don't know if you did before."

Jimmy's watching this, interested, somehow in all the hours, all the stories, all the conversations, that's one they hadn't gotten to.

"I believe in God. I do not believe in dogma. I believe that for most of humankind religion is a tribal marker. It's a way we sort ourselves into in groups and out groups. I believe that for much of human existence religion has made a place for itself by providing a useful order to the universe and a system of laws to produce some level of functional society. And I believe that those laws are, for the most part, and with many exceptions, a positive good. The basics of almost all systems of morality come from religious grounds. And I believe that the idea of sacred is important, vital, to a properly functional life. Is that helpful?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Ducky."

Gibbs took that moment to head into autopsy. He didn't even have to say anything. Jimmy just handed Kelly over straight away.

Gibbs smiled, kissed the top of her head, and gave her back to Tim. "Not why I'm down here."

"Jethro?"

"You haven't released Bufford's body, yet?"

"No, he's still enjoying our hospitality."

"Good. Need to double check something…"

Tim waved goodbye to them and headed up to find Abby.
Nannies

Back in grad school, Tim's girlfriend was a sociology major, specializing in feminine gender roles among pre-industrial societies.

Between Helen (said girlfriend) and growing up with a hard core, sex positive, second-wave-feminist, pacifist grandmother, he's still got something of a specialized vocabulary bouncing around his head that he very rarely uses.

One word that springs to mind is 'liminal.' The spaces on the edge or inbetween.

Politically he inhabits a liminal space of being simultaneously vastly more conservative than his grandmother/sister (and a few degrees to the right of Abby and Breena) and being wildly more liberal than Gibbs, Tony, or Ducky (and a few degrees to the left of Jimmy).

Mostly it's not the sort of thing that he really thinks much about. It's just something he's aware of, and occasionally takes some gentle ribbing about when election time rolls around. (From both sides, on one day in November of '12 he managed to get called a McBleeding-Heart by Tony and The Tin Man (no heart) by Sarah. They didn't much mean anything by it, beyond the fact that he wasn't voting for the same guy they were, but still…)

But right now he can feel years of liberal race/class/gender consciousness training creeping up and demanding he pay attention to it.

And the reason he can feel it, sitting there in the back of his mind, is that he and Abby are looking at the list of resumes that Anderson's Child Care Services sent over. It's the same agency that Vance used to find his nanny, and all of the women… people… one of them is a guy… appear to be highly trained, very competent, well-educated professionals determined to provide exceptionally good child care.

Great.

But he can't shake the idea of wealthy, career-oriented, white family hires brown woman from a less well-educated, less-affluent background to take care of the babies.

And it feels weird to even mention the fact that he's aware of it. That as he's looking through the resumes he can feel himself checking names, wondering about racial background and thinking about how the woman on the resume in front of him has a Latina name, but a master's degree in early child development, so hiring her isn't really a paradigm of privilege, right?

And it's not like they're planning on paying a sub-minimum wage to a woman who's here illegally and barely speaks English. These are hard-core professional women… people who have devoted their lives to providing top flight child care.

If this was a stack of resumes for the next member of his team, it wouldn't be an issue. If these were new hires for Cybercrime, he'd barely be aware of anything about them beyond the facts of the CV. But it's not.

They're nannies. The pinkest of the pink collar jobs, and he and Abby are so damn white they're practically translucent, and…

"Who do you like?" he asks Abby, figuring the easiest way to deal with this is to just let her pick.
She looks up from her computer. "So many good choices. But, it'd take forever to interview them all."

"We've got nine weeks. That's time to see twenty applicants. Compared to Vance, as long as we don't interview the entire agency, we're doing well."

Abby smiles at that. "There is that." He sees her flipping through the documents. "Marissa Allen, she stood out."

Tim flips through his own to find her, and scans her CV. "What…" Then he sees it. "Drummer for Twisted Puppies from '08-'11."

"Saw them live a few times." She grinned at him. "Besides, we want Kelly to have a sense of rhythm."

He chuckles at that, and adds her name to the call back list. "Okay, that's one."

"You know, this might be easier to just weed out the ones we don't want to see."

He nods. That's sensible. But… "None of the resumes we got said, 'Nope, Not Me!' to me."

"Me, either." Abby starts to type rapidly.

"Abby?"

"Sending Lara a note."

"Makes sense." Lara came from the same agency. And while it's true that she's been with Vance's family for more than three years now, she might have more of a sense of who the people they're looking at are than they can get from their resumes.

Tim kept reading through his stack, while Abby scanned hers. After a few minutes he said, "Okay, found one we can discard."

"What?"

"Looking for a live in position."

"Hold up on tossing that one." He's giving her the tell me what you're thinking look. "We both work insane hours. You aren't settled in Cybercrime, yet. We don't actually know how much having the other techs in the lab will change my schedule. We've got two bedrooms we aren't using, and a bathroom we almost never use. So, someone here all the time might be a good thing."

And, sure, that's logical but… It's a stranger, in his home, all the time.

His discomfort with that must show on his face because she nods and says, "Okay, no live in help."

"Thanks."

Kelly started to cry, letting them know she was awake and would appreciate some tending, so he went up to grab her.

"Good nap?"

She stopped crying when he came in, but didn't look pleased.
"Yeah, I'm usually not in a great mood right after I wake up, too." He picks her up, snuggling her close as he takes her over to the changing table, and gets started on changing her diaper. "Well, at least that was true until I started sleeping next to your mama all time. Tend to be in a pretty good mood when I wake up next to her."

The look Kelly's giving him is best described as, *Dad, I'm sure you find this amusing, but I'm hungry, so speed up on the diaper change and get me to Mom.*

He kissed her tummy and said, "Yes, love."

A minute later, he's downstairs, handing Kelly to Abby. "I think we've really got to see them. See who jells best with us, and with her. It's not about who's got the masters from the spiffiest university; it's who gets Kelly, and to a lesser degree, us, best."

"Yeah," she says as she gets Kelly settled on her breast. Kelly makes a pleased little sigh of a sound as she starts to nurse. "So, I guess I know what we're doing from now until you go back to work?"

"Guess so. I'm back on the twentieth, so that's ten days of interview time."

Abby thinks about that. "Five really. Doubt they want to do weekends, and I doubt we'll be able to get anyone in tomorrow."

"Good points. I'll go give them a call. See how many we can do."
On Saturday night, as they were getting ready for bed, Abby asked Tim, "How serious are you about Jimmy and Breena's church?"

It'd been almost a week since they saw Father John last, and Tim had informed Abby of Ducky's idea of what was going on, so they'd settled on skipping church for the next few weeks, see if that'd up the pressure and make John fold on the Godparents issue.

"Making sure that wasn't just 'I don't want to fold' talking?" he asks, putting toothpaste on his brush.

"Yeah." She reaches for her toothbrush.

"I'm serious." He hands her her toothpaste.

"I talked to Breena today. Service is at eleven tomorrow."

"Okay."

"Sunday dinner is at Ed and Jeannie's after."

That got a startled look out of Tim, he put his own toothbrush down. They've had hundreds of half-garbled conversations that come from talking while brushing their teeth, but he wants this to be clear. "So… we go to church, and we're… joining the extended family?"

She smiles at him. "That's what you said, right? A place where our family gathers? We're already part of the extended Slater family. But yeah, that's the tradition. Church, then supper at the Slaters', according to Breena there's football or baseball on the television after, they're Redskins and Nationals fans, but Jimmy usually runs to Bootcamp before that. Breena and both of her sisters, and their guys, and Ed's brother Tom, and his family, and Jeannie's brother and sister, and, yeah, the whole clan'll be there."

"How many Slaters attend that church?" Tim asked after picking his toothbrush back up.

"I don't know. A whole lot of them." Spit, rinse, brush some more. "Breena says they've been part of that congregation for a very long time, like since her great-grandparents got married, and it's also part of their business model."

"Guess that makes sense," he says, and grabs the mouthwash. After all, if you run a funeral home, it's probably a good idea to have deep ties to the local community. And it probably doesn't hurt if you're close to a Pastor or two, who may, should the need arise, suggest someone to take care of the dearly departed to the grieving family.

It occurs to Tim as he heads in, that with the exception of a few weddings, funerals, and Molly's christening, he's never actually been to a Protestant church service.

Sure, he's heard people call Episcopalians Catholic-lites but, at least at this church, it looks a lot different.

First and foremost, the Pastor is a woman. That's an awfully unsubtle hint that he's not in a Catholic church. The décor is quite a bit more restrained than St. Sebastians, but St. Sebastian's was old and in
They'd been around long enough to have the Stations of the Cross carved in ivory on the walls. There's nothing even remotely like that here. (Of course, from the ten minutes of googling he did this morning, Tim got the sense this was the sort of place that would find having ivory anything, even if they were antique objects of art specially made by one of the parishioners back in the 1850s, horrendously embarrassing.) No Confessionals that he can see, and he makes a mental note to ask Jimmy about that.

They're waiting in the entry of St. Mary's when the Pastor heads over to welcome them. And just like at St. Sebastian's she's warm, pleasant, (spends a minute cooing over Kelly) lets them know all are welcome. She asks about their religious background, and Abby says they're Catholic. The Pastor, Emma Brons, (Mother Emma? Obviously Father Emma isn't going to work.) smiles, lets them know that a lot of the service will look familiar, and the biggest practical difference is that everyone is welcome and encouraged to take Communion.

Abby's smiling and nodding, making polite conversation, asking questions. Tim's mostly standing there and holding Kelly.

Finally Jimmy and Breena find them, but Molly's not with them.

"Oh, good, you've found everything," Jimmy says to him while Breena joins the ladies' conversation. "Do you want to take Kelly to the nursery?"

"Nursery?" Tim asks. There was an idea that hadn't occurred to him.

"They've got a nursery for babies under three. It runs the whole length of the service," Jimmy answers, gesturing behind him.

"Oh." Tim looks a little doubtful about that, but if Jimmy and Breena are comfortable with Molly being there… "Lead the way."

They're halfway down a long hall off to the side of the entry, one filled with what looks like brightly decorated classrooms.

"So, you guys don't do the nursery at St. Sebastians?" Jimmy asks.

"Don't have one. Kids come for the full Mass."

"Oh." Jimmy winces at that. The idea of a church service filled with small, loud, squirmy people, let alone having to be the guy making the small, loud, squirmy person behave isn't anything he'd relish. "Not here. Little guys stay in the nursery. Older kids attend the service for the first ten minutes, then they have the children's sermon, and then they go off to nursery school."

"Hmmm… That's different."

"Keeps them from going bonkers."

"I can imagine." Tim had personally spent what felt like ninety million hours of being a very small, very young, very squirmy person trying to listen to some old fart drone on and on and on while his Dad glared daggers at him for not 'behaving.'

"Okay, here we are." Jimmy opened the door to a brightly lit room and the sound of twenty babies and toddlers rolled over Tim. There were six women in there, taking care of the kids, and right that second he was immensely glad to not have their job.

Molly, who was playing with some blocks, saw them, and ran over. "Uncle Tim!"
He knelt down and kissed her forehead. "Hey, Molly."

"Kelly?" She's not really talking in sentences, yet. She's got most of her sounds, (Though th is a problem. Gibbs is Uncle Jetro.) and tends to talk in one or two word questions/statements.

"Yes. Kelly's going to stay with you today. You going to show her the ropes?"

Molly didn't appear to know what that meant, because she was looking around for ropes. (She understands, at least on a literal level, way more than she can express.) He kissed her head again. "Not real ropes. We're going to go to church with your parents, and then come to dinner at…" He looks to Jimmy, "What are Ed and Jeannie?"

"Poppie and Gramma."

"And then we're going to dinner at Gramma and Poppie's house."

Molly nodded, looking very pleased by this development. Then she scuttled off, found who Tim is assuming is her favorite of the nursery ladies, dragged her to them, and said to her, very seriously, "Uncle Tim, Kelly."

"Hi, I'm Melissa James. First time at St. Mary's?"

"Yes."

"Well, your little girl is going to be just fine with us. All of our caregivers are certified in CPR, and if you want to take a moment and fill out this form..." She led him over to one of the tiny tables and grabbed some paperwork en route. "We can get your Kelly settled in."

"Okay, thanks." He handed Kelly over, little nervous, but if Jimmy and Breena trust these people with Molly, they know what they're doing, and got down to filling out the paperwork.

A minute later, Melissa was handing him small sticker with a number on it. "Kelly has the matching number. Don't lose it, because that's how we know which parents go with which babies."

"How do you make sure it stays on the baby?"

"Put it on the diaper. That way, even if it falls off, it stays in her clothing."

"Makes sense."

"Did you come with your wife?"

"Yeah."

"I'll get you another number."

"Thanks."

The service was… a service. More than familiar enough. Bits and pieces (like the kids all leaving after the children's service) were different, but not so much he couldn't zone out.

Being stuck in what was one of four pews filled with Slaters was different.

Church attendance was a sticking point with his dad, so every single week until he got out of his
But he's never been part of one of them.

Meanwhile, being stuck in a sea of Slaters, being introduced to all of them (For the second or third time. He met, at least for a second, most of them at Jimmy and Breena's wedding and Molly's christening, and probably most of them at Jon's funeral, but he wasn't paying enough attention to notice anyone he didn't already know, then.) and watching them spend half an hour after the service catching up, because, apparently not all of them were going to dinner after, felt really strange.

There are more people here in these four pews than were at his entire wedding.

They joke about the Gibbs clan. But this mass of Slaters really is a clan. And to some degree it is a bit intimidating. This if family in that massive sticky wodge of intertwined relationships and history that goes back before everyone standing in this church was born.

Tim suddenly gets exactly how much tradition Jimmy and Breena bucked by having them as Molly's godparents. And knowing that, he's feeling very, very sure that returning the favor matters, a lot.

Jeannie and Ed's place was the land of carbs. The whole house is filled with beautiful food, and none of it looks edible for Jimmy.

Tim chooses to usually avoid carbs, he feels a bit better and has an easier time managing his weight when he avoids them. But, it's a choice. And surrounded by piles of luscious food, he may decide to reverse that choice for an afternoon, and work extra hard at Bootcamp.

But it's not a choice for Jimmy, not really. He can but shouldn't eat them. Especially not in the heaping piles that are covering every horizontal surface in the Slaters' dining room.

Tim actually pulled Jimmy aside and said, very quietly, "Are they trying to poison you?"

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "They think diabetes is some form of bizarre idiosyncrasy."

Tim stares at a table laden with lasagnas, beautiful golden brown garlic bread loaves, something that might have been baked manicotti, the green beans were in some sort of casserole with crunchy bits on top, the only other vegetable he could see was baked carrots, and the salad was generously studded with croutons. On a sidebar, there's a collection of fancy cookies, two different cakes, and cannoli. He can feel his mouth water and stomach rumble at all of that lovely food, but he's feeling really bad for Jimmy.

"Thank God, you don't have Celiac."

Jimmy sighed at that. "They think I should just up my insulin and deal, and Ed'll make a few cracks about me not eating enough to keep a bird alive."

"What do you do?"

"Salad, veg, some weeks they'll have a turkey or roast beef, too, and I'll eat that."
"Too?"

"Yeah, this is the smaller version of the spread. At least once a month, Ed's other brother and the rest of Jeannie's family shows up. There's at least seventy people here that week."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

By the end of the meal, Tim knew a whole lot more about the funeral industry than he ever expected to. Apparently, most of the "family owned" funeral homes were, once upon a time, family run businesses that had been bought out by large chains that kept the local names. Competition was, to put it mildly, deadly fierce. And the Slaters were one of only two multi-location family businesses still standing in the greater DC area.

From what he could gather, the reason they were still around was that they basically ran their own chain. Ed and his brothers each had at least one location under their control. They expanded with their children, waiting until one was old enough, focused enough, to run their own branch, and then bought/built a new location.

Breena, as the oldest of Ed's kids, was expected to take over her father's primary shop. He also ran one smaller funeral home (one of his Uncle's original shops) that would go to Amy or Christine, depending on which one looked up for it soonest. The other would have a shop built for her when she was ready for it.

So, basically, Ed's shop was the training ground for his kids. Add in experienced hands to make sure they learned the trade properly, recognition value from the name, and a huge pool of collected capital for expansion when the next generation was ready, and they were a very stable business.

And, as much as he thinks Ed is a massive jerk, Tim is pretty impressed with the level of organized providing-for he's done for his girls. (Though he's curious as to what would happen if one of them didn't want to be a funeral director. After all, his dad had that level of planning done for his career, too. He filed that away for something to talk to Breena about when they aren't at her parents' home.)

The crew (including Abby and Breena) was settling down for baseball when Jimmy said, "Time for us to be heading off."

Tim checked the clock. It's an hour earlier than he'd have left for Bootcamp, but he also wouldn't have needed to grab lunch before getting there.

"Oh, yeah, that thing where his boss tries to beat some spine into you, right?" Ed says.

Jimmy grits his teeth and pretends Ed didn't actually say that. "Yeah, Ed."

"I like Gibbs. Man's got character, grit. You guys should invite him for next Sunday."

Tim tries to imagine Gibbs in this crowd. He figures Gibbs would be out of here in less than ten minutes. "He's usually busy early Sunday, but we'll pass it along."
"Busy?" One of the assorted Uncles, (Will? Wes? Tim has no idea what his name is.) asked.

"We're on call one weekend a month, and the other three he spends working on his boat," Tim replies.

"I told you about that, Dad," Breena adds.

"Right, he's the guy who uses his own house as the bottle he builds boats in." That got the rest of the crew interested in the Amazing Gibbs who says nothing, builds boats in his basement, and beats Jimmy to a pulp (to hear Ed tell it) on a weekly basis. Jimmy and Tim use that as an excuse to slip away.

"And now I understand why you're always so happy to pound the crud out of me on Sundays."

Jimmy flashed him a quick, and not particularly happy, smile, as he puts his key in the ignition. They're taking Jimmy's car to Bootcamp. Abby and Breena are going to carpool home in Abby's car.

"How do you do that every week?"

"Valium." He says it deadpan enough that Tim's honestly not sure if he's kidding. Jimmy sees the confusion and shakes his head. "No, not really. I love Breena. She loves them. So, I've at least got to tolerate them. I mean, I knew I was getting into this when I married her. Honestly, I spent a good six months really thinking about it before I proposed, because she made it clear she was a package deal. If I wanted her, I was getting all of them, too. And, it's worth it... but..." Jimmy lets out a long sigh. "Yeah, Bootcamp. I love Bootcamp. Before Bootcamp, I'd get home and run for at least two hours."

"And I can see why."

"Believe it or not, they're actually being nice to me. Rod, Christine's last boyfriend, didn't pass muster, and, God, that was horrendously uncomfortable."

"What's horrendously uncomfortable?" Tim's curious about that, because if Jimmy's the pet son-in-law, the idea of what must happen to guys they don't like is terrifying.

"Okay, Ed doesn't love me, but the rest of them treat me okay. I think they're under the impression that a properly functioning father-in-law is supposed to be constantly putting the Fear of Dad into you, making sure that you know, every single second of every day that you are not worthy of his daughter and the entire reason for your existence is to continually strive to be worthy of her. This happens until some sort of magic switch flips and suddenly you're deemed worthy of helping his daughter take over the family business. And since I turned that down, my guess is I never get to be treated like a real human by him. But all the rest of the guys can treat you like a human."

"All right." Tim silently thanks Gibbs for not being that flavor of bastard.

"So, Rod shows up for church, and first of all he's in shorts and a t-shirt." And yes, Breena had indicated that dressy casual was the way to go here, and a suit wouldn't be considered out of line. So, Tim donned his usual church suit. "And all of them ganged up on him. And, look, Rod wasn't my idea of a good boyfriend, either. He didn't show Christine enough respect. And I've got no problem smacking a guy who calls out to my wife, 'Hun, grab me a beer,' when he's standing ten feet from the refrigerator, and she's on the other side of the room and has to walk past him to get it. So, I'll admit, I joined in on it. But that poor guy was like a side of beef in a tank of irritable, hungry, snarky
piranhas, who earned points with each other by who could take the biggest bite out of him."
"I'm deeply glad not to be a perspective in-law."
"Yeah. So far we're the first ones to bring friends to this, but they seem to be treating you pretty well."
"Compared to my dad, Ed's a piker—"
"So's Charles Manson."
Tim smiles, appreciating that. "Not saying you're wrong, but I had a point there."
"Okay."
"Just saying, between my Dad and Tony, and hell Kate, or Ziva... Well, no one at Ed's is going to superglue me to a large, stationary object. Two snide comments about my wrist cuff and goatee... Tony used to give me more crap than that in the chunk of time between fetching the first of the morning coffee and finishing it. Everyone treated Abby well, and behaved like Kelly was the second-most darling baby girl on earth." Molly and Kelly are the only babies in the Slater clan right now. Though Molly does have several older cousins who start at age five and range up to fifteen. "So, yeah, that was more than I ever needed to know about funeral homes, but not really a problem."
"Okay, I guess it did go well."
Tim chuckled sarcastically. "Easy to have a nice family gathering when your standards are as low as mine... So, since they sort of approve of you, you only have to deal with Ed being a jerk and Jeannie trying to kill you?"
"Yeah. Though in her defense, I honestly think she doesn't get it. 'Cause, sure I can have an extra dose of carbs or sugar from time to time, but I feel pretty nasty after, so it's got to be amazingly good food to make it worth it."
"Like those ribs at Tony's bachelor party."
"Oh my God, yes, like those ribs! That was worth it. Hell, driving to North Carolina, shooting up insulin, night without Breena, and the sugar crash after was worth it. And one of these days, when we actually manage to have no pregnant wives between us, we're taking the girls and introducing them to those ribs."
Tim's nodding. He's on board with that idea. "Good plan."
"Oh yeah. Anyway, Jeannie's a great cook, and I actually do love Italian food, which I basically can't eat anymore, but I will, on a rare occasion, when we don't have Bootcamp after, snag a cannoli, because those are just amazing. She makes the whole thing, including the shells, from scratch."
Tim made a quiet mmmm sound. He'd had two (promising himself to work extra hard at Bootcamp), and they were little wads of creamy, chocolate-y, crispy heaven.
"So, she's more under the impression that I'm being an ultra-sensitive pain in the ass by not eating her food. And Ed, who will go to the wall to defend his girls, which includes Jeannie, will pick on me for it, because he considers it an insult to her."
"Great."
"Yeah."

"So, what are we getting you for lunch?"  

"You're back!" Ziva said, pleased smile on her face when she saw Tim walk in with Jimmy.

"And looking awfully fancy," Gibbs added. "You just visiting?"

Tim usually shows up dressed to work out: t-shirt, sweats, and sneakers. (Jimmy usually shows up dressed for church.) He'd worn a suit to church, and sure, the tie and jacket are back in Abby's car (It's July, and hot, so all the guys got rid of the jackets and ties and rolled up their sleeves about two minutes after getting out of the St. Mary's), but that means, like Jimmy, he's in a button down, dress slacks, and dress shoes.  

"Went to church with Jimmy and Breena. They don't take kindly to showing up in your workout clothing." Jimmy just nods at them. Showing up and taking a few minutes to change is his usual routine, and Tim follows.

Five minutes later, he's warming up with Gibbs, while Ziva puts Jimmy through his paces, and mentions, "Jimmy and I are supposed to pass along the invite to church and Sunday dinner with the Slaters to you. Apparently, you have 'grit,' and Ed likes you."

Gibbs lets go of the punching bag. (He'd been holding it steady while Tim worked it over.) He's just watching Tim.

So, Tim continues, "And neither of us will be in the least insulted if you develop some sort of massively time intensive hobby that eats up every Sunday for the rest of your life. In fact, Jimmy might encourage you to develop one."

"Run away, Gibbs, run!" Jimmy says, smiling, ducking under Ziva's arm, catching her hand in his and nicely spinning her around.

"He's getting a lot better at that," Tim says to Gibbs.

"Yes, he is." Gibbs is smiling. Actually, Tim's finding that smile a bit unnerving, because he doesn't know what it means. Gibbs gestures to the punching bags. "Elbow and knee strikes, right side."

Tim gets to it, mostly paying attention to Gibbs heading over to the boxing ring where Jimmy and Ziva are sparring.

Gibbs leans against the ropes, letting them wind down. Sure, Ziva won, but Jimmy can go a good six minutes with her now, and hold his own. (Well, not get too badly killed.)

"That a serious invite? Or was Ed just blowing smoke?"

Jimmy leans against the ropes, panting. Ziva's watching them, gulping down water.

"I think it was serious."

"You want me there?"

"You'd come?" Jimmy looks stunned by that idea. "It's church and a gathering of up to seventy
people just standing around, talking funerals, and eating. And, Ed's not exactly your favorite person."

"Nope. But he's your kids' grandfather, your wife's dad. Like it or not, he's family. Not like I've never been to church before. Used to do it regular when Shannon and Kelly were alive. Used to do Sunday dinner, long time back, with my grandparents."


Gibbs shrugs at that. "You want me to invite him to Bootcamp? Let him see what you can do?"

"God. No! You do that, and I'll have a day where I trip over my own feet just getting into the ring. This is fun. This is how I blow off the stress of Sunday Dinner. I'd like it to stay that way."

Gibbs nods, and then a slow smile spread across his face. "You ever want to put him in his place, and if he comes, you will put him in his place, he's more than invited to join us."
Dinner at the DiNozzos'

Apparently there are some problems money can solve. And looking at an email with a schedule for interviewing all nineteen of the potential nannies over the next four days reminded Tim very clearly why he was happy to write a check that big to Anderson's. (And reminded him that he needs to be spending as much non-interview time writing over the next week as he can.)

Tuesday to Friday, they've got interviews. A ton of interviews.

Possibly sending a note saying, 'We're free all week, fit as many as you can in,' wasn't the best idea ever. He was thinking they'd see, maybe, five.

But nope, all nineteen. In four days.

Wow!

Okay, time to write up some questions.

Sometimes people just fit.

It would have been nice to say that had been the case with any of the perspective nannies. Just like with their resumes, they're lovely, talented, devoted people. But none of them felt like, 'Yes, this is the exact right person I want in my home taking care of my child.'

As Tony put it when they were talking about it at Shabbos, "No Pah!"

Abby shook her head, "Not even a…" She made a soft p sound.

"There's nothing wrong with any of them. They're all charming, driven, focused, professionals. They'd all probably do a great job. But none of them click."

"What happens next?" Jethro asks, holding Kelly on his lap while eating a bite of the cold cucumber-dill soup Ziva had made for supper. Shabbos supper is sushi (Which is apparently Kosher. That was a surprise to Gibbs, but fish is parve, and as long as it had fins back when it was swimming, it's okay to eat. So sure, no octopus, squid, or clam, but tuna, sea bass, and salmon are fine.) and the soup. So, fancy enough to be a celebration dinner, but no heat needed to make any of it. He never thought he'd go for cold soup, but with as hot as it's been lately, this is awfully nice.

"Call ten of them back, and pick them out basically by tossing darts at the board," Tim answers.

"What do you want out of a nanny?" Jimmy asks.

"Same thing you would, Palmer, thirty-six, twenty-four, thirty-six, right, McGee?" Tony says with a smirk as he's returning to the table with more sushi. Tim whacks him in the hip, glaring.

Tony laughed.

"The problem isn't what we want," Abby says. "Looks like they'll all provide excellent care. It's some way to tell that one of them will do a better job than one of the other ones."

"Yeah, besides having a knee-jerk aversion to tweed—"
"What, Timothy, is wrong with tweed?" Ducky says, looking amused.

"Nothing, on you or Jimmy, during winter or fall, but on a fifty-year-old woman with a proper British accent, in the middle of summer, it just makes me feel like I'm about to be taken to the Principal's office and reprimanded."

Abby chuckles. "Okay, yeah, that one was funny. The whole time we're doing the interview he's staring at her like a deer in the headlights, looking like he wants to run away. He didn't ask a single question, and just about sprinted to go get it when she asked for a glass of water."

Penny's smiling at him, nodding. "Sister Mary Bernadette."

"Yeah," Tim says, shaking his head.

"Is there a story behind that name?" Jimmy asks.

"Oh yeah."

"Is this your agitated nuns story?" Ziva asks.

Tim stares at her for a second, and then he remembered the Doyle case with the image of the bleeding nun statue buried in the video.

"Nope, agitated nuns were from California. This was Annapolis. Second time we lived there?"

"Third. You were born there, too." Penny nods.

"Right, second time I remember living there. Anyway, I was eight. Public schools were okay, but the gifted program was too easy, so I'm at Saint Mary's Elementary. She was in charge of our class, and was very, very strict, very British, and very fond of year round tweed. Huge woman, at least, it felt like she was ten-feet-tall and six hundred pounds, with a perpetual glare on her face. One of those women who had every ounce of joy surgically removed from her personality."

"She taught third grade for thirty years. That'll suck the joy out of most people," Penny adds.

"Anyway, cardinal rule of the class, thou shalt make no noise, at all, ever. You didn't want to even breathe loud in her class. And I had a friend in the desk next to mine, Michael, and he really thought it was absolutely hysterical to get me in trouble. So, she'd be writing things on the board, droning away about whatever, and he'd start flashing goofy faces at me. I'd be staring at the back of her neck, trying not to see it, but you can't not see the guy with the two pencils up his nose sticking his tongue out at you. So, invariably, I'd look over, and start to laugh, and within a second I'd hear the crack of her pointer slamming down on my desk, she had this way of doing it so that it'd land less than a hair away from your fingers, but she never actually hit them. And then six hundred pounds of ten-foot-tall Nun was looming over me, saying," Tim tried a British accent to go with his impression of Mary Bernadette, but killed it, and not in a good way, "'Mr. McGee, do you need to leave class?' or 'Mr. McGee, do I need to tell your father that you couldn't behave?" He shuddered for effect.

"And as a result you're scarred for life?" Brenna asks, joking.

"As a result, I apparently find large women with British accents and head to toe tweed disconcerting. Ms… Corday? River Corday?" Abby nods. "Anyway, she looks like a great nanny. She's practically Mary Poppins. The only thing going against her is the fact that I've had issues with tweed-wearing authority figures in the past. But that's the thing, they're all great. The best we've been able to do in weeding them out is one needs a live-in position, and one likes tweed."
Jimmy stares at them for a moment. "Talk about your first world problems."

"Oh, yes, we know. We really know," Tim says.

"Yeah, 'Oh no, we've got tons of really ultra-qualified people who want to take care of our baby. Boo hoo!'" Abby adds with a hefty dollop of sarcasm.

"But, the fact that it's a stupid problem doesn't make it any less real. So, next few weeks, Abby'll see ten of them longer, see how they do with Kelly, and we'll both hope—"

"Pray," Abby adds.

"That one of them will finally click."

A bit later, Tim asked Tony, "So, how was the first week as Team Leader?"

Gibbs grinned, Ziva rolled her eyes, and Tony groaned.

"So much paperwork!"

Gibbs smirked. "Haven't had this much free time since '97. Managed to get to bed before midnight every night this week. Cut two cups a coffee a day because of that."

"Jerry," the man who runs the coffee stand outside of the Navy Yard, "wanted to know if you were sick or something. Tells me he's got a new Harley he's paying off, and you're not doing your part," Tony says, making the other's laugh. Then he switches topics, a bit. "You're back on Monday, right?" Tony asks Tim.

"Yep."

"Good."

Tim sees the gleam in Tony's eyes and says, "Oh no. No. No. I am not your paperwork boy anymore. No. I've got more than enough on my own plate right now. SecNav wants my next report. He outranks you by a mile. I've got tests to write. Just finished the latest Deep Six rough draft, so now I've got to go back and beat it into shape for my editor. I'm not doing your crap, too. You wanted Team Leader, enjoy it."

"Come on…"

"No."

Tony's aiming puppy eyes at Ziva. She shakes her head. "McGee's better at your signature."

"McGee's better at my signature than I am."

"Probably because a good two-thirds of them come from me. It's not hard. There were only two things I knew cold by the end of my first week on Gibbs' team, Tony's signature and don't mess with Jethro's coffee."

That got a laugh.
"You want me to train Draga on it?" Tim asks. Just because he doesn't want to do the paperwork doesn't mean he wants the team's ability to do the work bogging down in unfiled reports.

"Already tried. I dropped a pile of paper on Flyboy's desk, he looked at it for a second, flipped through the pages, and then said, "I'm really pleased with your confidence in me, but until I've got the title of Team Leader, I'm not doing the Team Leader paperwork."

"Give it to me on Monday. I'm not filling it out, but I'll explain to Draga some of the glorious joys of being the tech guy, let alone the probie tech guy." And, it's possible the smile of Tim's face may have indicated a certain level of mean pleasure at the idea of foisting that job off to someone new.

"Aren't you the senior agent, now?" Abby asks Gibbs.

Gibbs shrugs. None of them are claiming the spot right now. He's got the years, but is leaving in January. Tim's senior to Ziva, but also leaving at some time in the not wildly distant future. Ziva's the one who's really going to get the job, but she doesn't seem to mind being in limbo until the three of them get fully settled.

"Isn't the paperwork your job?"

Gibbs just shakes his head. "Tony only thought I was tossing it all on him."

"You mean me. You don't think he did your paperwork, did you?" Tim adds. "Took an extra three weeks, but I can do your signature, too. Ziva's the only one who does all her own paperwork."

"If I knew you would fill out any page that hit your desk…" Ziva says with a smile.

"Don't even think about it. I don't have your signature down, and I'm not feeling any compelling reason to learn it."

"So, besides a massive paperwork backlog, how's it going?" Penny asks.

Tony smiles a little. "Better. Draga still doesn't love me, but he's a lot clearer about where the lines are now. That Jethro will take orders from me makes a lot of difference. Basically, since he's not second guessing me, and he's been around longer than dirt. No offense." Gibbs shoots him the you're being a smartass look, but doesn't whack him upside the head. "Anyway, if Gibbs, with his vast experience, thinks I know what I'm doing, that's good enough for Draga."

"He is asking more, why do we do it like this questions and fewer do you know what you're doing questions." Ziva says.

"How's he doing on tech?" Tim asks.

"Fine." Tony answers. "Not as fast as you are, but he's doing the job. He's better in the field, but he's handling tech."

"That mean I'm riding the desk Monday?"

"Maybe. Let's see what comes up. I want him handling all the basic tech and working with you for the advanced stuff until you leave. Field time isn't going to vanish anytime soon. You are. So we're going to make the most of it."
Dinner was breaking up when Gibbs asked Breena, "What time is church tomorrow?"

"You're really going to come?" She also looks amazed by this.

"Sure." They're in Tony and Ziva's bedroom, she's getting Molly, and he just wanted a shot to talk to her alone.

"It's at eleven."

"I offered to invite Ed to Bootcamp. Jimmy said he didn't want that."

Her eyebrows shot up.

"He ever changes his mind about that, are you okay with it?"

"Uh… Inviting him to Bootcamp to do what?" Breena looks very concerned by this development, because she's awfully sure this isn't a friendly offer to workout.

"Learn firsthand that Jimmy deserves his respect."

"Jethro?" She wants to make sure she's absolutely clear what they're talking about here.

"Beat that fact into him if need be."

She looks disturbed by that, but doesn't immediately say no. "Tell me how you think this'll work."

"Your father and your husband are the two most important men in your life. In your kids' lives while they're little, too. It's not good for you to be caught in the middle. And it's not good for them to see him disrespect their father. I was sure, after Jon died, that he'd ease up on Jimmy, see that he was a good man, a good husband, and a good father. But it sounds like he still doesn't get it. If he doesn't respect that, maybe he'll respect force."

"He respects money, Jethro. He's worried that Jimmy doesn't make enough to support our family."

Gibbs thinks about that for a moment. He's never asked and doesn't actually want to know, but…

Okay, you don't get fabulously rich on a government salary, but you also pretty much can't be fired, the benefits are gold plated, and your family gets taken care of after you die. Whenever Ducky retires, Jimmy'll be going up about five pay grades. (The jump between Assistant ME and ME is huge at the Navy Yard branch because ME also comes with Director of Autopsy.) He knows Breena is making money, too, so…

"Won't be able to support you, or won't be able to buy you diamonds and vacations in Switzerland?"

She smiles wryly. "Is there a difference?"

Gibbs gets it, and it shows on his face.

She nods. "Yeah. Add in Jimmy not wanting to work for Slater's, which I completely support and approve of… but… In my family that's almost divorce insurance. Guys don't leave when their whole life is wrapped up in the family. We're like the funeral home mafia, once you're in, you're in, and there's no getting out. But Jimmy's not in, not the way my uncles are, not the way my cousins' husbands are, and that worries my dad. But, mostly, I think it's money. And I don't know if you and Jimmy punching him into a pulp will help with that."

Gibbs smiled a little and inclined his head, indicating that he understood what she was saying. "Might make Jimmy feel better."
That got a smile out of Breena, too. Then a sigh. "They're both adults. If they need to fight it out, fine. I think it's stupid, but if it happens, yeah, I'll be okay with it. I'm not going to cry on Jimmy if he coldcocks my dad. There have certainly been times I've wanted to do it for things he's said to Jimmy, too. And if my dad cries on me, I'll remind him that getting into fights with guys who are thirty years younger and use fighting as a way to workout is a really bad idea. And I might then suggest to him that a certain level of politeness is due to the guy who knocked him flat."

"Okay. Just wanted to make sure it wouldn't cause trouble with you and Jimmy."

"No. He's my dad, and I love him, and I know he wants the best for me, but his idea of the best and mine didn't exactly match. I want kindness, love, and joy. He wants wealth and security."

Gibbs nods. Then he kissed Breena and Molly's foreheads. "Thanks. Won't let anyone get really hurt if it comes down to it."

"Good."
When Gibbs was a child, church, Sunday dinner, and gathering with the whole family had been part of every week. It wasn't a huge gathering, not like this never-ending crowd of Slaters, but his parents, his Aunt, her family, his grandparents, and their siblings, all got together.

But in his family, the women were the glue. His grandmother died, and Sunday dinner limped along for a few years, his mom and his aunt keeping it going. But his mom got sick, and then she died, and his aunt didn't have the heart to do it on her own.

Shannon had lived in Stillwater when they were courting, and when he was in town, he went to church and Sunday supper at their home.

They'd moved around a lot, finally gotten settled in DC, and his mother and father-in-law eventually moved down, wanting to be closer to Kelly and Shannon. His dad even made it down a few times a year.

For two years, Sunday dinner was at his house. He doesn't think about that too much. Not that they aren't good memories. They are. But like a lot of his good memories, they hurt. Though that's starting to get better. Maybe not good, but it's not an open wound held together by tendrils of avenging anger and numbing booze anymore.

But like his birth family, the women were the glue, and when his girls died…

This time though, he's here for his boys. He's glad to see Tim giving Jimmy some back-up on this. Visiting your in-laws shouldn't be walking into a lion's den, but if it is, it's good to have friends at your back. And if they're going to invite him to come along, he'll come along and keep an eye on Jimmy's flanks.

Like with Tim's first visit, he's very aware that no one in this family is going out of their way to make Jimmy welcome.

Not that Gibbs is known for hospitality, but there is a bottle of Gin (And a bottle of Absinthe is in the works for a birthday present. No, it's not legal in the US. Some favors are in the process of being called in, and buddy of a buddy who'll getting home on leave soon should have a few bottles stowed in his luggage.) in his basement next to the Scotch and Bourbon.

There's black coffee strong enough to peel the tar off the roof, and it was handed to him by Jeannie within seconds of him entering her home. And sure, it may not be there for just him, but he doesn't notice anyone else drinking it.

So, he's welcome, and judging by the fact that no one else is drinking coffee, they have gone out of their way to extend a welcome to him.

But not to Jimmy.

The girls are mingling easily. Abby's been getting some interested looks. If he had to guess, she's explained her tattoos about nine times. But it's mostly curious, not much hostile. Though Abby being Abby tends to smother hostile with warm happiness.
And Kelly's got an adoring collection of bigger girls cooing over her. Something about tween girls, they like babies, especially darling little ones in a tiny pink sun dress. (Apparently Abby and Tim decided Kelly didn't need to break out the goth-wear for church.)

Of course, this is probably a very girl friendly house. His always was. Kelly and her little tribe of buddies giggling in his backyard, he can remember that very clearly, smiles a little at it.

Tim and Jimmy tend to stay together, and near him. They don't mingle as easily, but conversation around this group tends to range from business issues, to the Nationals, (Turns out Jimmy's a fan. Gibbs takes some ribbing for the Pirates, but the look of death killed it pretty fast. Then the idea that Tim doesn't have a team percolates through, and apparently that had about the same effect as walking into the Slaters' in a skirt and eyeliner. Wedding ring, baby daughter in his arms, wife who he's kissed a few times, it doesn't matter, the collection of Slater Uncles and Cousins are fairly sure he's gay. Can't be a man without a team. Tim just rolled his eyes.) and back to the business.

They spend so much time in their own little NCIS world, where everyone knows everyone else, that Gibbs has never had to really think much about who he is in relation to these people he's collected into his family. But, this isn't NCIS. The various Slaters have met him maybe three times.

He's a vaguely familiar face somehow attached to Jimmy.

And of course, there are some stories, and they can see who he came in with, but, "Oh, you're Tim and Abby's…” and that's how that sentence goes. It just sort of trails off, because they don't know where he fits.

First time it happens he just lets it go. Doesn't answer. Smiles, nods, shakes hands, moves onto the next introduction.

Second time, he catches Tim's eye, (Wants to make sure this is okay with him. He knows Abby'll be good with what he wants to say.) and Tim nods, knowing what that look means. So he says, "Kind of complicated, but Dad'll cover it."

"I thought you were Jimmy's boss." Breena's cousin says.

He shook his head. "Duck's Jimmy's Boss. I'm Tim's, or used to be, until last week."

"Long as you're there, you're still my Boss," Tim says.

"Something happen?" The cousin, Fred, asks.

"I'm retiring in January. He's taking over his own department soon. New member of the team just joined up. Slid Tony into the Boss slot to make everything run better."

"Oh." Fred doesn't seem to get that, but he's willing to nod and smile.

"It's disappointing, right?" Ed says. Gibbs had been standing on the back porch, leaning against the railing, watching the kids run around the backyard, grabbing a few minutes of quiet. (Okay, it's not quiet, there are five shrieking kids playing something tag-like, but it's also not making small talk with strangers. Maybe restful is a better word.) Ed joining him wasn't exactly what he was hoping for for this moment.
Ed's looking at him expectantly. Gibbs raises his eyebrows a bit.

"You have girls, and you want something for them, a kind of future, a man strong enough to be a…
man. And they bring home these cute, fluffy things and expect you to think that they'll make great
husbands."

It's possible that Ed isn't talking about Jimmy, though Gibbs doesn't think that's the case, but he
might as well make sure. So he looks, pointedly, through the sliding glass door separating them from
the dining room, at the twit that Amy's got hanging on her arm. Handbag, that's what Tony'd call
him. And, really, he's probably not a bad guy, but as a cute, fluffy thing goes, he'll fit the bill.

Ed sighs. "Yeah. Him, too. He's a 'consultant' for graphic design firms. I think that's code for
unemployed. I run a successful business, and she brings me a long line of unemployed or barely
employed guys. But, you're a Marine, all Hoo Rah, and… your girls brought you the Clown and
Tech Support. At least DiNozzo looks like he's got some backbone hiding under that Clown
exterior."

Gibbs gives him a long, cold look.

"You, me, we aren't going to be around forever, and they pick cute. Cute doesn't keep the wolf from
the door."

Gibbs' look was nearing absolute zero.

Ed is watching Amy talk with the Handbag, leaning into him, hanging on his every word as he
strokes her back. "I worry for them. Don't want push to come to shove and for them to find out
they've got no one to back them up."

And, yes, that resonates with Gibbs, but, nope, no one is saying that about his boys. "You think I
know tough when I see it?"

Ed looks away from Amy to him. "Sure."

"Think I've seen my fair share of losers and creeps?"

"Probably yours are a few others."

Gibbs nods; that's true. "I am not disappointed in Jimmy, Tim or Tony. There are five men I trust
with my life. Four of 'em I want at my back in a fight, and two of them are in your home right now,
one's married to your daughter. Wolf comes to the door, Jimmy'll snap it's neck, and before it stops
twitching, Tim'll shoot it between the eyes from 200 meters away with a hand gun. All of my boys
are capable of defending their own nests, and they watch each other's as well.

"He was a cute, fluffy thing." Gibbs remembered Jimmy from 2002. Cute and fluffy, good way to
describe him. "I thought Jimmy was goofy as Hell when I first met him. But he's not anymore. He's
as strong as any man needs to be. Losing a child ruins men. It breaks them, wounds them so they
never get back up again. You see the funeral. I see what happens months, years, later. Jimmy didn't
leave when they lost Jon, he didn't break, and he didn't let your daughter or granddaughter down.
Push came to shove, and shoved him hard enough to flatten another man. Jimmy stood through it.
You're worried he's not strong enough to be the man your daughter needs, then you're not looking.
Man's made of steel. He wasn't when they started dating, but he is now."

Ed doesn't look like he knows what to do with that. Finally he says, "You can pick anyone in the
world at your back, and you'd take Jimmy?"
"Any man in the world: Jimmy for hand to hand. Tim for a fire fight. Tony if there's a shot of talking our way out. Tobias if it's time to go out in a blaze of glory. And I want Duck somewhere safe, but able to see it all, for counsel."

Ed thinks about what Gibbs said for a moment and then says, "Any man. Let me guess, if we're talking anyone, it's Ziva for hand to hand, Ziva in a fire fight, Tony for talking his way out, and Fornell for the last stand."

Gibbs shrugs, that's not precisely wrong, but… "Not anymore."

That stuns Ed, more than anything else Gibbs has said.

"She's still a better fighter than the boys. Should be too, she's younger and trained for it her whole life. She's a better fighter than I am. Better than Tony. Jimmy can go six minutes with her, which is four more than I can—"

"Four more than you could have at thirty-seven?"

"She was thirteen when I was thirty-seven."

Ed gives him the, I know what you're doing look, but doesn't say anything else.

"I'm pretty sure she's not. But these days, there's always a shot she's pregnant, so, if there's any chance of getting her out of the fight, of making sure she's not the one at my back, I'd take it. Not gonna happen because she's stubborn as hell, but if it's my choice, she won't be in the line of fire."

Ed nods at that. He understands that in his bones. Women and children first, even if the woman in question is Ziva DiNozzo.

The sermon popped into Gibbs' mind. "You paying any attention to the sermon?"

Ed nods. "Enough."

"God gives us the lessons we need to learn in the people around us. That was the point of it. I don't think He forgot you when He was handing out lessons."

Ed smiles at that, acknowledging the point. "So, what am I teaching you?"

"Same thing He's trying to teach you with Jimmy, see the man inside the man."

"And what's your gut saying?"

"You're a jerk, but a good dad."

"Back at you."

"You could be a good father-in-law, too. Could be a great dad and make that daughter you love beyond anything else a whole lot happier by not treating her man like the enemy."

Ed shrugs at that. And Gibbs gets that as much as Ed does worry for his girls. As much as there is genuine concern, there's also a very large serving of him not wanting to be a good father-in-law, of him not wanting to share his daughters with another man. There's absolutely nothing wrong with Jimmy; other than the fact that he's not Ed.
Jimmy headed out a few minutes later. "'Bout time for us to head off."

Gibbs nods. He turns to Ed. "Thanks for the invite."

"You're welcome. Any and every Sunday, we're here."

This time the nod is aimed at Ed, not Jimmy.

Then Ed checked his watch. "Thought you said Bootcamp was at four?"

Gibbs nods, yet again. Ed had been asking about what it is they do on Sunday afternoons.

"It's ten past two."

"Yep."

"Doesn't take you that long to get downtown."

Jimmy lifts the corners of his mouth in a manner that could be called a smile, if you weren't paying attention or didn't know him well. "Gotta eat first, Ed."

"Of course. You're in a house full of food, but you've got to go out to eat."

Jimmy stiffened slightly. He could just take it, let it roll over him, like he does every week. But Gibbs is standing right next to him, watching, and he catches the faint, do it, you need to flavor of his look.

So he does. "Yeah, Ed, I need to eat. I need to eat every few hours when I'm awake, otherwise my blood sugar crashes, and that's a bad thing. And I'm standing next to a house full of food. Food all over the place." He looks at the cup in Gibbs' hand. "I see you've got Gibbs' drink. He's never been here before. You've only met him four times. But you've got exactly what he likes." Jimmy nods again, that not quite smile still on his face. He sighs. "But, yes, I have to leave your home to find food that won't make me sick. And I've got to do it soon, otherwise I'll start to feel woozy and won't have the energy for Bootcamp. So, it's time for us to go." Jimmy turned toward the patio door.

"Fine, go find food that doesn't make you sick." Ed rolls his eyes. "But really, how much energy can this take? According to Gibbs you mostly fight with Tim, and he's the precision shooter, not the muscle. Gibbs and Ziva train you, not fight you. When it's time to fight, you go up against the other skin and bones toothpick who's best skill is a gun."

Jimmy turns slowly back toward Ed, exhaling quietly. Gibbs is still flashing him the do it, you need to look at him. "Okay, Ed, you want to see what a workout looks like when a Marine and a Mossad-trained assassin are in charge of putting you through your paces? You want to see what training looks like? You want to see what us skin and bone toothpicks can do? Want to see how good even the least talented member of our team is when it comes to fighting? Hell, you want to take a shot at me? We meet up at four. Get your ass over to the Navy Yard and find out for yourself."

They're walking out of the house and Gibbs says quietly to him. "Glad you did it."

"Wonderful. Let's see if I can do this without embarrassing myself."

Gibbs puts his hand on Jimmy's shoulder. "You won't."

"Who are you texting?" Tim asks as he and Gibbs grab a table, and Jimmy orders himself some lunch.
"Letting Ziva know what's up."

"Stacking the deck in Jimmy's favor?"

Gibbs nods. "Like you're not going to pull your punches?"

"Not too much, I mean, I don't have to, not anymore. When we play to our own strengths, he's better. But he's going to be nervous, so I'll make sure it's close, but I don't intend to win any of our fights today."

"Exactly. Ziva's not going to throw any of them, but she'll probably move a little slower, telegraph her moves a little clearer."

Jimmy sits down, grilled salmon salad, bowl of three bean soup, and a diet Pepsi on a tray.

"How crazy is it that I can find a better low-carb lunch at a bakery than at my in-laws' house?"

Tim shrugs. They did this last week, and he had to admit, pulling into a Panera after leaving the land of carbs seemed strange to him. But, it is one of the few places Jimmy can get a decent lunch, fast.

"So this is what, fight club for geeks?" Ed asks, two minutes after finding Tim, Jimmy, and Gibbs at the NCIS gym.

"Come on, Ed, if you know enough to ask that question, you know the first rule of Fight Club." Tony says as he and Ziva enter.

"Tony?" Jimmy asks. Both Tim and Jimmy are pretty surprised to see him here today. He's never come to Bootcamp, probably for the same reason that Gibbs rarely fights. He's got a position and getting his ass kicked is not conductive to keeping it.

"Heard Ed was coming, decided I had to see this," he says with a big smile, clapping his hand on Ed's shoulder as Ziva gives each of the guys a hello hug.

"Great." Last thing Jimmy wants for this was a crowd.

Tony smiles. "Want to see the Gremlin take a bite out of his old man."

"The Gremlin?" Ed looks startled by that.

"What Tony calls Jimmy," Tim adds, you really don't want to know why on his face.

"Why?" Ed asks, starting to sound a little concerned.

Tony just shook his head and looked stern. "You ever see that movie? Sure, Jimmy looks like a stuffed animal, all cute and harmless, but hit the wrong trigger, and he'll mess you up! Breena ever tell you the story about how he drove a car into a suspect who was running away from us?" Ed shook his head. "Nope? It's a good story." Tony nods to the rest of them. "Go get started. I'll keep an eye on Ed." Tim, Jimmy, Gibbs, and Ziva headed off to warm up. "You know, Ed, Fight Club really was a great movie, but so many people forget the twist. Well, not forget it. Everyone knows the twist. They don't internalize it. They watch it and then stuff it in the cool story file, but don't change because of it. Kind of sad really.

"Edward Norton was brilliant in that movie. Starts off so soft and mild, letting everyone push him around. You never expect the twist. He's so good at just blending in and taking it that you never even
suspect he's got Tyler Durden hiding in there." He smiles some more at Ed, who's staring to look a little nervous about this.

"Oh, well, enough movie trivia. So, what's your background with this? Jimmy got to this kind of late, but he's catching up, fast. And Tim, well… you've got to be able to fight to be a field agent. Can't pass FLETC without a martial arts proficiency. Me, I played every sport you can think of, and then boxing on top of that. First time I went up against Gibbs, I was dancing around, showing off, telling him how I used to box. I asked him if he'd ever boxed in the Corp, and he said no. So I was thinking I'd take it easy on him, and ten seconds later I was on the floor, and he had my arm pinned behind my back with his knee on my kidney. Then he told me, 'They taught us to fight.' And Ziva, well…" He looks at his wife, who is stretching with Jimmy and Tim, and smiles fondly at her. "Hey, Ziva," he calls out.

"Tony?"

"If you had to sum up your training, how'd you do it?"

She's loosening up, leaning forward, her ankle on the top rope of the ring. "You said, 'They taught Gibbs to fight?'"

"Yep."

"They taught me to kill."

He smiles back at her and says to Ed, "They taught her to kill. And she's good at it. We ever need someone to go in unarmed, it'll be Ziva. So, Ed, you remember the last rule of Fight Club?"

"No."

Tony smiles, he's enjoying this way too much. "If it's your first time at Fight Club, you have to fight."

And while it's true that Tyler Durden's Fight Club turns men from cookie dough to carved wood might not be precisely true, it's close enough. Right now Jimmy and Tim are in the best shape of their lives. (Sure, Tim's not giving Pitt a run for his money muscle-definition-wise, but Jimmy is. This might be the difference between no carbs and just not a whole lot of them.) And Ziva's awfully lean and strong right now, too.

Gibbs has been looking better these last three months. Sure, he's not the guy he was in his Marine days, but… well, he's not getting there, yet, either, but he can see where getting there begins from where he is right now, and hopes to have gotten back to who he used to be within a year (okay, year and a half).

But, with Tony prattling on next to him, filling him in on exactly what they do at Bootcamp (Tony's making a lot of it up, telling a good story, because, that's what he does. Compared to Somali terrorists, playing Ed's like riding a tricycle. But Ed doesn't know that.) Ed's noticing that Jimmy and Tim are indeed thin, but they are not toothpicks.

And they are very, very much not skin and bones.

And he probably, no definitely, doesn't want to get into a fight with either of them.
Jimmy's focusing on Ziva.

He's decidedly not focusing on Ed.

Not at all.

He's not seeing Tony standing there, next to Ed, hand on his shoulder, narrating the action, filling in bits and pieces of stories of how Ziva used to kill or disable men with the moves she's using, and how he's dodging, evading, using her momentum against her.

He's not hearing about how a second slower and that kick would have gotten him in the jaw or how the thumb lock he's using on Ziva right now is something she taught them as a way to easily disable an opponent.

Nope. He's focused on "Ziva." He's so focused on "Ziva" that it's only now occurring to him that she should have handed his ass to him a few minutes ago.

And that actually does snap his attention away from "not focusing on Ed" to really focusing on Ziva. She sees it when she has his whole attention and ups her game to go with it.

That's when he gets it. They are not going to let him look bad. He doesn't have to worry about this, because they've got his back. Ziva's not going to let him win, that'd be way too obvious. But they won't let him look like a twit, either.

And with that he does start to relax and enjoy himself.

That's also, as he spinning on his back leg, landing a kick that Ziva dodged, when he realizes exactly what this is and why Tony's here, too. (And honestly, he wouldn't be shocked if Ducky, Fornell, or Vance were to decide to come play, too. Though he's kind of hoping they don't.)

It's a show of clan strength. The same way dragging the potential son-in-laws to church is for the Slaters. This is his clan, showing off that its strength means the literal ability to end your life should they desire to do so.

He catches Ziva's knee, blocking that hit, planning to use it to toss her off balance, but apparently that's what she wanted him to do, because by doing that, he's got both hands occupied and can't block the punch the follows up. He did manage to get her off balance, but dodging the punch sends him down, too. She's up faster than he is, so it's her round. She offers a hand, and pulls him up.

"Good round. Another?"

"Sure."

"This what they usually do?" Ed asks Tony.

"Sure. Warm up time…"

"That's warm up time?"

Jimmy's on his third round with Ziva. Gibbs and Tim are working with each other.

"Yeah, that's warm up time. Jimmy's better attacking than on defense. So right now, he's up against
Ziva. Main thing he's doing is learning how to see what she's going to do next and block it. Tim's thing is precision. Give him a gun and he can hit a dime on the goal post from the fifty yard line, but when it comes to fist and foot, he's not quite that controlled. That's what he's doing with Gibbs, working on making sure he can hit a dime at full speed with his off hand in close combat. I imagine in a few months they'll get to knives, but right now it's all fist and foot."

"Why aren't you doing this?" Ed asks Tony.

Tony shook his head a little. "Do I look stupid to you? I don't want to get into a fight with them. Hell, I don't even like running after perps anymore. You hit a certain age, and you don't want to be a punching bag. Okay, sure, Gibbs is insane, and he likes this stuff, and Tim and Jimmy are endorphin junkies, but I'm not. I like not having bruises. I mean, do you really want to get into a fight with them? Actually, I guess you do, that's why you're here. So, you better start getting warmed up and ready, because if you go at this cold, they'll kill you."

Usually, after working with Ziva, Jimmy and Tim go up against each other. These days those are free fights, no holds barred (Okay, not really, by mutual accord and respect, eyes and balls are off limits, but there's no set rule against it.), do whatever you like, first one to hit the floor loses.

Usually, that's when Gibbs and Ziva regroup, go over strategy, watch what and how they're learning, and plan out what sorts of things the guys need to work on.

But this is very much not a usual week.

And Gibbs already has a plan in place.

He and Tim finish up, and as they're heading toward the ring he says, "You and Jimmy, two rounds, take it easy, Ziva and I'll keep Ed busy. He won't be watching you two much."

Tim nods. He doesn't know where this is going, but he gets the basic instruction here is conserve your energy, more stuff coming up later.

Usually, they go for an hour, hour ten if things are going well, and he knows today is going to run longer than that.

So, as Ziva slips out from between the ropes, Tim joins Jimmy, quietly giving him the heads up, and they face off.

Ziva heads over to Gibbs, her usual plan, but sees that Gibbs is heading over to Ed.

"Tony taking care of you?" Gibbs asks as they get closer. Ed's working on one of the punching bags. Tony's keeping it steady for him. His form is good, speed decent. Gibbs is getting the idea that Ed probably boxed in college or high school, remembered what he learned, but hasn't used it in thirty or forty years.

"Yes."

"Great. You're up with Ziva next."

"Ziva?" Ed stops dead and just stares at her.
"Yes," Ziva says, looking pretty happy at this.

Gibbs gives Ziva a stern look. "Ziva, no eyes, no balls, no throat, no finger locks. Ed's got to be able to use his hands tomorrow."

"Yes, Gibbs." She's smiling pleasantly at Ed.

Ed's looking terrified.

"You start with Ziva because she's good enough and has enough control to not accidentally hurt you. Even if you are swinging wild and don't know what you're doing, she won't let you accidentally hurt her. You start with Ziva, and once you get good, you end with Ziva, because she's the one who knows what she's doing."

"I can't hit a girl!"

Ziva just grins at him. Gibbs claps his hand on Ed's shoulder and smiles. Tony says, "If I was you, I wouldn't worry about hitting a girl." He fishes a fifty out of his wallet. "This is yours if you can manage to lay a hand on her."

Gibbs laughs. "Come on, Ed. Time to see what Bootcamp really looks like."

Ziva puts Ed through his paces. Gibbs and Tony watch Tim and Jimmy work with each other.

"What's the plan?" Tony asks Gibbs.

"I'm up against Jimmy next."

"Really?" Tony knows where Gibbs is going to take this, and… He gets it, but that Gibbs'll do it takes his breath away.

"Yeah." Gibbs turns to Tony. "You make sure Ed gets it."

"Not a problem, been doing that all day. So, you're really gonna let him win?"

"Let? Have you been watching what he's doing?"

Tony shrugs. "Not exactly what I meant. Until I started letting you win, you made my life a living Hell. Once Ed's gone, you gonna give Jimmy any crap?"

Gibbs shakes his head. (He has a somewhat different memory of how that went down, and DiNozzo letting him win isn't part of it. Though as he thinks about it, it's probably a good idea that Tony hasn't decided he needs to go toe to toe against Draga, and just possibly Tony learned that from his own experience of being the young half of the equation when it came to working with him.)

Tony's watching him think about it and says, "You're going after him after he's been up against Ziva and McGee."

"Gotta do something to even it up. Won't look right if he drops me one minute in."

Tony shakes his head. Palmer creaming Gibbs a minute in isn't anything he's ever going to believe can happen, even if he does actually get to see it live. It's like the sun rising in the west, it's just
wrong.

"When did we get old?"

Gibbs laughs at that, very amused. There's a huge difference between ten and twenty years old. But not so much between twenty, thirty, and forty. But forty and fifty, which is where Tony is, oh yeah, lots of difference. Fifty and sixty, where Gibbs is, not as much, but he can feel it. "After Jimmy and I are done, we'll see if Ed still wants to take a swing at him."

"And if he does?" Tony asks.

"I don't think he's that stupid."

That got a chuckle out of Tony.

"Okay, Jimmy, you and me."

Both Jimmy and Tim are flashing very clear *are you sure about this* expressions at him. Gibbs nods at both of them.

Tim stares at both of them. *Be careful* aimed at Gibbs. And *Abby'll pout at me if you hurt him* aimed at Jimmy.

Jimmy's looking back at Tim with *What the hell is wrong with you? He's going to eat me alive and pick his teeth with my bones, and you think Abby's going to pout at me?*

Tim smiles at that. He's a bit more immune to the aura of *Gibbs* than Jimmy is.

Gibbs heads in, and Jimmy's looking warily at him.

"Gonna be okay, Jimmy."

He looks at Ed. He's close enough to see, but not really hear.

"Sure?"

"Yeah."

"You gonna take a dive or something."

Gibbs shakes his head. "Won't need to."

Jimmy's not looking like he believes that.

"Focus on me. Enjoy it. Then go have a chat with him."

The Marines teach you to fight and kill. All four limbs working together to drop your opponent as fast as possible. It's not fancy. Not (especially in the '70s when Gibbs was learning it) elegant. It's the martial arts equivalent of napalm. The point is overwhelming, conquering force. As long as the job is destruction, it gets the job done.
Mossad teaches you how to strike fast and precise. Maximum damage for minimum effort. How to get exactly the target you're aiming at and no one, nothing else. It's the fighting style of a small force, that must, because of its size be stronger. The fighting style of David who's facing a never-ending line of Goliaths. A group of men who have to be able to take ten, fifteen, maybe twenty men off the board for every man they can afford to lose.

If Tim has a fighting style, it's watch and wait. See the moves coming at you, look for the hole, dart into it, and knock the other guy on his ass.

And if Jimmy has a fighting style, it's a hybrid of the above three.

Gibbs is fighting fierce and fast. He's been conserving his energy for the last hour, intentionally not fighting until now. He makes sure Jimmy is on defense, the weaker of his skill set. But, Jimmy's spent most of his hours getting beaten by Tim when Tim is on defense. He knows how to play it, even if it's not his best skill.

Defense is a patience skill. At least that's how Tim plays it, how he uses it to take Jimmy down. But fighting isn't about patience, not for Jimmy. He's got yoga for that. Fighting is speed and aggression and pumping blood and fast breath and spiking adrenaline and endorphins.

He'd dodging fast, hard punches, using his legs and forearms to block kicks, his extra two inches of reach keeps Gibbs from getting too close, and while he's at it, he realizes this is the shot Gibbs is giving him. Gibbs was a sniper. Gibbs kills with a knife. Gibbs is patience and defense, and attacking fast and hard isn't his best skill. He's matching his weakness to Jimmy's, but he's got to be sure that Jimmy's better playing to his weak side than he is.

Because Jimmy does spend hours a week doing yoga. Because he can focus when he wants to, focus hard and tight, and slow the world down to beating heart and aware breath. It's not that he can't do it when he fights, it's that he usually doesn't want to.

But right now, more than ever, he wants to take the time to do this right. So he's focused, more focused on a fight than he ever has been, and he channeling the patience he needs to do this right, to see where to hop in, and use Ziva's precision to hit exactly what he's aiming for.

And he sees it about two minutes in. Gibb's is balanced on his left leg. He saw Ziva do a version of this, kicking at his head and taking his ankle out from under him. He doesn't have Ziva's speed, can't do it in one move. But he thinks he can pull this off in two fast moves. The punch toward Gibbs' head is a feint, pushing him a little further back, forcing more weight on that back leg, over balancing him just a bit further, and from that punch he immediate drops into the sweeping kick that takes that leg out from under Gibbs, and a second after that he's up and standing and Gibbs is on his back on the ring, looking up at him, and, there's an awfully pleased smile on his face.

Jimmy feels the smile on his face as well.

Which means it's time for part two of this, have a "chat" with Ed.

Getting into a fist fight with your father-in-law is probably a ridiculously stupid idea. On the list of top ten stupid ideas, it's probably on par with going up against a Sicilian when death is on the line.

And Jimmy isn't immune to iocane powder.
On the other hand, there's no shot Ed will respect him less for it. Unless he loses. But he just beat Gibbs. Just figured out how to own his defense. So he can't imagine Ed winning unless he was secretly a ninja back in the day. (For example, he's pretty certain he could take Ducky, but not enough to bet on it. He saw what Ducky did to those three Ninja wannabes. Ed, however, is a rather different story.)

So, as he gives Gibbs a hand up, sees the pride in his eyes, the go on, get him, in his look, he's ready for this. He faces Ed, makes sure he's looking at him. Then he checks with Gibbs. "You good?"

"Fine."

"Good." He headed to the ropes, leaning, forearms against them. He's hot, heart beating fast and hard, bright pink, dripping sweat, bit tired, and high as a kite on endorphins right now. For a few heartbeats he just stands there, staring at Ed. Then he runs his hands through his hair, mostly just moving it around a little, cooling off a bit, then wiped his face.

"Well, Ed, it's been an hour. I'm tired, so that'd even the odds some. You're all loose and warmed up." He sighed, stared down at Ed for a few more heartbeats, shook his head a little at how ridiculous this is. "You've wanted to take a shot at me since Breena brought me home the first time." He spread his arms wide, palms up, his hands are taped, so he can't exactly use his fingers to gesture, come on up, but he's getting the point across. "I'll even give you the first shot free." And then he smiled, cold, brilliant, challenging.

It's the smile of a man who just realized he can kill you with his bare hands if he feels like it. And he might decide he feels like it.

Tony said to Tim and Ziva, very quietly. "He's fucking terrifying when he wants to be."

"Indeed." Ziva said.

Tim nodded. He doesn't want to be on the other end of that smile. Ever. And if Ed's got more than three brain cells to rub together, he's about to shit his pants. (Gibbs standing behind Jimmy, arms crossed, grinning, insanely proud, is probably also not a comfort for Ed.)

The smile fell, and all they can see is cool contempt on Jimmy's face. "Well?"

Ed slowly shook his head. "Nope."

Jimmy nodded. "Good." He slipped between the ropes and headed down. Ed backed away from him, but in less than two steps found Tony and Tim immediately behind him, cutting off any chance of escape he might have. "Long time ago, I told you you didn't have to respect me, and you don't. No one gets respect by demanding it. Me telling you to do it won't make it happen." Jimmy smiled again, and hell, it's not aimed at him, but Tim's feeling a distinct desire to get the fuck away from that smile. "But you should respect me. I treat your daughter like a queen, my queen, and your grandchildren have been and will be adored every single day of their lives."

Ed nods, looking very nervous. He's got no idea what Jimmy'll do next. For that matter, neither does Tony or Tim, but they're on high alert to back any play he comes up with.

"Like, I said, I can't make you respect me. But just like I fake it and am always polite to you, and you are always given a proper welcome in my home, from now on you will treat me with basic politeness. No more snide remarks. No more inviting me to a meal and then only serving food that will make me sick. We clear?"

Ed nodded again. "Yes."
Jimmy smiled one more time. "Great. Time to hit the showers."

Abby got a text about half an hour after that. It's from Tim. Everyone's fine. Jimmy stood up to Ed. Didn't have to hit him to do it. Details and celebratory dinner is at Ducky and Penny's as soon as we can get there.

She was at Jimmy and Breena's, heard the chirp of Breena's phone, probably showing a very similar message from Jimmy, and sent back a quick. Be there soon.

Two hours later, when food had been consumed, and celebratory beverages drunk, and the whole crew was in a very mellow, possibly even silly mood, when Jimmy said, "We should have a crest."

"A crest?" Tony's giving him the you are such a geek stare. But Tim's nodding, and Gibbs isn't horrified by the idea, but not sold on it either. Ducky warmed to it immediately, and ramped up into a full on history of heraldry.

Eight minutes later, after the cursory Crests For Dummies lecture by Dr. Mallard, Jimmy's sitting back, nodding along.

"A crest, or a tartan, or something. We don't have a name in common. But, something that says, Clan Gibbs would be good."

Abby's listening to this, not saying anything, but she's definitely paying attention.

Christmas is coming (well, in five months), and a symbolic gesture of family... Oh yes, she's listening, paying attention, and thinking.

They'd been home for a bit over an hour when Abby sat next to Tim, holding out a piece of paper to him.

It's a sketch, colored in with Sharpies, but he can see what she's thinking with this.

It's a shield, which makes sense, crests are done of a shield. It's broken into quarters by a solid gold line. Top right quarter is sable on argent. Top of that quarter says Palmer. In the center is the black cross of mortuary services, the black caduceus, (also of the mortuary service) outlined in white over top of the cross. Top left quarter is argent on sable. Across the top of that quarter is McGee. It's a computer sitting next to a microscope. Bottom right quarter, sable on azure, DiNozzo across the bottom of that quarter, below a knife leaning against a badge. Bottom left quarter Vert over Gules. At the bottom it read Langston-Mallard, and it's an open book, one page covered in equations the other page with a story.

And in the center, where the golden lines crossed was a partially unfurled scroll, silver over argent. At its top was Gibbs, then below that Rules, and below that 1. Never... it's small enough you can't read anything beyond the never.

Tim looked over Abby's shoulder, at her finished crest, and said, "So, I guess I know what everyone is getting for Christmas."

She smiled up at him. "You like it?"
"Oh yeah."
And That Was Monday

Monday morning. Back to work.

Usual start up time is eight, so usual heading off time is seven thirty. Which means the last sight of his family, before heading out into the hot July air, was Abby nursing Kelly, and leaning in close to kiss them both goodbye.

Ah yes, the glorious orange hue that means justice and work.

*Yippiee.*

Somehow he's significantly less gung ho about being at work than he normally is. Draga's already at his desk, and he can smell Gibbs' coffee, so he's around here somewhere. Ziva and Tony's desks are empty. But Tony's on breakfast treats/drinks on Monday, so they get in a little later than everyone else.

Looks like it's a normal Monday.

He sits down at his desk, pulls the baby pictures out of his go bag, tacks two on his wall, one on the back of his computer, (so people can see without having to hang all over his desk) and fires up his computer.

Only 274 new emails since the last time he checked.

Maybe, if he's lucky, there won't be a body today.

Not that lucky. Usually, when Tony's on snacks, he comes in, doles them out, and then sits down. Today he's got the snacks, but instead of putting the bag on his desk, and handing them out he keeps hold of them and says, "Eating on the road today."

Gibbs chooses that second to appear out of nowhere. "Where to?"

"We're heading for the Reagan. Van to Norfolk. Heilo from Norfolk to the Reagan." He looks at Tim. "Bet this is what you were hoping for for your first case back."

Tim shoulders his go bag, rolling his eyes. "You know it."

Draga's looking at him, wondering.

"I get seasick."

"You get seasick and signed on to be a Navy Cop?" Draga asks as they head to the elevator.

"Long story."

"You know there are these pressure—"

"Got 'em all memorized. And a special bracelet that's supposed to help with it in my bag."

"Does it help?" Draga asks.
"Not really."

"Dramamine?"

Tony winces. "No."

"No?" Draga's looking at Tim, wanting to know how bad the experience that prompted Tony's 'no' was.

Tim shakes his head. "Like mainlining speed. It's not pretty."

"He was awake for three days the last time he tried that," Ziva says.

"Not three days, but yeah, didn't like the side effects. I wasn't sick to my stomach, though."

"Nope, not sick," Tony adds. "But you could hear his heart beating from the other side of the room."

"I thought it was supposed to make you sleepy," Draga says.

"It might, but that's not how I react to it." That makes Tim remember something, so he grabs his phone and starts texting.

"Letting Abby know what's up?" Gibbs asks.

"Good plan, need to do that, too." He sent her a fast text as well while saying, "Asking Jimmy about the stuff Breena's on for morning sickness."

A minute later he'd gotten one back from Jimmy. *Motion sickness is usually more of an inner ear balance thing than a hormonal thing, but the stuff she's on works for chemo patients, too. Might help you. How much do you weigh?*

Tim sent back *171.*

*I'll write you a script and bring some if we get called out to join you.*

*Thanks.*

They were getting the van ready when Tim said to Tony, "Never thought I'd be around to see this again."

"Had to happen. Wasn't working stuck in between them."

"That's fine. Still not calling you Boss."

"Gibbs said the same thing to me."

Tim laughed at that. "So, campfire when we come back?"

"Think so. That seemed to work well last time." Of all of his changes from the first time, the one that stuck was how he rearranged everything so it was easier to get to. The one he would have liked to have seen stuck was the campfire. Okay, sure Gibbs likes the report in style, but Tony thought his report in, and then talk through what you think is going on works better than Gibbs' report in, and
then Gibbs somehow magically comes up with the answer. And it'll sure as hell work a ton better than Gibbs magically figures out what's up next when Gibbs isn't there anymore. Plus, it is doing a better job of keeping Draga in the loop, which means he's getting fewer, *do you really know what you're doing* style questions.

"Yeah, I think it did. Gibbs actually talking at them?"

"Uh huh. He's a really good second-in-command."

"Shouldn't that be Ziva?"

"At this point it's basically everyone who isn't Draga."

"Ah."

Gibbs tossed Tim the keys. "Let's go."

Tony's handing out the snacks while he fills them in. "So, according to the call, 1800 hours, day before yesterday, three sailors: Ender, Simmers, and Blake didn't show up for roll. Since the Reagan was in the middle of the Atlantic, and since they had been at their posts as of 1700, the higher ups started searching for them. As of 2200 yesterday, they still hadn't been found."

"Isn't the Reagan an aircraft carrier?" Draga asks.

"Yes, it is, Flyboy. Hoping you'll be able to help us find all the hidden nooks and crannies where three sailors might hide."

"Yeah, but… Carriers have NCIS Agents Afloat, right?" Draga asks.

"Good point. Why are we heading to Norfolk?" Tim asks.

"Yes, they do. But, at 0600, when Agent-oh you'll love this McGeek-Mulder—"

"Really?" Tim looks away from the traffic for a second to see if Tony's joking. Tony's not. "Really. Three missing persons, and Agent Mulder's in charge."

"Oh, this is great," Draga says with a grin. "Scully on board too?"

Gibbs shoots a quick *less fooling around more working* look at the three of them.

"No pretty red-heads for you, Flyboy. Gibbs has that market cornered."

Draga looks curiously at Gibbs. Gibbs just shakes his head.

Tony continues on, "As of 0600, Mulder was running the search for those three—"

"How are they searching?" Ziva asks.

"Don't have details on that."

"Do we know if they went for a swim?" Gibbs asks.
"Report says they didn't, but I don't see how they could know that," Tony answers.

"All carriers have sensors and security on the decks. Anyone tried to go for a swim, and it'll set them off," Draga answers.

"Is that new?" Tim asks. He'd never heard of that.

"Think they got done installing them on all the ships in early '15. Pretty cool system. There's a series of lasers around the perimeters as well as cameras. The cameras are always on, and if one of the beams gets broken, it immediately sounds an alarm, the footage gets replayed, the computer can tell if it's a bird or something, and if it's a bird or something, no one does anything, but if it's a guy, then all hands onto rescue mode."

"Cool." Tim replies.

"McGee, Flyboy, once we're done with the scene, you two'll be making sure the sensors worked properly."

"Why do we have a scene? This is a missing persons case," Ziva asks.

"As I was saying before we got onto whether or not our sailors took a swim, Agent Mulder had been running the search. He notices something, quote, smells really off, unquote. He's in the process of checking it out, and was, 'pushed' down one of those ladders/stairway things they have between decks. So, Mulder's in the infirmary, with his left leg broken in three places, and we're being heiloed in to take over the search."

"What does 'smells really off' mean?" Ziva asks.

"Dead body? Dead bodies? That's what Mulder thought. Could be little green men for all we know, though. Whole area's been roped off, waiting for us. Supposedly, no one's been allowed nearby and a watch has been set to keep the spot clear."

"So three missing sailors, maybe dead, and two hours before we get there," Gibbs adds, maybe just stating the obvious, maybe giving Tony a hint.

Either way Tony followed up with, "Okay, Flyboy, pad out, I want a list of every non-standard hiding place you can think of on a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier that'll fit a person. The more out of the way, the better. I want wherever you'd take a girl if that girl was the Captain's wife."

Draga grins. "If I'm gonna fool around with the Captain's wife, I'm taking her off his ship."

That got a headslap from Gibbs.

"Non-standard hiding places, working on it."

Setting foot onto the Reagan after the helio ride, Tim was awfully pleased to see the seasickness didn't hit him nearly as hard as it usually did. They'd actually been on there for twenty minutes, working their way below decks to 'smells really off' and he was only feeling mildly nauseous, which given the fact that it'd been less than a day since Tropical Storm Helene blew through and the sea was still rough was a miracle.
He was wondering a little if maybe actually talking some about what had happened with his Dad was part of why he wasn't massively sick. Maybe, since almost twenty-five years of fear about what might happen to him on a ship had, not precisely died, but been put into some better perspective, his stomach wasn't quite so upset by the prospect of being on a ship.

So, he was thinking that he might actually get through the case without tossing his cookies when they got to the 'smells really off.' And it does. They all know that smell. Been there, done that, got the commemorative t-shirt in every color they make it in. There's something, likely someone, very dead down here.

Gibbs is already texting Ducky, letting him know to come out. "Ziva, this smell like less than three days to you?"

She shakes her head. "No. I'd think what we're going to find has been dead longer than that."

Draga's not look happy at this conversation. He's decidedly green around the gills right now.

"Of course, it could just be hot down there. That would speed things up," Ziva adds.

Draga swallows hard at that.

Tim takes pity on him and gets Draga fingerprinting the ladder Mulder fell down. Sure it's not likely to be too useful, probably twenty men a day go up and down that ladder, but he needs to work on his fingerprinting skills, and it's not impossible that something useful might come up from those prints.

Plus, he remembers his first time finding a decomposing body. That was bad enough. Trapped in a small area with recycled air… much worse. Draga can skip that until he's got a few more miles under his belt.

Meanwhile, the ladder leads down to a storage area. Which is where the smell seems to be coming from. They circle around to a different ladder, and down they go.

On the upside it's bright. Mostly. There are overhead lights, but tall boxes of… Tim doesn't know, something in stacks of tall boxes, cast deep shadows.

So, flashlights out, following their noses, but after a while the smell is so thick, so omnipresent, suffusing every molecule of everything around them, that they can't navigate by it.

They split up, each one covering their own area between the rows of boxes. He's got the last row, between rough wooden boxes piled up to well over his head on one side and the steel of the bulkhead on the other.

Of course he found it. Why wouldn't he find it? That's how the universe works, right? He's finally not feeling like being on a ship is going to make him throw up everything he's ever eaten, so he's the one who finds the body.

The body slowly being eaten by thousands of wriggling maggots.

No one was saying anything. They're spread out and searching between the boxes. And while it's true that aircraft carriers aren't precisely quiet, it was quiet enough. There's a sound that goes with thousands of maggots eating, it's very soft, and it's entirely possible that he imagined it, but when the wet, squelchy, rustling hit Tim he spun on his heel and sprinted away.

That he kept it together long enough to jerk his thumb in the direction he came from as he whipped past Tony and get clear of the crime scene before throwing up is something he's rather proud of. That
he didn't make it to the head, wasn't.

"You weren't kidding about seasick, were you?" Draga said a few seconds later, handing him both a bottle of water, and a box of wetnaps. He's got no idea why Draga would have them, but it was certainly convenient.

Tim shook his head. He took a sip of water, swished it around his mouth, and realized he didn't have anywhere to spit, so he swallowed and hoped it would stay down.

It took a few minutes, but he got the mess cleaned up, and then found Ziva, gave her his camera, because of all the scenes in all the world, that's the one he can't document, and decided now would be a very good time to go have a chat with Mulder about exactly what he was doing when he got pushed, and all the details of the case he could get from him.

Didn't take him too long to find the infirmary. The medic took one look at him (one smell probably, he has to reek of corpse and, assuming you could smell it over/through corpse, puke) and was getting ready to treat Tim. Tim cut him off, showed his badge, and asked where Agent Mulder was.

"Back here. Can I get you anything?"

Tim shook his head, few minutes too late for that. "Just Mulder."

"Okay." Tim followed the Medic back behind a large partition to a collection of beds. "Dave, got a..." He looks at Tim, wondering who he is.

"NCIS, DC Branch." Tim extended his hand to a guy who couldn't be less Fox Mulder if he tried. Dave Mulder was probably six three, ebony skinned, and lying on his back with his leg in traction. "I'm Tim McGee. You talked to my partner earlier."

"DiNozzo. You all got here, and from the smell of it, you found what I was looking for." Tim nods, looks around, no chairs, so he half sits/half leans against the bed next to Mulder's. "Take it you found a body."

He doesn't want to think about that, but he does answer, "Oh yeah. How long have your men been missing?"

"Two days come 2200."

He doesn't want to see it. Would really prefer not to have that image in his mind, but the image does flash back into his head, and he feels the queasiness rising in his stomach again, along with a panicky cold sweat. Deep breath, calm, you're nice and safe, here in the clinic. He's pressing the point on his right wrist as he says, "We found someone. I really doubt it's one of your men. At least, I don't think you'd get that many maggots that fast."

"Maggots?" Mulder asks.

Tim winces. "Lots of 'em."

"Huh."

"Anyone else missing?" Tim asks.
"No."

That's when the fact that Mulder was looking confused about the maggots worked its way through his fear. "Why huh?"

"Just… You need flies for maggots, and we don't have a lot of them out here. Not none of them, can't have none. But we're not on land, and Captain Zackles is vehement about running a clean ship. This is my third float, and ships have a smell to them, lots of men, lots of food, everything all close together, and this was the first ship I ever stepped on that didn't have that smell."

Tim thought about that, and Mulder is right. Ships do have a certain smell, and thinking back, he didn't notice that once they got below decks here. He makes a note of that.

"We headed down the ladder, into the storage area," Mulder is nodding along, "found the body between the bulkhead and the boxes, about two hundred feet back."

"Okay."

"What's stored down there?"

"Maintenance stuff. Everything you need to fix something if you're a thousand miles from the nearest port."

"Lots of raw materials." Tim jots that down.

"Yeah."

"So, not a lot of people going down there?"

Mulder flashes him a knowing look. "Either no one is down there, or a whole lot of them are."

Good to know. "When was the last time a whole lot of people were down there?"

"Don't know, but we can find out."

Tim made a note of that, too. He taps his fingers against his phone, thinking. "If not a lot of people are down there… How often do those boxes get opened?"

"Some of them, like the ones with paint in them, pretty often. The ones with screws and nuts, pretty often, too. Back up pressure gauges, o rings, sheet metal, probably not so much."

Tim makes a note to find out what's stored where they found the body.

"You guys sure they didn't fall/jump overboard?" he asks.

Mulder shrugs. "Only an hour between missing roll and last seen. I've watched every inch of the footage from every angle. If they went over, it's because they cut a door for themselves."

"Okay." Tim stops to think about that. "Could you do that?"

"Sure, it's possible, but you'd need some really serious cutting tools. Arc welder of the gods or something."

More nodding from Tim, that's a good point. Still, weirder things have happened. "But… I mean… It's a huge ship. Has anyone laid eyes on the whole thing to make sure it doesn't have any holes it's not supposed to?"
Mulder's looking at him like he's insane. "No, none of us checked. But, look, the outside is designed to withstand missile attacks, depth charges, and, you know," Mulder slams his fist into his palm, "planes crashing into it. It's not inch thick sheet metal. You'd need some really serious power to get through it, and a lot of time. You couldn't whip through it in less than an hour."

"No. You'd have to have it set ahead of time. They store tools down there?"

"Yeah."

"The kind of tool that could cut through the side of an aircraft carrier?"

"No idea."

"Would there be something like that on board?"

"Maybe." The expression on Mulder's face seems to be saying, Maybe you could try asking someone who's actually an expert on aircraft carriers this? But he does answer, "Since Pearl Harbor it's been pretty standard to try and have something that can cut through a bulkhead somewhere on board."

Tim remembers his grandfather telling stories of being able to hear the men trapped in the ships that had rolled over. They kept tapping out distress codes, but no one could get through to them. Ships that could shrug off a depth charge were ships you couldn't cut through, not then. Eventually the tapping stopped. And according to him, being stuck, hearing them, unable to do anything, was the single worst part of the battle of Pearl Harbor.

Back on track. "You ever cross paths with Ender, Simmers, or Blake?" Tim asks.

"No. Clean records. Not even particularly close to each other from what I could get. But Ender was part of the engineering crew."

"Great. Three unrelated crew members vanish. One dead body. One injured NCIS agent. I've got to ask, is there any chance you slipped?"

Mulder smiles grimly. "There's always a chance, right? But there's a boot print on the back of my jacket that says it's awfully unlikely."

"Is that all bagged up and ready to be processed?"

"Yeah, I made sure the medics were careful about getting me out of my clothing. Everything's ready for trace."

"Good. Any security footage of that area?"

"No. I've got people going in and out of that hallway, but…"

"But lots of people go in and out, it's the actual doorway that you'd need footage of."

"Yeah."

Tim had one last question. "Is anything, besides the men, missing?"

"Nothing that's crossed my path. But, there's more than five thousand people here, and the Reagan's the size of a small city. Unless it was something we use all the time, no one's going to notice something missing."

"I get that. We got a case where shells were being stolen off battleships. Inventory was every six
months. Deep storage. Took a long time before anyone noticed them missing."

"It's every three months here, and the answer to your next question is, yes, we just wrapped up the inventory ten days ago."

"Long enough to cut a hole and take something."

"If a hole can be cut."

"Okay, thanks, this has been useful."

"Yes, it has. Let me know what you find out?"

"We'll keep you in the loop." He shook Mulder's hand again, and gave him his card. "Hope you heal up fast."

That got a frustrated snort out of Mulder. "I'll be in this damn thing for another week. Doc's thinking it'll be three months before I'll get to the walking cast part."

Tim winced. "Sorry to hear it."

"You and me both. We're heading back to Norfolk. I was supposed to have shore leave this week. Now all I get to do is sit on my ass and read."

"Really sorry."

"Thanks. Well, go see if anyone cut a hole in the ship."

"On it."

"What happened?" Gibbs asked him when he finished updating the team on what he'd found out from Mulder.

Tim rubbed his temples, and pressed hard on the point on his wrist. Really not helping at all. (He checked his watch, only an hour until Jimmy and Ducky, and maybe some of those pills, would be here.) Only reason he hasn't thrown up again is because his stomach is already empty. "Every nightmare I've ever had that didn't involve Abby or Kelly getting hurt."

"I've seen you sicker than that and not lose it."

"I know." And he has been sicker than that, way sicker than that, and kept his food located inside his body until he found the head.

"So, what happened?"

"Maggots."

Gibbs squinted, remembering. "You hate them."

"More like terrified."

Gibbs sent him the keep talking look.

Tim rolled his eyes a little, and pressed the point on his wrist again. "I did acid in college, had a full
body, full sensory hallucination of being eaten alive by them. It lasted eight hours of real time, and about three days of subjective time, and I could see and feel the whole thing. Walking into that was pretty close to a flashback and add in seasickness and the smell on top of it, and... honestly, we're all pretty lucky I didn't puke on the corpse."

"That's why you hate maggots?" Tony asked, stepping back from sending Ziva and Draga off to find out what sorts of cutting tools might be on an aircraft carrier.

Tim nodded.

Tony winced.

Gibbs just stared at both of them, not sure what to do with that.

"You really meant it when you said you didn't like them," Tony said.

"Yeah I really meant it."

"Can you go back there?" Tony asked.

"Put a gun to my head and I will, but..."

Tony nods. He and Gibbs have made McGee do more than enough shit end of the stick stuff over the years. He can get a pass on this one. "When Ducky and Jimmy head back with the body, you go with them. Phone records, financials, personal histories, all your usual stuff for right now. Take Draga, too, and go through each of the missing men's lives with a microscope."

"Thank you."

"And when you helio out, go around the ship, make sure there aren't any new holes in it."

"Will do."

"Good, Jethro, I'm not liking the vibe I'm getting off the XO when I started asking about what they keep back there. He's acting hinky. Time to go put the fear of Gibbs into him."

Orders in place, Tim found a quiet nook, took his computer out of his go bag, plugged in, and began to get the permissions he needed to start going through Ender, Simmers, and Blake's lives with a fine tooth comb.

Norfolk to DC is three hours. The helio ride from Norfolk to the Reagan was another half hour. So, they got there, called in Ducky and Jimmy twenty minutes in, which means they'd been on board for four hours by the time Jimmy and Ducky showed up.

By that point they'd made several suppositions.

A: Whomever was being eaten by the maggots was not Ender, Simmers, or Blake.

B: Ender, Simmers, and Blake were still unaccounted for.

C: There did not "appear" to be anything missing, but the higher ups were acting awfully hinky about something.

D: If they weren't on the ship, where the hell were they? (In the water, yes, great. With what? And
where were they going? Middle of the freaking ocean, either someone had to pick them up, or they had to awesome swimmers.)

E: A Nimitz class aircraft carrier is only slightly smaller than a city

F: There are only (hahahahaha) 5700 people on it. And it's floating in the ocean, so compared to searching Lejeune… It's still a huge fucking mess, and this time they aren't going to get extra people to help.

By the time Jimmy and Ducky got there, Tim knew that Ender had been part of the engineering crew. Blake had been on underwater demolitions/salvage before joining the Navy. And last, but not least, Simmers had a sealed juvenile record for gang related issues, but had "gone straight" and joined the Navy out of high school.

He was reporting that to the team as Ducky and Jimmy joined them.

Without stopping his report, Jimmy handed Tim a bottle labeled Zofran, one of which he downed about two seconds later. And no, Zofran's not particularly good at treating motion sickness, (It's awfully good with morning sickness, which is why Breena takes it.) but Jimmy and Ducky both know it's extremely unlikely that the motion of the ship is the problem. Which is why the pill he downed is actually just compressed powdered sugar and baking soda, with a label for Zofran on it. Two hour long ride, more than enough time for Jimmy to put together eight placebo pills.

Tim wrapped up with the report on their missing sailors and Jimmy and Ducky were able to add one more piece of intel to the collection. There was indeed a rather non-standard looking hole, about twentyish feet above the waterline, a bit below what looked like a small deck protruding from the port side.

"It's really well hidden." Jimmy was saying to Tony and Gibbs. "You basically can't see it from the ship. You've got to be on the outside looking in, and it's on the side the planes take off of, not land on, so they wouldn't see it coming in," Jimmy said as they headed down the ladder toward the body.

"Great. Got a time of death for me, Ducky?" Tony asks.

"Anthony, I understand that you're taking after Jethro on this, possibly one upping him, but could you at least wait until I see the body before asking how long it's been dead?"

Tony smiled at Ducky. "Thought by now you'd be able to tell by the smell."

Ducky inhaled, deeply, "I'd say, Anthony, based on smell alone, assuming we are looking at the same temperature here as where the body is, that this is at least six days, if not longer."

Jimmy's nodding along, concurring with that assessment. "So, where is our John Doe?" He offers Ducky a hand getting down the last step. "And do we have a way to get him out of here more easily than the ladder?"

"Come, now Mr. Palmer, you know it's never that easy."

"No, Dr. Mallard, it never is. Lead on, Tony."

Draga nudged Tim. "They always that formal?"

"Only here. Off hours they're Ducky and Jimmy. Ducky would tell you it's useful to have markers
that block off your work life from your home life, and especially when you do what they do, I have no reason to doubt him. It's a lot easier to live Rule Eleven if you've got a wall between here and home."

"Eleven: when the case is done, walk away?"

"Yep. That's the idea. Of course, that's a bit harder to do when you're, literally, married to your job the way we are."

"I can see that."

"Anyway, it's not going to take them all that long to get this handled. So get your stuff packed up and then we'll head down and offer a hand. Not fun to try and get a body up a ladder."

"Great."

It's not just a body bag that has to go up the ladder. Tim's not a great fan of moving corpses around, but he's done it. No it's the two buckets next to the body bag. Pretty big buckets, and what's likely in those buckets is making his body feel tight and cold, fear sweat creeping down his spine.

Jimmy sees the way he's staring at them, and it doesn't take him more than a second to decide what to do.

"Fish."

Tim looks away from the buckets to Jimmy. "What?"

"I don't know what the hell we've walked into, but the John Doe was lying on a pile of fish."

Jimmy's staring right into Tim's eyes, lying his ass off. Of course there are no fish, but Tim's freaking out just looking at the buckets the damn things are in, and being stuck in a van with them for three hours isn't likely to be pleasant, so time to double down on the placebos.

"Huh?" Tim stares at Jimmy, baffled.

"Yeah, weird, huh?"

Tim nods slowly, appreciating what Jimmy's doing, but wishing he was better with off the cuff lies.

"Lids down good and tight on those fish?"

"Oh, yeah, sealed up good. Can't risk losing them. May have useful evidence. Did you know scales don't decompose at the same rate flesh does, so it's possible we might be able to get prints off of them?"

"Good to know."

And, thus, both of them were a whole lot happier.
"Pill help?" Jimmy asks Tim as they head back to the ME's van.

"Yeah. Still off, but don't feel like I need to keep a baggie with me all the time."

"Good." Jimmy nods. He knows that's what Breena's told Tim they do for her. So, he's just fine with the results.

"Being back on land helps a whole lot more."

"Yeah, it would," Jimmy says as Tim helps him get the body lifted into the van, while Draga hangs way back, as far behind them as he can get, and still be part of the group.

The ME's van can carry eight people in great comfort. As long as six of those people don't mind traveling horizontally with less than fifteen inches of vertical space between them and the next person. But as of this point, no one has ever complained.

It's a little less comfortable with four people all of whom prefer to remain upright.

And it's quite a bit less comfortable when the reclining visitor smells the way their John Doe does.

The thing about a body bag is that it's designed to move bodies from place A to place B without the contents of the bag spilling all over.

They are not however, air tight. And while it is true they do have hazmat bags, that are, in fact, airtight, those bags are for hazmats, and if you use them for what is just a very smelly corpse, you end up paying the six thousand dollars to replace the hazmat bag out of your own pocket.

(And right this second, Draga's looking like he'd happily write the check to cover it, if only he had six thousand dollars laying around.)

Jimmy got the John Doe strapped in, and gestured for Tim and Draga to get in. Tim did. He's not exactly skipping to get in there, but as long as he doesn't think about the "fish" sitting next to the John Doe, he's okay. Draga looks in, goes white, and shakes his head.

"Can't do it."

"It's get in or hitch hike," Tim says.

Jimmy and Ducky had been settling who was going to drive, but Jimmy seems to have noticed what was going on with Tim and Draga and heads back to them.

"Here." He heads into the van, searches for a second, and comes back with a small tub of Vicks Vap-O-Rub. "In our job, the smell gives us ideas about what happened, but you don't need to be that in tune with it. This'll kill your sense of smell long enough for you to adjust. You'll get used to it."

Draga's staring at the tub. "What if I don't want to get used to this?"

Jimmy hands it to him. "Then you need to keep job hunting. At least once a season we get one that's in this shape."

"Welcome to the glorious world of law enforcement, Eric," Ducky says to him. "Now, in you get. We have to be off."
Draga got in, rubbing the Vicks under his nostrils. Tim took the tub from him. It's better than how the John Doe smells.

They're about a mile into the trip when Tim pulls out his netbook.

"What are you doing?" Draga asks.

"Checking to see if I've got the court orders that'll let me go through the missing sailors' financials."

"In the van?"

"Sure? All the 4G I need is on this thing."

"Not what I mean. You're in the back of a van, with a corpse, reading, and okay?"

"Yeah." Then it occurs to Tim what Draga's really asking. "It's just seasickness. I'm fine in cars. Not a big fan of planes though."

"Oh."

"They don't make me sick or anything. I just don't like them."

"Never been a problem for me."

"No. I'd imagine not." Probably not too many Naval test pilots who don't like planes. "You bring your laptop?"

"No."

Tim squints at him. If Draga's back up tech, they need to work on this. "They go over what should be in your go bag?"

"Yeah."

Of course they did. And they gave him what they carry because Tim's always got all the other stuff in his bag. "Okay, here's the version from the guy who actually does the tech stuff, and from now on, this is what I want in your bag, too: full set of clean clothes, three pairs of socks, three pairs of underwear, toothpaste, toothbrush, deodorant, razor, comb, comfy shoes, batteries for everything you use, fully charged. Batteries for everything they use, fully charged. At work, I've got two main computers on my desk and my lap top." Tim patted his netbook. "This little guy right here lives in the bag, it's not great for any heavy lifting, but can at least get the job started. Chargers for all the batteries/devices. Extra power cords. Note pad. Pencils. Pens. At least one highlighter. Five empty thumb drives. I go through them like gum, always restocking them." Tim pats his pocket and comes up with his clasp knife. "This one stays on you. Rule Number Nine, always have a knife, and one extra magazine for your gun. That's what's in a properly stocked go bag."

"Okay. This why your bag is twice the size of theirs?"

"Probably. For days like today, you want to have a clean set of clothing in your desk, too.

Everything on us smells like death right now. The jumpsuits help, some, but not enough. So, in an effort to not make the entire rest of the office sick, we go in with Ducky and Jimmy, grab some scrubs from them, hit the showers, bag up our current clothing, and honestly, unless I love it, and I don't love anything I'm wearing today, I just toss it, but if you don't mind the idea of that smell getting into your house, you can take it home and wash your clothing. Anyway, put on the scrubs, then up to your desk where you've got clean clothing."
"What about the stuff in my go bag?"

"When you get your sense of smell back, you'll realize why you don't want to wear it. Won't be as strong. Won't knock the people around you out. But you'll be able to smell it. Tonight, unpack everything and let it air out. Wash the clothing. Send it through twice before you dry it, because if you dry it smelling like this, you'll never get the smell out."

"I don't have any clothing in my desk."

"Won't be the first time there was a guy in scrubs working in the bullpen. I've done it a few times."

"What do I do now?"

"Think. If you were going to take something off an aircraft carrier. Something so important you'd cut a hole in the ship and jump off, what would it be?"

"Launch codes. Not sure why you'd jump off, though. Thumb drive, bury 'em in your phone or laptop, then just walk off."

"Right. So, what don't they want to be on the ship for?"

"No idea."

"Keep thinking."

They were an hour out of the Navy Yard when Draga said, "You've got the camera with all the pics on it, right?"

"Yeah."

"Can I see?"

"Sure." Tim fished through his bag, found the camera, and handed it over.

Draga spent several minutes going through the pictures. Then, sounding excited, he said, "Thought so!"

"What do you have?"

"See these boxes around the body?"

Tim's very carefully not looking at to body, so focusing in the boxes was something he was happy to do. "Yes."

"They don't look like the other boxes."

Tim looks closer. Box is a box is a box to him. He's not seeing it.

"Look." Draga blows up the picture, sounding really excited.

Tim's shaking his head. "Still not seeing it."

"The wood's different. Those crates are two by fours, the other crates are lighter. There's something
very heavy in those boxes."

"Send it to Tony. According to Mulder, it's storage for raw parts down there, so for all we know there's extra anchors or something in there, but send it along anyway."

Draga got his phone out and started texting.

It was well after seven by the time he was back at the Navy Yard, scrubbed up, dressed, and back at his desk.

Draga had beat him to it, and was also at his desk (in borrowed scrubs. Tim resisted calling him Aqua Smurf.) on his computer, working away.

"Now what?" he asked Tim as he headed in and sat down.

"Now I email Tony everything I've got," Which was a heaping pile of not much. Financials, clean. Emails, boring. Phone records, the same. He'd already told the computers to start digging deeper, and come morning time he'd start going through what, if anything, they found. "And then I go home."

"Home?"

"Yes."

Draga's startled by that. "I thought we didn't go home when the case was hot."

"We didn't used to. I do now. I'm having dinner with my wife and daughter. I'm getting some sleep. And 'round about four, when I'm on pre-breakfast for Kelly, I'll turn the computer on and get at it again. But for now, I'm off."

"Okay."

"Call or text if you need anything."

"Will do."

"You're home." Abby sounded pretty surprised to see him when he walked in. Then she took a breath and winced. "And you got to play in dead bodies, too."

He put his go bag on the porch. "Yes, and yes. Another shower?"

She nodded, following him up to their room. "I was sure I'd be on my own tonight."

He would have kissed her, but he's guessing he's smelly enough it'd be unwelcome, so he said, "Unless it's literally life or death, I'm coming home every night," while stripping off. She grabbed his clothing and rushed them to the washer, and a minute later was back up in their bathroom.

"Tell me about it?"
So, in the middle of his third shower of the day, shampooing his hair, he did.

An hour later, he'd eaten, told her about it, snuggled both his girls, and decided that since four AM was likely his wake up time, that getting to sleep would be a good thing.

At nine he was asleep.

And that was Monday.
Tuesday began with crying. Tim's gotten pretty good at sleeping through the non-four-AM-feed-me cries. But it's his day, so the not very quiet *waa waa feed me waa* got him up and moving.

Get up, toss on a pair of boxers, head over to Kelly's room, pick up Kelly.

"Morning baby." He's still three quarters asleep, but this is getting more and more routine. (Though he's looking forward to this particular routine ending.)

"Waaaa!"

"Yeah, I know. Food's up soon."

He put her on her back on the changing table and got her cleaned up. Then he took her, and her bottle to the bathroom. He's got her snug against his chest, holding her with the one hand, while he fills the bottle with water (the powdered formula was already in there) then tightens the lid and shakes it up.

Normally, he'd head back to her room, get her situated in his arms, and then feed her while he dozes. Sometimes, when he's feeling really energetic, he'll hum a little to her, but for the most part he tries to keep it so both of them stay as far away from awake as possible.

But since he's not going back to bed, he takes them to his office, (Kelly fusses at this. She knows the routine, and this isn't it. Plus she can smell the formula, knows it's close, but it's not in her mouth, and this is not making her morning.) turns on his computer, and then gets her settled, bottle in mouth, (About time, Dad! I'm starving!) and gets to work.

He reads over what his search parameters have been returning. "There has to be something here. Three guys do not cut a hole in a ship and then vanish and have nothing to do with each other."

Kelly's staring at him.

Tim shakes his head. "Nothing. Big pile of nothing. No calls. No emails. No money…"

Gentle slurping and a confused look accompany Tim talking to himself/Kelly about this.

"They're on the ship together, so okay, they talk to each other, in person. Great. No records of that. But they got off the ship. So they had to have a plan to do something once they got off… What do you think? You hop off a ship. Why do you do it?"

Slurp, slurp. *Dad, I don't know what a ship is.*

"I know. Okay. So you hop off. Why? You've got something that'll go missing so fast that you can't wait the twenty-four hours it'll take to get to Norfolk." He thinks about that a bit. Feels right. "But nothing's missing. At least nothing they'll tell us about…"

He goes through the records again, looking to see if there's any links between his missing sailors and any of the higher ups on the ship. Nothing's jumping out, but of course, he's got nothing of the higher ups to compare anything to.

"Blackmail? They take something that'd make the Captain look bad? Hop off? He keeps quiet and then pays up. Back in port he gets it back…"
He starts to go upstairs to grab his phone, but Kelly squawks again, not appreciating this eat and go style of feed. "Okay, I'll let you finish before I give Pop a call."

He starts typing one-handed, requesting permission to search through the financials of the… XO… What was his name? Snader. That was the guy Tony was saying was acting hinky about this whole thing. See if he's made any recent payments to anyone interesting. See if he had the money to be worth being a target.

That really wasn't working. Yes, he can type one handed. Yes, he can feed Kelly one handed. No he can't do both at once at 4:17 in the morning without ending up with formula in Kelly's hair or every third letter wrong. So he pushes the chair back from the desk, gets a two-handed hold on his daughter, and feeds her while working different ideas.

By a bit before five, when Kelly was fed, burped, and settled back down, (Mental note: don't take her downstairs, it wakes her all the way up, and then he had to spend even longer getting her to sleep again. In seven hours, when he'll tell Jimmy about it, he'll just laugh at him.) he was really liking the blackmail angle.

That gave them a reason for why the XO was acting hinky. It'd answer why they couldn't find anything missing. It'd explain why they had to get off the ship. (Can't get information off a ship if the guy in charge of the ship doesn't want you to. Radio silence may not be the correct term anymore, but it gets the idea across. If the XO doesn't want anything getting off, he can make sure nothing gets off.)

And, by a bit before five, he'd gotten the clearance to do some hunting in the XO's private life, and found that not only did he have a pretty hefty sum of money in the bank, but he was also in the middle of a divorce.

So, playing hardball, the wife hires these guys to get some dirt…

Maybe…

He picked up his phone.

"Tim?" Gibbs doesn't sound particularly sleepy, but best he knows he's usually up and about this time of day.

"Yeah, just found—"

"DiNozzo's team leader, now. Call him."

"Oh. Yeah. Right."

He hung up, and hit Tony's contact info. Six rings before he heard, "McGee. It's five in the morning."

"I know."

"Not all of us are on baby time. We just got to bed two hours ago."

"Sorry."
"Can it wait until eight?"

"Yeah. Probably even more to build on then."

"Great. Tuesday is your day for snacks now."

"Fine. What's Draga eat?"

He heard the long low null of the dial tone and hung up.

Okay, so, nothing on the phone records. They aren't talking to anyone particularly interesting. Nothing in their emails. Nothing on the financials. He likes the idea of the blackmail but... He can't connect them to anyone. He can't even connect them to each other.

There's got to be more to this than that.

But he's done everything he can from home. He needs to get onto their own machines.

It occurs to him that he doesn't know if they even had Simmers, Ender, or Blake's computers or phones.

This time he texted Gibbs. Did we find phones and laptops?

Yes.

Okay. Gonna grab some food, and I'm heading in. What does Draga like?

Wheatgrass/banana smoothie, two shots of protein, B5 vitamin shot, RedBull chaser.

Wow. That was both an insane jolt and vastly healthier than anything anyone on their team was accustomed to.

Yeah.

When you heading in? He flashes to Gibbs.

Be there round seven. What'd Tony say to your idea?

'Tell me later.' He just got to sleep. Late night? He could feel Gibbs giving him the don't ask stupid questions look. See you soon, Tim texted and then headed to his room to put some more clothing on.

The coffee/snack cart outside of NCIS usually has a collection of agents around it, fueling up for... whatever it is they're going to do that day.

Jerry's known all of them awfully well for a good long time. He pretty much always has a pot on just for Gibbs, and he's got the rest of their orders pretty well down, too. So it doesn't take much effort for Tim to get everyone's drinks/morning snacks taken care of.

"You in early or staying late?" Jerry asks.

"Early. Have a feeling I'll be doing a lot more early and a lot less late these days."
Jerry nods, remembering. "Come on, picture time."

So Tim shows him baby pics, and collects up the cups and pastries, and heads on it.

Draga's still at his desk, still in scrubs, head on his desk, dead asleep.

"Draga."

"Mrghf."

"Got a smoothie and Red Bull."

One eye opens and their newest teammate looks at him. "Time?"

Tim hands over the smoothie and Red Bull, and then checks his watch. "Six oh three. Wake up enough to move, and then home, shower, change. You can work at your desk like that, but if we're in the field, you need to look up for it."

Draga nods, very slowly, pops the Red Bull, chugs it in one long swallow, tosses it, and then starts in on the smoothie.

"You ever hear of Caf-Pow?" Tim asks.

"Yeah. Too much sugar, not enough caffeine."


Draga waves a bit while heading off, sucking on the smoothie.

Tim unpacks Gibbs' coffee, Ziva's mango smoothie and blueberry muffin, Tony's coffee and bearclaw, and his own coffee. Okay, time to get into the evidence.

Technically there's supposed to be someone on staff 24/7 in the evidence lock up. But, budget cuts and all, so instead of a live person they upped to level of surveillance, and added weekly audits to the evidence logs.

So, he's in the basement, on his own, looking through the boxes, finally locating the one he needs. Two cell phones, three lap tops, okay, looks pretty good so far. Why only two phones…

He signs out the box and heads to the lab.

It's empty. Of course it's empty, it's six fifteen in the morning. Still, he's got the feeling that if he's here, Abby's supposed to be here. That's just how it is, right?

Except right now, it's not. And won't be. Until September.

He shakes his head. Work to do.

Normally he and Abby would set everything up, rig the cords he'd need, hook the computers up to
work in tandem, and then go to town on them. But, she's not here, and the computers are… Working. On something. Something not his case.

And the workbench has stuff on it.

The workbench is supposed to be clean and clear. It should be a long expanse of gleaming metal, ready to work, not… What the hell is this? Evidence of some sort but… Looks like some sort of experiment on electroplating. Long metal wires extending over a plastic tank filled with some sort of liquid, things that could be coin blanks danged from the wires, submersed in the liquid.

He heads into her office, looking to hook into her private computer, but someone's got stuff all over there, too. Someone has been using Abby's computer, and for a second he feels a desire to go find said person and explain to them in extreme hard-ass detail that no one messes with Abby's computer, let alone…

Her desk! The chair's wrong. It's got a cushion on it. And… there's… pictures, but not of them. And… he looks around some more, Burt's missing! Burt should not be missing. Burt should be on top of the filing cabinet ready and willing to leap into action as a comforter for anyone who may be down here in need of a snuggle and laugh.

"Can I help you?"

Tim rounds on his heel ready to chew out whomever has the nerve to interlope down here, only to realize that, damn it, that's Zelaz, and he works down here, now.

"Where's Burt?"

"Burt?" Zelaz is looking at him like he's insane. No one named Burt is supposed to be in the lab.

"The hippo?"

"Oh." Finding out who Burt is is not alleviating the you're insane in his look. "We moved him to the expanded area."

"Why?" Moved Burt? No. No. No!

"Corwin kept playing with him, driving us crazy. Most of Abby's stuff is in there. So, can I help you… Agent McGee, right?"

Tim sighs, glaring a little. Zelaz looks pretty disturbed at that. Then he shakes his head and waves it away. "Yes. McGee, we met a few times before Abby had the baby. I've got computers and phones to go through. Usually I come down here, hook in, and do it on the table, but you've got… stuff, on there."

"Ah. Yes. For the counterfeiting case. How is Abby and your daughter?"

"Just fine. Sleeping when I headed in here. So… got phones and computers I need to crack. No place to do it." Tim's looking long and hard at the stuff for the counterfeiting. Isn't that something the Secret Service usually handles? Sure we got that one case… And what sort of moron counterfeits coins? Never mind. Not important.

"You have to remember, your team isn't the only one. We do process evidence for everyone here."

"Of course." Okay, this is just flat out wrong. Everyone else takes a back seat to their evidence. Things his team need done get done right this second. Someone needs to have a chat with these guys
about this.

"But, if you want, there's two extra computers, and an extra table in the newer space."

"Thanks." He heads through the new door next to Major Mass Spec, quickly patting it, at least something still looks the same, and realizes that yes, this is pretty close to the set-up he's used to, though whoever did it wasn't paying too much attention to the lay out, both the table and the computers are facing the windows, so the sun is rising in his eyes.

Not gonna work.

He pokes his head out. "Zelaz, get in here."

"McGee?"

He's not usually the guy who tries to trade in on close relationships to people in power, but if I'm married to your boss can make this easier, he'll whip it out. "We're moving this. Anyone trying any real work here in the morning's going to go blind. Let's get everything unplugged and rearranged."

"McGee, I've got evidence to run and an experiment to monitor."

Zelaz does not appear to be understanding the unspoken context here. Tim tries again, putting a little more stress on the words, acting like he expects immediate compliance. Always works for Gibbs. "I'm sure you do. Give me a hand."

Zelaz is still staring at him, boggled at this. Apparently furniture moving isn't part of his job description. "Isn't this why we've got maintenance and physical plant guys?"

Tim takes three steps to the doorway, and grabs Zelaz by the hand, pulling him to the desk. "No. We wait for them it'll be three weeks before they get to it. We do it, and it'll take twenty minutes. Now give me a hand."

"But…"

"Are you running the evidence for Vance?"

"No."

"Is it a murder?"

"No."

"Dead body and three missing sailors trumps whatever else it is you're working on." Tim points to the cords. "Get unplugging. Sooner they're moved, sooner you get back to trace."

He's used to quiet for work like this. Once they'd get set up, usually he'll do the legwork, while Abby does something else. Sometimes they talk, gossip a little, (okay, a lot sometimes) but usually they both get into the zone and do their own thing.

Still, feels weird to be down here, by himself, breaking into these computers, and not hear her music, and the clomp of her boots on the floor as she moves from one job to the next.
Feels, just, bizarre, to not smell Caf-Pow.

And, honestly, it's kind of lonely to not occasionally feel a hand brush his neck, or to give her a quick kiss when he hits a lull of his own.

Burt's on top of the filing cabinet. "She'll be back in a few months."

Burt doesn't say anything. Tim gets up and takes a quick shot of him and Burt and sends it to Abby along with: Missing you.

A minute later, as he's breaking the password protection on the Simmers' computer, he gets one back. Miss you, too. Home for dinner?

I hope so. No idea yet.

How's it going?

Slow, this part always is. What are you listening to?

Right now, Kelly nursing. That gets a smile. The picture she sent him of Kelly looking awfully happy as she chowed down on breakfast number two gets a bigger one. Just put on Animal Collective.

Tim nods at that, and queues them up on his phone. Not his favorite, but it'll do. It's the kind of music he's got associated with 'working.'

Got 'em on. See you tonight.

Love you.

XOXOXOXO

By eight thirty, when he was fairly sure everyone else was in, Tim headed upstairs. By this point he'd dissected the computers and phones and found, once again, not much of anything interesting. No file marked "Secret Plan, DO NOT OPEN" or anything like that.

"Coffee's cold." Was the first thing Tony said when he saw Tim.

Great. Really late night. Tony's never much fun on four hours of sleep.

"Was nice and warm when I brought it in."

That got a glare. "So, since you've finally decided to join us, campfire time. Gather round."

So, gather round they did. The report in part looked a whole lot like when Gibbs was running the show, aside from everyone sitting down in their chairs in the middle of the bull pen.

The sum up led to this:

A: The USS Reagan had a five by two foot hole in the side of it.

B: That hole was located behind a stack of boxes in a deep storage area.

C: It can only be seen from the outside, (or right in front of it on the inside) so they had not more than
two days of time where it'd be undiscovered. (Maybe less if someone had to circle around for a better landing approach, Draga added.)

D: The equipment needed to make that hole had been on board. It did not appear to be on board any longer. And cutting said hole would have taken close to fifteen hours. Letting the hole cool off so you could go through it safely would have been another three days.

E: They were no closer to having any idea if anything, besides the cutting tools, were missing.

F: The only things Simmers, Blake, and Ender seemed to have in common was an interest in computers games, a lack of friends, and a socially awkward personalities. ("Kind of like you, McNerd." "Stuff it, Tony.") All three were good, but not excellent, at their jobs. Besides one drunk and disorderly for Simmers, none of them had anything on their records.

G: The XO, Carl Snader, was definitely hiding something, but none of them knew what. (Tim's blackmail idea struck all of them as plausible.)

H: Next up, going to visit their homes, talk to next of kin, try to get more of an idea of what was going on.

They're getting ready to leave, but Draga's still staring at the pictures of the crates. "Something's just wrong about these."

Gibbs drifted over, looking at the shots on his screen, squinting. "Put 'em on the plasma."

Draga does, flashing them up. On that screen, they're practically life size. Gibbs looks them over more carefully. Then he point to the area on two of them where the cross planks are flush with the side walls. "Pry marks. These have been opened."

"Opened?" Tony says. "That's not good. There's not supposed to be anything in those anyone's ever needed to get into. Ziva, Gibbs, we're heading back to Norfolk to go over Simmers' place anyway. We'll swing by the ship and see what's up with that. McGee, Draga, you're off to check out Blake's place."

"On it." Tim said to Tony as Ziva and Gibbs grabbed their bags.

"So, let me guess," Draga says a few seconds after they pounded on the door, announcing themselves. "They never actually leave the master plan laying out?"

No answer, so Tim's picking the lock. "You know how to do this?"

Draga shakes his head. "Passed the class, but I'm bad at it."

"Have Ziva or Gibbs work with you on it."

"Not you?"

"You want to try to learn how to pick a lock from a lefty?" Learning how to do it from his right-handed instructors at FLETC hadn't been much fun. He'd gotten to the point of being mediocre at it. Give him enough time and eventually he'd get through the lock. Then one day, when Ziva was
watching him grind away at it, she gave him a tip, do it with his eyes closed, don't worry about where your hands are, just feel it, don't try to see. That helped, a lot. But he's got the sense that he does it pretty much upside down and backwards from how right handed people do it, and they would have a hell of a time following his technique.

"Good point."

"And yes, sometimes they have left the master plan out, and we walk into it, but, in thirteen years, I'd say it's happened four times." He feels the last tumbler slide into place. "And we're in."

Draga's about to step in, but Tim stops him. "Tell me what you're seeing."

"McGee?"

"Before we go tromping in there, tell me what you see. What sticks out. What it makes you think."

"Okay…" Draga stares in. "Small house, one, maybe two people live here, tops." Makes sense. They're in a neighborhood of small, post-World War II bungalows. "Air feels stale. Hot. Air conditioning is off. No lights on. Shades are down. No mail." There was a mail slot in the door, but no pile of mail on the floor. "Whatever, wherever Blake is, it's not here." Tim nods in agreement. Of course, the foot tall grass, the lack of car in the driveway, and the fact that none of the neighbors had seen him in months also suggested that.

Draga looks around further, from where they are, they can see a small living room, part of a kitchen, and another doorway that probably leads to the bed/bathroom area. "No clock. No TV. Sofa, no chairs. One lamp, next to the sofa. No pictures on the mantle. No art on the walls. I've lived in DC for five weeks and have more stuff than this up. How long has he had this place?"

"It's been his listed residence since 2011."

"Great. Doesn't look like he entertains."

"Nope. Anything else?"

"He likes beige?" Beige carpet, lighter beige walls, darker beige sofa.

"Why not." Tim shrugs. "Let's see what else is in there. Keep telling me what you see and what you're thinking."

"Okay. Really hot in here." And it was. Only in the mid-80s outside today, but closed up house, no AC, full sun beating down on it, and it was sweltering in there. Draga looks around further. "Not getting anything else off the living room."

"Kitchen next."

They head in, look around. " Doesn't cook much."

"Maybe. He's been on a float for ten months. Might not see any need to keep any food in here that long."

"Not just bare pantry." Though the pantry is bare. No staples. "No microwave. No pots or pans."

"Could be in the cupboards."

"Not feeling it." Draga opens the cupboard, there are plates, bowls, glasses, and two pots. "This guy eats takeout, makes himself ramen now and again, and probably has a recipe for girlfriend spaghetti,
and that's it."

"Girlfriend spaghetti?"

Draga smiles at him. "You've been married so long you don't remember that? It's that one recipe every guy has that he can whip out to feed the girlfriend that one lone home-cooked meal to prove that he's not completely and utterly helpless."

"Tony calls it camouflaged takeout."

Draga smirks. "Of course he does."

"You thinking there's ever been a girlfriend back here?" Tim asks. He's thinking awkward personality may be code for has never been on a date.

Draga's reserving judgment. "Let's see the bedroom."

As they're leaving, Draga looks at Tim, "What was yours?"

"Mine?"

"Your one meal?"

Tim shakes his head a little. He never had a version of girlfriend spaghetti (though he has, on occasion, engaged in camouflaged takeout). "I'm not now, or ever was, a great cook, but as my mom said, 'You're not a prince, and you're not a pet, so you've got to be able to feed yourself, now get in there and make dinner.' So, I can make an okay version of a whole lot of things."

"Your mom and my mom would have gotten along."

Tim shrugs at that, not wanting to get into it. "Yours?"

"My parents run a bakery back home. I make a mean quiche/soup/salad combo."

"That explains the cake."

"Yeah, I'm good with desserts, too. Worked every night, morning, and weekend in their bakery growing up."

"Where's home?"

"Portland."

"Maine or Oregon?"

"Maine."

Tim nods at that and opens the door to his left. Bathroom.

Draga winces. "That's just nasty. I'm voting no on any woman ever coming back here."

Like the rest of the house it's empty. Unlike the rest of the house tidy in here doesn't mean clean. Both the shower door and the toilet look like they've never been scrubbed, and Tim's devoutly hoping those rusty-brown stains all over the shower wall and the toilet bowl are, indeed, rust stains from hard water, and not something more... organic.
They do however find the first sign that at some point an actual person lived here. There is toilet paper on the spindle. One toothbrush, old tube of toothpaste, mouthwash, deodorant, razor and shaving cream appear to live in the medicine cabinet.

"Insight?" Tim asks.

"Guy's tidy. Puts everything in its place. Doesn't like to see clutter." Tim nods at that, sounds good. "Bedroom?" Draga asks.

"Sure."

Like the bathroom there are at least some signs of life in here. Clothing in the closet, more clothing, towels, and linens in the dresser. Alarm clock and lamp on the one night stand next to the full size bed. The mattress was bare, pillows with no cases on top.

Tim and Draga home in on the desk in the corner, but besides being set up for a computer that wasn't there, it's empty.

"So, no landline, no tv, no desktop computer. Either this guy is a luddite or his whole life is on his phone and laptop."

"We've got both at in evidence." Tim shows him a thumb drive he had in his pocket. "And I brought their contents along."

"Interesting. What's left?" Draga asks.

"There was a garage," Tim replies.

"Let's see what's in there."

It's a detached garage. Probably added after the house was built. Probably added recently. The siding is vinyl and the door is some sort of composite, both of which Draga points out while Tim lets him take his time going after the lock.

There aren't any windows, but there does seem to be some sort of ventilation system.

"Think he's a wood worker?" Tim asks. Only place he's seen an exhaust system like that is Gibbs basement, and Gibbs only fires that up for when he's working with his band saw to rip larger pieces of wood into smaller ones or when he's doing any sort of spray finishing.

"Nope."

"Keep talking…"

"Upholstered sofa. Cheap metal kitchen table and chairs. Ikea bed, night stand, and dresser. Particle board desk. Whatever he's doing in here, it's not wood working."

Eventually Draga got the lock open, and Tim eases open the door. They both stare into the shed, and Tim feels his mouth go dry. Draga's staring in the shed, and back to Tim, and back to the shed.

"Not good?"

Tim shakes his head. "Not good." He's got his phone to his ear before he's finished shaking his head.
"McGee?" Tony asks.

"Draga and I are at Blake's. We're staring at a shed filled with bleach bottles, gasoline canisters, empty Vaseline jars, and bags of what I bet used to hold potassium chloride."

He hears Tony groan. "How much?"

"There's," he counts quickly, "twenty one gallon-sized bleach bottles, and about the same amount of the other stuff."

"Great."

"You get to Simmers' yet?"

"No. We're just south of Richmond. Any fertilizer?"

"Not that I'm seeing."

"Anything else interesting?"

"House was empty. Barely looked like anyone had ever lived there. I'll send the pics when I get off the phone. Be careful when you get to Simmers'."

"You, too, Tim."

Tim started to shoot pictures of the interior of Blake's shed. Draga was about to step in, but he grabbed his arm, and kept him out. "Those are the ingredients for homemade C-4. We don't go in there. Once I've got pictures of everything, we call Vance, he sends the explosive experts, they take everything apart."

"You wait for the bomb squad?" Draga didn't believe that; maybe he's been hearing too many stories of their past exploits.

"I wait for the bomb squad, and you do when you're with me. When you've got your own team... But you don't, so we sit here and wait."

An hour later, they're sitting in the car, having roped off the place, and waiting for the bomb techs when Tim felt his phone buzz.

He checked; it was Tony.

"You finally get to Simmers'?"

"Finally. Wanna guess what we found?"

Tim sighs, of course this case has to get messy. "Nothing good."

"That's putting it mildly. Everything you need for homemade det cord. No homemade det cord."

"Wonderful."

"It gets better."
Tim rolls his eyes. "Really, how does this get better?"

"We've got twenty blank books filled with incoherent ranting, and biographies of every whack-job, school-shooter from the last hundred years."

Tim winces. "You're right, that's better. You contact the Reagan?"

"Yeah. We're starting to get an idea of why they might not have wanted to stay on the ship. They're getting everyone off, calling in the bomb squad, and getting off shore, more or less all at once."

"Once we get the bomb squad here, we'll head for Ender's."

"Okay. Keep us in the loop," Tony says.

"Will do."

It occurs to Tony, as they sit, on the dock, nice and dry, not in the middle of what is probably the biggest bomb they've ever seen, watching the feed of the bomb squad checking things out, that once upon a time, Gibbs would have decided they needed to be on the ship in the middle of this investigation.

Say, this time ten years ago, hell, five years ago, he probably wouldn't have been satisfied with the idea that just letting the guys who do this for a living clear the thing out, and then go in. No if they were going to be in danger, he'd want to be in danger, too.

Tony catches Ziva's eyes as the three of them watch the feed. She nods slightly, understanding his unspoken thought. He notices that her hand is on Gibbs' shoulder. Just a brief touch, but it seems (to Tony at least) to say, I'm glad you've hit the point where you value your life.

Gibbs squeezed her hand back, and then all three of them focused on the techs, who were opening the boxes where the body was found.

Tony felt his blood go cold when he saw it. They'd all been standing there. Right next to what looked like a good twenty pounds of c-4.

Ziva was already looking at the specs of the ship.

Below the storage area were the tanks that held the jet fuel.

The techs opened (carefully) the boxes above and to the sides of the bomb. They were filled with sandbags and concrete.

It was a shape charge, designed to force the explosion down.

By the time the dogs and the bomb techs were done, they'd found charges set across the whole ship. Twenty seven of them in total, set so the one would set the next off, and so on down the line, and it was only blind, dumb, excellent luck that the stupid idiot who set the damn thing up didn't double check to make sure his battery had enough life count all the way down to 18:10.
Unlike Blake or Simmers, Ender lived in an apartment. Which means, unlike Blake or Simmers, just looking at the place doesn't give a sense of how long it's been since someone's been around. Of course there are cars in the lot, other people live in the building.

On the upside, there is a landlord, who was able to tell them that he hadn't seen anyone go in or out, and that while the lease on the place was good until September, a month earlier he had gotten a letter from Ender saying he wasn't going to renew.

"He say anything about grabbing his stuff?" Tim asks.

"Nope." The landlord shakes his head. "Just that he wasn't going to renew the lease, and that everything was tidy if I wanted to show people the place."

"Okay. Mind if we look around?" Draga asks.

"No." It took a moment but the landlord came back with a set of keys.

It's unlikely anyone is there, but after what they found in the other two places, they're not taking any chances.

"Standard room clearing for this one. Go in, check everything first, then we search," Tim says.

"Sounds good. You in first or I?"

"I'm in first, you stay behind, cover me. Then you hit the next door way to your right, and I cover you, and on and on until we've gotten all the rooms."

"Lead on, McDuff." Tim turns to Draga, giving him a long steady look. Draga looks embarrassed. "It's a quote… From Macbeth…"

"Uh huh." Like Tony didn't hit him with that one at least once a year. "'Lay on, Macduff.' Don't do it again."

Draga looks a little sheepish. "Okay."

Tim hammers on the door, "NCIS, we're coming in," and leads on.

Once cleared, they found a residential apartment in the middle of an apartment building with nothing out of the ordinary about the place. There were pictures on the wall, enough furniture to indicate an expectation of other people being in this home at some point. Nothing to indicate a girlfriend or boyfriend, but family shots, and some pictures that certainly looked like buddies goofing around were visible.

It's just… normal. Really normal.

"Does this make any sense to you?" Draga asks.

"Not really."

"There should be stockpiled weapons or something here, right?"

Tim shrugs, looking around at a perfectly normal apartment. "I'd assume so. But nothing ever just fits into tidy little boxes like that. Maybe… Maybe he's a red herring? Maybe he's missing and it's unrelated."

"What do you mean by red herring?"
"They grabbed him to make us think it's all one big thing and distract our attention from the real thing... I don't know. This is where we head back, talk it out, and try to make sense of it."

"We still don't know who John Doe is," Draga says, closing the door to Ender's apartment.

"Good point. Let's get back."

By five thirty they were back, and campfiring again.

There was a schematic for the Reagan up on the big screen, along with the location of all of the charges the dogs had found.

Tony also had the detonator for the first charge on his desk. Tim had glanced at it, looked pretty standard. Nothing about it jumped out at him, beyond that ice down the spine feeling of knowing he'd been right next to it.

Tony sees him staring at it. "It was set to blow at 18:10."

"So, it was supposed to blow the ship sky high ten minutes after someone noticed they went missing?" Draga asks.

"Great." Tim's shaking his head. "It's a nuclear aircraft carrier with more than three million gallons of jet fuel on it, and they gave themselves an hour to get away."

"Fair to say, they didn't intend to swim," Gibbs adds.

"Yeah, I'd say no to that one. Something really fast picked them up," Tony says.

"Sea plane?" Draga asks. "Nothing on the water moves fast enough to get you far away enough from something like that. But, if you're in the air…"

Tim's eyes light up at that. "And if it flew low… might not hit the radar."

"Or might just look like a blip," Draga finishes.

"McGee…" Tony doesn't have to finish that sentence. Tim knows what needs to happen next.

"Already checking all the radar feeds from every ship in the area, as well as any flight plans that had been set. Draga, I want you checking every company that rents seaplanes, maybe, if we can get lucky twice, they rented a plane."

"How'll we know it was them?" Draga asks Tim.

"We won't, not to start, but let's get some leads."

"On it."

Tim was getting access to every radar feed he could find. He was sort of aware of the fact that Ziva
and Gibbs had headed down to see what Jimmy and Ducky had found.

While he waits for the data he wants, he continues to go through the phones. He figured Blake's would be a very good place to start. And, as a start, he's sitting back and reading through all of the texts.

*Minecraft.* Great. Minecraft's fun and all, but Blake's a *hardcore* Minecraft player. Tim's learning way, way, way more than he ever wanted to about the game. (And yes, he does play, a little, every now and again. He's more a first person shooter/spellcaster gamer than sim games.) Blake keeps texting with MDeed about it, what they're building, where they're mining, when they're taking down the Ender Dragon.

He makes a note to hunt down MDeed, and keeps scanning the texts.

Two months back he sees a collection of texts from Blake to Simmers and back again. Apparently they were in leave in Cairo and were having a hard time meeting up. Then MDeed got into the text, he was also looking for them. Then it ended with one last text with them all meeting up at a Hookah bar.

He highlighted all of those texts and got them ready to go on the big screen. Might be useful, and figuring out who MDeed is went to the top of the list.

"Draga?"

"Yeah."

"How's the rental hunt going?"

Draga stares at him with dead eyes for a second and then says, "Do you have any idea how many companies rent seaplanes on the eastern seaboard."

Tim grins, happy that for once this isn't his job. "Nope, and I don't want to. But, focus down to Virginia and Maryland, that's home base for these guys. Anyway, while you're on hold, I want you to run this number: 555-124-9834."

"Okay." Draga holds up a finger. "Hello, yes, I'm Eric Draga with NCIS, I was wondering if I could speak with the manager of this shop. Yes, I'll wait. Thanks." He looks back to Tim. "Why am I running this number?"

"One of Blake's Minecraft buddies."

"Really?" Draga doesn't look very impressed by this, but he also doesn't ask what Minecraft is so, that's something.

"It's worth a shot. Blake, MDeed—"

"MDeed?"

"The buddy, all I've got is a number and a handle, and Simmers met up in Cairo two months back. Might be something."

Eric nods. "Hello? Is this the manager of Sea and Sun Air Tours? Great. I'm Eric Draga with NCIS… We investigate crimes involving the Navy… Yes, I'm a cop…"

Tim tunes Draga out and goes back to the texts. He stares at the ones where they were trying to hook
up in Cairo, and then decides to check the personnel logs from the Reagan.

Blake and Simmers had leave, and hooked up with each other, and MDeed. Ender was supposed to have leave, but he covered a shift for another sailor… Maybe Ender was supposed to have been at the hookah bar, too…

He keeps hunting further back. It was a ten month float. Lots of time all in the same place.

Tim was buried in the texts when Ziva and Gibbs came back up.

There's a sensation, it gets him right in the back of the neck, a sort of cold prickle, that goes with pissed-off Gibbs. It's just… Pissed-off Gibbs somehow projects pissed-off, and does it hard enough that the people around him can feel it without him having to say a word.

And Gibbs is pissed.

Tim thinks he felt that wave of pissed hit as soon as the elevator doors opened.

Gibbs stalks back to his desk, and Ziva says, "We have a complication."

"Complication?" Tony asks.

"Yes. Jimmy and Ducky checked both the DNA and the dental records to make sure. Our John Doe is James Ender."

That got everyone staring at her.

"Been dead for at least seven days, too," Gibbs adds.

"He's only been missing for three," Draga says.

"Yep," Gibbs says slowly, nodding, PISSED!

Tony rubs his eyes. "Okay. We have three missing sailors, one of which died four days before he went missing? He showed up for his shifts, right? I mean, how does someone go missing on a ship for four days and no one notices?"

Tim's already got the personnel reports up, so he double checks. "He's listed as serving all of his shifts until he went officially went missing…" Then he laughs a little. "All of his shifts under Snader."

"That's why the XO was acting hinky? He was covering for Ender. Why? Ziva, Gibbs back to Norfolk, drag him up here, stick him in interrogation until he's ready to crack and then don't be gentle on him. Draga, how are you coming on those planes?"

"Seventeen rental places down. Fifty-six more to go."

"Keep going."

Ziva and Gibbs are once again gearing up. "Hold up," Tony barks. They pause, looking at him. "Ducky have a cause of death?"
Gibbs shakes his head. Ziva fills in the details. "Nothing conclusive. The maggots did too much damage to the soft tissue for Ducky to see what it might have been. The tox screen came back negative for all common poisons. Ducky's best guess is suffocation because there are no signs of trauma to the body, but the usual sign of that is petechial hemorrhaging and…" She looks to Tim, not sure he needs the details on exactly why they don't know if Ender had petechial hemorrhaging.

Tim finishes her thought anyway, cold creeping up his spine and settling in his joints as he says it, "But they couldn't tell that because he didn't have eyes anymore, right?"

"Yes."

Draga swallows hard.

"If he was stabbed or shot it was in the soft tissue. No spatter where we found him, but that doesn't rule out a gut wound," Gibbs adds.

Tony nods at that, and Ziva and Gibbs head off.

A minute later, Draga says, "I got that number for McGee."

Tim looks up from the texts. (The intricacies of obsidian creation.) "Good, what is it?"

"Pay as you go phone. Last transmission was at 18:00 on Saturday."

"Supposed to set the charge off?" Tony asks.

"Maybe. What's the number on that thing?" Draga asks, looking at the detonator.

Tony rattles off the digits.

"Nope," Draga answers, and before Tony could ask, he says, "And I'm finding out who that call went to."

"Can you find where it was sold, McGee?" Tony asks.

"I can try," Tim replies, meaning that, because it looks like this phone got used over and over for at least a year it was probably charged again and again, and if he could get the search warrant, and if he could get Verizon to play ball, and if it didn't get paid for in cash, he could get a credit card number to go with it. He starts writing the request for the warrant.

"What do you have on the radar?" Tony asks Tim.

"I've got the FAA asking me for a warrant. I've sent the note to Vance requesting he have a chat with them about letting me see what they've got. I've got the radar from the Reagan, with nothing on it. Nothing at all. It looks like they shut the damn thing off. And I've got the Navy being less than perfectly forthcoming about what was in the area and letting me see what they saw. Supposedly Vance is going to have a chat with Jarvis about that as soon as he gets done with the FAA. Normally, one of their ships almost blows up, we've got no problems, but they're being stubborn today. While I'm waiting for that, I'm going through texts."

"Okay, good."

"You got anything interesting?"

Tony's reading through Simmers' journals.
He looks up from the composition book in front of him to Tim and Draga. "Mostly I've got an intense desire to wash my brain out with bleach. This guy was ninety-five levels of crazy."

"How'd he pass the psych evals?" Draga asks.

"Good question." Tony reads a few more lines. "That's a really good question." He grabs the journals. "I'm going to visit Ducky. Keep hunting, campfire in an hour."

"Hi Abby."

Tim got a few minutes free from combing through texts and radar read outs and was using them to bolt down some food and call Abby. The FAA finally gave him the flight plans of everyone who registered one in that area for that day. Only 187 of them. Most he can glance at and toss out of the pile. For example, there's no way that 747 touched down. But there are a lot of little puddle-jumper type planes out for fun. And there are a lot of smallish private let's-go-on vacation planes taking people to the islands. And he's got to check each and every single one of those planes to see if any of them are capable of a water landing.

"Hey, baby."

"I don't think I'm getting home tonight."

"No?"

"No." He fills her in on what they'd found and he can feel that she gets this, completely understands, but still, it's his second day back, not coming home is disappointing.

"I've got to get back to it. Still got seventy planes to check out. And something's wrong with the Navy, Jarvis is stonewalling Vance about something. Or Vance is stonewalling us. Either way, they want answers fast, without telling us what's really going on."

"Wonderful. I'll see you when I can."

"Love you," he says.

"You, too," she answers.

He's sitting in front of Tony and Draga, all three of them reporting in.

"FAA is a dead end. Lots of planes, none of them could have landed on the water."

"No one rented a plane to anyone who looks like our three sailors." Draga adds.

"Okay, so they cut a hole..." Tony's tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair. "The found one hundred and twenty three pounds of the homemade C-4 on the ship. What if they weren't getting off, but getting it on..."

"That works," Tim says.

"Makes sense, you get one duffle of stuff you can bring on. And it's not like they check it, but even
spread between three duffles that doesn't leave much room for your own kit. Plus you've got to store it, and, well, at least with the guys in my unit, you better not bring anything you didn't want them to know about onboard, because they were going to get into it."

"No privacy." Tony says.

Draga shakes his head. "Nope. I mean, sailors and soldiers have a reputation for stealing anything not nailed down, and they didn't get that reputation by accident. Though in my unit we called it 'borrowing,' because stuff usually found its way back sooner or later."

"So, they cut the hole, and then lower a ladder or something, bring the C-4 up. Simmers and Blake then stuff it all over the ship. Ender's dead. But he's still doing his job according to the XO. How does Ender tie into this?" Tony asks.

Tim and Draga shake their heads. "I got nothing," Tim says. "I can find texts going back between Simmers and Blake during every leave for the last two years. But Ender's the one I also don't have a cell for."

"Did he have one?" Tony asks Tim.

"According to his financials he was paying for one. I've got a number. I just don't have it popping up anywhere on Simmers and Blake's phones."

The three of them were sitting there, thinking, trying to put the pieces together. Something is missing. Something big. And without it…

"Splendid! I was hoping to find the three of you confabbing," Ducky says as he grabs Gibbs' chair and joins the circle. "The journals you gave me were fascinating, Anthony."

Tony just looks tired at that. "I'm glad you enjoyed them."

Ducky grins. "Oh, indeed. Those were the work of a very focused mind."

Tony stares at Ducky like he spent too long reading the journals and the crazy rubbed off. "Focused?"

"Oh, yes, Anthony. The author of those journals went to great lengths to manufacture the picture of a disturbed mind, but I am fairly certain he is not, in fact, a disturbed mind, at least, not in that direction."

"Keep talking, Duck-man."

Ducky does not appear to be thrilled at being called Duck-man, but he does, as Tony requested, keep talking. "The journals paint a portrait of a man suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, with a hefty dose of megalomania to go with it. They are letter perfect in their madness. The problem is, they're too perfect, too text book. In fact, a man so eaten by madness would be unable to function in any larger society. His conspiracy fantasies are so complete, so perfect, that if he had actually believed them, he would have been incapable of preforming his daily duties.

"According to Mr. Simmers' personnel reports and psych evals he was functional, as recently as the day before he went missing. So, the question is, why is he going so far out of his way to provide us with an image of madness?"

"Good question…" Tony trails off as they watch Vance head down the steps, over to the elevator, greet Jarvis, Vance nods at him, so Tony joins them and they head upstairs.
"The plot thickens," Ducky says.

"Oh, yeah," Draga replies.

"There was one other thing I found interesting in his journals. He repeatedly mentions a place, his 'safety nest' where 'no one will be able to ever touch me again.' I believe this place is real. He mentions enough clues to get a fairly good idea of where it is. However, I'm also sure that he wants you to go there, and that it is, at best, a waste of time, and at worst, a trap."

Tim sighs. "Give me the clues. I'll hunt it down."

An hour later, Tony comes down. Tim and Draga stare at him expectantly. He shakes his head. "Not allowed to say."

"That big?" Tim asks.

"Bigger. What do you have on the MDeed guy?"

"The cell was bought in Schenectady, NY. It's been refilled with 1000 extra minute every month. Those minutes have always been bought in the US, but pick a random Podunk city, and that'll be where it happened. Never the same city twice. All paid for with cash. With the exception of that last number called, it's only been used to call Blake. And something like 99% of the texts from it have been about Minecraft."

"Minecraft?" Tony doesn't know what that is.

"It's a computer game." Tim fills in. "You mine stuff, then you craft things out of the stuff you've mined."


Tim nods, that's a good way of describing it.

Tony's weary. "I've got a bomb maker with no motive to blow up his ship talking to another guy we can't track down, about Legos?"

"Basically."

Tony's head hits the top of his desk. "Shoot me now." After a minute, he pulls his head back up. "Tell me about the new number?"

Tim shakes his head, he wishes he had better news on that. "Also a burner phone. No calls to or from besides that one. If I had to guess, I'd say the ship was supposed to blow up, and when it didn't these guys stopped talking to each other."

"Great."

12:06 Ziva and Gibbs got back.
"What took so long?" Tony asks.

Gibbs growls.

"The Bay Tunnel Bridge," Ziva says it like it's the filthiest swear word ever. "We hit rush hour traffic on the way down, and it took two hours to go seven miles. Then on the way back, there was an accident. Four hours, just sitting there, under the Chesapeake, breathing in the exhaust of hundreds of other cars. And then, we finally get free, I finally get the car up to ninety, and we get pulled over by some..." Ziva pauses, not saying whatever it is she wants to say. "LEO for 'driving erratically.' And the badge wasn't enough, he decided he needed to actually check in with Vance to make sure we were legit."

"Snader in interrogation?" Tony asks.

"Yeah," Gibbs replies.

"Good. Leave him there. Let me get you two up to date." And Tony did.

"McSleepingBeauty."

Tim jerks when he hears that. It's been twenty hours since he slept. He wasn't actually asleep, just close. Tony was going over stuff he already knew, anyway.

"What?"

"You locate the 'safety nest'?"

"Yeah. Probably. It's either in Hampton Roads or Nebraska."

"No financials to back that up?" Tony asks, sharp, tired.

Tim glares at him, he's awfully tired, too. "If I had financials to back it up, I wouldn't tell you probably. Someone, probably MDeed, has a pile of cash, and they are doing this off the record. But, if you want a forensic accountant..."

"We're good." Tony rubs his eyes. "Okay, go home. Back at eight."

"Snader?" Ziva asks.

"I'm going in there." Tony grabs a manila folder at random off of her desk. "And I'm going to stare at him for a few minutes, look like I'm reading this, and then leave. We're going home in ten minutes, and he can spend the rest of the night in that room."

When Tim got home, Abby was up with Kelly, doing the 1:00 AM feed. He kissed both of them, walked, slowly, so tired, up to his room, stripped out of his clothing, and crashed into sleep.

And that was Tuesday.
Abby's jogging his shoulder.

"Mmmm."

"It's seven. Gotta get up."

He looks at the clock. Ten more minutes. He'll cheat on his shower. His hair doesn't really need to be washed. "Mrphgm."

He feels her lips on his shoulder. That's nice. Warm body pressed against his back is awfully nice, too, in a very comforting, sleepy sort of way. Then there was crying, and the soft, warm, pleasant weight of her body against his back vanishes. A very short bit later, he feels it again. Sort of. She's sitting back against the headboard. Her leg is along his back. She pulls the pillow out from under his head, he groans, and she uses it to prop her arm. That gets a half-awake glare from him.

"You've got to get up." Abby says with a half-smile as Kelly settles into her arms to nurse. (Something about being a nursing mom means she's not perfectly sympathetic to him being tired.)

"I know." He pulls himself up, spends a moment with his cheek pressed against her shoulder, enjoying the feel of her skin, his finger idly stroking Kelly's cheek. Then he levers himself out of bed and toward the shower.

He's brushing his teeth when he says to her, "I feel like I used to do this a whole lot easier."

"You used to have a sleep reserve."

He nods at her, heads back into the bathroom, turns on the shower, and gets in. Then he notices his toothbrush is still in his mouth, and that's not precisely the order he usually does this in.

8:03, the elevator doors open, and he's once again back at work.

And there is, thank… Gibbs (he thinks, he's not entirely sure what the new snack schedule is) coffee, on his desk.

Tony's already at his desk. He looks up at Tim. "Good. Come on, interrogation time."

Tony stands up, before Tim's even had a chance to get any of the coffee he's staring at longingly into his body, and says, "Draga, you're with us, too. McGee, I want you watching. Draga, you're with me. Just stand there and look disapproving. Don't say anything."

Draga nods.

Tim grabs the cup and follows along.

"And when I say stand, I mean it literally. I want you standing over him, little to the side and behind. He'll be able to see you in the mirror and his peripheral vision, but not dead on."

Draga nods again.

"You got a weak stomach?" Tony asks.
"Why?"

Tim shake his head. He doesn't mind being on the watching part of this interrogation. "He's been in there eight hours. Trust me, Gibbs and Ziva didn't let him have a bathroom break on the ride up. It's gonna smell bad in there," Tim answers.

Draga laughs a little. "My son didn't finally get potty-trained until he was three and a half. I can deal with wet pants."

"Perfect." The grin on Tony's face is ice cold.

Snader looked awfully broken by the time Tony and Draga got in there. Broken, jumpy, deeply ashamed. He'd been tidy about it, but there was a puddle in the corner, and the way he's squirming suggests he'd really, really like to get to a toilet.

Tim can't see the expression on Tony's face, but Draga's looming over Snader, looking at him like he's a puppy who just pissed on the rug, and he hasn't yet decided if he needs his nose rubbed in it or whacked with a newspaper.

Tony doesn't say anything for a long minute, then he carefully places the full color pictures of Ender's body in front of Snader.

"What I want to know is, how this man was, according to you, doing his job."

Snader just stares. "Who is that?" he finally asks, eyes glued to the pictures.

"Don't get cute."

His head shakes slowly. "Who… Is that… Ender?"

"Yes, that's Ender," Tony bites out. "How many dead men usually show up on one of your shifts?"

"But…" Snader's expression is somewhere between shocked and confused, and right this second, confused might be winning.

"You gonna tell me he's got an identical twin?"

Snader's jaw drops. "How long…"

"Like you don't know. So, what's the deal? Guy doesn't show up for five days, and you say nothing. Then suddenly you change your mind and report him missing? What's the game?"

Snader is still staring at the shot. "This is really Ender?"

"DNA and dental evidence don't lie. That's Ender."

Snader flips the shot over. "Not an identical twin."

"Huh?" Tony asks. He wasn't expecting that.

"I didn't report him missing until Saturday because until Saturday someone always showed up. If we had been on land, I would've laid into him, but… we were in the middle of the ocean. We weren't
picking up new crew."

That throws Tim for a loop, he sips the coffee, trying to figure out the angle on this.

Tony says, "Back up. Someone worked all of Ender's shifts?"

"Yes." Snader's nodding. "Someone who looked a whole lot like him. The first time I saw him, I remember thinking, this isn't right. I kept looking at him. It was like he'd gotten taller maybe, skin a little darker. But we're at sea, more than a thousand miles from the nearest port. On land, where there's plenty of other people, fine, you see something like that, and you call it in. But, there are no other people. We were floating in the middle of the ocean. He knew the job. He knew his co-worker's nicknames and everything, got the in-jokes. He spoke the same way. Voice was a little too deep, but he had all the same speech patterns. He, just… didn't quite look right."

Tony rubs his temples, and Tim's texting this to Gibbs and Ziva, asking them to pull up James Ender's picture and run it through facial recognition, see if anyone interesting looks a whole lot like him.

An hour later, they're back in the bullpen. Ziva's got two pictures up on the plasma.

"This is James Ender." She gestures to the man on the right in the Naval Uniform. "And this Hiri Al-Said. Not his real name. According to the facial recognition software, the two are a ninety-three percent match. James' mother is Iranian. His father is an American. Hiri is believed to be Iranian, as well."

Tony hears that and jogs up the stairs.

Ziva and Gibbs watch him go. Ziva raises an eyebrow.

"He got read in on whatever it is the Navy won't tell us. Apparently, this is relevant to that," Tim answers.

Gibbs nods. "Al-Said's been on the terrorist watch list since 2009. He was captured once in Afghanistan, but got free after a few days. We've been looking for him for years without a hint of him."

"Any relation between Ender and Al-Said?" Draga asks.

"Unknown," Gibbs says. "We called Ender's parents, and Ziva emailed them the photo."

"It's 5:00 where they are. They're probably not awake, yet," Ziva adds. "What we know about Al-Said's life prior to 2009 is sketchy at best. And what we know about since is even less detailed."

"Wonderful." Tim's staring at the photos. "Don't terrorists usually want some credit?"

"McGee?" Ziva asks.

"We've got Simmers, who's trying to look insane. Make it look like this was the worst attack of someone hearing voices in his head, ever. We've got Blake, who's got the skills for it, but no motive. Ender who appears to have just looked right for Al-Said to hop in and take his place—"

"And do what?" Draga adds.
Gibbs nods, that's a good question. Why did Al-Said even need to be on the ship, let alone for a few days…

"It would have taken days to get all the charges in place," Draga says.

"Yeah, but Blake's the demolitions expert. What was Al-Said playing Ender adding to the mix?" Tim asks.

"Does engineering run security sweeps on the places they put the charges?" Ziva asks.

Gibbs, Draga, and Tim nod. If they do, that'd be an awfully good reason to have someone on the engineering crew.

"Is Al-Said MDeed?" Draga asks.

"Be a huge coincidence if he's not. Al-Said was supposed to have been in Egypt for a few years," Gibbs answers. Just as his voice trails off, his phone chirps. He picks it up, answers, nods, hangs up. "We're invited up to get the details on this."

So up they went.

Tim recognized the short hair and posture, but didn't have a name for the first few seconds. Then the man facing Tony and Vance turned toward them.

Kort. Trent Kort. Of course the CIA was involved in this.

The glass eye looked really good. If Tim didn't know one of them wasn't real, he wouldn't have noticed.

Vance gestured to the conference table and sat down, deep, weary, I'm-so-done-with-this-shit, clear on his face.

Gibbs is bristling at the existence of Kort. "More messes you didn't get cleaned up?"

Kort flashes Gibbs a wry smile. "In a manner of speaking, Agent Gibbs. More precisely though, this is an op we were running smoothly, and then the Army made the mess of it, and we've been trying to fix it for six years."

"Let's have it," Gibbs says.

"Hiri Al-Said, or as he was known once upon a time, Thomas Ender, the older brother of your James Ender, was recruited by the CIA in 2007. He was proficient in Pashtun and Farsi, with a mountain dialect we were in need of. We sent him in on a deep cover mission in 2008, and by 2009 it was clear that he wasn't up to it any more. We arranged to have him removed from his mission. The Army succeeded in getting him out. They did not succeed in keeping him out."

"Not up to it anymore, how?" Ziva asks.

"Stockholm syndrome?" Kort spreads his hands, indicating a mystery. "His sympathies were shifting in an inappropriate manner."

Everyone winced.
"He was 'captured' in 2009, and we had arranged for him to be 'transferred' to Gitmo, where we'd break his cover, debrief, rehabilitate, and probably return him to civilian life."

"And watch him for the rest of his life," Vance adds.

Kort nods tersely. "That was the plan. And it was going swimmingly until the Army fell asleep at the switch, his convoy was hit, successfully, and the Taliban managed to recapture him. We had three back up positions for reclaiming him set. He didn't use them. We spent a year trying to get him out, but he had gone deep underground. At that point Thomas Ender officially went from MIA to KIA."

"Oh…" Ziva's face goes white and her posture slumps.

"Agent DiNozzo?" Vance asks.

"We emailed his parents a picture of him, asking if they knew who he was."

Tim can feel the eyes on him. "No. I can't delete an email once it’s sent. I can hack their account to erase it. I can't promise to do it before they read it." Vance is staring at him. "Who's their provider?"

"Gmail," Ziva replies.

"I'm on it." Tim stands up, making sure he doesn't need to be there for the rest of this. Vance nods at him, and off he goes to try and unsend that email.

Half an hour later, as he's hitting delete, and destroying any trace of Ziva's email, the rest of his team heads down.

"Give me the short version," Tim says as he logs out of the David Ender's gmail account.

Tony replies, "Here's the short version. We've got a CIA-trained operative who joined the other team. The reason Navy wouldn't give us any info on what was nearby was because a several submarines that aren't supposed to exist were going to be very close to a certain aircraft carrier at 18:10 on Saturday. If something were to happen to those submarines people sympathetic to the Taliban would be very happy. If some maniac with a grudge and too much C-4 happened to be involved in taking those subs out, then certain other people would be embarrassed, and yet a third group of people wouldn't feel a need to bomb Iran in retaliation for it."

"So, this is war, not terrorism?" Tim says.

"Yeah. Fear's a great side effect, but that wasn't the tactical upside of this move. You get the email?" Tony asks Tim.

"Yeah. Mom and Dad aren't waking up to, 'Hey, guess what, your kid's alive and a wanted terrorist.'"

"You think they know?" Tony asks.

"Already got the request for permission to go through their phones and financials in the works."

Tony adds, "Vance has sent word to the LA branch. They'll be sending agents in to talk to the Enders in person. See if Thomas has visited them. Meanwhile we've got three missing terrorists. You said you found Simmers' Fortress of Solitude?"
"Yep," Tim answers.

"Gear up. Let's see what's there."

The Fortress of Solitude was a warehouse. Not a huge one. Probably fifty feet by one hundred feet. Just another flat-roofed cinderblock building among a bunch of other industrial flat-roofed cinderblock buildings.

They were careful about it. Drove by once just looking around, checking for any sights of anyone there. Didn't see anyone or any cars.

They took one of the non-descript vans. So it's them in a white van. Inside it, Tim's got the tech working, scanning to see if anyone is transmitting anything nearby. But there are no radio signals, no wifi in range. If there's a camera or something, it's transmitting by wire.

One more circuit, slow, looking like lost delivery guys. (Tony actually stopped the van and left a brown box on the door of one of the other buildings and then pulled them away.) No one spots any obvious cameras. Tim and Draga get pictures of the layout, and they take their time going over them. They're in the parking lot of the nearest coffee shop. Tony's inside, just hanging out, drinking his coffee, keeping up the appearance of a delivery guy, as the four of them huddle up in the back of the van, planning their attack. And like any layout, there are places that would make for a good ambush, and other spots that look like they were made for a trap, so at least they can avoid them.

One last step. As Tony pulls the van up close to the warehouse again, he hits the switch that jams radio, cell, and wifi transmissions. If someone is watching, they won't be able to just flick a switch and blow them up.

Unless, of course, that switch is hardwired.

Time to go in.

They clear it first, fast, careful, watching each other's backs and all around. But it's empty. Really empty.

It's just a warehouse, filled with crates.

And God alone knows what's in those crates.

Tony headed back to the van, killed the jamming, called Vance, let him know they wanted the bomb squad, and then turned the jamming back on.

"Experience is a great teacher. We've had four different cases where the perps tried to hide what they were doing with a fake wall," Tony says, staring at the wall in front of him.
"And you think there's a fake wall?" Draga asks.

"You're the one who sees everything. Tell me how big the outside of this warehouse is compared to
the inside."

Draga trots outside, eyeballs the warehouse, and then heads back in again.

"You're right."

Tony rests his hand against the wall. "Think if we go knock on this, we'll find at least one section,
maybe all three, are hallow and hiding goodies."

Draga knocks, and it does sound hollow. He, Gibbs, and Tony start hunting for the latch. There has
to be a way to open this.

Draga spots it, high up, just where the wall meets with the support beam. He stretches up onto his
toes, pressing into it, as Tony yanks on his arm, saying "Wait." He and Gibbs and Tony all heard a
click as the wall swung out, and then a much softer snick sound.

Tim isn't paying much attention to what Tony and Draga and Gibbs are doing. He's getting pictures
of the whole layout. Hundreds of boxes to go through. Any of them could be filled with C4.
Gasoline canisters toward the back wall, lots of them, and from the smell of it, they aren't empty.
He's sure bleach and petroleum jelly's around here somewhere, too. He and Ziva are very carefully
going through, mapping everything out, looking for tripwires, pressure plates, anything that could
spell disaster.

Draga heads out, looks around, and then goes back in, calling out, "You're right."

He gets a few more shots and then feels his blood go cold when he hears Gibbs yell at the top of his
lungs, "Tim, Ziva, run!"

He doesn't hesitate. His body is running before Gibbs has even finished the words, moving as fast as
he can to get away.

"McGee, go." "Get out of here, McGee." "Go on, McGee. Go!" Many variations, many places,
many dangers, but one thing has always remained constant. That's the one order he has never, ever
obeyed.

Until today.

And he hates it. And he's got no idea how he's going to live with himself if whatever set off Gibbs
hurts them.

But he's running, because, in the end… Because this won't be the end, not for him, not today. And
because no matter how well earned it is, a name, a pension, a badge, and a flag are not enough.

Each pounding step, getting him closer to cover, is a promise to Abby and Kelly, that no matter
what, he will come home to them.

He's a husband and a father and that comes first, but right now, hiding behind the cinderblock wall of
the nearest building, begging God that his loves come through, son and brother aren't very far
behind.

There was a slithering roar, and he doesn't know what that is, but it scares the hell out of him, followed, maybe two seconds later, by a blast that left his ears ringing, his heart pounding, and though he's ashamed to admit it, he wet his pants, too.

He pulls himself up, looks around the corner, sees the ruined building, crumbled walls, smoke pouring through the shattered roof, flames dancing between curtains of black, and collapses, sobbing.

No way anyone got out of that.

The second he hears the snick, Tony knows it's a trap.

It's a stupidly easy trap. Open the wall. If you know it's trapped you only let it open an inch, slip the pin off the string, and then then the detonator doesn't go off.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid. Beat Draga up later, if you live.*

It didn't blow the second they heard the snick. *Angels on your side. Hope today isn't the day your luck runs out.*

McGee runs away from it.

Ziva runs toward them.

"Go!" Tony's screaming it, can't see how it works yet, hoping there's a shot of killing it before it kills them. But she's by his side.

"You go. I go."

"Fuck."

Timer, counting down, fifteen seconds. No time, not nearly enough time to figure the damn thing out and dismantle it.

"It's a detonator." Gibbs has the knife out, getting ready to cut wires, at this point it's just a blind hope that he'd get the right ones, and Tony knows it's just a hope and a prayer.

*It's a detonator.*

He grabs Gibbs' hand. Detonators work by making a smaller explosion that sets off the bigger one. It'll blow, maybe hurt them. But if it blows the C-4 tucked into that wall, it'll kill them.

Boxes all over the place. Who knows what's in them. Wall of C4 next to them.

"Fuck it. You can only die once." Tony grabs the detonator, yanking it out of the wall of C-4, and tosses it as far as he can.

Tim wasn't ashamed of the fact that when Tony found him, he was rocking back and forth, sobbing.
The only thing he was sure of, no way they came through, and the pain of that, the shattering, crashing, searing pain left him unable to do anything but sob.

Tony dropped down next to him, wrapping his arm around his shoulders, and said, very loudly, his ears are fucked right now, "Booby trapped with a bomb. You ran away. Ziva ran to us. Second after you left, I said, 'Fuck it, you can only die once,' and threw the thing as far as I could while we hugged the floor. Think I blew the gasoline. Big rush of fire went straight over us. Kind of cool really."

Tim's staring at him, eyes wide, tears streaming down his face. Then he grabs Tony, pulling him into a full body hug, clinging onto him.

"Looks like only a few of the boxes had explosives in them. That went next. Big boom. Haven't heard anything since. C-4 next to us didn't blow, thank God. Ziva's splinting up Gibbs, he might have broken his ankle. Blast picked us up and threw us. And Draga's pretty stunned, got him lying down. But everyone's alive. None of us can hear. You think you could call 911?"

Tim nods, taking as many deep breaths as he can, trying to pull himself together.

He holds onto Tony, hands on his shoulders, testing, making sure he's in one piece. Tony flashes him a lopsided smile, and then crumples.

Tim's frantically frisking him, trying to figure out what's going on, but his eyes slowly open, his focus shaky. He looks up at Tim and says, still very loud. "I think something hit my head."

Tim nods. He doesn't try to talk to Tony; he can't hear or read lips. Tim just gestures with his hands, trying to get the idea of stay lying down across, and hopes he does. He spends a full minute pounding on his phone, cursing at it, slamming his fingers down on the screen, as if hitting the numbers extra-hard will make the call go through faster, but nothing happened.

Then he remembers the jammer and sprints to the van, rushing in, slamming off the jammer, and calling with both his cell and radio for all available back-up.

After this sort of accident, usually agents aren't allowed back on the case until they've been medically and psychologically cleared.

As the only one of the group who got clear of the explosion, Tim's answering a lot of questions.

First there were the questions of the first responders, mostly EMS, but Fire, too. Lots of what happened, who's hurt, how bad, questions. Mercifully, there was a minute between them and the first wave of the NCIS techs hitting the scene, where he could get cleaned up.

Then there was everyone out of Norfolk, several members of the local PD, and eventually half of the DC branch of NCIS all milling about, wanting to do their job, but the explosions set the place on fire, and they had to wait for the fire trucks to get done. And Fire had to wait for the bomb squad, because burning building filled with C-4 was nothing anyone wanted to walk into. So, instead of investigating the place, they're investigating him, peppering him with questions.

But once EMS got Gibbs in an ambulance, he hopped in, too.

Which means now he's in the emergency room, near his team, but still answering questions. Vance is
standing next to him, getting the play by play. Tim thinks he's doing a pretty good job of it, though he's not really there. He's staring at the beds where Gibbs, Ziva, Tony, and Draga are, willing the doctors to show up faster, get answers quicker, and tell him his loves are going to be okay.

Ziva's announced (loudly) to everyone who will listen that she's just fine, nothing wrong at all, but she hasn't been cleared. (Apparently both Tony and Gibbs jumped on her to try and keep her safe.) She's being kept for observation for right now, making sure that she's not so high on adrenaline that she just can't feel the pain.

Gibbs has been into X-ray twice. His left knee and ankle are... They don't know yet. X-rays aren't back. But his leg is splinted and propped up, ice on his knee and ankle, pain-killers dripping through an IV into his arm. He's dozing.

Tony's on his bed, laying there, looking awfully listless. Ziva's holding his hand. Tim knows that the current diagnosis is mild concussion, but they're taking him for a CAT scan whenever the scanner gets free.

Draga's sitting on his bed, looking shell-shocked, also diagnosed with mild concussion, holding his phone, staring at it.

After yet another question, Vance is either satisfied or has given up on trying to get useful information out of Tim. (If he was paying less attention to his team and more to Vance, he might know which of those two options is correct, but he wasn't, so he doesn't.) And Tim's able to return to his team.

None of them can hear, so he doesn't try to talk to them. He holds Gibbs' hand for a moment, but he's out for right now, so that's more to comfort him than to comfort Gibbs. More than any words, any sight, the touch of real, warm flesh is proof of life.

A nurse takes Tony for his scan, and Ziva goes with him.

He sits next to Draga's bed, using Ziva's as his seat. Draga's still staring at his phone. Tim can see the screen is shattered. He takes his own out, still working, and wrote on it. Use it. Text whoever you want.

"Want to hear my son's voice." Also loud. He probably thinks he's whispering, but he's not.

Not until you can hear. Can he write?

"Just his name."

Skype? See him for a bit?

Draga shakes his head, looking very sad. "He's in daycare right now."

Tonight, then.

"Not until we can talk. His mom sees I'm hurt, she'll use it against me in the custody case. Say my job is too dangerous for me to be allowed to have custody."

I'm really sorry.

Draga nods at that.

"Mr. Draga?" a nurse asks.
Tim nudges Draga, who looks at the woman. She's got a whiteboard with her and writes on it. "We're ready to take you for your scans."

He nods, hands Tim the broken cell phone, and waves as she and a few others in scrubs push his bed away.

He goes and sits next to Gibbs again. Holding his hand, watching him breathe, trying to not think about the blast. Second time in his life he's been a whole lot closer to an explosion than he's wanted to. Even behind a cinder block wall he could feel the force of it. Sound that tore through him, made his bones vibrate. He doesn't want to think what in the middle of it was like.

He looks at his own phone, thinking of calling Abby, but doesn't. She'll worry. He's at least three hours away, no matter what. And that's bullshit because when it comes down to it, if he tries to talk about it right now, he'll cry, and he doesn't need to be doing that in the middle of the emergency room, not when he's literally the last man standing on his team.

They're all alive. They're fine. (Maybe. Tony's being scanned to make sure his brain isn't bleeding. Draga's being scanned to see if his ear drum ruptured.) They're in a hospital with doctors hovering over them. They'll heal.

He supposes right now, if he was the uninjured one, Gibbs would be up, single-handedly solving the case, making sure the bad guys didn't hurt anyone else.

But Tim isn't Gibbs. And maybe it's just his conscience making him feel better about not jumping up to solve this, but he's feeling pretty sure that wherever Blake, Simmers, and Al-Said/Ender are, they're not about to do anything else. Not for right now. Not if madness is a front and they prefer military targets that require top secret clearance to find.

His phone buzzes. Vance. *Fires are out. Got teams collecting evidence.*

_Good. Make sure they get photos of everything and send it all home. First thing tomorrow morning, I'll start on it._

_Tomorrow?_

_Gotta make sure my team's in one piece. Do you know how Ender knew the subs were there?_

A minute goes by. _I'll ask Kort._

_Thanks. Might get us a better handle on how to find them. Keep an eye out for traps. He can feel Vance rolling his eyes at that._

_See you tomorrow._

He takes Gibbs' hand in his again.

"Not dying, Tim," Gibbs says, turning to look at him, too loud.

_I know._ Tim signs back.

Gibbs looks really startled by that, and then starts something fast and complicated, and Tim can't follow it.

_Slow. Learning. Can you hear?_
Everything's... Another sign Tim doesn't know. Gibbs sees he doesn't know it. "Buzzing. Loud."

Okay. Tim doesn't know the sign for X-ray or scan so he spells it out. X-R-A-Y not back yet. They don't think your knee is broken. Not sure about ankle.

Not broken. Doesn't hurt like broken

He figures Gibbs would know. Then he notices what Gibbs signed. Are you hurting?

Yeah.

More medicine?

No. Don't want... More signing Tim's not following.

He shakes his head, letting Gibbs know he's lost again. Better signing than reading sign.

You think? Slower, more deliberate hand gestures. Tim still doesn't know what they mean. "Don't want to get loopy."

Only thing you are doing tonight is coming home with me and sleeping. Take the pain medicine.

"Tim."

Tim hit the call button. I am leader until Tony's cleared. You are on the bench.

Gibbs looks past Tim and sees only Ziva's bed is still on the floor, and none of the rest of the team is next to him. Tony?

Tim fills him in on the other three. By the time he'd done that, another nurse had come around.

"What's going on?" she asks.

"He's still hurting."

Gibbs glares at him and the nurse, but doesn't say anything until directly asked, "On a one to ten scale, what's your pain level?"

He thinks about it. "Five-six."

"Okay, we'll get you some more pain medication."

"Thank you," Tim says to the nurse.

Happy? Gibbs signs at him.

There are a lot of lovely, sarcastic responses Tim could say, but Gibbs wouldn't hear them, and just lip reading them doesn't get it across the way voice does. There aren't a lot of lovely, sarcastic responses he can sign back. So he settles for, Yes.

It's another twenty minutes before the Orthopedic specialist shows up with Gibbs' leg scans. Gibbs is laying in his bed, drifting, whatever they're giving him is hitting him pretty hard.
"Mr. Gibbs," the doctor offers her hand. "I'm Sarah Grunwelt." Gibbs slowly focuses on her. "The good news is you don't have any broken bones." She can see Gibbs isn't really all there. She looks at Tim. "Are you next of kin?"

"Yes. I'm his son." It won't hold up if anyone investigates, but he doesn't think anyone will. He's the right age, in the right place, and Gibbs isn't disputing it, so no one should ask any questions.

"Okay. Nothing is broken." She puts the X-rays up on the light board. "It looks like something large and hard hit him here." She turns back to them and circles the area between Gibbs' ankle and calf. "It's a very deep bruise." Yes it is. Tim can see it. They cut the leg of Gibbs' pants off, and he's looking at a patch of purple-black larger than his hand, blue, green, yellow extending from his ankle to his knee. "And it'll really hurt, but it should heal up just fine. His knee is more of a problem. Do you know what an ACL or a PCL is?"

"Yeah." Anterior and Posterior Cruciate Ligament, the main bits of tissue that keep the knee stable. New and better ways to deal with ACL blowouts was one of the issues they actually played with back at Johns Hopkins. "Degree in Biomedical engineering." Dr. Grunwelt looks surprised by that. He's a cop, in his NCIS gear, with a bunch of other cops, biomedical engineering wasn't anything she would have assumed he'd know anything about. ACL blow outs from sports or the job, sure. But not that he'd have studied it.

"Okay. His ACL and PCL aren't torn, but another ounce of pressure and both of them would have gone. They are both very strained, and right now, any little thing will rip them free. I get the sense your dad's not much of a laying around sort of guy…"

Tim looks amused and shakes his head. "No. He's not."

"Then glue him to his sofa. Use duct tape if you have to. His knee needs time to heal up. To heal all the way. At his age, you blow those ligaments and you're looking at a lot of pain, a lot of surgery, and limited mobility for the rest of your life."

Tim nods.

"We're going to get him fitted for a brace for his knee and some crutches, but unless he's absolutely got to move, like going to the bathroom, I want him sitting or lying down for the next week."

Gibbs winces, letting them see that he has been following the conversation to at least some degree. The Doc sees he was paying some attention, so she turns to him. "You think a week is bad? You get up too soon and wreck those ligaments, you'll be on your back for six months, maybe a year, and you'll walk with a cane for the rest of your life. Are you going to give your son any trouble about resting?"

Gibbs shook his head.

"Good. And when that week is up, you are going to take it easy. No running. Limited walking. Not too much standing if you can avoid it. You're not going back to running down bad guys for at least a month, got it?"

Gibbs nods as that, too.

"Until the bruising goes down, the brace isn't going to be very comfortable. We'll give you pain medicine to deal with that, and when you're awake and laying around, you can take it off. But anytime you're going to move, and when you're sleeping, I want that brace on. I do not want you rolling over in your sleep and tearing your knee up."
And yet another nod.

"Okay. I'll print up a full set of instructions. You guys live near DC right?"

"Yeah." Tim answers.

"I'll add a few recommendations for follow up care."

"Thank you."

From there Gibbs napped. Tim sat next to him, waiting for his team to get back. But no one showed up.

He's feeling fidgety, wanting to do something useful.

You still at the scene? He sends to Vance.

A minute later he gets back. Yes.

Send me the pictures. Tell me what you're finding.

Thought you were off until tomorrow, making sure your team's in one piece.

I'm multi-tasking.

He can imagine the look that gets. Good. So far all we've got is smoke, soot, broken crates, reams of soggy paper, and enough C-4 and stuff to make C-4 to take out the block.

Great. What's the paper?

If it wasn't torn to bits from the explosion and water-logged from putting the fires out, I might know. Right now, it's paper mache. The lab might be able to get something useful off of it.

Even better. Any news from the LA guys talking to Ender's family?

Not yet. It's only eleven there.

Okay. I'm looking through the pictures and going over the contents of Blake and Simmers' computers and phones.

Updates on your end?

Gibbs is off his feet for a week. Limited mobility for a month after that. No news on Tony. Ziva's with him. Draga's just getting wheeled back.

Let me know when you know how they are.

Will do.

Draga was cleared with a mild concussion and a ruptured left ear drum. He was told to head home, take it easy, and if he got a bad headache that he needed to get back to the emergency room, fast.
"When can I go back to work?"

His doctor shrugs. "Tomorrow, if you feel up to it. But resting is probably a better idea."

Draga doesn't look like he wants to rest.

Ziva was cleared as being fine. Bumped and bruised up, but her hearing would be back to normal in a few hours.

Tony didn't get cleared. Mild concussion was actually a contusion, that would, probably, be okay, but they wanted to keep watch on him overnight, make sure the swelling went down instead of got worse.

So, by four o'clock, instead of closing in on Ender, Blake, and Simmers, instead of resting in the morgue, instead of all the thousands of other ways today could have gone, he's hugging Ziva, squeezing Tony's knee, saying goodbye, that he'd see them soon, and getting ready to drive Gibbs and Draga back to DC.

Bit before seven, they're back in DC, and he stops short of the Navy Yard, pulling into the parking lot of Gibbs' favorite diner. Both Draga and Gibbs are looking at him curiously.

"Both of you, stay put."

Draga shakes his head, not willing to ponder the mystery out loud. Gibbs just settles back into his seat. Ten minutes later, he's back with food for all three of them.

"Thought we could use some food. I'm starving." He looks to Draga. "I don't want you driving home without any food in your system." His gaze switches to Gibbs. "And the Docs don't want you taking your pain meds on an empty stomach."

Draga opens his box and sees a huge club sandwich, chips piled high next to it, and a crisp, green pickle spear. "How'd you know what I wanted?"

"Not a clue. I told Elaine it had been a really hard day, and she had three guys in desperate need of food, two of them walking wounded, and gave her a hundred. Ten minutes later, this I what she gave me."

Gibbs smiles. Then opens his box, finds a bowl of chicken soup, rye bread toast, little butter, and scrambled eggs. Same thing his mom used to make for him when he was sick. And a huge travel-sized cup of black coffee, which she didn't, but Elaine always sends with his food when he gets take out.

"Who's Elaine?" Draga asks between bites.

"Gibbs found her years ago. She's his psychic waitress friend."

"Like Vincent."

"Who?" Tim asks between bites of his burger, a perfect warm-pink medium, with lots of bacon and lots of fresh tomato. It'd been in a box with fries (very salty, thank you Elaine!), piece of apple pie
(which he doesn't usually eat, but had been craving) and a tall, ice cold Coke (also not something he usually goes for, but loves with a burger). He's half paying attention to Draga while texting Abby, letting her know he should be home in forty-fiveish minutes and has already had dinner. He debates telling her Gibbs is coming home, too, but decides not to. When they get home is soon enough to get into it.

"Café Diem? Eureka?"

Tim's shaking his head.

"Cool TV show from a while back."

"Oh."

He got Draga to his car, and made sure to get a promise out of him that if he started to feel sick or wrong or out of it or anything, that he'd give them a call.

Draga seemed mildly amused at the mothering, promised he'd call if he took a turn for the worse, and slipped into his Charger to head home.

Tim pulled the van to right next to the roadster, headed to the side, and got Gibbs out. Gibbs looks like he might be about to protest being coddled like this, but Tim's glare cut him off. So he quietly leaned against Tim, and hobbled to the side of his car.

"I'm going to check the van in, and then I'll be back."

Gibbs nods.

Two minutes later, they were heading home.

Gibbs dozed most of the ride home. He jerked awake when they went past the exit to his house heading toward Tim's.

"What are you going to tell her when we get home?"

"The truth."

Gibbs doesn't seem to like that idea. He's got a wary look in his eyes, and he says, "Bad plan, she'll get scared and worry."

Tim shakes his head. "You think she can't tell when I'm lying? She'll let me do it if it's something minor like a surprise, but she always knows. If I try to tell her you tripped down the steps coming down from MTAC, she's going to know I'm lying, and then she'll be scared, worried, and mad because I'm lying to her. Not going to do it."

"She'll cry."

"So? I will, too. We all almost died today. I thought I lost all of you. For a full minute…" He doesn't finish that. If he finishes that, he'll flash back to that minute, and he's still got to drive. "That's worth a few tears. I'm the husband. It's my job to handle the tears. You don't want to see it, you don't have to. I'll get you set in my office. I've got a good sofa in there. It was supposed to be a bedroom, so there's a door between it and the downstairs bathroom, so you won't need to use the stairs at all."

He's not sure what that expression is on Gibbs's face, but he doesn't say anything one way or the
other about going straight to sleep after getting to Tim's house.

Tim knows what he wants to be doing. Felt it the second he walked through the door and saw Abby on the sofa nursing Kelly. She didn't look up that first second he was in the door, expecting just another night, and for that second, he's watching her, on the sofa, shirt open, their daughter against her breast and that yesnowalivefuck, your body, mine, up against the wall, hard and fast and more than anything else NOW! sensation pounded through him so hard it made his knees weak.

It's not sexual desire. Not exactly. Sex is how it's expressed. He wants her. Wants hard and hot and fast and wet and her and again HER and right now.

But it's not sex, not really. He's not hard (though a kiss, or hell, good eye contact would probably take care of that) and usually this level of want goes with hard. Usually this level of want goes with thrusting and leaking and hot and slick and moaning, moving faster and faster and aching, heavy, hard, pleasure-pain need NOW.

Really, it's not sex. It's tied to sex, entwined with it.

It's life. It's one more day where the bullet didn't have his name. It's home again to his woman and his child.

And though his brain may get the metaphysics of this, the philosophy, he's not just a brain in a jar being carried around by a robot.

He's a man, and balls and cock and guts and heart are all part of this equation too, and they want to fuck. Because that's how they understand life. That's the guts-in-charge, brain's checked out, understanding of life. They want real, tangible, physical proof that he's still alive. They want to be alive, make life, and just, anything, warm and alive and real and breathing and…

And Abby's staring at them, wondering why she's got two shell-shocked guys in her living room, looking scared, and Gibbs really isn't very steady on one foot leaning against Tim, and Tim's not just a body seeking more life, he's a father and husband and son, and it's time to live up to those as well.

He looks to Gibbs, silently asking if he wants to sit with them, be there for this, or go to his office and rest. Gibbs nods at the sofa. So he helps Gibbs to the sofa, gets him down sitting across two of the three cushions. He finds a pillow to prop Gibbs' foot and knee up, makes up a quick ice pack, and put that on Gibbs' knee, and then scoots so he's sitting behind Abby and Kelly, and entirely wraps around them.

"It's a long story," he says without her asking, his lips on her shoulder, basking in her skin on his, and Kelly's silk fine hair under his hand.

"I've got time."

He can feel Gibbs staring at him, No, Shut up! Don't tell her that! Stop! Not that! as he hits different parts of the story. He's not entirely sure why Gibbs decided to join in on this if he's going to keep staring at Tim, begging him with his eyes to not keep talking.
Maybe, because as much as he doesn't want to deal with this, he knows that doing it is right. Maybe he thinks he's trying to be useful, save Tim from himself.

But Tim doesn't shut up, and he doesn't gloss over it, or make light of it, or act like everything was okay today. Because she's his wife, and she's strong enough to take the truth, and right now he needs her strength. He knows he needs a partner to lean on, and he can't always be the strong one. And here, at home, with his girls and Gibbs, he doesn't have to be.

And yeah, Abby did cry. And so did he. And, though he probably wouldn't admit it, Gibbs did, too.

Part of him feels so sorry for Gibbs, for constantly feeling like he couldn't do this, like he couldn't ever let anyone see him be weak or break.

Tonight Abby'll carry him. And eventually he'll carry her. And they'll both carry Gibbs, even if he's pretending he doesn't need it.

And it occurs to Tim, that maybe part of the reason Gibbs is here, silently watching this, tears he won't wipe away dripping down his face, is because no matter how uncomfortable this is, he knows he needs it, too. Maybe it has been too damn long since Gibbs didn't have to be the strong one, and maybe he's here because he's finally willing to (grudgingly) let himself be carried.

Eventually, the story ends. And eventually, Kelly needs to go up to sleep. Abby stands up and Tim follows her, holding both of his girls for another long minute, his cheek against Abby's, his lips on the top of Kelly's head. He doesn't want to stop touching them, doesn't want to lose the feel of warm skin and breath against him.

Abby kisses him, and nods to Gibbs, who looks pretty wiped out on the sofa.

He nods back, letting them go. He kneels next to Jethro as Abby and Kelly head up.

"You just want to crash here? Or you want the privacy of my office?"

"Office."

"Okay, come on, sit up. I'll get you in there." He helps Jethro get settled, and then heads back to his car, grabs Gibbs' go bag, and brings it into the office as well. He snags his desk chair, and wheels it next to the sofa, where Jethro's sitting, and puts the go bag on it, then heads out. A minute later, a glass of water, and his pain meds are sitting on the chair, his crutches are leaning against it, all within easy reach.

He knows Jethro keeps pajamas in his go bag. "You want help getting changed?"

"No." Gibbs looks frustrated, and possibly verging on embarrassed. Changing he can do just fine, because he can do that sitting down. The world doesn't go all swirly when he's sitting down.

"What?"

"Damn pain pills. I can't stand up without feeling like I'm going to fall down, and need to use the head."
"I got ya." And he did, and okay, yeah, that's pretty weird, and way more up close and personal than he ever expected to be with Gibbs, but bodies are bodies and everyone's got one, and they all do basically the same thing, so acting like it's a big deal doesn't make anything any better. (Though five weeks of diaper duty might have made Tim a whole lot more matter-of-fact about this than he ever was before.) Plus, Gibbs is better off with an extra set of hands keeping him steady when it came to getting his pants off, or putting his pajamas on. (After all, since he was there, and since Gibbs was half-dressed anyway, might as well help.)

It took about ten minutes, but he got Gibbs settled on the sofa, and Tim headed up to Abby.

There's a dull glow coming from their bedroom. So, main lights have to be off, but not completely dark. Probably the candles. He smiles at that. Kelly's down, so they should have close to two hours.

Sure, he'd like all the time in the world, but that's enough.

Every extra minute is enough.

He closes the door behind him. Usually he leaves it open. Makes it easier to hear what's going on in the rest of the house, but the converse of that would be true, too. Open door means it's easier to hear what's going on in their room as well, and right now Kelly sleeping soundly matters a whole lot to him.

Abby does have the LED candles glowing away, and is laying on their bed, propped on one elbow, naked, waiting for him.

He stands next to their door for a moment, looking at her, letting his eyes roam over her skin.

"Like what you see?"

"Yeah. I do." He crosses to her, pulling his clothing off.

She's kneeling on the bed, and he's standing in front of her, face against her shoulder as she holds him, kissing his ear. And for all the immediate lust/fuck/sex/now of walking in, and that hasn't gone away, it's still there, speeding his pulse, right this second he's content to just hold onto her.

"What do you need?"

He smiles at her, kissing her lips. "You."

That got a smile back, and another kiss, a long, wet, slippery, sweet, so sweet, her breath against his, lips encouraging pleasure and joy. "What do you want?"

It's only been five weeks since Kelly was born, and she's not bleeding anymore, but they haven't had sex yet, and, yeah, there are things he wants, lots of things he wants. Hard, thrusting, deep, and fast. Fucking for the sake of letting you know you're alive. Fucking to make a baby. Fucking to chase away the cold of death and the shock of having the rug yanked out from under you. He wants all of that.

But hard and fast and spread wide and deep and her clawing his back to ribbons while he pounds into her over and over just isn't an option. Not tonight. Not this soon.
"Whatever you can give me."

That got a smile, too, understanding his point, and a kiss. "I still want to hear what you want. Turn us both on with your words. Might not be able to give it to you, not yet, but we'll both enjoy the story."

He holds her close, carefully, too tight will hurt her breasts, and smiles at that, because it's true. They won't get to up against the wall. They may not get to full on sex (though he's hopeful) let alone baby making sex (not this soon, they already agreed to that), but that doesn't mean they can't enjoy the fantasy of it.

"Just, want you. Want your skin and breath and body and heat." He's kissing her throat, stopping to feel her pulse against his lips. Her fingers are rubbing soft circles in his hair and down his neck and back. He's quiet as his hands trace down her shoulders, over her arms, and then settle on her hips.

Her forehead rests against his while she stares into his eyes. "When you walked in, you were staring at me like you wanted to eat me alive. What were you thinking?"

"Not sure thinking's the word. More like…" He picks her up, and she wraps her legs around his waist, and he takes the few steps to the nearest wall, so her back's against it. "More like… just… the feel of it. The sight and smell and feel of this." Okay, not quite this, they aren't moving, and his dick's pressed against her tummy, but it's close and warm and her breasts are against his chest and he can see her eyes and kiss her lips. "Of you on me and up against the wall, hard and fast and deep and mostly just that slick, wet, thrusting," he's punctuating each word with a short grind against her stomach, "rhythm of hard fucking."

Her eyes slip closed and she sighs at that, rubbing against him, heels digging into his ass. "I like that."

"Yeah." He does, and he really likes her body wriggling against his, but more than that there's this overwhelming sense of love. Of his heart so full of her that he can't hold it. He stops grinding against her, and just holds on, savoring her body wrapped around his, and this feeling of all-pervasive love.

"Tim." There are tears in her eyes as she kisses him.

"Yeah?" He can feel his own tears, and this isn't how he was thinking it was going to go, but it was a hell of a day and if they need more snuggling and crying, they've got time.

"You came home." She's crying again. Relief he thinks. He kisses her tears, and feels her wipe his away.

"I came home." Another long kiss, her hands cupped around his face. He takes a deep breath.

"Always come home to you."

Deep kissing, his lips sliding on hers, and eventually he takes a few steps back, sitting on the side of the bed, her in his lap, rubbing all over him. She pushes him back, and he lies back, watching her as she reaches over to the bedside table, grabbing the condom, tearing the package.

Sense memories are interesting things. It has been years since they've done it with a condom, but just the smell of it whips him back. Abby straddling him adds another layer to it. Been there, done this, enjoyed it a whole lot, both of their first times went like this, same smell, same position, and he's feeling very connected to that right now.

The first time they did this, this almost didn't happen. He'd been so nervous, and then so turned on,
felt like his whole body was quivering with wanting to get off, and he’d tied her hands, undid his pants, and she looked up at him, grinned, said, "Nice, McGee!" and then licked him, and God, he almost lost it.

She opened her mouth and sucked him down, and he knew if he didn't stop this right that second that he was going to lose it, because tied-up girl kneeling in front of him, sucking him off was so many of his fantasies all wrapped up in one that he knew he'd barely make it long enough for her to get all the way down his cock again, so he stepped back.

Then he helped her up, and slowly, carefully, and with a whole lot of attention and enjoyment licked from her ear to her pussy, and went to town on her. And yeah, he might not have had much (okay, any) technique at that point, but she was willing to tell him what to do, and he was very good at following directions.

After she got off, he untied her. (Because he wasn't comfortable with tied, kneeling girl blowing him, not then, no matter how hot it got him or how hard it made him.) And she grinned at him, very pleased, cheeks and chest flushed, and took his hand, "Bedroom, McGee."

"Okay." After her Christmas tree-light filled living room, her bedroom seemed pitch black. She mentioned being careful about the edge of the "box sofa bed," and her sheets were cool and satiny, and they were lying on their sides, naked, rubbing against each other which was all sorts of good, and eventually she rolled him onto his back, straddled him, and by then his eyes had adjusted enough that he could see her reach over to the… back… (lid?) of the "box sofa bed" (which he was suspecting had a much more common and revealing name, but he wasn't about to mention it then) snag a condom, and just the sound of her opening it had him leaking, and slipping it over him made him groan, loudly, and he felt a little stupid about that, but she was grinning, happy, and said something like, "If you like that, you'll love the next part," and slid down him in one long, brilliant rush of silvery red pleasure and golden happiness.

He stayed on his back for two, maybe three thrusts, but having her rise and fall on him, watching, but barely touching wasn't enough, so he sat up, wrapping his arms around her, holding her still long enough to kiss her slow and deep, his tongue on hers, and though he's never told anyone, even her, he felt something… electric… like a frisson of tingling energy through his whole body at that touch.

And at that point he just let go, wasn't bothering to try and live up to anyone's expectations, stopped caring how long he lasted and if it was long enough. He just let the pleasure flow through him, and it did, leaving him, probably a minute later, limp, twitching, high as a kite, and smiling.

Abby was lying on top of him, propped on her elbows, gently petting his face, and had said to him, "God, you're beautiful when you get off, McGee."

He thinks he said, "Thanks." He knows he was still smiling, and for once he didn't feel any need or desire to stammer or bluster or wrap himself in protective words.

And for the first time in his life, he was really satisfied after sex. Not just that it had felt good, though it had, but that he'd really been there, and she had, too, and they'd both had a very good time. First time he felt like he didn't need to ask if it had been okay. First time he didn't feel a need to grab his pants and cover himself back up again after. First time it occurred to him that he might not actually be that shy or modest.

Their second first time was fast. Pulling and tearing at clothing, trying to get closer, more skin, more touch, more pleasure, fast.

His pants were around his right leg still, bunched up on his shoe, and he remembers fumbling around
trying to get the condom out of his pocket, and finally snagging it, and handing it to her while he took care of the lube.

First time they did it, he didn't know the trick of putting a little lube on the tip of his dick or the inside of the condom. But by the second first time he'd had that trick in his arsenal for years. So he handed her the condom, and with years of working with her, both of them moving toward a single goal, he knew she'd take care of getting it out of the wrapper, and he could take care of the lube, and they'd get together that much faster.

So he was rubbing a few drops of it on the tip of his dick, hearing the crinkle of the wrapper, and then she pushed his hand out of the way, straddling his thighs, rolling it over him, and a heartbeat or two later, he was fully in her, both of them groaning, clutching each other, finally feeling like they could slow down and savor it.

And that time there was no electric frisson. But the sense of joy, and peace, and of finally being home, that was there.

And later, when he thought about it, he realized that was the first time he had sex with someone he truly loved.

This time she put the lube inside the tip of the condom before sliding it over him. The smell is the same. The feel of it, cool and slippery, is the same. Her legs against his hips, fingers slipping down him. Déjà vu all over again.

But as she slipped down on him, he was expecting… more. Especially after what went into getting to this point. Especially after today.

It doesn't feel right. Not that it's wrong or bad or anything, but it's not sex. Okay, that sounds dumb, obviously it's sex. She's slowly easing down his dick; that's more or less the definition of sex. But he's getting, on a visceral level, why he's heard other guys complain about wearing a condom.

It's warm and snug, and that's all sorts of good. (Once upon a time, like say, both of their other first times, warm and snug was his definition of good.) And he can definitely feel her moving, that's lovely. But that glorious wet, slick, hot, soft, skin, slide isn't there. That plush, sucking almost kiss of a sensation is gone.

It's like vanilla extract compared to a real vanilla bean. It's similar, but the nuances are gone.

And Tim really likes the nuances.

And it's not like he won't be able to get off.

But, it's just… not nearly as good as without.

And especially today, especially with the chill of death in the air, and the warmth of life in her body, he wants skin, wants life, wants her life on his and maybe both of them wrapping together to make more life.

He strokes her face, kissing her. Might not be everything he wants, but it's good, and it's her, and that matters more than the feel of it.

She's watching him, and probably sees it in his face, or maybe she's feeling the same thing. She smiles at him, and pulls off, taking the condom off, slipping back down onto him, sighing, and he's
groaning, head back, awash in how good that feels, how it amps everything up to eleven, and once she gets settled, he pulls enough of his brain together to say, "You sure?"

"Yeah. We both need this. And if it makes a baby, all the better."

"Yes!" And God, he wants that so bad, so hard, needs it, needs it now.

She rocks forward, and he groans again, loud, hands settling on her hips, guiding her.

That brings her up short, stopping all movement. "Tim, Gibbs's downstairs!"

Maybe he should feel embarrassed, but he just can't muster it right now. "He's on a boatload of painkillers. And honestly, if somehow he's awake, I don't care. He's been here, knows how this works. Not like anything we're doing is going to make him blush."

"If it makes me blush?"

Okay, that's a valid point. Just like he didn't much want his mom listening in, she might have something like that for Gibbs. "Then I'll be quiet. Does it make you blush?"

She thinks about it and gives him a squeeze. His jaw clench at the pleasure, but he keeps the groan quiet, and breathes out, "Oh fuck, Abby, so good!"

She smiles. "Nah, not going to blush."

"Good." He rocks into her, fingers slipping down her butt, and she moans softly. "Because I want to hear you and feel you and touch you and taste you and see you."

She slips back down on him. "Forgot smell."

He moans at her body sliding wet on his. "Kind of distracted right now."

She purrs at him, leaning down so her lips caress his ear, and moans low and rich as he slides into her.

"You sound so good."

Her lips meet his for a deep, wet kiss, stroking, petting, slipping, and rubbing, her tongue matching the pace of his dick, and he sucks it in as she thrusts.

He'd been planning on saying something about tasting good, but, he lost it.

Lost most of the other thoughts in his head.

Just let them go and let himself steep in the pleasure of this. Of her body, naked, on and in his. Of his body, naked, in and on hers. Of another day of being here, in and with her. Of making it home one more time. One more close call, the whisper of one more bullet that didn't have his name on it.

He lets it roll over him, her skin and heart and life against his. Of no-holds-barred making love, moving towards more life, pushing death and mortality back, at least a few more seconds, and maybe an entire generation.

Her fingers between his, grasping, hard, her breath against his lips, the sound of her in his ears, and the slippery, wet, pleasurefuckjoy of her body rubbing against his.

He arches high and hard into her, feeling the waves of ecstasy cresting through him, feeling her tight
and rippling on him, and then both of them wet and limp and breathing hard against each other.

Her left hand in his right, he lifts it to his mouth, and kisses the tip of her ring finger. "Always come home to you."

She kisses the bit of his shoulder under her lips. "Amen."

And that's all the prayer he needs.

And that was Wednesday.
Like with Tuesday, Thursday began with crying.

“And another one bites the dust,” Tim says quietly, putting Kelly’s empty bottle on the floor.

Bottle done, now he’s on burp and back to crib duty. So they rock gently, sitting on the rocking chair where Gibbs and Shannon did this with their Kelly, as he’s patting away, humming to her.

He doesn’t have a lot of good baby music. And most of the jazz he likes isn’t exactly slow and soothing. (Okay, he finds it soothing, but the beat is usually pretty fast, and he can’t hum it well.)

So, often he finds himself humming, or quietly singing the songs he’s recently come into contact with. Bits of music that have jumped into his head. Back in April, he’d been sitting on Jimmy and Breena’s back porch, Abby on his lap, hand rubbing over Kelly’s baby bump, feeling her kick, and Breena had cranked the volume on the music, saying she loved this song, and it stuck with him.

So when he got home, he added it to his playlist. Passenger’s not his usual taste, but he’s okay, and Tim likes Patient Love. He probably listens to it, once, maybe twice a month now. It’s attached to sunshine and laughing with people he loves, all manner of good things.

So that’s the song he’s half singing/half humming to Kelly.

“Got a pinch of tobacco in my pocket/I’m not gonna roll it/ No, I’m not gonna smoke it/’Til we’re staring at the stars and the rockets/Twinkling in the silvery night.

“Though the sun may be washed by the sea/And the old will be lost in the new/Well, four will not wait for three/Three never waited for two/Though you will not wait for me/I’ll wait for you.

“I’ll wait for you.”

He knows he’s skipping verses and probably has them out of order, too. But it’s four thirty in the morning, he’s amazed he can even produce coherent sentences.

For a day, maybe two, sometimes a week after you almost die, everything is more intense, more important, more pressing. You love your loves more deeply, everything tastes better, pleasure is so much sharper. (The converse of this is also true. You tolerance for bullshit drops like a rock. Life’s too damn short for it.)

And right now, very much in that space, half-humming, half-singing to his daughter, he gets Patient Love in a way he hadn’t before. He gets why out of all the music in his head, that’s the song that popped up today.

Life is short, and it goes fast, and sure that’s a cliché, but it’s a cliché he’s living very intensely right this second.

Kelly won’t wait for him. She’ll grow up at a million miles an hour, and one day he’ll blink and she’ll be fourteen or twenty and off on her own world, own life, and these gray-midnight minutes
will be gone, barely memories.

But he’ll be there, waiting for her, whenever she needs him.

For a moment, he has a very clear sense of who she’ll be at twenty: the young woman she’ll grow into; the life that will orbit his for vanishingly few years, to break away into its own trajectory. Suddenly he gets, really gets, what Jethro meant about your kids not being yours. That they belong to themselves and whomever they may give themselves to, but not you.

He holds her tight, inhaling deeply, trying to burn this sensation, this scent, these little baby sounds into his mind, because one day they will be gone and all he’ll have left is his ability to recall this, so he focuses, listing the details, writing them out in his head, committing them to his memory.

After a few seconds of that, she squawks at him, you’re holding onto me too tight, pretty clear in that outburst, so he loosens up his grip and goes back to patting her back, coaxing out the burps.

She finally burps, which means it’s crib time, so he stands up, and gently sets her in the crib, resting his hand on her tummy and singing five or so more verses of Patient Love.

“I’ll wait for you… Staring at the stars and the rockets… twinkling in the silvery night…”

Her eyes get droopy, and the sucking on the pacifier slows, so he quiets down, pulls his hand away gently, and creeps out of her room, hoping, praying, that this time she’ll actually fall asleep.

He stands outside her door, tense, waiting, counting to three hundred, and this time they made it. Still no fussing, no crying, so he went back to bed, and in about two hours she’d wake up again, and he’ll start his morning for real to the sound of his wife and daughter, next to him, in his bed.

Always come home to this. Always.

Seven o’clock came around, and Tim did wake to the feeling of Abby getting out of bed, and then getting back into it, and the soft, contented sucking sound Kelly makes when she nurses, along with Abby singing something upbeat and perky to her.

He takes a few minutes longer than normal to lay there, next to them, his lips pressed to Abby’s hip, arm over her legs, floating and sleepy and enjoying them.

He gets his shower, and then heads down to make them some breakfast.

Tim almost jumps out of his skin when he hears the toilet flush in the downstairs bathroom, but then he remembers it isn’t just the three of them in his house.

Gibbs hobbles out a second later, then sits at the kitchen table. Tim puts the pan he’d just grabbed on the burner, grabs an extra chair, gets Gibbs’ leg up on it, and then stares down at Jethro.

“You’re supposed to be in laying down.”

“Doc said I could get up to hit the head. Gotta eat, too.”

“You remember what she said about blowing out your knee?” Part of him is reminding Gibbs about the doctor’s orders, part of him is genuinely checking to see how much Gibbs remembers. He was pretty out of it last night, though he’s looking sharp now, and is wearing the brace on his knee.

“Enough.”
“Good. Abby and I are more than happy to have you here the next week.”

Gibbs’ eyebrows go high at that. He’d been thinking a day, maybe two. He doesn’t want to admit it, but he is really hurting and the pain meds do help, (if he didn’t have to take them on a full stomach, he’d have already gotten more of them.) and he’s not stable enough on crutches and one foot to be on the pain meds alone. But he’d also been thinking he’d stay on the pain meds for, at most, two days.

“You don’t have a full bathroom on the first floor of your house,” Tim explains. “And it’s a whole lot easier to lay around if Abby’s glaring at you every time you get up.”

Gibbs nods, that’s true. Disappointed girl staring at him will probably keep him in line just fine. (And drive him crazy, but that’s a different story for a different day.)

“But the point I was getting to is, we both want you here for healing up. But neither of us are going to be happy with you sleeping in my office for a year if you blow your knee out by being stupid. And you’re not going to be happy with that, either.”

Gibbs rolls his eyes and looks put upon. “Yes, Mom.”

“You were a complete snot as a teenager, weren’t you?”

Gibbs smiles at that.

“Good. Seriously though, you blow your knee out not doing something stupid, or you ever just need a place to crash, my office can move upstairs. You ever need it, that room can be a bedroom fast.”

“Tim…” Gibbs doesn’t quite know what to do with that. It’s just… “Wow. Okay.” He gestures for Tim to get a bit closer, and he does, kneeling next to Gibbs. Gibbs hugs him. “Thank you.” And that is genuine and heartfelt. Then he gently slapped Tim upside the back of the head, and finished by petting his hair. “And I’m not decrepit, yet.”

Tim snorts a quick laugh at that and stands up. “Tell me that when you can outrun Kelly again. I’ve only got decaf, you want coffee?”

Gibbs cringes.

“I’ll pick some of yours up along with your clothes. Sometime today, email me a list of what you want from your house.”

He nods. “Orange juice?”

“That, I’ve got.”

“Sleep well?” Gibbs asks a minute later, after he sips some juice.

“Yeah, thanks.” And especially given how yesterday went, and waking up to get Kelly, it had been a pretty good night of sleep. No nightmares. No waking up in a cold sweat. No trapped in that minute of scalding grief. “You?”

“Well as I could, given the circumstances.”

Tim raises an eyebrow. If Gibbs wants to talk about the aftermath of almost dying, he’s here to listen. Surprised, but definitely willing to listen.

“Different sofa, different room, pain killers making me feel dizzy, different nighttime noises.”
Or it could be a much more mundane set of issues. Then he stops, looks at Gibbs, realizing what he just said, and for a second, seeing the smile on Gibbs’ face, Tim’s wondering if Jethro is daring him to blush. He doesn’t. He does shake his head wryly, then sips his coffee, smile on his face, getting fruit out of their freezer, and says, “Yep, babies are kind of loud.”

Gibbs laughs at that. “Babies, uh huh.”

“Any given night I bet you’d get the same sounds at Jimmy and Breena’s.”

Gibbs nods. “Molly’s been sleeping through the night for eight months.”

Tim grins at him, mix of naughty and cocky on his face, and takes another sip. “What do you want for breakfast?”

That look gets a laugh out of Gibbs. “What are you making?”

“Abby’s been doing smoothies lately, so I can make an extra serving of that for you. We usually split some scrambled eggs. And I’ve got bagels.”

“Eggs, bagel.”

“Okay.”

A few minutes later, Tim’s putting eggs on plates, and sitting next to Gibbs to tuck in.

“We’re not waiting for Abby?”

“Nah. Only takes me five minutes to eat. I bring her food up for her, she eats while she finishes nursing Kelly.”

“Getting a pattern set?”

“Hopefully. Come September everything goes upside down again. But at least for right now, I think we’ve got a groove.”

Gibbs nods. “Kelly’s hearing okay, right?”

“Huh? Yeah. They did that test the day she was born. Why? Oh...” He realizes this is Gibbs asking why he’s learning sign language. “We want to be able to talk to each other without little guys listening in. I’ve still got a little high school French in my head. Abby’s the same with Spanish. But she’s already fluent in ASL, so we figured we’d go with that. Can’t listen in and translate a conversation you have to see to understand.”

“Planning on having a lot of conversations the kids can’t be part of?”

“Probably more than other couples. Hey Honey, let me tell you about the gory details of today’s case. Oh look, our four-year-old finds that disturbing. You mean you didn’t need to know about how mommy had to rebuild that bullet because it shattered inside the vic’s body?”

“Good point.” Gibbs chews a bite of his eggs, looks around for his pills, he thought he brought them.

“What do you need?”

“Meds. I thought I had them.”

“I’ll go.” A minute later Tim was back with the pill bottle. Gibbs shook one out and swallowed it.
“Why do you know sign language?”

“Undercover op.”

“You did a lot of them, didn’t you?”

“Used to. Mike was better at running them. I was better at playing whatever the role was.”

“Like you and Tony.”

“Sort of.”

“So what sort of op required you to learn to sign?”

“Dead Marine. We thought it had something to do with his rehab. He’d lost his hearing and was going through a program for deaf soldiers to help get them settled back into civilian life. Lip reading, signing, stuff like that.”

“So you went in as the newly wounded Marine.”

“Learned to sign, read lips, overheard a lot of conversations I wasn’t supposed to.”

“I’ll bet. Catch the guy?”

“Yeah. Took a while, but we got him. And also found that being able to convincingly play deaf made for a great information gathering tool. Lip reading was useful, so, even after the case was over, I kept up with it, finished the whole course.”

“Cool.” Tim finished his plate, and got up to put it in the dishwasher. Gibbs was done, too. “Okay, where do you want to be today?”

“Living room.”

“Then let’s get you over there.”

When he left for work, Gibbs was on the love seat. Kelly was on the floor, getting a little tummy time before her next nap. Abby was also on the floor, reading over the resume and the notes from the first interview, getting ready for her second visit with Elizabeth Henger, potential nanny.

He supposes getting the Gibbs gut in on the nanny hunt is a good thing.

Draga’s at his desk, working hard, and looking very run-down, and very contrite.

There’s not much Tim can do about contrite. Part of being a Probie is the fact that you will mess up, you will screw the proverbial pooch, and if, like Draga, you’re lucky, no one dies.

He, can, will, and should, however, keep an eye on run-down.

“How’re you feeling?”

Draga shake his head, not looking up from the files in front of him. “Doesn’t matter.”

Tim leans against his desk and catches Draga’s eye. “It matters. How are you feeling?”
“Fine.”

Black circles under his eyes, general look of discomfort, slightly shaking hands as he flips through the file in front of him. “Yeah, you look it. Go home.”

“What?” Draga stares up at Tim, startled by that. There’s no team if Draga goes home. No work happens. He can’t go home.

“Tony and Gibbs may be fine with the sit there, stew, and bury yourself in work technique for getting through stuff, but they aren’t here, and I am. You’re embarrassed, sad, scared, or feeling like you’ve got something to prove, I don’t care. Do it somewhere else. If you’re here with me, you’re on the case, and you’re working the case to work the case, not to prove to me or anyone else that you deserve to work the case, got it?”

Draga nods.

“Good. And if you’re here with me, it’s because you’re in good enough shape to work the case, so let’s try this again. How are you feeling?”

“Left ear hurts, and everything sounds like it’s underwater on that side.”

Which is, if Tim remembers correctly, exactly how it’s supposed to be. “Okay. How’s the rest of you?”

“Headache. No, it’s not the concussion. I get them when I sleep badly. I slept badly.”

“Also, okay. You’re riding the desk today. What are you looking through?”

“Contents of the warehouse as well as they can tell.”

“Good. Keep it up. When you’re done with that, I want you working on why the hell Blake is part of this. Go chat with Ducky and Palmer for that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t call me sir.” Tim fires that one off before he’s even realized it was Gibbs’ line. And it might be Gibbs’ line, but it’s his, too. He’s not Sir, and made a very clear set of decisions in his life not to be Sir. Though he’s wondering if Gibbs turned down a shot at Officer Training. He knows Gibbs could have been Sir here at NCIS, but chose not to be.

Tim settles behind his own desk, looking to see if he’s gotten anything back on the Ender parent’s phone and financial records.

“McGee?” Draga asks half an hour or so later.

“Yeah?”

“Is DiNozzo going to take my badge?”

Tim’s on the verge of automatically answering no, because every Probie messes up. Granted some messes are more spectacular than others, but then he remembers that Draga’s mess almost got Ziva killed.

“I don’t know.”

Draga’s staring at him, eyes wide, worried, vulnerable, looking very young. “When you’re up there,
it’s just your own skin on the line. Well, your skin and a few hundred million dollars’ worth of equipment. You fuck up over the ocean, it’s just you and deep blue.”

“Not for us.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that.”

Financials for the Ender family. Numbers, lots and lots of numbers, none of them interesting. If Mom and Dad were bankrolling Thomas, it’s not on any account he can find.

Phone… also boring. They talk to friends, family… There’s one other Ender child, a sister… That might be interesting. From the looks of it Lisbeth Ender calls her parents once a week, same with James, until he died.

They’ve called her a dozen times since they got the news about James, but none of those calls have been more than a minute long, and none of those calls have been returned.

Probably means Lisbeth’s in the wind… Interesting.

He checks his messages. Nothing. But there wouldn’t be. He scoots over to Tony’s computer, logs on, and gets into his email.

Draga looks up at him. “McGee?” What are you doing on DiNozzo’s computer? pretty clear in his tone of voice.

“I’m not team leader. He is. So all communications would go through him.”

“He be okay with you rooting through his email?”

“Doesn’t matter if he is one way or the other. He’s not here. I am. And it’s got to get done.”

“You just have his password?”

“Not exactly.” Though he knows that Tony cycles through four main passwords with a few variations on those. It won’t take him long to figure out which one he’s using today.

“Wait, you’re hacking his account?”

Tim looks up from Tony’s computer. This would be a lot faster if he wasn’t answering questions about it. “He used to do it to me all the time.”

Draga’s looking across the bullpen at Tim, puzzled. “Used to? Why’d he stop?”

“Just about two years ago, he found out I wired a bomb into my phone when it blew a guy’s hand off. Since then he hasn’t messed with any of my accounts.”

“You… wait… what?” Draga’s just staring at Tim, utterly stunned by that.

“Don’t ever mess with my phone.”

“You handed it to me last night!”

“Uh huh.” Tim shrugs, suddenly getting the idea that being handed a small bomb might be discomforting to a person who just went through an explosion. “And I was sitting right next to you.
It’s pretty safe. Just, don’t try to go digging in it.”

“Shit.”

“Gibbs has the same treatment on his. Speaking of which, when you get your new one, let me have it. All of our phones have been wired to send off a distress call if they ever shut down, or get broken.”

“What happens when you turn it off?”

“Don’t turn it off. Put it on vibrate. Don’t let it run out of juice. Number three.”

“There are two number threes.”

Tim nods. “And something like six number ones. Gibbs is better at coming up with rules than keeping track of which number they are.”

“Gotcha!”

“McGee?” Draga looks up.

“Tony’s got to clean out his email more often. Finally found something useful. Got an emailed transcript of the interview with the Enders.”

“Good stuff?”

“Maybe.” Tim checks the corner of Tony’s computer, 8:13, LA time. Late enough. He punches in Callen’s number. “It’s lunch time. Get yourself something to eat. Bring me food, too.”

“What do you want?”

“Don’t care. Food. Protein, vegetables, not a lot of carbs.”

Draga salutes and heads off.

On the fourth ring he hears, “Callen.”

“Hello, Agent Callen, it’s Tim McGee over in DC, you sent my partner an interview transcript, and I was hoping to take a moment to talk to you about it.”

“McGee.” Callen’s thinking about that. “We met once, million years ago?”

“Yeah.” God, when was that… 2009? Something like that.

“You’re part of Gibbs’ team.”

“Yeah.” Technically Tony’s, but… no, for him it’s Gibbs’ team and always will be.

“Okay, what can I do for you?”

“I’m looking at your transcript”

“Okay.”
“What’s your gut saying about the sister?”

There’s a pause on the other side of the line. Then… “Something’s off about her.”

“Beyond the fact that Mom and Dad haven’t been able to get a hold of her?”

“They didn’t mention that.”

“Was she there?”

“No.”

“They’ve called her a dozen times, none of the calls have lasted more than a minute.”

“That’s suspicious,” Callen says.

“Yeah.”

“Does she travel a lot?” Tim asks Callen.

“Yes, she does. She’s a sales person for a medical device company. Sells artificial joints, things like that. Every month she’s talking to new doctors in new cities, letting them know what her company makes and why it’s better than what they’re using.”

“Lots of little towns?”

“Not really, but she’d probably have to pass through a lot of them to get to the bigger cities.”

“Yeah, she probably would. How about the parents?”

“Looked like they got hit with a truck. First the news, then the it has got to be a closed-casket funeral, two dead sons, then oh one of them may not be dead.”

“Isn’t dead. We’ve got confirmation that the KIA was faked.”

“Great. Those poor people. Did the one Ender kill the other?”

“We don’t know.” It wasn’t in the transcript, but… “You guys didn’t suggest that, did you?”

“No.”

“Okay, good.”

Tim’s up from Tony’s desk and over to his, requesting permission to dissect Lisbeth Ender’s life, see what’s going on with her, when Callen asks, “So, how’s the old man doing? He finally retire?”

Tim takes a second to realize Callen’s talking about Gibbs. “Not yet. January.”

“Can’t believe he’d ever hang it up.”

“Well, they’re taking him out kicking and screaming.”

“That sounds more like it. He find himself another redhead?”

Tim smiles at that, been a while since they’re seen a redhead that wasn’t an ex-Mrs. Gibbs. “Nah. Got himself a tiny, little blonde right now, but no redheads.”
“Really… It serious?”

Tim laughs. “Very serious. I’d say he’s hooked for life…” Callen sounds about to say something, but Tim adds, “She’s my daughter. Five weeks old. He’s been on grandpa duty.”

Callen laughs at that. “Sniper magazine do the trick?”

Tim smiles, remembering that. “Something like that.”

“You got pictures?”

“Oh yeah.”

“You’ve got to send me one.”

“Will do.”

“Tell the old coot to give me a call.”

“No problem.”

“Enjoy your gossip,” Draga asks, having caught the tail end of Tim’s conversation with Callen.

“Yes.”

Draga hands Tim a carton of some form of Chinese food.

“What is it?”

“Food: protein and vegetables, low carbs.”

Tim opens it up. “Tofu and mixed veggies?”

“Yes.”

“For future reference, protein means meat.” Not like he hates tofu, sometimes it's pretty good, but he prefers meat.

“Noted. What’d you get from Callen?”

Tim fills him in. “How about you? Anything interesting in the warehouse?”

Draga looks pretty dismayed. “How sure are we that Simmers’ really isn’t bonkers?”

“More sure of that than of anything else in this case.”

“Good. One of the things he did have in there, that did make it through, that seems to have been carefully located to ensure it would make it through no matter what, was an enemies list.”

Tim glares at Draga, and Draga looks alarmed. “Not you. Him. How long is it?”

“Sixty-five people.”

“Son of a bitch,” Tim says under his breath. “Specific threats to specific targets?”
“Times, places, dates, methods, everything, and they’re all Navy personnel.”

Tim slumps and grits his teeth. All credible threats have to be noted, reported, and investigated, plus the targets of those threats have to be protected. Short of blowing up the Navy Yard (again) there’s nothing Simmers could have done that would have monopolized more NCIS manpower.

“Send me the list. I’m going to talk to Vance. Go head down and chat with Ducky about Blake. By the time I’m back, I want to know why he’s doing this.”

“On it.”

“Can I see Director Vance?” Tim asks Vance’s secretary.

“Is it important?”

“I’m not up here to ask him out to lunch,” he says with a tired smile.

She gives him a wry look and lifts her phone to her ear, asking Vance if he’s got the time. She hears his response, nods, and says, “He’ll see you.”

“Thanks.”

“McGee?” Vance asks, looking up from his computer.

“Case just got worse.” He put the list Draga complied for him on Vance’s desk.

Vance reads over it, says... something. Tim doesn’t catch what, because it’s very quiet, but it’s definitely kin to his earlier ‘son of a bitch.’

“I don’t have the manpower for this,” Tim says. With everyone on his team, he doesn’t have the manpower for this, but especially today. Hell, today, he doesn’t even have the manpower to coordinate getting the manpower necessary to take care of this.

Vance looks up at Tim, frustrated, tired, and knowing, exactly like Tim does, that this is a wild goose chase, but it’s a goose he can’t ignore. “I don’t have the manpower for this. There aren’t enough agents out of the Navy Yard to put a protection detail on sixty-five people.”

“We’ve got safe houses.”

“If I put all of them, or even a large number of them, in one safe house, that house is going to explode.”

Tim shakes his head. Sometimes it’s good to not be the guy at the top of the chain.

“Can you get me more face time with Kort?”

“Why?”

“There’s an Ender sister, Lisbeth, and my guess is she’s the one who’s been doing the stateside legwork for Thomas. Want to know, what, if anything they’ve got on her. I also want to know how Ender found out about those subs, how he knew, down to the minute, where they’d be. There’s got to be a way to find these guys, and knowing that will help.”

“I’ll put the call in.”
“Good.”

“You going to check with the FBI?” Vance asks. The CIA isn’t, legally, allowed to do any surveillance inside the US. So if Lisbeth Ender had been in the US the whole time, then the CIA shouldn’t have anything on her. Of course, shouldn’t and don’t are not the same thing.

“Fornell’s my next call.

“McGee?” Fornell sounds very surprised to hear Tim’s voice on his phone.

“I’ve got a possible homegrown terrorist aiding and abetting an attempt to blow up the USS Reagan.”

That has Fornell’s attention. “No messing around with you. What do you need?”

“What do you have on Lisbeth Ender?”

“I’ll find out. Why are you calling me?” Tim gets the context of that. This isn’t why is NCIS calling the FBI for information, let alone Fornell personally. No, this is why is Tim calling. When they need Fornell’s help, Gibbs calls, or maybe Tony would since he’s the leader right now. If Tim calls, it means something has gone very wrong.

“Everyone’s alive and everyone is going to keep being alive. Yesterday was a bad day. Gibbs’ll tell you about it eventually, but I need that info as fast as you can get it.”

“DiNozzo?”

“Today it’s my team.”

“Oh God.”

Tim slumps a little at that and rolls his eyes. “Your faith is overwhelming.”

“No… Just… Your team means you’re the only one still standing, right?”

“Draga’s here, too. And I’ve got seniority over Ziva.”

“Uh huh. But she’s not there.”

“No. She’s with Tony. Can we maybe have this conversation about how shocked you are that I can run a team when I’m not hunting down a terrorist cell?”

There’s a pause on the other side. “This is coming out wrong. You need extra boots on the ground? I got men I can shuffle over to you. Hell, I can be there if you need it.”

“Oh. Yes. We need help. Call Vance, we need a ton of people for protection details.”

“How about you?”

“I need information. Right now we’re playing catch up. Everything you can find on Lisbeth Ender or Thomas Ender/Hiri Al-Said. He’s been on the CIA radar since ’07, but if you’ve got anything on him, that’ll help.”

“I’ll get on it. Which hospital is Gibbs at?”
“My place for right now.”

“You’ve got a terrorist threat and he’s at your place?”

“Pump enough pain killers into him, and even Gibbs is useless as an agent.”

“Ah. I’ll call Vance and offer help.”

“Thanks.”

Two minutes later his phone buzzed. He doesn’t recognize the number, but he’s awfully sure who it belongs to. There’s a one word text: Coffee?

Sure. When?

Now.

Be down in five.

The CIA are jerks. How’d Sam Axe on Burn Notice put it? “Bunch of bitchy little girls.” Such bitchy little girls.

Kort’s staring at Tim with cool disdain.

Tim’s tired of this shit. Yes, Kort’s vastly too cool for everyone and everything. Yes, everyone outside of his team assumes Tim’s tech support and that’s it. Great. Doesn’t mean he’s willing to play the games, especially today.

“How did Ender find out about those subs?”

Kort continues staring at Tim, getting across, by body language alone, how little respect he has for Tim. “Aren’t you the last link in the chain of command?”

“I’m the link fixing up your mess. If those subs weren’t supposed to exist, then they couldn’t have been common knowledge.”

Kort nods, the look of a patient man explaining something very simple to an extremely stupid child. “Not common knowledge and unknown are not the same thing, Agent McGee. Those subs had to be built, and the country they belong to did not have the infrastructure to build them for themselves.”

“Israeli?”

“Yes.”

“Nuclear subs?”

“Yes again. Which is why something else that would blow radiation all over the place had to be involved in the explosion.”

“Okay. So… how many people are involved in building a sub? Sure you can claim they’re being built for someone else, but that kind of sub… that lie’s not going to hold. Hundreds of people knew about them?”
“You’re not nearly as stupid as you look.”

Yeah, he’s really done with this shit. “That fake eye of yours itch sometimes? Ducky once told us they had a ‘tendency to pop out during vigorous interpersonal interactions.’ You ever have that problem?” Tim deliberately steps into Kort’s blind spot. “You want to guess who tracked you down in Hawaii when you lost the real one? Through all the fake names and IDs. You’re, what, the best the CIA has to offer, on a top secret mission, and I caught you, and I did it without having to break a sweat. If I’m the last link in the chain of command, it’s because no one else can do my job. So quit the bullshit; I’m not putting up with it today. Did Ender get on the crew building them? Is that how he knew?”

Kort seems amused by that. Seem amuzed by most of this world. Amused disdain might be his permanent expression. “No, but that’s a good guess. A better guess is who killed three members of that crew shortly after they finished their work.”

“Ahhhh.” That would have been useful to know going into this. “I’m going to want the files on that.” Kort nods. “How would he know where those subs were supposed to be? I’d assume that’s not something hundreds of people knew.”

“That, we don’t know. But we do know who knew officially. And who would have known unofficially, and we are… investigating them and every contact they’ve ever had with the sort of delicacy and thoroughness the CIA is known for.”

“How many of them have you flown to black sites in Afghanistan?”

Kort smiles. “As soon as we know where the leak was, we’ll let you know.”

“I bet. Lisbeth Ender?”

“What about her?”

“Everything. What do you know about her?”

“The CIA does not investigate US Citizens on US soil.”

“Yeah, and the NSA doesn’t engage in indiscriminate information gathering. Remember, I’m not as stupid as I look. What do you have on Lisbeth Ender?”

“We maintained surveillance on all of the Enders for two years after Thomas was officially KIA, checking to see if he made contact. He didn’t. At that point we stopped watching them.”

“Why?”

“Two years is a long time to run an illegal op, Agent McGee.”

“You mean you got caught?”

“In a manner of speaking. We had our budgets cut. Anything that could be trimmed, was. Illegal fishing operations that weren’t producing results were ended.”

“Wonderful.”

“We never found Lisbeth doing anything interesting. We never saw her make contact with her brother. We did notice that she was not, enthusiastic, about her brothers’ choices in careers.”

“Pacifist or Islamists?”
“A combination of both while we were watching her.”

“Wonderful. One more question.”

“Fire away, Agent McGee.”

“Why would one of our aircraft carriers be that close to those non-existent subs?”

“Are you suggesting that someone altered the path of that carrier?”

*Why not?* “Every new layer on this case takes it deeper. Is it possible that Ender and Co. are that well-connected?”

“Anything is possible. Though I’d imagine your own men would be better placed to tell you if the path of the Reagan was altered and if so, by whom. Likewise, perhaps you have a better indirect route to information as to why those subs just happened to be there than I do.”

Riding the elevator back to the bullpen, Tim texts Vance about the Reagan’s path. Just in case he doesn’t have enough to do with coordinating the protection details. Actually, he probably handed that off to someone else. Tim also requests to find out who’s in charge of that, so he can keep an ear on it.

He sees Draga back at his desk as he heads back to his own, and says, “So, tell me all about Blake.”

“Remember how, back in ’14, in order to meet recruitment goals the Navy loosened its standards for who qualified to re-up?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, so until ’13 Blake had pretty normal evals. Then in July of ’13 he was on deck when one of the planes didn’t exactly nail the landing, and got caught in the explosion. He healed up, some scarring, but functional. Biggest issue was nightmares and post-traumatic stress. He was doing his job well enough, so when he re-upped in March of ’14, they let him, but no way in Hell Blake would have made the cut to re-up back in ’13.

“After the accident, his psych evals indicate he had developed some sort of dissociative type of thing. That he had, ‘empathy issues,’ but they thought he was basically harmless as long as interesting puzzles kept him occupied.”

“And Ender gave him the mother of all interesting puzzles?”

“Looks like it.”

“Wonderful. What’s Ducky think?”

“Basically, it’s a defense mechanism, that rather than deal with the trauma of the accident, he shut down the emotional centers of his brain. But unlike Simmers, Ducky’s a whole lot less sure on this one. The huge pile of nothing we found at Blake’s house, and his lack of anything interesting in his personal effects, means that Ducky’s doing this cold, based on just those psych evals and the lack of stuff we found.”

“So, we’re barely scratching the surface on him.”

“Basically. What’d you get?”
Tim gets Draga up to date.

“Lisbeth Ender is up next?”

“Yes.” Tim checks his email, he’s got the permission he needs. “You want communications or financials?”

Draga cracks his knuckles. “Bring on the financials.”

As a kid, Tim hadn’t been a big fan of puzzles. (Sounds kind of ridiculous seeing how he ended up a cop and mystery writer, but it’s true.) His sister was. So, as a bored fifteen-year-old, babysitting his six-year-old sister, he did a lot of puzzles.

In each puzzle there’s a point where you get enough of the pieces together to finally get a feel for what’s going on.

By the time he was getting ready to head off to college, his sister was old enough and patient enough to whip out the 2500 piece puzzles, and though he still didn’t love them, he had gotten to appreciate the rhythms of successfully putting one together.

You get all the outside pieces together. That gives you the boundaries. And like with puzzles, cases work the same way. You get edges and you know that anything outside those edges isn’t part of your case.

At this point, sitting at his desk, going through Lisbeth Ender’s phone records, he feels like he’s got the edges of this case down.

Once you get the edges you start grouping colors together, looking for details that only show up in a few places so you can get all of those bits together.

Likewise, he’s feeling like they probably have all the major players in place. They’ve got the colors and some of the details.

And once you’ve got those colors groups, you start putting the bits together, looking for lines to cross each other, and shapes to form.

The various Enders are one big color group for this puzzle, one he feels like he’s getting pretty well set. Sure, most of what he’s got with Lisbeth is a hunch, though as he’s going through her phone records, he is finding some interesting patterns. Circumstantial patterns, but… interesting none the less.

Hopefully Fornell will have something useful to back his hunches up.

Blake’s another color group, but it’s one of those dull colors that shows up all over the puzzle and you have no idea where it goes or why.

Would you really blow up a ship because it’s interesting? Would anyone? Anyone who can pass a Navy psych eval?

Same thing with Simmers. He can see the shape of that piece, he feels like he’s got a handle on what it’s doing, but not why. Who in their right mind wakes up one morning and starts playing insane?

“Done with the financials,” Draga says.
Tim looks up from thinking about the case and puzzles. “What do you have?”

“Nothing concrete.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Same on the phones?”

“Yeah. So, financials?”

“She does work for a medical company, and yes, I checked, they’re legit. They pay her every two weeks. First and fifteenth of every month. On the sixteenth of every month she cashes out five hundred and twenty-five dollars.”

Tim holds up his finger, signaling hold on, that’s ringing some bells for him. He quickly goes through the different phone records he’s been working on and finds that MDeed’s burner cell got it’s extra 1000 minutes a month every month on the seventeenth. “MDeed’s phone always got more minutes on the 17th.”

“Good. Got a connection there. You have the list of the places where his phone got more minutes?”

“Yeah.”

“Shoot it over here. I’m going to call her company and see where she was working when.”

“Okay. Five twenty-five probably means four other phones getting refills.”

“Yeah.”

“Any trace of her getting money from her brother?” Tim asks. He doesn’t know how much she was getting paid, but $525 a month isn’t petty cash for most people.

“Not that I could see. But if it was in cash, or if she’s got accounts in other names…”

“We don’t have any real movement on this by end of business tomorrow, I’m getting the forensic accountants in on this. Money’s got to be coming from somewhere.”

Draga nods at that. They’ve got to get something to break on this. “So, what do you have on her phones?”

“Everything was supposed to go boom on the 18th. Her last call, to a hotel in Hampton Roads, was on the 17th, after that every phone number attached to her went dead.”

“You check the hotel?” Draga asks.

“Was about to do that. What was her last credit card transaction?”

“Rental car, also in Hampton Roads.”

“Call the company get everything on that car,” Tim says to Draga as he grabs his phone and punches in Ziva’s contact. “Ziva, you still in Hampton Roads.”

“McGee?”

“Got a lead. Are you still at the hospital?”
“Yes.” She sounds tired, and Tim’s starting to feel like a jerk at barging in like this, but it’s the job, and she’s the one closest to the scene right now. “Tell me about the lead.”

“Thomas Ender’s sister got a hotel room in Hampton Roads on the 17th, and she rented a car down there as well.”

“Send me the information. I’ll check it out.”

“Good, be careful. Don’t engage them, just... Do you still have those trackers in your go-bag?”

“Of course.”

“If you can find the car, stick a tracker—“ Draga’s looking at him, giving him the cutting off gesture. “Draga’s got something. What?”

Draga’s shaking his head. “Rental company confirms that her credit card was used to rent a Ford Taurus, but it was returned on the twenty-first. It’s been rented out again and isn’t due back for another three days.”

“Damnit. You get that?” he asks Ziva.

“I did. Want me to check the hotel anyway?”

“Yeah. The mileage on the car should at least give us an idea of how far they could have gotten. And if by some stroke of luck, they’re still in the hotel, wait for us. We’ll be down and loaded for bear.”

“You think they’ll still be there?”

Tim’s shaking his head. They aren’t that lucky. “Not if the car was returned. But it’s not impossible. How’s Tony?” He hears the phone switch hands.

“Annoyed.” Tony's voice. “They won’t let me out of this bed until I get one more CAT scan.”

“Then sit your butt in that bed and get the scan.”

“Sounds like you’re spread pretty thin.”

Tim snorts at that. “You’ve got no idea, and you’re not getting one until you’re cleared by the Docs.”

“At least send me the electronics. I can read files—“

“You on pain meds?”

“Yeah.”

“No files for you. Heal up. Once they know for sure you’re not about to have an aneurysm, then you can read files.”

“You bench Gibbs? He’s got to be on more meds than I am.”

“He’s sitting at my house helping Abby interrogate potential nannies.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah. I’m not having this fall apart because one of my investigators was working stoned.”

“It’s only Tylenol 3.”
“I’ve seen you on pain meds. Go rest. I’ll see you when you get back to DC.” Tim hangs up and switches focus back to Draga. “What was the mileage on the car?”

“Eight hundred miles.”

“Dulles, Reagan, Philadelphia International, and Baltimore.”

“I think Newark is in that range, too,” Draga adds.

“So, every major airport in the Mid-Atlantic, hundreds of bus and train stops.”

“I’ll get the BOLO out.”

“For whatever it’ll be worth this late in the game. Flag their travel documents. Stick them on the terrorist watch list.”

“Closing the barn door after the cows got out?”

“After Mrs. O’Leary’s cow got out.”

Draga winces. “What else?”

“I’m heading down to talk to Ducky about Simmers. He’s not bonkers, so why is he doing this? You’re going to call every one of those places that MDeed’s phone got refills from, see if they recognize the shot of Lisbeth, and see if anyone remembers what other phones she may have bought or refilled.”

Tim heads down to autopsy, and sees both Ducky and Jimmy have the books out, crime scene photos out, and a collection of everything they’ve found on Blake.

“How’s it going?” Tim asks them.

They both look up and Ducky answers, “Frustrating, Timothy, very frustrating.”

Tim shoots Ducky his, I’m with you 10,000% look. “Anything interesting?”

Jimmy slips off his glasses and rubs his eyes. “The only interesting thing is the complete and utter lack of things. It’s like Blake didn’t exist before 2011. He has school records and medical records, but everything is so minimal. It’s barely even a sketch of a person. I know more about the background of the characters in your books than I do about Blake, and supposedly I’ve got his entire life sitting in front of us.”

Ducky’s nodding. “There is barely the shell of a man here. He went to high school, got middling good grades, but no one remembers him, he was on no teams, no picture in his yearbook, nothing. He worked odd jobs for three years, made an impression nowhere. Then he joined the military and ghosted through there. He made no close friends, kept to himself, did his job, and that was it. His phone has no books, no music, no favorite webpages, and besides a penchant for computer games, his computer is in the same shape.”

“Pictures?” Tim asks, maybe if there’s a shot of someone they can run it through facial recognition and get a clue.

Jimmy shakes his head. “None. He’s got a Creeper from Minecraft for wallpaper and that’s it.”
Great big heaping pile of nothing. Wonderful. “Can I pull you two off the mystery of Blake and onto Simmers?”

“Certainly, we’re not getting any further with Blake, not without any extra information,” Ducky replies as he and Jimmy start to pack up the information on Blake.

Tim spreads out what he’s got on Simmers. “I know you’ve come to the conclusion that he’s not really insane. Great. But… if he’s not, what is he doing? Why would he want to blow up a ship in the first place?”

Ducky looks at the picture of Simmers tapping it gently with his index finger. “That is a very good question, Timothy. Why does a sane man put the lives of over five thousand people in jeopardy?”

Tim’s staring at the picture they’ve got of Simmers from his military ID, willing it to tell him why they’re doing this, or better yet, where they are so they can get them.

“Guys…” Jimmy sounds excited.

“Yeah, Jimmy.”

“Is this correct?” Jimmy’s holding up the page with Simmers’ stats on it.

“As well as we can tell,” Tim says.
“Then something’s really wrong. Simmers’ was supposed to be born in ’88, but his Social Security number is really close to Molly’s.”

“Close how?” Tim asks. Other than his and Abby’s, he knows nothing about Social Security numbers.

“They circle through the numbers, as older people die they get put back into circulation. His number doesn’t look like it should have come from the ’80s.”

Tim’s got his phone out and is logged into the social security database in a heartbeat. A few keystrokes, a few seconds spent waiting, and… “Jimmy, how often do I tell you I love you?”

Jimmy shoots him his amused smile. “Often enough.”

Tim wraps his arm around Jimmy’s neck and kisses him on the cheek. “I love you. Jason Simmers was born on May 22, 2011. Then on October 15th, 2011, Jason Simmers enlisted in the Navy.”

“What an enterprising infant,” Ducky says dryly.

Jimmy nods, and Tim finishes, “Whoever our sailor is, he’s most certainly not Jason Simmers. Thank you.” He’s got his phone up to his ear. “Draga, get Simmers and Blake into the facial recognition software... Why…” They hear Tim explaining as he heads back to the bullpen.

He’s on the stairs, just having put down his phone when it rings again. Ziva’s number.

“Hey, what do you have?”

“Lisbeth Ender reserved and paid for the room in cash on the 15th. Thomas Ender did show up on the 18th around 10:00 PM to check in. The desk clerk never saw anyone else, and according to the records Thomas checked out at 6:00 AM the next morning.”
“Okay, so he was there for eight hours. Anyone else with him?”

“I was also able to talk to the maid who cleaned the room, and according to her both beds were unmade and there was an extra blanket on the sofa. It is likely three people slept there. I asked around the local businesses, and there was a breakfast shop two blocks over from the hotel, and one of the waitresses remembered seeing Ender, Blake, and Simmers, but there wasn’t a woman with them.”

“Okay.” Tim’s adding that to his mental list. Whatever it is Lisbeth was doing, it doesn’t appear to involve actual physical contact with the guys.

“I checked the car rental, too. Lisbeth Ender took out and returned the car.”

“So she was in Hampton Roads as of the 21st.” It’s not a question, Tim’s mostly just talking to keep the ideas straight.

“Yes. Any idea where she is now?” Ziva asks.

Tim’s shaking his head. “Your guess is as good as mine. Thanks for checking it out.”

“No problem. It is good to do something useful.” Tim thought that was an odd comment. Not that he disagrees, but being with your wounded husband would be pretty high on his list of useful.

“When are you guys coming home?”

“Hopefully tonight.” That also sounds tired.

“Is he really okay?”

“Yes. I think so. They keep telling me that this is just to be safe, that head bleeds can be tricky and they want to be absolutely certain he is ‘out of the woods’ but he’s acting like himself.”

“He going to be able to work tomorrow?”

“He’s going to want to. The doctors do not think it’s a good idea, though.”

“You going to come in?”

“I intend to.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow then. You guys need anything, give me a call, okay?”

“Okay.”

Tim puts down his phone, hoping things are going all right with Tony and Ziva, and wondering if he’s going to have to pull the same, if you’re here working the case you’re working the case with Ziva that he did with Draga.

Draga has Blake and Simmers up on the plasma. “So, the good news is both Blake and Simmers aren’t really Blake and Simmers.”

“And the bad news?”

“The bad news is even with ultra-top priority rush, we’re still at least ten hours away from coming up
with anything on the facial recognition software.”

“Great.”

“I’ve got more good news.”

“Really?”

Draga shrugs. “I talked to Lisbeth’s boss. She requested vacation from the 12th to the 30th. She was
telling her co-workers that she was going to Tanzania for safari. Apparently her tumblr is uploading
pictures of her adventures and the critters she’s seeing.”

“Would explain why her parents aren’t in a blind panic over her. They probably don’t expect to be
able to contact her, so they haven’t gotten worried, yet.”

“You think there’s any shot she’s in Tanzania?”

“We’ll check. But someone had to return that car.” Tim checks his watch. 6:35. “Go home. Rest.
Until we know who those guys really are, we’re stuck. I’ll let the FBI and CIA know what we’ve
got, and get them searching, too. First thing tomorrow, we hit the ground running, knowing who
these guys are.”

“Sounds good.” Draga stood up.

“Tonight, you sleep, take some melatonin or something if you need to, but I don’t want us to be
stuck in here tomorrow. Ziva’ll be in, too. If we need to move, we’re moving, so be up for it. Got
it?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Eight AM tomorrow, we end this.”

“Amen,” Draga said as he left.

Tim prepared a quick report on everything they had and fired it off to Fornel, Kort, and Vance. Then
he fired off one last email requesting any travel data for Lisbeth Ender. Not too many flights from the
US to Tanzania, shouldn’t be too hard to find if she was on one of them. With any luck, tomorrow
the Information Fairy would be ready to bestow it’s blessings upon them, and the break would come.

He was halfway home when he remembered that he’d told Gibbs he’d swing by his place and pick
up his stuff. A quick U-turn and ten miles of driving took care of that. It felt weird to walk into his
house with no one there, let alone doing it knowing he’s got to rifle through the man’s stuff to get…

He checked his email and found the list from Gibbs, clothing, toiletries, coffee, pillow, bourbon (Tim
squints at that, not sure how well it’ll mix with Gibbs’ pain meds), sketch pad, and all the paperwork
from NCIS.

Too late for the paperwork. It’ll still be there tomorrow. Mounds and mounds of it. Because of all the
things he’s done today, filling out paperwork isn’t any of it.

Later. Clothes, coffee, home.
If Tim thought being in the house by himself was weird, being in Gibbs’ bedroom was even stranger. He’s been in it once before, after the Susan-talking-thing, and it looks pretty much the same, though it’s changed some. There had been a picture of Kelly and Shannon up on his dresser when he was there last. Now there were shots of all of them, mostly from the different weddings, but he sees one that Breena probably took (she takes most of the pictures) of him and Gibbs, and Tony, and Jimmy, Ducky and Fornell from the Fourth of July party. Judging by the looks on their faces, that is definitely the No Shame story. He looks at that one more closely. There’s an orb behind and to the left of Gibbs. He know that’s just some sort of anomaly that happens with digital cameras, dust mote hits the light right, something like that. He also knows that ghost hunters think they’re signs of spirits present. He smiles a little and shakes his head a little at that, and puts the picture down.

*Stay on track.* Being in the house is weird, being in his bedroom is really weird, going through his dresser, okay, that’s borderline uncomfortable.

He grabs six pairs of boxers fast and tosses them on the bed. Socks next. T-shirts were in the next drawer down. Pants, mostly jeans, in the drawer below that. Easy enough. He tries to remember if he’s ever seen Gibbs in shorts, but he doesn’t think he has. But shorts would be easier with the knee brace than jeans or slacks.

Barring shorts… Sweatpants. That’ll do the job. He’s got to have sweat pants somewhere. Tim knows that because he’s seen Gibbs exercise, fight, and sleep in them, so maybe the next drawer down…

Nope. Picture albums in that drawer.

Tim’s curious, really curious, like hand on the cover of the one on the top curious, but he doesn’t open it. He’s seen some of Gibbs’ photo albums, shots of him and his girls. And these albums don’t look like that, they’re thicker, and Tim has the sense that it’s not just photos in these books. So he closes that drawer and spends a moment looking around Gibbs’ bedroom, wondering where sweat pants would live.

*Closet?*

Nope. Suits, dress slacks, button down shirts, a collection of those golf shirts he likes in every color on the planet, as well as lots of jackets, but no sweat pants. Sneakers were in there though, so Tim grabs them, and then puts them back, no need for sneakers when all you’re doing is laying around.

There’s a chest at the foot of the bed. Wood. Probably made by Gibbs. It’s not where Tim would keep sweat pants, but he knows Gibbs owns them, and he’s not seeing them, so… Not in there. Blankets, towels, quilts, extra pillows.

The only place left is the two bedside tables, which, well, Tim would really rather not go rooting through them. He knows what’s in his bedside table and… Well, he’s perfectly comfortable with the idea of allowing Gibbs’ condom, lube, and sex toy preferences to remain a mystery.

He takes out his phone and flashes a text to Gibbs. *At your place, found everything but sweat pants, where do they live?*

He heads downstairs and grabs both the coffee, and then to the basement for the sketch pad and bourbon. He’s halfway up the steps when he gets back: *Bathroom shelf, over the hamper.*

*Thanks. Home with your stuff soon.*

*Good. You eat yet?*

No.
We’ll get something on for you.

We’ll?

I’ll ask Abby nicely to put something on for you.

Thanks.

Back up to the bathroom, where there is a tidy looking hamper-shelf combo, which he’s thinking Gibbs must have made for himself because Tim’s never seen anything like it. It looks like a sink cabinet, but instead of a sink at the top, there’s a flat wooden door. Open it, and the hamper is underneath. On top, there’s a shelf with sweat pants and comfy looking t-shirts (Gibbs’ jammies). The shelf above that has clean towels on it. On the outside of the side piece, facing the shower, there are hooks for the towels that are in use.

Very clever.

Tim scoops up Gibbs’ jammies and lounging around wear, snags his toiletries out of the bath, and realizes he doesn’t actually have a bag or anything for all of this.

Back to the closet for a suitcase, and Tim was ready to head home.

Home again.

Tim’s pooped, all he wants to do is crash on the sofa.

But there’s already someone laying on the sofa, reading, looking awfully comfy.

And though he’s awfully fond of Gibbs, he’s not the person Tim wants to crash onto the sofa next to and wrap around.

So he crashes on the love seat, lays there for a moment, eyes closed, enjoying quiet and the fact that Gibbs isn’t interrogating him with questions as to how today went.

After a minute, he sits back up and looks around. No Abby, but there is a plate of food and a tall glass of iced tea on the coffee table. Checking the clock shows it’s a bit before eight, so she’s probably putting Kelly to bed.

“You human again?” Gibbs asks when he sits up.

“Closer.”

Gibbs is really staring at him, looking, maybe not worried, but… Hell, he’s too fried to figure out what emotion is hiding behind those blue eyes. He is, however, awfully sure why Gibbs is looking at him like that.

“Yes, I saw them. No, I didn’t snoop.”

“Thanks.”

“Not saying I wasn’t tempted.”

Gibbs nods. “Wouldn’t have been the end of the world or anything, but, they’re private.”
“And they still are.”

“Good.”

Tim’s pointedly *not* asking what was in those books as he drinks the iced tea, but he certainly wouldn’t mind if Gibbs would just tell him.

Gibbs sees it and shrugs. “Shannon kept all of our letters. Made sure I kept the ones she sent me. And, back in ’83, we got a Polaroid camera.”

“Oh.” And Tim has a very good idea of what’s in those books, and he’s feeling awfully glad he didn’t open them.

“Yeah. She put them all in books.” There’s a somewhat bittersweet note in Gibbs’ voice, but at least he’s talking about it. “Her very own romance novel: *The Maiden and the Marine*, she called it.”

Tim smiles at that. “Got a box like that upstairs. All of Abby’s poems are in there.” He rubs his temples feeling life crest back into him with the sugar from the tea. “Okay. That helps.” The chicken breast, green beans and cauliflower on his plate was looking awfully good, too.

“How’s the case going?”

Tim slowly shakes his head. He opens his mouth, about to say, “You wouldn’t believe it…” but his phone rings, and it’s Fornell.

“Let Fornell know you’re actually alive.” He tosses the phone to Gibbs. “I’m going to get more iced tea.”

As he heads to the kitchen he hears, “Tobias… Yeah… Knee’s shot. Doc wants me on my back… Since she tells me that if I screw this up I’m not walking again without a cane…” Tim’s back in the living room. “No. He’s not.”

Tim gestures for the phone, and Gibbs hands it back. “No, I’m not what?”

“Letting Jethro work,” Fornell says to him.

“He’s on Percocet, a lot of it.”

Fornell didn’t say anything to that, so maybe that meant he agreed, or maybe he thinks Gibbs is going soft, either way, Tim doesn’t much care. “What’s up?”

“Christmas in July for you. Friend of a friend did some digging and got everything you ever wanted to know about Thomas Ender. I’ve got FBI files, NSA files, CIA files, Homeland Security files, and now you do, too. If it’s got initials he’s gotten flagged by them.”

“And yet he still manages to sneak onto an aircraft carrier.”

“True. Mostly because he fell off the face of the Earth two years ago. We honestly thought he was dead at that point. It’s all in the files. I’ve also got everything we had on Lisbeth Ender, which was nothing. She’s never hit the radar. We’re running Blake and Simmers, and setting up a database of people we’ve wanted who went quiet the same time they enlisted. Should speed up the process of IDing them.”

“Thank you. How’re the security details going?”

“Don’t know. I handed that one off.”
Gibbs had been watching that exchange. “Security details?”

Tim shakes his head at Gibbs and signs, *Long story. Tell you when Abby is down.*

“Thanks, Fornell. Looks like I’ve got reading to do.”

“Enjoy.”

Abby’s down a few minutes later. Curled around her, he begins to get them up to date on what happened today. He’s half-telling them to let them know, half-laying it out in his own mind, to work on getting the pieces sorted out further.

And for that sort of talking, Abby and Gibbs are very good listeners. Quiet when he needed quiet, asking good questions, and Gibbs, who he can see is purposely not taking his next dose of pain meds to keep his own mind as clear as possible, looks like he’s really thinking his way through today’s deluge of new information.

Tim talked through Kelly’s full sleep cycle, and feels bad about that, because Abby stayed up with him, listening, instead of getting more sleep. Though he didn’t mind getting a little extra snuggle time with Abby, and he was happy to go get Kelly and bring her down to nurse, while he wrapped up what had happened today.

Eventually she finished eating, and he had finished talking, and he’s ready to sleep too.

He offers Gibbs some help getting back into his office, and was in the process of heading off to grab him more to drink so he could take his pain meds and sleep, when Gibbs says, “Tim, would you sign something for me?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Tim can’t imagine what paperwork could have possibly wandered into his home without him taking it there, but the damn stuff is like bunnies, you turn your back and suddenly there’s more of it. There were three sheets of paper, printer paper, printer paper from his printer, okay… paper work that originated at his house, sitting on his desk.

He finds a pen and asks, “What am I signing?”

“I remember you saying it to the Doc, and thought things would go a lot more smoothly if it was real.” Which gets Tim actually reading the pages in front of him. It’s the legal documents necessary to make him and Abby Gibbs’ medical proxy and official next of kin.

“Oh… I thought Ducky…”

“He is, will be until we get this filed. We talked about it. He thought switching over to you two made sense, too.”

Tim smiles a little at that, half-pleased at the switch, half-sad at the recognition of the fact that Ducky isn’t going to live forever.

He signs, noticing that Abby’s already done so, and then takes the time to actually read the pages. Most of it is straightforward legalese giving both of them the power to make life or death decisions for Gibbs, the last page is his living will.
“I didn’t know you were DNR.”

Gibbs shrugs. “I’ve got more tying me to life than I have in a long time, but, when I’m done, I’m done. My heart stops, and that’s the end of it. Don’t bring me back. And if you let me linger on a machine, as soon as I am dead, I will come back and smack you so hard upside the back of the head your ears’ll ring for a week.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Good.”

He scans the rest of the page. “Organ donor, too?”

“For whatever they’re worth. Can’t imagine there’ll be too much demand for my liver, and I smoked for ten years, so my lungs aren’t in top shape, but my last check-up said my heart was in great shape and my kidneys should be good. And yeah, you can put me on a machine and keep me going long enough to find good homes for them, then let me go.”

“Ohkay.” Maybe it’s just the long day. Probably it’s the lingering feel of having thought he lost them all, but that idea hits Tim really hard, and he feels his eyes burn and throat try to close up. He swallows hard a few times, and then shifts the topic to something that won’t make him cry. “You smoked?”

“You work with Franks and you either light up and smoke ‘em directly or you get ‘em second-hand.”

Tim knows all about that from his role playing days. “When’d you quit?”

“Little bit before you signed on. Abby’d rag on me for it. Keep giving me pamphlets on lung cancer. Sending me pictures of tar-filled lungs. Had Ducky put a smoker’s lung on my desk. Stuff like that. Just easier to quit.”

Tim can imagine that. “Yeah. She would have. I’ve never lit my pipe. Just like having it to play with. I like the way the tobacco smells before you set fire to it, and Abby still gave me crap about it.”

Gibbs chuckles about that. “Get some sleep, big things tomorrow.”

“Yeah.”

And that was Thursday.

Chapter End Notes

I’m fairly sure this is my last update before Christmas, so, for all of you who celebrate it, Happy Christmas. I hope it’s a lovely day.
By Friday morning Tim was starting to feel like he was in the habit of going to work again. Up, shower, food, dress, and out.

Felt like he was getting his rhythm back.

That was kind of nice.

"Good morning," Tim says as he heads into the Bullpen, seeing Ziva sitting at her desk.

Ziva grunts at him. She's mad. He can feel that coming off of her. It's not the same PISSED that radiates off of Gibbs. This is a duller, slower, longer lasting anger. Tim spends a moment really looking at her, and decides that she's pissed, but not at him, and not at being at work today.

That figured out, he's not going to poke it. If it looks like she's not letting it go as the day goes on and they get more intel, he'll have a go at it later.

The Information Fairy, AKA Fornell, had indeed been kind. Split between them it was three hours of reading.

After three hours they knew this:

Lisbeth Ender (or at least someone who looked like her and had her passport) left the US for Tanzania on the 22nd. Tim put in the call for someone to hunt her down, but he wasn't holding his breath on that. Wanted for questioning was awfully low on the priorities list for most international crime hunters. And though all her travel documents are flagged, he's also not expecting her head back to a first world country using those documents anytime soon.

Thomas Ender had been extremely good as a spy. His evals indicated he was at the top of the CIA's talent pool. He'd been trained for long-term, sleeper-cell style missions, where he could spend literally years in place, working his way deeper and deeper into the local culture, keeping an eye on things, and "nudging" them one direction or another.

His assignment as Aref Al Jalil, had gone smoothly for almost two years. He was settled in, working as an opium smuggler, making contacts in several small villages between the Afghanistan/Pakistan border, returning good intel, and then things went wrong.

Apparently he was so well-settled, he'd found himself a wife and had a child. And Kort's "Stockholm Syndrome" actually translated into drone attack hit the wrong target, killing them, and apparently half of Ender's in-laws.

Once the CIA figured out what had happened, they captured him.

Then the Taliban got him back.

That was 2009. In the intervening six years, rumors of what Ender was up to had spread. But they never got past rumors. He was good enough that deep, deep cover kept him a ghost. However, if
rumors (or the NSA, CIA, Interpol, MI6, and the like) were to be believed, he ran training camps out of Columbia and Uzbekistan, and managed to spend some time working with just about every major terror group on Earth.

Fornell's friend of a friend had something of a brainstorm, and decided to check James Ender's travels, and found that he'd been all over the world, all over the United States, and managed to do it while reporting for duty every shift.

Further digging found that James Ender had two passports and driver's licenses.

And if there's one thing the TSA doesn't do, it's give military personnel in uniform with correct travel documents a hard time.

"Draga, we got the IDs back on Simmers and Blake?" Tim asks as he closes the flap on the folder in front of him. (FBI's reports on Ender.)

Draga shakes his head.

"Okay, keep reading. Come on Ziva, let's get some lunch. What do you want, Draga?"

You don't have to be a genius to see Tim wants some time to talk to Ziva alone. She's been radiating mad all morning, and it's not getting any better. Draga's not stupid, so he's not having any issues figuring out that Tim is not going to even try to handle her the same way he did with him, so Draga doesn't get up at the mention of lunch. "Where are you going?"

"Thinking Carlo's. That okay with you?" Tim checks with Ziva.

Ziva nods.

"Cobb salad, no blue cheese, extra hard-boiled egg."

Tim makes a note of it on his phone. "You get IDs on them, let us know."

Draga nods. He's still going through the MI-6 file on Ender, mostly detailing what they suspected was a six month stint in the IRA.

"Okay. Come on, Ziva."

Like Draga, Tim's not stupid, and he also knows he can't handle Ziva the same way he did Draga. He can't just draw a line and tell her to toe it. Too much water under too many bridges there. So, once they had their food…

"Talk to me."

Ziva's still oozing angry. "I am not a child."

Okay, not what he was expecting, but he knows the right answer to that one. "No one thinks you are."

Ziva glares at him. *Or maybe not the right answer.* Obviously, according to Ziva, someone was treating her like a child. "He yelled at me. Actually yelled."
Tim's giving her the *tell me more* look. His husband senses kicking in and telling him this might be a good conversation for him to say as little as possible and do a whole lot of listening.

"Once we got home, he yelled at me for running to them. Screamed about it. Told me that if I ever disobeyed a direct order from him or Gibbs again, he'd fire me."

"Wow." Tim gets Tony was scared. He knows he would have been in a blind panic if Abby ran toward him into a dangerous situation, but he also hopes he'd handle the aftermath better than that. Though, given how bonkers he went on the whole pregnant-wife-thing, he's also awfully doubtful that he'd manage it.

"I am not a child. I can decide for myself if…"

He squeezes her hand. She's shaking her head, still angry.

"He has no right to…" She stabs her chicken.

"He's your husband. He's allowed to get scared and angry when you're in danger."

"And I'm not?"

Also not what he was expecting. Apparently they aren't just talking about Tony reacting to danger. "Not saying that. After the freezer, when I got calmed down, and it was her turn to go crazy, Abby hit me, couple of times, until I held her wrists and made her stop. Only reason I didn't get hit yesterday is because I ran away from the blast. I run into a blast, I get two steps past yelled at. So, I'm not going to say you're not allowed to be scared and angry, too. But it's not the same for you or her as it is for us."

Ziva's not buying that at all. "Of course it's the same."

"No, it's not." Tim takes a bite of his lunch. "Are you pregnant?"

"Are you insane?" Not buying it has morphed into seriously irked.

"Not any more so than normal," Tim says dryly. "You pregnant?"

"No."

"Trying?"

She rolls her eyes. "Soon."

"So, are you really certain you're not pregnant?"

"It's extremely unlikely."

"But it's not impossible."

Tim's noticing he's about to get some Ziva anger aimed at him if he doesn't get to the point soon, and it had better be an awfully good one. "It's very unlikely but not completely impossible."

"And that's why it's not the same. We… men… live in the present. Our bodies exist now and that's it. When they're gone they're gone. You… women… live in the present and, maybe, the future. There's always that chance that the next generation is along for the ride, and that's the difference. Sure, you're not pregnant. Sure, he knows that. But if yesterday was the end, you going with him took not just him out, not just you, but maybe any future he's got, as well."
That apparently was not a good enough point, she's glaring at him. "McGee, you are full of shit. It works that way for us, too. That is the father of any children I'm ever going to have, standing in front of a bomb. He's as much my future as I am his, and if he goes, that's the end of it, and I am an adult, and I am allowed to value that future more than a life without it."

Tim shrugs. He may not believe Ziva's right about that, because she not. It's not the same, at least, he doesn't feel that way, not in his gut, because it's the difference between… between the idea of a baby and a baby that might already exist… (He can feel Penny glaring at him on that, for being old-fashioned and patriarchal, but he's comfortable with it.) but he's also not going to argue about it. It probably does feel the same, to Ziva.

"You're the love of his life. You didn't need to die, and you ran into a bomb blast to be with him. You scared the shit out of him, probably Gibbs, too. I bet he's going to yell at you, or at least give you a headslap when you get in range again. I'd yell at Abby and probably say some god-awful stupid things if she did the same thing, because sometimes you're so damn scared all you can do is yell."

That gets a little nod out of Ziva. "She told us about not being able to carry in any groceries while she was pregnant."

"Exactly. Now, how ridiculously stupid is that compared to a bomb? It's really stupid. That's an entire level of special stupid that only guys get, and only about their pregnant wives, but it doesn't make it any less true. Jimmy feels the same way about Breena. I think it's just part of being a guy."

"It's part of being a human, McGee. Do you think I do not feel that same fear every time we go out? Or that Abby doesn't when you're at risk?"

Judging by the fact that he's never seen or heard of Abby, Ziva, or Breena hovering nervously over any of the three of them when they're doing fairly normal and extremely low-risk things, and he knows that both he and Jimmy did it for their wives when they were pregnant, he's thinking the answer is no. But he's also not about to say that.

And he also knows that there is fear there, and it's there all the time, and the fact that it's not the same doesn't make it any less real, or any less intense for the person feeling it, so he says, "I know you do. I know she does. I'm not moving to Cybercrime because I want career advancement. I would have taken a position as a tech down there if Vance hadn't gone for Department Head."

"And I ran away because that's my promise to her. That's our marriage. She and Kelly come first, and I can't put them first if I'm not alive. But... is that your promise to Tony? Will you live for him... Okay, that sounds wrong, but do you get what I mean?"

Ziva nods. "Yes, I do."

"Is that your marriage?"

Ziva shakes her head, and he thinks she's saying she doesn't want to talk about it, not commenting on their relationship.

"You two going to be okay?"

"Eventually."

"You two gonna be able to work together?"

She shrugs. Not a problem that has to be dealt with today. And honestly, not Tim's problem, either,
at least, not until Tony gets back and takes over again as leader.

"Your head in the game enough to be here with me?" But that is his problem, and it does need to be dealt with today.

"Are you asking as my friend or the senior member of the team?"

"Right now, it's as Team Leader."

Ziva takes a sip of her soda. "I am, in the game, as you put it."

"Good. 'Cause I need you to ask a favor."

Getting back to the case was making Ziva happier. Work is almost always easier than relationship when the going is rocky. "A favor of whom?"

"Orli Elbaz. I've got Vance working it on our side, and I want to know from hers as well. Who knew where those subs were going to be, and did anyone reroute them?"

"You know she isn't head of Mossad anymore?"

"She's the highest link on the chain I can get to, unless you know the current guy…"

"I do, but not as well. He wasn't a fan of my father, and I do not think he'd be interested in doing me any favors."

"Okay. Get me what you can. It can't be a coincidence those ships were that close to each other."

Both of their phones buzz. Tim grabs his while waving to their waiter for the check and boxes to take their lunch back to the Navy Yard. *Jason Simmers aka Xavier Martinez, last known as part of ETA. Vanished in 2010.*

Tim looks at Ziva. "Didn't the ETA sign a cease-fire in 2010?"

"Yes, and disbanded in 2014."

"Unemployed terrorist looking for a new gig?"

Ziva shrugs. She's certainly heard worse ideas.

By the time they got back, Blake had a new name, too. Seamus Ivers, formerly of the IRA, dropped off the face of the Earth at the end of 2010, and apparently, rejoined it as Edward Blake, of the US Navy.

So… three terrorists… though Tim's thinking that doesn't quite sound right… Not for targets that big. Not if they're aiming at military targets. Three mercenaries? Special ops? He supposes it's possible that Ender found the biggest target he could locate as a way to strike back against the US, but, what… the Israeli Subs were just icing on the cake?

No. He's working for someone and that someone has to be a government, or a quazi-government with some real money and intel behind it.

From everything he'd seen from the info dump on Ender, (and having IDed Blake and Simmers, massive mounds of new info on them were pouring in) the man was more than capable of planning a
mission where he'd get men in place four years ahead of striking.

His phone buzzed, and he saw it was Vance's private number.

"McGee."

"Feel like getting a coffee with me?"

"Yes, sir." What the hell is going on now? Intel too delicate to put in writing? Did I just screw something up? Are we being pulled off? Shit.

"Excellent."

Five minutes later, he was standing next to Vance, holding a cup of iced-coffee (it's really too hot for hot coffee) wondering what exactly Vance doesn't want to say to him in his office.

"I understand you have Ziva putting out feelers for why those subs were where they were?"

"Yes."

Vance sighs and rubs his eyes.

"I know you've been on Gibbs' team for a long time. And I know I take a hands off, let him take the case wherever it leads approach."

Tim feels his stomach start to knot up as it dawns on him what the problem might be. "So you're saying we weren't supposed to know those subs were there, either?"

"Mossad knows we spy on them. We know they spy on us. That's just how the game works. But, until Ziva started calling, they didn't know that we had managed to get our hands on that bit of intel. And they also hadn't know about the almost attack on the Reagan."

"Shit. Sorry."

Vance shakes his head. "Solve the case and all sins are forgiven."

"Yes, sir."

"I also have some news for you on our side of that. The path the Reagan was on had been planned out more than six months ago and was unaltered."

"Who planned it out?"

Leon smiles, but it's not a happy gesture. "Let's put it this way, if the people who planned it are compromised, we've got vastly bigger issues than a possible terror cell."

"I understand. Will someone be checking to make sure we don't have vastly bigger issues than a possible terror cell?"

"Yes, discretely." That answer makes Tim think that some members of the higher ups were about to answer some very uncomfortable questions.

"Okay."
"How close to solving this are you?"

"Closer than I was yesterday, not as close as I'd like to be." Tim doesn't say that he's desperately worried that he'll be able to figure out the puzzle, put all the pieces in place, but still not be able to catch the guys because they're better at hiding than he is at seeking. "I've got positive IDs on everyone. More information is coming in by the minute, but we're playing catch-up."

Vance nods, finishes his coffee, and says, "Play harder," as he heads back into the Navy Yard.

The thing is, as he's sitting there with Ziva and Draga, is that none of the three of them are the ideas guy.

Okay, that's kind of dumb, sure he's the ideas guy, as long as those ideas involve a computer. And Ziva's the ideas girl, as long as those ideas involve a gun. And Draga might be the ideas guy, as long as it involves seeing some little detail the rest of the missed.

But those are ideas. None of them are the IDEAS guy.

Right now, they're missing their ideas guys. Faced with a Mount Everest of facts and evidence, Gibbs or Tony would be the one to have the Eureka! moment and know what to do or where to look next.

And for the most part it's the three of them that do the looking.

And they're doing great at looking. They've got scads of information now. Wading through piles and piles of it. All three of those men have had long and glorious careers blowing stuff up and killing people for whichever "cause" was paying the bills. And Tim, Ziva, and Draga are reading up, learning patterns, getting familiar with how these guys think and why.

What they don't have is where the hell they're located now.

Or how they got off that ship.

Or how they all got onto it, too. Who got Simmers and Blake on the Reagan in the first place? Or, once again coincidence?

Or how they knew when and where to hit.

Or why three guys, three guys who are really great at what they do, used a frigging dead battery to power their detonator. Was the point even to blow up the Reagan, or just scare the hell out of everyone?

Sigh. Tim turns another page, learning more about Blake's training as an explosives expert.

"Think they're in Tanzania?" Draga asks.

Tim shrugs. It's possible. "Any of their aliases go traveling recently?" Specifically, and this is something that worries him deeply, is the idea that the three of them boarded planes using their military IDs and got out of the country before NCIS was even looking for them.

Sure, they requested intel on that, and yes, they set the BOLO, but the fact that nothing has popped up can be just as much a matter of the TSA being asleep at the wheel as those three are still in the
US. (In fact, given the CVs Tim's reading on these three, it's more likely not seeing anything is the TSA asleep at the wheel than these three still being in the States.)

But, now that they've got IDs for all three with their real names, the list of potential aliases just got a whole lot longer."

"I'm checking on that," Draga answers.

Tim's staring at his screen, looking at reports connecting the explosives in Simmers' fortress of Solitude to "explosions" (Sometime around 2009 most of the West realized it was in the best interest of everyone if any bombing that could be passed off as some sort of industrial accident, was.) in Ireland, England, Canada, the US, and Australia, and the residue they found at Blake's place.

So, at the very least Simmers and Blake are working together, and they can put the explosives that just about blew them up in Blake's hands. And they can now confirm that Blake really is Seamus Ivers. The facial recognition was only 92% sure, but no two bombers use the exact same explosive recipe, and the chemical composition on the explosives is identical.

Wonderful. More pieces together. Still no closer to finding them.

Tim checks his email, sure he's not going to find that any of the three of them got caught in a BOLO, but he might as well hope.

Nothing.

Simmers and Blake were on the Reagan together. They could talk to each other easily. Ender wasn't. There had to be some way they communicated with each other.

No phone records. No financials. No useful emails.

So, how were they doing it?

He's tapping his fingers on his keyboard, rubbing his forehead. They never did get around to combing through social media. Worth a shot.

"We still don't know how they were talking to each other. Social media time. Ziva, you take tumblr. Draga, you're on Facebook. I've got Twitter. They had to talk to each other, let's find it."

Two hours later, they finally did hit the eureka moment. "Guys!" Draga sounds really excited.

Tim and Ziva look up at Draga.

"They're all players on Minecraft. Got their own server and everything!"

Tim remembers that thing about the NSA watching people online on gaming communities. "That's where they're talking?"

"Think so. And… yeah… they're on now."

Tim quietly sends a quick thanks to God, and starts to hack. "I've got this. Gear up. Ziva, let Vance know what is up. I'll have a location in…" He taps the keyboard waiting for his computer to find what he needs. "Fredricksburg, Maryland. Let's go!" He's up and moving to the car while lifting his
phone to his ear to call in back up and the bomb squad. They almost got blown to smithereens once, they're not taking that chance again.

There are times when Tim is more than vaguely worried about the militarization of local police forces. Like, he very rarely thinks they actually need tanks or tank-like transports. (NCIS seems to manage just fine without them.) And having dealt with a decent number of LEOs who would find counting to twenty-one difficult unless they were naked, he's… skeptical is probably a good word, about their ability to use those weapons and the tactics that go with them well.

But right now, as he's being introduced to Lt. Jeffery Tomlinson, Fredricksburg SWAT, he's feeling pretty comfortable with the fact that Tomlinson knows what he's doing, and he's got enough firepower behind him to take out a moderately sized country, like say, France.

They're in a "Lawn Care" van, three streets away from the target house, in front of a foreclosed on house, and Tomlinson actually has two guys very slowly mowing the lawn.

In front of them is a bank of monitors, showing the house their perps is in from four separate angles.

"Once we got the call, we set up the surveillance," Tomlinson says, as he shows them how to control the camera feeds. "Nothing in that house has moved since we've gotten the call."

"Good. How'd you set it up?" Tim asks. "One of them is CIA-trained and probably knows what to look for."

"Saw that when we got your call. We went in with a UPS truck, and delivered 'packages' with hidden cameras to the front porches of a few of the neighbors."

"Cool." For several minutes Tim, Ziva, and Draga just watch, getting a feel for the layout. They've got really good line of sight. In fact, it's too good.

This is some sort of trap waiting for them. Tim can feel it. Ziva's looking really nervous, too.

"Too easy?" If anyone would know, it's their Ninja.

"Yes." She's staring at the aerial shots of the neighborhood. There's no cover anywhere. It's a fairly new development, no trees, very few bushes, and the ones that are there are all small. "They're practically inviting us to come in and get killed."

"Sooo… what's the trap?" Draga asks.

"The warehouse was simple. This is probably simple too. Easy to hide. Easy to disarm, they don't want to blow themselves up. Easy to trip…" Ziva's looking back at the footage of the house. It's a basic, cookie cutter, low end of the expensive spectrum, house for yuppies. Lots of windows, big front yard, no trees. Two hundred other houses all exactly like it, all on .75 acre lots, all facing tidy-little two lane streets, arranged into a near-fractal of cul-de-sacs.

Ziva uses the controls on the cameras, scanning around, giving them a better view of the front of the house. "Does it look like they ever use the front door?"

"Be a lot easier to tell in winter," Tim says. Nothing like snow for making obvious footprints. July isn't very good for that.

Ziva shakes her head. "I know, but… The cars are parked on the driveway next to the garage and
side entrance. The post box is at the end of the driveway. Who would use the front door? Police coming in."

"Give me a close up of the front of the house," Draga says. He looks, seeing, Tim has no idea what, but he says definitively, "Side door. They don't use the front."

"So..." Tim says, waiting to see what they're thinking.

Ziva focuses in a bit tighter. "Does that lump under the welcome mat look suspicious?"

"Looks like something I'd stay away from," Draga says.

"If I had any idea how much explosives they had, I would be tempted to just toss something onto the mat and let them blow up," Ziva says, flash of her old self showing through.

"But..." Tim says it, though he doesn't really need to. They all know 'but.' This is residential neighborhood with hundreds of people in it, and they've got no idea what all is in that house.

"Heat feed is online," one of the techs from the Fredericksburg SWAT says.

"Good!" Ziva says, keying it up.

It's honestly kind of boring. Three guys, sitting in front of computers. From the feed Tim's got on their servers, they actually are playing Minecraft right now. Probably. They're in creative mode and building something really big. The fact that they've also got a completely detailed, to scale, Nimitz-class aircraft carrier on their server means that whatever they're building, it's probably not just for fun.

"That can't be good," from Draga gets Tim's attention off of what they're building and back onto the heat cameras.

It takes him a few minutes to see it, but once he does... "Shit."

If it wasn't for the fact that Blake is part of this group, he'd probably be significantly less worried about the fact that there are multiple places on the house, like the front door, the garage doors, the back door, around several windows, that aren't radiating heat the way the rest of the house is.

It's July. It's 93 degrees outside. Most of the house is radiating a bit cooler than that, which makes sense, they've probably got AC going on the inside. But, if say, there were large blocks of something very solid, something that didn't transmit cool well, there would be darker, hotter sections, where whatever that dense material that wasn't transmitting the cool was.

And there are. A lot of them. And Tim's awfully sure those blocks are more of the C-4ish stuff Blake makes. The whole house is wired to blow, and from the looks of it, just about every entrance they could choose is set to blow anyone who comes in sky high.

"McGee," Ziva's voice, and her sounding concerned sends ice down his spine.

"What?"

She points to the square, cooler spots on each of the men.

"They're all rigged to blow, too, aren't they?"

"That would be my guess." She focused in closer on one of them. "Though I'd say they aren't switched on yet, this one is using both hands on his computer."
"Great. So, how do we get them out, without having them blow up the neighborhood?" He looks at Ziva, and she shrugs. Draga shakes his head. Tomlinson began setting up a plan to evacuate the neighborhood, which is something that Tim's in favor of in general, except the great line of sight means that as soon as they start doing it, the guys in the house will notice, and probably blow the place.

"You guys willing to get some bad press?" Tim asks Jeffery.

"Why?"

"They've got cameras all over the house. We can't move without them seeing it. If we could get a bunch of DEA or PD vans or something and go storming into one of the neighbor's houses, make a big deal about it, lots of noise and attention, maybe we could get in and get them shut down before they notice they really are the targets."

Draga looks up at that. "Better idea. Do that, but we'll gas them."

Ziva perks up considerably. "I like that. Big, huge show next door, I'll sneak up to the heat pump, hook in the canister, and then we can go in once they're asleep."

Tim knows the theory behind the gas. Sleeping bad guys don't put up any sort of fight. He also knows that as of this point no police force has managed to use it without killing at least half of the people they were trying to take down, and, honestly, at least half usually meant a whole lot closer to all of them.

If the Reagan had blown, that was at least 5700 lives, plus who knew how much nuclear fallout. Only sheer luck the warehouse didn't get them. And this house, in the middle of a neighborhood filled with people…

It's his call.

He got his cell and made it. Since the beginning of '14 all SWAT teams had been equipped with the gas. NCIS wasn't because they didn't usually go into situations like that, but Tim's call to Tomlinson's commander got the gas released for use.

He's not dying to capture these three, and neither is anyone else. Not today.

Half an hour later, on his orders, while the DEA staged a raid on the house two doors down, Ziva crept around to the back and hooked a non-descript canister into the house's HVAC system.

An hour after that, (while Tim personally apologized profusely to the owners of that house, assuring them that all the damage would be paid for, and the Fredricksburg PD made sure that all the nearby homes were evacuated) the bomb squad went in with gasmasks. Ender and Simmers were dead. Blake was going to have a whole lot of explaining to do, if he ever woke up.

But the EMTs who took custody of him after the bomb squad got him out didn't seem hopeful about him waking up anytime soon.

It took the bomb techs close to three hours to clear the house. And even after that, they weren't willing to guarantee that they'd found everything, or for that matter, short of tearing the whole place apart, that they ever could find everything.
But you can't process a scene if you can't go in it.

And the scene needs to be processed.

So, it was with extreme caution and very slow, very deliberate motions (and as much body armor as they could put on and still move) that Tim, Ziva, and Draga began going through the house.

Why every inch of that house was wired to blow was evident less than five minutes into going through the place, everything anyone could possibly need to roll the whole organization up was in there.

And that organization was much larger than three guys.

Much, much larger.

Tim had Fornell on the line before they'd even gotten halfway through pulling stuff out, and having done so, it was only an hour before the FBI showed up, with their own passel of bomb techs, explosive sniffing dogs, and probably every crime scene tech out of the Baltimore office.

Yeah, NCIS likes credit for big busts, but in the end domestic terrorism isn't their job. Not unless it happens to Navy or Marine personnel or their families.

Playing catch up, running down the likely fifty to a hundred guys in this group, Tim was fine with handing that off. They got their guys for their crime, and that was enough.

And if it looked like there was more Navy or Marine servicemen involved, Fornell had promised they'd get the call as soon as they knew.

It was well after midnight when Tim was finishing up the first of his reports.

He'd talked to Vance when they got in, debriefed him on what they had found, the most pressing bit being that this group appeared to be large enough to make good on Simmers' enemies list, so even though Simmers was dead, the protection details couldn't yet be lifted.

Then came the process of the first report, namely a general what all happened when and why. There'd be more detailed reports later, in which every single second of the day would have to be accounted for, but those could wait until tomorrow. (Checking the clock on his computer, they could wait until later today.)

Tim rubs his eyes and was about to hit the send button when his phone rang. Vance's secretary was requesting that he head upstairs to talk to the Director.

Tim didn't like the feel of that request. They'd already debriefed, so this added call was making him nervous. But he hit send, and headed up, wondering what was going to happen next.

"Agent McGee," Vance says as he heads in. He's not smiling, but he doesn't sound angry, either.

"Director."
He looks over and sees Kort standing next to Vance's desk, looking smug. Vance looks smug, too. Something weird is about to happen, and Tim's aware of it, on edge. He doesn't like being dropped into the middle of a set-up without being told what the set-up is.

"Mr. Kort, on behalf of his organization, felt it was necessary to complain about the handling of today's incident. He wanted to voice his, and the CIA's, distress at losing such a valuable 'asset.'"

Tim's staring at Vance, trying to see where this is going. Vance isn't smiling, but there's that amused, enjoying himself look in his eyes.

"I was thinking, that as the Agent in charge of today's actions, that you should have the chance to respond directly to Mr. Kort."

"Thank you, Sir." Tim can see that not quite smile is still there, and he really hopes he's not misreading the cues, and that this is, in fact, the guy who said he'd pay to see him cuss out the commander in charge of Lejeune setting him up for another version of that show.

Only one way to know for sure.

"And would this be a response from me personally, or from NCIS as a whole, Sir?"

Vance's smile broke through for a half a second. "I think, in this matter, you're more than qualified to speak for NCIS as a whole, Agent McGee."

"Ah. Good." Tim turned to face Kort. "Kort, fuck off and die you ungrateful son of a bitch. I got all of their phones, all of their computers, all of their papers, and their safe house, all intact, and now all in the hands of the FBI who are having a field day with all of this intel they've never seen before because you bastards never share.

"I got all of their contacts. There were fifty-seven people on that Minecraft server and unlike the NSA trolling operations, none of them are thirteen-year-olds just looking to have a good time.

"What you and the CIA couldn't do in five years, my team did in five days. You don't want your valuable assets dead, do your own damn job, and risk your own ass to capture them yourself. Me and mine aren't dying for your fuck ups. And I'm sure as hell not risking three maniacs blowing up an entire neighborhood just to preserve your assets. We clear?"

"Crystal." Kort looks at Leon, who is, for the first time, noticing that McGee's actually pretty tall. "That was impolitic, Director."

"Oh, my, you are right." The full force of Vance's sarcasm was withering. "I am shocked, deeply shocked at what Agent McGee had to say. He's usually much more polite. McGee!"

"Yes, sir."

"You and your entire team are being placed on paid leave. Once your reports are filled out, I do not want to see any of you here again until August. For the next week, I want you to go home, rest, relax, and think about the grave severity and dire consequences of saying impolitic things to pretentious assholes who upon being offered cake, ice cream, and cookies complain about the lack of whipped cream with sprinkles on top and deserve to have their ungrateful asses kicked."

"Yes, sir." Tim nods, trying very hard not to smile.

"Go on. Wrap up that report, and I'll see you in a week. Now, Mr. Kort, do you have any other complaints I can deal with?"
It was a bit after two-thirty when Vance finished reading McGee's report. Clear, concise, matched DiNozzo's, Draga's, and Tomlinson's.

It was the final wrap up that Vance found most interesting. When the case is closed, the Team Leader writes up what happened. He's gotten hundreds of them from Gibbs and a few from DiNozzo at this point, and McGee's was similar, until he hit the end.

The final section had the heading:

Unanswered Questions:

1. How did they get off of the Reagan?
2. Why was the battery that powered the detonator dead?
3. Why stay in the US?
4. Who actually killed Thomas Ender?
5. How did they know those subs were going to be there?

Vance stared at those questions. He doesn't know the answers, and if what the doctors are saying about Blake being brain dead are right, he's not going to be providing them, either.

*FBI's problem now.*

He flicks off his monitor, and stands, ready to head home, when he hears his door open. He sent Sharon, his secretary, home after McGee and Kort left. No reason for her to stay while he read reports.

"Hello." And while it's true he's not a field agent, he does keep a gun in his top desk drawer, and he's opening that drawer as he greets the figure entering his office.

"Leon."

He knows that voice and relaxes, sliding the drawer shut. "Don't sneak up on people like that, Clayt." Jarvis took a few steps into his office.

Jarvis is not looking happy. And Leon can imagine why, it's after two in the morning, and instead of being home, he's here. "CIA is pissed."

"Oh, come on, Kort deserved every word of what he got, and if he can't handle McGee telling him to fuck off, it's time for a new job."

"That's not why CIA is pissed. And that's not why they'd call me in." That's when what Vance said really starts to get to Jarvis. He spends a moment thinking about who was on DiNozzo's team, and finally remembers which one McGee was, the tech guy who was running the interesting test on Cybercrime. He cussed out Kort? "Really?"

"Really." Vance says with a smile.

"Amusing?"

Vance nods. "For a whole thirty seconds there Kort actually looked almost pissed off. That mildly annoyed, better than everyone else in the universe mask of his almost cracked. So if it's not about Kort, why are you here?"
"I'm here at two forty-three in the morning because at some time around one in the morning CIA Director Carl Hanson got the news that Ender had been killed."

Vance shakes his head. Really, they're going to moan about it? "It was a clean kill, Clayt. Probably saved hundreds of lives."

"Ender was still a deep cover asset for the CIA, reporting directly to Hanson. Kort had been instructed to provide as much information as he could while protecting Ender's cover, but he was instructed to break that cover should it be necessary to get Ender out alive. According to his report, he was intending to tell DiNozzo of Ender's real allegiance should he get too close to catching him. He didn't think McGee was up to it, and if somehow he managed it, that McGee wouldn't be willing to use lethal force to apprehend Ender. Apparently the use of the gas wasn't the 'by-the-book' play he was expecting McGee to come up with, so he didn't reveal that the entire plan was for them to get captured, all of the info compromised, and for Ender to 'break free' again once we transferred him to an Afghani black-site."

Vance sits back down, feeling like his stomach is about to drop out of his body, and gestures to one of the chairs near his desk for Jarvis. "So Kort screwed the pooch, underestimated my man, and the CIA is mad at us?"

"Yes."

Vance sounds tired. "Clayt, it's too damn late for this. Kort keeps his cards too close to the vest, he gets what he gets."

Jarvis flashes him a look that indicates he agrees with Vance, but there's more bad news coming. "They want an inquiry."

"They can have one, but I'll scream so loud and hard about what they were doing it's going to look awfully bad. The fact that they were running an illegal op on US soil will be the least of what I'll throw at them. I'm not letting them crucify McGee for doing his job and doing it well."

Clayton Jarvis stares at Vance for a moment. He knows Vance is protective of his people, but he also knows Vance has the political skills to let one take something for the team if it'll work better in the long run. If he's willing to embarrass the CIA over this, burn those bridges… "It's that cut and dried?"

"We go to the wall on this one and we fight to the last man, Clayton. If we don't, none of our men will ever step up when we ask them to. I'll send you the report. It was a clean kill. Even with Ender being an asset, Blake and Simmers weren't and they were both wearing functional kill switches that could have..." Vance turns his computer back on and sorts through his reports. "According to the bomb squad, if any of those vests had gone off, they would have touched off an explosion large enough to level three thousand meters in all directions, as well as shower debris all over the surrounding area. When they evacuated, there were sixty-three people in that area, and since it was late afternoon on a Friday in summertime, forty-six of them were children. He made the right decision, and if the CIA wants someone to fall on his sword, they need to tell Kort it's time to get sharpening, 'cause it's not going to be McGee."

Clayton nods. "Send me all of the reports. I'll make sure we put the full power of the Navy behind McGee on this one. Knowing we won't roll over should shut the CIA up, but if it doesn't, we'll fight."

"Okay." Vance sighs and reaches for his phone.
"Thought you were just about to head off."

"I was, but now I've got one more call to make."

"It's almost three in the morning. Let him sleep. Once I've got the full report, I'm going to talk to CIA again. If this is as cut and dried as you're saying, the CIA won't fight."

And that was Friday.

And on Saturday, a bit after noon, when he was just getting up, Leon found a text from Jarvis: CIA folded. They're not going to make an issue of it. Ender officially died in 2009, he's already got his star on the wall, and that's all that needs to be said about that.

A few seconds later Vance got Are you going to tell McGee?

No. Not having a good agent second guessing himself for doing his job right.

Okay.
Kelly's fussing. She's on her back, on a blanket, on the floor, under one of those baby play arch things. It's a plastic u-shaped device with colorful stuffed animals hanging off of it. Supposedly, when she's a bit older, she'll be able to kick and punch at them, make them move. Right now they're just bright shapes for her to stare at.

Gibbs is on the sofa, also on his back, foot and knee propped up, ice on his knee. It's Saturday afternoon, and he knows why Kelly cries. Being stuck on your back sucks.

He carefully starts inching his way to getting onto the floor to get her, but Abby, who had been in the kitchen, making lunch for both of them, beats him to it, scoops Kelly up, and puts her on his chest.

She glares at him. "You staying put?"

He rolls his eyes and sighs, focusing on Kelly, stroking his hands down her back.

Abby nods and heads back to the kitchen.

Gibbs looks at Kelly, who's calming down and staring at him. "I'm bored, too."

"I heard that," Abby calls back.

"It's not a secret."

Abby came back into the living room a few minutes later, drinks for them in hand. She takes Kelly from him while he very carefully pulls himself up, and then gives her, and his coffee, back to him. "Chicken lettuce rolls sound good?"

Gibbs nods at that. For all the crud they eat on duty, food at the McGee house is surprisingly healthy. Of course, that's probably counterbalancing all the crud they eat on duty. Though right about now, he'd really, really like something with a ton of fat and probably some bacon on top. He might suggest burgers for dinner. Tim's home, sleeping off yesterday, which they still haven't heard about beyond last night's Got 'em. Home late. text, and he's not helpless with a grill.

"Got another possible nanny you can try to scare into submission this afternoon."

"Wonderful." Gibbs doesn't feel particularly scary lounging about in his pajamas, knee in a brace, four days of stubble on his face. Crabby sure. But right now he feels like any of the potential nannies take one look at him and start to get nervous that they'll be taking care of him, too.

Or maybe that's him projecting.

He's nervous about it. And that's part of the reason why he's bored and crabby, because he's taking this seriously, staying down, healing.

Once he got enough of the pain meds out of his system that his brain was back online, he was planning on telling everyone to stop pampering him, and let him go to work. As much as he's sure that putting the fear of Gibbs into potential nannies is important, (That's his darling girl there, and they had better well take the best possible care of her or they will answer to him!) terrorists trying to
kill people takes a certain sort of precedence.

He'd been absolutely certain that the doc had been exaggerating, and that she was just trying to scare him into resting (wouldn't be the first time someone with a string of degrees next to his/her name told him to do something he didn't really need to do), and all he needed to get up and... and he did get up, and he felt the top half of his leg move immediately when he told it to, his hip and thigh were completely with the program and doing exactly what they were told to do. His knee and calf on the other hand... he felt the bottom half lag behind the top for a heartbeat or two, pain shooting through his knee, (and that was just getting up, he hadn't put any weight on his knee, yet) and he suddenly got the idea that maybe the doc knew what she was talking about on the whole ripping out his knee thing.

So, he keeps the brace on a lot, (even though it does dig into what is still his very bruised calf, and hurts like a bitch) because every time he moves without it on, he can feel that there is a lot more play in that joint than he wants. When he stands up to hobble over to the head, or get a shower, even with the brace, he can feel the slide between those bones, and he's very, very aware of how easily this could go very wrong.

So, for the first time ever, he's actually following doctor's orders and resting. And trying, but he's afraid he's not really succeeding, to not be a massive pain in the ass to Abby or Tim.

They've already got a baby, they don't need a helpless fifty-six-year-old living on their sofa, especially not for a year.

Sitting on his ass worries him on another level, too. Because there's only so much reading and sleeping he can do. Which means he's got lots of time to think. He did do a lot of thinking about the case, but thinking about the case reminded him of something.

One day soon, there won't be any more cases.

And when that's true...

He remembers the case they worked about the CO who ate his gun rather than face mandatory retirement. And he's not there, not at all, he's got Kelly and Tim and Abby, and Molly and the new baby, and lots of family stuff but... They all have their own lives and jobs and things that fill up each day.

And he's got the Shannon, which for some reason isn't nearly as done as he was expecting it to be at this point. Something about building cribs... (He's got some maple he's planing away, getting ready to find out if Baby Palmer is a boy or girl.)

But there's only so much woodworking he can do, and that's not twelve hours a day, every day...

And sure, once Shannon's done, he'll take her out, but he's not feeling much desire to just vanish for six months at a time anymore.

There's deskwork. They'll let him review cold cases and recommend 'new' leads on them until the reaper finally shows up for him. And like Mike, he'll be able to come back every now and again and 'help' (he's already checked the regs, post-mandatory retirement, he can't spend more than fifteen days a year on active duty). And if he feels like bouncing from one base to another, chatting with guys who are coming to the end of their enlistments, he could become a recruiter.

But for a guy who's used to working eighty hours a week, that's still a lot of down time.
Tim and Abby need a nanny. They need someone who knows the hours, understands why they can’t say, ‘we'll be home at seven,’ loves their baby, and will do everything to take great care of her.

He looks at Kelly, who's on his chest, chewing on his t-shirt. (She must have lost her pacifier in transit. Yep, it's on the carpet, just out of his reach. And he's damned if he's going to call Abby out here to make a whole other trip to get it. He's never been so frustrated by something being less than five feet away in his life.) so he gives her a finger to suck on, which she approves of. And honestly, though he is enjoying grandpa-hood, and though he loves time with Kelly, he can't see himself doing this full time.

He loved his own Kelly beyond all reason, but that doesn't mean he wasn't about to jump out of his skin the week Shannon had pneumonia, and he was on stay-at-home-dad duty.

Of course, he was a really different guy then.

"What do you think?" he asks Kelly. "You and me? Let mom and dad have someone who already understands the insane hours?"

"Think about what?" Abby asks, sitting down next to him. "Did you lose your paci?" she asks Kelly.

Gibbs nods. "Think she might be getting hungry, too." He gestures to the large drool soaked spot on his shirt. If it's anything to guess by, Kelly's looking for a breast.

Abby sighs. "Okay." She grabs the pacifier off the floor and hands it to Gibbs, who didn't mind getting his left hand back. Then she got up again, headed into the office, rooted through the bag with his clothing in it, and found Gibbs a clean t-shirt.

A moment later, she's got Kelly in hand, who is indeed trying to get to a breast, and Gibbs is changing out of one t-shirt for another.

"Can I eat my lunch?" Abby asks Kelly.

Kelly whines at her.

"I'll take that as a no." Abby says. She hands Gibbs her lunch, "Hold this," while settling Kelly in to nurse again. "You just ate. What is going on?"

"Almost six weeks old. Growth spurt time."

"Great. So, what were you asking her?"

"Just playing with an idea. Not sure it'd work. Not sure I'm actually up for it." Abby's looking intrigued. "Gonna retire soon enough. Maybe you don't need a nanny for all that long…"

Her eyebrows shoot up. "You serious?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Went pretty stir crazy when I was on all babies all the time with my Kelly, but… You need someone who understands the hours are crazy, someone who gets why you can't tell them when you'll be home."

"True…" Abby's nodding. "Keep thinking about it. If you're serious, then we'll talk about it, but… you sure you're not just looking at the calendar and realizing you've suddenly got nothing planned?"

If he could reach, he'd kiss her forehead, but he can't, not without seriously changing his position, so he squeezes her hand and smiles. "Always did know me too well."
A/N: So the last few chapters were huge because I wanted to create a narrative arc for each day. These chapters I've got planned coming up are smaller, all little arcs, complete bits, but there'll be times I can shove a bunch of them together into bigger arcs. (Well, sometimes, sometimes little chapters do the job. You get the point.) Anyhoo... assuming either way works with the narrative flow... do you guys prefer smaller, daily (ish) updates, or longer, further apart updates?
She's young, perky, professional. Her name is Heather Yung.

Gibbs doesn't like her.

Abby does. Probably because she came in, talked about her experience with babies a bit more, played with Kelly some (she seemed to approve, or at least didn't cry) then asked politely about his knee, listened carefully, offered some helpful suggestions, and then told him about how well her grandfather was doing after they put the artificial knee in, and how much better artificial joints are these days than they used to be. According to her, her grandfather was up on his feet without a cane only three months after the surgery and that a year later he was only barely limping. She seemed to think that was comforting.

Mostly she just made him feel seventy million years old, and broken on top of that. Sure, she's twelve (okay, not really, she's probably twenty-six) and bustling with useful purpose and energy. No need to rub that in.

When Heather got up to use the bathroom, Abby grins at him. Keep your butt on the sofa awfully clear in that expression.

He glares back at her, I hate the universe pretty clear in his.

That makes Abby laugh.

When Heather returns, Abby hands off Kelly, letting Heather put her down for her nap and that went… They both listened carefully, yep, smoothly. No crying. And in ten minutes Heather was down again, commenting on what an easy baby Kelly is, and they were talking about schedules, expected salary, and when she could start.

All in all, it was an hour out of Saturday, and by the end of it, Abby seems pretty pleased.

Once she saw Heather out, she sits down next to Gibbs and says, "So?"

He half shrugs. She's fine, on his face.

"Good enough?"

"Good enough." He says grudgingly, and it's not the sort of 'you'll do' statement he made about Tony. There's no affection here, just a recognition of the fact that Heather is good enough. "You can probably do better."

"Kelly seems to like her the best. No fussing on naptime."

"True." This was the first of the nannies who got Kelly down without any protest.

Tim wanders down a few seconds later, looking awfully out of it, hair sticking up in all directions and only wearing his pajama pants, and sat on the floor in front of Abby, resting his head on her knee. "Someone just leave?"
"Yeah. We had an interview today," Abby answers.

"Oh." He looks annoyed, mostly at missing it, not at her. "Why didn't you wake me up?"

Abby kisses his forehead. "Because when I finished Kelly's one AM feed, you still weren't home." Yeah, it wasn't too long after two that he finished his second report and headed home. He hadn't even told them about the team having the week off, yet.

"How'd it go?" Gibbs asks.

Tim nods. "Let me get some food, and I'll tell you all about it."

He's in the kitchen, located some chicken lettuce wraps ("Thank you, Abby!"), stuck half of them on his plate (it's after four, so he's hungry, but dinner's less than two hours away, so he doesn't want anything too big) when he notices a package on the kitchen table.

"What's this?" Tim asks, carrying it into the living room (food forgotten for the moment) and putting it on the coffee table.

Abby shrugs at him. "No idea. Has Thom Gemcity on the address, so I didn't open it. UPS guy asked about that though, and I let him know that it's your penname and that stuff with that name can be sent here."

Tim feels a shiver of fear go up his spine. Things with Thom Gemcity on them should go to his publisher or agent. Not to his home. Never to his home. He checks more carefully and sees that Thom Gemcity is a redirect, it had gone to his agent first.

He sighs with relief. Gibbs is watching him carefully.

"Tim?"

"Fan stuff shouldn't come here."

Gibbs nods; he remembers why fan stuff isn't supposed to come to Tim's house.

Tim smiles at him while heading back into the kitchen for his food and a knife. Yes, fans are great, but no, he does not want them knowing where he lives, that one time was more than enough.

A minute later he's back and opens it up and finds a very cute little basket of baby goodies, along with a few onesies, and some stuffed animals. Okay, good, it's all pink and covered in little flowers. Standard cute baby goodies.

Tim's checking a card, thinking it might have actually been from his agent, when he realized he had no idea who it was from. Which meant this was from a fan.

Which meant somehow one… shit there's a bunch of packages in this box… several of his fans knew he had a child.

He was getting into freak out, hunt down the stalker, make sure his family is safe mode, when Abby says (pulling him out of it) (for a second, at least), "You've got a publicist, right?"

"Yeah."

"And she posts things online about your life?"

"Sometimes." Oh shit! He's trying to remember if he ever specifically said he didn't want anything
"When was the last time you checked your Twitter or Facebook page?"

Tim winces. That's a really good point. "Damn it." He gets up, goes upstairs, grabs his phone and begins to go through "his" tweets and almost drops the phone when he sees that there's a shot of Abby and Kelly, still in the hospital, along with the announcement that mom and baby were doing fine. Thom's Facebook page had the same thing.

And yes, the fact that he had close to twenty thousand congratulatory tweets/likes whatnot is nice, but in that he's in a frothing rage that his publicist posted that pic… and that he's seriously contemplating getting his gun and scaring the shit out of her…

Then he realizes he didn't send that picture to her. He sent it to his agent, who must have given it to her. Unlike his publicist, who works for his publisher and answer to them, not him, his agent actually is his employee, and he's a valuable property she wants to keep happy. After all, she's getting ten percent of each of his contracts, and at this point his contracts take her, on average, twenty minutes every three years.

His hand is shaking while he dials the numbers. She picks up on the third ring and before she could say anything he yells, "Doreen! What the fuck?" (He half notices that Gibbs appears to approve of this, and if his knee was working, would be volunteering for the scare-the-shit-out-of-whoever-did-this plan. Meanwhile, Abby is looking really irked at him, and signs Kelly's napping!)

"Tim?" she's sounding really startled by that. She's never heard him raise his voice, let alone yell or curse.

"I just got baby presents from a fan," he says, still angry, much more quiet.

"Yeah." To her this is really obvious. Of course fans will send baby presents. That's part of what fans do. "We decided to send them on immediately. If we waited until we do your usual quarterly fan mail drop they'd be too small for Kelly. Four more packages showed up today. How's she doing?"

"You posted pictures of my child online!" His voice is rising again, and she's still clueless.

Obviously he's pissed, but this is just weird… So she patiently explains, "Well, yeah. Fans love stuff like that. They love little peeks into your life behind the writing. It makes them feel like you're a real person and keeps them happy and eagerly anticipating your next book. Any ETA on that, by the way?"

He's staring at the ceiling, vibrating with the desire to reach through the phone and pull her lungs out. He finally pulls it together enough to head into the basement (which should minimize the risk of waking up Kelly), shut the door behind him and say, "Do you remember about ten years ago, when that…" he can't even start to think of a word for that, so he goes with, "fan started killing the people I was basing my characters on? You remember how he hunted down Abby and tried to kill her? And, remembering that, WHY THE FUCK WOULD YOU POST A PICTURE OF MY CHILD ONLINE!?"

Silence meets his ears.

And Doreen suddenly gets it, really gets it, and realizes that she's got no idea how to fix this. "Would you like me to take them down?" she asks meekly.

"Them?" Tim's heart is beating so hard he can actually see the pulse in his eyes when he shuts them.
"It's just the one pic. Only one I had."

He inhales deeply and lets it out long and slow. "How many places did you post it?"

"Fifteen," she says, very quietly, suddenly very aware of the fact that Tim's only got two books left on his contract, and that it's suddenly extremely likely he's not resigning with her when it comes time to negotiate the contract for the next three books. "You've got some fan sites in addition to the Facebook and Twitter and tumblr, and there are the bio pages on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Goodreads so…"

"Fuck!" He scans through the Twitter feed. That shot had been retweeted and reposted hundreds of times. "It doesn't matter if you delete it or not. Do not ever, EVER post any pictures of Kelly or Abby. If I want pics of them up, I'll post them myself, and you'll note, I haven't posted any pictures of Kelly at all and the only ones of Abby are our engagement and wedding shot. That's it. I don't want anything beyond that out there."

"Okay. What do you want us to do with the baby presents?"

"Oh, God." He thinks about that for a moment. He's too damn nervous to use them, even though the rational part of his mind is sure they're just nice little presents. "Donate them. There has to be a shelter or something that works with pregnant women who need baby gear. Write up thank you notes for me. I'll copy and send them out."

"Okay, I'll get on that."

"Good."

Pulse still racing, he fired off a quick thank you for all the well wishes, and another one saying that Kelly had everything a baby could possibly need, and that while he was touched by all the presents, if fans felt moved to send presents that donations to Wounded Warrior Program or whatever local services were available to low-income mothers would be a very fitting present.

Tim spent about five minutes just pacing around his basement. Not really looking at anything, just trying to make himself calm down.

He knows that immediately moving and changing their names is not only not rational, it's also not warranted. Almost everyone on earth who's even a little famous has their private life splashed all over, and all that happens is that they get people looking at them. But he can't help but feel the fear that there are all these people out there who not only know he has a wife and child, but knows what they look like.

One of those maniacs found him before.

They can do it again.

And the vulnerability of it makes him want to be sick.

Eventually, he called his sister. "Hey, when you told me about starting your own imprint, were you serious?"

She sounds surprised that he's calling her in the middle of the day to talk publishing, but says, "Yes."
"You want a bestselling mystery writer? I move about fifty-thousand copies in hardback per book. More in trade."

"Tim?" She can't believe this. They've talked about him going indie, and about what she's hoping to do with her own start-up. But he's always been so set on staying with his own machine that he mostly just listened and smiled.

"My agent just screwed us big time."

"Doreen? Really? I've always heard good things about her. What, she skimming or something?"

"No, nothing like that. She posted pictures of Kelly online."

"Oh." Sarah knows that that's not a traditional definition of my-agent-screwed me. She also knows that's a hot button issue for Tim. "We're starting up a YA Urban Fantasy imprint. Not that I wouldn't love someone who's got a name that actually sells books, but…"

He nods on the other side of the phone, understanding that he's not part of their brand. "Okay. I've been with Doreen since '03. Never shopped around, and I don't want to query again. You know anyone who's any good at this stuff?"

"Yes. I can shoot you a few names. Trust me, Thom Gemcity isn't going to have to submit queries. Tell me more about it?"

"She published the baby shot I sent all of you to let you know Kelly was on the outside online without telling me."

"Oh! Ouch."

"On all my fan sites, twitter, Facebook, tumblr. It's everywhere. They're sending me baby presents."

"That's cute."

"Yeah. Until I find they've got razor blades or trackers or some other shit in them."

"Tim." Her voice is making it very clear that he's being, not silly, not with his history, but overreacting is likely.

"I know. I really do. Doesn't mean I wasn't about to shit myself when I saw it."

"Okay. Just calm down. Talk books more?"

"Yes." He nods. Books are easy. Books are calm.

"You know, you've got the name recognition, you could go it on your own. Skip the publishers all together and put it out yourself."

"More work than I want to do."

"Maybe not. We get our imprint going, you can contract with us on flat fee basis. At least until we've got some real sellers, that's part of our business model. We'll get you set up with typesetting, cover art, editing, what not. You just write the book and do whatever publicity you normally do."

"Normally my publisher does that."

"Oh."
"Yeah. I have no idea how they get the damn things in book stores, and I don't have the time to find out."

"It's not too hard. Not for someone who's already selling as well as you are. Besides, how many bookstores do you think will still be around by the time your contract is up?"

"That's a point. It'll be 2018 by the time I'm out, and…"

"And almost the entire market will be digital by then. And trust me, if I can get a book on Amazon, you can, too. It's not rocket science."

"By 2018, how set will your brand need to be? I mean…"

"Set. Blog placement, reviews, ad networks, I know that for my market. I don't for yours."

"Okay."

He sits there quietly, neither of them talking for a minute, then, "Tim, I'm about to be late for dinner. Talk to me about this tomorrow? We'll get a plan set up, and I'll give you some names for possible new agents if you want to try that."

"Sure."

"Things like this happen a lot?" Gibbs asks when Tim heads back out of the basement.

"First time that's happened." Tim paces around their living room, staring at the presents. Yeah, he got lots of congrats tweets and whatnot when they got married. No one sent presents. "My core demographic is twenty-five to fifty year old males, they usually don't get too weird about fan stuff, but sometimes they do, and my weird fans are really weird."

Abby's unpacked all the baby gear from the box, but hasn't taken anything out of its packaging. "You don't want to keep this, do you?"

"It's cute." The set closest to him appears to be a stuffed Bunny from the Pat the Bunny books, the Pat the Bunny books, and a little white hat with white and a blue bow and pink bunny ears. It's adorable. He's terrified it's got a tracker in it or slow acting poison, or just something. "I can see it's cute. But, no, I don't want it in the house. I know it's fine. I'm sure there's nothing bad in there, but…"

"It's okay, Tim," Abby says. If there's anyone who is going to sympathize with him on his fear of what might happen if his fans figure out where he lives, it's Abby.

He puts everything back into the box. "You guys mind if I go take this to Goodwill?"

Abby hugs him and shakes her head. "Not at all. Bring some dinner home?"

"Sure. What do you want?"

Before Gibbs got a chance to say something she says, "I think Gibbs is in junk food withdraw."

"Okay. How about I hit the diner and tell Elaine you've been stranded at my place and Abby keeps force feeding you vegetables?"
Gibbs smiles at that. "Good. Food. Tell us about the case. Snuggle your girls."

Tim kisses Abby, and then pats Gibbs' shoulder, and heads up to find a shirt.
“Did I lose a day, Honey? It’s Saturday, right?” Elaine asks as Tim heads into the diner. She’s not facing him, so he thinks she identified him by his car coming in, as opposed to watching him walk in. She turns to him, and as she does, she sees he’s very much not in his Special Agent garb. “Oh, it’s Saturday all right. You’ve got a whole other side to you, don’t you?”

He’s got a ratty MIT t-shirt, sneakers, and his flannel jammy pants on. Wrist cuff and the bottom of the bicep cuff tattoo are visible. It’s occurring to him that he didn’t brush his hair before leaving the house.

“Doesn’t everyone?”

Elaine smiles at him and says, “Amen to that. So what brings you out here in your pjs?”

“Wasn’t planning on heading out. But I’ve got Gibbs trapped at my place, and Abby keeps feeding him vegetables. He tells me he’s starving, and he needs you to save him.”

Elaine chuckles at that. “And am I just rescuing him from healthy food, or am I rescuing all three of you?”

“All three of us. Please?”

“Not a problem, Hun,” she says, placing a coffee cup (of course it’s decaf) in front of him. “For the wait.”

“Thanks, Elaine.”

She handles their orders and the other customers, but after a few minutes she drifts back. “So, when do I get to see that baby girl of yours?”

“Tomorrow or next Sunday, I promise. We’ll come in for breakfast before church.”

“You better. He’s been showing me pictures since the sonogram, time for me to see his little princess in the flesh.”

Tim smiles at that. “You will.”

“So, why’s he trapped at your place?”

He told her about Gibbs’ knee, and staying with them. She nodded and made appropriate sounds as he worked his way through the story.

“Good that he’s got someone looking after him. That man’s been alone for too long.”

Tim grins and sips his coffee, feeling the stress of the presents finally really fade away. “He’s been holding out, just waiting for you to make an honest man of him.”

She laughs at that, waves at him (brushing his comment off), smiling, and shakes her head. “My husband might have something to say about that.”

“All the good ones are married.”

She laughs again. Her husband, the man who actually makes all the food they adore, whacked the
bell, and Tim knew those to-go boxes meant their order was up.

“Thanks, Elaine,” he said, paying and heading out.

Summertime dinner on the porch. Nothing better than that. Gibbs is on the chaise. (Which Tim usually shares with Abby, but he’s not resenting not having a place on the prime lounging real estate.) He and Abby both have chairs at the table. Kelly’s in her bouncy seat, kicking her feet a little, making the chair bounce.

The sun’s low enough everything is pleasantly orangy-pink, the air is hot and humid, but not oppressively so. A tall pitcher of ice cold mint-lime-soda (Abby calls it non-alcoholic mojitos) is sitting on the table, drops of water meandering down it.

Cicadas are chirping away. Lightning bugs aren’t out yet, but as the shadows get deeper, they will be.

While they eat, Tim tells them about the last day of the case, starting with the info dump, and ending with telling Kort to fuck off. (Gibbs laughed out loud at that, very pleased by the idea.)

As he’s wrapping up the story (by then the lightning bugs were out, and Kelly had headed up for yet another nap) Tim says, “I just can’t shake the feeling that there’s a big piece of it missing. I mean, I know we don’t usually get everything tied up into a tidy bow. I know there’s usually something missing…”

“Tim, when it’s over, walk away.” Gibbs’ voice is serious about this, because he doesn’t want Tim gnawing on this one for years. But he has to admit, there’s that little niggle in the back of his head, too. The gut does not like this case, at all. But right now, everyone they were hunting is dead, (They pulled the plug on Blake at 3:30 in the morning, after the second doc declared him brain dead.) so it’s not like that niggle can lead to anything good. “We never get all the pieces.”

“I know, Jethro, but something just feels off about this.”

“Off like there’s another part ready to jump out and attack…”

Tim raises an eyebrow when Jethro says that. Sounds like he’s also feeling that sense of not done. “Yeah, but I don’t know how there could be. I got them. I got their communications system, that was all of them, but, it just feels… wrong.”

“What’s sticking out?” Abby asks.

“The dead battery. It’s such a dumb mistake. Come on, I carry back up batteries for everything we use. Draga has back-ups. Ender’s trained by the best, he runs a plan where he’s putting guys in place four years in advance, he’s gotten his hands on super-duper high-level secrets--We weren’t even supposed to know where those subs were. The Israelis weren’t sharing on that; we stole it--so how did he find out? Which is another thing that stuck out…” Tim waves that off, he had a point and he’s getting lost in the details, so he swings back to the original point. “He rigs the detonator with a dead battery? It’s just… wrong.”

“We don’t know he rigged it,” Gibbs adds.

“True. Blake probably did. That was his thing, but… He’s successfully blown up things on at least three continents, and he uses a dead battery?”
Abby thinks about that for a moment. “Why don’t you know who set the detonator?”

“What?” Tim asks. That hadn’t occurred to him.

“Is my team completely asleep at the switch? Why didn’t they tell you who put the battery in? Should have prints on it. After all, who wipes down a bomb detonator?”

Tim looks at Gibbs, who’s looking back at him. They did get prints. There were prints all over everything down in that storage area, but…

“Give me a second…” Tim gets up and goes to his computer. A few minutes later, he’s logged into his account at work, and checking the print reports. He’s scanning through it, and finally gets to the detonator. No prints.

Who wipes down a bomb detonator? The man who’s exceedingly cautious. But the man who’s exceedingly cautious also double checks the damn battery to make sure it works.

The man who wipes down the detonator is the man who knows the detonator is going to be found.

Shit.

He just about ran out to the back porch. “I’ve got to go see Leon.”

“What?” Abby asks, and Gibbs is looking pretty concerned.

“Your team wasn’t asleep. Well, sort of, they didn’t highlight it. The reason we didn’t know who set the detonator is because there were no prints on it. It had been wiped clean. This isn’t done, yet.”

“You want me to come?” Gibbs had successfully hobbled, by himself (and his crutches) the length of the living room and kitchen for dinner, and his knee didn’t feel like it had slipped the whole time.

Tim shakes his head. “No. But get on my computer and look around for evidence we don’t have but should. Something’s really wrong here.”

He wants to try and calm down, but it’s not working. He’s driving fast, that special, hyper-alert zone that he sometimes hits when his brain’s on overload so it focuses down on one thing and gets ultra-aware. Usually for him that’s a coding thing, but right now it’s a driving thing, too.

Right now he could tell you, from memory, the license plate of every car around him.

And it’s a driving thing because he won’t let his brain flail about on the case. Not enough intel. But something about this is really, really wrong.

“McGee?” Kayla Vance is very surprised to see him on their doorstep. He’s never been here when she was here. Last time he was here… No don’t think about that.

“Is your dad home?”

“Yeah. Come on in.” She turns and points toward the living room, calling out “DAAAAADDDD!”
Vance heads out of the dining room saying, “Kayla, what have I said about y…” Tim sees Vance’s face get tight and the tension in his posture shoot through the roof as he recognizes Tim standing there. By the posture he knows that Vance has a piece of the puzzle he doesn’t.

“Tim?”

_Shit, how bad is this? He’s calling me, Tim._

“Can we talk in private?”

“Yes, I think we should.” Vance leads him into his office. It’s a tidy room, lots of books, lots of boxing posters, a few trophies, some bronzed gloves, lots of pictures of the kids, a few pictures of the four of them from before Jackie died. Some pictures of the kids with Lara, and, stereotypes about dating the nanny aside (apparently it was working for Vance) there’s a new one on his desk of him, the kids, and Lara. It’s very much a shrine to the things that make Vance, Vance. Once he closed the door, he says, “What’s on your mind, McGee?”

Tim doesn’t sit down, and Vance doesn’t either. He leans against the edge of his desk, and Tim paces.

“The dead battery’s been bugging me since we found it. I was telling Gibbs and Abby about it, and I mentioned that we didn’t know who installed it.”

“Blake?”

“Probably. He’s the guy who does that. But we didn’t know. Abby asked us why didn’t we know that, because that’s like the number two piece of evidence she’d send up. Which is when I checked, because we should know that. Of everything we should know, that’s the top of the list.

“The detonator was wiped clean. The only guy who does that is the guy who knows the detonator is going to be found. Something’s really wrong on this one.”

Vance nods toward the sofa on the far wall of his office. “What do you drink, Tim?”

Tim feels his stomach knot up and his knees get that loose, wobbly sensation that means his body is sure something very bad is about to happen. He sits down, quickly, and licks his lips, his whole mouth suddenly very dry.

“I’m good, Sir.”

“We’re in my home. Here, I’m Leon.”

“Okay, Leon, I’m fine and right now; I don’t need a drink, but you offering me one and calling me by my first name is making me really nervous, so how about we just get to why you think I’m going to want a drink?”

Leon pours himself one, grabs the chair from behind his desk and drags it over so he can sit in front of Tim. “Bit after two-thirty this morning Clayt,” it takes Tim a second but he realizes Clayt is Jarvis, “came in to see me. Carl Hanson,” Vance pauses to see if Tim knows who that is, and he does recognize the name of the Director of the CIA. “had just gotten word that Ender was killed and that we were the ones who did it. Ender was on a deep cover, report directly to Hanson, long-term mission…”

Vance keeps talking, but Tim doesn’t hear it, all he could hear, feel is the voice in his head screaming NOT AGAIN.
He can see Benedict crumple a few million-year-long seconds after the bullet hit him. That was the shock of the first time he’d shot someone, the first time he ended a life. And it was bad. But since he got the news of who Benedict was, there’s been the feeling of getting kicked in the gut to go with that image, the screaming desire to take it back, make time slow, to do, anything, anything to have not made that decision.

He can see it, replaying in his mind, Ziva hooked up the canister, and for about three minutes while the DEA vans made a huge noise and spectacularly broke into the across-the-street neighbor’s house, he and Draga waited, not really breathing, hoping she could do it and not get caught. They watched all three men on the heat monitor, watched them watch the DEA raid, and apparently they decided it wasn’t their problem, so they went back to their computers.

And then she was back in their van, and they waited, watching the three as they moved slower and slower, and one slumped onto the ground, and another’s head fell to his chest, and the third… he was already pretty slouched, but eventually they saw his hand slip off the mouse.

And it wasn’t until they were all presumed out of it that Tim gave the go for the evacuation of the neighborhood. He didn’t want to start the evac until he was sure none of them could see it and hit a kill switch.

That took two hours, but they weren’t going in until everyone was out of the blast range.

And yeah, he knew the longer a person was exposed to the gas, the lower the survival chances were. He knew it, and he watched the figures on the heat feed slowly get cooler and cooler as their bodies shut down.

They didn’t let the Coroner or EMTs into the Ender’s safehouse, couldn’t get it safe enough. Two of the bomb squad techs carried him out, body limp, one arm trailing on the ground.

And last night he went to sleep with a clean conscience because there were more than forty kids in the blast range, and every single one of them made it out alive. Last night, that image… It’s not that it didn’t bother him, but it was firmly filed in the greater good pile.

And now it’s not. Now it’s tied to a ragged mental voice screaming NOT AGAIN.

Part of him is sitting apart from the screaming. Part of him is amazed at how much this feels like the first time, it’s that same breath stolen, want to pass out and puke sensation.

“How clean can it be? He was one of ours, and I killed him.” Tim hears his voice crack on that.

“Clean, Tim. CIA wanted to fuss. Clayt went over our notes. Hanson went over our notes. Given what we knew, no one could give us a way to get Ender out of there without that whole neighborhood blowing up. CIA wanted to. They wanted to yell about it, but Clay sat down with their higher ups, at three in the morning, and told them, ‘Have at it! You’re all so smart and good at this. Get Ender out without killing the whole neighborhood.’ No one had a better answer than you did.”

It helps, a little. Not enough. But it’s better than nothing, helps anchor him to the idea that this time everyone isn’t staring at him like he’s the enemy.

“What do you mean, ‘given what we knew?’”

Vance wishes he hadn’t said that. It’s easy to forget that Tim’s not just computer smart. “Kort had
orders to break Ender’s cover if he needed to. He decided he didn’t need to. CIA did have an exit plan in place for Ender. But, because Kort didn’t see any need to tell us about Ender’s real alliances, they didn’t get to put that plan into place.”

“What was it?”

“Kort was going to have the FBI fake an arrest of the ‘terrorists’ who tried to blow up the Reagan. He’d also supplied all three of them with high quality, fake, US Army IDs. He even had ‘fake orders’ for them. The plan was they’d hop a transport for South Korea, and then cross the border for their next job. Only thing was, that transport flight wasn’t going to work the way they were hoping.”

“Kort didn’t tell because he didn’t think I could catch Ender.”

“Kort didn’t think we could catch Ender. He was there before you took over, and he didn’t tell DiNozzo or Gibbs. According to him, this was an operation that required brains and finesse, not just… ‘bull doggish tenacity and an intimidating stare.’”

Actually, Kort had said nothing of the sort. But it sounded like him, and if you’re going to lie, you need to be specific, and Vance is a good liar. Which is also why Vance changed one other key detail in his story, those IDs were supposed to be Marine IDs.

Tim had called that one correctly. It wasn’t NCIS in general that Kort doubted, (When they were planning what the target should be, and who would eventually take Ender in, Kort had recommended a Navy or Marine target so NCIS would catch it because he knew Gibbs could handle it. He knew Gibbs would be ready and able to make sure that transport plane was the end of the trip for Ender, Simmers, and Blake.) it was Tim in specific. Once Kort knew he wasn’t getting out of this, he owned up to the whole thing and his report made very clear that he figured there was no shot at all of Tim taking Ender down, so there was no reason to compromise his cover, and once DiNozzo or Gibbs was up and about again, he’d read them in. But… And because of but, Ender was dead.

But none of that is anything Vance thinks Tim needs to know. This’ll be enough of a hit to McGee’s confidence, and from what he’s been seeing these last few years, McGee confident is capable of great things, and he wants that man working for him, running his Cybercrime department. He’s not about to do anything to hurt that. He does not want him second guessing himself any more than he already will be, and honestly, right now, he was wishing Tim was a little less sharp, so this whole thing could have just died.

Tim sat there for a long minute, staring at his hands, seeing the bodies on his screen slowly fade as the heat leached out of them.

“Scotch.”

“Tim?”

“I like scotch.”

Vance nods, gets up, and gets him one.

Tim holds it, looking at brown liquid and clear glass. Then he takes a good swallow. He’s not really looking to get drunk (he still has to get home, and he’s still aware of that) but he hopes the burn will help pull him out of this numb space.

At least the screaming is over. That’s kind of nice.
“So, what happens now?”

“Nothing. Like I said, CIA wanted to yell. I told Jarvis we go to the wall on this one, because we are not sacrificing anyone just to keep CIA happy, especially not when they don’t play fair with us. He went in full bore, and by this morning it was done. Not sure what’s going to happen to Kort. If he wasn’t so damn dangerous, they’d cut him loose, but he knows too much to ever really retire.”

“That’s why they call them spooks right? They live forever?”

“Something like that. My guess is that Kort might be spending the next year or two brushing up on his Farsi, and find himself doing some deep cover field-work.”

“Great.”

He sits quietly next to Leon for another moment.

“You going to be okay?”

Tim shrugs.

“It was a clean kill.”

Tim sighs. “No such thing, Leon. He’s still dead, and I gave the order that did it. That’s on me, and it always will be.” He takes another sip of his drink.

“That’s on Kort.”

“Kort might have put me there, but I still made the decision.”

“It was the right one.”

“I’m not saying it wasn’t.” Tim thinks about it. That’s a difference. Probie McGee couldn’t have said that. Soon-To-Be-Head-of-Cybercrime McGee can. Given what he knew, it was the right decision. He does feel sure about that. It still hurts, but... he’s not doubting himself. He follows that thought a bit further, what if he had known...

Even if he had known Ender was one of the ‘good guys’ he’d... still do it. Sometimes you can’t get everyone out. ‘I’d make it again. You don’t leave two guys with dead man switches sitting on tons of explosives in a neighborhood. They had mercury switches on the windows. Some kid misses the ball playing catch, and it hit one of those windows, that whole neighborhood would have gone up. You can’t leave that in place and hope the angels are on your side while you wait for the seventeen part trap you’ve got to play out. When we handed it over to the FBI, their techs were saying they’d basically have to dismantle the house to declare it safe, and they were planning on searching for landmines, too, given how much crap was in that place.” He takes another sip of his drink. “But he’s still dead, and I made the call, and in the end, there are no clean kills, not for something like this.”

“I know.”

“Was there anything in the reports about James or Lisbeth Ender?”

“Not much. No one knows who killed James. Thomas was going to take James’ place, that was part of the plan, but what was supposed to happen to James isn’t in any of the reports. Thomas did recruit Lisbeth for what he was doing. The CIA made sure she was reimbursed for the phones she was buying.”
“How’d we miss that?”

“You didn’t. They had an off-shore account for her, under a fake ID. We know who she became when she vanished, and they’re getting her back.”

“Great.” He hands Vance his still mostly full glass. “I should get home. Abby and Gibbs are both waiting to see what’s going on.”

“Okay. I meant it about you guys taking the week off.”

He nods. Not sure if he’s going in on Monday just to have something to do, or curling around Abby and clinging to her and Kelly for a week.

It’s after ten when he got back in the car. Abby should be nursing again. And hopefully sleeping soon after that. He’s been using up her sleep time, and that’s not fair, not with her getting up every three hours to feed Kelly.

He texts Gibbs. Everyone up?

Right now.

Case is over.

???

Long damn story. It's done.

That doesn’t sound good.

Is it ever? He pauses for a second. Is Abby reading these, too?

No.

Tell her I'm on my way. Will be home soon. Head to sleep, I'll be there for snuggling soon.

Are you? He wonders about that briefly, and then gets the idea that Gibbs is asking if he’s telling her to head to sleep, so she doesn’t notice him just driving around on his own, or whatever, for a while.

Yeah. I'm coming home and going to bed. Not sure about sleep, but…

I'll still be up when you want to talk about it.

Thanks.

Gibbs was on the sofa, reading, waiting up.

It occurs to Tim that this is the first time he’s ever come home and had a Dad waiting up for him. That gets a sigh.

“Tim?”

He shakes his head.
“I’ll be here.”

Tim nods and heads up. His eyes take a second to adjust to the dark of their bedroom, but once they do, he sees she’s on her side, her usual sleeping position, but he’s usually behind her, holding her.

Long exhale. *Keep your routine. Routine helps.* So he did. He stripped off and brushed his teeth, peed, and headed for bed, just like any other late night. It’s just not like any other late night. He wishes it was.

He snuggles up against her, between soft, nubby sheets and a light summer blanket. Warm, soft body, easy breathing, vague scent of her perfume and shampoo, deeper, stronger scent of her skin, little whiff of baby spit up. *Home.*

She scoots a bit closer, her neck resting on his arm. Automatically, his other arm curls around her, hand coming to rest under her breast. He kisses the back of her neck, and she sighs in her sleep.

*Clean kill.*

*If that means anything.*

*I am a gun in the service of life, and if I have to end a life to protect others, I do it.*

*That’s why I’ve got the badge.*

*That’s the purpose of the gun.*

*That’s the job.*

*More.*

*It’s not just a job. That’s the life. The life you chose, because it matters, because it’s the man you need to be.*

*You do what you need to to save lives, and if some goddamn son of a bitch sticks himself in the middle of a fucking bomb, he’s gonna die because I’m not letting the fucker blow. Not me. Not on my watch. Not in a neighborhood filled with families just like mine.*

He feels pure white anger surge as he gets to that last bit of his mental monologue. It’s his job to protect people. That’s the long and the short of it, and when it all comes down and works out, that’s who he is. The rest is just window dressing. And that son of a bitch built a cage so dangerous no man in his right mind could let it stand, walked into it, locked the fucking door behind him, and then expected to be saved.

*You wanna live, asshole? Don’t sit in the middle of a goddamned bomb, and don’t ask me to get you out. Don’t stay with maniacs who are walking death.*

But Ender is still dead, and the screaming from before isn’t guilt, and it isn’t fear. (Or maybe it was, but it’s not now.) It’s rage.

*God damn that motherfucking cunt for putting me here. GOD FUCKING DAMN HIM!*

Tim rubs his face and can feel he’s shaking, so he gets up and tosses on some pants. He’ll wake Abby if he keeps holding onto her this angry, and she needs her sleep.
“So?” Gibbs asks as Tim walks down less than fifteen minutes after he went up.

Tim shakes his head, pulls on sneakers, and points to the door.

Gibbs nods. He gets it. Sometimes you can’t talk. Sometimes you’ve got to work it off, and it’s got to be physical. If he could run, or fight, he’d go along, but he can’t. So he nods again, and once again says, “I’ll be here.”

Tim closes the door quietly, and Gibbs snags his phone. He flips through his numbers and calls Leon. “He’s not talking about it, yet. What happened?”

And Vance told him.

With Benedict there was sorrow, and grief (which, until that point, he thought was a synonym for sorrow, but after Benedict he knew it wasn’t, not really) there was guilt, mountains of stomach emptying guilt, and fear (which took care of everything in his intestinal tract that he didn’t puke up).

This time, running, hard, though his quarter-moon, ghost-silver neighborhood, there’s just rage.

He wants to scream it to the heavens, but he’ll settle for running. Too late, too public for screaming.

But that little voice is in the back of his head, screaming in rage.

*TWICE.*

*Fucking twice.*

His feet pound pavement, his body races through humid dark, heart pumping, sweat dripping, endorphins fighting so far outside of their weight class it’s not funny.

Once was bad enough. Everyone’s got that one case where you fucked up and the end was bad. Everyone.

But twice. When you did everything right?

This isn’t even failure.

This is what, a pyrrhic victory? This is every move done right. Meeting and exceeding everyone’s expectations, being three steps cleverer than the people who doubted him, and the wrong guy still died.

*Not died. The wrong guy was killed. Passive voice. Avoidance technique. It’s yours. Own it.*

*You did everything right, and you still killed the wrong guy.*

Tim stops running, staring at the stars, listening to the cicadas and the frogs, and then walks home.

He slumps onto the love seat. “Would it help if I shot Kort?”

Gibbs doesn’t know if Tim knows him so well he just knows he’d have gotten the story from Leon by now, or if he just doesn’t care if he knows the story.
“Can you look at yourself in the mirror without wincing?”

“Probably.” He left the light off while he brushed his teeth, and didn’t spend any time looking at himself.

“Good enough. Unless you’re between eating your gun or feeding it to him, you don’t shoot a man for this.”

“What’s this?” Tim sighs, feels like he’s been doing that a lot, staring at the ceiling.

“Hell, if I know the word. Fucked to hell and gone? Nothing else you could have done, nothing else you can change, you did the best you possibly could and it’s still wrong.”

Tim nods.

“And for that, you only shoot him if it’s you or him, and you’re not there.”

“No. Not even close.” Tim shrugs. “Never been close.”

“Good.”

“Not close isn’t the same thing as spiffy.”

“Nope. It was the right decision.”

“I know.” And this time, Gibbs sees that Tim does. He really does. That’s not the problem not today. “I am so fucking pissed at that asshole for making me do it. This must be what suicide by cop feels like, if you’re the cop.”

“Which asshole?”

“I was thinking Ender, but Kort’s got a mountain of shit I want to drop on him, too.”

“Why Ender?” This is when Tim realizes that he never did get deep into the details of the safe house.

“Front door had a bomb under the welcome mat. All of the first floor windows had mercury triggers on them, any vibration stronger than a lawnmower would have set them off. Bomb squad said they were set so that if, somehow, the cops missed the welcome mat, breaking through the door would set them to blow. Pressure plate on the door they used to get in and out, step over it, fine, but most people would have landed right on it. Pressure plates on the back porch. More mercury switches on the sliding glass doors on the back. Garage doors were wired with magnets. Every entrance of that house on the first floor was wired to blow. And a fucking softball tossed the wrong direction could have taken that whole neighborhood out. And Ender let Blake set it up, walked his ass into it, and somehow trusted us to get him back out again.

“And I didn’t do it. I wouldn’t do it. Stick me in that van, tell me Ender works for the CIA, and I’d still make the call. I’m not going to dance around and wait for the CIA to come up with some rescue plan that gets him out three weeks later, leaving this huge bomb in the middle of a fucking neighborhood waiting to go off. Hell, a delivery guy at the wrong address, neighbor knocks on the back door… No. I’m not doing it.

“That son of a bitch made me kill him. Because I’m not the guy who can just sort of hope it’ll go okay and wait it out.

“He was good at what he did, and he wrapped up a cell with more than fifty guys in it, and if I could...
have gotten him out alive, he would have gone right back to it, pulling in more guys, dangerous
guys, evil guys, but he’s not doing it anymore because he let one of the assholes build the trap that I
couldn’t let stand, and it didn’t matter if he was still in it or not.

“And all the right decisions in the world doesn’t help with the fact that I want to get his corpse up
and smack the shit out of it because I’m the one who had to pull the fucking trigger on him.”

Gibbs starts to get up, and Tim glares at him, then moves, sits on the floor so he’s next to Gibbs.
(Gibbs is across the sofa with his foot up.) “This what you were aiming for?”

“Close enough.” He squeezes Tim’s shoulder, and leaves his hand there. “I know it doesn’t help, but
I’ve been there, too. Half of sniper training is guns and math, feeling the wind, understanding
distance, knowing where something is going to be instead of where it is, trajectories, air currents,
calibers, vantage points, and cover. Half of it is pulling the damn trigger. Snipers take out other
snipers. We take out machine gunners. We take out high power targets like the other side’s officers.
Big enough gun and we take out engine blocks, that’ll force a column off the street and into the
mines.

“And when you’re doing that, you’re taking out enemy targets, and that’s just how it is.

“And I was good at it.” Gibbs smiles a little, but it’s not happy, just acknowledging the bittersweet
flavor to being exceptionally good at killing people.

“Really good. And in Colombia I ended up… Another son of a bitch with a bomb, and the idiot
Lieutenant wants to parley, hoping we can get our guys and some villagers back by talking. He
knows where I am, and the idiot keeps walking around, and the son of a bitch is getting more and
more aggravated, and I know where this is going, but I don’t have a clean shot because that idiot
keep walking back and forth…” Gibbs goes quiet, seeing that moment through his scope again. Wet
behind the ears, twenty-one-year-old moron fresh out of Annapolis, who’d been told not to do this,
walking back and forth, and Gibbs can see Delando Cortenz smirking, hand on the trigger that’ll
blow his hostages, and he knew where it was going to go, knew that smirk wasn’t going to lead to
anything good. “So, I swapped up, bullet big as your thumb, damn thing would have practically
gone through an elephant, and it did go through the Lieutenant. He didn’t even slow it down, and it
went through the son of a bitch, and we got our guys out, and a dozen villagers. And no one ever
said anything about it… but, yeah, I wanted to hit him. If he had stayed the fuck out of it, I would
have had a clean shot and gotten our guys out with no problems. If he had stayed to the side, just
picked a place and stayed in it, I could have gotten a clean shot. But no, the little asshole had to keep
moving around.”

Tim squeezes Gibbs hand back.

“How old was he?”

Gibbs shakes his head, looking frustrated. “Twelve? Something like that. Too damn green, too damn
stupid. So full of himself, thought he was God’s gift to all things military. The next incarnation of
Chesty Puller.”

Tim doesn’t say anything, he just sits there, and Gibbs lets him. There’s nothing else to say.
Eventually, he hears Kelly crying, asking for yet another meal, so he stands up, kisses Gibbs on the
forehead, and heads up to bring Kelly to Abby, save her from having to get up yet again.

“Tim?” Abby sounds sleepy as he lays Kelly in front of her. “You get any sleep at all?” she asks as
she gets Kelly settled on her breast.

“Not yet.” He pulls off the pants, and curls into bed behind her.

Between no sleep, and the fact that she has to be able to smell the sweat on him, there’s fear in her voice as she asks, “How bad is it?”

His lips on her shoulder, his arm over her side, his hand on Kelly’s back, he says, “I’ve had better days. But nothing that won’t hold until tomorrow if you’d rather doze while she eats.”

“You think I’m going to nap after that?”

“I can hope?”

“Uh uh.” She lifts his hand to her lips, kissing his palm, his wedding ring, and the tattoo of her lips. “Let me help you carry this.”

So he told her, and held onto her and Kelly, and tried to let anger go, and maybe it didn’t entirely, but being home helped, running helped, talking to Gibbs helped, wrapped in his home and people who love him, helps, and eventually, when Abby flips over, Kelly now between them, so she could nurse on the other side, Tim falls asleep to soft, little sucking sounds, and the feel of his hand on Abby’s hip, his forehead pressed to hers.
He woke up with a jerk, heart pounding, bedroom dim with almost dawn sunlight.

It was his night, and he missed it. His job to get Kelly fed and he slept through it.

_FUCK!_ Yes, Abby will forgive him, but still, _FUCK!_

Apparently he wasn’t exactly thinking that, and may have, just possibly, said it out loud, because Abby moved when he did it. (He’s really sleepy and jittery with adrenaline and all in all, pretty out of it.)

"Tim?"

"I'm so sorry."

She's looking barely conscious. "Huh?"

"You got Kelly, didn't you?"

She shook her head. "No. I've been sleeping."

His eyes went wide, and the first thing he did was more or less leap out of bed to check on her, but she was still in her crib, still breathing, still sleeping. He very, very quietly crept out of Kelly's room, and crashed back into his own bed, suddenly feeling completely exhausted as last night hit and the adrenaline crash faded.

"She slept through?" Abby asks.

"She slept through."

"Yay!" Abby said, tiredly, and then snuggled into him, and they both caught more blessed sleep.

Round ten he got out of bed feeling… He doesn't really know. Not good. Not sick, that haunted, all-over-ill sort of feeling that went with Benedict isn't there. Just, kind of on edge, like he knows something's going to break if he pokes it, but right now it's in one piece.

He decides not to poke it.

Like most Sundays he checks his phone first, and today there's a text from Jimmy.

_Molly's got a cold, and Breena didn't sleep well. Skipping church._

"Thank you," he says quietly under his breath, and quickly sends back _Good, couldn't feel less like it if I tried. Bootcamp?_

By the time he finished with brushing his teeth and putting on some clothing, (More pjs. He's home, he's tired, and he's not planning on going anywhere soon, so jammies work just fine.) he had one back. _Hope so. See how Breena's feeling when she wakes up._
What's up?

More of the same, tired, nauseous, pregnancy dreams. Touch of Molly's cold.

When she wakes up give her a hug from Abby and I.

Will do.

I'm going to hit the gym no matter what. Come if you can. I'll understand if you can't.

No problem.

He fired one off to Ziva: Bootcamp?

YES!

Sounds like you're in a good mood.

And he realizes he's got two other people who need to-

Or maybe not... Vance wasn't going to tell him. He didn't even get to figuring that out last night, and now it's sitting there in front of him, and maybe if it had hit him earlier, he might resent it, but thinking about Ziva and Draga...

They don't need to know.

They just don't.

But you don't lie to your team, not about stuff like this. Draga's idea. Ziva installed the canister. He made the call, but they're part of it. And they deserve to know...

Maybe...

Part of him really doesn't want to say. Just let it go. Bury it.

Would it stay buried? If it's going to come out, he wants them to hear it from him. If it can stay a secret...

He heads downstairs, finds Jethro on the sofa (where else was he going to be...) "You want a hand getting to the porch? Suck up some sunshine?"

Gibbs looks up from his phone. (Probably reading on his kindle ap.) "Yeah, that sounds good." He lets Tim give him a hand getting off the sofa, but not in getting to the porch, (beyond opening the door for him) and he accepts help in getting down onto the chaise.

"One more day."

"Jethro?"

"On my butt for a week. Tomorrow is the last day."

"You've got an appointment for a checkup on Tuesday, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'll take you. Or Abby will, if she wants to get out of the house some." Tim smiles and heads inside, foraging for breakfast, and then heads out again, a few cold turkey sausages on a plate next to a
"Where's Abby and Kelly?"

"Abby said Kelly slept through the four AM feed, so to celebrate they went out to do some shopping."

Tim thinks about that for a moment, about what sort of celebration Abby may have in mind for baby sleeping through the night (ish) let alone what sort of shopping it may involve. He's very pleasantly intrigued by that idea.

"Cool." He ate a few bites, enjoying the fact that it wasn't oppressively hot, yet, and then got back on track when he remembered why he was down here chatting with Gibbs. "I've got a question for you."

"Fire away."

"Do I tell Ziva and Draga? Would you have told us?"

Gibbs thinks about it then counters with his own question: "What are you thinking?"

Tim makes a dismissive sound, indicating that if he had confidence in what he was thinking he wouldn't be asking Gibbs about it.

"Gonna run your own team soon enough, tell me what you're thinking."

"If they find out, I want it to be from me. But they don't need to know, not really. But if it gets out, and I don't tell them, Ziva'll rip my head off, and she's smart enough the dead battery is bugging her, too. Bugs Draga, but I don't think he's got enough experience to put it together. The gas was Draga's idea. Ziva installed the canister.

"He'll take it bad. He already feels like he's screwed this one because of the first bomb, add this on top of it, and that might be the end of him as a cop.

"Ziva… I don't know. I'm not the one she talks to about this sort of stuff. She might just take it in stride, hazards of the job. It might really hit her, she was a handler who's asset went off the rails. She was an asset out there, spent months, probably, hoping her back up would get her, and then realized they weren't coming." Tim shakes his head. "She was an asset left to die. Getting her out was too expensive, so Eli didn't even try. And if I had known Ender was an agent, that's the same calculation I would have made for him. Too many people would have died if that house had gone up.

"So, I don't know. I know she'll be really pissed if I don't tell her and she finds out anyway. And I know that she doesn't need to know. She probably wants to. She'd probably, I hope, be okay with it… Well, as okay as I am."

"Are you?"

Tim exhales long and slow and eats a few more bites of his peach. "I don't know. It's not hitting me right this second, but I feel like it's still there, waiting to hop out. Bootcamp is going to be interesting.

"Which gets us to the next point, can I not tell her? Say she doesn't want to know. Say it won't help anything. She's always been able to tell when I'm lying and has never had any problem getting me to talk."

Gibbs tilts his head in agreement, that's been an issue, too. "I always thought that was because you
wanted to tell her. You never seemed to have any problems not telling her about stuff you really didn't want her to know."

"And yet it always came out anyway." Tim half-smiles. "But it's entirely possible that's true. And I haven't tried to keep anything from her, besides taking her home for Tony to propose, in years. I might be better at it now."

"Not craving approval so much now. You'd probably hold out better."

"Great. So…"

Gibbs doesn't say anything.

"You ever not tell us what was going on?"

"Yes."

Tim's expression is saying, go on tell me.

Gibbs shakes his head. "If I didn't say then, I'm not now."

Tim stands up and tosses the peach pit into the far back of their yard. He eyeballs the grass. Gotta mow tomorrow. Without turning around he retries the question. "Then how about this, she talks to you about this stuff, should I tell her?"

"As her friend, you should tell her. As a leader trying to keep his team working as well as he can... You've got the next week off, that's time for you and her to get your heads on right. And that week'll be shorter than the fall out that might happen if she finds out another way."

Good, that makes sense. He turns away from the grass to face Gibbs. "Draga?"

"Draga doesn't need to know. Draga especially doesn't need to know if Tony's going to can him or get him transferred. And that's the last part of this, Tony needs to know. When we go back to work, it'll be his team again, so he has to know."

Tim nods at that. He'd… forgotten isn't exactly right, but stopped thinking about Tony as Team Leader. Not once during that week did he call to check in, (About the case. About Tony as an injured friend, yes, he checked in) or try to get any advice, or… anything. Once he took over and benched Tony, that was it. From Wednesday to Saturday it was his team, so that's how he ran it. (He also made a quick mental note to give Fornell the heads up on that, too. He's fairly sure CIA wants Ender's cover in place but he's also sure that whoever's in charge of the FBI clean-up of this should know what's going on.)

"I should probably go see Tony."

Gibbs nods at that, too.

"You talk to him?"

"Commiserate about how much being on the shelf sucks?"

"Something like that?"

"Yeah. Talked with him a few times."

"He okay?"
Gibbs doesn't answer. And it was in the silence of not answering that Tim notices something, Ziva never responded to his comment about being in a good mood.

He snags his phone out of his pocket and sends her. *Are you in a good mood?*

A minute later he gets back. *Bootcamp 4PM.*

So he texts: *See you then.*

"Jethro, she told me they were fighting, are they okay?"

"Unlike Ender, that really is something you don't need to know unless they want to tell you."

Originally, six (Really, six months? Only six months? It feels a whole lot longer.) months ago, when Bootcamp started, it was mostly about making sure Jimmy had a place to really work out his feelings.

Because fighting is good for that. You have to focus on what your body is doing, so you can't be focused on the wider world. Stress makes your body produce chemicals that trigger a desire to run or fight, and if you don't run or fight, those chemicals just hang around, linger, making you less and less happy, more and more tense, and often cause chronic-pain conditions. When you fight, your body floods with endorphins, which not only make you feel better, but they also help to shut down sad, afraid, depressed, and the like.

And when you fight, those walls you build to keep the crap away, to hold it in a safe place where it doesn't touch you, they crumble, and you let your body do the physical work it needs to do to grieve and move on.

And so, when they began, it was about that. About letting his body do what it needed to do to get through the loss of Jon.

But they kept at it.

Because it's good exercise. Because it feels good. Because time went by and there were Sundays where he didn't need it so much, but Tim did. And every Sunday, Gibb is there, because… (Feels a little odd to say this, even in his own mind, but it's true, so he might as well say it, even if it is only in his mind.) because they're his boys and this is the kind of stuff you do for your boys. (The kind of thing Jimmy is desperately hoping he'll have the chance to do for his own boy one day.)

And Ziva started showing up every week, and so far she's been here because… Jimmy thinks it's mostly because she likes it, and because she needs to practice. And maybe she's here because Ziva misses having brothers, misses dad time, too, and this space here, where they beat on each other fills that need. (He thinks that's probably kind of weird that his family's deepest communication form is combat, but… it works, so it doesn't matter if it's weird.)

So far, though, they've never had a Sunday where they were there to let her fight off rage or fear or unhappy or whatever.

But in that she's killing him, absolutely killing him, and not in a let's-kick-this-up-a-bit-and-get-your-heart-pumping sort of way, but in a holy-shit-I-need-pads-or-I'm-going-to-die sort of way, Jimmy’s realizing that Ziva is not in a happy place.

Jimmy calls time before he hit the mat, holding up his hands in a 'stop' gesture. Any of them can stop any fight at any time for any reason.
He looks over at Tim, who's just… brutalizing… the punching bag, and realizes that Tim's got something going on, too.

For a second, he feels a surge of thankfulness at working in Autopsy, he knows this last case was an absolute bastard, but not for more than a second, because Ziva's glaring at him for stopping things. She wants to fight, but he's so far outclassed by pissed off Ziva, he knows he can't give her what she needs.

"Tim!" He has to yell; Tim's got earbuds in.

Tim stops, looks over at him, expression curious, as he takes out his earbuds.

"Get over here."

Tim's still in the dark, though he's heading over. Ziva's not looking nearly as annoyed. Two on one should be just what the doctor (literally) ordered.

"Have you ever done this before?" Ziva asks Jimmy as Tim slips between the ropes.

Jimmy shakes his head, hoping he hasn't just signed his own death warrant. "But, we've danced together—"

"When the hell have I ever danced with you?" Tim asks as he catches that bit.

"You and me and the girls. Ziva's killing me one on one. She's going to kill you one on one. Both of us against her should let her get enough of a fight in to calm her back down, and not get either of us killed."

Tim nods, smiles, and Jimmy's seen that smile before, that's the dark, predatory thing that hides in Tim and doesn't come out a whole lot, but when it does...

Jimmy sees that smile and sighs, silently wishing Gibbs wasn't flat on his back, an extra set of hands would be really useful today. "Okay, looks like both of you need this today. But when we're done, we're getting drinks and talking, too."

Ziva shrugs, and Jimmy knows they aren't the guys she usually talks to, but, you put your literal skin on the line to help your friend, you get to find out what the problem is. Tim nods, because for him, Jimmy is one of the guys he talks to. (And he was planning on telling Jimmy about it no matter what.)

Tim's thinking this isn't dancing. It's really not. He and Jimmy would be a hell of a lot better at this if it was dancing. But the skills aren't completely dissimilar. And when it is the four of them dancing, he does have to keep track of three other people, one of whom is Jimmy, and Jimmy's doing the same thing, and they do have some level of skill at doing that. (Okay, they're not going to be winning any dance competitions anytime soon, but everyone has a good time and no one gets their toes stepped on, and that's more than good enough.)

See when you're dancing either one on one, or one on one on one on one, two things are true, first off, there's music, which helps you keep an idea of time and beat, and you're moving slowly enough you can actually see what the other people are doing.

And he and Jimmy can sort of, kind of, okay, not really, but it's better than nothing, communicate what they're going to do by look, and kind of coordinate. If Ziva wasn't so fast, they'd be better at it.
(If they'd danced as a foursome sometime between Ziva's wedding and now, they'd be better at it, too, but for some reason there just hasn't been any clubbing dates lately…)

But, as of this point, (round two) he's only accidentally hit Jimmy twice and gotten in his way four times. Jimmy's doing about the same with him.

And Ziva's winning.

End of round two, another thought has hit Tim, he's got unlimited music on his phone and two floors up and a few hundred feet over, he's got speakers. Good speakers. LOUD speakers.

And, it still won't be dancing with Abby and Breena, but he and Jimmy are both going to do better if there is music for this.

So he calls stop, tells Jimmy and Ziva what he wants to do, and goes to do it.

Nine Inch Nails. Full volume. Unless Abby's playing it, he hasn't listed to them since college. But he knows it well enough to know what's going to happen when. And he knows Jimmy does, too. No one their age who grew up in the States and went to college in the late '90s doesn't know this music.

But Ziva's five years younger and didn't grow up in the States.

That smile pops up again. The first few beats of Mr. Self Destruct come up. Jimmy's head jerks up when he hears it, and he shakes it softly, grinning, and mouths, you bastard at Tim. Yeah, he knows this.

This is going to be fun.

This is going to be the kind of fun that he really needs right now.

Better. This is a whole lot better. Set beats both of them know, means he hasn't gotten in Jimmy's way and Jimmy hasn't gotten in his since the music began.

Music, loud, thumping, vibrates through your bones, inflicting minor hearing damage music means that even Ziva's moving with the beat, so they're having an easier time anticipating where she's going to be.

Music they know means that if he takes one melody (if NIN can be said to have melody) and Jimmy takes another, (Usually Jimmy takes the main lyrical line, and he takes the beat. He thinks that's because Jimmy's the singer.) they have a much easier time anticipating each other's moves. Likewise, they're doing much better at coordinating attacking and defending because there's a steady beat holding the whole thing together. (Or as much as NIN can be said to have a steady beat.)

The fact that this music is as much rage and pain screaming at the sky as anything else, doesn't hurt either. This music was designed to be yelled, designed to celebrate pain, channel it, force it into something tangible and real.

It's a very good way to blow off even more of what's bugging him. (It's possible he may be singing along at some points, at least mentally, because he needs his breath to fight.)
Round six (Get Down Make Love) begins with the electronic beat, spoken voice, and moaning, and Ziva's staring at Tim, "You listen to this McGee?"

"I did in college."

She shakes her head, listening trying to map out the music, knowing that Tim and Jimmy will corner the music, use it as their guide.

"You, too, Jimmy?"

"Trent Reznor dropped out of my college about five years before I went there. We fighting or resting?"

Ziva pivoted on her back leg, looking like she was aiming to kick Tim, but her right hand flashed out and would have caught Jimmy's cheek but he got his forearm up in time to defend while Tim spun into an elbow strike that Ziva deflected with the kick she started the move with.

"We fight!"

By the second verse he and Jimmy are working together well enough for one to constantly be defending and the other to constantly be attacking and to swap back and forth between them well enough to keep Ziva off balance.

Round nine, Head Like A Hole, began. Two main musical lines: 'Head like a hole, black as your soul', has one sound. 'Bow down before the one you serve' has another. They blend and support each other. Like the way Tim and Jimmy are fighting. Jimmy takes the bow down refrain, Tim's got head like a hole. Tim's moving faster, more attacking. Jimmy's slower, distracting, on defense.

*Head like a hole, black as your soul, I'd rather die, than give you control.* And sure it's not real, not him, but he can feel it, hook into it, channel all the pissed-of-just-want-to-beat-the-hell-out-of-Ender into this, and he's making Ziva sweat, literally and metaphorically.

And on what Tim considered a very well-coordinated move, in on the last run of 'bow down' Jimmy caught his eye a second before the line hit, and Tim knew, because he knew the music, what was going to happen. He slid slightly behind Jimmy, while Jimmy was engaging Ziva, but when the word bow hit, Jimmy dropped to the floor, and Tim kicked through where he had been, forcing Ziva's balance back as she leaned back to dodge the kick. Jimmy, on the mat, grabbed both of her feet and yanked them out from under her.

Round nine, for the first time ever, Ziva hit the mat.

Round ten, Ziva asked if they could sub in some of her music.

They took a ten minute breather, each adding three of their own songs.

He stayed with NIN. Jimmy tossed in the Mortal Kombat soundtrack, which Tim recognized. Hell, he even watched the movie back in the day. Perfect music. He's got no idea what Ziva's added. It's not in English and he's never seen it before, and steels himself to getting killed when her music comes on.

He flicked the play to random, music he didn't know, had to be Ziva's, began to shake the gym, and they got ready to go.

By the end of the playlist he knows he was feeling better, and he hopes Ziva is.
Next up, talking.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And on the blog today, links to each of the songs mentioned.

“So, what are we walking into?” Jimmy asks Tim as he gets out of the shower.

Tim’s already sitting on the bench in front of the lockers, putting his socks on.

“Not certain. She and Tony are fighting.”

“What?” Jimmy wasn’t expecting that, case crap troubling both of them, sure. But that? Nope. Of course, he’s also been out of the loop this last week.

Hard case and Team Leader means Tim hasn’t actually talked to Jimmy about, much of anything, really, since, God, Monday probably. Hard case means no getting together for lunch and gossip. Or lunch and real conversation, or, hell, a lot of the time, hard case means just no lunch.

“You know what happened at the warehouse?” Tim asks. They hadn’t talked about it yet, and since they all survived, Ducky and Jimmy didn’t get called in, but he’s not sure what the scuttlebutt on it is.

“You all almost got blown up?”

“Yeah, that’s the gist of it. Draga trips the bomb. Gibbs yells at Ziva and I to run. We’re at the doorway, almost outside the building. I book off, find the biggest, most solid building and get my ass behind it. Ziva runs into the building, toward the bomb, to Tony.”

“Ohhh…” Jimmy’s wincing. Tim can see that’s the fear of the person you love most in danger. That’s his husband sense kicking in, and he’s getting pissed at Ziva on Tony’s behalf.

Tim nods, he felt it, too. But, that’s not the whole story.

“It gets better. According to her, he handled it in a mature and rational way by screaming at her and telling her that if she ever disobeyed a direct order from him or Gibbs again, he’d fire her.”

Jimmy winces again, and Tim nods at that, too. Because while they are both sympathetic to not wanting your love in danger, they’re also both aware that while there may be women who appreciate caveman-style marital dictates, none of them married one. “He’s so fucked.”

“Yes,” Tim says, still nodding.

“He told Ziva he’d fire her? What the hell was he thinking?”

“Well, he was home with a concussion, so maybe he wasn’t?”

“Youch. Wait, if you know this, when was that?”

“Thursday/Friday sometime. She was just steaming at her desk, so we broke off to talk, make sure she could work.”

“If she’s still that pissed, he probably made it worse.”

“Yeah.”

Jimmy stares at Tim for another second. He’s got an idea that if Ziva is still pissed about this, and if Tony did make it worse, it’s extremely unlikely they’re just chatting with Ziva today. “We’re not going to get to both of you, are we?”
Tim shakes his head. And really, right now, he’s not feeling too much need to get to him today. The desire to beat the living shit out of something been well-sated at this point. He’s not okay, but he’s not walking wounded, either, and that’ll all he needs for today. “Not today. Mine’ll hold.”

“Really?” Jimmy looks concerned for Tim, too. Yeah, he’s seeming better since they got done, but, he can feel there’s still some edge there.

“Really. Nothing that needs to be dealt with right now.”

“Your parents?”

Tim shakes his head. “Nah. It’s the job and this case. Got the last piece of the puzzle and it’s complete shit.”

“Tell me?”

“Yeah, but I need to be the one who tells Tony and Ziva, and Draga may not ever get this.”

“Okay.” Jimmy gets that’s Tim trusting him to keep his mouth shut.

“Ender was still an active CIA Agent.”

Jimmy looks like he got punched in the stomach, hard. “Oh, God, Tim.”

“Yeah.” He stops for a second, but knows part of owning it is saying it. “I’ve killed two undercover cops.”

“You… okay? God that sounds dumb. You’re not; I can see that. You…” Jimmy’s not even sure what question he’s trying to ask.

“I’ll be okay. I know it was the right decision this time. I do. But, yeah, I’ve had better days. Getting out of my head was good. It was really good. Probably gonna write when I get home.”

Jimmy nods. He knows that’s how Tim gets back into his head, but in a safe way. Sounds like a very good plan to him. “Don’t think we’re getting home anytime soon.”

“Not given how pissed she was. I mean, she was pissed on Friday, but was doing better when we closed the case, and now… Gibbs tells me he’s been talking to Tony, and that ‘I don’t need to know unless they tell me’ what about.”

“Ohhh…” Jimmy comes up short. “Ummm… Was Gibbs giving him marriage advice?”

“Uh. I hope not. When we got home from the bomb, he didn’t want me to tell Abby what happened.”

Jimmy shaking his head slowly. “That’s not good at all.”

“He didn’t want her to worry.” Tim’s voice makes it clear how intensely ridiculous he thought that was.

Jimmy just shakes his head slowly. Sometimes it isn’t a huge mystery as to why Gibbs has been divorced three times. Jimmy doesn’t know any woman who has ever appreciated, ‘I lied because I didn’t want you to worry.’

“We will talk about that, too. I’ll come in for lunch tomorrow, we’ll catch up, but she’s waiting for us, and this is like twice as long as it takes us to change.”
“Good point.” Jimmy stood up, dropping his towel, and opened his locker. He started to put on his briefs and caught sight of his thigh and hip, already dark red verging toward purple. “That’s not gonna be pretty.”

“We’ll make sure to get you some ice packs.” Tim held up his right arm, his entire forearm was mottled yellow purple from deflecting Ziva’s hits, and his legs aren’t in much better shape. “Me too. She’s gonna need them, too.”

“Gibbs keeps his door open, right?”

“Yeah. I locked up when I got his stuff, but I’ve also still got his key.”

“We’re getting the drinks to go and heading to his place. We’ll be able to talk, no little people begging for attention, and lay around and ice down everything.”

“That sounds really good.”

He got to Gibbs’s first. Not too much of a shock. Jimmy’s the one getting the drinks, and there’s no reason to race because Ziva can’t get in until he’s there.

But he’s not there for long when Ziva heads in.

While it’s true that Gibbs doesn’t have a well-stocked kitchen (Tim makes a note to do a grocery run for Gibbs before he heads home to his own place.) he does have ice, and ice packs, and some frozen vegetables that’ll do for ice-pack duty, too.

So Tim’s laying out the frozen goodies, finding dishtowels to wrap them in, (Cause Jimmy will scold him about possible ice burn if he just puts them on bare skin.) and then heads to the basement for the alcohol. Ziva prefers Tequila, and Gibbs doesn’t seem to have any of it, but if they have to get her drunk to start talking, and then drive her home, he’s ready for it.

Ziva’s sitting on the sofa, ice on her right calf, right arm, left shoulder, and back. “Scotch and Gin?”

Tim shrugs. “I know you don’t like bourbon, so I didn’t bring it up.”

“I thought Jimmy was bringing the drinks.”

“He’s bringing some of them. This is here if it makes it easier.”

“I do not need to be drunk to talk, McGee.”

“Good. Once he gets here, you want to tell us what’s up?”

Once again Ziva shrugs at that question.

“What?”

She shrugs again. There’s a reason she doesn’t talk about stuff like this with Tim or Jimmy, well, several reasons, but the one that’s coming up right now is the fact that, no matter how pissed she is at Tony (and the answer is god awful fucking pissed) she’s also still aware of the fact that the three of them have a sort of competition as to who’s better at the husband thing, and that Tony, at least, according to Tony, feels like he’s been coming in third for, well, since Jimmy got married and Tim started dating Abby.
And she doesn’t feel like this is a problem that will necessarily get better if Tony’s got his buddies ragging on him about it, too. (Let alone being smug about him being a twit.)

But she’s not sure if it’ll get better on its own either.

And there’s no way to keep this a secret.

And it will directly effect Tim.

Jimmy came in and handed out the drinks. Mango smoothie for her, iced-latte for Tim, and a diet vanilla-mint soda for him. He sees the booze on the table and looks from Ziva to Tim, eyebrow high.

“Thought it might help,” Tim says with a shrug while trading a few ice packs for his drink.

Jimmy sits on the sofa, next to Ziva, across from Tim on the easy chair, and sighs as he gets the ice settled on his hip.

“Come on, Ziva, you’ve beaten it out, now get talking.”

“Tim can go first.”

Tim shakes his head. “Nope. Mine isn’t going to get worse if it stews for a day or two. Yours might. Spill.”

Ziva took a few minute to tell her version of the explosion, getting yelled at, ultimatum fight, then segued into getting home early Saturday. “By then I was thinking it would be better. We’d had time apart to cool down. He’d realize he’d been stupid. I’d apologize for scaring him so bad. We’d talk. It would be better.

“But I get home, and he’s not in bed, or on the sofa watching a movie. He’s at the dining room table, working on his computer, and doesn’t hear me come in. He sees my reflection in the screen and slams it down shut, turns around looking panicked and guilty.”

“What was he doing?” Jimmy asks.

“Porn?” Tim asks. Panicked, guilty, furious wife, not impossible, but he didn’t think Ziva was touchy about stuff like that.

“Nothing like that. But I didn’t know that then. At least, I didn’t see any pictures, and he was typing, but…”

Both of them know sitting in front of a computer, typing away, late at night, and slamming the screen shut means lots of possibilities. And of course, Ziva knows that, so she’s going to get suspicious as soon as she sees that.

“I ask what he’s doing, and he says getting everything in order. And we had a serious conversation, about serious things, which makes sense, we both almost died, but the whole time I had the sense that was not quite what he was doing. Why slam the screen shut if he was writing a living will? I should be able to see his will, right?”

“I’d think so. Breena and I wrote ours together.”

Tim nods along with that. Sure he got his stuff in order first, then told Abby about it, but he showed her everything and told her any changes she wanted made, he’d make. “We’ve got to re-do ours since Kelly’s been born, but I’d assume we’d do that together.”
Ziva nods at them and sips her smoothie. “That is the way you do that. Together. But we had our conversation, and I told him I was sorry, and how I understood how scared he was, and how scared I was for him, and… And it was a good conversation.”

“One sided?” Jimmy asks.

“No, he was talking, too. His mother died, and Wendy left, and Kate died, and if anyone gets that, it is me. I understand what having everyone who ever really mattered ripped away feels like. I understand. We talked about how to deal with it better. Talked about how… how some of our coping mechanisms weren’t healthy, and how to do better.

“I thought we were in a good place when we went to be bed that morning. We’d deal with it, together, get better at it, together.”

Tim and Jimmy are listening, this sounds good. This sounds healthy. The fact that they know Ziva’s so pissed she was beating both of them to pulp means that everything in this story is about to go drastically wrong. “We went to bed, slept in late. Saturday was a good day. We had fun. He seemed lighter, happier. I was feeling better, case was closed, we got them, all wrapped up and ready to go, and we’ve got a week off. It was good. This morning, when I woke up, he had left a note on the mirror saying he’d gone out for food. His computer was still on the table, screen up. I was curious. So I peeked.”

Tim sees her hands ball into fists and her jaw clench, and then she forces her muscles to relax and begins talking again, “He was writing the request for me to be transferred to my own team. I’d take Draga, start my own. He’d take you and Gibbs and build his own, new team from the ground up as you left.”

Tim and Jimmy both wince, and Jimmy makes a very pained sound.

“Does that sound like working on it together? Does that sound like healthier coping mechanisms? No, that is him pushing me away.” And Ziva is spitting mad.

“Maybe it was just a draft. What he was thinking before you talked?” Tim asks her.

She shakes her head. “I thought that for a moment, chided myself for jumping to conclusions, and… I was going to wait, going to talk to him, but…” Tim and Jimmy don’t need too much input on but. Ziva’s home, alone, this bomb dropped into her lap. Tony’s computer is right there, and if she checks his email and he never sent it, she can just let it go and pretend she didn’t snoop. “So I checked. He sent the request to Vance last night while I was sleeping. He lied to about what he was doing. This wasn’t getting his affairs in order, not the way he let me believe. He did not even suggest that was what he was thinking. He didn’t talk to me about it at all. He just did it.”

“What did you do?” Jimmy asks, suddenly very worried for Tony.

“I stabbed the knife he made me through his computer and left. I have not been able to even think about being in the same room without really hitting him, so I figure we are better off not in the same room.”

Tim’s nodding. Jimmy is, too. They look at each other, neither really sure where to go from here.

“You want us to talk to him?” Jimmy asks.

Ziva tilts her head a little, looking curious. “What could you possibly have to say to him?”

“We could slap him upside the back of the head without killing him,” Tim answers.
“How does he even start to fix this?” Tim asks Jimmy as he pushes the button on the elevator at Tony’s place.

“Abject groveling and making it very clear that he knows he went insane? Hell, I don’t know. I’m trying to imagine what Breena would do to me if I did something like that and lied about it.”

“Abby’d kill me, and I’d hand her the fucking knife, because that’s just… You just don’t do that.”

“Yeah. Look, I don’t hold him not wanting to work with her against him. I don’t think I could stand seeing Breena in danger every single day. Especially after Jon.” And Tim knows that Jimmy’s really not kidding about that. “So, I get that part of it.” Tim’s nodding along as he says that. He gets it, feels it, too. And he doesn’t know if he could handle Abby in the field now. Once or twice, yeah, he’d make it through, but every day. No. “But you sit down and you say, I can’t do this anymore. I can’t take the fear. You don’t go over her head and get rid of her, just… No!”

They stand quietly as the elevator eases its way up the levels.

“So, shock and awe? Use that to at least handle the work part of it.” Tim asks.

“Go in pissed and then give him an out by saying the concussion was acting up?” Jimmy replies.

“Works for me. You check him out, and while you’re doing it I’ll call Vance and countermand his email.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Granted it’s true that beyond the rules, no one in their family has any sort of guy code or guy playbook, but that doesn’t mean they don’t watch out for each other, and that doesn’t mean that all four of them aren’t invested in slapping (literally or metaphorically) the others upside the head if they’re being stupid.

That’s the point of having each other’s backs.

That’s the safety net. You don’t always have to make the right decision. You don’t always have to be strong. There will be men who will hold you up if you fall down, save your ass if it needs saving, and they’ll do it in a way that’ll hurt your pride as little as possible.

And for Tony, it’s a lot easier to be stupid than it is to be scared. So they’ll work the stupid angle, lay down cover for him, let him save as much face as he can, and help him fix this mess as best as they can.

“On a scale of one to toothpaste, how much trouble am I in?” Tony asks as he opens the door.

“Between invade Russia in November and reject Hitler’s application to art school.” Jimmy answers, herding Tony to the sofa, getting him sitting down and starting to check him out.

Tim adds, “Marginally closer to invade Russia, though. Trust me, Abby was significantly less horrified by the toothpaste thing than Jimmy was.” (At least, he’s assuming that’s why Tony knows about the toothpaste thing, and that’s going on the list of things he and Jimmy are talking about tomorrow, because he’s got no idea how bad the version Jimmy told Tony was, especially compared to real life.)
“Where is she?”

“My house,” Jimmy replies, holding his finger in front of Tony’s eyes. “Follow my finger.” Tony does, looking exasperated. “She hasn’t gone looking for a divorce lawyer, yet. How’s your head feeling?”

Tim’s staring at the remains of Tony’s computer, still on the dining room table, Ziva’s knife still sticking out of the keyboard. Time for the awe part of shock and awe. He gets his phone and dials up Vance.

It rings a few times and Vance sounds a little wary as he says, “McGee?”

“It’s just come to my attention, that due to severe head trauma, Tony somehow got the idea that this was still his team, and that he was allowed to request a change to the roster. It’s my team, and will continue to be my team until at least 8:00 AM August 3rd, when it may, if he’s all healed up, revert back to being his team. Any communications you get from anyone other than me until then, just toss right into the trash. Don’t even open them. I’m the only one you’re talking to right now.” Tony is staring absolute daggers at him, and might have been on the verge of getting up and doing something about what Tim’s saying, but Jimmy’s keeping him in check.

“Good.” Leon sounds relieved. And Tim’s certain he doesn’t want to get in the middle of a DiNozzo work/marriage fight. “And is DiNozzo receiving appropriate medical care?”

“Yes, I’m getting him checked out right now.” Now the daggers are aimed at Jimmy. “Preliminary reports indicate some level of temporary insanity due to…” he’s looking at Jimmy, give me a reason on his face.

“Inter-cranial pressure.” Jimmy adds, making it up on the fly.

“Inter-cranial pressure,” Tim says to Vance.

“And will this issue with inter-cranial pressure…” Leon’s voice makes it clear that this is bullshit, and he knows it’s bullshit, because among other things, the man’s a boxer, so he know everyone has inter-cranial pressure. It’s like blood pressure, as long as you’re still alive, there will be some level of pressure. Too much is a bad thing, too little is a bad thing. But his voice also makes it clear that he’d much rather have Tim fix this mess than deal with it himself, so any lie Tim wants to tell him right now, including that Tony is currently a pod person and he and Jimmy are trying to get him back with the help of Mulder and Scully, he’ll happily accept. “…be resolved by next Monday?”

“I certainly hope so, but if not, I’ll let you know. I’ll handle this until it doesn’t need to be handled anymore.”

“Good. Keep me updated as necessary.”

“I will, sir.” And Tim hung up.

“You’re pulling rank on me?” Tony asks him sounding… a lot less angry than he should. Tim’s looking at Jimmy wondering if maybe something really is wrong, but Jimmy shakes his head slightly, Tony’s checking out okay.

So Tim stays with the angry play, because that’s the plan. “I don’t have a rank on you to pull. This is a flat out mutiny. Second-in-command and the Doctor can take out the Captain if he’s being insane. And, my God, Tony, you are being insane. What the hell could you have possibly been thinking where fire Ziva, lie to her about it, pretend you didn’t do it, and then what, hope she doesn’t notice, made any sort of sense?”
There’s a fast flare of anger from Tony, and his words are hot, and… God… just so, so sad, and defeated. “You wanna know what I was thinking? I was watching Kate’s head explode right in front of me and feeling her blood spatter my face wet, not even sticky yet, just wet, like drops of water, warm, salty, water. I tasted her blood, Tim. It was on my lips and face and… And the sharp sting of the little shards of her skull against my cheeks,” he gestures to his face where the bits of skull tore across his skin, “and superimposed on that was the fire of the explosion rushing over us and holding Ziva down, my body, Gibbs body on top of her, and begging God to please, please, please no matter what please let her get through this because if I lose another one I will eat my gun.

“I was thinking about how I don’t know what to do if she’s not here.

“And how I don’t care if she hates me as long as she’s alive.” He takes a deep shuddering breath.

“I was thinking that as long as we are on the same team that no matter what, she will come to me. She won’t let me go. She won’t not jump to put her body between mine and the bullet heading toward me. ‘You go. I go’ that’s what she said to me when she ran toward me. Not, ‘I’m better with explosives, get out of the way and let me do it,’ but, ‘You go. I go.’

“She says she’ll work on that. And I’ll say I’ll work on it, but in the end we’ve both lost too damn many people, and if she’s there when push comes to shove, she’ll run to me to shove right back. And this is the line in the sand, the one I can’t let her cross. She’s not dying for me.”

Tim remembers Gibbs saying, ‘Scared guys do stupid stuff.’ And he’s staring at a terrified guy who just did something remarkably stupid.

He looks at Jimmy, and Jimmy looks back at him, and there’s giving your buddy a smack and some cover to get him moving in the right direction, and there’s so far out of you depth you don’t know what the fuck to do.

And this is way beyond what he and Jimmy can handle.

Tony’s just staring at his hands, probably still seeing his own, personal, mental horror show.

Then Jimmy says, and Tim thought this was very wise, “When was the last time you talked to Dr. Cranston?”

Tony shrugs.

“Would you talk to her? Because, there’s smacking you upside the back of the head for being stupid, which is something both Tim and I are willing and able to do at the drop of a hat whenever you need it, and there’s this, and this isn’t going to get better with a smack and some booze.” Jimmy takes Tony’s hands and gets him looking at him. “We love Gibbs, but we don’t want you to be him. You don’t need to continue his pattern of sabotaging the things you want best because it’s easier to screw them up on your own terms than it is to live with the fear of losing them.”

Tony doesn’t respond. He’s looking pretty listless right now. Tim’s texting Gibbs, asking what Cranston’s phone number is.

“Look, if you need help to do this, I will take you myself.” Jimmy’s voice is gentle, soothing as he says this. “I’ll go with you if you need it. And if you want to come to Bootcamp and fight it out, too, we’re here for that. It helps, it really does. But you need to talk to someone who knows how to deal with this, and that’s not me and it’s not Tim, and it’s really not Gibbs, not on this one.”

Ten digits flash up on Tim’s screen, and he punches them in. While it’s ringing he can hear the phone letting him know he’s got another text, but he wants to move on this before he talks more to
Gibbs about it.

“Hello.” Her voice sounds warm and open. He has the sense this isn’t her professional number.

“Dr. Cranston?”

“Yes.”

“Hi. It’s Tim McGee, do you…”

“I remember you, Tim McGee, what’s up?”

“I need to ask a massive favor of you. Tony’s having a really, horribly bad week, and he really needs to talk to someone.”

“And you think that someone should be me?”

“I know that someone isn’t me, and it’s not Jimmy, or Gibbs, and if it’s not you, you’ll have a much better idea of who to point him to than any of us will. Anywhere, anytime, just, soon, please?”

He has the sense of her nodding, that gentle, concerned, curious look on her face. “And you’re with him?”

“Jimmy and I both are.”

“Text me his address. I’ll be there as soon as I can be.”

“Thank you.”

Turns out as soon as she could was seventeen minutes. During all of that, Tony didn’t say much. He made a half-hearted joke about Dr. Kate’s Sister coming to visit, straitjackets, and how maybe he needed to hide the computer.

Jimmy smiled a little and asked if he wanted him to stay, and Tony shook his head.

Rachel knocked, and Tim let her in, giving her a very cut and dried version of the last week, but she stopped paying attention to it about four sentences in when she saw that computer with the knife through the keyboard and Tony sitting on the sofa, Jimmy next to him, hand on his shoulder.

“Did he do that?” She pointed at the computer.

“That’s how Ziva let him know she was pissed. He had the knife made for her as a Valentine’s present last year.”

Cranston nods, then notices that both Jimmy and Tim are sporting bruises. “Did he do those?”

“Nope. We… Long story. Not from him.”

“Ziva?”

“Some of them. But probably not the way you’re thinking. We train with her.”

“And trained extra hard with her today?”

“Yes, as I said, it was a really long, really bad week, Tony got it double barreled.”
Her head tilts slightly, that’s got her attention. “Interesting choice of words. That sort of bad?”

Tim shakes his head a little. “Among other things. Really bad week.”

Cranston heads over, and once again Jimmy asks if Tony wants him there, but he shakes his head, so they leave them to talk.

“God, I hope that was the right thing,” Jimmy says.

“I can’t imagine it’ll make things worse.”

“That’s not a high bar to jump.”

“I know.”

“I’ll head home, let Ziva know what’s up.”

Tim holds up his phone, Why do you need it? from Gibbs on his screen. “Gonna go find out what Gibbs has been telling Tony, if I can. Lunch tomorrow?”

“Definitely. Tuesday, too, if you can?”

Tim nods, they’ve got more than an hour of talking to do. “If we can.”
He’s in his car, key in the ignition, and texts Gibbs back: *Needed it so we could get her to come over and talk with Tony. Home in twenty minutes. Talk then.*

There are times when Tim just doesn’t get Gibbs. This is one… Why would the idea of calling in Cranston be hard to understand?

Wait, he’s assuming. Yes, Gibbs usually knows what’s going on, but he didn’t know they were over at Tony’s or talking to him.

He just got an out of the blue text asking for Cranston’s number.

So he adds another line to his own text: *Talked to Ziva. Got the newer(est?) part of the story. Went to visit Tony, got his version. Realized we were in way over our heads. Asked for number. Home soon.*

He’s about half a mile from home when a horrifying thought hits, what if this isn’t fixable?

If Tony can’t work with her anymore… If they can’t find a middle ground…

He makes himself not think about that.

They’re going to be fine, because they have to be fine, because his world doesn’t work if they aren’t fine.

“So, you left Tony with Rachel?” Abby asks once they’re all sitting together in her kitchen.

“Yeah. He didn’t want us to stay, and we knew we were out of our depths. There’s ‘you’re a bit spooked,’ and we’re good with spooked,” Abby knows that first hand, the whole family hopped in to help with their own spooked when they got the previa news, “but existential terror is something else altogether.”

“Is Ziva going home tonight?” she asks.

“I don’t know. When we were talking, she was saying she couldn’t be in the same room with him and not hit him, so none of us thought they needed to be in the same room.

“I do know how long her knife is, and how much of it was sticking out of the computer, so it had to be at least two inches into the table. And we didn’t do our usual non-combat exercises, but Ziva did eighteen rounds, seventeen against me and Jimmy. I know we were both dead at the end of round eighteen, and we could and were each catching quick breathers and letting the other attack for the last six rounds. She was going full out on both of us the whole time.”

“I’ll give her a call in the morning. Maybe head over, see how she’s doing,” Abby replies.

“Probably a good plan. I hope she talks to Rachel, too.” Tim looks over to Gibbs who’s been listening, but saying nothing, just holding Kelly on his lap, letting her chew on his fingers. “Did she really say, ‘You go. I go?’”

Gibbs nods. He’s not sure if that’s exactly what she said, but it was the heart of it.
Abby shakes her head. “That’s not good.”

Gibbs finally says something, “No, it wasn’t.”

There’s something Tim’s been wondering about since he got in his car, something… Not intangible, but it’s really only starting to get a shape now that he’s sitting here telling them about the latest bit of the case fallout and seeing Gibbs deal with it.

He knows Gibbs doesn’t think about this whole women, daughters, relationships, talk to girls, fear, and love thing the same way he and Jimmy do. And he’s also fairly sure that Gibbs won’t talk about it if Abby’s around. (Also part of not thinking about it the same way he and Jimmy do.)

Tim’s starting to wonder if Gibbs suggested or flat out told Tony to pull Ziva off the team.

Even the eat his gun line (granted that’s also the term Tim tends to use when he thinks about suicide) sounds like Gibbs.

But he can’t ask about that now, not if he wants Gibbs to do more than brush it off. The guy who was in favor of pretending he fell down a flight of steps or something rather than distress his girl with the idea they were in danger is also the guy who’s not going to be comfortable talking about how scared he was with Ziva in danger.

And the fact that, when it comes down it, Cranston probably needs to chat with someone else, too, is something Gibbs really isn’t going to like.

But right now, it’s Tim's team, and if Gibbs is the one giving Tony that god-awful bad advice, then he needs more help, too.

Tim’s brushing his teeth, trying to think about sexy type things, because Abby's been hinting in that direction when it came to what was on her Yay! Baby Slept Through The Night shopping excursion, but his brain keeps pulling back to Tony and Ziva, and Gibbs.

“Tim?” her hand on his shoulder, voice soft.

“Mmm.” He puts down toothbrush, rinses, spits. “Yeah?”

“Finish up and go down and talk to him. I’m not getting your full attention back until this is done, so go get it done.”

“But…” We've got plans, right?

“Tomorrow morning. I’ll feed Kelly. You’ll snooze. When she goes back down for her nap, I’ll wake you up, and trust me, you’ll like it.” And she smiles warm and sexy at him. “Besides, he won’t talk to me about it, and I can see just as well as you can that Tony’s not the only problem right now. We both know that Tony didn’t come up with that insane plan all on his own, and neither of us are going to sleep, or anything else, well sitting up here worrying about how deep this goes.”

He kisses Abby, soft and deep, holding her close to him. “I love you so much. And I am so, so, so glad that we are okay.”

She kisses him back. “I know. Love you, too. Go take care of our dad.”

He salutes her and heads down.
For once, Gibbs isn’t on the sofa. (Though Tim’s noticing there’s a Gibbs-shaped mark in the microseude.) He heads in the direction of the bathroom, figuring he’ll check there first, but light’s off in there, too.

So… He supposes it’s possible Gibbs could be sleeping, or getting ready to sleep. The man has to sleep at least on occasion, and in that it’s night time, and he appears to be in the room he’s been sleeping in lately… The idea that he may be sleeping isn’t insane.

“You coming in or just standing there?” Or he could be sitting there, hearing Tim moving around, wondering what’s going on.

Tim opens the door to his office. Gibbs is sitting on the futon, in his boxers and t-shirt, from the looks of it doing something involving… massage oil and his… thigh… hopefully.

He sees Tim eyeing him and glares a bit. “According to Abby just sitting around is bad for my leg, and if I don’t want to get stiff and lose muscle strength I need to do something. She showed me this.”

“She taught you how to Rolf yourself?”

“Something like that.”

“Is it helping?”

Gibbs sends him the how the hell should I know look. “It hurts, but in a kind of good way.”

Tim sits down in front of Gibbs, cross-legged, and snags the oil. No way he’s touching either of Gibbs’ thighs, and his calf is still bruised yellow-green so that’s out, too, but he’s got good hands, and at Jethro’s age atrophy is a possible issue for a guy who spends a solid week laying on his back.

“You work your ankle or other leg at all?”

Gibbs shakes his head, eyeballing the oil in Tim’s hands.

“Foot goes here.” Tim taps his right knee. Gibbs is starting to look a little alarmed now. “Come on, you aren’t the only one Abby’s taught some tricks to, and I’m good at this.”

Gibbs is looking awfully wary, so Tim very carefully lifts Jethro’s foot onto his knee. “Even Tony’ll let me work on him if he’s hurting bad enough. Congratulations, you qualify as hurt enough.”

Gibbs doesn’t jerk his foot back, and Tim gets the sense the only reason he doesn’t is because he’s also wary of trying that with his knee still feeling loose. So, instead of jerking away he says, “You’re down here to give me a foot rub? You can do that to Abby.”

Tim laughs, wryly, cradling Jethro’s foot between his hands, warming it up, stroking the oil over it. “Always been my fondest dream, ya know? Sitting here, in bed, with you, soft glow of my computer monitor providing mood lighting. You in your undies, me rubbing oil on your nasty, sweaty, old feet. Ever since that first case in Norfolk, as we stood in front of each other, wind whirring through your hair, smell of dead body lingering gently in the background, you chewing me out, I’ve been dreaming of this moment.” Tim gently whacks the sole of Gibbs’ foot. “Now shush. Your dick’s not going to fall off because I’m touching you. And get yourself some toenail clippers, you could take someone’s eye out with those things.”

Gibbs looks very slightly amused, like he’s trying to not be amused, but can’t quite manage it.
Finally he grins, and shakes his head, and goes back to working on the top of his leg.

Given that set up, why he’s down here should be fairly easy to get into, but all of the start-ups Tim says in his head don’t quite sound right, and Gibbs isn’t volunteering anything, even though he’s got to know why Tim’s down here.

So, finally he flat out asks, “Did you tell Tony to take her off the team?”

“No.”

Shifty sounding ‘no.’ So, it’s going to be this sort of conversation... “Did you suggest it?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know he’d requested she get her own team?”

“I knew he was going to. I didn’t know he’d done it.”

Tim exhales long and slow. Great. “Uh huh... What was different this time? She’s never obeyed the order to run, and you’ve given it before. I didn’t get the chance to ask him, and it wouldn’t have mattered if I did, because it was clear he couldn’t answer it, so I’ll ask you, what changed? We almost died the summer before last, too, and neither of you went bonkers on it.”

Gibbs also does not seem to be appreciating being called bonkers in regards to this. His eyes narrow very slightly, and then relax. Tim wasn’t there, he didn’t see, so he doesn’t know.

As Gibbs talks, Tim works on his ankle, stretching it a little, rubbing along where the tendons connect his foot to his leg. But he doesn’t need his eyes for that, so he’s watching Gibb’s eyes as he says, “‘You go. I go.’ She ran in and said that to him. And he was screaming at her to leave, which means neither of them was working with the bomb. Draga’s useless on this, frozen. Don’t know if it’s because he was scared shitless, or because he’s the one who triggered it. I’ve got my knife out, getting ready to cut because I can see which wire goes to the timer. Finally, he stops screaming at her, whips around, knocks my hand out of the way, yanks the detonator free and flings it into the pile of gasoline canisters.

“I knew what I was doing. He didn’t. It was complete, blind panic, grabbing at anything. And we both tackled her, got her down. Draga finally came to, and got the trick wall shut again, which probably saved our lives because the fire rushed over us a second later and hit the wall instead of the C-4.

“Something else in there went up. The rush of fire was followed by something loud and that’s what blew the crates all around and tossed us, too.

“And it was over, and we got out, as fast as we could.”

Tim just watches Gibbs. Everything about that report is factually true, at least, that’s how he’d bet. But it’s not the problem. That’s not why he and Tony were conspiring. Not if Gibbs is Gibbs. “So, you’re telling me that it’s your professional, tactical assessment of our team that even though they’ve successfully worked together for thirteen years that they’re not up for it anymore?”

“Yes.”

Tim stares at Gibbs as one of his earlier questions rang through his mind. What the hell could you have possibly been thinking where fire Ziva, lie to her about it, pretend you didn’t do it, and then what, hope she doesn’t notice, made any sort of sense? Rule 18. Better to seek forgiveness than ask
permission.

Tim’s still looking at him, eyes level, hands cupped around Gibbs’ ankle, not moving, and shakes his head. “I’m calling bullshit on that.”

Now Gibbs is looking angry. “You weren’t there.”

“No, I wasn’t. But I didn’t just meet you, either. You think I can’t tell the difference between scared and pissed? Because there’s only two Gibbs reactions to what you just described, and let me tell you what pissed sounds like:

“Pissed Gibbs boots both of them off the team and makes them work it out between themselves, and the fact that it’s Tony’s Team or My Team or Hell, Vance’s Team doesn’t matter because you’ve never cared at all about rank when it comes to your people not working up to your standards, and from now until the day you die and likely a long time after that, we’re your people, so there is never going to be a time when you won’t feel the need to drag us into line if we need it. Your ghost will come back and haunt us into submission if we get out of line after you die, so don’t try to tell me you’re supporting Tony in his position as Leader.

“Pissed Gibbs knows that if both of them have gone into blind panic mode that neither of them can be allowed on a field team.

“Pissed Gibbs tells me if a third of my team is so far off the reservation, she’s trying to toss her life away. Because pissed Gibbs doesn’t want my ass handed to me, either, because I can’t depend on my team.

“Pissed Gibbs doesn’t come up with plans to sneak around behind Ziva’s back, because Pissed Gibbs has no problem letting everyone in the universe know he’s pissed.

“Pissed Gibbs tells me he’s pissed, and he tells me why, and he doesn’t leave it open-ended when I asked about it this morning, because Pissed Gibbs understands that this isn’t just Tony and Ziva’s marriage, but our team as well, and as such they don’t get a curtain of privacy the way Jimmy and Breena do or Abby and I do.

“And Pissed Gibbs would have told me to bring both of them home as soon as Tony was fit to travel and Pissed Gibbs would have chewed them both new assholes right in my living room, definitely in front of each other, probably in front of me, maybe in front of Draga, because he’d want it to stick.

“And lastly, Pissed Gibbs would have used the threat of tossing both of them out of NCIS to get them both to toe the damn line because he knows they both love this job and that the only thing that scares either of them worse than disappointing each other is disappointing you.

“So, don’t tell me that this is you being rational and cool and calm and assessing the situation and coming up with the best answer, because it’s not.” And he stops there, hoping Gibbs will pick it up, maybe say something, but he doesn’t.

He doesn’t look away though.

And he doesn’t seem angry.

And he doesn’t deny it.

But he doesn’t talk, either. Things like this work so much better when both members of the conversation actually say words. *Now what...*
Well, if he won’t talk about being afraid, then Tim will. Let him know he’s not alone. That’s a starting point, right?

“We were planning on going in and slapping Tony upside the back of the head. Angry, bluster, call him stupid, and then give him an out, let him pretend he was upside down from the concussion, because stupid or hurt is easier, less shameful than scared.” Tim shrugs a bit, hoping that he’s getting the fact that he thinks being ashamed of admitting you’re afraid is silly across by his expression.

“We know he’s scared. We’re not stupid. Ziva’s already told us that, and even if she hadn’t, we’re able to empathize. We’re married, we love our wives, and we’ve both had enough close calls to know what real fear feels like.

“And then he told us what he was seeing in his head, and that’s just, nothing we know how to deal with. I mean, Jimmy and I have had our share of shit, and then some, but not that. And that sort of fear, we don’t live with it, not every day. So we don’t know what to do. So I asked for Cranston’s number, because she probably does.

“He’s so scared, Jethro. And he’s got good reason for it. And you do, too. Something happens to Ziva or Abby, and it’ll break you for good, right? And it’s one thing if it’s an accident, if it’s the bullet that comes from nowhere, the babies would get you through that, but to see her run into it… Watch her throw herself into the fire to be with him…” Tim’s shaking his head. He’s not playing this, and he doesn’t have to make his voice sound unsteady for this, it’s genuine.

“You’re allowed to be scared about it.”

Gibbs is staring at him, silent, intense eye contact, not even blinking, and right now Tim can’t read what his face is saying, just that whatever it is, it’s very strong, and very now, and very real.

“It’s okay to be scared, or terrified, or whatever comes after that.

“I heard the blast, saw the destruction. I thought I’d lost you all, and I lost it. Everything in my body went galloping out as fast as it could. Tony found me sobbing in my own mess. And yeah, that’s nothing I’m proud of, but it’s just part of being human and having a body. It’s just love, and the thought of losing it hurts so bad. I get it.

“And if we’re being really honest, I don’t know how you and Tony can deal with Ziva working with us. She’s not my daughter, and she’s not my wife, so I can take it. But I know how I feel about Kelly, how I want her wrapped in a protective bubble all the damn time. And I know how I feel about Abby… Jimmy and I were talking about it, how we couldn’t take having a field agent for a spouse.

“You and I talked about this, how I refuse to make Abby deal with that fear all that much longer. I don’t know how she does it, especially since Kelly, especially since the cops did come to her door to take her to the hospital after her parents were in the accident. If I’d lived that, I couldn’t do it again, not knowing if today’s the day you’ll get the knock on the door. So I’m not doing it to her, at least, not for much longer.

“And I don’t know how you latched onto Ziva so fast, not after you lost your Kelly. Not with what she does. Abby I get. Abby’s safe, tucked in her lab. I don’t know how you can take day after day of this with Ziva, but you do.

“But I do know this, it’s easier if you share it. You sat on my sofa and watched Abby and I cry together for the fear of the close call, and it was okay. Nothing bad happened after. We’re still married. We’re still good. I’m not letting her down by being scared. She’s not hurting me by being
scared. We’re allowed to be scared. We’re allowed to share being scared.

“You’ve got to be scared when the people you love are at risk.” He knows he’s very open right now, only two other people get to see him like this, Abby and Jimmy, and he hopes he can break into Gibbs with it, get him to open up in response. And if he can’t get that, he hopes what he says next will come across as concern and not an attack.

“But you and Tony can’t be insane about it. You can’t lie about it. You can’t try to send Ziva away without talking to her first. You cannot cripple our team because you’re scared.

“Taking Ziva off the team is the worst advice I’ve ever heard. That’s pure fear talking. And, not only is it fear talking, but it’s fear that’s increasing the chances that you or I or one of the rest of us gets killed because you’re taking our best member away. It’s fear that puts her in more danger, too. Her own team with just Draga? That’s insane. So, that’s not going to happen. Tony goes before Ziva does. He gets his own new team, and we keep Ziva. We sure as hell don’t send her off on her own with a brand new Probie and hope that’ll work out.

“It’s my team until next Monday. Actually, and Vance is cool with this, it’s my team as long as it needs to be to get working right again. And if I have to hold it longer than Monday to make this happen, I’ll do it. You’re off active duty for at least a month, great, you need the time to heal.

“You’re also off desk duty until you’ve talked to someone, Cranston, Wolf, someone, at least twice, about this. And I will check up on it.

Gibbs blinks slowly, and Tim finally looks away from his eyes, coming back to the fact that they’re sitting in his office. He’s in his jammy pants, Gibbs is in his pajamas, too, and he’s holding Gibbs’ foot.

“You’re going to tell me what to do?” There’s some edge there, but not the fire that would have been there... Hell, last year, even, let alone the get-his-head-ripped-clean-off he would have gotten five years ago.

“Long time ago you said I was yours. Not all that long ago, you said it again and offered to kill a man for me. Guess what, that’s not a one way street, not anymore. I’m yours. You’re mine. And if anyone on Earth has ever earned the right to tell you what to do, it’s me. So, yes, while you are in my home, on my team, and most importantly my dad, my daughter’s grandfather, and the second most important man in my wife’s life, you will do what you need to do to be healthy.

“You know what Jimmy said to Tony? ‘We love Gibbs, but we don’t want you to be him. You don’t need to repeat his pattern of being so scared of losing what he wants that he screws it up because it’s easier to end it on his own terms than it is to fear losing it.”

“Jimmy said that?”

“Yeah. And he’s right about it, and I didn’t put it together, but that’s what you do. And nope, not anymore. You deserve to be happy. And you’ve been floundering around in the wilderness too damn long. It’s time to come home. You’re almost there, so let’s finish this. Let’s get you home. And if I have to pull rank on you to get it done, then I’ll pull rank on you, but one way or another, it’s going to happen.”

More quiet, more not talking, but this time Tim’s not going to fill the silence with his own words. Now it’s time for Jethro to respond, and if he has to sit here all damn night, and all tomorrow, too, it’ll happen.
Eventually Gibbs asks, “Can I talk to you?”

Tim relaxes, because he was genuinely starting to wonder if he was going to have to be here all night.

“Yes, always, about anything, but in addition you have to talk to someone who actually knows what they are doing. I don’t. I don’t even know where to start on this. I just know where to end it. This is where it ends, for you and Tony and Ziva, none of you are working another case until your heads are on right. And if there’s any imprint I’m leaving on this team, it’s that you’ll really be right, or at least have a plan to get there, instead of holding together by duct tape, insomnia, and bourbon.”

“What would I talk about?”

“That’s part of what ‘I don’t know what to do’ means. I don’t. But try this for me: what was different this time?”

Gibbs snags his knee brace. He’s not working on his leg, Tim isn’t either, so he might as well make sure it gets the support it needs. But he doesn’t pull his foot back away from Tim. Touch is… he doesn’t know… but he’s not moving away from it. “You ever read Cranston’s report, back when she first checked us out?”

“Above my pay grade.”

“I know that. Did you read it anyway?”

Tim shrugs a little, of course he hacked it. “Just her section on me. Wanted to know what she took away from it.”

And? Gibbs’ look asks.

“Intellectual overachiever driven by a deep need for external validation from male authority figures. It’s safe to say she nailed it.”

“Did you read her letter to Vance?”

“Wasn’t in the electronic file. Just each of us by name.”

“He gave me the cover letter, wouldn’t let me see the individual reports.”

“They were supposed to be in confidence, so that makes sense.”

“Her basic read on us was we were a group of motivated but broken people who put our whole lives into the job because we could handle the job, we were good at the job, but we let everything else fall to the wayside because everything else wasn’t going so hot.”

Tim nods along, that was them. Not anymore, he hopes, but that certainly was them.

“The job, the team, that was all we had. I’m diffusing a bomb, and you’re standing next to me. Why? There’s no reason, at all, for you to be there. We don’t both have to die if I fuck up. And you’re not Ziva, you don’t know how to dismantle a bomb, you being there isn’t helping in any real way.”

“You go. I go.”

“Yeah.” Gibbs nods and swallows. “We know that about each other, always have, but we’ve never said it. And if you don’t say it… But she said it.”
“She broke the rule. We’re supposed to pretend we want a life beyond this?”

“Yes...” Gibbs stops on that, looks annoyed, but not at Tim. "No... You’re supposed to really want the life beyond this. You ran away, Tim. Draga probably would have, too, if he’d had the chance. And... she’s supposed to be attached to her life. And her life is supposed to be more than Tony.”

“Ziva was supposed to run away?”

“Yeah. We’re supposed to run away from shit like that. We’re not the people we were when Cranston talked to us the first time. You’ve got lives and homes and…”

“Her home is Tony.”

Gibbs shrugs.

“You wouldn’t have held it against him if he had ran into a bomb blast for her.”

“No.”

Tim stares at him.

“It’s different,” Gibbs says.

“Ziva was remarkably unimpressed by that argument. I tried it on her. Didn’t fly.”

“I’d guess not,” Gibbs says dryly. But it is different, to him, because he lived it. “You do everything you can to protect her... and if you can’t... If you can’t, you’re not supposed to walk away from it.” He stops, stares at the ceiling, above and behind Tim, and Tim knows that’s him forcing himself to maintain control. “That’s what women and children first means. It’s the vow you don’t say, but you pledge your life to when you marry one of them. That’s the core of being a man and loving your woman. That you will die to protect her. She will outlive you. That’s not negotiable. And... And I know Ziva thinks it’s crap. I know I won’t be winning any prizes from Abby or Breena on this, either. But, unless there’s a kid on the line, if you can’t protect her, you go with her.”

Tim closes his eyes and sighs. He squeezes Jethro’s ankle. And in the end, at its core, there’s always this. The original (though probably not original, his mom dying is probably the original, so ultimate, not original) trauma that’s shaped the rest of his life. Shannon died, and he didn’t go with her, and he’s been dragging that around for more than twenty-five years.

“After Shannon and Kelly, after you put the bullet through Hernandez, why didn’t you kill yourself? You talk like you wish you had.”

Gibbs sniffs, looks away from the ceiling and back to Tim. “Damned if I know. Not like I don’t know what a gun barrel tastes like.”

Tim puts Gibbs’ foot back on the futon, swaps around so he’s sitting next to Jethro, and wraps his arms around him. Gibbs isn’t nearly as stiff as he usually is when he’s getting hugged, but he’s not relaxing into Tim, either.

Tim doesn’t know what to do with this. He has no idea how to help. He wants some sort of magic words to make this better, ease this guilt, but he’s got nothing.

He can’t tell Gibbs that Ziva’ll always be fine. He can’t tell him that it’s irrational fear. He can’t make the guilt of Shannon go away. And he can’t tell him that he’s being silly about giving Tony any advice he can possibly come up with so Tony won’t have to walk his path.
He squeezes Gibbs tighter, rubs his back, and says, “I’m glad you didn’t.”

Gibbs nods, and Tim feels him start to relax, feels more of his weight ease into his body, and a minute after that he feels the shaking start, the full-body, wracking spasms that go with just falling apart. Jethro’s trying to muffle himself, biting his fist, but it’s not helping with the volume and he might be hurting himself. Tim pulls his hand down and holds it.

“In five weeks, no loud noise has ever woken Kelly. When she’s down, she’s down. Don’t worry about it. Do what you need to. I’ve got you.”

And this time, Tim held Gibbs while he cried.

And it wasn’t quick, and it probably didn’t make anything much better, and Gibbs certainly didn’t seem happier after, just, tired mostly, and pretty embarrassed.

So Tim pokes him gently and says, “If you think that’s gonna get you out of having to talk to Cranston, uh uh.”

Gibbs smirks, snorts a little, and flips him the bird.

“Better. We’re going to sleep in as well as Kelly’ll let us. See you in the morning.”

Gibbs nods, and Tim heads up to his room.
The Good Morning

Crying, the feel of the bed shifting, quick rush of cool air as Abby gets up out of bed and the blanket lifts off of both of them, bright light, red behind his eyelids.

Must be morning again.

Another few seconds of lying there, and his bladder decides to confirm that it is indeed morning, so he staggers out of bed to take care of that.

Tim's always thought it was some perverse quirk of evolution that a full bladder gives you a hard-on and hard-ons make it difficult to pee. It’s (obviously) not impossible, but still, especially when all he wants to do is stagger back to bed, having to wake up enough to will his erection down enough to pee and contort into a position where he can still hit the bowl isn’t his idea of fun.

When he gets out of the bathroom, Abby’s back in their bed, propped up, Kelly in her arms, getting everyone settled in to nurse. This triggers some memories from last night about what was going to happen after Kelly went back to sleep, and suddenly Tim’s a lot happier about the concept of morning.

He lays back down, the way he usually does when he’s sleeping around her nursing sitting up, right arm between her hips and the pillows, left over her thighs, lips pressed against her hip.

She gently pets his hair, and he kisses her hip, settling back into snooze mode, listening to Kelly sucking away, and Abby humming to her.

Tim never got the skill of lucid dreaming. He certainly tried to. Back when he was fifteen or so and his sex life was entirely based in dreams, fantasy, and his left hand, the ability to control his dreams so he could do whatever he wanted was way, way, way up on the list of skills to master.

Never really happened though.

Especially not for middle-of-the-night, deep-sleeping sort of dreaming.

He did find; however, that there’s this spot where he’s still aware of being awake, but his body’s pretty shut down, where he can just sort of start to see the images of dreams begin and his hold on awake wanders off, and he still can’t control that, not completely, but he can nudge it into whatever direction he’d like, and end up with a situation where he’s either fantasizing very intensely or lightly dreaming.

So, it’s not like he’s lying next to Abby thinking that there’ll be some sex in the offing soon, so ordering up some super explicit porn dreams of threesoming with Breena (been a while since he played with that fantasy) is a good plan.

It doesn’t work that way.

But, he’s leaning that way, and it has been a while since he’s played with that fantasy. And if he’s willing to hook into what’s around him, (Abby’s body and skin against his) and recent events, (flushed skin, endorphin rush from fighting, hard, throbbing music, feel of his body hot and wet) he can shape that into something that he won’t precisely control, but will most likely unravel in a way he likes.
Basically, he can set the scene and the tone, but from there his brain just plays it out, and he goes along for the ride. Usually he likes the ride just fine.

Mostly he’s seeing the insides of his eyelids, feeling Abby’s skin against his, hearing little baby sounds, but that starts to fade, and his mind starts pulling images, sounds in.

Hardcore goth/industrial club. He knows it’s a club because his mind has it labeled as a club. Music is loud, lights are flashing black and white and green and pink, and there are other bodies pressed around, moving, but there’s no real detail beyond that.

The music is loud. Really loud. And it’s fucking music. Not music for sex, or making love. This is hard, pulsing, throbbing, fast and heavy fucking music. This is feel her come against you, fingernails tearing down your back, flip her over before she stops twitching, and go at it again music. Nothing about it is gentle, and the lyrics are explicit.

Imagine, wrist cuff, collar round his throat, boots, nothing else on. Not even socks. He can feel the leather rubbing against his calf.

It’s hot, very hot, that’s why no shirt. He’s dancing hard, sweating, skin slick.

Whole place feels languid with the heat, moving fast and hard but slowed down at the same time. Almost a slow motion version of fast. Like he knows it’s supposed to be fast but he’s experiencing it slowed down.

Smells like clean sweat and sex. Turned on bodies pressing hard, grinding against each other. Wet pussy, musk, cum, not anything he’d want in a room freshener, but all of those scents scream sex to him, get him hard, make him want to fuck.

Abby’s in front of him. Not touching yet. Dancing for him to watch. Short skirt, plaid, green and black and red, so tiny, doesn’t even cover her whole ass. He’s watching it sway with the way she’s moving, seeing it just skim over the those sweet little cheeks.

He wants to reach out and grab. Wants to bend her over and lick.

She turns to face him, smile on her face promising good things.

Tiny white tank top, cut off, just barely covering the lower swell of her breasts. No bra. They’re swaying every time she moves, too.

He doesn’t know if he wants her facing him or facing away, just knows that she needs to stop dancing in front of him and needs to start dancing against him, right now.

Facing him. They’re kissing, and she’s pressed up tight against him, riding his leg as his hands cup her ass, holding her firm to him.

Breena appears from nowhere, but she’s beside them now, her body pressed into both of their sides, her arms over their shoulders. Abby breaks the kiss with him to kiss Breena, and one of his hands leaves her butt to circle Breena’s waist.

Skin. His fingers land on her skin. So hot, damp, soft. Bikini top, skin tight gold, another tiny little skirt, but hers is tight and Abby’s is pleated.

Lips. Abby’s on Breena, wet and soft and gliding over each other. Abby nudges Breena’s face to him, and he’s kissing her, enjoying the glorious, wet pull of her mouth on his tongue.
Abby turns, with Breena. Abby’s back against his chest, hot, wet skin sliding against his, her ass rubbing small circles against his hips. He can feel it, and since it’s a dream, he can see it from outside himself. See Abby grinding against him, and against Breena.

See them kissing more.

Breasts barely covered in tight little tops rubbing against each other, nipples hard.

He can watch them kissing, slow, wet tongues sliding over each other. Breena’s sucking on Abby’s tongue, and watching it is killing him. Watching it feels like having his dick sucked, and Breena and Abby know that. Abby’s still rubbing against him, and the kilt’s gone, but her skirt is still there, so it’s the slide of her skin and the raspy rub of her skirt against his dick.

Abby’s hands are on Breena’s hips. Breena’s arms are over Abby’s shoulders, her hands wrapped around the back of his neck. He kisses Abby’s neck, licking along her throat. His right hand is between the girls, letting them grind against his fist. (Skirts vanished, all three of them are naked now, except he’s still got the wrist cuff on. He can see that, and is kind of wondering why he’s watching that when he’s got naked Abby and Breena in front of him, but, well, dreams are weird.) He bites along Abby’s shoulder to Breena’s arm, takes it in his left hand, and kisses to her wrist, then licks each finger, sucking them.

Breena’s head falls back, and she moans, loud. Abby’s kissing down her throat, to her chest, pressing her breasts up and licking both of them. Her lips are so red, her tongue so wet and pink and just lapping at Breena’s nipples, and Abby’s still rubbing against him, driving him insane.

On his side, in bed now. His bed? Breena’s? No idea. It’s a bed, or a carpet, or maybe not. He’s on his side, he knows that. His hands are tied over his head. He knows that, too. Can’t use them, but he wants to. Too much beautiful woman all around him, and he really wants to touch all over both of them, so he’s struggling against the knots.

He can feel Abby behind him. His leg is over her hip and she’s fucking him, getting his prostate over and over and each time he feels that pulse that feels like cumming, but isn’t.

Breena’s in front of him, and they’re sixty-nining.

Wet pussy on his lips, wet lips on his dick, and every time Abby nails him, Breena sucks harder, and God, he’s never felt this good. He’s so hard, and so turned on, and it’s a dream so he can go like this forever and…”

God, so hard, so full, so… cock ring? Yeah, oh yes, that’s good, and both girls are licking all over him. They’re kissing each other around his dick and the visual on that and the way it feels, and fuck…”

“Starting without me,” Abby says quietly to Tim when she gets back into their room. He doesn’t wake up. And right now, she’s fine with that.

In fact, him asleep opens some interesting avenues for playing.

He’s usually a not very deep sleeper. Usually he’s fairly easy to wake up. But they’ve both been tired lately, (and at the one AM feed, he wasn’t in bed, and she could hear Gibbs crying, so her guess is last night was an awfully late one on top of a ton of other late nights this week) and it’s obvious he’s dreaming right now, pretty deeply if the little half-gasps sounds he’s making are anything to go by.
Dreaming about some awfully hot sex if the erection that goes with those gasps is a guide.

So… what to do with sleeping beauty over there…

She knows that if she just creeps around quietly, and moves him very slowly, he’ll sleep through whatever comes next.

Very slowly, very gently. Perfectly silent isn’t necessary. These days they’re both pretty good at sleeping through the other one moving around, getting in and out of bed. But she knows that when she gets up to nurse, he rolls into the warm spot of the bed she left, and when she comes back he curls around her, but he doesn’t wake up for that.

She knows she does the same thing when he leaves bed, so, as long as his sleeping body thinks this is just normal getting up and back, it should work.

She creeps under the covers, same way she usually does, and like usual, his arm wanders out for her to lay her neck over, and he presses in close against her back.

Perfect. Only took a little scooting to get his wrist to the headboard. Only took a few more seconds to get his right arm secured to the bed.

Dreaming Tim doesn’t move much, beyond that snuggling in closer, but she can feel exactly how hard he is, so she rubs against him, and very quietly moans, letting him add that into the dream.

She feels the drop of precum smear against her back, and that’s a bit closer to the edge than she wants him right now. Doesn’t want this over before he wakes up, let alone before she gets into it.

She nudges him gently over, and he rolls onto his back.

More slow, gentle shifting around gets his left hand tied.

She pulls back and watches. God he’s looking so good. Spread out, skin flushed, cock hard, eyes closed, fluttering a little, mouth slightly open, lips so ready to be nibbled. So good!

Mmm… Delicious. She leans over and gently licks him, just getting a little taste, and did taste another drop of precum.

Yeah, he’s way too close to the edge. And with the way this week’s gone, he probably hasn’t gotten off since they had sex, so giving him a bit of help is likely a good plan.

She heads for their toy box and grabs the silicon cock ring.

She isn’t sure if he’d sleep through that, but his hands are already tied, so she doesn’t mind too much if he wakes up.

He moans a little as she gets it set, making sure it doesn’t pinch or pull on anything, but his eyes don’t open, and he doesn’t say anything, so he’s still asleep.

So, dive on in and play with him? Show off what she bought yesterday…

That’ll hold ‘til next time. She wants him awake enough to really appreciate it.

Supplies, that’s a plan, get that set ahead of time. Lube, definitely need that. No matter how turned on her brain is right now (and right now it’s awfully happy about the idea of sex) her body’s not on that same page, and likely won’t be anytime soon, not until her hormones get closer to normal, and that’s still at least a month or two off.
So, lube.

And if they’re going to do anything where lube makes sense, then condoms are on the list, too. Wednesday was good and right, and if she’s pregnant that’s God at work, but she’s probably not, and also not feeling any real desire to tempt fate on that again.

Prepped, ready, supplies laid out, Tim trussed up and ready to play, time to wake him up.

This time she isn’t particularly slow or careful about getting onto the bed. She snuggles in close to him, on her side, presses against his, hand circling his dick, stroking gently. “Wake up, baby.”

“Mmm?” He turns his head toward her, eyes still closed.

She kisses his lips, and the tip of his nose, and lips again. He’s not exactly kissing back, but he is making a sound she’s got categorized as slipping from asleep to awake.

Finally his lips get into the game, though his eyes are still shut, and she feels him try to roll toward her, which stops the kissing as his eyes open and he looks at his wrist tied to the headboard.

The expression on his face is very perplexed. “I slept through that?”

“Look down.”

He sees the cock ring and grins. “Wow. Didn’t realize I was that tired.”

“When’d you get to bed last night?”

“After two.”

She nods, and he kisses her. “How much time do we have?”

She checks the clock. “All goes well, hour and a half.”

“Excellent.”

She straddles his hips, just brushing against him gently, and he groans. (Quietly. This time he’s awfully aware of the fact that Gibbs is in his house, and probably awake.)

“What were you dreaming?”

He pulls her bottom lip between his, tongue stroking over it, arching up as well as he can to rub against her. “You and me and Breena, all wrapped up in each other.”

“Sounds good.”

“It was. Want details?”

“Always!”

“Mmmm…” He wriggles around a bit, getting more comfortable, spreading his legs. “Whole set up, or just images?”

“Was there a set up?” she asks as she skims down his body, slipping kisses across his skin.

“At first. Slipped into images and feelings after that, but we started in a club…” He tells her what he was dreaming as she licks her way down his body. “…and then Breena turned… Oh, god, baby…”
She’s pulling his nipple with her teeth while her belly rubs against his cock. “That feels so good.”

Long slow lick while she grinds into him. “Better?”

“Ohhh…” His head falls back and he almost closes his eyes.

“You’re not talking.”

“Ease off enough for me to get six brain cells working, and I will.”

“Ease off, huh? So, not this, then?” She licks a wide stripe down his chest and stomach, and closes her hand around his dick, squeezing firmly.

“Oh, God, Abby! Fuck me, baby, please!”

She licks the tip of his dick, feeling his hips jerk.

“God, please! Want you so bad.”

She knows part of this is him playing. He’s probably not that close to the edge. Close, sure, but part of this is letting his desire ramp up hers.

Abby pulls back a bit, makes sure he’s watching, and then licks her lips slowly, tongue dragging over every millimeter, getting them good and wet, and rubs them against each other, keeping them just touching, and slowly bends her head and presses down on his dick, letting him breach the soft, wet press of them.

He groans. He’s not being loud, but very sincere in his appreciation, and the feel of his smooth skin on her lips is making her feel very pleasantly tingly in all the right places. Abby pulls back again, with a long, slow sucking kiss, and reaches for the condom.

Tim watches her reach for it, and part of him is really thinking that his dick doesn’t want to get anywhere near a slimy, cold bit of latex.

Part of him is really aware of the fact that, even with the cock ring, he’s not going to be setting any endurance records and the condom should slow him down enough for her to enjoy this, too.

And part of him really wishes she’d go back to sucking him because, fucking god in heaven and on high that felt so mind-meltingly good!

But his hands are tied, so he can’t flip her over, and if this is the game she wants to play, he’s happy to play it.

And yeah, it is kind of cool, but her hand jacking him, spreading the lube over his dick feels excellent, and the fact that she’s going to slip right onto him, and there’s the sensation of heat, and the anticipation of her body slipping onto his. She starts to slide down him, and that’s so… God, pressure, really, really good pressure, oh fuck, yeah… Wait… That’s not right.

Abby just winced. It’s very slight, just a second crossing her face, but that’s not a look he ever wants associated with them and sex.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”
There’s still a little tension in her face, and not the good kind. Not the so turned on it looks like pain. He thinks this really is pain. “Really?”

“Hurts a little.”

He tries to pull back, but he’s the one on his back and tied on top of that, so there’s nowhere he can go. But ‘hurts’ certainly backs him away from the edge. He’s not feeling any burning need to get off any more.

He wiggles his tongue at her. “Come on, flip around, no reason to do anything that hurts.”

“It’s not that bad.”

That pretty solidly boots him out of any of the lingering vestiges of his sexy mood. “‘It’s not that bad’ isn’t exactly the response I’m hoping for here. I know we haven’t been doing a lot of this lately, but you may remember, it’s supposed to feel good.” Which is when a horrifying thought hit. “Did it hurt last time?”

Abby looks sheepish. “Little.”

“Shit. Tell me stuff like that.”

“It didn’t matter that it hurt last time. We both needed it.”

“It mattered to me.” He’s feeling significantly less like he needed it now, not if it hurt. “Did you get off?”

“Yes.”

He’s searching her face, thinking she’s being honest, but not sure if she’s trying to keep him calm. “Really? You’re not just keeping me from freaking out?”

“Really.” She shifts so she’s laying on him, lips less than an inch from his, looking into his eyes. She hasn’t pulled off of him, but he’s about as limp as he can get wearing a cock ring. “Yes, it hurt, but… that whole night hurt. That’s part of this whole love thing, sometimes it hurts. And I needed it. Your body, in mine, maybe making a baby. I needed that, and it didn’t matter if it hurt because the pleasure through the hurt was more important than the hurt. That’s how we got here, both of us deciding the pleasure of this… this whole life… was worth the risk of the hurt.

“I needed to know you came home, needed to feel it in my bones and heart and guts, and sex does that. Your body in mine does that. Your skin on mine. Your cum in me. Lips on mine. I needed it.”

He reaches up to kiss her. “Untie me?”

She pulls off of him and does, and a second after he has his left hand free, he takes off the cock ring and condom, and once he has his right free, too, he pulls her against him, her whole body stretched out along his. He kisses her long and soft, hand cupping her face, leg wrapped around her hips, full body hug.

“I needed it, too. Needed to know I was still alive. Needed your body on mine. If Gibbs hadn’t come in with me, we would have done it in the living room ten seconds after Kelly was done nursing. And I still hate that I hurt you.”

“It really wasn’t that bad.”
“Great.” He kisses her again, left hand tracing down her skin as he shifts his leg, nudging it so hers rests on top of his hip, so his fingers can cup her pussy. “This isn’t supposed to hurt. And, ‘wasn’t that bad,’ isn’t how I ever want you to think of us fucking.”

“The pain wasn’t that bad. The sex was great.”

“How great can it be if it hurt?”

She shakes her head a little. “You’re so not a girl.”

“I’ve noticed that.”

“It was great because you came home. Because for the first time ever, you ran away from the danger and back to me. It was great because I could feel all of you and you were alive. It was great because it meant I got another day with you.”

He closes his eyes and sighs, feeling the worry in her words. Then opens them, looking into hers. “Not much longer.”

“I know. You’re doing so well with your own team, and, and I think you would have been a really great team leader, but I’m glad you’re leaving it behind. You and Gibbs walked in, and he’s got crutches and you’ve got that not really there look, and I can smell smoke on both of you, and my heart just stopped.”

He kisses her again. “Not going to happen again.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I don’t. But I’ll hope, and you’ll pray, and what was the line, ‘We’re too damn pretty to die?'”

She smiles gently. “Something like that.”

He takes her hand, presses it to his jaw, then kisses her base of her thumb. “Feel that chiseled jaw? I’m just too damn pretty to die.” He winks at her. She snorts at that, and holds onto him for a long minute, her forehead against his. “And you’re right. I was good at it. And I liked it. I’m ready for a team. Been ready for a while. So’s Ziva, really. But I don’t want a field team. I’m good with Cybercrime. I’m good with not getting shot at. I’m really, really damn good with coming home to you every single day of the rest of my life, and I want that to be a good, long time. A thousand years isn’t enough, but I’ll settle for the fifty or so we’re owed.

“I talked to Gibbs about it, after the freezer case, and he told me that when it was time to leave, when I was ready, I’d know.

“I’m ready.”

She kisses him again, lips lingering over his, touching him with feelings that don’t translate well into words, but eventually turn into a murmured, “Good,” against his lips.

He sighs against her, holding her a little tighter, little closer, feeling her heart beating against his.

And eventually the soft, warm sensation of her body against his wakes his dick back up.

She giggles, feeling it fill against her hip. “I take it we’re good?”

He rolls onto his back, taking her with him. “We’re about to be a whole lot better than good. Flip around and let me lick your pussy the way I was dreaming of.”
She sits up, and switches around while he scoots down a bit, making sure there was enough room for her legs at the head of the bed. “Thought you were doing that to Breena.”

Once she’s settled, he gives her a small, fast lick, just saying hi really, and says, “You think I’ve got you both naked and only Breena gets eaten out? Oh no.” Another lick, long and slow this time. She moans quietly and presses into him. “Favorite meal on earth, no way I’m skimping on it.”

She probably smiles at that. He can’t tell because unlike in the dream he can’t see. But he does feel her tongue caress the head of his dick, and that’s an awfully good sign to shut up and fuck.

Been a lot longer since they’ve sixty-nined than he would have liked. For a few minutes, he’s just getting back into the rhythm of it. Mostly remembering how the split focus thing works. How to really enjoy what she’s doing to him while still keeping track of her pleasure and getting her off. But it’s an old, familiar dance now, and his body knows what it’s doing.

He’s not trying to spin her out, mostly because he knows he’s not going to last for very long. Her mouth on his dick feels so amazing right now. Real, hot, wet, slick skin compared to the condom is blazingly good, and her tongue’s rubbing him just right while she pulls back with just enough suction and, just, fuck, so damn good.

She’s slick with lube, but not wet on her own, so she tastes different than usual, (not bad or anything, but not that same delicious, oh god, yes, more, fucking right now, flavor that usually goes with eating pussy) but it’s still her, and she’s still making happy sounds as he circles her clit with his tongue in tight, fast little strokes.

Her legs are getting tighter, always a good sign, so he gets his fingers into play. No penetration, he’s not sure what ‘not that bad’ means, but he’s staying away from that for now. But he can stroke, and pet, tug gently on her lips, and once his fingers are very wet, very slick, he slides them back to circle her anus in time with what his tongue is doing on her clit, and that gets some very, very happy sounds out of her.

Which is good because he’s about three seconds away from losing it. She’s got him deep in her mouth, using her hand as well as mouth, and moving fast, and it’s all wet, slippery, hot friction and feels so amazing.

He’s forcing his focus onto his lips and away from his dick because she’s not that close, not yet, but it’s so hard (difficult, too) and her mouth feels so fucking good, and he was so close before, and she’s rubbing his balls, too, and just, oh… holy fuck! He feels the pleasure course through his whole body, and the sharp pulsing rush of cumming over and over into her mouth.

He’s stretched out, feeling very sated, very lazy, purring against her like a fucked out lion laying in an especially good sunbeam.

She gives him a minute, and then, in proper lioness mode, nips him on the hip, reminding him it isn’t naptime, yet.

A little lick here, little lick there, long lick to tie them together, and he gets back to it. Lapping at her gently. Ramping her up, finally tasting her own lube.

Her body wet against his lips, the sounds she’s making, her legs clamping around his shoulders, as he slips her slowly into a shuddering orgasm. God, he loves this, loves her, so much.
They got eight minutes of afterglow together before Kelly started crying again.

Tim got up. “I’ve got her.”

Abby waited until she saw him walk past his dresser, past his pj pants, to say, “You’re naked.”

Tim shrugs, he’s two steps from the door. “No line of sight from downstairs to up here.” You have to be in the upstairs hallway to see their end of it. Sure, the bathroom and guest room are near the stairs end of the hall, but Kelly’s room and his room isn’t.

“Hey, baby girl. You have a good nap?”

She looking up at him, seeming to be pretty irked about this whole having to wait to get cleaned up before the food comes thing.

“Yeah, I know. But you’re pretty smelly right now, and the grown-up half of this equation is going to be much happier if you’re all nice and clean before you get into our bed.”

That answer didn’t seem to make her any happier. But since he is an adult, and he is picking her up and getting her changed, she knows that means the food will be coming presently, so the crying stops.

“One clean, hungry baby, looking for her mama,” Tim says as he lays Kelly on the bed next to Abby. She’s already laying on her side, which is good for nursing when they two of them want to snuggle.

Tim lays next to them, Kelly between him and Abby, watching as she gets her breast into Kelly’s mouth, and Kelly starts sucking greedily.

He lays his fingers on Abby’s shoulder, tracing down her ribs to her hip. Feels like it’s been a million years since they just laid around in bed together, awake, touching, and talking.

“Missed this,” she says.

“Yeah. Been a while.”

“Got plans for today? Want to run downstairs, grab up some food, and lay around in bed all day?”

“God… I’d love to…” There’s a sort of sheepish expression on his face.

“But?”

“Promised Jimmy we’d have lunch. Should check in with Ziva and Tony, need to at least get downstairs at some point and poke Jethro, see if he’s still in one piece. Gotta give Fornell the heads up about Ender.” He lifted up on his left arm and looked over her back to the clock. “But I’ve got two hours before I need to get moving to make it to lunch.”

“Then I’ll take two hours, and I should call Ziva, see how she’s doing. Get some girl talk in. You guys probably didn’t get the whole story.”
“We never do.” He gently strokes Kelly’s cheek and she half looks over to him, but realizes that won’t work if she wants to nurse, so goes back to ignoring him. “You want to start alternating the 1:00 feed?

“Yes.”

“Same as last time? You take three nights off, let your body get used to not nursing. I’ll catch them. And once you’re adjusted, we’ll swap?”

“Sounds… I was going to say good, because the whole sleeping thing does, but, ow… Hate this weaning part, it’s really uncomfortable.”

“Sorry about that.”

“All part of the job.”

“How about you stay out with Ziva as long as you need, have a good lunch. Use the pump. I’ll get her formula for lunch, and feed her a bottle of yours tonight.”

“That’ll work.”

“Three nights of getting to sleep from ten until seven should sound awfully good, too.”

She strokes Kelly’s tummy. “Oh they do, trust me. It’s the part where I wake up at five or so feeling like my boobs are going to burst that’s not sounding so good.”

He gently strokes the tip of his index finger over her breast. “What are you going to do when you go back?”

She tilts her head in a way that means not sure. “Pump as much as I can. Nurse morning and evening feed. Probably the ten o’clock one, too, as long as it lasts. But my guess is that she’ll end up on all formula all day pretty soon after I get back. Can’t see taking a half hour break every three hours to pump.”

That makes sense to him. When she’s working, she’s working and doesn’t much appreciate having to break. “Looking forward to getting back?”

“Yes. No. I’m loving this time here with her, and I know it’s short, and I don’t want to miss it. But I’m going insane home all the time with no puzzles to solve. And no, ‘why are you crying now’ doesn’t count as a puzzle to solve.”

He smiles at that, stretches again, feels his stomach rumble, and sits up. “What sort of food did you want me to grab from downstairs?”

“Usual.”

“Okay. I’ll be back in a few minutes with food.”

He’s slipping on his pj pants when Abby says, “Tim.”

“Yeah?” He’s turning from his dresser to look at her.

“Remember your blushing comment on Wednesday?”

He thinks about it, and, yeah, he does, but he's not immediately seeing how it's relevant.
“If you go down there with a wet goatee, smelling like my cum, and Gibbs sees you, the next time I see him, I will blush. Wash up first.”

He starts to giggle at that. Then rubs his face, and yeah, it’s still wet and a bit sticky. “Didn’t even occur to me…”

“I know. Doesn’t usually matter if you walk around the house looking like we just had sex. Not like it’s a problem for me. But…”

“I get it. I don’t mind him knowing we have sex, but,” he touches his goatee, “that’s a step further than I want to go, too. I just didn’t think about it. Can’t see my own face.”

He heads to the bathroom to wash his face. Might was well brush his teeth, too. A minute later he heads out. “Presentable?” His hair’s still sticking up in fifteen directions, and all he’s wearing is a pair of flannel drawstring pants and his wrist cuff, but yeah, he looks like himself just getting up (as opposed to himself just gotten off).

“You’ll do.” She looks at him for a long minute, eyes trailing up and down his body, letting him know that she likes what she sees.

He sits on the side of the bed next to her, and kisses her shoulder, scraping his moustache across her skin, nipping gently. “Since you’ve got me thinking about it; how was that?”

It takes her a second to figure out that he’s asking how oral with his facial hair felt. “Honestly?”

“No, lie to me. Only reason I’m asking is I want you to pet my ego. Yes, honestly.”

She shrugs a little. “Kind of itchy and distracting.”

His eyebrows furrow. “That’s not good.”

“Couple times I was pretty close and then you’d shift and suddenly I was getting attacked by a toothbrush.”

He winces. Apparently he’s not winning any awards for greatest lover ever this week. “Great. Shaving went onto the plan for today.”

“That’s a good plan. I like the way it looks. And it feels good when we kiss,” she brushes her fingers over it, “or like how you just trailed it over my shoulder, but… don’t love it for oral, and when I get back to waxing regularly, just, ouch.”

He nods. And if they’re being this frank… “I really don’t like condoms. You’ve spoiled me, because back when all sex involved them, they were just fine, but now…” he kisses her, carefully, “now I know how good real sex is, and how spectacular your body feels, naked and wet and silky on mine, and if it’s about me, I’m good with mouth or hands or anal any other part of your gorgeous body until we can go back to non-condom sex.”

“And what if it’s not about you?” she asks with a smile, because after all, it’s not just all about him.

He laughs a little. “If it’s not about me, then they’re fine. I mean, it’s still sex with you. It’ll still feel good, and I’ll still get off. But, if we’re talking about general preferences, I’d rather skin on skin than skin on latex on skin.” He kisses her again, standing up, getting ready to get them some breakfast.

“From now until we get back to baby making sex, it’s lady’s choice. You get to pick what we’re doing, and if I see the condoms come out, that’s fine.”
“You just wouldn’t mind if they sat in the drawer and collected dust.”

“Not at all.”

“And when we’re back to baby making sex?”

He smiles at her, eyes hot and sexy. “Gonna lay you out, hitch your leg over my shoulder, and slip into you long and slow, just easing into you, making sure to get that angle you like while rubbing your clit. I’ll do it so slow, all the way in and all the way out and over and over and over. Every single inch of your body clinging and slipping over mine.” He leaned in to kiss her one more time. “Gonna make you come so hard your ears ring and you see stars, and your body pulsing on mine’ll set me off, and we’ll see if all that hot, wet, clenching skin, and searing pleasure can make a little brother or sister for Kelly.” One last kiss, wet and slow, and if they’re ever going to eat, let alone not do something even more horrendously inappropriate with Kelly in the room, he really needs to get out of there. “I should probably get us that breakfast.”

“Yeah.” She sounds a little breathless as she says it, grinning at him, and he grins back, leans in one more time, and gently licked her bottom lip, just couldn’t not do that, then saunters down to get them some food.

“‘Morning.”

Gibbs nods at him. He’s sitting at the kitchen table, coffee and eggs in front of him. “Got some in the oven on warm for you two.”

“Thanks.” Tim opens the oven, and there are two plates of scrambled eggs in there. He shuts the door and starts collecting peaches, strawberries, almond milk, and yogurt for Abby’s smoothie. “How’re you feeling this morning?”

Gibbs flashes him a look that may mean *Come on, we’re not girls, we don’t have to actually talk about this stuff or possibly Pretty damn tired and maybe Didn’t we do enough of that last night?*

Tim shakes his head. “Use words. I don’t know what that look means.”

“Fine.”

“Okay. I know that look didn’t mean *that.*”

He certainly didn’t have any problems following the *back off* in the look that followed.

Tim raised his hands, and said, “I’ll stop poking.”

“Good.”

Tim very pointed doesn’t ask while he cuts the peach for Abby’s smoothie.

“Hannah used to do that,” Gibbs says quietly, not looking up from his coffee.

“Hannah?”

“Ex-number one. She’d sit there silently not asking me things.”

“Huh.” Tim shakes his head, then looks at Gibbs and quirks an eyebrow. “Must suck when people won’t talk to you.”
Gibbs glares a little, but there’s no heat in it. “Were you always such a smartass?”

Tim grins. “I have my moments. You and Tony probably should have heard some of the things I used to say in my head to you. You need anything else while I’m up?”

“No.”

Tim hits the blend button and the whirling of the smoothie kills any shot of talking. When it finished and he had her smoothie poured into a glass, he turned back to Gibbs. “Really, you okay?”

“Thought you weren’t poking.”

“You didn’t like me not poking.”

Gibbs sighs, looking put upon. In his own home if he’s in a bad mood, he just goes down to the basement and works until he feels better. “Slept like shit, knee aches, I’ve read every book I had on my to-read list, and I’m bored.”

Well, Gibbs doesn’t want to talk much, so Tim’s not touching slept like shit. Nothing he can do about achy knee. Gibbs is moving around well enough he can get his own pain meds if he needs them, but there is something he can do about the lack of reading material, which may help with bored.

“Have you actually read my books?” While he was getting clothes and stuff for Gibbs, Tim noticed that he did have copies of all of his books on the bookshelves in his room.

“Yeah.”

“Like ‘em?” Gibbs has never said anything about them. Until he was fetching clothing, Tim didn’t even know Gibbs had them.

Gibbs nods. They aren’t his favorite books ever, but they’re good. Once he got over the whole the-main-character-was-based-on-me part, reading them got fun.

“Wanna be a beta reader?”

Gibbs looks startled, he’s got no idea what that term means. “A what?”

“I finished Shadow Force recently. After I finish one, it goes to hibernate for a month or so. Then I read it again, make sure I actually wrote what I thought I did. Abby or Penny, sometimes both of them, read it, too. Beta reading, the second reader. Then I take my notes and theirs, and beat it into a second draft. It’s rough as hell, completely unedited, on paper, and it’s the only copy I have, so you’ve got to be just as careful with it as you are with Kelly, and she can’t get anywhere near it, but if you want to read it and let me know what you think, I’d be interested.”

Gibbs thinks about it. It’d be a good way to eat up the last day of laying on his back.

“Sure.”

“Reading on the sofa?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll put it, a pad, and a pen on the coffee table for you.” Tim heads out of the kitchen, and he hears him moving through the office, then footsteps in the living room, and back to the kitchen. “Don’t write on it. Penny’s gonna read this one, too.”
Gibbs nods again, watching Tim debate how to take both plates of eggs, and the smoothie upstairs. He settled for moving all the eggs to one plate and balancing a fork on it.

“Breakfast in bed?”

“That’s the idea. Haven’t had a lay in in forever. Still got almost two hours before either of us needs to get ready to go anywhere, and I don’t plan on getting out of bed again until then.”

That got a small smile out of Gibbs. “Enjoy it.”

“I intend to.”

Abby was still on her side, Kelly still sucking away. She had her phone and was reading something, head propped on her hand.

“Breakfast!”

“That was faster than usual.”

“Jethro made the eggs. All I had to do was carry them up.”

“Nice of him.”

“Yep.” He takes the phone from her and hands her the smoothie. Then set the plate with the eggs on it just behind Kelly, and settles into bed next to them, back against pillows propped on the headboard. He forks up a bite of the eggs, holds them out to her, and she eats them. “I remembered to say thanks.”

She nods at him while chewing, and he gets a bite for himself. They’re good. Gibbs cooks them in butter instead of the spray oil they use, and Tim thinks he adds milk and sour cream to them, too. Whatever it is, they’re tasty. Probably bad for him. But, once again, tasty.

“How’d last night go. When I got up to feed Kelly, I could hear crying. Didn’t sound like you,” Abby asks after she swallows.

“Probably was me some, too, but you were hearing him. Didn’t wake you up, did it?”

“Nah.” She shakes her head and Kelly looks up, wondering why her breakfast is moving. “Only one cry is on my wake-up-right-this-second-sensor, and it’s not his.”

“Good.”

“It’s funny, because Kelly crying did wake me up. Heard that and the switch flipped, and I was up. But the whole time I could hear him in the background, but that didn’t do it. Slept right through that until her little, baby cry cut through it.” Abby sips her smoothie. “This is really good. You do anything different?”

“Nope. Probably just got a really good batch of peaches.”

Another nod. “So, how drunk did you get him?”

Tim chewed another bite of egg. “Cold sober.”

Abby’s eyebrows went high as she sipped her drink. “Wow.”
“Yeah. Also got him to agree to see a counselor.”

Her jaw drops. Finally she pulls it back up again. “It doesn’t count as sober if you shoot him up with something other than alcohol.”

He smirks at that. If you had asked him last week what it would take to make Leroy Jethro Gibbs go see a counselor, he would have said, ‘narcotics.’ “Really, sober. Not a chemical in his system. Well, maybe pain meds, but if he was on them, he took them before I got in there with him. I told him that unless he wanted to start planning his retirement party, he was going to talk to someone, at least twice. Not letting him back on the team until he does it.”

Now she’s looking worried. “How’s that going to work when Tony takes over?”

And that’s something that didn’t occur to Tim, either. Fortunately, it also didn’t seem to occur to Gibbs. “We didn’t get into that. But I told Vance that I’d hold the team until it was ready to work again, and I will. And if that means Tony spends some time working for me, or he and Ziva decide they need some vacation time to work things out, both of those options are fine. But they can’t work together if they don’t get this sorted out, and Jethro’s been struggling with this guilt for too damn long. I’m in charge right now, so I’ll abuse the hell out of my power to get them moving in the right direction.”

She smiles at that. “Tim McGee, Benevolent Dictator For Life.”

“Damn right, baby.”

“Eggs,” she says, pointing at the currently empty fork. He fetches another bite for her, she took it, chewing, and then asks, “What did you say to him that got him crying?”

He took his own bite. “Long talk about fear and love and back to Shannon again, because it always goes back to Shannon, and I said I was glad he didn’t kill himself after she and Kelly died.”

Abby blinks hard and swallows. “That’d do it. That makes me want to cry, and I wasn’t there.”

“Yeah.” It certainly had made him want to cry.

“Think it helped?”

“Honestly?” The expression on his face makes it clear he’s not sure.

“Nah, lie to me, I like the happy sunshine and roses version.”

“He’s all better. Took the ring off before we went to bed. He’s hunting for a new red head online while we speak.”

She poked him and stole his bite of eggs.

“I don’t know if it helped. I’m not even sure what helped looks like. But I know he thinks it’s not cool for Ziva to run into a bomb for Tony, but perfectly fine for Tony to run into one for Ziva, and that it’s based entirely on the fact that he didn’t save Shannon and Kelly and feels like if he couldn’t do that he should have died with them. And I’m not a psychologist, but even I know that’s not a good thing.”

“That’s why you got talking suicide?”

“Yeah. Asked why he didn’t do it. Not sure what answer I was hoping for, something to link into not
feeling like it was his fault, but he couldn’t give me that, couldn’t tell me why he didn’t pull the trigger, and I don’t know if he doesn’t know or if he just can’t tell me. He did tell me he was a lot closer than I thought he’d been—“

“How close?”

“Knows what a gun barrel tastes like.”

Tim can see her heart breaking for Jethro, and since he’d felt it the night before he knows exactly where she is. “Yeah. So, I told him I was glad he didn’t do it. And he spent an hour or so crying on me. And I have no idea if it helped, or changed anything, or… He’s in a pissy mood this morning. But he’s also saying he didn’t sleep well, his knee hurts, and he’s bored.”

“Is he lying?”

Tim shrugs. “I’m sure all of those things are true. I don’t know if that’s the whole story. I gave him Shadow Force to beta read to help with bored.”

“Oh my. That’ll be interesting.” Abby beta read Most Precious and Traitor Within and she knows exactly how rough ‘rough’ is. (She’s one of the few people who knows that his spelling skills drop in a direct ratio to how deeply he’s into whatever part of the story he’s telling. The more into it he is, the faster he types, the worse the spelling gets. Anything that’s spelled perfectly with precise grammar and all the commas in the right places is filler written to bridge one scene to the next.)

“To say the least.”

“Did you explain that he’s not proof reading?”

“No. Just said it was the first read through, and I wanted his thoughts.”

She shakes her head a bit, images of lots and lots of red ink.

He took another bite of the eggs. “Maybe it doesn’t have to help,” he says, taking it back to Gibbs, and she doesn’t seem to be having any trouble following that he’s not talking about Shadow Force. “Nothing changed or got better with my parents by talking about it. In fact, I think it’s safe to say things got worse with my Mom. So, talking about it didn’t ‘help’ but sharing it wasn’t bad, either.”

“Maybe it’s enough to just know the people who love you love you and they’re not going to freak out or run away if you let them know who you actually are?”

“Yeah.” He nudged her hand, taking a sip of her smoothie. “You’re right, that did come out well.”

She nods. “Sooo… are you going to talk to your mom at some point?”

He flashes her a little dismissive gesture before saying, “I should. But like going to the dentist, I know it’s going to hurt, I know I’m not going to like it, and I have the feeling it’s not going to provide me with any real benefit.”

“Going to the dentist is good for you!”

“Yeah, I know.” And he does. Which does not mean he likes doing it. Just being in the waiting room gives him a headache. “You and everyone else on earth says that. I’m still not buying that I’m any better off than I would have been by just brushing, flossing, and only going when my teeth actually hurt.”
Her eyes narrow a little. Abby’s beyond religious about taking care of her teeth. And unlike Catholicism, which she sees no issues with him sort of just barely going along for the ride, doing a good job taking care of his teeth is something she expects from him as well. As a result, he’s been seeing his dentist a lot more often.

“Not saying I won’t go. Just don’t think it’s good for anything.”

“Uh huh.” She changes the subject, a little, or gets it back to where it was. “You don’t think talking to her again would be a benefit?”

He rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “Sometimes I miss her. Sometimes I forget, and I miss her so bad that I just ache for it.” He smiles, but it’s a sad smile. “Lots of things I want to tell her about Kelly, but that doesn’t last more than a minute or two because I remember, and so much of that crap was her. There are three emails from her in my inbox now. Haven’t been brave enough to open them.”

“You might be pleasantly surprised,” she says with her hopeful voice.

“I might get my heart ripped out again. And I’m… If that’s what it’s going to be, I can wait. And honestly, I can wait for good, too, because speaking of things where I don’t know what helped looks like, this is another one where… I just don’t know. Say there’s a massive, I’m so sorry, apology in there. It wouldn’t change things.”

Abby squeezes his knee and kisses him. He kisses back, feeling the comfort of her touch, and the deep peace of not having to do anything about this. She won’t push him, and right now, that matters.

When he pulls back, she detaches Kelly from her left breast. “Come on baby, you’re all done on that side.”

Tim picks up the plate, holding it and the smoothie so Abby can get herself sitting up, Kelly on her lap, face over her knees, and start the gentle percussion that goes along with coaxing a burp out of their daughter.

In a few seconds, there’s a massive belch, the sort that Tim can’t imagine can come from someone so small. “Can’t believe she can burp like that. I can’t do that, and I’m seventeen times her size.”

“You don’t live on an all milk diet.”

“There is that.” Tim scoots over a bit, and Abby rolls over, getting Kelly set on her right, while Tim walks around the bed to sit facing her again.

Kelly got latched on, slurping away, dreamy expression on her face, looking really relaxed.

“That is one really blissed-out little girl,” Tim says as he gently strokes her hair.

“I think she’s getting a dose of my post-climax oxytocin.”

“Hmmm… Interesting side effect.” Tim stretches, laying on his stomach, nuzzling Kelly’s ear, enjoying the smell of clean baby, and the ridiculously soft feel of her silk fine hair against his cheek. Abby’s fingers trace down his back, and he purrs at that.

“You’re looking pretty blissed-out, too.”

He kisses Kelly’s head, and looks up at Abby, smile in his eyes. “I’m at home, in bed, with my girls, pretty high on my own dose of oxytocin, and I’ve still got more than an hour before I have to do
anything besides lay here and enjoy you two. I am pretty blissed-out.” He leans up on his elbows to kiss Abby. “How about you, feeling pretty good right now?”

“Yeah. Be even better if the rest of those eggs got over here and into my mouth.”

He reaches over to the bedside table, and grabs the plate, probably about one egg left on there, and begins feeding it to her.

For a moment there was just the sound of content sucking/chewing, then Abby says, “You never did give us any details, how was Bootcamp? You and Jimmy fought Ziva together? How’d that go?”

“We spent the first two rounds tripping over each other.” He touches one of the bruises on his shoulder. “I think that one’s Jimmy’s elbow.”

“Ow.”

“Not too bad.” He holds up his left arm, still mottled with bruises from defending against Ziva. “This is sore.”

“You should put more ice on it.”

She finishes the last bite of eggs, and he puts the plate back on the bedside table, then scooted down, laying on his side, facing her, moving close enough so her leg could rest on his hip, Kelly snug between them. “I should, but I don’t feel like getting up right now. Anyway, when I was heading toward the ring, I heard Ziva asking Jimmy if we’d ever done anything like this, and he said we’d danced,”

“Uhhhh… Did I miss something…”

“He meant the four of us. But I said the same thing to him.”

She winks at that. “You know, if you two ever do do that…”

“Yeah, you want pictures and so does Breena.” He rolls his eyes and sticks out his tongue a bit. “Anyway, two rounds in it occurred to me that if we had some music maybe we wouldn’t be tripping all over each other, because we have danced as a foursome and we didn’t spend the whole time tripping over each other and obviously something was different, so maybe it was the lack of music. Got my old, college Nine Inch Nails favorites together. Jimmy knew them, too. And we got a whole lot better. We even won round nine. Then Ziva and Jimmy added their own music. It was fun. And we were a lot better with the music, even Ziva’s music, which neither of us had even heard before.”

Abby thinks about that. “Of course you’re better at it with music. When we dance, you and Jimmy lead. You’re like two poles, and Breena and I move between you, but each of you runs your own dance. When it’s all four together, whichever one of you is deeper in the press keeps leading. But when you fight, no one’s leading, or you both are, so it’s a mess. Add in the music, and it leads, so you work better.”

“Makes sense. And when it was NIN, or, Jimmy picked the Mortal Kombat soundtrack— “

“Good choice.”

“Yeah. But we both knew that music so we were doing better with the whole I look to my left a little and he nods a bit and between the two of us we get Ziva off balance.”

Abby seemed to be thinking about that, too. Her fingers traced up and down his shoulder, skirting
the bruise. “Think you’ll do it again?”

“Yeah, I do. It was good, and I kind of want to show it off to Gibbs.”

“I want to watch.”

His eyebrows went high. In six months Abby’s never wanted to watch them fight. Something about not enjoying seeing him getting hit. Which he understands. If she was joining in on Bootcamp, he wouldn’t want to watch, either. Even if it’s not a real fight, even if it’s just practice, he doesn’t want to see anyone hit Abby.

Then it occurred to him what was different about this and why Abby might want to watch. “You’re never going to get us to dance with each other, so you want to see this?”

He saw the grin spread across her face as she watched him understand the context for wanting to watch. “What’s not to like? You, Jimmy, hot, sweaty, moving together, loud music, yeah, I like that a whole lot. Breena will, too.”

He laughs at that and tries to think of what it must have looked like from the outside, but he doesn’t have too much of an idea. He was so focused on the fight that the only images he has are what his eyes were seeing. “Probably not as interesting as you think it’ll be.”

“Oh, it will be.” There’s that sexy grin again. “Wait. Your dream. Club, loud music, hot, sweaty… How much of that started fighting with Jimmy?”

“The music and the way my body felt.”

“Was Jimmy in the dream?”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m still a straight guy, so, no. He wasn’t. Not having guys in my sex dreams is one of the defining characteristics of being a straight guy. Just you and Breena.”

He gently nibbles that little naughty smile that lit up her lips. “Hey, I can hope, right?”

“Hope all you want, love.” He shook his head, rolling his eyes a little. “Hope all you want.”

“So, are you saying you’ve never had a sex dream about a guy?”

Tim’s eyebrows scrunch together. His immediate answer is no, but he decides to think about it for a minute to make sure. “Nope. Or if I ever have, it’s not the sort of thing I remembered when I woke up.”

“ Weird.” She looks really perplexed by that.

“Actually, um… no. I think that’s pretty damn normal for the kind of guy I am. I’m fairly sure Jimmy and Tony don’t dream about sex with men, either.”

“Or would never admit to it if they did.”

“Come on, Jimmy’d tell if he did. I just don’t think he does.”

“You could ask.”

“Umm… no…” he says while shaking his head.

She thought about that. “I’d ask.”
“And nothing is stopping you from asking.”

Kelly’s sucking started to slow down. Abby began stroking her cheek. “Oh no you don’t. No falling asleep, yet. Gotta finish both sides. Come on, baby, wake up.”

Her eyes lazed open and the sucking got a little faster. But she’s also looking a little miffed at the whole not being allowed to just drift off thing.

“That looks exactly like your I’m so done with you look,” Abby says with a chuckle.

“You’re not done with us, are you?” Tim asks, nuzzling her cheek and shoulder.

Her eyes track toward him, but she’s pretty focused on the food, so she doesn’t try to turn her head.

“She’ll be six weeks old tomorrow,” he says, slipping his index finger into her tightly clenched fist. “Hard to believe you’ve only been here six weeks.”

“Feels longer to you?” Abby asks. It’s been a very long six weeks for her.

“Longer, shorter, I don’t know. She’s got a doctor’s appointment tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah. I’ve got one, too, and so does Gibbs.”

“Okay, I’m available for whatever chauffer service is needed.”

“Good. I think his appointment is the same time mine is.”

“We’ll make it work.” Tim sighs and stretches again. Bright yellow sunlight is striping between their blinds and over Abby. He trails his fingers along the stripes. Kelly’s in her shadow right now, no stripes for her, and they pick back up again on his side.

They lay there, Kelly nursing away. Tim idly tracing his fingers over Abby’s side and hip, Abby’s leg curled over his hip, both of them enjoying this series of quiet moments with each other.

And eventually Kelly finished up. And like before, she was looking awfully sleepy and peaceful. Tiny babies don’t smile, but they can look pretty satisfied. Once Abby got her detached, Tim picked her up, patting her back while taking her to her room. Another massive baby belch, and then once again she goes down to sleep.

That makes him think something, about relative time, and he’s getting ready to mention it when he heads back into their room, but Abby’s not in their bed.

A second of listening lets him hear the shower running, and turning toward the bathroom shows him the door is open. Shower time together works for him.

He heads over there and sees she’s not got the shower on. She’s filling the tub, sitting on the edge, water lapping at her ankles. Laying around, talking, warm water, yeah, he’s good for that, too.

He shucked off his pj pants and sat next to her. “When I put her down, I was thinking, for us a day is one wake up to the next. I wonder if it’s the same for her. She’s growing so fast, and if each sleep cycle is like a day for her…”

Abby shrugs. “Could be. I always thought a day was on dawn to the next.”

“Or that. Sometimes wonder how this all feels to her.”
“Yeah. She lives in a world without words, barely any images, it’s all touch and sound and smells and weird blurry things whizzing past.”

“She knows these.” He lightly touched her breast.

“Well, she spends a lot of time with them up close enough she can focus on them. I bet once upon a time we all knew that.”

“Probably. Think that’s why even straight girls like breasts? All those good, warm, being taken care of, safe, and happy associations.”

“I think that might be why you like breasts.”

“I like them for a whole lot of reasons,” he says with a smile, kissing her shoulder, “but yeah, that’s on the list, too.”

She leans over and kisses him quickly. “Temperature on the water good?”

“Yeah, feels good.”

“Great.” She shut off the water, and he slipped in, back against the slanted side of the tub, and she followed, settling between his legs, head against his chest.

“Mmm…” she purrs at him.

He kisses her temple. “Yeah, liking this a whole lot.”

Her fingers close between his, left hand in left hand, wedding rings next to each other. His head drops back against the edge of the tub, and they both just rest with each other.

He’s getting pretty close to drifting off when his brain wanders back to ‘not that bad.’

He strokes her shoulder and arm, settling his right hand on her stomach, just below her belly button, about to ask, when she says, “It’s kind of trippy.”

“What is?”

“I can’t feel that.”

“Mmm?”

“There’s like a four inch wide strip below my belly button to my c-section scar, where I’ve got no feeling.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” She took his hand in hers and traced the edges, about four inches wide and four inches long, just below her navel to the top of her pubic hair. “No sensation at all there. Just completely numb.”

“Is it supposed to be like that?” He’s feeling a little alarmed by the fact that six weeks later she’s still numb.

“I don’t know. I read that numbness could be a side effect of a c-section, but it didn’t say how much. Gets better supposedly.”

“Like, gets better in a few weeks or months or…”
“Don’t know. Have to ask Dr. Draz about it tomorrow.”

He skimmed his fingers from her navel to just below her scar. “Nothing?”

“I can feel where you are now. The bottom side of the scar has full sensation,” she moved his fingers to the point where they were tracing the bottom edge of the scar, “but anything above it on the midline is dead.”

“Nothing at all, not that tingly dull feeling you get with Novocain?”

“Nothing at all. It’s like your hand vanishes when you get there.”

“Huh…” He’s not sure what to do with that. It doesn’t sound like she’s complaining, just telling him, and that, along with a whole lot of other things, goes into the seventy million reasons why it’s great to be a guy file.

“Were you about to say something? I think I might have cut you off.”

“What does ‘not that bad’ mean?”

“Not that bad.”

Yeah, that’s not helpful at all. Not that bad covers paper cuts and stubbed toes to the bruises all over him right now. “Like, sore, or achy, or…”

“Kind of like anal without enough lube and you didn’t stretch enough ahead of time.”

“Fuck!” He’s utterly horrified by that. Been there, done that, didn’t like it at all. “That’s not ‘not that bad,’ that fucking hurts!”

She shrugs. “Then it’s a bad example, because it’s not that bad. I still got off. Too tight, stretching further than was comfortable. Like” she pauses and says, “That’s not going to mean anything to you. It’s just not comfortable. Doesn’t hurt as much as getting a tattoo.”

“The whole way through, or does it get better as we got going?”

“The whole way through. Gonna take a while for my hormones to get all the way back into synch, and until then…”

He sighs and kisses her shoulder and makes a mental promise to keep his face as smooth as possible. “I know. Jimmy said right now your body is doing everything it can to not get pregnant again. I get it. Just, really, don’t like the idea of hurting you, at all. Even if it is ‘not that bad.’ Especially since we aren’t getting a lot of time for this, I want it to be really, really good when we do.”

“I know. We’ll go slow next time, start with one finger and tongue and figure out what feels good.”

“Yes! You, me, Kelly’s nap time, one finger at a time and lots of lube and my tongue driving you crazy, and… Didn’t you get some sort of surprise or something?”

“I did,” she sounds very happy as she says that.

“And do I ever get to see it?”

“Tonight? Tomorrow morning? Wanted you to be awake enough to appreciate it.”

He smiles at that, kisses the top of her head. “Looking forward to it.”
She cups her hand under the water, then slowly dribbles a stream of it down his knee. “So, what’s on for lunch with Jimmy?”

“We never got to Ender. Stuff with Ziva took precedence, but he still wants to know what’s up. And then there’s the thing with Ziva and Tony and how Gibbs works into that. And just haven’t had the chance to really talk to him since last weekend.”

“Good. Glad you’re getting time with him.”

“Even though it means we’re not spending the day in bed.”

“I really should check in on Ziva. If that wasn’t true…”

Tim nods. “If that wasn’t true, I’d cancel on him. He’d understand.”

“Yeah, he would. But if that wasn’t true, you’d have talked it out yesterday, and all the rest of the stuff that has to get done today would have been done, and we would have had the chance to go to bed together at a sane hour last night.”

“Yeah.”

She lifts his hand, kissing his palm. “I’m liking today, though.”

“Yeah. I am too.”

Abby sat up, away from him, and twisted around so she could face him, wrapping her legs around his hips. “You’re going to talk to Jimmy about Ender?”

“Yeah. Still got to tell Ziva and Tony, too.”

“Draga?”

“Probably not.”

“And Tony and Ziva can wait until they get themselves straightened out?”

“Yeah. Not giving them any distractions they don’t need. I mean, I can easily see both of them grabbing onto that and ignoring what’s going on with them.”

“Because that’s not a common pattern for us at all. Finding something else to think about to get away from our problems.” She scoots closer, wrapping her arms around him as well as her legs. “So, it’s been two days, you’ve talked and fought and fucked… How are you doing with Ender?”

He blows out a long breath, and drops his forehead to hers, his arms circling her back.

“I’m still here. And I think I’m okay. I mean, you know I’ve got legendary not-dealing-with-it skills, but I think I’m okay.”

“Still angry?”

He half shrugs. “I’m always going to be angry at that bastard. And if Kort knows what’s good for him, he’ll stay the fuck away from me for the rest of his life, because I will hit him so hard I will break my fist on him, and enjoy every second of the pain because it’ll hurt him even worse.”

“Speaking of maybe seeing a counselor…”
“Cranston’s going to be busy soon,” Tim says, too quickly.

Abby knows a bad excuse when she hears one. “Yeah, because she’s the only counselor on Earth.”

“I know. I get it.” ‘Cause Tim also knows a bad excuse when he makes one. “But, I’ll tell you, and I’ll talk to Jimmy, and eventually tell Tony and Ziva, and then I want to bury it. Just let the fucker go.”

“Can you?” The look on her face is concerned. She sleeps with him, knows how he gets nightmares, knows how the things that he pushes out of his waking mind come back to visit sometimes.

“Yeah. I really think I can. Not losing any more sleep over that son of a bitch.”

“Okay.”

They both know that means she’s letting it drop for now, but reserving the right to bring it back up again if it seems to be haunting him. He kisses her gently, nodding, accepting those terms.

Her finger trace over his goatee. “So, shaving it off?”

He nods.

“Want me to do it?”

That gets a smile out of him. He’d certainly enjoyed it the last time she shaved him. “Yeah, let me get it trimmed first. Are the trimmers still in the drug cabinet?”

“I haven’t moved them. Have you?”

“Don’t think so.” He gets up, water dripping off him, and takes the two steps to the medicine cabinet. “Yep, still here.” A minute’s worth of buzzing resulted in a much, much shorter goatee. (And a lot of dark brown stubble in the sink.)

He grabs a new blade for his razor and heads back to the tub.

Abby smiles at him as he sits in front of her. “Hey, you’ve got lips again!”

“Ha ha ha.”

She scoots closer, taking the blade from him and fitting it into his razor, while he reaches behind him to grab his shaving cream from the little shelf it lived on.

Abby puts the razor on the side of the tub and takes the cream from him, rubbing it between her palms to make it foam, then gently stroking it onto his face.

“Hold still.”

He blinks in response holding still very clear in his expression.

That also gets a smile out of her as she rinses off her hands and began to carefully run the blade over his face.

“I missed how this smells.”

He squeezes her foot.

“Okay, I’ll stop talking until you can talk back.”
One more squeeze.

The slightly raspy sound of the blade pulling over his face, the crisp, slightly citrus scent of his shaving cream, and the feel of her fingers as she tilts his head one way and then the next, making sure she gets all of it, the smooth slide of sharp steel across his skin, and right now, Tim’s feeling very home, very cherished, and just, all over, good.

She dunks the blade into the tub, swishing it through the water one last time, then touches his lips.

“There’s the face I fell in love with.”
"Family is exhausting," Tim says as he rolls the stroller next to the table and sits down across from Jimmy.

Jimmy smiles and tickles Kelly's feet. She looks awfully startled, in that at any given time she's not really aware of having feet, so having someone mess with them is something of a shock.

"I think she's going to be ticklish." Jimmy looks up from Kelly and really sees Tim. "You got your face back! Moving back into work mode?"

Tim shrugs, not feeling any need to explain why his goatee is gone. "I'm ticklish. Abby is. Wouldn't be a surprise if Kelly is."

"I didn't know that about you. So, which branch of the family is keeping you from your beauty sleep? Baby or Grandpa."

"Last night, Grandpa. She's actually sleeping through the four AM feed now."

"Congratulations." And once again Jimmy engages Kelly, picking her up, cradling her in his arms, leaning in close, and saying, "Good girl, letting mom and dad sleep. You keep this up, you're gonna end up with a little brother or sister."

"Maybe."

Jimmy's eyes shoot up from Kelly and back to Tim. "Maybe? Already?"

"Probably not. She's nursing. Only happened once. But, we'll find out for sure next week."

Jimmy laughs. "So, on purpose, or did you guys just forget?"

Tim's shuffling through the baby bag, searching for Kelly's bottle. "On purpose but not planned."

"What does that even mean?" Jimmy asks, looking curious.

Tim looks up at him. "Come on, we've talked about this. You almost get killed, and really there's only one thing your body wants to do to convince you and her you're still alive."

"Ah. Right."

"So, plan was condoms until Kelly's three months old, try not to have two kids in one year, but got home, almost died, and we were following the plan, but… It just felt wrong."

"If you're doing it to convince yourself you haven't died, it should make a baby, or at least try?"

"Yeah something like that."

Jimmy nods as Tim finds the bottle. "I get that."

Tim pulls it out, and shakes it up, then hands it to Jimmy, because it's easier to hand the bottle over than the baby.

"I'm on feeding duty?"
"You picked her up."

"Lucky for you, Kelly, I know what I'm doing." And he does, one arm holding Kelly, the other holding the bottle. "But it has been a while, so I appreciate you helping me get back into practice." Kelly latches on and sucks greedily, looking a little confused about this person who's holding her and talking in the perky voice. But he's got food, and that makes him her favorite person. Once she's sucking away, Jimmy looks over at Tim again. "You know, we're required by law to tease the ever living hell out of you if you end up with two kids in one year."

Tim rolls his eyes and nods.

"End up with three in two years and we drag you off to the urologist for the vasectomy whether you want it or not."

"Oh, come on!"

Jimmy shakes his head a little. He's joking, but he's serious, too. The kind of tone that says he doesn't think it's going to be an issue, but making sure Tim knows that it would be an issue if it happened. "That's just not cool. It's not good for her, at all. Really not good for her." Comments about Abby's age and why three kids in two years might not be completely out of the question are left unspoken, but Tim gets them anyway. "Once, okay. Twice, that's a pattern, and it ends there, because it's really not good for her."

"I know that. I'm not a moron."

"Just making sure you know the lines."

"I end up with three kids in two years, and I'll take myself in."

"Good." Jimmy looks back down at Kelly. "Want some time to enjoy you all on your own!"

"Is this her?" Dana, their usual waitress at Carlo's, asks as she comes over, setting a cup of decaf coffee in front of Tim without even being asked. Sometimes it's good to eat at one of the same four places all the time.

"This is her," Tim says.

"Oh my God! She's adorable." Dana leans down to pet Kelly's cheek. She flashes that irked look. Dana laughs at that. "She's what... six weeks old now?"

"Exactly six weeks old tomorrow."

"Where's Abby?"

"Having a girl's lunch with Ziva right now. So I'm on baby duty."

"Uh, excuse me," Jimmy says. "You're loafing. I'm on baby duty."

Dana smiles at that. "And you look like you know what you're doing."

"Well, I should. Not like I've never done this before."

Dana nods. "So, you two getting your regular lunches?"

"Yes." Jimmy replies.
Tim shakes his head. "Feeling pretty hungry today. I'd like a bowl of tomato soup to go with the grilled chicken salad."

"No problem. Should have it up in a few minutes."

"Thanks, Dana."

"Soup in July?"

"I'm hungry."

Jimmy stares at him, at the shaved goatee, and just nods, laughing a little, looking really smug. Tim grins. Then Jimmy looks back down to Kelly. "She's so tiny. It sounds so dumb, but you forget. This morning Molly was tiny."

"She is."

"She's a toddler. Kelly's what, eight pounds?"

"Thereabouts. She's got a check-up tomorrow, so we'll find out for sure."

Jimmy touches Kelly's face, fingers tracing over her cheek. "You forget how blue their eyes are, too."

"End of December."

"Yep."

"When's the twenty week scan?"

"Earliest they'll do it is eighteen weeks, so we've got an appointment for the 11th."

"You want us to come?"

"Abby maybe. You don't need to take time off for it."

"I don't need to, but if you want support, we'll both be there."

Jimmy looks up at him from Kelly. "It's going to be fine. I know that. The nuchal fold came back normal, the genetic counseling said everything was good, but I'm still really nervous." He nods towards Dana, who's waiting on another table. "We still haven't told anyone who doesn't see Breena in person. Haven't told my mom or brother, yet."

"It's normal."

"Yeah. Great. Still hate feeling afraid like this."

Tim nods, smiling sadly, understanding.

"Anyway…" Jimmy says, changing the subject, because until his newest child is alive and healthy and in his arms, this fear just isn't going away, so something else to focus on will help. "Tell me the whole story with Ender."

So Tim did, happy to get Jimmy thinking of something else. By the time he was done, Kelly had finished her bottle and was sleeping in her stroller, and he and Jimmy were both on post-lunch drinks.
Tim wraps up by saying, "I'm tempted to hack Hanson," he sees Jimmy doesn't remember which one of the names that was, "The head of the CIA." Jimmy nods. "See what he's got on Ender, what he was actually doing. But that's probably just rubbing salt into the wound. It won't make him any less dead."

"Might let you know what happened to James."

"Yeah. Might. Did he kill James? Was he so committed to the role he kept working with a guy who killed his brother? Did he even know? No, he had to. If he didn't kill James himself, he had to have a plan to get him off the ship. If he didn't have that plan, Simmers and Blake would have known something was wrong when the ship didn't blow."

"Think he was cold enough to leave the body there so he'd have a plausible excuse for how the detonator got found?"

Tim blows out a frustrated breath. "That's absolute zero level cold."

Jimmy just stares at Tim.

Tim shrugs. "I don't know. For all I know, Ender never mentioned them being brothers and just played it as he found a guy who really looked like him. Running the faces through the recognition software and 'planning from there.'"

"Maybe."

"Yeah. Anyway… it looks like Vance wasn't going to tell me. But now I know. And I do need to tell Tony. And I'm worried about telling Ziva. I don't want to do it now, because they've got enough on their plates right now."

"Yeah. What was so different about this time? My sense was as soon as anything dangerous happened, you all ran right into it. That the Venn diagram between self-preservation and your team was two circles on opposite sides of the page." Jimmy says, circling each of his forefingers. "Is it just because they're married now?"

"Spent most of last night talking with Gibbs about this. But, short answer, no. It's not just because they're married. Day after they started dating, Tony was telling me that if it's ever him or her, the right answer is her, and he didn't need to because the right answer has always been her. Before her, the right answer was Kate. And maybe that's stupid and sexist, but… especially after we lost Kate…"

Jimmy nods at him. He gets that.

"I mean we all know Ziva can take care of herself. So we don't… well, we didn't used to… get stupid about it. But no matter what, she was the one who was going to come home. I mean, hell, we went to Somalia to get her back. We didn't even know she was still alive. Actually Somalia should have been a good hint on how insane those two are on this."

"Those two,' if memory serves, you went, too, Tim."

"Yeah. A quarter of my family just died. I'm not letting two thirds of what's left run off on a suicide mission without at least someone who actually wants to come home on the team. I didn't go for Ziva. I hoped she was alive, but I didn't feel it in my gut. I went for Tony and Jethro. If she was dead, I wanted to make sure they actually came home. Before we left, Abby said that to me. 'No matter what you find out there, you make sure they come home.'"
"Isn't she supposed to say that to Gibbs?"

"I would have thought so. Especially then. But she said it to me."

"Because that time it wasn't about making sure you fought right, it was about letting the white whale go before it killed you."

"I guess."

"So, they're both kind of insane on this, but you guys get almost killed every year or two and until this time, Tony and Gibbs kept it under control, what was different?"

"Apparently, he and Tony, and me, you, too probably, are allowed to go on suicide missions if there's any shot at all of getting the girls out. Hell, even if there isn't any shot of getting them out. Save them or die trying is perfectly okay."

Jimmy nods along with that. "Sounds right."

"Yeah. Here's the change. Actually, no, it's not a change. They've probably always felt that way. Here's what came into play on this one: they aren't allowed to save us or die trying."

"Oh."

"Yeah. We're allowed to be the big damn heroes, but they aren't."

"Huh." Jimmy looks perplexed. "Like, I get that if we're talking about Abby or Breena, but Ziva? She's better at this stuff than Gibbs and Tony, right?"

"I think so. But, apparently this was the first time Ziva had a good shot of getting free, and ran into the danger, and, on top of that, apparently both of them acted like freaking twits, at least, if what Gibbs was saying was true, which didn't do much to improve anyone's confidence in the whole situation. But, from what Gibbs was saying, there was nothing she could do by running in, but die with them, and that's not okay.."

"Huh. So, she runs in, freaks them both out, and now everything is upside down?"

"Looks like it. And then apparently he and Tony decided to have some sort of heart to heart about it..."

"Because getting marriage advice from the guy who's been divorced three times is such a great idea."

"Marriage advice from the guy who's been divorced three times because he's never gotten over losing his first wife, and is still walking wounded on that front... I don't even think it was marriage advice so much as how to deal with fear, and fear of losing your spouse is the one area you do not want Gibbs' help. He suggested to Tony that she not be on the team anymore. Tony latched onto it, added his own particular version of screwed up to it, and now Ziva's at your place."

"Anyway, that was my half of it. Talking with him until late last night. How about your half, how's Ziva?"

Jimmy looks slightly disturbed. "It's really nerve wracking to be in a home with Ziva when she's pissed. She goes really, really quiet, so you never hear her move, she just appears out of nowhere."

"Any less pissed, now?"

Jimmy shrugged. "She appeared to be pleased at the idea that Tony might have been talking to
someone, but he doesn't get any sympathy for having a hard past. That's not really right. There's sympathy, but I can't ask her to overlook him being stupid because he's had a hard past. I can't say to her, 'Cut him some slack, his mom died,' because hers did, too. And 'He's flipping out because Kate died' doesn't mean much when she had to kill Ari two days later."

"Gibbs killed Ari."

Jimmy shakes his head. "No. He didn't. She did. Gibbs set it up as a trap, him as the bait, and trusted Ziva to do the job."

"Oh, God."

"Yeah."

Tim shakes his head a little, sighing. "I actually said to him last night that I didn't know how he could let himself love Ziva so much, so quickly, given how dangerous her life is."

"Guess we were talking in parallel. I suggested that maybe she and Tony might benefit from some marriage counseling."

Tim's nodding along with that. "Got Gibbs to agree to see someone."

"How much alcohol did you pump into him to do that?"

"Abby asked me the same thing."

Jimmy looks at him expectantly.

"It's still my team, and I told him he wasn't going back until he'd seen someone. Twice. And I'd check."

"I'm glad I don't work for you."

That gets a smirk out of Tim. "How'd it go when you suggested it to Ziva? Lead balloon?"

"Not that bad, but she wasn't enthusiastic."

"What does not enthusiastic mean?"

"She stared at me like I was speaking Swahili, laughed, realized I wasn't joking, and then said she'd think about it."

"Think they'll do it?" Tim asks.

"I think they'll do everything in their power to avoid it."

"That's kind of a pattern with this group."

"Yeah, I've noticed," Jimmy says dryly. And both of them know they both also have stuff that might be better off talked with someone about, and both of them aren't doing it, either.

"You didn't go talk to someone after Jon died, right?" Tim asks. He didn't think Jimmy had, but he also hadn't known about the sleeping pills until Jimmy told him.

"Breena did. I probably should have. But she was seeing our pastor, and that's fine and makes sense, and she found it a comfort, but... I wasn't in the mood to buy what she was selling."
Tim nods at that. "Talked to Gibbs about that. He says it helps. Not right away. Nothing helps right away, but eventually you hurt less and feel less angry and the idea that they're out there, waiting for us, helps."

Jimmy shrugs. Not brushing it off, but not willing to engage it for himself. "So, Gibbs believes?"

Tim nods, not sure if he wants to say how deep Gibbs goes on that one. "I'm sure he'd talk to you about it if you ask."

"That sounds like there's a story in there."

"There is, but it's his story, not mine. Mostly. I guess some of it's mine, but not most of it."

"That's ominous sounding."

"Good choice of words there. It's... Just ask him about it sometime."

"God, that's grim."

"Yeah, well... You ever have a sex dream about another guy?" It was out of his mouth before he'd made any decision beyond maybe they didn't need to be thinking quite so much about pain and death right now.

Jimmy's staring at him like he just turned green, a thoroughly perplexed look on his face. "I think you need to leave the clowning around stuff to Tony. He's way better at it."

Tim turns his hands up in a, it's what came out, gesture. "It's not depressing."

"Okay, yeah. Just... death, pain, missing the ones we love, sex dreams with men. That's not exactly a natural progression, Tim. Why would your brain go there?"

"Got talking about it with Abby this morning. She thinks it's weird that I haven't. I thought it was pretty normal for a straight guy to not be dreaming about other guys. But I only know me. You're here. You're a straight guy. Gibbs'd just stare at me like I'm insane if I ask him. Tony'd get insulted by the question, and then lie to me. Ducky'd probably answer it, and then give me an hour long dissertation on the psychology of sexuality and Penny would kick in another hour of feminist theory of gender/preference fluidity."

"I guess."

"So..."

"You haven't?" Jimmy's sounding a bit guarded as he says that.

"No." Tim's slowly shaking his head.

"Come on, all of us have had that wake up in a cold sweat, heart pounding, wanting to wash your brain out with bleach moment."

"Well, yeah. But none of mine have involved another man."

That gets an intrigued look out of Jimmy. "If it's not another guy, what are you dreaming of that makes you want to wash your brain out with bleach."

"Just..." Tim shakes his head. "No... let's not go there."
"Okay." Jimmy's staring warily at Tim.

"So, you have?"

Jimmy rolls his eyes a little, looking slightly embarrassed. "Well, until five minutes ago, I thought we all had, at least once."

"Huh…"

"So, you really haven't?"

Tim takes another sip of his coffee. "I don't remember a lot of my dreams, but, I don't think so."

"Not buying it. You just don't remember."

Tim shrugs.

"Why were you and Abby talking about that?"

"Just laying around while she fed Kelly, talking. Got talking about sex dreams. She wanted to know if—" He realizes that he doesn't want Jimmy to have quite that level of detail for what they were talking about, so he quickly edits what he was about to say, "I ever dreamed about guys. I said no. That not dreaming about guys was part of the whole being a straight guy thing, and she seemed pretty doubtful about that. So, she'll be happy to know that she's closer to right than I am."

"I think it's the waking up and feeling really squirmy about it after that's the defining characteristic of being straight."

"Uh huh. So, does it happen a lot?"

"NO!" Jimmy's horrified by that. "Been more than twenty years since the last time."

"Hey, just asking." Yeah, well, that wasn't horribly grim, but this was probably way too damn far into overkill territory. But… but he's curious, and Jimmy isn't going to flip out about it, and there isn't another guy he can talk to about stuff like this, so… "Why squirmy after?"

"Uh?" Jimmy's staring at him like that should be a really self-evident thing.

"Just, my own brain bleach dreams usually involve someone or thing I really don't like."

"Men are pretty high on my list of someones I don't like," Jimmy says dryly.

"Someone I actively dislike. Not just some random person."

Jimmy nods at that, then asks, "Thing?"

"Like I said, we're not going there."

"How could a 'thing' make you feel all squirmy in a bad way?"

"Thing as a verb, not noun."

"Oh." Jimmy's getting the sense that he's talking uncomfortable dreams, and Tim might be talking nightmares.

"Not saying I'm interested in guys 'cause I'm not but… don't think it'd make me feel gross."
Jimmy shrugs. "It's been a long time. Might feel different about it now."

"Good point. As a teen that would have been a brain bleach dream."

"That's all I'm saying. Spent the three days after more or less wrapped around my girlfriend, because it did kind of freak me out. Now, married, kid at home, another on the way, probably not a big deal. So, your brain bleach dreams involve a someone?"

"Sounds like yours did, too."

"Not a real person. Well, yeah, real person, not like a comic character, but no one I actually knew. Yours?"

"No."

"Come on, who am I going to tell?"

"Everyone."

"So it's someone we know? A woman someone we know? Shepard?"

"Just. No. We do not need to go there."

"Please?" Jimmy's looking awfully curious, and Tim's thinking maybe this wasn't his best hop off of an uncomfortable subject gambit, ever.

"What are we? Sixteen-year-old girls?"

"Says the guy who brought this up in the first place. Was it a sixteen-year-old girl?"

"NO! Stop it."

"Fine…" Jimmy lets it trail off for a second while he drinks more of his Diet Sprite. "Ziva?"

Tim glared at Jimmy. Jimmy's eyes lit up. "Oh, you have, haven't you?"

"Yes, and you have, too, and, no, that's not the brain bleach dream and if you ever say anything about that I am writing out a detailed list of every single piece of porn on your computer and giving it to Breena, Ziva, and Abby."

"Whoa. Calm on down."

"And don't do that. Breena's stuff is on there, too, and trust me, you don't know which is mine and which is hers."

The look on Tim's face says, really, you're going to try that on me? "Ultra X Fetish Shoe House is Breena's?" he asks, completely deadpan.

Jimmy's having a very hard time not smiling. "It could be."

"No."

"Fine. If it's not Ziva…"

"You're not letting up until I talk, are you?"

"Wasn't planning on it."
"Threat still holds, and I'll tell Breena why I'm doing it, and she won't get pissed."

"Terms accepted."

"Diane."

"Gibbs' Diane?"

"Yeah. Gibbs' Diane. Night after the first time we met her. Woke up in a cold sweat wishing I could rip my eyes out."

Jimmy just laughs.

"And then, a year later, she wants me to 'hug' her."

"Oh God. You poor guy."

"Yeah." Tim shuddered. "That's kind of how the dream started, too."

"You know," Jimmy says, thinking about, "She is kind of hot."

"That wasn't the problem," Tim said seriously, because it wasn't. Diane being hot is why (probably) that dream started. "That's never the problem. She's mean and a bully and she was both of those things in the dream, too."

And suddenly Jimmy's got a much better idea of what 'thing' means.

"Sorry."

"Yeah. But Spawn of Satan reputation aside, she's actually not that bad once she opens up some. She's one of those really bright, really accomplished people who's also really insecure and covers it by attacking everyone."

"So, she's mean and a bully."

"Yeah. I guess that is the traditional mold. According to her, she was softer before Gibbs."

"You believe it?"

"I didn't then. Now... Yeah, I know him well enough I can see how it probably went. I'm sure he liked the challenge of her, because softer probably didn't mean soft. Liked that she'd stand up to him. Loved the body, because like you said, she's hot. And Tony dug up this shot of her from about the time they would have been married, and smoking hot. Ducky said he was a lot like Tony back then, so he was probably all quiet charm and those big blue eyes. But she wasn't Shannon, and he didn't love her, and she didn't know what was going on or why he's pulling back. And she's not soft, and she doesn't put up with crap, so she's going behind his back, because he won't talk to her, rummaging through his stuff, finds the pictures, he's still got his old photo albums, and she finds out he had this whole life he never mentioned. Next thing we know, she's getting friendly with Fornel."

"And we're back to why you never ask Gibbs for marriage advice."

"Or if you do, you listen to what he says, think about it, and do the opposite. So, that's mine. Who was yours?"

"Hmmm?"
"Who freaked you out so bad you spent three days glued to your girlfriend?"

Jimmy rolls his eyes. "It's really silly."

Tim just looks at him.

"Fine. The apartment we lived in was small, and Clark and I shared a room. I'd do my homework at the kitchen table, because it'd be quieter, sort of, out there, and my mom is hovering around, getting dinner ready. In our room, he'd mess with me and stuff, but out there, he wouldn't because she's right nearby. Anyway, I'd be working, and she'd be watching this show, a lot, because she was like a major Beau Bridges fan and he was the star, and I didn't pay much attention, because I'd be working. But there was this smoking hot actress on it, Talisa Soto, oh my god, just, so hot."

"I don't know who she is."

"Kind of looked like Selma Hyack."

"Oohhh…"

"Yeah. Gorgeous. Most perfect caramel colored skin and long black hair and..." Jimmy's expression gets across that it wasn't just her skin and hair he was impressed with. Tim nod, he knows what Jimmy's not saying. "So, when she was on screen, I paid less attention to my homework and a lot more to her."

"How old were you?"

"I don't know. Fifteen, sixteen, something like that."

"Okay."

"Anyway. I'm studying my history, reading through this pathetically boring text on the unification of Germany, and my mom's got the show on, and I fall asleep studying, and I start dreaming about her, which was great, but there was also this twerp on the show, a guy about my age, and suddenly he was in the dream, which was kind of weird, but not terrible, and then she wasn't in the dream anymore, that wasn't good at all, and I wake up sticky and horrified with my mom asking me what I was moaning about."

"Oh lord."

"Yeah, talk about conversations you don't ever want to have with your mom while sitting at the kitchen table, let alone conversations you don't want to end with, 'Well, come on, clear up, we're having dinner in three minutes.'"

"No." Tim's somewhere between horrified on Jimmy's behalf and about to burst out laughing.

"Yeah. She's just standing there, staring at me, waiting for me to get up."

Tim's vibrating and biting his lip he's trying so hard not to laugh. Then Jimmy rolls his eyes and smiles, giving Tim permission to lose it, and he dissolves into a laughing fit.

After a minute he says, "Sorry, I know I shouldn't laugh at that. At least you could use the books for cover."

"Which I needed. All I want to do is get a shower and die of embarrassment, and she's like, 'Come on, Jimmy, we're having pot roast.'"
"What'd you do?"

"Lurched up, ran to the bathroom, made myself puke, because once again, little apartment, and you could hear everything in there, so if I didn't sound sick, she'd be knocking on the door, wanting to know what was up, then got the shower, and spent the rest of the night in bed, playing sick."

Tim shook his head. "I have to say, I'm deeply glad to have never had that experience."

"Yeah. Could have gone without it, too."

Kelly chirped a bit.

"I know that sound. That's the it's halfway through my nap time, you need to get moving if you want me to be home to Abby by my next feed call," Tim says.

"Then I won't keep you."

"Last question, is Ziva going home anytime soon?"

"She didn't have a plan when I last talked to her."

"Okay. I'm going to get Kelly home, and then I need to track down Tony, see how he's doing."

"Let me know how it goes."

"Will do."
Feel like company? Tim texts to Tony as Abby takes Kelly from him. His original first opening line, Are you alone, went by the wayside when he heard Ziva’s voice coming from his office.

“She’s talking to Gibbs?”

They hear her voice get very loud.

Abby cringes a bit. “Yelling might be a better description.”

“Is he saying anything back to her?”

Abby shakes her head. “Not that I can hear.”

“How long?”

“Over an hour now.”

“Phew,” Tim says as shakes his head lightly.

His phone buzzed. Not really.

Too damn bad. Not leaving you alone all day.

Not alone.

Cranston still over?

No. Talking to Ziva.

Tim sat next to Abby, showing her the screen. Abby shook her head. Tim holds up his hands. “What do I do with that?”

“Call him on his BS and make him man the hell up and deal with this.”

Tim shrugs at that. “He might just really need the alone time.” Tim knows that sometimes he just needs to be on his own, he figures that Tony probably does, too.

“Then don’t spend too long with him. But go, talk to him, or sit next to him if that’s what he needs. But this isn’t good.”

She’s in my office yelling at Gibbs. You at home?

Yes.

I’ll be over in twenty minutes.

“You gonna gloat?” Tony asks as he closes the door behind Tim.
“Why the hell would I do that?” Tim replies, sitting on their sofa.

“’Cause you and Jimmy are just so good at this love crap, and in three months, I’ve taken her from my bride to she’s looking up divorce lawyers.”

“Come on, sit down. No one’s gloating. How’d talking with Cranston go?”

Tony just glares at him. “Since part of the problem was Kate getting killed, she referred me to someone else.”

Tim winced, he should have seen that was likely to be a problem. But… hell, he didn’t have a plan B for that one. Not like he’s got Wolf’s number, let alone the kind of relationship where Wolf might make a house call. “Did you two talk at all?”

“Some. Until I got to Kate.”

“Did you start talking about Kate to shut her out?”

Tony’s listlessly picking at the splinters that came up from his dining table when he wrenched Ziva’s knife out of it. “The second guy asked that, too.”

“Did you?”

Tony glares at him again. And sure, maybe that’s a game he might play, but he doesn’t think he would, especially not to Cranston, because that’s just… cruel. But he’s not playing around with this, and the question annoys him. “I’m talking about her because I watched her head explode, and right now, for some reason, maybe because I just watched Ziva almost die, that’s really on my mind.”

“Okay.”

They sit quietly.

“So, she’s at your place?” Tony asks.

“Yeah, moving into hour two of yelling at Gibbs when I left. Have you talked to her at all?”

“No.”

“Are you going to?” Tim means soon, not ever. Obviously they’ll talk again, eventually.

Tony’s leaning elbows on his knees, hands laced together, staring at them. “Don’t even know where to start.”

“I’m sorry? That’s usually good.”

“I’m not.” Tim looks alarmed at that, and Tony looks up, catches it. “I shouldn’t have lied about it, but… I’m not sorry about moving her.”

Tim’s not sure how to even begin responding to that. His brain flails around for a few seconds looking for any angle on this, finally he came up with: “You want her safe?”

“Of course.”

“She’s safer with us. Draga’s green. He’s brand new. Anyone else, even if they had been in for a
while, wouldn’t know her moves, wouldn’t know how she works as well as we do. She’d be in more danger with a new team.”

The look on Tony’s face says he’s not buying what Tim’s selling, and that Tim’s missing the point. “She can take care of herself.”

“Okay, good, you haven’t gone totally insane. She can take care of herself, but even Ziva can’t see in 360 degrees and keep watch on everyone’s back and protect her own. She needs a team that can back her up. She needs us.”

Now that look’s all you’re missing the point. “No she doesn’t. She was trained for solo missions. She can see in 360, or close enough. I’m not worried about someone getting the drop on her. I’m not worried about her team failing her. No one on Earth is better equipped to handle that than she is. I’m worried about her going on the suicide mission. I’m worried about her running into the bomb or the firefight when it’s hopeless so she can go with us. And a new team, she won’t love anyone on that team enough to suicide for them.”

“Oh.” That’s… Tim shakes his head, and sits back against the back of the sofa. Stop assuming. He keeps underestimating Tony on things like this, expecting shallow, veneer style issues, but they all go deep, and this one does, too.

“Yeah.” Tony’s giving him a knowing look.

They sit there. Tim’s collecting his thoughts. Tony’s picking at the table again.

“Would you have run into a blast for her?”

“Yeah.” He doesn’t look up from the splinters to Tim. “And I know where you’re going with this, and it doesn’t matter.”

“Do you?” Tim raises his eyebrows, and Tony looks over at him, more you’re underestimating me in his look.

“You’re going to tell me she’s a grown up and she can make her own decisions and it’s her life, and if I’m dead anyway, I don’t get a say in the matter, and that if I really respected her and really loved her I’d be just as cool with her making that decision as I am about making it myself.”

Tim nods a bit. “First of all, all of that is true, and that’s where I would have gone with it if I hadn’t talked to Ziva on Friday, or if I hadn’t gotten a report back from Jimmy about how she’s doing, today. But that’s not it. She’s just as scared for you as you are for her, so how about you both promise to live, no matter what. Add it to your Ketubah, engrave it on the rings, tattoo it on your body, whatever it takes, but make the promise and make it stand. When I was talking to her on Sunday it sounded like she meant it, that you’d work on this, together. But apparently you didn’t mean it.”

There a very sad, very small smile on Tony’s face. “I meant it for her.”

“It doesn’t work that way. At least, I don’t think it does. And if you think I’m good at this, here’s what I’ve got: you can’t expect her to do anything for you that you won’t do for her.”

Tony just kind of looks at him, and Tim’s not sure if that’s him being emotionally worn to a nub or just not believing Tim or not caring.
“Hey, you’re the one saying Jimmy and I are good at this being married thing. So, that’s it. That’s my great advice on this. You want her to not run into the blast, you can’t do it either. You want her to come home every damn night, you’ve got to do it, too. You want her to treat herself like the most important thing in the universe, you want to make sure she safeguards that which makes you happier than anything else, you’ve got to do it for her, too.”

Tony doesn’t say anything to that, but he looks like he’s thinking about it. Tim lets him sit there and just think for a few minutes before saying, “If it makes you feel any better, we all do stupid stuff when we get scared. Even guys who are ‘good’ at this.”

“Uh huh. I lied to her and fucked with her job without talking to her about it.”

“I’m not saying you didn’t manage to stick the landing and win the perfect 10.0 Olympic Gold in stupid stuff, but we all do it. Before we knew about the previa, we’re talking about how Abby wanted to labor and deliver and she said at home. And I handled that in a mature and sensitive way, like any good husband would, by literally yelling at her and practically shitting myself with fear. Shockingly enough, she was not impressed by that response.”

Tony snorted at that.

“How much of the toothpaste thing did you get?”

“Some sort of Pod Person Tim showed up and said some really mean things to Abby after she flipped out about the wrong toothpaste. Were you really cursing at her?”

“Yes, I was. There’s on so long I can get yelled at before I snap, and she took me over that line. Anyway, she was having a really bad dream. That I was messing around and was leaving for someone else. She was scared and angry and picked a fight with the real-life version of me. And it was stupid as all get out, but she was scared and angry and people do stupid stuff when they’re scared and angry. And in her own stupid and angry she managed to get me to the point where I was so angry all I had left was stupid, and I said some God-awful hurtful things. Because people do stupid things when they’re scared and angry. We all do.

“But we’re still married. And so are you. Ziva was yelling at Gibbs, not asking him for advice on good divorce lawyers.”

“Might be better off if she was.”

Tim really doesn’t know what to do with that. He thinks for a minute and decides Tony might respond well to some hardness here, so he’ll try that out. “If you weren’t still recovering from a concussion I’d slap you upside the back of the head. No, you wouldn’t be, she wouldn’t be, none of the rest of will be better off if you two split up.”

Tony exhales, not quite a sigh. “It was easier to be her friend. I got to see her every day. Got to enjoy her, but I knew that if something happened to her, I’d still go on.”

“Because the whole Somalia thing was you and Gibbs being really healthy about moving on.”

“That was anger and revenge. And that was her leaving us, going off on a suicide mission to make someone else she loved happy. It’s a pattern for her, and… I know that about her and… This is so scared I feel like I’m going to just vanish under it.” He runs his fingers through his hair, looking away from Tim, like he can’t stand to have anyone see him, but he still wants to get the words out. “Like the world would stop turning if she’s not on it. It was easier to not let her in. It was easier to have a long string of fuck buddies and just be her friend.”
“It might have been, but that ship’s sailed. You can’t go back to where you were. And where you were might have been easier, but it wasn’t as good. Jimmy said this to Ziva, and I’m going to say it to you, marriage counseling is probably a good idea.”

Tony looks at him, tired, defeated, maybe annoyed, too. “You’re already making me go to counseling.”

“I know. And just like Gibbs, you don’t get to come back until you’ve talked to someone twice.”

“You’re not letting Gibbs back on, either?”

“He tells me he ‘suggested’ you take her off the team. No one’s going back to work until your heads are right again, and if that means Draga and I sit on our asses and work on cold cases, that’ll be what happens. And since Leon would rather cut off his own hand then get in the middle of your marriage, he’ll let me run this however I like as long as I need to to get our team back in order.”

“Lovely. Eventually he’ll want us working again.”

“Yes. But you’ve got time off owed you, a lot of it probably, and if you and Ziva need to take it all, take it. You can’t work like this. I can’t work like this. Just because Ziva trained for solo missions and is great at this stuff doesn’t mean I am. I need a team that works. If Kelly’s gonna grow up with memories of me, you’ve got to have it together enough to do a damn good job watching my back. My life, Abby’s happiness, my daughter’s future rests in your hands. I give that to you every day we go to work. I trust you with it. Usually. But I’m not giving it back until you and Ziva can work together again, and talking to someone together would probably help with that.”

Tony snorts at that, rolls his eyes.

“I’m not dying because of your existential crisis.”

“And it’s all about you?” Tony says dryly, pulling some of his emotional armor back into place.

“Damn skippy. You two want to fall apart after I’m in Cybercrime…” Tim shakes his head, he can’t keep this up. Hard’s not working for him, not for this. “It’d break my heart, Tony. You’re meant to be, and it’s hard and scary and… And I’m sorry this isn’t easy for you. I’m sorry you don’t have that little voice in your head that knows how to do this without pissing her off. But… She’s your life, so figure it out.”

“What would you do?”

“About which part?”

“If it was Abby on the line?”

Tim looks up a bit and shakes his head. “I honestly don’t know. Jimmy and I were talking about it. I was talking to Gibbs about it, too. I don’t know how you can take the fear. I… I know what I’ve done about it for her. Cybercrime isn’t about career advancement. Sure, it’s only for until you come back, but I’m a good Team Leader. I can do this on my own, but I don’t want to. I don’t want her worrying about the knock on the door or the late night call.”

Another snort from Tony, this time disdainful. “Easy for you. You’ve got fall back skills.”

“True.” Tim nods, acknowledging that. Abby gets scared; he does something else. Problem solved. Maybe not easy peasy, but easy enough. But Tony doesn’t have an easy out like that. “So does Ziva. But I don’t think you’ll have any luck convincing her to lay down her badge if you aren’t willing to
“And what the hell would I do if I did that? I can’t write novels, or hack computers, or translate nine languages, or build boats, or… I’ve done this all my life. I’m good at it. This is all I’ve wanted to be since I was twenty.”

“I don’t think you need to hang it up. I don’t think she does, either. But I’m pretty sure you can’t ask her to leave if you aren’t willing to do it yourself.”

“Every year we get the close call. And I’m fine with it for me, but I don’t want to be Gibbs.”

“No one, especially not Gibbs, wants you to be Gibbs.”

Tony nods; he knows that. Gibbs told him that, then suggested that maybe Ziva’d be better off with her own team. “You ever wonder what you’d do if you lost them?”

The answer to that is yes, but Tim doesn’t want to get too into it, because he knows he doesn’t want to be Gibbs either, and his own potential coping with it strategy isn’t healthy. In fact, it’s the antithesis of healthy.

So he lies, and feels no qualms about it. “When we first got the news about the previa, and were googling the hell out of it, reading utter horror stories about women bleeding out while their babies died… I didn’t let myself go there. Just wouldn’t let myself think it.” Absolutely none of that was true. He did think about it, especially that night, after everyone went home, and he lay there in their bed clinging to Abby, but what he came up with: that he wouldn’t outlive them by more than the amount of time it would take him to get to his gun, is A: Not useful for getting Tony to a healthy place, B: Nothing he thinks anyone else needs to know, because that might make them decide he doesn’t need to be in the vicinity of firearms if something were to happen to Abby and Kelly, and C: Maybe, (probably) like Gibbs, he wouldn’t actually do it, but he wants the option, and if you tell people stuff like that, you lose the option of doing it. But given all the above, he has no reservations about lying to Tony and doing it well.

“So, instead of thinking about it, I went bonkers on ways to avoid the problem. If we needed to spend the next six weeks in the hospital to make sure it didn’t happen, that was fine. I was ready to camp out there. But that wasn’t enough, I could feel myself starting to think about it, and I needed to shut it down. Couldn’t deal with it, so I started picking fights with my dad in my head rather than think about it.” Also a lie, but as per Rule Seven: Always be specific when you lie, he’s not above adding good details to sell the story.

“And when that stopped working, I moved into ultra-hyper-overprotective mode, which is what you’re doing, by the way, and as part of ultra-hyper-overprotective mode, I carried her from the car into the house, put her on the sofa, and wouldn’t let her move.

“Speaking of stupid, scared behavior, that one didn’t win me any points, either. And it pretty much did take an intervention from the whole family to snap me out of it. Penny actually headslapped me and Jethro over it.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Abby and I were being scared together. I’m panicking, she’s panicking and getting annoyed at me because I’m being stupid about it, I’m getting more scared because she’s getting more scared, we were feeding each other’s fears, because that’s just how we work. Fortunately Jimmy got worried when we didn’t call and let him know how the scans went, so he came in and saved the day. Told me I could freak the fuck out as much as I needed to, but not in front of her, and that if I ever needed
to go hide at his place and melt down, his door was always open.

“Tony, my door is always open. His door is always open. Ducky’s is, too, but, just, not for this. He’s the guy you go to when you’re freaked out about… anything else, but not this. This is what Jimmy told me: It’s okay to be afraid. It’s okay to be sad. It’s okay for her to see you being afraid and sad. She needs to know this sort of thing effects you, too. It is not okay for you to panic. You’re the man, so it’s your job to not totally lose it, especially when you want to. The other thing he said was this, ‘Only one of us has to be sane at any given time.’ And we’ll provide cover for you until you get sane again. We’ll help you fake it until it’s real.

“Bootcamp is part of dealing with scared. If we need to do it twice a week, once for you and once for Ziva, we will. It helps. Your body wants to run or fight when it’s scared, so if you need it, come fight with us. Or run or yoga or, whatever, hell, we’ll play basketball if you like. Tell us what you need, and we’re there for it.”

Tony looks at Tim’s arms. He’d kept a light jacket on when he was at lunch, because people who expect Special Agent Tim McGee look at him a bit oddly when they notice the tattoos and the wrist cuff, and they start to get concerned when they see bruises. But at Tony’s he’s just in jeans and a t-shirt.

“She do that to you?” He points to the bruises on Tim’s arms.

“Some of them. Some are from Jimmy.”

“What are you fighting off?”

“Mmm?” Tim’s eyes open a bit wider.

“You’re not just volunteering to be a punching bag. What’s got you so scared? What had you all beat the hell up back before Kelly was born?”

“Not scared, not right now. Week after we got the previa news, that was scared.”

“Uh huh. Come on. No bullshit, none from me, none from you. She’s fighting hard enough to make those marks on you, that means you were fighting hard, too.”

“We were. She took on Jimmy and I together and we lost fifteen out of nineteen rounds.”

“You won four?”

“Yeah.”

Tony looks a bit surprised by that. “That’s not answering my question.”

Tim rubs his forehead. “When we started it was about anger. It was about giving Jimmy a place to fight it out. But it’s good for fear, too, and for him fear stuck around a lot longer than anger did. For me it’s mostly been anger. There’s been some fear, but mostly it’s… It’s a place to beat out all the pissed off.”

“What’s got you so pissed?”

“Long story.”

Tony stood up and went to the kitchen. A moment later he was back with two beers and sitting on the sofa next to Tim.
“I’m not going anywhere anytime soon.”

“You could be going to my house, collecting your wife, and talking to her about your problems instead of listening to mine.”

“You brushed me off about this last time, too.”

Tim remembers after he’d had the post-talking-to-his-mom meltdown. Tony had asked about it then, and he had brushed him off. And Tony agreed to respect that, and he has. “I did.”

“Why?”

“I’m brushing you off this time because you’re using my problems to avoid your own.”

“Yeah, well,” he pops the cap on his beer and hands Tim the church key. “I’m not ready to face my own right now. And Ziva’ll still be there in an hour or two when we’re done. So, what’s got you so pissed you’ve got to beat it out?”

Tim sighs, not sure if he should play this game or not. But, Tony’s asking. He’s here. And if he wants this sort of access to Tony’s life, he needs to grant it in return. That’s part of the whole don’t do it if you aren’t willing to have it come back to you thing.

“Lots of things, but most recently… This is mine, and I’m going to be the one who tells Ziva about it. You’re not. Can you do that?”

“Yeah.”

“Not kidding about this, because it’ll be tempting to tell her, get her focused on something else, too.”

“I won’t say anything.”

“Okay. Ender was still working for the CIA. He was deep cover, and I gave the order that killed him.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. And I’m doing better now, but I needed to beat the anger out. That fucker made me kill him. And eventually I have to tell Ziva about it, too, because she pulled the trigger on my order. It was a clean kill, and I’d give the order again, even if I knew he was working for the CIA, I’d still give the order, but I’m pissed.”

“Yeah,” Tony says quietly and sighs. “That’d do it.”

“So, we were both fighting hot and angry. And eventually you hit and get hit often enough and, at least for me, since I know I made the right decision, that… It just helps. Jimmy says it helps with the fear. It’s better for anger, but it helps with fear, too. They’ve got the twenty-week ultrasound coming up…”

Tony nods, he gets that. Gets how doing it again has to be terrifying for Jimmy and Breena.

“So that’s today.” Tony gets up again, and comes back with a few ice packs.

Tim puts them on his arms. “Thanks.”

“What was before?”
Tim looks down at his beer bottle, finger circling the rim, and sighs. “Tony, would you just trust me that now’s not a good time for it?”

“Now’s not good for you, or now’s not good for me?”

“Both of us. And I don’t know when it’s going to be good for me. But I meant it, you’re still welcome to ask Gibbs or Jimmy or Abby. But… I’ve got to think about it to talk about it, and I still don’t want to do that.”

“Okay.”

Tim fished his cell out of his pocket and holds it out to Tony. “Come on, give her a call, and ask her to come home.”

He doesn’t take it. “She’s gonna yell at me.”

“Yep. And here’s something else Jimmy said to me, and I’m going to say to you, because it was excellent advice, ‘You are going to beg her to talk to you and when she does, you’re going to lay down at her feet and explain to her that she is your sun and the only thing that keeps you alive is getting to revolve around her.’”

Tony takes the phone, but he doesn’t dial. “Palmer said that to you?”

“After the toothpaste thing. And he’s right, and that basic idea, that: ‘You are my world, the most precious thing in my universe, and just the idea of anything happening to you kills me, so you can imagine how bad something actually happenings is,’ has gotten me a lot of slack on insane stupid fear stuff, too.”

“Hmp.” Tony hit Ziva’s contact on the phone, and Tim decided now was a very good time to wander off into the kitchen, shut the door behind him, and realize somewhat belatedly that he can’t read any of the books on his phone or call in to see what Abby’s up to if Tony’s talking on it.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So, as you all know, I update this on the blog and on FF, and as such, every time I update on the blog I see the little date saying that Chapter One went up on Jan 22.

So, this was supposed to be my year anniversary chapter. Then I noticed that I actually posted Chapter One on FF on Jan 17th, 2013.

Ooops. (Mom, you forgot my birthday!)

Anyway, it's been a year since 'There haven't been a lot of watershed moments..."

I'd had a goal of posting every day of this year, and well, I didn't hit that. I did post more than two out of three days. I've written 822K words of the Shardverse, and posted over 682K of them. Effectively, I published the NaNoWriMo word count every single month of the last year, and then some. That feels pretty good.

We've got three major plot points left in Tim's life at this point (and a ton of minor ones), and we're only waiting for two more relationships before my little shards are all whole.

I've been thinking more about the McPalmer stuff, and instead of doing a one version
here and one on FF, I'm going to post both versions in both places. In the not wildly
distant future the story will start to split, and I'll begin posting Shards as well as Shards
To A Whole. Shards will be sans McPalmer. Shards To A Whole will continue the full
story. (More info on that as we get to it.)

Anyway, it's been a year. Happy Anniversary.

Thanks to all of you who've taken the time to read this massive tome of McAbbyness.

Thanks even more for the comments. I love them. They completely make my day.

Keryl
"You sure? You've got a lot of stairs at your place…"

Gibbs just nods. They've just finished his checkup with the orthopedic specialist, and yes, he's healing up nicely, and has gotten the green light to start moving around again.

He's glad that Tim's making sure he knows he's still welcome at their house, but the Doc says he can start gimping around more, that he doesn't need to be on his ass all the time, so he wants to go home.

"Okay." Tim nods, putting his key in the ignition. "You've got no food at your place, so write up a grocery list. I'll drop you off, get the food, and then drop it off…" Left unspoken is: Let you spend an hour on your own, see if you're really up to it, and then offer to take you back to my home again.

"I'll be fine, Tim."

"Great. You hurt yourself on the stairs, and Abby'll kill both of us. You for being stupid, and me for letting you."

"I'll be careful."

Tim gives him a long look, and Gibbs can read the I didn't just meet you last week. I know exactly what careful means, and if you don't want to spend another two hours getting yelled at by another pissed off woman, you damn well better not go falling down the steps. "You better."

Gibbs rolls his eyes a bit. "I will." Really, I'll take it easy. Two hours with Ziva yesterday was more than long enough.

Tim nods. Okay, I believe you, this time.

An hour and a half later, Gibbs is home, alone, with a ton of food. He knows what was on the grocery list he sent Tim, and he knows what Tim got him, and… well… apparently he's giving Jethro a less than subtle hint that maybe eating something of a vegetable nature every now and again would be a good plan.

He's not entirely sure what this leafy green stuff is (kale, maybe?) but he does know it looks a hell of a lot like the spinach his mom would try to get him and his dad to eat.

Unsuccessfully.

He'd been expecting to get home and just revel in the quiet and alone. That's who he is. The guy who gets home from work, tosses his keys on the table by the door, and then hits the sofa or his basement for some quiet.

And he did that, for about five minutes. (Might have worked better if he'd headed to the basement, and yeah, he can do steps, but he's not steady enough on his feet to be standing without the crutch, but the only thing he's got on tap right now it making sure all the wood for Baby Palmer's crib is in order, which means planing, and he can't do that sitting down.)

For about five minutes, sitting on his own sofa, in his own house, his own, quiet, house felt really
He loves Tim and Abby, but the soundproofing in their house sucks. And he's glad they've got a healthy relationship and that they're enjoying each other that much, but he didn't feel the need to be that well acquainted with what them having a good time sounds like. And once he got off the heavy duty painkillers, Kelly crying woke him up, too, and he'd usually get pretty well back to sleep, and then the sound of footsteps taking Kelly back to her crib post-nursing would wake him up again.

So, Tim and Abby's place isn't precisely quiet, or restful.

Add the hours of Ziva just yelling at him last night on top of that…

So, yeah, quiet: beautiful, blessed quiet.

And sure, it's not like he didn't spend years sleeping on his sofa. It's not like the futon in Tim's office is bad or anything, but he's really looking forward to stretching out on his own bed. To sleep. All the way through the night.

That'll be excellent.

So, why doesn't this feel right anymore?

"You free?" he asks Fornell.

"Still wrapping up the case your boy dropped on us. Seventeen down, thirty-six to go. Haven't been home for more than an hour since Friday. Why?"

"Nothing. Just wondering if you wanted dinner."

"I do, but it's not happening today. Or tomorrow. Or the day after. Ender had all the goods on guys all over the world. We're wrapping them up as fast as we can. The word's out, they know they've been compromised, and they are running as fast as they can."

"I'll let you get back to it."

"Thanks. Sunday maybe? Have dinner with Wendy and I?"

"Sure."

Piles of food. Lots of good stuff. Gibbs decides to go see Elaine and let her feed him.

Cooking for just himself feels almost beside the point. He intentionally doesn't think about how he cooked for himself for years, decades, and sure, he ate out a lot, but that had as much to do with the job as not necessarily wanting to cook. He does not think about how much more he enjoys cooking, even if it is just whipping up a pan of eggs, if someone besides him is going to eat them.

Then, as he gets into his truck, puts the key into the ignition and pushes his-Holy shit… okay that's just not working.- He can't push down on the gas pedal like that without pain shooting through his knee.

Come on, there has to be a way to do this. He messes around a bit more, adjusts the seat, plants his heel on the floor of the car, making sure he's not going to move it, and tries again, just moving his
foot.
Better.

It's not comfortable, but it's not white hot pain through his knee, either.

"You make a break for it, Hon?" Elaine asks as he heads in, propping the crutch against the counter.

"Only so long I can go without seeing you."

She shakes her head, smiling. "Sweet talker. I'll have your coffee up in a minute, pot's not quite done yet."

"Take your time, I'm not in a hurry."

"Usual?" She's watching him, looking him over carefully, seeing more than just Jethro in jeans and a t-shirt, sensing the patterns that are shifting.

"Eh... No. Not today. Surprise me?"

Elaine smiled at him.

"So, what's going on? I was expecting to see Tim again," Elaine says as she pours him his coffee.

"Just got the all clear from the Doc, so I'm on my own again."

She gives him a long look.

"I've already been read the riot act by Tim. I'm being careful."

"Good."

One of the customers waved for a refill, and Elaine headed over to him, a minute later she was back. "That's not all that's going on, is it?"

Gibbs sips his coffee, look on his face saying, More's going on, but I don't know exactly what, yet.

"You'll figure it out."

This time the look said, Glad to hear it.

Elaine knows that's as far as Gibbs can go with this now, so she asks, "How many tattoos does Tim have? Until I saw him this weekend, I didn't have him pegged as the type."

"Three now, four soon. Getting one on his leg to celebrate Kelly soon."

She looks mildly surprised at that. Not the tattoo per se, but the location. Usually people put tattoos in places other people see them. "Didn't think he was a shorts kind of guy, either."

Gibbs shakes his head, smiles, and says, "He's not. Kilts. He likes kilts."

"There's a man with a lot of sides to him."
Gibbs smiles.

Home again. His nice, quiet home.

His nice, quiet, empty home.

He tossed the keys on the table, put his phone down gently, plugging it in to charge, and looked around.

Everything is exactly where he left it.

Everything is exactly as he likes it.

So why isn't this home anymore?

He hobbled over to the second from the bottom step and sat down, he can see most of the downstairs from there.

Once upon a time this was home. This was the place he went when the day was done. This was solace and comfort and... and quiet.

Why did quiet matter? Why was it so important that this place would be still?

Because noise meant family, and after three failed attempts at family he figured out that he couldn't get it back and second best wasn't good enough.

If it wasn't going to be his girls, his life, his loves, then he wanted quiet and still and alone.

A long time ago, Ziva asked him, 'Are you lonely, Gibbs?' and he said no, and sure, he was lying, but, he wasn't, too.

He wasn't lonely in the sense of longing for people. (Okay, that's crap, too. He wasn't lonely in the sense of longing for people and hoping he'd have them again. He'd given up on hope.)

He'd told her you're never lonely when you have kids, and kissed her forehead, called her kid, and that was true. That Ziva was and is his is true. (Even if she is spitting mad at him right now. Two hours of yelling resulted in two hours of yelling and a hoarse voice. Then Tony called, and she stopped firing at Gibbs, and started in on Tony. But she did agree to go home and yell at him in person, so that might be a step in the right direction. The last thing she said to him before leaving was, "We are not done!")

But you are lonely when you have kids. You're especially lonely when you can see them make lives, homes, and loves, and feel how you had that, and how much you miss it.

He thinks that's part of what changed, why he's sitting here, thinking about how this isn't home anymore.

Since Kelly was born he's been spending more and more time in a home, a real home. Because it's not really home if it's just you. Home needs people.

And sure, he's not feeling any need to listen to another night of Tim and Abby making love, but that's part of what's crystalizing what he's missing. Not sex. (Okay, yeah, he misses sex. It has been a
while, but that's intentional.) Not just sex. Not just people. Not just family in the sense of parents and children.

It's the whole damn package.

It's love and care and people who pet you when you need petting, people who you pet when they need it. It's touch and pleasure and noise and someone to ask you what the hell it was you did during the day while you were away and someone you want to tell about it. It's smiles and care and someone else to eat the food you make and another voice when you fold your laundry and…

And this isn't a home. This is a house. No, this is a grave. A mausoleum he crawled into when his girls died, and he never did right by the other girls he brought here.

What did Tim say? 'You've been floundering around in the wilderness too damn long. It's time to come home. You're almost there, so let's finish this. Let's get you home.'

Time to come home.

Time to build his own home, again.

He rubbed his thumb over his wedding ring, lurched up onto his good foot, took two hops to the table his phone lives on, and shuffled through his contact numbers.

He stared at it for a long minute before hitting it.

"Jethro?"

"Hey, Rachel. Could we talk?"

He can feel that gentle smile of hers. "Certainly. When were you thinking?"

"Doesn't have to be right now. You have, appointments, right?"

"Yes, I do. That's usually how this works."

"I'd like to make one."

"Good."
The Price

Make up sex is brilliant. There’s all the intensity of the emotions of the fight. Then there’s the even more intense ‘I’m so sorry; I hate you being angry at me; I hate being angry at you; I love you so much.’

It’s really, really nice.

The problem is, you can’t get to hot, happy, make up sex when the last time you had the exact same argument you pretended to make up, and then did exactly what you were going to do in the first place.

Because you can only get to the make-up sex when there’s trust that you have, indeed, made up.

So, while there had been yelling, and talking, and crying, and more talking, and more yelling between the DiNozzos, there hadn’t been any make-up sex.

There hadn’t been any cuddles.

Or hugs.

Because they aren’t made up.

Right now, Tony’s pretending to be asleep on the sofa (wasn’t allowed in their bedroom last night) while his ninja stealths around their home.

Someone once said, that if you’re getting along, even the smallest home has plenty of room, and when you aren’t, you can have acres of space and it’s not enough.

So, while it’s true they don’t have a huge apartment, until Ziva came home last night, furious, it had never seemed too small. It’s way too damn small, now. Technically, the entire eastern seaboard may be too small right now.

“I know you are not asleep.” She doesn’t look at him as she says it. She’s very intently making coffee, back toward him, facing the counter.

He sighs, opening his eyes, staring at the ceiling. “I know I’m not asleep, too.”

“Then why are you pretending?”

“I’m tired.” And he is, bone deep, every cell in his body begging for rest, tired. “Just want to rest.”

“Then rest!” Ziva says, slamming down the coffee mugs.

He sits up slowly, rubbing his head. He’s had a headache for two days, because of the fighting, not the concussion. “Not going to rest until this is done.” He hasn’t really slept since the bomb, and today isn’t likely to change that. (Also part of why his head hurts. He always gets headaches when he gets too low on sleep.)

“This isn’t going to be done anytime soon, so you might as well sleep. Maybe if you got some sleep you’d be sane enough to realize you are being completely unreasonable.”
“It is not unreasonable to ask you to value your life!”

“No, it’s not. But you didn’t ask.” She whips around to face him as the sk on ask slides off her tongue.

He just shrugs. “It’s not unreasonable to expect you to value your life.”

“I do value my life!”

“Not enough. If you’re going to…” He shakes his head, not willing to finish that sentence.

“You are not asking me to value my life! You are trying to make me your pet!”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes you are. You wouldn’t have done that to McGee or Gibbs. You respect them enough to actually tell them the truth.”

“It’s not about respect.”

“Of course, it is! You say you love me, but you don’t respect me, not if you’re willing to do that. Making decisions for me, not telling me about it, lying to me about it. That is not respect.”

“I knew you wouldn’t like it.” And he did. He wouldn’t have lied about it if he thought she’d have been okay with what he was going to do.

“Exactly! You don’t pull this sort of crap on Gibbs or McGee. If you want to do something they don’t like, you own up to it and tell them about it. It’s completely about respect. You respect them enough not to lie to them.”

“It’s not respect! I don’t love either of them enough…” Tony shakes his head. “The world doesn’t stop turning if something bad happens to them. I knew you wouldn’t like it. I knew you’d be angry. And I didn’t care because you angry and alive is better than you dead and happy.”

Ziva’s furious again, and the coffee cup in her hand is in serious danger of being squeezed so hard it shatters. “That’s not how you treat people! That’s how you treat a child or a pet. You do not get to make that decision. You do not get to just… ignore how I feel about it. You are my husband, not my father, and no one, no one has any right to treat me like that, not anymore. Not you, not Gibbs. I am not a child, let alone your child, and I get to make my own decisions.”

He stands up, walks across the living room and kitchen to her. He stares her in the eyes, tired, angry, hurting, all of it in his face and voice. “You made the wrong one! You stop getting to make that decision when you make the wrong one.”

Something very intense, very hot, and very not English spills from her lips as Ziva glares at him. Then she turns, pushes past him, out of the kitchen, and says, “This is useless! I’m going out. You sleep. I’ll calm down. We’ll try again in a few hours.”

Sleep.

Easier said than done. But at least right now, he can lay in their bed (more comfy than the sofa), stretch out, cuddle into pillows that smell like her, and not sleep.

Because sleeping requires a quiet mind.
And right now his mind is anything but quiet.

Lying about it wasn’t a good plan. But he knew she wouldn’t go for it, knew if he said, I want you on a different team, I can't take this anymore, it’d piss her off, but, if she could find out about it as something accomplished, done and unchangeable, then she’d be pissed, but, eventually, she’d like having her own team, and then they’d go on.

Then McGee butts his big ass into this and fucks the whole thing sideways.

It’s *his* team. Not McGee’s. Three days of running things doesn’t make it McGee’s team. He’s in charge of who’s on it, not McGee. It’s his job to make sure it’s running right, not McGee’s, and he gets to define what running right is. And if that’s just the three of them, slowly adding in new people, then that’s what it is.

Except that’s crap, and he knows it’s crap, the problem isn’t that McGee counteracted the shift. The problem was trying to move her in the first place.

Sigh.

Part of being a friend is smacking you upside the head when you’re being an idiot, and McGee’s being his friend.

Part of being an adult is seeing the problems that are there and taking responsibility for your part in them.

And all of being the leader is seeing the problems, facing them head on, and tackling them.

He sees it in his head again. Ziva standing next to them. Hears her say it, ‘You go. I go.’ Gibbs has his knife out, ready to cut, and he knocks it away, yanks out the detonator and tosses it. The most Hail Mary pass of the history of Hail Mary passes.

He stares at the ceiling. Feeling her body under his, hearing the almost slithering rush of the fire, how there was that second where he could hear it before the heat poured over them, then that month-long second between the fire and the blast.

Conversion aside, he’s not much of a praying man. He and God have a deal, and swapping out from not overly Catholic to not overly Jewish didn’t change that. But as the fire rushed over them, he was certainly begging God to get her through this, and even with as loud as the fire was, and his heart beating so hard as to drown out almost everything else, he could still hear her say the Shema, and…

And he panicked. He knows that. Or he took a calculated risk, but did the math wrong. Either way, letting Gibbs cut the wire was probably the better answer.

And he’s not sure which scares him worse, that her being at risk made him make the bad decision, or her running in to join them.

Her running in. He can (he hopes) control the panic. He can (still hoping) control himself.

He can’t control her.

And he knows that.

And trying was stupid.
But you do stupid things when the person you love above all others puts herself at risk. When fear reaches up, colors your world sickly green, chokes off your breath, makes your joints go week and your stomach clench, you do whatever you can to make it stop.

Ziva’s wildness, the fact that he couldn’t control her, that had always interested him. That, as much as her body, got his attention at first.

Like with Kate, the fact that she would be a challenge, that she wouldn’t just go along for the ride, that made him want to make her want to go along.

*Be careful what you wish for.*

He did it. He got her signed on for the long haul. He won her love and respect (at least, he’d had it up until he hit send on that email) and then came face to face (again) with why it’s easier to keep the walls in place.

After all, how many times can you volunteer to let your heart have the shit beaten out of it?

Of course, if he’s being honest with himself, he knows he’s doing it back to her. She scared him so bad, and that fear hurt so much, that he’s doing it to her, making her hurt the way he hurt.

And it’s not cool, or good, or responsible, or anything he wants to be, but… it’s true. Maybe, beyond acknowledging the fear, it’s the first true thing he’s thought about this.

Because you don’t just do crap like that, and all the justifications on Earth don’t make it all right.

And by hurting her, he’s hurting himself, and on some level, he feels like he deserves that, too.

The sound of her opening the door didn’t wake him up. Have to be asleep to wake up.

It did stop him staring at the ceiling. He gets up slowly, heads to the door of their bedroom, opens it, and leans against the door jam. She’s in the living area, just standing there, looking in his direction.

“I’m sorry I lied to you.”

“Not enough.” Calming down time does not appear to have done much to help with Ziva being pissed off.

“Right now, I’m sorry about this whole thing.”

“Yes, I know, you made that abundantly clear last night. That you are sorry about this whole thing starting with falling in love and ending with lying to me. You’d rather have just stayed a gigolo.”

Yeah, so apparently mentioning that particular bit of doubt, which he’d done as an ‘I’m so scared and in love with you and I don’t know what to do with myself because this was so much easier before’ thing hadn’t been the right tact.

He rubs his forehead. “I love you. I am so terrified that something will happen to you. I hate feeling like this. I hate that I don’t know what to do with this.”
“Just stop it!” Ziva bites out. “You are not alone. You are not the only one feeling fear. You aren’t the only one who’s lost someone. You’re the only one who decided to cut one of us out of the picture and act alone. You’re the one who spent hours talking with me about our future, about getting everything in order, about making sure we’d go on… You’re the one who lied to me! You’re the one who cut me out!”

“I’m sorry!” he shouts that, then gets under better control. “It was stupid, and I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care if you’re sorry! You hurt me, and all the sorry on Earth doesn’t take it away. You cannot just make it better by being sorry. It’s not like this was some sort of thing where you just did not know I’d be upset. It’s not like you stepped on my toe or forgot my birthday or this is some sort of misunderstanding. You lied to me!”

“I know. You scared the shit out of me, scared me so bad, made me so angry… I wanted you to feel it, too!”

Ziva looks like she had been getting ready to say something, but that stops her dead. She spends a minute thinking, then says, “So this is… what… revenge?”

“I don’t know. It was stupid it what it is. It was panic and pain and my balls doing the thinking and not my head. And I shouldn’t have lied, and I may not be sorry I hurt you, because, honestly I’m still too fucking pissed at you to be sorry about that, but I still know it was stupid.” He steps closer to her, stopping before he can touch her, wanting to see if she’d meet him halfway, and she does, stepping to him, staring up into his eyes, not touching, though. “And if you want to be angry about me lying to you, fine, I get that, I understand it, and yeah, it was stupid. But I don’t care if you’re angry about me trying to keep you alive. I don’t care if you don’t like my tactics.” His hands close over her shoulders, gentle, and she can feel the slight tremors in his fingers. “I DON’T CARE if I have to lie, cheat, or steal to do it, but you are going to outlive me, and not by minutes or seconds, but by years, decades if I have any say in it. You say you love me, then prove it, don’t ever run into a bomb for me again, don’t throw yourself in front of the bullet.”

“That’s not fair.”

“I don’t care. I know which one of us is the better person, and it’s not me.”

“Tony—“

“No! That’s the line in the sand for our relationship. That’s the one boundary that cannot be crossed. Anything else we can talk out, work through, forgive, but you will not throw your life away for mine. That’s it. Love, honor, cherish, bullshit! I don’t care. LIVE! That’s your vow to me. That’s the only one I want, and the only one that matters.

“Not once have you said you were sorry for running into the bomb. It’s all about it’s your choice, and I don’t get a say in it, and I don’t get to be mad about it, and I don’t get to try and stop that, and it’s fucking bullshit! I save lives. That’s my job. That’s all I’ve ever cared about doing for my entire adult life. That’s it. And I will be damned to fucking hell for the entire rest of eternity if I can’t save YOU!”

Ziva just stares at him, eyes wide, visually tracing the path of the tears running down his cheeks. “I… just…”

He shakes his head, breathing hard, and then says quietly, “That’s your promise to me. You want me, that’s the cost.”
She closes her eyes and sighs, then takes his hands in hers, and pulls him along to sit next to her on the sofa. “How can we be a team if I don’t have your back?”

He’s looking at her hands, her wedding band, then looks up to her eyes and says, “You go home at the end of the day, and that’s all the having my back I’ll ever need.”

She’s looking like she’s trying to find some wiggle room. “Our job is dangerous…”

“I’m not saying avoid danger. I know the job is dangerous. I’m not saying take a desk job. I’m not saying don’t ever go out again. But if you run into danger when you can’t help, when there’s nothing you can do but die… If I survive it… That’s it. You don’t think it’s fair? I don’t care. You cannot ask me to watch you die for nothing.”

“You aren’t nothing.”

“You weren’t going to die for me. Not then. You didn’t even reach for the bomb. You were going to die with me, and that’s… No! That’s my line that can’t be crossed.”

Ziva says sadly, “You have said nothing about living yourself. I don’t get to ask that of you, do I?”

Tony shakes his head again. “You don’t. And it’s not fair, and it’s not even, and I know it. But it’s who I am. I run into the fire to die with you, you don’t run in for me.”

“And you get to just dictate this?”

He shrugs. He knows he can make the promise, but he won’t keep it. “I could lie about it again.”

She glares at him.

“This is it. All honesty, I get to die for or with you, you don’t get to die with me, and if you think that’s me treating you like a child, if you think it’s disrespectful, I’m comfortable with that. This is who I am. I’m going out for a few hours. You think about it. And, I hope…”

He didn’t finish that sentence. He stands up pushes his feet into a pair of sneakers, and heads out of their home.

His wedding ring is a plain gold band. He’d inscribed hers with יִדְרָן לְךָ/you are not alone because he liked the promise of it, liked what he meant by it, how that was the day when he saw them having a future in a concrete sort of way.

His, though, is just blank gold.

There’s a jeweler only a few streets down from their apartment, so he heads in that direction. He’s not sure how long what he wants done will take, but he hopes it’ll be fast.

No one else is there. Not a lot of business at two on a Tuesday.

The jeweler hears him and jumps to attention. “Can I help you?”

“I hope so.” He took off his wedding ring and handed it over. “How long would it take to get it engraved?”

“Depends on what you want.”
“Got a piece of paper?”

“Sure.” The clerk lays his ring on the counter, then pokes around for a moment before coming up with a pad and a pen and handing them both over.

“Yma.” “That’s what I want.”

“Never tried Hebrew before, but…” He picks up Tony’s ring again, checking how wide it is, looking back at the Hebrew letters. “Yeah, I can do that. Probably about two hours. Give me some time to practice before I do it to your ring.”

Tony nods, turns, and was half way out the door when the jeweler asks, “What’s it mean?”

“I will live.”

He left, seeing the jeweler’s eyebrows still high.

Three hours later, he’s in the elevator heading back up to their apartment.

He’s not wearing his ring. It’s in his pocket. The Hebrew looks good. All the characters are right. It’s nicely centered.

And hopefully this isn’t the stupidest thing he’s ever done.

She’s at the dining room table, cleaning both of their guns. He knows that she hears when he walks in, but she doesn’t say anything.

He stands behind her, staring at the back of her head, and then places the ring on the table next to her left hand.

“When you can make this promise, you can put it back on me. I want to wear it, but I can’t, not if this isn’t part of it.” Then he steps back, heading for the door again.

She’s staring at it, hasn’t turned to look at him. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know.” He’s still facing the door. “McGee says his door is always open, but I’m not sure I can take McWedded-Bliss right now. I’ve got my phone. Call, and I’ll come.” And then he steps out, into the hall, heading toward the elevator.

He’d pressed the button for the ground floor, but doors hadn’t even shut when his phone rang.

She was standing outside their door, looking down the hall at him, ring in her hand.

She crooks her finger at him, and he came to her, she’s not smiling, or looking particularly happy with him.

He stands in front of her, watching, waiting to see what happens next.

“You will never lie to me again.”

He nods.

She gathers her hand in his, and slips the ring back over his finger. “Come home with me.”
He steps in.

And they weren’t done. There was still a lot of talking, and some crying, but no more yelling. And in the end they had agreed to go see a marriage counselor, because she’s not thrilled with the you will live ultimatum, but she understands that’s his price, and she’s willing to pay it.

And the make-up sex, (which, granted, happened on Wednesday, because they were both exhausted and needed the sleep after that fight) was excellent.
“So how does this work?” Gibbs asks Cranston on Thursday. He’s feeling a very strong desire to get another coffee, but the one in his hand is full. He takes a sip. It’s good. Hot, strong, very black. What’d Jimmy say about it? ‘What do you brew this out of, roofing tar?’ Something like that.

Of course, since he made it, himself, and put it in a travel mug, and brought it with him, it would be exactly the way he liked it, wouldn’t it? He was figuring that Cranston would probably have drinks available, but they’d be tame little things like herbal tea or light roast coffee with hazelnut flavoring or something. (He was sort of right, she’s got one of those multi-flavor coffee makers with a whole bunch of little pods in different varieties. Strong, black, chew your tongue off coffee is not among them, however.)

He’s almost wishing for some sort of massive emergency, like another troop transport crash, that’d pull all hands on deck, no matter what.

Okay, so it might not get him pulled into action, because all he can do in the field is limp around and look stern, but it might get Cranston pulled in, and that’d work just as well.

Just because this seemed like a good idea two days ago, doesn’t mean he’s exactly relishing sitting in a very… comforting is probably the right word, everything about this place just oozes comfort and sympathy and empathy, office. Cranston, serene and also, comforting, is looking expectantly at him, right now.

She smiles at him, notices the way he’s fiddling with the coffee cup. He sees her notice and stops.

That gets another smile. “It usually goes something like this, we talk about why you’re here, what you’re looking to get out of this, we talk about where you are, and from there we try to get an idea of what to do to get you to what you’re looking for.”

“Getting back to work.”

“Good start. But, usually for psych evals I get calls from NCIS, not from the person in question.” He can see a sort of amused curiosity in the way she says that. Work may be the goal, but this isn’t how work usually happens.

“It’s not an official psych eval. McGee won’t let me back on until I talk to someone, twice.”

“About?”

Gibbs isn’t sure if he’s relieved that Rachel isn’t asking about Tim being the one drawing the line here, or upset because he can’t use talking about that to eat up some of this time.

“He thinks my head’s not in the game.”

She tilts her head a little, looking at him intently, thinking. “Is he right?”

Gibbs has never wished more devoutly in his life for a catastrophe than right now. But wishing won’t make it so. He sighs. “I can do the job.”

She writes something quickly, then looks up and says, “Okay. So, he’s wrong, but you’re letting him make you do this, even though he’s wrong?”
Gibbs can feel the trap on this and shuts his eyes. He doesn’t want to own being here, but he can’t admit that Tim’s making him go, because he’s not, not really. He opens them and says, “It’s complicated.”

Not quite a full smile, more the look of someone who knows she’s got someone who wants to talk, but is having a hard time doing it. “We’ve got an hour. Two if you need them. Don’t have another appointment until four. Lay it out for me.”

Gibbs really doesn’t like open-ended questions. At least, not when he’s the one doing the answering. He tries to find a way to build a structure for this, see it like a ship of words. Main beam, support beams, ribs, siding. What idea is all of this riding on? What ideas branch off of it?

“I’m here because I let fear make me give bad advice, and he called me out on it.”

“Doesn’t sound complicated. Was it bad advice about a case?”

Shrug, eyebrows furrow, another sip of coffee. “Not exactly. It was bad advice about how to handle the fear of having someone you love in danger and a case brought that fear on.”

“Doesn’t sound like it’d effect how you do your job.”

“In the sense you’re thinking, it won’t. I can’t chase down a perp right now,” he gently pats his knee, “but I can follow up on leads and interrogate, and my gut still works just fine.”

“And yet you’re here.”

“And I’ll be here at least one more time.”

“Because McGee thinks it’s bad enough you can’t go back to even desk work.”

Gibbs licks his lips, sips the coffee again. “No. He doesn’t.” Gibbs taps the coffee cup. “He’s using that as a way to make sure I do this.”

“The carrot to go with the stick?”

Gibbs nods.

“And how did you end up in a situation where Agent McGee gets to tell you what to do?”

He’s not sure if she doesn’t actually know the answer, or if she wants to see how he understands it. He does know that it’s been two years since he’s seen her in person, and as such she hasn’t been around to see a lot of the changes of the last three years.

While he’s thinking about that, she says, “He married to Abby, now. And she’s basically your adopted daughter, right?”

“Yeah, they just had a baby girl six weeks ago.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” Gibbs gets out his phone and shows Cranston a picture of Kelly.

“She’s lovely.” Rachel hands the phone back, and sits next to him on the very comfortable sofa. “Any family shots?”

“Lots of them.” Gibbs flips through a lot of them to find one of Tim and Abby and Kelly all together.
and shows that to Rachel, too. He shows her another of Tim and Jimmy messing around in his backyard. One of Tim holding Molly. He shows her shots of all the girls together: Penny, Ziva, Abby, Breena, Molly, and Kelly. He shows her Tony with Molly riding his shoulders at the pool. There’s one of Ducky gently stroking Kelly’s head while Penny holds her. He doesn’t show her any of the shots with him in them, because they’re his and they’re goofy and private and… And not for today.

“You’re not in them?” she says, looking at a shot of Ziva lighting the Shabbos candles while the rest of the crew stands around the table, waiting for the start of dinner.

“I took them.” Which has the advantage of being both true and misleading.

“So, if McGee were here, I could ask him for photos, and there would be shots of you in them.”

“Yeah.” And knowing Tim, he’d have absolutely no issues at all about showing off the goofy ones.

“So, is it safe to say that there’s a certain level of respect and affection between you and McGee?”

“Yes.”

“You trust him with your girl?”

“Absolutely.”

“And he’s one of the men on your team. You trust him with your life, right?”

“Yes, I trust him with my life, and no, it’s not my team anymore, it’s DiNozzo’s.”

“You’re still working, but you’re letting DiNozzo run the team?” She didn’t seem to believe that.

“Yeah. I’m retiring soon. We’ve already got the first new member. It just works better with Tony in charge. Explosion took both of us out, which means, until we get back, it’s Tim’s team.”

She makes a note of that and asks, “So, Jethro, is Tim right,” he notices she shifts how she refers to Tim the same way he did, “do you need to be here?”

Gibbs sighs, so much for avoiding this, or getting into it, or… whatever. “Yeah.” He nods, staring at her, looking tired and a little lost.

“And is it really about having your head in the game?”

“Not really. It’s the lever he’s using to make sure I do it.”

“Okay. So, really, what do you hope to get out of this? What do you think he’s hoping you get out of this?”

“He wants me to be happy.”

She smiles warmly at him, and looks at the picture on the phone, this one of all the guys. “That doesn’t sound bad.”

“No.”

“Are you happy?”

He shrugs, tucks his phone back into his pocket, and sips the coffee again. “I’m better than I’ve been
in a very long time.”

“What do you want, Jethro?”

Another drink of his coffee, another moment where he licks his lips, another moment of *I’m so horrendously uncomfortable I’d rather be doing anything than talk about this* loud and clear in his body language. He looks up at the ceiling, takes yet another drink, and then says, “I wanted to be a good husband, and a good father, and a good Marine. And, for a while, I was.” A very sad smile crosses his face. “But you can’t do all of that at once. So, I was being a good Marine. My country needed me. It called, and off to Iraq I went. I had to be there, because I was good at my job, really good, and Shannon and Kelly were home and safe and… And when I went it was just another deployment, hotter than any I’d been on since Nicaragua, but just another job.

“And I got word that Shannon had witnessed a murder. I didn’t want her to testify. He was bad news and…” He licks his lips again, mentally skipping the fight he and Shannon had about her testifying. Last fight they ever had. Only fight he ever regretted being right about.

“And I got word that there had been threats on her life. I knew she was in protective custody. Everyone said she’d be safe. I asked for permission to get leave to go home, but they denied it, there was a ground war and all, and I was a good Marine. I followed orders. I didn’t go home. And they died.

“I failed at being a father and husband because I was off being a good Marine. I let other men protect my girls, and they died because of it. And nothing I did in Iraq made a fuck of a difference. We didn’t take Hussein out. We just left him there. Ten years later, we were back again. Hundreds of thousands of people were eaten alive by his regime between the day I got there and the day they finally took him out.

“I can’t say we were making the world a better place. I wasn’t storming Normandy or taking out Nazis. Hell, I was barely taking out members of the Republican Guard. They were surrendering to anything with an American or British flag on it, including TV news crews. So I was there, doing fuck all, which meant I wasn’t home defending the most important people on earth.

He shakes his head. “That was the point of it, ya know? Honor, duty, sacrifice. All of it was in the service of saving lives, of protecting your home and the innocent. I’m a Marine. I’ll always be a Marine. But I couldn’t serve anymore, not after they died, not after that choice meant they… And then they pulled us out without finishing the job… It was death and pain for nothing…” He’s smiling a little, shaking his head, he’s not even angry about how Desert Storm ended anymore, the anger burned so hot for so long it scorched his ability to be angry about it away.

“I still believe in the Marines. I still serve them and our sailors and their families, but I don’t trust ‘orders’ anymore, and I don’t trust the powers that be to use those men and women honestly or wisely…” There’s a long, quiet minute after that. Then he takes another deep breath and says, “Everything that mattered to me died that day. And since then… I don’t know what I want.

“There are things I need. I need to put murderers away. I need to keep my girls safe. I need to protect people.”

She thinks about that, writes a few more words down, and then says, “I know there are things you want. You are not clinically depressed, so there are things you want. Even if it’s stupid or silly. What do you want?”

He looks away from her, spends a moment studying the abstract painting behind her desk. Sunset maybe? Sunrise? Lots of pinks and orange and yellow, little hints of blues and greens. Then he pulls
his words together again and looks back at her. “I want them back.” Another head shake. “I want to wake up next to Shannon, and I want to see my Kelly hold Tim’s. I want the family I have to be part of the family I had, and I want all of us together. And I know I can’t have it. I know that if Shannon and Kelly were still here I would have stayed in the Corp and probably died…

“I want what I can’t have."

She rests her hand on his, giving it a gentle squeeze, non-verbally rewarding him getting it out, actually saying it, and then withdraws it, and asks another question. “What do you want that you can have?”

He snorts a quick, half-laugh. “Good coffee?”

Rachel smiles at that, laughs gently. “What’s Kelly going to call you when she can talk?”

“Pop.”

That got another warm smile out of Rachel. “Are you planning on being an active grandparent?”

“Yes.”

“You want that?”

“Yeah.” He nods. He does want that. Never thought about it in that light, but yeah, he wants it.

“That’s a start.” She looks pointedly at his wedding ring. “I’m guessing you didn’t actually get married again since I saw you last?”

“No. Shannon’s ring.”

She thinks about that for a moment, writes a quick note, and says, “Do you want to re-marry?”

That gets an alarmed look out of Gibbs.

“Let me re-phrase, I forgot how loaded a question that is for you. Would you like to have a relationship with a woman and not see her as a daughter?”

“Got one.”

“Really?” That did surprise Cranston.

“Penny Langston. Ducky’s… I’ll say wife because that’s close enough. Tim’s grandma. One third of our grandparenting team.”

Rachel laughs at that. “I’m not sure if that was you deflecting my question, or letting me know that you’re expanding your core of relationships in a healthy way.”

“Both?”

“Probably. Want to take a stab at the question I was actually asking?”

Gibbs looks up, looks away from Rachel, sips his coffee, starts to say something twice, but doesn’t. Finally he says, “Not really.”

“Okay.” But she doesn’t say anything, just letting that ‘okay’ linger.
Frustration is clear on his face as he says, “Not okay. Not really.” He shakes his head again. This is why he’s here. *Don’t try to hide from it. Won’t work if you don’t get to the heart of it.* “How much did Tony tell you about what happened?”

She starts to shake her head.

“Don’t want you to break confidence or anything, just want an idea of what you know about why we’re here?”

“How about you tell me how you understand what happened? How Tony understands it isn’t particularly useful when it comes to getting into your head.”

So he did. Explaining the case, and the explosion, and the how he was planning on getting off the pain meds, standing up, marching back to work, and telling everyone to go to hell, when he stood up, felt his knee slide out of joint and decided maybe the Doc wasn’t entirely insane about the whole lay around thing, so he sat back down and tried to figure out what the hell do to with himself if he was going to spend a week on his ass at Tim and Abby's house. Tony called in a panic once Ziva went back to work, and somehow, he hadn’t even noticed when it happened, but somehow Ziva slipped from Ziva to Tony’s wife, and went from co-solider manning the barricades to one of the women that get hidden when you’re hiding the women and children. (That got an interested look, and a note, but Cranston didn’t break in or interrupt him on that.) He gave Tony some god-awful bad advice that was part mourning widower, part terrified dad, but completely not Team Leader rationally assessing his team, let alone older, wiser head providing useful counsel, and then there was more about the case, and about living with Tim and Abby for a week, and about, finally, getting home and just missing that.

“So, I take that to mean you are missing a romantic attachment? And that you want that, as well?”

“Yeah. Maybe not a marriage. I’ve screwed that up in every direction a marriage can be screwed up. And Ducky and Penny aren’t married, doesn’t look like they’re gonna get married, either, but they’re doing fine. So maybe the rings and words don’t matter.”

Rachel raises an eyebrow, looks at the wedding ring, and then wrote another note. “So, what do you want? You imagine this ideal home of yours, what’s there?”

He thinks for another minute, notices the coffee cup is empty when he lifts it to his lips. “Comfort. Another voice. Someone to listen to. Someone to listen to me…” He licks his lips. “It’s dumb…”

“I’m good with dumb. This is a very dumb friendly place.”

He just looks at her, really? in his gaze, then he answers, “One of the clearest images is just having someone to sit on the sofa with and read. Shoulders to wrap my arm around and rest my chin on.”

“That’s not dumb. What else?”

He didn’t have much else, so he starts to flesh it out as he’s talking to her. What does he want? What did he miss most? “Someone to sort laundry with. Someone to show my sketches to. Someone who asks what I’m working on down there. Someone to call down so I can show off what I’ve done.”

“That sounds really good. What else?”

He thinks for another minute. What else… yeah, he’s lonely, but there’s more than that… What does the ideal look like? “Not fighting?”

“Did you do a lot of fighting with the ex-wives?”
He nods slowly. “Yeah. About everything.”

“Did you and Shannon fight a lot?”

“No. Some, everyone does some, but not a lot. Even you and Mr. Cranston fight every now and again, right?”

She smiles wryly. “Every now and again. Were you picking fights with your other wives?”

He was about to say no, because he never did, verbally. Never set a trap for them to make them want to argue. But, “forgotten” birthdays, late nights with no call home, hiding in the basement, refusing to do anything with their families, taking any assignment, no matter how long or far away from home, sleeping with other women… “Yeah, I did.”

“Why?”

He half-lifts the coffee cup, remembers it’s empty and puts it down again. “They weren’t Shannon.”

“The shoulder your chin is resting on, is it Shannon’s?”

“You mean when I imagine it?”

“Yeah, when you see it in your head, is it Shannon?”

“Sometimes.”

“Most of the time?”

He thinks more. “‘Bout half.”

“How about this time last year?”

He thinks about it. “Wasn’t thinking as much about it then.”

“As much, or at all?”

“As much. When Tony and Ziva started hosting Shabbos… That was back at the end of ’13, there was a change. I was home, with a family, doing family things, that started it. We were a family before, sort of… No… we weren’t. We were really close co-workers. We were a team or a unit or whatever. But it was all work. Once, twice a year we’d get together for Christmas or Thanksgiving, but that wasn’t the same. That was a bunch of people who were in the trenches together spending some off time together rather than be alone. Tony’d come over for dinner or a drink every now and again. Abby’d come over sometimes, but not a whole lot, not like she does now. Ziva did a few times, too, but she always kept her private life private. Never even saw Tim in my basement until he started dating Abby. We were a team. We were… close… friendly… depended on each other… trusted each other… but… not intimate. But we’re not anymore, now we’re a family.”

“And spending time with people who have loves and lives outside of work is reminding you of how much you miss that?”

“Yeah.”

“So, closeness, comfort, peace, someone to talk and listen to, what else do you see in this ideal home?”

“Is there more?”
“Sex?”

He gives her an *of course, I’m old, not dead* look.

“But you didn’t mention it. Didn’t think of it. Or did you just not want to say it to me?”

Good point. He didn’t think of it. Not right now. It was part of what he was thinking about as he sat on the step. Why not? “Sex isn’t too difficult to get. I want that and miss it, too, but it’s not…” He sighs again. “I can get laid. And I’m old enough that taking care of myself scratches that itch pretty well. So… it’s not sex…”

“It’s sex in the context of love and care and peace and family?”

“Yeah. The good morning kiss that runs hot.”

Rachel nods. “Are there children in this home?”

“Sometimes. The grandkids, Kelly and Molly, and the new one that’s due in December. Hopefully at least one more.”

Cranston flashes him a questioning look.

“I hope Ziva and Tony have one, one day. Love it if there’s more than the three of them. I’ll be good with just the three, though.”

“None of your own?”

He looks really startled by that idea, then finally says, “I’m too old. Helping out with Kelly has made it clear that I do not want to be a full time, 24/7 parent of a newborn again. And I’m way too damn old to start dating a woman young enough to have one. And even if I wasn’t, it’s not an option any longer.”

That questioning look again. “Too much risk?”

“Vasectomy back in ’82.”

“Ah.” That got a note, too. She glances over at her clock, fifty seven minutes down. “You want to keep going, or wrap up?”

“I’m good with wrap up.”

Rachel smiles dryly. “I’m deeply shocked. Homework for next time—“

“Homework?”

“Yes. I’ll play to your strengths. Tactical planning and assessment, I want a step by step plan for how to get to your fantasy home.”

“Isn’t that why I’m here with you?”

“Yes. But we start with a plan, and then we work on it, see what’s there, see where you’ve gotten tripped up before, things like that.”

He inclines his head, a physical version of ‘Oh.’

“Yeah. If you want the gold star, you can give me the version of how you got your past three wives
or any serious girlfriends, and what you’re going to do differently this time.”

“Sounds like work.”

She smiles one last time. “Monday?”

He nods. “Monday.”
Honestly, Gibbs would rather skip church this morning. But they've skipped the past few weeks, and Breena was sort of sending psychic puppy-dog eyes at them during Shabbos (Which was tense, but not painfully so. There's still friction between Tony and Ziva, and Gibbs's not her favorite person, either, right now, but they're still family.) dinner yesterday when the question came up, and Elaine has informed him that he will produce Kelly for inspection in the not wildly distant future.

So, he's standing in front of his closet, leaning against the crutch, trying to figure out which of his suit pants are loose enough he can wear the brace under them, or if he should just wrap up in ace bandages and hope that'll do it.

Gray one'll probably do.

It did. Add in a white shirt and a sharp blue tie, and he's presentable. Be nice if it wasn't 93 degrees out already with a high set for the low hundreds to go with his gray wool suit, but he'll live.

Pre-church Sunday breakfast at Elaine's struck him as a tradition he could get behind building.

He got there before the McGees, headed in, toward a booth. He was two steps in when Elaine looked him up and down and said, "You getting married again, Hon?"

He smiled at her. "We get dressed up for church."

"Dressed up mighty fine."

That got another smile.

"Getting your usual?"

"Yeah. Tim, Abby, and Kelly are coming, too…"

"Honey, you think I don't know you're expecting company when you head to a booth? I'll hold it until I see 'em." Then she notice Kelly was on the list. "You're finally bringing her in?"

"Yep. Might be a little late…” Because getting anywhere with a baby is always a challenge, but Elaine knows that.

"Doesn't matter, can't wait to see your darlin' girl."

Which was when he noticed the McGee's Highlander pull in. "'Bout two minutes." His first instinct is to head out and offer to help lug baby stuff, but, first of all, he can't, and, second of all, they've just got the diaper bag and the car seat/baby carrier, so it's only one thing for each of them.

He can, however, head to the door and hold it open, which he does. Abby gives him a little, are you taking care of yourself? look, while kissing his cheek.

He sends her an I'm fine. Stop mothering me. look back.
She just looked him up and down and then said, "Uh huh. Which booth is yours?"

He nodded toward the one that now has one cup of coffee, black, one iced coffee, with milk, and some sort of pink smoothie (Turns out it was frozen watermelon lemonade, really nice on a day as hot as this.)

The source of those drinks wrapped Abby in a warm hug, and even warmer words about how good she was looking, which lasted for a few seconds until Tim and Kelly got in, and all of Elaine's attention focused into a lazer like beam on the baby girl.

"Oh my God, Jethro, she's so precious! May I?"

Both Tim and Abby are a bit amused to see she's asking Gibbs' permission to pick Kelly up, but they also get this is some sort of grandparent bonding thing, and that they don't get to really be part of it for at least another twenty-years.

Gibbs does check with Abby though, and she nods, so he very carefully hands Kelly over for snuggles and soft words. Elaine gently rubs her cheek against the top of Kelly's head, inhaling deeply. "Nothing on earth smells like a new baby. I could just eat you up, precious girl!"

Kelly's looking a bit startled by this, not sure if she likes it, (it's kind of loud and smells different, and she doesn't know the person petting her) but it's not unpleasant, so she doesn't fuss.

Elaine is gently patting Kelly's back, cuddling her against her shoulder, whispering gently to her, "You be good to your Pop, now. He loves you more than anything else in the world. You should have seen him, showing off pictures of you when you were the size of a salad shrimp."

Kelly stares intently at Elaine, and then flops her hand onto her nose, squeezing tight.

"I'll take that as a yes, precious girl," Elaine says with a smile. She kisses Kelly's forehead, detaches her hand from her nose, and hands her back to Gibbs. "Well, let's get you all fed and ready for church. Abby, I know what those two want, but what about you?"

Outside of work, they don't really talk a whole lot about what exactly it is they do. They just don't. Gibbs doesn't know if that's a cop thing in general, or just something that's true for his team.

But he's very obviously injured, and he does want to hammer home exactly how important Tim and Jimmy are and how what they do is vital to protecting people and keeping them alive.

So, when Mark? Jeff? (For whatever reason every Slater on earth showed up for church and Sunday dinner today. There's got to be close to a hundred people in the house) one of Breena's extended collection of relatives asked why he was on crutches, he said, "You hear about that warehouse explosion down in Norfolk?"

"Uh. Yeah."

And Gibbs just gave him a long, long look. And from there, questions, answers, and choice details of the case started to leak out and circulate around the Slater family.

And he did notice, that by the time the ham and the turkey had been carved, and plates piled high with succulent meats, manicotti, penne with sausage and peppers, and lasagna, that the Slaters were looking at Tim and Jimmy with a lot more respect.
What he wasn't expecting when he started making sure that the Slaters knew his boys had seen some serious action recently was that he was injured, almost died, and is sitting in a house full of morticians and funeral home directors.

So, about half an hour after the first bits of what had happened started to circulate, Ed's brother Wes wandered over and asked him, "So, have you given any thought to your final arrangements?"

That took Gibbs by surprise. Yes, he's given it more thought than a lot of guys, and not for reasons he ever wanted to, but… Back in the Marines, they'd joke about guys who 'bought the plot' the plot being the bit of ground they'd dig your grave out of. Get badly wounded, you'd buy 'half a plot,' stuff like that. Well, he does in fact own his plot. It's next to Kelly and Shannon's. (There's space for his name on the headstone, too.) But between that and the flag, he's never given it any thought.

"You know, if you want to plan things ahead of time, it's a lot easier on the people you leave behind."

Gibbs nods silently, sure that that's true, and also sure that he's really not wanting to have this conversation.

"Plus, if you plan it yourself, they don't have to deal with the whole, 'Would Dad have wanted this?' issue."

"Okay."

"We also offer competitive pricing and the ability to pay over time. That way no one gets hit with a large bill right after what's sure to be a traumatic time."

"I'm sure you do." Gibbs is looking for a way out. Abby catches his eye, sees that Help! Get me out of this look in it, and heads over, wrapping her arm in his.

"Telling Wes more stories?"

Gibbs smiles at him and shakes his head.

"Just asking him if he had his final plans made. With as dangerous as your line of work is…” Wes lets that trail off.

"Ahhh. At this point, the family plan is to let Breena handle it. We know she'll treat us right. She took care of Jethro's dad, and did a great job."

Wes smiles at that, nods, and heads off.

Tim had told him about fighting with Jimmy, and how the two of them together took out Ziva. He mentioned that the music helped them keep track of each other, and coordinate their fight.

He'd been really excited about showing Gibbs, too. And he saw that from Jimmy, too. For a second it was hard to remember that these are two thirty-seven-year-old men, because they both had that puppyish I-did-something-really-good-c'mon-Dad-come-see-it! attitude when it came to explaining how this worked.

So, he's at the gym, changed into his workout clothing, though God alone knows why, not like he's
going to do anything besides stand there, watching, leaning against his crutches, while Tim messes around with his sound equipment and then a wave of… something… Gibbs isn't going to call it music, goes blaring through the gym.

(He's actually quite pleased that they generally have the combat area to themselves on Sundays. This would be really annoying if you weren't part of it.)

Yeah, this is music that'll make you want to fight. Granted, it's making Gibbs want to punch the asshole that inflicted it on the world. The fact that people voluntarily listen to this (Hell, that Tim listens to this. He knows Abby listens to weird stuff, but Tim's Mr. Smooth Jazz.) boggles him.

But, he's watching, can't do much else, and he has to admit, that, yeah, it helps. Probably help their one on one fighting, too. He knows that when they're on their own, warming up, working on their form, they usually have ear buds in.

They were two rounds in, warmed up, not too tired when Gibbs decided to see what would happen if he swapped it up again. He's sure Ziva'll cope well with this, but for Tim and Jimmy it should make things even more challenging.

He hits the off switch on the… thing… the music comes out of, and all three of them stop and look at him. "One on one on one."

Both of the boys are giving him the are you kidding me look. Ziva's grinning.

Then Tim is, too. Gibbs isn't sure what that grin means, not in any sort of detail, just that Tim's got a plan.

Jimmy's shaking his head, probably less than thrilled about having to keep track of Ziva and Tim.

"Have at it." He turns the music back on, and three notes died what, to him, sounds like horribly painful deaths, and then something peppy, fast, and sure, it's not anything he's going to listen to anytime soon, but it's not awful either (must be Ziva's music) comes up.

Jimmy's shaking his head. One on one on one, and it's Ziva's music. They're going to get killed again.

Tim tilts his head, in a way that Jimmy knows means, follow my lead.

Gibbs watches them do it and realizes they are not exactly embracing the spirit of one on one on one, but he's interested in seeing what they do.

It wasn't a brilliant plan or anything, but it was solid. Tim made sure Ziva was between him and Jimmy at all times. Which meant even though they took occasional shots at each other, they were still concentrating force against the most dangerous target, trying to take her out first.

That lasted for ninety-two seconds, until Ziva got her back to the ropes, which meant both guys could still flank her, but they had to be pretty close to each other to do it. That used their size against them, (getting in each other's way) and in her favor. Then she did some sort of flip thing with the rope, Jimmy's knee, and Tim's shoulder, and ended up behind Tim. (This was when Gibbs decided he needed to record these, because all three of them need instant replay to figure out what the hell it was she did.)

But whatever it was, it worked, while they were gaping at the spot where she had been, Ziva tidily tripped Tim into Jimmy and took both of them down.
As she helped Jimmy up, he said to her, "How can you possibly be that fast?"
"Years of practice."

They were in the parking lot, having finished for the day when Gibbs said to her, "Ziver, come home with me?"
"Gibbs?"
"Wanna show you something."

She's got a curious look in her eyes, and wary, and still some anger, but she nods and slips into her car.

"Come on up. Still haven't figured out how to do stairs while holding anything." And while that's true, even if he could carry something while crutching down the steps, he'd still invite her up for this. He wants the symbol of the intimacy of his bedroom for it.

She follows, looking around, scanning everything, the sort of training that never leaves a person. He knows he still does it every time he's in a strange place. Should do it every time he's anywhere, but he's used to this being home, and doesn't give it a proper look through when he gets in.

They head up to his room, and he pats the bed, signaling for her to sit down, before heading to his dresser, taking a moment to figure out the mechanics of how to do it, and then opened the bottom drawer, and got one of the photo albums out.

She's still standing between the bed and the dresser, watching him intensely.

"Look, I'm not doing this standing up." He put the album on the bed, rested the crutches against the bedside table, and then sat down, scooting over so his back was against the headboard and he was in the middle of the bed. Then he held out one arm to her, while putting the album on her lap.

"Come on, look at some pictures with me."

"We are going to look at pictures?" she asks, sitting next to him, cross-legged, looking across him, shoulder toward the headboard, very much not snuggling into the offered arm, so he drops it.

"Yeah. When you left to deal with Tony, you said we weren't done. I know we aren't. Just..." He licks his lips and inhales deeply, then meets her eyes. "Context."

It's the last of the albums. The one where Kelly's oldest. There are all the usual shots, holidays like Christmas and Halloween, vacation shots of the three of them, school shots, Kelly's first ballet recital. Just lots of little, common, snaps of a series of intersecting lives. There's nothing unique about a grandfather spinning his granddaughter around, but it's Jackson and Kelly. Everyone who's grown up in places with snow have shots of kiddies playing in the snow, but the ones of Kelly and Gibbs making the snowman together make Ziva smile. (And the one of Shannon standing on the porch, hot chocolate in both hands, watching them, waiting to welcome them in with delicious warmth Gibbs strokes reverently.)

He doesn't say much while looking at them. Mostly just short answers to her questions, like where is this, or in a few cases, who is that. Mostly he's letting her see them, letting the content of the pictures
say what his voice won’t, can’t.

By half way through the album, she is sitting back against the headboard, his arm around her shoulders.

The last page is two thirds of the way through the album. The last picture is Gibbs kissing Kelly at midnight on New Year's Eve; they're both wearing goofy hats that say 1991 on them, and Shannon framed it to get the clock in the shot. That was the first New Year's she was old enough to stay up until midnight.

"Went back to Iraq on the second." His fingers trace over the shot, and he closes the album.

"I've already buried one daughter. I can't do it again. And like it or not, you aren't just Special Agent David… or DiNozzo… anymore." He squeezes her a little more tightly and kisses the side of her head. "Somewhere along the line, maybe when I was walking you down the aisle, maybe when I was holding onto you, trying to keep you from freezing, maybe when I stood in your home and watched you light the candles, but somewhere along the line you became mine." He smiles at her. "Mine in a way you didn't used to be. Shifted from being someone I treated like a daughter to my daughter. And I'll try to do a better job about not pissing you off with it, but I've done this once, and I'm not doing it again."

Ziva looked at the closed album on his lap, snuggled in a little closer to Gibbs, but being careful of his knee. "How about we make a deal? I will do what I can to keep you from burying another daughter. But you will do whatever you can to keep me from burying another father?"

Gibbs smiled at her, kissed her forehead again, and said, "Deal."

Chapter End Notes

I'm not a Jibbs shipper. Never really got it. So, I've got a question for my Jibbs shippers. At the beginning of Season Three until the middle of Season Four, both of them were single. They were obviously attracted to each other. They liked each other. They had a history. Neither of them ever gave a shit about any rule that wasn't currently serving their purposes. Why do you think they didn't get back together?
When he was in school the first time, Gibbs hated homework. There were so many other things he wanted to do and being buried in books or writing essays just wasn't on the list.

Part of what he liked about the idea of the military was that he'd be done with homework.

There are times when he laughs at how he thought that.

The Marines was tons of homework, sure not a whole lot of it was bookwork (at first), but there was some, and though he was naturally handy, he did have to practice to get drills down and his rifle mastered, and all the rest of it.

And sniper school… As he told Tim, half of it is pulling the trigger. The other half… The other half is math. (Okay, technically physics, but still, it's math.) Hard math. Hard math you tried to get done ahead of time (like the rest of the snipers he carried around a small notebook with his calculations in it) but if something shifted, which is often the case with combat sniping, sometimes you've got to calculate a trajectory on the fly, in your head, under pressure, while taking wind readings, distance readings, and deciding which gun or bullet to use. And you fucking can't be wrong.

It was a ton of work. Work he liked, but there were still a lot of days when he felt like his brain was going to melt.

He can remember Shannon rubbing his shoulders as he sat at the kitchen table, staring at the book, willing himself to shove just one more fact into his head. Then she stepped away for a moment, and came back, with a Q-tip. "Here."

He leaned back in the chair and rubbed his eyes; she snuggled in closer. "What sort of break do you suggest?"

She smiled at him warm and saucy. "I know what I'd like, but how about you eat something first, before you get cranky on top of burned out." She kissed him one more time, standing up, taking away the coffee cup sitting next to him. "Man can't live on coffee alone, Gibbs."

He's sitting at his kitchen table, cup of coffee next to him, pad of paper in front, pen in hand, looking at a piece of paper that says: Dream Home: Steps.

Tactical planning. Great. Somehow he has the feeling that what he's got on the first page (crumpled up and tossed out) meet woman, get to know her, fall in love, move in together, isn't exactly a plan.

After all, if Eisenhower had said: Land in France, defeat Germans, win the war, everyone else would have laughed him out of the room.
The jump from Gunnery Sergeant to Master Sergeant is a pretty big one. One he had been hoping to make. And as such, he kept hitting the books.

They'd been hinting that come the end of the ground war in Iraq, he'd be up for Master Sergeant.

But that didn't happen.

And, for a while, when he was floundering in the dark during the months between killing Hernandez and heading back to see Mike Franks again, the idea that he'd ever have enough interest in anything, let alone a new job, seemed ridiculous.

But he did eventually wander over to see Franks.

And Mike looked up at him from the paperwork on his desk, looked him up and down, and said, "Back, huh?"

Gibbs nodded.

"I can use ya. Ya don't waste good, and yer good." Then he wrote down FLETC and a phone number. "Gotta go back to school first. Shouldn't have any trouble getting in. Gettin' out's a different story, but if ya get out, and I've got a job for ya."

FLETC felt a lot more like high school than he was hoping. But it was… distracting. It was different. New place, new people, new jobs. It was a goal. And he got through. (It was harder than he was expecting. He was used to memorizing regulations, did lots of that in the Marines. And the physical requirements were way easier than the Corp. Plus he could out shoot the instructor. Most of the skills he didn't have any issues with, and honestly, evasive driving was a lot of fun. Civil liberties law was a different subject, though… Possibly because he wasn't naturally inclined to being sympathetic to the rights of the accused. When he realized he was going to get yanked out on the psych evals if he couldn't fake it, he learned to fake it. That was also when he realized that if he talked about Shannon and Kelly, he wasn't going to be able to fake it. So he stopped talking about them.)

Few years later, he was in Okinawa with Franks, so he learned Japanese. More work, more hours spent with books and ear phones and listening to tapes over and over. But it ate up time, and it was useful. And it meant that everyone else learned he could pick up a new language pretty quickly. So, in '96, when Franks had his own, I can't take this anymore moment, Gibbs got a new Probie to go with Burley, a new set of assignments, tickets to Paris, and a copy of Rosetta Stone: French. (And then there was Russian. He picked up a bit of German, too.)

So, it's true that it's been more than ten years since he's done any sort of real homework assignments. And he hasn't worried about being graded on something and not passing muster since he was sixteen, sitting in his English Literature class, getting called on to give a speech about Messianiac figures in Red Badge of Courage.

But the paper in front of him is blank. And 'Meet woman' just isn't going to cut it.

When he got to the Corp, when there was finally a concrete goal (Private First Class was the first of them.) Gibbs had no problem doing the work he needed (and more on top of it) to get the gold star.
And staring at the blank page, he's thinking that he might have an easier time looking at this from the point of view of what he's already done.

It's easier to criticize a plan than it is to come up with one in the first place.

So he got up, poured himself some more coffee, poured a slug of bourbon in it, sat back down, and started to write down how he went about getting his various exes.

He met Hannah at a bar. Not that unusual. Those days he met lots of women at bars. (As Ducky said, back in the day Gibbs was a lot like Tony.) And those days, less than two months out of FLETC, nothing much to do when he wasn't working, too burnt to even woodwork. (Kept destroying the projects he tried to start.) Gibbs spent most of his free nights, sometimes with Franks, sometimes without, at bars, sucking down bourbon, looking to get laid.

He didn't plan to get her name, or number, or anything beyond the use of her body for an hour or so, but her hair was red, and her laugh light, and the perfume... It wasn't the same, but it was similar, and if he closed his eyes, (or, as it turned out, if he was behind her) it was close enough.

And for a little while he felt better. Or, at least, the pain dulled down some.

So, he did get her name, and he did get her number, and he did call the next day to see if she'd like some dinner sometime.

And she did.

They made it two years, longer than either of the other two, but he started hunting a serial killer, pulling further and further into the case, seeing more and more haunted faces of victims' families, more and more parents who'd lost their children, parents he wasn't saving from this pain.

He worked until he dropped, worked until Mike started sending him home, but he couldn't go home, couldn't talk about it, so he headed back to the bar, to more bourbon and more women.

By the time he got out of it, by the time he killed the man, he was alone again.

And, honestly, he didn't mind.

Diane was all heat and fire. He doesn't even remember where they met. (She does. And she's still pissed that he doesn't.) He does remember seeing her and the feeling of heat. How time and space sort of slipped away as dark, primitive, sexual heat swelled between them.

He remembers the sparks in her eyes.

The passion in the way she teased him, and how he teased back. How he wanted to tease her back.

And the blinding scorch of slipping into her body.

He remembers how that heat pulled him out of the dull, moving-through-fog sensation of depression. He remembers how looking forward to seeing her, fucking her, arguing with her, just being with her, was the first thing he had enjoyed, genuinely enjoyed, in years.

And if Hannah was the first time the pain stopped, Diane was the first brush of actual pleasure.
But it wasn't enough. Fondness wasn't enough. Great sex wasn't enough.

She was smart. She knew he didn't love her. She knew there was a core of him she couldn't touch. Didn't know why. And when she found out…

When erotic heat turned to anger, and she burned just as hot in that direction.

He does remember where he met Stephanie. Beautiful, classic, enticing Stephanie, olive on a toothpick between her teeth, nibbling gently.

Vodka martini. Why not? They were in Moscow. And again, it was a bar, and again, red hair, slim build, beautiful eyes, and a whiff of something that smelled like home.

They'd been married for two months when the case took him back to Paris. He and Jen went. Stephanie hated the fact that his partner was a woman (especially another slim redhead with long hair and green eyes) and loathed that there was a part of his life she'd never touch, but that Jen got to be part of every day.

She begged him to take Burley. He wouldn't budge. It was going to be him and Jen. Two guys roaming around Paris looked weird. A man and a woman, romantic city, they'd blend better.

By the time he got back to Moscow, four months later, the thing with Jen had started and ended, and he never said anything about it, but Stephanie knew.

They moved back to the States a month after that.

For six months their relationship limped along. He buried himself in work, picked up a new partner from Baltimore, and he fucked other women, and she slept with other men, and she screamed at him, hit him with a baseball bat, and practically set fire to the house, but when it came down to it, she couldn't hurt him the way he hurt her, because really, he just didn't care.

(He still feels guilty about that.)

"You wanna work with me? You gotta learn the rules."

"The rules?" Jenny Shepard, or, as he was calling her, Probie, said.

"Yeah, got a lot of them. Number one, 'Never screw your partner."

Jen smiled up at him, wicked glint in those beautiful green eyes. "Never? How painfully limiting."

And he knew he was lost. He made it two and a half years between Jen being made his Probie, and then Partner, and not once did he touch her, or beyond some mild flirting, step out of line. Because he knew where it'd go if he did.

But they were in Paris, and the cover was a couple, (and God, he knew he was playing with fire when he set that up, knew it was going to end how it ended, but he did it anyway.) and somehow pretending stopped being pretending. (Or maybe the we're-just-co-workers was the pretend part, and the couple was real.) Somehow a dinner out to keep an eye on suspects turned into a real dinner when he never showed, and dinner turned into a romantic walk (where they were supposedly scouting the turf ahead of time) and somehow that ended up with them in bed and her fingernails
leaving trails down his back.

Four months later the op was done, and so were they.

She was kind about it. They'd done so well on the mission she'd been offered a post, a team, of her own, (some sort of liaison work with Mossad or something) and she was taking it. He was to go back to DC, take their Medical Examiner with him, work with Burley until he had a start on a new team, at least one new hire, and then Burley would head for Agent Afloat assignments.

And in the end, she kissed his cheek, wished him well, and he was annoyed because even though he wasn't in love with her, he did really like her, and she was a great partner, and… That was bullshit.

It hurt to get left, and that was the beginning and end of it, she was leaving him.

But the part of him that remembered he had a wife in Moscow, and more importantly, one in the grave, knew he'd never be more than deeply fond of Jenny Shepard, and she deserved better than that.

He went back to Moscow, no idea what to say or do about Stephanie, but his rules had changed, and he added one more: Number 12: Don't date your partner, because obviously Number 1 hadn't been specific enough.

"When the case is done, let it go." Mike said that to him, over and over and over.

The case was done. Or should have been. But this one did go to trial, and Elizabeth had been one of the technical witnesses. She was a banker, worked for First Columbia, and had been instrumental in letting them know enough about how check fraud worked so they could catch the guy.

The job was over. He'd let it go.

And then bumped into her at the courthouse.

Twice.

Tall, slim build, curly red hair, fire in her eyes. Yeah, he was interested. So, he asked her out for coffee. She gave his wedding ring a long, pointed look. He saw her check it, noticed the one on her finger.

"Is it a problem?" he asked.

She shook her head. "For you?"

He shook his head and offered her his hand.

"Coffee" ended up being a motel four streets down.

They'd meet a few times a month. Mostly for stress relief. She'd pick him up from work when she had a bad day. Occasionally he'd pick her up when he'd had one. She never saw his home. He never saw hers. They usually made it to a hotel or motel, but occasionally they took advantage of the fact that her car was a convertible.

Drove Tony, and eventually Kate, and after another year Tim, bonkers that they never even got her name. Just, the mysterious red-head they'd occasionally see give Gibbs a lift at the end of a long day.
One day, not long after they met, he stopped wearing his ring. Another day, two years later, she stopped wearing hers.

They never talked about it.

Eventually she told him she'd gotten a new job in Miami. She didn't ask for anything. Didn't indicate he had any choice in the matter. It was a good job, better pay, more power, she was going. She was not inviting him to come along. (Though if he ended up down there on a case, he was welcome to look her up.)

He wished her luck, and genuinely meant it.

And for a year after, he'd think about her on occasion, and miss her.

"When the case is done, let it go."

Mike said it. He said it. He had it written down and tucked into his box of rules.

There's an unwritten one in there, too. "When the relationship is done, let it go."

So, of course, the new Director of NCIS was Jenny. He didn't play the politics close enough to even know she was in the running. (Best he knew twenty years of service was a requirement for the job, and she didn't have it. He doesn't know if they bent that for her, or if it was just an NCIS legend.)

She was still beautiful, still driven, still... everything... she'd been in Paris.

And now she was his Boss.

The attraction was still there. The desire hadn't been lessened by time apart. If anything the fact that she was his Boss, that it was forbidden, made it even hotter. But she had bigger goals than him, and the fact that he liked her, that he enjoyed her, that he wanted her body under his, (and for some reason, probably because she was his boss, in all the fantasies he was on top) and could still remember the taste of her skin slick with sweat and cum, still didn't mean he was in love.

So, he enjoyed the flirtation, he enjoyed playing the power games with her. He enjoyed their relationship in a way that was probably quite a bit more sexual than it needed to be, but wasn't sexual enough to cross the line.

And it felt like a punch in the gut when he watched her play DiNozzo, watched her wrap him in a similar web of sexual intrigue when she thought he wasn't looking.

But that's who she was, driven, and she'd use any tool, break any rule, do whatever was necessary, screw the consequence to get what she wanted.

And when she died, he lit a candle for her, too.

Maybe he and Hollis had had a chance.

Probably not.

But, sometimes, he likes to think, that... maybe...
Okay, she said she'd done a profile on him. He assumed (Stupid. Don't assume.) that meant that she already knew about Shannon and Kelly. (After all, Ziva's profile had included that.)

Turned out she didn't. So, of course, she never brought it up, because she didn't know. And he never brought it up, because he never voluntarily talked about it.

By the time she found out, they'd been together for almost nine months, long time to not mention something like that.

He couldn't say to her 'I thought you knew.'

And she couldn't say 'Can you move on from this? Can we do this?'

So they didn't. He found her listening to the recording in his basement. She looked up at him, so sad, and he sort of did that little shrug thing he does, and she shook her head, and next thing he knew, she was moving to Hawaii.

Sometimes he wishes he'd called her. Or taken some damn time off and gone to her. But he's fairly sure it would have ended badly. Or as Tony said, 'We just met the fourth ex-Mrs. Gibbs."

And he's out of the new ex-wife business.

Long time between Hollis and Susan. Long time before he found a spark that lit more than passing interest. Not that Hart or Ryan weren't fond of him. Not that he wasn't fond of them. But… They never really got past friendly sex.

Susan though… She was different. Less challenging. He likes women that stand up to him, that challenge him, and she did, but there was a sweetness there…

Diane was all sharp corners and edges, the razor-edged cuts he needed to feel alive then. Jen used her attractiveness to underscore her upper hand. For her, sexuality was a tool that she used to make sure the men under her obeyed. Hollis was that same drive and need to do the job he had. And all of them stood up to him, teased him, kept him on his toes, made him toe the line, and he adored it.

Susan was… gentle. What do they call them, Steel Magnolias? Those lovely, polite, gentle southern women who'll go to hell and back and enjoy the trip rather than let you screw them over? Yeah. Something like that.

But she was from Michigan, so maybe not.

However it worked, sometimes she'd just give him a look, and he'd know she was drawing a line just to see if he'd cross it.

And he liked that.

He liked her.

Even brought her home. Introduced her to the family. Told her about Shannon and Kelly before it could become an issue.

And six months on, he still liked her. Really liked her.

But she still wasn't Shannon, and he didn't feel that way about her.
And in the end, he wants more than just a pleasant companion to end his days with. And she was never going to be much more than that.

It was close to three in the morning when he finished writing. Most of it was just what he remembered about his ladies, how he met them, good bits, bad bits, very bad bits.

On the page on top was a list.

Dream Home: Plan

Meet woman.
-Not in a bar
-Not redhead.

Common ground good (cop, military) but not required.

Get to know her.

Let her get to know you.

Talk. Women like words, so talk to her.

-Don't hide Kelly or Shannon.

-Don't hide cases.

Introduce her to family. See if they like her.

Take it slow.

Get to know her family. (See if you like them.)

Reassess and go from there.
This time, he brought two cups of coffee.

“Planning on settling in?” Cranston asks as she sees him unpack them from his go bag.

“Ran out last time.”

“And we wouldn’t want you to go half an hour sans coffee.”

He nods definitively, and then handed over the nine pages (back and front) paper-clipped together.

“You really are aiming for the gold star, aren’t you?” she says, unclipping them as she sits down.

He sits down, flashes her a look that might have been wry, or possibly flirty, she isn’t entirely sure, maybe sarcastic might have been in there, too, and says, “Hoo Rah, Ma’am.”

She laughs. “I wasn’t expecting this much. Give me a few minutes, let me read the… plan. Is this…” Her eyes scan the pages. “Okay, sixteen pages of your different last times, and one page of plan. Let me read the plan. We’ll work on that first.”

It doesn’t take her long to get through the tenish lines of his plan. As he takes a sip of his first coffee, she says, “Do you think, maybe there might be an even earlier first step?”

He looks at her blankly.

“How do you feel about taking that ring off? Wearing it again is recent, right?”

“Yeah, since after Susan.”

“Ah.” She makes a note, flips through the pages, and sees Susan’s the last of the ladies.

“Ah, what?”

“I want to know the story behind that. I don’t want to distract from how you feel about taking it off. We’ll get to why you’re wearing it again sooner or later.” He doesn’t say anything, so she nudges him a little with, “Well…”

He extends his fingers, looking at the ring. “Not a clothes guy. Not a jewelry guy.” He taps his watch. “Have had this for fifteen years. I probably won’t bother with a new one when it dies; phone tells time just as well. I’ve got a box in the sock drawer filled with medals. Shannon put them in the box, collected them. I never cared about it. The ribbons, sure, they go on the uniform. But the medals? Couldn’t care less. Tony’s got something like six other ones in his desk.” He touches his ring again, tapping his thumb against the underside of it. “This and the uniform are the only things I ever wanted to wear. Only symbols that I wanted to carry on my body.”

“Marine, husband, and father were who you wanted to be. No symbol for Kelly?”

He shrugs. “Didn’t do stuff like that, then.” He taps the ring again. “This was it. My life, Shannon’s, and a promise to shelter and love any lives we made.”

She nods, understanding that. “You took the uniform off intentionally.”

“Yeah.”
“How about the ring? Tell me about taking it off the first time.”

He’s staring at it, rubbing it around his finger. “Night before I left for FLETC. You wear the ring, people ask questions. I didn’t want to answer them. I yanked it off, put it in the box with the medals, buried it under my socks.” He feels like he maybe should mention how he kept waking up that night, feeling it gone, how he almost got up to put it back on, but he doesn’t. He gets the sense from how she’s looking at him that she knows there’s more than what he just said.

“And no one asked if you were married?”

“No one asked much of anything.”

Cranston smiles. “I take it you weren’t exactly easy to talk to in FLETC?”

Gibbs nods, small smile on his face. “Wasn’t the first place I heard the second B was for bastard, was the most often.”

“I can imagine. Make any friends?”

“No.”

“All work all the time?”

“Yeah. If I wasn’t sleeping or in class, my head was in a book. I had the highest graduating score from FLETC for the DC Branch until Tim showed up.”

That also gets an amused smile, but there’s a bit of edge to the smile, a silent, back on track, Jethro.

He shrugs. “I don’t know how I feel about taking it off. I don’t intend to wear it forever. I know there’s an end to this. But I don’t want to take it off, yet.”

She nods at that. It’s honest, and that’s a solid place to start. “You’ll take it off when it feels right?”

“I guess.”

“Any idea what feels right might be?”

“No.” And he doesn’t. It’s not time yet. It will be time eventually. Beyond that, he doesn’t know. But, he’s thinking this might, maybe, help speed up getting to eventually.

“But you’re good with ‘feels right?’ That’s a natural way for you to deal with issues.”

He nods.

“The infamous ‘gut’ I heard so much about back in the day.”

“Yeah.” He can imagine what she might have heard about that. Then something else occurs to him. “Shannon liked that. She had rules for everything. I just kind of went with it. We worked on that, together. I got more rules; she got more gut. Met in the middle, both of us got better for it.”

Rachel nods at that, and makes a quick note about it. Then gets back to her first question. “So, are you going to take it off as step one?”

“Probably a good idea. Woman who doesn’t care if I’m married isn’t a good plan.”

She nods in agreement with that. “Probably not. Not if the goal is to build a home with someone. So
why did you put it back on?”

“After Susan. Tim told me I wasn’t done being married, so I should still be wearing the ring. And, that made a lot of sense, so I went upstairs, got it, and put it back on.”

“Still in the box with the medals hidden under the socks?”

He nods.

“You were willing to talk to Tim about that?”

“I was being enough of an asshole when I broke it off with Susan that he and Tony decided I needed a bottle of alcohol poured into me to get over it. He drew the short straw and ended up administering it.”

“And let me guess, you and Tony would have just gotten wasted, but Tim got you talking, too?”

“I think so. Something about wakes and telling stories. It’s a blurry night. But I still remembered putting the ring on once I stopped wishing to die from the hangover.”

She chuckles a little at that, clearly imagining it. Gibbs finds himself smiling. She really is amazingly easy to talk to. Of course, that probably makes this job a lot easier. He makes a quick note to remember that this is her job, that she’s a professional, and just because this is comfortable and she’s female doesn’t mean he needs to get interested in her.

“How does it feel to be wearing it again?”

He thinks about it. “Good. Once the ‘You get married again?’ stuff died down. Got a call from Susan two weeks later about how she’d gotten several extremely awkward congratulations from people who’d seen me wearing the ring.”

“Difficult conversation?”

He’s had way worse. “Uncomfortable. She thought it was a good idea, but… She was so sad for me, and that hurt. She was hurting for me, and I’m the jerk who can’t get out of his own past enough to do right by her, love her the way she should be loved. And I felt bad about sticking her in an awkward situation. And… it was really quiet on my end of the phone.”

The look on Cranston’s face is gentle and knowing. “I’d imagine. So, how long has it been since you’ve been on a date?”

“Since January of ’14.”

“Longest time on your own since…”

“Since before I started dating Shannon.”

She wasn’t expecting that. “How long between Shannon’s death and your next girlfriend?”

He was about to answer when he realized they may not be talking about the same thing. “Girlfriend or hookup?”

That answer gets a very curious look out of Rachel. “Is there a difference?”

“Big one.”
“Both then.”

“Four months for a hook up. Hannah was the first girlfriend, and that was a little over two years. That was part of the reason I was hitting the bars so hard that week, it was the anniversary.”

“Why did you go back to dating so fast?”

He shakes his head. Not sure if this is her not really getting him, not really getting men, or if she’s being euphemistic, or if she’s trying to get him to put it all out there. “Wasn’t dating. Just screwing.”

“Ah. Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Got off. Didn’t hurt for a few seconds. That was all I was aiming for.”

“Really?” There’s that look, curious, wanting to dig deeper, and he can feel there’s more she’s looking for here, but he’s not getting what it might be. After all, he doesn’t feel like this is an issue that’s got any real depth to it. He wanted to get laid. He got laid. This isn’t rocket science.

“Yeah.” He’s nodding, still not sure where she wants to take this.

“Like you said last time, now-a-days you can scratch that itch for yourself. What changed? Why seek out another person?”

He looks at her curiously--It’s a good question. Why was he looking for another person? Not like he wanted any sort of company; he practically sprinted out of the room the second they were done.--sips his coffee, and sips it again. He hasn’t thought about that, or any of this, not in any depth for a very long time, so it’s taking him a while to remember who he was back then. (Let alone this aspect of who he was, because it’s not the sort of thing he dwells on.)

Finally he puts it back together. “On my own, I’d think about her. Too much. Thought about her with other women, too, but less. Easier to focus on here and now if there’s a real woman there.”

“Could you get off on your own?” She asks it completely deadpan, staring him right in the eyes.

“No.” He shakes his head and looks away. “Not for close to three years. Couldn’t even get it up on my own for the first year. Too sad.”

“So, for a while, other women were a distraction and a release you couldn’t find on your own?”

“No.” He shakes his head and looks away. “Not for close to three years. Couldn’t even get it up on my own for the first year. Too sad.”

“Yeah. Guess so. A way to get out of my head for a little bit.”

She nods at that, index finger pressed to her temple, looking like she was putting something together. “And was Hannah the first time you got past not hurting?”

“No. Just the first time I managed to make it last for more than a minute at a time.”
“So, why did you go back to screwing so fast?”

He’s not sure what she’s asking. So he gives her that curious look, fairly certain they just covered this.

She sees the confusion. “Why was that your distraction of choice?”

“It wasn’t. Work was my distraction of choice. But work didn’t last all day every day. And we didn’t have hot cases every day. Bourbon was my second choice, filled the hours between cases. Sex came in third.”

“You build boats and do woodworking, right?”

“Yeah.”

“But you didn’t then?”

“I tried. That used to be how I got out of my head, got calm and focused. But I couldn’t do it. You’ve got to feel the wood, figure out what it wants to be, coax it gently into shape. Go at it hard, and it splinters. Those days I’d touch wood, and it’d shatter in my hands. But bourbon doesn’t care. Drink it hard, drink it slow, drink it steady, drink it fast. Bourbon’s happy with all of it.”

Rachel nods at that. “Anything besides women and bourbon?”

“Like harder drugs?”

She nods. “Everything here is confidential, and anything like this, I don’t write down or keep notes on. Even if I got a court subpoena, nothing illegal will be in my notes. So, yeah, harder drugs, cutting, picking fights, adrenaline junkie? How were you medicating yourself?”

“No harder drugs, I’m not sure what cutting is, and yeah, I drove like a maniac and picked fights, and scared the shit out of the guys I took in and took risks that no one else would even dream of. It was the early nineties, NCIS got the bottom of the barrel when it came to investigative talent, and I closed cases. Otherwise they would have canned my ass so fast, I’d have never made it past Probie. I’ve got Death Wish in my files from those days, and Mike and I didn’t have an easy time finding other partners because we did have a reputation as the two guys most likely to end up dead.”

This also makes Rachel look interested. “Mike enabled you in this?”

Gibbs smiles. “Mike was a cowboy of the old style. Go in guns blazing, shoot first, ask questions later, take the bad guys in dead or alive. He had a partner, Vera, who kept him toned down some. Kept me in line, too. But she got her own team, and then it was just the two of us. I don’t even want to count how many times we should have died once she left.”

“Did you like her?”

“Yeah.”

“Romantically?”

“No. More like a big sister. Half the time she was annoying me, making sure I’d do things like eat. Half the time she was treating me like… Like the Probie I was.”

Rachel nods. “Tell me about the first hook up.”

“What about it?”
“Anything.”

“I was drunk, and probably awfully sad looking, and she and her buddies were having a divorce party. I was a guy with a pulse and a dick and still sober enough to sit upright. Still wearing the ring. She didn’t notice or care. I guess I was pretty enough she thought I’d be fun.”

“We’re you?”

“No.” He shakes his head. It was certainly the most depressing sex of his life, and he can’t imagine it was one of her better encounters. “And I felt like shit after. Wanted to peel my skin off felt so dirty. For a few seconds there, I wasn’t hurting. And I didn’t deserve not hurting.”

“But you did it again?”

“Yeah, few months later.”

“Did you need to be drunk to hook up?”

“Yeah. Tried sober a few times. Didn’t work.”

“Didn’t work physically or…”

“Never got far enough to find out if it worked physically when I was sober. Sober, I’d shoot down any woman that got within talking range.”

“Were you sober a lot?”

“I was reliably sober, hung over maybe, but sober, every minute I was at work, and every minute we were on call. I was not reliably sober at any other time for the first two years.”

“Are you an alcoholic, Jethro?”

He shrugs. He probably was then. He might be one now. He does know that he prefers dealing with sad, uncomfortable, or tense if he’s got some alcohol in him. He’s certain that if he did find himself in emotional trouble again, he’d start drinking like a fish again. He also knows that one drink doesn’t mean he has to finish the bottle. And he knows that right now, he doesn’t crave alcohol. Doesn’t find himself thinking about the next drink at 4:30 in the afternoon the way he did back when he was first working with Mike and they were having a paperwork day.

“Unless I had a case to focus on, I wouldn’t have been able to go a night without a drink, and usually closer to five, back then. Smoked, too. After Hannah, I got to the point where I could do some woodworking without breaking anything my hands touched.” He rolls up his left sleeve and shows off a long, thin scar on his forearm, and several other small ones on his hands. “Woodworking with hand tools halfway into a bottle of Jack isn’t a good plan if you don’t like scars.” He doesn’t say anything, but she can see that they’re all old and faded. There are a few fresh scratches, but they’re from the explosion, and small enough they won’t scar. “I have about four drinks a week now, usually two of them are wine at Shabbos. Haven’t smoked since… 2002? 2004? It’s been a while.”

“Are there any aspects of your life that aren’t healthier now than they used to be?”

“Can’t think of any.”

“Good.”

She looks at his list. “So, I’m guessing ‘Meet woman, not in a bar, not red hair’ is you noticing that
never worked well.”

Another nod.

“’Common ground, good.’ What does that mean?”

“Just that it’s easier with someone who gets it.”

She taps the pages in front of her, obviously hasn’t had the chance to read them, but wants to know more. “The one that worked best, that you got closest with? Did she get it?”

“Yeah. Hollis. Light colonel. Army CID. Ran her own team.”

“Female version of you?”

“Nah, that’s Borin, and we know we’re too much alike to even try.”

Rachel makes note of that, too. “How did common ground make things easier?”

“She understood I couldn’t make really solid plans. She got why I wasn’t affectionate in front of my team, or hers for that matter. She knew that sometimes I needed to bury myself in the basement and work on the boat until I got it out. She knew that sometimes I needed to be at work all day and all night and all the next day because the bad guys were still out there.”

“Some of the other women have issues with that?”

“Yeah. Part of what killed Hannah and I. Worst possible case they could have put me on. Serial killer going after kids. And she didn’t know about my girls. Didn’t know why I couldn’t pull out of it. Stephanie didn’t like the fact that the job came first, either.” He doesn’t mention that part of what she didn’t like about the job coming first was the job meant Jen, but Rachel’ll read those pages and get to know that soon enough.

Rachel nods, puts a note about that on her paper, and asks, “What does ‘Get to know her’ mean?”

“Stop looking for Shannon. Get to know the woman who’s actually there. Stop trying to shove her into a mold she was never meant to fit.”

“Very good advice.”

“’Let her get to know you/Talk/Tell her about Shannon and Kelly/Tell her about cases’ all seem related. Tell me about that.”

The smiles. “Did you know Tony calls me a functional mute?”

She nods. “I heard that somewhere along the line.”

“Let me guess, you heard some other things about me not talking?”

“On occasion.” She’s got a smile that puts him in mind of Kate very intensely right now.

“In the job I find out all about everyone else, but they don’t get to find out about me.”

“You like that, don’t you?”

“Yeah. It’s safe. And…” he looks up, self-depreciating smile on his face “I’ve been told by various wives and girlfriends, that I can be awfully charming in a silent and mysterious sort of way—“
“No!”

He laughs a little, appreciating the shocked look on her face. “Yes. Rumor has it I was awfully pretty once upon a time, too.”

That gets a gentle smile and a little laugh. “You’re still pretty.”

“I’m pretty old.”

“That happens to all of us who are still up and moving around. So…”

“So, I found that I could be silent, and charming, and attractive, and keep all of me inside me. And women like Hannah would fall in love with the image. And Diane fell in love with the challenge, and the hints of what might have been under there. I don’t know if Stephanie actually loved me or not. She doesn’t hate me anymore, so that’s a step in the right direction, I guess. There are seven women on that list, and only one of them ever knew my whole story.”

“But that one didn’t work?”

“No. Susan and I parted friends. I don’t think she wanted to break it off, but… I knew it wasn’t going to happen, and by the time we got done talking, she could feel it, too.”

“’Introduce her to your family.’”

“Yeah. These days they’re part of the deal. Won’t even try with a woman they don’t like.”

Rachel nods, makes a mark of that, and asks, “What does slow mean?”

“I don’t know, but I do know I’ve gone from first date to engaged to married to divorced in less time than any of my boys took to go from first date to married.”

“That’s fast.”

“Yeah. And it didn’t work all that well.”

“Slow, then. ‘Get to know her family?’”

“If she’s old enough to be interesting to me, she’s got family. She’s probably divorced or widowed. Likely has kids. Maybe has grandkids. I don’t want to be the step-dad from hell.”

“How old are you thinking?”

“Within ten years of my age? I don’t know. She won’t be twenty-two.” That triggers a memory.

“Okay, I do know, she will not be younger than Tony. He’d never shut up about it if I tried that.”

“Sounds like there’s a story there?”

“He’s had more than a few step-moms over the years, and I think he was twenty-one when his dad married the first one that was younger than he was.”

Rachel winces.

“Yeah.”

“’Reassess?’”
“Take the time to find out if it’s actually going the way I think it is. Jimmy and Tim are really good at being married. Get their input. See how they think it’s going.”

“Sounds like a solid plan, Jethro.” She checks her clock. “So, that’s it for session two. You’re ready to go back to work, if that’s all you want out of this.” Rachel just let that hang.

“And if I don’t?” Gibbs asks, quietly.

“Then I’ve got another assignment for you.”

“Oh, great.”

She smiles at his put upon expression. “You talk about these women with obvious affection, but you tell me you didn’t love them. Next up: what does it mean to be in love?”

Gibbs slouches and gives her his best *are you fucking kidding me?* look.

She’s smiling again, this time *you can do this*, in her expression. “No, no joke. Can’t find what you’re looking for if you don’t know what it is. Like with planning, if it’s easier to go at it by looking at what didn’t work, take Hollis and Susan, those are the two least complicated and most recent,” she decides to hazard a guess, “Only two where you weren’t actively depressed?” He nods. He was coming out of it by the time things ended with Elizabeth, but he certainly was when they started. “Come up with what was missing. What is love, and what wasn’t there with them to make it love?”

He rolls his eyes a bit, shakes his head, and starts to stand up. “Monday mornings good for you?”

“Yes, Jethro. This time works fine. If you want to make this even easier, come up with your answer, and email it to me ahead of time. That way I can read it, and we can talk about it.”

He nods, then turns and heads out.

An hour later, he hobbled into the bullpen. Tim didn’t look surprised to see him, but he wouldn’t, Rachel’s email would have gotten there way before he did. He just nodded, waited for Gibbs to get settled, and then took half of the pile of paperwork off of his desk, and a third of what was on Draga’s and plopped it on his.

“Paperwork day.”

“Great.”

An hour later, when Draga wandered off in search of drinks for them, Tim headed over again, half sitting against Gibbs’ desk.

“You gonna see her again?”

Gibbs nodded.

Tim gave his shoulder a squeeze. “Good.”
Monday night, Gibbs finishes his dinner, washes up his plate, puts it on the drying rack, and heads back to his cup of coffee and pad of paper.

He’d been doodling on it, just sort of thinking about what love meant. Not coming up with much of anything that made any sense, either on the paper or in his head.

Then it hits him. He can’t email a piece of paper.

And he’s not doing this on his phone.

He’s certainly not doing this at work. No way in hell any of this goes near work.

So… he needs a computer. At home.

On Tuesday, they do more paperwork. He eyeballs Tim and Draga’s laptops between filling out forms.

Tim’s got… three of them… maybe, (he’s not sure if the tiny one is a laptop or something else). Draga’s got one on his desk, one in his lap, and seems to be using both of them to research something to fill out one of the reports with.

He knows NCIS will give you a laptop if you request one for field work.

But he doesn’t want one for field work. He doesn’t want to do work on it at all.

He’s not above the occasional misappropriation of government resources, but requesting a laptop just for personal use rankles. And he’d have to give it back once he retires.

He sends Tim a text. Busy after work?

Just heading home. Why?

Wanna get online at home. Can you make my computer do that?

Tim looks up from his phone, stares at Gibbs, a bit alarmed, and then texts, You mean that dinosaur in your attic that’s older than Draga? Yeah, I can get it online, but… What do you want to do with it? to him.

Write a document. Send email.

He can hear Tim sigh and sees him stare up at the ceiling.

Yes, I can make it do that. No, I’m not going to. It’d take hours, and I’ve got better ways to use my time. I will buy you one.

He stares across the bullpen at Tim, not saying anything, but that’s way too big of a present clear in his face.

I’m shopping. You’re paying. Pops up on his phone a few seconds later. Won’t cost much. And buying a new one will be way faster than getting what you’ve got set up to do anything more than
collect dust.

A minute later he gets one more text from Tim.

*Do you even have internet access at home?*

*Internet on my phone works fine.*

Tim rolls his eyes. *Because the phone has 4G. Who’s your cable carrier?*

*Verizon.*

*I’ll get it set.*

Thursday. No excuses. He’s got wifi, a zippy new… something… it’s small and black and way faster than his computer at work.

He’s sitting at the kitchen table, Word open, screen blank and white, cursor blinking at him, waiting.

Love

He types it quickly, feeling the nicely springy action on the keyboard. Yeah, whatever else may be true, Tim knows computers.

Then he sits there, staring at it.

This might actually be worse than the blank page. One, single word just sitting there, all by it’s lonesome.

Three hours later, he’s still only got one word. He has, however, learned what each and every function on Word does. He’s put love into every one of the standard fonts. He now knows how to set up an outline or different templates. He can stick love in a box, underline it, attach notes, translate it, set it up with seventy different layouts, mail merge it, track changes to it, and footnote it.

What he hasn’t been able to do is come up with any other word to go with it.

He closes the laptop and goes to bed.

Friday, he gets home from Shabbos, glares at the computer, and heads down to his basement. He still can’t really do any work on the crib, but he can sketch.

Saturday morning. He’s once again in front of the computer, not typing.

He’s got a list of movies he wants to see on Netflix down. He’s checked his email nine times. He’s looked at plans for cribs, boats, frames, and boxes. He’s ogled hand-crafted woodworking tools, read reviews of three new stains, placed an order for wood he really doesn’t need (but it’s very pretty) and has been seriously thinking about a lathe.
He’s getting dangerously close to setting up a Facebook profile.

It’s occurring to him that not having an internet connection at home is a good thing.

An hour later he still hasn’t written another word.

Love Sitting there, all by itself, staring back at him.

Gibbs shuts the computer.

It’s not words. Not for him. It’s never been words. He can’t tell Rachel what love means because he doesn’t know, not in words.

Besides, what do they say, a picture’s worth a thousand words?

His phone has a camera on it. It’ll do.

Last year, after talking to Tim, he moved a few of the photo albums downstairs, as well as a few pictures of the three of them.

So, that’s where he starts.

He takes a snap of the one on his mantle, last shot of the three of them before he left. Next door neighbor took it. He’s in uniform, has his arms around his girls. His duffle was already in the car, and two minutes later they got on the road. There isn’t a picture of the last hugs, last kisses. But he knows it, can see it in his mind’s eye, he was holding Kelly up on one arm, so her face was up with theirs, other arm wrapped around Shannon, holding them both close. He gave Kelly a quick kiss and Shannon a longer, deeper one, (He can still hear Kelly going ‘EWWWW!’ at it.) and then let them go, shouldered his duffle, and got on the plane.

Week later he got a copy of that shot from Shannon. It’s the last picture he has of them.

He puts it back and gets a further out shot, showing that it’s flanked by the family triptych on the left, and a triptych he made for himself, baby pictures of Kelly, Molly, and again, Kelly.

He gets a closer shot of the triptych he made himself, showing that the frames are handmade, by him, carved so that other shots can be slotted in. As long as he’s willing to make more frames, he can keep growing this piece for as many babies as he ends up with. He carefully painted on each name, and realized that one newborn baby with sandy hair and blue eyes looks an awful lot like every other newborn baby with sandy hair and blue eyes, and unless he did more than just first names, it was going to look like he had two shots of the same girl. His Kelly is Kelly Beth. Tim and Abby’s Kelly is Kelly Marie, and once he did that, he decided that all the full names would go on. So in between the Kellys is Molly Keira. (He’s already got the next frame done, just waiting to find out what name’s going on it, and a picture to stick in it. And not to tempt fate or anything, but he’s got the wood he needs for two more.)

On the bookshelf next to the mantle he has three more albums. He limps over to them, grabbing them, and heads to his sofa to take pictures of pictures.
One is their wedding album, the other two are collections of family shots from after Kelly was born.

He holds their wedding album on his lap. He knows what’s in there, but besides showing those pictures to Abby, Ziva, and Breena shortly before Abby’s wedding, he hasn’t looked at it in a long time.

He inhales fast and lets it out slow, then opens the white leather cover with the embossed silver bells and the words Our Wedding on it.

The first shot is their hands. Shannon’s on top, showing off the engagement ring.

She’d been in school then, majoring in English Lit, minoring in photography, and she knew how she wanted this album to look, how it would start and end, so he sat with her, talking, joking, being told, (sternly) to stay still while she kept fiddling with her camera and the lenses and the lighting to make sure that everything looked perfect and that the diamond all but popped out of the picture it sparkled so brightly.

She sent him a copy of it once she got it developed the way she wanted. Some of the buddies laughed, but he liked it, he had to trim it a bit, but it fit in his wallet, and he kept it on him all the time, until he replaced it with the picture of her under the maple.

“She’s gonna love it, Gibbs.”

“Ya think?” he asked Matheson, tucking the ring back into his pocket.

And she nodded, warm smile on her face. “Oh yeah. She is.”

It was smaller than he wanted, but they were both practical people, and saving money for a home came before getting a big diamond ring.

So, it was small, but it was real, and the setting was red gold that made him think of her hair. And it was bigger than what he could have gotten in the States, (for once the exchange rate worked in his favor) but it wasn’t the sort of rock some of the other guys got for their girls.

“Can I ask you something?” Matheson said.

“Sure.” They were sitting next to each other on a picnic bench, enjoying a free afternoon in late February.

“You and Shannon ever…” she gave him a significant look. “Or, you gonna wait to get married?”

He blushed so red he could feel his pulse in his ears. “That’s none of… Why… We’re not talking about this.”

She laughed, sounding pretty happy as he kept sputtering away. “Calm down. Just, trying to be helpful, you know? You’re the only guy on this base with an actual girl you can talk to about this. A girl who’s done this. Who might be willing to provide useful information. So, take advantage of it. ”

Gibbs stopped sputtering, his eyes narrowed, and he said, “What kind of information?”

“The kind where you’ve got a clue so she has as much fun as you do.”

He was staring at her, horrified. Why wouldn’t Shannon have fun? Sure, he’d heard things about guys who were bad in the sack, and jokes around the Corp about wives leaving for other guys, but
usually that seemed to center on not having a big enough dick or not lasting long enough. (He’d spent more than enough time in the showers with those assholes to know he had a big enough dick and wasn’t terribly worried about lasting long enough. He did just fine when they were making out.)

“Why wouldn’t she?” he asked, sounding, tentative.

Matheson fished around in her pocket and pulled out a dime. “You’re bigger than that, right?”

He nodded, eyes wide.

She gave him another knowing look.

“Oh.” Until that point in time he didn’t actually have any concrete idea what was really there. (Okay, even with the dime to help him understand scale, he still didn’t have a very good concrete idea of what was there.) He’d touched, over her panties, and seen Playboys, so he had a basic idea, but he tended to stay away from Penthouse, so explicit information of a particularly useful nature was few and far between.

“Yeah. Go slow. Go light. She doesn’t have a dick, so harder isn’t better, not at first anyway. Start with your fingers.” He was blushing again, and getting turned on at the idea of it, (which meant he had images of both her and Shannon in his head) and just really horrendously embarrassed, but also trying to pay attention because he did want to be good at it, and he did have an actual girl here who was willing to talk to him, so he might as well learn something, damn it! “Leave the lights on and actually look, so you can see what you’re doing. You didn’t learn to strip a rifle with your eyes closed in the dark, and trust me, a woman is a lot more complicated than that.”

He nodded; that made sense.

“She makes little happy noises when she’s kissing you, right?”

He didn’t want to comment on that, but he was sure she was asking for a good reason, and this was Matheson, and she didn’t blab, so… “Yeah.”

“She stops making those noises, she’s not having a good time anymore, go back to kissing and whatever else makes her make those noises.”

She looked at him for a long minute, and he wasn’t sure what that look meant, like she was testing him or something, but he didn’t know why or if he was passing. Eventually she said, very light blush on her cheeks, “You know what rug munching is?”

He nodded yes, but only in a very vague that-was-something-dykes did sort of way.

He was also sort of vague on what a dyke was, too, he knew they called Matheson one, a lot. (She’d just flip them off when that happened. Told him once that if she got pissed every time some asshole jarhead called her a dyke, she’d never have time for anything else.) He wasn’t entirely sheltered. He was a Marine Lance Corporal for God’s sake, so, he knew what a dyke was. But there’s knowing and then there’s knowing. And, like with rug munching, he didn’t know.

She was still staring at him, really looking, and then shook her head. “You don’t, not really, do you?”

He rolled his eyes. “I can figure out the basics from the name. I’m not stupid.”

She shoved his shoulder and smirked. “It’s just French kissing, but, you know, down there. It’s a
good way to start. Anything she likes on her lips, she’ll like down there, too. And if you do it while you’re playing with your fingers, she’ll probably like it a whole lot, and if you do that first, it probably won’t matter much that you’re a whole lot wider around than a dime by the time you get to the fucking.”

His eyebrows had gone high for that. He wasn’t sure how the mechanics on that works.

“She gets looser?”

“No. But the more turned on she is, the better everything feels, and if you’ve got her turned on, she’s going to like it if you slip in slow and gentle like.”

“Really?”

“I did. And I really didn’t like it when I wasn’t turned on. Hurt like a fucking son of a bitch and I bled all over the place, so don’t do that to her.”

“Oh.” He’d heard about that, too, but from the bragging, popped her cherry so hard it burst perspective. He didn’t know bleeding was optional, and decided then and there that if it was, he didn’t want to do that to Shannon.

“Yeah. So, when are you gonna ask?”

“Next time I get enough liberty to get up there.”

She grinned at him, “Good.”

But he didn’t. The next time he had enough liberty to get up to Stillwater was two days after Matheson died, and he was too sad to ask.

The second shot is the engagement picture she took for the local paper. They’re standing facing each other, but looking at the camera, her hand on his chest, facing the camera as well, showing off the ring.

“Why are we doing this?” he remembers asking.

“When we’re old, we’ll want to remember it. It’ll be fun.” She sounded somewhere between exasperated that he wasn’t gung ho about this, and mildly amused that he was still heading toward his car to take her to her friend’s house (which had the gazebo and creek she wanted for the background) to take the picture anyway.

He wasn’t buying that at all, and his look to Shannon made that clear.

“Don’t look at me like that, Gibbs!”

“Fine!” He rolled his eyes and stuck his tongue out at her, putting the key into the ignition, getting ready to head to her friend’s house.

She blew a raspberry at him. “Let’s go have some fun.”

He was in uniform, she had on a pretty violet dress. It was summer, a few months after they had gotten engaged, a few months before the wedding. The only leave he had between getting engaged and getting married that was long enough for him to get back to Stillwater.
Spring when they got engaged. Early May. Week before the end of class for her, two weeks before finals.

Close to 03:00 when he got in. He wanted to go to Shannon’s but he couldn’t just head over there at three in the morning. So he headed home, back to his dad’s place.

Old man was still up, messing around with something, a soldering iron, and a pile of wires on the kitchen table.

“Leroy?”

“Hey, Dad.”

“You must have driven like a son of a bitch to get here that fast.” Lejeune to Stillwater was, usually, a fourteen hour ride. He’d done it in ten.

Gibbs shrugged. He got here. That’s all that mattered. He slung his duffle on the floor, and sat at the table next to his dad.

“Stayin’ long?”

“Got five days leave.”

Jackson touched the tip of his soldering iron to a tiny bit of metal. “And let me guess, you didn’t run here that fast to see me. Callin’ on your pretty lady as soon as you can?”

“Yeah, Dad. Grab some shut eye. See her after class tomorrow.”

“She knew you were gonna be in town?”

“Yeah.”

“Nice to see you tell someone.” Jack put the soldering iron down and looked at Jethro. Then he looked more, one eyebrow high. “Something special gonna happen?”

Gibbs nodded, staring his dad in the eye. “Got the news yesterday. Sniper school starts in January.”

His father nodded.

“It’s in California.”

He nodded again.

“Gonna have a chat with Mr. Fielding tomorrow.”

“Good. That’s the way you do it. Show her daddy you respect him and that you’re worthy to be part of his family.” Jackson smiled. “Planning on having a chat with her, too?”

“Yeah, I am.” Jethro smiled wide at that, and his dad did, too.

Jackson got up, headed into the kitchen, found another glass, and returned, pouring Jethro a shot of whiskey to go with the one he was working on. “Good, Leroy, good. That girl’s like sunshine and air for you, boy; she keeps you right.”
Jethro nodded.

“I don’t want you ever thinking I don’t like her, or I don’t approve.”

Gibbs could feel the massive ‘but’ coming at the end of that sentence. He took a swallow of the liquor Jackson had poured, small one, he liked whisky well enough, but it went to his head pretty fast. Things were always tricky with his dad, he didn’t need to add drunk to the troubles.

“But?”

“But you are both very, very young, and the world won’t end if you wait.”

Jethro rolled his eyes, starting to feel the anger build.

“Don’t get like that. She’s not done school. And you know she and her family want her to finish. You’ve been a Lance Corporal for less than a year. You’re barely twenty and she’s not going to be twenty until August.”

He was glaring at his dad by the end of that.

Jackson sighed, knowing that look, what it meant, and exactly how deaf a young man’s ears could get when he wanted to get married. “Look, you get married next week, I’ll be happy for you. But a year from now, two years from now, she’ll still be here. She loves you, son; she’s not going anywhere. Some more time to grow up won’t hurt either of you.”

That got a glare, too, and Jethro started to get up, not wanting to listen to more of this. Jackson put his hand on his wrist, and looked him in the eye, earnest. “You think I don’t know why you want to rush? Think I haven’t been where you are?” He shook his head and gave Jethro a very long look that got across everything he wasn’t saying, and then he went and said to make sure Jethro got it, “Think I wasn’t in love with the prettiest redhead on Earth and couldn’t wait to make her my wife?”

“Are you really going to tell me you wanted less time with my mother?”

Jackson shook his head again, sounding sad, a bit wistful. “No. Wanted every minute I could get with her. But the first five years would have been a lot easier if they had started a few years later.”

“Dad.”

“I know.” Jackson smiled a bit. “We didn’t wait, either. My dad said the same thing to me, and I gave him the exact same look you’re giving me. Got married as soon as we could once I got back. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Go, get your sack time. Don’t want to talk to her daddy tired.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hey, John, the kid’s here to see you.”

Jethro didn’t roll his eyes. Back here, in his civies, he’s ‘the kid.’ The fact that most of these guys were vets (Army, he thought with a bit of disdain) and he outranked most of them didn’t help with his annoyance.
But he wasn’t here for that. If he had headed to the Fieldings’ house to talk to Shannon’s dad he would have had to do it when he was home, which was also when Shannon was home, so it would have given away the surprise.

So, it was lunchtime, and he was in Meadville, at the (of all ridiculous things) zipper factory, waiting for John’s lunch break, so he could offer to take him to lunch, buy him a beer, and have a ‘chat.’

A minute later, Shannon’s dad came out from his office. (He wasn’t one of the guys making the zippers. He was the guy who made sure the zippers got sent to wherever they were going, and that when orders were placed, zippers got made to go with them.)

“Jethro.” Fielding nodded at him.

“Hello, Mr. Fielding, may I take you to lunch?”

He saw the look in Fielding’s eyes, there was some humor, some joy, some trepidation, and mostly a whole lot of, I’ve been expecting this for a while.

“Sure, Jethro.”

Beers and burgers in front of them, Jethro sat there, feeling fidgety. He knew what he wanted to say, but actually saying it was proving difficult. So they talked about the weather, and his leave, and the Pirates, but not why he suddenly developed a desire for one-on-one time with his girlfriend’s dad.

And now there was just quiet chewing. He took a swallow of his beer, and forced himself to talk.

“I’ve been selected for sniper school.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you, sir. It begins in January, and it’s in California, and I’d like it very much if Shannon came with me.”

“Yes, I imagine you would.” Fielding smiled at that.

“I think she would like to come, too.”

“You’re probably right about that.” He was still smiling, but he was also going to make Jethro ask.

He fished the box out of his pocket, and put it on the table in front of Fielding, who opened it and looked approvingly at the stone. “I’d like your permission to ask her to marry me.”

“You have it, on one condition.”

Those words felt like ice down his spine, and he was suddenly very afraid that like his dad, Fielding was also going to say they should wait, make it a condition for his approval. “What?”

“You will make sure she finishes school. No matter where you go or what you do, you will make sure she gets the education she wanted.”

Jethro breathed more easily, that wasn’t a problem. There were colleges all over the world. “Yes, sir.”

“Okay, then.”

“Thank you, sir.”
“You can call me John, Jethro.”

He blushed a little at that, but said, “Thank you, John.”

John smiled at him, amused. “Should I tell her mother she won’t be home for dinner tonight?”

Jethro stuck the ring back in his pocket. “Sure.”

“But you’ll have her home by midnight?”

“I always do, don’t I?”

John gave him a stern look, making sure the lines were still bold and clear. “Until the ring that goes with the one in your pocket slides onto her finger, you will continue to do so.”

“Yes, John.”

He knew from her letters she’d be around here somewhere. He’d found the building easily enough, one kind of old brick building might look a whole lot like every other kind of old brick building to Gibbs, but the clock tower stuck out, so he didn’t have any trouble locating it.

Warm day by north-west PA spring standards. Might be in the low sixties, probably high fifties. Students were laying on the wide, green lawn in front of Rockwell Hall, absorbing as much of the spring sunshine as they could. He pulled his jacket a little tighter. Yesterday he’d been in North Carolina, where it’d been in the high eighties. He’d adjust back to the cool, but it’d take another day or so.

“Gibbs!”

And he had his hands fully of happy redhaired girl. He kissed her quickly and put her back on the ground. “Hi, baby.”

She was grinning up at him, eyes sparkling and sassy. “Don’t, ‘Hi, baby,’ me! Give me a real kiss and let me know you’re happy to see me.”

He grinned back at her, shaking his head slightly, little embarrassed by this, her buddies were all watching, giggling, but she was his, and here, and it had been so damn long, so he pulled her close, melding his body to hers, and kissed her right, mouth open, tongue wet and loving. He could sort of hear the buddies cooing in the background, and could definitely hear the appalled, “Miss Fielding!” coming from one of the professors.

“Professor Granger,” Shannon said as she pulled, slowly, back from him. “This is my boyfriend, Leroy Jethro Gibbs.”

She was ninety if she’s a day, and was probably born hating men, romance, and joy. Granger nodded at him curtly while glaring daggers at him. He was tempted to let Shannon go, but the way Granger was staring at him was a challenge, demanding he let Shannon go. He took a step closer, arm draped over her shoulders.

“You’re not a student here, are you, Mr. Gibbs?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Then what, pray tell, do you do that gives you such liberty as to be about on a college campus in the
middle of the day, molesting the students?” She was very blatantly glaring at his arm on Shannon’s shoulder.

He pulled himself into full Marines posture, while slipping his arm off her shoulder, sliding it around her waist, fingers slipping under her jacket, a much more intimate gesture. “I’m on leave, Ma’am.”

“Indeed, and what are you on leave from?”

“The Marines, Ma’am.” It was his best BSing the Sergeant manner. That so-polite-it’s-insulting,-but-there’s-nothing-you-can-do-about-it-because-it’s-polite manner that just about anyone who’d been enlisted for more than a month develops.

She was still glaring at him, because she couldn’t call him out for being rude. “And do the Marine endorse groping women you are not married to?”

“Wholeheartedly, Ma’am,” he nodded quickly, “They recommend we do it as often as we can possibly can.”

Granger’s eyes just about bugged out of her head. Gibbs flashed a quick smile at Shannon, and then pulled her away from the professor and toward his car. “That’s the one you hate, right?” he asked once they were out of ear shot.

She was smiling wide and giggling at him. “God, yes. She teaches biology and I loathe her!”

He’d been thinking about dressed up and fancy dinner for proposing, but… But they’d have to go back to her place, and he’d have to ask her to get dressed up, and then she’d know something was up because it’s Tuesday which wasn’t exactly a dressed up and out night, so…

They were at the same diner they usually grab dinner at, talking. She was talking. He was mostly listening, feeling kind of nervous. He kept touching the ring box in his jacket pocket, wondering if he should do it now, when everyone was around, or later in the car, or maybe at home, in front of her parents, or…

“Earth to Gibbs.”

“Huh?”

“What’s up? You’re off orbiting Pluto.”

“Just thinkin’.”

“About?”

He smiled and made the decision, not here. Not with everyone else around. Not with anyone else around. This was for them, just them. “You.”

“And what are you thinking about me?”

He smiled again, holding her gaze for a beat or two, and then slowly dragging his eyes down her body. She knew that look, knew what it usually meant. “Thinking about finishing up dinner, getting into my car, and driving out to Conneaut.”

“And what are we gonna do at Lake Conneaut?” There was a sparkle in her eyes as she asked. She knew exactly what they did at Lake Conneaut.
“Not look at the moon or stars.”

She grinned at him.

As a child, Gibbs hated fishing. Jackson and LJ loved it. So he got dragged along on what felt like thousands of endlessly long fishing trips. On the upside, he now knew lots of little, out of the way nooks and crannies of Lake Conneaut, spots where you could pull a car in, turn off the lights, and vanish for a few hours.

From his first leave back home, first time he and Shannon got enough time to find a place to really play with each other, they both appreciated his intimate knowledge of the less accessible bits of Lake Conneaut.

There were rules, underwear stayed on, hands stayed on top of it. And he was okay with that.

Frustrated, God, yes, frustrated, but really, on a deep level he couldn’t have explained if he tried, he was okay, too. Yes, he wanted sex, with her, more than he’d ever wanted anything. But waiting felt right. Right in a way he knew she got, and Matheson would have gotten if they’d ever talked about it. But they never did talk about that.

He didn’t talk about it with the rest of the guys, even though he was sure there were some who probably would have agreed, but most of them would have thought it stupid. After all, it was 1978, not 1958.

On a more practical level, he didn’t want to risk getting her pregnant. Seen more than enough of his buddies end up married with a kid on the way real fast. And, sure, it wasn’t likely, but he really didn’t want to risk getting her pregnant and not being able to get back in time to marry her. Or maybe not get back at all.

That had happened to one of the buddies, too. He got the ‘I’m late’ letter, wasn’t able to get leave, got sent to desert training in California, something went wrong, and died. They took up a collection for his girl, but only managed to scrape together a few hundred dollars.

No way, no fucking way in hell he was going to risk that with Shannon.

Besides, there were lots of fun things you could do with your underwear on.

And once he figured out that if he made sure he had a handkerchief and an extra pair of boxers in the glove compartment, getting home (or walking Shannon in to her home and chatting with her parents) after having fun with your underwear on worked a lot better, too.

They were in his Challenger, passenger seat pushed all the way back and reclined, mostly naked, relaxed, (They’d already gotten off once. Didn’t take either of them too long to figure out that she could sit in his lap, facing him, kissing, and they could sort of rub together, and very, very good things would result.) kissing and petting lazily, enjoying the glow. Normally, this would be a lull between rounds, just enjoying each other’s skin and the feel of another heart beating close to your own.

Normally they wouldn’t talk much now. Normally, right now, communication would be focused on touch, on sensations of skin on skin, and the nuances of how hands, lips, bellies, shoulders, and legs can say I love you a million ways.
His lips rested on the crown of her head, and she was gently playing with his chest hair, occasionally giving him a light lick. His fingers trailed through her hair, stroking down her back, over her bra strap, lightly fiddling with the edge of her panties, not breaking, or even bending the rules, just aware of them.

He stretched, content, and she shifted a bit, looking up at him, like she expected him to say something.

So, he did. “Got the news yesterday that I’ve been accepted for sniper training.”

She grinned, wide, happy for him, lips pink and plump from kissing and he had to lower his head and kiss her again. When he pulled back, she said, “That’s excellent.”

“Yeah. It starts in January.”

“Great.”

She still looked so happy, and he had to kiss her again, had to drink in her happiness, feel it on his skin, taste it on his lips. He reached behind him, trying to figure out where his jacket was. Couldn’t be that far off. The jacket had been (along with the rest of their clothing) tossed in the backseat, and while the front seats in a Challenger were large and comfy, the back was pretty tiny.

He felt denim, found the ring, and held the box in his hand.

“Shannon.”

For all the trying to keep it a surprise, he thought she knew what was coming next. Probably because she also knew that sniper training was in California.

“Yeah?” More of that electric grin on her face.

“Come with me. To California, and anywhere after that, for every day of the rest of our lives.” He opened the ring box, and she squealed with joy.

“YES!”

He was grinning so widely he thought his face would crack, and was so high on the excitement of it his hands were shaking as he took the ring out of the box and slid it onto her finger.

And there was more kissing, broken only by looking at it on her hand, feeling the weight of that promise, and the freedom of a bound future.

“I love you, Gibbs.”

“Love you, too, Shannon, love you so much, love you always.”

More kissing, more rubbing, more I love you, all of it round and full and perfect. Glowing with perfect.

That he remembers clearly, much more clearly than the sex or the words, that intense feeling of everything in the world being right and the contentment of that.

And he did get her home at 23:59, with thirty seconds to spare.
He flips to the next page, looking at shots of Shannon and her mom, Shannon and her dad, all the bridesmaids, all of team bride together. All of them sparkly and pretty, dressed up and ready to go.

Next page has him with his dad. Him on his own, all bright and shiny in his dress blues. Him standing next to the three buddies who had come up for the wedding.

He turns that page quickly. He’s lost every person on those pages.

Then he stops, page in hand, halfway to the next one, and wonders what Joann might be up to. He shakes his head, like the buddies standing next to him, that bridge is burned.

Besides, it’s been five years since he’s seen her. He’s not even sure if she’s still alive.

But he could find out.

More getting ready for the wedding shots. Shannon and her girls getting out of the car. Stuff like that. The cake, the bouquet, the garter (okay, he stopped to look at that one), stuff he didn’t care much about. Stuff he honestly didn’t remember all that well.

Finally he gets to one that does matter. He takes a shot of it, to add to the ones he’s sending to Cranston.

Shannon and her dad walking down the aisle.

Gibbs was not fidgeting. At all. Standing there at the front of the church, he was doing such a good job of staying still, in his absolutely perfect uniform, that he’d could have done duty at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, or a living statue, either would work.

The music started, and her friends came forward, all of them walking way, way, way too slowly. Just inching down the aisle at a glacial pace.

And finally, the last one of them got into place, and the music shifted, everyone stood up, the doors opened one last time, and his breath stopped.

The dress was white lace, long, flowy, billowy sleeves the didn’t quite come all the way down her arms. Her hair was in a loose braid, bits of it free and curling gently along her face and neck.

For a few seconds there, time stopped. He watched her eyes scan the church, find his, and a smile lit her face. He felt his own mirror it, and everything started moving again, he started breathing again, because his dad was right, she was his air, and wherever she was, he could breathe.

He takes a picture of the next one, too. It’s a shot of him slipping the ring onto her finger. And while it’s true a lot of the earlier pictures represent moments he doesn’t remember all that well, it’s also true that that one is burned into his memory forever, the feel of her hand in his, skin soft, his hand trembling a little, hers too, as he said with a quiet, reverent voice, ‘With this ring, I thee wed.’
He doesn’t grab a shot of the two of them facing the church as the Minister said, “I now pronounce you Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs,” but he remembers the way that felt, that insane rush of Mrs. Gibbs.

He remembers reading something where one of the characters was talking about offering his wife his name, like it was a crown, the most precious jewel he could give her, and that feeling of pride to see her wear it.

And he completely understood that feeling.

Mrs. Gibbs.

His woman. His wife. Wearing his name like a jewel.

His honor, his life, his name, laid at her feet, offered up to her, and she lifted it, placed it upon her skin, and made it sparkle.

His eyes close and he bites his lip. He stops looking at the pictures, needing to break that train of thought.

Then he opens the album again. There’s the shot of them leaving the church, under the swords of his buddies. There’s the picture of her alone, under the scarlet maple. He doesn’t take a shot of that, but he does put the album down, get up, hobble over to his wallet, and take a picture of the copy that he carries with him. The edges are worn, the corners bent, and the image is faded. He makes sure all of that is visible in his photo of the photo, making it clear that this is something he’s carried with him for more than thirty years, and then he heads back to his sofa and his photo albums.

The rest of the photos are fairly standard small-town, family wedding from the seventies shots. The VFW hall decorated in white and pink. Her mom had made the cake, and it was supposed to have the traditional bride and groom on top, but they couldn’t find one in a Marine uniform, so instead of that, it was white with lots of white curly cues on it, and Shannon had put scarlet and gold fall leaves on the tray around it, and more of them on the top.

Shots of his best man giving the speech while Shannon leaned against him, both of them laughing. Shots of them dancing. Shots of cutting the cake, and feeding it to each other. Shots of the garter and bouquet toss.

All familiar, none extraordinary to anyone who isn’t him.

The second to last shot was his car, ‘Just Married’ painted on the back window, streamers and cans dangling off the bumper. That one brings back memories, lots of memories.

Stillwater to Niagra Falls should have taken three hours.

Gibbs at the wheel, driving to their honeymoon suite, they made it in one hour and fifty-three minutes.

“Stay put.”

He was sitting on the edge of the bed. The bed they were going to share. The bed she and he would be in, together, naked, soon. Where there was plenty of room to spread out and then… God, his pants had never, ever been this tight. He felt like he had three extra guys’ worth of blood pumping
around him way too fast right now. “Where else would I go?”

She smiled at him. “Back in a few minutes.” And then vanished into the bathroom with her suitcase.

In a few minutes, she was out in a little white lace slip, and he didn’t know what to do with himself. He was staring, breathing fast, mouth feeling dry, painfully hard, and he just wanted to touch and kiss and see all of her at once.

She was looking a little shy. “You like it?”

He nodded slowly, tried to speak, but words wouldn’t form, so he nodded again and swallowed hard.

She crossed to him, standing between his legs, in front of him, and he just sat on the bed, staring, not touching, not anything, feeling completely overwhelmed by how beautiful she was and how much he wanted her.

“You okay?”

He nodded again, swallowed again, licked his lips, and finally got it together enough to say, “I have never, ever, ever been better than I am right now.”

She undid a button on his shirt, fingers stroking lightly below the dip of his collar bone, feeling the curly black hair there. “I bet you could be better.”

He nodded, finally touching her, his hands resting on her hips, feeling the lace of her negligee and the heat of her body under it, then sliding down, fingers finding her skin, resting on her thighs, tracing small circles on impossibly soft skin. “Yeah, I think I could be.”

A brilliant smile spread over her face and an answering smile spread across his.

She reached for the light, and he stopped her, fingers circling her wrist. “No. Wanna see you.”

She didn’t look entirely sure about that, but she stopped reaching for the light, and he let go of her wrist, dragging his fingers up her arm, and then down her side, so they mirrored the position of his other hand on her leg. Then his fingers slipped back up her thighs, over her hips, tracing lightly over the lace. She giggled a little as they slipped up over her ribs, and inhaled sharply as he closed them over her breasts.

The familiar sensation of her breasts, warm, full, round, under a layer of clothing, helped get his brain working again.

“I’ve been dying to see all of you. Dreaming about it every single night since the first time we met.”

She stepped back and leaned forward, hand on his thighs, kissing him deeply, and then pulling back a little so he could look directly down the negligee, see her breasts hanging free and the dip of her stomach, and while he’s staring, she straightened up, fingers trailing down his legs, ran her hands up her arms, slipped the straps over her shoulders, and let the concoction of silk and lace fall to the floor.

He had touched her over clothing, and they’d ground against each other in the tiny, dark, cramped space of her car and his, but this… This moment of actually seeing, blew his mind. Literally, all thought besides her body had vanished. He didn’t think he’s breathing. His wife, naked, in front of him, and she was the most beautiful woman in the world, the most beautiful woman ever born, smiling at him, in love with him, sharing her body with him.
She was all ivory skin and pink nipples and lips, glorious fire red hair above and below.

He gasped at the sight of her, pulling air into starving lungs, feeling lightheaded at how excited he was by just looking.

“What you were hoping for?” she asked, still smiling at him, enjoying the stunned look on his face, and he looked up, saw the smile, felt it cut through the haze of desire and he found a word to reply with.

“Better.”

He’d already shrugged off the jacket, and his shoes were tidily tucked under the bed, which left his shirt, undershirt, belt, pants, boxers, and socks. All of which were suddenly too tight, too hot, and just too clothing to be born. He needed to get out of it, all of it, right that second.

And while her clothing had come off in a graceful, sinuous slither of silky material, they pretty much tore his off of him, leaving him standing in front of her, at parade rest, naked, grinning, waiting.

It was her turn to look, and his turn to bask in being physically adored. And she doesn’t have the same sort of (what he suspected was a pretty stupid) look on her face that he did on his, but her eyes were wide as they traveled over his skin, and her smile bright.

Her hand hovered over his chest, just close enough to brush the hair and for him to feel the heat of her palm on his skin. She had touched him there before, skin to skin, lips to skin, but they could feel that this was different, that, in a second, things would change, touch would change, and there was a delicious anticipation to that that neither of them was willing to break quite yet.

She stepped in toward him the same time he reached for her, pressing up close against him as his arms curled around her waist. They both groaned, him loudly, her quietly, at the feel of fully naked bodies touching while their lips found a familiar and satisfying rhythm.

His hands mapped her back, her hips, her butt, every inch they could reach while he reveled in the feel of her skin so hot and smooth and tight against him.

He was rubbing against her stomach as they kissed, astounded at how amazing just her tummy felt, how it was softer than anything that had ever touched his dick before. Between that and the kissing he was leaking against her, leaving slippery, wet trails along her stomach.

She had had one hand on his neck, fingernails lightly scratching the tiny hairs there, the other had been stroking down his back, but it got to his hip and followed the curve of his waist to close around his dick. His eyes closed as his head dropped to her shoulder, and he inhaled fast, sharp, almost a whistle, pleasure racing through him. He couldn’t have not come if his life depended on it.

She was smiling up at him, holding him gently, when he opened his eyes again.

He kissed her slow and lazy, relaxing, enjoying, and after a second she pulled back a little, and licked the cum off her fingers.

“What’s it taste like?”

She looked really surprised by that. “You don’t know?”

“No.” He shook his head vehemently.

There was some on her stomach and ribcage, so she ran her finger through it and offered to him.
Gibbs shook his head again. “I don’t need to know.”

She laughed at that, stepped back a bit, looked around, didn’t see any tissues, and headed back into the bathroom. She came out a few seconds later with a hand towel and a box of tissues. She tossed him the towel (which was when he realized he had cum in the hair on his stomach) and wiped herself off as well.

He finished wiping up, and noticed they were both, still, standing next to the bed, so he picked her up, grinning, and tossed her into the middle of it, pouncing in after her, laughing, as she shrieked with giggles.

Leaning over her, smiling, on his hands and knees, he lowered his mouth to kiss hers.

He kissed down her neck to her chest, taking the time to look, lick, stroke, nibble, tickle, anything he could possibly think of with her breasts, loving the soft moans, quick gasps, and panting breaths he coaxed out of her, only stopping when she gave him a none too subtle push to keep heading down.

He traced his fingers lightly over her ribs and belly, watching her squirm, delighted at her giggles, and didn’t stop that until she gasped out, “Stop, that tickles!”

He eased farther down, leaning on his side and one elbow, kissing the crest of her hip, his right hand hovering over her public hair, not touching for a heartbeat, and then very gently stroking over her hair, half feeling the texture, crisp and springy under his fingers, half seeing how she responded to his touch.

She wriggled a little, pushing up against him.

“Good?” he asked, hoping she liked it, because he really did.

“Oh yeah.”

He did it again, and again, marveling at the feel of her body under his, at getting to have her naked, spread out next to him, at getting to touch her, there.

He scooted around a little, sitting between her legs, spreading her wide open. “So beautiful.” He barely spoke it, halfway between a breath and a prayer. It wasn’t original, but it was deeply sincere.

He really had never seen, or guessed, what a pussy looked like. Yes, triangle of pubic hair he knew, he’d seen pictures of that, and he’d felt enough through her panties to know it’d be wet, but the luscious, glistening, pink flower in front of him, surrounded by fire-colored curls, that he wanted to lick and suck and touch and nuzzle and look at and again touch all over all at once with all of him was nothing he’d ever guessed at, let alone imagined correctly.

He was hard again, and that was distracting. His dick was more or less screaming to get in her, but that wasn’t going to go with the go slow plan, let alone start with fingers (which he really wanted to do) and lips (just the idea of which sent even more blood cascading toward his dick).

“Just gonna look?”

He shook his head. “Nope.” Then gently grazed his fingers over her lips, feather light touches, and she jerked a little when he made contact. He yanked his hand back.

“Don’t stop doing that!”

So he didn’t. Touching along each fold, stroking fingers up and down, light touches, heavier ones,
seeing how she responded to each. The little spot up at the top seemed to get the best reaction, so he spent more time there, slipping his finger up and down, slowly, over again and again, and each time she’s rise up to press against him, whimpering, legs tight and quivering.

He changed position again, laying on his stomach, wanting to get closer, see more of her, taste her. His tongue darted out to that little spot, touching for a bare second, so lightly, and she squirmed again, hands clenching in his hair, groaning, so he decided that was something he needed to do again, do a whole lot.

Second lick was longer, firmer, coating his tongue with her flavor, and he knew he couldn’t do this lying on his stomach or he was going to come on the sheets from her taste and the way he was moving. He scrambled up to his knees, and that helped him stay focused.

He was moving, all of him, rocking back and forth with her, hands under her butt, thumbs keeping her spread wide, tongue exploring, tasting everything, touching everything, and finally he slipped it in her, feeling her all wet and smooth around him and he had to stop doing that, too. It was too much, the taste, the feel, the knowledge that he was inside her body, all of that was going to make him come, so he backed off and went back to licking.

Gibbs wasn’t sure if he should try a finger. Wasn’t sure if he could and not get off on it. But he did want to, and she was sounding so good, and he wanted to know how she’d sound if he slipped a finger in.

So he did, slow, gentle, licking her the whole time, and she gasped, arched her back, cried out his name, and that felt so amazing. He was doing this to her. He was making her shake and gasp and it was his name on her lips and her body on his and that felt… he didn’t have words for how that felt… but whatever it was he never wanted to not feel this way.

She tugged on his hair, getting his attention. “Now!”

He didn’t need to be told that twice.

Slide in slow and easy, and he did, or tried, took a few tries to get himself where he needed to be, but he found it, and as slow as he could, watching her face, hoping he wasn't hurting her, he started to ease in.

She was still making happy noises, and she was smiling, and it felt so amazing, all soft and hot and wet and just… God… if anything had ever made him feel the divine, it was this moment of his body slowly easing into hers. Nothing else had ever felt like that.

He was all the way in, holding her, wrapped in her body, kissing her, holding still, both of them savoring the feel of being completely together.

She started to rock against him, and that felt amazing, felt like… he didn’t know. Felt great, better than great. But with all that, with as amazing as it felt, it also made him want to move, go faster, chasing even better (which he wasn’t sure he could take, but he really wanted to find out if he could.)

He wanted to go faster because he just knew faster would feel even better, but he wasn’t sure if he should.

So he kept going slow, feeling her clinging to him, arching against him, wriggling, digging her nails into his butt, and he’s biting his lip trying to keep to slow, but he couldn’t, she was so wet and slick and felt so good, and his body was sparking with pleasure, so he thrusts fast, hard. And, God, it was even better.
But Shannon stopped wriggling, stopped making those little happy noises, and he knew that didn’t work for her.

Like in the car. Like how they’d grind against each other.

He rolled over, taking her with him, ending with her on top. He sat up, scooting both of them back so he’s back against the headboard, just like how they’d do it in the car.

“You.” He could barely form coherent thoughts, but she got what he was saying, and started to experiment with how to do this so it felt good.

Quick, little up-down rocking motions. They’re a little too quick, and a little too short. They helped to distract him away from the edge again. Helped him find enough focus to open his eyes and watch.

Her eyes were closed, mouth slightly open, face, neck, and chest flushed, nipples hard. He felt like he was going to wear out the word beautiful, but he didn’t care, because she was so beautiful. He gasped it as she slid all the way down, moaned it to her between kisses, said it against her neck and shoulder as she rested on him between strokes.

Long rolling strokes. His hands found her hips, guiding her, all the way up and all the way down felt amazing, those little, up-down, quick rocking motions are okay, but this is better.

“Good?” he half-grunts, half-asked her.

She slid all the way back down on him and groaned. He swallowed that groan with a kiss, adding his own to it.

He knew that when they were rubbing together in the car, she would start moving faster, grind harder, tilt her hips some and then gasp, moan, shudder all over, and so far that hadn’t happened.

He also knew that he was gonna come again any second. He couldn’t take much more of this. His brain was melting, his body quivering, and any second now he was going to explode.

But he wanted her to, too.

And he didn’t know what to do to make that happen.

“What…?”

And somehow she got what he was asking, (How? He didn’t know. Hell, he barely knew what he was asking.) but she got his hand against the base of his stomach, about where his dick usually was when they were grinding against each other, and she did that thing where she tilted her hips a little, and started moving faster, sliding along his fingers, and oh fucking God, holy mother of all things, that was magnificent. His eyes slipped shut and his body tightened a bit further, and then his whole body pulsed over and over, and he thought he might have been shouting, but he wasn’t sure. What he did know was that he’d never felt that good, never even felt close to that good, never knew he could feel that good, and he really, really wanted to feel that good again.

She kept rising and falling on him for a minute or so after he finished, still sliding against his hand, and eventually he noticed his other hand was just sort of lying next to him, so he rose it to her breast, rubbing lightly over her nipple. He felt her gripping him tighter, the squeeze of her knees against his hips and hands on his shoulders, which was familiar, the clench of her pussy, which wasn’t, but he was greatly appreciating. She gasped, and moaned, and did that little shudder thing, which he got to feel from the inside, and that got him hard again.
She slumped against him, resting against his chest as he held her close, feeling her heart pounding and the extremely pleasant way her body twitched against his, and there were a lot of things he wanted to say to her, lots of feelings pouring through him, but he didn’t have the words, so he whispered, “I love you,” against her ear, and felt her kiss it back to him on his shoulder.

The next morning breakfast showed up, and while they were munching away, and she said, “I got us a wedding present.”

“Us?”

“Yeah.”

“How is it a present for us if you got it?”

“You’ll see.” And he watched her get up, walk, hips swaying, sassy little jiggle to her tush that he was appreciating greatly, (Appreciating greatly was more or less a constant state for him for the entirety of their honeymoon.) and she found her suitcase, messed around for a bit, and came back with a somewhat large, prettily wrapped, rectangle.

“Is it a book?” he asked as she tossed it on the bed in front of where he way laying on his stomach, propped on his elbows, looking up at her.

“It might be. Open it up!”

He ripped through the paper fast and felt his eyes go wide. The Joy of Sex was looking up at him. Part of him was thrilled at the idea of going through every single page with her. Part of him was mortified. They both knew Mr. Hibbard, who ran the bookstore. He was friends with her dad, and the bookstore was right across the street from his dad’s store.

She saw the look on his face and laughed. “I went to Pittsburg to get it. Cut classes for a day, drove down, got it and a few other things to, as my mom put it, ’round out my hope chest.”

He looked up at her from the book and smiled. “Oh.”

“Yeah, couldn’t imagine walking into Hibbard’s and asking for it.”

“I could imagine you doing it. You’re fearless.”

She giggled at that, laying on her stomach, propped on her elbows next to him. “Come on, open it up. I want to see what’s inside.”

“You haven’t read it?” His eyes were wide at that, he can’t imagine having this for, however long, and not opening it.

“Nope. It was for us. I wasn’t going to open it until you were here.”

So he opened it, not sure if they should just flip around or read straight through or… Page one, good enough place to start.

He liked the idea of the pictures, really liked the idea of trying everything he was seeing, but the subjects were not precisely to his tastes. “Hippies.” He didn’t have much use for them. Hadn’t run into too many real live ones. But there were usually some protesting around their bases.

Her shoulder brushed his. (She didn’t seem nearly as bothered by the models.) “How many of the
“Guys you work with would pose for something like this?”

“Good point.” None of the guys he worked with were shy about being naked, but, he flipped a few pages and found a shot of the guy lying on his back with the girl lying on him, holding his dick, about to suck it while he… suddenly Gibbs had a much better idea of the fact that there were a whole lot of variations on the theme of rug munching, and that killed any train of thought he might have had about how many Marines would be willing to pose naked for a sex book.

They didn’t read straight through, not for a few weeks later. They did look at all the sketches, and tried a lot of them. Some worked, some didn’t, some actually required reading to make what was in the pictures make a lot more sense.

But all in all, they both had a very good time with that book.

And to this day, he’s never seen Niagara Falls in the flesh.

The last picture (taken a few weeks after the wedding) is both of their hands, hers over his, fingers clasped together, both wedding rings visible.

He takes a photo of that, and then closes their wedding album.

He knows what’s in the next album. This is the one he’s probably looked over the most often. This is the one that’s easiest to share. Brown leather, says Kelly Beth Gibbs March 22, 1982 on the cover.

It’s slim, only had forty-two pages and was only intended to have thirty-eight of them filled.

Hers only has the first eighteen filled.

He’d send the whole thing to Rachel if he could. But he can’t.

So he picks and chooses. The shot of the first time Shannon held Kelly. Kelly’s bright pink, eyes screwed shut, mouth open, yelling like crazy, wanting to eat right that second. Shannon looked tired, and pale, so very pale, he’d forgotten the way her skin looked like chalk for days after. He makes himself not remember the blood, or the screaming, or… or any of that, and goes back to the feel of holding Kelly in his arms, handing her over for the first time. Shannon’s smiling in that shot, eye’s teary, looking at her daughter with unreserved love.

He takes one of him on the sofa, Kelly on his chest, both of them snoozing.

He copies the first birthday party shot, Kelly tearing through her Cookie Monster cake.

She was a late walker. (Early talker, started babbling away at ten months. The Doc said that was normal, they either walk or talk, but not both at once.) He takes a shot of Kelly, eighteen months old, standing up, one tiny hand clenching onto each of Shannon’s forefingers, one foot out, half-tipping over on the other one, as she worked on her first steps.

Two-years-old, pretty yellow dress, shoulder length brown pig tails with yellow ribbons, he’s got her on one arm, the other around Shannon, smiling brilliantly in her cap and gown. It took longer than expected, but she did finish school.
First day of kindergarten, another pretty little dress, green this time, hair in two long braids, her mama’s big blue eyes smiling up at them. She wasn’t much of a dress girl. Liked shorts and jeans, but for the first day of school every year, she wanted to wear a dress. And for the first day of school, every year, Shannon made her one.

He doesn’t have a picture of it, but he can remember Shannon sitting at the kitchen table, sewing machine in front of her, what looked like hundreds of pieces of paper pinned onto fabric, Kelly laying on the floor, playing, watching Sesame Street or GI Joe. (Her Daddy was a Joe, so she watched that show a lot, wanted to be Scarlett (who had pretty hair, like Mommy and shot rifles, like Daddy) when she grew up. He had explained his job was kind of like Duke’s, like of like Leatherneck’s, kind of like Sgt. Slaughter, but not really like any of them. And that when he was here, with them, a lot of what he did was training other soldiers, and when he was away, what he did was to shoot bad guys from very far away. “Like Scarlett?” He hadn’t known she was the sniper. “Sure.” “Cool!”) Then Shannon called her in, trying on the dress for the first time, seeing how it fit.

He took a shot of second grade Halloween, princess costume, another one made by Shannon. One of the few Halloweens he’d been home. They’d been transferred to California earlier that year, and she didn’t have a new bunch of buddies, yet, so he took her out trick or treating.

Eight-years-old was the last page of that album. Raspberry Rumtart themed birthday party started that page off. Christmas ended it.

It’s a goofy shot, really goofy. She’d been one of the sheep in the Christmas pageant that year, and her friend Maddy had been one of the shepherds. It’s from after the play. Maddy had already gotten out of her costume, but Kelly hadn’t. So, goofing off, she put on Maddy’s robes over her sheep costume and was holding the crook.

Shepherd watching sheeps (as Kelly would say, she absolutely refused to believe the plural of sheep was sheep) on high.

Then she got a hold of another of the kid’s wings.

So, it’s her, looking at the camera, huge gap toothed smile on her face, wooly sheep costume and face paint with whiskers (Sheep have whiskers, right? They did at their church.) wearing a shepherd’s costume, with wings and a lop-sided halo.

He takes a shot of that one, knowing it’ll make Cranston smile.

He stands up, putting the albums back, and then hobbled over to the laundry room.

Most of the changes were gone, ripped out slowly, by one wife and then another. None of them needed or wanted a dark room, what they wanted was a laundry room where there was enough light to actually sort the damn clothing.

(He’d let them believe the house had come with a dark room, not that he and Shannon and Kelly had spent hours building her one.) He gets shots of the extra shelves, and the two extra-large sinks, the tiny ‘closet’ in the one corner where she could unload her film.

They’d bought the place in ’88, got it cheap, spent a lot of time and energy fixing it up, and then got stationed in California in ’90. It was only supposed to be for two years. Only six more with the Marines, then he’d have his twenty-years in, retire a Master Sergeant, maybe go into recruiting, and this house, with her dark room and his woodshop would be their permanent home. Kelly wouldn’t
have to spend high school moving every year or two. They’d be settled.

He’s not sure what album it's in, but he knows there are shots of the house when they first moved in. It had been a rental and the guys who lived in it had beaten the hell out of it.

You won’t get rich as a Gunny, but you can afford a decent standard of living, especially if you are a fairly frugal person.

Part of frugal was saving up for a house for a long time.

Part of it was getting a place that had been beaten to hell up.

And part of it was putting the hours into the place, putting the love into it to make it shine.

He goes back into the living room and checks the third album. Not that one. Which means it’s upstairs.

He knows he’s got shots of the three of them working on the house. Of him showing Kelly how to drive nails. Of Shannon and her peeling that god-awful puke-green wallpaper off the entryway walls. He knows there’s a shot of the two of them fitting the panes of glass together for the front windows. He knows there are shots of him putting them in.

He limps outside, taking pictures of the house. Making sure to get pictures to go along with the shots of them working on the place. Now versus then.

He heads upstairs to his room, and sees something else he needs to get a shot of.

Their bed.

His wedding present (late) to her.

Their first home was base housing. Two bedrooms, tiny living room, tiny kitchen, one bathroom. Since he’d lived his whole life with his dad or in the barracks, and since she had lived her whole life with her parents, it felt like a castle.

They didn’t have much money (besides the nest egg he was sitting on to get them a real house/college for her) so the furniture was cheap. Thrift store stuff.

Not much reason to go overboard on it. They were only going to be there two months, then they were moving to California.

They did splurge on their mattress and box springs. Used a big chunk of their wedding present money for that. But having done so, they had a really good mattress and box spring sitting on the floor in a very empty bedroom.

They’d been married about a month when he gave her the first sketch. He’d always liked mission-style furniture, clean lines, nothing fussy or pretentious about it. It’d be sturdy, beautiful, fairly easy to make, easy to disassemble, because he knew they’d be moving around a lot.

“It’s a bed,” she said, looking up from the sketch to him.

He nodded. “Do you like it?”
“Yeah.”

“Then that’s my wedding present for us. Between now and our anniversary, I’ll get it done.”

“How are you going to do that?” Not a facetious question. He worked long hours, then sniper school on top of it, and neither of them thought the next base housing was going to be any bigger with a better place to do woodworking.

He shook his head, not entirely sure. “I will.”

“I believe you.”

And he did, though he was giving the finish the last rub down on October 19th, 1979. But they started the first day of their second year together in that bed.

It had moved to California with them. Wherever she went, that bed went with her.

And when they died, he packed everything up, gave most of it away, and headed back east, to the home they weren’t going to grow old in.

Their bed ended up in the attic, along with most of the rest of their things.

When he went to visit Mike, and he ‘accidentally’ saw the Hernandez file, he was sure he’d never be back to unpack it all.

Eventually he was back, but he didn’t unpack.

Didn’t even bother to get a bedroom, (slept on the sofa, less painful) until he realized that Hannah might think it was really weird that he didn’t have a bed. And that she’d ask questions about why he didn’t have a bed. So he went to Sears and bought the first suite of bedroom furniture he saw along with the first pillows and first set of sheets. (It clashed horribly with the rest of the room, and Hannah giggled a bit about him desperately needing a woman’s touch in his home.)

He never slept in that bed alone.

And when the divorce was done, she had taken it, and pretty much everything else inside the house (but not the attic, that was his) with her.

Diane had her own bedroom stuff, it moved in with her, and moved out as well.

Stephanie picked some crap out. He barely noticed it, and barely noticed when it left, as well.

When he started to think that things with Hollis were going to heat up, he brought his old furniture down. After all, she’d done a profile on him; she already knew about his girls. Except, apparently, she didn’t.

She asked if he had made it, and he said yes, not saying anything else about it as her fingers trailed over the wood. “It’s beautiful, Jethro.”

He nodded. Sharing that bed with her ached, but not nearly as badly as he thought it was going to. By the third night, it felt okay. (He had the sense that Shannon was okay with it.)

When she was gone, he didn’t sleep in it again until Susan. Too many memories.
And when Susan was gone... Like with the ring, he’s not done being married, and tossing it aside, pretending it didn’t happen didn’t get him where he wants to go.

He takes pictures of it. It’s not new. There are dings, and a few places where the finish is rubbed a bit thin, (He’d noticed that, years ago, wanted to refinish it, but Shannon grinned, shook her head, told him she liked the memory of how it got worn thin, so he left it.) but this is the bed they spent the first night of their second year in, this is the bed they made Kelly in, the bed she spent her first night home with them in, this was a place of many good nights and good mornings. Much more than any of the houses they lived in, this was the physical manifestation of home.

And the idea that maybe, at some point, he might want to make another one, and that that is probably the final step to welcoming another woman into his home, his life, is terrifying.

But, terrifying or not, he mentally adds it to his plan.

And like ‘take off the ring,’ he knows it’s not time, yet.

He sits so his back is against the side of the dresser, and then reaches back and opens the bottom drawer. There are three albums in here he just didn’t bring down. Nothing particularly special about them, just didn’t feel like he needed every single shot down there.

Like (and he sorts through, looking at many different family shots, taking a moment here, and a moment there to get copies of them) the house make over shots. Nothing special or weird about them. They just didn’t need to be downstairs.

(Though he’s looking at a shot of six-year-old Kelly, holding the little hammer he’d gotten her, working on driving her first nails, and wondering if he’s still got that hammer, and if so, how long he needs to wait to teach Molly and Kelly how to build things.)

But those aren’t the only albums in that drawer.

There are ten others. The ones Tim saw, but didn’t look at, and Jethro trusts that he didn’t.

He hasn’t opened them in a long time. Since right after Hannah left.

The first four are just letters.

He takes the first album out, carefully, the contents are precious to him, even if he hasn’t been able to bear looking at them, because reading them felt like whipping himself with razor blades.

For a moment he sits there, album, black leather, on his lap, fingers resting on the cover. Then he opened it, and took a picture of the first letter.

July 12, 1976

Dear Gibbs,

As you know, I’m setting up rules for everything, but one rule I don’t have is don’t be forward. You’ll never get anywhere, or anything, that you want if you spend your life hiding in the background waiting for people to notice you.
So, even though my mother thinks it’s horribly unladylike to send a letter to a man who hasn’t written me first, (He had, in fact, already written three times when this letter was written, and tossed all three of them out, thinking he sounded like a blathering moron.) I’m going to assume you gave me your address because you wanted to hear from me.

And I have news!

As of today, I am registered for classes at Grove City College. I’m officially a member of the class of 1980! One step closer to out of here!

The campus is old and beautiful. Lots of ancient brick buildings, tall trees, and long, wide yards.

My parents won’t let me live on campus. (Don’t want me picking up bad habits in the dorms. Not likely! Grove City didn’t notice the fifties ended twenty years ago. They still have nightly bed checks for the girls’ dorm. Still, I would have liked the chance to develop some bad habits. They might have been interesting.) But still, four more years, and I’ll have my degree, and from there, the sky’s the limit.

And, since they won’t let me live on campus, and because I need a way to get to and from class, I’m getting a car. It’ll be an old beater, and it’s my job to pay the insurance and gas, but a CAR!

I can’t wait!

It’s been a good day here, Gibbs, and I just wanted to tell you about it.

I hope you’re having a good day, too.

Thinking of you,

Shannon

He practically danced back from mail call when he saw that letter. He read it and reread it and reread it so many times the words are faded and the creases are practically worn through.

And when he got done reading, he folded it up, and tucked it into his breast pocket and carried it with him.

Then he made himself write back. (Three more crossed out, erased through, and thrown out letters.) Finally he decided he was just going to write, and not re-read what he wrote, and just send it, because otherwise, he’d never get anything on paper and she’d think he didn’t like her.

July 14, 1976

Dear Shannon,

Congratulations on college. What classes will you be taking? It’s kind of like school here. Learn this. Learn that. Do this. Do that. Do it right. Do it faster. And it’s really hot and humid. July in North Carolina is terrible. Especially in full gear.


I’m doing well at the learning stuff, but Johnson isn’t. He’s got two left feet and in close drill when
we all go right, he goes left. He’s a nice guy. Has the bunk next to mine.

Sgt. McHugh was giving him hell for it. I told him to quit ragging on Johnson.

Turns out that after 56 pushups in 100 degree heat, I’ll pass out. Gotta work on that. The guys who have been here longer can do 100, easy. But I can’t. Gotta get faster, too.

I like rifle practice. Got good aim, always hit the target, usually hit the headshot. That feels good. Not fast enough taking it apart or cleaning it, yet, but I will be.

We don’t get a lot of down time, and I spend a lot of it working, but (he scratched out I really loved getting your letter and spend a lot of time reading it) I’ll write as much as I can.

Thinking of you, too,

Gibbs.

P.S. What kind of car? My Dad and I worked on fixing up an old Challenger. Might be able to give you a hand with whatever you get when I get back up north again.

He snaps a shot of her reply and several of the letters that followed. Mostly it’s just both of them being young. Her excitement as school got closer. Both of them talking about her ’74 Honda Civic (not nearly as old or beat up as either of them were expecting.) Him talking about boot camp.

Three quarters of the way through that album there’s a picture. First shot of the two of them together. He’d asked if she would be his date for the Marine Ball, and she said yes. She and her mom drove down to Lejeune for it.

So, it’s him, eighteen years old, standing tall and proud in his dress blues. He has his arm, very politely, wrapped around her waist. She’s also eighteen, looking quite a bit more relaxed than he was, wearing a flowy, mint-green dress, with a white rose corsage he almost dropped when it was time to pin it on her. He’s staring straight ahead at the photographer, looking very tense and stern. She’s smiling at the camera.

That night was the first time he touched her. First time he held her in his arms. First time they danced. First time they kissed.

There’s another picture, though not a photograph. This is a picture in his mind. They’re walking, he had his arm around her waist, immensely enjoying her body this close to his, his jacket was over her shoulders, and her head was on his shoulder. He was happier right that second than he thought it was even possible to be.

She stopped walking, and he did, too, for a second they weren’t talking, just looking at each other, then she leaned in closer, pressing full into his body, arms wrapping around his waist, and she kissed him, light and gentle. His arms finally got into the game, pulling her even closer, and his lips followed hers, and after a few seconds he… he’d heard of it, but never done it, and right that second he really wanted to do it, so he just gently licked her, and she whimpered.

He almost jerked back, afraid he pissed her off, but she licked him back, and he decided that wasn’t pissed off, and that he really, really liked being licked, and that he wanted to do this a whole lot.

He wanted to do this every single day for the rest of his life.
It wasn’t his first kiss.

It was the first one that mattered.

Joann grinned at him when he brought Kelly back to the motel they were staying at. She tried to start a conversation. He glared at her and left, sure she was laughing at him, and sure he knew why she was laughing at him.

He was right about that, but she wasn’t laughing in an unkind way. But he was too young to know that, then.

He probably would have had the same response to Kelly’s first real boyfriend if he brought her home, sexually frustrated enough to chew through eighteen inch thick concrete, thus proving there was no way his daughter had lost her virginity that night.

Disheveled Marine with a rock hard wood and balls bluer than his jacket heading back to barracks wasn’t precisely rare back in 1976. Which didn’t mean that Gibbs particularly enjoyed the sensation.

He’d thought the guys bitching about girls teasing them so long they hurt was just BS.

Turns out it wasn’t. He’d been kicked in the balls before, by someone who meant it, and this wasn’t that bad, but that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt.

Not a ton of privacy, even in the showers, but right then he didn’t care.

He wanted to get a shower so he could get off. And he didn’t because he’d have to wash off her perfume. Every time he moved he could smell her. He didn’t know what the scent was, something warm and red, something her, and he liked it on his skin more than he could say.

He didn’t like the way his balls ached.

Sex won out.

It didn’t take long. He remembered her body against his, and the softness of her skin under his lips, he could feel the softness of her breast in his hand as they kissed, that got him on edge. He shifted the image, her hand wrapped around his dick. He gasped quietly at that, wondering how her hand, so small and soft, and hers would feel, let alone how it would feel if her lips were on his, and her tongue between his lips while she did it. Then his brain came up with another image, something else he’d heard about, but wasn’t sure if people, girls, actually did, but he could remember the feel of her tongue between his lips, and he imagined her mouth on his dick, and groaned, climax slamming through him.

More letters, a lot of them were pretty light little notes. How was your day, here’s what I did, type things. Some were deeper. Some he wrote easily. Some took hours. He got better at it, more relaxed, less erase-every-third word, as time went by.

He finds the one he’s looking for. Hardest one he ever wrote her. It didn’t take long, but he almost didn’t send it, afraid how she’d react to it.
April 22, 1977

Dear Shannon,

You asked once, why I don't talk about my mom. Said I could tell you, if I wanted to.

Today's the fifth anniversary of her death.

I knew she was dying, but no one would talk about it. Like saying it would make it true. Or maybe they just wouldn't say it to me, like if they told me, I'd break or I was too stupid to handle it or...

I don't know.

Doc kept giving us happy bullshit about not giving up.

Pastor James kept giving us more shit about praying and miracles.

But she didn't get better. She got smaller and weaker and sicker.

And the medicine made her angry, made her cry, made her throw up, and her hair fell out in clumps, and her skin turned gray, and she smelled like chemicals and death.

I overheard the Doc saying to my Dad that it was in her bones and maybe if they look the right arm off, she'd have more time. Not, she'd get better. Not, it'd fix things, but that it MIGHT give her more time.

I know he was going to say yes. Anything to get her more time. More time trapped in a sick, dying body. More time in pain.

She was crying when LJ went in to visit her that day. She wasn't when he left, but he was, not even trying not to or hide it. He didn't say anything to me when he left, just looked at me, looked away, and wiped his eyes and walked out.

She died that night.

My dad still thinks I don’t know what happened. Like I couldn’t figure out that she didn’t just die. Like I didn’t know how much morphine was in her room or what would happen if you took too much of it.

So, that’s it. That’s why I don’t talk about it. She killed herself. It’s supposed to be a sin, you know? Pastor James would have...

But he didn’t know, and we didn’t tell him.

She was sick and she died, and that’s all anyone ever said.

I don’t know how to end this one.

Gibbs

April 24, 1977
Dear Gibbs,

I’m so sorry.

I wish I was there to be with you. Wish I could have held you while you said that.

For what it’s worth, I don’t think it’s a sin. Not then. Not like that. I don’t think God holds it against you when you’re suffering. And I don’t think He’d have wanted you or your dad to spend this much time feeling bad about it.

She was sick and hurting. She died. She’s not sick anymore. And she’s waiting for the day (a long time from now) when she gets to see you again.

I do believe that.

I love you,

Shannon.

April 26, 1977

Dear Shannon,

I love you, too.

Gibbs

P.S. Wanted to say that for a while. Wanted to make sure you got it, quick. Real letter soon, when I’ve got more time.

That is the last letter in that album.

He thinks that their long-distance courtship was probably a good thing. Miles apart meant they got to know each other by letters. Meant that he got to know her in a way that would have been more difficult in person, because he knew what they did in person. (Made out.)

If he had stayed in Stillwater, or if she had been a local girl in Lejeune, he wouldn’t have gotten to know her as deeply as he did through those letters.

And he’s awfully doubtful she would have gotten to know him, because when it came down to it, even with her, talking was hard. Silence was his armor, and he was comfortable in it. Writing his thoughts down was a halfway space. He could let those thoughts out without having to say anything.

He flips through the next album. Mostly light letters. Another Marine Ball photo. Pictures of the two of them splashing around at Lake Conneaut, (his Dad had taken them out for a picnic one afternoon when he’d had leave, wanted to meet this girl his son was so taken with) he makes sure to get a shot of that, wanting one of them playing with each other. There were a few shots of him being a Marine taken by various buddies that he’d sent her. And there were shots of her at school that her friends had taken. There were shots of school that she had taken. A series of self-portraits that were her final project for one of the classes.
She had gotten a few candids of him while he was home. One was him working on the Challenger with his dad. He’d forgotten that one even existed, and took a shot of it for him. He wants to put that one up.

There’s a series of portraits of him, also taken for a class. (Though he suspects that might not be precisely true. He’d been a bit cagey about sitting for formal shots, but she wanted them, and he was home, and it was for a grade and… And the result was some really good shots of him, looking significantly more relaxed and happy than he does in any other formal picture that’s ever been taken of him.)

And there are shots of both of them. At the end of the session where she was taking shots of him, there were still three frames left on the film, so he pulled her into his lap, and she used the cable release to get the shots.
He’s smiling, chin on her shoulder, arms around her. She’s kissing his cheek. He took a shot of that one, too.

They were engaged for five months. So there’s a bunch of wedding letters.

And then they were married, so the frequency of letters dropped quite a bit. Sniper training was six months, and he was home most nights. For two years after that, he was home most nights. Never sent away for more than a month at a time.

But in ’81 he was stationed in Germany. The letters picked back up again.

He’d gotten one about six weeks after he’d left, and remembers that one very well.

August 13, 1981

Dear Gibbs,

Don’t know how to say this. I’m so excited!

Talked to the Doctor today. (He remembers seeing that and putting that together with excited and starting to feel an electric current flowing through his knees and elbows.) ’Round about the beginning of May we’re going to have a baby! (He actually shouted when he read that. Let out a whoop of joy.)

Get your butt home, Marine, you’ve got a daughter to meet! (She always thought Kelly was a girl. He kept hedging the bet, but Shannon was sure.)

Love,

Shannon & Baby

He didn’t write her back on that one. He pulled rank, bullied, verbally abused, and literally pushed one guy out of line to get to a phone.
He’d completely forgotten about the time difference, so it was three in the morning for her.

Eight rings in and he was about to hang up, resign himself to a letter, but a groggy, “Hello” met his ears, which was when he realized it was the middle of the night where she was.

“Shannon, I just got the letter, are you sure?”

He could feel the smile over the line.

“Oh yeah. You’re gonna be a daddy!”

He was grinning, giddy, wanting to jump up and down, but there was a huge line of guys also waiting to use a phone, and he was a Corporal, supposed to have a certain level of decorum, so he didn’t.

He also didn’t know what to say to her, but he didn’t want to hang up, he just wanted to be there with her, hold her, feel her breath against his skin. But that all had to wait. “I love you.”

“I know. We do, too.”

We! A tiny, little person was growing in his wife. “Oh, God, it’s real.”

“Yeah, Gibbs, it is. Gotta get back here, you’ve got a crib and rocking chair to build.”


She was laughing, letting the happy out. “I think a crib and rocking chair’ll do for right now.”

He was staring at the ceiling, buzzing with emotions he didn’t know what to do with. “You tell your parents?”

“Yeah. And your dad. They’re all over the moon.”

“Yeah.” The guys behind him were starting to grumble. “Okay, I’ve got to go. Can’t be hogging up the phone. They’re already pissed because I butted in line.”

“Go. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

He takes shots of a few of the letters that followed, pictures of the sketches of the crib and rocking chair, pictures of Shannon’s belly slowly getting bigger, the two of them bouncing names around.

He was sent back home again in November, and then right before Christmas got drug back out again to go spend some time in Nicaragua.

He’d told Tim about those letters, making sure he got one out every single day, and he glances through them seeing that a lot of them were variations on the theme of ‘I’ll be home soon.’

And he was. Kelly was due May 10th. He got home the first week of February. Should have been plenty of time. But Kelly had different plans.
For the next five years, he tended to do four months on and four months off. Letters tended to be based on baby things, what he was doing, Shannon’s school work, stuff like that. He takes shots of a few of them, just to give a feel for what that time felt like.

And then the flavor of the pictures changes.

He picks up the next album, knowing what’s in it. He feels it, sitting on his lap, his fingers resting on the cover.

He had thought the idea of the Polaroid was stupid at first. They already had a camera. They had a good camera. She’d been a photography minor, so they had a good camera, a lot of good lenses and filters, and while she wasn’t developing her own stock anymore (Though he’d had plans to build her a proper dark room once they got a house. They were still saving up, wanted a place big enough for him to have a woodworking space, and a darkroom for her, and a backyard for Kelly to play in and…)

But it was her birthday money from her parents, and if she wanted to spend it on a camera she had already told him wasn’t very good, then he wasn’t going to say anything about it.

But not saying anything about it didn’t mean he wasn’t going to give her a few choice looks about it.

She just gently swatted him on the ass and said, “If Kelly cooperates, nap time’s ‘round two. Trust me, you’ll like this.”

“You’ve got her down?” Shannon asked when Gibbs came back into their bedroom.

“Yeah.”

“Good.” Then she handed him the camera. He was still feeling a bit stupid about this. It’s a camera, how much fun can it be? Then she started unbuttoning her shirt, and he suddenly felt like there might be a whole lot of fun things they could do with a camera.

She saw it really hit him and smiled, big and wide and happy. “Still think film that develops on its own is stupid?”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

The first ones are just nudes. Ones he took of her for his own viewing pleasure. (Though he gave her strict instructions that if she ever took any for him to never mail them to him. Pictures, no matter how graphic, were expected to be shared. And pictures that didn’t get shared more or less guaranteed that you got your stuff rifled through to find out what you got.) Ones she took of him for her. (He was shy about that at first, which felt weird, not like lots of people hadn’t seen him naked. Of course, lots of people hadn’t seen him naked, hard, and wanting sex. But eventually he got relaxed enough to be on the subject side of the camera. But he can see how stiff (and not in a good way) he is in the first few shots.)

Some of them were Shannon just messing around, seeing what she could do with the Polaroid. Composition. What the flash could do. There were some ridiculously under and over exposed shots of him in the all-together. Likewise she was messing around with focal length, seeing how close and
how far away she could get and still get good shots. (There was one so close up and out of focus that the only reason he can tell it’s his dick and not his thumb is because he was there when she took it.)

Eventually the quality of the nudes got better. More put together looking. Better focus. More likely to be properly lit.

Eventually the idea that they didn’t necessarily need to put the camera down when the sex started also crept in.

Eventually she figured out how to get the tripod in place, and how to use the cable release.

And eventually those shots got scorching hot.

Eventually he started getting letters that ended with, ‘Looking through the photo albums, thinking of you, Love Shannon.’ And reading that would get him so hard, so fast.

He hasn’t done this since before she died. Hasn’t been able to. Didn’t matter how hot the shots were, sadness killed his hard-on and just left him grieving, angry, and craving enough alcohol to kill the parts of his brain that remembered why he was sad and angry.

Technically speaking, he’s never done this. These books were hers. When he was away he didn’t have the space for a full photo album. But he did keep a small book of whichever new shots really caught his interest.

(And every time he was getting ready to ship out again, they made sure that both of them got a new set of shots to play with for while they were apart.)

But he used to do something like this. Back against the wall, pants open, one hand flipping through the pictures, other in his lap.

His pants aren’t open, yet. (Can’t open. He’s wearing sweats). Hand’s not in his lap, either. But he’s not opposed to the idea of trying, seeing if he’s able to enjoy what they had without the loss of it crushing every iota of pleasure he could take from it.

It’s been long enough that he doesn’t remember what the first one is. He knows he’s at the end of the just nudes, because he can remember Shannon setting up the tripod and saying, ‘Let’s see what we can do with this,’ but he doesn’t remember what’s on the next page.

He flips it over.

He remembered them out of order.

She’d handed him the camera and said, ‘Take pictures,’ then shimmed down his body and started to blow him.

It’s her face, lips, tongue, and his dick. She’s licking the head of it, flat of her tongue flush on the underside of the tip of his dick, just about to pull off, eyes on the camera, half-smile on her face.

He feels his body throb at it, remembering how that felt, her tongue lapping at him, hand holding him firm at the base.

For the first time in years, he started to get hard without any touching.

Next shot down was her sucking him, cheeks little bit hallowed out, eyes sparkling at him. He could
hear how she’d moan quietly while doing it, soft little mmmmm… delicious sounds. He loved those sounds. Loved how much she enjoyed him, and always acted like that, like he was delicious, like his physical body was something she craved every day, missed every night he was away, and was something she could never get enough of.

He certainly felt that way about her.

The film was expensive, and he didn’t want to burn through all of it, but when a minute went by without him taking another shot, she looked up and asked, “Not liking this?”

“No. I like this just fine,” he said, very sincerely, because he did like it, loved it.

“You aren’t taking pictures.”

“Don’t want to go through all the film.”

She smiled at that. “One pack is for you. One’s for me. You’ve got eight shots left.”

“Oh.” She licked him again, tongue trailing over his dick, and he decided he really needed a few more shots of that.

By the third shot he’s hard, and determined to enjoy it, enjoy this. Not let the sadness of the loss overwhelm the pleasure of what he had had.

He takes off his t-shirt. It’ll do duty for a cum rag.

He scoots out of his pants, wrapping his hand around his dick, looking at the picture, Shannon taking him all the way down. His hand moves slow and steady, the way her mouth would have. No need to go fast, plenty of time, this is just the opening round.

Half of his film was gone, and he felt his balls pulling up, knew he needed to switch things up or this wasn’t going to last all that much longer. He gently stepped back, then helped her stand, pulling her face to face, for a long, ravishing kiss.

When he was back from the edge, and she was breathing faster, he handed her the camera. “What do you want pictures of?”

Next page. They’re on the bed, instead of standing next to it. She was lying on her back. He was kneeling between her legs. The photo is cropped to just show him and her legs. On his left, her knee rested against his hip. On the right, he was holding her ankle, her calf against his chest. He was cradling it in his hand, kissing the hollow, as the fingers of his left hand trailed down her inner thigh.

The sense memory attached to that one hits like a hammer.

She used to wear… something. He doesn’t know what it was. It smelled good. Sweet, floral, yummy. The scent of it made him want to eat her alive.

It tasted nasty. They’d been married for a year when he finally said, “I love the way you smell,” and
then licked her throat, over her pulse point, one of her favorite places to be nibbled and kissed, and where she’d also dab the perfume, “but this stuff tastes awful.”

She winced. “Really?”

“Blech.”

She messed around with a few other scents, and eventually decided to try a few drops of vanilla extract. The real stuff, not the vanilla-flavored goop. And while it’s true that Kelly hated the way that tasted, that was because it doesn’t taste like it smells. It tastes like what it is, alcohol that vanilla soaked in.

Which meant it wasn’t a problem for Gibbs.

And that image, his teeth gently sliding over the hallow of her ankle, where she’d dab a little of the extract brought back the scent, vanilla blended with her skin, and the feel, the smooth stretch of her leg against his stomach and chest, the silky warmth of her leg under his fingers.

For a second there, he was back, gently kissing and nibbling his way down her leg.

And a second later, he’s sitting on the floor in his bedroom, looking at pictures.

But that was always the way it worked. He’d be alone, looking at the shots, get so into them, into the memories attached to them, that he’d lose himself for little moments of time. For a few minutes, he’d be making love to her, and sure, eventually the real world would come back, but he could shut it out, and pull a few more minutes of time with her out of the ethers.

Part of him fights that, trying to stay firmly here, now. He’s fifty-six, at home, alone, looking at pictures, trying to enjoy memories of the life he lost.

Part of him doesn’t want to. He’s twenty-seven, at home, with his wife, baby napping, taking advantage of the time they’ve got alone.

He gives in, surrendering to it, burying himself in the memories triggered by the pictures.

Kissing his way down her leg, the feel, taste, smell of her skin on his lips. The way she’d gasp when he’d bite gently. (And sometimes not so gently, but that didn’t happen all that often. Usually when he was getting ready to ship out. They both liked having a mark that’d last. He’d just smirk at the other guys bragging about the marks on their chests or shoulders or back. His were never easy to see, upper, inner thigh, just the way he liked it.)

Spreading her legs wide, taking the time to suck and lick every inch of her, riding the waves of her pleasure and her cries.

He’s there, wrapped in her taste on his tongue, the feel of her hair against his face, wet on his lips and nose and fingers, her legs wrapped around his shoulders, rubbing himself with her juices while he licked her through her climax.

There, in that moment of her body tight and pulsing on his, wet, sucking throbs around his fingers, his own body hard and eager, kneeling, pulling her up to ride him, catching those last few twitches as she sank down onto his body.

Kneeling, her lips on his, facing him, his hands cradling her butt, hers in his hair, then on his face, holding him, kissing and kissing and kissing again as they rocked together.
Face to face, eyes open, no words, no words could cover it, but touch, glorious hard soft wet rich pleasure touch over and over up and down and in and

There, that second, his body going tighter, harder. Hers moving faster. Blood pumping, her teeth closing on his lip. Her hand tightening in his hair, pulling his head back. Her lips on his jaw, teeth on his throat.

He’s grunting with each breath thrust, pulling her even harder against him. Deeper, more, faster, wet and soft and everything slick and pumping hot pulse pleasure as he arches into her and things blank out into a gentle white ecstasy.

And like before, coming out of it is disappointing. The part of his brain that was fighting it probably had the right idea.

He’s not twenty-seven, and he’s not home with his wife, and it’s not nap time, and none of that will ever be real again.

Gibbs wipes up, feeling… He’s not sure what this feeling is.

Better than the last time he tried this. He’s not despondent. He did get off. He doesn’t want to break things or kill people.

He guesses all of those are steps in the right direction.

His head tilts back, resting against the side of the dresser, his eyes are closed, and he’s breathing deeply.

“I miss you.” He shakes his head. “Miss you so much.”

He doesn’t see her, but he feels her presence very clearly, and with it the sense that this is something he should be doing.

He looks around, sees that it’s only two in the afternoon. Lots of time.

He picks up the first album again, and this time starts to read straight through, not skipping around, not looking for things to illustrate what love meant.

This time he’s just trying to be close to her, just remembering who they were, and trying to get closer to being at peace about not being that any longer.

It’s well after eight when he closes the last album. He sits there, staring at nothing, holding it against his chest.

The last shots, like the ones that made it to Kelly’s growing up book, are from New Year’s Eve, 1990.

Kelly went to sleep at midnight.

They didn’t sleep at all.

The Polaroid was especially bad with low light shots, so the last collection of them were all sort of vaguely orange-brown, deep shadows in black, highlights in gold.
He’d brought the ones he’d liked best along with him. The ones that were left were for her. It’s probably not prophetic or foreshadowing, just that she preferred to have shots of him, and he preferred the ones of her, and they both liked the ones of both of them.

But even with that, the last shot does feel like foreshadowing.

The last shot is of just him.

He’s resting in their bed, on his side, head on his arm, leg draped so that his dick’s hidden. His eyes are closed, and his muscles relaxed.

There are probably fifty other versions of that shot through out those books. They don’t mean anything, other than she liked to get shots of him napping.

But that’s the last of the naked pictures. There are still letters. The date on the last one was February 4, 1991. Nothing special about that day. Him writing about how much he didn’t like what he was hearing about possible pull outs from Iraq and that there was no point to this if Hussein was still in place when they left.

He knows he wrote letters after that one. But he doubts she stuck them in the books the second she got them. And the ones that didn’t make it into the books didn’t come home with him when he packed up their place in California.

He puts the book down and rubs his eyes, remembering he’s working on something here, besides just sitting around until his entire bottom half had fallen completely asleep.

He sighs and looks through the pictures on his camera.

He’s got shots of them playing, and their home, and the things he made her, and the close, easy intimacy.

He doesn’t have a sex shot.

And he’s not sure if he wants to add one.

Sex is part of love, big part of what he and Shannon had together, always was, but those shots… They’re his, and private, and… his.

But he gets the sense she wouldn’t have minded if he shared one. Not in this sort of context.

He goes flipping through again, looking for something erotic but not explicit. He finds a good one. She’d set the camera with the tripod and cable release, they both knew where in focus was, and either of them could just hit the release and snap a shot without getting out of bed.

She’s on top, looking into his eyes, and he’s looking into hers, faces about four inches apart. On the far side of the shot, her hair is long and loose. On the near side, his hand is in her hair, holding it back, so her face, and his, is visible for the shot. The shot cuts off mid-back. It’s clear they’re naked, clear they’re in bed, but her arm blocks her breast, so it’s not too revealing.

Well, it’s not too naked. The faces are revealing. Pleasure, joy, happiness, love, all of it is clear on both of their faces in that instant. They aren’t looking at the camera, so it’s in profile, but he thinks anyone can see the love in those expressions, and in the gentleness of his hand in her hair, or the way her fingers are curled around his shoulder.
He snaps the next one, too. She was lying on his chest, head on his shoulder, (his face is blocking the
view of all of her face but her chin) he was kissing her forehead, so all Cranston will be able to see is
the back of his head. But that’s not really important. He’s looking at their hands. His fingers were
lightly slipping down her spine. Her fingers were stroking over the back of his neck.

They weren’t done in that shot, though it wouldn’t be an insane assumption, just getting a break if he
remembered right. After a minute, she pushed herself back up, straddling him, rising and falling as he
palmed her breasts.

He turns the page. Yeah, he remembered right.

He didn’t take another shot of those pictures. The first two get the idea across. Rachel doesn’t need
to see Shannon, head back, face tight, skin flushed rose, mouth open, climaxing as he sat up and
licked her breasts. She doesn’t need to see the one after it, where his fingers and arms have gone
tights, his jaw clenched as he comes with her. Or the one after that, her slumped into him, cradling
his head against her chest, both of them sweaty, relaxed, panting, and smiling.

Almost done. He’s got shots of just about everything, now, but no fighting shots, either, because
who takes photos of fighting? But that’s part of love, too.

Just, nothing he can take a shot…

Oh.

He stands up, slowly, rebalancing and wincing when his full weight hits the damaged knee, and then
reaches for the box with his medals in it.

His purple heart is in there, and yes, it’s still got the slight dent on the top, and the scratches along the
back.

He’d never gotten one before, so he didn’t know how it worked, not really.

He didn’t want her to worry, so he hold her the if you bleed you get one (which is true), and it was
just a scratch, barely anything. (How he thought he’d get away with that lie, told to a woman who
knew every inch of his body, he doesn’t know, but he was dumb enough to try.)

She wasn’t there when he got the ribbon. But they mailed the actual medal and the citation for how
he got it home.

Which meant she read the whole story, and how ‘just a scratch’ meant almost bled out from a
shrapnel wound to the thigh.

When he got home that night, he was really excited to see that Kelly was off spending the night with
her parents.

Then he found out she was off spending the night with her grandparents so Shannon could full on
scream at him without upsetting their daughter.

She’d thrown the medal at him, and he ducked. It hit the mantle hard enough to leave a small dent
and scrape up the back.
That’s what all their worst arguments were, each of them being scared for the other.

She found the vasectomy scar.

Three other wives, who knows how many one night stands, four lovers, none of the rest of them ever noticed that scar. It’s tiny. It’s not in an obvious location. (It was intentionally not in an obvious location.) But she saw it, and what had been a very, very good afternoon rapidly turned into a very, very big argument.

And it was another stupid thing, because sooner or later she would have started asking about maybe they should see a doctor because she did want more children, and she would have continued to not get pregnant, so obviously something wasn’t working right.

But as he said before, and will likely say again, scared guys do stupid things, and with the memory of that c-section bright in his mind, along with how her voice sounded when she said, ‘Gibbs, I can’t see’ he was world-class scared and that brought on massive stupid.

He couldn’t do it again. Couldn’t risk it.

Though, in retrospect, if he had just told her, she would have been okay with it.

And while she never got okay with him not talking to her first, she understood he was scared, and understood that he couldn’t bear to let her see him scared. That that was just as bad as being scared for him.

That was one of the few times where his Dad’s ‘the world won’t end if you wait’ line made sense. Had he been a bit older, bit more sure of himself, he probably could have said to her that he’d never, ever been so scared in his life and that he’d literally rather go up against a firing squad than ever feel that way again.

But he was barely twenty-four when Kelly was born, still twenty-four when she found the scar, and he couldn’t say that, especially not to her, not then.

Their last argument, the last thing he ever had the chance to say to her, over a static and pop filled connection that he’d practically had to kill to get was about testifying in that case.

The Feds were telling her they could keep her and Kelly safe. They were telling her about how many people she’d be able to help by getting this guy off the street.

And she had her own sense of duty and honor, and how you had to stand up for what was right. And testifying was right.

He begged her not to testify. The whole thing just scared the shit out of him. Set all his warning sensors off. Woke him up out of a dead sleep in a cold sweat, nightmares he couldn’t remember, but knew had something to do with it racing through his head.

By then, he was enough of a grown up to say, ‘I’m scared.’ And she was, too. But she was also sure it was right. He’d killed a man. She saw it. It was her job to make sure it didn’t happen again.

And doing the right thing mattered more than being scared. After all, wasn’t that what he did every single time he went out there?

He didn’t have a good response for that. He never had a good response for any of it, other than flat
out begging her not to do it.

“Shannon, please, don’t.”

“Gibbs…”

“Please.” And he ran out of time.

He put the rest of it in a letter. But, by the time the letter got there, they were already dead.

The picture of the medal by itself probably didn’t mean much, wouldn’t, and there is no way in hell that he’d try to get a shot of the vasectomy scar. But it didn’t take much effort to get his pants down again, so he gets a shot of the scar on his thigh, and he flips through the nudes until he found a good one of her belly, takes a shot of that, cropping it carefully, so only the scar is visible.

That will do, until he sees Rachel and tells her about it.

He heads downstairs, to the table where he tosses his keys, wallet, and ID when he comes in, and takes one last picture, it’s his badge. There’s nothing left from that last fight, nothing left of Hernandez or the car crash that killed them or the bullet he put through him or begging Shannon not to testify.

All that’s left is him, and who he became because of that.

And the badge symbolizes that well enough.

He sat in front of the computer, finished attaching all of the photos, put them in more or less chronological order, put Rachel’s email address in, and spent a moment looking at the subject line. Then he wrote: 1000 Pictures One Word.
Tradition and Context

When five Sundays went by without them setting foot at St. Sebastian's, Father John called Abby. It was polite, gentle, wanting to see how she and Kelly were, reminding them that even if they weren't happy about the whole baptism thing, that they were still more than welcome at the church.

"He sounded a little nervous," Abby says to Tim as they eat dinner, after telling him about it.

"Like his plan won't work if we don't get back there?"

"Maybe." She tickles the bottom of Kelly's foot while she flails a bit in her bouncy chair.

"Sooo…” Tim asks, bite of grilled zucchini halfway to his mouth, "You want to wait another week and then have me try again? I can tell him that we're church shopping, that we've been to Jimmy and Breena's for the last few weeks and liked it, and that if he won't budge on this, we won't be back, and if he doesn't fold, then I will."

She shrugs.

"It's up to you. You want, we can be there next week, and I'll tell him Sister Rosita is fine."

"I actually do like Jimmy and Breena's church."

Tim nods. It's still church, so it's not like one's much better than another to him, but Jimmy and Breena are there, and the nursery seems nice, and everyone's friendly, and okay, yeah, he doesn't adore having an extra five hours a week with Ed Slater, but as downsides go, especially post-Bootcamp, post-Gibbs (Gibbs!) telling stories of them all kicking ass and taking names, it's not a horrific one.

"Whatever you want on this," Tim says, stroking her hand.

"More time to think."

"As long as you want. I don't mind if Father John sweats this."

Okay, it's not likely, at all, but it has been more than two weeks, and there's no other way to tell, because she's not menstruating again, yet…

"We going to do another pregnancy test?" he asks while walking Kelly around, patting her back gently, trying to get that last burp out of her before taking her for the second of her nighttime sleeps. Abby sticks her head out of the bathroom, toothbrush between her lips. "I had the water running, what did you say?"

"Pregnancy test? I know it's not likely, but…"

She nods and heads back into the bathroom.

Kelly belches loudly, and Tim kisses the top of her head. "Good girl. Okay, back to bed for you." She settled in against his chest more closely. "Yeah, I bet you do feel better, don't you?"

A sleepy and content little chirp answers him.
Rocking, lullaby, sleepy baby back in bed, and then back to his own room he goes. Abby's already in their bed, so he looks at her expectantly, and she shakes her head.

"Oh."

She's got a kind of disappointed half-smile on her face. "Yeah."

He sits down next to her. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just… I don't know, about half-relieved and half-disappointed. Didn't want to be pregnant again, not yet, didn't want to not be, either."

He nods at that and kisses her, same half-disappointed smile on his face. "Yeah."

Okay, it's not his most riveting story ever. Mostly just how Tony and Ziva are finally both back, which means Tony's in charge of the team again, and this was their first case out at full strength again, and sure, she's heard the whole, we found a dead body, we processed evidence, and then I spent the next six hours mucking about on the computers to find out more, is pretty routine, but it's not actually boring.

"What's up, you're a million miles away?" he finally asks, because she's not following the story at all.

She shakes her head. "Sorry. Just been thinking a lot today."

"About?"

"You asked, a while back, what being Catholic means to me, and, I think I've got it, now."

Ah, back to that. Well, it's Thursday, and yet another Sunday is looming. Okay, he can see how it'd be on her mind.

"Okay," he says, keep talking on his face.

"It's a line of traditions, tying me to my family. Mostly to people who aren't here anymore, people you've never met. And I don't want to break that line. Every Sunday we're there, I take communion just like I did with my mom and dad and my aunts and uncles and grandparents."

"That's good enough for me."

She flashes him the not quite done yet look. "But… maybe it doesn't have to be that line. There are other traditions out there. King cakes for Easter, Jambalaya for Christmas, the tree, stuff like that. Just… you know, if it's you and me, it doesn't matter that gays can't marry and women can't be ordained and no birth control, well, I mean it does, but…"

"I got ya." He's nodding, knowing that she doesn't mean that those aren't issues, but that they're grown-ups so they've got their own contexts for them.

"It can just be little idiosyncrasies that we ignore or tolerate, and the links matter more than they do."

Another nod. They're on the same page here.

"But Kelly'd be learning this from scratch. She and any other kids we have are a new start, and…"
And I don't want them burned on this the way you are."

He smiles ruefully at that. "You've got to actively work on it to get my past with this. This isn't some sort of accident."

"You didn't like the fact that this was just empty symbolism for your dad. You going to a church you don't believe in looks like setting up that pattern all over again, and I don't want that for our kids."

That stops him short. And for a moment he has to think about it, because he hasn't wondered what their kids might think about this, and if they'll see it as him just going through the motions to provide a certain image. But, eventually, he decides no, it won't be. "It's not empty for me, it's just… not what most people mean by it."

Abby smiles at that.

He gently strokes her wedding ring. "For me, this is part of our marriage. This is part of the vow to put you first. And that matters more to me than everything else."

That got a kiss.

"It's not just your dad that burned you on it."

True. Granted, his dad set the pattern that made him loathe empty symbolism, but he thinks even if he hadn't grown up with John it'd still bug him. "I'd have probably been a lot more tolerant of it if it hadn't been for him. Probably a lot more like how Penny deals with it."

"True. But the point I'm trying to get to, is that there is a lot of empty crap that goes with this, and… when I think about it, what being a Christian is, what I want and need from a church, and from faith, and what I want to do with it, the heart of it is love. God's love for everyone. And if it's about love, and if we're all sinners trying to do better… Then anything that encourages hate, that gives it space to grow and nourishes it, is the problem, and a lot of the stuff I don't like about being Catholic just encourages hate. And it's not a problem for me, I've got context for it, but Kelly doesn't and… maybe she doesn't need to hear about homosexuals going to hell, or that there's something bad about pleasure, or that it's her job to crank out as many babies as she can, or that she can never be equal to a man. Maybe, we don't need to try to teach her God loves everyone all the time and in all ways, while also teaching her that He's constantly judging everything and that eternal pain and torment is waiting for the people who don't measure up."

Tim smiles at her. "I'm good with that."

"And Jimmy and Breena's church isn't perfect, but they ordain women and marry gays and that's two pretty big steps."

He nods.

"And they're a lot less focused on doing things the 'right way' and more focused on doing the 'right thing.'"

"I like that part, too."

Abby smiles at that. "I bet Ducky would have something to say about Pharisees right now."

"I don't remember who they are."

"The guys Jesus was rebelling against. They were so caught up in the letter of the law that they
forgot the spirit of it."

"Seems appropriate. So, St. Mary's?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

On Sunday, Tim and Abby had a chat with Pastor Brons about what was involved in joining St. Mary's. They offered new members' classes which Brons said were basically Episcopalianism 101. They started new ones every other month, and the next class began in September.

Abby signed up for it. Tim didn't. He'll attend St. Mary's, but won't formally join any church. (Brons found that… amusing is probably the best word. He has the sense that she's thinking she'll eventually get her claws into him, but he's doubtful. Okay, he thinks she's out and out insane, but he's vastly too polite to say it.)

They also set the date for Kelly's baptism. November 9, 2015, they'll stand up there with the Palmers and officially welcome their daughter into the church.

And while various Slaters hadn't been thrilled at the idea of Tim and Abby as Molly's godparents, when word started to get around the family over the course of Sunday dinner that Jimmy and Breena would be Kelly's godparents, there was some hardcore celebrating.
Distance

Professional distance is something that, if you could get her to admit it, Cranston finds difficult with some clients. Not that that's terribly shocking or anything, every counselor has that client who, for whatever reason, is hard to keep off in a nice, safe little box.

Sometimes you just like people, and when you like people, they get inside, and when they get inside, that's bad for professional objectivity.

Which is part of the reason why she's got Gibbs mailing her stuff ahead of time. She does like him, and she is finding it difficult to keep the distance she needs from him.

She was skimming through what he wrote about his failed loves, saw, not just the length, but the intensity, and knew that part of keeping her own emotional cool would involve making sure she had time to read, think, feel, and process before she added him and his emotions to the mix as well.

She can feel her own inner ethicist yelling at her. She likes Gibbs. They do not have a good starting relationship for a client therapist relationship. The power dynamics are wrong. The history is wrong. Kate is a great, big, neon flag of wrong. (Some of the things Kate told Rachel about Gibbs, which is part of why she's interested in knowing him better is also a massive heaping pile of wrong.) The way he sees her is wrong.

But she's also dead certain that, unlike Tony, whom she could refer off to someone else, Gibbs will not talk to another person about this. If she refers him off, that'll be the end of this. He'll curl back into his shell and never crawl out again. (You're justifying. Yeah, well, I'm also right.)

And she doesn't want that for him.

So, (her inner ethicist thinks this is BS excuse making and that she knows what she needs to do, and not doing it is wrong) she gives him homework assignments so she's got enough time to deal with what he's giving her and can then listen to him with a calm mind.

Still, even with all of that, she was very excited to see 1000 Pictures One Word show up in her inbox. And very, very curious to see that it had 70 attachments.

She opened the email and saw they were pictures.

She wasn't expecting pictures. She probably should have. 'Tell me what love means to you?' What'd she expect, poetry? Another essay? The guy rarely talks if he can avoid it.

Next assignment, he'll probably carve her something.

She goes through his pictures, watching the love story unfold, (amazed at how young Gibbs and Shannon are in the beginning. She knew they had to have married young, but, Lord, they're teenagers in the first shots.) seeing them slowly age, seeing Kelly join the family. Mostly she makes note of the joy. She knows that most people only take photos of happy times, but there's a deep, settled quality to the happy in these.

She was mildly surprised to see how far he took the photos. (And somehow, not very surprised at all to see he had photos like that to share.)

She's not sure what the purple heart means, but does take note of the fact that it's dented and scratched. Unusual for a medal. Especially for a man like Gibbs, she's expect his medals to be kept in
pristine shape. She assumes the scar that's clearly his goes with the purple heart. She's not sure what, besides a c-section, the scar on Shannon means. (Or why it's off with the purple heart and the scar on his leg, and not with the shots of Kelly as a baby.)

Likewise she isn't sure what he's telling her with the badge.

But tomorrow she'll find out.

She makes a few notes for herself as she looks through. Questions as to what this or that means. (Like the laundry room, badge, and the Purple Heart.)

But when she gets to the end of the pictures one thing sticks out, and she wonders if he knows he was doing this.

What does love mean to you?

Shannon.

That's his answer. And she wonders if he thinks he's showing her examples of what a loving relationship looked like, or if he knows that what he's saying is that, to him, love is Shannon?

Closing her email, she stands up, and heads to her book shelf. She has a decent-sized collection of Mark Twain and knows which one she wants. Her fingers find the Diary of Adam and Eve and skip to the back cover, and then back a few pages to Adam's final words, spoken standing over Eve's grave.

"Wheresoever she was, there was Eden."

She sits down, finger marking the page, book in her lap, forefinger gently tapping the cover, and sees that this is Gibbs' fall. That life with Shannon and Kelly was grace, Eden, and a bullet tore it to pieces.

This isn't just the loss of love, this is the loss of innocence.

And no matter what, innocence is one thing Gibbs can't get back.

"Three cups?" Rachel asks as Gibbs hobbles in on Monday morning. She notices that he's got one in his hand, go bag slung over his shoulder and down to one crutch.

He handed the cup over. "Thought you might like one."

"You're getting me coffee?"

"Sure. You drink coffee, right?" he says while unpacking the cups he brought for himself from the go bag.

"Yes." There's some tension in her voice. Part of it is wariness from her own reactions to Gibbs, part of it is wondering how he's reacting to her. After all this is an emotionally vulnerable guy who doesn't have intimate relationships with women who are equals and has a bad track record when it comes to not sexualizing relationships with redheads.
He catches that wariness. "It's not a problem is it?"

"That depends, why did you get it?"

He shrugs. "I thought you might like it."

"Really?"

She can see by the look on his face he knows he's tripped over a line, but he's not sure what line or why. "It's friendly?"

She raises an eyebrow.

"It's easier to talk if we're just two people sitting around talking over coffee."

She nods and takes a sip. It's good. Hot, creamy, sweet, hint of nutmeg. The way she likes it, and very much not how he'd fix it for himself. "That's fine. If it makes talking easier, then I'm happy to have coffee with you. But somewhere in your mind, you need to remember that this isn't a date, we aren't just getting to know each other, and I'm not another redhead you're working on charming. There are lines, Jethro, hard rules, and this doesn't work if we don't follow them."

He nods. "I know."

"Do you?"

"Yeah." He nods, suddenly very aware of how easy it would be to slip into the idea of Rachel as another woman he was courting, and how that would fuck everything sideways. He nods again, voice serious as he says, "I do."

"Good." She sees the smile on his face. "What?"

He shakes his head, licks his lips, looks away, sheepish, and then looks back at her. "You might not want to know."

"Try me."

"Just bringing back the memory of slapping myself upside the back of my head about your sister. Had a very long conversation with myself about how she was my employee, and too damn young, and I'd already made that mistake once and no one ended up better off for it."

He sees the smile on Rachel's face. There's a knowing flavor to the amusement in her eyes.

"But you already knew about that…"

Rachel nods. And she'd heard the other half of it. The frustration of too old, too divorced, too bitter, too married to the job, too much of a bastard, too much her boss.

Gibbs shrugs. He wasn't surprised that Kate felt it, too. Would have been a whole lot easier if she hadn't been interested in him because, for whatever reason, he never sparked for a girl who wasn't at least mildly interested in him back.

"So, tell me about the photo essay. How long did it take…"

They spent most of the hour going over what he'd taken pictures of, what different details meant,
how it fall fit together.

By the end of it Rachel was sure that, yes, to Jethro, love meant Shannon. And as long as that was true, there wasn't going to be any getting past this.

"Jethro, try to put it into words. Just a few of them. What is love?"

He stares at her, swallows his coffee, takes another sip, stares some more, thinking, that's clear on his face, but eventually he shakes his head.

"Are there any words in your head right now? Is it that you can't say it, won't say it, or there's nothing to say?"

"There's nothing to say."

"Give me your wallet."

He's looking at her like she's crazy, but he hands it over.

She very carefully took the picture of Shannon out, feeling the years of attachment, the decades of love in the frayed edges of the picture, and then held it out to him. "Jethro, is this love?"

He nods.

"And that's why it never works, why you never fall in love with anyone else, because you keep trying to get this, again, don't you?"

"Yes."

She tucks the picture back into his wallet and hands it back to him.

"Jethro, you are never going to have her again. That life is gone. Shannon is dead. Kelly is dead. The man you used to be, is dead. None of it is ever going to come back."

"I know."

"Do you? Do you know it in your guts and bones, can you feel it in your soul, that this is never coming back, that you can never rebuild this, and hoping and praying and trying is never, ever going to get it back for you?"

He blinks, slowly, silently, and swallows, hard.

"Have you ever said the words?"

He looks at her, pained, curious.

"Have you ever said, 'My wife, Shannon, is dead?'"

He thinks about it, sure he must have at some point, but he also realizes that he's never said it to any of his women, even with Susan, he'd never said the word. He told her he was a widower, but left the details vague, and the word dead never crossed his lips.

"No."

"Can you?"
He opens his mouth and feels every word he's ever had go skittering off. Then he closes his mouth and shakes his head. No. Not right now. Not today. Not to her. Especially not after the hours he spent looking at the pictures.

"That's next week's homework assignment. Say it to someone."

He nods, and begins to pack his stuff up.
Tim's sitting on the floor, Kelly on his legs, looking up at him, one hand wrapped around each of his index fingers. She's cooing and gurgling, and he's doing it back to her, or she's doing it back to him, either way, it's happening.

He's rubbing the tip of his nose against hers and then pulls back, "Gooo."

Her eyes are bright, and she smiles at him. Wide open, happy, smiling.

And he feels so wrapped in love with that, so awash in adoration for this tiny person and how much she's his whole world and…

And he snags his phone and gets a quick shot of it.

And before he puts the phone down he hit the call button.

"Oh My God! Tim! Honey, are you okay!" his mom answers on the first ring, sounding breathless.

"Hi, Mom. Kelly just smiled at me."

"Oh, baby." He can hear the smile in her voice, and some confusion, and excitement, and fear. "Is she still doing it?"

"No. Not anymore, staring at me, looking confused."

"Is that her I'm hearing?" 'Staring at me' also involved blowing bubbles and cooing at him.

"Yeah, that's her. I just… She smiled at me, and I wanted to tell you about it."

"I'm glad you did. Did you get a picture?"

"Yeah. I can send you—"

"No!" he can feel the way she's biting her lip on that, not wanting to demand anything, but terrified she'll scare him off. "Just, please, don't hang up, please… keep talking to me, okay?"

"Okay." But he's not sure what to say. And she's just listening, listening hard. He can imagine the look on her face, can hear the fact that she's excited by the way she's breathing. Can feel how nervous she is right now, terrified of saying the wrong thing and scaring him off. "I miss you."

"I miss you, too, Tim. Miss you so much."

"And I'm really angry," he hears the edge in his voice as he says that, and feels her flinch at the heat in his voice.

"I know. I'm sorry. I… just… I'm sorry."

"And I'm going to be angry for a long time."

"It's okay."
"But I miss you, and she smiled at me, and I wanted to tell you about it."

"I want to hear about it, about all of it."

Kelly makes a little fussy noise, one he's got characterized as the naptime five minute warning.

"I've got to go put her down before she gets overtired."

"Okay."

"Bye."

"Wait… Tim?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I call you?"

"Sure. Might not answer, but yeah, you can call."

"Okay. That's good enough for now."

"Okay. Bye, Mom."

"Bye."

His hands are shaking as he hangs up the phone, and he didn't know what to call the emotion flooding through him.

But he does know he's a dad, and it's his job to make sure his little girl gets down to sleep before she gets overtired.

So he picks her up, gently, cradling her against his chest, and carries her up to her room.

And he spends too long sitting with her in the rocking chair, lips against the crown of her head, his hands wrapped around her, feeling her heart beating against his, because she's dead asleep before he felt like he could let her go.

But she didn't mind.

"Tim?" Abby asks him curiously as he heads out of Kelly's room. She knows something's up; it doesn't take half an hour to put Kelly down.

He nods toward their room, not wanting to have this conversation right outside Kelly's door. Sure, she'll sleep through whatever comes her way, but it still feels odd to chat right next to where she's sleeping.

He sits on their bed, in the middle, back against the headboard and pillows, and she follows, settling in next to him.

He fishes his phone out of his pocket and shows her the picture of Kelly smiling.

"Ohhh…” she half-says it, half-breathes it, eyes soft, smile wide. "She's smiling."
"Yeah," he says it softly, rubbing his hand up and down her back.

"Why didn't you call me?"

"You were sleeping."

She nods a little at that. As of this point, she has not yet lifted the wake me up and die rule. She snuggles in close to him, head against his shoulder, legs draped over his, holding his phone, gazing at Kelly's first smile. Then she looks back up at him and raises an eyebrow, *that's not all* clear on her face.

He rests his head against the headboard, staring up at the ceiling and sighed long and deep. "I called my mom."

"Oh." She squeezes him a little tighter and kisses his shoulder. "How'd that go?"

"Okay, I guess. She said she was sorry. I said I was mad and that I was going to be mad for a long time, but that I wanted to tell her that Kelly smiled."

She nods. "Are you all right?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know. She was sorry and nervous I'd run away and scared and misses me and... And I don't know."

"Angry?"

"Maybe." He closes his eyes, and his posture slumps a bit. "Hurting again. I hold Kelly and..." He opens them and looks at Abby. "And she's my world. Just, so much love and joy and hope and... And I just want to protect her from everything. And how could either of them, but especially her... She's my mom. I grew in her body. How could she have thought that what they did was all right?"

"I don't know."

He shakes his head again. And Abby snuggled with him, holding him, not saying anything, letting him process as well as he can.

Eventually, Kelly wakes up again, asking for yet more food. Abby starts to get up, but Tim shakes his head, kisses her, and gets up.

"Hey, baby girl."

She looks up at him from her crib, eyes tracking him as he leans over to pick her up.

"Let's get you clean and ready for second dinner."

She seems to appreciate that idea. She's quietly sitting in his arms, waiting to get changed.

He lays her down, takes care of business, tickling her feet a little, which gets a startled look and an indignant squawk out of Kelly. He chirps back at her, mimicking the sound. "You know, when you can laugh, you might get tickled a lot." He lifts her to his shoulder. "I can't imagine your Pop'll ever turn up a chance to tickle his favorite girl. And your Uncle Jimmy, he's a tickle maniac. Your cousin Molly'll tell you all about it." He kisses the top of her head. "But if you don't like getting tickled, I won't do it. And I won't let them do it, either."

"You don't have to be any tougher than you are. Or softer. Or girlier. Or more butch. Or anything else. You just figure out who you are, and that'll be good enough for me," he whispers to her as he
takes her to Abby.

He thinks she might have caught what he said, because she smiles, takes Kelly from him, and says as she gets Kelly set to nurse, "Goes for me, too." Then she kisses Tim. "And it goes to you, too. You never have to be anyone else for me, or for Kelly. No matter who you are, we're here for you."

"Thanks."

It's a pretty sad smile on his face, so she kisses him again. "I know we can't fix it, or make it better, but we can stop it. We can break the pattern and fill it up with love."

He nods. "That sounds really good."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay, so a few chapters ago I mentioned that I'd be updating Shards and Shards To A Whole on both sites. Well, it's time.

Next chapter(s. First of which should be up tomorrow.) will be on the Shards side. And from there all updates that work with both stories will be on both stories, but some chapters will only feature on one or the other, and some will be significantly rewritten to support the plot as it changes.

No, this does not mean the great McPalmer romance is about to begin. We're not nearly ready for that, yet. But, as you've probably noticed I'm pretty serious about the whole porn with plot thing, which means that McPalmer sets various conflicts into motion, provides for needed character development, and continues to push all my little Shards to their wholes.

Or put this way, I don't write smut just to get us all hot and bothered and in a good mood to give our significant others a good time. (Though it will! The already written McPalmer smut is melt-your-keyboard hot.) I bring this up to make it clear that Shards isn't just Shards To A Whole minus some sex scenes.

It means I've had to rearrange some important plot points to make this work. And I've had to soften some of them to make them work, as well.

So, honestly, I think the full Shards To A Whole storyline works better. I think it's more organic and truer to the characters. If McPalmer doesn't turn your stomach, I highly recommend reading the full version. Which isn't to say Shards is bad. It's not. The stuff coming up soon is good. It'll be a solid, well-crafted romance with the traditional HEA.

But it's not going to take you on the full ride, you won't get all the ups and downs. It's not as intense, and without McPalmer all my little Shards don't find their full wholes.

It's, to take a metaphor Tim's used before, the vanilla extract version of the story, so I'll encourage all of you to try the real thing and see what vanilla beans taste like.
"Hey, you're home," Abby says, looking up from the book she's reading.

"I am home."

"How'd it go?"

Tim flops dramatically onto the sofa, resting his head on her lap, and says, "BOOOOOOORING! Single most boring day of my career." It's day two of what he's calling the 'never-ending stakeout of doom.' And all day yesterday, and all day today, and likely all day tomorrow, they're spending sitting in a bus, in a bus station, staring at a monitor, waiting for someone to open a locker and take cash and travel documents out.

Abby pets his hair. "Poor baby. Having to sit around all day and do nothing using your brain. Gosh, I wonder what that's like."

He sits up and looks at her, stroking her cheek. "Yeah, I guess you do know. How was your day?"

"Mooooo," she says, imitating a cow.

He snorts a bit of a laugh at that, because, really, at two-months old, sleeping, eating, and pooping is pretty much all a baby does.

"We could stop dithering about the nanny and get you back to work sooner."

"I can do one more month off. Besides, I know I'm not with it enough to do my job well. I sorted the laundry, put it in the washing machine, carefully selected the right detergent, carefully picked the right setting, turned the machine on, and headed off."

Tim thinks about that, but it sounds right to him, so he's not sure what the issue is. "Not seeing the problem."

"I didn't actually put the detergent into the machine. It was still sitting there, on top of the dryer, when I got back."

"Ugh."

"Yeah. I mess up the laundry, oh well, do it over. Leave out a reagent on a test…"

He nods. That'd destroy evidence and screw up the test.

"So, do anything useful with your down time?" Abby knows they're doing half an hour on, half an hour off, watching the locker. That's as long as any of them can focus on one thing that boring
without getting distracted.

"Guess so. I rewrote the info dump in chapter three."

She pouts at him. "I liked the info dump."

"Baby, you're the only one who liked the info dump." Shadow Force starts with a series of mysterious poisonings, and the info dump, in which Amy (now Amy MacGregor) explains what's going on, had been noted by both Penny and Gibbs as being slow, draggy, overly complex, and way too much science. "I wrote the info dump and I didn't like it."

Abby continues to pout at that. Once she got used to being "Amy," she began to like having scenes, and since they tend to be kind of short and lab-oriented, she doesn't want them cut.

"I didn't cut any of your lines, just rearranged them, made them a bit more concise—"

"How is that not cutting?"

"You can read it and see. It's better. You'll see."

"Okay. Anything else happen?"

"Let's see. Sixty-three million people walked near the locker, but none of them opened it. Tony and I talked a little about how we need to do something really special for Gibbs when he retires."

She strokes his hair. "You're right on that; we do."

"Any ideas?"

"Nope, but I'll keep thinking on it."

"We are, too. At one point, it got slow enough I almost told him I called my mom, but then the whole having to tell him why I wasn't talking to her thing popped into my head… And, bored's bad enough, don't need to add sad to bored."

"Probably a good plan."

"Probably a good plan not to start that up at work, either."

She nods in agreement. "Are you going to tell him?"

Tim shakes his head a little, "I don't really want to. I mean, I don't mind him knowing, but I just… I don't want to say it to him. He's okay with me not saying it, so, that's where we are."

"Okay. You eat?"

"Yeah. Gibbs stopped by and brought dinner."

"Good." They hear Kelly start crying, asking for her second supper. "So, how about we do something not boring tonight?"

That makes him smile. "I'm all in favor of that."

"Good. I'll get Kelly. You get all pretty for me. Be in bed, waiting for me, when I get done."

He's grinning at that. "Gonna define pretty?"
She looks him up and down. "Naked, eyeliner, nail polish, collar, wrist cuffs out but not on."

He gives her a quick kiss, wants to do a long, slow one, but Kelly's getting pretty insistent about get-me-now. "I like your idea of not boring."

"Good."

"How do you want me on the bed?"

She thinks about that for a second. "Kneeling, hands crossed behind your back."

Tim smiles at her. Yep, this is an excellent idea for not boring.

Feeding Kelly had streamlined down to only forty-five minutes, which was… tight. He rubbed his face, and yeah, he needs to shave. Normally he'd have waited until morning, but he's fairly sure that she'll appreciate smooth.

And it's not like it takes him long to shave. But shave, nails, and eyeliner, that's a different proposition.

So, yeah, tight. He was hopping up the stairs two at a time, Abby smiling at him, looking really amused by how eager he was.

Okay, clothing went off first, that was easy and took about twenty-six seconds. Can't do anything while his nails dry, so they have to be last. Shave first, don't want to mess up the eyeliner. And a plan was born.

Shaving, easy enough, he did that all the time. Eyeliner, he hadn't done for himself in more than a decade, and he had to wash it off and start over again, twice. On the upside, he had got the smudgy, rock and roll, guyliner thing Abby liked down. Sure, it was an accident, and he was thinking he might look slightly more like a raccoon than he have liked to, but only slightly.

He stared at it for a few more seconds, debated taking it off again, but a quick check on the clock said his nails weren't going to be dry if he didn't book, so, collar.

There was a sort of calm that went with wearing it, but that was the point, really. Well, partially. Part of the point was ownership, which was true enough. He is Abby's, always will be, and just like the ring and the tattoos, the collar reinforced it. Part of it was the sign of submission, and since that was what he was playing tonight, it was appropriate. Part of it, which for him was the most difficult part, was the headspace, the full surrender, and like putting it on evoked a certain sort of calm, it was supposed to help him get into that headspace. And it wasn't that he had a hard time with submitting, that part of the headspace was easy enough, it was quieting everything else, focusing solely on Abby and his desire to please her.

He always had an easy time with following orders and rules, especially the sorts of rules she was going to be laying down for him. But the ability to let all the little background voices drop away, to exist solely in the space of her words and the sensations of his body, that was a lot harder to catch.

He pulled it snug, looking in the mirror to buckle it, and then twisted it so the buckle was in the back. And while he might want to think about it more, he's got two more jobs to do.
Okay. Nail polish. It didn't take him long to put on, but it did take long to dry properly. He'd been told (by Abby) that the non-matte polishes dry faster, but he couldn't see having shiny nails. Black matte is cool. Shiny black isn't. And no, he couldn't explain why.

Three minutes to go. Kneeling. Usually kneeling on the bed meant his butt on his feet, body facing the door. He assumed the position and then jerked up. He'd gone to get the outlining done on his Father's Day tattoo on Saturday and sitting all of his weight onto his calf stung pretty bad.

He'd just gotten settled into kneeling up, hands crossed at the wrists behind his back, when he realized the wrist cuffs were still in the toy box.

Another quick move, put them on the bedside table, kneeling again, and…

And less than thirty seconds later, he heard the door to Kelly's room shut.

His head was bowed, but he heard her stop at the door to their room, could feel her looking, could feel his body respond to her look, not getting hard, not that fast, not just from her looking, but longer and fuller, oh yeah. Knowing she was enjoying him on display like this always does that.

He was aware of her footsteps, very quiet, bare feet on carpet, and could track her circling around him, looking from all angles, making sure he'd done exactly as she asked.

He thought she was pleased, had the sense of a smile even though he couldn't see her face right now.

He heard her moving again, and the sound of her hands on something plastic, phone probably, and then music, his: smooth, soft, lush jazz, filled the room.

Another step, from the dresser where his phone was to the side of the bed. Her fingers trailed down his hip, along his thigh, and then, brushed, lightly, so lightly, sending a burning itch though his leg, over the dragon tattoo.

"Dragon Knight. Captured in Cyrmu. Battle of Pontypandy. We know from your clan marker," she traced her fingers over his cuff tattoo, "That you're one of the McGees."

He didn't smile. He wanted to smile, this'll be fun, not what he was expecting with the collar, but definitely fun.

"They tell me we've had you for five days, and no one's been able to make you speak."

He kept his head bowed, aware of her moving around him, around the bed, picking up the wrist cuffs.

"They say you take orders, so we know you understand, but you won't say anything."

He didn't respond, head down, posture relaxed and loose.

"They tell me they aren't even sure if you can speak. Of course, Dragon Knight, you wouldn't need to, the link with your dragon was psychic. And if you're the McGee we've been looking for… Well, you don't need to know which one of you we want."

She knelt behind him, securing his wrists to each other. "Comfortable?"

He still didn't respond.
"Doesn’t matter much one way or another. It’s my job to find out if you can speak. And if you can, it’s my job to find out who you are. And from there… Well, we’ll get there. Stand up, off the bed."

It was awkward to go from kneeling to standing on the bed without hands, but he did, and then stopped right next to the bed, head still bowed. He can see her feet and legs up to her hips, and while she was wearing a pair of his drawstring jammy pants when she went in to feed Kelly, they were gone now, replaced by her black robe with the cherry blossoms.

"They’re right; you’re very good at following orders." Abby pointed to right under the hook in the ceiling, still currently providing a place for the plant. But he had a good idea of how this was going to go and what would happen depending on how good of a job he does at ‘resisting interrogation.’

He stood where he was directed to, and heard her head to the toy box, where the chain they use to tie the wrist cuffs to that hook is, along with the ropes.

"Five days is a long time to go without making a sound."

He couldn’t see what she had gotten, but he didn’t hear any clinking so that leaned toward a rope, or a toy, but not the chain. If it was a toy, she might have picked this spot just because of the good view from the mirrors.

"But you would be good at it, wouldn’t you?" She put something on the bed, outside of his circle of vision. "Can’t be a dragon knight without a strong mind, strong magic. The dragons eat you alive if you can’t dominate them." She stepped closer to him, tilted his head up so he was looking in her eyes.

Looking up he wanted to smile, but didn’t. Sir… whoever he is… Gabriel, Gabriel McGee, Lord of… he was probably supposed to be Irish. Cyrmu is Wales, right? Donegal. Lord of Donegal. Is Donegal a city? Doesn’t matter. Sir Gabriel wouldn’t be smiling. Captured Dragon Knights don’t smile at their captors. Okay, Dragon Knight, but what was he, where did he fit? Captured for interrogation, has to be a high value captive. Has to have information worth this set up… Commander of the… hell… dragons… what sort of dragon… Hungarian Horntails? No. Irish… Nightfuries? They’re Viking dragons… Still better than Hungry. Besides, there’s only outlining on the calf tattoo, so right now it is a black dragon. Good. Character set, he just had to keep it somewhere in his mind so he could whip it out when he needed it.

Holding his gaze, Abby said to him, "So, Dragon Knight, you must be used to being in charge, to giving orders and having people obey your every command." She grinned and stepped behind him, and felt her

tie something to the collar, ribbon maybe, didn’t feel thick enough to be rope, and then she reached up, removed the plant, and after grabbing the footrest that went with the easy chair in the corner, tied whatever it is to the hook.

Okay, that was new. They’d never tried tied by his neck. He tentatively shifted a bit, getting the sense that he had about a half foot range of comfortable motion, before his collar’ll get too tight. He checked the view in the mirror, it is ribbon, not very thick, and he was certain it couldn’t hold his weight. If he let his body drop, it would snap. No chance of him strangling on this.

"I imagine this will be very different for you. Not being in charge. Taking orders rather than giving them." She traced her hand over his chest, stopping for a second to circle a nipple, pull gently on it. "The order is simple, answer my questions."

He looked down again, away from her gaze, not answering.
"Not feeling chatty, huh?" She sighed dramatically. "Eyes up, watching me." He looked up to follow her with his eyes. "Do you wonder, Dragon Knight, why we're still feeding you? Do you wonder why you've been asked questions, and yet not touched? You must know most interrogations don't happen to prisoners who are well-kept, well-fed, let alone in a sumptuous bedroom, or handled by a naked woman."

He blinked, slowly, at her. Just acknowledging that he heard her.

She strolled around him, moving deliberately, each step making her hips and breasts sway enticingly. He tracked her nipples, subtle points under her robe, and made a gleeful note of the fact that she'd taken her bra off.

"They say the Dragon Knights maintain a psychic bond with their mounts. That in order to do that they have to be strong in both magic and will power." She was directly behind him, and he was looking into her eyes in her reflection on the mirror on the bathroom door. "I don't know if that's true." Her fingers trailed very gently, just the tips, down his spine, skipping over where his hands were bound behind his back, ghosting down the cleft of his ass, and then skittering over the back of his upper thigh. "What I do know is that it's vastly easier, and tidier to make a man talk by offering him something he wants, than it is to try and scare or beat him into compliance."

She breathed against his shoulder, biting gently.

"Especially men like you. We could deny you water," soft, wet kiss on his throat, just below the collar, "but you'd just conjure it for yourself. Same with food. We could try pain," another very light stroke over the tattoo, another slow burn itch, "but you'd just pull your mind away from it." Her hands slipped down his sides, settling on his hips. "You must know that we've already broken fifteen Dragon Knights looking for a successful way to interrogate you. After all, the dragons report back when their masters die. So, you must know of the others."

He glared at her. Eyes narrow, trying to project pissed-off-captive, and probably not doing a great job of it, after all, it's not like he's an actor.

"But dead Knights yield no information. And we want information quite a bit more than corpses. Corpses are only good for manuring the fields. Information on the other hand, is power. And power is victory." She gave him a gentle slap on the ass.

"And you must know about the other three. Still missing. The Dragons must have reported back that they are not yet dead. In fact, you've probably been getting… confusing… reports back from the dragons about the other three. About how they don't want to be rescued any longer.

"So, you've been held, questioned, given food and drink, offered a soft and warm place to sleep. All in preparation for this."

He raised an eyebrow, signaling, 'What's this?'

"Still not talking… How disappointing. Did you notice, Dragon Knight, that though you've been offered a comfortable billet, provided with good food, and treated to the most gentle of interrogations, but that the only time you've been given free use of your hands is when someone else has been around? Likewise, you've been kept in certain positions, comfortable I'm sure, but limiting your access to certain bits of your anatomy?" Her hand stroked lightly over his dick, which wasn't full hard yet, but was certainly getting there.

"Five days without release is a long time for you, isn't it?"
He didn't respond to that, but did try to rub himself against her hand.

She stepped back. "Oh no. On my terms. Not yours. We know you checked your food and drink for poisons."

He looked surprised at that.

"Yes, our casters are good enough to monitor what magics you use. You didn't think to check for aphrodisiacs."

He gave her a *those aren't real* look.

"Aren't they? Haven't you been feeling more, *eager*, than usual. Waking up harder, dreaming more intensely, wishing for just a moment or two alone with your hands. Or maybe wishing you could roll onto your stomach and take care of it by rubbing up against those nice soft sheets in your comfortable billet." She pointedly looks down at his dick, which is full hard now. "You're certainly looking interested in sex." She stepped close, and inhaled against that spot where neck becomes shoulder. "I can smell the desire on you." Her hand slipped over him again, base to tip in a long pull. "Maybe aphrodisiacs aren't real. Maybe it's just been a long time for you." Another long pull. "Or maybe, Sir Knight, every drop of water you've drunk, every bite of food, that gentle scent you thought was incense, maybe all of that was designed specifically to wear you down, lower your will, just a hair at a time," she whispered against his jaw.

"Dragon Knight, have you guessed yet who I am, yet?" she asked with a kiss to his ear.

He tilted his head a bit, indicating he had a pretty good idea.

She licked her lips, and then leaned in and licked his, tongue slipping slow and easy over his bottom lip, followed by her teeth giving it a gentle pull.

"Lady Skye," whispered against his ear, fingers of her one hand trailing down his chest, fingers of the other wrapped around his dick, providing a gentle, warm squeeze, "Mistress of the Alchemical Guild. The Dark Potioner. Or, as I'm known in a few, select circles, King William's Encyclopedia. When he wants to know something, he asks me, and I always get the answer."

He bowed his head and shoulders as much as he could given the tie on his neck.

"Courtly politeness." She laughed at that, letting go of him, stepping back. "You Dragon Knights are amusing."

He smiled widely at her, keeping his eyes hard, head tilted in acknowledgement.

"So Sir Knight, let's start here, what is your name?"

He shook his head.

"Playing hard to get? Probably a good gambit." She stepped in closer, lips whispering over his, "After all, if you talk immediately, you don't get to see what happens." Her tongue darted out, slipping between his lips, and he leaned in toward her, as far as he could, kissing her back. After a second of her body, warm and rubbing gently against his, she stepped back. "And I think we'll both enjoy this quite a bit more, if it takes you a while to break."

He tried to convey, *not a problem, I can go all night*, in a look. He's not sure how successful that was, but she giggled at it and said, "Yes, we've all heard the stories of the Dragon Knights' incredible stamina." She took his cock in hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Though if memory serves those
stories usually have a lot more to do with fighting all day and all night and all the next day. That you take strength from your dragons to keep going and going. But your dragon isn't here. And besides, they lay eggs, so I'm not sure how handy your link will be for this."

He shrugged.

"What, have you never tested it?"

Another shrug.

"Really? No words at all?" She asked while pulling her hand up his dick.

He shook his head again, but thrust in counter point to her hand, enjoying the friction quite a bit. She loosened her grip but sped up, lighter, softer friction. Almost too light.

"Do you like this?"

He shrugged. It's okay, on his face.

"You could tell me how to do it better. Tell me exactly how you like to be handled, and who knows, you may get it."

He smiled at that, gestured with his eyebrows come closer, tilted his head forward, like he was going to whisper into her ear, and when she moved closer to listen, he kissed her ear, licking over the shell, and gently biting the lobe.

She pulled back, amused look on her face. "That's how you're going to play?"

He nodded.

He let go of him and stepped back to the bed. "Do you like to watch, Dragon Knight?"

He nodded enthusiastically at that, too.

"Know what this is?" She said, reaching for the toy she placed on the bed, letting her right shoulder slip out of her robe.

He nodded, very pleased to see that. That was a glass dildo. It didn't get out of the toy box all that often these days. It's aesthetically pleasing, great for a show, but too hard and thick for serious play, especially on him. And these days, toys that they can't both play with tend to spend all their time in the box.

"Man of the world then?" She was holding it between her palms, rubbing it gently, robe having fallen off of both shoulders, but still keeping her breasts and everything below covered. "Not all of your brothers were so well traveled."

She continued to rub it between her palms and then said, "James McGee? Subcommander of William McGee's strike force. Second son of the Lord of Waterford?"

He shook his head, wondering where she came up with that, and then remembered that Waterford is a place in Ireland known for glass.

She held it out tip first. "Lick it."

He kept his mouth shut, raised an eyebrow, and gave her his best, I don't think so look while shaking his head.
She lay it back down on the bed, and turned to him, letting her robe drop to the floor.

She let him look his fill, and he did, trailing his eyes up and down her, lingering in a very obvious way on her curves.

"You know, I should be insulted. Here I am naked, and you say nothing. I'm beginning to think you might not like this." She reached for her robe, and he shook his head vehemently, feeling the pull of the collar against his throat.

"Nope. Not good enough." She began to slip the robe back on.

A soft whimper escaped from between his lips.

"So, you can make sounds! There's a step in the right direction. Every time you cooperate, you get rewarded." She dropped the robe, and settled back onto the bed, legs wide, letting him look all he liked. Another soft whimper of appreciation followed the first.

She picked up the dildo, trailing it over the skin of her thigh, stroking it against her pussy.

"Wet glass is so slick. It just glides over everything. Slips into nice, tight places so easily." She continued to stroke it up and down, gently over herself, watching his eyes following her every move.

"It'd be so much easier if it was wet. You'd like that, wouldn't you? Get to see me slip it inside?" She licked her lips. "You'd like to know it was wet with you. Your tongue getting it all slick so it could just ease inside and spread me wide."

She lifted it away, and he saw a faint thread of her natural lube stretch between the tip of the toy and her.

That got yet another whimper as she stood up, once again holding out the dildo, and said, once more, "Lick."

This time he did. Tongue darting out, lapping her taste off of it, adding his saliva to it.

"Like the taste, Dragon Rider?"

"Mmmmm…"

She smiled at that, trailed a finger between her pussy lips, and then lifted it to his mouth, letting him suck it off.

"You're very good at that, Sir Knight. Are you used to sucking? You swing both ways?"

That got a quick glare.

"Pity. I like men who can give as well as get. They're so much fun."

She settled back onto the bed and began to play with the dildo again, stroking the whole length of the dildo up her clit in a slow, slick slide. "So much better with it all wet. The next question, Dragon Knight, is can you talk?" She shifted her grip, using the tip to circle over her again and again, then slipping down, dipping between her lips, but not penetrating.

He made another frustrated sound at that.

"You'd like to be this dildo wouldn't you? Your cock slipping hot and wet between my lips." She pressed the dildo in, slowly, making sure he had a great view of it as it slid into her. "You can
imagine how good it would feel, can't you…"

"Is that a good speed for you?" She matched his movements with her own, speeding up a bit. Abby moaned, soft and low and wicked, and the sound of it ripped through him, pumping up his own excitement. "Oh… It's a good speed for me."

Then she lifted the toy to her mouth, sucking it, licking the tip, and sucking again. "Or maybe those lips, want to slip between them?" That got another groan from him. "Or maybe…" she slipped it down her body, dragging it over her skin, over her clit, between her lips, and down to just rest at her anus. "Maybe there… Would you like to have me there."

"Yes." It came out as a low groan. God yes, please, let's do that, now!

"You are eager aren't you? All you have to do is tell me your name. Which McGee are you?"

"No, Sir Knight. You like it. I can see that. But you're not broken yet. I think you need something more persuasive."

She knelt elegantly. Sinking to the floor, holding him, firm, licking gently and then taking him to the root, until her chin rested against his balls and he was whimpering.

Two minutes, three? She set a quick, deep, pace, all the way up and all the way down, and fast. Fast enough his balls were crawling up, and his legs and back were tense, wanting to cum, wanting to thrust, wanting to fuck harder and faster.

Then she let go, pulled off him, looked up, and said, "Did you like that Dragon Knight? Do you want me to finish? All it takes is a name. Just a few syllables, and I'll swallow you again, work you with my lips and tongue and hands…" she licked the tip, rubbing the flat of her tongue along the underside, while her hand jacked him, slow and steady.

He groaned again.

She blew on the tip, mouth hovering just over it. "Maybe that's not enough? Maybe you don't just want my mouth." She opened her mouth, holding it around his dick, letting him feel the moist heat, and soft breath, but not closing her lips or sucking.
"Do you want to mark me, Dragon Knight? See your seed on me? Striping my face and chest." She licked him again, and this time closed her mouth over the tip of his dick, sliding down again, starting up that quick pace again pushing him closer and closer to the edge, and he could feel his climax building, that less than thirty seconds from falling over the cliff sensation in his dick and balls, the almost ache of being so close. And there she stopped. "It just takes a name. What's your name, Dragon Knight?"

"Gabriel!" he gasped out, very glad he'd already picked that because there had been absolutely no shot of him making it up on the fly. "Gabriel McGee, Lord of Donegal, Commander of The Nightfuries."

"Excellent, Gabriel." She stood up and he whimpered. Her standing up was not part of the deal. Kneeling down and finishing him off was the deal. Her standing up and walking away was really not part of the deal. She headed for the nightstand and opened it, getting the lube.

Okay, that looked good. He wasn't sure what she was going to do with it, but as long as it involved him getting off soon, he was all in favor of anything involving lube.

"Do you want to come?"

"God, yes!"

"Excellent." She was smiling widely at him. And once again she knelt, and he thought he knew what was coming next, adjusted his stance, shifting his legs further apart so she'd have good access, but apparently that wasn't her game.

She took his dick in hand again, and blew all over it, making sure her saliva had dried, and then took the bottle of lube, flicked open the cap, and carefully dribbled a few drops over the head of his dick, making sure they were full enough to slide down his shaft.

He groaned at that slow, meandering drip.

Then she stood again. "So excellent. So marvelous to have someone so eager. So, ready…and…" she squeezed gently and a drop of pre-cum oozed down his dick following the path of the lube, "so wet."

Her voice slipped over his ear, hot against his neck, as she stepped behind him and started with slow strokes to spread the lube and his pre-cum over his dick. "It'd be so easy. Just a few quick pulls and you'd be spurting, hot and wet and sticky all over my hand. Making a mess on my nice, clean carpet. But that's for…common information. Say, confirmation of something we already know."

He groaned, voice low. Half from sexual frustration, half trying to think of anything that could possibly qualify as 'good information.'

"Now, for good information, say something we don't already know, I'll release your hands from the chains, can't unbind them fully, can't risk you running off, but I'll unchain you, let you lay down on my nice, soft bed, and then let you lick me." Long, slow pulls, all the way up and all the way down, and he was thrusting into her hands, all six of his brain cells that weren't entirely devoted to getting off flailing away for some sort of story for her. "You like pussy, right? Succulent, wet, pussy, right on your lips. Your tongue deep inside."

A pained breath hissed out of him.

"Oh, come now, are you not talking again? I thought we'd gotten past that. Do I need to go back to where we began? Say, let go of you all together? Leave you standing there, so hard, so full, so…
needy." She started to pull her hands away.

He had to buy more time, because he's coming up with nothing. "What do I get for excellent information? Something you can't find out for yourself?"

That got a wide smile, and a stronger, faster stroke. "If you give me information I truly can't find out for myself, something useful and secret, I'll tie you down on my bed, let you eat all the pussy you want, and then slide down your body and ride you like one of your dragons."

Another groan. He tried to look torn, because Gabriel would be torn, but hell, he wanted to fuck, and mostly was just trying to think of anything that would work with the game. Finally something hit, and he spit it out, fast.

"Lord Ashworth has been spying for us for three years," came out fast, in one quick breath.

Abby smiled at him in the mirror, chin on his shoulder. "Oh… I like that." Her hand pulled faster over his dick and he could feel his climax building, wouldn't take much to push him over, but this wasn't how he wanted this to play out.

"No!" gasped out. "That's not common information!"

"Are you sure?" her hand slowed, back to that keep-him-on-edge pace. "At least half a dozen people on our side know about Ashworth."

"Like fuck they do. We wouldn't have thrashed your men at London and Cadbury if you'd known about the intel he was sending us. If you know he's a spy, fine, but you don't know what intel he's sending us."

She let go of him, and that also got a groan. "That is… compelling." He felt her undo the right cuff from the left one, and then she said, "Hands in front of you."

He did, and she recuffed them to each other, and then undid his collar, leaving it dangling from the ceiling.

"Onto the bed, Sir Gabriel, Lord of Donegal."

He sat, and then lay down, and she recuffed his hands into the slats of their headboard.

"Something so wonderfully delicious about a bound and hard man. It's just… fabulous." She licked gently up his thigh. "You like it, too? Need, desire, shame, it all wraps together, makes you so hard, so eager." Another lick, this time over his testicle and up his dick. "Mmmm… Nothing on earth tastes so good as a bound knight."

She straddled his hips, and moved up his body, stopping when she straddled his shoulders. "Well, Sir Gabriel, we know you can talk with that tongue, can you do anything else with it?"

He started with a long, wide swipe of his tongue, getting a little bit of everything from top to bottom, and then went to town. He was turned on enough that he doesn't want to linger on this. He wanted her riding him, hard and fast and now, and for the first time in a while, he was noticing that she's wet, really wet, maybe not dripping, but good and slick.

He focused in on her clit, fast little circles, over and over and over, keeping the pressure light at first, waiting to feel her hips roll against him in counter point before pushing up against her. She moaned at that, gripping his hair, and he grunted in response, liking the way she was sounding very much, feeling it go straight to his cock.
She started moving faster, harder, having a more difficult time holding a rhythm, but he kept pace with her, he knew this dance, loved it, and in a minute, she was shuddering over him as he switched to light, gentle, come down licks.

Abby leaned against their headboard, breathing hard. "Sir Gabriel, I don't think we're ever going to ransom you. You're way too much fun to let go."

He smiled at that. "Are you saying you want me for your own personal harem, my lady?"

"There's a thought. I'm sure King William would let me have you as a pet." She leaned over to the night stand, and fished out a condom. He was already slick with lube, so she didn't add any to the condom before slipping it down him and saying, "Would you like that? My personal plaything? Available whenever I want you."

She glided her pussy over him a few times, letting him grind against her.

"I can think of worse jobs."

"I'm sure you can." She lifted up a bit, getting the angle right, and then slid down onto him in one long stroke.

"Ohhh…" escaped him in a slow exhale. "Uhhhh…" followed as an inhale as she rose up.

She set a slow pace, and he didn't know if that's still getting used to post-baby sex, or playing the role, but it was driving him crazy. He thrust up against her, and didn't see any pain or discomfort on her face when he did it, so he was thinking slow was the role, but either way she rested her hands on his hips.

"Oh no, Sir Gabriel. I decide when you come. And right now, you haven't earned it, yet."

His brain was melting, one slow stroke at a time, and he was coming up blank on anything that might work for the game, but he knew he wanted to go faster, had to go faster, needed to get off, this was starting to hurt. So he got his feet flat on the bed, knees up, (Abby squeaked in surprise when he did it, falling forward a little, hands landing on his shoulders, and then snuck down for a quick kiss, breaking character for a moment.) and thrust up.

"Only so long you can tease, lady." Another hard thrust, forcing her forward, this time, though, she arched back into it, moaning. Her hands were on the bed, either side of his head, and he turned his head and nipped at her wrist. "Before the dragon'll bite."

It was more difficult to set the pace from the bottom, but difficult wasn't impossible, and he was so hard by then, so turned on. He used his legs for extra leverage, raising her up on his hips with each fast, hard thrust, and she was slamming down on top of him, groaning on each down stroke, tightening deliciously against him as everything besides the feel of her body on his faded away, wiped out by rushing, pulsing pleasure.

They were both lying there, happy, warm, comfortable, Abby's head resting against his shoulder.

"You know. Gibbs hasn't been able to break this last suspect yet. He spent eight hours with her in interrogation and she said nothing. Maybe I need to try your technique."

Abby laughed. "Head in all naked and sexy, and see if you can seduce it out of her?"
"Why not?" he said with a giggle. "Be a hell of a lot less boring than watching that locker."

She sat up, slapped his shoulder lightly, grabbed a tissue, and wiped them both up, tossing the condom in the trash, then uncuffed his hands. He stretched out his shoulders.

"Mmmmm… Good game. That your plan all along?"

"Nope. Saw the tatt and decided to run with it," she said, heading for their bathroom. A minute later she was back in their bed, lying on her side, him spooned up behind her.

He said to her, feeling sleepy, "Definitely going to be another chapter of that story."

She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed it.

A few minutes after that, they both checked out from the waking world.
Work

Tim was rummaging around in the cabinet under the sink the next morning, looking for cotton balls. "Did we use up all the cotton balls?"

Abby popped her head into the bathroom. "Yeah. Sorry. Forgot all about that. I'll put them on the grocery list."

"Great." He headed back into their room for tissues. "It never comes all the way off when I use a tissue."

"Hmm?"

"The nail polish. I always end up with those little black lines around the edges when I use a tissue to take it off. Makes my nails look dirty." And while there are places and times where that's cool, work isn't one of them.

"Then leave it on."

He looked at her curiously.

"It's not against the regs. Can't be. Women can wear it, so they can't stop you from doing it without risking a sexual discrimination suit. Besides, you're not going into the office today, right?"

Sigh. "Not with the way this stakeout is going. Twelve more hours in the bus station, breathing in the exhaust, bored as hell with a dull, nagging headache."

"Jeans, t-shirt, book bag, nail polish, wrist cuff, computer. You're just another guy getting on a bus, going somewhere. Artist, musician, or something."

"Like a writer?" he said with a wry grin.

"Yeah, you could be a writer. Hell, grab a Mountain Dew and you're an indie game designer."

He smiled at that. "Good point. We are trying to blend in when we go in and out. Make it harder to see we're watching the place."

He sat down next to Tony.

"You're late."

"It's 8:01, Tony."

The look Tony was shooting at him wasn't a glare, but it was a none-too-subtle, **hey, I'm your boss, toe the line.**

The *that might have worked eight years ago but isn't going to fly now* look that Tim shot back made Tony change track.

"You think they wanted to spend a single second longer here than they needed to?"

"No." Good point. "How's Ziva doing?"
"She didn't kill Draga. But I'd double and triple check everything before using it, make sure it's not booby-trapped or pranked."

"Yay." He sighed. One day of stakeout is about as long as their team can go before they start getting itchy and rubbing each other wrong. "Draga still in one piece?"

"He wasn't limping when he left."

"Good." Tim handed over the reason he was late, a warm box of breakfast. "And yes, they're scrambled."

"Good. Only took you a decade to get it down pat." Tony barely looked away from the monitor when he took the box from Tim, but he did catch sight of Tim's thumb which was on the top of the box. "Man, that must have hurt."

"Huh?"

"Your nail. What'd you do to bruise the whole thing up like that? Whack yourself with a hammer or something."

Tim held up all ten of them, wiggling them. "Not a bruise."

"Oh." Tony rolled his eyes, taking a bit of his eggs. "Cute, McMetrosexual."

"Says the guy with his own collection of organic bath salts."

"She told you about that!" Tony looked horrified.

"I've been in your bathroom, Tony. You've got like nine of those little glass bottles full of them."

"If you just saw them, you wouldn't have known they were mine!"

Tim flashes him the I didn't know they were yours until a second ago look. Which wasn't actually true. Ziva must have told Breena, Breena must have mentioned it to Jimmy, Jimmy mentioned it to him. But he's not tossing anyone under the bus for that chain of gossip.

Tony stared at him for a second, but when Tim didn't say anything else about it, he took another bite of his eggs, and looked back to the monitor. "These are good."

"They should be." Tim opened up his own box, and saw a western omelet staring up at him. "Elaine sends her love."

They both ate in silence for a few minutes. Tim noticed Tony glancing away from the monitor to his nails, then back to the monitor several times in the course of those few minutes. Finally Tony asked, "So, you just wake up this morning and think, you know, I really need some nail polish?"

"No, Tony."

"Then why the hell are you wearing it? Not like we're at a club."

"A: It's not against the regs. I checked." (And he did. Abby's assurances aside, he wanted to make sure.) "B: I already had it on. And C: As Abby pointed out, if I'm trying to look like a guy who rides the bus, maybe office casual isn't precisely the look I need to be going for. I mean, not to put too fine a point on it," he stared at Tony, eyes tracing over his navy suits, "but, who wears a suit to ride a bus?"
"My dad."

"Does he own any non-suit clothing?"

"Bathrobe? I'd assume he does, but I don't remember seeing it."

"And I'd assume the suit is his way of saying, 'I don't really belong here.'"

Tony shrugged. "Maybe. So, you're blending in?"

"I'm blending in." He had put on a t-shirt, jeans, and his boots as well. He wasn't as far away from Office Tim as he can get, but he was certainly not looking particularly professional. "T-shirt and boots are part of that, too. Get headachey enough, I might take a few hours out there. Just another guy waiting for a bus. I can watch that locker from the seats just as easily as I can from here."

Tony nodded at that. "Can't let me know if he moves just as easily."

"I can text. When you're off, take a look at the guys who are waiting. They're all on their phones."

Half an hour on, half an hour off. That's how long you can watch a locker where nothing happens without losing focus. Tony had the first half hour on, eyes on the monitor, hoping someone would go grab that locker and get the Euros and passports out of it.

Tim had the next one. And on and off they'd go for the next eleven and a half hours, until Ziva and Draga came back to relieve them or someone finally goes for that locker.

It was a pretty basic case. Wife and boyfriend murder husband, get the hell out of Dodge, and off to happily-ever-after-land with hubby's money. They had the wife, but she wasn't talking, at all. Nothing. Perfect silence. (Gibbs was less than sympathetic about the stakeout being boring, because he spent eight hours in interrogation with Leslie Smith, where she said nothing, not even asked for water.) They knew, because they trailed her accounts, that she'd bought the bus tickets. They found the key to the locker. They found the receipt for the copy she'd made of the key.

They hadn't found the boyfriend. They knew he existed. They had prints and DNA, neither of which matched anything. But they didn't have so much as a phone number, email address, or hint as to who he was.

So, they were waiting, eventually he'd use that key, and they'd grab him, and that would be that.

But that wasn't that, yet, and this part was deadly dull.

"So, how is your dad?" Tim asked as Tony got up, stretched, and began walking around a bit. They're in a bus in the maintenance dock. It looked like all the other buses on the outside, but inside it's a full surveillance center.

"Okay? I guess. Haven't seen him since Fourth of July. Last I heard he and Delphine were in Montreal."

"Doing what?"

"I have no idea. He usually does land deals, but the last thing I heard had something to do with the reboot, website compliance, drug company bids… I zoned out five minutes into the explanation. All
I know is he expects to make a ton of money at it, and it's really complicated, and involves people in seven countries."

"The next great score."

"Yeah. And Delphine's sticking around to be Bonnie to his Clyde, so they look like they're having fun."

"That's good. Think you're on the verge of a new stepmom?"

Tony sighed and rolled his eyes. "Who knows? If they follow his usual pattern, one of these days, he'll be flush with cash, and spirit them off for a romantic weekend and come back married. Eight stepmoms at this point, and I only found out about two of them before they were married."

"So, why'd you already have it on?" Tony asked ten minute later, after flipping through the magazine he bought without actually reading anything.

"Hmmm?" Tim didn't look away from the monitor. He'd been thinking that during his next downtime he'd start building a worm to mess with Cybercrime's password protections.

"The nail polish. You have a hot date or something last night?"

Tim smiled. "Or something."

"Do I want to know?"

"I'd really doubt it." Another minute of silence. "Why? Do you?"

"God, no! I don't want to know what the hell it is you and Abby do that involves nail polish on you." Another quiet minute. "You didn't paint your toes, did you?"

Tim was fairly sure he had the facial expression equivalent of 'The fuck?' on his face right now. "Why would you even ask that?"

Tony rolled his eyes, feeling a little silly about asking, too. "Ever watch Californication?"

Tim shook his head.

"There's a scene where the main character painted his girlfriend's toe nails, and then did his own. It was kind of hot."

Tim shook his head. "I didn't need to know that about you."

"Says the guy still wearing the nail polish from 'or somethinging' last night for everyone to see."

"Touché."

Both of their phones buzzed at them five minutes later. Tony grabbed his because Tim was still watching the feed, but he caught the grin on Tony's face out of the side of his vision.
"It's a girl." He held the phone so Tim could see it, and watched the feed for him.

On the screen was an ultrasound shot, with Anna Palmer written under it.

Tim felt a grin spread wide across his face. He didn't need to see to text, so he flashed back a quick YAY! message to Jimmy and Breena.

A minute later, Tony put a cup of coffee in front of Tim along with two Advil.

Tim rubbed his temples, took the pills, and said, "Thanks."

"You're getting that tense look."

"Yep."

He'd had the headache all Monday, and just figured he was feeling off. It got better when he went home, but if something's bugging him, he usually feels better when he gets home. Abby and Kelly are home, so home makes him happy, and little nagging pains tend not to hit too hard when he's happy.

When, half an hour onto shift on Tuesday his head started to ache again, he put together that he was in a bus terminal, breathing in a ton of exhaust, with the fact that his head hurt, and figured out that his body didn't like being exposed to this much pollution.

Today, he came armed with Advil, but hadn't yet reached for it, because it wasn't hitting him too hard. (Building up a tolerance?) But seeing it sitting in front of him reminded him that yeah, he was starting to ache some, so might as well nip it in the bud.

"So, how is 'or somethinging' going these days?"

He started to look away from the monitor toward Tony, but stopped that, gotta keep eyes on the locker. "Are you really asking me how my sex life is?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"New baby at home. Everyone says you never have sex again, but, well, we aren't all only children, so that can't be true, and Ziva's talking more about it, so…"

Tim did look to Tony for that. "You're doing research?"

"Yeah." Tony said with a sheepish grin.

Tim shrugged, eyes back to the monitor. "It's going. Kind of slow. We're both tired, and she's not all back to normal again. You ask Jimmy? He's done this twice and getting ready for three."

"I will when I get some time alone with him. What's slow mean?"

Tim flashed him a look somewhere between perplexed and mildly annoyed. "Slow." Once a week, once every ten days, slow. But he wasn't going to say that. And then, because he couldn't resist. "Probably about as often as you do it now."

"Yeah, well, some of us are good enough at it we don't have to do it every single day to keep our
ladies happy."

Tim laughed at that. "If that's what you've got to tell yourself... How often I'm getting laid isn't likely to have any effect on how often you get laid."

"Thank the Lord."

"Amen on that. What does matter is how long it takes her to heal up. Whether your baby actually sleeps. From what everyone says, Kelly is a ridiculously easy baby when it comes to sleep time, so we're probably a bit ahead of the curve. How much sleep you actually need. I mean, if you can't get it up on no sleep, you're not getting laid again anytime soon. How much sleep she needs. Abby's usually good on five hours a night, and she's up to eightish a day right now, which with nursing makes sense. When you like to do it matters. If nursing time and sex time are at the same time, feeding the baby wins. But, look, two months, four months, six months, a year, might be a long time before you guys get back to pre-baby sex. But, at least, according to Jimmy, you get back to it."

Tony's nodding along, this all seemed to make sense to him.

"So, how serious of talking about it are you two doing?"

"Like, expect another DiNozzo late next year serious."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

"Tony DiNozzo III?"

"Lord, no! Two of us were more than enough. But... Dave DiNozzo?"

"David DiNozzo?"

"Her last name, my middle name."

Tim smiled at that. "Sounds awfully serious if you've got a time frame and names."

"Yeah. I think we are."

Half hour on, half hour off, on again, off again.

He spent two of his off shifts creating a-Nasty wasn't exactly right. Not like it's the end of the world or anything. Annoying might be better than nasty.—little worm to invade Cybercrime.

He finished it, hit enter, and sent it off to wreck a very mild version of mayhem amongst his soon to be employees. Then he sent of a quick email to Leon.

"What was that?" Tony asked as he wrapped up.

"Cybercrime test number two."

"What are you doing to them this time?"
"You'll like this one. You know that software that holds all of your passwords?"

Tony nodded. "Heard of it. Don't use it."

"Yeah, well, when you've only got four of them, keeping track isn't a big deal. The guys in the basement hopefully have a different one for each login and with any luck they're a lot more difficult than forward22, center16, halfback34, and firstbaseman01."

"Okay, great. So what?"

"So, this goes in, sits in their computer, waits for them to log into something using that service, creeps into it, changes their password, and then logs them out."

Tony stared at him for a moment, and then shook his head, laughing. "That's just mean."

"Thank you. If they've got decent security in place, it'll bounce and they'll never notice, but given how badly they did on the last test…"

"Not feeling too hopeful about this one?"

"Nope. My guess is that within a day or two, at least ten of them will be resetting their passwords, wondering what's going on."

By two in the afternoon, even with the Advil, his head was hurting, so Tim decided to venture out into the bus station for a more comfortable vantage point.

Of course, the thing about being out there is that other people can watch him just as easily as he can watch them, and sitting there staring at a locker isn't subtle.

Leaning against one on the other hand…

He started in the seats. Messing around on his computer, looking like he was hunting for a better wifi connection. Moved over to besides the pay phones, spent a few minutes there. Then over to café area, more messing around, grumbling about how the wifi sucks and he needs to change carrier. He then spent another minute chatting with the guy in the seat next to him about how the wifi at the bus station sucked. After that he got up, headed over to the lockers, sat down, back against them, and got to work.

He opened his IM.

_In position. Keep an eye on anyone who might come near and get scared off by me here._

_Gotcha._

He was sitting so his back was against the locker two below the one their perp's gonna want. No matter how into what he does next he is, he will notice someone basically having to stand on top of him to get to the locker in question.

_Sit and wait._

He opened word and started to write up character sketches for Gabriel McGee and Lady Skye. Been a long time since he's written anything that wasn't based around the adventures of LJ Gibbs.

And more than that, maybe it's time to actually be the main character in one of his stories.
Eyes on me. Tim types into his IM.

Got him. Yeah, he's going for it. Getting into position.

Soon as he closes the door, I'll grab him.

See you in a minute.

The pair of legs next to Tim were attached to a not terribly impressive looking specimen of manhood. Medium height. Medium build. Brown hair. Brown eyes. Somewhere in that vague space between thirty-five and forty-five. Mr. Non-Descript.

But he was leaning over Tim, getting into the locker.

"Oh, hey, am I in your way?" Tim asked as he looked up.

"Don't worry. Almost got it."

Tim stood up, putting his computer down, on the far side of his body. (He'd prefer it didn't get stepped on.) "No problem. Best wifi in the place. Kind of silly really, right here. But maybe the metal lockers act like an antenna or something?"

"Yeah. Or something." The Perp's not looking at him, focusing in on the bag he's tugging out of the locker. It's shoved in pretty tight.

"So, heading far?" Tim asked, catching sight of Tony between the perp and the doorway.

"Nah. Just getting out of town for a bit."

"Well, hope you have a good trip," Tim said as the Perp got the bag all of the way out.

The Perp started to close the locker looking toward the doors, and Tim quickly said, "Hey, your passport's still in there."

The Perp turned back to the locker, and found himself shoved up against them, one wrist already cuffed. "NCIS. You're under arrest for the murder of Captain Lionel Smith."

He started to flail, reaching for something in his jacket but froze when he felt the barrel of Tony's gun against the back of his neck.

"Bad plan, buddy. Don't ever pull something out of your jacket when you've got a pile of cops around."

Tim grabbed his other hand, finishing cuffing him, and going over his rights while Tony emptied his pockets, finding a tube of pepper spray.

He held it up to Tim as they were taking the perp out of the bus station, bag slung over his shoulder, and said, "Would have made for a miserable night."

Tim nodded at that. He's been pepper sprayed and it does hurt like a bitch.

"Got an ID?"

"Nope. Nothing like that in his pockets."
"You gonna tell us your name?" Tim asked.

And like Leslie, the Perp shut up.

He was in the interrogation viewing room, watching Tony and Gibbs go after John Doe. They still didn't have anything to identify him. Well, that wasn't entirely true. They had the passport and driver's license that had been in the bag, but they're fairly sure that the guy in interrogation is not, in fact, Tom Hiddleston. The hint on that came from the fact that Tom Hiddleston died in 2008.

"How's it going, Agent McGee?" Vance asked as he headed in.

"Long and silent. He's not even asking for a lawyer. Nothing, out of either of them."

"Gibbs…” Vance seemed to notice what he was wearing, and his eyes lingered on the nail polish for a few seconds before he finished the sentence, "hasn't gotten either of them to talk?"

"Not at all. Not sure what the game is, other than he might be recognizable by his voice. If we ever get a word out of him, we'll try voice recognition."

"Sounds good. I got your email about the worm you sent in, any updates yet?"

"Last I checked, two members of Cybercrime had reset their passwords on LastPass."

Leon shook his head, eyes skittering back down to Tim's nails and then to the wrist cuff and back up to his eyes. "Why is their security so lax?"

"I'm hoping it's because they're so used to the firewall I built around NCIS keeping everything out that the idea that something could get in has never occurred to them. Do you have any idea how long HR holds onto job applications and resumes?"

"No."

"Eventually, I'll go ask. I want to know if this is a matter of not hiring top talent, or if it's a morale thing."

"Sound plan." Another pause. "I use LastPass, too. Could someone do what you just did to me?"

"You want me to send the same worm in? You'll have to reset your password if it does."

"Sure. Wanna see how secure I am."

"No problem."

Vance eyed the nail polish one last time, but didn't say anything, and headed off.

Hour two of the Perp not talking. Tim left interrogation to head to his computer. There had to be something to identify this guy, and if they could just get a name or something on him, they could run a believable Prisoner's Dilemma and get him talking.

He sat at his desk, tapping his mouse pad. Facial recognition software was running. But in that his prints and DNA weren't in any system they had, he wasn't feeling too hopeful about that. Though…
He got the parameters of the search up, and started with Leslie Smith's Facebook page friends and friends of friends, moving from there to people local to the area. He hit her twitter feed next, making sure followers and followers of followers got checked.

Hit or miss, and it'll probably miss, but still… Better, faster, than what he was doing right now.

He fired off a text to Tony telling him what he was doing. Got one back saying that both he and Gibbs had pulled an excited look and left Doe alone in interrogation.

Nothing much else to do right now, so he headed down to Autopsy.

"Hello?" No response. Tim looked around and didn't see anyone. Not too unusual with no fresh bodies. Jimmy and Ducky were around here somewhere and they'd come back eventually.

He headed over to the desk they shared and checked out the pictures. Molly at the pool, piggy backed on Jimmy's shoulders and the shot of Jon's fingers curled around Breena's index finger are unchanged, but the six-week-old ultrasound of Anna had been replaced by the eighteen-week-shot.

Tim's not an ultrasound expert by any stretch of the imagination, but it looks fine to him. Fingers and toes are all accounted for.

"Tim?" Jimmy asked as he headed out from the storage closet with Ducky.

Tim took the three steps to him and gave him a warm hug. "She's looking great!"

"Yeah!" Jimmy answered with a wide smile. "Double and triple checked, but everything looks fine."

"You feeling like you can breathe again?"

"Almost. Eighteen weeks down, twenty-two to go. What are you doing back? Stakeout from hell over?"

"Yes, finally. Got John Doe. He's not talking. Figured I'd pop down for a second while the computer did its thing. Wanted to share the happy."

"Thanks."

"Okay. Should probably go bug the guys in the lab. Make sure Doe's prints match the ones we got from the scene."

Jimmy nodded at that.

"Give Breena a hug for me?"

"Oh yeah."

"Good." And with that he headed back toward the lab and the next step of dealing with John Doe.

"Gibbs was already here, and I've reported to him," Zelaz said without looking up from his computer screen.
"Wonderful. Wanna tell me what you told him?"

"Fine." Zelaz turned, seeming annoyed to have to look away from his work and repeat himself. "Doe's your guy. His prints and DNA match the exemplars you took from the crime scene."

"Great."

"Yep. All you need now is a name to go with the profile."

"Working on it."

Back to his desk, and the search, and… And it was still chewing through the data. Gibbs and Tony were both looking expectantly at him as he checked.

"Still got at least an hour before it's gone through everything. You guys got anything?"

Gibbs shook his head.

"Nope," said Tony.

"Okay. I'll pull the data feeds from the local traffic cams, see if we can find how Doe got to the bus stop."

"Good."

"Yeah… Just gotta…" the sentence trailed off as a picture came up on his screen. He hit the keys to put it on the plasma. "Ninety-four percent match. Think this is our guy?"

Tony and Gibbs both stood to look at the picture on the plasma. Richard Fulp, one of Smith's Facebook friends looked back at him.

"Went to high school together, lot of the same likes, recent messages between them… I'm feeling it. Jethro, you take on Leslie, tell her that Richard's spilled the beans. I'll go after Dick. Tim…"

"Yeah, going over financials, phones, etc… Getting you the evidence you need to make this stick."

And less than two hours later, another murder was in the bag.
“My wife is dead.”

It feels weird to say it out loud, doubly so because there’s no one else in the room with him.

And he’s fairly sure that saying it to himself isn’t what Cranston meant by say it to someone.

God, how the hell do you say that to someone? You don’t just walk up to them and say, ‘Hey, guess what, my wife is dead.” That’s just horribly uncomfortable for everyone involved. And sure, Gibbs doesn’t usually go out of his way to avoid making people feel uncomfortable, but there’s a huge difference between staring down a perp and polite conversation among equals.

And at home, in his basement, starting the measurements for Anna Palmer’s crib, he’s not even sure who he’d say that to.

Mike.

Mike would have been his first choice. But, he looks around, and doesn’t see Mike’s ghost, doesn’t feel him, and he’s fairly certain that if he tells Rachel he’s having heart to hearts with ghosts about dealing with grief he is rapidly going to find himself embracing an even earlier retirement than he was expecting.

Fornell and Ducky had both been upset that he’d never told them. Understood, eventually, but still upset. So… he puts his pencil down and picks up his phone and hits Ducky’s contact number.

“Hello, Jethro.” Penny’s voice. He’s getting ready to ask for Duck when a few things hit him. Penny’s a widow. Penny lost her husband after forty years. The husband that by all accounts she adored.

Penny’s done this.

Penny has perspective.

“Hi, Penny. Are you busy?”

“Not right this second.”

“Wanna get some coffee with me?”

He hears the pause, where she’s wondering what is going on. “Are you serious?”

He nods, realizes she can’t see it, and says, “Yes.”

“Just me?”

“Just you.”

“Do you know you dialed Ducky?”

“Yep.”

“Okay. Did you want me to give him a message.”
“Nope.” He can imagine the perplexed look on her face.

“Do you have my phone number?”

“Uh huh.”

“So why did you call him?”

“Why did you pick up?”

“Phone was sitting next to me, and he’s in the kitchen.”

“Then that’s why I called his phone. So, coffee?”

He can hear the confusion in her voice as she says, “Sure.”

“Jethro,” Penny says as she slips into the booth across from him. Before he could say much more than ‘Hi,’ Elaine’s over.

She hands the menu with the specials on it to Penny, while asking, “What can I get you to start off with?”

“Coffee’s fine.”

“Iced or hot?”

“Hot.” Elaine nods at that and then says, “New friend, Jethro?”

He smiles at her. “Keeping track of my ladies?”

“You know it, Hon. Looking for your next sweetie.”

“Elaine, this is Penny, Tim’s grandma.”

She looks more carefully at Penny and says, “I should have seen that straight away. Shape of your eyes and face… Well, welcome Ms. Penny. Used to just get Jethro, but the last few years he’s been bringing the family in. Get to see your darling baby girl on Sunday mornings. Anything you want, just holler and we’ll have it for you. On the menu or not.”

“Just Penny is fine.” Elaine nods as that and heads off to get her coffee. “Sunday mornings?” Penny asks Gibbs.

“You know I’ve been going to church and Sunday dinner with them?”

Penny nods; Breena and Tim had mentioned that in passing.

“Last two, and hopefully going forward, weeks, we’ve had breakfast here first. Eight on Sundays, you and Duck want to come, to breakfast or church too, you’re welcome. Meet Breena’s family. They’ll probably invite you to supper after.”

Penny nods at that, smiling, as Elaine set a cup of coffee down in front of her, along with cream and sugar.

“Not sure how you like it, but I know tastes tend to run in families, and he takes his with cream and
sugar.”

Penny pours a splash of cream into her coffee as well as one sugar. “They do tend to. He had his first cup of it at my house. Would have been ten or eleven, drank some of mine, liked it.” She stops telling the story there, but Gibbs catches the hesitation and knows there’s more on that for when Elaine heads off.

Elaine sets a piece of strawberry pie in front of him to go with his coffee. She looks to Penny. “We’ve got pecan and raspberry, too. I know Tim likes both of them.”

“Is the raspberry a frozen pie or a jam pie?”

“Oreo cookie crust, raspberry ice cream, raspberry puree, whipped cream and chocolate shavings on top.”

“Yeah, he would love that,” she says with a smile. “Bring me a piece, too.”

Elaine nods at that and heads off again.

“So, let me guess,” Gibbs says quietly, “John was fine with him drinking coffee until he saw it was yours and sweet and creamy and then yelled about how men drink it black?”

“Something like that. I was there, so it was just a few sarcastic comments, not full out yelling, but in context of what happened when I wasn’t there, Tim dropping the coffee, spilling it down his shirt, which resulted in more sarcasm about being clumsy, and never drinking it again when his dad was around makes a whole lot more sense.”

Jethro shakes his head and grits his teeth. And while learning more about Tim and his dad is something he’s interested in, it’s something he wants to learn from Tim, and also if he gets into it, he’ll use it as a way to avoid dealing with his own stuff.

He doesn’t know if Penny senses what he’s thinking, or if she’s just curious, but she asks, “So… what’s got you offering coffee, Jethro? We’re obviously not talking about Tim, or you would have had something to say besides just gritting your teeth. We planning a surprise for Ducky?”

“No. We could be, I guess, but we aren’t… unless you want to.”

Penny laughs at how startled he looks by that idea. “I’ll put that on the back burner. So, if it’s not about Ducky, what’s going on?”

He takes a sip of his coffee, not saying anything for a long second. Then put it down and exhaled deeply. “Did Tim tell you he’s got me seeing someone?”

“No, and what sort of someone?”


“No. He didn’t mention that, and I’m glad to hear it.”

“Yeah, great.” He’s feeling monumentally uncomfortable, and while she’s listening attentively, she’s not meeting him halfway or filling in the blanks on her own. “It’s ummm… yeah…”

“Less than easy or comfortable?”

He nods decisively at that and jumps over the cliff. Dithering about it can’t make it any easier. “My wife and daughter are dead. They were murdered when I was in Iraq. They are the loves of my life.
And they’re gone. And I haven’t handled it well. And I realized that you’ve dealt with something similar.” He tries to smile with that, but it comes off more pathetic than anything else.

Penny reaches across the table and squeezes his hand.

“You two were married forty years, right?” he asks as her hand withdraws.

“Yeah. Met in early ‘46, when I was fourteen and he was twenty-six. The Langstons were a navy family, too, and my dad was Nelson’s commanding officer. Brought him home for working dinners a few nights a week. It was right after the war, I had a twenty and twenty-two-year-old sister at home, and my dad was dangling them in front of him, thinking he was good husband material for them.

“He was a Captain then. Working on making better aircraft carriers. I was bright and precocious and interested in math and geometry and how thing flew. My dad thought he was humoring me, letting me join in some of those conversations. After a few months of it, most nights we’d wrap up dinner, my mom and Elsa, the oldest sister would clear up the table, and Nelson would spread out his drawings and calculations, and we’d work on them together until I had to start my own homework or go to bed.

“By ‘49 he’d decided that he couldn’t do a better job of trying to build a better aircraft carrier until he really knew what it was like to fly. He was accepted into the naval aviator training program, and we got married fast and headed to Pensacola, three weeks shy of my eighteenth birthday.”

Gibbs shakes his head at that. Then he thinks for a moment. “Would have been forty years for us in October of ’18.”

Penny knows how old he is and does the math. “So you were babies, too.”

“Not quite that young, but yeah. We were eighteen when we met. Really met. Lived in the same small town, went to school together, but were never in the same class. And even if we had been, I probably wouldn’t have been brave enough to talk to her.”

Penny smiles at that.

“Were you Mrs. McGee back then, when you first got married?”

“Mrs. Captain Nelson McGee.”

Gibbs laughs at that.

Penny sips her coffee and takes a bite of the pie. “I was so obnoxiously proper back in the day. At least about things like that. Even back then having a seventeen-year-old bride, especially in the Officer Corp made you stick out. So, I dressed older, my manners were impeccable, and I was pretty enough to be attractive, but not so pretty that men wouldn’t listen to what I had to say when I said it. I didn’t talk a lot, not to the others, but when I did have something to say, it was always dead on right.”

“How’d you get to be Dr. Langston?”

“Started college by correspondence just about the time John was born in ’50. Had three more boys and finished my Bachelors by ’56. Began working on original research in ’57. I already knew that in the field I was working, medical technology, that Penelope McGee wasn’t going to get any traction. And P. McGee didn’t sound much better. So I’d publish as P. Langston. There wasn’t biotech per se at that point, but in ’61 Johns Hopkins wanted to move in that direction, and, without knowing P. Langston was a woman, they offered me a research position based on the strength of my
publications. I said yes. They were awfully shocked when I showed up, but Dr. Renner, who ran the program knew I was the real deal, and kept me on.

“You know about some of the stuff I worked on after that. A lot of it is still classified. But by ’72 my husband was an Admiral, my oldest son was a Lieutenant Junior Grade in Vietnam, James, our second boy, had been killed in action, and Michael and Thomas were still too young to enlist.”

“I didn’t know you’d lost a child.”

“Hasn’t come up in conversation, and, though I’m sure Tim’s aware of the existence of his Uncle James, it’s not like they ever met.”

Gibbs nods at that. “You two made it through though…”

“By the skin of our teeth. By the end of ’72, I’d legally changed my name back to Langston and drawn up the divorce papers.”

“But never pulled the trigger on it?”

“No. We worked a lot of it out, and after that dinner parties at the Admiral’s house were always…” she smiles, “interesting. I was done being horribly proper, and he decided that having me, as me, in all my me-ness, was worth the occasional uncomfortable moment with the higher ups.”

“Not a lot of higher ups when you hit flag rank.”

“There is that. The number of guys he couldn’t tell to go to hell with impunity was fewer than ten.”

Gibbs thinks about that and nods. “What did you do when he died?”

“Handled it." She says with a rueful look. "I was a Navy wife, an Admiral’s widow, stiff upper lip and all that crap. The Navy took care of the burial. Whatever’s left of him is deep in the Pacific somewhere, maybe swimming around as ten or twenty generations of some sort of meat-eating critter. He’d have liked that. That maybe there’s a king crab out there that’s part him.

“You live with sailors or fishermen, you’ll notice something, they don’t, usually, eat crab. Maybe they do now, so few of them get killed in action, but especially when I was young, you could always tell a navy family or a fisherman’s family because crab and lobster, no matter how cheap it was, and in Boston it was cheap, never went on the menu. Didn’t know who you were eating. But he’d joke about that, how one day he’d be the biggest, meanest, oldest king crab scuttling along in the Pacific.” She makes a pincher gesture with her fingers. Gibbs smiles and nods.

“I knew it as soon as I heard the knock. There’s that, pause, stopping in front of the door that people just don’t do when its good news. I heard the footsteps, heard the pause, and then the knock, slow, precise, and I knew. Hell, back during Korea and Vietnam, until we lost James, I was one of the people who’d stand on the porch, next to the Chaplain, ready to help comfort.

“I planned a very proper memorial, stoically took the condolences of the probably thousand people who dropped in over the course of three days. John brought me his flag, but I wouldn’t take it. It meant more to him than it did to me, so he kept it. He’s got it in his office along with all the medals.”

“And after?”

She smiles again. “Four day after the funeral, after everyone had left, when I was just knocking about alone in my house, the way I had been doing for a decade at that point... It was just like him being at sea, except it wasn't because he wasn't ever going to come home again. Alone and waiting
had changed to just alone. I broke down, finally let go of stoic, cried for days, and then I cut my hair off. Total buzz cut. I think it was a third of an inch long. Packed everything up. Gave most of it away. Put some of it in storage. Tim’s mom got a few boxes. And then I bought a ticket to Italy and spent the next two years traveling. We were going to travel. He had placed he wanted me to see. I had places I wanted to see. So, I did them. Took pictures. Sent postcards home. Tim probably still has some of them. Didn’t come home until I was feeling like a person again.”

“How’d that happen?”

“I don’t know.” The expression on her face is soft, comforting. “It just did. You ever chip a tooth?”

He nods.

“You know how you just can’t not keep poking it with your tongue, and you end up with a chipped tooth and a sore on your tongue.”

He nods at that too.

“But eventually, you get the tooth fixed, and eventually your tongue stops hurting.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what happened. Eventually it stopped hurting so bad. He went the way he wanted to. Sooner than either of us would have liked, but it was fast, painless, and at sea. He couldn’t have asked for more than that.”

“Still miss him?”

“Sure. Especially for family things. I love sharing Molly and Kelly with Ducky. That’s true and always will be. But I would have liked to have seen Nelson hold his great grand-daughter, too. Wanna hear something funny?”

“Sure.”

“They would have liked each other. You’d have never gotten the two of them to shut up. Nelson loved stories, too, and had a million of them. He was a good listener and a good storyteller and the two of them would have gotten on splendidly.”

Gibbs smiles at that, trying to imagine both men together.

“I think Tim gets that from him. He always had to put everything into stories. It was how he made sense of the world.”

“You have any serious boyfriends between Nelson and Ducky?”

She smiles at that, looking very amused. “I had friends. Some very good friends. Some less good friends. Some acquaintances. Ducky’s the only man I’ve attempted to live with, since.

“One of the things I’ve missed most about Nelson was a man who didn’t find my mind a threat. Someone who would love me because of it, instead of in spite of it. I’m an academic. Even traveling, I tended to stay in places filled with people who live and die by their minds. And what I rapidly found out was that men who had a brain, and a modicum of charm, and who weren’t intimidated by a woman with a brain, were all married by the time they hit my age. The ones who weren’t, were like Ducky, married to a job. Or they were grad students or undergrads, which was fun, but not any sort of long term solution.
“Jerks and blowhards existed in droves. Mincing piranhas who couldn’t have identified manhood, let alone been one, tons of them.”

Gibbs is looking at her curiously. It's never occurred to him that someone who was proud of being arrested at different peace/feminist rallies would appreciate “manhood.”

She sees the look, and responds to it with, “Women don’t need men. But we want them. I never had any problem with any man who wanted me and wanted me to want him. I had and have a whole lot of problems with men who try to create or uphold a world where I need one to survive.”

“People like to be needed.”

“Men like power. Being needed creates power. Men especially love the power and hate the responsibility of that power. So they write laws that codify the power and let them off easy on the responsibility.”

Gibbs decides this is a good point to get off politics or philosophy or whatever this is and get back to family history and getting through grief.

“What happened after James died?”

“Didn’t like the last topic, hit too close?”

“Don’t like being judged based on the actions of every other asshole on earth. I imagine you don’t, either.”

“Fair enough. June of ’72. Things were slowing down, but not done, in Vietnam. Nelson was the newest Admiral of the US Navy. John was a Lieutenant Junior Grade. James was three weeks out of Annapolis, brand new Ensign. They were both turtle navy.” She gives Gibbs a questioning look, making sure he knows what that is. He nods, familiar with that term for Naval deployments on rivers. “Bringing supplies in, taking men out, stuff like that. Dangerous as hell, on a tiny boat, filled with weapons, moving through the jungle, no real line of sight, possible ambush from anywhere on shore, and on occasion, the rivers got mined, too.

“Three weeks in, his boat took fire, he didn’t make it.” She looks away from Gibbs, out the window of the diner, just staring into space for a long minute. “That never gets easier, does it?” she asks, shaking her head, ruefully.

“No. It doesn’t.”

“I’d already joined the peace movement at that point. Quietly. That was the deal Nelson and I had, once he made Admiral, I could be as outspoken as I wanted to, but before that, I needed to keep quiet. And I did. And he’d give me occasional bits of information on thing he thought were dishonorable, that no honest man could support, and I made sure they saw the light of day.

“Like what you were doing with the Annex project.”

“That was one of them. It’s one thing to be a warrior and to fight other warriors. It’s another all together to unleash plague and famine upon non-combatants. Neither of us approved of that. Napalm to clear a landing zone is one thing. Napalm on a village is another all-together.”

Gibbs nods at that. There have been numerous times he’s wondered what he would have done if he’d been five or ten years older and ended up in Vietnam. He and Fornell have had a few long conversations about that.
“When James died, quiet stopped. I started getting arrested. Admiral’s wife at protest march made for impressive headlines. I wanted to destroy anything that had a hand in sending my son off to die. But to do that, I had to cut ties with two of my sons, Michael was a plebe at Annapolis that year, and my husband.

“When we should have been pulling together to share the grief, we all ran our own separate directions and screamed it to the heavens.”

“But you pulled together eventually?”

“Eventually. Like Nelson, James was buried at sea. Should have been shipped home, but when you’re an Admiral you can get things like that done. We’ve never been a dust to dust family. From the sea we came, and to the sea we return. Or as Nelson would say, ‘We’re water given breath and set free to walk upon God’s green earth. Allowed a short time to see what else is out there, and then we’ll return to the oceans that gave us life.’ But, because of that, I never really got a proper goodbye. And I was so mad at him.

“Eventually in early ’73, Nelson got home. And we got a chance to talk, and yell, and cry, and scream, and fight and mourn and all of it… And when it was done, we still loved each other and we decided to stay together. What did you do after your girls died?”

“Earned my second purple heart the day they died. Didn’t come out of the coma I was in until after they were buried. I was invalided home, granted compassionate leave on top of that. And for a week, I more or less lay on the sofa, stared at the ceiling, and did nothing. Only time I did anything was when Mike Franks, the NIS agent handling Shannon and Kelly’s case would come around. He’d get me up enough to eat something and occasionally shower, took care of me in a hands-off sort of way.

“Wasn’t like he was asking me questions or anything. They knew why my girls had been killed. They knew who did it. It was just a matter of trying to get the guy who did it.

“That was the pattern for about two months. He’d pop by once or twice a week, usually with a bottle of bourbon, two cups of coffee, a bag of McDonalds hamburgers and fries, and ‘fill me in on their progress’ while pouring the bourbon, coffee, and food down my throat.

“Eventually he hit the point where they knew where the guy was, but Mexico wasn’t going to go out of its way to capture or extradite him. So, Mike invited me in to his office, told me that it’d be a good plan to show up having gotten a shower and shave so no one would notice me when I went in, and then while he was ‘releasing personal items to me’ he got called away from his desk while the file with everything about the man who killed my girls, including their best guess as to where he was, was sitting open on his desk. Then he ‘forgot’ I was in there for two hours.”

He could remember Franks heading back into that dingy little office, seeing him there, giving a big, mock startled jump, saying, “Good Lord, Gibbs! Completely forgot you were in here. Here, let me get this signed.” He took the bag with the ‘personal items,’ which was actually empty, none of the evidence in the case could go missing, signed it, staring at him, and said, “I hope you found what you needed,” his eyes giving Gibbs permission to do what he wouldn’t.

Gibbs nodded at him. Didn’t say anything, and left.

“When Hernandez ended up dead, killed by a sniper’s bullet, no one fussed much. Guy ran a drug family, competition’s pretty fierce in that job. The Federales didn’t exactly strain themselves looking for who shot him. After that case, Mike got transferred back east.

“Like you, I packed everything up, headed back east. I put that life in a box, bunch of boxes, stuck
them in the attic, found Mike again, and learned how to be a cop.” He fiddles with his coffee cup as he says that.

“And now you’re taking that life back out of the boxes?”

“Been doing that for ten years. Trying to figure out what to do with it’s more likely.”

“That’s always the question, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Ideas?”

He blows out a frustrated breath. “Working on getting some.”
Gibbs set Rachel's coffee on the little table she had next to her chair, and limped to the sofa, setting his crutch to his side, and taking his coffees out.

"How's the knee doing?" she asks once he's settled, taking a sip of the coffee. "Thank you, this is lovely."

He nods. "Down to just the brace next week. They want me to go to physical therapy."

"You don't sound happy about that."

He shrugs. "Not happy about the whole thing." He taps his knee. "Don't like feeling useless. They'll only okay me for light duty once I get off the crutches. Then won't get okayed for full duty until the physical therapy is done, and that'll be about a week before I retire."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Yeah, well… It is what it is. Work with the boys. Have Ziva put me through my paces. I'll get it done faster than they expect, but faster'll be two weeks, three weeks before they boot me out? Not a big difference."

"No. I guess not." She makes a little note of that.

"What?"

"Reminding myself to talk with you about retiring, but probably not today."

"Okay. What are we talking about today?"

"Did you do your homework?"

He nods, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Who'd you tell?"

"Penny."

Rachel thinks about that. She knows the name but isn't immediately coming up with who Penny is. He sees that.

"Tim's grandma, Ducky's…" he sort of rolls his eyes. "Can you call a woman north of eighty a girlfriend? And if I did, I'd have to listen to her lecture on she's a woman, not a girl, and that describing her by her relationships to the men in her life diminishes her personhood. Or something like that. I zoned out last time."

"The third corner in your grandparenting triangle?"

"Yes. Kelly's great-grandma. Maybe that one won't get me chewed out. She might do it just because she knows it bugs me."

"Sounds like you have an adversarial relationship."

"Not really. Not as smooth as the rest of the family; there's friction but not anger…" he thinks about
that and decides it feels right. "If she was thirty years younger, I would have been interested. Of course, if she was thirty years younger, I wouldn't have been smart enough for her."

"Is that part of the friction?"

"Nah. We met on a case—"

"Not through Tim?"

"Not really. He was taking point, she's his grandma after all. She wasn't talking, actually playing him, so I went in and went hard, and she may have called me a jack-booted fascist, or thought it, not sure if it actually came out, but she didn't know I wasn't as straight up law and order as I looked and I didn't know she wasn't as hippie-dippie, peacenik as she looked, and we both kind of nudge each other with it now and again."

"Family dinners must be a blast."

He nods, smiling. "They are. Shabbos dinner three out of five weeks and it looks like we're getting Sunday breakfast in the works, too."

Rachel makes a note of that, too.

He looks at her curiously.

"One of these days I want to hear about this family you've built. Created families of the kind you have are fairly rare, working ones rarer still. Tim and Penny are the only two with any blood ties?"

He nods and she makes a note of that, too. Long note. He decides not to ask what she's thinking right now. They'll get to it sooner or later.

"So, why Penny?"

"Her husband died back in '88. She'd been married to him all her life at that point. They lost a son in 'Nam. Wanted to talk to someone who got it."

"Sounds like a good choice."

"I think so. It was a good conversation. Got to know more about her, too. Though neither of us seem to know how the switch flips and you move on. She said it just did."

"How'd her husband die?"

"I don't know the details. She said he was at sea, it was unexpected, and painless. It was the '80s and he was an Admiral, so I'm fairly sure it wasn't combat related."

"Admiral?"

"Yeah, her son, Tim's dad, is one, too."

"You weren't kidding about not being smart enough."

"No. Not smart enough. Not ambitious enough. You need at least a PhD before she's willing to look at you for more than a good time."

"She must be a very interesting woman."
"She is."

"He likely died of natural causes?"

"I think so."

"And she doesn't think she had anything to do with how he died? No guilt?"

"Probably not."

Rachel stares at him.

"Yeah, I know, probably has a lot to do with flipping that switch." She makes a note at that, and he has a feeling she's thinking up his next homework assignment.

"How did saying it feel?"

His look could best be described as, how do you think?

"That's the point of this, Jethro, I don't assume how it works for you, I ask. And even when I do know, I still ask, because then you have to think about it, put it into words, and actually tell me."

"Really uncomfortable."

"Why?"

"Talking? Bringing it up out of the middle of nowhere? That look that comes right after you say it? All of it?"

Rachel nods.

"Are you going to do it again?"

"Probably. There's this diner we go to. Elaine's the lady who runs the counter. She asked when I put the ring on, 'Go and get married again, hon?' and I said no, and left it, and she hasn't poked. Probably tell her the next time I go in for a late night coffee."

"Sounds good."

He shrugs. "She'll give me a hug and pie."

"Hugs and pie are good."

"Not saying they aren't just…"

"It's easier to be invulnerable?"

"Yes!"

"Too bad. You're human, Jethro. None of us are made of stone."

"Yay," he says, dry and sarcastic.

She takes another drink of her coffee and picks up the pages he wrote about the wives and girlfriends. "I was reading over your collection of ladies, and I wanted to know, why did you marry them?"
He blows out a frustrated breath. "Beyond it seemed like a good idea at the time?"

"Yes. You're a fairly traditional guy, so can I assume that at some point, for each of these women, you went out, found a ring, came up with some sort of 'let's get married' speech, set up some sort of romantic encounter, and then stuck around long enough to plan a wedding, and then got married?"

"Only two weddings."

"Hm. One was Shannon, who was the other one?"

"Diane."

"What were the other two?"

"Eloped. Justice of the Peace with Hannah, Marine Chaplain owed me a favor for Stephanie."

"Okay. So let's start with Hannah. What made you think, 'I should marry this woman?''"

He exhales, looking a bit sheepish. "Not exactly my finest moment."

She smiles at that and nudges him on. "We can talk about your finest moments, later. Why'd you marry her?"

"She was young, twenty-three, going to school to be a pharmacist. Which was why she was in DC in the first place. She finished about four months after we started dating. Her family was in Buffalo. They wanted her to find a job closer to them. Wanted her to drop me, move home, meet a nice guy, one a lot closer to her age, settle down, make lots of little red-haired grandbabies. They didn't much like me, probably because they had an easier time seeing who I was than she did. So, she was telling me about her parents giving her grief about heading back north. I wasn't in love with her. But I didn't want her to leave. And if I didn't make a move, she was going to go, and I was going to be rattling around the house with just memories and bourbon for company.

"So, I found a ring, and I lied my ass off about loving her for the rest of our days, and she said yes, and two weeks later she was Mrs. Gibbs."

"How was it?"

"Okay, for about a year. That year was better than Diane or Stephanie. We got on pretty well. Not… not what I wanted, but better than nothing."

"And after that year?"

"I caught the Boone case, and that one ate me, and our marriage, alive. I don't even know when she actually left. Just one day I noticed that her stuff was gone. She could have left that afternoon, she could have left a month earlier, and I had no idea.

"Didn't contest the divorce. Signed over whatever she wanted, besides the house. That was mine. That's the only thing I've managed to keep a hold of, besides my tools, through the three divorces."

"And Diane?"

He smiles at that. He might not remember where they were when they met, but he certainly remembered that look she gave him, and the way she said, 'Back off. I don't like cops.' "She told me I wasn't her type."

"And you had to prove her wrong?"
He shakes his head, half-smile still on his face. "Or die trying."

"Why did you have a real wedding with her?"

"Diane and I liked anything that made sparks. Sex, teasing, fighting… Anything that got us hot was good. And a wedding is seventeen million things to fight about. Hell, I almost cancelled the thing three times just to stretch it out even longer, because the arguing was fun."

"Did she think it was fun?"

"She changed the date on me twice."

"Cold feet?"

"Moved it up the second time. Nah. Just messing with me. But eventually, we did get married, and we had a great honeymoon, and we got home and ran out of stuff to argue about. And if we weren't fighting, I wasn't interested."

Rachel stares at him, looking like she doesn't think that's the whole story. "You won?"

"Yeah. I won. I proved her wrong. And I got bored. And she got angry. And that kept things going a little longer. I got more and more into work. Into the next case, the next puzzle, the next challenge. She got more and more annoyed. Then she got mean. And I pulled in further. She got clingy and meaner. I took Agent Afloat. We were divorced by the time I got back."

Rachel squints at him. "The way you write about her seems… fonder."

"I am fond of her. Now. And a long time between then and now helps. We keep running into each other. And… We're okay… ish, now. At peace, definitely. For some reason, every single fall, it's practically clockwork, sometime between September and November, I'll find Fornel or Diane at a case, and within minutes the other one shows up."

"God's amused by you three together?"

He rolls his eyes and sighs a little. "Satan probably. Every year. And I already know the one after next. Tobias is getting married in October of '16. Last time she got married, she invited both of us. We didn't go. Tobias was going to, got all dressed up, showed up at my place, saw I was in street clothing, and we spent the rest of the day drinking in my basement."

"So, he's already got it set with Wendy, she's cool with it. After all, she's not just his ex, but also his daughter's mom. He's going to invite her. And she'll come. I'll be there, I'm the best man." Gibbs looks up, licks his lips, and shakes his head.

"Jethro?"

"Unless she's found herself a new pet, she'll show up, we'll argue, it'll be fun, and we'll end up in bed together."

That got a curious look from Rachel.

"We were always good at pushing each other's buttons. And so far, every time we've run into each other, she's been married, or had a new boyfriend. But last I heard, she was single again."

"You seem pretty sure your advances would be welcome."

He's not entirely sure what that look on Rachel's face means. "Are you asking if I think I'm God's
gift to women, and she'll just fall for me because I think it might be interesting, or if I actually know something to indicate making a move would be welcome?"

She nods, nicely, but nods. He sends her a wry look, one that makes it pretty clear that he knows he's not God's gift to women, not these days.

"She told me I was her Shannon. I think, especially if we spent a night sniping at each other, all dressed up, kind of tipsy, it'd be welcome. Probably end up making out in the parking lot."

And while Rachel looks really surprised at that, she's not surprised about the making out in the parking lot comment. "She knew about Shannon? Did you tell her?"

"No. Never spoke her name for… close to a decade. Like I said, we had a great honeymoon, we got home, and I got bored. She knew I was bored. Knew something was wrong, didn't know what. We limped around for a few months, and she got more and more angry, and I dug further and further into work. The challenge was over. I'd won. She was Mrs. Gibbs, mine, and even whacking me with a golf club didn't shake the boredom.

"I took Agent Afloat. Six months in the Med. While I was gone, she went through all my stuff, and found out about them."

"Oh. Yet, even with that, it sounds like you're still attracted to her."

"I am. She's beautiful. And I do like her. Always did. Probably always will. Don't like the way she gets mean and shrill when she's unhappy, but I do like her."

"So. You aren't the same man you were then. Say you did go to the wedding, you did get tipsy and push each other's buttons, find yourselves a quiet bit of parking lot, would a new start be welcome? Obviously she cares for you. You like her…"

"Don't think I'd be able to trust her enough for it. Not for more than sex."

Another curious look.

"I'd been afloat for five weeks when I got the 'I'm pregnant' letter."

Cranston winces. She remembers the comment about the vasectomy.

"Tobias?"

"Yeah. Her name is Emily. She's sixteen. Beautiful girl. Funny, smart as a whip, calls me Uncle Gibbs."

"You have a relationship with Emily Fornell?" Cranston looks stunned and amused.

He chuckles, shaking his head. "Life is weird. I'm her father's best friend and her mom's ex-husband. Yeah. She's at my house for extended family parties a few times a year. Occasionally she crashes at my place when they're driving her buggy. My door's always open, and they both trust that if she's at my place, she's safe and well-looked after."

Cranston closes her eyes, smiles, and shakes her head. "Sounds like you and Diane are better than okay… ish."

"We're okay, now."

"But you don't trust her?"
"Not deep down."

"But you trust Tobias?"

"Yeah."

"Why?" *Takes two to make a baby* clear in her eyes.

He licks his lips and looks up again, trying to figure out how to put this feeling into words. "The three of us got on great. Dinner at my place, especially before we got married, was always a lot of fun. I knew he liked her. And when I got the letter… It was the nineties, hard to make calls off a battleship, but I was the Agent Afloat, so I managed it. I called Tobias. And I was so…"

"So…"

"I knew it wasn't mine. I mean, I just knew. I'd told her I didn't want kids. She seemed on board with that. She'd been on the pill."

"You didn't tell her about the vasectomy?"

"No. Couldn't tell her about that without telling her why I'd had one. Not like the scar is obvious, so, never mentioned it.

"So, I knew she couldn't be mine. But, I saw the word on the paper and felt the thrill of it and the kick in the balls all at once. I called Tobias, and he was acting off, but I was too out of it to really notice, but he did remind me that sometimes vasectomies heal up, so I should get it tested before I got a hold of a divorce lawyer."

"So you did."

"Yeah, easy test. Anyone with a microscope can do it."

"And you hadn't had any sort of miraculous recovery."

"No. And when the medic told me that, I realized that Tobias had been acting off, and I suddenly knew why. And that hurt like fuck. Fourth worst hurt of my life. But… He's not the one I married. He's not the one who told me he was okay with not having children. And he's not the one who slept with my best friend and tried to pass off his kid as mine."

Cranston nods at that. "What do you think she was doing?"

"I think she thought that, after seeing the shots of Kelly, that if there was a baby it'd get my attention, and keep it. And it would have. She was dead right. Like I said, Diane always knew how to push my buttons. If Emily had been mine… But she wasn't."

"Does Emily know…"

He shakes his head. "She's under the impression Diane and I got divorced a year earlier than we actually did."

"Ah."

"None of the three of us see any reason for her to know the truth on that."

"Probably wise. How about Stephanie? Why did you marry her?"
He shrugs.

"Don't give me that, you know."

"I couldn't have Shannon, and I needed a distraction from Jen. She looked, smelled, and acted enough like both of them that I could kind of pretend."

"That's why you slept with her. Why did you marry her?"

He glares at Rachel. She smiles back.

"Come on, I'm not stupid, and you aren't either. And we both know you'll sleep with a woman for distraction, but that's not why you'll marry one."

"She wanted to."

"Nope."

"Nope?" He's got a startled look on his face when he asks that.

"Nope." Rachel shakes her head. "You and I are not strangers, we have not just met, and I do not, for one second, believe a man who couldn't be bothered to come home on time for dinner regularly married a woman because she wanted it. Try again. Dig deep. Why did you marry her?"

He hasn't thought about it for years. So he does. Moscow, it was brutally cold and very snowy and lonely and why marry her?

Oh.

"In '96 Franks left, and I got a new Probie. Stan Burley. Great guy. Good agent. Put up with my crap and then some. Including the fact that I called him Steve for four years just to see if I could piss him off enough to do something about it. In '98 NCIS began to shift its main focus away from crime to anti-terrorism. At that point in time we had nothing in the way of anti-terrorism talent.

"I'm good at languages. Stan's family was well-connected. He was a Senator's aide for years. Law school, all the rest of that. So, they sent us to Europe to head up the new NCIS anti-terrorism squad."

"Europe?"

"Moscow, Paris, Romania, few other places."

"Don't sound like hotbeds of international terrorism."

"Like I said, we weren't the crown jewel of the anti-terrorism world. Anyway, it was '98, and NCIS also wanted a stronger female presence, especially on all of the 'premier' teams. So Stan and I got this new Probie, and that was Jen.

"Stan's not stupid, and he's not blind, so he knew how I felt about Jen. He saw the way I'd watch her. Saw how she'd watch me. Probably had a better idea of what was going on in her mind about that than I did.

"We're in Moscow, and we know we're going to Paris, long mission, at least four months, maybe longer. We know Jen's going, because the couple in love cover works well. What we don't know is which of the two of us is going.

"He was going to go over my head. He'd knew I'd fuck it up. And he was right, I did exactly what
he thought I was going to, and we got a few lucky breaks and were able to pull it out of the weeds. But I know it, and Jen knows it, and Stand did, too. In the end it was luck. Because I fucked up and got distracted and put more into her than the mission.

"We were planning the mission, and he's giving me the 'you aren't going to Paris with her' look, and I had a girlfriend, and I knew we were still a few months out, so…"

"So, Moscow has, or at least had, the kind of malls where you could buy anything and everything. Stephanie and I were out, and she'd been moping about something, like me missing dinner, so we walk past one of the jewelry stores, and there's diamonds all over the place. She's staring at them. I nod at them and say, 'Pick one out.' Ten days later we were married, and Stan stopped riding me so hard about Jen."

"That's cold."

"It was Moscow."

"Cute. You said Stan had a better idea of what Jen was doing. What did you mean by that?"

"I was the next rung up the ladder, and she was going to climb me however she could. I saw pretty, sassy redhead with…" He realizes he'd kept that sentence going a few words longer than necessary and stops.

"With…"

"Attractive curves—"

She smiles at the way he's censoring himself. "Big boobs?"

"Yes. And some other nice curves, too. Jen was an extremely well-shaped woman. And between being my probie, and so cute, and sexy, and she had this mix of standing up for herself and taking orders and… she had me wrapped around her finger pretty fast."

"And you like women who challenge you, ones you can't have."

"There was that, too."

"She liked me. I liked her. That was real. That'd she'd play up the sex to get the men around her to do what she wanted was true, too."

"And Stan saw that better than you did?"

"Yeah. Probably didn't hurt that he had a serious girl then, made him more immune to big boobs, doe eyes, and sass."

"And it worked for her?"

"It did. There are a few things that every other NCIS director has had in common that she didn't. One of them was twenty-years in. Department head was another. Marine or Navy service. Somehow all those 'rules' vanished when her name got on the list."

"Was she a bad Director?"

He shrugs. "She was herself. She put me in charge for a week while she was at a conference. Great. Message received. Being Director is hard. I get it. So that was fine for the two of us working things out. But, I've never gone higher than Team Leader for a reason. I didn't become an officer for a
reason. And we lucked out and nothing too big happened that week. But if something had happened, I wouldn't have been able to handle it, not without pissing off everyone in DC with initials, and not without making the whole agency look bad.

"She was good at people. Running them, building relationships and teams. She was good at politics. She was bad at not getting caught in the little stuff.

"Was she a good Director? I don't know. I think there were things she could have done better, but that's true for everyone. Are you actually asking me if I think she slept her way into that position?"

"Do you?"

"No. But she used her charm to move higher, faster than she would have otherwise. And it's not like she wasn't good. Not like there wasn't substance to go with her looks. But she mixed them together and got a lot further than someone who wasn't as pretty would have."

"A male someone?"

"Sure, or a less attractive female one. She was tiny. And she'd look up at you, big green eyes, and say something unexpected, sharp as a whip, and dead on right, and just use that charm to shape the world around her to the way she wanted it to be."

"How about the other ones you didn't marry?"

"Jen wanted the job a hell of a lot more than me. Elizabeth was… a friend with benefits? That's what Tony'd call it."

"How about Hollis? Were you getting serious with her?"

"We were starting to talk in that direction. She had her twenty-five in, and was thinking of retiring, wanted to know if it'd be worth it for her to stay in DC. I'd said yes. Starting to feel kind of hopeful about it. Like maybe this time it'd work…"

"But…"

"But she found out about my girls, and I'd never said anything, because I thought she knew, and I think she decided I wasn't going to be able to get past it, and next thing I knew she'd moved to Hawaii."

"You didn't talk at all?" Rachel sounds credulous.

"I thought we were going to. She looked at me. I looked back at her. We didn't say anything. She left. I figured that she'd take a day or so and then give me a call. But she didn't. And I caught a hot case. So, eight days later, I finally come up for air, and notice there are no messages on my machine, no emails, nothing. I'd told her that…” he trails off on that.

"Told her what?"

"When she was talking about retiring. I told her I'd be around, that I wanted her to stay. Helped her fix up her place so she'd have a better home for staying. So, she knew I wasn't going anywhere, she knew I was hoping we'd have something. But she didn't call, and I got the message loud and clear. She retired and moved to Hawaii."

"And you never tried to reach her?"
"Didn't know her number. Figured she would have called if she wanted me to find her. It just ended there."

"Was she already moved after a week?"

"No."

"So, you had her number, you just didn't call. A week went by and you just dropped her."

"I think she dropped me."

"So, you're telling me this person you cared about just wandered off and you did nothing about it?"

"Yeah."

"You really want me to believe you just let her go?"

"Yes."

She's building to something, but he's not sure what. "How many other things have you ever just let go?"

He shrugs.

"How about Susan? Did you just let her go, too?"

He thinks about that. "Not exactly. I sent her off."

"What happened? You obviously cared about her. How'd you make the jump from this is good to no more?"

That's a whole lot more recent so it doesn't take long for him to remember the, nope, this isn't right, moment. "Valentine's Day. We're having lunch, and the guys are all talking about their plans. What special things they were getting or doing. Tony was worrying about not having a plan yet. Stuff like that. And I liked Susan. She's sweet and beautiful and kind and just… just a really good person, you know? Just being around her makes you feel good."

"She sounds great."

"She is. She really is. Anyway… The guys are getting their various things ready, and Tony asks what I'm doing, and I… think I didn't answer… brushed it off in a sort of Valentines never works sort of way… which was true, we caught a case and Molly was born. No one got home until the 15th. But I could hear them talking, especially Tim and Jimmy, and they were really into it. Not the hearts and flowers and cuteness stuff, but the doing something to make your woman happy part of it. Even Tony, who told us five hundred times how much he hates Valentine's Day was saying it because he was scared of not doing enough. And I had some plans in motion, we had our Valentines that weekend, and it was nice. But that was it. It was nice. We saw a movie she'd been looking forward to, I made dinner, quiet night in front of the fireplace. It was nice. She liked it. She was happy."

"But I was going through the motions. I was doing something to make her happy, not because I was enjoying her happy, but because I didn't want to make her sad. Tim, Tony, Jimmy, they were all doing things that would make their girls happy, and that happy would make them happy, feed them. All I was doing was avoiding sad."
"I thought about that more, and two weeks later broke up with her. Then spent a few more weeks acting like a bear. Which was when," he taps his ring finger, "that happened."

Rachel thinks about it. "Did making Hollis happy make you happy?"

"Yeah, it did. I repiped her home and put up drywall. Yeah, making her happy made me happy."

"Jethro, did you really not love her, or was she just not Shannon?"

He thinks about that. "I don't know. I'd like to think I'd have gone to see her, or called her, or something, if I had loved her."

"Really? Would you have? On the verge of a functional relationship, something that might work, might make you happy, might threaten the sacred space you hold your love of Shannon in? Another shot at getting your heart ripped out? Do you really think you'd have gone after her if you loved her? Would you have jumped into that again?"

"No."

"Especially after she left without saying anything to you?"

"No."

"Did you love her?"

He closes his eyes and sighs. "Yeah. I did."

"Good."

Good? His look says, disbelieving.

"Good. It's one thing if you can't fall in love, it's another thing if you won't. And won't is a lot easier to deal with than can't."

"Wonderful."

"So, can you guess what this week's homework is?"

"Think about love some more?"

"Yeah. What is love? This time not defined by Shannon. Don't have to write it down or anything, but think about it."

"Okay."
Abby's New Groove

You fall in love, get married, get pregnant, have a baby, life changes, your body changes, your home changes, everything changes.

It has to.

You can't do all of that and have things stay the same.

And Abby knows that.

There are welcome changes, like Tim curled around her each night, or the feel of Kelly's breath against her breast as she nurses, and there are unwelcome changes.

Like the inch of blond roots peeking out from her black hair.

And yeah, it's not the end of the world or anything. But her hair is one of her defining characteristics. It's black and up in pig tails most of the time. It's dark and cute and perky and just fun.

But she's naturally blonde, and until Kelly was on the outside every two weeks she'd dye it to keep it looking perfect. She's so good at the upkeep that a lot of people don't know that her hair isn't naturally black. It's her own special dye mix, organic, natural, no ammonia, beautiful color that doesn't make her hair feel like straw. None of this right out of the box stuff for her.

It's her hair, and she loves it, and…

But, because it's not the out of the box stuff, and because it's natural and organic and has no harsh chemicals, it takes her two hours every other week to keep it the way she likes.

Two hours she could be doing something else, like sleeping, or Tim.

But it's her hair…

God, she hates this; it feels so whiny. She wants "her" hair. She doesn't want to spend the time she needs to to keep it "her" hair.

Okay, really, it's not the hair. Well, it is… but… It's just the one last straw on the camel's back. Her favorite tattoo is broken, her skin's covered in stretch marks, none of 'her' clothing fits, even though she's only twelve pounds away from her pre-pregnancy weight her hips and boobs aren't even close to the same size they used to be. Even her shoes don't fit properly anymore. (That one kills her. She's probably got fifteen thousand dollars' worth of beautiful boots and shoes, that she spent the last twenty years collecting and they're all at least half a size too small now.) Nothing about her feels the same, so she could at least keep her hair, right?

Breena and Ziva are looking at Abby as she's saying this.

"Could you just dye it less often?" Ziva asks. "The roots aren't very noticeable until they get to be about a quarter inch long."

Abby mopes at that. "I can see them. And it makes me look like my hair's really thin because I end up with what looks like a really wide part."

"Tony uses Garnier to cover his gray. He likes it, and it doesn't take two hours. I am sure they have black."
Abby nods at Ziva's comment. "They do. They all do. But my hair's so fine it feels like straw after I use one of those dyes. And especially with nursing, I don't want to use anything I didn't mix up myself."

Breena's staring at Abby's hair, playing with it a little. "Go blonde. What's your real color? Kind of light honey blonde?" That's what color her roots are.

"Lighter. About the color of your highlights. At least that's what it used to be." She thinks the roots were always this color and it just got lighter as it got longer, but she doesn't really remember. It's been almost thirty years since she dyed it black the first time.

Breena's thinking about that as they sit in Abby's living room. Summer's inching to a close, and once more Labor Day weekend has come around. So, right now, as the guys are outside messing about with the grill and keeping babies entertained, the ladies are inside, taking advantage of the AC, (It's way too hot out there for Breena. At five months pregnant, anything over eighty-five is torture,) and working on making some plans for getting Abby's groove back.

She ruffles her fingers through Abby's hair, feeling how thin it is. "It'll take a lot of bleach to get rid of the black, and that's hard on hair. So, cute, sassy, short little cut, bleach it back to whatever you think it is, and we can fine tune when more of it grows in. Maybe put some pink or blue on the tips, too. When you're out of all babies all the time, you can go black again."

"Cute and short sounds like time getting it cut instead of dyed," Abby replies, twirling one ponytail between her fingers, not loving the idea of chopping them off. Though she finds herself wondering how much of that is not being willing to let go of Kate. Last thing she ever said to her... almost last thing... last thing was about the tattoo on her bum... was how much she liked Abby's hair up in ponytails.

"Yeah, but every other month instead of every other week," Breena answers. "And you go out to have someone else do it so you get some baby-free time where all you have to do is sit around and let someone else take care of you for a while. I don't think you'll have a hard time selling Tim on the idea that you need a Saturday afternoon off every other month."

Ziva smiles. "He will drive you to the appointment himself, smiling." 

Breena stares at Abby's hair, runs her fingers through it again, and says, "Actually, the first cut's really only about limiting the damage from the bleach to get your hair lighter. If you don't want that afternoon off, just grow it back out again after the first one."

Abby stands up and heads to their downstairs bathroom, looking at herself in the mirror. "How short are you thinking?" she calls out to the others.

Ziva joins her. Breena stays comfortable on the sofa. She'll be doing enough up and down and chasing Molly around soon.

"Not a pixie cut," Ziva says.

"Noooo..." No way in hell she's doing that. Though it would take care of the dye issue all-together. Cut it that short and it'd just be her natural hair and maybe some tiny little black tips. That actually might look kind of cool... Okay, no that's insane. Ten pounds from now, when she can find her cheekbones again, maybe. But right now her face is too round for it.

"Maybe jaw length?" Ziva suggests.

She can kind of imagine that.
"Maybe."

They hear the sliding glass door to the porch open, and the sound of Tim's voice. "Dinner's ready. Got some ladies that want to eat?" He looks at Abby and Ziva a little oddly when they both come out of the bathroom, but doesn't ask about it.

"Do I want to know?" he whispers to Abby a few minutes later while everyone floods into the kitchen to put together their burgers and salad. He'd told her about Tony's baby research and was wondering if the confabbing in the bathroom had anything to do with that.

"Just talking hair." Or not.

"Hers or yours?"

"Mine."

"Really?" That has his interest.

"Yeah."

"What are you thinking?"

"I don't know. Tossing around the idea of short."

He thinks about that and kisses the back of her neck. "I'd like short."

"Yeah?"

"Like long too, and really long, but yeah, short might be interesting. Looks bad, it'll regrow. Not a big deal."

"You'd really like short?"

"I like my mental image of short. If it looks anything like that, I'll like it."

"Hmmm.."

"What are you two conspiring about?" Penny asks, snagging a few more glasses.

"Nothing big."

"Good, get moving, we're waiting on you to eat."

"Yes, Ma'am," Tim replies, and Abby suddenly has a very clear idea of him at eight or nine-years-old being told to hurry up a bit and get to the table.

They get settled and dinner begins, bits and pieces of conversation floating around while Kelly naps and Molly pokes at the little cut up pieces of hamburger she's eating off of Ziva's plate.

"It's been a while, what happened with your log everyone out of their password protection?" Penny asks, while passing the salad to Ducky on her left.

"Better than my last test, but not necessarily for the right reasons. Two passed, but they passed the last test. My worm never got in. Two of them are running their passwords old school, either have them memorized or written down, or something like that, so the worm never got them. Three of the others noticed something was wrong, actually talked to each other, and caught it and killed it before
it got the other five."

"That part's better, right?" Tony asks.

"Yeah."

"They figure out it was from you?" Jimmy asks.

"Nah. And that's the part that's worse. Didn't do much to cover my tracks. They may have the IP address I launched it from, but that's a dead end. Now, if any of them have any investigative savvy they may decide to find out where that IP was located, and then try to figure out why they got hacked from a bus station, let alone a bus station NCIS was running an operation out of, but if they're doing it, no one's said anything yet."

"How about Leon?" Tony asks.

"His system defeated it."

"Didn't you set his system up in the first place?" Breena asks.

"Not all of it, and he's had new stuff added since."

"Bet he was happy to see that," Abby says, and Tim nods.

Conversation bops around, mostly just family stuff, little bits of work, catching up on the things they've done lately. As burgers, salad, and corn on the cob is cleared off, and strawberry-peach shortcake (sans cake for Jimmy and Tim) was passed around, Kelly starts crying.

Tim heads up to get her, and hears the tail end of, "finally hired a nanny," as he sits down, handing his daughter to his wife.

"Her name is Heather, and she starts on the 15th. Give her a little time to get used to this while I'm still home."

"I met her, didn't I?" Gibbs asks.

"Yep. She was the one telling you about artificial knees."

He rolls his eyes a little at that. *The twelve-year-old.*

"So, does that mean you're heading back to work soon?" Penny asks.

"Back on the twenty-first."

"Good, you've got to get them into the shape. They keep working on other teams' evidence," Tony says, half-joking.

"I'll remember to speak severely to them about that," Abby responds, like Tony, half-joking.

"It actually is something of an issue. It's not that they are working on other teams' evidence, it is that they do not seem to grasp the concept of murders take precedence over drug deals, thefts, or money laundering," Ziva adds.

Tim nods at that. "Priorities are a little skewed. They seem to do a sort of first come first served sort of thing."
"And I get the feeling they aren't used to doing much in the way of time sensitive work. I've sent Jimmy down with samples on several occasions, and sometimes they just sit there for a few days."

"They are doing a whole lot more work, too," Jimmy adds, feeling like it's important to get the idea across that the lab staff didn't suddenly triple, have the same amount of work, and were doing it badly. "They're getting everything from all the Afloats, too. But, yeah, we're not getting the sort of personal touch we're used to."

"Then I guess I know what my first job is."

While they were cleaning up the table, Penny quietly asked Jethro, "Still seeing your new friend?"

"Yeah."

"Finding any clarity?"

He shrugs. "Haven't stopped going."

"Are you getting what you want out of it?"

"Maybe. Thinking about things different, so that's something."

She gives his shoulder a squeeze. "Yeah, it is. Not that I'm planning on blabbing, but, who all knows about this?"

"Haven't said, but I think it's already gone through. Think Tim let the crew knew that was part of Tony and I getting back on the job."

NCIS may be closed on Labor Day, but the just about everywhere else, isn't.

So, having dropped boys and babies off at the McGees' house, the girls ventured forth for a girls day out. What started as a haircut for Abby morphed into treat the ladies day when Jimmy looked at Breena and said, 'I'll take Molly over to Tim's, you go out and have fun, too. Don't come back until you've had at least a massage.'

So, with both of them thinking massages and facials to go with Abby's hair transformation, sounded good, Breena just made the appointments for Ziva and Penny, too.

The Gibbs clan ladies were going out, and that was that.

One of the good things about living in the Capitol City of the US is that it's not hard to find places that will cater to a quad of ladies looking for a nice day out, let alone a nice day out that involves things like haircuts and massages.

Only tricky part was picking where to go.

But Breena took that in hand, and by shortly after 8:30, all four of them were very happy with her choice.

Abby had to admit that getting a reflexology treatment while the black cooked out of her hair was awfully nice.

She was really nervous about the staff here being able to do what she wanted, because they were
awfully… vanilla looking. She didn't get the sense that much of the ladies here had any edge, or if they did they kept it well hidden.

But as she described the idea for her hair, short, shag cut, lightened to match her roots, little touches of pink to frame her face, Amanda, her stylist got really excited, and started gushing about the new dyes they got in, taking her in hand and dragging her over to see all the shades they had to play with.

"We never get to use them," she said, gesturing to the close to six different pinks, (they had a similar inventory of blues, greens, and reds, along with a large library of standard hair colors) and holding up a few of them to Abby's face to see how they looked with her hair and eyes. "How about this baby pink, and maybe a touch or two of this rose color?"

"Sure!" she was starting to get excited about this idea of… changing.

"You know, while we're at it, we could take a stab at your wardrobe," Breena said as they got lunch. "Gonna be a while before you can get back into your jeans and skirts. You're going to need something to wear to work."

Abby kept staring at herself in the mirrored wall behind them. It felt really odd to be able to identify everyone at the table at a glance, besides herself. She also kept turning her head, fast, feeling this new, short hair flip around her neck and jaw.

"They don't really sell the kind of clothing I tend to like here."

Ziva was looking her over. "Maybe you might try some new clothing to go with the new hair. Sort of like how your court wear changed, maybe you could try something less…"

"Me?"


Abby looked to Penny, who shrugged. "Do you have any even vaguely appropriate tops that fit?"

"No." Double D nursing breasts were doing everything they could to get out of every top she owned. (Which was why she'd been wearing a lot of Tim's t-shirts lately. Why she was wearing one now.)

"Then you need to get something. But you've got time. Head online and get your old style. Play with the girls and try a new one. Do both. But having spent my entire professional life working with male scientists, I have noticed they tended to be more respectful and more willing to pay attention to what I was saying when I dressed a certain way."

"So that's what you did?" Breena asked.

"Certainly not! I had to dress like a nun to get them to pay attention. I wore whatever the hell I wanted and when they ignored me I shoved my better understanding of the subject down their throats and made them see I was a better engineer than they ever dreamed of being. I intentionally dressed like a woman so they couldn't just sort of pretend I was a small man with long hair.

"But… and this is probably important, I was also not trying to create a harmoniously running department, I was not joining an already up and running team, and for a lot of those years, I was the only female in Biotech anyone had ever heard of, let alone seen. The only thing I was doing was making sure they understood lack of penis did not mean lack of brains."
"Yeah, that's not precisely what I'm going to be doing."

"So, as Breena put it, getting some Bosswear might be in order. At least until you have a better handle on them. Or go all out Goth and make them see that collars and black leather doesn't mean lack of brains, either."

Abby looked from Ziva to Breena to Penny. "What would Bosswear look like?"

Tim, Tony, and Jimmy were entertaining Molly (naptime for Kelly) when Breena and Ziva and Penny came in. For a second Tim was feeling a bit apprehensive because Abby was lingering outside of view and the three of them were grinning stupidly at him.

Jimmy stood up and kissed his wife. "You guys lose a member of the party?"

"Oh no. We just wanted to be in range to see you respond to the grand unveiling," Ziva answered with a wide and happy smile.

Jimmy looked at Ziva, watching the pleasure on her face, and says, "Ziva, you're a girl."

Tony whacked him. "Really astute, Palmer."

"No. I mean, look, she's grinning, and really happy about a makeover party…"

Tim's aware of the fact that they're chatting about this new revelation that Ziva does indeed appear to like some girly stuff, he's somewhat less aware of Penny's commentary about 'girly stuff' being a social construct. (Ziva liking girly stuff is not, in fact, a revelation to him, he figured it out when he finally saw all of wedding stuff put together. No way you put something that pretty together without being a girl. He, Tony, Gibbs, and Jimmy could have worked on that wedding until the end of time, it still wouldn't have looked that good. Hell, infinite monkeys planning infinite weddings would have gotten that level of elegant, refined prettiness before he, Jimmy, Gibbs, and Tony stumbled onto it. Mainly because, there're fifty-fifty odds that any given one of those infinite monkeys is a girl. What that says as to his belief in the idea that appreciation of girly stuff is a social construct shoved down the throats of baby girls at a young age is probably better left unsaid in the presence of his grandmother.)

No, he's standing there, sort of aware of them talking, of Molly riding Breena's hip, waiting for her to come in. Abby and dress up games has always been one of his favorite things and…

His breath literally caught in his chest. It's just so…

Her hair is short, comes to her jaw at the longest part, and blonde, mostly, bits and pieces around the edges are pink. He doesn't know what that sort of cut is called. Not a bob, but beyond that, he's clueless.

It's cute and playful and flirty and adult. That's always been the thing with the pony tails. They're a link to her past, her childhood. They're adorable, but not the mark of a grown up. This is fun, but sophisticated, and so sexy, her whole neck is visible, and the colors perk up her skin and…

"Wow."

"You like it?" She's looking a little shy as she asks, so he takes two steps, pulls her close and bends her back into a deep, passionate, oh my God! YES sort of kiss.

A bit later, as he was getting both of them standing regularly again, he noticed Breena saying to
Jimmy, "That's how you respond to a new haircut."

"Yes, dear." (Apparently 'Yes, dear,' must have had some unspoken context, because Breena gently whacked Jimmy's shoulder, and then he grinned at her.)

He stepped back a bit, and looked Abby over a bit more carefully. "You've got new clothes, too."

That got a smile out of her. "Yeah."

These are a lot closer to her traditional style than the hair is. From what he can tell, it's just a bigger version of the clothing she normally wears.

"Got some work clothing, too."

"Gonna show me?" he asked with a raised eyebrow and a little sexy grin.

"Eventually."

"Ooo…" He was about to say something mildly salacious about how she could show him, but Kelly woke up, so she turned and headed toward her room.

"Let's see if she can figure out who I am."

Dress up came later that night, after they were on their own.

It's stunningly amazing how much difference a new haircut/color makes. Even in her "regular" clothing (as much of it as she could squeeze into) light hair and different jewelry made some of it look, almost, normal.

Not plain or boring, but… Not nearly so edgy. Some of the less skull bedecked pieces started to look classically professional with the new hair and no cuffs or collars.

And there was the new stuff. Tim could feel the hands of Breena, Penny, and Ziva on those outfits. Granted none of it looked like anything that the three of them would wear, but all of it was vastly more aware of traditional office casual/high end professional wear, with, like everything else, an edge.

He's not sure what kind of skirt it is. Tight. It curves perfectly from her waist to just above her knee, has a little slit up the back so she can walk more easily. She's got it paired with some sort of black shell, and a white blouse and… little black pumps and… just… wow…

"Do you really like it?" She's staring at herself in the mirror, not sure about this change at all.

"Oh yeah."

"Really?"

He steps over to her. "I like anything that shows off your butt." His hands trace from her waist to her thighs. "And anything that puts this luscious curve front and center is good by me. So, snug jeans, those short flirty skirts, whatever this thing is called. Really, I'm awfully easy on this… Booty right there?" He squeezes her gently. "Yep? Happy Tim!"

"It feels really weird."

He nodded at that. "Look, if it's not really you, it's okay. Taking it back isn't a problem, or just using
“It for court dates. If you wanna go back, that's fine. But playing is good, right? That's what you tell me?” He gestures to himself, kilt, t-shirt, wrist cuff, three new tattoos, and thirty-five fewer pounds. "I don't exactly look like that guy you started dating again back in '12. Not exactly him, either. You still love me. And if you want to go all satin and sophisticated with just and edge of punk, I'm good with that. I'm not going anywhere, and I'm more than happy to play new Abbies with you."

"Feels weird."

He nods at that.

"Good weird?"

"Just weird. I was really into it with the girls, but now… It doesn't look like me."

"Nope. Looks different. Good different."

"I feel really naked in this."

He looked at her curiously. "Naked?"

"Yeah. Like… I'm terrified I'll spill something on myself. My legs and feet are practically bare."

"Oh, literally, naked."

"Yeah."

He headed over to their bed. "How about the trousers?"

They're slim cut, navy, some sort of light-weight wool blend. As he was handing them to her he said, "You know when it fits again, both of these would go with that pink blouse of yours, and you could probably match this with some of your belts and cuffs, and nicer tank tops type shirts."

"Maybe.” She pulls off the skirt and begins to wriggle into the trousers. And like with the skirt, Tim was seriously appreciating the cut on them. "Who was picking these out?"

"Mostly Breena and Ziva. Penny kept me from breaking into hives at 'normal clothing.'"

"Remind me to thank Breena and Ziva, and Penny for getting you into it. Weather you ever wear these again or not, they fit really nicely."

"You think so?" She's looking at herself in the mirror critically.

"Maybe I just really like what's under them. Either way, I'm having a good time."

"And that's what matters?"

He shrugged. "At least one of us should be enjoying this, right?"

She laughed at that, shaking her head. "Yeah, I guess so. There's a sort of drapy top that goes with this…"

And Tim headed over to their bed to dig through the bags and find it.
Chapter Notes

I know some of you are reading Shards and STAW, when the chapter titles are identical, that means the chapters are identical.

"Gibbs?"

"Abbs?" He looks up from Anna Palmer's crib. He's gotten all the pieces cut, now it's time to start putting them together.

"Hey."

He glances around briefly, but doesn't see or hear anyone else. "So..."

She sits on the second from the bottom step. "I don't know how to be the Boss. I'm not sure I even want to be the Boss."

Gibbs smiles at that and sits next to her, wrapping his arm around her. "Trust me, Abbs, you know how to be the Boss. You've scared interns into wearing bells in your lab. You'll get those three whipped into shape."

"That's not being the Boss... That's not leading. That's just being scary."

Gibbs gives her a *if it gets the job done* look.

"These are professionals. They're good at their job. They deserve respect, and I can't just threaten or pout at them until they toe the line."

"You want a team of equals."

"Benedict technically is. He ran his own lab for seven years. Only reason I'm in charge is seniority."

"And you're a better scientist."

That gets a smile out of Abby and a kiss on Gibbs' cheek.

"Leon knows his job. If you're still in charge, it's not because you've been around longer. He's got no problem shuffling people around if it'll work better."

Abby leans against him. "How do I do this?"

Gibbs shrugs. "Takes a long time to get a good team. And all the leadership on Earth isn't gonna help without the right people. But, first of all, there are no teams of equals. One of you is going to lead. You can be... conciliatory. You can be like Jen, building alliances and teams, but someone is going to make the decisions at the end of the day. And that's gonna be you."

"I don't like being in charge."

Gibbs tilts his head at her in a sort of *really, you're gonna try that with me* look.
"Not saying I don't want things the way I want them, or like them exactly right, but… That's not leading. That's not being in charge. That's me forcing every assistant I've ever had out because I can't stand working with someone else for more than a few hours at a time."

She looks up.

"I'm a prima ballerina in the lab, and the ballerina's only in charge of her own dance. She does it perfectly, but she's only responsible for herself. And now I've got to learn to be the director and choreographer and make everyone work."

"Yep."

"How am I going to do that?"

"One day at a time, Abbs. Keep remembering the point of the ballet, and let the other dancers do their thing so you can get through it."

---

Seven AM to seven PM. At least, that's the idea of how it'll go for now. Tim and Abby are both hoping that eventually they can get their schedules wrangled well enough to make sure that at least one of them will be home every day around five.

Mostly because twelve hours a day five days a week is a long week. Add in commute time on top of it, and it's a really long week.

But, for now at least, those are Heather's hours.

And she seems happy to be working them.

Abby's not actually going back for three more days. Right now, they're both home so Kelly's not just getting dumped into someone new's hands as Abby goes sprinting out the door.

The idea is that she's taking a back seat, letting Heather get the hang of dealing with Kelly, learning where everything is and how they run their home.

That's the idea at least.

She's honestly not sure which is going to be harder, sitting back and letting a stranger take care of her child, or trying to run her other baby with all those new people in it.

Every time Kelly chirps she wants to leap up and grab her from Heather.

And it's not even that Kelly seems to be having a bad time. Actually, as much as you can tell with a baby, Kelly seems to be doing fine. (She's not crying any more than she usually does.) Heather doesn't seem to be struggling, either. They're getting on fine. Learning each other, but fine.

And not swooping in and taking care of it is killing her.

"Mrs. McGee—"

"Abby."

"Abby. This part is always hard. I've got her schedule. I've got your number. I'm sure you've got cameras somewhere so you can do a spot check. How about you head out for a bit, get some lunch or something? This'll go easier for all of us if Kelly and I get some time alone."
And sure, that's logical, that makes sense, but she still wants to rip her hair out as she heads off.

"Okay. I know this needs to happen. I know I don't want to be home with her all the time. I know I'm starting to go buggy on laundry and nursing all the time, but how do you do this? How do you leave your baby with a stranger?"

Breena looked up from the lady she's embalming. "You just do it. And it sucks, and you visit fifty times the first day, and you cry more than the baby does, but you do it. But eventually it gets easier and you get used to it, and you don't feel so beaten down when you are in charge, don't feel like baby care is an unending run of hours and hours of mindless nothing which means you enjoy being with her more when you're with her."

"What if I don't want to get used to it?"

"Well, you better, or you'll be going to college with her, and she won't appreciate that, and neither will Tim."

"Yeah." Abby picked listlessly at the edge of the embalming table (currently empty) that she was leaning against.

Breena tied the knot on the final stitch closing the incision that would keep the cotton she'd packed into the corpse's torso in place. "All done Mrs. Callum. We'll get you all dressed up and ready to go soon. Your daughter tells my mom that you love the dress they picked out for you."

"Ducky does that, too."

"Talks to the clients. Of course. They're humans, so you've got to talk to them. If you stop talking to them you'll start treating them like things."

Abby nodded at that as Breena straightened up, and gently stroked Mrs. Callum's face.

"Your parents died when you were still in the breaking away from them part of life, right?"

"Sort of. The end of it. I was still swinging between wanting lots of hugs and vastly too cool to be in the same hemisphere with them."

"I remember those days. It'll get easier, it really will, and it's something you've got to do. Maybe not this early, not if you don't want to, but… That's the job, we hold them for a little while and then send them off."

"Great." Abby looked remarkably unenthusiastic about that.

"How long have you been out of the house?"

Abby checked her phone. "Thirty-six minutes."

"Okay, come on, give Heather a call, and then we'll go get some lunch."

And yes, Skyping with Heather and Kelly for two minutes, just to see that she was indeed sleeping peacefully felt stupid as all get out, but it also helped. Made it easier to head off to lunch. She checked back in at the end of lunch too, and saw Kelly getting a bottle, looking just fine.

Kelly was still awake when Abby got home, so there was snuggle time, which felt very, very good. (She's getting a better sense of why most nights Tim makes a bee line to Kelly for snuggles as soon as he can.) And Kelly seemed very happy to see her, too. Which was also good.
But... but maybe it hurts a little that someone else can do this, can make her little girl happy and keep her safe and...

And maybe she wants to be the only one, but she doesn't, because she can't, because this will drive her buggy if it's all she's doing... and... and she just doesn't know.

So, she goes on, stowing the breast milk she pumped in the fridge, putting Kelly down when it was naptime, letting Heather get her when she woke up, then nursing. And she tried to burn this into memory, tries to make it last, knowing it can't and won't, feeling... she wasn't sure what this feeling was, just that it was here and real.

And then she started to figure out what to do tomorrow. Because like Gibbs said, one day at a time. And tomorrow, even though it's not her first day back, she was thinking it'd be a good plan to drop into the lab and just get a feel for what's going on.
"Abby!" Benedict says as she heads in. "Didn't think we'd be seeing you for a few more days."

"Nope. Supposed to meet Jimmy and Tim for lunch, but they're going to be an hour." Which is true, but misleading. They're going to be an hour because she showed up an hour early. "Figured I'd head down and see what's going on."

"Right now we're running trace for McKellan's theft, Jamison's murder case, Apley's drug ring. And Corwin is logging evidence on the Meyer's case."

She doesn't recognize any of those names, so they must all be Agents Afloat. Apparently it's a bad time to be at sea. "All at once?"

"As much as we can. Only so many slots in the mass spectrometer."

She bristles a little at the way Benedict is treating Major Mass Spec like it's just a tool, but that's not important here.

"Okay. You've got the reports up to date?"

"As up to date as they can be mid-case."

"Good. I'll log on and get reading. Want to be ready to hit the ground running when I get back."

"Great."

One of the good things about the position of her main computer monitor is that she can be 'reading' her reports while watching, with a fairly clear view, what's going on in the lab. What's even better is that, with the door shut and her music on, her new underlings are sure she can't hear what they're saying.

They are absolutely right about that. She cannot, at all, hear what they are saying.

Of course, she doesn't need to hear what they are saying to follow the conversation.

And, it's not like they're saying anything particularly troublesome or indiscreet. They are, after all, professionals, at work, doing their jobs. Little bit of gossip about the new hair and wondering if that music is going to be on all the time (She makes a note to get more earbuds.) as well as some speculation as to exactly how many tattoos she's got and where they might all be, (something you get used to when you've got as many tatts as she does) followed by some speculation as to what kind of skin ink Tim must have, but for the most part they're talking about work.

And skimming the reports, they do seem to be doing fine.

The quality of the work is good.

The tests are accurate, well done, and thorough, exactly what she expects if she's the one doing them. Likewise they're maintaining the equipment properly, and running tests on it often enough to make sure that everything is in tip top shape.

So, if there's any issue with this crew, it's that they don't seem to grasp the concept of triage. The most important work comes first. They do indeed seem to be working on the idea of the first case in
gets worked as each spot in the lab opens. So, Major Mass Spec can handle twelve samples at once, so the first twelve bits of whatever get run, and if that means the trace under the nails of the vics of the triple homicide have to wait because the robbery got there first, then wait they will.

So, that's the first job, getting the triage protocols set.

As she continues to read through the reports she's noticing that computer forensics is looking a bit shaky. They've been handing things off to Cybercrime that she or Tim would usually handle, but… well, okay, technically that's part of what Cybercrime is supposed to do. Still, gotta get that up to shape, make sure they understand that their lab handles all forensics that comes into them.

But, it might just be that, in that they are forensic scientists, and not computer guys, they just don't know how to do that sort of work. Not uncommon, computer forensics wasn't a skillset the forensic lab usually hires for.

That might be her new prima ballerina area, she'll be the shining star of the computer forensics, and let them do more and more of the traditional lab work…

Maybe.

Day after tomorrow she'll officially be back, and they'll figure it out from there.

After an hour, she did head over to Autopsy, say hello to Ducky, and collect Jimmy for their lunch date.

"How's it going?" he asked as the elevator took them up to the Bullpen.
She nodded her head a little. "It's going. Zelaz is very interested in how many tattoos I really have."

Jimmy nudged her shoulder with his and grinned at her. "Aren't we all?"

"Twenty-two."

"That many? Really?"

She pushed up the sleeve of her lab coat so he could see the stitch marks. "Well, this is nine of them."

"Okay."

She can see him thinking through that. "You've seen all of them. Anyone who's seen me in a bathing suit has."

"That's what I was thinking."

"Yeah, I could see you counting it in your head."

The doors opened, and Tim saw them head toward him, held up his index finger in a one minute gesture, and typed faster. And a minute after that he did join them.

"Finishing up an email to Vance about my last test on Cybercrime."

Jimmy and Abby both know that's not something he really talks about at work, so they both nod, wait for the door to the elevator to close, and then Abby asks, "So?"
"Just clean up stuff, details about the six of them who completely failed to figure out what was going on. I checked the regs, and since, technically I'm a co-worker and not their boss, I'm not allowed access to their HR files, so I was asking him for permission to get them."

"Why asking permission? Don't you have a rule for that?" Jimmy asked.

"Because if I don't get permission, they can sue me, personally, for breaking into their records for privacy violations. I'm not so gung-ho on Gibbs' rules that I want to bankrupt us."

"Thank you." Abby said.

"No problem. So, how's the first day back going?" he asks with a quick hello kiss.

They talked about work, and about Abby's plan for creating some sort of evidence/case triage system. Talked about getting used to the idea of being at work, of not being Kelly's primary caregiver. And, in that they're dads, and no one ever expected either of them to be their baby’s primary caregivers, talking to them about it is somewhat less satisfying than talking to Breena, but they’re both very supportive and trying to be sympathetic.

As lunch was winding down, Tim said, "I was thinking…"

"God, that sound ominous," Jimmy adds.

Tim kicked him lightly under the table. "How would you feel about being major characters in a series I'm thinking of writing?"

Jimmy put his drink down. "Wait, are you actually asking, ahead of time, if we'd like to be in one of your books?"

"Yeah."

Abby's eyebrows shot awfully high up on her forehead. Like she can't believe he'd ask. (Of course, having starred in one of his series, and having been told about one of them when he was writing it, and having to scour the internet to find the other, she's… used to… might be the best way to put it, being his silent muse.)

"I'm contracted for one more Deep Six, and I was thinking of… I don't know… I don't want to stop doing them all together… Maybe writing more of them on spec…" He can see Jimmy and Abby don't know what that means. "As they come out. Instead of a set schedule of one a year.

"And I was thinking of a fantasy series." Abby lights up at that, knowing what characters he's playing with. "Maybe not full on Game of Thrones, but something for adults, something with dragons."

"You aren't going to make me a dragon, are you?" Jimmy asks.

Tim looks a little startled by that. "I hadn't been thinking of it. You wanna be a dragon?"

Jimmy shakes his head. "I am not your comic sidekick."

"No, wasn't thinking that. Besides, does three tons of flaming death machine sound like a comic sidekick to you?"

"Oh, real dragons." Jimmy lights up at the idea of that.

"Might like being a dragon, then…"

"I was thinking of the Lord of the next castle over."

"Sidekick?"

"Partner/friend/brother-in-arms." Jimmy doesn't look thrilled by that. "You wanna be the main character, write your own book."

Jimmy smiles and takes a sip of his drink.

"So, you're going to be the main character in your own book, finally?" Abby asks. Tibbs leads the Deep Six series, with Tommy and Liza being the main secondary characters, McGregor, Amy, and James are all firmly in back up territory. And nothing even remotely like him shows up in the T. M. Gee books.

"Yeah. I was thinking maybe it was time to really be in my stories, not just have them happen around me."

Abby squeezes his hand. "I like that."

Jimmy smiles. "I think Gibbs should be a dragon."

That got the other two of them laughing.

"He should be an old, silver one, trains the young dragons, beats them into shape."

"Fornell, too." Tim adds.

"Oh yeah. Can you just see that? Old dragons, just a bit past fighting prime, wings are starting to get a little droopy, but the brains, claws, and teeth are still sharp, the spells still fly fast and deadly…" Abby says, getting into the idea.

"Dragons can change shape right?" Jimmy asks.

"Why not?" Tim replies. Some dragons can. No reason his dragons couldn't.

"Then there's your twist. We are the dragons, but we're the knights, too. No one outside the Dragon Knights knows that, though. They use the magic to keep it a secret, for, I don't know, whatever reason… thinking that up is your job…"

Tim looks at Abby, grinning. "That'd explain the 'need to be strong of will and magic to control them' bit. It's not that the dragons eat the knights that can't control them, it's that they are the knights, so they don't let anyone else ride them. Building up the mythos of their power and the power of the men who control them."

She nods along with that. "If you've got to be a total badass to even get on the dragon… Yeah, that works. So, why are we at war?"

"Who the hell cares?" Tim asks.

She rolls her eyes. "It's been a while since you've read an epic fantasy, hasn't it?"
"Yeah."

"Trust me, they care now."

"I'll figure out something. So, wanna be in my next series of books?"

"Yeah."

"Yes."

"I'll ask Breena, too. After all, the Dragon Knights have to have their ladies."

"I think she'll like that. So, we're gonna be the big, damn heroes?" Jimmy asks, quoting Firefly.

Tim grins back at him. "Big, damn heroes engaging in thrilling heroics!"

Abby laughs at both of them, enjoying their excitement.

Seven AM. Normally they don't leave for work until 7:23, but she wants to get in a bit early today. Has to get in a bit early. Needs to be the first one in.

So, she hands Kelly to Heather, who takes her with a smile, grabs her bag, kisses Kelly one more time, exhales deeply, and heads with Tim to the car.

He squeezes her hand as he pulls out of the driveway.

"It's gonna be fine."

She bites her lip. "I know."

"It really is. Only thing you've got to worry about now is getting into the house before I do so you can get your snuggle on first."

She glares at him.

"Just kidding. I know you get first snuggles today."

"Today?"

"She's my baby, too. I've got just as much dibs on snuggle time as you do."

Abby snorted at that, and he wasn't sure if that was a laugh or a dismissal, but she wasn't, either…

First one in. Exactly the way she had hoped. Abby took the poster she had rolled up and tucked into her bag, and opened it, taping it to the shelf over the monitors on the main computers. (She'll put it somewhere less in the way, later.)

NCIS Lab Priorities:

Terror Threat

Kidnapping

Terror Attack
Murder

Everything Else

She saw Benedict take a look at it as he came in, but he didn't say anything, and started getting his station ready. She waited until Zelaz and Corwin were in as well and gathered them 'round.

"From everything I've been seeing, you three are doing a find job on the evidence. Your technical skills are top notch. You're doing the job exactly the way it's supposed to be done.

"Organizational skills are a different matter. We're not just working on Afloat cases where the perps are all stuck in one place, can't get away, and time sensitivity isn't such a big deal.

"From now on, this is how we handle evidence. Protecting and saving living victims come first. Terror threat is a whole bunch of living victims, so it goes on top. We get a credible terror threat and everything else that does not contribute to stopping it goes by the wayside.

"Kidnappings come next. The only thing that trumps a kidnapping is a terror threat. Someone goes missing, all hands go on deck and we work until we get 'em back.

"Then comes a finished terror attack. Lots of dead people don't outweigh one alive one. But if it looks like figuring out what happened'll stop another on, this gets bumped up to preventing a terror attack.

"After that comes assaults/rapes. Fortunately we don't get a lot of those.

"Dead bodies come next. When we're working a murder we're there for the survivors.

"Everything else comes later. I do not want to see any of you working on any evidence for anything that isn't one of the above until everything we've got on the top five is processed or processing. I don't care how time sensitive or embarrassing a theft or fraud or whatever is. It doesn't get taken care of until anything that belongs to one of the above is cooking.

"Got it?"

Three nods. "Good. Okay, they tell me you've got a smoother system for checking and processing evidence. Show me what you're doing and let's get this lab moving the way it's supposed to."
"Have a good nap?" Gibbs asks.

Tim looks through the car window with muzzy eyes, rubs them for a moment, and stares at the factory in front of them.

"Yeah, actually. Thanks for letting me rest. Kelly's making sure neither of us gets a lot of sleep." Neither he, nor Abby, nor Heather knows what's going on, but for the last three days she's decided that 3:30 AM is party time, and they're having a devil of a time getting her to go back to sleep. She's not hungry, or gassy, or poopy, or… anything. But whatever it is, she wants to be up and playing.

He and Abby have been doing their best impression of Zombies for two days now, and are looking for anything they can think of to get their child back to sleeping from one to seven, the way she had been doing and the way they had been appreciating greatly.

Gibbs has been nodding away at that. (His own veteran parenting technique for this worked something like this: 'Waking up for no good reason?' 'Yep.' 'Crying?' 'Nope, just wants to hang out with us.' 'Call Jimmy.' He knows when he's out of his depths.) "Babies do that. Nothing going on right now. But you fall asleep when you're on watch, and you're toast."

"Got it, Boss. So, how long was that?"

"Three hours."

"Thank you." He stretches as well as he can in the car and rubs his eyes. "Okay, I'm up. No one's moved?"

"Nope."

"You wanna crash?" It's a bit after two in the morning, good time to crash if you don't want your entire schedule upside down. Since he and Tony got the day shift on the last stakeout, they got the night shift on this one, and since Gibbs is officially back on 'light duty', he's capable of sitting in a car and making note of who goes into and out of a brownstone just as well as Tim and Tony can, so he's taking some of the night shifts, too.

"I'm going to get us more coffee first, then sure." Gibbs gets out of the car and heads down the street.

Tim stares at the building in front of them. Okay, in front of them and one street over. They've got a view through an empty lot. Nothing's going on, so he keeps his eyes moving. Three doors, two access roads, six windows. He keeps them all in view. Sure, no one's likely to go repelling off the roof into one of those windows, but he's also sure that if he just stares at the house he'll be asleep in a matter of minutes, and that would be a very not good thing.

Gibbs gets back a few minutes later, while Tim's noting the license plate of every car that's parked out front. Yes, he's sure Gibbs has already done that, but redundancy is good, and if it helps to keep him awake…

He takes the coffee from Gibbs and gulps it. "Okay, starting to feel like a human again."

Gibbs smiles, shakes his head a little, after all, it's decaf, takes a sip of his, and then settles back into his seat, relaxing, eyes closed. Crashing for a few hours sounds like a really good plan right about now.
Tim watches the house, and then watches Gibbs, seeing how even getting ready to snooze he's still awfully alert.

So, he decides to ask Gibbs something he's been thinking about for a while. Since he blew his knee out and had to take that time off. When he and Tony started talking some about what the hell to do when Gibbs hangs up his cuffs the idea started to crystalize.

He's already talked to Abby about it, and she thought it was a good idea. Thought it was worth the risk, assuming Jethro and Leon were on board.

"Jethro?"

"Yeah." He doesn't open his eyes.

"You aren't ready to be done with this, are you?"

"I'm ready for this stakeout to be done."

"Not what I mean. January 15th, that's supposed to be your last day, right?"

"Yeah."

"What if it didn't have to be?"

That gets Gibbs' eyes open. "You got someone who'll change the mandatory retirement age for field agents?"

"No." Tim stares at Gibbs, really looking at his face, thinking about what he could do, what people might be willing to believe. If only he hadn't enlisted the minute he turned eighteen.

"Say the word and you were born in 1960."

"Tim?" He looks startled by that.

"One year. I can cut a year off your age. People will believe that. Anyone asks, you lied and enlisted at seventeen."

"Vance knows how old I am."

"Yeah, but he won't say anything about it. Keep his best team running smooth for another year? Let Draga really settle in before adding in another Probie? He'll go for it."

"Five on a team?" True, that'll be awkward, but Tim's fairly sure it also won't be true all that much longer.

Tim shakes his head. "Jenner's on his third call back with IBM. Can't imagine I'll finish out the year on the MCRT. You want me to do it?"

He can see it in Gibbs' eyes, hope, that he can pull it off. Doubt, that he won't be able to do it. Little bit of fear, not wanting to get his hopes up if this can't be done. Lot of fear, what happens after retirement. Relief, he may not have just tossed the drowning man the lifesaver, but he's noticed he's there and has told him he's going to find one.

"What would you have to do?" He can see the how illegal is this? in Gibbs' eyes as he asks the question.
"Nothing much." Yeah, it's pretty damn illegal. I won't get caught. "Just, don't screw it up. After it's
done, you've got to act it. Don't start collecting social security a year 'early.' Stuff like that."

"I can do that."

"Okay. I'll take care of it and have a chat with Vance. If he's not cool with it, I'll put everything back
the way it was."

"Thank you."

He shrugs.

"No. Really, Tim. Thank you."

"Let's see if I can actually pull it off before you thank me."

Tim made an appointment with Vance a week later, as September was easing into October, and
wasn't surprised to see he got a chance to talk to him less than four hours later.

"Agent McGee, what can I do for you?" Vance was assuming this was going to be another update
on his continuing Cybercrime investigation. And there was some of that. He'd been looking through
the HR files and coming to the distressing conclusion that Jenner was good at hiring, but working at
NCIS was sucking all the life and talent out of these people.

On the upside, it was easier to change the environment than it was to change people. So… hopefully
he can get the morale switched around and start beating them into shape.

"I was talking to Jethro a few days ago, and something came up."

Vance was giving him the 'get to it' look, because this wasn't what he was expecting and chit
chatting about Jethro isn't on his to do list for today.

"Did you know he lied about his age to enlist early?" But, Jethro was what Tim was up here to talk
about, so they were going to talk about him.

"No. I did not know that." The subtext being, I did not know that because it didn't happen, so why
are you bugging me about it?

"Yeah, besides you and I, and Jethro, of course, almost no one knows that."

"Fascinating." Vance was giving Tim his get to the point look.

"It just seems like it'd be a shame to lose such a good agent because of forty-year-old lie."

"Uh huh…" Vance was looking remarkably unimpressed that Tim would even try this on him.
"McGee, has anyone ever told you how bad of a liar you are?"

He nodded. Unlike Tony, he didn't have a reputation for being any good at lying. "Several times.
There's a reason why I almost never go undercover. Of course, as someone once said to me, there are
two ways to follow someone, one way is so they never see you, and the other way is so they see
nothing but you. Likewise, there are a lot of ways to lie."

Vance seemed interested in that, interested in the idea that McGee might have more than just his
word for it, but still cool. "Uh huh. So, this forty-year-old lie, is there anything to suggest it might not
be a lie?"
"Well, someone might wonder why Jethro started kindergarten at four, but there is a note in his file from his kindergarten teacher about how smart of a child he was, and everyone knew his mother was sick at the time, so having him out of the house for a few hours a day helped. And someone might wonder why his social security number is one from 1959, but the records show it was assigned in 1960, and as we all know, SS numbers can be a little wonky. And if someone were to check his birth certificate, or the baptism records at Stillwater First Episcopal, they'd find that he was born in 1960. He's something of a pack rat, you know? Still has all of that, still has his first driver's license, and that has his birth year as 1960."

"Uh huh." Leon's respect for Tim's lying skills, or at least his forging skills, appeared to be increasing. Technically, Tim handled the computer work and the 'rewriting' part of the forging detail. (Literally, rewriting, he's better at matching someone else's handwriting than Abby is.) Having someone with a masters in chemistry around made it a whole lot easier to come up with "blank" documents to rewrite, along with chemically correct inks to do the rewriting with. So Abby handled that. Short of carbon dating, Jethro's "new" documents were perfect.

Tim was seeing the way Leon was looking at him and was wondering if he was going to be getting some interesting off-the-books assignments in the not wildly distant future.

"Yeah. It'd just be unfortunate to make him retire because of that."

"Uh huh. What about actual living people?"

"LJ'd tell you he was born in 1960. Most of the time. LJ's been telling that lie about 1959 for a long time, too, so he might answer wrong on automatic. So, he might need some reminding about why he's telling the truth. But once he knows he's not covering anymore, he'll tell you about how Jackson didn't want Jethro to join the Marines, how they were fighting all the time, so LJ stepped up and suggested he go in early. Off they went to the next town over. His Godfather, a distinguished veteran, vouched for his age. Jethro got in." All of that was complete and utter bullshit, but LJ knew the 'real story' and was willing to swear on it. He actually rather liked that version of it. And because Stillwater didn't have a Marine recruiting station, Gibbs did have to go to the next town over, Meadville, to enlist.

"I'll see what I can do."

"Good."

It wasn't until he walked out, got back to the bullpen, and nodded to Gibbs that he realized that just possibly mentioning this plan, to their actual team leader, before putting it in action, may have been a good plan.
Tony sees the nod. Sees the way Gibbs is looking at McGee, follows that glance, sees McGee nod, and sees Gibbs… not smile, but he's looking very, very satisfied.

Then he sees McGee notice he's watching the exchange and go white.

And suddenly Tony's thinking something just went very, very wrong.

Ziva and Draga are out, grabbing a suspect, which means, right now, they have the time to get into whatever the hell just happened.

"Okay, both of you, my office."

McGee and Gibbs both glance at each other. Tony doesn't have an office, and as of this point, he hasn't had any need to have a private conference, at work, with either of them that couldn't wait to get home. Which means he's talking about Gibbs' office. Except that it's Tony's, right? Not Gibbs', not anymore, because Gibbs isn't supposed to be having the sort of conferences that require an office. Because that's Tony's job.

Or, at least, it's supposed to be.

Tony feels his stomach drop even further when Gibbs suddenly looks guilty and then shakes his head. "Coffee run. Someone'll want to use the elevator sooner or later."

Tony's eyes go wide. "What the hell did you two do?" he asks while herding them toward the elevator. His office, Gibbs' office, whatever, it's the only nearby space they can talk in private.

McGee glances at Gibbs and says, "It's not in the bag, yet. Leon's looking into it."

"Great. Whatever it is those two have got running, they've got Vance in on, too. "Looking into what, McBackstabber?" Tim sort of cringes at that but doesn't deny it, and that makes him feel worse. By that point they are in the elevator, and he flips it off and says, "McGee, what the fuck did you do?"

"Bought me another year."

Tony stares at both of them, feeling the steam getting ready to come out of his ears. Another year? Without even saying anything to me? Reset my whole team without my permission? Then he slams the off switch, hit the button for the bullpen, and stands there, silent, vibrating with anger, and when the doors open, he points at McGee and says one word. "Out."

McGee doesn't look like he wants to leave. Tony's not sure if he wants to stay and protect Gibbs, or stay and have Gibbs protect him, but either way, he doesn't budge until Gibbs gave him a quick nod. Doesn't move until his Boss gives him permission. Tony closes his eyes and winces as McGee heads back to his desk to do… Right now, Tony's so pissed he doesn't care what McGee does.

As soon as the doors slide shut he bites out, "You didn't think it was worth mentioning this to me before doing it?"

"Eighteen."

He's flat out glaring at Gibbs. "Fuck eighteen! Eighteen is crap. Eighteen is something you pull on strangers you don't care about because doing whatever the hell it is you want is way more important
to you than how they feel about it. So fuck eighteen. I am not a stranger. I am your partner; rumor has it you've got a rule about that, too. Technically, I am your boss. And above and beyond all of that, I am someone who has earned the basic common courtesy, if not the respect, of you telling me what the fuck you are doing!

"And more than that, because if fifteen years of having your six, backing every play you've ever run, and saving your life more often than any other man on earth doesn't do it, you are not the team leader! It is my team, and you and McGee don't get to run off and pull crap like this on your own."

Gibbs doesn't say anything. He's not sorry about doing it. Tim's right, he wants this. He needs it. Another year is like being able to breathe again; it's like getting to step off the ledge, or hearing the crack of the bullet as it whizzes by your head, but the fact that he's not sorry doesn't mean that he doesn't get why Tony is pissed.

Or that, as he's thinking about it, that he's not sorry about how they did it. And that, not being sorry about trying to get another year doesn't erase the fact that he's feeling like he did, in fact, stab Tony in the back.

And he gets, standing there, watching Tony vibrate with anger, that there are levels of this. A lot more of them than he would have guessed if he'd thought about it, beyond the rush of hope at getting another year, but of course, he didn't think about it, not beyond that hope for more time.

The first level is that punched-in-the-gut, feeling betrayed that came from them not telling Tony.

It really hadn't even occurred to him to do it. Secrets work best the fewer the people who know about them. And he didn't know if Tim and Abby really could pull it off, and if they couldn't…

Obviously, if it worked, he'd have to say something about it, because the whole family knows that January is coming, but…

But it didn't hit him to say something to Tony because… Because he hasn't made the switch out of Team Leader. He's letting Tony play in charge, sitting back and following his lead, but in his own head it's his team and he doesn't have to answer questions about what he's doing to anyone. He certainly doesn't have to explain what he's doing. He does his thing; they follow and back his play, and that's how it works.

Except, of course, it's not his team.

And that's the second, deeper, real level. Tony is never going to be his Boss. He just… can't. And sure, he'll take Tony's orders, back his plays, run whatever game he wants run, but Tony isn't his Boss.

Same as that minute he always spent thinking about it whenever he called Mike Franks back in. Franks would help; Franks always helped, but he was never in charge of Franks.

This is a fine mess you've gotten yourself into, Probie.

Ya think, Mike?

He can feel the nod Mike would have given him at that. What he doesn't feel is a way to get out of this, at least, not a way that doesn't feel like setting himself on fire.

He feels Tony's anger on another level, a related one. Tony isn't Tim's Boss, either. Few more months and Tim'll outrank Tony, and they both know it. And really, since Tim was in charge back in July, he's been doing his own thing, running his own plays. He's working with the team, but it's clear
he's not following anyone's orders, not any more.

Which means, as long as both of them are there, it's not really Tony's team. Can't be. And Tony knows that, but was willing to put up with it because it's temporary. And because they'd both been playing their roles, allowing for the illusion of it being his team.

Sort of. Tim's already broken it once when he sidelined Tony after the thing with Ziva.

And this breaks the illusion again, and not just in a quick, temporary sort of way. That's why Tony winced when Tim waited for his nod to leave. Just another mark of it not being his team.

And the only saving grace of this is that it happened when Draga wasn't in the office.

Gibbs leans against the wall of the elevator, the back of his head hitting with a dull thunk, as he looks up and licks his lips.

"You want me to go?"

"You are too old for this!"

"Not what I asked."

"Your vision is shot. Your knee is fucked. The only reason you're still here is because we've got a five man team and can take up the slack. You are too old!"

"I passed my last physical. My vision is within specs, even without glasses, but I can wear them full time if that's the issue. I've got to get through physical therapy and then pass another physical to get back to full duty. If I can't pass it, I won't stay. You know that.

"Until I blew my knee out, I was hitting the gym every day. I dropped sixteen pounds between February and July and took a minute twelve off my time on the mile. Until the warehouse, I was in the best shape I've been in for five years." He leaves unsaid that right now (knee aside) he's in about the same shape Tony is, maybe slightly better, and better shape (stronger, better wind, faster) than Tim was for most of the years he's been here.

"Besides, you know the retirement age is about money. You were there when they dropped it from sixty-two to fifty-seven." NCIS, like a lot of the Federal Government, paid by years of experience, and cutting that five years off saved literally tens of millions of dollars a year for NCIS in wages and pension outlays. And it was true that if you had less than twenty years of service it was very easy to get the fifty-seven mandatory retirement age waived, (it's so common there's actually a form for it) but back in '13 that stopped being an out for Gibbs. "FBI and the Marines would let me hang around until sixty-two."

"Marines would have booted you for too many years a decade ago." Which was true, also. As a Gunny, they would have booted him at twenty-four years. If he'd hit Master Gunnery Sergeant, they would have booted him at thirty years. Well, not booted, he would have been able to serve out his term, but they don't let you re-enlist after that many years of service. And like NCIS, but on a much larger scale, cutting those years saved lots of money. A Gunny with thirty years in made fifteen thousand dollars a year more than a Gunny with twenty years, and did the same job. Gibbs' twenty two years at NCIS meant he was getting paid eleven thousand dollars a year more than Tony, who was, at this point, literally doing the same job. "And you know just as well as I do that it's not just about money. It's also about making sure guys like me can move up before we get put out to pasture."

That's true, too. Upper-middle rungs never mind when the top level gets sent off, because they fill
those positions. And as long as he's there, Tony can't really move up. "Do you want me to go?"

Tony glares at him, and he knows what that means. He's asking Tony to cut his head off, and Tony, no matter how pissed he may be about this, doesn't want to drop that blow. It's one thing for him to age out, it's a whole other thing for Tony to tell him to leave.

"It's kinda like dying. I guess." Gibbs says, quietly. "Not really, but… There's that day on the calendar, staring at me, and after it… What? Sit around, drink, build boats? Remember the Reynolds case?" Tony looks alarmed, so obviously he did remember the Commander who killed himself rather than face retirement and the emptiness that went with it. "It's not that bad, not even close, but… January 15th is like jumping off a cliff. He threw me a lifeline, so I took it, and I'm not sorry about that." And it's a low blow, because he knows that'll make it even harder for Tony to boot him out, but it is like dying, and he doesn't know what the hell he's going to do on January 16th, and right now, he'll take almost any out he can get.

"I'm sorry we didn't tell you. Should have done that. I'm sorry it screws with your team. And if you need or want me to go, I will. I've got my twenty plus in, my pension's vested. If you need me to be done, I can be done." And that's true, too. If Tony draws the line for him, he won't give him any trouble. He'll make drawing that line as hard as he can, but if Tony does it, he'll abide, and he'll leave, and he'll never mention it again, and, eventually, he won't hold it against him. Everything ends, and his run as NCIS can't be exempt from that, no matter how much he wishes it was.

"But you're not done," Tony says with a deep sigh.

"No. I'm not. I'm not ready to be done with this. I'm… I'm not ready for whatever comes next."

"You will pass the physical, and then you'll pass my physical and it will be a hell of a lot harder, and if it looks like you're lagging or anything…"

Gibbs holds up his hands in a gesture of peace. "Your team, you pick."

Tony shakes his head, muttering, "Like fuck it's mine. You know I can't shoot my own dog, and you're taking advantage of it."

Jethro nods. "Yes."

They're closer to the first floor than the bullpen, so Tony flicks the elevator back on, let it go down, and got out. He doesn't say anything, but Gibbs figures it's a good idea to let him have some time to himself.
A Discussion

Tim's not at his desk when Gibbs gets back up. Ziva is. Draga's not.

She's looking pretty calm, so either she doesn't know what's going on, or it's not bothering her. Probably doesn't know.

"He give you any trouble?" Gibbs asks about the suspect.

Ziva flashes Gibbs her, no not at all, don't be silly look.

Gibbs nods at that. Good to know collecting the suspect went well. And since they tracked him through tech stuff that Tim and Draga handled, they were probably interrogating him.

"Draga and Tim in interrogation?"

"Yes. Where is Tony?"

"Don't know."

Now she's sending him her curious look. Always be reachable, make sure someone knows where you are, those are bedrock for their team, and Gibbs above and beyond everyone else usually knows where everyone is.

Gibbs holds his phone so she can see he's texting on it. He sent a quick message to Tim about what just happened.

"Gibbs?" Now she's starting to look a bit worried and nervous.

So he starts at the beginning. They're in the bullpen in the middle of the office, so he tells the 'official' version, but she knows well enough to know that's bullshit and why he's lying, and the bit where he mentions how McGee was 'helping him find the right documents' to prove how old he really is lets her know exactly what happened.

He looks fairly sheepish as he gets done with the telling, and he can see she's torn. Half-pissed at him for not treating Tony with more respect, half-understanding that desperate need to be useful and to save lives and do the job.

Of all of them, she's the one who gets that need the most. She's the one, like him, with the dark red blood on her ledger, trying to erase it one solved crime at a time. It never washes out, and what Ari did wasn't her fault, any more than what happened to Shannon and Kelly was his, but in the end, that doesn't matter, the red is still there, and only one thing eases the ache of it.

"Why didn't you go to him? He would have been fine with it if you had just told him."

Gibbs isn't entirely sure of that, but he does know that Tony would have been a whole hell of a lot better with it if they had asked him.

"Honestly didn't think to."

"Because you're the Boss and the Boss doesn't ask."

"Yeah."
She mutters something, low and quiet, and possibly not English, while shaking her head. Then says in her normal tone, "You cannot stay if he's not the Boss. A few months isn't a problem. A year is."

"Thirty-eight," he says quietly.

"No Gibbs. Your lead, your case, no." She shakes her head. "No your rules. It's his and it gets done his way and he runs it how he likes, and if you are going to stay, you need to show the proper respect for that."

"And you'd know something about that?" he asks, realizing at some point Ziva must have had this conversation with herself, must have made the decision that Tony could be her husband and her boss.

"Yes. I would. So, can you do that, or do you have to go? We know McGee has to go. He's ready for his own team, and they are both stepping on each other's feet. Especially this last month... But that will happen, sooner than later."

Gibbs nods, he wants to say that he can do it, that he can jump in and surrender the team and whatever it is he needs to do to stay, but... But he realizes he needs to really think about it. Three leaders on one team is two too many, but two isn't much better, and certainly isn't fair to Tony.

"I'll know soon."

"Good enough. Maybe... you might talk to Rachel about it?"

They tend to skirt around the fact that he sees her, just like they don't much talk about the marriage counseling that Tony and Ziva are doing, but he nods nonetheless. Talking to Rachel about it probably is a good idea.

Tim felt his phone buzz. Just once. Probably Gibbs or Tony letting him know he was up. He doesn't check his phone. In interrogation, get buzzed twice and that means pull it out and look, once means get 'round to it when you can.

Draga's taking lead on this interrogation, not his first time, but he likely hasn't hit ten yet, either. Tim's chilling in the corner, staring down at Ralph Mason, intentionally looking bored, making sure Ralph feels like they've got him dead to rights and this is just about getting the paperwork filled out. (Which, as far as Ralph is concerned, is true. Who he was working for is another story, one they want a conclusion to.)

Draga's asking about the technical specs of what Ralph was doing. (He cloned the VA's website interface for doctors, stole their info, then used it to order extra medical devices from several companies. VA never got the devices, but the companies that made them got paid. Not their usual sort of case, but the last murder they handled involved an artificial knee that they traced by the manufacturer number, and found that said knee joint had been sold four times... Solved the murder two days ago, but decided this stunk to high heaven and needed to be checked out.) Tim's enjoying getting to be the guy who hangs out in the corner. In the past, he's always had to write up notes that were too deep for Tony, Gibbs, or Ziva to do the questioning, so they didn't. They hung out and looked menacing and he asked the questions.

So, Draga's working Mason over, laying the verbal trap to get the names of who actually set this up. His voice is calm, the questions are lulling, he's even adding a sort of Robin Hood angle into it, making Ralph look like some sort of hero, after all, times are hard, and those 'extra' orders kept a bunch of people employed, and no one got hurt, really... so...
About three words too late, Ralph figured out what was happening and froze, demanding a lawyer.

And a quick change of track, the ‘come on, you don't really need one, only guilty people need lawyers’ didn’t get Ralph's tongue to loosen again. And as Draga's aiming for another run at that, Tim ends things, gently pulling him out without making it obvious he's doing it.

So, they head back out of interrogation. Tim pulls out his cell, sees the note from Jethro, and feels a… he's not sure, and right now isn't a great moment for introspection. He says to Draga, "Okay, give him a few minutes in there, then take him down to processing, they'll handle the details."

"Got it."

He tucks his cell back into his pocket. "Also, next time, once they ask for a lawyer, you've gotta stop. If you get the wrong judge or the right lawyer, anything he says after he's asked for one’ll get tossed, and anything we find based on anything he says after he's asked for one'll get tossed, too."

"Okay. What'll you be doing?"

"Having a chat with Tony." He's not entirely sure about that, but he's guessing they better get it done.

"You two okay?" Draga doesn't look like he's sure he's allowed to ask that, but he does, anyway.

"Nothing you need to worry about."

"You know, if you want to talk or something…" Tim smiles at Draga, appreciating the offer. "Even if I did, it wouldn't be appropriate. He's your Boss."

Draga thinks about that. "But he's not yours, is he?"

"No."

"Is that the problem?"

"Yeah." Tim glances around, they're the only ones in the hallway outside of interrogation, but he pitches his voice low, anyway. "Look, we're not talking about it yet, but, yes, your interview question about why are we replacing Gibbs with you was right. We're not replacing Gibbs with you, we're replacing me. When Jenner leaves, I'm taking Cybercrime. Cybercrime does not know this, yet. Jenner does not know this. Jenner's second-in-command really does not know this, and I do not want him to find out from anyone but me, got it?"

Draga nods. "No scuttlebutt."

"Good."

"But Gibbs is a few months away from fifty-seven."

Tim doesn't comment on that.

"So, he should be leaving, right?"

"That's the question."

"So, is Gibbs not leaving?"
"That's what I'm going to be talking to Tony about."

"Why would you be talking to him about it?"

"Because if Gibbs isn't leaving, it'll be my fault."

Draga looks perplexed by that answer.

Tim shakes his head. "There are a few ways around mandatory retirement. Let's leave it at I found one of them for Gibbs."

"Okay." He thinks about it. "That a long enough wait for…" he tilts his head toward the interrogation room.

"Actually, yeah, that was. Take him to processing, then head back to the Bullpen. Ziva or Gibbs'll have something for you."

He'd only gotten Wh texted into his phone when the door to observation opened and Tony curled his finger, indicating Tim was to come in.

"Report?"

Tony looked mad enough bite his head off, and his voice was sharp, but he didn't ask about Gibbs, so Tim answered the question he did ask crisply, "Mason lawyered up. Draga handled the interrogation, got enough out that we've got him dead. Realized he was in danger of incriminating whoever's hiring him, and shut up."

Tony's not really paying attention to his answer, probably because if he was in observation, he saw the interrogation and doesn't really need a report. Finally he notices that Tim's finished and says, "See who's paying for the lawyer. If he is, he should roll pretty easy for the reduced sentence. If one of the companies is, we'll see if we can put pressure on him for conflict of interest."

"That's the play."

"Yep."

Tim turns, getting ready to head to processing to find out who Mason's lawyer is, and who's paying for him when Tony says, "So, you gonna tell me why you woke up a few days ago thinking, 'I know, today I'll fuck Tony's team?'"

He turns and squints at Tony, feeling like he's being overly dramatic about this. "Please. I maybe goosed you, no one got fucked."

Probably wasn't the right answer, ready to bite his head off morphed into the level beyond it, a sort of dangerous calm where Tony's brain speeds up and he starts really seeing everything around him, ready to go in for the kill.

Tony takes a deep breath, exhales long and slow, and then says, "Really? You goosed me? That's how you see going over my head, to my Boss, about my team, without talking to me first? You think that's a minor deal? You think making sure that Vance knows that I'm not in charge of my own team is like a pat on the ass?"

Okay, that was a decent point, and one Tim hadn't thought of. "I'm sorry. I just…"

"You think rearranging my team is just a minor little thing? Gibbs around for a whole nother year,
that's a moot point? You think that, really?"

Well, actually, yes on that. Sure, he hadn't been thinking about it when he was getting everything ready to get Gibbs another year, but he is now, and now he's not seeing it as a big deal. Tony's been working with Gibbs for sixteen years, not like one more should be an issue. So Tim says, "Okay, I get how going to Leon over you looks bad, but how is keeping Gibbs an extra year fucking you or your team? You're running it. Everything is going nice and smooth. You've an experienced hand to help take care of things and keep Draga in shape. You'll have him good and trained before you bring in someone new, instead of trying to ride herd on two probies. Why is this a bad thing?"

"Because that means he'll be here for an extra year! That means instead of breaking in someone new in the next few months, I'll be breaking someone new in next January, you know, about the time Ziva and I were hoping to be having a baby. But it's my team, so I've got to be here to break in a new person. And Ziva obviously can't be anchoring the team while I'm on paternity leave because she'll be on maternity leave, and no matter how good Draga is, he can't be running a brand new probie of his own less than two years in, so yeah, I'm fucked by this. Ziva is fucked by this."

"Oh." Tim winces, yeah, he's fucked Tony over royally and he's feeling like shit for it.

"Yeah. Why would you do this? I get why he's doing this. He's staring into the goddammed abyss and seeing nothing staring back up at him. But you're supposed to be the smart one. You're the one who sees three moves ahead, so why the fuck would you do this to me?"

"It's not about you..." Tony doesn't look happy at that, at all, but Tim keeps explaining, "Because the gold watch wasn't enough. You and I were talking about that, remember, what we'd do for him when he retires, and I was thinking about it, and there isn't anything that's enough. And we're sitting in the car, and I'm watching him do the job, and he's not done. He's not ready to retire. And I could do it for him. I could fix that. I never managed to get my Dad anything that made him proud, but I could fucking well do it for Gibbs. God, he looked so happy when we showed him the new documents. It was like the way he looked at us when we told him Abby was pregnant.

"I'm sorry, but I didn't think about you at all when it came to this. I know that's bad, but you didn't cross my mind."

"Because I'm not your boss."

"Because it wasn't about you! I should have thought about you, but I didn't. I should have been thinking three moves ahead, but the three moves I was thinking through was how to hack into the Social Security database to change his birthdate."

Tony's staring at their reflections in the window to interrogation.

Tim's leaning back against the door staring at the ceiling, not sure what to say next. He gave it to Gibbs. He saw the way he lit up at the idea of it. He heard the hope in his voice when they showed him his new documents. He wants this, wants it bad, probably wants it more than he's wanted anything in decades, and when push comes to shove, when it's Tony and Ziva's happiness or Gibbs' he's more attached to Gibbs.

But it's Tony's team, and Tony and Ziva's family, and... and he fucked it up.

He doesn't want to take it away from Gibbs.

He doesn't want to be the guy who screwed Tony and Ziva.

"Leon's still checking into it. I can fix this. Make it go away."
Tony closes his eyes and grits his teeth. "No. It'd be like cutting his head off. I can't do it."

Tim nods at that. They stand there quietly. "The team doesn't always have to come first, Tony. Honestly, it probably shouldn't. Just because that's how he ran it doesn't mean that's how you do."

Tony stares at Tim's reflection, blinks slowly, once, and Tim doesn't know what that means.

"Just… You married Ziva, not Draga, not NCIS. You're allowed to let it go to the back burner long enough to have babies. World won't end if Draga and whoever the other Probie is do paperwork for a month or get loaned to someone else. Lab didn't fall apart because Abby left. Her new guys were on for three days before she left. Crimes still got solved, murderers got put away, NCIS kept going. You're allowed to leave. Or… if she got pregnant now, you'd have Gibbs in place to cover for you…"

Tony's not glaring, but this doesn't seem to be anything he wants to hear. He waves that away. "As long as he's here, I'm not in charge. He's staring over my shoulder, making sure I'm doing it 'right.' Draga's the only one who actually thinks I'm his Boss. I know I'm never really going to be Ziva's Boss, don't want to be, not really. It's good to have a partner. But until he's gone, it'll still be his team. We'll still do it his way. Keep his rules. Follow the same patterns."

"What do you want to change?"

Tony shakes his head. You're not getting it clear on his face. "You remember the difference between how it felt to drive with… who taught you to drive?"

"My grandfather."

"Remember the difference between driving with him next to you and the first time you got behind the wheel on your own?"

"Not really. Messing with the windshield wiper, looking up, seeing the bus two seconds away from plowing into me then feeling it hit is pretty much the only concrete memory I've got of the first time I drove on my own."

Tony looks pretty frustrated by that. "How'd it feel when you were running the Ender case?"

"Good. I liked it. Didn't feel much different than usual, though. More handling people, less tech."

Tony sighs. "No. I guess it didn't." So much of what Tim does is all on his own. None of the rest of them actually know what it is he does on the computers, so they don't ask, and he doesn't tell, and until he's ready for them to move, he's just on his own. Tony shakes his head again. "It's not the same with him here. It's not like it was back when he left and I was really in charge."

"Okay. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, great." It's very clear that sorry hasn't fixed this, can't fix it.

"What do you want me to do?"

Tony waves at the door. "Go through those companies' financials again. Bring in the bookkeepers if necessary, someone okayed the payments to Mason. Go find them."

"On it."
Ziva, Draga, and Gibbs all watched Tony head through the bullpen to his desk.

He sat down, drug his chair into the center, and said, "Report."

All three of them sat there, still staring at him.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, Boss," Draga said, scooting into the center, Ziva and Gibbs following a second later.

"Are you okay?" Ziva asked. Doesn't take a trained investigator to see sad and angry on him.

"I'm fine."

She and Gibbs nodded, looking at each other, tucking that away for things to be talked about later. But they also know that right now is not the time to ask about it.

So, Tony, having declared himself "fine" and requesting a report, Draga launched into pretty much the same report Tim had. Then Ziva added what she had found going through the VA joint registry, and how there were close to 5000 artificial joints that had been purchased multiple times, and God alone knew what else. Joints, pins, heart valves, things that go and stay inside bodies have serial numbers, but literally thousands of other devices get used on a daily basis by the VA, and without physically going to the warehouses and hospitals and counting up inventories to go with purchase orders, there's just no way to tell if the amount of stuff purchased is even remotely like the amount of stuff in the stores.

Gibbs explained that he had overseen Mason's processing and that his lawyer was due in tomorrow morning, and as of this point said lawyer appeared to be paid for by Mason, (he found him in the phone book) but that he'd get on checking that out. (Okay, he's actually already checked that out, but he's waiting to be told to do it to produce said information. Another hour or so and he'll volunteer that Meyers, Briggs, and Meyers is, as best as he can tell, in no way related to any of the companies they're investigating.)

"McGee's rechecking the financials, looking for an actual person who paid Mason," Tony said, not looking toward McGee's desk, not expecting him to come near unless he has a breakthrough.

The other three nod at that. The problem with these companies is that they're huge. Somehow, somewhere an invoice shows up for services rendered by Mason, and someone in Accounts Payable handles it, but when you're talking about a company with five hundred employees it's awfully hard to find exactly who is making sure things like this happens.

"Until we've got more to go on, finish up the paperwork on the Finely case."

They nod at that, too, and go back to work.

The LabRats kept shooting Tim curious looks as he worked next to Abby. Not every day their boss's husband showed up and then decided to commandeer a lab computer. But neither of them said anything about it to them. (Though he did, briefly, by sign, get her up to date on what was going on.) So they didn't ask.
He was sorting through Mason's financials, hunting down every company that was paying him, looking for one that might be small enough to actually locate a specific person who had to take responsibility for agreeing to pay his invoice.

So far, no dice. The fact that he appeared to be providing legitimate web work and IT services didn't make this job any easier.

About an hour into it, while he was cross checking company web sites with IRS filings, looking for the right target, Gibbs headed in, Caf-Pow in hand for Abby, and a cup of coffee for him.

Abby accepted the Caf-Pow and the kiss on her cheek while pipetting something into the vials they use for Major Mass Spec. "Don't have any updates, yet."

"I know." He turned to look at Tim, placing the coffee cup next to him.

Tim took it, sipped it, and stood up, stretching a bit. He eyed the door and Gibbs got that look. Neither of them need to have this conversation with the LabRats lurking.

When they were outside, Tim leaning against the south wall of NCIS, sipping his coffee, Gibbs facing him, both of them sucking up a bit of October sunshine, Tim said, "I'd say we managed to screw that particular pooch in every direction a pooch can be screwed in."

"Fubar."

"Yep." He took another sip of his coffee. Then he closed his eyes, let his head drop against the brick wall, felt the sun warm on his skin. "It's not done, yet. Leon's looking into it. I can still make it go away."

"You probably should."

He opened his eyes and looked into Gibbs' seeing the doubt, fear, and uncertainty there. "Do you want me to?"

"No."

But wanting isn't having and sometimes we shouldn't get the things we want. "Should I? Really?" Gibbs closed his eyes, and Tim can see the pain there. "Yes."

"I'll let Leon know. Gotta win back a ton of brownie points on this, so I won't have time to fix the data for a bit, but when this case is put to bed, I'll do it."

"Okay."

"Sorry, Jethro."

"Why are you sorry?"

"I got your hopes up. Back when this was inevitable, you were better with it."

"Nah. Just doing a better job of hiding it. You don't bitch about the things you can't change."

Tim nods.

"I'm grateful, Tim, even if it didn't work."
Four hours later, he was home, doing what he always did when he had a bad day. Woodworking and bourbon was always good for clarity and peace in the past. But, as he's carefully stroking the first layer of the maple stain onto Anna Palmer's crib, Gibbs isn't feeling particularly calm or clear.

Been a long time since he's been so torn between what he wants and 'the right thing to do.' Last time he felt this torn between want and right, he was looking at his new redhead probie thinking about at least half a dozen x-rated things he wanted to do with and to her.

At least then he knew it wasn't right.

This time he's not nearly so sure.

He knows he can do the job.

He knows he can do it way better than anyone else Tony can get to replace him. That's just a given. No fresh-out-of-FLETC, wet-behind-the-ears, newbie (that's what Tim calls them, right?) can match his twenty plus years.

He just can't.

And honestly, anyone who'd be willing to transfer into their team, even with experience, won't be as good. Not bad, certainly. Different, of course. But he clears more cases, more quickly, with a higher conviction rate than anyone else in NCIS.

That's his team, working his rules, doing it his way…

Except it's not. Not anymore.

Because it's Tony's team, and letting him run it is the right thing to do. He's ready for his own team. He can run it. He's good at his job and knows the way to make it work. He's ready.

And he doesn’t need Gibbs staring over his shoulder.

Because while it's true that sticking around for another year may be the right thing for Gibbs, it's not the right thing for Tony.

And it's not selfish to want his own team. It's not bad or wrong or anything else. And Gibbs knows he's got to go for it to really be Tony's.

Because that's just the way it is.

But if he goes, people will die. Cases won't get solved as quick. Tony's good, he's solid, his instincts are sound, but he doesn't have Gibbs' gut. He just doesn't. And soon, Tony and Ziva will have two probies, and that's a lot of untested, un-experienced, un… everything, to have on your team and watching your back.

Which means some of those people who may die may be Tony or Ziva, because he won't be there, watching their backs, and anyone who replaces him won't be as good.

He hears his front door open, followed by heavy, quick steps, searching the upstairs from the sound of it. Not Tony, he's too pissed to chat tonight. Too heavy to be Jimmy or Tim, who might want to have a chat with him, touch base and see what's up. Not Draga, Draga doesn't come here, not yet. Ducky would have headed straight to the basement, so not him. Likewise, Fornell would have headed straight down, too.
He catches a faint scent of coffee and whatever that cologne Leon wears is.

"In the basement, Leon."

A second later he hears the first step on his stairs.

"Do you even use the rest of the house?"

"On occasion."

Leon looks over the crib and smiles. "Newest baby Palmer?"

"Anna. She's supposed to be on the outside middle of December. Want to get this done by Halloween."

"Good plan." He faces Gibbs, leaning against the workbench. "So… What's this bull McGee's telling me about you being born in 1960?"

Gibbs stares at the ceiling and sighs. "A bad idea."

"Uh huh," Vance says in that exceptionally understated way of his. "I understand DiNozzo and McGee had a conference this afternoon as to the suitability of this plan, and worked on reinforcing proper respect regarding the chain of command?"

"Something like that."

"And is the chain of command in place?"

"I think so. Tim'll be up to tell you not to go forward on the new birthdate thing soon, but right now he's putting in his 110% to try and make it up to Tony."

"Good." Leon took a form out of his jacket pocket and unfolded it on Gibbs workbench, then poured himself a drink. "1087 B. It's filled out and signed."

Gibbs looked at it, the form that allows for exceptions to the mandatory retirement age.

"Thought you couldn't get one of these if you had more than twenty years in."

"You usually can't, but in that I'm the guy who okays them…"

Gibbs nods, and Leon nudged he document. "No need for McGee to go and perjure himself to get you another year."

"Thanks, Leon."

Leon shook his head. "There's a whole ball of strings attached to that, Jethro."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"I do now."

Leon took another sip of his drink. "Is DiNozzo ready? You two just pulled the rug out from under him, and he didn't have a clue until after."

"He's ready."
Vance nods. He taps the form. "If he's ready…" You don't need to stick around is loud and clear.

"I know. He can do it. He'll do it well. But…"

Vance nods at that, too. He's fifty, and he'll hit twenty years in in '16. He knows that as Director his job doesn't have a get-out-of-town date attached to it, but he also knows that in the next five years he's going to start getting hints along those lines. "Date on the form is October 15th. Don't need it back until then. Take it. Think. Talk to him."

Gibbs nods.

"Jethro, there's more to NCIS than just hot cases. We need recruiters. We need instructors. We have a whole team going through cold cases in DC alone. We need translators. You speak what, four languages?"

"More."

"You wanna run classes on sniper skills or tactical assessment or interrogation technique; I'll set you up for it. Things are still unstable in Crimea, you want to finish up the Shannon, head to the Black Sea, find a nice port city, hang out, read newspapers, and keep your ear to the ground, I'll send you."

"Spying mission on my own?"

"Passive intel gathering. Just feet on the ground seeing what's going on, but yeah, I'll send you. You do speak Russian, right?"

"Da."

"Wouldn't be like your cloak and dagger days. More like retired tourist keeping an eye on things, but, you want it, we can do it."

Gibbs looks at the crib and shakes his head. "I need to be closer to home. A week or two, fine, but I can't miss my girls for too long."

Leon smiles at that. "Know that feeling." He takes one more sip. "Even if January is the end of your days as Team Leader, it doesn't have to be the end of your days being useful."

Gibbs shrugs at that. "Pushing paper doesn't do it, ya know?"

"Yeah. I know." It had taken a full half year for Leon to get used to not jumping up to handle field assignments. "But it's not useless, either. And we do need talent scouts, and we do need people who have been there and done that to teach the younger ones."

Gibbs just looks at Leon, getting across exactly how much that's not what he wants to be doing.

Leon nods at that, he gets it. "So, let me see these newly discovered documents. I poked around on the computer records he built you, and they're clean."

Gibbs led Leon upstairs, and showed him his "new" birth certificate, first driver's license, first report card, and a few other odds and ends.

Leon studied them carefully. "Good work. Where'd he get the paper?"

"They're the originals. Abby lifted the old ink and made new ink to match it. Tim's better at copying handwriting, and owns the typewriter for the rest."
"Yes, I know how good he is at copying other people's handwriting. Especially DiNozzo's and yours."

"Thinking of an assignment for him?"

"Not right now. We've got people who do this when I want it official. But it's good to know that if I ever don't want it official, I've got someone who can do this."

"According to Abby, unless the exact right bit of the paper gets carbon dated, there's no way to tell it's forged."

Leon nods, then stands up. "You get some quiet time tomorrow, head over to HR and take a look at what all we've got going on that you don't need to be under fifty-seven for."

"Okay."

Before he and Ziva got together, Tony was never much of a bath guy. There were probably several reasons for this, but most of them could be distilled into this, none of the things he liked doing outside a bath could be done in it.

Can't watch movies in the tub, can't watch the game, can't pick up women, can't dance, you probably could play the guitar, but it'd be really bad for your guitar.

So, though the apartment he lived in at the time had a killer bathroom with a very nice tub, he never bothered to use it.

Ziva's place didn't have a particularly good bathtub. Kind of small, and it took forever to fill because the faucet was too tiny. But Ziva did like baths. She liked filling up the tub with hot water, fragrant oils or salts, and settling in to read for an hour or so.

And when they got together, taking advantage of his tub was something she enjoyed.

And from there, Tony found that he enjoyed sharing a bath with her.

And the worse the day was, the more stressed he was, the more he appreciated being able to fill up the tub, add the bath salts, (sandalwood and jasmine, pleasantly fragrant, doesn't make him feel like he smells like a flower shop after) and settle in to talk with her.

Add in the fact that their current place had a Jacuzzi tub, and yeah, happy muscles relaxing and trying to let go of the day.

He was already in the water, laying back, trying to get himself calm. She sat on the edge of their tub, twisting her hair up into a knot. "Are you going to tell me about it?"

"What's there to tell? Papa Smurf is scared. Brainy Smurf is desperate for Daddy to pat him on the head. Put the two of them together and I get screwed."

"Tony." She smiles sadly at him.

"I think I've got McGee handled. When we left he was still hunting down leads. For a few more days at least, I think he'll be putting in the extra to try and make me smile." Ziva drops her robe on the floor, and slips into the water, settling so that she's sitting between his legs, back against his chest, head resting on his shoulder. He kisses her temple. "Lord… the thing with Gibbs is such a mess."

She smiles gently at that, too. "This is fixable."
He shakes his head. "Not by me. I can't spend another year working for him, and I can't cut his head off. 'It's like dying,' he actually said that to me. How am I supposed to make him leave after that?"

Ziva shrugs, she doesn't know how he can do it. She does know that he needs to do it, because he's right, he can't work for Gibbs for another year. "We talked a little. I told him he can't stay unless you really are the Boss, and he thought about it. Didn't jump in and give me an immediate I-can-do-it answer."

He thinks about that and says, "I need to talk to Vance in the morning."

"Why?"

"Tell him I'm keeping Gibbs."

She winced slightly at that.

"Too little, too late?"

She nods. "Perhaps something along the lines of you've got your mutineers in hand and are in control again and that anything that doesn't go through you is to be immediately reported to you and that you'll handle it?"

He shakes his head again. "That's the thing about a mutiny. Even if you do get it under control again, anything you do about it reminds the higher ups that you lost control."

"Ignore it? Pretend it didn't happen?"

"I don't think that looks like in charge either."

She turned in his arms, and reached up to kiss him.

Gibbs stared at the form on the workbench.

"It's like dying."

He probably shouldn't have said that to Tony. That was beyond a low blow. But…

But it's also the most honest thing he's said about retiring. It's not like dying. It is dying. 'Leroy Jethro Gibbs, NCIS.' "Gibbs, NCIS"

He doesn't spend time doing cop things. He is a cop. That's… not his whole life, but it's so damn close. At least ten hours a day, five days a week, and most weeks it's probably closer to nine hours six days. He thinks of cases when he's not working them, he works them until he drops or solves them, he hasn't taken a vacation since his last honeymoon. Hasn't taken a break since he left with Franks, and even with that, he was driving Franks buggy, fixing everything that wasn't nailed down.

He's a cop. He's been a cop for twenty-two years, twenty-three years four days before he retires. If he retires. He touches the form again. Another year. Three hundred and sixty five more days until he has to… become something else.

If he can.

He knows retired military. He knows retired doctors and lawyers and farmers and accountants and… and just about everything.
But he doesn't know a lot of retired cops. Because the ones he made friends with, the ones he liked, they lived the job. It was their end all and be all and when they weren't on the job, there wasn't anything else.

And when they retired, they died, and not in the metaphorical sense of the men they used to be shriveled up and vanished, but in the literal within a year their wives/kids stuck them in a box and buried them sense.

The guys he knows that are still around are like Mike; they burned out on it. They left by choice. They didn't get booted out. The ones who were forced out, they didn't do so well.

Because when your whole life is the job, you just don't keep going when it's gone.

So, his whole life can't be the job.

His fingers trace over the form. The right thing to do. What he wants to do. The right thing for him, or the right thing in general. He can remember the version of him Mike showed him, the one who did the 'right thing' and let Hernandez go. That broken shell of a man, living on bourbon and hate.

But that was the 'right thing.' Just not the right thing \textit{for him}.

But this time it's not just about the right thing for him. It's the right thing for Tony, and by extension, Ziva, too. It's the right thing for his kids.

But it feels like throwing himself on his own funeral pyre.

Gibbs knocked on the door to Tony and Ziva's place. It's not too late, but not exactly early, either.

Ziva opened it a few seconds later, in her bathrobe, and looked mildly surprised to see him.

"Can I see him?"

"I'll check."

She headed off to their bedroom, and he heard quiet voices. Two minutes later she was back, and nodded again. But he can see she's wary, so he smiles a little at her, letting her know that Tony won't regret this.

Tony's sitting on their bed in a pair of shorts. Yankees are playing on the TV, but he's got it on mute. Gibbs knows they do that. Tony watches the games on silent while Ziva reads.

Tony looks him up and down, also wary. "Gibbs."

He held up the form. "1087 B, filled out by Vance. He's given me until the 15th to hand it back in." Gibbs turned his back to Tony, so he can't see his face, can't see the pain of this. Then he ripped the form into little pieces, flicked on the switch that turned on the gas fireplace in their room, and dropped the bits. He swallowed once, and then twice, opened his mouth, and then closed it, not sure if his voice would hold. Two more seconds, the sound of the rushing flames and the smell of burnt paper filling the room. Then he was sure he could get a few more words out. "January 15th. That'll be my last day."

Tony nods at that, and Gibbs heads out, he doesn't want to talk, and he doesn't think Tony does either.

Ziva follows him to the door and hugs him as he gets ready to head off, holds him close for a long
minute, then reaches up on her tip toes to kiss his forehead.

He burrows his face against her shoulder, and stands close to her, not sure what happens next, but eventually he pulls back and head out of their home back toward his own, feeling hollow, aching from the sense of nothing left to do.

The fact that it's the right thing doesn't make it any easier.
When he gets home, he opens up his computer, not really sure what he wants to do.

Not true.

Not really comfortable with what he wants to do.

What he wants to do is call Rachel up and just talk to her. Well, what he'd really like to do is actually see her, share a cup of coffee, and talk to her. But he knows that's a bad plan. They are, as she made very clear, not dating. Technically, she's not actually a friend. He can't just call her up at 8:53 on a Thursday night just to talk because he had a bad day.

But, God, he wants to. She'd sip her coffee, listen attentively, ask good questions, help him sort out his head in a way that woodworking just doesn't.

In a way that isn't lonely.

But he can't ask her to come over. Can't suggest going to her. This little fantasy of talking to her, her on his sofa, listening to him, is already dangerously close to over the line, and actually seeking her out would be way over the line.

So he won't.

But he can email, and ask to shift this week's assignment. In that it's October and his thirty-sixth wedding anniversary is creeping up on him, he's supposed to be coming up with a plan for what he's going to do to mark the day.

He can ask to put that off, right? That's within bounds, right?

So, he opens his email account, and begins to hit the compose button when he looks to his contact list on the left and sees the little green dot next to Rachel Cranston.

He's aware of those dots. Noticed them before. But he doesn't know what they mean.

He pulls out his phone and flashes a text to Tim. What's the little green dot next to someone's name on gmail mean?

Three minutes later he gets back I'm fine, too. Thanks for asking. How are you?

He rolls his eyes. Frustrated. I don't know what the green dot means.

It means the person's online.

So if I send an email they'll get it immediately?

Yeah. Or you can chat with them.

How's that work?

Double click on the name, little box pops up, type. Who you talking to? Tony?

No. Already talked to Tony.
How's he doing?

Better than he was two hours ago.

?

Tomorrow or the next day.

Probably Saturday, not sure when I'm getting back.

Back? Where are you?

Tracked down a lead in PA. Snagged Draga, heading north. Traffic on the beltway means we're just hitting the middle of Maryland right now.

Gibbs is glad to hear he's got a lead, more happy yet that he's following it, but then something else hits him. Did you tell Tony you found a lead?

There's a minute where nothing comes up on his phone, and then one word flashes up. Shit. Two minutes later: Done. Have gotten permission to go to PA and hunt down lead. I wouldn't mind if he thought I worked this late in the lab and just left.

Gibbs shakes his head. Ziva's right, Tim needs to go. He's beyond ready. There's taking initiative, and then there's you're in charge on your own. He knows he wouldn't be thrilled if Tim just ran off, snagging another agent, on his watch without at least a heads up as to what's going on.

Good plan. He types. Tony doesn't need to know, this soon after the two of them blowing up, that Tim's on his own.

So, who you want to chat with?

Tomorrow. Dinner. Your place. Hate texting.

No problem. See you then.

He double clicks on Rachel's name and a little box did appear in the lower right corner of his screen. Sort of like texting then, but at least for this he's got a real keyboard.

So… how do you start this?

Hi

He's feeling stupidly off balance waiting for the response. Half-afraid that he's intruding on her, half-nervous that she just won't respond, but mostly feeling foolish that he's so out of sorts he can't wait until Monday and just talk to her then.

Hello Jethro.

He feels like he can hear her voice as those words pop up on his screen.

Now what?

Can I change my assignment for this week?

Having trouble?
No… Not like that. Lot happened this week. Wanna talk about it.

That's not a problem. How about you send me an email, get me up to date, and we can hit the ground running on Monday?

That sounds good.

The screen stays blank and he's not sure how to sign off for this.

He types goodnight but deletes it before hitting enter.

I'll have it in your inbox by tomorrow. That he does hit enter for.

And a few seconds later he gets back. Looking forward to it. See you Monday.

It took him close to three hours to get it all out and it's probably the most… real… thing he's ever tried to put into words.

It's rambling, and doesn't make a ton of sense, but the swings are there, that resignation he had before Tim gave him the out, the elation of getting another year, the desperate grab for more time, feeling like shit for pulling it on Tony, guilt for that, ripping it up, burning the bridge, and now this just sort of numb, terrified hopelessness.

Not knowing what to do, what comes, next.

Being scared by that, too.

How he's afraid he needs more than just the kids and grandkids. How he's afraid that until he finds it, he'll be clinging to them so hard they'll get sick of him. That he's afraid there isn't more, not for him.

That he doesn't know who he is if he's not a cop.

That getting booted out is so fucking unfair. It'd be one thing if he couldn't do the job anymore, but he's getting shelved because he's… inconvenient and expensive. And he's angry at it. Angry at Tony right now, even though he probably shouldn't be. Tony's more than within his rights to want his job, he's earned it, he's put the time in, and Gibbs' clock has almost zeroed out so suddenly adding more time wasn't fair, either.

But running out when you can still do it… He's good at his job. He's probably one of the best at his job, but being the best, or near best, doesn't matter, because it's not a meritocracy. That makes him want to rage.

But mostly, through all of it, is scared. For almost twenty-three years he's always known what he was going to do the next day. He was going to get up, grab a shower, throw on some clean clothing, and then do the job. And maybe nothing else would be stable, or make sense, or make him feel good, but that's always been there.

And come January 16th, it won't be.

But sitting in front of his computer won't solve it. Nothing'll solve it. The clock won't go backwards, and it keeps running forward, closer to tomorrow. So he heads to bed. Might as well try to get some sleep.

It's not like he usually springs out of bed with a song in his heart and joy in his soul. It's more like he
sort of grumbles his way out. His team... he sighs... Tony's team, knows he's about as much fun as splinter under your fingernail until he's got some coffee in him, and stomping out of his nice comfortable bed, and usually fairly pleasant dreams, does nothing to make that any better.

But he's fairly reliable about wake up, get up, get showered, get dressed, eat, and out the house. He doesn't laze around in bed. He doesn't linger in the shower. He's a Marine, and Marines are up, in, out, and done. (Shannon used to have a rather off-color joke about that, one he had appreciated greatly. Though back in those days, he didn't go sprinting out of bed right after waking up if he didn't have work. In fact, before Kelly, on several occasions, they didn't make it out of bed for anything but food and the bathroom. He misses those days.)

He doesn't have an alarm.

Doesn't need one.

His body knows when to get up, and it doesn't matter when he went to bed, he's up when he needs to be.

But this morning, he's just... laying there, not really feeling like it's worth getting up.

And the little mental pep talk (bad guys to get, people to arrest, lives to save) isn't exactly revving his engine. He finally wills himself out of bed by the sheer fact that if he's late to work and doesn't give them a reason for it, they'll send out the Mounties to go find him.

And lying in bed in a bad mood is nothing he wants to expound on, let alone why he's in the bad mood.

He gets in after Tony and Ziva, and both of them are at their desks reading up on something. No Tim or Draga, so they must still be in PA working that lead.

"We got Mason and his lawyer in?" Gibbs asks.

Tony nods toward Ziva who is reading up on Tim and Draga's notes. "They'll be in a ten. McGeek and TechSupport Mark II are both grilling Eva Flanders, the bookkeeper at Herden's Titanium Works. Should get a report back in an hour or so about them moving up the food chain. Ziva's playing catch up for talking with Mason and his lawyer. You're going to go in there with her, look menacing, and if any of her questions get to him, make a note of it. We'll send McGee and Draga in on the second run."

"I can do that."

And he did. Because he loves the job. Because doing it feels right. And even if he's not the Boss, the rhythms of a case, of paperwork, of puzzles to solve and people to save are his life.

He's sitting next to Ziva, keeping a close eye on Mason, and as he does it he feels his silence coming back. Not that he'd ever gotten particularly talky at work, but the shield of no words will help keep fear and sorrow, not tamed down, but hidden.

It'll help get the job done, and if he can only do it for two and half more months, he'll do it as much, as fully, and as well as he can.

But he can't talk about it, because if he does, it'll show through his voice.

The end is near, and he can't pretend that it isn't.
Tip of the Iceberg

Abby and Corwin were dusting a collection of evidence for prints when Tim got back from his chat with Gibbs.

"Everything okay?" she asked

"Enough."

She nodded at that. That was enough for right now, and when they get home they can talk for real. He headed over to the new lab annex, where his computer (okay, his keyboard and monitor with the little black hearts on it, the computers were all off in Abby's office now) ended up, and got back to work.

Three hours and two cups of coffee later, Abby was leaning against the doorway. "We're wrapped for the day over here. How about you?"

He looked up from what he'd found. (Possibly) (Hopefully) The break he needed.

"Twenty more minutes?"

"Okay." She squeezed his shoulders gently, and kissed the back of his neck, then headed back to her office to wade through more paperwork. (Requisition forms! Not much fun, but if they don't want to run out of reagents, pipettes, and the like, vital.)

Half an hour (and orders placed for new vials, replacement motor for Major Mass Spec, he'd been slow and techy all week, and sterile growth compound) later, she headed back to him.

"Closer to done?"

"Not exactly." He shook his head, looking at her with a less than enthusiastic half-smile on his face. "I found which company we need to lean on to break this. Herden Titanium Works. Only twenty people work there, so it's not like they can play the no-one-knows-where-the-invoices-come-from game."

"Let me guess, you aren't going to wait until tomorrow to get into this?"

"Got a lot of brownie points I need to earn back. And if I get into a car now, I should be up in Downingtown in..." he quickly googled, "six hours. Be able to start questioning Eva Flanders, their bookkeeper, first thing in the morning, maybe have whoever hired Mason by lunch."

She gave him a long, gentle kiss. "See you tomorrow, then?"

"Yeah." He kissed back, hands clasped on her low back. "Give Kelly an extra-long snuggle for me."

"Okay."

He'd told Draga to meet him in the motor pool, and there he was, standing next to one of the Mercury Sables, go bag slung over his shoulder.

"So, where are we going?" Draga asked as he unlocked the car.

"Downingtown, PA."
"Where's that?"

"North."

Draga's answering look was a pretty clear, *that was amazingly useful, thank you oh so much.*

Tim shrugged back at him. "I did a quick google. It's six hours from here. GPS'll have more details. Let's go."

So in they got, and as Draga backed out, Tim set the GPS for Herden Titanium Works and explained why they were heading there.

They managed to drive for eleven whole minutes before getting to the first traffic jam. I-495 was gridlocked and the GPS was telling them they still had two miles to go before they could get to the exit that would let them find a new route. Estimated time to that exit, forty-five minutes.

"I take it this isn't uncommon?" Draga asked.

"You wish. I've lived here since 2003 and the entire time some part of the 95 interchange has been under construction and mucking up the rest of it."

"Wonderful."

"Yeah, there's a reason to live inside DC if you can possibly afford it."

"Or don't have kids living with you."

Tim thought about that for a second and made the connection between Draga and his son. "There are some really great private schools."

"Uh huh."

Tim thought back and remembered what Draga was making these days. "Kevin's starting kindergarten next year?"

"Yeah."

"Maryland's got great schools, but not right next to DC. Supposed to be some good charters near DC."

"But you get into them by lottery, and the Virginia side has great schools, but I can't afford it." Draga sighed. "His mom's lawyer's harping on the fact that where she is the schools are better."

"Don't they have programs in DC for cops and schoolteachers and nurses and stuff, try to get them into better neighborhoods?"

"They do. I don't qualify because I'm a Fed and make too much money."

"That sucks."

"Yeah."

"Ziva and I used to live in Silver Springs. Schools were okay there."

"Okay. Not great. Not terrible. Anywhere in the areas I can afford, I've got to be able to come up with tuition to one of the private schools to get a better education than he can get where he's living
"And tuition is too much."

"At the places I've checked. They all say financial aid is available, but I can't apply for him if I don't have custody, and I can't get custody because I can't prove that I can get him adequate schooling. At least, that's where the argument is right now."

"I'm really sorry."

"Me, too. On the upside, her lawyer is offering summers, Christmas, and spring break, so that's him bending to some degree. Before it was just every other weekend, and if I couldn't get down there for him, too bad."

"You gonna take it?"

"Right now, I'm thinking I am. Trying to get my lawyer to make sure there's something in there about revisiting the agreement in three years."

Tim nodded, he got that. In three years, Draga will be up three levels and making enough to afford a better place to live or tuition.

"So, what's going on with you and DiNozzo? Good talk?" Draga asked a few minutes later as they sat in gridlock, staring at cars just sitting still.

Tim shrugged.

"You gonna be working in the lab forever?"

"No. Just, you know, sometimes it's a good plan to make yourself scarce for a bit."

"Yeah, I know that. Gibbs sticking around?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

That surprised Draga.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Tim asked.

"Thought if anyone would know, it'd be you."

"It probably would be. I'll lay odds on him not staying. You ever get caught between what you want and the right thing to do?"

"You mean like not kidnapping my son?"

Tim glanced over and saw that Draga may be playing that for a joke, he wasn't nearly joking as much as he should be. Granted, Tim was feeling a bit edgy on the idea of one, maybe two, nights without seeing Kelly, so the idea of only seeing her summers and at Christmas would drive him insane.

Draga saw Tim get it, and Tim nodded back at him. "Actually, yes, probably a lot like that. It'd be good for you, but probably not for him, not in the long run. Same thing with Gibbs and Tony. Gibbs sticks around another year, that's good for Gibbs, bad for Tony."
"But Tony's Team Leader."

"Yep. As he put it, it's like the difference between driving with whoever taught you how to drive in the seat next to you, and driving on your own."

And for as much as Tim didn't intuitively get that difference, the lights went on for Draga, who apparently had a much less exciting first driving experience than Tim did.

"New team for Tony?" Draga asked.

Tim sort of squinted at Draga, honestly shocked that he'd ask that. "Think they have leaderless teams just hanging around waiting for a new person? You get a team by being around when the old leader leaves. But say there was one, what happens to you and Ziva in a year when Gibbs leaves? Or say you and Ziva go with him, where does Gibbs go? Just like there's no new team hanging out waiting for Tony, there really isn't one for Gibbs. We haven't put any new field teams on the ground since... 2008? I don't remember, but they did offer Tony the one they were forming in Rota and he didn't take it."

"So, you're saying it's going to be a damn long time before I hit Senior Agent?"

"He'll age out in ten years. And who knows, if Russia makes a move on Estonia, we might start building up in Europe again, which'll probably involve a few new teams, but... You might be the low guy on the totem pole for a while. It's not a bad thing. You still get raises every year, or few years once you've been in for a bit, you still move up, Vance is good about making sure talent doesn't just sit there."

"Hence your lateral move?"

"Technically it's lateral and quite a bit up. I got offered Okinawa back in '10. That was the last new Cybercrime team. Field agent still worked better for me than desk jockey back then, so I declined. Asked for Cybercrime and got okayed for it back in... March? So my move's been on the books for a while. But, I'm still here because I can't go there until Jenner heads off, and he's taking his sweet time looking for his perfect next job. The only reason I can shift into head of Cybercrime is because I'm better than the second and third in commands and happen to be the guy the Director calls in for all of his personal hacking. Otherwise, I'd be stuck until they open a new team. It's like anything else, can't move up unless someone moves out, or they expand or reorganize forces. None of that's happening right now."

"So, really, damn long time?"

Tim shrugged. "Technically, I was a Senior Agent for less than four months. Ziva's never been a Senior Agent. Few more months, I'll run my own department. Excellence counts for a lot here. Be better at your job than anyone has any right to expect you to be, and Leon will work with you to make sure you're properly taken care of."

The sun had set and they were well out of DC when Tim felt his phone buzz. Text from Jethro asking, of all things, how gmail worked.

Why not? He shook his head slightly and started talking him through it, idly wondering who Jethro wanted to chat with.

Did you tell Tony you found a lead? Popped up on his phone after he explained where he was and why.
He stared at that text and cursed under his breath. Then he texted what he said. Then he started quickly texting Tony, getting him up to date. He didn't ask permission to go. It's written as an update. Here's what I found, I'm on the lead, taking Draga along, will send more when I know more, sort of thing.

A few seconds later he got one back saying that Tony wanted updates as fast as he had them and that Mason and his lawyer were due in in the morning, and if he had it cracked before they came in, they'd appreciate that.

On it. he typed back to Tony, and then got back to texting Jethro.

Once that was wrapped up, he said to Draga. "Just remembered to let Tony know where we are."

"Isn't there a rule about that?"

"Never be unreachable." He held up his phone. "Obviously, I'm reachable. Abby knew where we were going."

"But Tony didn't." Draga glanced away from the road toward him. It was pretty clear that he had assumed Tim had squared this with the rest of the team before they left.

"Did you tell him?"

"When would I have? During the fifty seconds between 'get a car we're going to Pennsylvania' and getting the car, or the minute between that and you popping up next to the car?"

"Good point. He does now."

"He's really not your Boss, is he?"

"Apparently not."

Zero for two on being a good team player. Wonderful. He used to be good at this. He used to be the most reliable one of the three of them on the not just wandering off and doing his own thing aspect of this job.

When did that change? When he took over the team or when Tony moved up?

Both things happened so close together he couldn't really tell. He'd only been working for Tony two days when Tony got hurt and he took over for two weeks.

Is it that he can't see Tony as his Boss, so he's just on his own, doing his own thing, or did running the whole show shift how he saw his job?

Tim didn't know, didn't care. Either way, this had to change. Okay, fine, Tony wasn't his Boss, (even if, right now, he technically was) but he was the Team Leader, and he needed to know where the whole team was and what they're doing at any time. So he could, you know, lead the damn team.

Or put this way, eventually he'll have a pile of computer techs all working for him, did he want them just going their own way without at least a heads up?

Actually… that was a good question.

He mulled over it. What level of I-know-exactly-what-you're-doing did he want? He wasn't a micro manager. He knew that. He didn't want hourly updates from everyone about precisely what they're
doing.

Ultimately… maybe… set the task with daily check ins… Let him know if there was a big break… That sounded decent. Given what he knew about his soon to be employees (not all that much) that might work. Of course, given the current quality of the work they were doing… more frequent check-ins may be necessary.

He'd seen their resumes, so he knew that once upon a time there was talent in Cybercrime, it just seemed to have drained out of the people down there.

But, eventually, he wanted to be able to give them a task, and have them handle it, and report in only when they came up with something he needed to know. Kind of like how Vance handled Gibbs.

Like Vance… That wasn't a bad template… Maybe…

Teams. 'Like Vance' worked better if he had teams. Each problem comes in, assign a team to it, foursomes… web specialist, database specialist, code wizard, hacker… Whoever had the most specialties on whatever it was got the leader position, and he'd check in with Tim. Swap 'em around so everyone got some leadership time…

"McGee…"

"Mmm…"

"What's up? Lots of texting and then you went dead silent."

"Oh… Nothing. Just thinking of how to reorganize Cybercrime."

"Oh."

"Yeah… Kind of a mess down there. And, haven't done a whole lot of running the show. So, gotta figure out how to do that."

"It'd be nice to not be completely clueless on day one."

"Something like that."

---

They were in Northern Maryland, getting gas and "dinner." Tim was fueling up the car while Draga foraged for sandwiches and drinks from the Wawa.

"So, how does this work. We get one room, two?" Draga asked when he came back, setting a bag with subs and two sodas on top of the car.

"They let us expense up to seventy-five dollars for food and lodging per-diem. So, usually one of us gets the room, and the other gets the food, and that way everything gets covered. But, if you want your own room it's not a problem. I'm good either way."

"Okay."

Tim was googling away while Draga started unwrapping his dinner. "Least expensive thing I can find in ninety a night."

"One star roach motel?"

Tim flipped his phone around and showed Draga the picture.
"Wonderful. I'd prefer not getting bedbugs. What's the least expensive three star place?"

Tim changed his parameters. "One twenty-three."

"How's that work?"

"Form E-458-B, we pool all of the receipts and expenses, and they cut one of us a check, and then we split it."

"Lovely. One good thing about the Navy, your bunk goes with you."

"We can sleep in the car."

"I'm thinking no on that," Draga said, shaking his head.

"Good. I hate sleeping in cars."

It was well after 1:00 when they got to the Fairfield Inn in Exton. (If there were hotels in Downingtown proper, they either cost too much to hit Tim's search, or weren't online. Either way, they were in the next town over.) It was a basic, no frills, hello-business-traveler-on-a-tight-expense-account kind of place.

It was clean. Smelled decent. Not too hot, not too cold. They had a room with two beds. Bathroom was functional. There was a coffee maker. Wi-fi worked. It was good enough, and better than some of the rat traps Gibbs had picked for them over the years.

Way better than Afghanistan, not as nice as the place they were in in Lejeune.

By all rights, Tim should be able to brush his teeth, slip into his pajama pants, and crash, not moving until the alarm kicks him out of bed six hours from now.

But he wasn't having an easy time settling, feeling edgy, and apparently Draga noticed.

"First full night away since she was born?"

"Yeah." Tim nodded, lying down. "Feels weird to not at least touch her every day."

"I know. You thinking we'll be home tomorrow?"

"I really hope so."

"Okay. Gonna get a swim," they had to go past the indoor pool to get to their room, "blow off some of the drive."

"You have swim trunks in your go bag?" Talk about non-standard go bag equipment.

"It's one in the morning. Who's gonna notice I'm in boxers?"

"Good point."

1:53, he was still awake. Usually he was pretty good, especially when tired, at hitting the pillow and going to sleep. But it wasn't his pillow, and Abby wasn't next to him, and he hadn't seen Kelly, and yeah, all of the things that say SLEEP, NOW weren't firing, because they weren't here.
Granted, there was a fairly… easy… solution to this issue, that usually worked awfully well, but he was really not a fan of doing it when he was sharing a room. They've all done it, (Okay, Tony and he have done it. He was honestly not sure about Gibbs, and didn't need or want to know.) at least once, especially when it was day three or four of the case, and they all ignored it, but… still, it wasn't anything he ever got particularly comfortable with.

But Draga was still off swimming.

Not like he was looking to really work himself over, just wanted to blow off enough tension to fall asleep. Wouldn't take more than five minutes.

He sat back up, snagged his phone, and headed for the bathroom. Rule one of jerking off when you're sharing a room: Always use the bathroom. You do not jerk off in bed when you're sharing a room; you just don't. (You really, really, REALLY don't if the other guy is in the room with you.) Even Tony, who was not exactly discrete in his habits, knew this.

The bathroom had those lights that turn the fan on as well, so no shot of whomever else is in the room hearing what was going on in there, which was nice. He locked the door, because… years of boarding school or the Marines meant that neither Tony nor Gibbs would think twice about walking in to use the head or brush their teeth when another guy was already in the bathroom. First time it happened, Tim was in the shower, barely awake, and just about jumped out of his skin when the water went ice cold when Tony flushed the toilet.

Door locked. Fan on. Good pictures of Abby on his phone, he went for the ones of her tied up from their honeymoon… very, very good pictures… set the right mood very quickly. (And reminded him of how long it'd been since he tied her up. Way too damn long!) He sent her a cock shot to perk up her morning. (Along with the caption, Thinking of you.) And yeah, it didn't take more than five minutes, but he was feeling awfully loose and relaxed by the time he hit the bed again.

He was just about asleep when he started to wonder if Draga actually was getting a swim, or if "getting a swim" meant taking advantage of the likely to be completely empty locker room.

He smirked at that, and fell asleep.

Eva Flanders, long term bookkeeper for the Herden Titanium Works, lived in a pleasant, little house on a street lined with other pleasant, little houses and large maple trees, blazing scarlet in the October sunshine. They all looked like they were built around the end of World War II and the effect of the whole thing could be described as "quaint."

Draga knocked. Tim already had his ID out.

If Betty White had a twin sister, she was standing in front of them, looking mildly confused at the two men on her doorstep at 8:00 in the morning.

"Hello?"

Tim flipped open his ID, and Draga got out his. "Tim McGee," he nodded to Draga, "Eric Draga, we're with NCIS and we'd like to talk to you."

Mildly confused morphed into boggled. "NC—what?"

"Naval Criminal Investigative Services. May we come in?" Tim asked.

"But… I'm not in the Navy."
"No ma'am, we didn't think you were." Tim glares at Draga for that.

"We investigate crimes involving Naval personnel, their families, and Marines," Tim explained.

"You're a bit late on that fellas, Bob died back in '82."

Tim and Draga glanced at each other, confused by that.

"Ma'am?" Draga asked, as she opened the door and let them in.

"Bob Flanders, my husband. He died back in '82."

"Was he Navy ma'am?" Draga asked.

"Marine."

"Ah… And… was he murdered?"

"Lord, no." She looked appalled by that idea. "Died in his sleep."

"Okay…” Draga was staring at Tim now what? on his face.

"Was there a crime involving your husband ma'am?" Tim asked.

"No."

"Ahhh… Okay." He smiled brightly at her, deciding to get to the point. "We were hoping to talk to you about your job with Herden Titanium Work."

"Why on earth would you want to talk about that? They don't work for the Navy."

"Could you just tell us about some invoices?" Tim asked, taking copies of the Herden bank statements from his pocket.

"Maybe." She saw the papers. "Let me get my glasses, back in a jiff."

He nodded at Draga, letting him know to keep an eye on her. Yeah, it wasn't likely that she was about to run off, or call someone at Herden, but this not-all-there-thing might be an act, and he wasn't about to get caught sleeping on this.

So Draga looked like he was checking out the pictures on the wall, keeping her in view, as unobtrusively as a guy who was 6'2" with bright red hair could.

She shuffled back in a few seconds later, glasses on, and sat down next to Tim. "So, what do you want me to look at?"

"We found that your company was paying Ralph Mason six thousand dollars a month for web design, and we wanted to know who hired him."

She squinted at the bank records and saw the transfers to Mason Web Consulting. "Oh, gosh. Tommy does all of that. I just make sure the books balance and the checks get sent out. You'd have to talk to him."

"And who is Tommy, ma'am?" Draga asked.

She stood up and headed over to one of the pictures on the wall. It was some sort of company picnic
shot, from the look of it all twentyish people who work for Herden were in it. She pointed to a man with brown hair and eyes, tan skin, happy looking smile. "Tommy. He took over about two years ago when Bill died." She pointed out an older version of Tommy, standing behind Tommy, hand on his shoulder.

"So, Tommy Herden?" Draga asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you have any idea where he'd be right about now?" Tim asked.

"He usually gets into work about noon. Stays until eight or nine. He handles second shift."

"Thank you very much Ma'am." Tim said, getting ready to head off.

"So…" Draga said as he got into the car. "We gonna get him at home, or wait for him to head into work."

"We're going to his place. Eva may be cute and sweet, but she may also decide to give Tommy a call, and if she does that, and if we're waiting at work, he may never show up."

"Okay. You want me to text Tony, let him know what's up."

"Yes, good idea." And once again that hadn't occurred to him at all. And yes, it was a good idea.

Another modest house in a neighborhood filled with modest homes.

Draga was staring at them, shaking his head as they cruised on through, looking for Tommy's address. "I'd figure you'd be living higher on the hog if you were going to screw the government."

"Twenty people work there, he was only pulling off about 500K a month. Wasn't making a whole lot of money on their other accounts."

"So, you're saying he was only stealing enough to stay in business."

"Sounds dumb as hell, but yeah. I mean, unless he's got a whole other account or something we haven't found."

Draga shook his head as he pulled into Herden's driveway.

"So, what's the plan?"

Tim scanned the house. Then quickly looked it up on google maps. "There's a backdoor."

"Okay."

"I'm going to the front door. If everything goes well, I'll knock, he'll open the door, I'll tell him why I'm here, and he'll let me take him in nice and easy."

"And if it doesn't, he'll take one look at you and run for the back."

"Where you'll be waiting for him. And then I'll cuff him and we'll take him in."

Draga looked very excited by this prospect. He was grinning as he said, "Let's do this!"
It didn't go according to plan. Tim knocked. He heard footsteps heading down the stairs. He saw the vague outline of a man look through the beveled glass on the door, saw the man stop, see someone he didn't recognize, with a badge, and then he started running for the back.

"Draga!" Tim yelled, opening the, surprisingly enough, unlocked front door.

Two seconds later, he was walking up behind Herden, who was standing in front of Draga, holding very, very still, because Draga was pointing his gun at him.

"Thomas Herden?" Tim asked.

Herden nodded.

"You're under arrest for defrauding the Veteran's Administration."

Draga put his gun away and was going over Herden's rights as Tim stepped closer to put the cuffs on.

Tim was looking down, focused on getting the cuffs on, he had it clicked around Herden's right wrist, and was opening the cuff for his left, standing directly behind Herden. He remembers hearing Draga saying, "If you can't afford—" And then his face exploded.

He kept a hold of the cuff, and didn't let go until he felt Draga tackle the guy. Then he tried to figure out what the hell had happened.

Best guess: he'd been head butted. Probably not a bad idea. Timed right, and on someone greener (like Draga) it probably would have worked. Crack the guy putting the cuffs on in the face, he'd let go, you'd run. As long as you got the hit in when Herden did, after the first cuff was on, before the second one, your hands would still be free, and you'd have no problems getting away.

Except Tim did hang on. And Draga was, from the sound of it, (Tim's eyes were still closed, watering, probably swelling shut, and he was sure the liquid dripping over his mouth and chin was blood, but he wasn't sure if his nose was broken,) was possibly using a tad more force than was strictly necessary to get Herden to stay down. (He thought Draga may have kicked Herden about three times more than he needed to, but Tim wasn't feeling particularly sympathetic to Herden right then.)

But, after a minute or two, Draga did get Herden secured, and into the car, and read his rights, (Though, 'You have the right to have your ass kicked all the way up I-95 and back down it again,' didn't seem to be one of the standard ones, and Tim wasn't entirely sure he didn't just imagine that, because, you know, he was in the house and Draga was putting Herden in the car, which was not, technically, in the house.) and was crouching in front of him, gently checking him out.

"That was a perfect head butt." Draga sounded vastly too entertained by that.

"Great."

Draga gently poked his forehead, nose, and eye sockets. "Nothing's broken. How are your teeth?"

Tim very gently, very tentatively poked his front teeth with his tongue, none of them moved. "Fine."

"Hold still, head back, pinch the bridge of your nose, I'll be back with something to help with the bleeding and some ice in a minute."

Tim nodded, finally able to get his eyes open again. And a minute after that Draga was back, with an
ice pack, a pile of tissues and… "Is this a tampon?"

"Yep. There's at least one woman here often enough to have some in the bathroom. Cut one in half, yank the string off, and you've got something that's perfect for a bloody nose or a bullet wound."

"I'm good with the tissues."

"Pussy."

"I think that's what you generally call people who use tampons."

Draga snorted at that, "Good to see you've still got your sense of humor," and gave him a hand up.

After the brief wash of dizziness passed Tim said, "Rule number… hell, I don't care, pick whichever number you want… wait until after the guy is cuffed to put your gun away."

"Noted. Now what?"

"We go see if the local LEOs will let us borrow their interrogation room. I want him broken and confessed before we drag him back to DC."

He got the text from Tony, an update as to what Mason wanted, namely immunity or almost immunity for the guy who was organizing this whole thing.

*Don't take it. I'll get it out of Herden in a few minutes.* He was letting Herden stew in the Downingtown PD's interrogation room while he got ready to interrogate him.

He put his phone down, took off his jacket and button down, blotted his nose one more time, and then headed in to interrogate Mason.

If there was an upside to two black eyes, a nose still slowly oozing blood, wearing only your blood spattered undershirt, (Because your main shirt looks like you were slaughtering livestock in it, and you were not about to change into yesterday's shirt until you got the chance to wash some of the blood off of you.) jeans, and gun, tattoos and wrist cuff visible, and then sat down, slowly, alone, in front of the guy who did it to you, who was currently sitting, hands cuffed behind him, glared him down while fingering your gun, and explained to him how he was going to jail for at least five years for assaulting an officer, while indicating by body language alone, that five years in prison was going to be immensely preferable to what you were personally going to do to him if he did not immediately start telling you everything he'd ever done, including jaywalking violations, it was that he'll tell you everything you could possibly want about why you tried to grab him in the first place.

At ten minutes and thirty-seven seconds, that was Tim's fastest interrogation. Add in the fact that at least four minutes of that was Herden saying how he really wasn't a bad guy, how he was just trying to keep his business going, and hell, their business paid more than taxes than they were taking anyway… And that was practically a record-breaking interrogation.

When he got done with that, Tim asked the Downingtown PD if they had a locker room he could borrow, got a quick shower, changed back into something a bit less scary looking. While he was doing that, Draga was in charge of getting Herden ready for transport, and securing the warrant they need for the next step up the ladder.

By the time he was done, Draga had Henry Bing's address up on the GPS, Herden handcuffed and in the back of the car, and they were ready to head to Bowie Maryland to get the guy who made all of this possible.
His next text to Tony read: *Henry Bing, Bowie Maryland, going to get him.*

The problem with traveling with the guy you just arrested in the back seat was that you had to listen to him. And Herden won't shut up. He went on and on about he was totally getting screwed by the government, and how since the ACA went into effect, they can't make enough money on the things they sell to even stay in business, but he can't stop making the screws and nails and other medical devices because if they stop making them people will suffer because there'll start being shortages of those screws and nothing works better than titanium screws for the sorts of fractures they use those screws for... and on and on and on...

Finally Draga had enough and snapped at him, "Do either of us look like a defense attorney to you? Shut up until you're paying someone to listen to you."

Herden glared and shut up.

When they got to Bing's place in Bowie, MD, Tim got out of the car, opened the back door, saw Herden flinch back from him, grabbed his hands, uncuffed the left hand, and then closed the cuff around the post that kept the headrest attached to the seat, then stepped out, closed the door, and locked it behind him.

"Think that'll hold him?"

"Hope so. At the very least, we'll hear it if he tries to run."

"Same routine as last time?"

"I'll take the back door this time."

"Okay."

Bing wasn't home. From the looks of it, Bing left in a hurry. Several computers, all still working, were arrayed on a desk set up in the front room. Cup of coffee, stone cold, was still sitting next to the computer along with a half-eaten sandwich.

"So..." Draga asked.

"Herden still in the car?"

Draga looked out of the window.

"Yep."

Tim turned on the monitor and got to work while Draga kept poking around. Didn't take him too long to find what he was looking for. Bing had a fairly specialized search running, still, on his computers. From what he could tell it checked the booking data of basically every law enforcement agency in the US. And apparently it sent Bing an update as soon as one of his guys got booked.

Mason's name was up and flagged. Time stamp was yesterday afternoon. Bing had twenty hours on them. Herden's name had just popped up less than an hour ago. He was tracking everyone he worked with.

Tim was reaching for his phone, getting ready to call Tony when he noticed exactly how many names Bing's search was working on.
Close to eight hundred.

He took several more minutes to go hunting through his computer. Bing was running… a talent agency for guys who ran scams on the government.

"Draga."

"Yeah."

"Take a look at this." He started scrolling through the information, piles and piles of it. Social security fraud. IRS fraud. Medicare and Medicaid fraud. WIC fraud. If it was government agency that had money, Bing had someone in his files who specialized in bilking them.

"Good Lord," Draga said, shaking his head, starting to dig into the data.

"Yeah."

"We don't have jurisdiction on this, do we?"

"Nope." Tim lifted his phone, hit Fornell's contact number.

A few seconds later, "McGee? Gibbs in trouble again?"

"No. What if I told you I've got the computer of someone who's got the goods on literally hundreds of guys who are scamming the government?"

"Sounds too good to be true. You handing it over because it's hot?"

"I've even got a search warrant to go with it."

"I'd say thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm at 365 Blowder Dr., Bowie, Maryland. How fast can you get guys here?"

"An hour."

"See you then."

"Who was that?" Draga asked.

"Our FBI contact."

"Do they have jurisdiction?"

"They've got a hell of a lot more of it than we do. And I don't know anyone at the IRS."

Tim made copies of everything on all the computers. Using up all of his thumb drives and Draga's.

"I see what you mean by you go through them like gum."

"Yep. Get 'em in bulk at Costco, keep em at home."

"How's your face feeling?"

"Not bad." Getting into the case and the data was distracting him, but as he thought about it Tim decided to steal a paper towel and some ice from Bing for another ice pack.
They set a BOLO on Bing's car. Draga checked to see if he had any other modes of transportation registered in his name. Nope. Tim grabbed his laptop and began to get permissions in place for his credit cards and the like. Wouldn't be done by the time the FBI got there, but it'd be a start.

They were sitting in Bing’s house, looking around, taking pictures of everything, keeping an eye out for Bing should he decide to come home suddenly.

"You know, this makes me think of Heat," Draga said.

Tim looked up from the stacks of books on Government Aid Programs. "Heat?"

"Yeah, Robert DeNiro, Al Pacino, Val—"

"This is probably a conversation for Tony."

"Okay, I won't bore you with the details. Anyway, it's about a heist that starts to go wrong. The thieves all have this, 'don't keep hold of anything you aren't willing to leave in 30 seconds flat' motto. Whatever it is, just walk away."

Tim nodded. The tracking program Bing had running on everyone he was working with, and the fact that he left it up and running certainly indicated that. Coffee on the desk. Car missing.

He saw Mason's name come up and ran.

"God, McGee, you look like shit," Tony said as Tim headed into the bullpen six hours later.

Tim cracked half-a-smile, raised his eyebrow a fraction of an inch. (Which hurt like hell.) "Thanks."

Judging by how people have been looking at him all day, he did look like shit. Fornell went white at the sight of him when he passed the case over. Bob, who runs the metal detector downstairs, muttered, "Good Lord" as he went through. And Seth at the coffee cart gave him a cup filled with ice without him asking for one.

But this case is closed. He's got it in the tank. So, all in all, he's feeling pretty good, well-nigh giddy on the lack of sleep mixed with exactly how easily today's dominoes fell.

Tony half-nodded. "What do you have?"

"I've got a confession. I've got evidence. Draga's got Herden in processing. I've got how they got hooked up with Mason. I've got the name and address of the guy who set the whole thing up. I've got eleven other companies who were also using Mason's services. The one thing I don't have is the guy who set it up. Henry Bing apparently started running as soon as we grabbed Mason. So, he's got twenty hours on us, but they'll find him."

"How does Bing even work into this?" Tony asked. He'd gotten Tim's somewhat cryptic text, but let it be trusting that he knew what he was doing.

"Talent broker, basically. He hooked up companies with guys like Mason. From what we found at Bing's place, he was doing it for all sorts of companies and all sorts of government agencies. Say you sell something that Medicaid would pay for. Bing's the guy who hooks you up with another guy to handle defrauding Medicaid for you. You pay him ten grand, next thing you know you've got a guy who'll keep the government money flowing in."

Tony looked at Tim's desk, where Tim was not sitting at a computer, hunting away for Bing. "They'll
find him?"

"Once I saw how many agencies Bing was working on, I gave him to FBI. It's their turf. They've got
the accountants and analysts to take care of him, and we don't."

Tony did not look pleased by that.

"We've got Mason; we've got the companies he was working with; we can get full sentences on all
of them because we've got hard evidence; all of that is... kind of... our jurisdiction. But only because
that artificial knee was located in a Marine. We've got no standing, at all, for going after a civilian
who's ripping off Social Security."

That was true, but didn't touch on how it should have been Tony's decision to call in the FBI.

It took a second before Tim got why Tony was glaring at him, and he sighed, and said quietly, "Zero
for three."

Curious gets added to annoyed on Tony's face.

Tim shook his head. "Few more months at most."

"Great."

"We really don't have the personnel for it."

"Not the point."

"I know." They stared at each other for another minute. "You mind if I head down and say hi to
Abby."

"No." Tony looked in the direction of the stairs. "Write it all up for me, and then I'll take care of
Mason and his lawyer.

"On it."

"McGee."

"Yeah?"

"Once it's written up, head home, get some sleep."

"Okay."

Relying on habit was often a sign of sleep deprivation. So, while it was true that Tim bopped pretty
happily down to the Lab, it was also true that the part of his mind that was aware that someone other
than Abby worked there hadn't reported for duty.

So, in he bopped, saw her eyes go wide and the question start to form on her lips as he pulled her
into a very sexy, and enthusiastic hello kiss.

Which was when he heard, from behind him, Zelaz talking to Corwin and then stop dead mid-
sentence.

It occurred to him, Abby's husband or not, her co-workers probably did not expect to see her being
groped in the lab.
"What happened to you?"

So he told her, and she very gently traced the bruising and swelling across both of his eyes, and the place where the skin on the bridge of his nose split. "He really clobbered you, didn't he?"

"Yep."

"And yet you're amazingly chipper. I take it the rest of today went well?"

He was smiling at her, took her by the hips, lifted her to the counter they load the guns on, and snuggled in close, lips pressed to her throat, holding onto her for a long second before saying, "Yeah, it did."

He told her about it, hands sliding up and down her back, smelling her skin and feeling her pulse thrum against his lips. It had been a while, since the day after Kelly was born, since he'd gone a night without any snuggle time with her. And, at least that night, he was in the same room and able to hold her hand if not be in the bed with her.

He pulled back after a few minutes, and she skirted her fingers, very gently, over the bruises on his face. "How are these?"

"Sore. I think they look a whole lot worse than they are."

"So, you'd be up for something tonight?" Apparently she did receive his naughty selfie.

He grinned, flashed his eyebrow at her (ouch, he had to stop doing that), smiled, "Maybe tonight Lord McGee gets his revenge. Maybe he's in charge." He traced his fingers over her lips. "Maybe he's fought his way out, gotten free, and has now captured Lady Skye. And maybe tonight Lady Skye learns that it's not nice to tease a man that long."

Abby smiled back at that. "And what would she have to do to earn forgiveness?"

"Good question. Gabriel'll be thinking about that. But until he figures it out, all she'll get is fingers."

"No cock?"

"That'll probably be on the menu, too."

"Good." They were both grinning at each other, she kissed him tenderly, and stroked along his cheeks. "You're goofy today. How much caffeine have you had?"

"Significantly less than it would have been this time last year."

"Okay, how much sugar?"

He smiled a little. "You probably don't want to know."

She looked at him curiously, and he shook his head. "No, really, not that much. I can feel it, this is that stupid so tired, everything is funny and good with a pile of everything in the case went just right."

"And let me guess, you're gonna crash in about three hours?"
"Yeah. Gabe and Skye'll actually probably be tomorrow. Gotta write this up for Tony, then I'm going home, giving Kelly a huge hug, and probably sleeping… Do we have Shabbos tonight?"

"No. Didn't know when you'd get home. I invited Gibbs for dinner tonight, anyway." Abby checked the clock, already 3:30. "Go fast you can get a nap."

"I'll be wrecked if I do that."

"Finish up, go home, get some food and rest. Gibbs can hang out with Kelly and I tonight, and get some time with you tomorrow."

He thought about it, and was leaning in to kiss against her, maybe nibble gently on her lips, when Benedict knocked on the door to ballistics.

Abby rolled her eyes and glared at the door. Tim stepped back so she could slip down from the counter. She quickly signed to him, when I get home, I expect to find you in bed, asleep. If you are, I'll wake you up nicely tomorrow morning.

He smiled at that and headed out of ballistics to write up that report.

"Benedict?" Abby asked, sounding annoyed.

"Got the results back from the mass spectrometer." He had a pretty sheepish look on his face, and it was awfully clear that the three of them had just been looking for an excuse to snoop on their new boss and her hubby.

"And…" she said archly.

"And it's exactly what you thought."

"Uh huh." Abby said, holding Benedict by the arm and dragging him into the main room of the lab. "All three of you, front and center: rule number twenty-two, 'Don't bother Abby in ballistics.'"

"Okay, what are rules number one through twenty-two?" Corwin asked.

"Rule number one is don't lie to Abby. Number nine is always have a spare. The rest you'll learn as I make them up. But the next time someone bothers me in ballistics, unless the world is about to end or the lab is on fire, especially if I'm having any sort of private conference in there, very bad things will happen."

"Why isn't 'Don't bother Abby in Ballistics' rule number two?" Zelaz asked.

Abby sighed at them, wanted to glare, but didn't; they didn't know, and she wasn't exactly feeling like explaining. "It's just not. So, world isn't about to end, don't bug me in ballistics. I won't ever be in there for more than half an hour, so, are we good?"

"Can we use ballistics for conferences, too?" Corwin asked.

"I don't see why not. As long as the work gets done."

Three nods followed that pronouncement.

"Oh my god! Tim! Are you… What… Can I get you some ice packs?" Heather was leaping off the sofa to tend to him when he got home.
He held up a hand. "It's part of the job. I'll be fine. Kelly napping?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I'm going to head up and..." Well, watch her sleep for a little bit and maybe rest a hand on her tummy, but saying that felt weird so he didn't.

"Okay. Really, ice packs?"

"Sure, if you want to. I'll be down in a bit."

Getting used to having a nanny in the house has been kind of... weird. First of all there was this extra person in their house twelve hours a day, which was just... yeah, weird. Second of all, while it was true that Heather's there twelve hours a day right now, it was also true that Kelly sleeps for six of them, so, she keeps doing stuff... and who knew, maybe this was normal nanny stuff, but neither he nor Abby had put it on the list of things they expected Heather to do, but it kept happening and it did make things easier, but still, it felt, kind of, just... odd.

Like she did the shopping, which was cool, and a week into it she started asking what they wanted to have for dinner. She didn't cook the dinner. They never know exactly when they would get home, so getting it ready and hot was something of a challenge, but if they tell her what they intend to eat, when they came home all the ingredients would be prepped, whatever it was may be marinating, the table would be set, and all of the things they would use to cook the dinner would be laid out and ready to go.

(And if it was a slow cooker meal, it would be in there, bubbling away.)

And like, she did the laundry. They expected her to do Kelly's laundry, just can't keep a baby in enough clean clothing in you weren't doing laundry at least once a day. But she did their laundry, too. They'd find it sitting on the bed, in nicely-folded, sorted piles. Stuff that goes on hangers would be in the closet, (his shirts and Abby's skirts ironed) but she didn't put anything that goes into drawers back because... he guessed... that going into their drawers was too private.

He knew she cleaned. House was a whole lot tidier than it ever was. For example, he knew he hadn't personally dusted or vacuumed anything since Heather joined them, and he was fairly sure that Abby hasn't, either, but the dust bunnies were not freely roaming about his office, so, obviously, someone was taking care of it, and he was awfully sure it wasn't Kelly.

So, he wasn't saying he didn't like it. Having someone else do that stuff was really convenient. It just felt a little weird to have someone else do it. It was like having someone else carry your bag, yeah, it was nice, but he didn't feel like the kind of guy who had other people do stuff like that for him.

And all of that was a moot point as he eased open the door to Kelly's room, took the three (very quiet) steps to her crib, and stood there, watching her snooze.

Almost four months old. The little brownish blond fuzz she was born with had been falling out, so right now she was almost bald on top, with a little ring of dark blond hair around the back of her head. (Pediatrician said it was normal. Penny said Tim was born with dark brown, almost red hair that all fell out by the time he was four months old, and he didn't have visible hair again until he was almost one.) If her eyes were open, he'd be able to see how they're just starting to edge toward green. And if she didn't have the pacifier in her mouth, he'd be able to see how her lips are the same shape as his. He could see that her face was shaped like Abby's (or will be as she grows).

Her eyes fluttered, and she sucked enthusiastically on the pacifier. Dreaming baby dreams of nursing,
probably.

He knelt down, resting his arm on the edge of her crib and his face against his arm, and then placed his finger tips on her chest and stomach, feeling her breathe.

"Hey, baby," he whispered. "I'm home."

Watching Kelly sleep seemed to trigger his 'time to crash' mechanism, so by the time he got downstairs he was dragging (and hurting, his face hadn't bothered him much over the course of the day, but right now it was making up for that with a vengeance) and the ice packs Heather had set for him, along with the sandwich and iced-tea sitting next to them were very welcome.

He sat at the kitchen table, one pack held to his face as he chewed. "Thank you."

"No problem. Looks like you had an exciting day. Bad guys all put away?"

"Bad guys are in jail. NCIS, FBI, and from the looks of it the IRS are all about to have a massive field day."

"Wow."

"Yeah. Good day."

She was staring at his face. "Is this… normal?"

"Not really. Maybe once a year, once every other year, I get pounded by work, but it's usually not this bad."

She was looking at him with very wide eyes, and while he knew she was older than he was when he started at NCIS, he felt like she was very, very young. "Have you ever been shot?"

He shook his head. "Well, not without a vest. I have been blown up, twice, mauled by a dog, exposed to black plague, irradiated, fights like this… the thing in Somalia…" (Which probably qualified as torture, but he doesn't call it that, even in his own head, because he knows what they did to Ziva there.) "and frozen but, I'm the tech guy, so believe it or not, I've got the least dangerous job."

"Yeah, sounds really safe." Kind of nice to see she had some sarcasm in there.

He smiled, tiredly. "Found a guy who ran a ring that's probably defrauded the government to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars, if not more. Put away a guy who was doing it in the ten million range. Got on that case by helping to solve the murder of a Marine. I do stuff that's more important than safe."

"I guess."

"How'd today go with Kelly?"

He listened to her talk about taking Kelly shopping and for a walk, and about how she seemed to like seeing the Jack-o'-lanterns that were starting to pop up all over the neighborhood. She asked if they had any plans for Halloween, and off the top of his head, he doesn't.

The second time she asked something and he just sort of blanked out on it, she looked at him and said, "You should probably go to bed."
And by that point, he just nodded slowly and headed back up to his bed.
He got the text from Abby as he was fueling up the car. Gibbs coming for dinner. Down to last bottle of Angry Orchard. Pick up a few six packs, two onions, and sub rolls?  

Sure. He texts back.  

He crashed pretty hard the night before, but at one point he was vaguely aware of the sound of voices from downstairs, and in the morning, after Abby did indeed wake him up nicely, she mentioned that Gibbs had been over for dinner and that he was likely coming back again tonight. Maybe the Palmers too.  

Jimmy and Breena?  

Just Jimmy and Molly. Breena’s mom’s not feeling so hot, so she’s running the front of the house today.  

Serious?  

Don’t think so. Breena didn’t say. Post-church Sunday dinner is still on as of now.  

Okay. Back in an hour or so.  

Chatting with Abby about Jeannie being sick means that it’s in his mind, so as he passes the ‘Flu Shots Here’ sign he decides to sign up for that as well. It’d be nice not to spend a week wishing he was dead.  

You need me home soon? He texts to Abby.  

Nah.  

Okay, gonna get a flu shot, too.  

Good!  

They take his information, have him fill out some forms, and tell him it’ll be a twenty minute wait. He nods and heads off, figuring he’ll wander around, get his shopping done, and that’ll be that.  

Somehow, between now and the last time he was at Target, all of the Halloween stuff had come out. Which is making him think it may have been a while since he last went shopping.  

Oh well. He’s here now.  

And faced with a lot of really cute stuff.  

Really cute.  

Like, he’d been somewhat vaguely aware this time last year of the possibility that Halloween with a baby might be a whole lot more fun that Halloween with just grown-ups. (Or at least a very different flavor of fun. He and Abby have had some awfully good Halloweens.)
But, it's hitting him, as he's walking more and more slowly past the baby Halloween costumes, coming to a complete stop, looking at them, instead of heading to the grocery department, that, well, Kelly really needs some Halloween costumes.

Multiple ones. (After all, what tiny baby doesn't need multiple Halloween costumes?)

Because, God, they're just so damn cute.

And, before his brain even got involved in the conversation, he was holding a little green dragon (with shiny purple wings!) a tiny jack-o-lantern (God, it's so cute!), and the tiniest little black cat costume he'd ever imagined owning.

And somehow a little pair of shoes (after all, just because you can't, you know, walk, or for that matter, you spend the vast majority of your time swaddled, doesn't mean you don't need shoes, right?) tiny, tiny little shoes in black with little silver and purple bats on them, also ended up in the cart, next to the Halloween themed onesies. (Because, come on, obviously Kelly needs way more skull oriented baby gear, it's not like she doesn't have enough of that, right?)

Tim was muttering quietly to himself about how they shouldn't let him out of the house with a credit card, blaming the flu shot for him even being in this part of the Target, as he put several of the onesies back and snagged yet another tiny pair of shoes and the Halloween themed pacifiers. (After all, she's got to have the pumpkin and bat and black cat pacifiers to go with the costume, right?)

Okay, out of here, now, before you buy the whole damn section.

Retrieving the stuff he actually went to Target to get went pretty quick, and he was in line, not really paying attention to much of anything when the idea of the dragon costume reminded him that he'd… promised… (he's not sure if he promised, he's awfully sure he mentioned it, though) Abby some sort of game tonight.

But, just because his memory of saying something to her about playing with Gabe and Skye again is kind of vague doesn't mean he didn't make that promise.

Had been an awfully long time since he's tied her or done much of anything along those lines…

He steps out of line and heads for the scarves.

Gabe's a dragon/magic user/knight sort of thing. (He's been playing with the character a bit getting more ideas of him and jotting bits down.) So… he told Abby something about Gabe being in charge tonight... That'd mean some sort of magical binding, right. So… imaginary. More just the image to keep the idea in mind than any sort of real binding.

He perused the scarves and found a few in light marbled gray. Very thin, very light, he's not loving the texture. They aren't silk, some sort of poly blend, but all he wants is something to tie to her wrists and ankles. Doesn't have to be strong, just has to suggest magic.

They'll do.

He snagged them and headed back to the line.

"Halloween's a big deal at your house, isn't it?" the cashier asks.

"Yep. Favorite holiday, and the day after's our wedding anniversary. It's a big deal."
She nods, packing up his purchases. "Hope you have a lot of fun."

"I think we will."

He was in his car before, the day after's our wedding anniversary filtered through his brain enough
to realize that the week before Halloween was their anniversary, the day after is their wedding
anniversary, and he's got nothing planned, no presents purchased, and no good ideas for what he
wants to do. And in that it's October, 3rd, he's only got twenty days to figure it out.

"Shit."

He gets home and finds Kelly and Abby on the back porch. (In the shade.) It really is a lovely day,
mid-seventies, bright blue sky, leaves starting to turn color.

Kelly's getting some tummy time on her blanket, mostly doing what four month olds do, namely
laying around trying to get her hands to go where she's aiming them. (Abby had set a few pacifiers in
her reach, and she's sort of flailing in their general direction. Apparently picking things up is a
learned skill.)

Abby was half sitting, half laying on the chaise, reading, keeping an eye on their daughter, and
listening to music.

She looks up at him, smiles, sees the bags and says, "Successful shopping trip then?"

He smiles, little sheepish, little excited, and then sat next to Kelly, picking her up, and settling her in
his lap, back against his tummy.

"Look, Kelly. Halloween goodies." He shows her all of her new finery, which didn't impress her
much. But Abby seems to approve, she's smiling, and after a few seconds sits down next to them to
get a closer look.

Late afternoon, post-lunch, pre-dinner, Kelly decided it was naptime. Abby seconded that plan, and
headed up to grab a bit of a snooze as well. (This was when it occurred to Tim that if he goes
heading off on an assignment Abby's on her own with Kelly all night, and while they've got a
routine for that, not only did he head off on what should have been his night for getting the 1:00
feed, it's also a lot harder to relax when you're the only one on duty.)

"Sorry," he says, having gotten to that realization when Abby was three quarters of the way up the
stairs, heading to nap time.

"Huh?"

"Heading off didn't work that well for you, did it?"

"It was a long night. And for some reason I don't bounce back so fast now," she says with a half-
rueful smile.

"Yeah. I know that feeling. It just hit me that I should have asked—"

"You're a cop. I know you're gonna have nights where the job wins. I am, too. Don't have to ask to
do your job. And I don't, either."

He nods at that.
"What if it's calling both of us?" he asks, realizing that they didn't have a back-up plan for that, yet.

"Rock, paper, scissors?"

"Hope Heather can stay late?"

"Or that Breena can take another baby for a night?"

He shakes his head at that. Breena's the absolute last person they call, at least, for the next few years. "Wouldn't want to do that. If it's that level of all hands on deck, that means Jimmy'll be working, too. Two babies under two and six months pregnant, alone?"

Abby winces at that, she knows she doesn't want to take that on if she doesn't have to. "Penny or Sarah, then."

"That works."

Kelly made an impatient noise.

"Okay, little girl." Abby pats her bum, continuing her trip up the stairs. "Let's get some sleep."

The addition of the LabRats to Abby's domain under NCIS brought about several changes, one of which was the removal of the fuzzy lambskin rugs. The weekend before Corwin, Zelaz, and Brandt joined them, Tim took them out of the closet they hid in, lugged them to the car, and back home they and the pillows went.

The futon stayed, it's good to have a place for tired people to crash, but the lambskin rugs are just for them, and the kind of thing they do on the rugs is really unlikely to happen now that three other people work in the lab.

Which means those rugs now live in the attic.

Part of the reason this house was so attractive to them was that upstairs there are four bedrooms. Obviously, one for them, and one for a child, one for guests, and one for, hopefully, another child at some point.

Right now, the room that would (hopefully) belong to another little McGee, is empty. They don't use it for storage much, because Abby's the kind of person who wants things where they belong, and temporary storage makes her itchy. So, even though it's been pointed out to her (by Tim) that this room is a more convenient place to put things than their attic or basement, stuff ends up in the attic or basement because that's going to be its final resting place.

However, as his girls are napping, and he's thinking about tonight's game, the fact that they've got this basically empty room just sitting there is seeming awfully nice.

By the time he hears Gibb's car pull up, he had the lambskin rugs on the floor, scarves tucked under the edges, waiting to be pulled out, L.E.D. candles on the window sills, and his laptop in the corner, "music" picked out.

Saturday dinner, Tim's manning the grill. Not that it's taking too much manning. This is a pretty simple dinner. Brats on the flames, onions and apples sliced thin and simmering in hard cider. Pretty much it's just a good excuse to sit on the back porch, suck up the early autumn evening, share a drink with Jethro.
He's half-way through his own cider. (Abby brought the first six-pack home last week, and he promptly decided that beer was highly overrated and hard cider was now his low-alcoholic beverage of choice.) But for the moment, he has his pressed to nose, letting the cold numb his bruises.

"Those any good?" Gibbs asks. He's already finished his first beer.

Tim hands one to Jethro who just stares at it (hard cider with elderflower flavoring) for a second before cracking it open. He looks mildly surprised at how it tastes. "Thought it'd be sweet."

Tim shakes his head. "Nope." Has the flavors of apples and elderflowers without the sugar. He really likes it. "Good?"

Gibbs nods, looking thoughtful, taking another drink. "How's your face?"

"Healing."

Gibbs looks at one of the lounge chairs on the porch and then takes the tongs out of Tim's hands. So he goes and sits, relaxing. The cool of the drink chases away some of the sore on his face, and Tim sits quietly for a few minutes before remembering Gibbs asking about gchat. "So, who were you chatting with?"

"Rachel."

Tim raises an eyebrow, there's something edgy about how Gibbs says that. "Professional chatting with Rachel?"

Gibbs glares at him, while flipping the brats. "What else?"

"Not saying there is anything else, just asking."

"Why would you be asking?"

"All of the hairs on your body hopped up all at once when I asked and you started to growl, so I figured I hit a nerve."

The look Gibbs gives him says lay off but his words say, "Been talking about Shannon, wanted to talk about this last week."

"So, just giving her a heads up?"

"Yeah."

"Nothing else?" Tim's not feeling like digging too deep, but he doesn't exactly want to lay off, either. He's not sure if Gibbs is touchy because this is counseling or touchy because it's Rachel, and he's curious.

That gets another glare.

"And how is this last week going?"

"You're covered in bruises, Tony's not coming over today because we're both still avoiding him, and I told Vance yesterday that January fifteenth was definitely my last day. I'd say between the two of us, we've had better ideas and better weeks."

Tim nods at that. This week wasn't either of their crowning glories. "So, January's really it?"
“Yeah…” Jethro doesn’t look at him when he says that, but Tim hears the distress in his voice.

He remembers Gibbs saying that Tony was better after the two of them talked. ”And that’s why Tony was better than he was?”

"Yep."

"Sorry."

He shakes his head, dismissing it. ”Everything ends, right?”

"Yep."

"I had twenty-three years, that's a good long run."

"But not long enough."

"No, not long enough. It'd be… easier… if I knew what came next."

"I'd imagine. That what you're gonna talk to Rachel about?"

"Yeah, start at least. Life beyond Boss." That also reminds Gibbs of something. "He wasn't thrilled about you passing the case off to Fornell without giving him a heads up. I wouldn't have gone for that, either. Wasn't your case to give away." And, as the man who was the Boss for so long, Gibbs knows Tim overstepped, badly. As a Dad, as a man who's been watching this fairly timid guy expand his goals and skills, learn to take charge of anything handed to him, and take care of it all the way through, he's proud.

And he's not sure which one of those Tim needs more right now.

But Tim half-smiles at him, seems to get both. ”I know. And I know I'm not winning employee of the decade by doing stuff like that. He did seem pleased about dropping Fornell and Diane on you come Monday."

Gibbs rolls his eyes and lets that go. ”You're not an employee anymore."

He shrugs. ”Maybe. I'm fairly sure I'd still run major things by, say, Vance before just doing them. But, yeah, I'm not doing the employee thing well right now, and I've got to get my head into treating Tony like the Team Leader, even if I'm doing a bad job at treating him like my Boss."

That gets one of Gibbs' I understand looks. ”Ya still gotta work with him."

"Yep. I was telling myself that on Thursday, and still screwed it by Friday afternoon. Probably a good thing I won't be working for him much longer. Jenner's getting really serious with IBM."

Gibbs nods, then thinks about that, thinks about several comments along those lines he's heard from Tim. ”How do you know that?"

"While back I asked Leon about what sort of attacks I could do on the private computer accounts of the guys in Cybercrime. You remember that pile of paperwork everyone filled out a month ago, the new NCIS privacy standards, buried in there was permission for NCIS to raid your stuff. So… I hacked his email. I mean, I hacked or am in the process of hacking all of Cybercrime, seeing how good their personal defenses are, but I actually read some of Jenner's emails in addition to just breaking in. They're negotiating starting dates and wages now. Didn't read the details that closely, just wanted an idea of how much longer he was going to be down there."
"Oh." Gibbs was looking vaguely uncomfortable at that. Tim shrugs, he was snooping and he knew it.

They hear the sound of another car pulling into Tim's driveway, followed by the sound of doors opening and closing.

"Smells good," Jimmy says heading toward the grill from the side yard. Must have smelled the food, and headed straight to the back. Molly's riding his shoulders.

"Should be." Gibbs grabs another Angry Orchard from the cooler next to the grill, and tosses it toward Jimmy, who catches it neatly and then puts Molly down. She goes tearing off for the swing set. She's still too small to really play on it, but that has not stopped her from trying. (Tim's thinking that next spring he'll put some sort of small kid play stuff up. Should have a ton of them crawling around his backyard soon enough.)

Jimmy sits next to Tim. "Damn. Draga didn't do that justice when he told us how taking down Herden went. How bad does that hurt?"

"It's just skippy," Tim says dryly. Of course this fucking hurts, why are you even asking? on his face.

"Pretend I'm asking you as someone who can write you a prescription for painkillers."

Tim blinks. "Oh."

"So, he knocked some of your brains loose as well as blacking your eyes?" Jimmy says while very gently palpating Tim's nose and his orbitals.

"Apparently. It hurts." Tim's flinching at Jimmy investigation, as well. "Advil's taking care of the worst of it. Ice is helping. I'll live."

"You want something stronger?" Jimmy seemed satisfied that nothing was broken.

"Nah."

"Where are the girls?" Jimmy asks as he gets up and leans against the deck railing, so he can keep an eye on Molly, popping the top on the hard cider. (After taking a moment to read the label for the sugar content.)

"Grabbing a little shut eye right now. Abby'll be up for dinner. Kelly probably will be, too."

"You short a girl tonight?" Gibbs asks while Jimmy casts an approving eye on dinner as he takes a sip of the cider.

"Yeah, Breena's got a viewing."

"Thought her part of it was usually done by the viewing," Gibbs says.

"It is. But Jeannie's not feeling good, so either Breena takes front of the house or Ed does and…"

And he doesn't need to finish that sentence, Tim and Gibbs are both well aware of how you might not want Ed Slater in charge of the grieving part of your funeral. He watches Gibbs handle the sausages, keeping them moving on the flames to prevent too much in the way of flare ups, and that got Gibbs and fire together in his head. "So, did Tim tell you about his dragons?"

Gibbs looks over at Jimmy, leaning against the porch railing where he can keep an eye on Molly easy, closes his eyes, opens them slowly, flashes his best are you kidding me look at him, and Jimmy
shakes his head. So he turns to Tim, who's relaxing on the chaise, and says, "Dragons?"

Tim smiles. "Dragons. Big, mean, magical warriors. Whole clan of them spread out over a few counties of some sort of ancient magical version of Ireland."

"Uh huh…" Gibbs looks… less than thrilled is probably the best way to put it. He can sense the guys are excited, but, really, dragons?

"That's the next series of books," Tim says, still grinning.

Gibbs sighs at that, and turns the sausages while saying, "Do not tell me that JL McPibbs is going to be the main dragon in this next thing."

Jimmy and Tim laugh pretty hard at that.

"Okay, I have to remember that," Tim says as he calms down. "JL McPibbs may have to be a throw away character of some sort. That's too good of a name to pass up. How about Lorcan McGee, patriarch of the McGee clan?"

Gibbs thinks about that for a moment… "I can live with that. Is Lorcan the main character?"

"This time, no."

"Your own name?" Jimmy asks.

"Not gonna write them as Tim McGee. That'd look kind of dumb."

"And when they find out your real name?" Jimmy asks.

"Come on. Ninety zillion fantasy books out there. And this is not going to be the next Game of Thrones. My mystery readers aren't going to follow me to this series. If it sells as well as most books do, about five thousand people will read it."

Jimmy keeps looking at him, they're gonna find out, clear on his face.

"I'll set fire to that bridge when I come to it?"

Jimmy rolls his eyes, takes another sip of his drink, and looks away, keeping his eyes on Molly. "Got a name for me?"

"Daegan McGee? Did some googling when we were stuck in traffic on the way up to Downingtown."

"Daegan?" Jimmy's mostly just testing that name, getting a feel for it but Tim takes his question as what does it mean.

"Means black-haired."

Jimmy thought about that for a second, kind of liking it, and then something occurred to him, and he squints at Tim, baffled. "What color hair do you think I have?"

Tim looks at him more carefully. "It's not black?"

"Are you color blind?" Jimmy asks, Gibbs looking between them, appearing to be pretty amused by this.
"I didn't think so."

"It's dark brown."

"Huh." Tim keeps staring at Jimmy's hair. And, well, now that he's looking, yeah, it's not black at all. Dark brown, little bit of gray, less than one percent, but enough so it's visible, but mostly dark brown, some lighter brown highlights. Really, not black at all.

Jimmy's flashing his so done with you back at him. "So, you're not actually getting better at naming things, you're just doing it in a different language?"

"Hey, you aren't Seamus!"

Jimmy squints at that.

"That's the Scots/Irish version of James," Tim explains.

He spends another minute looking at Jimmy more carefully. "What the hell color are your eyes? Green? Brown?"

"Hazel. For a writer, you don't pay a lot of attention to detail."

"I can tell you where every mole on every visible inch of Breena, Ziva, and Abby is, and probably spend a paragraph each on their eyes, but for some reason, I haven't felt much need to pay any attention to how you look."

"Good point."

"Bet you don't know what color my eyes are."

Jimmy took another drink of his cider. "Not blue, beyond that, I don't know. But I also don't write stories with you in them."

"Mine are blue. His are green. Tony's are hazel. And this is the dumbest conversation we've ever had. What's Lorcan mean?" Gibbs asks, more interested in seeing what Tim's going to do with this than he wants to admit.

"Little fierce one."

"Really?" Gibbs isn't horrified by that, but he's not loving it, either.

"Come on, you weren't an adult when you got named. If Lorcan didn't describe you as a baby, let alone as a baby dragon..."

"Okay, decent point..."

When Abby came down she did have Kelly with her, and she was in the little pumpkin costume. Jimmy looks at the two of them, smiles at Kelly, taking her from Abby and giving her a kiss and a little petting, before handing her over to Jethro, taking the tongs from him, (Unwritten but always followed rule at both the McGee and Palmer homes: the person with the baby is not the person standing over the stove/oven/grill, minding the food.) and then says, "So, which one of the two of you went insane on the Halloween costumes."

Tim raises his hand as Abby sits on his lap.
Jimmy shakes his head and smiles again.

Molly comes tearing over. "Kelly!"

Gibbs kneels on the porch so she can get a good view of her cousin. "Remember, very gentle." Molly nods seriously, and leans in to kiss Kelly. Kelly squints at her, looking confused at the noisy thing slobbering on her.

"When your baby sister comes, you're going to have to be gentle with her, too," Jethro says.

Kelly nods at that.

"But you know what?"

"What?"

"When she comes, she's gonna sleep a lot, and your mommy and daddy are going to be really tired, too, so you and me, we're gonna go out and play so everyone else can get naps. Probably take Ducky and Penny, too. That sound good?"

"Good!"

"Okay." Gibbs looks back up to Jimmy. "What's the official count now, ten more weeks?"

"December 14th, supposedly. Of course, Molly was supposed to show up February 1st, so we're not holding out a lot of hope for Anna coming before Christmas."

"What do you think, Molly, want a little baby sister for Christmas?" Abby asks.

Molly shakes her head vehemently. None of them are sure if that's yes or no, (she's shaking side to side and up and down) but they also know that both 'little sister' and 'Christmas' are really nebulous concepts for Molly, so mostly it's just about making sure she's part of the conversation.

Molly keeps looking at Kelly, and finally says, "Pumpkin?"

"Yep, it's a pumpkin costume. For Halloween. Are you and Daddy going trick or treating?"

Molly ponders Uncle Tim's question, while Jimmy nods. "Few houses around ours. Nothing big." He pokes the brats again. "These are done. We eating inside or out?"

Tim shifts Abby onto the chaise and stands up. "I'll get plates and napkins. Too nice to go in."

"There's a salad already made up in the fridge, too," she adds.

"I'll grab that, too."

Perfect evenings may be vanishingly rare. They may not even exist. But, if you were to ask him, Tim'd tell you that sitting on his back porch, as the sun slips behind the trees in his backyard, eating dinner, enjoying a very good conversation with a group of people he loves is probably about as close as a man can get.

Sure, if everyone had been there it would have been better, but this moment here, Kelly nursing, his arm around Abby, sharing a cider with her, Molly on Jimmy's lap, giving the tiny piece of bratwurst on the fork the big, hairy, eyeball, while Gibbs told them about taking his Kelly trick-or-treating the first time was awfully sweet.
But moments are just moments, and they all end.

Kelly went down for the first of her night sleeps post-nursing. And not much beyond that, Molly was starting to yawn, which meant it was time for her and Jimmy to head home.

And it's not so much that Tim wants to boot Gibbs out of their home, but he is hoping to have as much of the ten to one sleep block for playing with Abby as possible, and knows there's some pre-game prep that needs to happen that'll eat up some of this current seven to ten sleep cycle, so, as dinner's winding down, he's sending off not very subtle see-you-in-the-morning signals to Gibbs.

"Can I leave you two to clear up?" Abby asks, standing up from the table, stretching.

"Sure," Tim replies.

"Good, want to get a shower."

"We're on it." Tim says, watching Gibbs already stacking up plates. Now, normally, if say, Gibbs wasn't the third person here, he'd just sign what he wants to say to Abby, or maybe say it silently. But, of course, that doesn't work with Gibbs.

So, Tim grabs the salad bowl, follows her into the house, plunks it on the kitchen table and follows her to the bottom of the steps. As she rests her hand on the bannister, he lays his hand on hers and says very quietly, while kissing her throat just below her ear, "Get all cleaned up, okay?"

She smiles brightly at that, knowing what 'all cleaned up' means. Then says, also quietly, while kissing his lips. "Yes, Lord Gabriel."

He gently pats her tush, and she heads up.

"I was thinking…" Tim says as he and Gibbs load the dishwasher.

"Yeah, I noticed," Gibbs says dryly. "I'm heading home soon."

Tim smirks and begins to scrub out the cast iron pan the apples and onions had been cooking in. "Well, yeah, thinking about that, too. But I know you'd already gotten that message, so that wasn't what I was going to talk to you about."

"Okay."

"Thinking about retiring. What was Franks doing? You told me he had more irons in the fire than anyone guessed. Obviously, he wasn't just lying on the sand sucking down the cervezas. If whatever it was kept him going, maybe…"

"Maybe it'd be good enough for me?" That wasn't a bad idea. What the hell was Franks doing? 'Trust me, Probie, you're way better off not knowin', ' was all Franks would say about it. Gibbs knew better than to ask if it was legal, answer like that meant no, it wasn't. But it was Mike, so legal or not, it wasn't immoral.

"Or give you an idea of where to look next."

Gibbs shrugs, that wasn't an insane idea. Could talk to Amira, maybe she'd have a clue… He could head down to Mexico and have a chat with Camilla, she might be able to shed a bit of light on the story. (Or, maybe not go down to Mexico, going to Mexico might not be the best idea he's ever had.)

Could open that box, the box he'd been assuming contained every skeleton in every closet that NCIS
or NIS ever built. What Franks had been doing might be in there.

Gibbs nods, not saying much, but definitely thinking.
After Gibbs leaves, Tim heads upstairs. Abby's still in the shower, water still on full blast, so he takes a moment to head to their toy box, snag the glass dildo she'd used last when they were playing these characters, along with the… blindfold.

It's not exactly a blindfold in the way most people mean that word. Pretty much just taking a scarf or tie or piece of fabric and tying it over someone's eyes is a really inefficient way to go about making it so they can't see.

If the fabric is narrow enough to not hide most of their face, (Which is important when it comes to sex play. It's much easier to tell if your partner likes what you're doing if you can see her face.) then it's also narrow enough to gape at the nose. He's also noticed that most fabrics don't tie well against hair. Either the hair gets caught in the knot, or the fabric slips over the hair when the person wearing the blindfold moves her head, (say if she's lying on her back and squirming, next thing you know the blindfold's round her nose or in her mouth.) and more annoying than that, a blindfold that's large enough to really block sight is a blindfold large enough to block most of the expressions on the person wearing it's face.

So, Tim doesn't much like a traditional blindfold.

But every now and again he likes to set a scene they don't happen to have on hand, and Abby being able to see where they actually are takes away from the idea of the scene he's setting.

So, about a year ago, after showing her the house for the first time, and not being very satisfied with how the blindfold he used then worked, he came across an idea, tested it out with Abby's enthusiastic cooperation, and both of them were pleased.

It's a cheap, little masquerade mask. Probably cost about three bucks. He trimmed it down a bit so it covers less of Abby's face than it would otherwise. (She never blindfolds him, he likes watching way too much for that to be fun for him.) Then he bought some soft, black felt, and lined the inside of the mask, over the eyeholes, with it.

Voila, perfect blindfold. It stays in place when she moves. Her hair doesn't get caught in it. She doesn't have an uncomfortable knot in to deal with. If the elastic ever snaps, he's got three more he can set up in a jiffy.

It's even black.

He snags it, as well as the dildo, and the lube, and heads into their extra room, making sure everything is ready to go.

He's laying on their bed, googling what sort of things Irish people wore in the 1300s, thinking about costume ideas. (Obviously not for this round, but for the story and future play. For this round, he's debating putting on a kilt or keeping on his jeans.)

Looks mostly like tunics and a cloak. No hose, so that was a plus. No kilts, a minus. Maybe it'll be magical Scotland, not like there aren't already seventy million versions of that out there…
Hell, maybe their part of the universe has denim. Yeah, they'll be cotton-baron dragons of a mythical medieval Alabama… He shakes his head and rolls his eyes. *It's fiction, and more than that, fantasy, you can set it up however you like.*

The water stops running, and that pulls his attention away from costumes. A few minutes later, Abby's standing in front of the doorway, toweling off her hair.

"So, besides 'all cleaned up,' do I get any hints for tonight?"

He answers that with a question of his own. "Does Skye have a first name? Is it a title, where she's from, just something that sounds good?"

She sits on the bed and starts to smooth on her moisturizer, recognizing his lack of answer means that nope, no more hints. "Not sure. There's an Isle of Skye, right?"

"I think so. And even if there isn't one on the real world, doesn't mean there can't be one in my world."

"Good point." She thinks while he googles, then says, "Katherine. That's an old-school English name, right?"

"Think so." He looks up from his phone. "Isle of Skye. It's up in northern Scotland, just off the west coast. It's beautiful, green and craggy, no trees, or bushes, but lots of grass, rocks and sky, and water."

"So… I'm thinking Katie got bored of fish and sheep and decided to make her fortune further south."

He nods along with that and leans over to show her the picture on his phone.

"Does anyone live there?" Abby asks, the only thing that looks like human habitation on the pictures he's showing her saw its glory days in the 1500s.

"Says about nine thousand do. Apparently it's a tourist attraction." He holds out his hand. "Want me to get your back?"

"Sure." She squirts a bit of the lotion onto his palm, and he shifts to sitting behind her, rubbing it onto her skin. "Mmmm..."

"Feels good?"

"Always. Wanna go there, someday?" She continues to go through pictures of the Isle of Skye.

He shrugs. In the pictures, it's beautiful. Very green and severe, lochs and moors, sky stretching out forever, the feel of the sea even in the pictures where you can't see it. It doesn't look like anything in the United States. He would like to see it.

The tenish hour flight to get there isn't rocking his world. Though commercial air travel is likely quite a bit more comfortable than the troop/equipment transports Gibbs delights in plopping them on for work.

"Find a quiet bit of grass and make love on the moors?" She turns his phone toward him, showing him a shot of very green grass broken by standing stones. Looks, honestly, kind of rough and prickly to him, but that's what picnic blankets are for.

He smiles at that. "As soon as we can drive there, I'm all for it."
She laughs. "So, you want a name. Anything else?"

He thinks as his thumbs press into her shoulders. She purrs quietly at the massage. "You've been keeping me as a pet for a few months; what kind of stuff would Gabe have learned about Skye in that time? Besides her name."

"If you'd been a pet, and really a pet, mostly how to fuck." She looks over her shoulder and grins at him.

He mock pouts. "My charms aren't enough to get you talking while drowsing post-sex?"

"You might be good in bed, but I don't think Lord Gabriel McGee of the Nightfuries is much of a spy. If you were paying attention, you might know a whole lot more about alchemy now. But, really, I think you're her boy toy, how she blows off stress at the end of the day."

He trails his fingers down the back of her neck, making the fine hairs on her skin rise. "I suppose there are a lot of ways to bring honor to the clan."

That gets a laugh. She shifts around, so she's kneeling between his legs, and gently kisses him. "How's your face feeling?"

"It's sore." The bruises from getting head-butted are sore, and his right eye is still a bit swollen. He kisses her finger and his tongue darts out to lick her fingertip. "This still works just fine."

"Excellent." She grins at him, and he sucks on her fingertip, letting his tongue slide over the tip, heavily hinting what's coming later.

Kelly's going to wake up soon, so he doesn't want to get too deep into playing, yet. Right now is just about being with each other, setting a mood, and enjoying these little, everyday intimacies. So one last suck, a quick flick of his tongue, and then he releases her hand. Tim takes the bottle of moisturizer, and adds another squirt to his hand, then taps the back of his knuckles lightly against her knee. She changes position again, her leg over his, and he strokes the lotion over her right leg as she did her left.

"This stuff new?" he asks, hands smoothing up her leg. "Smells different."

"Yep. You like it?"

"Not sure. It's not bad. Just not that 'you' scent."

"Turns out my last brand started testing on animals so they could sell their stuff in China, so I ditched them."

He nods at that, rubbing her thigh gently, making sure all the lotion absorbs evenly. She let him keep it up for a minute or two longer than necessary, then takes his hand away from her leg and kisses it. "Don't want to get me too revved up before I've got to feed Kelly."

"Good point." He glances at the clock. Any minute now, Kelly would wake up, and once she'd eaten they could get to really playing.

Abby stands up, slipping on one of her nursing bras. "So, costume for this?"

"Hmmm..." He ponders happily. "Were you planning on putting anything else on?"

"Robe or button down. Little too cool for naked."
"Go for the robe then."

She nods, reaching for it, and as she did, they heard the first tiny wail of their daughter looking for second dinner. Abby checks the clock. "That's the fourth night in a row that she's hit 10:04. How can she possibly be that accurate?"

He shrugs.

"Back in a bit."

He grins. "See you then, Lady Skye."

Second dinner usually clocks in at half an hour. He uses that half hour to make sure he's got his scene set. Everything looks in place. He's standing in the spare room, checking around, thinking about his own costume.

*Jeans or kilt…*

_You're a captive sex slave breaking free. Did she let you have clothing? You didn't in the first game. The keep's fallen, everything is in chaos, you're breaking out and snagging her to go with you. Did you go hunting for clothing before grabbing her or are you just grabbing her and leaving? He tosses off his jeans. No way you'd take the time to go scrounge up some pants. You're grabbing her before someone else does, and getting the hell out of there._

He's naked; the room's set. Time to get in place for her. He picks up the blindfold.

Kelly's room will be dim. The night light gives just enough illumination to make sure all poop comes off during the pre-feed diaper change, and that's it. He flicks on the hall light, opens the bathroom door, turns on that light as well. He wants it bright out here, so for a few seconds she won't be able to see much.

He waits, standing, pressed against the wall, right next to Kelly's door. If this goes the way he hopes it does, she'll shut the door, he'll leap over, snag her, get the blindfold on, hoist her over his shoulder, and into the not so empty, empty room they'll go.

That's the plan at least.

He can hear her humming, the slight click of the rocking chair settling back into place as she gets up. "Sleep well, baby girl."

One step, two, three, her hand hits the doorknob.

She opens the door, blinking hard at the bright light, and he pulls her to him, fast, his hand over her mouth. "Quiet."

Abby nods.

"Your keep's fallen. Time to get you out of here, Lady Skye."

"Before I'm taken as a prize?" she whispers.

"Before you're taken as someone else's prize."

"And how do you suggest we get out? You're clearly wounded, unarmed, and naked."
"I fought my way to you like this, and I'll get us out." He flashes her a cocky smile. Tim slips the blindfold over her eyes, hoists her over his left shoulder, and murmuring something he hopes sounds vaguely magick-y, he carries her into the spare room.

He'd set the room carefully. A few of the LED candles are glowing, providing him with enough light to see. He'd turned the "music" on while Abby nursed; it's the sound of waves and wind. Turning the ceiling fan on means they have a bit of a breeze. Dragging the humidifier up from the basement and running it while she was nursing means the room is slightly damp.

It feels and sounds, he hopes, a lot like they are on the ocean.

He puts her down, gently, on the fuzzy rugs. "I wouldn't stray far, Lady Skye, the water's rough, and twenty feet below us."

"I'm a good swimmer," she says, still sitting, reaching around her, feeling what's near.

"Make sure you jump far then, the rocks below us are rougher, yet."

"And will I get my vision back?"

"Eventually. You don't need it right now."

"Why? Keeping me from running off?"

"Something like that," he says as she feels around, finding the edges of the rug. "The cliff we're on only extends a few feet beyond the rugs."

"How did we get here?"

"Magic."

She stops feeling around and looks at him, exasperation on her face. "This whole time, you've been able to just leave whenever you wanted?"

"Yes." He kneels, straddling her legs, and gently strokes her lips with his fingers. "But being your amusement of choice made for a very pleasant situation. Didn't feel any need to leave until I could let my men know where I was."

She nods, starting to put the pieces together. "And did my keep fall to your men?"

"Yes, Daegan has it now. If it's any consolation, I'm sure you'll get back to it."

"You're just going to let me go?"

"That wasn't how I was envisioning this working." He sits back on his heels, next to her, slipping one of the scarves out from under the rugs, looping it over her big toe, crossing it over and over her foot, and tying it gently at her ankle. He kisses the knot and once again said something low and nonsense, magic words to work the spell. "On the off chance you can't actually swim, this will make sure you don't fall."

"And how did you envision this working?" she asks, foot still between his hands, her hands braced against the rugs, leaning back against them, robe slipping off her left shoulder.

"Did you know I have six brothers?"

"You hadn't mentioned that."
He shrugs, gently stroking her ankle, tips of his fingers skittering between the lines of the scarf. "Well, we didn't do a lot of talking. They're envious of my position as firstborn and covetous of my lands. I would find it... convenient... to have a well-fortified keep they didn't grow up in, finding all the nooks and hidden passages. A keep staffed with men who aren't loyal to my family might be nice, too. Likewise, that keep of yours is on prime land, and it's much easier to defend lands when the people attacking them do not know every river and glen."

"Uh huh." She doesn't look particularly impressed by that, understanding where he's going with this. She changes the subject. "What is this place?"

"Mine. This is my one holding that I do not have to defend from them. They see no use to it. First of seven boys, only one with a lick of magic to him. For them, this is just a cold lump of rock in the middle of the ocean. But for me... All magic is sea, sky, earth, and fire, and here, we sit on earth that was once fire, that burned until it hit the sea, cooled, became this shelf of rock, here sea beats below us, and sky dances above. Here we are fire made earth, held between sea and sky. Here is perfect."

Abby moves the edge of the rug and touches the carpet below, as if to touch the rock. "Poetic. This is your power source?"

"One of them. But, yes, this is an especially fine node. Easy to pull off of, easy to work with. I'm not, by a long margin, the first mage called to this rock, and I won't be the last. But while my heart beats, it's mine."

"Why bring me here?"

He smiles, but she can't see that. So he reaches for her hand, and places it on his chest, over his heart. Her other hand lay on the carpet below the rugs, touching what would have been bare rock. "Bringing my heart to my heart."

She tilts her head, teasing, emotional armor in place, but her voice is soft as she asks, "Are you really that fond of me, Dragon Knight?"

"I think I could become so, and I'd like that chance. I am that fond of your lands, and it's an awfully nice keep, very comfortable, hot and cold running sex available at all hours. I like it there." He smiles brightly, keeping the lightness in his voice, so she can hear it.

She smirks at that, starting to tug her hand away, but he holds her wrist firm over his heart.

"Do you think I'm that fond of you?" she asks him.

He keeps hold of her hand, lifting her wrist to his lips, kissing gently, and then biting softly, scraping his teeth over the sensitive skin where her pulse thrums. He smiles at her again. "We'll find out."

"You'll try."

"Unlike you, Lady Skye, I've got more than thick walls to keep a person near." Abby looks too amused to be properly Lady Skye, but, lack of proper indignation aside, he's very pleased to see Abby's having a good time with this. He kisses her wrist again, then licks gently up the inside of her forearm, speaking against her skin, letting the breath of his words tickle damp flesh.

"I bind you, Katie of Skye," her eyes go wide as he says that. Apparently that isn't what Abby or Skye expected him to do.

"I bind your flesh to mine." He snags another of the scarves, one that already had a small loop tied into the end, slipping it over her first finger.
"I bind you Katie of Skye, here, where earth meets air." He wraps the scarf over her hand and wrist, looping it further up her arm as his lips slip over each new word.

"I bind you, here, where sea kisses earth." He kisses the crook of her elbow with that.

"I bind you, here, where fire met water.

"I bind you, here, in the shadow of where fire leaps to air.

"I bind you, here, my woman" a kiss to her wrist, "to my magic" a kiss to her palm, "to my name." One last kiss to her lips.

He finishes tying the knot onto her arm, and then shifts his hold to her other arm, where the knot tattoo is. "I bind you, Katie of Skye, brand you with my mark, take you as my woman.

"I bind you, Katie McGee, from this day 'til our spirits return to the heavens that gave us birth.

"I bind you."

Abby's grinning widely at that, and he has no problem feeling her break character as she says, "I like that."

"Really?" That was quite a bit more one-sided than he's ever taken his playing before. After all, Skye, in character, probably wouldn't have been thrilled with the whole magically overpowered, taken captive, and married by force thing. And though he liked saying it, was in it, with the character in the moment, there is a part of him feeling a bit wary going that far. He thinks she knew he'd need a bit more reassurance to take this that far, and he appreciates getting it.

"Oh yeah!" She's nodding at him. "I think most girls like the idea of being swooped up, taken, and claimed, by the right guy. You know, as a game… Different if it's real. But, sometimes it's nice to be reminded of exactly how much bigger and stronger you are. Sometimes, it's fun to be… swept off your feet, literally."

He slips off her blindfold, (he doesn't like having a real conversation when he can't see Abby's eyes) and she quickly looks around, appreciating what he's done to set this.

"Nice."

"Thanks."

"Why are there two kitchen chairs up here?" There's a chair on either side of the rugs.

He smiles happily at her, naughty gleam in his eyes. "That binding might get a whole lot more literal. Just don't tug hard; they won't hold for much."

She's still grinning at this, and looks him in the eye and says, "Sometimes, an edge of danger is fun. Sometimes, the safeword isn't just about making sure you've got a way out, sometimes it's about allowing the illusion of lack of consent…"

That's way further than they've ever taken his Doming. He knows he's not comfortable going that far. She's never said no in a game, but he's sure, even though that's not her safeword, that it'll stop him dead.

Edge of danger, bigger, and stronger, and just taking what you want… That's also a different flavor than how they usually play. Even when he is in charge, he'll tell her what he wants, have her do it for
him, but she always has the control of not following orders. He's never just *taken* what he wants. There's a huge chasm between saying, 'Pull it out and suck' and actually grabbing a woman by the head and forcing her to do it.

He's looking at her, not quite sure how to even put what's bouncing around in his mind into words, but she's nodding at him, reassuring.

"Play with me. Trust me, I'll like it. And Skye's not from around now, she's used to a world where men decide what they want and then grab it."

"But, does she like it?"

"She does if the right guy's doing it."

"Is Gabe the right guy?"

"I have a feeling that's the main plot of book one."

"You think there's more than one book here?"

"Oh yes." She grins up at him, kisses just below his chin, where his skin is unbruised, and then slips the blindfold back over her eyes.

Tim takes a moment to shift the storyline in his head a bit, embracing a more 'taking' less 'telling' perspective. Then says, "It's not nice to tease a man."

He leans over her, snagging another scarf, whispering in her ear, "Not nice to show him something he wants, day after day, letting him see, but not touch." He bites her earlobe, and then ties her right wrist (loosely) to the leg of the chair.

"And what, poor little Knight, did you want so badly that you couldn't have?" She tugs the binding as a token complaint against being tied, but Abby's being careful not to yank too hard.

His hands stroke over her hips, unknotty ing the tie on her robe, pushing it off her body and up and over her arm, so it pools in a soft silk puddle up by her right hand.

"Hands and knees, Lady McGee, on your hands and knees."

Abby's wriggling in a very pleased sort of way. Completely out of character for Skye, but well, he's a guy, and an ass guy at that, and her wriggling a soft, plump ass at him in a very *come and get it* manner hits him all sorts of all right.

He quickly ties her left ankle to the other chair, spreading her legs apart, and lays a line of kisses down her spine, then settles, kneeling between her legs, looking.

"Best view in the world," he says, hands cupping her rear, stroking gently over her skin, staying to the sides, nearer her hips than her pussy.

"Not my face?" she asks, back into Skye, looking (well, not looking, she's got the blindfold on, but turning her face to him) over her shoulder.

He pats her cheek gently. "Get to see your pretty face all the time. This treasure's usually hiding under your skirts. Shame to see it covered." He gently licks the base of her cross tattoo. "Maybe I'll do that... Take you to my home, keep you bent over all day and night, on display for my pleasure? You kept me ninety-seven days. Shall I keep you bent over for me ninety-seven days?"
"Open to your every whim?"

He growls gently at that. Many, many whims flashing through his mind. "You're teasing again."

"Maybe I like teasing. Besides, what sort of teasing is this? 'Get to see but didn't touch.' You touched me all over."

"No, Lady McGee, I didn't. You let me touch here." His hands slid down her hips and legs. "And here" he drags them up the backs of her legs, over her ass, and up her back. "Of course here." He cups her breasts gently. "And here." His fingers trail down her throat and over her arms.

He kisses her pussy lightly, just brushing his lips against hers. "Loved touching there." He slips his tongue between her lips, lapping gently at her, taking the time to savor her taste and tease her clit, working her until she's rocking against him, soft, breathy moans matching the cadence of the waves in the recording. When he felt her start to tighten, when her voice got higher and her legs began to just barely quiver, he slid further up, over her perineum, and an inch further, circling her anus then lightly flicking his tongue against it.

She jerks at that touch, gasping, sounding surprised, drawing in a little, and he's sure that's her being Skye, because he knows Abby likes that just fine and having been told to get all clean, was certainly expecting something like that to happen.

"But you didn't let me touch here." He licks his finger, making sure it's wet and slick, and then slides it over her, circling the delicate skin. "You teased, and you let me imagine, you told me how good it'd be, let me see," he grabs the glass dildo and trails it over her, "that, but you didn't let me touch." He bites the curve of her buttock, where it met her thigh, while continuing to circle her with his finger.

"No more teasing, Lady McGee, time to deliver on your promises."

She inhales fast and hard, shifting away from him as much as she can without pulling too far on the ties and tipping over the chairs.

He strokes the dildo up the insides of her legs, teasing closer and closer toward her pussy, but not touching. "No sarcastic quip for me? No more teasing?"

She shakes her head. "Not about that."

He licks gently over her, tongue trailing in a wet, silky promise. She tightens against him, squirms, partially pulling away, partially pushing back, getting more friction, and sighs. He licks again, and again, nothing demanding, no penetration, just kissing her properly, making sure everything was warm and wet, quivering in anticipation. When he pulls back he says, "Do you not like it?"

"I like what you're doing. I've… never…" She blushes prettily, and Tim's not sure if Abby's so into Skye right now she can't find the edges between them, or she's just that good of an actress. Either way, he's really liking it.

"Never?" That got another long, wet lick, and this time he points his tongue, very gently starting to press forward, wriggling against her. When she presses back against him, he stops. "Tease me like that, and you've never…"

"No."

He bites her gently again, growling, feeling a surge of lust-filled possessiveness through him. "Nothing a man likes better than virgin territory."
"That's what I'm afraid of," she says very quietly.

"Afraid I'd like it?" he asks, gently, concerned.

"Afraid of being marked by you."

That got a smirk, and another kiss, his fingers dancing over the lip print on her throat and the cuff tattoo on her arm. "Little late for that, Lady McGee. You're mine. Body, lands, soul. Mine." He leans up, so that his chest covers her back and his lips are near her ear. "See me." He whispers against her ear, and slips the blindfold off. She turns her face to him, and he kisses her lips. "I want you to see me do it. I want you to know it's my body. No closing your eyes, no pretending. My body, in yours. My cock, making you come."

"You're awfully sure about that."

"Ninety-seven days. That's how long you held me. Eighty-nine of them you came to me. Came for my tongue, my cock, my fingers, my body. You slept in my arms and screamed my name. I know you had other men you kept as toys, but you came back, over and over, for me."

"Maybe they were just lame fucks," she says with a smile, seeming more in control.

"Maybe. But you know I'm not." He unbinds her hand and ankle. "When I sink into you, I want you to see it. I want you watching. First man to take your ass'll be me, and I want to make sure you know it." He picks her up again and carries her into their bedroom, dropping her on the bed and quickly adjusting the mirrors in their room.

A second later, he's back again, this time with the dildo and lube. He takes a few seconds to rearrange the pillows, wants something to help keep him easily propped up, then he reclines against them, shoulders and chest off the bed, rest of him lying down.

"Hands and knees again. Over me. Want you sucking me while I play with you."

Abby nods, settling into place over him. He scoots them (and the pillows) over a few inches. "Can you see everything?"

"Yes." It's not an easy angle to get a good view of, but lots of mirrors means he can bounce the view off of one to another, so she can see him as he touches her.

"Good." He licks her slow and steady. Then notices she's not doing much licking of her own, and pushes his cock toward her lips. A second later, when she sucks him in in one long pull, he groans. "Perfect, just like that. Keep me happy, while I get you ready."

One last lick, wet and slick and lavish, lingering on her skin, making her arch against him, mouth wet and supple on him,

He reaches around, finding the lube by feel, and tossing it to her. "Slick up my fingers."

She does, using lots of lube. This is one time when extra friction isn't a good thing. He pulls her hips a bit higher up, begins to stroke her clit with his tongue, while his fingers begin to gently massage around her anus. He takes his time, slow, easy, lots of long strokes with the pads of his fingers to relax the muscles, help get everything loose and happy.

She's rocking against him, humming blissfully against his dick, mouth wet and supple on him,
making it difficult to concentrate on what he's supposed to be doing, but it's the best kind of
distraction.

He starts to ease his first finger in, slow, steady pressure, while he sucks on her clit, flicking it with
his tongue. She's moaning against him, thrilling him with the sounds of her pleasure and the feel of it
on his dick.

Once his finger's sunk in he pulls back for a second to say, "God, that's beautiful. So, hot and tight.
Still watching?"

He feels her nod and starts on finger two. Slow, gentle pressure, easy stretching, making sure her
body has time to adjust. Making sure to keep her just on the edge of getting off as he adds each new
finger. He's reading her responses carefully, feeling the building tension in her body, the almost-there
clench of her ass around his two fingers as his tongue speeds up, getting her closer and closer. He
wants to feel her twitching around him as he slips the third finger in, wants to hear her coming on
him.

It's there, that breathy, gasping, high-pitched moan that lets him know it's time. He speeds his tongue
and slips the third finger in, fast, knowing by that point she's so turned on the burn'll feel good. And
it does, or seems to, at least, her legs twitch and her body spasms around him as the third finger slides
home.

He waits until she's not twitching anymore, until her breathing calms back down. She's resting
against him, not sucking anymore, just lightly licking his thigh. "Still think my confidence is
unfounded."

"No."

He wriggles his fingers. "Still feel good?"

"Yes."

He starts to pump them in and out, slowly. She moans again. He rises his hips toward her again.
"That wasn't nearly muffled enough."

She giggles and takes him back into her mouth. He moans, then goes back to licking her, rolling her
clit with his tongue in fast circles as his finger set a slow steady glide. When her mouth work starts to
get sloppy, when she lets him slip out and doesn't seem to be paying much attention at all to his dick,
that's his cue to move from fingers to the dildo.

He was about to press the dildo in when an idea occurs to him. An idea they haven't played with
before. He's not even entirely sure how the mechanics of it would work, but he reaches back, just
able to get the drawer on the nightstand open, grabs one of the condoms, and quickly covers the
dildo.

Abby had been watching and is looking at him curiously. They're the only ones that use their toys,
not like they need extra protection. He adds more lube to the condom and then pulls forward with
one long, smooth thrust, watching her shudder and moan.

"Like it?"

"Yeah."

"How's it feel?"
"Full—" he slides it out a little and she moans again. "Hard. Unh… Slick…" She rocks back onto it, groaning again, head dropping to his thigh.

He pulls her head up by her hair. (Gently, mostly just nudging her up.) "Keep watching. Want you to see every second of this."

He bends low, licking her clit while sliding the dildo in and out, listening to each hitched breath and half moaned sigh. Again he licked until her body was tight, quivering on the edge of climax, and again he stopped.

"Fuck you, Gabe, do not leave me like this," she spit at him as he pulls back, lips, chin, and neck shiny with her juices.

"Patience, Katie. I've always gotten you there before. Tonight's not gonna be any different, love."

"Damn well better."

"Up, off of me." He sits back on the bed, still making sure the mirrors are keeping everything in easy view. He takes her hands and gets her straddling him, so she was over his cock, facing the mirrors, then holds her hips so she couldn't sink down. "Stay. Watch." He coats his cock with lube, generously, pumping his shaft with his hands as her eyes follow every motion.

Then with slick fingers, he got a hold of the dildo, slid it out, stripping off the condom, and pulled her onto him, sinking balls deep into her pussy, hissing at the feel of it. "Fuck, Katie, you feel so good." He rocks into her, feeling her rise and fall against him, and then on yet another upstroke he stopped her, pulled out, and shifted his dick back.

"Watch. Watch my cock slip into you. Watch me fuck that glorious tight little ass of yours."

She slowly lowers herself, and they both watch her body spread around him, watch as his slick flesh was enveloped by hers.

Her eyes grow heavy, and he knows they usually close when she's feeling intense pleasure. "Keep them open, Abby, want you to see me fuck you."

"Yes" slurs into a deep groan as she settles onto him.

He's kissing her shoulder and neck, reveling in the soft, tight, hot, so incredibly hot, feel of her body on his.

"Want you to touch yourself. No getting off until I say you can, but I want to see your fingers on your clit."

"Yes." She does, circling slowly, and he feels her muscles tighten against him.

His teeth worry her shoulder, nipping along the skin, as he rocks gently in and out. Can't move too much, but right now he's just adding a little friction, enjoying how this feels, her body so tight and slippery on his.

Finally he remembers he's still got the dildo in hand, and why he put a condom on it in the first place.

"Suck it. Get it good and wet." Not that it really needs it. She's so wet there's a puddle on the bed under them, but he likes to watch. And like always her perfect mouth wrapping around something dick shaped and slurping ramps him up a few more notches.
She stops licking, eyes glinting at him, knowing where this is going to go.

"Never tried this before."

"Didn't think you had. Okay?" They're both fully out of character, but it doesn't matter.

"Oh yeah. Go slow."

"I will. Keep rubbing yourself. Want you so close you're begging for it." He licks her earlobe as he says, "But no coming. Not until I say you can."

Her fingers speed up, faster pace, not flying over her skin, but moving quickly, firmly. He keeps rocking against her, building up his own speed, and then begins to rub the head of the dildo against her. Not slipping in, not yet. Just playing it over her lips, nudging between them, letting her use the head like a finger, rubbing it over her clit, then sliding back again to trail lightly over her pussy lips.

She starts rising and falling on him, fingers moving a bit faster, and she might not be begging for it, but he knows he's not going to be able to hold on all the much longer, so Abby flushed red and whimpering is close enough. He shifts his hold on the dildo, moving it a fraction of an inch, gently parting her lips with it, and holding it in place, letting her sink down on it.

She does, slowly, hissing, body tight, low, deep groan echoing from her lips. "Oh God!"

He agrees with that. 'Oh God!' is right. It feels amazing. He didn't think it'd feel that different to him, but it's more pressure, more tight, more everything, and he really likes it.

He stops rocking, knowing he can keep his hands moving or his hips, but not both, not this far gone. Abby's slipping up and down on him, fast, blowing his mind. He starts to ease the dildo up and down, different speed than her hips, and that... that's her cursing with every breath, a long half-gasped litany of delicious profanity, and him... he's got no idea, he knows he's making noise because that, up-down, her body at one speed and the dildo at another, and he can feel it sliding up and down against him, but not exactly, because he's feeling it through her. It's like her, all around, but her more, where the ridge of glass pushes into her, and it's pressure and tight and friction and everything moving at once and just, holy fucking mother of god gold-red-white pulsing, burning, tingling pleasure through his whole body, every nerve sizzling with it, shouting, probably as loud as he can, her body clenching and spasming and rippling and everything wet and limp and lightly twitching, collapsed on each other, so high neither of them is in any danger of coming down anytime soon.

Waaaaa...

Or, coming down right now. Waaaaa... Crying baby is the proverbial wet blanket tossed on a good post-orgasmic glow.

Abby's not moving at all. Tim really doesn't want to move, either. Really. Every limb of his body feels like it's made of gently twitching, very happy, cement. But not only is it his night, he also missed the last two, so really, he needs to get up and get Kelly back down again. He inches away from Abby, very much regretting not getting to nestle in close and let his body calm back down, basking in the tight gentle heat of hers as he went soft.

He's quietly muttering to himself about Kelly picking an extraordinarily inconvenient time to stop sleeping through everything, as he wipes up a bit, when he notices the clock, 1:04. Or she's just woken up at her usual time, and they played a bit too long.

He stumbles into her room. "I'm here."
The appearance of a parent (late) but no food produces what could best be called an irate look. But in a few minutes, when she's cleaned up, laying against his chest, slurping away on her bottle, she's mollified. And, by the time she's mollified, Abby's gotten cleaned up, too, and come in, sitting on the floor, head on his knee, dozing against him.

Eventually Kelly finishes eating. Eventually they go back to bed. And eventually he curls up behind her, lip pressed (very gently) to her shoulder, inhaling the post-sex scent of her skin, and falls into a deep, content sleep.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: For those of you who are curious, I have started writing the adventures of Gabe and Skye. (I'm actually fantasy author, even got some titles on Amazon.) Not sure if they'll be a series of short stories, or a full novel, or full-on epic, but as I get 'em together they'll end up on my blog, and eventually, once properly edited, Amazon.
Gibbs thought about it the whole ride home, what had Franks been up to?

Whatever it was, he wasn't doing it when Gibbs stayed with him that one summer. Or, if he was doing it, whatever it was didn't involve doing anything for four months at a time.

But Gibbs didn't think he was doing, whatever it was, back then.

But the last few years... especially after the Doc said it was cancer... he was doing something. Wouldn't say what. And, thinking about it, Gibbs doesn't know why he thought Franks was up to something. There were no obvious tells. Mike wasn't asking him for favors or anything. But... there was something.

He knew it in his gut.

Or maybe he just knew Mike so well that he knew there had to be more to it than laying on the beach drunk all day long. Even Mike couldn't do that for a decade at a time.

So, what was he doing?

The box. (technically, boxes) Gibbs had had it for years. All of Franks' "insurance policies." Everything he ever knew about anyone that he could use for leverage.

Gibbs built the false wall behind his bookshelf, stuck the collection of stuff Franks had given him in it, and left it there. And though he added to it as Mike gave him more and more stuff, he never opened any of it.

Because, unlike Franks, he was never so much of a loose cannon that he needed to blackmail people into letting him keep doing the job. Never bent the rules so far that he'd have to keep a loaded gun to make sure that no one would smack him for it.

Well, that's not true.

Unlike Mike, he never felt like he deserved to wiggle out of getting smacked for the rules he'd bent or broken.

So, there was a sense of... trepidation as he opened the box. A sense of peeking behind curtains he never meant to touch.

On the upside, if it can be called an upside, by now most of the things he was looking at were moot. The cases were over, the people involved dead. The entire first box was filled with dead men on dead cases. Things that happened not just before his time, but in several cases, ended before his time
as well.

The second box caught up to when he began at NIS. Not exactly current events, but at people he knew, cases he heard of, some he'd been on as a Probie. He refused to look into the file marked "Leon Vance," though he found the quote marks around Leon's name ominous.

And, it was true that he felt dirty by reading through them. These weren't just the skeletons in the closets; these files told the tales of the monsters that put those skeletons there. All 'greater good' arguments aside, there was some awfully shoddy work in these files and a boat load of men who deserved to sleep poorly because of it.

Worse than that, there were signs that the people he knew, respected, men who helped him to anchor himself when he was lost after Shannon and Kelly, were full of shit when it came to doing the job and doing it right.

That was probably part of not opening Leon's file. He doesn't want to know if Leon's full of shit, too. Doesn't want to know how many bodies Leon had to bury to get to where he is.

But for most of these files, and the men represented by them, they've passed to eternal sleep. And for almost all of the others, retirement has come and taken them off every case, forever.

Gibbs burnt the dead files without thinking twice. Nothing left to do with them. The ones where any of the agents were still alive, he kept, one day those cases may open again.

He looked at Leon's one last time, and tossed it on the fire, as well. Whatever was in there, he didn't need to know. Whoever Leon was, the man he is now will own up and act right if it ever comes back at him. Gibbs trusted that. Gibbs needed to trust that.

In the last box, the one Franks gave him right before he died, there are clues to something different. There are files on Coast Guard employees, on Federales and Mounties, on members of the TSA and the FAA, ICE, there are a bunch from the Border patrol, both on the Mexican and Canadian sides, there are files on high ranking officials at the Miami, Los Angeles, Philadelphia airports, and there are dossiers on people in different US Embassies.

These were all, as much as they can be, Frank's has been dead since '11, up to date. These were recent files on men still doing the job. These were also, unlike the others, which were mostly case files highlighting shoddy or flat out illegal work, straight up blackmail, lists of mistresses, gambling debts, embarrassing past activities, that sort of thing.

They're clues, but beyond the fact that everyone Franks had a file on was involved in some sort of travel or border thing… Gibbs wasn't seeing it.

"God, Mike, what the hell were you doing?"

He looked at the files in front of him again. FAA, Coast Guard, TSA, Border Patrol, ICE, airport officials…

"Smuggling?"

He looks around for a moment, willing Mike's ghost to pop up and tell him, but he doesn't. The Embassies are all in the middle east… Opium? If it meant making sure that Leyla and Amira never wanted for anything… If the payout was big, and he was dying already… Yeah, he'd do it in a heartbeat.

"Mike…"
Not drugs. Keep thinkin', Probie, you'll figure it out.

He doesn't see Mike, but the voice is clear.

"Thinking about what?"

Left you all the clues you need. Practically spelled it out. Just keep thinkin', you'll get there.

Thinking about it through church didn't help. The only answer he can think of, drugs, doesn't make any sense.

Actually, no, it makes perfect sense.

He can see what Mike's got set up is some sort of smuggling ring. With Mike's background in law enforcement and the military he'd have had good connections for drugs or guns.

But… he wouldn't leave that lying around for Gibbs. Mike knew there was no way he'd touch anything like that, and Mike wouldn't have given him all of this if he didn't expect him to eventually pick it up and use it.

So, it can't be drugs. Just. No. Never. Wouldn't matter how bad off their family was, how much they were hurting for cash. He'd hire out for wet work before running drugs.

Guns… Not like he couldn't think of people he wouldn't mind getting their hands on some good weapons. He was sure Franks felt the same way… (Though, given what he can see, this looked like Mike was moving something into the USA, and Gibbs really hoped he wasn't arming groups inside the US.) But… TSA? Airport officials? Immigration? Passport officials at different consulates? Guns are big, heavy, take up a lot of space. That's not who you call in for running guns.

It's who you call in to get a cover ID for someone who was running drugs…

Sort of… But… No, there isn't a document guy in the list of files Mike had. There's a list of people who you ask to turn a blind eye. Some you might ask for help. But you don't go to the US Consulate and bribe the Ambassador in an effort to get fake papers. You do that to get real ones, in a hurry.

He was distracted at Sunday dinner, still thinking through the problem, wondering. That got some minor ribbing from various Slaters, but in that he wasn't paying attention, it didn't much matter.

He's tempted to skip Bootcamp. Tim's not fighting, not risking getting a hit to the face today, and he can't, either, not really, and with just Ziva and Jimmy there, they might decide he needs to do some of that god-awful stretching stuff they're so fond of in an effort to get his knee back to functional.

The PT guy already has him doing a shit ton of it, and he hates it because it hurts like a son of a bitch and doesn't seem to be helping much. And with only Jimmy and Ziva able to fight, they'll probably do a few rounds and then make him stretch with them while Jimmy explains, at length, about how all of him needs to be loose and supple if he's going to really get back to fighting prime. (Sometimes having a doctor for one of your kids is highly overrated.) Then Ziva will explain how this sort of conditioning was part of her training and how it helps with fine muscle control or some other thing… (Mossad-trained former assassin isn't necessarily much better.) And… next thing he knows, they're trying to see if they can turn him into a pretzel while his hamstrings and low back scream in pain because there are some positions that guys in their fifties just shouldn't try to get into.

Ed Slater sidling over, looking at Tim, and saying, "The tech guy gets into fist fights?"
He stared at Ed, perplexed that they're still having a version of this conversation. "Tim's a field agent. Won't be after he takes over Cybercrime, but right now, he doesn't spend his days glued to a desk. His job is just as dangerous as mine."

Ed shook his head.

"What?"

"Just, hard to believe."

"Other men have thought that, too. They're dead."

That got a quick, shocked laugh out of Ed. "How about the guy who did that to him? He dead?"

"Nope. In jail. He'll be spending a long time there."

"Thought you and DiNozzo did that stuff."

"All five of us do."

Ed nodded and glanced at the clock. "You and Jimmy heading off?"

Gibbs responded with a nod as well. Time to go.

"You're being awfully quiet," Jimmy said to him as they headed toward the Navy Yard.

Gibbs shrugged, putting his key into the ignition.

"Even for you, you're being quiet, what's up?"

Gibbs turned off the radio and told Jimmy about Tim's suggestion, and what he'd found, what he was puzzling over. He didn't tell him about the other part that was also keeping him quiet. Namely, that Ed's 'Thought you and DiNozzo did that' bit got him thinking about Tony.

Who, of everyone he knew, could look through Franks' papers and help him figure it out.

But he didn't much want to talk to Tony right now.

He was sulking. He knew he was sulking. It was not Tony's fault that he was getting old. Not Tony's fault that he'll take over when Gibbs leaves. And it was not Tony's fault that he was not doing a good job of gracefully slipping into whatever comes next and handing the reins over.

None of that was Tony's fault.

But that didn't mean he wanted to spend an afternoon or two sitting in his living room, next to Tony, drinking a few beers, looking over a bunch of files.

That wasn't right. He wanted to get back to being the guy who enjoyed that. He needed his second-in-command's eyes on this. He wanted to bounce ideas off of Tony.

But right now, bouncing ideas off Tony meant looking the fact that he has to leave right in the face, and he didn't want to do that.

"Gibbs?"

He'd just sort of stopped talking, thinking about Tony and keeping his eyes on the road.
"Mouth open, words coming out," Jimmy said, while making a little talking gesture with his fingers. "I'm not psychic. I'm the one who spends nine hours a day with a guy who talks constantly. So, I need words, out loud, coming from you."

"Not much more to tell."

"Okay, let me remind you of this, in addition to not being psychic, I'm also not stupid."

Gibbs looked irked by that, turning his gaze from traffic to Jimmy. "You were a lot easier when I had you scared into submission."

Jimmy smiled grimly. "Would you like me to shut up and let you stew?"

"If I say yes, will you?"

He shook his head, no. "It's extremely unlikely."

Gibbs rolled his eyes and added in what he'd been thinking about Tony. Jimmy nodded at that, thinking quietly, a few miles down the road he said, "This time last week, you'd have worked out with us, gone home, given Tony and Ziva a call, tossed some steaks on the fireplace, and the three of you would have gone over it?"

"Yeah."

"So, this week, work out with us, get your shower, pick up some steaks on the way home, and then give Tony and Ziva a call."

Gibbs flashed Jimmy something that could only be called 'the stink eye.'

"Fake it until it's real again. You know you're sulking. You know it's stupid. Hiding in the basement isn't going to make it any better, and it won't solve your problem with Mike. On top of that, you know you owe Tony an olive branch and showing him that you still trust and value him does that."

That made an uncomfortable amount of sense. Fortunately he was parking the car when Jimmy said that, so he didn't have to respond immediately to it.

Unfortunately, unlike Tim and Tony who knew well enough to leave the hell alone, as soon as he was done parking, Jimmy was looking at him expectantly, waiting to hear something along the lines of… Jethro rolled his eyes and said, "Fine."

Jimmy smiled brightly at that. "Good. So, besides drugs and guns, what do people smuggle? Art? Antiques? I'm sure Ducky has a good fifteen hours on different stories of how people have been smuggling artifacts out of Iran and the like."

Gibbs nodded at that. Ever since everything went haywire in the Middle East, everyone who could, had been smuggling stuff out. He doubted Mike would have any objections to something like that, especially if it did provide a pile of cash for his girls to live on comfortably.

Jimmy added, "You might use people in the consulate to provide a diplomatic pouch for something like that. Don't want your ancient statue of whatever to get checked, go bribe someone into giving you diplomatic protections."

Gibbs nodded at that, too. It felt plausible, but not right. He was about to say something along those lines when Jimmy saw Ziva and called out to her, "You and Tony have dinner plans?"
"No."

"Good. Jethro's cooking. You two are going to his place and helping him solve a mystery."

Ziva looked very pleased by that. "What sort of mystery?"

"The sort we'll tell you about when we get changed. See you in five," Jimmy said, heading them toward the locker room.

"No chance of backing out, huh?" Gibbs said quietly.

"Nope. I'll be good for you."

"Uh huh." Gibbs didn't sound convinced as he dropped his gym bag on the floor and sat down to take his shoes off.

"Speaking of good for you, how's the knee?" Jimmy asked while opening his locker.

"Fine."

"Fine, like how you're doing with Tony, fine?" Jimmy knelt in front of him, looking at the knee in question, gently poking at it once Gibbs had the brace off. "Or," he extended Gibbs' leg and tested to see how much play was in the joint when he wiggled it, "fine, fine?"

Gibbs slapped his hands away and began to get changed. "Fine."

"Run a mile, fine?" Jimmy's expression was serious as he asked.

"Not yet."

"Walk a mile?"

"Yes."

"How's it feel?"

"Aches after that. Have to ice it down."

He nodded along with that. "Any weight on the leg curls?"

"No."

"How long can you go without the brace and not have it ache?"

"An hour."

"Stand on one leg, steady?"

"About half a minute."

Jimmy thought about that, and this time, hands hovering over Jethro's knee, waited for permission (and got it) before feeling how everything moved through a full extension of his knee. "You're healing."

"Not fast enough."

"Ducky felt that way after his heart attack."
"I know."

"How about after Ziva and I fight, we work on some targeted calf, hamstring, glutes, and quadriceps exercises?"

"Am I going to have to stretch?"

"Yep." Jimmy looked like he enjoyed this idea quite a bit more than was warranted.

"Great." Jethro did not look like he was enjoying that idea.

"More flexibility means lower chance of reinjuring yourself. More flexibility means better blood flow which means faster healing. The looser you are the more of each muscle works-"

"I know. I got it the first three times you started singing that song. We'll do it. Just don't love it."

Jimmy turned back to his locker, hanging up his jacket and quickly stripping out of his church clothing. "You don't have to love it. You've just got to do it."

Gibbs stared at Jimmy not sure he wanted to say it, but… "Why?"

"You want to be able to walk without a brace?" Jimmy wasn't sure what exactly he was asking there, and the puzzled expression on his face said that loud and clear.

"Yeah, but… big picture, what's the point? Say I set the record for fastest recovery ever, how soon will I be back on full duty?"

"Middle of December?" By which Jimmy meant first week of January, and Gibbs knew it.

"So, I'll have, at most, a month. And really, a week. What's the point?"

"Oh…” Jimmy sat down on the bench next to Gibbs, understanding that this is about more than just his knee. Unfortunately he doesn't have any good answers for Gibbs, not at first. "Getting the most out of that month that you can?"

"Yippiee." Dry, withering sarcasm, more the style of Tim than anything Jimmy expected out of Gibbs went with that.

"Being able to play on the floor with little girls easily?"

"Better." That got a ghost of a smile, but it's a genuine ghost.

"Finding out whatever the hell Indiana Jones stuff Franks was up to, getting your own whip and fedora, and heading off into the sunset for incredible adventures that Tim'll steal and stick in his book?"

Gibbs laughed dryly at that, but that was real, too.

Jimmy poked him gently and gave him a dirty smile. "Because six months from now, when, on said adventure, you meet Ms. Right, you want all of your different bits working so you can rock her world."

That got a genuine, unreserved laugh.

"Can't get through a proper tango, let alone pick her up and carry her off Rhett Butler style if your knee's gimping out on you."
Jethro nodded wryly, and grabbed for his shorts, tugging them on.

Fire crackling gently, savory scent of steak and potatoes cooking away, one beer in his system, Operation: Fake It Till You Feel It was about to begin.

Tony also looked a bit wary as he headed in. Ziva and Tony were staring at him, seeing the pile of files on his kitchen table, looking expectantly at him, waiting to get filled in. He offered beers and explained what he wanted them looking at.

For the first hour, it was pretty quiet. Sounds of eating, papers rustling, Ziva and Tony looking through the files.

"You got a map of the world?" Tony asked.

"Yeah." He headed upstairs, went searching through the books on the shelves, and found their atlas. Tony stared at it when he came down, shaking his head. "Need McGee and the plasma."

"Or MTAC," Ziva added.

"Yeah. Spread it all out so we can see it easy." Tony squinted at the little map in front of him, shaking his head. "This isn't going to do it. Look, East Germany. It's" he opened the book's cover, "thirty years out of date."

"What were you thinking of putting on a map?" Gibbs asked.

"The Embassies... All but three are in the Middle East. Then he's got one in Jamaica, one in Mexico City, and one in The Dominican Republic. They're all US Embassies..." Tony tapped his fingers on the files in front of him. "Why? That's got to go with the border thing, somehow. You don't bribe US Borders and Customs to get things out of the US, but to get them in. They don't care about stuff going out."

"Look at what is not on this list," Ziva said. "He has no one at DEA, FBI, or ATF. That means your first two guesses, drugs or guns cannot be right."

"So, Jimmy's antiquities?" Gibbs asked.

"Maybe. But why no high ranking officials in the middle east? Everyone he's got there works for one of our Embassies. Afghanistan's a mess, but if you want to take the local Mona Lisa out, you still need some of their people to look the other way, not just ours." Tony was staring at Gibbs' mantle, looking at the pictures. There was a shot of Leyla and Amira. "Why was he doing this?"

"Money? Make sure the girls are set. Leyla never married Liam, so she doesn't get spousal benefits."

"Isn't her family rich?" Tony asked.

That was true. "Yes."

"And she and her mom are on good terms again, right?"

"Think so."

"And she is working for Homeland as a translator, correct?" Ziva added.

"Yes. Married last year, too."
"Mike would not have known that. But she has been working here since before he died. And she and her mother reconciled long before Mike died," Ziva said.

"So, not financial security for his girls," Tony says. "And he told you you were better off not knowing?"

Gibbs nodded.

"Not guns, not drugs, probably not antiques…" Tony was shaking his head. "No one on his list seems to know squat about that… Not, it can't be antiques, there's no fence on this list. Someone's got to buy and sell the damn things after he got them here. What's that leave?"

It hit Gibbs like a hammer, and he could see Mike smiling at him from behind Tony. "People. It leaves people." He turned to look at the picture of Leyla and Amira, and he knew, he felt it in his gut. "It leaves girls in a bad situation looking to get somewhere better."

All three of them stared at the folders in front of them. Then Gibbs started to close them and pack them up, quick. Illegal, very, very, very illegal, but not immoral. Never immoral. Because Mike didn't care about legal, he never did. But he cared a whole lot about what was right, which was why he couldn't keep working for a government he felt had betrayed it's people.

He looked at Tony and Ziva and both of them shook their heads, a silent, 'We didn't see this, you didn't see it either, we're all blind, stupid, and deaf, and we weren't here to boot.'

He nodded at that, finishing tucking the files back into their box.

A minute later, as Tony and Ziva were getting ready to leave, Tony glanced at him, almost as if he was going to ask what Gibbs was going to do with this, but, just like Mike wouldn't tell him, because he was a cop, Gibbs won't tell Tony. But he nodded at Tony, and Tony nodded back.

They got each other.

And as they left, Gibbs knew something else, this box was going back into the hidden wall, and it was going to stay there, for about three and a half months, and then, when he was no longer a cop, he was going to pull it out and really look it over.

Chapter End Notes

So, I love the idea of Mike running the Afghani-girl underground railroad. That's such a wonderfully Mike sort of thing to do. I enjoyed Anonymous Was a Woman, too. Give me tons of McGee and Gibbs together and I'm happy.

But, I did not, for a second, buy the idea that Mike told Gibbs what he was up to and Gibbs didn't help.

The idea that Gibbs placed "legal" and his job over helping little girls/teens escape repeated rape and slavery did not compute. My suspension of disbelief snapped with an audible twang.

Okay, actually it snapped with an audible "No fucking way!" and while it's true that my husband doesn't curse, he agreed with my assessment of that situation.
One of the reasons we root for Gibbs is that Gibbs stands for what's right. He doesn't care about the niceties or legalities. He does the right thing at the right time for the right reasons. Add in his history with girls, let alone his go to the wall for family, and there's just absolutely no way he didn't sign those papers for Mike and get those girls on that plane.

No way!

So, we've done a bit of a rewrite here. Mike never told him. He was sensitive to who Gibbs was, and his position, and that Gibbs could get into a shit ton of trouble for this, so he didn't tell. He just, set it up so that Gibbs could, should he go through Mike's stuff, start putting some pieces together and maybe, if he found himself with some free time, a boat, and a desire to be useful, take over for him.
"Good morning." He sets Rachel's coffee on her desk, and then sits on the sofa across from her.

She takes the coffee and arches an eyebrow at him. "You're in a surprisingly chipper mood. What's changed since Thursday? You and Tim come up with yet another plan to keep you on for another year?"

"No. I…" his voice trails off. In the rush of having a plan and in the mindset of you-can-tell-her-everything, the shut-the-hell-up instinct hit him a few seconds too late.

"You…" she leads looking very intrigued.

He bites his lip. "Stuff I tell you is confidential, right?"

"Mostly. Unlike, say a lawyer or a priest, the things you tell me can be subpoenaed. And should such a subpoena show up, I would have to turn my notes over. However, a thorough investigation of my notes will never reveal any illegal activities on the parts of any of my clients. I'm more interested in helping you than providing Internal Affairs with fodder for an investigation. If you're doing something that's against my own rules, I'll boot you as a client, but I won't write it down."

He finds that reassuring. "Okay."

She smiles at him, lifting her coffee, inhaling the bitter/sweet scent. He's added cream and pumpkin spice to it for her, a nice fall touch. "So, what has you in such a good mood this morning?"

"I think I found the next thing."

"Really?" She sounds intrigued by that. His email had seemed so helpless and adrift, the idea that less than a week later he had something planned out and ready to go seems incredible.

"Yeah."

"And are you going to tell me what the next thing is?"

He squints at her, fairly sure she'd be fine with it, but… Not like they've ever actually had a chat about US immigration policy. And some people really are law and order types. (But she's not. She just said she doesn't write stuff down.) Of course, some people actually agree with the idea that everyone who comes here has to go through the proper channels and that if they don't they have to leave.

And some people just don't give a shit.

And some people don't want to see anyone who's any darker than they are coming to this country.

But he's sure she's not one of them.

"How much have I told you about Mike Franks?"

Rachel looks at him, curious about what appears to be a digression. She's not following how Franks might work into any of this. She knows he's dead, so it's not like he could be doing much to help Gibbs. "He worked Shannon and Kelly's case. He got you into NCIS. He took care of you and gave you what you needed to know to go after the man who killed them."
As she says that, it hits him, she already knows he's murdered a man. Adding human trafficking to the list really isn't going to be terribly shocking compared to that. Probably. He's talking about pre-meditated, going at it cold, straight out breaking the law. This wouldn't be a crime of passion or revenge or a broken heart looking for an instant of peace.

"What do you think about that?" He sips his coffee, watching her carefully, seeing if her face matches her words.

"About which part?"

"Him giving me everything I needed to kill Hernandez."

"It's not about what I think."

The looks like standard boilerplate, but he's not sensing any condemnation. "I'm not asking for your approval. Just, trying to figure out how specific to be with the next bit."

"You want a sympathetic audience for your grand plan?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

She nods. And she knows that it's much easier to tell people what it is you intend to do if you think they'll approve. Granted, she doesn't think her approval will influence Gibbs' actions one way or another, but it will affect how free he is in the telling of what he's thinking. "You remember, the first time we met, you took me to your basement, showed me where to stand, and asked if I could feel that spot was where… that…" he senses that she doesn't have a word foul enough to describe Ari, "died?"

"Yes."

"Did I look like I had any moral qualms about that?"

"No. But it was a clean kill. He had a gun on me and was going to shoot. Ziva had every right to pull that trigger. Hernandez… I was almost a mile away. One second he was driving, the next second he wasn't. He wasn't a threat to anyone in that second. And… I had to kill him for me. If I was going to live with myself, I had to do it. But I didn't have to kill him to save or protect anyone else. And honestly, I could have shot the tires out, then shot his knees out, and brought him in. I could have made sure he stood trial. I didn't. I killed him.” It feels very… freeing… to actually say it. Everyone he loves knows he did it, but this is the first time he's actually said it, said all of it, owned the fact that it was a choice, something he had to do for himself, not for honor or justice or anything like that.

"Were you right? Did he kill your girls?"

"Yes."

"Did anyone have any doubts about that?"

"No. Only reason he didn't stand trial was because he'd run across the border. Only reason he wasn't extradited was because he owned the local government there. Short of invading Mexico, we couldn't legally get him. Grabbing him to take back for trial to the US would have been illegal, too."

"Then no. I have no problem with that. What have you found? Your email sounded very lost, and you look more excited right now than I've ever seen you. Are you planning on killing someone?" It's a serious question on her part, and he can see how he walked right into that.
"No. Not killing anyone. Mike… Mike always played fast and loose with anyone else's rules. Hell, he played fast and loose with his own, too. He knew he was dying well before it happened, and started to give me his 'insurance policies…"

"Everything you ever wanted to know about everyone at NCIS?"

"Pretty much. But there was some other stuff he gave me, too."

"What kind of other stuff?"

"Blackmail stuff. Very… specific blackmail stuff. Getting onto ten years ago now, Mike found out about his son, and his son's fiancee, Leyla, and his granddaughter, and… we smuggled her into the US when Liam, his son, died.

"Mike got it straightened out, eventually, she and Amira are legal, now…" Though it occurs to Gibbs that he doesn't actually know that for a fact. She works for Homeland, so whatever she has passed the background check. "Maybe… I'm sure her papers look really good."

"Anyway… I think… I think he kept doing it. All of the blackmail stuff, it was aimed at the kind of people you'd want to make look the other way if you were, say, smuggling people into the US. Or, some of it was the kind of stuff you'd use if you wanted someone to give you a visa."

"You think he was smuggling people into the US?"

"Girls. You don't have to do too many tours in the Middle East, especially Afghanistan, before you don't even want to look at the men there. You see a guy with a fifteen-year-old wife, and he's already got a kid or two with her, and… and the nicest thing you can say is you don't want to look at him. He's probably not a 'bad' guy. He's some farmer from the middle of nowhere just trying to keep himself and his family fed. He's not violent. He's not a terrorist. He treats her as well as any guy treats a woman back there. It's his culture, but his culture's rotten. He's got no problem fucking a little girl. No problem giving his own little girls to some other asshole. And he's one of the good guys."

"One of the cases we did was a series of bombings to destroy a school for girls. Girls reading was too horrifying for those bastards, so the school had to go. They killed the teachers. They tortured some of the girls, too. Other cases, ones we didn't work, where they barred the doors and burned the girls alive. You… You see stuff like that and all that you can feel is rage. You stop seeing the men there as individual people. Some good, some bad, some indifferent. And you start seeing predators, start seeing evil." Gibbs shakes his head. "Not supposed to do that. Makes for sloppy work. But… Can't say I don't feel it. Can say I try not to work too close with the locals in situations like that."

"And you think that Mike was the kind of guy who'd have no problem helping girls like that get to the US?"

"I know it. We smuggled Leyla in. Liam died before they could get married. It wasn't legal, at all. Her family eventually reconciled with her, but… She can tell you stories that'd make you want to bomb Iraq back into the dark ages. Just make you want to kill everyone who had a hand in it or ever turned a blind eye to it. And if she got talking to Mike, and she would have, he'd have done something about it."

"And now you're thinking of doing something about it?"

"He gave me all of his leverage. There's only one reason to do that."

She smiles gently. "I'm fine with the assumption that Mike wants you to do it. That's not what I'm asking. Are you going to do something about it?"
"I'm tempted." Gibbs shakes his head. "More than tempted. I want to do it. Once we put it together, it was like a light going on. I'd be good at it. Probably couldn't do a lot. But an old guy with a boat and a 'friend.' Hell, I don't care if they think I'm a pervert buying sex as long as I can get 'em on the boat and out of there."

"Afghanistan is a landlocked country."

He flashes her his don't bother me with stupid details look. "Doesn't have to be Afghanistan. Iran, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia they've all got ports."

"And they're lousy places to be a girl."

He nods. "Pakistan's not a picnic, either. India's got a lot of honor killings. Not like it'd be hard to find a place. Probably wouldn't be hard to find them on this side of the world, either."

"So, how do you find the girls? I'm assuming you're not planning on just sailing over and kidnapping some."

"I don't know. You're right, you don't just run up and grab a few. Gotta find the ones who want out. And Mike didn't leave me anything on how he found the girls. Or if he did, I haven't figured it out yet."

Rachel pulls him a bit closer to reality. "If he found girls. You don't actually know that's what he was doing."

"It fits."

"And it makes you happy, gives you a sense of purpose." She's giving him that knowing look, filling in the is this what he was doing or is this what you want him to have been doing with her expression.

"Yeah."

"Say you dig into this and find that Mike was doing something else. Then what?"

"I don't know. I like the idea of this. Even if I could only get one out a year…"

"If you can't do this… If you can't find someone to hook you up with girls in need of transport, then what?"

"The same problem I had before. I might find something else, but I won't be as good at it as I was at being a cop. Say I signed up to be an EMT, yes, it's useful, it'll save lives, but it's not what I'm best at. Any other EMT will do as good of a job as I could, if not better. And what I'm best at, looking at people figuring them out, solving puzzles, I won't be doing anymore."

"Cold cases?"

"Leon's offered. I'll probably take him up on them. I'll be ripping my hair out because they won't let me in the field for more than ten days a year. It'll be my job to go through the paperwork on dead cases, see if there's anything that still can be found, then tell someone else to go find it.

"If something else is people, they might let me do interrogations. Don't need fast reflexes for that, just a good brain. Or not, there're plenty of Probies who'll need practice, and it's not like there's any rush on a cold case."

"Private detective? Your friend Fornell, he'll be hitting the mandatory retirement age soon, too, right?"
You two could partner up."

"FBI lets team leaders stick around until 62. Tobias still has another year and if they bump him up one more level, another four because you get to hang on to 65 if you hit management. Emily'll be going to college soon. I know they've got plans for traveling and stuff like that once she's out of the nest."

"What was your original plan?"

"Have Shannon finished by now. Wake up, deal with the hangover from the retirement party, then out to sea. Float around until I got it out of my system. Come home four, six, eight months, however long, later. Maybe not come back at all."

"So, it's safe to say that plan's well out of date."

"Can't miss eight months of my girls. Eight months from now Kelly'll be unrecognizable, and Molly'll be two and a half… Anna's due in December, miss eight months with her she'll go from a bright pink peanut to… like Kelly, unrecognizable." He shakes his head. "Not heading off for more than a few weeks…" He thinks of how long it'd take to get to the middle east and back by Shannon.

"Three months, tops, now."

"Which means you need to solve the problem, not run away from it."

"Yeah. And this… This solves the problem. I can pick up new languages fast. And if I could find someone to get the girls to the Black Sea… I already speak Russian, and Leon's offering me a shot to go spend some time in the Crimea, keep an eye on things."

"That sounds dangerous. Mixing those jobs."

He nods. "Be good cover though. Depends on the girl. If she's a child… Grandpa and his girl doing some touristy things. Give her some time to work on her English before hitting the States. If you start somewhere where no one else speaks English, no one will notice if hers is bad."

"What happens to her after she gets to the States? Are you planning on adopting a collection of girls?"

"No. Mike had to do something with them."

"If that's what he was doing."

"If… And if he wasn't… I could do it. I'd be good at it. I've got good connections. I don't know about either of the ends, but I can handle the middle part. I've got the boat, just have to finish it. I'm old and white and speak perfect English and I'm a retired cop and Marine, Coast Guard isn't going to look twice at me. Shannon's small enough… And… I was talking with the kids a bit about maybe finding a place on the Chesapeake, maybe the Potomac, if it had its own pier… Wouldn't have to deal with customs or docking fees or any of the rest of it. Just an old guy, maybe with a dog, on a boat. Look like I'm out for a day or two with my girl."

Rachel smiles at him. "It's a nice fantasy."

"Yes."

"What would you do about making it real?"

"Finish the damn boat. There's step one. Talk to Leyla, that'd be step two. Can't do anything if I can't
find the girls."

"You think maybe she was involved?"

"I don't know. Knowing Mike, probably not. He would have wanted to keep her as out of it as he could. But she might still have a clue as to who to talk to."

"And by then, you'll have the boat finished?"

"Yeah. I don't want to be messing around with blackmailing ICE agents or the TSA guys at the airport, trying to get them to look away. I'd go old school. Boat, quiet bit of beach, blend in, just another sailor on vacation. The east coast is really big, there's got to be some bits of it no one's watching too closely."

"Or like you said, Grandad out with his girl, assuming the girl's young enough, doesn't matter if anyone is watching. You just stroll on out like it's the most normal thing ever."

"Go out enough with my own girls, get a reputation for being the old guy with the pile of kids on his boat all the time anyway. They might just assume I was out with the kids and some of their friends."

"I have a feeling that won't work for a few years at least."

"Probably not. But in a decade… Fifteen years…"

"Would you want to involve your whole family in this? Mike didn't tell you about this while he was alive for a reason, right?"

"Yeah. If he was doing it… Yeah. If he told me, it'd have put me in a bad situation."

"And if you tell your kids…"

"Same thing."

She looks at him knowingly. "It does seem like this has given you a lot to think about."

"Yeah."

"I also take it that you couldn't care less about the whole illegal thing?"

He nods.

"How about channeling your energy in a more… socially acceptable direction?"

"Like what?"

"Getting involved politically. Trying to get our immigration laws changed? Trying to make it easier for girls like the ones you're talking about to get asylum?"

He shakes his head. "Rather do good than talk about good." He thinks about that for another second. "Wouldn't be good at it. No patience for bullshit. Jen was good at it. Leon's good at it. Me, I'd sit there for five minutes, until my blood pressure shot so high I could feel my pulse in my eyes, and then I'd storm out and go shoot things to blow off steam. Not my thing."

"It could be your thing."

He shakes his head. "Even if it was, we're not talking about girls who can just head over to the
consulate and sign up for a visa. Someone still needs to get them out safe."

"And clandestine missions, you and a boat and the open sea, swooping in and saving the day, doing the impossible job, that's your thing?"

He nods vehemently. "That's my thing!"

"And it's very important to you to be not just good, but excellent at what you do?"

The thinks about that for a moment. "Yeah, it is."

"How are you with learning new things?"

"Usually pick things up pretty quick."

That isn't what she's trying to get him to think about so she shifts the question a little. "How are you with someone teaching you something new? Someone you don't know or respect?"

That gets a shrug. He didn't bite Tim's head off when he was setting up the computer, and he did call about the gchat thing, but it's also true that now that it's up and running he'd rather take six hours looking for help online than ask a stranger for help.

"This girl rescue idea, this doesn't require you to learn something new from someone. Not as a student. You'd have to investigate, track down leads, then find the girls, then infiltrate, sail, land somewhere, smuggle them in. You might need to spend a lot of time with Rosetta Stone picking up Farsi or Arabic, but letting someone else see that you don't know what you're doing wouldn't be part of it, right?"

He nods in concession of that.

"But, say, signing up to be an EMT, that would require you to learn someone else's system, be the low man on the totem pole, deal with another person's rules, take orders from someone else. Realistically, as an EMT, you'd be saving lives every week. Good at it or not, you'd still be there getting people to the hospital when they needed to go."

He nods at that, too.

She looks at him, sipping her coffee, not saying anything.

He sips his too, also not saying anything. She's got a very good point, but not one he wants to comment on, not right now.

She sees that, nods, allowing him time to think about it, and says, "How are things going with Tony?"

He tells her about Jimmy's fake it 'til you feel it plan, and how he'd put it into action the night before.

"I have a feeling I'd like Jimmy."

"You haven't met him?"

She shakes her head. "Saw him in passing for a few seconds. But we've never sat down and had a conversation. So, how did faking it feel?"

"Uncomfortable. Once we got into the work, it was better. Once I figured it out, and the light flicked on, and Tony wasn't so much the… Tim's got a word for it… harbinger?" Rachel nods, that word
will do. "The image of things ending, it was a lot easier. I think we were in good shape as I packed everything up and we all agreed to pretend we had no idea what Franks was up to."

"But you haven't gotten back to work, yet."

"No I'm—" he's about to say heading straight there from here when his phone buzzes. He takes it out, glances at the screen, texts back to Tony, and sighs.

"What, something wrong?"

"Not… wrong. Did I tell you about the last case?"

"Just a little."

He fills her in on how Tim handed the case over to Fornell, and how Tony just got a call from Fornell, requesting Tim and the NCIS conference room, so that he, Diane, who is an IRS investigator, and Fornell could go through everything together, cutting the case into pieces, and how Tony had just, gleefully, sent him orders to accompany Tim. "Not that there's much I can add. I was here while Tim and Draga were up there handling the last bit, but I think Tony's looking at having me handle them as a sort of payback."

"Excellent," she says with a smile. "So… is Diane seeing anyone? Thinking about finding yourself a quiet bit of parking lot?"

He glares at her, but there's no anger in it. "I think I said something about being drunk, flirty, and at a wedding for that to happen."

Her expression says that she considered those aspects negotiable.

He shakes his head. "No. We'll snipe at each other, and…" He shakes his head again.

"I'm not saying you need to fall in love with her. But, enjoy it… Without feeling guilty about it. Take the time to see the woman who's really there, and enjoy her. Doesn't have to be romantic or sexual."

"Is this today's homework assignment?"

"Yep. You don't need my help on figuring out the mechanics of what happens next. And it sounds like you won't move in that direction for a while, yet."

"Meanwhile, you've got a chance to experiment with something here, namely letting yourself genuinely feel an emotional response to a woman you like. Just go with it. See where you end up. It's supposed to be fun, so let yourself have some fun."
Interagency squabbling over who gets the lead is the fun part. But once that's done, and the perp's behind bars, there's the much less fun part of alphabet soup cooperation. Namely, you and all your compatriots sit down with the casework, go through all of it, and then break it down into who's got jurisdiction over what, how, why, and all the rest of it.

It's long, boring, and usually as soon as you get something worked out the prosecutors toss the whole damn thing out anyway.

But you've still got to do it.

Gibbs entirely understands why Tim is sitting there, across from Fornell and Diane in the conference room, all of them with their laptops out, working on who gets what (The answer that seems to be winning: Diane gets all of it. Don't mess with the IRS. The IRS always wins.) while Tim explains how he got them to Bing in the first place.

And given the way Fornell was glaring at Draga, and the way Diane was watching him like she wanted to pounce on him while they waited in the bullpen for Tim to grab his stuff, Gibbs gets why Draga isn't in there with them.

But, beyond amusing Tony, he's not seeing any reason why he's in there. Not like his presence is enriching the discussion on any level.

So, while it's true that he's not doing anything particularly useful on a helping Tim keep a hold of any of the case. (Tim's doing as well as can be expected, namely he's losing. Diane is rapidly taking over the entire case. At this point, pretty much the only thing they'll be able to keep Herden on is assaulting an officer and resisting arrest. Apparently there is a specific level of IRS Hell reserved for violators of the ACA, and Diane is gleefully getting ready to introduce Herden to all of its torturous glories.) It's also true that there's not much he can do, so he settles in to try and do what Rachel had suggested. See and enjoy the woman who's actually there, not just his image of her.

They saw each other, very briefly, last fall. Tim and Abby were honeymooning. He was happy from the wedding. She was happy with a new boyfriend. Fornell was getting ready to propose to Wendy. All three of them were in a good place, good mood. The case went fast and smooth.

So, the last time he really talked to her, when she dropped in on him back after she got a hit called on her and Fornell, was when he told her to not hold it against Victor that he was Victor.

And now he's trying to not hold it against her that she's not Shannon. Trying to see the woman who's really there.

She's dominating the conversation. Half of that's just her. Half of it is both Tim and Fornell are well-versed in the art of dealing with her. Path of least resistance gets everyone out alive and in one piece.

The heat, that's real. That's her and something he always liked. She's spouting regulations, quoting how many violations they've got Herden on, laying out why the case is theirs, and she's all fire. Her eyes are sparking, her words fast and hot.

It's overkill. Neither of the guys are putting up much (any) fight, but that was her, too. She'd keep going until she collapsed (after going much, much, much longer than anyone thought she could) regardless of if she needed to keep going.
That's something he feels a kinship to. He'd keep going past all reason, too. But two people together like that, probably not the best idea ever. Someone's got to know when it's time to throw in the towel, and neither of them ever did.

"Oh, come on, I am not giving you their bookkeeper! You are not investigating Grandma." Tim taking a stand draws him back from musing on Diane.

"What do you mean, giving her to me? His company was ripping off the VA. She had to—"

"No. Leave her be. She's eighty-four and senile."

"You hand over those notes, Chucky!"

"NO!"

"She's in violation—"

"I don't care. You can't have her!"

"Diane, you know those laws are so complicated every company in the US is currently in violation of something in regards to them," Fornell hops in, trying to calm things down.

"That was the point, Tobias! We'd have leverage over everyone. I can't believe you guys haven't figured that out. Company gets stubborn, owner won't talk, call us in and we will find at least half a dozen ACA violations. They tell you whatever it is rather than pay the fines. It's literally impossible to be in perfect compliance. That was the point."

"Yeah, well Herden's singing," Tim says. "He already gave us Bing, and we've got everything we need on him for his own for the VA fraud, leave Granny out of it."

"Chucky…"

Tim's got that very determined look on his face, made significantly more sinister by the bruising.
"You just said the whole point of it was to screw people. You're not screwing her. She was doing her job as well as she could, and from what we saw her job was literally writing checks. Leave her be."

Diane glares at Tim, but shuts up, so, hell, maybe people do change. Maybe she's finally learned to occasionally drop things. Gibbs certainly knows he has.

At that point, Gibbs notices they're getting low on coffee. (In the sense that his personal cup is about half full. Okay, they aren't even remotely low on coffee, but he wants to get out of there.) "Coffee run, who wants what?"

Tobias leaps up. "I'll help. You two keep squabbling. We'll be back in about a month." He pulls Gibbs out and they walk, slowly, (without actually having gotten any orders) toward the coffee trolley.

Gibbs is easing toward the elevator when Fornell shakes his head. "Steps. Slower."

"Can't. Bad knee."

"Oh, right." He looks at Jethro's leg, as if he could see through his pants to the knee under. "Doing better?"

"Don't need a crutch anymore. That's better, right?"
Fornell nods.

Seth starts laying out cups when he sees Gibbs and Fornell head toward him. "Regular for McGee and I, double caff Sumatra, one cream, three sugars, two squirts of hazelnut, whipped cream on top, and caramel sauce, and… cappuccino for you, right?" Gibbs asks Tobias.

He nods. "Can't believe you remember her order."

"Only had to watch her take a sip, grimace, put it back down and glare at me three times before I had it down."

A small smile crosses Tobias' face. "And then you only got it wrong on occasion to piss her off."

"Something like that. Put French vanilla in it once to see what she'd do."

"What'd she do?"

"Gave me a thermos of what smelled and tasted like my coffee the next morning. It was decaf."

"Oh." Fornell winces. He's seen Gibbs sans caffeine. It's isn't pretty.

"Didn't notice until my head started to hurt and my hands were shaking."

Fornell shakes his head while watching Seth make up their orders.

"So… She seeing anyone these days?"

Fornell whips his head back towards Gibbs. "Why on earth would you want to know that!"

"Curious."

"Bull."

"Looking out for Draga."

"More plausible, still bull."

He glares at Fornell, who still hasn't answered the question.

"Best I know, she's single. But these days all single means is not married. She's probably got three or four Dragas lurking in the background somewhere."

"I'll let him know."

"Like hell you will. You aren't contemplating doing something stupid, are you?"

"No. Just asking."

"You never just ask anything."

"I'm just asking about this."

Fornell's not buying that. "Like hell you are."

---

See who's really there. Enjoy it. Heat, passion, intellect. Once they got through the territorial
squabbling, Tim's taking her through what he did to find Herden, and though he and Fornell are somewhere between asleep from boredom and lost by the details, Diane is following along just fine.

She might not be a hacker, but she can see the money trail Tim honed in on, and understands some of the techniques he used to follow it.

He's showing her the database of Bing's fraudsters, and why he called in Fornell, and she's nodding along, pointing out that some of these people are legitimate businessmen running companies that get actual government grants and the like.

Tim's nodding back, talking about how the first link in this chain, the guy they found Herden through, had produced similar issues. He actually did genuine web work in addition to bilking the VA.

Gibbs thinks that in some ways Diane and Tim are very similar. Diane was the oldest of three girls. Daddy, career Navy, wanted boys, sailors to follow in his footsteps. Mom wanted princesses. She could never be enough of a boy to make her father happy, and wasn't the docile little girl her mom had envisioned, either.

Unlike Tim, instead of hiding in plain sight, she responded by being sharp and aggressive. She couldn't ever be a boy, so she'd scare the crap out of them, be harder and better and smarter than they were, and she'd make sure they knew it. Make sure Daddy knew it. But in the end, Daddy didn't much care. By the time they were getting married Daddy was on his third family, this time with two little boys, and didn't want to be reminded of his girls.

She was never going to be a placid as her sisters, but she was prettier. So she played that up, too. Her mom wanted pretty, so pretty she was. Granted, her mom wanted Cinderella, and what she ended up with was Scarlet O'Hara. Last he heard Mom was in Florida living with Gillian (her older sister) and her insane husband. (He only met Gillian once, liked her, too. Never met the husband, though he used to be FBI. They both did. Fornell's got some really bizarre stories about them.)

He sees, watching Diane and Tim working together, two very different responses to similar childhoods.

Tim quietly begged for attention by doing the job better, faster, spending more time at it than anyone around him. He'd light up when he was petted, and put his head down and work harder when he wasn't.

Diane demanded attention, screamed for it, hit him in the head with a golf club when he kept ignoring her. That's what she had said to him, that it was all she had ever wanted, someone to love her and fill up that hole. Someone who would pay attention.

And right now, he's paying attention.

_________

Tim stands up and stretches. "Lunch break?"

The other three nod. Everyone is tired of sitting around, talking numbers, and a break sounds like a splendid idea.

"I'm going to head down and see if Abby's free. Back to it in an hour?"

More nodding.

Diane looks at Jethro, head tilted to the side, "Get some coffee with me?"
"Sure."

"Just got to freshen up. Meet you downstairs?"

He nods, pleased, and smiles at her.

"Are you flirting with our ex-wife?" Tobias asks the second the door closes behind her.

Gibbs shakes his head. He's not flirting. He's intentionally not flirting because part of this whole see the person who's there, involves actually seeing Diane, and if he's going to do that, really see who's there, not moving into flirty, romance, get laid mode is the plan. So, no, he's not flirting.

He is being nice, and considerate, and, maybe, looking at her longer than is strictly necessary, while listening very intently. And, maybe, smiling more than usual. Because he's putting her at ease, getting her to talk more, and actually listening to the answers.

Shit. That's flirting, isn't it?

"Don't give me that. What could you possibly be thinking, flirting with the Spawn of Satan?"

"I'm not flirting, I'm… being nice?"

"You aren't nice! You especially aren't nice to her. What are you doing?"

"Just, tryin' something."

"Well, don't!"

"It's just coffee."

"It's never just coffee with her. She's probably got five boyfriends she's happily off having coffee with. Hell, she probably had coffee with McGee. And she's been eyeballing Draga like he's an extra foamy mocha latte with chocolate and caramel sauce. You don't need to go down that road again."

"That's not… You remember that thing I told you I was doing, with Cranston."

"God, you make that sound like getting coffee, too. Most people would just say, my therapist said…"

"Fine. She suggested-"

"Picking things up with Diane? That woman is insane!"

"No. Just… I like her. I always did like her."

"That's the problem! She's likeable. You think you're getting this cute, little, sassy kitten, next thing you know your heart is broken, your bank account is empty, and she's having a kid with another guy."

"I know, Tobias. Not talking about marrying her again. Just, trying to see how liking someone feels. Without all of the baggage."

"You have an entire airport terminal's worth of baggage with that woman!"

So do you, so stop dropping your baggage on me, okay? Comes through loud and clear in Gibbs' expression. "Just coffee. Just talking."
"You don't talk!"

"I'm talking to you!"

"No, you're listening to me talk about you shooting yourself in your own ass and then rubbing salt in the wound and then finishing it off with a nice dip in a bath tub full of lemon juice." They spend a good minute staring at each other, Gibbs feeling frustrated, Fornell searching his face, trying to figure out what on Earth Gibbs could possibly be trying to do, before Fornell takes a quick breath and says, "Right, we're going out tonight and getting you laid. Look, I know, trust me, I know what you're seeing when you look at her, and I know it's been a long time and you're getting edgy—"

Gibbs holds up his hands and winces. "Stop. Right there. It's not about…" Fornell's still talking about how Tony's got to know somewhere they can find a girl for him. "Stop!" That finally ends Fornell's dissertation on the subject of getting Gibbs laid. "Don't wanna get laid. Just want to sit down and have a cup of coffee and talk to a woman I like."

Fornell doesn't look like he thinks that's legit, but he's willing to go with it. "There has got to be some other woman you like who will have a cup of coffee with you." Fornell is watching Gibbs carefully so he catches that little flicker in the back of his eye. "Okay, what the hell was that? There is someone, isn't there?"

"Yes, but I can't ask her."

Fornell's mid don't give me that lame excuse look when something hits him. "She married or something?"

"Yes. She's married," Gibbs says, relieved to get off of this.

"Well, that doesn't mean you go after Diane."

"I'm not going after her. It's not about that."

Fornell doesn't seem to buy that, but he backs off, curious about the new one. "So why haven't you mentioned her?"

Gibbs opens and closes his mouth in his I don't know, don't make me think or talk about this gesture.

"How married is she?" Fornell asks.

"Married! Doesn't matter if she's barely married or joined at the hip with the guy. She's married."

"Do I know her?"

"No." Drop it is written all over Gibbs' face.

"Only new woman you've mentioned in months is…” Fornell's eyes go wide and his shoulders slump. "Oh, holy shit, Jethro, that's a bad plan! That's the mother of all bad plans. That's the only plan I can think of where going out with Diane sounds like a sane alternative. What the hell is wrong with you?"

Jethro is giving Fornell his I am so done with you look. "Nothing. There is no plan. The only plan is have a cup of coffee with Diane and remember what liking someone felt like. That's it."

"Sounds like you remember liking someone just fine."

"Yeah, I like Rachel. Nothing I can do about it, so that's that. Nothing I can do about it is probably
part of liking her."

"Like, seriously liking her?" The warning bells are all going off in Fornell's expression, and Gibbs knows he's asking, *falling in love with her?*

"No. Just. I like talking to her."

"You like *talking* to a woman?"

"I'm not completely mute!" He looks at Fornell, earnestly. "It's… nice, you know?"

Fornell squeezes his shoulder. "God, you are so lonely, aren't you?" he says gently.

Gibbs rolls his eyes and shakes his head. Fornell keeps looking at him, waiting for a response. Finally he says, "I'd like to not screw it up this time. I know I'm not in a good place for it, yet, but… yeah, I miss it." He looks away from Fornell. "I'd like to sit down and just talk to a woman. Ya know?"

Fornell nods, that he understands. "But, Diane?"

"When we weren't fighting, it was always fun. I liked playing with her. You, me, and her, remember the dinners we'd have?"

"Yeah." Fornell nods at that, too.

"It was fun."

"It was."

"I'm not going back, but… be nice to feel something like that again. I know how to push her buttons. She knows mine. And, maybe… this was what Cranston was thinking… maybe trying that, seeing her for her, not her for some sort of Shannon substitute… would be a good thing. She told me once I was using her as a human anti-depressant. Too much truth there. Might be nice to just see her for her, at least once."

"Tall order for one cup of coffee."

Gibbs shrugs, smiles, says dryly, "Might be pie, too."

Fornell snorts a laugh at that, then gets serious. "Jethro, don't fall in love with her again."

"I didn't the first time."

*Give me a break* is unspoken but clear. "How long you been telling yourself that lie? She wasn't Shannon; that doesn't mean you didn't love her."

"I…"

"I was there, remember? Steaks on the fire, sitting on the floor in front of the fireplace, her cuddled up on your lap, feeding you little bites, teasing both of us. Us telling her about our different cases, sounding like big damn heroes. All three of us sucking down beer and laughing. Just because it wasn't fairy-tale, forever love didn't mean it wasn't real."

Gibbs remembers those nights. Hasn't thought about them for a long time, especially not in a way that recognized that those had been good nights.
"And I heard your voice when you got that letter. You don't sound like that if it's someone you were just fond of. It went wrong, Jethro. I fucked you over. You fucked her over. She fucked both of us. It went wrong in almost every direction it could go wrong. You loved her. I loved her. She... God only knows... I think she loved us, or you, at least. That's why it hurt. That's why it still hurts. And you don't have it in you to give her the attention she wants. I didn't either. I don't know if any man does. But you'll like her again, because she's warm and fun and beautiful and sexy and sharp... and you'll get sucked in, and she'll hurt you when she wants more than you can give. And, honestly, you'll hurt her because you can't be the man she needs."

"Just coffee."

Fornell shakes his head. "Fine, have your coffee. Tomorrow night, come to dinner with Wendy and me."

Gibbs is on the verge of nodding when he notices something in how Fornell said that. His eyes narrow. "Dinner?"

"Yeah, we've had dinner before. Food, at night. You remember how that works, right?"

"What else?"

"Else?"

"Yeah, you've got something else in mind."

"Wendy's sister is in town," Fornell says with a guilty smile.

"No. We've already got the same ex-wife. I am not getting hooked up with your sister-in-law."

"You'd like her."

"I don't need to get set up."

"Says the guy so lonely he's contemplating coffee with Satan Incarnate."

"Tobias..."

"Fine. Don't do anything stupid."

"I won't."

"Tobias try to talk you out of this?" Diane asks half a minute later when he meets her outside the conference room.

"Yep."

"What are you doing, Jethro? Trying to give him heart failure? Last time you spent that much time looking at me, we were still married."

He raises an eyebrow in question, looking her over intently. "You mind?"

"No. Nice to know you still like to look. Starting to wonder about that these last few years."

"The view was never the problem. Always liked the view." He smiles warmly. "Still like the view."
"Thank you. You're looking awfully fit these days, too. You and Chucky make some sort of get in shape pledge?"

"Something like that. Want some food to go with your coffee for lunch?"

"Sure. Know anywhere that makes a decent salad around here?"

"I know someone who'll whip one up for you."

Monday and Tuesdays are Elaine's weekend, so while they do go to the diner, the service is a bit less personal. Which actually suits Gibbs just fine. Elaine has heard of Diane, and… that's a complication he doesn't need to get into.

Mindy, the girl who takes over on Elaine's days off is friendly and efficient, but not prescient. They actually have to order.

By the time the food is sitting in front of them, he had gotten through why he and Tim are in better shape. (The quick version. He doesn't like to whip out Jimmy and Breena's heartache to just anyone. He may have indicated it was more of a passing on of Dad-like martial virtues to his two younger boys, and then a few weeks later Ziva got into it.)

"Show me some pictures," she says as he wraps up the story of them putting Ed in his place.

"Hmm?"

"That's what old people do when they reminisce, right? Chucky showed me some shots of his girl, and you with her. So, show me the rest of your family."

"You're not that old."

She laughs at that. "I'll be fifty next year. I'm old enough."

"Happens to all of us. They're making me retire in January." He switches around to sit next to her and pulls out his phone.

She looks taken aback. "I was expecting you to whip out a shot from your wallet."

"Tim got me this."

"And got you to use it?"

"It's… handy. Plus he wired it so that if you mess with it, it'll take your hand off."

She rolls her eyes. "You and your guns."

"This one has pictures of my kids on it." He grins. "My Sig doesn't do that."

She rolls her eyes again and laughs a little. "So, show me some shots. Got one of all of you together?"

"Got one of all the grown-ups." He flips around and finds the shot of all of them from Tony and Ziva's wedding.

"Oh, wow. You give away the bride?"
"Both times."

"I know everyone but the lady with Ducky. Who's that?"

"Penny Langston. Tim's grandma."

"Date for the evening?"

"That one and every one after it. They're living together now."

"I saw some shots from Tim and Abby's wedding. Emily kept telling me about it. She had a blast, she's still Facebook friends with… Harper, right?" Gibbs nods. "But the ones she took were of the other kids or Tobias. Didn't see a shot of you."

"Here, this one will make you laugh." He found some shots with him in them from Tim and Abby's wedding.

"Are you wearing a morning suit?"

"Yep."

"I had to pull your toenails out with pliers to get you into a tux. What did Abby do?"

"Pouted a little. Threatened to have a RenFaire wedding."

She laughs at that. "I would have paid money to see you dressed like that."

He smiles wryly. "You and everyone else."

She's holding his phone, flipping through the shots, and stops of the one of Tim and Abby dancing together at Tony and Ziva's wedding reception.

"They really that happy?"

"Yeah."

"Good. The night I slept over, when we were talking… I mentioned how things were going wrong with Victor, and he talked a little about how sometimes you need time to get yourself right before you can make it work. That sometimes the second time was a charm."

"Sometimes."

"Looks like it was for them." He catches the wistfulness in her voice, and sees the deep loneliness. He thinks that was always there, too, part of what drew him to her, his sorrow to hers. He catches another layer there, the question she's too hurt to ask, too burned by him and years of rubbing each other raw, the part of her that opened up in his basement, named how she felt, and watched him say nothing.

But that spark is still there. Hope he doesn't feel like he ever earned. It's still lurking back there, still striving for his attention and affection.

He very lightly, just the back of his forefinger, strokes her cheek. Her eyes close and she leans into the touch. "I'm sorry, Diane. Sorry I never saw you for who you are. Sorry I couldn't enjoy you for you. Sorry I couldn't let it go."

She smiles, warm and pleased, overwhelmed by that, for a second, and for one more second, and
then on the third second she pulls her armor back into place. He sees her snap it back around herself. And he nods at her, recognizing it, as she says, "Oh, God, Jethro, did you join a twelve step program or something?"

He smirks at that, shaking his head, taking a bite of his meatloaf. "Or something."

"Good, Lord. I knew… I didn't know it was…"

"No. Not that sort of or something. Just… Remember me telling you that I'm not such a great guy to be?"

She nods.

He took the phone back from her and found a shot of him with Molly and Kelly. "Got a bunch of little girls gonna be looking up to me. Another one's due in December. Really hope Tony and Ziva have one, too, someday. Got a bunch of kids who need a Dad. It's time to get to being a man worth looking up to. Time to get to being the guy I was supposed to be."

"And this is part of that?"

"Maybe. Don't know. Doing a lot of thinking, lot of figuring stuff out."

"You're not dying are you?" She says pointedly, spearing a cherry tomato on her fork, lifting it to her lips, amused smile on her face at how intensely he's watching her.

"Hope not."

"But…"

"But they're making me retire. Tony's in charge of the team now. Tim'll be heading to Cybercrime any day. Duck's gonna fly soon. Everything changes."

"Yes, it does."

"Emily's a sophomore now, right?"

"Uh huh. She sighs. "We're starting to look at colleges next month. PSATs are next week. Her grades are good, and if her scores are high enough, she's talking about skipping her senior year and going straight onto college."

"Has she mentioned that to Tobias yet?"

"No, not yet. He's still debating going to college with her and sleeping at the foot of her bed with a loaded gun."

"He's not that bad."

"He's not that good, either. He's scared for her. Afraid he didn't do enough hands on dadding and that she'll run off and throw herself at the first boy who shows her any real affection."

Gibbs shrugs. He knows it's real. Fornell's talked about it. But he missed that phase with Kelly, and now it's a good thirteen years off for his girls. "Want me to help talk him down?"

"Sure. If it happens. Got to see how she does on the PSATs, might not be an option. But if it is… She's so excited to get out there. I want it for her."
Gibbs nods, he knows all about wanting good things for your kids. He takes another bite of his meatloaf. "Now that you've been back at it a while, how you liking have your own badge?"

She takes a sip of her coffee and smiles. "Feeling overshadowed?"

"Nope. Just curious. You spent so much time listening to us blather on about it, wondering how it feels to have one of your own."

"I like it. I really like it. Without it, I'm just a pretty numbers wonk. With it, I'm terrifying."

He snorts, amused. "You are more than terrifying without it."

"Then I'm the step beyond terrifying. 'Diane Anderson, IRS.' One guy wet his pants."

Gibbs laughs at that. They spend a pleasant half hour talking. Him listening mostly, enjoying it, because listening to Diane talk about something she loves is fun. She lights up, happy, passionate, and it's not like he can't sympathize with the high that comes from solving the puzzle and tracking the bad guys down.

"Should head back soon," she says after eating the last bite of the caramel apple pie they shared.

He doesn't need to check his watch to know they are already bordering on late. He's reaching for the check when she snatches it. His eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Not a date, Jethro. IRS will expense me for it, since I'm in the field today."

He nods and they head back toward NCIS.

Apparently, they weren't the only ones taking longer than was strictly necessary for lunch. As they got out of his car, they see Tim, Abby, and Jimmy getting out of Breena's car. Jimmy leans over, kisses Breena through the window, and she drives off.

The three of them start toward the lobby. Tim has his arm around Abby. Abby has one arm around his waist, and has her other arm linked through Jimmy's.

Diane sees it and stops, staring, then looks over to Jethro. There's a warning in her face. "Are they?"

He almost shakes his head, but doesn't. He's fairly sure Tim or Jimmy will talk to him before they jump in, and he's absolutely certain that even if they don't, he'll know, feel it if their relationship changes that drastically. He hasn't heard anything from Jimmy, and nothing new from Tim since April, so whatever it is that might be brewing between the four of them is probably currently on hold. So instead of a flat out denial of whatever it is they may have he just says, "Good friends."

"Good friends can be a lot of trouble. Hope they're smarter about it than we were."

"They're gonna be okay." And no matter what else may be going on, that's something Gibbs is sure of.

"I thought we were, too."

There's a gentleness in his face that only shows up when he's working with women or children. "We were never okay."

She shrugs, looking tired, little sad, and smiles, but it doesn't get to her eyes. "No. I guess not."
He thinks about it, in an idle, almost intellectual sort of way, as they head back into the building. What would have happened if he and Tobias could have shared her? Would have solved the pay attention to me problem.

Diane wanted more love, affection, and attention than any one man (any one Gibbs or Fornell) could provide. Together? The two of them? That would have been a whole hell of a lot of attention. And a happy, well-loved Diane was a treat.

But together wouldn't have solved the Shannon and Kelly problem. Wouldn't have taken care of the gaping Dad-shaped hole in Diane's heart. Might have helped with Tobias feeling like a third wheel.

And together didn't get near to touching the complications of him and Tobias together, let alone trying to share anything. One of them always has to be in charge. Even on cases, they can't really share; they just swap back and forth for who's in charge. Trying that with a relationship? With Diane, who also wanted to be in charge?

Could have been three times worse than it was just as twosomes.

Didn't matter. That ship not only sailed, it headed off to Valhalla, flames kissing the sky as the still living passengers burned.

She and Tim are finishing up the official who gets what draft when he thinks of his proposal:

"I'm not much for words.

"Most things are better left unsaid

"It'd be a lot easier if I could just pick you up, and we'd start running, and we'd never stop.

"Maybe I'll still do that. But before I do…" and he knelt down and whipped out the ring, and her face was soft, her eyes lit with pleasure and love and she grinned wide, and said, "Yes."

Running. Take her and run, run away from the pain and who he was and who she was and just live in those minutes of sex and fighting and teasing.

Say goodbye to the past and their ties and… And it never works because you can't run away from yourself. You always come along for the race.

He never told her he loved her. Never said the words. Hid it behind the not talking thing. Wrote it a few times. Gave her some cards with it. But never said it, and right now, watching the late afternoon sun light her hair and eyes, he doesn't know if Fornell is right, doesn't know if he never said it because it was never true, or if he never said it because he couldn't bear to admit it was.

They're still talking through the final settlement of who'd be charged with what and by whom, and what they'd be taking to their individual prosecutors. He's got nothing to add to that, so he takes out his phone and sends a text to Rachel.

What if I did love her?

A minute later he gets back: Would you rather be a rock who used women you didn't feel for to make yourself more comfortable, or would you rather be the guy who couldn't make it work because if it worked that might threaten what you had before?

He's not sure if she expects a real answer right away, and even if she does he can't give one. They're
wrapping up for today. So he sends back a quick: Thanks. Thinking.

As Diane and Fornell head off, bickering gently with each other, Tim says to him, "Have a good day?"

He shrugs.

"Fornell talked to me some before you and Diane got back from lunch. Whatever it is you're contemplating… Rachel or Diane… It's a bad idea."

"I don't need an intervention."

"And we're not having one. This is just me and you having a chat."

Gibbs glares, not hot, more of a back off look.

Tim raises his hands, peace gesture. "Just, you know, I've been so lonely that anyone who's even remotely interested in you starts to look good. No matter if they're good for you or not."

Gibbs nods at that.

"Gotta give this to Tony." He taps the folder with the agreement in it. "You want to come over for dinner?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "Got some thinking to do."

"Okay. See you tomorrow, then?"

"Yeah." Gibbs is in the process of stepping past Tim when he put his hand on Gibbs' shoulder and pulls him into a hug. Gibbs stands there, and lets himself be hugged, feeling kind of stupid, wondering exactly how much of what he was thinking was on his face today. When Tim lets go, he squints at him What was that for?

"Looked like you needed one. Besides, how long has it been since someone touched you? Saturday night? Friday? Whenever it was Abby hugged you last?"

Gibbs nods.

"You need to be touched. We all do. Took a damn long time for me to figure that out. Helps you make fewer stupid decisions."

"Think I'm about to make a stupid decision?"

"I hope you're not."

That gets another eye roll and a gentle ruffling of Tim's hair as Gibbs steps out of the conference room. "See ya tomorrow."
Perfume

Somehow, after Molly was born, the occasional Saturday morning at the Farmers' Market got added to the things they did with the Palmers on a semi-regular basis. Maybe once, maybe twice a month. It depends a lot on caseload and how rammy the babies are. (Might have something to do with the Farmers' Market being open early on Saturdays and babies not grasping the concept of sleeping in on the weekend.)

And, while it's true that Tim's been aware of the fact that DC has a really awesome Farmers' Market, it wasn't the sort of thing he ever bothered with. But once it got added to the routine, he's come to look forward to seeing what will be there.

Since October 10th dawned absolutely glorious, bright blue sky, highs in the mid-sixties, leaves in full autumn fire, he was supremely unsurprised to see: Farmers' Market? Half an hour? Pop up on his phone from Jimmy.

And in half an hour, they were getting Kelly's car seat into Palmer's van, and another half hour after that they were strolling around, looking at the harvest, artisan crafts, and all sort of yummy things, feeling pretty relaxed and happy.

(Well, Tim and Abby are pretty relaxed. Kelly's just chilling in her stroller. Jimmy and Breena are kind of nervous. Molly objected vehemently to riding in her stroller, so she's on foot and wants to touch everything.)

But for the most part, they're just sort of ambling along, snagging things like apples, jars of heirloom popcorn, fresh breads, greens, mushrooms, talking with each other.

"What do you think of this?" Abby asks Tim.

Tim's not really paying attention. He's looking at a stall selling wind chimes, half-thinking maybe they should get some; the front porch is kind of bare-looking, half-pondering the fact that he still doesn't have an anniversary present for her, and both of them are getting closer and closer.

"Tim?"

"Huh?"

She thrusts her wrist under his nose. "What do you think of this?"

He inhales and fucking hell, what is that?

It's deep and rich and… and… he thinks it's sandalwood and vanilla and maybe jasmine or something floral and some sort of musk, maybe some leather and smoke, there's a tickle of something spicy in the back, and it's just… it's everything perfume is supposed to be. The ads always act like perfume is bottled sex and yeah, it's okay, and there are a lot of scents he likes, but that gotta grab the woman wearing it and eat her alive, nope, he's never felt that.

Which isn't to say that there aren't scents that get to him like that. But the kind of scent that grabs him by the balls and yells SEX at him usually is a sex scent. Her pussy, wet, God yes!, that hits him so hard. His saliva along with that. That's a scent that gets him hard. The way his hands smell after he's gone down on her, when they're wet with her cum, and his saliva, and usually some of his musk, too,
that definitely gets to him, gets him so hard he'll ache. The way her face smells after she's gone down
on him. That mix of his semen on her breath, sure that's usually a too little too late sort of thing, but it
gets to him. His semen on her pussy. Also, generally, too little, too late, but for a second round, that
one really gets to him.

But whatever the hell it is they sell for three hundred dollars an ounce and stick in pretty blown glass
bottles, not so much.

But this, whatever this is, on her arm, that's getting his attention in a very good way. In a wanna-
push-you-up-against-the-nearest-stationary-object-and-get-it-on-right-here-and-now sort of way. In
an he's awfully glad he's not wearing his kilt sort of way.

He's probably staring at her with that hit over the head hasn't quite managed to come to yet look,
because she smiles, giggles, and says, "So you like it?"

He nods. "Oh yeah."

"How much?" she asks with a saucy grin, licking her lips.

He steps closer to her and says very quietly, finger tips lightly stroking her thigh just below where
her gray and navy plaid skirt ends, "If we were in a club, I'd already be balls deep in you. As it is,
I'm counting the minutes to naptime."

That got another smile and a teasing kiss, as she cupped her hand on his cheek, holding her wrist just
below his nose, and he inhaled deeply, again, then titled his head to kiss her wrist, biting gently
where her pulse throbbed.

"The booth behind us." She tilts her head toward it. "It's called Thousand and One Nights. My purse
is in the car. Buy it for me?"

"Yes!"

Finding the booth took about nine seconds. Finding the right scent took longer. There has to be at
least one hundred different blends here, all of them with identical labels. But, fortunately they're
alphabetical and it didn't take him long to find it among the Ts.

It's a tiny little amber bottle. "Five-fifty," says the girl behind the display. Like Abby, she's probably
not as young as she looks, her eyes are just too adult for her blue-haired, teenager-ish aesthetic.

But the price is right. Really right. Hell, five-fifty, and he'll buy it out. He takes the other three bottles
and hands the woman a fifty.

She just stares at him, shakes her head slowly, and hands him the fifty back. "Five hundred and fifty
dollars."

He just looks (eyes on the verge of falling out of his head) at the bottle. It's the size of his thumb.
According to the label there's only half an ounce of perfume in there. (He can hear Jimmy laughing
behind him.)

"What's it made out of, gold?"

The lady at the booth looks amused at that. "Most of the ingredients actually cost more, per ounce,
than gold does. And even if they didn't, the skill necessary to put them together to make something
that smells like that is worth more than gold."
He hears the pride of ownership in her voice. "You make this?"

She nods. "I make all of them."

He smiles at her, hoping he didn't insult her with the gold crack. "You're right about that. That's beyond delicious." He puts the other three bottles back, very carefully, and gets his credit card out. "Don't suppose you ever have sales?"

"If you give me your email address, I'll put you on my mailing list. I do, on occasion, have sales."

He hands her one of his Thom Gemcity cards. (This didn't seem like anything he wanted going to his computer at NCIS.) She reads it and looks up at him, scrutinizing.

"How many twitter followers do you have?"

"I don't know. Let me check." He gets his phone out and looks, thinking that's a really bizarre question. "Forty-three thousand four hundred and twelve."

She thinks about that for a tenth of a second. "Mention it in a tweet and the second bottle's free."

And then her question made a whole lot of sense. Better advertising than any five hundred dollars could buy. "Done." He took a quick picture of the bottle, making sure the label, which had the name of the scent, the company, and their website on it, was clear, and then sent out: *Anniversary present for my love.*

She tucks the second bottle into a small, padded box, and put both of them in his bag. "Enjoy."

"I intend to."

She looks to Jimmy, who's just been standing slightly behind him, watching the exchange, smirking at Tim, until he realized Tim was actually going to buy it, and then looking stunned. "Anything I can help you with?"

"Got anything I don't need a second mortgage to afford?"

"You got forty thousand twitter followers?" she asks with a smile.

"If I had twitter, all six of my followers would follow him, too."

She smiles at Jimmy and points to the left side of the booth where there are even tinier vials. "Two point five milliliter vials. They all run less than fifty, and for most people that's about twenty or so applications. Or you can use it to scent a bottle of moisturizer, massage oil, shampoo or something like that."

"So you mean he's got enough for the rest of his wife's life?"

She nods. "Pretty much." Then looks at Tim, realizing how that may have sounded. "You can swap one for another scent if you want."

He shakes his head, holding one hand up. "I'm good with this."

"Okay. Store it in a cool, dark place. As long as it stays in that bottle it'll be fine, and that particular scent gets better with age. In about three years, it'll knock your socks off."

Given how he's reacting to it already, the idea of better is staggering. "Good to know."
Ten minutes later they're wandering back toward the girls. (Jimmy had gotten two little vials for Breena, both sweeter, more floral scents. Tim thinks of them as being 'pink' scents. They're pretty. He likes them. Doesn't have a visceral reaction on any level to them.)

"Can't believe you actually bought that," Jimmy says, smiling.

Tim shrugs. "Got an anniversary present now."

"And then some."

"Got two of them in one week, this should do."

"Two?" Jimmy's expression is curious. He knows one is coming up, but isn't sure what the other is.

"Second first date was the 23rd, wedding's the 1st."

"Good point."

"What'd you do for your first anniversary?"

Jimmy smirks a little at Tim, and shifts his eyes to Breena, about five stalls up sitting next to Abby on a bench, Molly in her lap. She's wearing a pretty maxi dress in pink and coral, and a white cardigan, very pregnant with his third child, sharing a muffin with his first child, and that smirk morphed into a genuine smile. "Made Molly. Maybe. Probably. Like to think we did, you know?"

Tim smiles at that, nodding, he knows. Then Jimmy looks at him, does a bit of quick math, remembers one of his pre-wedding conversations with Tim, and says, "Same thing you did, too."

"Probably. Technically that was our second anniversary. I missed the first, thought it was a week later than it was."

"Oops. Think you may have made up for it this year."

"Maybe. So besides baby-making sex, you guys do anything?"

"Dinner, movie, ate the top of the cake we missed because we spent our wedding day in the hospital waiting to hear if Ducky was going to live, checking our phones every ten second to see who they'd found at NCIS and if they were all right."

Tim sighs. "I forgot how exciting your wedding day was."

Jimmy rolls his eyes. "Try traumatic."

"Yeah."

"Puts for better or worse in context."

Tim nods. By that point they were back to the girls. Abby's smiling up at him, looking excited. "You get it?"

He takes the little box out and shakes it (gently) at her. "I really hope you like this."

She looks mildly confused by that, and he shakes his head, smiling.

"I get any treats?" Breena asks.
Jimmy smiles at her, looking satisfied. "Maybe. Did you want a treat?"

"When don't I want treats?"

"Treats!" Molly says, excited.

"You've already got one," Breena tells her daughter, breaking off another piece of the muffin and giving it to her.

Jimmy sits next to her on the bench. "Close your eyes."

Breena did, smiling.

"Okay, this one." He opens one of the vials, wafting it under her nose. "Or this one?" Then he repeats it with the second one. (Abby leans over, sniffing both as well, nodding at Jimmy, giving him a thumbs up, approving of his choices. He nods at her, pleased.)

Breena's grinning. "They're both great. How about the second one?"

Jimmy covers the top with his forefinger, flicks it upside down, letting the fluid touch his skin, and then gently drags his forefinger down her throat, kissing the other side, and then kissing the top of Molly's head.

"Does Mommy smell good?" he asks his daughter while capping the vial, as Breena rubs her wrist against her throat, and then against her other wrist.

Molly snuggles in close, inhaling loudly, and nods.

And Tim is noticing, able to smell it on her, that before by "pink" he meant flowers, cotton candy, and teddy bears. Now he's thinking flushed skin, wet lips, and hard nipples, "pink." In the bottle it smelled innocent. Nice. Pleasant. Not even remotely sexy.

On Breena, like the scent Abby picked, it's sex in a bottle.

Whatever the hell it is that woman does, it's worth a grand an ounce.

The car ride home is interesting. Kelly's feeding schedule means they needed to rearrange the seating. Usually if both of their families go out, Jimmy and Breena'll take the front, the girls go in the middle row, and he and Abby hang out in the back. But Kelly wants to eat, and she can't feed herself, so Jimmy's driving, Breena's in the front next to him, and Abby's in the back row with Molly. He's in the middle row, feeding Kelly her bottle.

But, in the middle, twisted toward Kelly, he can easily see both of the girls, and he can definitely smell both of them, too.

Like the women, each scent is very different, but they both hit him hard, both appeal deeply to him. The longer they wear the scents the more they shift, blend into the woman, but amplify her own unique sensuality. Floral and sweet are still there on Breena, innocence is there, too, maybe. Debauched virgin, that's the words that come to mind, pink roses and eagerly pulling the bride's panties off. And Abby's scent is still warm and sensuous, spicy, exotic, dark, making him think of darkly painted eyes, silky veils, tied wrists, and hidden sex in verdant, wet, blooming, walled gardens.

The last time he was this turned on by both of them together was the tail end of that dry spell before
Kelly was born. When they were sitting on the sofa together, and there was just lots of beautiful woman in front of him looking all soft and pregnant and sexy.

And breathing in both scents, watching Breena in coral and pink and white, long flowing blonde hair, very round breasts and tummy, all sensuous, pregnant curves, and Abby in thigh high socks, a short plaid skirt, relaxed gray sweater with a wide collar slipping off her shoulder, and short, sassy blonde/pink hair, he can honestly say that he is deeply grateful that it's not going to be more than an hour until he gets laid.

The girls are chattering away, smiling, having what looks to be a great time. He's quiet, torn between keeping the tip of the bottle in Kelly's mouth and the x-rated fantasies flying through his mind. He's vaguely aware of the fact that Jimmy's not saying much either, and he half-wonders if the way the girls smell is hitting Jimmy as hard as it's hitting him.

Abby's putting the groceries away when he gets downstairs from putting Kelly down. They don't have all that long, half an hour tops, twenty minutes, realistically, before she wakes up and wants to eat again.

DC has an awesome Farmers' Market, and everyone and their cousin agrees with that. By the time they got free of traffic a good hour and twenty minutes had gone by.

So, now, home, baby down, it is indeed naptime, and Abby still smells like walking sex.

Delicious, sultry, hot, exotic sex bopping around the kitchen, (she's got music on, pretty loud) putting groceries away.

"She go down okay?" Abby asks without looking at him, pulling a bunch of broccoli out of one of their bags. They've had occasional issues with Kelly not transferring well between her car seat and the crib.

He nods, steps right up behind her, pulling her flush against him, his hands on her hips, and nuzzles her throat and ear. He nibbles gently before sucking her earlobe. "For future reference, wearing this scent means 'Fuck me right here and now, I don't care if the neighbors are watching or not!'"

She squirms against him, as he takes the broccoli out of her hand and tosses it toward the counter. (Didn't actually hit the counter, ended up on the floor.)

"You're saying I shouldn't wear it outside of our bedroom?" Her hands stroke up his sides, curl around his neck, and then run through his hair.

"Depends on how much you want our neighbors to know about us," he says, wet and hot against her ear has his hands slide under her sweater, gently cupping her breasts.

"Uh huh." She grinds into him, rubbing her ass against his erection, and he groans quietly. "And what if I wear it to work?"

That gets another groan as several images go spinning through his mind. His left hand settles on the back of her neck, stroking lightly with his nails, getting a sharp inhale and goosebumps out of her, then grasping firmly, as he pushes her to the counter, bending her over it.

"Unless you want Corwin to walk in on this." He flips her skirt up, kneeling to kiss her through her panties, hot breath meeting moist cotton, then hooks his finger in the crotch, and pulls them down in one swift move. He gets them off her left foot, and lifts her leg, so her knee and thigh are also on the counter, spreading her wide open, while kissing his way up her right leg. "I wouldn't suggest it."
She groans as his tongue finds her clit, arching back against him. "You'd just have to… oh fuck…"
His teeth graze over her clit. "Go fast… wouldn't want… God…" She shudders as he sucks gently,
one finger stroking over her gspot. "That to happen."

He stands up, popping the button on his fly, unzipping quickly, and pushing his jeans and boxers
down. "Fast?" It slurs into a long groan as he thrusts into her, hard, fast, deep.

"Yeah!"

She's touching herself, and he's rocking into her as quickly as he can. This isn't about spinning their
orgasms out or finesse. This is desire so sharp it has to be acted on at once. This is need burned into
quivering strokes and half-moaned grunts.

It's not pretty at all, just hard, sloppy fucking, his hands gripping her ass, as he slaps against her in
hard, solid thrusts, one of her hands steadying herself on the counter, the other rubbing fast on her
clit, and both of them loving every second of it.

Doesn't take long before both of them are crying out, bodies jerking, quivering in blissful release.

Took even less time after that for both of them to tense and look over at the sound of the sliding glass
door opening followed by Jimmy saying, "Hey, we got one—" Which is when Jimmy actually
looked over and sees what they were up to. "Oh shit! Sorry… um…" He grabs one of the bags off
the kitchen table. "Bye." And sprints out of there.

Tim's head drops to Abby's shoulder and they both giggle as they hear Jimmy's car pull out of their
driveway.

While it's true there are a lot of things Breena likes about the latter months of being pregnant,
constantly craving salty snacks is not one of them.

But with twoish months to go, she's well into the MUST HAVE SALT, SALT, ALL SALT ALL
THE TIME, SALT! phase of her pregnancy.

And, the Farmers Market was kind enough to provide her with many wonderful options for dealing
with this particular craving.

As they pull out of Tim and Abby's neighborhood, heading toward their own, she's really hankering
for the home cured olives they'd picked up. For some reason they sound unimaginably good right
now, and she really, really needs them.

But she can't find them. All three of their bags are in the space between the front seats, and she's
looked through the first two, no olives, and the third… still no olives.

Of course, the reason there are no olives in the third bag is that it belongs to Tim and Abby.

"They've got one of our bags."

Jimmy sort of shrugs at that. He's having enough difficulty trying to focus on the road and not how
Breena smells, or the fact that her dress is gloriously low cut and he can see the tops of both breasts,
and how much he really wants to be touching them right now.

Given that, he is not feeling a burning need for olives right this second.

But, in that he is a veteran pregnant daddy, he feels the flavor of the silence that follows his shrug,
and looks at his wife. Okay, looks at her face, he's been looking at her, as much as he can, without crashing the car. "You want us to turn around and go get it? Or is tomorrow at breakfast soon enough?"

"Now!"

He nods. "Now it is." And runs them through a u-turn at the first intersection he sees where it's legal. Minutes later, he pulls back into Tim and Abby's driveway, grabs the bag that isn't his, and heads toward their back porch.

He can see the grocery bags on the kitchen table through the sliding glass door, and yes, one of them is his. Since Tim and Abby have a no knock policy, he opens the door, heading toward the table, saying, "Hey, we got—" which is when his eyes slide to the right, and see what is happening in the part of the kitchen not visible from the sliding glass doors. "Oh shit! Sorry!" he grabs his bag, fast, drops theirs, "Bye," and runs back out, blushing furiously.

Breena looks at him curiously when he gets back into the car, blushing and giggling.

He gets out, "They were busy."

She stares at him for a second, then figures out what busy means, and starts to laugh, too.

Jimmy holds up the bag. "Busy or not. I got you your olives."

"Good husband!" She takes the bag from him, leans over to kiss him, smiles, and says, (while opening the jar) "Hoping for some busy time when Molly goes down?"

Jimmy nods, kisses her shoulder, looks her over, from head to toes, puts the car into reverse. "God, yes."

She smiles brilliantly at him, and gently licks the juice off the olive between her fingers, making sure he sees her tongue slipping soft and wet over the round tip of the fruit.

He closes his eyes, grits his teeth, and puts the car in reverse, trying to focus on driving. "You're killing me, you know that? Literally, dead."

"Yeah, but you love it."

"I do."
"It's tomorrow, isn't it?" Rachel asks as they're wrapping up the session.

"Yeah." He doesn't need clarification that they're talking about his wedding anniversary. Only one big thing happening tomorrow, and the advent of yet another Tuesday isn't it.

"What are you going to do?"

"Don't know."

She doesn't believe that, but his evasion has her interested. "What do you usually do?"

He shrugs at that. It's been a while since he hasn't wanted to answer her questions but this one's... not so much personal, though it is, it's more that he'd prefer she didn't think he's gone fully bonkers.

But she's learning his different looks and silences, and knows that this is something he wants to say, but hasn't worked himself up to yet, so she pokes a little further. "Don't have a usual, or don't want to tell me?"

He half-smiles, sips his coffee. "I've got a usual. Sounds crazy."

"You're already talking to a shrink," Rachel says with a gentle smile.

"It's straight jacket crazy."

She raises one eyebrow. "I doubt that intensely. No one wraps you in a straight jacket unless you're a danger to yourself or others. Are you going to do anything dangerous tomorrow? More so than usual."

"No." He shakes his head. "We got married a bit before sunset, and... usually, around then, I see her. We talk."

Rachel's considerably less surprised by that than he was expecting her to be. "Does it happen when you aren't alone?"

He tries to remember. He doesn't take the day off, but he also does his best to be home by sunset. Hasn't always worked, but it's probably been a while since it didn't. "I usually am, but if not, then no, it doesn't happen. She waits until I'm on my own."

"What do you talk about?"

"Stupid stuff?" He's not sure how to characterize what they talk about. But it's not... important... on any real level. Last year he told her about Tim and Abby's wedding. She liked the idea of him dressed up in the morning suit, and really liked him giving away the bride.

"The weather?"

"Nah. Not that stupid. Just... stuff. Whatever's going on. The kind of things you store up over a day or so to tell your spouse. Dinnertime talk. Always wraps the same. I tell her I miss her. She tells me to move on. That we love each other." There's a sad smile on his face. "Just stupid, everyday stuff."

"Talk about Kelly?"
"No." They don't. And he doesn't know if that's because it'll break the illusion in his mind of Shannon, prove she's not really there, or if it'll just make him too sad.

"Do you see Kelly, too?"

"Rarely. Sometimes on the anniversary of their death. Sometimes when I've been close to dead." He watches Rachel for another moment. "Why don't you think that's insane?"

"Jethro, one of the exercises we often have clients do is talk to people who aren't there. Say the things they need to say. That you're doing it on your own isn't a problem."

"I'm telling you I see ghosts. That's not a problem?"

She flashes him a get over yourself look. "One of my clients is a wizard. Full on magic. Summons angels, likes to talk to them about the secrets of the universe. And you know what, I am completely indifferent to the truth value of his magical skills or the existence of his angels because that's one of the aspects of his life that's functioning and makes him happy. And as long as your ghosts are also trying to point you in a healthy direction, like Shannon encouraging you to move on, I have no trouble with you chatting with them. Ghosts in and of themselves aren't a problem. Ghosts encouraging you to do stupid things, that's a problem. Anything like that happening?"

"No."

"Then enjoy your visit with Shannon."

"That my homework?"

"Yes." And he can tell, by her smile, that like with enjoying some time with Diane, she expects this to take him deeper than just a pleasant evening.

"How are you going to get what you need if you can't let go?" "It's time, Gibbs." "You need to let go." "You can't get what you need if you're still clinging onto me."

She's said it a lot of different ways, lot of different times. At least every year for the last five years. Said it to him when he was with Hollis. He doesn't think she said it before then, but that's at least ten years now.

"It's time, Gibbs." He's not sure if that's her, or if he's saying it to himself. Either way, when they quit work, he shakes his head at Tim, who invited him over for dinner, gets into his truck, and begins to drive away from his home.

He hasn't been back here in years.

They aren't here. Not really. Names on a stone and bones don't matter, not in any real sense, but he doesn't have a better place to go in mind, so this will do.

He sits down, back against the tombstone Shannon and Kelly share. There's one empty space on it, for him, and sooner or later, and these days he's gotten to the point where he's consistently sure it'll be later, and more importantly, he's also hoping it will be later, Tim, Tony, and Jimmy will carry him here and lay him to rest with his girls.

He feels her before he sees her.
That's always been true. Was true the first time he saw her. There was just a sense that something, someone earth-shakingly important was nearby, and it drew his eyes, made him look.

He saw the red hair, fine build, and warm smile and fell in love before he even knew her name.

Her hand lands on his shoulder, and he grasps it, squeezing gently, not saying anything while she sits beside him.

"Been a long time since you've come here," Shannon says to him, letting his hand go and resting her head against his shoulder.

"Yep."

"Don't know if I like you coming here to remember us. Home is better, or the beach, or somewhere we were together."

He nods and sighs.

The sun is setting and it's starting to get cold. He points to the left, where a scarlet maple filters the sunset, the reason he picked here. "This time thirty-six years ago you were standing in front of a tree like that, getting your picture taken."

"Oh." She looks over at it. This one is bigger, one of many trees, not a lone ornamental in the churchyard. "Why here, why not the church in Stillwater?"

"They remodeled in 2006. The tree's gone. So's the church, really. It's glass and steel now."

"Blech." She sticks out her tongue, and then smiles at him.

That pulls a smile out of him. Emanuel Episcopal Church had been made of the local stone. Quarried less than five miles from the site. It was old, always a little damp and cold, no matter how hot it got outside, the gray granite slowly going black and greenish with time. It built it almost two hundred years. But it was old, and damp, and cold, and growing black mold, and didn't attract new young people, and stone was hard to renovate so that it met with the OSHA codes, so they ripped it down and built it up new and shiny.

She takes his left hand in hers and strokes his wedding ring. "Putting this on you was one of the happiest moments of my life."

"Mine, too."

"But it's time to take it off. You've spent twice as long mourning me as you did married to me."

"I know." And he does. He feels the weight of those years very intensely right now.

"And this last year, you've done a good job getting yourself right. You're finally letting the anger go and filling up that hole with love."

He's looking at her fingers stroking his. "I miss you."

"I know." She's staring him in the eyes, her expression soft, tinged with sorrow.

"I'm trying." He smiles sadly at her, and she strokes his face, leaning in to press a gentle kiss to his lips.

"I know that, too. And you're succeeding." Her face is earnest and encouraging. "You were meant to
be a family man. Being a dad and granddad, it's good for you."
"Yeah, it is."

Shannon shifts around so she was kneeling on the ground in front of him, between his outstretched legs. She holds both of his hands in hers, and stares into his eyes.

"You were meant to be something else, too."

He nods, knowing that the heart of the family is husband and wife.

"All I ever wanted was for you to be happy, Gibbs."

"I know. It's all I ever wanted for you, too."

She squeezes his hands. "You made me so happy. And you can make me happier. You're ready; it's time to move on."

He cups her face in his hands. "How can I be ready for this?"

"Because you are. Because it's time." She shakes her head. "It's more than time. Because the hate and the anger and the guilt are almost gone, you just have to let them go. Because I want you to remember me and smile, not cry. Because I want to stop being your pain and go back to being your joy." There are tears streaming down her face as she kisses the ball of his thumb.

"You are."

"Not yet. But I will be."

Gibbs slips the knife he always carries off of his belt, and digs a shallow hole over Shannon's grave, then places the ring in it. She smiles, still crying, as he does it, helping him replace the dirt and grass over his wedding band.

"Will I see you again?" He doesn't wipe away the tears that are streaming down his face.

She shakes her head. "Not for a good long time. Got a lot of life left in you, Gibbs, you gotta go live it."

He's quiet, looking at the hole, feeling the lack of her very intensely.

"Gibbs…" He feels both of her hands on his shoulders. She's standing behind him, and he turns to look up at her. "I've never had any problem with sharing you. I shared you with the Marines. I shared your love with Kelly. One of these days, you'll bring another woman here and you'll tell her about me, and it will be okay. You'll love her, and she'll love you, and it will be okay."

He nods, unable to speak.

Shannon bends down, kisses his forehead, and vanishes.

He spends a long time staring at the darkening sky, crying for what was lost, fearing what is new, but when he stands, he feels purged of anger, of guilt, and ready to go on.

It's well after dark when he gets home, and like with burying the ring, he knows what he needs to do. He goes upstairs, takes his mattress and box spring off the bed, and begins to take it apart. Carefully,
slowly, he knows he'll save the wood. Won't use all of it, and he'll redesign, but at least some of the new bed will be made with this wood. The main support structures, probably. The big beams, the legs. That seems fitting to him.

His fingers linger on the oak, drift along it.

It'll never really be goodbye. Shannon and Kelly were so much of his life, so much of who he was and who he is, and that will never change. They're the bedrock foundation of Gibbs.

But it's time to build something new on that foundation.

It takes an hour for him to get it completely disassembled and then all of the pieces down to the basement.

And from there he spends the rest of the night sketching, working on a new bed, something that remembers who he was, honors it, but isn't trapped by it.

In the morning, there's no call out, another paperwork day. He can feel all four of his teammates staring at his hand, seeing the missing ring. He shakes his head. He'll tell them about it, explain, sooner or later, but not yet.

Right now, this needs to be just his.

And right now, they aren't pressing him on it, which he appreciates.
At 11:23 on October 23, 2012 McGee and Abby were making love for the first time in a little less than a decade.

They were in her apartment, on the floor, right in front of the front door, having a very good time.

At 11:23 on October 23, 2013 Tim and Abby were sitting in his car, pulled over on the side of an empty road in Kansas, listening to the song Abby had picked for Tim to celebrate the anniversary he thought was the next week.

She snuggled in his lap as they listened to the music, cold fall air whirling around them, as stars undimmed by the lights of man gleamed overhead.

At 11:23 on October 23, 2014 the soon to be Mr. and Mrs. McGee were in bed, just having finished making love in their new home for the first time. He was spooned up behind her, hand on her belly, both of them wondering if they had just made a baby.

And, at 11:23 on October 23, 2015 Mom was nursing an intensely fussy baby girl while Dad googled ear infections, hoping there was something they could do to make her more comfortable because, with the exception of when Kelly has Abby's breast in her mouth, she's screaming bloody murder and all the baby Tylenol in the world does not seem to be helping.

And while it is true that if you were to ask either of them if this was how they had hoped to celebrate their third anniversary, the answer would be no, that this is, at its heart, the essence of love.

They are both exhausted, dark rings under their eyes (Kelly was up all last night and all day), crabby, Abby is god awful sore, wanting to wince every time Kelly sucks because she's been nursing for close to an hour and a half now, and no one's nipples were designed to take that, but they are still working together, still supporting one another, and still trying to comfort the person their love made.

And yes, there is sarcasm and snarkiness here, and short tempers, but when Abby can't take another suck, she hands Kelly to Tim, and he takes her in his arms gently, letting her suck on his finger. (She's less than thrilled about that, but she still seems to prefer it to the pacifier.) He kicks back the recliner sofa, props Kelly on his stomach and chest, letting her suck away, and Abby snuggles into him, and both of them catch a few minutes of sleep while Kelly chews on her Daddy's finger.

Eight minutes later, when Jimmy texted them back with Baby Orajel, could be early teething or sore throat to go with the ear infection, they were overjoyed to try it, and see Kelly fall into an almost immediate sleep.

So, for their third anniversary, the now married, now parents, now Mr. and Mrs. McGee, got to sleep, both of them, for a solid three and a half hours.

And by that point, that was all the celebration either of them wanted.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Just a short one today. More tomorrow/next day. Passed the million word mark last week. Lots more to come!
He supposes it's something of a record. Almost five full days. He took the ring off on Tuesday. They'd all seen it by Wednesday. They saw his look and didn't press.

And kept not pressing.

But, with the little glance he sees Ziva shoot to Tim and Jimmy as the three of them head to the men's locker room after bootcamp, he's got a pretty good sense that not pressing is about to end.

Double teamed by Tim and Jimmy is both frustrating and impressive. Impressive because they're handling it well. Frustrating because it's annoying as hell to have two guys nattering away with each other, very much not asking you about what happened so that you took your wedding ring off while talking about wedding anniversaries (Tim's is next week, and the party that acted as Jimmy and Breena's wedding was the second week of November.) and being married and all of that jazz.

But they aren't actually asking. They're just talking to each other. Slowly. With lots of looks at him and breaks in the conversation where, should he so desire, he could, add some information of his own.

"Doing anything special on Sunday?" Jimmy asks Tim, looking at Jethro, and both of them pause, leaving an opening for Gibbs, but he doesn't say anything, so Tim responds. And they just keep doing it.

Finally, having done it all through getting stripped off and their showers, without any useful results, Tim opened his locker, pulled out his boxers, and turns to Gibbs and says, "So, you want us to keep doing this? Cause we can keep it up until you get home, and then we'll wander down into your basement with you, drink your booze, and just keep doing it."

"All three of the girls have deputized us to do this. We've been told not to come home until we've gotten confirmation that you are at least okay," Jimmy adds, opening his locker.

"I'm fine," Jethro says, pulling his briefs out of his locker.

Tim and Jimmy look at each other, roll their eyes, and then they look back at Gibbs.

"What exactly do you think is going to happen to me if I go home and tell Abby, 'He says he's fine'?"

"Breena's not buying that either," Jimmy says, shaking his head.

"And really, just because she won't jump down your throat about it, does not mean Ziva will be cool. Our ninja will be displeased and take it out on us next week."

"You won't be here next week. And I won't either," Gibbs reminds them. Sunday is Tim's anniversary, and Gibbs will be babysitting. Though, last he checked, Tim thought everything was starting up well after bootcamp ended.

"I am not going one on one against her if I have failed to have gotten the information she wants. So, shall we keep chattering away, waiting for you to volunteer the information, or do we go out, get some drinks, and just talk?" Jimmy wraps with.
"Girls don't expect us home until later. Dinner's on me. Whatever you want." Tim says as he buttons his jeans.

"You should be getting home. Abby doesn't need to be spending all day alone with a sick baby."

Tim shakes his head, reaching for his shirt. "Nope. Not getting out of it that easy. We already had that conversation. Ziva and Tony are heading over to my place after she gets dressed. Abby's getting some down time. They're getting some babysitting practice. We're interrogating you for details." Tim smiles.

Gibbs grits his teeth and sighs, pulling his t-shirt over his head. The downside of a family full of cops is that none of them are good with just letting mysteries be, and they've got the planning skills to dig deep and find out what's going on.

"Fine. But you two are going to be useful."

"We're trying to be," Jimmy adds, zipping his fly.

"Useful to me."

"That's what he meant."

For the most part, woodworking is soothing for Gibbs. He likes the whole thing: the tactile experience, the feel, smell, and sound of metal shaping wood. The repetitive, yet focusing, motions. Put that all together and it's a very good place for him.

Stripping the finish off of wood on the other hand… Not his idea of fun at all. Dousing wood in nasty smelling chemicals that you have to keep yourself covered head to toe to prevent it from touching your skin does not make his day.

So, if the wonder twins want to pick his brain, they can also strip his wood.

"Is that your bed?" Tim asks, very surprised at what they saw when they got into the basement.

Gibbs nods.

Jimmy steps closer to the pile of beams laid out between two sawhorses. "You took off your ring and disassembled your bed?" Taking off the ring makes a certain amount of sense to Jimmy, the bed is leaving him boggled.

Gibbs nods again, and Tim adds, "It's the bed he built her."

"Oh."

Gibbs tilts his head toward his workbench. There's a sketch of a new bed on it. Like the rest of Gibbs' stuff, it's fairly restrained. Like the original, it's mostly straight edges and square corners, but there's more detail work here, showing how he's grown as a woodworker in 36 years, beveled edges on the headboard, intricate legs, and when he finds the right piece of wood, he'll make his own veneer for the main part of the headboard.

He explains this to the guys, who are following along as well as two guys who know basically nothing about woodworking can. He wraps up with, "It's time to rebuild."

Both of them nod. They may not have gotten what precisely a hidden dovetail was, let alone how
Gibbs was going to make them, but rebuilding is a concept they both understand.

"What do you want us to do?" Jimmy asks.

He picks up the bottle of solvent and tosses gloves at them. "Gotta get the finish off of these."

They're nodding along, gloving up, getting ready for this when Gibbs opened the bottle and Tim's lungs decided that they weren't going to play along.

"I'm on dinner," Tim says with a wheeze.

The other two stare at him.

"Can't do this," he says, heading up the stairs. "Abby doesn't need a sick kid and husband at home. Stay down here much longer and I'll have a full on asthma attack."

Jimmy and Gibbs nod at him, and he heads up.

Jimmy surprises Gibbs by not saying much of anything. He's just steadily working away on the wood, dabbing on the solvent the way he showed him.

"Thought you guys were supposed to be cross-examining me."

"Tim told me it was your anniversary. You took your ring off. You're rebuilding the bed you built her. I tell the girls that, they'll know you're okay. That you're doing something healthy with your grief. Don't need to press more than that. Though, if you want to talk…" Jimmy gestures to indicate his ears work just fine.

Gibbs doesn't say much. They keep working. A few more minutes pass and Jimmy says, "I've been thinking about this… How to work with someone who isn't Ducky. I know it's not as soon as you heading off, but one day he won't be down there anymore. It'll be me and whoever I hire."

"Got your own stories."

"Not sure I want to spend all day telling them. Not sure I want just quiet, either. I think part of why he talks all the time is to help fill the room. Too easy to just blend in with the dead if it's just silent. A voice, even your own, helps keep your mind on life."

Gibbs tilts his head, adding more solvent to his rag; he can understand that. "His mom told stories. Knew everything about everything, and she told them all the time. Used to say they were a clan of Bards and historians. They told the tales that made men immortal."

"You knew her before she started to slip away?"

He shakes his head. "Met her four-five times. And the last few times she didn't remember who I was from time to time. Remember Ducky talking about her."

"Keeping the stories alive. I guess that'll pass down to Tim."

"You've got stories, too."

"He's better at telling them."

"Doesn't mean you can't."
Jimmy smiles at him, and Gibbs starts to wonder if he just talked himself into a trap. "Nope. It doesn't. Of course, just because your best friend tells the stories, doesn't mean we don't want to hear yours, too."

Gibbs shakes his head. "Smartass."

Jimmy smiles again, even brighter. "I try. So, are you okay? This really moving forward or a new layer of hiding?"

"Hope not." Gibbs pats the beam under his hand. "Was the cross piece, one of them," he points to the other one that matches it. "Gonna cut it in half, here." He gestures to the midpoint of the beam. "Then split it in quarters." He points to the legs of his current bed, which are propped against the wall. "Will cut two inch-thick sections and an eight-inch section out of those, take the corners off, and fit the quarters into them. Glue it into a solid block. The eight-inch piece'll get drilled for pegs, and that'll connect into the mattress supports. Those supports and the pegs'll be made from new wood."

"The memories and history are still there, but changed into something beautiful, something that supports a new life?" Jimmy looks at the pieces in front of him and starts backtracking. "Not that the old one wasn't beautiful before, but…"

"I got ya, Jimmy. And, yeah. It's easier to build it with my hands than say it."

"Where's the ring?"

"With her."

Jimmy touches Jon's diamond on his medic-alert bracelet. "Are you going to keep anything to mark it, her?"

"Sleep on this bed, live in this house, sailing the boat with her name. Probably enough, maybe too much."

"Naming the boat after her… That's you and her heading off into the sunset together?"

Gibbs nods. That was the idea.

"Maybe naming it after her, especially if you're thinking that you might want to sail off with someone else at some point, maybe that's not such a good plan."

That wasn't a thought that had hit Gibbs, but hearing it, there is a certain logic to it. "Been thinking of her as Shannon since before I started building her."

"Yep. But it's been… four years? Lot's changed since then, though, right?"

"True."

"Come January, you're not going to just vanish off the face of the planet, right?"

"Didn't intend to." Which is the closest he's come to admitting to any of them that that did used to be the plan.

"So, maybe she needs a new name." Jimmy can see Gibbs thinking about that, so he doesn't press. A few minutes later, as they flip the beam they're working on over, to get the underside wiped down with solvent, he does ask, "You find out what Franks was doing? Tony and Ziva aren't talking."
Gibbs nods.
"You're not talking, either."
"Can't tell you for the same reason he couldn't tell me."
"Oh, god. How illegal is it?"
Very says Gibbs' expression.
"Drugs?"
"No." *Quit asking.*

And Jimmy may not, as he said, be psychic, but he can read that loud and clear. "Fine. Are you going to start doing it?"

Gibbs doesn't answer. He does glare slightly.
"I'll leave it alone."

A few seconds later, they hear Tim yell down, "Jimmy, where are your keys?"
"In my pocket." He puts his rag down, and strips off his gloves. "Why do you need them?"
"Got the fire started, thought it might be a good plan to buy some food to cook on it."
"Good point." He heads to the base of the stairs and tosses his keys up to Tim, who catches them tidily.
"Back in a bit. Fire's lit, got the grate closed." Jimmy nods, and a few minutes after that, they hear his car pull out of Gibbs' driveway.

Jimmy heads back, snaps the gloves back on, and says, "Okay, last thing about whatever it is Franks was up to, keep good notes if you want Tim, Tony, and I to pick it up in twenty year."

"Maybe it won't be necessary then."

Jimmy's eyebrows shoot up, and Gibbs shakes his head again, not willing to say more.

---

Gibbs is better at cowboy cookery than Tim. In that he's been doing it for decades, this is not much of a surprise.

So, yes the steaks are simultaneously somewhat less rare than Tim or Jimmy like (black around the edges) and a bit more rare than they like (quietly mooing in the middle), but they are steaks, and the fire's still burning, so getting the middle bit cooked more isn't that much of an issue, and he absolutely nailed the greens.

(Of course, the fact that Gibbs thinks this is the best spinach in the history of spinach may have something to do with the fact that it's kale and chard. Or possibly that Tim cooked them in lots of butter, garlic, and salt, and then added a little cider vinegar to them. Either way, this was the most enthusiastic they'd ever seen Gibbs about a vegetable.)

They're sitting near the fireplace. Tim and Jimmy close to the flames, trying to get their steaks a bit less rare. Gibbs is further back, sitting on the floor, leaning back against the sofa, happily eating...
Jimmy’s got a piece of steak on his fork, charred top and bottom, luke-warm, almost purple center. He's toasting it over the fire, trying to get it to rare without burning it any more. "So, is next week's bootcamp learning how to cook over a fire?"

Gibbs sniggers at that, chewing, looking like he's enjoying this quite a bit. "Don't like your steak black and blue?"

Neither of the guys know what that means.

"Pittsburgh rare?" Gibbs adds, seeing that means nothing to them, either. He stares at Jimmy, confused. "He grew up in California, so I know he doesn't get it. But you're from western PA, right?"

"I went to college there. Wasn't eating much steak then. Grew up in Wilmington, Delaware."

Gibbs nods at that, tucking it into his mental map of Jimmy. "Burn the hell out of it on a really high flame and keep the middle rare."

"People do this to steaks intentionally where you're from?"

Gibbs nods. "Douse 'em in melted butter first, stick 'em over a high flame, fwoosh. Black and blue."

"Really?" Tim had been feeling pretty embarrassed about the steaks. They'd been sizzling along, looking fine, smelling great. He went into the kitchen to start on the greens, and as they were cooking down nicely, he started to smell char and by the time he got them flipped they were black on the side closest to the flame.

"Mom made 'em like this. She said that the steelworkers would take cuts of beef to work, pop 'em on the cooling steel for a sec, flip 'em, and that was lunch."

Jimmy's staring at him, not buying it. "You sure that wasn't an accident? Sounds like the kind of story my mom would tell when she accidentally messed something up in the kitchen. Spaghetti's still crunchy in the middle, 'Oh, that's the way they eat it in Italy.' Spaghetti's cooked to soup, 'That's how they do it in France.'"

"Saying my mom couldn't cook?"

Tim's got Danger! Back away! all over his face.

"I'm sure she was a great cook. Just, you ever see Pittsburgh rare or black and blue anywhere else?"

Gibbs laughs. "She was a weird cook. She'd put chocolate sauce on apple pie or ketchup on scrambled eggs. Pittsburgh rare is a real thing, not like 'French' spaghetti soup."

"Ketchup on eggs?" Tim asks, that's not just weird to him, it's revolting.

"Uncle Ron came home from World War II and ate ketchup on everything. He'd put it on oatmeal if you let him. Sort of like how MREs all come with Tabasco. Everything came with ketchup then. She was seven when he came home, and idolized him, did everything he did, so for a while she put ketchup on everything, too. Ketchup on eggs, she liked."

Tim's shaking his head, eating a less raw piece of his steak.

"'French spaghetti soup' only happened once or twice," Jimmy says. "Most of the time dinner was
okay. But she did like those god-awful pour canned mushroom soup on top of canned tuna, frozen peas, and noodles and bake for ten hours casseroles."

Both Tim and Gibbs wince at that.

"Jello salads," Gibbs says. "No dinner was complete without some sort of jello with all sorts of weird stuff floating in it. Orange jello with chunks of carrots, apples, and raisins. That was always part of Thanksgiving."

Jimmy and Tim look at each other. Tim says, "Doesn't sound too bad."

"The carrots and apples were hard and crunchy, size of a dime."

"Oh," Jimmy says.

"Red white and blue Jello for Fourth of July. Cherry and lime Jello for Christmas, eggnog jello on top. Pink and yellow and blue Jello eggs for Easter. Name a holiday, and we had Jello for it."

"Labor Day." Jimmy says.

"Whatever the pink stuff was with watermelon and strawberry chunks, Cool Whip on top."

"Your mom loved Jello."

"Yeah, she did."

"Baskin Robbins," Jimmy says. "We had one five blocks from our apartment. Friday nights in the summer, Mom'd make hot dogs on the little grill we had on the back patio." He looks at the steak on his plate. "Actually, they were usually cooked pretty close to this. Then we'd walk down to the Baskin Robbins and get ice cream. Summer break's ten weeks long, so one year, fourth grade, fifth, something like that, we decided we'd try all 31 flavors." Jimmy smiles at that. "Each get two scoops, and try all of each other's as well. Clark let us down, he kept getting the same four flavors, but we still made it."

"Tim?" Jethro asks. They've been talking about family food memories, but besides listening, he's not adding anything.

Tim shakes his head. "Wasn't a big deal for us. When I was little, it was mostly just me and Mom. So, sandwiches, take out, McDonald's playland some nights. By the time I was ten, Sarah was a baby, and we'd split cooking. Nothing special, just enough calories and vitamins to keep us going. Only time dinner was ever a big deal was when The Admiral was home, and I didn't cook those nights. Didn't eat much, either. Gran was a 'good, plain' cook, which was code for well-done everything cooked with salt and pepper and boiled veggies with butter or bacon. She could bake though. Good pound cakes and biscuits. Penny didn't learn to cook until she was in her sixties. She got back from traveling one time, and had all these ideas she wanted to show us. I remember that."

"Any of them good?" Jimmy asks.

"Probably. I was fourteen and lived on a diet of white bread peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, soda, microwave pizza, my own cooking, and fast food. Salt and pepper was the extent of my skills with seasoning. I remember being mildly horrified by anything she tried to spring on us. However, I had mastered spaghetti by then, and never served it as soup."

Jimmy snorts at that.
"How about Shannon, what was her special thing?" Tim asks.

Gibbs smiles, looking at the fireplace, and waits a beat or two, until they've got the kind of steaks he makes on there in mind. "Who'd you think taught me how to do that?"

"Wasn't the Marines?" Jimmy asks.

"Or Boy Scouts?" Tim adds. Even he got the cooking badge, so he's sure Gibbs had to have gotten it, too.

"No one gives a pile of Marines or Boy Scouts decent steaks. They'd kill 'em. Cook 'em like Jimmy's mom's hotdogs."

Jimmy's eyeballing Tim, the steaks sitting between them, Tim again. Tim pokes him in the knee with his foot.

"Shannon's family liked to camp. She and her mom believed that being miles away from a stove was no excuse for making a bad meal. She was even better with fish. When we lived in California, we'd spend long weekends at the beach, cook 'em less than a hundred feet from where we caught them. Doesn't matter what it is, catch it, gut it, cook it over a driftwood fire, finish it up with s'mores. That's gonna be a good night."

Jimmy nods along with that.

"Did that once, with my grandparents," Tim says. "Hadn't thought of it in years." He watches the fire, sorting through the memories, trying to place them. "Would have been little. Sarah wasn't with us, yet." He rubs his eyes, thinking more. "Dad and Pop caught the fish. Dad built the fire, really big and high, probably not great for cooking on but it looked awesome. Spent the day fishing and playing in the surf. Might have been clams... Are clams an east coast thing? I remember a big pot, so something must have gone in that pot. But we were with Gran and Pop, so that meant California, not the east coast." Neither of the other two answer, letting Tim talk. Both of them getting an idea of how young 'little' had to be if Tim was referring to his father as 'Dad.' "Built this huge sandcastle. Walls, ramparts, moats, more walls, towers... Surf got it eventually, but it had to work hard to get it. I don't remember eating the fish. Probably did, get yelled at for wasting food if you didn't eat it, and I don't remember yelling. I do remember the marshmallows." He smiles at that image. "Pop was holding me around the waist, making sure I didn't get too close to the fire, showing me how to keep rotating the marshmallow or it'd catch fire. Then my mom just stuck hers right into the flames, and up it went, she let it burn for a few seconds, blew it out, and popped it in her mouth, grinning at him, teasing him about how much better they were charred."

"And thus we learn how Tim learned to cook over an open flame."

Tim rolls his eyes at Jimmy. "That was a good night. And marshmallows do taste better gently browned with salty driftwood smoke."

Gibbs is nodding in agreement. "Three, four years, when they're all potty-trained and down to one nap a day we'll find a place on the coast and do that."

Jimmy smiles at him. "Already got a place. It's on the water. Four bedrooms. Don't even need to wait for them to get potty-trained, never have to be more than two hundred feet from a convenient changing table. Ed and Jeannie's place in the Outer Banks is ready and waiting for little girls to come and play. Ziva and Tony manage to not be really pregnant this summer, and we can head down."

"Remember what Leon said..." Tim adds.
Jimmy shrugs. "By this summer you'll run one department, I'll have another, Abby'll have a third, Tony and Ziva'll have the MCRT and we'll all have seconds in command. Won't be like the lab shuts down when Abby leaves, or MCRT can't investigate. Cybercrime'll go without you for a day or two. And yeah, I'd need to get up there pretty quick, if someone dies, but that's not as big a deal as having the investigative branch, the lab, and the morgue all shut down."

Tim nods, that's a pretty good point. Jimmy looks at Gibbs and asks, "You got more than one fishing pole?"

"I will by this summer."
For as lovely as November 1st, 2014 was, November 1st 2015 is determined to be ugly. Lead gray clouds, a mixture of cold rain, light sleet, and mist (Abby calls it freezing ick.) is drifting sulkily from sky to ground.

The theoretical plan for the evening is dinner out. Short dinner out. Abby still nurses three times a day, and two of them are seven and ten, so they can't go out for too long, but a decent meal and some good conversation is certainly a possibility.

If all goes according to plan, and the weather stays the current 35ish degrees, Gibbs'll be there around seven, Kelly will eat, they'll go out on their first baby-free date since June.

"What are you doing?" Jimmy's voice on the other end of the phone.


"Good. I'm already on my way to your place. We're taking the girls to the mall."

Tim just stares at his phone for a second, wondering what the hell is going on with Jimmy. In that, among other things, he last saw Jimmy a hour ago when they were all leaving Ed and Jeannie's, he wasn't expecting to lay eyes on him again until tomorrow. "All right. And we have a burning need to go to the mall with the girls, why?"

"Because it's 36 degrees out and raining, Molly's climbing the walls, Breena wants a nap, and Abby wants you out of the house so she can get ready for tonight. Hence, we're going to the mall."

That seems like a fine reason to Tim. "Okay. I'll get Kelly suited up."

In general, Tim is not a fan of malls. At this point in his life, he'd say he's spent, maybe, but this could be an overestimate, four hours at a mall in the last ten years, not counting when he's had to be in one for a case or when he's eaten in a restaurant attached to one.

He's just not a mall guy. He wants something, and unless he needs it right now, he buys it online.

In general, Jimmy's not much of a mall guy, either. Though, between a significantly more extroverted personality, and the fact that just about every tenth store in a mall sells shoes, Jimmy does tend to have a better time in them than Tim does.

But, Jimmy is, in addition to not being much of a mall guy, a bit further along on the Dad curve than Tim is, and he has realized (namely because Breena told him) that at the Mall there are several areas covered in soft foam rubber designed for small people to run around on.

And he's in possession of a seriously rammy small person. A small person who, when not tearing around their house like a wild woman, is whining and fussing. A small person in desperate need of space to play hard and fast without driving her very pregnant, very uncomfortable, and very tired mama insane.

In that it is, as Jimmy previously noted, cold and raining, the park and his backyard is out.

So he's driving, Tim's in the passenger seat, the girls are in their car seats, and they are en route to the
They're the only married men there. Okay, not the only married men, there have to be some other
guys with wives somewhere in the mall, but the little area where the toddlers are running around
shrieking, all the other guys are at least ten (and three of them look more than fifteen) years younger
and none of them are wearing wedding bands.

It occurs to Tim that his demographic does not appear to hang out at malls.

But Molly's having a blast. Kelly's sitting on his lap, watching the other kids play. He and Jimmy are
chatting about something, he doesn't remember what, when one of the grandmas (lots of them
around) comments on how pretty their girls are and asks how old they are, standard questions.

And they know how this works, so they ask which one of the kids are hers, and about three minutes
of polite conversation ensues.

Jimmy checks his watch. "This time last year, I was getting suited up for the wedding."

Tim nods. "Was already at the church."

"Hard to believe it's been a year."

"Yeah. Fast year." Tim smiles, looks at Kelly, kisses the top of her head. "Good year." Jimmy nods
at that, his smile not nearly as bright, because for him it's been a much rougher year, and Tim nudges
him with his shoulder. "Next year'll be even better."

That got a real smile out of Jimmy. "Yeah, it will."

"Excuse me," The Grandma asks, "I know this is... I was wondering, how did you find a surrogate?
My son and his partner would like to be fathers and are thinking about it and..." She can see from
the stunned look on Tim and Jimmy's face that they may have been talking about a wedding, it
clearly wasn't a wedding to each other, and she starts backtracking fast. "Oh, God. I'm sorry. I heard
you mention the wedding and... you've got one stroller and... and your girls look just like you, so
you couldn't have adopted and... I'm so sorry."

Jimmy recovers first. "No problem. It's his anniversary. I was his wife's best man, so we were getting
ready to go. Mine's in May. My wife is eight months pregnant, so we already have the two baby
stroller, so with it wet and cold out it was just easier to use the one stroller."

"Oh. I'm so sorry." She's cringing and looking horribly embarrassed.

"Really, not a problem," Tim says, wondering exactly what the protocol for something like this is,
because, yeah, he'd prefer that people don't think he's married to Jimmy. But at the same time, having
a fit about it is just really uncomfortably homophobic, and the woman already indicated she has a gay
son so... "Just, don't know anything about surrogacy. We both... um... did it the old fashioned
way."

She nods, still looking embarrassed. "No. I guess not. Happy anniversary."

He nods back, a really everything's all right smile on his face. "Thanks."

She looks away, watching her grandsons toddle about.
They are heading back to the car an hour later, after Molly's tired herself out and is ready for nap time, when Jimmy says, "That was a first."

"No one ever thought you were gay before?"

"I don't think so. Never got hit on by a guy before, if that's what you mean. Just… When did we get to the point where two married guys out with kids at the mall are assumed to be with each other?"

Tim shrugs.

"It's not like our rings are even close to matching." In that his is white gold and Tim's is mostly black titanium, not matching is something of an understatement.

"Did you notice we were the only married guys with kids there?" Tim asks.

"Yeah. That's weird, too. I mean… It's not like I'm one of those you've-got-to-be-married-to-have-kids-guys. Don't have any problems with Draga. But… I mean… none of those guys were married to their kids' mom."

"Maybe the young ones don't wear rings?" Tim says with a shrug, fairly sure he's wrong. All the baby Sailors and Marines they run into with wives wear the ring.

"Maybe." Jimmy looks back at their girls. "I'd kind of like to know my grandkids' dad is going to stick around."

Tim looks at his ring and shrugs. "Ring's not magic. Can't make anyone stick around."

Jimmy catches that and realizes Tim's thinking of his dad. "Yeah. I know. But…"

"No. I get what you're saying. I never would have even noticed it before Kelly, and it's my anniversary, so it's on my mind, but, yeah, I did check the other guys, and it did feel weird to see that none of them had a ring."

"That little voice, in the back of your head, sounds a lot like Gibbs, and you didn't even notice it was in there until you saw the guy with the two kids and the pregnant girlfriend, and it's yelling, 'Man up, you pussy, go marry that woman!'"

Tim laughs a little at that. "Wasn't quite those words, but yeah, something like that."

They were a few miles down the road when Jimmy says, "So, Jeannie was trying to gently pump me for information about your parents."

Tim nods at that. "She's been pretty gung ho about this whole have to have a christening party for Kelly thing, and week before last she asked for my parents' address so she could invite them and…” And Tim had been pretty startled by that, didn't have an immediate answer ready.

"And… She said you said your dad was out of the picture, and you clammed up pretty fast on your mom, and she didn't want to press because she could tell it was sensitive and you didn't want to talk."

"Yeah. She asked, my face must have gone white or something. I did say my dad was out of it, and she back-tracked pretty fast. Told me would press and she'd do me proud on welcoming Kelly into the family."

Jimmy's nodding on that. "Oh, she will. If you think Sunday dinner is impressive, any sort of party Jeannie's in charge of'll blow your mind."
"Okay."

"Seriously, if you think Breena gets into the birthday parties and stuff, she's about twenty levels down from Jeanie."

Tim shrugs, with the exception of the weddings, his crew just doesn't really do parties. "I guess that makes sense, I mean... she basically plans parties for a living."

Jimmy thinks about that. "I guess. Sad parties."

"Food, music, flowers, booze. Sad parties."

"Well, she's good at it. Anyway, just, remember to write thank you notes. They will all bring presents and if they don't get little notes about them later the nagging begins."

Tim shakes his head at that. The idea of christenings being this sort of big deal is very foreign to him. Jimmy nudges him off of pondering what sort of present one buys for a four-month-old, by asking, "So, how are things going with your mom?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. I've talked to her twice in the last month and it was... Okay. Really tentative and nervous, but maybe better than nothing. After Jeannie asked, I've been talking with Abby about maybe inviting her and Ben to the christening."

Jimmy looks pretty surprised by that. But he knows Tim hasn't been talking about his mom, so he hadn't been poking, other than checking in with Abby and Gibbs to see if everything was okay. "What's Abby think?"

"That if we do it, they shouldn't stay with us."

Jimmy nods emphatically at that. "I'll second that."

"She's also kind of nervous about how the rest of the family, and Gibbs in specific, would deal with her."

"Ohhh..." Jimmy winces like he's staring at a train wreck. The idea of Gibbs and Tim's mom in one room hadn't occurred to him, but now that it has, he's not seeing how that could be anything but trouble.

"Yeah. That makes things... complicated."

"I mean, if you tell him it matters to you, and you're trying to patch things up, I'm sure he'll support you..." Though Jimmy doesn't sound very certain about that. And as he's thinking of that, it's occurring to him that he's not sure he can be polite to Tim's mom, either.

"I know. In a he won't actually shoot her in the head or do anything out and out that he thinks would bug me, but it won't be warm or easy or..."

"Yeah." Jimmy nods. Gibbs isn't the poster child for warm or friendly when he's at his best. At his worst... defending one of his cubs... No... Jimmy doesn't think that'll be pleasant on any level.

They drive another mile.

"So... you going to do it?"

"I don't know." Tim sighs. "Part of me wants to see her. And she's never seen Kelly. And if she's going to be part of our lives, then the whole forgiveness thing would be part of that, right?"
"Probably."

"Everyone says forgiving people is part of the whole not being mad all the time thing. Forgiving them or fully cutting ties. That this… in between, ignoring it until I can't anymore, blowing up at it, and then ignoring it again thing isn't good."

Jimmy stares at him, remembering the cuts all over him from his last blow up in the lab with the glassware, and how, to him at least, that doesn't look like a natural or easy progression to forgiveness and a functional relationship, and then says the thing you're not supposed to say. "Might be easier to cut ties…"

Tim shakes his head, staring at the traffic whizzing past. "I know." He smiles, very sad. "But she's my mom."

Jimmy squeezes his hand. "Whatever you're gonna do, I'm here." And seeing that, he means it, too. Even if it does mean swallowing his own anger and treating Tori kindly.

"Thanks."

They drive a few more minutes, ending up in Tim's driveway. He looks back and sees both girls asleep. "You want to put her down with Kelly? Stick around, give Breena more quiet time?"

"Sure."

It takes a few minutes, but they get both girls settled in the nursery. Tim pokes his head into his bedroom and sees Abby getting a nap as well. He smiles at that, thinking it bodes well for staying up late tonight.

He heads down to the kitchen and grabs himself a cider. "You want something?"

Jimmy pokes around his fridge a bit, and grabs another one for himself. "This is good." They both settle on Tim's sofa, and Jimmy asks, "So, say she does come for the christening? What are you hoping to get out of it?"

Tim snorts. "Not crying?"

"That hurdle's so low it's in danger of melting from the heat of the Earth's core."

"And yet it's not even remotely close to guaranteed."

_Oh, god, Tim_, and the sorrow that goes with it is clear on Jimmy's face. "What do you want? Really?"

Tim shakes his head, exhaling lightly, dismissing his words with his body language before he says them. "Something I can't have. The one thing I want most, being able to consider my Dad a monster who acted alone, I can't do anymore."

"Nope. Tim…" Jimmy's not sure how to ask this. "Does she know how hurt you are?"

"I don't know. I haven't really been able to get into it, and I don't know what Penny's done."

"Maybe telling her about it, how you understood it, is a good step? Maybe you need to really yell at her?"

Tim shrugs at that, too. "I don't know if I can. I tried, wrote it down, but I couldn't send it to her." He looks away from Jimmy as he says that.
"Why not?"

"Still being a good boy? Taking it quietly? Dealing with it by myself and not making a fuss? Decades of this is how our relationship works and I can't make myself break it? Take your pick."

"Tim, make a fuss. It'll probably be good for you."

He shrugs again. "At some point, I need to sit down with Sarah and Penny and talk to them, too. Because it's not just me."

"No, it's not. How are you guys handling your dad?" He means as a family, and Tim gets that.

"You know my part: completely out of my life. He visits Sarah when he's in town."

"She still has contact with him?"

"I'm not going to ask her to rip her dad, who didn't pull any shit on her, out of her life, because he was an ass to me."

"He was more than an ass to you. Not like he was just impolite."

"I know. But…" Tim rubs his forehead. "He's still her dad. Maybe he started overcompensating or something after they divorced, but she's got happy memories of learning how to ride a bike, and sailing, and fishing, and getting to go onto his ship and meet the sailors and…"

"Okay. I get it. Maybe after he lost you he decided it wasn't going to happen again?"

"Yeah, well, he could have tried not treating me like shit." Tim says with a self-deprecating smile. "That might have worked wonders. 'God, sorry I was a flaming asshole, Tim.' That would have gone a long way."

"Really?" Jimmy doesn't look like he's asking so much for himself, as to get Tim to think about that more.

Tim shrugs, probably not. That would have been a band aid on an amputation. "Would have been better than what actually happened."

"I guess."

"I called him, a year ago…" Jimmy's really surprised by that. "Didn't like my vows… That's not true, I didn't love them. They were so bound up in… in not being him. In having seen, lived this train wreck that was their marriage and knowing who and what I didn't want to be, I called, asked what he thought he was doing. I mean, how did it go that wrong? I needed a piece of the puzzle I didn't have. Only talked for like, five minutes, something like that. But, 'Hey Dad, I'm getting married tomorrow, gonna have a baby in the summer,' got nothing. Just disapproval that Abby was already pregnant. I mean, even if you didn't like the guy, you'd offer some congratulations on that, right?"

"I would."

"Yeah. Me, too. But from him, nope. And in that it didn't involve him cussing me out or insulting me, that was our best conversation in… God… Ever."

"I'm sorry, Tim."

"Yeah. Me, too. So, anyway, he and Sarah are fine. I haven't been brave enough to ask about it, what she might be doing with him about me, beyond telling her that I didn't expect her to cut him out
of her life. Penny yelled at him a few times and when he wouldn't come to the realization that he'd done anything inappropriate, she stopped talking to him."

"She cut ties with her son?"

"Yeah. I… I don't know what to do with that, either. I know how bad the idea of losing Kelly hurts, and I don't want to be responsible for that for her."

Jimmy shakes his head at Tim. "I know one thing to do with that, stop thinking it's your fault. He behaved in a way your grandmother felt was indefensible. She cut ties with him because you don't keep relationships with people who do things like that. None of that is your fault."

"I guess."

"Stop guessing. You know. Him being a psychopath is not your fault."

Tim smiles at him sadly. "But I don't know. Wish I did. Be easier if I did. He adores Sarah. She was able to be everything he ever wanted for her, and they get on fine. She could make him smile, so why not me?"

Jimmy slowly closes his eyes and opens them again, then put his cider on the coffee table and scoots closer, wrapping an arm around Tim. "It was never you."

Tim snorts, bitterly. "Be a lot easier to believe if he'd been a psychopath to both of us."

"It wasn't you."

"Yeah. That's what everyone but he and my mom say."

That last bit kills Jimmy, feeling Tim's hurt from his mom having agreed with whatever it was his dad thought, even if she didn't want to use the same tactics. "What did your mom say?"

Another depreciating smile from Tim. "That they were afraid I was too soft. That I needed to be tougher or the world would beat the shit out of me. She's not saying that anymore. Now it's all, 'So, so sorry,' and walking on a tightrope, afraid to say something that'll scare me off. I have a feeling Penny ripped her a new asshole or six. But before she started double and triple thinking everything she said, that came out. I was too soft, too afraid, and needed to be tougher. And Sarah was fearless, she always was. I was twelve, she was three. I'm babysitting. She had one of those Big Wheel tricycles, and she'd take it to the top of the driveway and go down, full speed, straight toward the garage…"

"And you were babysitting when she crashed?" Jimmy knows where this story is going, but that doesn't make listening to it any easier.

Tim nods. "Yep. One of the few times he got home before Mom did. She's screaming. There's blood all over the place. She'd split her lip…" And they both know, first and second hand, how a split lip bleeds like crazy. "I'm trying to get her cleaned up, and he comes in, takes one look around, orders me to my room. So up I go, but I can hear him talking about his brave little girl, and I can see him, half an hour later, zooming down the driveway with her, she's shrieking with laughter. Later, after she was asleep, he came to my room and chewed me out for an hour over how I was an irresponsible cunt incapable of keeping a three-year-old under control, and if I couldn't keep her safe, how was I ever going to be of any use to anyone else? How were other men going to depend on me? How was I going to run a ship if I couldn't get a three-year-old to follow my orders? And on and on and on and fucking on.
"I'd been taking care of her on and off, with help and without, since the day she came home from the hospital. I spent more hours alone with her that week than he had in her entire life at that point, but yeah, I was the irresponsible fuckwit who couldn't be entrusted with another life."

Jimmy's rubbing his shoulder, trying to be comforting. "You know, before Breena, I wasn't a church guy. But my family went, and I had some buddies in Sunday School. No one I was really close to, we didn't go to the same school, but there were guys I'd hang out with between the services."

Tim nods, he's familiar with how that worked. He had a few guys like that at his church, too.

"One of them was gay. He came out senior year. The second he turned eighteen, his parents booted him out of the house. And everyone at the church, the grown-ups at least, were all, 'You made the right decision. Can't have a kid like that hanging around. You've got to think of your younger kids,' all this bullshit that boiled down to if only Tom had acted different, if only he'd pulled it together and been the guy his parents wanted him to be, it'd have been all right.

"They were all sanctimonious assholes, Tim, one big circle-jerk of rabid homophobia. Tom couldn't have 'pulled it together.' He couldn't have made himself straight. And it was not his fault his parents and the people around him were scum. And it's not your fault you weren't Captain America or whatever the hell sort of super sailor your parents wanted. It is entirely their fault they couldn't look at the child you were and loved you like you were. And if Sarah was more what they were hoping for, well, Tom's little brother and sister were straight, and none of that changes that his parents and yours are assholes. It's on them, not you, not Tom. Them."

Jimmy smiles at him a little. "That's why it's a job, right? We make these people, and they're gonna be whoever it they are, and it's our job to love and shelter them and help them become the people they want to be, not the people we want them to be."

Tim closes his eyes and leans his head on Jimmy's shoulder for a moment, seeking and taking comfort from his touch. Then takes a deep breath and sits up, away from Jimmy. "What do you think, should I see her again?"

"I think seeing her is going to hurt. But it may be pain you need to go through, like having a bad tooth pulled. I think not seeing and not making a firm decision as to if she's going to be in your life is putting that pain off. Tooth is still bad, it's still festering in there, and you've got to get it out. You're right, ignoring it until you blow up is a bad plan. I think the only thing that's going to fix this on any long term sort of way is making that decision, cut her out or forgive her. And that... I don't know what the answer is to that."

They heard Kelly start to cry, and Tim got up, fast, going to grab her before there was any shot of waking Molly up, but as he headed up, he said to Jimmy, "Neither do I."
Tim gets into the office, sees that he's, like usual, in after Gibbs but before Tony and Ziva. He's not sure if Draga's in yet or not. There is a RedBull on his desk, but there's usually a RedBull on his desk. Could be fresh, could be yesterday's. He's not poking around to find out.

So, paperwork.

He sits down and fires up his computers.

Like always he hits his email first. Checks to see what's new or interesting or updated. As he's scanning through the list of new letters, he finds himself thinking of talking with Jimmy, and then later, over dinner, with Abby, (wasn't the most romantic meal ever, but probably something they needed to talk about. After dinner made up for it.) and hits the compose button.

It's quick, just a few words:

*Hey Mom,*

*Kelly's christening is on Sunday. There'll be a big family party after. I know it's last minute, but if you and Ben want to come up for it, we'd like you to.*

*If you're free, dinner's at our place on Saturday, 5:30.*

*Hope to see you then,*

*Tim.*

And he hit the send button before he could think about it again.

He's filling out paperwork when his phone rings. That startles him. Yes, he has a phone on his desk, but it's probably been three years since he's given that number to anyone. If you want to get a hold of him, you call his cell phone.

That's even the number on his card now.

But the phone on his desk is ringing, and for a second there's a tinge of dread in his heart. Is his Mom calling him? Does she want to actually, physically *talk?*

But it's still ringing and the rest of his team is staring at it, so… "McGee."

"Agent McGee…” He identifies the voice of Vance's secretary and feels a wash of relief. "Director Vance would like to see you."

Oh. That sends a spark of flushed happy through him, only one thing Vance is likely to want to have a one on one chat with him in person about. "Okay. I'll be up in a few seconds."

He hangs up and feels all four of his teammates looking at him. He points up, and everyone nods, understanding what's about to happen.
Fifteen seconds later, he's standing in front of Valerie, and she tells him, "Go on in," so he does.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes." Vance looks up from his computer, stepping out from behind his desk. "Twenty minutes ago Jenner gave me his letter of resignation. Sixty days' notice." He offers Tim his hand, and Tim, smile breaking across his face, shakes. "Congratulations McGee, as of January 4, you'll be the newest NCIS Department Head."

There's a smile on Leon's face, too, but Leon's smile has some bite to it. "My understanding is that the techs down in Cybercrime are aware of Jenner's resignation. So, while it is true that you are not taking over for two more months, letting them know that you're their new Boss is entirely on your shoulders."

"Ah." Yes, there is that, and especially sitting down with Manner to have a chat with him about how he's not the guy taking over Cybercrime. "Then I guess I should be making an appointment to have a talk with Jenner soon."

"I'd think that would be an excellent idea."

He knows exactly what is going to happen if he heads right down to the bullpen. He'll have all four of them congratulating them, and in a matter of minutes Abby, Jimmy, and Ducky will be up for a little impromptu party.

Which would be great. Which he's intending to enjoy. But not right this second, because the guys in Cybercrime don't know about it yet, and he doesn't want them finding out via scuttlebutt. He especially does not want Manner finding out by having someone say to him, "Hey, did you know there's that guy up in the MCRT celebrating getting your job?"

So he flashes a quick text to all seven of them: 1/4/16 first day as Head of Cybercrime! Cybercrime doesn't know that yet. Need to talk to Jenner and Manner.

As he's heading down the steps, his phone buzzes, another text from Abby to everyone, along with Breena and Penny: If there's no hot case, we're cutting out early. 5:30. Dinner and drinks on us, at the diner.

Three quarters of the way down the steps, he's hunting through the NCIS employee directory, finding Jenner's number. He sends a quick text. Can we talk?

Once he's back at his desk, supposedly working, watching everyone smiling at him, smiling back at them, not really paying attention to his paperwork, feeling really happy, he gets back. Kind of busy. Does it have to be today?

Be nice if it was, but no, it doesn't.

Two more minutes go by. Got a few minutes at 2:00. That do it?

Probably. See you then.

"Agent McGee."

"Jenner."
They stare at each other. He worked with Jenner briefly back when he was down here. He's changed. Jenner hasn't. Still that same tightly wound, pale, nervous personality. The kind of guy who's physical appearance is so bland he blends into the background while you're looking at him, but his mood is so nervous he puts everyone else on edge. "What can I do for you, McGee? We're kind of busy down here, big changes coming soon, and I didn't expect a request for time from the MCRT golden boy. Finally run into a puzzle so big you can't handle it on your own?"

Tim looks at Jenner strangely. There's a lot of bite in those words, and okay, yeah, he'd been spying on his team, and making sure Vance knows how inefficient Jenner's managerial style is, but he also didn't think Jenner knew that. And, also, he's thinking that it should be fairly obvious why he's down there. A senior tech guy shows up at your desk half an hour after you give notice, putting two and two together shouldn't be difficult. But he's not getting any sense that Jenner knows this call is about anything other than a case.

"It's about those changes. Vance tells me your last day is December 31st."

He sees the recognition light on Jenner's face, and felt his mood go from curt and slightly annoyed to absolutely frosty. "And your first day is January 4th."

Tim nods, smiling, trying to... He's not sure… Trying to not piss this guy off just by existing? *Screw that.* He stops smiling.

"So, why are you down here?" Jenner asks.

"I wanted to talk to you, get up to date on all the cases you're working, let your team know that I'll be taking over, transition stuff."

"Before I leave, I'll have briefs written up for all active investigations. Obviously we won't be working on the same things then as we are now."

"Nope. From now until then, when I'm not actively investigating or in court, I'd like to be down here, getting to see how you work, how your team functions, getting to know the players."

Jenner shrugs. "You can do that, but I don't think it'd be very informative. No one does their best with someone breathing down their necks."

"All right. Then I'll see how they do when they're at less than their best. When do you want to tell them I'll be taking over?"

*Never* is clear on his face. "Doesn't matter."

"Then today will work fine. I understand you were grooming Stephen Manner to be your replacement?"

He nods, terse, and Tim gets the sense that Jenner genuinely likes Manner and is pissed that he's not getting this job.

"Steve's been my right hand man for six years now."

He gets another layer of this. "And you told him he'd take over for you?"

Jenner nods. "He deserves to run this department. He's put the years in, done the job, and done it well."

Tim has his own opinions about that, but in that Manner is one of the only two techs who passed all
of his tests, he deserves at least basic respect.

"Obviously Vance thinks I'll do a better job of it."

"With all due respect, Agent McGee, Vance has no idea what happens down here. He wouldn't know a worm from a phishing attack."

"But I do. And he knows that when he needs the impossible done yesterday, he calls me, not you. And he knows that when NCIS needed to up its Cyber security, you guys built a system. That system got hacked in three weeks. So, he had me build a wall around us that's never been breached. A wall so well-designed that people have had an easier time breaking into the building to use our computers than getting through by hacking. So, do you mind if I pull Manner off of his station for an hour or so and have a private chat with him?"

Jenner looks like he's gotten a mouthful of lemon juice when he was expecting hot chocolate. "Have at it, Agent McGee. I assume you know who Manner is?"

"Yes."

Manner's sitting at his desk, earbuds in, some sort of pop music blasting away, fingers flying over his keyboard. Tim doesn't interrupt. He hates it when someone breaks his flow, so he's not going to do it to someone else. Sooner or later Manner'll notice him standing there.

The correct answer is a hell of a lot later than Tim expected. For ten full minutes he stands there, watching Manner at work. By the end of the third minute, he's thinking Manner may be intentionally ignoring him, but since his eyes haven't flicked off his screen, and this is the guy who coded straight through his font attack, it's entirely possible he's really that into it.

It's a good long time to study the man. Since he's trying to get Manner to notice him without interrupting, he's facing him, so he can't see what he's doing on the computer. That leaves his physical person.

Tim's pale. He always has been, always will be. Can't be Irish back to the dawn of time and not be pale. Manner's ghostly: porcelain skin, white blonde hair, light blue eyes. Tim's debating if he's some sort of albino or whatever that tribe in Northern Europe the girl from Frozen was based on is. Either way, working in a dimly lit basement is not helping at all.

But, eventually, his fingers slow down, and Manner looks up, sees Tim, leaning against the edge of his cubicle, and jerks with surprise.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes. Hi." He holds out his hand. "I'm Tim McGee. I was wondering if you'd be willing to get a cup of coffee with me?"

Manner squints at him, seems to be figuring out who he is, does not shake his hand, and looks annoyed. "I've got work to do. Don't need to be flirting with you."

Tim stands up a bit straighter, tucking his hands into his pockets. "Let's try this again." He smiles, but it's not warm. "Hi. I'm Tim McGee, in two months I'll be your boss. I thought, since Jenner kept telling you that in two months you'd be the boss, that it'd be a lot easier to get the news that wasn't going to happen in private, and that we could talk about what happens next without your eleven co-workers all listening in. So, want to get a cup of coffee with me?"
Tim waits, patiently, as what little color he has drains from Manner's face when it hits him that he's not going to be filling the office he'd been designing in his head for however many months now, then Tim waits through the homicidal rage phase, which lasts a bit longer than he was expecting, and Tim waits a few more minutes for the what-the-fuck-am-I-going-to-do-now phase to pass into the find-out-more phase.

So, all in all, he stands there for almost twenty minutes before Manner says, "Let me get my jacket."

"It wasn't supposed to be you."

Tim shrugs. It's not raining anymore and warmed up a bit, so they're sitting on one of the benches outside the Navy Yard. For all he's been thinking about this moment, because he's known for months that job one was going to be telling Manner he didn't get the job, he never felt like he'd gotten to a good way to deal with this. If Manner can play with the team, Tim wants him to play. Manner's probably about a good third of the talent NCIS Cybercrime has on staff, and losing him would hurt. But if he can't play, or won't accept Tim as his boss, Tim's not interested in dealing with that headache.

So, somehow, he's got to get through this, making sure that Manner knows he's the better man for the job, but not alienating him so much that he decides to stick around and be a pain in his ass.

"I disagree, and Vance does, too."

Manner shakes his head. Like Jenner, he doesn't seem to hold much respect for Vance when it comes to what they do. "How did you…"

"I went up there and asked for it. I gave him a plan for where I wanted Cybercrime to go. I gave him a tactical assessment of your strengths and weaknesses. And then I showed Vance why I'd do it better than Jenner is, and honestly, better than you would, too."

Manner isn't buying that. Scorn's radiating off of him as he sips his coffee. "You really think you're good enough at this to be my boss?"

"I know I am."

Another snort. "Yeah, I know your reputation. You're the one everyone calls in when they're stuck. But it's not just hacking down there. You've got to run the team, run the ops, run the paperwork. So you're slick with a computer, fantastic for you, you've got to be a bureaucrat, too."

"I need to do it, you're right. But you don't, and Ngyn doesn't, and Hammon and Brent and Connon and the rest of them don't. Right now, bureaucracy is the biggest problem you guys have down there. We're cops. What I need to be is a team leader. What you guys need to be is a team. You've been sitting down there thinking you're some sort of hall monitors and keeping all your paperwork tidy. You've got the cleanest record of any government agency on the east coast, lowest cracked case ratio, but your paperwork is perfect because you spend more time dotting I's and crossing T's than you do catching bad guys. No more. We catch bad guys. We stop them from hurting people. That's our number one priority. We do it with computers instead of guns, but we work together and we do it. Are you in any way surprised that Leon found that to be a compelling vision for NCIS Cybercrime?"

"Are we being honest with each other?"

Tim holds up his hands. "Why not?"
"I don't think Leon cares one way or another what happens down in Cybercrime. I don't think he has a clue as to what we do down there. I think he's got a pet who's handy with a computer who asked for a new assignment. If the rumors I hear about you are true, it's in Leon's best interest to keep you happy, because otherwise you'd be a nightmare of a whistleblower. And, now, instead of running a smoothly functioning operation, I'm stuck with having to manage a cowboy who wouldn't know a rule if it jumped up and bit him in the ass."

Manner looks sincerely taken aback when Tim bursts out laughing at that.

Tim shakes his head. "The rule thing. You have no idea. And if you'd ever seen me near a horse, you'd know why I'm laughing at the cowboy image."

"Rumor has it you've hacked the CIA, FBI, DOD, Justice, Mossad, Coast Guard, MI5 and 6, more private companies than anyone can list, more individuals than anyone can count, couldn't care less about legal or warrants, and you think you're good on rules?"

Tim smiles, still amused, but he can see this is pissing Manner off. "The thing about rumors, most of them aren't true. But the thing I find really interesting here is this, you seem significantly more interested in following the rules than catching the bad guys."

"If we don't follow the rules, we are the bad guys."

"Justice and Law aren't synonyms."

"Said every villain ever."

"I'll remember not to send you in on the wet work missions."

Manner's eyes go wide.

Tim holds up his hands again. "I'm kidding. The real question is, do you want to stick around? I can guarantee you Cybercrime under me will not look like Cybercrime under Jenner. If you don't like that, I won't hold you leaving against you. Jenner'll give you a great review, and I will, too. If you aren't interested in working for a 'villain,' now might be a very good time to spruce up your resume.

"But, you are one of the two techs who passed every test I ran. And I don't want half of my best talent running off as soon as I show up."

"Don't like… Tests…?" Manner is looking very confused by this.

"Like I said, I did a tactical assessment for Leon of your strengths and weaknesses. Think it's a coincidence you've been hacked several times since summer? You and Ngyn were the only ones who noticed I was doing it. She actually figured out it was me. Vance had to tell you because you missed my breadcrumb trail. Neither of you thought it was worth pulling your team into action, or letting Jenner know what was up.

"My first goal for this team is that it will be a team. One of you gets hacked, it'll be all-hands-on-deck until we're secure again. I sat there and watched as all twelve of you had your screens go bonkers, and most of you did nothing. You coded straight through it, and didn't even make a move until after you'd finished your work.

"And if you think that maybe you deserve Cybercrime more than I do, that you'd do a better job of it, that I'm getting this department because I'm being paid off to keep me happy and silent, then you need to ask yourself why you didn't rally your team, fix the breech, and find who caused it? Because I can absolutely guarantee I would have, and Vance knows that."
"I didn't 'rally the team' as you put it, because I knew the attack was coming from the inside. It didn't do anything important, so there was no reason to go full bore on it. Vance said it was a test, so there was no reason to go any further."

"The attack looked like it was coming from the inside. It wasn't."

"Yeah, well no one is suggesting you don't know your way around a computer."

"I'm flat out saying that you're the second best person in Cybercrime and you fell asleep at the switch. And, not to put too fine a point on it, but ever since I built the wall we've got protecting NCIS, all attacks have come from the inside. No one's gotten through from the outside, which also should have been a huge neon sign for who was hacking you. So, if you're staying with us, I want the words, 'coming from the inside' to vanish from your vocabulary. I know for a fact we've had people break in to screw with us, because it's easier to get into the building than it is to get into the computers."

Manner is not looking thrilled with this assessment.

"So, you sticking around?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know."

"Fair enough."

He heads back into Cybercrime with Manner, who goes straight back to his cubical. From there he stops by Jenner. "You've told them you were resigning, right?"

"Yeah. Told 'em Steve was their new Boss, too."

Tim mentally winces. "Wonderful." He thinks for another moment. "Was 'busy' code for getting the congratulations party in order?"

"It was."

"You mind if I get them together to tell them I'm taking over in January?"

"Go for it."

"Thanks." Tim turns away from Jenner and quickly notices there's no good workflow here. He can't just gather them together or call campfire. His eyes flick over the basement, straight rows of cubicles, huge bank of filing cabinets, at the far end there's a counter, a coffee pot, a soda machine, and a snack vending machine.

Closest thing they've got to a meeting place.

He takes a minute to set the text then sent it to all of his team. **Meet at the coffee pot. 15:05.**

And in five minutes he had twelve techs, all standing, pretty awkwardly, in front of the coffee pot, most of them looking around curiously.

"I'm Tim McGee. I work upstairs with the MCRT." They kind of nod along with that. From the way they're looking at him, they're expecting him to hand them a problem to solve. "Jenner told you today that he's resigning at the end of December. Come the beginning of January, I'll be taking over as Head of Cybercrime." Eleven sets of eyes all turn toward Manner. He rolls his eyes, shrugs a bit, and gives them a **life sucks** gesture. "Right now, I'm still a field agent, so as often as I need to be in the
field, I'll be out there, but when I'm not investigating, I'll be down here, talking to you guys, seeing what you're doing, getting a feel for how you do it. Come January 4th, I want to be able to hit the ground running, up to date on your cases." They all sort of nod at that.

"I guess what you really want to know is what is going to happen when I take over. Is everything going to be change? Yes. It is. Part of what I'll be doing is figuring out what you do and how to do it better. Any ideas you've got, plans you'd like to see put in place, stuff that just bugs the hell out of you, all of it, make notes, talk to me. I haven't worked down here since '08, and I was only here for four months, so I've got no attachment to any ways or traditions. You can't step on my toes by telling me you don't like how things are done. Can't win points by liking how things are either.

"Total blank slate time. We're going to rebuild from the ground up. So, from now until January, keep thinking about how you want this job to be. Think about what tools, what practices you need to be able to do your job as well as you possibly can."

They all stare at him. He hands out a stack of his cards. "Anything you want, need, want to talk about, drop me an email. I'm in court tomorrow and the next day, so I won't be down then, but if a case doesn't go hot, I hope to be down here on Thursday, just getting a sense of how this works."

There's some mumbling along the lines of, "Okay, yeah, we'll think about it," but he knows that they really just want him to head the hell off so they can commiserate with Manner and gossip with each other about him without him listening in.

"Okay. See you Thursday!"

He was in the elevator when he got the text from Tony. *Dead body. Meet us at the car.* So much for celebrating.

It's well past two in the morning when he gets home. Like anytime they get a dead body call, he heads straight for the washing machine to deposit his clothing, and sitting on top of the washer, where Abby knew he'd be, was one of the tirimisu cupcakes he loves.

Next to it is a piece of paper with a little heart on it.

He smiles, takes a bite, and heads to his office to decompress for a few minutes before going to bed.
Inviting his mom to visit five minutes before becoming the next head of Cybercrime was awfully bad timing.

Tuesday morning an effusively happy email was waiting for him, confirming that Tori and Ben would be up for the christening. And that's when the full-bore: *Holy shit what the hell was I thinking; do I really want to see these people?* crashed into him along with a side of muscle twitching nervousness.

Add in two days of testifying on top of that, which is more free time than he needs right now. He's gotten to the point where testifying is old hat. Waiting to testify, though... They stick him in a room by himself, and he waits and waits and waits. Eventually some junior legal beagle shows up to go over one final prep, and on the stands he goes.

The testifying part is usually fine. He doesn't get called in as often as Tony, Ziva, or Gibbs, because his part of the job is usually very technical and tends to bore jurors.

Likewise, at this point, defense attorneys tend to not like him, either.

When he's answering prosecution questions, he gives somewhat lively versions of 'explaining how it works to Tony and Gibbs' style answers. He keeps it simple, short, and as amusing as possible. Jurors don't exactly listen to him, attention riveted to his words, but they don't fall asleep.

When he's on cross-examination, he whips out 'explaining it to Gibbs or Tony when someone else I want to impress with my brains is in the room' and pulls out all the tech speak. This buffs his expertise cred and puts the jury to sleep/makes them annoyed at the defense team for making them have to listen to all this nit-picky crap they don't understand.

So, that part's not too bad.

But right now, sitting in this room, doing not much of anything beyond worrying about his mom and Ben showing up, is not fun.

He's got the personnel files for everyone on his soon to be team. (Had to get special dispensation for that. The Defense side was wary he had some sort of extra case prep that hadn't been agreed on, but finally decided he could keep the folders with him once they'd glanced through.) He's trying to pay attention, write up notes and brief dossiers on everyone. But the enormity of *Mom's coming on Saturday* is making it difficult to focus.

He knows part of the reason this is jarring him so hard is that he just signed up for an undetermined number of hours of emotionally intense interactions. Even if everything goes perfectly (and he's not even sure what perfectly would be) this is going to be tense and draining and... and... and that's not really it. That's part of it. That's the easy part of it.

He's typed out the email, twice, the *nope, I'm not ready for this, don't come* email, but doesn't send it. (Can't send it. He's not allowed contact with the outside world until he's done testifying. Even if he could, he wouldn't.)

He doesn't send it because he knows what he's doing. If he sees her, he'll have to make a decision. Can't be in the same place, same room with her for hours and leave it in this half-functional limbo. Once she shows up, he has to act, has to make himself forgive or burn that bridge.
Sending that note would just be putting it off that much further.

Once identified as the problem, some of his nervousness starts to ease into the background. At least he has an easier time forcing himself to look at the folders in front of him and really see, focus on them.

He’d gotten a hold of Cybercrime's resumes earlier, in an effort to figure out if Jenner had hired the B Team, or if working under Jenner turned good people into the B Team. Nothing he's seeing in the personnel files is disabusing him of his original impression that Jenner had hired decent people and then sucked all the life out of them. As he looks through, he sees things like Jenner was giving them commendations for how well-done their paperwork was or how efficient their code was and stuff like that, which is all well and good, Tim's in favor of correct paperwork and efficient code, but he also noticed that Jenner never gave anyone any petting for actually catching bad guys.

Sigh.

Worse, doesn't look like he's ever given anyone any grief about not catching bad guys. He's not allowed to have contact with the outside world while he's waiting to testify, so he makes a little note to himself: Check Cybercrime hours. He's got the sinking suspicion that this department never racks up any overtime.

On the upside, it's a pretty evenly balanced team. Twelve members, four basic skill sets: coders, hackers, web specialists, and database experts, everyone's got at least some skill in all four, and their specialties divided nicely.

Except… Edward Riely. Joy of working for the Federal Government, can't get rid of dead wood… He's a mainframe specialist who's most recent language is C++. It's not that Tim has anything against unique or weird specialties, it's that NCIS doesn't have a mainframe and hasn't had one since the mid-90s. And best he could recall, every other US Gov. agency had gotten rid of their mainframes, too. So, unless he's called in to go back in time and solve a crime in 1992, this guy is more or less useless.

He takes out his phone and writes another little note, reminding himself to find out if they’ve got a computer guy on the cold case team. That might be a way to fob this guy off and open up his desk for a new hire. Tim's thinking that if he can get that free desk, Catherine Howard, who he'd interviewed for the MCRT, would be a good fit.

"Agent McGee?"

He looks up and sees one of the bailiffs staring at him. "Yes."

"You're being called to the stand."

"Okay." He quickly packs everything up and heads off to explain what it is he does and how he does it.

Thursday he's back in the office, and for the moment, there's only paperwork.

He looks over to Tony, who's working his way through the mound of forms on his desk. "You mind if I head down? I told them I'd be poking around down there when I had some downtime."

Tony looks up at him, and though he seemed happy for Tim when the news broke, he's been… Tim doesn't know… hasn't seen enough of it to know, but there's something besides I'm happy for you going on back there.
"Your stuff done?"

Most of it is. He's got about a quarter inch of forms to go. Monday night he'd been part of the hard original push on the case, but he'd been sidelined for Tuesday and Wednesday, so he hadn't been as involved as he usually is in one of their cases. Tim stands up, grabs his short stack of paper, and puts it on Draga's desk. Draga glares up at him. "Hey!"

"Two months from now, it'll all be yours, anyway. Might as well get used to it." Then he turns to Tony. "Yep."

Tony appears to approve of what Tim just did. He smiles. "Have fun."

Tony watches McGee head toward the stairs. The idea that he's really leaving, that two more months and his partner will be gone...

He's happy for McGee. He really genuinely is.

And it's time. He knows that. They're butting heads like two bucks fighting for control of the herd. He talked with Gibbs about it, a little. Can't have more leaders than followers in a team. And Tim's not a follower, or at least, he's not willing to be Tony's follower, not anymore.

Either way, it's time. He knows it. He's pleased. Tim's getting his own department and the family life he wants to go with that. That fantasy life of the house in the 'burbs with the babies with pig tails and black diapers that he'd told Gibbs about back when they started dating: Tim's there.

But his partner's leaving. The geeky kid who turned into a man with balls of steel on his watch is leaving. His wing man, his back up, his straight man, no more. And that aches.

He's talked with Ziva about it, how weird it'll feel not to have McGee's quiet, stable energy there. He hasn't mentioned, though he's sure she knows, how lonely it'll be not to have a good listener for his stories.

He wonders, a bit, if this is how Ducky would feel if Palmer was moving on.

But it doesn't matter, McGee's leaving. Two more months, sort of, he'll probably be spending more and more time down there as they get closer to his go day, and then, one day he'll come up here and McGee'll be gone. All of his stuff will be off the walls, Draga'll be sitting at his desk, and everything will be different.

This time Tim heads down, and for a few minutes lingers just outside the elevator.

He supposes, if he tried, he could come up with a less welcoming work environment. But short of hanging up an "Abandon All Hope/Ye, Who Enter Here" sign with a few manacles to the blank, gray wall that's the first thing anyone sees when the elevator doors open, nothing is immediately springing to mind.

It's a big, dim, dank (But not really, it should be dank, it's gray and dim, and dank goes along with that, but it's not dank because computers don't like dank. It's psychosomatic dank.) rectangle of gray painted cinderblock walls, gray concrete floors, not nearly enough overhead light, no natural light, twelve (gray) cubicles in three straight lines, all of them softly glowing with individual lights and computer screens. It's simultaneously a little too cold, (ACs on high to keep the computers cool) and a little too warm (all of those computers are throwing off a lot of heat). It's loud in an indistinct buzzing sort of way, computers, exhaust fans, AC, dehumidifier, music on too loud through...
headphones.

Filing cabinets on one end (army drab instead of gray). Out of date coffee pot (God, it's a drip pot on a hot plate!) and snack and soda vending machines on the other.

There's absolutely nothing he can do about the lack of natural light. They're three floors underground here. (Which is intentional. Nothing short of a mag pulse or a bunker buster will take out their systems. After Deering's bomb, the level between Cybercrime and the rest of NCIS was strengthened; a "regular" bomb going off in the building won't take out Cybercrime.) But from what he can see only one out of three of the lights hanging from the ceiling are actually lit. He doesn't know if that's some sort of green use-less-energy thing, or if it's a matter of physical plant hasn't been down here in months. He does know, that unless there's an awfully good reason for it that he's not seeing, as of day one they will get some freaking light bulbs down here.

He circles around, and like every other time he's snooped electronically, everyone is in his or her own cube, working away. They're all looking very industrious. He doesn't see how they communicate with each other. (IM? Maybe? He's not looking closely enough at their screens to see if that's how they're doing it.) He also, from just walking around, can't tell who's working on what.

They do, however, have little nametags on their cubes. He ducks into the one labeled "Summers," remembering that he's a fellow Beaver (undergrad/machine learning), database specialist, has been with NCIS four years, and has received two commendations from Manner for (unspecified) excellence.

It's a very tidy, lighter gray on the inside, cubical.

Tim stands, waiting for Summers to take a break. And eventually (three minutes later) he does.

"Can I help you Mr. McGee?"

"It's just McGee, and yes, thanks. You mind telling me what you're working on?"

"Running down an IP for Hanson."

Tim nods, he knows Hanson, he runs the third of the five DC field teams. "Then I'll leave you to it. Don't want to slow you down."

"Won't matter." Tim's getting a sense that just possibly Summers is less than perfectly thrilled by how Cybercrime is currently run. At least, that 'won't matter' sounds awfully hopeless. And the way Summers is looking at him, wary but hopeful, is making him think there's more than just a conversation about a specific bit of hunting going on.

"Why not? Faster you get that address, the faster they can move."

"Cases are first come first serve down here. Get a case, work it to the end, pick up a new one. This one's been on the board for three days. And extra few minutes won't matter. All I can do now is tell them where the suspect was."

Tim stares at him, dumbfounded. It takes a literal thirty seconds before he can say, "Three days?"

"Yeah." Summers nods slowly. I really don't like this all over his face.

"Is there any chance this is a cold case?"

"Might be by now." Oh, that's really not the answer Tim wants to hear. Likewise the fact that his
team is the fastest team in the building is very sharply coming into focus, all the other teams farm their computer work down to Cybercrime.

"Help me out, why has a lead on a hot case been sitting for three days?"

"Because it was sixth in line."

"Okay, where's the line?" Summers wrote down an address for their NCIS interweb. "New things get added to the bottom of the chart, old things are at the top, as soon as you finish one job you pick a new one."

"Who else is working this one with you?"

"No one."

Tim blinks slowly, stepped around, and read over Summer's shoulder. No it's not a big job. It'd take him maybe two hours on his own. So, soloing on this makes a certain amount of sense. He looks at the chart. "How about any of these. This one… Rundlebach…” he'd heard a few mentions of that case, big time fraud involving enlistment benefits, "that's big case, who's on that?"

"Ngyn. I think."

"Who else?"

"No one. You finish one job, you grab another."

"So, you're telling me you're all working solo?"

"Yeah." The look on Summers' face makes it perfectly clear he does not approve.

Tim's shoulders slump, he sighs, and then straightens up and smiles. "Okay. That's good to know. Thanks, Summers."

"No problem."

He walks the circuit one more time, watching, listening, getting ideas in mind for how this whole thing is going to change, and then heads over to the coffee pot, pours himself a cup, and practically spits it out. The stuff they have upstairs is revolting. (There's a reason why it doesn't matter how nasty it is outside, they always go to Seth's cart.) However, it's manna from the coffee heavens compared to this. He's not even sure if this is genuine artificial coffee flavored coffee. (Tony talking about his civil war reenacting days with his dad, being forced to drink the stuff they called "coffee" which was brewed from something like burnt dried corn and acorns, springs to mind.)

He flashes a text to Abby: *You'd think, in that we're NAVAL criminal investigative services, that someone, somewhere would have heard of the idea of triage.*

A minute later he got back: *You'd think. Though none of my guys ever served. How about yours?*

He thinks for a few seconds. *Nope. They're, like your guys, doing the cases first come, first serve, doesn't matter how big or urgent. Get this, they're also doing all of them one tech to a case.***

*Oh Lord, even my guys knew that wasn't good.***

*Yeah. Coffee sucks, too.*

*That's easy to fix. Now you can get that Keurig you look at longingly every time we go to Target.*
He smiles at that. He does look at it longingly, occasionally petting it, but at home, he's the only one who drinks coffee, and he's got a perfectly good machine, so no reason to get a new one until the old one dies.

*I think I have a plan for Saturday. Kelly and I are going on a Target run, getting one of those, along with a ton of coffee pods. I may not be able to change anything else, yet, but I can get my guys better coffee!*

There you go. *You'll be McGee: The CoffeeBoss.*

*I can live with that. Are you in charge of what color the walls are in your lab?*

*Ish. Part of the maintenance routine is every five years they paint. They give me a list of options, and I pick one.*

*How about new equipment? How's that work?*

*Got a yearly budget. As long as I don't go over, I can requisition new stuff.*

*Carryover from year to year?*

*Yeah. No way I'd ever be able to afford the new scanners or the gas chromatograph, otherwise. Don't tell Major MassSpec, but we're saving up for a combo GC-MS. Should have enough cleared in two years.*

*My lips are sealed. Besides, he wouldn't believe me even if I did tell him. He'd assume I was rumormongering to just make him angry.*

There's a long quiet minute. Tim assumes she's actually working, and he opens his laptop and logs into the task log, getting a feel for how it works, and becoming familiar with what's on tap for Cybercrime.

Then his phone buzzes again. *It's just hitting me. This is how it's going to be from now on. You won't be coming by to chat and work. Might stop in to mess around or something, but it won't be every day. We'll text about work, maybe have lunch together, but you and I won't sit next to each other at the desk, working the same job, not anymore.*

*(sad smile) Yeah. I know. You won't be read in on all my stuff anymore, or I yours, too.*

*Sigh.*

*Yeah. No unmixed blessings.*

*Guess not.*

---

He heads over to HR and asks for information about how the hours in Cybercrime work. Doesn't take too long of hunting through the forms before he's sure that part of what is going on down there is that no one is working overtime. They all get in at eight. They all leave at five. They each take every single day of vacation. (Okay, he's assuming on that, it'll take hours to go through everything that thoroughly.)

He takes his phone out and sends a text to Gibbs: *I know why you hired me, now.*

A few minutes later, as he's heading toward Accounting, curious to see what shape his budget is going to be in, he gets back. *Couldn't resist those pretty green eyes.*
Wink.

Not yours, Abby's. She kept pouting at me about it. But Gibbs, we neeeeed McGee! I run the lab; I can't be your tech girl, too.

Love you, too. They get in at eight. They go home at five. God forbid you need computer work done at 5:15.

There was a reason why Abby was doing all our tech before you showed up.

Yeah, and now I know why you needed a tech guy. I'm also feeling significantly less cool about mocking the other teams for being so slow.

Mock away, the other team leaders could have done the same thing I did and hired a computer guy.

Guess so. Just hitting me that you and Kate and Tony worked pretty well as a trio. You didn't actually need another field agent.

Didn't think you'd ever really become one. Probably the best surprise of my life.

Thanks.

There's a few minutes' pause while Tim makes a note to himself about getting Cybercrime onto a twenty-four hour cycle. Crime happens all the time, so someone's got to be around to handle casework. He also makes a note to make sure that there's not some sort of messy labor rules against it.

His phone buzzes again while he's searching the regs.

Draga's getting sassy. Says if he's doing your paperwork, he should have your desk. He just scooted over there.

:) It'll be his soon enough. I'll boot him out when I get back up there, though.

Nothing against it he could see. Time to head off.

Tim gets to Accounting, asks for the budget information he wants, waits for the girl to call up to Vance to get the okay for this. She's staring at him warily, apparently requests to see departmental budgets are few and far between, let alone by guys who are not actually in charge of said department.

But, after a brief conversation with Vance, she stares at him, nods grudgingly, and sets him up at an empty desk, giving him the log in information he needs to view what will soon be his budget.

It's very nice. Painfully tidy. Like the rest of Cybercrime it's in perfect shape. The accounting team probably loves them. Nothing's over, everything appears to be accounted for, he's even got, and this pleases him quite a bit, close to twenty thousand dollars unused. Yeah, that's not big money, not in the grand scale of things, but that would certainly spruce up the basement, get the work flow better, upgrade some of the tools, and add a few toys to keep his techs happy.

Of course, no one in Cybercrime ever works overtime.

That 20k may vanish really fast if he gets them working the kind of hours they need to work.

He grabs his phone and flashes another text to Abby. Where does money for overtime come from?
From your budget.

Shit.

?

They're working perfect 8 to 5, no overtime. I know I've got stuff I want to change that'll cost money. And I know keeping butts in chairs'll run overtime.

Welcome to management! ;)

He snorts at that. Thanks.

Comp time may or may not be your friend. Or, you shake them up enough, and they only log 40 hours, but work more because they love the team. Same way you guys do.

Great.

Not feeling hopeful of that?

Not immensely. Talked to one of them, Summers, he was showing some signs of wanting things to change.

That's good.

I hope so.

And a pile of new trace just came in. Off to actually work.

Enjoy!

He's digging through his numbers, looking into what all it is Cybercrime spends money on (software licenses, wages, hardware, bonuses: It's not too complicated.) when his phone buzzes again.

Gibbs this time. Really weird to see him sitting at your desk.

Tim supposes it would be, but he's not having any sort of gut reaction to it. Probably would have this time last year, but... The desk isn't home so much, not anymore.

I haven't left yet.

Nope. Just different.

Yeah. I know. Would have felt the same way if I'd been the one who left later, and had to see someone else at your desk.

Don't remind me. Tony and Ziva are rummaging through resumes right now.

Gotta fill that space sooner or later.

Guess so.

At least it's less traumatic than the last time we filled an empty desk.

Amen to that.
Ziva is sitting next to Tony, both of them scanning through the list of resumes on file with HR for field agent positions.

Her eyes dart over names, qualifications, just little bits and pieces of information. They want more tech, sniper skills, a Marine would be good, and if they can get all of that with a psych background, someone who can really nail the interrogation angle, that'd be perfect.

But it won't be perfect, because her team is splitting up and heading off.

It's been almost five years since she told Cranston that she wanted something permanent, something that couldn't be taken away. When she said that, she was envisioning her team.

Silly answer. She knows that, feels it now, but she needed it then, the idea of a rock to chain herself to.

But nothing is permanent, everything changes, and anything can be taken away. Of all of the team, she knows that most intimately.

Which is probably why she wanted the opposite more than anything.

Now, though, having lived five years of changes, she knows that if you've got permanent, you're looking at something/someone dead.

Her team will never be the same. It'll never work as smooth. It will never be the haven from life outside.

But that's okay, because she doesn't need that anymore. And, privately, in the very deep thoughts, the ones she's still playing with herself, the ones she hasn't even voiced to Tony, yet, she's not sure how much longer she'll be part of the team. There are parts of her that have been hiding, afraid to see the light for decades, and she's thinking that maybe, wrapped in a family that loves her, it might be okay to see about exploring them again.

Back when this started, when she became Special Agent Ziva David, NCIS, she was replacing the smoldering ruins of a blasted, destroyed family with a team. It wasn't enough. But it was what she could get. And it was safely distant enough that she didn't have to risk, yet again, heartbreak.

Once again, she has a family. She doesn't need a team to fill the void left by ghosts of a brother and sister, mother and father.

She looks through resumes with Tony, and thinks about a conversation they need to have.

Tim spends another hour, through lunch, on the computer, checking around, coming up with some ideas. (Modified shareware/freeware. Cybercrime spends more on licensing than it does on anything else, and if he can free up some funds by switching software, he can get more hours out of his people, and get better tools for them to work with. Get more out of each of those hours. That's the plan, or one of them, at least.)

By the time that was done, he felt like he'd done as much as he could with what he had. Tomorrow, Monday, he'd start heading down to shadow individual techs... God, there's got to be a better name for them.

Abby's got LabRats, so what should his guys be?

Worms? They're underground, never see the light of day, and computer worms are a thing. But he
doesn't like worms. Too... worms.

He's got a dungeon. Dark, gray, dank (but not really). Who works in a dungeon? Imps?

Computer Imps?

Diskworld references aside, he's not loving that. No, if he's going to be the grand overlord of Cybercrime he's got to have... A smile spreads across his face, yeah, it's kind of dumb, but it'll make Abby laugh and it amuses him.

McGee's Minions.

That works.

Tomorrow he'll start spending at least an hour or so a day observing his Minions. He feels a bizarre desire to rub his hands together and cackle at that.

When he got back up, Draga was sitting at his desk, working on his computer. He just stares at him, *Really, you gonna pull this shit on me?* on his face.

"In two months, it'll be my desk, might as well get used to it, right?" Draga says with a cocky smile.

Tim steps behind his desk, kicks (lightly) at the back of the chair while pointing to Draga's desk.
"Out!"

Draga stands up, grabs the stack of papers, leaving about half of them on Tim's desk, and moseys over to his own.

Tim shrugs and starts filling them out. Not like he hasn't done it before.

"How was it McGee?" Ziva asks looking away from Tony's computer.

"It's going to depend a whole lot on how the people working there react to change. I can see a lot of easy ways to make things better, but..."

"But if they do not want to change..." she leads.

"Yeah." He smiles and nods. He tells them a little about what he's noticing. His teammates are all properly appalled. Tony makes a joke about how if he'd known he could have gotten regular hours by learning computers he would have bothered to learn. Gibbs watches them (because it is a paperwork day, and a certain amount of goofing around is allowed on paperwork days) fondly.

As he's talking, Tim's thinking about how much he's going to miss this. Easy, fun chatting while they all fill in the blanks.

And for as much as he's looking forward to the future, as much as he wants to see where Cybercrime will take him, there is a sort of anticipatory ache of losing this.

Tony's phone rings. He picks it up, listens, nods, asks a few questions, jotting down answers. They all know what this means.

Like Gibbs, Tony's kept the start of case mantra, "Gear up."

Cases, all cases, begin with "Gear up." The team will change. Tim'll go. Gibbs'll go. Eventually Ziva will probably take maternity leave. But those words will stay the same. "Gear up." And the cases'll
keep coming. No matter what, sometime, somewhere, some poor son of a bitch'll buy the plot, and NCIS'll show up to figure out what happened.
Tim's nervous. Really, really nervous. They're due over any minute now. The plan, dinner, get to know Kelly, spend a few hours at his house before they go back to the hotel, followed by the full on baptism festivities tomorrow sounded good when he was typing up the email.

Now it sounds insane. What the hell was he thinking doing this? His stomach is hurting, and he's picked up his glass at least twenty times, taken a sip, put it down, and fidgeted around.

Right now, it's just him, Abby, Kelly, and Gibbs.

He's not precisely sure how Gibbs got invited to this. Part of why he's nervous is Gibbs and his mom in the same room. Of course, Abby and his mom in the same room isn't going to be a picnic either.

Hell, him and his mom in the same room probably isn't a great plan, either.

"You really want to do this?" Abby asks.

He nods, taking yet another sip of water, wondering if they've got any good snacks in the house, because he really wants to eat, something to keep his hands and mouth busy.

"Hey." Gibbs rests his hands on Tim's shoulders. "We're gonna make this as easy for you as we can."

"I know." He doesn't, not really, but it's the right thing to say. And right now he's not even sure what easy would be.

His phone rings, and he more or less sprints to get it.

Gibbs looks at Abby as he leaves the living room for his office. "Is he ready for this?"

"He says he wants to try." No! very clear on her face.

"Is there anything we can do to make this easier? Last time he was that tense…" Gibbs shakes his head. He doesn't remember seeing Tim this tense. Maybe when they walked down that hallway and saw John?

Abby shakes her head back at him. "This isn't in our hands. We're making sure he knows he's loved and not alone."

A minute later he's back.

"Who called?"

"Breena."

Gibbs and Abby both look at him expectantly.

He manages something that's vaguely smile-ish. "Last minute pep talk."

They nod.

The knock on the door.
He doesn't know if it's worse for being expected or not. But he does jerk at the sound of it, and then hops up to open the door.

They look the same as they always do. His mom, tall, blondish hair even more gray now, but the same straight posture and conservative clothing. Ben's as round and smiley as always. He shakes Ben's hand first, that's easy. Nothing about that changed.

Ben steps in, hugging Abby, talking to Gibbs, and Tim stares at his mom.

She smiles and hugs him, and for a second he feels himself melt into it, into the comfort of old lies and memories, and then he pulls himself out of them, and steps back a bit. Her hands are still on his shoulders. "Let me look at you! Oh, Penny told me married life was agreeing with you, but I didn't think... You look fantastic, Tim."

"Thanks."

Abby allows herself to be hugged, but she's not doing her usual enthusiastic, all-encompassing Abby hug.

"You remember Jethro Gibbs?" Tim says.

His mom and Ben nod. He shakes hands with both of them, cool but not the level of frigid Gibbs can easily do, let alone his full on malice.

"Dinner'll be ready soon. We're eating kind of early because Kelly usually wakes up and wants her dinner a little before seven," Tim says, and the nervousness is audible in his voice, along with the way he's started rambling on about the fact they're having roasted chicken.

Ben breaks in, rich voice soothing over Tim's nervous ramble, relieving him of the need to fill the quiet, which he appreciates, complimenting Abby (good guess, she did cook) on how wonderful the chicken smells, asking what she'd used to spice it with, and wandering into the kitchen with her, dispersing some of the tension.

Tim and Gibbs follow along, and Tori ducks out.

She's back a minute later. "Almost forgot this." It's a bottle of chardonnay. Good one by the looks of it. And Tim smiles a little, fairly sure that "almost forgot this" means "I've got a bottle of red and a bottle of white in the car and was waiting to see what dinner was before picking one of them."

"Can't forget that, Darlin.'" Ben smiles at her. "Tim, you got a corkscrew?"

"Yeah." He grabs it and hands it over, along with some glasses, to Ben. Ben's opening the wine, Abby's messing around with the vegetables, which his mom rapidly joins in helping with, Gibbs settles in at the table, watching, comfortable, but Tim can see the edge there. He's ready to jump in if need be.

"Who wants wine?" Ben asks once he's got the bottle open. Tori and Gibbs say yes. Abby shakes her head, "Still nursing. If there's some left after Kelly's last dinner, I'll probably have some then."

"Any for you, Tim?"

"Nah."

"Part of how you're staying so trim?" Ben asks.
"Something like that. Remember how when we went to visit you, you guys picked up the best ice cream ever? Well, we've got the best cupcakes, and I want to have some." They do have great cupcakes. And he does keep track of his calories that closely because otherwise it is too easy for him to go overboard and start putting on weight again, but that's not it. A glass of wine to go with dinner won't tip him over that far. He just doesn't want to deal with alcohol in addition to everything else tonight. Doesn't need anything, even a glass or two of wine, mucking with his emotional control.

Ben laughs at that, happy to hear it. "Always save room for great cupcakes. So, your grandma's been telling us about this mixed martial arts thing you've been doing, is this," he gestures to indicate how much more in shape Tim is now compared to a year ago, "the result of that?"


"Well, whatever you're doing, it looks good," Tori adds.

"How'd you get into this?" Ben asks, sipping his wine. "Great pick, Tori."

She nods, appreciating the approval.

"You remember me telling you about how Jimmy and Breena lost the baby?"

They nod at him.

"Jimmy was talking about being so angry and not having anything to do with it. So we fought. Then this one," he nods to Gibbs, "took a look at us, decided we didn't know what the hell we were doing, and that it was more than time that we learned. Something about making sure we'd both be ready and able to put the fear of Dad into future boyfriends."

Gibbs smiles at that, looking satisfied, and took a sip of his wine. "They had the basics, just getting them polished up."

"Getting them ready to singlehandedly invade France," Abby adds, grating nutmeg onto the carrots she was sautéing.

Gibbs smiles. "Nah. Ziva's doing that."

"Ziva's the pretty little thing with the dark hair?" Ben asks.

Abby smiles at that. Of course, if you'd only seen Ziva at a rehearsal dinner and wedding, you might think that about her. "Yes. Though she used to work for Mossad. They call her the ninja."

"She's the team's hand to hand combat specialist."

"And you're computers?" Ben asks.

"And precision pistol shot." Gibbs adds. "Haven't made a target small enough Tim can't hit it with a hand-gun."

"What are you?" Ben asks Gibbs.

"Sniper."

"Interrogator," Tim adds.

The timer dings, and Abby takes a big step to the side, away from the oven, but still able to keep the
Relaxing dinner at home with the parents. They all work toward that illusion.

Ben does a good job of keeping up pleasant, easy conversation. He's like Tony in that he can keep everyone, even Gibbs, chatting comfortably. They talk about Tim's soon-to-be new job, how the team is faring, a bit about Gibbs' retirement plans, some about the new development he and Tori are working on. Just a round hour of fairly gentle, pleasant interaction.

Tim can feel how easy it would be to slide back into this. This is what visits with his mom were like before. There's warmth, and laughter, and even with the edge that everyone is working hard to pretend isn't there, this could be something lovely.

He can imagine Penny and Ducky, Sarah and Glenn here as well. Everyone together, first time in a year. All goes well, that'll be tomorrow after the party.

He's almost feeling hopeful when they hear Kelly's tiny cry.

Gibbs stands up; he's done eating. (Downside of the formula they're feeding her, baby poop right now is fiercely awful, and even two or three hand washes after, little whiffs of it seem to linger. Since he's done eating, and Tim and Abby aren't, he's offering to get her.) "I've got her. Back in five or so."

And in about five minutes, Gibbs does head down, Kelly cradled in his arms, leaning against his chest, bright-eyed and looking at everything.

Tori hops up fast to go to her, and stops, a step away, eyes warm and brimming with tenderness for the tiny child in Gibbs' arms. "Hello Kelly, I'm your grandmom," she says while moving to Gibbs' side so Kelly can see her face easily. "May I?" Gibbs looks to Abby and Tim, and they nod so he hands Kelly over.

"Oh, God, Tim, she's perfect," his mom says as she snuggles Kelly against her shoulder.

And those words shot the fragile peace of dinner to bits. They rip through Tim like hot knives, each stab ripping open infected psychic wounds, swollen with anger, putrid with regret. He bites his lip, and both Abby and Gibbs know that's a classic unhappy Tim sign, closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, stands up, and says, "Yeah, she is. Exactly the way she is."

"Yes." She holds Kelly a little further away, cradling her head in her hand, so wrapped up in studying her granddaughter that she's completely missing, for the moment, the heat in Tim's words or look. But eventually, she feels his look, glances up, sees the rage behind his eyes, and blanches.

He shakes his head, takes Kelly in hand, gently, and turns around, heading back up the stairs.

Tori looks stunned. She's been desperately trying to not say or do the wrong thing, and cannot begin to even fathom how she could have gone wrong by saying Kelly was perfect.

But Abby gets it, and after a few seconds Gibbs does, too. Timothy was the child who wasn't perfect to his mom, not the way he was.

Abby looks to both of them. "We'll be... I don't know. I've got to feed her," and heads up after Tim.
Vastly stronger women than Tori Allister have faltered before the death glare of Leroy Jethro Gibbs. And men, much, much harder than Ben Allister have fallen before that look.

So the fact that it's all of three seconds before neither of them can meet his gaze isn't exactly a surprise.

He does feel a little bad for pulling it on Ben, who, from what he can see, is a genuinely nice guy who got dumped into a massive family mess that, from his side of it, ended years before he even got on the scene.

But Tim is his boy, and he's hurting, and if there's one thing Gibbs is good at, it's spreading hurt all over the place.

Gibbs doesn't say anything. He's never precisely rude. He just keeps looking until Tori starts to cry. Then he stops.

And he doesn't look at her again.

For a minute after she starts crying, it seems like Ben is going to try something, but he sees the look, sees the force, the anger behind it, and realizes that Gibbs might literally kill him if he tries to defend Tori on this, and he decides not to say anything.

That's probably a wise move.

Ten of the longest minutes of history go by, and Tim still doesn't come back. Gibbs can, just, almost, hear him, and part of him is wondering if he's really hearing the tears, or if he's just imagining them. Probably imagining them, all of the times he's seen Tim cry, he didn't make any noise.

But he can feel it, hear it, if hearing it is what's happening, and it goads him into moving. He grabs Tori, who jerks at his touch, trying to get away from the vice-like grasp on her wrist, and pulls her to the back porch, waiting the barest second for the door to shut behind him before he starts in on her.

"You knew. You knew, and you didn't stop it." Those aren't questions. They're statements, statements edged with broken glass and laced with poison. "It was your job to stop it. You had a beautiful, brilliant boy, and instead of treating him like the love of your life, like the light that made you happy to get up in the morning, you broke him."

Tori nods. She knows right now would be a very bad time to disagree with Gibbs.

Gibbs' voice is very low. "He's not yours anymore. He's mine, and he's Penny's, but he is not yours. You and Ben leave here, and you don't come back."

"He invited us."

Gibbs shakes his head. "You leave, and you do not come back."

"He wants—"

"No." Gibbs' voice is cold and hard, almost calm sounding, but he's not calm. Or if he's calm, he's the calm of a beach where the water has pulled back, gathering into the wave of the on-coming tsunami. "You leave. You leave right now. He will go to you, on his terms, in his own time, if he wants you. But right now, you leave, and you do not ever set foot in my presence again. You hurt my son. You hurt him worse than you can imagine, and you and John are only breathing by his sufferance, so you leave, you turn around and you walk out of here, now. And you pray he never
sheds another tear over you because otherwise you will answer to me."

Less than half a minute later, Tori and Ben are gone.

He heads upstairs, knowing they'll be in their room. The door is closed, and he's not sure if that's to keep the sound down, or to keep everyone out. But before he can knock Abby calls out, "Come on in."

He does, sees them on the bed. She's nursing Kelly with one arm, and has the other around Tim. His head is on her shoulder, and yes, he is crying, silently.

Gibbs' immediate instinct is to join them, but they're in their room, in bed, so he's hesitant of violating the intimacy of that space. Abby sees him pause and nods a bit to Tim's far side, kissing him on the forehead in the process.

And with permission granted, Gibbs heads over, sitting next to Tim, wrapping his arm around him.

He looks up, face red and wet, eyes bright green, looking a little embarrassed that this still hurts so bad, hits him so hard.

He sniffs, his defensive, sad smile in place. "She was supposed to feel that way about me."

Gibbs smiles back at him, also sad. He nods, ruffles Tim's hair and kisses his temple. "Yeah, she was. And she should have fought to the death to protect you, too."

Tim wipes his eyes. "They still down there?"

"Nah. Sent them away."

"Okay." He sniffs again, inhaling hard, his head resting on Abby's shoulder. He pets Kelly's cheek, hand skirting gently over her shoulder and arm.

"Why wasn't I enough for them?"

And that's the question that Abby and Gibbs can't answer.

_We love you. You're more than enough for us. We adore and cherish you._ All of that's great. All of that matters. That's his soul and bedrock.

But it doesn't help with the pulsing hot, sick ache of not being that for his mom.

And all of the snuggling, cosseting, and petting he's getting right now, all of which he needs, doesn't answer that question, can't answer it.

And the only way to get the answer is to go to the dragon's den and look it in the eye.

But he's not ready for it. Not yet. He needs a few more minutes to put himself together, and time after that to don his armor.

Half an hour later, when his face has calmed down, and his emotions are a bit more in check, he texts to his mom. _Where are you?_

_Does it matter?_ Comes back a few seconds later.
He's honestly not sure. It'd be easy to just hide away, let them leave, not speak of it again. But he thinks of Jimmy saying this is pain he probably has to go through, and that he can't just leave this festering.

Yeah. Like to talk to you. Probably won't be fun or pleasant. Probably don't want Ben around. I know I don't.

Okay. DC Hilton.

Be there soon.

It's a fairly high end hotel. Not too far away. Not too close. Only takes Tim twenty minutes to get there.

He changed before he headed out. When his mom and Ben got to his house he was in his standard work clothing. Nice jeans, belt, button down, jacket, loafers. His blend in, don't attract attention look.

The kind of look, where, if you're paying close attention, you can catch occasional sight of the wrist cuff, and that's it in the way of hints that there might be something interesting going on below the surface.

It's November, night, and cold, so he doesn't go for his full on Goth-wear. Kilt, t-shirt, Abby's gray sweater, (It's a men's sweater, oversized on her, just right on him.) leather jacket, boots. He did his nails, left off the eye makeup. He's sure he'll be crying again.

He added just a little of Abby's perfume. On her skin it's walking sex, but he's spent many pleasant, drowsy, very happy moments where enough of it has rubbed off on him that he's got warm, cherished, loved, sated and safe associations with that scent on his skin. On his skin it's adored afterglow, and he needs that right now.

Like the knight going into battle, he carries his lady's favor. Being able to smell her scent won't hurt, and will help keep some good things in his mind. And if it's a bit more sweet and femme than a 'guy' scent, he doesn't care, not like he's wearing gallons of it. Just enough so he can catch the occasional hint, just enough to help anchor him in now, not let him get lost in the past.

Because he knows it'll be too easy to get caught in the past. The child/teen he was is right below the surface right now, and he'll break through very easily.

He knocks, almost wishing he could just run away from this, knowing that never getting done with it will bite him eventually.

She opens it, and looks him up and down, bit of shock coming through the sorrow on her face. "Oh."

He steps in, nods.

"Penny and Sarah mentioned the kilt. It's..." He can see she's horrified by it; he might as well be wearing a pretty floral sundress, her eyes flick to the painted nails, and he feels her discomfort at it. Trying to be kind she limply finishes with, "nice."

"I like it."

"I like the dragon." She does look carefully at the tattoo. "That's the family mark, and each rope goes with a baby? That one's Kelly's, and you're leaving room for others?"
He's surprised she's good with the ink, but it looks genuine. Of course, she saw some of the arm cuff tattoo when they were in Texas (the bit that's an inch or so below where most of his t-shirt sleeves end). She didn't ask to see the whole thing, but it didn't seem to bug her, either. "Yeah."

"It's nice work. Always liked that about living on base. The guys usually had interesting body art."

"Oh." He hadn't known that about her. "Thanks."

They stare at each other.

"So, why all dressed up now?"

He shakes his head. "This isn't dressed up. This is me." He slips the boots and jacket off. She's sitting on the bed, so he sits on the chair by the dresser. "This is me, hanging out, at home, with my family, on the weekend. The other stuff, that's what I wear to blend in, be like everyone else, not attract attention."

"Okay."

"This is me, Mom." He's shaking his head. "And I shouldn't have had to wait thirty-seven years for you to see it. Shouldn't have had to spend thirty-four years only letting little hints of me come out, constantly terrified of getting chewed into dust for being me. This is..." His eyes are tearing up, and his voice is warbling, so he takes a second to steady it. He doesn't just have to say it; she has to understand it, too. "I should have been enough. You should have looked at me like I was perfect. I am your son, and that should have been enough!" He takes a long, deep, shaking breath, feeling years of... he doesn't even know what all, too many emotions, he can't even begin to name them, let alone sort them out, all come bubbling up.

"It was, Tim!"

"Like fuck it was!" He's not looking at her, making sure he doesn't start sobbing because she needs to hear the words that he's not done saying. "You and Dad spent my whole life with you trying to change me. Nothing about me was ever good enough. Didn't matter if all the answers on the test were right, I still had to do better. Didn't matter how bad life sucked, I still wasn't allowed to cry about it. Didn't matter if I hated whatever it was you and Dad wanted, I had to do it. Nothing about me was ever enough for you.

"And you look at her, and you hold her in your arms, hands trembling, face lit up in a huge smile, love oozing out of every pore... You were supposed to be feel that way about me!" He's inhaling shaky and harsh between words, but still intelligible. "I was supposed to be perfect to you! Just the way I was. I was supposed to be enough..." And that did break him. He is sobbing, audibly. Not loud, especially not by grown-man standards, but it's probably the first time in twenty-five years that he's let go enough to make any noise.

She sits there, tears streaming down her own face, too. She wants to get up, hold him, comfort him, and starts to, but he glares at her, so she sits back down on the edge of the bed, fingers clenched, nails digging small crescent shaped tears into the palms of her hands.

Finally he gets himself together. "Why not me?"

She takes a few seconds to get her own voice under control. "When you were a baby I held you just like that, and cuddled you, and told you you were perfect and sang to you and petted you and snuggled you all the time."

"When I was a baby..." He snorts. "Love doesn't have an expiration date. What, I turned three,
wasn't cute enough anymore, and that was that? When did I stop being your perfect little boy? Because if I ever was, it was way before I can remember."

She smiles, very sad. "No one's perfect. Not really. That's not how it works. Babies can be perfect because all they have to do is exist. And even babies aren't really perfect. But... No. Your kids aren't perfect the way they are. I wasn't. You weren't. Kelly won't be. They are going to want things that aren't good for them. And it's your job to stop that. You're the adult, you're the one who knows how to survive in this world, and you will do whatever it takes, even if she hates every single second of it, to make sure she has what she needs to make it through."

"It's not about perfect. And it's not about not being enough or not loving. It's about the fact that one day she won't be a baby. It was about the fact that one day you were going to be out there on your own, and you needed to be able to survive it."

"Kelly won't want her vaccinations, she won't want her medicine when she's sick, she might not want to learn how to swim, or do algebra, or whatever. She'll be rude and wild. But there are skills she is going to have to have if she's going to survive, and even if she hates you for it, you will make sure she has them, because giving her the best shot she can possibly have to survive out there, that's what being a parent is."

If Jimmy or Gibbs had said that to him, he'd agree wholeheartedly. But she's not Jimmy or Gibbs, and he survived her and his father's version of 'I don't care if you hate it, you will master this,' so he can't come up with a detached, 'Yes, that's a pertinent insight into the rearing of children' type response.

"So this was my medicine? It was good for me? God, you sound like those assholes who hook their gay kids up to electrodes and try to shock the gay out of them," comes out instead.

She thinks about it for a second and then shocks the hell out of him by saying, "You know what, yes! If you honestly believe that your child is doing something that will result in a lifetime of pain, let alone eternal torment after that lifetime is over, you do whatever it is you can to change it. If you think literal Hell, flames and eternal torment, is looming for your child, you put a stop to whatever it is they're doing because otherwise you aren't doing your job. I mean... You wouldn't let Kelly walk into a bonfire. No matter how much she protests about how the fire is fine, how you're an old-fashioned moron for believing it'll burn her, how it won't hurt her, how she belongs in the fire, and all her buddies are there. No. And if you can't convince her, you will literally pick her up and take her away from it because you don't want her to get hurt. And you will listen to her scream at you, you will hear her cry about it, and you will do it anyway, because you're her father, and that's what a parent does."

She brings it back to raising him. "And we... we were so afraid that you'd get hurt. You were so timid and eager to please, and we didn't want you to be the kid who just went along with whatever the crowd wanted you to do. Didn't want you running into the bonfire because your buddies thought it'd be cool."

His eyes are hard as he asks, "Really? Is that what Dad was doing?"

She shrugs, looking very sad. "It's what he said he was doing. It was what I was doing. And I did it wrong. I know that now. But the goal, the only goal, was to make sure you were strong enough to handle anything that came your way. That's why Johns Hopkins and writing and MIT and working for NCIS and all of that was fine to me. That was you being strong enough to be you."

Tim snorts at that. "You ever think I was so 'timid' because there was someone yelling at me all the fucking time?"
"I do now."

"I used to peek at my Christmas presents."

She nods. "We knew."

"Why did you think I stopped?"

"Figured you didn't care as much anymore. You were eleven when you stopped. Christmas wasn't such a big deal."

He shakes his head. "It's because I had gotten to the point where I could think ahead well enough to understand what would happen to me if I got caught. You say I was too timid, you wanted me to be able to stand up for myself; then why never reward me when I did? Seventeen years, I don't ever remember being petted for being bold. Sarah was. She got compliments and happy smiles, and all sorts of good piled on her for being sassy. Why constantly keep doubling down on me?"

"You needed to be able to draw from your own strength and handle anything that would come your way. If you do whatever it is for someone else's praise, you'll fall down when you don't get that praise anymore. And there will be times when you don't get it. You had to be able to do what was right for you on your own because it was right, not because someone would praise you for it. And Sarah, even as a baby, she just kept rolling. Didn't matter if you liked what she was doing or not, she just kept it up. But you didn't, you were much more sensitive to the people around them, always checking in to make sure they were happy with what you were doing. You needed more help to rely on your own strength than she did, so you didn't get the same kind of treatment."

"Life'll beat the shit out of you, Tim. You know that. The punches just keep coming, and it doesn't end, and it may be decades before it gets better~~" She sounds so sad as she says that, weary.

"That's the point of family, to make sure you've got a refuge~~" And it hits Tim like a punch to the gut. "You didn't, did you? Stuck in a marriage you hated, little kids constantly needing attention, moving every eighteen months/two years, no close friends, can't complain to your parents about your husband, they told you not to marry him in the first place, your church is telling you to suck it up and pray~~" He looks at his mother, trying to see the woman, not just the mom, sitting in front of him. "You were trying to make me hard enough to live your life."

She half-shrugs. "It's just life, Tim. Up, down, doesn't matter, you've got to handle it. Like I said, I wanted you to be strong enough to handle anything that came your way, and I know, now, that wasn't the way to do it... I'm sorry we were wrong about that. I'm sorry that kindness would have worked better, and we didn't try that. But... But I'm not sorry I did everything I could think of to make sure you had the skills, the brains, the grades, and the balls to do anything you ever wanted to do." She does look sorry, and he can feel deep regret and pain on her.

But he's angry, and he needs real answers, and honestly, he doesn't much care that this is painful to her. She didn't want this kind of pain, she didn't have to do this to him in the first place. "How could you have possibly thought that was the right way to do it?"

"Because doing things your kids hate because they need it is a ton of being a parent. Do you remember swim lessons?"

He shakes his head. Not that he doesn't remember them, because he does have vague memories of cold, fear, wet, and crying, but because he's got no context for them and he's not even entirely sure those memories were swim lessons.
"When you were three, the house we ended up in had a pool next door. No fence. Nothing to block it off or keep you out of it. I couldn't watch you twenty-four/seven. We could tell you not to go over there. We spanked you, one of the maybe three times that happened, when you did. But it wasn't stopping you, you kept wandering on over because you were fascinated by the water, so you had to learn how to swim.

"And you hated every single second of those lessons. You'd cling to my legs, crying, begging not to be put in the pool. You'd cry through the whole lesson, and cling to the edge of the pool or the girl teaching you. It was a disaster, but we kept doing it because there was no way we were going to live right next door to a pool with a child who was too young to stay out of the water and couldn't swim. You hating me for dragging you to those lessons was less important than you possibly drowning."

He thinks back. "And let me guess, by the time I could swim I was so terrified of the water it wasn't an issue anymore?"

She shakes her head. "We moved before you got it down."

He thinks about it, unsure of how long they stayed wherever it was when he was three. "So you're saying you tortured me for, God knows how long, months after I hit the point of being so terrified of water that there was absolutely no shot of me going anywhere near a bathtub, let alone a pool," he does remember fighting over the bath time. A lot. He was probably six or seven before he decided water was okay. "because of some insane notion that my three-year-old self absolutely had to be able to swim."

"Can't quit once you start. Have to see it through." That's his dad, at least, he always thought of that as his dad, talking.

"I was a baby!"

"You were a child, Tim. And you did need to learn how to swim. And you needed to learn to finish what you start."

"I didn't start it. You did."

"Tim…" Her face is heartbreakingly sad, and she's shaking her head gently. "It doesn't matter. It's over."

He feels the tears start again, and he's biting his lip, hard, before he gets out, "It's not over because I am still here, and I am still dealing with this crap, and God…" He rubs his eyes. "It's not over! I don't suppose you ever just got in the pool with me and played, splashed around a bit?"

"Your dad did."

"Until, what, I started crying on him, and he got disgusted and gave up? Handing me over to swim lessons until I grew gills or died? And if I wasn't going to grow gills, he really didn't much care if I died."

"It wasn't like that." Her eyes are soft and voice gentle as she says that.

"Of course it was! I had to be able to swim by four because we were a Navy family and I needed to be a little fish to make Dad happy. He stopped getting in the pool with me because he couldn't bear to be seen with a child who was afraid of water. And you couldn't watch me twenty-four/seven to keep me out of the neighbor's pool? Did this house have no doors or locks? Molly's really clever for almost two, but she's not unlocking doors and toddling her little self out into the backyard on her own."
She shakes her head and says dryly, "Your niece may be clever, but you were smarter. And there is a massive difference between almost two and not quite four. You knew how to get out of the house when you wanted to. I only had to grab you two feet from that pool twice, both of them in the first week after we moved there, before you were going to have swimming lessons. You had to be able to swim and that was that.

"You had to have the skills to do whatever it was you wanted to do and not get burned. You wanted to play in the pool. I wanted you to be able to play in the pool. You couldn't do that if you couldn't swim. So you were going to learn to swim."

"If I wanted to play in the pool so bad, why did I hate every single second of swimming lessons?"

A very brief twitch of a smile lights her face. "You didn't, at first. You were really eager on the ride over. Little swim trunks, flip flops, even had your own tiny goggles. You told everyone you ran into how you were going to learn to swim. You were happy, so happy until you got into the water and it was cold, and then the teacher was trying to show you how to do the breathing bit and you were already unhappy with cold and wet and then you sucked in a big mouthful of water, felt like you were going to drown, panicked, started flailing around, slipped out of her hands into the deeper water, and it took her maybe ten or twenty seconds to grab you, but by then you hated the pool, hated swimming, hated her, and didn't want anything to do with water ever again."

The tiny, rational voice in the back of Tim's mind is saying, very quietly, that making your child learn to swim is not insane. The much louder part, the part that is rapidly remembering more and more details (that may be imaginary) of swimming lessons is more or less screaming in rage at what they did and how. He does get calm enough after a few minutes to say, "And from there you decided, what? I needed another sixteen months of swimming lessons after that, never learning how to swim, terrified every day? Was I still running out to the neighbor's pool then?"

"No. But you still had to learn to swim, because the alternative was if you got in the water, you'd drown, and that wasn't going to happen."

"I'm sure."

"You're not thinking like a parent. You're thinking like a child."

"I am your child! And I was a child when you were doing that to me. And yeah, the part of me that's a Dad knows Kelly has to learn how to swim. All the kids do. Molly's already learning. But we don't have to terrorize them to do it. Water's too cold, go somewhere else. Hates the instructor, try someone else. Get in the damn pool and play. There are a million things you can do that don't involve constant pain and terror. Almost everyone else on earth manages to teach their kids how to swim without instilling a multi-year long water phobia."

"I told you, we did it wrong," She snaps out. "Okay? I know that now. I didn't then. I was alone. Just me and you and... And there were things you needed to do, needed to be, and I tried my best, but I didn't know."

"How could you not know?" His voice goes soft and hard for that. Anger beating sorrow into the background shutting it off. "Yeah, I didn't come with instructions, fine. But treat like a human being. Treat like you want to be treated, all that golden rule crap and loving each other they spouted at us every Sunday, how hard would that have been? I mean, just basic kindness. That's not the mystery of the ages."

She doesn't answer that, instead she says, "It was done with love. It happened because I love you. You're nine, the docs say that no, you don't just have bronchitis, more antibiotics aren't the answer,
that's asthma. All you want to do is hide inside and read, play the Nintendo, and every damn day I was forcing you outside, making you run, making you play little league and kiddie soccer and whatever the hell else it was, and you're whining and moaning about you hate it and the other kids hate you and you suck at it, and you think that was fun? You think I did it because I got my kicks from seeing you trembling and crying and hating every afternoon? Is that why you think I did it?"

"I don't know why you did it! And all Dad had to say was to stop being such a goddamn fucking pussy and get out there and play."

"Of course he said that." Tori looks very tired. Tim's getting the sense that she may be feeling like she got fed a line by her husband and not only did defending it suck, but the 'line' was a cover for him to be cruel. Then he forces himself not to think that. It's just another way for him to give her wiggle room and absolve her of the responsibility of her actions. Tim tunes back in and hears "…the doctors said the more you ran around and played and did hard physical stuff, the stronger your lungs would get, the less you'd need the inhaler. The fewer inhalations the better because you were sucking steroids right into your lungs and they had nasty side effects for long term use."

"And you couldn't tell me that?"

"We told you it was good for you. We told you you needed the exercise. We told you it'd make it easier to breathe. We told you all of that, and you still wanted to sit around and play make-believe games and write and read. You were ten. You didn't care about being able to breathe much, you just wanted to do what you wanted to do, and it wasn't run around.

"Laying around wasn't going to happen. It didn't matter that you loathed it, you needed to be out there, so out you went. And fortunately we moved again and whatever you were allergic to there was less of at the next place, so we didn't have to force it so hard because you could breathe better on your own. But you needed to be out there, running around, and you wouldn't do it on your own, so we kept it up and made sure you were on at least one sport until you got out of high school."

Once again, the rational part of his mind can see that. He was also overweight then (though it occurs to him that if he was sucking steroids straight into his lungs, that may have had something to do with being overweight) and exercise was good for him, and if a Doctor was telling him that getting Kelly out and exercising was necessary for her to be healthy... Yeah, he'd make her do it. But... and once again the angry voice takes over, "And the fact that they were all team sports? Was that for my own good, too? It wasn't enough to make me run around and get exercise? I couldn't have done laps around the backyard, or hell, I could swim then, joined a pool or something like that. I had to have twenty other guys constantly ragging on me all the time because I wasn't very good at any of those sports? I had to have coaches and other little league parents screaming at me when I dropped the ball? What, was that helping me develop character?"

Her posture slumps further. "You needed friends. On your own, you'd spend all your time reading, living in your head with imaginary friends. You needed real, live people in your life."

"Why?" That stupefies him, always has. He has never understood when people say that someone needs to make friends, and then proceeds to dump that person into a crowd of other people who treat him like utter shit. "What good did I get out of being constantly mocked and bullied? Just. No!" The logical part shuts down and all emotion is coming out now. "I don't care what your justifications were. I thought I did. I thought I wanted to understand, but I don't. I don't care. I'm sorry torturing me for my own good was so painful for you." Skin lashing sarcasm on that line. "You know what Jimmy says, when we're off doing something stupid? That pain is your body's way of telling you to stop; that what you're doing is bad for it, and if dragging my ass all over hell and gone and forcing me to do stuff hurt, then you should have stopped."
There's a tiny spark of fire in her eyes as she says, "You don't stop when it's someone you love. You don't stop. You don't give up. You do whatever you need to do to get them where they need to go. You needed to stop second guessing yourself. You needed more confidence. You needed to learn to work, to study. You were so damn smart you were just going to coast along on your memory if we didn't keep raising the bar. You had to get all the answers right because we knew you could get 95% of them right without even trying, but eventually that wouldn't be true, and you had to have the skills to learn things you couldn't pick up from one read or listen. You needed to physically play, or you would have just curled into your brain. You needed to stop being afraid of everything, or you'd let that fear stop you from being who you wanted to be. You needed:"

"To be someone else. I needed to be Dad or Sarah or... Not me."

"No. The fear, the weakness, the shyness, none of that was you. That was standing in the way of being you. You've let it go, even this... mess between us... is part of having let that go. You're fearless now, or as close as any sane man gets. You've got the confidence to be whoever you want to be. This is all I ever wanted for you, and you've got it."

"Of course it was me. All of it's me! I'm not fearless now; I'm just loved. I've got a whole crop of new fears because I've got people I love all around me, and something happening to them scares the shit out of me. I'm not any less shy. I just handle it better because I've got a safe place to be me at the end of the day. I am less nervous, but that's because so much more of my life is under my control. I don't constantly worry about putting a toe out of line because I know it won't get chopped off now.

"But all of it was me. You didn't teach me to stand up for myself. You made me so miserable that I stopped caring about what was going to happen next. I was so unhappy by the time I was applying to Johns Hopkins my self-preservation mechanism shut down and all I could care about was being able to finally give Dad back a taste of what he'd been doing to me.

"When I ripped up the Annapolis letter, I was sure he was going to literally kill me. He was going to do it with his own hands or drag me onto his ship and let his sailors fuck me to death the way he kept threatening. And by that point I didn't care anymore. No matter what happened, dead or alive, I'd end up out of his house, out of his reach.

"And for decades I pretended you didn't know. You and I, we were victims together. Hiding out from him. But you knew. You didn't just know what he was doing to me; you helped." He's crying again, quietly, tears streaming down his face. "I don't care what you thought you were doing. That's a lie. I do care. I care, and I hate caring, because there's still that kid in there, scared, crying, silently, not wanting anyone to hear, who loves his mom more than anything and wants her smiles and petting and..."

"And he's not dead, not yet. But you are. That image of you is gone. There's just that screaming child who wants his mom to adore him, but you didn't."

"Tim -"

"No, Mom. Don't tell me you love me. Not if that's what love is to you. I've got people who love me now. Really love me. Even Tony, who is a grade A asshole sometimes, doesn't pull crap like that on me. When he's ragging on me, he doesn't try to make me think it's for my own good. He doesn't tell me or him lies about how he's trying to make me a better man by ripping me apart.

"Don't tell me it was for my own good. Don't tell me that I needed those skills. You're right; I did, but not like that. Don't tell that screaming child that all those hours of pain, all of that fear, all of the alone and alienation was love. None of that was what he needed."
"I'm sorry. I know we were wrong."

He feels the break inside, somewhat like the break when he started throwing the beakers, but this is more of a hyper-aware sensation as opposed to the numb-dead that went with that. This is perfect, aching clarity.

"It's not enough." And it's not. All the sorry on earth can't, won't make this better. "Don't come to the christening party." He stands up and slips on his boots. "We're not going to see each other again. We're not going to talk. Kelly, Abby, and I aren't going to be part of your life." He shakes his head. "I can't forgive what you did to me. And I can't pretend you didn't do it. And I can't just leave it there and go on. So, we're done." He puts his jacket back on, and without looking back at her, turns and leaves.

"Well?" Abby asks, but it's on Gibbs' face, too. They're both waiting up for him. Though it's actually not really late. Only 8:45, though it feels like day three of a four day long no sleep work-a-thon to Tim.

He sits down heavily between them on the sofa snuggling into Abby, Gibbs' hand on his shoulder. "No one's the villain in his own story."

They both stare at him, questions on their faces, waiting for more explanation.

"It was all for my own good, and yes, it was the wrong way to do it, but it had to happen and... She treats it like making me take my medicine. I didn't like it, but I needed it, so it had to happen. That's how she understands it."

Abby hugs him a little tighter. Gibbs squeezes his shoulder.

"I told her we were done. Walked out, didn't look back. It doesn't matter why she did it, she should have known it was wrong."

Abby says, "Yeah." Gibbs nods.

Tears are forming yet again, and he struggles against them for a moment, wishing this was just done, but struggling doesn't help, and again sobbing rocks through him.

They both hold him, and let him cry for as long as he needs. And neither of them are very surprised when he quiets down less than half an hour later, not because he's done, not really, but because he's fallen asleep. Only so much you can deal with in one day, and sometimes after that, you just shut down.

Eventually, Kelly starts chirping again, the 'feed me' cry of the four-month-old. Abby looks over to Gibbs, who nods. She slips out of Tim's arms, shifting him gently over to Gibbs, who keeps holding him, very gently stroking his hair.

Tim doesn't sleep through it, waking with a start a few seconds after Abby got up. He starts to pull away, feeling a bit embarrassed, but Gibbs hold on. "I've got you, Tim. She'll be back down in a bit. You rest, okay? It's been a long damn day, and tomorrow's not going to be any shorter."

He nods, letting himself settle further against Gibbs, feeling pulled into deep, numbing sleep.
Tim wakes up the next morning, sevenish, Abby spooned on the sofa in front of him. Gibbs nowhere to be seen (probably in the guest room, that more often than not these days, Tim thinks of as being Jethro's room).

He hurts. All over. Last time he hurt this bad he was waking up the morning after he and Jimmy fought it out. Right now, even his hair hurts. It feels vaguely like a hangover. Given how much crying he did, he probably is pretty damn dehydrated.

Abby wakes up, or senses he's awake and rolls over to face him, very gently stroking his forehead and cheek, kissing his lips lightly.

"Hi." She smiles at him.

"Hey." He doesn't smile back.

"How are you doing?"

He shakes his head slightly, resting his lips on her forehead, holding her close, feeling her warm and sleepy in his arms. "I don't know."

"That's okay."

"Hurt. I feel hurt. I feel like I should be sporting bruises from head to toe."

She scoots up a little, and kisses him softly again. "Yeah, I remember that from when my parents died. Crashed when I got home from the hospital, and just ached all over when I woke up."

"Next time I decide to engage in some form of emotionally difficult thing because it'll be good for me, smack me in the head and tell me to stop."

She kisses him again.

Kelly wakes up, letting them know it's start the morning time. Tim winces; he didn't get the 1:00 feed. "Did you get her at 1:00?"

"No," she says, getting up to grab Kelly. "Gibbs did. But if he hadn't, I would have. You needed to sleep."

He sits up slowly, expecting his head to feel like it's going to fall off, but this isn't actually a hangover, so that doesn't happen. "Thanks."

"Down in a minute."

There is a story Tim has not told Abby. Not that it's particularly bad or sinister or something, just, it involves teeth. He thinks of it as he steps into the shower, still aching all over, still thinking that maybe putting this off wasn't a great plan, but wishing he had none the less.

Namely, it's the story of how, when he was a junior in college, one of his molars got infected. It's not like he didn't brush or floss, but he was a junior in college, so he wasn't exactly religious about it. Especially not compared to Abby's version of religious about dental care.
However it happened, he did end up with an abscessed molar. (This is why he had no trouble following Jimmy's bad tooth metaphor.) And they did the traditional soak him in antibiotics treatment plan. This did basically nothing. His tooth kept festering, and finally, after the first course didn't seem to touch it, the Dentist said that they'd drain the tooth, and then do another course, and maybe that'd get him healthy enough for a root canal.

Draining the tooth hurt. Even with Novocain. It was a 'Holy shit, what the fuck is that!' sort of hurt. And draining it didn't magically stop his tooth hurting, either. Once the Novocain wore off, he was still in a world of hurt.

But it was different hurt. Clean hurt, if that made any sense. Between getting the pus out and the new course of antibiotics, the sick, throbbing, poisoned feeling was gone.

He hurt, but it was healing hurt.

And he's not exactly feeling hopeful right now, as he's standing in his room toweling off. Not feeling much of anything that's even remotely positive, but he's thinking this might be the first step toward healing hurt, and away from sick, poisoned hurt.

Putting on his suit that morning is another layer of armor. Covering himself in the image of respectability. Happy dad of the new baby.

Once his tie is secure, he picks up his phone and texts Penny and Sarah.

*Things didn't go well with Mom. She and Ben won't be at the christening.*

He heard back from Penny first.

> Sorry. We'll talk when you're ready?

> Yeah.

> Everything else on for today?

> Yep. Just pretend my smile's real.

> Oh, honey!

> I'll be okay, eventually.

> Sorry. Hug.

> Thanks, Penny. See you in an hour?

> We'll be there.

He's pulling his shoes out of the closet when his phone buzzes again. Sarah this time. *I know. She called last night, sobbing.*

> Well, that's two of us.

> You really done with her?

*I...* he shakes his head, staring at the phone. *I think so. Too much pain. Too many memories. I can't be with someone who could do that. I sat there and listened to... We'll talk in person, okay? When I don't need to spend a day looking calm and happy.*
Okay.

I know she's not the same person she was back then. And right now, less emotional, less revved up, he does know that. But I don't think it matters. Only so much forgiveness in me, and that's the bridge too far.

Okay. Everything still on for this morning?

Yeah.

Then we've got to go now, if we're going to get to the diner by nine.

Okay. See you in fifty minutes.

He smells coffee as he heads down the steps. Gibbs must have stayed the night. And, once he's down in the kitchen, Gibbs hands him a cup of coffee, not smiling at him, but the look on his face is gentle, comforting.

Tim takes the coffee, sipping it, trying to feel more grounded in right now, and a bit less adrift.

It's really not helping all that much.

A minute later, Abby heads in, Kelly in her arms. "Okay, she's fed. If you guys could get her dressed, I'll get dressed, too, and we'll head off."

Tim nods, taking Kelly, and Abby hands Gibbs the christening dress.

Getting Kelly dressed does a much better job of focusing him in right now. Trying to put twelve pounds of very squirmy, diaper-wearing small person into little, white tights, is taking all of the focus and energy of both of the guys.

"Okay, you just hold her up; I'll get the legs pulled up." Tim says.

Gibbs nods, holding Kelly by the torso, arms and legs flailing around, (She's not really enjoying this adventure in high fashion,) three inches of floppy white nylon dangling off of each foot, whipping around as she kicks, while Tim inches the tights up her legs.

"Remember doing this with my Kelly. Little white dress. Shannon got her dressed. It was my job to carry her in and hold her while the Chaplin did his thing."

"Shannon do most of the dressing?"

"Not at first, she was still healing up from the c-section. But after the first month, yeah, she did most of it. Kelly was six weeks old when we had the christening. Spring time. Back in Lejeune then. Her mom was still staying with us, but the Monday after she went home. Day after the baptism was the first day for just the three of us together. Shannon did a lot of dressing and feeding and diapers. I did the cooking, laundry, and walking Kelly around the house when she wouldn't sleep."

Tim finally got the tights yanked all the way up. He looks at Kelly, still held up by Gibbs, kisses her forehead and says, "Don't worry, I will never, ever do that to you again. Mama wants you in tights; she can do it herself."

"Do what myself? You've only got the tights on?" Abby asks, back in the living room, completely dressed and ready to go.
Both of the guys glare at her, and Abby gets the sense that just possibly this was not the job for her Marine and Dragon (her pet way of thinking about Tim recently). If she can't do it personally, this was a job for someone who's worn tights before, or barring that, someone who's put tights on a baby before, namely Breena.

"Never mind. Sometimes I forget you're guys. Hand her over." Tim does, and in a matter of seconds she's got Kelly in her white, lace dress, very cute little white shoes, and white bonnet. They may not be Catholic anymore, but Abby's got very New Orleans Catholic ideas of what a christening gown looks like, and Kelly's wearing it. Change the outfits on the adults, and they could very easily be going to a christening in 1885.

They're a bit late getting to breakfast. (Getting the tights on ate more time than expected.) So they're the last ones there. But getting into the diner, they find the crew much lighter than normal, but the members who are there have gotten Sarah and Glenn and Kyle all settled in, and are entertaining them.

Hugs, kisses, congratulations, and an extra-long hug from Penny and Sarah. Penny's holding both of her grandkids close and says, quietly, "Dinner tonight, my place?"

And they both nod. It's well past time for the three of them to sit down and talk this through.

"Call out?" Abby asks. She didn't get a call last night, but she also wasn't on last night. But Ziva, Tony, and Ducky are absent. Actually none of their team should have been on last night into today.

Penny nods. "It was two in the morning. Ducky left a note saying he hoped to be there for the party. He'll call in later to let us know what's going on."

That's something of a let-down, but, to some degree Tim's almost hoping Tony and Ziva don't make it. Not because he doesn't want to see them, but because they don't know the full story of what's going on with his Mom, and if they don't make it in time, he won't have to explain.

Elaine sweeps over, "Oh, now look at all of you all pretty! Can't wait to meet the rest of this group. Party starts at one, right?"

Tim nods as she hands him a plate piled high with eggs, turkey sausage, and fresh fruit.

"Wonderful." She tickles under Kelly's chin. "Does my heart good to see a proper christening!"

When Elaine retreats to grab the coffee pot for more refills, he looks at Abby. "Elaine's coming?"

"And her husband. First time this place has closed for lunch in fifteen years."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

"Ummmm..."

He's not sure how to even ask what he's thinking politely, but Abby sees it and replies, "First two guests lists I gave Jeannie she looked at and said, 'Oh, Abby, come on, you know more people than this. This is big. This is how we welcome babies into the world and get them started in life. EVERYONE needs to come to this. This isn't some sort of intimate little gathering, this is a PARTY! We're calling in everyone to celebrate your little girl. Give this back to me with a few more names, okay?"
He hadn't known that. "So, um... who is coming to this?"

"Everyone."

About a month ago, when Jeannie had asked them, "So, what sort of party are you intending to have for the christening?" both Tim and Abby had sort of looked at each other in confusion. Tim's take on getting his daughter baptized could be summed up as: This bizarre ritual matters to my wife, and as such I shall go along and smile because it makes her happy.

For Abby this is a sign of membership and fellowship in the church and being washed in the eternal love of Jesus, saved for all time by His mercy. And while that's very important to her, she's aware of the fact that her family is, at best, vaguely Christianish-secular or Jewish, so she wasn't expecting this to be any real big deal.

They'd probably, like every Sunday, have breakfast at the diner, and maybe Ducky and Penny and Tony and Ziva would come to church, too. Maybe Sarah and Glenn or Kyle if they were in town and felt like it. And that'd be pretty much that.

So, Jeannie standing there going, "Oh no. No. You've got to have a party! This is how we welcome babies into the family! We'll do it here, everyone already knows how to get here, anyway. You give me a guest list, and I'll take care of it. Not have a party! Hah! Got to have a christening party! Every child in this family gets her very own party." She took Abby by the arm, dragging her into the kitchen, calling out for Breena, and a few hours later, when he found Abby again, they did have what appeared to be a serious christening party in the works.

The next week Jeanie snagged Tim as he and Jimmy and Gibbs were heading out to Bootcamp.
"Tim, dear, I don't have any contact information for your parents. I don't want them to feel left out by getting their invites late, so can you just email me their address?"

"Uh..." They haven't talked about his parents, at all. Beyond the fact that if asked, both he and Abby will identify Gibbs as their 'Dad or close enough' and that's all that's said about that. "My dad's out of the picture and... I'll... I'll email you when we get done with Bootcamp."

Ed Slater may have the sensitivity of a brick, but Jeannie Slater runs the front of house for a funeral home, so being keenly attuned to the needs and moods of her clients is second nature to her, and she can sense the distress on Tim, and knows she's put both feet in it. "Oh. I'm so sorry, Tim. I didn't want to dredge up bad memories. Just, if you want them, send me addresses, if not, we don't have to. Whatever you're comfortable with."

"Thanks, Jeannie. I'll send you a note."

And now, three weeks later, they're done with church, where he did a fine job of standing there next to Abby, Breena, and Jimmy while the Pastor droned on and dribbled water on Kelly. And sure, maybe he wasn't smiling as bright as the other four people, but he thinks he did an okay job of faking it.

Easy part done, now on to the hard part.

He'd been dreading the party. At church there's other things to focus on and no one expects you to make casual chit chat.

But the party after... He'll be spending a lot of time holding the guest of honor. And they all know his mom and Ben are supposed to be there, but they aren't.
So, he's driving more and more slowly as they get closer to Ed and Jeannie's. Abby's glancing over at the speedometer, hovering at 25 in a 40 zone, concerned. She squeezes his hand.

"It's going to be okay."

"Yeah. Great. How many times do you think I'll have to explain why I have no parents there?"

"None. You didn't have to say anything to anyone at the church, and you won't at their home, either. I sent Jeannie a text this morning, even Ed's behaving."

"Oh." That was true. Somehow it hadn't filtered through the hurt and faking a smile on top of it.

"You are grieving. It's really, really obvious to anyone who's ever seen it before. Trust me, they all know you're hurting, and none of them are going to step on your toes."

That made a whole lot of sense, too.

Jeannie wasn't kidding about doing Kelly proud. He's never been to a party this big that wasn't a wedding. Slater cousins he's never met before are here. He's thinking it's possible that every Slater east of Ohio decided to show up for this gig.

There's food on every horizontal surface. He approvingly notes that there are several Jimmy-friendly dishes, and (hours later, when they get there) Jeannie does pull Ziva and Tony aside to point out the lasagna and manicotti are Kosher. Tony's face lit up into a vast smile at that. Likewise, he notices Fornell telling Gibbs that this is what a party is supposed to look like before smothering Jeannie in praise for setting a table the way his Nona used to. (Apparently Abby wasn't kidding, everyone they've ever met has been invited to this.)

Flowers, balloons, a general pink baby girl theme blended with a white/silver baptism theme is linking all the rooms together. There's music, and little kids bouncing around, snarfing down the cupcakes and cannoli.

It's loud, hectic, happy, chaotic, and besides lots of congratulations, comments about how beautiful his little girl is, no one says anything to him. No one is asking awkward questions. At one point it did look like Kyle was going to ask where his parents were, but Jeannie neatly brushed him off, redirected his conversation, and took him off to the kitchen to get more to eat.

Besides taking presents, eating, making fairly standard small talk, and saying thank you for those presents, no one expects him to do anything.

He's in a home filled with people who specialize in handling the bereaved with kid gloves, and he's appreciating it greatly.

So, standing there, holding Kelly, amid a veritable sea of Slaters, most of whom are, for all practical purposes, strangers, milling about, eating, drinking, enjoying each other, in her honor, gets Tim contemplating bad families.

For as much care as they're showing him, he also knows that Jimmy had to threaten to beat the shit out of Ed to get even basic respect and courtesy.

That doesn't make any sense to him. But, as Breena's very good friend, none of the adult males feel like they're protecting one of their girls from a guy who won't stand up and do the job. Maybe that's part of it.
He's talked with Breena a little about her family. Enough to know that how her dad treats Jimmy kills her, because she loves both of them dearly. Enough to know that Ed may not be a deep font of tact, but that he did a good enough job of raising his girls that they are voluntarily continuing to work with or for him now that they're adults.

He knows that five-year-old Breena got to work with her Daddy when she indicated she wanted to spend more time with him. And that as a little girl, he took the time to explain to her that they made sure the last days a person's body spent among the living were handled with care and respect. Made sure she wasn't afraid of the people on the tables in the mortuary. Hell, he made sure she understood the things on the table were people and deserved to be treated as such. (Tim spends a moment contemplating what it says about Ed that he shows corpses more respect than Jimmy, before getting back to thinking about Ed as a dad.)

Her youngest sister, Christine, never liked it. Didn't want anything to do with death or mourning. And somehow, Ed didn't press. He and Jeannie made sure she got a great education, studied what was interested her, and were very, very happy when she came back with a degree in finance and offered to start working with the family's money.

And when push came to shove, even Ed, who is an absolute flaming asshole of the first magnitude, still figured out how to treat his children, all of them, whether they liked what he did or not, with kindness and respect.

That hits him hard enough that he has to excuse himself.

He's been hiding in the bathroom for a good ten minutes when he hears a knock and sees the door open.

"You decent?" It's Jimmy.

"Enough," he says, sitting on the floor, back against the side of the bathtub.

Jimmy sits next to him. "What happened? You looked like you were doing okay, and then ran off."

"Just hit me that Ed's a better parent than either of the people I come from. Even he inherently knew how to treat his kids."

Like everyone else, Jimmy got Abby's text saying that Tim had had a bad fight with his mom last night, so tread with caution, but he doesn't have the details, yet.

"I take it seeing your mom didn't go well."

Tim sniffs, mustering up humor to help protect himself. "Only in the same sense that the maiden voyage of the Titanic didn't go well." He smiles grimly. "First hour went well."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Me, too."

"Did you get a lifeboat?"

"I think I might be the ship. And she's the iceberg. And I voluntarily sailed into her."

"Ugh." Jimmy winces.

"Yeah." Tim spends a few minutes filling Jimmy in on what happened, and wraps up with, "I'm
going to tell you the same thing I told Abby, the next time I'm about to do something emotionally traumatic because it's 'for my own good' slap me upside the back of the head and stop me! Dealing with stuff is highly overrated."

Jimmy squeezes his shoulder. "You feeling any less angry at her?"

"Only in the sense that I'm too damn hurt to be angry. I'm not missing her anymore, either. Maybe that's a good thing. Not feeling like I'm going to regret cutting her out."

"I guess that's a step."

"Yeah. But is it a good one?"

"I don't know, Tim."

Jimmy sits with him for a few more minutes, until he stands up and washes off his face. Trying to fight down red and puffy with cold water. It helps, some.

"Presentable?"

He smiles and nods at him. "You'll do."

Tim, obviously, didn't get a copy of the text Abby sent out as a warning. "What did Abby send out?"

"Big fight with your mom."

"They whispering about it where I can't hear?"

"Yes, but not in a bad way. More in a they-hope-it-gets-better sort of way."

"Want to get their hands on juicy gossip?"

"Of course. Probably had twenty people ask me what was up with you and your mom, but they're not hitting you with it."

He shakes his head, and presses a cool damp towel to his face again. "Right now, that's all that matters."

"Ready?"

He takes a deep breath, straightens his tie, and turns to face Jimmy. "Enough."

When he gets out, he sees Tony, who is standing with Draga and Ziva, talking with them, letting Kevin Draga climb him like jungle gym.

He watches Kevin grab Tony's arms, scamper up his legs, then launch himself in a back flip. It's a fairly impressive feat of four-year-old gymnastics.

He takes congrats and hugs from the rest of his team, along with a quick explanation of what they got called out for. They aren't asking him anything, but he can feel Tony and Ziva and Draga all wondering what's up.

"Really bad fight with my mom last night. Don't really want to get into it."

They nod. He snags Kevin off of Tony, holding him upside down, over his shoulder, while tickling
him. Once he's shrieking with laughter, Tim asks, "Hey, how about you show me your trick?"
Playing with little kids sounds like a good plan right now.

"Okay." He lights up, very happy with all of this attention. "First, put your hands out."

"It's harder than it looks," Tony says, kind of smug.

Tim does, holding his arms out, bent, at waist high. "Like this?"

"Yeah." Kevin grabs on to both of Tim's hands, and begins to climb up his legs. Tony is right, this is harder than it looks. But, it's also fairly similar to sex standing up, holding Abby, without a wall or something to prop her against, and Kevin's a whole lot littler than she is. He's starting to feel a bit smug about this until Kevin gets all the way up his legs.

"Whoa," he says, wincing, almost dropping Kevin because his immediate reaction to what happened was to try and get a hand between Kevin's foot and his balls. See, when he and Abby do this, she knows not to step on his balls. "Foot doesn't go there, Kevin."

"Sorry." He quickly adjusts, feet on Tim's hips, and gets a better hold on Tim's hands.

Tony's nodding at him, looking smug. Apparently harder than it looks means, don't try this without a cup.

Fortunately it doesn't take Kevin more than another second to flip and then land feet first, on the ground.

"Very cool trick."

"Thanks." He's grinning up at Tim. "Again?"

"Sure. Just..." Tim cups the area he doesn't want stepped on. "No feet there, okay? That hurts."

"Okay," Kevin says with a huge, bright smile, grabbing his hands, and starting to climb again.

The party whirls on, and he watches. And yes, it's a party. Yes, people are happy and on their best behavior.

But there are still a lot of kids running around being loud and rambunctious, and... kids. It's true, there are parents yelling here, kids being taken aside, lessons on sharing, not hitting each other, don't climb the credenza, no eating the flowers, the presents are for Kelly, you don't get to open them, stuff like that. But while voices get loud and there are certainly (especially as the party gets later) some very annoyed parental voices, there's no insult in those words. He notices that none of the kids have been called idiots, or screw ups, or anything, really. 'Share that with your cousin' (or variations on that theme) does not involve the child being called a greedy little pig. He hears some very exasperated versions of 'What on earth could possibly make you think that was a good idea?' He doesn't hear, 'Stop that, you moron!'

And sure, not all of the language is PG rated. Some of the laughing coming from the far corner of the dining room has to go with a very dirty joke, but no one is cursing at the kids or the teens.

And yes, not all of the teens look like they want to be here. It's very obvious from the way they've all congregated on the stairs with their phones to text with buddies that a family party for a baby they don't know is not making their day. But none of them look cowed, and he doesn't notice any of them jerking, scared when an adult calls their names.
He checks the house, doing a quick count. There are twenty-seven kids/teens in this house, and none of them look scared. (Okay, one is crying, but he just got bit by his little brother. And little brother is looking awfully pissed.) He can't imagine that with this many kids none of them are naturally shy or timid. At least one has to feel that way, and he can't imagine there isn't at least one introvert in this group. They can't all be fearless little extroverts.

They're just kids, being kids, being comfortable.

Best he can recall, the only time he felt like that was when he was at Pop's house. Without his parents.

It was done with love. It was for your own good. You needed it.

NCIS doesn't work a whole lot of child abuse cases. Just doesn't. (Or maybe it's that his team doesn't. Smacking a small child around is likely to get you killed by Gibbs, and the rest of the team will all, simultaneously, go deaf, blind, dumb, and stupid about it.) So, maybe, at this point, he's been involved in two cases in twelve years.

And in both of them, the parents had the same line, it was for the kids own good.

John always said that. Making a man out of him. Because if there's one thing a seven-year-old needs to be; it's a man.

Tim imagines, if you were to ask him, that John would say he loved his kids. Maybe not now, not Tim, but back when they were kids and he was still living with them. John would have said he loved Tim.

He probably believed it, too.

His mom believes it. That he could see, especially now, looking back at the memories of last night with a better emotional wall between him and what happened. She loves him. This whole thing hurts her. Bad. By the time he left, her palms were bleeding from digging her fingernails into them.

NCIS does work a decent number of spousal/partner abuse cases. Once again, his team not so much. (Or they tend to get called in when things have gone bad enough to leave a body.) But it's much more common than child abuse cases.

The abuser always has the same line, 'But I love him/her.'

Like most cops, his immediate response to that is bullshit. There are things you don't do to people you love. Hard and fast rule, you don't pull crap like that on people you love.

But maybe that's wrong. Maybe it is love. Twisted, warped, sad love. Destroying love, not uplifting love.

Or maybe it's that love isn't enough. On its own, love breeds obsession and pain. Maybe love has to be married to kindness and respect.

Maybe.

Doesn't much matter if she loves him or not. Not if her love could do that. Not if she could look at the child he was, see only weakness and decide that weakness wasn't worthy of either kindness or respect.
It's hitting him, as he's watching the party roll around him, that that's what 'Johns Hopkins, MIT, NCIS, writing, all of that was fine with me' meant. Until he could 'stand up for himself' he wasn't worth even basic kindness, let alone anything approaching respect.

That was the shift. He finally 'earned' the right to be treated as a real person.

It was like a frat or the military, survive enough hazing and eventually you qualify as a member.

Eventually, the party winds down, and on his way out, he very sincerely thanked Jeannie for doing it for them, and for keeping him in a safe space the whole four hours they were out.

She nods at him, grasping his hands warmly. "It's okay. I love planning happy days. Kind of a nice change from the usual."

He can see that. "I'm glad you enjoy it. Thank you, for... all of it."

She smiles at him, hugs him, says, "If you ever want to talk, I'm a good listener."

"Thanks." He's not thinking of taking her up on that, but it was warmly and sincerely offered, and like the rest of what she's done for him, them, today, he appreciates it.
They're driving home from the Slaters'. Gibbs in the backseat with Kelly. Abby's driving. Tim's more or less jelling in the front seat, not thinking about much of anything.

"Better than you expected?" Abby asks as they get closer to home.

"Yeah. It was. I don't know how the hell Ed managed to catch someone as awesome as Jeannie, but yeah, today went a whole lot better than I thought it was going to."

"Good," Gibbs says.

A few more minutes pass, Abby filling the quiet, chatting about how Jeannie had told her she loves parties, loves getting everyone together, and how every baby deserves a special day where everyone gets together to celebrate her. Apparently, for the girls, sweet sixteens are a huge deal at the Slater house, as well.

He's half-aware of Abby asking Gibbs if he wants to grab a pizza for dinner, and that triggers a memory.

"Dinner's at Penny's."

Abby glances over at him. "Oh. Um. I thought you might want to talk to Penny and Sarah on your own. I mean, if you want us to come..."

"Oh. Yeah." He thinks about that for a moment. He'd just assumed they'd be there, along with Ducky, and maybe Glenn.

"Will Ducky and Glenn be there?"

"I think Ducky and Glenn were thinking the three of you might just want to talk with each other," Abby says. "But, it doesn't have to just be you three."

"Glenn's working tonight. How about both of you go, and I'll babysit? Let you talk without interruption." Kelly's snoozing in her seat. "I don't think she'll mind some quiet time with her Pop."

"You sure you aren't babied out?" Tim asks. He knows after all the loud chaos of the party he's looking forward to some quiet, alone time.

"I'm good." Gibbs gently strokes Kelly's cheek, and she turns her face, nuzzling into his hand.

"So, we'll get home, get changed, crash a bit, and head off to Penny and Ducky's."

Tim's an introvert. This is not a shock to anyone who actually knows him. Abby is an extrovert. This is also not a shock to anyone who knows her.

One thing they have worked out over the twelve years they've known each other is that there really are times where Tim does need to be, literally, alone. Usually time doing something quiet with Abby around qualifies as alone time, but the more stressed he is the more he needs actual, literal alone time.

Now is definitely one of those times.

He strips out of his suit, tosses on jeans and a t-shirt, and vanishes into his office for jazz and alone
One of the things he loves about this family he's collected over the years is that for the next two hours, while he takes the time to recollect himself and recharge, no one knocks on the door or pokes a head in to check on him or see if he wants some company.

Here, he's allowed to just listen to music and veg.

He's not even gaming, just relaxing on the futon, head back, music flowing through him, resting.

It's possible he fell asleep. He doesn't remember falling asleep or waking, but the two hours went by awfully fast, and though he knows the first few pieces he listened to, and the last one, he doesn't know what the middle ones were.

Whatever happened, two hours later, when Abby did knock, with a, "We've got to get going," he felt like he could handle seeing people again.

When they get to Penny and Ducky's place, Tim does notice Ducky's Morgan parked in the lot next to his grandmother's Prius.

"So, Ducky's here, then?"

"Yeah, while you were napping I texted Penny to see who was going to be here. She wasn't sure if you'd want Ducky, and I told her you thought he was going to be around, so he is."

"Okay. Glenn?"

"Gibbs was right. He's on shift tonight, and it's the shift he already traded for to get off for the christening." Gibbs is an arson investigator, and in his off time he volunteers as a firefighter. The shift he's on is at his station, waiting to see if he's got to go out and save people or put out fires. Tim doesn't see any reason to pull Glenn away from saving people just for their family drama. The drama will still be there tomorrow or the next day. The people Glenn might have otherwise saved may not.

Tim does like to see how Ducky's home has been shifting into Ducky and Penny's home.

When just Ducky lived there, it felt very much like a hybrid of library and an antiquities museum. Formal. Tidy. Hints of sternness. Very, very male in a stiff upper lip, leather armchairs, and brandy by the fire at the club sort of way.

Penny's home(s) have always felt more like an art gallery, flexible, wild, eclectic. And, honestly, temporary. With the exception of the fairly vague memories Tim has of the house she shared with his grandfather, Tim has never had any sense that any of the places she lived were "home."

But this is home.

It's grounded in Ducky's formal, old world, European style, but Penny's free spirit's been changing the place, freshening up. New colors on the walls, new art, more electronics to go with the books. The furniture is more comfortable now. (Though there is still a brass riveted leather arm chair near the fireplace. There's also an ergonomically correct, sleek, modern, armchair, with a built in desk for a laptop, on the other side.)

Sarah's already there, sitting curled into the modern armchair, laptop open, typing away. She's still in the same outfit she wore to the baptism, so Tim's thinking she went straight from there to here. She
looks up at him, types a few more fast words, and then shuts down the computer.

He can hear some soft cookery sounds coming from the kitchen.

"They cooking?" he asks his sister.

"Unloading takeout."

He nods. Both Ducky and Penny can cook. But when they do they prefer to do it in the long, drawn out, huge meal with many components sort of way that takes three days to prepare for. They seem to think that if they are going to make an effort to cook the results should be lavish and grand. Quick meals are almost always take out.

Abby kisses Tim on the cheek while discretely bugging out to help in the kitchen, giving them some time alone with each other.

They stare at each other, neither really sure what to say. Tim sighs and looks around, he's got the idea that brass-riveted leather chairs belong to his dad or grandfather so firmly embedded into his subconscious that the idea that he might just sit down in the chair across from his sister never occurs to him.

Instead he ends up taking off his jacket and sitting on the low step in front of the fireplace. It's a bit warmer than he needs, but not horrendously so, the fire at his back is kind of nice, and it's close enough to his sister for easy conversation.

"So, she called you?" he finally says.

"Yeah. Bit after eight. She was sobbing. Most of what I got was she was trying so hard and somehow everything went wrong and you hate her and more sobbing and then some words I couldn't make out, by that point I told her to just come over, then there was more crying."

"She stay at your place?"

"I drove her back to Ben around midnight. They went home today."

"Great," he says, voice very flat.

"What happened?"

"You want the whole lifetime's worth or just last night?"

Penny came in, and sat next to Tim, wrapping an arm around him. "Hi."

He kissed her cheek and rested his head on her shoulder for a minute. "Hey. She call you, too?"

"Not yet. She probably will tomorrow or the next day. You want to talk and eat, or just talk?"

"Might as well eat, too." Tim says, though he's not feeling hungry, but it's about dinner time and making sure his nursing wife gets fed well, regularly is important to him.

"Okay, food's on the table."

Abby's setting the table as Ducky places serving bowls filled with, from the smell of it, take out curries. When naan and rice hits the table, Tim's sure about the curries.

He takes a little bit of everything, and pokes listlessly at it. Abby gently nudges his hand, and it
occurs to him that the only things he can remember eating today is a cup of coffee, a few bites of eggs, one cupcake, and more coffee. He scoops up a bite of what he thinks is chicken korma with his naan, and she gently squeezes his knee.

He guesses it's his job to start, so he fills them in on his part of last night.

Then Sarah adds her part, mostly talking about Tori being heartbroken and sobbing and... and she stops talking mid-sentence.

Tim's just been listening, forcing himself to eat, but the pause, the way she seems to be thinking before letting more words come out is very familiar. It's the sort of self-editing he does when he's talking too fast and only has a few seconds of lee-time before saying the wrong thing. She caught it before she said it, but it was noticeable, to him, at least.

Penny, Ducky, and Abby don't say anything about it. And Sarah's continued on, but he wonders what she left out.

"What'd you leave out?"

She shakes her head. "Not important."

"Really?"

He catches that look, too. He knows Penny does, too. It's the should I lie or just refuse to answer? look.

"I can't imagine it helping, and it'll just piss you off," Sarah says after a second's thought.

He snorts at that. "Hit me with it."

"Really?"

"Why not? If she's going to trap you in the middle of this, I might as well know what she's telling you."

He sees Sarah look at Abby, making sure with her that she should keep talking, which he found perplexing and a bit annoying, but she nods too, so Sarah says, "That she was trying so hard to make you happy again, but you're being just like Dad because nothing she does is good enough."

Several second of blinding... hell... everything, rage, sorrow, snark, everything, jumps up and down and short circuits every single synapse in his head. Eventually he did calm back down enough to notice that Abby's holding his hand, and apparently he's gripping his fork so tightly his knuckles have gone white.

Finally, he does get himself under control and comes back with, "Sucks when the shoe's on the other fucking foot. Nothing I did was good enough, either, so maybe we're equal. Oh, wait, we're not, she's had to deal with it for one damn day!" Sarah winces at that. Seeing that makes him pull back a bit further. "I'm sorry. This isn't fair for you. If you don't want to be in the middle of this... I mean... I can't control her, but..."

"No, you can't." Sarah says, archly. "And if she's going to be calling me and crying on me, I might as well get your side, too."

Penny adds in, "If you don't want her calling about this, I'll see if I can get her to stop it. You shouldn't have to be in the middle. And it's entirely likely that she might listen to a 'you aren't doing
Sarah any favors by dropping this on her' from me."

Sarah shakes her head. "Right now this is the biggest thing going on in her life, and it's in the top five in Tim's life. Assuming you're both actually my family, and you both love me, you'd be talking to me about it, right?"

Tim shrugs. "Maybe you don't need to see her the way I do. It's probably better if you don't."

"Maybe," Sarah allows. "But it's part of who she is, right?"

"But it's not part of who she is to you," he says, stabbing a lump of chicken with his fork.

"She's my mom, too. And if there's any shot of fixing this, I've got to know-"

"Sarah, it's not getting fixed," Tim says quietly, looking back up at her. "This is what it is."

There are tears in her eyes, and he can see she's finally letting her own armor, which has always been very thick, crack a bit, letting him see how distressing this whole mess has been to her, as well. "Tim, it's been twenty years-"

That hits his defensive button and he cuts in with, "You saying I don't have a right to be mad?"

"No! Just..." She looks frustrated, trying to find a way to say this that won't set him off. She wipes her eyes and straightens up, something that reminds him of himself a whole lot. "I don't want seventeen years of bad to outweigh twenty years of good. Don't want you burning this bridge and regretting it later."

Sarah's looking at him earnestly. He sort of gets the idea of regretting not having people in your life. Like on an intellectual level, and on a practical level, how Jethro feels about the years he missed with Jackson. But right now, he can't feel that about her, and like with the decision to cut his dad out, he's not feeling like he will regret this.

"You really think I'm going to regret cutting ties with someone who thought it was appropriate to torment me my entire childhood?"

"Was that her or Dad?"

Tim shakes his head slightly. That was the lie. The comforting blanket of lies he told himself for all those years. "Doesn't matter. She knew he was doing it, and let him." He bites his lip. The light sting of tooth on flesh helping him stay calm for this. "Twenty years of good was based on a lie: she didn't know. Or that she was as much a victim as I was." He licks his lips, and smiles sadly, shaking his head again. "But she wasn't, and she did know, and worse, she approved. She thought I needed it."

"I'm not saying don't be mad. You deserve mad, and she deserves to take it, but don't rule her out."

"Why not?"

"Because she loves you. Because you love her. Because you told her you were going to have a baby and a week later you had little hand-knitted pink and blue booties in your mailbox. Because she stopped. Dad's still treating you like crap, but she's not. Because it has been twenty years."

On a rational level, those may be good points. But he's not a machine, and he can't be rational about this, not yet, at least. "I was thinking about that today and yesterday. About what I had to do to get to the point where she was willing to let us get to good. How far I had to go before she backed off and I earned her respect. Twenty years of good came from hitting the point where I was so scared, so broken that I didn't care if he killed me or not. That's how bad it had to get. That's what 'I had to stand up for myself' meant."
"That was their goal, to so totally destroy my sense of self-preservation that I'd be willing to let him kill me as long as it got me out of this situation. That's what I had to pay to get to good. And that wasn't fair or kind or right!"

"I know," she says, touching his hand.

"No, you don't!" He jerks away. "She didn't do it to you! You were allowed to be a child, to make messes, to get answers wrong. You didn't have to be perfect for her, and still not have it be enough!"

"I mean, I know it wasn't right. She does, too. Everyone but Dad's figured that out. But it's also not now."

"Oh." He squeezes her hand. "I don't think it matters. You remember the summer I was fourteen?"

She thinks for a moment. "Not really. I was five then."

"Dad was home. That was the summer he decided I was going to stop being seasick or die trying, and I really don't think he cared one way or another which way it came out."

Sarah nods, that helps anchor it amid a lot of vague memories. "Tense. Sad. You spending every minute you could in your room." She leaves out sitting on the porch eating watermelon with their father, which, along with the memory of the smell of fresh cut grass and the sound of the lawn mower, is actually her most vivid memory of that summer. Not only would Tim not remember it because he was in his room, but she doesn't think highlighting, even further, the difference between them would be a good thing.

"Yeah. That's the summer. That's the summer he threatened to have me gang raped and mutilated by his crew. Okay, that's him fucking with me, fine, that's on him. She wasn't there. I didn't tell her. She didn't know. That's how I understood that for two decades. And I finally tell her about it, and oh, no she knew. She didn't approve." Acid sarcasm showed vibrant contempt for that. "It was 'too far.' But she knew he'd 'never actually hurt me.' No. That's the breaking point. He told her. She sat there and listened to him say that he threatened to have me sodomized and my dick cut off and she sent me back out with him again. Maybe I could forgive a lot of the rest of it... but... No."

He pokes his curry with his fork. Then looks her right in the eye and says, "If Glen ever does that to one of your kids, the right answer is you grab your kids, you come to my house, and you don't leave until you've got your own place, a divorce, and full custody with no visitation rights. You tell me about it, and I will beat him so hard he never walks again. That's how you handle it. You don't just shrug that off as guys being guys."

"We should have been out of that house by nightfall. All three of us should have been at Gran and Pop's, and we should have never seen him again. But no, next day I was back on the boat with him again, but by then I was too scared to even think about fighting back, so he doubled down, grinding me down further, taking us out into rougher water, spending even longer days out there, making me sicker and sicker."

"I spent twenty years lying to myself about how she didn't know. I lost thirty pounds in two months that summer. I threw up so many times that at my next dental check-up I had three cavities. But in my head, she didn't know. She said she put a stop to it when it was clear that I wouldn't do it myself. Fuck that, I was fourteen. I shouldn't have had to put a stop to it. She put a stop to it when it was clear that if I went back to school looking like I did in the beginning of August they were going to call Child Protective Services. She was covering for him. She was making sure I had enough time to look vaguely healthy again by start of school. She knew it was wrong, and she covered for him."
They're all quiet after that, thinking. Tim's got the feeling that Sarah doesn't fully believe that's what happened. Not that he's lying, but that he doesn't understand what their Mom thought she was doing. Wisely, though, she's not saying anything.

After another minute Sarah asks, "Has she done anything even vaguely like that since you've been out of the house?"

"No." And that's true. And that's what cemented the lie. Once he got out of the house, she's been perfectly supportive.

"She changed when she left. She left him, Pop died, and that was a rough year, but then it was a lot better. That's the part you weren't there for." Sarah looks over to Penny. "She was depressed, right?"

Penny shrugs. "Probably. But I wasn't there for a lot of it. Most of the time I was just talking on the phone with your mom, or reading letters. She sounded a whole lot better after they got divorced. Once she was on her own and working again, she sounded happier than she did at any time after the first year they were married." Both Tim and Sarah are listening with interest. "I know she was sad. I know she was angry. I don't know if she was actually depressed. But it wouldn't be a shock if she was.

"It's not a secret that none of us thought your parents were good marriage material. Her parents flat out told her not to marry him and wouldn't give him their blessing. By the time they'd been married five years both Nelson and I were encouraging your mom to leave. We loved her. We loved your dad. It was a bad match."

"That's not an excuse," Tim says.

"No, it's not. It's background. It's part of her not being the person she was."

"Feels like she's the same person to me."

"I know, honey. I know."

"I can't look at her now and not see her looking at me then, knowing that I've been crying, knowing that he's torturing me, and doing nothing. I don't want anything to do with someone who could do that. Even if it was twenty years ago. And..." He's making excuses for not forgiving her, and he doesn't want to. "Fuck that! I don't need to make excuses for this." Abby squeezes his knee again, and he finds that touch comforting, but it doesn't slow his speech down. "It happened to me! This isn't some stranger who I met as an adult with a bad past. She did it to me. She let him do it to me. And I don't owe her reasonable or logical or kind or adult or..." he's staring at his plate, stabbing his dinner again.

Abby's stroking his back and Penny and Sarah both pull back, looking at each other.

"You're right, Tim, you don't," Penny says gently. "You don't have to forgive or forget or any of it. You can be as angry as you want or need. It's okay. Just, none of us want to see angry bite you in the long run."

He takes a moment to calm himself back down again, putting down his fork, pushing his plate away. "Until I was talking to you two, I wasn't feeling angry. Just hurt. So damn hurt."

"Sorry," Sarah says quickly, knowing she brought up most of angry. "It's just... she's my mom."

He closes his eyes, feeling the tears seeping out. "Yeah, I know. And you feel defensive for her. And it's your family, too, ripped to bits. And, and... I know." He sniffs. "And like with Dad, I don't
expect you to cut her out or burn any bridges. I get she... they didn't... not to you..." He swallows hard. "It just really hurts, okay? I thought if I got it, if she told me what and why it'd be better, but it wasn't. I wasn't worth patience, respect, or kindness until I was so fried I didn't care about my life anymore."

"But you are now. She loves you so much, and she's so proud of you." Sarah says.

He blinks, wipes away the tears. "It's not enough."

"She thinks you're punishing her."

He snorts at that. "Karma's punishing her. I'm doing what I need to to not melt down."

"You want me to tell her that?"

"I... I don't know. I don't care. Not really. I want you to do what you need to do to keep whatever sort of relationship you need with her. Like with Dad... I don't want you giving her hope that this is going to somehow get better. I don't want you giving her pictures or news or... whatever. I don't want her thinking there's some magical formula of right things that's somehow going to make it all right."

"Okay."

"What are you going to do?"

Sarah shrugs. "I'm not in a doing position here. I want you two to be better. Okay, so we never had happy Brady Bunch family time, but... I miss us."

"I know." And he does. He misses "us" too. He misses the lies that let "us" work.

"A year ago last week, we were all together, celebrating your wedding, all dressed up, and it was fun and happy and-" she sounds so eager to get that back, and so sad at the loss of it.

"And based on a lie."

"I liked the lie!" she says, sharply.

"You think I didn't?" he snaps. Not mad so much as irritated. And God, yes, he liked the lie. Right now he'd happily go running back to it if he could. "News flash, Sis, this isn't fun. I'm not doing this for kicks."

"I know, but..." He can see the ache in her eyes. The loss of something that she cherished is writ large on her face.

"Yeah." He nods, understanding, and sighs. "I just... I mean, what would forgiving her even look like? Saying that what she did was okay? Saying I'm okay with it? Hey, you and Dad abused the shit out of me as a kid, but it's a lot nicer if we all get along, so I'll just pretend that was okay and quietly have a nervous breakdown anytime you get close to my kid because I'm terrified you'll pull the same crap on her that you did on me?"

"No!" Penny says fast, but after that none of the rest of them have anything to add. People talk about forgiveness but in actual fact it's an awful nebulous concept.

Ducky says, calmly, after another very long, quiet moment, "Forgiveness is not approving of her behavior, nor is it giving it sanction. It's acknowledging it, and knowing that it's over. It's
understanding the past, and firmly locating it there. It is recognizing that everyone who was involved
in what happened is now gone. Neither you, nor your mother, are the same people. The woman she
was and the child you were are gone. They're just memories, and hold only as much power over you
as you chose to give them.

"For the sake of your own mental health, that part of your life has to die. It needs to be properly
acknowledged, learned from, mourned, and let go. Beyond that, I do not know what forgiveness is
for you and your mother. It might be trying to rebuild from the ground up, recognizing that she is
someone who looks like someone you have a history with, but is not that person. It may be saying
goodbye to that part of your life, and your relationship with her may be a casualty of that farewell.

"Right now, Timothy, I'd say you're still in the acknowledging phase of this. You're not ready to
mourn or let go because you still don't have a full understanding of what happened. You say you're
not angry, that you're hurt, and that may be true, right now, because you're still feeling your way
through this.

"You're still naming, organizing, and understanding. You're building context. That's long work, and
rushing it won't result in good things."

That made a whole lot of sense.

"I think it is safe to say, that the one thing we all want, is for you to be happy and whole. I'm sure
Sarah would prefer happy and whole involved your family once again together. But if it doesn't, it
doesn't."

"And no matter how it works out, this here," Penny gestures to the five of them, "And Kelly, and
Gibbs, and Glenn, and any other babies that may join us, are family."

A/N: Yes, I know, these last few updates have been grim. Upside, tomorrow we've got Kelly and
Pop, so light, fluffiness coming your way soon!
When they got home from the Slaters', Abby put Kelly in her crib, Tim vanished, and Gibbs realized he either needed to head home now, and grab stuff for tomorrow, or he was going to be getting up really early tomorrow to run home then.

He went up to the guest room, grabbed his bag, and headed down.

"Gonna run home, swap out my clothes."

Abby nods at that, she's on her computer, reading something. "You know, you could just leave stuff in that room. I know you don't live on the other side of the earth, but, for nights you don't feel like running home... It's fine with both of us if you want to treat that like your room. We've both been thinking of it as your room."

That actually would be really convenient. He nods, feeling a little surprised at how he's not feeling any sense of reticence towards grabbing some stuff and leaving it here. It doesn't feel like intruding.

"If you let me know what sort of pillows you like..."

"Everything you've got in there is fine."

"Okay. Just, feel free to make it comfortable. Anything you want, add to the grocery list. We'll keep it stocked for you."

When he got back a bit more than an hour later, Abby was pumping, watching something on TV, Kelly was still snoozing, and he could hear music coming from Tim's office.

He put his stuff upstairs, unpacked, didn't take too long to find a home for a few changes of clothing and one suit, and headed back down.

"Making sure we're all set for dinner?" he asks Abby as she wraps up with the breast pump.

"Yep. Heather tells me she gets irate when supper isn't breast milk."

"And we wouldn't want that."

"Not at all."

About three minutes after Tim and Abby headed out, Gibbs hears Kelly start to cry. He pauses the game, and heads up the stairs.

"Just you and me tonight," he says as he heads in, scooping her out of her crib.

She gurgles at him, looking like she approves.

He tickles her tummy as he gets her out of her extra-warm footy-pajamas for her diaper change. Unlike tights, these are easy. Just a zipper from neck to foot, and he can handle that one-handed. Pink with little kittens on it. He thinks he's seen this on Molly. Wouldn't surprise him. He does know that a pile of baby clothing migrated from the Palmer house to the McGee house when it was clear that Kelly was a girl, and he knows that clothing (along with some skull-bedecked onesies that he deeply doubts will ever end up on Anna) heads right back as Kelly outgrows it. Breena's got
everything ready for Anna now, they're just waiting for her to show up. Though, he thinks, it'd be nice if she decided to cook for at least a few more weeks.

He gets Kelly cleaned up, and then gets him cleaned up, and in a matter of minutes they both head down for some dinner.

Abby did order him some pizza, which he's enjoying. And Kelly's propped against his chest, slurping happily on her bottle.

He turns the game back on, and both of them have dinner while the Redskins wipe the floor with the Steelers.

"Those guys in red are your Uncle Tony and Uncle Ed's team. The ones in black and yellow are our team. When the ones in red have the ball, we say 'Booooo!'" He stretches the sound out, exaggerating it. She gives him the perplexed look that seems to be her standard response to adults goofing with her. "We'll work on that whole sense of humor thing," he says as she drains the bottle dry. She fusses a bit, looking like she's still hungry.

"You want more?" She continues to fuss at him.

"Don't have more of this. I can get you formula."

More fussing.

"Formula it is." He makes up another bottle, one-handed, Kelly pressed against his chest. "I think you're getting ready for a growth spurt. Might be getting onto time to add some cereal to your diet, too."

He lifts the formula bottle to her lips, and she does that little, *uggh, this stuff* face as she takes her first suck. "Yeah, I know, you don't love this. It's supposed to be really good for you."

She keeps sucking.

"Your mom tells me this is chemically identical to breast milk. Same fats and proteins and whatever. Doesn't have the micro-nutrients, but it's as close as she could get you."

Kelly doesn't appear to be impressed.

"Yeah. It's not the same, is it?"

More unimpressed suckling. He takes them back into the living room, and turns the game back on. "On the upside, you're not going hungry. And I'm not having to decide for myself if you're getting some cereal for the first time tonight."

They settle in for another quarter of the game. He's sitting there, enjoying the pleasant, warm weight of her against his tummy, as well as the little mwuf, mwuf, mwuf, sucking sound of a contently eating infant. He notices the sucking is slowing down and she's a good two-thirds of the way through her second bottle, so she's probably feeling full enough.

"Burp time?" He shifts the rag that had been tucked under her chin, catching the drips of milk and formula that hadn't been making it into Kelly, and drapes it over his shoulder. He props her against his chest, stands up, and starts his patting and slightly bouncy stroll of a walk.

It takes a minute or two, but he does coax a burp out of her, and she settles in more comfortably against him.
He shifts his hold, so she's in his arms, looking up at him. "Feeling better?" He nods for her. "Good. Tubby time. Someone's smelly, and it's not me."

When he did this last week, Kelly didn't get a bath. She didn't need one. But she is definitely a bit whiffy today, and bath time, when she needs one, is part of her bedtime routine. Plus it's not like he's never given a baby a bath before. He doesn't think Tim or Abby will mind.

So, up to the tubby they go. He gets the water going, gets her stripped off, and is in the process of putting her in the little bath caddy thing they've got in there for her when his knee sends him a loud and clear message that it will not be going along with any adventure that involves spending more than another thirty seconds kneeling, and that if he does not stand up or sit down right now, it is going to complain in a very loud and unfortunate manner, possibly involving him having to go back to wearing the brace all the damn time.

Which means he's sitting on the edge of the tub, naked baby in his arms, who is a human time bomb of sorts, just waiting to pee on him, having to figure out how to do this without kneeling. Sitting on the edge of the tub he's too high up to easily wash her off, and way too high up to keep a good grip on her.

So that leaves getting into the tub with her, either standing for a shower, or sitting in the tub. (Or putting the afore mentioned pretty whiffy baby back into her jammies and punting the problem to the next day. But in that he's a take-charge, Marine kind of guy, the idea of just ignoring it never occurs to him. The mission is washed baby, and he will not fail!)

He wonders, briefly, if it'll bug Tim or Abby that he's getting in the tub with Kelly. He's awfully sure it won't be a problem for Abby. Not as sure about Tim. He does know that Tim gets in with her, if he didn't know that, or if it wasn't true, he'd be eyeballing the baby wipes and just giving her a sponge bath. But, just because Tim gets in with her, doesn't mean Tim's cool with other naked guys around his baby daughter.

He carries Kelly over to her changing table, laying her down, and quickly strips out of his own clothing. (He leaves his boxers on as a compromise between naked and dressed. He knows Jimmy's been at the pool with Kelly, so it's not like she hasn't had some naked chest time with someone who wasn't Dad.) And picking her back up, snuggling her close, she made a very surprised sound, and immediately got both of her tiny hands gripped vice tight in his chest hair.

As he was gently prying her fingers open, hoping he doesn't have two bald patches on his chest from how tight she's grabbing him, he says, "I know; I'm a lot fuzzier than Dad and Uncle Jimmy. I'm also attached to that fuzz, so quit trying to yank it out."

Maybe she's listening, maybe not. But once he gets the second hand open, she stops trying to rip his chest hair out. She does keep pressing her cheek against his chest, making a sort of surprised squawking sound, pulling back, and doing it again.

He looks down at her the third time she does it, as he's testing the water to see if it's nicely warm. "Are you laughing?"

She does it one more time and makes that sound again. He rubs his chest a little and says, "Yeah, I guess it is kind of tickle-y."

She's eyeballing his nipple, trying to grab it. She doesn't have enough fine motor control to get it, but her hand keeps landing in the right general area. "Just like with Dad, that doesn't do anything you're interested in," he says as he notices that he's only got one towel in there, and it's hers. He takes her hand in his as when she gets his chest hair again, heading into the hall to find another towel. "Okay.
Got it. We're all set for shower time."

He steps in, back to the spray, and then turns slowly. "We good?"

She doesn't fuss, so he thinks this is probably success and proceeds to get her washed off. She's a plump little thing, so washing off involves getting soap worked into knee folds and elbow folds and the like, which she seems to consider tickly, too, so there's a lot of pleased squirming as he's getting her lathered up, and then some not so pleased squirming, she's determined to not let him wash under her chin, but after about five minutes she's all cleaned up and rinsed off, and it's time to get out.

He gets her wrapped up in her towel. It has a little hood, which he thinks is a nice addition to baby gear, and also wings, a tail, and horns, (Of course it's a dragon, a little pink and pastel blue dragon. Molly's got a puppy one. There's a kitten one waiting for Anna for when she gets home,) which he's not seeing as much use for, but she does seem to enjoy chewing on one of the horns as he dries her off. He quickly dries himself off, slipping off the soaked boxers, wrapping his towel around his waist, and takes her to her bedroom.

Dried off, diaper on, fresh jammies on, pacifier in mouth, sleepy baby cuddled in his arms, slowly sucking her pacifier, eyes drooping: that feels good. He settles with her in the rocking chair, gently swaying back and forth. He doesn't pick up the book. She doesn't look at the pictures. These days, reading to Kelly is more about the sound than anything else.

Besides, he knows the words.

So, he gently strokes her back and starts with, "In the great green room, there was a telephone, a red balloon, and a picture of the cow jumping over the moon..."

Before Kelly, he hadn't thought about those words in decades. Didn't know he still knew them. But he does. And right now, words slipping off his lips, quietly, eyes closed, as he rocks back and forth, it could be, save for the dull ache in his knee, 1982, and he could be doing this in a small nursery in base housing at Lejeune.

He finishes up, adding 'Goodnight Kelly' the final line he always used, gently putting her down, and then heads to his room to get dressed.

---

Tim and Abby get home and find Gibbs on the sofa, reading, in his PJs. He's looking very comfy. (Game wrapped ten minutes earlier; Redskins (booo) won.)

Abby leads Tim into the living room, plunks him on the sofa next to Gibbs, tosses the Playstation controllers at them and says, "Fun. This has been a god-awful grim weekend and we are finishing it off with some fun!"

Tim's looking at her defeatedly, like he'll go along with this but all he really wants to do is sleep. Gibbs doesn't think dinner went badly, neither Tim nor Abby have that sort of feel about them, and he's sure that if it had been a disaster Ducky or Penny would have given him a heads up, but it's been a long two days, and Tim's fried. He doesn't look like he's thinking gaming will be fun, and Gibbs certainly isn't.

Gibbs is glaring at the controller; reading was fun. The game, even with the Redskins winning, was fun. Bedtime was fun. Anything that involves one of these confounded glowing electronic things is not fun.

She comes back a moment later with three ciders. One for each of them, all open. Tim drinks his pretty thankfully, right now some alcohol would be a good thing for him, blur the edges a bit, and
Gibbs takes a deep drink, it'll make whatever it is she's got in mind easier.

She sits in Tim's lap, turns on the tv and the playstation, flips around for a few seconds and queues up a game. "This one's really easy."

Gibbs is staring at the tv. Then he blinks slowly and looks at her. "Plants Versus Zombies III? They needed three of these?"

"Yes." She smiles brightly, but there's a brittleness to that smile, she's not as happy as she seems because she's trying to make things lighter than they are. "Because it's fun!"

Gibbs gets that message loud and clear. He is being shanghaied into fun, and he will have fun or answer to a mope-y Abby. So, if enjoying whatever comes next will make them feel better, he can fake it for an hour or so. "Do you own all three?"

"Of course!" She flips it onto two players, taking another drink. "You're going to watch Tim and I play, then you get to."

Gibbs is staring at the screen, weak smile on his face. He's not loving the idea of playing this. But Tim's starting to grin.

"This one's pretty easy, Jethro. Just use three buttons," he says, taking a drink, starting to look a bit more alive.

"Yeah, simple controls, but it's a defensive strategy game. Your job is to use the plants to defend the house. If the Zombies get in, they eat your brains and you lose." A cartoon lawn with a hedge on one end and a house on the other pops up on the TV. Abby plants a smiling flower and starts moving the cursor around collecting smiling cartoon suns. "You just swoop around, collecting suns, and planting your plants, and then they kill the Zombies."

Tim starts to relax a bit. "It's a silly game. Simple controls, but not a simple game. Lots of different Zombies, lots of plants, everything does something different, and the terrain changes every level." He kisses his wife. This is exactly what he needs right now. Something completely unrelated to the rest of his life that will hold his attention, but is easy enough it doesn't involve adrenaline spikes. Win, lose, doesn't matter, this is cute and fun. "Thanks."

She kisses back. "Anytime, baby."

"Okay. So, these little flowers here," he starts explaining to Gibbs, "are like your banking system. You've got to plant them to make sure you can buy the stuff you need to defend with. These pea plants are like rifles. They shoot one pea at a time. The walnuts are a barrier defense..."

Gibbs listens to Tim explaining what's going on as he and Abby start building their fortress. They get a minute to put things in place before the Zombies start to shuffle their way through.

"So, you see how the pea keeps shooting and the Zombie dies?"

"Yeah, I can see that, Tim." Not blind yet, even if I do need glasses all the time now."

"Good, so that's the game. More plants that do more damage. Bigger, faster, badder Zombies. You've got to make sure you've got enough sun for the plants and you've got to wait between plantings."

"I think I've got it. You need a rifle pit in the top line." There's nothing shooting up there, and a new Zombie's wandering toward the house.
"On it," Abby says, planting the pea shooter.

"What's that corn cob thing you've got?" Jethro asks Tim. (When they play Abby handles making sure they've got enough sunshine, and small arms fire, Tim handles barriers, big guns, and last ditch efforts.)

"Multi-directional mortar fire."

"Hmmm..." He can see the value of that. Especially as crowds of Zombies are starting to head toward the house. "The hot pepper?"

"Single line napalm fire."

"Hmp." Jethro keeps watching as horde after horde of Zombies die before getting into the house. But he's thinking he's getting the hang of this. The plants and Zombies are silly, but it looks like the strategy aspect is solid.

And he's good at strategy. After all, if you want someone to defend a house against a horde of anything, let alone Zombies, Leroy Jethro Gibbs is your man.

More importantly, this is the first time he's seen Tim laugh since work on Friday, so anything that'll help with that, he's willing to try.

Tim and Abby play three levels, while Gibbs watches intently. As the last Zombie on that level died, Gibbs says to Abby, "Okay, hand that over. Let me try."

That gets a smile out of Tim, and a happy laugh out of Abby, who shifts next to him, starting to point out what buttons do what.

And all in all, it's not that bad, kind of addictive, really. He might, possibly, be interested in playing this again.

They'd been at it for an hour, he and Abby swapping the controller, Tim playing straight through, when Kelly begins chirping for second dinner.

"And that's my call," Abby says, handing the controller over to Jethro.

"How'd it go?" he asks Tim as he plants landmines. (Some sort of potato thing. He has an easier time just thinking of them by what sort of weapon they are.)

"Better than yesterday."

"Not a high hurdle to clear."

"Nope." Tim shakes his head at that. "You and Kelly?"

"Fine. Realized half-way through my knee wasn't up for kneeling to give her a bath."

"Tubby tomorrow then?"

Gibbs looks appalled at the idea that mere knee issues may have waylaid him from his goal of a clean baby. "Got in with her. Figured I should make sure that was okay, though."

Tim shrugs. "Doesn't bug me. Can't imagine it'd bug Abby."

"Good. Just figured I should check."
Tim thinks about it for a second. "If it's something you would have done with your Kelly, it's okay to do it with mine." He goes very quiet after that, not saying anything, not paying attention to the game.

After a minute, Gibbs asks, "You okay?"

"As much as I've been any time since yesterday." He shakes his head. "We were talking a little about forgiveness and what it would look like. And I just said that to you. Just slipped right off my tongue without a second thought. And I don't need to give it a second thought. I know you'll be okay with her. Sun rises in the east. Gravity pulls stuff toward earth. Kelly is safe with Gibbs. Absolute truth." He smiles limply at Gibbs. "Assuming I ever did get to forgiving her, let alone allowing her back into our lives, that's something I'd never be sure of with my mom."

Gibbs puts the controller down and rubs Tim's shoulder. "You thinkin' about it?"

"My sister would really like it."

"I'm sure she would. Doesn't mean it's a good plan."

"I know."

"Doesn't mean it's a bad one, either."

"Thanks," Tim says dryly. And then, more seriously. "What would you do?"

"I'm not you."

"Which is why I'm asking. Sarah kept pointing out, it's been twenty years, she's not the person she used to be..."

Gibbs does think about it. He takes a few minutes to put the words together properly. "I think trust is what builds families. I think part of what makes our family different, stronger, is that our trust in each other was earned. It's not a matter of accident or blood. It's that every day, for years, we put ourselves on the line for each other. When push came to shove, we all stood up and shoved back for each other. Even when we're rubbing each other wrong, we all know, in our bones and souls, that we've got each other's backs to the end." He stops at that, takes a breath, sees Tim watching him, listening very intently, and continues on, "The best, most charitable version of what happened with you and your mom is that when push came to shove, she rolled on over and let your Dad steamroll you and her. The real version is worse. She broke your trust. And different person or not, twenty years or not, reformed or not, you'd be insane to trust her with you, your wife, or your child. And since that's true, she can't be family. Coming to terms with that, making peace with it, getting to the point where you can tolerate spending an afternoon with your sister's mom for your sister's sake, all of that is probably a good idea. But I don't think she's your family, and I know she's not mine."

Tim nods at that and stands up, shutting off the game. "Thanks." That time it was genuine. "Abby'll be wrapping up with Kelly soon, and I'm beat. 'Night."

"Good night, Tim."
In the six months since they began living together Ducky has learned quite a bit about Penny Langston. (He assumes the converse is true for her, as well.) He's also learned quite a bit about himself, among them, how much he enjoys the quiet intimacy of getting ready for bed with someone, followed by settling in to sleep.

He has, of course, had many bedmates over the years. Many great loves. Yet this moment now, preparing for rest, him sitting on the edge of his bed, undressing, watching Penny, who is sitting at one of her additions to their home, a vanity, taking off her jewelry and brushing her hair, has been a rarity in his life. And the moment to come, when they will lie in bed, resting, finishing off the night with gentle conversation and gentle, or depending on mood, maybe not so gentle touch, is one he eagerly anticipates.

Of course, for Ducky there is an added layer of learning this woman he has chosen to share his life with, namely, he's known her grandson for well over ten years now, and there are times where he finds himself staggered by how sharply she reminds him of Timothy. (Though, technically, it's Timothy reminding him of her, but he didn't meet Penny until he'd known Timothy for almost a decade. As a result he often has to remind himself of the correct direction in which that association lies.)

Right now, the quiet of her motions, the look on her face, the lack of her usual pre-bed conversation, all of that is reminding him of Timothy quite intensely.

Which makes quite a bit of sense, given what happened tonight.

He's been thinking about it, too.

Many thoughts, many ideas, family secrets, questions, and beloved, fragile hearts all in play.

For example, a thought: one that's struck him over and over with this whole thing is that he cannot fathom how two people who put Timothy so thoroughly through the ringer would be good parents to Sarah.

It's obvious watching how the two of them understand their parents, that John and Tori were very much not the same people for Timothy as they were for Sarah.

There is something else, that is, to Ducky, looking in from the outside, obvious. Something he's fairly sure that Penny has to be aware of, but he's equally certain that Timothy and Sarah are not.

And it's something that... he's not sure of. And less sure of voicing his suspicion out loud. If his suspicions are correct... If they are, everything becomes yet more confusing... Or possibly... though that's a version of John he's never contemplated before, a level of self-loathing he does not expect or suspect, less.

"You're thinking loudly." Penny says, looking at him in the mirror, putting her brush down.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was speaking." he says, unbuttoning his shirt.

"You weren't. That's the dead give-away. You stop chattering when you're thinking hard. What has your gears turning?"

Family secrets... Well, given what they got together to talk about today, and that he was welcomed as
an insider, as family, by both Penny and Tim... "A rather indelicate question, I'm afraid."

"Really?" Penny looks intrigued, turning to face him as she smooths moisturizer onto her arms and neck. "What's sparking that?"

"I've been pondering how John and Tori could have been so hard on Timothy, and yet so kind to Sarah."

"Both of them would have told you that Sarah didn't need it. John especially would tell you that she was just fine the way she was."

"Yes. I imagine he would say that." The perversity of that man's mind is staggering to Ducky.

"Was that your indelicate question?"

"No. Though I suppose that one was indelicate, as well. This one, I suppose, is outright rude."

Penny's looking very interested in where he's going with this. "I've met Tori twice, and if memory serves, she has blonde hair and green eyes. I saw John once, and I don't remember clearly, but my sense was he had light hair and blue eyes." Penny's nodding at that, and seems to know where this is going. "My sense was neither of them have a cleft chin, either." She nods at that, too. "And yet, Sarah has brown hair, brown eyes, and a bit of a cleft chin."

"She does," Penny says, watching him intently.

He tosses his shirt into the hamper, and turns to face her. "I would not have thought that John would be particularly kind to the cuckoo in his nest."

Penny nods, acknowledging that, then adds, "I'd imagine that would have quite a bit to do with how she got there. And no, I don't know the answer to that. Likewise, I do not specifically know if he's noticed or wondered about the fact that Sarah looks nothing like the rest of us, though I have a hard time believing he could have somehow missed that fact.

"I know they both wanted several children. I know Tori miscarried once before Tim and three times after. It's entirely possible that most of the difference was that Sarah came well after either of them had given up any hope of another child."

"The longed for second chance?" Ducky goes back to getting undressed, and then fetches his pajamas, pulling on the light blue, cotton drawers.

"Maybe." Penny begins dabbing another potion of some sort on her face. "Things were already tense with John and Tim. But, at least as I remember it, they were only tense. But, I also wasn't there for a lot of it. I was there enough to know they got worse after Sarah was born."

"Pre-adolescent hormones making things worse?" Ducky asks, pulling on the matching, long-sleeved buttoned pajama top. Like much of what he owns there's a certain formality to his pajamas, but at the same time, they are old, worn, well-loved and exceptionally well-made cotton.

"Possibly." She shrugs, grabbing yet another bottle and starting to apply a new fluid to her feet and legs. "I think it was more that it was becoming clear that Tim wasn't going to grow out of being quiet or shy, and was still showing absolutely no interest at all in the Navy and John knew the window was closing, fast."

Ducky's still thinking. He just cannot imagine that John would have, on any level, been accepting to a child who wasn't his. And if Tori miscarried over and over... Timothy would have been young, but... not young enough to spring a baby out of nowhere with. A visible pregnancy would have had
"You didn't live near them when Tori was pregnant with Sarah, did you?"

"No, they were in California that year."

"Are you sure Sarah is Tori's?"

That got a very surprised look out of Penny, she opened her mouth and then closed it, and then opened it again and closed it again. *That* was an angle that she'd never considered. That was an angle no one (and yes, if she and Nelson were talking about it, other people must have, too) considered. Penny thought about it, remembering everything she could. "We only knew she was pregnant for three months. After four miscarriages we didn't expect them to say anything until Tori was sure the baby was healthy. So, when we found out she was supposed to be twenty weeks along. Sarah was a very large preemie. Almost seven pounds at thirty-two weeks gestation. If she was full term, John was on a float when Sarah would have been conceived. He was on a float when she was born, too. Shipped out the month before she was born. He was home for two of the months in the middle, though.

"If she isn't Tori's, her parents were in on it. They stayed with Tim while she was in the hospital, helped with her when she was brand new."

"Would she have been willing to raise another woman's child?" Ducky asks, heading to the foot of the bed, sitting on the chest in front of their bed, closer to Penny.

She's thinking hard, tapping her fingers against the handle of her brush. "I think by that point, she would have been willing to have done pretty much anything that involved another baby. She talked a bit about adopting when Tim was younger, but nothing ever happened." Penny thinks about it more. "She didn't nurse Sarah. She did for Tim. But with Sarah she was saying it hurt too much and took too long and bottle feeding meant Tim could get a meal or two and she could get a few more hours of sleep. Unlike with Tim, who was born two weeks before John got back for a two-year stint at home, she was basically a single parent for the first year Sarah was alive. He was gone her first four months, home for sixty days, gone for another six months."

"So, like sailors everywhere and through all time, he had ample opportunity to make friends."

"Of course. And he was captain of his own ship by then. If he wanted or needed to swing an unscheduled detour, he could have done it. He also, if memory serves, had female members on his crew then."

"I thought women weren't on combat ships in the US Navy until 1991."

She nods, always impressed by how much information about everything Ducky seems to have. "You're right, combat ships. They started serving in non-combat, non-hospital ships in '78. John wasn't on a combat ship then. Like Tim and I he was always good with technology, and he was running a test ship, all of the latest goodies were floating around under his command, so the closest he ever got to combat on that tour was war gaming. No one wanted the stuff he had getting anywhere near the USSR's navy."

"Ah."

Penny nods, and he can see on her face the idea that this is suddenly making a whole lot of sense. And it's making a whole lot of sense to Ducky, too. Too much sense.

"Their marriage was already more than strained at that point?"
"Their marriage was strained by the time they finished cutting the cake at the wedding."

"But they were also Catholic, and a divorce looks bad for an ambitious officer climbing fast and hard toward Admiral."

"Exactly. Especially on that last push. Everything needs to look perfect when you're trying to get that last jump between Captain and Admiral. Can't run your own house, how can you run a fleet? Can't have people saying that."

"And, would I be remiss in assuming everything he didn't like about Timothy came from Tori, at least according to John?"

"If he felt that way, he was smart enough to never say it in my presence. But I wouldn't be surprised if he eventually felt that way. And..." She shakes her head. "I hate saying this, but it was likely true, too. Tori was quieter, more timid. She thinks first, thinks again, and then does things. She's not a social butterfly; she has a few friends she's very loyal to, her family, and that's it. Given the option of fighting or finding a way to smooth things over, she'll smooth. Tim also looked a lot like her then. The shape of the face and the eyes especially, and the same longish blond hair. God, that hair drove John crazy. Tim liked it longer. John didn't want any of it more than two inches long. Getting it cut off right before his Dad got back was always a fight."

Ducky nods, feeling like the pieces are shifting into place. "So for John the first child, Timothy, is the symbol of a failed marriage and wasted potential. His seed ruined by inferior breeding stock. The second child, Sarah, doesn't have the taint of Tori's genes. Perhaps her mother was one of his shipmates. She's unlimited potential unmarred by a woman he's grown to resent. For Tori, Timothy is a long nightmare of nothing she does, because how he behaves is the yardstick her husband is using to measure her actions, ever being good enough. He's the symbol of her failure as a mother, because she can't force her round peg into the square hole. She wanted more babies, her husband wanted her to have more babies, but she cannot have any more children, yet another marker of failure. For her, Sarah is the fulfilled yearning for another child, and because Sarah delights John, she's a reprieve from the constant grinding of only being judged by how good a job she does of making Timothy into someone he was never suited to become."

That's probably not dead on, but it fits. Penny adds, "And when Sarah is born, John loses the restraint that kept him from fully opening up on Tim. Yes, he's the only boy, so he can't go as hard on Tim as he wants, someone's got to carry on the family name and traditions, but he's not the only child anymore so he can push harder, if it doesn't work out, there's always another shot."

"Add in Timothy's more traditionally feminine traits, and Sarah's more masculine devil-may-care tomboyishness..."

"And it's the perfect storm of everything that could go wrong, going wrong."

Ducky buttons the shirt of his pajamas, and steps over to Penny, leaning down to kiss her. Yes, this feels solid, like a puzzle well-solved, but the glow of putting the pieces together is rapidly cooling in the light of this is his love, and her son, and his children, all warped by this morass of pain.

These are not unknown pieces on a board being shifted around to come to a conclusion for the purpose of solving a crime.

This is her family, and for that matter, his. "But it is only speculation."

She smiles, grimly, a very Timothy gesture. She appreciates the fact that he's trying to soften the idea of it, but also knows the softening isn't real. "It fits. It wasn't the way I was thinking it worked, this
works better with who John and Tori are, but... Two years ago Sarah was really excited about that DNA company that let you do your own testing. Learn all about your genome."

Ducky nods. He remembers Jimmy talking about it with Abby.

"She asked all of us if we wanted to do it. Tim seemed interested, but those fascists at FDA shut the company down before we got around to it. Which worked out just fine, because I was fairly certain the results would have been quite surprising to the kids."

"I was thinking that this did not appear to be something that's occurred to either of them."

"If it had ever crossed Tim's mind, he would have said something to me..." She pauses, considering that. "No. He would have had Abby test it, and he'd already know, and then he would have said something to me. If it had ever crossed Sarah's mind, she would have said something to me, her mom, her dad, and Tim."

Ducky nods, that strikes him as how Sarah would handle it. Penny stands, pressing into Ducky's embrace, stroking his face gently. "So, profiler, what do you think? Should he know? Would understanding why Sarah got to be the golden child while he was Cinderella help?"

Ducky shakes his head. "I can't imagine it would. Short of finding out he's not actually John's son, I don't think there's any information along those lines that Timothy would find comforting."

"No. Probably not."
On Monday, before going to the Bullpen, Tim went down to the basement, unplugged the old coffee machine, poured out the scorched battery acid that was masquerading as coffee, set the drip pot under the counter, and then set up the Keurig, put the box of assorted flavor cups next to it along with a whiteboard and a dry erase marker.

He wrote on the board, *What kind of coffee do you like?* and left plenty of room for them to add their favorites.

He's not the Boss yet, but he can sure as hell get his Minions some decent coffee.

On Tuesday, during lunch, Tim headed down to see Jimmy. Monday night, after work, he and Abby began opening all of Kelly's christening presents, and while a few of them were cute little onesies and stuff, most of them were cards.

They were expecting greeting cards.

They were not expecting (in that most of these people are near strangers) money in those cards.

So, he pulls Jimmy out of the morgue and they head off in search of lunch, and for Tim, pointers on correct responses to this level of family generosity.

Once they were seated with food in front of them, he says, "Jimmy, everyone gave us money for Kelly."

And Jimmy nods.

"Like, a few thousand dollars all told."

And he keeps nodding.

"Is this usual?"

"Welcome to the Slater Funeral Home Family Mafia. You get in, but you never get out." Tim's just staring at him. "They take this family wealth thing *really* seriously. We're all supposed to add to it, help it grow, and then lavish it on the kids, making sure they've got everything they need to build the business further and keep all of us in the black. Christmas, birthdays, all the kids get little presents, and mom and dad get cash for them which is supposed to go toward making sure they get a good education or having seed money to go start a business for themselves/build onto the family business."

"That's what every baby needs a party means?"

Jimmy nods. "Something like that. All of the kids getting out of college with no debt is a *big* deal. I was talking about how I was able to refi and consolidate my student loans, and they all stared at me like I was talking about how proud I was of getting a good rate to finance my prostitution ring. By the end of that night Ed, Jeannie, and two of the Uncles had offered to pay them off."

"Is that a good thing?"

"It was nice... I guess. At the time I was kind of insulted, because, you know, it's mine, so paying it off is my job. Especially when Ed hit me with it first, I saw it more as a 'he didn't think I'd be able to..."
do it' sort of thing. But the more time I'm with them, the more I get they really don't see it like that. The money, the debts, the businesses, the houses, it's all sort of ours. We hold onto the wealth for the kids, try to build it up, and pass more of it to them than we started with. So, they're offering to pay it off rather than let interest payments eat even further away at our capital." Jimmy eats a bite of his salad. "That's part of me not being son-in-law of the year material. I don't add to the wealth pool."

"You've got a job."

"Yeah, but I bring in cash. Cash on its own is useless. You've got to do something with it, make something of value that makes its own cash. Ed thinks you're a dork, too, but you write books and get royalties and whatnot, so you're higher on the value scale than I am. I get fired, I'm screwed. You get fired, your royalties keep coming and you go spend more time at the typewriter turning out more books and making yet more royalties. You're financially independent in a way I'm not."

"So, you leave NCIS and open a medical practice..." Tim leads as he cuts his chicken.

"Yeah, up to Son-In-Law-of-the-Year I go, along with suddenly having a hundred patients, a pile of seed money, and three or four accountants to make sure my books are in great shape, while a financial planner or two goes over everything and makes sure all of my assets are sheltered."

"And let me guess, if you got into hospice care..."

"I'd get the gold star to go with my shiny new Son-In-Law-of-the-Year Award," Jimmy says dryly. "Did you ever read The Godfather?"

"Million years ago."

"They don't kill people or steal stuff, but I married into the real world Corleone family."

"And now I'm part, too?"

Jimmy smiles. "Breena and I are godparents to your daughter. You're godparents to ours, so, yes."

"You couldn't have mentioned this before we got into it?"

"I figured if Ed didn't scare you off, this wasn't going to be a big deal."

"Okay, that's probably true."

"Just, don't forget thank you notes. They're a really big deal. Actual, real, on paper, in the mail, handwritten, thank you notes. Lack of thank you notes results in nagging."

"I think we can swing some thank you notes."

"Good."

On Wednesday: they worked a case. And worked some more. And then worked a bit after that. It was technically Thursday when they headed home.

On Thursday, Tony let them off early. Tuesday they worked late. Wednesday they worked early and late. So when 12:30 rolled around and they had the perp in booking, he sent them all home.

He and Ziva went home and crashed.
A nap felt good. Sex after the nap felt fantastic. Post-sex, shower-time snuggles were awesome. They made dinner together, lazy, relaxed, nibbling half of the ingredients before they got into the oven.

All in all, it was a really grand afternoon.

But, after dinner, as Ziva was curling up with a book, Tony was feeling a bit out of sorts and edgy. He also wasn't having an easy time putting his finger on why. Everything had gone just fine today. He should be warm, content, earbuds in, happily watching a movie while Ziva reads, curled up against him.

But she's not settling, either. Which is probably what's setting his senses on edge.

He can feel it. She looks settled. They're on the sofa. He's got his feet up on the coffee table. She's lying with her head in his lap, book in hand. She's still, very, very still. Which is usually a dead giveaway that something is wrong. It's not that she's fidgety or anything. But when Ziva goes stock still, she's either on full alert or thinking hard, and neither of them are appropriate for a second read of her current book. (Among other things, book reading involves turning pages, which hasn't happened for at least five minutes.)

"You okay?" he asks after another tense moment.

"Yes. I'm just thinking."

"Good thinking?" That makes him nervous. He can't help it. Women "thinking" is a deeply ingrained warning sensor for him.

"Just thinking."

"Okay. Work thinking or us thinking?"

"A bit of both."

"Uh huh..." He'd really rather she just told him what was going on, but as they've talked about in counseling, making sure she's got time to get big things right in her head, before he drags them out of her, is important. So, he doesn't push. He wants to. All of his little curious sensors are tingling. But he's not pushing.

He puts his earbuds back in, unpauses the movie, and lets her think.

He didn't have to wait long. Twenty minutes, half an hour maybe. Long enough for him to begin to get sucked into the movie. But, sucked into the movie or not, he certainly notices when Ziva marks her page, rolls onto her stomach, chin resting on her hands, hands on his thigh, and looks up at him. He's not entirely sure, because it doesn't happen a lot (okay, ever) but he thinks this could be Ziva's version of puppy-dog eyes.

He pulls the earbuds out. "Done thinking?"

"For now."

"Okay. So, do I get to find out what you've been thinking about?"

"Yes." She doesn't say anything after that.

"Maybe you could say a bit more than that. You're starting to scare me."
"No. It's not bad, just..." And she pauses, taking a breath, making him more nervous, and then jumps in with what she's been thinking about. "We've been talking about a baby, and I was thinking, once we hire Gibbs' replacement, that might be a good time to start trying."

"Oh." And yeah, that's not bad or anything, it's just...

Yeah.

He's not got much of anything going through his head. The spasm of 'Holy shit, a kid!' terror didn't fire, so that was a good thing. A step in the right direction. But, when they hire Gibbs' replacement is a whole lot more concrete that the somewhat nebulous 'eventually' they'd been bouncing around before.

But, like he let her think, she's letting him think, too. Which is a good thing, because right now, he doesn't know what he's thinking.

Unfortunately, he doesn't feel like he's pulling things together. There's just this huge, vague, something, and he's not sure how to deal with it.

So, he's gently stroking her back, not saying anything, kind of wishing he was saying something, though right now rambling on like a twit probably wouldn't win him any points.

After a good ten silent minutes, he comes up with, "So, like, as soon as we hire the guy, or when he joins the team, or once we know he's sticking around?"

"I was thinking when we hired him. But if you want to wait a bit longer, make sure he's blending in well, we could do that. Say, March or April at the latest."

"Ah... Really celebrate our first anniversary?"

"I was hoping we'd know by then, but, yes."

"Okay." He doesn't exactly sound excited, but there's no dread in his voice.

"Okay?" She double checks. He has the sense she was more than half-expecting him to freak out and melt down at this.

"Yeah, okay." He nods, tries to smile reassuringly.

"Are you really sure?"

They'd been talking about honesty, and that it's all right to be vulnerable with each other, and that actually discussing fears is better than pretending they aren't there, so unlike what he would have done this time last year, he answers honestly. "I don't know."

She smiles a bit, and nods, expecting that.

"Half of me is excited. Half feels like I'm marching off to face the firing squad."

She's not sure what to say to that. She knows, because they've talked about this, that he's, at best, wary about children. And he knows that she wants them.

"I just... I like our life. And, it feels really... something... to have a solid end to that."

"I understand." And she does.
"But I meant it when I said I'd do this with you. When we got married, this... kid thing, was part of it. So, yeah, I'm nervous about it, but, sure, when we get Gibbs' replacement. I'd like to make sure he gets a bit of time to settle in, make sure we're keeping him, but then, sure. We'll do this. Baby DiNozzo, show Palmer and McGee what a beautiful baby really looks like."

She half-smiles at his joke, and then sits up to kiss him.

On Friday, after they got home from Shabbos, after Molly was put to bed, Breena is kneeling on the floor, leaning her upper body against an exercise ball while Jimmy rubs her hips.

"I forgot how much I hate this part."

"Mmm..." He makes an agreeing noise, gently pressing the balls of his thumbs into her sacrum.

"I really don't think I can do forty-two weeks of this again. Everything hurts all over."

He nods.

"Hear that Anna, any time after thirty-six weeks. No hanging around forever like your sister did. When they say your lungs are done, out you come. The sooner the better."

He kisses the small of her back, fingers gently trailing down her spine.

"November 27th. That's thirty-six weeks." She says, hands rubbing her stomach. "That's when we're aiming for. Two more weeks and then out you go. Okay?"

He ripples his knuckles against her back, stroking his palms down her spine, cradling her hips in his hands and squeezing gently. "You want to flip around, sit on the ball, and I'll get your hips and thighs?"

"Sure."

He helps her get up, and seated on the ball, sitting cross-legged between her legs, gently rubbing her thighs and hips. He's resting his forehead (lightly) against her belly, feeling Anna squirming around in there.

He kisses again, lips brushing lightly above the waistband of Breena's leggings, trailing along the line from her now flat belly button to just above her pubic bone.

"Wouldn't mind a little bit longer with her on the inside." He kisses again, hands cradling her butt, and pulls back, smiling up at her. "Don't get to do this," he mouths gently over her. "For far too long once she's out."

Breena chuckles, a visible combination of exasperation (sex, now, really?) on her face as well as approval (I'm very glad you still find me sexy and attractive). "It's a good thing you're awfully cute," she says, ruffling his hair.

He smiles up at her again. "Well, you know, endorphins are good for pain, and for keeping your mood happy, and semen is supposed to help ripen the cervix. And if you want to stay on schedule for the 27th..."

"Uh huh." She's smiling, and takes off his glasses, resting them on the sofa behind him. "I don't remember that working all that hot last time."

"Obviously, we didn't do it nearly enough." He's inching her leggings off, and she stands up to make
On Saturday, Gibbs had cleared out his basement and set up the band saw.

It's one of the only power tools he's willing to use. Especially on his own, especially for long pieces of wood, ripping boards is just not a good plan with a hand saw.

All of his wood is stripped. The finish is off.

He's built the guides that will keep each board straight and true as the saw goes through them.

Gibbs takes a deep breath, picks up the first of the beams that will soon be repurposed into bed legs, flips on the saw, places the board into the guide and gently pushes, feeling the saw go tearing through the wood with the sweet hum of destruction that creates.

A moment later, holding two, even, clean-cut pieces, he exhales, realizing he wasn't breathing as he cut.

And holding them, he realizes that he is ready to start to rebuild. The pain he thought he'd experience as he took blade to wood never materialized.

He picks up another of the beams, settles it into the guide, and gets to work.
"Okay, this guy's a psychopath!"

"Why you saying that, Draga?" Tim asks as he's photographing the scene.

"Look at his browser history." So, Tim goes over and does, reading over Drag's shoulder.

Then he laughs and shakes his head. "Not a freak, just a writer."

"They aren't one and the same?" Tony asks as he breezes in.

"Not this time."

"How do you know he's a writer?" Draga asks. "Because nothing about this says writer to me. Aspiring Hannibal Lecter, sure, but not writer."

Tim laughs at that, remembering some of the things he researched for his first book. "Yeah, you should have seen my browser history back when I was working on my first novel. Would have blown your mind."

"Would have blown his mind because you're McSuperfreak, not because you're a writer," Tony adds. Tim rolls his eyes. "Got this room done?"

"Just about," Tim answers. "Got a few more shots and I'm done."

"Good."

"McSuperfreak?" Draga asks.

Tony winces, shaking his head. "You don't want to know, on like fifty different levels."

Draga's looking really curious about that, looking from Tony to Tim and back again.

Tim shrugs; he doesn't want to share, but Tony still needs a smack for making a big deal out of this, so he calls out, "Hey Ziva, wanna know what Tony was on the last time his computer crashed?"

Tony's eyes go wide in horror as Tim does that. "You wouldn't dare!" he says very, very quietly.

"McGee?" Ziva asks, interested and curious, coming into the computer room where the three men are. According to Tony, his computer just mysteriously crashed one night, and the next morning Tim did something magical to it, and it started working again. She has been, suspicious, to say the least, as to the veracity of Tony's story about that.

Tony stares at him in a blind panic.

"Did you know he was on a file sharing site?" Tim has a huge smile on his face.
Tony's giving him the I'm going to kill you slowly and no one is ever going to find all the body parts look.

"No, McGee, I did not," she says, little smile on her face; she's enjoying watching Tony squirm.

"Yeah. You'd think an adult, with a real income wouldn't need to share movie downloads..." Tony's suddenly looking a whole lot more relaxed. Yeah, they were movie downloads, but not the sort of movie Tim's implying. "...but for some reason his cheap side kicked in and he decided torpedoing your computer was worth saving twenty bucks."

Ziva's not looking like she believes that, but Tony jumps on it like a lifesaver tossed to a drowning man. "They were uncut footage of the original Shining. You can't get them legally. Not unless you're willing to take out a second mortgage."

She stares at him coolly, and shrugs, seeming to file this in the men are weird column, and let it go to continue working the case. But as she heads out, she raises an eyebrow at Tim. He flashes her a just wanted to make him sweat look. She nods at that.

Tim turns to Tony as soon as she's gone, very smug smile on his face. "Wanna call me a freak again?"

Draga just looks at both of them and then says, "McGee, that was just not cool. That's... I mean... There's a code and... That was not cool."

Tim shrugs again. "Don't mess with the guy who regularly saves your marriage because you're so damn dumb with a computer you can't figure out how not to get infected with every piece of malware on earth."

"Remind me not to call you for tech support!"

"Hey, I'm great tech support! I'm the best damn tech support you've ever met. I make house calls and work for coffee. Just don't rag on me after. Especially not two days after. Especially when your wife is twenty feet away."

Draga snorts at that, looks back at Tony, and then finishes packing up their vic's laptop.

"So... are you a freak?" Draga asks as they're working their way through William Wade (the victim's) electronics.

Tim rolls his eyes, both at the question and that Draga'd ask. He's not sure if this is part of Draga being the no privacy generation, or if he's just not got a very well-developed sense of appropriate. (Or maybe all that time on an aircraft carrier where you can't help but know everything about everyone else is coming into play.) Whatever it is, he's just staring at him, waiting for an answer, so Tim says, dryly, "I doubt I'm into anything that'd make you blush. Tony's vanilla."

"Uh huh. So, you're saying I need to ask Palmer to get an unbiased opinion."

Tim chuckles at that, imagining Jimmy's face if Draga wanders down to autopsy to ask that. "If you do, let me know what he says."

He and Ziva are heading off to talk to Wade's CO when she asks, "So, what was it?"

"Ziva?"
"Uncut footage of the Shining he would have not just told me about, for hours, but he would have dragged me over to watch it."

There are certain, tacit, unspoken agreements their little family has. One of those agreements is that, while it is true that Tim is tech support, and that he will fix up whatever issues Tony or Jimmy's computers 'mysteriously' develop, Breena and Ziva won't ask what caused the problem, but, if it's anything troublesome, he'll tell them about it.

He assumes that Tony and Jimmy have a similar deal with Abby, everything is confidential, unless keeping it confidential would cause real problems.

"Nothing bad."

"I know that. Lesbian cheerleaders or curious Catholic school girls?" Say whatever you like about Ziva, she knows Tony inside and out.

Tim nods, small smirk on his face, mostly expressing that he thinks the level of secret Tony thinks is necessary in regards to this is silly. "Curious lesbian Catholic school girls."

She shakes her head. "Why do men do that?"

"Look at porn?" He thinks that one's fairly obvious and is surprised she'd ask.

She's giving Tim her, do you think I'm an idiot? look. "I know why men watch porn. Why do they think it is such a big, dark secret?"

That strikes Tim as a much better question. "I don't know why Tony thinks it's some sort of deep, dark secret. I know a lot of guys don't want to get yelled at because of what they like. And I know a lot of women aren't cool with their guys looking at it."

Ziva rolls her eyes. "I am not a lot of women."

"I know it. He does, too. But it's like being afraid of spiders, it's deeply ingrained behavior."

She's still looking frustrated and kicks at the carpet on the floor of the car.

He sighs, signals, switches lanes and then says, "I don't know if this is Tony's thing, but… most of us have had this experience. You're home, decide you want some… " quiet time, and in the midst of said quiet time, as you're enjoying yourself, your mom, sister, girlfriend, or wife suddenly decides that she needs you right that second, and for whatever reason you don't have the door locked, and she walks in, sees what you're doing, and has a fit."

Ziva thinks that's pretty funny. At least, the way she's gasping for breath between episodes of hysterical laughter indicates that.

"Who caught you?" she finally asks, wiping tears from her eyes.

"Not saying."

"Oh, come on, you have got to. You cannot tell a story like that and not say!"

Tim rolls his eyes. Long experience with Ziva has taught him that he can answer the question, or have her investigate it. Might as well answer, because he's got no idea how Abby might answer it if Ziva asks her, but he's sure, like with the Diane rumors, that whatever version Abby comes up with
will be significantly more salacious than what really happened. "Penny."

Ziva's quivering she's laughing so hard.

Tim nods, and says sarcastically, "Oh yeah, single best day of my life. The three hour long lecture about how pornography objectifies women was torture. Now, this was the same women who was fine with me dressing up in her shoes, and actually flat out told my dad, while I was listening, that if I was gay it was fine, who prefaced the lecture with the longest twenty minutes in the history of time on how self-pleasure was fine and normal and natural, but a teenage, heterosexual male looking at pictures of naked women, oh noooo! End of the world."

Apparently, Ziva thinks that is a riot, too. Much more laughing ensues. Finally Ziva gets calmed down enough to say, "I didn't think Penny was that… restrained?"

"Good word. And no, she's not. You can do pretty much whatever you want with a real person, but ogling pictures of them turns sex into a commodity and that wasn't cool with her."

"Huh?" Ziva's a little unsure about the commodity aspect of this.

"Yeah." Tim had been way too close to exploding from embarrassment to actually follow Penny's argument on the subject, and he certainly hasn't brought it up with her since. "Anyway, most of us have had something similar happen, so we tend to be cagey about what we're looking at when we're on our own."

"But Abby knows what you like."

"Yeah, she…" Tim's eyes snap away from traffic to Ziva. "Wait, why do you know that?"

"We talk."

He glances back at traffic to make sure he's not about to crash into someone, and then looks back to Ziva to give her his, really? look. "You guys talk about what kind of porn we watch?"

"Of course."

Tim winces and rubs his forehead. "Really?"

"Yes. We talk about everything."

He sighs.

"We don't tell you guys about it, though."

"Small favors." He supposes he's not allowed to get upset about this. He thought it was an absolute riot when the girls added stuff to Tony's honeymoon box, so the idea that they were talking about all of the intimate details of Tony's sex life was just fine with him. "Really, everything?"

"Yes, McGee, everything."

"And, everything doesn't freak you out?"

"Why would it freak me out? You like what you like, and that's it."

He squeezes her hand. "Everything has freaked a whole lot of women out."

Ziva nods at that. "As I said, I am not a lot of other women. But, you don't hide what you like from
"No. I don't."

"Why?"

"I did the first time we dated, because we didn't know each other that well then. But we know each other a lot better now, so I knew it wouldn't freak her out, and that she'd probably like it. She did…" He thinks about the other reason, which is… very personal, but… maybe useful… especially seeing what Tony and Ziva are doing with marriage counseling and all… "You like porn or smut?"

Ziva's surprised he's asking that, but answers anyway, "Yes."

"You watch it with him?"

"Read."

"You read it to him?" If the girls really do talk, then this idea won't shock her, because he knows Breena and Jimmy do that.

"No."

"Okay, here's the deal. I like porn. I don't care if it's objectifying, not anymore." Okay, that sounds really bad. "I mean, I don't think it is," he can see Ziva's not particularly interested in this debate, "but that's an argument I can have with my grandmother, later. Or not, because… Anyway… But I like sex with Abby a whole lot better. And I'm not a machine so there's only so much sex I can have. So, I think it's important that if I am going to be getting off, that I do it with her."

"You don't…" Ziva's hand gesture is unmistakable.

Tim rolls his eyes. "Not saying I don't, just, not very often. And not if there's any shot of real sex with her. Not saying there's anything wrong with jerking off, either, but… if I blow off some steam after dinner, I'm not in shape for anything at bedtime, and being in shape for bedtime matters.

"Anyway, the reason I mention this is because she isn't freaked out by what I like, it doesn't have to be an either/or thing. We can watch it together, or if it's smut, read it together, and that's a lot of fun and has led to a lot of good things."

Ziva nods at that. "And, if I wanted to get him to share…"

Tim's eyes go wide. "Ummm…" Obviously he and Abby somehow negotiated this, but he's not really remembering who brought it up or why. Probably Abby, because that's more an Abby thing, but he just doesn't remember the first time it happened. "Read him your favorite story?"

"It has two men in it."

He probably didn't need to know that about Ziva. "Okay, don't read him that! That'd freak him out. But, you get my point."

"Yes. I do."

Two days later, Tim's picking up some files from Jimmy, when Jimmy asks him, "Okay, so why is Draga asking me if you're a freak or Tony's just vanilla?"

"Oh, God, I didn't think he actually would. There's something seriously wrong with that kid."
"Tim…" So, Tim explains how they got there. Jimmy seems to agree with Draga that what he pulled on Tony was a very low blow. "So, you're telling me I need to think twice about calling you when my computer dies."

"I didn't actually do it. And it's not like Ziva doesn't know what Tony's into. Hell, not like Breena doesn't know what you like, either. And, because they talk about 'everything' apparently the girls all know what all of us are into, too."

That's not news to Jimmy. He knows what the girls talk about. "Yeah, but there's knowing and there's knowing."

"Fine." A few beats go by. "So… what'd you say?"

"What?" Jimmy looks up from collecting the files for Tim, surprise in his face.

"I'm curious."

"I told him to mind his own business."

Really? is loud and clear on Tim's face. Gossip is the bread and butter of NCIS, keeping all hands happy and running smoothly. The idea that Jimmy wasn't contributing to it didn't sound right to Tim.

Jimmy rolls his eyes a bit. "I told him that if he really wanted to know, he needed to talk to Abby and Ziva, because, you know, I've never had sex with either of you and wasn't planning on starting anytime soon, in that I'm both married and straight, and for that matter, could not physically care less how kinky you are or how not kinky he is."

Really?

"Fine. I may have also said, that if you were going to ask me to bet, I'd say you were pretty far off the standard path. I mean, you wear kilts and makeup, and have how many tattoos now? And, come on, you're married to Abby! Not that Ziva's boring or anything, but... different sort of thing. And that Tony, on a really frisky day, went looking for a redhead to go with his blonde and Asian lesbian cheerleaders."

Tim sneers at that. "Well, that at least explains why he's been looking at me weird all day."

"Yeah, well, I'm gonna be looking at you weird all day, too. Why on earth would you tell him to talk to me when he's standing twenty feet away from Tony's wife?"

"He suggested it."

Jimmy's startled by that idea. "Now, I'm gonna be looking weird at him, too. Why would he think that I'd know?"

Tim just stares at Jimmy. "Because you do?"

Jimmy shakes his head. "God, talk about conversations I never expected to have." They stand there for a few more seconds before Jimmy says, "So... um... what would you say about me?"

"Uh…” Tim thinks about it for a second, working on some sort of shoe related comment, and then comes up with an even better one. "Out of deference to your wife, whom I both respect and adore, I have no comment on that subject." And then he smiles, pleased and cocky.

Jimmy whacks him on the shoulder with the back of his hand. "Yeah, you know it's coming and
think about it and come up with a good answer. I got blindsided."

Tim shrugs with a smirk.

Jimmy stands there, thinking, fingers tapping on the files in front of him. "Actually, what would you say?"

"Jimmy?" That's a much more intimate question than Tim's expecting.

He half-shrugs. "You know more about me than any other guy. Draga asks you if I'm a freak, what's your take?"

"Uh..." And that's a topic Tim never expected to have to talk about. "I don't know. I don't spend a lot of time pondering your sex life."

"Yeah, I know, but..."

"Like Ziva told me, you like what you like, not a big deal." "

"Even the shoes?" He had given Jimmy a lot of ribbing about the shoes back when they hypnotized him.

"Doesn't freak me out, if that's what you mean. I mean, I don't get the thing with the shoes. They're shoes..." Which are awfully low on the list of things that turn Tim on. He likes the whole finished effect of an entire outfit, and yes, as of yet, there has never been a time when he wasn't in favor of just stockings and stilettos, but he figures most guys feel that way, and he knows that's not how Jimmy likes shoes. Of course, he doesn't actually know what it is about shoes that Jimmy likes. "So, do you wear them, or like looking at them, or is the feet in them, or..."

Jimmy brushes that aside. "I don't get tattoos."

"I don't like tattoos, not like that." He thinks about that for a moment. "Okay, I liked getting the first one like that, because it was... you know, kind of dangerous and wild and so not 'me.'"

"Your first tattoo is computer code. That was dangerous?"

"Says the guy who breaks out in hives at henna."

"Black henna allergies are a real thing! Like peanuts level dangerous for some people!"

"Okay. Sorry. The first tattoo felt dangerous to me. Did getting your back done feel dangerous to you?"

"No. Felt like a way to get to see Breena's full back for an hour, and I just went along for the ride."

They both smile at that. Then Tim gets back to tattoos. "Okay, well, having someone brand something on my skin forever felt that way to me. And that... doing it... that was awesome. But that wore off about the time it had healed up. I know some people get off on them. Some people really like getting them. But, that's not me. I like the kind of people who tend to have them. The actual tattoos I can take or leave. But they usually mark people who are into the same things I am. But everyone wears shoes. You're not narrowing down the pool by picking shoes."

Jimmy shrugs. "As long as I can remember, I liked them. I always knew what all the women around me were wearing. You like butts, right?"

Tim nods.
"Do you remember choosing to like butts?"

"Nope. Just, 'round about the age of eleven I started noticing them."

"Exactly."

"So, you like shoes on girls?"

"Yeah." Shoes on girls are a very good thing for Jimmy.

"What about on their own? Like, just sitting in a box?"

"They're significantly less interesting to me then. Mostly, if I'm staring at them in a store, it's because I'm thinking about them on a woman."

"Do you do anything with them?"

Jimmy looks bothered by that idea. "Like what? Wear them?"

Tim nods. "Or anything?"

Jimmy's looking at him very curiously, what the hell would I do with them besides wear them?, and Tim's staring back with if you don't know, I don't need to enlighten you on his face.

"I don't wear them. They look dumb on me."

Tim thinks about that for a second, and then realizes exactly what Jimmy just said. "So, wait, you actually know that?"

Jimmy looks at him, long and cool. "I've seen you in eyeliner, nail polish, and a skirt, and you're going to act surprised by me in pumps?"

"Not judging or anything... Just didn't expect it from you."

"Just like with drugs, I've tried just about everything, at least once. On me... I look like Klinger from MASH. Not sexy at all. On her..." Jimmy nods happily, "much better! I like the way they look on her, and I like the way they feel against me if she wears them when we're fooling around. Especially, if we're doing it fast and public, she usually keeps them on, and those are some good memories"

"I get that." Granted not for shoes, but he figures liking Abby tied up is probably a kin to that. "I get liking almost getting caught."

Jimmy chuckles at that. "Yeah, but you suck at it. I've caught you twice already."

"You walk into my house without knocking when the girls smell like that, what do you expect?"

Jimmy shrugs.

"Like you weren't doing the same thing as soon as you could once you got home."

He grins at that. "Not the exact same thing."

"Uh huh." Tim's doubting that intensely. Then he notices that Jimmy said, 'exact same.' "You get all the way to bed?"

He smiles again, enjoying that memory. "I did tell Breena to wear that perfume with caution."
"Told Abby something similar."

"Found out Sunday night the other scent was just as good. Different, but…"

"Yeah. I can guess. Gonna start saving up for a big one?"

"I don't know. Variety is nice. Checked the website, that lady makes like two hundred scents; I made a list of ones that looked good. They sell the massage oil, too, suggested eight ounces of that to one of those little vials I got Breena. Might be a very good Valentine's Day present."

Tim thinks about that, nodding, enjoying the idea of rubbing some sort of silky, slippery oil all over Abby that smells like that perfume. Yeah, that's going on the list.

As he was thinking about that, and scents in general, he gets out his phone and makes a quick note for the McGee Dragons. Lady Skye is an alchemist, maybe perfumery is how she made her fortune and used it to move onto bigger and better things.

"Are you actually making a note of that?" Jimmy didn't go along on his little mental trip for how he got from massage oil to _perfume? alchemy? kind of related, right? Beguiling magical scents that make spying easier, scents that pull the truth out of a man..._

"Yes."

"I'm not writing down what you're thinking of doing for Valentine's Day."

"Good, cause that'd be kind of creepy."

Tim nods, agreeing on the creepy factor for that. "Why you thinking that far ahead?" Jimmy flashes Tim his _think about it for a second and it'll come to you_ look. And it did. "Oh."

"Yeah. Anna'll be out mid-December, so Valentine's Day, in addition to Molly's birthday, will probably be around when things start happening again, so…"

"I get you."

"Yeah. If there's ever a year where you don't want to muffle Valentine's..."

"No kidding. Speaking of presents, Abby said something to me about you guys sticking Molly's Christmas presents at our place... Take it from someone who mastered it, she's too young to peek."

"Not like that. If Anna hangs around the way Molly did, she won't be coming out until Christmas, so, if the presents are at your place, that means someone who's actually had six hours of sleep in a row will be in charge of making sure Molly gets them."

"You're putting me on assembly duty, aren't you?"

"Of course. I can barely plug my phone in to charge with a new baby in the house. Let alone a new baby, a twenty-two month old, and Christmas all at once. So, this year, you're putting together the toys."

Tim salutes. "Yes, sir." He takes the files from Jimmy. "I should probably get these up before I get head slapped for messing around."

"Up you go."
When Tim gets home, he spends a few minutes writing up a quick sketch for Skye, then does some research on how perfuming works and very rapidly comes to the conclusion that this is not something five minutes on Wikipedia is going to take care of. He figures he needs to know something about alchemy for this to work in the first place, since he's got a vague idea of Gabe and Skye eventually both leaving the sides they're fighting for, combining his magic with hers, and the whole McGee clan taking over their own land/island/whatever. He's fuzzy on what the eventual stakes of this war are, but he does like the idea of several different sides all fighting with each other and blending will-base magic with component-based magic.

Besides, lots of politics seems to be pretty standard fantasy fare these days. Team Good and Team Evil are about twenty years out of date, unless you're writing for kiddies. (As Sarah explained to him in extremely complex detail last week while they worked on cooking Thanksgiving dinner.)

It occurs to him as he's quickly jotting notes, that the scent he got Abby hits him really, really hard. It also occurs to him that while Abby likes the way his soap/shampoo/deodorant combo smells, and seems to like the cologne he wears on occasion, he has also noticed that this does not seem to produce the same result as the perfume he got her does for him.

It also occurs to him that, should he find himself in possession of some downtime later tonight, say, after Kelly goes to bed, that he could research this further and see if there were any scents that might produce said result.

Once upon a time, Tim wore cologne every day. Get up, shower, soap, deodorant, moisturizer, cologne. Having been the kind of guy who read Redbook and Marie Claire and similar publications he was well aware of the fact that women are significantly more sensitive to, and aware of, how men smell then men are for women. And that while it was true they didn't want guys to completely douse themselves in scent, that making an effort not to smell like sweat, ball funk, and unwashed clothing is a good plan.

He always aspired to smell good. Clean. Fresh. But not so covered in cologne that visible smell rays poured off his skin. And when it turned out the only moisturizer that kept his skin from feeling like sandpaper was FemmeGlow (He did, eventually, with Abby's help, locate a much better replacement.) which smelled like a combination of candy and pink flowers, he decided that it would be nice if he didn't smell like a sixteen-year-old girl.

So, cologne. And yes, it helped. He usually smelled good. (Though still like flowers. "Lilacs," Ziva said. She might have been right; he doesn't know what a lilac smells like. No matter, it wasn't precisely the scent he was going for, though.) Or, at the very least, Gibbs has never said anything about him "reeking" or made any off-color comments about "a French cat house." (Though he does remember the 'trying too hard' comment in regards to him wearing Old Spice.)

Two things changed that daily habit, first up Jimmy's, "If you don't want everyone on earth to know you're sleeping with her, not having her smell like your cologne is a good plan." That was the first step in maybe not needing cologne every day. (It was, by then, several years since Abby introduced him to the skin oil one of her buddies made that kept his skin happy and was, blessedly, unscented.)
The second part was a few months later, when he and Abby were just bumming around his apartment, enjoying a lazy weekend. Nothing to do, didn't go anywhere, he'd been writing, she'd been gaming or messing around on his computer. Spent the day in their pajamas. And when that day came to a close, he was heading to the shower (hadn't gotten one earlier) when Abby said to him, "You know, it's okay to smell like you. With as sensitive as your skin is, it'd probably be a lot happier if you didn't scrub it every day, and you don't need to do it to keep me happy. I wasn't kidding, I like how you smell."

That brought him up short, because as well as he could tell that was the first time in the history of womanhood that a girlfriend was asking her guy to shower less. "So, wait, you want me to get fewer showers?"

"Some bits of you probably need a daily wash, but not all of you. I mean, you're really conscientious about it, and if it's for you, that's fine, but if it's for me, I'm okay with you smelling like you."

It turned out that she was right. So, just like his hair gets a daily rinse but only gets washed twice a week, that's what happens with most of his skin (yes, certain smelly bits get washed every day) but (barring dealing with dead bodies) the rest of him gets washed every three days or so, and his skin is significantly happier for it.

And that's pretty much how it's been for the last two plus years, but now, as he's sitting in front of his computer, searching through the website of the company that made Abby's perfume, he's rapidly coming to the conclusion that there probably are scents out there that will make her jump him, and that he might enjoy locating them.

Plus, it's not like the whole sleeping with him thing is much of a secret anymore. Married, live together, kid that looks like both of them, that cat's well and truly out of the bag, so, if he did locate the male equivalent of the scent he got her, it wouldn't be an issue if, on occasion (a little wicked smile lit his face) say, at work possibly, Abby smelled like him.

Just like he's never felt self-conscious about walking around with her perfume on his skin.

On the site, he finds lot of different options, (Jimmy wasn't kidding, there are at least two hundred scents. And, no, there isn't a "men's" section.) and most of the tiny vials were in the ten to twenty dollar range, and there were even smaller tester sizes (one milliliter) in the five dollar range, so… He ends up spending a very pleasant twoish hours looking through everything. He's on the verge of going kind of bonkers and getting like twenty-five testers, when it occurs to him, that yes, the write ups on all of these scents sound great, and the names are fabulous, but he still has no idea what any of them smell like, and maybe, since there is an actual store that sells this stuff less than ten miles from his house, that going there and investigating would be a good plan.

Saturday morning, he and Kelly have a mission.

Okay, so there are probably some things that you shouldn't do with a baby. Scent shopping may be one of those things. It's hitting him as he's heading through the parking lot toward a tiny closet of a store that Kelly might not love this. It's also hitting him that if there's a space in this store large enough to turn the stroller around he'll be shocked.

But in he goes, and it is small, tight quarters. It's pretty much empty, just a lot of goth posters on the walls, and a glass counter with a laptop on it. He's not seeing bottles all over the place, or vials, or any of the rest of it. And, what's really surprising to him: it doesn't smell like anything.

He does see the blue-haired woman (though now it's green) who sold him Abby's perfume.
She looks up at him and smiles, seeming to remember him, as well. "I read your books."

Definitely remembers him.

"Thanks."

"Least I could do. Sold out of Thousand And One Nights after your tweet. Got a whole bunch of new customers all at once that day. That was a very good day."

"Good to hear it worked for you."

"Yeah, it did. So, what brings you back? No way you went through two ounces of Thousand and One Nights in less than a month."

"No."

"Christmas shopping?"

He hadn't thought of that, but probably should have. "Maybe. Wanted to find something for me. I went on your site, found a bunch of things that looked good, and then realized I liked the way they sounded but had no idea how they smelled."

She looks him over, head to toes, seeming very amused and surprised at the idea that he'd check out her site or like anything on it. "What sort of things caught your interest?"

He unfolds the list of scents he'd almost ordered online before the idea of trying them came to mind. "I was thinking of these."

She looks through it, hmmmimg, quietly, and then heads off. A minute later, she's back with a collection of amber-colored glass bottles and a box of coffee beans. "You picked a lot of wood scents, leather scents, or dragon's blood scents. Do you know what Dragon's Blood smells like?"

He shakes his head. Then he pulls up the leg of his pants enough for her to see the calf tattoo. "I like dragons."

She nods approvingly. "Cool. That your only ink?"

"No. Only one that's easy to see." It's cold out, he's wearing long sleeves, and a coat. "Got knot here." He taps his right arm. "Bit of code there." He taps his left. "Abby, my wife's, lips here," and touches his wrist.

"Mind showing me the knot?"

"No." Though he's a bit puzzled for why it'd matter. He shrugs out of his jacket and button down, and pushes up the sleeve of his t-shirt.

She eyes the knot appreciatively. "That's beautiful. Sam Onthan's?"

"Yes, actually. You know him?"

"Yeah. I thought the dragon might have been his, too. He did the piece on my back, and he's a customer of mine."

"Oh." He does remember that Sam, and his studio, have a fairly unique scent, though beyond 'kind of like incense and ink' he'd be hard pressed to explain what it smells like. "So... is seeing this useful?"
"Yes. Scent is very personal. Better I know you, the better I can figure out what'll blend with you," she says while opening one of the bottles, pushing it toward him. "This is Dragon's Blood."

Like any guy who's spent more than ten minutes in a lab he wafts a bit toward himself, instead of sticking it right under his nose and snorking it up.

Green haired-woman... Okay, he needs a name for her. "I'm Tim, in real life. Thom's my penname. Little girl here is Kelly."

"Hi, Tim." She leaned over the counter so Kelly could get a good view of her. "Hello Kelly. I'm Janice." He's a little surprised her name is so... normal, and she catches that. "What were you expecting? Raven?"

"Or Phoenix or Soibhan or something."

She half-smiles at that. "What can I say? Not too many Ravens in 1979. So, what do you think of it?"

He wafts more of it toward him, and Janice appears to approve of his technique. "Sweet. Incense-y. Fruity? Flowers? Little dark on the edges. Maybe something woody? The way dark red is supposed to smell? Puts me in mind of the store I used to get my roleplaying books at."

"Okay." She closes that up and hands him the box with the coffee.

"I know what that smells like."

"You and everyone else. Helps you get off one scent and onto the next."

"Okay."

She pushes the next bottle toward him, but doesn't take her hand off of it. "Just about everything you picked has a sandalwood note to it."

"Yeah, one of my partners wears sandalwood a lot; I like it."

"Then you probably know the scent, sort of." She opens the bottle. "That's real sandalwood. Remember the costs more than gold thing?" He nods. "This is one of them. Sandalwood trees have to be fifty-years-old before they're any good for perfumes, they're endangered, and finding responsibly sourced sandalwood is a bitch. But this is it, the real deal. I'm hooked up with a plantation that's doing it right, so they only harvest four trees a year, which means this stuff is more expensive than gold."

He leans closer and wafts it toward him. "Wow. That..."

"Doesn't smell like you expected it to, does it?"

"No," And that's not a bad thing, at all. This is... just... really. Yeah, he likes it a lot. She's looking at him expectantly, so he tries to explain how it smells to him, as she closes it and tucks it back nice and safe. "This is... buttery almost. Dry. Woody certainly. Not..." He doesn't have a word for the scent he thought sandalwood was, but isn't.

"Much at all like what you thought it'd smell like?" He nods. "It's so hard to get the real stuff, it's usually not actually in sandalwood blends. Usually it's a synthetic version. Don't get me wrong, there are some good synthetics out there, but you don't get the depth from the synthetics. If the real stuff is in a blend, it's at way less than one part per thousand."
"So, do you use the synthetics in your blends?"

"In some of them. Depends on if it's a base note. If Sandalwood is supposed to carry the scent, then I use the real stuff. If it's a nuance, then I'll use the synthetics. No need to use the real stuff if you won't be able to smell all of it."

Tim nods with that. It makes sense to him. "I like it."

"You and just about everyone else. There's a reason it's endangered, and unlike the Pandas it's not because it doesn't want to reproduce."

She looks him over again, and right now he's in his classic bumming around with Kelly gear. Jeans, t-shirt, button down, jacket, sneakers. She's looking a little doubtful, but her eyes flick back to his wrist, where the wrist cuff is visible.

"A lot of the ones you like have leather notes. Do you actually like leather, or do you like the idea of it?"

He knows he looks like a mild-mannered suburban dad right now, so it's a fair question. "I like actual leather. Actual leather doesn't like an almost six-month-old drooling on it, and baby spit up isn't good for it."

She looks at Kelly, who is sitting in her stroller, gnawing on her pacifier, and watching the two of them intently. "Good point. What color?"

He thinks that's a pretty weird question, can't imagine how the color effects this, but what the hell, why not? "Both of my jackets are black. My boots and most of the shoes are black. I've got one brown belt, one brown pair of shoes. The wrist cuff is black." He pauses, debating adding the last bit of leather he owns. But, it's not like he's ashamed of it. It's just private. But, so's what he's hoping to find a scent for. "My collar is black."

Her eyebrows shoot up. "Interesting."

He smiles a little, appreciating the sudden added respect he's seeing in her face. Like between that and the tattoos he's identified himself as someone who belongs in this shop. "Wouldn't have pegged you for that."

"I switch."

"Lucky wife."

"She thinks so."

Janice smiles and makes a little note on the pad next to her. "How do you feel about patchouli?"

"Hippies? Pot?" He shrugs. It's nothing he's ever contemplated. "Don't feel anything about it. My day job is in law enforcement, so might be nice not to smell like a head shop."

Now Janice is looking at him again, peeling away extra layers. "You're a cop? Those stories real?"

"No. They're more a love letter to my job and team. The people are real, the cases aren't. And I'm a cop for another month, and then I'm moving up the food chain."

She looks at him for another few seconds. "So, are you MacGregor?"

"Enough. Some of the time. I'm MacGregor, and I'm Thom, and I'm Tim, and a few other guys, too."
Are you always Janice?"

She seems to understand that. "Not always. So, when you said code..."

"I meant I've got a few lines of Python on my bicep. It's my master's thesis in forensic computing."

"Huh." She takes out two bottles, opening them carefully. "Left is real patchouli, right is oakmoss."

He wafts and sniffs. "I prefer the oakmoss. Earthy, kind of cool, forest-y? The patchouli smells like dirt to me."

"Okay. That's a genetic thing. Some people smell patchouli as a deep, earthy, spicy scent. For other people it's a pile of dirt. How's it smell to your wife?"

"No idea. Never noticed her wearing it."

"Do you usually wear cologne?" She's marking off scents on his list.

"Not for a few years."

"What did you used to like?"

"Burberry Classic. Polo Black."

That also surprises her. "That's a lot lighter and crisper than anything you've got on this list. She doesn't say, kind of generic, but he's got the sense she's thinking that, too."

"Used to wear it every day. Also used to care a whole lot more about blending in with everyone else. I was thinking of some sort of special occasion-"

That gets a smile out of Janice. "Like night out, or night in?"

"Both. Thousand and One Nights is... really good on my wife."

Janice's smile develops proud and smug notes. "Makes you want to eat her alive?"

"Yeah. I was thinking about something along those lines for me, well, not for me... Thousand and One Nights is for me. On me?" Janice nods. "Little, black, lacy things look dumb as hell on men, so the scent equivalent of that."

She's giggling slightly at that, then she eyes him up and down. "I bet you'd be awfully cute in some sort of little, black, lacy thing."

He looks her over coolly, wondering if she's trying to see if he'll blush, and says, dryly, "My wife didn't agree. And I didn't, either."

She laughs at that answer, pleased by it. "So, you want something sexy?"

"Something for date night or work would be fine, too. But mostly I'm looking for good night at home, or very good night clubbing."

"What kind of club?"

He thinks through the different places they've been, and are likely to go again. Hell, if they ever all get babysitting again, it's their turn to pick the place. And he knows where they're going. He smiles. "For the night I'm thinking of, Enoch's Cove."
Now she's blinking in shock, apparently she knows the Goth club he's thinking of. "You're a member?"

"Since 2012. We don't get there very often, especially not since Kelly joined us, but, yes, we're members. Abby's been since '99."

"I feel like I should already know you, or her, at least."

He smiles at that. "Abby knows everyone. She's probably on your Facebook feed. Friend of a friend or something like that."

"Maybe. Okay, last thing." She opens three vials. "Which one do you like best."

They all smell the same to him, he's not sure if he can smell a difference, or if he thinks there's supposed to be a difference so he's imagining one. He tries burying his nose in the coffee beans between sniffing, but it doesn't help. "I honestly can't tell the difference."

"That's fine. I'm just checking how sensitive your sense of smell is. They pretty much are the same. One on the left leans sweeter, middle has more bitter notes, right is musky." She puts the stoppers back into the vials and packs everything up. "Okay, back in a bit."

She comes back with seven of the tiny tester vials, two of them already filled, five pipettes, and five amber bottles. One of the little testers she set aside. "Not for you. Present for your wife, for her, when you're wearing the collar."

"Oh."

"Every day wear." She pushes two of the amber bottles toward him. "One's a blending in with everyone else scent. Think fresh air and ocean." He sniffs and yes, it does put him in mind of sitting on the beach. Really, literal beach. Not that vaguely blue "beach" scent that so many home scents/perfumes have. It's freaky how much that smells like the ocean. He's not sure how it'd smell on him, or if he wants to smell like the literal ocean, but it's interesting.

"One not so much blending in scent, still light and appealing, but not sexy, good work scent. Woods: cedar, sandalwood, little pine, rosewood, all well-aged and clean."

"Might have Gibbs sniffing my neck." He mutters, inhaling, and this is definitely woody, in a good way. Actually does make him think of Gibbs's basement a bit. "Add some bourbon to that, and it'd be the perfect scent for my dad."

"I've got a version like that."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Wood, bourbon, little bit of sea spray. It's very popular."

"I need one of those, too. He builds boats."

She smiles, heads back for a moment, and puts a small bottle of that next to the tester that's for Abby. "Date night. Out somewhere nice." She pushes the next bottle toward him.

"Family wedding?"

"Something like that. Something you'd wear a suit, or better yet, tux to." She opens the bottle. "Little sexy, restrained. Nothing's happening until you get home, but you're probably cutting out early." He
nods along, liking that description quite a bit. "Little sweet, little heavy: sweet myrrh, frankincense, black amber, jasmine, mandarin orange, three woods, drop of vanilla to smooth it together."

He really, really likes that. It's very male and sophisticated, expensive, lush. When she was listing myrrh and frankincense he was afraid it was going to be a bottle of Christmas, but this really isn't. This is the man DiNozzo Sr. thinks he is, but isn't. Hell, this is the man James Bond thinks he is, but isn't. "Just grab a big one of that."

"Try it on your skin first. Can't do returns on these. That's why you're going home with testers. These will smell different on you than they do in the glass."

He looks away from the tiny vial and up at her. "Let me guess, this is another one where the full-sized bottle is frighteningly expensive?"

There's that smile again, sharp and amused. "It's not cheap."

"Then I'll make sure it works on my skin."

"Good plan." She recaps the bottle and opens another. "Enoch's Cove night. Dead sexy, for you. Dragon's blood, leather, smoke. This one wears close to the skin. She's got to get in your lap before she'll smell it, but once she does, she won't want to leave." He sniffs and blinks. It's his jacket. The original leather jacket. The first piece of really good leather, really good clothing, he ever bought. The one he adored, that Abby had to cut to test for radiation. Soft, supple, black leather that felt like a warm, sexy hug draped over his body. His jacket, but better, whole, warmed by the sun, worn outside on a really splendid fall day, ripe with harvest scents, little hints of smoke in the air. He's just sort of gaping at it, stunned that there's that much... response in him from a smell. "I take it you like that one."

"Oh, God, yeah."

She caps it and hands him the coffee beans to clear his sense of smell, making a few more notes. Then opened the next bottle. "The metaphorical something black and lacy. Got any plans for this afternoon?"

He shakes his head.

"You do now. Give me your wrists." He does, taking off his cuff and watch. "This isn't the stuff you got at the men's department at JC Penny's. Little bit goes a long way."

"White musk, white sandalwood, Spanish moss, few florals, little herbal so it's not too femme, slight hint of ocean. You've got a pretty strong ocean vibe to you."

He laughs at that.

"What?"
"I'm a Navy cop."

She laughs, too. "I think this one's going to get along well with you."

He's nodding along, no idea how it'll smell to Abby, but it's making him feel sexy and eager. "What's that last one?" he asks looking at the little, already filled tester, sitting next to them.

"For you to test on your own." She taps the tester, not opening it. "He's got no middle gears. Depending on your body chemistry he's just very, very animal male lust, full-on grab her by the hair and take her off to ravish her, or he's dirty goats and cat pee."

Tim's all in favor of that until she got to the downside. "Doesn't sound very appealing."

"He's not, if he doesn't agree with you. If he does... Well, let's put it this way, he's the only thing that's ever gotten my wife to look at a guy twice. Helps if you're already leaning in that direction to begin with. But he usually takes at least ten minutes to warm up, sometimes closer to half an hour, and in the bottle he reeks, so he doesn't get opened in here."

"And does he wash off easily if he doesn't agree with you?"

"Eh..." No is clear on her face. "Maybe don't rub him on your neck until you know if he agrees with your chemistry."

"Okay." He looks at the little collection of vials in front of him. "So any of the things I liked the sound of in front of me?"

She circled two of the names on his list, while affixing little stickers to each vial with their names, and pipetting the scents into them. "Some of the others," she put little stars next to three of them, "Will probably be good choices, too. But how about you go play with these, test them out, see how they work with your skin, before adding much new stuff. Only so much your nose can take before it shuts down."

And with that, she tidies everything up into a small bag and with a swipe of the credit card, sends him on his way.

Chapter End Notes

I'm a huge fan of Black Phoenix Alchemy Lab, so all of the scents mentioned here are stolen from them or inspired by them. I've got links up on the blog for which scent is which.
"So, successful trip?" Abby asks, looking up from her laptop as he and Kelly head in. He had told her what he was off to do. And before he can answer, she inhales deeply and says, "Oh, yes!"

She's up, draped around him, purring in a very content sort of way, sniffing along his jaw and throat. "What is that?"

"Apparently, exactly what I asked for." He hands over Kelly, who's fussing a bit, wanting some lunch right that second, as he smiles at her and takes his jacket and hers off.

"Hello to you, too." Abby says to her daughter once she's out of her cold weather gear, taking her into the kitchen, putting her in the highchair. Lunchtime is a cereal and formula meal. "Lunch'll be ready soon, little girl."

Kelly smiles.

"You think she understood that, or does she just know that highchair time means food soon?" Abby notices she's drifting closer to Tim as she asks, wanting to strip him down and rub all over him.

"No idea." He takes two steps closer to her, kissing her gently, and put his collection of tiny vials and the list on the table, next to Abby's seat. She presses against him, and his hands are in the process of wandering away from putting the scents on the table, looking to find some soft, warm, curvy Abby bits to cup, when Kelly interjects with some definitive, 'Feed Me Now' sounds.

They break apart with another quick kiss, and Tim starts to get some lunch for them, as well.

Being a parent is a balancing act. For example, right now, if this was a year ago, and Kelly was still on the inside, Abby knows that the absolute last thing they'd be doing right now is making lunch.

But Kelly is hungry, and she's fussing. When it was clear that being set in the highchair would not make food immediately appear, her smile fell and the little wa wa wa cry of 'Hey, food, now! C'mon, hurry up! I'm starving here!' came back out again.

But, as Abby's moving around the kitchen, mixing up formula and getting the cereal, Tim's also in there, moving around, grabbing sandwich stuff for them, and he's close and smells amazing, and looking like walking sex and just...

God...

Not pinning him to the counter and just getting to it is killing her.

And if she's got to be this turned on and distracted while baby wrangling, she thinks he should be, too.

For her, today's been a Saturday morning, spent laying around the house. She's in jammy pants, t-shirt, and a bra. She gets the formula into the bottle, adds the water, and caps it, shaking the mix up, while slipping off the pants.

She knows Tim loves her ass, and the t-shirt is just long enough to almost, but not quite, cover it. And yes, she's smiling as she heads to Kelly, mixed-bottle in hand, well aware of the fact that he's staring at her, eyes glued to the little glimpses of her rear as she walks toward their daughter, lunch
utterly forgotten.

And it's also true, that usually, if they're feeding Kelly in the highchair, that whoever's doing the feeding sits in one of the chairs next to her, so, the fact that she's standing next to the chair, leaning a little, bent just a bit at the waist, so that the shirt rides up just another inch higher, is not in any way, shape, or form an accident.

She looks over her shoulder to him, once Kelly's got the bottle in her mouth, and smiles, happy, wicked, come and get me on her face.

His eyes are hot, devouring her, and sending back a very clear, oh yes, I am definitely coming to get you! message as he bites his lips and slowly, making sure she's watching him do it, adjusts himself in his jeans.

Abby's eyes sparkle at that, the sight of him hard against denim, his hands on himself, and Kelly brings them back to the real world with another chirp.

Tim's eyes pull away from Abby, and his hands shift away from his dick, as he picks up the cereal, mixes it with water, and then brings that over to her at the table. Tim presses right up behind her, rubbing against her back, nuzzling her neck, as he sets the bowl on the table.

Abby wants to melt into him, strong arms around her, that delicious scent wrapping into her skin. He's still wearing his shoes, and she's barefoot, so he's enough taller than she is that she's feeling small and very femme. She turns her face to kiss him, and he kisses back, teasing, flicking her lip with his tongue, and then steps away, quickly. "Gotta get a spoon for her."

She sighs, that's right. "And a bib." One thing they have both noticed in the week since they started feeding it to her, is that cereal meals are a hell of a lot messier than formula or nursing.

He comes back a second later, putting the spoon on the high chair, and wrapping the bib around Kelly's neck. Then leaves again, gently stroking Abby's rear as he heads back over to the counter to make them some lunch.

She sits in the chair, facing Kelly. That makes holding the bottle she's eagerly sucking down a bit easier. (Not that it's difficult, but it's easy to kind of miss Kelly's mouth if she's not paying enough attention. And right now Abby is not paying enough attention.)

"So, which one of these are you wearing?" Abby asks, pulling the vials towards her. "Whip?"

He shakes his head. "That's a present for you. Janice, the perfume lady, told me it's yours, for when I'm wearing my collar."

"You told her you've got one?" Abby's pretty surprised by that. It's not the sort of thing that tends to come up in general conversation.

"We were talking about leather scents and if I liked real leather or the idea of it, and she wanted to know what color the leather I owned was, so I told her what I had and what color it was."

"Uh huh." She can't open the little vials one handed, and Kelly does not look like she wants to take a break. "This'll be easier when you can hold up your own bottle," she says to her daughter, who keeps contentedly sucking away. She does pick it up, and sniff, hoping to get an idea through the cap, and she does get a hint of roses and leather. That makes her smile.

She does keep picking up the vials, sniffing the caps, getting a hint as to what is what. "Vicomte De Valmont?"
"I think that's what I've got on. Kind of fluffy name."

"You don't know who is he, do you?"

He looks up from laying pieces of bread on the counter. "Not a clue. Real guy? Character?" He's making up corned beef on rye for both of them.

"Character. Dangerous Liaisons."

Tim shakes his head. "Never saw it or read it."

She nods, expecting that.

"He one of the good guys?"

"I think it's fair to say that story doesn't have good guys. He's a protagonist, but not, by any stretch, a good guy."

"Okay, what sort of bad guy is he? Am I wearing eau de murdering-psycho?"

"Would you stop wearing it if it was?"

He thinks about that for a moment, eyes skimming over her legs, thinking about how much she seems to approve of this. "How much do you like it?"

She licks her lips, staring him straight in the eye, and then lets her eyes travel slowly down his body, settling on his erection, and dragging back up again after a long, deep breath. "I really like it."

"Then I don't care what it's called," he says, shaking his head. "So, what'd he do?"

"He's a sadist. Seduces women and breaks their hearts for amusement."

"Lovely. This is a movie millions of women thought was achingly romantic?"

"He eventually falls in love with one of them, and then screws it up, ends up fighting a duel with this other guy, and dies, but not before the woman he falls for dies, too, and... actually, everyone dies."

She didn't sound very certain about that. "You weren't really paying attention when you saw it, were you?"

"More like I was supposed to read it for a French class, but I never got good enough at French to get the nuances."

"Ah." He finishes up their sandwiches and places them in front of her, and then takes her free hand, lifting gently, letting her know he wants her to stand. He sits on the chair, and tugs her into his lap. She settles in, wriggling in a very pleasant sort of way, leans in closer to his neck, and inhales deeply. "I really like this."

"Thanks. I do, too." He nips gently at her shoulder, before lifting his sandwich and taking a bite. He's thinking that getting done lunch as soon as possible, and Kelly in bed as soon as possible after that is an exceptionally good plan.

She continues sniffing at the vials, and then looks at the bigger one. "You bought a bottle of something called Jolly Roger?"

He put his sandwich down, and opened it for her. "For Gibbs. One Christmas present down, all the
rest to go."

Her eyes went wide as she inhaled. "That's... God, that's a boat, a handmade wood boat, at sea, and the guy on it is drinking rum."

"And now you know why I thought of him when I smelled it."

"Rum?"

"It's close enough to bourbon."

She sniffs it again. "Might want to smell this on you, too."

"Not really a boat guy."

"Exactly. Unless it's in dry dock, this is the closest I'm getting to you on a boat voluntarily."

He laughs at that. "Wanna play pirate?"

She grins and rocks against him. "I might."

He gently strokes the tip of his index finger from her ear to the collar of the shirt, and then much less gently squeezes her breast. "Arrgh." He bites her ear lightly, and she laughs. "I've got a wishlist set up on her site. You can add it for me, or anything you want for you."

"Good." She picks up another vial, sniffs at the lid, and winces. "Ulgh! What on earth made you buy this?"

"Oh. That one." He took it in hand and twisted it around so he could see the name. Satyr. Fitting.

He explains why he brought that one home, and Abby does look intrigued, but exceptionally doubtful as well. "So, you're telling me this woman could sell ice to Eskimos?"

"I'm telling you she could sell ice perfume to Eskimos."

She sniffs him again. "Sexy ice perfume."

He kisses her shoulder, his fingers sliding up her inner thigh, just barely brushing her pubic hair, making her shiver. "Very sexy ice perfume. Wicked ice. Cold and sparkling, glittering on your skin, slowly melting with your heat into soft, full drops of water, quivering with each gasped breath and I lick them off your skin."

"Mmmm..." Abby squirms against him again, eyeballing Kelly's bottle. She's almost done. Then cereal. Then naptime. Then sex.

She pulls the highchair a bit closer, and then stands, handing the bottle to Tim. Kelly looks confused at this. "You hold on." And Tim does, quickly getting the bottle back in his daughter's mouth. Abby straddles his lap, facing him, unbuttoning his button down, pulling the collar of his t-shirt aside, and nibbling on his collar bone, rocking gently on his lap.

"Oh, god, baby, you're killing me!"

"You think you weren't fucking with me?"

He bites his lip, resisting rocking back against her. Then he nips hers, wanting to suck it between his lips, lick it, taste her slow and deep, but he's also feeding their child right now, so he pulls back and
says, "Not that bad."

She shifts from rocking to an exceedingly slow roll of her hips, circling against him with exquisite pressure. "Better?"

His head falls to her shoulder. "God, yes." He puts the bottle down and grabs her hips, stilling them. "And no. Got a baby to feed here, don't need to be cumming in my pants to go with it."

"You're not that close," she says, knowing his sexual response cycle in and out.

And she's right, he's not. "Yet. I will be if you keep doing that!"

Kelly starts fussing again. Yes, the bottle is just about done, but she's not full, and she can see the bowl with the cereal in it in front of her, but though she's grabbing for it, she's not able to succeed in getting the food into her mouth.

Tim lets go of Abby's hips. Then he kisses her, hard, fast, deep. Too fast. That should have been a long, thorough, full-out making love kiss. Instead it was a promise of love to come.

"I want you upstairs, in our bed, naked, spread out and waiting for me. I'll feed her and get up there as soon as I can."

Abby grins at that. "Can I be looking at pictures, too?"

"As long as they're of us, yes."

She brushes his lips with one more kiss, and bounces (God, that's killing him, too, that soft, pert bounce of her ass as she heads out) out of the kitchen toward their room.

Tim closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, counts to five, and then opens them, grabs the bowl of cereal that Kelly's just about to flip over, gets the spoon into it, and starts to feed her.

Being a parent is about patience. There's the patience of allowing your child to learn to do whatever it is. Not jumping in and taking over because it's faster and easier if you do it.

But that's patience for parents of older children.

For parents of babies, the key to patience is accepting that babies move at their own speed, and that speed is slow.

So, even though Tim had time to eat his own sandwich, and get a drink, and mess around with the wishlist he set up, Kelly is still, slowly, munching her way through her cereal. In that she's only been eating "solid" (though how you could possibly consider something that is only marginally thicker than formula a solid boggles Tim's mind) food for a week, she's still in the this is really new part of eating, and hasn't quite gotten down the whole food goes in mouth, swallow thing.

She keeps trying to use her tongue to nurse it, which results in spitting a good deal of each spoonful out.

This morning, the fact that at least two thirds of all food gets pushed out of her mouth, then spooned back in, and then spit out again, and over and over until enough calories have been absorbed by her skin to do the job, did not bug him. That was just feeding a baby.

Right now, when there is something he'd much, much rather be doing, it's driving him buggy.
And this is the patience of a small baby. It's the balancing act of your needs and wants versus hers. It's knowing that if you rush and do a half-assed job she's going to fuss and cry and not properly nap.

So, as lunch is stretching out, and out, and the little pile of cereal in the bowl gets smaller in microscopic increments, Tim is being patient.

Eventually, after three quarters of forever (real elapsed time: twenty-nine minutes) Kelly was fed, cleaned up, sung to, and sleeping.

And Tim is standing, at the door to his room, watching, feeling the blood cascade back into his dick.

She's naked, and spread out, sort of.

She's on her elbows and knees. Ass high, legs spread, glistening wet pussy on display. She's gently, slowly fingering herself. Just the tip of her middle finger circling lightly over her clit. He knows that move, that's the just staying on the edge of getting off stroke.

If there's a more deliberate fuck me now pose, he's got no idea what it would be.

He sees she's got her earbuds in, and just knows she's watching one of the videos of them. He doesn't know which, obviously, but they usually do still pictures, so there's only a few videos to pick from, and he knows all of them by heart.

Between what he's seeing, and the memories in his head that go with the different videos, his pants are frightfully tight.

And then they're on the floor, along with his boxers.

He doesn't know if she's got the volume up high enough she can't hear him, or if she's playing with him, pretending she doesn't know he's in their room. Either way, with that pose, he figures this is welcome.

He gets onto their bed fast, and she has to feel that, but she doesn't respond, other than to wiggle her ass at him. He gets that she's pretending to be so engrossed in the video she's lost to everything else. That's fine. She wants to pretend they're fucking and get "surprised," he's happy to play along and add the real thing. In a second, he's kneeling behind her, grabs his dick, squeezing and stroking himself just bit, (That feels too damn good right now, too.) lines up, and slips in, groaning at how good she feels.

She makes a surprised squeaking sound. He pulls her up, so she's kneeling too, back against his chest, then yanks the cord on the earbuds, so they jerk out of her ears.

"Good?"

"Fuck yes!" she moans, turning to kiss him. He feasts on her lips as one hand finds a breast, and the other one slips to her clit, replacing her barely touching caress with a firm, fast stroke.

She's close, a lot closer than he is. He can feel it in the tightness in her body, the panting of her breath, the way she's frantically sucking his tongue. And, God, by all that is or ever was good and holy, that feels good. Feels amazing.

He breaks the kiss, licking her jaw and throat. "Wanna feel you come, baby."

She's rocking against him, pressing herself into his fingers, grinding on his cock, and he rubs a little
faster, little harder, and she goes just a hair tighter before her whole body ripples against him.

She's moaning, and he gentles his stroke. "That's it! So beautiful, Abby."

For a few seconds, she rests against him, cradled in his arms, his head resting on her shoulder as her body twitches and her breathing slows. Then she kisses him, long and slow and deep. The kiss they should have had downstairs.

She breaks the kiss, squeezing around him deliberately. "You're not done, are you?"

He shakes his head, grinning. "Not yet."

"Good." She drops onto her elbows and wiggles her hips in a very encouraging, very, very, insanely good sort of way, and he growls quietly. "Want you to go as hard and fast as you like."

He grunts, the pleasure of those words and the feel of doing it short-circuiting the part of his brain that comes up with words, stroking into her fast and hard.

"Ohhh... Just like that, Tim. Want your finger marks on my hips."

He grabs her hips, pulling her back as he thrusts. She meets him, arching back against him, hard and deep. She's rocking fast, and so is he, encouraging him with a steady stream of "Fuck/God, yes/So good/Fuck!/Please!" as he groans with each stroke.

He can see his fingers leaving little pink marks on her hips, and watch his body slipping into hers, high as a kite on the feel and sight of this. He doesn't go quite as fast as he can, he wants another minute here, hovering between the intense erotic pleasure of almost-there-but-still-in-control and the free fall of climax.

A minute's enough. He moves faster, savoring her half-moaned words, plunging over and over into her, reveling in the wet slide of her body on his and the bursting, pulsing ecstasy of climax.

Three days later, he's in the car with Gibbs, who's been looking at him all day, trying to figure out why he smells the way he does. At one of the stop lights, Gibbs looks over at him and says, "Did you start woodworking?"

Tim just grins.
Last year, when Tim relieved Abby of her Christmas decorating gear, and valiantly went out into the snowy cold to apply said gear to the house, he did not realize he was setting up a pattern for future Christmasses.

But he was.

And thus, this year, in somewhat less cold and no snow, he's once again out there, with a ladder and lights, bedecking the house, grumbling about it the whole way through.

It is one thing to grab the lights and prevent your pregnant wife from getting up on a ladder.

It's something else all-together when she just pouts at you about how cold it is and how nice the house looked last year and how good you are with that sort of thing.

But he's out there, doing it, because…

Because it's Abby, and she's already got everything in the world she wants, and he's not exactly swimming in Christmas present ideas, and the house all lit up makes her happy, so he's doing it.

When he gets in, he finds out that ultra-rich, ultra-dark, ultra-yummy hot chocolate waiting for him is also part of the tradition.

And this year, he notices something else, stockings hung by the chimney with care.

Three of them.

And a darling baby girl, sitting in front of the fireplace, looking up at them.

So, once he's got his cold weather gear off, and warmed his hands up on the hot chocolate, he sits down behind Kelly, picking her up and cuddling her against his chest.

"Looks like Mama's getting ready for Santa to visit."

Abby, who's been putting the lights on the tree, turns and smiles at him. "Oh yes. Kelly's first Christmas, can't not have stockings for that."

He stands up. There are three of them, one is white with silver snowflakes on it, one is green with darker green holly, and one is blue with white snowmen.

"Whose is whose?"

"You get to pick."

"What do you think, Kelly, should I have green or blue? I think Mama gets white." Kelly reaches out and grabs the snowman. "Green one's mine. I think she likes blue."

One of the things about being in possession of a small baby is that it's really difficult to not go overboard with the cute.
Tim's never thought he was a particularly cute person, (Tony and Jimmy both think that, given how Halloween went, this is an utterly hilarious self-assessment.) but as the Christmas season rolls around, and being in possession of an almost six-month-old daughter, he's noticed that he has a very difficult time going to Target for supplies and not coming out with some sort of painfully cute little thing to put her in.

Unfortunately, this problem is not alleviated by sending Abby in, because she's even worse at it than he is.

Kelly already has winter gear. She doesn't need a furry little bear suit. Not at all.

But gosh, it was so cute. And little, though it's kind of big on her. (It's size 6-12mo) And fuzzy, did he mention fuzzy? And look (here's where Abby started cooing) it's got ears! Oh, and look, paws!

Fortunately, in that she is six-month-old, and has no idea how overboard her parents are going, Kelly is willing to tolerate being stuffed into a variety of painfully cute little outfits.

And her Pop has shots of all of them on his phone, and a few of the really good ones on the wall behind his desk. And it might be possible that he's… maybe… made some Christmas tree ornaments… that sort of have her pictures, in her painfully cute little bear suit, in them, hanging on his tree.

First grandbaby, he's allowed to go a bit bonkers, too. (It's also possible that very similar ornaments will be given to the rest of the family as Christmas presents.)

"Okay, so I understand how I got wrangled into doing this to my house, but why am I decorating yours?" Tim asks Jimmy as he hands him another string of lights.

"Because Breena's about to pop, and when she told Abby she didn't have the energy to do any decorating she bundled you and Kelly into the car and over you came."
"Yeah, sounds about right."

"And next thing I knew they were staring at both of us, and you volunteered to do the outside." Jimmy leans a bit further over, and Tim steadies the ladder while he tacks up another few feet of lights.

"That's not how I remember it."

"Breena's on the sofa with Molly and Kelly, Abby's putting up the tree, they both keep looking at us, and then you say, 'I guess we should go do the outside.' That doesn't sound like volunteering to you?"

Tim shoots Jimmy an irked look. "Yeah it does. I remember you saying it."

Jimmy snorts. "Just keep telling yourself that."

"At least it's not so god-awful cold this year."

"That's true." High thirties isn't comfortable, but it's not bad either. "And just think, in fifteen or so years we'll say, 'Kids, go decorate the house!'"

Tim laughs at that idea, and how well it'll likely go over. "And they'll complain, whine, and flip us off because house decorating is something old people do, and they want to be out with their buddies."

Jimmy laughs at that, places one more tack, and says, "Okay, roofline and windows are done. Wrap some lights on the porch railing, stick the wreath on the door, and we're done."

"Amen."

Jimmy descends the ladder, and Tim hands him another string of lights, and between the two of them, getting the porch wrapped up goes pretty fast.

"So, I thought you really liked this stuff. Last few years you've helped Abby decorate the lab," Tim says as they're stepping back to look at the finished house, noticing that there are still two full boxes of outside decorations.

Jimmy shrugs.

"You okay?"

"Enough."

"Jimmy?"

Jimmy looks at his house, as if he could see through the wall to where Breena is. "It's different this time. I know it. I really, really do know it. But she's starting to have contractions, you know that one an hour, two the next hour, nothing for three hours just getting revved up thing?"

Tim nods. "Yeah, I remember that."

"So, it's different. She's full term. Anna's fine. She's healthy. They did an extra, just-checking scan last week, and she's perfect. Everything is going to be fine." He's as much convincing himself as telling Tim. "But, sometime in the next few weeks, we're going back to that hospital," Jimmy half-smiles, then takes his glasses off and wipes his eyes, and clears his throat, "and we're going to do the whole labor thing all over again, and... just... lots of memories."
"Oh."

"And our OB said this would be part of it. That it's normal. And it's part of both grieving and moving on. And that we have to work on anchoring ourselves in the present, so we don't get lost in the past. But, yeah, kind of nervous, distracted, sad, and scared, which sort of cuts into my Jolly-Old-Elf-Christmas-Spirit."

"Yeah." Tim doesn't tell him it's going to be fine. He didn't find 'it's going to be fine' even remotely comforting when they were dealing with the previa. He thinks for a moment. "You remember telling me, not long after you lost Jon, that you needed all the happy you could get?"

"Yeah." He nods.

"That still true?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Then I'll scrounge up some Jolly-Old-Elf for both of us. C'mon, we've got a whole box of lights here, let's go do the trees."
Anna Victoria Palmer

December 7th, yet another Monday at work. Tim stops down in the basement, noticing that one of the Minions had donated a K-cup caddy to the coffee station, and the rest of them weren't shy about listing what they liked on the whiteboard.

He's getting into the habit of buying more coffee for them each weekend, and bringing it in on Monday mornings. He can't really tell, because he's not down there all the time, but they seem to like it.

He's also getting more of a sense of the people who'll be working for him. If he had his way, he'd fire four of them, reassign another two, and start rebuilding from the six that don't seem satisfied with how the department is working. But he's a government employee, with twelve other government employees. Short of them stealing the computers, sexually harassing each other, or leaking NCIS secrets to the media, he basically can't fire them.

Which means he's got to somehow make four guys he'd rather not work with because they're under the impression that a nine-to-five, crime works on my schedule, not the other way around attitude is enough, turn into real cops, or decide to leave this cushy, safe, well-paid position.

He's hoping they leave.

He's guessing that if Manner heads off after he shows up, they'll follow. But he's not sure about that.

Either way, it's not happening today. He stops by Ingram's desk (one of the dissatisfied-looking ones) and spends (like he's been doing with each of them, whenever he gets the chance) an hour or so talking with her, finding out what case she's on, how it's going, which cases she's worked in the past.

She's pleasant, competent, and he gets the sense that dissatisfied comes from being a hacker stuck on a database job. He makes a mental note to find out who's best at what, and try to make sure cases get sorted that way.

There's no reason why someone's who's main specialty is getting in and out fast and sneaky should be sorting fifteen million data points looking for a pattern. Especially not when the person in the cubical one over specializes in sorting data.

You going to grace us with your presence today? Tim reads off his phone.

On the elevator, heading up. I'm not leaving you with all the paperwork. He sends back to Tony.

Good.

Just making sure the Minions are kept properly caffeinated. He can feel Tony snigger at that.

You going to let them know you're calling them the Minions?

Tim's turn to laugh. The doors open, and he heads over to his desk, saying, "I don't know. It'll depend a lot on how they do," as he passes Tony's desk. "Don't want to horrify them." He pulls the stack of papers toward him.

"Maybe you do. Might help keep them in line." Tony replies.
"What are we talking about?" Draga asks.

"The care and feeding of Minions," Tony replies.

Draga and Ziva roll their eyes.

"How about it, Gibbs? Is being feared the secret to success?" Tony asks. It still feels weird to Tim to hear Tony address Gibbs like that, instead of the usual Boss, but... yeah, everything changes.

"Kept you three in line," Gibbs says calmly. "But horrified isn't scared."

Tim's nodding at that. "Scary's fine. Oh my god, he's such a dork! isn't what I'm aiming for."

Tony looks like he's about to say something along the lines of, "If the shoe fits..." But he doesn't. He nods to the papers on Tim's desk. "They're not filling themselves out."

"On it."

"And how was this morning, Jimmy?"

Jimmy's noticed, that for the last year or so, when Ducky is talking about personal things, he refers to him as Jimmy, but when they talk professionally, especially if someone else is around, he's still Mr. Palmer.

So, by the use of his first name, Jimmy knows that's a question about home and family, and not the stack of paperwork he's wading through.

"Breena's tired. She's not really sleeping. She seemed pretty relieved to get Molly and I out of the house."

"Enjoying what is hopefully a last few minutes of restful solitude before the upcoming excitement?"

"I hope so. She had pretty steady contractions all weekend long, not a lot of them, but I don't think more than two hours went by without one. Then last night they just stopped. I think Anna's trying to go full term."

"She will come when she's ready."

"Yeah. I know, trust me. But this part is wearying. Especially for Breena. But weeks of being on high alert aren't easy for me, either."

Ducky nods, understanding what Jimmy is saying, and isn't. "Is everything ready?"

"Oh yeah, since Thanksgiving."

Ducky pats his bag. "And I, too, am ready."

"Good." Jimmy looks down at the form in front of him, and goes back to filling it out. They work that way for several more minutes, Jimmy filling out the paperwork, Ducky reading through a cold-case, working up a psychological profile of their perp.

Then Jimmy's phone buzzes. He answers it absently, not checking the name, eyes on the form. "Palmer."

"Jimmy." Breena's voice, with a certain breathy quality he immediately recognizes.
"Time?"

"Water broke a minute ago."

"I'll be home in twenty minutes."

Ducky's already tidying up his files, getting ready to go, huge grin on his face.

---

Tim is filling out paperwork when Jimmy rushes over, Molly's car seat in hand, plunks it down next to Tim's chair, grins at all four of them, and then rushes back out again.

Different variations of "Good luck!" follow his rapidly retreating form.

Tim picks up his phone and sends down to Abby, Detour en route home. Picking up Molly, too!

Just got the text from Breena! Comes back to him. He looks up and notices the rest of his team is also reading off of their cells, so it seems that Team Gibbs is all on the same page.

Sometime, hopefully in the next 24 hours, Anna Palmer would be on the outside!

---

At twenty-two months old Molly Palmer can (mostly) feed herself. She has very definite ideas as to what she will or will not eat. She has a well-chewed stuffed-corgi (Named Doggy, she's not really imaginative with names,) she adores and will not sleep without. She prefers her hair down, likes dresses more than pants, and will have a literal hissy fit if you attempt to make her wear something other than pink shoes.

She is, in other words, a perfectly normal toddler.

She is also pretty firmly mired in the part of life where she likes surprises, but she also starts to get edgy and irritable if too many of them pile on top of each other.

She does much better with a certain routine.

And the addition of a little sister to the mix means routine will never be the same.

And, while it is true that she has no idea how things are about to change, it is also true that she is well aware of the general vibe of things being different around her house lately, and to say that she's been a bit on edge is not an exaggeration.

---

Molly is pleased to see them when they go to her daycare to pick her up. Jimmy and Breena'd been telling her for few days, since the contractions started kicking up, that one day Uncle Tim or Aunt Abby might be picking her up from daycare, and if that happened, then very soon she'd get to meet her little sister.

Meeting little sister doesn't mean much to her.

Sleepover at Uncle Tim and Aunt Abby's on the other hand… That interests her.

So, she's excited, babbling away about the baby as Uncle Tim fetches her stuff and Aunt Abby gets her into her winter clothing. And, on the car ride home, they've gone through about six versions of "When's baby coming?" when a new concern surfaces, "Doggy!"

Abby looks to Tim, who was in charge of packing things up, and he looks to the back seat, valiantly
hoping that Molly carried her pet doggy into the car with her, because he knows he didn't touch it.

But, of course, Doggy is not back there.

And while it's true that two seconds ago she was in a pretty good mood, she's tearing up at the lack of Doggy.

Abby makes a quick executive decision, and whips them through a u-turn as soon as she can make one. Trying to get an excited toddler to sleep in a new place is almost impossible. Trying to get an excited toddler to sleep in a new place without her beloved Doggy is impossible.

"We're getting Doggy."

Tim quickly texts Heather, lets her know they're going to be a little bit later than expected. And, five minutes later, back at the daycare center, he hops out, locates Doggy (He was in the far back of her cubby.) and brings him back to what is now a full on sobbing toddler, who is, until Doggy appears, inconsolable at the idea that her precious may be lost.

Abby looks over at him, and Tim shakes his head, well aware of the fact that they've got a VERY excited little girl on their hands, and that all plans for tonight are going to revolve around being as calm, and quiet, and boring as possible.

One day shy of eleven months, Jimmy thinks.

In a lot of ways, it feels very different. Everyone who comes in is happy to see them. That's a huge difference. Everyone is smiling. Ducky's here, so are Breena's parents (just like last time) but this time no one is crying. That's a step in the right direction, right?

They're in the maternity ward this time. Another huge difference. (Their OB had thought delivering a stillborn baby in the maternity ward, where they'd be able to hear other new babies crying, would be an extra layer of trauma on top of what was already the worst day of their lives. They'd been in the general ward last time.)

Their pediatrician has stopped by to look in on them. Very, very big (and welcome) difference.

There's a little warmer and bassinet waiting for Anna. (That's a massive relief.)

The monitor sounds different, and this time three lines, Breena's heartbeat, her contractions, and Anna's heartbeat are all zig zagging across the monitor.

But it smells the same, and Breena's in a gown, in a bed, again. Same sort of bed. And contractions, no matter the state of the child being slowly pushed out, feel the same. And what you do to deal with those contractions, the walking, the back rubbing, all of it, is exactly the same. So it's easy, for both of them, to slip in time, lost in the shockingly fresh memories of Jon's delivery.

Their doctor and Ducky had mentioned that this would happen. They both knew it, felt it, the fear, the sorrow, during each step of Anna's pregnancy, as they went through the same motions, but it's hitting harder here.

The happiness of this, the rational knowledge that Anna is fine, is tempered with the memory of doing this with Jon, when everything wasn't fine, and both of their hearts broke as they said goodbye to the dream of their son.
Don't give an excited toddler choices. Not if you don't want a melt-down.

Tim and Abby are learning this the hard way. They'd gotten Molly home, taken her and her things upstairs, showed her the little bed they had made up for her on the floor right next to Kelly's crib. (Sleeping in the same room as Kelly is a big deal. They used to just put both of them in the crib together, but at six months and not quite two, they don't both fit anymore.) Showed her the bathroom where she'd be getting her tubby that night (and tomorrow night, maybe the night after that if Jimmy and Breena want a bit more time on their own with Anna), how they had a special bottle of (pink!) shampoo waiting for her as well as her very own toothbrush and toothpaste (also pink!) and a brand new (more pink!) unicorn towel.

(It's possible that Tim might be remembering a bit of how it felt to have a new baby come home, and how no one paid much attention to him for, oh, a month after that, and so he's gone a little too far in the other direction for Molly.)

All of that goes well. Abby gets Kelly fed while Tim lingers with Molly, letting her take her time to explore everything. She's been upstairs in their house before, but this is the first time she's done it sans parents. Plus, he's not sure how good her memory is and how well she's got the idea of their upstairs in her mind.

But, eventually she's bored with messing around in the bathroom and nursery, so he takes her hand, helping her stay steady as she heads down the steps, and they go to get some dinner.

Molly loves chicken nuggets. Molly loves pizza. Both of those foods are occasional treats at Jimmy and Breena's. And, of course, Tim got both for her.

"Do you want pizza or nuggets for dinner?" he asks as he puts her in the booster seat they've got on one of the chairs next to Kelly in her highchair.

"Nuggets!"

"Then we'll have nuggets."

He gets them out, while Abby continues to feed Kelly her cereal, talking with Molly a bit about that, then she notices that he's putting the nuggets on a baking sheet, and says, "Pizza!"

"Okay, fine, we can do pizza."

He puts the nuggets back in the bag, seals it up, tucks it back into the freezer, and grabs the pizza. "See, yummy pizza."

"No. No. No."

"No?"

"No pizza!" She's extremely definite at that, frowning at him in a very determined way.

"Do you want nuggets?" Tim asks.

"Pizza!"

He holds up the pizza. "I'm holding the pizza. Do you want the nuggets?"

"Nuggets."

Okay, fine, they can do nuggets. He turns to put the pizza back in the freezer and was met with a
teary chorus of "Pizza!"

Tim feels like he's about to rip his hair out when Abby has a brainstorm and says, "Molly, do you want both?"

"Yes!" (sniffle, snuffle, snort, cry)

"I will make you both."

That gets a tiny smile.

"You're making great progress, Breena. You're at six centimeters. Do you want to start some medication for the pain?" Dr. Jun, their OB asks.

"God, yes!"

"Okay. I'll get the anesthesiologist in, and we'll get you hooked up with an epidural."

"Thank you." Her hand grips tighter against Jimmy's as she says that, yet another contraction cresting through her hips and back. They've been here seven hours and gone from one centimeter to six centimeters, that's making good time, and more than far enough along that the risk of the anesthetic slowing things down is minimal.

She's tired, she's hurting, and right now having something to take all of that away, and let both of them get something of a nap before the pushing starts, probably, given the speed things have been moving, around eleven or twelve tonight, sounds like a really good plan.

Molly Palmer is normally a sunny, happy, and fun little girl. She's normally in possession of a pleasant and laid-back temperament, able to roll with the punches.

She's also, normally, not in a strange house, unable to have her Mommy read her her goodnight story, with a whole lot of excitement about this whole, 'baby' thing.

So, she's pretty fried, and though bath time went well (she and Kelly both enjoyed being in the tubby together, while Abby got them soaped up and rinsed off), and the first part of story time (Tim with Kelly cuddled on his chest, Molly in his lap, quietly reading Goodnight Moon) went well, there was this point, when he laid Kelly down to sleep, and then tucked Molly in, that it finally occurs to her that Mommy and Daddy are not going to put her to bed, and they will not be reading her any stories and she just completely melts down.

Which set off Kelly.

And just about set off Tim.

He gets Molly out of the nursery, and Abby goes in to get Kelly calmed down, while he holds onto Molly, cuddling her, patting her back, quietly telling her about how she's going to get to see Mommy and Daddy tomorrow, while she wails inconsolably for her Mama.

He's having no luck, at all, getting her quieted down.

So, he takes his phone out, one-handed, and begins to text, while walking Molly around his living room.

*Can you leave long enough to tell a story or two?*
He doesn't hear anything back for a minute, and then gets. *Breena's at six centimeters. I can get away for a bit. Any particular story?*

"Thank you," Tim whispers.

*Molly's completely fried, and we're having no luck calming her down. I'm thinking that telling her that her Ducky is coming might help.*

*I'll be there as soon as I can, Timothy.*

---

Ducky, like Jeannie and Ed, has been hovering around the edges of the birth. In the room some, offering support and comfort. In the waiting room some, offering them privacy, as well.

Ed looks over at him as he tucks his phone back into his pocket. "Someone die?"

"No," Ducky smiles. "Fortunately. It seems our Miss Molly has just realized her mother and father will not be providing her usual good night tuck in, and she is complaining vigorously at that."

Jeannie smiles, knowing how that works. She nods briefly at Ed, and then at Ducky, as well. And while it is true that Ed and Ducky are not overwhelmingly fond of each other, they are both extraordinarily fond of Molly, and emergency story-time tuck-ins sounds like a job for the Grandpa squad.

Or as Molly calls them "My Ducky" and "Papa!"

---

Tim didn't expect to see Ducky and Ed show up at his house, but he has to admit Molly is pleased to see them, and between Ducky taking her in his arms, saying, "Oh, my Molly, what has you so sad, dear?" and Ed petting the back of her head, kissing her cheek, cooing over his darling girl, that they do get her calmed down.

Eventually, she ends up in Ed's arms, sucking her thumb, eyes drooping as Ducky tells her the story of how giraffes ended up so tall.

And they do get her tucked in about twenty minutes later, dead asleep.

"Thank you," Tim says, very sincerely, to both of them, as they get ready to head out.

"She was so wound up, we just couldn't get her calmed down," Abby adds.

Ed smiles. "They call them terrible twos for a reason. Angelo, Jeannie's dad, did the same thing for me when Amy was born. Everything was upside down. Jeannie was still in the hospital. And it was the first time I had Breena all on my own, and I managed to set fire to dinner. Just about ripping my hair out by bedtime, and when she realized that Jeannie wasn't coming home, she completely flipped out."

"How are things going?" Abby asks, and it's clear that by *things* she means not only the delivery, but Jimmy and Breena's mental health, too.

"Very well, though we want to get back quickly. She was at six centimeters when we left and the anesthesiologist was due in soon. With any luck they'll both get some rest, and then Anna will make her grand debut," Ducky replies.

"Okay." Abby hugs both Ducky and Ed. "You both give them some hugs from me."
Ed looks surprised by the hug, but Ducky smiles and says, "Certainly, Abigail."

There's the last hard push, the feeling of intense, focused effort, everything in Breena's world narrowing down to one goal, pressure, lots and lots of pressure, and then release followed by tiny, high-pitched wailing.

They'd already talked to Jun about this, she'd overseen Molly and Jon's delivery and understood exactly how fragile this moment was, how much both of them needed to touch, see, hear, but mostly feel their child, alive and whole and precious and real as soon as they could.

So, before Anna is cleaned up, bare seconds after the cord was cut, she is lying, wet, gooey with vernix and a little blood, crying, tiny body vibrating with indignation and shock at her new surroundings, on Breena's chest.

And they are both holding her, kissing her, crying, laughing some, awash in so many emotions they'd have had a difficult time sorting them out.

She's here, and real, and healthy and whole. Her eyes are open, squinting at them, mouth open, wailing, breathing tiny puffs of air against Breena's chest, pink hands clenched, little brown curls smeary with birth fluids.

After a few more seconds, she calms down, seems to get the lay of the land so to speak, maybe she hears Breena's heartbeat and recognizes it, maybe the sound of Jimmy's voice is familiar (though, not distorted by a watery background). But for whatever reason she stops crying, (though her parents don't) while Breena holds her in her arms, and Jimmy has one arm around Breena, his head pressed to her shoulder, looking close at his daughter, his hand on the back of her somewhat pointy head.

They touch ears, lips, and chin, stroke her face, petting her skin and hair, kissing fingers and toes, marveling at her finally being here, reveling in each breath she takes.

Once the placenta is delivered and Breena's all stitched up, their pediatrician gently takes Anna from them, and Jimmy follows, keeping her in view as they clean her up, weigh her (six pounds twelve ounces) measure her (seventeen inches) print her feet, put the tags on her, along with a diaper, onesie, hat, and then swaddle her into a tiny bundle and hand her back to Jimmy.

He carries her to his wife, and snuggles up as close to her as he can, while she gets Anna settled on her breast to nurse.

And for the first time since the pregnancy test turned positive, Breena and Jimmy Palmer felt all traces of fear drain away.

Between being a field agent and rule number three, Tim always has his phone nearby, and it's always on.

He also, because of these things, cannot sleep through a text or it ringing.

Which means he wakes up shortly after one, as his phone buzzes, and sees: *Anna Victoria Palmer. 12/7/15 11:47 PM Six pounds, twelve ounces, seventeen inches long. Mama and baby are fine!* Along with a picture of a tiny, pink newborn, one eye peering curiously at the world, swaddled in the traditional white hospital blanket with the pink and blue stripes, snuggled in Breena's arms.

Abby pokes her head up, seeing him standing next to his dresser looking at his phone.
"Anna?"

He's grinning. "Oh yeah!" Then he takes the phone over, and shows it to Abby.

"Oh, she's beautiful."

"I was thinking that."

It's not the same.

Can't be, because he's not the same man, and Breena's not the same woman, not anymore, and it's
not Jon, but the feel of it, the fantasy, is still there. Tempered, morphed by time and grief and life and
now, joy.

So, it's not the same. But that doesn't mean it isn't good. Doesn't mean his eyes don't tear up, this time
from joy, as Tim and Abby, Molly and Kelly come in, and Tim sets Molly on the bed, where he's
sitting next to Breena, who has Anna in her arms, and he finally gets to say, "Molly, this is your little
sister."

She creeps closer, and he picks her up, holding her, partially just to touch her, to have real, physical
proof of all of his girls, partially because she's not quite two and he doesn't want her accidentally
shoving or smushing Anna. And cuddled in his arms, her hand extends, gently, and she touches
Anna's face, puzzled look on hers.

"Baby."

"This is your baby sister, Anna." Breena says.

Molly's confused, she looks back to Kelly. "Baby?"

"They're both babies," Abby says, having kissed Breena and Jimmy hello.

"My baby!" Though it's clear from how she's looking from Anna to Kelly she means both of them.

Tim nods solemnly, leaning down to kiss Breena, and give Jimmy a hug. "Your babies."

Molly grins, a sort of well, all right then, as long as we've got that sorted, this is all good, expression
on her face.

Jimmy and Breena see it. They look from Molly to Anna, who's staring at her big sister with the
somewhat standard look of newborn confusion, back to Molly, who's leaning in to kiss (slobber on,
she doesn't quite have the kissing thing down yet) her baby sister. They look at each other, each
holding a baby girl, and laugh.
The Bitter Pill

He's fired the text off before it occurs to Gibbs that just maybe doing it was a little odd.

Well, maybe not odd.

Telling?

God-awful stupid? He sighs, pocketing his phone.

Like the rest of the crew, he got the text at one in the morning with the picture of Anna. He was still up, working on his bed, (no shot of him sleeping until he knew they were out of the woods, so to speak) so he sent a quick one back to Jimmy asking if they wanted visitors now, or later, and got one back saying that morning was soon enough.

So he went to sleep, looking forward to seeing his newest girl. (And of course there is never a second's doubt that this is one of his girls. He's kind of like Molly in that.)

As he was falling asleep, he found himself feeling especially happy, and really, sincerely looking forward to telling Rachel about this. And sure, he's looking forward to telling Fornell and LJ and Vance about it, but he's just lighting up at the idea of telling Rachel, imagining showing her the pictures, and the look on her face as he does it.

He got there in the morning after the McGees, but before Tony and Ziva, and once he got a chance to hold Anna, he asked Abby to take a picture of them, and she did, and once he handed her back to Breena, he sent the shot to Rachel, feeling very pleased about the world in general, and showing her his newest baby in specific.

Which is when it occurs to him that the person, the woman, he most wants to share this with is not his friend or girlfriend, but his therapist.

He doesn't want to show Anna off in a Look, I'm making progress sort of way, because adopting baby girls was never an area where he felt like he needed any help. No, the feeling that's going with this is one that he remembers, most recently from Susan, and before her, Hollis, that desire to share the good parts of your life with someone who you enjoy. Someone who will enjoy them with you.

A friend.

(If he's being honest, a more than friend.)

Everyone else is cooing over Anna, so he makes some sort of excuse, and heads off, none of them really paying attention to him, because he's not the star of the show, not today.

He's pacing the hallway feeling fairly black about the whole thing when he gets back:

Congratulations! She's beautiful, Jethro. Everyone okay?

Yeah. Tired, sore, but you know how that goes. He's aware of the fact that her youngest child, a son, is a sophomore in high school right now.

Yes, I do. Bring more pictures Monday?

The question mark means it's a request, not an assignment. So he texts back. Sure.

Good! See you then.
Warm, polite, focused. Enthusiastic about the good things in his life, but even with that, she's
drawing the lines. She'll see him on Monday, during their appointment, because she's his therapist,
not his friend (or more than friend.)

He's leaning against the wall, slipping his phone into his pocket, head back, and eyes closed when he
hears, "Are you all right, Jethro?"

"Fine, Penny."

She's not buying that, at all. And, if he's the clan's patriarch, she's the matriarch, and anyone with an
ounce of sense in his head knows pulling bullshit on grandma isn't going to fly. "You were fine five
minutes ago, and then you weren't. Really, are you okay? Get some bad news?"

He shakes his head and says, "Yeah, I'm fine."

She snorts at that, leans next to him against the wall, and squeezes his hand. "Want some company
while you stew in your 'fine'?” He is suddenly well-aware of where Tim got his font of sarcasm.

"Nah. Go, enjoy Anna. Nothing going on with me that's that interesting."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. She won't be brand new forever, and I'll still be old and kind of stupid tomorrow."

"How about you come with me? You're right, she won't be brand new forever, and snuggling tiny,
little babies tends to help with feeling stupid and old."

"I'll be there in a minute."

"Okay,” she says as she walks off. One of the things he appreciates about Penny is that she’s well
aware of the fact that he's full of shit right now, and she's offering to help him with it, but she also
recognizes and respects the fact that he’s a grown-up, one of her equals, and she doesn't push when
he makes it clear he'd like to be alone in his stupid.

He sighs again, wondering how the hell to get himself out of this, without actually doing what he
needs to do to get himself out of it, because right now, the idea of cutting Rachel out of his life,
stopping seeing her, is just too depressing to bear for more than a second.

Of course, at the same time, he knows what's going to happen if he keeps seeing her, and that's
depressing, too.

He's fifty-six, fifty-seven and mandatory retirement coming up in a month. Three ex-wives. More ex-
girlfriends than he wants to count. He thought he'd made every emotional mistake a man could make.
Thought he was done getting himself into stupid emotional tangles that weren't good for anyone.

But, of course, he's not.

Noooo... He's the dumb fuck falling in love with his therapist. The same woman who just about flat
out told him not to fall in love with her.

His married therapist.

It hits him; he doesn't actually know that for a fact. Rachel will, occasionally, talk about her children
(there are three of them, one out of the house, one in college, one in high school) but she never
mentions Cranston. He's never specifically asked about him, but they'll often talk a bit about what
both of them were doing over the weekend, and while she'll mention things with the kids, she doesn't mention him.

She also doesn't have any pictures of him up in her office. There's a few graduation shots, two high school, one college, of her and the three kids, but not any with him in them.

Which would make sense, if he's the one taking the pictures.

But...

There is a... Tim would call it a meta voice, but Gibbs is not Tim, so he doesn't have much of a name for it, but whatever this thing is, it's well aware of the fact that he's desperately grasping at straws, because he knows what the right thing to do is (stop seeing Rachel), but he doesn't want to do the right thing.

For that matter, since he said it to Fornell, mentioned that he couldn't ask the one he was interested in out, he's known what the right thing to do is.

But he doesn't want to do it.

He wants to go see her on Mondays (and the other days of the week, too, but he can't, so he'll settle for Mondays) and talk with her, watch the way the early morning sun lights her face and hair, enjoy the sound of her voice, the way she watches him as he speaks, the way her fingers stroke over the cup of coffee, and the expression on her face when he brings her a flavor combination she especially likes, revel in time spent with an attractive woman he can say absolutely anything to without fear.

He hasn't let his interior fantasies go past just talking to her. Probably because she is married. (You don't know that. Stop kidding yourself, Gunny. That is one married woman!) Definitely because if he breaks that line, even in his mind, he stops being able to say that she's just a friend, and this is how friends feel about each other, and all the rest of the lies he's been telling himself since Fornell looked at him and said, "God, you are so lonely, aren't you?"

He sighs and straightens up. He can hear voices coming from Jimmy and Breena's room, and his internal clock is good enough that he knows his team is getting ready to head to work.

He slaps a happy smile on his face, marches himself into their room, kisses Breena goodbye, pets Anna one last time, gives Molly a big, whirling hug, and promises to come over to Tim and Abby's tonight to read her a very special goodnight story picked out especially for her, Jimmy gets a slap on the shoulder and a one-armed hug, and then he heads off with Tim, Abby, Tony and Ziva. Time to go to work and, hopefully, stop some bad guys.

Or spend a rather contemplative day doing paperwork.

Probably a bad day for it. A good case would have gotten his mind off it. (You know you're distracted when Draga, who still has to read the forms, and look up information to fill them out, is going through them faster than you are.)

But there wasn't a good case, or a bad one, or any sort of case at all.

Tim spent two hours on the paperwork, and then vanished down to the basement to mingle with the Minions some more.

And Tony, who is usually good for a distraction, is also musing something. He's going through his paperwork even slower than Gibbs is. Gibbs can feel something is up with him, and it doesn't take a
rocket scientist to put together Tony's fear of babies, visiting Anna, and the way he keeps looking at Ziva whenever she's got her head down filling out the forms, and come up with Tony's got babies on his mind.

So, instead of a juicy murder, and bad guys to hunt down, there was paperwork, and showing Draga and Leon baby pictures. And, in that he can fill a lot of this paperwork out on automatic, not needing to think much about it, there was time to come up with something of a plan.

It's a bad plan. It's a goddamn awful stupid plan. That little voice knows it. Is telling him it's a bad plan. But it's not as bad as it could be. And it is as much as a middle ground as he can stand right now.

So, after a day of paperwork, he heads home, and it hits him while driving there, that now, Tim and Abby's house is home, too. There's a shift. He knew he was going there, so he could lend a hand on baby wrangling, and he drove it on automatic, not needing to think the way there. But today was the first time he realized that he was heading *home*. His house is still home, too. Anywhere his tools live is home. But, this house with the kids is home, too.

He beats them there, because he's not picking up Molly.

He spends a few minutes playing with Kelly and talking to Heather, seeing how today went. (About average. Looks like that first tooth might be thinking of popping out soon. Kelly's been extra-drooly and kind of irritable today, but the little white mark on the gums that means tooth soon isn't there. Either way, Heather's on top of it; she's got teething rings in the freezer and baby Orajel in the medicine cabinet, ready to go. In that Kelly's gnawing on his knuckle, Gibbs is thinking Heather may be onto something with the whole teething soon thing.)

Heather's looking at him expectantly, not really sure about something, when it hits him that what she's not really sure about is if him showing up means she can head home for the day.

He smiles at her, trying to put her at ease, and says, "How about you head off, get out of here before traffic gets too nasty? I'll give them the teething report."

"You sure it's okay?"

"Yeah." He nods, smiles reassuringly. "They're only a few minutes behind me, picking up Molly, but they won't mind if you leave Kelly with me. Baby girl and I get along fine."

She stares at him, sees the obvious ease with which he's holding Kelly, and the peaceful way she's chewing on his fingers, and decides, that yes, he'll do on his own, for a few minutes at least. "Okay."

Tim and Abby do show up a few minutes later, and the five of them have a calm dinner. Having learned their lesson last night, dinner was offered as an accomplished fact. "Molly, dinner time. We're having chicken and broccoli!"

And he does whip out a "special story" for Molly.

Okay, technically he's been reading it to Kelly every now and again, when she's not quite restful and he wants something a bit longer than Goodnight Moon, but he's also pretty sure she won't rat him out.

It's a story one of Shannon's friends had written, self-published, sold probably twenty-five copies, but they got one of them. It's a little girl and her daddy sailing. (He's fairly sure that's why Shannon
bought it.) It's basically an introduction to a boat, and all the parts, and, honestly, kind of boring if you don't like to sail. (Okay, honestly, even if you do like to sail, it's kind of boring.)

But it's quiet, and long (ish), and he can read it in a dulled-down voice that puts babies to sleep nice and easy. And both of them are seconds away from asleep when he finishes, gets them laid down, and creeps out to the sound of two little girls breathing deep and easy.

He heads down the stairs, hears typing from Tim's office, and the TV from the living room. He feels marginally bad about cutting into Tim's writing time, but he figures by this point, Tim knows that he can just toss him if it's terribly inconvenient.

(And he also knows that he asks for help so rarely, especially on something personal, that there's no way Tim'll toss him unless he's literally in the middle of the thrilling climax of whatever he's writing.)

But, this'll hold for a moment or two. Hold for him to get a little more loosened up, more comfortable actually saying the words in his head. So, he heads to the kitchen, finds the bottle of bourbon they keep in the pantry for him, realizes that since this isn't his basement he should probably find a glass for it, so he does, pours himself some, and then finds himself walking into the living room and sitting next to Abby instead of seeing what Tim's up to.

She's watching TV. Pretty intently from the looks of it. He kind of recognizes the characters, he's seen her watching them before. The two pretty boys who keep pretending to be FBI agents but aren't.

"Is it good?" he asks her.

"It's awesome, Gibbs."

"Didn't know you liked cop shows." Then something weird happened, some sort of monster popped out of nowhere and one of the pretty boys, the one with the really long and not even remotely FBI approved hair killed the absolute living hell out of it. "This isn't a cop show, is it?"

"Nope. Those two, the one with all the blood on him is Sam, and the other one is Dean, pretend to be Feds sometimes, but they aren't really."

Gibbs nods, wondering what that thing Sam just killed was. "I'm getting that. Why are they pretending to be cops?"

"It's a long story. Mostly so they can get information, find the monsters, and kill them."

"Ah." He stands back up. He doesn't actually like horror movies or shows. He's experienced more fear than any one man ever needs, and feels no need for adding any more to his life.

"We can watch something else if you want. I've seen this once already. Newest one starts in an hour, and I'm just refreshing my memory on what happened last week."

"No. I'm good. Might drop in on Tim for a sec, then maybe turn in early."

"Okay."

The door to Tim's office is shut. From what he's seen doors are almost never shut in this house, so that means knock. So he does.

"Come in."
"Hey. Am I interrupting?" He hadn't heard any typing before he knocked, but he still wants to check.

Tim had been lounging back in his chair, staring at the ceiling, but he sits up and says, "Thinking, but I can take a break. What's up?"

"Can you do something for me?" Gibbs asks as he heads into Tim's office.

"Probably." Tim's looking a bit alarmed, and it hits Gibbs that he's sounding nervous. He takes a breath, and summons his No Shame vibe. "What do you need?"

"It's kind of personal."

He might now be sounding nervous anymore, but he did for a second there, and between that and personal, he's got all of Tim's attention riveted to him. "Okay, what's up?"

He tells Tim, and sees Tim wince as he's going through it. He wraps up with his great brainstorm: "She never, ever mentions Cranston, I… If she's really married, Monday's our last session and I'll cut it off, I'm not gonna… I mean, either way, Monday's the last day, but… if she's not married… Maybe, in a while…"

Tim's never seen Gibbs look this indecisive. "You want me to check and see if she's really married?"

"Yeah." He feels dumb as hell saying it, but if she is, he'll cut it off and not see her again. If she isn't, he'll cut if off, let her go for a good six months, at least, try to date some in the meantime, and if no one else catches his fancy, he'll call her up and ask her out. "She's got no pictures of him in her office. I ask her, sometimes, about how her life is going, and she never mentions him. I don't even know his first name. So…"

Tim drags his chair to his computer, and pulls the other one in front of it for Jethro to sit. And he does.

Tim turns everything on, and then sits back, looking at him, and Gibbs can read that look, half-sad, half-warning, all concern. And once the computer's finished booting up, Tim says to him, "Jethro… If she's a widow, or divorced, or if there never was a Cranston… if he's just a shield she put in place to help keep patients in line… It's a bad idea. She knows everything about you. You know nothing about her. I know she's kind and a good listener and probably the closest, most intimate relationship you've had with a woman in decades, but it's her JOB. You are paying her to be kind and listen." He shuts the door and says very quietly, once he's sitting again, "It's like falling in love with a hooker."

"I know." And he does. He really does, and feels stupid as hell for it, but, it's real. And the fact that it's stupid doesn't make it any less real, and… well, not like he's never met a guy who fell for his favorite hooker before, or… whatever this is. "Will you check for me?"

"Sure." Tim nods, gets online, and hits his first best guess of how to find this out.

It doesn't take long. Few seconds to get into Facebook, and from there to find her personal page. (Rachel Todd) Gibbs is sitting right next to him, watching him search, which means he can't lie about what he finds, but… God he's tempted. If there's no actual Cranston, he was ready to lie his ass off and say there was.

But, a few minutes into it, he does find her Facebook page, and he does find the little married heart, and a few more seconds located a bunch of pictures of the two of them.

Gibbs is smiling at the page, and Tim has the sense he's doing it because he can smile or curse, and he's not willing to start cursing up a blue streak in the middle of his office, with Abby right nearby.
Tim squeezes his hand. He doesn't say anything, just gets up, and a minute later is back with a drink of his own (tea) and the bottle of bourbon.

Gibbs adds another inch to his glass, nods, smile still on his face, eyes so sad. "They look happy, don't they?"

Gibbs has focused in on a shot of Rachel, a man with blue eyes and gray hair, both of them sitting on what looks like someone's back porch, his arms around her, her head leaning on his shoulder, both of them smiling.

"Yeah. They do," Tim answers.

Gibbs takes a big gulp of the drink. "She basically told me not to fall in love with her."

"She flat out told me we weren't dating."

"Looks like she knew you pretty well."

"Yeah." He rubs his forehead, running his hand through his hair, and takes another drink. "She had me pegged before I got in the room."

"She's good at her job, good at people."

"And beautiful, and smart, and funny, and..." He's not sure how to finish that.

"Comfortable? Intimate?"

"Yeah."

"That's her job."

Gibbs sighs, drinking a bit more. "I know. Doesn't make it hurt less."

"Yeah. What do you want to do? We can sit here and drink if you like. We can head into the living room and play some Plants Versus Zombies. Won't fix a broken heart, but it might distract you some."

He shakes his head. "Don't want to explain this to Abby."

"Okay. I won't tell her, either. But she'll understand if you do tell her."

"I know she will... Just feel so god-awful stupid about this. It's almost as bad as falling for her in the first place. I can't have her. I knew I couldn't have her. She told me not to fall for her, and I did anyway. I feel like I shot myself in the ass, intentionally."

"The single man who doesn't fall in love with a smart, funny, beautiful woman who listens to him, encourages him to be the man he wants to be, never judges him, and accepts everything he has to offer is gay. And he'd fall for handsome man who did the same thing for him. That's just who we are."

Gibbs shrugs.

"Seriously. It's not stupid to want someone who gives you almost everything you crave."
Gibbs shakes his head at that. It feels stupid. Just because it's normal doesn't make it any easier.
"Told Abby I'd drop in on you and then turn in early," Jethro says, standing and picking up his glass.

"Okay." Tim nods, squeezes his hand again.

If you name a problem, if you admit it's there, you have to deal with it. At least, if you're Leroy
Jethro Gibbs, you do.

So, he knows, as he drags himself into Rachel's office Monday morning, his usual going-to-see-her
spring in his step completely absent, that this is it. It's not fair to him to keep going, keep pretending
that there's more here than there actually is. It's not fair to her, because if he keeps wrapping himself
in this fantasy, he'll eventually do something (even more) monumentally stupid with it.

So, today's it. The end. And that hurts so much more than he thought it would, and vastly more than
he's willing to admit to anyone.

"So, Jethro, same time next week?"

He smiles sadly at her, been doing it all morning, not really talking, just looking at her and the way
the light hits her face and hair. "Nah. Think this was it."

"Oh." He sees it in her face, that she knew this was happening and that it was a problem, and that
she appreciates him backing off without having to do it herself, and she very much appreciates that
he's not going to push it, not going to make her deal with some sort of awkward and embarrassing I-
love-you… type thing.

He sees that she trusted him to let her help him as much as she could, and then to back off when he
got in too deep. He respects that, but it doesn't make it hurt less.

"Yeah."

She doesn't make him say why he's done, which he thinks is a kindness. Of course, she is kind, that's
part of the problem. He stands up to leave, and she takes both of his hands in hers, looks him in the
eye, and says, "You're going to be okay."

He nods, still sad, swallows hard, and says, "Sure. Eventually." And as much as right now hurts, he
knows that's true. He will, eventually, be okay. Then he turns away and heads out of her office.
Why Does It Have To Be Babies?

Babies.

Why does it always have to be babies?

Five years ago, Tony never expected to have to deal with being hip deep in babies. Let alone babies of his co-workers. Because hip deep in babies meant that his co-workers would have had to have developed lives outside of work, and he just wasn't expecting that, at all.

But they have.

Resulting in three tiny Palmers and one tiny McGee in the last two years.

Resulting in his wife (speaking of things he didn't expect five years ago!) getting all yay! babies on him.

On the upside, he's used to them now. He can hold Molly or Kelly and not want to run away. (He's still nervous with Anna. Little floppy people who look like they'll break if you breathe on them wrong make him really nervous.) But he's not comfortable with it. Fortunately, everyone clamoring to hold the new baby, means he only had Anna for about ten seconds before handing her off to Penny. (Who, just like everyone else, took one look at her, snuggled in close, closed her eyes, hummed a little, and fell, instantly and irrevocably, in love.)

And, God, he feels like a total asshole for this, but he did not and has not fallen instantly, madly in love with any of the little gremlins. (They are not, as per Gibbs' prediction, the lights of his life.) He's got three nieces and sure, he doesn't want anything bad to happen to them, and yes, when they lost Jon, he cried just as long and hard as the rest of them, and he will throw his physical body in front of any of the girls to protect them, but all of that's about his love for their parents.

That instant, utter, chemical adoration that the rest of them seem to have as soon as they hear that one of the girls is pregnant, just doesn't happen to him.

Yes, he's warming up to Molly significantly. There are things he likes about her. (He's got the sense she's going to be a lot of fun when she grows up. Goofy like Jimmy, but not willing to take any crap, like Breena. He's looking forward to that.) But Kelly and Anna don't exactly have personalities, yet, so… He kind of sees them like exceptionally precious pets. He'll go to his grave to protect them, because that's what a good guy does, but he's not feeling any sort of instant connection to them.

And that scares the shit out of him.

Everyone says it's different when it's your kid.

Great, wonderful. Well, these are his nieces, as close to his kids as it's possible to be without knocking Ziva up, and… he's not feeling it.

He's cooking with Ziva that night. Part of being a good friend is taking care of your buddies when they need taking care of. When Jimmy and Breena get home, their fridge and freezer will be stocked with food that just needs to be heated up.

He hasn't been willing to say it out loud to her. Because it does scare him. And because he's afraid it
will disappoint her.

But, he has talked to their counselor about it, and he does know that he really should talk to Ziva about it, honesty and all...

So, he's cutting up onions as Ziva's browning up sliced beef (Tacos. Breena'll eat hers in the tortillas they'll provide; Jimmy eats his as a salad topping.) he says, kind of quietly, "What if I never feel it?"

"Tony?"

"You picked up Anna, snuggled her close, sniffed her head, and fell in love. You did it with Molly and Kelly, too. Complete and utter love. I could see it on your face. I picked up Anna and tried to figure out the fastest way to give her to someone else. They say it's different with your own kids, but... what if it's not? What if this is it? That the best I get is fond?"

She thinks about that for a long time. He's not sure what's going on in her head. Not sure if that's her looking for a rebuttal, disappointment, or what. But, eventually she says to him, "My father loved me." She looks away from the beef to him. "And your father loved you. But it didn't help much, did it?"

Tony shakes his head. "No. I guess not."

"If you can be kind, respectful, fond... If you can be there with me through this, wake up in the middle of the night for feedings, change diapers, bandage skinned knees, show up for dance recitals, remember birthdays... If you can protect this child, serve him, devote your life to making sure she grows up happy and well-rounded... If you can do the job, if you can be a father, then I don't think it matters if you never get past fond."

"Really?" That's an angle he's never even imagined on this. Their counselor was more interested in talking about why he might not love his child than how to deal with it.

"Really." She nods. "How does a child know love? By your actions. Be here for us. Be a good father. Be a good husband. And that's all that will matter on this."

He doesn't look convinced by that, at all. "It should be more than that."

"Maybe." She shrugs. "But none of us got that, and it's what we wanted more than anything else. If you talk to Abby about her father, or Breena about Ed, they'll both tell you pretty much the same thing: their fathers took the time to be with them. They listened, and accepted, and invested time in them. Can you do that?"

"Yes. "I will do it."

"Then we'll be fine."

"I'm so scared of fucking this up."

She brushes his face with her fingers, and then kisses his lips. "I know. And you're not going to."

He smiles limply at that. He's fairly certain that, given the shot, he could fuck this up to levels of fuckage that Ziva has never imagined.

She smiles brightly at him, trying to fill his uncertainty with her certainty, and then they both smell the meat starting to scorch, so she refocuses on the beef, and he goes back to cutting up onions, moving onto peppers.
As he's cutting up the yellow bell pepper level one of not fucking this up hits him. "Ziva… How do I do this and run the team? Be there. That's your number one suggestion. If I'm running the team… McGee had to leave. Draga doesn't have Kevin most of the time. Jimmy's doesn't hang around to just help out anymore. At the end of the day, if the autopsy is done, he's out of the office. I just said I'd do it, and I will, but…"

There's a look in her eyes, and he doesn't know what that means, at all, but it simultaneously terrifying and breathtaking.

"Ziva…"

"We'll figure it out. I have an idea, but I need to think about it more."

"A good idea?"

"Yes, I think so. But… Like the rest of this, scary. Let me think some more."

"Okay."

Thinking.

Ziva's not saying whatever it is that's got her brain ticking, but he can see it's whirling away.

He's tempted to chat with Gibbs, but…

Honestly, Gibbs has just been pretty weird lately. He was fine on Monday, and then something happened on Tuesday (which should have been an over-the-moon good day for him) and he's been in a funk ever since.

If it wasn't for the fact that Tony knows that Gibbs isn't dating anyone, he'd think Gibbs had just been dumped. He's not exactly doing that passing out head-slaps to anyone who gets too near thing, but he's a whole lot more bear-with-a-thorn-in-his-paw than usual. (Even Draga noticed. He crept over to Tony yesterday and said, "What the hell is wrong with him?" And Tony had to say, "I don't know. But if you want to live a long and happy lives with all of your limbs attached to your body, don't poke the bear." Draga nodded, retreated, and did his best to be located in a different zip code from Gibbs at all times while still working the case.)

He asked McGee about it, and he just shook his head. "It'll pass."

Tony rolled his eyes. He didn't ask if it would pass. He knew it'll pass. He asked what was up.
"That's not useful."

"I know." Leave it alone is really clear on McGee's face. "But it will pass."

"Great." He could feel the frustration of that answer. "I need to keep an extra eye on him?"

"No! He'll be fine. Just having…" He could see McGee censor himself. "It'll pass."

He's a bit annoyed that Gibbs and McGee have this thing now that he's not part of, but… Well, if it is something female oriented, because this really, really does feel like dumped Gibbs, he did send Tim in to handle it last time, and if that's the case, maybe it just stuck…

Whatever it is, right now Gibbs is off the people to talk to list. Hopefully 'it'll pass' means that Gibbs'll be Gibbs again soon enough for him to have a chat with him about this before he gets Ziva pregnant, but…
Whatever. It's not happening today. It won't happen tomorrow. And the day after is looking remarkably unlikely, too.

He'd kind of like to talk to Jimmy. But the last thing he's going to do is go barging in on them right now. Mr. and Mrs. Autopsy Gremlin are more than busy enough right now.

But, on Tuesday, when Anna is a week old, he heads down to Autopsy to talk to Ducky about the case he's wrapping up, and was very surprised to see Jimmy napping on one of the tables, no one else around.

"Jimmy?"

"I'm up," he says, lurching into a sitting position, rubbing his eyes. He's in jeans and a Christmas sweater, sneakers on the floor next to him, so he's not here in a professional capacity.

"Yeah, you look it. Shouldn't you be home, for like, another week?"

Jimmy nods. He's not back until the Wednesday after tomorrow. "Molly wanted some Ducky time. I called in. No dead bodies today. So they're out… Hell, I don't know what they're doing. I'm grabbing a nap."

"I should let you get back to it."

Jimmy squints toward the clock, feels around, puts his glasses on, and looks again. "Nah. They'll probably be back in ten minutes. I'll feel even more tired if I go back to sleep."

"Okay."

"So, what do you need?"

"Nothing you're helping me with." Their current case began after Jimmy left for Anna. He hadn't been there for any of it. They spend a moment, quiet, comfortable, and then Tony thinks of something Jimmy could help him with.

"You weren't really 'Yay! kids' before you had them, right?"

Jimmy shrugs at that. "I knew I wanted some eventually, but it wasn't any sort of burning need. Tim's more the 'Yay! kids' guy."

"I know that. Just… Okay… Look. I don't love kids."

"Tony, everyone on earth knows that. People who have never met you know that."

"Yeah, thanks. I wasn't saying it was a secret. But… Everyone says it's different when it's your kid. But… I mean… Is it? Really?"

Jimmy thinks about that. He likes kids okay. He's not afraid of them the way Tony is. But he'd been to more than enough Slater family gatherings before Breena got pregnant, and sure, playing with the kiddos was fine, but it did not instill an instant, oh yes, let's go have seventeen of them, sort of vibe. (Getting kidnapped and almost dying, on the other hand, that kicked up his and Breena's let's have a whole mess of babies desire.)

He thinks about how seeing the pregnancy test turn positive felt.

"Okay. I'm kind of fried right now, so if this is a little loopy…"
Tony waves that away.

"If I call Abby in here and snog the living daylights out of her, what would you do?"

"Snog?"

Jimmy glares at him. "I've had four hours of sleep today. It's the first word that came to mind."

"Okay. You're snogging Abby. I'm gonna pull you off her, slap you upside the back of your head, lecture you about adultery and your marriage vows, slap you upside the back of the head again, lecture you more about breaking Breena's heart, slap you a third time, and then we're gonna talk about ruining your life, your wife's life, your kids' lives, and your best friends' lives, then you're getting one more slap, and then, because you are my friend and I love you, I'll give you a good five minute head-start before telling McGee and Breena about it, so there's a shot you don't get killed."

Jimmy nods. "Thanks for the head-start. Okay. I call Ziva down here and kiss the living daylights out of her. Let me guess, you walk in on that, and I better hope there are no bullets in your gun, right?"

For a second Tony's tempted to brush it off. Not really deal with how that would feel, but as he's doing that he gets how that would feel. That insane rush of pain and jealous and betrayal and just every sick-making, heartbreaking, punched in the gut and kicked in the balls while gasping for breath feeling of it.

So, instead of brushing it off, he nods. "I always have bullets in the gun. You've just got to hope it's not in reach."

"Fair enough. Well, Abby's as close to your wife as you can get without being your wife. You love her. She's your friend. You think she's attractive. She's your best friend's wife. And sure, you'd get angry on his behalf, and worried about the pain that'd cause us all, but it doesn't hit you in the balls, does it?"

"No."

"But me kissing Ziva does."

"Yeah."

"And that's the difference between someone else's kid and your kid. It's you and Ziva and everything you've ever felt for each other turned into a person. Trust me, you may not feel it the second the pregnancy test turns positive, but at some point it will hit you who this child is, and you will fall in love with it."

"Thanks, Jimmy."

"So, good birthday?" Tony asks Tim.

He's still thinking. Talking to Jimmy helped. That was the most concrete description he's run into, and it's good perspective. But it didn't put his worries to rest, just calmed them some, so he's still thinking, and since he's got some free time, getting lunch with Tim on the way back from talking to a suspect, now seems like a good time to gather more intel on the ins and outs of life with a baby.

"Yeah, it was," Tim replies as he hands Tony his hot dog.

Tony smirks at him. "Get a little something special?"
Tim rolls his eyes a bit. Okay, honestly, no. Birthday celebrations have never been a really big deal for Tim in the first place, and in the second place they both worked late, Kelly was fussy, that first tooth is well on its way to poking out, along with tooth number two, so when it came to bedtime, they both just crashed. But he doesn't want to actually say that, so he intentionally misunderstands the question.

"Double chocolate mocha cupcake."

Tony looks appalled by that. "Dessert? It's your thirty-eighth birthday and you get dessert? That's depressing." And does not bode well for the whole life goes on post-baby thing. If you can't get laid on your birthday, something is very wrong.

"It was a really good cupcake," Tim says with a grin, and it was. He's kind of hoping that'll be enough of a brush off.

"You know what I was asking you."

Apparently not. "Why you asking?" He takes a bite of his grilled chicken wrap. "You haven't done that a long time."

"Well Mr.-I-Get-Laid-Every-Day, I was wondering how the whole having a kid thing was effecting that."

Ah... that makes more sense. He knows from Abby, who's been talking with Ziva about it, that she and Tony are creeping closer to parenthood, and with Anna less than two weeks old, it's probably on Tony's mind more, too.

So, as Tony's watching him, taking a sip of his Coke, Tim says, "Like Jimmy said, new baby, not great for sex. Things are getting better. She's sleeping through the night most nights, or she was until that tooth began to poke out, and we're starting to feel human again, but not back to every day, yet."

"So, what's better mean?"

"You want this much detail?" Stop being nosy is clear in his expression.

Tony rolls his eyes. No, he's not particularly interested in how often Tim has sex. What he actually wants is reassurance that everything he loves about being married isn't about to end. But he can't ask that; that's just way too damn vulnerable. He can ask about sex though, so he does. "I want a better idea of what comes after. It's really easy to just look and see tired, covered in baby puke, crabby, and in love. Those aren't hidden. When you get your sex life back is buried a lot deeper."

Okay, all of that is true, but... "Yeah, but, I don't think how much sex Abby and I are having is going to be really enlightening in regards as to how things'll be for you and Ziva. I mean... when do you like to do it... and no, do not actually answer that question for me. Just in general, if you tend to aim for a time your baby wants to be awake, that's going to cut into your numbers a lot deeper than if you like times when she sleeps. Kelly's bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and wants attention at one of the times that used to really work well for us, so that complicates thing. One of our favorite places is out now, too, so that's cutting the numbers down.

"What happens when the baby comes out'll effect things. How she thinks she looks, how she feels, all of that goes into it. If she thinks she's repulsive, nothing's happening.

"How well you function tired'll be a big thing. If you can't get it up on no sleep, you're never getting laid again."
"That's not encouraging."

Tim sort of shrugs at him. Might not be encouraging, but it's true. "Okay. It'll be fine. You have a baby, and you barely notice the difference. It's all sunshine and roses and lots of sleep and hours of lazy sex."

Tony squints at him. It's not quite a glare, not enough heat for that, but talking with Jimmy was a hell of a lot more useful. "That's really not encouraging. When did you get that sarcastic?"

Tim snorts and says dryly, "Probably when I had a baby and stopped getting laid every day. So, really, why are you checking up?"

"We're talking about it more, and..." Tony's never said this out loud to anyone who isn't Ziva, and even saying it, letting the rest of the world know to expect it is scary. "The idea is when we get Gibbs' replacement we'll start trying."

"That's great!" Tim says, genuinely happy for him.

Tony just sort of stares at him, irked. He supposes Tim could do a better job of not getting what he's not saying, but it'd be awfully difficult.

"Or not?" Tim's starting to get more of what Tony's not saying, tuning in more on the body language and less on the words. "Is that why you've turned down every resume that's passed your desk?"

"None of them have been good enough. I mean, I'm finding a replacement for Gibbs. This guy's got to walk on water."

"Tony, you're replacing Gibbs. All this new guy has to do is fill in your missing skill slots."

Tony rolls his eyes. "Am I telling you how to run your team?"

"Nope."

Tony looks at him.

"I'm laying off. So, is this not great?"

"Yes, it's great, but..." That sounds remarkably unconvincing, even to Tony.

"No." Tim's shaking his head. "That's not what great looks like. Great doesn't have a big, nervous 'but' hanging on it. What's going on?"

"It's fucking terrifying, okay? She knows that, but..."

"But..." Tim leads, trying to get more detail than fear of lack of sex out of Tony.

"Okay, you move in together, and that's scary as shit because she'll be there all the time, in all your stuff, learning everything there is to know about you. But at least with that, you know that if it doesn't work out, you head off, pack up your stuff, and find a new home. And you get married, and that's scary, too, but you still know you can get out of it. Things go south, and out you go. But if you have a kid, there's never an exit. You're tied to that woman for the rest of your life. And if you screw it up bad enough, she will always have a weapon to cut your heart out with."

Tim's not sure what to say to that. Probably because he doesn't think of his relationship with Abby as a collection of levels in which his different exits are being cut off. It's not even something that hits him on any level. Fifty years from now, they'll be the old couple down the street with the gray hair.
"Tony… Why do you always think you're going to screw it up?" Tim gets that Tony can't rest easy in the idea that Ziva'll be there forever. Every other woman he's ever cared about has left. So, he gets that. But being left and screwing things up so that she leaves is something different. And he doesn't get why Tony's default position on relationships in general and kids in specific is he will screw it up.

There are things Tony's never said to Tim. Things he doesn't exactly want to get into. Stuff Ziva knows, of course, and has known for quite a while. But the rest of them…

No. That's not the sort of thing he wants to talk about.

Of course, he's kind of touched on it, or near it, with Tim, once. Back when they were talking about kids before any of them had one. And he mentioned the whole constantly looking at other women thing…

But he doesn't think Tim actually got what he meant by that. He thinks Tim just filed that under overactive sex-drive and never thought about it again.

Of course, saying it would be not just revealing, and probably more revealing than he wants to get, but it would blow the whole, just being a guy cover he's using to shreds.

On the other hand this is McGee. He might not understand, not on any sort of visceral level, but he won't mock him, won't make him feel bad for it, and if he tells him to back off, he will.

And he'll give him better advice for it.

So… "You know how you used to call me a misogynist or womanizer?"

"Yeah. I remember that." Though he's got no idea why Tony's bringing it up, let alone now. It's been years since he was that guy hooking up with anything in a skirt, so it's been years since Tim's called him out on it.

"That's not quite it..." He looks up at the roof of the car they're sitting in. Tim's not eating, listening intently to this, knowing it's important. "I'm a sex addict. I get really… just… There's more to it than I like to get laid."

Tim blinks, slowly. He's never even thought of that, but, thinking of it, that makes a whole lot of sense. That explains the really edgy, tense, crabby sort of mood Tony used to get in whenever he hit a dry spell. Tim certainly remembers so horny you're climbing the walls, but that's different than the sort of edge Tony used to get.

And then he really gets it, gets why when you get your sex life back would matter a whole lot more to Tony.

Tony sees him put it together and says, "I screw things up. I screw relationships up. Besides Wendy, this is the longest I've ever managed to make it with one woman."

"That's good. Ziva knows why you're afraid you'll screw this up, right?"

"Yeah, she does."

"Does she understand?" Because Tim figures there's a difference between knowing someone is an addict, and understanding what that actually means.
"As well as anyone who's not can, yes, she does."

"Okay. So… what are you afraid of?"

Tony doesn't look at him when he says, "That when push comes to shove, she'll be focused on the baby, because she should be focused on the baby, because it's a baby, and focusing on it is the job and… And… But she won't be focused on me, and I'll fall off the wagon because I'm not getting my regular fix. I mean, I know I can go a while. I can do two months on my own before I start to have problems, but…"

"Is it just sex, or…" Tim feels really uncomfortable trying to clarify this, but if they're talking about it… "I mean… Is it about affection and time and attention or… or is it literally just you need to get laid?"

"Both. I can go a lot longer without sex if I'm distracted or if someone is keeping me emotionally happy. But even with that, I…" Tony knows Tim doesn't get it. He's not an addict, and doesn't get that edgy, itchy, world's-gonna-start-falling-apart-if-I-don't-get-what-I-need sensation. "I've never made it past three months."

"Oh. So what you're really asking is when you do get your wife back?"

"Yeah. I guess."

Tim sighs. "I don't know. She's going to be focused on the baby and her at first, and that's going to be pretty much it, because like you said, that's the job. But eventually you get your wife back. She doesn't stop being your wife because she had a baby. Just like you don't stop being her husband because you're a dad."

"When Kelly was brand new, and Abby was sick and depressed, I was carrying her, and Kelly, and me. And thank God for Gibbs and Breena, because they were carrying us, too. But that's this whole family thing, people who will carry you when you can't walk."

"We'll carry you Tony. As much as you'll let us. And eventually, you will get Ziva back."

Tony doesn't look like that's terribly reassuring. And Tim kind of wishes he can just say, 'Don't worry, it'll all be fine,' but he doesn't know if that'll be true for Tony. Kids do change things. They change things a lot. And if you're well-suited for each other and children, the tons of work necessary to raise kids draws you closer to each other, and you end up more deeply in love with each other because of it. But if you're not, and you know you're not… There are plenty of decisions you can take back, or fix, or change, but this isn't one of them. It's an all-in or nothing sort of thing.

Tony nods at that, eats another bite of his dog, and changes the subject to the case they're on.

When it comes down to it, it's a lot like skydiving. And sure, he can talk to Tim or Jimmy, and he can think about it, ponder why he's scared, make plans with the therapist for how to deal with it, but none of that is actually jumping out of the plane.

And he is scared.

He's probably more scared than he's ever been of anything in his life. (Including, literally, jumping, well… getting pushed, out of a plane.)
But on the ground there's a woman, a woman he loves more than anything else, more than he loves himself, and she says he'll make it. She says he'll be fine.

He's going to jump. He knows it. He trusts that she's right, but… The ground's a million miles below, and the wind's rushing past his ears, and… Not yet. He can't throw himself out of the plane, yet.
Thinking

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the last twelve days, Ziva has been thinking. A lot.

Not so much on the let's have kids part of things. She's settled on that. And she understands that Tony is afraid, and that he's not really a kids sort of guy. He doesn't just naturally click with kiddos.

Not without some effort.

And she certainly gets that this is complicated for him on a whole bunch of levels beyond mundane fear of kids. She understands that, too.

They've talked about it together, talked about it apart, and are going to keep talking, because otherwise this is going to bite both of them in the ass.

But she's also sure that like a relationship (which he was nervous about), like a marriage (which scared him even more), that they can do this, together. She's sure that Tony will be a good dad, and that if he finds himself being a good dad, he'll get confident in his ability to be a good dad, and that a lot of the fear will vanish.

He's not scared of being married anymore, let alone of having her live with him, or dating. They did it; he found out that he could do it, that he could be good at it, and he got confident in it.

It's just that babies are the current unknown. And if there was ever a man who feared wandering into the unknown, it's Tony.

Of course, there's unknown, and unknown. Some unknowns, like going undercover, bursting into a house without full intel, or whether or not the guy with the gun really means it, he's got a lot of experience with. He's got scripts ready to go, processes in place, and lots of skills to depend on to deal with those unknowns.

A warehouse with six perps in it, no clear vantage points, and a ticking clock at his back is vastly less scary to him than a crying baby, because he knows what to do with the building and the perps, while the baby is something of a loud, tiny, inscrutable mystery.

But, like how to deal with the building and the perps (or having her in his space all the time), he'll learn babies, and as that happens, he'll start to get cocky and confident and… And it'll be good. Might take a while, but he'll get there. (And honestly, given how quickly he took a shine to Vance's kids, she's thinking awhile will translate into, at most, three weeks.)

However, he did have a very good point about how to get there. How to do the job and raise those kids. Namely, they both work at least sixty hours a week.

So, how are they going to do the actual parenting part of being parents?

Abby's scaled back her hours. She is delegating more and more of the work. McGee's headed to a new department where he may work the same number of hours, but he can do at least some of them from home, and they should be set regularly, same number each day. And Tony was right, if the autopsy is done by five, Jimmy heads off. You need him, he's got his cell on, and will come back in, but he doesn't stick around a minute longer than necessary.
And if they are going to be there for this child they're envisioning, something has to change. They cannot both be on call, all day, every day.

She thinks she knows what the change is. She's been feeling it for… honestly, since it was clear that this was serious, that she and Tony were building a life together, one that would last for the rest of their days, but feeling it doesn't mean it's a good idea.

But, good idea or no, when she envisions herself with this child, who as the days go by is becoming more and more concrete in her mind, she envisions herself with him. (And yes, he's a boy. A sturdy little boy, with her curly hair and brown eyes, but Tony's easy grin.)

She doesn't see daycare or a nanny.

And if she were to do the whole stay-at-home-mom, take-care-of-the-kids-and-house-and-everything-else route, that would mean that when Tony's home, he'd be free to be with them. He'd still have the insane hours, because that's the job. You can't lead the team on eight hours a day. But pick up dry cleaning, get groceries, fill up the cars, make dinner, all those little, piddly errands that eat up hours of your week, she'd be doing, so that when he's home, he'd be home.

But that means change. Big, big change. Team Gibbs would be gone. Thirty-five percent of their income would be gone. They'd have to move. Their current place is big enough for a baby, but the rent is too high for them on just Tony's salary. They'd have to scale back in a lot of ways. Between lost income and added expenses it'd be a huge hit to their finances.

There is one other thing Ziva knows about this, 'this' is not the sort of decision you whip out on a man after you are pregnant. If you tell him, 'I'm going back to work after the baby,' and then change your mind about it, dropping a massive change into his lap without him having any input into the situation, he's liable to resent the hell out of it.

So, thinking, lots and lots of thinking.

"Down here," Gibbs calls out when he hears footsteps on his floor. He's completed ripping the boards and is now in the process of getting them cut for assembly.

He's surprised to see Ziva on his steps. Of all the kids, she's the one least likely to just drop by to chat.

She looks a bit surprised to be on his steps, too. She'd been a bit tentative about going to see him, whatever was causing his black mood seemed to peak on Monday and has been getting better since, but he's not exactly perky right now.

But she needs advice, advice from her dad. So, perky or not, she's on the basement steps, staring at Gibbs.

"Hey, Ziver."

She smiles at him. "Gibbs." And proceeds to say nothing else, though she does head down to him, looking over his work. "Does anything need to be sanded?"

He shakes his head. "Not today." He touches the hand saw next to him. "Cutting today."

"Okay." She looks very distracted. Her plan, work with him, and then let the words just sort of flow out while she's focused on something else, has just hit a major snag.
"You need to sand something?"

Ziva shrugs. "It might have helped."

"Ziver?"

She takes a deep breath, ready to plunge into it cold. "Do you remember the Passover story?"

Gibbs nods; he knows that story, but he's got no idea at all where she's going to take this.

"The Angel of Death passed over those who marked their homes. That's who my father trained me to be, The Angel of Death. He told me that there were people God made, special people, who would be His wrath, who would protect or avenge others by wielding righteous death. That when everything else failed, there would be people like me, Angels of Death, who would finally settle the score. I was an assassin Gibbs, not an agent, not an investigator, but an assassin."

He lays his tools down and turns to face her, focusing entirely on her words. He's still got no idea where she's going with this, but he can feel it's deeply important to her.

"I broke people. That was what I did. I know who I killed, know what they did, and I don't regret it. I met Jenny coming off a job to take out one of the men who ran Buchenwald. I broke him. Like he broke hundreds of thousands of others, and I never lost a moment's sleep over it." And that's true. The only thing she felt was the satisfaction of a job very well done, and the righteous joy of long overdue justice served. That is, until recently, until she started thinking more about the idea of a life with a child. "But I broke his family, too. And I broke his wife. And his grandchildren and his great-grandchildren, and none of them had ever done me or mine any harm."

"But I did them irreparable harm."

Gibbs is following along, but this is nothing he'd expected out of her. There's something he's… sensed… maybe. Just the ghost of a feeling, since Mike died, that there was something like this lurking in the back of Ziva's mind. A sort of regretful weariness. He's surprised it's coming out now, but everything is changing now, so maybe it's a good time for it. And he's starting to get a feel for where this is going to go.

"More than ten years ago, I came here, and I stopped breaking people, for the most part, and started to clean up the pieces that are left over after a break. Justice and closure, and maybe that helps. I like to think it does."

He nods. It helps. It helps as much as anything can help.

"But we don't create here, Gibbs." He hears that and knows that whatever is coming next, she's made her decision, and right now, she's looking for reassurance and support. "On our best days, our very best days, we pick up the pieces and keep the mess from getting any bigger than it already is. We give other people the tools to try and patch the pieces back together." She looks at the already cut pieces of wood in front of her, and picks one up, no idea what it'll be. (Once it hits the lathe, it'll be a peg.)

"What if that isn't enough? What if I want to create? What if, instead of breaking people, or cleaning up the mess left by broken people, what if I want to build people? What if I want to make a home, and a family, and devote all of myself to it? What if I want to spend my time cherishing my husband and children?" She puts the piece down and turns to look him in the eyes. "My whole life has been about death, murder, pain, vengeance, and justice. And maybe, maybe it's time to focus on life."

Gibbs pulls her into a hug so fast she gasps, and then gently kisses her forehead. He holds her close
for a long time and finally says, "Maybe?"

She smiles a little at that, looking relieved. It hits him then that all the girls work. None of them are or (in Penny's case) were, stay at home moms. And for as much as Ziva has a 'couldn't care less about what other people think' armor in place, she does care, very much, about what this family she's collected over the years thinks. He wonders if she's here, with him right now, because he's the one most likely to respect this decision.

"I haven't spoken to Tony about this. We've been talking about children, you know that." And he does, so he nods. "But I have not said anything about…"

"Being a full time mom?"

"Yes. Beyond anything else, there are practical considerations. With both of us working, we can live here comfortably, with just his income, that won't be true."

Gibbs nods. The only reason he can afford to live here is the fact that he bought his house back in '86 and owns it outright now.

"You speak nine languages. You could translate part time or teach or tutor one on one. Vance might be willing to hire you on a per-piece basis for translations."

She nods at that.

"And the CIA and the FBI both have a huge intel backlog. They're always looking for people to listen to tapes and translate them, too."

"I know, Gibbs. It's not a lack of potential other jobs that's the issue. In the long run, say when this child we're thinking of is in school, that will be an attractive option. But when he's a baby, every hour I am doing that is an hour someone else is raising our child. And I know Tim and Abby have a nanny, and Kelly is thriving. Molly is in daycare, and she is fine. Anna, when she goes to daycare will be fine, too. But… when I imagine it. When I think about the kind of mother I want to be, I don't see myself handing my baby over to someone else."

"You think Tony won't like that?"

She shrugs. That's not precisely that. "I think Tony will be exceptionally uncomfortable with the changes necessary to make that possible. He's already at the edge of his comfort zone with the idea of a baby, and… And a completely new team. A new home. Fewer comforts. Less money. A less 'nice' home…" Gibbs is nodding along. Tony does like his luxuries. A kid (or two) does cut into that, major loss of income would make it even worse.

But he also thinks of the child Tony was. He thinks about the fact that Tony doesn't talk much about being a kid, but the bits he does talk about, the moments he cherishes, are time spent with his Mom. He knows he personally would have given anything for more time with his mom, healthy. And he's sure Tony would have, too. So Gibbs says, "I think a man who was raised by nannies and boarding schools might just surprise you on how far he'd be willing to go to have his child's mother home with that child every day. And I know for a fact that we're both a whole lot more comfortable with you nowhere near anything even remotely dangerous. If the biggest risk you've got facing you in the next ten years is going stir-crazy from too much Sesame Street, we'd both approve." Gibbs squeezes her a little tighter. "When are you going to talk to him about it?"

"Tonight? Tomorrow? Depends on when we've got a quiet night in without a case to focus on."

Gibbs nods at that. "Let me know when you do."
"I do not think I'll need to. He'll probably be in your basement about twenty minutes later."

Gibbs smiles and kisses her again. "Yeah, he probably will be. I'll help get him straight."

"Thank you."

Chapter End Notes

So, according to my Word Doc, the first version of this was written almost a year ago. (Honestly, I can't remember details that well. I do know I was in Costco, snorking down a diet Pepsi, typing away.) Yes, some of these scenes have been around for that long, some are even older, some I write the day before they go live.

I also know it was before Cote De Pablo-gate, and the firestorm of she's not coming back!

No, as I was sitting there, working through the conversation with Gibbs, I was mostly thinking of the scene in Swan Song or Pyramid, where Tony and Ziva are talking about there always being another monster. And Tony's tired, he's sad, but he's ready to go out and fight more monsters. But Ziva's not. In that moment, she's done. Now, obviously, they got her going again, but when I got thinking about which of the girls would eventually be the stay at home mom, that scene stuck with me.

Ziva was tired. She wanted a new path. She just didn't know what it might be.

Likewise, there was the bit in A Man Walks Into A Bar about wanting something permanent, something that could not be taken away from her.

And thus, the Angel of Death, and the desire to focus on life.

And, as much as I thought Past, Present, Future was... rushed? (Is that a nice way to put it? Riddled with gaping plot holes large enough to swallow Godzilla? I guess that's less nice.) I was fairly pleased to see that same, 'I've broken people, and it's time to stop mindset.'
Free Fall

Stay at home mom. Tony's nodding. He's looking supportive. Inside he's screaming in terror.

Yeah, she wasn't kidding, that's a scary fucking change.

Sure, the rational bit of his mind that is not completely flipping out at the idea, agrees that this is a fine idea. That it would solve the time issue. It would definitely allow him to run the team (but what good is the team if none of his people are on it? God, he doesn't even want to think about how much that hurts.) and still have a family life when he's not running it.

And he really appreciates her hitting him with this now, before she's pregnant, so that they're talking about it as opposed to just this is the way it's going to be. (Though the screaming part of his brain is also fairly sure that this is how it's going to be, and if this were just a discussion, like if she had said this to him before they got engaged, he'd be a whole hell of a lot less flipped out.)

She's looking at him expectantly, so he smiles, or at least lifts the corners of his lips and bares his teeth, (She flinches at that, so obviously it wasn't the comforting gesture he was aiming for.) and says, "I… just… um… thinking… Yeah. Thinking. Got to do some thinking," grabs his keys, and heads out.

Fourteen minutes. Gibbs didn't think even Ziva could make it from their place to his that fast. But that's how long passed between Ziva's call and Tony's footsteps on his stairs.

"There's nothing I can afford on my salary in a decent school district anywhere near here."

Gibbs looks up at him, puts his saw down, and points to the stools next to his work bench, two bourbons are already poured and waiting. He sits down, and so does Tony.

"Tony…" Yeah, you won't get rich on a Team Leader salary, but you can afford a decent place to live.

"They're going to force me to retire in eight years! Nine or ten if I can get McGee to pull his age erasing trick for me. I can stay on for desk duty, was planning to, because we're going to need the money. But with her on team leader salary and me on desk duty we'd be comfortable, still scrambling to figure out how to pay for college, and not looking to retire rich or anything, but I wouldn't be worried about how to pay the rent."

That makes a whole lot more sense. Gibbs doesn't know what kind of money, if any, Tony and Ziva have in the bank. His general sense was that Tony liked to live pretty close to the edge of his paycheck, if not a bit over. He's also sure Ziva's a saver. And he had kind of assumed that Eli David had some money, and that Ziva as his only heir probably got it, but… But he doesn't know that, and he knows assuming is a one way trip to wrong.

So if Tony's looking at a maximum of ten years to get as much as he can… Because post-retirement desk duty money is the kind of cash that's supposed to pay for that nice vacation, or the deck on the house, or round out the college funds. It's the money that lets you do fun stuff on your off time while your pension does the heavy lifting. It's not the kind of money you're supposed to live one.

Gibbs stands up, grabs a legal pad and a pencil, and starts writing things down. Right now, he figures that a good, solid, set plan is what Tony needs. "One problem at a time. Place to live in a good school district. Tim, Jimmy, and I can help with that."
"Gibbs, I can't take money from you guys."

"Not what I was thinking, Tony." And it wasn't, he knew there was no way Tony'd take that kind of help. "There has to be a house or condo in bad shape around here somewhere. Something foreclosed on and damaged. And I'm sure Tim can make his computer find it. And then we fix it up. This place was a wreck when we got it, and Shannon and I got it into shape. We can do the same thing for you."

"I know nothing about fixing a house. And it's not like I've got tons of downtime to work on one."

"Neither did Shannon. I doubt Palmer's any handier. And unless it's a wiring job, Tim probably doesn't know how to do it, either. But Tim knows electrical. I'm good with just about everything else. And what we don't know, we can learn. And it's not like I won't be swimming in free time come January. How low does your housing payment need to be to keep you putting enough away?"

Tony thinks for a moment. "God. Eight hundred."

Gibbs just stares at Tony, that seems really reasonable to him. Okay, sure, that's not a mansion, but any fairly decent house should be in that neighborhood.

And Tony stares at Gibbs, suddenly very aware of the fact that Gibbs hasn't been in the real estate market in more than thirty years.

"Gibbs, McGee's house went for over four hundred thousand and is worth more than six now. The only reason Jimmy and Breena could afford theirs was they got enough money as wedding presents to swing the down-payment. Your place is probably worth over five hundred thousand now. When the market went hot at the end of '14 prices jolted way back up again. If it's beat up enough for us to afford it, it'll be in pretty rough shape."

Gibbs shrugs a little. "Labor's usually the expensive part. You and Tim find something in the right place, I'll make sure it's got a solid skeleton, and instead of fighting for bootcamp, we'll make sure you can get moved in before the baby shows up."

"God." Tony slugs back some of the bourbon. '"Before the baby shows up.' She's not pregnant, yet. We're not even trying, yet."

"I know. But she's gonna be, or you two are going to adopt. I think at this point it's pretty fair to say it's going to happen."

"I hate this."

Gibbs gives him the keep talking look, and Tony is deeply relieved to see no condemnation in his eyes.

"We do this, it's all on me. I fuck it up, she's screwed. Something happens to me, she's screwed."

"She'll be dependent on you."

Tony nods, looking terrified. "Yeah. Fuck! She's got no out if we do this."

Gibbs nudges Tony's jam jar of bourbon, and Tony takes another drink, then he coolly says, "You think if you fuck up badly enough that she wants out, we aren't going to make sure she's got a soft place to land? You think if you get hurt or killed, we're not going to take care of her?"

"No… but… She'll be completely dependent on me! She's… volunteering to be dependent on me."
"She trusts you."

"God knows why."

"You're trustworthy. You have saved her life multiple times. You're not the guy you were five years ago, let alone ten years ago."

Tony looks about to take another drink, but he just stares at the liquor in front of him. "My mom was dependent on my dad like that."

"And he screwed it up, didn't he?"

"Yeah."

"You're not him. Look, I know you, and I know your dad, and you are a vastly better man than he ever was or will be."

"Thanks."

"And it is normal to be scared by this. It is sane to be scared of this. Kids are scary. Having your whole life change is scary. A new team is scary. Having the future you were expecting ripped away from you is scary."

"I'd just gotten to… I don't know. Still scared but, ready, I guess. You know that feeling where you're looking over the edge and about to shit yourself, but you're still going to jump anyway because you know it's the right thing to do?"

"Yeah, I know that feeling."

"Now I feel like I just looked over my shoulder and my parachute's not packed right."

Gibbs nods. "Part of being a parent. You feel that way a lot."

"I hate feeling this way."

"Yeah. I do, too. Feel it a lot. Feel it when we're in the field and suddenly everything's fubared. Felt it when I was a Marine, especially every time I got transferred to a new unit. Felt it all the time with my Kelly. Felt it when my mom was sick. It's always there, Tony. The only time it goes away is when you stay so stuck in your routine that nothing changes. That… holding pattern we were in for eight years between Ziva joining us and Jimmy getting married where we all stayed nice and snug in our little cocoons of safe, unchanging habit."

"I take it seeing Rachel's been helping," Tony says dryly, but he catches the slight tightening of Gibbs' jaw. "Is it not helping?"

"Helped just fine. Just, over now."

"Really?" And then why Gibbs has been a bear makes perfect sense. "Oh. So, no romancing Doctor Kate's Sister?"

Gibbs glares at him.

Tony holds up his hands. "I know. She's married. And your therapist. It's apparently really common, though. Called transference."

Now Gibbs is flashing his you know this how look.
"Our first two sessions with our counselor were one on one. I went first. I told her that besides the occasional psych eval, I'd never done this before. So she gave me a counseling primer and that was part of it." Tony shrugs at that. "You going to find someone else?"

"Not right now. Maybe if I get stuck again. I'm good at stuck." He brings it back around to what they had been talking about. "Spent a long time stuck. So did you. It's not scary, but nothing really good happens."

"My dad said that when we got married. Something like it. That she was going to want things that would scare the shit out of me, but if I trusted her, and went with it, I'd find joy, instead of just happy."

Gibbs smiles at that. "Even your dad's learned a thing or two over the years."

Tony takes another drink, and Gibbs follows, enjoying the sweet burn of the bourbon.

"You remember that case… We worked it with Borin… Would have been just about when Tim and Abby got together. Ziva was pissed because we were playing that game without her..."

Gibbs nods, he remembers that.

"Borin asked me why I was still with your team."

"And?"

"And I said I couldn't find better people. My people are leaving. If she goes, too… it'll just be a job."

"You remember being down here, Christmas-time six-seven years ago, and me telling you to learn from my example, not follow it?"

"Yeah."

"It's okay to have a job, Tony. NCIS doesn't have to be every single moment of our lives. In fact, it shouldn't be. I don't want any of you to get to my age and be afraid of retirement. I want you to have lives and loves and hobbies and passions, and stuff beyond this. Go, build your family and life with Ziva. And you run the team, and you do the work, but when it's done, you go home. You spend time with the people who make you happy. You don't keep hanging around that office, picking at dead cases, running every detail through your head over and over, looking for the splinter of evidence you missed, like I did.

"Maybe it won't be the 'best' team anymore. Maybe you won't solve them as fast. But it doesn't have to be. You don't have to ruin your life and your family trying to quiet my ghosts. It'll be your team, Tony. You'll run it however you see fit. No one looking over your shoulder. No one comparing you to anyone else. It's an almost complete fresh start. No more rules, no more slaps, no more… anything you don't want. And just because I couldn't stand the quiet moments alone in my own head, just because I had to work until I dropped, and I dragged all of you along for the ride, doesn't mean you have to do that."

Tony sits there quietly, absorbing that. Thinking. And though he heard it when Gibbs had said to learn from his example before, it didn't much soak in. So much of his own life was upside down and unsatisfactory, and Gibbs looked like he had it together. So he heard, but, it didn't mean anything. Just like when McGee spouts computer-talk, sure he hears it, but it's gibberish.

Not being like Gibbs was gibberish.
But now, it's soaking in.

Now, it means something.

He thought the shift was going from being second-in-command to team-leader. And that was part of it, that was the start. But he's getting it now. Getting that along with McGee's 'you're replacing Gibbs.'

It's his team. But it's not just his team. That's the real shift. It's not second-in-command to team-leader, it's NCIS-is-life to Tony DiNozzo-is-life. He is not the job. And if he wants any decent shot of joy, he cannot be the job.

All of this together, happening at once, it's for a reason.

This is his life. And it's time to start living it for him, and for Ziva, and-he feels the edge he's looking over, takes a deep breath, and jumps-for the child, children they're going to have.
Twas The Night Before Christmas

Chapter Notes

A/N: With apologies to Clement Clark Moore

See the end of the chapter for more notes

'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the den

Tim McGee was cursing, significantly louder than a wren.

The stockings were hung, by the chimney with care

In the hopes that Dad and Pop would soon finish there.

Tim's holding the instructions, staring at the fifteen million pieces of plastic in front of him, glaring at them, saying, "I swear to God, Palmer said to Breena, 'This year, we're making Tim put them together, go find the most ridiculously complicated toys they make for toddlers and buy all of them!'"

Gibbs stands up, takes the instructions out of his hands, and drops them in the fireplace, where they very rapidly go up in smoke.

"Are you insane?" Tim's voice raises at least an octave on that.

"No. Just done this a few times. They don't help. They never help."

That moment, Abby gets down from putting Kelly to sleep, surveys the chaos in front of them, and says, "Have you tried the directions?"

Tim glares again, looks at Gibbs, looks at the fireplace, where the curling edges of the instructions are visible among the leaping flames, and looks back to Abby.

"You set fire to them? Gibbs!"

Gibbs looks back up at her, laying down the pieces of plastic he's attempting to put together. "They weren't helping. He was just sitting there, staring at them, muttering about how he's got a degree in engineering, and if he can't put this together, it can't be put together."

"I do have a degree in engineering! I got a magna cum laude BS in Biomedical Engineering from the best program in the US. For my senior project, I helped to design better artificial knee joints. I've done papers on how to make heart valves work better. I wired up our phones into lethal weapons. I've hacked everything that can be hacked, and when it couldn't be hacked, I stripped it down to its component parts and worked from the hardware up. I know how to build things!"

Abby puts her hands on Tim's shoulders and kisses the top of his head. She's actually never seen him this frustrated, probably because he thinks this is something he's supposed to be good at, but he's not.

"It's okay. No one expects either of you to be able to put these together by just looking at them. Here, let me get my laptop." She came back a minute later. "What's this thing called?"
Gibbs hands her the box. She calls up Youtube and puts in 'how to build a Tiny Tyke Ball Bubbler,' and in a matter of minutes they were watching a video on it.

Tim's still muttering about how it was designed by idiot sadists, but with the video playing, and a few of the nonstandard modifications suggested on said video (superglue, x-acto knife, file), they got it together quickly, and while Abby made them eggnog (Jackson's recipe) and put some Christmas carols on, they grabbed the next toy, and went looking for another video of how to put it together.

An hour later, presents were put together. (Abby's wrapping them.) Tim leans back against the sofa, relaxing, drinking more of the eggnog, then says to Abby, "So, what do you think, we get pregnant again in March and make them do this next year?"

She giggles at that. "Revenge baby? That's where you're going with this?"

"Just saying. Don't want to waste a perfectly good opportunity to do unto him as he did unto us."

Gibbs laughs. "It's eight thirty, everything is put together, and you didn't have to wait in line for six hours to get a present. Count your blessings. We had three Christmasses in a row up until two, and then Kelly bounded out of bed at five."

"Three in a row?" Tim asks.

"First one, she was five, and wanted that bear. I didn't get home until after one. Didn't take too long to get the batteries in it, but the wait in line took forever. Second year, she's six, wants a bike. Instructions are in Japanese, and yes, I can speak it now, but I couldn't then. And I still can't read more than two thousand words of it. The English translation was so bad, I was doing just as well with the Japanese. Year three, she's seven," Gibbs smiles, remembering that year, "That year the toys were simple. We were celebrating that we'd gotten everything done well before midnight."

"And ended up staying up way late?" Abby asks.

"Something like that." He sips his eggnog. "I think some of this was involved, as well."

"There! All wrapped up." Abby looks at the presents in front of her. "Um... Don't these need to get to Jimmy and Breena's?"

Gibbs grins. "Duck'll be here soon. He's on Santa duty this year."

"They're doing presents at their place in the morning and then we're all together at your place in the afternoon/evening?" Tim asks.

"Best I know."

The baby was nestled, all snug in her bed

Visions of nursing dancing in her head

And Mama in her negligee and Tim in his skin

Had just settled in for some late winter sin.

Some things really shouldn't be legal. The scene that greeted him as he stepped out of the bathroom was definitely among them.

Abby grinning at him in opera-length red satin gloves, red high heels, a Santa hat, and a wide red
ribbon tied around her hips, bow right over her pussy, with a little spring of mistletoe dangling off of it, and the scent of that perfume wafting off of her is one of those things.

Okay, no, it should definitely be legal.

Very, very legal. Just… Gibbs in a room twenty feet down the hall is the snag.

'Cause Tim remembers the few somewhat gently pointed comments about it occasionally being 'loud' in their house, and Abby in tiny scraps of red satin and 'quiet' do not naturally go together.

So he grins, reminds himself that no matter how loudly and sincerely he wants to shout out how much he likes this, that like the poem says, he needs to be quiet as a mouse.

He looks her up and down, very deliberately, smiling wide and happy, then takes the three steps to her, and says (quietly), "Merry Christmas to me, huh?"

"Ho ho ho." She's grinning, too, face all lit up with pleasure.

His fingers ghost over her shoulders, breasts, stomach and come to rest, lightly on the bow. "This is going to kill me."

"Which part?"

He kisses her throat, and shoulder, inhaling deeply, moans softly at it, feeling his body rise in response. "All of your luscious self, but mostly trying to appreciate you quietly."

"Hmmmm… I'll just have to find something to keep your mouth busy."

"Oh…" He's very pleased by that idea. Of course, he's very pleased by all of this.

She has her hands clasped behind her back, looking up at him, kind of innocent, kind of naughty, pushing her breasts up and out toward him while nibbling her lip. "So, you gonna unwrap your present?"

"Oh yeah." He stares at her, hot and lusty, for a second before kneeling in front of her. He's about to nip the ribbon between his teeth when she tugs his hair to stop him. "What?" he asks looking up to her eyes.

"It's poisonous."

It takes a tenth of a second before he understands she means the mistletoe. "I know. Wasn't going to eat it."

"Okay. Good."

"Got way better things to eat," he says, voice dark and low, as his hands cup her rear and he takes the ribbon between his teeth and pulls. It slithers off of her, falling (along with the mistletoe) to the floor. "Oh, Abby."

She's grinning again as he stares at her sleek, bare pussy. Soft, so, so soft, pouty little pink lips peeking between the white folds of her skin. She hasn't waxed since a few months before Kelly was born. But, apparently, that's part of his Christmas present.

"Thought you'd like that."

"You know I do." He looks up at her, adoringly. Gently kissing her belly before returning his
attention to her pussy.

And he does love this, and he really, really appreciates that she'll do it. As of this point, that's the only thing he adores but won't ask for. It has to hurt like a son of a bitch, so he just won't ever ask her to do it, but yes, he loves it. He kisses her mound gently. "I love this. Love you all smooth and silky." His fingers slip over her. "Nothing else feels like this. So, so, so soft." He kisses again. "Fuzzy is good, too, but this... God, baby, love this."

Her fingers twine in his hair, feeling oddly slick wrapped in satin, but nice, especially the slight rasp across the grain against the top of his ear.

He looks back up to her face as she caresses his hair and scalp.

She's still grinning at him, just very pleased with everything in the world right now. "So, you going to give me something to keep my mouth occupied, too?"

That gets one more deep, licking, sucking kiss out of him, as his hands tighten on her hips, making sure he has a good grip. Then he stands, still holding her, so she tumbles back into their bed (squeaking, quietly, in surprise at it).

The second after that, he follows her, settling on his side next to her, kissing her lips, feeling her suck his tongue in soft, wet pulses that are going straight to his dick, because he knows that's coming, soon.

He's rubbing against her, reveling in her soft and smooth on his dick, and it's trite, and he's thought it before, and he knows he'll think it again, but nothing, nothing feels as good as this. Abby's pussy, wet and slick on him. Her laugh (quiet) in his ears. Her arms and legs around him while he kisses her throat, feeling her pulse thrum under his lips.

Nothing else is like this. Nothing else makes him this kind of happy.

And all of that happy wants to spill out of him. In words, fervent, praising, dirty, sexy words. In groans, hot and low. In laughter, deep and rich. And in cum, spurts of liquid pleasure marking her as his.

But it's not time for that, not yet.

He hooks her leg over his hip and slips into her, groaning, quietly, against her collarbone. He knows he's going to just start babbling if he doesn't find something to keep his mouth busy, so he scootches down a bit, pulling her breast to his lips. She tugs his hair lightly, reminding him that that's still a mostly look-don't-touch area.

So he straightens up, rolling onto his back, pulling her to lay full out on top of him, so they can kiss deep and easy.

They aren't really moving, just holding on, kissing, enjoying their bodies together, and the play of lip on lip and tongue on tongue. Though eventually she does start to rock in rhythm with his tongue, and he starts to thrust shallowly to go along with her. Just ramping things up, going from simmer to boil, though he's sure this isn't how they're going to finish tonight.

No, this is the warm up, just about enjoying the glide and pleasure drenched friction of slick skin on skin.

She's starting to tighten on him, that almost frustrated roll of her hips, close but not enough friction, not focused enough to get her off.
"Switch around."

That gets a quick grin, and then the delightful sensation of her body moving on his, followed by one of the scents that hits him hardest, her body wet, ripe, his own musk on her skin, trace of pre-cum, bit of that perfume, light sweat. Just smelling it makes him drip, and tasting it…

He groans at that, too. The rich, salty, musky sex of it. And she's tasting him, and it's that swimming-in-sex sensation, all-over, full-brain, full-body, all of him wrapped up in it, sex.

She's sucking his balls, rubbing his dick with her hands, and he's licking her clit while his fingers slip in and out of her, both of them going at it hard and fast, chasing orgasms that aren't far away.

His legs are getting tense, balls pulling tight, her body tight and almost quivering on his, pussy clenched on his fingers as he rubs with his tongue and she mouths her way down his dick, wet, loving sucks that take him that much higher, thrusting that much harder, pointing his tongue rubbing a bit faster, trying to get her g-spot with each stroke, and she's taking him all the way down as her legs clamp on his shoulders, and he's so close, and she is too and one more lick, one fast flick, a gliding suck, and then were both twitching, pulsing, buzzing with pleasure.

Quietly.

When warm and happy he from the bed crept

Quietly down the stairs to where the coffee was kept

Down to the kitchen he went with a dash

To open the cupboard and raid the caffeine stash

He's not sure if saying he was going to find some Jolly Old Elf for Jimmy made the switch, or if it's just that yes, having kids makes this more fun, or maybe, more than that, this whole family thing makes it more fun, could be the very good mood from the sex, but he's feeling almost giddy as he creeps out of bed to add the finishing touches to Christmas downstairs.

The last time he was this happy about Christmas he was ten-years-old, sitting beneath the tree, late on Christmas eve (possibly early in the morning) the x-acto knife he had promised to only use for building models in hand, very carefully slitting the tape on the wrapping of what he was really hoping was a Nintendo. And YES, it was! He carefully taped everything back up, tucked the knife into the pocket of his robe, and crept back up the stairs, happy as happy could be.

He's got a few things in his arms, and he does stop in the living room to put them on the sofa, and then heads to the kitchen.

Usually he makes his Christmas cookies on Christmas. But, when it became clear that Gibbs was going to stay over for Christmas and they'd be doing this whole family-Christmas-thing his plan shifted.

He's already got the cookies made. Because he knows Gibbs likes them. And he knows, that sometime between now and morning, Gibbs will be down here with his own presents.

So, Tim grabs a plate, puts a few of the cookies on it, preparing the traditional snack for Santa. Gibbs isn't really a milk guy, though. And he's fairly sure that Gibbs'll be up at the pre-crack of dawn for putting his own presents down here, so Tim sets the coffee maker to start at 04:45, loads it with Black Death, which should result in coffee brewed and ready to go for Gibbs when he gets down.
Then he takes the cookies, puts a little note on them. *Coffee* with the arrow pointing to the kitchen, and sets them in front of the fireplace.

Next part is putting his presents down.

He's feeling pretty eager to watch Abby open her presents. He may have ordered a few more perfumes than was strictly necessary, and he also found a red-wool coat that he was pretty sure Abby'd practically swoon over.

(And yes, swoon is the right word. It's floor length, with a very Victorian cut, and beautiful, ornate black detailing. Breena whistled when he showed her the picture of it, and Ziva nodded quietly, looking impressed. He's fairly sure that if the other two girls approve, he's in the clear.)

He's looking forward to seeing Gibbs open his presents, too. Abby had the Gibbs family crest made up for everyone. Art prints, full size, and made sure they all had framing gift certificates. All of which have been rolled into tidy cylinders and ready to go.

Tim knows he'll like the crest; and he'll probably like the Black Death Coffee of the Month Club. (Twelve of the blackest, strongest, most stand up and eat the spoon coffees on earth! Or so said the PR information.) He'll probably be irked by the cologne, but Tim's okay with that. He's expecting irked. Irked is part of the fun of it. It's not exactly a joke gift, but there's some of that there.

But he's hoping the bit that'll go over the best is what he's (quietly) doing right now, and that's putting Gibbs' stocking up on their mantle and tucking the last present into it.

As Abby said to him three years ago, when they were putting up that first Christmas tree, that the tree is like a family tree. Not dates or names so much, but stories. So, the last presents he tucks into the stocking are ornaments for Gibbs. His own marks for their tree.

And, feeling very happy and satisfied, Tim heads back to bed, to enjoy his own long winter's nap.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yes, there is a shot of the coat on the blog. It's worth a look.

Secondly, got some comments on the DiNozzo family finances, so here's my head cannon for what's up with that:

Yes, Eli David did have money and he did leave it to Ziva, but given how he died and what happened right before that, when she settled his estate, she gave it away to two peace organizations. (One Israeli, one Palestinian, though that one had to be given anonymously.) She didn't want his money but did want to make sure it did some good.

In her own personal habits, I tend to see Ziva as the kind of woman who stashes away ten percent of her income. She's probably got money and emergency supplies in half a dozen places. If they ever have to run, they won't be broke. But, that's not a lot of money, and it's not for living on, it's the emergency, shit-has-hit-the-fan, get-out-of-Dodge funds.

She also has a bit of a cushion for every day issues, call it three or so months of living on money in the bank. Like all NCIS employees she's in line for a pension, so she's not
saving too hard for retirement.

For Tony, I see him as the kind of guy who put six months of expenses in the bank, and as soon as that was covered, he's spent every other dime. He's got his pension in place, probably has a 401K as well, life insurance paid for, is expecting social security when he retires, and expects to work until he can collect. (Age 65 for those of you who aren't Americans.)

Okay, why is he flipping out? Because he's gone from expecting to bring in about $130K a year for the next twenty-five years to having his income drop to $85K a year and a max of ten more years of that, then maybe another ten years at $70K (pension/desk duty money) before he's in line for Social Security.

So, it's not so much that they don't have savings. They do have some. It's that Tony's looking at a massive shift in his expected income, and trying to figure out how to wrangle the rest of their lives on a much lower income stream than he was expecting.
05:03. Gibbs doesn't need to set any sort of alarm. His body remembers how this works.

He spends a few more minutes in bed, resting, enjoying laying out with nothing hurting and not feeling particularly tired. Then he gets up, decides it's cool enough that he wants more than a t-shirt and sweat pants, so he pulls on one of his NIS sweat shirts, and grabs his goodies.

They're mostly presents for Kelly. He kind of went a bit bonkers on that. But, like Ducky with Molly's first Christmas, he's feeling entitled to engage in a bit of grandfatherly spoiling.

He creeps out of his room, trying not to make too much noise; he doesn't want Tim leaping out of bed and shooting him before his brain wakes up enough to realize that other person moving around his house belongs here.

Though, it's hitting him, that him wandering around the house happens enough these days that Tim probably already has it in his mind that those extra footsteps are his.

He gets down the steps and is greeted by something he wasn't expecting, at all. The Christmas tree lights are all on, so the room is glowing gold. Light enough he can see easy, but he doesn't have to turn the overheads on and go blind. He can smell coffee, freshly made, waiting for him. He doesn't see anyone and he'd have bet good money that Tim and Abby were still in bed, but light and coffee is very welcome.

Before doing anything else, he puts the presents on the sofa, and heads to the kitchen to grab a cup. He smiles as he gets in there, nose identifying that this is his coffee, and there's a cup waiting next to the coffee maker for him.

Back to the living room to do his Santa work. When he went up last night there were three stockings on the mantle, and now there's a fourth, and it does have some promising looking lumps. It's ice blue with silver snowflakes on it, and as his fingers trail over it, he's sure who it belongs to.

He looks down, sees the cookies, and the sign, smiles again, and begins to put presents in stockings or under the tree.

It only takes him a few minutes to get them all laid in place. Only thing missing is a roaring fire in the fireplace, so he takes a few minutes to get that set, and then looks around. Yep, tree's lit, fire's burning, presents all around, there's even boughs of holly on the mantelpiece.

It's Christmas.

All done, he settles onto the sofa, munching the cookies, drinking his coffee, and coming to the conclusion that Andes mint-chunk cookies and coffee are very good together.

The addition of children, even tiny baby ones who aren't actually aware of the whole Christmas concept, makes the whole thing more fun.

Tim's got no idea why this would be true. He can get why it'd be true if Kelly had raced down the steps to tear into her presents, but… she couldn't care less about this whole Christmas thing. She's, if anything, slightly annoyed because her morning routine is off.
But, Abby's opening her presents, squeeing over the coat (trying it on over her jammies, and spinning in it), Gibbs is squinting at the bottle of Jolly Roger. (Yep, he's irked. He's got that, what on Earth could you have possibly been thinking look on his face. Tim's pleased.) Kelly's sitting in his lap, chewing on one of her presents (those stackable rings) and he's just really, really enjoying this.

"You going to open yours?" Abby asks as he's sitting there, watching.

"Oh, yeah." Presents. He's got presents too, right. He takes his stocking off the mantle and finds one rectangular package in it. He holds it up to Kelly, who's still in his lap. "What do you think? Wanna help me open it?"

She whacks it a few times with her palm, so he takes her hands in his, and gets her gripping the paper and gives it a rip. She giggles at that, and tries again, this time successfully grabbing the paper and tearing.

Call of Duty 5 is staring up at him, and he grins. Oh yes, he's got plans for that. "Jimmy and Tony got copies, too," Abby adds. His grin gets wider. Jimmy really can play. Tony's still learning. He does much better when Ziva spots for him. He shows it to Gibbs. "Feel like learning how to play?"

Gibbs sips his coffee and slowly shakes his head. Then he reaches behind him, to the tree, and grabs Tim's other presents, flat squares. Tim smiles at them too, thinking he knows what they are, and a bit of quick unwrapping shows he's right.

Records. Old ones. Mostly jazz, but there's some blues, and some country, which he's surprised at, because he's really not a country music guy, but these are old enough that it might be that sort of music where blues and jazz and rock and spiritual and bluegrass and country hadn't yet all morphed into distinct genres… He's looking forward to getting them onto his record player.

"They were Jackson's. LJ and Ducky helped me pick out which ones you might like."

"Thank you."

He hands Kelly over to Gibbs, puts the records (gently) on the sofa, and heads into his office. A minute later, he's back with his record player, and plugging it in.

He holds them up. "What do we start with?"

Gibbs raises his hands. "No idea. The ones I knew well enough to remember, I also knew weren't the sort of music you like."
"Okay. We'll start at the top then. Can't go wrong with Etta James."

The scratchy hiss of the needle hitting vinyl fills their living room, and a few seconds later it's replaced by a warm, smoky voice.

Tim's watching Gibbs curiously, wondering if once he hears it it'll spring memories, but Gibbs just shakes his head. Then he surveys the mounds of wrapping paper, and the toys strewn in front of Kelly, along with three tidy piles of grown-up presents, and says, "So, breakfast?"

"Sure."

After they finish breakfast, Gibbs knows he has to get moving. That turkey isn't going to roast itself, and if he wants food to put on the table for the horde of people who are going to be coming to his house starting around noon and lasting all day, he has to go.

So, home he goes. He got the turkey into the oven and the veggies prepped. (Potatoes are peeled and in cold water, waiting for closer to time to cook. Green beans have been cut, and are also sitting in cold water waiting for closer to time. And now, with as many people coming and bringing food as he has, that's all the cooking he has to do.)

Shower time, get dressed (cargo pants, t-shirt, flannel shirt over it: It's his house, he's not feeling any need to get too fancy.) and by the time he's heading downstairs again, he hears voices.

Wendy's sitting in front of the fireplace, stacking the logs.

"You're looking comfy," he says as he kisses her cheek.

Fornell's fiancée looks up at him and smiles. "Indeed. Where are the matches?"

He nods to the mantelpiece. There's a long, narrow wooden box, mahogany and maple inlay. He'd made it for Shannon a long time ago. She'd used it for holding her jewelry. Now it holds long fireplace matches.

She stands and begins to light the fire while he heads to the kitchen. Fornell is already in there, cutting up peppers and onions, sausage browning.

"Told Jeannie that I'd show her how my Nona did it."

Gibbs nods. In addition to Draga, Kevin, Sarah, and Glenn, Ed and Jeannie are the new people joining the feast this year. Gonna be a very full house.

Tim puts Kelly down for her post-lunch nap, and finds Abby sitting on their bed. She's playing with the new perfumes (he got her a bunch of little testers this time, instead of two huge bottles.) and smells delicious.

Like Jimmy said, it's different, but that doesn't mean it's any less good.

So, he flops down onto the bed next to her, pulls her so she's laying across his chest, and kisses her gently, inhaling deeply.

"You like this one?" she asks.

"I think it's safe to say I like all of them. Which one is this?" One thing he does know is that he's got almost no shot of figuring out which bottle it came from by smelling Abby. They smell like one thing
in the bottle and something very different on her.

"Morocco."

This one is dry and spicy and not quite so sexy, but still smells very good. "Yum!"

"Yeah."

She's got on his MIT sweatshirt and from the looks of it, nothing else. His hand comes to rest on the little bit of her butt that's peeking out from under the hem.

She kisses the tip of his nose. "Two hours until we have to leave for Gibbs' place."

He nods, then flashes her a sassy grin. "Yep. Maybe I should go play some Call of Duty."

That little kiss turns into a playful nip on his lip.

"No? You've got something else you want me doing?"

She nods, kisses him again. He cups the back of her head, kissing her slower, deeper. "What if I've got something I want you doing?"

She looks thoughtful. "Does it involve getting out of bed?"

He stands up, takes her hands, and pulls her up, too. "Yep."

"Curious."

He leads her to their bathroom.

"Even more curious."

He drops her hands, opens the medicine cabinet, and pulls out the trimmers. She sees them, understands what he has in mind, and smiles. "Not so curious."

He sets them on the edge of the tub and goes to put a new blade on his razor. "I think, if you're going to go to all the trouble to do this," his fingers trace lightly over her pussy, "for me, then I can take some time to spruce up for you. Especially if you might want to help me in my sprucing up efforts."

She's giggling at that. "Sprucing up?"

"I absolutely refuse to call it 'manscaping,'" he says, shaking his head. Tony was talking about it a few years… hell, it has to be getting onto a decade ago now, back when Queer Eye was big, and from that point on he decided he was never, ever using that word.

She's outright laughing at that, but finally calms down enough to say, "Grooming?"

"Sure." He strips out of his t-shirt and jammie pants. (None of them bothered to put real clothing on for presents and breakfast. Casual, laying about in pjs had been the morning vibe.)

She looks him up and down while grabbing the trimmers and sitting on the edge of the tub. Everything's regrown and back to normal from when they did this in April. "Everything?"

He steps into the tub, fingers lightly brushing his thigh. And while it's true that shaved legs did feel awesome, they aren't spending the whole day in bed. "Nah. I was going to wear the kilt to the party, and I'm not feeling any need to explain to Senior or Ed why I have no leg hair. Beyond that,
anything else is up to you."

She lightly kisses the tip of his penis, which has noticed that something good is about to start happening and is looking forward to getting going on that. "Think I'll just get around here then."

"Good, want to be all soft and smooth against your soft and smooth."

She smiles at that and begins to trim.

Lots of sex results in a very relaxed, very playful, and honestly, kind of goofy Tim McGee. And sure, twice in less than twenty-four hours isn't exactly a record for them, but it is a post-Kelly record, and he's enjoying it immensely.

Trimming had led to shaving, and shaving had resulted in a very turned on Tim and Abby, and that resulted in bathtub sex, and finally wrapping up with a long, slow, tender co-shower.

And with them getting out of the bathroom about nine seconds before Kelly woke up.

So, it is, with Kelly on their bed, on her back, (in yet another painfully cute little Christmas outfit: this one is brown footy PJs with little hooves on the feet, a tiny tail on the tush, and a little hood with reindeer horns and floppy ears.) grabbing her feet while balanced precariously on her back (and rolling onto her side four out of five grabs) that they were finally getting dressed for the party.

Tim's stepping into his kilt (the McGee tartan: it's more 'Christmassy' than the black one), watching Abby slip on a little black skirt to go with her white button down and red sweater with the Grim Reaper Santa on it, (He now knows that's Death in his Hogfather costume.) enjoying watching her get dressed.

She's talking practical matters. (Making sure they've got all the presents packed up. That cookies and jambalaya are ready to go. Stuff like that. He's just watching her happily.)

"Earth to Tim, you hear any of that?"

He blinks, looking a little sheepish.

"Nope."

"What's got you so distracted?"

"Just… It's been a really good day. I'm enjoying it." She's smoothing red and green plaid thigh-high socks up her leg. "Plus, the view is awesome."

She laughs, shoves him gently, kisses him, and eyes him up and down. He's got the kilt on, and his shirt, dark green button-down, is currently on but unbuttoned. "Yeah, I'm liking the view." One more kiss. "And we've got to get moving if we don't want to be the last ones there."

"Okay. Moving." He turns toward the closet, buttoning his shirt, and looking for his gray tie. That's a bit dressier than Christmas at Gibbs' place usually is, but he's feeling kind of frisky.

Abby's dressed before he is, so she grabs Kelly, heading downstairs to start packing them up to go. He laces up his boots, puts on some of the 'tux date night cologne' and grabs his black leather jacket.

Time to make merry with the extended Gibbs clan.
Jimmy, Breena and the kids get to Gibbs’ place next.

As soon as Breena’s in the door and out of her winter gear, Gibbs takes Anna from her, very much enjoying her tiny, warm self, and then wraps Breena in a warm (one-armed) hug. "Not that I don’t want your company, but we’re all on kid duty, so if you want, I’ve got a nice, soft bed upstairs, and you’re more than welcome to sack out."

She smiles, that half-drugged tired look that goes along with an eighteen-day-old on her face, very, very happy at his suggestion. She strokes Anna’s fine curly brown hair. "She’s going to want some supper shortly, but I’ll take you up on that after."

Jimmy's getting Molly out of her coat, so Gibbs says the next bit loud enough for him to hear, "That offer’s open for you, too. The three of us are more than ready to take care of little girls for you."

Jimmy smiles, too. "Thank you. Someone's," he looks at Molly, "been really excited today, so down time would be a very good thing."

"Good. Get a nap. Especially before everyone gets here. The soundproofing is good, but not great."

"Right now, the world could be ending down here, and as long as it doesn't involve a newborn crying, I'll sleep through it," Breena says.

Gibbs nods, he remembers when Shannon was there, she could have slept through a jackhammer, but the tiniest squeak out of Kelly got her up. "You want anything? Drink? Food?"

"Just want to sit down for a bit."

Gibbs ushers her to the best spot on the sofa, next to the fire, warm but not overly toasty, and makes sure she's got some water and sugar cookies (Wendy's addition to the menu) nearby, anyway. Then he shows Jimmy up to his room, and shuts the door behind him, fairly certain Jimmy's going to be asleep before he hits the sheets.

Wendy's talking with Breena, who's nursing Anna, when the DiNozzo branch of the family shows up. Tony, Ziva, Senior, Delphine.

They're also laden with food and drink. Senior's snickerdoodles. Tony's mulled cider and spiced wine. Ziva's latkes. And Delpine adds a chestnut-stuffed goose to the mix.

There are congratulations on the new baby, chatting and catching up with Wendy and Breena (at least until Anna finished up her sixth meal of the day, and Ziva took over on baby wrangling so Breena could also grab a nap).

As Breena heads up the stairs, looking wilted from tiredness, Wendy says to Ziva, who has the burp rag over her shoulder, gently patting Anna's back. "I love babies, but I don't miss those days at all."

"It is not so bad."

Wendy smiles; she knows what Ziva's not saying with that answer. That's a woman jonesing for her own little one. "No, it's not." She strokes Anna's cheek, marveling in how soft she is. "Especially when you think of what you get out of it."

Ziva nods, patting gently.

Once they had gotten the food down, and he'd said hello to the ladies, Senior's nose started quivering
at the smell coming from the kitchen, and he knows he has to head in there and see what's on the stove.

Fornell browning up his own part of the feast makes Senior smile, and suddenly he and Fornell are reminiscing on what New York Italian-American Catholic Christmas looked and smelled like. (Promises of Nana DiNozzo's baccala pasta were made for next year. Fornell's looking pretty eager for that.)

As that's wrapping up, Senior looks out the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room, seeing Ziva patting Anna, walking her around, chin resting on the top of Anna's head.

He grins. Fornell looks over and sees it, too.

"Grandbaby soon?"

"Can't imagine it'll be more than another year, two tops."

"Looking forward to it?" Fornell's hit the point where he enjoys his friends' grandkids, and can imagine liking being a grandfather, but in that he's got a seventeen-year-old daughter, he's also terrified of being one anytime soon.

"Yeah. I screwed up a lot at being a Dad, but I am going to be a hell of a Papa."

Fornell nods at that. Then he remembers something. "Hard to do when you're never in town."

Senior flashes his patented smile. "Got something in the works on that."

From there, the house continues to fill. McGees, Vances, Dragas, and Slaters round out the crowd. LJ wanders in with the Franks girls. Diane had Emily for Christmas Eve and the morning, and when Gibbs heard they were planning on switching her over to Fornell's that night, he invited her to join in, too. Ducky and Penny finally make it, thus finishing up the guest list.

The house is packed. People are talking and laughing. Little kids (Molly and Kevin) chasing each other around between the adults. Older kids (Emily, Amira, Jared, and Kayla) hanging out on the steps, eating, talking to each other and texting their buddies. Food covers practically every horizontal surface, and rich, holiday smells fill the air.

A bit later, Tim, feeling cocky and maybe a tad on the giddy side, gets Tony alone and quietly says, "Just, you know, for your post-baby research, Christmas more than made up for a lackluster birthday." Then he flashes his widest, most shit-eating grin at Tony, who elbows him (in a friendly way) in the ribs and laughs with him.

"So, you're saying Mrs. Claus had something nice for you?"

"Oh yeah," Tim says, nodding smugly.

"All stockings were well-stuffed?"

"Well-stuffed. There was a great outpouring of holiday cheer."

They both snerk and giggle at that. Tony gives him a quick back-handed slap to the shoulder. "That's the dirtiest thing you've ever said, isn't it?"

Tim shakes his head. "Not by a mile. Not by ten of them. And certainly not in the last twenty-four
hours."

Tony laughs at that, too. Ziva joins them a second later. "Do I want to know?"

Tim shakes his head. "You really don't. It'll drop your opinion of both of our maturity by about thirty points."

"Then I will not ask."

Gibbs is sitting on the sofa, he's got Molly on one knee, holding her hands and bouncing her up and down. Kevin's sitting next to them, patiently waiting for his turn to play horsey on Gibbs. (Gibbs has explained that in a few months, maybe when they all get together for Easter, both of them can go at the same time, but right now only one knee is in play.)

Diane sits next to him. "Looks like all three of you are having fun."

He nods. "How about you?"

She surveys the party. "Yeah. Way better than home alone." She looks Draga up and down. "What's the story on him?"

"Young enough to be your son."

She shrugs. "He's too old for my daughter, so that means he's in play."

Gibbs laughs at that, shaking his head. But, he also knows that Delphine has to be at least twenty years younger than Senior, and no one's said a word to him about it. (Granted, at least twenty years younger than Senior puts her in her mid-to-late-fifties.)

"In the middle of a nasty custody fight for this little guy," he says as Kevin hops on and Molly slips off, heading over to go see if Uncle Tim will give her any treats.

"I know a good divorce lawyer."

"Never married his mom."

"Don't think that matters if you've got someone who's good at what he does."

Gibbs remembers the barracuda Diane has on speed dial. Be nice to see that man do someone he likes a good turn. "Then give him your guy's card. He could certainly use the help."

She starts to stand up and he says to her, quietly, "Go easy on him."

"I'm just going to say 'Hi.'"

Diane nods, smiles at Gibbs, from the looks of it enjoying him in his Pop mode quite a bit, and then heads off to have a chat with Draga. Gibbs quietly hopes that he's not setting up the fourth Ex-Mr. Diane.

At slightly more than six months old, Kelly McGee has mastered grabbing things, chewing on them, and sitting up on her own.

She has perfect posture, back straight, head high, no shoulder slump in sight. (Just another example of doing her Pop proud. She'll look really awesome in her 'Future Marine' onesies that were part of
Kelly's also sitting on the floor, between her Aunt Sarah's legs, knocking over the blocks she keeps stacking up for her, as she talks with Penny.

"Can't believe how big she is," Sarah says about her niece.

Jimmy's on the sofa with Anna, which puts Kelly's bigness into perspective. About three weeks ago, Kelly was the tiny baby, now she looks huge.

"Don't they start crawling soon?" she asks her grandmother.

Penny laughs and shakes her head. "I've heard of babies that do that, but none of you did. You, Tim, your dad, and uncles all stayed firmly on your bottoms until you were about fifteen months old, and then in less than two months you all went from not moving at all to walking."

Abby kneels down and kisses Penny's cheek. "Hi. Didn't see you get in. So, you're saying I probably don't have to worry about her ripping up my house for nine or so more months?"

"If she takes after our side of the family, yes."

"You okay?" Tim asks. Gibbs has a... it's not sad precisely, but there's more melancholy than usual in his face. It's very much not a party look. It's much more 'a party is swirling around me, but I'm not really in it' look.

"Thinking about dads."

Tim nods at that. "Feels weird not to have Jack here." And, even with the house loud and bustling with people, it does feel weird not to have him here.

Gibbs looks around, as if he expects to see Jackson leaning by the fireplace, eggnog in hand, talking to Ducky and Senior. "Yeah, that, too."

"Too?"

"My dad, your dad, the dads we became. Jimmy. Tobias. The dad Tony's gonna be. Hell, even Ed over there." Inviting the Slaters had been something of a perplexing moment. Over the last year, it's been becoming more and more obvious that these people are... well... family. Maybe not the same close, loving, respectful ties the rest of them have, but... Okay, if Draga and Vance and Senior are all here, then the people who have gone out of their way to make his girls feel welcome in their home have to be here, too.

(Or, as Gibbs put it in his own mind, the woman who threw that christening party for his granddaughter had an open invitation to everything that happens at his home, and if she drags her jerk of a husband along, then she drags him along.)

"Oh."

"Yeah. Thinking about all of it."

"Any conclusions?"

"Nah." Gibbs shakes his head. "Don't think this is the sort of thing you ever get to conclusions about..." He takes Kelly from Tim. "But I'm glad you're my granddaughter's father."
Delphine's new diamond ring isn't subtle, at all. The damn thing is about the size of the iceberg that took out the Titanic. Obviously, DiNozzo Sr. is back in flush territory.

Tony's comment to Tim about his dad having ideas as to what constitutes a proper engagement ring is becoming very concrete in Tim's mind. And apparently those ideas center around making sure your fiancée has a team of servants to lug her hand around because otherwise she'll develop massive shoulder and wrist strain from trying to move it.

Okay, it's not that big, but he's out carat-ed Abby, Ziva, and Breena combined.

So, in that Delpine is lugging around her own brand new mini-iceberg, there is basically no surprise when Senior announces that come early summer he and Delphine will be getting married.

There is, however, surprise when he says they are going to be moving to DC, as well. Tony does a very good job of not choking on his drink at that. Though the 'Oh God,' look on his face is awfully clear. But Senior sweeps over, all smiles and hugs, and Tony's hugging back, looking over Senior's shoulder with a 'what on Earth did I do to deserve this' expression aimed at Gibbs.

Gibbs grins back at him. Then he heads over and hugs them both, which shocks the hell out of all three of them.

"October 1st." Fornell's talking with Senior and Ducky, answering the question of when he and Wendy are getting married. "How about you, Ducky? You going to make an honest woman out of Penny?" Fornell asks.

The look on Ducky's face could best be described as, you are insanely lucky that you're in the middle of a loud and crowded party and Penny is busy talking to Tim and Sarah and did not hear you say that. "Penny's value as a woman it utterly independent of any action of mine."

"Come on, you know what he means," DiNozzo Sr. adds.

"Yes, I do. However, I have never been fond of that phrase."

"Fine. Are you going to join us in the no-longer-bachelors club?"

"If you think I'm still a bachelor, you've sorely misjudged the situation," Ducky says dryly with a hint of smile. The other two grin at him. "I think it is safe to say that our somewhat unconventional arrangement is working just fine, and as such, we are unlikely to change it."

Senior doesn't look like he buys that. "Are you telling me she doesn't want to get married or you don't?"

"I don't see why it matters much one way or another. There is nothing a marriage could offer us that we do not already have, and there is much it would complicate."

Ed had drifted over a few sentences before and is listening intently, then adds, "As a wise man once said in my hearing, the purpose of a wedding is not just to promise your life to your beloved, it is to do it publicly and show the rest of the world that you intend to do it for the rest of your days."

Ducky's honestly stunned to see that Ed remembers him saying that from Jimmy and Breena's wedding celebration. He didn't think Ed had been paying attention to much of anything that anyone was saying during the ceremony.

"I'll admit I don't think it matters much if you make it legal or not," Ed adds. "I've dealt with and
helped deal with more than enough estates to understand what you mean by complicated, but I've never yet met a woman, radical feminist or no, who didn't like having her man stand up and tell everyone who has ever mattered to him that he loves her and intends to spend the rest of his days with her."

And, as he thinks about it, Ducky has to admit that Ed has an awfully good point.

Ducky gets a moment alone with Gibbs later that night and says, quietly, "I'm not sure, but I think Jeannie disposed of Ed and found a doppelganger to replace him."

"He has been on really good behavior tonight, hasn't he?"

Ducky nods, slowly, watching Ed chat with Senior. (It's not a surprise to see those two get along.)

"Is she down?" Abby asks Tim. He's leaning against the wall, door to Gibbs' room two feet away, doing his usual put the baby down, lurk around for five minutes, make sure she's really asleep before heading off routine. (Right now there's Breena, Anna, and Kelly all sacked out on Gibbs' bed. Though Breena had stirred a bit when he put Kelly down, so she might decide to join the party in a few minutes.)

He nods. "Think so."

She presses up tight against him. "Good." She's rubbing against him in a very deliberate way while kissing him, hand snaking up the inside of his leg, cupping his very naked balls gently. "Can't get the fact that you're completely bare under there out of my mind."

He's grinning at her, kissing back, enjoying, very much, what her hand is doing under his kilt. "Looking forward to getting home?"

"Oh yeah. You know what else I'm thinking?" Big, huge grin on her face.

"What?"

She kisses his bottom lip, sucking gently, and then gives his dick a firm squeeze before letting go of him. "There's a bathroom ten feet from here."

His eyes go wide. That's nothing they've ever done before. Yeah, sure quickies at weddings, great fun, loves them, but, God, here? Gibbs' house? Sure, he's thought about it, but… here? Really?

She's backing him toward the bathroom as he says, "We get caught; I'm blaming you."

"Who's going to catch us?"

"If the past is anything to go by, Jimmy or Breena."

She laughs at that, gives him a gentle shove into the bathroom, and locks the door behind her.

It's a fairly standard hall bathroom. Eight by tenish. Tub taking up most of one wall, sink and toilet on the other. There's not exactly what he'd call a great place for this. The door's got a mirror on the back of it, and the bit of wall that's open has a towel rack, so they're out for leaning against.

There is, lucky for them, one of those ventilation fans, which Abby switches on, so the noise aspect is taken care of. And then she's dropping her skirt and panties on the floor, so… Yeah, quickie at Gibbs' house, why the fuck not?
She's leaning against the sink, one hand on each side of it, facing it, looking over her shoulder, wiggling her ass at him, and the visual of her in that red sweater, white button down, top button undone, naked butt, plaid thigh-high socks and high-heeled mary janes, works wonders for getting him in the right mindset for this.

About thirty seconds later, his kilt hits the floor, too.

And like all proper quickies, fast is the name of the game, so about four minutes later, they're panting quietly, her fingers twined between his, while he gently kisses her neck, feeling her thighs still quivering against his.

"You good?" she asks.

"Oh yeah. Anymore good and I'd be dead." He nods, dragging his teeth lightly over the nape of her neck. "You?"

"Yep." She stretches and reaches, and has just enough arm length to grab the tissues on the back of the toilet. She slips off of him and they begin to clean up. "Still looking forward to getting Kelly to sleep tonight."

He gently kisses her breast through the sweater. "Insatiable wench!" He grins. "I'm not a machine, you know."

"Oh… all fucked out all ready?" She mock pouts at him while lightly stroking his softening dick. "Maybe I'll have to use one of the machines, and you can just watch."

He groans at that mental image. "You really are trying to kill me, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but it'll be a great way to go."

"Amen." He fastens the kilt and tucks his shirt back in. Then he makes sure she's watching him, and licks his left index and middle finger clean, and winks, before turning to wash his hands. Once he's got them dried off, she's almost all dressed again, so he cups her face in his hands, and gently, mouth open, lips wet, kisses her slow and deliberate. "And yes, I am looking forward to getting Kelly to bed, and showing you exactly what I'll be" he guides her hand to his now completely soft dick, and she gives him one last gentle squeeze, "up for."

She smiles very prettily at him, kissing him again. "Good. Don't know what's up, but I'm just craving you constantly today." She turns back to the mirror, makes sure that she's all put together, and then stops suddenly.

"Abby?"

A slow smile spreads across her face. "I think I know what's up."

His eyebrows rise in silent question.

She turns to face him. "I'm only nursing twice a day now. And the last time I felt like, this we made Kelly. I bet I'm ovulating again."

He pulls her flush and kisses her hard. They aren't charting and obviously don't know for sure, but just the idea of it makes him so very happy.

Senior and Ed had been talking. They'd been talking a lot. Gibbs has no idea what, beyond a general
love of wealth and the appreciation of expensive things, that they might have in common, but they've been getting on like a house on fire.

So, he has to admit there is a sense of trepidation when both of them, grinning, stalk over to him.

Senior drapes an arm over his shoulders and says, "Junior tells me you've volunteered the crew for helping to get whatever house he finds fixed up."

And Gibbs nods, not sure where this is going.

"Count us in," Ed says.

Gibbs eyes go wide. First off, he had no expectation at all of Ed doing anything like that, but he's seen Breena handle tools so he knows he's handy. Second of all, what the hell would Senior even be useful for on something like this? Finding the house… Okay, he'd probably be good at that. But after that? It's one thing to teach Jimmy and Tony and Tim on this stuff, but Senior's eighty-two.

Senior sees the look in Gibbs' eyes. "He's never told you, has he?"

Gibbs shakes his head.

"By the time Tony was born, we were well off. But that wasn't true when I was born. My dad got here in 1922 with the clothes on his back, the bag under his arm, and about ten words of English. He worked construction. Started on high rises. Easy to get work if you knew how to weld in those days. The Depression hit, and he scaled down. Jack of all trades, carpentry, drywall, cement, brickwork, welding, plumbing. By the time I was big enough to be useful, he had me helping him. From six until I graduated high school I worked nights, weekends, holidays, and early mornings with him. If it broke anywhere in the south Bronx, the DiNozzos fixed it.

"By then he had some money, and I had some ideas, so we started buying the houses, fixing them up, renting some, selling others, demolishing some when the land was worth more than the thing on the land. By the time we made our first half million, we hung up the hammers and nails and had moved entirely into real estate, and from there I moved to stocks, bonds, and a bunch of other things you'd probably find boring. Point is, I still know what to do with the business end of a hammer or wrench."

Gibbs would have to admit that if you asked him who he'd want to work on a massive project like this, Ed and Senior would not be on his list of guys to go to, but… and it's a big but, if Senior actually does know his ass from his elbow when it comes to construction, this goes from a mammoth project to a plain huge one, and if he can get a few hours a week out of Ed, that'd help. At the very least, that's two more sets of eyes who know how to do this to keep watch on Tim and Jimmy and Tony, and that might be worth its weight in gold in time and money saved by not having to re-do things over and over.

Gibbs shakes his head, sips his coffee, and says, "This'll be an adventure."

Senior grins at him.

"So, it's your last week?"

Tim nods to Fornell. "Friday's the last day on the team."

Diane heads over and says, "Hey, it's about time for me to head off. I've got her stuff in your trunk and ready to go."
"Okay, thanks. I'll drop her off Friday night?"

"Yep…" Which is about when she notices that Tim is the guy he's talking to. Her eyes travel from his leather jacket, to the kilt, to the dragon tattoo, and back to his eyes. "Wow!" She looks him over again. "Damn. You do have a hidden side. Nice skirt, Chucky."

He winks at her. "Yours is pretty, too, Love."

"Uh. Thanks…" Between the wink and him coming up with his own nickname for her, she's almost off-footed. She wasn't expecting that, and for that matter Tim wasn't expecting to say it, either. Definitely feeling pretty cocky today. She's looking at the dragon. "I didn't know you had a tattoo.

"I have four of them."

"Huh. If I had known that, I would have tried harder."

Tim shakes his head. "Wouldn't have worked." He touches his wedding ring.

She smiles. "I know. Knew then, too. Guy in love always has a certain look to him. Still, I do love a guy with a badge and ink. Toby ever show you his?"

Tobias is glaring at her, and Tim's staring at him with interest.

"No. Toby's never felt any need to share that."

She grins, kisses Fornell on the cheek, and says to Tim. "It's really cute. Merry Christmas, you two. See you Friday, Tobias."

Tim looks at Tobias, one eyebrow high. Tobias shakes his head, so Tim doesn't ask.

Five minutes later though, when he gets a minute with Gibbs, he asks, "Diane says Fornell's got a tattoo and it's cute."

Gibbs laughs.

"So you know what it is?"

Gibbs nods again.

"Gonna tell?"

Gibbs shakes his head.

"Where is it?"

Gibbs shakes his head at that, too.

Fornell's looking at him from across the room, bit worried, but Gibbs shakes his head, some secrets, like how Fornell ended up with a two inch-long bumble-bee (Wasp! It's supposed to be a wasp! Damn it, he asked for a wasp. His unit was the 99th Airborne. They were the wasps! It was not his fault that the guy who translated his English into Vietnamese didn't know a wasp from a bee, or for that matter that he was drunk enough he didn't notice it was wrong until the next morning.) on his shoulder, don't need to be shared with the kids.

Jimmy sidles over to Gibbs. "So, you thinking now's a good time for an application of the Fear Of
Dad?"

Gibbs watches Kevin Draga chasing Molly Palmer around the sofa. "You can probably let it slide for now. Next year…"

"Yeah," Jimmy shakes his head, "because they all turn into little bastards as soon as they're five, right?"

Gibbs nods solemnly. "Only one thing a five-year-old wants, and it's your job to make sure he doesn't get it from your little girl."

It's probably due to the lack of sleep but Jimmy finds that utterly hysterical and just about strains his back he's laughing so hard at it. After a minute, he pulls himself together, wipes the tears of laughter from his eyes, and gives Gibbs a hug. "We've got to get going soon. Breena's pooped."

"Yep. *You are, too* is clear on Gibbs face as he pulls back, and Jimmy nods a bit, acknowledging it. "Want me to come over tomorrow? Get you two some more down time."

"Sure. We could both use more sleep. Nap I got here was my best Christmas present, yet."

"Let's see about getting you a few more."

Jimmy kisses Abby goodbye, pulls back for a second, looks at her, thinking, then hugs her again, inhaling. Then he looks at her, eyebrow high, and she smiles widely at him, and he glances at Tim and smirks, shaking his head.

As he's hugging Tim goodbye he says, quietly, "Here?"

Tim shrugs.

Jimmy chuckles, shaking his head again. "At least this one actually smells pretty good on her."

And Tim laughs.

They don't stay all that much later than Jimmy and Breena do. Tim feels a bit bad about that. Previous years they stayed late, helped Gibbs clean up. And sure, he's looking forward to what's waiting at home, but still, he doesn't know if anyone else will do that if they don't. No one did before, and he doesn't want Gibbs left with a mountain of dishes on his own.

But there's a fairly brief, golden travel window when Kelly's up but sleepy, where she'll do her last bottle of the night, and then fall asleep in the car and they'll be able to take her up, put her in her crib, and she'll sleep through the night.

So, it's a bit after nine, and they're getting all of their gear packed up and in the car. The idea being that as soon as she's done her bottle and burped, they'll be on the way.

And with many hugs and Merry Christmasses, they are.

There are things that Tim assumes are true for just about all guys. How sex works (in general) is one of those things. Namely, if you're having sex, you want to get off, and, honestly, all the other stuff is usually window dressing. (Nice window dressing, good window dressing, and sometimes all you get is the window dressing so you may as well appreciate it... But… look, you didn't come see the room to marvel over the curtains…)}
Lingering is fun and good and often produces some splendid results, but when it all boils down there's this goal, orgasm, and getting there, sooner or later, is the point.

But, in that he's done it three times in the last twenty-four hours, and once in the last three hours, he's not exactly feeling as goal-oriented as usual. (Yes, there will be an orgasm, but he's not feeling any sense of urgency.)

It's not fucked-out, which is more of a 'I'll just lay here and sleep' sort of feeling. That, 'I don't care if the house is on fire, I'm not moving,' sensation.

Likewise there's sated. Fucked long and well enough that you just don't want to do it anymore. He's very much not sated; he definitely wants more sex.

He tends to think of this as Zen Sex. There's a sort of calm hyper-awareness that goes with this sort of sex. It's like, because he's not focused on getting off (or not getting off) that everything else comes to the forefront.

So, he's much more aware of everything: the feel of Abby's fingers between his, the tension in them, and the way she grips just a hair tighter as he presses in, or the sensation of her hair brushing his cheek as he kisses her throat, or the slide of her heel on the back of his thigh. Little things that he tends to miss when his world narrows down to his dick.

He's watching more intently than normal, all of his usual favorite sights are burning into his mind, breasts, buttocks, pussy, his dick slipping into her pussy or mouth, but not just those. He's watching the way her eyelids droop as she gets close, and the line of her collar bone rising and falling with each hard breath. He's watching the shine of their saliva on her lip, and the tension in her adductor muscles as she rides him.

He's much more present in the moments of stillness. Often stillness is about backing off, postponing climax a bit longer, about not thinking about sex, about finding the space to inch back from the edge. But not tonight. There is stillness here, more so than usual, both of them enjoying pulse and breath and the exquisite fullness of flesh on flesh, quivering in anticipation of the next stroke, next move, drawing out that desire-filled waiting.

They're in a resting stroke, slow, easy, on their sides, facing each other. His one arm is under her neck, hand in her hair, other arm resting on her side, hand cupping the underside of her thigh. She's stroking his cheek and ear, leg hooked over his hip. They're kissing, slow and deep, soft breaths morphing into gentle love words.

It's unraveling sex, one long, soft stroke after another, pulling his layers apart, dragging attention away from the rest of the world, away from life outside this warm circle of touch, taste, sight, sound and scent, stripping him bare of anything that isn't his essential Tim, leaving him focused entirely in this physical, spiritual, worshipful meditation of her body on his.

And that's where Christmas ends, much like it began, in bed, wrapped in each other, enjoying the almost infinite varieties of the gift of pleasure and love.
Tony almost wishes that the phone would ring. That'd get them out of here. And out of here is a very good excuse for not doing what comes next.

But it's got to get done. It's time. No more stalling.

Tony stares at the collection of resumes in front of him. He's been through them all, (and a bunch more besides) and tossed them all.

No one in that pile is worthy of replacing Gibbs. No one even came close.

Because that's what he was trying to do. Replace Gibbs. Get his team back. Get his people back. But that can't happen. His people are moving on and leaving him, and it's not healthy to try and force other people into those roles.

It's time for a new team, with a new plan, and…

He clicks on it. He doesn't know why this one stuck in his mind. Maybe because it was so unexpected. This one looks nothing, at all, like any of the others in his files. Maybe because it's… a very different path. If you have someone like this on the team, you've got to move in a new path. And a new path might be exactly what they need.

Exactly what he needs.

He's read the resume. So it's not like he's got to look over it again.

Team Gibbs was built, if built is the right word, (Ordained by God? Who knows? Feels that way sometimes,) but however it came together, it worked because it complimented Gibbs' style.

But he's not Gibbs. He's got his own style. His own strengths. And he doesn't need to be Gibbs. He can't be Gibbs. And if he's going to run this team, he can't be hunting for a new Gibbs. And he can't be stocking it with the people Gibbs needs to make Gibbs' team work.

He needs to decide who he is, and where he wants to take this, and find himself people to work with him. Time to build the team around him. Time to get the people he needs.

"Director?"

"DiNozzo?" Vance looks at him, cool and surprised. December 28th is well in the middle of that dead time between Christmas and New Year's when everything pretty much shuts down, and technically, Vance isn't in the office today. And if you didn't know that from the email that went out last week, the fact that he's in jeans and sweatshirt would have been a tip off. So, he's very much not expecting anyone to drop in on him.

"Can I steal a few minutes?"

Vance looks back at his computer, and then turns the screen off and gestures for Tony to sit down.

"What's on your mind, DiNozzo?"
"My team."

"All right?" Vance has his get to the point look on his face. He's only supposed to be in for ten minutes, tops. Just quickly checking on the status of a case for Sec Nav, and then he's out of here.

"I have one slot opening up in a matter of days, and likely another in the next year."

Vance raises an eyebrow at that. "Should I be offering you and Agent DiNozzo congratulations?"

Tony takes a breath, realizing what he just admitted to there. "Not yet. With any luck, soon, but not yet."

"Ah. So..."

"So... I'll have a lot of room to play with the nature of my team. What I wanted to know is where do you want the premier NCIS MCRT focused? Obviously, murders, big thefts, our usual daily grind... But what else? I know McGee's telling you about wanting to get his team to the point where they can be pro-active. Hunting trends, more playing offense and less defense. Doing a better job of anticipating where issues are going to arise."

Vance is intrigued. "Do you think you can do that?"

"I think we get two or three big terrorism cases a year, and I think we can do a better job of anticipating them, and following up one case to the next to the next. I don't think we can do it on murders and thefts. Question is, are those big cases going to happen often enough to make filling one of my slots with someone who specializes in that sort of thing worth it?"

Vance thinks about that for a moment. "Are you asking to be put on point for terror cases?"

Tony realizes he is. It wasn't a set idea in his mind when he came up here, but it is now. "Yes. If I build a team with that in mind, will you send enough of those cases my way to make it worthwhile?"

Leon looks thoughtful. He has five MCRTs working out of DC. It would be easier to have one of them on full-time liaison with the FBI, Homeland, DOD, Navy, Marines, CIA, and the rest of the alphabet soup for all of their terror related cases.

And if he has a Team Leader who can do that job, who can play the politics and keep everyone's feathers smoothed down, it's DiNozzo.

At the same time, he's not sure if DiNozzo's the first guy he'd pick for actually working the higher levels of terror cases. For grabbing individual guys, going after single attacks, for having a crime scene, attaching it to a set of people who did said crime, and bringing them in, he has no doubts about DiNozzo. He is an excellent cop.

What he's not sure of is if DiNozzo's got the big picture skills for this kind of work. If he finds one knot, can he unravel it, follow the threads, and then take them to the next knots? That seems to be what he's talking about doing...

Of course, Gibbs, who in addition to having no political skill, seems to solve these things on sheer gut and determination, has done just fine on all of the longer-game cases that have been tossed his way. And though DiNozzo doesn't have Gibbs's gut, he does seem to have a very solid sense of where to dig further, and he's better at sharing the sandbox. Plus, if he were to hire someone who actually does know how to think ahead on things like this...

DiNozzo's right-here-right-now skills mixed with someone who knows how to see trends could be a
very valuable asset.

It's an intriguing idea. "If I were to rearrange things so one MCRT, your MCRT team were to handle the terror cases, who would you add to your team?"

"I want some sort of analyst. Someone who specializes on what's going on and what's going to happen next. Even better if she's a good reader of people. Someone who can see the big picture and the individual players."

"Do you have someone in mind for that?"

"Maybe. I got an interesting resume along those lines. Would have to meet her in person… But, yeah, maybe. She's not a field agent, at all, from what I can see, but I got McGee beaten into shape, I can get her up to the job if she wants it."

"Okay, who else?"

"The fourth member would be replacing Ziva, so I need a language expert, muscle, and guns. Draga's got muscle and guns. But I need someone who can speak Arabic, Farsi, Pashtun, and probably a few others if I can swing it. He's got to handle himself well enough that I can send him undercover."

"Tall order."

"I know." And he does, he really does. Half of flipping out over Ziva leaving is personal. Half of it is that she's even harder to replace than Gibbs. "Ex-Mossad-trained officers don't exactly grow on trees."

"True, but you might not have to go quite that far afield to find someone who's got the skills you want, but isn't happy in his current location."

"Headhunt the CIA?"

Vance nods, that's one direction. He adds another for Tony to consider. "I understand we have wounded Seals who have the sort of training you're looking for. Can't be dropped out of a helicopter behind enemy lines anymore, but might be able to do what you need."

Tony nods, takes out his phone, and makes a note to go looking through the SEALs and Marine Special Forces. "Thanks, Director."

Vance nods, and Tony heads out.

He gets down from chatting with Vance and sees McGee, Ziva, and Gibbs working away. (Draga decided that the last week McGee was around would be a good time to use some vacation days. He'll be back Wednesday.) For a few seconds, it feels like normal. Ziva and McGee are talking. Gibbs keeps shooting them more work, less chit chat glances. They're sort of humoring him, quieting down for a few minutes, cutting a swath through the paperwork, then talking again.

"Good chat?" McGee asks him as he sits down.

"Yeah." He looks at the resume, still up on his computer, and picks up his phone.

"Hello?" Her voice is young, very young, and awfully perky. He checks the resume again, and realizes that she got done with her doctorate in '11. He's looking at another twelve-year-old
wunderkind.

"Is this Eleanor Bishop?"

"Yes, is it. Can I help you?"

"Yes. I'm Special Agent Tony DiNozzo from NCIS. You sent in a resume a few months ago. I was wondering if you'd like to come in for an interview?"

"Of course." He can hear the smile in her voice.

"Wonderful, when can you come in?"

"Pick a time, and I'll be there."

He schedules the interview for tomorrow and wraps up the conversation. The other three are looking at him, so he prints out her resume and explains what he's thinking.

They're nodding at him, looking impressed.

About a half an hour later, Gibbs goes to get his coffee and takes Tony with him.

"It's a good move."

"I hope so."

"It is. You're gonna do well with it." Gibbs doesn't say you needed to do this, break away from me. He doesn't say I'm proud of you. He does remember, a long time ago, saying to Tony, 'What do you expect? An 'Atta boy!' and Tony more or less saying yes. So he raised his hand, as if to slap the back of his head, and Tony winced, and then he rubbed his hair and said, 'Atta boy!' And Tony glowed at it.

He remembers another time, leaving Tony with the team and saying, 'You'll do.'

Tony had looked half-proud and half-hurt by that. He knew it was praise, praise he had wanted, but he had needed more than that.

This time, he puts his coffee down, and then takes Tony's coffee out of his hand, puts it down, and hugs him. Then he pulls back, pets the back of Tony's hair, and says, "Atta boy!"

Tony, who had been standing there, pretty startled by all of this, broke into a smile at that.

"It's going to be good," Gibbs says, picking up their cups.

"Let's see if I still think that when I've got the FBI on one side and the CIA on the other and NSA refuses to tell me what's going on."

Gibbs grins at that.

Chapter End Notes

You knew I had to work her in sooner or later, right? ;)
Hopefully, she'll be a bit less fish out of water in the Shardsverse.
She can't literally be twenty-two. She got her Doctorate in Quantitate Predictive Statistical Analysis from the University of North Carolina (He'd asked McGee what the hell that was and he said, 'Means she's smarter than I am,' then he looked at her thesis and said, 'A lot smarter' which wasn't exactly helpful.) in '11, worked at NSA until the middle of '15, and has been on her own since then.

But, not actually twenty-two or not, he feels like he hasn't seen anyone this young or green since he first laid eyes on Probie all those years ago.

She's cute and blonde and wholesome, a little bit nervous, but he's good at soothing that, and gets her talking about herself. She's the youngest of four, three older brothers, a mom and dad all back in Oklahoma, and a husband here. (He's a lawyer, also used to work for the NSA, and is now working for some sort of open government think tank).

And after a bit more about herself, he asks, "Why you leave the NSA?" He's a bit worried at the idea that they both worked for the NSA and left. He's wondering if they did something stupid and got the 'you're going to resign to save us the trouble of firing you' speech.

She sighs, looks up and behind him, seeming to be thinking about how best to answer this. Finally she says, "We had different understandings as to what the job was."

"How so?"

"I signed up to help protect the United States from terror attacks. I signed up to look at patterns, see the pieces, put them together, and catch people who wanted to do us harm. And I kept telling myself that that's what I was doing. First wave of scandals hit, and I told myself that we had to go to court and get warrants like everyone else."

Tony's got an idea of where this is going. "Then you found out that court never turned anyone down."

"Yeah. Didn't matter how shaky the evidence, and then there were the guys who weren't even bothering with that. But that didn't come out for a while. And I told myself we were focused…"

Tony definitely knows where that's going. "Then the Snowden stuff came out and you found out focused meant you were watching everyone on Earth with a computer or phone?"

"Yeah. And then it got worse when the list of who we were spying on came out. Look, I can guarantee you Angela Merkle isn't a terror threat to the US. Yes, I know we all spy on each other, but… that's the CIA's job, right? And I didn't sign up to work for them for a reason."

"Then I find out they're using some of my research to target people who are peaceful, but politically active in a direction they didn't like. And that was it. I was out. Look, all up front, I'm a moderate. I don't love the hardcore peace activists, I don't think they've got a clue as to what's out there, the far-right TEA Partiers creep me out, and the Libertarians look like anarchist pot-heads to me, but I didn't want my work used to make their lives miserable. They aren't the bad guys, and they certainly aren't the guys I signed up to track. So I left."

"What kind of work were you doing that got used that way?"

"Classified. And you don't have the clearance. Your Director doesn't have the clearance for it." She smiles sadly. "It sounds trite, I'm sure, but I believe that this country means something. Call me
Captain America if you want, but freedom, privacy, a government you can trust, it matters. And I was working for the bad guys. So after some long conversations with my husband, we both left. Couldn't do it anymore, Agent DiNozzo."

Tony thinks about that for a moment and says, "Well, we go where the leads take us, and they've taken us here and they've taken us abroad, but we do wait for actual leads."

"That's all I need. I've got no problem going up against anyone who wants to hurt us. I've got a lot of problem going up against people who just disagree with me. And I've got an even bigger problem with going up against people who aren't doing anything at all."

He can see that sort of attitude blending well into any group he'd be willing to run. She might be a little sticky on some of the techniques they use, but they never go in completely blind, and they certainly aren't listening to everyone's phone conversations, reading all their emails, and adding back doors into popular software.

"So, why NCIS? Why not go and use your skills to make a killing on Wall Street?"

She smiles at that. "I still want to fight the bad guys. Terror is real. There are people out there who want us dead just because of who we are. I hunted some of them down. I've been face to face with a few of them." That interests him very much. She's not a field agent, or at least nothing in her file suggested that, but maybe that's classified, too. "I want to stop them. My dad suggested you guys. He's retired Navy. According to him, you've got a good reputation. Maybe not total straight shooters, but you still know who the bad guys are. You're small enough that I could probably do some real good here. And who knows, my skills might be useful for run of the mill cases as well. I'm good at puzzles. Murders are puzzles, right?"

"Something like that Mrs… Ms… Bishop."

"Ms. Or Ellie. I like Ellie."

"We usually go by last name here. Part of the Navy culture."

"Then I can be Bishop." She smiles at him. "That's got a sort of pleasant gravity to it, right? But not Mrs. Bishop, that's my mother."

Tony smiles and shakes his head a bit, wondering why on Earth he's actually thinking of doing this. But, good idea or not, he's starting to like it. Good idea or not, he's starting to like her.

"So, tell me something you did that isn't classified fifteen levels above my pay grade."

She looks curiously at him and launches into a complicated discussion of probability and the use of what seems like unrelated data points to make a pattern. About two paragraphs in he stops her.

"Okay. That's how you explain it to McGee or Abby. Explain it to someone who still needs a calculator to figure out the tip."

She's about to laugh at that, realizes that he might be serious, and then thinks about that for a moment. "You ever play minesweeper?"

He nods. He didn't play it a lot. Mostly because both Ziva and McGee would absolutely kill him at it. They'd be flashing their zippy times and perfect scores, and he'd get blown up twenty times in ten minutes. And it's not that he can't play it, because if he takes the time to really look, he can. But he was a whole lot slower at it than they were.
"Okay, so that's what I'd do. You get a few data points together, and you've got a whole lot of blanks, too. You use the data you have to make a guess about those blanks. Then you hit the blank. If your data was good, and you're a bit lucky, you get more intel, and that helps you uncover more blanks. One of the things I did was take our guesses about what might be in those blanks, and then used those guesses to figure out what might be in blanks even further down the line, and then from there go even further."

"How do you know if you were right?"

She shakes her head. "You never know if you're right. You do know if you're wrong."

"If you're wrong?"

"Boom."

"Lots of booms?"

"No. I'm good at my job. They probably wouldn't have found my stuff so useful if I'd been bad at it. So, you never know if you've got the right idea, but when nothing goes boom, that's data, too, so you add that in, and go after even more invisible blocks."

"Phew."

"And of course the other side knows you're watching, so sometimes you get something, and they fed it to you, so they don't go Boom on purpose just to feed you more false data."

"Huh."

"Yeah. Like playing chess on an infinite board with an unknown number of pieces and an unknown number of players where the players are blindfolded ninety percent of the time."

"Great." All of that sounds really… theoretical. Is she going to be able to do anything useful for a concrete situation?

He is, however, pleased to see she reads people well enough to ask, "So, I guess, my question is, what do you think I can do for you? I mean, I applied as an analyst, not… this."

"We are a MCRT, Major Case Response Team, that means we get sent out on murders, rapes, grievous bodily harm, thefts and frauds with a value of over one hundred thousand dollars," it had been fifty grand when he started, inflation hits everything apparently, "and I'm building what is going to be the main NCIS anti-terrorism task unit."

"Okay."

"We usually get two or three terror cases a year. The four other MCRTs out of the Navy Yard get a few each, too. The shift is that we'd get all of them, but even with that, we're talking something along the lines of one new case a month, so we'd still be doing murders, rapes, and thefts. So, this is an actual, in the field, deal with dead bodies and criminals sort of job. Is that a deal breaker for you?"

She thinks about it. "Nah. I'm always trying to push myself in new directions, new challenges. Since I left the NSA, I've tried everything from gourmet French cooking to marathon running to writing crossword puzzles. This would be another new challenge."

Okay. He hands her a folder. "This is one of our solved cases. Look through it, tell me what you see, what you're thinking…"
She opens the folder and starts reading. A few seconds in she says, "Do you mind if I eat?"

He's puzzled by that, but maybe she's diabetic or something and needs to eat regularly. "No."

"Good." She pulls three candy bars and a bag of chips out of her purse. Obviously not diabetic. She catches him staring at the food. "Food helps me file the things in my head."

"Oh." That's… weird. But, if it works… Her eyes scan over the pictures as she chews, taking in details, reading the file, and then she starts to talk…

She's fast, a little disjointed; he's not following everything she's coming up with, but she is seeing patterns they didn't find until later in the investigation, and there's a touch of Ducky's profiler in there. (Which is when it hit him that eventually Ducky will be leaving, and one thing Jimmy won't be replacing is Ducky's profiling skills, so that's something else he's going to need.) The information he's given her is just the basic facts, what they found at the crime scene, original witness statements, stuff like that. It took her less than twenty minutes to read the file, and in half an hour she'd come up with a fairly decent plan of attack for finding their killer. She'd missed a few of the clues, but she's not a field agent, so he doesn't expect her to get everything on one look.

He can work with this.

"You're up to date on your FLETC certifications?"

She nods.

"You any good with a computer?"

She just stares at him before slowly answering, "Everything I did for the NSA was on a computer."

"Good. So, you can hack into things?"

She squints at him, feeling like they just talked about this and how she's not really big on just breaking into people's stuff. "What sorts of things?"

"We get a vic's computer. It's got some locked files on it. Can you get in?"

"Maybe." He sees her relax at that. Yeah, she's probably not the person to call in on the 'can you hack this suspect's computer' without a warrant stuff, at least, not right away. "I'm more of a number cruncher when it comes to computer work. Like if you've got three victims and you want to find out what they've got in common, that's the sort of computer work I'm good with."

He nods. That's useful. McGee spends a lot of time doing stuff like that for them.

"So, like if I give you ten years of financials for three different guys…"

"No problem." She waves that off. "You can give me fifty years of financials for two million guys, and I'll find your patterns." She sounds half-proud and half-ashamed at that, and he gets that that was the problem with the NSA. He's also now wondering if they were doing that, running through everyone's bank records willy-nilly. He wonders if how to do that better and slicker is part of what she came up with that made her leave.

He's half thinking that she's overkill. Like bringing a tank to a knife fight. She may be way too damn smart and theoretical for this job. But it feels right. He's sure he can use her. He's sure she's part of getting to the next… whatever it is that comes next. So he says to her, "You doing anything January 18th?"
She checks her phone. "Nope."

"You are now. 08:00, front and center, bring lots of pens, you'll have a ton of paperwork to fill out."

She looks startled. "That's it? I've got the job?"

"You're a Probie. You've got a year to decide if you like the job for you, and to prove you deserve the job to me."

"Cool!" She smiles brightly at him.
Tony brings Bishop into the bullpen and introduces her, and Gibbs feels his heart freeze.

She's young. She's really young. And blonde, and pretty, and innocent, and bubbly and cute and just, shit. Sure, she's dressed for an interview, so her hair's up and she's got a cream colored suit on, but... she just radiates cute and playful.

She's a problem waiting to happen.

She's a problem he's really hoping Tony's outgrown.

Really, really hoping.

He smiles and shakes her hand and notices that Tony's introducing her as Bishop, which he thinks is good, but...

Shit. This could go so bad so fast, and bite Tony so hard in the ass he'll limp for the rest of his life.

Gibbs knew Bishop was a woman. That was clear from the resume. But his mental image of her was someone older, less attractive, less cute. Someone a whole lot more Eleanor. God, she's a puppy, so light and bubbly and eager to make everyone around her happy.

She's talking to Tim and Draga, getting acquainted, and Gibbs is just staring.

Tony catches the look, and Gibbs looks toward the elevator. Tony nods, wondering what Gibbs is seeing that he isn't. He can feel the worry coming off Gibbs but doesn't know what's setting it off.

"Bishop?"

She looks over to him, away from McGee. "Yes?"

"We're mostly coffee drinkers here. First one's on me. Next one's," he gestures to the group, indicating she's getting a whole round, "on you. What do you like?"

"Ohhh..." She thinks about it. "Half-caff macchiato with a shot of vanilla syrup and whipped cream."

Tony nods, burning that into his memory, and he and Gibbs go on the coffee run. Two seconds after the elevator doors close, he whacks the emergency stop.

"What's wrong?"

Gibbs stares at him, not sure how to even start saying this, because he knows this is going to be touchy. But... Just... SHIT! "You can't be bending or breaking the sexual harassment rules if you're the Boss."

Because they do, generally, ignore them. They always treated them like a joke, did everything they could to get out of having to deal with them, and Gibbs knows he turned a blind eye to everything Tony dished out to Kate and Ziva, mostly because if they couldn't handle him, he knew they weren't tough enough for field work.

But Tony's the Boss now, and he can't pull that crap. If he does... Shit. And... in the more than ten years since they hired Ziva those rules went from something they all winked at to laws that had to be
followed.

And Tony's reacting exactly the way Gibbs expects him to. He's staring at him, horrified, hurt, stammering, "I'm not...!"

Gibbs holds his hands up. "Just, listen, okay? Not your Boss, not right now. But as your friend, as a Dad, as someone who wants the best for you and wants you to succeed in everything you do, please, take this seriously. You cannot be crossing, bending, stepping on, or even getting near the line with her. And, if the stuff Penny says about her school is anything to go by, the line's about three miles closer than you or I think it should be, and none of these kids have any sense of humor."

"Gibbs..."

"Please. Get the regs, re-read them, and then go talk to Penny; she's going to have a much better idea of how someone Bishop's age understands this stuff. Because I know it's not how we do."

Tony's looking stunned, hurt, and like someone's shining a light on the parts of himself that he doesn't like seeing, let alone anyone else seeing.

"I love Ziva."

Gibbs winces, that's a direction he wasn't thinking, but... Yeah, that's in play now, too. He was thinking about Tony making some sort of stupid joke or off color comment or... but not that. "I know you do. I know you're faithful to her, and I know you're going to stay faithful to her. I trust you on that. But... God, you make the wrong joke, or she catches you looking..." Tony appears unhappy at that, but Gibbs knows Tony's gonna look, he's married, not blind, and Bishop is well worth looking at. "You and I both got away with things with Kate because she would take it, part of proving she belonged in the boys' club. Ziva knew anything you dished out she could take and double down on. You don't know how Bishop understands this stuff, you're more than twenty years older than she is, and she's married, so anything you do may seem really creepy to her."

Tony's glaring at Gibbs. "What do you think I'm going to do?"

"I don't know, use her deodorant? Take your shirt off in the bullpen? Talk too loud with Draga about when you got laid last? I don't know! And that's why I'm worried. That stupid porn conversation you guys were having last month might be her idea of sexual harassment. Or... remember that time Borin was talking about playing softball left-handed and you made that comment about swinging both ways? First time you met Kate, she asked about sketching, and your example for scale was a model's cup size, I know you know that's out of bounds now, but..."

Tony's nodding, getting an idea of what sort of minefield this might be. "I'll re-read the regs."

"Good. Talk to Penny, too."

"Okay."

"Thank you."

Tony flicks the elevator back on, and it gets less than ten feet down before he hits the stop again.

"Did I just shoot myself in the ass?"

Now Gibbs isn't sure what the problem is, so he says, "Not if you keep your mouth in line."

"Not what I'm thinking."
"What are you thinking?"

He's thinking that, ten seconds ago, he'd been really insulted at the idea of the sexual harassment thing meaning him flirting or hitting on Bishop. That Gibbs was hitting him on something he was trying hard not to be. But he wasn't. And yeah, inappropriate jokes/comments is a possible issue.

But once Gibbs got off that idea of crossing more personal lines with Ellie, Tony got onto it. And he'd quickly shifted from feeling like he's a million years old and she's some new little puppy to noticing that Ellie Bishop is very attractive.

"I'm thinking as Ziva's Dad, you're gonna kill me for this."

"Right now, I'm your friend. And even in full on avenging Dad-mode, I'm not going to do anything to you for just thinking. And you haven't done anything yet, so talk to me, and let's not end up with Ziva's Dad putting together his sniper's rifle."

Tony flicks on the elevator. "Someone's going to want to use this eventually. Too cold for outside. Locker room's usually empty this time of day."

Gibbs nods, and off they go.

Tony does check to see that it's empty, and it is. Gibbs sits down on one of the benches and Tony paces between the lockers and the bench. He's not talking, just sort of moving back and forth, trying to get this right in his head, so he can say it to Gibbs.

He's not attracted to Ellie. She's cute, she's perky, she's pretty, but he's not feeling any spark for her. However… thinking about it… He can see a situation where he could. He can see it happening very easily, and it scares the shit out of him.

Every woman he's worked with, gotten close to, trusted his life to, he's fallen for. Adrenaline, the fight or flight chemicals pumping through your system, the chase, that soaring high of getting the bad guy, add that to a beautiful woman sharing it with you, and it's almost as good, and for him, often more intimate, than sex. Definitely more intimate than sex with anyone who wasn't Ziva or Wendy.

This might be a much bigger problem than he was anticipating. And worse, the net of help he depends on, people who keep him straight and narrow, they're all leaving.

"Tim's gone Monday. You're gone two Mondays after that. Ziva's leaving… whenever she leaves. Draga can't do it…"

Gibbs watches him walking around.

"She's leaving. She's going to go get pregnant, and have the baby, and she's going to change, and she'll be focused on it, and… I'll be here, but she won't be. Her being here keeps me in line. And I just hired my dad's hot secretary's body double."

Gibbs nods. He gets this. Just because you love your wife doesn't mean every other woman on Earth goes away. Doesn't mean you stop wanting. He knows that worries Tony, because they talked about it when they talked about him marrying Ziva.

He knows that love isn't always enough. And he knows that people are frail and do stupid things.

And he knows that Tony's actively scared of doing something stupid.
"You guys would keep me in line. She keeps me in line. But you won't be here."

Gibbs nods at that, too. "Bishop going to do what you need her to?"

Tony gets that Gibbs is asking *did you just hire someone cute and decorative, or can she do the job.* "I think so. New job, new way of looking at the old job, but I think she'll do it, and be good at it. That's probably part of the problem, too. If she isn't good at it, I likely won't be interested. But she'll be good, she'll be working with me, all day, late nights, talking killers and terrorists, overnight trips to God knows where and who knows what cover IDs, and I'll go home and Ziva'll be talking diapers and teething."

"You're afraid Ziva'll be less interesting to you?"

Tony waffles on that, but he is afraid. "She's going to change."

Gibbs nods. "She is. So are you."

"My ninja's becoming a soccer mom."

Gibbs shrugs.

"I love the ninja. I fell in love with the ninja. I married the ninja. Me and her taking on the world, together, catching the bad guys."

"She's not dying, Tony."

"No… but… our life is."

Gibbs nods at that, too. Life as they knew it is coming to a close. Life as all of them know it is ending right now.

"And it's not like I'm looking at Bishop and thinking 'I want some of that.' I don't. And you suggesting it—"

"I wasn't…"

"It pissed me off anyway."

"Good."

"But she could…" That's not right. This is on him, not Bishop. "But I could find her attractive. Kate, Cassidy, Jen, Ziva, of course Ziva, always Ziva, EJ… Borin's the only woman we work with regularly that I've never been interested in."

"I know."

"The job's so intense and…"

"Tony, I know. Rule 12 didn't just come to me in a dream one day."

"Twelve involved your third marriage going down the crapper?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "That marriage was… It was never good, Tony. Jen didn't kill it. Desire for Jen didn't kill it. But wanting Jen, thinking that maybe, somehow I could have her. That screwed a lot of things up."
Tony nods. "For a long time, I thought twelve meant don't get caught."

Gibbs nods, he knows exactly what Tony did with twelve and how to get around it, and he knows how Tony got burned on Cassidy and EJ.

"When I was married to Shannon…" He's never come close to saying anything like this to Tony, but right now he thinks Tony needs to hear this. "I loved her more than anything in the world." Gibbs smiles sadly. "Still do. But, even with that… I'm not going to say I never looked. Not going to say I didn't think about it." And Gibbs' look gets across that some of those thoughts involved some pretty vigorous hand motions, too. "And there were nights I did extra rounds, took extra sentry duty, and made sure I had a buddy with me all night so I wasn't alone. Because the job is intense, and when they're with you, going through it, and home's far away and it's been a long time, and… And you know. You've felt it. But you do the rounds, you make sure you aren't alone, you call us for help if you need it, and we'll come. None of us are going to think less of you if you call at one in the morning because it's late and you've been on a case non-stop for two days, and she's telling you her back hurts and wouldn't a quick rub feel so good. That happens, you get the fuck away from her, you call, we'll be there. You do what you need to do to make sure you don't end up in a bad situation with her.

"That's love. That's being a man. That's knowing that what you have is worth more than what you can get." He stares at Tony, decides to go crude as hell, because right now, that's part of this.

"There's pussy all over the goddamn world, and it's all yummy, and we all want it, and it's easy as hell to get. If anyone knows that, you do. But there's only one woman attached to a pussy that lights up your life and makes you glad to be alive. So you be a man, you be a husband, and you keep control of yourself, and if you get shaky you call for back-up and we get you through it."

Tony nods.

"That's being a good husband. But you've got to be a Boss, too. I don't have a great track record with this, but… You do whatever it is you have to not to see her as someone you can have. It was easy to see Abby as a daughter. We just clicked like that. After Ziva killed Ari, that slipped into place, too.

"But Kate had a dad. She didn't need me to be her father. She didn't want me to be her father. And… I wanted her so much. All the time those first few months. I had a girlfriend, but I still wanted her. She was so good at her job, and smart and strong and beautiful and…" Gibbs shakes his head at that. Three quarters of his interest in Allison Hart had been based on how much she reminded him of Kate. And right now he doesn't want to think about how much of his attraction to Rachel was Rachel or similarities to and memories of Kate. "But I was the Boss. And I'd already been down that road and it had been a disaster." Gibbs looks a bit embarrassed by this, but, it… Maybe worked is a bit of an overstatement, but it made it easier. "I finally started telling myself you two had a thing. I wasn't going to mess it up for you guys. I got it so deeply embedded in there, that… He lets that trail off. Tony probably doesn't need to know about that… vision, fantasy, whatever that was. "It helped some. Your future girlfriend was off limits, so that was that." Gibbs can hear Penny yelling at him in his head on that, that he had an easier time dealing with Tony's claim on Kate than just shutting himself down. but he's thinking that isn't very important to this. "Bishop's married. You are. Use those rings as anchors. It might help."

Tony nods at that, and Gibbs knows this must be serious because he's not getting any ribbing on being attracted to Kate.

"You were Jen's Boss when…"

"Yeah." Gibbs rubs his eyes. "She was my first Probie, at least, first one as Team Leader. And Burley was trying to keep me in line, but it didn't work. I didn't want to be kept in line, and Jen really
didn't want me in line. I married Stephanie as part of trying to keep myself in line, and you know how well that worked."

Tony sits down on the other end of the bench. "Not even sure what to think about that."

Gibbs shrugs.

"I mean, you couldn't do it. You can do anything…"

"I didn't want to do it. I put myself and Jen into a situation where it was going to get sticky. The only reason Burley didn't get sent into Paris is that I didn't want to share Jen. Say you do find yourself wanting Bishop, you gonna go on a two-month-long deep cover op, where your cover is couple-in-love with just her?"

"No."

"And that's the difference. When I wanted to do it, I did. Sure, there weren't a lot of beautiful women in Iraq, and they kept the female Marines away from us, but Colombia was a different story and so was Nicaragua. But that time, I knew I had something at home worth guarding, so I did it."

Tony sits quietly, thinking about it.

"It doesn't get easy. Your dick wants what it wants and the fact that your head and heart know it's a bad idea doesn't change things. But like I said earlier, I trust you. Ziva trusts you. I looked at Bishop and saw you saying something that horrified her, making a bad joke at the wrong time, maybe looking a bit too long or standing a bit too close, but that's it."

Tony nods. He looks at his watch. This is way too long for a "coffee run." "Let's get the drinks and get back there."

"Okay."

When they get back, Bishop grins at him, taking the pro-offered coffee. She takes a sip. "Perfect. McGee was telling us about going after Saleem and using the Caf-Pow trail to find him. That's one of the things I used to do. Just on a much, much bigger scale."

She's all smiley and perky and chatting with Ziva and Tim and Dragu, and Tony watches, thinking, studying what he's feeling. He's not feeling any attraction to her. She's pretty, she's aesthetically pleasing, but... no spark, no craving. He looks a Bishop as she talks to Ziva, the way she's leaning toward Ziva, listening carefully, asking good questions, and he's pleased by that. She looks like she's going to make a good student, good addition to the team.

He looks at Ziva and sees his whole world standing there.

And right now, he's thinking, hoping, this is going to be okay.
The Last Ride of The Four Musketeers

It's a series of endings.

Last day as an Agent.

Last day of the year. (That wasn't intentional, but it feels very right.)

Tim signs his name to a 445B2. His last piece of paperwork. (Well, his last piece as an Agent. There'll be tons when he gets downstairs.)

They head out to lunch; last time he straps his gun on to head out.

And while he knows this won't be his last meal with Tony, Ziva, Draga, and Gibbs, it is his last working one. Last one where they're all talking shop about the most recent case. No. That too, will happen again. Talking shop is part of down time. Last time he's part of talking shop, last time he's in charge of part of the case.

When they get back, he heads to HR. They take his current ID and shred it. (He was kind of hoping to keep it. It feels really, really odd to say goodbye to all of the marks of Special Agent Tim McGee.) He stands against the white background, smiles, and they shoot a new picture of him.

Five minutes later, he's holding a new id. Like Abby's it's designed to clip onto his clothing. (No, he doesn't have to have it on at all times, but they don't let you in the building if you don't scan in first.) He touches the picture and the words beneath it. Timothy McGee Director of Cybercrime.

He feels a thrill at that. A rush of heat and pride. But there's some sorrow there, too. Special Agent Tim McGee is gone. He's a memory now, and that's worth a bit of sad.

Back upstairs, he shows off the new ID, and they're all properly oohing and ahhing. But that's really only about three minutes of showing off followed by… packing up. He guesses that's the part that comes next.

After all, he didn't drag a stack of cardboard boxes into work today just for kicks.

So he gets to it.

He untacks the last picture and lays it on top of all the rest of his stuff. Surprising that it only took up three boxes. It feels like it should be more. Like… Like twelve years should matter more. Like they should take up more space.

But it's only three boxes.

He'll take them down on Monday. When he officially starts. (He's not going down to Cybercrime today. Today he's making sure Jenner has the time to do the same thing he's doing up here, saying goodbye.) For right now, he's got them tucked under the empty desk behind his.

He pats the desk one last time, fingers lingering over the smooth surface, and for a second he's almost wondering if they'll stick, if somehow Tony might have done one last run with the superglue. Keep him here that much longer. He almost wishes Tony had.

But they don't stick.
He didn't turn. "All yours, Draga."

"Thanks, McGee."

Then next bit is harder. He notices he's going slower and slower the closer he gets to Leon's office. He's got the new ID, which means it's time to say goodbye to the old one.

"Mr. McGee," Vance says as he heads in.

Tim shakes his head. He knows that all the department heads are called by their title, Mr., Ms., Dr. but... nope. That's just wrong.

"That feels really odd. They're going to be calling me Boss or McGee, so, just McGee, please." That's when it hit that if Vance is calling him Mr. McGee, that means he outranks Jethro, and that's just… That's all of his heartstrings vibrating in a chorus of resounding NO!

Vance seems amused by that. Tim's not sure if he's amused by seeing the shades of Gibbs in him, or just recognizing how this kind of career jump feels. "Okay, McGee. You've got something for me?"

"Yes." He wears both his badge and his service pistol on his belt, and he took them both off. "One Sig Sauer P-228, serial number," he reads it off the gun, "and one service badge, number..." he rattles off his digits. Those he doesn't need to read, he knows them as well as his Social Security number. But they aren't his. Not anymore.

"Ready for Monday?" Vance asks with his amused smile.

"I think so, sir. Got a few plans in mind."

"Kind of plans I'm going to like hearing about?" Vance's eyebrow crooks up slightly.

"I certainly hope so. But, either way, they're going to happen."

Vance smiles at that. Tim realizes he's pleased to hear that it doesn't matter if he approves of the plans or not, they're going forward.

Vance stands and shakes his hand. "Congratulations, Mr. McGee." Tim knows that this is intentional, a mark of his new status, so he doesn't mention the Mr. again.

"Thank you, Director."

He heads down to the lab, and none of Abby's LabRats look even remotely surprised to see them head for the ballistics lab to talk privately.

"All wrapped up?" she asks.

"Yeah." He hands over his new ID.

"Ohh… Good picture." He hadn't looked at it enough to notice that, so he does.

"Yeah." It is a pretty good picture. Of course, he hadn't had his ID redone since 2012, so he looks a lot different in this shot.

"Director of Cybercrime? How fancy." She grins at him.
He nods. "Kind of silly really, I didn't bother to find out what the official title was." He sounds a bit off as he says that.

She wraps her arms around his neck, and kisses him gently. "You okay?"

He half-smiles, half-shakes his head, and flashes her a mostly confused look. "I should be, right?"

"Not if you aren't."

"It just feels… I don't know… Lost. It's not bad or anything… It's not scary."

She pets his face and kisses him again. "It's okay."

"Yeah, it is." He nods, as much convincing himself as her, and kisses her again, taking comfort, reassurance in touching her. The world spins, changes, the carpet gets yanked out under his feet, and his feet find new floors to inhabit, but this is true and real and there. Abby is here. Loving Abby is here. As he said in his vows, that's his bedrock, and the rest of the world can burn, as long as she's near, he'll be okay. "And it's going to be. And Monday is going to be awesome. But right now…"

"Yeah." She caresses his face, smiling softly at him, getting it. "Right now. You want to hide out down here with me a bit more?"

He nods, resting his head on her shoulder, enjoying having her pet his hair.

They'd had the 'real' celebration when it was official that Jenner had resigned and he was going to be the next Director (Really, how did he not manage to find out what the title of the job was?) of Cybercrime.

So, he's half-hoping, as he heads back up to the Bullpen, that today can sort of just fade away. Clock out at five like a normal paperwork day. Then home for a bit, get Kelly, and over to Ziva and Tony's for Shabbos.

But, half-hoping or not, he's pretty certain that when he heads back up there, there'll be some sort of big deal.

He doesn't feel like he can get out of the building today without Tony drawing attention to it.

He supposes that's appropriate. They've been a team for eleven years. Longest unchanged roster at NCIS. And today it ends. Two weeks from now, it really ends because Gibbs goes, too.

When he gets up there, Draga's got his stuff unpacked and set up. He's not sure if he spent longer with Abby than he intended to, or if Draga just doesn't have that much stuff. But for a second there's a visceral flash of get the hell out of my desk, but it fades pretty quick. It's not his desk. Not anymore.

He sees Tony flash off a quick text, but nothing else is happening, so he heads to the empty desk and… And he doesn't know what to do now. There's half an hour until quitting time. But he's done.

No one's talking to him, and Draga won't look him in the eye, so, some sort of surprise is in the works.

And two minutes of just sitting around reveals it. The elevator bongs, and Jimmy and Ducky and Abby head in, wheeling in a pretty large computer shaped cake with Congratulations McGee! on it.

He stares at Abby and Jimmy, rather shocked they managed to keep it a secret, but they both grin at him.
He smiles back, and settles in to eat some cake, drink some champagne, and listen to some stories about his various exploits.

It's not unpleasant, just, odd. He usually does a really good job of not being the center of attention, but as the cake gets handed out, along with the booze and soda for people who are still on duty, more and more people wander over. Co-workers, colleagues, Penny and Breena and the kids all make it.

And they're all paying attention to him. Telling stories about him. Even Gibbs tells the story of the first case he was on. Tony's got at least three of them. Abby adds a few. And, he thinks he's handling it gracefully, holding Kelly, laughing at his own history, taking the compliments and praise nicely, no blush is sight, but, yeah, it's just odd. He feels almost outside of himself as it happens. Like he's watching it from afar.

Vance stops down, smiling at him, adds a few of his own stories, the redacted, don't involve any illegal activities versions of those stories. They're a bit less impressive that way, still it's probably not a good idea to admit hacking Mossad or the CIA or hunting down Bodnar when there are a ton of people around.

After two hours, it wraps up. Everyone's had some cake, said congrats, wished him well in Cybercrime, and told stories of how he'd saved the day.

Turns out there's no Shabbos celebration tonight. They're heading toward the diner for dinner, and then, because babies don't like late nights, home.

But as they're getting ready to leave, waiting for the elevator, Tony says to him, "Last time this ever happens." He's smiling, but there are tears in his eyes. "You did good, Probie."

"Thanks, Tony."

"C'mere." He hugs Tim, and after a moment he feels Ziva and Gibbs snuggle in, too. The rest of the family holds back, knowing this is for them, the core team. They break apart after a minute, all of them looking shaky, discretely dealing with teary eyes.

The elevator opens and the Four Musketeers walk through those doors for the last time.
"You ready?" Abby asks as they pull into the parking lot.

He nods. "Ready."

"Kick ass and take names?"

He nods again, then wiggles his foot. "Boot shall prod buttock as often and with as much force as is needed to get these guys into shape."

Abby grins at that and kisses him. "You're gonna do great."

He sighs. He's been telling himself that all weekend long. He is going to do great. He's got big plans, little plans, and a bunch of in between ones, and it's time to go put them into place.

He kisses her, and squeezes her hand. She smiles at him. He takes a deep breath and lets it out, and then they get out of the car and head in.

For the last few months, Tim's been pondering what to do his first day as, apparently, Director of Cybercrime. He's talked to all of his Minions. He's got the beginning of a feel for them. They're starting to get a feel for him.

But he wants to make it absolutely clear that the status-quo-ante-McGee ended the minute Jenner left the building.

So they're taking a field trip.

To the range.

"Why are we doing this?" Of course the one asking is Stephen Manner.

"Teambuilding, Manner." Tim says crisply as the Minions all gather around him, ear protection around their necks, safety glasses on. "I know none of you are field agents. That's fine. But we are cops. It is our job to solve crimes and defend people. And if any of you ever need to defend yourselves or anyone else, I want you to be able to do it with something other than code."

He takes out his gun, (Personal piece, also a Sig. He carried for more than a decade, and he's not comfortable roaming about DC without a gun. He didn't realize how painfully naked he would feel on the ride home Friday night without his service piece, so that's just not happening again.) shows them how it works, explaining that yes, this is a loaded gun, when he's got a gun on him, it's loaded, and that it's in his desk when he's in the building and he carries when he's not in the building. Then he runs the target out to the full extent, and shoots a smiley face into it at 100 meters.

He brings it back in, and watches them all stare at it, wide-eyed, stunned. (Even Manner looks impressed, against his will.) The first time he was in Cybercrime they treated him like a rock star because he'd been a field agent and carried a gun. This time he's proving he can use it. "By the end of the year, you're all going to be able to do that, too. Handgun proficiency just got added to all of your to-do lists. We're geeks. That's fine. That's who we are, and we're going to be proud of it. But we're going to be the most dangerous geeks anyone has ever seen. We will code longer, harder, and better than anyone ever has or will, and if we ever need to, we'll back that up with physical force. Those of you who were here back in '12 remember what happened to James Hunt. For those of you
who weren't, Hunt was one of us; he was undercover in the field. Our security was breached, his name was leaked, and he was tortured and killed, leaving a wife and six-year-old child behind. Not happening on my watch. On my watch, you will all be able to take care of yourselves, and you are never going to be dangling in the wind out there alone."

They all look pretty impressed by that.

"So, step one, let's get you some guns."

For the most part they're pretty bad at it. Cheerful, having a good time, but by any shooting standard, they're pretty bad. A real gun is a whole lot different than a simulation of one. He got to know each of them better, and more importantly got to see how they reacted when given a task way outside of their expectations. For two thirds of his group, he's pleased with what he's seeing.

By the time they get back to the basement, his guys are loosening up a bit. They seem to be getting a little more comfortable with him, and, for the most part, appear to approve of his field trip.

Okay, they'd seen fun, approachable McGee. Over the last two months they'd seen curious McGee. With the coffee they'd seen considerate McGee.

Time to bring out the hard-ass, and as he told Abby, apply boot (Technically, today it's a loafer. Unlike Tony he almost never wears boots to work. Of course, also unlike Tony, all of his boots are on the Doc Martin side of things.) to buttock.

Right now Cybercrime is a collection of desks in nice, straight lines, divided by cubicles. It's very tidy, very organized. And Tim has nothing against organized, he prefers organized, but this flavor of organized is not good for brainstorming, it's not good for working as a team, and it's certainly not good for how he wants his team to work. His office, in specific, and the basement, in general, is also woefully lacking in space to conference with 13 people.

First thing tomorrow, they're rearranging furniture. But for now, he's got them in a semi-circle in front of the coffee maker, desk chairs all around.

He remembers Gibbs telling him that most men just need a gentle whack to the pride to get them moving in the right direction. And he's about to apply said whack.

"Everyone comfy?" They've all drug their chairs out, gotten drinks, and settled in to see what he was going to do next. No one suggests he isn't ready, so Tim twists his chair around, straddles it, folds his arms on the back rest, facing them, and continues on, "In the last six months, I've hacked all of your systems. I got your personal computers at home, I got your work systems, I got your phones, and I did it multiple times." He sees signs of anger at that, some alarm, and a few of the brighter ones are starting to look a little sick. "It was a test. I wanted to see how good your security was. I wanted to see how aware of threats you were. And I wanted to see what you'd do if your systems were compromised." As soon as the word test fell off his lips ten of them start looking very nervous. Good, they should.

"Six of you failed. Completely and utterly. You did not notice you'd been hacked. Your security was sloppy and your safeguards insufficient.

"Four of you passed, barely. You noticed you'd been hacked, tightened your security, and didn't think twice about it.

"Two of you passed the test. You tightened your security, tracked the attack, found that it came from me. One of you talked to Vance. One of you talked to me.
"None of you had a system I couldn't get into, which means none of you aced it."

He sees ten of them blanch. Six of them look sick. Ngyn and Manner, the two who passed, are looking uncomfortable, too. Ngyn's taking this a lot harder than he had hoped for, she looks ready to hang herself because he was able to get into her system, and Manner's between annoyed and outright angry.

All in all Hard Ass McGee appears to be working.

He makes sure to take a few seconds to hold eye contact with everyone who isn't Ngyn or Manner and then says, "To say I was disappointed by those results is an understatement. You are Cybercrime. One of your primary jobs is to defend against cybercriminals. If I had meant business, I could have crippled all of your personal systems. More importantly, if I had meant business, I could have crippled NCIS on your watch. From what I can tell, the only reason that hasn't happened yet is because NCIS is such a small institution that no one knows we exist." He decides mentioning that no one's been able to get through the wall he built around NCIS after Hunt died is counter-productive to the mood of abject terror he's trying to instill right now.

"After almost all of you failed my first test, I decided to go and check over all of your resumes; I rechecked your references and transcripts. I know, that once upon a time, you were all top-notch talent." Okay, that's not exactly true. But they were all in the top quarter of talent, and he's trying to add a little pep talk to his slap to the pride here. "What I do not know is why all of you stopped being top-notch talent, and why only two of you even remember what top-notch talent even looks like.

"I know one other thing, the only people who are staying on this team are the top-notch talent.

"As of today, you just became Probies again. We'll talk one on one today and tomorrow about what I'll expect from each of you. But one thing is true, only two of you were even in the neighborhood of what I'm going to expect from you going forward.

"I wasn't kidding at the range. We're geeks. And we are going to be the best team of geeks anyone has ever seen. We are going to redefine what it means to be a Cybercrime operation. Right now we sit here, wait to find out that someone has broken the law, and then go after them. Not anymore. We are going to be hunters, searching for the problems before they become apparent. We're not just going to clean up messes, we're going to prevent them. Now, all of you back to your desks. Start packing your stuff up." Some of them look terrified at that, and it hits him that they may think he's doing a mass firing. "Tomorrow we're rearranging everything so we can work as a team." And he sees some relief cross six faces. "You've been off doing your own things for too long. We're rebuilding so we can work with each other. Meanwhile, I'll be dropping by to talk to you one on one about what I expect out of you for the next year."

Twelve sets of eyes just stared at him, but no one moved.

"Okay, speaking of what I expect, the correct answer right now is 'On it, Boss' or 'Yes, Boss' then you all get up and do what I've told you to."

Ten forced-sounding versions of "On it, Boss" echoed through the basement as the Minions began to move. Tim made note of the two who didn't say it. Ngyn, terminally shy, and Manner, who was probably horrendously annoyed at this whole thing.

Talking to everyone went, for the most part, smoother than he was expecting. Apparently a judicious application of hard-ass did indeed soften people up nicely.
Unfortunately a judicious application of hard-ass did not speed up physical plant. So, after being told that there was no possible way that they could get new light bulbs any time before February, Tim heads to the supplies cabinet, finds the damn light bulbs and a ladder, and shocks the hell out of his team by replacing them himself.

"What are you doing?" Hepple asks. (Though he can feel eleven other sets of eyes watching as he sets up the ladder below one of the dark lights.)

"Leading by example. This," he points to the lack of lights, "is a problem. Physical Plant says they can't get here until February, so I am fixing the problem myself instead of just ignoring it until someone else can deal with it."

Hepple nods at that, looking like he approves, and goes back to his cubicle.

By the time Tim's done, they can all see easily and the basement is suddenly looking significantly less dungeonish. (And with more light it is clear that it's also in need of a new coat of paint and the janitorial staff has been slacking off. There really shouldn't be cobwebs in the corners.)

And of course, it's after he's done that Manner drifts by and says, "We had so few of them to cut down on the heat and glare. They get really hot and make it hard to see the screens."

"We're moving around tomorrow, so we'll find spots that don't cause too much glare. As for heat… Physical plant says they can get here in February, so when they do, we'll upgrade to LEDs. There's no reason for us to be stumbling around in the dark down here."

Manner doesn't seem impressed, but he drifts back toward his cubical, which he may or may not have been packing up.

That ate up pretty much the whole first day. He was putting the ladder back when the clock hit five. He knows they usually leave at five, so he's curious as to whether or not anyone will be there when he gets back.

They are.

"Okay." He gestures and they all drift forward again. He takes the white board he had written *What kind of coffee do you like?* on and tacks it to the wall outside of his office.

"Last of today's changes. Come Monday we're on twenty-four seven. Crime doesn't just happen on a nice, tidy nine to five schedule. So, names on the board, write down whatever hours you'd like to work best. I don't care when they are, as long as there are fifty of them a week." He sees Manner about to chime in, "And yes, that fifty hours includes your lunches and breaks. Actual working time will still be forty hours, though we're going to be having a chat about overtime and comp time in the not wildly distant future.

"You don't have to decide what hours you want tonight. Go home, talk with your families, figure out what times will work best, stick some hours up there by Friday end of work. For times I don't have a lot of coverage, we'll use the same sort of on call system we have upstairs, skeleton crew rotating through and one or two of you on call if there's a rush/someone calls in sick.

"All right. That's today. Tomorrow we're rebuilding the office and going over the new vision for Cybercrime.

"Wednesday, we get back to work."
This time he hears a collection of variations on the theme of 'On it, Boss,' as they all wander off, some to fill in hours on the whiteboard, (He makes a mental note to get a big one to stick in the center of his soon to be conferencing area. Yes, there will be upgrading as soon as he gets his hands on his budget and requisition forms, but for right now, he feels like he can spare the pocket money for a big whiteboard. Plus, they're just always good to have around.) most to grab their gear and head home for the night.

With everyone gone, Tim heads into his office for the second time ever. He got in in the morning, put his boxes on the desk, and then turned right around, headed out, waited by the coffee maker, and got everyone together to explain their field trip.

He stands in the door, looking around. He's got an office. Of his own. All his own.

And while he's sure that Manner had already been in to measure for curtains (The front and left walls are both glass with vertical shades.) he hadn't paid much attention to the idea of an office.

Right now, it's a moderately sized room (twelve by ten) with a desk (Big desk, more than enough room for two monitors, keyboard, writing space, pictures… It's at least half again the size of his desk upstairs.) desk chair, two book shelves on the back wall, with two file cabinets between them, a blank wall to his right, and two more guest chairs along the left wall.

So, right now it's really empty.

Kind of odd that there's no computer in there, what with the whole it's the office of the Director of Cybercrime, but there's also a packet of paperwork for him to fill out on the desk, so he's hoping that there's something in there about how he gets a computer for himself.

He'll get to them soon enough.

He's just standing in there, looking around. He figures tomorrow, when everyone else is setting up their new work stations, he'll set up his as well.

But he does put his pictures up. That helps it feel a bit more like his.

"Hi."

He looks over his shoulder from putting the skull picture on the corkboard between his book shelves and above the filing cabinets to see Abby standing in his doorway.

"Nice," she says, grinning at his space.

She touches his door, fingers tracing over the small black and gray plastic name tag that reads, Timothy McGee Director of Cybercrime. "A real door?"

He shrugs. "Looks like you get all the fancy toys." With the exception of the main lab door, all of hers are sliding glass.

"Probably not much chance of any sort of chemical gas leak down here."

"I'd imagine it's pretty small."

She's looking at the blinds, fiddling with the plastic wand that opens and closes them, smiling, and then turns to him. "You know, your desk will never, ever again be that empty or clear."

Right now, the only thing he's got on it is a box of his stuff and the stack of paperwork. So he nods.
He can't imagine it will ever be this empty in here again.

"And… as of… tomorrow, the next day… you'll have them working twenty-four, seven right?" By 17:10 or so the Minions were out of the office. So, he is, currently, in possession of a mostly empty office in a deserted Cybercrime basement.

"Monday. We shift to full time on Monday." He's starting to guess where this is going, and a grin is spreading across his face, as well. They've certainly christened her office, might as well do his…

"So… this is a rare opportunity, then." She's facing him, wicked smile on her face, but her back is to the door to his office, she hooks her foot onto the door and kicks it closed. With a snick, it does. One more click and it's locked. Takes a few twists, but the vertical blinds all shut.

He sets the box on the floor, paperwork on top of it, and closes on her, pulling her against him. "Very rare."

"Excellent." Her arms wrap around his neck, and she feels him lift her, and then set her on his desk. He kisses her, wet and soft, lots of explicit promise from his tongue.

She's moaning quietly, a soft breathy sound that he knows well and loves, as her hands find his belt.

"Quick?" he asks.

"Heather expects us back usual time," she says between kisses.

He nods, thinking that means they've got fifteen minutes, nibbling her collar bone, hands trailing up her legs, noticing that she's got a skirt on today. His fingers brush her pussy, skirt and a thong. He smiles at her, seeing the glee in her eyes. She definitely planned this for today.

Her legs cross around his hips, keeping him close and snug, while her hands unfasten his belt and jeans. "Been thinking about this all day," she says nibbling his bottom lip, unbuttoning his shirt, rubbing her hands and lips over his chest.

He pulls her head up, kisses her, shoving her skirt out of the way, making sure her lab coat is pushed back enough. "God, I love you so much!"

"You mean you haven't been thinking about this?"

He shakes his head, and then groans as she pushes him back a step, pulls his dick out of his boxers, and bends forward to kiss it, lips wet and soft, tongue playing on the tip.

She jacks him slow and steady with a wet hand. "You mean, all day today, you've been thinking about work…"

"I'm not anymore," he says through gritted teeth, watching her hand slip over his dick.

"Good."

He pushes her back a bit on the desk, so she's lying down, hips on the edge, and drags the thong to the side, giving her pussy a good long, wet, sucking, licking kiss. Then reaching back, he grabs his desk chair, pulling it to sit on, and placing each of her feet on one of the arms.

"Good?"

She moans as his mouth dips to her pussy again, body rocking up to meet him, and that's all the
confirmation he needs.

He's licking hard, fast, fingers thrusting. There's nothing teasing about this. Sure, he'd like to lay her out and feast on her here, spread out on his desk like his own private, kinky Boss and Secretary porno, but… But it's not happening, not tonight.

Though he thinks she's on the same page, because he's hearing her say, "Oh, God, Yes, oh sir! Yes! Please, sir, get me off, sir!"

She's wet and eager, probably really has been thinking about this all day, and it's only a matter of minutes before words slip into deep breaths and high pitched moans, and just as she's cresting, as her body's pulling tight and her fingers are clenched on the far edge of his desk, he stands up and slips into her, setting her off, reveling in the wet, tight, pulsing grasp of her body on his. Doesn't take him long to follow her, few fast, hard, deep thrusts, hoisting her legs up, around his waist, arching into her at full out speed, and then he's shuddering and twitching, glowing with this.

For a moment, he rests there, head on her chest, bent over his desk, the heels of her boot scratchy on the small of his back. When his heart stops pounding, and her breathing calms down, he kisses her gently on the throat, feeling her lightly stroking his shoulders.

He stands up, about to step back when he notices a snag in their plan. He's in a very empty office. Very empty. And the nearest bathroom is fifty feet away.

"No tissues."

She ducks her hand into her lab coat pocket and pulls a few out. "Don't let it be said that I'm ever unprepared."

He kisses her, grinning, and in a minute, they're wiped up, and his shirt's buttoned and tucked in again.

"You ready to head home?" she asks, and he takes the paperwork and nods.

They're in the elevator before he asks, "You ever going to do that again?"

"You want me to? I don't think you'll ever have an empty office again."

"True…" He's on the fence, because his door does lock, and he does have the blinds, so… as long as they were quiet, they probably could get away with it.

She sees him thinking about it and says, "One day, when you're not expecting it, I'm going to head in for an 'important conversation,' and then I'm going to gag you, and ride you in your office chair."

His eyes close at that, and he bites his lips. Then he kisses her, hard, once more.

The door to the elevator is just about to open. She gently pats his dick, and then, just as they slide apart says, "So, how did your first day go?"

And, as they walk toward her car, he tries to answer.
Tuesday morning, he's the first one in. It's intentional. First and foremost, he drops off the paperwork he filled out last night, detailing what he wants in his computer set up. Supposedly IT will deliver it sometime today. He figures the earlier they get it, the sooner he'll be up and running, too.

Next up, back to Cybercrime. He steals two cubical dividers, hooks them to each other, and sets them up with his newest additions to Cybercrime, two of the biggest whiteboards Target sells.

Then he starts to sketch.

He's breaking Cybercrime into seven sections, four of which will be huddled around a central conference area. He's hoping to get a good long table, a bunch of whiteboards, and several plasmas for the conference area. He wants them able to talk big jobs there, about what everyone is working on, and that area should also be where jobs get picked up and assigned.

Each of those four areas will be three desks set facing each other, the dividers used to provide some level of walls, but not shut everyone off. Like how the dividers were used in the bullpen. He's setting them up into hackers, programmers, database, and code wizards. He wants them working in teams based on skill set. Sure, big problems are going to require multiple people from different specialties, but at least to start, this'll get his people into teams.

He doesn't see anything, anywhere, set for dealing with hardware. So that's the sixth section. In the far back, near the filing cabinets (He's not sure where they're going, but not down here, not anymore.) he's going to be putting workbenches and tools. Cybercrime should be able to deal with actual, physical computers if need be.

Last section is going up by the coffeemaker. All he's got for it now is an empty space. Once it's full, there'll be at least a few sofas, a big screen TV, a few game systems, some games, and a decent array of drinks and snacks. He's going to expect them to work hard, so he needs a place for cooling down and playing, too.

The Minions all make it in by 08:00. Whatever else is true about them, they're punctual.

He shows them his floor plan, and what he's hoping to do, and then, and they were surprised by this, he says, "Okay, before we start moving things around, double check the plan, talk to each other, and me, and if you've got better/different ideas, let's hear them."

They do. Looking it over. Chattering among themselves.

Ngyn says, very quietly, not looking at him or anyone else, "What if we like a quiet place to work?"

He looks at his plan. That's a good point. If you need solitude… "How about a line of three traditional cubicles on the east wall? I'll see if I can get the extra gear. You'll all have your main stations, but those'll be for when you want to work on one computer as a team, or when you want to be on your own?"

They seem okay with that, but Ngyn isn't looking happy. Tim makes a mental note to go chat with her about this whole teamwork concept, and how the rest of Cybercrime has to know what she's up to.

"Anything else?"
More chattering, but no one came up with anything.

"Okay. Today, we're moving stuff and getting settled into our new places. I'll be getting my stuff set up, too." Then he headed into his office to set up his own stuff and watch how his twelve Minions would do when given a specific end goal, but no guidance on how to get to said end goal.

He had taken the stack of paperwork home, and gone through it. That was a good thing, because how he got his own computer set up was in there.

Fortunately IT works a lot faster than Physical Plant.

He'd filled out the forms for what he needed, handed them in, and in only four hours, he was looking at the system of... okay, not his dreams. His dream system is a lot snazzier, but he's also staring at what is likely the best set up in the building. He doesn't think the Director of IT has this much computing power on his desk. (Of course, the Director of IT also doesn't need this much power.)

It's not the bleeding edge of tech, but it's the best stuff IT had to offer him, and it's a few light years past what he had on his desk upstairs. It's on par with what's on his desk at home.

Between setting up his own stuff and filling out requisition forms for what he hopes to add (Thank you Jenner for the sixty thousand extra in budgetary operating capital. Tim's not going to use it all. He wants to make sure he's got a 30k overtime cushion, but that other 30k will get him a lot closer to his goal of what Cybercrime should look like and have than he is now.) he keeps looking out to see how the move is going.

By three hours in, when they were all still kind of milling around, having successfully taken the dividers down (because they can all easily lift and move the dividers, and the chairs were pushed out of the way, but all of the heavy lifting was still sitting around, he heads out again.

"All of you, over here."

And they come to him. He sits on the nearest desk and pats it. "These weigh, what? Ninety pounds, hundred and fifty? They're heavy, right?"

They all nod.

"So, is that why you're all just sort of standing around? Because you can't move your own desks?"

More nodding.

"What I'm considering the biggest problem with Cybercrime is that none of you are working together. That stops now. There are twelve of you. This desk is no big deal at all, if you move it together. It's a massive pain in the ass on your own. So, you all know the plan. Traditional lunch time is in an hour. I want all the desks in place by then. When you get back from lunch, the rest of the afternoon is about getting everything set up again. We hit the ground running tomorrow."

He hops off the desk, hoping they can team on their own if pointed in that direction, dreading they'll need more help that what he's already provided.

When he heads out for lunch, he does see that all the desk have been rearranged and three of the dividers are up in their new places.
By the end of Tuesday, Tim had twelve Minions, a completely rearranged floor plan, and though it wasn't yet filled with furniture, a conference space.

He gathers them together and starts with the speechifying, hoping this is the last time he's got to do this.

"Okay, I've talked to each of you, and you know things are going to be very different around here soon. Some of you are going to decide to stay, some of you won't, and here's the last bit of information you need for figuring it out:

"My team, my rules. There's seven of them and they're easy:

"One: Never be unreachable. At least one member of the team will always know a way to get ahold of you. I don't care who it is, and I don't care what you are doing, someone will always be able to reach you. This is a two way street, someone will always be able to reach me, too. You will all have my home address and number, as well. If you need me, my door is always open.

"Two: Never screw your team. If you cannot have every other member of the team's back 100%, I will accept your resignation right now. If you are worried about someone else, come talk to me. We'll get it worked out, but if it can't be, then walk away. If you can't work with someone on the team, I will not hold it against you if you want to leave. I will hold it against you if you stick around and screw one of your teammates.

"Three: Verify. We're gonna wade through a lot of crap here. We are going to go to the front lines of the cyber battlefield and we'll never be entirely sure what is going on, so we verify. Check it once, check it twice, make sure what you think is happening is happening.

"That leads into Four: Trust your instincts. If it feels hinky, it probably is. See number three. Let me know what you think is going on, let your teammates know. If you're too close to it, we'll be your second and third eyes. But if it feels wrong, let us all know so we can swing into action and beat whatever it is into submission. Even if you think it's stupid, even if you can't back it up, tell us. No one ever gets laughed at for telling the rest of us what sort of feel they're getting on a project. Your subconscious notices things you conscious doesn't, and it tries to let you know what you're missing with that little voice in the back of your mind. Listening to that voice saves lives in the field, so we're not gonna ignore it down here.

"Five: When you're on the case, be on the case. When you're off, be off. You need downtime. Make sure you get it. We cannot be the best if we're burnt. Yes, someone needs to be able to get ahold of you at all times, but you're not getting called in on your off time unless the world is ending. Your downtime will be held sacred, but I'm also going to expect you to work the case until its done. You won't have to be physically here to do it. I've got a wife and a six-month-old daughter, both of whom I intend to see every day, so if I need to, I'll work from home, and so will you.

"Six: If you screw it up, fix it first, apologize second.

"Seven: You will screw up. I will, too. If you can't fix it on your own, own up to it and get help. Screwing up is never unforgiveable sin, trying to hide it and not getting the help you need to fix it, is. Most of the time, you screw up, it'll be a small problem, and it'll be an even smaller one with all of us on it. Screw up, hide it, wait until you're in so deep over your head you can't possibly get out on your own, and that small problem becomes a massive one that burns all of us. Bad plan, don't do it.
"That's it. McGee's rules. If you can work by them, if you want to be part of what will be the finest Cybercrime division in the US, then stick around. If you want to keep coasting around with a cushy federal job with nifty benefits and easy hours,” he points toward the elevator, “don't let the door hit you on the ass on the way out.”
Wednesday morning. First day of the new layout.

08:00 everyone is there, front and center, at the new conference table (Showed up last night. Light bulbs they won't give him until February, but a decent sized table and fourteen chairs, that took two hours. He's got no idea what sort of priority list Physical Plant has.) waiting.

He's still making due with the whiteboards. Big screen plasmas are still a ways out and the digital touch screens he's hoping for are waiting for a quarter where he's got more free money in his budget.

"Until now, you've had a system where jobs come in, and each of you took whatever came next, worked it until it was done, then grabbed the next one. We're not doing that anymore. Ten of you are on current jobs, right?"

Twelve heads nod.

"Okay. I want each of you explaining what you are doing. Put it up on the whiteboard. Then we're going to play job swap and team building. I'm sure some of these actually are single person jobs. But a lot of them aren't. By the time we're done with this, all twelve of you will be on active cases, and we'll have a working template in place for how jobs get divided."

He looks to Connon, the tech closest to him and hands him a dry erase marker. "You're up. What are you on?"

"Case for the New Orleans branch…" Tim's listening him explain the case, thinking along, seeing this is a database case. They need to build one, putting facts in, and then use it to find the patterns. Pretty straight forward, not difficult, just time consuming. He's thinking about that when it hits him, New Orleans branch?

His guys are doing cases for the New Orleans' branch? He's tempted to ask about that, but they're actually working with each other pretty well, two of the Minions offering good suggestions for how to deal with the data, because Connon isn't a database guy, so he doesn't want to break that up. He'll ask later.

Connon gets done, and Tim says, "Trevet, Manner, good ideas for dealing with this. Congrats, Connon's case is yours now." Connon writes their names next to the case and then hands the dry erase marker to Trevet, who had been sitting next to him.

Trevet isn't looking thrilled about that, and as he explains what he's on, Tim can see why. Connon's job is big and slow. Trevet's current one is a monster. And doing both at once would be a pain in the ass. It's twenty million, at least, lines of code that have to be slipped through to find the way to sneak into a program, but the more he explains what he's on, the happier Ngyn and Dume look. His Code Wizards are ready to hop on this.

So, Trevet hands off his project, and hands the dry erase marker to Patil, who explains what he's on.

And on and on it goes. They get the jobs rearranged and, listening to what everyone is doing, for whom, and why, and Tim's come to a conclusion: Cybercrime has changed since he was down here last. At least, from the sound of it, they're now handling all the cases for anyone who doesn't have a tech on hand, which appears to be every one of the smaller outposts in the western hemisphere and all of the Agents Afloat in the Atlantic.
Once they're all assigned, and they're getting ready to start to work again, he stops them for a last second. "Okay, last thing. My job. Today, I'm reworking the job system. Let me make sure this is right. Anyone who wants our attention logs onto our intranet, write up a job ticket, and then you guys grab it?"

They all nod.

"Okay. That's what I'm on. We're redoing the interface. By the time I'm done with this, the system will triage as well as send us cases. They'll not only tell us what work they need done, but it'll be ranked by how urgent it is. You guys won't be slogging away on thefts while a kidnapping lingers in the background anymore."

They seem to like that.

"Once I'm done with it, cases will come up in order of importance. Whoever's on deck takes the next case and diagnoses it. Figures out what it is, what specialties are needed for it, and then flag it to whomever it's a best fit for. So, say, like what we've got Trevet and Manner on, it's a database case. Trevet, Manner, and Patil will all get flagged on the case, then the three of them will talk about it, come up with a plan of attack, split it up, and get it done. Once it's done, they'll each go back and grab another case. Sound like a plan?"

Nodding and 'Yes, Boss' hits his ears.

"Great. I'll have it done by this afternoon, and then you guys are going to test it. If it's good, I'll send the beta live tomorrow."

They look surprised at the speed he wants to move at, but they don't argue with him. Everyone breaks up and off they go.

He notices, as he's coding away, reworking the Cybercrime interface, that he's getting some emails he wasn't expecting.

As of this point, he's had three different Cybercrime Team Leaders, (Okinawa, Pearl Harbor, and Rota) all send him pleasant emails introducing themselves, explaining what they're working on, how their teams work, and how they used to work with Jenner.

He sends them polite emails back, happy to get to know them, explaining that he's looking forward to working with them, too.

Then he does more coding and doesn't much think about it.

He got the first letter of resignation that afternoon.

He wasn't dismayed to see it, either. Bergener wasn't happy about the range, really wasn't happy about getting hacked, was fuming at being told that she needed to shape up quite a bit to get to the level he wants his guys at, and didn't seem to like this new system, either.

She's exactly the kind of person he wants to see the back of, and in two weeks, he will.

That's one open desk, and he knows who he wants to fill it. He just hopes she's still available.

He kept her contact information, and pulls it up.
"Hello?" Same voice, she still sounds shockingly young.
"Catherine Howard?"
"Yes."
"Hi. This is Tim McGee, you may not remember me, I interviewed you for a position at NCIS."
He felt the pause, then she placed him. "I remember you. What can I do for you Agent McGee?"
"Are you still looking for a job, or feel like getting a better one?"
"A better one?" she sounds intrigued.
"Probably. Where are you now?"
"Homeland Security."
He nods, she would have been a good fit there.
"I'm running the NCIS DC Cybercrime Division now, and I'm rebuilding it from the ground up. At Homeland you're one of what, three hundred techs?"
"Something like that."
"Give notice. Come with me. There'll be thirteen of us, and by the time next year is done Homeland will be asking us for help when they get stuck."
"You sound pretty sure of yourself."
"I am. What could you do with a smallish team of very talented people and an awfully open-ended mission statement, let alone with a Boss who wants you spending no more than thirty percent of your time on the paperwork?"
She sounds very eager as she says, "A whole lot."
He's quiet.
"I've got to give two weeks' notice."
Tim smiles. "Then I'll see you in fifteen days."

It was one thing to say he wanted his guys spending no more than thirty percent of their time on paperwork, it was a whole other thing to deliver on that.

Upstairs, the break down is somewhere along the lines of forty percent of their time in the field dealing with criminals, ten percent on court related work, and the rest is paperwork.

Down here…

Okay, not much in the way of court time. From the looks of it, his guys rarely see the inside of a courtroom, probably because no lawyer in his right mind wants to spend hours digging through tech specs the average juror couldn't make heads or tails of if his life depended on it.

No… as he's looking through what they do, (He sees confirmation that they are indeed handling the casework for every Field Office with fewer than four people, which works out to about thirty offices,
and for twenty more Agents Afloat.) close to ninety percent of their guys plea bargain out or plead guilty, and the ones that don't end up in cases where the lawyers try not to do much with the tech work.

Still, looking at the paperwork… God, they've got to be running close to sixty percent of their time filling out forms.

There's got to be a way to streamline this.

He steps out of his office and heads over to Ngyn's desk.

She's got her headphones in, bopping away to something as her fingers fly over the keyboard. He reads over her shoulder, making sure she's not actively coding, (nope, more paperwork) before interrupting.

"Hey."

She jerked at the sound of his voice and stammered through, "Boss?"

"May I?" he snags one of the chairs from the conferance table, pulls it over, indicating he'd like to sit down.

"Uh… sure." She's blushing and not looking directly at him.

He settles in. "I'm looking for ways to battle the paperwork dragon. I was wondering if you could take me through it."

"Boss?"

"We don't have 5440s or D-13-67s, or Internal Tracking 44-Cs, upstairs. What is all of this? Why are we doing it?"

"They want to know everything we do, how we do it, and why."

"Everything?"

"Just about."

"Why?"

She thinks about that for a long minute, looks at him, like she's testing him, and then looks away. "They just do."

"Who's they?"

She shrugs.

"Okay. So, you fill these out, hit print…" That part's killing him, they're still using actual paper down here, though, in that they're filling out the forms on the computer, they're three steps ahead of the Field Teams. "…give them to me, and then what?"

The look on her face seemed to be saying, Isn't it your job to know that?

"Like I said, we don't have these upstairs."

"I think you file them?"
He looks in the direction of the filing cabinets. He can't see them, but he knows they're there. "Great. So, basically you spend more time reporting what you're doing than doing what you're doing?"

She nods. He makes a mental note to ask legal if they actually need to have physical copies of all of this crap sitting in a file somewhere, or if he can just warehouse electronic copies.

He looks back at the form she's got up on her screen. "You keep putting the same information into the same blanks over and over?"

"Pretty much."

"This the kind of thing where if there was some sort of master database for each case that could then fill the forms out for you, it'd save a lot of time?"

She thought about that for a minute, too. "Probably."

"Okay." He was standing up, getting ready to add building a database for this to his to do list when something hits him, he's the Boss. He doesn't have to build this. He's got people he can delegate this task to. It's a rather novel sensation to realize that the tech problem he's encountering is not one he has to personally solve himself. In fact, given the talent pool in front of him, it's better off that he doesn't actually solve this one, because while he can handle a database, it's not his specialty. "Come join me in the center." He raises his voice, "Hey, conference time. Everyone in the center!" He really needs a call to arms, some sort of Gear Up for the Minions.

He snags a few markers for the whiteboard and begins writing:

**Master Case Database:**

* Takes info as you work
* Fills out forms for you
* Accessible by all of us
* Tracks casework
* Shows who did what
* Electronic signature

* Stores basic forms, print them out only if you need them.*

By the time he's finished that everyone else is around them.

"From what I can see, we're wasting way too much time on paperwork down here. So, that's gonna stop. We're going to build a database that'll take information from our computers as we work, store it, and then fill in the forms for us, so all we've got to do is fill in whatever specialized blanks there are, print it out, sign it, and then go send it off to collect dust.

"Manner, Trivet, and Patil… You're the database specialists, right?"

Three heads bob up and down.

"Hepple, Jonas, Chang, you're my programmers, right?"

More nodding.
"Good. You're gonna build it. Roger, Ngyn, Connon, you three are going to test it when the alpha version is done. Allen, Soth, and Sturm, you're going to test the patched up version.

"All twelve of you are going to add ideas to this whiteboard. What does this thing need to do so that when you get to the end of a case all you do is hit print, and then all your paperwork comes out nice and tidy, waiting for your signature?

"The six of you who aren't building, you're taking up the slack while the two development teams work.

"Two weeks I want us on a beta version, which we're all going to work with, probably for a month, and then move onto a production model."

"You want a beta version in two weeks?" Manner asks, an expression between stupefaction and rage on his face.

"Yes. Was I unclear?"

Manner is still glaring at him, beyond angry at what he considers a ridiculously inappropriate request. 
"Two weeks? You're talking about a system that would take any other team a year to get into place. A year if all they did was work on it."

"Door's over there" Tim points to the elevator. "If you can't or won't do it, Manner."

"No one can do this," Manner spits out.

"Are you resigning?"

"No! I am telling you that you are asking us to do something impossible. We're playing catch up from two days of furniture moving, you've got us all on new cases, you want us testing a new job system, we're already past swamped and now you want us to build an entirely new system in two weeks. It's impossible."

Tim smiles at him, eyes sharp. Manner might be the only one feeling secure enough to say it, but he's fairly sure that at least a few others have to be thinking it, too. So, time for more Hard-Ass, and also an example of what he's going to expect them to be doing down here.

"Get used to it, Scotty. We've been limping around on a rusty warp core for way too damn long. Jenner might have been fine with just getting the job done, but he's gone, and I'm here. And just getting the job done doesn't cut it anymore. Now, you gonna do it, or sit there and complain about it?"

"Just the requisitions alone-"

Tim cuts him off. "Code it yourself or use open source software. You're right, this is impossible if we try to get NCIS to buy us a database to work with. That's why I didn't tell you to go shopping for one. I told you to build one. Mongo is good. Data X is better. And I'm sure that if you spent this much time actually doing some research you could find something even better."

"But-"

"My office, Manner. Sturm, congratulations, you just joined the Alpha team. Go, build us a database that'll do our paperwork for us and save us thousands of hours of boring, useless, soul-sucking work each month."
Eleven versions of, 'On it, Boss,' echoed through the basement as Tim points to the office door. Manner storms in, and Tim kicks the door shut behind him.

"But, what, Manner?"

"But we are legally not allowed to just grab up software off the internet! Which you would know if you had actually worked down here before. We are required by law to make sure that it's clean, that there are no backdoors, that it's designed in such a way as to not be vulnerable to attacks from the outside. Because of that, we are required to go through certain distributors for our software. We are required by law to -"

Tim stops him dead with a dry, "Bullshit."

"What?" Manner stares at Tim like he had just peeled off his face and is actually a gray alien.

"Bull shit." Tim enunciates both words very clearly. "That is an excuse. You don't want to do the work, fine, but don't give me bullshit about it. First off, if it's open source, we'll have millions of other people also pouring through the code, looking for bugs and backdoors. It'll be way safer than using the same stuff every single other federal office uses. Anyone who's serious about getting into one of our systems knows who we get our software from and is targeting them.

"Secondly, we aren't the NSA, and as long as we stay on the side of the angels and keep our noses clean when it comes to not spying on everyone on earth, no one is going to care if we used an open source database to fill out our paperwork."

Manner's looking furious, trying to get Tim to listen. "But we are-"

"No! We do the job! And, though it seems that you've forgotten this, the job is stopping the bad guys. We do what we need to do that. And right now we're filling out forms and not catching bad guys, so that stops."

"It's not legal!" Manner says desperately. He's acting like his magic words, that always worked before, suddenly stopped working, but he's got no idea of what else to try, so he keep spouting them again and again.

"That's my job. You think I'm going to leave you out there without cover? You guys build it, and I'll get it squared away. There's only one person who's successfully broken the protections I've got on the NCIS computers, the entirely legal protections that I built myself instead of buying from an approved vendor, and that's me. We've had people break into the building to use our computers because that's easier than hacking them. You think I can't get an open source database fortified to the degree it needs to be to get up to specs?"

Manners had the grace to start looking embarrassed.

"Now. In two months, when we have a fully functional system set and ready to go, Vance is going to be awfully pleased. In four months, when it's so streamlined and functional that we can roll it out to the other departments, he's going to be very pleased. And in six months when the whole of NCIS is saving hundreds of thousands of hours a month on paperwork, he is going to be ecstatic, and in that happy mood, he's going to be making note of the people who made that happen, and do you know who's name isn't going to be on the developer list?"

"Mine." And with that word he sees Manner get it, he's not the Boss, he's not going to be the Boss, and he is not going to be able to get rid of Tim. This is the new reality of the situation because now Vance is going to be expecting things like this out of Cybercrime, and he's not the guy who can
come up with them.

"Exactly." He takes a long minute to stare Manner down. "Next time I give you a job, you do the job or you hand me your resignation."

Manner blinks, slowly, and says, "Yes, sir."

"Boss or McGee, Manner. Not sir. I work for a living."
Director?

Thursday morning, he got in, and noticed ten more introductory emails.

He's noticing something else, his nametag says Director of Cybercrime. The emails he's getting are from people with the title of Team Leader.

It is occurring to Tim, that possibly, actually finding out what this job was, instead of going off his memory of what Jenner was doing when he worked down here the first time, before waltzing into Leon's office and saying he could do it, was probably a good idea. Because, as he gets more of these 'Hi, I'm (insert name here) out of (insert NCIS station). My team's on blah. We often do blah, blah, and blah. Looking forward to working with you,' emails he's coming to the conclusion that he may actually be the Director of Cybercrime and not, as he thought, the DC Office Team Leader.

For most of NCIS the hierarchy goes something like this: Agent, Team Leader, Department Head, Office Director. People like Abby and Ducky are Department Heads (because of their more specialized work, and they do work for all the teams in the office) and report directly to the Office Director. Team Leaders report to the Office Director, too. Office Director report to... He doesn't remember, but there's a Director of Operations who's in charge of the ins and outs of what all the Field Offices are up to.

Leon is, in addition of Director of NCIS, the Office Director for the Navy Yard.

So, Tim was thinking that, like Abby and Ducky, he was moving into Department Head.

But, looking at his inbox, where yet another Hi, I'm Blah (This one is from the Reykjavik Office. Why they have a Reykjavik Office, he has no idea.) it's occurring to him, that possibly Cybercrime doesn't follow that pattern.

This puts him in something of an odd position, because he can't exactly head on up and ask Leon what the fuck his job actually is, because he got the job by saying he could do the job better than the guy who, at that point, had the job, and way better than the other guy who wanted the job. (Manner's comments about Tim moving to this job being some sort of pay off from Leon are making a hell of a lot more sense now.)

So, on Thursday, he did some rather discrete research on what Jenner had left for him, and rapidly came to the conclusion that he may, in fact, be the Director of Cybercrime for the whole of NCIS, and that running his twelve Minions was only one of his jobs.

Figuring this out left him simultaneously feeling exceptionally proud and wanting to hyperventilate.

---

He fires off a text to Abby and Jimmy: Lunch?

Sure! Comes back from Abby.

Autopsy. Tomorrow? Comes from Jimmy.

So he heads out of his office and down… nope… up to Abby's office, collects her, and she can tell something is up, she keeps looking at him sideways as he fidgets in the elevator on the way out.

Once they're at Carlo's, food in front of them, she says, "What? I haven't seen you this antsy in a long time."
"I think I'm Director of Cybercrime."

She's staring at him, not getting it. "Well, they did write that on your door."

"No. I mean Director of Cybercrime. All of it. Every branch. All the teams, all hundred and fifty people, are reporting in to me, and… I was going through Jenner's files, and they've been reporting to him for years now. It looks like Cybercrime consolidated under him in '11. Every month they all check in, let him know what's up, get his approval for hires and fires and send him budget updates and… I think the whole department is mine."

Her eyes go very wide, and then she starts to giggle.

"It's not funny!"

"Oh, no, this is funny. This is the definition of funny. You're telling me you got a senior level position by accident? You swaggered on in to Leon, told him you could do the job, and didn't bother to find out what the job was?" She laughs some more.

"I thought I knew what it was!"

"Apparently not." She giggles again. "So… You outrank me, then, right?"

"Um… Yeah, I think so."

The more research he did, the more it seems that Cybercrime is spread out all over the place because it's convenient for one part of its job, namely offering computer support to the Field Teams. However, for bigger jobs, terror threats, major cyber-attacks, they all work together as one team, reporting to, apparently, him.

"I think I might be the fourth or fifth highest ranked guy at NCIS. You answer to Leon because you're in DC. I could be based out of Los Angeles, and I'd still answer directly to Leon."

She smiles widely at that. "So, what does think mean?"

"I'm not entirely sure if I am or not. I mean, when I told Vance I could do the job, I meant I could run the DC branch."

"Do you want to run Cybercrime?"

"If I'm right, I'm going to have to. Not like I can head up and say, 'Oops.'"

She giggles at that, too. "Obviously… I mean, assuming you're right, Vance thinks you're up for it. So, how do you intend to find out for sure?"

"Money hits the bank in a week. If it's a lot more than you make, that'll be a hint."

She laughs again. "Yeah, that would."

"And, at least now, I'm sending emails to the other Team Leaders… Speaking of hints, there's one, they all have Team Leader as a title… Anyway, the letters are kind of vague, but basically… I'm assuming…" He cringes at that. Assuming got him here, and he's hoping it doesn't bite him too hard. "That I'm the guy in charge."

"Well, if you aren't, who is?"

"I thought it was like Tony. You know, report to your Office Director. But, the more I read up, the
more it looks like that's not how it works."

She sips her drink, smiling at him. "So… what are you going to do with all your new power, Director McGee? I mean, there's, what, Leon, Craig, Operations Director, who handles all of the field teams, and then, what, you?"

"I think so," he says with a slow nod. "Operations… What's his name?"

"Severin."

"And, God, he's not at the Navy Yard, right? He's based out of where…?"

"Okinawa last I heard. Craig handles all the politicking and Severin handles the Office Directors."

"And I've got the Cybercrime teams reporting to me. So… yeah… I think it's Leon, Craig, Severin, and then… me."

She laughs again. "Youngest department head in NCIS history, by accident. Do you think Leon has any clue that you didn't know what you were asking for?"

Tim shrugs. "He looked really amused when I handed in my Special Agent stuff, but I haven't talked to him since."

"Bet he's going to want to check in soon."

"Probably."

She squeezes his hand. "You can do it, you know that, right? And you're going to be brilliant at it."

He gives her a lopsided, self-depreciating smile. "Yeah."

Thursday afternoon he sees Manner get up, paper in hand, walk a few steps, and then turn around and sit back down three times.

Each time he sits back down, he works on his computer a few more minutes, stares off into space, taps his fingers a bit, picks the paper back up, and then repeats the standing up, taking a few steps, and then sitting back down again.

The fifth time he does it, he's half-way across the basement before he starts to turn around, which was when he notices Tim is watching, so he squares his shoulders and heads to his office door.

It's open. (Tim's figuring that's going to be true a lot.) But Manner stops at the door, waiting to be waved in.

"You resigning?" Tim asks, waving him in, nodding at the door so Manner knows to shut it.

Manner bristles. If he asked right, (and he's not sure if he did) there was just enough challenge in his voice to make Manner want to stay and prove that he can do this job. If he did it right, (and once again, Tim's not sure he did. Gibbs would have gotten it right. Tony definitely would have gotten it right, but he's not Tony or Gibbs,) that voice would have indicated that he thinks Manner is up for playing the role of Scotty, and it's just a matter of if he's got the balls to step up and do it.

Manner sits down, holding his letter, not answering. Finally he says, "I can do the job."

Tim nods. "I never said you couldn't. I've never thought you couldn't. I know you can do it. You
graduated fourth in your class at CMU. You've got over-the-moon recommendations from your professors. You passed my tests and tracked me down. Once upon a time, you were a creative worker, able to dissect problems at a glance and come at them in directions no one expected. Somehow, in the ten years between then and now, you got in a rut. So, it's not about can; I know you can. It's about will.

"Will you do the job? Will you put the hours in? Will you get out of this bureaucrat mindset and become a computer guy again? Will you be a cop? If you want to do that, I've got a job for you. If not, then it's best we part ways now, before I'm no longer willing to give you a glowing review."

Manner thinks about that for a moment, then stands up, doesn't hand over the piece of paper in his hand, and heads back to his desk.

Tim's feeling like that's a victory. Then, seeing them all working away, he goes back to tweaking his case triage system. They noticed some bugs in it yesterday, and he wants it fixed fast.

After all, if he really is Director of Cybercrime, that means he can roll this out to the whole of NCIS. Assuming it works, (They'll test it in just the DC branch for a month or so, give DC's best and brightest a good chunk of time to break it in ways they'd never imagine on their own.) and assuming its better than the systems his other teams currently have (He jots a quick note to let them know what he's doing and see how they handle it, and what they want in a system for this sort of thing.) he'll have made a positive change for the whole system.

Might as well earn his pay. (Whatever it might be.)

One more thought hits as he's coding away. If he really is Director of Cybercrime, then there's no reason why he can't be sending his casework to whoever's best at it. If John in Reykjavik is the best guy for the job (even if the job is in Bogota) there's no reason, short of the need to get hold of the physical computer, for John not to do the job.

Tim gets back to programing, but he makes a note for himself, he's sending out an email to each of the Team Leaders, finding out exactly who works on each team, what they're best at, and building a database of who does what.

Once this system goes live, any casework that comes up will get triaged, diagnosed, and then whoever's best at this is going to get flagged. It's 2016, long distance communication is easy, so there's no reason to run Cyber cases like it's 1999.

Quitting time Thursday he's got his alpha version in play.

Team goes onto the intranet. They fill out a Cybercrime request form. Originally the form just included name, location, and a brief description area for what the problem was.

Now it still has all three of those things but includes bits like what sort of case this problem belongs to. Do they have a physical computer in custody. There are detailed directions for how to get said computer/phone/whatever it might be also onto their intranet (Yes, he knows he's got to build a safe haven for that so that you can't infect the whole damn system that way.) so that the tech in question can crack into it right away instead of having to wait for the field team to get moving on it. What sort of information is the field team trying to get. All of that's on the intake form now.

He's got the basic triage up and ready: Terror, Kidnapping, Murder threat, Rape, Assault, Murder, Theft, Drugs, Misc. (There are many things that are technically illegal in the Navy and Marines that Tim has no interest at all in having his guys slogging through computer logs working on. For
example, inappropriate fraternization cases will be dealt with shortly after Hell freezes over, or every single other case on the docket is clear.) So that the jobs should show up in the queue based on what sort of case they're for.

He's got a keyword database up and running for the tech who will do the diagnostic. S/he'll read through, maybe get onto the computer, mess around a bit, and then keyword it. He's also got his twelve techs sorted by keyword as well.

So, if this works the way he hopes it will, jobs will come in, they'll get sorted, the next available tech will diagnose, and once she's done, the program will send an email to the three techs that matched the most keywords.

He sets it live, and sends out a last email of the day letting them know it was up and to each spend an hour messing with it tomorrow.

And then he heads to Abby.

They're halfway home when she asks, "Did you get to talk to Jimmy or Breena today?"

"No. Just a few second to ask if Jimmy wanted to do lunch with us. Why?"

She shakes her head a bit. "Tried to call Breena today, but she let it go to voicemail."

"Okay…" He's still not getting it.

"It's the seventh, Tim."

And then he did get it. "Oh." He winces, feeling the dull ache of it. Better off not having remembered.

"Yeah. Ducky dropped off samples for us today, so I'm guessing Jimmy's feeling pretty low today, probably pretty anti-social, too."

"I'll stop in early tomorrow, make sure to get to Autopsy. Just, give him a hug or something."

She nods at that. "If the case is wrapped in time, I know Ziva's got something planned for tomorrow's Shabbos, in remembrance."

"Okay." For the first time all day, Tim realizes that it's January 7th, which means this time a year ago Jimmy and Breena were going through the torture of delivering a stillborn baby.
Tim got in early on Friday, but not, today, for the job. He wants to head to Autopsy before going to his own office.

And once he gets there, he sees what he's expecting, Jimmy and Ducky, working away. Apparently they aren't done with yesterday's hot case, because they're working on an actual body.

It's probably a horrible thing, but he's glad there's a case. Glad that there's something besides paperwork for Jimmy today.

He doesn't want to interrupt them, and assuming all goes well, Shabbos is on for tonight, with a special yahrzeit celebration… remembrance… He's not sure what all that entails, but… It's been a year since Jon died, and they need to do something for it.

He heads in for a moment, squeezes Jimmy's shoulder, he looks over to Tim and nods, knowing why he's here. They don't need to say anything. Ducky nods at him too, looking pleased that he came in.

"Lunch?" Tim asks.

"If we've got time," Jimmy answers. "I'll text."

"Okay."

They'd wrapped up the autopsy, consulted with Tony, and were working on the paperwork. Jimmy's filling forms out with a vengeance.

Ducky's been keeping track of the time. It's getting onto lunch. He puts his own pen down, and gently touches Jimmy's forearm. "Do you want to get lunch out? Text Timothy, take a quiet afternoon, go home early? There's nothing here that I can't handle on my own."

"I don't know."

"It's fine if you want to work through. It's fine if you want to go home. Commander Breen," their current guest, "does not need both of us here."

Jimmy nods, he knows that. He knows that right now, whatever he and Breena need, they'll support. He takes his glasses off and squeezes the bridge of his nose, then rubs his eyes.

"I had the four AM feed this morning." Ducky squeezes his hand, knowing that'd be the acid hour. "I fed Anna her bottle, told her about her older brother. Managed to not turn into a complete bawling mess. But I couldn't put her back in her crib when she was done. Held onto her until it was time to give her to Breena for her next feed."

Ducky nods along with that.

"Not sure I want to do Shabbos tonight. I know Ziva's got… something, planned, but…"

"Ziva will understand if you'd rather be alone."

"Yeah…" Jimmy sighs. "I know. I know they all will. I think Breena wants to get out of the house."

"What do you want?"
Jimmy shakes his head, not saying the jumbled thoughts of how much he had wanted Jon, wanted him strong and healthy, wanted to never have even imagined all of this pain, but if that had happened, they wouldn't have Anna, and his beautiful girl wouldn't be here and... And Jon would have been about eight months old now, he'd be round and plump and grabbing for things with a big, drool-y two tooth smile, and maybe thinking about starting to crawl soon, or not, Molly didn't crawl until she was a year old. And Anna's a month old, and she's tiny and sweet and perfect and... He doesn't know how to sort out the grief for the life that didn't happen, or deal with the tinge of guilt for feeling that while looking at the life that did. "Tomorrow..." He takes a breath, and says, with a sad smile, "I want tomorrow."

Ducky smiles kindly at him. "Tomorrow is the one thing I can assure you will happen."

"Yeah." He pulls out his cell. "You really good with the paperwork?"

"I am fine, Jimmy. I'm here to answer whatever questions Anthony or Jethro may come up with, and any forms I do not get filled out will still be here on Monday, waiting for us. Go. Have a good lunch. Spend some time with your girls."

Jimmy nods, flashing a text to Tim, and heading down to Cybercrime.

Tim's phone buzzes and he sees, Lunch?

Yes!

Good, I'm in halfway down to you. Abby?

Already checked, got trace coming out of her ears. We're bringing her something to munch while she works.

"Okay."

Tim looks up and sees Jimmy standing at his door. "You weren't kidding about halfway down."

Jimmy shakes his head. "Nope." He steps in and looks around. "Nice."

It's still pretty empty. There's nothing but a few pictures on the book shelves for example, and his desk has three monitors, a keyboard, and a few more pictures, but otherwise it's clean. He notices that, a perfectly clean expanse of matte black, where something else is supposed to be. No phone. "One sec." Tim types a quick note to himself to get a phone down here, then realizes he doesn't have any office supplies either, and needs to get them, too. "Okay. Just noticed I don't have a phone."

Jimmy nods dryly at that. "It's a really nice office. You know, Vance is the only person I know here who has his own office. Abby's got her desk, but that's also work space and the other LabRats use it, and Ducky and I share a desk, too, but no one's got an actual office."

Tim gets up. "You know, I've got a kind of funny story about that."

Jimmy looks relieved and then curious. "Good, I could use some funny stories."

Tim smiles at him, and squeezes his shoulder. "You'll like this one." They head out, and Tim closes the door to his office, and calls out to the nearest Minion. "Dume, I'm out for lunch. I've got my phone on. Anyone needs me, give a call."

"Back soon?"
Tim looks at Jimmy, can see the sadness behind his eyes. "Not more than two hours. I've almost got the scheduling program done again, Monday, everyone takes a crack at it, then I'll run through it again and we'll begin live testing."

"Got it, Boss."

"Good."

They're in the elevator when Jimmy asks, "Does it feel weird?"

"Hm?"

"Them calling you 'Boss.' I mean, that's Gibbs, right?"

"Actually, it's a lot less weird than I was expecting it to be. I thought it would feel kind of fake, but…” Tim shakes his head. "Nope."

Jimmy smiles at that, for a second, and then it falls from his face.

"How are you doing?"

Jimmy shrugs. "I've had better days. Yesterday was hard. Today's not any easier. Hopefully tomorrow…"

Tim nods. "Early bootcamp this week?"

"No." Jimmy shakes his head. "I don't want to fight. I'm not angry. Just sad."

"Okay."

"So, tell me your funny story about having an office."

Tim smiles, and then says, "So… Um… Yeah… I might be the fourth highest ranked guy at NCIS."

Jimmy snorts a laugh at that, sees Tim's serious, and then raises his eyebrows. "Is this where I say, 'I'm out of it for a little while and everyone's getting delusions of grandeur?'"

Tim sighs and laughs quietly. "You might. Vance has asked me to come up and chat with him this afternoon, so I'll find out for sure then, but… So, yeah, I'm the Director of Cybercrime."

"Well, yeah, that's on your nametag."

"Uh huh. And the door. You know, the door, of my office, the kind of office no one else has…”

Jimmy nods, and Tim sees it hit him that he might actually be right about this as a slow smile spreads across his face.

"Okay, so, I've been doing some checking and…” Tim tells Jimmy about what he's noticed, and by the time the elevator doors were opening, Jimmy was laughing.

Tim gets back from lunch, drops food off for Abby, and then heads back to spend another hour beating the new scheduling system into submission before having his chat with Vance.

He's almost nervous about talking to Vance. Almost. Like, there's the idea that he should be nervous, especially because he's not entirely sure what the hell his job is, but… He's not actually feeling
nervous.

It's sort of like how, when he got to a break point in the code, he just fired off an email to all of his (and he's thinking of them as his) Team Leaders, describing what the new system should do, and how he wants to know who each team member is, what they specialize in, and build a database so that the best person (people) for the job gets the job, no matter where the job is. He didn't think about it. He didn't worry about it. He just fired it off, and within an hour started getting emails back with ideas for how to make the system better and all the information he asked for.

If there's one thing true about Tim McGee, it's that he's never had any problem seeing what an issue is and taking care of it. Sure, in the past, he's felt nervous about doing things he hadn't been specifically told to do, but that's never stopped him from doing it. And now... he's just not feeling that anymore.

It's almost like the last year burned the nervous out of him. He almost feels like he's gotten to the point where he no longer has the capacity for nervous (at least, about the job.)

As soon as he gets to Vance's office, Vance asks, "How's it going?"

"It's going," he says, sitting in the chair Vance nods at.

Vance's eyes narrow very slightly, and Tim adds, "I think it's going well. They don't all love me; one of them has resigned already, but I've got her replacement starting week after next. We're moving toward being an actual team and getting some real work done." He fills Vance in on his job software, and how he's hoping to have a testing version ready by start of work on Tuesday. Vance looks pleased by this. He looks very pleased when Tim starts telling him about how once he's gotten it working properly, he'll roll it out across NCIS and start assigning jobs by specialty instead of geography. Vance is even more pleased as he explains how much he think that'll speed up computer work for the Field Teams.

Vance's satisfied smile as he tells him about the job software plans could be a hint that, yes, he's Director of Cybercrime and that this is indeed under his job description. Or it could just be the fact that Vance will take any good idea that makes his operation work better, no matter where it comes from.

Vance jots a quick note on the new job system and then says, "You rearranged the basement."

Tim nods, wondering if Vance headed down there to take a look at what he had done. "Better workflow. They can talk to each other without having to deal with walls. They weren't working as a team before because they were walled off in their own little cubbies. Now we've got a space in the middle for breaking down what we're doing, who's doing what, why, and how. Once I get the stuff delivered, we'll have a conference area in the middle, space to plan our jobs out, who's doing what, and with any luck, some room for down time, too."

Leon nods. He was looking enthusiastic until Tim got to down time. He's not sure about that, but he's also not arguing about it. "Physical plant is fussing because you changed the light bulbs on your own."

Tim shrugs. The guy he spoke to did seem kind of pissy about the idea that Tim might actually attempt to change his own light bulbs, but, degree in biomedical engineering, he's feeling competent to handle light bulbs. (Turns out Manner was full of shit about the heat thing. It might be a degree or two warmer down there, but it's not sweltering. Still, the LEDs are cooler and only need to be replaced every twenty-five years or so, that sounds pretty appealing to him.) "Physical plant told me they couldn't get new bulbs in for three weeks. So while the Minions were rearranging, I put in new
Leon raises his eyebrow at 'Minions' and then shakes his head, and gets to why he brought it up, "Any non-union labor on that sort of thing invalidates our liability insurance."

"No. You putting them in caused the problem, taking them out doesn't fix it. But in three weeks Physical Plant will show up with the union electrician and he'll 'inspect' the job you did, and that will make it all better."

Tim, by sheer force of will alone, does not roll his eyes. However, there's a lot of skepticism and annoyance as he says, "We need an electrician for light bulbs?"

"Welcome to management," Leon says dryly.

"But I can rearrange my floor plan?"

"Technically, you should have waited for the electrician to do all the plugging and unplugging, as well, but if you do that, it'll be July before they get a full free day to do it all. He'll be back in June to 'inspect' your job of plugging and unplugging, as well."

"I understand you took them out of the basement for target practice."

"Yes." "Why?" Leon looks curious about that. Like it's nothing he ever expected Tim to even think of, let alone do.

"I wanted to see what they'd do if I gave them something they'd never done before. If you dropped me in charge of a new field team, I probably would have made them knit or something."

Leon smiles dryly at that image. "And was it informative?"

"Yes. Most of them were able to roll with it. Might have thought it was silly, but they loaded up, listened to instructions, worked on it, and had a good time. Four of them dug in and balked. As I said, I've already gotten one of them to resign. At least three more of them aren't staying. There's a fourth I'm not sure about. She's great with a computer, and I think just too shy to really function with all of those people staring at her. I want to see what Ngyn will do if I toss her a loop when she's not on display. I can work with shy. Stubborn and unwilling to bend is a different story all together."

"And who are you thinking needs to go?"

Tim grabs his phone and sends Vance their CVs.

"What would you suggest happen to them?"
"Forensic accounting?" Tim shrugs. They have lots of jobs that need computer skills. Part of the issue is he can't really fire them. It's almost impossible to get rid of a Federal Employee, so he can use all of the tools at his disposal to make them want to resign, but he can't out and out boot them. He can, possibly, reassign them, though. "Tech support? HR? Web development? See if the IRS can use them? Somewhere decent computer skills are necessary, but the ability to adapt on the fly isn't. If we're going to track down the bad guys we need to be faster and better than they are. Just sheer computer skill isn't enough, we need imagination, too. We're not just going to think outside the box. We're going to be the guys who build the box so other guys can think in it."

"Okay." Leon seems to like that idea. He's flipping through the CVs Tim's given him.

"I need to know how young I can hire," Tim asks. This is something he's been thinking about for a while. Currently all Federal jobs on their level require a college degree. But… for the kind of talent he wants a college degree means those guys are going to be VERY expensive.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm hoping to have four open desks soon. I've got one new tech on the way, and I've got ideas for the kind of people I want on the other three. I currently can't hire without a college degree, but I figure if you wave that, I can. So, if I can grab a seventeen-year-old on his way to MIT, can I have him?"

Leon just stares at him for a moment. "You're going to headhunt babies?"

"If I can. The seventeen-year-old I want will be going for millions by the time he's twenty-one. Even if I could pay based on merit, I can't win in a bidding war against Stanford, let alone Facebook or Google. I don't have the budget for that, but if I can get him early, I can train him to cover what he might miss by skipping the traditional four-year-school, and hopefully get him for a fraction of the cost."

Leon's still staring at him.

Tim lets him in on his logic for this. "They can enlist at seventeen. We'll let them work on a nuclear submarine at seventeen. I don't think I've got anything hotter than that under my umbrella."

"Seventeen, with parental permission," Vance says slowly, realizing that Tim's not just serious, but has given this some real thought.

"If I can get this hypothetical teenage hacker's parents to go for it, can I hire him?"

"Check with legal, if they say you can, sure."

"Good."

Vance looks at his phone, seeming to re-read the guys Tim wants out. "Why Hepple? According to your reports he was always in the middle on all of his scores."

Tim shrugs. "He is. He's not bad at all, but… he's a mainframe specialist. Apparently we hired him right out of Cal-Tech in '88."

"And…"

"And we don't have a mainframe. We didn't have a mainframe the first time I was in Cybercrime. No one has a mainframe anymore. He's not a field agent, so I can't age him out. Back in '13, when he hit twenty-five years in, Jenner was suggesting that maybe retirement would look good, but no dice."
He's not bad at any of the stuff we do, but he's not good either. And this isn't the team for mediocre. I can't fire him, no cause. He's on time, muddles through his work, and if, for some reason, we ever end up having to deal with a mainframe again, he'll be worth his weight in gold, but... It's like having a mimeograph tech on staff. Best I can hope for now is that he doesn't like the hours I give him, and he decides retirement is looking good."

"Okay. Anything else?"

Tim's been thinking about this for a bit, but had been planning on waiting more than a week into it, but Vance is asking... Tim thinks for a second more, this is a good test. The Director of Cybercrime can make this decision for himself. Navy Yard Team Leader needs to ask permission. So... "I'm dropping the dress code."

Leon lifts his eyebrows, but doesn't challenge his right to do so.

Tim explains his thinking. "I can't offer them better pay. I can't give them better benefits. My hands are tied on both of those. I will move heaven and earth to get them the best team, and we will find the most interesting cases, and I'm going to do everything I can to make it the best work environment. I've got plans for the environment, budget permitting, but step one is making this look like a place where real computer guys work."

"Uh huh." Vance keep staring at him. "We got you on that salary and benefits."

"As a field agent. You couldn't have afforded me as a computer specialist. If Armstrong hadn't promised me that I wouldn't be chained to a computer here, I would have gone with the CIA; they offered more money, a car, and would have paid for my doctorate as long as I had been willing to get that doctorate overseas and report back about what I noticed while I did it."

That was something Vance hadn't known. He looks at Tim for a long minute, working on actually, really seeing him, and then says, "You took a pay cut so people could shoot at you?"

"Yes."

Vance shakes his head, looking surprised and amused. "You have to write the code up, and it's got to be in line with the sexual harassment regs."

"Thanks."

Vance spends another minute staring at him, and then a smile spreads across his face, "So, now that you've been on it for a week, is the job about what you expected?"

Tim sees the smile; it's an awfully smug sort of look. Now's the real acid test, if he actually is as highly ranked as he thinks he is, he can say this to Vance. "You've got a really sick sense of humor, Leon."

Leon laughs at that. "My kids say that about me all the time. Congratulations again, Director McGee."

Three hours later Vance was CCed on an email that went out to all of the Minions: (A similar one went to all of his Team Leaders, updating them on the Navy Yard change, and letting them know that whatever level of dress code they deemed appropriate for their own teams was fine with him. Tim's not going to mess with his Team Leaders until he's got a much better idea of what's actually going on out there.)
As of 1/11/16 the dress code for Navy Yard Cybercrime will relax.

Feel free to wear whatever you are comfortable in, keeping a few things in mind:

1. Are all of the bits of you you really wouldn't want a bad sunburn on covered? No? Go put more clothing on.

2. If the idea of getting a tattoo/piercing there hurts so bad you wince, it better be covered with clothing.

3. If the idea of getting a tattoo/piercing there hurts so bad I wince, it better be covered with clothing.

4. Is the clothing you're covering those parts with so sheer/transparent I can see them through it? Put more layers on until they're invisible.

5. If there is anything written on said item of clothing that you don't want your hyper-vigilant, ultra-feminist grandma to see, don't wear it to work.

6. If you do not have a hyper-vigilant, ultra-feminist grandma to school you on what's appropriate, I will lend you mine.

7. If it is violent or gory or would give a small child nightmares, do not wear it to work. Come on guys, you know this.

8. I do not want to see your underwear. Doesn't matter how snazzy it is, it stays under your clothing.

9. If there is a chance I may mistake your outerwear for underwear, it better be hidden under more outerwear.

10. If words printed on it would show up in George Carlin's Seven Words You Can't Say on TV (Google it) act, don't wear it to work.

11. If you consider it appropriate for a hot date out at a club, don't wear it to work.

12. If you are unsure as to whether or not it's appropriate for work, it's not.

13. That said, non-office-casual makeup, piercings, tattoos, facial hair, hats, shoes, boots, jewelry, and items of clothing are fine in the dungeon. Just don't be a twit about it, and try not to make your co-workers uncomfortable.

14. For court appearances, you will be dressed exactly how the legal beagles tell you to dress. Which will likely be conservative, upright, and professional. This means you will own at least one outfit of clothing that makes you look conservative, upright, and professional. (If this is a concept you are unsure about, the legal beagles will be happy to help. But, quick rule of thumb: Navy suit, white button down, black shoes. If you're a guy: maroon tie, good watch. If you're a woman: nude pantyhose and pumps. Boring makeup. No jewelry beyond watch and or wedding/engagement ring.) You will wear this outfit often enough so that you can fake looking comfortable in it if you are not genuinely comfortable. You will also own and know how to use whatever camouflage makeup is necessary to cover whatever needs to be covered so that you look like you just stepped out of a Brooks Brother's catalogue.

15. Speaking of uncomfortable, that is what anyone who screws this up so badly I end up having Vance decide he needs to chat with me about this is going to be.

Forward this back to me to show you've received it and understand the terms.
See you Monday,

McGee

Vance sighs, closes his email, closes his eyes and rubs his forehead. He knew Cybercrime was stagnating. He knew it was falling further and further behind where he needed it to be. He knows he put McGee in charge because he'd shake it up.

Somehow though, he hadn't expected this much shaking up. Not this soon. He figured it'd be at least a month before Tim got comfortable enough to start really swapping things up.

And right now, he's really hoping that McGee's right, and this is what needs to happen to get it to where he wants it. He's certainly intrigued with the hiring younger workers. He's seen the stats, knows that less than 10% of the Federal workforce is under 30 and that more than 25% is about to retire. He knows for NCIS those numbers are even worse, fewer than 5% under 30, more than 35% retiring in the next five years.

If this scheduling thing he's talking about works, that would be fantastic. He has gotten irate calls when someone's been sitting on a hot case waiting around for Cybercrime to do its job.

He thinks about this, and finally comes up with why this feels so off. This is Gibbs... Junior... his upfront, no bullshit, no excuses style, but with actual power. Gibbs as a Team Leader is a great thing, Gibbs as a Department Head is terrifying.

Vance blows out a breath, hoping he made the right call, and then he forwards the email to Gibbs with: Your boy in action in the subject line.

Two minutes later, Gibbs is staring at his computer screen, smiling, chuckling quietly, very glad to see Tim putting his mark on Cybercrime.

He'd been hoping to get a chance to talk with Tim, see how he was liking running a team, but between Tim on full work mode with his new team, and them on a hot case, it hasn't happened.

With any luck he'll get to see him tomorrow or the next day. Gibbs can already feel that tonight is off the menu. They aren't breaking this before tomorrow morning at the earliest.

Tim's wrapping up for the day. He's got a beta(ish) version of the job allocating software in the can, and on Monday, the Minions'll start playing with it again.

He heads up to Abby, and as he heads in, he notices that all four of them are in there, and they're all still working.

No music, they've all got earbuds in, listening to their own stuff. But he knows the feel of this, the sort of energy that goes with the Lab humming away.

Abby looks up from her pipettes, and smiles at him. She's in full on lab protection gear, so is the other three, so he hangs back and waits for her to take her earbuds out.

"Not quitting time for you, is it?"

She shakes her head.

"They're all working away upstairs, aren't they?"
She nods at that, too. "Gibbs was in three minutes ago for an update. I think Tony and Ziva are heading to Baltimore. Draga's still digging through financials, and Gibbs has a suspect he's about to break with what we just gave him."

Tim nods. "Okay." He knows Jimmy went home after lunch. "I guess I'll pick up some food and Kelly and head over to Jimmy's."

"Probably a good plan. Make sure to give both of them kisses from me."

"How about hugs?"

She quickly switches to signing, which he appreciates once he got the message. Jimmy kissed you when you needed it.

Jimmy's not on the verge of a panic attack, does not need to be shocked out of anything, and getting kissed by me, even if it is "from you" isn't going to do much to cheer him up.

It'll perk up Breena.

Tim shakes his head, no.

The looks she's giving him indicates that she thinks that's BS, but isn't going to argue it. "Fine, hugs. I'll get home when I can."

He kisses the nape of her neck. He'd like to do more than that, but she is covered in protective gear, so he doesn't want to risk getting whatever it is she's messing with on his skin by going in for a hug or a real kiss.

He's in the parking lot, texting Jimmy and Breena, seeing what they want to do for dinner, when it hits him that a whole week went by, with a hot case, and beyond chatting with Abby and Jimmy about what they were up to, he was just out of it.

He didn't feel any need to go up. There wasn't any sort of itchiness or wondering. He wasn't craving the mystery and didn't feel any need to head upstairs and make sure Draga was doing his job right.

In fact, other than a sort of missing his family, because besides Jimmy and Abby (and Ducky for a second), he hasn't seen any of them since Sunday, he's not feeling any craving for his old life, at all.

And he's honestly not sure if he's okay with that.

Not sure if switching over that fast, that completely means this is good, that he was ready, more than ready for a new job, or if this is his usual routine and he's just got his feelings so deeply buried under making sure he's doing the job right that he can't feel them.

He gets a text back from Breena, saying they're in the mood for Japanese, and right now, he can contemplate his emotional interior, or grab his baby girl, a bunch of sushi, and spend a few hours trying to cheer up his hurting friends.

Doesn't even take a tenth of a second for him to know what he's going to do.

Place the order, go crazy and splurge, it's on me. (Has Jimmy told you the story that goes with that?) I'll pick it up. See you soon.
Monday Morning

On Monday, first day of the twenty-four hour shifts, Tim knows he's heading in early and leaving late.

He got in at 04:00, three quarters asleep, but determined to fake awake. He's the Boss, so sure, he doesn't have to work every shift, but he's at least got to be willing to show up for them on occasion.

He's not surprised to see that Ngyn chose a 22:00 to 06:00 shift. When he gets in at four, it's just her and Connon, and everything is awfully quiet.

He heads to the coffee machine, grabs a cup, pops in a Black Death Kcup. (Of course they make Kcups, and as Boss he's thinking that he might begin to appreciate the wonder that is super dark, ultra-caffeinated coffee. It wanders through his sleepy mind that Abby may be pregnant again, and if she is, this week's coffee might be his last caffeine for quite a while… Oh well, he'll buy some toothpicks to prop his eyelids open if necessary.) He winces as he drinks, the stuff tastes awful, but it's got a kick, so his heart speeds up and the sleepiness vanishes.

"Report?" he says, cup in hand, looking at his two overnight techs.

"All quiet, Boss," Connon replies. "My notes on the new job system are in your inbox."

Tim nods. "Ngyn?"

She nods back at him. "Wrapping up Trevet's case so he's free for paperwork database construction."

"Good."

"You need me; I'm in my office."

They both nod, and get back to what they were doing.

For the first hour, he's working on waking up, and reading through Jenner's files on… pretty much everything. He's got a good idea of how to be a Team Leader, and obviously, he's got some ideas on tap for how to change NCIS Cybercrime operations to streamline things, but there's got to be more to the job of Director of Cybercrime than that.

And there is.

His field teams work pretty much on their own most of the time. As adjuncts to the in-the-Field-Teams, (he really needs some new terms for this) they usually work in house on local issues. And for that, they've got almost complete autonomy. Each Team Leader is in charge of that.

It's bigger issues where they all work with him. Terrorism is one of NCIS's big concerns, and when they are working on Cybercrime Terror issues, the whole department works together, under him. Apparently, for those sorts of cases, Jenner did use a system similar to what he's setting up for the run of the mill cases. Whoever was best at it, no matter where they were, got set on the job.

(Though the travel vouchers seem to show that he was actually sending techs to… here apparently… to do the work. Tim's not loving that. Traveling is a waste of time and money unless there's an actual, physical computer in play, and if there is, the techs should go to it.)
In the second hour, when he's feeling a bit more alert, he heads over to Ngyn's cubicle. Like last
time, she's bopping away, fingers moving fast, and once again, she's on paperwork, wrap up for
Trevet's case from the looks of it.

"Hi."

She jerks a little at that, and looks back at him, "Hi." She's got that nervous, am I in trouble? look on
her face.

"So…" He's not entirely sure how to get into this. "I'm wondering… Is it that you prefer to work
alone because you're shy, or because you're quite a bit better than the other techs down here and
don't like explaining what you're doing and why?" He's fairly sure both of those things are true about
her, but he's also sure that this group needs to be able to work as a team, which means she can't be
constantly hiding out.

Ngyn blushes scarlet from her forehead to her throat, but doesn't say anything.

"Whichever, or both, it's okay." He's talking quietly. Connon's also got earbuds in, and is on the
other side of the conference area, but he doesn't want a shot of him listening in. "I've got first-hand
experience in both."

"You're shy?" she doesn't look like she believes that.

"My wife's referred to me as the nervous, little introvert on occasion."

Her eyebrows shoot up at that and she looks like she might want to laugh. He nods and smiles.

"So, I really do get it. But I also get that no matter how good you are, and you are good, this isn't
going to be a place for Lone Ranger work styles. We're going to be working with each other here."

She's looks pleased at the praise and nervous about the Lone Ranger bit.

"So, what can we do to make this work for you? I want you to stay. I don't want you having a
nervous breakdown because working here is so uncomfortable for you. How can we get you teamed
up but still alone enough that you don't feel overwhelmed?"

She thinks about it. "This…" she looks around indicating that she's here pretty much on her own,
"helps. And, it's easier to do it online. Just words on a screen."

Tim nods at that, agreeing. "Yeah, it is. Love chat boxes."

She nods, looking eager.

"As long as you've got this shift, it probably will be a lot of email and chat box work."

She looks reassured by that.

"But there will still be times when the other best person for the job is in this room with you and you
will need to physically talk to them, or times when you and whoever will need to schedule things so
you're in the same place at the same time so you can brainstorm together. So, can you go over and
actually talk to someone about a job? You've got great skills; you've got lots of ideas; I'm sure that if
you lead a team on a job, that job will be well done. But you've got to step up and talk."

She closes her eyes and bites her lip. It feels a little bizarre to see it from the other side, because
obviously, Tim knows what it's like to be on the closed-eyes-and-biting-lip side of the equation.
Then she nods.

He smiles. "Good. Okay, I'll let you get back to it."

She nods again.

At 07:00, when Connon leaves, and his next shift starts heading in, he starts to see his change in dress code coming into play. (Tim's planning on shifting his own wardrobe, some, lead by example and all. He's still debating exactly what that'll mean; he wants to make sure the rest of them know it's okay to be whatever form of possible counter culture they may, or may not, be, but at the same time he's the Director of Cybercrime… Either way, today it's a moot point, he's going to wait for a morning where he's awake enough to actually know what he's putting on.) Manner and Hepple are still in office casual. That's probably what they're genuinely comfortable in. But, he's also seeing more jeans, more t-shirts, some flannel button downs, a knit cap and Dr. Who scarf, and several members of both sexes with non-standard nail polish. Two of the male Minions apparently decided shaving was overrated.

From the looks of it, this is the group that most closely matches him. Middle aged, kids at home, spouses they want to see regularly, so they're trying to pretty much match in school hours, 08:00 to 17:00, 09:00 to 18:00, something like that.

He heads out, chats with everyone for a minute or two, checking in on how the new jobs are going, and notices that this is starting to look more and more like a place where actual computer people work.

He smiles at that.

12:00. You up for some lunch? When he gets yesses back from the team upstairs, he heads up to see what they've been doing for the last week.

16:00, the next wave of Minions begins heading in. He's guessing the ones who opt to start around now are his children of the night. He sees one outfit Abby would envy, a nose ring, more jeans and t-shirts, but not a single twinset or polo shirt in sight.

He's also noticing this is the shift his younger workers are on. That makes some sense to him. The part of the crew with no kids is showing up now.

He's got a feeling these are the guys who aren't really even moving before 17:00 if they get to set their own schedules. Patil, for example, certainly looks perkier rolling in at 18:00, ripped jeans, combat boots, a black t-shirt and black leather jacket, than he's ever seen him before.

And as they all head in, one more thing hits him, if he can get this job scheduling thing actually working for all of Cybercrime, it won't matter anymore when anyone is in the office, because he'll have the whole crew, worldwide, working, which means someone will always be available.

That feels pretty good.

So, one more cup of Black Death in his system, he heads back to his computer to read over the notes he's gotten from the Minions who've already taken a stab at his new system, and begins to make changes.
On Monday morning, Gibbs whacks his alarm clock three minutes before it went off. He's done this every morning for the last three years. (Since he started sleeping in his bed again.) He's not even sure, why, beyond habit, that he still sets the damn thing every night, but he does.

Hit the head, brush teeth, put on jammies, set alarm, and go to sleep. That's how every day ends for him.

And, like usual, in full-on habit mode, he's starting off his morning.

Whack alarm, lay in bed for two minutes, get up, hit the head, wander downstairs, heat water, put coffee in the French press, make coffee, stand around kitchen staring into space. (He's not good for much beyond cursing pre-coffee.) drink some coffee, start to feel vaguely human, debate making breakfast for himself, (he used to go visit Elaine three out of four days, but back when he decided he was going to get into better shape, he cut that down to two out of five, and these days at least one of those mornings will be Sunday) apply frying pan to heat, and eggs to frying pan, oatmeal into the microwave, eat breakfast, drink more coffee.

Then exercise.

When he decided that he was going to get into better shape, the plan was start hitting the gym until he could find his abs again. He rapidly came to the conclusion that that was a huge waste of time. (Not the exercising, the getting there and back bit.) So, he'd eat breakfast, and then do his workout at home. (He even installed a chin-up bar in the doorway of the spare bedroom.) He does hit the gym some evenings, and with the kids at Bootcamp, but until he ripped his knee out, he was doing his Marine calisthenics routine every morning at home, followed by a three mile jog.

And then he ripped his knee up.

And then came physical therapy, which he's been doing every morning instead. Then Jimmy and Ziva added the stretching stuff, which, okay, it's hard. It's really hard. It's way harder than anything that doesn't involve moving fast or heavy weights has any business being. But he's doing it. Even though it's hard (and he thinks the positions look dumb as hell, if not a bit beyond that) because his knee does seem to be doing better for it, and his range of motion is getting better, and Jimmy's 'once you get running again' you'll injure yourself less often and you'll go faster, and there's absolutely nothing in your life that benefits from tight hips, back, glutes, or thighs, all makes a distressing amount of sense.

On top of it, the stretching stuff did seem to be good for keeping his weight down, too. Not as good as the running he'd been doing, but better than the nothing he was doing right after he hurt himself.

And somewhere along the line Jimmy got him to explain what he'd been doing (Marine calisthenics circa 1976) and once he stopped shuddering, he re-wrote his whole exercise routine, modified to work with his steadily (but slowly) healing knee. And it's… effective.

He doesn't know why he feels like that should be a surprise. He's seen Jimmy naked. If there's a guy who actually knows how to do this stuff, it's Jimmy. But for whatever reason, the idea that Jimmy knows how to do stuff like this refuses to settle in his mind.

So, upon finishing up breakfast, he's starting with the stretches, twisting himself into every sort of pretzel he can think of, (and a few that, without help, he couldn't have) then comes the sit ups, and the push-ups (all of his weight on his good leg, ankle of the bum one resting on the ankle of the good one.) Something called planking (once again, one legged, though this time he holds the position and switches between the legs. When his left leg gets the all-clear he's supposed to start doing that with the push-ups too.) There's some sort of tricep thing. Pull ups. More stretches. Some sort of vastly
oversized rubber band is involved.

And he would tell you it's all pretty damn silly, except for the whole he's lost another three pounds this month and no longer needs to use his nipples to locate his pecs.

It's even possible that he may, at some point, in the next six months or so, if he keeps this up and doesn't eat like a maniac, locate his abs again.

Compared to what he does with himself at home, the exercises Dr. Klenn has him doing are a piece of cake.

And with any luck it's also the last time he's got to eat this particular cake.

He finishes his last squat, shows off, yet again, that he's got full range of weight bearing motion with his knee, and Klenn nods approvingly.

He puts up the MRI results on his computer and looks them over again.

"I think you're healed."

"Good."

"Doesn't mean I want you running marathons any time soon. That knee is always going to be a bit weaker than the right one. So, build it up gentle and easy before jumping into anything strenuous, but you're good for back in the field."

He thought he'd feel… happier… to hear that, but it's kind of flat.

Klenn also looks surprised to hear that. Gibbs has been breathing down his neck for how to get healed up as fast as possible, and this is two weeks earlier than he thought he'd be able to do it.

"This is good news."

"Yeah. I know it is. Just… Friday's my last day. And the likelihood they'll even let me out of the building between now and then is just about non-existent."

Klenn nods, nothing he can do about that. "Then at least you're starting retirement with all of you at full strength. Maybe it is time to start training for a marathon?"

"I don't like running." And he doesn't. He likes what running can get him, speed, endurance, the ability to eat whatever he likes.

"Then try ballroom dance. Whatever you like. Your knee's ready to ease into it."

Gibbs buckles his belt and nods. The problem is, while he's got some possible big plans, he's awfully short of day to day small stuff that he wants to do.

On Monday morning, Tony was feeling a bit apprehensive.

He could say to McGee that Abby had told him she was going to do unspeakable things to him if he got out of the building and got hurt, and that would be that.

But Gibbs isn't McGee, and the threat of bodily harm from the girls if he gets hurt is unlikely to keep Gibbs in line.
So, right now, the only thing he's hoping is that Gibbs won't get cleared for duty.

It's not that he thinks Gibbs isn't ready for duty, (even at a casual glance, it's clear that he's moving the way he's supposed to be moving again) or that he really believes the superstition, but… Okay, honestly… He's talked to Ziva a little about this, and he's a bit worried that Gibbs… doesn't have death wish per se, but that he might be less careful than he should.

That's probably it. Not that he'd be chasing any sort of end, but that fear of what's coming up, not wanting to have to deal with post-retirement life might make him just a hair more reckless, or a few seconds slower, or… just that he'd do something… not stupid, not the way he was back when Tony started working with him and he really didn't care if he woke up the next day or not, but just not as careful as he should be.

He gets in and finds Gibbs already at his desk, working his way through the never-ending slog of paperwork.

"Morning."

Gibbs nods to him and Ziva.

"How'd the doc's appointment go?"

Gibbs looks at Tony's desk, and Tony sees the filled out Fitness Eval. "You passed! Great!" Tony thinks he even managed to sound almost convincing on that.

"For all the good it'll do me." Gibbs not only didn't buy it, but the more he's been thinking about the whole last week thing, the more grumpy he's getting. "You going to let me out of the building this week?"

Tony sighs. Bear Gibbs has come to NCIS today. "Depends, are you going to do the job like Friday's your last day, or are you going to do the job like you know there's a kidnapping coming on Monday and you've got to be here to solve it?"

Gibbs doesn't glare at him, but he doesn't answer either. Tony gets the sense that he's not sure what the answer is.

Tony scoops up the eval, signs it, and puts it in the to-be-filed pile.

Draga came in five minutes later, coffees and treats in hand. "So, are we having a good morning?"

"Enough." Gibbs says as he takes the coffee from Draga, sounding a bit less Grizzly. "Thanks."

"No problem."

McGee heads up at lunchtime.

"Missing us already, Probie?" Tony asks.

"That's Director Probie, to you, Tony," Tim says with a sassy smile. The case that started on Thursday ran long, into early Sunday, so none of them have heard his news.

"Look at you, getting all high and mighty with your new position. Next thing we know, you're gonna want us to call you, sir."

Tim grins in response, looking forward to telling Tony what's really up. "Only you, Tony. Everyone
else calls me Boss or McGee. You're in luck though, I'm feeling generous in addition to high and mighty. So, food? I'm buying."


So, over lunch he gets caught up on their case, and then tells them about his first week down in the basement. At first he was just talking about what he was doing, moving things around, getting Manner beaten into submission.

"I think I've got him in the right place. Probably more friction in the future, I'm yanking him way out of his comfort zone, so I can't imagine it'll all be smooth sailing from here on out, but at least right now, he's working on proving he can do the job."

"Good for you, Tim," Tony says.

"I would have paid good money to have seen his face after you told him not to call you, Sir," Ziva adds.

Tim's smiling. "It was pretty funny. What I didn't know when I said that is that…" He wants to tell them, but there is a sort of embarrassed silliness that goes with this, so he fumbles a bit getting it out. "Yeah… Um… That actually is my title. That's probably what most of them were calling Jenner. Vance, Craig, Severin, McGee. I'm the Director of Cybercrime. All of Cybercrime. I've got… um… about one hundred and fifty people under me."

They stare at him, stunned. They'd been hearing about his plans, and what he was hoping to do, and how he understood the job: ie NCIS Navy Yard Cybercrime Team Leader for months. The idea that he'd have all of Cybercrime under him had never entered into those plans.

"What?" Tony asks, first one to get his words back. "Back up. Last Monday you were heading down to whip the DC Cybercrime Team into shape, and now you run the whole department?"

Tim nods. "Vance has a sick sense of humor. He knew what I was asking for, knew what I thought the job was, and decided that it'd be fun to sit back and see how long it would take me to figure out I had an entire division under my command."

Tony's got his mouth open, and is blinking at him, but finally says, "So, you weren't kidding? You honestly are Sir to us now?"

"Yeah. I mean, no, don't you dare go calling me Sir, but… yeah." Tim nods, grinning, feeling really cocky and happy.

Draga, who's sitting next to him, breaks into a big smile, shoves him gently with his shoulder, and says, "You are so paying for lunch from now on."

Tim laughs. "I can handle that."

"Director McGee," Ziva says, also smiling warmly. "Congratulations. Are you… okay with this?"

"Yeah. I am. Been there less than a week and I've got two projects cooking to roll out to the whole agency. I mean, it's a little overwhelming, but it feels right, too. I've got… so many more options than I thought I did. Like, you know you want to draw something, and you planned on having the eight crayon pack, and then you see you've got the 124 crayon pack. That's pretty awesome."
"Feels good?" Tony asks.

"Yeah, it really does. So many options, so many ideas, and I've got the power to do most of them. Can't change my own light bulbs, but..." he's shaking his head in wonder... "It's just really cool. Feels like every day I've got more ideas of what we're doing next, and I can do them. Like, okay... This hasn't left Cybercrime yet, haven't even mentioned it to Vance, so, you're not mentioning it, either, okay?" They all nod. "Good..." and he gets talking about the paperwork program he's got them working on.

As he's wrapping that up, Tim notices that Gibbs hasn't said anything, and Tim's wondering about that, but he sees the look, gentle, proud, satisfied, and knows that Gibbs is holding whatever it is he's got for when they're alone.

When they get up to head back to work, Tony hugs him, "My Probie's all grown up. Running his own department." He pets the back of Tim's head. His voice is teasing, but there's real pleasure and pride, as well. "So, you think I need to go check and make sure Vance isn't sitting around, waiting for me to figure out that I'm taking over for him?" Tony asks with a laugh.

"Depends, Tony, when you got your new ID, did it say Team Leader or Director of NCIS?"

Tony pulls it out, looks at it, and shakes his head. "God, damnit! I really need to read more carefully. This says, President of the United States on it!"

Everyone laughs at that.
Three Days Left

On Wednesday, Gibbs is bored.

He hasn't felt this edgy without a case in years and he knows why. Three days left.

On Friday, they'll put him out to pasture, and…

And filling out paperwork isn't doing the job. It's not keeping his attention.

He finally gets the all clear for full duty from his doctor and suddenly everything goes silent. No cases. Nothing, at all. Not even a decent theft. Tony's phone might as well be disconnected for all the ringing it's done.

He'd be suspicious that Tony had worked some sort of deal with dispatch, but three of the other four teams out of the Navy Yard are also sitting at their desks filling out paperwork. It's like every sailor and Marine from Baltimore to Norfolk, DC to Charleston, WV, all decided, simultaneously, to go on the straight and narrow.

He glares at his paperwork, grabs his coffee cup, tosses it into the trash, and heads off to get a new one.

It doesn't help. Coffee, which usually quiets his mind and makes him more alert, more able to focus, more able to do pretty much whatever he wants, isn't doing the job today. Probably can't do the job today. Only so much you can ask ground, roasted beans to do.

He's about to head back to the bullpen when he decides there's no rush. It's not like he's got to race to get that paperwork done. What's Tony going to do if he doesn't get it done soon, fire him? He finds that mildly amusing for about ten seconds and then jittery comes back.

Going to his own desk isn't going to help.

So, instead of hitting the up button on the elevator, he hits the B for basement.

He hasn't been down here since the last time Tim worked Cybercrime. He did intend to go down at some point, but he was figuring he'd give Tim some time to get settled in (he knows Tony's doing the same thing, making sure Tim's secure in his own Boss role before anyone else who has that claim on him heads down), but he's not feeling very Bossish, past or present, right now.

And… if he's being honest, he's missing Tim.

The elevator doors slide open, and the first thing Gibbs notices is that it's not dark down there anymore. It was dark the last time he was down here. Just the glow of the computers keeping people from crashing into things.

It's not dark now. The walls and floor are still gray, the cubicle walls are black and lighter gray, which leads to a feeling of dark, but it's not actually dark. It's the idea of dark.

He heads in, noticing the coffee station Tim had been talking about. Looks like more of his goodies showed up yesterday. There's a coffee maker, a bunch of cups, microwave, fridge, two vending machines, a soda machine, and… The Caf-Pow dispenser he was talking about... It's not there yet, but the space is there for it, and Gibbs knows it'll be there soon, all clustered against one wall.
He's walking past a big screen plasma, which he thought was Tim's conferencing area, until he noticed two sofas (black) and three bean bags chairs (dark blue) in front of it, along with a coffee table, and several remotes that look really familiar.

He's not sure, because he's not seeing anyone using it, but he's thinking Tim's got a game station set up there.

He shakes his head at that. But, apparently, if you get to the level of Director, you can mess around with your set up however you like. (It occurs to Gibbs that if he was in charge of the field agents, he probably would have wanted to make sure there was a spot for them to crash, too. Sleeping at your desk or in the morgue isn't a good plan. Of course, Leon appears to be under the impression that you're supposed to take breaks and go home, even when working a hot case, which is probably why there aren't any nap stations…)

There's a divider wall between the tv area and the next section, four collections of desks in little triangles, also walled off into their own sections, two really casual looking techs working away in one of them. In between the desk units is the conferencing area, long table, lots of chairs, whiteboards at the ready.

He sees two of the techs standing next to the whiteboard, writing something, while a third one sits in front of them on the table, talking and pointing things out.

To the left he sees what had been a cinderblock wall switch to glass, and then an open door.

The "office" Jimmy had mentioned.

And Jimmy wasn't kidding. It's a real office. With bookshelves, and a door, and chairs, and blinds that close so you can have a private conversation.

Right next to the door, on the cinderblock wall, is a whiteboard that says:

Rules:

1. Never be unreachable.
2. Never screw your team.
3. Verify.
4. Trust your instincts.
5. Work hard, play hard.
6. Fix it first, apologize later.
7. Own it when you screw up.

Gibbs smiles at that. It's very much Tim's little kingdom in the basement. It feels like him. He's been here a week and a half and he's already got his fingerprints on everything.

As Gibbs looks around at everything, he isn't sure what the emotions going through him are. Part of it is the awareness that Tim was beyond ready to go. That they held onto him for too long. He should have been running his own team for years by now.

Part of it is pride. No help. No direction. No double thinking or nervousness. Hell, he didn't even know what the damn job was, but he's got it. And it's absolutely clear that he owns this. It'll take time
to get it all ironed out, but this is Tim's team, hell, his *department* and he's going to be amazing at running it.

Part of it is regret. Day after tomorrow he's gone. He won't be here to see Tim do it. He won't be able to just drop on down and catch up. He assumes this is like when your kid goes off to college, you're happy for them, proud of them, you know it's good for them, you know they need it to be happy, to be the people they want to be, are meant to be, but you know you're going to miss having them in your life every single day.

He watches Tim at his desk. He's focused, typing away at something, fast, eyes scanning over the screen. Whatever he's doing, it has his full attention. Gibbs sighs. No matter how this works, that's gone. Tim won't be part of his daily life, not anymore. None of them will be. Gibbs takes a deep breath at that.

"Hey!" Tim's looking up from his computer, waving him in, smiling at him, cutting his musings short. "What bring you down here? Draga in the weeds?"

"Nah. He's filling out forms like a champ. Just wanted to see you, see your stuff."

"Come on in." Tim stands up and closes the door behind him, offering him one of the chairs, sitting on the corner of his desk. "What do you think?" Once that question would have been begging for approval, the combination of knowing it's a good job, but desperately needing confirmation of that. Now it's just the excitement of sharing something good with someone you love.

Gibbs nods, smiles a bit, turning to see the department behind him. "Lot better than the last time I was down here."

Tim nods with that. "Yeah. It really is. Be better yet, soon. It's balking a little bit, but they tell me I'll get my new stations for group work or solo work in the next two weeks, and Physical Plant's trying to get out of doing it, but rumor has it they'll be moving the filing cabinets out of here and replacing them with work benches and some actual tools eventually."

"Faster than light bulbs?" Gibbs had been appalled to hear about not being able to change your own bulbs.

"Probably not. They won't give me a firm date. Just, 'I'm on the list,' whatever that means."

"Where are the filing cabinets going?"

Tim shrugs. "Don't know, don't care. Evidence lock up, maybe? Deep storage? I went through the regs, and found out that there's nothing that says I have to have copies of the paperwork on literal paper." Tim points to the glass bowl on his bookshelf that he's got filled with thumb drives. "Until we get the paperwork database up and running, I've got them saving the forms on their computer and to these. They're all coded for each sort of form. I'll get second and third copies, make sure we've got them in storage, and if we ever need any of this crap again, I'll print it out."

"You can do that?"

Tim shrugs. "Legal may have a different interpretation of how paperwork works, but as I said, I checked the rules, and they do not specifically say that I have to have *paper* copies, just that I have to have copies, that those copies must be secure on and off site, and that I cannot destroy those copies. Same as the regs for emails."

Gibbs smiles. "Eighteen?"
Tim grins back at him. "Exactly."

"Legal's gonna love you."

"If I do my job right, they're never going to notice me, at least, not for this. I've got a conversation coming up with one of them about hiring. But, for this, it's not exactly like I'm going to run up there and say, 'No more paper copies for me!'"

Gibbs nods, looks around, hearing the hum of the computer, a few voices, and what he guesses is probably the ever-present tapping of fingers on keys.

He looks at Tim, half-sitting, half-leaning against his desk, posture relaxed, black leather jacket, red button down, and, Gibbs doesn't shake his head, but having seen the dress code Tim wrote up, he's not surprised, black nail polish. Right now, everything about him is radiating comfortable.

He smiles at Tim. "You're finally home, aren't you?"

Tim nods a bit. "Upstairs was home, too."

Gibbs shakes his head. No, it wasn't. Not like this. He's happier, more satisfied looking than Gibbs has ever seen him at work. "Upstairs was what you needed to do, to be, to get to be the man who could find this home."

Tim inclines his head. Gibbs knows that means probably.

Gibbs stands up, looking around at the office, at the rest of the basement, at the techs working away. There's this huge bubble of feelings, there's pride, and joy, and the sense of loss from not being here, and love and more happy to go with joy, and… and when it comes down to it, he couldn't find the words for it if his life depended on it.

But it must be coming across in his face, because Tim nods at him, smiles, acknowledging it.

"It's good, Tim. You've done good."

"Yeah, it is."

He's half tempted to hug Tim, but they're at work, and he can feel some of the techs are watching… And sure, that likely wouldn't bother Tim, but it feels weird to him, so he pats his back and says, "Okay. I'll let you get back to it. I know you're busy."

Tim nods at that, too. "Job scheduling system went live upstairs yesterday, and Hemmer's team has already found a way to break it." He sounds significantly more excited by that prospect than Gibbs would have expected, but he's guessing that figuring out how to fix it is Tim's current mystery.

Gibbs shakes his head, walking out, hearing Tim's fingers clicking away behind him.

The elevator doors open just as Tony's putting the phone down. Gibbs knows that look, knows the gestures, and heads straight to his desk to grab his bag.

"Murdered sailor in Arlington," Tony says.

And with that, jittery flees and Gibbs settles back into case mode.

Processing away (he's on photos) Gibbs thinks that his first case was like this. A murdered sailor
in… It wasn't a suburban home, but it was a home, an apartment, but someone called it home. And it wasn't daytime, it was night. And… actually it wasn't much like this at all.

He was taking pictures. That he remembers. Franks was moderately sure he could handle photographing the scene without messing anything up, so that was his first job.

Franks had been sure that he was good, and that he'd eventually be useful, but Gibbs knows, back in the beginning, that Mike wasn't sure he could put enough of himself aside to do the job. He knows, those first few cases especially, that Mike worried he'd get too caught in what they were doing, get lost in his own experience from the other side. He knows Mike was nervous that Gibbs would blow up and kill someone, but he also didn't mind, too much, as long as that someone was one of the 'bad guys.'

He had been nervous that first day. Didn't know what the hell he was doing. Hadn't felt that way about anything in decades, since being a recruit stepping off the bus. Hadn't felt much of anything about anything for months by that point, so at least nervous was a step in the right direction.

He catches Tony watching out of the corner of his eye, realizes he's just standing there, not taking any shots, and gets to it. Crime scene isn't going to document itself.

"What do you got for me, Abbs?"

The LabRat (He hasn't bothered to learn their names. He should. They work here. They're good at their jobs. But they aren't Abby. It's the male one in his late forties. He ran the lab in Norfolk.) looks up at him and Gibbs mentally kicks himself. They processed the scene, got on their secondary work, (he was on witness statements) reconnoitered back at the Navy Yard, got Ducky's preliminary autopsy report (yes, the knife sticking out of the vic's chest was indeed what killed him), and now he was in the Lab, with the Caf-Pow, wanting to know what was up with the trace.

But it's 23:42. Abby's probably been home for hours now. She only sticks around after 18:00 for floods of trace, and this isn't that sort of case.

"Abby's not here right now."

Gibbs nods, feeling a little embarrassed. "What do you have, then?" He hands over the Caf-Pow and the tech (Corwin? Something like that…) looks at it curiously and puts it on the desk.

"Finger prints. Wife's prints were all over the knife."

"Kitchen knife from her home. It'd be weird if she didn't have prints on it."

"Prints in Duncan's blood." That's not the sort of thing that's common on kitchen gear. "We've also got a second blood sample on the knife. If we can get a sample…” Gibbs knows how that works. A breastbone is hard, stab a knife through it, and if you don't have a good grip, you'll cut yourself, too. Happens all the time.

"We'll hunt her down, see if she's got cuts on her hands. Anything else interesting?"

"No. Looks awfully straight forward. He was in a fight with whomever stabbed him. Ducky sent hair, blood, and skin samples from under the vic's fingernails, and they're all the same DNA. So, you don't have the wife in custody?"

"Missing since this morning. Neighbors heard a fight, called the cops, by the time they got there she was gone, and he was dead. Draga's hunting her by phone and financials."
The tech nods.

It was Thursday morning when Draga got the alert. Credit card activity.

Took them less than an hour to find her. Shelby Duncan wasn't exactly running. She was having coffee at a Starbucks. Was still there, sitting in a comfy chair, reading something on her phone, sipping a latte.

They watched the scene for a minute.

Ziva looks at them, nods to Shelby, takes her NCIS jacket off, she doesn't want to spook her, and heads in. Gibbs and Tony keep an eye on the front. Draga's in the back. When she sees Tony nod at her, she approaches Shelby and quietly says, "Shelby Duncan?"

Shelby looks up, split lip and black eye very visible under some haphazard makeup.

"I'm Ziva David, NCIS," she shows her badge, "I'd like you to come with me."

"Okay." Shelby goes to tuck her phone into her purse, and Ziva tenses, hand hovering over her gun, but all she does is put her phone in her bag and stand up, slowly. As she gets to the van, it's easy to see the bandages on her hands.

"This is about Paul, isn't it?"

Ziva nods, ushering her into their van.

"He's not gonna be okay, is he?"

"No ma'am, he's not," Tony says.

There had been a fragile, holding together by cobwebs sort of feel to Shelby. That's why Ziva had gone in soft and gentle. But that air of helpless damage fled before a brilliant burst of savage joy when Shelby said, "Good. Son of a bitch deserved everything he ever got."

Ziva's on point. She's in the interrogation room, gently pulling the story out of Shelby. Gibbs and Tony stand behind the two way mirror, listening.

It's a bad story, one he's heard too many times.

Awful marriage. The wife who took all she could take, and finally quit, got out, got help, got the restraining order, but just like too many other women learned the hard way, a restraining order is just a piece of paper. And a piece of paper has never, ever, in the history of paper, stopped a man who wanted to make trouble.

But a ten-inch chef's knife can and will and did.

They've got the case wrapped by lunch.

Gibbs wishes he could feel some sort of triumph, go out on a high note. (He supposes there's always tomorrow, or even this afternoon for that, but he's not feeling it.)

But maybe going out on a case like this is fitting.
Maybe keeping in mind that they aren't all wins, that sometimes justice isn't in the cards, sometimes all you could do is hope, and maybe pray some, that the perp gets the best damn lawyer on the East Coast and squirms out of it.

Maybe that'll help ease him out.

Keep him focused on how he'll never have to put another battered woman behind bars.

And it does help, for maybe five minutes, long enough to fill out the first form and stick his name on the bottom, but as his pen scratches the last s on his signature, it fades.

Unless his gut is wrong, and it may be, he certainly hopes it is, this is it. He's never going to bust anyone again. He's never going to put away another murderer, pull lies out of a thief, he'll never find another missing kid, he'll never say to another victim's family, 'We've got him.'

That hits hard enough he has to get up and head to the restroom to get control of himself again.

Ziva's kept one eye on her paperwork, and the other eye on Gibbs since she got out of interrogation.

It's clear he's not in a good place right now, at all.

And when he slams down his pen, and storms off in the direction of the men's room, she glances up at Tony, he nods at her, and she follows Gibbs.

She's probably about fifty seconds behind him, and isn't sure what she'll see when she gets in there. Nothing good. She stops at the door, listening, but doesn't hear anything, and then heads in.

He's leaning against the back wall, jacket folded over the wall of the nearest stall, ripping his undershirt to shreds.

He's got the polo shirt on, but his usual white undershirt is already in about four pieces. He's working on five as she watches.

Ziva gets this. Understands it on a visceral level. Anger is always easier than sorrow. And if you can't kill the sorrow, you might as well revel in anger.

He doesn't look up when she comes in. Or when she gently lays a hand on his shoulder. His shirt makes a very satisfying ripping sound.

She doesn't try to stop him, but just stands there, quiet, present, and about half an hour later, when he's got a huge, fluffy mass of shirt shreds she finally says to him, "Better?"

"A little."

"We can hit the gym next time. You are cleared to fight now."

He nods. That would have helped, too.

"I don't want to go." His voice broke on go.

She wraps him in a hug, stroking the back of his neck. "I know."
Retired

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On Friday Gibbs was…

He doesn't know.

Resigned is probably the best word for it.

All day people have been stopping by his desk to pat him on the back, wish him fair wind and following seas and tell him how much they’re going to miss him, and... It's not really touching him, beyond feeling fairly proud of himself for not snapping at them or rolling his eyes, or storming off and hiding in the elevator all day.

He's got his stuff boxed up and is trying to not think too hard about NSA girl sitting at his desk, using his stuff, working on his team, doing his fucking JOB.

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, lets it out, and goes to get another cup of coffee (number six of the day, and it's only 10:37.)

After lunch, he heads down to HR. The slow route, which means taking the stairs and visiting the whole damn building.

So much history here. So much of his life is bound to this building, woven through the bricks, flowing through the air.

The HR lady is nattering away about how wonderful retirement must be, and how many plans she's got for when she goes, but he's not listening as he gives her his ID and begins to fill out the mound of release forms.

He's seeing Tony stepping out of interrogation, joking with Ziva, Tim sitting at his desk working on something, Abby dancing in the lab, Duck and Jimmy leaning over one of the tables talking in the morgue. He's in Vance's, Jen's, Morrow's office, talking with them about… whatever.

He's smelling the coffee that goes with those moments, feeling the purpose of knowing what he was doing and why he was doing it.

Nothing lasts forever, Probie. Mike's leaning against the desk he's sitting at, watching him fill out the forms. You had a good long run, and now it's time for something new.

I know, Mike.

Do ya?

Knowing doesn't mean liking.

Mike laughs. Don't I know that!

"Sturm."
"Boss?"

"Hold down the fort. If the batphone rings," Tim jerks his finger toward his phone on his desk, "give me a call, okay?"

She nods. "If someone needs you?"

"You've all got my cell number. I'll be taking texts."

"Where are you going?"

"Upstairs, probably be an hour or so."

"Case?"

"Nah. Just offering some moral support."

She looks at him curiously, and he smiles. "Text if you need me."

Tim timed it right. He gets out of the elevator just as Gibbs is getting ready to step in.

"Here for Leon?"

"No."

"Here for you. How'd it go?"

"No."

"How'd it go?"

"Yeah, I know."

Several moments later, he pulls back. "Now what?"

Gibbs rolls his eyes, wipes them off, and looks at the ceiling. "Grab my boxes and go."

"Want a hand?"

"Nah. Tony and Ziva'll have that. They're waiting for me to get down and 'help me to my car.'"

Gibbs knows that's code for get out of the building so they can cry a bit with him, too.

"Then I'll see you at the diner, later." Tim says, nodding, blinking, hard.

"Yeah." Gibbs takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly. As of 16:30, Leroy Jethro Gibbs is no longer a NCIS Agent.

It's a bizarre party. Usually parties are to celebrate something, and this… There are people celebrating. And it is fun to get everyone together. But the guest of honor is basically going through the motions.

New plan or not, he's not relishing giving up being a cop, and plastering a smile on his face about it is proving even harder than giving up his badge and gun two hours ago.

But, you retire, after twenty plus years, and everyone you've ever worked for or with wants a chance to suck down some free drinks, say a few vaguely true but complimentary words, and pat you on the back before putting you out to pasture.

So, he's there, at the diner, half-sitting on one of the stools, greeting people as they come in and out. Apparently, Tony and Ziva did a great job of making sure everyone in the entire universe knew he
was going. Even Tom Morrow's dropped by to pat him on the back, commiserate on the whole retirement thing (he gave it up last year), and wish him luck. Jarvis has been by, joking about how he's going to have to actually start showing up for those distinguished service medal ceremonies, because the guy who wins them now'll also probably show up to collect them.

Borin's been in. Only for a minute, she got a call before she even got the drink to her lips, but she promised to make sure they got together, soon. He's actually pretty interested in seeing her for more than a minute. Still no ring on her finger. And she did kiss his cheek on the way out.

Burley flew in from Pearl. Cassius Pride, who he hasn't seen in at least a decade, is here from New Orleans. Callen's here, telling stories of Russia. Those three are getting along great, and he's made sure that he'll get a shot to spend some more time with them later. (The idea of the post-party party is actually cheering him up a bit.)

Fornell and Diane have both dropped in. (Not at the same time.) Leyla and Amira. Slater cousins, whose names he doesn't remember, are here to wish him well. (Along with Ed and Jeanie.) The whole extended family is here.

Leon, Lara, and the kids are here. And at some point, Vance'll make some sort of dryly amusing speech about how Jethro's been a pain in his ass for a decade now.

Rachel stops by for half an hour or so. He's not sure if she's watching to see how he handles it, or is offering support to get through it. Either way, and even with not seeing her anymore, he finds it comforting. She smiles and nods at him as she leaves, and he can feel the, 'You're going to be fine' she's thinking at him. He smiles back; he will. Just, not today, and probably not tomorrow or the next day.

Emily, Kyla, and Amira are in the booth in the corner, giggling with each other, eyeballing James, Elaine's youngest son, who's tending bar for this. Amira's really too young for that, but she idolizes Emily, has for years, so she glommed onto her as soon as she got in. Vance's son is glued to his phone, texting rapidly, visible 'why did you drag me to this' rays vibrating off of him.

The food and booze are good. Vance's speech is mercifully short (and genuinely funny).

In only four excruciatingly long hour, the send-off is done.

And Leroy Jethro Gibbs is officially, retired.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I've gotten a few notes on the Minions. First off, I'm immensely flattered that you're all reading so closely as to notice this. Secondly, so... yeah, Minions. You might be noticing that I kind of only have two 'real' Minions and ten fill-in-the-blank Minions. I'm working on that. And as I write more of this, I'm getting a firmer idea of who the Minions are.

So, yes, they do, on occasion, change names. (If the Copious Spare Time Fairy shows up to gift me with her bounty before I finish Shards, I'll see about fixing that. Otherwise it'll get taken care of in the post-finishing edit. Yes, I am going to go through once I finish this and edit it.) And if you guys notice that, or say, one of them suddenly changes gender or something, feel free to drop me a line about it. (Actually, for any of that sort of
thing, feel free to drop me a line, I'm cool with grammar/continuity help, especially given how long this story is.) It'll make it that much easier for me to notice and fix errors whenever I get to rewrite territory.

Thanks!
Tony stands in front of his mirror, straightening his tie. He hasn't dressed this carefully for work in… Forever.

But today is the first day, the first real day, of Team DiNozzo.

Ziva kisses his cheek, and straightens his already impeccably straight tie. "Ready?"

He kisses her. "I was born ready for this."

She smiles at that, wry look in her eye, knowing exactly how nervous and eager he is for this, and then nods. "Then let's go."

It's been ten years since it was really, truly his team.

That's a lot of time to get a plan together. Lot of time to think about what worked the first time, and what didn't.

The first time, he was trying to out-Gibbs Gibbs. Not necessarily the same style, but solve the crimes, save the day, push harder, faster, longer than anyone else. That, he was trying to do.

He was trying to prove he was worthy of Gibbs' job. Because, when it comes down to it, 'You'll do,' and ending up with "temporary" Team Leader status because there was no one else around to take it wasn't exactly a ringing endorsement of his leadership skills.

But this time he's not feeling any need to kick into overdrive. He doesn't have to prove he's the man for the job, because he knows he is.

It feels really bizarre to be the old man on the team. He's fourteen years older than Ziva, eighteen years older than Draga, and he did peek into the HR forms and found that he's twenty years older than Bishop.

Who is, speak of the devil, walking into the office, little spring in her step, hair long and loose, looking perky and happy and just… so not a cop. He shakes his head (mentally, he doesn't want to do it for real and show what he's thinking) and says, "Hi."

She smiles up brightly at him. "So, where do we start?"

He points to Gibbs'… hers… it's hers now… desk and the pile of forms on it. "Fill 'em out. Don't get carpal tunnel. Doris, the evil troll from HR, wants me to remind you that they're supposed to be in black ink, perfect, no cross-outs. Cross something out, and you've got to fill it out again from scratch."

"He's not kidding about that," Draga adds. "First day in, I'm filling out the forms, we get called out, Gibbs had me doing it in the van on the way to the crime scene. I got it done on the way because you can't go into the field if they aren't done, and then, a few days later, in the middle of a massive terror case, Doris shows up, with half of my forms, bitching at me about how they have cross outs on them.
and how I have to re-do them because they have to be perfect and original."

Bishop's staring at him with wide eyes. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. McGee stood up and bit her head off. We were the only two on that day, because the rest of the team was injured, and he said... uh... It wasn't polite... but it boiled down to she could have my time for filling out the forms shortly after hell froze over because saving human lives and catching terrorists was more important than crossed out black ink, and that if she ever showed up here again and wasted his time during an active investigation she'd regret it."

Tony hadn't known that. "Probie slew the Troll?"

"Didn't hurt that Vance was up on the top level, watching, and just slowly nodded at her after McGee got done chewing her out while we were trying to stop someone who almost killed an entire aircraft carrier full of people."

"Wow."

"A week later, when we were on paperwork duty, he sent me down to fill them out again, perfect, the second time. Still had to do it."

Tony nods, the t-s have to be crossed and the i-s dotted. "Anyway, fill out those forms, Bishop."

"Filling out forms!" She nods along, looking at the forms, and puts her bag on the floor next to her chair, finds where Gibbs kept the clip boards, sticks the forms on it, and then hops onto the desk, cross-legged, pops her earbuds in, opens up a bag of caramel corn, hunches forward, and starts filling them out.

Tony stares at her, perplexed, but she's completely unaware of that, filling in blanks with all her focus. "Bishop?"

"Yes?"

He was about to say something like, this isn't college, you sit on the chair, not the desk, but, as he thinks about it, it doesn't matter. If she's comfy up there, and gets the paperwork done correctly. Who cares?

"Nothing."

She looks at herself on the desk. "Is this a problem?"

"Not for me." Feels a little odd to say that, because her on the desk does irk him, but it shouldn't, so he's going to let it go.

"Okay, good. I like to spread everything out for big picture work, and pull in tight for little details. This looks like a lot of little details."

"Yes it is." She keeps looking at him for a moment, and he nods, "Carry on."

So she does.

It hits him, as he's doing his own paperwork, that he put the badge on for the first time in fall of '91. Which means, when Gibbs grabbed him back in '00, he had two more years of experience on the job than Gibbs did.
Means he's *always* had two years as a cop on him.

And it's only now, sixteen years after they met the first time, that it's hitting him that that's true.

He knows he's older now than Gibbs was when they started working together. (A rather terrifying thought in and of itself.) But it's also hitting him that right now, he's the same age Mike Franks was when he gave it up.

He's the grown up. Husband, probably father soon, and now, without any question, the Boss.

Last week, when he had a fully functional team of people who... okay, Draga's still new and all, but for the most part he's out of the puppy phase and can be relied on not to pee on the rug... knew what they were doing (mostly), he got one case.

One case that took less than twenty-four hours to solve.

So, on day one of Team Dinozzo, dispatch calls up, and he's hoping for a basic homicide, something to gently get Bishop's feet wet. (Unlike the massive terror free-for all of doom that was Draga's first case.) But does he get that basic homicide? Noooooo...

No, they're calling him in on a triple murder and missing child/maybe kidnapping.

It's a family. Mom, Dad, and older brother are all dead. Little sister is missing. This is literally the case he had in mind when he asked Gibbs if he was going to work like he had a kidnapping on Monday.

He almost told Dispatch to send this down the road. But as he glances around the office, he can see the other teams are working, too.

"Give me the details."

Dispatch does, and right now, he'd give his left arm to have Gibbs back. This is the kind of case you want all hands on deck, and you want those to be good, unflappable, experienced hands. Not one barely-trained Probie and a complete wild card. But calling Gibbs for help... No, not today. Today is the worst possible day to call Gibbs for something like this. For both of them. He's got to fly on his own, and calling Gibbs in today would be like dangling a raw steak in front of a starving lion and then telling the lion he can't actually eat the steak, but some advice on how best to cook it would be nice.

So. No calling Gibbs. Team Dinozzo is on the job. Even if this is a triple homicide kidnapping and he's got two probies on the team.

Though he notices his phone is in his hand and he's got McGee's number up before he turns the damn thing off and sticks it back in his pocket.

If there is any saving grace for what's coming up, it's that they get the call from Dispatch while they're en-route, and learn the missing child has been located and is currently with Grandma.

Two-year-old Emma Tennu managed to get herself hidden in the laundry chute, and is currently the only living member of the immediate Tennu family.

They're way the hell out in the sticks. West Virginia's less than an hour away, and even with the GPS, they're on their third non-descript, sign-free, dirt road meandering through a million miles of
forest, hoping that unlike the first two, this is the right one.

"There!" Ziva says, catching sight of an even smaller dirt driveway with four mailboxes at the end. Tony slams on the breaks, backs up, and turns in. Four log cabins. Each one on its own driveway branching off the main driveway. Fortunately the one he wants is easy to find, cop car with lights flashing, tape over the door, a very distressed looking LEO standing guard at the front porch.

This is the place.

Draga catches sight of the LEO, and his face hardens. He knows by the body language this is going to be all sorts of bad. Bishop's too green for that, so as soon as they stop she says, "Okay, what first?" in an eager voice.

"Just like a puzzle, we work from the outside in. So, first up, coveralls. Next up, perimeter. Bishop, I want you photographing everything. Draga, show her how to secure the perimeter."

"How far out do you want?"

Tony looks around. They're on a wooded lot in the middle of nowhere. If their perp… perps? He's thinking this far out in the middle of nowhere, three dead people means more than one perp, but that's based just on a feeling, no facts, yet. If their perps, came in by car, the driveway's basically the only way to do it without leaving a huge mess. "All the way to the mailboxes for the driveway. Hundred meters out from the house. Do either of you know anything about wilderness tracking?"

They both shake their heads. He sighs. Gibbs was great at spotting the trail someone leaves when they go through woods, practical use of that skill in the field. McGee was okay at it, he probably had like six merit badges in it. Of all the days not to have snow on the ground…

"Okay. See any suspicious looking broken bushes or branches, get Ziva."

"What would a suspicious looking broken bush be?" Bishop asks.

He's sure it's a good question, but since he's not the one who ever noticed the damn things in the first place, he's a bit stumped by that. Fortunately, Ziva answers, "Imagine someone was running through the forest quickly. If you see damage to the trees that matches that, yell for me."

They both nod.

"Get to it." Tony says.

"What do you do?" Bishop asks.

Ziva catches his, it's not okay to dole out headslaps for questions is it?

She shakes her head minutely. And he very much understands her answering look you're the one who hired the girl with literally no practical experience in this subject.

"I talk to the LEOs… Law Enforcement Officers…" he says before she can ask, "Ziva's going to handle the outside of the house. And when I get done with them, I'll help her with that. Once you and Draga are done with the perimeter, we'll head inside to process the scene."

"Okay," she chirps, bright, happy, camera in hand. "Lead the way, Draga!"

And off they go.
On the outside, the house looks fine. The only clue, which Draga points out to Bishop, is the knob on the front door is broken.

Inside everything is not fine, at all. It looks like a horror movie was shot in here, but with real people.

Tony puts Bishop in charge of photographing everything, because even the greenest Probie can handle 'Photograph every square inch of this house, at close range, twice! And don't step on anything!'

Dad (aka Lt. James Tennu) is in the living room. From the looks of it, he put up a hell of a fight. Ducky points out the bruises on his knuckles and the fact that he's got four bullet wounds in his chest. Bishop does okay with that. So she takes pictures, looking nervous, scared, excited, and unhappy.

She's green by the second body. Mom, (Ensign Harper Tennu) is on the stairway leading up to the second floor, gun near her hand, and from the looks of it, she got at least four shots off before she was shot, too. He sees Bishop, swallow, hard, but she keeps photographing and does a good job of staying out of the way. She doesn't mess up the blood spatter or touch anything she shouldn't, and she waits patiently for Ducky and Jimmy to collect Harper, get her properly taken care of, before trying to get up the stairs.

Upstairs is the problem. Big Brother, aka Brian Tennu, eight-years-old, still holding the baseball bat he was trying to defend his sister with, is in the hallway. Tony knows how bad this hurts to him, how much he hates seeing this; how much moments like this make him feel the world is just a festering ball of evil, and that they'll never win, never even fight it to a draw, that the best they can do it just clean up the mess. He honestly can't imagine how this feels to Bishop.

And then he doesn't have to, he hears the first retch. She iron-jaws her way through it, doesn't puke on the rug, and walks, carefully, but quickly, to a bathroom. (Which hopefully doesn't have the key to this whole thing in the toilet.)

He wants to tease her, make a few bad jokes, try to lighten the whole thing up. He's about to do it, words on his tongue, but he can't. He's the Boss. Really, truly, the Boss, and he can't make himself feel better about this absolute shithole of misery and despair by mocking her response to it.

He hands her a Dixie cup of water. She swishes and rinses out her mouth, skin gray and clammy. "This is as bad as it gets, Bishop. We never run into anything worse than this. Take a minute, get your legs under you, and then take more photos. Get all of it on film, because somewhere in one of these shots is likely the answer to what happened and why."

She nods, takes a few deep breaths.

"Next time, get clear of the crime scene."

She nods at that, too. "I was afraid, that if I ran, I'd mess something up."

"Okay." That's way better than the she-panicked-and-headed-for-the-nearest-available-toilet that he was thinking she had done. "Make sure you've got puke bags in your pockets from now until you get used to this. You're right, it would have been bad to run through something and destroy some evidence. But, we haven't processed this bathroom…" He doesn't need to finish the sentence, her face goes even paler as she gets it.

"Oh God… Did I just…"

"Probably not. There's no blood trail into or out of here, and our perps (this much carnage means
more than one person) would have been covered in it. But... there's no way to be certain."

She's looking crushed, listless, leaning hard against the bathroom sink, looking at herself in the mirror. "I'm not sure this is me. I'm more of a numbers sort of girl."

"That's why we've got a Probie year. You get to find out if this is you."

She exhales long and deep, closes her eyes, and he can see her steeling herself for what's outside the door. Then she stands up, picks up her camera, and says, "Okay. Let's get this asshole."

"That's the attitude!" He pats her gently on the shoulder and wonders if he was ever really this young or green.

Hours later, when they're still, still processing the scene, he can't take it anymore. He looks around, makes sure Bishop and Draga are nowhere nearby. (He's got them getting blood spatter samples. He's figuring they'll be done roughly ten minutes after Hell freezes.) Then he pulls his phone out and hits Gibbs contact number. Before he gets the chance to even say hello, Tony says, "I want you back."

"Tony?" Gibbs sounds curious.

"She's so green. Remember McGee's 124 Crayon box? She's every shade of green in the box."

"No one's born a cop, Tony."

"I know, but... God, Gibbs, she's making Probie look smooth and polished."

Gibbs laughs at that. Tony thinks he hears some woofing in the background.

"Where are you?"

"Doesn't matter. You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah. I will. And she probably will, too. But... God, I'm being encouraging and sincere. Ziva's starting to wonder who the hell I am and what I did with Tony."

"Part of the job. You don't want to be cutting her knees out from under her on the first day."

"No. I don't. So I'm encouraging her and keeping the snide comments in my head. It's," he checks his watch, "16:08, and I've said nothing, nothing at all even remotely off color." He can feel Gibbs smirk at that.

"What's the case?"

Tony crumples. He can hear the longing in Gibbs' voice. He shouldn't have called. Not today. But he answers anyway, because right now lying would be worse. "Triple homicide. We thought it was a kidnapping, but we've found the girl."

Gibbs goes quiet on the other line, and Tony can feel him actively forcing himself not to offer to come back and lend a hand.

"We've got it, Gibbs."

"I'm sure you do," he says, slowly.
"We do."

Gibbs sighs. "I know you do. Doesn't mean I don't want to help."

"Yeah, sorry. Just needed to bitch about Tinkerbelle. To someone who'd get it."

"Tinkerbelle?"

"She's really, really cute in addition to being every green you ever imagined. She spent the morning sitting cross-legged on your desk, ear buds in, humming gently to country pop music, while munching caramel popcorn and filling out the forms."

Gibbs chuckles at that mental image. "How are Ziva and Draga doing?"

"I'll let Ziva tell you herself. Draga's kicked into Older-Know-It-All-Big-Brother routine. Oh, you'll like this, Vance headed down for something, walked by the bullpen, saw her on your desk, stopped, stared at her, then stared at me, stared at her some more, she completely missed it, didn't see it at all, then he looked down, slowly exhaled, shook his head and continued on. Ziva saw it, too, and laughed out loud as soon as Vance was out of range."

Gibbs sniggers at that, and Tony's sure he hears another woof in the background.

"Are you getting a dog?"

Gibbs snorts a quick laugh at that, too. "Back to work, DiNozzo. Someone's gotta keep Tinkerbelle and Flyboy in line."

"On it."

"Tony?"

"Yeah?"

"They bickering at each other, yet?"

Tony sighs and rolls his eyes. He knows exactly what Gibbs is thinking with this. "They're a lot younger than we were."

"Thirty-five and thirty versus, twenty-nine and... how old is she?"

"Twenty-eight."

He can feel Gibbs shake his head, and remembers the question he hasn't yet answered. "No bickering yet, but yeah, it's coming."

He can feel Gibbs smile before the line goes dead.

17:00 rolls by. So does 18:00. "Draga, you don't have Kevin right now, right?" Tony asks.

Draga's still working his way through the fingerprints. "Not until President's Day Weekend."

"Okay." Tony looks around at the house. The bodies are out. All of the blood spatters have been sampled. They've still got... Lord, fingerprinting everything. "Bishop, you're on finding us food. Then we're working until 22:00. We'll find a hotel, sack out there, and get back at it first thing tomorrow."
Draga and Ziva nod.

"I don't have a change of clothing."

"No one's gonna mind if you wear the same thing two days in a row. Draga'll brief you on what sort of gear you need when we break to eat," Tony says. "But every day you come to work, you never know where work is going to take you, so you need a bag with everything you'll want for an overnight, maybe two."

"Okay. Then… I'll… just find us some food."

"Good."

"I don't get it," Bishop says.

"No one gets things like this, Bishop. If you 'get' something like this, you've gone over to the dark side," Draga replies, without looking away from his computer screen.

"No. I mean… I was talking to Ducky yesterday…" Monday they processed the scene. That took the entire day. Tuesday they finished processing the scene and then worked on witness statements, rebuilding the crime, trying to figure out what the hell happened. Wednesday they dug into the vic's lives. Today, they feel like they've got a handle on what happened: at least four people broke in and killed the Tennus, but why is still anyone's guess. "We were working on the profile of who does stuff like this. One guy could be some sort of insane loon out for whatever messed-up crazy's in his head, but this was at least four guys, so insane loner is out. The way it was done, bloody, everyone in the family, that's a message, but to whom? We've found nothing…"

Draga's scowling at the computer screen. He can feel DiNozzo watching him. (Even though he's technically not in the room right now.) DiNozzo hasn't said it yet, but he knows he's thinking 'McGee would have found the thing that breaks the crime open by now. Do your computer magic and find me the answer!' But the answer isn't there, and every night Draga heads home, seeing Brian Tennu, dead on the floor, holding his baseball bat, and he just wants to throw up or hit someone.

"You aren't listening to me."

"No, I'm not. I'm doing my job."

"I'm trying to help you do your job! We're looking in the wrong place."

Draga looks up from his screen at her. She's sitting cross-legged on her desk, sipping a coffee, looking very determinedly at the crime scene shots up on the plasma and the what looks like hundreds of other pictures she's got scattered around the desk, on the chair, on the floor, and taped onto the book shelf.

"It's not right! Groups of guys do not go on murder sprees just for kicks."


She glares at him. The Mansons is not helpful. Random, crazy, evil will not get this case solved. "Not like this. Too tidy for Manson wannabes." She doesn't actually know if that's true, but she's hoping it is. Because if this is some sort of Manson crap… then there's no pattern, and she's useless for solving this. "If it was terror. If they were targeted because they were military, someone would have claimed this by now, and they probably would have been beheaded. If they were targeted for something they had done, you would have found it. There's no trace at all that the Tennus were into
anything that could get them killed. Not like this. Not the kid, too."

"Sounds like crazy people."

"It's not! Just... It's not!"

"Okay, fine! They would have killed the boy to keep him from identifying them."

"Sure, that's logical, but why show up when the kids are home in the first place? You're going to show up at someone's home to kill them, you pick a time when just the people you want are home, right?"

Draga doesn't roll his eyes. He knows Bishop's married, knows she has family, but somehow this hasn't filtered through. "It's a family, Bishop. If Mom and Dad are home, the kids probably are, too."

"Maybe..." She's not really paying attention to him. She's staring at the shots, looking at them, feeling a deep level of just all-out wrong. "Still doesn't feel right. This pattern's off."

"I'm heading down to the Lab. They've got to have the DNA results back."

"Okay, fine! They would have killed the boy to keep him from identifying them."

"Sure, that's logical, but why show up when the kids are home in the first place? You're going to show up at someone's home to kill them, you pick a time when just the people you want are home, right?"

Draga doesn't roll his eyes. He knows Bishop's married, knows she has family, but somehow this hasn't filtered through. "It's a family, Bishop. If Mom and Dad are home, the kids probably are, too."

"Maybe..." She's not really paying attention to him. She's staring at the shots, looking at them, feeling a deep level of just all-out wrong. "Still doesn't feel right. This pattern's off."

"I'm heading down to the Lab. They've got to have the DNA results back."

Tony and Ziva were already in there, listening to Abby expound on blood spatter.

Bishop tries to keep calm as she hovers in the back, watching Abby go through a computer simulation showing how each member of the family died, but it's difficult. She's feeling scared and sad and excited and angry all at once.

"That it, Abby?" Tony asks.

"Of course not, Tony! We've been on this all night. I've got more than blood spatter analysis for you." She flicks the clicker in her hand and a new image pops up onto her plasma screen. "The bullets Ducky took out of the Tennus are favored by both the Russian Mafia and no less than three Colombian drug cartels."

Bishop hears that, and it clicks. She knows why this doesn't fit. She turns and goes sprinting up the stairs.

"Draga, you've got that almost photographic memory, right?"

He rolls his eyes. "I've got good visual recall. I don't have an eidetic memory."

"Good enough, I hope. When we drove up, it was a split driveway, right? Four houses off of it, but the mailboxes were all at the end of the driveway, right?"

He thinks about that. "Yeah, that's how I remember it."

"Did the Tennu's house have a number on it?" She asks, clicking through the pictures on the plasma.

He thinks for a few minutes. "Don't remember one. Just that it was way the hell back in the trees."

"Maybe..." She's not really paying attention to him. She's staring at the shots, looking at them, feeling a deep level of just all-out wrong. "Still doesn't feel right. This pattern's off."

"I'm heading down to the Lab. They've got to have the DNA results back."

"Okay, fine! They would have killed the boy to keep him from identifying them."

"Sure, that's logical, but why show up when the kids are home in the first place? You're going to show up at someone's home to kill them, you pick a time when just the people you want are home, right?"

Draga doesn't roll his eyes. He knows Bishop's married, knows she has family, but somehow this hasn't filtered through. "It's a family, Bishop. If Mom and Dad are home, the kids probably are, too."

"Maybe..." She's not really paying attention to him. She's staring at the shots, looking at them, feeling a deep level of just all-out wrong. "Still doesn't feel right. This pattern's off."

"I'm heading down to the Lab. They've got to have the DNA results back."

Tony and Ziva were already in there, listening to Abby expound on blood spatter.

Bishop tries to keep calm as she hovers in the back, watching Abby go through a computer simulation showing how each member of the family died, but it's difficult. She's feeling scared and sad and excited and angry all at once.

"That it, Abby?" Tony asks.

"Of course not, Tony! We've been on this all night. I've got more than blood spatter analysis for you." She flicks the clicker in her hand and a new image pops up onto her plasma screen. "The bullets Ducky took out of the Tennus are favored by both the Russian Mafia and no less than three Colombian drug cartels."

Bishop hears that, and it clicks. She knows why this doesn't fit. She turns and goes sprinting up the stairs.

"Draga, you've got that almost photographic memory, right?"

He rolls his eyes. "I've got good visual recall. I don't have an eidetic memory."

"Good enough, I hope. When we drove up, it was a split driveway, right? Four houses off of it, but the mailboxes were all at the end of the driveway, right?"

He thinks about that. "Yeah, that's how I remember it."

"Did the Tennu's house have a number on it?" She asks, clicking through the pictures on the plasma.

He thinks for a few minutes. "Don't remember one. Just that it was way the hell back in the trees."
She gives up on the photos. She took literally thousands of them, not like just flipping through will find a house number or not. She turns back to Draga. "According to Abby, the bullets that killed the Tennus are a sort that's popular with several drug cartels and the Russian Mafia."

"What?" Draga had to admit that he didn't think this looked right, either. The financials, the phone records, the service records, social media, everything he could dig up on the Tennus showed a very average, middle-class, Navy family. Nothing he could find should have gotten them killed, let alone by any sort of organized crime syndicate. Unlike Bishop, who had decided that this was "wrong," he decided he'd missed something and was looking through their lives even harder.

"That's why this isn't right." She's clearing off her desk, quickly stacking her collection of photos up on the corner of the desk.

"There's nothing about them that would get them involved with…"

"Check their neighbors! Long driveway, out in the sticks. The houses all look kind of the same. They were the second one on the left, but no one's got a number. I think they got the wrong house."

"You think someone broke in and slaughtered everyone because they were at the wrong house?" Given what he's found on the Tennus, that's making a distressing amount of sense.

"I think if we check the neighbors we're going to find a hell of a lot more motive for this than we are by studying the Tennus!"

She's sitting behind her own computer pulling up her notes. They talked to the neighbors. Well, the neighbors at two of the four houses. No one was home at the fourth one. They'd left cards, and told the LEOs to keep stopping by, and from the looks of it, completely forgot about it because the vast amount of everything else in this case took precedent.

"The empty house was the second one on the right. Ian McKenna and Brigit Heyn live there."

Draga's keying those names in. "Those are some really Russian Mafia sounding names."

"'Cause no one in the history of names ever had a fake ID. I had one back in the day."

He looks up from his computer, really surprised. "You had a fake ID?"

She pauses, staring at him. "You didn't?" She's amazed by that.

"So did I," Tony says, sending them his best stop fucking around glare, watching both of them jerk in their seats. "Ziva had tons of them, but I'm not seeing how this is relevant to solving a triple homicide,"

Bishop almost runs up to him and starts talking, fast and excited.

"Breathe between sentences, Bishop."

"Okay." And a pile of new words spill out. But, he's liking those words, and Ziva is looking very interested by this idea.

"Draga," Ziva says, "track down McKenna and Heyn. Come on, Bishop, we are heading to check on their house."

Tony just nods at Ziva, pleased with her grabbing Bishop. "You want extra back up?"

Ziva shakes her head.
"If McKenna and Heyn are the intended recipients of that treatment, they are long gone by now. And if Abby is correct about who was shooting, our shooters know they will not be back to that house."

Tony nods at that. He knows what his job is, get the warrant, connect this to any other similar hits. If these were pros, they're long gone, and that burns, but there's also a good shot that he can find more of their work, and get a hint of where long gone might be.

And, if he's right, and hiring pattern-girl was a good plan, maybe she can turn a hint into a clue, and a clue into four professional killers in custody.

And learn from the house they did.

"They left awfully fast," Bishop says, once they get in. Everything is still exactly as it was dropped. There's cold food on the table, the refrigerator door is open, as they get upstairs they can see that the closets are full.

The house looks like they just… stepped out to the back porch or something.

Or something.

Upstairs and downstairs are a normal looking home. Nothing suspicious, nothing out of place.

The basement was an entirely different story.

"Is this a…" Bishop's squinting at the tables, chemicals, cooling equipment, chewing her bottom lip. "Meth lab?"

It doesn't quite look like that to Ziva. She shakes her head. "Ecstasy, I think. They do not use," she points to a massive pill tabber, "for Meth."

"Oh." Bishop looks around. She can tell Ziva's seeing something, but she's not sure what it is, and then she is. There are four empty boxes for zip lock bags, but no zip lock bags. "Oh! How much do you think they took with them."

Ziva picks up a box. "Fifty bags per box. They are sandwich bags so… what do you think? They'd hold about a cup of pills?"

That feels about right to Bishop. "So, a trunk full Ecstasy?"

"I believe so."

"What do you have, Ziva?" Tony asks when she calls in.

"Possible good news. McKenna and Heyn are definitely on the run, with what looks like a trunk full of Ecstasy."

"A trunk full?"

"I'm sending you the photographs." And she does, then says, "As you can see, they've got a full production lab set up down in the basement, and we found boxes that held bags, but no bags, and no pills."

Tony nods at that. "So, they'd have a difficult time moving from one car to another."
"They'll at least have several large bags to carry around. And once they sell their product, they'll have bags of cash. They cannot travel light until they stash everything."

"And if they're still out there…"

"With any luck our assassins are out there, too."

"With any luck. Fornell put me in touch with Gables, an FBI agent who specializes in the Russian Mafia, and according to him, what we've got matches four other open cases. He hooked me up with Hallahan, who's out of the DEA and also works with them on these cases, and all three of us are going to be confabbing soon. I've got Draga setting the BOLOs and making sure that McKenna and Heyn are on everyone's radar."

Ziva's nodding along with that as Bishop dusts everything for prints.

"I will be sending prints to Abby soon. She can make sure we are not looking for unidentified bodies in a morgue somewhere."

"Thanks." McKenna and Heyn are their only good leads. Having them turn up dead would end this case.

"We will get back as soon as we can."

"Good. Love you."

"And you."

Part of how he envisioned this whole working on bigger cases, more terrorism angles, was the idea that he'd be working with other organizations, team building, and sure, this isn't precisely the sort of case he was thinking of, but it was the same skillset.

Getting all of the info out of Hallahan and Gables took all of his skill, all of his charm, a bit of butt kicking, and when push came to shove, his own version of the Gibbs-stare-of-doom, but he did eventually get access to what turned out to be eleven cases with the same type of bullets (shot from different guns though), same MO, believed to have been carried out by the same four man team. (They have concrete DNA samples of all four of them, but not all in the same places at the same time.)

"Okay, Bishop, find me some patterns. Where do these guys go when they aren't working?" he says, dropping the stack of paperwork on her desk.

She stares at what is literally a foot high stack of paper with three thumb drives on top. Then she starts spreading things out, grinning. "Ziva, you need your desk right now?"

Ziva shakes her head. She didn't have anything to run down right this second that would require her desk. (She's calling everyone she knows in Interpol, and also a few associates in Russia who she "technically" doesn't know, but might be willing to slip her some intel on this.) She can do that just as easily leaning against Tony's desk.

Bishop may be every shade of green to ever green. She may be gently rolling hills of misty Ireland, green upon green upon green, but here, now, with a pile of hard data and dots to connect and blanks to fill in, Bishop is in her element.
Her very untidy, chaotic, and wild element. Honestly, Tony finds it vaguely uncomfortable to have this much buzzing (She's got music she's listening to, sometimes when she's really thinking, she hums along to it, and she's constantly eating something, so between the dull music, the humming, and the chewing there is a literal buzz that goes with Bishop at work.) activity spread out all over the place right next to him.

But it also seems to be working.

She's building maps. The maps he follows. He's good with the maps. Where the attacks were, who was at them, (They don't have hard names yet, so right now It's just A, B, C, and D.) and who died.

She's building a timeline, which he's also good with. Once again, who was where, when, doing what.

And she's got a database going, which Tony doesn't understand, but as he takes a quick break from the hunt for McKenna and Heyn, Draga checks her work, nods approvingly, and then gets everyone more to drink.

It takes two hours before she gets her first of what Tony considers useful conclusions. "They aren't leaving the US between jobs. I don't think they're leaving the east coast." She points out what happened when and where, adding in a few cases that the FBI and the DEA didn't offer, that she had culled from local PDs that also matched the pattern. "They're working too hard, too fast. And this one," she points to a job in from 2009. A woman found dead in her home in Ohio, her husband went missing, is still missing. "I think this one is the key. A's DNA, his prints, too, but nothing for B, C, or D, and usually we find traces of at least two of them. When the… LEOs?" Tony nods at her, "First looked at it they assumed that A was one of the men who broke in, because his rap sheet was a mile long. I don't think that's right. This is A's house. His prints were all over everything. They found his blood, because someone went after him there. Then there's two years where A's prints don't show up, but B, C, and D are active. And then in 2011, they're all back and working again. Someone grabbed A, held him for however long, and then he got out again."

Tony's listening to that, looking up the case. "Yitzack Havawicz was the name of the missing husband. Sounds more Polish than Russian."

"Fake name? Fake ID? How many people in Woodduck, Ohio can tell the difference between a Polish and Russian accent?" Draga adds.

"Good point." Tony keeps reading, while Draga tosses a shot of Yitzack (Blurry, quarter profile, Yitzack appears to have done a very good job of avoiding having his picture taken. There wasn't even a wedding shot of him.) up on the plasma. Along with the only full face photo they could find of him, his driver's license.

"According to what I'm seeing, he's a Polish national, immigrated in 2005, his and the wife's tax returns list him as self-employed as a long-distance currier/delivery person," Draga says.

"Good excuse to travel all the time," Ziva says as she comes back to the bullpen.

"Draga, can you put up the file I just sent you?"

"Sure."

Two more shots pop up, and one of them Draga squints at, and then throws up next to Yitzack's driver's license shot. "If they aren't the same guy…"

Tony's nodding.
"Illyan Fedoryvich," Ziva says, "was serving time in Russian prison for multiple murders until 2000 when he, and," she looks to Draga, and he tosses up the next shot, "Mikial Blezun escaped. They fell off the radar from 2000 until…" She looks at Bishop's timeline. "2003 apparently. Abby is running the prints to make sure, but Blezun is probably C; he was known to be handy with a switchblade." Evidence of C showed up at several cases that seemed to involve knives as well.

Bishop's smiling. "This is great, right? We've got names to go with two of them!"

Tony nods tiredly at her. "Yes. Names are good. But even with names, we don't know where they are, we don't know who B and D are, and cases that involve professionals tend to be sticky because they're usually good at hiding."

Truer words were never spoken. By Monday, a week into the case, they had all four names. (Fedoryvich, Blezun, Poppotic, and "Smith," no one knew who "Smith" really was.) They had a list of cases attached to those names two feet long. They had physical evidence, circumstantial evidence, financial evidence, electronic evidence.

What they didn't have was any clue (beyond somewhere on the East Coast, maybe, probably, ish) of their perps were.

The FBI came back to him saying that if they put their computers on it, they could, if they get lucky, turn up with someone on the facial recognition software anytime between now and the end of time.

So, after hearing that, a little before noon on Monday, Tony heads down to Cybercrime.

It's buzzing away down there. He can hear fingers clicking, dull music through earbuds, the sound of two Minions playing something… When did they get an X-box One down here? Yet alone sofas? He knew McGee was going to change the place up, but… He sees the Caf-Pow dispenser on the far wall and smiles.

Looks like McGee found a way to get Abby down here.

He follows the far wall toward Tim's office, and sees him in there. He knocks on the door, and Tim glances up at him, looking… really tired.

"You okay?"

"Hmm?" And distracted, he's looking really distracted as he says, "Oh, yeah. What's up?"

Of course, Tim gets that way when he's into his code up to his elbows, so… maybe this is just him working hard. Tony explains his facial recognition software issues.

"And you're what? Hoping I can do it faster?" Tim's actually sounding really testy to go with tired.

Tony shuts the door. "Really, are you okay?"

Tim shakes his head. "Fine. Just… No. If the FBIs on it, I can't do it faster. They've got more resources to throw at the problem, and this is a resource problem."

"Tim? Screw the case for a second. What's up? Or is it classified?"

He shakes his head again. "No. It's not a work thing. It's… I don't even know who we're telling… Gibbs and Jimmy because we told them at Bootcamp, but…"

Tony's feeling cold down his back. "What?"
Tim doesn't look at him as he says, "On Saturday morning, the pregnancy test was positive, and today she started her period... or miscarried. We don't know. According to her doc, this early on, there's no way to tell. Could have been a false positive."

"Oh, shit, Tim." Tony closes in on him and puts his hand on Tim's shoulder.

"It's not the end of the world. It's not Jimmy and Breena and Jon. We barely had time to get excited about it, but... It's really, really disappointing."

"God, yeah... Shit!"

Tim nods, slowly. "Yeah. It's really common. And, like... I mean if we weren't using the most sensitive test out there, we probably would have never known. But, we did know, so, it hurts."

"I'm so sorry."

Tim nods. "I know."

"How's Abby?"

He sighs, and shrugs. "'Bout me." Tim shakes his head. "It's not a good day to be a lab tech."

"She's here?"

"Stay home and dwell on it, or work it away here, helping to catch bad guys and give someone else a good day. I think we're both quitting early, though, spend some extra time cuddling Kelly."

Tony nods at that.

"You want me to tell Jimmy?"

Tim shakes his head. "Already made lunch plans with him."

"Okay."

"You can tell Ziva, too. We'll be okay, but, just sad and disappointed right now."

Tony nods. Hugs him, fast. "I really am sorry for you."

"I know. Wish I could solve your problem for you."

"Don't worry about it. We'll wait for the FBI."

Tim manages a limp smile for him. "I should get back to..."

"I'm out of here." So, in addition to so frustrated by waiting he wants to chew his own arm off, Tony's got a good dose of sad for his friends. He makes a quick detour to the lab, and sees that Abby is off. Everything about her right now is depressed and droopy. (If she still had ponytails, they'd be drooping.)

"Hey Abby."

"What do you need, Tony?" She's also sounding sharp and prickly. He can see the LabTechs staring at her, wondering what on earth is wrong with their Boss today. He knows they don't know, and he's sure Abby doesn't want them to know.
He smiles at her and opens his arms. "The case is kicking my ass, and I need a hug." She rolls her eyes, not in a hug mood, but he wiggles his finger in a come here manner, and she does, wrapping her arms around him, him wrapping his around her. When she gets into his arms, he whispers in her ear, "And Tim tells me you need one, too."

She sniffs at that, swallows hard.

He kisses her ear and once more whispers, "I'm so sorry."

She nods, melting against him for a moment. Then she pulls back from him. "Better?"

"Yeah. I needed that. So, you got anything interesting for me?"

"AFIS linked in three more cases."

"Anything that breaks Bishop's pattern?"

Abby shakes her head. "Nope. Judging by how busy these guys are, I'd say this is the main hit squad on the East Coast for the Russian Mafia."

"Lovely."

"Any idea why they're so careless about leaving fingerprints around?" Abby asks, and he can feel her focusing in on the case as a distraction.

"Bishop thinks it might be part of the message. She called it, 'The Dread Pirate Roberts' effect."

Abby perks up slightly at that. "Everyone knows the Dread Pirate Roberts leaves no survivors, but somehow the rumor has to spread, and these prints is how they're build their reputation."

"That's her idea. Not sure how well it's supposed to work on people who aren't cops, but maybe that's the idea, keep the cops nervous about going up against them."

"I guess." Abby thinks about that for a second. "Could be darker. If the Russian Mob's as connected as they're supposed to be, see those prints and you start losing evidence and you put the D Team on the case."

Tony hates that idea, but it's plausible.

"You have anything new?" Abby asks.

He shakes his head. "Waiting for facial ID. Waiting for McKenna and Heyn to surface. Just, waiting. Trying not to channel Gibbs looking for Ari."

She nods at that.

"Okay. I'll get back to it. Thanks for the hug."

She nods again.

More waiting.

Tony hates waiting. This is possibly months of waiting, for what might be a hint of a guy walking through a mall ten months ago.
He hates the fact that he can't tell Rob and Maryanne Tishuccia that they've got the men who killed their daughter, son-in-law, and grandson. Telling them that their family was in the wrong place at the wrong time was bad, having no answers for them is worse.

He hates the fact that they can't find Heyn or McKenna, either. If they could find them, they could sit on them and wait for the next attempt on them. Then swoop in and grab everyone all up at once. But even with everyone BOLOed out the eyes, they're getting nothing.

Not exactly a shock. Sure they've got to be driving something big enough to move their pills. But they're basically a walking ATM. Scrape up enough cash to get into a club with a handful of pills. Come on out again with a pile of new cash. No financial pings. No electronic pings. (Because the first damn thing they probably bought with their pile of cash was a mess of burner phones.)

Nothing.

No one likes working with the DEA. As Federal Agencies go, they're only one step above the IRS when it comes to having a reputation for being flaming assholes. However, Hallahan, appears to be a decent guy, and, much to Tony's surprise, is waiting for him in the bullpen on Tuesday morning.

Smiling.

"Guess who got word of a big player on the E market coming into town looking to move a lot of product."

"Are you for real?" Tony asks, feeling himself relax for the first time in days.

Hallahan nods, grinning. "It's even the right sort. Snake-eyes!" Heyn and McKenna had stamped their pills with a little set of die showing snake eyes.

"Thank you."

"Now, look. I know you want them for bait, but if they get away, and I don't get a bust on them, not only will my ass be in a sling, but I'm going to hunt you down and stick yours in one."

"We'll keep track of them. Where's it supposed to happen?"

Hallahan sighs. "At a club, where else? A hot, trendy, young place that you and I can't get into." If Hallahan's a day under forty-five, Tony wouldn't believe it. Neither of them are young or hip anymore. And while it's true that he'd much rather have experienced hands for something like this, at the very least he's got people who are young and can probably fake hip.

"Lucky for you, I've got some hot, young things on tap."

Both of them look at Bishop, on her desk, drawing more dots on her map, and Draga, walking into the office.

"We're going undercover!" Bishop's so excited she's about ready to pop. Draga's only marginally cooler. It's like every single James Bond fantasy is about to come true, for both of them.

"Yes, you are, but on a tight leash. There's exactly three things I want you two doing. Do not arrest them. Do not let them know you're watching them. The whole goal of this is to get a bug on one or both of them, preferably on their car as well," Tony says after sharing Hallahan's bounty.
"Cool! Oh… do we have micro RFID trackers? We could buy some of the E, stick the trackers on the bills. They're selling because they're unloading and getting ready to run, so they'll probably keep the money with them, right?"

"And if we can get one on the car, and maybe… How big are those things?" Draga asks.

"The ones we used at the NSA were smaller than a grain of rice. Brush up against someone's coat or something, and they'd never find it tucked into a fold or pocket. The ones we used on the money, well, you know those strips in the bills, we'd yank 'em out and stick one of our own in."

Draga's grinning at that. "Good. So it's a club, people will be dancing, rub up against one of them—"

"They probably won't be on the dance floor," Tony says, seeing both Draga and Bishop stare at him like he's a million years old and probably couldn't identify a club if he tripped on one. "They're there to move a lot of product. Pounds and pounds of it. This isn't the sort of thing you do slipping pills and bills to each other."

That seems to make a distressing amount of sense to them.

"So, yes," Tony continues, "You are going to arrange a buy. The RFIDs on the bills sounds like a good plan. Got to talk to Abby to see if we can get them on there in a way that won't stick out, and if we have them, plus get you two all suited up for the job. Ziva and I are going to get their car, and if there's a chance for it, Ziva'll lift one of their phones, and get a tracker in there, too."

Ziva nods, Child's play on her face.

"And then we hope Fedoryvich, "Smith," Blezun, and Poppotic go after them again?" Draga asks.

"And then we hope. And when they do, we sweep in and grab everyone."

Bishop thinks for a moment. "Um…" She's biting her lip, looking nervous and resolved. "Judging on what we found in the house, how do we sweep in without ending up in a firefight?"

"You're qualified on a pistol and a rifle, correct?" Tony asks her. She had said she had all her FLETC proficiencies, but double checking is always a good thing.

"Well, yes, but…" She's looking a little green at the idea of a shoot-out.

"Hopefully the 'You're surrounded, give up,' technique works. If it doesn't, then we'll all be wearing vests, making sure we've got good cover, and going in and taking them out," Tony says.

"You don't think they're going to go after them at the club, do you?" Draga asks.

"Nope," Bishop says. "Way too messy. The only thing, besides connections to the Russian Mob, that all of their vics have in common is they were hit at home or in a hotel room. These guys aren't going to storm a club with two hundred other people."

Tony's pleased by that. "But…" he says, hopefully leading her on.

Bishop's thinking, but Draga catches it first. "But if they're hooked in like we are, and they probably are, they'll be watching the club, too, waiting for them to move, get alone, and then go in."

Tony smiles. "Exactly right, Flyboy. So, hunting for them is what Ziva and I are going to be doing while you're in getting trackers on Heyn and McKenna. If we can grab them before they go after our favorite E dealers, all the better. Then we can grab our favorite E dealers sweet and easy as you
"All right!"

"So, what's the club?" Draga asks.

"Unity," Tony replies and sees Bishop light up and Draga's face drop. "What?"

"Ravers," Draga replies, looking like he's sucking on a lemon.

"Oh, come on. This'll be fun!"

"We're not going in to party!"

"I know. But the music will be—"

"Crap. Electronic, overloud, crap."

"Eric!"

"It's crap!"

Tony cuts in, "We can talk about the music later, or better yet, never. Club opens at midnight. I want both of you going home, get some rest, back here at nine, with whatever the hell it is you wear to a rave already on."

"Good Lord." Tony is not, no matter what McGee might think, a prude. He's just not. And in any other circumstance, he'd probably appreciate what Bishop's wearing. But, well, it's lingerie. From everything he can tell, she left her outfit at home and just showed up in white thigh high boots and her undies.

They're really snazzy undies. White bra with little sparkly things all over it. White boy shorts panties, with more little sparkly things (spelling out LOVE on her butt) and dangly sliver chains looping around the waistband on the front. But they're still undies.

"You look perfect, Bishop." Abby says. "We don't have any white glasses with a camera in them… So…" She's rummaging through their gear. "I know! You okay with pony tails?"

"Sure." Her hair had been down.

"Okay, let's get your hair up. I can get a mic hidden in your ponytail holder." Abby pulls her hair into two high ponytails and leaves a few wisps by each ear. Then she hands Bishop an earwig. "That goes in, and then off to ballistics to do a sound test."

Tony's watching her set Bishop up. "So you're saying you can't get eyes on her?"

"I don't have anything that'll look right. And if these guys are as nervous as they should be, they'll notice if something is off. But," she holds up a pair of thick-rimmed, black, hipster glasses, "Draga'll have these on. We'll be good. Speaking of Draga, where is he?"

Ziva prods him into the lab at that. "Here," he says, sounding sulky.

They all look at him.

"I hate raves. I hate ravers. I hate neon."
"Yeah, you're the poster boy for Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect." Bishop says as she heads out. "Abby, how about you come. You're almost dressed for it, and I know you've done this before."

Abby smiles a bit at that, looking more like herself. "Not tonight, not for me. And Eric, you look fine." He does look fine. He's wearing a pair of sneakers, black jeans loose enough that the top inch of his boxers is showing, black light paint highlighting his tattoo and on his lips, and that's it. "Okay, let's get you geared up. Now you're the only one who's going to have visual contact, so remember, you're the one who's making sure that everyone else can see what's going on. You'll both have sound, but you're eyes."

"Great."

Abby got him wired up, tested his sound and visuals, and declared everything was good. Then she took them to the next level. "Okay, we've got cash. One out of every five of these bills has an RFID tracker on it." She shows them two pacifiers on necklaces. "These also have trackers on them. If you get a chance, drape them around McKenna or Heyn's neck. They're waterproof, so you can use them yourself."

"Are those Kelly's?" Ziva asks. She's wiring herself up, and getting into her (modified) stealth-ninja garb. No one's going to see her tonight. But, in that she's swapped out her usual black cargo pants for tight black jeans, and the extra warm, padded, pocket studded black sweater for a black leather jacket, if she needs to pretend to be part of the party for a minute, she won't look too off.

"They were going to be, hadn't opened them yet, so it's not like they've got baby drool on them."

"Okay."

Draga picks one up, stares at it, eyes narrow, and shakes his head. "Ravers," he says it like a slur.

Bishop grabs the pink one with the unicorn on it and drapes it over her neck.

Abby touches one last prop. They just look like strips of little stickers. Half of them are little sparkly bits of plastic that will catch the light, half are neon smiley faces. She hands one strip to Draga and one to Bishop. "RFID stickers. Peel it off, pop it on McKenna or Heyn, and you're good to go. They're really sticky, so they'll stay put."

"Can you loosen up at all?" Bishop asks Draga as they wait in line to get into Unity.

"I am loose."

"Uh huh. You're standing at attention. I'd hate to see you at a party."

Tony and Ziva are in the command center van. About two streets back, one block over. They've got a good view of the Unity parking lot through the window, and a great view of everything through the cameras they put up earlier today.

Tony can hear some movement, and the angle of Draga's camera shifts. Tony assumes that means that Draga's getting 'loose.'

Tony covers his microphone and says to Ziva, who's watching the feeds to see when McKenna and Heyn get here, and more importantly what they're driving. "Now I know why Gibbs had white hair." Then he uncovers it and says, "I can hear you two, you know?"

Bishop's hanging on Draga, and he's looking better, but still really stiff and uncomfortable. She
wraps her arm around him and kisses his ear, saying. "Look, we're buyers, right?"

"Uh huh."

"Okay. Not anymore. I'm ditzy arm candy, just here to party. You're Mr. Serious Buyer on a mission. You keep them paying attention to you, and I'm going to be drunk and flirty and falling all over everyone."

"I can do that."

"Good."

"Got them!" Ziva says, pointing out a non-descript Toyota Camry that's riding just a bit too low.

Tony nods, switching the car to his main feed, secondary feed to the door of the club. (Bishop and Draga are now three places from getting in.) Ziva gets a third feed up, locking Heyn's face in place, so the camera will follow it where ever it goes in range.

She zips up the leather jacket and gets ready for part one of their plan.

Tony squeezes her hand and gives her a quick kiss. She smiles back at him and heads out.

He stares at the image of Heyn on the feed, watching carefully. Like Bishop, she's in a warm coat, and probably not much else. Once they get inside, it'll be hot, but out here it's in the high thirties, so everyone is bundled up.

"Left pocket's hanging lower than the right," he says to Ziva.

Ziva brushes by Heyn, a ghost, snagging her cell quickly, adding one of Abby's stickers to it, and putting it back into her pocket before she knows anyone was ever near.

"Done," Ziva says as she heads to the parking lot.

"They're in line, about a hundred people behind you," Tony says to Bishop and Draga.

He sees Draga's video feed bob up and down, must be nodding. "Great!" Bishop says, all perky and bubbly and cute.

Tony fiddles with the tracking software, map of the area coming up, all of the trackers are live, but most of them are in the money, in the trunk of Bishop and Draga's car, some of them are on Bishop, the pacifier and the stickers, more stickers on Draga, and one, he highlights that one, lets the computer know to keep track of that one, is on Heyn's phone.

"Onto the car," Ziva says. This is the tricky bit. If "Smith", Fedoryvich, Popotic, and Blezun are also in on this, and are waiting for a shot to grab Heyn and McKenna, they're likely also watching the car. So if they see Ziva toss a tracker on it, they are going to get suspicious.

They'd debated about which was the better way to do it, make sure they saw her do it, but make it look like nothing had happened. Or have her do a full on ghost routine.

The parking lot dictated how it would go. It's brightly lit, the spaces are wide, and there are about five hundred spots where you can camp out and get a great view of everything that's going on. It's the ultimate stealth nightmare.

So, step two on the car involves Ziva shifting from one form of ghost, dark, subtle, silent, to another.
Drunk party girl heading back to her own car. She's swaying, stumbling, fumbling for her keys in her purse, and with an exaggerated action, pulls them out, overbalances herself, and topples to the ground right behind Heyn's car. She crawls around on the cold ground, trying to grab her keys, missing the first few times, (and in the process tucking two RFID tags onto the car) and then finally gets herself standing, staggers over to a car, puts her key in, turns it, and "finds out she's at the wrong car" a moment later, she does find the right one, gets in, pulls back way too fast, rear ends one of the other cars in the lot (Tony makes a note of the tags, they'll reimburse the owner) and peels out of there.

He can't see the way she's driving, but he's sure she won't drive "sober" until she's a good mile away.

"Ziva's clear. Looked great."

"Of course. Did you catch anyone watching?"

"No. But, like we noticed before, there's more vantage points on that parking lot than there are of home plate in a baseball stadium."

She chuckles at that. "Back in a few minutes."

"And we're in!" Bishop says with a giggle. "Okay, drinks first, then dancing, then…" She sounds so cute and fun.

Draga lets himself get pulled to the bar, where Bishop holds up a finger, bopping around to the music, already moving to it.

Bartender sees her. And she shouts over the music, "White Russian, and for Mr. Boring over there, Dewars."

The bartender nods, and she places a fifty on the bar.

A minute later she shoots back her White Russian and puts the empty shot glass on the table.

"Bishop…" She hears Tony say in her earwig.

"Come on, Babe!" He sees Draga lift his, but it looks completely full when it goes back down. "Oh, Lord, you just really are no fun. Here." She shoots his back, too. "Come on, dancing!" She pulls him onto the dance floor, and once she's draped over him, she says quietly, so Tony and Draga can here. "Cops can't drink on duty, right? Well, look, I'm not a cop."

"They can't drink because you're not supposed to be working drunk," Tony says, sternly.

"No problem. I can't get drunk."

"What?" Both Tony and Draga say it.

"Just, can't. Same reason I can eat all day and not get fat. My metabolism is insane. Seriously, an hour from now, you can breathalyse me, and I'll come up clear."

"Really?" Tony asks.

"Yep!" She's dancing close and wild, hands and body free and exuberant, but she quietly says, "As soon as we're in and we approach them, I'll have another drink in hand and be sucking it down. Probably buy them a round, too. Wanna be good hosts, right?"
Eventually, McKenna and Heyn come in. They don't get drinks. They don't hit the dance floor. They grab a table, and settle in.

Bishop and Draga continue to dance, watching different people head over to them, quiet deals being made. Twice McKenna gets up, heads out of the club, while Heyn sits with whomever was with the buyer, chatting.

After the third buy, they decide to go in.

Draga heads back to the bar, one thing he's noticed is that everyone who heads over brings drinks, so they'll bring drinks, too.

Bishop is sipping hers as they head over, and sits down next to Heyn. Eric slides into the booth next to McKenna.

McKenna and Heyn just stare at them. "Booth's occupied," McKenna says.

Eric looks at them, then looks at Bishop. "Goddamn, Babe, did you notice there were people sittin' here!" Then he turns to McKenna. "We're here because the booth is occupied, specifically because it's occupied by you, and we'd like to see about doing some business."

Heyn raises an eyebrow.

McKenna shakes his head. "Wrong booth. We're here to party, not do any sort of business."

"Uh huh," Draga says, sounding cool and bored. "Don't let the paint fool you, I'm not nearly as stupid as this looks. You're here to party," he pushes the drinks toward them, "which is why she's been sitting here all night, and you only get up after having a chat with someone, agreeing to a price and an amount. If that's a party, it's awfully lame. If it's a business, though…"

McKenna and Heyn look at each other, some sort of silent communication going on between them. Then McKenna says, "So, you're the brains; who's pretty girl then?"

Bishop giggles. "Watch. Eric." She stands up and he does, too. She takes one of the little stickers, they're about pill shaped, and he gets where she's going with this. He's got a bill in his pocket which rapidly ends up in his hand.

She kisses him the sticker while palming the bill, tidily tucking it into her boot. Then she sits back down, so cute, right next to Heyn, and puts another sticker onto Heyn's shoulder, kissing it, taking another drink. "I'm distribution. You don't think I'm wearing these boots because they're comfortable, do you? And honey, let's put it this way, these" she gestures to her breasts, "look great in this bra, but they're not really that big. Got a lot of room for a really good time in there. And no one gets strip searched at a place like this, so they don't ever find the goods."

"Uh huh." McKenna doesn't look impressed. "Goodbye, Smalltime," he says, waving at the door.

Bishop pouts and throws herself in his lap while Draga bristles. "Smalltime?" He pulls up his phone and pulls up a shot. It's the trunk of their car, in the trunk is a gym bag filled with nicely stacked bills. "Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars." (All the cash NCIS could scrape up on ten hours' notice.)

McKenna shakes his head and pinches Bishop's butt. "God, you two are cute, but I don't get out of this booth for under a million. Come back when you're ready to play."

Bishop pouts at him again, looking very cute and very determined. She drapes her pacifier over his
neck and says, "Fine. You don't want our money, we're gone!" Then she gets up, very huffy, intentionally wobbling on her feet, and heads off. "Coming, Eric?"

Draga's stuck, he wants at least one more tracker on them. He feels around in his pocket and finds the matchbook he'd grabbed earlier and gets a sticker on it. He writes his name and number on it. "On the off chance you change your mind. My money spends just as well as theirs does."

McKenna rolls his eyes but takes the matchbook.

He's dancing with Bishop, well into the middle of the crowd when he feels safe to say, "Now what?"

"Leave them be. Get eyes on anyone who's buying. DEA'll like that. Ziva got their car, you got trackers on them, it's good enough," Tony says. The whole time he was watching them run the buy attempt he was halfway between wanting to shout directions in their ears and stay silent, afraid that they'd startle or spook or, God, worse, McKenna or Heyn might hear a whisper of his voice.

Silent won. He didn't want either of them looking like they were hearing voices in their head while they made the deal.

"Should we approach someone who looks like they made a successful buy?" Bishop asks.

"Sure," Tony says. DEA'll like that even better and it'll make them look even less like cops.

They dance for an hour, scanning the crowd, watching McKenna get up and head outside with two more men. One of whom did come back into the crowd to party and celebrate. And who they were able to buy two hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of Snake Eyes from.

Bishop sat there, smiling at McKenna and Heyn, waving, as Draga heads out into the parking lot, taking care of the actual sale.

Heyn heads over to her, which surprises Bishop, but she tries to keep it off her face. Heyn's holding a pill on her fingertip, looks like a Snake Eyes. "Could have sworn you were a cop."

Bishop snags the pill and downs it, giggling. "Why would you say that?" What the hell are you doing!? Tony's yelling in her ear. He can't see what she's up to, but obviously he's got a feel for something going on.

"Because we know every buyer here, and we don't know you."

"Your damn loss. Wanna dance?"

Heyn shakes her head. "We'll be in town for two more days. You come by any more cash, come see us. We'll give you a better price than Green did."

"Sure." Heyn heads off, and Bishop heads into the center of the room. She's not feeling weird, yet, but she's guessing that she's got, at most, ten minutes before her body starts dissolving the tab. One song. She's going to dance for one song, then she's hitting the head and throwing up.

Yes, it's true she can't get drunk, but she's got no idea what'll happen to her if she gets any real dose of E in her system.

"Bishop, what did you just do?" Tony's asking in her ear, again.

"You don't want to know," she sings along with the music.
"Draga get back in there."

"I'm fine. Nothing I can't handle."

"If you test positive for E, your job is over."

"Uh huh." She starts bopping toward the ladies' room. There's a line. Fuck that. She stumbles into
the men's room, retching, and the guys clear a path for her as she stumbles/runs to one of the stalls.

She's not a fan of throwing up, and throwing up booze is no fun at all, but the pill comes up, too, and
it's in good shape. She staggers out, looking disheveled, a little embarrassed, but able to pass as just
another drunk party girl. (Probably because she's in a men's room filled with drunk guys.)

Draga's scanning the room for her. He knows where she is, the com links are making sure of that.
But the character he's playing doesn't.

She waves to him. He smiles and waves at her. She nods. Waves back to Heyn and McKenna, and
the two of them leave. After all, job's done, they got their goods, why stick around?

Tony watches them make it to their car, feeling like he's got to have a very long, very detailed, very
explicit conversation with Bishop about what the hell is appropriate behavior when undercover.

Ziva, on the other hand, is awfully impressed. "She would have done well in Mossad."

"Yeah, great. You guys didn't have any rules. She gets hit with a random piss test anytime in the next
year or two…"

"She will be fine. She got the pill up before it could do any harm…" He's watching Heyn and
McKenna's car. (DEA was going to be thrilled with them, they have five buys on camera now.)
Someone… "Do you think that's Blezun?"

Ziva squints at the feed. Right general shape and size. He's also doing the drunk partier routine, and
like Ziva conveniently "trips" next to Heyn's car.

"Oh shit!" Tony says quietly. "Ziva…"

"I'm on him."

"Guys, things just got interesting. Blezun just planted a bomb under Heyn and McKenna's car. He
did it fast and easy, so it's a remote detonator, not hard-wired in, which means he's got to stay close
enough to set it off. Ziva's following him. Draga, get to her for backup. Bishop, I want you back in
the club, if I say go, I want you to pull the fire alarm and get those people out of there."

"On it." "Got it." Came from Bishop and Draga.

"Ziva, I've still got eyes on him, he's heading back toward the parking garage across the street.
Draga, what's your ETA for Ziva?"

"Less than a minute."

"Good. You got vest on?"

Tony can hear fast breathing, and the feed on Draga's camera is bouncing up and down, then for a
second everything goes black, and he hears the ripping sound of Velcro. "Just pulled it on. You want
Tony the husband wants him right on Ziva's ass. Tony the cop, the leader, has an idea of what might be going on, there's a white van on the third floor of the parking garage facing this parking lot. He can't see in, the street lights and garage lights are reflecting into the glass, making it opaque, but his gut is saying that's where to go.

"Third floor, parking garage. White van overlooking the club's lot. That's where I think he's going. Ziva, you have eyes on him?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'm going blind right now." He gets into the front seat of his van, grabbing the sniper rifle they have in their inventory. It takes a second but he gets it set so he's got focus on the van, thanking God that they picked a spot where they could actually see the Unity parking lot, and by extension, the parking garage next to it. "And I've got eyes on the van. Blezun still heading in that direction?"

"Yes he is," Ziva answers.

"So, what's the plan? We follow him, close in, and ask them to surrender?" Draga asks.

"No. You are going to find a nice spot somewhere on the third floor where you've got a clean shot at that van. Ziva is going to follow him, close in, and ask him or them to surrender, and when he just about wets his pants laughing, I am going to very nearly miss his head with a bullet. If he or they don't surrender then, things are going to get sticky. But if he goes for a gun, you kill him. Got it."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Ziva?"

"Entering the parking garage, heading for the elevator. I'm hanging back. Draga?"

"Just got to the third floor. Bishop?"

"Just got back in, looking for a fire alarm."

"He's in the elevator. The three is lit up."

"You want me to ask him to surrender?" Draga says. "I'm in position."

Tony wishes that he could keep aim on the van and still see from Draga's camera. A quick glimpse of who is in there and where would be worth its weight in gold. "No, let him get to the van. Better yet, try to see who's in the van. They aren't going to blow up the car until McKenna and Heyn are in it. They'll probably want to follow it until it's out of range of a whole lot of other people. They'll stick around for at least a few more minutes, long enough for Ziva to go in."

"Okay." Draga says, "Elevator just binged. Doors are opening. I've got eyes on him. He's coming toward the van…"

Tony scans his scope toward the elevator. "Got him." He watches Blezun head to the van, open the doors, and, yes, he can see Fedoryvich, in the far back for a second. "Smith" and Poppotic must be in the front seat, that is, if they're there at all. He gets a quick glimpse of a shit ton of guns, and what looks like a lot of electronics before the van door closes.

"You see that?" Draga asks Tony.
"Yes. They're in there with enough firepower to take out France. Ziva?"

"Entering the elevator right now."

"Bishop?"

"I've got the fire alarm. DiNozzo, how do I keep them from all flooding out toward the bomb?"

_Shit_, Tony hadn't thought about that. "Only reason I want you to pull it is if McKenna and Heyn try to leave. I'm hoping that with that much potential collateral damage they won't pull the trigger until after McKenna and Heyn are well out of range."

"Hope you're right."

"Me too! Ziva?"

"Elevator just stopped, doors are opening."

"I've got eyes on her, DiNozzo, and a clear shot on the van. Wish I had more than a pistol on me."

"You and me both." Ziva clears a truck, and Tony spies her in his scope. "Got you in my sights."

"You always do." Ziva says back. She raises her voice, pulls her gun, and calls out, "Fedoryvich …"

"Draga."

"Yeah, DiNozzo?"

"Tires, now." Tony says a quick prayer, hopes he's as good at this as he thinks he is, and then pulls the trigger, twice, fast, and watches the front tires of the van sink low. Less than a second later he hears two more shots and sees the back end of the trunk sink down.

Ziva's still saying… actually, he doesn't know what she's saying, it's in Russian. But he's pretty sure that it's some variety of come out unarmed with your hands up, you're surrounded.

He catches just the tip of the muzzle (thank God for 10/20 vision) peeking out from the front, passenger side window, pointing toward Ziva. He can't see inside, the lights from the parking lot and garage are still, even two inches lower, reflecting off the glass, but he's got about two tenths of a second before something very, very bad happens, so he fires again, straight through the windshield, about where he assumes a head would be for someone holding the sort of gun that barrel probably goes with.

The barrel jerks, falls back into the van as the windshield shatters, but holds in place. He's got no idea if he hit anyone, but there's no longer a gun pointing at Ziva, (that he can see.)

She's saying something else, still in Russian, but this time he hears a voice respond, also in Russian, and though he wants to see, he's not about to take his aim off the van.

"They're moving out of the van," she says. "Draga, to me, keep the door in sight."

"Got it."

She's barking orders in Russian again, and this time three of them come out, and line up next to the van, where he's got a perfect line of fire on them. Ziva holds her gun on them, too. "Draga, cuff them."
He sees Draga nod, and tuck his gun back into his pants.

"Stand down, Bishop."

"Okay. You want me back in the van?"

"Do you have eyes on McKenna and Heyn?"

"Yes."

"No, stay in the club right now. Keep eyes on them."

He can see Draga cuffing the other three. "Where's number four?" he asks Ziva.

"They say he is dead." She moves around to the side of the van, and looks in through the passenger's side window. He can see her nod. "Clean head shot."

"That's a miracle. From here, I can't see through the windshield."

Ziva says something in Hebrew. Sounds like a prayer. He adds a quick Amen to her words.

"All secure. Everyone is cuffed."

"Good. I'll be up there in a few minutes."

And in a few minutes he did get up there, with the van, to collect Fedoryvich, Blezun, and "Smith." And once collected, (and cuffed to each other, and to the steel bar in the back of the van. They aren't going anywhere.) he called Hallahan, explained exactly what they had done, and that they still had eyes on McKenna and Heyn.

"I'll be there with my guys as soon as I can."

"Good."

They didn't process the scene for the shooting, or do anything besides sit tight. He wants to maintain custody of everything right now. But, he also doesn't want ten thousand cops spooking McKenna and Heyn.

It took half an hour, but Hallahan gets to the scene. He's got a few plain clothes people with him, and they get into position to follow McKenna and Heyn.

An hour later, when it was getting onto five, the club was ready to close. Bishop radioed in. "Crowd's thinning out, they're going to notice me if I stick around much longer."

"Okay, get out of there. Hallahan's guys are watching for McKenna and Heyn."

So, Bishop heads out, wrapped in her coat, and eventually makes her way back to the parking garage.

She sees their van, and the blood, bullet holes, bullets, and broken glass all over the parking garage and is very glad it's three stories up and not in anyone's direct line of sight from the ground.

From up there, she has a very good view of six DEA agents swarming on McKenna and Heyn as soon as they get out of the club.
And as soon as they moved, Tony has his phone to his ear. "Ducky, hi. Yeah, I know it's early. We need you here." Then he makes the next call to Vance. He updates Vance on everything that happened, reports the shooting, and requests the correct IA auditors to come and make sure it was a clean shoot.

"Does IA always come in?" Bishop asks.

He nods. "Any time one of us kills someone, there's an investigation. Just saves a lot of time and trouble."

He looks at Bishop, shivering in her coat. Temp's dropped during the night, can't be much above fifteen degrees right now.

"Go home. Get some rest. They'll be debriefing us until at least lunch time today. Bright and early tomorrow morning, these guys go to interrogation and you get to see what happens."

"Okay."

She turns toward the car that she and Draga had been using.

"Bishop," her name from Tony stops her dead. "Before you go. Coffee, donuts, more coffee, something with some protein in it for the three of us. We need food and we need to be awake to talk to IA."

"No problem!"

And eventually she was back.

And eventually IA questioned them, and processed the scene while Ducky and Jimmy took care of the body.

And eventually, not long after what should have been lunch Tony, Ziva, and Draga got to go home.

Right now, the official verdict hasn't been reached, but it was a clean shot, he knows that, and he knows IA's going to find that way.

Eventually they got Blezun, Fedoryvich, and "Smith" into custody and processed.

And eventually, they went home, and he and Ziva fell into bed, wrapped in each other's arms, and slept like the dead until the alarm went off at 6:05, the way it usually does.

Eventually there was questioning, but it didn't amount to much. Tony knows how to read the prison tats. These guys have already been through everything the Russians had to offer (including Siberia) and didn't talk. He's got nothing to scare them with.

So they sit there, silent, not even asking for a lawyer, refusing to say anything.

And once he's got them arraigned on everything they've got on them, he hands custody over to the FBI.

And that was the first full case for Team DiNozzo, and all in all, he'd say it was a job well done.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: And yes, we will back track to see what Gibbs has been up to and get the story of what happened with Abby and McGee. Just wanted to get a good Tony-centric case fic out there.
January 18th Gibbs woke up at exactly the same time he did every morning. He'd gotten up, eaten breakfast, exercised, gotten two-thirds through the usual shit, shower, shave routine when, reaching for the shaving cream, he realized he didn't have to shave, because he doesn't have to go to work.

Because he's not a cop.

Not anymore.

And for all the dreading, for all the not wanting to be here, for talking about it with Rachel, for mentioning it to the kids, standing there, in his shower, water rushing over his back, shaving cream in hand, it still hits like a punch to the gut.

He's not a cop.

He doesn't have to go anywhere today.

He doesn't have anything to do.

The case, the case he was on, the case that the paperwork wasn't done on… Doesn't matter. It's done for him.

Tony and Ziva and Draga are on their own today. No they aren't. NSA Girl is starting today, sitting at his desk, filling out the forms, maybe going on her first case.

Whatever happens, he's not finding out about it until later. Maybe not until Shabbos on Friday.

Because he's not a cop. He doesn't work at NCIS, not any more.

It's a kneejerk move. One that he didn't think through. He just did it.

"Hello, Ruby Lemere?"

"This is Ruby."

"Hi. This is Jethro Gibbs, I don't know if…"

"I remember you Agent Gibbs. I'm sure Dex does, too. What's going on, something with the case?"

It's been two years since her husband's case closed, three years since the investigation ended, but things come back up again sometimes.

"No. Nothing like that, at all… In fact… I'm retired now. No more cases for me. I've got time on my hands. I'll be home at a sensible hour every night, and I was wondering if you could tell me about what happens to military dogs once they can't serve any more."

He thinks he feels a smile in her voice as she says, "Sure, Agent Gibbs."

"You can call me Jethro or Gibbs."

"Did you want to talk on the phone, or do you have time to get some coffee?"

"I've got time coming out my ears right now."
He's always liked dogs. His internal mental image of 'home' had a dog in it. But they moved around so much, and there was no guarantee they'd be somewhere hospitable for a dog, so they didn't get one.

It's not a kindness to get something that needs a lot of space to run around and then end up stuffing it in a tiny apartment for six months or a year. That's a recipe for a miserable dog. (Doesn't necessarily make for happy humans, either, but that wasn't something he and Shannon ever really talked about.)

And, of course, his mental image of "dog" is something that did need space to run around. Dogs are large, occasionally slobbery, sometimes smelly, critters that like a lot of exercise and running around. Dogs keep you company when you go on your morning run. Dogs guard your home and can take down an intruder. Chihuahuas, most terriers, Corgis (shudder) and the like are, according to Gibbs, cats. (Strange, temperamental beasts that appeal to women for reasons he does not understand. In case this is not clear, Gibbs is not a cat person. He doesn't much like them, and previous experience tells him the feeling is mutual.)

And, as he was looking for Ruby's contact information, it was hitting him, he's got the house, he's got the space, he's certainly got the time, so why not get the dog to go with all of it?

Same house, though it feels different. The ripping ache of immediate mourning is gone. There are some signs of moving on, though nothing to indicate a new husband or even boyfriend, yet.

Three of those signs bound up to him as he follows Ruby into the living room, and are trying to jump up onto his legs and get petting and attention. Like Dex they're all black labs, unlike Dex, who is hanging back, watching his charges, seeing how they're behaving while keeping an eye on Gibbs, they're puppies.

"Max, Ken, Jake, down," Ruby says, firmly, smiling at Gibbs, but the puppies know they're about to get in trouble. They sit down, all around him, reluctantly, quivering, staring up at him with big brown eyes, hoping for some petting.

Gibbs looks at Ruby and asks, "May I?"

She nods, and he kneels down, making sure her three newest students all get patted. And after a minute, when he's been properly licked, sniffed, and accepted as a member of the group, they fall back from him, and return to Ruby.

"Three at once?"

"Sort of. Max lives here with me and is mine. Ken and Jake are his brothers. All three of them are training as service dogs, though Ken and Jake are learning to be seeing eye dogs. They're here today working on getting used to being in places other than their own territory."

"How old are they?"

"Three months." She gestures to the sofa, and he sits down. Once he does so, Dex ambles over, sniffs him, gives him a hello again, it's been a while sort of look, accepts some petting, and then settles next to Ruby. "Training for these guys starts young, but it also starts pretty easy, getting used to being around people, dogs, new places, and not freaking out about it. Any dog that can't handle somewhere new every day isn't going to make a good Marine."

Gibbs nods at that. "Is Dex enjoying retirement?"
Ruby smiles. "He was a little edgy for a while. Once he was all healed up, he didn't feel like he had enough to do. He's a working dog, so he expected to be working. Just laying around wasn't doing it for him, but once we got another dog to train, and he started helping with that, he began to feel better." Ruby can see he's as much asking for himself as he is for Dex. "How about you, how long have you been retired?"

Gibbs checks his watch. "Officially, three hours and thirty-seven minutes."

"They drug you out kicking and screaming," she says with a smile to soften the fact that's pretty damn close to true.

He nods. "And stuck pictures of me next to the door with a 'Do Not Let This Man On The Premises' sign."

Ruby laughs at that. "And you're interested in sharing your retirement with someone else?"

"Yeah. I've always liked dogs, but didn't have the sort of life that would be good for one before. I've got it now, might as well get the dog to go with it."

"Then why not just head over to the local rescue shelter?"

"Depending on what you've got to say, that's my next stop. But, if there's a chance of providing a good home for a Marine who needs one, I'd like to do it."

She smiles at that, too. "Marines look after their own?"

"That's the idea. So, what does happen to service dogs when they get to…" he shrugs, "my age?"

"Well, it depends on the dog. Most of them are adopted by members of their units who are also heading home. Some are too hurt, they get put down. Some go to breed-oriented rescues. But most of them, the vast majority, go home with someone they already know and trust."

Gibbs figured that was probably about how it worked. "So, I take it you don't know of a four legged Marine in need of a good home."

She shakes her head. "Not right now. Honestly, not in the whole time I've been doing this. She thinks for a few seconds. "Beyond retired Marine, what do you want in a dog?"

Gibbs thinks about that. It was a knee-jerk decision so, beyond looking for something he could help, he didn't have much idea. "Not a puppy. I'm too damn old for a puppy. Plus, I've got three human ones, so I've got enough tiny critters chewing on my stuff, making messes in my house, and drooling on me."

She looks very surprised at that. "You have babies at home?"

"Grandbabies. Youngest is five weeks old, oldest'll be two next month."

She nods, that makes more sense to her than Gibbs with little kids of his own.

"But you're a hands on granddad with three little…"

"All girls right now, got at least one in the works soon, we all hope. Lots of little people in my house. So, whatever it is, it has to be laid back enough to be good with kids. Good with a lot of adults at family gatherings."

"Three kids under two don't have the same parents?"
"Noooo! Molly and Anna, almost two and five weeks belong to one set of parents, Kelly, seven months belongs to another, kid in the works soon hopefully is yet another set of parents."

"Not kidding about a lot of people at family gatherings."

"Nope."

"So, you're looking for… a kindred spirit or sorts. Some gray around the muzzle but not done, yet? Maybe a little gruff but good with people it considers part of its pack?"

Gibbs nods.

"Do you care about what breed?"

"Not a Corgi."

She's taken aback by that. It's really specific and not a breed most people who aren't dog aficionados are familiar with.

"Bad experience with a Corgi?"

He nods. "Maybe they're fine one on one, but the ones I knew were part of a pack of eight Corgis, one senile, old woman, and my friend who did his best to not ever be home."

"That sounds like a recipe for obnoxious dogs, of any kind. Doubt they got enough running around or socialization with anyone who was a human to be good pets."

"That could be the problem. Kind of mean, nervous, yappy creatures that didn't want anyone getting too close to their owner."

She nods. "They're usually pretty sweet dogs, good with kids, but… Anyway, if you want something that's middle aged, it's a good idea to keep in mind that smaller dogs live longer than big ones. Labs, Dobies, German Shepards, they all live ten to twelve years. Little guys like Terriers can get to fifteen. Great Danes, St. Bernards, you're looking at eight to ten."

He's nodding along with that, thinking that if he is looking for something middle-aged, it'd also be nice to know that he's signing up for more than three years.

"Collies, Border Collies, Shetland Sheepdogs, Australian Shepards, they're generally okay with kids, though they may try to herd them, with as many as you expect to have, that close in age, that might be a good thing. They live in the twelve plus year range. They're working dogs, so they're alert and focused. They do like attention and a lot of exercise. They'll get fussy if all you want to do is lay around. But they're good family dogs."

"Okay."

"Labs are the quintessential family dog. Laid back, friendly, at the age you're talking about they're a whole lot less bounding around with unending energy."

"Do they like water?"

"Good water dogs. You got a pool?"

"Boat."

"Might do better with a Collie of some sort than a Lab. Not because they don't love the water, but
Labs can be… No offense to Dex here, but Labs can be pretty hit or miss on brains. Collies can be
dumb as a box of rocks, too, but it's less common. My guess is, if you're on a boat, you want
something smart enough to not leap into the water when you want them on board, and able to not be
underfoot at the wrong time.

"Yes."

Ruby gets up, grabs a piece of paper, and writes on it. Then she folds it and hands it to him. "Beth
Sanders runs a no kill shelter out of Arlington. I know she's usually got a few bigger, older dogs
hanging around looking for someone to take them home. And if she doesn't have your dog, she'll
know who does."

He stands up, taking the paper. "Thanks."

"Thank you. Would you be a one dog household?"

He shrugs. "Maybe. Don't know."

"If I ever hear of a Marine service dog in need of a home, you'll be my first call."

"Thank you. And if you do, I'll be an as many dog household as I need to be to take care of him."

Gibbs hates not having a plan. Sure, he can head straight over to the rescue. Or he can get some
lunch first. Or lunch after. Or… or sit here in his car dithering about what the hell he's going to do
with himself, because, really, this couldn't be less about food if he tried.

Food. Easier to make good decisions with a full stomach.

He's not in his usual digs so he just cruises around looking for whatever the local equivalent of his
diner is and eventually he finds something like it.

At least, it's a local-looking place with lots of cars in front. Looks like it's a café. Food's food, might
as well try it.

It's what he thinks of as a "Jimmy" place. Food on the menu looks tasty, but healthy. Really healthy.
Salads, wraps, no burgers, no fries, he's looking more carefully and notices there's no meat, which
means this is definitely not a Jimmy place. If he had to do no meat in addition to no carbs, he'd be
one malnourished guy.

But the coffee in his hand is good, and three bean soup with fresh cornbread sounds like a decent
way to warm up, and everyone around him seems to enjoy the food, so… Why not?

Everything else in life is changing. He can eat at a vegetarian restaurant for one meal.

While eating lunch (Soup's okay, kind of flat, needs some bacon or ham. The cornbread's excellent.)
he thinks more about this dog idea.

Getting a pet, something that's going to live with you for the next… five, maybe ten years on a
moment of I woke up and I don't really know what I'm doing with myself panic isn't a good plan.

Getting a pet because you're a pet person, because you're lonely, because you're used to noise and
something alive around you all the time, that's a good reason.

How would a dog do with his woodworking? He doesn't want something chewing on his tools.
More importantly how would a dog do with someone who will want hours of mostly alone time. Where it's okay if it just wants to hang out in the corner, (He's got a pretty clear mental image of one of those big pillows they sell as dog beds in the corner of his basement with a… something… that parts not clear yet, curled up on it.) but if it wants constant attention and petting, that'll be an issue.

He's also got the image of starting running again. His knee's been clear for a week now, so it's about time to add his morning run back into the workout. Having something to go with him would be good.

Would a dog want to actually run three miles? Like you're gonna run three miles first day out! Try one, maybe half. Knee's not that much better. You and whatever sort of pooch this is'll build up to it together.

Having a dog who likes water, one who's good on a boat would make traveling, and what he plans to do while traveling, easier. Extra set of eyes and ears on-board would be a good thing.

Probably scare the shit out of any girl you'd be likely to take. Lot of Islamic cultures hate dogs. 'Course, at the same time that makes you look more like sea-granddad out for a sail with one of the kids.

If you're going to do that, you'll have stuff in your house you don't want people getting into. A dog, and… hell, a lock on the door'll make a lot of sense.

He ate another bite of soup, noticing he's scraping the last drops out of the bowl, and decides, yes, a dog, assuming the right dog is out there, is a good plan.

And having really made the decision, with something more than just a knee-jerk don't want to be lonely issue, he's ready.

He leaves a twenty on the table, while punching the address Ruby gave him into his phone's GPS.

Time to find the dog!

It's loud. That's the first thing that really hits him as he heads into Sanderson's Rescue. Lots and lots of barking and woofing and yapping.

The next thing to hit is that there are three dogs, laying on the floor, just sort of quietly eyeing him as he heads in. One of them... he's got no idea what it is... It's a dog, very definitely a dog, but it's also the product of probably hundreds of generations of indiscriminate doggy sex. Four legs, medium length tail, medium size, medium length fur, two perky ears, mottled brownish gray color, yep, it's a dog. But beyond mutt, there's no categorization for this dog.

The mutt heads on over to him, gives him a sniff and looks him over.

He kneels down to pet him.

"That's Roscoe," a heavy-set woman with brown eyes and hair says.

"Hello Roscoe," he says to the dog, looking up at her, standing up, offering his hand. She shakes, firmly. "Hello, I'm Jethro Gibbs. Ruby Lemere told me that you were the person I should see about getting a dog."

Beth smiles wryly at that. "As you can hear, I've got a lot of them."
He nods.

"Beth Sanders. What kind of dog are you looking for, Jethro?"

He explains about what he's looking for, bigger than smaller, middle-aged, good with kids, good with water, good with other dogs. She's nodding along with that. "I might have a match for you. Come on out and meet Mona."

He follows Beth out of the main office, through a long hall with what looks like (to him) a collection of small holding cells, (about half of them are empty, the other half have dogs in them) though each one has a doggy bed, water bowl and food bowl in it, and most of them have some sort of toys.

"Out" is a large fenced yard where ten more dogs are running around playing with each other.

"Mona!" Beth yells, and another dog… this one he feels like he should know, she's mostly black, with a rust colored belly and chest, soft floppy ears, and a long waggy tail, trots up to them. Her face is pretty square and her coat's somewhere between short and medium length.

He holds out his hand and she sniffs at him. Not jumping up in an effusive wave of doggy love, but not standoffish either. All in all she's pretty cool.

"She's a little younger than you're asking for, four years old. But the family that had her before us had three kids, and she got on fine with them."

She's allowing herself to be petted, so Gibbs looks up from that and says, "I feel like I should know, but, what is she?"

Beth smiles. "Mona gets that a lot. Imagine upright ears and a short, upright tail."

"Oh." Once he does that, sure, he knows exactly what she is.

"She's probably, judging by her face and coat length, got some Labrador in there along with the Doberman, but we know for sure her mama was a Doberman, and her shape and coloring suggest daddy was at least half Doberman, too."

All of the Dobermans Gibbs have met have been guard dogs. They weren't exactly cute, little pets. "But she's good with kids?"

"She's good with kids she knows. She's good with her pack. I'm not saying you'd want to take her to a daycare and have fifty kids climbing all over her. I think that'd freak her out. But she's smart as a whip, and once she knows who's in the pack, she's very protective of them.

"I introduced you to her properly, and she's cool with you. But say you're at the park and some stranger starts moving toward your girls, she's going to start growling. No one gets within ten feet of the pack without an introduction."

"History as a guard dog?"

"Not really. She was a pet, had a family that loved her, but they adopted kids as well as dogs and their youngest child turned out very, very allergic to dogs, so she had to go find a new home."

He looks at Mona. She's looking up at him.

"I've got an extra run out back if you two want to get acquainted?"

Gibbs keeps looking at her, and she doesn't exactly nod, but she does turn, walk a few steps towards
where he's assuming the run is, and then look over her shoulder at him as if to say, *Well, you coming or not?*

Gibbs nods and follows her.

He's tossing a ball, and she's tearing after it. She's not playful in the jumpy or overly perky sort of sense, but given the chance to run around and do what she was built for, she leaps at it.

Likewise, as they spend some more time alone, she's not effusively friendly, either, but she seems to be warming up to him.

*Kindred spirit.*

He's pitching the ball to the far end of the run when his phone rings.

Tony.

He click the answer button and hears "I want you back."

That feels insanely good.

Mona brings the ball back, sees him talking to the black thing in his hand, figures out he's not talking to her, tries to get him to take the ball and toss it again, and he does, and she brings it back, woofing when it looks like he's paying too much attention to the phone.

Gibbs tosses the ball again and again, still talking to Tony, wishing, God, wishing so much that he could be back there.

He doesn't want to step all over Tony's time, but… triple homicide, that's a bad deal for a team that knows how to work together, for one that's half newbies…

Mona's back, seeming to understand that something's going on, she puts the ball down and nuzzles his hand. "Woof?" *You okay?*

And with that, Gibbs knows Mona's going home with him.

"Are you getting a dog?" Tony asks him.

"Back to work…" Friday, or whenever they see him next will be soon enough to introduce his new lady-friend.

He finally gets off the phone. "So, what do you think, want to come home with me?"

She tilts her head, giving him the doggy equivalent of *You'll do.* Then she picks up the ball and gives it back to him, heading for the gate to the run. *Let's go!* clear in her walk.

Gibbs has not been to a pet store since before the invention of PetSmart and the like. The last time he was in a pet store, Fluffinkins III (fortunately Kelly decided to name him the Third, it's not like they ever had a Fluffinkins I or Fluffinkins II) was in need of more bedding and hamster treats.

That pet store had been small, cramped, filled to the rafters with stuff, and had a very distinct aroma of 'pet.'

But, if a store like that still exists, he doesn't know about it.
So, he is, with Mona, venturing into a PetSmart for the first time ever.

He is rapidly coming to a very firm conclusion as he wanders through the dog aisles (aisles!) namely, people are way, way, way too into their pets.

There's a whole section of nothing but dog clothing. It's probably a good thing Mrs. Mallard didn't live long enough to find this place, she'd have spent the whole fortune on coordinated plaids for her Corgis.

He can kind of understand, like, maybe, if you live in Alaska or Maine or something, or if you've got one of those little yappy things with no fur, that you might want to, when it's cold, stick a jacket or something on a dog, but… There's literally thirty feet of dog outfits in front of him.

And okay, sure, the ground gets cold, so maybe the little bootie things make a certain amount of sense, (once again, in like Maine, or if you get a really hard cold snap) too, but, they're dogs, they're designed to be outside, barefoot, that's why they've got fur and those pads on their feet.

He eventually locates what he's looking for, dog beds, and there's at least thirty options in all different colors for those, too. He grabs two of them, and quietly says to Mona, "These people need kids."

She's looking at the beds as he puts both in the cart. Her head tilts a bit. Two?

"Got three floors. Thought you might like one in the basement as well as upstairs."

Her head straightens out and she looks ready to head on.

"Food?"

Woof.

"Yeah, thought you'd like that."

She's sitting next to him in his truck, very alert, watching the road, and that feels, really right. He's even driving fairly slow (only slightly over the speed limit) and being careful about stopping and starting, because, obviously, she's not wearing a seat belt.

He pats her head. "You good?"

She looks at him and licks his wrist.

Back the… second… maybe third time they were out of Lejeune, it was after Kelly was born, but before she was walking, they had a neighbor who bred Border Collies. She had mentioned that they were very smart, and all you had to do was show them where your property ended, once, and from then on they knew what and where home was.

Well, she's not a Border Collie, but, she does seem awfully smart, and if it takes more than once, it takes more than once.

So, when he stopped the truck in the driveway (behind Shannon) he got out, attached the leash to Mona's collar, and walked her around the outside. "This is home." His back yard already had a fence around it, so that makes things easier. Front yard's tiny, little strip of grass between the house and sidewalk. But Mona seems to be getting the lay of the land.
Then he heads inside, takes the leash off and says, "Go explore."

He follows her from room to room, saying things like, "Living room, kitchen, spare room, my room," occasionally pointing out things he doesn't want her to mess with.

She trots over to the basement, peering down into it, and he says, "Go on down," while grabbing one of the beds. He plops the bed in the corner while she sniffs everything.

"Okay, see these," he's pointing to his tools and the bed. "No chewing on these."

Woof.

"Good girl."

Exploring takes the rest of the day. Then there's dinner. Gibbs is pleased to see that she's not begging for his food. (Leftover Chinese, not great for him, probably worse for her. But he's thinking that when he's making food that's good for both of them, she'll be able to eat it.)

"I'm usually working after dinner," he says to her.

Woof.

She follows him down into the basement, continuing to walk around and sniff everything while he works on the bed. He's getting pretty close to done. Veneers are going on tonight. Then assembly, which means pegging, lots and lots of pegging. Then finishing. Probably shouldn't have her down here for finishing. Varnish fumes and breathing in sanding dust probably isn't good for her.

Eventually she does settle down in her bed, head on her paws, watching.

Bedtime. (Two hours later than usual. He wishes he could say he just got so into it he didn't notice time pass, but it's a much more mundane thing, he just wasn't sleepy.) He heads up. She follows. He's heading toward the bedroom when she goes to the kitchen door, and it hits him what she needs. He makes a note to get a doggy door for his kitchen door, so she can let herself out, while opening the door to let her go about her bedtime routine.

A few minutes later he hears paws on the steps up to his door, and a let me in woof.

He goes about his own routine, and when he gets out of the bathroom she's sitting on his bed, watching him.

He thinks about that for a moment. He certainly doesn't mind her sleeping with him. But he's also thinking that it would be nice to have a human woman in this bed at some point, and she might be less than thrilled with sheets that smell like dog, let alone have lots of little black hairs sticking in them.

He looks around his room, and comes up with a compromise.

Back downstairs, he grabs the second dog bed.

"I know it doesn't match up well now," he says, putting the bed on the chest he keeps at the foot of his bed, "but it will. I don't usually have my mattress on the floor. Usually there's a bed here, lifting this up about ten inches. That's what I'm building down there. When it's done," he pats her bed, and she ambles over to it, "This'll be a little bit lower than the rest of the bed, but right next to it."

She turns around a few times, nosing the dog bed, and then settles down, seeming to be satisfied with
the compromise.

He pats her, and then gets into bed, feeling like, as first days of retirement went, it was a pretty good one.
"So, why is Shabbos at Gibbs' place," Tim asks as he pulls into Gibbs' driveway.

"He just said he had someone he wanted us to meet."

"A someone who couldn't come to Tony and Ziva's?"

"I think that's part of this, too. I know I'm fried from this week, and they're worse. So I think a lot of it is letting them have the night off, get fed, taken care of, and have to do nothing more complicated than just sit around and eat."

Tim knows exactly how much work Abby's been doing for this case, so he assumes that Tony, Ziva, and Co. have to be even busier.

"Good point."

If you asked him, Gibbs would tell you that he remembers what Beth said about Mona being protective of her pack and that she has to be introduced to new people. He knows he heard that.

But as he's bustling around the house, getting the last bits of dinner ready to go, pulling the chickens out of the oven, (Mona's staring at them, longingly, and he's firmly telling her "No!") sticking candles all over the place, it's completely slipped his mind. No, what he's thinking about is that if he's going to host Shabbos, he's going to do Ziva proud.

But it's crashing back into the forefront of it as he hears his front door open, sees Mona go shooting out of the kitchen, barking and growling, off to stop the intruder who has just broken into her home.

"Mona!" He's yelling, but she's charging toward Tim, who has just pulled Abby behind him and has his gun out, in hand, trained on the black thing charging toward his family, growling.

"Don't shoot her!"

Fortunately Tim's better at taking orders that Mona is. She's stopped two feet away, growling at him, teeth bare, quivering, ready to leap, and Gibbs is absolutely certain that if Mona makes a move, that's one dead dog.

"So, any breaks in the case?" he asks Abby as she opens the door.

She's saying something, but he doesn't know what it is. His entire world narrows down the big, black, growling, barking, bared teeth, attacking thing that is coming straight for them.

He was carrying a bottle of wine, but it hit the welcome mat with a dull thud.

He yanks Abby back, hard, knocking her off balance, right now he doesn't care if she ends up on her ass as long as he ends up between her and Kelly and whatever that thing is. His left hand darts to his gun, and he's thanking God they asked Heather to drop Kelly off and that they are coming directly from work, so he is carrying.

He figures he's got one, maybe two more heartbeats before it closes on them, but he doesn't want to miss, he knows he's shooting into a house where Gibbs is, somewhere, so he pauses, makes sure is aim is good, makes sure he can anticipate where the thing, (dog, it's a dog) is going to be when it
leaps for his throat, and is tightening his finger when he hears, "Tim, don't shoot her!"

Abby is, of course, aware of the fact that, when push comes to shove, Tim will and has, literally, killed people to protect himself and others.

She is aware of the fact that he shot Jethro when Jethro was trying to kill him.

She's seen him shoot before. (Though not at anyone.)

She's seen the nervous, scared side of him wanting to be protective.

She's seen him talk his way out of danger for him and her.

But she has never seen this.

It's only the fact that she's got on wide heels that she didn't fall when he pulled her back. There was a lot of force in that grab. And by the time she's got her balance right she can see he is blocking the whole doorway with his body, has his gun out, a completely focused, and honestly, terrifying look on his face, and he's about a heartbeat away from murdering Gibbs' (apparently new) pet.

Of course it's Tim at the door. It's not a secret that Tim doesn't like dogs, but generally, he's got more of a run than shoot sort of mentality when it comes to them. Gibbs knows from Tony that the last time some sort of four legged critter came tearing out at them, barking and on attack mode, he ran for the car and slammed the door shut. (Tony could fend for himself.) However, Abby and Kelly are not Tony, and he's got them behind him, and Gibbs is awfully sure that right now Tim is on Def-Con One Defend Family Mode.

"It's okay Tim." He's intentionally using his 'calm' voice. "Don't shoot. Mona! Get over here."

Mona stares at Tim, who has not lowered his gun, growls one more time, snaps at him, and trots back to Gibbs, looking awfully satisfied that she has correctly defended her home against the invader.

Gibbs stares down at Mona. "Bad girl!" He head slaps her. "That's Tim and Abby and Kelly, and this is as much their home as your home. They are always allowed to be here, so you be nice to them!"

Woof. She's looking very contrite. The master is not happy with her, whatever that thing he did to her head was, he's never done that before, and she doesn't want him to do it again. Vast amounts of doggy shame are visible in her posture right now.

Gibbs gets a good hold on her collar and walks her over to Tim. "You okay?"

He falls out of kill mode slowly, and then lowers the gun. Once it's back in the holster, his hands start to shake. He exhales long and slow before saying, "Ask me in ten minutes when my heart stops racing."

"Didn't think she'd charge like that, she's usually pretty friendly."

"Usually? You've already developed a usually?"

"She didn't try to kill the mailman or the paperboy."

"Your mailbox isn't in the house." Tim closes his eyes, takes another deep breath, tries to calm down,
long experience from Jethro (his Jethro, not Gibbs) taught him that this doesn't work well if he's nervous, he takes yet another deep breath, and then holds his (still shaking, it'll take at least a half hour to get over the adrenaline spike) hand out. "I'm Tim." She sniffs him. "I don't much like your kind, but if you don't slobber on me too much, and don't ever go running at my family like that again, we'll get along okay." She nosed his palm and he patted the top of her head. He takes another deep breath, and says, "Okay, I think you can come in now."

Abby's not looking overwhelmingly pleased with him right now. But she can see he's still shaking, so she squeezes his shoulder, nods, and hands him Kelly.

He can also feel that Abby's sure he just overreacted and by a factor of twenty or so. And he can feel that she wants to talk to him about this, because she had to have seen how he just almost killed Gibbs' pet. But it'll hold for after dinner. He nods to her, appreciating that. He's way too damn jittery to have any real conversation about this (or much of anything else right now).

So she heads in, while he holds Kelly, tight, he doesn't want his baby girl getting anywhere near that beast, and Abby kneels on the floor, while petting Mona and saying something to Gibbs along the lines of 'You got a dog!' sounding really excited.

Mona, of course, responds to this with a big helping of happy licking, and excited woofing, doing her best to look like the most harmless little ball of fluff on the East Coast.

Tim glares at her. Harmless ball of fluff is not going to make tonight any easier.

Tony walks in a few minutes later, heads straight to Tim, and hugs him saying, "I am deeply sorry for any crap I ever pulled on you. You were a prince among Probies and I will never, ever forget it."

"Uh… Thanks?" Tim's sure there's going to be a story to go with that later tonight.

Tony hugs him again, looks over his shoulder, sees Ziva petting Mona and says to Gibbs, "You did get a dog!"

The application of food, wine, and his family all around does, eventually, calm Tim down. By the time they're doing the (semi) weekly blessing of the children his heart is no longer pounding and he can look directly at Mona without wanting to run away.

Doesn't help she's some sort of Doberman thing. Granted, Jethro trying to kill him was the worst attack he's ever had from a dog, but he's not had a good time with Dobermans in the past, either. Basically, that… lizard brain? He thinks that's the term, is firmly convinced that four legs, pointy teeth, and black fur = bad news.

"So, how is it going?" Breena asks Tony and Ziva once the food is passed around.

Tony sighs, loud and extravagant, then face palms.

"It is going well," Ziva says. "He is being dramatic."

"They spent an hour bickering about music. Bishop likes every form of music ever made, except whatever it is Draga's listening to. They've both got earbuds, so it's not like they have to listen to each other's music, but because we're in waiting mode, they decided snarking at each other about how bad their taste is was a good way to kill time while messing around with their respective searches."
Gibbs laughs at that. "Two adults doing a real job, sniping at each other non-stop. So, you're saying that's annoying?"

"Go ahead, rub it in."

"Is Bishop useful?" Penny asks.

Tony nods. "Yeah. I think so. I hope so. She's found some good stuff I certainly wouldn't have. With a stack of cases and a computer, she's great. I'm less sure about in the field."

"That happens when you hire an analyst for a field job," Tim says, something of a smirk on his face.

"I'm getting that. I just don't know if, longer term, she's a good fit. I don't know if she's going to stick. She's pretty happy right now, because we're connecting dots and drawing lines and she's building maps and databases and... whatever it is she does over there. Making predictions. She didn't seem nearly as happy when we were processing the house."

"Like you did any better the first time you saw a murdered child, Tony," Jimmy adds. "Let alone on your first day."

"What happened?" Tim asks.

"She got sick," Ziva says delicately.

"That's not what I mean, Jimmy. She threw up, so what? First time we met McGee he had on a facemask and looked like he was going to pass out if he had to look at that body one more time. He stuck. She said to me she wasn't sure if she was right for this. More of a numbers girl. That's what I'm thinking of. We've all lost it at a crime scene one time or another."

Tim sees a glance pass between Gibbs and Ziva, and is getting the idea that no, not everyone's "lost it" at a crime scene, but they're both too polite to say it.

"I remember saying to you that I wasn't sure I was cut out for this, once upon a time," Tim says to Tony.

Tony nods. "I remember. Different aspect of the job, though."

"True."

"What'd she do, after she threw up?" Breena asks.

"Washed out her mouth, straightened up, and went back out and photographed everything."

Ducky nods along at that. "I think that is the core constitution of Eleanor. She came down to visit us on Wednesday, pay her respects to the Tennus, talk about who may of done this, and why. She was not comfortable, but very, very determined."

"Smart, too." Jimmy adds. "Says when she got the job she read the Manual of Post-Mortem Pathology, all six hundred plus pages of it, so she'd be able to learn more about the crimes by looking at the bodies."

"She isn't a traditional profiler, but there are similarities. A profiler looks at the individual in front of them, studies the clues, and determines who that person is based on those cues. She has a... wider view of it."

Penny gets this. "The difference between social history, where you study huge swathes of people..."
and their trends, and literary history, where you study the story lines of individuals."

"Exactly," Ducky replies. "She didn't have much insight into our killers as individuals, but some very interesting ideas based on the sort of crime this was and what sort of person engages in said activities."

"How'd Draga do with a murdered child?" Abby asks.

Tony exhales and shakes his head.

Ziva says, "I think part of the amount of bickering going on between them is him distracting himself from this. He's very frustrated. We got one break yesterday, the Tennus were not the intended target, which I know is making him feel better, because he was digging through their lives and he was sure he had missed something because nothing was coming up that should have gotten them killed."

"We're all frustrated," Tony adds. He's about to go deeper into it, but he looks over to Gibbs, who has been listening to all of this, not saying anything, radiating his own sort of frustrated, and decides now's a good time to get off of this topic. "But it's the Sabbath, day of rest, day of putting the working world behind us, so, talking about good things? Gibbs, how'd you end up with your new friend?" Who was sitting in the corner, watching all of this.

So, Gibbs told them about how he ended up with Mona.

"She looks like a real sweetie," Breena says. Mona, apparently having figured out they were talking about her, came over and rested her head on Breena's leg, looking at her with big brown eyes, silently asking for some ear rubs.

Tim's eyes narrow slightly, but Jimmy catches it. "What?"

Tim shakes his head.

"He almost shot her when we got here," Abby sounds exasperated by that.

"And that was the right thing to do," Gibbs says, hoping to shut this down. "A dog this big runs at your family, barking and growling, you stop it before it gets there. That one was on me. I should have had a better hold on her when you guys got here."

"Thank you." Tim says to Gibbs. "Apparently she turns into a fluffy little love muffin for the girls, but she charged the door when Abby opened it."

"You were going to shoot her?" Tony asks.

"He had his gun out and was physically blocking the door," Abby says.

Molly, who had been eating and not paying too much attention to the conversation, decided that was an opportune time to tune in and managed to put together gun and her. "Shoot Mona?" she asks, horrified. (Speaking of fluffy little love muffin, yes, Mona likes kids. Mona loves kids. Molly now has a new best friend.)

Breena's eyes go wide. "No, no honey. Mona's fine. See?" Molly had been sitting in Jimmy's lap, but he hands her over to Breena, who holds out Molly's hand and strokes Mona's ears with it. "See, she's fine." Mona licks Molly's hand.

"Soft ears."
"Yes, she has very soft ears."

Molly looks up at Tim, who's on the other side of the table. "Shoot?"

"I didn't shoot her. She's fine. She's licking your hand; that's a happy dog."

Woof.

"You were really going to shoot her," Abby says once they're home and Kelly's in bed.

Tim nods, that scary look back in his eye.

"She's a dog. A dog protecting her home, that's what she's supposed to do."

"I'm a dad protecting my family! It's what I'm supposed to do! Dog, bear, squirrel, rabbit, turtle, if it's growling and charging at you, it's going down. Nothing that looks like a threat gets through me to you. That's just the way it is. If I hadn't had a gun, Mona would have gotten kicked into the kitchen, and you saw, Gibbs wouldn't have given me an ounce of grief over it. He would have approved."

Abby shrugs, she saw the way Gibbs dealt with what did happen, and could feel that, if anything, Gibbs was proud at Tim for getting ready to blow away his pet in defense of his family. But that the same time... She's a dog. A pet. A cute, cuddly, furry little ball of love just trying to make sure her owner was safe.

"Tim, she wasn't—"

"No!" He says it firm and hard. He's never cut her off like that, and probably won't ever again, but this... Nope. "You can go commiserate with Hagrid about how misunderstood and safe all these animals really are. Not me." They're getting ready for bed, so he's already got his shirt off. He steps to her, takes her hand in his and touches the four tiny scars on his throat, and then his left arm, and the similar, darker, deeper scars there. The ones on his throat are tiny. He knew Jethro was going to kill him if he got his jaw closed so that wasn't going to happen. His bullet cut that short. His arm wasn't so lucky. The scars on his arm are very clearly the marks of something with a pretty nasty set of teeth on it. "You and Kelly never get marks like this on you. Not if I'm anywhere nearby."

Her fingers ghost back to the ones on his throat. He feels her touch each one. He sees her get it, really get it.

All those years ago, they got back to the Navy Yard, and he was up and moving, and Jethro wasn't. He had bandages, sure, but he was talking, and walking, and not giving her big, drugged, wounded puppy eyes.

Jethro was helpless, when she saw them, and he wasn't.

She didn't see his left arm, because he doesn't wear short sleeves at work, until they were dating again, and by then it was more than healed. The scars are white now, blend into his naturally pale skin tone pretty well, but they're there. If you look you can see something bit the hell out of that arm. So, she's seen them, knows them, but it's not something she (or he for that matter) really thinks about.

She touches the throat scars again, really seeing them, seeing where they are, and what's under them. They straddle both his trachea and right jugular. If Jethro had gotten his jaw closed, he would have ripped out Tim's throat.

He's standing there, watching her face, seeing her actually, truly, get it.
She shivers, her eyes close, and she says, "I'm sorry."

He nods. "Okay."

"It was easier to think you flipped out than..." She smiles sadly at him. "Because if you didn't flip out, than that sweet, hurting baby in the car was a man-eater and needed to be put down. And those big, soft, doggy eyes were gonna shut forever."

He shrugs at that. Jethro lived with him for five years and was a sweet dog. He was good company. He made going out to jog bearable. A big chunk of the whole get in shape thing he did, the first time, was spurred on by noticing he was having a harder time keeping up with Jethro than he would have liked. (And getting back out of shape had a lot to do with not having anyone pushing him to go out and run twice a day. Just, didn't seem worth it anymore on his own.)

But Jethro was not a big, sweet baby. He was one hundred and ten pounds of trained drug-sniffing canine who spent his whole life getting in shape to find stuff and stop anyone his master told to stop. The fact that he was drugged, that he was a victim, too, didn't mean he was harmless.

"I didn't flip out. He was a dog. Just like anything else, just like me, and you, under the right circumstances, he was deadly. Mona is, too. Everything is. And I'm not taking that chance with you and Kelly. Just me, I'll run. I have run. I'm not too proud to run away from something that wants to kill me. I'm not going to be that guy who shoots the neighbor's pet for no good reason.

"But if you and Kelly are behind me, and if something is charging at us, you will be behind me, and I will kill it before it can get to you."

And that was the last word on that.

"Tim."

"Hm?" They're in bed, in that quiet space between turning off the lights and maybe having sex (he's not feeling wildly sexy right now) or falling asleep.

"I don't want Kelly to be afraid of dogs."

"Okay." He doesn't want her to be afraid of dogs, either. Cautious. He wants her to be cautious around strange dogs, but not afraid.

"She's going to be afraid of dogs if you're scared of them in front of her."

"Not much I can do about that. That's a gut response now."

"You can go over to Gibbs' tomorrow and get to know Mona well enough that you don't flinch if you catch her out of the corner of your eye."

"I wasn't flinching, was I?"

He feels her nod.

"Damn. I was trying not to."

Abby nods at that, too.

"I was going to go into the office for an hour or so. I'll head over, after."
"Sounds good. How do you feel about adding one more errand to that list?"

"What's the errand?"

"Get me some pregnancy tests? It's been three weeks, and still no period. Maybe we've got something to celebrate?"

He grins at that.
Good Days

Tim's getting the sense that while it's true that his hours are ending more reliably by six (5:30, really) every day, that he's probably going to be heading in (or remoting) to work every day, as well.

Yesterday they got yet another fix in place for the job scheduling software, and he wants to make sure it worked properly all night long.

(If he'd been thinking about it, but of course, he wasn't, he would have complimented Tony on not being totally useless with a computer. It's astonishing how inept some of the guys on the other teams are. He spent an hour muttering at the job scheduling software about how even Gibbs could run this program without killing it while trying to figure out how to make it even simpler. He's redefined "foolproof" down twice now. He hopes he won't have to do it a third time.)

He gets into his office, sees Hepple, (Not happy about working Saturdays, he's sulking and working slow. Good. Retire. Tim thinks at him.) Sturm, (earbuds in, bopping away, fingers flying over the keyboard) Ngyn, (Curled in a little ball, sleeping on one of the sofas. He makes a mental note to see what she's been up to all night.) and Patil (not officially on right now, but he's putting in extra time on the paperwork software.)

He gets into his office, logs in, and finds "Yes!" (he punches the air in victory at this) the job software has been successfully working all night and has correctly triaged and assigned every job it's gotten.

He writes a quick email to all of the Minions, lets them know it's working properly, and gives them the heads up on how they'll give it a week, reassess, and if it's still doing the job right, they'll start work on expanding it NCIS wide.

Tim checks in on Ngyn's work. It was a big problem, long, complicated, intense, but thank you job triaging system, in her wheelhouse. She handled it alone… Probably would have been a better team effort, but she's the only one on Friday graveyard shift right now, so not a lot of teaming options when it came to it. When he gets all of NCIS up on this, that'll change. He does know that he's overheard Patil and Soth mention things she had texted them about, so she's not completely going it alone these days.

His eyes scan over the jobs on tap, nothing's screaming for attention while everyone ignores it, and then logs out.

He stands up, sees Patil still coding away. He checks his phone, yep, Patil's shift ended at 04:00, four and a half hours ago. So, that deserves some petting.

Patil likes… Tim checks his phone, again; he's been surreptitiously writing down what sorts of treats the different Minions like. He likes the Dunkin' Donuts Dunkin' Dark coffee and Snickers bars. Tim heads over to the coffee machine, makes up a cup, grabs a Snickers from the vending machine, and takes them over to Patil's desk.

He puts the coffee and the candy bar on his desk, touches his shoulder, (Patil's working hard, hadn't noticed him come by, and startles at that.) and says, "Good job."

"Boss?"

"Your shift ended hours ago. You're still here, still working. Good job. I appreciate it."
"Had an idea for the paperwork software, wanted to get it out."

Tim smiles at him. "Good. Order yourself some real breakfast. If you're not sleeping, you've got to eat. So eat, okay?"

Patil's looking pretty surprised at this, but says, "Okay."

"I'll let you get back to it."

"Uh… Thanks."

As Tim's walking out he sees Ngyn curl up even tighter on the sofa. She's looking a bit cold. He makes a mental note to get some blankets down here, too.

---

So, having successfully gone to Target and picked up both pregnancy tests and blankets for the sofas, Tim gets to the part of his outing he's not exactly looking forward to.

He'd been planning on heading over today to get some one on one time with Gibbs all week. See how week one of retirement really went. (He's sure the version of it that came out last night and what really happened are, in some fundamental ways, not precisely the same thing.)

But, having Mona there is dampening his enthusiasm for heading over.

Abby's right, though. The more time he spends over, the more he gets to see cute-ball-of-doggy-love the less he'll see mile-long-teeth-and-one-hundred-pounds-of-leaping-black-death every time he glances over and catches Mona in his peripheral vision.

But, like with Jethro, making that transition won't happen overnight, and it will take effort.

He pulls in front of the house, walks up to the front door, and stops. Usually he'd give a quick knock and head right in. And sure, Gibbs says Mona's smart, and that once she knows someone she's cool with them, but, he doesn't trust it. Can't feel safe, not in his gut, not yet. Like anytime he heads into work, he's wearing his gun. (The Navy Yard isn't in the most desirable neighborhood in DC.) So, hand on gun, he knocks, opens the door, (gingerly) and pokes his head in.

Nothing comes running at him, that's a start.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

Okay, they can't be too far off, Gibbs' truck is in the driveway.

He heads down to the basement, fairly sure they aren't down there. Gibbs' hearing is more than good enough to respond to a hello from the first floor if he's down there, but he'll check just in case.

Nope, not down there. Tim looks around again, seeing what's really down there.

A finished bed. Well, almost finished. It's not assembled. But it's done. Tim's fingers ghost along dark brown oak, and warm-golden burl. He can see how it'll look all put together, light but solid. Wood finished to a deep, warm satin sheen.

The footboard is all slats. Mostly the dark brown oak of the original bed, but the top and bottom cross pieces are new, finished with the same golden stain that's lit up the burl in the headboard's veneer.
Gibbs had explained what he was going to do with the legs. How he'd split the beams from the old bed in four, set them into blocks of new wood at the so there'd be a stable space for the side supports and for the head and footboards to fit in, along with a block at the top and the bottom to make a secure column, and Tim had nodded along with that, no idea how it would look.

The correct answer is awesome. It's very strong looking without being overly heavy. Gibbs pegged all the pieces together, and the pegs are in contrasting wood colors.

Tim thinks if Mission and Art Deco got drunk and hooked-up one night, this bed would be the result.

The headboard draws him over. Wood is wood is wood to Tim. He likes it well enough, but it's not meaningful or special to him. But, even as a woodworking philistine, Tim can see this is exquisite. Once again, the cross pieces are the new, golden wood. Between them are four, he'd call them screens for lack of a better word. (Slats? Too wide for slats.) Each screen is edged in the dark brown oak from the old bed, with a ten inch wide panel (panel, there's a good word for them) of gleaming, golden burl. The rest of the bed's got a satin finish, matte almost, but the burl is glossy to the point of looking like glass.

If he had never seen burl before, didn't know wood could do this, he'd think it was some sort of liquid, many colors of gold swirling together in rivers and eddies, somehow frozen, captured in a wooden frame.

Tim knows one other thing, looking at this beautiful work in front of him. Last Friday, at the retirement party, Gibbs thought he had three weeks' worth of work left on this bed.

Today it's finished. Tim, tentatively, on a spot that won't show, touches the finish, really pokes it, not the barest brush he had done before. It's not just finished, it's dry.

Gibbs isn't sleeping.

Or probably doing much of anything else.

He's thinking he'll wait for up to an hour. If Gibbs and Mona aren't back by then, he'll text and make a time to see them.

But, in less than five minutes he hears, "Abbs?"

Tim heads up the stairs, seeing Gibbs sitting on the sofa, unlacing his sneakers, breathing hard, covered in sweat. Mona's flopped on the floor, belly on the carpet, panting, next to him.

"Me, this time." He drove the roadster. Doesn't take the SUV if he's going out by himself. "Good work out?"

Gibbs nods. Tim heads into the kitchen and pours him a glass of water, then comes back with it a few seconds later.

"Thanks." Gibbs takes the glass and drinks it back in one long series of gulps. Mona watches him do it, eagerly.

Tim shakes his head at her. "I don't deliver water for you. But it looked like there was plenty in your bowl."

She slowly gets up and trots into the kitchen. They both hear contented slurping a few seconds after that.
Gibbs is rubbing his knee.

"You want some ice for that?"

Gibbs nods, breath starting to slow down.

Tim heads back to the kitchen, makes up an ice pack, and heads back, sitting down next to Gibbs on the sofa, handing over the ice pack.

"How far'd you go?" Tim asks.

"Three and a half."

"Farther than usual. Knee holding up okay?"

"Yeah. Sore. Ice it down. Hot shower in a bit. More ice tonight. It'll be good to go tomorrow."

"Really? No jogging for five months to more than three miles a day in a week is good to go?"

Gibbs shrugs. He is sore. But he's also sure he's not ripped his knee up. He remembers Basic, he knows, intimately, exactly where the line between pushing as hard as you can go and injury is, and he may be dancing on the line, but he hasn't crossed it, and doesn't intend to.

"Jimmy ever wants to give up the Morgue and go into rehab, he'd be great at it. Didn't think I'd be back this fast."

Tim flashes Gibbs his best cut the bullshit look.

"I'm not ripping it up. Spent too damn long on my ass to go and tear it to bits the first week out."

Tim raises an eyebrow at that. He knows exactly how little pain you feel while you're pushing yourself, and how you ache later when the endorphins wear off. But Gibbs doesn't say anything about that. He just sits there, continuing to cool off.

"I saw your bed. It's beautiful. You want some help getting it upstairs and put together?"

"Yes."

"Thought you said just the peg work alone was going to take ten days."

Gibbs shrugs at that, too. It would have taken ten days if he had been working on it the way he used to, from 20:00 'til midnight. "Bit more free time then I'm used to."

Tim nods at that, really looking at Jethro. Yes, he looks tired, really tired, but he just ran three and a half miles, tired is normal for that. His eyes are a bit red and bloodshot, too.

"You sleeping, at all?"

"Enough."

"What's enough mean?"

Gibbs holds up his left hand, looks at it, and then looks at Tim, shaking his head. "We get married when I wasn't lookin'?"

"I'll back off. Just want to know you're okay."
Gibbs looks frustrated. "I'm as okay as I can be. Tony and Ziva and Draga and Tinkerbelle——"

"Tinkerbelle?"

"That's what Tony's been calling her."

Tim snorts at that. There is a sort of Tinkerbelleishness to Bishop.

"They're on a triple homicide. They're hunting down killers. You're running a department, changing how NCIS does Cybercrime. Abby's running her lab, catching killers. Jimmy's looking through bodies for clues. Ducky's putting together psychological profiles. I'm jogging, and putting together a bed, and right now, the highlight of the day is heading over to visit with Kelly or going over to Breena's and taking Molly out so Breena can get a real nap when Anna goes down. I'm not exactly feeling vital right now."

"Sorry."

"Yeah, well, bed's done. Shannon's next. At the rate I'm going, I should be able to get her in the water by early March. That'll help. Getting out there was always good. But... it's just... busy, you know?"

"Yeah, I do." (No he doesn't, not really, but he can empathize.)

Gibbs stares around the house. "Just really noticing how shabby the inside of the house looks, so, there's some more stuff to keep me occupied. Get Kelly's room redone so the girls have their own space when they're over here. That'll eat more time."

"You've got hobbies; you need a job."

"Yeah." Gibbs is feeling very close to telling Tim about what job he's hoping to start up once he's got Shannon ready for the water, but he doesn't. It's not that Tim wouldn't approve of his abused girl underground railroad. (He's sure he would,) Or that Tim would feel torn, that he'd have to report Gibbs (because he's sure he wouldn't). No, it's that if he tells Tim, Tim's going to feel like he has to help. More than that, Tim is going to want to help. And so will Abby, which means Breena and Jimmy will be in, and then comes Tony and Ziva... And, no.

It's one thing to put his own future, freedom, life on the line for this. If he gets caught, he'll go to jail, and that'll be it. (Of all the things he could or should go to jail for this strikes him as the most... worthy.)

But he's not willing to get his whole family into this. If he gets caught, he doesn't want them going down. Doesn't want his babies in foster care because their whole family ended up in jail for this.

So, he doesn't tell Tim what he thinks his next job might be. But he does see the way Tim's watching him, sees that recognition that something else is going on in his head.

"Should I ask?" Tim says.

"No." Gibbs stands up, slowly, and hands over the ice pack. "Should get that shower before I get stiff."

Tim nods.

"Church and bootcamp tomorrow?" Gibbs asks.
"Sure. You want to come over for dinner tonight?" Tim sighs, looking at Mona who's sitting in front of them right now. He forces himself to stroke the top of her head, and she... he'd call it a smile, but she's a dog and dogs don't really smile. She looks very pleased by that. "Mona's invited, too. She's um... got a standing invite at our place."

Gibbs smiles. Tim couldn't have sounded less enthusiastic about that if he had tried for a week. But Gibbs knows he's making an effort, and appreciates it.

"Sounds good. See you then."

He's halfway up the stairs when Tim says, "Bed?"

"Right. Yeah, let's grab that."

Doesn't take long for both of them to get it up. Not long to get his mattress and box spring out of the way. An extra set of hands made assembly a lot easier, and Gibbs had the whole thing designed so that once all the pieces were slotted together, one peg per leg kept everything tight and solid.

"I'll get them glued in after the shower."

Tim nods at that, taking a shot of the bed all together for Abby. "This could be your next job. Might not be catching killers, but it's real, and beautiful, and people would pay well for it."

Gibbs shrugs at that. "You looking forward to the day where all you do is write?"

Tim shakes his head, because no, he's not. Maybe one day he will, but... Just like Gibbs, he needs the justice. He needs to be doing something bigger than just him.

Gibbs nods.

"I get it. See you tonight."

Tim gets home just as Kelly's waking up from her morning nap. So, he gets her, and Abby gets working on lunch.

Kelly's sitting in the high chair, munching down Cheerios between bites of mashed ham and peas that he's trying to get into her mouth while Abby makes them omelets.

"How'd it go?"

"Do you mean, did I shoot Mona?"

She flashes him a mildly exasperated look.

"Fine. We have reached detente. I told Gibbs he's always welcome to bring her over when he comes here. Might have to get a doggy door or something so she can get in and out easy."

Abby nods at that, sliding the mushroom, caramelized onions, and Swiss omelet onto a plate, and grabbing two forks for them.

"How's he doing?" she asks as she puts the plate in front of him, sitting next to him.

"Worse than he looks, not as bad as he could be?" He grabs his phone, and pulls up the pic of the bed. "Here. He's got this done."
"Oh, that's beautiful." She says, looking through the picture.

"Yeah, it is. But it was supposed to take three weeks."

Abby nods. "He sleeping? At all?"

"He says he's sleeping enough. I asked what enough was, and then told me to stop acting like his wife."

She laughs at that.

"He's got something cooking."

She cuts a bite off the omelet and offers it to him while asking, "What sort of something?"

He chews for a moment, scooping mushed peas off of Kelly's chin and back into her mouth.

"Don't know. He told me not to ask."

"Think it's bad?"

He thinks about that. "No… Not bad… Didn't feel bad. More like… protective? But whatever it is, he doesn't want to talk about it. Not to me, at least."

Abby looks puzzled. "What doesn't he talk to you about? You're the one he's most likely to talk to."

"I know. But he was thinking about it and I could literally see the wall go up. He had that sort of open, grouchy look, we were talking about him getting Shannon done and heading out, and then his eyes went blank and his posture shifted. So, something on the water, but no idea what it'd be."

"Hmm…" She chews her own bite of lunch.

"I know. But he was thinking about it and I could literally see the wall go up. He had that sort of open, grouchy look, we were talking about him getting Shannon done and heading out, and then his eyes went blank and his posture shifted. So, something on the water, but no idea what it'd be."

"Hmm…" She chews her own bite of lunch.

"Yeah. Mysteries. One thing's sure, he's never going to say anything about it unless he wants to."

"And let me guess, one other thing is true, you're not going to snoop."

"I'm not going to snoop. That's true, too. But, he's coming for dinner, so you're welcome to try and grill him, too."

She shakes her head at that. "No thanks." She eyeballs the bags from Target. "Maybe by the time he's here, we'll have something else to discuss?"

Tim smiles at that.

Last time they were in that space between ovulation and pregnancy test time, Tim couldn't make time move fast enough.

It hasn't been so urgent this time. Part of it, he assumes, is that they've done this once.

Part of it is they've got Kelly, so yes, he'd love, love another baby, but if she's not pregnant, is not as big of a deal.

And part of it, a big part of it, is that wedding planning is significantly less absorbing to him than setting up his own department and hacking his way through red tape and code.

Last time, he had hours for his brain to sit there thinking: Is this is? Am I a father? How is life about
Well, he doesn't know if this is it. But he is a father. He's fairly sure how life will change with the addition of another baby, and he's spending way fewer hours on rote paperwork filling out (not that he's got less paperwork, but it's new paperwork, so he can't just slide into automatic and do it without thinking about it) so he's got less time for thinking about it, and fewer questions to wonder about.

Which is not to say, that when Abby came out of the bathroom, and they stood, hips against his dresser, her holding the test up, his arm around her shoulders, staring at the little electronic grains of sand shifting from one side of the hourglass to the other that he was any less excited than he was last time and they were reaching to flip the test over and see what it said.

And that same golden rush spreads through him when the hourglass blinks three times and the word Pregnant pops up. Abby shrieks with excitement again. (Quieter this time, Kelly's napping.) And once again he's grinning so wide he doesn't think his body can hold it. His fingers, toes, ears would smile if they could.

He's giggling a little, and thinks a bit. It's the end of January, so, nine months out means… "Happy second anniversary to us!"

"Happy almost anniversary then!" He kisses her, pulling her so she's standing between his legs, his hands on her hips. "Happy new school year, to you," he says, hand cupping her belly.

"We've got every season now."

He giggles again. She's right about that. He's winter. She's spring. Kelly's got summer, and new McSciuto has fall.

"We're gonna need one of those two seat strollers. If Kelly takes after me, she'll barely be walking by then."

"Two cribs, or try to get her moved into a big girl bed?"

"Oh… Well, Jethro said he was looking for more projects."

Abby laughs. "Think he meant this?"

"I think he's eyeballing wood for Tony and Ziva's crib."

"Too bad! He's got a new order in place."

"You know, they're talking about starting when Gibbs left." He strokes her belly, slipping his fingers under the waistband of her skirt to make contact skin on skin. "Your cousin might not be much younger than you are."

"Cousin might already be in the works. Cousin might be older than you are."

Tim's head shoots up to look Abby in the eye. "You speculating, or is Ziva sending out some hints?"

"Speculating." She laughs again. "Can you see it? Gibbs and his girls? Him and five little baby girls? Three of them under a year old?"

"I can see the fifteen-years-on version of this. Pop, Pop's sniper rifle, and putting the fear of Gibbs
into future boyfriends." He kisses her again, nibbling her lower lip, then pulling back. "Gibbs and his girls… You thinking this is a little sister?"

She thinks about that for a second. "Yeah. Another little green-eyed blonde."

"Wavy hair, like yours?"

"Yeah… Laura Rose McGee?"

He squints at her. Not that it's a bad name or anything, just seems kind of random.

"You don't like it?"

He shakes his head and kisses her. "Just don't get it. It's not bad, but… how about Maggie?"

"Maggie McGee?"

He hadn't thought that through. "Not Maggie. Bridget?"

"Is that what you're calling Breena's character in the dragon book?"

"Uh… Yeah."

"That intentional?" He nods. "BreeAnne?" She asks, coming up with something closer.

He shakes his head at that. "Nope. We've got time, lots and lots of time. Might end up having to whip out some boy name, you know?"

"Eight months. And, nope. Just like last time, this is a girl. I can feel it."

"Okay." He likes the idea of two daughters.

"Gabrielle McGee? Gabbi?" she asks.

"Abby and Gabbi?"

She winces at that. "Not Gabrielle."

"Noo!" He's shaking his head, feeling wonderfully fine, so amazingly happy, and just goofy all over.

She scoots a bit closer, rubbing up against him in a very pleasant way. "Like you said, lots of time." She kisses his lips.

He kisses back. "Lots and lots of time."

She's unbuttoning his shirt. "However, we don't have lots and lots of time until Kelly wakes up."

He glances at the clock. Little under an hour. "Nope." He kisses her throat, while turning them around so she's back to the dresser. "Not lots and lots of nap time. Not anymore."

Her leg slides up his, curling over his hip, and he cups her face in his hands, taking a few seconds to just look at her and smile, bask in her smile back. "Love you so much."

Her lips find his, kissing "Love you," back to him as she unbuttons the last button on his shirt.

She slides his shirt open, hands stroking over his chest, lips following, trailing over his throat,
collarbone, and chest.

"Mmmm…" His hands settle under her skirt, palming her butt, stroking gently, and when she kisses her way back up to his lips, he finds the zipper and undoes the tan plaid skirt, letting it drop to the floor. He steps back, wanting to look. Abby, white knee socks, small white thong, white t-shirt, and one of his black leather jackets. "God, you're so hot!

She smiles at that, stroking the few hairs leading below his navel, before hooking her thumb into his belt, and pulling the tongue through the buckle.

He grazes his knuckles over her thong, just a light touch, while she gets his belt undone, and starts to work on the zipper.

He slips the bit of cotton to the side, thumb finding her clit, rubbing gently, enjoying the way her eyes close and she sags for a second, just feeling it. He bites, gently, below her left ear. "Good?"

Her hands grasp his jeans, pulling them down past his hips, then she shifts her grip, giving him a warm squeeze. "Yeah."

He moans quietly, letting her feel the vibration of his voice against her throat, as she continues to gently squeeze him. She hops up onto the dresser, wrapping her legs around his hips, pulling him close again.

For a few strokes, he's just next to her, dick rubbing on the soft cotton of her panties and the silk-suede of her skin. And that's good, but they both want better. She takes him in hand, and he slips in long and slow, both of them groaning at the feel of it.

This is an old dance, familiar, well-loved. His thumb knows what to do, her body squeezes around him warm and lush. It doesn't take long for both of them to be shuddering and gasping, high on each other and this shared joy, shared ecstasy of their life, their love, and the life it's made.

Even if Gibbs wasn't a trained investigator, even if he hadn't spent years working with Tim, even if he wasn't Tim's defacto dad and hadn't seen him earlier today, he'd have known something was up.

When he gets a wide hello hug as soon as he walks in the door, and then Mona gets affectionately petted while Tim just oozes happy all over the place, something is definitely up.

Abby bouncing in a few seconds later, also all aglow, is also a remarkably unsubtle hint that something is up.

So, the list of somethings that can be up resulting in this level of happy now, but not four hours ago when he last saw Tim is awfully small so…

He stares at Abby for another minute, and she's happily playing with Mona. He knows some people claim they can tell a woman is pregnant just by looking at her, but if that skill actually exists, he doesn't have it.

It'd be one thing if she was far enough along for there to be some level of change. He can spot that like an eagle, but if she is pregnant, they would have just found out, and knowing them, that probably means she's about nine seconds pregnant.

Tim's got Kelly in his arms, sitting on the sofa next to Jethro, quietly, in a very happy, very satisfied sort of way, contentedly watching Abby play with Mona.
"You two just gonna sit there beaming at me, or you gonna say it?"

"Told you he'd figure it out," Abby says to Tim.

"Yeah, well, this time we don't have a wedding to hide behind."

And with those words a wide smile spreads across Gibbs' face, too, that's exactly what he wants to hear. "When?"

"Middle of September," Abby says, getting up, sitting on the sofa, between her guys, snuggling both of them. "Little girl's," she pets Kelly's face, "gonna be a big sister!"

Kelly's remarkably unimpressed by that.

They told Jimmy and Breena at breakfast, and after several moments of congratulations, when are you due, and the like, Jimmy appeared to do some math in his head, smirked at both of them, and then says, "So, Merry Christmas to you, huh?"

Tim laughs at that.

Abby gently slaps Jimmy's shoulder.

"You really need to sterilize your upstairs bathroom," Jimmy says to Gibbs.

This time Tim whacks Jimmy's shoulder. "Shut up!"

Gibbs rolls his eyes and says dryly, "Like anyone doesn't know what you two are up to when you vanish for fifteen minutes during a party. Clean up after yourselves, don't be too obvious about it, and I'll keep pretending I don't know about it."

Abby blushes scarlet at that, and Tim spends a minute, head down, staring at his food, laughing silently.

Then Gibbs looks Jimmy dead in the eye and says, "And just because you two are quicker and sneakier doesn't mean I don't know about you, either. Same rules for you."

"So, who are we telling?" Breena asks as she takes a bite of her pancakes, utterly nonplussed, while Jimmy sits there, gobsmacked. "Making the announcement at dinner today?"

Abby shakes her head. "Nah. Want to just enjoy the secret for a bit, you know?"

Breena and Jimmy both nod at that.

"Tony and Ziva, Ducky and Penny, tomorrow. But that's it for a while," Tim says.

"Once I can't keep my eyes open anymore, that'll be time to make the announcement."

"So, Tuesday after next?" Breena asks.

"Oh… don't remind me. I hate how out of it I feel when that first trimester tired hits."

"At least you're not getting ready to buy out the drugstore of all the anti-nausea meds."

"Good point."
Jimmy's in the locker room with Tim and Gibbs post-Bootcamp. They've worked out, fought, Jimmy double checked Jethro's knee, and it seems to be holding up properly, and have finished up with showering and are getting ready to split up and go home.

"So, you really knew?" he asks Gibbs, "I knew you knew about him," he points to Tim, who's pulling on his boxers, "'cause he'd tattoo I JUST GOT LAID on his forehead if he could." That comment earns Jimmy another whack from Tim. "Didn't know you'd caught me."

Gibbs is toweling off his hair. "You think you and Lee sneaking off at Duck's was stealthy?" Gibbs gives him a get over yourself look.

Jimmy looks a bit chagrined by that. "I think the word is horny, not stealthy."

"Yeah." Gibbs nods. "Already knew you'd pull a stunt like that, otherwise I wouldn't have caught you."

Jimmy nods. "Good. Didn't think we were ever gone long enough to make it easy to tell."

"Most guys don't brag about being Zippy the Wonder Rocket," Tim says.

"If Zippy can get his girl off in three minutes, he gets to brag about it." Jimmy deadpans back at Tim.

Gibbs rolls his eyes at both of them. "Just because it's been a million years since I've had a girlfriend doesn't mean I've forgotten what that shit-eating just-got-laid grin looks like, and I've seen both of you strutting around my house wearing it."

"Speaking of which," Tim adds. "Did I see Borin kiss your cheek at the retirement party?"

Gibbs half nods, that did happen. He's not sure it mattered though. "Her and about twenty-five other women."

Tim nods slowly. "Uh huh… Didn't hear twenty-five other women tell you to not be a stranger."

"Really?" Jimmy hadn't seen that bit. "You like her?"

Gibbs doesn't exactly shrug. "Never thought about it. Not much anyway." Which means that since he's worked with her several times, it's just easier to see Borin as a cop. Cops are, in Gibbs' mind, sexless. With the exception of the occasional fantasy, (after all, he's not blind, but said fantasies reinforced why he needed to see Borin as a cop first, second, and last) he'd kept Borin in a non-sexual/colleague box. After Hollis, he expanded 12 to cover any woman who he ran an investigation with.

But she's not a colleague, not anymore.

"Maybe you should. She's single, attractive. You two have a lot in common. You know you get along. Might be fun to spend some time with her," Tim says as he buttons his shirt.

Gibbs nods. He's heard worse ideas, and she did tell him to call her. (And, if he were to let himself explore those fantasies a bit, he'd admit that they did push his buttons nicely.)

Tim pulls his jacket over his shirt and hefts his bag onto his shoulder. "See ya, tomorrow," he says to Jimmy, and then lays his hand on Gibbs' shoulder. "Any day you're getting stir-crazy and want some company that talks back, come on over for dinner. At the very least, I'm home every night now, so don't feel like you've got to be on your own, okay?"
"Don't want to wear out my welcome."

"I had you within arm's reach for ten hours a day five days a week for fourteen years, you can be at my place for dinner every night until the end of time, and you're not going to wear anything out."

"Okay."
Bad Days

Abby knows that sensation. She figures all women do. That sort of dull, aching, low gut, wrong but familiar sensation.

But she's not supposed to be feeling it.

Not… for another year, at least.

But she is.

Mildly crampy, wet, bit of a headache.

Yeah, she knows it. And it's not the way she wants to wake up at, she glances at the clock, 4:38 in the morning on Monday. She reaches out from under the blanket, grabs a handful of tissues and stuffs them between her legs before getting up and heading to the bathroom.

For a second, she begs God that they come away white, but, as she pulls them away, they're the intense red of first day of her period blood.

Usually her period's not much of a big deal. Light flow, lasts about four days, not too much emotional craziness (she's got more than enough of that just on her own, her cycle doesn't seem to effect it), mild cramps the first day. As periods go, they're not bad.

So, it's probably not any sort of hormonal issue that's making her sit on the bathroom floor and sob.

It's just pure, unadulterated, heart feels ripped out sadness.

Tim woke to… he wasn't sure, he took a second to place it, and then he knew. Abby crying. He's half tempted to go back to sleep, because she does cry a lot when she's pregnant, and as of this point he's still zero for nine million on thinking up some way to fix whatever has caused the crying.

But, something, his "gut" probably, really doesn't like the way that crying sounds. This doesn't sound like a bad dream, sad thought, snuggled Kelly and just burst into tears crying. This sounds… off.

So he drags himself out of bed, knocks gently on the bathroom door. "You okay?"

"No."

That 'no' scares the shit out of him, but he's not going to just barge in on her. "Can I come in?"

She opens the door, eyes bright red, chest heaving, and immediately collapses into his arms.

"Abby…" his question dies on his lips. He sees the tissues, wadded up in the trash can, sees the open box of tampons, and puts two and two together and rapidly comes up with four. "Oh."

She's nodding against his chest and he kisses her temple, stroking her back.

He doesn't have any words. He's not even sure what he's feeling. This hurts, but it's not sobbing pain. Maybe it will be, eventually. It certainly is for Abby. This is more an aching, breath knocked out of you by the sucker punch that gets you right in the solar plexus, sort of pain.
It's an hour later, after her crying has calmed down, when he tentatively says, "Do you think you should see Dr. Draz?"

She shrugs at that.

And he really doesn't know the answer to that. He's not trying to gently nudge her toward it. He's honestly not sure if she should or not.

"Would you like me to give her a call? Get an opinion?"

She nods.

"Okay. I'll go do that."

He's on the phone, on hold, when he hears Kelly wake up, so he heads toward her, but Abby's got her. She nods at him, letting him know she's got this, and he heads downstairs where he can talk without a fussing baby in the background.

He finally gets Dr. Draz and explains what happened.

"Okay, first thing first, do you have another pregnancy test lying around?"

"Yes." He bought a two pack, because if it was negative but her period kept not showing up, they'd want to test again.

"Have Abby take it. Just because you're bleeding doesn't mean you aren't pregnant anymore. Give me a call back in a few minutes when you know what the result is, okay? This might be a lot of upset for nothing alarming."

He heads into Kelly's room where Abby's nursing her. "Doc says it's a good idea to retake the pregnancy test. See if this really is your period or just some sort of bleeding. Which can be normal."

She looks up at him, not seeming very enthusiastic about that. And he can see from the way she's looking at him that she's certain this is not just some sort of little bleeding thing.

"Do you want to take it?"

She shrugs. "When Kelly's done."

"Okay. I'll... um..." He feels so useless right now. Normally, he'd be getting his morning shower, she'd be feeding Kelly, Heather will get here soon, and the day begins. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"Uh..." He can see she doesn't really want to eat, and he's not exactly hungry right now, either, but they may as well eat. "Make me some scrambled eggs?"

"Okay."

She comes down ten minutes later, and shakes her head. "Negative."

"Fuck." It comes out pretty flat. Mostly just expressing how disappointed he is. He didn't have much hope that it was going to come up positive. He puts the plate with the eggs on it in front of her, she looks at them, pokes them a few times, and then they hear Heather coming in. She gets up quickly, tosses the eggs in the trash, and Tim understands she doesn't want to explain why she's not eating.

"Hey guys! How's this morning going?"
Abby plasters a really fake smile on her face. "Fine. Kind of slow. But I know someone wants to play." She hands Kelly over.

"Hey, Kelly girl! Did you have a good weekend?"

Kelly grins up at Heather.

Heather seems to notice that both of the grown-ups are still in their pajamas. "You weren't kidding about a slow start. I always have a hard time getting up and running on cold, gray days like today, too."

"Yeah, it was a good day to stay in bed," Tim says, taking his cues from Abby. "Shower time for us."

"Okay." Heather's looking like that's probably more information than she needed. "Have fun?"

"Sure," Abby says, voice flat, and they head upstairs. She does head into the shower, and he calls Dr. Draz again.

"The test was negative."

"I'm so sorry." Her voice is soothing, or would be if he was in a willing to be soothed mood.

"Uh… Thanks. Do we need to come in?"

"Probably not. You said it's been, at most, four weeks since she would have conceived?"

"Yeah."

"If the flow gets very heavy, or she's passing large clots, or very bad cramping, then sure, come in. But, if it acts like a normal period, then she doesn't need to."

"Okay."

"I know this probably isn't very comforting, but this happens all the time. Something like four out of five embryos don't implant in the first place, and a decent number of them don't stay long after implanting. It usually means something's gone wrong in the cell division."

"Okay."

"And it's also possible that she wasn't pregnant at all. False positives aren't unheard of, and the hormones involved in nursing can throw off a test sometimes."

"Okay."

"She's going to be fine, and this will in no way effect your chances of having other babies."

"Okay," falls, numbly, off his lips again.

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks. I should go."

"Goodbye."

And he hung up.
Tim joins Abby in the shower. They're quiet in there for a long minute, just holding each other. She's not crying anymore, and he hasn't.

Her voice is very quiet, practically a whisper as she says, "I can't stop thinking about what I could have done differently. Gotten more sleep, worked less, those two cases where I worked all night can't have been good for this, and I had eggnog at the Christmas party, and… I'm standing in a hot shower. I know you're not supposed to get hot showers. Get your body temperature too high and you can cook…"

Tim's not sure how much ranting she needs to do to feel better, and when he needs to jump in and stop it, but as she jumps from hot showers to took two Advil four days ago, and the sushi she had for dinner last night, he's thinking now is probably the time.

"It's not your fault."

"I've had three Caf-Pows this week. I know that can't be good!"

"Abby. It's not your fault. We don't even know for certain that you were pregnant. Dr. Draz says that the nursing hormones can cause a false positive, and even if you were, it usually a cell division thing, not a you made an inhospitable womb for your child."

"But I should have…"

"NO." Because he can't have her going there, because nothing good lives there. "Would you have told Breena she should have done something different, quit working, stayed away from the embalming chemicals?"

That horrifies Abby, and she swallows hard, blinking.

"It's not any different for us. It's not your fault. It's not my fault. It just is. Or isn't. Because we don't really know, not for sure."

She's looking at him, so sad, and that's crushing him. "If it's not my fault, then there's nothing I can do to change it for next time."

He kisses her.

"And we did know, Tim. Doesn't matter if it was real or not, we knew and we felt it and that's all the real anyone ever gets."

He kisses her once more. "I know," and he does, because she's right, they did know. They watched it turn positive, they felt the joy of it, and they knew. And now it's gone. And that starts his tears.

"You want to go to work?"

She nods. "Might go home early. But if I spend today snuggling with Kelly, I'll just dwell on it."

"If you want to stay home, you can snuggle with me, too."

She shakes her head. "Not that I don't want the snuggles, but we can go out and make life better for someone else today, maybe break Tony's case open or something, or stay here and cry."

"Then let's go."
Jimmy might not be the sharpest knife in the drawer when it comes to picking up non-verbal cues, but when his two best friends, who should be in a jubilant mood, join him for lunch, both of them looking like they've taken a hard beating, he's not having a difficult time figuring out what's going on.

So, he doesn't ask, "Are you okay?" It's clear they aren't. But, though he's awfully sure what flavor of not okay this is, he doesn't want to assume either. Just because he immediately jumps to they lost the baby doesn't mean it's true. That's his own past feeding into this, and it could be something else.

But it's not.

So, it's a very quiet lunch, with a lot of hugs. He makes sure both of them eat, because you've got to eat, and hearing how this morning went, he really doubts they had breakfast.

When they head back to work, he stops the elevator, pulling his phone out, ready to call Breena.

It doesn't hit him as hard as he expected it to. This time last year, this would have dropped him to his knees. There's distance here, now. This loss aches, but when he was sitting in the booth at the restaurant, waiting for one of them to say the word miscarriage, he was expecting it to feel like knives.

And it didn't.

And he doesn't know if that's himself healing, or if it's a sign that the calluses and scars have numbed his ability to empathize.

He does know he's worried about how Breena will take it. He's half-afraid this will be like going back, like being in the Doc's office getting the bad news all over again. He's hoping, that like for him, this will ache, the sadness of disappointed friends, but that it won't be an instant flashback.

He thinks about waiting to get home to tell her, but… He'd like to stop by Tim and Abby's tonight, bring food, make sure they aren't alone.

He hits Breena's contact number.

"Hey, Jimmy, what's up?" she says when she picks up. He's not calling the way he was after they lost Jon, not every half-hour, or hour even, but he still does check in once or so a day, usually just to say hi, see how things are. So, she expects to hear from him at some point during the day on slow days. And, since he never knows how long he'll be out on non-slow days, she expects a call on those days, too. "Catch another case?"

"No. Not today." He sighs, and she catches the flavor of that sigh.

"What's wrong?"

"Abby miscarried."

"Oh." He can hear and feel her wince. "Are they…"

"From the looks of it, they're as okay as can be." He's quiet for a moment. "How about you?"

"Me?"

"Yeah."

"Sad, disappointed. That's what should happen, right?"
"Think so."

"How about you?" she asks, getting why he's asking, and from the sound of it, hoping that he's okay, too.

"The same. I saw them sitting in the restaurant, looking deflated, and... I kind of expected it to hurt worse, but..." He can't see it, but he knows she's nodding, understanding.

"This may hit harder, later, but right now, just... sad," she says.

"Okay."

"Have they told Gibbs, yet?"

"Don't think so."

"He's out with Molly and Mona right now. When they get back, I'll tell him."

"Thanks."

Beth wasn't kidding. Mona likes kids. She's smart as a whip, and when she hears the words, "Come on, let's go see Molly," she bounds up to the truck, leaps into the cab as soon as he opens the door, and sits in the front seat, looking very alert, beaming, well come on, get moving, let's get there already! at him.

And Molly loves Mona. As soon as she hears the quiet clicking of Mona's claws on the tile floor in the mudroom, she comes tearing in shouting "MONA!" (Followed by, "Shhh... No shouting in the house," in Breena's voice as she follows, more slowly, pets Mona's head, and gives Gibbs a kiss. While it's true that the rest of the crew met Mona for the first time on Friday night, Breena and Jimmy were sworn to secrecy on Tuesday, because Gibbs wanted to take Molly and Mona out.)

And thus, last Tuesday, Adventures with Uncle Jethro, began.

Anna, at six weeks old, has gotten to the point where she's reliably sleeping for at least an hour and a half out of every three. So, a bit before lunch, he and Molly and Mona go out for 'adventures,' (The park, the mall, "the zoo" (Petsmart, both Molly and Mona like to watch the fish,) anywhere he can go with a toddler and a dog.) where they go run around and play, followed by lunch at his house (or Jeannie's if she's home, and he's thinking he'll check in with Penny and see if she's got any days where she's got some lunchtimes free), then more playing, and bringing Molly home for naptime, thus buying Breena two full nap cycles where she can sleep.

It's, as he told Tim, the highlight of his day. And Breena certainly appreciates it, too.

Today's adventure is a Petsmart run, where they get more food for Mona, and then spend twenty minutes watching the fish. Gibbs idly wonders if the fish get nervous with two sets of eyes tracking them as they go swimming back and forth, but decides that fish are awfully stupid, so they probably don't notice.

Then over to the diner. ("Shhh... our secret. Mama thinks we're having peanut butter and jelly at home." Of course Breena knows what's really up, but the idea that she and Uncle Jethro have secret outings tickles Molly to no end.) Elaine hooks them up with one burger with everything, rare, for him, peanut butter and jelly, for Molly, and one burger, hold the bun, lettuce, ketchup, cheese, tomato, mayo, and pickle, raw, (packed up to go. Eliane would have liked to let Mona in, but the health department is awfully strict.) for Mona.
Followed by romping at the park, and then back to Jimmy and Breena's with a sleepy toddler he goes.

When he gets in, Breena's nursing Anna. He's already carrying Molly, so he just nods toward her bedroom, and Breena nods back.

He kisses the top of Molly's head. "Stories and snuggles and naptime?"

She nods. "Nigh' Moon?"

"We'll do Goodnight Moon. You gonna find the mouse for me?"

"Yes!"

Goodnight Moon's a hit with Molly, though, unlike Kelly, she likes to see the pictures, so, once he's got her changed and his hands washed, he finds a copy of the book, and they settle into the rocking chair in her room, and he quietly reads the story to her. She cuddles in his lap, looking at each page, finding the mouse in each picture, and sucking her thumb.

He gets to the end of the story, and tucks her into her bed, kissing her again, as she goes off to sleep.

It's not a shock to Gibbs, he knows her parents after all, but Molly Palmer is the sweetest child he's ever met. Sure, she gets crabby and frustrated, and if you get her overtired she's an all-out holy terror, but for day in day out life, when the grown-ups are doing a good job of managing her, she's just a little ray of sunshine and cuddles.

He's wondering a bit (for example he knows Ed will talk your ears off about how sweet his girls were as babies, but part of that's time and distance rose colored glasses) what Breena and Jimmy were like as little kids.

He's also wondering if Anna's gonna be a spitfire just to mark her own territory out.

He heads into the kitchen, getting himself a cup of coffee, and calls out quietly, "You want anything while I'm in here?"

"I'm fine."

And a minute later he heads toward Breena, sitting across from her in their living room.

"Go well?" she asks him.

"Went fine. Those two'll sit there watching the goldfish for an hour if I let them." He smiles, but notices she's not looking that happy. "You okay? She nap?"

Breena nods. "Anna napped just fine." She smiles at him, but it's sad. "Jimmy called me after lunch..." He can feel bad news coming and braces for it. He knows it can't be the worst, she wouldn't be here alone if someone had died, but whatever she's about to say won't be good. "Abby miscarried."

"Fuck!" He says it low and quiet, wincing at the news.

Breena nods. "Yeah."

"Are they… okay?" He finishes, lamely. Of course they aren't okay.

"They both went to work today. Probably heading home early."
He nods at that, already making plans in his mind.

"I'm going to head over."

Breena nods. "We'll join you when Jimmy gets home, bring some food."

Gibbs waves that away. "You rest. I'm on food."

If he was paying more attention, he would have noticed that Breena didn't nod along with that. But he wasn't. He's mostly just feeling very disappointed, and trying to think of what to do to be comforting for Tim and Abby.

He heads off shortly after that, planning on going to the grocery store, grabbing something for them, and then going to their place, letting Heather go home early. (He's guessing they wouldn't have told her what was up.)

He's standing in the grocery store, debating chard or kale (neither of which he has ever given a flying fuck about before, or for that matter, could have identified as something other than "Spinach?" but he's shopping for Tim and Abby and they like curly green veggies) when he can feel Rachel in the back of his head saying, "You're avoiding it by being busy. They don't care if you get them the perfect dinner or not. Just being there is enough. Let yourself feel it, Jethro, don't push it away."

He put the greens down and left.

He's been sleeping like shit since he retired. Too much time, not enough work to keep his brain active, and that means no sleep.

But last night, and Saturday night, he'd slept pretty well. He'd been dreaming of Tim and Abby's son.

And yes, he does know that anything you want to do with a boy, you can do with a girl. He really knows that, and maybe it's because for as many sons as he's collected over the years, he's never started out with one from the beginning, but he was really looking forward to a little boy.

It's not even so much that he's got "boy" things he wants to do. His fantasies of camping and rough housing and teaching them to shoot and drive involve the girls, too.

But, God, he wanted a little boy. He wanted Tim and Abby's little boy.

He especially wanted Tim, and Tim's son to have men around him that adored him no matter what.

He wanted to be able to give that to Tim as much as to the image of the child in his head.

And he knows it's not like this is it, that there will never be any other babies. He tells himself the same things that he figures everyone else in this situation says to themselves, there'll be other chances, this isn't it, but saying goodbye, or maybe, he hopes, putting that dream on hold, hurts.

Gibbs is waiting for them when they got home. He sees they're surprised to see him, but he smiles a little, puts Kelly on her play mat (Mona immediately trots over to her and lays down right next to her, keeping her company), and pulls both of them into a hug. "Breena told me when I took Molly home. She and Jimmy'll be over if you want them. Or just me if you want more quiet."

"They're already on their way," Abby says, quietly. Jimmy had texted her about that when they were driving home. "They wanted to make sure we ate."
Gibbs smiles at that, kissing both of them. "You think I didn't bring food?" (And he did. He told Elaine he had some sad people at home, but not why, he hinted it was a bad day at work, and she did her magic. Much better than him glaring at greens in the grocery store.)

There's a quick knock, followed by Tony and Ziva heading in, also with food. It's a mitzvah to feed those who mourn, and it looks like if there is any obligation owed to those who hurt, this is the one their family is all over.

Jimmy and Breena are there less than half an hour later, with yet more food.

It's a very quiet meal, even Molly seems to sense something is up, so she's staying close to Jimmy and Breena. There's lots and lots and lots of food. Tim and Abby aren't going to need to do anything other than put food in the microwave to heat it up anytime this week. Which is probably the plan.

Whether or not they were telling Ducky and Penny came up, and Jimmy got deputized to pass that along tomorrow. With everyone else knowing, there was no way it wouldn't slip out.

And eventually everyone but Gibbs went home. It's not so much that he thinks he's got anything that'll help, but having him near is comforting, and if he's being honest, being near is comforting for him, too.

It's not late. In fact, it's honestly not all that long past Kelly going to bed, but they're tired. Physically tired, it's been a long day, and emotionally drained.

So Gibbs doesn't say anything when they go to bed two hours early.

Tim appreciates that. He appreciates all the things people haven't said to him today. And yes, his family learned, the hard way, what not to say to someone where they are, which he supposes is the tiniest damn silver lining in the history of silver linings, but...

No one minimized it. No one said they shouldn't be sad. No one tried to jolly them out of it, or make them look on the bright side, or any of that hollow, meaningless cheering-up shit.

Today they were allowed to be sad, allowed to grieve an idea or a hope or whatever it was.

And tomorrow will be better, he knows that, Abby does, too. Tomorrow, they'll get their minds wrapped around next month, and trying again, probably start charting so they know what's going on. They'll rally round each other and move on. But they needed today, too, and he's very pleased they got it.

Abby's cuddled up in his arms, spooned against him. His face is pressed against the nape of her neck. He feels her take his hand, lift it to her lips, and kiss it.

"Next month will be different," she says.

"Yeah, it will." He kisses the back of her neck. "Valentine's baby."

She nods. "Valentine's baby."
Interlude

There are times Tim thinks he understands love. Times where he just feels so full of it that he can’t contain it.

There are moments, like this one, here, now, when he's hyperaware of himself and Abby, of breath and bone, pulse and heat.

There are moments where he believes there is more to this whole human thing than skin bags holding together various solids and fluids. Moments where he's aware of the energy of his life and hers and how their love for each other brings that to the front, allows him access to it.

Right now, they're kissing, soft and deep and he's aware of lips, and tongue, and wet, and hot. Aware of the scrape of tooth and the slide of lips. Right now, there's the light rasp of his stubble on her mouth, and the flavor of her toothpaste on her tongue. Right now, lips are moving, but bodies are still, waiting for the fullness of this moment, for that second where they both can't not move.

He's aware of the feel of the pillows behind his back, and the blankets under his legs. He's tuned into her toes against his thighs, just above his knees, and the smooth expanse of her calves against his thighs and hips.

Her thighs, quivering, soon, but not yet, sinking down on him, are rapture.

Her butt, cradled in his hands, soft and full against his fingers, delight.

Her pussy, just barely touching the head of his dick, wet and slick, and just the mearest hint of friction every time his heart beats, there's life, and heat, and love.

And there... one moment shifting into the next, the fullness of waiting sliding into a new moment needing to be filled.

She slips down him in a golden rush, and he groans into her kiss, aware of all of it, from her fingernails in his hair to the palm of her other hand on his chest, the smell of her skin, and the heat of her body.

And love isn't sex, and sex isn't love, and he knows that and it doesn't matter because right now... here... there is an aching, filled, contentment of having and wanting and need fulfilled with cherishing. This is all of it mixed together, bodies exultant, moving past bodies without losing the actual concrete experience of his body and hers together.

Tomorrow this will fade. Ten minutes from now it will be vague. But this, right here, right now, is love made real, made tangible, made light and ecstasy.

And right now, it's what both of them need, so very, very much.
The thing is, there's only so much woodworking you can do in a day.

Or maybe there's only so much woodworking that Jethro can do in a day.

He didn't think it was possible, but, by the end of his third week of retirement, when he'd finished his bed, and gotten most of Shannon done, too, he'd hit the point of feeling bored with woodworking.

It's not working it's mind-quieting magic anymore.

Probably because it's not a refuge from anything anymore. Now it's a symbol of what he's trying to escape.

Tons and tons of time. He gets up, eats, finishes working out (longer and harder than he had been doing, which kills another hour) and… oh look, hours of nothing planned. From eleven to three he's been heading over to Breena's and taking Molly out. That buys Breena a bit more quiet and downtime, which she's appreciating, lets her grab a nap when Anna goes down, but come March both girls are going back to daycare because Breena's going back to work.

Likewise, he heads over (sometimes with Molly, sometimes in the afternoon without her) to get some baby snuggles with Kelly, and it certainly eats up time, and he enjoys it, but…

You're not supposed to say it, but babies are boring. Molly's big enough to be getting into everything and asking questions and exploring, so that's fun, but, no matter how much he loves Kelly (and he does) she's just seven months old, so the majority of her awake time is spent laying on her back or tummy kicking at things and chewing on them. And sure, that's cute, but hour after hour of it… (He doesn't know how Heather hasn't gone stark, raving mad.)

He lets Kelly chew on him, and they work on standing (where he holds her under her armpits and she stands, not holding any of her weight) or sitting (she's got that pretty much down by now). He'll build block towers and she'll knock them down and chew on the blocks, and peek-a-boo is a perennial favorite, but that's not exactly keeping his brain active.

Part of the problem is time. Hour and hours of it. Part of the problem is sleep. He's never been good at sleeping if he isn't tired, and unless he's got something that tires him out, some sort of work that makes his body feel like it's earned some sleep, his brain keeps going, and he can't really shut down.

He was never a huge sleeper to begin with. Six-seven hours a day and he was good. And now, even with working out as hard and as long as his body will let him every morning, he still doesn't feel sleepy at the end of the day. He gets to midnight, his usual end of the day, and he's not ready to sleep. He's tired, but not restful.

So, bedtime has shifted from midnight to two or three, but wake up time is still firmly set at 06:30.

Three more hours of nothing much to do.

By the end of the third week, his bed is done, every part of Shannon that can be done is, and besides finishing and sanding and more finishing and more sanding, he's out of woodworking projects.

He's getting Shannon done for a reason, so, as he's waiting for her finish to dry (so he can sand it
again and put more finish on it. Boats, because of that whole in the water thing, take a lot of finishing), he gets all of Mike Franks' files out, and begins to go through them again.

And then he put them all back in the hidden space behind that shelf and heads to the hardware store.

He'll tell you that he doesn't have a lock on the door because there's nothing worth taking in his house. This is true but misleading. Once upon a time he had a lock on the door. There was certainly one when he lived here with Shannon and each of the wives that followed.

But, in a… fit of pique… (blind fury, really) Stephanie decided her last parting gift would be to leave the house, locking all the doors and supergluing the keys into the locks.

So, he shot the lock. (Gibbs did not have a door he, or anyone else for that matter, could kick down. That puppy was solid oak and steel and could have thwarted a battering ram.) And when he got a new door, he didn't bother to stick a lock in it. Which is how he ended up with a house with no locks.

But if he's going to do this, he's going to have things in his house that he'd prefer people didn't get into. So, yeah, locks.

Fortunately, Mona's a good excuse for him to have a lock on the door. Anyone (and he's thinking Fornell or Vance may qualify as anyone) asks, and he's just making sure none of his buddies get killed by his pet.

Once he had the locks installed in his kitchen door and his front door, he went back to the hidden compartment, got Mike's files out again, and got to work.

Or, at least, getting to the preliminaries of getting to work. Time to try and figure out how he was going to do this.

And that night, sitting at his kitchen table, glass of bourbon next to him (untouched) files all around him, long before midnight, his body starts saying to him, "Sleep now, please!"

So he goes to bed, and dreams of sailing.

Mike was infuriatingly specific about some things and mind-bogglingly vague about others. He's got pages and pages of who he was blackmailing, he's got detailed numbers on exactly how much he was paying in bribes and to whom, and he's got excruciatingly specific information on how to get an undocumented person from any point A in the US to any point B.

What he doesn't have, and… okay, no, it's not actually mind boggling, it's… It's that Mike never knew if anyone else (besides Gibbs) was going to see this stuff, and if they did he didn't want to screw his supply chain.

So, what Gibbs doesn't have is how Mike found the girls, or who made the documents for them, or what happened to them once he got them to the US. All of that is completely off the books.

What he has is a pile of tantalizing, but years old, leads, and no real evidence.

So, what next?

It doesn't take him long to decide. There are probably hundreds of people Mike knew and used for this type of operation, and there's exactly one who he knows and might be willing to talk to him about it.
Leyla's married now. Lives in a nice home with Amira, her husband (also a Mike) and in the next month or so, a new baby boy.

"Don't get up. I can get myself a drink." Gibbs says when she offers to get him something. She looks like she's at least two hundred months pregnant and has hit the point where it's hard to move.

He grabs himself a drink, and one for her, and then heads over.

"Got a serious question for you?"

She's looking a little worried at that, and years of training tells him that she's got to know something because people don't get that kind of look unless they're afraid of what you're going to ask.

"What kind of serious?"

"About Mike serious."

"Oh. Mike." Yep, she's worried.

"Yeah. He was smuggling girls into the country, like you?"

She nods. "Why are you asking? His… operation… died with him."

"He left me all of his papers. There were hints of what he was doing in there, enough to put me on the right track, but..." he pauses, aware that saying this out loud commits him to, well, not much of anything, but it gets the idea that he's interested in this out there, out there in a way telling Rachel didn't. Best way to keep a secret, keep it to yourself. Second best way, tell one other person. There is no third best way. But he can't do this and keep it a secret. He needs help. "I don't know how to find the girls. I don't know what to do with them once I get them here."

Leyla looks shocked. "You want to do this?"

"I can do it. I've got a boat. I've got connections. I've got the time. And I can't think of anyone who deserves the help more."

"And you were hoping I knew…" she looks expectantly, waiting for him to fill in what he's looking for.

"Anything. But how to find the girls would be the first step. I can't just sail on over to wherever and grab girls off the street."

She smiles at that and shakes her head. "No. You can't. Unfortunately, I don't know how he found the girls. For years, I didn't know he was doing it. Then he had one that he needed to talk to, and I was the closest, most reliable translator available."

"Any idea where he took them… Anything about what happened after they got here?"

"No. After I translated… She was hysterical, and he couldn't get her calmed down on his own… They had walked past one of those video monitors that has a camera on it, and she saw herself on the television and was sure her husband and his brothers were going to find her because of it. After that, I never saw another of the girls. And he never actually said how he ended up with a fifteen year old Iraqi-girl who spoke no English and was on the run from her family, but I could put the dots together."

"Yeah, you would."
"So, he didn't actually tell you what he was doing?" she asks.

"He couldn't tell me because I was a cop. He left me a paper trail to follow, for when I was ready, if I wanted to follow in his footsteps, but he left enough of it out so that if anyone else got it, his people couldn't be hurt."

She nods gently at him. "I'm sorry I do not have more for you. I would have helped him if he had let me, but... It was clear he... they didn't want me in on it. I think... but I don't know... They didn't exactly like each other, but I think my mother was in on it, too."

Once Leyla says that, it all clicks for Gibbs. Of course Mike would keep it in the family. "She would have known who needed help."

"Yes."

"Could I talk to her?"

She shakes her head. "Only if you can speak to the dead. She died the year before last."

Gibbs hadn't known that. "I'm sorry."

"When Iraq went crazy in '14, she was one of the leaders calling for calm and peace. The men of our family decided they were done with that. I got word that she 'died in her sleep' and one of her half-brothers was taking over. I decided it wasn't a good idea to go home for the funeral."

Gibbs nods. "I am sorry."

"So am I. I wish she had stayed in Mexico. But she couldn't run things from there and she didn't want to spend the rest of her days laying on the beach."

Gibbs squeezes her hand.

"If you ever need a translator..."

"I know who to stay away from." He looks at her home, the pictures of Amira and her new husband, the baby growing in her. "You've got way too much to lose if we get caught. If they were in it together, I'm sure that's why Mike or your mom never talked about it, either."

She stares at Gibbs for a long minute. "And do you not have too much to lose?"

Gibbs isn't sure what to say to that.

---

His best first guess was a dead end, which leaves... He spends an hour with Mona, tossing the ball, she's tearing after it, bringing it back to him, while he racks his brain. It's not that he doesn't know some shady people who might be able to get him in touch with other people for something like this.

It's that he doesn't know anyone he trusts. It's not enough to know who to talk to, who needs help, where to look. It's that the person who finds that for him has to also know how to shut up.

He needs a contact who won't fold under questioning, someone who looks at cops with disdain. Someone who will tell the powers that be to go to hell if they get in her way.

And that train of thought brings up a mental image. Specifically the first time he met Penny Langston, sitting in his interrogation room, ready to tell him to go to hell and then kiss his own ass while he was there.
He feels the smile start as he thinks more about it, because, not only does she have the perfect temperament for this, but, if anyone he knows would know about this, it's her.

"Hi, Penny," he says into his phone as soon as he gets home with Mona.

"Jethro."

"You doing anything today?"

"I've got class until four."

"Can I offer you dinner then?"

"Is this an offer for just me, or for me and Ducky?" She sounds very curious. Gibbs doesn't often just call her up out of the blue to chat.

"You're the one I need to talk to, but he can and probably should come along, too."

"Mysterious."

He smiles into the phone.

"Shall I bring wine?"

"Just tossing some steaks on the fire. Bring it if you want to drink it."

Dinner's on the table. Steaks, baked potatoes, if it was just him and Duck, he'd leave it there, but since Penny seems to actually enjoy green stuff, he's made a salad and tossed some green beans in the microwave.

He hears his door open, followed by Mona moseying over to say Hi to his visitors. Apparently her hearing/sense of smell is good enough to identify people before they get in the door, and these are people she's already identified as part of the pack.

They settle in to dinner quickly.

"So, what is our mysterious assignation, Jethro?" Penny asks while Ducky pours the wine.

"Duck… this might not be good for you."

"Might not be good for me?" Ducky asks with a smile. "You intend to feed me a porterhouse and baked potato so loaded with sour cream, cheese, and bacon that my arteries are hardening just smelling it. What more possible ill could you have aimed at me tonight?"

"More intriguing," Penny says, sipping her wine, "why would it be bad for him and not me?"

"Because this is the sort of thing where if we get caught people'll think you're a hero and best he can hope for is fired and lost pension."

Ducky grins, wryly. "Sounds like a grand conspiracy. Which laws are we planning on violating?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "That's the idea. Few months ago…" He explains what he found from Mike, how that got the idea in his head, his conversation with Leyla, and wrapped up with, "and, since you're on campus and part of all those do-gooder feminist groups, and I know for a fact you're not
going to break under questioning, I thought, maybe, you might know someone who knows someone…"

Penny doesn't seem to love the idea of 'do-gooder feminist groups' but she does seem interested in putting some action behind the rhetoric. "Tall order. I assume you're serious about this. You want it to actually succeed, so it couldn't be the kind of thing where we'd find someone just talking the talk."

"Yeah." He nods. "And if we're going to keep doing it, it can't be someone who's in it for the glory. This has to stay silent. Can't be parading the girls around, using them as examples. They've got to get here and vanish."

"And they've got to be willing to work with you," Penny says, eyeing him.

"What does that mean?" Of all of the things Gibbs has thought about this, the idea that someone might not want to work with him has never occurred to him.

"Jethro, everything about you screams COP."

"Oh." Yes, that could be an issue. If it looks like a sting, they won't let him in, and all the really, I'm retired on earth won't help.

Ducky chuckles at that. Gibbs is looking somewhat less coppish these days. He's got at least two days of stubble and is wearing cargo pants and a well-worn Marines t-shirt. "You haven't seen full Vacation Jethro, yet. He makes an exceptionally convincing beach bum"

"I was beach bumming."

"And you looked the part. He even has some Hawaiian shirts, if memory serves. However, I was thinking that looking like a cop or a Marine, while you are on the sea, would be a benefit."

"Old, retired, law and order guy on a handmade sailboat. Nothing about that screams human smuggler. One girl, maybe two, it's a long run, work on her English on the way, sail right on through."

"Act like you belong and everyone will accept it," Penny says.

"That's the idea. Probably go on a bunch of dry runs, take the kids out, stuff like that, make sure that I'm a familiar sight." Both of them are nodding. "But it doesn't work if I can't find the girls, and right now, I don't know how to find the girls. And it really doesn't work if I can't find what to do with them when I get them here." Now he was looking at Penny.

She thinks about it, going through her mental rolodex. "I don't know anyone off the top of my head. But I do know a few people who likely know people. Is two or three degrees of separation close enough?"

"I'm not in a rush, so I'd be willing to get to know them well enough to find out if they seem trustworthy."

She shakes her head at that. "I'll handle that part. Let me do the sniffing out. The kind of person I'm likely to get introduced to who's likely to be interested in this is also likely to be turned off by you."

"I'm not Attila the Hun."

"You're a cop, and a Marine, and a capitalist, and a Republican, and a Christian, and a gun owner. You are the Patriarchy. If I can find someone on campus who is involved with this, they will not
"Want anything to do with you."

"Other than I'm the old, white guy with the boat who will risk his life and his freedom to get women in need of a new home to the US."

"Doesn't matter. They'll assume it's because you hate Arabs more than you dislike women."

Gibbs rolls his eyes. "Wonderful. Why do you like these people?"

"Because people aren't just labels, and I like getting to know who's under those nametags."

"And you enjoy being a bridge between cultures, and doing what isn't expected of you," Ducky adds, toning down the tension a bit. Then he moves to more practical matters. "Speaking of 'taking the kids out,' are we telling the children about this?" Ducky asks.

"I want to. You'd know they'd support it, and you know they'd be useful. But... no. This is for us, and just us." Gibbs shakes his head. That isn't up for debate.

Penny immediately gets why he didn't tell them. "They've got a lot to lose. What happens if Ducky and I get arrested? Good publicity. No one is going to take octogenarians to court for helping to smuggle oppressed girls into the country. Realistically, we'll be dead before the case is over."

"Not quite the same boat for me, but retired law enforcement, retired Marine, four... six... no... seven... distinguished service medals. Put me on the stand, get me talking about what we're getting those girls away from... I'm a nightmare for a prosecutor."

"If we do this, I think we need a good lawyer on standby," Ducky says, making an excellent point.

Penny nods at that. "And we certainly need a place for you to land. You mentioned looking for place on the water, just as a vacation spot... How are you set for buying one? I can put a good stake into it, or back expenses on this, because this has to cost money."

Ducky thinks about that, then nods as well... "If we can get an 'underground railroad' going, I can shift money to it."

"I..." the idea that this would be expensive hadn't occurred to Gibbs, but now that he's thinking about it... Yes, this will be expensive, and sure he's got some money, but he's not independently wealthy.

But both of the people sitting next to him are.

Both of them stare at him, then Penny says, "Waterfront property, even in bad shape, isn't cheap. You wouldn't blow your entire nest egg on a vacation place. But the three of us together might put up the money for something, the kids'll add sweat equity. It'll look like we got a family vacation home. Most of the time that's all it will be. Place for us to spend time on holidays and weekends."

"Timothy and Abigail will want to buy in."

Penny shakes her head. "We can't let them buy in. It's one thing to work on the place. Another to actually have money in it. That'll tie them too closely to it."

Gibbs nods at that. "They put money up; they have to know what we're doing with it."

"If they know the others will, too," Penny finishes.

"Then, I think we will take advantage of being old," Ducky says. "All of my estate is going to
different charities." He looks to Penny. "Your estate is similarly designed. This is our present to them. Passing on some of that wealth in a way that fosters family and warm memories. Doing it in such a way that we will get to enjoy it, as well. You find a place Jethro, and we'll buy it. When we pass, it'll go to you, and from you to the children."

Gibbs nods, that would solve the problem nicely.

Ducky grins at them, "Did I ever tell you about the year I spent in Prague? Officially I was part of a medical conference, trading western and eastern surgical techniques. In my spare time, I was helping to get dissenters out from behind the Iron Curtain…"
"Okay, Molly, what do you think?" He's at the hardware store, Molly in the cart, Mona standing next to them, staring at the paint chips.

"Pink!" She's very definite about that.

He nods. There are twenty-six million shades of pink in front of them.

"Which one?"

"Alllll the pink!"

"Uh huh," he says dryly, grabbing a light one and a darker one pretty much at random. Gibbs is a guy, pink is pink is pink to him. Do not attempt to confuse him with concepts such as rose, mauve, salmon, fuchsia or, god forbid, peach. (A color he suspects that only women can see. Shannon once teased him about how he's probably colorblind. Diane would have agreed, having said the same thing to him once upon a time. All he knows is that he passed the color vision test when he enlisted.)

He holds them up. "Pretty?"

Molly nods, satisfied. "Pretty."

"Good. Let's go get them."

He's been thinking of it for a while, and at least as of 10:47 on Friday, all of his guys have the weekend off, so this weekend, they're going to re-do Kelly's room. He wants his girls to have a space in his home for napping and playing or whatever it is.

Plus he's a little tired of everyone at his house, girls going down to nap in his bed, and then coming back up later that night to find wet spots (That are drool, and that's all they are, and that's that, thank you very much.) on his blankets.

So, Saturday, they're redoing the nursery.

Though, the more he thinks about it… He grabs a few more gallons of paint. If he's got captive labor, he might as well put them to work.

When he was working, Gibbs didn't live for the weekend. He didn't exactly dread it, but he didn't love it. But now, Friday to Sunday is rapidly becoming his favorite time.

He found the first week that he likes making Shabbos dinner. At least, he liked having something very concrete to do that would make the people around him happy.

He's not Ziva, so he's not an inspired cook or anything, but he can learn, and, in that he's not working, it seems like it'd make sense for him to host their weekly dinner. At least, it makes more sense than Tony and Ziva racing home, cooking, and getting everything ready in the few hours between end of work and sundown. Maybe, come summertime, they'll take over on cooking again. (He knows Ziva likes hosting Shabbos, too.) But right now, him handling it is good.

This way they get to relax on their Sabbath, too.

Plus, he and Molly have a pretty good groove going now. She likes grocery shopping. So, on
Fridays their adventures involve hitting the grocery store (and the hardware store today) followed by lunch at home, and she 'helps' him cook.

Today, he's got Ziva's challah recipe, and they're going to make it.

He supposes his kitchen could be a bigger mess, but it'd take actual effort. So, while it's true that Gibbs is a veteran dad, it's also true that it's been a while since he's done hands-on dadding, and as a result has forgotten certain aspects of toddler maintenance.

Specifically, he'd forgotten exactly how uncoordinated they can be. And he's never known how adding an excited Doberman to the mix makes things even stickier.

On the upside, Molly had an absolute blast.

And, the finished challah both looks and smells awesome.

And Mona was happy to help out by licking up the coconut oil, flour, eggs, and dough that got dropped on the floor. According to her, today is Christmas, Easter, Halloween, and her birthday all wrapped up in one and celebrated by yummy, sticky manna falling from heaven.

But he's thinking, as Molly naps upstairs, and Mona's still licking the floor (the floor he thought he'd gotten everything washed off of) that next week (and as long as he's doing this with a toddler helper), they'll buy the challah.

Gibbs knew Tim was going to change when he shifted from tech-specialist to Boss. He hadn't expected how fast or easy he'd slide into it, but he knew Tim would find his fit.

And he has. He's sitting at the table, telling them about how he's got the job scheduling software up and running, and how he's gotten the cyber searches for field agents out of the Navy Yard so streamlined that Leon headed down yesterday to congratulate him, and offered him three techs out of IT to help get it that much faster for the rest of NCIS.

"Are you going to use them?" Penny asks.

"Right now I've got a ton of coding, and the more coding someone else is doing, the more solving crimes my guys are doing, but I have no idea if any of the people he's offering can code their way out of a paper bag, and if they can't, we'll spend more time fixing problems then we'll save by them working for me."

"He's working on a test to find out," Abby says.

"Yeah, in my copious spare time," Tim says with an eye roll. Seems like every job he finds, every fix, every plan spawns more work. On the upside, last week he got rid of Bergener, and on Monday Howard starts. (Turns out it took her more than two weeks to get to NCIS, she wanted to finish a case she was working. Tim didn't mind, she's worth waiting for.)

"Any news on the paperwork software?" Jimmy asks. (Tim hadn't had much trouble enlisting Jimmy and Ducky as testers for the potential paperwork software. They too put everything into a computer, and then print out forms and fill in the forms with the stuff they just put in the computer. As soon as he's got a beta version, he'll roll it out to them and to his guys.)

"I told Vance I was working on it and should have a beta version for testing in the not distant future. He's intrigued. If it works, he's ecstatic. If it works and it's legal the champagne's on him."
Tony laughs at that. "I don't care if it's legal, if you can make it work on my computer, the scotch is on me, and I'll fund Abby's Caf-Pow for the next five years."

Tim laughs at that. "Alpha version's been up for two days. So far it's glitch-y, buggy, filling out the forms wrong, has crashed three times, and won't print."

"So, it's an alpha version," Abby says.

"Exactly!" Tim says, gritting his teeth. He'd been hoping to get a somewhat better product out of his team first time out, but… There's realistic, there's beyond realistic, and then there's the mountain coming to Mohammed, and he's fairly sure that any better than he's got right now fits in the third category. "Everything is slower than I think it should be. So, enough of my computing woes. How's the new team?"

Gibbs wasn't expecting how much Team Leader would change Tony. Probably because he watched Tony be "Team Leader" for months.

But, when the Old Boss is looking right over your shoulder, it's hard to really come into your own. Hard to be your own Leader.

But he's gone and the team is really Tony's now, and he is growing into the job.

Gibbs is sitting at the table, listening to Tony talk, hearing the details of the case, and seeing the change. For years Tony spent his time showing off, making sure he was the center of attention, and now he's not.

Gibbs doesn't know if he's hit the point where he doesn't need the constant external validation that he's doing the job right, where he knows, deep down in his gut, that he's got it, or if having the team met that need and is filling it, but either way, it's there. Tony's solid in a way he's never been before.

Solid Tony doesn't feel the need to be constantly showing off. He's not goofing around, making jokes all the time. He's comfortable enough to let the other people around him shine, too.

And that's a welcome change.

"And that's when Bishop said to Draga, 'You know if we set the search pattern in a..." Tony squints, trying to remember, but it's not coming to mind, "Actually, I don't know what she said, could have been in Japanese for all it meant to me, but Draga looked up at her, his eyes lit up, and then both of them grabbed their laptops and did something for the next hour, and an hour after that Ziva and I were driving to Quantico, where we grabbed two guys and broke the case wide open by leaning on them."

"They set up a financial search pattern that found a connection between both of our suspects and two other dummy accounts. The dummy accounts were linked to a third account, which was how they were being paid."

"What she said," Tony says, smiling at Ziva.

"Tink getting any better in the field?" Gibbs asks.

"She is getting more comfortable," Ziva answers. "Like Jimmy has said before, she's very smart. No… 'gut' as you would say, but if you show her something once, she will have it down by the next time she has to do it."
"Are she and Draga still bickering like crazy?" Breena asks.

Tony sighs. "Not this week. I think Draga's got a new girlfriend. He's way more laid back this week and just about sprinting out the door as soon as we call time. She's tried to tease him a few times, but it's just rolled off of him."

"And right now, he is not picking fights with her," Ziva says, with something of a smile. "I think all of his energy is currently directed elsewhere."

Breena notices it. "What's that smile?"

"I know who the girlfriend is."

"You do?" Tony's shocked by that. "How did you find out? He won't even admit there was a girlfriend to me."

"He told me this afternoon. Said that since I'd met her a few times, and knew some of her exes, could I give him any hints…"

Gibbs' eyes go wide, he thinks he might know where this is going. "It's not…"

She's grinning wide, very amused. "Oh, yes, it is. His new sweetheart is Diane."

Half of the table groans, the other half laughs. Mona and Molly look confused.

On Saturday, he's has Tim and Jimmy and Tony at his place, three gallons of off-white paint, a pint of light pink, a pint of darker pink, and a stack of cream and pink (Diane would have called it rose) colored carpet squares.

"You know, they might not all be girls. Maybe we don't need to coat everything in pink," Tony says to Gibbs as he helps Tim yank the ancient beige carpet off the floor of what used to be Kelly's room.

"Right now, we've got girls." Gibbs looks over his shoulder, pausing in taping the molding. He was about to say, 'When you three get off your asses and make me some grandsons, I'll paint a room blue,' but fortunately the little voice in the back of his head shut that up before it got out and changed it to, "I'll make you a deal, Tony. You make me some grandsons, and I've got another bedroom that we'll paint blue."

Tim rolls his eyes. "Tony DiNozzo III. Lord have mercy."

Tony shakes his head, rolling up the carpet as Tim cuts it into wide, easier to move, strips. "Nah. We're done with that. Two were more than enough. But… maybe… David DiNozzo. I can kind of see a Dave running around, chasing after his girl cousins, trying to freak them out with frogs and snakes."

Jimmy laughs at that. "You think there's any shot of any DiNozzo, boy or girl, successfully freaking out Abby's child with a frog or a snake? He'll have better luck wielding a Barbie doll."

Tim just nods along with that. Sure he's not a huge fan of frogs or snakes, but they don't hit his yuck button, either. "And I'm pretty sure Breena's girls aren't going to be scared by the Barbie," Tim adds.

"Yep, if you're going to produce the evil little cousin of doom, he's going to have to reach deep into his bag of tricks to pull one over on our girls," Jimmy says, opening the first gallon of off white. "This is way too much paint for just this room."
"It's not just for this room. We're getting the hallway and stairs and living room/dining room, too," Gibbs adds.

"Oh." Jimmy stares at Gibbs, fairly sure that when he got signed up for this, he was just working on a nursery.

Gibbs grins at him, then points to the paint and makes a little stirring motion.

So Jimmy gets to it.

They've been at it for a few hours when Tim says to Tony. "You're a lot less freaked out about the idea of David then you've ever been. Got some news for us?" He's wondering if, with it being barely two weeks since their own bad news, if Tony and Ziva may have good news they just aren't sharing, yet.

Tony shakes his head. "Nah. Just… Feeling settled, you know? Like I'm where I'm supposed to be."

Tim nods at that. Pieces fall into place and the scary things become less scary.

"So, you guys going to have any news for us in the near future?" Jimmy asks.

Tony shrugs. "Do I look psychic to you?"

Jimmy smirks at him. "Shouldn't take psychic vibes to know that, Tony. 'Cause, you know, supposedly, you're there for the thing," Jimmy adds a very descriptive hand gesture to that, "that might produce the good news."

Tim and Gibbs laugh at that.

Tony whacks him (gently) with his (fortunately not very wet) paint roller, then rolls his eyes and shakes his head. "You're an asshole, Palmer."

Jimmy grins. "I try. Sooooo…." All three of them are now looking at him, waiting for an answer.

"Maybe. Like I said, I'm not psychic, but… yeah, maybe, soon… Don't know, yet, obviously. But… Sooner than later… probably." Tony shrugs. Because he doesn't know. Can't, but yeah, maybe soon. Maybe not. Seems like some women get pregnant just by thinking hard about sex, and some take lots and lots and lots of time and sex, and they just don't know where they are on that scale.

But he does know he's not completely freaking out, or rooting for Ziva's period to show up, and he's got his Dad searching for a beat the hell up house somewhere in the greater DC area that he can afford, so…

"Who knows, everything goes smoothly, maybe 'round April, we'll be doing this at my house."

That was met with grins, and whooping, and congratulations.

On Sunday, Tony joined them for Bootcamp. Gibbs smiles at that, sensing that this too is a mark of Tony coming into his own. He's not so worried about his status, not concerned with tarnishing his image of Boss, so he's coming to join the fight/training.

Or maybe, he, too is missing time with his family, and is trying to get as much of it in as he can.

Either way, Gibbs is happy to see him here.
Tony however, as the new man in, is having somewhat less of a good time. "God, McGee, when the hell did you learn to fight?" Tony says, staring up at him from the floor. (The floor he did not expect to be lying on anywhere near this fast. He's rapidly coming to the conclusion that he really needs to get back in shape if McCybercrime can hand him his ass in less than a minute. He went into the fight defenses down, figuring he'd take it easy on McGee, and got clobbered, fast.)

Tim gives him a hand up. "You sound surprised. Ziva's not bragging on us when she gets home?"

Tony looks at his wife, who is smiling very smugly. "She told me you're getting better, not she's turned you into a ninja."

"He still hasn't gotten the invisible part down, yet." Jimmy adds. "You going a round with me, or are you begging off?"

"Begging off for now. Don't want my heart to explode. I'll take your next one."

"Okay."

So Tim and Jimmy sparred together, against Ziva, and Tony and Gibbs watched.

"Glad you're coming."

Tony nods. "Like you said, this is just me spending time with my family now."

"Good."

After Bootcamp, Gibbs lingers behind for a bit, watching Tony and Jimmy joke with each other as they headed out of the locker room.

"Tim," he says while Tim ties his boots.

"Mmmm…"

"Can you do something for me?"

"Sure, what?"

"I had Borin's number in my computer. Don't have access to that anymore. Could—"

Tim's grinning and pulling him, (they're both completely dressed by now) out of the locker room toward his office. "Yes!" He's shaking his head and nodding. "Oh, yes. I will get you her number!"

It takes a minute to get into Cybercrime, and like always there's the sound of people working, and Tim pauses in heading toward his office to look in on one of the Minions, reading over his shoulder.

"You in the weeds, Soth?"

Soth shakes his head. "Just thinking." He rubs his eyes, not looking away from the screen. "I can solve it big and messy, lots and lots of lines of code. Looking for a cleaner way."

"Got the dirty version done?"

"Sure."

"I'll be here for a few more minutes. Shoot it to my computer, and I'll take a look."
"Thanks, Boss."

"No problem."

A few more steps gets them to the conferencing area in the center. One Minion is standing in front of two huge plasma touch screens, moving images around with her hands.

"You really upgraded, didn't you?"

"Once Leon got the report showing that Navy Yard Cyber request times had dropped from an average of four days to five hours, he decided that some more money could flow my way." Gibbs sees Tim eyeing the work on the plasma. "How's it going, Dume?"

Absent nodding responds to that request, but Tim seems to think that covers his question.

Gibbs looks around Tim's office as they get in there. It was awfully bare the last time he was down here, but it's filling up. There are books on the bookshelves. (All mysteries, most of them from different writers, but one guy's got a quarter shelf all to himself. Apparently Tim McGee is a fan of some guy named Thom Gemcity. Gibbs doesn't know if any of the Minions have figured out why Tim's got the whole collection up on his bookshelf.) Pictures of the family on the walls and on his desk. There are a few things Gibbs has never seen before, Tim's diplomas from MIT and John Hopkins, for example, and there's a shooting target with a smiley face shot into it on one of the walls, and across the target's chest is a sticker with the words: Achievement Unlocked in Abby's handwriting.

"What's that?"

Tim looks up from his contact list.

"Oh. We're Federal Agents, supposedly all of us passed FLETC. I added an extra reg to working down here. Everyone has to maintain their gun proficiencies and physical fitness certifications. Not like my guys get out into the field very often, but when they do, I want them able to handle themselves. This one's mine. Any of the rest of them do that, they'll get a treat."

"What sort of treat?"

"One of Abby's Achievement Unlocked stickers to go on the target. Already have a few of them in my desk, waiting for someone to bring me a target. Gonna put them up on the wall, sort of a hall of fame type thing. Haven't decided on the rest of it yet. Probably depend on who does it. I'm thinking I can wiggle some extra vacation time for them, but if I can't, I might end up using petty cash to buy some gift certificates for fun things." Tim looks away from his computer. "Okay, I've got Borin's number. Give me your phone."

And Gibbs does, and a minute later Tim hands it back, grinning. "All programed in. All you've got to do is tap the screen. So… When you going to call her?"

Gibbs rolls his eyes, waves at Tim, and heads off.
But on Monday, the weekend was over, and while he's got time with Molly scheduled, he's still, for most of the day, alone.

And lonely.

Gibbs didn't expect that. Didn't realize how much he needs actual voices around him. Maybe not people to talk to, but people to be near. It's not just cases he misses, it's actual, living, breathing, snarking people around him all the time. (Right now, he's missing Tony and Ziva and Tim just fussing at each other.)

And sure, Mona helps, and Molly helps, but they aren't exactly the kind of company he's yearning for.

So…

The retirement party was a little over three weeks ago. Borin had breezed in, said hello, given him a quick hug, ordered her drink, turned to talk to him, smile on her face, eye amused and interested, picked up her drink, and then her phone rang and she rolled her eyes, answering it.

Thirty seconds of 'Uh huh, yes. Got it. Okay.' wrapped up with 'Be there in forty-five.'

"Case?"

She nodded. "I thought when I moved up the food chain and got out of the field, that I'd get some sort of regular schedule." Leon laughed, loudly, at that. "Maybe even the occasional night off."

"It is a regular schedule," Leon said, still chuckling, "you regularly work all the time."

"Thanks, Director."

She hugged Gibbs again. "Don't be a stranger, Gibbs. Give me a call one of these days." And she kissed his cheek, and breezed right back out.

He knows that he told Rachel that he and Borin were really too similar to even try anything, but… Thinking about it, really thinking about it, he's not sure if that's actually true. They are a lot alike. So, to some degree that's a good thing, right? He won't spend so much time staring at her, puzzled, wondering what the hell she's thinking, because he'll know, or at least have a good idea.

And he gets her job. Gets it in his bones and guts and soul, so there won't be that 'pay more attention to me,' 'which means more to you, me or that job' sort of thing. As he thinks about it, it hits him that if he and Borin start anything up, he's going to be the girlfriend who's outside of it all, and he's not sure about that. On the upside of that, he'll get it, way easier than any of his outside of it girlfriends ever did. On the downside, he doesn't know how well he'll handled being kept out of things. Not sure how he'd do with someone who is clearly hurting but won't tell you why or let you try to help to solve the problem. (After all, he's never done well with that in the past. It's his job to ride in and save the day.)

But when it comes down to it, he knows the job is her number one. He's fine with it being the job. It's an important job. (Saving lives and catching killers should outweigh 'I'm lonely.')
And he does like strong women who can look after themselves, stand up for themselves and better yet, stand up to him. He knows she can do all of that.

So… maybe… he pulls his phone out. He's asking for coffee not to get married. Hell, technically, this isn't even a date.

And for that matter he has no idea if 'don't be a stranger' means she's just looking to chat and catch up, they haven't seen each other since that debacle with the phony DEA agents, or, if she's interested in more.

He's also not sure what 'more' might be for her. She's married to her job. So… more probably means… what? Pleasant company? Friend with benefits? Casual dating? Gibbs isn't even sure what the terms are these days, but… probably… she's looking for someone who gets her, gets the job, and is willing to take a back seat to it, but keep her company when she has free time.

And if he's right about that… That's okay. That feels… he's not sure… but really… safe… maybe?

He's not going to disappoint her or break her heart, and he can take the time to explore this whole enjoying a woman for who she is instead of trying to shove her into a Shannon-shaped hole or giving up when it doesn't turn into the same kind of love he had for Shannon.

And that's a start, right?

And now he's holding his phone. Borin's contact number is up. And he's staring at it.

Been more than two years since he's done this. Hell, longer really. He didn't actually ask Susan out, they met through a case, she was an expert witness, he "needed more information," and one night they were talking about submarines and what pressure does to human bodies (found a dead sailor in one of the torpedo tubes, annoying case) and then they were talking about other things, and then they weren't talking at all, and all in all that made for a very pleasant five months.

But, at no point did he actually just sit his ass down and cold call her. He sighs… He hasn't done this, like this, since… honestly… ever. The last time he was staring at a phone with a girl's number in his hand he chickened out and didn't call. (He was also seventeen, so cut him some slack.)

Usually he'll see a woman a few times, keep "running into her," and just kind of toss himself into her path, show up at her office, develop some "questions" for her, or something. He'll just keep showing up and being charming, and sooner or later, he gets asked out or does the asking out. (Or, and this is his preferred method, said woman shows up at his house and they skip the whole date thing all-together.) If you don't really talk, and nine tenths of your charm is your quiet manner and looks (both physical appearance and the ability to communicate with your eyes), phones are not your ally. So, they're just not really part of his dating game.

But, unless he wants to drive over to… Where the hell does Borin work? He knows they were all in this one office building back in '11, but then they reorganized and moved to… He doesn't know.

And, even if he did, it's not like he's got an excuse to be in her building. Say he googled her, because he could do that, there's still no reason for him to be there, not like he's got a burning case that needs him to head over to CGIS headquarters. So, his just 'ran into you' strategy won't work. On top of that, he knows she's busy enough that if he wants to actually see her, he needs to make an appointment.

After all, if you already know the job is the number one commitment, just showing up and hoping she'll drop it to entertain you is a good way to spend an afternoon alone.
Which is what he's trying to avoid.

So, the phone. In his hand. And talking. Making words, with his mouth, at a woman, requesting her company.

Shit.

Okay, just staring at the phone's not going to do it. And she did say to give her a call. So, call. He's going to call. He takes a quick breath, and taps the phone icon.

"Borin." She sounds harried and distracted. Like he's the tenth call in ten minutes and she really doesn't want to deal with this crap.

"Hi..." God, shit, what do I call her? It's not a work call. Abby? Abigail? Borin? Fuck! God damn it, plan these things before you jump into them!

"Gibbs?" She loses some of the edge in her voice.

"Yeah. Hi, Abby."

"Hey." Just quiet on her side.

He's getting the idea "Abby" might not have been a good plan. He's wincing but says, "You mean it when you told me not to be a stranger?"

"Yeah, Gibbs." That sounds welcoming, which makes him relax a hair.

"Wanna get some coffee with me?"

He thinks she's smiling when she says, "Sure. When and where?"

He knows he's smiling as he says, "How about you pick? These days, I've got a real flexible schedule."

She laughs at that. "I've got budgetary meetings all day tomorrow. But we always break for lunch at noon, and have another break at four. Which one works better for you?"

"Four." Molly'll miss him if he skips Adventures.

"Sounds good. We've got a shop that knows how to brew a real cup of coffee a few blocks from my office. Java Jane's."

"I can find it. See you at four."

"See you then." And then she hung up.

Of course there are four Java Jane's in the greater DC area.

Fortunately he's hit the point where he knows what Google is, and how to use it, so he's able to not only locate where the CGIS offices are, but he also figures out which Java Jane's he needs to be at.

When he heads over to pick up Molly, Breena looks him over, he's shaved, wearing his 'work' clothing (which has been sitting, untouched, in his closet since he retired) and looking pretty spruce.

"You going back in? Got a deposition?" It's a good guess. Any case he investigated he can be called
back in on, and the fact that he's retired doesn't mean he doesn't have a dozen cases still working their way through the courts.

"Nah."

She looks him over again, eyes narrowing, trying to read the outfit. "You got a date?"

He laughs.

"Oh, you do!" She's grinning.

"It's not a date."

"Uh huh. Just keep telling yourself that."

"Getting coffee with a friend."

"Uh huh." She's not buying that, at all. "I know your friends. You don't get dressed up for Fornell."

Then her eyes go wide as she thinks of a "friend" he might get dressed up for. "Are you going to talk to Diane about Draga?"

"No!" That idea had never crossed his mind. Draga and Diane are both grownups, can handle themselves, and he has no desire, at all, to have any clear ideas of what they may be up to.

"Does your friend have a name?"

"Yes."

"You going to tell me what it is?"

He shakes his head, grinning. "Come on Molly, let's let your Mama get a nap."

"Tease!" Breena says to him.

He smiles and winks at her as he and Molly head out of the house in search of Adventure!

On the upside, he notices the handprint on his slacks before he gets to Java Jane's. The other upside is that he still has his go bag in his truck, so swapping out slacks with a milky toddler handprint is something he can do nice and quick at Breena's after he gets Molly down.

The downside is that the slacks in the go bag have been sitting in there since before August. Once he blew out his knee, he was grounded, so he hasn't been on any overnight runs. And between the slow getting in better shape he had been doing, and the working out like a maniac to kill time that he has been doing, they're two sizes too big.

Which is also forcing him, as he's tightening his belt, to notice that the slacks he had on before were a size too big, too, and for that matter, so are most of his pants, and that unless he's planning on giving up the exercise, he probably needs to add buying some new ones to his list of things to do.

In proper Marine and NCIS fashion, he's early. Not by a ton. It's 3:53 when he gets in, which is enough time to buy some coffee for both of them, and some cookies, which he has no idea if she likes or not, but people usually get food to go with the coffee… so… he'll get some food, too.

He's feeling a faint tinge of nervous, as well as pleasantly excited, which he knows means, protests to
Breena about this not being a date aside, his body thinks this is a date. Or maybe a proto date. The step that sets up the date if all goes well here.

"Gibbs."

He looks up at her, and stands, pulling out her chair. "Hi." She's in her 'work' clothing, too. Though, having been booted from Team Leader to management, her 'work' clothing is now a tailored pantsuit. Navy, cream blouse, no jewelry he can see, but her hair's down, and he appreciates that.

"Jethro is fine." It's okay for Abby… McGee's Abby, not the Abby in front of him… He's got to get different names for them… to call him Gibbs, but… for a woman, a possible lover… No. Gibbs is Shannon's and Shannon's alone.

"Okay, Jethro." She looks a bit perplexed at him getting the chair for her, but accepts it gracefully.

"Did calling you Abby bug you?"

"No. Just seemed a bit odd. Wasn't sure you even knew I had a first name."

He smiles at that and sips his coffee. "How you liking the view from the other side of the desk?" Last time they worked a case together, she'd been on the warpath, so they didn't exactly sit around chewing the fat about how her new position was working out.

She rolls her eyes a bit, takes a deep drink of her coffee, and smiles at him for getting it right, and then says, "If I'd known then what I knew now, I'd have pissed more people off and gotten myself kicked out of the management track."

Gibbs laughs at that, watching her, eyes warm, inviting her to talk more about it.

"It's not all bad. It's not even mostly bad. Me doing my job means that my guys can do theirs. I do it well, and they don't have to piss around with stupid piddly crap that gets in the way."

"But you end up doing the stupid piddly crap?"

"Exactly. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow's the annual budget meeting, and I'm the one dealing with how we can possibly squeeze more money out of anything that isn't staffing or equipment. If I can figure out how to pull more money out of the air, I can hire another agent, who we sorely need. And if I can get that agent, my guys can actually get some of that vacation time they've been accruing since '14."

"You're that tight?"

She nods. "I'm not supposed to be in the field at all these days. But I am, just so my guys can get some down time."

"Ouch."

She nods. "But I think I'm onto something. Dworkins, my HR guy, is acting awfully squirrelly. He's hiding something. When I get back, we're going to have a 'chat' and with any luck that 'chat' will result in me finding enough money to hire someone else instead of finding out that he's embezzled away even more of the budget."

Gibbs grins at that. He's seen Borin work, and her running an interrogation is a thing of grace and beauty. "Bad day for him."
She nods. "With any luck it won't be a bad day for me, too."

Gibbs nods. "Here's to luck."

"How's retirement?" she asks him after taking another sip of her coffee.

He sighs, exaggerating the exasperation in his face. "You want a trained investigator, willing to take any case, for free, just to get back to doing something useful?"

She laughs at that. "You'd take orders from a woman?"

He flashes her a wry smile. He's about to say something along the lines of how he'd take orders from Mickey Mouse if it got him back on a team working murders, but the part of his brain that knows there's no shot of him getting on one of her teams gets together with the bit of his brain that remembers how flirting works and says, with a smile, "I'd take orders from you."

That tickles her, and her eyes light up at it. "Really?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Ohhhh that was worth it. She's looking him up and down, enjoying this. He lifts his coffee cup to his lips and takes a sip, eyeing her over the rim.

She laughs again. "You'd let me be your Boss?" Half-joke, half-testing, mostly not buying it.

"I don't always have to be on top." She grins at that, and he decides to tone it down a bit, sliding into a more serious mode. "Last six months I was on, it was Tony's team, and I was working for him."

That does startle her. "How'd you end up taking orders from DiNozzo? You finally piss Vance off so bad he demoted you?"

Gibbs shakes his head, smiling at her. "Nothing like that. We had some staffing issues…" He tells her about how they ended up with Draga, and how it wasn't working with Tony just lingering, not really in charge, not really second-in-command. He wraps up with how Team Gibbs has gone its separate ways.

"As they say, all good things come to an end."

He nods. "Would have liked more time with this one, but it was time. Tony was ready. Tim was ready. Ziva's got some new adventures on the books. It's time. But that doesn't mean I have to like it."

She nods at that, sipping her coffee, nibbling the cookie. He likes the look of it between her lips, the little flash of white tooth snipping through shortbread pastry. "Felt that way when I left my team. But, it was time. Hogkins was ready to lead. But especially on days like today, I miss it."

He nods at that, too, taking another sip of his coffee.

He feels her eyes on his left hand as she says, "So, speaking of things ending… Last time we worked a case, you were wearing a wedding ring."

Shit. Yeah, he had been, and just like they didn't talk about her new position, they didn't talk about the gold band on his ring finger. Gibbs sighs. "Kind of complicated, but, no I'm not recently divorced again."

She stares at him for a moment, eyes flicking to the now naked ring finger.

He holds his hands up for a second. "I'm not married, either. I… It's a long story."
"I've got time, especially if you're going to tell me how you ended up wearing a wedding ring without a marriage to go with it."

"There… there was one, but…"

Now, she's looking appalled.

"Here, let me get more coffee."

"This sounds like it's going to be a hell of a long story if we need more coffee for it."

He nods and grabs both of their cups, beating a tactical retreat.

Okay, so she wants to know about the ring, which is good from a this-is-more-than-just-two-colleagues-getting-together-for-coffee-standpoint, right? Would she be asking about that if she wasn't interested in him as a man? So that's good, right?

Except… he tries to remember where his hands were and if she could see the left one during the two minutes they were together at the party… it's entirely possible that when she asked she thought he was married again, which would be bad, right?

FUCK!

"More coffee." He puts both cups down on the table.

She drinks some of hers. "More coffee and the tale of the not quite wedding ring."

He sighs and licks his lips. He hasn't told this story, or any versions of it, cold, since Susan. He told Rachel, but she'd read his files, she already knew the basics. Well, the kids gossip, so maybe Borin knows the basics, too. And she was part of that thing where they were trying to find him a girlfriend, so, maybe they gave her enough background he doesn't have to do this cold. "How much scuttlebutt did the kids tell you about my marriages?"

"The kids?"

"They're not exactly my team anymore, are they?"

She nods, but she can also see there's more than just the change in employment status going into this. He thinks she approves. "Four times, all redheads, you've got a divorce lawyer on speed dial, but the last one ended in… 2000 or 2001, Ziva wasn't sure."

…Or they left out the important stuff and he does have to start at square one. "2001. I haven't been married since 2001."

"But you were wearing a ring last year."

"I took it off in October. My first wife and daughter were murdered in 1991."

Borin winces. "I'm sorry. I kn…" she stops, and he notices what she almost said, I know how that feels. Which makes him curious as to if she does actually know but he's the one telling the stories right now so she's not going to derail him, or if she stopped herself from saying something stupid.

He nods. "Didn't do a good job of dealing with it. Got married a lot. Bad marriages. One after another. Took nine years to figure out that was a bad plan. Slowed down, stopped marrying any
redhead who gave me the time of day. Dated. Never let it really go anywhere.

"Back in '14 I'd ended another relationship, and was being an asshole about it, dumping pissed off on everyone around me."

She gives him her best *I'm shocked* look.

He nods at that, acknowledging how in character that is. "Tim shows up in my basement with a bottle of bourbon and says, 'I've never done this before, do we just drink until you're ready to stop being an asshole?'

"McGee talked to you like that?" she asks, stunned. Yeah, she noticed at the party that Team Gibbs has been changing, and Gibbs referring to them as 'the kids' and 'Tim' didn't pass unnoticed, but she didn't expect *that* much change.

"I may be putting words in his mouth. Especially then. But I was acting out, and he called me on it."

"McGee?" She looks curious. "Really?"

Gibbs nods again. "He got me talking about Shannon and Kelly, my first wife and daughter, which was something I hadn't done. After a while, he asked if I still had my wedding ring, I said yes, he told me to put it back on, because I wasn't done being married. He was right. So I did. I wore it until October. I didn't date. I didn't go chasing other women. Said goodbye to the life and the future I had wanted. And started to really… get into this life. For my thirty-sixth wedding anniversary, I buried that ring with my girls and said goodbye for the last time."

"Oh."

He tilts his head, trying to brush off that rush of what feels like empathy from her. "Yeah, so that's the story behind the ring."

They're quiet for a moment before she asks, "So, what does getting more into this life mean?"

That gets a sigh, too. How to explain that… "Takin' better care of myself."

She looks him up and down with a smile. " Noticed that."

That pleases him, and makes him think new pants might be a decent investment beyond matters of not worrying about them falling off his hips if he's not wearing a belt. "Wasn't quite how I meant it, but that, too. Here…” he switches around so he's sitting next to her, and gets his phone out.

"Smartphone?"

"Turns out you can make them blow up."

"And *that* sold you on one?"

He nods, pulling up the most recent picture of him with the girls.

"Who are your friends?" She asks with a wide smile, looking at a shot of him with Molly and Kelly and Anna.

"These are my girls." He points out who's who. "A lot of getting more into this life is about being here for them, and their parents, and being a Dad and a Grandad. It's not the guy I thought I was going to be, but it's fully being the man I am."
She smiles at that. "That sounds healthy."

"Hope so."

"You stopped being Boss and became Dad."

"Pop. Became Pop, or Uncle Jethro. That's what Molly calls me, and she's the only one who's talking. As for the kids, they don't need a Boss anymore. They are the Bosses. Tim's got Cybercrime, the whole department, all hundred and fifty of them answer to him." Borin looks impressed by that. "Tony's got the team. Jimmy'll have Autopsy before the year is done. Abby's always had the lab, but she's got people under her there, now. But they still need a Dad."

"And you need kids."

"Yeah, I do. Need a job, too. Going crazy with too much time on my hands, but… The kids help."

"I'd help out with the job if I could, but unless you've already worked for CGIS, I can't put you on, even as a volunteer, if you're over 57."

"Same thing with NCIS. They'll let me back on for ten days a year."

"We've got that deal, too. But, if you wanted some company to help eat up more time…" She lets that trail off, but he's hopeful.

"You'd be interested?"

"Sure."

That sounds very promising. "Would you like to have dinner with me?"

"Are you asking me out on a date?"

He smiles at her and cocks an eyebrow. "Would you like me to be?" They're both being a bit cagey, wary of actually committing to what this might be.

Then she laughs, warm and throaty. "If I say no, then we're what, buddies catching up? Old cops swapping tales, or does the offer vanish."

"Sure, buddy, if that's what you want." He grins at that, too, eyes warm and, he hopes, flirty. He'd prefer more, but if she wants to be friends, right now, he'd like a friend.

She bites her lip, not nervous, sensuous, lip sliding between her teeth. "And if I say yes?"

He lightly traces the tip of his finger over the back of her hand, keeping his eyes on hers. "Have dinner with me?"

She's still smiling, but doesn't touch him back. "Yes."

That doesn't sound friendly. Sounds quite a bit more than friendly. But it also doesn't clarify if this is a date, or if they're just being friends. He spends another moment looking at her, letting his eyes trace over her lips, slipping down the line of her neck, taking in the fact she's got the top two buttons of her blouse undone, and then back to her eyes, hoping that is explicit about his intentions but not over the line. "At my house?"

Her eyes are warm and sparkling. "I'll bring the bourbon and the dessert."
He nods, very satisfied by that response.
Gossip

Chapter Notes

REMF stands for Rear Echelon Mother Fucker. The guys behind the army that keep everything running properly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A month into being "Boss" and there are some things Tim really loves about it.

The power is great. He sees a problem. He fixes the problem. He's not feeling like he needs to ask permission or risk stepping on someone's toes by not asking permission. Sure, this has resulted in an irked electrician from physical plant standing in his office, glaring at him, getting ready to give him a hard time about the new set up before putting new light bulbs in.

And then Tim stood up, took two steps, drawing Mr. Electrician's gaze to not only the smiley face gun target right over his shoulder (he's also got the skull picture next to it) but to the fact that he knew Mr. Electrician was coming today, and had, as a result, dressed carefully for this meeting.

First and foremost, his jacket (black, leather) is draped over his desk chair. Which means Mr. Electrician is getting a full view of the newest Department Head of NCIS, all six foot one inch and one hundred and seventy-five pounds of him, standing up very straight, very tall, in a black kilt, black leather work boots (adding an extra inch), dragon ink visible on his leg, crimson button down, top two buttons undone, sleeves rolled up to show off his wrist cuff, and black matte nail polish.

The man who walks into a Federal Office building dressed like that is a man who does not give a flying fuck as to what anyone else may or may not want to say to him about anything. The man who gets to Department Head and dresses like that is also the man who is so amazingly good at his job that everyone else doesn't give a flying fuck as to how he looks. Which means, that man is the last man in the building you want to mess with.

Tim has also noticed that one of the "every day" colognes Janice picked out for him, Lightning, smells like a storm coming in. This may be some people's cup of tea, Abby, for example, likes it, (Ziva really likes it, to the point of having gotten a bottle of it for herself.) but it makes most people mildly nervous, but they can't figure out why. Their inner lizard brains smell that scent and know something they don't want to be near is coming, which results in a sort of barely conscious nervousness.

So, as Mr. Electrician is doing a double take and looking like he wants to get the hell out of Tim's office about two minutes ago, Tim says to him, mildly, voice quiet, arms to the side, posture open, "Yes?"

He tries, he really does. Tim sees his eyes narrow and the way he steels himself to get ready to lay down the law in regards to who's supposed to be plugging in the computer, and he gets about half a sentence into rules and regulations before Tim says to him, calmly, cutting him off, "You appear to have a fundamental misunderstanding as to what your job is in relation to mine.

"My job is catching killers, finding kidnapped children, and putting rapists behind bars. Your job is plugging in appliances. Now, I can, and will, and have done your job when I need to, but you can't
do mine, so if you want to keep yours, the next time I call down to Physical Plant and request any level assistance, you are going to drop every other thing you may possibly be doing, including wiring the Director's office, and run your ass into my office to take care of it." Tim smiles, and it's a cold, sharp look. "Do you understand me?"

Mr. Electrician, nods, slowly.

"Splendid. Go put the LEDs in."

And Mr. Electrician does.

And he'll have to admit, that was a whole lot of fun.

The schedule is great. That's something else he loves about being the Boss. Yes, he's working a lot, but he's also able to go home when he needs to. He can imagine there will be cases when he'll need all hands on deck (including his) but so far that hasn't happened.

There are no dead bodies, no ships, no dogs, no one shooting at him, no explosions, nothing dirty, messy, or gross about this job. And if there was, he could make someone else do it!

He doesn't have to spend hours trying to outwit liars who aren't nearly as good at it as they think they are. He sees no panicked eyes trying desperately to figure out how much he knows, and what the most believable spin could possibly be on what he knows.

The work is interesting. Mostly. The paperwork sucks, and there's a ton of it. But unlike being on the MCRT, he's got the power to actually do something about it. So, while it sucks and eats a lot of time, it won't be doing that forever.

But, compared to hours of paperwork he couldn't do anything about, hours spent driving from point a to point b, hours waiting to testify, hours in depositions rehearsing what he was going to say when he got done waiting to get called to the stand, hours staring at things, waiting for someone to do something, a whole hell of a lot more of his time is now spent doing something useful.

And, for a lot of the work, he's doing things that are interesting in addition to useful. A month into the job, a lot of what he's doing right now is still getting everyone on the same page and up to speed. So far, the greater world is accommodating him with that, and they haven't been hit with anything bigger than computer work for the field teams.

At the rate they're going, even with half of his team working on the paperwork project, his triaging system and moving to a twenty-four/seven schedule means that by the end of the week they will be caught up on their case backlog.

Once they're through the backlog, once they've got the paperwork software up and running, then he'll be able to get them really working, and with a hundred and fifty guys under him, he's got some big plans coming up.

Among other things, he knows he's going to be splitting everyone into two main teams, attack and defense, and for the next year half of them will spend at least an hour a week trying to break into NCIS, the Navy, or the Marines, and half of them will work on defense. Then the next year they're going to switch, and they're going to keep at it, because it's not okay to assume that he built a firewall that'll keep everything safe always.

The military war games. They run scenarios, see how their men operate, put all hands on deck and watch responses. They find holes and plug them.
And his guys are going to do that, too.

And then they're going to start hunting. A lot of cybercrime works because no one ever notices it. Sneak in, move things around, skim some off the top, snag IDs, even in cases where hundreds of thousands of records are breached, it can take weeks, months sometimes, for people to notice. And smaller scale work? Please, no one's checking.

His guys will be checking.

He loves the fact that he's starting to mold his team. High standards and petting for good works seems to be having a positive effect. The whole you-will-work-as-a-team thing is speeding cases up, and for the most part getting better results out of the Minions.

He's starting to get "his" people into place. Howard started yesterday, and she's already slipping in, inching things closer to where he wants them.

She's a code wizard, so he stuck her on the clean-up team for the paperwork project, and she's not only got mad skills, but fresh eyes, so she can see the stuff they've all been looking at too long. He's thinking she'll be a good leader for the Navy Yard's Attack team, and can't wait to see where that goes.

Hepple filed his retirement paperwork; effective June (when he hits twenty-eight years in) he'll have another open slot soon, and Tim's already got his search parameters up for that. He knows what sort of person he wants for that slot, but not who that person is, yet.

He's also found, that since he's in the building every day, he actually does get to see Abby and Jimmy more often… Or for a longer chunk of time. Sort of.

He can have lunch with them on most days. So, instead of a few quick visits, he's got one longer visit. (Granted, he doesn't end up working in the lab anymore, but that was time near Abby instead of with her, mostly. He misses that.)

And on days when Tony and Ziva aren't in the field, they often join in.

But, on Tuesday, they were in the field, and Ducky and Penny were having lunch with each other, so it was just the three of them.

And both Tim and Jimmy have some interesting gossip.

"Breena called," Jimmy says as he takes a bite of his salad. "Apparently Gibbs showed up to take Molly out, all dressed up."

Abby grins at that. She already knows Tim's half of the gossip. "Like he was going out for a date, maybe?"

Jimmy nods. "She tells me he wouldn't say who. Though he did say it 'wasn't a date.'"

"He asked me to find Borin's contact number after Bootcamp," Tim adds between bites of his grilled chicken.

Jimmy's grinning at that, too. "So, tell me about her. I've seen her, twice, maybe. She's tall, has red hair, and a good voice, but that's about all I know."

"She's Girl Gibbs!" Abby says.
Tim takes over. Sunday night, after he got home, he and Abby did some 'research' on Abigail Borin. They've both met and worked with her, but they don't know much about her. "Drinks the same black as sin coffee, and bourbon, too, head slaps her guys, was a Marine, served in Iraq, under Bush II instead of Bush I, did ordinance disposal—"

"Which is insanely dangerous," Abby adds.

Tim nods at that. Really, really dangerous. "Her whole team got killed when a bomb went off wrong, so she left the Marines, floated around for a bit, and ended up at CGIS."

"Been there since, worked her way up, and now she's in charge of the Chesapeake division."

"So, not entirely Girl Gibbs," Jimmy says. "Can't see anyone putting Gibbs in charge of an entire NCIS region."

"Not entirely." Tim agrees. "No one out-Gibbs Gibbs when it comes to stepping on toes."

"Jenny left him in charge of the Navy Yard a few times." Abby sips her water. (Usually, when they're out, she gets soda. Jimmy doesn't know if she's trying to take better care of herself or just didn't feel like it today. Her tuna and edamame wrap is about par for the course. He'll keep his eyes open and ask Tim about it later if it's a pattern.)

"I think that was punishment, not career advancement. He certainly acted like it was punishment," Tim says.

"Probably." Abby nods.

"So, I mean, is she going to be good for him?" Jimmy asks.

Tim shrugs.

Abby nods, while poking Tim. "Of course she is! She's awesome, and we already love her." Tim shrugs at that, too. She is cool. He does like her. Unlike Abby, he's not quite ready to start picking out Gibbs' wedding tux.

"I think, out of all the previous girlfriends, he got on best with Hollis, and Borin's got a lot of the same sort of feel to her. He doesn't do well with clingy, needy people and Borin's in charge of herself. So, that should be good."

"Good? That'll be great! There won't be all the nagging he hates. She's not going to get annoyed when he won't talk about the job—"

"You mean the job he doesn't have any more?" Jimmy cuts in with.

"You know what I mean. She wouldn't know what to do with a man who spills vast oceans of emotions on her, and he'll run screaming from a woman who does the same thing. So, there's one mismatch they're not going to have."

"The true love of the emotionally closed off," Jimmy adds with a healthy touch of sarcasm.

"Something like that," Tim replies.

Abby glares at both of them, then blows them a raspberry. "You two." Another glare more frustrated than angry. This is good news, everyone should be excited and happy and they're both… wary. "They'll go slow. Get to know each other. Open up a little at a time. It'll be good! Sure, he won't
admit they're even dating until, mmm… probably about a week after he proposes, but it'll be good!"

Tim and Jimmy look at each other, both of them thinking about the same thing, but in that Tim's the husband, he's the one who gets to say it. "Yeah, good, or a recipe for disaster."

Abby sighs again and rolls her eyes. "Breena and Ziva need to be here."

"If they'd be so good together, then why didn't Borin offer her own name up when we were looking for a girlfriend for Gibbs?" Tim asks.

"Whoa, when did that happen?" Jimmy looks quickly from Tim to Abby. He completely missed that.

Tim waves him off. "Years ago. He was moping, annoying the hell out of us, we tried to set him up, Borin helped, one of her buddies was the perfect woman. Turns out she really was. He'd already dated her, and yes, she was perfect, and perfect was boring."

Jimmy blinks at that, perplexed look on his face. "So, wait, he broke up with the perfect woman?"

Tim nods.

"She wasn't perfect for him. But Borin might be! He needs some challenge and she's got challenge written all over her," Abby says.

Tim nods at that. "Last time we talked about this, you were telling me that Gibbs had already found his perfect woman and no one else was going to work."

"Last time we talked about this, Gibbs was still married, in his heart, at least, to his perfect woman, and I don't think that's true anymore."

"Good point." Tim nods while chewing. He agrees that there's the possibility for a perfect woman, or as close as one can get, now, but… he's not sure if Borin's her.

"And as for why not add herself in… Uh, let's start with the bet between you and Tony that she completely knew about and end with, with both of them working, what would be the point of even trying to date? They'd never see each other. You can't successfully date when both of you work seventy hours a week. And now, he doesn't."

Both of the guys seem to think that's a good point.

"Can't you just see both of them," Abby sounds very excited about this, "and Mona, on Shannon, sailing away… Long weekends at sea——"

Jimmy shakes his head. "He cannot call that boat Shannon. Not if he's hoping to put another woman in it. 'Let's go sail off on my testament to my undying love of my first wife.'"

Tim nods in agreement with that and then adds, "Maybe it won't be too much of a problem, they'll have only been on it for ten minutes when she catches a case."

Abby seems to think that's a relevant point. "Yeah, but she'll never find someone who understands that better than Gibbs will. He's not going to be moping about her having to work."

"No." Tim steals a bite of the cantaloupe Abby's wrap came with. "He'll be moping about not getting to go along and help. Duty calls, I'm off to go catch killers, you stay home and play with the kiddies. He hates when we do it to him, can you imagine when he's got to deal with a girlfriend doing that." That really does worry Tim, and it's why, unlike Abby, he's not immediately seeing this being all
sunshine and roses for the two of them.

Jimmy winces at that, getting it immediately. "The two of them get together and he'll be the girlfriend. She'll be Gibbs, and he'll be Gibbs' girlfriend."

"Jimmy!" Abby's appalled by that.

"Oh come on, you think that's not how he's got it in his head? The man goes off and solves the crimes. The woman stays home and waits for him to get back from solving the crimes."

"You keep saying that, you're gonna get headslapped!"

"I'm not saying that's how I think of it, but I'm sure that's how he thinks of it. And it's fine if woman's out there solving the crimes. Obviously if he got on fine with Hollis, that's not a problem, but if you ask him who's not solving the crimes, who's home waiting for the crime solver to get back, it's the girl, and being the girl might really flip him out."

Abby glares at him again, but he and Tim are sharing a look that indicates both of them think this might be an issue for Gibbs. Still, Jimmy decides to shift topic some. "Is he getting anything going? A real job or something, so that he's not just home waiting for everyone else to get done? Look, I love the fact that he's taking Molly out, and it sounds like they're having a great time, but Breena's actually getting a bit worried for him. The girls are going back to daycare in less than a month and if there was ever a guy who needed something to keep him going, it's Gibbs."

Tim shrugs. "He's got something. But he's not talking about it, and I have no idea how much time it'll eat."

"Why isn't he talking about it?" Jimmy asks.

Tim takes a bite of his own chicken. "Knowing Gibbs, it's illegal, insanely dangerous, or both, and he doesn't want us to worry."

"And Tim's not going to press," Abby says pointedly. It's not so much that she thinks Tim can get it out of Gibbs but is choosing not to, it's that she's frustrated that he likely can't.

"No! I'm not. And like I said last time, if you want to grill him, have at it."

"He'll just shut down."

"Which is why I'm not grilling him. He'll tell us if or when he can."

"And we're stuck hoping he won't be stupid about it and get himself hurt," Jimmy says.

"Exactly." Tim says. "His knee as good as he says it is?" Speaking of Gibbs possibly being stupid and getting himself hurt…

"Best I can tell, yes. But take that with the grain of salt, I don't have an MRI or X-ray, so all I can go off of is what he tells me, how it looks, how he's moving, and what I feel when I get my hands on it. But, yes, it looks like he's healed up." Jimmy inhales, about to tell Abby about Sunday's Bootcamp, where Gibbs went up against Tony, and neither of them held back, at all, which was both worth watching, and looked like a very good work out for both of them (because they're pretty evenly matched) but his phone chirps.

He gets it out and texts back quickly, reaching for his wallet, but Tim shakes his head. It's their day to pay for lunch. (When they eat together, Jimmy gets one out of three of them, which represents as
far down as they could talk him. He wanted to do one out of two.)

"Case?" Abby says when he looks up from the phone.

"Yeah, gotta get going."

He leans over and kisses Abby's cheek. "See you tomorrow, or whenever we get back with samples." (He's still on delivering the samples to the lab.)

"Bye."

Jimmy waves at them and heads off.

Abby looks at Tim. "You going to talk to him?"

"Which him?"

"Gibbs, about Abby."

Tim shrugs. "What would I say that he hasn't already thought about?"

Abby shrugs back. "It sounds like they're going to be bringing in more evidence, and it's my night for the late shift. Go home, grab Kelly, grab dinner, and head over."

"You know, if his date went really well, he may not want me heading over."

She smirks at that. "He put a lock on the door, I'm sure he knows how to use it if he doesn't want anyone dropping in."

Tim laughs at that.

Abby takes a bite of his chicken, and then says, a bit more seriously, "You could tell him that it's not the end of the world to be the girl. Half of us do just fine, day in and day out as girls. You could tell him it's just as important to be the person who keeps the person catching the killers going as it is to be the person who catches the killers. REMFs, right?"

Tim nods, he knows that term, (Occasionally Marines who didn't exactly get what his role in the team was would call him one. He certainly is one now, and so's Abby, and Jimmy, for that matter.) but not sure where Abby's going with it.

"The world needs REMFs. Can't go off and be Big Damn Heroes without the REMFs in the back keeping you going."

He supposes that's true, but he also supposes that after forty years as a Big Damn Hero, REMF status may be a hard sale.

"You might remind him that the people who made being the guy who caught the killers worthwhile were all girls, too."

"Maybe you should have this chat with him?"

"If you don't, I will. But from you, from another guy, it probably means more. Sort of like how if I tell Jimmy eyeliner is cool he just raises his eyebrow, but when you do it, it means there's another guy who does stuff like that, so that makes it safer. You know… being support for the Big Damn Heroes didn't make your dick fall off; you didn't have to hand in your man card."
He figures Abby may have a point with that, though translating that to Gibbs might be a trickier proposition.

When he gets back to the office, there are three Minions (2/3rd of the paperwork program testing team and Howard) all waiting, eagerly, for him.

He sees the grins and says, "Progress?"

Three heads nodding.

"Set up a case," Roger says.

"Any type?" Tim asks, all five of them heading to his office.

"Any type," Connon replies.

So he does. As soon as Dispatch gets a report of a case, they stick a case number on it. Everything involving that case goes with that number. So Tim grabs a case number and starts a false report for it. He begins working on it, running a false phone records search as well as a financial report.

"Okay, now watch." Connon waves, indicating for Tim to move over, so he does, sliding his chair out of the way. Connon takes over, hitting the icon for the paperwork software, and then hits a few more buttons and… for a few seconds all four of them hover, nervous, hopeful, and then there's the whirling sound of Tim's printer kicking to life and he smiles wide.

"Don't get too happy. It only does the 5440's right. But, we've got one of the fifteen documents we fill out for every case running properly."

"And if you screw up the case tracking number the whole thing is fucked," Roger says.

Tim nods at that. But that's always been true for any computer work at NCIS. (That was part of having to try to figure out how to dumb down the job triaging software. Most cops can't type.) "But you've got at least one bit of it working?"

"We've got one bit!" Howard looks really pleased to be doing something this concrete and useful her second day on.

"Good job! Now, go get the next fourteen of them working."

"On it, Boss!"

Kelly in one hand, take-out pho in the other, Tim heads into Gibbs' driveway.

He can see Mona, perched on the bow of Shannon, (or maybe not Shannon, there's no name painted on her, yet. Though the outside is looking awfully smooth and glossy.) looking at him, very alert. She greets him with a woof and scrambles down the step ladder Gibbs has leaning against the hull. Tim puts the food on the hood of Gibbs' truck and pats (firmly, he wants to do it gingerly, ready to yank his hand and more importantly, Kelly's body, back in a second if he needs to, but he knows if he does anything other than look like the top dog, Mona will try to run all over him) Mona's head.

"Hey, Mona. He's in there, right?"

One more woof.
"I've got food and Kelly with me, and I'm not climbing a step ladder with her."

Gibbs pokes his head out. He's wearing a face mask and has on gloves. If he's wearing protective gear, whatever the hell he's working with in there has to be pretty nasty. "Out in a minute. Go in, get set."

Tim nods at Mona. "You feed her?"

"Not yet."

"Come on, Mona, I'll get some food for you, too."

Mona perks up at that, she's always in favor of food.

However dressed up Gibbs may have been when he was over at Breena's he's in ratty jeans, work boots, and an old t-shirt now, and he smells very strongly of shellac. But he had shaved, and that doesn't go unnoticed by Tim.

Apparently Tim's outfit didn't go unnoticed by Gibbs, either.

He looks Tim over and says, "Fancy."

Tim shrugs a little. "Electrician showed up today. Wanted to make sure he knew who he was dealing with."

"How'd that go?"

Tim nods, look satisfied. "I have the feeling Physical Plant's going to be a bit more responsive to calls from Cybercrime."

Gibbs smirks, very pleased, by that.

"Breena told us you were looking pretty fancy today, too. So… you put that number to good use?"

Gibbs sprinkles a little cilantro on his pho, and then adds a lot of hot sauce. He's not exactly glaring at Tim; he doesn't want to immediately shut him out on this, but he doesn't necessarily want to go spilling about this, either.

Tim lets him think. He portions out noodles onto Kelly's place, as well as giving the little jar of mashed green beans a good shake. He opens the beans and gets a spoonful into Kelly before seasoning his own pho. He takes a bite, adds a bit more lime, then one more bite.

"You know, it was almost getting blown up by Deering that made me decide what I wanted. That 'holy shit, I'm not dead, time to get my life in order' moment. Then everything went gray, and I blacked out. She took me home from the hospital that day, and this" he points to the pho, "was the first thing we did. She brought me home, got me on my bed, and I slept for… no idea. Until the pain pills wore off. When I came to, she had a bowl of pho waiting for us. She got the noodles and meat, I got the broth. She stayed with me that night. Nothing sexy or anything. Just slept next to me, held my hand, 'cause we were both scared and upset. That's where it started, for me, at least. I don't know if she knows that. Should probably tell her at some point." Tim takes a sip of his broth, and Gibbs waits, eating, wondering where he's going to take this.

"She makes our home, you know? Last three years, every bad day, every shit thing, every time the bullet barely missed, she's been there for me. She's been my home, my heart, my safety. All of this,"
he pets Kelly's cheek and squeezes Gibbs' hand, "doesn't happen without her. I can't be this version of me, without her."

Gibbs nods, still not sure where this is going, but he's agreeing with what Tim's saying.

"We want you to be happy. And we're thrilled with whatever it is that you're not saying about Borin. And just… you know… maybe she needs a home, too."

Gibbs just stares at him, honestly not sure what the hell to say to that. So, finally he nods and says, "How's the paperwork software going?"

Tim decides he's done his duty by Abby to try to get the message across and replies with, "Good. Got two of the forms working right."

"Good." Gibbs takes another bite of his pho. "What's with the other thirteen?"

Tim rolls his eyes, and feeds Kelly another bite of her green beans while grabbing some noodles out of her hair. "Stupid blanks all have different names and a computer's so dumb that if one form says Date and another form says Day and a third form has mm/dd/yyyy on it, it needs specific instructions to know that those are all the same thing. You and I and pretty much every human on earth can figure out that if one form has case number on it, and the next has case no. and one just says Number up at the top, they're all talking about the same thing. The computer can't. So we've got to tell it to pull one piece of data out of the information you're working with and stick it in all the paperwork blanks that it goes with."

Gibbs nods at that, he's following.

"Tricky bit is when the 5540s use Number to mean the case tracking number and the DF-56-A," phone tracking request forms, "use Number to mean phone number, and of course, they're both ten digit numbers, and then the 34Q-Self Report uses Number to mean your employee ID. That's giving all of us headaches, but Howard—"

"Interviewed with us Howard?"

"Started yesterday." Tim smiles at that. "She had some good ideas to help the computers figure out what means what. So, right now my database wonks are working on building up the database so it can pull the data out and put it in the right places, and she's working on an AI learning algorithm to help it figure out what the hell all of these blanks mean." Tim crosses his fingers. "Any luck, by the end of the month we'll have a functional beta version to roll out."

Gibbs smiles. "Good."

They both eat, quietly, enjoying the company, Tim switching between feeding himself and making sure that food gets into Kelly.

Eventually Gibbs says, "It was good."

Tim raises an eyebrow.

"Called her up, met for coffee."

Tim smiles.

"We've got a date Saturday."
Tim smirks at that, and Gibbs can feel there's something there, something Tim's finding deeply amusing, but he's not sharing.

"What?"

Tim shakes his head. "Just happy for you."

Gibbs knows that's not all of it, but he's clueless as to what else it may be.

"What are you going to do?"

"Dinner. Here." Gibbs smiles at that, and Tim's grin spreads even further across his face.

"Cowboy steaks?"

"That's the plan."

---

Chapter End Notes

So, been getting some questions about the behind the scenes stuff lately, so here goes:

Yes, I do write ahead, and as of this point all of the remaining major plot points have been plotted out and written. (Though written varies from a note saying, "stick plot point here" to fifty pages of fiction that's been edited seven times.) Minor plot points, on the other hand, keep dancing around, and some major plot points are morphing as the minor ones come out to play.

This story continues to give me new surprises, so while I know what things have to happen, there's a lot of new lines that pop up and keep me interested.

As of this point I've got an additional 200 pages ready to go. (STAW/Shards will top out at well over 1,000,000 words.)

This does not, however, mean that I've got the next chapter (or the one after that) done. (Though, as of this writing, I do, in fact, have the next chapter done.)

Shards To A Whole has always been intended to be an epic, and it has always had a set plot arc. It has five "Books" (Lover, Husband, Father, Boss, and Tim McGee) and we're in book four. (Tim'll hit his whole before all the rest of the shards do, so that last section will still be Tim-centric, but his immediate growth arc will have finished.)

As for what those major plot points are... Well, there's the McPalmer line for the STAW version. There's the final confrontation with Tim's dad. There's getting Gibbs settled (the last of the Shards in major need of some whole-ing). Baby DiNozzo is in the cards, as well as additional Gibbs clan children.

Eventually we'll hit the point where significantly longer chunks of time (in story) will be going by between chapters, because the last remaining plot points need time but I don't necessarily have months and months of minor plot of fill them out.

I know where this one ends. I know I've got stuff set post-ending. I may run them as stand-alones, or just add them to STAW (because once I get done with the main version,
I won't be doing two separate editions of the follow up work) as an easy-to-find Coda. I know that at some point we'll see Tim and Jimmy in their late fifties with their teenage kids (because the McGee-Palmer Sex Ed class is already written and *must* be shared.)

But that's about as specific as I want to get on the spoilers. So, thanks for asking.
On Friday night, Ducky and Penny stay late post-Shabbos.

They didn't plan it, didn't need to. Conspiracy, apparently, comes naturally to these three.

Once he had the second round of dishes all in the dishwasher (can't get an entire dinner's worth, at least, not dinner for nine adults and one toddler, in addition to pots and pans in one go) Gibbs fetches a file filled with real estate listings.

He doesn't much like computers.

However he likes real estate agents even less. And his other best idea for how to do this was to call DiNozzo Sr. up and see if he could find something, but... Even if this is 'officially' a vacation house for their family, he's got a sense of the kind of place he's comfortable with, and then there's the kind of place Senior would come up with and those two places are not only not even remotely similar to each other, they're also in vastly different neighborhoods.

So, given the assignment of 'find a place on the water,' Gibbs decided to do some googling.

And for as much as he doesn't love computers, he'd have to say that was a hell of a lot less painful than trying to find the house he's currently sitting in.

Penny and Ducky are on the sofa, and he pulls an armchair over, and lays out a collection of pictures of places on the water.

Penny and Ducky look at them, nodding, sorting through, nodding again, and he's having a hard time reading those looks. He feels like he's got a pretty good collection there, but they don't seem pleased by this. They aren't really reading the listings, they're mostly just flipping through.

As Penny tidily stacks them on top of each other, Ducky says, "Jethro, I think you may be missing the scale of what we were thinking of for this."

Penny nods. Ducky says, "Indeed."

"We have money, Jethro."

"At least five bedrooms, similar number of bathrooms, seven bedrooms is even better because that'll give the youngest members some room to themselves and lets us set up a girls and boys room. Nine would be perfect because if Jimmy and Breena have their way, there are going to be a lot of children running around this place. It needs enough land to be private. As you know, it has to be on the water. It needs a pier and boat house of some sort, because we have to keep Shannon in good shape."

Gibbs still can't find words. He blinks and exhales and finally says, "That's gonna cost a ton."
"We know," Penny says, definitively.

Jethro shakes his head, he can't even think of how much that'll cost. The beat to hell up four bedroom he'd found had topped out at $650,000. "You've got to give me a price range then."

"Three point six million," Ducky says, calmly.

"Duck!" That takes Gibbs' breath away.

"We can put in that much. Though it would be a good idea not to put all of that into the real estate, a place like that will need furnishings, and we'll need to build some sort of trust to pay the property taxes on it. Call it two point seven, less if it needs extensive repair. The market was still hot when I sold the home I shared with Mother. That money has been sitting around collecting interest and dust for a long time. It'd be nice to do something interesting with it."

Penny adds in, "Likewise, the home I shared with Nelson sold well. I traveled but it would have taken years to burn off that sort of money. I'm a tenured professor. They pay me very well, and I live quite below my means."

"As Penny said, Jethro, we have money."

"We've been talking about it more. You're retired. Ducky won't be staying around for more than a few months. Jimmy, Tim, and Abby will all be running their own departments, Tony running his own team. Ziva at home. You won't be seeing each other every day anymore."

"The Navy Yard is no longer our home. And we need one. This needs to be a space for our whole family. Where we can all be together, at once. It will need to be big, at least one bedroom per couple. No matter what else we do with it, it has to be a comfortable space for all of us. Do you remember the home I shared with Mother?"

Gibbs nods.

"That was meant to be a family estate, Jethro. It was meant to have multiple generations of people who called it home. A testament in stone and wood to people who valued and loved each other. Children and grandchildren were meant to grow there. That didn't work out, and it was vastly too large for two people and eight corgis. But, we can do this. We have the money, and it may be late for us, but we can build a home for our family."

"Mallard Manor?" Gibbs says with a slight laugh.

"Something like that," Penny says wryly, "One of the things Nelson and I had wanted, one thing we had envied Terri’s parents for, was that they had a family home. We were going to build one. A place where, no matter what, our children and grandkids could come in out of the storm. It didn't happen. But that doesn't mean that it cannot happen."

"So, would this space be open to Sarah and…" Gibbs doesn't know exactly how many grandkids and great-grandkids Penny has, but he does know John was one of four children, and that his surviving brothers had married and had kids, too.

Penny shakes her head. "Sarah, maybe, in that she lives here and seems to be getting closer to the rest of this group. But not the rest of the grandchildren. Can't have nine other people and their spouses and kids wandering in and out of the place, not with what we're talking about doing with it."

"Will that cause problems?"
Penny shrugs. "It's possible. But Tim's the only one I see on a weekly basis. I see Sarah monthly. The rest send me emails for my birthday, and drop by if they're in the greater DC area. If they're mercenary enough to feel like they deserve a chunk of the cash, then they can come and visit me on occasion, too. At this point I'm much closer to Tony, Ziva, Jimmy, and Breena than I am to any of my grandchildren besides Tim."

"Okay." Calling DiNozzo Sr. just went on his to-do list. Apparently Penny and Ducky's idea of this place is right down the street from Senior's idea of the place. "How's your end of it going?"

Penny shrugs. "Less concrete moving forward. I joined the Amnesty International group on campus, as well as well as a pro-immigration one. So far I'm just getting a good idea of who is who. Most of the 'do-gooder feminist' groups" she laces his term with some heavy sarcasm, "focus on women here, but there's a Mosque in Georgetown that one of the groups works with to help Muslim women here in the US, and I'm getting to know the woman who runs that outreach. Since most of the women that program works with are here legally, but weren't born here, she may have a clue as to who to talk to."

Gibbs nods at that.

"I've found us a lawyer," Ducky says. "Jason Ramsey is the brother of Alton Ramsey, the ME for the District of Colombia. He's something of a political gadfly. Active in pro-legal immigration circles. Penny and I had lunch with him, on the books, as clients," Gibbs appreciates that, as best he knows, if you actually hire the lawyer, everything you say to him is in confidence, "explained what we were thinking about. He's very pleased and has agreed to take us on retainer."

"Better yet," Penny's smiling at this, "the retainer is just to cover costs, he'll do the work pro-bono."

Gibbs blinks. He doesn't like lawyers, and the idea of one doing this… "So, he just gave us a blank check for all the legal wrangling we may need?"

"We'd have to cover expenses, court filings and the like, bailing you out if need be, and along with a trust to cover the expenses on the house, we're setting up a trust for that, but yes, he's willing to donate his time to any defense we may need. Granted, he would prefer we didn't get caught."

"Since it'll me my ass in jail, I'd 'prefer we didn't get caught,' too." Gibbs says, dryly. "I'm not going to try to get caught. The whole plan is to not get caught. Looks like Mike did this for more than five years, no one ever got close to him, and I'm a hell of a lot more careful than he was."

You sure about that, Probie?

My network doesn't involve literally hundreds of people, Mike. And I'm not blackmailing them so none of them might decide they're just done with me and report me just to get rid of me.

"There was one other protection that Mr. Ramsey recommended to us, and it's something we'd like your help with," Ducky says, bringing Gibbs back to the conversation with the living people around his coffee table.

"Okay, what?"

With a smile, gently squeezing Penny's hand, Ducky asks, "Would you be the witness for our marriage? That way we cannot be compelled to testify against each other."

A night of surprises all around, apparently. "First of all, yes. Second of all, you two cannot just sneak off the Justice of the Peace and do it in secret. All six of them will whine and bitch at me if I let you two get married and don't do something to celebrate it."
Ducky checks the clock. "Then you have a bit under fourteen hours to do something because our appointment with the Justice of the Peace is at noon tomorrow."

"You're killing me, Duck. Both of you."

"We didn't see any reason to make a big deal out of it," Penny says.

"Or necessarily mention it, for that matter. Not getting married was about how it was easier in regards to our estates, so why that would suddenly change will cause questions that we do not have a good answer for."

"Easiest way to lie is to not have to tell one in the first place. And you of all people should know that."

Gibbs shrugs, that makes sense, and he's sure they've had a lawyer or accountant or someone go over everything… But he also knows that when one of them dies and it comes out that they got married and that it's his signature on the marriage license, he's going to be in deep, hot water for not telling anyone about it.

He squints at both of them, licking his lips, shaking his head, able to imagine in glorious Technicolor detail the level of crap Abby and Breena are going to dump on him if he keeps this secret. "Couldn't it just be… I don't know… Valentine's Day romance or something?"

There's something of a glint in Ducky's eye. Something… Gibbs doesn't know what it is, but he trusts it. There's a level here he's not seeing, yet. "Trust me, Jethro, it will be easier this way."

"Okay, Duck."

And so, on February 13th, 2016, at 12:14, Leroy Jethro Gibbs signs, with no fanfare, the marriage certificate of Donald Mallard and Penelope Langston.

He takes them out for a celebratory lunch, after, and when Penny excuses herself for a moment, he says to Ducky, "You damn well better have something so romantic planned that I do not end up with Abby and Breena crying on me because they didn't get invited to your wedding."

Ducky grins at him, eyes sparkling. There's definitely something in the works. "Trust me Jethro, I will not leave you open to the weeping of distressed women."

Gibbs narrows his eyes, shooting his best I mean it look at Ducky. "Good."
First Date

Gibbs honestly hadn't noticed what day he'd picked when he set the date. Saturday. Made perfect sense to him. No Shabbos. No Bootcamp. He was completely free, and should things go especially well, the kids won't mind if he skips breakfast and church.

So, it wasn't until they all got to Shabbos on Friday night, and Jimmy reminded them they had Molly's birthday party at their place after church, that he realized that he'd made a date with Borin on February 13th, the day before Valentine's.

Which is when Tim's 'Saturday Date' smirk suddenly made a whole lot of sense.

Talk about stacking the deck for a first date, let alone his first date in two years.

There was a time when he knew how to do this.

There was a time when the whole get showered, get dressed, do fun thing with woman, hopefully resulting in sex was an actual pattern.

And it's not so much that he can't fall back into the pattern. Once he takes off the suit he wore to… he still can't believe it, Ducky's wedding, he can feel himself inching toward his gelling-at-home casual-date clothing. He wants to fall into his pattern, because his pattern is comfortable. But he knows that falling back into the same pattern is just asking to make the same mistakes over and over.

 Granted, he's not sure that making a whole crop of new mistakes is much of a better plan, but… At least it won't be boring.

And who knows, maybe he's learned something after all these years?

Okay, so, not following the same patterns he always does.

He's never been much of a get dressed up for dates kind of guy. Casual, laid back, go see a game or movie and easy dinner is usually his style. He's planning on cooking over the fire, so getting too dressed up doesn't make any sense, but maybe a step above cargo pants and t-shirt is in order.

He thinks about it a moment longer, tries to imagine what he'd like Borin to be wearing. Her smiling at him without a stitch of clothing on springs to mind. He enjoys that for a moment, and then shifts it to what she'll probably be wearing, what kind of effort she'll likely put into this, and does his best to mimic a male version of that.

He hasn't hit the point where the Magic Clothing Fairy just shows up and deposits stuff in his closet. But he does know that Breena occasionally attempts to drag him out of his usual fashion rut. So, he's got a few button-down shirts that have been hanging, washed, nicely pressed, in his closet, that he's never worn.

He eyeballs the bright blue one. It's been sitting in there since October. (He thinks about it more and comes to the conclusion that those shirts showed up just about the time he took his wedding ring off.) When he asked about them, Breena had said something about how he'd be moving on to new and interesting things, and maybe he might, on occasion, want something other than a jacket with a golf shirt. He takes it out, checking and sees that it is his size. His size, now, not his size, then. He looks at it again, thinking it's been there since October, but wondering if Breena somehow snuck some
new clothing in there. She'd certainly been looking him over carefully when he came out for the coffee date in the too big, but hand-print free pants.

He slips it on, and yeah, it looks good, fits very nicely. But, wearing this, he can't do his usual cargo pants.

He owns jeans. He wears them once or twice a blue moon. He even bought a pair of new ones during the great shopping extravaganza that ate up his Thursday afternoon. (Once he grabbed a few pairs of pants, it hit him that part of why the old ones didn't fit was that he was carrying around a whole lot less stomach, which meant he also needed new shirts, and once he figured that out, it hit that he needed a new suit for church and any testifying he still has to do, and by that point he'd already realized he needed new boxers, too. So, what was meant to be a ten minute grab-some-pants-and-run shopping trip ended up taking the whole afternoon.)

He takes them out, lays them on his bed, and turns to his dresser. He grabs the first pair of boxers he sees, and is halfway to putting them on before deciding that it might be a good idea to make sure they're in decent shape. (Just because he got new clothing does not mean he got rid of any of the old clothing.)

Kind of frayed around the hems. (Four inches too wide around the waist, too, but that doesn't matter so much if they're under another pair of pants.) He tosses them in the trash can and hunts around for a new pair.

He's reaching for socks when another thought hits, they're having dinner in his home. He's probably not going to be wearing shoes. Does he want to be padding around in socks? Jeans and dress shirt, what kind of socks go with that?

He realizes he hasn't put this much effort into a date since 1978. Hell, he didn't put this much effort into trying to look good at his last three weddings. And he hasn't put this much effort into impressing a woman since the last time he saw Shannon, and that this is, hopefully, a good thing.

He stares at the socks for a moment, debates calling Tony, has the phone in his hands before he shakes his head, imagining the level of ribbing he'll take if he actually asks for fashion advice for a date, let alone in regards for socks, and decides to go with bare feet. That's relaxed and intimate.

Jeans on. Another debate between shirt tucked in and a belt or out. He runs his hands over the shirt, flattening it, staring at his stomach, wiggling the fat that's still padding him, way less than there was this time last year, but not Marine hard, yet. Untucked hides that, but he's hoping she'll take his shirt off at some point, and tucked in is tidier, looks better with this sort of shirt… He tucks it in. Dark blue jeans, bright blue shirt, he skips a jacket, skips the belt, too. He's not going to work.

Hair brushed, teeth brushed, shaved… anything he's forgetting?

He looks at the little, heretofore untouched, bottle of cologne Tim got him. (Good Lord, what on earth goes through the kid's head sometimes? Cologne, for Christmas?) It's been sitting on his dresser, ignored since he got it home. Jolly Roger. (Really, Tim? Really?) But, it has been forever since he's been on a date. And he's always been a sawdust and coffee kind of guy, bit of his Old Spice (classic, none of those new, bizarre scents they've been coming out with lately) deodorant peeking through.

And if part of the idea is breaking molds and trying new things...

If it smells gross, he won't put it on.
He opens it, face already half-way into a protective grimace (He doesn't wear cologne because he's never smelled one he liked… Okay none of the wives or girlfriends ever found anything he was willing to wear more than once. Not like he's ever gone shopping for it himself.) but he's pleasantly surprised (okay, floored) to see this smells like… Like a day on a wooden boat on the sea.

It's actually really nice.

So, he tentatively puts a little of it on him, pretty much expecting it to turn sour or burn or… something unfortunate, but no, it just sits there on his skin smelling pleasantly of salt and sea and sun and wood and maybe some rum.

(Toss some Banana Boat suntan lotion into this and it's several of his best dates with Shannon.)

He heads to the bathroom and looks at himself in the mirror. He's fifty-seven, and it shows on his face. But he looks presentable. He's in… decent… Hell, really good shape… for a guy his age. He's hoping to drop that last bit in the next year. The exercising like a maniac seems to have tightened up things further, and sure, he's not cut or anything, but he's also no longer got anything that could even remotely be called a beer gut. He smells good. And, until he knows Borin better, he can't do anything else to try and make himself more appealing to her.

For right now, this is as good as he gets.

He looks himself over one last time. He'll do.

Fire's burned low to hot coals, steaks are sizzling away, potatoes are wrapped in foil, nestled in the embers, he's got a green salad in a bowl on the coffee table, along with plates and silverware.

Now it's just time to wait for Borin… Abby… Abigail…

He hears the knock, and jumps up to answer it. Borin's been to his house before, she knows his open door, let yourself in policy, but, it's polite to actually open the door for a date, right? (Plus, he very much does not want a repeat of how Mona met Tim.)

So he opens it, smiling, and she steps in, also smiling, holding a bottle of good bourbon and a box with whatever dessert is in it.

"Hi."

"Hi yourself." She looks him up and down and appears to approve of Date Gibbs.

He takes the bottle and box from her, nodding at the coat rack while nudging the door shut with his foot, and hopefully, discretely locking it. Tonight is not the night he wants Tobias or Vance just walking on in. Mona ambles over (coaxed away from the smell of cooking steaks by hearing a voice/smelling a person she doesn't recognize.)

"You got a dog."

Gibbs nods. "This is Mona."

Mona looks her up and down, decides Borin's acceptable, and comes closer to get her ears rubbed.

"Hello, Mona."

Woof. Mona tilts her head right and left, making sure Borin gets all of the good ear rubbing spots, licks her hand a few times, and wanders back to the spot she'd been using to keep watch over the
"Dinner smells good," Abby says, straightening up, taking off her cold weather gear. Once her coat and scarf is hung up, and boots off, she kisses his cheek and says, "You do, too."

He grins at that and looks toward the living room, letting her walk ahead of him, enjoying the view. Her hair's long and loose, wavy, which he enjoys. She's wearing a white cable knit sweater with a wide neck that's slipped off one shoulder. It's short enough that if she were to reach for something overhead he'd get a glimpse of her tummy or low back. Under that, snug blue jeans. (And he notices, that yes, she does not have any socks on either, and she's also got a tiny little silver toe ring on her right second toe, a very girly touch he didn't expect, but really likes.)

Yes, he's enjoying the view quite a bit. He sighs happily while he follows her in, and places the box and the bottle on his coffee table.

"You cook on your hearth a lot?" she asks when she notices the steaks on the grate on his fireplace.

"As much as I can. Tastes better like this."

She nods, sitting on the floor in front of the fire. "Smells like summertime."

"Camping?" He sits between her and the coffee table. He touches the bottle of bourbon, and she nods. So he pours each of them a glass, handing one to her, his fingers brushing along her index finger as he passes over the glass.

"Cookouts. Memorial Day to Labor Day, every night it didn't rain, my mom would fire up the grill and cook out in the back yard."

"Where did you grow up?"

"Little middle of nowhere town in Montana."

He hadn't know that. Her voice and accent suggested somewhere in the west, but he hadn't narrowed it down beyond 'not California. "Montana to the Coast Guard?"

"There were a few stops along the way." She says with a smile, watching him sip his drink.

"That's good."

"Thanks."

She inhales deeply. "Add some pine to this and cold mountain air, and it's home."

"Wood grill?" Not a lot of people cook on wood, and especially when she would have been a kid, charcoal and lighter fluid would have been the norm.

"My dad built it for her, big thing made of cement and the rocks he kept digging out of the gardens. It had an oven and a grill. Made awesome pizzas. Really good pies. We'd pick the blueberries and blackberries. Mom would make up the dough while the fire burned hot. Pizza goes in first. It cooks fast and hot, all singed on the crust and bubbly top. While we'd eat that, the pie would go in. By the time dinner was done, it was too."

He'd never thought, wondered about her family or where she comes from. But he's enjoying these little glimpses into her past. "What does your family do?"

"Little bit of everything, farming, ranching, dairy. They headed out in the late seventies as
homesteaders. They've got five hundred acres of mostly grass, but there's one section of the lot with a creek running through it, lots of pine trees there, and that's where the house is."

"Beautiful?"

"Yeah, it is. Their lot is pretty flat, but you can see the mountains. They run cattle, it's good grazing land. But that's not exactly profitable, so they built a few cabins and got the permits in place, and in the winter they've got cross country skiers, snowmobiles, and dogsledding.

"Summertime, the flatland's boring. Pretty, a million miles of grass and wildflowers, snow-covered mountains in the background, fat cows munching away, but all in all, it's boring. Wintertime though, it's miles and miles of space to just go. The dogs love it. They can run for miles. The snowmobilers have a blast. They make enough from October to May on tourists to keep the ranch running, which makes them happy."

"Why'd you leave?" Her description isn't precisely his version of heaven, too far away from the water, though a good sized lake nearby would take care of that, but little out of the way place covered in wild flowers and berries or snow… Sounds awfully good to him.

She sips the bourbon. "Finished high school in '94. I was sick of cows, sick of tourists, sick of snow seven months a year, sick of living with my parents. Don't get me wrong, I love them, and we get on fine, but I was eighteen and wanted to be on my own, so I signed on with the Marines. I did my three years, did college on the GI Bill, and I was seriously thinking of heading back to Montana when 9/11 happened and I enlisted in Officer Training."

He scoots over, so he's kneeling in front of her, in front of the grill, and pulls the steaks off the grill, setting one on each plate, but he leaves the potatoes on the coals and the plates on the hearth instead of handing them over. She looks at them curiously. He answers the unasked question. "According to Breena, they taste better if you let them sit a bit."

"Is she right?"

"I think so. You can tell me if you agree in about ten minutes."

"I'd have to eat two of your steaks to know. One right away, and one with the wait."

"Next time you can have one right off the coals."

"Next time?" That's a pleased sounding question.

"Hope so." He's not sure what to say after that, and looks over, seeing the dessert box. "What's in the box?"

She smiles, and he gets the idea that she's really looking forward to what's in the box. "You can open it if you want."

There's tape along the one edge and the name of a bakery stamped on the top. Like always, he's got a knife, so he slits the tape and opens the lid. He's not entirely sure what he's looking at. Two little chocolate cups with something brown and fluffy inside them, scent of sweet coffee hitting him, a swirl of what's probably whipped cream on top and a little coffee bean on top of that.

Whatever it is, he's thinking he'll like it.

He's looking at dessert, and hears her move. Then there's the warmth of her body against his back, the feel of her chin resting on his shoulder. He smiles at that, enjoying her body against his. He turns
to look at her, really seeing the green and brown whorls of her eyes, the few freckles across the bridge of her nose, the tiny bit of makeup she's wearing, just enough to bring up the green of her eyes. Her gaze holds his for a moment, and he's fairly sure she's doing the same thing, really seeing him from close up. She's still smiling, so he thinks she likes what she's seeing. He knows he does.

She quickly reaches around, takes the coffee bean off of one of the desserts, balances it on the tip of her index finger, and offers it to him. He nibbles it off her finger as she says, "Chocolate cups, coffee mousse, whipped cream, and a candied espresso bean."

"I take it you don't want me asleep anytime soon?"

She grins, warm and seductive. He's watching her lips, feeling her breath against his cheek. He's about to inch forward, kiss her, then, still grinning, she pulls back before he can. She chuckles at that, teasing him, enjoying this game of getting closer but keeping him on his toes. For that matter, he is, too. Not that he doesn't appreciate a woman who will toss herself in his lap, but he also likes working for it.

So he grins back.

She licks the tiny smear of whipped cream off of her finger and says, "Like this could keep you awake."

He nods a bit at that, amused. Then he looks her up and down, eyes slowly mapping her curves, and carefully picks his words. "Like I'll need that to keep me up with you here."

She smiles brilliantly at that.

And Gibbs remembers that he really likes flirting.

It's comfortable, sitting on the floor, talking, eating, warm bourbon and dying firelight casting a sultry amber glow to everything around them.

They trade battle stories, been a lot of the same places over the years, just with a decade in between. Stories of Saudi, Iraq, the Med, going back farther, Lejeune, they know some of the same people.

When they get to dessert he stands up to get spoons, because he assumes something like this gets eaten with one, and plates for them. Heading back into the living room he kills the overhead lights, and puts a few more logs on the fire.

She smiles as he does it, approving.

A few seconds later, he lifts each cup onto its own plate, and then takes the remaining coffee bean off of the second cup, balances it on the tip of his finger, and offers it to her.

Like him, she nibbles it off his finger. He feels the warmth of her breath, and the delicate slide of her tooth along the top of his finger, and the wet of her tongue lightly touching his fingernail. He exhales a quiet sigh at that, loving the visual and reveling in the sensation.

He feels her place a tiny kiss to the tip of his finger, before crunching down on the coffee bean.

"Wasn't sure if you liked sweets. Figured this would be pretty safe." She dips her spoon into the coffee cup coming up a second later with some of the coffee mousse and whipped cream, and he watches her lick it from the spoon, seeing her tongue dart, pink and wet against the metal, thinking about every dirty, sexy, wonderful thing he wants to do to and with her tongue.
He swallows, mouth dry, and then touches the bourbon glass. "Usually drink dessert, but I like sweet things, too."

She lifts the cup and nibbles it. "Chocolate sweet or fruit sweet?"

He takes a bite of his own dessert, and yes, it's good, very strong coffee flavor, not too sweet, bit creamy, and there's probably some booze in there, too.

"Both. Or coffee. Love coffee. Tim and Abbs had coffee cupcakes at their wedding, those were great."

"Mmmm…"

"Yeah."

"Irish coffee, not too much cream, not too sweet, good whiskey. Love that."

He nods. Sure he's more of a bourbon guy, but he's got nothing against whiskey if it's in coffee.

"Turkish or Saudi style?" Anyone who spent any time in the Middle East and was serious about coffee has a preference. Turkish style is thick and sweet, strong enough to peel the paint off the walls. Saudi style is served hot, very, very hot, a teaspoon or so at a time, and both styles add spices to the blend.

"Spent a month in Kuwait, there was a tiny café, a bench, three tables, and five or six chairs on the sidewalk. Turkish style service," boiling water poured onto the grounds in a special pot, allowed to steep, then poured into the cup, let gravity pull the grounds down, "no sugar for this mix, but honey, thick and rich, golden, think it was flavored with saffron, and cardamom were part of it. That. Never had coffee like it before or since. Not even close."

He shakes his head. "Nothing ever tastes the same. You can try, but the air, the people… the place seeps into the food, changes it. Miller Lite, lame-ass, barely beer swill, smuggled into Baghdad for ten buck a can, same damn stuff you get here, bottled here, made here, but there…" He shakes his head. He'd been in Baghdad for six weeks, first alcohol in months, drunk with men he loved, and it tasted like heaven.

She nods. "First tour, I still smoked. Not much to do out there during the downtime."

He nods, knowing all about that.

"But it's the same thing. A pack of Marlboros in the middle of the desert with a zillion stars overhead… Just isn't the same here. Even in the mountains, same starts, same nights you can see forever, but, it's not the same. Quit when I got stateside again. It just wasn't worth it."

He takes another bite of the dessert, feeling the chocolate melt on his tongue, the bracing sharpness of the coffee fill his mouth. He may eat this again, he hopes he does, but it'll never taste like this. It'll never be this first meal together, first real conversation, first night of Jethro and Abby again.

Chocolate, coffee, cream, hint of wood smoke, tinge of beef, bourbon and her skin perfuming the air, filling his lungs and flavoring the treat in front of him. This moment will never be again, so this dessert will never taste the same again.

She takes another bite of her dessert, follows it with a sip of the bourbon, seeming to be thinking the same thing. They're sitting close. She's between the sofa and the coffee table, her back against the sofa, sitting cross-legged. He's at the end of the table, legs bent to the side, arm resting on the edge of
the table, facing her. There's maybe two inches between her left knee and his right knee.

He can't feel the heat of her leg near his, but he can feel the heaviness of this moment. The way they're watching each other, the silence broken only by popping flames and Mona snoring.

She's golden and flushed by the firelight, and maybe, maybe by anticipation of what may come next.

He sets the cup down on the table and kneels, leaning forward, and traces his fingers across her cheek. She smiles, holding his gaze with hers, and turns her lips to his palm, pressing a kiss into his hand.

His eyes close for a heartbeat as he takes a deep breath, and they open when he leans in closer, lips finding hers, stroking gently, and she sighs quietly against him as he kisses her.

And it's slow, almost tentative, but not nervous. No, this is quiet, gentle exploration.

He's fantasized about this before, but in the dream images it's always been hard, rough, demanding kisses, desperate as they grind into each other, tearing clothing off.

And he's sure they'll get there, but not right now. Right now is like the honey she talked about, thick and gold and slow. One soft nibble at a time.

He's only touching her mouth and face, and she's got one hand on his arm, fingers on his wrist, but that's it. Right now is just about kissing, about lips pulling every sensation out of each second.

Eventually his knee tells him that he cannot keep kneeling, not on a floor this hard, not if he wants to do anything else fun tonight, so he eases back, and she smiles brilliantly at him, eyes sparkling, face flushed (he's sure it's not just the effect of the firelight now.)

She looks at the remnants of dinner. "Bout time to clean that up, wouldn't you say?"

He's loading the dishwasher, more and more slowly, because dinner's really over when everything's put away, and he's not entirely sure if she's going home when he gets done. (He's really hoping she's not.) But finally, there's no more lingering he can do, so he slips the last fork into the silverware caddy, tosses in a detergent pack, and then closes up the machine.

She's looking at him expectantly, and he thinks he knows what that look means, feels it rush through his skin and tingle his toes (among other places), so he's awfully hopeful that he's reading it right.

He steps a bit closer, not touching, but close enough to see her individual eyelashes, close enough to feel her breath against his cheek as she's looking up at him.

He strokes his hand over her hair, down her throat and across that one bare shoulder, stepping even closer yet, but still not touching.

"This okay?"

And she steps into him, pulling flush to him, warm, soft body tight against his, and that feels great. "Oh yeah. Been waiting for this all night."

"Didn't want to get presumptuous."

She laughs at that, warm and throaty, and then cups her hand around the back of his neck, where his head and neck meet and pulls his lips down to hers.
And, yes, kissing. Full body kissing. Making out! He remembers making out. He remembers how much he loves this, and how this is all sorts of very, very good and... Just, God, soft wet lips on his, gentle sucks, warm, hot, perfect tongue slipping against his, rich with coffee and bourbon and her, and, just, yes, all over yes, a thousand million yesses of unending wet, hot, firm, soft good God, YES!

Eventually she pulls back, breathing hard and fast, Gibbs thinks she was going to say something, but right now, he wants more, of everything, so follows her, not letting her catch her breath, hands spanning her hips as he keeps her close, full bodies touching, and Lord that's good too, that's so good. She's soft in all the right places and her hands are pulling him in closer as more kisses slip between them.

But finally the brain in the big head takes back over, and he steps back, giving her the space to say whatever it was she was going to say before.

This time she follows him, and his toes curl at. All of this beautiful woman, clinging to him, kissing him fast and deep, hands curled in his hair and cupping his hip, keeping him anchored to her.

She's rubbing against him, all over, making him feel almost light-headed it's so good. He manages to tear his lips away from hers, dragging them down her throat, ripping a breathy moan out of her that feels amazing, that he wants to hear again, over and over and over, wants to feel it against his chest and shoulder as she's pulling her nails down his back while he slams into her.

A low, hot exhale answers her moan, raising goosebumps along her shoulder.

"God, Jethro, you gonna take me upstairs?"

"Still not presuming," he whispers it to her, licking her earlobe.

She pulls his face up, eyes to eyes and gives him a quick, nipping kiss. "I am officially giving you permission to presume all you want."

He stares at her long and hot, raking his eyes over every inch of her body, and gets across, by look alone, that he may presume some pretty wild stuff.

She grins, wide and happy at that, sending back her own look of anything you can come up with, I'll try. "Come on." Borin steps back and takes his hand, leading him to the staircase. She looks up, but obviously doesn't know what is where in his house. He takes her pause, presses her against the wall, and begins kissing down her throat, long, soft, sucking kisses.

He nibbles her collarbone, hands finding their way under her sweater, heading up her back, looking for the strap, and he's very pleased to see that she doesn't have a bra on under it.

He didn't realize he'd made some sort of pleased sound until he heard her say, mirth in her voice, "Take it you like that?"

He trails his fingers across her ribs, palming her breast, and groans, teeth ghosting along her jaw. Her leg slides up his, hooking over his hip, keeping him close as she rocks into him, pulling another groan out of him. His hand buries in her hair, as he shifts to kissing her lips, and she arches into him, squeezing the hand on her breast, letting him know the kind of touch she likes.

He mimics her touch, harder, more insistent, and she moans at that, letting go of his hand, and cupping his ass, pulling him into her, grinding into him.

He pulls himself away, doesn't want to, but he knows this isn't going to work on the stairs. Actually,
no, it'll work just splendidly on the stairs, several very good images of exactly how this could work on the stairs flood through his mind, but… nope… Condoms are upstairs. Nice big bed is upstairs. Room to really spread her out and explore is upstairs.

He's holding her shoulders, keeping her about a foot away, and then turns her, swats her ass, and says, "Upstairs, second door on the left, now!"

She kisses the hand on her shoulder, biting his wrist, and heads up the stairs, quickly.

As soon as she's through the threshold of his room, she's turned toward him, pressing into him for more kisses and touching and rubbing. More of her sweet body on his, and his hands cup her ass, as he rubs into her, kissing her lips and throat and jaw and shoulder, wanting to touch, taste every inch of her all at once.

Her hand finds his dick, cupping, squeezing gently through his jeans, and he knows part of it is just it's been so damn long since a hand other than his own has touched his dick, but Holy God! that's good.

He didn't think it was possible, but right now, he's exceptionally glad to be fifty-seven because even ten years ago, with as good as this feels and as long as it's been, he would have come right here and now from the way she's rubbing him.

As it is, he's hard. Really hard. Drive nails with it hard. And she's gotten his jeans open, wormed her hand into his boxers and skin on skin… "Fuck…" It slips out of him on an exhale and she grins, loving having pulled that word out of him.

Last time touching a woman was this intense, it was Shannon and he'd been away for six months, got home in the afternoon, in the summer, and Kelly was old enough she didn't take naps anymore, so it was five hours of touching, and petting, and whispered promises, before he finally got some time alone with her.

Last time touching a woman was this intense it didn't matter if he got off in the first thirty seconds, he was still young and horny enough that he could get it up again in twenty minutes, half an hour, tops and he had more than enough stamina to keep her happy with tongue and fingers until his dick perked up again.

But he knows he doesn't have ten hours of oral in him, so he does not want to get off, yet.

He pulls her hand out of his pants, kisses her palm, nipping his teeth across her wrist, and goes to work on her pants. She's also wearing jeans, pretty tight ones, but a button and zipper aren't difficult.

He kneels in front of her (very happy his knees have decided to cooperate in this) and begins to tug her jeans off. Only takes a second to get them down and off, which means he's staring at her in that sweater, knowing she's got no bra on under it, and the tiny, little emerald green thong she's got on.

Tiny, green, wet, thong. That hits him right in the balls, her body, hot for his, wet, slick, craving his.

He peels her panties off, very pleased to see she's a natural redhead, but he'd known that for a while now. (Okay, guessed... hoped) And then he gently kisses her mound, and part of him wants to stay here for hours, licking and kissing and sucking, burying himself in her pussy, and part of him wants to get that sweater off and see the rest of her. That part wins. He kisses up her belly, and licks her hip.

He doesn't say, 'You're beautiful' but it's clear in his face, and the way his eyes travel over her skin. And he knows from her smile that she understands the words he hasn't (yet) said.
Gibbs stands up, holding her close, enjoying her skin, his hands playing along her spine under the sweater. Borin raises her arms and he lifts the sweater off of her, finally seeing all of her naked. He feels the grin slide across his face.

This time he does say it. "You're beautiful."

She smiles at that, taking the compliment, enjoying it. Her fingers trail over his chest, down to his jeans, they're open, but still on, she teases him, very light brush of fingers over his dick, then she steps in close, nipples rubbing his shirt and she reaches to the top button and begins to slip it through the button hole.

She takes her time, slowly undoing each button, kissing his chest between buttons, sucking his left nipple, and then doing it harder when he hisses, pleased, at it. He wants to toss her on the bed and devour her, he lifts a hand to play with her nipple, but she takes his hand and puts it back on his own hip. She's undressing him right now, and that's just how it's going to be.

So he lets her. Waiting patiently(ish) for her to unwrap him.

She smiles, pleased at him, though she doesn't say anything, but she does step in close, her breasts crushing against his chest, as her hands slip under his jeans, over his hips, around to his ass, and then push the fabric off of him.

A second later, it's a pile of denim on the floor in the corner, because as soon as his pants hit his ankles he kicks them off, not caring at all about where they land.

She steps back, looking him up and down, and licks her lips, then bites the lower one. "I am going to have so much fun with you."

That makes him laugh. "Hope so." He pulls her close again, then backs two steps to the edge of his bed and sinks down, pulling her to straddle him.

And she does, pushing him onto his back, laying over him. Kissing him while his hands wander her body, mapping every curve he can reach. She's straddling his thigh, rubbing up and down his leg, wet and slick, and he's just about crazy with it, wants her so bad, needs to get inside her, because just her hip (which, God, that feels good, too) rubbing against him isn't enough.

He's reaching behind him for the condoms he knows live in his dresser when it hits them that they're at least five years old, if not older, and those little bastards have expired.

He groans, and this time it's not a happy sound.

"Jethro?"

God, he doesn't even know if she likes this, some women don't, but… "You wanna switch around? Sixty-nine?"

She looks very surprised to hear him say that.

"Not if you don't like it… but…” He feels God-awful stupid for this. "Condoms are old. I'm clean and had a vasectomy a million years ago, but…”

She smiles again, sits up, still straddling his thigh, squeezes him in an exceptionally pleasant sort of way, making him hiss and grit his teeth, and then gets up. "I've got some." He watches the sway of her hips as she heads out of his room, enjoying the little dimples on her butt and the way her hair bounces with each step. A minute later, she's back with her purse, and a few seconds after that, she's
holding a three strip of condoms.

"Not that I don't like it, because I do, and tomorrow morning, if I don't get a call out, I'll take you up on that offer. But," and she squeezed him again, hand stroking from base to tip in a long, slow, toe curling pull. "I wanna see what you'll do with that."

He smiles, bright, happy, really happy in a way he hasn't been in years. "Trust me, you'll like it."

She smiles. "Good." And put the condoms where they could both reach them easily. "We do this often enough, I'm fine with getting tested again, and then saying goodbye to them if all goes well."

He nods. That's fine by him. She's standing on the side of the bed, and he wraps his hands around her hips, pulling her onto the bed, straddling him again, but this time he nudges her up, so she's over his shoulders.

She smells like sex, tastes like it, is wet and open and soft and again wet. She's all possible meanings of delicious.

Doesn't take long to get revved all the way back up again. Three minutes, four, tops, and he's reaching behind himself again, this time grabbing the condom and getting it torn open behind his head.

She smiles at that, scooting down, kissing the tip of his nose, and then takes it from him, smoothing it over him in one steady motion.

She slips onto him in a slow glide, and there's that hot, snug, glorious of slipping into a woman's body. His jaw clenches and eyes close as a soft breath slips out of him.

She smiles at that, too, enjoying knowing she feels this good to him, enjoying how good it feels to her, and begins a gentle, steady rocking motion.

He loves this position. He can watch. She's riding him which means he can see her breasts sway, her body bounce over him, every ounce of pleasure on her face is visible, and, watching that…

Borin about to climax is amazing.

Her head is back, eyes closed, mouth open, small, panting moans slipping out of her with each fast thrust and firm rub of his thumb over her clit and other fingers on her nipples.

She's flushed and her hair's wild and she's every kind of beautiful a woman can be.

She takes his hand in hers, showing him exactly how to touch her, as she grows tighter on him, he thinks he's got it, because she lets go of his hand, leans back a little, deeper angle, moving faster as he arches up into her.

She reaches behind her, palming his balls, making sure he's not about to get off, and he gets that message, focusing more on her, less on him, there'll be another round, and he'll get off then.

He rubs her nipple more firmly, follows the faster, smoother stroke she showed him for her clit, and rocks his hips faster, wanting to watch her fall apart on him, and she does, brilliantly, deep, sultry moans slipping from her mouth as she pulls in tight, twitching against him.

He almost can't watch it, it's almost enough to push him over. But it's not, and he's glad it didn't because he wanted to see her, wanted to feel and hear, immerse himself in her pleasure at his touch.
She snuggles on him for a moment, her cheek against his shoulder, lips on his throat, one finger stroking his nipple. He pets her hair, enjoying her body pulsing around his. He lets her breathing slow down, lets her body stop quivering, and then rolls on top of her, hooking her leg over his shoulder and starts to thrust, hard, but holding back some. "Fast?"

She grabs his butt and pulls, he figures that's a yes. He kicks his speed up, reveling in it, in fast, hot glide, and the smooth slip of her body along his. He's still a little worried he's going too fast or too hard, holding back just a bit.

"God, Gibbs, fuck me!" She bites his shoulder while that tears out of her mouth, and that breaks any reserve he might have had about doing it too hard.

She's groaning with every breath, and he's not exactly being silent himself, this feels too amazing to be quiet, and he's a little worried about getting off before she does, because he knows those sounds, knows that's her building up to number two, and he doesn't want to leave her hanging, but, God, he's so close and it's been so long and she's pulling on him, scratching him to go faster, deeper.

He's rebuilding the bed in his mind, calmly, serenely applying layer after layer of finish onto the wood. Stroking it smooth and gentle, feeling the brush glide over… Shit that's not working at all. He's turning woodworking into sex in his mind.

She's so tight on him, rising up to meet each thrust, grinding against him, and he feels the tingles start, that gotta-come-now feeling that starts in his balls and spreads like molten gold everywhere. He's begging God that this does it for her, too, 'cause he's got nothing left in his bag of tricks, not that he can pull out this far gone. He's thrusting harder, faster, pulling her up to meet him and she bites down on his shoulder, hard, twitching, and feeling her body spasm on his throws him over the edge, falling into a chasm of searing, wet, pulsing pleasure.

He hopes he's not too heavy on her, but he's way too comfortable, and happy, to move, yet.

He's gently stroking his hair, and kisses his forehead.

Eventually he feels like his arms and legs are working again, so he lifts up, making sure he's got the edge of the condom, too, and rolls to his side, taking care of the condom and tossing it out before snuggling in close to her.

"You're a cuddler?" she asks.

"Been known to happen."

She smiles at that, then kisses him, points to the bathroom door. "Bathroom?"

He nods.

"Back in a second." She grabs her purse and heads in, and in a few minutes is out again. He takes a moment to likewise get ready for bed, and then joins her, this time under the covers.

He yawns, and she giggles a bit at that while he spoons up behind her.

"This okay?" he asks.

She nods. "I'll shove you off if I get too hot."

That strikes him as reasonable.
She rolls over, so she's facing him. "You're not going to tell me it's been five years since you've had sex?"

He looks amused by that. "Am I that rusty?"

She laughs.

"No. Bit more than two. But they were still good when I needed them last." He'd gotten them when things were heating up with Dr. Ryan, and then they fizzled before getting to the point where he needed them, Susan didn't think they needed them, so they kept sitting in that drawer, and now they were on the other side of expired.

He kisses her, soft and tender, and then says, "But I am so grateful you had some."

"Me too." She yawns, kisses him once more, and then rolls back over, so her back is to his chest. His chin comes to rest against her back, and he kisses the nape of her neck.

"Night."

She kisses his index finger. "Night."
Gibbs feels disoriented when he wakes. It takes him a second to get himself situated in both time and space. There's a warm female body pressed against him, red hair in his face, for a heartbeat he thought he was back with Shannon, but then the rest of his life came back, and he knew he wasn't.

Probably the sixth time that's happened to him. It only lasts for a second or two, and only happens the first time waking up with a new redhead, but... But this is different. He's not with Shannon, but this is the first time he's had that slip, and he's not feeling distressed when he rights himself in time.

He's not disappointed that it isn't her.

Abby's on his usual side of the bed, so he can't see his clock, but he's not feeling any desire to go springing out of bed and get started on the day. Also a first. His usual way of dealing with realizing that the woman lying next to him isn't Shannon is to hop up and do something: make coffee, work on whatever project he had going, go home, *something*. Because if he just lays there, he'd end up dwelling on who he wasn't with.

He stretches a little, inhaling and exhaling deeply, enjoying the way she feels against him, the long, smooth expanse of her back against his front, the way she smells, and even the fact that her hair is tickling his face.

That wears out its welcome pretty fast, so he carefully gathers her hair and tucks it under her neck.

She shifts a bit when he does that, and he's hoping he didn't just wake her up. She stills again, and he settles in to enjoy holding her, counting the freckles on her back and shoulder.

Eventually his bladder lets him know that now would be a really good time to get out of bed, so he does, carefully, making sure not to wake her up, and he does get to see the clock, notices it's a bit before six, earlier than he usually wakes up, but he does have a new person in his bed.

He takes care of business, brushes his teeth, and heads back into the bedroom, thinking about morning sixty-nining and waking her up very nicely.

He sneaks back into bed, slow, easy movements, trying to not wake her up. Doesn't work. She's lying on her side, arms curled in front of her, hand under her chin, top knee against the bed, top foot draped over her lower calf. For a second, she looks very, very peaceful, and then one eye goes springing open as soon as his weight hits the mattress in front of her.

There's a split second of *huh?* on her face, but then she, too orients herself in time and space, remembers why she's in Gibbs' bed and why he's naked, laying in front of her, propped on one elbow.

"Morning," she says, stretching. He smiles and strokes his hand down her shoulder and side.

"Yep. Sleep well?"

She nods, inhaling, making a little purring sound as she stretches again. "Always sleep well after a good tucking in."

He chuckles at that as she gets up to use the bathroom.

When she's back she smells of toothpaste and morning. She slips back into bed with him, and kisses
him properly.

This time is slower. They take longer, exploring each other, mapping out each other's curves and planes with fingers and lips, palms and tongues, finding old scars, and on Borin, one new one. Gibbs wonders, briefly, at the bright red bullet crease on her hip, but he doesn't ask. Now's not the time.

And she does like sixty-nine, and he does too, and God, she's brilliant at it. And he hopes what he's doing to her feels half as good as what she's doing to him, and he figures it does when she goes tight and bites the inside of his thigh, hard.

She ends up with a matching hickie on her thigh. He'd meant to be kissing her, but she did... something... he's not sure what, just that it felt beyond amazing... and he lost it.

They're both drowsing, warm, happy, comfortable. His face resting on her thigh, and he has one hand cupped over her hip. She's using his thigh as a pillow, too, and is gently stroking his now dormant penis. Not trying to turn him on, just touching to touch.

"What's on for the rest of your day?" she asks.

"Mmmmm..." he blinks a few times, sliding fully into awake. "Only thing I have to do is Molly's birthday party. Duck reminded me yesterday that I can't miss it. You?"

"Nothing. Phone doesn't ring, and I've got all day free. What's Sunday usually look like for you? Sounds like you've got other things you'd usually be doing."

"Run with Mona. Breakfast at the diner with the kids. Church. Sunday dinner at Breena's parents' house. But we've got the birthday party instead. Jimmy, Tim, and I cut out early for Bootcamp. Ziva meets us there. Tony showed up last week, hopefully he'll come today, too. Then home, dinner... woodworking. Play with Mona. Read sometimes. What's a typical day off look like for you?"

"You've got full Sundays."

He nods. "Empty Mondays through Fridays, but right now I've got full Sundays."

"Sleep in on Sunday. That's usually the start. Breakfast out." She yawns.

He laughs. "So, don't wake you up so early, next time?"

She shrugs. "Sundays I'm on call, it's better to grab me when you've got me. Never know when the phone'll ring."

He nods at that. "Know that story."

"Yep. After breakfast, swimming. Lunch with friends, usually. Call my parents in the afternoon. Maybe hit the range. Then takeout and catching up with all the shows I didn't watch over the week."

"Sounds like a good Sunday."

"I like it."

He kisses her thigh and was about to say, "Wanna get breakfast with me?" when her phone rang.

So much for 'If I don't get a call out.'

She sighs, rolls over, reaching around on the floor, and finds her purse. She sits up. "Borin." She rubs her face while listening. He kisses her shoulder and then puts on a pair of shorts and heads
downstairs.

It only takes him five minutes to put everything together. He's done this for himself more times than he could count, so doing it for her is just a matter of rote morning routine.

It's not fancy. But it's hot, and it's filling, and it'll keep you going. Big cup of coffee, scrambled eggs sandwiched between two pieces of toast.

He hears the shower going, and knocks. "Come in."

"Breakfast's sitting on the sink. Got a go bag in your car?"

"Yeah."

"I'll grab it and bring it up for you."

She pulls back the shower curtain, and wet, naked, Abby in his bathroom is making him want to whimper for mercy and shoot whichever son-of-a-bitch killed someone and is pulling her out of his home.

She reaches out, grabs the waistband of his boxers, and pulls him close for a long kiss, submerging him, again, in vivid sensations of exactly what he's going to be missing out on by her leaving. As soon as she catches the son-of-a-bitch, he's going to shoot that bastard, twice.

"Thanks," she says when she lets go.

He smiles wryly, at her, at the situation, at the fact that he's half-soaked, and desperately wants to hop in with her. "Keys in your purse?"

"Front pocket."

"Okay. I'll be up with your work clothes in a bit."

He strips out of the wet boxers, tosses on last night's jeans, and remembers that it's February and now is a really bad time to be outside in just a pair of jeans when his feet hit the ice cold front porch. It'll take longer to bundle up than it will to get her stuff. So he gets to her car (fast), finds her bag (fast), and almost sprints back into the house, where Mona's waiting for him, staring up, and wondering why he started their morning run without her.

"In a minute," he says to Mona, taking Borin's bag up, and then heading down to make sure his other lady gets some breakfast, too.

She comes down while he's getting food for Mona. She's carrying the coffee mug and plate (both empty), and wearing last night's jeans, but with a button-down and a jacket. She looks professional. Except for the damp hair.

"It'd be a stretch to think you've got a hairdryer?"

He nods. His hair's a little shaggier than usual, because he's not getting it cut every two weeks, but it's still short enough that a good toweling off and five minutes of air takes care of drying. Though he's thinking that by the end of today, he'll have one, and... maybe a pizza stone to go on his hearth grate, and definitely a new pack of condoms.

She nods, having expected that answer and separates her hair into three hanks, starting to braid it.

"Where you going today?"
"Not sure, yet. Dunton Cove. Think it's somewhere on the Delmarva Peninsula. Got a ghost ships with two bodies on it."

He nods at that. She finishes her hair and shoulders her bag. "I had a really good time."

He smiles. "Wanna show you a lot of good times."

She smiles back at him, pleased by that, as he walks her to his front door. She's about to step out when something hits him.

"Wait."

"Wait?" She looks irked. "I've got to get going."

"You can hold up for two minutes." He kisses her fast and heads into his kitchen. It takes forty seconds to find it. Two seconds later he's kissing her again, pressing a key into her hands. "I know the schedule is insane. I never lock up on my own, but Mona's changed that. Whenever you want company, come on over. If I'm not here, let yourself in. I'll be back sooner or later. Sleep over at Tim and Abby's sometimes, but fire off a text, and I'll come. Don't want anyone else coming by, lock yourself in."

She stares at the key, and for a second looks a bit alarmed, but then what he's actually said hits her. She smiles, realizing he's not asking her to move in after one date. Just making sure that she knows she can just come over whenever, that his open door truly is, for her, and she can have privacy here, if she wants it.

"I lock up, can you get in?"

Of course says the look on his face.

"Okay." She kisses him one last time, body flush against his, fingers twined in his hair, and he holds her close for several seconds after the kiss ends, hands spanning her hips, lips just touching hers, enjoying her body on his.

"Go get 'em."

"Enjoy your birthday party."

And she heads out. Mona stares up at him, Okay, we're at the door again, we going on our run, now?

He rubs his eyes. "Yeah, Mona. Let me put some more clothing on."

Gibbs usually doesn't spend a lot of time looking at himself, especially not when breakfast starts at eight, it's 7:45, he's naked and dripping wet, and he lives seventeen minutes from the diner.

But as he towels off his hair, he does look, seeing the bruises on his skin, three of them. He touches one, little tender, not bad. They'll be gone tomorrow or the next day.

Nothing about him changed between today and yesterday. His body is still the same, but it feels new. Feels, hopeful, maybe.

Or it might just be that right now, he's wearing her touch on his skin, in real tangible reminders, and he likes that.
Too many women have drifted in and out of his life, never leaving a mark, but this one did. And he's proud to wear it.

When Gibbs walks into the diner for Sunday breakfast, late, with something that could, just possibly, be called an I-just-got-laid-shit-eating-grin on his face, he sees Jimmy and Tim glance at each other, can feel them both thinking it, and sees both of them break into grins, too.

"Looks like someone had a good night," Jimmy says, smug.

Gibbs nods.

"Gonna tell us about it?" Tim asks.

"Nope."

"Come on!" Abby says. "You can't not tell us about it."

Breena's nodding along with that. "First date in forever, you've got to tell us about it."

Gibbs shakes his head, little smile on his lips.

Elaine heads over, looks at him, pours the coffee, and calls back to her husband, "Add an order of pancakes to Gibbs' plate." Then she looks at him smiling. "You better bring her in to meet me. Twenty years you've been coming in here, and I've never seen that look on your face. I want to meet the lady that's inspiring it."

Gibbs sips his coffee, without comment.

Church came. Church went. The only interesting part of it was that, while sitting there, it hits Gibbs that he should call or text or something, Borin.

And sooner would be better than later. First time he and Hollis hooked up, he didn't call after, and she was not happy about that.

He didn't call any of the ladies after her either, though he did go out of his way to 'run into them' sometime in the next day or two and see them again.

But he's not going to 'run into' Borin. There's no reason for him to be in Dunton Cove. (Wherever it may be.) And true, he's got nothing planned tomorrow besides calling Senior and learning more about how expensive real estate works, and adding another coat of finish to Shannon, but he's not going to go stalk her job.

He's got enough sense to know that's a bad idea.

Which is why, when he gets into his car to drive over to Jimmy and Breena's, he shifts his phone from call to text. If she's working, if she's busy, a call could just be annoying. But a few quick words…

*Happy Valentine's Day, Abby.* He debates sticking a smiley face on that and decides not to.

Gibbs hits send and pockets his phone, putting the car in reverse, getting into toddler birthday party mode.
The party was winding down. The guest of honor had been put down for naptime. (Her oldest cousin napping beside her, her little sister, not quite on the same schedule was bright-eyed and enjoying cuddling with her Aunt Ziva.)

The whole family, plus Ed and Jeannie, are here in Jimmy and Breena's kitchen, milling around, chatting, moving in the direction of getting ready to go home.

It is in the midst of this, that Ducky reaches to Penny, and kisses her, on the lips. That's not unheard of. It's not common, either. And this sort of kiss, deep, passionate, maybe not erotic, but very definitely loving, is not the sort of gentle display of affection the rest of the crew has seen over and over again.

Compared to clinking a ring against a glass, this is a much more effective, and direct, way of getting the attention of everyone in the room.

When he pulls back, eyes sparkling, grin on his face, everyone else is staring at them.

He kisses her one more time, quick little peck on the lips.

"You weren't there, darling, when Jimmy and Breena celebrated their wedding, but they asked me to say a few words about marriage. Though, given my lack of experience on the matter, I think it had more to do with having a soothing voice than any sort of wisdom on my part." Jimmy and Breena laugh at that.

"However, I did appear to come up with something relevant, which Edward reminded me of a few months ago." He strokes her face, looking into her eyes. "The point of marriage vows is that they are public. That it's not enough to build a life together, but that you do it in public, that you stand before everyone who has ever mattered to you and proclaim that you will devote your life to that person."

Penny's staring at him, eyes wide, knowing where this has to be going, but looking like she cannot believe he's doing it.

"Penny, the journey has been long, and I have been blessed with a rich and satisfying life, not a day of which I would trade for any other, but this last year, spent with you, has been the sweetest of all of them. We're surrounded by everyone in this world who I love, and I would like to say, in front of all of them, that I will devote all of my remaining days to the love of you."

She's smiling, tears in her eyes, and he kisses her, quickly, one more time.

"There is a symbol that goes with these words, one..." his voice catches, "One I would like to wear. One I would like you to wear."

He pulls the ring box out of his jacket pocket and opens it.

Penny doesn't gasp, but that short, sharp inhale is awfully close. Gibbs wouldn't believe that she could get flustered, but apparently Ducky's managed to do it. He takes the first of the wedding bands out of the box. Gibbs isn't close enough to get a very good look at it, but he can see some sort of reddish metal twined around a cool gray one, and there's a blue stone at the top.

"Red gold for the passion and heat that keeps us together. Steel for strength, for love that will sustain us through the years to come. Star sapphire, because you are the star that lights the twilight of my life. Penelope Langston," he's staring up into her eyes, so much love on his face, "be my wife?"

She's crying and smiling and manages to get out, "Yes" while nodding at him.
Ducky slips the ring onto her finger, and kisses her again.

"May I be your husband?"

"Yes!"

He hands her the other ring. Same mix of gold and steel, but no stone. She slips it onto his ring finger and kisses him, long, and soft, and so happy.

There were hugs, and kisses, and congratulations, and girls cooing over rings, and at one point Ducky did manage to get Jethro alone to say, "I believe it is safe to say that I, nailed that, and there shall be no weeping women complaining at you for keeping secrets."

Gibbs chuckles and shakes his head. "No Duck. Not gonna hear a peep out of them. How far ahead did you have to plan that?"

"Edward did say something that made a lot of sense on Christmas. It took me a day to remember who Timothy's jeweler was and yet another day to track him down. The rings were not done until yesterday, though."

Gibbs smiles at that, watching Breena, Abby, Ziva, Penny, and Jeannie all inspecting Penny's new ring.

"Looks like you did good."

Ducky nods, an of course look on his face. "And now…" he leaves Jethro, detours to the foyer to grab their coats, and returns to Penny's side, checking the clock, while holding open her coat. "And now, my dear, we have a plane to catch."

"We do?"

"Indeed." He's smiling, eyes sparkling, mischief radiating off of him. "One cannot properly celebrate a marriage without a honeymoon!"

"And where is this plane going?" Penny asks as she puts on the coat.

"That, my lady, is a surprise, but I shall promise you will be happy to get there when it lands." He puts on his own coat, adjusts his fedora, wraps his arm around his bride, and waves goodbye to the rest of the crew.

As soon as the door closes, Ed looks around at the rest of the group from his seat at the kitchen table and says, "None of us will ever be that cool." The other guys all nod.

Jeanie ambles over and wraps an arm around him, kissing the top of her head. "But none of us will mind if you try."

He grins up at her. "Oh, I've got some plans for you." Then he looks to the rest of the family. "Time for us to be heading off, too. I think."

And with that, Molly's birthday party really did break up.

Speaking of plans, the girls have something planned for them. It is ultra-top-secret, but involves all three of them.

It also involves the guys being shut out of the Palmer house, though, upon naptime ending, Gibbs
has instructions to come in, pick up baby girls, and then transport them to their fathers/uncles where they shall stay until after dinner time.

So, since this is the long afternoon nap, the guys have two hours, which is long enough for a quick Bootcamp sans Ziva.

They fought. One on one on one on one. It was fun. Played to Tony's strength of being better at understanding a fight, so he wasn't quite so behind Tim and Jimmy's been-training-for-a-year-now speed. Pretty much looked like a brawl. Though none of them were working particularly hard. Gibbs because he's just feeling too good to muster any sort of real killer instinct, and Tim and Jimmy and Tony are all hoping to get very laid tonight and don't want to be sore and achy for that.

So they don't go at it for long before calling time.

They're heading to the locker room, (the three younger guys knowing this is their prime get ready for tonight time) and Tim asks Jimmy, "Did you know Ducky was going to do that?"

Jimmy holds up his hands shaking his head, and then opens his locker, stripping out of his clothing while saying, "About a month ago he swore me to secrecy about the time-off request. I thought a getaway somewhere warm was his Valentine's Day gift, but that was all."

"Gibbs?" Jimmy asks, grabbing his towel.

Jethro's untying his shoe, and shakes his head, he can honestly say, "Not a clue." Because if he had spent hours thinking of it, though he didn't he never would have come up with that for how Ducky would make sure all the girls were happy.

"You know, that's the way to do it." Tony says as he pulls his shirt over his head. "At home, your whole family there, good rings, nice words, and then off to the honeymoon. No flowers, no renting a place, no dithering over cake flavors. You tell her you love her, you offer her the rings, and then party time on the beach. Ziva and I ever renew our vows, that's how we're gonna do it."

"I liked dithering over cake flavors," Tim says as he tucks his shoes into his locker and tosses his shirt in on top of them.

"You would," Tony replies.

"We had great cakes!"

"Okay, yeah, they were, still… What Ducky did, that's a wedding!" Tony sounds very definitive, tossing his shorts and briefs into his locker, wrapping his towel around his waist.

"That was a wedding for a guy," Jimmy says as he pulls out his towel and bag of toiletries. "Covered everything a guy thinks matters. And sure the girls loved it because it was completely out of the blue and the ring was gorgeous and it's Valentine's Day and he's Ducky so he can get away with it. Plus, she's been married before and did the whole white wedding thing once. But if any of us had tried that…" Jimmy's shaking his head.

Tim nods in agreement. "Yeah, that wouldn't have flown for Abby. We renew our vows someday, and that would probably work, and anytime I want to show up with expensive custom jewelry and shower her with love words, she'll be happy, but… I loved our wedding. It was, right, you know?"

Gibbs shrugs, tossing his shirt into his locker, back to them. "That was right for them."
Tim nods. "I think you're right on that. Haven't ever seen her look like that. Just shocked and happy and… It was right for them."

Tony, who had been facing Jimmy and Tim turns, seeing Jethro, who is currently facing his locker, and sees the nail marks down his back. Then Gibbs grabs his towel and turns to face them.

"Whoa, you did not get that from the fight." Tony says, staring at the bite marks on Gibbs chest and thigh. Jimmy and Tim looking over, summoned by the shock in Tony's voice. "That was one hell of a date, wasn't it?"

Gibbs looks down at the two bite marks on his chest, touches one of them lightly, smiles gently, nods, then looks up at Jimmy, Tim, and Tony, smiles, cocky this time, and says, "Duck's not the only one who's got some moves." Then he calmly slings the towel over his shoulder and heads off to the showers, all three of them just staring at him.

"What are they doing?" Jimmy asks as Gibbs hands Kelly to Tim. They've all gathered at McGee's house, waiting, with instructions to baby wrangle and feed themselves.

He shakes his head. He's got a pretty good guess as to what the girls were doing. He saw Abby and Ziva, who were both made up very pretty and in their bathrobes, so he's guessing they've got a camera somewhere and are taking pictures, but he's not telling. They're going to this much effort, he's not spoiling the surprise.

So he just smiles at them, says, "Trust me, you'll like it," and finishes with, "Got some shopping to do." He waves and heads off, in search of a hairdryer, pizza stone, and, most definitely, condoms.

When Gibbs gets to his car, his phone buzzes. Happy Valentines to you, too, Jethro.

How's it going?

Just finished processing the boat and where it landed. ME's got time of death but no cause, yet. Gonna be a long night.

Know all about that.

Yeah, I bet you do. Gotta get back to it.

Okay. Go get 'em.

Will do.

He's about to let her go, tucking his phone back into his pocket when something hits him. Hey, you get to eat yet?

He can feel the eye roll. One power bar and six coffees since breakfast. No time. We're just heading back now. Why?

J

He googles Dunton Cove, VA, and sees that A: It's not on the Delmarva Peninsula, it's much further south and B: 'heading back now' means 'won't hit DC for hours.' So, he heads off to do his shopping, stocking up on groceries and a few other things to make Borin feel more at home in his home.
Unlike with his clothing, where he just shoved the new ones on top of the old ones, he takes the old condoms out and tosses them. He might, eventually, wear the old clothes again, he's not going to be using the old condoms.

He heads down, not feeling like eating, yet. Mona's watching him, looking expectant.

"Fetch?"

She bounds up and runs out the doggie door to the back yard.

He grabs a tennis ball and his jacket and heads out, too.

While he's tossing the ball around, he thinks about Borin, and about this whole… life… thing.

He's not a cop. Not anymore. And right now he's a lot less bothered by that than usual. Which is not to say that it's making him happy, but… it's not a kick in the balls right now, either.

But she is. And right now, he wants to… He's not even entirely sure. It was a really good first date. And he wants more of them, a lot more of them. He wants to hear about what happened with the HR guy (they never got to that) and how today's case went, and if she's on call because they're short men or because it's Sunday and she's being fair, making sure everyone gets a turn at saying goodbye to their off time.

He wants to know how she ended up with the Coast Guard. They talked about the Marines, but not how she got from there to here. She was an officer, so it's not like they would have just booted her out.

He wants to know about the old scars, and the new one.

He doesn't want to scare her off. Doesn't want to go from being so aloof women can't tell if he's really interested to so clingy they need a jackhammer to get rid of him.

The problem with not following old patterns is that he's got no idea how this will work. He can't just imagine it and see how it's going to unfold.

And it might be that she's just looking for some company for her downtime. Or she might, like Tim suggested, be looking for a home.

And right now he's not a cop, and he's not entirely sure he's a good bet for anyone's home, either, and for that matter, he's not entirely sure he's ready to be someone's home... But she is a cop, and if anyone knows how to take care of a cop, it's him. And right now, he wants to do some taking care of.

So he pulls out his phone, and starts to make some calls.

Two hours later, when Borin got back to her office, she found coffee delivered from Java Jane's sitting next to a bowl of pho. No note, no explanation, no hint of Gibbs around, so she's not sure if he brought it and left it here, or if he had it delivered and paid for it, but however it happened, there's hot food waiting for her on her desk when she sits down, ready to do more work.

She sends one more text. Thanks.

Gibbs is inside Shannon, sanding the finish yet again, second to last coat for the inside, when he gets it. Hope you like it.
Best Valentine's in years, Gibbs.

He smiles at that. *Me too. Shoot for better next year?*

*Sure.*
"God, Borin must be so hot! I mean, I knew she had to be, but… Damn!" They're back at Tim's house, lurking in the kitchen as Tim gets dinner ready, and Tony's been… talking is probably a stretch, musing might be better, as to exactly how those bite marks got on Gibbs.

Tim and Jimmy have gotten to the eye-rolling stage, because, while it's true that all three of them just stared at Gibbs as he headed into the showers, more less all thinking the same, _God damn, good for you, Gibbs!_ and it's also true that both of them are interested in gossiping about this, they don't want to gossip with _Tony_ about it, they want to tell their _wives._

And it may be that Tony wants to talk to Ziva, but she's not here, and they are, so he's chattering away, sitting on the floor, stacking blocks for Kelly, while Jimmy finishes feeding Anna her bottle, and Molly plays with her new birthday toys.

"It's a good thing you muffed asking her out, McGee. She would have _killed_ you."

"That was her!" Jimmy says, eyes wide. Tony more or less sprinted down to Autopsy to produce a verbatim re-do of Tim asking out Borin as soon as he got a shot, and Jimmy laughed so hard he almost wet his pants. (Ducky had to take his glasses off to wipe the tears of laughter from his eyes.)

Tim gives both of them the stink-eye. "I needed a way to get tickets for something fun to take Abby, my Abby, to without it looking like a date. So, I had you buy tickets, did the worst job I _possibly_ could asking Borin out, oh, and by the way, later that night, when you and Ziva were playing darts, she still said 'Yes,' which meant I had to explain how I hadn't actually intended for her to be even remotely interested in saying yes, so she wished me luck, which is why Borin knew about Abby and I before you did, Tony."

"So, while you full-on chickened out, I asked Borin and Abby out in one day and both of them said yes. And, Tony, just because I haven't had any the last two weeks, so you haven't seen them, it's not like Jimmy and Gibbs have never seen me in the locker room sporting hickies." He taps his wrist cuff. "I started wearing this to cover some bruises I really enjoyed getting."

"Why would you have a hickie on your wrist?" Jimmy asks. Yes, he's seen the occasional love bite on Tim, but never one there. Wrist sucking doesn't strike him as particularly erotic, but Tim's into some weird stuff, sooo...

Tim smirks. "Wasn't a hickie."

"What was it?" Jimmy asks, curious. Tim gives him a long look and after a second the light goes on and Jimmy says, "Oh."

Tim nods.

Tony squints a bit at that, then shrugs and comes back with, "I didn't chicken out!"

"Sure," Tim says, sarcasm high. "You were going to 'let me have her.'" He rolls his eyes.

Tony glares at him. Jimmy flashes a curious look to Tony. "You left that part out."

"When you know you're in love with someone else, you don't ask out a woman who might expect more than a quick fu—good time." Molly's looking up at him with very big eyes, listening intently. This conversation probably doesn't make much sense to her, but he's fairly sure that she'll pick up on
that word and start repeating it if she hears it. And he does not want to have a conversation with Breena about how her two-year-old learned that word. No, he's more than happy to have that be on Dad or Uncle Tim. "Those days all I was doing was picking girls up at bars. Wasn't looking for anyone who might expect me to spend the night. And someone I'd work with…” Tony shakes his head vigorously. "No… Let alone the female version of Gibbs. That'd be a disaster all around. Still, don't think I've ever seen him that relaxed."

Jimmy nods, and Tim has to agree with that. "When we lived on base housing, there was this one guy, three houses over, old, been in the Navy forever, he'd call it 'getting' your ashes hauled." Tim's also aware of the two-year-old listening to this conversation while she plays with her birthday toys. "Yeah, those were some hauled ashes."

"Bet she's pretty damn relaxed, too," Tony says with a smirk.

"Think she's on a case? Maybe… I don't know, being nice, and smiling, and driving her co-workers crazy because they can't figure out what the hell happened to the Borin they know?" Tim asks with a chuckle.

"No!" Tony shakes his head definitively. "You remember Gibbs on a case with Hollis? She's biting everyone's heads off trying to get the job done faster so she can go bite on Gibbs some more."

Jimmy and Tim laugh at that.

Molly pipes up. "No biting!"

"You're right, Molly, no biting." Jimmy stares at Tony did you have to mention biting on his face. Tony looks back at him you were laughing, too on his. "You don't bite the people at day care or your sister. Uncle Jethro's friend was being very naughty."

"Very naughty," Tony says with a smirk. Tim and Jimmy try not to laugh.

She nods, pleased that she's correctly remembering the rules, and then returns to whacking the little dolls that pop up on her game.

"Wouldn't have pegged her for a… kisser," Tony says, watching Molly play.

Jimmy shrugs. "Basic anatomy Tony, orgasm causes muscle spasms. More intense the orgasm the more muscles spasm. Jaw's a muscle. There's a reason why simultaneous orgasms and sixty-nining isn't a great plan."

Tim and Tony just stare at him, and Jimmy looks back at them, smug, and says to Tim, "What, you think you're the only one who's ever made a girl black out? Gibbs was just lucky she had his thigh in her mouth. 'Course, that tension/release response works both ways, bet she's got some interesting marks, too."

"Palmer, that was one sentence further than you needed to go. I don't need images of Gibbs getting off in my head," Tony says.

Jimmy shrugs. Good for the goose, good for the gander, right? Not like he edits Gibbs out of the mental pictures that go along with this conversation. Apparently, Tony does. "Okay, here's a better image. What do you think our girls are doing?" He's patting Anna's back, trying to get a burp out of her as he asks.

"What makes you think we know any more than you do?" Tim asks, as the timer on the oven bings. He pulls dinner for the four of them that eat solid food out of the oven. (Baked salmon, roasted
onions, zucchini, and eggplant.)

Jimmy flashes Tim his I can't believe you just asked me that look. "Gosh, I don't know? Somehow I got this weird idea that you two were like, cops, and that Tony never met a mystery he could leave be, and you peek at you presents ahead of time, so, like, maybe you two would have snooped or something?"

Tony opens his mouth to say something along the lines of how, as a now veteran husband, he's learned that if Ziva says leave it alone, he's going to leave it alone. But he's cut short when all three of their cells buzz in quick succession.

Tim's had a text from Abby. Check your email.

He flashes back. Checking.

It takes his security program a few seconds to burn through the encryption on her email, but finally it does, and he sees there are ten photos and a video linked to it.

As soon as he opens the first photo, memories of Afghanistan and the day he got home from Afghanistan flood through him. Same cobalt blue teddy with white lace trim, same matching panties, but this one isn't a selfie, Breena or Ziva must have snapped it.

She's kneeling on the bed, Jimmy and Breena's bed, nibbling her bottom lip, nipples hard, hands clasped behind her back, sweet, innocent, but not really expression on her face, her makeup soft and natural looking. The sheets and pillows are mussed, her hair is wild, and she looks like she's just hopped up from bed to greet him and invite him to join her.

He closes his eyes and bites his lip. Fuck!

He can hear Tony chuckling, and Jimmy's not making any noise at all.

He knows not to look at the other nine pictures. They're all going to be variations on this theme and he can see from the thumbnails they're going to get sexier and sexier.

"Killing us, Jimmy, that's what they're doing," he says as he sees the little icon for a movie.

Jimmy nods slowly, not looking away from whatever's on his phone.

Tim can't make himself not click on the video. His brain is reminding him he's standing in the kitchen, Jimmy and Tony four feet away, Molly and Kelly on the floor, and there's absolutely no shot at all that he can watch anything that'll be on there and not get hard, but his finger still taps the screen and it starts to play.

He hears a quick giggle and hits mute, fast. He does not want Tony or Jimmy to hear whatever it is that's coming up.

Apparently Ziva had to be filming this one because he could see Breena and Abby. He feels his heart start to speed up. They're both in little teddies. Abby's in the blue and white one. Breena's in light pink with a little pink thong. They're on what has to be Breena and Jimmy's bed, sitting next to each other, Abby half kneeling, feet tucked under her butt, facing Breena. Breena's cross-legged, facing the camera. They both wave at the camera; Abby blows it a little kiss, and Breena winks, mouthing 'Happy Valentine's Day!', then Abby turns toward Breena, cups her face in her hands, while Breena's hands slip up her arms to lightly rest on her shoulder, for a second Abby's eyes flicked to the camera, and Breena grins, and then they kiss.
Tim whimpers. He can't make that sound not rip from his mouth.

Soft, slow, and wet kissing. Full, luscious red and pink lips rubbing all over each other, little, tiny glimpses of wet, pink tongues stroking each other, and Abby runs her hand through Breena's hair, her long, tumbling along her back in soft curls, hair, and Breena reaches up, pressing her body into Abby's, and every single ounce of blood in Tim's body is racing toward his dick as fast as it can possibly go.

He hears Jimmy choke next to him and realizes he must be seeing the same thing.

"What?" Tony asks. He's starting to circle around to see, and Tim rapidly tucks his phone into his pocket. Tony takes a step toward Jimmy, and Tim has enough presence of mind to grab him and stop him, because from the look on Jimmy's face he's completely unaware of the fact that he's in Tim's kitchen with two other guys.

Finally, Tim pulls enough brain cells together to say, "You just get an email from Ziva?"

"Yeah." Tony grins.

"Good stuff in there?"

"Promise of good stuff later."

Tim takes a deep breath. Abby knows how to encrypt an email. So what he got was encrypted. He doubts Ziva does, and she'd be aware enough of the risk, so she wouldn't send something like that without encryption, and Breena just wouldn't care.

"It's really good stuff. Jimmy and I just got ours."

"How good?" Tony glances at Jimmy, seeing him completely absorbed by whatever he's watching, absently patting Anna.

Jimmy's still staring at his phone. Tim watches him, sees the tension in his face and shoulders, realizes that kiss must still be going on and that it's possible there was more than kissing happening and oh fucking god he needs to be seeing that right this second, but Tony's still next to him, waiting for him to say more.

"It's really, really good." He says, eyes closed and nodding.

"Like, dirty pictures?" Tony says with a wide grin on his face.

"Yeah, like that."

And Tony, understanding the guy code of you don't look at another man's wife, especially if she might be naked, takes a step back, so there's no shot of seeing the screen on Jimmy's phone, and says, "So, you two got emails of really, really good stuff, and I got an email telling me there would be good stuff later."

"Apparently."

Jimmy finally blinks, puts his phone into his pocket, hand shaking, carefully gives Anna to Tim, and walks out of the kitchen without saying anything.

Tony watches him do it. "I really don't want to know what he's about to do, do I?"

"Probably not." Tim shakes his head. "Let's put it this way, Breena, Abby, and Ziva don't seem to
get that there's a point where teasing stops being fun and crosses the line into torture. And in that Anna's a little over two months old, my guess is that tonight is supposed to be their first night back at it…"

"Oh!" Tony suddenly gets exactly (okay, not exactly, but he's got a much better idea of why Jimmy's acting like a fourteen-year-old) what's going on with Jimmy.

"Yeah. Can I have your cell?"

Tony looks confused. "Why do you want mine?"

"Because if I take mine out of my pocket, I'll see the end of what Jimmy was just watching, and… now's not the time."

"Wait, why did you guys get the same… watching… video?"

Tim swallows. "Because Abby and Breena are evil and enlisted Ziva to help them be evil."

Tony's eyes go really wide and his expression seems to be somewhere between blind with lust and homicidal rage. "Abby and Breena and Ziva?"

"From what I saw, Ziva was the camerawoman."

Tony looks much more relieved, and then a really dirty smirk spread across his face. "Breena and Abby?"

"Yeah, and I need to send her a text and if I pull my phone out, I'll just watch them, and end up in pretty close to the same state Jimmy is."

Tony laughs and hands over his phone. Tim sends a quick text to Abby and Breena.

Tim here. You are EVIL! Jimmy's brain melted. That was not nice!

A minute later he feels his phone buzz, so he takes it out, sees the video has ended and finds Yours didn't? from Abby.

I stopped watching! I'm in the kitchen with two other guys and three babies. That was not cool at all.

He can feel her grin from here. It was kind of cool. ; )

No! Got babies to watch, Tony to entertain, and dinner to eat, and all I can think about is what's on this email.

That's the idea.

EVIL

Come on, you know you like it. ; )

Not saying I don't. (Really, not saying that at all!) But your timing sucks. You do not send something like that to three guys when we're together. Seriously, Jimmy's either icing himself down or jerking off in our bathroom, and I'm sure as hell not getting close enough to figure out which.

LOL

Breena here: He's what?
He's got his phone on him, go text him.

Okay

Abby again: What's Tony doing?

Grinning like a smug moron. Ziva just told him good stuff would be coming later. He didn't end up seeing anything too revealing because she seems to get how this works.

Okay, sorry. Next time Breena and I decide to make some smut for you guys, we'll make sure you're alone before sending it off.

Thank you. That's all I'm asking for. Wait… Again?

Well, we had fun doing it. Sounds like timing aside, you're enjoying it.

Oh fucking God YES! (sound of me whimpering for mercy and begging for more)

He can imagine how satisfied she's looking when she reads that. A second later he gets. ; ) So, yeah, there'll be a next time.

When are you coming home?

Breena's wrapping up Ziva's pics, and I'm wrapping up the Photoshopping on them, so… call it another hour and a half?

Okay, see you then.

Good.

You're getting fucked through the wall when you get here. Putting Kelly to bed early, waiting for you naked and eager, and as soon as you're in the door I'm wrapping your legs around my waist, backing you into a wall and showing you exactly how hard you and Breena kissing makes me.

Good. Wanna feel you in me as soon as I get home.

He groans when he reads that, sees Tony staring at him, curious, and says, "Gibbs isn't the only one getting his ashes hauled."

Tony laughs at that.

An hour later, as he's feeding Kelly, after the guys left, Tim decides to look at the pictures and watch the video.

It's not like he's unfamiliar with sexual arousal or desire.

And it's not like he and Abby never play games or she never dresses up for him.

But it has been a while.

And this…

They're pin ups. No full nudity. Nothing that'd get more than a PG-13. But each costume has been picked to hit his buttons and her hair and makeup is carefully done for each of them. He can tell that in some of them she has to be wearing Breena or Ziva's stuff, because it's nothing like what she owns
and it's a little too small on her, but that's oh so good, too.

Some of them are a little translucent so he gets glimpses of shadows of tattoos and nipples. And there's one where she's lying on the bed, on her stomach, propped on her elbows, wearing a red satin slip, reading one of his books, and her legs are spread almost far enough apart for him to get a glimpse of pussy, but just not quite far enough for it, and the slip is just tight enough and sheer enough that he can see the line between her buttocks, and fuck these shots are just killing him.

Kelly's complaining because he's not being properly attentive to getting the food into her mouth. So he shuts down the phone and tries to focus on baby wrangling.

Dinner for Kelly, bath time, because at seven months old she needs to be hosed down after all non-nursing meal, and then Goodnight Moon, lullabies, and sleep time.

Which puts him at twenty minutes until Abby's due home.

So he opens the video, and God, it hits him just as hard, if not harder, because he's not in the kitchen with two other guys, and this time there's sound.

They're kissing, petting each other gently, and Abby keeps playing with Breena's hair, and Breena's slowly stroking her hand up Abby's arm, and all that soft, wet, open-mouthed kissing, and both of them are breathing fast, with hard nipples that just barely graze over each other, and then Breena lightly strokes the backs of her knuckles over Abby's breast, and he knows that has to be what made Jimmy choke because an awfully similar sound rips out of him. And Abby pulls her closer, bodies pressed tight together, Breena sitting in her lap, and they just tongue fucked, there's no other term for it, Breena grinding on Abby's leg, as Abby sucks her tongue, and then after a few more seconds of that, they pull back, breathing hard, looking a little glazed, and Abby turns to the camera, winks and blows a kiss at him.

It takes a minute before he has enough control over his hands to turn the video off and hit the text screen.

*On your way home?*

A minute later he gets back. *Yeah, at the stoplight at Tuner.*

*Just watched the video. Play a game with me tonight?*

*Always. What kind of game?*

*Gonna ravish you.* His hands are shaking as he texts that, so he has to back up and delete a few times to get it right.

*Ooooo!*

*Oh yeah. You wearing panties?*

*No.*

*Skirt?*

*Of course.*

*Find a place, stop, put some on. Gonna cut them off you.*

*I like the sound of this.*
I really hope so. You wet?

I thought you said you saw the video. Of course I'm wet!

He groans at that. It wasn't just a show, she liked it, really liked it. Even better. Park so your door is next to the Highlander, say three feet away.

Okay. Mysterious.

This is what the step past gonna fuck you through the wall looks like.


Fifteen minutes. Either this is a really good plan, or it's a really bad one, but Janice did say that it helped if you were already leaning in that direction, and right now, he really is.

He heads up to his room, and finds the little tester bottle of... somehow he hadn't managed to notice the name before, but he does now, Satyr.

Why not?

He opens it up, and God, it reeks. Dirty goats. Dirty goats cats have peed on. Blech. And it's black. The color of old tar. He's hoping, as he puts the tiniest little drop of it he can manage on just one wrist (it leaves a mucky brown stain) that this works out.

He heads to his closet, looking for a belt. He wants everything about tonight to broadcast exactly how turned on he is, wants her to feel the power of it, and slowly stripping off a belt will help with that.

If he had button fly jeans, he'd put them on, too. The image of popping each button, hand moving slowly down the fly, the feel of his dick hard, pressing against the denim, straining to get free, strong in his mind.

He slips his belt through the loops on his jeans, feeling very turned on, very... cocky. And not so much in a can take on any challenge that comes his way sort of way, but in a literal, balls in charge, much more focused on his dick than he usually is, feeling like he's a walking hard-on sort of way.

He's also not smelling like dirty goats or cat pee. No, not those, just very male. Very, very male. He's feeling urgent, and insistent, forceful. He heads back to the vial and adds a bit more, upping the amount to what he usually puts on.

Yeah, very much not dirty goats. Horny as a goat. Randy goats looking to fuck anything that will let him. Wild-goat man with a huge, raging, throbbing erection, grabbing a barely dressed woman, dancing around a bonfire, wearing translucent wisps of fabric that flutter around her as she moves, carrying her off to ravish her under the full moon in some sort of ancient fertility ritual as she screams and begs in ecstasy, ripping her nails down his back as her legs wrap tight around his hips and her pussy quivers and clenches around him in shuddering orgasm after shuddering orgasm, as he plunges into her over and over and over… Yeah, that's definitely going on.

His pants are way too damn tight as he tucks his knife into his pocket, very much looking forward to cutting Abby's panties off and burying himself in her over and over and over as he squeezes his dick through his jeans… and if he doesn't stop that this is going to be done before she shows up.

So he stops, grabs the baby monitor, (Kelly usually sleeps right through, but he'll plug it into the wall
socket, so they can hear if she wakes.) and heads outside to wait.

Abby does as directed. There's a gas station on the corner of Patterson and Grove, so she stops there, grabs the bag she had taken to Breena's, and changes into some panties. The idea of having them cut off again, because it's been a long time since they played that game, sending some very happy tingles all through her.

Getting home, she sees the porch light is off, and so are all the house lights. Which means once she turns her headlights off, their front yard, and more importantly the place she parks as per Tim's directions, is awfully dark. Moon's out, so it's not pitch black, but it's not well-lit, either. Probably a good plan, the neighbors don't need to see what's about to happen out here.

_Perfect_.

If it wasn't staged, it would set her danger sense off. As it is, there's this sense of heightened anticipation. She knows he's going to jump out from somewhere, but not when, not where, and not what (exactly) he's going to do when he does.

She doesn't see him as she pulls in. But it's dark, so she doesn't expect to. She knows that she won't see him until he wants her to.

She's expecting it, or something like it, yet it still takes her by surprise when less than a heartbeat after closing the door to her car he's materialized from somewhere, twists her to face him, and pushes her back against the door of the SUV.

His hands pin hers to the car, holding her wrists flush against cold metal. His legs are between hers, grinding his pelvis, cock, into her.

"Feel it? Feel how hard that video made me?" he says, voice low, hard, almost dangerous, each word feeling like a slow, wet lick over her clit.

"Yes."

He arches into her, grinding what feels like a just on the verge of coming hard-on against her, and she moans.

He lifts her hands over her head, pinning both of them in his right hand, just above her head, and reaches with his left into his pocket.

"Watch." She does, eyes wide, nodding, as he flicks open the blade, puts the knife on the hood of the car, yanks her skirt up, picks the knife up again, and very carefully slips the blade between her hip and the waistband once, twice, slitting it fast on both sides, tossing the knife aside, and pulling what was left of her panties off of her.

She watches him do it and breathes, "Fuck, Tim."

He's staring at her, eyes scalding hot. _"Exactly. Keep watching."_

He doesn't usually wear belts on the weekend, but he is now. He's taken just enough of a step back so she can watch him undo it.

Her hands pinned, cold winter air on her naked skin, his voice, and the sight of his left hand deliberately yanking off his belt, working the button on his fly, her eyes start to close as another moan slips through her lips.
"Keep your fucking eyes open! I want you to see it." He shoves his pants down around his thighs, pulling his cock out. She can feel it hot and hard against her hip for a second before he guides it into her in one fast, hard, balls-deep thrust that has both of them moaning.

"Fuck, Abby, feel that? Feel how hard it is?" He's grinding into her, rubbing his pelvis into her clit.

"God, yes!" He lets go of her wrists and pulls her up a few inches, wrapping her legs around his hips, thrusting into her relentlessly and making the car shake. "Tim, fuck!"

"Yes. Gonna fuck you so hard you tremble for a week." She's back against the car. He's using it and his weight to keep her up, as his hand settles into her hair, tightening into a fist at the base of her skull, keeping her looking into his eyes. "Gonna pump into you over and over, fill you up with me, and lick it off your quivering thighs when we get in the house." His other hand clenches on her hip, and she's straining against him, trying to get just a little more friction on her clit because she's so close and this is almost enough but not quite there.

"We get in there, you're going upstairs, and I'm going to tie you up, lick you all over, fuck you with the vibrator while I eat you out, and then more… Oh, God… fucking." His thrusting is getting erratic, losing its rhythm and she knows he's almost ready to come. "Gonna do it all night… Over and over… Long, slow fuck, do it until you're flushed and begging, until your legs won't hold you up anymore…” his words slur into a long groan as his body tightens and spasms, finishing off the first round in hard, wet pulses.

After a minute, he's still breathing fast, but let her put her legs down, and pulls back. Then he kisses her, soft and gentle, smiles, and says, "Good start?"

"Fuck yes!"

"Good." He quickly pulls up his pants, buttons them, not caring to redo the belt or zipper, and hoists her over his shoulder, fireman's carry style.

She squeaks in response. "Tim!"

His hand trace over her rear, slipping under her skirt, fingers brushing very lightly against her lips, getting wet with his cum, and slipping a little further back to circle her anus.

"Wasn't kidding, baby. All damn night!"

He planned it out, and left the front door a centimeter open, but none the less, it looks really impressive when he kicks the door open and carries her into their home.

He literally tosses her onto their bed. "Stay put."

She nods, very much enjoying being 'ravished.'

"Get naked." He's rummaging through their toy box looking for the ropes he wants as well as the right vibrator.

Abby quickly strips out of her clothing, tossing it away from the bed.

"Do you want anything to eat or drink? Go to the bathroom?"

She shakes her head.

"Good." He sets the vibrator on his nightstand and then kneels on the bed next to her. "You made
me wait an hour and twenty seven minutes between seeing the first picture and slipping into you." He loops the first rope over her wrist, securely knotting it, and pressing gently on her chest to let her know to lie down on her back.

"That's a very long time to want something and not have it." He secures the knot to the bedpost.

She tries to look chagrined at that, but isn't doing a very good job of it. "Were you hard the whole time?"

"Yes. Saw you in those tiny blue panties and teddy and my dick got hard, all I could think about was how you'd feel wrapped around me." He loops the second rope around her left wrist, securing it to the bedpost as well.

"Seventeen minutes between watching that video all the way through and you getting home." He grabs her right ankle, pulling her toward the footboard, just enough force that it feels dangerous, not so much he might risk hurting her, and ties her leg down.

"Seventeen minutes where all I could think about was you and Breena making out. All I could see was your sweet mouth on hers." He grabs the left ankle, forcefully, too, spreading her wide, and tying her down.

He climbs onto their bed, reminding her very strongly of a big predator cat stalking its prey, about to leap. He leans over her, weight on his hands and knees, and gently sniffs along her throat, breasts, and pussy.

He licks her inner thigh. "I can smell me here. And you." He nuzzles his way back up her torso, licking and kissing her belly and breasts. He lays open mouth kisses across her collarbones and up her throat to her ear. "I can smell her, here." He licks her lips. "Taste her on you." Though he can't, not really, but he likes saying it. Likes imagining that he can. Wants to taste Breena on Abby.

She'd been grinding on Abby's leg, so he slides down again, licking and nibbling his way to her left leg, and begins to slowly kiss each inch of her thigh, sucking and ghosting his teeth along her white skin.

He catches a hint of a scent, flavor that isn't Abby and isn't him. He's not entirely sure if it's real or if he's imagining it, but either way, he thinks it's Breena's musk on Abby's skin, and it makes him growl, look up, make sure Abby's watching his eyes and then he gently bites her hip, followed by a long, sucking lick up her thigh, making sure to get every hint of Breena off of her.

He slides back up so he's face to face with Abby, kisses her, hard, tongue thrusting between her lips, reveling in fast, rough friction.

"Makes me feel crazy, tasting her on you, seeing you touch her. Makes me want to fuck you, so bad."

She moans at that, and he kisses her lips, taking her moan, echoing it back to her.

He pulls back a hair, kissing "Makes me so hard knowing her lips were here," to Abby. "Didn't just get off two minutes ago, smelling her on you, tasting her on you, I'd be rutting on your leg and leaking."

"Good." She smiles brightly at him.

He sits back on his heels and begins to slowly undress. He carefully pulls off his jacket, hanging it on the corner of the footboard.
"Tell me how it felt," he says as he slowly unbuttons his shirt. "All of it."

"She's so soft, Tim. Her skin and lips and hair, everything about her is soft or smooth as silk. And she's nursing, so her breasts are so full and ripe. Heavy in my hands, and warm, all of her is so warm."

He groans at those mental images/sensations.

"She was wearing that perfume Jimmy got her, smelling like rich, spicy peaches and vanilla dipped in honey. And she tastes sweet. Not food sweet, but... just sweet. I wanted to push her back on the bed and lick every inch of her." 

Tim's jaw clenches and he groans at that, tossing his shirt toward the hamper. He stands up next to bed, popping the button his jeans, as she says, "She's a really good kisser, Tim."

That makes him groan, too, and a second later he's naked, on his hands and knees, leaning over her.

"Show me. Kiss me like she kissed you."

Abby lifts her head up some, so he lays down, so she doesn't have to strain her neck. Her lips find his, stroking gently over him. She doesn't open her mouth as quickly as usual, this is more lips and a bit less tongue than they usually do. She's keeping her touch light, resulting in very sharp, focused, almost but not quite ticklish strokes over his lips.

Eventually she does coax his tongue out, sucking it, soft, plump sucks that flood his mind with images of both Abby and Breena sucking his cock, just the tip, then she sucked a little harder while flicking the tip of her tongue along the tip of his, and he groans again.

"God, baby."

"Yeah! She's gold and pink all over."

He buries his face in Abby's neck, kissing her throat and collar bone.

"Kissing her feels like gold and pink. So femme and so soft and smooth and everything about her is so GIRL."

He shifts his weight to one arm, leaning on his side, kissing her breast, hovering over her breast for a moment, catching her eyes this okay? on his face. She nods.

He begins gently, slowly kissing her breast. He doesn't want to start her milk letdown, so no sucking, but he makes sure to cover every inch with kisses and gentle nibbles. She arches her back, looking for a bit more pressure. Been a long time since they've done this, and they've both missed it.

He takes his time, getting to know her breasts again, noticing that she does need a firmer touch than she did before, but he's a quick study so it doesn't take long to get his technique adjusted.

He reaches for the vibrator, feeling around for it for a few seconds before his hand gets it, then he starts with it on her nipple. He's licking the one, firm, focused touch, lightly buzzing the other.

That gets a pleased squeak out of Abby. And then a somewhat less pleased note as milk rushes out of her nipples. He leans back, smiles, licks her clean, and says, "So, not yet, huh?"

She shakes her head. "Not yet."

"Just have to find something else to lick." And he did. He kisses his way down her chest and
abdomen, settling himself between her legs and kissing her properly.

He's not a huge fan of oral with a vibrator. He finds having his tongue buzzing distracting and doesn't much like the noise. So, it doesn't happen a lot. But Abby really likes it, so it does happen.

And he has to admit, he loves the visual of it. Loves watching himself play with her and the vibrator, loves seeing her flush and writhe as he gently strokes it over her skin, starting at her inner thighs and gently working his way closer and closer to where she wants it. He loves the way she arches up as he starts to ease it into her, loves the look of her body taking it in, soft, wet, glistening pink lips spreading wide around the expanse of bright blue plastic.

And more than that, more than all the visuals on earth, he loves bending his head, tasting her, hearing her gasp as he starts to suck her clit (mimicking the sucking and tongue flicking combo she'd kissed him with earlier) while rocking the vibrator in and out in firm, deliberate strokes.

Then there's the way she tries to grind into him. The strain of movement hampered by ties. She wants more, faster, but he's not doing it. He had to wait more than an hour to get off, and she's going to wait, too.

He turns the vibrator off, just using it as a dildo, and licks harder, slower. Barely any friction, just pressing and releasing as she arches against him, trying to get off.

He pulls back, each palm on her inner thighs, and looks up at her. "Frustrating, huh?"

She whimpers. "Please."

"Close your eyes," he says, "I want you to imagine something."

Her eyes close.

"Good girl." He delicately licks over her clit, making sure to keep his tongue pointed so that just his tongue touches her. He's shaved recently, but it's been a few hours, so he's also sure his mouth doesn't feel as soft or smooth as it should for this. "That's Breena, tasting you."

Abby sighs. He licks again, light, just wet tongue on wet clit.

"And she's seeing how sweet and yummy you are. How you're all ivory and pink and ebony." Another slow, dragging lick, and this time he draws the vibrator out before thrusting it back in hard, fast, and sliding it out slow again. "She'll be telling Jimmy about how soft you are, and how everything about you is so amazingly hot. How every curve and angle and flat made her feel all sexy and fluttery." More licking, in time with the vibrator. "She's going to tell him how wet you were, and how slick, and how everything about you just begged to be licked and how she just couldn't help it, she had to tie you down and lick you all over." Firm, hard, fast licks, just a few, just enough to make her tense, thighs quivering looking for release, and then he stops again. "She's going to tell him how she made you come. How you called out her name and screamed from the pleasure of her mouth." Back to slow, easy licks, forcing her back from the edge of getting off. Abby groans at that, she wants to come, now. "Then she's going to climb up you, straddle your face, and you're going to get her off." He stops licking all together and spends a few seconds just sucking her clit, drawing his lips over it, making sure the suction is firm but not bruising. Abby's hips thrash at that, trying to get some more friction to go with suction, but he holds firm, just sucking, and then turns the vibrator on low.

"You're going to show her how to lick pussy. Show her every trick your brilliant tongue knows. And she'll be flushed and arching against you, so wet, so sweet, everything about her flushed pink, beautiful gold hair, golden skin, and you'll be burying yourself in her wet, pink pussy." Abby groans at that and what he's doing to her. Licking again, still soft, still slow, but he's angling the vibrator up
with each stroke, rubbing it over her g-spot.

Her thighs are growing tight again, stomach pulled in, he doesn't look up, but he can imagine her hands are clenched and arms tight, so he stops breaking the action to talk and keeps licking, gradually increasing his speed and the speed on the vibrator.

She's moaning, no words, just low, deep, sounds of pure need.

He moves faster, keeping his touch firm, but speeding his tongue again, speeding the vibrator again, stroking it all the way in and all the way out as his tongue circles fast and hard. Her hips are jerking, fast, hard, looking for more, so he gives it to her, matching his speed to her, fucking her hard with the vibrator, licking as fast and hard as he can, and she tightens further, not moving for a heartbeat, and then her whole body jerks as she yells, orgasm racing through her.

His face is wet, slick, smells and tastes like sex and Abby, and his dick has certainly woken all the way back up.

Which means it's time for phase three. Or it will be. Giving her some time to catch her breath and relax is a good plan, so he scoots back up, cuddling her, and Abby turns into him, kissing him, soft, gentle, lazy.

She nibbles his lips, sighing lightly, eyes closed, and he very lightly strokes her nipples.

When she opens her eyes, grinning at him, he grins back. She licks his cheek. "I got you all wet."

He wipes his face and grins. "I like to think of it as I got you all wet."

She tries to reach for him, and notices her hands are still tied.

He grins at that, too. "Abigail, you up for more?"

She nods. "You're not trying to get out of your promise are you?"

"Just checking in, making sure we're good."

"I'm good. Hoping I'll be better in a bit."

That gets an evil smile out of him. "Oh, god, baby, trust me, you're going to be so much better."

"Good."

He unties her hands and legs, rubbing her wrists, letting her curl into a little ball and pull everything tight, then stretch herself back out.

"All good?"

"Yeah."

He's on his side, facing her, and pulls her to him. Side by side. Slow sex. Talking sex. Relaxed, easy, kissing, nibbling, her neck pillowed by his arm, her thigh over his hip. Gentle, rocking against one another, slow burn sex.

But eventually slow burn sparks hot, igniting everything around it. Eventually she's on her back and he's on top, moving hard, fast.

His time sense blurs, fades into wet, slick friction, hyper-awareness of the tension in her muscles, her
heart-rate, and breathing, he kept easing both to the edge of orgasm, and then pulling back, just to take them higher after the pause.

There's a point where everything starts to unravel. Where the world falls away. Where sex becomes a sort of hypnotic meditation, slick, gliding sensation that shuts everything else out. That's where he loses his intentions, his plans, where his body takes over and brain shuts down, and there's just soaring through quivering pleasure and striving for faster, harder, more sensation. She's moaning, and begging, and maybe crying, and he might have been too, no idea, there's just the need for more, pushing himself and her as far as they can go before tipping over and edge that felt like it ate them alive, leaving both of them collapsed, breathing hard, buzzing all over with sparking nerves and sated bodies.

It takes a long time before either of them wants to move, but eventually Tim pulls away, and both of them get cleaned up and crash back into bed, elated and exhausted.

"Happy Valentines," he murmurs, her hair under his lips.

"Love you."

"Love you, too."
Senior

To call or not to call.

Sigh.

Gibbs stares at his computer. Telling it to go find him run-of-the-mill family vacation homes on the water had been more difficult than he'd wanted. But, still, a whole lot of options popped up, he found some he liked, and he didn't have to talk to a Realtor.

But he's not just looking for a home now, he's looking for an estate. And judging by what he's coming up with… This isn't going to work.

He can find properties, top of the line, in spiffy shape, all shiny and pretty and in move in condition. And it's not like that's a bad thing, but… either they're smaller than he wants, or they're further away from the water. He wants land, space, and water access. Granite countertops, Jacuzzi tubs, and stainless steel appliances don't matter all that much to him.

And beat up places… He's not seeing them at all.

Which he supposes makes a certain amount of sense. If you've got a place that big, you're probably keeping it up.

He feels like there's some sort of rich person club. They've got people to do stuff like this for them, but he's not hooked into the club.

So, keep scouring the internet hoping to just trip into something, or call Senior (who is hooked into the club) and see if he knows someone?

It's not like he loathes Senior or anything. It's just… he knows a fuck-up when he sees one, and Senior's a fuck-up. Granted, he's a fuck-up who's getting to be less of one, but it shouldn't take a man seventy-five years to decide to be a better person. Let alone an additional seven years to go from fuck-up to okay. (At the rate he's going, Senior's going to have to make it to ninety before he gets to Gibbs' idea of a stand up guy.)

And, it's probably a lot of his own background coming into play, because on the cosmic scale of fuck-ups Gibbs has seen vastly worse. And, hell when it comes to marriages, he may even be a worse fuck-up. To hear Tony tell it Senior gets all caught up in the romance and ends up with a new wife every few years because he's just in the moment, not using them as human anti-depressants… But…

But if Kelly had lived… He doesn't know what he would have done. Active-duty Marine isn't a good match for a man who's the sole support for a child. Maybe moved back up north and helped his dad with the store. That would have been a good, stable life, for both of them. He does know boarding school and pretending she didn't exist would have been nowhere on the plan. He would have been there for her every single day.

But Senior didn't do that for Tony. He fucked-up. He raised a decent boy into a fuck-up and left Gibbs with twelve years of trying to get that decent man out from under the fuck-up.

Gibbs feels a dull sadness with that. He assumes that it's a combination of the traditional sadness he always feels when he tries to imagine any sort of life with Kelly, mixed with the sorrow that hits him
when he thinks of the chance Senior wasted.

He starts to do his usual pushing it away, moving onto the next challenge, (calling Senior) but it won't fade into the background, so he lets himself feel it, lets himself figure out what this is.

It takes a minute, spent thinking about family patterns, before it hits him. His father was a widower with a teen. Senior, a widower with a child. Himself, lost both of them.

Something about that pattern jumps up, wanting him to pay attention.

And when he gets it, it feels like a punch. He closes his eyes, exhales, and says, "Oh, Dad."

Senior ran away. Jack stayed. Gibbs was fourteen, and he was angry, and he hated his Dad and everyone else, and he didn't know what to do with that angry, so he pissed Jack off every day, every way he could.

And Jack stayed. And he took it. And he kept him close and looked out for him and protected him, and he was just as lost as Senior was, probably just as lost as Jethro, but he stayed. And more nights passed with Jack halfway in the bottle than Gibbs could count, but every morning he got back up, ran the store, took Leroy's shit (He was still Leroy then. Didn't start introducing himself as Jethro for another two years, because his dad called him Leroy, so he needed to be different. And his mom called him Leroy, and he couldn't take that constant reminder of the family he didn't have anymore.) and muddled on through, keeping them together because that was his job.

Jack was a dad, and it was his job to raise his son, not palm him off on strangers because it was convenient. Not banish the living reminder of the home he no longer had away from his sight so he could pretend it never happened.

"You'll understand when you're older." How many times did Jack say that to him? More than he could count. He looks up, wishing he could give his dad a call and say, 'I'm sorry. I get it now.' But he can't. Ten months too late for that.

He says it out-loud anyway. "I'm sorry, Dad." And it helps, a little. Unlike Mike, he's never really felt the presence of Jack, and he doesn't, not now. "I miss you." That helps a bit, too, but it doesn't bring him back.

He sighs, pets Mona, who's staring at him, trying to figure out why he's talking, and goes back to googling, not really feeling like talking to Senior right now.

In the end though, he just doesn't know. He's not finding what he wants because he's not hooked into the people who do this sort of thing, and he can either hire a stranger or give Senior a call.

So he calls.

"Jethro?"

"Hey, you got some time?"

For a second Senior doesn't breathe, then he says, "Whatever it is, you can tell me right now, I can take it." Senior's voice is quavering, and Gibbs can feel the wave of fear coming from him. He probably should have expected that. The only reason he would call, normally, would be to say something very bad had happened to Tony or Ziva.

"Nothing bad. They're both fine. I wanted to talk real estate."
A palpable wave of relief washes over the phone lines. Senior swallows hard, and says, "Okay. That I can do. What do you want to know?"

"I need help finding a place. Feel like getting some coffee with me?"

"Sure, Jethro."

It's just… coincidence, really, that he set their meeting at Java Jane's. The cookies and coffee were, good, really, that's it.

She's probably still working, hard. Because that's how cases, even easy cases, tend to go. They're almost never done in one day.

But, he really wouldn't mind if she ran into him.

He checks his phone. Been less than twenty-four hours since the last text. That's not the end of the world. Just… feels like a long time when you're not running around like crazy between texts.

Senior comes in, waves, and sits in front of Gibbs, pulling his mind away from Borin.

"Little out of your way?" Senior asks as he sits down.

"Coffee's good." Gibbs pushes a cup of coffee toward him, and Senior nods, accepting it, taking a sip.

"It is. So, what can I help with? You looking to scale down?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "Not looking for me. This is… It's a surprise, for the kids, so they can't hear about this from you."

Senior looks shocked that Gibbs might take him into his confidence, and then very proud. Gibbs isn't exactly laying odds on Senior keeping quiet about this, but it's also not the end of the world if he tells Tony and Ziva, he's sure they'll keep quiet about it if Senior leaks.

"Ducky and Penny are looking to get a place for us. Mallard Manor or something like that. Family estate. We're not all at the Navy Yard all the time, so they want to make a home for us."

Senior's eyes light up. "Big place, on the water. It's got to have room for your boat, and room for all the kids and…"

Gibbs nods, kind of surprised at how rapidly Senior's getting this. Of course, for all he knows his family may have had one of these once upon a time. "Exactly. At least seven bedrooms. On the Potomac or Chesapeake. It can't be so far away that getting there on the weekends is an issue. I'm retired, so I'm on finding it duty, and I'm not seeing it."

Senior nods. "What's your price ceiling?"

"Two point seven million. It can be, and probably should be, beat all to hell up. If you can find me ten bedrooms with roof damage and broken windows, that'd be perfect."

Senior thinks about that for a moment. At that price range, you can afford not beat up. "Why beat up?"

"Get more house for the money? Better location for fewer dollars? Kids can put in labor so it doesn't feel entirely like a gift. So it's as much their home as Ducky and Penny's."
Senior pulls out his phone and starts flipping through names. "This isn't the kind of deal I normally work… But…” He flips some more. "Yeah." He's nodding, taps the phone a few times, and then Gibbs' phone beeps. "Just sent you the name of a friend of a friend. She specializes in settling estates. Might not be fast, but when someone dies with a lot of money and land, she comes in and takes care of everything so the kids don't have to. If anyone will have a line on the kind of place you're looking for, Jenny will."

"Thank you."

He taps his phone a few more times, and Gibbs phone beeps again. "Name of a lawyer who's good at structuring wills and trusts. Buying property with a woman you're not married to is a pain in the ass for everyone down stream of you. Among other things, at your price range, you're looking to get hit hard by the inheritance taxes, so you want this protected so you don't have to sell it in five years to pay the taxes on it. Bob's good at what he does. Knows his way around a will inside and out, never met an estate he couldn't tame."

Gibbs nods at that, then smiles.

Senior sees that smile and his eyes narrow. "Or is Ducky not buying property with a woman he's not married to?"

"Surprise wedding at Jimmy and Breena's yesterday. Off honeymooning now. Not even sure where they are."

"Good for him! You love a woman, you should marry her, none of this just living together fooling around."

Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

Senior shrugs. "Just because I'm not good at the follow through doesn't mean I don't get the basic idea."

Gibbs shrugs at that, too. "How's wedding planning going?"

"Great. Delphine's having a blast. She's only done this once before, and last time her mom was in charge. So she's really enjoying getting to plan the wedding that she wants. Nothing makes a woman happy the way planning a wedding does, and… I love that. Love how excited they get. Love how the details make them happy. Love that I can say, make it the way you want it, however you want it, and then they go do it."

"Thought you eloped six times."

Senior thinks about that. "Four. Junior never quite remembers how many times I've been married. And he boycotted two of the weddings when he was a teen/early twenties."

"How many times have you been married?"

"Lucky nine is coming up."

"Lucky?"

"Hope so. Maybe this time I've learned enough to make one work."

"Here's hoping." They both drink their coffees. "How's looking for a place for Tony and Ziva going?"
Senior shrugs. "Haven't found anything I love yet, and if I'm not loving it, I'm not passing it on to them."

Gibbs squints at that.

"Not, love in the sense of 'this is a perfect neighborhood' or 'ohhh granite counter tops' none of the deals have been good enough yet. Too beat up, for the price. I'm not touching anything we'd have to bulldoze and build anew from the ground up. Some of the one's I'm watching haven't been on the market long enough. We're not touching anything that hasn't been on the market for a year, and eighteen months is even better. And if it's had a bid placed on it in the last six months, we're not going for it. I'm going to lowball the first offer, hard, at least thirty percent under the list price. They're going to come back with a higher number, but if they've been trying to sell for a long time, that higher number will be lower than the list price. I'll give them 10% below that price, but offer to settle fast. Cash in hand in two weeks or so. They'll bite. But that deal doesn't work with the wrong place or the wrong buyer. Do this right, you'll get more house, and a better location, for a better price, than you can from a foreclosure sale."

That makes a certain amount of sense to Jethro, though it's not the way he'd ever look at buying a house.

Senior stares at his cup for a moment, serious. "Take a piece of advice from me, Jethro? Something I have learned. Pass it on to Ducky and Penny."

Gibbs inclines his head, somewhat curious as to what sort of advice Senior has to offer.

"I know you don't think of me as a font of good advice, but I've been down this block, a lot. The kids are adults, so they'll be fine. They're all set as themselves and a big gift like this isn't going to change that, but keep an eye out for the little ones. Tony's the only one of our kids, my family's kids, that's worth a damn. He's also the only one we cut off. The only one we made sink or swim. Lots of money is not a blessing, especially for children. You've got some very sweet girls, and, just… keep an eye on it.

"I was talking to Ed… I know he hopes his girls do better than he did, that they hit real wealth, but…" Senior shakes his head. "Ed's as rich as you can be and still safely raise kids. Much past that, and… it's just too easy to buy everything. You work hard, you save up, you invest well, and then you want to play when you're not working. You buy the toys you always wanted, the toys you worked hard for. And your kids see you do that, and they don't get the work that went into it, because they're not seeing you working, or don't understand it if they did, they just see the toys. To them it looks like you get to have whatever you want whenever you want it.

"They end up with expensive taste, because they're being raised in an expensive home, but they're kids and the paper route isn't ever going to buy them one of the Ferraris you just got yourself. It makes them envious if you try to stick with the you've got to work for your money line, makes them feel like work is useless because there's nothing they can do to get the kind of toys they want to play with. It makes them resent you, because you've got the toys, and they don't, and they don't have any context for why you do and they don't. It makes you feel like an ass, so you buy the toys for them. Why not? You've got the money. What's the point of money if you can't make people happy with it?

"But money doesn't make people happy. You end up breeding monsters and constantly feeding them. You can have money, have piles of it, but if you use it for all the things, they end up unhappy, wasted adults." Senior shakes his head. "Make it a home, fill it with people and memories, use that money to buy time together, but besides big and well-located, keep it simple."

Gibbs nods at that. "That's the plan."
"Good. It's good plan."

They both drink again. Senior's here. And Gibbs doesn't know. Tony's mentioned that it happened, and Gibbs filled in his own blanks, teasing him about it, poking him around Kate, but…

But he doesn't actually know why Tony got cut off. And Senior's here, and has mentioned it…

"Why'd you cut Tony off?"

Senior sighs. "He hated books, didn't like to study, didn't want to be a doctor or lawyer or anything like that, which wasn't a problem. I'm not a lawyer, neither was his granddad, we all made our money without a college degree. Except he also didn't like to work, either. He wasn't interested in making deals. He didn't want to build things. He just wanted to play sports. And he was good at them, but not pro-good. He was seventeen, best center at his school, best of any of the schools they played, but his boarding school wasn't exactly swarming with college scouts, let alone NBA scouts. So I said, no. We'd pay for school if he wanted to learn something. Phys-ed major wasn't going to cut it. If he wanted to work one of the crews, learn a trade, that was fine, we'd support him through that. If he wanted to start shadowing me, learning how to find deals and work them, he was welcome to join in.

"He wanted to shoot hoops. I told him we wouldn't support him through that.

"He got the basketball scholarship to Ohio State. Which was great, but it wasn't a first rung school. He did well, but being the league scorer in a second rate league in a second rate school didn't get the NBA calling. And by the time he was ready to graduate he'd decided on being a cop, and was too damn proud to ask to come back.

"By that point I'd noticed he was the only one doing anything useful with his life. His cousins are professional dilettantes, useless, and trust me, I know useless. His cousins are the kind of guys I charm into paying for me when money's scarce. People who are so lonely they're willing to pay for entertaining company." Senior waves dismissively. "When Junior graduated, I didn't offer to start bankrolling him again. Might be the only good decision I ever made for him."

Gibbs nods at that. Agreeing.

They sit there quietly, not having a whole lot else to say to each other, and Gibbs isn't exactly the poster boy for meaningless chit-chat. It's not precisely awkward, but not comfortable either.

Finally he finishes his coffee and says, "Thanks."

Senior nods. "Glad to be of help."

Gibbs is gathering up his stuff, getting ready to go when Senior says, "Just about had a heart attack when I saw your name come up on my caller ID. I do a pretty good job of not thinking about how dangerous Junior's job is, but every now and again I can't ignore it."

Gibbs nods. "Didn't think about that until you picked up." He shakes his head. "If… If a call like that ever needs to be made, it'll be in person. As long as you're anywhere even close to nearby, one of us will come in person. We don't drop that kind of news over the phone."

"Okay." Senior nods. "That's… comforting. I guess. Just, don't ever show up at my door without calling first. Don't want to feel that again."

Gibbs smiles. "Not a problem."
"Thanks." He finishes off his coffee as well. "Okay, got to get moving."

Gibbs nods again. "Enjoy!"

"Thanks. Got an angle on a drug company that I want some more information about."

One last nod from Gibbs, and Senior heads off.

Gibbs lingers, sitting at his table. He calls Jenny, getting her machine and leaves a message, explaining who had referred her and what he was looking for. After twenty more minutes, he gets up and leaves. Borin wandering in was a long shot, anyway.
"McGee," Tim's not really paying attention as he answers his phone. He's staring at his computer, scanning the code in front of him, hoping to get everything done in time so he can snag lunch with Jimmy and Abby.

"Tim?" That's not a Minion. His attention shifts away from the screen to the voice in his ear.

"Hey Sarah, what's up?"

"Glen asked me to marry him!"

He feels the smile spread across his face. "Congratulations. Date picked?"

"It's been two days."

"No then. Sounds like you had an extra-special Valentine's?"

"Yep!" She sounds really excited. His email beeps, and he brings it up on his computer, seeing a shot of her left hand and the diamond solitaire sitting on her ring finger. Kind of plain by his tastes, but it's very simple and elegant, so he can see Sarah loving it.

"Looks like Glenn did good."

"Oh yeah."

He knows that tone of voice. The ultra-satisfied timbre of someone who's gotten exactly what she wanted. "You sound happy, are you?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Good." He nods, pleased. Then a thought hits. He is a big brother. A big brother who is soon to also be a brother-in-law, and he's feeling like he may have some duty toward his sister and her soon-to-be husband, so he says, "Come to Sunday breakfast with us?"

Not like Sarah just met him, she feels the change in how he's thinking about this, so she sounds a little wary when she says, "Why?"

Tim grins, but she can't see it. "Show of clan strength. I'm not doing my job as a big brother if I don't scare the snot out of him at least once."

"Really?" He can feel the eye roll aimed in his direction.

"Yep. It's in the big brother handbook. I'm required by law to take him out and make sure he knows that I and all of my friends will beat him within an inch of his life if he hurts you."

He hears an exasperated sigh. "Isn't that Dad's job?"

Tim snorts. "Like he'd do it."

He can feel her roll her eyes, again. "Fine." Sigh, palpable I'm humoring your vibes radiate off of Sarah. "When's Sunday breakfast?"

"Same as with the christening. Eight."
"You and all your friends?"

"Just me and the guys."

"How progressive of you," she says dryly.

He shakes his head. "No… You don't want us bringing the girls in! We want to scare him into behaving well. We bring in Abby and Ziva, and he'll wet his pants and run for the hills. He'll change his name, and you'll never see him again. We're just going to make sure he knows the rules."

"You're going to have way too much fun with this, aren't you?"

He's grinning. "That's entirely likely. So, you'll come?"

"Sure. Penny'll be there, right? I've called three times, but haven't been able to get a hold of her."

"Uh…” He doesn't actually know if she'll be there. "They're… somewhere. I'll ask Jimmy how long he's got Autopsy on his own."

"What do you mean somewhere?"

"Errr..." The flaw in Ducky's brilliant whirlwind romance wedding was suddenly staring him in the face, well, talking in his ear.

"Tim?"

"They um…" he says the next bit very fast, "kind of got married on Sunday, and are on their honeymoon."

"What?!!"

"It was a surprise."

"How do you have a surprise wedding? It's a wedding, the one thing you can't do as a surprise. You've got forms to fill out and paperwork and…"

"I don't think they bothered with that. It was Molly's birthday party. She was down for her nap. Party was breaking up. He kissed her, said some really romantic things, whipped out the rings, asked to be her husband, asked her to be his wife, gave us just enough time to hug everyone and drink a toast, and then they were off on their honeymoon. Fifteen minutes, tops."

"If they didn't bother with the paperwork, it's not a wedding."

Tim shrugs. You ask him, they're married. The paperwork strikes him as extraneous. But that's a moot point right now. "I just… don't know when they'll be back. Don't know where they went. Jimmy thinks it's somewhere warm, but… For all we know they could be touring the fjords. But I can find out when they'll be back. Jimmy'll know."

"Fine. Let me know."

"Okay. So… Sunday? Putting the fear of big brother into Glenn?"

She sighs. "Sure."

"Good!"
He feels her roll her eyes one last time, and then she says, "Bye," and hangs up.

He did get lunch with Jimmy and Abby (though it's takeout. They're in Autopsy, which isn't Tim's favorite place to eat, but Jimmy's on solo, so he has to be around if anyone needs him.)

"This is really clean?" Tim asks. They're sitting around one of the stainless steel autopsy tables, food still in its containers, but Tim's still a bit squeamish.

"Hosed off, washed down with alcohol, hosed off again, and tested three times a week for bacteria content, but if you'd like I can grab one of the sterile drapes we use for the bodies," Jimmy says as he opens his chicken curry.

Tim sighs, opening his carton of beef and green beans, making sure his chopsticks don't touch the table. Abby gently pokes him but he feels he's within his rights to have irrational hang-ups about eating on the autopsy tables.

Jimmy shakes his head. "Your desk is a bubbling cauldron of raging bacterial sex compared to this table."

"I know." Tim holds up his hands. "I don't want to think about it."

Jimmy smirks. Then takes a bite of his curry. "So, anything interesting today?"

"Oh," Tim looks to Abby, who's digging into her organic tofu-veggie stir fry. "You were right. I got the call today. Glenn proposed on Valentine's. They're coming for Sunday breakfast, so we're on put the fear of Big Brother into Glenn duty."

Abby's grinning at that. "Ohhh… That'll be fun."

Jimmy looks at her with wide eyes, and Tim shakes his head. "No. Me, Jimmy, Gibbs, Tony if he shows. If I let you put the fear of Abby into him, he'll run screaming for the hills." She's somewhere between pouting and pleased at that. She wants in on the fun, but enjoys having her superiority at this recognized.

"Breena told me Amy's bummed. No ring for her," Jimmy says.

"She and Collin have only been together for what… a year?" Abby asks. She and Breena (and over the course of a few Sundays, Amy, too) have talked about this.

Jimmy nods. "Something like that. Apparently he moved in last week, but Ed doesn't know, yet."

Tim cringes. "Oh, that's going to be a mess."

"Yeah, Breena's thinking she was hoping to present it as, 'We're getting married! Oh, and Colin's all moved in.'"

"He gonna flip out about them living together?" Tim asks.

"Well, he almost bit my head off for having sex with his daughter after we got married, so I can't imagine he'll be cool with Colin doing it before."

Tim shakes his head. "You know, I'm going to enjoy not being in the middle of that."

Jimmy and Abby both nod in agreement.
Abby takes a sip of her water, eating another bite of her lunch. Jimmy watches her. She's been eating really healthy lately. She even skipped birthday cake at Molly's party. (Hell, even he had a bite of that cake, because like her mama, Breena can really bake when she puts her mind to it.)

"Okay, what's with the ultra-healthy food. Are you trying to lose weight?"

"What?" She looks up at him, really startled and unhappy. "Do you think I need to lose weight?"

(Tim is very glad to not be in the middle of this, either. He pulls a few inches further back from the table and gets ready to duck if need be.)

"No! You look great. That's why I'm worried you might be trying to. You're drinking water, haven't seen a Pepsi, let alone a Caf-Pow in weeks, or any other sugar for that matter, and you've got, what, whole grain rice in your vegetarian stir-fry? What's going on?"

She looks at Tim, eyes slightly narrowed.

"I didn't say anything. We eat together all the time; he was bound to notice."

She sighs. "Since… the miscarriage… I've been trying to eat better. Don't want it to happen again." Her eyes narrow at Tim again. "He thinks it's silly."

"It's not silly, but… I don't think it'll do much, that's all. It can't hurt, but…” He shrugs. "It feels like a placebo to me, so if it tricks your body into doing what you want it to do, that's great, but I don't think it's science."

He looks at Jimmy who's got the I shouldn't have opened this can of worms look on his face. "You're the doctor, how much does it matter if the tofu's organic or not?"

"Uh…” He's frantically thinking of a way to get out of this. "Do I look like your OB? 'Cause that's who you need to talk to."

They both give him their That's a bullshit answer look.

"Fine. I don't know. I don't think it matters much, but if this job teaches you anything it's the everyone is different and just because something works, or doesn't, for 99% of the population doesn’t mean it'll work, or not, for you. And the placebo thing is real, and it works. They've got cases of people who didn't get their chemo drugs, they were given sterile solution by accident, and still got better. No one's suggesting that's a good plan for Joe Average, but if you can swing it… And like Tim says, it can't hurt."

"But you don't think it really helps, do you?" Abby asks.

"I'm not an OB. I'm not a nutritionist. I know I've got a very delicately balanced system and all organic or not didn't make any difference I could tell. Upping veggies, that made me feel better. Saying goodbye to most carbs, same result. More good fats, more meat, and more eggs to replace those carbs, my body seemed to like that a lot. But one of the steps I tried, back when I was first diagnosed, was to do natural sugars instead of processed one, and I never saw any difference by subbing out white sugar for honey or maple syrup. Getting rid of high fructose corn syrup didn't help. So, sure eat the veggies, get lots of them. And protein is your friend, enjoy it," he points to his own curry, "real meat, nuts, and there's cream in the sauce, higher fat content means I won't get hungry again as soon as I do when I do all veg. I'd recommend that for anyone trying to eat better. No one ever ended up in worse health because they stopped sucking down piles of caffeinated sugar, so saying goodbye to the Caf-Pows and sleeping more isn't a bad plan. But I've got no idea if it'll affect your fertility at all."
Then he looks at Tim and back to Abby. "Neither of you drink much, but cold turkey, for both of you, is something that's got actual science behind it, proving that it helps… Sort of. For guys it helps with sperm count."

"Likely not a problem," Abby says.

Tim shrugs, unless they've been insanely lucky, she's right.

"For women not drinking while you're trying to get pregnant and the first few months helps avoid miscarriage, but… the information on that's kind of sketchy. In this country at least, the kind of woman who admits to drinking while pregnant isn't the kind of woman who's just having a glass of wine with dinner once a week. They know binge drinking causes problems. They know alcoholism causes problems. They know not drinking at all avoids them. They know that women who have fewer than two drinks a day are fine, but that's an average, and your mileage may vary, and you can't really prove something is safe, so the rule of thumb is no alcohol at all."

"So what you're saying is that best anyone knows we're already drinking less than the amount that would make a difference?" Tim asks.

"Probably. Not drinking won't hurt. None of this will hurt. But since you aren't binge drinking, it may not help, either. Just, I wouldn't stress out about it. Oh, speaking of things you can do that there's some science behind, stressing out about it does make fertility rates drop."

"You wouldn't stress out about it because you're not in spitting distance of the end of your fertility," Abby says to Jimmy. "Forty-two is next month. I'm getting to the end of my store of eggs and I don't want to waste any of them, so anything that may help just got added to the to-do list."

Jimmy nods. "Want me to do some research? Or give you my Physician's log in for PubMed? That'll get you full access to any of the articles you want."

Tim thinks that's a good way to diffuse the situation. And Abby nods. "Yes. Thanks."

Tim's been back at his desk for a few minutes when Jimmy texts him.

Come back down?

Okay.

He tells Soth he'll be in Autopsy, and if anyone needs him to head over and grab him, and then goes.

"Jimmy?"

"Here." He backs out of the storage closet. "Just getting more forms. When's that paperwork software going live?"

Tim crosses his fingers. "Week from tomorrow beta testing starts. You know you'll have to fill your stuff out by hand and do it with the computer while testing, right?"

"Yeah, if it doesn't work, yada yada yada. I got it the first time."

"Good. What's up?"

"How's she doing, really?"

Tim sighs. "Okay. Really. You know how much she loves not being in control, and she can't control
this, but she can control what she eats, so the food's gotten really healthy. And you know we do morning yoga, or at least as much as we can."

Jimmy nods, he's familiar with how small people put a crimp in any sort of morning plans you might have.

"She's added some fertility poses and is centering the meditation that way. And like with the food, it doesn't hurt, but I don't think it actually helps, either. So, she's kind of frustrated with me because I'm not all gung ho on this."

"Frustrated?" Tim can tell Jimmy's asking if he's 'editing' the situation.

Tim shakes his head, frustrated isn't code for angry. "Yeah. Not angry. I'm not being a jerk about it. But she'd like me to be a better cheerleader on it, and I'm trying. I'm buying the organic veggies and making the food she likes when I'm on dinner duty, but my enthusiasm levels are leaving something to be desired."

"You're charting, right?"

"Of course, but... no egg to even shoot for, yet. Hoping we'd have gotten another chance by now, but..."

"But she's nursing and almost forty-two and every month isn't realistic right now."

"Right. From what we can tell, if there's an egg around we've gotten pregnant. Just... And that's only happened once so..."

"You okay, Tim?"

Tim shrugs. "Yeah. I'd love more kids but, right now at least, I could be happy with just Kelly."

Jimmy doesn't ask out loud, but Tim can see the look, the way he's watching to see if that's real or not.

Tim shrugs again, it's real enough. "I don't need it the way she does." Jimmy nods, that's definitely real. "So we're both trying to stay cool, because we both do know that massive, stressed-out, hissy fit isn't going to help. I'm working on being supportive. I mean, I'm eating the veggies, too, and doing the yoga, and I can not drink. Not like that's a problem, at all. But there's really only so much I can do for this and none of it seems really useful, you know?"

"See your OB?"

"If we get to six months post-nursing without her getting pregnant, that's the plan."

"Stop nursing sooner?"

"Maybe. We talked about it when Kelly was new, planned to nurse for a year, but if she wants to cut out earlier and buy more time, I'll support that."

"It sounds-"

"Really reasonable?"

"Yeah."

"It is. Apparently 'reasonable' is cold comfort when you're jonesing for another baby."
Jimmy nods, he knows all about that. "Yeah."

Tim's phone beeps and he looks at it. "Gotta run."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah. You know how the job system works?"

"Sure."

"I'm the available tech with the highest specialty rating for the case that just came in. I gotta move."

"Go move!"

Glenn Holland actually is a good guy. He's warm, funny, smart, and Tim understands why his sister loves him. As potential husbands go, he approves.

This does not, however, get him a pass from being dragged to the side by the various males of clan Gibbs as Sunday breakfast comes to a close.

Glenn half smiles at him as he notices he's being pulled further and further back from the rest of the crowd, who are getting in cars and heading toward church. He holds his hands up. "Look, your Dad already did the hurt my little girl and I'll kill you in ways that hurt so bad just imagining them will make you break out in a cold sweat."

Tim nods at that. Bit surprised that the Admiral would make the effort, but he was always good at scaring the shit out of people by threatening them.

"This isn't the hurt my sister and die speech. Unlike my Dad, I actually know something about being a good husband." He points to Jimmy, Ducky, and Gibbs who are all surrounding Glenn. "They do, too. Any husband who's been around for more than a year will do something that hurts his wife sooner or later. Even if you're trying, it'll happen. That's just being alive and being a human being in close proximity to another human being every day for the rest of your life."

He can feel Jimmy thinking toothpaste even though he doesn't say it.

"This isn't even the marry her and you will stay married for the rest of your life, speech. We all know that can be a recipe for misery, and I don't want that for her, or you for that matter."

"So what is this?" Glenn looks legitimately curious. This is very much not the conversation he had with Admiral McGee.

"The rules. They're simple, and there aren't a lot of them. One: as long as you are a firefighter, you will have life insurance. You will have about five times more life insurance than you think you need. You stop being a firefighter, you can go back to the basic just get the job done level, but as long as you're out there risking your life running into burning buildings, you are going to make sure that she and your kids are covered.

"Two: If it doesn't work out, and you guys decide to split, you will pay child support and you will be a dad. I want it in your mind that there are men who will literally hunt you to the end of the earth and will fuck you over so badly on so many different levels you'll wish your parents had never met if you try to skip out on your kids."

Glenn nods with that, seems to agree, but he's looking a little disturbed at the language. He's never
seen Tim be anything other than mild-mannered computer guy, the cursing is unsettling.

Tim takes that nod as his due, and also as a sign of Glenn being a basically decent guy. Then he doubles down. "If you think my Dad was scary, I want you to remember something, I learned everything he ever had to offer and then I spent the next fifteen years of my life putting away killers. I've got a library of twisted shit so vast and so varied that it'd make him blanch if he ever had to come face to face with it."

Glenn starts to look very disturbed.

"Three: If you ever find yourself contemplating something stupid, something where the words, 'I never meant to hurt you' translate into 'I never meant for you to find out,' don't do it." Glenn quickly nods along to that. "Honestly, you ever get in trouble, any kind, where you really are thinking, 'I never meant for you to find out,' come to us, we're amazingly resourceful at solving problems and helping each other cope with wanting things that are bad for you."

Jimmy's nodding along with that. "Anytime. Really. We're good at this and our wedding present to you is that if you need it, help is always on offer."

Tim hadn't expect this to go that far, but he figures Jimmy's doing well, so he rolls with it.

"Look, you hurt her accidentally, that's just being alive. You hurt her intentionally. You do something where you know that if she finds out about it, it will make her cry, then I will make you cry. Make her cry badly enough, and next thing you know every FBI agent on Earth will be in your home pulling more kiddie porn than you ever knew could exist off of your hard drive. And then you'll get transferred to whatever holding cell has the guys who were the victims of pedophiles in it." Tim smiles blandly. "That's assuming they," he looks at Jimmy, Ducky, and Gibbs, "don't get you first." Glenn's eyes are very wide right now. He's thinking having the Admiral beat the shit out of him is vastly preferable to what McGee the younger will do.

Tim clasps a hand over Glenn's shoulder. "There is exactly one acceptable reason for my sister to be crying on me about something you did intentionally, and that's because you got hurt or died saving someone else. We good?"

Glenn nods slowly. "We're good."

"Wonderful."

Tim watches Glenn head back Sarah's car, he sees the somewhat stunned look on his face and enjoys it. He says something to Sarah, but he can't lip read well enough to know what.

But Gibbs laughs and says, "He just told your sister, 'Your family is fucking terrifying.'" Gibbs put his arm around Tim's shoulder and nods slowly. "Good job."

Tim grins at him. "Thanks, I was well-trained."

He gets out of church and turns his phone back on. (He may be a heathen atheist, but he's a heathen atheist with manners; he turns his phone off in church. The Minions know that's a black out time for him, and where he is so if it's urgent enough they can go and get him.) There's a very irate text from his sister on there that says, KIDDIE PORN?

He laughs.

To any sane man, that's the scariest threat in my arsenal.
TIM! What the fuck?

Love you, too, Sis. And it looks like he does, too, so this'll never be any sort of issue.

You don't do that to people, don't say that... Just... Tim!

Honestly, is he bothered? Did he think I was out of line?

There's a pause. Abby's getting Kelly buckled into her car seat. "Trouble?"

"I don't think so. She's less than perfectly happy with my Fear of Big Brother technique."

Abby nods.

No. He's taking notes for when his little sister gets engaged.

Good man!

Ugh. Men!

:)  

It's after Sunday dinner, after Bootcamp, and just like Glenn didn't have any trouble figuring out he was being weeded out of the herd for a private conversation, Tim's not having any issues with figuring it out, either.

Jimmy and Gibbs look... concerned.

"What?" he finally asks.

Jimmy looks to Gibbs. Gibbs looks back. They both look at Tim. Tim gets the sense they didn't plan this out, just came to the conclusion, at the same time, that it had to happen.

"Wedding coming up," Gibbs says.

"And your mom and dad'll probably be there, right?"

Tim had indeed already come to that conclusion, talked with Abby about it a bit. "Yeah. Probably."

"You going to go?" Jimmy asks.

Tim shrugs. "I don't know. I want to see her get married. I want to be there for her, and support her, and celebrate with her, but I could easily go the rest of my life without ever seeing either of them again." He shrugs again. "How about this, I'll burn that bridge when I come to it? When she gets a date and everything set, when we know for a fact The Admiral is actually attending, because if she picks a time when he's on duty, he won't. He didn't get out of a shift for her birth, I can't imagine he'll take time off for her wedding. When we know that... We'll figure it out from there."

Gibbs nods at that, and Jimmy seems to think that's an okay place to be.
Tenderness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He hears a car pull up, a door open and close, and Mona woof in greeting, so obviously someone was coming.

"In the driveway," Gibbs calls out. They're having some amazingly nice weather for the last week of February, so he's taking advantage of it by getting outside and finishing the outside of Shannon.

"What's her name?" Borin asks, walking up behind him as he's stroking another layer of waterproofing onto Shannon's hull.

Gibbs looks over his shoulder at her, opens his mouth to answer, but nothing comes out.

"Gibbs…" She's looking at him curiously. The name of his ship shouldn't send him into what, on someone else, she'd call a panic. On Gibbs, she'll label it as disconcerted.

He shrugs and kisses her quickly. "Hi."

"Hi?" She's squinting at him and then looks at the sailboat. She's, whatever her name is, beautiful. Long sleek lines. She'll just ease through the water, skimming the waves, carried by wind.

Gibbs can see she's not perfectly thrilled with his lack of answer, but... Everything Jimmy said to him about not being able to name this boat Shannon if he wanted to move forward is crashing into him all at once, and he's stuck. He sighs and decides to try honesty. Hopefully it won't scare her too bad. (Granted he was hoping to get a bit further into this than three very successful dates before having this conversation, but… now's the time.) "I've… I started building her back in fall of '12 and… she had a name and there was a plan for what I was going to do with her, and… And everything changed."

"So, she doesn't have a name, or you still think of her by the old name, but you're not sure you're keeping it?"

He nods.

Borin looks her over, walking around her slowly. "What was the plan?"

"Wake up from the retirement party hangover, dry swallow enough aspirin so I could move, get in, and head off to sea. Just me and her for as long as it took to get the job out of my head. New beach every week. Send Abby the occasional post card so she wouldn't worry."

She nods. "And that's not the plan anymore?"

He shakes his head. "Got some girls to teach how to sail. New plan. New life, really, but I never thought of a new name for her."

She nods, gently touching a dry part of the hull. "So this is Shannon?"

He nods. "Yeah. Jimmy tells me I've got to rename her, and…" Gibbs shakes his head. "He's not wrong…"

"But you've been thinking of her as Shannon for four years and you've got nothing else?"
He nods again, looking at her, feeling like he's standing on the edge of a cliff. "I don't know what to do with this." He exhales long and slow. "I've been looking at the pictures of us on the mantle, too. Not sure what to do. We were married twelve years, had a beautiful daughter, and I loved both of them more than anything else. I… didn't use to talk about them. Just pretended it didn't happen. Never mentioned them at all to most of my wives or girlfriends. I don't want to pretend my life began in 1992. But I don't want you to feel unwelcome. I don't want you…" he rubs his face, trying to think of words for this. "I don't want a ghost constantly hovering in your peripheral view. Don't want you uncomfortable. And I don't know what to do."

She smiles gently at that, takes a few steps closer to him, and cups his cheek. "That's a start. I don't want you pretending that life began in 1992, either, and you don't have to take pictures of your family down."

"Okay. And…" He nods at the boat.

She shrugs. "I don't know. You see me on her one day?"

"I really hope so…" He stares at her, stares at Shannon. "I'm not… in love with her anymore. That was taking off the ring, I think. But, it doesn't go away, you know? It eases up, and you finally get what 'they would have wanted you to move on' means, but there's still…" he touches his chest, over his heart, because he'd be at this for years trying to find the right words. "But it's not all that's there." He feels like that's a pretty lame explanation, but he doesn't have better in him.

"Yeah, I know." She sounds wistful at that.

"Do you know? When I mentioned them the first time, you started to say 'I know,' but didn't. Do you know?"

She swallows and nods. "Yeah. That's a long story. Not for out here."

"Okay. Not gonna press. You tell me when or if you want to."

She nods, still looking at Shannon. "How about this. I'll get us some dinner. You wrap up out here, get cleaned up, and then we'll talk and eat."

"Sounds good. Got about half an hour left on this."

"Okay." She kisses him. Still willing to kiss him, real kiss, not just a peck on the cheek, so that's good. "Hungry?"

He nods.

"Craving fried chicken all day."

Gibbs doesn't have to think about that. "Sounds really good."

"Back in a bit."

---

She's walking into the house as he's stripping off in the laundry room. He doesn't mind the way the finish smells, but he doesn't necessarily want his whole house smelling like it. So whenever he does jobs like that, his clothing goes from his skin to the washing machine without taking any unnecessary detours.

She smiles at him, bags of insanely yummy smelling chicken in hand, looks him up and down (he's
in his boxers and one sock) and says, "Thought we were eating first."

He smiles, eyes warm, takes the bag of chicken from her, putting it on top of the dryer, and pulls her to him for a long, hot kiss. "You want to eat first?" he asks against her lips.

"No," she says back, lips still touching his, and steps back from him. "But I should. Haven't eaten since breakfast. I'm going to start feeling light-headed soon."

"Then we eat. Let me head up and grab some pants. Little chilly for just my skivvies." Yes, it's been a very nice day, for February, but he doesn't keep his house warm enough for comfortable dinner in his underwear in the winter.

She chuckles at that. "Fire?"

He nods. Toasty fire sounds great right about now.

He comes down a few minutes later in sweats and NCIS t-shirt. She's in front of the fireplace, fire burning, chicken laid out on plates on the floor with thick slabs of corn bread, green beans, and cold, open beer.

"That a pizza stone?" she asks, looking at the eighteen inch by eighteen inch ceramic square leaning against his hearth. It had been there the last time she came over, too, but they hadn't spent any time in front of the fire that night.

He nods.

"You get it for me?"

He nods again. "I like pizza. I like fire. Never thought about trying the two together. But if you like them, too…"

She smiles at that. "I do, but it's not going to work on your fireplace. Your oven, sure. But heat's got to hit it from all sides, fast, or you end up with the underside burned to cinders and raw cheese on top."

"Hmmm… Doesn't sound good."

"It's not."

He sits next to her and kisses her shoulder. "Speaking from experience?"

"I might be," she says with a smile. "Let's put it this way, there's a reason why you have to light the fire, let it burn, for a while, then push the coals into the back of the oven, then put the pizza into the oven, and if you attempt to skip any of those steps you end up with some rather irate looking tourists who really wanted pizza."

He laughs at that. "How old were you?"

"Fourteen. We didn't usually have tourists in the summer, but they wanted to hike, and we had a place, so there they were. Been out all day, starving. Don't remember why my mom wasn't doing it. Probably some sort of cow emergency. She handled most of the veterinary stuff, unless it was really bad.

"Ended up feeding them ham sandwiches."
Gibbs chuckles, taking a bite of the chicken. Long day of working on the boat, it tastes damn good. She stands up and looks at the picture of Gibbs, Shannon, and Kelly on his mantle.

"You have more pictures?"

He nods.

"Show me your life before 1992; while we eat?"

He nods at that, too. Standing up, grabbing the photo albums that are just general family shots. He finds another one, taken from his father's house. There are some pretty big gaps in there, but it's a more complete picture than anyone's seen since Shannon.

He moves to the sofa, easier to juggle food and pictures and drinks if they can put everything down on the coffee table.

He opens the first one, while she's eating a chicken wing, and she looks down, swallows quickly and says, "Is that really you?"

He nods. "Probably three-ish."

"You were so cute!"

"Thanks."

The shot's black and white, so she asks, "Were you really blond?"

He shrugs. His hair looks light in the shot, but as long as he can remember it's been very dark brown or black.

He flips through shots, the majority of which were from when his mom was alive, so first day of kindergarten, birthday parties, little league, Fourth of July picnics. Not a lot of pictures, not by the standards of today when everyone takes shots of everything, but about ten or so a year. He's slowly growing up across the pages and then he hits thirteen and the pictures stop. The one after that is one he didn't know his Dad had until he went through this album when he took it home from his father's house.

His grandfather had taken the shot. It's him, in his Marine uniform, graduation from Lejeune.

She smiles warmly at that. "Oh, look at you. What'd you do, enlist at fourteen?" she jokes.

"Ha ha ha. I'm eighteen. And I bet there's a shot of you just like this."

She nods. "You ever get to my parents' house and you can see about fifty of them. And I look just as young, green, and proud."

"You think I'm going to be visiting your parents?" He's intrigued and kind of scared of that. Visiting a girlfriend's parents has been on the to-do list for a very long time.

"It's not impossible." She stares at him for a moment. "Are you scared?"

He shrugs.

She pokes him gently then she flips back a page. Gibbs, thirteen, playing first baseman. Next page, Gibbs, eighteen, Marine Graduation.
"Lose some pictures?"

He shakes his head. "Lost the photographer. My mom died when I was fourteen. Breast cancer went bad and spread all over."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugs, never sure what to say to that.

"Your dad…?"

"Be a year ago in April. He was lucky, a fast stroke and done. Ducky's mom, she died slowly, over the course of years, and that was torture for everyone. He went fast and it didn't hurt. Good, long life behind him. I miss him, but, I don't regret how he went."

"I get that." She also gets the parallel he's not saying, that his mom died slow, too, and it was torture for him and his dad, her, too probably.

He flips the page, smiles, those shots were taken by all three of them. He remembers that day, home on leave, decided to introduce Shannon to Jack. They went to Lake Conneaut to swim.

There's shots of him lounging with Shannon. Shots of him splashing with Jack. (The shots Shannon took were significantly better than the ones he or Jack took.)

One shot of Jack standing next to Shannon, arm around her, grinning at the camera.

That had been a really good day.

"That's Shannon?" Borin asks, looking at her intensely.

"'Bout a year after we met. Think we're nineteen in that shot." He shakes his head at the dopy grins in some of the shots. It had been a picnic. Sandwiches, cup-cakes, cold corn on the cob, beer. "We're all a bit drunk, too."

"Your dad let you both drink?"

"Now you're making me feel old. Drinking age was 18 then."

She laughs at that, looking at the shots of what would eventually be a family playing. "Never let it be said you don't have a type."

He smiles, sheepish, and then kisses her hair. "Always was a sucker for a pretty redhead."

She smiles, too, and ruffles his hair. "Like 'em high and tight. Not like you can't get a date with me if you aren't a Marine, but, it really helps."

He nods, getting that.

Her voice turns serious. "I was engaged once, long time ago." He can tell by the look in her eyes that it didn't end well. "He was KIA, and I was there when it happened. One second he was there, and the future was there, and life was there, everything that mattered was there, and then boom, it was gone."

He nods, squeezing her hand. "Know all about boom."

"Yeah." She looks at the picture in front of her, Gibbs and Shannon on the beach near a lake. One
minute it was there, and the next it wasn't. "Once I healed up, I couldn't go back."

"When I healed up, they wouldn't let me go back. Don't think I would have wanted to if it had been an option," he shrugs, "but it wasn't."

She nods. "I lost him. I lost my whole team. Just dumb, stupid luck I got off the raft first. Without them… the job wasn't worth it anymore. And… " she shakes her head, seeing whatever her personal 'and' was.

He nods. "Know all about 'and,' too."

"That's how you ended up here?"

"Yeah. Spent a lot of years on 'and' as an NCIS agent. 'Back in… '05, might have been '06, while ago now, I got hurt again, and most of the years between '91 and waking up went missing. When I got them back, I had to deal with it, all over again. Been slowly getting a life together since, last couple years really getting it together."

"Are you back together?"

He shrugs. "About as close as I get, I think. I don't know. You back together?"

"Maybe." She shrugs, takes a bite of her cornbread. "If anyone is. Of course, in the middle of it, you can't really tell."

He nods. "I can see how the past didn't work, but I couldn't see it when I was in it."

"Yeah. So, sure. I'm back together. I'm not walking wounded, not anymore. More nights than not I sleep, and I don't even need to drink to do it anymore. More nights then not, if I'm not sleeping it's a case right now, not the past, keeping me up."

"We're cops. I think that's as close to together as we get can hope for."

She nods at that, taking a sip of her beer. "Show me more pictures?"

"Sure."

When Rachel asked him about what he missed about a relationship, what he wanted, Gibbs had had some fairly tame and specific ideas.

He hadn't realized, when he told her about having someone to just talk to, someone to share the quiet with, that what he was looking for was tenderness.

And it wasn't like past wives and girlfriend didn't want to offer it to him. It wasn't like they didn't try. Even Diane, who isn't exactly the poster child for soft and fluffy interactions, tried. But he couldn't take it from them.

He couldn't allow himself to have it. Couldn't let himself properly rest with another woman, because that wall had to always be there, keeping them away from things they couldn't possibly understand.

But he's talking with Borin, his stories interspersed with hers, and there's this moment, where she's talking about how she went from being home with her parents after the explosion that ripped her world apart to the Coast Guard, that he recognizes the difference here, feels it, feels why this time it works, why he can rest. It's like that moment where Tim went from McGee to Tim.
This is shared history for them. Borin gets it. She knows what he lost. For her, one day everything was fine, and before the sun set, her world stopped turning.

She's talking, and right now, he's finished dinner, and is sitting next to her on the sofa, arms wrapped around her. She's got her head resting against his shoulder, nursing a beer between bits of her story, and right this second he's just so content he doesn't know what to do with it. He doesn't know how to express it, but it's real.

So when the story wraps he takes the bottle from her (empty now), setting it on the floor, and kisses her soft and gentle, taking his time, savoring her skin, letting the heat ramp up between them slowly.

There's no rush here (Except for that moment where he more or less leapt up to grab her purse and find a condom; he was moving awfully fast then.) just slow, easy, gentle movements. Trying to feel this with more than just skin, trying to make love in addition to have sex.

And it doesn't feel like it did with Shannon. But he's also not the same man he was back then.

And different it might be, but it's still good. It feels right. More right than any sex has felt in a very long time.

It's not like he's new to sleeping on his sofa. Not like this is, by any stretch of the imagination, the first time he's spent a night there.

But it was the first time he did it with someone else.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So, slow few days there on the update front. Probably a slow few days to come. However (big grin) on this side the writing is coming fast and furious. 30,000 words (100 pages with the way I've got my word processor set) over the last four days of stuff I'm really looking forward to sharing with you in the not wildly distant future!
Preparations

The sound of one foot stepping onto his front porch stairs begins to draw Gibbs from asleep to awake. The second foot, stepping from stairs to the porch proper, pulls him a little closer to all awake. One more step gets him thinking that there might be something he should be doing, but really he's too sleepy and warm and comfortable and naked and wrapped around a beautiful woman to want to do anything other than snuggle in and go back to sleep.

The sound of his doorknob turning, a body slamming into the door, Fornell cursing loudly, and Mona leaping up to bark wildly at him, however, kills what was left of warm and happy and sleepy, and wakes both him and Borin all the way up.

He sits up, carefully, she's mostly lying on him, and takes a moment to untangle himself, leaving her the blanket.

"I'm coming." He yells to the door, along with, "Mona, quiet!" while he looks around for his pants. (They've got to be around here somewhere.)

Meanwhile, Borin wraps herself up in the blanket, grabs her clothes, purse, and scurries up the stairs to get a shower.

Fornell's in a pretty good mood. It's a lovely Tuesday morning, crocuses are starting to poke up, he doesn't need to be in the office until after noon, and today, he and Gibbs are heading off in search of his wedding tux.

He hops up the step, humming a little, puts his hand on the doorknob, (Relevant fact: Gibbs did indeed get a lock for his door. A deadbolt. The doorknob is still sans-lock and turns freely if you grasp it and apply some torque.) turns the doorknob, and crashes shoulder first into the door when the damn thing doesn't open.

Two seconds later, there's some sort of large, black, barking thing having what sounds like a mental breakdown on the other side of the door. Gibbs had mentioned he had gotten a dog, so why Fornell's surprised he got an attack dog isn't clear, (after all it's not like Gibbs was going to get a toy poodle or something small and cute like that) but he is feeling mildly surprised. (Though given how Mona is spazzing out about him on the other side of the door, he's awfully glad he didn't just walk in.)

Then, two more seconds later, he hears Gibbs making noise from the area of the living room. Why Gibbs spent many full days' worth of hours making a bed to not sleep in it boggles Fornell's mind, but Gibbs is weird like that. Followed by holy shit a woman, redhead, wrapped in the blanket that lives on Gibbs' sofa, and likely very naked under said blanket, streaking up the steps.

Suddenly he's feeling a whole lot less boggled.

Then, and only then, once she was fully up the stairs and out of sight, did Gibbs, in a pair of sweats and nothing else, with a firm grip on Mona's collar, open the door.

"Looks like you forgot our date," Fornell says, with a laugh, rubbing his shoulder, as he breezes in. "This is the dog, huh?"

Gibbs looks at Fornell, eyes narrowed, but Fornell's just beaming at him, very pleased with himself and the universe right now, so Gibbs says, "Mona, Tobias. Tobias's welcome here, too, so you be nice to him."
She barks one more time and spends a moment just looking at him.

Fornell holds out a hand to be sniffed, and Mona deigns to take an interest in him. One last woof, and she heads up the stairs to see what Borin's up to.

"So, looks like you've got more than one new friend," Fornell says with a huge grin.

Gibbs grunts in his direction, not sure what the hell to do right now.

Fornell waves a hand at the stairs. "Go. I can get myself coffee. She like hers god-awful black, too?"

Gibbs nods. "Weren't you supposed to be here an hour from now?"

"Thought you might want pancakes. Didn't realize you had something better than pancakes at home."

Gibbs glares at him slightly about the 'better than pancakes' line and then shrugs, because breakfast does sound good, though Fornell wasn't precisely who he was hoping to have it with.

"Go."

"Take it you had plans this morning?" Borin asks as he steps into the shower behind her, she's wet and naked and facing him, and he's not having any trouble at all getting used to having someone to shower with.

He gives her his well, sorta, I'd rather be here with you look.

"I've got to get to work, anyway. Might as well do whatever you were going to do."

"Tuxes. That's Fornell." He's not sure if she knows who Fornell is. He doesn't think he's mentioned him. He knows he hasn't mentioned to shared ex-wife saga. "He's getting married in October. Today we're getting tuxes."

"We're?" That's got her interest.

"I'm the best man."

Her eyebrows shoot up, and she bites her lip trying not to laugh.

"Why is that funny?"

"Are you going to give a speech?" And she does laugh at that.

He glares gently at her and turns them so the water's at his back. "Give me the shampoo."

She does, he squirts some in his hand, and begins rubbing it through her hair. And then he starts rubbing her neck, and shoulders, and then breasts as he presses up against her and the water cascades down them.

"That's not my hair."

He rubs against her deliberately. Morning wood deflated a bit with Fornell crashing into his door, but naked woman in his arms is perking it back up. "You mind?"

She kisses him, melting against him and he groans at the feel of that. "Your friend is downstairs, and
I don't like being quiet."

He's gonna shoot Fornell. He pouts a little, sighs, but respects it, returning to rubbing the shampoo through her hair.

She sighs at that, leaning against him. "You doing anything tonight?"

"Not supposed to be."

"You've seen me all dressed up. I don't think I've ever seen you in a suit. My house. Seven. Wear the tux."

His eyebrows shoot up; that could be very interesting. He nods, approving.

"Don't know where you live."

"I'll text you the address."

"Okay. I'll bring the bourbon and dessert?"

She smiles at that.

He lingers in the bathroom, watching her get ready. (Didn't take him long to brush his teeth and hair and pull on his I'm-retired-uniform of cargo pants, t-shirt, and flannel shirt. He'll shave closer to date time.) She didn't mention the hairdryer when she found it, but she did look at him and smile. That made him feel good.

And when it comes down to it, he likes watching a woman get ready. Likes watching her take her clothing off (oh, yes, very, very good!) but putting it back on again is good, too.

Eventually he gets the sense that she's a bit uncomfortable with him just staring at her while she does her hair, so he heads back down to see if Fornell did indeed make some coffee.

He did, and whipped up some eggs.

"You're out of bread," Fornell says to him as he heads into the kitchen, grabbing his coffee and sucking some of it down.

"Thought we were going out for breakfast."

"We are. She's got work right?"

Gibbs nods and heads to his freezer. "Bagels." He pulls one out and tosses it in the microwave to thaw.

"You've got bagels in your freezer? For her?" Fornell shakes his head. "Must be love. Can't wait to meet this one."

"Ever work a case with CGIS?"

Fornell thinks for a moment and then his eyes go wide. "Borin? Is that Abigail Borin up there?"

Gibbs grins.

"How do you even know her?"
"Navy and the Coast Guard. Usually had a case or two a year with them. Worked 'em with her until she got promoted. You?"

"She ripped two of my guys new assholes when they fumbled a case and didn't call her team in. Poor bastards limped for a week when she got done with them."

"Only a week. I'm getting soft," Borin says as she heads into the kitchen. She looks at him, thinks for a moment, and says, "FBI?" Fornell nods. "One of them had the nerve to call me 'Hon' when he finally got around to returning my call."

Fornell winces, he knows that Agent well enough to know that he is that stupid. Though that didn't end up in the report. "He knows not to do that, now. Tobias Fornell," he offers his hand.

"Abby Borin," she shakes his hand, and looks at him pulling the bagel out of the microwave, slipping it into the toaster. "I get him making me breakfast…"

"I'm the better cook. He turns eggs into rubber."

Gibbs sips his coffee, inclining his head, Fornell is right about the better cook part, maybe not about the eggs to rubber part. (Fornell likes his soft and kind of squishy.)

"You two eat together a lot?" she asks, looking from the one to the other. Gibbs can tell she's amused at the idea of him having a buddy.

"He got a fiancée a while back, so less now."

"Usually take out, anyway. But maybe two times a month I pop over and make him a real meal."

"Steaks on the fire are a real meal."

"Penne with sausage and peppers is a real meal. You make... snacks."

"Half pound steak is a snack?"

"Big snacks."

"You make penne with sausage and peppers? With the sauce?" Abby asks.

"Of course! Nona made sure we could all cook. Don't like to this time of year because the tomatoes taste like paste, but come summertime…"

She looks impressed. The toaster pops, and Fornell grabs the bagel, slipping the eggs (which he has cooked into a nicely holding together circle) between them, and handing them over.

"Make him bring you to dinner at our place and you can find out all about it," he says with a smile.

Borin smiles at that, looking vastly amused by the idea of a date with Gibbs' friends. "Thanks." She takes a bite of her breakfast and smiles at Fornell. "For the food and the invite." Her eyes skim across the kitchen to the clock on the microwave. "And I've got to get moving."

Gibbs walks her to the door, kissing her goodbye.

"Tonight?"

He smiles and nods, eyes warm and wicked.
That gets a grin out of her, and another warm, close kiss. "Oh, yeah, definitely tonight."

He and Fornell are at the diner when Fornell says, "So, you've got a girlfriend? When were you going to tell me?"

Gibbs doesn't say anything.

"You didn't mention it at the retirement party, and we poured so much alcohol into you you were singing and dancing, so it had to be after that."

Gibbs glares, that is not how he remembers that party.

"Don't give me that look. Pride got you up there, and I've got video of it. So, how long?"

Unfortunately, Gibbs thinks that might have actually happened, 'cause that's the kind of thing Pride's good at, but he's not entirely sure, so he glares at that, too. "Two weeks."

Fornell takes a bite of his banana pancakes. "God, this woman know me. Elaine, these are perfect!"

Elaine waves at him. "You like her?"

"Try not to date women I don't like."

"You know what I mean. Date for the wedding, eight months from now, like her or just clearing out the pipes, like her?"

He shrugs. "Hope so."

Fornell speaks Gibbs well enough, and can read his face well enough that he's answering 'hope so' to the first half of that question, not the last. "Wow." Fornell eats another bite of his pancakes while Gibbs drinks some of his coffee. "She looks a lot like our ex-wife."

Gibbs shrugs, a it happens look on his face.

"No, Jethro, it doesn't just happen. It's not like every third woman in this city is a tall, strong red-head with a sassy tongue. We move to Ireland, and you want to give me that look, fine, but not here."

"She is who she is."

"Yeah, I know. And you are who you are, so question is, you doing something stupid, chasing after someone bad for you?"

Gibbs shrugs. "Hope not. Trying not to. Doing things different this time."

Fornell nods. "Good." He thinks about it for a few minutes. "Different, how?"

"Told her about Shannon and Kelly."

Fornell nods at that, too. "Decent start."

"Told her why I haven't been on a date for two years."

"Better."

"Haven't been on a date for two years."

"Good point."
"Sat my ass down and listened to her stories, and not just as a way to avoid telling mine."

Fornell smiles at that. "So, come on, tell me about her? She's a Fed, what else…"

Tuxes. Lots and lots of tuxes. Sigh.

While it is true that Diane will talk anyone-who-gets-too-near's ear off about how Fornell is 'cheap' that is not entirely true or accurate.

Fornell is frugal, this is true. He grew up with people who lived in Italy in the aftermath of both World Wars, so the home he grew up in was extremely frugal and used every usable portion of everything. So, it's not so much that he's pinching pennies when he adds a tablespoon of water to the tomato paste can and swishes it around to get every last bit out, it's because that's how he was raised, and Nona will do cartwheels in his grave if he wastes food. (This is also true for any clothing that is still wearable. He comes from a world that mends things.)

Likewise, if it's something that doesn't matter to him, he is downright cheap in addition to frugal. (Which is why in one rather fierce fight with Diane when Emily was young and money was tight, Diane had bought a, what he thought was freakishly expensive, moisturizer, and then threw it out when it was less than a quarter used, because it made her skin break out, she started calling him cheap, and well, it just never got much better than that.)

But in that he is no longer a middle-aged FBI Agent providing the only source of income for a family with a small child, he is significantly less stressed out about money these days. And given that Wendy, who is, second only to Emily, the light of his life, has told him he has to look good for this thing, he is determined to find a good tux, cost be damned.

So, they are at as upscale of a place as you can go, and still rent tuxes. Assuming you are going to lay down money to rent a tux, this is where Tony would send you. (Though he'd try to convince you to buy one because, look, what do most guys wear rental tuxes to? Weddings and proms. Do you really want to think about what fluids got spilled all over and in that tux before you had it? No. Just the idea of a rental tux makes Tony cringe and want to break out the alcohol wipes.)

Early morning, work day, besides the sales man, the place is empty. So he waits less than three seconds before swooping down on them to offer assistance. (It's also extremely obvious to the sales associate that these are two guys who do not regularly do formal wear of any sort.)

The salesman gets them measured, Fornell first, while asking what Fornell was looking for in a tux. (Black. Fornell's looking for black. What Fornell knows about tuxes could fill an especially small thimble. He's worn one precisely twice in his life.)

Gibbs does feel pretty satisfied to see the waist measure has dropped from a (snug) 39 inches (Tony and Ziva's wedding tux) to 34 (33 ½ really.) He's more satisfied to see Fornell staring at him about it. Though getting measured now is making him wonder if this stupid thing is going to fit in October.

"Isn't the wedding eight months from now? You're not moving it up, are you?"

"Still set for October," Fornell answers, looking at different black vests.

"So why are we doing this now?"

Fornell sighs. "Got some sort of formal thing in May we're going to."

That triggers a memory for Gibbs, so he fires off a text to Tony. Your dad's wedding going to be
formal?

A minute later he gets, Black tie.

Am I invited?"

Last I heard, this was going to be a close, intimate gathering of Dad, Delphine and every other person on Earth they've ever met. Yeah, you're gonna be invited. Why?

Looking at tuxes with Fornell for his wedding, wanted to know if I'll need one for more than two days.

Two days? You getting married again without telling us?

Gibbs laughs. Back to work, DiNozzo.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I want all the details later.

Fornell's reading over his shoulder. "That's a good question, why do you need one for more than two days?"

Gibbs grins. "Hot date tonight."

Fornell punches him in the shoulder and laughs. "You son of a bitch."

An hour later they left, Gibbs with a tux in a bag over his shoulder (plus his receipts for rentals in May and October. The sales associate promised him that if he wanted to re-measure closer to time and change the size that wasn't a problem.) Fornell with the paperwork for both the wedding in October and his 'formal thing' in May.

The tux place is near a mall. The mall has food. So, as they're heading out, Fornell says, "Lunch?"

"Sure."

They find an Indian place that looks promising and settle in for curry and naan.

"So… you, size 34… that just that Bootcamp thing you're doing with the boys?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "Running a lot. Jimmy got me doing some stuff when my knee was hurting, that helps, too."

"What kind of stuff?"

Gibbs looks up and shakes his head. "You'd never believe it."

"Like what? You a vegetarian now?"

Gibbs takes a deliberate bite of his lamb vindaloo curry. "Not that unbelievable. It might be yoga."

"Might be?" Fornell asks with a smile.

"He wanted me to actually do it, so he couldn't just call it that, could he? But I know he and Tim do it and there's stretching stuff, so…"

Fornell laughs. "Stealth yoga."
Gibbs shrugs. "It helps. It's hard. I could do it when my knee wouldn't hold me. Being more flexible is kind of nice. Got better over-all strength which is good. Got back to running, didn't hurt as bad as I thought it was going to."

"You've got a girlfriend who's twenty years younger, you better keep working out. And get your heart checked. Otherwise you're going out with a smile on your face."

Gibbs smirks. "Good for that, too."

Fornell's eyes narrow. "Good how? Heart good?"

"Probably good for that, too."

"Younger girlfriend good. So... good how?"

"Everything moves easier good. Low back doesn't complain if I'm on top. Haven't tried yet, but if my knee'll hold, my back will, too, for standing up."

Fornell thinks about that, after all he's got a honeymoon coming up. "Huh. Palmer taught you this?"

"He's a doctor."

"Well, yeah, but... Palmer? Goofy one with the glasses, right?" (Fornell has DiNozzo and McGee firmly in his mind. Palmer is, especially in regards to any sort of image of a physical body, a somewhat fuzzier proposition.)

Gibbs sighs. He doesn't like to admit he notices stuff like this, but... "Remember those naked pretty-boys Emily's got on her phone?" (The reason Gibbs knows about them is because Fornell found them, and once he started breathing again, he called Gibbs to have a complete and utter meltdown of epic proportions.)

Fornell nods, slowly, malice in his gaze. "Had on her phone." Those guys were very naked and doing indecent things to each other. Stuff he didn't know about until he was in his thirties. Finding them on his seventeen-year-old daughter's phone had been horrifying.

Gibbs gives Fornell his yeah right look. The chance those boys weren't back on there the second she got her phone back, just better hidden, is non-existent. "Jimmy's built like them."

"What?" Fornell's coffee stops midway to his mouth as he just stares at Gibbs.

"Yeah." Gibbs nods.

"Really?" Fornell puts the coffee down, looking really perplexed.

"Yeah. Kid's ripped. I wasn't that toned when I was a Marine. I wasn't that toned when I was an eighteen-year-old Marine, let alone thirty-eight."

Fornell's eyebrows are high. "I didn't know real people could look like that."

Gibbs spreads his hands wide and shakes his head.

Fornell thinks some more about this and purses his lips. "Think he'd be willing to talk to me about it?"

"Offer to buy him lunch, and he might. He made me show him what kind of exercises I had been doing, and then he spent the whole time wincing at me and groaning about how no wonder my knee
ripped to shreds, I'd been killing them for years. And then he showed me how to actually do the
damn things and suddenly even a pull up was a hundred times harder."

"How can a pull-up be harder?"

"You're supposed to do them slow."

"What?"

"Yeah. Then fast, then just sort of hover half way, then bounce some, slow, then all the way up and
all the way down, slow again. Then, if you're showing off, you do 'em one handed. First time we did
Bootcamp he punched me, staggered me, and I was already braced for it. Didn't know how he had
that much force. Then I saw him do pull-ups. Mystery solved."

Fornell laughs at that then shakes his head. "Palmer."

Gibbs nods.

On the way back to his truck, Gibbs texts Abby. What's the name of the bakery that did your
wedding cakes?

He's in the ABC store to pick up some bourbon when he gets the answer back along with: And you
need a baker why? Would this have anything to do with the tux? Seriously, you getting married
again?

It's my night to bring dessert. No. I'm not getting married again. Tell DiNozzo more working and
less gossiping.

Slow day, Gibbs, gossip keeps us going.

Paperwork?

You know it. Tim's beta version goes live tomorrow, but right now we're filling out forms. Dessert,
huh? Sounds like fun. When you gonna bring her to Shabbos?

Back to work, Abbs.

Hey, am I Abbs and her Abby? That's going to be confusing, isn't it? I mean, you're not still calling
her Borin, right? That'd just be wrong.

Paperwork's not doing itself, McGee.

J Oooo! I like that. 'Course you do that, and Tim'll be just as likely to answer as I am.

Getting in the car now.

Fine, I'll quit bugging you.

Gibbs is buckling his seatbelt when his phone buzzes again.

I lied. That bakery, they make the most amazing chocolate-covered strawberries. The berries are
huge, and they soak them in brandy, then fill them with whipped cream, and then dip them in
chocolate. If Abby likes strawberries, you've got to get some for her.

Thanks Abbs.
Ziva says when they went out for drinks, she got a strawberry margarita.

I'll keep that in mind.

She also says you better bring Abby to Shabbos soon.

Are you all just sitting around the lab gossiping?

We're in Autopsy. Tony still wants to know why you need a tux, and Jimmy wants to know why he just got a call from Fornell.

Gibbs sighs, looks up at the ceiling of his truck, supposes having people in his business is part of this whole family-loving-you-thing, but sometimes it's a pain in the ass.

Fornell wants to get in better shape, and the tux is private.

Cool! Chocolate covered strawberries and tux! Oh yeah! Lucky Abby! Suggest that to Tim at some point. You got one with a vest right? Cummerbunds look kind of dumb. Not that you'd look dumb in any sort of tux, but vests are better. And you're just about to shoot your phone, so I'll shut up. Have fun on your date.

Thanks. He turns off his phone and stuffs it in the glove compartment. And then a few seconds later he pulls it back out and turns on Google Maps so he can find the bakery.

---

Tux, check. Dessert, check. Bourbon, check. He feels like there should be something else… An idea springs to mind. Honey dust… Not check. That would be fun. He pulls out his phone and then immediately decides there is no way in Hell he's texting Tony to find out where he got the stuff in the first place.

(When the box with no card and the honey dust showed up for Christmas of ’02, he thought it had been a present from Elizabeth. She certainly enjoyed it, and he did, too. But she didn't know where it came from and suggested he needed to do a better job keeping track of his girlfriends if he didn't know who was sending him sex toys. When Christmas turned to New Years, and New Years to Valentines, and no bottle of bourbon showed up, he figured out how he ended up with the Honey Dust. Getting a chance to tease Tony with it later was just icing on the cake. Honestly, it's the best Christmas present he's ever gotten from Tony. Certainly the one he had the most fun with.)

So he googles where to find it instead.

Four places sell it in DC, and one of them is in a decent, expensive neighborhood, so hopefully it won't be too sleazy.

He shakes his head and snorts a little, another Adventure, though this time without Molly.

---

Having been married four times, and having dated a lot between those marriages, and dated some more after them, Gibbs is pretty confident in the idea that he knows his way around a woman and is well-versed in the art of sex.

That, on a purely technical level, he knows what he's doing.

And he's a cop, so he's seen a lot of… weird… stuff over the years.

So, it's not like he's some sort of nervous virgin as he's walking into this place, but, best he can
remember, he's never been in a sex shop as a customer. It's a small store, but, *Holy God*, there's a shit ton of sex stuff in here. (And he read the reviews saying this place didn't have an amazing selection.) There is way, way, way more stuff involved in sex than he'd ever dreamed of or… His eyes land on… he's not sure what that thing is, but he's certain he doesn't want to know.

Okay. He wants honey dust. It's got to be in here somewhere. He roams around, looking for the stuff, and finds the lubes and… He knows they come in different flavors. That was true even back when Shannon was still alive. But, they've got… fifty brands, different versions of each brand. Who can possibly know, that specifically, what kind of slippery stuff they like? (He ends up grabbing three kinds. When it comes down to it, he wouldn't *mind* knowing that specifically what sort he likes.)

Condoms are near the lube, he guesses that makes sense. When he'd grabbed some after their first date he hadn't really spent much time perusing the selection. Just grabbed what looked like the thinnest sort they had, and went with that. But he's in a sex shop for God's sake, and he's got four hours before he needs to be anywhere else, so he might as well look.

So he looks. And like everything else, this has changed since he did it last. (He can't really imagine how what's basically technology from the dark ages has managed to change this much in five years, but… It has.)

He picks up a "more sensation" pack, which he's in favor of, sees the shape is kind of different than what he's used to, and thinks about it for a minute. He's about to just put them in the little basket with everything else, try 'em out and see, but he notices the price and decides maybe he doesn't want to spend that much if he can't tell the difference.

He gets his phone out. And then, shaking his head, he puts it back in his pocket and puts them back on the shelf. He's good with what he's already got.

Okay, honey dust has to be somewhere. (And no, he's not about to ask where.) Fortunately it's in the next aisle over, and shit, it comes in like seven flavors now, too. (Coffee and bourbon not among them.)

There's a four pack so he grabs that, can taste them when he gets home, and pick there.

He heads toward the register, back through the condom aisle, and stares at the boxes again.

This time his phone comes out and he actually texts. *You alone, or is the gab fest still going on in Autopsy?*

Tim sends back. *I have no idea what they're doing in Autopsy. I'm in my office overseeing the installation of the paperwork software for my guys. So I'm not alone, but no one's reading over my shoulder, either.*

*Got a minute?*

*Yeah, a few. This is the boring part. Ten minutes we'll start finding new and interesting ways to break it.*

Gibbs stares at his phone, and stares at the package, and back at his phone. Fuck it, he's gonna ask. *Extra sensitive condoms, ones that're shaped weird, they actually feel different?*

Tim has to read that three times to make himself believe it's actually on his phone.

Gibbs is staring at his phone and the utter lack of response on it, imagining (pretty accurately) the
look on Tim's face right now.

Finally he gets back. *I can't really feel a difference. Jimmy think's I'm insane and likes them better.*

*Do I want to know why you know that about Jimmy?*

*Stocking Tony's honeymoon box. Turns out we didn't agree on what the best kind were. Which is why Tony got a few kinds. So he's probably got an opinion, too, I just don't know what it is.*

Gibbs shakes his head.

*Do I want to know why you're asking?*

*Wondering if it's worth the extra money.*

*Jimmy's got them if you wanted to snag one to just try them.*

*No. Gibbs literally cannot imagine the conversation that would be involved with doing that. He can feel Tim laughing at the idea of it, though.*

There's another pause where nothing comes up, and Gibbs decides what the hell, they don't cost *that* much, and they sell three packs so... He puts it in his basket.

*You know about putting a little extra lube inside them, right? Pops up as he's about to step closer to the register.*

That seems like it'd be counter-productive. *Don't want it to slip off.*

*Not that much. Drop in/on the tip, keep it off the shaft, it won't slip off. That, I can feel the difference on.*

Gibbs stares at the phone, and all the lubes in his basket. Might be worth trying.

*System's live, got to go. Pops up on his phone.*

*Hope it works.*

*Thanks.*

---

It's a very black tux.

Wendy's got her heart set on a black and white wedding, so a black and white wedding they're having, and this is the blackest suit Gibbs has ever seen. This isn't so much a color that absorbs all light as a color that scares it off.

It's really black.

And there is a vest. (Fornell tried on the cummerbund. They looked at it, and put it back about two seconds later.) It's black with a charcoal pin stripe. Gibbs honestly isn't sure if it's two colors or if it's just a slightly different texture that reflects the light differently.

*Shirt's white. Little black studs for buttons. Black cuff-links. Black tie (also with the charcoal pinstripe.)*

It's very black. He looks at it, sitting on his bed, and decides he needs to shine his dress shoes. If he's
going to be this sharp looking he can't have dull shoes. So he does.

Slipping into the tux feels a little weird. Not bad say, just… yeah, weird. It's one thing if say he's getting ready to give away a bride or get married himself (both of the times he's worn a tux previously) he's got that firmly entrenched in stuff that goes along with weddings in his mind.

He's gotten dressed up for a nice date out, but, they aren't going out… This is just because she wants to see him in a tux. And as reasons for getting dressed up go, doing it because she enjoys it seems just fine, it still feels a little weird.

He's looking in the mirror, tying the tie when why this is weird really hits him.

It's weird because it's him going out of his way to be physically attractive to a woman. If Gibbs can be said to have any sort of dating game, it's all personality based. Which is not to say he's unaware of the fact that he is (and was, definitely was) an attractive looking guy, but it's not anything he's ever done anything about, either. (For example, at no point when he's purchased clothing has the thought 'Do I look good in this?' ever occurred to him. 'Does it fit? Is it comfortable? Will it last? How much does it cost?' He's thought of all of those things, but 'Does this color make my eyes look good?' let alone, 'Does this show off my butt nicely?' are collections of words that have never appeared together in his mind.)

Until now. Because right now he's doing this so she can enjoy looking at him. He knows in an abstract sort of way that women must like looking. He knows that when he was younger he'd sometimes catch them doing it.

All the pictures Shannon took of him certainly indicated she liked looking at him.

But it's still a novel sensation to realize that he's getting dressed up so a woman can look at him, and then take his clothing off.

And it's certainly not like he minds the idea. And it's definitely not like he hasn't put clothing on hoping it was going to come off soon, but this feels different.

He looks at himself again, very black tux looking crisp and formal, straightens the tie a hair, checks his cuff-links, and decides he looks good. He's sort of vaguely thinking that if this is something he's going to do more than once, maybe he should talk to Tony, because if anyone he knows understands how this attempting to look good thing works, he does.

Enough of that. He grabs the bag with the dessert, bourbon, and honey dust in it, tugs on his coat, makes sure Mona's got lots of food and water, and then heads off.
Tonight

Borin's house is a brick row house in DC proper. Small, but she lives alone and is rarely home. Good neighborhood. Gibbs' truck is probably about two standard deviations less expensive than most of the cars he sees lining the road, and it takes him a while to find parking.

He likes neighborhoods like this. Sidewalk. Old trees over-arching the street. Row houses with front stoops a few steps up from the sidewalk. In the spring and summer there are probably people who spend time on them, chatting with the neighbors. Each house has a tiny, fenced-in backyard. Big enough for a patio with a grill and maybe a baby pool. (Though, there probably aren't too many people with kids in this neighborhood.)

A few of the neighbors give him a curious look as he's heading toward her door. Since the tux isn't visible under his coat, he's assuming that means that these people have a good enough feel for who lives here that they recognize him as an outsider.

It's winter (ish, got up to 45 today), so he can't really tell, but there are tidy, wrought iron flower boxes on the first floor windows, and what looks like a planter right next to the front door, so come spring time, he's thinking Borin's got some plants in front of her house.

He knocks, and hears, "Come on it." Which is promising, though he'd kind of prefer she open the door for him. Still, he's got no idea what she's up to, so in he goes.

"Hello," he calls out, closing and locking the door behind him. He doesn't see her. He's in a tiny foyer area, steps leading right up, long hall heading all the way back to the… whatever's in the back. There's a coat rack against the wall, and shelves under the stairs with keys, mail, and her phone charger on it.

"Down in a minute. Come on in."

He puts his bag on the bottom step and hangs his coat up, looking around. Hardwood floors. The long wall is cream-colored, he thinks it might be original plaster and lathe. The wall against the stairs is raw brick, and there's what he's guessing is oak (very dark stain, matches the floors) trim.

"Okay." He looks at the shelves. Besides her shelf for random stuff, there are books, fiction and history, DVDs, mostly action flicks, though he notices some things he might call fluffy romances, interspersed with pictures of what he assumes is Montana and pictures of people who are probably her parents, sister, and sister's family.

He looks closely at a picture of her with her parents and comes to a somewhat distressing conclusion, they can't be more than ten years older than he is, and five is even more likely.

He heads down the hall, first door on the left leads into a small living room. It's mostly light blue and white, with dark blue furniture and the dark brown floor. It's bright and airy, but he couldn't have guessed if the person living here was male or female based on it.

He's thinking about checking out the next room when he hears, "Lord, you clean up good!"

He turns to face her, and… God, he's not the only one who cleaned up good today.

And sure, it's true he's not entirely used to being the one getting looked at, but he certainly appreciates the way her eyes are trailing over him, and he really doesn't mind the fact that this is old hat to her, and she is very definitely dressed to be looked at.
Lord, she's worth looking at. "Wow," he says and swallows, hard. He completely understands why she didn't get the door. She's in… He doesn't know what it's called. It's black and silky and starts at one shoulder and falls all the way to the floor and it's cut hip high on her left leg and there's scarlet lace edging where the dress (Maybe. Nightgown? Negligee? That'll cover it.) cuts away over her leg. His mouth opens to say a few things, but keeps shutting without words coming out.

She closes to him and kisses him, arms wrapping around his neck. "I take it you approve."

He nods slowly and then pulls her in tight for more kisses. Yes, he approves of this. If he approved of this any more, there'd be so little blood left in his brain he'd pass out.

"You're gorgeous," comes out of his mouth, and she smiles at him, stepping back, looking him over again.

"Likewise."

He laughs at that and rolls his eyes a bit. Speaking of words that have never entered his mind in relation to his idea of his own body…

She lays her index finger on his lips, shakes her head, and says, "You are not allowed to disagree with or mock my opinion on this."

That gets an amused smile out of him. "Am I allowed to suggest that you may need glasses?"

"No."

He kisses the tip of her finger, nibbling it gently, and, as she pulls her finger away, asks, "Is that an order?" Technically, since she was an officer and he was a non-com, she outranked him. Though he had more years in and was a higher pay grade.

"Damn right, Gunny."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Her fingers trace over his lapels, coming to rest on his hips as she looks him up and down again. "I really like this."

He smiles, lightly brushes his hand over her bare shoulder. Part of him (especially one very insistent part that has been patiently waiting since morning and is currently feeling rather constrained by the presence of trousers) wants to step in close and kiss her senseless and then put that sofa to good use. Part of him (this would be his brain) thinks that checking in and seeing if she had any plans besides immediate sex in the living room is a good idea.

His brain won. (Sort of.) He kisses her ear, throat, and shoulder, inhaling against her neck, enjoying her scent and the smoothness of her bare skin against his lips, and then says, "Your play tonight, what are we doing?"

"Come upstairs."

He nods, smiling widely at that. He's all in favor of upstairs. "Lead on."

She smiles, taking his hands, and pulling him toward her staircase. "You bring dessert?"

He nods again.

"Good." She sees the brown paper bag sitting on her bottom step. She's on the bottom stair, and he's
right behind her, but still on the first floor. She stops, turning toward him, and pulls him close, stroking his face before kissing him, wet and slow. She breaks it when his hands tighten on her rear. "Question for you, are you the sort of man who likes to eat dessert first?"

"I am tonight."

"Fabulous." One more lingering kiss, and as she pulls back he sucks her bottom lip, trying to keep her near for another second. "Grab that bag and follow me."

Gibbs does as told, grabbing the bag and following her up the stairs, very much enjoying the view of her climbing the steps right in front of him. He makes it four whole steps before the hand that isn't carrying the desserts cups over her ass, stroking the full, soft curve that draws his eyes as she walks ahead of him.

She looks down at him, over her shoulder. "Like that?"

He nods, fingers lightly skimming over the negligee, hooking into the hip-high slit, pulling it back and up so he's got her bare skin in sight, and lays a soft, gentle kiss on her curve of her butt, followed by a quick, sharp nip. "Oh yeah. Love that."

She wiggles a little for him, and then heads up the rest of the stairs, fast. He follows, eager.

He was expecting upstairs to be like downstairs, long hall, small rooms (he assumes, only saw the one, but this isn't the first row house he's been in) but it's not. It's her house. She lives alone. So she made it the way she liked it. She ripped out everything but the studs for the supporting wall (which had a fireplace in it and she wanted to keep that, anyway) and turned her upstairs into one big bedroom.

So, it's a long, open space, fireplace flanked by pillars (all some sort of dark green thing, he's too far away to tell what exactly they are, and honestly, doesn't care all that much, either) in the middle, separating what appears to be a living space on the one side, from the sleeping space (and likely bathroom further on) on the other.

There's the same dark, hardwood floors, from downstairs, same exposed brick wall on the one side, the other three walls are light green, the ceiling, what bits of it that are ceiling, she's got a long row of sky lights, is white. If the sun hadn't set an hour ago, this would be a very bright space.

She pauses in front of the fireplace. On one side of it, at her feet, he can see what looks like a comfy, soft rug, and several pillows, on the other side, beyond it, is her bed.

"How crumbly is dessert?"

"Not very. Wanna see?"

"Yes." She grins as he pulls the small box out of the bag and hands it to her.

She opens the box, not seeming to notice, or not caring that the bakery tape had been slit already and looks in. He enjoys the pleasure on her face at seeing one plump, ripe strawberry, covered in chocolate, small mound of whipped cream at its top.

"Only one?" She looks up from the chocolate-covered strawberry in the box. (He'd bought two, but once he got the honey dust, he also got an idea in mind, and he liked that idea, so... He ate his at home. Abby... Abbs was right; it was awesome.)

He grins. "That's your dessert."
"Mine? What are you having?"

He sets the bag on the floor and pulls out the small tin of honey dust (decided on honeysuckle flavor) and the little feather duster that went with it. He spends a long minute looking her up and down, making sure she can feel his eyes all over her skin, then he grins and says, "You."

She smiles, delighted at that. And he laughs, enjoying how happy she is right now.

She reaches for his hands, and says, "Bed. Dessert's in bed."

He nods. Gibbs approves of dessert in bed.

King-sized bed, black metal of some sort, more light green for the sheets, dark green for the quilt and pillows. He's paying just enough attention to the bed to notice that she's already turned down the blankets, and then he's paying attention to her on the bed, which is vastly more interesting to him.

She's sitting in the middle of the bed, legs folded under her, the naked one visible, as she lifts the strawberry out of the box. He quickly goes to sit next to her, kicking off he shoes as he does. He takes the jacket off, hanging it on one of the bedposts, and she smiles, approving of that.

"You look good in vests."

He just sort of looks at it. "Don't usually wear them."

"Nope. Didn't think you did."

She lifts the strawberry to her lips and begins to eat it, making a very pleased sound as she does so. Gibbs has noticed that sometimes Tim gets a kind of stupid look on his face when he watches his Abby eat strawberries, and right now, Gibbs is fully, utterly, completely understanding that look because he's awfully sure it's all over his face, too.

It's big enough that it's a several bite strawberry, but she hasn't bitten it, yet. No, she's carefully licking every tiny little bit of whipped cream that oozed out of it off, and doing that melted the chocolate some, so she sucks the chocolate off her fingers, and then sucks more of the chocolate from the tip of the strawberry and he's never, ever going to be able to watch her eat one of these damn things without getting a hard-on again.

He's biting his lip, watching her eat that damn thing, feeling each lick and suck as if it's happening to him.

She's grinning at him as her tongue flicks over the tip of the strawberry. He groans quietly, pulling her into his lap and grinding into her. She smiles, takes a tiny nibble from the fruit and then kisses him, sharing the sharp/sweet/cream/sour/boozy/chocolate rush of flavors with him.

He sucks it off her tongue, and then sucks her just for the sake of doing it, just for the flavor of her and the feel of her skin on his.

"You like it?" he asks, kissing her jaw as she takes another bite.

"Oh yeah. Good choice." She kisses his lips again, again sharing the dessert, again he takes his time kissing all traces of it off of her.

Third bite and done. She carefully licks and sucks each finger clean, and again, just the visual of that is enough to make him want to tip her off his lap, pull himself out of his pants and watch her wrap
her lips around him. (God, there's a visual, him in this suit all put together and proper, standing up, her on the bed, hands and knees, sucking him off. That makes him bit his lip, too.)

Once her fingers are clean, all traces of sugar gone, she carefully takes his tie in hand, loosening it, which is a good thing because if he has to spend another minute in this suit he's going to explode. He's firmly convinced that right this second he should be naked, she should really be naked, and every part of him that can feel should be touching her.

His tie hits the floor, and he's already got the vest unbuttoned, so that goes next. He gets the cufflinks while she undoes his shirt and he's about to peel it off, but she takes his hands in hers, stops him, and spends a moment just looking, again.

She wants to look. She gets to look. He carefully scoots her so she's not in his lap anymore and stands up. White tux shirt, unbuttoned, black belt, dress slacks, very visible erection tenting them, black socks. Her eyes trail up and down him as he pushes the shirt off, and slowly strips off the belt.

She licks her lips as he does that, eyes on his dick through his pants, and he's deciding he's really liking this getting looked at thing. He gives himself a firm squeeze and her eyes light up at that, too. Then he unbuttons and unzips the pants, letting them hit the floor.

Getting out of them and the socks off probably wasn't the most graceful or erotic move ever, but it didn't take long, and then he's standing in front of her, naked save for boxers.

She'd been sitting on the bed, but once he's standing there (at parade rest, though he's not aware of that) she shifts to kneeling, and both of her hands come to rest on his chest, fingers twining in his chest hair, and then slipping down, stroking him through his boxers, (He groans quietly at that.) before slipping up to the waistband and pulling them off of him.

She looks him over again, eyes to toes, her gaze travelling all over him, lingering on face, shoulders, chest, cock, hips. She bends down, gently kissing the tip of his dick, giving it a very soft little lick, and as much as he wants her to keep doing that, he had some other plans for tonight that are going to be a hell of a lot less fun if he lets her get him off before he does them.

He pulls her face to face, and kisses her again. "Do I get to taste my dessert?"

"Oh yeah." He begins tugging at the negligee, looking to lift it over her head, but she's got to shift a bit, get it out from under her knees first. Then he pulls it up and over, tossing it behind him.

He growls gently at her, looking his fill at her naked and kneeling in front of him. One more kiss, one long, deep, tongue thrusting, in and out, rubbing against her, reveling in her skin against his, kiss, before tearing away. "On the bed, on your stomach."

She does as told, lying diagonally across the bed, turning so she can watch him.

He carefully unscrews the lid on the tin, sweeps the little cluster of feathers into it, and gently, lightly sprinkles the honey dust over her back. She tenses as it lands, but he knows it's too fine to really feel. It smells like honey and honeysuckle, sweet and summery, as he showers another puff of it across her low back, and one more along her legs.

Time to play.

She's laying on her stomach, hair wild, one hand clenched in the sheets, the other one pillow ed under her cheek, squirming gorgeously as he strokes the little cluster of feathers over her spine, delicately swirling it across her shoulders, taking a second to dip it back into the powder, and lightly sprinkle more of it amid the freckles across her low back, then stroking again, gently, across the dimples on
And if the squirming she was doing when he was stroking the feathers across her skin was gorgeous, the way she's moving, arching into him and cursing quietly as he retraces, backwards, the path of the feathers with his tongue is astounding in its beauty.

He could very happily stay right here, nibbling the crest of her hip, mapping every freckle on her body with his tongue, but there's teasing, and then there's drawing things out too long, and he doesn't yet know exactly where that line is, so he begins to kiss his way down her body, trailing nipping kisses down the back of her thigh, leaving small, pink suck marks on the insides of her knees. When he gets to her ankle he says, "Flip over."

She does, and he sighs, very happy, very turned on. Nothing like a begging woman laid out wet and naked in front of him.

He starts at the tops of her feet, brushing the honey dust over them, watching her toes twitch and curl as he hits tickly spots. He nibbles there, licking the path of the feathers, holding her ankle when she tries to jerk it away.

He switches from licks to firm sucks, and instead of jerking away, ticklish, she relaxes, moaning. "Better?"

"Ya think?" she answers perfectly mimicking his usual inflection. "Could be even better if you slide on up here."

"Oh, I'll get there." His eyes sparkle as he says that, dipping the feathers back into the honey dust, trailing them up along the inside of her leg. He stops about mid-thigh, not that he doesn't want to play there, too, but that's one spot of a woman he wants to smell and taste like woman.

One more dip into the honey dust, this time spreading it along her stomach, over the tips of her breasts, and down the inside of one arm. (Okay, that was just to watch her squirm. He's fairly sure he's never going to get tired of that.)

He goes to her wrist, kissing intently, licking the honey dust off of her, trailing his lips and tongue over her arm, to her collarbone. He nibbles along it, focusing on her breath, the soft gasping sounds she's making as each, wet, sucking kiss falls to her skin.

Eventually he gets to her breasts, gently licking them, making sure to suck lightly on them. Abby's arching into him, whimpering, begging him for more, and by that point, as much as he wants to linger, kiss and suck each inch of her, he wants more, too.

He wants her on his tongue. He wants to feast on her, so he slides down her body, laying between her legs, and begins licking in earnest.

Wet, hot woman. Nothing else on earth tastes like this, and he loves it.

Her hips rock in time with his tongue, as her breathing speeds up and she moans along with each stroke of his tongue.

He gets his fingers into the game, alternating between thrusting into her, and then stroking himself. Tasting her, feeling his cock slick with her juices feels fucking amazing. Then back to thrusting because there's this sound she makes as he hits that little spot, a sort of quick, gasped, "Fuck!" and he wants to hear her make that sound a lot.
Her legs are starting to go tight, and that gasped "Fuck!" has gotten higher pitched. He thinks that means she's getting close, and he wants to watch her come, wants to kiss her while she hits her crest, so he pulls back to slide up.

She groans when he pulls back, tugging his hair, in a very commanding, *get back down there and finish that*, sort of way.

Gibbs pulls her hand free from his hair and puts it firmly, *that stays there, or I tie you down next time* clear in the pressure on her wrist, back on the mattress. He shifts so he's on his side, next to her, his body over that one arm, his left arm under her neck, his right leg draped over her left leg, keeping her pinned in place.

His thumb finds her clit and his first two fingers slip inside her again, setting a fast, firm rubbing thrust. His lips fall to her nipple, sucking, wet and hard and it doesn't take long before she's squirming and moaning and going tight against him again.

He can feel the tension in her thigh, feel the tightness on her fingers, she's close. He pulls away from her breast, so he can watch her face, expression tight, mouth open, panting moans filling the room, sweeter than any music he's ever heard. He kisses her lips, tastes her moans.

She's thrashing against him, wild, demanding more and faster, and then her hips jerk, hard and again, and once more, again, softer that time. He gentles his touch, eventually settling for just touching, no movement, but doesn't stop kissing.

Her breathing slows, interspersed with very content sounding purrs/sighs, and slow, sated, lazy kisses.

Her free hand, which had been clenching onto the headboard, finds the back of his head and gently strokes his hair. "You almost got shot when you stopped going down on me."

He pulls back and grins. "Wanted to watch. Can't do that from down there. Figured you'd forgive me if I made it worth your while."

She kisses him. "You did. But I'm not sure about forgiveness." She rolls him over so he's on his back and she's straddling his stomach, pinning his wrists to the mattress. "Do I need to cuff you to get you to stay down?"

He really likes the sound of what's going to happen next.

"You got 'em right here?"

"Downstairs."

He grins. "Next time. I can hold still for now."

She grins back. "You better. Or I'll leave you hanging and take at least three minutes to go find them."

He licks his lips. "Yes, Ma'am."

"Good. Your hands come off the headboard, everything stops."

He nods again, really, really liking where he's thinking this is going to go.

She stares at him, reading his face. "You really good with this? Not going to flip out after?"
He nods. Sure, he hasn't played this half of the game since 1990. This is a level of intimacy/release/whatever he hasn't been willing to allow himself since he was with Shannon. This is something that hasn't felt right in a very long time. Sure, like he told Jen, he doesn't always have to be on top, but being in control is something he did need, always needed, because if he wasn't in control… But right now, he doesn't need it.

And that feels really good. That feels light and happy and just, all over, good.

His fingers curl into the slats of the headboard. "I'm very good with this."

She lifts up and brushes her pubic hair against his dick. He twitches, jaw clenching at the wet, tickly feel of that, a low ragged breath ripping out of him.

"Like that, too?"

"Fuck, yes."

She does it again, letting her body get even closer, so he can feel not just wet hair, but her heat. His dick's straining, trying to get to and in her, begging for real contact, but she stays, teasingly, just barely out of reach.

"You really had a vasectomy?"

He nods. Swallowing hard as she reaches for him, shifts his angle a bit, and then sinks down onto him in a slow, hot, wet, vibrant rush of red-gold pleasure.

He stops breathing as she does it, hands clenching on the headboard, hips surging up into her, wanting to slam into hot, wet paradise over and over, but she gets settled on him, presses her hands into his hips, and says, "Still."

He bites his bottom lip, but holds still, lets her set the pace.

She's going to kill him. Long, slow strokes up and down, little squeezes along the length and when just the tip of him is inside her. Between her naked skin on his, and waiting all day, and already having gone down on her so he can still taste and smell her on his lips, he's dying from wanting.

He's trying to be still, trying to keep holding onto the headboard and not grab her hips and pull her down hard on him.

Maybe she feels his tension, maybe she just wants to go faster herself, but she starts to speed up, which makes it easier for him to not move.

"Look at me, Jethro."

He didn't realize his eyes were closed, but they must have been. He gets them open, and she leans back a little, her whole body on display, riding him, and she starts touching herself, and he can see his dick sinking into her, see her skin flush and her nipples hard, see her finger flying over her clit, feel the little brushes of her finger tips against him as she goes back to that crying slow pace, inching up and down him, taking him to the root as her fingers move faster and her body grows tighter on him.

He's whimpering. There's no dignified version of the sound ripping out of him as she keeps taking him all the way from tip to root, and when she comes, when twitching, rippling, hot, wet, snug, tight, and again so wet and so slick, and so fucking good is slipping over and over on him, whimpering stops and is replaced with full-on cursing.
His arms are so tight he can feel them shaking, but he's not letting go of that headboard. She slips off of him and if the cursing from before was an expression of *this feels amazing, keep doing it*, the cursing going on now is significantly less happy.

And then she sucks him down in one long draw and the deep and sincere "FUCK!" that jerks out of him is very, very happy with this.

This time she's going fast. Firm suction, keeping her hand going with her mouth, and it's not going to take much of this to tip him over, maybe another minute, probably less.

His balls are pulling in tight, his legs are tensing, his toes are starting to curl, just a few more strokes of her brilliant, glorious, fabulous all good things that have ever been good mouth and he'll be gone and then she pulls all the way off and just stops.

Completely let go of him.

That gets some less than happy cursing, too. Then his eyes open, and he finds her kneeling next to him, looking very amused.

"I did not do this to you," he says when he gets the ability to talk back.

"I figure you'll forgive me if I make it worth your while."

"You better."

She grins, and then leans over and kisses his lips. "Promise." For a full minute she only touches his lips. A long, hot, hard, deep kiss, keeping him focused on what's to come without actually getting the rest of his body into it.

"Sit up," she tells him as she breaks the kiss. He tries to figure out how to do that without letting go of the headboard and she shakes her head. So he lets go, and sits up. She props some of the pillows against the headboard and he gets comfortable. Pillows between him and the headboard, so he can't keep hold of it now, so his hands curl into fists at his sides.

Borin turns so she's facing away from him. "Remember something about you liking this view."

"Fuck yeah, " he says through clenched teeth. He likes any view of her about to fuck him. But yes, her ass from five inches away, as she's sinking, "Fuck!" (that's something of a whimper, too) slowly down on him, yeah, that's a winner in his book.

He's even more sensitive now, because she stopped, because she made him wait, and every move sparks hot pleasure all through him. This time, after that first stroke, she doesn't go slow. This time there's nothing soft or gentle or tentative about this. She's absolutely fucking him, slamming up and down onto him and every stroke has him panting and begging for more.

He's cresting fast, everything tight and hard, God, so hard, so, so, so hard, feels like it's never been this hard as she rocks back and forth, hands and knees, breakneck pace, his heart pounding as he yells when the first pulse hits along with a scalding wave of pleasure.

Rush after rush of it, hot, tingling spurts of pleasure, and when it stops, she's resting, back against his chest, and his hands are still on the bed.

He exhales, long and hard, uncurls his fingers (they're sore from having been so tightly held), and then kisses her shoulder. He sits there, wiped out, for a few moments before saying, "You're forgiven."
She laughs at that, reaches for the tissues, cleans them up, and snuggles into him.

---

He wakes up with a jerk when he feels her move out of bed. For a moment he lays there, blinking, seeing her finding her robe and pulling it on.

He rubs his eyes, propping up on one elbow. "What's up?"

"Hungry. You want some dinner?"

He blinks again, feeling pretty muzzy. Going back to sleep sounds good, but his stomach rumbles, so apparently it has opinions about that.

"I'll take that as a yes. You take a few minutes and wake up, then come on down."

He does, laying on her bed, drowsing a bit, enjoying being this relaxed and happy and feeling this good all over. Then he rolls over, yawns, and realizes that the only clothing he has over here is a tux. The tux he's not precisely feeling motivated to get back into right now.

He's really hoping this won't bug her as he grabs the blanket from the back of her over-stuffed recliner and wraps it toga-style around himself. (Stephanie, for example, did not like his naked body touching any of her stuff, especially his post-sex, not-yet-showered naked body, and would have chewed him out for not putting on boxers, too.)

He pads down the stairs, peeking into what appears to be a powder room, and dining room, not seeing her in either of them, finally locating her in the kitchen at the end of the hallway. Like the rest of the rooms downstairs it's fairly small. This one has exposed brick walls on both sides. Though the rest of the room is cream colored. There's a stainless-steel counter along most of the back wall. (The fridge/freezer combo is on one side and the door to the outside is on the other.) Sink, dishwasher, and oven are all along the right wall. Six shelves covered in pantry goods are at his back.

In the center is an island (oak, stainless steel top), where she's laying out little trays of take-out sushi from the fridge.

"Wasn't sure when we'd eat, wanted something that would get over-cooked or go bad or…"

"I like sushi." He recognizes the sticker on the pack. "And I like Shiro's sushi a whole lot."

"This is dinner at least once a week."

He nods as she opens the second tray, and he pulls out one of the stools from under the island. "Eating in here?"

"Thinking that."

He pulls out a stool for her, too. There's a rack over his head with pots and pans on it. "You like to cook?"

She nods, grabbing chopsticks for them. "Don't get to do it a whole lot, but yeah, I do. In the summer those little boxes in the front have basil and cilantro and garlic chives growing in them."

"Yum." (Though he doesn't actually know what garlic chives are, but he likes garlic and he likes onions and that sounds like it'd be in there somewhere."

"Yeah." She lays the chopsticks down, takes three steps to her shelves, and pulls down the soy sauce. "Drinks?"
The bourbon he brought along is upstairs and he's not feeling like getting it. Plus it's not a natural match for sushi. "Water? Beer? What do you have?"

"Green tea?"

"I drink tea." He watches her pour water in a kettle and set it to heat. A second later she pulls out two mugs and puts teabags in them, then sits on the stool next to him.

They eat quietly for a few moments. Just tasting and enjoying each other's presence. Her kettle whistles, lot faster than Gibbs was expecting, but she's got a gas range, so probably higher heat than he gets on his electric. She pours the water over the tea bags, and dinner is complete.

Two more bites, she's watching him chew, and he can feel she's wondering about something, so he looks at her expectantly.

"Why did you have a vasectomy? I mean, I know the main reason, but… You like kids, right?"

He realizes that she's... thirty-eight, thirty-nine, and if she wants kids she can't afford to spend a few years messing around with him. Not with what he knows about himself.

He rubs his mouth, and exhales, putting down his chopsticks, hoping this doesn't kill them.

"I like kids. I like them a lot. I love my girls. And I'll love any little brothers or sisters they'll end up with. I love being with them. I love being a granddad. But… That's my bridge too far. I'm done with kids of my own. I know they can... fix things back, but… Not for me. I'm done. My kids are grown. I've got grandbabies-" He's kind of rambling on, piling words on top of each other, feeling just so wrecked at the idea that this is it, that it takes a second for him to notice she's got her hand on his wrist and is trying to get him to stop.

"Jethro, I'm not tossing you out because you don't want children."

He inhales, feeling better, but… It's a big deal, really big deal, and he's not sure he trusts it. "Sure? You change your mind two years from now, this is still going to be my deal breaker."

She nods. "I strike you as someone who changes her mind a lot?"

"No."

"When I was engaged we talked about it some, but, even then... Kids aren't really my thing. I don't see myself as a mom."

He swallows, looks up at the ceiling, and wipes his mouth. "Fornell and I have the same ex-wife."

That seems like something of a non-sequitor to her, but she waits for him to say more.

"I'd already had the vasectomy, and I told her I didn't want children, but not that I'd had one."

"A child or a vasectomy?"

"Both." She winces at that. "It was a bad marriage. She told me she didn't want kids, too."

Borin can feel where this is going and winces again. "Oh."

"Yeah. Looks like we were both liars. We got divorced when she was pregnant. She and Fornell got married about ten minutes after the ink was dry on our papers. Then they got divorced two years later."
"You're still friends?"

"1999 when we divorced. Caught a case with him in '02, and... yeah. We're still friends. Still friendly with her, too. Emily, the little girl, calls me Uncle Gibbs. Water under a lot of bridges there, but..." He gestures to let her know it's her turn.

"When I think about being a mom, I see myself being a mom, not... juggling it with being a cop. I'd want to be there, and I can't do that, not with this job. I don't even have time for a pet with this job. And I love the job."

He nods along to that.

"I don't see that ever changing. But if it does, I'll sure as hell talk to you about it first, not just... I don't know, jump DiNozzo or something."

He snorts a little at that, and she half-smirks.

"You had it done while you were married, the first time?"

"Yeah."

"I was thinking that. Just didn't think you'd be a one and done sort of guy."

"Oh." Why did you have it done? Makes more sense now. "I wasn't; neither of us were. I was away when Shannon found out she was pregnant, got back for two months, away again for two months, and when I got back she was thirty weeks along. Thought we had lots of time.

"Her mom kept coming down, we were in Lejeune then, but it was a week she wasn't there, and Shannon felt like crap. Felt like crap isn't exactly rare at 32 weeks pregnant. Resting didn't help, and it was more than just the irritable everything hurts feeling like crap. Luckily the next door neighbor was on kid number three and she was talking to Shannon and just didn't like how it looked. I got home from my shift and she grabbed me and told me to take Shannon to the doctor's. So I did. Felt a bit stupid about it, and she did too, because it was just an all-over sort of wrong and she had an appointment in like three days, but we went.

"You know what preeclampsia is?"

She nods.

"So, it was a good thing we went. They gave her meds to get her blood pressure down. And a list of instructions about a mile long, and then sent us home. Shannon was supposed to be on bed rest until Kelly came, which at that point was still looking eight weeks off.

"And I'm a big, dumb jarhead, so what the hell do I know about this stuff? So I call her mom, and she comes down, and I move the TV so it's in our bedroom and get every library book she's ever wanted, take over as much home stuff as I could, but even lying around doing nothing but going to daily doctor's appointments, it wasn't getting better.

He sighs again. "Week thirty-four she moved into the hospital. Forty weeks pregnant is average. Thirty-six weeks is considered cooked all the way. But anything before thirty-eight makes everyone nervous, and back then it wasn't like they could just ultrasound her to check and see how Kelly's lungs were doing. So, it's a balancing act, every day they could keep Kelly inside dropped the morbidity rates," Borin can feel from the way he says that that someone said it to him, exactly like that, and his mind never touched it, never shifted it into his own language, "but every day she was in there Shannon's blood pressure kept going higher. They wanted to get to thirty-six weeks. That was
He closes his eyes, and rubs his forehead, sighing again. "I got done from a shift and headed to the hospital, she was napping, so I didn't wake her up. Just took off my boots and gently snuggled onto the bed, spooning her. She slept for maybe ten more minutes and then she shrieked, and jerked, grabbing at her head... And really bad sudden headache was on the 'holy shit, panic' list, so I got yelling for any and every person who even remotely looked like a doctor. It hurt bad; she was crying. And I was trying to keep her calm, trying to not completely lose my shit, but I wasn't doing too well on it, and then she told the Doc she couldn't see, and...

He bites his lip. "And by that point Kelly was coming out, now. They had time for lidocaine. And I had to help hold her down because I was strong and I was there. And when your blood pressure is that high, it... It was bloody, really bloody, and she was crying because lidocaine just gets the skin, and her head, and...

There are tears in his eyes as he says, "It was bad." He sniffs and wipes them away, swallowing hard a few times. "And... uh... that was it." He shakes his head and licks his lips. "I just... I couldn't do that again. Vasectomy was done before they got home from the hospital." He smiles at Borin, very sad. "I can't... I can't have another child. I can adopt 'em as grown-ups, and I can be Pop, but... No. Can't do that again."

She squeezes his hand. "It's okay."
Dr. Palmer

So far, a week into testing the new paperwork software, it's going, very, very well. Yes, they do have to do all the standard paperwork, on the off chance something in the software doesn't work properly, but for right now it does appear that all of the paperwork that was printing, all filled out, from their computers was coming out perfectly fine.

Or so Ducky thought.

He's looking at his case notes, filling in the form, when he notices a discrepancy. According to his notes there are fractures at both the C1 and C2 vertebrae, along with a complete severing of the spinal cord at C3 (the cause of death.)

According to the form the computer spit out there were fractures at C1 and C2, complete severing of the spinal cord at C3, and hairline fractures of the occipital crest.

"Dratted computer." Now he has to double check. Though, as he thinks about it, that seems to be a very unlikely sort of mistake for the computer to just pull out of thin air. He's suspicious as to how that information got into the computer.

Ducky sorted through the x-rays, found the correct ones, and put them up on the light board. He stares at them intensely for a moment, wipes off his glasses, stares longer, takes a step closer, and… "Buggeration. Mr. Palmer!"

"Excuse me, Dr. Mallard?" They are at work and working, so the formality that marks this as a space apart from home continues between him and Jimmy.

"Mr. Palmer, do you, perhaps recall what I have said to you in regards to maintaining correct and complete notes on all of our cases?"

"It's entirely likely, Dr. Mallard, but in that you've said many things, and I do not know why you're scowling at that x-ray, I'm at a loss for coming up with what specific thing you are looking for."

Ducky points to the x-ray. "That is a collection of hairline fractures along the occipital ridge."

Jimmy heads over, and looks, and knows exactly what is going on. "Yes, Dr. Mallard is it."

"And did I not tell you that if you see something and I do not, that you are to inform me of it?"

"Yes, Dr. Mallard, you did."

"I see you noted that collection of fractures in the case notes, so your lack of verbal explanation would be…"

Jimmy smiles, sad. He's caught and there's no getting out of this. "It's the third time in a month, and for the last year you've been saying that if you miss three in a month it's time to go."

Ducky sees the smile, knows what Jimmy's been doing, and nods, "Indeed it is, Dr. Palmer, indeed it is." Then he squeezes Jimmy's hand. "All things end, Jimmy, even good ones. We enjoy them while we have them, and then we lay them to rest and search for new good things."

Jimmy blinks a few times, and says, "Okay, Ducky."
Actually, it was the seventh thing. They're all little misses. Nothing big. Nothing that would affect cause of death or change their understanding of a case. (Example: broken wrist. Dr. Mallard would catch three of four fractured carpals. It doesn't change how anyone understands what happened, and even in an emergency room that sort of miss would be common.) And Jimmy does catch them, and he makes sure the notes are complete, but with doing them on the computer and by hand, he hasn't been able to hide them, as well.

The few ones that have been big, or big enough to matter, he had told Ducky about, and the look on his face after... It feels like he's stabbing his grandfather.

He knows it's time. By Ducky's three misses a month line it's been time for four months now, but…

The brain is active and strong and willing and knows more about everything than any brain has any right to know, but the eyes won't do the job anymore. Jimmy knows it isn't a matter of better glasses, Ducky would already have them if they could solve the problem. It's just a matter of old eyes.

He watches Ducky settle in at his computer and begin to write up his letter of resignation.

It's not a matter of Jimmy not feeling ready. He looks around Autopsy. This is his job, and he's ready to do it. He's spent almost fifteen years with a man who's taught him every trick from every book. He can, and will, do this.

But this space, this job, is also so Dr. Mallard's (and he's very much Dr. Mallard while he's doing this job.) This is his home and his life, and Jimmy feels almost like an imposter trying to take it over.

A mere mortal trying to stand in the place of a giant.

But, Ducky's a mortal, too. They all are. And he's hit the print key, waiting for the letter to print out, intending to take it directly to Leon.

As of 10:38 on March 3rd 2016, Dr. Jimmy Palmer is now the Medical Examiner at NCIS.

They didn't celebrate Tony becoming Team Leader. Mostly because celebrating him moving up meant celebrating Gibbs moving out. The same is true for Jimmy moving up.

There's also the fact that Jimmy doesn't want to celebrate. Not this. He thinks that was true for Tony, too.

He knows it's time. He knows he's ready. He'll admit that being the guy in charge is a kick. And once he finally noticed that Ducky was doing it (probably the third time it happened) he appreciated and was deeply touched by the "Dr. Palmer" bit.

But it still feels like cheering for a funeral.

And so, at eighty-one years old, thirty-six years after joining NCIS, Dr. Donald Mallard handed in his resignation. Effective immediately he is no longer the Medical Examiner at NCIS. He also gave a month's notice, figuring that staying on for a month as Jimmy's Assistant (he's not precisely sure how that will work, but if Jimmy's the one catching the mistakes, he's the one doing the job, and all Ducky's doing is assisting) would allow enough time to transition smoothly to a new Assistant Medical Examiner.

Thus, April 4th, a month hence, would be his last day at NCIS.
Which means Jimmy's first job (beyond his usual daily work) as a Medical Examiner is hiring a new Assistant Medical Examiner.

And for this first job, Jimmy is happy to have the aid of an extremely talented Assistant.

Human Resources put the job up on the web. They narrowed down the applicants and sent him a stack of resumes. Jimmy had felt confident weeding that stack down to the three he wanted to interview.

The help he wants is in seeing who those three applicants really are.

Ducky and Gibbs might be able to read a man just by looking at him. Jimmy can't, and he knows he can't. Unlike the rest of the team, he hasn't spent the last decade honing any sort of 'gut' that's good at reading people. (Live ones anyway. He's got a great 'gut' for dead ones, and he can read a crime scene like nobody's business, now.) So he proposes one last job for Ducky… as they sit around the autopsy table looking at resumes.

"What I'd like to do is something of a ruse. I'd like them to interview with you, see how they respond to you, and see how they respond to me, thinking that I'm another applicant. I want to see how they'll treat me if they don't think I've got any say in them getting hired, and what they'll say about you behind your back."

Ducky smiles at that. "And should I appear to be an especially doddering old fool?"

Jimmy shakes his head. "Just be you. I want to see if they can tell you aren't a fool or if they'll be lulled by the accent and tendency to chatter."

"Tendency to chatter?"

Jimmy smirks at him. "You aren't my boss anymore, so I feel like I can say this. I worked with you for almost fifteen years and in that time you never shut up. It's honestly unnerving to work with a man who can talk for ten straight hours, day after day after day, and never go over the same thing. Don't get me wrong, the sheer amount of stuff you know is staggering, and I feel like I got three or four PhDs worth of education listening to you, but, hour after hour, sometimes you just have to tune it out."

Ducky smirks back at him. "When do we meet the first one, Dr. Palmer?"

"Tomorrow at ten."

Dr. Samuel Allan, MD from University of Chicago, specialty in infectious diseases, is Jimmy's first choice. He's curious about how a man goes from what is mostly lab work, studying pathogens and bacteria in petri dishes, to wanting to be an Assistant Medical Examiner.

Beyond that curious fact, it's a good resume. Top marks. Worked for the University of Chicago for two years, worked for CDC for another year, and now he's applying here.

Reference are good. Apparently Dr. Allan is quiet, conscientious, and everyone he's worked for would hire him again. In that Jimmy got this job while he was still in medical school, Dr. Allan is also vastly over qualified for this job.

Jimmy's waiting outside of Autopsy, in a nice suit (He'd wear it for an interview if he had one.) calmly reading on his phone, when the elevator opens and Dr. Allan (he presumes) heads in.
Allan stares around, sees him waiting, (not like he's hard to miss) and asks, "Dr. Mallard?"

"Nope. Jimmy Palmer. You interviewing with him today, too?"

"Yeah."

"Good luck then."

"Uh…" Allan turns red, disconcerted by this other, older, significantly calmer person here.

"Thanks." He then shuts up. He's young. Twenty-six maybe. He's short, with kind of floppy blond hair, (Puts Jimmy in mind a bit of the pretty-boy character from House, whose name he doesn't remember. Breena'd know.) no wedding ring, his suit is conservative charcoal gray, but the tie is flashy, cobalt blue with some sort of pink thing on it. After another second he visibly jerks, blushes again, and says in a rush, "Good luck to you, too. Sorry, I'm a little bit nervous."

"Trust me, I understand." Jimmy smiles at him, tucking his phone into his pocket, offering his hand. Allan shakes, and yes, his palm is a bit sweaty, but the grip is good and he's making proper eye contact. "You fresh out of med school?"

"Not quite. Fresh out of the CDC."

"Cool! What were you doing there?"

"Tracing pandemics, working on figuring out where they'll hit next." Jimmy looks properly impressed. "How about you?"

"Assistant ME for Baltimore. Wife's family is down here. Decided we'd like to live somewhere a bit safer."

Allan nods.

"Bit of a smaller job here, too, but it'd be nice to see my kids every day."

Allan nods at that, too.

"So, why leave the CDC, this isn't… you know…"

"Even remotely the same field?"

"Yeah."

"A friend was murdered last year, I was there for the trial, and the ME cracked it. Found the cause of death, found what they needed to put the…" He's clearly editing himself.

"We called 'em assholes in Baltimore."

Allan inclines his head, but doesn't repeat the word. "To put him away. It was so real. And it made a difference. Made a difference to real people in a way those models I was building never would."

Jimmy nods, very pleased with that answer. "It does. It really does." His hands are in his pocket, along with his cell phone. He taps the button that lets Ducky know it's time to appear.

"Ah, gentlemen!" Ducky says as the elevator doors open. "So sorry we had to reschedule Mr. Palmer. Dr. Allan, I did not intend to run concurrent interviews, however, we had a lively day yesterday, and as I am on my own, I could not juggle fieldwork with interviewing. Please, come in.
Let's start with a tour!

Ducky shows them around, nattering away about the history of Medical Examination, periodically asking them questions about their own backgrounds. Thus they learned that Dr. Allan hadn't been near an actual human patient of any variety since his residency.

Jimmy can see that Allan's a bit flustered to have Jimmy here, which he supposes makes sense. He wants to look good, and like he can do the job, but there's this other guy who has been doing this for "ten years" answering the questions and looking really at ease and competent next to him.

"Mr. Palmer, Dr. Allan, time for the practical exam. There is a written section on my desk, Mr. Palmer, have at it. Dr. Allan, come with me to the light board, let us go over some x-rays."

Jimmy's "practical exam" is filling out more paperwork. They did have a lively day yesterday, and he's wrapping up his hand-written copy of the work. (One more week, and if no one manages to break the damn paperwork software, he'll be able to stop doing everything twice. Tim's not really hopeful about the not breaking thing. But so far, it's doing the job. Of course, so far the only people using it is Cybercrime and Autopsy. He's fairly certain that as soon as he takes it office wide it'll be crashing every nine seconds.)

Of course, in that he's done this ninety million times, Jimmy doesn't need to pay much attention to what he's doing, so he gets to listen to Drs. Allan and Mallard discussing the X-rays on the light board.

Allan has good skills. His anatomy is on point. He's catching the breaks and nicks and issues on the x-rays.

Acid test comes next.

"Mr. Palmer, have you finished the written exam?"

"Yes, Dr. Mallard." He flips his pages over, leaving the actual written exam, for Allan, on top.

"Ah, splendid, come around." Ducky motions to Allan as well, drawing them near, opening the second drawer. "Here we have Lt. James Kenneworth." Ducky gestures to the body and then looks to the table. "You've transferred bodies before, correct, Mr. Palmer?"

Jimmy smiles. "About four times a day. Usually not when I'm in my good interview suit, though."

"Ah. Quite, right. Could you walk us through the procedure then?"

"Of course, Dr. Mallard. Usually we begin with paperwork, note who is being removed and why, then over to the nearest gurney," Jimmy heads to the nearest gurney, "flip the breaks up on the wheels," he nudges the latches up on each wheel with his toes, "roll the gurney to the body." He does that as well, narrating each move as he does it. "Put the breaks down. I usually end up getting the feet." Jimmy heads to Lt. Kennworth's feet, but does not touch him. (Feet is the harder half of the lifting, because you have to lift from next to the body, instead of from in front of it.) "Someone else grabs the shoulders, count of three move body to the table." He pantomimes the grip and motion used to lift a body off the slab. "Slide the drawer back, lock it up. Unlock the wheels on the gurney, and move the body to the table, repeat locking everything down, repeat moving the body, unlock the wheels, put the gurney back, flip on the lights, and off we go."

"Very precise, Mr. Palmer."

The whole time Jimmy's been reciting, Allan's been staring at the Lt. "What happened to him, Dr.
Lt. Kennworth is covered by a drape, so the large gunshot wound to his chest is currently not visible. Ducky folds back the drape. "Would you care to venture a guess, Mr. Palmer?"

Jimmy looks the body over, of course he's seen this before. "Without flipping him over, I'd guess it's a gunshot wound, but without flipping him over, I couldn't be sure."

Allan swallows, hard, staring at the destroyed chest.

"A bullet does that?"

"Large caliber ones do. Mr. Palmer, is correct, this is the mark of a .45 from a short range. Can you glean any extra information from this body Dr. Allan?"

Allan blinks a few times. Jimmy can see him making himself be clinical. "Anterior discoloration and swelling means he fell forward."

"Indeed. Other observations?"

"No signs of decomposition, wherever he was lying was cool or he wasn't there long."

"Correct."

Allan looks even closer. "No signs of anything chewing on the Lt. Once again he either wasn't down long or he was inside or wrapped up or protected somehow."

"Good."

Allan looks up. "Do you know what happened to him?"

"Yes. This made for a lively day, but only one lively day. Our guest had something of an untenable gambling habit, and cheated, and got caught cheating, at the wrong game."

"Aces over eights, Dr. Mallard?"

Ducky smiles at that, as Allan stares at them blankly. "The Dead Man's Hand, Dr. Allan, supposedly held by notorious gunman Wild Bill Hickok when he was shot in the back at a poker game."

"Ah," says Allan.

"Come, Mr. Palmer, time for the X-ray. Dr. Allan, to the written exam."

---

He and Ducky confer quietly at the X-rays while Allan fills out a series of basic anatomy, physiology, and pathology questions. He should smoke the exam. If Jimmy could pull it off as a first year in medical school, this should be no problem for Allan.

"How's he doing?" Jimmy quietly asks Ducky as they 'confer' on the X-ray.

"I am pleased so far. He certainly has the skills for the job, though I'm less sure about him having the constitution for it."

Jimmy nods at that. "Want someone hard enough to do this, but not so jaded they stop seeing them as people."
Ducky nods along. "Precisely. Did you find out why he's hoping to do this job?"

"Yeah. Friend was killed. He was at the trial. One where the ME cracked it."

"Justice served. A powerful motivator."

"Yeah."

They glance over and see Allan staring at his exam, looking awfully finished.

Ducky shakes Jimmy's hand. "Thank you for coming in, Mr. Palmer."

"Thank you, Dr. Mallard. I hope to hear from you soon."

Ducky nods at that, and Jimmy heads off to Abby's lab. In that it's below Autopsy, there's no shot of Allan accidentally wandering into him on the way out. Plus he can tell Abby about how the first interview went.

"All done, Dr. Allan?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Any questions about the job?"

"One."

Ducky looks at him expectantly.

"How many don't get solved?"

Ducky likes that question.

"Not many, Dr. Allan. In thirty-one years, I've sent all but twenty-six of them to rest. We don't always get the conviction. And we don't always find who did whatever it was. That's just part of this job. We do what we can with what we have, and what we have is a collection of great minds who almost always figure out what happened."

Ducky smiles gently. "Anything else?"

"What happened to your last assistant? Anything I can take away from that?"

"He has moved onto bigger and better things. And yes, over the years to come, I hope you do learn from my experiences with him."

Allan nods at that, thinking it's a bit cryptic, but possibly a sign that he's done well on the interview. "Thank you for the interview."

"You're welcome. Do you know the way out?"

"I can find my way."

"Good. I hope you have a pleasant rest of your day."

"Thank you. You, too, Dr. Mallard."
The second candidate crashed and burned before he even got in the door. Amos Potter actually was the Assistant ME for the city of Baltimore. (Where Jimmy got the idea.)

Lots of experience. Neutral references (which worried Jimmy). No MD, but technically an MD isn't necessary for this job.

Like with Dr. Allan, Jimmy was waiting in the hallway when Mr. Potter came in.

He saw Jimmy, did a double take, and then checked his phone. "One of us is in the wrong place, and it's not me."

Jimmy tucks his phone into his pocket. "Hello to you, too. Neither of us is in the wrong place. My interview got moved to today. Apparently someone was killed yesterday, so Dr. Mallard was out of the building."

"Great." Potter says sarcastically, looking like he wants to sulk.

Jimmy hits his contact for Ducky; he wants to get this one done fast.

Ducky heads in a moment later, using the same spiel he did yesterday. As he's heading into Autopsy Potter says quietly to him, "God, he's a million years old. They told me he was old, but... Ancient. Upside, won't be waiting long to advance, old dude can't have more than a year left in him."

"We're done, Dr. Mallard," Jimmy says.

"All ready?" Even Ducky thought that was frighteningly fast.

Potter looks confused by this.

Jimmy turns to him. "Mr. Potter, politeness is a virtue. And when you spend hour after hour day after day working intimately with someone in a small space it is a good plan to at least try to not get on their nerves. You may go."

Potter's still staring at him, flummoxed. "Who are you telling me that I 'may go'?"

"I'm the guy who might have hired you if you had actually said hello to me and treated me like a human being."

"But..." he stares at Ducky.

"Goodbye, Mr. Potter," Jimmy says again. And Amos Potter left, in a very bad mood.

Candidate number three was the least qualified of the lot.

Bachelors of Arts from Penn State. One year of Medical School at the University of Pennsylvania, (three years ago), and two years as a Veterinary Assistant. Good references, though her previous employer (the Vet) had chuckled a bit about Sarah saying she was, 'One of a kind.'

Since that was a fairly close match to Jimmy's history prior to getting to NCIS (though he was in Medical School as opposed to dropped out) he's interested in giving her a go. It certainly worked out well for him and Ducky.

Like the previous two times, Jimmy is waiting in the hallway.

The doors open and this time he does the double take.
What Jimmy knows about Goth could be summed up in one tiny word. Abby. He knows he likes the aesthetic, even if it's not personally for him.

The woman standing before him is in head to toe black. Okay, not a problem. Black jeans, black and silver studded belt, black t-shirt, black trench coat, black lace gloves. (The concept of professional does not appear to have occurred to her. Though he does snap a discrete picture of her and one handedly sends it to Abby with *Would you go to an interview like this?*) Three lip piercings, black lipstick under them, those spacer looking things in her ears, lots and lots of black eye makeup. He finds himself idly wondering about how you put lipstick on with pierced lips. Like, is a brush involved or do you just pull the rings out of the way, and how does that little lip rub thing Breena does after she puts on lipstick work?

She doesn't smile, but she does say, "Hey. You waiting to interview, too?" That pulls his focus away from the mystery of the black lipstick.

"Yeah."

"Cool. Really looking forward to this."

"Me too. I understand this is a great Morgue."

"Yeah. Couldn't get much info on Autopsy, but a friend of a friend of a friend works in Cybercrime here, and he says it's great."

Jimmy wonders who the friend of a friend of a friend is, but makes a note to let Tim know that. "Jimmy Palmer."

"Hey. Sarah Bast. So… aren't you kind of old for this?"

Jimmy snorts at that. It's the kind of thing that might have come out of his mouth, but she doesn't look embarrassed or chagrined.

"I was with the Baltimore ME for ten years. Moving south to be closer to my wife's family."

"Oh, cool. New to town, too. Girlfriend and I are getting hitched in two months, and it's legal here so we decided to settle here."

"Good reason to move. Does she have a job already?"

"Oh yeah. She's a tattoo artist down on Lexington." Sarah quickly pulls off her coat, and pulls the neck of her t-shirt wide showing off her shoulder. "That's her work."

Jimmy nods. It appears to be some sort of demon-looking thing chewing on a goat. "That's very… intricate."

"Yeah. Still got to add the color in. Covers my whole back."

"Ah." He whacks the button to let Ducky know to come in. "So, um… what is that? Design for an album cover or something?"

"Oh no. Personal demon."

His eyebrows shoot up.

"You have a personal demon?"
“Yeah. Some people have guardian angles, I have a personal demon. Or he has me. Whichever.”

Jimmy's very rapidly trying to remember everything he read in the handbook about religious discrimination. He doesn't think he can not hire her just because she appears to be some form of Satanist, but he's also feeling distinctly uncomfortable about this.

"Good for you," he says with a very fake smile hoping Ducky gets here soon. "So, what makes you want to work down here?" He's staring at her shoulder.

"Always liked death. Just, you know, really feel at home with it."

"Tend to think of this job as being more about the living. Finding closure for the people left behind. Every person on one of those tables represents a string of lives, and it's our job to do what we can for them."

She thinks about that. "That's a good way to think about it."

The elevator doors open and Ducky sweeps in, "Mr. Palmer, Ms. Bast, so good to see you." He does a brief double take upon seeing Sarah as well, but his is not nearly as noticeable as Jimmy's was. "Let us begin out interviews…

While Jimmy's working on the 'written exam' he checks his phone and finds a note from Abby. No. For interviews I used to don my best career girl Barbie suit. Now, since I've got more than fifteen years in charge of my own lab and people headhunt me, I'd go edgier, but I'd still wear a suit. Just because you're Goth doesn't mean you aren't professional.

Thanks. She tells me she has her own personal demon.

I'll get the sage.

Why?

You're gonna have some bad juju in the morgue until it gets cleaned out.

Okay… What do you do with the sage?

Burn it. Few other bits and pieces, too.

I don't actually want to know, do I?

Probably better off that way.

Jimmy would have to admit to feeling relieved that Bast muffed the written exam. Why she only made it through one year of med school was readily apparent going through her answers. And while it is true that there were several classes that Jimmy made it through by the skin of his teeth (And one he had to take twice, but look, it's not like Psychological Pharmacology was anything that he was going to need for his job, which by that point he was sure was going to be with NCIS. Yes, he can prescribe meds because he is a doctor, but if anyone he runs into is looking for psych help of a chemical nature, he's getting them to a real psychiatrist, fast. He knows he's not the guy for that job, and if he's got to look a drug up when it pops up in Abby's tests, then he'll look the damn drug up.) he was also working a full time job while he did full time med school.

Plus the stuff he had a tricky time with was not basic anatomy. He helped put the damn meat puzzle
together, including the toe that was attached to a hand, so anatomy was something he had down, pat.

But anatomy was not something Ms. Bast had down pat, which meant he had a good reason, as opposed to a bad one, for not calling her back. (Abby took one step into Autopsy, cringed, and started talking about how bad this was and setting fire to stuff and chanting. He's still got no idea what was up with that, and really doesn't want to. He's just relieved he can put something other than 'personal demon' down for why Ms. Bast didn't make the call back list.)

As soon as Jimmy got done going over Bast's test, he grabbed his phone and punched ten digits in.

A second later he heard. "Hello?"

"Is this Dr. Allan?"

"Yes." There's a brief pause while Allan thinks for a second. "Is this Jimmy Palmer?"

"Yes. You've got a good memory for voices."

"Uh. Thanks." Another pause. "Why are you calling me?"

"I'd like to offer you a job."

"What, in Baltimore?"

Jimmy laughs. Good memory for details, too. "At NCIS, as my assistant."

More quiet. Finally, "Uh… Did you get offered a job as the Medical Examiner?"

"Yes, a few weeks ago. I actually am the NCIS Medical Examiner. Hiring an Assistant was my first job as the guy in charge. I'd like that to be you if you're still interested."

"Yes! Quite interested. Just… Who is Dr. Mallard?"

"Dr. Mallard was the Medical Examiner. I was his Assistant ME for more than a decade. He's on staff until April 4th, and I was hoping you'd be coming into work on April 5th."

"Yes, Mr. Palmer. I'd like that."

"Dr. Palmer. Off hours and out of the office, I'm Jimmy, but in Autopsy we go formal."

"Okay. Um… Not that I've got a problem with it, but, why?"

Jimmy doesn't actually know the answer to that. He has ideas. He certainly has a way he understands it, but by flat out being asked he realizes he doesn't know what Ducky thought he was doing with that.

So he answers for himself, and for why he intends to keep that formality in place, and for why he and Ducky kept it up well past the point of using each other's first names whenever there wasn't a body in the morgue. "It's a hard job, Dr. Allan. Our guests are going to tell us things we must hear. And we will listen because someone has to. We speak for those who cannot speak any longer. It's a good job, and it's an important one, but it is not easy, and a wall that separates us from what happens inside autopsy from what happens outside of it is necessary if we are to have functional lives. We cannot live this job 24/7, and that formality helps keep the different spheres of our lives separate."

"Yes, Dr. Palmer."
"Good, then I'll see you on the 5th?"

"Eight AM, right?"

"Correct."
There have been a few, rare, moments where Tim's wanted to rub his hands together, cackling like a mad scientist, shouting 'Eureka!'

And right now he's awfully tempted to start doing it.

Exactly one month ago he hit the key that set the Beta test of the paperwork software live. Over the course of that month his guys and Autopsy had managed to snag, break, stall out, and confuse the software six times. (He was expecting that to be the first day of reports, not the first month.)

And now, fixes in place, patches patched, he's once again getting ready to send the software live, this time for the gamma test, NCIS Navy Yard-wide.

He hits the enter button and, boom, it's up.

A fast email to everyone, (he'd already written it, just needed to hit send) explaining what was up, and how everyone would still need to do their paperwork by hand, but that the computers should be doing it, too, and how if something went wonky they needed to let Cybercrime know.

And then it was time to settle in and wait for the error reports.

He's feeling more and more at ease in this job. His guys are moving more smoothly. They're teaming properly now, and as of last week the job software went live for the whole of NCIS, so they're running twenty-four seven with full teams. (Granted the members of said team may be spread along three continents.) With his current talent pool no case ever has to wait for more than a few hours to find someone who knows how to run it.

That makes him very happy.

Sure, getting hands on work can still be a bit rough. ID10T errors seem fairly common when, say, someone in Bogota needs a phone hacked, and the nearest hacker is in Eido, and Bogota is having a hard time figuring out how to get the phone hooked into the system so Eido can hack it. But, talking Bogota through how to do it is still faster than sticking the phone on a helio and moving it to the closest hacker (Mexico City) and then waiting for him to get into the office, get done with his other cases, and then hack the phone.

So, in that he doesn't have a mound of paperwork on his desk to fill out, and in that he's also (not yet) getting inundated with error reports, and in that his Minions who also do not have mounds of paperwork to fill out and are now on 24/7 are whipping through the job queue, something he hasn't thought about for a while springs to mind.

Namely, back when he tested Cybercrime the first time Jarvis mentioned that he'd like a copy of the report and a feasibility study for doing it Navy-wide.

Might as well start that up.

"Can I ask you for some advice?" Tim asks, walking into Gibbs' living room later that evening. (He cut out a little early, wanted to talk to Gibbs. Kind of hoping to just 'drop by' when Borin was there so he could report back to the crew that he had at least seen them both in the same place at the same time, but no dice.)
"Sure," Gibbs answers, looking up from his kindle. (Tim makes a mental note to get him a new one for Christmas, this one's two generations out of date.)

"I started writing that report on the feasibility of my Cybercrime test navy-wide."

"Yeah."

Tim sits next to him on the sofa. "Okay. I've hit a brick wall. I don't know precisely how their computers are set up, and I can't determine how feasible this is if I don't know that."

"Sounds like you know what's going on."

"Yeah, on that part. None of the tech is an issue. I mean, I can find out how they're set, on my own, but, that's about twenty grades above my clearance and really illegal. So, what... Do I tell Vance, and he tells Jarvis? Do I go straight to Jarvis? I mean, what's the chain of command here? He asked me to do it so, do I go straight to him?"

Gibbs thinks about that. How to do politics is something he's not good at. How the chain of command works, he's... still not good at. His plan was to always go to the guy who could get you what you want or need and screw the intermediaries. He tries to think about it like he was the kind of guy who wanted a career and that not pissing off the powers that be mattered. That didn't work, he's not that guy, never was, and really can't imagine him too well. So, he tries it from how he would have handled it.

"You wanna own this, or do you want NCIS to own it?"

"Not following."

"If it's your baby, then you call Jarvis' secretary and make the appointment. If it's NCIS being useful to the Navy, if it's Leon loaning you out, then you put it through Leon."

Tim thinks about that for a while. His first instinct is that this is his. He thought it up. He put it in motion. His second instinct is that Leon might not see it that way. "Do you think Leon will be upset if I take this?"

Gibbs shrugs. "Maybe. Probably depends on what you do with it and how the rest of your jobs go. Keep doing your job and doing it well, he likely won't mind."

"Will Jarvis?"

"He asked you for this?"

"He told me that if I had time I should write it up for him."

"Sounds like he asked for it."

"That's how I took it. So, call his secretary?"

"Unless you want to share the glory with the rest of NCIS."

"I'll think about it."

And Tim did. For a day. Then he called Leon's office, got his secretary, and asked for Jarvis' email. Which she gave him.
Then he carefully drafted an email with his current findings and explaining what he needed to know and why in order for him to take this to a Navy-wide level. He cced it to Leon, but did not address it to him.

A few hours later he got a quick note from Leon:

*Looks good. Keep me in the loop.*

Four days later he got this from Jarvis (also cced to Leon):

*McGee,*

*I've read over your preliminary reports and your plan for how to roll this out wider. I like what I'm seeing.*

*If I remember correctly, you were involved in the hunt for Harper Deering. He used his knowledge of our system to find flaws and attack us with them.*

*Put your Deering hat on. Set up a test, find our flaws, break them open, and let's get them patched before someone on the outside can break into them. Once that's done, I'd like you to set a testing protocol for the Navy, so that we may continue running these tests, but doing so doesn't become your full-time job. I have a feeling you have other jobs that need doing just as much as this one.*

*Admr. Dean Finnegan runs all Cybersecurity for the US Navy. I've included his contact information and sent him a note to offer you any assistance you desire.*

*Clayt*

For a long moment Tim just stares at that. *Clayt.* He swallows hard and gets to work. Jarvis is right, he's got jobs to do, lots of them. (Like right now he's the lead hacker breaking into a hyper-secure shell corporation's inter-web.)

But he also takes a moment to write an introductory email to Admr. Finnegan, requesting a meeting. Once he's got the access he needs, he can design one hell of a test, and he's really enjoying the idea of that.

Traditionally Admirals have flagships. They have battle groups and one specific ship that is their, for all practical purposes, home.

Admiral Finnegan does not have a flagship. That's sign one of how much naval warfare has changed over the years. He could have a flagship. He's an Admiral. He could have his very own pink aircraft carrier should he so desire. (Both his father and grandfather have/had aircraft carriers. Not pink ones though.)

But he doesn't.

He's out of Norfolk for several reasons, but primarily because it's the Cyberhub of the Navy, and if it happens on a computer anywhere in the world under a US Navy command, he's hooked into it from there. And because he's on land, in a hardened base, he doesn't have to worry about his command getting knocked out by wonky satellites, storms, or anything that could mess with a ship.

So, if there is one Admiral in the Navy that Tim McGee wants to visit in his home base, it's Admiral Finnegan.
Tim would have to admit to feeling a little nervous about this as he's driving down to Norfolk. He knows it will clear once they get talking, because Finnegan seemed very enthusiastic about what he wanted to do in his emails, but he's still going to visit an Admiral, and even if it's not The Admiral, it's still got a lot of the same associations buried in the back of his mind.

At least it's on dry land.

Over the years, Tim has been pleased that McGee is a very common last name. Because there are lots of McGees out there, the number of people who have put together Admiral John McGee with Special Agent (and now Director of Cybercrime) Tim McGee have been very few and very far between.

For example, he's not sure if Jarvis has twigged to it. He knows the only reason Leon found out was they had that one case his dad was part of. Armstrong actually did some research on him when he showed up to recruit him for NCIS, which is how he found out. He'd worked for the MCRT for five years before they knew what Navy Brat actually meant in regards to Tim.

But, of course, there are only eleven Admirals in the US Navy, and they know each other, so…

Tim can hope it won't come up, but he's not thinking it's likely.

So much for hope. Admr. Finnegan's secretary walked Tim in, they shook hands and then Finnegan looked at him carefully, thought about it for a few seconds, and then said, "Are you John McGee's boy?"

Tim supposes he probably does look like his dad some. And even if he doesn't, last Sarah said, he still had a picture of him up in his office, so…

"Yes, sir."

"No need for that. Dean'll do. How's the old son-of-a-bitch doing?"

"I understand he's well." Which is true but doesn't require him to pretend they have any sort of relationship.

Finnegan seems to catch it though, thinks about that for a second, like he was about to either ask a follow-up question or say something else about John, but decides not to.

Instead he nods and says, "You've got Clayt all fired up about this, so what do you need from me?"

Finnegan shows him their central hub. He talks through how everything works, giving Tim some very good ideas.

"We do this for ourselves, of course. My guys run tests on our ships, on our bases, on anything with a computer on it."

"Good tests?"

"Yes. But they still come from the inside. And they've still got a… Navy feel to them."

Tim smiles at that. "I trained at MIT, and I can spot another Beaver from my era from a mile away. I know what you mean about having a certain feel to them. Trust me, nothing that comes from my
office is going to feel like a Navy attack..." Tim thinks about that. "Unless I want it to."

Finnegan smiles at that. "Tit for tat? Want us to take a swing at you guys?"

"Certainly. So far all of my attacks have come from the inside, too. Part of how I could hack my own system. And you've got to keep watch for that, too. Especially with how spread out your organization is."

Finnegan nods. "Physical security of the system is just as important as keeping the internals safe."

"Exactly. We've had people break into the building because that's easier than hacking the system from the outside."

"So, you going to break in and 'compromise the physical layout'?"

Tim smiles. "Maybe. I'd have to talk to Jarvis about this, but... I think I'm going to make them think I broke in and launched from the inside, but actually strike from the outside."

Finnegan grins at that, really enjoying that idea. "That'll be fun."

"Oh yeah."

A week after talking to Finnegan, Tim had finished the first test protocol.

If he were to explain it to Finnegan, it would take three hours and involve a lot of words that most laymen don't know.

If he were to explain it to Gibbs, it would go something like this: My computer at work is going to slip a program into Norfolk. That program will hit the computers there that run everything. Those computers are hooked into every command center in the Navy. From there a program will hop to whatever ship we're testing. That ship will then get a message to do something bad. The ship will also get the message that it's being told to do something bad from one of the computers on the ship. The test is can the guys on the ship get it shut down in time, and can they find out where the attack actually came from?

He sent a somewhat more technologically sophisticated version of that to Jarvis (with the cc to Leon) and got back a one line response from Jarvis. Isn't that supposed to be impossible?

Tim smiles, feeling pretty cocky, and writes back. Yes. It's supposed to be impossible.

Another brief email hit his inbox. I have three free hours in the morning of May 16th. Lt. James'll select a ship and we'll discuss putting the test into play. Let's get this set to go.

Tim sent back one line. Yes, sir.
"Think he's gonna bring her?" Tony asks Ziva as they get ready for Shabbos.

"No. He'll tell us ahead of time."

"It's been six weeks. Not like we've never met her before."

"I know, but…" She spreads her hands wide. Short of kidnapping Borin and dragging her to Shabbos or Sunday Dinner or Bootcamp, they've done everything they can think of to try and get Gibbs to bring her to one of their weekly gatherings.

But he hasn't, and besides glaring at them when they all stare at him and drop less and less subtle hints (Last week's was Breena flat out asking, 'So, when are you going to bring her?' and by that point you really can't call it a hint anymore.) he refuses to give them any sort of response.

Which means he's got six frustrated, gossiping kids on his hands, all of whom really want to get to meet (again) the new girlfriend, and get to see her as a girlfriend.

Gossipping about Gibbs and Borin is currently the favorite hobby of what used to be the MCRT. And it's not like they don't have other things to do, but right now they're the big news. After all, no one's pregnant (and by mutual accord they don't gossip about efforts related to getting that way, at least, not beyond their own spouses at home), everyone's married (except Gibbs), all babies are settled in, jobs are jobbing along.

All in all, the status quo has, for the moment, re-set, and sure Jimmy's collection of interviewees was fun, but that was two days of chatting. (Mostly about what on earth a 'personal demon' is and who would possibly mention that to someone at an interview, followed by Jimmy doing a bit more scrutinizing of Ms. Bast's work history and coming to the conclusion that she'd left way more animal-oriented jobs after a year or so than was comfortable.) And yeah, the thing with Tim's navy test was cool, but, well, besides Tim getting all hot and bothered about the details it's kind of nebulous for anyone who isn't Abby.

It's not like they're doing anything mean, they aren't being snide or snippy, talking about Gibbs and Borin. Invasive, sure. It probably wasn't entirely necessary for Abby to dig up that face morphing software and make up some baby Gorins. (They were awfully cute, though.)

And looking at Baby Girl Gorin, (while Tony and Abby discussed whether any potential Gorins would be their kids' cousins or aunts and uncles) Jimmy said, "I think that train left the station a long time ago."

Which resulted in Abby, Ziva, and Tony all staring at him. "What do you mean, Palmer?" Tony asked.

This was when it occurred to Jimmy that Gibbs' vasectomy was unlikely to be common knowledge, and that it was entirely possible that besides Ducky (who was Gibbs' medical proxy and doctor for a million years) he might be the only one who knows about that.

"Just, you know, get the sense he's done with kids. Three ex-wives, no kids with them." Jimmy said, fast.

"You are a terrible liar," Ziva replied, closing on Jimmy.
"How can that possibly be a lie? He has three ex-wives. He didn't have kids with them."

"But that is not why you think he's done with kids." Ziva said.

"Okay, how about he's almost sixty, and no man in his right mind starts a family that old?"

Ziva didn't buy that, either.

"Okay, I know he's done with kids."

"Jimmy?" Abby asked.

"Doctor patient confidentiality. Can't tell."

More staring, but they let it drop.

"She coming?" Breena asks as they head into Tony and Ziva's place on Friday night.

Ziva shakes her head. Week seven, still no Borin. She turns to Jimmy and Tony, "On Sunday, you two and Tim, you will get Gibbs, and you will talk to him, and you will make him bring her next week, yes?"

"With what? Am I going to drug him or something?" Jimmy asks. "If anyone's going to make him do something it's you girls. You need to go cry on him or something."

Ziva rolls her eyes. "You will talk. Explain. This is home. We bring the people we love home."

"Might not be love. Not yet. Not this soon. And..." And for Tony it all clicks into place, slamming into place, hard. "And if it is love, we're not going to see her anytime soon. If it's love, it's going to scare the shit out of him and he's going to take it really slow."

Jimmy nods.

Breena stares at both of them, eyes narrowed and shakes her head. "Men."

Jimmy sighs. "No. I get it. If she's a disposable girlfriend he can bring her around, because if it doesn't work it won't hurt so bad. If it's real, and he lets us see it's real, then if it doesn't work out, he doesn't just have to deal with being hurt, he's got six of us trying to be useful and comforting and..."

And Gibbs steps into the kitchen saying, "And in my business all the time, hovering around, asking me how I am, treating me like I'm made of broken eggshells, and moping on me."

Ziva takes two steps over and gives Gibbs a hug and a kiss. "We want you to be happy."

He gets double teamed by Brelena with another hug. "And we want to see you being happy."

"Are we doing hugs in here? I want hugs!" Abby bustles in mid-hug. Adding herself to the press. "Borin meeting you here?"

Gibbs stares up at the ceiling. And yes, he does not mind having his arms full of warm girls all happy to see him, but... "How about you guys let me date her for a while before you get the wedding all planned out?"

Abby and Brelena look slightly guilty. (Not like they planned the whole thing out, but... Slow day. No customers at Slater's, Tim's software is whipping through the paperwork in the lab, so they may..."
have spent an hour or two texting about it.)

"Fine. Still, you know she's welcome in any of our homes, right? Just as welcome as you are. You
don't ever have to feel like you can't bring her around. And, it's exciting, Gibbs! You're dating again
and acting so much happier and… We want to share, too!" Abby says.

He kisses Abby's forehead, then Ziva, then Breena, and sighs. "It's going well. I'm enjoying it. But, I
don't even know if we're really dating or not. So, how about you let us get that figured out before
adding you to the mix?"

"How can you not know?" Breena asks.

"We... haven't actually gone out."

Which is true. They've made dates to see each other, at one of their homes. And she drops by
sometimes. (He's been tempted to just show up at her place but A: he does not have a key, and B: if
she wants people-free downtime, he doesn't want to barge in. Sometimes you just need to be alone.)
But there have been several ten day long stretches where they didn't see each other at all. And she
has had to cancel two the 'dates' they made. Though they usually text for a minute or two a day. So,
it's not like weeks have gone by without any contact.

And yes, he thinks (hopes) this is serious, or could move in a serious direction, but they could just be
fuck buddies. (Okay, he could be building that in as a buffer so it won't hurt so damn bad if it falls
apart.) It feels real and serious and good, but... he's wary. After all, they've had some pretty serious
conversations, but... but they've all been about the past, and Gibbs is fairly sure that those
conversations are just mostly housekeeping, the kind of things you talk about if you're anywhere near
a half-way decent person and you want to do what you can to avoid hurting the person you're with
or wasting their time.

So, besides a general sense that they seem to be liking this, and they'd like to keep seeing each other,
there's been no definition as to what it is they have.

"You haven't gone out?" Breena stares at Gibbs as they pull away from him and move into getting
dinner on the table mode. "What are you doing?"

Abby laughs at that and the somewhat startled look on Gibbs' face when she asks. "Jimmy's rubbing
off on you, Breena. That's a question worthy of him."

Breena squints at Gibbs. "Come on, that can't be all you're doing, right?"

No, it's not all they're doing. Eating, sleeping, talking, quietly reading/watching movies/watching a
game, sometimes go for a run or swim (maybe that qualifies as out for a date?), all happens, too, but,
yeah it's a lot of what they're doing. Plus it's one of Borin's favorite ways to blow off a bad day at
work, and it certainly was one of his back in the day, too. So, it might be two thirds of what they're
doing when they're together and awake.

Tony's got a really dirty grin on his face as he slaps Gibbs on the shoulder while Gibbs continues to
stand there feeling a bit blindsided by that question. "Lucky man!"

That snaps him back into action. Tony gets a light head slap. "I'll bring her round when we're both
ready for it. Okay? And you all nattering at me isn't speeding me up, got it?"

He gets four versions of "Fine" from the ladies and Tony.
They say the prayers, bless the children, and sit down for dinner.

"How was the first week?" Tim asks Ducky, passing the Challah. Monday had been his last day at NCIS, and unlike Gibbs, when Ducky said that he did not want any fussing about it, they paid attention.

"Infernally slow, Timothy." He and Gibbs share a look. "But not as bad as it could have been. I've been spending a few hours a day working with Eleanor on her profiling technique. It is an interesting hybrid approach we're creating, her use of numbers and patterns with my use of psychology.

"Possibly, if this proves to be effective, we'll have a paper or two worth writing."

"And a new sub, sub-specialty for people to work on," Penny adds.

"There is that." He passes Penny the salt, unasked. "And how is your new assistant settling is?"

Jimmy starts to answer but Tony cuts in with, "You mean The Ghost?"

"He's quiet," Jimmy says.

"No. You and Tim are quiet. Ziva, when she's in ninja mode, is quiet. Your new assistant is dead."

Jimmy rolls his eyes a little. "Thursday was our first call out. Dr. Allan is still trying to figure out the line between properly respectful and… unnervingly reserved. He's never been at a crime scene before, let alone one that was in someone's home. So he was being very quiet, and very precise—"

"And very nervous. If he inhaled twice the whole time you were in there—" Tony says.

"It's also been a long time since he's had anything to do with a dead body. And that was a smelly crime scene. So, yeah, he was nervous, and he was being very careful, and he didn't breathe much because the vic had been in that house for forty-eight hours. And at one point, while he was laying out the body bag, he was being so quiet Tony almost tripped over him."

"Just about broke my ankle trying to save from that."

Jimmy rolls his eyes a little again. Allan may not be huge, but even if he was silent, he's still a full-grown man next to a dead body; Tony should have been paying better attention. (Of course, Tony's got a different view of the subject, along the lines of he was photographing behind the body, and the last time he looked, no one was back there, and next thing he knew he'd stepped back into something soft and moving.)

"So you are saying he's a perfectly functional medical professional trying to do a good job in a new and sensitive environment?" Penny says, dryly.

"Precisely. Thanks Abby. " He takes the green beans from her, taking a large serving for himself, put five of them on Molly's plate, and passes them onto Gibbs who is sitting next to Molly. "He talks more when we're back in Autopsy. But, especially when someone else is there, he doesn't want to be cracking jokes over the corpses."

Breena shakes her head. "You've got to break him of that, or this job'll kill him."

"We're working on developing a sense of humor. I'm trying to get across the idea that they're people. Dead people, but still people, and people like humor, they like being talked to, and the like getting a chance to tell their stories."
"He'll get there," Abby says. "You were awfully quiet the first few weeks, too."

"That's how I remember it."

Ducky laughs. "That's not how I remember it. You hovered around behind me, repeating everything I said into that recording device." Ducky mimics the way Jimmy held the recorder, right up to his face. "How many hours did it take before you just recorded what I was saying?"

"Three minutes." Jimmy says dryly. "I remember things better if I say them and hear them. Since you found it annoying, I just started doing it in my head."

"How are you liking having Autopsy all to yourself?" Gibbs asks.

Jimmy shrugs. "It's really quiet. I'm," he looks to Ducky, "used to a constant stream of some sort of educational information, stories, anecdotes, or something in the background. So, now when we're working, I start talking, just to fill up the quiet."

Ducky nods, understanding.

"Meanwhile, Dr. Allan's looking at me like I'm some sort of bizarre wing nut because I can talk about things like wing nuts, and why they're called wing nuts, and when they started using them, and —"

"You weren't really going on about wing nuts, were you?" Ziva asks.

"No." Everyone's staring at him. "Sort of. Surgical screws. Our current guest has three in his femur. That's how we were able to ID him."

"DNA?" Tim asks. (He's been busy with the Navy-wide computer test, and was out of the office yesterday and spent just about all of today sitting in front of his computer digging through what he got access to yesterday, so he missed this part.)

"Missing identical twins. We found one of them," Tony says.

"But not which one," Tim fills in, the light going on for him. "Anyone want that chicken wing?" Everyone shakes their heads so he snags it. (The wings are his favorite part. At least they are the way Ziva cooks chicken, all brown and crispy and salty and yum!)

"Right." Jimmy says, catching the bit of chicken Molly tried to send flying before it got more than two inches from her fork. "No flinging food. Do you need to be excused?" Molly shakes her head; she knows that if she's excused before she eats everything on her plate, there'll be no dessert, and Aunt Ziva always makes sure there's a special dessert for her, so she doesn't want to miss it.

"Anyway, he's got the screws, we take them out, look them up. And then we've got an ID."

"Do you have a missing twin?" Tim asks.

"As of 13:27 this afternoon we have a missing twin." Ziva answers.

"He's not being overwhelmingly forthcoming on why he was missing and what happened to his brother. So he's spending some quality time in holding, and we're going to head back in around two in the morning to have another chat with him," Tony replies.

"He's not the vic?" Tim asks.

Abby shakes her head. "Bishop and Ducky and I ran the numbers, looked through everything, and
"best we can tell, he's two or three levels behind this, but not directly responsible for it."

"Yeah, he did something that went, very, very wrong, brother dear ended up dead, he ran for it, and now we've got to figure out what the hell he did to get a guy so angry at him that he stuck a knife in his brother seven times."

"The guy's wife?" Breena asks. "Tim can you…" She's nursing Anna while trying to eat, but can't cut her chicken one handed. Tim's sitting next to her so he takes over slicing the chicken breast into bite sized pieces for her. She nods her thanks when he's done.

"Seven stab wounds, yeah, it's something like that," Tony answers. "So, you were in Norfolk today?" Tony asks Tim.

"Yesterday…” He takes a few minutes to explain how his conversation with Admiral Finnegan went, what he learned, what he hoped to do. "If I can pull it off…” he wraps up, "whoever's in charge of that ship is going to wet his pants when it happens. I'm thinking I'll make the ship target another one of the ships nearby. It won't actually target or shoot but the computers will think it is."

"Can you do that?" Penny asks between bites of sage stuffing.

"That's where 'if I can pull it off' comes in. I've got the blueprints and an invitation to come on in and ransack the place, now all I've got to do is see if I can."

"In your copious spare time," Abby says while wiping mushed cauliflower off of Kelly's chin.

"Got a bit more of it now. Paperwork software is still holding strong. Only two error reports today and both of them were user issues."

"User issues?" Ducky asks.

Tim shakes his head. "Code 1D10T, problem is located between chair and keyboard. Same thing with the job processing software. Cops can't type. And if they don't put the information in correctly, the computer can't use it. But that's not a bug on my end, so I'm feeling very good about this."

"You should. Monday's case, we broke the case by three, finished filling in the database once, and by five all of the paperwork had spit out, nicely filled out, ready to file. It was perfect, McGee!" Ziva says, very happy.

"Great. Now, how do you feel about running a how-to-type-class for those twits in the desks behind yours?"

Ziva shakes her head. "Not a chance."

Breena and Ziva are tidying up the dishes after dinner. Ziva's rinsing, Breena's making sure everything is stacked properly in the dishwasher, and Gibbs is on lugging dishes in from the table duty.

He places the dishes next to Ziva, and she puts her hand on his wrist. "This week, take her out. Go somewhere, in public, with her, and have a good time."

He raises an eyebrow.

"Women like to go out, Gibbs."

Breena nods along with that. "Makes us feel good. And we like showing off when we've got a
handsome man on our arm."

He just looks at both of them and then nods quickly before heading back into the dining room to grab more dishes.

When he came back in, Ziva has a different question for him. "You are almost done with Shannon, right?"

He nods. Everything's done but the name, which he's still stuck on.

"So, does that mean you are out of projects?"

He eyes her tummy for a second and she catches that. "I am right now."

"Good." She pulls him back into their dining area and pats their table. It's a good dining room table. Sleak, elegant hardwoods in rich, warm cherry browns. "This seats six comfortably, nine of us is a squeeze, Borin will be ten, and the kids will need more room soon. Would you be willing to take a commission for a dining room set?"

"No. But I'd make one for you as a gift."

"The wood and hardware and everything has to cost real money." And yes, properly kiln dried hardwoods are not inexpensive. "Let us pay the cost, at least. You can gift us the designing and the labor." (She and Tony had guessed this was probably the best deal they could get out of him.)

His eyes narrow at that, but Ziva's got that set look on her face, and he's sure that if he doesn't budge on this, they'll just go buy a table.

"Fine. You want something like this but bigger?"

She nods a bit. "Not precisely like this. We want it to look like something you made, but we like these colors."

He nods again, and thinks a little more, especially about what he's doing on Monday. About the Realtor DiNozzo Sr. had hooked him up with and what she wanted to show him on Monday. Namely, what might be the future Mallard Manor.

And if this place is big enough, and close enough (supposedly it is) that might end up being where future Shabboses (Shabbis? He doesn't know what the plural of Shabbos is) are held. Because it's not just that kids will take up more space (because they will) but because he's fairly sure there will be more than four of them, and if Borin does become part of this, that gets them up to at least fourteen people for dinner, and he none of them have a dining area that can handle that easily. He knows for certain that nowhere Senior's going to find for Tony and Ziva will feature enough room to hold the kind of table she's talking about, at least, not if they want to use that room for anything else, and they will.

"Get me pictures of what you like. We'll talk more, then."

Ziva smiles at him.
Son-In-Laws

They're wrapping up Sunday dinner when Amy's boyfriend, Collin, asks Jimmy, "Can I come to Bootcamp with you guys?"

"Uh..." Jimmy glances at Tim and Gibbs who both nod. "Yeah, sure."

"Cool." Collin's grinning at them. "Used to do MMA in college. Haven't found a group around here I really like. They're either way too much kill everyone or too into proper form. Where do you fight?"

Jimmy gives him the address for the Navy Yard.

"Okay. I'll follow you guys there."

"Do you have gear?"

"Yeah. Amy said Breena said you'd probably be cool with me joining in."

"Ah." Jimmy nods. As soon as Collin's in his car, he quietly says to Gibbs and Tim. "What the hell was that?"

Gibbs grins at him before slipping into his own car, and says, door open. "That's a guy contemplating becoming your brother-in-law. He's about to pull an end run around Ed."

Collin actually can fight. In an academic, never-done-it-in-a-life-or-death-situation sort of way. (He runs his own graphic design business, so it's not like pounding on people is part of his job description.) So, honestly, he's pretty even with Jimmy, who's also never fought for real, and not too far behind Tim, who does everything he can to avoid 'real fights' with his fists.

Real danger adds an extra edge to your skills, and Collin doesn't have that.

What he does have is he's ten years younger than Tim and Jimmy, five years younger than Ziva, and really, really quick.

He's actually making Ziva sweat, which is amusing to all of the guys. (She still won. Five years and fast doesn't win over Mossad-trained and does this for real, but it was more of a workout one on one than she's had in a long time.)

So, it was fun, and Collin is a pleasant companion, pretty quiet, focused, making sure that he's not annoying anyone.

Once they are all showered and dressed again, he says, "That was fun. Can I buy you all something to drink?"

Ziva and Tony demur, their no-longer-missing twin is proving to be unreasonably quiet, and they're going to take another swing at breaking him.

Which is how, ten minutes later, Tim, Jimmy, Gibbs, and Collin are outside, milling around Seth's coffee cart, letting Collin hand over drinks, and getting ready to really talk to him.

Once handed out, they're sitting in the shade, enjoying bright sunshine and a warm April day.
Collin takes a sip of his iced coffee and says to Jimmy, "So, I don't suppose there's some magic formula for making Ed like me?"

Jimmy laughs. "If you find it, let me know?" He shakes his head. "Being worth a few million dollars and signing pre-nup saying that Amy gets all of it if you two ever split up might do it."

"Got a few million I can have?"

"Amazingly enough, I'm all tapped out on millions right now."

"Yeah, figured that. Is it worth it? I mean, all three of you know him better than I do, and he seems to actually like you," he says to Gibbs. "I love Amy, but…"

Jimmy nods again. "Yeah, 'but.' I know all about 'but.' I spent a long time thinking about that before I asked Breena to marry me. If you love her, really love her, then yes, it's worth it. But this isn't light love, or cute love. If you have a good, strong, healthy relationship, he's going to be a stressor, and if you've got a rocky one, he'll break it. It really does have to be you and her, back to back, able to take on all comers."

Collin nods at that. "I do love her."

"Good," Gibbs says. "He's protecting his girls. Finally started warming up to Jimmy a bit when he figured out that Jimmy wasn't going anywhere and he had the balls to keep his girls safe. He respects strength and he respects money, because they represent a safe, secure life for his daughter."

"And I was light on both of them when Breena and I started dating."

"Even if you had piles of money and used to be a drill sergeant, he still wasn't going to like you," Tim says.

"True. And he's not going to love you, Collin, either. Because both of us mean that he's not his little girl's number one man anymore."

"Great." Collin's not thrilled by that. "She really loves him."

"He's her dad," Tim says. "And the more I learn about that family, the more I see that if there's one thing Ed Slater ever did right, it was raise three amazing daughters. They all adore him, and not in a spoiled-brat,-sucking-up-to-daddy-for-presents sort of way, but in a he-provided-them-with-all-the-support-they-needed-to-become-brilliant-women sort of way."

Jimmy nods along with that. "Complete son-of-a-bitch, to me, and you, and any other poor bastard who marries one of them, but to them, best dad ever."

Collin thinks about that.

Jimmy does, too. "When it comes down to it, you've got to be sure that Amy does chose you. Breena picked me over Ed. If it ever comes down to me or him, she'll back me. Having to pick'll break her heart, but she'll back me. And he has tested it to make sure. Part of our wedding being so stressful was him asking every ten minutes if she really wanted to do this, and how she could back out at any time, including while he was walking her down the aisle. Tim hadn't known that and he winces at it. "But she picked me. She picked me even when I asked her to postpone the party part of the wedding. If you and Amy don't have that, he'll kill your relationship. You've got to love her enough to put up with him. She's got to love you enough to draw the line in the sand and tell him you're not going anywhere, so he better get used to you."
"Okay." Collin looks, determined is probably the best way to put it, as he drinks his coffee.

"Look, only reason I'm going to say anything about this is because you're here and you're asking. Breena and I got married before we lived together. That was us, and it worked for us. This one," he points to Tim, "lived with Abby for…"

"Year and a half."

"Year and half, before they got married, and I helped them move in, so it's not like I've got a problem with it. But this is your acid test. She wants you. She wants Daddy happy. She can't have both, so she's fooling around trying to hold it as long as she can by lying to him. If she's not willing to go with you and tell Ed you're living together, and take the shit storm that is going to come upon both of you from him, pack you stuff and move out. She doesn't have your back, not the way you need. Not the way you want if you're serious about being married forever.

"And don't dither about it. I had to threaten to beat the shit out of the man to get him to treat me like a human. He drops by to visit, notices you live there, he's going to understand that as you don't have the balls to talk to him about it and he will never offer you a dime's worth of respect."

Gibbs nods. "And you won't deserve it, either. You're sticking around, you're looking to join his family, you talk to him."

Tim can see that startles Collin. "It's not an old-fashioned he owns her sort of thing. You don't ask for her, because she doesn't belong to him. But you do talk to him. It's just polite. It's showing him that you do have the strength to sit down, look him in the eye, and prove to him you've thought about his daughter's future enough to have a plan. A lot of hard things are going to happen in your life, and if you can't handle her Dad, a man who loves her and wants what's best for her, how are you going to do with people who genuinely want ill for her? He loves her. He doesn't want her getting hurt or hooking up with a loser, so you show up and prove you aren't one."

"And then he laughs until he cries, tells you over his dead body, and spends the rest of his life annoying you, but, still… you do it anyway. We all did. It wasn't fun. None of us liked it—"

"I thought it was fun." Tim adds.

"That's because you talked to him," Jimmy replies.

Collin's looking from Tim to Gibbs, really confused. "Wait, isn't he your dad?" They don't really clarify exactly how the McGee branch of the family is related to each other. The larger Slater-clan just has them all classified as 'Jimmy's friends."

"Yes," Gibbs says. Collin does not appear to find that answer useful for his real question, namely, 'Why was he asking you?' "And if you spend ten years working for Ed, save his life several times, always have his back, when he'll say 'yes' without thinking about it if someone asks him if you're his kid, you too can enjoy Tim's level of just show up, pull out the ring, and say, 'So, you giving her away or what?'"

"I did not do that."

Gibbs flashes him his amused look. "You sure as hell didn't ask."

"No. You'd have laughed if I asked." Gibbs nods. "And Abby would have been pissed off about it. 'Cause you don't own her." Gibbs nods at that, too. "But I did show up, and I did show him the ring, because… Because I wanted to, really. It's a cool ring. But, if I hadn't worked for him for ten years and if he didn't know about my writing, I would have shown it to him as a way of saying, 'Look I'm
serious about this and I've got the sort of cash to support her and your grandchildren.'"

Jimmy shrugs. "I asked, and the ring was tiny, and he laughed. I didn't get part of it was a pissing contest. But especially with Ed, what you're doing is showing him you can and will stand up for his daughter, against him if need be." Jimmy stares at Collin, looking him over coolly. "And just for the record, nothing against you or personal, we did this in February with Tim's soon to be brother-in-law, but the one thing Ed and I do agree on, and you'll find the rest of this crew does, too, if you hurt one of the girls, you better run fast and hide good because otherwise we will hurt you."

Tim nods along with that. "And by hide good, he means you never touch a computer again, 'cause otherwise I will find you." Then he nods at Gibbs. "You also never go outside, and you stay away from windows, because he can still nail a headshot at a thousand meters. I've been right behind the guy where if he had missed it would have hit me, so trust me when I say this one can still shoot."

"We're guys, and we're not her dad. We get it. We're not saying you can't break it off, or if you do marry her that you've got to stay married forever. But you start banging the secretary while you're married or stop being a dad to your kids, you're going to wish you were dead," Jimmy says, wrapping up the expected behavior of members of the extended Slater clan.

Collin's eyes are wide and he's looking between Gibbs, Tim, and Jimmy, realizing none of them are kidding. He nods slowly. "Okay."

"Okay!" Jimmy says brightly with a big smile. "So, you wanna come next week? Trust me, we also all get wanting a good excuse to get out of Sunday dinner early."

"Uh, yeah, that sounds good." He stands up. "I should probably get going."

The other three of them nod at him. "See you next week," and other variations on the theme of goodbye echoing from them.

Gibbs leaned back against the bench, sipping his coffee, grinning. "Ed's not going to know what hit him."

Jimmy and Tim are looking at him curiously.

"You're going to report back to Breena that he's a good guy. I'm going to report to Ed that he's a good guy. I'm sure he's spending time with Jeannie. By the time he's ready to move on a ring, he'll have Amy, Breena, Jeannie, and me all hitting Ed with the fact that he's good son-in-law material. That kid's not stupid. Little scared, maybe—"

Jimmy shakes his head. "Amy's scared. Look at how he's handling us. He's not afraid to say they're living together. She is."

"He's scared now," Gibbs says, "Not sure she'll pick him in the long run."

"Oh. Yeah."

"Think she will?" Tim asks, sipping his drink.

"I'm sure we'll know one way or another soon."

They're walking back to the car when something hits Tim. He gently nudges Gibbs with his shoulder. "You gonna be doing that again? Talking to Borin's dad?"

That gets him a headslap, a head shake, and "You're just as bad as the girls."
Tim grins at him.
Skeptical

Gibbs is skeptical. That's probably the best way to put it. But in the two months since he called Jenny, this is the first place she's found that she thinks might be what he's looking for in a family home.

It's big. Definitely big. And beaten up, really beaten up. He asked for big and beaten up, and it's really big and really beaten up.

Ten bedrooms, seven baths, lots of extra space (there will be no problem sticking a table big enough for twenty for Shabbos in the… empty space that could be a dining room, or living room, or something, let alone one for their current group), a good deal of land, and water access.

It's ugly as sin. Whoever designed this thing… They're tromping around it, and he's looking at it critically. And, his opinion as someone who's spent a lot of time building a lot of different things is that no one designed this. No one in their right mind would design this. Crazy people wouldn't design this, either.

It probably started a someone's little (or not so little) vacation place, and then that someone (or a different someone) just kept tacking on rooms as needed.

It's beaten up. Four days after Lana Turner, the most recent owner, died, Tropical Storm Tina roared in and left the place battered. Window damage, roof damage, siding torn off. One of the trees had uprooted and was blocking the driveway, another one took out a back corner of the house. But, since no one was living there at that point, no one noticed, and a full winter went by before her sons remembered they had this chunk of property in Virginia. And, remembering it, they wanted to get rid of it, so they could settle her estate that much faster.

Gibbs stares at it. There are things they can do to lessen ugly, new siding, new roof (beyond what they had to fix to deal with the storm damage), new windows. But it's still shaped like a house made out of Legos by a kid.

And the inside… water damage, weather damage… Most of it looks okay, but where the roof ripped off and the window broke is a mess. And if that's mildew and not water staining those walls, that'll be a lot of work to deal with.

Plus, it looks like no one's done much with the place since the '70s. No one's decorated, that's for sure. (Polyester shag carpeting left open to the elements for seven months is a sight Jethro never wants to see again.) Whatever this house was, it was not a valued bastion of happy family memories. At least, not any recent ones.

But as he's roaming the back he notices something, a stone patio. Big one. Fire pit, two foot tall wall that works for additional seating, and something big covered with a tarp. It looks a lot newer than the rest of the house.

"What's that?"

"Not sure," Jenny says, checking her notes. "Oh. Outdoor kitchen. According to the notes, back in '08 they began to refurbish for a sale, but the sale fell through." She starts to pull the tarp off, and he quickly takes over and then feels the smile easing across his face.

It is an outdoor kitchen. It's stone, gray something or other. There's a built in (small, given the shape the rest of the house is in, likely broken) fridge, and a sink, but the main part is a huge grill, and, he
smiles even wider, an oven. There's even, though it's cracked and splintered, a pizza peel on a hook on the far side.

Gibbs may not be a deeply superstitious man, but he also doesn't believe in coincidences, so, with this staring him in the face, he gets his phone out and starts taking pictures.

"Let's go through again."

Jenny shakes her head, if he wants to see the place again, she'll show him. After all, if she can get someone to take this Albatross off the Turner's hands, all the better for her and them.

This time, he gets shots of everything.

He's printing out the photos when he hears Mona hop up and head to the door, followed by the sound of it opening.

No insane barking, so it's got to be someone she approves of.

"Hi Mona." Borin's voice. He smiles at that.

"Hey."

She's in his living room a few seconds later, hugging him from behind, looking over his shoulder. "What's that?"

He turns to kiss her. "Surprise for the kids, maybe."

She squints at the shot that's printing out, perplexed on how this might be a welcome surprise for the kids. "That looks like a wall with a pretty nasty case of black mold. They pissing you off?"

He laughs. "I'm hoping it's not, but it might be." He shuffles through the shots finding one of the whole house from the outside. "Duck and Penny want to find a place where we can stay without tripping all over each other."

She looks at the shot, eyes wide. "Won't be a problem there."

"Nope. Room for all of us, the kids, any more kids they may have, and twenty-five years from now, any new kids they may bring home."

"So, a family home for you?"

"Yeah. For all of us. Home used to be NCIS, but we're not all there all the time, and even if we were, the babies wouldn't be. So, home. At least on weekends and holidays and summers and as often as we can all get there. We're already overflowing Tony and Ziva's for Shabbos, and we're tight for any sort of sit down meal here. We never all fit at Penny and Ducky's. And Tim and Abby or Breena and Jimmy can just get everyone squeezed in, now, but in ten years we'll have who knows how many kids all running around. So, home, for all of us, together."

She smiles at that. "Ducky and Penny are bankrolling it, and you're…"

"Finding the place, seeing if we can make it livable, and then in charge of getting it that way. Kids'll add muscle and sweat. Realtor seems to think this is about as good as we're going to find given what we're looking for. Less than an hour from DC, big, on the Potomac, with a pier and boathouse. Beat up shape, but that's something I want."
She looks at the shot of the whole place, thinks about the almost completely done boat in the driveway, and says, "Give you a job to do?"

"Among other things. We don't want the kids putting cash into this, but if it's beat all the hell up they can put work into it. It'll be theirs, even if they aren't bankrolling it."

She nods at that, looking through the pictures. "It's really… unique."

"Ugly."

She nods. "Yeah."

He smiles dryly. "With any luck, by the time we're done, it'll 'have character.'"

She snorts at that.

He looks at his house. "This one was ugly as sin when we got it. Turns out there was pretty under all that '70s crud."

She stares at the picture. "You think there's pretty hiding under there?"

He inclines her head in a way that says very doubtful. She's right, unless they bulldoze a bunch of it, that place'll never be pretty. "It'll be big. We'll be in one place, but everyone'll have their own room, and with my kids…” He shakes his head. "I've slept over at Tim and Abby's often enough to know you don't want to share a room with them, or be in the room next to them."

Her eyebrows rise at that.

He gives her a Yes, exactly what you're thinking is correct, they are horny and loud look. "And I've got no reason to think Jimmy and Breena or Tony and Ziva are any different."

She smiles at that, kisses him gently, nips his bottom lip, and pulls back saying, "Apples didn't fall far from the tree, or are you taking after them?"

He laughs, silently, eyes warm. He glances around, sees she's got her purse and her go bag, but didn't bring any food. "You wanna go out tonight?"

"Out?"

"Yeah, like a restaurant or something. Delivery is fine, but… maybe I like having everyone see you on my arm for a night?"

"Got a place you're thinking of showing me off?"

"You like meatloaf?"

"I've been known to eat it every now and again."

"I've got a place."

Elaine approves.

Vast, visible rays of Oh My God, Gibbs, she's PERFECT are radiating off of her as she pours more coffee and gets their orders.
"Now, I know what he wants. He's here on a Thursday night, he's looking for meatloaf. But what can I get for you? And for his friends… You got a hankering for something not on the menu, we can do it."

Borin looks over the menu. She does eat meatloaf on occasion, but she's got to be in the right mood for it, and right now, she's not.

"Bacon cheeseburger, fries."

"Sure. Rare?"

That surprises Borin. "You serve rare hamburgers?"

Elaine smiles, very satisfied. "Grind our own beef, to order. Takes longer, but you can order rare anything here and won't get sick."

"Yes, I'd like a rare hamburger. Haven't had a rare burger in forever."

Elaine smiles. "Back in a bit."

Borin looks at Gibbs. "This who you're showing me off to?"

He nods, sipping his coffee. "Best comfort food in DC, too. Once Elaine knows you, you don't have to order. She sees you pull in, and by the time you're sitting down she's already got her husband cooking it. And she always knows what you want. You might not, but she does."

"And on Thursdays you want meatloaf?"

"Today's special. Try some of mine, you'll know why."

"That why your retirement party was here?"

"One reason. Kids knew this was one of the places I'd put up with. Wouldn't have been true for a lot of other places. Elaine and Joe would have been invited to the party, which meant closing up shop, so might as well have it here and let them make some money, maybe get some new customers."

That makes sense to Borin. She takes another sip of her coffee, thinking about the house.

"They really are 'the kids' now, aren't they?"

He nods his head. "Got asked if Tim was mine on Sunday, said yes without thinking about it."

She smiles at that. "What's he think about that?"

"When I was hurt, out of it, the docs asked who he was, he said he was my son. Right now he and Abby are my next-of-kin. They and Ziva are more mine than the others. Abby's parents are dead, so are Ziva's. Tim'd be better off is his were. So, it's more whatever it is, with them. But they're all my kids. Some of them have some other parents, too. Breena's not less mine because both of her parents are alive and well and actually good at being parents."

"Sharing them?"

"Yeah."

"So, who was asking if Tim was your kid?"
And while they wait for dinner he tells her about adventures in dealing with Ed.

The second time Gibbs shows Ducky and Penny a stack of pictures, it's just the one place.

This time Ducky and Penny are a lot happier with the results.

"It's in awfully rough shape," Gibbs says by way of warning.

"And yet you've already gone to see it?" Ducky asks.

"Yeah."

"Can we see it?" Penny asks.

"As of this morning, no one's placed a bid on it. It's an hour ten from here, if traffic cooperates, closer to forty-five minutes if I drive it."

"We'd prefer to get there alive," Ducky adds, dryly.

Gibbs acknowledges that with a head tilt. "If you're free, we can see it tomorrow."

"What else would I be doing?" Ducky may be doing better at adjusting to retired life than Gibbs is, but that's not exactly saying much. In June a new semester begins at American, and as the spouse of a Professor he can take whatever classes he wants. He's looking forward to that. Been a long time since he's done anything with Classical Greek, and there's two high-level musical theory seminars that have piqued his interest. They're also talking about possibly letting him teach a class or two on criminal pathology, he's obviously qualified for the job, and that intrigues him, as well.

But June is still two months off.

Gibbs gives him a look. "You weren't the one I was asking, Duck. Got class, Professor Langston?"

"I have an early seminar on Fridays, but after ten I'm free until Shabbos."

"Then we'll pick you up at American and go from there."

"How's the other half of the hunt going?" Gibbs asks several minutes later after they've got the details of who is driving out of the way.

"Slowly," Penny replies. "I'm getting to know some interesting people, but so far…" She trails off and looks at Ducky. Gibbs can feel there's something the two of them have talked about and wanted to hold off on mentioning until they were alone with him.

"Jethro, are you sure you're set on this plan?" Ducky asks.

"Yes." Of course he's sure. Why would he not be sure?

They both look at each other.

"Ah." Ducky says, delicately.

"Ah? 'Ah' what?"

"Do you think it's wise to simultaneously be starting up a relationship with the Coast Guard's Head
of the Chesapeake Division while trying to work on smuggling, by sea, illegal aliens into the country?"

"Ah." Yes, that's a point. And that's something he's been working really hard on not thinking about. "I know."

"Jethro, we want you to be happy. We're behind you on what you want to do with these girls," Penny says. "But we don't see how sleeping with the head of the local CGIS is going to work well for that."

Jethro could, if he wasn't feeling so defensive, actually sit down and think about this, but he is feeling defensive, so he shoots back with, "How did sleeping with a four star Admiral work for your peace activism?"

Penny inclines her head. That's a point. And she can see what Jethro's doing, that this is two things he wants clashing and he's trying to not really deal with it. "I'll give you that was tense. But neither of us were looking at prison time for what we were doing." Jethro just stares at her, remembering something she said about the occasional leaked detail, and she knows he's remembering it. "Okay, point taken."

"I'm not saying anything to her until I can't not, and then… I can't imagine this would be a problem for her."

Penny's just looking at him, letting those words just sit there. One of the things she knows from very long association with people who are convinced they're in the right is that they have a very hard time understanding how anyone else might disagree with them.

He doesn't budge on it, so Penny says, "She's the Coast Guard, Jethro, having a problem with stuff like this is her job."

"He was an Admiral, having a problem with leaking stuff was his."

Ducky's listening to this quietly.

Penny sighs. She can see Jethro's got his wall up on this, so she pulls back and tries a different tact. "I had more than twenty-five years of marriage with him before we got there. I knew that man in and out and through all things, and he knew me the same way. In that we were married, we couldn't be forced to testify against each other. In that he was an Admiral, he was above suspicion. We knew we could get away with it clean. You and Borin are none of those things."

That hits. Hits him hard. Hits him so he can't shy away from it or try to shift what she's saying away from the point. "Fuck." He barely puts any voice into it, just mouths it really. The heart wants what it wants. It wants Borin, and it wants to be able to find girls in trouble and give them a better life. It wants to not just save lives but offer lives worth living.

And it wants a home, that it's starting to imagine with a woman who gets the job and the need to do it and who likes bourbon and steaks by the fire. "Fuck." Little louder this time. Because Penny and Ducky are right, and these two sides are at odds with each other. He doesn't know why she ended up at the Coast Guard, not specifically, not yet… And just because this is a no-brainer to him, doesn't mean it's one for her.

If it's just the job, just going after killers, she probably won't have an issue with what he wants to do. If it's about service to the country, if it's about protecting the borders she may. FUCK.

"We don't even know if we'll find someone, yet."
He sees the look Penny and Ducky share, and it sounds incredibly lame to him. "That does not mean you stop looking for someone. If..." He licks his lips. If it's the right thing to do, and he's sure it is, then he can't be with her if she doesn't agree. "If Borin can't be okay with this, then she's not the one for me. That's just how it is. But if there's nothing to be okay with, then..."

"Hedging your bets, Jethro?" Ducky asks.

"Why not? I'm allowed to, right? I've borrowed more than enough trouble over the years, maybe I can put this one off until I've actually got some trouble to borrow?"

"Okay." Ducky and Penny can both see that he won't, can't just let it rest. He wants to. Wants to pretend it's not there, but in that they've actually spoken to him about it, he can't, not anymore. "See the place tomorrow?" Jethro asks, again, getting them off of Borin. They both nod.

"Rough." Ducky says, as they walk around the outside. Lana's sons hadn't wanted to put the money or effort into fixing the place up. They just wanted to get rid of it and get her estate settled as quickly as possible. (Something about how getting rid of the property would mean that all of her holdings would be in Maryland, and that would streamline something with the taxes... Gibbs was paying significantly more attention to the house than what Jenny was saying about the Turner family.)

It was a big, sprawling, something. Might have been a Cape Cod style house originally. But over time a lot of different wings and rooms got added onto it. Now it's two, or three, and in one spot where there was both attic and basement, four floors of rooms spreading off a huge, two story kitchen-living area wrapped around a massive, open to both sides, stone fireplace.

It has ten bedrooms, with a master suite on the first floor, and an in-law suite on the third floor.

It's dull, blue weather-beaten wood siding on the outside, grimy gray trim, tarps covering some of the roof and several windows, three acres of lawn that hadn't seen a mower in months, another three acres of woods, and a path down to a small beach, boathouse, and pier leading on the Potomac.

Inside it's... depending on which part you're in, wood and stone floors, cool white (where there isn't water staining and possibly mildew) walls, and warm, golden oak trim. It has two spacious suites (shag carpeting and fake oak wood paneling), and eight more bedrooms, ranging from huge echoing squares of space (one with mirrors on the ceiling) to one small octagonal one, with floor to ceiling windows on five sides. Bathrooms range from copious space with Jacuzzi tubs and good light to tiny, dank closets tiled in avocado and bubblegum pink. It's close to 5,000 feet, plenty of room for nine (and Gibbs hopes, ten) adults and an indeterminate number of children with them.

Inside it is also water damaged from the storm and the winter that came after, hardwood floors rotting away, drywall Jethro knows is going to have to come down because it's falling apart, and fake oak paneling that is also going to have to come down because it's so ugly it's making his skin crawl.

But the bones, and the parts that have weathered the storm... He turns to Ducky and Penny and asks, "So, is it home?"

Penny rests her hand on the fireplace in the center of the main living space. It's slate and granite, gray, cool under her touch, just about at her eye-level is a mantle piece, also in warm oak, that wraps all the way around. There's room for a lot of memories on that mantle, a lot of pictures.
And above it, the chimney goes straight up the ceiling fifteen feet above their heads.

"I think the big version of our crest goes there."

Ducky nods, pointing in front of it. "Dining table here?"

Penny smiles. "I think so. How much effort is it going to take to get this place livable?"

That's a real sticking point. Jethro shrugs. "This is more than I can just do on my own. This is ask the rest of them if they're willing to put some real time into it before making a bid. This is you," he's looking at Ducky, "and I have something to do every day for the next three months, at least, and that might just be tear down." Gibbs looks a little uncomfortable with it, but… "Ed and Senior offered to help with the building on Tony's place. Supposedly, they know what they're doing. I've seen Breena handle drywall, so Ed does know what he's doing, 'cause he taught her how to do it right. Not sure about Senior. If we can wrangle them into it, we should take the help. And if…” he pointed to a discolored smear along the far wall, "that's mold and not just water staining, this'll be an even bigger and more expensive project."

"Then tonight at Shabbos, we shall talk," Ducky says.


Decision Time

Apparently it has been a quiet week at NCIS. Tony and Ziva are able to cut out early, so Shabbos is at their house. Which Gibbs thinks is just fine. Their home makes a very clear argument for why a place where they can all fit is a good idea.

He's got the pictures. Ducky and Penny are going to bring it up when they think the time is right. Probably after the 'what have we all been doing this week' part of the conversation.

He didn't get bombarded with 'You bringing Borin?' questions this week. That was nice. Several looks, and the 'So, what exciting happened to you this week?' question seemed to indicate that Borin-centric information would be welcome, but he didn't add anything.

Besides seeing her once, and mulling over what the hell to do with the fact that she's Coast Guard, and he wants to start trafficking people, not much Borin-centric stuff happened this week, and none of it is anything he's willing to tell them about.

Excitement for the week for the rest of them ranged from Breena getting to deal with a family that was so fractious that they had to schedule two separate viewings, complete with funeral service, so that the dead man's sons didn't have to be in the same room at the same time, to Penny enjoying the fun that is having a student show up to complain about his failing grade, even though he had A: not done any homework, B: only shown up for a quarter of the classes, and C: left half of the midterm blank.

"...I asked him what grade he thought would be appropriate for a man who did not even deign to attend the class regularly and he just stared at me like I was speaking in French. Finally he said, 'I need a B to graduate with a 3.0.'"

"What'd you say to that?" Tim asks his grandmother.

"In that this is a junior level micro-medical engineering seminar you should be well enough versed with basic mathematical averages to know that it is mathematically impossible for you to get a B in this class. However, if you pull a C, which will require you to get As on everything in the rest of the class, turn in all of your homework, and ace the final, you can then take it again in September, get an A in it, average that with the C you may be able to pull this time, and then get your B."

"Let me guess, he had a fit?" Jimmy says between bites of roast beef.

"He glared at me and left. I got the note from the registrar that he's dropping the class today."

"All's well that ends well?" Ziva asks.

"This time. One of the little boogers complained to the Dean last semester. He didn't get very far with that." For a second, everything is quiet. Penny catches Ducky's eyes, and he nods, now's the time. "We had something we wanted to talk to all of you about."

That gets six sets of eyes staring at Penny. Most of them looking curious with a slight tinge of nervousness, after all that's a vaguely ominous phrase coming from the eighty-three-year-old clan Matriarch.

"Nothing bad. Ducky and I had been talking about how this is a very big family, one that will hopefully be getting bigger, and how it'd be nice to have a place where all of us can be together
without bumping into each other and tripping over each other."

In that they're all tightly squeezed around a table made for several fewer people in a living/dining room combination that is only four feet longer than the table they're squeezed around, this seems like relevant point.

"A home, for all of us. A place for weekends and vacations, and down time. To be used by all of us, together, or on our own."

"We roped Jethro into this, and he found a place." Gibbs gets up from the crowded table, and heads to Tony and Ziva's room, where all the coats are currently hanging out on their bed. He finds the folder of pictures he'd taken, and brings it back to the table. He can hear Penny explaining how she and Ducky were thinking of buying it, but since it's for all of them, and would require a sizable time commitment, it would be a group decision.

"It's big," Jethro says, "Lots and lots of room for all of us. But it's gonna need a lot of work. And right now, it's really ugly."

"Are you trying to get us to turn it down?" Abby asks.

He shakes his head. "Trying to make sure you guys know how big of an undertaking this is going to be." He hands the photos to Tony, who had been sitting next to him. "We do this, and all of our off time, all summer long and probably the fall, is going to be spent on this."

Tony's flipping through the pictures, and then passes them to Ziva. She looks more slowly, smile spreading over her face. From her, the shots go to Breena, and down the table.

"But when we are done…" Ziva starts.

"If we just fix it up, don't change anything structural, it'll be ten bedrooms, seven baths, plenty of room, backyard to run around in. It's on the Potomac, and there's a boathouse for Shannon, little bit of a beach for swimming or fishing. If we go for it… We're going to have to redo so much of it to deal with the damage and the fact that it was decorated last in the '70s, that ripping down more walls and rearranging it into five suites wouldn't be a problem," Gibbs says. He'd been thinking about how best to deal with their collection of families, and the idea of setting it up so that each family had its own area, main room for Mom and Dad, auxiliary space for the kids, and then turn two of the smaller bedrooms (they didn't have their own baths anyway) into a play area made a lot of sense to him.

Breena smiles, getting this idea immediately. The pictures she's looking at are rough, but if anyone had seen the home her parents turned into their vacation place (bought shortly after Hurricane Andrew) they'd have never dreamed of what it eventually became. She can look at this house and see a lot of potential. Yeah, it's never going to be on the cover of Home and Garden, but they can make it into a damn fine home.

Her smile spreads. This is how her family built wealth that they hoped would last for generations. Variations on this theme is how her great-grandparents set up their business and homes. She looks around at the collection of people around her and feels very pleased by this.

Wealth isn't yours. It's something you use, build up, and pass more of onto your kids so they can do the same for theirs. The family she was born into isn't "rich," no gold plated china for them, no yachts, and south of France vacations were a once a decade sort of thing, not a hop on over every season type thing. They are at the top most range of comfortable. But she knows her Dad certainly hopes his grandchildren would be able to shift into full on "rich."
Steps like this is how they'll get there.

A house like this, all fixed up, on good land builds equity. Equity can be parlayed into top-flight educations (she looks at Tony and Ziva, knowing they're worried about finding a home in a good school district) and business loans. Those seeds grow more wealth, and with wealth comes choices, and choices bring many more paths to stable, comfortable lives.

Tony looks really nervous about this. Unlike Breena's family, his family was "rich" and he remembered the dark side of sibling squabbles over who got to use what, when. He remembers his Dad using his money as a club, a way to try and beat Tony into becoming another generation of businessman, constantly on the hunt for the next big score.

He has useless playboy cousins, and, sure he liked a good party as much as they did, but he didn't live for the party. That's not true. He did live for it, once. Just like them, he spent years running from one 'fun' high to the next.

And if winning the game wasn't a better high than any party ever, he'd still be there, yet another useless, charming DiNozzo, running from one empty high to the next.

And if a fire hadn't shown him what life could be, what it could mean, he'd have probably gone back to it as soon as school was done.

Constant fighting, constant nitpicking, constant sucking up, the way the money gets used to ensure the image of affection. He hates that, now, can feel how much it poisons everything. How you hate your aunts and uncles and grandparents because they're just walking bank accounts, and they loathe you because you're a parasite.

To say Tony's wary about this is a massive understatement.

At the same time, any home with Gibbs in it seems very unlikely to encourage that sort of behavior. And a home with an actual family in it, that too seems like it wouldn't encourage that.

But it still makes him nervous.

Ziva was born on it kibbutz, the idea of a family-owned home is second nature to her. Granted, the one she was born on grew orange and olives, and people came and people went, but there was always family there, at least some of them, a long branch of extended cousins and cousins of cousins, relatives by marriage or, like their family, long and dear association.

She's wondering, as she looks over the pictures, if they could grow something there. Obviously not oranges or olives, it's way too cold for that up here, but home for her has trees that blossom and grow fruits. Apples, maybe? She loves fall, now that she lives in a place that has autumns, and a grove of apple trees, with kids playing in it, picking fruit, as summer ends…

She likes the image a whole lot.

Jimmy's torn. He likes the idea of having this place, but he's also got a ton of continuing education units he's got to get done this summer. The paperwork software's bought him a lot of time, but right now he's using it to get Dr. Allan up to speed. He doesn't want to say, 'I can do this' and then end up short shifting his hours because he's got to spend a lot of his Saturdays in seminars so he can keep up his MD.

He's looking at the pictures, and Penny isn't kidding, this is a massive time commitment.

"I've got one hundred hours of CEUs planned for this summer. Five of my Saturdays are already
booked for seminars, and I'm going to have a lot of homework and studying. I like the idea of this, but…"

"You do what you can, Jimmy. None of us are going to fuss if you're not putting up shingles because you're keeping up your MD," Abby says.

For her this is easy. Of course they're going to do it. The biggest issue she can see, and she's sure Tim's on the same page, because as soon as Gibbs said ten bedrooms they both looked at each other, his eyes asking and hers saying yes, is how they're going to get Ducky and Penny to take money from them.

A place like this, even if it is… She gets the pictures from Jimmy, opening the folder, Tim looking over her shoulder, and yeah, it's rough.

"It's the Burrow on steroids," Tim whispers to her. And there is a certain resemblance to the Ron Weasley's version of a rickety-looking house with rooms added wherever, whenever a new one was needed.

She laughs a little at that. "Like the Weasleys'd ever let it get so beat up."

She keeps flipping through, and yeah, it's beat up, but it's also got to cost at least a million dollars, probably two, and that's a ton of money. Tim's on track to finish the last of the contracted Tibbs novels this summer. That's another three hundred thousand dollars coming in soon. Tuck more away for Kelly and retirement, but they'd still have a good chunk of cash to put into this.

"Is that black mold?" Tim asks.

"Don't know," Gibbs answers. "If you guys want to see it live, maybe snag some samples, we can go tomorrow."

Like for Abby, for Tim this is a no-brainer. Assuming this place is close enough so it's easy to get to for weekends, he's all for this. They already spend a lot of time just driving from one home to the others, something that cuts that out would be lovely.

He can imagine this, cut off little early on Friday, head to this house, Shabbos, weekend together, back to the real world Monday morning. Sure, not every weekend, and when the kids are older, they'll probably want to be home for time with their buddies, of course, this thing'll be big enough to bring some buddies along…

"All summer and fall, but it'll be ready by Christmas, right?" Tim says.

"Maybe." Gibbs isn't sure. Jimmy not being there for five of their working days will cut into this.

"Hopefully. The outside will be done by then."

"Okay, definitely next year then." Tim puts the picture of the mantle in the center of the table. "Stockings hung by the chimney with care. All the kids together for Christmas morning. Hell, we'll have the room, if Ed and Jeannie, Senior and Delphine want to be here, too, we can do it up right. Everyone here, all at once, together."

Abby squeezes his hand gently. The Christmas he never had as a kid.

Gibbs nods along with that, and Penny says, "That's what we're thinking."

"So, let's go see this place, tomorrow," Breena says.
Ducky and Penny were expecting Tim and Abby to walk them to their car.

"We can put money into this," Tim tells his grandmother.

"Not a ton, not right now," Abby adds. Between the wedding and house all of the money from Most Precious was gone. Shadow Force was finished right before Kelly was born, and that had been earmarked for college and other kid expenses. Right now Tim is less than twenty thousand words from the end of the last of the Tibbs novels. Should have the full advance on that by November.

"But come fall we could kick in two hundred thousand."

Penny smiles at that, and shakes her head at them. "This is for fun. When you've got all of your basic expenses taken care of, you own your house free and clear, college for Kelly and any other children you'll have paid for, your own retirements set, then yes, we'll take your money for this. But not before then."

She and Ducky had come up with that as a good way to put Tim and Abby off without actually hinting as to why they didn't want them to have a financial stake in the property.

"We're close. House is paid for. Kelly's college fund is full," Tim says, he determined look on his face.

Penny shakes her head again. "I know you both want more than one child. You're going to have to do better than one college fund."

Tim rolls his eyes. He can write more books. They aren't thrilled about taking Tibbs books on spec, but on spec is better than no books at all. And all he has to do is say, 'Write me a contract,' and he'll have money set for at least three more of them. "We're not hurting for cash. At all. Between my salary, and Abby's, and the books… We can afford to put money into this, in a way none of the rest of them can." Though, as he thinks about it, Jimmy and Breena are likely getting close to having that sort of income. "Even that badly beat up, that house has to cost a ton, and even with us doing it, fixing it won't be cheap."

Penny stares at him. "When you two have five million in the bank, you can buy in."

"Penny!" Yeah, they aren't hurting for cash, but that's still at least a decade off, and likely more.

"Uh un. Not negotiable. We're old and well off. We can buy this outright and still not have to worry about outliving our money."

"You sure?" Tim asks his grandmother. "Don't want you hurting for this."

They both nod. "Your grandfather's pension alone is providing me with over ninety thousand a year, for the rest of my life. You want to guess how much I'm making in residuals from some of the patents I hold? Let alone my professorship?"

Tim holds up his hands. "Fine." Then they both look at Ducky.

"I appreciate your concern, but I am financially sound. And like your grandmother, I can afford to buy this without any risk outliving my wealth. Even with this purchase, my charities of choice will still do well by me."

"Okay."

Ducky says, "When we buy, we'll be setting it up as a trust. Jethro will be one trustee since he's the
The pictures didn't do the place justice. It looks beaten up and ugly in the pictures. In real life it's tooth-achingly ugly.

They got there, a fine early April morning lighting the gnarled grass and weather-beaten home, and spread out to explore.

Tim and Abby are walking around, Kelly in her snuggli on Abby's chest, looking very intently at everything.

"I didn't know polyester came in colors this awful," he says as he kicks at the carpet in the room that was open to the elements, feeling his lungs starting to tighten up.

She shakes her head. "Get samples of it." She brought a collection of sterile test tubes. Part of making the decision on this is what level of hazmat this place is. If they can't disassemble it without getting sick, they're not going to bid on it.

"Don't need to, I can feel it's filled with mildew."

"Here." She swaps him Kelly for the sample tubes. "You need an inhaler?"

"God, no." Asthmatic lungs work by tightening up and shutting down to keep the stuff they don't like out. Inhalers work by opening them back up again. People who don't understand this think that taking a few hits on an inhaler is a good plan for an asthmatic sitting in the middle of whatever is setting of the asthma attack. Asthmatics know that you take the inhaler after you're away from what's setting you off, otherwise you're just going to make the problem worse. "That'd just get this crap even deeper into my lungs."

Abby isn't not asthmatic, but she's grasping the basic concept with ease. "Okay, get out of here."

"Good plan." He wheezes.

"Timothy?" Ducky asks as he heads back into the kitchen area, hands over Kelly, quickly, and starts coughing loudly. "Are you all right?"

"Lot of mildew in the…" he points toward the side of the house they'd been wandering around in, while coughing. "Lungs don't like it," he says when he can inhale again. "Just got to get away from it."
He spends a moment standing in front of the fireplace, not talking, because talking messes up how you breathe and will just make him cough more. After a few minutes, his lungs notice they're no longer under attack and begin to relax.

"Okay, better."

"Really?" Ducky sounds concerned as he pats Kelly's back. She's been staring at her father, wondering what that loud noise was.

"Yeah. I'll be fine."

"Do you have an inhaler?"

Tim shakes his head. "Not for years."

"Uh huh."

Tim catches that look in Ducky's eyes, and knows that by the time they come back to work on any sort of tear down for this project, he'll probably have a collection of inhalers to pick from.

"Mold, mildew, and dust triggered asthma. I'm allergic to cats, and it wouldn't shock me if there weren't a bunch of them living here over the years. I don't on well with Albuterol-based inhalers."

Ducky nods. "What does 'don't get on well' mean?"

"Mean's I'll make Abby mainlining Caff-Pow and speed look tame."

"Jittery?"

He smiles, self-depreciating, and nods definitively. "Yeah." He looks around the house again. "Granted, if you want me working on this twenty-four seven at about three times my normal speed, Albuterol might be a good plan."

"Have you tried Xopenex?"

Tim takes Kelly back, slipping her into the snuggli. "Don't think so. I haven't had an inhaler in probably eight years. Besides now and dropping Penny's things off at your house in that dust storm, I've wanted one, maybe, twice in all that time. Is it new?"

"Enough. I believe it's been out for a decade or so. When we get back to the..." But Ducky doesn't have his prescription pad at the Navy Yard anymore. "I shall send Jimmy a note and tell him to write you a script for it. Fill it on Monday. Whether we buy this home or not, you should have an inhaler on the off chance you need one."

"Sure." It can sit in his go bag and collect dust until it expires like the last one did.

"McGee!" he hears Tony yell out. Fortunately from the sound of it, he's in the other, hopefully mildew-free, wing of the house.

"Off to investigate," he says to Ducky, who nods at him.

It takes a few minutes, due to how rooms were haphazardly applied to this house, the hallways are of a long and winding nature, but he finds Tony and Jimmy standing in the middle of a bedroom, smirking.

"What?"
"We found your room." Tony says, still smirking, and Jimmy's on the verge of laughing.

Tim looks around at it. Okay, it's a bedroom, decent size, no carpet, that's a selling point, harvest gold wallpaper, that's not, and, like the rest of the house, it's got one electrical socket per room. (Ducky wasn't kidding, he's going to be rewiring the whole damn house to get this thing ready. Barely any electric, no cable at all, and wifi, what the hell is that?) It's got its own bathroom, which is nice, but he's really not seeing why this particular one is *his*.

However Jimmy and Tony are just standing there, grinning at him, really enjoying this joke.

So he looks around again, and still doesn't see it.

"What?"

Tony points up. There's a large patch of the ceiling covered in mirrors. "Figured that was about your speed," Tony says before both he and Jimmy succumb to giggles.

Tim looks at them, and then snorts. "Amateurs." He wiggles his index finger at them, as he steps below the mirrors. "Come here, let's learn how to use mirrors. Your wives will thank me." He points up. "Mirrors on the ceiling don't give you a very good view. And in most positions only one of you can see them. Lame view for only one of you, that's a job done by someone who doesn't know what they're doing." He heads to the middle of the room and looks around for a bit. Then two steps to the left. "If you do know what you're doing... The bed goes here. You want the mirrors..." He points to back of the closet door, and the front of the bathroom door. "Though you'll close the door a little bit more to get a really good angle. And you want a vanity, there." He points to one more wall. "That way you can both see, from any angle you like, you don't get the distortion from the mirrors being over your head. Upside down and backwards is more likely to make you seasick than turned on, and, better yet, you don't look like a freaking pervert if anyone just walks into your room." Tim stands there, smiling, enjoying the look of surprise on Jimmy and Tony's faces.

"I'm never going to be able to set foot in your room again, will I?" Tony says.

"You're the one who brought it up." Tim looks around some more, and heads into the bathroom. One of the nicer ones. He comes out nodding and quickly texts Abby. A few minutes later, she wanders in. "This one ours?" he asks.

She looks around, looks up, looks around again, and says, "Once you move those mirrors, sure. Closet and bathroom doors, and," she points to the same spot on the wall where he said the vanity should go, "there, right?"

He nods, smiling.

"Good. Yeah, I like this room. It gets good light." She heads out for a moment and then comes back in. "Ohhh, and the one next to it is that little octagonal one. We knock the wall down between them..."

Tim nods back to her, getting this idea. They're close to the end of the hallway here. The little octagonal room is off of this one, and then there's another room at the end of the hall, that opens into the octagonal one.

"There's another room next to that, and then the other side of the hall's got another bedroom/bathroom combo. You want to share the room without a bathroom for our girls?" Abby asks Jimmy. "Put them in there. That way we've got them between us. And you guys take the next master bedroom?"
"Let me go find Breena and take a look," Jimmy says.

Abby smiles at that, looks at Tony and Tim standing around and says, "Okay, glad we've got that set. Gotta get more samples." She kisses Kelly and Tim, and heads back out again to grab some more mildew.

An hour later they're all sitting on the back patio.

"Assuming that your tests show that the micro-organisms that are growing on this house are non-toxic, should we put a bid on this home?" Ducky asks.

"Didn't see any signs of termites," Gibbs says. "But the whole north corner of the house needs to be ripped down and redone."

"Windows and doors are ancient," Breena adds. "If they're younger than Abby is, I'd be amazed."

"There's nothing in the way of insulation, either," Gibbs adds. "But all the siding's coming down, so Tyveking everything won't be too hard."

Tim hadn't been able to check out the exposed wiring in the north corner of the house, but Abby had taken pictures for him. "We're tearing out the drywall in pretty much every wall on the inside, because the whole place needs to be re-wired. That'll make adding extra insulation, easier, too."

"Don't know anything about plumbing," Jimmy says, holding onto Anna, as Molly runs around in the grass beyond them. "But I know grout is not supposed to be black and I'm fairly sure the tile is supposed to be attached to the walls and floors in the bathrooms, not lose."

"So, we're looking at ripping off the roof and the siding, tearing out all of the windows and door, taking down most of the interior walls, chipping off all the tile, rewiring everything, likely re-plumbing it, all new appliances, and just for kicks, redoing a bunch of the walls. Are we keeping any of this place?" Tony asks. "Or would it just be easier to low-ball the bid, see if they'll bite for the price of just the land, bring in the bulldozers, and start from scratch." The others all stare at him as he says that. "What? I wasn't always asleep when my dad talked real estate."

They all look at Jethro. He shakes his head. "Nah. The bones look good. Structure is sound. The kind of messing with walls we're talking about is more about moving around where the drywall goes than tearing out studs."

"So, are we doing it?" Penny asks.

Jethro smiles. "I'm in. Tests come back clean, I can start working on tear down and designing what the inside'll look like."

"We're in," Abby says. "We'll hit the Navy Yard on the way home. I'll get the samples cooking. Hopefully, by start of work Monday I'll know if we should put a bid in."

"I think Molly approves," Breena says, as they can hear her laughing as she runs around. She looks at Jimmy and he nods. "We're in."

Tony's looking at the place. It's very much not a mansion for pampered brats. He really hopes it won't be when they're done. Ziva's looking out at the yard, and the trees beyond, seeing something, gardens in her mind, probably. She looks happy here, really happy, and he can imagine her planting things, enjoying a space to make things grow.
"We're in," he says.

"All right. We'll get the report back from Abigail and if all is well, we'll place the bid on Monday," Ducky says.

On Monday, Ducky got the call.

"Abigail?"

"It's mildew, and mold, and a lot of other little nasties, but none of it's toxic. Keep Tim out of it or get him a face mask, and we're good to go on teardown."

Ducky felt the smile spread across his face. "Wonderful! We'll get on it."

He and Penny sat down, and talked, and went through their finances to see how fast they could shift money around. Then they placed a bid. Twenty-five percent below the asking price, but to sweeten the deal they offered immediate closing. Cashier's check in hand as soon as the paperwork could be drawn up.

Wednesday morning everyone got a text from Penny: *Saturday morning, get your grubby clothes on; we've got work to do!*
Thursday morning. The rest of the crew would be joining them on Saturday, but, like Gibbs said, he and Ducky now had something to do, every day, for at least the next three months.

Gibbs, of course, is used to this. And sure, this is a much bigger project than he's ever worked on before, but he's at least familiar with the ins and outs of something like this.

He has the sinking suspicion, as he picks Ducky up, and notices that for Ducky, grubby clothes equals scrubs (Gibbs supposes that makes a certain amount of sense: cheap, easily washed, easy to move in, cool, all of that is good, but it looks really odd.) that Ducky has likely never done anything even remotely like this.

It's also occurring to Gibbs, as they head toward the house, that he's never really done anything that involved managing Ducky before. He's never had to try to teach Ducky anything. Or, God, correct him on something.

*Yeah, this'll be interesting.*

Of course, today's version of interesting is somewhat less strenuous than tomorrow is likely to be.

First things first, they've got to get those fallen trees out of the way.

Once that's done, there's ordering a few dumpsters, making lists of the tools they're going to need, obtaining said tools, and then tomorrow they can begin the tear down.

Today's work is actually going to be fun, because ripping up trees with chainsaws is something that Gibbs really likes doing.

Plus, as they get out of the truck and head toward the first tree, chainsaw (Gibbs only has one) over his shoulder, Ducky with two hand saws, it hits Gibbs that this appears to be oak, which means as long as they roll the logs out of the way, he can use them later for something interesting.

"Branches come off first. Clean cuts, gonna want to save this."

Ducky nods at that, eyeballing the tree in front of them. It's dead. Very dead. There are littered brown leaves on the ground under the tree, and the twigs look dry and brittle. "And are we using the hand saws for the branches?"

"You are. I've got this."

"And why do you have that?" Ducky appears to be under the impression that the older guy should get the power tools.

"Have you ever used one before?"

"I've used bone saws before."

Gibbs flips off the safety and turns on the engine. "Not the same thing." He pulls his ear protection on, and hands ear plugs to Ducky before taking two large steps away from Duck, and starting up the chain saw. It buzzes to life with a hard kick, which is why Ducky didn't get to use it. If you've never done it before, that kick can be a surprise, and that surprise can kill you. Tim or Jimmy or Tony want to use this, that's one thing, but the girls and Ducky… he's got no idea how strong their arms are, and
he's sure as hell not explaining to Penny how he handed Ducky a chainsaw and that was that.

He keeps an eye on Ducky as he works. (Okay, he keeps an eye on Ducky between choosing branches to remove, while he's actually sawing, he keeps his eyes on the tree.)

Eventually Ducky notices or senses it somehow. He pulls off his ear protection and gestures for Jethro to do likewise, so he shuts off the saw and does so.

"What?"

"I am fine, Jethro."

"Didn't say you weren't."

"You are staring at me as if you are afraid that at any second I will drop over with a heart attack."

Gibbs opens and closes his mouth. Because, yeah, okay, that is more or less exactly what he's doing, but he didn't think he was being that obvious about it.

"As of my last check up all of my arteries and veins were clear. And I am more than capable of" he mimics the motion he's using for sawing, "for hours without any ill effect."

"Okay. Just… Don't want to be bringing Penny any bad news."

"And I would prefer you didn't have to, either. But if it happens here, it happens here, and this," he gestures to indicate the work they're doing, "will not be the cause of it. I do not need you coddling me."

"Okay."

Ducky's voice grows serious. "Mother lived fifteen years too long. Slowly fading further and further away from the rest of the world a day at a time. I don't want that. Jethro, I am of sound mind, doing something I enjoy with someone I love, for the joy of other people I love, wrapped in spring sunshine. Can you think of a better way to go?"

"Duck…” He swallows hard at that; he doesn't want to think much about Ducky going any which way or another, and then sighs, blinking. Yes, it's a good way to go, but this a hell of a lot grimmer than Gibbs wants to be. He rubs his hand over his face, blinks again, and then forces a smile and says, "My girlfriend's almost twenty years younger than I am. I can think of a better way to go." Gibbs holds his face serious for almost a second before breaking into a huge smile and laughing.

Ducky's eyes go wide for that second, and then he starts to laugh, loud, belly laughing, along with Gibbs. After a moment, he takes off his glasses and, still chucking, wipes his eyes. He inhales long and deep, exhales, and says, "Le petit mort becomes le grande mort. I'll give you, that's a better way to go." He laughs again, and Gibbs laughs with him. "Bad for your lady friend."

Gibbs nods, agreeing with that.

"But good for you. We should all aspire to such ends."

"Amen, Duck."

Gibbs is about to put his ear protection back on when Ducky asks, "And is Ms. Borin your girlfriend?"

Gibbs looks up at him, startled.
"It's just, your previous women, Susan, Dr. Ryan, Ms. Hart, Hollis they were all friends. In fact, if memory serves, both Timothy and Anthony received headslaps for referring to Susan as your girlfriend."

Gibbs inclines his head at that, they did get headslaps, mostly for the gossip, but the girlfriend bit triggered it, too.

"Have you… spoken to her about what else it is we hope to do here?"

Gibbs shakes his head. No. He tried, but the fear of her leaving killed those words dead long before they had a shot of getting out of his mouth.

"In the old tales, the knight goes forth, and risks everything to do what is right. Thus he goes off to slay the dragon, knowing exactly what it is he risks, because the threat of the dragon is too great to be ignored. You are a knight, Jethro, you always have been.

"But there are myriad dragons out there. More dragons than there are knights. We can go and find one that doesn't risk you losing your lady in the process."

"You getting cold feet?"

"No." Ducky smiles. "I've married my lady. She'll be there to the end of my days, or hers, whichever of us goes first. My castle is secure. My loves are safe. I'm ready, willing, and able to go forth and slay dragons with you. My last grand adventure.

"But it doesn't have to be this adventure."

Gibbs sits down on the oak, patting the bark, Ducky sitting next to him.

"What else would I do? Really? Rachel suggested being an EMT."

"You'd be good at it. Cool head, able to deal with anyone who comes your way. The medical training is intensive, but I doubt you'd find it difficult. Private Detective, take up cases the police have given up on. You could teach self-defense. Work with battered women, teach them to fight and to shoot."

"So we can arrest them when they finally shoot the sons-of-bitches hurting them? I get into that, I'll end up doing a lot more than just practicing with my sniper rifle."

The look on Ducky's face indicates he doesn't necessarily see that as a problem.

Gibbs shakes his head. "Only one bullet left for that rifle, and it's got a target picked."

Ducky nods, well aware of who that bullet's for, should the need arise.

"I want to do it, Duck. It's… if you were to sit down for hours to come up with something that perfectly matched my skills and what I've got to offer, that's it."

Ducky nods, agreeing. Sailing skills, ability to read people at a glance, facility with language, nerves of steel, undercover skills, deep sympathy and protective nature, yes, this is Jethro's perfect job.

"But I want her, too."

Ducky smiles, sadly. "I'm afraid that may be a combination you cannot have."

"I know. I am, too." Gibbs swallows hard again, and pats the tree. "Come on." He puts his ear
protectors back on, waits for Ducky to get up, and then fires up the chainsaw again.

Saturday morning. Bright and early. Tim's noticed it's a lot easier to get up bright and early on Saturday mornings these days. Probably because it's not like there's any shot of sleeping in. Kelly's up by seven every morning, so they pretty much are, too. Right now, Kelly's all dressed and ready to go. She's chilling out on Mom and Dad's bed, laying on her back, working on stuffing both sets of toes into her mouth.

Mom and Dad are somewhat less ready to go.

"Jethro's bringing all the tools, right?" he asks Abby as he's pulling on his oldest, rattiest jeans. (Not very old or ratty. Downside of all the weight he lost is that almost everything he owns and still wears is new.)

"Think so, why?" She's hunting through her closet for her overalls. It's been a while since she volunteered to build houses for Habitat For Humanity, but she's still got her gear somewhere.

"Just checking."

"Do you have tools to bring?"

"Yes, but not for this part of it." Most of his tools are for electronics. He's got lots of good stuff for soldering, and a wide array of extremely high-tech micro tools for dealing with the delicate innards of a computer. On a much bigger scale, he's ready and able to fish cable through a house, splice wires, sink LED light sockets, and add in extra electric plugs. However, the hammer, saw, crowbar, wrenches, and various and sundry other around-the-house tools they have are all Abby's. "When we get to rewiring, I've got stuff."

"Found it!" Abby pulls her overalls and tool belt out of deep storage. "Now let's see if I can still fit my ass into these."

He pats her rear gently while kissing her neck, and then delves into the closet to find his work boots.

Out in the sun, breaking things, spending the day with most of his favorite people. Jimmy was really looking forward to this.

All was going well. They got their things, packed the girls into the backseat, and headed over to Ed and Jeannie's. Molly's going to get some quality time with Gramma and Papa. (Anna's staying with them, because she spends most of her time nursing and sleeping.) He and Breena were going to head off, and then breaking things!

Was and were are the operative words in those statements.

 Apparently, last night, Amy and Collin dropped by to have a chat with Ed and Jeannie. Jeannie, of course, knew why they were there and what they had to talk about. Ed did not.

To say he did not take that conversation well would be an understatement along the lines of 'You know, absolute zero is a bit nippy.'

A very quick conference between Jeannie and Breena resulted in Ed coming along, because both of them thought that a chance to break things would be good for him.

So, as they're driving to the house, Jimmy now has, instead of an hour to just chat with his wife,
alone, without small people interrupting, which he had been looking forward to, an hour with Ed fuming in his backseat, occasionally muttering things under his breath.

They've been in the car for ten, tense, minutes before something that's actually intelligible comes out of him. "Why would she lie to me?"

Jimmy bites his lip. He could answer. He wants to answer. He's got answers coming out his ears right now, but he feels Breena's hand on his wrist, so he doesn't. He stays quiet.

"She's not blind, Dad. She saw how you treated Jimmy, she saw the crap you've put me through, the crap you've put both of us through, and for some reason she wasn't eager to deal with that. You put me in an impossible situation, and you wonder why she didn't want to be there herself?"

Ed glares and looks out the window. "When it's Molly and Anna, you'll understand."

"No! I won't. You couldn't have designed a better husband for me if you tried, and you're still not fond of him. So, no, I'm not going to understand this. Molly or Anna fall in love with a good man, a man who's good for them, I'm not going to be a jerk about it."

"He'll understand," Ed says looking at Jimmy.

Jimmy glances at Breena, wondering if it's okay for him to talk, now, and she nods slightly. "It's my job to protect Molly and Anna's hearts, my job to raise them so they can find happiness and recognize it when they have it. It is not my job to constantly second guess them. It's not my job to try and wedge myself between them and the men or women or whoever it is they love. And it's sure as hell not my job to make them break down crying on their eventual mates because I'm being a flaming asshole about the fact that they want to get married. That's not my job, and it's not yours, and if you don't want Christine," Breena's youngest sister, "pulling the exact same crap on you, shape up, get over yourself, and welcome their men into your home."

"Collin's a good guy, Dad."

"If he was a good guy, he'd have married her. None of this shacking-up shit."

"Dad."

"It's bullshit. You love her. You're going to stay. You get married. This… he's playing house and then he's going to knock her up and run."

"We've already told him that if he tries to bail on his kids we'll kill him," Jimmy says. "He took it seriously."

"Who's we?"

"Me, Tim, Gibbs. After bootcamp. After letting him see that we could literally beat the shit out of him if we wanted to."

"Why were you doing that?"

"Because he is serious, and he's not insane, so he decided having a chat with the one other person who knows what it's like to be Ed Slater's son-in-law was a good plan." Breena already knows this, but Ed doesn't. "We would have been engaged six months earlier, but I was spending a lot of time figuring out if she was worth having to deal with you. And she is, but that was a lot of long nights thinking hard about it. And then it was another year of you making her miserable and me want to shoot you in the ass because of it. So no, no sane guy jumps into that without a lot of thought,
because having someone you love ripped in two because her Dad is being an ass isn't fun. Every day of it kills you, and it kills her, and…"

Now Jimmy shuts up, because if he gets going on this too much, he's going to make Breena upset, and he's going to be in a bad mood, too.

He relaxes his fingers on the steering wheel, noticing they were clenching hard. "Getting married was supposed to be happy and fun. It was supposed to be joyful. And honestly, between you and Deering, I'm not sure who fucked over our wedding worse. You've got a chance of not doing that to Amy and Christine, so for God's sake, take it."

From then on, it's a very quiet drive to the house.

"Hammers, crowbars, duct tape… What else do you think we'll need?" Tony asks Ziva as she returns to the cart they're pushing through a Lowes on their way to the house.

"Tony, why do we have a shovel?" Ziva asks as she puts the tool belts she had grabbed into the cart.

"We need a shovel."

Ziva eyes the shovel; it was not in the cart when she went to grab tool belts. Granted, she doesn't know all that much about driveway snow removal, but she's fairly certain that the kind of shovel one uses for a driveway in winter does not look like the long handled, small-bladed object that Tony just put into their cart.

"What do we need that shovel for?"

"You'll see. So, this everything?"

"For today, at least. I'm sure we'll want other tools eventually." In that both of them are apartment dwellers, they don't have much in the way of tools. A few screwdrivers, okay, one screwdriver, phillips head, because a knife just won't do that job well, and one strap wrench. For anything else, if something goes wrong they call the maintenance guy, and he fixes it.

As they head toward the register, Tony turns the cart away, heading toward the plant section.

"Tony?"

"Come on." He takes them in deeper, surrounded by growing things. "I know you were seeing something in your head when we were there. Knew it was outside by where you were looking. Thinking it's some sort of tree, because that's home. So…” They're in a long row of young trees. Apples, peaches, pears, plums, cherries, further back are decorative ones.

"Tony…” She's smiling at him.

"Not a whole lot of them. They've still got to fit into the car." They're young trees, yes, but young trees are still seven feet long. "But, we can start, at least. Get one or two in today."

Ziva starts hunting around. She knows basically nothing about growing fruit trees, but this part's probably pretty easy. She takes her phone out to see which ones do best in this area and comes up with a decision.

Two small trees, each with a tag that says Arkansas Black, and a picture of very dark red apples go into the cart, too.
Tony smiles at them, and at her. "Trust the ninja to go for black apples."

She smiles at him, eyes sparkling. "Ninja apples."

"Okay, so, this is also our home. We're gonna walk around the property, and you've got to stay inside of it. If you can do that, you can go run around. You go wandering somewhere else, I'm going to have to tie you up."

Woof.

Mona's excited. Twice now Jethro's left and come home smelling interesting, and she too wants to know what those smells are and where they're from.

He opens the door to his truck and she goes bounding out of the cab. Space. Lots of space. And it's green. And... oh a butterfly. And like that she's off like a black rocket, tearing after the butterfly.

Gibbs looks around at the work site. Yesterday and the Thursday, he and Ducky got the trees cut up and moved out of the way. They also cleared out the section of the house the tree took out.

He's not sure if he wants to tear all of the siding off first, and then go back in and reframe and Tyvek, or if it's a better idea to get this patch cleaned out to healthy wood (that's how he thinks of the parts of the house that aren't growing mold and mildew), reframe that section, put the plywood up, and then pull all of the siding off the whole house and go at it at once.

What he does know is that having a big hole in the house isn't a good plan.

Either way, he's got a load of lumber and a bunch of tarps in the back of his truck... so he's ready to move.

Ducky and Penny thought of something the rest of them didn't. Water. It was a very good thought.

Theoretically the water got turned on yesterday. But, whether or not it's good to drink is a whole different story. So, when they pulled up with a trunk full of bottles of water, Gibbs sighed with relief.

He'd brought burgers and burger fixings, figuring that with three acres of woods, and all the branches that are too small for good woodworking he'd have no problem getting the grill fired up and ready to cook, but somehow the idea that they'd want something to drink (beyond his own thermos filled with the coffee that goes everywhere with him) hadn't hit him.

Two by fours are not light.

And he's got a metaphorical ton of them in the back of his truck. (In reality, it's probably close to 600 pounds.) They need to get from his truck to a space he and Ducky cleared out for them (tarp already laid out so they're not sitting on wet ground.)

At first it's just Gibbs, Ducky, and Penny. Which makes for slow headway. Eventually Tony and Ziva show up, which speeds things up. Then Jimmy and Breena and Anna, and Ed with a black cloud hovering over his head. (Bad mood or not, he's still lugging wood like a champ.) And finally Abby and Tim with Kelly and the play pen the girls will be hanging out in.

At ten-months old Kelly's still pretty good on the stick her in one place and she stays there part of life. She's also still at three naps a day, so she gets to come along, too. At five months old, Anna
sleeps and eats even more often. With any luck, they'll hang out in the play pen, amuse each other, and enjoy the shade. At least this one time. If it's a disaster, then they'll work something else out. But at least for right now (fourteen minutes into this experiment), they seem pretty content to hang out in the playpen, in the shade, watching the adults.

Once the whole crew is there, they make fast work of the lumber.

Ed eyes the siding, standing next to Gibbs, and says. "You got anyone who knows anything about plumbing?"

"Not really."

"Anyone can rip siding off. I've got a flashlight in the car. Show me where the steps to the basement are and I'll give your plumbing a once over."

"Thanks."

A minute later, Jethro's got him in the house, in the back of the kitchen, next to the pantry, at the basement steps. "Electric's not on, yet." He takes a few steps to the sink, and turns the water on. "Water works." It's kind of grayish brown. He shakes his head at it.

Ed nods, heading back into the basement; Gibbs following. They stop at the bottom two steps and Ed turns on his flash light. "Hopefully that's just it's been years since the water's been used." Ed looks around, they're the only two in the house. "She's living with him."

Gibbs nods.

"You knew."

He nods at that, too.

"Didn't say anything."

*That's obvious* is on Gibbs' face.

"Why?"

"Your daughter's so scared of wrecking things that she's not willing to talk to you, I'm not going to get into that."

Ed snorts. "He didn't come talk to me."

"Thought that happened last night."

"Didn't talk to me *before*."

"He doesn't want to marry you. He's not going to piss Amy off if she's saying keep quiet."

"He should have talked to me."

Gibbs nods. "Jimmy told him that."

Ed's eyes go wide. "Jimmy told him that?"

"Yeah. 'Cause it's the right thing to do. He talked to you, first. The way he was supposed to. And you laughed at him, even though your daughter loves him and he treats her like she's a goddess, you
still laughed. You think he didn't tell her that? Or that she didn't tell Amy?

"Think she didn't see that, and understand it as you don't respect a gesture like that?

"You think Amy didn't watch and see everything you did to Jimmy. Think she didn't know how miserable you made Breena when they were getting married? Think she somehow missed all the snide comments and little putdowns you piled on him over the years?

"Collin's a good kid. He's serious about her. We could see it; she didn't want him talking to you, so he talked to us, about how to deal with you. Because no man in his right mind wants his woman crying on him about her dad.

"And that's what she's doing today, right? Crying? Because let me guess, they came over, and they sat you and Jeannie down, and they told you they're living together and they love each other, and you threw a fit, probably said some really mean things to her and him?"

Ed nods. "Just to him."

"They invited to Sunday dinner?"

"How can they be invited to Sunday dinner? We all get together, to go to church, which they aren't welcome at anymore—"

"Quit it. Three quarters of you family'll get booted out if that's the case. Jimmy and Breena are the only people I know or have ever heard of who are under the age of forty who waited until they got married. Your Minister had no problem letting Tim and Abby stand up with Jimmy and Breena for Molly, and they were living together then. And you're not going to suggest I stop coming because I've got a girlfriend I sleep with."

Ed's got the grace to look uncomfortable.

"Your girls are people. People like sex. You do. Your wife does. The stork brought none of your grand babies. Be happy for them that they found good men who love 'em, are good at it, and make 'em happy with it."

Ed looks really startled by that.

Gibbs shakes his head. "I only had my daughter for nine years. So, I didn't get to this part of it. But I had dreams for it. And I don't know Collin well enough to say for sure, but I've got a good feeling about him, but I do know Jimmy, and I would have given my right arm for Jimmy as a son-in-law. To have had a man love my girl the way he loves Breena…"

"I've put away men who raped women, put away men who killed their wives, beat 'em up, tortured them. I've killed 'em, too. One… sick bastard stuck 'em in wedding dresses and kept them chained in abandoned rooms made to look like the '50s. I've seen every flavor of bad out there. And for just plain, old not getting along, I've lived it.

"Right now, I'm just getting started again, and you know who I'm looking at when I'm trying to figure out how to do this? Jimmy and Tim. Because they get it. Because they're good at it.

"I've got a lot of rules, and one of them is 'don't apologize, it's a sign of weakness,' but when I fuck up, fuck up bad, I apologize. And if I were you, I'd get Jimmy alone and I'd apologize for all the crap you've put him through. Then I'd do the exact same thing for Breena. Then I'd give Collin a call, offer to buy him a beer, and start trying to patch up the mess you've made with him, and if not for his sake or yours, you do it for Amy. You do that, you work at it, and you won't have this problem with
Christine."

Ed nods, and Gibbs isn’t sure if that’s his way of saying I'll do that or I’m done talking about this but either way he knows they’re done.

He heads back into the kitchen and sees Jimmy just standing there, staring at him.

"Uh… just checking in. Wanted to see what you were up to."

Gibbs inclines his head. "You heard?"

"Yeah."

Gibbs takes a step closer and puts his arm around Jimmy. "She'd have been the same age as Ziva, and I'd've been damn proud if she had picked you."

Jimmy nods, solemnly. "Thanks."

Gibbs shakes his head. "Nothing to say thanks for. You earned it. Lot of times over. Anyone who's not deliberately blind can see it."

"Still nice to hear."

Gibbs nods at that. "They get started."

"Yeah, feel like ripping off some aluminum siding installed just about the same time as Ed's sexual politics?"

Gibbs laughs at that. "Sure."

It's fun. Loud. Aluminum siding does not come off a house peaceful and quiet. And Abby's got some sort of music blasting out of their car. So, they can't really talk. But it's fun.

It's a beautiful day, the sun is shining bright overhead, they're working together at something happy, instead of the way they usually work together, at something tragic.

It's a good day.

Ed pops back up an hour later, vastly longer than it'd take to inspect the pipes, not nearly long enough for some serious soul searching.

"Good news. Your pipes are copper and in good shape. Bad news is your hot water heaters are older than Breena and so calcified you could use them as fossils."

Gibbs nods. Relieved about the pipes, and he'd already put new water heaters on the list, so that's not a blow.

Ed picks up a crowbar and finds a chunk of wall no one's working on, and gets to prying away.

It's during the lunch break that it occurs to Tim that, though it is April, and as a result cool out, it is still bright and sunny.

And as the biological result of many, many, many generations of pale-skinned, melanin-deficient Irish people breeding with each other, he's got a natural SPF of, maybe, on a good day, negative two.
He is realizing this because, while moving around, and working, and sweating he wasn't paying attention to anything but the work, but right now, relaxing into their lunch break, enjoying the scent of wood fire and burgers, it's hitting him that the bits of him that have been open to the sun, his face and arms, are burning.

He doesn't think his skin looks too pink, but he peels off his work gloves and winces. (This would also be when it hits him that he's wearing sunglasses. Brown-green sunglasses, which tone the red down on everything. And for that matter, so is everyone else around him.)

He takes them off and winces again, able to see what color his skin is. "Oh…"

Abby looks up from Kelly. She's nursing right now, and had been talking to their daughter. She looks at him and her eyes go wide.

"It's really bad, isn't it?"

Abby nods. "I've got sunscreen in my purse. In the car."

"Probably too late for that."

She nods at him. "It'll keep it from getting worse." She takes her glasses off, too, and winces again. "Oh, God, Tim. Wow, okay. At least it's just your face, neck, and arms. You have a long sleeve shirt in the car, right?"

He does. He'd worn a button-down over the t-shirt because it is cool, but working meant he warmed up pretty quick.

"Go get a lot of sunscreen and that shirt back on. Gibbs!"

He turns from the grill, and Tim sees his eyes go wide.

"Do you have an extra ball cap in the truck?"

He shakes his head. "Don't you have yours in your go bag?" he asks Tim.

"No. I don't need field gear in my go bag anymore."

"I have mine," Ziva replies. "Come, McGee, let's get you fixed up."

Back at his car, rubbing copious amounts of sun block on very tender skin, he figured out why everyone looked at him like he was some sort of bizarre creature. He's got a reverse raccoon look going. Two wide round bits around his eyes where the glasses were, the rest of his face, bright, flushed pink.

Ziva's cap (adjusted to fit him) helps to get more shade on his face, his long sleeve shirt means his arms are protected now, and as they're walking back to the patio she says, "You remember what poison ivy looks like, right?"

He shakes his head at her. "It's a summer plant. Don't have to worry about it in the spring."

"Are you sure? This will be miserable. This plus poison ivy…"

"I'm good, Ziva."

"Okay."
Tony's putting buns on plates as they get back, and he takes one look at Tim and says, "Time to take you out of the pot, McLobster, you're done."

"Yeah, thanks, Tony. You couldn't have noticed that before I was cooked?"

Tony spreads his hands wide. "I was doing my job."

"Yeah, well, me too."

"When you get home, Timothy, brew up a good strong tea, allow it to cool, soak paper towels in it, and then apply them to your burns. That will help with the swelling and pain."

"Thanks, Duck."

"My first tour of duty was in Korea, which is not, in fact, Scotland, or anything like Scotland. The height of sun screen back then was titanium dioxide paste. In addition to absolutely destroying any camouflage you may have had, it was utterly useless as sun screen. No one there had ever heard of an aloe plant, let alone had one, so tea compresses were all the first aid one could do for burned skin."

"Ugh." Tim says, wincing in sympathy.

Ducky nods. "Took two months before I stopped burning every single day."

"Oh." Tim shudders at that.

"Africa was worse. The only time I've ever had sun poisoning was in Africa."

"Ducky, no offense, but, I don't want to hear about sun poisoning."

"Why are we talking about sun… Good Lord, Tim, you forgot sun screen didn't you?" Jimmy asks as he sits down.

"Very astute, Palmer," Tim says back. "Ducky's making sure I know how blessed I am to live in a world of sunblock." He turns to Ducky. "Trust me, I get it. Just forgot I needed it, because that's usually a summer thing."

"You don't wear it every day?"

"No. You do?"

Jimmy rolls his eyes. "What do you think that stuff I'm rubbing on myself when I get out of the shower is?"

"I try not to think about things like that."

Jimmy shakes his head. "Next time we're in the locker room, remind me to do a mole check on you."

"Me? You think either of those two do, either?" He points to Tony and Gibbs, both of whom are looking a little sheepish about this.

"Really?" Jimmy asks.

Tony and Gibbs shake their heads.

"Next bootcamp that's at the Navy yard, you're all getting checked out. 'Cause none of you are
missing a melanoma on my watch."

Three heads nod.

"And you two, he points to Gibbs and Tony, start wearing sunblock."

"Why us and not him?" Tony asks.

"He should, too, but it's not as big of a deal. You and Gibbs go outside. He spends most of his time in front of a computer."

And quietly, lingering toward the back, Ed watches.

Breena's getting Anna in the car seat. Jimmy's tossing tool belts into the trunk. Ed stands next to Jimmy instead of getting in the car.

"Gibbs said you're the one who told Collin to talk to me."

Jimmy nods.

"Thanks."

Jimmy nods again, about to close the trunk of their car.

"That was a good thing to do. Even Jeannie was lying to me about it. So, thanks."

He turns to Ed. "Wasn't for you, Ed. He's asking about how to make you like him, and I've got nothing for that, because nothing I've ever done's managed to do it. But I do know that if he wants any shot of a decent life with Amy, she's got to be on his side, not yours. You make them chose, and her living with him was just putting it off. So, I told him that that's his acid test, if she's not willing to tell you, if she wants to keep hiding, then he's got to leave, because you'll rip them apart in the long run."

"You told him he should talk to me, too, though."

"Yeah. I did. It comes back to us, Ed. At least, I believe that, and in twenty years, I want the guys my girls love to come and talk to me, so yeah, I told him to talk to you. So did Tim, and Gibbs, because that's just basic courtesy. But it's not about you. It's about him being a stand up guy."

"Okay."

"You ready to go?" Jimmy's hands flatten on the door to the trunk, about to shut it.

"Almost," Ed says. Jimmy turns so he's leaning against the back of the car, arms crossed over his chest. Ed looks at him, really looking, seeing Jimmy. "I know you're a good husband."

"Great."

"And you're a good friend."

"Everyone knows that."

"You're a good father."

Jimmy nods, taking that as his due. "There was a time when that would have lit me up like a
Christmas tree for a week. If you had said that to me back when Breena and I had been married for a year, I would have glowed." He shakes his head and then shrugs. "Maybe I hadn't earned it at a year. Anyone can do a year. You screw up the first year, you're trying to mess things up. Hell, Tony's dad, who's got a new wife every leap year, can manage a good first year.

"And, you know, if at any time, when our hearts were breaking during those days of losing Jon, if you had taken me aside and told me I was doing a good job, it would have mattered, and it would have helped.

"But now. Too little, too fucking late, Ed. I don't care what you think about me anymore. Caring about what other people think about me burned off when we lost Jon. There are men, who I respect, who's opinion of me matters, you are not one of them.

"I should respect you. You raised three wonderful girls, one of whom is the light of my life. You're a good grandfather. And if you ever figure out how to be as good of a father to a woman as you were to little girls, I will respect you. Breena's thirty-two, Amy's twenty-nine, Christine's twenty-six. They are adults, with lives and loves and jobs and hopes, and they need a Dad who can handle them as adults. You ever figure out how to do that, and I'll start caring again what you think of me."

Ed nods. Jimmy slams shut the trunk, and heads to the driver's seat.

It was a good day. They'd worked hard and enjoyed it. The north corner was re-framed, got new plywood up, and a quarter of the old siding is off of the house. He's tired, and sore, and, like Tim, a little (but only a little) sunburned.

A very good day.

He's looking forward to getting home, kicking back, few cold beers, call Abby, see if she wants some company, and if not, pizza and a game sounds good. Turn in early. His body might not have considered what it was doing right after he retired work, but it's certainly aware that today was work, and as a result, he's tired.

Tomorrow, after dinner, they'll get a few more hours in. (Tony and Ziva had decided to camp over tonight, so they'll get a full day in.) Rate they're going, they'll have all the old siding off by the end of next weekend.

It occurs to Gibbs that maybe he and Ducky and Penny should have a chat about what they're going to replace the old siding with. He sends a quick text off when he gets to a stop light.

A few more miles, and he pulls onto his street, and sees that his day just got better. There's a dark red Taurus sitting in his driveway.

He smiles and pats Mona. "We've got company for dinner."

Mona's not impressed by that, though she is in favor of dinner. She hops out of the truck a step behind him, and goes running for the doggie door, not wanting to wait for him to get the mail and head inside.

Almost nothing interesting in the mail, bills, bills, bills, and… It's huge, and thick, and he thinks he's slept on sheets that have a lower cotton count than the paper in this envelope. Lots of silver curly-cues, and a personalized Love stamp.

It's Senior's wedding invitation.
Well, at least his date's enthusiastic about him in a tux.

Speaking of said date, he steps into the house, and finds her sitting on his sofa, reading.

"Hey."

"Hi," she stands up, getting ready to hug him, and he takes a step toward her. He sees her stop, sees her wince a little, and stop breathing, and it hits him that he's been working in the sun all day, hard, and probably smells bad enough that he could knock a goat over.

He holds his hands up. "Fifteen minutes."

Borin nods.

Gibbs heads straight for his washer, tosses everything he's wearing (besides his boots) in there, and then goes to the shower.

He's still in there, enjoying hot water on sore shoulders, as Abby steps in, pressing up close against him, kissing his shoulder. He turns to face her, kissing her back.

"Take it you had a good day?" she asks.

"Yeah." He smiles at her. "And it's getting' even better."

---

A/N: Sooo... The powers that be decided to have Abby Sciuto and Abby Borin on one show. Great. Now, I'm at the point in the story where Gibbs is thinking of Borin as Abby. I'd like to write it that way when we're in his head. ("Give Abby a call...")

Is that too confusing? I think it's in character for him, but I also get that you guys out in reader-land need to be able to follow along. Comments from the peanut gallery would be welcome.
A/N: Some housekeeping. Those of you in reader-land seem pretty evenly split between 'figure out which Abby from context' and 'change the spelling of Abby.' (Come up with cute nickname came in third, but as of yet, Gibbs hasn't told me what nickname he might use for her, and Borin hasn't consented to respond to one.)

Sooo... Abby McGee and Abbi Borin. The characters think of both of them as Abby and get it from context, but I'll add the i to make the reading easier.

As they settled into their third month of... whatever this thing they've got is, there are certain things that Borin deeply appreciates about Gibbs.

First off, he has never, not once, gotten sharp or annoyed with her when she's had to break a date. The fact that he doesn't get huffy about it, how, 'Look people's lives are on the line,' actually does trump dinner in front of the fire for him makes her happy and makes her try to miss fewer of said dinners.

She has, twice now, cut meetings that were running long, short, so that she could make it to his place for dinner.

His own personal level of been there/done that means that when she's stuck and spit-balling, he asks good questions and usually has good ideas. Though 'Tell 'em all to go fuck off,' one of his bits of advice, may not always be practical, but it is often a satisfying idea. And, even if she won't act on it, it's fun to have someone else who gets how annoying the brass is.

And, due to budget levels, she's still in the field on occasion. Like everyone else at CGIS under her, she takes a turn on call for weekends, but there are also cases where she gets called in because she is who she is and she's damn good at the job. If she's getting called in, it means the case is already at stratospheric levels of FUBAR, or 'delicate,' or both, so both times she was having very bad days, when she just needed to get out of her head, out of her world, out of all the shit that goes on and the monsters out there, when she headed to his place with a bottle in one hand and metaphorical steam pouring out of her ears, he was more than willing to knock back a few shots, fuck her until she couldn't see straight, and then just relax quietly, instead of asking her lots of questions about what was going on.

Though the second time it happened, after the first round, when she was laying against his chest, feeling the vaguely tickly roughness of his chest hair against her cheek, he quietly said, while petting her hair, "When it was me, there were some things I didn't want to take home. I wanted them out of my head as fast as I could get rid of them. So, I'm not gonna ask, because I'm thinking you don't want to talk, not because I'm not interested. If you do want to talk, I want to listen." She nodded at that and kissed his nipple.

"Just want to fuck until I can sleep."

He kissed the top of her head. "I'm good for that, too." And then flipped her onto her back and started to kiss his way down her chest.

She appreciates that she can bitch to him about the job, and he doesn't suggest that she should quit if she finds it so frustrating.
There are more, tangible, things she appreciates about him, as well.

He almost always smells good. Okay, not always. She'd been curled up on his sofa, reading, when he got home, raggedy, dirty, and sweaty from that day of tearing down chunks of the house of black mold (as she thinks of it) and she'd gotten up to hug him, gotten about three feet away, and promptly came to the conclusion that he smelled so bad that even Mona didn't want to get near him.

(He saw her come near, saw her stop, step back, stop breathing, and said, 'Give me fifteen minutes,' before depositing his clothing in the washer, and walking naked up to the shower. Fifteen minutes later, he was still in the shower, and she slipped in behind him, much happier with how this was working.)

But most of the time, he smells right to her. First time she can ever remember seriously thinking about stealing a t-shirt or two so she'd have something man scented to snuggle up against when she's alone.

And, if he knows she's coming over, he shaves. She likes that. Likes that he makes the effort, and how smooth his skin is newly shaved.

She likes how, sometimes, when he's not expecting her, and she just drops by, it's clear he hasn't shaved for a few days, and he's pleasantly stubbly.

Actually, she likes the fact that he's hairy all over. She's always said that if she wanted some sort of hairless, girly thing, she'd date women, and the men who can grow body hair, should. And he can, which she likes. Plus, she suspects he'd find the idea of ripping it all out or shaving it horrifying, which she also likes. She finds men who spend longer on their grooming than she does on hers disconcerting.

She likes the fact that he's in damn good shape. She's got men twenty years younger in her office that aren't in half as good of shape. A lot of them. She loves the fact that he can keep up with her. She works hard to keep her body the way it is, to make sure she's quick and limber and ready to deal with whatever may come her way, and she appreciates that if she says, "Get a swim with me?" because that's her exercise of choice (She knows he's more of a runner or fighter, and maybe one day she'll join in on Bootcamp, but not yet.) he grabs a pair of trunks and is ready to go.

She loves the fact that he can keep up with her on other levels as well. Sure, he's not twenty-two, or fifty-two for that matter, and his left knee won't agree to go along with marathon sex if they're kneeling, but he's happy to use his tongue and fingers when his dick's out of the game, and he can go a damn long time with said dick.

So, given this level of appreciation, she's getting… curious, is probably the right word, as to how he ended up with three ex-wives, because from everything she can see, he's a keeper.

But she's also not insane, and a man who's been divorced three times is a man wearing a huge, neon proceed with caution sign.

Of course, it's not just proceed with caution on his part. Though there's a lot of that. After all, three other women liked this man enough to marry him, and maybe he did have unerringly bad taste, but…

They had to think things were going good, right?

They must have liked him, too. Must have liked this whole, life-with-him-thing, right? That's part of the whole get married thing, you like being with each other.
And it went bad, somehow. Somehow this is good and right and fun and everything stopped being all of those things.

Three times.

And one time it didn't. One time where it was good and right and fun and love and everything a marriage is supposed to be, and then it was gone.

She knows all about the time it didn't go bad. About that weird space of the memory of something cherished and beloved and how to work a new life into that, letting it go enough to have a life, but keeping it close because it was so much who you are and were.

She's very aware that there's a boat in his driveway with no name on it. Everything else is done. It's ready for the water. Except for the name.

She stopped wearing it a decade ago, but she still has her engagement ring. She still has the pictures of the two of them, and she's sure Jethro has more than the shots he showed her.

So, she gets it. And she gets not knowing exactly what to do about that. She doesn't want him to feel like he has to cut Shannon and Kelly and who they were and what the meant to him out of his life. Just like she doesn't want to pretend there was no Liam, or burn his pictures, or any of the rest of it.

*I'm not in love with her...* He had said. And she's not in love with Liam, not anymore. But she still loves him, loves the life she had with him, and she knows Gibbs still loves Shannon and Kelly, loves the life he had with them.

She supposes that's a good thing. A man gets to fifty-seven years old and never loves anyone, and you've got to see that as an even bigger glowing, neon *back the hell off* sign than three ex-wives.

Then there's her own proceed with caution. This is good. It's very comfortable. It's easy in a way even Liam wasn't. It's really freaking scary because it is good and it is comfortable, and she could easily see herself snuggling into this man and staying there forever and she hasn't felt that way in a very long time and the last time that was true it got ripped away and...

And sometimes she feels like he's taking her apart. When they're at it slow and gentle, or just sitting around quietly, or when she's drifting off to sleep and he snuggles in just that little bit closer. Sometimes that feels like unraveling, cracking... shifting, like old dry plates of... something, armor maybe, are slowly moving into a new configuration.

And she's not sure if that's good of if that's just setting up for another heartbreak.

Lots of ands.

Abbi Borin hasn't had any hope about a man, or a relationship in a long time, and that's under all the ands, under the proceed with caution signs, under the fear and doubt, a tiny sprig of hope, trying to grow strong.

Still, *three* ex-wives. That's something to talk about it.

They're at his place, post-sex. She thinks this is true for both of them, it's certainly true for her, that it's easier to talk about intimate things when they're naked and relaxing.

There are some things she just can't talk about dressed. Her clothing is as much armor as her
personality sometimes, and for some things it just has to come off before she can get into them.

So, she's laying across his bed, he's on his stomach, looking very content. She rolls a bit, so she's facing him, one leg draped over his hips, fingers gently stroking along his spine. He turns his face toward her, but his eyes are closed.

"So, three ex-wives?" she asks.

He doesn't exactly smile, but there's a sort of sheepish grin on his face as he opens his eyes, propping up on his elbows. "Yeah. Three ex-wives."

"Why?"

He rubs his face and looks uncomfortable, rolling onto his side to face her completely. "Because I really can be dumber than a box of rocks. And no one was kidding when they said the second B was for bastard."

"You still dumber than a box of rocks?"

He gives her his *uncertain* look. "I hope not. But I didn't think I was then, either. I do know I'm not a bastard, at least not that kind, anymore."

"That's a start."

He gives her his *agreeing* look. Then came the sheepish one. "I missed her." Sad smile. "And I chased after anything that was like her that I could find, and then I made sure it didn't work," he sighs, thinking about the trafficking he's hoping to do and wondering if this counts as an entirely new and even more spectacular way of making sure it never works again. "Trying to do better with you, because I'd like this to work."

She nods at that, kissing him.

"How about you?" He strokes her shoulder. "Ever get close after…" He doesn't know the name of her Marine.

"Liam. No." She shakes her head slightly. "Decent number of 'friends,' a few lovers, but I never let anyone stick around long enough to ask."

"Gonna let me stick around?" he asks, eyes serious and watching hers.

He can read the look on her face, the mix of knowing her past patterns and hoping to not repeat them, but knowing they're patterns for a reason. "Not planning on sending you off. Hope I don't scare you off." He can read the look on her face that says trying may not be succeeding, but she's going to try, and he can live with that. Trying might be all either of them can do. It's a good first step.

"What made you want to try again?"

The hip with the new scar is the one that's face up. Her fingers lightly ghost over it. "Just creased me, you know? Didn't even notice it until Flant told me I was bleeding, but it got me thinking. Wasn't sure if I wanted the job to be all I ever had or was. I don't want to give it up, but… I don't want it to be my everything, either. A week later, you want to get coffee, why not? I like you. I'd told you not to be a stranger. Worst comes to worst, we spend twenty minutes drinking coffee trying to think of something to say."

"Worst didn't come to worst."
"Nope. How about you, why'd you call?"

His eyes trail over her body, making one reason very clear. "Pretty red hair, great voice, you do your job well, you don't take shit from anyone, and you can stand up to me. My ideal woman."

She wiggles her butt a little. "Great ass didn't hurt, did it?"

He kisses her, hand resting on her bum. "Not at all." He could let it lie. They could just stay here, warm and comfortable and together, maybe nap some, maybe get some dinner. But he can't just let it lie. He's got to bring it up, because it's not fair, to either of them, to know what he wants to do, to know how bad it could be for her, and to do it anyway without telling her.

Like he said, he's not a bastard, not that kind, at least, not any more. The guy who married Stephanie to give himself a cover for fooling around with Jen is long, long gone. He takes a deep breath. "Why CGIS?"

She can feel this is important, to something, but she doesn't know what, or why it would be. "Wasn't supposed to be CGIS, didn't even know they had an investigative service. Was going to be FBI, or you guys. But, I finished FLETC in '05. It was the beginning of a six month hiring freeze. I was the last class to go through for a year. Coast Guard was small enough, and understaffed enough, that it still had a bit of budget left, so cool my heels for six months, and no promise of a job after, or go with them. I couldn't just sit there for half a year, so I applied, they liked me, I'm with the Coast Guard."

"It's not about serving the US or defending the borders from whatever's out there?"

She shakes her head. "If I could still do that, I'd still be a Marine. I can serve people. I need to serve people. But, patriotism's lost its shine over the years. I mean… what the fuck did we do over there, Jethro?" She rubs her eyes. "What did I lose my team for? Since '14 the whole bloody place is a mess again, and ISIS grabs a new chunk of it every day." She sighs, shaking her head, he can feel she's hit the point where angry on this is all burned out, and all that's left is defeat. "CGIS is about catching killers, tossing drug smugglers in jail, returning stolen people home, and feeling like… Feeling like there's a reason I'm still here."

He nods at that, gets that in his bones. The bullet, the blast misses by a hair and kills everyone else, and you've got to wonder why you're still there. Gotta make yourself feel like you earned the second chance.

She looks at him, head tilted, thinking about being just out of FLETC, and the prospect of six months of nothing followed by job hunting. She couldn't have done it. She still couldn't do it, day after day of just… nothing. "What are you doing, Gibbs?"

He sends her his huh? look, and she shakes her head. "I can't retire from this. I'm never going to be able to retire from this. And you're worse than I am. So, what are you doing? You didn't just retire. You'd be climbing the walls, going insane if all you had was woodworking and me. You need it, just the same way I do. So what are you doing?"

He smiles, and she catches the bit of wary sadness in the back of his eyes. "I don't know." He licks his lips and there's a sad smile on his face. "Hopin' I'm not a whole new level of stupid. I've got something in the works, but I don't know if it'll ever come to anything beyond in the works." He swallows. "Would you be willing to trust me on it? That if it ever goes from an idea to real, that I'll tell you about it first?"

She looks at him for a long moment. He's scared. His guard is up and he's trying to get away from something on this. And that scares her because this is Leroy Jethro Gibbs, and she's never seen him
"scared before. "Am I trusting you because it's dangerous or because it's illegal?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Lord." She winces and rubs her face. "Yes, I'll trust you on it, but don't make me. You're not telling me because you think I won't like it, won't stick around for it, so tell me now. If you're willing to set it in motion, you're already set on it, so, if this is it, this is it, let's get it done."

He nods and then kisses her, his eyes are so sad right now, and she's feeling sure that whatever he's going to come up with, it'll break her heart. "If I was going to do something… If my mind was already made up, and there was no talking me out of it… and if you'd approve of it… I'd hope… something where no one would get hurt… and someone, maybe several someones, in a very bad situation would get a much better one… but it was illegal, and if I got caught, you'd be in a shitload of trouble for not reporting it, 'cause it's in the realm of illegal you're in charge of…" He winces at that. "Would you want to know? Or would it be easier to not know, so you don't ever have to worry about not reporting it?" He figures that's specific enough for her to put the idea together and vague enough allow her to say, under oath, that she did not know what he was doing.

She ponders that for a long minute, thinking about what he's said and what she knows about him. No one gets hurt. So, he's not talking about sniping people. She knows she's got people who she wouldn't mind if they met a bullet, and she's sure he does, too. He wouldn't run drugs, not with what happened to his wife and daughter. Guns? That doesn't strike her as people in a bad situation to better. Bad situation to better… He's got to be talking about moving people.

That's not nearly as bad as she was afraid it could have been.

It's the hardest part of her job. For anyone who's got a conscience, at least. Poor, hungry people desperate for a better life, so desperate they're willing to literally die to try and get it, and it's her job to turn them away. They come in rafts, boats, in anything that'll float. Chesapeake isn't as big of an issue for that, but she did two years in Miami, where every day there was more of them.

It's why she transferred out of Miami. Couldn't stand fishing dehydrated, starved, sometimes dead people out of the water, and turning the living ones back to 'wait their turn in line.' She knows that for most of those people the line never ends, that there literally is no legal way to get into the US.

Poor, uneducated person, no family in the US, all he's got going for him is a willingness to put it all on the line for a better life. For him, they put up 10,000 visas a year, done by lottery. Tens of millions if not a hundred million people in that lottery. He's got a better shot of getting stuck by lightning than getting that visa. Next year, the exact same thing. Not like he gets a better shot of getting in the next year. Same odds. Because there is no 'line.'

But it's the job, and it's the law, and if she's stingy on allocating resources away from drug smuggling and murders to go after illegal aliens that's doing as much as she can do.

Gibbs can't even begin to put into words how much of a relief he finds this, when she asks, "Are you going to get caught?"

"Hope not." Because right now, that's all he can do. "Like I said, it's in the works. Don't have anything to move or plan on yet, so…"

"You gonna do more than hoping?" It's a serious question, gauging how carefully he's planning this.

He strokes her collar bone. "I am going to do everything in my power to make sure that I don't get caught. If it's hinky, we're not going to move on it. It's not some sort of go out in blaze of glory thing.
I want to actually help."

She squeezes his hand, stopping his meandering finger. "And will 'everything in your power' extend to using my position in any way to help you not get caught?"

"No." He shakes his head. He won't, can't do that, or ask her to. "And I won't. I'll tell you, as specific as you like, if you want to know, or I'll go on 'fishing trips' if you don't, but I'll never ask for help, or for you to do anything that might get you in any trouble."

She nods and licks her lips. He's never seen that gesture on her, but he knows exactly what it means: a sort of contemplative uncomfortableness. "But you'd prefer I didn't ask what you were up to if I felt like I'd have to report it?"

"Yes." He thinks about that for a moment. "I guess I am asking you for something. I'm asking for you to look the other way. And I'm asking you to not ask me about it if you can't."

She kisses him, sweet and exasperated at the same time. "Jethro."

"Yeah?"

"Tell me about it. Don't want anything biting me in the ass as a surprise."

He lets the breath he didn't know he was holding out. "This goes right, and it never will."

He knows that look, it's extremely well-worn skepticism. "When does anything ever go 'right'?"

"Good point." And so, lying in bed, early May sunset mellowing into dark, Jethro tells her his plans. "It's just... ideas... right now." He tells her about Mike, and who Mike was, and what he thought Mike was doing, and what he and Penny and Ducky were trying to get started up. He tells her how they don't have any details, don't know how to find the girls, yet. But the boat's ready, the house will provide them with a launching point, how they have a lawyer on standby, how, right now, the ball is in Penny's court because she's the one on finding them a good contact.

For a long minute she just stares at him, and then sighs, pressing her hand to his chest. "You couldn't have designed a worse thing for me to know about if you had tried."

"I know," he looks and feels sorry about that.

"And there's no shot of changing your mind?"

He shakes his head, looking at her, eyes soft and earnest. "Abbi, is it the right thing to do? If we can find them, we're going to be getting abused girls to a better life. Is that wrong?"

"No." There's not a hint of doubt in her voice.

He lifts her hand from his chest and kisses her palm. "Then why would you want to try to change my mind?"

Her eyes shut, and she kisses him again, fingers cupping his cheek. She stares at him for a long moment, and he can feel her make the decision. "You ever get a text from me that says 'See you Tuesday' you drop everything and head for the hills, got it?"

He nods, knowing exactly how serious that is. "You don't—"

"Hush. It's the right thing to do, so why wouldn't I help?"
"It's your job to not help. Stopping guys like me is exactly your job."

She stares at him for a long time, thinking, and he doesn't try to rush her. Finally she says, "We do the job because it makes a difference. Because we give other people some peace, and maybe we save some people by putting the bad guys away. But most of the time, it's too little, too late. We provide closure. Maybe for once it'd be nice to help provide some openings."

He nods. "Yeah. Ziva and Tony have been talking about having a baby soonish, I hope, and she talked about that, about how it's time to stop devoting life to death, and start devoting it to life."

"Yeah. It's good, Gibbs."

He nods. "If we find someone, I'll tell you."

"Jethro, don't get caught."

He smiles at her. "Can you think of any better reason to get thrown in jail?"

"No… But… I don't want to be visiting you there." She stretches and slides her hand down his naked side. "They don't let you do this in jail."

He smiles, feeling, very content, very... secure right now. Very, right, all over. "Friday night Shabbos. Not sure if it's at my place or Ziva's yet, but, would you come?"

"You mean, like bringing me home to meet the family?"

"Yes."

"I'd love to go to Shabbos with you."

He grins at that. Imagining her as part of the family.

She stretches and sighs. "It got dark while we were talking."

He notices that for the first time. "Yep."

"You hungry?"

"Yes."

"Good, because if you're going to get me involved in a major criminal conspiracy, you better buy me a damn good dinner, too."

He smiles at that, sitting up. "Wherever you want, my treat."

They're in the shower when one other thing about this springs to mind. He's certain that Borin will keep silent on this, but he also knows that it's a good plan for the conspiracy members to know who is who.

He's washing her hair when he says, "About our plan. Ducky and Penny are part of it. You know about it. The kids... suspect something is up, they also know I can't retire, but they also have not and will not ask about it. It's not the sort of thing we'll be chatting about at family dinners."

She turns around so her hair is in the water, rinsing clean, and then gently taps his shoulder so he knows to turn. "They don't know to protect them?" she asks as she starts to shampoo his hair.
"Yes. They'd agree. They'd approve. They'd probably want to help. But the fewer the people who know, the better."

"So, why do I know? This is a case where not saying anything really would protect me."

"You know how you don't tell the people you love about the job to protect them?"

He can feel her nod, even if he can't see it. But he figures it'd be good to say this next bit face to face, so he turns around to say, "Has that ever worked out for you? It's never worked out for me. And it wouldn't have worked here. You ever found out, or if I got caught, you'd hate me for not telling you."

"I'd understand."

"Yeah, but you'd still be pissed."

She nods. She would be.

"And I don't want to be lying to you. I've done it. Not said. Protected partners, friends, family, lovers. And it never works. They're always angry after. Finally someone put it like this: when you say, 'I was trying to protect you,' what you're really doing is saying, 'I'm going to do what I'm going to do, and I don't want to have to deal with your emotional reaction to it.' And, that's not fair or kind to the person you don't want to deal with."

Borin nods at that. "Never thought about it that way, but… that makes a lot of sense. 'This is hard enough without you being horrified/scared or crying on me about it. And I cannot take anything else on top of this, so please, back off.'" She goes back to massaging the shampoo into his scalp. That feels good.

"Yep. And that's it. For you, and for me. But there's this other person who's scared and worried and… And I've done that… more times than I want to say. Never, ever works. I'm trying to not make the same mistakes I've already made a dozen times."

She switches them around again, so this time he's under the water, rinsing off. "So, you're saying, with me, you're going to make new and different mistakes?"

"That's the plan."

She laughs at that.

He looks at her, tenderness in his eyes, seriousness, too. There are a lot of feelings, ideas, all of which probably could translate into words, if he worked at it, for a long, long time.

She strokes his face, sees him working at this, and then kisses him. "It's okay, Gibbs. I get it."

He smiles and kisses her back. "What do you want for dinner?"
Team Building

In an effort to locate quality people for his pool of talent Tim has a specialized search in play for his news feed.

And on May 3rd, 2016, that search pays off.

He's writing up a plan. He's had it in play for a while, but, since they've now finished the active development stage of the paperwork software, he's got the time to put this into play. Namely, he's got 154 techs under his command, all of whom suddenly have a lot more free time, and that is a huge pool of talent.

So, he's writing up a memo about how he wants each member of Cybercrime spending at least one week a year studying, attacking, dissecting, all manner of closely scrutinizing their security protocols, looking for holes, weaknesses, or God, worse, spyware that's lurking in their code where it isn't supposed to be, and then one additional week on defense, building up extra walls, protecting them, when his computer chirps at him to let him know that something interesting is up.

And boy is it. His eyes flick through the storyline quickly, and before he has it done, he's already calling Abby.

"You okay on your own for a night?"

"Tim?" she asks, wondering what's up. Part of the whole Cybercrime thing is that he's not supposed to be just wandering off unexpectedly.

"Just went across the wire, three kids out of New Mexico just took down Anonymous. Got all of it, all of the servers, the nineteen people who were orchestrating it..." Yes, officially Anonymous is a collection of somewhat sympathetic to each other individuals all working toward vaguely similar goals, but, especially among law enforcement, there's always been the idea/hope that there was some sort of unifying force behind it, and if the story he's reading is right the answer to that was yes, and this girl... Cristin Brand, and her two buddies, just broke the whole thing open. "the fifty-four hundred people who were hacking, they took down the entire house of mirrors. The oldest one is seventeen. I want to be in the air in an hour and at her house offering her a job before the sun sets."

He can feel Abby smile.

"I think Kelly and I can do a night on our own. Go get your hacker!"

"Thanks. I'll call when I can."

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

Tim doesn't have a secretary. Every other Director at NCIS does. Why he doesn't has never occurred to him, but he's guessing it's because no one ever thought that his job would need one. After all, he already knows how to use a computer, which, from what he can see, is a lot of what the other Directors' Secretaries do.

He's never actually thought about that until right now when he's trying to figure out how to get in the air, while wrapping up his memo, and sending out another one for where he's going and why. Finally, he calls Vance's secretary and asks her what to do. He's found a commercial flight, but it
leaves later than he'd like and won't get in until after ten.

He's hoping he can hop whatever Navy or Marine transport might be available and get there faster.

Karent gets him pointed in the right direction, and hooked into the air traffic schedule at Andrews, Norfolk, and Dover, and lets him know that NCIS does have a jet, and it is available to him, but as Director of Cybercrime, he's fourth on the list of people who get to use it.

But today, it's free. And tomorrow, it's free. So he snatches it, calling in with instructions to get ready to go, he'll be on the tarmac as soon as he can get there.

"Like the last five times, we are done talking to the press!" and the extremely irate woman with the black hair and brown eyes tries to shut the door in his face.

Tim's very glad that he got his foot in the door and that today's shoes are pretty tough, otherwise he'd have a very sore foot. She did not give the door a gentle push.

"I'm not with the press." He gets his ID out and the woman in front of him, who he's assuming is Cristin Brand's mother, squints her eyes to read it. She's frazzled. Probably didn't know what her daughter was up to, let alone expect the storm of reporters and tech bloggers who are camping out in front of her house. (They've actually got cops keeping them back. So the fact that they let him through probably should have been a hint he isn't a reporter.)

"What's NCIS?"

"Naval Criminal Investigative Service."

"We're not talking to you without a lawyer."

He holds up his hands. "I'm not here to interrogate your daughter; I'm here to offer her a job."

"What?" She's utterly stunned by that. Apparently none of the barracudas circling her home are headhunters. Their loss.

"May I come in?" It's got to be one hundred and ten out there, and sure, dry heat and all, but it's still hot! The fact that he's dressed for early May in DC is not helping the matter. Blue jeans, black button down, leather jacket (in the rental car) is not New Mexico-friendly clothing.

She squints at him again, but lets him in. A staggering wall of AC hits him, and for a second it feels really good, and then he's wishing he'd brought his jacket. Overheating to overchilled in less than five minutes. Splendid.

Enough of that, business time. She hasn't offered him a seat or a drink. She's got him standing in the foyer, looking at him warily.

"I'm Tim McGee, Director of Cybercrime for NCIS, we're a Federal Agency devoted to solving crimes involving Naval and Marine personnel and their families. We also work on terrorism and Naval and Marine security. Your daughter and her friends just counted one of the biggest hacking coups ever, and I want her working for me."

"Just like that. You've… You don't know anything about her."

"Are the stories true? Did she and her buddies take down Anonymous?"

"Yes."
"Then I want her, and when they turn eighteen, her buddies working for me. May I talk to her?"

"She hasn't even graduated high school, yet."

Tim thinks quickly, there's what, six weeks of school left for the year? He's not getting rid of Hepple until June, anyway. "She's a senior, right?"

"Yes."

"That's fine, I can't hire her until she's eighteen anyway. I'm comfortable with a whichever happens first start date."

Mrs. Brand (she still hasn't introduced herself, so he's hoping that's right) is still staring at him, dumbstruck. "Are you really serious?"

"I am dead serious. Yes, I do want to meet her and talk to her and see if this kind of job is interesting to her. But, if she wants it… We have what's called a Probationary Year. She'll work for us, be a full employee, but over the course of that year, if she's not happy or doesn't like it, she can leave and it's not a problem. No bad reviews, nothing like that. I just chalk it up to being a bad fit. If, at the end of the year, she wants a career with us, we're good to go."

"She's been accepted to MIT."

He nods. "MIT's a great school. I'm a Beaver, too. I got my MS there, class of 2002, and loved it. But, MIT also has a deferred acceptance program. She can work with me for a year, and if she doesn't love it, her place will still be waiting for her. Plus, they've put all of their classes online, so there's no reason why she can't study anything that takes her interest in her spare time. With as hot as she is right now, I'm certain that if she wants to work with me, and take a course or two a semester long distance with them, they will work with her to make sure it can happen. Trust me, they're going to want her on their alumni list.

"And, if she does love working with me, and just wants to work for me, four years from now, instead of being $170,000 in debt with no concrete job experience, she'll be…" Tim does a little quick math. "One hundred and forty thousand in the black, with four years of experience at a Federal agency, and the kind of skills that any firm would kill to have."

The assumed Mrs. Brand looks him over for a long minute, and then says, "Wait here. I'll go get her."

And, two minutes later Cristin Brand, the girl who got Anonymous, and her dad, had joined them in a sunny living room to hear more about this job at NCIS.

She's so young. He forgets exactly how young eighteen is, because it's been a long time, and there really aren't any teenagers in his life. She must have gone to school today, (Catholic school from the looks of it.) because she's in a plaid skirt, white shirt, and navy blue blazer. Her hair is long and black, her eyes are dark brown, like her mom's, and he's not sure if she's (and her Mom) half or a quarter Latino, (her Dad is blond with blue eyes) or just tan.

They talk, and she's smart, and enthusiastic, a little overwhelmed by all of this, little overwhelmed by him showing up and saying, 'Come with me, get to be a grown-up overnight, none of this messing around with college stuff, I'll give you a job and let you catch bad guys and save the day.'

After all, he remembers how it felt when he was not all that much older, and the FBI and IRS were offering him desk jobs and then Armstrong sauntered in and told him to leave that bullshit behind,
come with him, and get to use a gun and put bad guys away.

(Though, in that he's sitting in her parents' living room, both of them watching him like a hawk, his version of 'leave this bullshit behind' is significantly more polite than Armstrong's was.)

But he's very much playing up the save the day angle, explaining their most recent cases, and how what they do literally saves lives, and she's impressed.

He asks her about what they did. Most science/hacking reporters know just enough about the subject to write something that other people who don't know anything about the subject find compelling. So, while he's sure that the main thrust of the coverage was right, took down the whole Anonymous syndicate, he's also sure the how and why aspects were, at best, glossed over.

So he gets her talking, and she spends two hours on it, working him through the whole thing, seeming to really enjoy talking about this with someone who gets it.

He's enjoying the conversation, too. She's got great instincts. She and her buddies can code like no one's business and they went in deep, built awesome covers, and broke the whole thing into pieces.

"When do you turn eighteen?" he asks as they wrap up.

"July 7th."

"If you want it, July 8th I've got a desk and a job waiting for you."

She's smiling at him, eyes bright. "Oh yeah."

"Wonder—"

"Wait a second. We are not letting you just snatch up our daughter," the now-introduced Marcella Brand says.

"Mom, I'll be eighteen. You can't stop me."

Tim holds up his hands. "Look, I get this. I've got a daughter of my own. You did college visits, right? Checked everything out, made sure the place looked good?"

All three Brands nod.

"Pack some bags. I've got a jet, so come back with me. Check it out. We pay travel expenses for people who come to interview, so putting you up for a night or two and then flying you back home won't be a problem." (He doesn't actually know if that's true or not, but if petty cash won't cover it, he'll pay out of pocket. He wants this girl on his team.)

"You have a jet?" David Brand asks.

"Not me personally. NCIS does. I've got 154 people under me all over the world, Cristin would be part of the 12 who report directly to me, but if I need to get to one of my other stations, I have to be able to travel."

"So, wait, you… what, read about her, grabbed a jet, and got here, just like that?" Marcella asks.

"Yes. I'm going to build the best Cybercrime division of any Federal Agency. You build something like that by investing is good people. You," he looks at Cristin, "are exactly the kind of person I want on my team. So, if you like, pack up, let's go see where you'll be working if you come with me."
He thinks it's the Lear jet that sells the Brands on the idea that this is a real job offer. The idea that his agency would go to this level of expense to come get her, and make her want to work for them, begins to settle them down.

Of course, after a day of annoying press badgering them (and they did swarm when they saw him leave with her) several hours outside of any contact with the rest of the world was probably pretty nice.

"You really want to hire me?" Cristin asks. She's been alternating between watching the sky and ground, and staring in awe at the jet. And Tim has to admit, it's an awfully cool jet. He did some staring in awe and fiddling with all the nifty little dohickies on the way over. Then he took pictures and spent a few minutes texting with Abby about the fact that he gets to use the Lear Jet!

"Yes."

"Don't I have to have a college degree or something?"

"I got some wiggle room from my boss on that. You've got to be over eighteen. You've got to do the job. Showing up on time, doing the work. You go to college, you can coast. You can play. You're more than smart enough that if you wanted to go and party for four years, you could. You come with me, you can't... Actually, you can do whatever you like on your off time. But, when you're on, you've got to be on, and they do random drug tests so you can't come up positive for anything. Beyond that, your off time is your own.

"So, for fifty hours a week, you'd be mine. The computer will spit out jobs, and you'll do them. They'll range from pretty easy stuff, NCIS agent in New Orleans, say, needs someone to track a suspect's computer history, to very hard stuff. You remember Ajay Khan?"

Her eyes go wide, and she nods. "That was you?"

Tim nods back. "Yeah. I'm the one who took him down. I had help. My partners actually grabbed him and made him talk, but I'm the one who found out what information we had to get out of him. Even thinking he was about to die, he was still trying to BS us, and I'm the guy who knew it was BS, so I got the right answer out of him."

"Wow."

"Thanks."

She stares at Tim for a few minutes, really looking at him, thinking. "So, why haven't I heard of you?"

Tim inclines his head, not exactly shrugging that off, but keeping the answer light. "Because I like it that way. Got a kindle on your phone?"

"Yeah."

He gets out his own phone, heads over to Amazon, and sends her a gift. "Maybe you have heard of me."

Her phone chirps to let her know it's got a new email and she sees the book he sent her. "You write books, too?"

He nods. "The job will take as much time as you'll let it, but it doesn't have to be your whole life. I've got a wife and baby girl at home, too. Cybercrime works twenty-four seven, but I work hard to make
sure all of you have downtime, too. Once those pictures of us leaving your house go on the wire, some other agencies will get the idea that maybe they'd like to hire you, too. If I'm the only guy who shows up with a job offer in hand, I'll be stunned.

"They'll be good offers. Maybe better pay, maybe they'll say 'Go to college and we'll have a spot for you in four years.' They may offer to pay for college. I can't do that. But I can give you the best team, the best work/life balance, and the best cases. I can get you working now, and they likely won't. And I believe in teams, in the power of people who know how to work with each other, and how that makes the work better, makes you sharper, so as soon as they're old enough, your two friends'll get job offers, too.

"You won't always be working with them. They might not even end up at DC. I have to put people where I get openings, and the one I've got right now is in DC. The ones I have next year may be in Tokyo or Berlin or Detroit or… We've got stations all over the world.

"But if you let me, I'll leverage your skills, teach you to be an even better hacker than you are right now, and we'll catch killers and stop terrorists."

She stares at him with wide eyes. "I feel like I'm dreaming."

He smiles at that.

It's after ten when they get wheels on the ground. "So, get you settled and come in tomorrow morning, or come see everything now?"

The older Brands look like they're all in favor of settling down. Cristin wants to see Cybercrime.

So they go.

It's after eleven by the time they get in. "Pretty quiet this time of night. Ngyn and Connon are on, and I think Howard's still here. She's been hunting a digital terror cell for the last five days along with techs in Eido and Cartagena."

Brand's eyes light up at the big screen tvs, gaming stations, and snacks.

Tim sees that, and his Dad instincts are sharp enough to read the look. "That's for cooling off time. Sometimes it's good to have some time to just veg before you go back to it, and sometimes you need to cool off some before heading home. Either way, you can get it here." He points to the sofa and says to the adult Brands. "If they're too wired to drive, I don't let 'em go home without a nap or someone else driving."

"How old are most of your employees?"

"Cristin would be the youngest by six years. Next one is twenty-three, and she's a wunderkind, too. Most of the rest are somewhere between thirty and fifty-five."

"You're younger than a lot of your employees?" Dave Brand asks.

Tim nods. "NCIS respects talent more than years on the job. This time last year I was a field agent, actually carried a gun and arresting people. But I was better with a computer and had a better vision for where I wanted Cybercrime to go, so now I'm the guy in charge of it."

All three Brands look impressed by that.
He shows them the work stations, introduces Connon, who's busy working away. He explains what he's doing (pretty straightforward, just basic computer history for one of the guys upstairs) and tells the Brands a bit about working at NCIS.

Tim introduces them to Ngyn, whose eyes go wide when he introduces Brand. Then she looks to Tim and back to Brand, and immediately gets into a deep and heated conversation with Brand about what she'd done. Howard drifts over, sees the gab fest going on and hops into it, bringing over Caf-Pows and coffee.

"Cristin…" her dad says when it gets to 01:00.

She waves him off, her new buddies are awesome!

"Cristin, time for us to get some rest."

She pouts at him, but allows herself to be pulled away.

When Tim drops them off at the hotel he says, "There'll be a formal job offer in the mail tomorrow. If you want to come back tomorrow and meet more of my team, you're welcome to. If you want to just rest and head home, or do some sight-seeing, that's fine, too. I'll email you tickets for a return flight for tomorrow evening."

May 6th, Tim got a piece of mail, over-nighted from New Mexico. It was a signed job offer. He also got an email from Leon, short and to the point, You used the jet?

He sent back. Got five minutes to talk?

A minute after that, Sure.

He heads up to Vance's office, and as soon as he has the door shut he says, "I found my first seventeen-year-old."

Vance does not seem to think this is an answer to his comment about the jet, but says, "Tell me he starts after he turns eighteen?"

"She'll be eighteen in July, and she begins then."

He's not entirely sure if that look on Vance's face is amusement or concern. "You're hiring eighteen-year-old girls?"

"I hired the seventeen-year-old girl who flushed out Anonymous. I was at her house less than four hours after the news broke, which is why I needed the jet. And I gave her two best friends who helped offers to start the day they turn 18, in 2018."

"You going to have a space for them?"

"I'll make 'em if I have to. They're worth it. So, you saying I'm not supposed to use the jet? Karen," Vance's secretary, "said I was on the list for it."

"You are, just… Usually we send each other a note about it."

"Oh. Will do that next time."

"Good. Craig was surprised to see it wasn't sitting on the tarmac waiting for him."
"He didn't have it reserved."

"No, he didn't. He's the only one who uses it, so he didn't bother."

Tim gives Leon a not my fault sort of gesture. "Something blows up and I need to be there for it, unlike Jenner, I'll move. Someone hits my radar, someone I want for the team, I'll move on it. I've got no problem using Navy or Marine transport or going commercial, but if I need to be in Rota tomorrow, I'll be in Rota."

Leon smiles at that. "I'll remind Craig we've got a sign up system for a reason."

"Thanks."
Meet The Family

Gibbs had last seen Borin on Tuesday, when they'd had that long talk and he invited her to Shabbos. Now it's Friday, and he's hit the point (usually noonish) where he and Ziva need to decide who's house it's going to be at. So…

Phone in hand, he gets to calling.

"Hey, Ziver."

"Gibbs, our place this week. Pot roast is roasting away in the slow cooker." He loves the fact that she's good with direct and to the point. Though it also occurs to him that he might have gotten her in the middle of something. He's got the sense she's a bit distracted right now.

"Good. Feel like setting an extra plate?"

That gets what sounds like Ziva's undivided attention. "Yes! Borin is coming?"

"That's the plan. Next call is making sure she can come."

"Gibbs!" He can feel her smiling from here. "What changed? Why now?"

He flashes his best nope, not telling look at the phone, where it's completely useless.

"Gibbs?"

He rolls his eyes. "It's called a private life for a reason."

"Fine. But this is a good thing! Can't wait to see her again. Is she Abbi?"

He stares at the phone for a second wondering if she's asking if he's developed some sort of pet name for her, or if she thinks he calls his girlfriend by her last name. "I call her Abbi."

"Hmp. We used to call her Borin, but…"

"You and Tony still call Tim, McGee and Jimmy, Palmer, I don't think she'll be annoyed if you keep calling her Borin."

"Yes, but what about when her name is Gibbs? We will have gone from two Abbys to two Gibbses."

A sigh and massive eye roll. "Rein it in while she's there, okay? Tell Tony I don't want to hear anything about the fourth ex-Mrs. Gibbs, and if any of you call her Mom, you're all dead."

He can feel that smile, too. "Yes, Dad."

"What do you want me to bring?"

"Salad is good. Some sort of fresh, green vegetable. It's fleischig, so nothing with milk. Those brownies you got from Abby… This is going to be insane… From Abby McGee's baker were good."

"Noted. See you by sundown."
"Oh yes!"

Gibbs's picking Abbi up at her place, and then they're heading to Tony and Ziva's.

He's not nervous. Excited maybe, but not nervous.

It hits him, as he's driving, that he's never voluntarily shared a girlfriend with his family. Probably because last time he had one, they weren't precisely a family, yet. Though they were getting a lot closer, and that made it easier to let them see.

They met Susan, once, because they pretty much couldn't not meet her. It was Christmas time. He invites everyone he's on speaking terms with to his Christmas party, so it's not like he couldn't invite her.

But it did feel really odd to have her there, and them there, and have them see him be intimate with a woman. Not like he was ever smooching Hollis in the Bullpen. (At least, not when his team was still at work.) Not bad, but very odd.

This doesn't feel odd.

He heads to her door, and lets himself in. When she expects him, she leaves the door unlocked, and he doesn't have to knock. (Though he doesn't yet have a key, and has not pressed in that direction. He figures that when you date someone who can pick the locks to your home, that offering a key is doubly important, and that you need to wait until it's freely and comfortably given. Otherwise you're just barging on in.)

"Hello."

"Hi," he hears from upstairs, so he heads on up. She's standing in front of her closet, in her underwear, staring at her clothing.

For a moment, he settles in to enjoy the view.

"What's the dress code for this?" she asks, turning around, and as she faces him, he steps toward her for a hello kiss.

He's in his standard work clothes: slacks, t-shirt, golf-shirt, jacket. She sees that and nods. "Dress code is casual but not grubby. Dinner starts before sunset, so in the winter we're usually coming straight from work, so work clothes. Summertime things can get more casual. Girls wear sundresses. Tim'll wear a kilt."

She blinks slowly, looking confused. "McGee has a kilt?"

"He's got three of them now."

She looks irked and shakes her head slowly.

Gibbs shrugs. "He likes it. Abbs likes it—"

"DiNozzo teases the hell out of him about it."

"Not so much anymore. If you ever want to come to church with us, that's suit and tie and Sunday-best dressed up."
"You wear a suit and tie to church?"

Gibbs nods.

"I'll have to see that."

"I'm free on Sunday if you are."

She nods at that and then returns to her closet, pulling out a blouse, tailored gray trousers, and a navy jacket.

"I've never been to a Sabbath dinner before," she says as he pulls away from her place.

"Until Ziva and Tony hosted the first one back in… Molly was brand new, so gotta be more than two years ago, none of the rest of us had been either."

"Do I need to do anything?"

"Not if you don't want to. Join in as much or as little as you like, being there's the important part."

Abbi nods. She stares out the window while he drives and then asks, "Shabbos on Friday, church on Sunday… Do you have a religion?"

He laughs at that. It's a fair question, and something they haven't talked about. "Raised Episcopalian. Dog tags say I'm Protestant." He shakes his head. "I don't care much one way or another. Shabbos is home and family for Ziva and Tony, so I'm there. Church and Sunday dinner is home and family for Abby and Breena, so I'm there. You?"

"According to my dog tags, I'm also Protestant. Haven't been to church in… forever. Wasn't a big deal for my family, and the livestock needs to be taken care of every day. They don't care if it's Sunday and town's fifteen miles away and you've got to drive half an hour to get there for a service that's going when they like to be eating."

Gibbs nods at that.

"You believe in God?" she asks.

"Yeah. I pray, too. Been known to light the occasional candle. But, most of the… stuff… that's not important. Just there to help set the mood." He glances over to her, your turn on his face.

She shrugs. "Don't think about it much. Not sure I like the idea of some great, all-powerful, all-knowing being that lets all this shit happen. The bad stuff's easier if it's just us, you know?"

Gibbs nods. He understands that. "Tim'd agree with you on that."

She smiles. "You call him Tim now, and DiNozzo, Tony, and Palmer, Jimmy. When'd that happen?"

"Slowly, a little bit at a time."

They're in the elevator heading up toward Tony and Ziva's place. "No emergency stop," Abbi says, looking at the buttons.

Gibbs shakes his head.
"You ever… put that to good use? You know, at work?"

He looks at her and licks his lips, a very amused expression on his face. "Didn't think I was that fast."

She laughs at that, squeezing his hand. "Didn't answer me."

He shakes his head.

"Ever think about it?"

He kisses her ear and whispers quietly, "Oh yeah. First time you worked with us, I was thinkin' about it."

She gives him a quick kiss as the doors slide open. "Good." When she pulls back and they step out, she says, "So, how affectionate are we in front of them?"

Gibbs shrugs. "Whatever you're comfortable with. Duck and Penny don't touch a lot. The kids… no one makes out, but kisses and pets and hugs are common. More of us then there are chairs sometimes, so the girls'll sit in their guys' laps. Might get some stares if we're huggy, but I don't mind."

"Big, bad, Leroy Jethro Gibbs is huggy?" Borin is vastly amused by this idea.

"At home, I get to be whoever I want." He stops and pulls her close for a second, kissing her quickly. "And if I want to be huggy with the gorgeous redhead by my side, I can be huggy."

Abbi smiles. "Good. That's how home should be."

You work with people a half-dozen times, you spend some very intense hours with them on cases that are matters of life or death, and you develop a certain sense of them.

In some ways it's very deep and intimate.

In other ways it barely scratches the surface.

And when it came down to it, Borin, who had worked with and gone out for drinks with the MCRT a few times, really didn't have any sense for them as a family. Sort of. She has a sense of their positions in the family. She knows Gibbs is Dad, she knows Abby's the baby, the favorite who's doted on. DiNozzo's the oldest son; the brat who's allowed to get away with more than the others, but gets smacked on occasion for it to keep him in line. McGee's the invisible middle child. David's her dad's right hand, the child most like himself and the one he'd turn to if he needed something.

But, hearing Gibbs talk about them, she's fairly sure that those broad sketches are, at best, caricatures and likely, these days, quite a bit off.

If what Gibbs has told her is true, she's also never seen them as a family. She's seen a very close team of good friends. But that's not who they are now.

Even knowing that the people she is going to meet again have changed, and that this is going to be a much more intimate gathering, she isn't expecting Tony and Ziva's home to be so… homey. But it is.

It's warm and welcoming and smells amazing.

They're the first ones there, and even though she and David, who is now DiNozzo, and should
probably just be Ziva, get along well, and have gone out for drinks and dinner a few times on their own, Abbi isn't expecting the warm hug when she walks in, or the way Gibbs gets hugged, too. (He is apparently not kidding about being allowed to be huggy at home. Ziva gets a warm squeeze and a kiss on the forehead.)

The house smells great, savory, spicy, beefy smells mingling with fresh baked bread. Borin knows Da—Ziva can cook. They've talked about that. But it's not an obvious concept in her mind. Ziva cooks. Because Ziva eats. And Ziva has a home, that she cooks in, that's very warm and comfortable looking, astoundingly tidy (magazine cover tidy, which staggers Abbi because she can't imagine any place that DiNozzo… Tony… lives being this organized) decorated in warm creams, bright yellows, and cooler rust tones.

There's a table set for ten plus a high chair, flowers, gracefully curved yellow calla lilies, flanking the source of one of the amazing smells in the house, two loaves of bread.

"You make the bread?"

Ziva smiles. "I do. If we're at his house," she indicates Gibbs, "he does, too."

Borin looks at Gibbs, surprise on her face. He shrugs. "Ziver's better at it."

"Because I've done it for years. And I did not have a two-year-old helper the last time I did it."

"Molly only helped once."

"How do you have time for that?"

Ziva smiles. "Once a month I make a large batch of the dough. It rises twice, and on the second rise I punch it down, braid it, put it on baking sheets, and freeze it. Then on Friday morning, I take it out of the freezer, and by the time we're back from work, it's thawed, risen, and ready to bake."

That's so easy that Abbi's thinking she's going to be baking more bread.

DiNozzo steps out of what Abbi's assuming is their bedroom a moment later, relaxed, white button down, blue jeans, hair damp, feet bare. "Borin! Ziva told me you were coming. We've been badgering him to bring you for months now." She gets a hug, and Gibbs gets a slap on the back.

Gibbs's eyes narrow slightly at that as Abbi turns to him, "Months?"

"They're easily excited," he says dryly.

Tony laughs.

They hear the door open, and a second later Borin has her arms full of Abby, blonde Abby, blonde Abby wearing normal, professional clothing, even her neck tattoo is missing, (She's not entirely sure what happened with that, but wow, it's a change!) hugging her. "You're here! Oh, this is so awesome! You should be here all the time! We've been waiting for you!" (Fortunately, Abby talking at a million miles an hour and knocking her over with boundless enthusiasm is exactly what she expects, so the shock of the different outside is rapidly soothed by the proof of the same inside.)

Gibbs licks his lips and quietly says to Borin, "Very easily excited."

Borin chuckles at that as Abby pulls back, giving Gibbs a warm hug, saying something quietly to him as she held him close. He smiles fondly at her.
Abbi notices McGee a few steps back. Who is also looking a lot different. Gibbs has talked about the whole Bootcamp thing, and she gets the idea that that kind of workout builds muscle and tone, but wow! And when the hell did he start wearing rolled up sleeves and a wrist cuff, let alone… yeah, that really is black nail polish… Okay, he and Abby switched. He went Goth, and she's clean cut, and apparently today is opposites day. There's a little, baby girl in his arms, and he's smiling at them.

"Hi," she says.

He gives her a one-armed hug. "Hi."

"So this is Kelly?" She says, staring at the baby in his arms. She's small, but very alert, big... bluish-green eyes looking at everything, taking her in. She doesn't have much in the way of hair, very short blonde-brown wisps all over her head, but she's got a little head band made out of pink ribbons with tiny skulls on it, and a black onesie, also with a pink skull on it, so yeah, this is very much Tim and Abby's child.

He smiles at his daughter. "This is Kelly."

"She's beautiful."

"Thanks." Gibbs is hovering closer, so he also gets a one-armed hug from Tim along with. "She's got a new trick. Don't know if she'll do it now, but she kept doing it on the car ride over." He hands Kelly over to Gibbs. "Okay, baby, what do you have to say to Pop?"

Kelly looks at her grandfather and snuggles into him, tucking her head under his chin.

"Yep, she not—"

"Papapapapa."

"Good girl!" Tim coos at her.

Gibbs holds her out so he can see her face and kisses her. "So you're talking now? You know I'm gonna want to hear what you've got to say."

"Papapapapapapapapa!"

Tim smiles at the look on Gibbs face; he's just beaming at this. "She started day before yesterday. Don't get too excited, that's what she's calling me, and Abby, and Heather, and the mailman—"

"Sounds like she got that one right." Jimmy cuts in with, kissing Kelly's cheek and giving Gibbs a quick hug. Tim quickly whacks him on the back of his shoulder before giving him (and Anna, who Jimmy's carrying) a hug as well.

"You've met Jimmy, right?" Tim asks Abbi.

"Yes, briefly." She offers her hand and he shakes it.

"Hi. This is Anna," Yet another baby in the family. This one is even smaller, with a mop of wild, curly brown hair, looking at Pop... Wait, no, he's Uncle Jethro to Jimmy's kids, with big blue eyes. "her mom and older sister are around here somewhere. Glad to see he's finally brought you. The girls have been ragging on him for months."

"The girls?" Gibbs asks, raising an eyebrow, cut the bull on his face.

Jimmy looks pretty satisfied as he says, "I have given you exactly no crap at all about when you
were going to bring Abbi home."

Gibbs thinks about that and comes to the conclusion that might be right. "That's because Tim's been doing it for you."

Jimmy nods. "Division of labor. He nags you on stuff like that. I make sure you don't rip that knee out again."

Tim laughs.

Tony slips over. "Oh, good the Wonder Twins are here." He gives both of the girls kisses. "We fighting or house-building for Bootcamp this week? I've got a new move I want to try out."

Abbi's got Wonder Twins? on her face as she looks from Tim to Jimmy. Okay, they look, similar...ish, maybe. Nope, she's not seeing it.

Jimmy catches it before Tim does. "We have the same birthday. Since he found that out, he's been calling us the Wonder Twins."

Tony shrugs. "Can't really call him Probie anymore; he outranks me, and these days you've got your own Autopsy Gremlin, so I needed something new."

Those seem like decent points to Borin. "What's the move?"

"It's really cool. But I could explain for a week and won't get it right. Happy to show it to you if we're fighting this weekend?" He looks to Gibbs. "Well, Jefé?"

"Thunder storms all day tomorrow and Sunday, I'm good with fighting."

"Excellent. You come, too, Borin, okay?"

She looks at Gibbs, not sure if this is something he wants to share. He nods.

"Sure. I'm on call, but if I don't get pulled away, I'll come."

"Uncle Jetro!" A small blur of curly brown hair came tearing in and tried to tackle Gibbs.

He picks her up and kisses her, one girl on each arm. "Hello Molly. I'd like you to meet someone, this is Abbi."

Molly looks over at Abbi and smiles at her for a second before starting to bounce on Gibbs' arm. "Horsey!"

"Let Uncle Jethro breathe for a moment." Breena scoots in to give Gibbs a hug and a kiss. "Hey, Jethro."

He kisses her back. "Hi."

Breena turns back toward Abbi and hugs her as Gibbs says, "This is Molly and Anna's mom, Breena Palmer."

"We're so happy to have you here. He hasn't been telling us nearly enough about you; you know him, he doesn't talk, but he's been glowing."

Were it not for the fact that he's got a baby on each arm, Breena would have gotten a very gentle headslap for that. Instead she gets the Gibbs look of death, which she turns to face, and absolutely
grins at, letting Gibbs know that she purposely timed that comment for a moment when he could not properly retaliate.

"Your wife's getting sassy, Palmer."

Jimmy snorts. "What do you mean, getting?"

Breena laughs at that and kisses Gibbs' cheek again. "We get a shot to tease him once a blue moon, this is Christmas and Easter and all of our birthdays at once."

"I see, once again, we are the last ones here," Ducky's voice cascades over them.

"You have the longest trip," Tony replies. "Not that it's so far milewise, but they've got to get from Chevy Chase to here, and traffic's always insane."

"You brought her, Jethro! Wonderful. Abigail, may I present my wife, Penny Langston?" Ducky asks as he introduces Penny.

"She's also my grandmother," Tim adds, stepping over to hug both of them.

A second later Penny offers Abbi her hand. "Hello."

"Hello, Penny, and please, call me Abbi."

Abby McGee bops over, taking Kelly, who is getting pretty squirmy, from Gibbs. Two little guys at once when one of them is determined to try and leap out of your arms is a bad plan. "That's going to be interesting. He already calls me Abbs, so how about if both of us are in the same room, I'm Abbs and you're Abbi?"

Abbi nods. "That'll work."

"Almost time!" Ziva calls out.

Gibbs looks to Molly. "No time for Horsey now, how about a piggyback ride to your chair?"

She nods at that, and he lifts her to his shoulders, she gets settled, little toddler hands and arms holding tight around his forehead, chin resting on the crown of his head.

Dinner starts, as always, with Ziva lighting the candles, the Kiddush over the glass of wine, ritual hand washing, the blessing of the children, and then the blessing of the challah.

And then it's dinner time. Which with this group is chaotic and noisy, usually with a few conversations going on at once, for the first few minutes, but after a few minutes they settle into the somewhat traditional what we all did this week, where generally one, maybe two of them talks, and the others listen.

So, they got up to date on Tim's newest hire. ("Wait, we have a jet?" Tony asks. "Yeah!" "Why the hell are we always hopping military transports?" "Because Craig has it reserved 300 days a year, and Leon's got it another 30. Craig's so used to it being his own personal jet that he didn't bother to reserve it ahead of time, so I snagged it out from under him. He's got it reserved now, and no one else is ever going to see the damn thing again.")

Abby's court date. ("Oh, no…" she ran her fingers over her neck, smearing the makeup, in response to Abbi asking if she'd gotten the tattoo removed. "Lawyer thought I'd look more professional with it covered." She rolls her eyes. "Two advanced degrees, I've run my own lab for sixteen years, three
guys reporting to me, expert witness on more cases than they can count, and a book full of publications to my name, but apparently all that flies out the window when jurors see a black spider web." "At least he didn't make you bleach the pink out of your hair," Breena adds. "He tried. I explained where he could shove that idea.")

Tony told his tale of Bishop and Draga crunching some numbers, looking for a pattern in a cold case, completely absorbed in what they were doing. When Tony and Ziva got up to go home, that triggered Bishop's awareness of her coffee cup being empty, and she decided to get a new drink for both her and Draga. Unfortunately Draga's Red Bull was not empty, so when she grabbed both cups and quickly whipped around to go get refills, she managed to spray Red Bull all over Tony, which is why he was getting out of the shower when Gibbs and Abbi got there.

Jimmy told them about quizzing Dr. Allan on possible causes of death, which amused Ducky to no end, because he remembers doing that to Jimmy, and told them about it.

Then he told them about him and Gibbs taking more siding off the house, and how, with any luck, if the weather would be kind enough to comply, one more day without rain should get the whole house done. Penny took over from there, talking about how they're hoping to do the bottom three feet of the house in stone, gray limestone and granite, that'll look a lot like the back patio, and the top section will be done in something that's a lot lighter and lower maintenance, but will look like split logs.

"So, we're build Gibbs his log cabin?" Tony asks.

"Bit bigger than any cabin I ever dreamed of."

"To say the least. Sounds like it'll look really cool. We doing the roof in shingles or slate or wood?" Abby asks.

"Shingles that are not cedar, but look like cedar," Ducky replies.

"Thinking none of you guys are going to want the work involved in real wood," Gibbs adds. The kids nod, from everything they know real wood seems like a lot more work than whatever this stuff'll be.

"How about you, Abbi, what's new and interesting at Coast Guard?" Abby McGee asks.

Borin sighs. "Not much new or interesting. No case for me this week. So, I handled reports. I made sure the paperwork got done. I bickered with legal about what we can do about the guy from HR who was embezzling from us. Then I made sure we were following our document retention compliance procedures."

Tim shudders. "Give me a simple murder any day."

Abbi nods vehemently in agreement. "Yeah." She gently touches Gibbs' hand. "Starting to think he had the right idea. Piss the higher ups off enough so they don't promote you, but be so good at your job you get all the cool cases."

Gibbs smiles at that and kisses the back of her hand. (It's possible that Abby and Breena cooed at that, but they did it quietly enough not to get the Gibbs glare of death aimed at them.)

"So, he tells me you're in charge of Cybercrime now?" Borin asks.

Tim nods. "Whole department. That's why I get to grab the jet. Last time you worked with us..."

"It was still the same team."
"Lot of change since then. Abby…ss." He stumbles on Abby versus Abbs. "Okay, I'm not going to be able to switch like that. She's my Abby and always has been."

"You've called me Abbs before."

"Like, what? Twice?"

Abby nods.

"Anyway, she has three LabRats working for her. I've got my Minions. You've heard about Tony's new team and Jimmy's new Autopsy Gremlin."

"I prefer assistant and so does Dr. Allan."

"Okay, assistant," Tim says. He thinks for a second. "You've got an Autopsy Mogwai." Tony laughs so hard at that he practically chokes on his wine.

"It feels very different there, now," Ziva adds, whacking Tony's back as he gasps for breath.

"You aren't the same people," Breena replies.

"No, we are not. Speaking of becoming new people, has any of Ed's recent lesson sunk in?" Ziva asks Breena.

Breena tilts her head toward her food and groans. Jimmy gives Abbi a brief re-cap on the great Ed drama, but holds off on the latest installment so Breena can tell it.

Breena sighs. "What Jimmy's left out is, just like you've all got a family business, we do, too. Our family runs eight funeral homes in the area, and my mom, dad, Amy, and I all work out of the same building. So, to say things are tense is an understatement. Dad's shut up, which I suppose is a sign of inching in the right direction, but if Amy walks into the room, he walks out."

The rest of the table winces, groans, and commiserates on that.

"He's driving Mom buggy. And Amy wants to scream. So, after two weeks of that, Collin comes in, wanting to have a 'man to man' talk." Another long sigh. "Obviously, I didn't get invited along to that chat, but the version I got went something like this: apparently Dad went off on him for just using Amy, and he went off on Dad for hurting her and then doubled down on a long rant on how Amy's more than just a body and if he actually loves her he'd put just as much value on her happiness as her virginity and… how a mutually beneficial relationship can't be 'using' someone. When Dad got back from that 'chat' he was bright pink and there was smoke pouring out of his ears.

"So, Sunday should be week three of no Collin and Amy at Sunday dinner." She looks to Gibbs and Tim and Abby. "Look, we're not going, either. So, if you want to… I mean, my mom would love to see you there, but…"

"We're going on strike in support of Amy?" Abby asks.

"Yeah. If you would?"

Tim nods. "Not a problem." He looks at Jimmy, "You already let Collin know he's invited to Bootcamp?"

Jimmy nods. "Making sure he knows all the future in-laws aren't jerks? Yeah, got it covered. He's more enthusiastic about MMA than carpentry, but whichever, he's signed up for." Then he squeezes
Breena's hand. "Wanna tell them the good news?"

Breena smiles. "Did have one bright spot at work this week. Since I started working there, I've been saving ten percent of my salary, and using that to buy shares of the business. As of Thursday, I own fifty-one percent of the Brandon Street Slaters' Funeral Home."

That got many congratulations, wrapping up with Penny asking, "Does that change anything?"

"Not really. Suggested Amy work out of Uncle Wes' building for a bit. Told Dad he was going to be taking a vacation soon if he couldn't pull it together. But the day in, day out stuff is all the same. Our clients are having significantly worse days than we are, so that helps to keep things in perspective."

Dinner conversation waxes and wanes from there. More stories of the week interspersed with feeding babies, dessert flavored with stories of cases.

It was a good meal.

At the end of it, Borin joins the clean-up team. By mutual accord, once everyone knew their way around Tony and Ziva's kitchen, the rule became that whoever cooks doesn't have to clean up. So, Ziva and Tony get some relaxing time while at least four of the crew is on getting dishes in the dishwasher, pots and pans scrubbed and put back, and the table all cleared.

It's a quick job with that many people on it.

Ziva's not helping clean up, but she was enjoying the clean-up conversation. So, she's leaning against the door-jam between the kitchen and the dining room, chatting with everyone.

As that wraps up, Borin drifts over to the far wall. There are pictures there, lots of them.

"I've seen this before." She points to the Gibbs clan crest. Gibbs has his in the basement, on the wall, where he can see it easily when he's working. "But I don't know what this is."

Ziva smiles. "That's our Ketubah, marriage contract. You'll find one of these in most Jewish households."

Borin nods, watching Ziva snuggle Anna, who is trying to grab Ziva's hair.

"And these?" Borin points to the pictures.

Ziva smiles at them. "Ahhhh… At the top, we have a shot from Jimmy and Breena's wedding." It's the picture of Tony and Ziva, Tim and Abby, and Jimmy and Breena all goofing for the camera.

"That's from before you were a couple, right?"

"Yes. Not a lot of pictures of us from then or before then. Abbs has a few, I think." She points to the next shot down. "Breena took that one." It's one from the day they moved Tim and Abby in together. The day after they started dating. It's a candid shot, neither of them knew she took it. It's Tony working on putting together their kitchen table, looking across the room at Ziva, peace and joy in his eyes. "That's right after we started dating. This one," she points to a shot of Tony in his best man's tux, and her in her red steampunk bridesmaid's gown, "Is Tim and Abby's wedding."

"Costume wedding?"

"Steampunk wedding. Has Gibbs not shown you pictures?"
Borin shakes her head.

"Oh, no. No no no! You have to see pictures of that. Abbs!" Ziva calls out.

Abby McGee comes in a moment later. "Yeah?"

"He has not shown her pictures from your wedding, yet."

"Oh, you have to see the pictures! I've only got a few on my phone, but..." Abby hurries out, and a moment later she's back with her phone. "Okay. Do you know what steampunk is?"

Borin shakes her head.

"Really cool fantasy world. Steam and clockwork powered everything instead of internal combustion engines. Everything's all Victorian or Western. We knew we were going to have a Halloween wedding, and decided this was the look we'd go for. Here!" She hands Borin her phone, shot of Gibbs, in his morning suit, giving her away. "We thought he'd go like Old-West Sherriff look, but he kept it a surprise, and I step out all decked out in my dress, and there he is dressed to the nines."

Abbi stares at that, smiling. She flips through the shots, seeing mostly ones of Tim and Abby, but she finds another one of Gibbs and Abby dancing together. Everyone all dressed up and playing and having fun, and right this second, she would have really liked to have been there for that. She's smiling as she hands back Abby's phone. Then she looks back to the shots on the wall. There's Tony and Ziva dancing at their wedding, and the group shot of the whole family. The last shot is the two of them relaxing together on the beach. "Honeymoon shot?"

Ziva nods. "South Africa. It's a lot like California, but more interesting if you like safari."

By that point everything is cleaned and put away, so they wander out of the kitchen to join the larger group.

Abbi sees Gibbs on the sofa, he's got Molly on his right knee, bouncing her up and down while she shrieks with laughter. He's grinning at her, making funny faces.

Abbi goes to sit next to him, and quietly says, laughing, "You're such a goof."

"Is that a bad thing?"

She shakes her head, smiling at him. "No!"

"So, Ed and Jeanie are offering to take the girls for the weekend for an anniversary present. If you can scrounge up a babysitter for a night, the six of us could go out," Jimmy says to Abby and Ziva, as he strokes Breena's shoulder while she nurses Anna.

Abby immediately looked over to Gibbs, sending puppy eyes across the room. He has Molly on one knee, bouncing her up and down as she squeals with laughter and he talks to Borin. He's showing off, and that makes her grin.

But he's also into what he's doing and doesn't sense the puppy-dog eyes and look up. (Or he's dodging babysitting for a night.)

"We'll find someone, when are you thinking?"

"May 14th?" Jimmy half-says, half-asks. That's the day that works best for them, but it'd be great to
All three of the girls grin. Tony, who came over at the words, 'six of us could go out' sighs elaborately and rolls his eyes. "You're going to let him" he looks over to Tim, who's talking with Ducky and Penny by the piano, "pick the club we go to for your anniversary?"

"Technically, I'm going to let Breena pick, and she's decided that she wants to play Goth for a night, which means they're picking."

Ziva kisses Tony. "I have been wanting to see you in eyeliner and leather trousers for a while now."

"Oh God."

"Afraid of a little leather?" Jimmy asks, wicked grin on his face.

"No!"

"Wonderful." Ziva smiles even wider and happier.

"You're really good at this," Abbi says to Gibbs. He's got Kelly in his arms. They've talked about his girls, and she's seen pictures, she knows about the room that's pink and has the bed for them along with the toys, but she's never seen Pop in action, let alone really grasped the fact that there were tiny people who would crawl all over him calling him Pop or Uncle Jethro.

She certainly likes seeing this, but it does come as something of a surprise to see him playing on the floor with babies.

Like she said, there's this, warm, soft, friendly, playful goofball hiding deep inside Gibbs, and apparently the magic ingredient for getting it out is baby girls. She likes it, likes seeing him so happy, but, it just really wasn't anything she was expecting to be in there.

"You want to hold her?" Gibbs asks her. Kelly's probably about half asleep, she just finished her pre-bedtime nurse, and in a few minutes he's going to be heading into the bedroom to put her down. But she's pretty easy and would probably go along with Borin helping out.

"Sure."

And in a moment she had a tired, but restful baby in her arms. It's a nice sensation. Not the sort of thing that's making her want to rush out and have six of her own kids, but it's still pleasant.

He leads Borin to Tony and Ziva's room, furthest one from the hubbub. Anna's already sleeping on the bed, Molly will be in here soon.

Borin's standing in the center of the bedroom, watching him rooting through Kelly's bag, he comes up with a onesie, wipes, and clean diaper.

He pets the back of Kelly's head and quietly says, "Abbi's going to help with bedtime. That okay with you, love?"

Kelly appears to approve. At least, she's not crying, but she's awfully sleepy, so she just might not think complaining is worth the effort.
"Good. We've got to be quiet, Anna's already asleep. She's on Aunt Ziva's bed waiting for you and Molly to join the sleepover." While he's talking to Kelly, he gets the changing mat on the floor and gestures for Borin to put her down. He takes care of the diaper, and gets her into her sleeping onesie, and then hands her back to Borin. "Back in a sec," he kisses Kelly's forehead, "Gotta wash my hands."

And a few seconds later he is back, and he takes her from Borin, Kelly on his lap, snuggled in close on his chest, sitting on the edge of Tony and Ziva's bed, Borin next to him, leaning against his shoulder listening to him recite Good Night Moon from memory while gently petting Kelly's back.

He kisses Kelly one last time, and then lays her down next to Anna.

"Good night, Kelly."

She yawns around her pacifier. "Papa."

And if that isn't the most ridiculously cute thing Borin's ever seen, she doesn't know what is.

On the ride home Gibbs asks, sounding a bit uncertain, "Was that too much? Everyone and everything all at once. Can be a lot."

"Oh. No. That was fine." Abbi wonders why he asked that, and realizes she's been very quietly watching the road go by as they head toward his place. "Just thinking."

"About?"

She shakes her head. "Sounds dumb, but... You're a dad. You're really a dad."

He glances at her quickly with a Well, yeah. Did you think I was kidding about that? sort of look.

"No. But... Didn't expect you to be that dad."

*What did you expect?* is on his face, and she reads it.

"More like at work. More team leader, less... playful."

He shrugs. "They don't need a leader anymore."

She shakes her head, watching the street slip by. "No. They don't. It's been a hell of two years, hasn't it?"

He smiles at that. "Yeah, it has."

Another few quiet miles. He probably shouldn't ask. They already talked about it once, but, especially if she's seeing him as an entirely different sort of dad...

"Making you think more about kids?"

She turns away from watching the street to him. "What? You mean, have I seen you in action now, and suddenly am I jonesing for a pile of my own?"

Yeah, he shouldn't have asked. He feels dumb as hell on that.

She catches that on his face and squeezes the hand that's on the gear shift, letting him know the question wasn't out of bounds. "No. Look, if anyone had ever asked me before tonight if the words
'cute' and 'Jethro Gibbs' could belong in the same sentence, I'd have said 'No.' And I'd have been wrong. You and the girls are painfully cute. If I had a biological clock to tick at me, it'd be bonging away like Big Ben chiming the hour. But, no. I'm not feeling that. I'm a good Aunt, and maybe… I'd be a good… step-grandma?" She winces a little at that, and he shakes his head, kissing her hand.

"Gotta earn some gray hair before you get Grandma. That's why even Tim calls her Penny."

"Uh huh." She says dryly, appreciating that he's trying to be sensitive to the fact that she's not even forty yet, and that's awfully young for Grandma, but not shut her out of his family. She shakes her head again. "I can't let the job go enough to be a good mom. Not the kind of mom I'd want to be. And that's always going to be true. No matter how cute you are with a pile of little, squirming rugrats."

"You need the job."

"I do."

Gibbs squeezes her hand. "I understand."

She smiles at him. "I figured you would."

Several quiet minutes go by. They get to his house and head in. Mona gets her petting and cuddles. Gibbs isn't entirely sure how to say this, not sure exactly what he's feeling, but once he gets Mona settled down, he turns to Abbi. "I know the job comes first. I know it has first call on your time and love. I get it. I lived it. And I don't begrudge you that life—"

They're standing in the foyer. Abbi's hanging up her coat. "Sounds like there's a huge 'but' coming up."

He licks his lips, staring at her, eyes earnest. "There is, but I don't think it's the one you're expecting. But… in the time you've got for me, the time you've got that isn't owned by the job… I'd like another person sharing my home and my life. I'd like that person to be you. And, for as much of it as you're willing to give me, I'd like to be in your life, too."

"So, what are you actually asking me?"

He smiles, shaking his head. "Would you believe I don't really know?"

"Keep a toothbrush and some clothing here? Move in? Get married? Or at least…" He licks his lips again, very aware of the fact that she's standing a step away, staring at him, hand still on his chest, his hand over it, but beyond that, not touching him. "Make it clear that that's my endgame? That's what
I'm looking for. Hell, put that little heart thingy on your Facebook profile?"

She laughs at that last one, steps into him, and kisses him, then steps back, still holding his hand. "Won't work if you don't have a profile."

"Okay, not that." He smiles at her. "I'm not getting a Facebook profile." They stand there, quiet for a moment. Well, if you're not going to go slow... "Abbi..."

"Yeah."

"I think I love you, and I haven't said that to a woman in decades, and I'm terrified of screwing this up, and I don't know what I'm doing and probably never did. I've got three ex-wives, and I don't want you to be number four. But I'm happy when you're here, in a way I haven't been for a long time, in a way I never was with any of the ones that didn't work, and I hope, pray, that I make you happy, too. Make you happy like that."

She thinks about that. "You do make me happy. In a way I haven't been in a long time."

"I know I'm going too fast."

"Ya think?"

He appreciates getting that back from her. "Yeah, I think. So, from here I'll slow down. I love you. I want a future with you. I want you as part of my family and home. I've been divorced three times, and that's off the table now. Next time's 'til death do us part.' And I'm willing to take as long as needs be to get there."

Borin smiles at that. "Preferably of natural causes?"

He chuckles. "Depends on if I'm really as bad at this husband thing as my track record suggests."

She kisses him gently, touching his face. "You make me happy, Jethro. You make me want to shut off my brain and let my feelings take over, make me want to just jump in feet first, and let everything else fade away. But I can't do that. But I'm not going anywhere, and I like where you want this to go, so we'll take the time to get it all figured out."

He smiles at her and kisses her again.
Goth clubbing night. Tony rolls his eyes and sighs. It's Wednesday, and a package has arrived at their apartment with Ziva's name on it.

He knows what's in it. Even before she starts pulling pieces of black clothing out of it.

"Come on, it will be so much fun!" Ziva's looking really enthusiastic about this.

He's staring at the pile of black clothing she just handed him, stuff for him to try on, see if it fits.

"Go, try it on."

He starts pulling off his clothing with the enthusiasm of a man about to face a firing squad.

"You know, if I could see your outfit—"

"No." She shakes her head, smiling. "And no snooping, either. It is a surprise. But I promise, you will like it."

He smiles. "I know I will, but…"

"Pretend it's an undercover mission."
He looks at the clothing again. "This is a mission I'd send Draga and Bishop on."

How leather is supposed to be worn.

Ziva smiles at that, while Tony finishes stripping. He eases into the trousers, leather pants. Tight, black leather pants. They're actually not bad at all. The texture against his skin is pleasant, but he does like good leather. That is, he likes good leather the way good leather is supposed to be worn, as shoes, belts, and the occasional jacket.

He's less thrilled with exactly how much of him is on display with these pants. Sure, he doesn't mind when women check out his package, he actually likes it, but… like with a Christmas present, he likes to keep it well enough wrapped you can't tell exactly what's under there. Right now, he looks like a guitar under the Christmas tree, the only person who can't figure out what it is, is the person who's never seen one before.

He's also a bit less than thrilled at the inch of flub that's muffin-topping over the waistband of said pants. He stands up a bit straighter, and that helps.

"Size up?" he asks Ziva.

"This is how they're supposed to look."

He picks up the shirt, it's… wrong. Shirts are supposed to be made of solid fabrics and this is… he puts it on, yeah, it's mesh. Black mesh, say quarter inch holes all over the shirt. And sure, part of him is aware of the fact that Ziva's looking at him like he's the most perfect chocolate cake ever, and she's going to eat him alive, most of him is aware of the fact that his chest hair is sticking out of those holes in what he considers ridiculously-stupid little tufts.

He looks at himself in the mirror and mutters, "I'm killing McGee for liking this, and then I'm killing Palmer for going along with it."

"Oh, hush, you look great." She's standing behind him, hands on his shoulders, and kisses him.

"I look like a dork." He touches one of the little tufts. "And I'm going to have to shave if I do this."

Ziva's eyes light up, and she tackles him into their bed.
On Thursday, Tony heads down to Autopsy.

He sees Jimmy working away, but doesn't see the Autopsy Mogwai (He'll have to give that to McGee, that's a killer nickname.) anywhere, so he says to Jimmy, "Really, Goth club?"

Jimmy shrugs. "Why not? It'll be fun."

"You and I have very different definitions of fun, Palmer."

"What's the problem? Loud music, good drinks, dancing with our girls? Last I checked you were in favor of all of those things."

"Well, yeah, but… Leather pants? Eyeliner? Ziva bought a mesh shirt for me." Tony looks really uncomfortable at that. Mostly because, if you wear a mesh shirt, and you happen to have a lot of chest hair, it sticks out in really stupid-looking little clumps. Which means, if you are going to wear a mesh shirt, you have to shave off said hair, and if you shave off said hair, while say, your wife coos at you with great enthusiasm about it, it's suddenly abundantly clear that you have not done nearly enough in the way of crunches or push-ups in the last ten years, so to say he's not enthusiastic about that mesh shirt, in addition to all of the rest of this, is a vast understatement. (Yes, attending Bootcamp every week for the last three months has improved things, but, like they say, most guys gain fifteen pounds in the first year of marriage, and well, he was already at least ten up when he got married, and yeah… mesh shirt. Ugh. Tight leather pants, double ugh. If they push this off until, say, November, when, with any luck, he'll be down another ten pounds, he'll be a hell of a lot more enthusiastic about it.) "Last time I dressed up in a ridiculous costume for a girl, I looked like a dork, felt like a dork, and the sex wasn't nearly good enough to make up for it." (Okay, it's not like the post-shaving sex was bad, but he had a really hard time getting out of his head enough to really enjoy it.)

"Wear what you're comfortable in. Abby says it's a private club, and any guest of a member is welcome. Put on your James Bond tux if you like. I haven't seen what Breena's got for me, but she tells me it's not strictly Goth."

"They're members?"

"Of course."

"You're really going to do this? Get all dressed up? Wear makeup?"

Jimmy shrugs at that, too. "Wouldn't be the first time. Like Tim said to me, 'Not like your dick'll fall off if you put on mascara.'"

Tony acknowledges that with a tilt of his head. "Gonna feel like a moron."

"It's for a good cause."

"Getting' you laid isn't a good cause!"

Jimmy smiles brightly at him. "It is to me!"

Tony laughs, shakes his head, decides to ask McGee about the tux, because that would feel a lot more comfortable, and wanders out of Autopsy.

A few minutes later, he finds McGee, at his computer, fingers flying away. Like usual, he waits at the door for McGee to look up from his work, and wave him in.
"Hey," Tim finally says, noticing him there.

"Hi."

"What's up?"

Tony explains, glossing over exactly how dumb he feels in what Ziva picked out for him, and if he could do something else.

"Yeah, sure. Goth comes in lots of flavors. Just because I go for a punk version of it doesn't mean you have to."

"Jimmy suggested my tux."

"If you like. If you've got what you wore to my wedding, say with a black button down, you'd be perfect. Even the red sunglasses'll look right."

Tony lights up, feeling a lot better. "That, I can do."

On Friday, during Shabbos, all three girls vanished for about fifteen minutes to chat about it. (They dragged Abbi and Penny into that conversation, too.) They returned giggling, happy, looking at each other, and the guys, and very much looking forward to Saturday.

On Saturday, Tony chickens out. Or as he put it in his phone call to Jimmy, "Oh, so sorry, you know, crime..." and off they went on a case that takes him and Ziva, Bishop, and Draga to London. Jimmy's suspicious that Tony may have specifically called Dispatch and begged them for any case in the Western Hemisphere, but he's fairly sure Ziva wouldn't have gone along with it if it wasn't a real case.

So, on May 14th, 2016, two days after their fourth anniversary, the Palmers head over to the McGees' to get ready to Goth themselves out, just the four of them.

Since Jimmy and Breena have never done this before, they agreed to head over to Tim and Abby's before getting dressed, the idea being that Tim and Abby would be able to help them get into costume and look authentic, or at least as authentic as they could get.

(Jimmy's a little fuzzy on why they need help getting dressed. He's been successfully doing that since he was a child, but if Breena and Abby want to have a BFF makeover slumber party thing ahead of time, it doesn't bug him. Hanging out with Tim is good, and having another adult to spend time with always makes baby wrangling more fun.)

They get to Tim and Abby's, and Breena and Abby vanish. He and Tim hear occasional, loud, laughter from upstairs.

He and Tim are just hanging out. Nothing they're going to do to themselves is going to take nearly as long as whatever it is the girls are going to be doing to themselves, or each other.

Tim would be lying if he said he wasn't imaging what the girls did the last time they played dress up. But, he's trying not to think about it too hard. He's got Kelly on the floor, playing with her, while he and Jimmy watch a game. (Gibbs'll be over closer to date time to grab Kelly.) It's not a really good time to be imaging them fooling around with each other, say in their underwear, little, lacy
underwear, kissing, soft and wet, while they get ready.

But, eventually, Gibbs and Borin, her presence makes Tim and Jimmy smile, come to pick Kelly up.

Borin looks them both up and down. They're both in their gelling at home on the weekend outfits of t-shirts and jeans. "Aren't you supposed to be all dressed up?"

Tim shrugs. "Doesn't take too long to get into a kilt and t-shirt."

"You really wear kilts?" Okay, sure Gibbs had mentioned that, but she's having a hard time wrapping her head around McGee in a kilt.

"I own and wear several kilts."

"I've got to see this."

Tim nods a bit. "We got invited to Senior's wedding, too. I can swing it."

"It's black tie," Jimmy says.

"It's a formal kilt," Tim shoots back.

Borin chuckles at that. "Okay."

Gibbs has Kelly, looks at both of them for a second, and Tim catches a hint of warning in his eyes, but he's not sure what it's about, "Jethro?"

He seems to snap out of whatever that look was, hoisting Kelly up a little further. "Have fun."

Jimmy grins at him, "Oh, we will. And I'm sure Abby and Breena'll get pictures if you want to see them after."

Tim kisses Kelly as Abby heads down the steps in her bathrobe with her hair in curlers. "Hi. Thank you so much for taking her!"

"No problem." Gibbs says, allowing himself to be hugged.

Kelly gets petted and kissed again, and then he and Borin are off.

Abby links arms with both of the guys and begins to pull them up the stairs. "Come on, time for you two to get ready."

In 2002 when Tim met Abby, he liked Goth. He appreciated the aesthetic, and the danger, and the whole forbidden aspect of it. He did not, however, grasp the concept that Goth came in many flavors and nuances.

However in the fourteen years that he's been 'Goth Adjacent' he has come to understand, respect, and enjoy the nuances.
There is literally not enough alcohol on Earth to get Tim into this outfit.

His own personal flavor of Goth tends to go for straight rock and roll or punk Goth. This is probably a result of not much liking velvet or lace (on him, Abby wants to coat herself in the stuff, and that's fine with Tim) helped along by the fact that he is awfully fond of leather.

Plus part of the point of tattoos is for other people to see them, and ninety percent of the time when anyone other than Abby is around, Tim's are hidden. If he goes for the more dressed up styles of Goth, his will be covered.

So he doesn't. Part of nights when Tim goes Goth is about letting the hidden parts of himself out. And tonight, everything comes out.

He steps out of the bathroom, toweling off his hair. "You're sure this is temporary?" he asks Abby, who's doing her makeup. He's going all out tonight, so he dyed his hair black.

"Yeah. I know lots of people who have worn this. Your hair'll be its natural color again by next week."

"Good." Sure, right this second, he thinks black hair looks cool. He's not sure he wants it forever, though.
This on the other hand...

His t-shirt is black, and sleeveless. Not a tank top. It's a regular t-shirt, he just carefully ripped the sleeves off of it, that way two of his tatts are visible. There's a name of a band on it, and some very intricate artwork, all in gray and white. He doesn't much like the band, but the art's cool, knotwork that has a similar feel to the knot on his arm.

And, of course, he's putting his black kilt on. (Means half of number four is visible. His boots are high enough they hide the bottom half of his dragon.) No way he'd skip that. DC isn't exactly prime kilt-wearing territory, so when he has the chance, he takes it.

The wrist cuff and the boots are a given. So, number three is, like usual, hidden.

Nail polish, also black, of course! Hell, he's hit the point where he wears it to work one week out of four, so he's got to be wearing it for clubbing.

He's waiting for his nails to dry when Jimmy and Breena head into their room. He sees Jimmy glance around, look at the mirrors, and then smirk at him. Tim inclines his head and smiles.

Tim likes Breena's outfit. Likes it a whole lot. She's got her hair in a high ponytail, red and black streaks cascading down, and had borrowed Abby's black and pink dress with the halter top and very low back. He knows Abby can sew, and wonders if Breena can too, because that dress fit Abby perfectly when he last saw it, and now it fits Breena just as well, but Breena's six inches shorter than Abby.

Breena or Abby, that dress is a winner.

He loves the makeup. She's got her lips painted patent-leather-shiny blood red, and lined in black. It
looks awesome. He's not sure if she'll be able to eat, but it looks really cool. Not much on her eyes, just a little liner and mascara, she wants all the attention on her lips, and they're worth it.

Abby usually wears that dress with knee or thigh high boots. Breena's got small black pumps and two very long, very intricate tattoo transfers that'll go on her leg and back.

But for as much as he loves how Breena looks, it's Jimmy he's staring at in amazement. So, he knows that Jimmy will wear clothing vastly tighter and a hell of a lot smaller than he will. But… They're jeans, blood red, tight, nothing to the imagination, clinging to every single inch of his skin all the way down to the black boots he's got on, jeans. And sure, Tim has worn and still owns a few pairs of skinny jeans, but… okay, he never leaves the house in pants so tight you can see his dick. He just doesn't.

And pants so tight you can tell he's not wearing anything between those pants and his dick? NEVER!

But Jimmy in those jeans, you can practically tell if he's circumcised. They're really, REALLY tight. Add in the white button down, completely unbuttoned, bow tie, undone, just sort of draped over his collar, and Jimmy's a whole lot more straight rock and roll than anything he'd think of as Goth.

"God, Jimmy, what the hell are you trying to do, smuggle a hamster into the club?" Tim says when he gets his words back and stops just staring at Jimmy.

"Guinea pig," Jimmy says with a smirk.

Abby and Breena laugh hysterically at that.

"Baby guinea pig," Tim says when they quiet down, and that sets off another round.

When Breena can talk again, she asks, "Tim, you have a black leather jacket that'll fit him, right?"

Tim nods. "Yeah. I was going to say it might be a little snug, but I guess that's the idea."
Jimmy smiles. "So, my wife tells me."

"So..." he's looking at Jimmy while Abby shows Breena his jackets and she messes around with them. "What's the Goth part?" Jimmy opens his hand and Tim sees he's holding a contact lens case.

"You're not wearing your glasses."

Jimmy nods. "They're silver. Got some sunglasses, too. And Breena and Abby said something about eyeliner."

Tim nods. That'd be pretty subtle, other than the incredible pants-of-show-off-everything-you've-got, and cool.

"You two almost ready?" Jimmy asks Tim, sitting down in front of Abby's dressing table, opening the contacts.

"Almost." Abby's still in her robe, but her hair's "almost done" and her makeup is. Theoretically, all she has left to do is get her dress on and take her hair out of the curlers.

Tim's almost entirely dressed. He's sitting on their bed, waiting for his nails to dry. Abby kneels behind him on the bed and slips the last piece of his outfit on.

It's true that there's nothing intrinsically Dom/sub about Goth and vice versa, but there does seem to be a fairly large overlap between the two groups. So, one thing Tim has noticed is that, while he did get felt up at Zephyr, that's never been an issue at any of the clubs they go to in DC. (Well, yeah, he gets felt up, when he goes clubbing with Abby, all the time, by Abby. Zephyr was the first time a stranger did it.) And he's fairly sure there's a reason why he's never been felt up at any of the clubs they go to in DC.

Abby's fastening it around his neck.

It's a nine strand braid of the softest, most supple black leather he's ever felt. It ends in a belt buckle, which works better than snaps because the size of this is more easily customizable. And yeah, he's not a bound submissive, won't ever be one, but he doesn't mind playing one when they go to what he considers Abby's territory.

Breena's watching Abby pull it snug, quest for the perfect jacket temporarily forgotten, as black leather slips through the buckle. She seems really curious, looking from Tim to Abby and back again, as Abby kisses the nape of his neck, right above the collar, before hopping off their bed.

Finally Breena says, "What kind of club are we going to?"

Abby catches the different layers of meaning to that question and smiles. "A Goth club. Nothing else."

"Really?"

Tim nods. "Really."

Breena steps closer to Tim, standing in front of him, fingers brushing lightly over the leather around his throat. "And... um... yeah... You know what you're saying, wearing that, right?"

Tim laughs. Yes, he does. He didn't realize Breena would know, though. "And what do you think I'm saying by wearing this?"
Breena picks her words carefully. "That Abby's in charge."

Tim smiles, feeling pretty flirty as he says, "And when we go to one of her clubs, she is."

Jimmy, who had just been quietly listening to this says, "So, it's not actually a sex club?" (He's possibly rethinking his choice of pants.)

Abby gives Tim a long, questioning look, and he shrugs, at no point did he actually tell Jimmy it was a sex club. Though, thinking back to what he actually did say, two years ago, he can understand why Jimmy might think it was.

She answers, "No. Though people do have sex there. And there are private rooms where anything goes. It's mostly a place where the music is loud, the lighting is dim, and no one stares if you like black and leather and pretending to be a vampire."

"So, why the collar on Tim?" Jimmy asks.

Tim looks at Abby; he's never asked that. The first time they went, she had suggested it. He thought it looked cool and knew exactly what it meant, and since it didn't bother him, that was fine.

"I just like the way they look. You got a neck as pretty as Tim's, you should show it off. Same reason I always wear one."

"So being told what to do doesn't make you all tingly?" Breena asks Abby.

"Not saying that." She smiles hot at Tim, then glances to Jimmy. "Just saying that isn't why I wear them."

Tim watches Breena think about that. He looks over at Jimmy, who is watching them in the mirror, finger with a silver contact frozen en route to his eye as he stares at the girls, and figures they are both wondering exactly how far tonight is going to go, and what they might all be comfortable with. He's also wondering how much of this the girls planned with each other ahead of time.

"So, you do like being told what to do?" Breena asks, smiling.

"I do if the right person is saying the words," Abby says, looking at Tim, then to Jimmy, then to Breena. Images of Abby subbing for Breena leap into Tim's mind, and he swallows hard. "You?" she asks Breena.

"Oh yeah." She sighs it, looking from Jimmy to Tim and back to Jimmy.

Tim takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, bites his lip, and tries to clear his mind of the suddenly very explicit image of telling Breena to get on her knees. When he opens them, he notices that Jimmy's squirming a little at this conversation, as well. And he also gets the sense that neither of them are entirely sure if this is I'm-so-turned-on-I-can't-think or this-is-getting-really-close-to-outside-of-my-comfort-zone squirming.

"Do you like telling him what to do, too?" Abby asks.

Breena shrugs. "It's okay. I'd rather be told what to do. Would you do the transfer on my back?"

Breena picked a large dragon tattoo. The dragon's face would go on her bicep, and the rest of its body would twine around her arm, onto her shoulder, and down her spine. She had borrowed Abby's black and pink halter dress because it had the right cut for the entire dragon to be visible.

"Give me a hand, Tim. I'll hold it in place, you press the wet paper towels into it," Abby says,
heading into the bathroom to wet the paper towels. A second later, she's handing them to him, and then he's watching his and Abby's hands on Breena's skin. Abby gently smoothing the transfer into place while he presses the wet towel over her skin.

Breena and Abby are talking about something. It's probably not even sexy, right now. But he can't focus on that. He and Abby are touching Breena. Pretty much his number one fantasy for the last four years. He's watching their hands working together over her skin, across her back and arm, and when they finish that one, she's got a long abstract spire of curly-cues that'll go from her right ankle all the way to her hip. He and Abby do that one, too. Smoothing the tattoo transfer up her leg. She's coy with her skirt, so he can't see anything besides her leg, but touching her skin, her very soft, very beautiful, very naked skin all the way up to the crest of her hip, drops of water from the wet paper towel he's using on the transfer meandering down her leg in slow, swollen rivulets. (And yes, he wants to lick them off, bad.) and he's very, very glad he's not wearing anything as tight as what Jimmy's got on.

He's wondering if the four of them are going to have sex tonight. And right now that's the hottest thing he can think of and more terrifying than being locked in a room with ten German Shepherds and foot deep maggots.

He makes a quick promise to himself. He's not drinking tonight. No matter what happens, he wants his head clear. It's hard enough to make good decisions when your balls are doing the thinking, it's even worse when they're drunk.

"I'll drive tonight."

"Okay, Cool." Jimmy says, two beats too late, sounding distracted. Tim looks away from Breena's leg and sees that contact is still there, balanced on his finger, and he knows Jimmy hasn't moved since they began this. He'd just sat there, watching it, probably just as confused between God, too damn hot and Freak out, now? as Tim is.

Abby peels off the transfer. "And I think you're done, Breena. Your nails dry, Tim?"

Probably should have made sure of that before they started rubbing all over Breena. He gently
touches his thumbnail. "Yeah."

"Jimmy?" she asks.

"Not quite." He quickly faces the mirror and gets his contacts in, then turns to them, eyes flashing sliver.

Abby grins. "Oh, that looks so cool! Okay, give me a few minutes, still got to get my hair done."

"Thanks. Still got to do my makeup, too. Breena?"

"On it." She crosses to Jimmy, and begins to rifle through the bag of cosmetics she had brought. After a second, she has eyeliner and mascara. She straddles his thighs, still standing, tilting his face up to her. "Hold still. I'm not used to doing this on people who move."

Jimmy grins, hands settling on Breena's hips. "Staying still."

A few minutes' work has Jimmy's eyes rimmed with kohl and lashes darkened. Jimmy glances at himself in the mirror, shakes his head a little, and says, "Line my eyes and call me pretty."

Tim's standing next to them, doing his own eyes, and he smiles wryly at that.

Breena, who's in Jimmy's lap, rocks against him, smiles hot and dirty, then pets his face, "Pretty, James, so pretty." Then she bends to kiss him, very quietly saying, "Laid's not just going to be the name of that song, tonight."

Jimmy grins at her, and she runs her fingers through his hair, tousling it, making it curl wild. Tim notes that her lipstick stayed perfect, so whatever magic she did involved making sure it wouldn't smudge.

A second later Abby steps out of the bathroom, her hair down.

Gothic Marilyn

Tim looks at her and sighs. "Oh, baby!" It's the Marilyn makeup, lips black instead of red, and hair, this time her real hair, in soft, blonde and pink-tinged curls. Instead of the white Seven Year Itch dress, she's got on something with a similar feel if not the same cut, same halter top, but this one is
black, the edges spattered with red, and rough. It swirls around her the same way the white on did, kissing the back of her calves when it settles. Black pearl earrings, black lace gloves, tiny, little sparkly black anklet, and cute, little black satin pumps finish it off.

"Good?" she smiles at him, twirling, doing her best dark Marilyn.

"Fuck, yes," he answers, stepping to her, kissing the nape of her neck.

"Are we ready to go, then?" Abby asks.

"Oh yeah," Breena answers, pulling Jimmy up. "Let's go!"

There are club, clubs, and clubs. When they went out to Ziva's club, it was just a place with music and drinks. The only reason anyone got turned away was for being underage.

Jimmy and Breena's place was a club. There was a dress code, and the guy at the door was keeping out anyone who didn't look like they fit. Tim in his kilt did get a bit of the hairy eyeball, but the girls were cute, and he did have a jacket and tie, so they got in.

Enoch's Cove, Tim and Abby's club is a club. You have to be a member or a guest of a member to get in. And you can only get a membership by being invited by another member.

It's not that it's a heaping cauldron of illegal activities, (Though this would be a vice cop's wet dream or nightmare depending on if he's the one getting credit for the busts or having to do the paperwork.) but the clientele here deals with enough shit for being counter culture in the rest of their lives, and this is a place to relax and have fun, not get ogled as freaks.

It's a Goth club. It's dark. The décor is sumptuous and baroque, lots of detail work and everything is covered in silk and velvet. The music is loud, live, and unless you're really into the scene, you won't know the bands. The men wear just as much (if not more) makeup than the women, and everything about the place has been designed to cater to utter decadence. For example, this is the first place Jimmy's been to where not only can he get Absinthe, real Absinthe (as opposed to the Thujone-light version that's legal in the US.), but he has options from six micro-distilleries from different regions of France, and if he wants his sugar cube with refined white sugar or raw sugar or stevia. If it wasn't for the fact that he doesn't want to mess with insulin tonight, he'd be really interested in trying them all out. The party animal he was at twenty would have loved this place. Of course, at twenty, he couldn't have scraped up the cash to afford the cover fee, let alone the drinks.

Abby's been going here since she moved to DC. It's pretty far off the beaten path, in a strip mall of all things, and everyone here knows her.

And for that matter, they know Tim now, too. He'd gone with her once the first time they dated, and enjoyed it once he got enough alcohol into him to shut down the part of his brain that felt like he stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb. (Though part of the reason for going to Enoch's is that it is a private club, and they do tend to be fairly kind to newbies who don't exactly fit in, because those newbies are the guests of someone who does.) The second time they started dating, they went back, and by that time he was more than comfortable enough in his own skin to enjoy it.

And enjoy it he did.

They made it back a few times a year until Kelly was born. But this is their first time back since. It's his favorite of her clubs, but not the only one they go to. But like with choosing this one to introduce
"Are we the only married people in here?" Jimmy asks Abby as they stake out a booth. As Abby said, there are private rooms here, and there are booths lining the dance floor. Unlike the private rooms, they provide a view of the dancing, and in some spots, whoever's playing, but each booth has high walls reaching to the ceiling on three sides, providing a certain level of privacy.

"I'd doubt it," she replies. "We're not the oldest people here, either. Goth's just like everything else, lots of people who do lots of things."

Tim and Breena head over with their drinks and snacks. Absinthe for Jimmy, Cosmopolitan for Breena, Abby's got mineral water, and Tim has a Diet Coke. Enoch's offers tasting menus of chocolates, caviars, and oysters, and Breena had opted for all three as well. Dinner was light, and they'll want snacks for dancing.

"I'm out about it a lot more than the rest of the world, for a lot of people, especially adults with real jobs, this only gets to come out at play time. But just because you can't do it every day doesn't mean it isn't real. Oh, you got all three didn't you?" Abby asks Breena as she sees the stacked trays.

Breena nods. "Going all out tonight." The top tray had three bites of six different kinds of chocolates, second tray held four mother of pearl spoons, and six shot glasses with tiny mounds of different caviars, bottom tray was larger, with a two inch high lip, filled with ice, and sixteen oysters (four different types) sitting among the crushed ice.

Tim sets the tray with the drinks down, puts each of the "easy" drinks in front of their owners, and then points to an assortment of things that he's set in front of Jimmy. "Okay, Jimmy, how does this work? I've seen complicated drinks before, but this is the first one I've dealt with that's required equipment."

Jimmy smiles about that and wonders how it is, with that bottle Jethro got him for Christmas, Tim's never seen him do this before, but… Oh, yeah. Said bottle is still in his closet with the rest of the Christmas presents he opened, looked at in a pleased sort of way, and promptly forgot all about
because Anna was two weeks old and he was completely fried from no sleep. He needs to go open that thing and see how it tastes.

There's a small decanter, crystal (All of these are on what looks like a silver tray, Abby's not kidding about decadent, everything in this place is silver, Victorian, and expensive.) with what looks like about three shots worth of Absinthe in it. "How much did you get me?"

"Three. We're going to be here for a while," Tim answers. "That's what you normally do, right?"

Jimmy shakes his head. It's not that Tim's wrong. If they're out for a night and he's not driving, three is right, but three is usually wine with dinner, (which he's already had) and two mixed drinks, that are usually low on the alcohol and high on mixers. If this is as strong as he thinks it is, that's probably the equivalent of six or eight of his usual drinks sitting in front of him.

He really should have already done this with them. He takes the first decanter and pours a bit in the long stem glass that's also sitting on the tray (of course it's cut crystal) and takes a quick sip. It's way easier to tell what he's getting himself into if he tries it straight. "Wow." He exhales, fast. This is STRONG. "Absinthe 101: it's somewhere between fifty and seventy percent alcohol, and this stuff's at the high end. For reference, the bourbon Jethro likes comes in at a bit over forty percent." There's a silver slotted spoon, and he places that on top of the glass, removing one of the stevia cubes from the little silver bowl on the tray and setting it on the spoon. "You don't drink it straight. The alcohol content's so high you can't really taste it if you drink it straight." There's a larger decanter of water, also crystal, and this one is the somewhat traditional fountain shape (It holds about a pint of water, which is more than you'd typically use for this much absinthe, but Jimmy's appreciating it, because this is really strong.) with a small spout to dribble the water. Jimmy sets the glass under the spout, opens it gingerly, but it's well-calibrated, the water eases out a few drops at a time, meandering through the stevia cube into the absinthe.

After a minute, the cube's crumbled and the water and stevia dripping into the absinthe have turned what was a clear, slightly yellow-green liquid into a cloudy light-green liquid.

"Once the Green Fairy's appeared," Jimmy says, stopping the flow of water, "It's ready to drink." He offers the first sip to Breena, knowing she's not a huge fan of licorice-flavored things, but the sip he took told him this was more of a sweet, green, herbal flavor than overwhelming anise. She smiles, nods agreeing this is okay, and hands the glass over to Abby, who decides a taste is unlikely to have much effect on the on-going quest for the next baby McGee. Like Breena, for her it's okay, probably really good for absinthe, but Jimmy's appreciating it, because this is really strong.) with a small spout to dribble the water. Jimmy sets the glass under the spout, opens it gingerly, but it's well-calibrated, the water eases out a few drops at a time, meandering through the stevia cube into the absinthe.

From there the music shifts, and Abby takes both Tim and Breena's hands. "Come on, dancing, now!"

And so they dance.

As a medical doctor, Jimmy is well aware of the fact that the hallucinogenic properties of absinthe are vastly overrated. Yes, thujone can produce a mild hallucinogenic effect, in quantities way higher than you'd get in a glass of absinthe. In fact, you'd probably need to drink a whole bottle of it for the thujone to be an issue, and by the point the boat-load of alcohol will have kicked in and taken over.

And, as a medical doctor, he's well, well aware of how the brain can react to suggestions, how the
psychology of an event is in many cases just as powerful as the pharmacology, if not more so.

(Plus, back in the day he actually got his hands on some real hallucinogens, so he knows how that feels, and this is not that.)

But this is awfully nice. He's feeling very... he doesn't have a word for it. The mood is genteel, sensuous, pampered. The music is loud, sinuous, beat shifting from a heart's throb to a languid pulse, ebbing and flowing like the pace of really good sex. The lighting is dim, reds, purples, and golds, washing everything in a dull-warm hue.

Everyone in costume, the perfumes both of the girls are wearing, faint incense and musk of the club, the slightly narrowed frame of vision courtesy of his contacts, the buzz he's got from his drink, and the pleasure of Breena sitting next to him, feeding each other tiny bites of chocolate (for her) and caviar (him) between kisses, he feels like he's dreaming. Like this is the easiest, most intense, lucid dream he's ever had.

He gets why Tim and Abby like this. Sure, it's not anything he's ever going to chase for every day, but once a year or so, oh yeah.

"Do you and Breena have anything planned for tonight?" Tim asks as he and Abby dance slow and close. Jimmy and Breena had headed back to the booth about two songs ago. This one right now is finally soft enough that he can actually talk to Abby, on her own, for the first time this evening.

"What sort of planned?"

"The sort where you ambush Jimmy and I, and all four of us end up in bed?" His eyes slip away from her to Jimmy and Breena, who are in the booth, petting and necking, Breena in Jimmy's lap.

"All four of them had been dancing together, as a foursome, and as two couples in every combination but the guys with each other, and precisely none of those dances were friendly and chaste. From the first second their feet hit the dance floor, everything was close and hot."

Tim knows why Jimmy's back in the booth, and it's not just a matter of a somewhat more discrete location to make out with Breena. Only so long you can dance like that without getting hard, and there's no way that's even remotely comfortable in those pants. If he wasn't unzipped two seconds after getting that table between them and the rest of the club, Tim'd be shocked.

"Abby smiles at him, pressing in closer yet, her body stroking his as she moves in counter point to him, pulling his attention away from watching Jimmy and Breena necking in the booth. "Would you like it if we did?"

"I honestly don't know. Half of me loves the idea. Half is scared shitless."

She kisses his neck, just above the collar. "Don't worry, we wouldn't spring something like that on you. We're just playing, pushing the line a bit further than we've been before, see how you two do, but we're not going that far. At its most, tonight is just a dry run to see if you two look like you can handle something like this."

"And how's it looking?"

"Like you're both half-terrified/half-so-turned-on-you-don't-know-what-to-do-with-yourselves."

"Yes!" He kisses her long and deep. "Talking with Breena about subbing while having me rub a
tattoo onto her was torture!"

She leans up, speaking into his ear. "I was thinking about having you and her sub, and letting Jimmy and I play with you. Tie you down on the bed, arms above your head, her on your cock, leaning into your chest. Her hands tied together behind your neck. You don't get to move. She doesn't either. Jimmy's behind her, fucking her ass, and that's all the direct friction you get, the way he moves in and out of her, and the way she moves on you as a result of that."

Tim can see that in his mind, feel it on his body, and right now, he's hard as a rock. He bites his lip, looks over to the table, where Jimmy and Breena are, and maybe they're just making out, maybe they're having sex, the table is in the way, so he can't tell for sure, but he knows what that rocking motion means when he and Abby are doing it, and it certainly isn't just making out. He swallows, hard, and asks, "What are you doing?"

"Gently petting your hair, letting you watch Breena and I kiss slow and deep from an inch away, then passing her lips to yours, saying something extremely dirty while you kiss, and holding the remote on the vibrator in your ass, pulsing it every time Jimmy thrusts."

"Oh..." That's a recipe for an orgasm so intense he'll pass out.

"Yeah. Still scared?"

"No." He shakes his head for a second and kisses her hard, holding her face in his hands, grinding against her, then pulls back so his lips brush against hers as he says, "The part of my brain capable of fear left the party as soon as you said 'having you and her sub.'"

She doesn't pull back any further, her lips still brushing his, kissing him with her response, "So what's the problem?"

Now, he does pull back, a few inches. They're still close but he wants to be able to really look her in the eye for this, and that's almost impossible if they're lip to lip. He needs to be able to read her face, and let her read his. "It'll come back when I'm not insanely turned on and things'll get weird and uncomfortable and shoot our relationship with our best friends to hell and gone."

"No way to know if we don't try." He can see she's hopeful.

"You really want to?" At first this is a question about the four of them and the fact that she thinks it'll go well and that it'll be happy and fun and the scared part of his brain isn't coming back and they can handle it.

"Yeah." She's smiling, reassuring him, and he can feel that she's certain they can do this, that it won't cause problems.

But he's not sure, afraid that that little, jealous, MINE voice in the back of his head will hop up and bite them, so he takes it a step further, making her say it, seeing how that feels. "You, with Jimmy?"

"Yes." She kisses him again, rubbing against him. "Want both of you, together. Me in the middle, rocking between you."

He expected to feel a flash of mad jealousy and wanting to kill Jimmy, but it didn't happen. And he's not sure why, he certainly felt it before when Jimmy was joking about sleeping with Abby, but he's not feeling it now.

No, if he's feeling anything right now, it's turned on, really turned on. But the rational part of his brain is still in control enough that… he's not afraid so much as afraid of being afraid.
She sees him thinking about it, and pets his face. "Could be all four of us together, and you know it'd be so good."

Tim sighs. He knows. He can imagine it. He can look over and see Jimmy and Breena, and yeah, his dick's all in favor of heading over and joining in. On a purely physical sensation level, it'd be amazing. But the fear is still there. "I don't know if I can. If there's a guy I can share you with, it's Jimmy. And, the idea is insanely hot." He ground against her, getting the point across. "But I don't know if I can."

"Then it'll stay a fantasy."

He's very happy to see no disappointment on her face, just acceptance. "Thanks." He kisses her long and hard, his hands gently running over her arms. "Got any other fantasies for me?"

He can tell the look in her eyes is asking if he wants to hear one with all four of them, or if Jimmy involved with her is still off limits. He nods a little, *all four of us, sure.*

"How about this one?" she says, turning so her back is to his chest, and he bends to kiss her throat, keeping his ear near her mouth. "Jimmy's on the sofa, I'm on my knees between his legs, sucking him down, while you fuck me from behind. Like that image? My tongue, wet and soft on his cock while you get to slip in behind me?"

Yes, he does. He shouldn't. It should make his blood boil, and not in a good way, at all. But he does like it, likes it way too damn much. He swallows, throat dry. He can imagine it, the look of Jimmy's dick slipping between her lips. He'd be behind her, setting a slow, steady pace, one hand holding her hair out of the way, letting him watch, matching his pace to hers, and Jimmy'd be sprawled out, eyes closed, hands in fists, legs quivering, breathing hard, so turned on.

He looks toward their table. Breena's skin is flushed, even in this light he can see it, and Jimmy's kissing her neck, hand on her breast, under the dress, both of them rocking slowly against each other, rhythm utterly unrelated to the music throbbing through the club.

He pulls his eyes away from them, back to Abby.

"What's Breena doing?"

She turns again, facing him, letting a few beats of music flow through them as they dance, and then grins, sexy, dirty, so good smile on her face, and licks his bottom lip before saying, "You, with a strap on. You slip into me, and she slides all the way into you, and when you pull out she does, too."

She knows the look on his face isn't pain, but a casual observer wouldn't. That's very intense sexual arousal. "Are you trying to just talk me off?"

"Do you think I can?"

"No, but you're going to get me awfully close."

"How close?"

"Wet spots on the inside of the kilt close."

"Ohhh..." She grins. "I like that. Wanna lick it off and then kiss Breena, let her suck it off my tongue."

He groans at that image and kisses her, long and hard, while her hand traces up his leg, feathering...
gently over his balls and pulls away much too fast.

"Anything else you like?" he asks.

"You in charge. Seeing you take Breena and I in hand and making us both all happy and tingly." She presses in even closer, grinding against him. "Wanna see you run the whole show. Want you to get us both off while Jimmy watches, tied up, unable to touch himself, so hot he doesn't know what to do with himself, and we don't let him get off until you're done with both of us."

"Fuck!" he breathes it quietly while grinding into her. Then he pulls back, kissing her, quick and hard. He unbucks his collar, and slips the leather slowly off his neck, trailing it over his skin, knowing she likes to see it, likes leather and his flesh, and better yet leather and hers. He fastens it onto her, snug and smooth on her skin.

His hands trail down her back, settling on her thighs, and then snake up, under her skirt, cupping her ass and pulling her flush to him.

He hisses at the pressure of her pelvis right against his, and grinds against her.

"I want you to know who owns you. Me. My collar on your throat." His fingers skim the collar. "My marks on your skin." He lifts her arm and bows his head, kissing the tattoo on her arm, then licks the one on her throat. "My rings on your finger." He squeezes her left hand. He pulls the edge of the kilt up, hitches her leg over his hip and slides into her in one fast thrust. "My cock in your pussy. My cum on your lips. You are mine."

She nods, leg tightening on his hip, pulling him closer, deeper. "Yours."

"And if I want you to fuck my best friend, you will."

"Yes."

"If I want to get off on seeing you eat out his wife..."

"I will lick her pussy until she's quivering, begging, keep her on edge until you give me permission to get her off. I will make her scream and make you proud."

He's got to back his mind away from this, or her words will get him off. He's stroking her neck, kissing, biting, hard enough there'll be little pink marks for a while, not hard enough to bruise.

She takes his hand in hers, guiding his fingers to her mouth, and then gently sucks on two of them.

"Tell me to, and I'll do that for Jimmy."

His teeth grit, and he's replaying BioShock 3, trying to ease back from the edge. It's not working.

Time for the big guns. He looks over, and yes, Jimmy and Breena are watching them, and they are definitely fucking now. Nothing about the way they are moving suggests frotting. He catches Jimmy's eye, knowing that'll do it. If he and Abby are the entertainment for the night, he is damn well going to be worth watching.

Jimmy watching him cools him down again. Competition is good for a lot of thing, and no way Jimmy's lasting longer than he is. And no fucking way he's getting off before Abby does.

He looks back to Abby, and he can see by the smile on her face that she knows what he just did. He shrugs quickly, breaking character for a second, and she winks, as long as it keeps the game going, she's good with it.
He kisses her quickly on the nose and gets back into character.

"We're going to the table, and I'm going to lay you on it. Back against it. Your legs up over my shoulders, head leaning back over the edge, so you can take Jimmy to the root. You've been looking at it all night. I wanna see you take it out and taste it. And you're going to suck him so good he won't know his own name. Then Breena's joining in. She's going to straddle you, pussy over your face, and you're gonna lick her while Jimmy fucks, and she's going to lick you while I fuck."

"Look at them." And Abby does, turning her face to Jimmy and Breena, keeping her eyes on them, seeing them flush and grind against each other, watching her and Tim. "He's about a minute from coming, and you'll be the one doing it to him, with your hot, soft, wet mouth sucking him down. And Breena, see how tight she is right now, see how close, two more soft, wet licks from your succulent tongue, and she'll be coming on your mouth."

He grinds his hips against hers, thrusting deep and steady and scans the club. This is a fine position to start in, but it's not an easy one to get her off in, and if Abby getting off, really getting off, shaking, screaming orgasm ever mattered to him, it does now.

And then he has a plan.

"There's a support pillar over there." He nods behind them. It's deeper into the crowd, but not so far back they'll be invisible.

"I'm going to slip out of you, and we're going over there." And he did, smoothing down the kilt and her skirt, making sure she's covered before he steps back, and leads her over to it. Then he spins her, looks like a dance move, and it is, sort of, just maybe not the dance everyone else is doing, so she faces it, pressing her against it, facing the Palmers. His right hand strokes over her throat and shoulder, while his lips nibble her ear, and his left hand slips under her skirt to rub her clit.

"They'll be able to see your face, and mine, but the crowd will keep most of what we're doing hidden. They'll get little glimpses now and again. A tease here." And he bites the back of her neck just above the buckle of the collar as his fingers slip around her clit. She arches into him and moans. "A hint there." He fists his hand into her hair, pulling her into a hot, open-mouthed kiss.

"But mostly they'll just see your face," he says, lips brushing the words to her. "See the pleasure on it. See the way I'm making you feel, and imagine how good it is.

He slips into her again, a hard, sure thrust, and stills, savoring the sensation of her body clinging wet and tight to his. He kisses her shoulder and the curve where neck becomes back, feeling her hands reach behind her, rubbing over his sides and thighs. Tim sets a slow, easy pace, feeling the rush of this, the rich, golden pleasure of her body on his and the ego trip of knowing Breena and Jimmy are watching, seeing him fuck her, seeing her enjoy it, and getting off on it.

He'd never thought he had that much of an exhibition kink. Yes, having Abby watch him makes him even harder. And yes, the risk of getting caught has always appealed to him. And sure, in the club, in the dark and anonymous, two bodies writhing along to the music and maybe turning on someone else was fine too, but this…

Jimmy and Breena know them! After this they are going to go home together. Monday three of them will go to work together. Right now he's feeling Abby's body on his, hot and silky and perfect, and he can see Breena's face, the way her eyes have narrowed but not closed, she doesn't want to stop watching them, and her expression has gone tight, as her lips open into a small O.

Abby's close. He can feel it in the tension in her body, the way she's moving.
He's behind her, so he can't really see if her eyes are open. "Are you watching them?"

She nods.

"Like what you're seeing?" God, he does. Really does. This is better than any porn ever. They're real people, real people he adores having a very good time. Breena's coming, flushed, shuddering and twitching on Jimmy's lap, beyond beautiful. Jimmy can't be far behind, he's moving fast and erratic, pumping into her.

"Yes."

He rubs her clit faster, little harder, thrusting faster. Won't be able to talk too much longer. "I'm gonna lay on the floor. You're going to kneel on my face. What I do to you, you'll do to Breena, while Jimmy fucks her. I'm going to show you exactly how I want you to eat her out, and if you get off before she does, or if you get distracted, I'll be disappointed."

Her hands are fisted in his hair, her body's tight on his, and she's balanced on the edge of what he knows will be a full-body, shaking orgasm, and he's so close, too, just a few more seconds.

He pulls her back against him, hard deep thrust, fingers moving even faster over her and he feels the tingles start deep in his dick, that second before the rush begins.

"And if I don't disappoint you?"

"When you're done coming down, I'll slowly stretch you open, and Jimmy and I'll fuck you together. You get to pick who goes where."

And that did it. He felt her fingernails scraping against his scalp and the nape of his neck as her body shuddered. Her body clenching on his took him over the edge, too. Dropping him into an insane, rushing, pulsing high of pleasure, pride, ego, fuck, and ecstasy.

It should be awkward, right?

Once his brain got back online, he was expecting awkward. Awkward with a side of 'Oh holy fuck, what were we thinking?' and not being able to look Jimmy in the eyes for, by conservative estimate, nineteen years. There's a reason why the little head doesn't get to make the decisions, and that's because the little head is stupid.

His forehead is pressed to Abby's shoulder, and he's handing her one of the tissues he always has on hand when they go clubbing, feeling no need to look up and face what they just did. But time doesn't just stop because you let your balls make the decisions. She slips off of him, and he takes a second to make sure their clothing is hanging properly again. He feels Abby slip the tissue back into his pocket, (he makes a quick mental note to find a trash can), and then she turns to face him, smiling, face flushed, lazy, happy, approving grin on her lips, and, okay, yeah, that helps.

She kisses the tip of his nose, gets a little smile out of him, takes his hand in hers and squeezes it, and starts to dance again.

And he can do that.

It's a bit later, two songs, maybe three, when the real acid test for awkward shows up.
Breena and Jimmy bop over, and yeah, Jimmy's looking sheepish too, but the girls are smiling and laughing, and it's contagious, because that's just how happiness works, and then he had Abby on one side and Breena on the other and they're both dancing with him and Jimmy kind of looks at him and shrugs, and Tim sort of half-nods back, and Abby sees it, grins again, kisses him, gooses Jimmy, who looks really startled for a second, and then smiles, and both of them start to laugh too, and, well, everything is okay again.

Tim feels the freedom of that. They're okay.

Better yet, the girls already know where the lines are and have promised not to cross them until they're all on the same page.

Which means they can play. They can explore this… space… game… whatever it is. He heads back to the table to grab a drink. As he's there, taking a gulp of his diet coke, it hits him, this is like subbing, he can relax into it and enjoy it, let the girls run the game, knowing that he's made his lines that can't be crossed clear, and they'll respect it.

Something else hits, these people love him, absolutely. He can safeword out of this if it's ever too much. If it gets freaky or uncomfortable he can say the word and they'll stop, and that'll be it. Abby didn't flip out about leaving it a fantasy, at least for tonight, and Jimmy and Breena won't, either.

Maybe all we'll ever be is good friends who dance too close and flirt too hard, and we enjoy it because it makes us feel good and sexy. And if that's all this ever is, that's fine, that's more than fine! Breena had said that, or something close to it, and he's watching Abby and Breena and Jimmy dance, as he takes another sip of his drink, then takes a sip of Jimmy's.

There are rules here, and they won't get broken, because this matters too much to all four of them to fuck it up, which means he doesn't have to stay rock solid sober. (He's driving, so he can't have too much, but some…okay, Jimmy's absinthe is even better after a bit of time to breathe and he really likes it, but yeah, driving… not too much. Next time they do this… This is already expensive as hell, adding a limo or something so they can all drink won't break them.)

He takes his shirt off, because it's hot, and they're dancing hard, and this matches some of his fantasies, and he's not the only guy without a shirt in the room, and hell, Jimmy's is completely undone, so…

So, it doesn't matter why, he doesn't need to justify it. That's the freedom of this, the joy of love. It feels good, the girls'll like it, and he likes it, and that's all that matters here.

Time to play.

Abby's between them, one hand on Jimmy's chest, her other arm wrapped around Tim's neck, grinding between them, and Tim's so fucking turned on he doesn't know what to do with himself. (Well, he does, he knows exactly what he wants to be doing, but that's not happening for a while yet. He's enjoying this… space… between desire and getting what you desire, and though he wants to get to the next part, he's not feeling any need to hurry, this bit right here is amazing, too.) Jimmy's got one hand on Abby's hip, the other on his waist, keeping all three of them close, leading the beat. Abby's sandwiched between them, and with the kilt and no shirt Tim can feel her skin against his, and Jimmy's hand on his waist, fingers on naked skin, feels a bit odd, but it's not bad, and it is helping him keep the beat.
Her ass is grinding against his dick, which has definitely woken back up and is very interested in seeing this go further.

He's kissing along the back of her neck, fingers of his left hand toying with the edge of her skirt, right hand on Jimmy's shoulder, helping with balance and timing.

He can see it in his mind, slipping her skirt up, rubbing his hand up along the insides of her thighs, feeling her wet, turned on from the dancing, sex, and desire, lingering drops of his cum from last time, and they don't have lube, but it's a fantasy, so they don't need it, cum, hers, his would be enough. He could be stretching her out, getting her ready, while she grinds against Jimmy, fucking him through their clothing, riding the beat against him, this song's flashing strobe lights catching the silver on his contacts, and gleaming against the sweat on their bodies, as he slowly eases one more finger in...

Jimmy's saying something to her, head bowed to her ear, and even only a few inches away, Tim can't make it out, but he can imagine. Jimmy telling her to pull it out, kissing down her throat, groaning while she does it. He'd hold her steady, leaning against his chest, while Jimmy slips in.

She'd lean forward, into Jimmy, and he'd hold her while Tim eases in, and for a few beats they'd be still, just feeling it, so tight and full, her body stretched around them, letting Abby get used to it, then she'd smile, kiss Jimmy, turn her head, kiss him, and start to move...

Breena cuts in, twirling him off of Abby's back, and she's soft and warm and pressed into him, and the fantasy drops away, replaced with right now real, and right now real is very, very good.

Breena can feel how hard he is, has to be able to because she's dancing close, grinding into him, and she's got this grin on her face, so hot, so good, so making him want just... everything.

That's part of the fun of this, getting to enjoy the wanting.

He can smell sex on her. Light sweat, wet pussy, Jimmy's cum, it's all there, mixed with her perfume, and probably about ten gallons of pheromones pouring off of all four of them. Her hands are around his neck, and he can feel her skin on his shoulders, on his legs where his calf is rubbing against her knee.

That support pillar is behind her, and he's imagining pushing her back against it, dropping to his knees, lifting her skirt, and finding out if she's bare or not. In the fantasy she's got a small triangle of blond pubic hair, and he spreads her lips, watching a drop of Jimmy's cum ooze between her lips, down her thigh. He licks it off, before rubbing her clit with his tongue, feeling her arch into him, leg tight over his shoulder.

Abby's behind him, pressing into him, and Jimmy's behind her now, and... Fuck... Daisy chain, all of them fucking into each other...

And it's all good.

Wanting it is good.

Being able to want it, with no one freaking out or insulted or... It's really good.

Breena and Abby are dancing. With each other. They'd led Jimmy and Tim back to the booth, pushed them, gently, into it, and Breena said, "Stay put, watch, enjoy."
The girls aren't pulling any punches. They're dancing close and slow and kissing each other, deep, open mouths, tongues and lips and FUCK. Tim's whimpering as he watches. He's sure they've got some sort of bet going to see if it's possible to kill him or Jimmy by making them watch the hottest thing in the history of hot things.

Tim looks at Jimmy, seeing the same thing in his eyes that's going through his head. He doesn't know if he wants to drag them both out of here and fuck them in the car immediately, or let them keep doing it and watch.

Watching seems to be winning. Breena's leg slides between Abby's, and Abby's rocking back and forth against her thigh, kissing her throat and Tim's thanking God it's a black kilt, because if he had the khaki or plaid one, the precum would have soaked through it in a really obvious spot.

He's never, ever, ever seen anything this hot.

Then Abby steps back from Breena, twirls away from her as the music speeds up, and there's a shiny, wet spot on Breena's leg, and that's killing him. There's literally not a single drop of blood anywhere in his body that is not in his dick or racing toward his dick right that second, and then Jimmy (who, wait… okay, no he's not still sitting next to Tim) kneels down and licks it off Breena's thigh and the only reason Tim didn't cum in his kilt right then is that he literally cannot get off if no one is touching his dick.

It's actually fairly early when they head home. Because they have stuff they want to do at home. Stuff that needs more room, more props, more of everything, than you can get in a club.

Abby's rubbing his thigh as he drives, not willing to distract him too much.

And Tim can hear what's happening in the back seat, wet sucking kisses and the sound of skin rubbing on skin.

At a red light, he's feeling all of it, high on being here, doing this, and thinking about how happy he is not to be wearing Jimmy's pants, because those things looked uncomfortable as hell to have an erection in. Yeah, Tim walked out with his kilt tented, but there's no room for that in Jimmy's trousers, so he could see the long line of his cock, hard and full, heading up toward his waistband and maybe if he was less turned on he'd be bothered by checking out another guy's cock, let alone Jimmy's, but, right now, it's all good.

It's reinforcement of this being okay. It's… positive visual confirmation that this is good.

Fuck it.

It's hot is what it is. It's him looking in the rearview mirror, watching Breena stroke Jimmy through his pants, hand moving long and slow over hard flesh and tight red denim, and Abby's got her hand under his kilt, making slow, languid circles on his inner thigh, back of her hand rubbing against his balls on each of the upstrokes, and he jerks in his seat when the guy behind them in the lane honks his horn, hard, letting him know that red turned green, God alone knows how long ago, because he certainly doesn't.

Getting all the way upstairs is going to be a challenge. He sees Jimmy and Breena stumble, Breena
backing up the stairs, pulling Jimmy by the waistband of his jeans, already unbuttoned, cock already sticking out of them, probably very grateful for the extra space, and he's not sure if Abby and him are going to make it up or just fuck on the sofa because it's three feet away and looking awfully tempting.

Up the stairs, okay, he can do that, make a bee-line for their bedroom, also not a problem, both of them tearing clothing off as fast as they can, kilt on the floor, no idea where her dress ended up, his boots are still on because taking the time to untie the damn things just isn't going to happen.

Tumbled onto the bed, Abby on top, him deep in her and swearing at how good she feels on him. Hours of foreplay, the most erotic show he's ever seen, and her body on his, and he doesn't think he's ever felt this high.

Then he slips up another notch. He can hear Jimmy and Breena. Breena's breathy moans, and low, soft grunts from Jimmy. And he and Abby aren't being quiet, at all. Every thrust pulls another panting moan out of Abby, another gasp out of him, and he's talking her through it, telling her in explicit detail exactly how good she feels to him right now and how hard he is and how hard they're both gonna come.

He sits up, hands on her ass, guiding her body, kissing her deep and hard.

Abby's going tight on him, moving faster, jerking, erratic, nails dragging down his back, and Breena's keening, higher-pitched ecstatic sounds with each breath, and everything about it feels so incredible, like sex in a dream, a perfect dream, the kind where you feel everything and can fuck forever, and it just keeps getting hotter and hotter and more and more turned on and each second lasts for hours of unending better.

Abby's hips jerk, hard, against his, and she shouts his name, nails tearing down his back, and that sets him off, vision going dim as he pumps into her, clutching her tight against him as he soars through his climax.
Tim wakes to the smell of coffee the next morning, which he finds a little confusing because he's the one who makes the coffee in the morning.

Then it clicks. Jimmy and Breena crashed at their place last night.

Which is also when the rest of last night hit him.

Abby's still sleeping, so he gently kisses her neck, eases out of bed, finds a pair of pajama pants, puts them on, and heads downstairs.

Jimmy's sitting at his kitchen table, in his boxers and t-shirt, drinking his coffee, and reading something on his phone.

"You look comfy."

"I am, thanks." He pushes a second cup of coffee toward Tim. "Figured you'd be down less than ten minutes after you smelled it."

"Yeah." He takes a sip; it's the way he likes it. "Thanks."

"No problem."

"Sleep well?"

"Yeah, the bed in your guest room is good."

They sit there, drinking their coffee in silence, and that silence is significantly less comfortable than usual. Finally Tim says, "So, um... last night, was that weird?"

Jimmy looks up from his phone, and Tim sees the hickies on his collar bone and throat, while realizing he's got fingernail marks down his back, no shirt, and he didn't bother to wash his eye makeup off last night, so he's likely got raccoon eyes to go with the rest of it. They both look utterly fucked. "Getting off watching each other have sex at a club, all four of us basically spending the next three hours making out with each other, then getting off again, listening to each other have sex. Do you have to ask?"

Yeah, there's some sarcasm there, but not nearly as much as there could be, so Tim says, "I do. Cause I'm alternating between completely freaked out and totally okay with it. How about you?"

Jimmy takes a long drink of his coffee and then sighs. "Yeah, it's weird, but... not in a bad way."

Tim's not looking at Jimmy as he says, "Yeah. Maybe in a I-really-liked-it-but-I-don't-want-to-think-too-hard-about-it sort of way."

"In a we-never-ever-tell-Tony-about-it sort of way."

Tim's nodding almost violently in agreement with that, and Jimmy smiles at him, and uncomfortable fell apart. "So, we're good?"

"Yeah, we're good," Jimmy says. "Think the girls are?"

"If what Abby's telling me is right, they want to take this a lot further than just showing off for each
other, so yeah, I think they're good."

"Err…" Jimmy looks somewhat uncomfortable at that. But Tim notices, only somewhat.

"Yeah." Tim drinks more of his coffee.

"Not sure I'd want to go there."

"Yeah. Like, it's a hot idea, but…"

"But…" Jimmy nods. "I mean, we've talked about it, and it's a fun fantasy, but…"

Tim nods, he knows exactly what Jimmy means by this. "Abby says they won't ambush us with it. They'll let us know ahead of time and give us plenty of room to back out."

"That's a good thing. 'Cause if it went wrong, it'd go really wrong."

"Yeah. And I don't want that."

"Me, either."

Tim takes another sip of his coffee. Part of him wants to leave it there, get up, make some eggs for them, and just let it lie. Keep this in the realm of fantasy and the occasional live show. He's thinking being the ones in the booth, watching the show would be a whole lot of fun, too.

But the part of him that knows how much he likes those fantasies is awfully sure Jimmy really likes those fantasies, too. So, he swallows again, trying to ease his nerve-generated dry mouth, looking for some moisture so he'll be able to speak, and says, "What if it didn't go wrong?"

Jimmy's staring at him, looking awfully startled by that. He carefully puts his coffee cup down full attention with laser focus on Tim. "You think it might not?"

Tim shrugs. "I don't know. I was talking with Breena about—"

"You talked to Breena about this?" Jimmy looks stunned and a bit angry at that.

"You haven't talked to Abby?"

"No!" Tim gave Jimmy a cut the bullshit look. "Not exactly. She's your wife. I'm not going to talk to her about having sex with me."

"Well, what does 'not exactly' mean?"

"I talked to Breena, and Breena talked to her, and next thing I knew we had Valentine's videos of the girls making out. That's like right out of the guy playbook."

For a moment, Tim's thinking that Jimmy has a way different playbook than he does, but it probably doesn't matter much. "I think it's safe to say that last night we not only tossed out the playbook, but that we set fire to it first and pissed on its ashes."

"Maybe." Jimmy sounds guarded at this, like he's reserving judgment and debating about if he needs to get really pissed. "What did you say to Breena?"

"Day after Tony and Ziva's wedding, Abby tells me that maybe you two might be willing to come play with us, which was the first time she told me that she and Breena had been talking about this, like really talking about it, and once I got my brain back online, the first thing I was wondering about
was how your virgin-to-her-wedding-day wife got to the point of let's-have-sex-with-our-best-
friends, too. And that's something I couldn't ask you. So, I flat out asked her about it."

Jimmy thinks about that, eyeing Tim… And it's an okay question, not too far out of line. He relaxes. "When was that?"

"Last Memorial Day, when I was showing her the anti-nausea points."

Jimmy thinks back, and remembers that. "You had that conversation with her when she was in a bikini while touching her?"

"Yeah, while wearing a wet bathing suit, with our whole family fifty feet away."

Jimmy laughs, rolling his eyes. "You really are a glutton for punishment, aren't you."

"Says the guy who wears skintight jeans to go out in public when he knows he's going to be walking around with a hard-on. Yeah, I'm the glutton for punishment." Tim drops the sarcasm. "But… You've talked with her about this, right?"

"Of course." She's my wife, of course I've talked to her about this. I'm the one who's supposed to be talking with her about this. Is pretty clear on Jimmy's face.

Tim nods, letting him know he gets that. "Okay. I just… really liked the way she was thinking about it. And there's this part of me that's all Grrrr… My woman! Stay away! But if I could get it to shut up, this could be a really great."

Jimmy thinks about it. "I could see you watching what Breena and I were doing. Could tell you were getting off on it, and it didn't bother me." Jimmy lets that sit there, and then decides that if they're going to actually talk about this, then honesty is probably the best way to make sure it doesn't end up biting all four of them in the ass. "Okay, I really liked it. Taking getting caught one notch higher, you know." Tim nods; he gets that. "But, it's supposed to bother you, right? I mean, you watched Breena get off. That's supposed to piss me off, right? Not make me feel… turned on… and proud… kind of?""Tim nods. "Best, hottest porn ever, because you're real, and actually having a good time, and… And you're watching us, so we're showing off, too, and you kick it up a bit because we're watching you, and…"

"And that feels kind of weird. Like it's wrong, but that's part of why it feels so good, but maybe it's not wrong, because it's you and Abby, so it's safe, but it's you and Abby, so maybe it's not safe and… Almost getting caught is one thing, putting on a show… And feeling like I'm… I mean, it felt really good, but…"

Okay, if Tim's filling in those blanks correctly, it looks like Jimmy is on the same page he is, and that makes Tim feel a lot better. "You could tell I was talking to Abby, right?"

"Yeah."

"We'll… tell each other stories. And last night was the first time she flat out said she wanted to have sex with you. Not… together, the two of us doing Breena-

"Both of you with Breena?" Jimmy looks like he feels like he should be surprised about that, but isn't.

"Oh yeah! You don't have one of you and her with Abby?"
"Of course," Which is likely why he's not surprised. "We've had that one for years."

"Us, too. Anyway this was the first time your ass got tossed into the mix, and… It didn't piss me off. I felt like it should have. I mean, she's telling me she wants to have sex with you. But it didn't, and from there, I just ran the story, all four of us, and we passed it around, playing with it, and…" He feels like he's standing on the edge of the cliff, and takes a deep breath. "And… even with you in the mix, it was really hot, and… And then the three of us were dancing… and…" Just say it. *He's not going to have a fit. He's your friend and he probably feels the same way, too.* "And I really liked the idea of you and me with her."

"Hmm…"

Tim can't read the expression on Jimmy's face right now. He's got it intentionally blank. *No! Don't just sit there saying hmm! Do not leave me out here on my own with my balls flapping in the breeze.* "Hmm… what?"

Blank crumbles, replaced with confusion, fear, and worry. "I don't know!" Jimmy snaps out. "Yeah, it's hot! You and me and Abby, or you and me and Breena, or…" and Tim's getting the sense Jimmy's having a similar debate about actually saying out loud what he's thinking that Tim just was. "Or maybe, you and Breena, you know, on your own, and me and Abby, on our own, but like, together, same room, same bed, watching each other…" Tim's not even sure how to respond to that, because it's nothing that he'd thought of, yet, though it's starting to bounce around in his head, now. And… yeah, he swallows hard as a whole slew of new erotic images go flashing through his head. That's not hitting him wrong, at all. He nods a little, and Jimmy knows he hasn't crossed the line, so he gets to his point. "It's really hot; it's don't think about it in public hot, but if it went wrong, it'd kill us, and I don't…" He shakes his head a little, eyes on Tim's, very earnest expression on his face. "This is everyone in the world who really matters to me, all in play because of this."

Tim nods, he understands that, feels it, too.

"And if it went right… Then what?"

Tim looks at him quizzically. Concerns about this going right are nothing that's occurred to him. "I'm not following you."

"It goes right, are we, just… what? Fuck buddies? Extra fun on long weekends? Abby's alone in the lab, and I've got a sample to run, do I get to play with her? If it's really good, do we move in together, form one family? Is Abby still yours and Breena mine? What the fuck does yours or mine even mean if we do this? Do we care if the kids have blonde hair and green eyes or brown hair and hazel eyes?"

"Er…" Absolutely none of that was something Tim had given any real thought. Beyond saying to Gibbs that if they could do it once, they'd probably want to do it a lot, he hadn't thought of anything beyond them still getting along and sex.

"Yeah." Jimmy nods at him, seeing the ideas really hit Tim.

Tim opens his mouth, not entirely sure what he is going to say next, but feeling like he needs to say something, when the sound of a truck pulling into their driveway lets both of them know Gibbs is less than a minute from the door. And less than a minute later they hear the door open along with, "Anyone awake? Got a little girl who wants to see Mom and Dad, here."

"Jimmy and I are in the kitchen," he calls out to Gibbs. A second later he's holding Kelly, kissing her forehead.
"Looks like you guys had a good night," he says to Tim and Jimmy dryly. And it occurs to Tim that not only do he and Jimmy both look really f*cked, but they have to smell like it, too.

He flashes Gibbs a sheepish smile, but Jimmy either misses the insinuation or ignores it, and just says, with his trademark innocent smile, "Oh yeah. Ladies are still sleeping. You want a cup of coffee?"

Gibbs looks at both of them, staring long and hard before saying, "Nah. Was planning on heading up to the house, get a good day in on that." He looks at both of them, eyes lingering on the hickey on Jimmy's throat. "Don't want to eat up your anniversary time off, but maybe you'll both come up and help?"

"This week's bootcamp is carpentry?"

"Sure." Gibbs says.

"Yeah, I can swing that." Jimmy answers, while Tim nods in agreement. "Want me to call Collin?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "Just you two."

"Okay." Jimmy's looking a little perplexed at this, but Tim's thinking he knows what's up.

Gibbs grabs his keys. "Got some errands to run, more mortar and tools to pick up. See you in a bit?"

Tim and Jimmy nod as he heads off.

Jimmy looks back to Tim, who's bouncing Kelly in his arms. "Okay, I know I missed at least half of that conversation. What the hell was that?"

"Dad's making sure we're not about to shoot ourselves in the ass."

"Okay, how could he possibly know? The man cannot actually be psychic, and I don't care how good he says his hearing is, he did not hear that conversation."

Tim's looking sheepish again. "I might have told him, a bit more than a year ago, that we were... kind of thinking about it."

"You talk to Breena and Gibbs about this, but not me?"

"You'd have hit me last year if I brought it up then. And... I couldn't have said it. But we're talking now."

"Why would you tell him..." Jimmy looks stupefied. "How do you even get into that conversation with him?"

"It's a longish story. Just... it was the week of Tony and Ziva's honeymoon, we were on stakeout, got talking, and he'd seen us dancing at the wedding, and was... I don't know, not curious, but... cautious, I guess."

"And it was like, two days after Abby said she and Breena had been talking about it, like actually doing it, talking about it, and that was a lot to process so... I asked for advice."

Jimmy knows Tim and Gibbs are closer than the rest of him, but the idea that Tim would ask Gibbs for advice on this floors him. For a second he sits there quietly, and then another thought hits. "What did he say?"
"Take it slow, trust my instincts, and don't do anything stupid."

"Take it slow?" Jimmy's utterly shocked by that. "I'd have been thinking he would have had something closer to 'Fuck around on Abby, and I will personally introduce your testicles to my hedge trimmers.'"

"Yeah, well, I didn't put it like, 'Hey, I'm kind of bored, and Breena's looking good. So, how about I go fuck up both of our marriages and wreck our kids' lives.' I'm sure that would have gotten hedge trimmer introductions in order. Abby put it as, if it ever happened, it'd be the four of us, all together. So, that's what I told him. And that if we could do it, it probably wouldn't just be a one off kind of thing."

"One off?"

"He asked if the girls were thinking like some sort of birthday treat for us, kind of like what they did for Valentine's, or if it'd be something we'd do a lot. And... like you said... I don't know... But, I mean, if we can do this, that would mean it was fun and good, so... We'd want to do it a lot, right?"

"I guess..." Jimmy's looking wary about this. "If we can do it."

"Yeah. If... I mean, we're not... committing to anything, right?"

"No!" Jimmy stops, thinks, staring at Tim. "But we're not ruling it out, either."

"No." He bites his lip. "We're... figuring it out."

"Yeah. Okay." At that Jimmy starts to laugh. Tim's just staring at him.

Finally Jimmy gets out, "We're two white-bread, suburban dads with minivans, responsible jobs, and likely PTA memberships and volunteering for the Girl Scouts in the not wildly distant future. Hell, I wear bow ties to work! How on earth do we end up here?"

Tim shakes his head slowly, smiling a little, also getting the irony of this. "I don't know. But we might as well enjoy it, right?"

"Oh yeah."

"So, we're good?"

"Yeah. We are. Whatever's coming, we'll figure it out."

"Okay. For future reference, wouldn't mind if you and Breena were the ones on the dance floor next time. We like to watch, too."

Jimmy nods. "Noted."

Gibbs and Ducky and Penny have been putting in full days at the house over the course of the last week. (Finals were last week. She's off until the summer session begins in June.) This has resulted in remarkably little work done on the actual house.

All the siding is off. They've got new plywood up in the places that needed it. Everything is wrapped in Tyvek, and in one tiny corner of the longest southern-facing wall of the house, there's the start of the masonry work.

The reason why it's only one tiny corner is laid out in the driveway. Penny had taken one look at the
load of stone in their driveway, and promptly come to the conclusion that just randomly slapping rocks against the side of the house would not result in the kind of job they were looking for.

So she and Ducky marked off the size of the area they were going to work on, and began laying out the stones ahead of time. Supposedly this will result in maximum efficiency of stonework, and will prevent a situation where they end up having to stick twenty-five tiny stones all next to each other to fill in a gap. Gibbs isn't sure about that. He knows that what is has resulted in is Ducky and Penny puttering about in the driveway debating which stone goes where, while he grabs stones they've already laid out, one at a time, and gets them up, slowly.

Apparently this is how house building goes when you're working with scientists.

On the upside, the first wall's stones are laid out, so all he has to do today is keep schlepping them from the driveway to the side of the house and apply them and the mortar to the house.

And he does suppose it's nice that this is like putting together a puzzle when the pieces are already laid out right next to each other. It does let him immerse himself in the feel of wet mortar, hard stone, tapping and scraping each bit into place.

It's not wood. He'd be doing better with wood. But this is good, too.

As soon as Gibbs realized that Tony wasn't at Tim's place, he started to get a bit nervous. He remembered that conversation bit more than a year ago about maybe the four of them becoming more than friends. He saw, immediately recognizing the hot-date-gonna-get-so-laid look on both of the guys' faces when he went to pick up Kelly. Tony told him about the Valentine's Day treat the girls made, and how it completely fried Jimmy's brain. Didn't take him more than a second to put that all together with his original advice: take it slow, don't do anything stupid, and to make sure all babies were healthy and that everyone was settled.

Everyone's settled, all babies are healthy, it's been more than a year since he said that to Tim. If there's such a thing as a prime time to move on the four of them… foursome-ing… he guesses that'd be the term, it's probably now.

Gibbs's not sure if they did it or not last night. Both guys reeked of sex, so he knows on a basic level what happened, but he doesn't know if they crossed the line or just got close. He could feel something was up, but not well enough to know precisely what.

And he doesn't know if today's pick up the pieces and clean up time, or if… if something new's starting, or… or if they even have a clue what's going on.

He just hopes they didn't fuck things up.

Gibbs has gotten a few more feet of wall done when he hears Jimmy's car pull up. He sees both of them, dressed to work, amble out, look over the stones all over the driveway, and the head to him.

Tim's got a bag in his hand. "You have lunch?"

Gibbs shakes his head. He hasn't eaten yet. Though they got the electric working on Tuesday and now have a working fridge with food in it located in the kitchen.

Tim hands over the bag. "Club sandwich, chips, macaroni salad, and Elaine sends her love, hopes to see us all back for breakfast next week." With no Sunday morning church, they hadn't been doing pre-church breakfast.
Gibbs nods, opening up the bag. "Next Sunday?"

"We're fine with that, church or no. Not like we aren't up," Jimmy adds. He looks at the wall, looks at Gibbs kneeling in front of it, and looks at the rocks. "So, we talking or working?"

That's a bit more abrupt than Gibbs was hoping for. He still doesn't have a read for what happened last night, yet.

"Both."

"Then show us what to do." Tim says.

Gibbs does, picking up the next rock. They're of many different shapes and diameters, but they're all about an inch thick. The idea is to create the appearance of a stone wall. He applies the mortar to the board and the other stones, setting the newest one in place, tapping it down, making sure it's secure, and then scraping off the extra. It's not the fastest or tidiest job ever. Gibbs is very obviously not a mason, but he's got the basics down. (Thank you, YouTube.)

"Penny and Duck laid 'em all out. Grab some, measure where they go, twice, start from the bottom up, and get to work."

Tim and Jimmy nod, and get to it. Jimmy grabs his stone from a patch about ten feet away from Gibbs, and Tim snags the bottom of the other corner. (Righties, like say, Gibbs, tend to prefer to work left to right. Well, he likes to go right to left, so Tim homes in on the far edge of the wall.) They'd been at it for a moment when he hears Jimmy say to Tim. "Heads up."

Tim looks up and then quickly catches the SPF 50 sunblock that is flying toward his head. "Thanks. Already wearing some."

"Good. More goes on every hour fifteen."

"Yes, Doctor Palmer."

Jimmy nods, and goes back to applying stones to the wall. He's good at it. Might be some overlap between masonry and autopsy. At the very least, both require a certain level of manual dexterity, and the ability to manipulate malleable solids.

Gibbs keeps watch on them as he works. They seem fine, talking a little, joking some, mostly focused on doing something new and technically precise well. He's not catching any tension between them. There's a slight edge of 'are we in trouble' coming from both of them, but it's not so sharp as to affect how they're working, and it's aimed at him, not at each other.

After watching both of them for an hour, Gibbs decides to break for lunch. And him breaking for lunch means they both wrap up what they're doing to grab drinks and sit with him. Once he's got his bag unpacked, he asks, "Good time last night?" He's watching for the micro expressions, the little tells that neither of them know they do every time they talk.

"Yeah." Tim says, nodding. And yes, he had a good time. That's true. Gibbs gets the sense that there's some reticence to get too deep into it, but it's aimed at him, and it doesn't appear to be related to shame or regret.

Jimmy grins at him, wide happy expression. "Oh yeah!" And like with Tim, that's real, but there is also a reserve, and… yeah, it's aimed at him.

He catches the look the two of them give each other. Takes him a second to decide that look is, How
much are we telling Dad?

Gibbs can see they're okay with each other, so… He should probably leave it alone. That's all that really matters on this. And any deeper than that is not, by any stretch of anyone's imagination, his business.

He's about ready to drop it, but Tim says, "We're fine; we're not being stupid; we're taking it slow, and we don't know exactly what's going to happen next, but nothing's happening without all four of us wholeheartedly agreeing to it."

Jimmy nods. "It's good you're looking out for us, but we're okay."

Gibbs looks at both of them, staring, trying to lay their souls bare with his eyes. "You sure?"

"Yeah," Jimmy says with a nod. Tim's nodding, too.

"You okay?" Tim asks.

Gibbs eyes narrow a bit. He hasn't bothered to think about this in terms of if he is okay. Gibbs thinks about it for a minute. If they're okay, really okay… and they look okay… Whatever it was they did last night, he's sure it didn't suddenly make both of them expert liars. So, yeah… he's okay.

Gibbs nods. Then he thinks some more. "But I won't be if you guys tear apart." He sighs. He hates trying to talk about deep, emotion-y things. "Be like having my heart ripped out if you four stopped getting along."

"Yeah." Jimmy says, looking from him to Tim, very serious. "I know."

Tim nods back at both of them, just as serious. "Me, too."

"Okay," Gibbs drinks some of his coffee and grabs his sandwich, chewing a bite, he says, "Back to work. Stone's aren't putting themselves up, and you're not eating."

Jimmy's getting up, but Tim hasn't moved. "If… and not saying it'll happen, but…" Tim rubs his face, looking a bit sheepish, so Jimmy sits down again, wanting to see where he's going to take this. Gibbs is watching this closely, too, getting a sense of where this might be going, but not sure. "If we… the four of us… get together, for real, like, serious, long-term, rest of our lives, for real… We were just… playing… last night. You still going to be okay, with us?"

Gibbs watches Tim, knows that it cost him to ask that, to lay out his need for approval that nakedly. He swallows, because, okay, if the four of them do become, whatever, it does strike him as sort of weird. Of course, a lot of things about Tim and Jimmy strike him as weird. But, at least right now, this feels more like kilts and man-of-honor weird than something he needs to actually get excited about weird.

He hates this because he has to take a moment and really feel whatever this is, because he doesn't want to just haul off with a quick answer and have it bite them later.

So, he takes the time, and Tim's looking a little nervous, so Gibbs puts his hand on Tim's signaling, be calm.

He's not feeling any immediate sense of disgust or problem. There's fear here, but that's fear of it falling apart, of their family ripped to shreds and people he loves in pain.

He exhales, trying to think of how to say this. "I'm always going to be okay with all of you. That's
not changing. You are who you are, and you're good men, and I'm proud to have you as sons. But I want you to be happy. And, if you can keep the sort of good thing you've got with your own wives going while becoming… whatever this is… then yes, I'm going to be okay with you, all of you." He looks directly at Tim for this bit. "I don't care what combinations you're sleeping with each other in." He gives Jimmy a quick glance, too, but both of them know Tim's background well enough to know that matters a hell of a lot more to him than it does to Jimmy. "I also don't want to know." He hopes that'll prevent the occasional overshare Tim and Jimmy are known for, too.

Gibbs licks his lips, because there's more than that. "While back, I told Tony that rule twelve had changed. Don't date Ziva if you're not willing to marry her. It'd hurt so much if they screwed it up, you know?" Both of the younger guys are nodding. "So, that's what I'll tell you. If you do this, it better be a forever thing. I've already lost one family. I don't want to lose another one. Don't fuck around with this. Don't cross the line until you're willing to commit to it."

Tim nods, looking relieved. "Thanks."

Gibbs looks at Jimmy, who nods. He's happy to have this… conditional blessing of sorts… but it's clear that it matters a hell of a lot more to Tim.

Tim stands up, dusting off his jeans. "Okay, putting up stones."

Jimmy also stands, grabbing a trowel and then handing it to Tim. "This one's yours."

"Thanks."

"Didn't know they made these lefty," he says to Gibbs.

"Until this morning, I didn't either."

He's closing up the truck, whistling for Mona, letting her know it's time to go home, and can hear both of the guys talking, quietly, about something.

They walk over to him, and Tim starts, "Since we don't really know what we're doing yet, we're hoping to keep this quiet."

"Be a lot easier to figure this out if it's just the four of us doing the figuring out."

Tim adds, "If there's ever anything to be, out, about, we'll be out at home, but right now, this is just for us, okay?"

Gibbs nods. He can keep their secrets.

"Tim noticed that look you shot us last night, and Borin's not stupid, so we're guessing that she's probably wondering what that was."

Gibbs nods, she had wondered, but was willing to let it go when he said he couldn't talk about it.

"So, look, we don't want you feeling like you can't talk to her," Tim says. "Anything we hit you with, you can tell her, too."

"Don't want you feeling like you've got to shut her out."

Jimmy finishes with, "Just, don't want this going through everyone else, yet."

Gibbs can read that 'everyone else' means Tony specifically and to a lesser degree Ziva. He's not
getting a feel if they're concerned about Ducky and Penny one way or another. And then something else hits him, 'everyone else' is the entire Slater clan. And 'everyone else' means not shooting them looks that Tony or Ziva or say Collin will pick up on at the next Bootcamp.

Gibbs nods. "No problem."

"Good talk?" Borin asks as he and Mona step into the house.

He nods, sitting down next to her on the sofa. She knew he wanted to talk to the guys, on his own, or she would have offered to go along on today's trip. She actually likes masonry. But, they needed 'guy time' so, instead she's catching up on the shows she likes to watch on her iPad.

Gibbs isn't sure where to start this, why he was concerned, what's going on.

"You get permission to tell me what's up?"

Say what you like about dating a cop, but they miss absolutely nothing.

He nods at that, too.

"So…"

He shakes his head, opening and closing his mouth.

"How bad is this?"

"It's not…" He does that I don't have words gesture, but finally gets some together. "They're tiptoeing around becoming a foursome. Not sure if they're staying where they are or going further."

Borin blinks a few times at that. She stares at Gibbs, and can see he's not on the warpath, no sense of anger, but… "Shouldn't you be getting out the sniper rifle and putting the fear of Dad into them?"

He shrugs. "If Tim and Abby and Breena and Jimmy all want to be… with each other… all of 'em, together, at once… Who am I supposed to shoot?"

Abbi opens and closes her mouth. She doesn't have an answer to that.

He looks at her, exactly on his face. "Is it cheating if you're all in it together?"

"I…" she's about to say, 'I'd say so," but thinks about it more, thinks about all together, at once, and comes up with a very uncertain, "No?"

Gibbs nods.

Abbi thinks about what she's seen of the four of them together, slotting it into that sort of a focus. And thinking about it, yeah, they are close. Really close. She's seen plenty of relationships like what Breena and Abby have, that almost effortless closeness between two women. She doesn't think she's seen too many examples of guys who similar levels of comfort with each other, but as she thinks about it, Tim and Jimmy do have that. And she can feel that's something Tony and Ziva are outside of.

"So, that's why you got tense when you realized Tony wasn't there?"

"Yeah. Know they won't do anything if he's along for the trip."
"You worried?"

He shrugs at that, too. "Feel like I should be. They seem okay. Right now, they are. But… I don't want them getting bit in the ass."

"Do you think they will get bit?"

He shakes his head. "Gut says no. They… feel… good with each other. If there's gonna be a problem, it'll be with the guys, and right now they feel solid. They're worried about getting bit, know what's at stake. Brains are in charge instead of balls, so that's good. And it looks like they're taking it slow, making sure they're all good. Maybe they'll never pull the trigger on it."

"But you think they will?"

Gibbs nods. He's feeling that in his gut to. "Tim asked if I'd be okay with it if all four of them became… I don't know if there's a word for it, a quadruple? Serious, long-term, married-style. You don't ask that if you're not gonna do it."

"Are you?"

"You know anyone who ever pulled it off? Two's hard enough for most people, four? That's juggling, what…" he thinks about it, the girls, the guys, all four of them, plus four couples, so…”

"seven relationships?"

Abbi shakes her head. "Not that I know personally. I mean, I know they're out there. I know it's not impossible, and supposedly four works better than three, but…"

"Yeah. If they can do it, yeah, I'm good with it. I mean… I'm from the seventies. I remember swinging. First sex book I ever read suggested fooling around with your friends as fun and a good way to get to know each other better and learn new tricks. Not like this is something I've never heard of. But I don't know anyone who made it work long-term." He sits quietly thinking about that, about all of it. "If anyone can do it, it's them, but I don't know if anyone can."

"And that scares you."

"Yeah."
The Gathering Storm

A/N: I know some of you aren't Americans... In US schools grades are done A (Excellent), B (Above Average) C (Average) D (Below Average) and F (Failing.) Why is this important? You'll see in a minute.

Okay, on with the story…

Tim gets in a bit early on Monday, wanted to make sure he'd gotten everything clear before meeting with SecNav.

And yes, he did.

When he heads up to Vance's office, he's feeling excited about this. The test he's got planned is beyond awesome, and he cannot wait to put it in action.

He gets up there and there's the usual 'Hello-how-are-you-doing' pleasantries. And to some degree it blows his mind that he's been invited to refer to Jarvis as Clayt. That doesn't feel real, but it is, and he only stumbles over it the first few times. In addition to Jarvis, there's his secretary, a meticulously precise young man named Remy James, and, of course, Vance.

Tim's already sent the emails detailing how he wants the general flow of the test to work, but they still have to settle on a specific ship to put everything into play. He's going to run the first test, on the first ship, and then write up his notes, write up how he came up with the test and design a protocol for doing this to other ships, and from there he's handing it off to someone in the Navy.

He takes a moment to go over the idea of the test again for all three men, how he's got it set so that he'll be slipping a program from his computers here to Norfolk, and from Norfolk a sub-program will hit the target ship, making one of the computers on the ship produce a program that tells the ship to target another ship in whatever combat group he's got. Communications with the outside world will then crash. A second later, the techs will see that the test ship is targeting another ship in the combat group. The tested ship will see the targeted's ships sensors spring on-line and start to aim to fire back. From inside the computer stations, it'll look like a catastrophe.

Tim wraps up his explanation with, "The test will last less than ten minutes, and real targeting as well firing will be off-line. Don't want anyone completely freaking out and actually firing. But this should result in a complete all hands on deck situation while the techs try to figure out what's going on."

"Then once the main part of the test is done?" Jarvis asks.

"I keep an eye on them. Track what they're doing. Full passing marks is them noticing it's up and shutting it down before the test really gets going. Say, a B would be them getting it stopped before the ship "fires." C work means they don't manage to get it stopped but they stay cool and in less than five hours figure out what happened. And anything beyond that... Well, you know what's after C."

Jarvis smiles dryly at that. "Lt. James has drawn up a list of test ships. The first one you'll run personally, on site, and from there..."

"I'll write it up so I can hand it off. Not a problem," Tim says, eager to see the list. He's pulling his phone out of his jacket, because the number of ships he knows by name is smaller than five, as James slides the paper in front of him.
He's looking at the list. Of course. Because that's how life always works. He sighs.

When he'd written up his idea for the test he'd been thinking of a few cruisers, or maybe, if one could be found, a nuclear sub (Using a nuclear sub for his test would have caused literal pants-wetting. Nuclear sub targeting a neighboring ship… That would have been fun.)

But it's not a nuclear sub. It's an aircraft carrier. And yes, if they scramble the jets, because they expect that one of the other ships in the combat group is about to fire on them… That'll be intense, too. Though, he's got to figure out how to safe guard this to make sure no one fires on the ship that's 'targeting' them.

So, on a logical level, he knows this is an excellent test ship. All the requirements are right. It'll work perfectly for the test. If he does it right he can get multiple ships all on full alert at once and see exactly how good an entire battle division is.

It's the perfect test.

That does nothing to quell his first response, which is an almost overwhelming desire to beg to not go on that ship.

It's the *Stennis*. The *Stennis* is a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier. It is the operational hub of the entire Pacific fleet, and it is the operational hub of the entire Pacific fleet because it is the flag ship of Admiral John McGee, Commander of the US Pacific Fleet.

Jarvis, his secretary Lt. James, and Vance are all sitting in Vance's office, waiting to see what he has to say about this, and maybe it's stupid pride, but he cannot make himself say, "That's my Dad's ship. I can't go on it without throwing up." So, instead he says, looking up at Jarvis "You can't let anyone on that ship know I'm coming aboard. Not if you want this test to work properly."

"Excuse me, McGee?" He sees the light start to flick on for Jarvis as he says his name.

"The *Stennis* is my father's flagship. As soon as he sees my name is on the visitors' list he's going to get antsy and will put everyone on high alert. He won't know what's up, but he'll know it's something, because he knows I don't belong on his, or any, ship, and he'll know it has something to do with computers. He's going to figure out what's going on in a matter of seconds after he realizes I'm on the ship and his computer guys start yelling, but by then he won't be able to swing the test."

"Would he 'swing the test'?" Jarvis asks.

Tim turns his hands up in an *I don't know* gesture. "If he knew it was a test, and he knew it was coming, he might not do anything 'intentionally,' but he'd probably beef up security and make sure his guys are on high alert. We're officially there for an inspection, right?"

Jarvis nods.

"Well, he'll be making sure everything's in ultra-ship-shape for that. And it's not like he's trying to swing the inspection, he just wants everything to look good, right?"

Jarvis nods.

"So, that'll probably be what his computer guys will be doing if he's got a hint of me on the ship." Tim feels pretty satisfied that that's a good reason for him to not be on that ship.

Jarvis thinks about it. "What would make this go best?"
"Probably work best if we picked a different ship. No one's going to know me on the Atlantic command."

Jarvis looks over to Lt. James. James spends a moment checking something on his phone. "Doable, but not a good plan if we want to keep this secret. We'd end up rescheduling everything, 'cause we can't do it the same day, and that'll cause scuttlebutt as to why exactly everyone's plans are upside down."

Tim nods. Classified ops work best with minimal scuttlebutt. So, plan B. What is plan B? "Okay. Just… stick someone else's name on the visitor's list. Someone who isn't a tech guy. Lt. James comes along on things like this, right?" James nods. "Put your name on the list, and then you take a few days off. As long as he," he nods to Jarvis, "doesn't mind carrying his own bag for a day or two, it'll work."

James smirks at that and rolls his eyes. Jarvis looks amused. "Lt. James does a bit more than just carry my bags."

Tim realizes how insulting that probably sounded. "Sorry." It's genuine, so James nods, accepting it. "I'm sure you do. Just… spinning my wheels looking for something."

"Unless you're also offering to keep my schedule straight, run my correspondence, and make sure the rest of the Navy functions while you run this test, it's probably a good idea for James to come along," Jarvis says with a smile.

"Point taken." He looks back to James. "I really am sorry. I don't have a secretary, so I don't actually know what you guys do. Who else usually comes along on things like this?"

"Usually a visitor or two." Jarvis smiles, if a new name needs to go on this, they should do it up right. "Do you have any undercover experience?"

"A very tiny bit. Been undercover fewer than ten times in fourteen years, and once I was playing myself."

Jarvis raises an eyebrow at that, and Vance doesn't look like he knows that story either. "Few years before you were here," Tim says to Vance. "We had to get into a club. No reasonable cause for a search warrant. Metro was working it with us, but they had someone leaking their moves. All of their people got turned away, 'not hot enough.' Anyway, my first book was out; I was on the New York Time's Bestseller list for the first time, so, Thom E. Gemcity and his three lady friends were able to get into the club. But most of my undercover work has been along the lines of being the guy who blends into the background and makes sure all the tech gear is working."

Jarvis thinks about that, looking at Tim. "Stand up."

Tim does.

"Can you pull off Navy posture?"

Tim tries, after all, not like he didn't get years of yelling at on how to stand up properly. He's got it, but it's fairly obvious it's not his natural posture.

"You hair isn't usually black is it?" Jarvis asks.

"Uh, no." Yeah, that looked cool Saturday night, but it's looking a bit dull and fake right now. According to Abby, it should be gone next shampoo or the one after.
"Will it be black on the eleventh?"

"I'd doubt that intensely."

"Good. Grow a beard. And... no nail polish, okay?" Jarvis is looking at Vance as he says that you let him wear nail polish? on his face, and Vance has a computer guys are weird, but this one is really good, so I humor him look on his.

"Not a problem."

"Wonderful. Feel like being a liaison to the British Navy?"

Tim smiles at that. He has an idea where this was going, and how he'll hide in plain sight. "What, Ireland doesn't have a Navy of its own?"

He'd meant it as a cute aside, but Jarvis' eyes light up and he grins. "Actually, it does. And it's tiny enough that just about no one knows anyone in it. So we don't have to worry about, the, 'Oh, do you know, Blah' trap." The smile gets wider. "James, add Captain T. McGee from the Irish Naval Service to the guest list. They've been expanding lately, looking at bigger ships, the Stennis is still a few classes beyond what they're building, but maybe not beyond their dreams. I have a feeling Captain McGee is going to be coming along for the inspection and looking at the feasibility of an Nimitz-class aircraft carrier for the Irish Naval Service. My guess is that should float by whomever on your dad's staff actually checks things like that."

Tim's feeling pretty amused by that. "I'd imagine so."

They wrap things up from there. Test day is June 11th. They'll meet again on the 10th, make sure everything is in order, and from there...

Test time.

The more he thinks about it, the more calm he feels about it.

By the time he's back in his office, doing the coding, putting the test into play, nervous is bleeding away with the pleasure of doing this.

It is an awesome test. And getting an aircraft carrier involved does mean he's got an extra challenge, which he's looking forward to. He's got to make sure they don't scramble the jets and shoot the... according to his notes the Borealis and the Aether will be nearby, so that'll be the ships the Stennis targets.

He spends two hours messing with the code, and finally decides the easiest way to make sure that the Stennis doesn't send any of the planes after the Borealis or the Aether is to make sure that the Stennis doesn't see them targeting. If their tech guys are calm and alert, that'll probably make them notice something is wrong, but... It's more important to make sure no one gets killed on this than making sure it's a perfect replica of an actual attack.

He takes a break, heading to grab himself some more coffee, thinking about why he's so nervous. After all, he's not walking into his dad's ship naked and alone. He's walking in as the personal guest of Clayt, the freaking Secretary of the Navy, besides the President, he's pretty much the only guy left who outranks his dad.

Nothing is going to happen.
Okay, that's not true. His dad'll see him, and then he'll try to play that slightly sarcastic version of the happy family charade they always used to live under. It'd be annoying and uncomfortable, but that's it. Just like it was when he was sitting there with Gibbs. There's no way the man is going to flip out on him when he's standing next to his Boss following Jarvis' orders.

That's who he is. Assuming there's someone around who's keeping an eye on things, that's always who he is. God forbid anyone see them not being the perfect, happy family.

Tim thinks about it more. This is a covert test. He's not Tim McGee, NCIS Director of Cybercrime, not on this mission. He's Captain T. McGee, Irish Naval Service, as long as he's on this test, as long as someone else is around, The Admiral can't even admit to knowing him.

Tim smiles at that as he heads back to his computer. That'll drive the old man buggy.

So, why does his voice sound nervous when he says to Abby and Gibbs that night as they have dinner, "I talked to SecNav today. Got the official time for the test."

"Great." She's excited for him, because as the only one of the group who gets all the ins and outs of what he's doing, she knows this is mad difficult and stratosphere-level computer geek sexy, so she, also, can't wait to see how it goes. "When are you going?" She puts the fajita vegetables on the table in front of them, while Tim grabs cheddar cheese and sour cream from the fridge.

"June 11th."

Abby smiles at him. "You excited?" Gibbs looks happy for him as he pats Kelly's back.

He half-smiles back, and she looks at him, curious. He should be having a better time with this. Gibbs catches it, too. He might not get all the ins and outs, but he knows Tim's been enjoying this. So, getting to show it off should be fun. "What?"

"It's on the Stennis." Tim says as he pours the tortilla chips into a bowl, not looking at either of them.

"Oh." Abby says, stopping in the middle of the kitchen, bowl with grilled chicken in her hands, staring at Tim. Gibbs' eyes narrow. He doesn't know what John's flagship is, but he's not having a hard time figuring it out from the way Abby's looking at Tim.

"Yeah." All the nervous Tim talked himself out of comes back in a rush as he sees both of them looking really angry and sad. He sort of half smiles at them, taking the chicken from Abby, and putting it on the table, and the grabbing the tortillas.

"Don't go!" Abby says hot and fast, stopping him mid-stride, holding him by his shoulders. "You can do it from land. Do it from land!"

"It's already set."

"Unset it. Do not get onto his ship! It'll be bad."

He's looking at Gibbs for help, figuring if anyone'll get the whole 'just because it won't be fun doesn't mean I can't do it' aspect of this, but Gibbs is shaking his head, too.

"Don't go."

Okay, at this point nervous is back, and it's brought it's buddy, fear. Tim closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, tries to kill the butterflies dancing in his gut, and doesn't really succeed. "Look, I don't want
to go, but, come on, nothing's going to happen. Sure, he'll be annoyed, but… He's not going to cuss me out in front of the Secretary of the Navy for doing the job he's asked me to do."

"Tim…" Abby looks scared, and scared is making her angry. Gibbs is just flat out angry.

"I know." He caresses her face. "The little kid part of my brain is scared, too. The rational part knows this'll be fine. I'm an adult. I will not allow myself to be alone with him. It'll be fine. Call it practice for the wedding or something like that. I'm sure we can be in the same room for a few hours... We did it before, remember," he looks to Gibbs, who was there, "during that case. It wasn't fun, but nothing really bad happened."

Gibbs eyes narrow, he was there, so he saw the kind of shit John pulled during the twenty or so minutes they were together. And yeah, it wasn't fun, and nothing 'really' bad happened, but... "Don't go. Call it… a conflict of interest. Hell, tell SecNav what happened to you as a kid. But don't go."

Tim shakes his head, hard. "I am not talking to SecNav about that! Look, this is the job. I have to do it. He's lived his whole life for the Navy. The Navy is sending me to him. It'll be okay."

Abby doesn't look convinced, probably because he's not exactly doing a great job of being convincing. Probably because he's not convinced. Gibbs is shaking his head. "I'll go with you."

Tim's turn to narrow his eyes. He kisses Abby, and then goes to sit next to Jethro, putting his hand on Jethro's shoulder. "You go with me, you'll pick a fight with him, and it will become a problem. Might screw the test, and will get you arrested. Let's not do that. I want you home for Kelly's birthday party, not in jail for punching the shit out of The Admiral."

"He deserves to have someone pick a fight with him."

Tim lets that go. He agrees. But if anyone is going to pick a fight, it'll be him. "He's never disobeyed an order in his life. He'll be ordered to secrecy because it's a classified op. Being seen doing anything that blows my cover as Capt. McGee of the Irish Naval Service would violate that order. It'll be fine. When we're on the ship, he won't even be able to admit he knows me."

"Captain McGee?" Abby asks.

"That's the official reason I'll be on board. Jarvis is getting it squared away with the Irish Navy so they don't get any surprises with this, and if The Admiral's people check, my background will pass. I'll go in. I'll be 'inspecting the Stennis and working on a report about the feasibility of adding one to the Irish Naval Service.' Get there, do the test, monitor their progress until they find out they were hacked, and then, depending on how long it takes, helio or fly back to land. Won't be there a minute longer than necessary."

"You better not be," Abby's staring at him, looking worried.

"I won't."

Gibbs doesn't look any more secure about that.

Tim shrugs. There's something here, something he needs to say, but he's not sure what. Picking the fight himself triggered some faint understanding of what's going on... and then he gets it, knows why nervous fell away before, and how to make it go away again. "The test is perfect. It's..." he smiles shaking his head, thinking of a way to translate this into Gibbs, "It's a dead center head shot at three klicks out in high winds and the target has cover. And I want to do it to him." And beyond anything else, beyond nervous, there's that. He thinks about it more and knows that's why he didn't press for the Atlantic command. "He always thought the computer stuff was a waste of time, literally
told me that MIT was 'me fucking away the best years of my life,' and I want to hit him with that. I want to do it. Once I get onboard, all he'll be able to do is sit there and watch as I throw his entire fleet," he makes a note to check and see exactly how many missiles are on the Stennis, because he's going to target every ship even remotely near the Stennis, and as he thinks about it more, if he can do it, he's going to have the smaller ships start targeting each other. "into disarray, with a computer, while his Boss sits there and smiles at me while I do it."

Gibbs and Abby both get that. And Gibbs remembers Tim saying that if he was ever going to do anything about his dad, it would be his, his tools, his attack. He'd own it from top to bottom.

So, Gibbs says it before Abby does but only by a second, he's still nervous about this, it feels bad in his gut, but he gets it, and she's getting it, too. "Okay."

They're getting ready for bed, brushing teeth, doing that traditional last pre-bed moments of the day routine.

When she's done with her teeth, Abby puts her brush back in its holder and stares at him. He finishes his teeth and says, "What?"

She sighs, steps in close, rests her head on his chest, wrapping her arms around his waist. "I get it. Saw the way you were looking when you were talking about the test. I know you need this, but… God, Tim, be careful. I've got a bad feeling on this, and Gibbs does, too."

He squeezes her tight, kissing her forehead. He's not sure how 'careful' he can be. Not like this is something where a vest'll come in handy.

He tilts her lips towards his and kisses her again. "All he ever had were words and my fear. His words can't hurt me anymore because you make me fearless."

She kisses him, and then nips his bottom lip. "You're being sweet, and I appreciate that, but I also know bullshit when I smell it, and that's a dairy farm's worth."

He shrugs. Of course she can read when he's 'trying to be brave.' "Yeah. I'm nervous, but…" He sighs again. The more he thinks about this, the more he wants it. He's got extra code dancing in his head. By the time this test is done, PacFleet will be so thoroughly fucked over The Admiral'll walk bowlegged for a month.

"I know. Like I said, I can see it. I know you need to be able to pull the rug out from under his feet and get some of your own back. I get it. But, be careful, stay near Jarvis, make sure you're locked in your quarters or you've got people around. Don't let yourself be alone with him."

"I won't. I'll be with Jarvis or James or in my quarters the whole time. I'm not going to spend a minute longer with him than I have to."

She's holding his face in her hands, staring into his eyes, "Okay."
"Sure, I'll see her." Tony says, putting down his phone. Usually calls on his desk phone mean dispatch wants them to go deal with a dead body. Not today.

Today there's a call from the front desk, with a visitor.

One he really doesn't want to see.

"What is it, Tony?" Ziva asks. "You look like ghost just walked over your grave."

"Something like that."

"DiNozzo?" Draga asks.

Tony shakes his head. "Later. No way this isn't going to be a long story."

Ziva looks worried, but he shakes his head. He is worried. Why on earth would she want to see him?

She's older now, of course she is, not like she found some sort of magical time stopping device. He could have walked by her a thousand times in a thousand grocery stores and never noticed. After all, they only met the one time, not like he burned her face into his mind. But she's here, sitting in the break room, staring, glaring, at his wedding ring.

"What can I do for you, Helen?"

Dr. Helen Berkley, Jeanne Benoit's mother, looks up from the ring. Seems to be debating if she should even be here. But finally, glaring at him, she says, "Are you a bone marrow donor?"

"Excuse me?" Of all the things she could have asked, could have needed to see him about that, was… nothing he could have even possibly thought of.

Her voice is crisp and precise and slaps him with each word. "Not a single word of what I said was unclear. Are you on the bone marrow registry?"

Tony shakes his head. "No."

"Get on it! Fast. Before the end of work today. I am a doctor. I can and will take care of the blood work."

He feels the ice down his spine, knows there's only one reason why anyone would ask that of him, but he's got to hear the words, has to know it's really true.

"Why?"

Her eyes narrow, but she seems to think he probably is stupid enough not to figure this out for himself, so she says, "Because in December of 2007 my grandson was born. He has brown hair and hazel eyes. After what you did to her, his mother never spoke your name, but I can do simple arithmetic."

Oh shit! He nods. "Okay. And I take it he's sick?"

"Yes." The heat in her eyes could boil him alive.
"She said she went to Africa."

"She did. Nothing about Africa prevents people from having babies there."

"I didn't know."

"No, you didn't. And the second she learned you had a real name, you lost all right to know."

"Yeah. Okay," Fuck! If this isn't every worst nightmare he's ever had of the hookup who's got news for him, all combined and multiplied by twenty, he doesn't know what could be. "What do you need?"

"You to get on the bone marrow registry. I didn't think I was unclear about that."

"Won't that take a long time? Couldn't we just… do the test straight up?"

"Mr. DiNozzo, you are not my grandson's father. You are, at best, a stranger who may be able to provide him with the bone marrow he needs to survive. He will never meet you. He will never speak to you. You don't even get to know his name."

Tony holds up his hands. "Set whatever rules you like. I'll abide them. But, just, let's get it done as fast as we can. There's no need to jump through the hoops or whatever. Jeanne's not here to see me herself, even to save her son's life, then she must still hate me pretty fiercely."

Helen bit her lip.

"Helen?" That's a warning sign. Something about this really isn't right. Everything about this isn't right. He has a son. With Jeanne. Who's sick and… Shit! He can't think about that right now. There's something else there, something about Jeanne, he's hit a nerve for Helen. Think about that.

"You lost the right to know about that when she learned you had a real name, too." But her voice catches on that.

"Is Jeanne all right?"

"You don't get to know! I have privileges at Washington General. We can get the blood work there."

"That's… Okay. We've got a fully functional medical suite less than a hundred feet from here. If you'd like to do it even faster."

Helen shakes her head. "Washington General is close enough."

"I'll get my coat and be there in half an hour."

"Fine."

He skirts the bullpen, going out the back. He sends a quick text to Ziva. It's a mess. Got to go for a bit. Back this afternoon. We'll talk.

How bad is it?

Bad. Not in danger, not that kind of bad, but it's bad.

Okay. This afternoon. Do I need to…
No. Nothing for you to do. Few hours, I'll be back.

He doesn't know what he's feeling as he drives. Numb. Numb is probably right.

"Was any of it real?" Jeanne'd asked him, scared, angry, hurting, hurting so bad, and it was all on him.

"No." God, he thought he'd done the right thing. Thought it'd be better to let her hate him. He wonders what would have happened if he had said 'Yes,' because, after all, it was real. He tries to imagine the life if he'd dropped the job and gone with her to… What? That apartment they were moving into, eventually a home in the 'burbs with a little boy who looks like him and a ring that matched one on Jeanne's finger?

Still be a cop? Moved onto something else? He sure as hell wasn't a Professor of Film Studies.

He tries to will that image to form in his mind, but it won't. He is who he is, and Jeanne's husband was never in the cards for him.

December of 2007, he'd be eight now. Brown hair, hazel eyes, and eight-years-old.

Eight-years-old, and no dad.

Of course Tony doesn't know that, not really. Jeanne may not have come because she married. There could be a guy who is this child's dad, but…

No.

He can't believe that she could hate him so much she'd let her son die rather than talk to him again.

But she could hate him enough to send her mom to do it. She could be sitting in a hospital room, holding his hand, worrying for him, husband, the man this child calls Dad by her side, hoping that somehow he's the Hail Mary that'll get her boy through this.

That works.

He pulls into Washington General, looking for a space.

He probably deserves Helen jabbing him three times before getting a good draw. Deserves a lot more than that. There are a lot of questions he'd like to ask, lots of things he wants to know, not the least of which is whether the child is actually his or not, but…

But he's already hurt this family enough, and even if the child is his, it's not like he's got any claim to him.

It's not enough to be the guy who broke your mom's heart. Even if she broke yours, too. Though, really, Jeanne didn't break his heart. He broke his own heart by not being enough of a man to choose her over the job.

Helen tosses him a band aid. "If you match, I'll let you know."

"Okay. Is there… I… I know you don't want me to have any contact. That's… Not fine… But I'll respect it… But, anything you need for him, anything I can do, anything I can ever do, call."
"How noble of you," Helen says, her voice indicating he wouldn't know noble if he tripped over it.

"I can't change what I did—"

"No shit!" Her voice is scalding hot with anger.

"I didn't know about him. Didn't even suspect. And I won't go tromping into your family. But, just, anything..."

She's staring at him, furious, and he feels his body go on high alert, because this is a woman who will physically attack him if he so much as breathes wrong. "Here's what you can do: if you match up, you can provide my grandson with bone marrow, and after that you can remember that somewhere there's a child with your eyes who you will never know. You can spend the rest of your life knowing how you hurt his mother, and how, because of your lies, he never knew his father. You can go to sleep at night with your wife and maybe your kids and know that you failed your son and fucked his mother while lying to her about every single thing in your life, including the fact that you loved her. You can spend the rest of your life hurting for what you did to my child. And you can spend the rest of your life knowing your son is sick, but never knowing if he got better, never knowing if he's alive or not. You can steep in the torture of that, and have it eat your insides out. That's what you can do!"

Tony swallows, wanting to step back, away from this rage, but not doing it, pressing the band aid to his elbow instead. "How long before you'll know if I match up?"

"Day after tomorrow."

He's been thinking of ways to say this to Ziva as he's driving back to the Navy Yard, but nothing feels right.

She knew about Jeanne. They've talked about it a little. Some at the time. Some since. She had a few Jeannes of her own in her past. She gets that that's the job, sometimes you hurt people, but you say it's for the greater good and you get up the next morning and you keep going.

But he can't for the life of him figure out how to start this conversation.

He heads through the metal detector at the front desk, strides toward the elevator, and finds himself hitting the B button instead of the 3 one that leads to the bullpen.

"I fucked up," Tony says, slumping into the chair next to Tim's desk.

"Mmm..." Tim's not listening, he's working on making sure that the test makes three separate ships look like they all began the programs on their own, while firing at each other. His fingers are flying over the keys and he's, at best, tangentially aware of the fact that Tony's in his office.

Tony stares at Tim, looking really hurt. "Way to show some sympathy, man. How 'bout you kick me in the balls a few times while you're at it?"

"Huh?" That gets Tim looking up. What Tony actually said hits him, and more than that, the look of utter desolation on his face, breaks Tim out of programming mode. "What's wrong?"

Tony told him. And wrapped up with, "Can't go to Gibbs with this; he'll snap my dick off for getting her pregnant and not sticking around long enough to find out. Don't even know where to begin how to say this to Ziva. I mean, she knows about the Jeanne thing, but..." Tony lets that trail off.
"Gibbs isn't going to be that hard on you. Franks didn't find out about his son until he was in his twenties, and Gibbs didn't have a fit about that. You do right by this kid, and you're not going to have any problems with Gibbs."

"Besides opening a vein and offering whatever he needs, what is doing right by him?"

Tim blows out a long breath. "I don't know. If Jeanne had been a one-night-stand or something, I'd say try to get involved in his life. Be a dad, or as much of one as she'll let you."

"But she wasn't. And she still hates me enough she sent her mom to come talk to me."

"Yeah."

"And she made it very clear that I am never to have anything, at all, to do with this child."

Tim nods.

"What would you do?"

The idea of being in this situation is so ridiculously foreign to Tim that he's got no idea, at all. "I really don't know."

"He's eight now, so he's got to wonder who his dad is. Of course, he might have a dad. She might be married, there might be a man who he calls Dad and if that's the case…"

"You want me to check her out, see what I can find?"

"Please." Tony sits there, glances at the door, seeming to think about moving, but doesn't. "What the hell am I going to tell Ziva?"

"Same thing Helen told you? That there was a very good reason why she took a year off before trying to get revenge?" It sounds lame as Tim says it, and he knows that, but he doesn't have anything better for Tony.

"Don't think that's going to cut it."

Tim shakes his head. "No. It's not."

The idea that there would be a downside to Tim's paperwork software never really hit anyone at NCIS until the software was up and running.

But, there is. Namely, they suddenly have way more agents then they need. When you go from, on average twenty hours a week of paperwork to an hour of database entry and five minutes of printing, you suddenly have a whole lot more time.

On the upside, the case backlog is dwindling rapidly. The cold cases are seeing more attention than ever before.

But, well, lots of time means lots of pranks. And Tinkerbell and Flyboy are right now in the middle of what, until this morning, was a vastly enjoyable prank war of epic levels, but is now, as Tony heads to Ziva's desk to talk to her and somehow triggers some sort of shrieking menace that one of his Junior Agents planted to prank the other one, rapidly becoming VERY annoying.

Tink's looking sheepish and shutting whatever that thing is up. Flyboy's grinning, very satisfied. Tony's eyes narrow. "If you have this much free time, you can go back to filling out the forms by
hand.

Both of them look properly chastised and move so quickly to find something useful to do that they practically dematerialize.

Ziva's watching him, coolly, knowing something she's not going to like is about to hit her. "Here or at home?"

"Home."

"Home" actually translates to their car.

"Do you remember what I told you about Jeanne Benoit?"

She nods, pulling out of the parking lot.

"Her mother called me, today." Ziva's carefully holding her face, keeping her expression neutral, and beyond knowing that that's a coping mechanism for her, a way to shut things down so she can process, he doesn't know what precisely she's feeling. Probably dread, she knows the next sentence can't be good. "Her eight-year-old grandson is sick, and she asked me to give blood and see if I'm a match for a bone marrow donation."

She stops the car. They're at the entrance to the parking lot, not a good place to stop. People will want to get in and out. So she drive eight more feet and parks them in a new spot.

"You and Jeanne have a son?"

"I think so. She told me he's eight, and has brown hair and hazel eyes."

She doesn't say anything.

"I didn't know, Ziva. Didn't guess."

"I know." And she does know. Even if this wasn't something they talked about before they got married, granted not for Jeanne in specific, she can do the math, knows, as best as he can guess, how many partners he's had, and how careful wasn't how you would have described him for the first twenty years he was at it. So, for the whole time they've been together, she's known a day like this was possible. "Is he really yours?" Obviously he can be Tony's. They had sex. A lot. She knows that; it's not what she's asking. "Were you careful with Jeanne?"

He shakes his head. Usually they were. But there were a few times. He thinks back. Twice. There was twice, and they were just in it, and everything was going right and it felt right and… "Not always." He thinks more. "The last time was a few days before everything fell apart."

She nods. "And he is sick?"

"Yeah."

"Did she tell you anything?"

"Just that there's a child, he's a boy, he's sick, and she wanted to know if I was on the bone marrow donor list." He takes off his jacket and shows her the bandaged crook of his arm. "I gave her some blood. If I'm a match, she'll get back to me."

"And if not, you will never hear from her again."
"Yeah. She was very clear about this not being my child, and that I do not get any say in the matter."

"No, you do not."

She's still holding her face very carefully, and he doesn't know what she's thinking.

"Are you angry?"

"I don't..." She shakes her head. "Some. Yes. You should have been careful. Missions like that are hard enough on the people you leave behind even if you are careful. She should have told you. But it is long, long past. Long before there was an us. And I know, have known, just like you, that today was always a possibility. So, not too angry, but there is some. Sad, maybe? You have a child, and he's not mine."

"He's not mine, either, not really."

"But now that you know about him, you'd like him to be?"

"Yeah. No. I don't... His mom hates me, and she's got every right to. I told her it was all a lie, that there was never anything between us, that I'd faked the whole thing because I thought it'd be easier for her. Because then she could just be angry, and I could be the bastard, and there'd be a nice, clean break. And that's probably why she never told me."

"But he's sick, and he might want a dad. He might need one. He might already have one. I know nothing about him, nothing about them. And I don't know what the right thing to do is. I've got Tim hunting Jeanne down, looking into her. If she's married... If her son already has a dad, I'll leave them be."

"And if he doesn't?"

"I don't know. She still hates the idea of me so much her mom came to see me. She didn't want to be in the same room with me long enough to ask for blood. I can't imagine how 'Hey, how about you let me spend time with our kid' would go. For all I know, Helen might not have told Jeanne she was coming to see me about it. Or Jeanne may have told her not to, knowing that if she asked, I wouldn't be able to leave it alone."

Ziva shakes her head. "Her son is sick. She'll go to whomever can make him better. And if that's you, it's you. I'm sure she knows Helen called you."

They sit there, in the car, people walking past, looking at them curiously.

"I don't want to rip up his family. He's sick, and that's as bad as it gets for parents. I don't want to add me to the mix and make it worse, more stressful. I don't want him thinking that he was just abandoned. Don't want him thinking I found out about him and couldn't be bothered to look him up. I don't want him wondering about me, and why I wasn't around. If Jeanne's been telling him I'm an asshole his whole life... I don't know what to do."

She squeezes his hands, and then turns the car on again. "I don't know, either."

"Where are we going?"

"Home, eventually. I'm taking you to Gibbs' house."

"You think he knows what to do?"
"No. I don't think anyone knows what to do with this. But I think some quiet time with him will make you feel a bit better."

He nods. "What are you going to do?"

"Learn about bone marrow transplants and donations."

He kisses her. "Thanks."

She nods.

Ziva drops Tony off and heads away, quickly.

He doesn't really notice that because he's feeling awfully scattered.

He heads in, and it's once he's in the house that it hits him, he's alone. It's a brilliant, sunny day out, mid-70s, birds are chirping. It's everything a spring day is supposed to be. Gibbs and Ducky, and maybe Penny, are at the house, putting up masonry or something.

So he's at Gibbs house, alone, with no car.

He's about to call Ziva back, but… Actually, alone time might be a good thing. He heads to the basement, currently empty, but the bourbon's down there, and pours himself a glass. Then he heads back up.

Tony takes a sip. For a second he's fully in right now, taste of bourbon on his tongue, awareness of the room around him, the feel of his clothing on his skin, and then the next second it's washed away by this: *I have a son!*

He feels dizzy at it, having to sit down. He has a son, and he's missed his whole life, and he's sick and hurting and in need and probably dying and his mother and grandmother will likely never let him see that child, won't let him try for a paternity test, won't…

He rubs his face. DiNozzo men don't cry, so he's not crying, he's wallowing in the epic fuck of all fucks this is.

His son was born, and lived, and got sick, and if he's not a match, may die, and he will have never seen him, never spoken a word to him, and yesterday none of that mattered but today it does. Today it burns.

Numb falls away, replaced by scalding pain, heart wrenching failure.

His son is dying, and he can't so much as walk in and hold his hand.
Unfinished Business

Ziva did not go to research bone marrow donation. She will, eventually. But not yet, not now.

No, right now, she is driving back to the Navy Yard.

Right now, she knows that Jimmy is without a client. Tony asked Tim to check up on Jeanne and this child, so she heads for Autopsy and not the basement.

And right now, she wants to hit something, hard, a whole lot.

"Hey, Ziva," Jimmy says as she heads in, sounding and looking chipper. He's got a huge book in front of him, and from the looks of it is in the middle of studying something. Probably those continuing education credits he was talking about.

"Do you have a few minutes?"

Jimmy stares at her. Dr. Allan doesn't twig to it, but he does. Ziva is often cool, but right now, she's cold. Something's gone wrong.

"Sure. What's up?"

"It's private."

Jimmy nods. "Dr. Allan, can you get those reports filed and then all of the glassware sterilized?"

"No problem, Dr. Palmer."

"Thank you." And with that Jimmy steps out with Ziva, following her to the elevator. As soon as the doors shut, she hits the off switch and tells him what's happened.

"Oh." Jimmy starts to offer her a hug but she steps back. "Not hugs then. What can I do? Anything and everything you ever wanted to know about bone marrow donation?"

"Yes, eventually. Right now I need to fight. She should have told him."

Jimmy nods. "Grab your go bag, I'll get some scrubs, and we'll meet in the gym in five?"

"Good."

"You want me to grab Tim?"

She shakes her head. "He and Tony have talked, and he's supposed to be looking up Jeanne. I do not want to take him away from that."

"Okay."

Scubs aren't great fighting gear, but it's what he's got, and it's a hell of a lot better than going in and trying to fight in a suit.

Ziva has her gym clothes handy, so she's looking about normal, and Jimmy had about nine seconds to notice that before she started hitting, and he started dodging.
It's entirely likely that people wondered what the hell was up when the Medical Examiner and Senior Agent DiNozzo were in the middle of a drop down, drag out, no-holds-barred fight on a Tuesday afternoon, but no one asked them.

They did, apparently, go in search of Tim, because less than twenty minutes after they started, he was leaning against the ropes, waiting for them to notice him.

Eventually, Jimmy's focus widened enough to see him there, and for him to call time.

Ziva's breathing hard, fire in her eyes, posture tense and ready to leap. Jimmy's looking grateful for the down time.

Tim looks at her. "He talked to you, huh?"

She nods.

"Want me to get in there, too?"

"I want you finding out what's going on."

"Computer's doing that right now. It doesn't need me hovering next to it. I can take a few rounds, let him catch his breath."

Jimmy's looking thankful for that. He hasn't tried one on one with a pissed off Ziva in months, and had forgotten how fast she is. The only good thing is that she's still in enough control to pull her punches and aim a bit wide, otherwise he'd be a walking bruise right now.

Ziva shakes her head. She's feeling calmer, has fought off all the first, major spike of fight or flight chemicals. "I've always known this could happen. When you marry a man who can only give you a stadium figure for how many women he's slept with, you know that there's a good shot that sooner or later a child will show up, but…"

"You didn't expect it to be Jeanne?" Jimmy asks.

"No." She bites her lip. "And I did not expect it to feel like this." Then she swallows, pushing that down and away, and turns to Tim. "Have you found anything?"

"Locked Facebook page I've got my computer hacking, a few newspaper articles about the vaccination outreach program she was doing in Ghanna back in '09. Tony was wondering if she was married, but I haven't seen any mention of a husband or her son, and her name is still Benoit. I've got the request in for her records, they should be up in the next hour or so."

"Thanks, McGee."

"Where's Tony?"

"Left him with Gibbs."

Tim does a little math in his head, how long they've been fighting, how long it takes to get to where Gibbs is and back, and… "How? I mean, I know you drive like crazy but, it's been less than two hours since I talked to Tony."

That's when Ziva remembers that Gibbs isn't at Gibbs' house and she winces. "I dropped him at Gibbs'."

"Oh." Jimmy says.
"Yes. I need to…"

They both nod at her.

"You will call when you know something?"

"Sure," Tim says.

"By the time you get there, I'll have links to everything you've ever wanted to know about bone marrow donations in your inbox."

"Thanks, Palmer."

When it rains, it pours.

All day Gibbs has been worrying about Tim. He's trying not to. Everything Tim said about that test makes sense. He will be with the Secretary of the Navy. Nothing is going to happen to him.

More than that, he needs to do it. He needs that shot to prove to his Dad… that he can beat him. That he's as good if not better than John ever was. That he made the right choices for himself, and then force his dad to see it.

So, he gets it.

And he talked with Duck about it. (Penny didn't come to the house today, she's prepping for her next classes, which begin the week after next. Some sort of high level grad-seminar where she gets together with each student before they begin the work.) Ducky gets it, too. He was talking about how this is a metaphorical slaying of the monster under the bed, and that it should be deeply cathartic and all this other psych stuff that Gibbs took to mean that it'd be a really good thing for Tim.

But his gut won't stop yelling. The last time it was yelling this loud, he was begging Shannon not to testify. With just as much luck as he's having with Tim. (He's also sure that Tim will not, in any way, shape or form, appreciate him heading over to Jarvis' house and saying he's coming along on this trip.)

To that, Ducky pointed out that he's already had one experience where he had to trust the safety of someone he held dear to someone else, and it failed miserably, so of course, he's on high alert. He felt that way about Abby before Kelly was born, and it turned out just fine. And that's true, but not particularly comforting. When Tim's back, in one physical and emotional piece, then he'll be able to settle.

So, he's already on edge when he gets home and finds Tony sitting on his sofa, alone, clutching a drink, and crying.

That hits him like a Mac Truck, ice down his spine, knees going week, because the only reason he can think of for Tony to be, alone, at his house, crying, is that Ziva took a bullet. So he sits next to Tony, who jerks when he wraps an arm around him, seeming to notice him for the first time, not even trying to not cry.

Tony sees that, and tries to smile, tries to say, something, but his voice cracks before he can get anything out. Finally he gets himself together enough to say, "It's not Ziva. She's okay."

Gibbs is staring at him, lost. There's a rush of relief, but obviously something is really, really wrong.
"What?"

So Tony tells him, and Gibbs listens.

"Fuck." He says as Tony gets going. Not terribly elegant, but it's heartfelt.

Gibbs hates that mission. Hates the fact that it was stupid. He gets a revenge mission. Gets that in his bones, and he's run them, so he knows how to do them, right, but that one… It wasn't stupid because it was about revenge. It was stupid because he's got no idea how it was supposed to work. Some sort of 'magic' or something. Because when it came down to it, as a way to get The Frog, it made absolutely no sense at all and there was way too much collateral damage.

And then, he thought about it, and it did make sense. Maybe. He hopes not. It's possible torturing Jeanne was always the entire objective of that mission. That would have been revenge for Jen: a 'Hurt my daddy, well look at what I can do to your daughter. Suck it, Frog, you can't protect her' scheme.

He can see the look on Tony's face, utterly haunted, wrecked at the idea of this child, and he hopes that wasn't what Jen was trying to do. Hopes she wasn't that cold.

He hates that she picked Tony for it. Once Gibbs found out what the mission was, if you could say that mission was anything, it was clear that Tony wasn't cold enough for it. Ziva might have been able to pull it off, back then. He could have, back when he and Jen worked together the first time. But not Tony. Part of why he was the king of one-night-stand was that if he got to know a woman, he'd start to feel for her, and feeling was the surest root to heartache for that sort of mission. For everyone involved.

But, of course, once again, if torturing Jeanne really was the point of that mission, Tony was the perfect guy for the job, because he would feel for her, sooner or later, and she'd feel it, too. Jeanne's emotions would feed on his. That would draw her in deeper, hurt her that much worse when it was time for the reveal.

He hates the fact that Jen was cold enough that he doesn't know for a fact if she planned her mission perfectly, got her target and inflicted maximum pain, or if she was reckless enough to plan a mission that half-assed.

Either way, that mission bit everyone it touched. And now, almost a decade later, it's still biting them in the ass.

When Tony's about three quarters of the way through the story, they hear a car pull up, door open, door shut, and light footfalls on the front step. Mona hops up, barking happily, (she loves Ziva) as Ziva head in.

"Hey," Tony says to her.

"You're home," she says to Gibbs.

"Got in ten minutes ago."

She looks to Tony. "I just realized you were here alone."

"It's okay. I needed some thinking time."

Ziva heads over to the sofa, sitting on Tony's other side, getting a kiss from Gibbs as she gets settled.
"What are you going to do?" Gibbs asks.

"McGee is checking to see if she's married. See if this child already has a dad," Ziva replies.

Gibbs stares at Tony and then shakes his head. "Cop out."

Tony stares back at him. "I wrecked her life and hurt her once. Barging back in again if she wants me nowhere near her or her kid…"

"Didn't say barge on in. I said seeing if he's got some other man in his life is a cop out. He's your kid. Your job is to be there. You didn't know about him before, fine, not your fault. You do now, so you do something about it. Doesn't matter if there's another man there."

"Okay. But, what? What's good for him? What's best for him? Yeah, I want to know him, for me. But… is that being selfish? Is that good for him? For Jeanne? Her son is hurting; it's got to be killing her, me running back in won't make anything easier. And if there is another guy, and if he thinks that other guy is his father, I don't think me running in now and saying, 'Guess what?' is going to help. Hell, he's eight, I don't know if he even knows how the dad thing works, yet. So, I don't know what to do." Tony stares at the fireplace. Ziva's gently rubbing his neck.

And Gibbs, who can usually be relied on to have some sort of plan, for once, has no clue what to do, either.

"Is Agent DiNozzo all right, Dr. Palmer?" Dr. Allan asks when Jimmy gets back.

"She will be. I think." He stares at Allan for a moment, sure this is probably over the line, but… the whole thing will be all over the office soon, you can't suddenly end up with a kid and not have NCIS notice.

"Dr. Allan, condoms are your friend, use them, with spermicide. Protect your future wife from becoming an over-night surprise step-mom. Protect yourself from becoming an instant parent, having to deal with a co-parent who wants nothing to do with you. Protect your future children from the heartache of a family where mom hates dad."

Allan's eyes are very wide. He opens and closes his mouth a few times, not sure what to say to that. He settles on shutting his mouth and not saying anything. Jimmy nods. "Is the glassware sterilized?"

Allan swallows hard and then says, "Should be out of the autoclave in three minutes."

"Wonderful." It's fifteen minutes to traditional quitting time. "Feel free to take off a bit early. I don't think we'll have any guests today."

Allan nods. "Thank you, Doctor." He goes to gather his things, and then, as he's at the door, he stops, and turns to Jimmy. "Uh… Thanks for the advice, too, but… It's medically impossible for any of my partners to get pregnant."

Jimmy blinks at that, about to ask why? when why hits him and he feels like an utter moron. "Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't…"

Allan shrugs. "I didn't say. I'm out. If I was dating, I'd have told you I have a boyfriend, but I don't have one right now, so…"

"Ah." Something else hits Jimmy, and his eyes go wide at it. "Your friend… the one who inspired the career change…?"
"Was he more than a friend?" Allan asks.

"Yeah." Jimmy nods, feeling like the pieces of Dr. Allan are falling into place. As Ducky said, justice served is a powerful motivator, justice served for someone you love deeply… even more so.

"He was. William Dawset. The ME was able to prove murder, and who did it. No CSIs or Forensics Lab like Abby's got out there, the ME covered the whole thing. But he couldn't prove it was a hate crime on top of that. All the evidence for that was 'circumstantial.' You'd think sixteen stab wounds would have made an awfully compelling case for hate, but apparently the standard for anti-gay hate crimes in rural Georgia is beyond any possible doubt at all."

"I'm sorry." And Jimmy really, truly is.

Allan nods, feeling Jimmy's sympathy. "Thank you." He nods again. "Tomorrow, then."

"Tomorrow, Dr. Allan."

---

Jimmy closes up shop at five, and heads down to the basement.

Tim's still on his computer, reading intently from the looks of it.

"Hey," Jimmy says, stepping in. "You close to done?"

"Yeah, just about. Abby's wrapping up some testing, so I'm waiting for her."

"You tell her, yet?" he asks, half-leaning/half-sitting on Tim's desk.

"No. She's been working full-out today. You know that drug bust Kimmle caught?"

Jimmy shakes his head. "No dead body."

"Okay. Lots and lots of samples. They're running something like three hundred samples to trace where the drugs came from."

"Busy work."

"Yeah. Has to get done, but not a matter of life or death. So, she's wrapping up and handing it over to whichever lab rat's on today."

"You find anything, yet?"

"Actually, yeah. Got Jeanne's vital statistics back about ten minutes ago. It's…" Tim hands over the print out he's made.

Jimmy's eyes flick over it, and he sighs, feeling kicked in the gut. "That's why she didn't come."

"Yeah." Tim sighs, rubbing his eyes. "I'm trying to track down the boy. I've got a name, now, so that makes things easier, but so far, I can't find him."

"How hard can it be to find Aiden Benoit? You know he was born in December of '07."

"Yeah, well, name and birthdate isn't all that handy for a child who wasn't born in the US, and 'Africa' doesn't exactly narrow down the search. I'm coming up with nothing on the vital records for him. I'm even looking under Tony's name, thinking she might have filled him in as the father on the birth certificate, but… nothing, at all."
Jimmy stares at the obituary Tim printed out. It's the standard fare, picture of Jeanne, day of death (a week ago), no cause, a bit about who she was, what she did, when the funeral was (day before yesterday), the only line that's really standing out is the: Jeanne Benoit is survived by her mother, Dr. Helen Berkley and her son, Aiden Benoit.

Jimmy looks around Tim's office. "You've got a laptop in here somewhere, right?"

"In my bag. Why?"

"You find a cause of death. I'll find Aiden."

"How?"

"He's on the bone marrow registry. I'm a doctor. I'll find him. Let's see if we can get something useful for Tony."

It doesn't take long for Jimmy to smell a rat. Not long at all. He tries every spelling of Aiden Benoit he can think of, and nothing pops up. He widens the search to all of Virginia, nothing. He adds in Maryland and Delaware, still nothing. He double checks Helen Berkely in the Federal Medical Database, she's got admitting privileges at Washington General and Children's so she's got to live around here somewhere.

He checks Jeanne, she had admitting privileges at Washington General and Sibley. So she has to have lived somewhere in this area.

"Tim."

"Hmmm…" he scanning a police report.

"He's not in the bone marrow database."

Tim looks up.

"I'm breaking into his medical records. He's got to be somewhere here in DC, but he's not on the database."

Tim's eyes narrow. Jeanne's dead. Her mom's visiting Tony with a request for a bone marrow donation the day after her funeral. "This stinks."

"Yeah… it…" Jimmy's keying in his ID, requesting information, a few seconds later a selection of Aiden Benoits pop up, he clicks on two of them, finds the one with Jeanne Benoit listed as the mother, and he's found why Tim couldn't find him. "Aiden Benoit was born September 14, 2010."

And with that everything makes sense to Jimmy. Helen's angry, furious, grieving, and Tony's nearby and convenient, someone she can kick with impunity, and a way to feel like she's got come control back. "You find a cause of death yet?"

"Traffic report. Car accident, no witnesses. Car found in a ditch, upside down, she'd been dead for four hours. Blood alcohol level was .06."

"Not quite drunk."

"Just under the limit. It doesn't say how long they think she survived. It's possible she was over when the car flipped but under by the time she died."
Jimmy nods at that. "She ever marry?"

"Not that I can see."

"So, she's dead, maybe she's been spiraling out of control. Kid with no dad, driving drunk-ish… Maybe her mom blames Tony for that path. Maybe she's angry and just wants someone to kick, someone she thinks deserves it…” Jimmy, who until this point had been feeling mostly sympathy for Tony and Ziva, starts to shift. Starts feeling for Helen, the wall between him and the rage at a dead child isn’t particularly thick. From there his brain heads to why Helen would hate Tony, what he did to her child. He starts to remember how he felt that night when he learned what Lee had been doing to him. Remembering that cold fear of being interrogated as a traitor, not knowing what was wrong or why, and then finding out what had happened, how he'd been used.

Tim's reaching for his phone, getting ready to call Tony, when Jimmy grabs his hand. Tim looks up at him. "Jimmy?"

"Don't call yet."

Tim's staring at him curiously. "Why?"

Jimmy's looking at Tim's desk, staring at the obit. "You ever meet her?"

"Not really. Think I saw her for a few seconds while she was framing Tony for murdering her father."

"That one never got solved, did it?"

"Kort said it was one of his. Don't think Gibbs bought that."

"But it wasn't Tony, right?"

"No. Thumb tap. Tony's big enough he wouldn't have needed to use that sort of hold on a person. You do that when you're a small person using pain to control a bigger person."

"Okay." Jimmy sighs, touching the picture of Jeanne's face. "That was a shit mission."

Tim nods; he agrees, sees the look on Jimmy's face as he stares at the shot of Jeanne and understands why this hits Jimmy harder than the rest of them.

"How many hours do you think she spent crying, hurting because of it?"

"I don't know, Jimmy. Enough so that she decided to try to get revenge."

Jimmy looks up at Tim. "She deserved something, Tim. Not life in prison for Tony, no, but… something, more than she got. He broke her heart on purpose. He used her... He fucked her, and he used her. Give it a night, please. Hold off until the morning to tell him."

Tim feels sympathy for what Jimmy's thinking, for the revenge he never got, but… "I say nothing, and we're hurting Ziva, too."

Jimmy stares at the ceiling; that's true, too. "I know. Twelve hours won't kill either of them."

"Jimmy…"

"Look, if it makes me a shit friend, I don't fucking care. He deserves it, or something like it. I'm sorry it screws Ziva, too, but…" He's staring at Tim. "I was on the other side of it, Tim. Someone used me,"
and for a hell of a lot better reason, and it still hurt. You doubt everyone around you for… years. And I'll never get my own back. That bridge is beyond burned. And Jeanne won't either, her bridge is burned, too, but…" Jimmy shakes his head. "Look, I'll talk to Helen, make sure she never pulls any crap like this on him again, but, give him a night to deal with it. Please."

Abby walks in on both of them, Tim looking torn, Jimmy angry and earnest. "Oh, God, what did I miss today?"

They tell her, and sit there, her best friend and her husband, both of them staring at her, waiting for her to be the arbiter. She looks from Jimmy to Tim and back again.

"It's not kind, Jimmy."

"I know, Abby. That's pretty much the point. What he did to her wasn't kind, and it wasn't necessary, and… We're the good guys, right? It our job to protect the Jeannes out there, right? So, what kind of 'good guys' are we if this is okay?"

"Okay, Jimmy. I'll be quiet. Tim?"

Tim doesn't really like this. But… He can see how deeply this hits Jimmy. "Okay. First thing tomorrow morning, I'll let him know."

"Fine. Call him at the crack of dawn if you like. Actually, no. First thing, before work, before they usually leave, I'll be at their place and I'll explain. This is… my life and his intersecting in a crap way, so it's on me. I've got it."

"And you'll talk to Helen?" Tim asks. "I mean, if she's willing to pull this… She might be willing to go further."

"She won't, not after I talk to her."

"Okay." It's almost six when Tim says that. "Time for us to be getting home. Heather's going to start wondering where we are."

"Yeah." Jimmy says, agreeing. They're all standing up, getting ready to head out, when Jimmy says, "You didn't know about that op, did you?"

"Not until it was over," Tim replies.

"And you didn't approve, either, did you?"

Tim shakes his head. "I'm the only one on the team who's never slept with a suspect to get information out of them."

"She wasn't a suspect," Jimmy says.

"That's why Gibbs and Ziva didn't like that op, either," Tim replies.

Jimmy gets home, spends some time snuggling his girls, hoping, as close to praying as he ever gets, that they never run into someone like Tony, explaining to Breena what happened today.

He'd told her, in a round-about sort of way, about Lee. That he'd had what he considered a serious relationship before her that went very, very bad.

And after the Fourth of July party, when he got thinking about Jeanne, and was feeling down, he
told her the whole story of Michelle Lee, how she used him to get the information out, how for a while he'd thought she really liked him, but she got colder and colder and eventually he'd ended it, but, that was too little, too late, and for a while he ended up being a suspect in a treason case because of what she had been doing.

So, she knew that story. And she knows, as well as he does, the story of Jeanne, because he had to explain why that one set off his own feelings about being, basically, Jeanne.

And most of the time, he does a good job of not thinking about it. Most of the time, it's firmly in the past. But right now, it's not.

It's not that he wants Tony to suffer, not for too long. But he does want him to have a taste of that… fear, doubt, pain… anguish, that's probably the best word for it. He spent a night between finding out that Lee had been using him and learning that she had a damn good reason for it. And that night sucked.

Between the recriminations of how did he not see it, to whether it was all lies, did she even like him, ever, or was he just the easiest, stupidest, horniest target around, that night ached. People died because he was being led around by his dick. He opened himself up to that woman, relished her time and body and smiles, let her touch all of him, risked his job for her, cherished the quiet moments when they were both calming down and he could smell her hair against his lips. That's why they broke up, he wanted more of those quiet moments, and, apparently she didn't want any of them. Apparently, she didn't want the loud minutes, either, but… that was beside the point. You do what you need to do for your family, so she did.

And even when he knew why, which helped in that he at least developed some sympathy for why she would do it, he still had to wonder, why him?

They eat dinner, and put the girls to bed, and he's a million miles away through all of it. Michelle was an NCIS employee, killed by an NCIS employee, in the line of duty. The last time he saw her (though he wasn't supposed to, Ducky was supposed to handle that one solo) she was on a slab, in their morgue, dead.

And he felt stupid about it, but he cried for her, even knowing what she did to him, because he also knew why.

After dinner, he calls Washington General, and finds out that Helen's got a shift starting at eight.

Hopefully this can be in out and done. Because, while it's true that he wants Tony to hurt, some, for a night, he also doesn't want Helen deciding that now would be a spiffy time to try something even more intense. He wants her to know she's on their radar, and that this is her one free pass.

From here on out, anything she pulls will have consequences, and if she values her grandson, she will not risk them.

He pulls on his scrubs. Thinks about a lab coat to go with them, but all of his say NCIS on them. Scrubs and a clip board will do the job. Just one more doctor in a sea of doctors.

He kisses Breena and heads off.

"Dr. Helen Berkley?" She's talking to a nurse, wrapping up instructions for a patient when he says that.
"Yes…" She says, turning, not recognizing him.

"Dr. Palmer." He offers her his hand. "I'm with the bone marrow registry. I'd like to speak to you about your grandson, in private."

He sees the color drain from her face, and then she squares her shoulder, nods, and leads him off to a quiet corridor.

"I take it he sent you?"

"If by he, you mean Tony, no he didn't. He has no idea I'm here, nor will he. I sympathize with both your loss and what you're doing about it. So, I will not be informing Tony that your grandson is not only two years too young to be his, but not on the bone marrow recipient list." He doesn't mind lying to her, if she thinks her revenge works, there's no reason for her to ever try anything else.

"Why on earth not?"

He shakes his head. "As I said, I sympathize. Now: a warning. You are on our radar. If anything happens to Tony, if he sneezes, trips, and scrapes a knee, we're going to be checking you out about it. Assuming you like having custody of your grandson, you will do everything in your power to make sure we do not come to your house to investigate something bad happening to DiNozzo. Do you understand me?"

"No. I do not."

"Then I'll try this even more clear. You already know how badly my organization will fuck over an innocent bystander. You daughter already was that bystander. Do everything you can to make sure your grandson isn't one, too. Okay?"

She nods, eyes hot.

"Did you keep his bloodwork?"

She nods.

"Add it to the registry. Maybe we can get some good out of this mess after all."

Now her eyes are wide, and not hot, just puzzled. "You work for NCIS?"

"Yes."

"You're supposed to be arresting me, aren't you?"

"I wasn't aware that practical jokes are illegal. You do something illegal, we'll have a very different conversation. You think about doing something illegal, and I find out about it, we'll have that conversation. Goodbye, Dr. Berkley. I am sorry for your loss."

She rolls her eyes at that, and he leaves, hoping he's taken care of the issue.

Well, one of them, at least.

Tomorrow's soon enough to take care of the other ones.

He's pulling out of the hospital parking lot when he decides he wants to know more about that case. About how it was supposed to work.
Tim doesn't look very surprised when Jimmy just walks in twenty minutes later. He pauses the show he's watching and gets off the sofa. "What do you need?"

"Can you find Jeanne's case? I want to read the files on it."

"Come on." They head into his office. Tim pulls his writing chair over to his computer, and they both get settled. "Being a Director of NCIS should have some advantages, right?" he says as he starts digging into the case log.

Nothing comes up for Rene Benoit. He tries 'The Frog.' Nothing. 'La Grenouille.' Nothing. Tim shakes his head. "They don't want anyone poking into this. It's probably all on paper, all is dotted and ts crossed and filed with the janitorial reports from 1956. Ummm… Okay…" He starts querying Shepard's records. "Yeah, they don't want anyone checking out Jen too closely. These are all locked down."

"You can get around that, right?"

Tim looks at Jimmy. "I'm the guy who designed the lock they're using to keep it hidden. Yeah, I can find a way around it." And he does.

They spend the next hour reading up on Jen, and having done so, it became very apparent why those records are locked. How she went from Probie, in '95 to Director in nine years was in there. And it wasn't pretty.

"God, she was ruthless," Jimmy says.

Tim nods. He didn't work with Jen much, and his most vivid memory of her was handing her his badge because he wasn't going to work for someone who valued looking good over doing good.

"Can't believe Morrow would put 'great ass' in a fitness eval. God, that'd get him fired so fast these days," Tim says.

What's not in any of those files is a mention of La Grenouille.

Tim looks up at Jimmy. "Whole thing was off the books from the looks of it."

"Okay. Tell me what you knew about it."

"Come on." Tim stands up. "You want a drink or something?"

"Got some tea?"

"Hot or iced?"

"Hot."

"Yeah, I can do that. Abby can kick in some of the story, too." Tim puts some water on, enough for Jimmy and him, and he's thinking Abby might want some, too. Yesterday and today she's been going through green tea like crazy. Jimmy's in their cupboard, rummaging through their tea stash. "Grab a green tea bag for Abby."

Jimmy nods, and a second later a tea bag is flying toward Tim's head. He catches it and puts it in a mug.

"What do you want?" Jimmy asks.
"Don't care. No caffeine."

Jimmy grabs two French vanilla chai blends, one for each of them, and Tim gets things set. "First thing I really knew was up was that Ziva was on his case. He kept vanishing, and didn't have good excuses, and it was bugging her."

"Didn't bug you?" Tim hands Jimmy his mug, and both of them go sit down.

"Not the way it bugged her." Tim puts down his mug. "Okay, I've never asked, and I do not actually know, but when Gibbs left, I think something happened with them. Tony's in charge; we've got these movie night things happening, but Lee and I were only invited to some of them, and every single one all four of us showed for, we left before Ziva did. Then Gibbs is back, and they're sniping at each other, and she's all pissed at him for ducking out and lying about it."

"You were working with Lee then?"

"Yeah, technically I was the Senior Agent and she was my Probie, for, I don't know, about two minutes."

"Did she ever… try anything with you?" Jimmy asks, looking vulnerable. Did she try another target first and fail, or did she aim straight for him?

Tim shakes his head. "Nah. Or if she did it was so subtle I didn't notice it. When did you two…"

"She started in what, May? June?"

Tim nods, it was something like that. "Think so."

"Before the summer was over, don't remember more specifically than that."

"Anyway, fast-forward to May, and Tony keeps getting pulled aside, and having 'meetings' with the Director, then next thing we know his car's been blown up, he's got this whole other job he's been working, and this girlfriend we've never met, and…"

Abby sits next to them, giving Jimmy's shoulder a squeeze as she does. "Getting up to date on the Frog?"

"That's the idea. What did you know about it?"

"Tony didn't kill him. That none of us thought he could even keep a secret until that job. That he loved her, or thought he did, but not enough to leave NCIS. That she loved him, but not enough to forgive him."

Jimmy snorts at that. He looks at Tim, Abby sitting on his lap, her arm draped over his shoulders as she sips her tea, and the easy way that his hand curls around her hip.

"Don't call that love." He points to the two of them. "That's love." He circles his finger to mean the three of them. "This is love. That was… lies and lust and… I mean, the whole time, he knew he was going in there to make her fall for him. That was the plan right? Seduce her, and then… Somehow get the goods on her dad?"

Abby nods, and Tim sighs. "Yeah, Jimmy, that's about it."

He stares at his mug. "First time I met Michelle, she had headed down to ask about something for Tony. Ducky wasn't in the office. It was just me, and for once, I knew the answer. He wanted to
know if a wrench could have made that sort of fracture." Tim nods, he remembers that case. "And I got the x-ray out, double checked, outlined the fracture, said that it looked right for that, but if she wanted to wait, we could run it by Doctor Mallard, too. She looked up at me, smiled, then looked me up and down and asked if I'd like to get some coffee with her.

"I knew she wasn't in love with me. And I wasn't in love with her. But, it was nice, you know? She liked me, laughed at my jokes, made me feel special, and good. Made me feel desirable, ya know?"

Tim and Abby nod. Tim who also got asked out once a blue moon, and once by someone who was using him, and once by Tony pretending to be his ultimate woman, gets this intensely.

"And eventually there weren't any more jokes, and we stopped getting coffee or dinner, and I decided I wanted more from a woman than mechanical sex in the loading docks. So I broke up with her. But, I'd hoped, that when I said I wanted more, that she's have been okay with it. But she wasn't. So that was that.

"And then we knew what she was doing, but before I ever got to find out what had happened, if any of it ever meant anything, if she had ever liked me at all, she was dead. I never got to know if she seduced me from the get go, or if she looked me up and down and smiled because she liked what she saw."

Abby shifts off of Tim's lap, and he lets her go, easily. She hugs Jimmy from behind.

"She should have loved you."

He shrugs. "Not in the cards." She's gently rubbing his back, standing next to him while he sits. He leans his head against her side. "And I'm way better off with her not having loved me. But… I wish she had told me, or told you guys, or… I wish we could have gotten it fixed without anyone dying. If I had noticed what was going on… Been less stupid, less horny, at least four more people would be alive. God knows how much crap she got out of NCIS and what he did with it. Under my nose."

Abby kisses the top of his head.

He squeezes her hand gently. "Normally I don't think about it. It's not like it's always there, or even often there. It's been almost ten years. I don't dwell on it. But right now… I've forgiven her. Someone held a gun to her daughter's head and said 'Jump,' and if you do that to me, I'll say 'How high?' too. So, I get it. I don't like it, and it still hurts if I think about it, but I get it.

"But I don't get what he did. I don't get how he did it. I don't get it on a moral level, on a how on Earth you can possibly think this is okay level. I don't get it on a physical level. Jeanne was beautiful, but, I don't think I could get a hard-on if I knew I was lying to her like that. If I knew doing it would hurt her like that. I don't get how you do that and live with yourself.

"I don't get why it was necessary. There had to be another way to get this guy." Jimmy looks at Tim. "You said Kort claimed his people killed Benoit?"

"Yeah."

"So, that means the CIA was working the case, too?"

"Probably," Tim replies.

Abby thinks about it. "They'd have proper jurisdiction for it. He was almost never in the US, that's why you guys only got that one shot at him, right?"
"Think so. And technically, we were in Canada, and not really there, because he tried to stay out of the US."

Jimmy shakes his head again. "I don't get it." He looks up at Abby. "I was hoping he could get me the files, so I could get it…"

"But it was all off the books," Tim finishes.

Abby nods and hugs Jimmy again. "Only one way to get it, Jimmy, and that's talking to him."

"I will, but… unless Jeanne was actually part of the gun running ring, I don't there's anything he can come up with that I'll want to hear."

A/N: So, um, yeah, if you've ever wondered why I didn't much like Shepard and don't ship her with Gibbs, that cluster fuck of a mission of doom is why.
Hour to bed later than usual, hour earlier getting up, and a busy mind in between… Jimmy's had better nights.

Once he's up and moving he fires off a text to Ziva. **You on your jog?**

A minute later he gets back: yes.

**Whole thing was a hoax. There is kid, but he was born in '10, he's not sick. Jeanne died last week, and Helen went a bit crazy.**

Nothing comes back on his phone but he can imagine what Ziva's doing.

He gives her another few seconds, but nothing comes up. **I haven't told Tony, yet. Want to talk to him, in person, alone. Is that okay?**

**Why?**

**Got some things to say to him about this. He's not going to like them. You might not, either.**

**Things about Jeanne?**

No. Anything I know about her, I'll tell you, too. **Things about him and me. You want to be there for this, that's fine, just be easier the two of us.**

**Jimmy?**

**What do you remember about Michelle Lee?**

His cell stays blank for a moment, and then it rings. "Hi."

"Hi, Ziva."

"I remember Lee. I was the only one she didn't try to convince she did the right thing."

"Not the only one." After all, what could she have said to him? **I actually liked you.** That would have been nice. *I'm sorry.* Yeah, that would have gone a long way, too.

"I'm sorry. I… knew, but…"

"Didn't put it together?"

"Yes."

"Because I'm a guy? And as long as I got laid, I was getting what I wanted, so what's the problem? Guys don't get used, they don't feel bad about it after, not if they get sex, right?"

Ziva's honest enough, with both herself and the people around her to not dissemble. "That's part of it, yes. Mostly though, because you ended it, before it blew up."

"Yeah. I did. Still bit me in the ass, though. Still got hauled in for questioning, for treason. Lucky Gibbs was running the investigation and he believed me. Still… had to deal with… all of it."

"I'm sorry."
"Yeah, well… Anyway, got some things to say to Tony. About using people. About sexually using someone. They aren't complimentary. He's unlikely to enjoy them. If you wanted to get yourself some breakfast, say for two hours or so, it's my treat."

He can feel her nodding. "It really is a hoax?"

"Yeah. It is. Jeanne was in a car accident last week. She died. Helen... I don't know how she came up with it, but making Tony hurt seemed like a good idea to her. I've already talked to Helen, she's not going to pull anything again."

Jimmy stops for a second there. "Ziva, I'm sorry this screws you, too. I really am. I'm sorry you're in the middle of this. I'm sorry this isn't just done, and we can't just all relax and kick back and let it go. I'm sorry, for you, to you, that I can't just let it go. I want to. I'm a lot happier not thinking about this. But, right now, I can't get this out of my head, because I was where Jeanne was. So, I've got to go yell at him. And I know I'm going to hurt him, and I know that's going to hurt you, and I'm really sorry about that, because I don't want to be hurting you, but I don't know how I can stop hating him without it hitting you, too."

She doesn't say anything to that, and he wishes he could see her face, get a hint of what she's thinking. Finally she says, "You've already spoken to Helen?"

"Yes."

"How long have you known?"

"Since around six last night. I got into Aiden, the boy's, medical records around then. Couldn't find him on the bone marrow registry, so I went into the Federal Medical Database. Then I looked Helen up, found when she was on shift, and made sure she'd never pull anything on Tony again." She doesn't say anything. He has the sense that his apology is making a lot more sense to her right now. "Ziva?"

"You and McGee were working together to find Aiden?"

"Yeah. Tim was coming up empty because he had a name, but the wrong birthday, so... technically you aren't supposed to look up people who aren't your patients, but... any doctor has access to any patient, because you never know who'll roll in your door. It was the most direct way to get the information about him."

There's another quiet minute while she thinks about that. "I accept your apology, Jimmy." Her voice is tight as she says it, and he's got the sense there's something else in the background, something he doesn't know about, coming into play here.

"Thank you. Anything I say or do to him that you think is over the line, you get as many free shots as you want on me." As he says that, it occurs to him there's likely someone else hurting about this. "You want to give Gibbs a call? Let him know. Tell him I'm handling it."

"I can do that."

"Thanks."

---

Jimmy knocks twice, and after a minute, a tired, distressed, eyes rimmed red, bloodshot, and utterly fried-looking Tony opens the door.

He supposes he should be feeling sympathy for his friend. He supposes that if it was real, he would
be feeling sympathy. His own attention didn't shift off of the grief Tony was dealing with until he knew it was fake.

But he's not feeling any sympathy. He's feeling satisfied. That tiny little voice in the back of his head jumping up and down shrieking, You deserve this! Reap it, Tony, reap it! That little voice is making an awfully compelling argument to yell at Tony first, and then tell him it was a hoax. Because that voice remembers how he felt, how he looked, the morning after he found out what Lee had done.

Jimmy shuts it down. Twelve hours, one night, was enough. The first night is the worst. The first night hurts like fire and death, and that's what he wanted Tony to feel.

Jimmy follows him into their dining room, where the computer's on the table, Web MD, PubMed, American Lymphoma and Leukemia Association are up. Next to it is a bottle of bourbon, two thirds empty, a tumbler with about a quarter inch of bourbon in it, and a notebook filled with handwritten notes.

"Tell me you've got news," Tony says as he sits down.

Jimmy hands over both Aiden's birth certificate and Jeanne's obituary at once.

Tony looks from one to the other and back again. Eyes flicking so fast between them that he can't be actually reading what's on the pages. Confusion is written all over his face.

Finally he looks up at Jimmy. "These are real?"

"They're real. Aiden's five. He's healthy. Unless you and Jeanne had a one off for old time's sake 'round about New Year's 2010, there's no way he's yours."

Tony slumps with relief, shutting his computer, and then shoots back what's left of the bourbon in his glass. Then he stares at the obit. "What happened?"

"According to the police report she was driving, just over the limit or very close, car flipped, by the time anyone found her she was dead. Ruled an accident." Jimmy keeps his voice neutral, but as he sees Tony relax, sees the tension fade away, his own anger surges forward.

Tony's fingers gently touch Jeanne's face, and then he stands up, fast as it really, fully hits him what just happened, "That fucking bitch! I'm going—"

Jimmy's hand shoots out and he pulls Tony back into his seat. "You're going to do precisely nothing, at all, about Helen Berkley."

"Nothing, Tony." This would be when Tony notices that Jimmy's holding onto not falling into full on rage by his fingernails. "You're going to sit here, and you're going to listen to me. And you're going to talk. You're going to take me through what the hell it was you thought you were doing, and then you're going to listen some more, because there's a shit ton of stuff I never got to say to Michelle. So, you didn't fuck me over personally, fine. But you don't get to complain, because you fucked Jeanne over the exact same way, and you did it for a hell of lot worse reason that Lee did. So start at the fucking beginning and make me understand how this could have possibly made sense to you."

Tony shakes his head. "Can't be done, Jimmy. It was a bad case and it was a bad plan and everything about it went wrong."

"So, you what? Went in with your eyes open and fucked her knowing it was a bad plan?" Jimmy's
staring at him, horrified. "I know you aren't a sociopath, so... what the fuck, Tony?"

"I... no. Not from day one. René Benoit was an arms dealer. Very security conscious. Very slick. No one could get close to him. No one could get enough for a conviction. Jen had spent a decade going after him, but he was a ghost. So, she hit me with a plan. He had a daughter. They weren't exactly close, but from everything they could find out he visited her a few times a year.

"He was a bad guy, Jimmy."

"Uh huh. That's why Ducky was so fond of him, so intrigued by him. Tell me about all the other murdering psychos Ducky liked."

Tony opens his hands... He can see this would be an especially bad time to bring up that one psycho Ducky was dating. "He sold guns to the murdering psychos, and he didn't care who they were or what they did with them."

Jimmy nods. He doesn't want to debate if René Benoit was a bad guy. He was. Fine. Doesn't justify what he did to Jeanne. "Why was NCIS even on the case? He was French, right?"

"Yeah."

"Arming people fighting against us?"

"No."

"Operating in the US?"

Tony shakes his head. "Rarely."

"Stole weapons from us to sell?"

"No."

"Killed a member of the Navy?"

"Technically, no. Shepard was sure he killed her father, who was a Marine."

"What was the official story?"

"Colonel Sheppard was taking bribes from Benoit, it was found out, an investigation opened, and he killed himself."

"So... Jenny had a full morgue at her disposal, the power to order her father exhumed, could have had us go over the whole thing, top to bottom, proven that he'd been murdered, or not. She had an entire Federal Agency at her beck and call, that could have been tapping Jeanne's phone, keeping her under 24/7 surveillance, just waiting for Daddy to show up and swoop him up."

Tony nods.

"But she didn't. And this guy's a complete ghost, but they were able to indict her daddy for taking bribes from him? How'd they know that, Tony? He's an arms dealer, you guys knew his name, that he had a daughter, and an ex-wife apparently, knew what he looked like, had at least some sort of money trail on him... How much of a ghost could he have possibly been?"

"I don't know," Tony shakes his head.
"So, it was, what, you and her?"

"I think Cynthia knew what she was doing, too."

"Oh, good, you and her, and the secretary. That's a brilliant plan. Just the three of you. That didn't, I don't know, tip you off to the fact that there was something intensely wrong about this? You've got Ziva and Tim sitting right next to you, someone who used to do missions like this all the time and the guy who can find anyone with a computer, and you didn't use them. Why?"

"Orders."

"Bullshit. We break dumb orders when we get them. We especially break orders to lie to each other about what we're up to."

Tony shakes his head. "Gibbs left. Last thing he said to me was, 'You'll do.' Not exactly a ringing endorsement. Shepard made me Acting Team Leader. That was a kick in the balls, too. A month and a few cases later, she calls me up. She's impressed with how well I've been doing. She's got a case. A case that only I can do." Tony flashes his patented DiNozzo charm smile. It looks ghastly on his tear-puffy face. "A case straight out of a James Bond movie."

"James Bond is a sociopath, not a hero!"

Tony ignores that. "The bad guy even has his own code name. La Grenouille. The Frog. Everyone else who has tried to take him down has failed. He has made, spotted, outed everyone else who's gotten close. But me, I'm Mr. Charm. I'm smooth, and dapper, look damn good in a tux, and it's my job to go in and be the one he'll never see coming. You want to know why I took it? Because it played perfectly into the image of the guy I wanted to be.

"I was smooth, and cool, and perfect." He licks his lips, very uncomfortable. "I was Jeanne's dream man. Warm, flirtatious, attentive, romantic. Over the top romantic. And she fell for me, and I fell for her, and... and then I didn't know how to get out of it."

"You didn't know how to get out of it?" Jimmy couldn't look less impressed with that if he tried, and Tony looks so embarrassed by it, he wants to squirm out of his skin.

"No."

"*You tell the fucking truth*, that's what you do! That's how you get out of it. You didn't know? You didn't *want* to get out of it! You wanted her to keep adoring you, and you knew she'd hate you when she found out, so you just kept it up, digging in deeper and deeper, cutting her heart out that much further each day you were there."

"It was my job..."

"Bullshit. Bull fucking shit, Tony! We're the good guys, right, Tony? I mean, that's why we do this, right? That's why you've got that badge, right? Because at the end of the day, we're the guys who fix up the mess; we're the guys who protect the innocent, right? *That's* the job. We've got all these laws, and all these regulations, and ideas and... and if we need to we say 'fuck 'em' because we do what we need to do to protect the people who need protecting. *Always.* That's who we are. We're supposed to be the goddamn white fucking knights who come to the rescue. We're supposed to protect the Jeannes, not pray on them!" Jimmy unclenches his fists, makes his breathing and heart calm down.

"You were getting a place together, right?"

Tony nods.
"How was that going to work, Tony? You couldn't get out of it... How was it going to work? You
going to lie to her forever? You think she'd be stupid enough to not notice when Dad goes missing?"

"I didn't... I loved her and—"

"Stop. Stop right there. You loved you. You loved how she made you feel. You're married now. I'm
married now. Hopefully we both know enough about love to know that's shit, so don't even try that
on me. If you had loved her, you would have told her who you were. You would have picked her
over Shepard, over the job. I know if Vance walked in today and asked you to fuck over Ziva, you'd
introduce his ass to your foot so hard you'd have to pry your shoe out from between his teeth. 'Cause
that's how love works. You would have cared about how she felt, and you would have rather ripped
your own heart out than have made her face that night where she knew who you really were alone,
by herself, sitting on the floor crying for being stupid. You would have handed in your badge, and
then gone to her, and told her everything, that's what you would have done if you had loved her.

Jimmy's not looking at Tony as he says this. He's looking behind him a little. "You know how that
night feels Tony? Got any clue?"

"I already knew Lee was using me. I felt it change. Playful vanished, fun fell away, we stopped
spending time together that wasn't sex. It happens. She didn't actually like me, I guess, but liked what
I could do for her, and that wasn't enough, so I broke up with her, told her I didn't want to be her
fuck buddy. That getting laid wasn't enough." Jimmy sighs. "You break up, and... you've got all the
why didn't it work, why didn't she like me, blah, blah, blah. At least I could scratch an itch for her.
Maybe she didn't want to have dinner with me after, maybe I was too goofy for that, but hey, I'm
good at sex, so there's that, right? But, you know, being a great fuck, that's really hollow when it's
clear that she doesn't think you're a good enough person to get coffee with after.

"And then there's not even that." He's shaking his head while he says that. "There's not any of it. I
had access to something she needed, and my dick was the easiest way to manipulate me into giving it
to her." He bites his lip, still not looking at Tony.

"You feel used. You feel violated. You feel dirty. And so goddamn fucking stupid! She played me
for more than a year. That's almost as long as you played Jeanne, for, right, Tony?"

Tony nods, curtly.

"And the what ifs... Hours of what ifs. What if I had headed back and seen her messing around?
What if I had stayed with her a bit longer? What if I had broken up with her sooner? What if I had
been smarter? What if... Jeanne must have had a million of them, too."

"I've wondered if that's what it feels like to be raped. 'Cause I sure as hell didn't consent to what she
did to me, and Jeanne sure as hell didn't consent to what you did to her. Sure, no force, no bruises,
and you're not scared when it happens, so, not the same as violent rape. You're not sitting there,
shaking after. Maybe not. Maybe Jeanne wasn't. I was. Shaking that is. But I was shaking mad, not
shaking scared, at least, once I knew I wasn't going to go to prison for treason; I was shaking scared,
then. But, for me at least, force would have been easier; force would have been out of my hands.
Someone holds a gun to my head, there's nothing I can do about it.

"But she didn't do that. She was warm, and cute, and sexy. And I was lonely and horny. And then a
beautiful woman was smiling at me, listening to what I had to say, kissing me... I have to live with
being the stupid son-of-a-bitch who let someone else use my desire, my need for affection, and body
to turn me into a tool. I have to deal with being the one who was so bad at reading another person
that I couldn't tell I was being used until it was way too late. I've got to live with the fact that people
literally died, her among them, because she was able to play me. Because I wasn't smart enough to
"Jeanne never married. What a shock! All of your relationships after, there's that tinge of this hanging over it. Is it real? Am I reading this person well? You don't want to even guess how long it took before I could relax enough with another woman to even get a hard-on. And, I wasn't in love with Lee. I just liked her. But Jeanne, she loved you, right?"

Tony nods again.

"Part of Breena and I working was that she wanted to take it slow and wouldn't sleep with me until we were married. I wasn't just being good to her on that one. She didn't know it, not then, but those first few months, until I was sure about her, she was giving me the space I needed to be comfortable enough in trusting someone like that again."

Jimmy stops at that, watching Tony, who is sitting there, silent, letting him vent.

"We're friends, right? And I can see it, this pisses you off. What happened to me makes you angry. You've got a lot going on in your head right now, but some of it is that you really hate Michelle Lee because of what she did to me, and how bad it hurt me."

Tony nods at that, too. Because that's true, and he does, and he had no idea it hit Jimmy that hard, but… they barely knew each other back then. Been out for drinks a few times, but that was it.

"Jeanne was a person, just like me. She had friends. I bet they missed her when she ran away to Africa. I bet they hate you, the way you hate Lee right now." Jimmy rubs his eyes, noticing for the first time he's been crying as he's been saying this. "How did you do it, Tony? You're naked, in her arms, in her body, and she's so in love with you. You could feel it, right? The way she adored you. You couldn't not see it in her eyes and feel it in her touch. How do you lie to her, day after day after day, month after month?"

Jimmy waits a few beats to see if Tony will try to answer that, but he doesn't.

"Lee was saving her little girl. I hate what she did to me, hate that she didn't immediately go to you guys and get it fixed, 'cause you guys would have fixed it. Moved heaven and earth and killed everyone who needed to be killed to fix it, because that's what you do. But I can live with what she did, because I can understand it. Because if I didn't have you guys, I'd steamroller whoever I needed to to keep my girls safe, too.

"But I don't understand what you did to Jeanne. I can normally just not think about it. Usually I'm unaware of it. Literally didn't put it together until last July, 'cause you and her were over and done before the stuff with Lee and I. And I like you, and I want you in my life, and you're not that guy anymore, and I know that, I do. So… It's like there's a wall in your life, and anything before 2010, I just don't look at too hard. But right now, that wall's down, and I can't not look at what you did to her, because someone did it to me, too."

Jimmy stands up, back against the refrigerator. "So, no. You're not going to do anything about or to Helen. You literally and figuratively screwed her little girl and right now, she's out of her mind with grief because she just buried her daughter, and I know all about that, too. That's something else, I never wanted to know anything about…" Jimmy swallows hard. "But life didn't work out that way."

He rubs his face again. "And, um… you're on the bone marrow registry, and from everything I know, donating hurts like hell and takes you out of commission for a long time, and if you come up as a match for someone, you're going to donate bone marrow, even if I have to hold a gun to your head to make you do it. And I know it was a long time ago, and I know you can't change it, and that you wouldn't take that mission now. I know you're not that guy, not anymore. But… until I can get
that wall back up in my mind, I don't want to see you. You need something from autopsy, Ziva can get it."

And with that, Jimmy left.
A/N: Last one of these, really. For reference, it might be a good idea to re-read chapters 255 and 257.

Running. Usually running is good. Feet moving forward, speed, wind, earth below, sky above, quiet mind in between.

Usually.

Today isn't doing it for Ziva.

She can't get into her running zen. Can't quiet her mind.

The last time she had this hard of a time getting out of her mind when she ran, it was the day after Lt. Sanders died. She ran the loop from his direction, mourned the lost opportunity of him, missed him, and then tried to make herself forget.

In that she wore his hat every time she ran until it was destroyed when her apartment blew up, it's safe to say she didn't succeed.

She's tired. That's part of it. It's always difficult to find peace when you're aching tired.

She's sad. There's no way this will work out well. There's no happy ending where Jeanne and Tony get along and they all get to be some sort of functional extended family. They still don't know what they're going to do about this child. If he wasn't Jeanne's Tony would be all for trying to get involved in his life, but he is Jeannes, so they aren't sure.

Tony researched bone marrow donation most of the night, and she had a long chat with Draga about what sorts of rights a father has. Apparently, a DNA match doesn't offer much in the way of rights. According to him, the only reason he's been able to have any luck on getting shared custody of Kevin is because his name is on the birth certificate, and since the day he was born, Kevin has been listed as one of his dependents.

But Tony and Jeanne were never married, and because they've got no idea what she's got written on this child's birth certificate, it's entirely possible that even if they go to court, they cannot get visitation rights. If she's got another man's name on that certificate, and if Tony does not match for the bone marrow donation, he likely won't even have standing to demand a paternity test.

Assuming they can prove paternity, given the story of how this child came to be, it's likely they can't get visitation rights. Ziva knows how that case would go, she's spent more than enough time with lawyers to see that whoever Jeanne hires will make the defense that Jeanne was effectively raped, that the psychic damage on her of having Tony around will be too high, and that Tony has no rights to this child, at all.

And, since NCIS had no legal standing for the case against Le Grenouille, if said lawyer is really sharp, he'll counter-sue Tony for what he did to Jeanne. After all, there was no warrant, no court order, NCIS does not have jurisdiction over civilians engaging in civilian cases. A counter-suit on this would be horrendously embarrassing to NCIS and might actually land Tony in jail.

All of that is a heart ache.

Then there's fear. Jimmy sent them a list of links on bone marrow donation, another list on bone
marrow diseases. They'd been online, pretty much all night, reading over everything he'd sent them. From everything they've been able to find, parent-child matches are rare, really rare. So the possibility that this might work is almost non-existent.

From everything they were reading, it would have made more sense to use the child's own bone marrow. They've got some sort of technique to suck it out, clean it up, and put it back in again. Or, suck it out, muck around with it, and grow new, clean marrow from the stem cells. Either of those is way more likely to work, no rejection issues, and if Helen's hunted down Tony for this, it likely means those techniques have failed.

And if they've failed… If the cancer (if it is cancer, that seems most likely though) has come back…

If they've failed, attempting another transplant, from a foreign donor… Either there's a piece they're missing, or Helen and Jeanne are torturing this child because they aren't willing to let him go.

More heartache, because if that's true… If that's true then you have to do something about it. You don't let a child suffer, not like that, not if there's not much shot of it actually working. You don't just 'do something' to do something. The potential for healing has to outweigh the pain.

But, Lord, coming in, now, with 'I want access to my child' will be hard enough. 'I want access so you can stop medically torturing him, and let him die in peace…' Just the idea of trying to make that case makes Ziva clench her jaw so hard her teeth ache.

Beyond all of that there's anger.

Jeanne should have told him. She's said that like seven times now and keeps repeating it in her mind.

Jeanne should have told. A child has a right to know his father. And as soon as she knew she was pregnant she should have found Tony and told him.

Ziva keeps saying that to herself, building up her own anger with it. But each repetition is more hollow. Each time she says it, she musters less outrage at Jeanne.

And she knows why it's not working. Because as time goes by, and hours pass, and the more she thinks about this child, the more she has to think about Jeanne, and how this child came to be.

She can hold a moment's rage at Jeanne for not telling, and she wishes she could hold more, but in the end, thinking about, feet pounding the pavement, if the same thing had happened to her… If she had been the target, and she certainly could have been… Not like her father didn't have enemies galore, and it's not like he was easy to get to. Part of her training was to make sure she never did trust anyone, because that way she couldn't be used, not the way Jeanne was.

Her father knew there were Tonys out there. Her father made sure her boyfriends had full, deep, background checks. Her father drilled into her head that trust is dangerous, and trust could lead to deep, deep pain, so it was to be handed out slowly, carefully, only to people who had earned it with blood. And as Bodnar proved, even after it is earned in blood, it can be lost, so easily.

But… If her father was less careful. Or if Tali hadn't died… She would have been a ballerina, dancing in Paris or Moscow or New York. She would have had boyfriends. Men who came to see the shows, and if one of them had been kind, paid attention, loved her… If he was charming, and witty, and funny. If he lavished her with praise and attention and desire… If she had been the target, if a man had used her, lied to her, and gotten her pregnant… Would she have told him?

No, she never would have told him.
Jeanne had her baby, and then came back and tried to frame Tony for murder.

Ziva tries to think about what she would have done, how she would have reacted. She slapped the shit out of Ray, arrested him, and walked off. But that is NCIS Agent Ziva, who believes in things like law. And Ray wasn't using her, not the way Tony used Jeanne. She knew who he was, she knew what he did. She knew she was getting involved with a professional liar. She had already detached from him, had already begun to grow some distance when he tried to use her.

And it still hurt. And she still burned her tears with hate, and made Gibbs drive her home, and she turned away from him, not letting him see the pain, headed into her place, and beat the hell out of her pillows, ran ten miles, and then forced herself to be calm.

Then she went back to work, and buried all of it in the job.

What if it had been from day one? If from day one everything with Ray had always been an act… If one day she had a man she loved who was moving in with her, and the next it he was out to kill her father and she was pregnant…

What if Ray had done that?

No, she wouldn't have framed him for murder. And she wouldn't have stopped at just hitting him. She would have killed him. And that would have been that.

Confusion trumps anger. If she was the target, she'd rage, but she's been on Tony's side of it, too. She's run this op, twice, and both times she used her looks, her charm, her humor, and walked into a the target's home and killed him.

One time she seduced the target. One time she seduced his son.

The time it was the target, it went fast. Third date, back to his place, he had certain expectations of how that night was going to go. It didn't go that way. In, out, done, clean. She got everything in his hard drive, all of his files, and hasn't been back to Prague since.

The time it was the target's son, it went slow. Deep cover. Took months before he invited her home to meet his family. She eagerly accepted that invitation. His family was Catholic, devout, or at least his mother and sisters were, so they each had their own room. When Philippe suggested it was bedtime, that first night, she'd smiled at him, said she was heading to the kitchen to get a bottle of wine, and that he should meet her in bed in an hour. He'd grinned and headed off, huge smile on his face, looking forward to sneaking around.

She'd headed to his father's office, knocked quietly, and when he opened the door, all he saw was a pretty girl, with long curly hair, wearing a sundress and cute, little sandals. He'd smiled at her, too, and she'd asked him some sort of question about the family, stepping in, closing the door, setting him at ease. By the time the door was closed, she had him in a choke hold. Ten seconds later he was unconscious. A minute later he was dead. Two minutes after that, she walked out, with a bottle of wine, going to get some fresh air and enjoy the countryside.

It can be very difficult to get into a place, but it's usually not very difficult, especially if you are willing to walk and leave all of your things behind, to get out of one.

She walked away, found the motorcycle waiting for her three miles away, and was gone before anyone knew she was missing.

She's never regretted that kill, never thought twice about Philippe. But right now, she is, and she hates the way that feels. He probably looked for her when he noticed she wasn't in her room. He
may have been the one who found his father. It wouldn't have taken long after his family knew what
had happened to start putting it together, blame him for bringing home the woman who killed Papa.

She wonders, now, how he dealt with that.

Papa led a branch of the Basque Separatists. Now, she wonders if Philippe, who studied sculpture
and music in Barcelona, had been killed for bringing home the woman who killed his father.

Confusion and hate and regret slip to anger as her feet pound over the pavement. Anger at Tony. On
one level, the big level, the one she feels stupid for, there's just the rush of 'How could you possibly
be so fucking stupid?' It was a long time ago. She knows this about him. She knows his past is a
wasteland of reckless sexual encounters, any one of which may have produced a child.

When they were talking about it, before they got married, and she asked how many women he'd
slept with, his best guess was 'about a thousand.' She thought he was kidding until he broke it down.
First time at sixteen. He was forty-five when they had that conversation, so almost thirty years. Five
years with Wendy cut it down to twenty-four. Not much action from sixteen to eighteen. Call it
twenty-two years of an active sex life. He got to college and got to be one of the stars on the
basketball team. Two or three girls a week in college. Two or three a week for the year after Wendy.
He figured those five years covered about five hundred girls. The other seventeen years worked out
to about thirty women a year, or about one every other week. Factor in Spring Breaks in Mexico and
dry spells, and that was about right for him.

She thought she was okay with that. At the time, she was okay with that. She's had more than
enough partners of her own that she's not going to complain about what he did before they were
together.

But right now, especially knowing that Tony wasn't careful with Jeanne, that's really pissing her off.

And she's pissed at herself for being pissed about that. It can't be changed. None of this is blindsiding
her or a shock. But it still hurts. She's pissed that this hurts so much. Tony has a child. A child who
isn't hers, and that aches.

He's so skittish about making a baby with her, but he spent twenty years more or less spraying sperm
around at random like some sort of fertility garden sprinkler, but for her, for a woman he loves and
has a future with... No, with her, he's scared.

They talk about it in counseling. She knows rushing him is a bad idea.

And he's said that it's like standing on the edge of the cliff looking off. He can't make himself jump,
but that, if he just got a good hard shove, once he landed, he'd be fine. But he needs the shove. So,
she's shoving.

They're 'trying' for a baby. But she can feel he's not really comfortable with it. He can't fully relax
into it, though he's 'trying.' And she can feel it's getting better, but better and good aren't the same
thing and she doesn't know how to get him to good.

But with Jeanne, he could just be in the moment and 'forget.' With Jeanne, he could make a baby.
And that hurts so much worse than she thought it would.

Her phone chirps at her, and she stops running. You on your jog? From Jimmy.

She looks around, really noticing that she's about ten minutes from home. Yes.
Whole thing was a hoax. There is kid, but he was born in '10, he's not sick. Jeanne died last week, and Helen went a bit crazy.

She stares at that. For a good five seconds her head is completely blank. She's got no idea, at all, how to even begin to feel about it. Eventually, she feels like she can breathe. Like a huge weight is gone. And sure, some of this stuff won't go away just because this has, but the biggest part, the what do we do now part, that's gone.

Her shoulders slump, tension spiraling out of her, relief washing over her, pulling away a lot, but not all, of the anger and fear and hurt that's been aching through her for the last day.

Her phone chirps again. I haven't told Tony, yet. Want to talk to him, in person, alone. Is that okay?

What would Jimmy want to say to Tony about this on his own? Why?

Got some things to say to him about this. He's not going to like them. You might not, either.

Ice goes down her spine. There's no kid. It's a hoax… Jeanne's dead… Did she commit suicide? Lord, did the thing with Tony screw her up that badly? Does Jimmy want to protect her from that? Things about Jeanne? she texts quickly.

No. Anything I know about her, I'll tell you, too. Things about him and me. You want to be there for this, that's fine, just be easier the two of us.

That makes no sense to her at all. Why would Jimmy want to talk to Tony about Jeanne, and what would it have to do with him? Jimmy?

What do you remember about Michelle Lee?

And then she gets it. What would she have done if she was the target? How would she react if someone had spent months lying to her? God, Jimmy was the target. He can't be cool with this because it happened to him. She punches his number into her phone. A second later she says, "Hi."

"Hi, Ziva."

"I remember Lee. I was the only one she didn't try to convince she did the right thing."

"Not the only one."

She supposes that's likely true. She can't imagine what Lee might have said to Jimmy. "I'm sorry. I... knew, but..."

"Didn't put it together?"

"Yes."

"Because I'm a guy? And as long as I got laid, I was getting what I wanted, so what's the problem? Guys don't get used, they don't feel bad about it after, not if they get sex, right?"

She winces; he sounds so bitter and so hurt about that. The fact is that it never hit her, at all, that Jimmy got used, until two minutes ago. Why? Then she knows. "That's part of it, yes. Mostly though, because you ended it, before it blew up."

"Yeah. I did. Still bit me in the ass, though. Still got hauled in for questioning, for treason. Still... still had to deal with... all of it."
She can feel the pain in his voice. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well… Anyway, got some things to say to Tony. About using people. About sexually using someone. They aren't complimentary. He's unlikely to enjoy them. If you wanted to get yourself some breakfast, say for two hours or so, it's my treat."

She nods. The silence stretches for another second. She's got too much rolling around her mind right now, so she asks again, "It really is a hoax?"

She hears Jimmy sigh. "Yeah. It is. Jeanne was in a car accident last week. She died. Helen... I don't know how she came up with it, but making Tony hurt seemed like a good idea to her. I've already talked to Helen, she's not going to pull anything again." Jimmy stops for a second there. "Ziva, I'm sorry this screws you, too…"

Something feels off about that. He was sorry yesterday, too. Sorry that she was stuck with this mess, stuck with having to deal with the emotional fall out of her husband's stupidity. And yesterday, she definitely got the sense that Jimmy was not thrilled with Tony for having done something that would put her in this position, but that for the most part he was all about making sure they got through it as easily as possible.

But she's not feeling that anymore, and he's still apologizing. Ziva's starting to wonder what the hell just happened, because this is too much for sympathy.

"I really am. I'm sorry you're in the middle of this. I'm sorry this isn't just done, and we can't just all relax and kick back and let it go. I'm sorry, for you, to you, that I can't just let it go. I want to. I'm a lot happier not thinking about this. But, right now, I can't get this out of my head, because I was where Jeanne was. So, I've got to go yell at him. And I know I'm going to hurt him, and I know that's going to hurt you, and I'm really sorry about that, because I don't want to be hurting you, but I don't know how I can stop hating him without it hitting you, too."

It takes her a second to sort through all of that, and find the relevant part. Jimmy's already talked to Helen. Which means he's known about this long enough to find her and have a conversation with her.

"You've already spoken to Helen?" Her voice is cold.

"Yes."

"How long have you known?"

"Since around six last night." Twelve hours. He's known for twelve hours. "I got into Aiden, the boy's, medical records around then. Couldn't find him on the bone marrow registry, so I went into the Federal Medical Database. Then I looked Helen up, found when she was on shift, and made sure she'd never pull anything on Tony again."

Her eyes close and her hand fists. Jimmy went out of his way to find the child for them. He went to see Helen to protect them. And then he let them stew for a night. She's smiling, but it's not a happy gesture.

What would you do if it had been you?

"Ziva?"

"You and McGee were working together to find Aiden?"
"Yeah. Tim was coming up empty because he had a name, but the wrong birthday, so... technically you aren't supposed to look up people who aren't your patients, but... any doctor has access to any patient, because you never know who'll roll in your door. It was the most direct way to get the information about him."

She forces her fist to relax. He broke the law to find the child for them. Because he's their friend. He talked to Helen, because he didn't want anything bad to happen to them. When everything was going bonkers with Tony last summer, he was the one she spent hours talking with. He was the one who suggested they try marriage counseling. It was his house she stayed at. He's asking her permission to talk to Tony about this. Because he's her friend.

And he let them sit, because he's hurting, and he wanted them to hurt. No, he didn't want them to hurt. He wanted Tony to hurt, and he couldn't figure out how to do that without hurting her.

She exhales, loud. If Tony deserves any of this, she does, too. Jimmy doesn't know that, and she's thinking he's likely better off never knowing that, but...

And if Tony doesn't deserve this, and if she doesn't, then what is she saying to Jimmy? She's saying that what happened to Jimmy was okay. Because if it was wrong when Lee did it, then it was wrong when they did it. And if it wasn't wrong when they did it, then Jimmy's just got to suck it up and deal, because it was okay for Lee.

And it wasn't okay when Lee did it.

She hates this. She hates all of this, every single fucking second of this is torment. All of those hours... but... compared to what she would have done, if it had been her... "I accept your apology, Jimmy." Her voice is tight as she says it.

"Thank you. Anything I say or do to him that you think is over the line, you get as many free shots as you want on me." Of course, yesterday he gave her twenty minutes of free shots on him, because she was hurting. Yesterday, he let her literally hit him (well, he was dodging and moving around, too, but he put his physical body in the game, gave her the opportunity to beat it out on his skin) to make herself feel better.

And it's not the first time he's done that. Because, as of yesterday, anything she has ever needed from him, Jimmy has provided.

"You want to give Gibbs a call?" he asks as she's thinking about the fact that Jimmy will take literal, physical pain from her if it makes her feel better about herself. "Let him know. Tell him I'm handling it."

She sighs again. "I can do that."

"Thanks." He hangs up, and she puts her phone back in her pocket. Right now, talking to Gibbs sounds like a VERY good idea.

"Balance challenge." Gibbs says it like a swear word. You're knee's all together, so new exercises, working on all of you, not just leg strength. Jimmy had said to him the last time they had a Bootcamp in the gym. Then Jimmy stood on one foot, which didn't look hard at all, then he closed his eyes. When you can do it, each leg, for twenty seconds, no wobbling, we'll move up to the next level.

Gibbs is horrendously embarrassed at how hard it is to stand on one foot with his eyes closed. He hasn't actually fallen over, yet, but he has had to touch the other foot down on more than one occasion.
He can do it with his eyes open, no problem at all. He can probably stand on one foot for as long as he can stand on two, with his eyes open. He just slips into sniper mode, patient, balanced, still, and it's no problem at all. Once those little bastards close, his weight starts to shift, his ankle goes wobbly, and two seconds later, he's got his second foot on the floor.

He's not exactly feeling great this morning, and teetering around on one foot is not improving things. Bad sleep, got some, but the ghosts of the whole Jeanne thing kept his sleep light and his dreams confusing.

But it is morning, and in the morning, he gets up, takes care of business, and then he does his exercises, so he's doing the damn things, and Mona's being 'helpful' by occasionally nosing one of his hands (he's holding them out to help balance, and she keeps thinking this is an offer for petting, so she noses him, and he tips over.) He spends five minutes on his left leg, trying to get to twenty seconds without wobbling, failing at it, and is getting ready to do five on his right when Mona looks up, and suddenly trots down the stairs.

Someone's coming in, fast.

Gibbs tosses on a t-shirt and some sweats and heads down just as Ziva walks in.

She's on her own, in her jogging gear, and he doesn't know exactly what's going on with her right now. Right now she's snuggling Mona, because it's easy to take comfort from a pet. He sits on the floor next to her, where her face is pressed against Mona's neck, and he strokes her back.

"News?"

She looks up at him and nods. "Yes. Jimmy called. The whole thing was a hoax."

Gibbs feels a hot flare of rage. "Did Jeanne put her mom up to it?"

Ziva shakes her head, sadly. "According to Jimmy, Jeanne died last week, and Helen…"

Gibbs nods, getting it, not needing more words. "C'mere." He wraps her in a hug and kisses the top of her head. It's hitting Gibbs, as he's holding her, that this is not relief, there's some of that, but Ziva's doing her sad thing, and her angry thing, and her I-want-to-explode-but-there's-no-one-to-hit thing.

She's not talking, because she doesn't much like to talk about this stuff, but… there should be some happy here, right? He's feeling a lot more relieved right now, so she should, too, right?

Also, half the team is missing.

So, he quietly asks, 'Where's Tony?'

"At home. Jimmy's yelling at him."

Gibbs blinks at that. Ziva's got mad radiating off of her in all directions, so his first guess is that Jimmy is yelling at Tony for being a selfish dork who put his wife in a situation where she had to deal with this crap. Because that's a Jimmy thing to do.

Ziva pulls back, looks at Gibbs. "Can we run?"

He nods. She wants to run it off, that's fine with him. "Let me get my sneakers on." He gets up, grabs them, and sees Mona head back to Ziva and rub the top of her head against Ziva's chin.
He's laced up and they're on the porch when Ziva says, "He found out about Aiden, the child, last night. Didn't tell us until now."

Gibbs stops dead and stares at Ziva, he blinks slowly and licks his lips. He knows he heard what she said. Not like she mumbled or something. But, he can't make himself understand.

She can see him staring at her, trying to put the pieces together.

"I was running, thinking, too much thinking all night long, because we were sitting there steeping in this… torture… And I'd been making myself not… I kept saying she should have told Tony, because then I could be angry at her, because I don't want to be angry at him, not right now, not when he's hurting that bad.

"But I could not keep thinking she should have told him. I started to think about what if it had been me. It could have been me. So many men wanted my father dead, for so many reasons. If Tali had lived and… I could have had a life where I would have been a target.

"If it had been me, I never would have told him. Never. And I would have done much, much worse to a man if I found he had been lying to me for months, almost a year, using me like that. Ray used me for a few days, and that… that hurt. Weeks? Months? Everything, all of it a lie?" She shakes her head, and then meets Gibbs' eyes, saying, voice soft, dangerous, "I would have done much, much worse."

Gibbs is feeling very confused, but he's standing there quietly, waiting, letting her get it out.

"Then Jimmy calls, and it's all a lie. And I was starting to feel better, some, about the child and what we'd have to do, at least. There's still, our own… issues… And Jimmy is apologizing to me, which did not make much sense. Because, he had not done anything to me, but he is being very sincere and…

"And then it did make sense, because he has known since last night. He went to talk to Helen, to make sure she would not try anything again, last night. And he let us sit. And… And I want to hit him so hard. Because… the worry, and the fear, and the hurt… But… What if it had been me? What if I had been the target? What would I have done to a man who used me like that? If I had been a target, what would I do to any man who used a woman like that?"

Gibbs is still a step behind. He's getting Ziva starting to feel for Jeanne, but he's not seeing how Jimmy fits into this.

Ziva can see that Gibbs isn't putting it together on his own, either. "Do you remember Lee?"

Gibbs nods, pieces snapping into place.

"Jimmy was the target. And… somehow that never hit me before today. Somehow, I never put that together.

"He let us sit to get back at Tony. Because he knows Tony used Jeanne as a target. And, I want to hit him for it, hard. Want to break a hand on him, because it hurt." She's staring up at Gibbs, and her face is making it clear exactly how bad last night was. He'd offered to stay with them, but they left anyway. He should have gone with them.

"And I understand why he did it. Because twelve hours would not even begin to cover what I would want to do to someone who did that to me. And… And I have my own Jeanne, but Jimmy does not know that. A man I never thought twice about, but… But today, I am thinking about him, wondering what happened to him."
"I hate this whole thing, Gibbs. I hate every angle of it. I hate every inch of it. I hate every minute of this. And I am so mad at everyone right now." Ziva squares her shoulders. "Can we just run?"

"For as long as you need."

So they run. Running is good, because it's letting Gibbs get things into place. Sort of. Jimmy found the kid. Last he heard Tim was looking, but… Okay, Jimmy found him, which means… Medical databases, Tim doesn't have access to them, and Jimmy does.

So, Tim stalls out, Jimmy gets into the game.

He finds Aiden.

And then…

And then Gibbs stalls out because he's not sure how this works. He wants to ask more, but she very clearly does not want to talk.

So they keep running.

Round the block, through the park, down the side street, and back again. It's a mile and a half loop, he usually does it twice. But when they get back to his house, she stops, and goes to sit on the porch. Of course, judging by how she looked and what time it was, she's already done her full morning jog, on top of this.

He pats Mona. "That's it girl. Go play."

She trots off to the backyard. She'll probably be back with her ball, soon.

"I am so angry at him."

Gibbs nods. What Jimmy pulled looks like a shit thing to him. "Want me to go slap him upside the head?"

She laughs, a little, at that.

"He is already slapping himself right and left."

"Wait, Jimmy pulled this, but he feels bad about it?"

She blinks slowly. "I was talking about Tony. But yes, if you want to slap Jimmy, I'd approve."

Gibbs nods. A visit to NCIS just went onto the schedule for today.

She half-smiles, self-deprecating, not happy. "It feels stupid. I know all of this about him. I knew about it when it was happening. I've known about it since, and… I was okay with it. I had forgiven him for that year. I thought I was at peace with it, but…"

"But it's back?"

She nods. "It's rule number one, Gibbs. Don't screw your partner! I was his partner, and that year... The lies, lie after lie after lie, and I was so worried for him, and he just left me hanging."

"He had orders."
"When do we ever follow orders to screw each other? It's a case. I can't talk about it. When I can, I'll tell you.' How hard would that have been?"

Gibbs nods. "And you two were more than partners, then, right?"

Ziva's mildly surprised to hear that, but only mildly. Of course, he figured it out. "Not once you got back. His team, his rules. Your team, your rules. How did you know?"

"The way he looked when you called me in for help instead of him. The way you were acting. Known a few jealous women over the years."

She inclines her head at that. She was jealous, and worried, and angry. Anyone who knew what it looked like could identify it.

She had called Gibbs in because she didn't want Tony to get in trouble. He read it as she called Gibbs in because she didn't trust him to save her. They couldn't get past that, and when it was clear Gibbs was staying, she ended things. "His team, his rules," she had said to Tony, and left him in the break room on his own.

"I should be done with this. Yesterday I was done with this. Today, I want to slap him for being stupid. He got in too deep and didn't ask for help, and…" She sighs, gritting her teeth. "He wasn't careful with Jeanne."

Gibbs can feel that's a live wire, but he can also see she's not ready to touch it yet.

"I want to dig Jenny up and shoot her. She knew how to run that mission right. She knew Tony was not trained for it or capable of pulling out smooth. She knew he wasn't hard enough for it.

"We had both run honeytraps. We'd run one together. I know she knew how to do it right. How to get in and out clean. How to take out the target. And… and now, all I can think is that Jeanne was her target, because I am certain she did not tell Tony that this was supposed to end with him killing Benoit. He wasn't hard enough for Jeanne; he certainly wasn't hard enough for wetwork."

He rubs her back, gently. He knows he can't fix this, can't make it right or better. "You want some breakfast?"

"Sure. Send Jimmy a bill."

He looks at her curiously.

"Breakfast is on him." She shakes her head. "I hate being angry at him, too. He asked my permission to talk to Tony, offered to let me sit in on it. He apologized to me because he didn't want me to hurt about it, but couldn't figure out how to not hit me, too. He let me beat it out on him yesterday, gave me a huge pile of information, found the kid, and talked to Helen.

"And he let me sit. Once he figured out it wasn't real, that this wasn't something we'd have to deal with for the rest of our lives, that we weren't going to be burying a child or dealing with a massive custody battle, something in his head switched and…"

Gibbs nods, that makes a more sense, once the immediate danger was over, Jimmy could stop just looking out for his friends and start to think about himself. "Look out when a good man goes to war."

"Yeah. I shouldn't have let Tony take that alone. But I'm afraid that if I get in the middle of it, I'm going to start yelling at both of them."
Gibbs nods. They're in his kitchen now. "Eggs?"

Ziva nods.

"Milchig or parve?"

"Doesn't matter. I have not eaten yet."

She starts the coffee while he gets his pan set and begins cooking up the eggs. Once he's got the eggs on plates and they're both sitting down, he says, "Wanna tell me the rest of it? There's more than fallout from Jeanne here."

She shrugs.

"It's personal."

"Okay. But... you want to say it... It's okay, you know?"

She nods, chewing, sipping her coffee. Not saying anything.

"Want me to tell Jimmy these eggs were coated in gold and had those really expensive mushrooms cooked into 'em?"

She smiles a little, appreciating him trying to joke with her. "With caviar and powdered diamonds on top."

"I can do that." He thinks about it a bit more seriously. "Two thousand dollar eggs? And maybe a long weekend somewhere nice for you and Tony? Get your personal stuff talked out?"

She sighs... "We are talking. We have talked." Another quiet moment. "I know all of this. I have known all of this. I knew it before we got married and signed on anyway. But it's harder, now. This child wasn't his. But the next one? Or the one after that? They have to be out there. No way there isn't at least one, and probably more.

"Once he knew, he wanted to know that child. He wanted to be part of his life. That he was Jeanne's complicated things, but if this hadn't been Jeanne... If it had been one of the ladies from a bar or a club... If that had been the case he would have dived right in..."

"But with me... he is scared. With me, he doesn't want to make a baby. With me he isn't interested in just jumping in." She stabs her egg with her fork. "That's not entirely fair. Like I said, we have talked, we are talking, and we're trying for a baby but... that is how it feels. He could knock up strangers with abandon and glee, but with me..." she's looking at her eggs, then she looks up at Gibbs. "Got anything that makes this better?"

He shakes his head. "Want me to slap him upside the back of the head when I get done with Jimmy?"

She shakes her head, and looks over at the clock. "I should get going. Still have to get ready for work. Have to see what sort of a mess is at home."

Gibbs nods.

"What are you going to do?"

She shrugs. "Right now, he's having a worse day than I am, so I will be there for him and I will support him, and I will make him feel better. Tomorrow, he will be there for me. And we'll get it
worked out."

Gibbs nods. "Jimmy?"

She shrugs. "I have already accepted his apology. We're not doing carpentry this week for bootcamp, though."

Gibbs nods at that, too. "Okay. Not going to the house today. I'll have my cell on, and I'll head over to NCIS later. You want me, you track me down, okay?"

"Okay."

She stands up to go, and he does too, hugging her close for a moment, kissing the top of her head.
A/N: Turns out I lied about these being identical. Only tiny changes between today's and the next update, but there are some.

There's only so much shit a person should have to take in one day. And yesterday poured about two years' worth on top of Tony's head. And today added at least another week's worth. And it's only 6:45.

And right now, Tony doesn't know where he is or which end is up.

Jimmy came in like a small, angry tornado, dumped… a lot of shit on him, and, he's sure, when he's a bit more sober and a bit less… whatever this is… shocked probably, that more of what Jimmy said will hit him, but right now…

He finishes his drink. He closes the windows on his computer, one at a time, shutting down information on lymphoma and leukemia, x-ing out of how bone marrow transplants work, hoping he never, ever needs to get this deep into this sort of thing again.

Yesterday his son was dying. Today he's not. Not dying. Not his son. Not… any of it. Right now, there is no custody case looming. There's no fighting with Jeanne about possible treatments. There's no facing Jeanne at all. There's no fear of having this… feeling, whatever it is... at the idea of this child, turning to ash and ripping his heart out.

And Tony's sure that, as whatever this is fades, all the rest of it'll hit, but right now… Right now his son isn't dying, and that's all he needs.

He's still sitting at his kitchen table, little bit drunk, mostly feeling confused, like he's got whatever the emotional equivalent of whiplash is, when Ziva comes in.

He glances at the clock and notices she's been gone for almost two hours. "Long jog."

She inclines her head. "Jimmy called me, said he wanted to talk to you alone." She looks Tony over, sitting next to him. "I take it he did."

Tony nods.

He doesn't look nearly as bad as she expected him to be. "Are you okay?"

He shrugs. "I'm better than I probably should be. He had a lot of things he needed to say. I didn't have anything good to say back. I don't think I've ever seen him that mad before. Not at a person, at least." He touches the bourbon bottle. "Between that and the boy not being sick, I know I missed some of it, which was probably a good thing. He got really fired up and wasn't entirely making sense the whole time… I think he knew what he was saying, but he was crying for some of it, so I didn't get it all, but I was with it enough to know asking him to repeat himself was a bad plan. I got enough, and the short version is he doesn't want me in the morgue anytime soon."

Ziva sighs. She looks at the bottle, it's at least a drink lower than it was when she left. Tony's not drunk; she knows drunk Tony, and this isn't it, but he's not sober either. He's been keeping himself steadily buzzed all night. She looks at the clock. "Come on, shower time."
"Need to call Gibbs, don't want—"

"I have already talked to him. He's relieved."

"Probably won't be when he sees how this blew up."

She tilts her head, taking his hand in hers, and gently tugging him up, walking him toward their shower. Once they get in there, once clothing is off, and water is rushing over them, he feels himself start to clear up, feels some of the euphoria of his-son-isn't-dying fade.

He feels what Jimmy said to him start to hit.

And Ziva sees it; she says, "Benoit sold the weapons that killed tens if not hundreds of thousands of people."

"I know. I know he wasn't a good guy. The world's a better place without him. I know. And maybe if I'd arrested him, that'd help."

"Every western government was trying to get him, and none of them succeeded. No one ever scraped together enough proof to hold him. Traditional tactics had been used for more than a decade and failed."

Tony shakes his head. "Except they didn't. Kort was already in his organization. He made me the first time he saw me, and Jen knew he was onto Grenouille. It wasn't enough to take him down, she had to be the one who took him down. All that crap that followed, that was him discrediting her to keep the CIA in charge of it. I know what you're doing," he kisses her "and I appreciate it, but… come on, Jimmy's a fucking doctor and he could see the tactics on that mission never worked. I was a cop with fifteen years' experience, no way I should have said yes to that, not without a whole lot more information, not the way Jen wanted to run it."

He looks at Ziva, naked, wet, in front of him, trying to make him feel better about this pile of shit and what he did that got them into it. "He said we're supposed to be the good guys, that it's our job to look out for the Jeannes. He said a lot of other things, but that's the one that hit hardest, because it was true. I'm a cop. It's my job to protect innocent people, and I didn't do it."

"He said I kept on that case because I loved how Jeanne treated me, because I loved me more than anyone or thing else. And he was right. I knew how to get out of it. I knew how to end it. I was having a hard time looking in the mirror from halfway into that operation, but I just kept on doing it."

"I should have never taken that case. When he first found out about Grenouille, Gibbs tried to make me feel better about lying to him, said I was under orders to lie, but I wasn't… Not exactly. Never ordered. 'Deep cover mission,' she said, 'between her and I.' I asked if he would have lied to Franks, and he left without answering. Because he wouldn't have. Because that would have broken One."

"Even if the tactics worked, even if it had made sense, even if we weren't tromping all over the CIA's case, I shouldn't have taken it, because she asked me to break One for it."

He looks at Ziva, and kisses her again. "I never said it, but I should have, and I shouldn't have done it in the first place, but… I'm sorry I spent so long lying to you about it. I'm sorry I made you worry."

She smiles at him and kisses back. "We have many lies and worries in the past between us. They are dead. They should be dead." She kisses him again. "I want them to be dead."

He touches her cheek. "But they aren't, are they?"
"No."

He sighs and closes his eyes, nodding. "Let's get through today, do whatever needs to be done, get home early, get some good sleep, and go at it tomorrow? I'm too tired and fried for much today."

Ziva nods, that sounds like a good plan to her.

Tony's just pulling on his pants when his phone rings. Dispatch comes up on the ID.

"Case?" Ziva asks.

He nods, listening to the details. She grabs her phone and begins texting Bishop and Draga, letting them know to get in as fast as they can.

"Okay, got it Charlie," he says to the dispatcher after a minute.

Ziva's looking up from her phone, waiting.

"Dead body on K Street. Metro thinks suicide, but he's one of ours, so they're handing him over."

Her phone buzzes. She reads and says to Tony. "Draga's two minutes from the office already. Bishop is still at home."

"Tell him to gas up the van and meet us there."

"Okay."

Doesn't matter how deep in the shit you are, you're still having a better day than your victim.

They don't talk much through the ride to the victim's home. If he is a victim. Ziva tells Tony about talking to Gibbs, and about Jimmy apologizing to her, and about why he was apologizing to her. That Jimmy had intentionally waited twelve hours was one of the things Tony missed in the rush of my-son's-not-dying, or Jimmy didn't flat out say it, or it was one of the garbled bits, or some combination of the three.

However it works out, Tony knows now, and he's less-than-thrilled. And maybe it's just tired, maybe it's that some of the things Jimmy said really hit him, maybe it's just that he wants this shit-storm out of his life, but less-than-thrilled is about all he's able to muster right now.

K Street is the land of the Lobbyists, filled with expensive high-rise apartments, high end cars, and oodles of oodles of money. Their victim's home is no exception to that.

They go in, take over from Metro, secure the scene (bathroom), and while they wait for Jimmy and Dr. Allan, Bishop takes pictures of everything, and Tony and Ziva talk to Major (Ret) Ian Kimmel's nearest and dearest.

Apparently he lived alone. Was last seen two days ago. The cleaning lady had let herself in, and gotten a hell of a shock when she went in to tidy up the bathroom.

Major Kimmel was in a tub filled with blood, dead.

No weapon or wounds they can see, but the water in the tub is up to Kimmel's chest, and it's so murky with blood it's impossible to see through.
They'd only been on the scene for ten minutes when Jimmy and Allan head in. They've got the gurney and their gear. The rest of the MCRT team pulls back to give them room in what is a spacious bathroom, but it's still a bathroom, so it's not exactly a comfortable space for six adults, a body bag, a gurney, and a dead body.

Jimmy eyeballs the room, the space available, the dead body. "Body bag on the floor, Dr. Allan."

"Yes, Doctor."

While Allan spreads the bag on the floor next to the tub, Jimmy makes sure to get the air temperature and the water temperature, both are the same, 70 degrees. He'll get body temp when they get the Major out.

Jimmy looks behind him, sees the bag is all spread out. There's a collection of large, clean, fluffy towels on the towel rack. "Towels around the bag, he's going to drip and Abby will want the liquid. Then down to the van, grab the full arm-length protective gloves."

"Any idea of time of death?" Tony asks.

Jimmy looks up at him, answers cool and professional, no anger in his voice. "He was last seen two days ago, right?"

Tony nods.

"Then not more than two days ago." And while that is a smart answer, that's an almost verbatim 'Ducky' smart answer that Ducky or Jimmy would whip out at any crime scene when asked for a time of death way before there was any way for him to know. "I don't know what temperature the water was, how long he was in it before he died." Jimmy gets his hand behind Major Kimmel's head. "He feels room temperature. Can't be more than a few degrees warmer than the air." He nudges Major Kimmel's head; it moves. "He's either out of rigor or hasn't gotten there, yet."

Dr. Allan finishes with the towels. "But it'd have to be at least a few hours, right? Even if the water was cold and could chill him down fast, it'd take a while for everything to settle into one temp?"

"Correct, Dr. Allan."

Allan nods, pleased, and heads off to get the protective gloves.

Jimmy looks up at Tony. "He's probably already out of rigor mortis, given the temperature of everything, but we'll make sure. Once we get him back, we'll check every fifteen minutes for rigor. If he's not there in two hours, that means he's on the other side of it, either way that'll give me a better idea of time of death." From there, Jimmy shuts up, which is out of character for him, waiting for Allan. He's back in two minutes. They glove up.

"Very carefully, Dr. Allan. If this is a suicide, there's likely a very sharp object in this water somewhere."

Jimmy gets a good hold on Kimmel's shoulders. Allan gets his feet, and they carefully lift him from the bath and lay him on the body bag.

"We'll have to get him rinsed off to know for sure, but I'm not seeing any defensive wounds." Jimmy points to the two long, precise cuts along the Major's thighs. "Slit femoral arteries. Given his position, and depending on water temperature, he could have bled out in less than a minute with those cuts." Jimmy sniffs and stirs the water in the bath lightly. "Apparent lack of fecal matter in the tub indicates premeditation. Suicide or a very well-staged homicide. Blood tox'll help us know for sure."
Allan zips up the body bag.

Jimmy turns to Tony. "I'll send Dr. Allan up with my report as soon as it's ready." Then he turns back to Allan. "Ready?"

Allan nods.

"Careful footing, the floor is going to be slippery, and these protective shoe covers provide no traction."

Allan nods again, re-bracing himself, ready to lift. And once again, they both lift, taking Major Kimmel to the gurney, and from there, to further examination.

Once they're back in the van, heading back toward the Navy Yard, Allan asks, "I take it you and Tony are not pleased with each other, right now?"

Jimmy nods, tensely.

"It's not my business, and I'm not interested in gossip, but… Do I need to get pissed at him, too?"

Jimmy looks at Allan, and smiles at him, pleased by that display of loyalty. Then he shakes his head. "No. It's between me and him."

"You and him. No, you and him and Ziva? Just… with that condom comment, and her wanting to fight in the middle of the day…"

"Oh. No! He's not cheating on her! He's not that guy. Everything is from a long time ago. Turns out that was a hoax, anyway. One of…" It hits Jimmy how bad this load of crap'll look, and that he doesn't want Allan hating, or even not liking Tony. Because Tony now is not Tony then, and Tony now does not need to be judged based on Tony then. (And yes, Jimmy is aware of exactly what he just thought, and yes, it is making him a bit squirmy.) "Dr. Allan, yesterday's situation was a mess. But it's a private mess. Everything involved in it happened a long time ago, but it hit me pretty hard yesterday. Tony and I'll be okay again, eventually. Beyond that, I'd appreciate it if you left it alone."

"Certainly Dr. Palmer."

"Thank you."

Ziva's checking any and every place she can think of for a possible suicide note when her phone buzzes.

_Have a few minutes? From Tim._

She stares at that, and another piece of Jimmy's apology slips into place. Tim was looking for the child, Jimmy found him. They would have worked together, which means at some point Jimmy got Tim to hold off on telling them. Maybe… Tim could have just handed it off, gone home… That doesn't feel right.

_Why? Are you looking to apologize to me, too? _She texts back.

_Yes. _She winces when she sees that. _If you'll accept one. Kind of hoping to talk. You in the bullpen? _

_On scene._
Oh.

That was a very long night, Tim.

Yes. I imagine it was. I am sorry that backing Jimmy meant hurting you. She exhales quickly. Looks like Jimmy stuck at least him, and knowing how they work, Abby, too, in the middle. And they picked Jimmy.

I'm not the only one who got hurt.

I know. But since we're not all three of us together, I'm just aiming for you. I'll talk to him, too.

Good. When we get a bit of time, we'll be down.

Thank you.

In the hours between getting on the scene to getting back to the Navy Yard, Tony goes from shell shocked to angry.

He doesn't like what Palmer did, but he can understand it. He's not always the sanest guy in the room if you hit him on one of his hot button issues, and he's wishing he had actually talked to Jimmy back in July, the first time it hit his radar, because that probably would have saved them a lot of this.

But he didn't. He knew this hit Jimmy wrong. He knew it was an issue. But Jimmy buried it, so he did too, because there's nothing he wanted to do less than have a heart to heart with Palmer about Jeanne.

Except, now that he's been through the last night and this morning, he's thinking that heart to heart would have been a good idea.

So, he gets Jimmy. He doesn't like Jimmy right now. He's not in any, way, shape, or form happy with Jimmy, and next bootcamp is going to be very interesting, but he gets it. Tony kind of wishes he didn't get it, that he could just cocoon himself into 'poor little picked on me' but he can't, not for this, not for Jimmy.

McGee, on the other hand, is a whole other book of other stories. Once Ziva let him know that McGee was in on it, too, he found someone he could be really good and fucking mad at. McGee is getting his ass kicked from one side of Cybercrime to the other and back again and then he's going to let himself really express how mad he is.

Strategy time. Tim figures he doesn't have all that long before Tony or Ziva, or Tony and Ziva are in his office looking for some payback.

So… lay on his back, expose his belly, and be really upfront about knowing exactly what he did, why he did, and that he'll do whatever they want to make it better?

Err… He sighs.

That's probably the right strategy for Ziva. Tony's likely a different story.

It's been a while since he's been on the apologizing end of things, but he knows sometimes you want an apology and sometimes you just want to hit. And right now he doesn't know if Tony wants abject apology, or if he wants someone to kick.
"You think I deserved that?" Tony asks two hours later as he and Ziva storm into Tim's office. Tim watches both of them for a second, Ziva's tired, Tony's running on angry.

He takes a quick breath and hopes this is the right plan.

He stands up, side-steps Tony, ignoring him, and heads right over to Ziva, kicking his door shut, and closing the blinds on his office as he goes.

Once they're private, he faces Ziva and says, "Ziva, it was intentional, I knew it was going to hurt, I did it anyway because I valued Jimmy's desire for revenge over your happiness. I am taking full responsibility for this. My lack of action hurt you; I know it. Anything you want, anything you need, whatever it is, I am at your complete disposal."

He didn't see the strike that split his lip. He felt it. His head is ringing and he can taste blood, but as best as he can tell, Ziva didn't move.

Tim bows his head. "Whatever you need to do."

Ziva tilts his head up, so he's looking her in the eye. "Next time you feel torn, like you have to pick sides, you grab your phone, and you call all of us, and we talk about it as a family."

Tim nod. "Yes, Ma'am."

Ziva nods back at him. Tony's behind him, and he flicks his eyes toward Tony, hopefully signaling, *I'm doing this on purpose, I hope it's the right thing.* She gives him a curious look in response.

"Stop me if this is wrong." He mouths it, no sound, but she nods minutely, so it looks like she got it.

Then he turns to face Tony, standing right up in front of him, eye to eye, and very calmly says, "Yes."

Tony's eyes just about fall out of his head, and he hears Ziva shift slightly behind him, but she doesn't grab his shoulder, so he doubles down.

"You deserved every second of that, and for a hell of a lot more than what Jimmy called you on. You and me, last night, that evens us up for all the-"

"Even? How could this possibly be even…" And Tony was off, hot, angry words spewing out of him at a very high rate of speed.

And Tim keeps egging him on, smartass comment after smartass comment, pushing him that much harder, that much angrier.

Tony's not much of a puncher. He can punch, and will punch, but between basketball and football, Tony tends to start a fight with a bull-rush. (That's part of why Tim is right in front of him, he wants to let Tony get it out, but he doesn't want to get killed. So he's making sure Tony doesn't have enough room to get full speed up and use the fact that he's got twenty pounds on Tim and momentum to his advantage.) So, it's not a rush, but he does start out with a hard shove, and Tim's already braced for it, so he doesn't go down, which seems to piss Tony off even more.

Tony's a lot like a firework. He burns angry and hot and bright, but not for very long. After about three minutes of yelling and hitting, (and yes, Tim is both dodging and blocking, as previously stated,
he's not looking to get killed today, just let him get the angry out.) he'd blown off everything he had
to say about how last night did not even begin to come close to any of the shit he'd ever pulled on
Tim and that there was no possible way that any of that was even in the neighborhood of "even" and
that if he was such a bad fucking friend that he thought "even" was even in play that he could go
fuck himself sideways with a flamethrower (Tony's actually got an impressive command of cuss
words. Some of them would have even shocked the Admiral).

But, after three minutes, he's glaring at Tim, panting slightly, face red, fists curled, but from the looks
of it, out of words, and just feeling quite hurt.

Tim waits another two seconds, makes sure he's done, stands up, and then puts his hand on Tony's
shoulder. Tony tries to shrug it off, but Tim keeps the contact, and says, "No, Tony, I didn't think
you deserved that. I just figured you wouldn't find it very satisfying to just yell at me if I laid there
and said I was sorry about it." He lets go of Tony's shoulder. "Better?"

Tony blinks. God does he have a big 'fuck with me' sign on his back today? But, he thinks about it,
about how it would have felt if Tim just stood there and kept saying I'm sorry. He nods, stiffly. He
actually is feeling a better at really getting to let it go.

Better and done aren't the same thing, though.

"If I didn't deserve it, why'd you go along with it?"

Tim points to one of the chairs, for Tony, and pulls his desk chair around to campfire up. "When we
first found the information, I had my phone out, your number up, thumb about to hit the button when
he stopped me. You've seen him today, right? So you know how bad he was hurting—"

"Do you have any idea how bad I was hurting?" Tony says, voice hard, glaring at Tim.

"As much as anyone who's never been there can, yes."

Tony's eyes narrow at that. He's not sure if the idea that Tim didn't know what he was doing would
have hurt more or less than the idea that he did.

Ziva settles in, just watching.

"I wanted to make you feel better, and I wanted to make him feel better, and I couldn't do both, so
when it came down to it, he's never pulled any shit on me, but you have, so I went with him."

McGee's got that obnoxiously earnest look on his face as he says that.

"He's hurting because of bad memories of something entirely outside of his control. You're hurting
because of your own screw up. I'd assume, in a similar situation, if my own bad decisions were
biting me in the ass, and the fact that I'd made those decisions was hurting Jimmy, you'd make the
same choice."

Earnestness plus logic is even more annoying. Earnestness plus logic with not a single trace of malice
or joy or… Shit. It's really hard to stay mad at McGee when he's just sitting there, waiting to get
dumped on some more. Tony's actually wishing the smartass would come back so he could have
another go at him.

Tim continues filling them in with what happened last night. "Jimmy cracked the case for you. I was
stuck. Nothing left. Aiden Benoit was coming up on nothing I had. He looks at it and uses his ID to
break into the kid's medical records. And I'm about to call you when he says stop. I've got three
McGee stops at that, and Tony can tell by the look on his face that that option did not in any way ever occur to him. He thinks about that. He inhales, exhales, mind very obviously whirling around, and after a minute says, "Apparently, I do think you deserve it. Shit. I'm..." McGee's doing that annoying thing where Tony can actually see the synapses firing away in his head, trying to get everything in order. "Damn it, I thought I was just backing him, but... Yeah... Should have thought of D. D was obvious."

Tony doesn't know what to do with that. And Tim's rapidly thinking through something, eyes far away, with that 'processing' look on his face.

After a minute, his eyes come back to Tony. "I had to watch you die, in real time, on satellite, and then help clean up your charred corpse, because you didn't feel like letting us in on the full mission. I thought I was over that. Hadn't thought about it in a long time, but... I think that's why I didn't think of D.

"If you'd let me in, you could have had a tracker on you. Could have been a tiny, little thing, in your watch or something, something you would have kept on your body. But I didn't know you were still undercover. Thought you were done after Kort made Ducky. So I didn't have any signal, anything that could let me know you were still alive." They both hear Ziva shift slightly in her seat at that, and Tim remembers how much those hours of not knowing hurt her, too. "If you had had that tracker, we could have had people on you, we could have picked you and Grenouille up, and gotten the whole thing wrapped up, with arrests, that day.

"It was hours before we knew it wasn't you, longer before we knew what happened to you. And you came in and pretty much laughed at me for being hurt because I had to help Jimmy and Ducky get your charred corpse out of a bombed car. So, yeah, apparently I do think you deserved some shit for that. Because otherwise I would have thought of talking him out of it, because that's not rocket science, and if I was truly going at it as someone trying to minimize both of your pain, I would have come up with that."

McGee doesn't look particularly pleased with himself right now. "Tony, it doesn't matter why. I did it intentionally. I knew it was going to suck. I knew it would hurt. And I picked him and his pain over you and yours." He's looking Tony straight in the eye as he says, "You're welcome to do anything and everything you like to me make yourself feel better about that. Whatever you require of me to make this right, I will do."

Tony glares at Tim. Right now he's feeling too defeated to even come up with something that might make him feel better about this. He hadn't realized they'd watched the car blow up, and it's just hitting him how terrible seeing that corpse, believing it was him, would have been. He's starting to think he probably owes Ziva an even bigger apology for that case than he gave her.

Tim turns to Ziva. "Ziva, as I said, anything. Wash your car, ten rounds at bootcamp, do your taxes, all of the above, anything."

She stands up, shaking her head slightly. "My father used to say, 'Do not apologize. Learn from your mistake, and do not do it again.'"
"I won't."

"Then we are good."

Tony stands up, too. He looks around, tries to find a joke or something. McGee can see what he's aiming for. "I'd offer to do all your paperwork, but I kind of already did."

Tony nods. "That car better sparkle when you're done with it."

Tim nod. He can do that. He takes three steps to his desk, grabs his keys, and hands them to Tony. "Swap with me? It'll be gleaming in the morning."

Tony hands his over and heads off.

"What do you have, Abby?" Tony asks as he heads to the lab.

"Good stuff, lots of good stuff. First off, no prints on the razor, but it was in water for more than long enough to dissolve prints, and of course, it's covered in the victim's DNA. No shocker there. Jimmy was right, no fecal matter, or urine, in the water. Just water and blood, so the Major relieved himself before he took care of things. He had Tylenol, Eliquis, that's a blood thinner, and alcohol in his blood, but not so much that he was incapacitated. Just enough to numb him a bit. I've got no evidence of anyone else on him or on any of the samples you gave me. I'm not Jimmy, but to me, this looks like a suicide by someone who was serious about doing the job right."

Tony nods. Then he looks to Ziva, and back to Abby, waiting.

Abby stares at them, shifting her gaze from one to the other, looking at them expectantly.

"Anything else?" Tony asks.

"Not from me," she shakes her head, short blonde ponytails flapping.

"Nothing about last night?" Tony says. He hates it when she does that innocent/pretending to not know what's going on/cute/dense thing.

"Oh. Yeah. Come on back." She leads them into ballistics so they can have a private conversations. "Yeah, last night sucked. And I know I can't make it suck less, but… She's still doing that cute thing, which is really annoying Tony right now, but then says, "So I… uh… kind of called Diane, you know Gibbs' Diane, this morning, and you know she's an IRS auditor? Anyway, she agreed with me that what Helen pulled on you was total shit, so Helen's going to get a very thorough tax audit this year. And, I've got another buddy who works for Medicare, and she might have… um… flagged Helen for possible Medicare fraud, so… all of her billing for the last five years is going to be gone through with a fine tooth comb. And… yeah… so it's possible that Blue Cross and Anthem got anonymous tips about her overbilling them."

Tony and Ziva are staring at Abby, who is smiling at them, both of them remembering that for as cute as Abby is, there is a very hard, very cold person under there and you do not fuck with Abby's friends. "Jimmy didn't want you going off on Helen, but he didn't say anything to me about it."

"Abby!" Tony says.

"Hey, if she's been playing by the rules, it'll be annoying, but nothing bad will happen to her. If not… That's on her. I made sure to pick agencies that do audits at random, so it's not like checking
out Helen is any more or less likely to turn something up than any of their other 'random' audits, so I'm not wasting resources by doing it. I love Jimmy, and I love you guys, and I know I can't make last night better, and I know you're pissed, so I can and did lay some payback on the person who put this whole thing into motion.” She smiles at them again. "I hope that helps, some.

"I do have one other thing, Tony, I've got your DNA on file. Tim and I talked about this last night. If you want, I'll run it against everything we've got, and he'll hack the big private databases, all the organ donation sites, bone marrow, 23&Me, all of them, to increase the scope of the search. If you want to know, we'll find your kids, or at least as many of them as are old enough to have hit any of the major databases. It's not perfect, but it'll cut down on the chance of you getting blindsided like this again."

Tony opens and closes his mouth, a very Gibbs looking gesture, that Abby doesn't think she's ever seen from him. Ziva's looking from him to Abby and back again, not sure what she thinks or feels about that offer.

"You two talk and think. But if you want to know, we'll get it for you." Abby starts to head back to the lab proper.

"That's it?" Tony asks.

Abby nods. "What else would you like?"

"No, I'm sorry?"

Abby shakes her head. "Nope." Then she looks at both of them… "Do you really want to have a long conversation about how I know for a fact that both of you have done exactly what set Jimmy off and that I think he's allowed to be crazy about it as a hot button issue because it happened to him? We can do that. We can talk about the fact that I know about several of Ziva's lesser known exploits, but Tim and Jimmy don't, because that conversation was private between you and I and Breena, and since Jimmy was already in epic-meltdown mode, I really didn't think he needed to know that about you. We could talk about how I hate all drunk drivers, because one killed my parents, and about how you know that about me, and how you have never suggested the fact that I loathe every single drunk driver on Earth is in any way inappropriate, because it's my hot button issue. We can talk about how I let you slide on your hot button issues, and how I've never said a peep about the fact that neither of you are gentle with suspected rapists, and that not gentle can get even worse when I've given you a DNA match. We could talk about how I would not expect you to be kind to Tim or Jimmy if you found out that one of them had ever hit your hot button, even if it was more than a decade ago, and that should you find that out, I'd back your play and let you get whatever comeback you'd need."

Abby waits for both of them to say something. They don't.

"We good?" she asks. Very cold, very hard, not very cute at all right that second.

Tony slumps his shoulders, and Ziva nods curtly.

"Great!" There's that smile again. "Let me know what you want to do about the DNA matching."

Allan's waiting for them, with his report, when they get back up to the bullpen.

"Dr. Allan?" Tony asks.

"Unless you find something to indicate otherwise, we're calling this a suicide. No defensive wounds on the body. Three small hesitation cuts on the right thigh, none on the left. Lividity is consistent
with dying in the position we found him in. No signs of rigor, so time of death is more than twenty four hours before we found him, but because we don't know the temperature of the water, we can't get more specific than that. Agent Draga…"

Draga puts up a picture of the bathroom.

"Dr. Palmer noticed the contents of the trash can." In the picture they can see what looks like plastic bags. "They're bags for ice. It's possible that the contents of those bags were in the water, numb him further, make it hurt less. He also had alcohol and Tylenol in his blood, so it's not implausible that he wanted to mitigate the pain. If that's true, that'd put time of death much closer to when he was last seen. But according to Abby, that brand of ice is just municipal water frozen solid, there's no way to tell if it was in the tub with him and melted, or if he used it for something else."

Tony nods. "Thank you, Dr. Allan."

"My pleasure. May we release the body?"

Tony nods. "Yes."

Allan heads off and Tony looks around. It's a bit before four in the afternoon. He's beat. Ziva's tired, he can see it in her eyes and the way she's holding herself. "Bishop, Draga, fill in the database, print the little bastards out, and then cut out. We're all going home early today."

Bishop and Draga seem pleased with that. Tony grabs his go bag, looks at Ziva, and glances at the elevator, and they head home.

He's driving Tim and Abby's car, first time behind the wheel of the roadster. Part of him is very tempted to get into a fender bender. Mostly, he's just too damn tired to deal with it. They're at a stop light. Ziva's not talking, and he's not feeling very talk-y either. But they should talk. Lots of things to say, lots…

Ziva looks at him. "Not tonight. Food. And then I want you to find the dumbest, lightest, fluffiest comedy ever made, and we are going to watch it, and then go to sleep, and as long as no one dies tomorrow, we are taking a personal day, and we will sort it out then."

Tony exhales, relieved. That sounds like a really good plan to him.
Mediator

Gibbs supposes, that five years ago, he would have just headed straight into Autopsy and started smacking Jimmy around.

Of course, five years ago, he didn't think Jimmy could have even imagined pulling shit like that.

Well, he could have imagined it. But he wouldn't have had the balls to pull it off. The downside of the boys growing some backbone is that they'll want to use the damn things from time to time.

It feels odd to Gibbs to be the guy who's looking to fix things, calm them down, get them soothed over, rather than just being the guy who storms in and kicks everyone until they all get along again. Of course, as he thinks about it, he's not really 'fixing' anything. He can't actually 'fix' this. What he can do is make sure each of them is as okay in themselves as possible, and try to help them get to understand where the others are coming from so they can then 'fix' it themselves.


He feels like he's got a handle on Ziva's side of things. Or at least as much of a handle as Ziva does. But he's not sure if she's going easier on Jimmy than she needs to because she's also got some pissed at Tony going on, and thus Jimmy can be an indirect way to get that out, or if she really does sympathize.

He doesn't know where Tony is, because he hasn't seen the fallout of whatever the hell it is Jimmy's done to him.

And he's got no clue on Jimmy, either.

But he's going to find out.

No funeral today. That's a good thing. He doesn't stick out in his cargo pants and Marines t-shirt.

Gibbs heads around to the service entrance and knocks. A few seconds later, Jeannie opens the door. "Jethro?"

He gives her a bit of a smile. "Breena here?"

She nods. "She's working with one of our clients."

Gibbs nods at that. "I know my way." And he does, so he heads back to the mortuary.

Breena's standing next to a steel table, wearing scrubs of her own, as she gently applies makeup to the elderly woman on the table. She's talking to her, letting her know what she's doing and why, and doesn't hear him come in.

"We do this to everyone Mrs. Sander. Just makes you look like you're asleep. I know your kids said you didn't like makeup, so it's nothing drastic. No mascara or lipstick. Just enough foundation and blush so you're not all gray. Then we'll get you dressed and ready to go." She puts the sponge down, and sees Jethro, jerking a bit.

"Don't ever just creep into a mortuary, Jethro."

He shrugs and pulls up a stool.
"So, which one was crying on you?" she asks.

"Which one wasn't's more like it."

She nods. "Tony and Ziva going to be okay? I know all of this has to be killing Ziva."

He nods. "Tell me about Jimmy. He go bonkers last night?"

She sighs. "He didn't tell me the whole Lee story until July. Apparently, it happened and he buried it, and then he and Tim are talking about Tony, and Jeanne gets mentioned, something about Tony not having an easy time trusting that a woman'll stick around, because before Ziva they all left…"

Gibbs is nodding; he's following that, can see how Tim might have mentioned that, and… yeah, depending on when in July, Tony and Ziva were in a rocky patch… okay, that makes a certain amount of sense.

"Somehow Jeanne got mentioned as one of the ones who left. Probably because Tim had the 'official' 'Tony's girlfriend' story more in mind than the real story."

Gibbs nods at that, too. He's actually got no idea, at all, of how much of that whole story Tim has, or for that matter, how much of it he has. Not like they ever sat down with Tony and had a long talk about it, let alone a full debrief. They found out about the Frog side of it months before they found out about Jeanne, and by the time they knew about her, it was done. They all know what Tony was doing and how it was supposed to work, sort of, but Tony's girlfriend was way more entrenched than the second half of the Grenouille story.

"Somehow, they're talking, and it clicks for Jimmy, what happened to Jeanne, what happened to him with Lee. If you remember the second half of the Fourth of July party, he was in a wicked bad mood and kept poking Tony."

Gibbs doesn't really remember that. Franks, stories, he was a bit toasted that night… Tony in a foul mood the next morning. He shakes his head, he doesn't much remember what Jimmy may have been doing that night.

"We get home, and we get Molly down, and I get him talking. I get the whole Lee story. It's a good thing you killed her, because if you hadn't…"

Gibbs nods. He doesn't think Breena would really try anything, but he understands that's more a statement of how angry she was in response to that story.

"Anyway, he was so angry. But, he was also with it enough to know it'd been ten years. Lee's dead. Jeanne's out of the picture. Past can't be changed. So, he decides to bury it again. I suggested to him that maybe that wasn't the most healthy plan he'd ever had, and that just possibly, he might try talking to Tony about it, but he looked at me and said, 'If I talk to him, then I have to acknowledge he did it. And if I do that, I have to do something about it. If it's real, I can't let it lie. So, I'd rather this not be real.'"

Breena raises one eyebrow and says, dryly, "If memory serves that's NCIS coping method 101. Ignore it until it bites you so hard you can't ignore it anymore."

Gibbs inclines his head, she certainly isn't wrong about that.

"So, yesterday, he couldn't pretend it hadn't happened, not anymore. From what he told me he was doing okay as long as it was a real threat to Tony and Ziva, but once he knew it wasn't…"
"He couldn't use the threat to keep himself from thinking about it." Gibbs thinks about what he knows about Jimmy. Jimmy's the guy who gets the shakes after the action's over. He's good as long as he needs to be good, but as soon as it's done, he's useless for a while. So... yeah, he was probably all over helping Tony and Ziva until the crisis was over. Then he got shaky. Then he got thinking. Add in sick child... yeah, protecting them, helping them with a sick child... he'd be right on top of that. Until he knew there wasn't a sick child anymore. Once he knew the nightmare was just that... and once it was over, it'd be over...

Gibbs feels like he's getting Jimmy and where he was in mind.

"You knew what he was doing?"

She nods.

"You went along with it?"

He didn't ask why, but Breena figures it's implied. She nods. "Two parts on that. One, he's holding Anna, and he looks at me and says, 'What if it was her?' I've got the kind of job that makes enemies. What if someone tries something with her to get to me?' and the second part is that I know about a few missions Ziva hasn't told the boys about. I didn't much like the idea of them hurting, but...

"What would you do if it was Kelly, Jethro? Your Kelly, Tim's Kelly? How about Anna or Molly?" She looks Gibbs full in the eye.

He doesn't answer, because he doesn't need to. Breena knows exactly what he'd do to the guy who tries something like that on one of his girls. That brings up another question, what would he have done if Grenouille had lived and gone after Tony? After all, he heard, just like everyone else going after ARES, that everything Grenouille was doing was for his kids. That brings about another thought, one he sincerely hopes Jen never had: NCIS's claim on Grenouille was somewhere between shaky and non-existent, but if he attacked an NCIS agent, they'd have jurisdiction. *God, please Jen, tell me you didn't set Tony up to get assaulted or killed.*

Breena speaking jerks him out of those thoughts. "It happened to Jimmy, Gibbs. MY Jimmy. My sweet, funny, gentle, and trusting Jimmy. The things I love best about him got turned against him. You think I care less about him than you do our girls? And since Ziva and Tony had both been on the dishing out side of it, I figured they could handle a night of taking it, treat others how you would be treated and all that, especially if it made him feel better.

"He called after he got done talking to Tony, he's doing better. Don't know about Tony, but Jimmy's a lot closer to solid than he was last night."

She shakes her head, looking at Gibbs. "I wish this whole thing never happened. I wish Helen had stayed the fuck-" Gibbs blinks, he doesn't remember the last time he heard Breena curse. "away from Tony, and I wish he'd had the sense God gave a cat and turned down the Jeanne mission. I wish this whole thing never touched us. I wish Lee had stayed out of NCIS. I wish her sister never got kidnapped. I wish she had trusted you guys to fix it.

"I wish for a lot of things. Here's something I wish: I wish one of you bastards had acknowledged that something bad had happened to Jimmy when the Lee thing blew up. That would have been nice. Just a few words. Apparently none of you even asked if he was okay." Breena's eyes are right on Gibbs' as she says that, making it awfully clear she's laying that on him.

"You guys put her body in his morgue. For three days." Breena shakes her head and rolls her eyes at that. "And maybe if any of you ever dealt with anything when it happened, or if any of you had even
hinted to him that he had any right to feel *something* about it at the time, he wouldn't have stuffed it so damn far down and let it fester for this long.

"I wish he'd talked to Tony about it before it blew up. I wish I could get him to do something more constructive with all of his shit beyond beating on you guys. Bootcamp helps, it does, and I'm glad he's doing it, because it's a lot better than when he was just stewing, but therapy would be a good plan, too. But you know about doctors and getting doctors to go see another doctor.

"There's a lot of things I wish for…" She sighs. "He's my husband. He and my kids come first. What he did to them eased his pain, and it wasn't entirely out of the blue. Not like he just woke up in a bad mood and decided to start kicking people at random. So, I can live with it. I can back him on it. Can you, or are you going to go slap him upside the head, hard?"

Gibbs sighs. "He goes off the rails again, call me?"

"He was already with Tim."

Gibbs sighs again. He gets how close they are. He gets they can say and… apparently… do… things… maybe… he's still not sure what exactly happened last weekend, with each other that they can't with Tony, but… yeah, sometimes the two of them together is not a great plan.

"I was just pleased to see he didn't come back covered in bruises. Those two don't seem to have gotten much past the beat it out stage when it comes to dealing with pissed off. I'm not sure if ganging up on Tony is a step in the right direction or not."

"Lord. Okay."

"What are you going to do?"

Gibbs shrugs, but stands up, and kisses the top of Breena's head before he leaves. "He's lucky to have you."

She nods. "And he knows it."

Gibbs never did say anything to Jimmy about the Lee case. Once he was done with his questions, that was it. There was the investigation, and hunting down Bankston, and then getting her sister back, and having to deal with the fact that he killed Lee.

It was a good kill, but it's still a life he ended.

And even the good kills hurt.

And none of the rest of them really would have talked to him, either. They weren't close enough for it back then. Ducky might have… or he might have lectured Jimmy about how ridiculously inappropriate it was to be screwing away all over the office and how lucky he was not to get fired for it.

Gibbs sighs, knowing Ducky, it's entirely likely that Jimmy got the latter speech.

Getting a visitor sticker feels weird. Gibbs doesn't need one when they use the gym. Officially they're supposed to sign him in, but they just head in like they always do.

After all, the rules you don't make for yourself don't really apply.
But, in that Gibbs no longer has an ID that opens the doors to the Navy Yard, he's standing at the front desk waiting for Clark to get him an ID. He's not big on small talk, but Clark's chatting about how retirement is going, so he half-heartedly plays along.

A minute later he's got his VISITOR sticker.

"Take it you know the way, Mr. Gibbs?"

"I can probably muddle through."

"Have a nice day!" And thus he's waved off, through the metal detector, and on his way to Autopsy.

Dr. Allan's wiping down the autopsy table with alcohol.

"Get a customer?" Gibbs asks as he steps in.

Jimmy looks up at him. "Suicide. All wrapped up."

Gibbs nods at that. "You got time to get a coffee with me, then?"

"Sure. Dr. Allan, once it's all tidy, you're free to leave."

Allan nods, staring at Gibbs.

Jimmy catches it. "Sorry. I forgot you haven't met. Dr. Sam Allan, Leroy Jethro Gibbs."

Gibbs and Allan do the traditional nice to meet you stuff. Allan's genuinely curious; he has, of course, heard about the infamous Gibbs. Gibbs is going through the motions, he wants to get to talking with Jimmy.

But they get wrapped up, and in a matter of five minutes, they're out front, sitting on one of the benches, both of them with a coffee in hand.

He stares at Jimmy, really seeing him. "You okay?"

Jimmy shrugs. "Now, yeah. This morning really helped. Feels stupid to be this pissed, this many years later, but it's real, and it's right now, and just sitting on it never really seems to work, so might as well get it out and done."

Gibbs nods at that, agreeing with the basic concept, but thinking with a decade down, that Jimmy's got an interesting definition of 'not sitting on it.' "You going to talk to Tony again?"

"Sooner or later. I don't expect him to apologize to me. He didn't do it to me. And I'm not apologizing to him, because he deserved every single word of it and every single minute of it. He needed to know how that night felt. I think he does, now. Not my brightest moment, and I'm not getting the buddy of the year award, but... on my end at least, we're in spitting distance of good."

Gibbs sighs at that. "Put Tim and Abby in a bad place."

"Yeah. I know. Feel bad about that. Feel really bad about what I did to Ziva. I hope they forgive me for it. I hope you do. Didn't hit me until this morning that you were probably hurting, too. I'm sorry about that." Jimmy stares at Gibbs. "No denial, no excuses, no, I didn't think you'd get hurt. I mean, I didn't think you'd get hurt, but that's because I kind of forgot about you." Gibbs holds up a hand, he knows where Jimmy's going with this. "I know what I did. I did it intentionally. I was pissed, so I kicked Tony until I felt better, and bruised the rest of you, too."
Gibbs may not approve, but he respects that. You fuck up, you admit it, you say you're sorry, you face the music, and you move on. "Are you feeling better?"

Jimmy shrugs. "Yeah. Not dancing around with joy in my heart or a song on my lips or anything, but I'm better." Jimmy takes another drink, looking at the Navy Yard. He can see the Director's Office from here. "You know there are no files on that case, not on the computers at least. Tim's gonna check the paper copies, but given how there's literally nothing on the computers, he's sure he won't find anything on paper.

"Jeanne went through all of that, for nothing, and at first, when I grabbed Tim's hand and said, 'Don't tell Tony,' it was about me, all about me, and I'm not going to lie, a lot of this is still about me, but it's about her, too. Everything she went through was for nothing. We never made any arrests. The CIA handled the whole thing, apparently, at least that's how Tim remembers it. No arrests, no convictions, no… nothing. It just vanished.

"That feels bad. Been thinking about that all night. All that pain, for nothing. If… if it had mattered, if… something good had come out of it, it'd be easier, you know? But, there's nothing. It was just meaningless, random pain. Kind of like Jon, you know?" Jimmy looks away from the main building and back to Gibbs. "But, no one did Jon to us. No one had any choice in the matter." He sips his coffee again. "So, then I showed up and bit Tony's head off, and he let me. Not like he was going to say to me, 'It was for a good cause' or 'I didn't know what I was doing' or… He just took it."

"People make mistakes."

Jimmy nods. "I know. Burning Ziva, sticking Tim and Abby in a bad place, that's mine. Ziva's a bad one. She says she accepts my apology, and I really hope she does." He doesn't ask the question, but he knows that Gibbs has had more recent non-professional contact with Ziva than he has.

Gibbs nods. "Yeah. She does. She's pissed at you, but you've earned enough brownie points over the years that she let you have that one. But that's your one freebie. Try something like that again, and she's going to kick your ass from one side of DC to the other."

Jimmy nods.

"And so will I."

He nods at that, too. "I deserve that."

Jethro sips his coffee and quietly says, "I didn't go after every drug dealer in Mexico. Just went for the guy who actually did me pain. I know Lee's gone, and I know that's unsatisfying. But she's gone. And kicking someone else isn't going to scratch that itch."

Jimmy purses his lips, not sure exactly how Jethro means that. He spends a good two minutes really thinking about it, then he says, "We had to pry you out of that desk with a crowbar. Are you really going to tell me that going after the next best thing doesn't help? Or are you trying to tell me that all of this," he gestures to NCIS, "wasn't about going after the next best thing?"

Gibbs also takes a moment to think before answering. "This was the next best thing. And, especially when you've got nothing, the next best thing will keep you up and moving. Keep you going until you can get something, or until the next best thing becomes your something." He sips his coffee and turns to face Jimmy. "But you don't have nothing. You've got piles and piles of not nothing all over the place. You are neck deep in not nothing."

Gibbs gently rubs the back of Jimmy's head, where it meets his neck, and then gives him a slap, hard
enough to sting, not hard enough to make his head ring. "So don't fuck it up, and don't burn people you love!"

"The next best thing is never going to do it for you. The best thing will never do it for you. You may have noticed, getting the best thing didn't actually make me better. No one ever accused me of being well-adjusted back in '93. More than twenty years of second best didn't do it, either. Nothing outside you is ever going to do it for you. It can help, but it won't bury your dead or calm your demons. It'll, just, maybe, give you room to find out how to do it for yourself. You got a plan for dealing with this, for fixing it, for you, on the inside, so it doesn't come back?"

Jimmy nods. "Yeah."

"Okay."

Jimmy takes a drink, quiet, and then says, "I keep thinking about Jeanne, and me… And me for her."

Gibbs doesn't quite seem to be following that.

"We're here for the victims, right? That's literally my job. Everything I do is with or for the victims. I'm the last voice a dead man will ever have. But, no one ever spoke up for Jeanne." Jimmy smiles, sad at that, looking away from Jethro, back toward NCIS. "And yeah, it was way too little, and way too damn late, but… Someone should have stood up for Jeanne. Someone should have said, 'Whoa, slow the fuck down; there has got to be another way to do this!'" Jimmy looks back to Jethro. "I'm someone. So, that was the plan. And like I said, I'm feeling better, maybe not all the way there, and pretty cruddy about pulling that on Ziva, but… There's peace in there now. I'll sleep tonight."

Gibbs sighs, shakes his head a little, and rubs the back of Jimmy's head again. "Breena's worried about you."

He nods. "I know. I'm good, probably ninety-seven days out of one hundred now, but… She lives with me, so she sees the bad ones, too."

"Cranston's a really good listener."

"I'm sure she is."

"Wouldn't hurt."

"I've got to sleep sometime, Jethro. Job, kids, house, continuing education. I'm pretty much scheduled straight though all summer long. Got two breaks in there, long weekend late July and a break for Labor Day, and I'm going to need them."

"She'll still be there in the fall, and so'll you."

Jimmy nods. He figures if you've hit the point where you're so messed up that Gibbs is telling you you need to see someone, you've got to go. "Email me her number?"

"No problem."

Next stop is Tim's office. Tim's in there, working away on something, fingers flying away on the keyboard.

"Hey."

He jerks slightly and looks up at Gibbs, who closes the door behind him and then whacks him, hard,
upside the back of the head.

Tim shrugs a bit at that. "If it's Tony or Jimmy, Jimmy's gonna win."

Gibbs shakes his head, and then looks a bit more carefully at Tim. He sees the split lip, and... "You not shaving again?"

"Clayt suggested it as part of my cover. Might have almost a goatee again by the time we get going."

Gibbs lightly touches Tim's lip.

"Ziva?"

Tim nods. "Arms and shoulders are pretty bruised up, too. Got Tony riled up enough he could let it out. And I'm sure they'll both beat the crap out of me next bootcamp. I'm fine with that. I knew what I was doing, and I did it anyway."

Gibbs shakes his head. "We've got to get better ways of dealing with this. Beating the shit out of each other all the time isn't a good plan."

Tim shrugs. "Seems to work better than talking. Though not doing stupid shit like this in the first place will hopefully do an even better job of it."

"Amen to that." Gibbs sits down. "You and Jimmy okay?"

Tim nods. "Yeah. Didn't love what he wanted to do, but I got it. Happened to me once, too, only for a day, but... Especially if you don't a lot of attention from girls, a woman who really digs you, makes you feel really good... and then it's gone, and she never really... It sucks, Jethro." Tim shakes his head. "Not fun being one the played. So I'm not holding it against Jimmy. He's backed me on plenty of my own insane, I can cover him for this." He pulls his collar to the side, showing Gibbs a greenish blue bruise on his shoulder. "In more ways than one, if need be."

Tim shrugs a little. "While back, Jimmy told me that, basically, at any given time, only one of the two of us needs to be sane. Just wish I'd done a better job of being the sane one. Wish I'd been with it enough to do a better job of talking him down, or had come up with a better way to deal with it, but I didn't. Apparently I'm still pretty pissed at Tony on that whole thing, too."

Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

"Didn't hit the front of my mind, at all. But, he's in here today and asked me why I didn't talk Jimmy out of it, and it literally never occurred to me. At no point did even a hint of there's an option other than we steamroller him or you have to lump it occur to me. So I had to think of why that didn't hit, 'cause it wasn't exactly a reach to come up with something else. Once Tony was in the room, I had one in less than thirty seconds. For a second, I was sort of flailing around and then that image of his car blowing up, and then the corpse..." Tim shudders a little. "You remember how burned and wedged in it was, so I ended up helping Jimmy and Ducky get it out, and... yeah, apparently I'm still a bit pissed on that." Tim shakes his head.

"Jimmy says there's no files on that case."

"None I can find. I asked Janice in records to see if she can find anything, but, you know, they're all by case number down there, and if you can't look the case number up because there's nothing in the electronic files... According to her, cases that old are sent to deep storage, which is a warehouse in Norfolk. They're supposed to be stored by number, by year. But, every case from every NCIS branch will be in that warehouse. Without that number, that case basically can't be found, assuming
that there's even anything to find."

Gibbs sighs at that.

"And, I'll admit, I'm not feeling motivated enough to hack the CIA and see what they've got on Lodestone."

Gibbs nods. "Don't think Jimmy needs you going that far."

Tim nods back, agreeing.

"Does Abby need a headslap, too?"

"Nope."

Gibbs shakes his head, standing up, getting ready to head to the Lab. "God, you're a bad liar."

"You think I'm ever going to tell you to go smack my wife?" Tim stands up, and steps close to Gibbs. "In fact..." he turns so the back of his head is toward Gibbs and points to it. "I'm taking hers, too."

Gibbs shakes his head, pats the back of Tim's and says. "It doesn't work that way."

"Fine. No slapping her."

Gibbs licks his lips. "I will deliver a metaphorical head slap."

"Thank you."

In the elevator, on the way up, it hits Gibbs how similar Tim and Breena's reactions to this were. Both well-aware that this would hurt Tony and Ziva, but Jimmy outranked them, and that was that.

Another second after that, it hit him how similar Tim's responses to Jimmy and Abby were, too.

He sighs at that. On one level, if the four of them are going to do... whatever this thing they're thinking of maybe doing is... then they should feel that way about each other. At least, if this thing has any shot of not biting them all, they're gonna need that. They should close ranks to protect their own, because if this ever goes farther than the four of them, and... him and Abbi, they're in on it, too, they're going to take some shit for it.

If they're willing to risk this... then yeah, Tim should be just as protective of Jimmy as Abby, and vice versa and all the other permutations.

He sighs a little at the idea of Tim being Jimmy's... boyfriend... no, if they do this, it'll be permanent... so... husband? He doesn't know how the hell that's supposed to work. He's awfully certain the guys are straight. Sure, they've never had any conversations about that, but he's not blind. He's been out with both of them, and while he's caught both of them checking out women, he's never seen either of them check out a guy. And yes, he knows they're a hell of a lot more comfortable with each other, on every level he can see, than, well, pretty much every other set of guys he's ever met, but... He doesn't get any sense they're even remotely interested in each other sexually.

Gibbs wonders vaguely if he needs to point out that a foursome with two guys in it will also involve, by definition, two dicks, but decides that, even if the two of them are not impressing him with their combined brainpower right this second, they have probably already sussed that particular fact out.
He really hopes *that* doesn't end up biting them. He's really not looking forward to some sort of existential sexuality crisis this late in the game.

But if the four of them get into this... thing... are they going to end up with a permanent situation of the four of them on one side and Tony and Ziva on the other? One reason their team really worked was because it was a team. Sure, at any given time two of them were ganging up on the other one, but alliances kept shifting, and it never stayed static for too long.

Though, thinking about that more... The alliances did keep shifting, but, really, it was more often Tony and Ziva on one side, and Tim on the other. And, whenever something went over the line, it was always Tim on one side, and Tony with Ziva or Tony on his own, on the other.

Of course, they're not all working together any longer, so now... Now the alliances are set, three teams of two.

Sort of.

Last summer when everything went bonkers with that case and getting hurt and Ziva and Tony's marriage all messed up...

Jimmy took care of Ziva. Tim and Abby got him.

Tony was mostly on his own. He thinks both of the boys made sure he got some attention, but he didn't get the sort of care and hand-holding that he and Ziva did.

And Tony never really gets that sort of attention. At least, not from anyone who isn't Ziva. Gibbs sighs at that. The elevator doors open at the lab, and they close again. Gibbs gets his phone out.

*Want to talk?* He sends to Tony.

A few minutes later he gets back. *No. Crashing tonight. Asleep by eight. Lay in tomorrow. Lots to say to Ziva."

*I'm here if you need me."

*Thanks.*

Gibbs hits the L button again.

---

Tim and Jimmy both had a vaguely guilty and chagrined air about them. Breena was completely matter of fact about everything, and Abby...

His read on Abby's body language as she comes bouncing over to hug him is that she's completely unaware of any drama that may be going on in the wider world.

"Hi, Gibbs! What, no Caf-Pow?"

Her underlings are around, and he's not saying anything in front of them. "Only when I'm on the case."

"And no cases for you. So, what can I do?"

"Take a walk with me?"

"Corwin, you good with me out for a bit?"
Corwin nods.

Once they get out of the Lab, Gibbs watches her carefully, but the perkiness doesn't dial back.

"What don't I know?"

She half-shrugs. "A whole lot of things I'd expect, but the relevant ones are that I sicced the IRS, Medicare, and two insurance companies on Helen. Then I offered Tony the option of searching every database I've got, and Tim hacking the ones I don't, to go find any kids he may have."

Gibbs' eyebrows rise, and he nods a bit. Sure, that's not... Hell, he doesn't know, that might actually be even for her part of it. That might even be a bit ahead. Depends on what the IRS does. Then his eyes go wide, he knows who Abby knows at the IRS. Helen's gonna have Diane go after her. For the first time ever, Gibbs is feeling like he might have to give Diane a call and suggest that she go full bore on someone.

Another thought hits, past what Diane's going to do to Helen, the offer to find Tony's kids. "He gonna do it?"

"I think he and Ziva are going to have a long chat about it. I mean, I don't have everyone on Earth, let alone the US, and a lot of his kids, if he has them, would be young enough they probably wouldn't be on any of our databases, but... It's a start. He's probably got some out there, don't know if we can find them, but..."

Abby gives Gibbs a thorough looking over. She's been around long enough that she caught the tail end of Stephanie and the fallout of that. She remembers when he wasn't doing all of his drinking in his basement. "How about you Gibbs? You ever get curious about if you left any little Gibbslets along the way?"

He shakes his head.

"Didn't leave them or didn't get curious?"

He shakes his head again.

"Well, if you ever do, the option's open for you, too. Sticking one more profile into the search won't take much more work. In for a penny, in for a pound, right? We're going to run Tim, too."

Gibbs looks curious at that.

"No, not for that. He knows his kid. His dad... He's got no idea how many half-brothers and sisters he may have kicking around."

Gibbs nods, that's a... actually that's likely to be interesting. "Running you, too?"

"Don't see why not. Might get closer to tracking down my birth mom or dad. So, you poking around trying to make sure we're all okay?"

"That's the idea."

"And?"

"Haven't seen Tony, yet. Ziva's not good."

Abby nods. "I think that's more between her and Tony than the rest of this. The kid thing's pretty sensitive for them right now."
"She's talking to you and Breena about it?"

"Yeah. She's..." Abby inhales, ready to get talking and then stops. "Actually... This probably isn't a conversation for you."

Gibbs nods at that. He doesn't need those details. "Just want to know she's talking to someone."

"Yeah. Us, she and Tony are talking... Uh..." A thought hits Abby. "Look, I know you're gonna be all, go track those kids down, do the right thing, be a Dad, hoo rah, but... They're not her kids, Gibbs. And if he says yes, especially if he's feeling pressured to say yes... You got to remember, that she's going to be stuck with a guy who's really skittish about having kids with her, and then the actual, real, live kids he had with other women.

"I get it."

"Good."

---

Tim heads into Autopsy. It's just about normal quitting time, little bit early, but he's got something to do.

Jimmy's at his desk, books in front of him, reading and highlighting away.

He looks up when Tim comes in. "Hey."

Tim heads over to him and leans, his hips on Jimmy's desk. "Hi. What're your plans for after?"

"Dinner, more studying, early night."

Tim nods. Then he gets his phone out and texts Breena If I bring Jimmy home with food, about half an hour after you'd normally get there, is that cool? What kind of food? Pops up a few seconds later.

You pick.

Pizza for Molly and I. You've got Jimmy (I assume) so something for him, too.

Will do. And yes, I've got him. He'll be home 7:00ish.

Okay.

"You making a date?"

"Sort of, asking Breena if I can steal you for a bit."

Jimmy seems to appreciate that these days Breena gets asked that, not him. "Okay... and we're doing what?"

"Washing Tony's car."

Jimmy shakes his head a bit, but nods. "Okay. This part of payback?"

"Yep."

"I'm sorry about putting you and Abby in a bad place."
Tim shakes his head a bit. "We're good. Sorry I failed on the one-of-us-being-sane end of things. If there's ever a next time, I'll try to do a better job of it."

"Better job?"

"You want to guess how long it took me to come up with, 'Here, how about you and I go over and tell them it's a hoax, put Ziva out of her misery, and then we'll both go full bore on Tony,' once Tony was in the room, suggesting that maybe there were options other than side with you or side with him?"

Jimmy winces. "Oh… Yeah… that was kind of obvious, wasn't it?"

Tim's nodding.

Jimmy closes up his books, marking his page, and tidies up his desk. They both stand up to head off. As the door to Autopsy opens, Jimmy asks… "So, why would you be going full bore on him, too?"

"Couple things… Did I ever tell you about Amanda Barrow?"

"I don't think so."

"Okay… It wasn't like it was weeks or months or anything. Just a few days… but…"
A/N: I know some of you aren't old enough to remember the '80s (God, how old do I feel, now?)
Anyway, things were a whole lot different in the pre-AIDS era. But, for a quick reference, if anyone
in Tony's circle in college might have been talking about AIDS, it would have been that vaguely
nebulous 'gay cancer' thing. The idea that straight people could even get HIV didn't start to really
percolate through most America until the early '90s.

Going to bed early was a good plan. Tony needed the rest. He's waking up, stretching out, and
starting to feel fully human again.

Of course, rested means talking. Lots and lots to talk about. Lots to think about. He rolls onto his
side, pulling the blankets over his shoulder, listening to Ziva snore.

'We can find your kids, if you want to know.'

Does he want to know? God… That number could be so damn high.

College alone… He went to school with a lot of those girls, but Ohio State isn't a small school. It had
more than 40,000 students when he was there. (Sure not all in one spot, but everyone got together for
games…) And some of the girls he saw over and over, had class with, or were cheerleaders. He
knew none of them were wandering around visibly pregnant.

But if one had dropped out, no way he would have noticed.

And, of course, the team travelled. New schools for all the away games.

And a lot of them… He knows that after a big win, especially against another Big Ten school, or any
of the Final Four Championships, he might have been with three a night, maybe four, and they'd just
be whoever was cute and nearby.

Frat parties… God, they threw the best parties ever! And no one ever got turned away. Girls didn't
have to pay for drinks, or drugs, or anything else. Just because he wasn't into coke, didn't mean it
wasn't all over his frat. 1986-88, everyone with money was on coke and his college was rolling in
the stuff.

Coke's got a kind of nasty side-effect, makes you horny, but you can't get it up.

So, loose, drunk, horny, happy girls all over the place, and he's the guy who's actually sporting
wood. Not difficult math.

Condoms? Huh? What? He'd graduated by the time the whole safe sex thing really got rolling.
They'd started to hear more about it by his senior year, so if a girl had one, he'd always go with it, but
he never carried them. Never had to deal with the 'what kind of girl do you think I am?' stuff, never
had to break the illusion of 'just got so swept away by you.'

College ball player, young, healthy, invincible. Sure he came up positive for gonorrhea, crabs, and
the clap every single time they did a physical, but so did three quarters of the rest of the team.
Antibiotics got handed out like breath mints for their team. Ten days on, a full dose of Quell for the
crabs, and back you go, good as new, with a quick lecture about condoms, but really, what was the
point, damn things were a pain in the ass, and as long as you weren't allergic to antibiotics, why
bother?
Herpes was scary, but he always made sure to really look before he touched, and that seemed to keep
him safe. At least, he never came up positive for it.

Graduated, police academy, first job in Peoria, he spent a lot of that time studying, learning the ropes,
and banging anyone he could get his hands on during the weekends.

He was in the middle of a shift, traffic work, sitting on the side of an empty street, listening to the
sports station, holding up the radar gun, waiting for someone to drive by when Magic Johnson's
press conference came on. He'd been expecting something about the Dream Team (really was
looking forward to seeing that) and got a hell of a shock instead.

And two days after Magic Johnson came out as HIV positive, he got tested, and was clean. He
thinks half of his team found their first white hair that day. (Between getting tested and waiting for
the results, he certainly did.) Six months later he was still clean. (And in possession of a large
quantity of condoms.) Five years later, Rob (the center) was dead from AIDS and Stephen (point
guard) was living with HIV.

Five years between then and meeting Wendy. A few girlfriends, but nothing steady. He was young,
and hot, and could dance, no problem finding company whenever he wanted it. He… usually… used
condoms, but, he didn't always have one, and sometimes he did actually get swept up in it, and
besides Wilt Chamberlin had had way more women and he didn't come down with anything, so…
(And rumor had it that Steve and Rob had been with each other a few times… At least, they liked to
share girls, and come on, straight guys didn't catch AIDS… Well okay, everyone said they could,
but… Come on…) Like lots of young guys, the little head was in charge a lot more often than it
should have been.

The little head being in charge had a lot to do with never holding a job in one place for more than
two years. No big screw ups, never really got in trouble, but he also never really fit, never made any
friends, no one really wanted him for a partner. Too cool, too know it all, too much of a jerk or
prankster. Whatever it was, he didn't fit in Peoria or Philly.

Then there was Baltimore, and Wendy, and settling down, getting on the straight and narrow, and a
ring and the white picket fence, but it turned out Wendy didn't want the ring or the fence.
Apparently, Wendy wanted the guy he was before he straightened out. So he went on his
honeymoon alone and spent every minute he was awake drunk and balls deep in strange women.

Gibbs had been at the wedding. Was the guy who drove him to the airport, guy who picked him up.
He slept on Gibbs' sofa for a few weeks and Gibbs made sure he was sober by clock in time every
morning. (Hung over a lot of them, but that was true for Gibbs, too. After all, the Stephanie mess
was just wrapping up, then.)

More clubs, more parties, more bars, Spring Break in Mexico… That year after Wendy he fucked
every woman in DC, just to prove to himself that he could. Wendy may not have wanted him, but
look at all these other women who did.

That lasted a year. Kate came around, and he slowed down, got to his 'grown-up' pace, two or three
girls a month, longest dry spell he ever hit was eight weeks, and then he took a long weekend to
make up for it. Still he knows he averaged about thirty girls a year, and at twelve years… Lord, him
going slow was three hundred women over a bit more than a decade.

By then he was using condoms all the time. Girls expected them, looked at you like an unwashed
sock if you didn't have them, and by then… He never wanted to give Kate the satisfaction of having
some women he barely knew show up with a kid.
But even with them… Let's put it this way, that episode of Friends where Ross is flipping out about condoms not working all the time, that hit a lot closer to home than Tony would have liked.

God, Abby could dig up a hundred kids… Okay, probably not that many, but… twenty? Ten?

Does he want to know?

Does Ziva?

Does it matter if he wants to know? They're out there. They have to be out there. They don't let you donate sperm unless you've got lots of healthy wiggles per shot, and, at least as of college, he did. And he can't think of any reason why that wouldn't have continued to be true.

1984, April, he's pretty sure it was April, maybe March, he was home from school on spring break. Got into a Theta Chi party in the city, found a girl who made his night. He doesn't remember what she looked like, not anymore. (Not reliably anymore. She got hotter and hotter each time he told the story. He thinks her hair and eyes were brown. He knows she wasn't a Rockette. She had wanted to be one, he does remember her saying that.) But he does remember how she made him feel: special, sexy, crazy turned on, desired. And he very clearly remembers how she felt on him. That he remembers. Never saw her again. Never got her name… So, winter of '84-'85. His oldest child could be thirty-one. Lord. He wonders if Abby can make the computer find his grandkids, because, given how active he was in college, it's possible there are a bunch of little guys somewhere in Molly's age range who might be his grandkids.

No, they wouldn't be in any of the databases… Well, it'd be unlikely.

Realistically, any of them who are under eighteen wouldn't be in there. But over eighteen would get all of his most active years, except for the Wendy fall out. Those kids would have been born in 2000, 2001 at the latest. So, they'd be fifteen or fourteen, out of the system unless they really screwed up at something.

He feels Ziva roll over next to him, facing him, hair all wild around her, eyes still closed.

"Morning," he says.

She sighs, stretching, cuddling in closer to him. He holds her, letting quiet and sleep and whatever calm she's got hold onto her for as long as it can.

Eventually she shifts some, moving back a bit, laying on her side, still facing him. "Sleep well?"

He nods. All things considered, yes he did. "You?"

"Enough."

"Talking first, or breakfast?"

She leans up on her elbow and checks the clock. His gaze follows her, it's a little bit after nine. For him that's a decent morning of sleeping in, for her, that's a sleep marathon.

She stretches again. "Talking. If we get called out…"

"Okay. Where do you want to start?"

They've done this in counseling often enough that if they don't actually set it down they'll just sort of keep nudging the topic without really getting into it. So this is him, tossing the ball in her court,
letting her know he wants to get her topics done, first, then they'll get to his.

With any luck, they'll overlap.

She sighs. It's easier to be on the listening side, sometimes. Right now it'd be easier to be listening to him talking about finding out about his kids. Still, one of them has to start, so…

"You wanted to be part of Jeanne's son's life."

He nods.

"You jumped right into it, worry, fear, concern. He was your son, and you wanted to be… something… Intimate?" He nods, that'll cover it. "With him."

Ziva brushes the backs of her fingers down his cheek. "But you do not want my child."

His expression is somewhere between sheepish and a wince. "It's not… If it's already said and done… That's what I mean by I can't make myself jump, but I'll be fine when I land. I know when I hold our child, I'll be good, it'll work, but…"

She shakes her head. "I do not want to push you off a cliff. I want you to jump off with me. You used to like sex. We both used to like sex, a lot, and now… Since I have been off the pill, I have seen you go to dental appointments with more enthusiasm. Now, you are 'tired.' And while I do not mind all the oral sex when you aren't 'tired,' I know what you are doing."

He doesn't deny it. It's intentional after all. He knows she can get pregnant. It's been five months since her last pill, and that has made certain bits of his anatomy very skittish about getting too close to certain bits of her. His tongue on the other hand, that works just fine, no matter what, thank you very much.

And it's not like they haven't had any sex. But the frequency of sex that makes babies has dropped from three to five times a week to closer to once a week. And, he's not exactly relaxed on those occasions.

"Tiny person entirely dependent on us. Little bundle of never-ending need. Everything in our life changing. I can deal with it if it happens. I can handle it. But I can't just sign up for that."

"You already did, over and over apparently," her voice is sharp, and he sees her make herself stop that.

He opens his mouth, and closes it, and sighs. "I signed up for a lot of meaningless sex with women I'd never see again. Women who knew me well enough to have my name or my phone number, I was a lot more careful with." He's not proud of it, but it's true.

"Like Jeanne?"

He sighs at that, too. "The first time was when Cassidy died. We almost died that day, too, remember? I told her I loved her, and… And I didn't go hunting for any condoms. I didn't the first time I told you I loved you, either. You remember that, right?"

She nods. "I remember." Very gentle, very quiet, still in the hospital after they almost froze to death. They whisper/kissed it to each other over and over, rocking slowly. That's a good memory.

"I'm fairly sure that even if you hadn't been on the pill, I still wouldn't have said, 'Stop, go get protection!'"
That's a good point.

"And I'm not sorry about it, but, we just don't have the kind of relationship where I can get so caught up in how good right now feels and forget about the fact that we're going to wake up in the morning together and go to work together and come home again, together. The whole forever thing means I can't pretend there isn't going to be a tomorrow."

They watch each other for a few seconds. "That could have been our son, Ziva, and it could have been real, and..." He rubs his face. "How do you just sign yourself up for that? It's one thing if you have to. You've got the kid, you do the job, okay, but... I'll get there. I'll be a dad, a good one, but..."

She shakes her head. "I want you to want this, with me. This should be... joyful."

"I don't think I'm ever going to get there. Caring about people is terrifying. Even people who love you will hurt you. I mean... It's not easy. I can't just—"

She's looking frustrated as she cuts in with, "You think this is easy for me?"

"You want it, so I'm going to have to say, at least compared to me, that yes, it's easy for you. Maybe not cosmic scale easy, but... You're still breathing. The idea of making a child doesn't stop your heart or break you out in a cold sweat, so yeah, it's easy for you."

Tony sits up, back against their headboard, elbows resting on his knees, hands laced loosely together. "I want you. I want a life with you. I want you happy. I know kids are part of that. But they're not something I'm ever going to want for myself. They're something I'll want for you because I know you want them.

"I don't like kids. I don't like loud, messy, chaotic things, and that's pretty much the definition of kids. I'm getting better with them because we've got a bunch of the little ankle biters all over the place, and really, they're not that bad, but you'll notice I never line up to babysit because I don't enjoy spending time with them. I'm not saying I hate our girls, and I'm not saying that sometimes, when you're holding one of them, I don't get all, 'oh how cute,' but... I'm relieved when they go home."

"But I know you want them, so I want them for you, but... I'm sorry I'm not enthusiastic about it, but it really is like jumping off a cliff into icy water. Yeah, I know I can swim, but... So, whatever you need to do to get me into the water is fine, but... I can't just jump."

She nods, resigned. "I know."

"I'm sure, we have one, I'll be able to leap for the next one, but right now..."

"Okay. I know. I do." She looks disappointed by that, but not hurt. "Go get us some breakfast. I'm going to do some thinking. Then more talking?"

"Sure. I can do that."

His phone is showing he's got two texts. First one's from Draga. No cases yet. Enjoy your day off.

One from McGee. He checks it. Keys are in the glovebox. Already picked up Abby's car.

And yes, when he gets down to his usual spot his car is there, and the damn thing does sparkle. It didn't look that shiny when it was new, and Tony's wondering if McMoneybags actually hired someone to detail it. He uses Ziva's keys to unlock it, and finds his in the glovebox.
It doesn't have that 'clean car scent' detailers usually spray the interior with, but it's really, really clean.

That helps, a little. He's more… hurt? Disappointed? Something. Whatever it is, it's not raging angry. Not at McGee, not right now.

McGee picked Palmer over him. Flat out said it. 'He's never pulled any shit on me, you have, so I picked him.'

And honestly, with all the years of stuff between him and McGee… Given the same choice, he'd pick Palmer, too. They have a less complicated relationship. Or at least, that was true the day before yesterday. Now… Well, now, if he's ever in need of someone to hide a body, he's not going to Palmer.

Then he thinks about Bodnar, and the fact that Palmer and Breena did, literally, take care of a body for them. Tony sighs. If it was a clean kill, they'd do it again. Palmer will back him to the end of the line, as long as he's doing the right thing.

And he'll call him out and hurt him for doing the wrong one.

Tony shakes his head. He doesn't know what to do about Palmer. He's angry, because that whole thing just sucked, but… But if it was the other way around, and Palmer had pissed on anyone else for something like this, he'd get it and back him.

Flip it around… What if Jimmy wanted to do something nasty to McGee… for the book maybe. The whole necrophilia thing, or writing about them without permission… A whole night of pain… overkill, but… he didn't have any problem with the teasing Jimmy did, and he wouldn't have had any problems if Jimmy wanted to take that teasing up about ten or twenty notches.

He puts his key in the ignition.

McGee picked Palmer. Because whatever it is they've got, that's easier. He thinks that's some of it, sure, but, not all of it.

He and McGee don't work together every single day. They don't have to trust each other implicitly in all situations now. His life no longer literally rests in McGee's hands and vice versa.

If they hadn't worked together, they would have never been friends. Never been more than acquaintances, and likely less than that. If McGee had stayed in Norfolk, he would have just been a name and a face Tony kind of, sort of knew.

But that's not how it worked out. And right now, he is literally still breathing because of Tim McGee. And that's true for McGee, too. Every day for almost fourteen years, he put his life in McGee's hands, and McGee put his life in Tony's. And that's how it was.

But not how it is, not anymore.

Six months ago, when they were still working like that, Tony's fairly sure that McGee would have… maybe not picked him, but done a better job of coming up with some sort of common ground. He would have thought of a compromise, because his literal life depended on both of them trusting each other utterly with no hesitation.

And now they don't. Now their lives, their survival, isn't chained to their ability to work with each other. And, without something else, a deep interest in the same sorts of things… They're drifting apart.
It's not like they're ever going to be strangers or something. Not like they'll just be acquaintances. They're bound by this family they've got now. But their lives, literally, don't revolve around each other anymore.

They aren't partners, not anymore. They are friends now, but… it's not the same.

And Tony's fairly sure it never will be. It can't be. Because the stakes will never be the same again.

Things change, and they have this, family, now, that's gluing them together, but… It's not the same as knowing that's the guy who will take the bullet for you.

Tony pulls to a stop at the stop sign, idling for longer than strictly necessary.

Things change. Of course they do, and they're going to keep changing.

But Ziva's still there, and she's the one who will still take the bullet for him. She's the partner who's got his back no matter what…

Implicit trust. No questions, no hesitation. You lead and I will follow. I lead and you follow. No matter what I have your back and you have mine.

He touches his wedding ring. *I will live.* That's the promise he asked for. Those are the words that underline their marriage.

They've talked about that, too. In counseling, and out. How due to too many losses, too many broken loves, they are both terrified of going on by themselves. How that's not healthy. How, in the long run it's probably a good thing that Ziva's going to be getting out of police work, safer for both of them. They've talked that all through.

But that promise. *I will live.* That's his bedrock. That's what he needs from her. That if something happens to him, she'll keep going without him. That she'll put her fears aside and keep going, alone.

He blinks. He couldn't give that promise back to her, then. And he can't, now. If the words ever left his lips, they'd be a lie.

He can't give her that, but he can give her a child. He can stop being a jerk about it. He can, just like he's asked her to, stuff his fear down and keep going, doing what he needs to to treat her like she's more important to him than air.

He can do that.

And one other thing hits him as that does. If they have a child, and if something happens to her, he can't follow her. He can't let himself self-destruct if she's no longer in his life. He has to make the promise that scares him more than anything else.

*Can't live without you.* He said that to her, in Somalia. He didn't want to say it, but the wall between his brain and mouth was gone and it just fell out.

And suddenly why he's been dragging his heels, and as she put it, going to the dentist with more enthusiasm than he's been going to bed with her, slams into place and makes a whole lot more sense. Why he can jump full into the idea of another woman's child with both feet and no hesitation, makes perfect sense, too.

If they make a baby, then he has to make that promise, because no matter what, one of them has to come home.
And he's terrified it'll be him.

The car behind him honks, and Tony's got no idea how long he's been lingering at the stop sign. He pulls through the intersection, and then pulls over, stopping the car.

He takes his wedding ring off, and trails his finger over the inscription.

_I will live._

His partner. The one he trust implicitly, in all things. The one who will take the bullet for him (though he'd very much prefer she didn't) or put one in someone else.

The one who always has his back.

He slips his ring back on, not feeling any less scared, but he knows what he has to do.

Fake it 'till you feel it… That's the phrase, right?

So, whatever you need to do to get me into the water is fine…

Ziva's in the shower, washing her hair, thinking about that.

She's not sure if that's as close as he can get to outright saying, 'Just lie to me, take it out of my hands, and when we land, I'll be good,' or what he means by that.

The problem is, if he is asking, 'lie to me' then her asking for clarification will screw up the lie. If she asks, 'Tony, are you saying you want me to pretend to go back on birth control?' and then he says, 'Yes,' and two minutes later she says, 'I'm on the pill again,' it's not believable.

If he's going to buy it, it has to look real, otherwise it won't work. He won't relax about it.

And if he's not saying 'lie to me…'

She's talked with Abby and Breena about this, and they've both said that since Tony's already mentioned that he needs some help with this, that he may be asking for her to just lie to him, but… None of them like that option. They all know someone who's done it, but… It feel dirty, and, just… wrong.

She doesn't exactly want to talk to _her friends_ right this second. She's not feeling mad at them. Not right now, much bigger stuff on the horizon, maybe when this all fades that will change, but… Tim and Jimmy don't know about Philippe. Breena and Abby do. That story was told in confidence, and neither of the girls broke that confidence. That helps with mad. The fact that, like Breena, she'll back her husband, even if he's being stupid, helps with mad. The fact that Abby pulled some pretty serious crap on Helen helps with mad, too.

She is mad at Jimmy right now.

But that can wait. Feeling mad at Jimmy right now seems like a way to not deal with what's going on right here, right now. So, that can definitely wait.

She feels the temperature in the air shift, and a second later Tony says, "Hey. I'm back. Got hot coffee, croissants, and strawberries."

"I'll be out in a minute."
"Good."

He's laying food out on the table when she comes out, dressed in pajama pants and a t-shirt.

"I'm going back on the pill." She's not sure if she's lying or not as she says that. She still has two disks full of them, the option to do it for real is there.

He looks a little surprised at that.

"Not forever. Not more than six months. But... I am tired of sex being a chore. And we have more than enough big issues to deal with right this second." So much for what he was planning on saying to her. Before he gets a chance to do much besides stand there and look startled, she says to him, "Your turn."

His turn... Time for him to talk and her to listen. "Okay." His stuff. They can start there, and get back to hers. They've got all day. "I don't know what to do about Abby's offer. It's easier not to know. It's safer, for me, and us, and this tidy little life we've got going here. It's less complicated. But I have this suspicion that not finding out isn't right. That... if you can know, you should know."

She nods at that.

"What do you think? Do you want to know? If we find out, this can hit on a lot of levels, not just emotional, but... God, I feel like a dick for saying this, but, this could be a hard financial hit, too. I mean, if I know those kids are out there... Especially if they're kids, under eighteen and all, I kind of have to do something about it, and..."

And she knows. Money is going to be tight if she wants to do the stay-at-home-mom thing. Adding a pile of child support to the list of bills would only make that worse, and, possibly, take it completely off the table.

Time with these kids... That'd be taking him away from her and their family. It would be... destabilizing. Thinking about that doesn't make her feel good. But, it's real.

"I don't want to know." She's fairly sure that's not the 'right' or 'good' answer. But she doesn't want to know. She looks up at the ceiling for a moment. "But there is likely a child somewhere who wonders about her father. And I do not want to be the wall between you and that child."

"Do you think there's... I don't know, some sort of in between? Some way to set it so that if that girl's out there, looking, she can find me, but... But I don't have to go barging into her home? I mean... I'm sure there are kids who wonder, and there's likely some who don't... I mean... I know at least three of the ladies I hooked up with were doing a last night before the wedding fling, and... if that resulted in kids, they probably aren't wondering who their dad is... They may not have the right answer, but they probably aren't wondering. If I'm just sitting there with a list of people Abby dug up, I won't know who is who."

Ziva shrugs. "I would think so. You cannot be the only man in this situation."

"I think that's what I'd like to do."

Ziva nods at that. Maybe not a perfect answer, but, she can live with it.

Tony spreads some butter on his croissant. That was actually a lot easier than he was expecting it to be. Of course, if he gets on or whatever, and someone does find him, this might get a whole lot less easy.
But that's tomorrow, not today. Other things for today. He puts the croissant down. "Don't go back on the pill."

Her eyebrows rise.

"I'm scared. I'm not going to stop being scared, but..." He touches his ring again. "I asked you for something that scared the hell out of you, and you've handled it with grace. And you deserve that back. So... Don't go back on them." He stands up, heads to their bathroom, and finds both disks. A minute later, he's out in their kitchen, tossing them in the trash.

"You and me, to the end of the line, and... And I've got you. You've got me. That's how this works."

Ziva's smiling at him, very touched, very wowed, and very much hoping that he can stay in this headspace, because she likes it.

He looks at the plate in front of her, about half a croissant and two strawberries has been eaten. He takes the basket of berries, and her hand, tugging her out of her chair.

"Come to bed with me," he says with a smile. (And yes, that might not be the most genuine smile he's ever had, but part of this whole loving people thing is putting them and their needs first. He can do that.)

And Ziva smiles back. She can see that this isn't entirely real, but she really appreciates the effort.
May I see you? Text from Jimmy. Been sitting on her phone, without a response, for more than an hour now.

Yesterday was good. Good all over. And at the end of it, she and Tony had asked Abby about their potential halfway solution, and she gave them some suggestions for how he could get his genome out there, and let other people hunt him down. Apparently, this is going to take a lot of spit, a bunch of test tubes, and mailing off bits of DNA to several internet companies that specialize in helping people find their relatives/history/genealogy or whatnot.

Today was busy. Drug case. No dead bodies, but sixty kilos of heroin will get the MCRT rolling.

Ziva likes drug cases. They're... clean... for lack of a better word. No dead bodies. No having to inform next of kin. No having to ask questions of grieving widows or orphans. No friends reeling from loss. They may be messy as hell with lies and backstabbing and deceit, but no one's dead.

It's occurring to her that she may have been a cop for too long if this is her idea of a good day.

But it has been a good day. And as they were getting ready to go home, her phone buzzes, with Jimmy's message on it.

She shows it to Tony, and he shrugs. Whatever she wants to do about Jimmy, that's up to her.

So she tucks her phone back into her pocket, and they go home.

They're home. Dinner's done. Tony's got a movie he's been looking forward to, but Ziva's not really interested in it.

She heads to their room, grabbing her book, and settles into the overstuffed armchair near their bed.

She's read the same paragraph three times, which means the book's not holding her interest, and she knows why not. Her eyes keep darting to her phone.

Talk to him or not...

She picks up the phone. Yes.

A minute later Where? Anywhere that's good for you, I'll go.

I'm at home.

I can be there in half an hour.

Fine.

And in twenty-eight minutes, he is there.

He knocks. He usually wouldn't. Normally, if he's expected, he'd just head in, because that's how
they are with each other's homes. But today he knocks.

He's been trying to think of what to say on the ride over. Not much is springing up. *I'm sorry I hurt you.* That's pretty much it.

But he's already said that.

*I hope you forgive me. I hope you understand.* That's there, too.

*I hope this is fixable.* That's why he's at their door.

Ziva opens the door, and looks at him. Yeah, not pleased at all. It's not a happy expression on her face, but she lets him in.

She leads him to the dining table. They've got an open floor plan, so he can see Tony watching his movie, and feels a flash of hot, angry at seeing him, so... yeah... not okay on that, yet, but... Tony's ignoring them, letting them get whatever they need to do with each other, out of the way.

He sits down, and she does, too, staring at him, making him speak first.

"I'm sorry I hurt you."

"You've said that."

"Wanted to say it again. That was something I needed to do, to be okay, in myself, and, longer term, okay with him, but it hurt you, and... I didn't want that. But I couldn't think of a way to do it without hurting you."

"If he deserved your anger, I did, too."

Jimmy shakes his head. "No... Ziva...You're not—"

"I have run that mission, too, Jimmy."

Jimmy blinks. He opens his mouth, and shuts it, staring at her. He licks his lips, still staring, and opens his mouth again, but no sound comes out.

She sees his posture slouch, and he looks like he's been punched.

But finally he says, "Oh. Uh..." He straightens back up again, breathing deeply. "Then I'm not sorry." He's biting his lip, hard, apparently stopping himself from saying something, likely harsh. He stares at her dining table, and then looks up at her. He looks away again, collecting his thoughts.

"Uh..."

"Would you like to be judged for your worst mistake, more than a decade later?" Ziva asks.

He licks his lips again, and tries to think of what he considers his worst mistake. But when it comes down to it, not going with Breena to Jon's twenty week ultrasound doesn't feel like it fits into the category of use someone for your own gain. But, if she wants to dump on him about it... Not like she'll ever come up with anything he didn't say to himself about that. Not like he won't deserve it. He should have been there with her. She shouldn't have had to face that image and everything that came after it, alone.

"No." He's looking at his hand, wedding ring. "But I'll get it if it happens." He looks back to Ziva. "I don't know if you can call something you did intentionally, knowing you were fucking someone
over, a mistake."

"Decision, then."

"Yeah. Decision." He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. "No. I wouldn't want to be judged on my worst decision. Two minutes ago, I thought it was letting you spend that night sitting there, hurting. Now I don't know what it would be. So, you know what, fuck it, judge away. Nothing you didn't deserve. I don't expect you to be happy with it… But, I hope you understand."

"I understand."

He nods and it turns into a head shake. "I don't." He's looking up at her, big eyes, fragile expression on his face. "I said this to him, or if I didn't, I meant to. I don't get it. I don't fucking get it, at all. There are no targets. Just people. And I don't get how you could go into a mission to literally fuck an innocent person with no shot of it working, no hope of doing anything useful. Not when there was a really obvious way to do it without hurting that person. It's one thing if you're off to save the world or something, but…" he shakes his head again. "I don't get it, Ziva."

She shakes her head. "You don't have to, and if you're lucky, you never will."

"That sounds like you do get it. That this… makes sense to you."

She shrugs. "In a properly run mission, it's a simple costs benefits analysis. What's the easiest way to achieve your goal? What tools do you have at your disposal? What timeframe do you have to move in? One broken heart versus a fire fight with an expected fifty casualties? You break the heart."

Jimmy's eyes flick toward Tony. "So, you're saying, what? That this was cheaper than putting surveillance on Jeanne?"

Ziva shrugs, while that is likely true, she doesn't want to put her approval on that mission. "That was not a properly run mission."

"And when you did it, was it a properly run mission?"

"I like to think so."

"Ah." So, not exactly the same mission. "And… did… that heartbreak save lives?"

"It certainly did from my side's perspective. None of our men were lost. It cost lives for the other side."

"But that was going to happen either way?"

"Yes. It's likely fewer died by using the route we did. But it's certain that the target would have been vastly better off if I'd stayed away from him. And, in as much as there are such things as innocent people, involving him meant hurting one, and a direct strike would have only engaged combatants."

Jimmy bites his lip again, thinking.

"Did you know that Ilan Bodnar had a wife and sister?"

"No. You never said."

"We were close once… Not family close, but he was my father's protégée. We worked several cases together. Had dinner together on numerous occasions. Friendly."
"More than friendly?"

Ziva shakes her head. "Never that friendly. Since, I'm 'still looking for Bodnar' I get in touch with them every year or so. Check in, see if they've heard anything." Jimmy knew that keeping up the ruse of still looking for Bodnar was part of the cover, that if he was truly missing, Ziva wouldn't have just given up on the hurt, but he hadn't realized what was really involved in that. "They are still waiting for him, still looking. Still hoping he is alive.

"Everything we do, no matter how justified, touches other people. Sometimes it hurts. If you get into something like that, like the kind of life the Frog was leading, you open up the people you love to this sort of hurt. The fact that they become targets, too, is supposed to help dissuade you from that path."

Jimmy blinks, and nods. "Doesn't mean we have to be the ones to do it to them."

"No, it doesn't. And we try not to. But we are human, and we make mistakes, and we make bad decisions, and things that look like a good plan at the time go haywire."

"Yeah. That's how I was feeling about hurting you."

"But you are not feeling that way anymore, are you?"

"No. Now I'm wishing I had chewed out both of you." Jimmy stands up. "I'm..." And he heads out.

Tony stands up and heads over to Ziva. "That went well."

She glares at him. Not hot, but not appreciating the sarcasm.

He shrugs. "You okay?"

"It is hard to be angry at him when he's sitting there like a kicked puppy."

Tony nods at that, too. "And then you remember exactly how long that night was..."

She nods back at him. Remembering brings that fear and pain back in a flash. Unnecessary pain and fear. Hours of it.

"I'm kind of hoping we can fight it out. Beat the hell out of each other and then call it even."

"It's worked well in the past."

He nods, some. "Yeah. Just get all the angry out in one big burst and then be done with it."

Gibbs has been trying to take a back seat and let them work this crap all out on their own.

Unfortunately, he's not liking the direction 'working it out' looks like it's going to take. Because they're all planning on just beating it out.

The good thing about Bootcamp is that they can all take care of themselves, and then some. The downside is, they're way too damn good to be pounding on each other.

And he can see how this is going to play out. Four person brawl. While it does look like McGee and both DiNozzos are doing okay now (or at least not talking about it) Gibbs knows that if this goes down, Tim will get in it, and he'll fight for Jimmy.
Gibbs just doesn't see any way that ends well.

On top of that, what Breena had to say about Tim and Jimmy coming home with bruises stuck with him.

Ziva and Tony trying for a baby, sticks with him.

Tim having the *Stennis* test coming up, that's sticking, too.

And in each of his conversations with them, they're all mentioning Bootcamp.

Gibbs has a bad feeling about this. He does not want to see a full-on four person brawl, especially if one of those people may be very slightly pregnant and another one might be walking into a real fight in the next few weeks.

The more he thinks about it, the more it's hitting him that he doesn't want beating the shit out of each other to be the fallback position for how to deal with anger at each other.

He wants the guys, especially Tim and Jimmy to be comfortable with their violence, able to use it when they need it, but... He doesn't want them using it against each other.

---

*Bootcamp is at the house, on Saturday. All six of you. Duck and Penny are watching the girls. No whining or complaining about that. McGee, Palmer, bring your checkbooks.*

Gibbs figured that email would do the job, and then he went off in search of a Mason jar and a permanent marker.

---

The internet is a useful thing. He's never going to have Tim-level google-fu (or for that matter know the term google-fu) but he's found that if you're persistent, you can find out lots of things.

For example, Gibbs already knows what Tony and Ziva make. He's had their jobs, after all. And he's got an idea for Tim, Abby, and Jimmy. But a bit of research and knowing each of their rankings, meant that he was able to get, within a few thousand dollars, what their yearly salaries are.

More googling meant that he was able to find out, again, ballpark, what an author makes per copy of his book sold, and how many books Tim's sold. (A lot more than he had thought.)

Some googling after that meant that he now knows that the Slater Funeral Homes are a closely held C Corp with 14.6 million a year in sales, and shares of the publically traded stock (Not a whole lot of that, the Slaters own more than 90% of the company. He bought some anyway, not a lot, but he wanted a symbolic gesture of supporting the family business.) going for $17.14. More googling found that Breena Palmer currently owns 11.6% of the company and is officially listed as a Director.

And with that, he has a plan.

---

No Shabbos this week. He's not surprised at that.

He hits Tony and Ziva's place first. They seem, okay. Especially with each other. That reassures him. He doesn't want to be poking his nose into their marriage deeply enough to know what exactly shifted, but they're both more at ease with each other.

They always have that fine buzz of tension. That's just how they work, but right now it's a barely audible hum, coming through in the occasional, slightly sharp, joke.
So, they're running on normal.

Tony wants to bitch about whatever the mystery bootcamp is, but Gibbs just shakes his head.

Palmers' next. Jimmy and Breena he's expecting. McGees just happened to be an added bonus.

Tim and Abby seem okay.

Breena's fine.

Jimmy… Jimmy's in worse shape than he was the last time they talked, and also looking forward to Bootcamp a lot more than Gibbs thinks is healthy.

He'd had dinner with Tony and Ziva, but he's not turning down the watermelon sorbet Breena had for dessert.

Dessert's wrapping up, and he more or less pulls Jimmy onto the porch. Tim follows, not really planning on getting into it, but just staying in the background, there if need be.

"What happened?" Gibbs asks.

Jimmy shrugs. "Turns out Ziva's done it, too." Tim's eyes go wide, he hadn't heard that bit of it yet. "And honestly, if you've ever seduced an innocent person for the job, made them fall in love with you, and used them, I really don't want to hear about it."

Gibbs shakes his head. Sure he's slept with suspects or accomplices, never a bystander.

"They still your friends?"

"Yeah."

"You still love them?"

"Yes."

"Then you've got to let it go. Long time ago and there's nothing they can do about it, now."

"I know. Still hard when people you love and respect do asshole things."

Gibbs stares right at Jimmy, dead into his eyes, makes sure he has his undivided attention, then he quickly glances to Tim before staring back at Jimmy. "Yeah. It is. Sucks when your friends put you in a bad situation, too."

Jimmy blinks at him, getting what that look is saying. He nods.

"Let it go, Jimmy."

He shrugs. "I'm trying."

"Try harder."

Saturday morning, bright and early.

He's got six tense-looking people milling around what will eventually be the living room once they get this whole place fixed up.
Gibbs takes the mason jar out of his bag. It's got the word ASSHOLE written on it in big letters. He sticks it on the mantle and then points to it. "This is the asshole jar. All instances of assholery will result in donations being placed in the asshole jar. Then whomever has been the victim of assholery will get the proceeds of said jar. I know, ballpark, how much money all of you have, and what you make, so the penalty for assholery is adjusted by income and will sting, but it won't break you.

"The point of Bootcamp is not to beat the shit out of each other. It's to be strong and fast and able to beat the shit out of the other guys out there.

"So from here on out, beating the hell out of each other is off the table. We'll still fight, we'll still train, but it's never going to be a way we deal with our anger at each other, ever again. You need to fight out your anger at the outside world, great, we're good on that. We support each other on that. But never for each other, never again.

"Lifting a hand to each other in anger, in annoyance, it ends now. No one's ever getting a headslap again, either. We're done with it.

"Now, pay up. Director Gemcity, twenty-five hundred, into the pot, each, for Tony and Ziva."

Tim winces, yeah, that's gonna sting, and they haven't gotten to Abby yet.

"LabMistress McGee, thirteen hundred, each, for Tony and Ziva."

Abby's wincing too. Gibbs is right, it's not going to break them. Won't mean a missed payment on anything. They've got the savings to cover it, but they're going to have to shift some cash around and sell off some of their stock to cover it. Tim gets his phone out and starts taking care of it.

"You got a check with you?" he asks Tony.

"Why would I have one? I wasn't told to bring one."

"If you had one, I could wire the money right into your account. I'll Paypal you instead."

Tony nods at that.

Gibbs says, "Dr. Palmer, grand a pop, to Abby and Tim. Five hundred to Tony and Ziva."

"Five hundred?" Jimmy asks.

"Aggravated assholery. You get a discount on that."

Jimmy bites his lip, this isn't supposed to be funny, but he likes the idea of aggravated assholery.

"Director Palmer, eleven hundred each to Tony and Ziva."

Gibbs hands a check over to Jimmy, who looks at it for a second and then stares at Gibbs, dumbfounded, as he asks, "Why?"

"Because as your wife pointed out, someone should have said something to you when it happened. I should have checked in with you. I didn't. My team, my screw up."

"Tony and Ziva, you're not paying out this time, but each count of assholery's gonna cost Tony seven fifty and Ziva four hundred. I know you all get raises, so those numbers are just going to keep getting higher and higher as time goes by."

Breena's got the checkbook out and writing in it. "If you can hold them 'til Tuesday, that'd be good.
I've got to move some money into this account, and unlike Tim, I don't have everything for that online."

Ziva and Abby nod. 

Gibbs is almost done. "Rule 72: If it happened more than two years ago, let it go. That's our new statute of limitations. Two years. We've known each other a long time and have long memories, and that's not biting us in the ass again. You wanna bitch to your own spouse about it if it's more than two years old, fine. But unless it is so bad you are literally willing to rip our entire family apart over it, if it's more than two years old, let the fucker go.

"Rule 73: If it's less than two years old and didn't happen to you personally, forgive it."

"Rule 74: If you'd yell at the girls for it, don't do it yourself.

"Now, if you still need to go do something hard and strenuous to burn it off, there's a truck load of rocks that still need to be laid out, and then stuck on the house. Get to it!"

House building starts off awfully quiet. Working with Ducky during the week means that about two thirds of the masonry is up. Hopefully with the whole crew here, they'll get it all in place by the end of the day.

Then comes windows. Normally, if you had a full crew of people who knew how to do this, you'd go through, pop the old ones all out, and then put the new ones all in.

They are not going to do it that way. Each one goes out and a new one'll go in. The inside has more than enough water damage already without having every widow a gaping hole for God alone knows however long it'll take to get all the new ones in.

So, that's the plan for today, rocks on the house, and a few windows if they manage to get that far.

But so far, putting more stones on the walls is bordering on silent.

There is a logical part in Jimmy's mind which is greatly appreciating a way to… get out of this… for lack of a better term, without beating the hell out of anyone, or getting beaten.

That's the logical part.

It's normally in charge.

He'd like it to be in charge. Things work better, and they're a hell of a lot easier when it's in charge. And for right now, it's in control of things. Mostly. It's driving the car.

The obnoxious, and loud, passengers in the backseat, anger and violence, are pouting at how this has worked out. They'd be really happy with a drop down, drag out, no one gets out without skin mottled with bruises fight.

He's trying, as he's placing stones against the side of the wall, to boot them out of the car and get back to being okay.

He's thinking that Gibbs may indeed be onto something with the whole Cranston is a good listener thing, because he knows there was a time when beating the shit out of someone because he's mad at them would have literally, never, occurred to him.
If you need something hard to burn it off…

He does. So instead of putting the rocks on the side of the house, he gets up, and starts moving them. Grabbing the next few stone for each of the other six, picking them up, carrying them over, and then back to the lay out for the next batch.

It is hard, and heavy, and he's sweating freely by the time he's done fifteen of them. The driveway (where all of the stones have been laid out) is about four hundred feet away from this side of the house, and sure none of the stones is really heavy, but they aren't light either, maybe ten, maybe twelve pounds, and he's making sure to grab three or four of them in a go.

It helps. Not as good, or fast, or satisfying as actually fighting would be, but it's hard and his heart is pumping, and the feel good chemicals are starting to flow.

Tony would have to admit that not beating the shit out of Jimmy is disappointing. He's also have to admit that the more than ten thousand dollars he and Ziva now have is pretty nice. And that, right now, he's thinking that they are going to go somewhere warm and beautiful and very luxurious and very expensive in the middle of god-awful, nasty winter and then sending pictures back home to gloat about it. And it'll be even better if they manage to time it so the girls have colds.

That is, if that doesn't count as being an asshole.

That's probably being a smartass, and if Gibbs wants them to stop doing that, he's going to have to shoot them, because that's only going to stop when they're dead.

Things start to thaw by lunchtime. Abbi shows up with food. Very welcome food.

They're milling around on the back patio, grabbing drinks, rummaging through sandwiches and salads (everything has names on it) when Jimmy snags a sugar-free iced tea, chugs it, and then takes five steps to the grass and collapses on his back, sprawled out, groaning with pleasure.

His arms are sore, his back is sore, quads are trembling (You have to do a deep knee bend to get the rocks off the driveway, then stand back up with them, multiply that by about two hundred trips, and his legs are jello), and cool, soft grass feels awesome right now.

"What, you sleeping on the job? Not gonna do it. You know you don't get out of working this afternoon unless you're dead." Tony's mouth shoots over to Jimmy before his brain remembers that maybe now might not be the best time to tease him.

Everyone else stiffens slightly, wondering what's going to come next. Jimmy doesn't even look over in Tony's direction, though his arm slowly bends at the elbow, lifting his right hand high, followed by his middle finger extending.

"Good news, Tony, he's still alive. Now you don't have to worry about moving all those rocks yourself."

That starts the laughter.

"Please, I could move those rocks in my sleep."

Jimmy slowly rolls up into a sitting position, and heads back to the main group, grabbing another drink, and his lunch, and then sprawling bonelessly in the chaise that Breena had grabbed for them.
"Yeah, in your dreams you can move that many rocks that fast."

Tim snorts at that while the rest of them laugh and decides now's a good time to shift the topic a bit. He takes a quick bite of his sandwich (corned beef on rye) and asks, "Got your speech done?" The DiNozzo Sr. wedding is a week from today, and Tony's on best man duty.

Tony nods. "Yep, just re-heating the one I used for your wedding." That gets a bit of a laugh, too.

"'I remember the first time McGee saw Abby… The way his eyes glazed over and that slight bit of drool on the corner of his lips…' Yeah, that'll flow naturally for your Dad's wedding," Abby says.

Tim adds. "You know, you weren't actually there the first time I saw Abby. You were going to walk me down, but I shocked you so bad the doors to the elevator closed before you got in."

"It's called poetic license, and you were already drooling by then! You were just about licking your chops as you got into the elevator."

Tim shrugs a bit, not like that was precisely wrong. And technically it wasn't the first time he saw her. He'd caught just enough of a glimpse on the video conference to be very interested in getting to know her better. But it was the first time he saw her in person, and… well, he's fairly sure his eyes did glaze over, and if he'd been drooling… He wasn't, but he thinks that's because his mouth went dry.

"How'd you shock him?" Abbi asks.

Tim smiles. "It was our first case together, and a few days earlier I'd asked about Abby and he told me Abby wasn't my type. I said 'why?'"

"And I asked if he'd ever had any desire to get a tatt on his ass. He said no. I told him he never had to think about Abby again. You have to remember that back in the day McInked here was about twelve-years-old and looked like he was wearing a suit he borrowed from his dad to go play at being an agent."

"I was twenty-four, Tony. Anyway, I told him that no, I'd never had any desire to get a tattoo on my ass." Tim's pushing up the sleeve on his left arm, showing off the code he's got there. "And that was true. No desire, at all. Still don't have one. Because they hurt to get done and they hurt when they heal up, and who wants to sit on that?" He touches the code. "This on the other hand… I'd been thinking about this for a while. That's my masters dissertation, so not like I woke up one morning and said, 'Oh, bunch of random letters!'"

"So, Tony's really looking forward to me seeing Abby and flipping out, or her seeing me and laughing hysterically, and he's telling me she's really not my type, so I said to him, 'You know that desire you were asking about? I took care of it. Went with Mom.' And that fried his brain and stopped him dead."

"Why'd you say Mom?" Tony asks.

"Because I wanted to get to my lunch date, and explaining this would have taken most of the hour Abby had off."

Abbi's looking at that tattoo. "That's your master's dissertation?"

"The core of it. The whole thing is about five pages long. This, then four and a half pages explaining what it does and how."
"What does it do?" Jimmy asks, realizing he doesn't know that.

"Remember, I got out of grad school Winter of '01. So, anyway, back then they were just getting into using database policing. You know, you've got a database that's got every theft in the county, and then use a computer to figure out what was likely to get hit when. Back when I wrote this, the program that did it was thousands of lines of code and would take days, even for a small community. This can handle New York City in an hour, and anywhere smaller in minutes."

"So, everything a cop on the beat could tell you if you asked," Gibbs says, dryly.

"Maybe. This could give you the likelihood of any given address being hit at any given time on any given day. Cop only knows his area and his times on. Usually you'd use something like this to help assign who goes where at what times. How to plan out those beats. And unlike the cop on the beat, this one can update as fast as you feed it new information. So it could tell you in practically real time if your new beat assignments were having an effect."

"Is anyone using it?" Breena asks.

"Not anymore. Much better stuff is out there now. But I wouldn't be shocked if someone built off of it to make some of that better stuff. Just like all the other MIT dissertations, anyone with a library card can find this and build off of it." A thought hit Tim as he says that, something he's never asked. "Ziva, did you go to college?"

"Why are you asking, McGee?"

"IDF at 18. That's what, two years?"

She nods.

"Okay, you're twenty. Then working for your dad. Adventures all over the place. 2005 rolls around, and you're with us. That was fall, so... You're what, just barely 23 then?"

Ziva shakes her head. "I was still twenty-two when I met you. I did not attend college, at least not the way you did. I did get a semester in Barcelona, and another in Cairo, one in Prague. College student is an easy cover if you are twenty-one, and colleges expect to have foreign students. But I do not have a degree. Leon was willing to make an exception for me, based on my vast, in-the-field experience."

"Wise man," Abbi says.

Ziva nods. "I've thought about maybe doing college, going back, along with the job, like Jimmy did, but so far... I think I'd rather just read."

Jimmy nods at that. "Unless you want a degree in something like medicine where you have to go to college, I wouldn't recommend it. Took me seven years to do med school and residency part-time, and I was pretty fried for a lot of that time. What would you study if you went back?"

Ziva shrugs. "I do not know. Literature?" She smiles at Tony. "Film? I did take a class in that, and enjoyed it. I always thought I might like to learn photography, art photography, not just shooting a scene, or go back to dancing. If I went to school it would be for fun."

That makes Gibbs smile. He knows what Ziva's getting for her birthday this year. He still has Shannon's cameras and the dark room equipment. No chemicals, obviously, they'd all be way past their prime, but he's got an enlarger and film spools and trays collecting dust along with an SLR and a collection of lenses and gels in his attic.
They continue to chat while eating, not as easy or smooth as usual, but not silent like the beginning of the day either.

As lunches are wrapped up, and each of them began to head back to the side of the house in need of stonework, Jimmy says to Tony, "Your shot to show off. I'm done with lugging rocks. Let's see how long you can keep it up."

Tony smirks. "All damn night."

Jimmy snorts at that, shaking his head, and follows Breena to where she'd been working, figuring he'd help her with her bit of the wall.

They're getting ready to head home. Gibbs is packing up his tools, talking with Abbi, Tony and Ziva are already pulling out. Abby wanders over to Breena and hands her the check back. "We're good."

Breena looks at her. "Sure?"

"Yeah." She nods to Jimmy, who's putting up the last stone of the day, with Tim. "You think he's gonna make me do something I don't approve of?" She snorts a quick laugh.

Breena nods, that's a good point.

"I should have said or done something when it happened. I didn't. We're good on my end, and I know Tim is, too," She wraps an arm around Breena. "Besides, I know what you said to Gibbs about those two beating on each other hit home, so I'm perfectly good with you getting the idea through to him that this isn't cool. They may not listen to us on it, but when Dad lays down the law, they pay attention. That's worth a few grand to me."

Breena smiles at that.
Normal As A Wedding

Tim supposes it's a good thing that his wife is squeeing with joy at him developing white hairs, but he's not exactly relishing it.

She's standing behind him as he sits at the table, playing defense on keeping Kelly's food on her tray. At almost a year old (God, how'd that happen?) she's more or less feeding herself these days, but feeding herself often means food all over the place. He feels Abby start to play with his hair. He doesn't mind that at all, it feels good and is putting him in a good mood for the next part of today.

She's making some fairly excited sounds that haven't really filtered through his determination to make sure that at least some of the food on the tray ends up inside Kelly.

Finally, it does filter through.

"I knew it! I knew you'd be one, too. My very own silver fox!"

"Huh?"

"White hairs. You've got sixteen of them."

"Oh. Great." By which he means, not great, and she gets that from his tone.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm thirty-eight."

"So?"

"You're forty-two, no gray hair. Tony's forty-eight, no gray hair."

Abby laughs. "Tony's been dying his since he was thirty-five. And Jimmy's exactly the same age you are, and he's got some, too." For Jimmy, some means probably about two percent of his hair is white, all scattered about his head.

"Tony dyes his hair?" Tim asks.

"You didn't know that?" Abby's really surprised by that.

"How would I know that?"

"His hair's been getting lighter for more than a decade now. It was almost black when he started."

Yes, Tim had noticed that, but it didn't seem like any sort of big deal. From what he can tell everyone's hair changes color some. "My hair's been changing, too."

"Getting darker. That happens. Mine's not as blonde as it was before I started dying it. No one's hair slowly goes from almost black to medium brunette over fifteen years without help."

Tim stares at her, not sure if that's right or not.

She shrugs. "I noticed because I know what hair-dye smells like, and occasionally he comes in smelling like Garnier."
Tim lights up. That he knows about. Every now and again Tony comes into work or Bootcamp smelling a bit fruity. It's not unpleasant or anything, but it is a pretty distinctive aroma. "Is that the sort of fruity smell?"

"Yeah." She nods at that, emphatically.

"He told me that was lube."

Abby looks horrified at that idea. "Why would anyone use lube that smells like that?"

"I was thinking the same thing after I got past the massive yuck of you-didn't-get-enough-of-a-shower-to-wash-the-damn-stuff-off! but we had only known each other for a few weeks when I asked, so I sure as hell wasn't going to ask for specifics. So, really, that's hair dye?"

She nods.

"He told me that was lube."

"Yeah." She nods at that, emphatically.

"He told me that was lube."

Abby looks horrified at that idea. "Why would anyone use lube that smells like that?"

"I was thinking the same thing after I got past the massive yuck of you-didn't-get-enough-of-a-shower-to-wash-the-damn-stuff-off! but we had only known each other for a few weeks when I asked, so I sure as hell wasn't going to ask for specifics. So, really, that's hair dye?"

She nods.

Tim smirks. "I've got to tell Jimmy that. Tony's been ragging on him for months about the gray hair."

"Well, now you have ammo to shoot back with."

He grabs a grape as it goes flying by his head and puts it back on Kelly's tray. "No throwing the food." She grins at him, big eight tooth grin, grabs it, and puts it in her mouth. "What did you mean by you knew it? Have you been thinking about this for a while?"

Abby smiles. "Like since we were first dating. One night Kate and I got talking about you guys, and talking about you guys got into what'd you'd be like in twenty years, and I was betting you'd be a silver fox."

He grins at that.

"Didn't think you'd be so thin," her hands slip down his arms, "or so built, but I like that."

He pulls her down for a kiss. "Glad to hear it."

"So, when's Sarah and Glen coming?"

Tim glances at the clock. "Any minute now."

And, as if conjured by those words, they hear a car in their driveway. "And they're here!"

"Perfect." Senior's wedding starts in two hours. That gives them plenty of time to get changed, and to the church.

"Can I borrow your sporran?" Tim's holding his phone to his ear, kilt on, shirt half-buttoned. He's hoping Ducky can save him on this. He'd told Borin that he'd do the kilt for the wedding, and then noticed a tad late that he was missing part of the outfit for the whole formal kilt concept.

He hears the sigh on the other side of the phone. "Timothy, one does not borrow a sporran."

"Yes, well, one doesn't have one, and apparently they're kind of required for the whole formal kilt thing, so…"

"Fine. Get your own, soon."

"I've got one on order already," Okay, not technically true, but only because he hasn't decided which
one he likes better. He does have a website up and is dithering between two of them. It'll be true before he gets out of the house. "But, it's not going to get here in an hour."

He hears Ducky chuckling.

Sarah whistles at them when they get downstairs.

"Good God, you two can do stylish!" Once again, they may not be fashionable, but there is definitely some style going on here. He's got the tux jacket and vest, a white button down, and hunter green tie (eldritch knot), along with the kilt, which feels kind of odd to wear without boots. He's just relieved that half a dragon sticking out of the top of his sock doesn't look too stupid. He was afraid it was going to look like it was peeking out of his sock.

Abby's the really stylish one. She'd been jonesing for the dress she has on for about two years, but no reason to get it or wear it, and then those magical words showed up in the mail. Black tie cocktail party.

Tim knows just enough about fashion to know that he likes the dress, and that the guy who made it, Alexander McQueen is a big deal. Beyond that… No clue.

But he does like it. And it goes with his outfit perfectly. It's plaid, navy and hunter, black and silver, like his. He doesn't know what to call that sort of shape, but it goes from her chest to her knees, one little bit swirling up from her left breast to wrap around her throat, the rest falling into a flouncy pleated skirt, the left side of which is tucked into a wide, black leather belt circling her waist. Under the skirt are many flounces of white lace, and all along Abby's chest, shoulders, and arms is more white lace, with black arabesque detailing.

It looks fucking awesome, and he does not regret a penny of what it cost. (Once they got off the phone with HR to make sure he was still getting paid bi-weekly and not, seasonally, or something, they've been having a good time with Tim's recent raise.)

Lucky for them, they paid for it, and the hotel, and the rest of this, before Gibbs levied his Asshole Fee and wiped out what was left of that month's play money.

Of course, as Tim's looking at the shot of the two of them Sarah took, compared to the black eye(s?) he could be wearing to this, a few grand wasn't that big of a deal.

"Make sure to get shots of Ducky and Penny for us!" Sara says as they head out.

Tim's nodding as he kisses Kelly goodbye.

"No problem," Abby adds to her hug and kisses.

"See you noonish tomorrow!" Tim says, and they're off.

They're in the car, en route to the church, looking forward to this. He notices Abby yawning as he's telling her about almost having the last of the contracted Tibbs novels done. Ten thousand words to go, and the Continuing Adventures of LJ Tibbs go on spec. Which means when he's feeling inspired he'll crank one out, but the one novel-a-year pace is done.

"Bored?"

She smiles. "Nah. Just sleepy." She sighs. "Had a hard time getting out of last night's case."
Tim nods at that. "Tony was texting me about that one yesterday. Afraid he'd end up stiffing his dad on his best man."

"Lucky for all of us Draga noticed that envelope between the books."

Tim nods. "Feels a little weird to just hear about them, you know?"

"Maybe?" Abby half shrugs. "I almost always just hear about them."

"Yeah, but you work them, too. All week I've been perfecting my test, hacking a database in Tokyo, and fighting with HR about hour tracking. Can you believe they still want us filling out pieces of paper?"

Abby's already heard every flavor of Tim complaining about any branch of NCIS wanting paper documents, so she nods at that.

"I mean, I can give them precise, to the second, accountings of how long my guys are working, when and where, but no, they want paper forms!"

"Tim…" Her hand lands on his, squeezing gently, giving him a look that he knows means, calm down.

"I'm calm. I put Howard on it. She's writing a program that will take the information off their computers, fill out the forms, and then print the damn things out for us. All my guys have to do is sign. She tells me it'll be done next week."

"That's good."

"And two weeks from now, Loretta in HR will call me up to complain about how they're all printed out and none of them were actually filled out by the individual who's being tracked."

Abby snorts at that, and yawns again.

"I think you needed a nap this afternoon."

She nods. "You know it."

They get to a stop light, and he leans over to kiss her. "I don't mind if we get there late and leave early."

She laughs. "As long as we put the hotel room to good use after we leave?"

"And before we get there," he says with a big grin.

"Twice in one wedding? You're feeling frisky, aren't you?" Her hand trails up the inside of his leg, giving him a gentle squeeze.

He grins, looks her up and down. He really likes that dress, and it's going to look even better on the floor. He grins again, taking his foot off the break and driving them toward the church.

Tim is intellectually aware of the fact that this is a big wedding. The fact he's been invited to this thing is a less than subtle hint in that direction, but still…

It's a huge church, easily seats a thousand and it's almost full. He can't even begin to imagine knowing this many people.
They're waiting at the front doors for the rest of their crew, minus Tony and Ziva, who are part of the wedding party.

Ducky and Penny find them first, and yes, Ducky does have his sporran. Tim takes one look at that and blanches. Abby clutches his hand when she sees it, whimpering. Ducky appears especially pleased with this reaction and is happily handing it over to Tim, who really doesn't want to touch it.

"I'm sorry, Ducky, I can't wear that."

"Timothy… First you ask to borrow it," Ducky is absolutely grinning as he says this, "which required me locating it, and now you tell me you can't wear it?"

He shakes his head, still staring at it. "I didn't expect it to be so… lifelike. What is that, a badger?"

Penny's smirking widely, enjoying this interaction way too much.

"That Timothy, is indeed a badger." Tim was expecting a small leather pouch, not… Oh God, it's taxidermy hell: a full badger's head, shiny, beady eyes glinting away, with its two front paws hanging down, and the pouch made of its pelt, and the damn thing is about the size of a salad plate. If he puts this on, he'll be standing around with what looks like an attack rodent on his crotch. "This badger is the result of my first hunt with my father. Back in the day we kept Dachshunds, Dachs is German for badger, and they were bred to hunt the wee beasties…" Tim finds it interesting that as Ducky gets going on this story, his accent deepens, gets harsher, reminding Tim that Ducky is actually from Scotland, (He's spent so many years with Ducky, that at this point, he doesn't really hear the accent anymore.) and once upon a time, he was a small child, out on the moors, with his father, chasing after a pack of Dachshunds in search of this particular badger.

Ducky keeps going, telling about tromping over broken ground, barking dogs, and what felt like hours of following his father in search of this critter, and Tim takes it from him, very gently, and puts it on, which stops Ducky dead. "Timothy, I never expected you'd actually wear it."

Yeah, it looks several steps beyond dumb as hell, but… "Is even half of that story you're telling true?"

"Yes, it is."

He half shrugs. "Do you mind if I wear it?"

Ducky smiles at him, very pleased by that. "My father would have been gratified to see someone put this on without a fight." He looks back at the badger. "Honestly, it always gave me the willies. The eyes tend to follow you no matter where you go."

Penny laughs at that.

Gibbs and Abbi find them next. The last time Gibbs gave him that what the hell? look he was wearing eyeliner to Shabbos for the first time.

Now both he and Abbi are staring at the sporran. They're trying not to, but failing miserably.

"I borrowed it from Ducky. He's got a great story about it."

Gibbs looks to Ducky, who launches into the story again.
Jimmy and Breena are late. They wait outside as long as they can, but the bride is getting into place and ready to walk down the aisle, so they all scoot in, fast, grab seats by the back and get settled.

Half a minute later, Jimmy and Breena slip in beside them. Jimmy next to Tim, whispering that Molly decided now was a great time to have a massive existential toddler crisis about whether or not Mommy was ever coming back.

He and Abby are nodding along, the rest of the group looking sympathetic, as the bridal march begins, and they all stand up.

Two more minutes later, when said march is done and they all get to sit down again, Jimmy nudges him and whispers, "Why are you wearing a stuffed weasel on your dick?"

And so Tim misses most of the first reading, because he is bent over, biting his lip, vibrating, silently laughing so hard he has tears in his eyes.

The next time they stand up, he takes it off and hands it back to Ducky, who seems to appreciate the fact that he managed to keep it on for fifteen whole minutes. Ducky quietly says back to him, "Probably a wise choice. I fear Tony would have had some sort mental breakdown if faced with so many glorious options for making fun of you."

"Thanks, Duck."

"You're welcome, Timothy."

While it is true that Tim has come to the conclusion that it is vastly more enjoyable to be a guest at a wedding than being in the wedding, or the guy getting married, this part here, in the church, listening to, by conservative estimate, nineteen million songs and readings, is awfully boring.

The nice part of being the groom is that not only did he have input in the matter, thus pruning the ceremony part of their wedding down to as small as possible, but, as the groom he was also not, in the slightest, paying any attention to any part of the ceremony that wasn't his or Abby's vows or ring exchange.

He honestly can't tell you who said what, or what hymns were sung. What Abby was wearing, her walking down the aisle toward him, details about the vows, the way it felt, he's got those down, but the rest of it is fuzzy at best.

But this, right here, right now, as yet another nameless cousin (okay, he could check the program if he wanted a name) is droning on and on about love. Sigh…

It'll be over soon.

They get to see Tony and Ziva for about two seconds while going through the receiving line at the doors of the church.

If there is such a thing as a person built for a tuxedo, it's the DiNozzo men. He knows Tony tends to think of his various cousins as screw ups, but apparently they're screw ups who look good in black wool. The whole line of them are cool and pressed, perfectly attired and just vastly too fashionable to be real.

Tim doesn't get a chance to really say anything to Tony, but he gets across in his look, I get why you left.
And Tony nods back, looking at the cousin on Ziva's other side. He's polished, poised, looks ready to step out of a magazine. *Yeah, made the right choice on that, didn't I?*

Back to the Adam's House. Tim breaks away from everyone else, briefly, to check in and grab their keycards.

Key tucked into his pocket, he heads back, and finds his family all milling around.

He snaps a quick picture of them as he heads in. Candid shot, everyone is just standing around, talking, and sure the guys don't look like they were measured for their first tuxes at age three, but they do clean up well. They also all look pretty similar. Jimmy's also wearing his tux from Tony's wedding. Ducky has on a standard cut, with cummerbund and bow tie, black tux, probably with a boat load of history to go with it. Gibbs is in the blackest black Tim's ever seen. (He's thinking that Abby's probably going to snag a few threads of his jacket to find out what the hell it is and where she can get some of it. It's *really* black!)

So, in that they're guys in black tuxes, they more or less look like every other guy in the room. Right now Tim is the only man in the room who doesn't look like every other guy in the room. The ladies on the other hand…

It's occurring to Tim that Penny probably used to do things like this a lot. She's at ease in her little black dress and scarlet silk wrap, hair up, cocktail held elegantly. Hell, she's old enough that she probably remembers cocktail parties, when people used to get dressed up and did this at each other's homes. In that she was married to Nelson, and becoming an Admiral is two-thirds politics and one-third astounding talent, she probably hosted a lot of them back in the day.

Tim's trying to imagine her in a 1950's dress, small waist, fluffy skirt, martini in one hand, cigarette in the other, schmoozing with the other officers and their wives.

He's having a hard time picturing it.

Abbi's in green. He thinks Breena would call what she's wearing 'Grecian' but he's not sure. It starts at one shoulder and is tight over the bust, and then flows soft and drape-y to just above her knees. It's dark green, forest at night green. In fact, the only reason he can tell it's not black is that she's standing next to Gibbs, who's wearing the Platonic Ideal of black. Her hair is curly and down and looks really soft and pretty. She shifts a bit, laughing at something Gibbs said, and Tim realizes that her dress probably is black, but the threads have some sort of little green shimmer thing going on that you can only see when the light hits them right.

Breena's in white gold and pink. It's a sheath dress, some sort of thick, rich, silky brocade, the background in white with gold fibers adding just a little shimmer, and an overlay of pink roses. Her hair is up, some little bits of it falling down in soft curls, and she's also looking very soft and pretty.

Abby sees him getting pictures, and winks, sticking out her tongue. He gets a shot of that, too.

When he closes on them, he says to Penny, "I was just thinking about this, seeing you all, but… Did you used to do things like this? Cocktail parties?"

She smiles, laughing gently at that. "Once upon a time, the McGee house was famous for the driest martini anyone had ever tasted, red hot music, great conversation, and tasty food… Well, as much as anything we ate back then qualified as tasty. I was a wizard with Jello."

Gibbs laughs at that. "So was my mom. Fruit jello, meat jello, fish jello."
"Fish jello?" Jimmy asks, appalled.

"I'll have you know, that a properly constructed tuna and lime jello salad is... Honestly, appalling," Penny says with a smile. "It looked amazing though. I even had the special fish pan—"

"My mom had that, too!" Gibbs adds.

"Did she used to put the sliced green olive where the eye went?"

Gibbs nods. "Dad took one look at that and said, 'Never again. Not eating anything that's lookin' at me!'"

They all laugh at that.

"Nelson got back from Korea in '54. From then until he was shipped out to Vietnam in '63, at least once a week, I spent all day cooking, the boys got put to bed early, I got all dressed up and pretty, and hosted at least five other couples at our home for cocktails and dinner."

"Nelson was home for nine straight years?" Abby asks.

"No, dear. He was away about six months a year every year. But, as his wife, I was keeping up appearances, making sure his connections were fresh, keeping an ear open, and making sure he knew what was happening stateside. By '63 I was getting sick of being the perfect wife, cocktail parties were dying out anyway, and with actual men coming home in body bags again, it seemed a politic time to end the frivolities."

"So, you were working as hard at his job as he was?" Breena asks.

"Not precisely. Probably about a third as hard as he was, I had my own job, and running the house, and keeping the boys out of trouble, but I was working on it. Admiral is a political game as much as a tactical one, and without a very sharp secretary and an even sharper wife, the climb from Captain to Admiral is a very steep one. By the time you've hit the upper officers ranks, none of their wives are pretty little accessories; they're all in the game. Or, at least that was true in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. I don't know about now."

Tim wonders how much of that was involved in his parents' marriage falling apart. He knows that he doesn't remember cocktail parties and getting paraded around as the perfect child more than once or twice a year. Of course, his father hit Admiral after he left home. He's got no idea what sort of gaming went on behind the scenes.

A waiter heads on by, drinks on a tray, none of them are non-alcoholic, so he and Abby both skip them, and he decides to head over to the bar and get them something to drink. By the time he's back with a Diet Pepsi for him and a Coke with two cherries for her (Yes, she's been avoiding caffeine, but he figures that if she's this sleepy at half past five, a boost would be welcome. She takes the glass from him, pets it and whispers 'Hello My Love!' to it, smiling at him.) they're on a different topic.

Eventually the wedding party show up. Eventually they head off to yet another ballroom, this one filled with tables covered in sky high flowers, crystal, and silver. Tim's thinking it's entirely likely his house cost less than this wedding.

They can't even see the head table (where Senior and Delphine are flanked by their eight attendants, each) from where they are. Luckily there are enough of them to fill their own table, so they aren't making awkward small talk with strangers. (Or more likely, making several strangers painfully bored as they chat with each other.)
The food is good, (prime rib) somewhat cooler and less rare than Tim likes, but he figures the logistics of feeding this many people all at the same time mean that as long as even vaguely the right thing shows up on his plate, the team in charge of this is doing superb. And, yes, everyone does have (more or less) what they ordered.

They talk about what they’ve been up to over the week. Penny’s got her grad students working away. Breena’s been mediating between fractious family members. Though, fortunately, this week the fractious family members have belonged to families other than hers. (Her own family is entering week eight of the Collin-Amy standoff, but she thinks her father is starting to soften some.) Ducky and Jethro have gotten all of the windows on the west side of the house popped out and replaced. Abby and Jimmy tag team the tale of their latest murder. Abbi and Tim share stories of bureaucratic wrangling.

All in all, a pretty normal week for this crew.

And, after a while, as stories get told and conversation flows, food is cleared away, and the band starts up, letting everyone know to head to the dance floor for the first dance.

It really is a band, eight guys are up there doing their thing. And the music is swing. Fast, perky, fun.

Tim looks at Abby, who has been yawning an awful lot, and comes to the conclusion that unless by leaving early he means eight-thirty, there's really not going to be any fooling around post-wedding, at least, not until tomorrow morning.

He's holding her hand as they watch Delphine and Senior dancing their first dance and gently kisses her ear. "Slip away with me?"

She smiles at him, both of them carefully backing out of the ballroom to go find their own room.

They're heading up the main elevator this time, but the hallway looks really familiar, and it's when he's putting the key into the door that Tim realizes this is the room across the hall from the one they got at the Palmers' wedding.

He laughs at that, explaining it to Abby, who's grinning, too.

He presses her against the door as soon as it shuts, and the room's not exactly the same, but it's very close. "Good memories?"

"Oh yeah!" she kisses him, warm and soft, inviting him to taste as well as touch.

He carefully unwinds the bit of plaid that wraps around her throat, and then unzips the dress. Enjoying the view of her stepping out of it. (Dress that fancy, costs that much, he's certainly not rumpling it up. He carefully lays it over the arm of the sofa in their sitting room.) White lace push up bra, white garter belt, white stockings, and black pumps, yeah, he likes that view a whole lot.

"God, you're so beautiful."

She's unbuttoning his vest. "Not looking bad yourself."

"At least since I took the sporran off?"

She giggles. "That thing was ghastly."

He's nodding, then kisses her as she pushes off his jacket and vest. A few seconds later, his kilt hits
the floor, too. He undoes his tie, stripping out of his shirt as she kisses him and rubs his dick.

Last time they did this, it was up against the door. He likes the idea of tradition but wants to play with it, too. He lifts her in his arms, slipping into her in one stroke the way they did last time, but this time he doesn't press her up against the wall. Given her comment about enjoying how built he is these days, he's showing off, holding her up.

He feels her legs wrap around the small of his back, enjoying her holding him tight as they kiss.

He's lifting her high, rocking her on him, as he lowers his head to nuzzle and lick her nipples. She hisses at that, jerking back slightly, so he goes softer, more gentle. He's got a fairly decent looking goatee right now. Well... he's hit the part where it looks intentional as opposed to he just forgot to shave, and apparently it's prickly.

Though softer and gentler seems to be working a treat, she's moaning against him, voice getting higher with each thrust as he rolls his tongue over her nipple.

Her slipping over him, fast and deep, is working for him, too. His orgasm's building, body growing tighter with each stroke.

He adds a bit of tooth, just a light graze and a little pressure, not more than a bare nip, to what he's doing to her, moving her a bit faster and a little harder, too, reveling in the sound of her getting close, that high-pitched, breathy almost pant, almost moan of a sound.

Can't touch her clit, not in this position, not with his hands at least, but he leans back a little, so he can grind his pubic bone against her, and that does it, she's rippling and moaning against him as she comes. Her body rippling on his sets him off.

He holds her up for another minute, both of them catching their breath and relaxing, and when she's done pulsing, he lets her feet touch the floor. He's about to pull out when it hits him that the tissues, which he did remember to bring, are inconveniently located about six feet away from him, on the floor, in his jacket pocket.

She sees him staring at his jacket and begins to laugh.

"Think that's funny? Not my stockings that're going to get wet with cum."

"I know you're a better problem solver than that." She nods behind him and to the left, where there's a tissue box on the table beside the sofa.

"Ah." He picks her back up, and walks them over to the tissues. She grabs one, and takes care of cleaning up.

They're both looking very happy and pleased with themselves when they get back down to the dance floor.

---

Swing music. Senior and Delphine decided on a Swing wedding.

Ducky and Penny are doing great with that. They're both old enough to remember when it was popular, the first time.

Tim makes a mental note to ask Gibbs when he learned to dance. He's doing fine. Borin's a bit off footed, but not too bad.
Tim is… competent. But in that he did take ballroom dance in college, and in that swing was part of it, and he did (of course) get an A in the class, he's got a very basic understanding of where feet go when and the like.

Like Jazz, which he loves, Swing is all improv, which is, unfortunately, not his strong suit, but… he's dancing with Abby, and by this point in time, as long as either of them has the vaguest clue what they're doing, the other can follow along easily, and with the amount of physical stuff he's been doing with his body over the years, he's a lot better at it than he used to be. (With the exception of one dance at Jimmy and Breena's wedding, with Breena, it's been twenty years since he's done any Swing dancing, but he's still better at this than he was in college, what with the whole doesn't need to choreograph each move out ahead of time, thing.)

Add in the fact that Abby really is a good dancer, and seems to be able to pick things up just by watching them once or twice, and in a matter of three songs they're doing well. (Okay, he's not flipping her around like some of the other guys are with their dates, but he's got the sense they actually do this sort of thing regularly.)

Jimmy's never done this before and from the looks of it, that dance at their wedding may have been the last time Breena did any Swinging, too. So, they're just sort of happily bopping along, making due with more conventional steps.

Ziva's got it. Tony does, too. Tim didn't know that he actually knew any formal dances. (They've been clubbing often enough that Tim knows Tony's good with pretty much any style of music, and can handle a decent box step when the music slows down, but he's never seen Tony do anything he could identify as a rumba, or a merengue, or the like.)

All in all, a good time is being had on the dance floor.

"Rescue me!" Tony says to them as he heads over to their table. "If I have to hear about another merger or another party in the Hamptons I'm going to go insane!"

Tim and Jimmy are getting a break, sipping drinks. Abby's dancing with Breena right now, and they're happily watching.

Jimmy smirks widely at that. "Not having fun?"

Tony stares at him. "This is the most vapid evening I've ever spent. Oh, God, there's another of them! He's trying to get me to 'invest.'" A somewhat drunk looking man, a bit younger than Tony is veering toward them. Tony makes a fast bee line into the crowd, looking to lose his tail.

An hour into the dancing, the party slows down for cutting the cake. Everyone sits down, watches Senior and Delphine laughing and nibbling bites of chocolate cake from each other.

Then, as the cake is served, Tony stands up to do his Best Man's speech, and… "I remember the first time I met Delphine. It was a little over a year ago, at my wedding, and Dad told me he had a date. A date he really liked, loved maybe, and I'll admit, I rolled my eyes. Because Dad falls in love every ten minutes.

"But, even though, as the Groom, I wasn't exactly paying much attention to anything beyond making sure I got to the ceremony on time, I did notice that Delphine was someone special. I noticed her grace, and the ease of her smile, and how my Dad lit up when she touched his hand.

"And for the first time in a long time, I was hopeful for him."
"Fast forward a year, where I've gotten to know you, and see how you make my dad happy, how loving you is making him a better man, and I have to say that I am so very thankful that you love my father, and that you've decided to join our family." Tony raises his glass. "To many years of joy for both of you."

They all nod at that, good, solid best man speech, especially given how little Tony's been involved in Senior and Delphine's life. And it's not just a reheated version of the speech he whipped out for their wedding.

The wait staff is placing plates of cake in front of them when Tim asks, "Where did you learn to dance, Jethro?"

He takes a bite of his cake. (Chocolate, vanilla frosting, chocolate cream between the layers, it's yummy.) "Asked Shannon to the Marine Ball. She said yes, and was very excited. Realized I didn't actually know how to dance, when I got her letter back and read her gushing about it. Didn't want to let her down. Captain Jimsin's wife offered lessons for anyone who wanted to learn. Took 'em in my off time with twenty other guys." He smiles wryly at that memory. Him and twenty other teenage Jarheads, fussing over who got to lead, in the Captain's living room, working on their two-step.

"And was she properly impressed?" Abbi asks him, warm smile on her face.

He inclines his head a bit, dry smile on his face. "Probably would have been more impressed if I'd learned any sort of disco, which was the music they were playing, but we both had a good time. How about you, Duck?"

Ducky places his cup of coffee back into the saucer. "There are certain things that are part of any proper gentleman's education. Dancing, elocution, Latin, Greek, and at least one modern language, hunting, equestrian, some form of properly masculine sport, I rowed and boxed, the ability to paint, sketch, or play an instrument, and the ability to produce, or at least recite, insipid poetry upon command. Thus, as a lad, Mother made sure I received lessons in all of those things.

"Of course, as a lad, I was not terribly interested in any of those things."

That gets a laugh. "Gentleman…" Jimmy's looking at Ducky. "So, are you Lord Mallard or something?"

"No!" Ducky waves that away. "My father was the youngest brother. So, we were well-off, but never inherited the title. I do believe my cousin Milton is Lord Mallard."

"Milton Mallard?" Breena asks, giggling, fork paused en route to her mouth.

"Aunt Edith had atrocious taste in names."

"So you learned as a kid and…" Tim adds, keeping the story going.

"And while it is true that the Medical School at Edinburg allowed women to attend long before any other Medical College in the UK, it is also true that while I was there, there were only three females in attendance, and the college kept them in segregation from the male students during our off time with the rigor of harem guards who have sworn their lives to the protection of the virtue of the ladies.

"It is also true that a doctor has long been seen as a desirable catch, and that the first Friday of every month featured a 'mixer' in which both local ladies and dancing were available. In preparation for said 'mixers' dance classes were offered, where I was able to hone the skills mother tried to instill upon me. And by the age of twenty-four, I was significantly more interested in honing those skills.
How about you, Timothy? I was rather surprised to see you handle a decent Charleston."

Tim holds his hands wide. "You had to take one gym course a year to graduate from Johns Hopkins. Ballroom dance seemed like a good way to meet girls."

"Was it?" Jimmy asks.

Tim nods. "Always twentyish people in the class, never more than four guys. If I'd been a bit less shy, and a bit more confident, that would have been a lot of fun. Ended up being fairly nervous about doing it right. Had a better time the second and third time I took it. It's possible that I qualified as good by my senior year. Instructor had me demonstrating steps when I was a Senior."

"More than once?" Gibbs asks.

"You could take the same gym class for credit over and over as long as you passed it. One of my roommates took four semesters of bowling. He was all in favor of a gym class he could drink beer and smoke during."

"You lived with a smoker?" Breena asks.

"Not exactly. Senior year I had a quad. Common room/kitchen in the middle, door on each side leading to a bathroom with two bedrooms off of it. I was on one side, he was on the other. No one smoked in the common room or in my room. Okay, Jimmy, you're up. How'd you learn to dance."

Jimmy shakes his head slowly, swallowing his sip of coffee. "It's an epic story. Great story. Completely amazing, you'll never, ever believe it."

"Because it's a huge lie," Tim says, taking a bite of his cake.

Jimmy elbows him. "Alas, in that the statute of limitations is not, technically, expired, I'm not able to tell that story until shortly after 2020." That gets a laugh, and he pauses for a few seconds before saying, "Pretty much the same story as Gibbs," he strokes Breena's cheek, and she leans into the touch. "Met a girl who liked to dance, didn't want to look like a moron, so, and here's the twist, I asked her to teach me."

"Which I was happy to do. So, I guess it's my story then?" The others nod at her. "Pretty common. Ballet as a little girl, jazz as a slightly older girl. Had to take square dancing in gym in middle school. By then no one 'danced' at dances, it was just all about bopping around to the music. So, I was pretty good at bopping around, and then this guy showed up," she kisses the back of Jimmy's hand, "and we went out a few times, and somehow he got the idea that I actually knew how to 'dance' dance and asked me to teach him, so I'm learning them from Monday to Friday, and showing him how to do them on Friday nights."

"Then I'm working on them from Saturday to the next Friday, completely unaware of the fact that she's learning them the week before teaching me. It was a lot of fun, though."

"Yeah, it was. So, you're up, Abbi."

Both Abbies look at each other, and Breena quickly adds, "You're Abbs when we're all together, remember?"

Abby nods, taking another bite of her cake, and Abbi begins, "Like you all saw, bopping around is pretty much all I do. Never took any sort of dance lessons. But softball, field hockey, basic training, I'm good at picking up any sort of physical thing, quickly. Not too hard to follow him."

That gets her a
quick kiss, too. "Okay, Abbs, you're up."

"Footloose. You have to remember that I grew up in a house that was either silent or so loud that the paintings were rattling on the walls. So, neither of my parents were much for dancing, they couldn't keep the beat on anything they couldn't feel, and most people don't like the volume high enough for that.

"So, volume's up, and I'd be bopping around, just playing with it. But then Footloose comes out and it just appealed to my little rebel-wanna-be. Not that anyone had any problem with dancing where I lived. But, off to the library I went, and they had some Betamax tapes of how to dance, I took them home, bribed Luca into helping, and we learned how to dance."

"How'd you bribe him?" Jimmy asks.

"Even then I made the best chocolate chip cookies ever. A bit later, I'm thirteen and Dirty Dancing comes out…" All of the women at the table nod along at that. "And I decided I wanted to learn even more about how to dance."

"Decided you wanted your very own Patrick Swayze," Breena adds, and Abby nods at that. (Once again all the women at the table share a look.)

"They had classes at the Y, so I signed up for them. They were less interesting than I had hoped." Everyone laughs at that. "So, that leaves you, Penny, right?"

"I was nine when World War II began. My older sisters were fifteen and seventeen. We've been a Navy family since there's been a US Navy, and my father was a Captain. He… understood sailors as he liked to say. So, according to my Dad they were old enough to go to USO dances. I was not. Had to be fifteen to go out. So, they'd get ready to go out, get all pretty and… I wanted to be them so badly. They were allowed to wear lipstick and real silk stockings on USO nights. Dad was a big fan of keeping up the soldier's 'morale' up. As he said," she smiles, chuckling, "I haven't thought of this for years, and I'm just now getting why my mother thought this conversation was so hysterical. Anyway, as he said, 'A fighting man needs to keep his spirits up, and nothing lifts a man's spirits like dancing with a pretty girl.'" Everyone laughs at that.

"Your father was okay with your fifteen and seventeen-year-old sisters, lifting spirits?" Tim asks incredulous.

Penny smiles. "To a degree. His youngest brother, my Uncle Brian had had polio in the early thirties when he was a teenager. So unlike all the other men in our family, he didn't go into the Navy. He became a priest. And every week, at each dance, Edna and Maggie Langston were chaperoned by our Uncle, Father Brian, who made sure that dancing was all they managed to do while they were out."

"And you learned to dance from them?" Abby asks.

"Yes. They wanted someone to lead, so they could practice, and I was tall for my age. I didn't learn how to play the girl's role until I started 'officially' courting Nelson when I was sixteen. Speaking of which," Penny puts her fork down, takes one last sip of her coffee, and then stands up, "I'm rather fond of this song." She holds out her hand to Ducky who rises eagerly, eyes sparkling. "Dance with me?"

"Always."

Tim's back at the table, getting a drink, taking a quick break from dancing, waiting for Abby to get
back from the restroom, when Gibbs draws closer. "Where did you find?"

"Gibbs?" Tim's about two pages behind on this because he has no idea what Gibbs is asking him.

"Don't look confused at me like that. Every wedding we go to, you and Abby slip off. You were both missing for twenty minutes two hours ago. Where'd you go?"

"Why do you want to know?"

Gibbs just stares at him.

"Oh." Tim giggles. "Stupid question." He hands over a key card. "Room 416. Don't make a mess."

Gibbs looks from the key to Tim and back to the key. "You get a room for a quickie?"

"No! I get a room for the night. Sarah and Glenn have Kelly all night. But if I have a room, I'm not going to go find a corner somewhere to have the quickie."

Gibbs looks at the keycard.

"Look, if you want a corner somewhere, I can guarantee you that Jimmy's found one." Tim scans the dance floor, not seeing Jimmy or Breena. "Actually, he's probably still in whatever corner he's found. But every time I've been here, I've had a room. So... just flush the condom, don't use the bed, and remember to give that back to me before you leave tonight, okay?"

Gibbs tucks the card into his jacket and grins.

Two minutes later, Abby's back, in his arms, dancing close and slow with him. "I saw Gibbs and Borin heading out of the ballroom."

Tim nods, kissing her gently. "Yep. They're borrowing our room."

She giggles at that. "Talk about twisted family traditions."

"Hey, weddings should be properly celebrated, and how better to celebrate one?"

She laughs at that. "So, think we're even now. We did it in his bathroom, he's in our room?"

Tim doesn't know why, but he finds that idea ridiculously funny. He hasn't had any alcohol tonight but he's feeling almost giddy anyway.

"I love you."

She's smiling wide and bright at him. "Love you, too. So, what do you think they're doing?"

He rolls his eyes. "Crossword puzzles. And beyond that, I don't need to know."

"Come on, you can't tell me you aren't curious."

"I am not curious. At all."

Abby sighs. Two seconds later Jimmy and Breena are dancing near them. Abby looks up at them, and says, "Okay, so Gibbs and Borin are off in our room, you want to know what they're doing, right?"

Jimmy winces, and Breena says, "Oh my God, really? That's so cool! We've got to get talking to her
when they get back."

Tim slowly shakes his head, and Jimmy nods in agreement.

Breena gives Tim a gentle shove, swapping from dancing with Jimmy to dancing with him, as Abby flows over to Jimmy. "Are you two really trying to say you're not even remotely curious?"

They both shake their heads.

"There are a finite number of things they could be doing up there, and I don't need to be able to narrow it down any further than that," Jimmy says.

"Plus, neither of us could care less about what Gibbs looks like naked."

Breena and Abby both laugh at that.

"Okay, what's so funny?" Tony asks. He and Ziva finally managed to get free of the wedding party and join them. They're not so much dancing now as standing, talking, in a close circle on the side of the dance floor.

The four of them look at each other, quickly, and while Tim's fairly sure the girls would tell Ziva in a heartbeat, they're all feeling a little reticent about talking about this beyond the four of them.

"I asked Ducky if I could borrow a sporran, and he brought this stuffed dead badger for me." Tony and Ziva seem to think that's hilarious. Once they stop giggling, Tim continues on with, "So, he tells me about how he and his dad hunted the poor thing down and all their family together time, so I put it on, get into the church, sit down, and the wedding's just getting started when these two show up," they know that means Jimmy and Breena, "and Jimmy sits next to me, looks down and asks…"

"Why are you wearing a stuffed weasel on your dick?"

(The girls had missed that. They knew Jimmy said something that set Tim off, but not what, and are now laughing hysterically again.) "Which was when I decided that family memories might be great, but I really didn't need to be wearing that."

Abby finally stops laughing long enough to say, "I can't believe you thought that was a weasel."

Jimmy's hands go wide in a defensive gesture. "Weasel, badger, I knew it wasn't a rat or a skunk."

Tim's dancing with Breena when he feels someone slip something into his pocket. Since Breena's not bothered by it, he knows it's not something to be alarmed about, and looks over to see Gibbs standing next to them.

A very satisfied and pleased looking Gibbs.

"You look like you had a good time," Breena says.

Gibbs looks smug.

Tim takes a quick glance at his watch. "You were gone for an hour and a half."

Gibbs shrugs, huge, sassy grin on his face. "Who gets a quickie when he's got a room?"

Tim shakes his head, slowly, smiling at Gibbs, but there's some challenge in that smile. "I can't believe you went there, but, okay. You know who gets a quickie when he's got a room? The guy
who can still get it up more than once a night."

Breena snorts out a fast laugh at that. Gibbs eyes go wide, and then he starts laughing, hard. When he stops, he looks Tim dead in the eyes and says, "Really nice bathtub in there. Never much for baths, but I'm thinking of changing my opinion on that."

Breena lights up at that, and Tim bites his lip shaking his head with mock rue and passing Breena over to dance with Gibbs. "She wants all the details. I don't. Have fun."

It is early. Not even ten yet. But Abby's tired, and Tim's perfectly fine with cutting out early. Good long sleep tonight, and then lots of fun tomorrow morning. (He's already ordered the room service.)

Everyone gets hugs and kisses, and then they head up to their room.

In the elevator, on the way up, Abby's leaning against him, back to chest, and he's got his chin on her shoulder. He kisses her ear, listening to her pleased hum at that. She squeezes his hands which are clasped in front of her, around her waist.

"A million worlds, Tim, infinite possible lives, universes untold, any possible option that can occur, does, somewhere, and I'm certain that this life, right here, with you, is my happiest."

She turns in his arms, and he holds her close, kissing her deep and soft. His fingers cup her face, as he pulls back, smiling. "Me, too, Abby."

And yes, the blog version has pictures!
"Abby, we've got to get moving if we're going to make it to breakfast."

"Mrghr."

"You feeling okay?"

She raises her head from the pillow, glares at him, and says, "Let me sleep, McGee."

He backs out of the bedroom. "Letting you sleep."

Once he's downstairs, he says to Kelly, with a wide, beaming smile on his face, "You know what? I think you might have a little brother or sister in the works."

---

If it had just been one day of sleepy Abby, he wouldn't be grinning or jumping to conclusions like this. But it's not day one. It's day three of sleepy Abby. (Or maybe day eight. He's not sure if the wedding should count. She did perk back up again after a full night's sleep.)

Thursday night all the stars aligned properly. They got home by six. Dinner went off without a hitch. By seven thirty Kelly was asleep, and he and Abby were on the sofa. The idea, the idea he'd been hoping for all day, was sleeping baby, little TV, then lots of sex, and sleep for them.

So, the plan was working. They'd settled in to get up to date on Sleepy Hollow. Abby was snuggled in nice and close. All was good with the world.

Halfway through the show she was dead weight on his chest, cuddled in and sound asleep.

And as much as he appreciated having her warm and close and cuddled in, he'd been hoping for a different sort of warm and close. So, he let two more shows go by, hoping she'd wake up, feeling refreshed from her nap and ready to play, but eventually the clock hit eleven, she was still dead to the world, so he picked her up and carried her to bed, and she slept through that.

Friday morning she claimed she wasn't feeling sick, just really tired, and yeah, the first part of the week had meant two hot cases, so she's been working harder than usual. So, she's sleepy, okay.

Friday night, Abby was drooping by the end of Shabbos, fell asleep on the car ride home, staggered up to their room and was asleep again as soon as she hit the sheets.

Saturday she slept in late, they had a very enjoyable afternoon nap time, followed by dinner with Kelly, and both of his girls were in bed and asleep by seven thirty.

Which meant now, on Sunday morning, he's feeding Kelly breakfast on his own, while sending Jimmy and Gibbs a text saying they were skipping breakfast at the diner this morning.

Gibbs sent back. *Okay. Bootcamp?*

*Think so. Let you know closer to time. Gym, right?* Rain's pouring down right now, and supposed to continue on and off all day, so Tim's thinking they're not going to the house today. Though, he's also a little wary of bootcamp in the gym. Everyone is getting along right now, but he knows Jimmy hasn't spent any time alone with Tony or Ziva, and that things are superficially fine, but still a little tense.
Yes.

Jimmy sent back. *Tired? Keeping her up all night?*

*Not that sort of tired.*

A minute later he gets: *Ohhh! "Tired" :)*

*Really hope so. Don't know yet.*

*Let me know when you do.*

*:)

---

So… Sunday morning, and he and Kelly have ventured out to Target to run some errands. Windex, more pacifiers, (he has no idea how they can possibly go through them so fast. If it weren't for the fact he changes her diapers, he'd swear that she eats those things. As it is, he's expecting that sooner or later he'll find fifty of them all stuffed in an air conditioning vent or something,) toothpaste, (Tom's of Maine, Spearmint,) pregnancy test, (He's grinning as he tosses that in the cart,) frozen wild blueberries, (just in case) more of the puffed fruit snacks Kelly likes, and the K-Cups assorted flavors he likes to keep his department well-stocked with (along with a decaf pack for him).

He's in an awfully good mood as they head toward the check out, and for that matter, so is Kelly, (he's pointing things out, naming them, and she's trying to repeat them back to him) so maybe they don't need to head home right this second.

He'd like to get Abby some sort of little present to go with the pregnancy test. Some sort of I-love-you, so-happy-you-chose-me-to-have-babies-with gift.

And, sure he can get her a rose, a NonCaf-Pow, and tie the rose with a bow to the pregnancy test, but he's hoping for something a little more impressive than that.

Plus, not like he can just walk into a florist, let alone a supermarket, and just grab the kind of roses she likes best. They might, if he's lucky, have the sort they had at their wedding, white with the red edges, but black roses are special order though, and so are the ultra-dark red ones she likes, too.

Of course, there's a nursery on the way home… Couldn't get one for her there, but a whole bush… That's an option.

He flashes Gibbs a text: *What's involved in planting roses?*

*Dig a hole in the ground. Put the roots in it. Add dirt. Water. Why?*

*Just checking.*

*You do it in the early fall or spring.*

*Or not.*

*???

Want to do something nice for Abby.

*Roses are good, but they'll be dead by August if you put them in now. No later than March.*
So, what to get? What to get? This is a moment where it'd be a hell of a lot easier to be Jimmy or Tony. Head to jewelry store, grab pretty, sparkly thing, and you're all set.

And like with the roses, it's not like Abby doesn't like pretty, sparkly things, it's just that she's got very specific tastes and a good present takes that into account.

"What do you think Kelly? What's a good happy baby present?"

"Cookies."

Tim nods solemnly. Kelly's pretty firmly convinced that cookies are the answer to everything right now, and the odds are pretty even on she's answering his question or requesting them for herself.

"Cookies!"

Requesting them for herself then.

"Uh uh. Lunch. Then cookies."

She pouts at him. "Cookies."

"Nope."

He ends up going with a rose. Mostly because he's not seeing or thinking of anything that's really wowing him, and because he thinks he's got a plan, that buys him some more time, and that she'll really like.

When he gets home, he'll get online, find something cool, and give it to her on Kelly's birthday. He thinks that's a very good way to say thank-you-for-having-my-babies.

She's still sleeping when he gets home. That's making him smile even more. He certainly remembers when she was first pregnant with Kelly and wanted to sleep eighteen hours a day.

And yes, he probably shouldn't be getting his hopes up, but… It feels good. And he'd rather be happy than worried that something's wrong.

They've had lunch (with cookies) and he's put Kelly down for her afternoon nap, by the time he hears Abby thumping down the steps.

She pauses at the bottom of the steps, and he calls out, "In my office."

A moment later, she's in his office, sitting on his lap, eyes scanning over the page that's in front of him. "You're really doing it?"

Tim nods. He typed the last words yesterday, now he's re-reading. "The last ride of LJ Tibbs. Anything that comes next is a prequel."

"You think you're going to do another one?"

"Probably. I'm not done with them. Just want to go and play with some new things. Got a really rough outline for the Dragons series, and about six scenes written. Be kind of fun to just write, no
deadlines, no page caps, just tell the story however it unfolds.

She nods at that, snuggling into him.

"I've got a present for you."

"Ohhh…" Her eyes light up and she smiles. "I like presents!"

He pulls a pregnancy test out of his top drawer with a baby pink rose tied to it.

Abby takes one look at the rose and the pregnancy test and starts crying.

That startles the hell out of Tim because of all of the possible responses to his little gift that she could have come up with, that wasn't on his list. And it's not good crying either, this is deeply unhappy, world's-about-to-end crying.

Part of him is terrified that this is a response from last time, but she even didn't get to the tired part last time, so she's got to be further along…

"My temp didn't drop this month." More sobbing, and okay, so she might have missed it, that happens, right? This doesn't seem sob worthy.

She can see he's clueless. "Tired, erratic mood swings, no temperature shift, they're all signs of menopause."

"Oh." He winces. "Shit." He rubs his face. "I didn't even think…"

"That the clock's run out, and we're never having another baby. That we've been trying for almost a year, and I'm fucking barren!"

"Oh… Abby… I just… I'm sorry."

"I'm not pregnant; I'm just old."

He doesn't know what to say to that. You're not old may be true, but it's also not true. She is forty-two and the clock is just about run out.

She's crying more, and erratic moods might be a sign of menopause, but the last time he remembers her sobbing like this she was pregnant.

"Wait. The day after we went clubbing with Jimmy and Breena, you couldn't get a good temp that morning because we'd been up all night?"

She half shrugs. "Didn't get one at all."

"Well, okay then." He picks up the pregnancy test and shakes it. "Come on. Let's see what's going on before we start crying about it."

She's not looking happy at him, and he's sure that if it isn't positive this is probably the absolute wrong thing to do, but… he feels it in his guts and… "Please."

"Fine," she snaps out.

A minute later they are sitting next to each other, on the floor next to their bathroom, watching the little grains of electronic sand shift through the gray on gray hourglass that let them know the test is working.
The last grain drops, then the screen goes blank, and then it flashes up one word. Pregnant.

Abby shrieks at it. Tim feels that frisson of joy again, and this time, minor hearing damage.

He pets her tummy, "Hey there, little dude," then he kisses her. "Don't ever tell me you're old."

"I am."

"Well, you're my old woman, and you're also the mom of my kids."

She's smiling and giggling at that. He smiles, too, and then kisses her again, soft and sweet. "You know, we've probably got almost two hours of naptime left."

She giggles at that, too, and straddles his lap.

"You want me to tell everyone at Bootcamp?" Tim asks as Abby gets a very late breakfast or possibly very early dinner.

She exhales long and deep. Celebrations are better with friends, but telling everyone to stop celebrating last time was hard.

"Yeah. Tell them. Neither of us are any good at keeping stuff like this quiet. And we might as well all enjoy the good as much and as long as we've got it."

"Okay." He's grinning. "Boy or girl?"

She thinks about it. "No real feel, yet. I still like Sean James if this is a boy."

His fingers find her stomach again. "Well, you gonna be SJ McGee?"

"Sean! Not SJ."

"I like SJ!"

"Then you can call him that. I'm calling him Sean."

"If he's a him."

"Fifty-fifty shot. More we talk about it, the more I'm feeling boy."

"So, you want to call this one McScuito, too, or just go straight for Sean."

She inhales and exhales dramatically. "To hedge our bets or not?"

"Yeah." He's smiling at her. "I'm leaning toward all in."

"Me, too. Okay, don't tell them at Bootcamp, I want to see Jimmy hear the name. Invite everyone for dinner, okay."

"Was Gibbs already coming over?"

"I think so. That was the plan on Friday."

"Great. I'll get the bootcamp crew, you want to call Ducky and Penny?"

"No problem."
"So, how does this work?" Abbi asks Jethro as they wait outside the NCIS building.

"Tony and Ziva get here soon, then we all get warmed up. Tim, Jimmy, and Collin'll show up eventually."

"Who's Collin again?"

"Jimmy's likely brother-in-law."

Abbi blinks at that.

"He's living with Breena's sister. Looks serious, but no ring yet."

She nods. "So, we get in there…"

"Warm up, practice. There's one ring. I usually set the fights, who's against who. What everyone does, who's on offense or defense. Ziva works on technique, now. Last fight, she was training them on nerve strikes. Jimmy handles general fitness, strength training, stuff like that."

"He's the one who's got you standing on one foot."

Gibbs nods. "Supposed to be good for me."

Abbi's giving him a look suggesting that Jimmy might be pulling his leg on that. They see Tony and Ziva heading toward them, and in a minute, they join Abbi and Jethro.

"So, why are we here half an hour early?" Tony asks.

"Tim's got that test this week, and I want him ready to fight cold if need be."

"We're ambushing Tim?" Abbi asks.

"More or less."

As soon as Tim walks in, before he's even put his bag in his locker, Gibbs says, "Tony, Ziva, Abbi, all three of you on attack, hard, like you mean it. Tim, you're on defense."

Ziva grins. "With pleasure."

Tim glances over at Gibbs, this is overkill in his eyes, but Gibbs just shakes his head, so, without a warm up, without expecting it, Tim's on fight mode. He tosses his bag to Jimmy and heads into the ring and the next thing Tim knows he's being double-teamed by very fast moving DiNozzos, while Abbi hangs back a bit, watching, looking for openings to jump into.

Short of having them jump him on the way in, this is probably as close to a real fight as he can get. And Gibbs is going to make sure he's ready for a real fight.

Jimmy's standing next to Gibbs, watching Tony and Ziva and Abbi put Tim through his paces. "You've got a really bad feeling about the test, don't you?"

Gibbs nods, grimly.

"He's going to be fine."
Gibbs doesn't nod at that. "What do you have for me?" Part of Gibbs' usual warm up is checking in with Jimmy, showing off how well he's doing with whatever it was Jimmy set for him last time, and then getting new additions to his training routine.

Jimmy rolls with the change in topic. "How are you doing on the balance challenge?"

Gibbs shuts his eyes and stands on one foot, without wobbling, for a minute.


And with teeth gritted, Gibbs closes his eyes, and is down on flat feet in less than two seconds.

"That's the next balance challenge."

"Why are we doing this?"

"Because I'm not visiting you in the hospital because you fell and broke a hip."

Gibbs flashes Jimmy his exasperated look, but closes his eyes and rises up on his toes again. "You can do this, right? You're not just messing with me." (He's down on flat feet before he gets both of those sentences out.)

Jimmy looks satisfied and holds up one finger. He tosses his and Tim's bags aside, slips his shoes and socks off. "Tree pose." He's standing on one foot, other foot tucked against his thigh, hands at heart center, palm to palm, then he rises onto his toes, and then closes his eyes, holding that for a full minute before setting himself down again.

"Yeah, I can do it. And I can do a version of it on one hand, too."

"Why?" Gibbs can understand why you'd spend hours, days, huge chunks of your life working on something other people can see. Practicing for a sport or something. He gets doing the work to look the way Jimmy looks. But he's not getting the point of this. Seems like time you could be doing something else, something useful.

"Why does any man do something physically difficult and kind of stupid? To impress women."

Gibbs laughs at that.

"No, not really. I mean, yes, Breena's impressed by that, but that's not why I can do it. Being able to do it feels good. The focus necessary to do it is good, for a lot of things. You can't hold something like that if your brain is whirling around." He shakes his head a bit, that's part, but not all of it. "I don't talk about it much, but... I'm diabetic, you know that. I manage it so well most people don't even notice. As much as you can beat it into submission, I have. But it's not like I've got allergies. This isn't some little annoyance that makes me periodically uncomfortable. This is serious, and eventually, it will kill me. But it's not taking me easy." Jimmy shakes his head. "So, until they develop that artificial pancreas, I'm running a race against my body, and the better I do with it, the longer I get to keep running. If I want to be there to play with my grandkids, I can't just let myself slide. And, since I want you here to play with my grandkids, too, you're not letting yourself go, either."

Gibbs smiles at that, nods, and then pushes himself up on his toes again.

Tim knows that he's not winning a three on one fight. Not if a third the team he's up against is Ziva,
and another third is Abbi, who he's never gone up against before and has a completely different style than he's ever dealt with. His only goal is to just keep at it long enough to not embarrass himself.

But, eventually, like with all fights like this, he hits the mat.

Tony helps him up, and for a moment they all just stand there, breathing hard.

"Test ready to go?" Tony asks after a minute.

Tim nods. It's ready. It's beyond ready. He's grinning, wide and happy at the idea of it. He's going to turn an entire strike force upside down, and it will be completely awesome.

"Be careful."

Tim holds his hands out in a quit worrying gesture. "I'll be with the Secretary of the Navy. Everything should be fine."

Tony nods. Ziva's eyes have narrowed. They don't have the entire story of Tim's issues with his dad, but the bits they do have are enough. Plus, as the test gets closer, nervous is radiating off of Gibbs, so, they're all catching it, too. Same for Abbi, Gibbs hasn't given her all of the details, but she knows McGee and the Admiral don't get on, and she's figured that if McGee can keep a relationship going with DiNozzo after all the teasing she's seen and heard about over the years, there's got to be more between him and the Admiral than they just rub each other wrong.

"We prep Thursday." Tim looks at all three of them. They talked about it a bit at Shabbos, so this isn't new information. "You know, when I get that cover ID that means The Admiral can't even admit he knows me without blowing the op. Then up at the crack of dawn Friday, test goes off in the afternoon, I hang around and watch, and as soon as they figure out what happened or give up, I go home. Should be back by Sunday, Monday at the latest."

Tony nods. Ziva does, too. Then she heads to her bag, rummages around in it, and comes back a few seconds later, handing him something.

Tim looks at it. "A roll of quarters?"

"Makeshift brass knuckles, McGee. The reason you have them is you are bringing home American coins for your children. Every new place you go, you get some of the local currency and take it home to them."

Tim raises his eyebrows and nods. That's a good story. Actually, he's not planning on travelling much, but if he does... He might start doing that. Another thought hits him. "Did your Dad do that for you?"

Ziva nods. "Yes, he did. We also had a map with little pins in it. Learn geography and where Abba was all in one. I was nineteen when I found out he was never where those little pins were, and that his secretary kept a supply of currency for him." She sighs, and Tim does, too. Eli David stories always have that sort of disturbing twist to them.

Gibbs and Jimmy head over, having finished whatever it was they were working on. Collin's been hanging by the edges of whatever it is they've been up to, so he joins them, too. Gibbs looks them all over, focusing on Tim. "All warm and loose?"

Tim nods.

"Good." Gibbs heads into the ring, gesturing to Jimmy and Collin to join him.
Tim stares at Gibbs for a moment, because Gibbs isn't setting up teams. "Six on one?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "Ladies out." Abbi's not looking thrilled at that, but Ziva inclines her head in a I'll explain in a second sort of way. "Your job is to keep us in each other's way as much as possible. Hard to hit one guy if there's a bunch of you fighting at once, so use it."

"Okay."

Ziva and Abbi are watching, and it's a melee. Hard to actually track what's going on, but Tim does seem to be keeping at least three of them out of the fight at any given time.

"So, why are we out?" Abbi asks.

"Collin won't go full out if there's a girl in the ring. Tony won't if I'm in there. And Jimmy and Tim are a lot better than they were when we started, but they can get shaky when they're tired, and Tim's tired. Gibbs doesn't want either of us getting an elbow in the face by accident."

"But he doesn't care if one of the guys do?"

Ziva nods. "Jimmy caught me in the mouth with an elbow… Six months ago. Not a big deal, just a split lip and a bruise, but every time I went anywhere with Tony, the whole time my lip was cut, people kept glaring daggers at him, and two even offered me suggestions for battered wife services. And, yes, people stare if the guys have split lip or visible bruises, but it's not as big of a deal."

"Oh."

"So, one of them gets tired, he pulls me out. Apparently, same for you. But there is no reason we cannot spar with each other. If you're interested?"

Abbi smiles at that. "Oh, yeah. Show me your best moves, DiNozzo."

Ziva grins.

Tim's sore, and tired, really tired, as they head to the showers. Gibbs ran him through pretty much every possible fight combination he could think of in preparation for the test.

So, he's undressing slowly. Partly because nothing about him wants to do anything fast right now, and partially so he can get a minute to talk to just Gibbs.

Tony and Jimmy head to the showers. (Collin headed straight home after fighting.)

"Your gut is screaming."

Gibbs nods. "Take your gun."

Tim shakes his head. "Blow my cover. I've always got a knife, and Ziva's roll of quarters is a good plan."

"You keep them on you, all the time."

Tim nods. "I'll be fine."

"You can believe that when you're home. Until then, you're walking into battle and that's how you're going to treat it."
"Gibbs—"

"No. Don't give me any feel good bullshit about this. You stay armed, you stay alert, and you keep people around you all the time. You do not spend a second alone with him."

"Okay."

Gibbs nods again, not looking relieved, and heads to the showers. A minute later, Tim follows.

They're out of the shower, drying off, dressing, ready to move on with the rest of the day when Tim says, "So, kind of went a bit bonkers at Costco today. They had some really nice looking tomatoes and that bacon we like was on sale… Anyway, BLT night at my house. Everyone's invited."

Jimmy grins. Granted, for him a BLT is a salad and not a sandwich, but he's a fan. And Breena's almost always a fan of nights where someone else cooks. "We're in. Get home, grab the girls, and head on over?"

"Sounds great."

Tony looks pained. He is also a BLT fan. "Can't. Want to, but can't. Dad and Delphine got home from their honeymoon yesterday and invited us for dinner today. I think they're working on setting up some sort of Sunday dinner type thing. Her kids and grandkids'll be there, too."

Tim nods at that. "Sunday dinner sounds like a good thing."

Tony inclines his head. "Hope so. At least, none of the other wives really worked to bring him into her family and vice versa. So, any luck this is a move in the right direction."

Jimmy nods along with that.

"You and Abbi coming?" Tim asks Gibbs. When Gibbs agreed to dinner at their place, he was solo, so it's possible he had things he wanted to do with Abbi on their own.

"We're coming. That was the plan, right?"

Tim nods. "Just checking in."

All four of them are up and ready to go. They're heading toward the door, but Tim hangs back a bit.

"Tony…"

"What?"

"You dropped…"

Tony gives Tim a perplexed look, he knows he hasn't dropped anything, but Tim is giving him the get over here look, so he does.

"We're telling everyone else at dinner, so, let Ziva know, Abby's pregnant again," Tim says quietly.

Tony breaks into a huge grin, glances over his shoulder, sees that Gibbs and Jimmy have headed out of the locker room, and then pulls Tim into a warm hug. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks."

"When..."
Tim does a bit of math. "February, probably, early or middle."

"So Molly might be sharing her birthday time?"

"Maybe," he says, grinning.

Tony hugs him again. "So, this one going to be Timmy Junior?"

"No." Tim says emphatically. There will be no Juniors of any variety among his kids. "But… our boy name last time was Sean James, and we're both getting a bit of a boy vibe, so… Maybe SJ McGee?"

"SJ… Sean… Sean works better."

"Abby thinks that, too."

"Wise woman." Tony grins again. "How far do you want this to go?"

"Just us right now. Labor Day's soon enough to let everyone else know."

"Okay, we'll keep quiet. I better get moving before they wonder what I could have possibly dropped that took that long to pick up." Tony pauses for half a breath before saying, "And don't you even suggest anything about the soap."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

There are things in this world better than sitting on the porch on an early June day, air warm and damp from many thunderstorms, as the last clouds scuttle away, leaving the world watercolor clean. Adding in your family, BLTs, watermelon, happy baby girls playing peacefully with each other, (Okay, Molly and Kelly are "playing," and Anna's just chilling in her baby carrier, enjoying the air.) takes that experience into the upper echelons of better things.

So, it is already a very good evening, as Abby, who's sitting on Tim's lap, gets everyone's attention during a lull in the conversation and says, "I'm pregnant!"

That gets a lot of happy responses, a lot of congratulations, many smiles and hugs, a few words on who's getting told now, when the newest McGee should be showing up, and, as is usual for brand new baby announcements, possible name ideas.

"Have any thoughts about names?" Penny asks.

Tim and Abby nod at that. "Yeah, we do," Tim says

"Another mystery 'family name' that we'll all have figured out by the time we get home?" Jimmy asks with a smirk.

Tim grins at that, and Abby says, "Not a mystery, but yes on the family name part."

"Sort of," Tim adds. They don't have any Seans in the family. "But I bet you can't guess it," he says to Jimmy.

Jimmy's willing to take up that challenge. "Boy or girl name?"

"Boy's name," Abby replies.
"Thomas. That's Abby's Dad's name, right?"

Abby nods, pleased to see he knows that. "Yes, it is, but not the name we're aiming for."

Jimmy thinks for another minute. "Jack or Jackson?" Gibbs looks pleased by that.

Abby and Tim quickly glance at each other, Jackson McGee actually sounds pretty good. Thomas Jackson… that's good, too. That's going on the list of potential baby names if they find themselves looking for another one.

"We like that, but no. Next time we have this conversation, maybe," Tim says.

"Donald?" Abbi asks.

Tim nods toward Jimmy and Breena. "They've got dibbs on that one."

Ducky looks very pleased at that.

"I'd say Leroy or Jethro, but I know you don't like them," Jimmy says to Tim, who turns to Gibbs and says, "No offense."

Gibbs nods at that. His names are country and dated, neither of which is true about his kids.

Jimmy's staring at Tim, mild exasperation overlaying a whole lot of pride in his eyes. "I can't guess it, or I won't guess it?"

Tim shoots him his best smart-ass grin. "Is there a difference?"

Jimmy laughs at that, and before he gets a shot to say anything Abby says, "Sean James. That's what we're thinking."

Jimmy looks down for a second, a very warm, very pleased smile spreading across his face, then he looks up, beaming at both of them, and heads over for more hugs. He's got an arm around each of them, and kisses Abby's cheek. As he pulls back his hand falls to Abby's tummy and he says, "Sean James, you hear that? That's a good name, so you better be the with-a-penis-model, okay?"

Everyone laughs at that, and when they stop, he adds, "Just fooling on that. Girl, boy, little bit of both, doesn't matter, we're all gonna love you no matter what."
A/N: Almost identical to the Shards version, just a few differences. Next update is where this goes really AU. I'm going to try to update Shards and STAW concurrently, but I may not be able to swing it, might be too many details to keep track of at once. We'll see. If STAW suddenly goes silent, it just means that I've focused on the other one, I'll be back when I can spare the brains. ;) Enjoy!

Tim's all but bouncing as he takes the stairs up to Leon's office. Last prepping meeting before the test is today and he's really looking forward to it.

And not just because he's enjoying the idea of showing off exactly how the test will work, but because it'll also be really nice to talk to someone about this who isn't assuming he's going to get assaulted or killed the second he sets foot on the Stennis. Of his family members, the only one who knows about this trip and isn't worried is Penny. Because she also gets exactly how horrified John would be at the idea of ever disobeying a direct order.

Everyone else is varying from not sleeping (Jethro) to on edge (Ducky).

So, heading up, showing this off and talking to people who assume it's going to work splendidly is going to be fun. Showing off how damn good he is at his job to the Secretary of the Freaking NAVY, is awesome.

And, sure, he's worried, a bit, but mostly, he's really enjoying the idea of seeing the look on John's face when he steals his entire fleet, turns it inside out, kills his communications, and makes all the guys with all of their command experience and years in the Navy completely irrelevant as he uses the skills he spent decades honing to cripple everything his Dad loves.

For a few minutes, at least. Until he chooses to give it back to them. Just the idea makes him smile.

Karen waves Tim in when he gets to Vance's office. Vance is (obviously) already in there.

"Not that I don't appreciate being kept in the loop on this, McGee, but why are you and Clayt meeting up here? You have an office of your own for a reason."

Tim nods. "Yep." He shrugs a bit. "Probably just being too cautious, but… This is supposed to be kept quiet, and the Secretary of the Navy coming to visit me'll cause talk. Him coming to visit you, doesn't. He happens to drop by while I'm briefing you… That happens, right?"

Vance smiles dryly at that. It is cautious. Too cautious, likely. The chance that anything that happens here getting out is minimal. But Vance does approve of this level of caution for what's supposed to be a classified test.

Tim looks up from his laptop. "Okay. Final report on how it's supposed to work is in your inbox. For a heads up, my team thinks I'm at Cybersecurity conference on a cruise ship. If they ping my phone and see I'm at sea, they won't wonder why. Manner and Howard are minding the store while I'm away. Nothing big's on deck for right now, and I'll be checking in when and as I can."

Vance nods along with that. "How's Manner liking that?"

"He's pleased. He's a good second-in-command, and he knows it. The difference between now and
ten months ago is that he knows he's better at taking orders than giving them. So, he's got the DC Team and instructions for what to do with them. Howard's nominally keeping an eye on the rest of the techs. Ngyn's coordinating that, but having to deal with 130 plus people in person is her idea of Hell, so she's making sure everything keeps running, and if something SNAFUs, Howard'll handle the people while she and Ngyn wrangle the tech.

Vance approves of how Tim's handling his teams, playing to his people's strengths.

A second later, Jarvis and his secretary, a young Lieutenant named Remy James, enter Vance's office. They're both looking pleased to be in there, and after a few moments of pleasantries, James hands Tim a suit bag, which Tim opens.

"What did you do before you were SecNav?" Tim asks as he looks at the content of the suit bag in front of him.

Vance smiles at Jarvis. "Clandestine services. Clayt always did enjoy breaking out the costumes and cover IDs."

Clayt nods, pleased by that comment. It's true, too. He always did like slipping into new lives. "Cover is a good idea, but a cover is only as good as it's details, so..."

"So the details will be perfect." Tim's looking at the contents of the bag. It's a Captain's uniform, Irish Naval Service, proper insignia, McGee on the nametag, a few medals he's going to have to google because it'd be useful to be able to say what they are if anyone asks. James hands him a folder, which he opens. Or maybe there will be no googling. He's got a life history, a history of the Irish Naval Services, the meaning and history and what he did to get all of those medals. It's a complete backstory.

"I don't suppose you can fake an Irish accent?" Jarvis asks.

Tim shakes his head. "No. You don't even want to hear me try. It's, really, really bad." (The less that's said about that particular misadventure in role playing, the better. We'll leave it here, Gabriel McGee is not Irish. Abby wasn't laughing so hard she wet her pants, but only because she'd been to the bathroom recently.) Clayt takes the folder back from McGee, crosses a few lines out, and adds in, Moved to US as a baby. Back to Ireland late teens.

"Ah." Clayt looks up from the McGee notes and hands them back to Tim. "Add what you need to personalize it. Make it yours. Just give us a heads up if you really shift something. You're just a guy on a trip with us, so we wouldn't know you well, but major details would stick out."

Tim nods.

"Anyway, the plan is that we'll get on board. The XO generally meets me when we do this. John prefers to keep everything under his eye and doesn't like to be pulled away from his men if he can avoid it."

Tim nods again, that sounds right to him.

"So, on we'll go. We'll get settled. You'll do your thing. And then we'll call him in and let him see how they handle it."

"If his guys are on top of their game, at some point they'll pull him away from us," Tim says.

"That'll be fine. We can watch how he reacts… Don't suppose there's a way to do this without him knowing it's a hack?"
"Sure, I stay home." Tim supposes that would make Abby and Gibbs and Jimmy and Breena all really happy, but… Right now, he really wants to go. He wants to see the look on his Dad's face when this goes down. "The test is already set. Nothing any of us actually need to do, now. So, if you want him completely blindsided, you do your thing, and at 13:03:06 everything goes bonkers. Look alarmed when his XO starts yelling."

"And the downside to that is?" Because there has to be a downside.

"We won't be able to see how they respond. I need to get to a place where I can hack the security feeds and get us footage of his computer guys. I don't, technically, need to be on the ship to do that, either, but since you'll be on the ship, it'd be easier to show you what's going on if I'm there, too. If you just want a data feed, or just a report after, I can do that from my computer from pretty much anywhere."

"No." Jarvis shakes his head. "I want to see them in action, as well as get the data."

Tim grins. He wants to see the action, too. "That'll be easier in a room with a big screen TV."

"When McGee did it here, he was able to use the cameras to check everyone, see how they worked as a team in addition to tracking what they were doing with their computers," Vance adds.

"Okay. So we go. I'll request a pre-inspection briefing… Conference room on all of those ships has a big screen these days. Spin some bull about Irish Naval ships and what 'you guys' are looking for. That'll be the reason he'll be there. It'll be just him and his secretary. They'll be ordered to silence. And we'll watch the test from there."

"Sounds good." Tim looks at the uniform again, checking the tags. "How did you know my size?"

Jarvis smiles. "Once upon a time, I was really good at this."

Abby looks up at him as he heads down to the lab, suit bag over his shoulder. Then he realizes that he can't open the damn thing, because if he does, the cat goes leaping out of the bag, and sure, the Lab Techs aren't likely to talk, but…

Too late.

"Ohhh… what's that?" she asks, seeing the bag.

He grins at her. "Surprise." He looks around, everyone else is milling around, some low music is playing in the ballistics lab, but it doesn't have the active case feel. "You guys working late today?"

"Everyone should be out by six." She's smiling as she says that, getting a hint of what he's possibly thinking. Get all dressed up, head down to the lab, maybe carry her off to her office… He's smiling at that idea.

But, God… if someone sees… It's not obvious what, exactly, it is, and… not a lot of traffic down here, as long as the lab's officially closed…

No. Too much risk. And Heather probably wants to get home at normal time, and holding her late so they can fool around…

He leans in close and kisses her ear, whispering, "After dinner, dress up time," and heads out quietly humming Up Where We Belong from Officer and A Gentleman.
She catches it, and begins to giggle, having a very good idea of what might be in that bag.

"Gibbs?" Tim's at his desk. Right now he's not on deck for the job triaging system. (Since he can't reliably finish whatever he might start before quitting time tonight.) So, he's scanning through the jobs that are up, looking for ones that have been open for more than a few days, and hopping into them to give everything a quick look over. See if he can add anything useful.

So far, and this pleases him greatly, the answer is no. He's gone through two jobs, and both of them are on day three or four because they're sorting through absolutely massive wodges of data, and there's just no way to make the computers do that any faster than they already are.

Gibbs shuts the door behind him, and heads over to sit on the edge of Tim's desk.

He's not saying anything; he's just looking at Tim.

"Okay, at this point, you're making me a hell of a lot more nervous than the test is."

Gibbs nods. "Be nervous."

Tim sighs. "Okay, really, specifically. What is the gut sensing?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "Nothing specific. This feels bad. This feels like walking into a trap."

Tim slumps at that. He hates how worried and afraid Jethro is.

"You want me to ditch it?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "I know you won't. I know you want this, maybe need it."

"I do."

Gibbs sighs. "Be careful, Tim."

"I will. I'm not the one who takes the stupid risks."

Another sigh. "Yeah. I know."

Tim stands up and hugs Gibbs. "I'm fine. I'm going to keep being fine. Sunday or Monday I'm coming home, all in one piece."

Gibbs squeezes him tight, holding him quietly for a long minute before letting go. "You better."

"I will."

Gibbs swallows hard, nods, and heads off.

Tim exhales, low and deep, trying to chase away all the nervous Gibbs just dropped on him.

Almost done for the day. Just a few more keystrokes and…

"Hey."

Tim holds up one finger, letting Jimmy know he's almost done. A second later he hits enter, and then looks up.
"Hey, back. What's up?"

"Got something for you." Jimmy heads over, pulls an orange pill bottle from his lab coat pocket, and hands it to Tim.

Tim looks at them, nodding. More anti-nausea meds.

"Thanks. Still got plenty from last time, though."

Jimmy shakes his head. "Use these."

"Okay… The other one's expired or something?"

"These are stronger."

Tim nods at that, looking at the label. Sure he didn't memorize the bottle last time, but this looks exactly the same. "Stronger how? This is the same stuff, right?"

He looks up and sees Jimmy looking a little uncomfortable. "Last ones were ninety percent baking soda."

Tim blinks and sighs. "You gave me a placebo?"

"And it worked splendidly until you saw that body, right?"

"Well, okay, yeah."

"This time you're going to be on a moving ship, with your Dad around, and I thought maybe having something beyond a mild antacid would be useful."

Tim opens the bottle and notices that this time the pills are in a small blister pack, with labels. He puts the cap back on, noticing the Target logo on the bottle. Which is when it hits him that, yes, Jimmy can write prescriptions, but he doesn't have his own dispensary. "What do I owe you for these?"

Jimmy waves it away. "Call it a going away present."

Tim smiles at that. "Keep an eye on Gibbs for me? I don't want him getting Abby panicked during Shabbos tomorrow."

"I was going to do that anyway."

"He showed up today, pretty much just to hug me."

"He's really freaked out."

"I know. That's not keeping me any calmer, either."

"Yeah, well, I don't want you going into this calm and relaxed. I want you on full alert. Just because I'm not flipping out doesn't mean I'm not worried, too."

"I know, but short of emergency appendicitis, I'm not getting out of this."

Jimmy looks Tim dead on. "That can be arranged, you know?"

Tim flashes Jimmy his exasperated look.

"I know. I'm not helping." Jimmy pats the pill bottle. "This is helping. Call in if you get a shot,
It's black or navy blue. So dark he can't tell which. And if asked, he's sure it's not identical to US Navy Service Blues, but he couldn't tell you how. (If it's blue and not black, that'd be a difference.) But the cut looks the same, the double row of gold(ish) buttons on the front, the four gold stripes on the cuffs, same gold star above them, the white hat with the black (navy?) bill, to Tim, this looks like a US Naval Uniform.

Which is more or less the only piece of clothing he's never, ever wanted to have touching his body.

He looks at it more, the insignias are different, so there's something. Holding the hat, cap, whatever, he can see that where, on a US Naval Officer's hat there's an eagle and the shield, on the Irish cap there's some sort of big, gold two spread wings-looking things. Between them is an anchor, and above it is something that looks like a sun with two Fs in it. But just like it's US counter-part it's got the gold curly-cues on the bill and the gold stripe across the band.

He checks the jacket more carefully, and, if there's a difference between it and the US Naval equivalent, he can't see it. The stripes are the same. The stars are the same. The buttons are different, and that's it.

There's probably some sort of uniform manufacturer in China who makes a ton of these things and they just send them out for fine tuning the embroidery.

Enough dithering. If he doesn't put the damn thing on soon, he'll find Abby asleep in bed, dreaming about the sex they're going to have, instead of awake in bed, actually ready to have some sex.

When he steps out, in full uniform, with as close as he can get to the right posture, Abby just stares at him, blinks hard, stares some more, and finally says, "Wow!"

Tim nods, looking at himself in the full-length mirror on the back of the door.

She hops up, standing behind him, hands on his shoulders, gently slipping them down his arms. "Just, yeah… Wow!"

He takes the hat off, only part with anything really visibly not a US Uniform, and says, "This was supposed to be me."

Her chin is on his shoulder, but she shakes her head anyway. Her hand slips under the jacket, between the buttons of his shirt, and comes to rest on his chest. "This is who you're supposed to be." She strokes the uniform. "This is… I don't know. But not you. Not for more than a few nights. Not for more than play."

He smiles at that.

"It looks good."

He nods. It does. "Feels weird."

"Probably going to make your Dad pass out when he sees you. Especially if you're not wearing the
hat."

He has to admit that makes him smile. Drive the old man apoplectic to see him in a Captain's uniform. And, while he's sure John would have some choice words that he'd love to say about him defiling the uniform, the fact that he's wearing it at the request of the Secretary of the Navy is awfully sweet.

"So," she nibbles her lip. "Are we playing with this, or is it too weird?"

"I think we're playing. If it gets weird, I know how to stop it."

She grins and nods. Then steps back, settling herself in the center of their bed. He's noticing that she's not her usual pre-bed naked. He's appreciating that she's got on a little teddy and cute little lace panties.

"Hello, Sailor," she says, voice lower than usual, come hither all over her tone.

He grins, liking that. "Hello back."

"Looking for company?"

He laughs, and then gets himself into the character. "Think I found some. What's the going rate?"

She stretches a little, rubbing one leg along the other, then shifts her weight onto her arms, pressing her breasts up and out. "Depends on what you like."

"I like lots of things." He says, stepping closer, unbuttoning the jacket, loosening his tie.

"Lots of things, huh? And let me guess, you've been away a long time, only your hand for company?"

"Communal showers, so not even a lot of that."

She shifts onto her knees, gesturing for him to come a bit closer, and then rests her hands on his chest. "Poor baby." She's close, lips a breath away from his, as she slips her tongue over them, it just, barely brushes against his lower lip. "I bet that's frustrating."

"You have no idea."

She nods.

"So, is it true what they say about sailors?"

"Which part?"

"That you're all really horny all the time?"

He takes her right hand, and places it on his cock. "What do you think?"

She moans quietly, and squeezes gently. His teeth clench and a sigh slips out of him. "Mmmm…"

"Know what'll feel even better?"

"What?" he asks.

"Not having pants on."
He nods. "That'll feel much better." She squeezes again, and he bites his lip.

"But you've got to tell me what you want, first, so we can get the business part done."

He closes his eyes and smiles a little, licking his lips. "Don't suppose you just charge by the hour?"

She shakes her head. "Nope. Gotta tell me what you want."

"Okay…" He looks her up and down, figuring that this is a pretty direct statement of 'You get to pick what we're doing tonight.' "Feeling kind of lazy tonight. Just want to lay back, sixty-nine until I'm about to come, and then have you slip off and ride me home."

"Sounds good. Two fifty, but if you can get me off, it's on the house."

He gently licks her lip. "Then I'll just have to get you off."

He's stripping off his uniform (carefully, it can't be all wrinkly for tomorrow) when she says, "You can try."

"Oh yeah." He grins. "I love a challenge."

A few seconds later he's naked, standing at attention (in more ways than one) next to their bed.

"Nice ink." She says.

"Thanks, like yours, too. You gonna let me see all of it?"

She carefully strips out of the teddy and panties, and his eyes trail all over her. He nods slowly, eyes lingering on her breasts and then pussy. "Yeah, like that a whole lot."

He sits down on their bed, wondering how 'realistic' this is going to be. Granted, he's never had sex with a hooker, so he's a bit fuzzy on the details, but he's assuming a lot of foreplay isn't part of the deal. Of course, given how sleepy she's been lately, quick is probably a selling point right now.

So, he just lays down, pulling her to him, careful not to crush her breasts between them. They're starting to get really sensitive again. "You kiss?" he asks.

She smiles and kisses him, soft and wet and deep. Then pulls back. "I do when I like the guy."

His hand twines in her hair and pulls her down for another kiss, also wet and deep. She's making soft, needy, happy noises in the back of her throat when she pulls back, and starts to flip around.

"Hold up. Change of plans." His hands urge her forward, up his body. "Still want to go down on you, but want to be able to touch more of you."

She's straddling his lips, exactly where he wants her. And for a few seconds he's just looking. Perfect pussy pouting at him, pink lips peeking between white labia, slight gleam of wetness, that smell hitting him so hard.

"Love pussy."

"You and every other sailor."

"Mmmm…" And he dives in. Kissing all over her. Starting gentle and easy, waiting for her body to start to rock in counter to his. Then licking, reveling in her flavor on his lips and tongue. His left hand strokes her, getting wet and slick, moving along with his tongue, finally, first two fingers...
slipping into her, pressing forward, finding her g-spot. His right hand reaches up, the reason for changing positions. Barely a month pregnant means very sensitive breasts, and he intends to take advantage of it.

Old, familiar dance, well-loved and satisfying. His lips and tongue and fingers know what to do, how to play her, how to touch so that in a matter of minutes she's going tight on him, hips moving fast as thighs tense. He's focused his touches, tongue on her clit, rolling over and over, fast and firm, keeping a steady pulse on her g-spot as his other hand pulls gently on her nipple.

She's moving faster, grinding against him, moans going high and breathy, and he knows she's almost there, just a little more, a few more seconds, bit more pressure. He sucks on her clit, pulling it between his lips, and pinches her nipple, firm, not too hard, and feels her hips and pussy twitch in response, slipping her over the edge.

Abby takes a minute to catch her breath, and then shimmies down him, kissing his lips. "Looks like you know your way around more than a ship."

He grins, sassy, at that. "Aviator. Don't like boats."

"How does a guy who doesn't like boats end up in the Navy?"

"It's where all the best toys are."

"Uh huh." She kisses him again. "So, ride you how? Facing you or turned away…"

"Ohhh… options…" His hands settle on her butt, and he leans up a bit to lick a nipple. "Tits or ass…" He kisses her nipple again, letting his teeth just drag over it, and she shivers. "Love this view, but… Turn around. Always been an ass man."

She turns around, wiggling at him, and then settles onto him in a long, slow stroke.

"Fuck!" he says it sincerely, voice low, hands settling on her ass.

She sets a quick pace. Not setting any endurance records tonight. And like before, it's an old, favorite dance. Motions mastered long ago and beloved. He holds her hips, rocking up to meet her, enjoying the view and the sublime pleasure of her body on his.

It's only a few minutes, but they're good minutes, happy minutes, and then he's also jerking and twitching as he comes.

She rests against him for a moment, both of them enjoying the glow, and then he reaches for the tissues, followed by quick cleaning up, and snuggling in close and sleepy.

They roll onto their sides, breathing slowing, and settle into sleeping position. He kisses her neck and shoulder, and she kisses his hand.

Another breath, one more, and the day ends in slumber.
The Storm

A/N: This one is substantially different from the Shards version, and will continue to be so for at least the next three or four chapters.

Four AM Friday morning. Butt crack of dawn as Tony would say. Tim's yawning, and Abby's looking like she's about to fall asleep on her feet. Test begins 13:03:06 Pacific Standard Time. Between now and then he's got more than three thousand miles to cover. Time to get moving.

He kisses her, and she holds him, tight. "Come back as soon as you can."

"All goes well, I'll be home Sunday or the day after."

"You better be." She's looking up at him, serious, some fear in her eyes.

"Look, there is no way I'm missing Kelly's birthday for this. Give her extra hugs and kisses from me when she wakes up."

"Okay."

He kisses her again and then gently turns her toward the stairs. "Come on, go back to sleep, you look ready to drop. I'll be fine. I went to Afghanistan, and you were less nervous about it."

"Because you were less nervous about it."

He smiles a little and kisses her one last time.

"Sunday or the day after. I'll skype if I can."

She kisses him, pulls back a little, and looks him over in the uniform. "Think they'll let you keep this?"

He knows where this is going but plays along anyway. "Why?"

"Want to take it off you when you get home."

He grins at that, kisses her ear and whispers, "As you wish," then pulls back and heads for the roadster.

Jarvis and James are standing on the tarmac when he pulls up. He sees both of them eye the car. Bright red 1930s roadster isn't precisely subtle.

"Didn't know you were a car guy," James says to him as he gets out, shouldering his bags.

He shakes his head. "I'm not. My wife is. She rebuilt this from scrap. I just get to drive it when I need to get somewhere, and she needs the car with the baby seat in it."

Jarvis nods. "Beautiful car." Then he looks Tim over critically. He's pulling off the uniform okay, doesn't look uncomfortable in it. Posture's a bit wonky, but not terrible. It's right, but it looks like he's got to think about it to keep it right. "What's that black thing on your wrist?"

"Wrist cuff." Tim pulls up his jacket sleeve showing it off. Jarvis is good at this, everything fits,
almost perfectly, but the sleeves are about a quarter inch too short.

"Any chance of you taking that off?"

Tim does and shows him the red lip print tattoo under it. "This at least looks vaguely like a watch. I can take the watch off, so it looks even more like one."

Jarvis nods, squinting at the lip print, curious. "Why do you have a pair of lips tattooed onto your wrist?"

Tim smiles, putting the cuff back on. "Had a good time on my honeymoon. How about you, do you have any?"

Jarvis smiles at that, looking amused. "No. It's difficult to do a good job in the clandestine services if you have a readily visible identifying mark. James has a few interesting ones, though."

James shrugs, touches the top of his arm. "SEAL team mark. Got Bill on my calf."

Bill the Goat is the official Navy mascot. "Played for Navy?"

"When I was at Annapolis, yes. Linebacker."

Tim looks at James, who is likely six two and two hundred pounds of muscle. Yes, he would have been a fine linebacker. James is looking at him. "You're what, a swimmer?"

Tim smiles. "MMA."

James shakes his head, and Tim sees him flash Jarvis a *Computer guys really are weird* look. "Of course."

The pilot joins them. "We're ready to go, as soon as you are."

Clayt is dozing. James is going over his files, probably making sure everything is ready to go as soon as they hit the ground in California.

Tim's prepping his character.

He actually likes the idea of naval aviator. Between talking with Draga, and his personal aversion to boats, he feels like he can pull off an aviator.

The Irish Naval Service doesn't have aviators. That's not entirely true. They have one team. Search and rescue missions. It's a helicopter that works off the deck of their largest ship. Tim could fill a thimble with what he knows about helicopters and still have plenty of room left over, so he can't convincingly fake that.

Plus, apparently one of his medals involves diving. Another one indicates he was loaned out to the UN for peacekeeping missions.

He looks up from his reading to James. "So," he taps the medals, "Is this a real person or…"

James shrugs. "I didn't handle that. He's got contacts all over the world from doing all sorts of things. Once the idea was set, he called *someone* and then this showed up along with the SparkNotes version of what all of this is a week later. All I know is that if someone gets suspicious and actually
calls the Irish Naval Service to check up on you, you'll pass."

Tim nods at that. "Okay." He does more reading, and thinking, and when he feels like he's got Captaen (Captain, he's lucked out this is the one rank where the English and Irish Gaelic are practically identical) Timothy McGee set in his head, he also decides to get some more sack time.

It feels a little odd to be part of a VIP delegation. Personal guest of the SecNav.

His stateroom is nice. Really nice. Walnut and mahogany fixtures, crisp linens, plush carpeting. It's about a thousand times nicer than the berths the enlisted men get (which is where, on the few times he's been on a ship overnight, he's crashed.) Actually, other than the small aspect, it's also nicer than basically every hotel room he's ever stayed in for the job, too.

But, very nice or not, it's still a room, in a ship, which is at sea, moving, under his dad's command. To say that he's nervous is an understatement. As soon as he saw the damn ship, it hit. Bad. He feels like his skin is buzzing he's so keyed up.

To say that he's green from sea sickness isn't. That hit about two minutes before he got on the ship.

They have an hour to get settled, and then they're meeting in the conference room. The Admiral didn't greet them when they got on the ship. That helped with both the jitters and the seasickness. But helped doesn't mean he's feeling good.

Like Jarvis had said, John's XO, Captain Russle, took them in hand, and if his dad still has pictures of him up, he looks different enough now, or Russle never paid enough attention to them, to identify him from them.

Captain McGee

Of course, between the uniform and the goatee, it's possible that all the XO saw was an Irish Captain with a goatee and never looked any closer.

Fifty minutes until they meet. Tim takes a deep breath, and two of the anti-nausea pills Jimmy donated for this trip, then he gets his computer out, and gets going.

Focus is a good thing. He needs to focus to do the only hacking he's going to do on board today, and that's getting into the security feed.

Takes him a good half hour to break in and get everything set. It'll take a minute or two more to transfer the feed from his computer to the big screen in the conference room.

By the time James knocks on his door saying, "Three minutes," everything is ready to go.

"Okay." He checks the count, then closes up his computer. "We're good on my side. 13:03:06 it all
begins."
"13:03:06?"

"Just a random time not too long after we get together. Wanted to get it started off soon, but some people run periodic sweeps. They usually start at the top of the hour or the top of the minute. Anyone who plays the game knows that, and adjusts. If they're on their game, they know that too, and have also adjusted, instituting random times. Hopefully the guys on this ships are that good, but there's no reason to give them an easy target if they aren't."

James nods. He's looking like he's going to enjoy this. "We'll see how good they are."

Tim exhales, forces his shoulders to relax, and says, "That's the plan."

"Looking forward to seeing your dad?" James asks.

"No." Tim says flatly. It'll be clear to everyone who sees them soon enough, so… "We're not on speaking terms."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

James looks nervous. "Is this going to compromise the test?"

"It shouldn't. Him noticing I was on the visitors' roster might have, because he knows I'm a tech guy and he'd wonder why I was coming. But once it gets going, everything should run smooth."

"Good." He can see James is in pre-emptive clean-up mode.

"Really, no one ever accused my dad of letting his personal life get in the way of his professional life. He's not going to let the fact that it's me doing it mess with his career."

"Okay."

Like his stateroom, the conference room is plush. It'd be at home in any four star hotel or Top 100 corporate board room.

There are some hints they're at sea, the table and chairs are attached to the floor. There aren't a lot of cute decorations that could go skittering around. But everything just screams money and luxury.

That doesn't much matter to Tim. The fact that he's got lots of plugs and excellent Wi-Fi does.

The fact that the TV's huge is quite nice, too.

He can run a good show from here. He's getting it set up when he notices James (who's been hovering in the back of the room, doing something with his own computer… getting ready to record the whole thing, Tim remembers,) leap up.

He looks up and notices that he didn't hear the door open, but open it did, and The Admiral has just walked in. As best as Tim can tell, he looks the same as he did four years ago. Maybe a little more gray in his hair, maybe not. Posture, eyes, face, voice, all of that is the same. His eyes flick to the man standing next to his father… He's met him before, but doesn't remember his name. Same secretary he had back when they last met up.
The secretary glances at Tim, not happy at his lack of jumping up and proper attention, and then he sees who Tim is, and glares. That's not a good look. Tim feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He's got no idea of what this guy knows about him, or thinks he knows, but it's not good, at all.

"Clayt!" The Admiral sounds happy to see SecNav, though Tim's thinking that's probably a façade. He doesn't ever remember his dad having anything positive to say about higher ups poking around in his business. Of course, as a political animal, he never had anything negative to say about the higher ups who were poking around, but he would tell Torri about how frustrating it was to have to stop everything and deal with said higher ups.

"John. How are you doing?" SecNav's smile is warm, but restrained.

"Just…” And that's exactly how long it took for his dad to notice the tall, thin guy with the goatee in black sitting at the table, not standing up for him, not saluting, is Tim.

"Tim?" There's a mix of confusion and horror in his eyes at seeing his son. Tim's not sure how much of that is him, versus him in a Captain's uniform, versus being caught completely flatfooted by Tim in an officer's uniform.

He nods curtly, acknowledging his existence. "Sir."

John turns to SecNav, very confused look on his face. "Clayt? What is going on here? What is he doing in uniform?" Apparently the Admiral can't tell at a glance what nationality this uniform belongs to, either.

"McGee… Hmmm…” Jarvis looks at both McGees. "That's awkward. Tim?" He looks over at Tim, who nods, his first name is fine. "About a year back, before Tim took over NCIS Cybercrime, he decided to test their team. The test was very informative…” while Jarvis is explaining, Tim's continues setting up. He can feel his dad's eyes on him, but he's doing his best to not pay attention to it. He's got a job to do, and that job means getting everything online so they can watch the test.

He gets the images of their main computer stations up on the big screen, and gets his computer up and scanning the techs' feeds. He half-notices Jarvis pause, and gets the sense they were waiting for him, so he looks up and says, "All set on my side. Show starts in sixty-four seconds."

"You're running a blind test on my men?" John McGee does not sound pleased by that. Tim doesn't look up, but he can feel or maybe imagine, the look the secretary is getting right now. Tim's very, very glad to not be him in about an hour when John gets him alone.

"Exactly," says Jarvis. "Though not just yours. This will be happening periodically through the whole Navy for the foreseeable future. You and Lt. Mane are the only ones on this ship read into this and you are to remain silent about it until we're done with the testing phase. What are we seeing, Tim?"

"The test will run on the whole of Strike Group Three, so upper left corner is the Stennis, lower left is the Borealis, lower right is Dewey, and upper right is Kidd."

John nods and turns to Tim. "And you're in charge of this?"

Tim nods. "Just this first one, sir. I have a department of my own to run. Since it's my baby, I'm setting up the first test, writing up the assessment, and how to do it for whomever takes over from here, but from here on out someone else will handle it."

"Did you pick my ship?" The Admiral's voice is icy.
"No, sir." I wouldn't voluntarily go anywhere near your ship if it was up to me is left unspoken, but The Admiral gets it.

"Your ship was chosen at random, John," Clayt says.

"Then why the secrecy? Why?" he points to Tim's uniform, his voice scathing on the why.

"You would have known something was up if you saw my name on the visitors' roster. But a good cover ID is easy to remember and respond to, so my name, different branch of service. Apparently McGee is a common Irish name, and their Navy was happy to play ball."

"Indeed," John's voice is frigid as he says that. Tim's heard that tone before. He exhales quietly and shakes his head at it. Mane is going to get grilled awfully hard in the not very distant future for missing that the name of the visitor from the Irish Navy was Capt. Timothy McGee.

Mane shifts slightly, and Tim can see he knows what's coming for him, too.

He sees his screen flicker, the feed changing. "Okay, we're starting. The first time I ran this, I made sure the test was big and ugly and really visible. But if you guys were really getting hacked, that wouldn't happen. So this is slick and quiet. If your guys are awake, they may notice it in the first two minutes. If not... Well..."

They spend a moment watching techs on the different ships working away. Tim rotates through three of the screens, showing the other ships. He keeps the Stennis up so they can keep eyes on this ship's response.

"You run your own department now?" John asks Tim.

"Yes. In January I became the Director of Cybercrime for NCIS."

John nods. "How many men are under your command?"

"One hundred and forty-seven, sir. My biggest team is twelve, smallest one, and they're scattered across the entire globe."

"I had an entire battle group under my command by your age."

"I remember, sir. I was there. That's when you started going to sea ten months a year."

John inclines his head. "Quite a step up from being tech support for a four man team. You catch your Boss in a compromising position with a sheep and get pictures or something?" John asks with not quite enough of a smile to make it a joke.

Tim closes his eyes and refocuses on the screen. Jarvis winces at the tension between them and the silence that falls after John's statement.

"How are they doing?" Jarvis asks a minute later.

"Haven't noticed so far."

"What happens if they don't notice?" The Admiral asks.

"First all of your communications for the entire strike force will go down. Then you'll start firing on your own ships. Your ship will be aiming at the Borealis. Well, that's what they'll think is happening. Unless they've got a view of the deck, they won't know it isn't real. I'm not looking to kill anyone, so the guns won't move or target or fire or anything, but they'll see it target and the command to fire go
through on their computers. Your other ships will get similar messages. Your radar and sonar will go blind, so no one will have any clue what's out there. And because I don't want you scrambling the jets and actually shooting anyone, your intercom is going down. By the time your men have figured out what's going on and can get a message by foot to the pilots, the test will be over and everyone will know no one was actually shooting."

"You can do that?" John looks very surprised.

Tim smiles, and there was nothing kind in that expression. His father is on the President's Commission for Drone Warfare, the top Drone man in the Navy. So, he's not asking, 'Is this possible?' He knows it's possible. He's asking, 'Can you do that?' "Apparently those years at MIT weren't the complete and utter waste of my time or talent you claimed they'd be, sir."

That's a smartass answer. Jarvis and James likely read that question to mean, can this be done. Jarvis looks from Tim to John, one eyebrow raised, and Tim just shakes his head. John's appalled at the idea that Tim would ever say that to him, let alone in front of his Boss.

"He is your father, you show him some respect," Mane growls.

Tim turns to look at him, mild expression on his face. "Were I to show him the respect he's earned as my father I'd have to resort to immensely unprofessional behavior and a vocabulary of nothing but profanity. Since that would be uncomfortable for everyone here, I'm showing his uniform the respect it deserves. However, after that sheep crack, I'm sorely tempted to quit doing that, too."

The other four men in the room go silent at that. John's looking at Tim like he's never seen him before, and Tim isn't sure if that look is good or not. Mane is seething. Jarvis and James both appear to be deciding that Tim's got a hell of a lot more backbone than they had expected.

They wait for a minute. Tim watching the big screen, looking to see if anything interesting is occurring, but the techs are all staring at their computers, doing their jobs, oblivious.

John is standing behind him, too close, and Tim's very carefully trying to ignore him, but that's impossible when he asks, "How is my grandchild doing?"

Tim bites his lip. He's gonna double down on it. Son of a bitch, never could leave anything alone. "I wasn't aware you had one, sir." He played the happy family charade for more than a decade. Not anymore. "However, if you mean my daughter, she's well, sir. She'll be a year old next week, already talking, everyone says she's extremely smart."

"Takes after your wife, I see," John says, dryly.

Tim rolls with that. "Yes, sir. She does. Looks like her, too. She's absolutely beautiful."

"Do you have pictures?"

"Yes." He's staring very intently at the feed, hoping his dad will drop this.

"On you?"

"Yes."

"May I see one?"

Tim finally looks away from the screen to face his dad. "No, sir. You lost that privilege decades ago." Mane is seething at that response. John looks mildly annoyed.
Jarvis clears his throat, and Tim goes silent, returning his gaze to the screen, willing someone to figure out something is going on and get them off of his own family drama.

"How long will it take?" John asks.

"Eleven minutes start to finish. I'm hoping having your guns target one of your own ships will make sure your men know something is up. But, if somehow they don't notice, then in…" he checks the clock, "six minutes the test will end, and I'll be on our way. If they do notice, I'll be staying until they figure out what's going on and someone shows up to arrest me for espionage."

"Arrest you?" John seems interested by that idea. Mane is grinning. Tim really doesn't like the edge of glee in his voice at that.

"If they're any good, they'll figure out where the commands are coming from." Tim gently taps his computer. "Technically, today I'm an Irish national, which means if I'm hacking your ship, I'm guilty of espionage."

Tim sees James and Jarvis glance at each other on that. As they understand how the test works, it's not coming from anything that can be traced to Tim. But they both have the sense not to ask about that. And Jarvis has the experience to see a trap being laid when it happens in front of him.

Two tense minutes pass, and Tim keeps monitoring both his worm and the lack of response from his father's men. Jarvis hovers over his shoulder, occasionally asking what different bits of information mean. Mane is sitting at the conference table, watching the feed intently. Through the whole thing, his dad paces back and forth across the conference room, and the sound of James' fingers clicking on his keyboard as he does whatever he does fill the room.

"Show time," Tim says. Three of the sections on the big screen went blank. "Okay, that was communications going down."

"Why did those screens go blank?" John asks.

"Because you've got communications blocking tech on this ship, and I've hijacked it. Once the jamming software goes live, nothing gets in or out, including the feed I was using to monitor the rest of your Strike Group. I'm still recording the responses on the other ship, and will get them uploaded once communications are back up." Tim's fingers fly over the keyboard and three new angles on the Stennis' computer hub come up. "Can't get feeds from the rest of your group, so we're just watching here, now."

Unfortunately nothing is happening.

Tim's feeling very satisfied, watching the way the vein on his father's head is throbbing away as his techs just sit there, completely unaware of the fact that they've been cut off from the rest of his fleet.

"Okay, phase two begins…" They see one of the techs hop up, yelling. "Now. Looks like he just noticed the order to target go live."

John's gone stone-faced, staring at the screens, watching his whole command fall apart as they realize they can't talk to anyone and have no clue how to stop the targeting.

Tim shakes his head. "They're not figuring out what's doing it."

By this point John's bright red, the vein is throbbing, and his eyelid has started twitching.

Tim's glancing between him and the feed. "Clueless. They're in damage control mode, just trying to
shut it down, and not having any luck. They're not even sure where it's coming from."

One of the techs runs over to another computer, one no one was sitting at.

"Okay, he's on the ball. He's noticed that it appears the commands are coming from that computer. Would have been better if someone had been using it, but this is good, too."

They can see the sailor hitting keys, fast and nervous, and calling over his shoulder.

Jarvis says, "I have a feeling you're about to get a call, John." He looks at John and Mane. "Neither of you can let on that you know what is going on. They have to believe that this is real, so act like your ship is suddenly targeting another of your ships."

John nods, curtly, standing very, very still, hands in fists. Mane doesn't respond, though he does stand up, ready to go as soon as they get "word."

Half a minute later, they hear footsteps pounding toward the room, and Tim quickly flips a schematic of the Stennis up onto the big screen. An out-of-breath sailor bursts into the room, obviously having run as fast as he could, and lets them know the XO wants the Admiral on the deck NOW.

So John and Mane leave.

As the door closes, Jarvis says, mildly, "I take it you two don't get on?"

Tim's tempted to apologize for being a smartass or letting Jarvis see that, but… No. This is not a guy he wants thinking him weak, and he's not sorry he didn't let his Dad see the pics or pretend they get along.

"We don't. And he knows that he is not, in any way but DNA, Kelly's grandfather. He has never seen her. He never will see her. He does not know her name, until five minutes ago he didn't know she was a girl. And he knows no one in our family has permission to share pictures of Kelly with him. So asking was way out of line. He was probably hoping I'd knuckle under because you're here."

"Okay." He can see Jarvis wondering what could have gone that bad between the two of them. "Is this going to be an issue?"

"I don't see how it could be. Even if he got on deck and specifically told everyone it was a test, and that they're being hacked by me, it won't speed them up on fixing it or help them figure out how to trace it. But he won't do that. Best of my knowledge he's never disobeyed a direct order, but… I'm here and I'm making his guys look bad. He's not going to react well to that. He's never let me beat him at anything before, and if his guys fail, if they can't shut down the worm, that would be me winning. Sabotaging something of mine would be in character for him, so I built an extra layer of protection in. I lied about them being able to trace the signals coming from me. If a bunch of his guys show up to arrest the 'Irish spy,' it means he's told someone what's going on."

"Because the test is launching from Tim McGee, Director of NCIS Cybercrime's computer. Someone shows up for you, I'll take a few minutes, 'call the Irish Consulate' and then get you transferred to my custody," Jarvis says.

"Thanks. My computers will keep recording everything, but if I'm in the brig I can't follow what they're doing, and God only knows what they'll do to my laptop if they can figure out how to open it." Tim pauses, they hear the red alert, all-hands-on-deck go through the intercom. "And they've got communications back. That's good."
"Look, I hope he plays by the rules, but… I've never beaten him at anything, and if they don't come
out of this looking great, he'll consider this me beating him, and it'll get messy."

"How messy?" Jarvis asks.

For all he told Abby about everything running smoothly, once he was in front of the man again, Tim
began to doubt that. "Unpleasant, I'll probably get yelled at later. At least, that's how he used to
handle it. I haven't spent more than an hour with him in fifteen years, so you probably know him
better than I do these days."

"Ah."

"Just, if someone… Mane," Mane'll be the one that shows up, he's sure of that, and really doesn't like
that, at all, "does show up to arrest me, don't leave me on my own too long, okay?" That's as close as
he's willing to get to saying he may need to get bailed out of something sticky.

Jarvis stares at him for a long minute, and Tim feels like he's having his whole life history read.

The feed catches Tim's eye. His eyes narrow, and he nods. "They failed. If that had been a real
attack, five missiles would have just blown the Borealis out of the water, but not before it fired on the
Aurora, and the Aurora fired on the Mobile Bay, and on and on. If that had been real, Strike Group
Three would be completely out of commission by now."

"Okay. Now what?" Jarvis asks.

"Eventually, you do whatever it is you do with him. I'm thinking I'll stay in my quarters and keep an
eye on this. They didn't stop it, but now they know it happened, so I want to see what they do and
how they try to track me."

"Fine."

Clayton Jarvis was never a cop.

At eighteen he was young, talented, the apple of his Daddy's eye, and Daddy, a Senator, made sure
he got into Annapolis when he indicated he wanted a career in the Navy.

He did well there, bright, good with people, good with languages, always able to see all the angles,
somewhat 'flexible' moral compass. He was a natural for the Clandestine Services.

The twenty-five years he spent in active Navy Service are classified and the bits that aren't classified
are so heavily redacted that only one out of ten words is still legible. So, suffice it to say, he had a
rich and varied career involving many hair-raising adventures before he blew out a knee (officially he
was repelling from a helicopter when that happened; we won't speculate as to what he was really
doing) and moved from active engagement with the enemy (and friends, and allies, and some neutral
parties, but we're not going to talk about that, either. Trust me, we're all better off not knowing who
he was working with) onto the Navy political track.

Once on the political track, he was able to blend the fact that he is good with people, and languages,
and reading a situation and figuring out all the angles, with the fact that he has a whole cemetery full
of skeletons from other people's closets into an upward career arc that made him Secretary of the
Navy less than ten years after leaving active service.

So, he was never a cop, but like a cop, he's got no ability to just let a mystery lie, and right now the
mystery he can't let lie is the McGee family drama.
And with, what may be, hours to spare, after all it's not like John is offering to take him around the ship for inspection right now, he asks James to get him everything he can find on both McGees.

And James, who was also never a cop, and who is also not exactly a bloodhound when it comes to mysteries, is, nevertheless quite curious about the McGee family by this point, so almost before Jarvis has asked, the first of the files are on his computer.

And so, instead of touring the *Stennis* and inspecting the men, they are both reading up on their host and their hacker.

What they learn is that both of them are off-the-charts intelligent. But while McGee Senior added ambitious and politically savy to intelligent, McGee younger delved into his specialty and seemed to be very satisfied to find a niche and then become the best possible person he can, at that niche.

What they don't find is anything to indicate why those two wouldn't be speaking. Jarvis assumes that if there was some sort of noticeable friction, it would have been *noticed* in the different evals that John went through before hopping to flag rank. When the Navy looks at you for Admiral, every facet of your life gets dissected. And while there are mentions of McGee's marriage falling apart, there's nothing in there about the kids, other than the fact that there are two of them.

Jarvis looks up at James, question in his eyes?

James shakes his head. "Earliest thing I can find on Tim is that he got accepted to Annapolis and didn't go."

Jarvis shakes his head, exhaling. "Long time for a grudge like that."

James nods. "Everything else… Summa cum Laude from Johns Hopkins and MIT. Perfect score on the FLETC entrance exam. Highest graduating marks until year before last. Did you know he's a bestselling novelist? He's practically the poster child for the kid you'd be happy to brag about. He ever mention Tim to you?"

Jarvis shakes his head. "I've been in his office before, noticed he had family photos up, but didn't pay much attention to them."

"So, is this all on Tim's end?"

Jarvis shakes his head. He reads people way too well for that. John's not good on this, and frankly, Mane is scary. "No. Someone shows up to grab McGee, and you stick with him, okay? Make sure the paperwork is right. That they process him correctly. Once he's locked up nice and safe, you come back to me, and then we'll be there in a few minutes with my 'custody transfer' order."

"No problem."

Jarvis is surprised when an hour later Mane shows up at his door.

James answers it, and in keeping with the official cover story (in that they're basically talking in a hallway with other men milling around), Mane explains that there was some excitement on deck earlier, and that the Admiral is still engaged with it, but if they'd like to continue the inspection, he would be happy to take them around.

James lets him know that'd be fine.

"Shall I tell Captain McGee?" Mane asks.
James shakes his head. "No. He's busy."

Mane looks mildly surprised at that. "Busy? Curious. He sets foot on our ship, everything goes haywire, and then he's too busy to go along with the inspection he supposedly came here to do."

Jarvis stands up to join them. He can see where this is going, and knows James has stepped in it. They should have thought of a cover for why McGee wasn't actually inspecting ahead of time.

"Yes, Lieutenant Mane, he is busy. It did not require an in-depth inspection to recognize that this ship is vastly beyond the current needs of the Irish Naval Service. He's writing up his report on that, and taking care of a few other issues. I believe he will join us for dinner, though."

"Of course, sir. Have you worked with Captain McGee before?" Mane asks as they step into the hall, heading toward the flight decks.

"No. However, I have worked extensively with his commanding officer, and I am more than familiar with military investigative committees who develop bright ideas to waste officers' time and send them on wild goose chases. Captain McGee is likely writing up some polite version of 'In that we've got fewer planes in our entire Air Force than will fit on one of these ships, and in that our landing fields are in range of anyone even remotely likely to attack us, perhaps we don't need an aircraft carrier right this second.'"

"Ah. A wise assessment." Mane says. "Still, you have checked his background? He is who he says he is? Right?"

Jarvis glances at James. Mane is laying the groundwork for the Irish spy line, and he's doing it in public. No one appears to be listening, but that doesn't mean no one is.

"Are you suggesting that Lt. James is less than competent at his job?" Jarvis asks, pointedly.

Mane shakes his head vehemently. "I'm sorry to even hint at it. I just know how difficult it can be to stay on top of every visitor."

James nods, he pitches his voice so several of the men in the hallway near them will hear this, too. "It is, and I'm certainly not perfect. But, if you'd like to double check, you can contact the Irish Naval Service. I've got the contact information for Commodore Stephens, and he will be happy to confirm that Captain McGee is who he says he is."

Mane shakes his head. "No matter. I'm sure he checks out."

Tim's back in his quarters, keeping watch on the clean-up effort by his dad's men. They're doing… Okay. Taking all the standard steps, looking under the usual rocks, searching for horses before they go zebra hunting. (At least, he hopes that's what they're doing, as opposed to horse hunting is all they can do.)

But nothing they're coming up with is rocking his world. Nothing they're coming up with would have impressed him at MIT, fourteen years ago, either.

He checks his clock. 16:35. Everyone should be at dinner. He grabs his phone and pulls up Skype. A minute later he's got Abby on the screen, looking really happy to see him.

"Tim!"

"Hey, I said I'd call." He can hear everyone else buzzing around behind her. And once she said his
name Jimmy and Breena (who were apparently sitting next to her) crowd into the screen as well.

"Look, I'm still in one piece." Gibbs drifts into the back of the frame.

"How'd the test go?" Abby asks.

"Awesome. For six minutes, the entire strike group was paralyzed. It was beautiful."

"How did your father take that?" He hears Penny's voice, but she's not in the view. Then everything shifts and she is.

"That little vein in his forehead was throbbing away the whole time, but he just stood there and took it. I'm really glad I'm not his secretary. He's getting reamed tonight."

"So, nothing bad?" Penny asks.

"Few snide remarks, mostly along the lines of how I'm barely competent to breathe and walk at the same time, let alone pull a coup on his strike group, but, not really. Not by his standards. He suggested I got my job by sexually blackmailing Leon. Little tense when he asked to see pictures of Kelly, but I said no, and that was that. Four minutes of me explain what the test was doing, and then his XO sent a runner for him, and off he went to look like he had a clue as to how to stop the mayhem."

"And did he?" Ducky asks.

"Not a clue. I think the only idea he came up with was to break out the Semaphore flags so the ships could start talking to each other again. But communications were up again before anyone found them."

He sees the scene jiggle around again. Then Gibbs is looking at him. "So, you're really okay?"

"I'm really okay." He flips the phone around, showing them his room. "Look, I'm in a locked, from the inside, stateroom."

"Nice digs, McGee!" Tony says.

"Oh yeah! If you can swing it, pretending to be an officer rocks." He shifts the view of the camera a bit further. "Look, mini fridge. Between the upset stomach friendly snacks I brought, and this, I don't even have to leave this room the whole time."

Abby circles back into the frame. "What's the whole time?"

"Who knows? Rate these guys are going, I'm thinking middle of Sunday before they figure it out. Shouldn't be much longer than that."

She nods at that, and hands the phone back to Gibbs, who's just watching him carefully. "I'm really okay."

For the first time in days, Gibbs actually nods at that assessment.

"Unless he wants to blow my cover and his orders, he won't even see me again. His strike force just suffered a huge computer FUBAR; he's not going to be entertaining some piss-ant Captain from Ireland. He's going to be on deck, every minute he can be, until this is handled. Maybe he'll take the time to eat with Jarvis, but me, nah, I'm out of the picture now."

Another curt nod from Gibbs. "Good."
"Hey," Abby says, sitting down again, taking the camera from Gibbs. He sees Kelly on her lap. "Look who wants to say Hi!"

"Hi, Baby!"

Kelly stares around, really confused. She can hear him, but can't see him. Abby's finger hovers over the screen. "Daddy."

Kelly looks at the screen, sees him, and looks really confused. "Hi Kelly," he says with his biggest possible smile.

Apparently she finds the idea of Daddy in a phone horrifying, because she starts crying.

"Oh no! No crying. I'm okay. I'm just far away."

Of course, none of that means anything to a one-year-old who expects Daddy to look a certain way, and two inches tall in a little black box is not the way he's supposed to be.

"Daddy!" she gets out between sobs.

He sees Abby facepalm. Talk about plans going awry.

"I'm okay, baby. It's just a picture." Also completely useless for baby soothing. Abby hands the phone over to Breena, who's laughing quietly. He can hear Abby humming quietly. Ziva and Abbi slide into the frame.

"How is the seasickness going?" Ziva asks.

"Not too bad. It hit pretty hard before the test, but right now… I'm not feeling great, but I'm not green, either. Hey, where's your husband?"

"Hers or mine?" Ziva asks.

"Hers."

Jimmy shows up behind Breena. "Amazingly enough, if you give me pills with actual medication in them, they work a hell of a lot better."

"Thought you said the last ones worked."

"These work better." Tim holds up a bottle of water and a green apple that's missing three bites. "I'm actually able to eat some, this time."

"Lucky you," Breena says. "All those do for me is make me not throw up. Certainly don't make me feel good enough to eat."

Tim shrugs. "Well, I'm not pregnant. It probably works differently."

"Ya, think?" Breena says with a perfect Gibbs deadpan.

Abbi laughs at that, and Tim does, too.

They all hear a soft beeping sound.

"What's that?" Abbi asks.
"My cue to get back to work. Someone on board's up to something interesting. Love you all." The phone gets handed back to Abby.

"Love you, too."

"I'll call again if I get a shot, but... this is looking interesting. I might be keeping watch on this all night."

"Okay." She air kisses the screen. He doesn't see anyone else in the field of view, so he kisses back.

"See you soon."

"Bye."

So much for promising. It started off well, but whoever CT Jenner is, he got lost along the way to promising. He traced the hack through two bounces, but from the looks of it, he decided that two bounces was either: A, where the attack was coming from, or B: after two bounces there was no way he was going to follow it all the way home.

Either way, he gave up nine bounces away from NCIS.

Tim kept watching, focusing in on Jenner, but couldn't tell what he was doing. Thinking apparently. He's just staring at his monitor. Finally he stands up to grab someone else.

The downside of the security feed is that Tim can't hear. He's got prime seats for what all the techs are doing on their computers, and he can see them interacting with each other, but Jenner's back is to him, so he's got no clue what he might be saying.

He's watching intently, wondering if the XO was just told that Fight Group Three was attacked by NASA. (Tim routed the attack through the CIA, IRS, NASA, Homeland Security, IBM, Bank of America, Facebook, and Pirate Bay, and some lesser known spots. He had a lot of fun setting it up.)

There's a knock on his door, which makes Tim tense up for a second, and then he notices that it's dinner time.

He stands up, opens the door, and there's Jarvis and James. "We're heading to the Captain's mess for dinner," James says.

"Okay." Tim's not exactly relishing the idea of having dinner with his dad. "We're starting to get some action on tracking down what happened—"

"You're coming with us," Jarvis says, definitively. "Lt. Mane is already asking about how suspicious it is that you're on board for an inspection and have done no inspecting."

Tim nods and grabs his jacket, slipping it on. "Good point. Do I wear the hat to this?"

Jarvis is in a civilian suit, and James has his under his arm. "If you like."

Tim looks at it for a second and then decides to leave it off. If anyone is looking for an Irish Spy, he wants to look as American as possible. "No need to advertise who I am, right?"

Jarvis approves of that. Unless you're close enough to see the buttons, Tim's wearing the uniform of an American Captain, and that'll get a lot of line-toeing on a US ship.
As an Annapolis grad, John McGee has been an officer his entire career. Which also means he's been an officer Tim's entire life. And while it's true that Tim can, sort of, remember being brought onto his Dad's various ships as a child and pre-teen, he doesn't think he's ever been in an Officer's Mess before.

Maybe for questioning on a different ship. Snagging the Captain's Mess as a quiet place to talk to people would be right out of Gibbs' playbook.

But, if he has, said mess was a few steps below the level of luxury available here.

Of course, Admiral McGee is expected to do things like entertain the Secretary of the Navy, or the President, or… whoever, so his mess would look like a four star restaurant.

There's one long table, comfortable seating for twelve, white linen table cloth, china (with the Navy emblem on it in gold), crystal, silverware that's actually silver, fresh flowers in the centerpiece. John is there, waiting for them, along with several other officers that Tim hasn't met. Lt. Mane is not there, neither is Capt. Russle, who was on deck last Tim saw.

John stands up to greet them, and even pulls out Jarvis' chair for him. He's being exceptionally polite, and doing a very good job of projecting an air of pleasantness. He introduces Jarvis, and James, looks at Tim for a second and says… "McGee, right?"

Tim nods. "Not an uncommon name where I'm from."

"Ah, yes. Where I'm from, too," John says dryly, he looks to the other officers, "Captain Timothy McGee, Irish Naval Service." The others laugh politely at the coincidence.

"And where are you from, Sir?" Dad's playing nice; he can play nice, too.

"Boston originally. Large population of transplanted Irish there."

Tim nods. "According to my Gran, some of our family headed here during the Famine, and I know few cousins left during the Troubles. How long has your family been here?"

"Since the 1880s. Don't know much about my family before my great-grandfather."

"Ah."

"So, am I to understand that this afternoon's dust up is take care of?" Jarvis asks, mainly for the other officers who are listening.

"Getting close. Last I heard our people had found the trail the attack took, and are now back tracing it. Lt. Mane is with the techs, keeping watch, letting me sit down for a bit and get a bite to eat."

"Splendid!" Jarvis says.

Tim's wishing he was sitting at his computer watching that. He really does hope they're onto his tracks because that would mean they're doing well with this test.

"If you don't mind me saying, you don't sound Irish," John says, drawing Tim back to thinking about here and now.

"I get that all the time. I was born in Dublin, lived there for my first year, and then my father got a position teaching at the University of California. I grew up there, didn't move home again until I was fifteen. Came back to the states for University, and then back to the Irish Naval College for officer
training."

"Where in California?" John asks.

"He lectured at the UCSF Medical School. We had a nice little place just north of the city."

Tim can see in John's eyes that he knows exactly where Tim is talking about, and that Tim's built a cover so he can't be called out on facts he wouldn't know.

"Lived there for a few years myself. It's a beautiful part of the world."

"Yes, it is." Tim tries to leave it there. The steward is making his rounds, asking what people want to eat. Tim's not enthusiastic about food right now. (Apparently at this level, you've got options, but absolutely nothing looks good to his queasy stomach. He asks for roast beef, which is pretty hard to screw up.)

"Nothing on the menu you like?" John asks, bit of glee in his voice.

"Everything looks lovely," Tim says, with a smile at the Steward, who is trying to do a good job. "Still getting over a bout of food poisoning from last week. Let's just say not everyone runs as clean a ship as you do."

John nods, taking that compliment. "Of course, clean ship is a luxury. Don't get me wrong, a properly run ship is clean, but not all commands are ships. My first run out was turtle Navy in Vietnam..." And John spends a few moments expounding on his adventures in the jungles, and how absolutely nothing about those commands could be even remotely classified as clean.

Tim's good at this. He's heard these stories before, and knows his job is to just sit there and listen, so he does.

James, who was a SEAL, adds in a few of his own adventures in the less than perfectly sanitary world of getting dropped out of helicopters and swimming into enemy territory and the like, along with a few bits about epic food poisoning in said parts of the world.

They're impressive stories, and Tim's doing a good job of listening to them, asking good questions, keeping James talking, because every word he's saying is a word his Dad isn't.

But eventually James runs down, while food is just being placed in front of them, so that means more conversation for however long this will take.

"How about you, Captain McGee, and interesting stories for us?"

Tim smiles, and shakes his head. "My interesting stories are not nearly as interesting as Lt. James', and currently classified."

"Then what do you do now?" John asks.

"Significantly less interesting work. I believe your Marines would call me a 'REMF.'"

That gets some polite laughter.

"I studied engineering at John's Hopkins and MIT before moving back home for Officer Training. Right now I'm on research, design, and assessment. They send me to go look at various possible toys for our Navy, and I determine if we need them, or if we can modify them to make them work for us."

"Not much of a fighter, then?"
Tim shakes his head. "Not recently. I'm the one who makes sure the fighters have the tools they need to fight as well as they can for as long as they can with minimal damage to themselves."

"And yet you're a Captain? In our Navy, that requires some level of combat experience. Of course, as small as you guys are, I suppose you make do with what you have."

"As I said, not recently. I've always done what I could to serve my country, use my skills for the benefits of others. I'm better at this than anyone else in our service, so this is what I do."

John nods at that. "An honorable sentiment. All men should bend their skills to serving their country."

"Indeed." Tim nods, smiling, enjoying how he's going to force the Admiral into a box. "Armed forces, police, first responders, whatever it is you excel at, should be in the service of others."

And, in public, in front of the SecNav, the Admiral can't disagree with that. So he nods.

No one says anything for a moment, and Tim's feeling like maybe this is almost done. He's only had a few bites of food, but some of the other officers are getting close to done.

"Your father must be proud of you. Putting on the uniform, officer training, serving your country. I bet that makes him smile."

Tim looks up with a jerk; he really didn't expect that.

"Uh..." He's flatfooted, trying to figure out if the Admiral is offering an olive branch or not.

"My son writes books and plays with computers. He had the opportunity to serve, and turned it down."

Nope, no olive branch there. Tim stiffens slightly, realizing what box the Admiral walked him into, as well. "If my father had even a nodding acquaintance with sane when it comes to who to be proud of, he would be proud of me. But he's a surgeon, and he wanted me to be a surgeon. By his compass the only thing that matters is saving lives by putting people back together. He spent my entire life piling insults on me for not being a surgeon and tried to terrorize me into attending medical school. So, no, he's not proud of me, and as of this point we have not spoken in years."

The Admiral's eyes have narrowed, and Tim decides to double down.

"I write, too. Nothing out yet, but working on a novel. And I love to read. Who's your son?"

"You haven't heard of him," John says flatly.

"Oh, not very popular then?"

"No, he's not."

"Huh." Tim looks at the Admiral for a moment, as if he's remembering something, putting something together. "Wait... Are you Sarah McGee's father?"

John blinks at that. "Yes."

"I love her books. Does she serve?"

"No."
"Oh, must be disappointing to have both of your children decide to skip the path you wanted for them." Tim's curious to see if John'll badmouth Sarah for not serving, or if he'll be impolitic enough to admit that he thinks women don't belong on a ship.

"Aren't you a little old, and male, to be reading Sarah's books?" Or he could take an altogether different path. "Her intended audience is fourteen-year-old girls."

Tim smiles at that. "Someone has to decide what my daughter can and cannot read. Since I'm the one who likes fantasy stories, I'm the one who got to read her series and see if it was appropriate. Strong female role models, girls doing awesome things, romance that's uplifting rather than psychotic, Sarah McGee writes great stories. Though I mean... It's on her website. Isn't her brother is a New York Times best-selling author five times over."

John blinks. "You have a little girl?"

"Yes, sir. She's ten."

"Wonderful age for a daughter. Any pictures I could see?"

Tim bites his tongue. "Certainly. Just..." He removes his phone from his jacket, sits back a bit, James, who is sitting next to him, can see that he's not opening a shot on his phone, that he's in fact taking a picture of his extended middle finger, but to the rest of the table it just looks like he's fumbling around with his phone getting a shot up. Tim stands, heads to the Admiral, and hold his phone, shot of him giving his Dad the bird on the screen, so only John can see it, smiling at him.

John smiles, faintly. "She's lovely."

Tim drops the camera, rapidly flicking through the shots until he finds one of Harper Scuito from their wedding, and then shows it around the table. "Fancy dress party. Something called 'Steampunk.' She had a blast." Then Tim sits back down, taking a sip of his soda. (He hoped some Coke would help settle his stomach.)

He's just about put the glass down when Lt. Mane enters the room, whispers something to John, and then sidles over to Tim. "Would you come with me, sir?"

Tim can feel the hairs on his neck stand up again. Whatever's about to happen, Mane doesn't mean him any good, so for whatever's about to happen, Tim wants lots and lots of witnesses.

"I was hoping to finish my dinner and return to my quarters to finish my report. Where would you like to me to with you."

Mane says, quietly, but not so quietly that everyone can't hear, but he may as well be speaking in his normal voice because everyone in the room is staring at him. "I think you'd prefer I didn't say where I'd like you to go."

Tim looks surprised. He didn't think they'd really do it. But if they are... He thinks for another second and says, "Interesting proposition, but in my Navy, you don't have to hide things like this. I mean, I'm flattered," Tim says, regular voice, "but I prefer women." He touches his wedding ring, and several of the other officers laugh at that.

Mane's eyes all but bug out of his head. "Timothy McGee, I am taking you into custody on charges of espionage and sabotage!"

Tim blinks, looks at James and Jarvis, and sighs. "And what exactly is it I'm supposed to have done to sabotage you."
"Come with me, now, or I will call the Masters at Arms, and they will bring you with me."

Tim stands up. James does, too. Jarvis already has his phone out and is 'getting in contact' with the Irish Naval Service.

"You stay here, sir." Mane says to James.

James shakes his head. "Commodore Stephens vouches for McGee. He's the commander of the Irish Naval Service. Obviously there's been some sort of mix up. I'm staying with him until we can get this sorted out."

Mane looks like he just found out the chocolate cake in front of him was actually Styrofoam with a layer of frosting on top of it. For a second he looks so disappointed he might spit. But then he rolls with it.

"Fine, you may come with us Lt. James."

Mane ushers them out of the Mess. In the hall, there are two armed MA's waiting for them.

They look at Tim and James. "Thought we were only grabbing one?"

Mane clasps a hand on Tim's shoulder. "This one. The other is Secretary Jarvis' Aide."

"Ah." Tim does not like the way the two MAs are looking at him.

"So, we're at peace with Ireland," Mane says. "What the hell was this attack about? Just trying to see if you can do it? Good thing our people are better at this than you are, or thousands of people would have died today."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Tim replies.

"Yeah, just keep saying that. The MAs are in your room, collecting your computer. All the proof we need is on there."

Tim glances at James and rolls his eyes.

"What exactly do you think I've done?"

"You tried to kill my whole Carrier Group."

Tim shrugs and says to James, "Apparently I'm an ambitious man."

James nods. "Apparently."

"Apparently, I'm also stupid. This attempt on your Carrier Group, was that the thing that happened where everything went on red alert?"

"Yes."

"Ah… So, you think I did something to your ship while I was on it? I'm a good swimmer, but we're a really long way away from land."

James chuckles at that. The MAs look confused by the fact that the Aide to the Secretary of the Navy being so relaxed about this.

"I don't think. I know. And your computer is going to confirm it."
Tim sniggers at that.

"You're awfully cocky for someone who's about to be tossed in the brig for espionage."

"Because I'll be out of your brig in fewer than ten minutes. But lead the way, Lt. Mane. Have fun with my computer. I'm sure, if your techs can figure out how to get into it, that they'll find my report of the feasibility of an aircraft carrier for the Irish Naval Service fascinating."

The brig is well below deck. And the combination of having actually eaten something, plus the hours between his last anti-nausea pill and now, in addition to a close in, slightly moving environment, is biting him in the ass. Tim's starting to feel really ill.

He reaches for his pocket, but both MAs leap at him, grabbing his arms.

"I'm just getting an anti-nausea pill."

"You aren't getting anything until it's been run by our medics," Mane says.

Great, petty cruelty. This'll be lovely. "Fine. Might be a good plan to get me a bag, unless you want to be dealing with a mess."

Mane doesn't respond to that, and Tim tries to breathe deep and easy.

They finally get to the brig, and he's herded in. "May I have a JAG?"

Mane shakes his head. "No sir. Spies are not granted that privilege."

He glares at Mane. The Master at Arms in charge of the brig says, "We need all of your valuables, sir."

Tim feels that someone-just-stepped-over-my-grave sensation. He's got to empty his pockets. Whatever happens next, he'll have nothing but his hands on him.

He hands over his knife, wallet, roll of quarters, and phone.

"I'm going to want those back."

The sailor who's noting everything glares at and him and drops his cell phone, shattering the screen before picking it back up again. "Sorry, sir. Butterfingers."

Tim sighs. As long as those dolts don't try to pry it open, they'll keep their fingers intact.

"All of your valuables, Sir." He's looking at Tim's wedding ring.

"You can get this when you pry it off my corpse." Apparently he looks stern enough on that, the MA doesn't press. The fact that he hands over his watch, without a word, probably helps.

"So, this the son of a bitch who made us fire on the Borealis?" Another sailor asks, looking really eager to see Tim behind bars.

"Yep," Mane says. "Techs traced the attack to his computer."

Tim looks at James. He's starting to get alarmed. They didn't fire on the Borealis, but he doesn't know if they know that or not down here. How far and fast has scuttlebutt flown, and what story did
"Jacket, shoes, and..." The MA in charge gestures to the wrist cuff.

Tim takes off the jacket, and the shoes no problem. "It's a wrist cuff, and you can have when you get my wedding ring."

They process him, take his finger prints, DNA swab, make him sign for his things. James stays by his side, keeping an eye on everything, and while it's tense, and it's nothing that wouldn't happen to a suspect at NCIS, so Tim rolls with it.

Tim's wiping the black ink off his fingertips as the MA says, "Follow me." He does, and James goes along, too.

"Not you, sir," The MA says.

James shakes his head. "This is a high-ranking Irish national who is the guest of the Secretary of the Navy on this ship. Once he's safely locked into a cell, and I've seen with my own eyes that he's being treated well, you can get rid of me."

The MA doesn't roll his eyes, but it's clear he's annoyed with James, though if he's annoyed because he can't wait to get his hands on Tim, or if he's annoyed because of the slight to his professionalism, Tim's not sure.

He follows the MA, who gestures to one of three cells. It's the only empty one. Three walls are bars, one, on the back is metal, with a john and a sink. No bunks. Nothing to sit on. There are men in the cells on both sides, and they're watching him very carefully.

The MA opens the door and Tim steps in, hearing the key shoot the bolt home.

"Are the accommodations to your liking, sir?" The MA asks James.

"They're lovely. I'm sure the Ambassador to Ireland will be pleased to see how well you've taken care of one of his own."

Tim appreciates the sarcasm. "Not like I've never done this before."

James looks curious about that, then nods, and holds up four fingers, which Tim takes to mean he'll be out of here in less than four minutes.

James turns to the MA and says, "And now I'll go report back to the SecNav. Thank you."

The MA nods, doing the putting on a show of obedience for the officer act, and it's very clear it is an act. And it's clear that he intends to make sure James knows it's an act.

Tim looks around, two men in the cell on his left, two on the right. None of them look friendly. None of them look the way most men you'd find in a brig look, no one is drunk, or hung over, no one is sporting any bruises. Possible they've all been in here for a few days, though.

Less than ten seconds after James leaves, Mane is back.

"Step out, Thomas."

"Certainly sir." The MA is smiling at that. And he rapidly goes for a walk. Leaving him in the brig with Mane, and four other men.
Shit. Tim's adrenaline spikes. How long until Jarvis gets here? He takes a few deep breaths, trying to calm his nerves and see what, if any, advantages he can get on this.

He's got nothing. Not his knife, not his quarters, hell, he doesn't even have his fucking shoes. Sink and John are bolted down, can't attack with them.

Okay, can't let them get in here. They've got to bunch up at the door.

"This is the guy I told you about. The one who hacked our system. Made us fire on the Borealis. You've got kin on the Borealis, right, Manz?"

"Yes, sir." Manz's staring at him, and Tim knows that's the man who's going to kill him if he gets the shot. That's the one who has to go down, first.

"Two hundred and twenty dead already. Still doing search and rescue. No word on your wife, yet."

God, if they've been down here all day... All they would have heard was the red alert. They wouldn't know what actually happened. No one would be giving them any news, except whatever shit Mane's told them.

Mane finds what he's looking for, the keys. Manz and his cellmate, and the two others are crowding the doors of their cells. Tim finally gets to see them standing up, and he knows he can't keep them in the doorway of his cell. He's not big enough to bull rush one of them, let alone all four in a bunch.

Okay, back of the cell, wall at his back. John and Sink are both low, they'll limit his mobility some, but protect his flanks. They won't be able to get too close to him on his sides.

Come on Clayt, get in here, now!

Mane unlocks both cells. Tim takes another deep breath, moving back.

"I'm going to unlock his cell and take a walk. Five minutes, I'll be back to deal with the body. You need to be gone by then."

The other four nod. And Tim realizes they aren't actually prisoners. They won't be on the record as having been in here. That's why James wasn't supposed to go in. Tim was supposed to get to his cell and have some sort of accident.

Tim watches Mane open the door, watches the four of them rush. He sees the door closing and knows that if he waits for them to get the first move in, they're going to kill him, so he jumps, and hits exactly right. It's a windpipe strike to Manz. It drops him, sends him to the floor gasping. Probably won't kill him, but it will (and does) take him out of the fight.

Three on one, even if you're fast and good, and these days Tim is both of those things, is a losing proposition if the other guys are fast, good, and bigger than you are.

He stays standing for as long as he can, gives as much pain as he takes, tires them out, because once he falls they'll have nothing stopping them but their own fatigue levels, and he has to survive this, he has to get home, he's got a wife and baby and another one on the way and he has to get out of this. But in the end he can't take them. When the one rips his arm out of his socket, and cracks it over the sink, Tim drops. He curls into the tightest most protective ball he can, using his body to protect his vitals and the wall to protect his back, and then he endures.

"Good Lord! STOP!" Jarvis' voice echoing across the brig. And with that the kicking stops.
"Who the fuck are you?" Tim hears one of the voices above him say.

"I'm Clayton Jarvis, Secretary of the Navy, and you will back away from that man right now. James, get every medic and every MA in this ship here right this second!"

"Yes, sir." He hears James talking on a phone, but doesn't move, doesn't uncurl. Time goes blurry for him. Jarvis may be kneeling next to him, or may not, he isn't sure. The only thing he's sure of is that he's alive and he has never, ever hurt this bad in his life.

He senses another person next to him, and jostling, as what are likely MAs pull the other four out of the cell.

"McGee, we're going to get you to the infirmary."

"No." He slowly begins to uncurl.

"Don't move."

"Necks not broken. Toes hurt, legs hurt, hips hurt. I can feel all of me." Tim inhales and winces. "Ribs might be." Sparking pain shoots through his chest and face when he breathes. "Nose, too?"

Jarvis nods. Tim's nose was in the center of his face when he left the mess, and it's not now. But that's not what's worrying Jarvis. "You've got to see the medics. I'm not a doctor, but even I know you hand is not supposed to be pointed in that direction." Tim looks at his right hand and arm… then looks away and throws up. It's still attached to him, that's the only good thing he can say about it.

"Not his infirmary. Not his doctors."

"McGee…"

Tim stares up at Jarvis, who is kneeling on the floor next to him, and now that they aren't attacking anymore he can't keep the terror out of his voice as he says, "He set them on me! You know he did. The MA on duty left so they could do this to me. None of them are even prisoners. They're not supposed to be in here. They were going to find me dead in a locked cell in an empty brig. Official report was probably supposed to say something like slipped and hit his head. Can't trust his doctors."

They've been at sea for eight hours. Still closer to the west coast than anything else, but closer isn't close.

"We're hours away from any other help, Tim."

"I'll live."

Jarvis stares at his arm. Short of it being blown off, he's never seen an arm this mangled. "Your arm might not."

"I'll take crippled over dead, any day."

Jarvis gets up and faces the XO (who, in addition to a team of medics and ten MAs, has been summoned by James), "Ship's equipped with a helicopter for fast trips, right."

"Yes, sir." Capt. Russle looks like he wants to kill people and pass out from embarrassment at this treatment of a guest on his ship.

"Get it ready. Alameda's the closest of our hospitals. I want McGee there in under two hours."
"Done, sir."

He crouches next to McGee again. "If the medics say you can move, you'll be on a helio as soon as you can be. They say you can't move, and I will stay with you the whole time, watch everything they do. Will you take pain meds?"

"Not from his doctors."

"From me?"

"What do you have?"

"Nothing strong enough. Pulled my back out four days ago. Got some Tylenol Three to keep me up and moving."

"Sure."

"James, can you get my meds? If we travel, you can have them."

"Okay." Jarvis moves to the other side, trying to avoid the puddle of vomit, as the Medic starts very gently trying to brace Tim's arm.

He's not even trying to be quiet about how much that hurts. "Look," The medic says, "I'm not one of them, and I'm sworn by the Hippocratic Oath to take care of you. Let me put you under, get your arm set and properly braced. You'll still be on the chopper in less than an hour, and you'll be a hell of a lot less likely to slip into shock and die on the way home."

Tim shakes his head, which makes him want to puke again.

"Jarvis and James will stay with you the whole time. This arm is broken in at least three places and dislocated on top of that. Men have literally died from having to travel with broken bones grating against each other. Let me get it set."

James looks at the MAs who are corralling the men who were attacking Tim. "Get them in another cell, at once."

"Don't let them stay together! They'll all have the same story if they get to stay together," Tim gets out, much preferring thinking about that than anything else.

"McGee, let them treat you. What do you think Gibbs and your wife will do to me if I let you get on a helicopter without medical attention and you die on the ride home?"

That gets through the massive waves of pain and panic.

"Okay. Stay with me."

"I will."

The medic looks relieved and gives him a shot of something, and then everything goes fuzzy, and then black.
It's after 01:00 Eastern Standard Time when Leon gets the call. He pulls himself awake, sits up, rubs his eyes, and then checks the name on his phone.

Jarvis.

"Vance."

He listens as Jarvis gets him up to date, nods a few times, and slips out of bed, quietly, hoping not to wake Lara.

"McGee's alive, right?"

"Yes. He's sedated. They're setting his arm, and wrist, and hand, and I think ribs, and then we're on the helio to Alameda. He didn't want his Dad's staff treating him."

Vance nods at that, too. He wouldn't want the guys who work for the guy who tried to kill him operating on him, either. "Okay, start at the beginning, Clayt."

"The test went off without a hitch. Everything was fine. John and Mane, his secretary, had left to go handle the aftermath of the Stennis 'firing' on the Borealis. Tim mentioned to me that he's had some issues with his father and that he had planted a false lead in their conversation. If the men on the Stennis did their job right, they'd trace the attack back to NCIS. But he said to John that if someone showed up to arrest him for espionage, we'd know they'd traced the attack back to him."

Leon gets to his desk and sits down, rubbing his eyes. "But the attack couldn't be traced back to him because he didn't attack from the ship."

"Right. After that test, he went to his quarters to monitor what the techs were doing, how they were responding, what they were doing to try and hunt him down. That's what he told me he was going to do. He also mentioned that he was nervous, doesn't get on with his dad, and was afraid that this would go badly.

"Mane shows up in the afternoon to do the inspection. He's talking, making hints that Tim may be a spy. I tell James that I want him sticking to McGee, and that if someone grabs him, he's to stay with him until he's safely locked in a cell."

"Should have stayed with him in the damn cell."

"I know that, now. Been a while since I ran an 'accident' in a prison and didn't expect them to try it here. This is a US Navy ship, for God's sake! We're supposed to be better than that."

Vance sighs. "Often looks different from my end."

"I know. Anyway, James stayed with him until he was locked in his own cell and Mane had left. Then he went to get me. I was already on my way there, so McGee was only alone for, three minutes, tops, but that was long enough for Mane to come back, unlock the other guys, let them into Tim's cell and go full out on him."

"What did they do to him?"

"You want the diagnosis?"
"Yeah." He hears Jarvis asking about it.

"His right arm's a mess. It was dislocated at the shoulder and wrist, broken in three places, three of his fingers are broken, and his hand is, too. As soon as he hits Alameda, they're gonna have a team of surgeons for that because… Assuming he wants any shot of really using it again, they're going to need specialists working on this. Broken nose, cracked ribs, and his left foot got stomped, bunch of little broken bones in there, too. He's black and blue from head to toe, but doesn't appear to have any damage to his internal organs. He'll live. His brain is still working. They didn't break his neck. His right arm's going to need a lot of PT, and he may never get full use of it again. But, they're saying he'll probably be up and walking again, with a crutch, in a few days."

"Okay, what's happening now?"

"We're in the infirmary. I'm about ten feet away from McGee, watching him get ready to travel. The four he went up against are in here, too, getting patched up. McGee mentioned he does MMA fighting, and that probably saved his life. Never would have guessed he could hurt four guys as badly as he did."

"He held his own?"

"The only one who doesn't have any broken bones is the guy he elbowed in the throat and took out of the fight in the first two seconds with that hit. He hit the rest of them as hard as they hit him."

"Good." Vance hopes they hurt, really, really hurt.

"Each of the attackers has his own MA keeping watch, and they aren't being allowed to speak to each other. Tim mentioned that. Once they get out of here, we'll get them squirreled away where they can't make up some story.

"The Agent Afloat isn't on this ship, she's on the Dewey, but she's getting here as fast as she can. The Admiral's been confined to quarters, and James is running the hunt to find Mane."

"Mane's vanished?"

"Yeah. Obviously, he's on the ship somewhere, but… Big ship."

"Okay. Was John in on it?"

"Not so anyone could ever prove."

"Is that a yes?"

"I'm sure the words, 'go attack my son' or any variation on that theme never crossed his lips. I'm sure no verbal hint of any sort along those lines ever occurred. I also know he was not dismayed about the attack when James told him about it, was not surprised about the attack, and did not ask James what condition Tim was in."

"I see." Leon nods. He knows that the stretch between I'd-approve-if-something-bad-were-to-happen and ordered-a-hit-on-my-son is going to be almost impossible to prove.

He thinks through who he has on the West Coast to send in. This is way more job than one Agent Afloat can handle. Then he thinks further west, because further west is the best option for this case, seeing that DiNozzo is out of the picture because he'll just go right in and kill everyone. "I'll give Agent Burley a call. His team will handle the investigation. How far out of Pearl are you?"
"Eleven days."

Not even remotely close then. "I'll have my guys there as fast as possible, and I'll call the Agent Afloat to let him..." No, Sarah Angua is the AA for the Stennis group. "Her know what's going on. If you can, get that ship back to San Fran."

"I can do that. I haven't called his family."

"I've got it. Let me know when you get moving toward Alameda. I'll have his family waiting for him there."

"Thanks, Leon."

Leon remembers the first time he met John McGee, first and only time. He remembers Gibbs saying that John didn't respect anything Tim was doing.

This is quite a few steps past 'didn't respect.'

He also remembers that John wasn't at Tim's wedding, nor was John ever mentioned by anyone talking to him. Granted, he's not part of the intimate family, but he is a cop, and he was paying attention, and at no point did he ever hear something like, "Gosh, it's a shame John couldn't be here for his only son's wedding."

And one other thought goes through his head. Gibbs killed the man who killed his girl. What on earth would he do with the man who hurt his son?

The frustrating part of this... One of them anyway, is that Vance is certain that Admiral McGee has made sure that a case cannot be made linking him to this attack.

He is absolutely certain that Admiral McGee never said that he wanted this to happen to Tim. He never suggested that such a thing would please him. He wouldn't have to. A secretary who's that good at his job knows his Boss inside and out; he'd never need the order. (Just like Vance's secretary wouldn't need instructions for something along those lines, either. The major difference is, Karen wouldn't kill a man for him.)

If Mane is the kind of man who would do that to McGee, then he's also the kind of man who will fall on a grenade to protect his Boss. He'll take the rap for this. He'll claim it was all on him.

Which means they'll have to break him, break him so bad he lies.

And that's going to be difficult. Maybe impossible.

But one way or another, Admiral McGee is going to pay for this. Because there was only one way Mane would have pulled this crap, and that's because he knew the Admiral would approve.

Vance is a good Boss; he's a very good administrator. He's good at finding talent and letting that talent do its job without him interfering.

The problem with that technique is that he's not as up to date with the seconds-thirds-and-fourths in command of his different teams as a micro manager would be.

He has a plan, he knows what he is going to do. What he doesn't know is who he needs to execute part of that plan. Normally, should a plan like this need to be executed, he'd call in McGee, and
obviously that won't work.

At two in the morning, on the road to the Navy Yard, he's about to make a call to Abby, and then decides against it. While it's true that she's the person most likely to know who Tim's most trusted second-in-command is, it's also likely that if he calls her in the middle of the night looking for a tech, she will flip out. So, he is not calling Abby, instead he's making a call to Dr. Palmer, the man most likely to know what he needs to know.

"Nrgh." Sound of Jimmy rubbing his eyes. "I'm awake, Palmer here. What's going on?"

"Doctor Palmer. I have a question for you."

"Director?" Jimmy sounds surprised to hear Vance on the phone.

"Yes. I know McGee relies heavily on Ngyn and Howard, which one of the two of them is better with a secret?"

"Sir?"

"Ngyn or Howard, Dr. Palmer?"

"Why aren't you asking Tim?"

"Because the Stennis is under radio silence right now, as part of making sure that McGee's test doesn't get out." That's a complete lie, but one he doesn't mind. He doesn't need handling Palmer on top of Gibbs right now.

Jimmy thinks for a moment. "He tells us about how good Howard is all the time. I don't know if she can keep a secret. Ngyn's one of his wunderkinds, too. He likes both of them, trusts both of them. Ngyn's more likely to be in the office right now. Oh, and she's really shy, so she probably wouldn't enjoy blabbing about something."

"Thank you, Dr. Palmer." He hangs up before Jimmy can get enough brain cells together to wonder why Vance would be asking that in the middle of the night.

He doesn't have Ngyn or Howard on his personal phone. He does have McGee's desk. So he tries that. After four rings, "Cybercrime, McGee's desk."

"Who am I speaking to?"

"Sturm. Who is this?"

"Director Vance. Is Howard or Ngyn down there?"

"Yes, sir." A quiet moment passes. "Ngyn here."

"Ngyn, this is Director Vance, can you meet me in the evidence lock up in twenty-five minutes?"

"Uh… Sure…"

"Good. See you then."

Vance remembers one other thing as he walks toward the Navy Yard, another early morning, one very much like this, when he walked in through the bullpen and found McGee working on David's
He remembers being told that McGee was making sure everything was nice and secure.

He remembers a few months later, when David walked into his office, handed him a bloody knife, and said, "For your wife."

She left, and he never asked. He didn't have to.

He knows that Gibbs' whole team handled the wet work.

He's sure McGee's the one who did the actual tracking.

And he knows, absolutely, that he owes McGee, all of them really, but right now he can repay one of them.

And he will.

The frustrating thing is that, even with Burley on it, and Vance knows Burley will hold this case and work it until he's out of case to work, is that John's secretary will fall on a grenade for him. And that the one thing they'll never know is if he was specifically ordered to make the call, or if John expressed displeasure and his secretary handled it, knowing, without being told, what his Boss wanted.

He thinks the play that Clayt is thinking of works like this. Once John no longer has the President's protection, Clayton will make a fuss, a private fuss, to John, one that will make it exceptionally clear that he will blast John's career and destroy his reputation if he does not step down immediately.

He doesn't know John McGee, but you don't get to be an Admiral unless you live and die for the Navy, so the embarrassment factor on having his name dragged through the mud, shaky case or not, should provide enough traction to get John out of his stars.

Leon thinks about that for a few minutes.

Then he thinks about what would have happened to McGee if Clayton hadn't gotten suspicious and decided to keep eyes on him.

Resigning is not good enough. It's a start. It has to happen because being forced to resign will, if John McGee is even half of the man he thinks he is, hurt like an amputation. But it's not nearly enough.

And he's got an idea of where enough begins.

Vance knows, on an intellectual level, that McGee'd revoked the dress code. But it'd been a while since he's been down in Cybercrime, so he was rather surprised to see this… girl… woman… he looks closer, she's a real adult, just small and dressing young, in jeans, a t-shirt, and oversized Converse All-Stars standing in front of the evidence lock up looking nervous.

"Director!"

He walks through the lock up, keying in his numbers, and goes to the back where the weapons they have confiscated are kept until they are destroyed. It takes him a moment, but he finds what he is looking for.

HTR 2000. Sniper rifle. Wanna-be Marine sniper who decided to show the world what he could do.
Case pre-dates Vance as Director. Scheduled for destruction in three weeks. The last appeal had been exhausted in March. This gun is done.

For what he needs, it'll do.

"Agent Ngyn, I want everything regarding this gun destroyed. All records of ballistics, every case it was involved in, the fact that this gun ever existed needs to vanish."

"Sir?"

"Everything. Dr. Palmer tells me McGee thinks highly of your skills. I need this gun to vanish. I need the fact that you and I met down here, that I'm taking this gun out of here, all of it needs to evaporate. Can you do this?"

She's staring at him, very wide-eyed. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Up you go to my office. Use my computer." He quickly writes down his passwords. "Take care of it."

"Yes, sir. Sir?"

"Ngyn?"

"Why is Doctor Palmer recommending me on McGee's behalf? McGee's okay, right?"

"Yes, Ngyn." He smiles kindly. "He's fine. You know 'he's at a conference'?"

"Yes?"

"He's war gaming. Top secret. Right now, he and everyone on his ship is locked down for radio silence."

"Oh."

"Got an undercover op that just went hot and needs a clean gun, normally he does things like that, so I had to find out who he'd send in if he couldn't do it for me himself, and I figured that if anyone would know, it's Palmer."

"Huh. Okay. I'll get on it."

"Thank you."

It's slightly before 03:00 eastern time when Vance, with a rifle, opens Gibbs' door.

He almost breaks his nose when the door doesn't actually open as he steps forward.

So he knocks, wondering when on earth Gibbs got a lock and why.

Less than a minute later the dog, who's name he couldn't remember, had bounded down the steps and is barking vigorously at him. Suddenly the lock makes a lot of sense. He's awfully glad he didn't just walk into that. Three minutes later a sleepy, disheveled, and upside down looking Jethro ambles down the steps in a pair of shorts and Marines T-shirt.

Barking.
Gibbs sits up, rubbing his eyes. One shift from working Gibbs to retired Gibbs is that he actually sleeps when he sleeps now. Before some little part of his mind was always a few degrees awake, ready to leap into action.

He hears another knock on his door. Great.

Abbi rolls over, looking at him, little bit of curious in her eyes. He waves it off. "Go back to sleep. Probably Fornell. He crashes here when he's got a case he doesn't want to take home."

She nods, looking mostly asleep too, and he gets up slowly, heads to his dresser, finds some shorts and a t-shirt and, still pulling the shirt over his head, wanders down the steps.

"Mona, hush up."

One last bark, and she bounds up the steps to him, thumping on down with him as he goes to the door.

Through the leaded glass in his door, he can't see who's there, but with each step, he's feeling a little more awake, and as sleep clears from his mind, that little voice that's always been able to sense danger starts to scream.

For a second, he can't place it, there's just a sense of blind panic.

Then he opens the door and sees Leon standing there, holding a rifle case.

Gibbs feels his knees go week. One second he's standing up, the next he's on the ground. Leon kneeling next to him, case forgotten for a second. It takes a good thirty seconds before he can pull his voice together enough to ask, "When did it happen?"

"Oh." And Vance, who is fully in revenge and justice mode, snaps out of that, realizing how bad this would look to Jethro. "No. No. Jethro. No. He's alive. Tim'll be fine, eventually."

From there, everything goes cold. He stands up slowly, taking the rifle case into his living room. "What happened?"

Vance explains, and then he explains some more, and then he pats the case. "And if we can't get a case against him, there's this."

Gibbs nods slowly, and he opens the case, looks at the contents, nods, and heads up the stairs.

While he does that, Vance calls Karen. She's less than thrilled to be woken up at 03:45 with a request to get the Lear Jet up and running and ready to go to Alameda, but she doesn't ask questions. She knows if he's asking for the fastest transport the Navy has for civilians in the middle of the night, it's important.

"When will you be back in the office?"

"Tomorrow, I hope."

He calls Lara, telling her what's going on, why he's not in bed, why he's not going to be home for a while, hopefully tonight, but probably late. She understands.

By the time he's done, Gibbs is down, he's got a duffle packed. It's not very full. He stuffs the rifle case into it, too. Now it's full. He takes a moment and gets a second bag packed, stuffing two bowls, dog food, and some rawhide chews into it.
"Abby next, right?" Leon asks.

Gibbs nods. Then Palmers', someone has to take Kelly and Mona in.

This wasn't supposed to happen. That was the whole point of Cybercrime! Gibbs and Vance weren't supposed to be in her home at 04:23 with bad news. He could have stayed a cop if this…

She's barely awake, pregnancy tired clinging to her, trying to drag her back to warm dreams where everything is fine, battling the surge of adrenaline that goes with waking up, finding Gibbs in her room, Vance hovering at the door to her bedroom, looking ready to kill someone.

She's crying, sobbing, before she can even put together what's going on, really.

But she knows, in her gut, she feels it. They wouldn't be here if everything was all right.

Gibbs has got his arms around her, rocking her, gently, saying… something, but she can't get the words, she's too trapped in tired/pain/hormones/terror bawling.

"Abbs… Come on baby, pull out of it. Abby… he's alive." Gibbs has said that about three times now, but it's not breaking through the immediate horror of him at her door in the middle of the night, Leon behind him. "Come on, Abbs, you've got to pull it together, hear what I'm saying, baby, he's alive. He's alive, and we've got a jet waiting for us so we can get to him. We've got to get Kelly all packed up and over to Jimmy and Breena so we can get to him. Come on…"

Eventually 'he's alive' filters through. It'd be almost comical the way she jerks when it finally hits, but this is real, and someone you care about's abject, soul-deep horror isn't funny.

She sniffs, wipes her nose. "Alive?"

"Yeah, Abbs, he's alive. He's hurt. But he's alive. And we've got to get to him."

She nods and begins to get up out of bed, grabbing her robe. "I'll get dressed. Can you…" her voice is rough, and it cracks, but she keeps talking, "get a bag packed for Kelly."

"Yeah. Want me to call Breena, too, let her know she's got some visitors coming soon?"

"Yeah. That's… Yeah. He's alive?" There's desperate terror in her voice, and Gibbs suddenly gets that the last time someone showed up in the middle of the night at her home and told her someone was alive but hurt, it was her parents, and her mom was already dead, and her father only had hours left.

Gibbs nods, holding her tight, kissing her forehead. "He's alive. Vance says that as of 04:10 he was stable to travel and they were med-evacing him to Alameda."

"How badly hurt?"

"Vance has more details than I do. Get dressed, get packed, stuff for Tim, pajamas and clean clothes, and he can fill you in when we go to Jimmy and Breena's."

That gets her moving. Every minute talking is a minute they aren't getting closer to Tim.

The second time a phone rings in the middle of the night, Jimmy's awake, and scared. It's Breena's phone, but she's still pretty groggy, so he grabs it.
"No bullshit this time, what happened?"

Gibbs wasn't expecting that, but he answers, "Tim's hurt, we're going to California, can Mona and Kelly stay with you? Don't know how long it'll be."

"Hurt? Hurt how?"

"John had his men try to beat him to death."

Jimmy goes cold at that. "Fuck. Okay, no more talking to me. I'll pick up the details when we're on the plane. Get the girls here as fast as you can."

"Thanks Jimmy. Vance has more details than I do, he'll call when we're in the air."

"Okay." He hangs up.

"Was that my phone?" Breena blinks a few times and sees that Jimmy's so pissed he's shaking. "What happened?"

He's jumped up and is packing a bag. "Can you take a few days on your own with an extra kid and Mona?"

"Jimmy, you're scaring me."

"Tim got on that fucking ship, and his dad tried to have him killed. All I know right now is that he's alive and Gibbs and Abby and Vance are heading to California, and if you can handle the kids, I'm going with them."

"Okay. Mona and Kelly are coming here?"

"Yes."

"I will handle it. Ducky and Penny'll help."

"Yeah, they will."

Breena gets up, and wraps Jimmy in a hug. "Okay, you get a shower, and eat. You've just packed nine pairs of socks, two pairs of pants, two left shoes, no shirts, and no underwear. I'll get you set to go. You get calmed down because Abby's going to need calm people around her, got it?"

Jimmy swallows, takes a very deep breath, lets it out, shakily, and nods. "I've got it."

She kisses him, holding onto him, tight.

"I don't even know how hurt he is." Jimmy's somewhere between rage and about to cry. "It's got to be bad because he's not talking to us, though."

She nods, holding him close, cradling the back of his head, kissing him. "We'll find out, and you'll get there, and you'll be his doctor, making sure they treat him right and he comes home to us."

"Yeah." He wipes his eyes, takes another deep breath, and heads for the shower.

It's a quiet handover. Kelly sleeps through the whole thing, and no one is surprised to see Jimmy's up, packed, and ready to go. Mona's confused because she doesn't see Molly, and visits to this house always involve Molly, so there's some barking, but Breena swings into Bad Ass Mommy Mode
(which is identical to Alpha Bitch mode) and has her calmed down and toeing the line in a matter of seconds.

She kisses and hugs Jimmy and Abby as they head off. "You bring our boy back."

They both nod, ready to go.

"I'll call Ducky and Tony when it's really morning. Let me know how he is as soon as you do."

More nodding, more hugs, more kisses, and they go.

Tim wakes in a panic, everything hurts, there's this weird whupping noise, and he has no idea where he is, how he got there, or why. On top of that, he finds he can't move.

Fortunately, before he gets the chance to even start yelling a face hovers into view, one he doesn't know.

"He's awake, sir."

Jarvis comes into view.

"You didn't want to stay on your dad's ship, so as soon as you were stable enough to move they got you on a medevac flight. We're en route to Alameda."

"Okay." That helps with some of the panic, and the whupping noise suddenly makes sense, he's got to be on a chopper.

The first face, probably some sort of medic comes back into view. "Are you in pain?"

"What the fuck do you think? I'm enjoying this?" Tim's eyes go wide as that comes out. He'd been thinking it, but apparently the pain meds he's already on have shot the filter between his brain and mouth to shit.

"Scale of one to ten, how bad is it?"

"Eight? I'm conscious, and I don't want to be."

"Okay. More pain medication coming up."

He can half-see out of his peripheral vision someone else messing with his IV. Then the medic comes back into view. "Do you know why you're here?"

"Sort of." He remembers fighting. He hurts all over, so he's got to be hurt bad. But he doesn't know how hurt he is.

Seems like Jarvis got that. "You remember the fight?"

"Images. Details are fuzzy."

"Do you remember after?"

"Not really." The image of his arm sprang to mind. "Oh God…" Fortunately the Medic is with it enough to figure out what that cue meant and gets the backboard he's strapped to tipped to the side, before he started to retch. No food in his system so it's just dry heaves. "My arm!" Tim manages to gasp when he stops retching. He remembers how it looked when the fight was over, but he's
strapped down so he can't see it now, and he can't feel it, either.

"All bandaged up for travel. There's a team of orthopedic surgeons who are waiting for you in Alameda. The *Stennis* has a combat ready medical suite, and they say you should get full use of it back when it's healed up," Jarvis says.

"Can't feel it." There's a lot of panic in his voice as he says, "Everything hurts, but I can't feel my arm."

"You're on pain medication for your whole body, and a nerve block on your arm. You can't feel or move it." The Medic replies. That calms Tim down, he can't see his arm, but apparently it's still attached to him. "They assessed you in the infirmary. You have a concussion, a broken nose, chipped tooth, broken arm, and broken foot."

He'd nod if he could, but he can't. "Neck damage?"

"No, but we're not taking any chances for the trip. Your neck is braced and you're on a backboard. Once you get out of surgery you'll be able to move you head and neck again."

"Okay."

The Medic says a few other things, but by that point the pain medication is kicking back in again, and Tim checks out.

A Lear jet is the fastest transport NCIS has to offer for four people traveling together. There are lots of nifty goodies on board, the flight crew is beyond obsequious. On any other occasion, this would be a lovely trip.

But it's not, because anything other than Star-Trek style transporters is too damn slow. (And honestly, even if they could be beamed to California, it'd still be too slow.)

Gibbs is sitting next to Abby, keeping an arm around her. Right now she's praying, and from the looks of it, Gibbs is, too.

Jimmy's got Tim's medical records up on his computer. The rough version they filled out aboard the *Stennis*. He finishes reading, carefully shuts his computer, stands up, and kicks his seat, hard, three times.

Gibbs, Abby, and Vance stare at him as he does it. When he gets done he rubs his eyes, then stalks over to the bar, finds the strongest alcohol they've got (Vodka) pours three shots of it, and hands one to Gibbs, one to Vance, and shoots his back.

He picks up his computer, sits next to Abby, and says, "I'd have poured one for you, but I figured you wouldn't want it." She nods, face a mask of fear. Vance looks curious about that, but no one says anything, so he puts two and two together and decides Abby's pregnant again.

Jimmy opens his computer and begins to go over the details with them.

They're racing the sunrise, and winning. Perpetual dark of near dawn envelops the jet as it continues westward.

It's a bit after 06:00, by Vance's watch (Eastern time, he's not sure what local time is, or for that matter where they are) when they get confirmation that Tim's in Alameda, in surgery, and that they're
in the process of putting his arm back together.

He gets up and asks the pilot how far out they are, and he says they’re about an hour from starting the descent.

His mouth tastes really bad. That's the first thing that hits Tim as he starts to inch toward awake. His mouth tastes bad and is really, excruciatingly, dry.

He wants a drink.

A lot of drinks.

Hurting. That comes up next. Not as bad as last time, but everything, including his right arm, aches. Must be out of surgery.

There's a weird tugging sensation on his hair, and that finally gets him to open his eyes.

"Oh, you're awake. Hi. I'm Amelia Clark, one of the post-op nurses," says a woman in scrubs who's hovering over him.

"Water."

"Not yet. You'll just throw it up. I can give you a damp sponge to suck on."

"Okay." That weird sensation is in his hair, and he hears clicking. Tim gingerly turns his head. Oh. I'm being processed.

Jarvis is standing in the corner of the room. There are two other people, in scrubs, so nurses maybe. One of them is taking pictures of him. He still can't see most of himself, but the photographer is getting shots of his left foot and leg, which are awfully black and blue.

He thinks the medic on the trip said something about a broken foot. "Is that the broken foot?"

"Yes." The nurse who is photographing him replies. "Amelia has a walking cast we're going to get you set for in a moment. Just have to get the shots."

He nods, and then feels more tugging on his hair. "There's DNA from three of four of them on my clothing. Have you scraped my nails?"

"Yes." The nurse who is combing through his hair answers.

"Are they in custody?" Tim asks Jarvis.

"Everyone but Mane. The four you were fighting are all being kept apart from each other."

"Good."

"Vance is calling in Agent Burley to handle the case. Do you know him?"

Tim's a bit surprised and dismayed that it's not Tony handling the case, but he knows Stan, he'll do a good job.

"Yeah, I do. He's a good guy. Gibbs' first Probie."

Jarvis doesn't seem to know what that means, and Tim isn't feeling like explaining.
The nurse who is combing out his hair glances to Jarvis, and then says quietly, "Do you need a rape kit?"

"No." He wonders exactly how badly thrashed he looks if she'd ask that, and then it hits him that his leg is bare, he tries to touch his leg, see if he's got his shorts on, but comes to the conclusion that's not going to happen. His right arm isn't going anywhere, and the IV is in his left. He can't tell, but he's guessing he's naked under the sheets, and may have come in that way.

The photographer nurse steps to the side, lifting the blanket off of his other leg, taking photos. Apparently that leg's all bruised up, but nothing's broken. Amelia, the only one he's got a name for, carefully eases a cast under his right foot and ankle and begins to strap him into it.

"You'll get written instructions, too, but you can get this wet and walk on it. In six weeks, when you're home, they'll re-xray make sure everything is properly healed, and if it is, you'll be out of this." She then tucks his leg under the blanket as the photographer finishes with his leg.

He knows what comes next, but Amelia's glancing at Jarvis, silently asking if he wants Jarvis out of the room. "He can stay. Just take the blanket off and do them all at once, okay?"

The photographer strips him down, and begins shooting. He's bruised all over, and it does look like at least one of them got him in the balls. (Good thing there's no food in his stomach, just seeing the swelling and bruising is making him nauseous again.) That might also explain part of why the nurse wondered if he needed a rape kit.

(It's also making him wonder how much pain medication he's on. Everything right now aches, but… Well, he's taken a shot to the balls before, a much less sever one, and that hurt about ten times more than he does now.)

He can't see much of his chest, it's wrapped in tight bandages. But Amelia notices him looking. "Three cracked ribs. They were already wrapped when you got here, and we're not unwrapping you. Open your mouth."

She pops something that looks like a lollipop in his mouth. It's wet, which is good, and god-awful sour. He'd spit it out if it wasn't for the fact that his mouth is so damn dry.

She nods, apparently that's a common reaction to whatever this thing is.

"Keeps you from trying to swallow the liquid. Looks like Barb is done with the photos." She begins to pull the blanket back over him.

"Back, gotta get my back."

"Can't. Your arm is in traction for the next two days."

*Right, the arm.* He finally turns his head to look at it and… He can't really see it. There's this wodge of bandages, and some sort of pulley system attached to the tips of his fingers, and a black vinyl thing that looks a bit like his walking cast for his leg, and some other soft foam thing keeping his arm elevated, and another strap across his chest so that it can't flop around and…

"Am I ever going to move it again?"

The nurse waves that away. "Of course. Hon, you're in a trauma ward for the US Navy. Please, that's barely a flesh wound by our standards. Last week we put an arm that was clean torn off back on a Sargent. You're gonna be fine."
That's reassuring.

"We're pretty much all done here. How about you get a nap, and when you wake up, your family'll be here."

That also takes him by surprise, somehow the idea that they'd be on the way didn't hit him.

"Vance tells me they landed a few minutes ago. Still have an hour's drive to get here, but they'll be here soon," Jarvis say.

Tim nods slightly, closes his eyes, and finds that falling asleep, even aching from head to toes, isn't that tricky when you've got this much pain medication in your system.

It's a long hallway. A really long hallway. They come in from one end and find Jarvis, he leads them toward Tim, at the other end.

Solid door, they can't see in, and it's closed, so they don't know what's on the other side.

Abby hugs Gibbs and Jimmy, and then says, "I'll... I need to... Alone."

"Okay. We'll wait, right out here," Jimmy says. Gibbs just gives her another hug.

Her first thought upon entering the room, stupid, silly thought, she sat next to Jimmy as he read the different files, she knew, intellectually, how bad he was, but it didn't stop her from almost turning right around, walking out and saying, "This is the wrong room. That's not Tim."

His face is so battered and swollen and bruised, she couldn't have identified him by looking at it.

They cut his shirt off and didn't put a gown over him, so she can see the tattoo on his delt, marred, swollen, black ink merging into black, red, blue, purple bruises, and knows it has to be him.

She makes herself look, makes herself see, analyze, and plan, because she cannot just throw herself on the bed, weeping, wrapping around him.

His face is black, some spots are purple or green, one tiny patch along his right ear is still skin-colored. There's a brace on his nose. His lips are split, swollen, bruised.

There are choke marks on his throat. His collarbones are black and blue, both shoulders covered in greenish-yellow-purple. Upper chest doesn't look too bad, comparatively. Little patches of skin colored skin. Middle and lower chest are wrapped up tight in some sort of bandage.

His left hand is black-purple-green, knuckles bandaged. Left elbow in similar shape. There's an IV leading to the back of his left hand, which she's praying is sending powerful pain medication into him.

His right hand and wrist are in traction, his right shoulder is propped up, and strapped to the bed to keep it immobile. There's some sort of black vinyl thing, a cast of some sort, covering from his armpit to mid-forearm, and another device cradling his wrist. Each finger is braced, and wrapped in bandages, with a web of lines pulling on his hand, keeping the tension on it.

She can feel the tears pouring down her face. She can't hold him. She can't lie down next to him, rest her head on his chest and just soak up him being alive. She's crying, trying to be quiet, because she doesn't want to wake him up, though she's fairly sure they drugged him enough that he won't wake
for anything short of the Apocalypse.

Abby spends a few minutes sitting there, next to him, fingers on his left wrist, stroking very gently over unbruised skin. For a moment she wonders where the cuff went. He's got his wedding ring, but beyond that appears to be naked under the blankets.

Her fingers find his pulse, feeling it, strong and steady. She spends a few moments thanking God that he's still alive.

There's another spot on his left shoulder, about the size of her palm. She lays a kiss to that little patch of un-hurt Tim, about to get up and let Jimmy and Gibbs in, and hears, voice very rough, "I must look like complete shit if you won't kiss my lips."

She snaps up, hand reaching to touch his cheek and then pulling back.

He sees her face, no makeup, red and puffy from tears. Sees her almost touch, but not quite.

She swallows hard. "I didn't think you'd wake up."

"Not sure if I am. I'm half-sure this is a dream."

She kisses his leg again. "I'm here. Jimmy and Gibbs and Vance are outside. Once you can travel, we're going to take you home."

"Today?"

She shakes her head. "No."

"Tomorrow?"

"No."

"What's the day after that?"

"Monday. Maybe. We just got here, haven't gotten to talk to anyone, yet. Whenever they can unhook your arm, then you get to go home."

"Okay. Why are you kissing my shoulder?"

She wipes away her tears and tries to smile. "No bruises. I couldn't stand to do anything that might hurt you more."

His tongue slips over his lip, mapping the splits and the puffy, swollen flesh around them. She leans in and kisses the tip of his tongue.

"Do you have a mirror?"

She does but she says, "No," anyway. He doesn't need to see his face today.

He knows that she has a compact that lives in her purse and has a mirror on it, so she's lying to him. "Is it really that bad?"

She nods, more tears in her eyes.

"Okay. I don't need to see."
"Not until the swelling goes down some."

"Okay."

She kisses that bit of arm again. "I love you, Tim. Love you so much."

"Even ugly?" He tries to smile and that hurts, too, he can feel the skin of his lip separating again, so he stops.

"Tim!" She sniffs.

"I told you I'd fight to the last breath to come home to you."

"You did." Another sniff. "I love you so much, so much. Gibbs and Vance came at four in the morning and…" She's crying again.

"I'm alive, baby." His left arm seems free, so he very tentatively reaches up to stroke her face. That hurts bad. He doesn't know what's wrong with that arm, but it's not happy. However, her cheek in his palm, lips kissing him matters more than the hurt. He tries a very small smile. "I'm alive."

"I know. I do. Now." She wipes her eyes again. "Jimmy and Gibbs are going to want to see you. You want them to come in?"

"Little bit, feeling tired again."

"Okay, little bit, then you sleep some more."

They're waiting right outside the door, but by the time Gibbs and Jimmy get into Tim's room, he's asleep again.

Gibbs looks at Tim, lying there, just… broken.

He very gently ruffles his hair, kisses the top of his head, sees Tim wince in his sleep, and pulls his hand back.

He looks over at Abby, realizes that the little bit of his shoulder that she's touching has to be the only part that's not hurt and swallows hard, staring at the ceiling. He blinks once, twice, and once more, forcing himself under control. He can't break down, not in front of Abby, not until he's on his own.

So, if he can't fall into a mess, he can get mad.

He kisses the top of Abby's head, squeezes her shoulders, and heads into the hallway, where Vance is, again.

Vance didn't go in. This is a quiet, intimate, family moment, and he's not going to crash it. At the same time, though, he did look in and felt every ounce of blood in his body boil as he looks at McGee.

Vance is a cop. He's been at NCIS thirty-five years. He has seen literally thousands of dead people, and a whole lot of them looked way better than Tim McGee does right now.

Gibbs comes out a few seconds later. "I want on that ship."

"No."
He's giving Leon the help me or get out of my way look. "Leon."

"No. Agent Burley is heading there, with his team. The ship is heading back to port, and when they land, you can talk to him, but you will not get within sight of Admiral McGee. We will handle this properly until we cannot handle it properly anymore." There's so much ice in Vance's voice that it gets through to Jethro. He actually listens.

"Jethro, what do you know about John McGee?"

There are a lot of things he could say, but most of them are private, for Tim and the family and that's it, so he says, "He's the man who didn't call to see if his son was alive or dead after the Deering bombing."

Vance nods. He hadn't known that, but isn't surprised.

"Here's what I know about you: if I let you on that ship, you'll kill him. Here's what I know about me: Dying by your hands will not be nearly as slow or painful as what I want to happen to him will be. Here's what I know about him: He loves his rank, his ship, and his job, more than anything on earth, so we will rob him of it. Hell is whatever hurts worst, Jethro, and we will make him hurt. That rifle I gave you, use it, after he's been stripped of his rank and dishonorably discharged."

And Gibbs has to admit, that's something he can wait for.
"Burley." Stan answers.

"What do you have, Stan?"

"Gibbs?" Burley's confused. This whole thing has been confusing. He got a call just as it was quitting time, from the Director of NCIS, no less, demanding he get his team on a ship that was way the hell out of his jurisdiction, for something, Vance didn't say what, just that the Lt. James, (whoever the hell that is) and the Agent Afloat Sarah Angua would get him up to date as soon as he got there. And now, from nowhere, Gibbs is calling for an update.

Asking for an update before he's even begun the case. This feels like morphing back in time.

"Yeah. What'd'ya have?" He's sounding impatient, and ready to start biting the heads off of things.

"Nothing, I'm still in the air. Gibbs, I haven't even been briefed on what I'm investigating yet. I just know I was told to get my team to the Stennis ASAP and the Agent Afloat would get me up to speed. I'm on a cargo plane, still an hour out."

Gibbs bites his lip. "You remember my retirement party?"

"Lot of it's pretty hazy. After the second bottle, things started to go sideways. Can't party like I used to."

"Not that one. The one at the diner that everyone went to."

The one that wasn't really a party. "Oh. Yeah. Okay. Enough."

"Tall, thin guy, married to Abby, little baby girl, one of my kids."

"Yeah. Tim, right? Think I've worked with him once, twice maybe?"

"Right. That's his dad's ship." He says the next bit voice low, trying to not broadcast this all over the hospital, but his voice is very hot, and Leon notices, watches, as he says, "Son of a bitch abused him as a kid, but he got an assignment on that ship, and he didn't say anything because he's a pro and he'll do his job wherever that job takes him, so he went and that..." there aren't words foul enough for McGee, "thing tried to have him killed while he was on the ship."

"Holy fuck! Tried?"

"He's alive. I'm in the hospital with him, and Abby, his pregnant wife."

"Okay. Got it."

Vance has taken three steps closer to Jethro and motions for the phone, he hands it over.

"Agent Burley, this is Director Vance."

"Director." Burley's confused, and then he's impressed. He was impressed that whatever this was the Director was handling it. He's more impressed now. The Director of NCIS is in the hospital with McGee, which means McGee is connected. Which blows Burley's mind, because the last time he saw McGee at work the only real impression he had was of a somewhat timid guy doing his job quietly.
"Agent Burley, I know you have a reputation for the highest standards of professionalism. No matter how painful this case is and how personally satisfying it would be to absolutely destroy anyone even remotely related to it, you are to do your job, as a professional. You are an officer of the law and you will act like one."

"Yes, sir."

"The Admiral, Oh God, Tim's father is an Admiral? This is going to be a mess. "is a well-respected member of the Navy. He is on the President's Drone Task Force. He is on good terms with the Former Secretary of State, who is, as you know, currently running for President. So this investigation will be letter perfect, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You will investigate as long, and as hard, and as deeply as you need to. If anyone tries to pull rank on you, shoot them down. If you do not receive the fullest cooperation on every single aspect of this case feel free to charge everyone with obstruction of justice. The Secretary of the Navy has your back on this, but you will also follow all the rules, fill out all the forms, dot all the is, cross all the ts, and make sure that when this goes to trial that no one can claim any sort of partiality was involved."

"Yes, sir."

Vance hands the phone back to Gibbs. Gibbs doesn't have anything to add to that.

Apparently Burley can tell the difference between them by the quality of the silence on the other side of the phone. "I'll give you a call once I get on board and start figuring out what's going on."

"Thanks, Stan."

Leon's staring at Gibbs, and Gibbs knows why.

"Some of us know, the outside world doesn't. Hell, even DiNozzo doesn't have the whole story. It's need to know, and you didn't."

"He should have—" Gibbs cuts Vance off as Leon remembers that Tim did suggest a different ship.

"Mentioned it? Asked for a different ship because his dad was on it? Open this up for everyone to see? You know how private he is. Abby didn't know about it until last year."

"God." Vance shakes his head.

"He hates ships, gets seasick something fierce, his Dad was a nightmare before this, but the job was on that ship so he went on that ship to do the job. Abby didn't want him to go. I didn't want him to go. Lots of other ships in the Navy. He could run the attack from anywhere, but…"

Jimmy steps out of Tim's room. Gibbs looks at him, as if he's got some answers. "Still asleep. Been reading his medical records, looks like they're doing a good job. Supposedly there's an orthopedic specialist around here somewhere. The guy who took care of his arm. I'm going to hunt him down and talk to him."

Gibbs and Vance nod at that.

Jimmy takes a detour on the way to finding the surgeon. He heads for the bathroom, locks the door,
sits down, and lets himself break down.

Couldn't the shit with Tony have been enough? Did this really have to run right on its heels?

He's sobbing as quietly as he can, pouring out this, and well, everything. Right now he wants Breena so badly, needs to bury his face against her neck and just let go, but she's coralling the crew back home.

He knew, as he was reading the medical records, that he wasn't going to be able to handle this, not the way he needs to handle it. He was only in there for ten minutes, and was having a hell of a time staying calm.

He's a doctor, emotions shut down, logic, calm, healing, that's supposed to take over.

And it's not. *That's why you don't treat your family.*

He wipes his eyes, which isn't useful, he's still crying. He wants to rage. He wants to break people. Wants to break everyone who laid a hand on Tim. And he can't.

He hears a soft knock. "Occupied," Jimmy chokes out.

"It's me." Gibbs' voice.

He gets up slowly, wiping his eyes, and takes the two steps to the door, opening it.

"Trying to not lose it in front of Abby." His voice cracks on that.

Gibbs nods, shutting the door and locking it behind him. "You lasted longer in there than I could."

Gibbs wraps him in a hug, and Jimmy sobs more.

After a minute, he steps back. Taking a deep, shuddering breath. "I heard what Vance said to you."

Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

"About the rifle. And come on, I know what your go bag looks like. You don't need a duffle for however long we're going to be here. So, I know what's in there. And I know you can't take the shot."

Gibbs is looking stunned and angry at that.

"And you can't get close enough to him for a knife."

Gibbs' eyes narrow. "Why can't I take the shot?"

"Because you're a fucking sniper Jethro! People who hurt your family end up dead by a sniper's shot, and unless at least fifty people can place where the hell you are when the Admiral bites it, you're going to jail for the rest of your life. And it's basically the same goddamned reason why Ziva and Tony can't take the shot, either." Jimmy swallows hard. "First time Tim took me shooting, I said to him, 'It's like yoga with explosions. Relax, find your center, slow down, focus, target, gently squeeze.' He said not to let you know that, because you'd turn me into a sniper." Jimmy's staring at Gibbs, eyes red and puffy, very determined.

"It's a patience and focus skill, right?"

Gibbs is staring at Jimmy, really seeing him, thinking. "Yeah, it is. Some math, too. Some mechanics. Mostly it's waiting until it's time to pull the trigger, not rushing."
"And by this point, my vision's not much worse than yours is. Probably better when I've got my
glasses on than yours is. Just you and me. The rest of them don't need to know. Take an hour or so to
practice every time when we're supposed to be working on the house. Got lots of room out there.
Take Shannon out, teach me how to sail, too, shoot down the water, no one to see, no risk of hitting
anyone."

Gibbs shrugs. "You won't pick it up fast."

"It's a patience skill. It doesn't have to happen overnight. One day, something'll happen to John. And
Leon'll hand it over to whoever, Metro, so that he can claim everything is above board, no cover up.
Every cop'll show up at your door, asking lots of questions, but you'll have a solid alibi, in public,
probably with Penny. They'll poke around Tony and Ziva, hell, maybe even Ducky, he's got a
military background. But they aren't going to ask about me, not deep. They'll run a quick check, and
I'll have cover for it, and that'll be that. Never solved."

Gibbs licks his lips. "We telling Tim?"

"Were you planning on telling him what you were going to do?"

"No, but he'd know."

"Permission. We're asking permission and leaving it there. He gets to decide what happens to John.
But if he says yes, one day, something is going to happen, and you're going to be with Penny when
it happens, so she won't think you killed him, so she'll be able to… pretend or whatever."

Gibbs nods. "You and Tim have just done handguns, right?"

Jimmy nods, too.

"It's different than a handgun."

"I'd imagine." Jimmy heads to the sink and begins to wash off his face, hoping cool water will help
with the swelling.

"Say the words, Jimmy."

He looks at Gibbs in the mirror, unsure of what Gibbs is telling him to do. "Not teaching you how to
do this if you can't even say the word."

"Show me how to take the shot, and I will kill John McGee with it."

"Okay." Jimmy straightens up, grabs a paper towel, dries his face off, and then turns to Gibbs. "Your
turn."

"If you'll kill John McGee, I'll teach you how to take the shot."

"Um… No." Jimmy steps closer and hugs Gibbs. "Your turn to let it out. We need to be her rock to
cry on, doesn't mean we don't get to cry, too."

For a second Gibbs stands there, stiff, uncomfortable, but Jimmy is holding him, gently rubbing the
back of his head, and from the feel of it, isn't letting go anytime soon.

"You can't spend the whole time we're here hiding in the hall or raging about this. Which means you
need to do something with it. We're not killing anyone today, so let go. I've got you."

And eventually, after a few more breaths, Jimmy feels Gibbs start to shake.
It takes another half hour or so for Jimmy to get himself (and Gibbs) entirely back together, but he does, and he gets his phone out, noticing it's only a bit past eight thirty at home, and texts Breena.

*We're here, got him taken care of. Who's at home?*

A minute later he gets. *Everyone but Sarah and Glenn. Decided to hold off on calling them until we know how he is. How is he?*

*Bad. Alive and he'll heal, but it's bad. Going to talk to his surgeon next, find out exactly how bad his arm is.*

*How bad does it look?*

Jimmy rubs his eyes. *Did Ducky bring his computer?*

*Yeah.*

*Tell him to log onto the Federal Medical Records database and use my ID. He used to specialize in hands surgery, ask him to give it a good going over.*

Breena knows when he doesn't want to answer a question. *Jimmy, how bad is it?*

*Bad enough I'm crying, too.*

*Shit. Any idea when he'll be able to come home?*

*No. Not today. Not tomorrow. Maybe Monday, Tuesday is more likely. Got to get his arm out of traction before he can move.*

*Oh God. Ducky just got logged in.*

*Go, read. Gibbs and I are going to talk to the surgeon. I'll text back when I know more.*

*Okay.*

Breena waited until 7:00 to give everyone a call. And by everyone, she meant Ziva, who will have no problem corralling the rest of the crew and getting them over to her place, because honestly, getting three kids under the age of 2½ and a dog all fed breakfast at once while on the phone is just too damn much.

She talks to Ziva briefly, explains that everyone needs to be at her house as soon as they can, and Ziva, who is always rock solid in a crisis asks just enough questions to know that no one is dead, and who qualifies as everyone, and then takes over.

Tony is stalking around Breena's house like a caged tiger. A deeply unhappy caged tiger. Ziva's still, but no less agitated. Ducky's getting his computer set up and logged onto the Palmers' Wi-Fi so they've got ready communications.

And then…

And then there's nothing to do but wait.

And waiting is not Tony's strong suit.
"Why are we not on that jet?"

Breena shrugs. She assumes that there's a reason why Vance didn't call them to run the case, but off the top of her head, she doesn't know what it is.

"We should be on that jet, and then on that ship, and then making every single other person on that ship sing. We should be hanging John up by his toenails, getting a confession out of him, we should be…” He shakes his head and pulls his phone out of his pocket.

Vance feels like a seventh wheel. He's not family, and doesn't want to go into Tim's room by himself with just Abby. But he doesn't want to leave either. Doesn't have anywhere to go. He's thinking of heading off to find all of them some sort of breakfast when he gets a call and sees the name on the ID. DiNozzo.

"Agent DiNozzo, calling in to brief me on your current case?"

"Director—"

"No time for that right now. I'm eager to hear about it, but kind of busy. I should be back on the East Coast late tonight, so how about you, Agent DiNozzo, and Dr. Mallard all join me at my house for breakfast tomorrow morning say, 07:00 to tell me all about it?"

"Director—"

"Splendid. I'll see you then." And he hangs up.

"What was that?" Ziva asks. She expects Tony to get more than two words out. They all do.

"He won't say anything. Didn't let me get a word in. We've got a breakfast date at his place tomorrow at 07:00."

Ziva looks puzzled, but Ducky gets it. "Oh."

"Oh?" Breena asks.

"Do you remember a few years ago when the IRS conveniently lost all communications between its Director and certain outside groups?"

Ziva nods, Tony doesn't. He doesn't pay all that much attention to larger politics.

Penny already knows where this is going so she says, "Last year, after the fall-out from that settled down, all communications for any Director of a Federal Agency is now copied and kept off-site. I'd bet that includes any conversations on their cell phones, or at least phone logs.

"Ah. Breakfast tomorrow, then." Ziva says.

"When we won't be overheard." Tony nods. "I get it." And suddenly he does. Suddenly furious and scared clear enough that he does get it. "We're not on this so that it looks proper. Has to look by the books because he's an Admiral. He'll have top lawyers and there can't be any wiggle room for him." Then he gets the deeper level, the reason why they aren't going to wait to see what whoever actually is investigating this manages to find. There's probably nothing to find to link John to this. They're going off the books on this one, way, way off the books. "Whatever we're really going to do, that'll be what we talk about tomorrow."
Breena's phone beeps, and she spends a few moments texting.

"Ducky, can you log onto the Federal Medical Records Database? Use Jimmy's account. Tim's stuff is in there."

Ducky nods, and gets to it. He reads the notes out-loud, voice getting angrier with every sentence. While Tony, Penny, Ziva, and Breena hover around, listening, getting paler and more furious by each word.

Ducky's last word falls, and for a second there's just silence then Tony says, "He's dead. John's dead. And if Gibbs doesn't do it, I will." Then he realizes Penny's sitting right next to him. "Oh, Penny… I —" he doesn't know what to say. John's dead. That's a fact, and it's a fact he's in no way sorry about. He will destroy that man if Gibbs doesn't, and he will enjoy every second of it. But his mom is sitting right next to him. Tony weakly says, "Tim's really hurt."

She nods. Ducky explained each bit as he read it. And there's more stuff that isn't in those records, yet. She knows exactly how bad this is. "I know Tony." She rubs her eyes and stands up, heading to the back porch. Ducky follows. They hear the door open, then close, and the faint sound of Ducky's voice, along with the louder sound of Penny sobbing.

---

No one has ever accused Penny Langston of being a weak woman. A raving bitch, oh yes, but weak? No.

But right now she hurts so bad she just wants to collapse.

She's sitting on the Palmer's back porch, sobbing, face buried in Ducky's shoulder as he holds her and gently pets her back.

Whether John did it or not, they're going to kill him. She wants to believe he's not responsible. She needs to believe it.

But she doesn't. She knows her son, and she knows the man he was raised and trained to be. Nothing happens on his ship without his approval.

"They're going to kill my son," she says quietly, to Ducky.

He holds her a little tighter, kissing her gently.

"He's my son, and I know… I know… But…" Sobbing replaces words. A moment later she gets out, "I've already outlived one child; I don't think I can do it again."

"Shhh… None of that. Whatever comes next, we'll get through, together."

"No we won't. You didn't raise a monster. It's not your child that tried to destroy your grandchild. It's not your family that's going to murder your son."

"I know. And I'm not going to pretend I can even imagine I know how this feels. But I'm here, and I will be here, with you, for you. And if we are even remotely lucky, John will have the good sense to do the right thing and take this out of our hands."

---

When Jimmy and Gibbs get back from talking to the surgeon, Vance also heads into Tim's room. He figures they can all get each other up to date in one run.
He feels his blood boil at the sight of McGee again, and forces it down.

Tim is, fortunately, asleep.

Vance has three large cups of coffee, and… and he doesn't know what Abby likes when she's pregnant, but he's fairly sure Caf-Pow is not what the doctor ordered right now, so he's also got a large iced-green tea.

There's a bag in his other hand, it's filled with muffins and pastries. He knows that besides Jimmy, none of them have eaten, and they could probably all use food.

"Jarvis and James have headed back to DC." Vance says, quietly, as Gibbs and Abby pick through the pastries. Jimmy shakes his head at them. "He's called John Ramis," none of them recognize that name, "highest ranking Naval Doctor, personal physician to the Vice President. He's looking over the case and will be giving you a call, Jimmy.

"Agent Burley just texted me to let me know he's aboard the Stennis, has met with Agent Angua, and is reading through all the notes they currently have on the case, and will soon be beginning to interrogate the three who assaulted Tim who can talk. Angua is still running the hunt for Lt. Mane. They have Tim's computer, but they think it's been so damaged they can't get anything off of it."

Tim slowly shakes his head, eyes still shut. "Can't figure out how to open it."

"How long have you been awake?" Abby asks, stroking his wrist.

"I don't know. Is that food?" Abby looks at Jimmy. Can he eat? on her face.

Jimmy shrugs. "Yeah Tim, Vance brought us some muffins and pastries. If the nurse says it's okay, there's a bear claw in there that's all yours." Jimmy gets off the sofa and hits the call button. "How are you feeling?"

"Like someone beat the shit out of me and then made me eat the shit."

Vance looks slightly alarmed by that. Jimmy catches his eye and mouths, pain medication. "How badly are you hurting?"

One of Tim's eyes slowly slides open and meanders toward Jimmy. It takes a few seconds to fully focus on him. "Was beat the shit out of me unclear?"

Jimmy snorts slightly at that, hand gently resting on the unbruised bit of Tim's shoulder. "You're fun when you're stoned."

"I'm hurting too bad to be stoned."

"I'll make sure you get more pain medication. Need anything else?"

That eye slides shut again. "Water?"

"Yeah, I think we can get you some water. Drink slow, okay?"

"Okay."

A moment later Abby's holding a cup to his lips, letting him have a few sips of water.

"More?" he asks when she pulls back.
Jimmy shakes his head. "Give it a few minutes, see if this stays down."

"I'm so thirsty."

"You want one of those—" Jimmy's reaching for one of those sponge lollipop things when Tim cuts him off.

"No, I want a fucking drink! I don't care if I throw it up."

"Too bad. Five minutes. And don't pout at me about it. You're not cute enough to pull it off today," Jimmy says. He kept his voice joking, but the three of them who have their eyes open can see this is killing Jimmy. He wants to give Tim a drink. He doesn't want him retching and puking with broken ribs and his arm in traction.

That one eye of Tim's opens again (which is when it occurs to Jimmy the other one is probably too swollen to open easily) and he tries to glare at Jimmy.

"Glaring's not going to do it either. Your ribs are broken and puking with broken ribs is going to make the pain you're in right now look like a field day. So, hold on for a few minutes, suck on the damn sponge, and pretend I know something about this what with the whole went to medical school thing."

Tim sighs and closes his eye again. "Sponge tastes like lemon juice and vinegar."

"I'll rinse it out and soak it in water."

"Thanks."

"What was that about not being able to open your computer?" Vance asks.

Both of Tim's eyes open this time. He's looking at Vance, bleary and confused. "Director. You're here?"

Vance nods.

"Wow. Must have been pretty fucking close to dead if you're here. Um… You asked me something, didn't you?"

"Doesn't matter," Vance replies, shaking his head.

Abby looks over to Vance. "Give me your phone."

*Abby here: She texts to Burley. What happens when you try to make his computer work?*

A minute later Stan replies: *Hit the power button, the computer whirs a little, screen goes from black to blue for five seconds, then everything goes black again.*

`:9pfhrubgTHF64^`

*What?*

*Type it in when the screen goes blue. His computer locks and encrypts if he hits a certain key on it. He probably locked it. That'll unlock it.*

*Thanks.*
Jimmy returns with the de-lemoned lollisponge, just the same time the nurse comes in.

"Can he have solid food?" Jimmy asks.

"Not yet," he answers. "Solid food for dinner, maybe tomorrow depending on how you're feeling. We've got chicken broth and beef broth, though."

"Beef," Tim says. "More pain meds would be good, too. And would you please tell him I can have more water."

"How much did you give him?"

"About a tablespoon," Abby answers.

"Keep that down for about five minutes and you can have more water, broth, and jello if you like."

Tim's not looking happy about that, though with as messed up as his face is right now Jimmy's not sure if he's reading an expression so much as just knowing what he's feeling.

"Pain meds?" Jimmy asks.

The nurse nods, and then checks Tim's charts. "We can up the dosage."

"Good," Tim says. "Is Jethro here?"

"Yeah, Tim." He'd been standing at the end of Tim's bed. He very gently touches the sole of Tim's unbroken foot.

His head turns a few degrees toward where Jethro is, but his eyes stay shut. "Oh. Good. Thought I was kind of dreaming it. Could sort of feel you in here, but couldn't see or hear you."

"I'm here."

The nurse heads off, and it looks like it was just a matter of sheer luck, because the possibility that Tim was even remotely aware of her being in or out of the room was nil.

"Don't kill him, okay? That's mine. You, too Abby. No one's dying today, okay?"

"Not killing anyone today, and we're not talking about this until we're home, and you're off the drugs, Tim."

"Oh. Right." He nods. "Shit, is the nurse still in here?"

"No, Tim," Vance says.

"But you are, fuck. Ummm... Yeah, off the drugs. When'll that be?"

"We just got back from talking to your doctor," Jimmy says. "Good news, they're not just laying down words to make you happy, that arm really will heal up."

"Isn't that usually followed by bad news?" Tim asks.

"Mediocre news. Your hand's going to be in traction until Tuesday, so not getting home before Wednesday."

Abby's looking at Jimmy, checking to make sure he's not whitewashing it. He nods. Tim's looking at
a ton of PT, some of which he's already planning, but, given the time to let it really heal, and working at it, he'll get the use of his hand back.

"By the time Sean shows up, you should be able to bring your diaper changing A game to the party."

Tim smiles a little at that.

Eventually there's nothing left to do. They've got the official news. They're off the case, so it's not like they can do any work on it. They're waiting for Vance to get back to even get any word, and sure, they could hack Burley's notes, except, oh no, they can't, because the guy who does that for them is the victim. And right now Tony doesn't trust Draga enough to call him in to do the hacking for this.

Penny's still crying on the porch. Ducky's trying to comfort her. After another moment of that, Ziva stands up and heads out there. It hits Tony that Ziva's got some insight in someone you love going very, very wrong.

And more insight than anyone should ever want to have about doing something about it.

Ducky comes back in, looking wrought out, shoulders slumped, caught between anger and grief. He picks up Anna who's been relaxing in a sort of laid back way, and snuggles her. (Through all of this Molly and Kelly have been watching, transfixed (because neither of them gets to watch a lot of TV) Dragon Tales. Say whatever you want about children's TV, when you need some time with your kids paying attention to something other than you, it works a treat.)

Breena sits next to him, arm around him. "How's she doing?"

"Wretched."

Breena kisses him, squeezing him a little tighter. "You got them?" She looks at the girls, and Tony nods. Then Breena gets up and heads out, too.

Ten minutes of nothing but just sitting around passes. Finally Tony says, "A while back, he told me he was dealing with stuff, old stuff, he didn't want to talk about it, but if I wanted to know I could ask Gibbs or Jimmy. They're not here, but… I mean… Look, I'm not blind, I could see how on edge they were about Tim getting on that ship, especially Gibbs. That's not just they don't get along, so… Do you know?"

Ducky nods, wearily. "He said you could ask?"

"Yeah. He didn't want to talk about it personally, but I could ask if I wanted to. Said, I'd wait until he could tell me himself, but…"

"It's not that they, as you said, 'don't get along.'" Ducky looks away for a moment. "From everything I've been told, from everything Timothy is saying, it was never physical. But John is just as good with words at Timothy is, and he used them, and his power, to keep Timothy terrified more or less the entire time he lived at home. He abused Timothy verbally from the age of six until Timothy stopped talking to him. He made… exceptionally painful threats involving dragging Timothy onto his ship and physically maiming him and sexually torturing him. There is a very good reason why Timothy gets seasick practically before he gets on the ship, and that it doesn't matter if it's moving or not."

"Oh God."
Ducky nods. "He's had some rough times dealing with it over the last year."

"And you guys let him get back on that fucking ship?"

"Let?" Ducky says mildly. "Did you somehow miss how he was talking about that test? He wanted to get on that ship. He wanted to go up against his father as an adult and show him that he wasn't going to take it anymore. You saw how pleased he was when he called us. It backfired spectacularly."

Tony rubs his face.

"Sometimes when you go into the dragon's den to face the monster, the dragon wins."

"Like fuck. He is not winning!"

Ducky gives Tony a very tired look. "Anthony, at this point, there are no winning moves, for anyone, left on the board. Every possible version of this ends in more pain for everyone."

"Oh, God, Duck."

"Exactly."

Abbi stretches, feeling very rested, awfully content, and… alone. As she gets more awake it hits her that she's really alone.

"Jethro?"

Nothing. No smell of coffee, no soft clicking sound of Mona's claws on the floor coming up to say Hello.

She checks the clock. It's a bit after ten. About her usual Saturday off wake up time. She sits up, wondering what's going on. Sometimes they'll go out for their run, grab some breakfast, and come back before she's up, but… usually she's up after they're back.

She gets up and pulls on one of his t-shirts, slipping into her own pj bottoms, and heads downstairs. Nothing. No coffee. No hint that anyone is here. She checks Mona's bowls, wanting to see if she's eaten yet, and they're missing.

A quick check of the driveway shows that Jethro's truck is still there, so…

Okay, there's got to be a note somewhere.

Where would he put a note?

Borin heads back upstairs and checks her phone. No note. She looks at her clothing from yesterday. No note. Damn it!

Okay, where else… Usual morning routine. She heads into the bathroom. The first thing she does when she wakes up is hits the head and brushes her teeth, and sitting on her toothbrush is a piece of paper with her name on it.

She unfolds it.

Abbi—
Had to go to California. Tim's alive, hurt. Don't know when I'll get back. Will call when I get a chance.

Love,

Jethro.

She closes her eyes and sighs. He'd been worried about it for the last two weeks and it came true. Shit.

She heads over to her phone and sends him a text. *Wake me up before you run off in the middle of the night.*

She's done with her morning routine when she gets back. *Okay.*

*Want me to call? Tell me what's up?*

*Tim's sleeping, text is better.*

*Okay, what happened?*

*He got onto that ship and his... The Admiral tried to have him killed. Stuck him in a cell and four guys jumped him. He's alive. In the hospital, broken arm, foot, ribs, nose, something else I'm forgetting. His whole body is one big bruise. But he's alive, and they say he'll heal.*

*Shit.* She knew something was up between the two of them. Knew it had to be more than the version Gibbs had told her, that they didn't get along. The Admiral's an Admiral, and Tim didn't want anything to do with the Navy. But, given what all Jethro's been willing to tell her about Tim's life, the fact that he wouldn't get into the details on this one made her decide not to ask too deeply.

When next they talk, she's going to ask.

*Yeah.*

*But he'll be okay?* she asks.

*Jimmy says he will. Right now he's sleeping a lot.*

*Probably the best thing for him. Where are you guys?*

*Alameda*

*You want me to come?*

*You've got work.*

She snorts at that and rapidly texts back. *Screw work, they owe me three months of vacation time, anyway. You want me there?*

There's a two minute long pause, where she sits there staring at the words realizing she not only wrote them but meant them, and she's thinking he's probably feeling something similar seeing that. Then she gets back, and is amazed at how one word can convey so much, *Please.*

*On my way.*

*Thanks, Abbi.*
You're welcome. Wake me up next time.

Didn't think you'd want to come.

She feels slightly irked by that, and then actually understands what that means. Didn't want me to see you that upset?

She can feel his look, and the nod that went with it. He wouldn't be easy with all the emotions of this stuff. He'd been trying to keep it under wraps, badly, for weeks, and now it just blew up.

I'll let you know when I'm in the air.

Okay. I'll be here. Vance doesn't want to let me near the ship.

Wise move on his part.

Why is wise always such a pain in the ass?
A good cop, especially a well-trained Gibbs cop, can hit the ground running, on no sleep, in the wrong damn time zone, assess the facts, and get up and solving the crime in a matter of minutes.

At least, that seems to be how the outside world thinks it should work.

Burley is a good cop. But he, and his team, are not, in fact psychic, nor are they robots, so they do, on occasion need to sleep and eat.

So, right now, they're caught between reading up on the stuff that Agent Angua is sending them, as it comes in, or trying to get a nap. According to the pilot they're eight hours away from the Stennis, so he puts himself, Theresa Millin, his right hand and partner, and Amos Olnton, their tech guy, on rest shifts. Everyone gets a five hour nap, and a two and a half hour up stretch. Whoever's up is in charge of staying up-to-date on the case.

Luckily he was up when Gibbs called him. Gibbs always knew when he was napping, and he'd have had a fit if he caught a hint that he was sleeping on Tim's case.

He talks to Gibbs, and Vance, making a few mental notes, watching his napping teammates.

This is going to be a disaster. "Sensitive" cases always are. Sure, he's got Vance behind him, great. Vance will not always be in charge, and if one of Admiral McGee's pets ends up at NCIS this case could be biting him, and his team, in the ass for decades to come.

He rubs his eyes. Start at the beginning. Treat it like any other case. Get to know the victim. He pulls up Tim's service record and medical record.

Stan Burley is not a stranger to violence. He's been a cop since 1994, twenty-two years. He has seen fights. He's waded into fights to try and stop them. He's been in fights for his life and fights to protect others. But that doesn't stop him from feeling nauseous as he reads through the medical records. Tim's hurting, and he's going to be hurting for a long time.

Then he gets to Tim's personnel file. Director McGee. Oh... He remembers that. Just like everyone else, he got the email, but he didn't pay much attention to it. Olnton handles all of their tech needs. Getting anything done was always such a pain in the ass that instead of hiring another field agent, he actually went with his own tech when Banner (his and Millin's previous third team member) retired. Why Vance is on this makes more sense.

"How dumb do you have to be to attack an NCIS Director?" he mutters as he keeps flipping through McGee's files.

He feels kind of stupid that he doesn't know this stuff already. DiNozzo he remembers well. They worked together. Abby, he's got a very clear memory of her, and a few fuzzy memories of some very good times they had back in the day. (Tim probably doesn't need to know about them, what with the whole they're married now, thing.) Ziva, he met her a few times, and likes her, but he doesn't much remember Tim.

He reads through, realizing that Tim got hired for the same reason Olnton did. They needed a tech if they were going to do the job well, so they got a tech. Unlike Olnton, who is just a tech, he doesn't carry a gun and does not get sent into the field unless he's got to travel to do the tech stuff. McGee actually became a real cop.
And from real cop he's gone to Director of Cybercrime. A very long and very high jump. He's got to be amazing at what he does.

A few moments later he gets copied on why McGee was on the ship. According to Jarvis, he swallows at that, the Secretary of the NAVY is getting involved in this case, they were running a top secret test on the ship's tech systems. His eyes scan over the notes. Apparently there is a Lt. James on the ship, who will get him up to date (which Stan understands to mean, will tell him all the stuff SecNav doesn't want put down in writing.) and provide him with all the paperwork reading him into this test.

While he's reading up on the test, he gets two emails, one from Lt. James, and one from Agent Angua.

He sends them a quick Reading up, eta 7 hours from now, no idea what time that'll be where you are, talk soon email, and then does some more reading.

Angua's preliminary report is that McGee was brought to the brig. He was properly processed. Then he was led to a cell, locked in. Then the MA in charge 'went for a walk on Lt. Mane's orders.' Four sailors, who were not, in fact, prisoners, were in the two cells next to him. They're in the infirmary right now, each with his own MA keeping watch to make sure they aren't talking. According to them, Mane told them McGee had made their ship fire on the Borealis, killing at least two hundred people. They all had family on the Borealis, who according to Mane, had not been accounted for. According to them Mane left after McGee was locked in, as did James, and once Lt. James had left, he returned, unlocked the cells, told them to beat McGee to death, and then get out of there, fast. He'd be back in five minutes to handle the body. Best they could tell, in about two minutes Jarvis was there, yelling at them to stop. If Mane attempted to get back to the brig, he would have seen a huge collection of MAs and Medics and the Captain all in there, so he probably turned around and headed off when he saw that.

Lt. James is in charge of looking for Mane. According to him, they'd searched all of his usual places, and were now starting a deck by deck sweep of the ship. He had three seamen using the security footage to try and figure out where he had gone, but according to them the footage had been compromised, and while they could track Mane, McGee, and himself going into the brig, the footage of when they were supposed to be leaving it shows a blank hall.

Burley shakes his head. "Sensitive" cases suck. Millin touches his shoulder. She's up, which means it's naptime for him. He hands over his phone, easier for her to just read it all off of his machine than send it to her, and then he settles in as well as he can to catch some shut eye.

Burley stretches and rubs his eyes. It's daylight… ish, as they go jolting to a heart stopping landing on the Stennis.

"Hate aircraft carriers," Olnton mutters.

"You and me both," Millin replies.

"Then let's hope we're off the damn thing soon." Burley wraps up.

He's never worked with Agent Angua before. She's waiting for them on deck, tall, strong, light blonde hair back in a severe braid, light gray eyes seeming to catch everything around her. Everything about her gives him the impression of someone who's always watching, and always about to leap into action.
Honestly, if she wasn't on his side, he'd find her intimidating.

"Agents Burley, Millin, and Olnton," he says by way of introduction while shaking her hand.

She nods. "Sarah Angua." She points to the large, well-muscled man next to her, who all but radiates crisp, Navy perfection. "Lt. James."

"Has Mane been found yet?"

James shakes his head. "The full search of the ship has been running for six hours. We've finished the flight deck. Jarvis tells me that search and rescue dogs are being sent in, and will be ready for us when we dock in San Fran."

"Good."

"Have you had any chance to eat?" Angua asks.

"No," Olnton says.

"Okay, let's get you in, get your gear tossed into a locker somewhere, and we'll debrief as you eat."

"Sounds good."

They're docked in San Fran by the time they get done with the briefing (pretty much what was in the reports with a bit of an update on the hunt for Mane. Still missing.) which meant they basically could have just flown to SF and landed on a real airstrip.

Sigh. All the fun of the job.

Once they dock, James heads off to rejoin Jarvis. Burley puts Angua in charge of hunting down Mane. Which leaves them on interrogation.

"Who are we starting with?" Millin asks.

Burley grabs the files on the four perps. "Manz is still in the infirmary and sedated."

"He's the one whose throat got crushed."

Burley double checks the medical files. "Yeah. Doc says he's not talking for at least another day. Maybe not ever, they're not sure how bad the damage is. That leaves Rodrick Ylyns, Seth Chase, and David Nordstrom."

She scans the notes he's got open on the table. "Nordstrom's the one who peed himself when he realized what had happened?"

"Yes." Burley scans the report, too. Yep, he's the one who when hit with the idea that this was actually the Admiral's son and that he was on the ship on a top secret mission, wet his pants in fear.

"Weak link."

Burley nods.

Nordstrom is hurting. Broken nose, broken orbital, broken hand, tons of bruises, sprains, strains, and a huge bite taken out of his left arm. Yeah, he's hurting. He's on a ton of pain medication, and Burley
has required a lawyer stay with him, because even though he said he didn't want one, he's stoned off
his ass, and Burley does not want this testimony getting tossed because he didn't have counsel
present.

"Start at the beginning and tell me what happened."

Nordstrom stares at the ceiling behind Stan for a moment, collecting his thoughts.

"I had oatmeal for breakfast. Then went to run—"

"Okay, that's a bit too beginning. What started the fight?"

Nordstrom blinks, hazy brown eyes floating languidly over everything in the room. "That guy going
to be okay?"

"They don't know, yet."

"Damn."

"Why did you decide to beat—"

The JAG breaks in. "That's supposition."

"We have McGee's blood, skin, saliva, and hair on your client. The Secretary of the Navy, Clayton
Jarvis, is one of the men who helped to pull your client off of McGee. Lt. Remy James, his secretary,
saw him in the cell next to McGee before the fight began, and took custody of him after Jarvis pulled
him off, when the fight was done. We've got absolutely no doubt at all that he was involved, we
want to know why."

The JAG nods. "Okay. Go ahead Dave, tell him what happened."

Dave blinks, unsure what he's supposed to be saying.

"Why did you decide to beat McGee?" Burley coaxes.

"Oh. Uh… Earlier… you know, like, after lunch, there was a code-red-all-hands-on-deck. I was
already at my station. I work in security. It's my job to keep an eye on the feeds. If it looks like
something's going wrong I focus in on it, make sure it's all on tape, stuff like that."

"Okay. So you're at your computer…"

"Watching, and everything's insane. Everyone's running to stations. All the alarms are going. Pilots
are running for their planes. I've got nothing to focus in on, because everything is insane. Things
slowly start to calm down, and then Mane shows up, talks to Lt. Kett."

"Your commanding officer?"

"Yeah, he runs the security bay."

"Then Mane comes over and asks to talk to me, and I know whatever he's gonna say, it's bad,
because he's got that look on his face. He tells me we fired on the Borealis—"

"Someone's told you the Stennis didn't actually fire, right?" Burley asks. He's been at this more than
long enough to know abject terror when he sees it, and that's how Nordstrom sounded as he said
'fired on the Borealis.
He nods, slowly. "One of the medics. I asked where the casualties were; he wanted to know what casualties, and… And we didn't fire. Mane told me we fired. Told me over 200 on the Borealis had been killed. That my brother wasn't accounted for, yet. He's on the Borealis. He's new, eighteen-years-old. This is his first run out. All I could think about was having to tell my mom that my ship killed Steve." Nordstrom's crying at that.

Burley pats him gently on the shoulder. Not really wanting to, but between the drugs and the regret, soft-ball ing him with sympathy is what's going to get everything out of this guy.

"What happened after he told you about your brother?"

"I tried not to start crying. He told me we didn't know for sure about Steve, but he did know who'd done it, and asked if I would help take care of him."

"And you were all over that, weren't you?" Burley adds.

Nordstrom nods, fire and hate in his eyes. "All over it! He asked me to go with him, and I did. We went to his quarters, and he gave me a computer. Told me the guy who did it was hacking our computers and our security feed. I don't know much about computers, but I know our security feed, and there was someone piggybacking on it.

"Mane said he was some sort of terrorist. Pretending to be some sort of Irish Navy Captain or something, but really a member of… Something. It was bad."

"And how were you going to 'take care of it'?"

"He was going to have an accident. My job was to handle the cameras and then help him have his 'accident.' The brig's got cameras on it at all times. Has to have cameras. We go through the feeds every seven days, checking and rechecking, making sure everything works. So, first job, kill the camera that covers the cells. I deleted everything from the last four days, messed with the logs. Looks like it went out way ahead of time."

Burley nods at that. Agent Angua had asked for the security feeds moments after getting on the ship, and they were… a mess isn't right, but clearly doctored.

"What did you do next?"

"Next was hard. I got a lot of footage of the hallway to the brig when it was clear. A minute here, minute there, ten seconds here, my job was to get ten minutes of it all put together. Then I sat, and waited. I watched Mane bring that guy in, along with another guy. Then I queued up the blank footage, and booked into there. Found three other guys waiting, too. The MA stuck us in cells, and a minute later the terrorist and the other guy were in there.

"The other guy left. Mane let us out of our cells and into his, and reminded us we needed to be gone in five minutes."

"What happened in five minutes?" Burley asks.

"Nothing, really, but in six the camera would start recording again, so that gave us time to get out of the hallway without getting caught on tape."

"So there'd be no footage of you going in or out?"

"Yeah, and it'd look like Mane and the MA were in there the whole time. I think they were going to leave for a bit, come back, and find the spy'd 'killed himself,' or something. Not sure what they were
going to do. It was our job to take care of him."

"Didn't you think it was… odd… that you were being asked to take care of this yourself?"

Nordstrom blinked. He blinked again. Looking completely dumbstruck by that. He swallows hard. "No. Just… Just thinking about Steve and hoping he was alive, and all I wanted to do was beat the man who may have killed him until he screamed and then keep hitting until he stopped screaming. I wanted to be able to tell my mom that I killed the bastard who killed Steve. While I was getting the cameras ready, Mane kept bringing other guys into his quarters, three of us, and… None of us knew where our family was, or if they were dead, but we were gonna kill the fucker who messed with them."

Burley nods. "I understand."

---

Millins took point on Ylyns. Very similar story. JAG on the case because the perp is stoned off his ass on pain meds. The overwhelming pile of evidence proving he was involved meant the JAG decided immediate cooperation was the best way to go, followed by a somewhat rambling, disjointed story about how Mane hunted him down, "explained what had happened," and hatched a plan to take care of the Irish Terrorist on board.

Burley took point on Chase, who also had kin on the Borealis, and came up with almost the same story. A slight variation was in play. This one knew that they hadn't actually fired. (He worked on the flight deck, so he could literally see the rockets not going off.) But he knew that something had gone very wrong, and the idea that his wife might have died got him fired up enough that the part of the brain that thinks up questions like, how about we let the legal system handle this? was completely shut off.

They read up on Manz's background, making sure he didn't work on the computer systems, that he, also, hadn't personally seen what had happened with the test. He hadn't.

"So he found people with kin on the Borealis, most of whom worked so far below decks they had no idea what actually happened," Millin says to Angua when she checks back in. "Separated them from the rest of the ship, got them 'planning' on how to take care of the spy, and then set it up."

"And, the 'your nearest and dearest were last seen bobbing in the Pacific' was a good story for getting them to attack first and ask questions second," Angua replies.

"Yeah. Doesn't hurt the oldest one of the bunch is twenty-three. Not exactly an age known for lots of forethought," Millin adds. "What do you have for us?"

"Dogs are on board and looking for Mane. No joy, yet. But they'll find him. I do have a question for you. Why do we have the Admiral confined to quarters?"

"The vic is his son," Burley says.

"Yeah, I know. That's why I'm asking," Angua says. "I mean, doesn't that rule him out?"

Burley winces. "From what I'm hearing, that rules him in."

"Oh, shit!" Angua looks distressed. "So, we're thinking that Mane was… ordered to do this?"

"Yeah." Burley thinks about that. "Or… probably he never said it, but… hinted…"

"Ugh." Angua winces. Cases like this are a pain in the ass to deal with.
Petty Officer Thomas Weis is not thrilled about this whole thing. At all. He does not want to be sitting here, confined to his quarters, waiting for some asshole NCIS agent to rip him a new one.

He's caught, and he knows it.

So, as best as he can hope, immediately spilling everything is the only way he's getting out of prison in time to see his kids graduate high school.

"What do you want to know?" he says as soon Burley and Millin head into his room.

"Everything." Burley says, sitting down on the one free chair. Millin settles herself on Weis' desk, setting up her computer to record everything. "But first, you've been advised of your Article 31 rights?"

"Yes, I have."

"You may have any counsel you like." Burley replies. Usually he's not nearly so… consistent… about reminding everyone of their rights, but this one's got to be above board.

"I'm fine. I want to get this done as fast as possible."

"All right, we like that," Burley says. "So, what happened?"

"Mane shows up in my brig. Been a quiet week, there's only one guy in there, and he's just sleeping off a drunk.

"Mane tells me that he needs my help with something. Asks about the code red, what I knew about that, which was basically nothing. Just that it happened. So he tells me how we were hacked, how our guns were taken over, how we'd almost fired on the Borealis, and that the guy who did it was on board.

"So, I ask what he wants to do to the fucker, and he tells me. Apparently this guy is buddy buddy with the SecNav, so who knows what sort of shit he's getting out, or who he's selling it to. So, we've got to get him pulled away. And yeah, everyone'll wonder what happened, but because of the way the thing with the cameras'll work, no one will ever know."

"And you just go along with this?"

"It's Mane. If he's asking me to do this, it means the Admiral is asking me to do this. No way in hell I'm saying no."

"Did Mane ever say the Admiral wanted this to happen?"

"Of course not!" Weis looks appalled at that idea. "You don't say things like that. And you sure as hell don't ask. But if Mane's asking, it means the Admiral is asking. He's the Admiral's secretary. Everyone knows that."

Burley asks, "Has the Admiral asked you to look the other way often?"

"The Admiral's never spoken to me, period."

"Has Mane asked—" Burley asks and gets cut off before he can finish.

"Oh, no." Weis shakes his head. "No. I run a good brig."
"Until last night," Millin says.

"He hacked our ship, so we almost shot another one of our ships. Who knows how many people would have died if he'd succeeded. He's gotten himself in close with the Secretary of the Navy, some sort of spy… That fucker can die in my jail any day, and I'll call it an honor, and I'll take the shit coming to me because of it. I tried to help take out a spy, and God knows how many lives I've saved, so, if I go to prison for it, I go to prison, my conscience is clear."

Burley sighs. "Timothy McGee, NCIS Director of Cybercrime, son of Admiral John McGee, hacked your ship on the orders of the Secretary of the Navy in order to find flaws that could be fixed, and test your cyber unit's responses, showing them the holes in their security. For all practical purposes you tried to have the Captain who was running the other fleet during a war game killed."

Weis goes white at that. "I didn't… No one…" He looks horribly confused. "If he was Admiral McGee's son… Mane would know that… I mean… Why?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," Millin replies.

Millin and Burley are walking back from Weis' quarters to the conference room they're running the investigation out of when they hear a commotion.

Neither of the can make out individual words, but there's a lot of excitement coming from the enlisted mess.

As they get closer they hear, 'Wait, no put the—" followed by a gunshot.

Burley looks at Millin, who's looking back at him. "Guess we've found Mane," she says dryly.

Twenty more steps, shouting "Make a hole" repeatedly, and pushing a crowd of sailors back and out of the way proves her right.

Lt. Mane is on the floor in the enlisted mess, the back of his head gone, service pistol, still warm, on the floor next to him.

Burley rubs his eyes. "Suicide with one hundred witnesses."

Millin is patting Mane down, looking for a note or something, and she finds it in his breast pocket. She unfolds it, sighs, and folds it back up again.

Burley gives her a Well, what does it say? look, and she shakes her head. Not reading it out loud, not here.

They control the crowd until the Medics get to the mess and take over. Then they return to the conference room.

Millin spreads out the note.

It was all my fault, all my idea. I organized and executed the attack on Timothy McGee. I had to stop his lies. I failed.

"What the hell does that mean?" Olnton asks.

"Means Gibbs is going to go mental," Burley says.

Millin is confused by that.
"We've got no case against the Admiral," Burley replies, rubbing his head.

"I know that. What about the lies?" Olnton asks.

"I have no idea," Millin replies.

"I... shit... I might, but..." Stan shakes his head. "Look, I want to take you into it blind and cold. Just keep a really good watch on the Admiral when we talk. He's still confined to quarters, right?"

"Should be." Agent Angua says, catching that question as she heads into the conference room.

"Okay, we're not telling him Mane is dead. Let's see what we can get out of him."

Burley gives the MAs a few minutes to get Admiral McGee out of his room. He doesn't want to lay eyes on the man, or, more importantly, let him lay eyes on him, until he's ready to interrogate him.

As an Admiral's flagship, the Stennis boasts more "entertaining" capacity than an average Nimitz class aircraft carrier.

And as an Admiral's flagship, there's a significantly nicer suite available for him.

By aircraft carrier standards, it's huge, which boils down to about 200 square feet. It's extremely tidy. Burley has the sense that even dust is afraid to fall out of place here. (Not that a speck of dust would dare to land anywhere in this sacred temple to all things Navy.)

The sleeping quarters are sparse. Large bed (navy and white linens, perfectly made), night table (clean, nothing on top of it. Burley opens the drawer: kindle, tissues, eyeglass case, eye drops, small humidor) light over the bed, photographs on the walls of several ports, Burley knows Hong Kong, San Francisco, and Pearl Harbor, but the other three are a mystery to him.

Like the sleeping quarters, the private bath is immaculate. One thing catches his attention, the shaving kit is a brush, a soap mug, and a straight razor. The man who shaves with one of those at sea is hardcore.

Closet is tidy. Everything perfectly pressed and hanging. He assumes that John has to have some off duty clothing, but he's not seeing it. Probably in the impossibly neat looking chest at the foot of the bed.

He opens the lid, extra blankets, clean towels, a pair of sneaker, sweats, t-shirts, a few off-duty, laying around outfits, underwear, and socks. Apparently, this isn't the kind of guy who just shows up for something in a suit. He's an Admiral, and he wants everyone on earth to know it, always.

Spartan. That's the main thing he's getting from this room. This is a man who pared everything that wasn't essential to his job out of his life. There's no sign of friends or family in here, just a space to rest between shifts.

So, the office has to be more revealing, because that's where he really lives.

And it is. Like the sleeping quarters everything is beyond tidy. The Navy thrives on paperwork, but there's none on the desk. It's plain, functional black plastic and cool gray metal. John's computer is up on it, but off right now. Burley is tempted to snoop, but he's already pushed his without a warrant leeway as far as he can.

Behind the desk is something he'd call a shrine. There are two officer's swords up on the wall, each
Below them are two flags in shadow boxes, one is clearly old, the stars are… well, they look wrong
to Burley, but in 1918, there were only… 48, he thinks, states. Under the flags is the traditional
ribbon salad.

Tons of them. Medals all over the place. Between what must be McGee's father and grandfather, it
looks like every single medal a man could win from the Navy had been won.

A little further down is John's sword, along with his formal medals.

Burley shakes his head. 'Respected member of the Navy.' Trust Leon to understate the case. He's a
Four Star Admiral, son of a Four Star Admiral, with more decorations than the fucking Christmas
Tree in Times Square.

To the right and left of the shrine are book shelves. The left is filled with naval histories and technical
manuals for planes, drones, electronics in general. On the right is… Fluffy stuff. Fiction. Odd for a
man who owns a Kindle to have two shelves devoted to…

There's a shelf of… Burley doesn't recognize the books. He picks one up. Mysteries. There are five
of them, and next to them is a picture of Tim and Abby at what has to be their wedding. It's a candid
shot, unplanned from the looks of it. Tim's smiling at Abby as they dance. It's really sweet. The
costumes are kind of weird, sort of Victorian or something, and he's not sure what's going on with
that, but he makes a mental note to badger Gibbs for more pictures, later, when they aren't in the
middle of this case, because he can't wait to see what Gibbs wore to that thing.

There's a grainy black and white ultrasound in a frame next to the shot from the wedding.

The shelf below it has… He picks one of them up, too. Some sort of horror thing. Then it clicks, the
name on those books is Sarah McGee. He opens one of the mysteries and sees a picture (old picture)
of Tim smiling at the camera.

This side is devoted to his kids.

'Child abuser' Gibbs had said. Stop his lies Mane had written. In his gut, Burley knows those two
pieces are related to each other.

He puts the novels back and picks up the picture next to the horror ones. It's a shot of the Admiral.
He's got a young woman on his left, his arm around her. On the right is a young man, and he's got an
arm around him, too. All three of them are grinning for the camera. Tucked into the corner of the
frame is a save the date card. Apparently Sarah McGee and Glenn (must be the guy) Holland are
getting married in March.

Estranged son, daughter he's close to… Mane loves his Boss… Child abuse… There's no shot it
didn't happen. No way anyone could pull that lie on Gibbs, and… no reason to think Tim would
even try it. But… daughter is close to him, that picture can't be more than a year old because it's got
2015 in the corner.

So… If Mane got wind of this… Who knows what about what happened? What did happen?

On the walls are more pictures. More ports (New York, he knows), and then a gallery of shots of
drones, some in the air, some on the ground, some John was putting together or taking apart.

One more wall of pictures, this one has shots of John with Important people. There he is with the
President. And the previous president, and hell, the one before that. He's rubbing elbows with Hillary
and Bill Clinton at Chelsea's wedding. There's a shot of him with two Supreme Court justices. More
people Burley doesn't recognize. A group shot of all the current Admirals. There's a picture of a kid, can't be more than six, but he's guessing it's got to be John, sitting on John Kennedy's lap.

He's on buddy-buddy terms with everyone who's ever mattered.

Burley has never called Jarvis before. He doesn't exactly want to call Jarvis, but… he doesn't know who else would know.

So he does call.

"Jarvis."

"Excuse me, Sir. This is Stan Burley, I'm running the investigation on the assault on Tim McGee"

"How are things going?"

"Well, I hope. I'm getting ready to talk to Admiral McGee. I'm in his office, trying to get a better idea of who he is. I was wondering… his ambitions don't end at Admiral, do they?"

"No, they don't."

"Is he gunning for your job?"

"No. Higher. He's on the short list for the next Secretary of Defense."

"Okay, thank you. Will he get it?"

"Depends on who wins in November, but right now, I'd say the odds are better than even if Hillary wins."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome."

Secretary of Defense… If a story about hurting one of his kids got out… That's worth killing to hide.

Burley checks his watch. It's a bit after noon. According to his phone he's a bit over half an hour away from the hospital where Gibbs and Tim and the rest of them are.

"Millin, keep an eye on the shop. I want to everything there is to know about Mane in your head by the time I get back."

"Already on it. Olnton's helping Angua toss his quarters."

"Good."

"What are you going to do?"

"Have a chat with a friend about the McGees."

Burley doesn't like hospitals. Not that that's a terribly original statement. Not too many people just go hang out at hospitals because they like the vibe of the place.

But, though he hates to admit it, they creep him out. Probably because every time he's been in one, it's because he's visiting someone who doesn't want to be there.
He sends a text to Gibbs when he hits the lobby, and gets directions to where they are.

"Stan." Gibbs gives him a hug. He's waiting in the hall standing next to Vance, who Stan recognizes, and another guy, tall, thin, round glasses, puts him in mind of an adult version of Harry Potter, Stan thinks he's seen him once or twice, looks like he's ready to start killing people, on the other side.

"This is Jimmy Palmer, our ME."

"Really hope they told you you didn't need to come for this," Stan says while shaking his hand.

Jimmy shakes his head. "Tim and Abby and this guy," he lays a hand on Gibbs, "are family. And I'm a doctor. So, I'm not here in my usual professional capability. Today I'm the guy who goes through all the medical stuff and makes sure it's sound."

"Has it been?"

"Yeah, it has. He's getting good care."

"Great. Can I…?"

Gibbs nods. "Sure, go say hi, and then we'll talk."

Burley eases in quietly. Abby didn't hear him, so she's still sitting beside the bed, head resting against the railing, fingers on Tim's wrist. Tim's eyes are closed, and Burley's hoping he's asleep. "Hi," he says quietly.

Abby jerks a little at that, turning toward him, letting Tim's hand go and standing up to wrap Stan in a hug. "Hi," she also says quietly.

"I'm actually awake, you can talk."

"Hi, Tim."

"Stan, right?" He hasn't opened his eyes to look. "Eyes don't much like opening right now."

Stan's looking at how black and blue and swollen all of Tim's face is. He's coming to the conclusion that opening his eyes probably takes some concerted effort. "Yeah. Wanted to check in before talking to your Dad."

"Check away. So, I do look properly beaten?"

"Uh… Shit… Yeah."

"He'll be happy to hear that," Tim says dryly. "How are the other guys?"

"They're looking pretty bad, too." Abby pulls Stan over to the chair she had been sitting in, and half leans half sits against Tim's bed. "The one you got in the throat, they're not sure if he'll talk again."

Tim sighs. "That's the one who was going to kill me if he got a shot."

"Yeah. I would have in his place, too. He worked below decks, heard the code red, knew something was up, then Mane shows up, tells him that they'd blown the Borealis out of the water, killed over 200 people, and that his newly pregnant wife was missing."

"Shit. I'd have killed me, too." Tim turns his face toward Abby, but his eyes don't open.
"How could he have not known it wasn't real?" Abby asks.

"Machinists mate. Never got anywhere near anyone who'd be working on the part of the ship where you could actually tell. Then Lt. Mane shows up and tells him what's going on. No reason to think the Admiral's secretary would lie to him. If he'd been more with it, he probably would have been asking questions, but he wasn't. He just wanted to get his wife back and kill the son of a bitch who might have hurt her. So he jumped at the chance.

"All the guys in there had some version of that story."

"But Mane knew it was a test, right?" Abby asks.

Tim tries to nod, but that makes him feel dizzy, so he stops. "He was with us when we ran it. You want my statement on what happened?"

"Eventually. When you want to give it. Three of them have already plead guilty to assault. We haven't settled on what we're charging the MA who walked out and let it happen with, and the other guy's been in and out of surgery on his throat since last night.

Abby nods at that.

"I've got... some personal questions to ask. Probably aren't going to like them. But I need to ask before I talk to your dad."

Tim sighs, he'd reach to hold Abby's hand but she's on the wrong side of him. She sees him try and takes his foot into her hands.

"Fire away," Tim says quietly.

"Mane killed himself this afternoon. In the enlisted mess, so at least a hundred people saw him do it. Not like there's any doubt as to what happened. He left a note, too. Said it was all on him, all his idea, that he had to stop you telling lies, and that he failed."

Abby makes a small choking sound at that.

Tim grits his teeth for almost a tenth of a second, and then pain goes shooting through his mouth as he remembers he's got a broken tooth.

"It's not a lie," he says quiet and hot.

"I don't think it is. But... would Mane think it was? Or... would your dad have told him it was?"

"Yeah, sure... Maybe. Shit, I don't know. I didn't... I've never talked to him about it. I talked to my Grandmother and sister and they... I know my grandmother talked to him about it. I don't know what my sister's done."

Abby's watching Stan. "If Mane is dead, you can't actually make a case against John, can you?"

Burley inclines his head, looking sad. "That's why I'm here. Only shot I've got at this is getting John so pissed off he admits to telling Mane to do it, or admits to wanting it done, or... something."

Tim sighs. "You're gonna have a hell of a time with that."

"Hard to piss him off?"

"Not if you're me. The rest of the world, not so easy."
"You are NOT getting back on that ship!" Abby says, very sharp, very afraid.

"Wasn't volunteering for it," Tim sounds tired.

"And I'm not offering to take you there. Just want background. He and your sister are still close?"

"Sort of. They get along. They always have. I was supposed to be brave and bold and... Navy. She is brave and bold and sassy and... He never pulled any shit on her because she never caved. I always caved, so I got piles of shit heaped on me."

"You got piles of shit heaped on you because he's a fucking monster. It wasn't ever about who you are. It was always on him."

Tim gently presses his foot against Abby's palm, sort of the equivalent of squeezing her hand.

"He wanted to make me into someone else. She naturally is more of the kind of person he was aiming for."

Burley asks, "Does she know about you and him?"

"I've told her."

"Does she believe it?"

"I don't know. Maybe? She's never said she didn't, or that I was pissing him off, or it was my fault, or anything."

"But she still spends time with him?"

"Yeah. Not a ton. He's at sea probably eleven months a year. I'm nine years older than she is. My parents got divorced when I was eighteen and for most of when she was old enough to remember, he was away. So most of her memories of him is of this cool guy who'd occasionally show up, play with her, shower her with praise for being such a good girl, and bring her presents. Most of my memories of are of man who was at best silently disappointed in me, and at worst screaming about how he was going to... beat me into Navy shape and make me be a real man."

"Did he actually beat you?"

"No." Burley notes that McGee's sounding distanced from this, like he's remembering something he read. He's seen that before in people remembering things they don't want to deal with. "When he was teaching me how to fight, he hit me a few times, but when it was clear I wasn't coordinated to duck away from the punches or block them, we stopped. So, one afternoon, and he was soft-balling it. Mostly taps. No harder than what Gibbs does with a headslap."

"Enough to sting, let you know you got hit, not enough to even raise a pink spot on the skin."

"Yeah. When Kelly was born, I told Sarah she didn't have to cut either of our parents out of her life. They weren't the same people for her that they were for me. Ten years makes a difference." Tim lets out a yawn.

"I should let you sleep."

"You need anything else?"

"Nah. I'll be back later, when I know more."
"Okay."

Abby stands up. "I'm going to walk Stan out."

"Good. I'll just lay here."

"Go to sleep."

"Okay."

Jimmy and Gibbs and Vance are waiting outside of the room. Abby looks at them, and Vance gets the idea from that look that maybe right now is a good time for him to take a walk, so he heads down the hallway, out of earshot.

She quietly says, "By 'beaten into Navy shape' he means 'threatened with gang rape and having his dick cut off' more than once."

"Oh shit."

Jimmy nods. "First time Tim took me shooting, I wasn't exactly gung ho about shooting anything, even a target. I'm a doctor. I don't love guns. He tells me there's no way I'll be worse than he was when he started, and proceeds to tell me about being seven years old and getting laughed at and chewed out by his dad because he doesn't just automatically know how to shoot, and how by the time he was fifteen the chewing out got so bad that he's standing there with a loaded gun in his hand as his Dad's reaming him, calling him a useless fag and a cunt, thinking about how if he blew the man away they wouldn't put him in jail for more than six years."

Stan shakes his head. "God."

"You want to press his buttons, you want him so mad he'll admit to anything, you hit him with that. He might be nice to his daughter and mom, but hates women and he hates gays, and if you can work that into it, you'll have him in a blind rage," Abby says.

"You sure?" Stan asks. "Have you ever met him?"

"No. But I'm sure. He dreams about it sometimes, talks in his sleep, repeats the shit that man called him. You don't use that sort of language unless there's a lot of hate in there. You don't fixate on your kid, not like that, not unless that's a big issue for you."

Jimmy nods. "Ducky's speculated about that, too. Says it fits the profile. Closeted homosexual, lots of self hate. A lot of the shit Tim took was for not being... 'male' enough or aggressive enough. Anything about him that was less than Rambo level hard and male freaks John out, reminds him of who he is under his facade."

"You and Ducky talked about this?" Abby's curious as to what they came up with.

"We've talked about a lot of things, hours and hours alone working together, we've talked about all of you at one time or another."

"Oh."

Gibbs isn't saying anything. He's just watching Stan. "Case is stuck isn't it?"

"Mane killed himself this afternoon. Left a note. Said he planned the attack to stop Tim spreading his lies."
Gibbs closes his eyes, then opens them slowly. "You've got nothing on McGee."

"No."

Gibbs bites his lip. "And he's too damn smart to say anything."

"Hoping to get him pissed."

Gibbs shakes his head. "Not so pissed he'll admit to ordering it."

"I can try."

"You'll fail."

"You think you can do better? I'll give you a shot if you can keep it under control enough to not hit him."

Gibbs shakes his head. He knows he can't. "No. You get to Admiral, you've got control. You know when to talk and when not to. And he'll shut the fuck up and there'll be nothing..." Jimmy notices that Gibbs is biting his lip so hard, it's bleeding.

"Jethro." He lightly touches Gibbs' hand. "Stop it."

Gibbs relaxes a hair. "I interviewed him once. Nothing. Cold son of a bitch just sat there. Couldn't break him, could barely get him to admit anything."

"What was that case about?" Burley asks.

"Doctor on a ship got killed. You were on the ship. Last case we worked together."

Stan nods. "Didn't even know he was involved with that."

"He barely was. Just on the ship. Knew the Doc. Mostly pulled him in because I'd never seen Tim's dad before, didn't know the shit they had, and was curious. Big mistake."

Abby's glaring at him. "That's why you questioned him? He's been having nightmares since because..."

"I didn't know, and back then you didn't, either."

She closes her eyes, looking sad. "I didn't. I should have."

"So this is a close in secret?" Burley asks.

"Really close," Abby replies.

"Was there any shot Tim was going to go further with this?"

"No!" Jimmy answers, hot. "Look, not even all of us know. Tony doesn't. Ziva doesn't."

"Probably do by now." Abby says. "No way he hasn't asked for more details. We all knew they didn't get on, but Tim doesn't like talking about it, so he's told the absolute minimum number of people he can."

"Penny talked to John, yelled at him, if Mane heard that... She can be very passionate and loud and... And she would have done it in person, and..." Gibbs shakes his head. "If there's a woman I
don’t want yelling at me, it's Penny."

Jimmy's got his phone out. "What's your number?"

Stan answers.

"Just texted you her number. You'll probably want to talk to her. See what happened with her and John and if Mane was part of that."

Burley nods. "I'll let you know what I find." Then he heads off.

He decides to hold off on calling Penny until he knows more about Mane. So, once he's back on the ship it's Millin's turn to talk.

"You ever watch the Simpsons?" she starts off with as Angua, Olnton, and Burley sit around the conference table, looking at pictures of him.

Three heads nod.

"Okay, say hello to Lt. Smithers. From everything I can see Mane, literally, lived for his boss. Short of the picture of him in skivvies the heart shaped frame, he's got all the trappings of the desperately in love, hyper-over-achieving underling."

"Was he?" Burley asks. Given what he knows about McGee, this might be an interesting lead.

"Not exactly. Not romantic. At least, not from anything I could tell. Well... It'd make sense, but all the scuttlebutt leaned more toward massive suck up and revenge... Not revenge, but... I don't know."

That's got everyone's attention. "Okay, so John's the hot shot Drone guy, right?" Millin asks.

They all nod.

"Mane's one of three boys, all of them are in the Navy. His middle brother was an aviator, killed in a training run. His wingman's plane had some sort of mechanical issue that took both of them out."

Burley fills in the blank. "So he gets himself working with the guy who will make sure that planes don't have pilots anymore."

Millin nods.

"Even better," Olnton adds, "If he becomes Secretary of Defense, he'll have the power to shift a lot of money and resources into unmanned arms. I was looking through his reports and publications, McGee's not just on the airborne drones kick. He's been pushing for unmanned tanks, unmanned planes, unmanned subs, smart rockets, and mech style warriors for the few guys who'd actually need to be on the ground."

"If he had his way, something like ninety percent of our soldiers would never leave the US or a battleship. They'd all be in computer centers running machines from far away, and never get anywhere near live fire."

Olnton pulls up a report onto the television screen. "This is McGee's latest report that's making the powers-that-be all happy. Pretty much it's a plan for a post-WWII style industrial revolution, where instead of cars coming off the lines in places like Cleveland and Detroit, it'd be drones. A multi-disciplinary way to get weapons producers to start building massive piles of unmanned stuff in depressed areas in an effect to improve local economies, while, at the same time retraining current
soldiers and sailors for working in computer hubs. So, big push for lots of brains all working on this stuff at once. Lots of manufacturing jobs. And the next President gets to look strong on defense and offense, without a parade of dead soldiers on the news.

"That report is what's making everyone think he's the golden boy for the next Secretary of Defense."

The four of them look at each other. Mane being hyper-protective of his Boss makes sense. Now they're all staring at Burley, waiting for him to fill in the lies side of the equation.

"McGee was abusing his kid. Verbally beat the shit out of Tim for years. Never used a fist, never left a mark, but… Tim's whole family is convinced of it."

"Are you?" Angua asks.

"The guy who trained me on how to sniff out a lie believes it, and he's the sharpest lie detector I know. And, yeah, it feels real to me. If that got out…"

"Secretary of Defense goes up in smoke," Millin finishes.

"That's worth killing for, right?" Angua adds.

"I think so," Burley says. "Got a few more questions to ask before I take a swing at him. Then… I'm starting to get a plan in place."

Asking people questions they don't want to answer, at horrible times in their lives, when everything hurts and everything is falling apart is one of Burley's least favorite aspects of being a cop.

Doing it over the phone is worse.

But he doesn't have the time to get Penny to California, and he doesn't have the time to go to DC and then come back so…

So he punches in the number that Palmer gave him, and waits a few seconds for the ring.

And one more.

And… "Hello?"

"Hello, is this Penny Langston?"

"Yes." Her voice is rough, and he can tell just by the sound that she's been crying all day.

"This is Agent Stan Burley…" He hears a voice in the background, followed by the sound of the phone being handed over.

"Burley?"

"DiNozzo?"

"Hey, look, is there any possible way to do this another time, Stan?"

"I wish. You know the drill, DiNozzo."

"Yeah, I do. Just, it's been a bad day here."

"I know. I'll keep it fast."
He hears the phone being passed back again. "I take it you're in charge of my grandson's case."

"Yes, Ma'am. Only a few questions, and they're quick."

"Fire away."

"Did you know Lt. Mane?"

"Not well. I've met him several times, and he usually hovered in the background somewhere when I visited on board."

"Okay. Look, this one's not good, but, I need to know, did you talk to your son about your grandson, and was Mane there for it?"

"Talk?"

"About… Did you talk to him about abusing Tim, and did you use the word abuse, and if so, was Mane there?"

"I…" There's a long pause, sound of someone trying to remember all the details of something. "Yes."

"Okay, thanks, that's all I needed."

"Agent Burley, why do you need this?"

"Mane killed himself today. His suicide note claimed full responsibility for the attack on Tim, and according to him he did it to stop Tim from telling lies."

"Oh God." Penny swallows hard. "Yes. Early last summer… We started talking, and then yelling, and then I walked out and we haven't spoken since. Mane was there for at least the first few minutes. I thought he left, but if he was hanging around, he could have heard."

"Mrs—"

"Doctor…"

"Sorry, I didn't know. Palmer gave me your number. I'm doing this cold. Doctor Langston, I know it happened. But… how does your son think of it? Does he think he was abusive?"

She snorts a bitter laugh. "He thinks Tim was too soft, and that he needed to be toughened up, and that as long as he didn't hit Tim, anything was in bounds. He thought the fact that Tim was starting to talk about it was just another sign that he was too soft."

"Okay. So if Mane flat out asked, 'Did you abuse your son…'"

"He'd say no, and that was a ridiculous idea. He'd say he never laid a hand on him, and that he did everything he could to be a good father and to make him the kind of man who could stand up for himself and what he believed in. He'd say he failed, and that Tori, his wife, and me, spent too much time coddling Tim, let him grow up stunted and weak."

Burley shake his head. "God. I'm going to go talk to him next."

"Agent Burley, did he order this?"

"I don't know. If it's any comfort, it's likely no one will ever be able to prove he did."
"No, that's not a comfort."

"I'm sorry."

"I am, too. Have you seen Tim?"

"Yeah, little bit, earlier today. He's awake and talking. Bet you guys could give him a call if you wanted to."

"Thank you."

"Goodbye." He hears Penny hang up.

Time to talk to the Admiral.

Everything hinges on a confession, and if this guy's unbreakable, then Burley has to get him comfortable, has to get him wanting to talk. So, if he's walking into the den of a misogynistic, homophobic, ultra-hard ass, then he's going to be a misogynistic, homophobic, ultra-hard ass, too.

Stan takes his wedding ring off, and rubs his hand to make sure the indent goes away. No tan line, thank God. He ruffles up his hair a bit, and pops a stick of gum, chewing it sassily. "So, I look like a pig?"

"Give me a leer."

Burley looks Millin up and down. She giggles at it. "You'll do."

He leers again and winks. "Thanks sweetheart."

"You swat my ass in there and I'll break your hand."

He snaps back into his regular personality. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"Good."

Millin heads in first. She takes a moment to set up her computer, and starts in on Admiral McGee's Article 31 rights, laying out his right to counsel, right to not incriminate himself, and all the rest of that.

Burley is watching through the computer feed she's got set up.

McGee is annoyed. He can't really tell how much of this is annoyed at not doing his job (he was complaining about being stuck in his quarters) versus annoyed that Millin is a woman (he can see the way John's looking at her, the look of a guy who knows how he's got to behave to make everyone happy, but that behavior doesn't go more than skin deep).

Just as Millin's wrapping up the Article 31s, Stan breezes in.

"Come on, Amelia, you know he knows 'em. No need to waste the man's time." He turns to McGee, offering his hand, and then gives McGee a good, firm, knuckle cracking show of dominance handshake. "Agent Stan Burley. We'll get this done and you moving again as fast as we can."

McGee nods minutely.

"How about you head off and let us talk."
Millin nods, looking annoyed at him.

He winks at her. "Thanks, love." He looks back at John as she heads out. "My tech bunny. I love her. Anything I need, she can do. First off, let me get you up to date on Tim. He's in the hospital, and they say he's going to be fine. Probably. They aren't sure about his right hand, but he's a lefty… Not like he'll be a cripple."

John nods very slightly. "That's a relief."

"Yeah, for me, too. I've worked with him a few times, always liked him. He's… he's a good guy."

"Thank you."

"Always kind of surprised to see him there, but he's a good guy."

"Why does Tim being an NCIS Agent surprise you?" John sounds interested in that.

"Hey, you know, takes all kinds right? But… he's… you know… He's not Dirty Harry. But you know that, right? And he's great with a computer, just a really… nice guy, maybe a little sensitive, but tech guys can be that way. Not like you've ever got to stare down a computer when it's aiming a gun at you, right?"

"Yeah."

"Kind of surprised to see he married Abby. I mean, I didn't see that coming. She was wild back in the day, but… Shit… I'm telling tales. Tell me about Lt. Mane."

"Why were you surprised about him and Abby?" John seems mildly intrigued by this.

"Hey, not my place to say, but, look, girls want a certain sort of guy when they want excitement, and… Okay, let's just say, back in the day, Abby and I got into some exciting situations," Burley says with a smile and a knowing smirk. "And then want another type of guy to settle down and raise babies with, and apparently he's a baby kind of guy."

The Admiral smirks at that. "His sister tells me he's very good with babies."

"And he would be. He's a very kind, very gentle sort of guy, you know? If I ever have kids, I'd let him look after them in a heartbeat. Like I said, he's a good guy. I like him. I'm really sorry any of this shit happened to him."

The Admiral nods, and Burley notes that he can't even muster an 'I'm sorry about that, too' sort of comment.

"So, it's my job to investigate the shit, and unfortunately that means holding you up for a bit."

John nods, weary. "I understand that everything that can be done, must be done, to bring the man who assaulted my son to justice. Do you have him in custody?"

"Yeah. Right now we're working on the how and why."

John nods. Theoretically, if things went the way they were supposed to. As soon as SecNav found out about the attack, John was escorted to his room, and kept there, without contact with the outside world, since.

Burley looks at his notes, a stalling technique, he wants to see how patient John is, if he'll try to rush him, but he doesn't, just sitting there, waiting.
"Now, you didn't know Tim was coming onboard, right?"

John nods.

Burley rolls his eyes a bit. "Kind of a dick move. I get the upper levels like to do stuff like that, but..."

John doesn't respond to that.

"Yeah, I know, can't say anything about it, whatever the guy in charge wants to do is fine, right?"

Very small nod, tiny, tight smile.

"So, you go into the conference room with Mane, and there's SecNav, Lt. James, and Tim?"

"Yes."

"And then everything on the ship went bonkers."

"There was a full red-alert situation," John says precisely. Stan gets the sense he doesn't like the idea of anything he's involved with being 'bonkers.'

"Of course. And what did you do then?"

"I spent most of the afternoon on deck, keeping an eye on the effort to track down the hacker."

"Did you guys track down the hacker?"

"That's why I'm here, isn't it? We tracked down the hacker, and something unfortunate happened to him?"

Burley nods. "That's what we're going to talk about. What can you tell me about Lt. Mane?"

He sees a little guard go up in McGee's posture. "What sorts of things do you want to know?"

"Is he good at his job?" Burley asks.

"He wouldn't have his job if he wasn't."

"Your fitness evals for him show that he's an exemplary secretary."

John nods. "He is. I've had many assistants over the years, and he's the finest one so far."

"Would you say he's devoted to you?"

"Certainly. He takes better care of me than my wife did."

Interesting choice of comparisons. "Uh huh. And is he anything other than your secretary?"

"What do you mean by that?" The Admiral is spitting mad from that accusation. He's got it under a cold shell, but Stan can feel it.

Stan holds his hands up. "Hey, not trying to rub you wrong. People like what they like, and I'm always live and let live about that, you know, as long as I don't have to see it. Just... Look, like I said, Tim's a great guy, but there's always been rumors. He's... you know..." John nods very slightly, looks almost like an involuntary motion. "He's married to Abby so he's got to go at least both ways, so let's say he's flexible and sometimes that runs in families. Just got to find out how close
"Why do you need to know how close I am to Lt. Mane?" John bites out, grudgingly.

Stan just looks at the Admiral.

"Is he a suspect? All the MA would tell me was that Tim had been attacked and I was to remain in my quarters until the NCIS Agent talked to me."

"Can't say. So, once again, how close are you?"

"Ask him."

"Trust me, I have, and he's not talking. So I'm talking to you. What kind of relationship do you and Mane have?"

"He's my secretary."

"And that's it?"

John's eyes are narrowed and he's mad. "That's it."

"Huh… Really?"

"Really." His voice is icy cold. "We work together all day, every day, three hundred days a year. We are close. I am fond of him. He is an extremely talented young man."

"Good to know. Tell me about Tim."

"What about Tim. I've seen him twice in the last decade. We do not speak. I barely recognized him when I saw him."

"Then let me be more specific, tell me about the lies Tim's telling. The lies that have Mane's panties in a twist."

John looks alarmed. Stan waits. They're both silent for a full two minutes.

"What lies are worth killing a man for, John?"

John still doesn't say anything. Another full minute of silence stretches by.

"See, one thing Mane is saying is that Tim needed to be shut up. That he was telling lies about you. And those lies were so bad that killing Tim looked like an appropriate option to get him to shut up. So, you and Mane, you fucking him or something?"

John slams his hands onto the top of the table. "You shut your mouth about that. There is nothing, at all, along those lines… How would you even… Not another word."

"Fine, you're not. Which means you're screwed, because if you were fucking him," Stan flips over the picture of Tim, beaten to a pulp, arm in traction, whole body bruised, "doing this to a guy who might damage your reputation makes some sense, 'cause if you were fucking him, I could see how he might take the stories Tim's starting to tell as a personal insult. But if he's just your secretary, I have to think you put him up to it."

John doesn't say anything, he doesn't respond to any of Stan's words. He just stares at the shot, and then quietly says, "I always told him if he didn't learn how to fight, someone would hurt him."
"Didn't…" Burley wants to spit. Instead he calmly gets the photos of the sailors. "This is Seaman Kevin Manz, fighting Tim's probably cost him his voice. This is Seaman Ylyns: broken nose, broken orbital, broken jaw, two broken fingers, two lost teeth, more sprains then they could count. This is Seaman Nordstrom: cracked wrist, broken toes, broken nose, broken ankle, two sprained wrists, and a dislocated elbow. Here's Seaman Chase, broken hand, dislocated fingers, broken knee, and two knocked out teeth. All four of these men are at least ten years younger than your son and have at least twenty pounds on him, and went after him at once! The only reason Tim's alive right now is because he's a fucking ninja.

"Didn't…" Burley shakes his head. He places the shot of Tim's face back to the top of the pile. "Tell me Admiral, you work with Lt. Mane every single day, you claim you're not fucking him, so tell me why he thought this would be desirable to you?"

"I don't know."

"Bullshit. There's no possible way a guy like Mane does this to your son without your approval, so what did you do, suggest that it'd be nice if he stopped talking? You let loose on Mane when it turned out Tim was behind the test on this ship? You rip him a new one for not doing his job, and you tell him he had a new job, and he already knew what you wanted? Or did you just flat out tell him you wanted Tim dead?"

John's still staring at the photos, looking at the other soldiers now. "Tim did this?"

"No, the Easter Bunny did. Yes, Tim did that. One on four, and sure, he lost because that's what happens when the odds are that out of your favor, but he held on long enough they weren't able to kill him. Now tell me, why did you order Mane to do this?"

John takes a quick breath and looks up at Burley. "At no point did I ever order, suggest, hint, imply, or in any way shape or form suggest on any possible level that I wanted this" he taps the photo, calm and in control again, "to happen. This interview is over. If you wish to speak to me again, you'll have to make an appointment for a time when I have counsel present."

Burley stands up. "As you wish."

"What'd'ya got Stan?" Gibbs asks as Stan walks towards him and Vance. It's been a hell of a long day. Almost dinner time. They moved a cot into the room for Abby, and she's sacked out on it. Jimmy's napping on the sofa.

Supposedly he and Vance are getting dinner, then Vance is taking the jet back to DC. In the morning, he'll let Tony, Ziva, and Ducky know what the plan is.

"Let me sit down first, okay?" Vance leads them into a waiting room and finds a cup of coffee, handing it to Burley. "Thanks." He drinks deep and sighs. He's been on for nineteen hours and he's tired. "I've got a brick wall. Everything comes to an end with Mane."

"The secretary?" Vance asks.

"Yeah. And at this point, I honestly don't know if McGee ordered it or if Mane knows his Boss so well he did it without orders. Either way it stinks. I know McGee approves of it, but I can't prove he ordered it. Technically I can't prove anything, not for McGee."

Stan slumps back in his seat. "I've got no physical evidence. I've got no heresay. The only guy who could have fingered McGee is dead, and did it himself, in front of a hundred witnesses. I've got absolutely nothing to even suggest McGee knew or was in on it."
"Mane wouldn't do it without his approval," Gibbs says.

"I shot my bolt on that, and missed. Not only can I not prove that, but… Mane apparently heard about the stuff involving Tim and his dad. John's a hot shot drone guy, possibly the next Secretary of Defense, which would give him a lot of power for making those drone dreams real." Gibbs and Vance are following along. "Mane's lost a brother. Aviator, killed in a training mission. To say he was gung ho about drone pilots was an understatement. If he thought Tim was an obstacle to John's career, even without approval, he might have moved on it. As long as John gets to where he's supposed to go, Mane would have seen it as some sort of 'greater good.'

"He had it planned out so, if Jarvis hadn't shown up at the right time, one minute Tim would have been alive in prison, the next he would have had an accident, alone, in a locked cell, that no one would have seen."

"Everyone would have known it was a mess, but nothing could be proven," Vance says.

"Yeah. I don't know if he was supposed to just go missing, or if they were planning on finding him hanging by his belt. Hell, for all I know, he was going to 'flip out' and throw himself against the bars until he killed himself. No one below Mane was thinking properly about this. And no one above him can be tied to it."

"Nothing?" Leon says.

"The absolute best I can do is make the case that Weis and the rest of them were sure they'd get away with it because the Admiral wanted it done. It was his secretary doing the asking."

"So you're saying you've come up with mitigating factors for the defense lawyers to put into play, but nothing even a second year law school student couldn't shred on the stand as evidence," Leon replies.

"Exactly. Hell, you don't even need two years of law school to kill this case. Watch a year of Law and Order and you're qualified to kill this case."

Gibbs is sitting there, fuming, holding his cup so hard it looks about to break.

"I can't do it, Gibbs, and…" Burley shakes his head, "even for you I'm not fabricating evidence."

Gibbs looks up at him and shakes his head. "Not asking you to, Stan. Give me the transcripts, the videos, let me see everything, and I'll find a way to hang him."

Stan glances at Vance and Vance nods. "You've got email, right?"

Gibbs nods dryly.

"You brought a computer with you?"

He blinks. He didn't. "Jimmy did. He'll let me use his."

"Okay. I'll head back to the ship, send it all over to you, and get some sleep. Maybe with some rest and your fresh eyes, we'll find something." But Burley doesn't sound like he believes that.

Once he leaves, Leon says to Gibbs. "He's good at his job. If there was something, he'd have found it."

Gibbs shakes his head. "I know. But if I ever want to sleep again…”
"I know. Take your time, look over everything. But, if you two can't come up with something between now and this time tomorrow, I've got to let him loose."

Gibbs nods.

"Jethro," Gibbs knows by the look on Vance's face that he's talking about what's going to happen with that rifle now that they have no case. "It can't happen tomorrow. Or the day after. Can't be soon."

"I know. Won't be. This'll be barely a memory."

"I'll give you all the cover I can, but you can't do it sloppy."

Gibbs nods one last time and then gets up to go to Tim's room, and grab Jimmy's computer.
Gibbs gets a text from Abbi as he's opening up Jimmy's computer. *I can get a flight now, hop all over the US, and be there by seven tomorrow morning, or I can wait, catch a red-eye, fly direct, and be there by nine.*

*Take whichever works best. Two hours won't kill me.*

*Probably nine then. How's Tim?*

*Sleeping. Probably.* Gibbs looks over at Tim, who's laying in the bed, quiet. *His eyes don't open easy, too much swelling from the broken nose, so even when he's awake, they're closed. He's not talking right now, and looks pretty relaxed, so asleep. I hope.*

He can feel Abbi nod. He looks at Jimmy's computer. He's gotten himself logged in, and there's everything, just like Burley promised.

*Would you look at something for me?*

*Sure.*

*Tim's case.*

*Certainly. Send what you've got over.*

He does, and after a minute she sends back. *Am I looking for anything in particular?*

*Nail John to the fucking wall.* He texts that in, and then stops, and then deletes. *I'm too close to this one. Tell me how it looks from the outside?*

*Sure, Jethro. Have you been awake since you left?*

*Yeah.*

*I've got the notes. I'm leaving for the plane at 4:00 AM. Between now and then, you sleep. You can bone up on the notes then and we'll talk them through when I get there. But you get some sleep.*

*Can't.*

*Jimmy's still there, right?*

*Yeah.*

*Have him give you something if you can't fall asleep on your own. I'll text when I leave for the airport. Sleep.*

*Yes Ma'am.*

Time stops in a hospital. Night, day, who the hell knows? Everything slows down, the light never changes, and the routine continues twenty-four seven.

Abby's sleeping.
Gibbs is sleeping. (Or doing a convincing job of pretending to be asleep. And in that he gave Gibbs a horse-tranquilizer-sized dose of sleeping pills, Jimmy's thinking he's not faking.)

Jimmy's watching McGee's interrogation, over and over and over.

Other than the thirty seconds when Tim was seeing him for the first time in years back in '13 ('12? Jimmy doesn't remember, it was a while ago.) but with the exception of that less than a minute long encounter where he caught the tail end of Tim seeing John, and more or less going white, then storming off in a cloud of snark, he's never seen John.

Never had a clear image to go with the stories.

And now he does.

It's funny. Jimmy's never actually wanted to kill anyone before. He's thought he has. He's certainly been mad. But, especially since he shot Lincoln, and really felt that weight of an ended life in his hands, even though it was a life trying to end his, he's had no desire to kill anyone.

He does now. He can feel exactly how different this is. He cannot, on any level, connect with the idea that John is human.

He watches the interview again. It's not long, but he's catching layers of McGee each time he sees it again. That little flicker of disgust at the idea of Tim being bi. The lack of any horror at the sight of him beaten to a pulp. The shock at the idea that Tim managed to keep those four men from killing him. The fact that he is furious at being accused of sleeping with his secretary but, at most, and this is a charitable read, mildly disconcerted at the idea that his secretary ordered his son killed.

Jimmy doesn't have a "gut" per se. And he's not Ducky; he can't read a guy just by looking at him, but right now, he'd bet everything he owns on the idea that John ordered the assault on Tim. He'd bet just as much that he never had to say the words, because saying the words would be… inappropriate or something, but by voice, or by look, or the same way that Ducky could sort of think 'microscope slides for a histology report' to Jimmy and he'd go grab it without a word. Somehow, John made it clear that this was what he wanted.

Except, as he looks up at Tim, sleeping, this isn't what he wanted because Tim's still alive.

In addition to no "gut" Jimmy's not a cop, and he's not a lawyer, but even with that, he knows this can't be taken to court. There's nothing here. At all. Wanting someone hurt or dead isn't illegal.

The fucker's going to get away with it. That's the beginning and middle of the story. And right now, Jimmy's perfectly happy with the idea that one day, with a rifle in his hands, he'll be the end.

He hears Tim shift a little, like he's trying to roll toward Jimmy, followed by a soft grunt of pain, and then, "You've watched it, what? Six times now. Turn it off."

"Oh, God, sorry. Thought you were asleep." Jimmy takes his ear buds out and closes his computer. He's got the volume low, but when John starts yelling, it's probably slightly audible even with his earbuds in.

Tim turns his head toward Jimmy and opens his eyes. "And I thought you were Gibbs."

Jimmy smiles ruefully. "Not today." He takes Tim's hand in his. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit."
"Want more pain meds?"

"Yeah."

Jimmy hits the call button.

"Think they'll let me eat something?"

"We'll find out." Yes? Comes from the voice on the other end of the call button. "Hi. Room 245 here, could we get some more pain medication?"

Sending someone to you.

"Thanks."

"You're not going to find anything," Tim says when Jimmy puts the call button down. "You don't get to Admiral by being the guy who makes stupid impulsive decisions. Mane's fucked. It'll all fall on him. But he'll have made sure it can't touch him."

Jimmy thinks about that, not sure what Tim knows/remembers from the last few days. "Mane's dead, Tim."

"Right." Tim winces a little. "I remember that. Sort of. Burley was here, right?"

"Yeah, he was."

"Obviously, he interviewed The Admiral, and it didn't go well."

Jimmy shakes his head. "Vance is giving us until tomorrow to try and find something."

"It won't be there, Jimmy."

"Gotta do something."

Tim squeezes his hand gently. "You are doing something. You're here."

He snorts a bit at that. "Doesn't feel like much."

"It's enough. Right now, this is all I need."

Jimmy's fingers stroke over the back of Tim's hand, careful not to brush the tender bruised skin, or the sore spot where the IV leads into him. "And later?"

"We'll talk about later when I'm sober."

"Okay."

Tim sighs, he's starting to go from the steady everything aches pain level to being aware of each individual pain, too. He's hoping that nurse shows up soon. "What's going on back east?" he asks to distract himself.

"Oh... Um..." It takes Jimmy a second to switch gears. "Everyone hopes you get well soon. Penny's wrecked. No one's said anything about this to your sister, yet. Don't even know what to say or how..."

"Probably a better in-person conversation."
"Yeah. Abbi's on her way here. Going to get in in the morning. I think Gibbs has her looking over the case as well."

"The girls?"

"Busy being babies. Breena tells me Kelly keeps asking where you and Abby are. Might try a call tomorrow, maybe not skype, maybe just a voice, see if that doesn't freak her out."

"Call would be good. Not skype. Don't want her to see me like this."

"You're looking a little better. Swelling's going down some. The worst parts are just really bad now."
Jimmy thinks about that, looking at Tim. "You haven't seen yourself yet, have you?"

"No."

"Want to?" Jimmy asks. He can find that mirror Abby keeps in her purse.

"Do I?"

"Eh… I don't know. Not sure if your idea of how you look is better or worse than reality."

Tim looks at his left arm. "How's this compare to my face?"

"Face is worse."

Tim stares at the mottled blue, green, purple black of his one "good" arm. If this is better, his face has to look like it was tenderized with a meat hammer. "I can wait."

Gibbs feels halfway between drunk and hung over when he wakes up. He's got no idea what the hell Jimmy gave him, but whatever it was did the job.

He jerks on the sofa as his eyes find a clock. It's already 10:30, and he's way late to pick Abbi up.

Then a hand squeezes his gently. "I take it you needed the sleep," Abbi says dryly, kissing him.

He blinks once, twice, and once more, trying to put this right. She smiles gently and shakes her head. "Abbs called a bit before I landed. None of you have a car, would have made it tricky to meet me. I rented one and came over here."

He stretches, rubbing his eyes, wincing at the pain in his back.

"Got a room, too. Tonight you sleep on a real bed."

He looks around. Tim's still on the bed (like he'd be anywhere else.) Abby and Jimmy are gone.

"Where…"

"Sent them to use the room. Get some real sleep, on real beds. Showers. Go eat a real meal. Tim had to tell them to go, too, but they eventually got out of here."

Abbi kisses him again, and hands him a large cup of coffee.

He takes a deep drink. "Thank you."

"No problem. Though, if you want to give that back to me and sleep some more, I'm thinking you could use it."
Gibbs stands up and starts slowly walking around, trying to work some of the kinks out. "Not sure I'll ever move again if I sleep on that sofa again."

Abby points to the far side of the room. "Cot's free. Like I said, Abbs and Palmer are catching some zs at the hotel. Nurse said Tim could start having real food tonight, so they're sacking out, and I'll come back with dinner for all of us."

Gibbs looks at the cot. He can feel drugged sleep clinging to him.

"Come on," Abbi says, pulling him to the cot, "You're asleep on your feet. Nothing's happening right this second that needs you awake. I'm on watch."

He nods and lets her tuck him in.

Several minutes pass, and when Gibbs starts to snore again, Tim quietly says, "You're really good for him. You know that, right?"

"When'd you wake up?" she asks, half sitting on the side of his bed. After she got Abby and Jimmy out, it looked like Tim had drifted off, too.

"Few minutes ago. Heard what you were saying, figured he wouldn't go back to sleep if I was up."

"Good figuring. How are you feeling?"

He half-smiles, wryly. "Like I've been asked that five hundred times in the last two days."

"Got at least another thousand more coming."

"Yeah. First time I've woken up in... Fuck... What day is it?"

"Sunday."

"First time I've woken up since Friday and not felt stoned off my ass or in serious pain."

"Non-serious pain or only mildly stoned?"

"Everything aches. But that's actually better than it's been. And the room doesn't want to swim around whenever my eyes move, so I'll put that in the mildly-stoned column."

"Healing up in leaps and bounds."

Tim rolls his eyes a little. "Oh yeah." He looks around a bit, and sort of glares at that little table that's got his water on it. If he could reach over, he could get it, but he's not even remotely tempted to try reaching, because between his ribs, shoulder, and right arm, his torso is firmly convinced that it is going to stay in the position he's in, and any sort of moving is a very bad idea. "Can you hand me the water?"

"Sure." She scoots the tray table in front of him. "Here." Not only can he reach the water (which he now can, and does) but the broth the nurse brought him last night is also in reach. He's slow, and his hand is shaky, but he does manage to feed himself some.

And yes, it's slow. And he does spill some on himself. But right now, this is the first thing he's done for himself in days, and he is very glad that Abbi's letting him do it. "He got you looking over the case, right?" Tim asks between spoonfuls of broth.

She nods, not looking happy. She knew where Jethro wanted to take this, and she knows what
they've got evidence for, and she knows those two are not the same thing.

"There's nothing on him, is there?"

"Your dad, you mean?"

"Yeah."

She shakes her head. "Nothing I saw. Nothing Burley saw." She holds up Gibbs' phone. "He texted an hour ago, Mane's autopsy is done, and there's nothing to suggest it wasn't a legitimate suicide. He did it cold sober."

"Yep." Tim was expecting that. (Or would have been if he thought about it.) "Can I have that?"

"Sure." She hands over Gibbs' phone, and he goes scrolling through, looking for Leon's number. Takes a moment (He has to look through three times before he locates Vance, exactly where it should be, in the V section. He bumps his mental assessment from mildly-stoned to stoned), but he finds Vance, hits the button, and after a few rings gets him.

"Got something, Gibbs?"

"It's me, and no."

"McGee?"

"Yeah. Up and talking, for the moment, at least. There's nothing left on this one. Pull Burley out. Give him authorization to get my stuff from the brig, and..." he looks at his left hand, his wedding ring is there, but the wrist cuff is gone. Of course, the IV tube is taped to the back of his hand and where the cuff would go, and as best as he can remember he's had that IV the whole time he's been in and out of consciousness. "The infirmary. Then... Then that's it, case over."

"You sure, McGee?"

"I'm sure. You're not going to find anything. Not on him. Not like this."

"Okay. I'll make some calls. Any news on when you can come home?"

Tim thinks about that. "I think they said Wednesday. Arm gets out of traction on Tuesday, so... Wednesday, I hope."

"Okay. I'll make the calls."

"Thanks, Director."

"Not a problem. You take as long as you need to heal up, got me?"

"Got you. I'll be in on Thursday."

"McGee!"

"It's a joke."

"Good, or I will order you home until at least July."

"Noted, sir."
"Damn right," Leon says, hanging up.

"So there are people you still call, sir?" Abbi asks.

"It's been known to happen."

She laughs a little at that.

Leon holds his phone, debating on how exactly to do this. Finally he settles for an email. His official address to Jarvis'. It's a very formal, stilted, precise email, listing exactly where the case is, and what's happened.

Jarvis knows how the game is played; he'll understand what Vance hasn't written, what he won't write.

And while it's true that Jarvis is a political animal. It's also true that he knows that right now Vance can bring a whole lot more hurt onto him than John can, so even if Jarvis' natural inclination would be to drop and bury this, he'll go the extra mile to make sure it's taken care of, as well as it can be.

He gets a call from Clayt about an hour later. Short conversation, apparently he's rallied all the players on the board and is "handling it."

"Eat slow and easy. You haven't had any real food in days, so don't just gobble it down."

"Yes, Mom." Tim says to Jimmy, mouth watering at the plate in front of him. Any other day, two pieces of sourdough toast with butter would not be anywhere near this interesting to him, but right now, golden brown toast with a light smear of butter looks like absolute heaven.

Everyone else has bowls of cioppino, rich with shrimp and crab and scallops, and if this stays down, rumor has it he can have some of that, too.

But he can enjoy the smell of the seafood stew, and the taste of the toast, exploding in his mouth all buttery and sour and crispy, and food has never, ever been this good before.

His lizard brain thinks that, maybe, eventually, if they ever unhook him and let him shower again, sex might be really good, too. (Assuming he can find a way to do it that doesn't involve moving, or well, anything other than his dick getting touched… Might have to hold off on that.)

Which is when it occurs to him that he hasn't gotten up for three days. He knows liquids have been going into him. He can see the IV bag, and he's been drinking water and juice and broth, so… He looks around a bit and notices that, yes, there's a tube heading out from under the blankets.

He doesn't want to think too hard about that, but is rather pleased to see that apparently a catheter doesn't hurt once it's in place.

Burley's gotten the call from Leon. He's not surprised by it. There really was nothing left to do on this one. They've hit the point where the JAGs are doing their bit, quarreling among themselves about who faces what charges and how long in prison and all the rest of it.

Their job, finding the facts, is over.

Almost.
Burley heads to John's quarters on his own. He relieves the MA's that have been standing watch, making sure he's remained in his quarters.

He knocks quickly, and just as quickly hears, "Enter."

Stan steps in. John's at his desk, reading something, not bothering to look up at him. Burley does not wait. He should. Waiting to be acknowledge would be showing proper respect for McGee's rank, so he doesn't.

"As of ten minutes ago, your son's case is officially closed. You are back to active duty. Your ship may disembark whenever you desire."

John looks up at Burley and nods.

"My team and I will be gone within the hour. Seamen Manz, Ylyns, Nordstrom, and Chase, as well as Petty Officer Weis have been removed from the ship."

"Lt. Mane?"

"His remains have been transferred to the mortuary at Alameda, and his family has been notified of his suicide."

John blinks, but doesn't allow any other outward display of emotion. After a moment he says, "And would that be what you meant by Lt. Mane wasn't talking?"

"Yes. He left a note saying that he had to stop Tim's lies and then blew his head off in the enlisted mess. But he's just your secretary, right? Everyone has a secretary ready to blow his head off to protect his boss's career. You're just fond of him."

It was fairly satisfying to see John's eyelid start twitching at that, but in that he's not whipping out the cuffs, it's a hollow victory.

"Whole ship's talking about it. Had to do some damage control. After all, Tim's mission is classified. Most of your ship, fortunately, doesn't have a clue as to what actually happened with that. Just that some poor son of a bitch got beaten in the brig. As for Mane, scuttlebutt has it you two had a serious lover's quarrel. Apparently you're leaving him for someone younger and hotter. Even set up his transfer to a different ship. Broke the poor bastard's heart. Burley shakes his head. All of that's a cold lie. Sure there are lots of rumors flying around about Mane right now, but to the best of his knowledge that isn't one of them.

"Goodbye, Admiral." And with that, he turns and leaves.

It's a bit before breakfast time on Monday when Jarvis comes to visit again. Gibbs and Abbi haven't come back yet, so it's just him, Abby, Jimmy, and the nurse who is in charge of Tim's morning routine right now.

Jarvis makes all the right noises while the nurse is in the room, but when she asks how Tim's pain level is he flashes a significant look at Tim, who does manage to catch it, so he says he's doing okay now.

When she leaves Tim asks, "What was that?"

"A serious conversation that has to happen now rather than later, and you need to be as close to all here as you can get for it."
Tim rubs his eyes. He's starting to really ache all over again, and he can feel his pulse through his whole right arm, so right now not being all here sounds awfully good.

"Does it have to be now?"

Jarvis looks at Abby. "Yeah, it does."

"Fine."

Jarvis glances at Jimmy, not entirely sure where he fits into this whole thing. "Doctor, now might be a really good time for you to take a walk."

The glare Jimmy gives him could peel the skin off an orange.

"Or not. It's this cut and dried, you cannot prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, that Admiral McGee ordered the attack."

Jimmy and Tim and Abby know this. And it's very obvious in their collection of no shit glances that they have aimed at Jarvis.

"Tim, if you want your day in court, if you want to smear him, you can press charges. And I can make sure the judge who gets the case won't dismiss it out of hand. And yes, it will be excruciatingly embarrassing for your father. But you cannot win the case, and in addition to your father it will be horrendously embarrassing for everyone else involved. Specifically, it is an election year and we are gearing up for the final push before the convention, so it will be horrendously embarrassing for the President and for Mrs. Clinton, as the former Secretary of State, if their pet drone warrior starts to look bad. So I am asking you to let it lie."

That's not going over well.

Jimmy snorted at that, and Abby shoots out, "He just gets to walk away?"

"No." Jarvis pats a file that's sitting on his lap. "No, if you are quiet and discrete, I will make it beyond well worth your while. I was there, so I know he's behind it, and I know we can't prove it, and I want to see some sort of justice for this, too. So, you guys be quiet and I will make a promise."

"And what is this promise?" Tim asks, disappointed. Politics. He hates politics, and now he's smack dab in the middle of it.

"First of all, your father will never become Secretary of Defense. In fact, he's also been asked to step down from the Commission on Drone Warfare. The President and Hillary are both disassociating from him as fast as possible. He's no longer on the invite list for any of the fundraisers, his spot at the nominating convention as a speaker is gone."

That's not satisfying anyone. Yes, that will infuriate John, but that's not the level of payback Tim was hoping for.

"Eventually Leon will retire and there will be an opening at NCIS for a new Director. Short of you dying between now and then, it's yours."

Abby and Jimmy look impressed by that, but right now Tim's arm is hurting too much for that to really matter.

"You're trying to buy me off," Tim says, annoyed. Trying to hit him with politics when he hurts this bad is a terrible idea.
Jarvis looks at him, frustrated. Then it really hits him that this is the exact wrong time to do this, but that it also can't be put off, so the straight ahead no possible bullshit route is the way to handle this. "Of course, I'm trying to buy you off! This is politics, the gentle art of buying off as many groups as possible, as cheaply as possible, so you and yours get to do the stuff you want to do.

"Me and mine want to win the election and stay in power. It's that simple, and things that will make that difficult are issues to be taken care of.

"Let me be painfully blunt about this: If you go forward with this case on a criminal or civil level it will embarrass everyone involved, during an election campaign. In that that Paul guy is pulling voters away from the Democratic side by tacking hard left on the pacifist/isolationist side, by, among other things, hawking pictures of innocent people being killed in drone strikes, I have been told, in no uncertain terms, to offer you anything you want to keep you silent and to make sure that Admiral McGee does not end up with a bullet in him until after November 9th. You want Director of NCIS? When Leon retires, it's yours. Want a bigger budget? You've got it. Feeling burned on this whole thing? Your pension is vested, and you've got your full thirty years in benefits. Hell, they keep talking about spinning off a CyberTerror Division separate from Homeland. You want to head it up? It's yours. My job, right now, is to come up with something so grand that you will shut up about this and let it sleep until after the election. November 10th, you can do whatever you like and still reap every reward I'm offering, but if anything happens before then, you are on your own."

"I want him publicly stripped of rank."

Jarvis shakes his head. "That's the one thing I can't give you. Can't do it now, and unless he screws the pooch again, I won't have standing for it later."

"You won't let me kill him, so that's what I want."

Jarvis takes a breath. Time for the big guns. Wouldn't be the first time he's done something like this. Unlikely to be the last, either. "Position's not the only thing on the table. You shut up, and sometime, next year, your father will have heart attack. It will happen after an appointment with me. It will appear to have happened by natural causes, and in that your grandfather also died of a heart attack around the same age, no one will question it.

"Your Grandmother and sister will never have to wonder if they are sitting at a table with the man who killed their family. You will never have to worry about someone deciding that it's awfully convenient that the man who did you wrong ran into a sniper's bullet. No one will even notice that people who hurt Gibbs' family tend to have fatal accidents involving sniper's bullets. Leon won't have to cover anything up to make sure your tracks stay clean.

"So, yes, I am trying to buy you off. If you want public revenge more than actual justice and the safety and peace of mind of your family, I cannot stop you from running that play, but I will also make it immensely worth your while to decide to sit on your own hands for five months." Jarvis hands over the file. "This is my CV. This is what I did when I was on active duty. I'm sure that after reading it, you'll know that I've got the skills and connections to do exactly what I just said and get away with it clean. Read up. Think. Talk amongst yourselves—"

"Yes."

Abby and Jimmy both blink. Neither of them expected Tim to take the offer.

"This will never come back to us, right?"

"Right."
"Tim!" Jimmy says.

Tim flashes him the we'll talk about it later look. Much later, when they're alone and his body isn't throbbing with every heart beat. "Anything ever happens to him and our whole family is the prime suspect. Drops dead of a heart attack sounds just fine to me. No career advancement'll hurt him."

Tim looks at Jarvis. "There's really no way to strip him of rank?"

Jarvis shakes his head. "Not with as connected as he is, not without proof. Now, if he goes on the warpath and does something stupid, we're going to go full bore on him, but, I don't think he's going to try anything. And I've made sure his new secretary has loyalties that are not primarily aligned with your father's, so someone will be watching him all the time."

Tim nods. He approves of that built in safety measure.

"So, what do you want?"

Tim's eyebrows raise.

"Dead body is only part of the deal."

"It's enough." Except it's not, there's a nagging sense of that not being the right answer, and it takes him a minute to find the issue. His budget, and Abby's, and Vance... too low. "No, it's not. Twenty percent increase for the NCIS budget, and we don't ever go on the cutting board again. If I ever make Director, it'll be on my own merit."

Jarvis looks deeply amused by the idea of 'merit.' "If you shut up about this, you'll have earned it. You're as high as anyone gets on talent alone. The next jump up requires going above and beyond for your agency, and something like this qualifies. Trust me, no one you've ever worked for made it to Director of NCIS based on being an excellent cop or administrator."

"That's depressing."

Jarvis shrugs. That's just how it is. Talent can take you so far. Talent and a closet full of skeletons and people who owe you will take you a whole lot further. "You were already on Leon's short list for his replacement, this bumps you to the top and keeps you there. We can cement it now, or you can wait the ten years and see if you still want it then."

"I'll wait."

"Then it will be yours to turn down." Jarvis taps the file again, and if he was hurting less, Tim might have gotten that was more than a 'check out how bad ass I really am' gesture. But he is hurting, and he's starting to lose focus, and Jimmy sees it, so he goes looking for the nurse again.

Jarvis excuses himself.

By the time Jimmy gets back, Tim can feel each and every single break in his entire arm, as well as foot, and nose, and ribs, and just about wants to throw up from how bad he's hurting. Pain's trying to sweep away every other thought in his head, but he knows Gibbs and Abbi are coming soon, so he's got to say this, now, before they get here.

He's staring at Jimmy and Abby while the nurse adds something to his IV which is taking way too damn long to get into his system. "Take the folder, stuff it somewhere, and don't mention this. At all," he says through gritted teeth.

"We're not telling Gibbs?" Abby asks, looking appalled at that, while Jimmy stuffs Clayt's folder into
his go bag.

He nods, tears in his eyes. The nurse starts tutting about not waiting until you're hurting to ask for medication. "I'll keep that in mind," he whimpers, and then sighs as the first bit of whatever's in that IV starts to hit and the pain eases up a little.

By the time the nurse leaves he's back down to being able to feel his heart beat in throbs of pain in each broken bone, but that's an improvement, and he's still got two brain cells to rub together so he says, "I know you've got some sort of plan cooking. I know you're not moving on it until we can all talk. Just..." his eyes are trying to slide shut and everything's going sideways, whatever she gave him was really strong, "keep this quiet until the three of us can talk."

"Okay," Abby says from a very long distance away.

This time, John is not in his office, not waiting for Jarvis. So Jarvis waits there for him.

"Are you eager to get going?" he asks as John enters his office.

"Yes." It's clear by the look on his face that he'd be even happier if Jarvis were to fuck off and let him actually leave. "We're three days behind on our trip to Pearl."

"Yes, you are. Trips do tend to get delayed when someone's almost murdered on your ship. I take it you're not holding things up to offer your condolences to Mane's family in person?"

John's eyes narrow. "I've written them already. We're running late."

"Then I won't hold you long. Just some housekeeping to do to wrap this situation up. As I'm sure you know, of this point in time, nothing can be pinned to you on the assault on your son."

This would be where most people would say something like, I had nothing to do with that! but John remains silent. He doesn't flinch or respond on any level to that comment. Jarvis isn't sure if that's just him refusing to even acknowledge this whole mess, or an implicit acknowledgement of the fact that he did have something to do with it, or in that it's patently obvious that Jarvis thinks he was involved, he's not going to bother arguing about it.

"However, in that this entire thing has blown up, and your history with Tim has come out, there are going to be a few changes in your circumstance. First of all, you are no longer on the Commission for Drone Warfare. That's touchy enough without possibly being linked to a child abuser. Secretary of Defense is gone. Were there to be a scandal of some sort on your watch, this too would come out, which would raise unfortunate questions as to the wisdom of the President in appointing you, so you can no longer pass the background check for it. Both Barack and Hillary have requested that I convey to you that they are deeply grateful for the aid you've offered them in their different political adventures, but in that you are currently political plutonium, and in that it is an election year, they don't want you anywhere nearby. Your invitation to speak at the Nominating Convention has been unissued. As of right now you have a "scheduling conflict."

"The President would like to suggest that you look into a well-deserved retirement. You've offered long and respected service to your country, and while no one will force you out, it would be... prudent... if you were to just vanish."

John blinks at that, looking like he's been stabbed in the chest. He still refuses to say anything.

Jarvis sees that. He knows what the President requested on this, but he doesn't want to see John go. If he moves, then it'll be more difficult to find him again, say, in January after the swearing in, when
the wider world is no longer watching.

And seeing the way John's responded, the look of betrayal, the straightening of his shoulders, the set of his eyes, Jarvis knows what he needs to do to make sure that John stays right where he is.

"Now I'm going to offer my own suggestion, one I would certainly take if I were you. Retire. Now. While you've still got you rank and commission intact. Then go find somewhere far, far away, well outside of the United States. Change your name, consolidate your holdings, kiss your daughter goodbye, run there, and don't ever come back."

John's not impressed by that and it shows in his face.

"You know how I got to where I am, right?" Jarvis asks.

John nods. "Some of your missions were run off of ships under my command."

"Good. Then you know I don't scare easy."

"Never thought you did."

Jarvis steebles his fingers together, tapping the tips lightly. "Then trust me on this, there are very few men in this world who scare me. Very few men who can burn hot long enough, and keep enough of their mind in place, to act on that and get away with it. Leroy Jethro Gibbs is one of them. And since I don't have the proof to toss your ass in jail, he is going to kill you."

John laughs. "He can try. I met him once, wasn't that impressed."

Jarvis shakes his head. "Men have hurt his family before. They're dead now. And if you think somehow Tim isn't his family... or that he won't kill for him... I never took you for a fool. But if you think that, you are one. If memory serves you haven't seen combat since the '90s. I sent him on a wet work mission back in '12. Your son took on four combat ready sailors, at once, bare handed, and lived. Who do you think trained him? So, get it right in your head, if you do not vanish, Gibbs will kill you."

"Not today, not tomorrow. He's a sniper and has a sniper's patience. But one day, you're going to die, and he's going to do it."

"I don't back away from threats."

*Perfect.* He's got John focused on the wrong threat now. "Of course not. But you should. If you value being alive, you will run. Or, of course, you may request a protection detail, which would require you to explain why Gibbs is trying to kill you. But, let me be clear, if you remain an Admiral, then like before this happened, your movements and locations will always be known, anyone with any connections to the Navy will be able to locate you at any time, so I am suggesting that now would be a very good time to return to civilian life."

"Is that an order?"

"No. It is a suggestion from someone who doesn't want to see an Admiral murdered."

"An Admiral?" John asks, dryly.

"After the shit you just pulled on your son, I don't give a fuck if you get murdered. It didn't really hit me when he was doing it, but at three separate times, in understated ways, Tim suggested we not do this on your ship. In retrospect, I now know why.
"I was in the damn room when Mane came in, and I watched your face as he took Tim away. You know how you looked?" Jarvis smiles, brilliantly cold. "Like a predator about to kill. But, because my observation of your satisfaction at seeing your son dragged off to be murdered will not stand in court as proof of guilt, you are still a Four Star Admiral of the United States Navy, and it is my job as Secretary of the Navy to keep everything in order and looking good, so I will do that. Your current commission is up in '17. If you do not elect to retire, you will not be allowed to re-up."

"I will take your advice under consideration."

Jarvis knows the correct polite military code for *fuck off* when he hears it, so he nods and leaves, absolutely certain that he has made sure that John McGee will stay on active duty and under his gaze as long as need be to arrange a heart attack.
"Interesting luggage choice," Abbi says as Gibbs lifts his duffle to his shoulder. It's been sitting in the corner of Tim's room, mostly ignored and unopened for… Gibbs honestly isn't sure how long they've been here now.

He knows that he's periodically fished his toothbrush out of it, and that's it.

He doesn't say anything to that as she leads him out of Tim's room.

Not too long of a drive to the hotel room. Twenty minutes.

They ate at the hospital, so food's taken care of. Jimmy drugged him to the gills, so he's had enough sleep. But even with that, he just feels so aimless. No idea what comes next.

He puts his duffle down when they get into the room, and Abbi takes him by his hands, and then pulls him into the bathroom. "Shower, shave, clean clothing." She pats him gently on the rear. "You're getting pretty smelly, so take care of that." She flicks the water on. "In you go. I'll be back in a minute with your stuff."

"I can..." He's looking through the bathroom doorway to his duffle, knowing what she's going to see in there if she goes to find his toiletries.

"Shower. You honestly think I don't know what you've got in there? That's the duffle you pack for a six month float, not a week in a hospital. It's full, and I know for a fact that if all you had in there was clothing, it wouldn't have rectangular corners poking out of the side that look suspiciously like a rifle case."

He looks a little chagrined at that.

And in a minute, she is back, slipping into the shower with him, and his shampoo, soap, and razor. "HTR 2000. Nice rifle. Looks like it hasn't been cleaned in a while. I'm guessing it's not really yours."

"Right now it's no one's. Leon brought it when he told me about Tim."

Abbi nods. "You actually stupid enough to use it now?"

He shakes his head at that.

"Good." Abbi starts to wash his hair. Although Tim was asleep most of the time they were together today, it felt odd to try and really talk, especially about him, in front of him. "I take it you left some stuff out when you told me Tim and his dad don't get along."

Gibbs nods at that.

Abbi looks at him curiously.

"Any kind of shit you can lay on a kid without touching him, John did to Tim."

Abbi raises an eyebrow.

"Any kind. Not strong enough, not smart enough, not good enough, too gay, too girly, you name it, he dumped it on Tim. Only reason Tim even got in this mess is he told me not to kill him. I wanted to
do it when I found out, but he said no. He wanted a shot to go up against him himself."

"And it bit him."

Gibbs nods.

"What about now?"

Gibbs shrugs.

Abbi's standing in front of him, arms wrapped around his neck, staring into his eyes, looking exasperated. "Come on, don't give me that. If you're going to go off and kill someone, tell me about it. Don't let something like this catch me cold."

"It's not…" He closes his eyes and opens them. "I'm not lying to protect you… It's just…"

"Just…"

"I don't know." He shakes his head and looks away. "Jimmy says I can't take the shot. He's too protected to get in and do it close. So someone has to take the shot. And Jimmy's saying I can't do it, because everyone knows I'm the guy who takes the shot. And if he drops over dead with his head blown off… Penny'll know. Sarah'll know. Even if I do it clean, and I will, they'll know it was me."

"But you want to."

"Of course I want to! I want to…" the look on his face is an eloquent testimony to the universes of pain and torment Jethro would like to lay on John McGee. His shoulders slump. "But this time there are people waiting for me when I get home."

She strokes his face at that. She's not entirely sure what 'this time' means, but her guess is awfully close to right.

Abbi can see he's looking pretty lost right now. If he could run it as a case, he'd be okay. If he was planning the attack on John, he'd be okay. But right now, waiting, that's a problem.

Shampoo done, washed up, shaved, Gibbs finally says, "I can't just let him get away with it. He's got a whole lifetime of getting away with it, and I can't…and he drops over dead with his head blown off… Penny'll know. Sarah'll know. Even if I do it clean, and I will, they'll know it was me."

"But you want to."

"Of course I want to! I want to…" the look on his face is an eloquent testimony to the universes of pain and torment Jethro would like to lay on John McGee. His shoulders slump. "But this time there are people waiting for me when I get home."

She strokes his face at that. She's not entirely sure what 'this time' means, but her guess is awfully close to right.

Abbi can see he's looking pretty lost right now. If he could run it as a case, he'd be okay. If he was planning the attack on John, he'd be okay. But right now, waiting, that's a problem.

Shampoo done, washed up, shaved, Gibbs finally says, "I can't just let him get away with it. He's got a whole lifetime of getting away with it, and I can't…" Jimmy had said to keep it between them, but… He can't imagine Jimmy won't tell Breena so… "Jimmy asked me to teach him how to shoot."

"I don't know." He shakes his head and looks away. "Jimmy says I can't take the shot. He's too protected to get in and do it close. So someone has to take the shot. And Jimmy's saying I can't do it, because everyone knows I'm the guy who takes the shot. And if he drops over dead with his head blown off… Penny'll know. Sarah'll know. Even if I do it clean, and I will, they'll know it was me."

"But you want to."

"Of course I want to! I want to…" the look on his face is an eloquent testimony to the universes of pain and torment Jethro would like to lay on John McGee. His shoulders slump. "But this time there are people waiting for me when I get home."

She strokes his face at that. She's not entirely sure what 'this time' means, but her guess is awfully close to right.

Abbi can see he's looking pretty lost right now. If he could run it as a case, he'd be okay. If he was planning the attack on John, he'd be okay. But right now, waiting, that's a problem.

Shampoo done, washed up, shaved, Gibbs finally says, "I can't just let him get away with it. He's got a whole lifetime of getting away with it, and I can't…" Jimmy had said to keep it between them, but… He can't imagine Jimmy won't tell Breena so… "Jimmy asked me to teach him how to shoot."

"I don't know." He shakes his head and looks away. "Jimmy says I can't take the shot. He's too protected to get in and do it close. So someone has to take the shot. And Jimmy's saying I can't do it, because everyone knows I'm the guy who takes the shot. And if he drops over dead with his head blown off… Penny'll know. Sarah'll know. Even if I do it clean, and I will, they'll know it was me."

"But you want to."

"Of course I want to! I want to…" the look on his face is an eloquent testimony to the universes of pain and torment Jethro would like to lay on John McGee. His shoulders slump. "But this time there are people waiting for me when I get home."

She strokes his face at that. She's not entirely sure what 'this time' means, but her guess is awfully close to right.

Abbi can see he's looking pretty lost right now. If he could run it as a case, he'd be okay. If he was planning the attack on John, he'd be okay. But right now, waiting, that's a problem.

Shampoo done, washed up, shaved, Gibbs finally says, "I can't just let him get away with it. He's got a whole lifetime of getting away with it, and I can't…" Jimmy had said to keep it between them, but… He can't imagine Jimmy won't tell Breena so… "Jimmy asked me to teach him how to shoot."

"I don't know." He shakes his head and looks away. "Jimmy says I can't take the shot. He's too protected to get in and do it close. So someone has to take the shot. And Jimmy's saying I can't do it, because everyone knows I'm the guy who takes the shot. And if he drops over dead with his head blown off… Penny'll know. Sarah'll know. Even if I do it clean, and I will, they'll know it was me."

"But you want to."

"Of course I want to! I want to…" the look on his face is an eloquent testimony to the universes of pain and torment Jethro would like to lay on John McGee. His shoulders slump. "But this time there are people waiting for me when I get home."

She strokes his face at that. She's not entirely sure what 'this time' means, but her guess is awfully close to right.

Abbi can see he's looking pretty lost right now. If he could run it as a case, he'd be okay. If he was planning the attack on John, he'd be okay. But right now, waiting, that's a problem.

Shampoo done, washed up, shaved, Gibbs finally says, "I can't just let him get away with it. He's got a whole lifetime of getting away with it, and I can't…" Jimmy had said to keep it between them, but… He can't imagine Jimmy won't tell Breena so… "Jimmy asked me to teach him how to shoot."

"I don't know." He shakes his head and looks away. "Jimmy says I can't take the shot. He's too protected to get in and do it close. So someone has to take the shot. And Jimmy's saying I can't do it, because everyone knows I'm the guy who takes the shot. And if he drops over dead with his head blown off… Penny'll know. Sarah'll know. Even if I do it clean, and I will, they'll know it was me."

"But you want to."

"Of course I want to! I want to…" the look on his face is an eloquent testimony to the universes of pain and torment Jethro would like to lay on John McGee. His shoulders slump. "But this time there are people waiting for me when I get home."

She strokes his face at that. She's not entirely sure what 'this time' means, but her guess is awfully close to right.

Abbi can see he's looking pretty lost right now. If he could run it as a case, he'd be okay. If he was planning the attack on John, he'd be okay. But right now, waiting, that's a problem.
"suspect."

"Abby?"

"Had some trouble with a lab assistant years ago. She's rated on every gun or rifle I am now."

"Oh. Breena?"

"Ed started teaching her how to hunt when she was twelve. Jimmy's the only one of us who doesn't have any history with rifles. As long as he's got a solid alibi, and he would have one, no one will check into him too carefully." He snorts. "Hell, if there was a case, Jimmy and Breena would be Tim and Abby's alibies."

Abbi nods. If it was her case, she'd spend exactly no time on Jimmy, other than, like Gibbs said, to double check Tim and Abby's alibi. She'd dissect every inch of Gibbs' life, and then Ziva, then Tony, depending on how healed up he is Tim may be the next suspect, followed (or proceeded) by Abby.

And if they all came up clean, she'd start hunting through the rest of Admiral McGee's life. After all, you get that high, there'll be someone better off with you dead.

"He's a good choice for getting away with it clean."

"Yeah. And he knows it."

"Gibbs…" She's looking him in the eyes as she asks, "Are you sure. Not on his past. Not based on Tim's fears or your hate, but on this, right now, are you sure he's behind it? 'Cause I'm not looking the other way while you kill someone on maybe."

"No one else would have had any reason to want this. If John didn't want this, why would Mane have done it?"

"Protect his career?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "If Tim was going to go wide with this, he already would have, and John would know that. All of this happened before he made Admiral, all of it happened before got any of those plumb assignments. He's already passed every background test he was ever going to take.

"Besides, son beaten to death in your own brig is huge black mark on your career. Doing this had to be more important than the career."

She flips that around on him. "But he loves the job more than anything else, and he's supposed to be smart enough to figure that out, so…"

Gibbs doesn't want to hear that. "He did it. I know he did it."

"Do you?"

"You saw his interrogation, do you have any doubts?"

"If I had him in for questioning, I'd know he was hiding something. But Burley hit him with being Mane's lover and… And I honestly cannot tell if that's what he's trying to hide, because that's why Mane took it way too damn far, or, if he tried to have Tim killed. You slept through the night, right?"

Gibbs nods.
"So you haven't actually seen the interview, yet, have you?"

"No."

She shuts off the water. "Come on. If you're still certain after, then that's that."

They sit in the bed, wrapped in towels, hair wet, McGee's interrogation playing on Abbi's computer. By the end Gibbs' hands are clenched.

"You sure, really sure?"

Gibbs nods, once.

"Okay."

Gibbs lays there in bed, thinking of the rifle and Jimmy, debating what he's going to do with this. Is he training another sniper, or is he designing a tool.

Is Jimmy going to take the shot himself, or is he going to be an extension of Gibbs, taking the shot for him.

He thinks about that, and about what sort of access they're likely to have.

When it comes down to it, if the point is that he's going to be out, in public, possibly with Penny, definitely with Ziva and Tony, so she's not thinking one of them killed her son, then Jimmy has to be able to set it up and take the shot for himself. He can help with scouting, and setting up the target, but Jimmy's got to be able to do the final steps himself.

A sniper's rifle is a tool. It's a very well-designed tool for doing one thing and doing it very well. It kills one particular creature from a great distance. Possibly you get a chance to shoot twice or maybe even three times, but that's pushing it. By the time you're doing that sort of shooting you've moved away from Sniper and into Marksman territory.

As a tool it's fairly simple to use. Point and shoot. Literally. Knowing where to point can be difficult. Wind speed, weather, altitude, what exact rifle you're using, all of that comes into play, but once you've got it, you point and then you shoot.

Shooting is not easy. Even good kills hurt.

And the ones that don't hurt…

Hernandez didn't hurt. But it didn't help, either. Maybe… Gibbs still remembers that… whatever that was, when he almost died in the diner, and talking with Mike about Hernandez. It was what he had to do to keep putting one foot in front of the other and not completely implode.

But it didn't change anything. It didn't bring his girls back. It didn't ease loneliness or the ache of loss.

It kept him alive. It allowed him to become the man he is now. Allowed him to find the whispers of peace he needed to be able to at least work.

So there was that.

He thinks about McGee, about the desire to hurt him, bad. Gibbs wants to break him, on more levels than a man can break. But it's not the same as last time.
Tim's alive. The rest of his family is here and well.

And if John McGee is still alive tomorrow, the world won't end, and Gibbs won't end. He thinks about that, and from everything he can see Jimmy won't end, either.

This isn't something they have to do to be able to look at themselves in the mirror. This isn't vital for any sort of meaningful survival. Like he told Tim, as long as you can still look at yourself in the mirror, this is the step you don't take.

And it'd probably be, in the longer run, detrimental to their well-being. When he went after Hernandez, Gibbs never intended to come back.

And if he does this, or has Jimmy do it, he still needs to come home. Jimmy has to come home. Doesn't matter how much this burns; there are girls who need their dad/husband to come home to them at the end of the day, no matter what.

On top of that, he still wants a home to come home to. And he's not sure if it'll still be home if Penny's not there.

And he's not sure if Penny'll be there if he kills John, or helps Jimmy kill John.

But he's also not sure how he'll sleep if John is out there just going along, no repercussions, free and clear after what he's done to Tim.

Gibbs has heard the whole 'forgiveness is something you do for yourself, not the guy you're forgiving' line before. He heard it and promptly filed it under feel-good BS designed to let assholes get away with being assholes.

And he's certainly not willing to drop that opinion.

But he's also thinking about considering that it might not be entirely bullshit, either.

Does he want to kill John McGee? Yes, absolutely.

Does he want the fall out of having killed John McGee? Maybe. Ish… He wants the satisfaction of it. He wants John's blood on his hands. He wants to see the life ease out of him, and he wants him broken, bleeding, torn for what he's done. Gibbs does want that, a lot.

He doesn't want to murder Penny's son. Doesn't want to deal with whatever fall out may come from that. He doesn't want her to deal with the fallout of that, either. Burying a child breaks you, and even if that child is John, he doesn't wish the pain of that loss on Penny.

Does he want to make Jimmy a killer? No. But he's also not sure that matters all that much. Jimmy isn't a child, and he's not so innocent that he doesn't know what he was asking to do.

Would he regret it? Five years, ten years from now. If he murders John, will it haunt Jimmy?

Bodnar doesn't seem to have had that effect. If his ghost is lingering on Jimmy's shoulder, he's not telling anyone about it.

But Jimmy and Breena didn't handle any of the wet work. They took care of cleaning up the van, stripping it of anything even remotely identifiable. They took care of Bodnar's body, but Gibbs doesn't think they ever saw it. He was already wrapped when they brought him to Slaters' for disposal.
At least twice a month for the last twenty-four years, Gibbs went to someone's home, and tried to put together the pieces of a shattered life. 'I'm sorry for your loss…'

It was his job to make sure the people he talked to played by the rules, let him put everything together, and then waited, like good little citizens, for him to get them justice.

And usually he could. Most of the cases he worked he was able to find the perp and nail him for it. And on occasions where he couldn't, where the rules made sure he couldn't put the perp away, he never minded looking the other way if the vic could handle it.

But for this one he can't. If he plays by the rules, John has to walk.

And for the first time ever, he's wondering if the cost of breaking the rules might be higher than the pain of following them.

The fact of the matter is, both Jimmy and Abby are terrible liars. (Gibbs tucks that into his calculation for how possibly killing John will work. He's not only got to teach Jimmy how to actually shoot, but how not to broadcast on his face that he did it. Sigh.)

So, on Tuesday morning, when he and Abbi get in, and both of them are hemming and hawing and looking shifty as all get out, he knows something is up.

First and foremost, whatever it is, that something isn't Tim. He's completely checked out.

And it's also true that Jimmy and Abby both know they're terrible liars, so they practically sprint out of the room in search of breakfast for everyone as soon as Gibbs and Abbi get there.

As soon as they leave, Gibbs looks at Abbi, she sighs, looking back at him, and then says, "Hang out here, I'll check the visitor logs."

"Thanks."

A few minutes later, she's back. "Jarvis."

Gibbs nods at that, wondering what he had to say that's got both of them skittish. No better way than to flat out ask.

"Have a nice chat with Jarvis this morning?" Gibbs asks as Abby hands over his coffee.

She squeaks at that.

"Uh. Yeah." Jimmy replies.

Gibbs nods, sipping his coffee. "Just checking up on Tim?"

Jimmy rolls his eyes at Abby, and she sighs. "No, but we can't say what's up."

"Since when have we ever cared about—"

Abby shakes her head. "Not for Jarvis. Tim wants some time with it before we talk to anyone else."

That catches Jethro by surprise. Now he's really concerned about what might have been put into play that Tim wouldn't want him to know about.
Bodies are highly overrated.

For the most part Tim loves his body. It does everything he wants it to do. It makes him feel really awesome. It has been the source of much pleasure and joy over the years, and these last four years especially, he's been awfully fond of it.

But right now, if given the option, he'd upload his brain to a computer and hang out there until his body gets working again.

He hurts. Okay, that… sucks, honestly. Everything that can hurt does, and he's not seeing an end of that anytime in the near future. They keep giving him pain meds, and given how much he was hurting when he got that one dose about half an hour late, he's pretty horrified at the idea of how bad this would hurt without them. With them, he feels like he's got an all-over toothache.

But that's not nearly as problematic as the issue currently facing him. Dinner last night was real food. Delicious real food. Delicious real food that was a practically ecstatic experience to eat because it's been so damn long since he's had a meal involving real food.

But, his body is sending him some awfully clear signs that it's done with that food now, and would rather like to get rid of it, and he can't figure out how to accomplish that on his own.

Supposedly, at some point, say, six hours from now, various medical type people will show up and remove his right arm from traction. Supposedly, when that happens they'll also unhook the catheter (which he really doesn't want to think all that much about) but once he's all unhooked he can sort of move around a little. Like maybe get in a wheelchair and enjoy a change of view or something.

The problem is, six hours is probably about five and a half hours longer than he can make it without hitting the head.

He tries, very gingerly to move one leg toward the side of his bed, with the plan of somehow getting himself standing up, but his left leg sent him a very clear, 'Oh no you aren't!' signal to his brain.

He tries it again once more, just for... for a chance at not having to tell someone he needs to shit. No dice. His body is not going anywhere on its own.

(What the hell he thought he was possibly going to do had he succeeded in getting that leg off of his bed is unclear, but, once again, he's on a ton of pain medication.)

Which means he needs help. Help he doesn't want to need. But he can't get himself up, and wishing isn't going to make this issue go away.

Abby's napping. She's his first choice for help, but he's pretty sure, (she's got black circles under both eyes) that she's not getting enough sleep, so he doesn't want to wake her up.

Press the help button? He sighs at that. The nurses are all women, at least, on this shift, and he's fairly sure he's not going to make it to the next one.

He reaches over and gets Abby's phone. He doesn't know where Jimmy is, but… he's strong enough to lift him and a doctor, and a guy. If anyone can help him to the head…

*Tim here. Need some help.*

*There in a sec. You okay?*
Jimmy steps into his room shaking his head. "Not gonna happen."

Tim's giving him his best, *oh come on* look. "It better happen." They're both talking quietly, so Abby can keep sleeping.

"Broken ribs and dislocated shoulder means I can't lift you. And I'm not fucking with your arm. There is a reason you have a person who has devoted entire decades of his life to putting arms back together in charge of that, so let's not take my six week rotation in orthopedics and put it to the test, okay?"

"Yeah, well, I can't hold it until he gets here tonight."

"No one's suggesting that. Ever hear of a bedpan?"

Tim winces; yes, he has, though it hadn't occurred to him. "How does that even work?"

"Roll on your left side, someone'll situate the pan, roll you onto it, you do what you need to do, roll on your side again, and they'll clean you up."

Tim grits his teeth. "If you shot me in the head right now, it'd be a mercy killing."

"I'll get a nurse."

Given that he's the parent of a one year old (who he desperately wants to see again), and as a result of that, he's done this roughly seven hundred (if not more) times in the last year, dealing with poop shouldn't be that big of a deal.

But it is.

The best thing he can say about it is, it was fast.

And he's never going to suggest that heated diaper wipes are a ridiculous luxury again. Those little bastards are fucking *cold* right out of the pack. And as soon as he was done, he'd gotten Amazon up on Abby's phone and ordered one of those diaper wipe heater things because no way is his baby(s) having to deal with that again.

When the nurse leaves, Jimmy heads back in, and says, "Jethro and Abbi are getting us some lunch."

Tim nods.

"About two minutes after they got here this morning they knew something was up with Jarvis."

Tim's shoulder slumps. "What did you tell him?"

"That you wanted more time with it on your own before telling him about it. You weren't making a lot of sense on it when you told us to hide the file."

Tim's eyes close. So much for that plan. "I was hoping that we could keep it a secret. Penny's got a razor sharp BS detector, and if The Admiral dropping over dead caught Jethro by surprise, she'd know, and she'd think it was real."

Jimmy winces, yeah, that was a decent plan, and it's pretty much toast now.
"Sorry."

"Should have explained."

"Don't think you had enough brains left for that at that point."

"No." Tim sighs. "Actually that plan was already showing I didn't have enough brains in place. Would have needed something to slow him down enough to give Jarvis time."

Jimmy tilts his head and rolls his eyes a little. "We already had that covered."

"We?"

"He can't take the shot, not anymore. Your dad goes down with a bullet in him, and Gibbs is suspect number one, and even if he isn't, Penny's always going to wonder. But if he was actually with her when it happened..."

"Okay, and..."

"I asked him to teach me how to do it."

Tim's eyes go wide. He's not sure what to think about that. He gets Jethro being willing to kill for him, between hurting your kids being a white hot button issue for him, and the fact that Jethro's... a killer, that's what he trained for, he got it.

But Jimmy? The man who wanted to throw up, and cried after he thought he killed someone who was about to murder him, that hits Tim really hard. He swallows. "Wow. I'm..."

Jimmy shrugs, brushing off the way Tim's watching him right now. "You'd do it for me. Wouldn't have been fast. He was saying that. But I'd get it. I wanted to get it. Wanted to do it. And then when Metro or whoever came over to see what you and Abby were up to that night, you'd have just been at our place, having dinner, whatever."

"You'd be the alibi."

"Because who'd expect me? Ziva, sure. Tony?" Jimmy nods. "You or Abby, why not? But me?" He snorts. "I'm harmless, right?"

Tim nods, he can see that. "You gonna tell me about it before you did it?"

"We were going to ask. Make sure you wanted it."

Tim sighs a little. "I want it for me. And you, and Abby, and Gibbs, and... And I don't want it for Penny and Sarah. I want you and Gibbs in my life, not behind bars."

Jimmy nods, acknowledging that. After all, no such thing as a perfect crime. His team has done an awfully good job of proving to lot of different people who thought they'd come up with perfect crimes that they were wrong about that.

"What do you need on this?"

Tim starts to shrug and his shoulder screams. He winces. "Right now I'll settle for getting out of this goddamned bed."

"Five more hours. Get you up, new casts, grab a shower. It'll help."
"Home. I want to hold Kelly."

"Tomorrow." Jimmy's watching him, waiting for what he's got to say about the larger issue of his dad.

"I wanted to take him down for once, you know?"

Jimmy nods.

"I wanted to win. On my own. My skills, my tools, ME." He notices Abby sitting up. "Hey. Good nap?"

She nods, taking two steps to his bed, sitting by his not broken foot. "Yeah." She squeezes his foot. "He's going to die because he couldn't stand to see you win. He doesn't know that yet, but it'll happen. If the test hadn't worked. If his guys had aced it, he would have just smirked at you. You won, Tim. Your skills, your tools pushed him so hard he's going to lose everything. Just not right away."

He smiles at Abby, knowing she's putting the best possible spin on this. He'd reach for her hand, but she's too far down, for him to do it, so he rubs his toes against her hand. "Doesn't feel like a win. One minute he'll have everything, one minute he won't, but he won't know it, and he won't know why."

She nods at him. "But it's not a loss, either. Wasn't that part of his thing, never loses control, always in charge?"

Tim nods.

"The only way for him to get out of this required him to admit he couldn't control his personal secretary, let alone his ship."

Tim closes his eyes and smiles a little at that, too. That's better. That would have burned the man who always said everything that happens under your command is your responsibility. (Though, when he was yelling it at Tim, it usually had more to do with things like Sarah drawing on the walls while he was babysitting, or getting a less than perfect grade on a team project because someone else dropped the ball.)

Gibbs and Abbi come in, with food. Tim's wondering if it's a sign that he's healing, that food's the highlight of his day now, or a sign of how small his world's shrunk as he's in here.

Eating comes first, because he might not be awake all that long (he can feel drowsy pulling at him, and Gibbs'll still be around to talk to after his nap, but the food might not be) so, eating. He's scarfing down some really excellent sushi (thank you Abbi for thinking of finger food!) as it also hits him that by the time he can work out again, he's going to be the size of a house.

Apparently that slipped out because Jimmy laughs at that, "Don't worry about it. If I could design a work out where that one regained strength in his knee, and lost weight doing it, I can keep you trim, too."

Tim raises an eyebrow at that.

"You're not eating the way you were thirty pounds ago. Diet's worth so much more than exercise, at least on the level we're doing it. Out plowing the back forty by hand every day, that'd be a different story, bootcamp and daily yoga, not so much. As long as you don't decide being on your ass also means you can eat everything that gets within range, you'll be fine."
That's reassuring.

Lunch wraps up, and Tim's feeling sleepy, but he can also see Jethro's on edge, wanting to know what happened with Jarvis.

He knows that Abby and Jimmy already know this, and he knows that Jethro's just going to turn around and tell Abbi about it, but he still wants to tell Jethro about it on his own.

Apparently no one else in the group is having any trouble figuring that out, because when he says, "Can we get a few minutes," they all know what he means and he doesn't have to explain who's supposed to head off.

Part of it is the drugs. He knows that. The medication he's on means that he's got, at best, shaky emotional control. Part of it is that his actual father, the man who he spent seventeen trying to please, just tried to have him killed. Part of it is that Gibbs is the man he latched onto to replace that first father.

After that first case, when he got the 'good job' 'nice working with you' from Gibbs he just glommed onto it. Needed it. Wanted it. And sure, he didn't give it much thought at the time, but older guy, with white hair, who wanted him to do the job perfectly, and then praised him for doing it really meant something to him.

So, he explains the deal, and why he took it, feeling really nervous about how Jethro's going to react, because he doesn't look happy about anything he's hearing. And as he keeps talking, Jethro not asking any questions, he really needs approval for this. He needs to hear that this was okay, needs to know that Gibbs is still proud of him, and that he did the right thing.

He's doing that thing where he just keeps piling words on top of words on top of words because he's nervous and if he keeps talking he doesn't have to deal with whatever fall out is coming, and, finally, as he's really getting into the politics of it and how he's feeling bad about selling out but he got a really good price for it and maybe his voice is quivering some as he's saying this, and maybe he's a bit more rambling than he thinks he is (once again lots of pain medication) Gibbs, who has been sitting there, quietly, holding his hand, letting him talk stands up, kisses his forehead, and says, "It's okay."

Tim's staring at him with big eyes, still nervous.

Gibbs gently rubs the back of his head, and kisses him again. "It's okay."

"Really?"

"Yeah." He very lightly pats the back of Tim's head, as close to a headsnap as anyone is going to get, anymore. "You don't have to apologize for a deal that protects your family, and keeps the peace."

"Good. I was afraid you'd be pissed."

Gibbs shakes his head. Yes, he's disappointed in not getting to do it himself, but not that Tim took or made that deal. Of course, in 366 days, if Jarvis hasn't lived up to the letter of the bargain, John McGee's getting a massive target on his back, and, metaphorically speaking, so is Jarvis. But that's a different topic for a different day. Specifically, he's thinking that's a conversation to have with Jimmy, say, tomorrow.

Tim's getting pretty droopy by now, ready to sleep again, but Gibbs isn't quite ready to let him go yet. "Tim, I'm never going to be pissed at you for putting your family first. That's the rule that supersedes them all."
Tim nods, grateful.

"Am I'm proud that you stood up to him, and I'm proud that you held your own, and you came out of that fight. I'm angry that you walked in there and got hurt—"

"I know. I'm sorry. You told me not to go. Abby told me not to go, and I'm sorry—"

"Shhh… I know. That'll hold for later. You're here, you're in one piece, and you're going to heal up. I'm not angry that you made a good deal." Gibbs smiles sardonically. "And I can't wait to see Tony call you Sir."

Tim laughs a little at that. "Only once."

Gibbs smiles. "Only once."
"Okay Mr. McGee, let's see about getting you out of this!" The orthopedic surgeon says.

"Please." In that he's attached to his right arm, he hasn't been able to escape noticing that it's swaddled in a huge mass of bandages, casts, various support structures and the like.

He's seen buildings covered in scaffolding that had less crap on them than his right arm does now.

He's also approving the small and light looking tray the Doc's brought in as well. The thing on it kind of looks like what would happen if Spiderman built Buckey Barnes’ prosthetic arm, with a few extra electronics tossed in for… he doesn't know, shits and giggles maybe.

It's a rigid web a plastic, that from the looks of it, is going from his pectoral muscle to his fingertips. It's not what he thinks of as being a 'cast' though.

"That's new," Tim says as the nurses are very gently detaching the weights from the cords that are attached to his fingers and keeping his wrist in the right place.

"Yeah, it is. Those two," The Doc looks at Jimmy and Abby, "said you wouldn't mind being a test case."

Cutting edge medical tech. That appeals to Tim. "No. Don't mind at all."

The doc holds it up. "We're really excited about these. Once we got your arm back together, we took scans of it, and fed them into the computer, and got this printed out."

"3D printed casts, made for me?"

"Yep, strong, light, because of the web-like structure you can get it wet with no problems. Plenty of ventilation for your skin, so it won't start to smell funky and don't have to worry about accidentally tearing up your skin to scratch an itch. It's thin enough it should fit under most of your clothing without a problem." The Doc picks up the electronics. "These are the really cool part. They make tiny sonic vibrations, that encourage your bones to heal faster. With the number of breaks you've got it's going to take a while, but twenty minutes a day, pop the vibration head into the right hole in the web." The Doc holds up the vibration head, and the cast, and Tim does notice that some of the holes… Shit, ten of them… are white while the rest of the cast is black. "Let it do its thing, then onto the next one for another twenty minutes, and, assuming it works the way it's supposed to, we should have you down to a sling and braces for your wrist and fingers in only six weeks."

Tim nods. Only six weeks was actually longer than he was hoping for, but judging by how excited the orthopedic specialist is, and the way Jimmy's grinning at him, only six weeks is apparently a major improvement over whatever the normal length of time someone with as many breaks as he's got would have spent in a cast.

"We've got one for your foot, as well. Probably only need that one for a month."

That sounds a bit better.

"We'd offer for your ribs or nose, but it's not tested, at all, for any sort of break near a vital organ, and we wouldn't cast them anyway. If you mess around with it, write down what happens, okay."

"Uh… okay." He's thinking 'not tested for any sort of break near a vital organ' means he's happy to
just leave it alone, but maybe if he gets frustrated enough on slowly healing up he'll do some research and mess around with it.

By now the nurse has his arm out of the previous bandages and casts and he's getting a chance to look at it for the first time since… God, his shower Friday morning.

"Is it… Tuesday?"

Abby nods.

He sighs. His arm is still covered in blue, purple, green, yellow bruises, swollen more or less from top to bottom, and there's a long incision down his bicep and forearm.

"Cuts?"

"We had to use screws to put your humerus and radius back together. Can't do that without opening your arm up."

"Oh." On the upside, they didn't have to cut through his tattoo. He thinks it'll still look right when everything heals up.

"Good to see no infection." The Doc cracks open the cast. "It's got hinges on this side, and fastens together here. Antibiotic ointment on the incision sites for the next few days."

"All right." Abby says. "Bandages?"

Doc shakes his head. "You need to be in this cast as much as you can. In a week or so, it's going to start to seem too big, because the swelling will go down and you won't be moving your arm, so you'll head to your orthopedic surgeon back home, and he'll hook you up with a new cast that'll fit better. And probably once more before you're out of this all together, but except for when he's popping your arm out of the one and putting it into the next, you stay in the cast."

"I can do that."

"Good. I run into too many kids who look at one of these things, notice they can open them, and then decide that since they're feeling mostly better it's time to get out of it. The only thing I like better about plaster casts is that most people couldn't get out of one on their own without letting me know they'd done it."

"I'll keep it on."

"Very good." The Doc very gently places Tim's arm in the new cast. Even very gently, it hurts. And he gently closes it up and snaps the web into place. That hurts, too. And then it's done, and Tim can at least see his arm, and he's not tied to little weights that were pulling his wrist into the right place. That's progress. After a minute he's done the same thing for Tim's foot.

"Okay, technically, if you want to try to use a crutch, you can. On your left side. But you've also got three broken ribs on the left, so you might want to just stay with a wheelchair for at least a week or so. I'll let you play that by ear. Just remember, this cast is strong, but it is not a walking cast. You put your full weight on this, and it will break. So, don't try to just hobble around on it like it's a walking cast. You want to get up, grab a crutch or cane or something to put your weight on."

Tim nods at that. Idea of actually getting up is both something he's eager for and terrified of. Just shifting the non-broken leg around hurt, attempting to put weight on it might be a very bad idea.
But very bad idea or not, he is sure as hell going to try because he's sick of being in this damn bed, and the idea of actually getting a shower sounds like heaven.

Once he's got the casts in place and the instructions for dealing with them, (And more importantly, Abby has those instructions, because right now he's doing well if he can keep a constant thought in his head for half an hour) everyone other than Abby heads out to let the nurses get him completely unhooked.

So, he can understand, rationally, why you'd tape the catheter tube to the leg of the person who's wearing it, but in that he's been strapped to the damn bed (so it's not like he was going to go anywhere) and they didn't bother to remove any of his leg hair first, peeling the tape off hurt like a bastard, and set him up with a perfectly rectangular patch of brand new bruise on what was one of the few places he didn't have any bruises.

As for removing the tube… Okay, honestly, not that bad, more an issue in his head than his dick, still having a strange woman grab his penis is really off-putting, and he's very glad he was unconscious when they put it in.

Saying goodbye to the IV meant more bruises on top of skin that's already bruised. He's got no idea what the hell adhesive they used on the tape but apparently it's designed to create unbreakable bonds with human skin. He feels like the back of his hand and wrist got peeled off along with the tape.

Last bit was the bandages binding his chest. More tight taping, fortunately this wasn't adhesive side against his skin. He's got to sit up for that, which takes a bit of help, and Abby's hands on his shoulders to help keep him steady, but after a minute he's free of the bandages. Tim tries inhaling deeply, and decides that feels like being stabbed in the chest in about six places, and maybe he doesn't need to do that again anytime soon.

But finally, he's free of the various bonds of the hospital, and though the nurses offered to stay and help, Abby shooed them out. So he's unhooked, and alone with his wife.

He's sitting up, on his own, without the support of the mattress behind his back and eyeballing the bathroom where rumor has it there's a shower.

Abby smiles at him. "Twelve feet to the door, and four more to the shower. Let's go."

Tim nods. And then blinks. Might as well be two miles away. He starts to shift the one leg over, and it eventually complies, sore, achy, bruised, sprained, hasn't really moved in days, but eventually it meanders over to the side of the bed in an attempt to get him facing the doorway to the bathroom.

His left leg eventually, more slowly, follows suit, and after some shifting around on his hips he manages to get facing the edge of the bed.

Abby heads to his left side, wrapping his arm over her shoulders. "Okay, easing down slowly on your right foot."

He nods, and slowly, gently slides the four inches from the edge of the bed to the floor. He whimpers slightly as he makes contact with the ground. His bruised up foot isn't much liking it, and the broken ribs on his left are complaining about Abby supporting him on that side, while the ones on his right are even less happy about her hand resting on them.

"Can you keep your weight on your right foot?"

He bites out a brief, "Yeah."
She lets go of his chest and re-adjusts her grasp to his hips. "Okay, lean into me."

He does, and she makes sure she's got him secure. "Better?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, off we go."

They're two steps into the journey when he says, "Probably a good thing I'm already naked. Can you imagine how long this would take if you had to get me undressed at the end of this."

She smiles at him. "Find that out tomorrow. Got some very soft pajamas waiting for you."

He nods, soft clothing sounds really great right about now. He never thought that days of naked would be an issue, but right now, looking at another night on hospital sheets, soft flannel jammy pants and a t-shirt sound great.

"Got something else, too."

"What?"

"It's a surprise. Once you're all cleaned up and dressed again."

Two more steps and they're in the bathroom. Where there's a mirror. A horrified and pained whimper slips out of him as he sees his face. Four days means that a lot of the swelling is down, and they did put his nose back into the right place, but his face is still black and blue, his lips and eyebrow and the bridge of his nose are all cut and split.

"Oh God."

Abby pets him gently.

He whimpers again, looking at the rest of himself. He could see some of the damage before, mostly his left arm. He had a blanket over most of him, and bandages on his right arm and chest for almost all of the last four days, so this is really the first unobstructed view of all of him and the fact that this is how he's looking four days after the attack makes him want to throw up.

Abby very gently strokes his back as he stares at the bruises and the cuts and all the swollen, strained bits. He feels like it's not really his body. He can feel all of it, and then some. Seeing it makes everything he wasn't noticing all go jumping to the front of his mind, and he starts to cry. Half physical pain, half emotional distress at seeing himself.

"Okay, come on, let's sit down." There's a little seat in the shower, and Abby gets him on it. Not enough room for two people to sit on it, so she kneels in front of him, holding his legs, kissing the unbruised bits of his knees, very, very gently stroking her hands over his skin.

She figures this is probably like seeing herself after having Kelly that first time and feeling like her body was completely destroyed. And she knows the last thing she wanted to hear was some sort of happy, feel good bullshit, so she just holds on and lets him cry.

And when he stops, she stands up, fiddling with the shower controls, turning the water on so it's coming out of the shower head that's attached to the hose, and letting it pour down the drain right now, warming up.

She kisses the top of his head. "Back in a few seconds, gotta get your stuff."
Tim nods at her and starts to shift a bit, so he's facing into the shower. He thinks about reaching for the shower hose, but it's on the wrong side of him, and bending down to grab it sounds like it'll hurt, so he just sits there, feeling devastated.

He thought he'd gotten through and dealt with and all that other shit you do when your Dad's a complete fucking asshole and you've got to live with it. He thought he was done. But he's looking at his body, beaten to a pulp, and dealing with that fact that John didn't just let it happen, he made it happen. He wanted this, and more than this, and it's hitting Tim in waves of revulsion how deep that hate has to go, how sick you've got to be that this would be okay. He's breathing deep (as much as he can without hurting) and steady, because he doesn't want to throw up, and even though the toilet and sink are only a few feet away, he doesn't think he can make it on his own, and given how much breathing hurts, puking's going to kill him, so, deep, steadying breaths.

Abby comes in, sees the way he's breathing, and drops the clothing and toiletries. She's kneeling in front of him again, holding his left hand carefully, stroking the back of his neck.

"He let them do this to me."

She nods.

"He wanted this." The crying ramps back up again. "Wanted worse than this." Tim's shaking with fear and anger in addition to crying, and she's holding onto him as best as she can, cuddling and wrapping him in as much love as touch can convey.

Several minutes later, they both hear a tentative knock on the door along with Jimmy saying, "Need an extra hand?"

Tim shakes his head, so Abby calls out. "We're good."

"Okay. Holler if you need help."

Tim wipes his eyes, forcing fear and anger back, some, can't spend all day in here. He sniffs. "Let's get this done."

Abby strokes his face. "We can take as long as you need."

"I know. Just… want to be done. Want to get home and back to normal as soon as I can."

"Okay. Let's get you washed off and dressed."

Warm water feels good. Gently being washed is nice. Abby naked in the shower with him is something he approves of, but mostly in a this is pleasant and comforting and intimate sort of way. The sex part of his brain isn't online right now. Getting his hair washed felt really good, apparently his scalp isn't too badly bruised up.

"Want me to shave you?" Abby asks once she's got his hair rinsed out.

"Nah. Unless you want to."

"Don't need to. I think we're done." She turns the water off and begins to gently dry him off. That's good, too. When she's done, she eyeballs the toilet. "Want some alone time?"

"I'm good on that for right now." He can see his clothing sitting on the sink, and knows that since he's sitting on a wet seat in the shower that not all of him is dried off. "I need to stand up, don't I?"
"Probably make finishing this up easier."

He eyes the hand rails along the walls of the shower. They, like everything else in the universe, are built for righties. Once he's standing, he can grab them easily. But, if the idea is to hold on to help get himself standing, they're on the wrong side.

Abby sees what he's doing. "Okay, let's get you up, then you grab, and I'll get you all dry."

Plan in play, they get to it, and in a few seconds he's dried off, and sitting on the toilet while Abby gets his jammy pants over the cast on his foot. Up again for a few seconds to get them pulled up over his hips, and for the first time in days he's actually dressed.

Tim's eyeballing his deodorant when it hits him that he can't put it on. Can't use his left arm to put it on the left side, (He guesses that maybe he could, normally, but the idea of trying to get his arm into position for that makes him want to break into a cold sweat,) and the cast covers his right from just about his nipple to fingertips.

Abby sees the way he's looking at it. "You want me to do the one side or just skip it?"

He closes his eyes, hating how helpless he is, and lifts his left arm as high as it will go, just a bit above shoulder level.

He winces a little as she does it.

"Hurts?"

"Tickles."

"Sorry." Abby puts the deodorant down after a swipe in each direction. "Is that enough?"

He nods.

"How do you even do that with armpit hair? Are you even getting it on your skin?"

He laughs, slightly, at that. "I've never thought about it. You just do it, and it works."

"Okay. Shirt next."

Given the instruction to 'bring clothing for Tim' Abby had grabbed the softest, most comfortable, laying around the house clothes he owned. It didn't occur to her, until right now, that a button down or two would have been a really good plan. The cast is keeping his hand and wrist in neutral position, his elbow bent at ninety degrees, and his shoulder joint extended about an inch forward, with his arm turned in across his stomach.

She's looking at his arm, thinking her way through how to deal with that, when Tim says, "You feed the arm through the sleeve first, then over the head, then the other arm."

"That's right, you've done this, well something like it, before."

"Yeah." More times than he's wanted. At least this time it's his right arm. All those years ago it was his left, and that made for a hellish two months.

"Or would you rather just wait and let me go get you a few button downs?"

"T-shirt. I don't want to see how bad this looks."
"Okay." She carefully scrunches up the shirt and threads his arm through, then lets him take care of his head and other arm. While he's getting into the shirt, Abby gets toothpaste on his brush.

He looks at that, and almost cracks a smile.

"Feeling a little more like yourself?"

"Little." He takes the brush from her and gets to it while she gets dried off and dressed. While he's brushing he checks out both his teeth (Upper jaw, second front one on the right appears to be the one that ended up with the cap. At least, it's not the same color the other ones were.) and his face.

It looks a little better than before the shower. Apparently some of what he thought were bad cuts was actually dried blood. So, he's a little less beat up looking. But only a little.

One of the cuts goes straight through his left eyebrow. "They think that'll heal?"

"No one's said anything about it in specific. If it scars, two seconds with an eyebrow pencil will cover it."

He nods at that.

"Plus, if it scars, and you like it, having a bisected eyebrow's pretty cool."

He looks at her wryly, finishing up with his teeth, and then says, "I know you love James Marsters, but..." and then shakes his head.

She grins at him. "It'd look awesome! Okay, you look done, back to bed? Sofa?"

He sighs. "Bed." He'd like to be somewhere else, but he's hurting, and tired, and his internal clock's telling him pain meds are coming soon, and as soon as they're in his system, he'll be asleep again.

"Okay, back to bed. Get a good nap. Dinner. More sleeping, and then tomorrow, bright and early, on the plane and home we go."

"That sounds good."

Someone changed out the sheets while he was getting washed off, and Tim appreciates that. And, with his arm no longer in traction, he doesn't have to be on his back, reclining, or smack dab in the middle of the bed. Which he also appreciates.

Once he's out of the bathroom, Jimmy hops up and takes over from Abby on giving him a hand getting to the bed. Stronger, a bit steadier, and slightly taller makes that easier. Once he's on his bed, Jimmy grabs the sling that goes with his new cast, and gets it situated and strapped on, and while the cast is large and rigid enough to hold his arm in place, the sling has some padding and straps to help keep his arm secure against his stomach, which is nice because that means the top part, that's resting against his pec, armpit, scapula, and deltoid isn't digging into him every time he moves.

Tim gingerly rolls onto his left side (he usually sleeps on his right) but it doesn't hurt any worse than his back did, and Abby can tell, by the way he's only a few inches from the edge of the bed, that he's looking for some cuddling. So she carefully gets on the bed, too, and snuggles against his back, arm under the hollow of his neck.

His left hand finds hers, and holding it reminds her of her surprise.

"Jimmy?"
"Yeah?"

"Can you get the present?"

He smiles at that. "Sure." He digs around in her purse before pulling it out, back still toward them, hiding it from Tim's (sleepy) view. Then he turns around, taking a step closer, holding a plain, black, embossed with a Celtic dragon, leather wrist cuff, out. Sort of a hybrid of the knot on his bicep and the dragon on his leg.

"It's not the same…" While Gibbs and Abbi had been on duty, they'd gone looking for one. His old one was not only in evidence, but in an effort to make sure that any prints that might have been on the snaps remained in pristine shape, they'd cut it off Tim. "But it's as close as we could find," Abby says.

Jimmy's about to hand it to Abby to put it on, but she quickly shakes her head. She's in a bad position for it, and moving around's just going to hurt more, so Jimmy slips it over Tim's wrist, snapping it into place.

"Good?" Jimmy asks.

Tim nods, eyes tearing up. He knows they mean well, and he knows, because this new one is on his wrist, that the old one has to be destroyed, but he wants the old one back.

Abby kisses the back of his neck.

Jimmy's still holding his wrist. "Want me to take it off?"

Tim shakes his head, not trusting his voice.

"It's okay if you don't like it." Abby says.

He squeezes her hand a little tighter, before closing his eyes, and curling in on himself.

She can read that as a pretty definitive I've dealt with everything and anything I can deal with today, time to check out gesture.

She kisses the back of his neck again. "Okay."

__________________________________________________________

It's an hour later, when Jimmy is absolutely sure that Tim is completely asleep when he quietly says, "Well that went over like a lead balloon."

"Bad timing, too much, too soon. Tomorrow we'll get home, and that'll help."

Jimmy nods. "Lots of healing to do."

"Yeah. What happened to him really hit when he saw himself."

Jimmy closes his eyes and swallows, gritting his teeth. Then he looks back at Abby, who's cuddling Tim, gently stroking her thumb over the back of his hand. "I hate that deal. Hate waiting. Hate that it won't be me. I want to rip John up myself."

Tim shifts, moans a bit, and seems to settle in to deeper sleep.

Abby kisses him, then speaks a little more softly, "I know. Me, too. Want revenge so bad I can taste it. Keep fantasizing about ways to do it. Get back to my lab, and start mixing up cocktails…"
Jimmy shakes his head. "Not for at least nine months."

She gives him the stink eye for raining on her fantasy.

"And he'd be dead by then." If he's going to rain on her parade, he may as well pour.

"Gibbs," she says, a very good idea of how it'd go.

"Me!" Jimmy says, fire in his eyes. Abby looks curious at that, wondering what Jimmy's plan would have been. "I asked him to teach me how to take the shot. That way he could be somewhere public, with an alibi, like, say, with Penny, and I could do it."

Abby sighs, quietly. "God, Penny… And Sarah…"

"Figured what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them. Figured they'd never really look further than Gibbs."

Abby nods. "You talk to them?"

"Ducky. She's holding on, but taking it hard. Wouldn't you?"

"Lord." Abby goes quiet, praying for peace and calm and… and hoping that there's comfort somewhere.

Dinner comes and goes.

Tim eats, but he's quiet.

Night comes and he's sleeping, but fitful. Another shift in his pain meds means they aren't doing quite the job of knocking him out that they had been. Instead of falling asleep within seconds of closing his eyes, he's got this sort of strange half-awake half-asleep sensation where he's aware but his body doesn't want to do anything for long stretches.

So he sleeps, and dreams, nothing bad or disturbing, waking up and not being home with Abby and Kelly and all healed up is the disturbing part, and lays there, feeling Abby against his back, the soft puffs of her breath on his neck. He can hear Jimmy's quiet, steady breathing, and the little night sounds people make, shifting around, bits of vocalizations, getting up to hit the head, stuff like that.

He wants to touch the new wrist cuff, run his fingers over it, really see and feel the new pattern. He's sulking about the old one being gone, because he wants the old one, not that there's anything wrong or bad about this one. The love that inspired the first cuff was involved in getting this one, and as he thinks about it, Jimmy helped get this one, too, so this is a gift from two of the most important people in his life.

Two of his loves trying to make him feel better. Trying to help him to getting back to who he is. So he gets it, understands the gesture, and eventually, he'll love this one, too.

But he was robbed of the old one, and that stings.

Morning comes and with it a huge stack of paperwork encompassing all of Tim's release documentation, prescriptions, what he needs to be taking when, appointments made with the one orthopedic specialist in the DC area who works with the kind of casts he's got, and all the rest of it.

But, eventually, Abby's wheeling him out of the hospital, and they're heading toward the jet, and
from there, home.

They're on the plane, quiet, resting mostly, heading back east. Gibbs notices that Tim's completely sacked out again, so he shifts over a bit, next to Jimmy and says, "Saturday morning, at the house, with me."

Jimmy's eyebrows raise. "Uh…"

"You believe a politician's promise after he keeps it. This time next year, if John McGee's still walking around, we'll be ready to do something about it."

Jimmy thinks about that for a moment and then nods, "Okay."

Tim's awfully tired by the time they get home. Tired and aching. Plane travel followed by car travel with as many broken bones as he has is pretty much torture.

The original plan was everyone was going to be there to say 'Hi' see he was all in one piece offer welcome, but by the time they were on the runway, heading toward Abby's car, that plan had been scrapped. Jethro and Abbi are heading back to Jethro's. Breena and the girls are going to meet them at the McGees, and then that's it.

Visitors tomorrow, if he's feeling up for it.

So, as Jimmy's helping him get up the stairs on their front porch, and Abby's running ahead to get the door open, Tim wants to sack out, take about fifty pain pills, and more or less just die.

But he can't, not yet. There's something very, very important he needs to do first.

Abby's giving him help because between the arm and the ribs he can't get a very good hold on her, but more than anything else right now, he wants to cuddle his baby girl, and he is. (Jimmy's similarly wrapped in a pile of hugging girls.)

"Happy Birthday, Kelly." He kisses her, holding her close, crying some. "Told you I'd be back for today."

"Dadadadada!" She's in his arms, and squirmy, and laying big, wet, (ouchy) kisses all over his face, and right this second Tim couldn't be happier or more relieved.

A minute later, he gets a gentle hug from Breena, and a not so gentle hug from Molly, who's fascinated by his casts and bruises, and wants to touch and poke him all over, which means it's time for the Palmer branch of the family to head off before she decides any really tender bits of Uncle Tim need to get poked.

He's fading pretty fast by that point. Weary, really not all there, so he's guessing this was mostly for Abby's benefit, or maybe it was just important enough that waiting didn't make any more sense. But as Jimmy and Breena are getting ready to go, he gets his usual (albeit very gentle) hug from Breena, and then she pulls back a little, arms still around him, looks at Abby, looks back to him, and says, "Life's too damn short to let fear win."

Then Breena kisses him, very soft, very gentle, and he's appreciating the kiss, at least it's got enough of his attention that all of the pain in his body fades to a sort of dull ache, and much too soon she stands up, takes a step over to Abby, kisses her too, which Tim would have to admit he enjoyed watching, though he would have enjoyed it even more if he'd been feeling anything approaching good, and then she took one more step and kissed Jimmy, which was also nice to watch, too.
Her voice is steady as she speaks, but it's clear that the what-ifs and very close call of this last week have hit her, hard. "I love all three of you, and I don't know where this is going, but one day, soon, when you're off the pain meds," Tim gets a gentle stroke on his hand, "we're all sitting down, together, and talking this out, because life is short and we are not letting this slip away. Okay?"

Tim nods, and Abby and Jimmy say, "Okay."

Breena smiles, and Tim and Abby both get quick pecks on the forehead. "Good. Okay, I'm going to get the girls in the car. Abby, you need Jimmy's help getting Tim upstairs?"

Abby nods. "Unless you want to stay down here?"

"No. Upstairs, bed, lying down, sleeping."

Jimmy steps over to Tim, helping him getting standing up. "Up we go."

They're halfway up the steps when Tim asks, "Did you know she was going to do that?"

Jimmy nods. "Talked about it last night. Abby did, too."

"Oh."

"It okay?"

"Yeah... Just wasn't expecting it."

Two more steps, four to go. "Yeah, well, almost dying puts things into perspective. And being on a shit ton of pain meds takes them out of perspective, so when you're not hurting from your eyelashes to your toenails, we'll talk some more. About a lot of things, like us, and your dad, and the deal with Jarvis, and just, lots of things."

Tim gets his right foot onto the next stair and slowly lifts himself up. "Good plan."

After another minute, Jimmy gets Tim to his room, and sitting on his bed. "Don't flop back, yet."

Tim stares at him, slumping, all I want to do is sleep on his face.

"Look, I'm here, I can move you around fairly easy, you need to hit the head? Want a change of clothing? Something like that?"

"Just want to lie down."

"Okay." Jimmy helps him get lying back on the bed. "Pillows good?"

"I'm home. Everything's good."

"Okay." Jimmy gives him a quick hug, and then stands up. "See you soon."

"Thanks, Jimmy."

He smiles at Tim, and heads off.

He's almost asleep when he hears the sound of a car door shutting, followed by tires on his gravel driveway, a minute after that Abby's next to him, Kelly between them, and he's drifting off to sleep, in his own bed, his girls by his side.
"What happens tomorrow?" Abbi asks Jethro as they get to his place.

He rubs his eyes as he flops onto the sofa. He's tired and feeling pretty lost right now. No case to solve, no revenge to get, just dealing with the emotional fall out of this, which isn't his strong suit. "Pick up Mona. Get over to Tim and Abby's, see if I can be useful. Go get prescriptions or cupcakes or something."

That's a good idea. Concrete plan. Something he can do, but Abbi's looking blankly at him.

"Kelly's birthday is tomorrow. I'm sure they'll be swamped on just taking care of Tim. So, go get at least a cupcake or something for her."

"Got your presents all ready to go?"

He winces a little. "Go get some of those, too. Real party'll probably be once Tim and Abby are feeling like company, but, still, gotta do something for my girl. You?"

She's nodding at that. "Back to work tomorrow. Haven't gone this long without checking in since my sister's wedding."

"Good wedding?" He's wondering how intense it would have had to have been to have gotten her to go five days without calling in.

"Eh." She's looking non-committal. "Out in the middle of nowhere. Sunrise and sunset ceremony at Mt. Kimball, in Alaska. The wedding part was fun. Cold. Grow up in Montana and you think you know everything there is to know about cold and snow, but you're wrong. Because your insane sister really likes the idea of having a wedding that starts as the sun rises and ends as it sets so your ass gets dragged to a mountain in Alaska in December where you can freeze in the cold and miss the damn sunrise and set because it's snowing. No cell reception for five days."

Gibbs nods at that. With the exception of when he went to Mexico, he doesn't think a week passed when he was a cop where he didn't check in at least once. He pulls Abbi close to him. "Thank you. I..." he licks his lips. "I needed that. Needed you."

She smiles and nods, kissing him gently. He holds her tighter.

When he heads over to Breena's place the next morning, she gives him a warm hug, and Mona's leaping all over him, ecstatic to see him again. The doggy version of I thought you left me forever! Don't ever do that again! I love you! I love you! I love you! He pets her vigorously, with many versions of 'good girl,' and she glows with it.

He looks around, noticing that besides leaping doggy, the house is awfully quiet. "Jimmy and the girls?"

"I'm taking a day on my own. He took them to daycare, I took the day off, and I'm sucking up some quiet time."

Gibbs nods. Three baby girls, one dog, no husband around. He knows Shannon had plenty of days where it was just her and Kelly and she was ready to scream by bedtime. Three girls under the age of
He hugs Breena, kissing her forehead. "Thank you."

She nods. "You do what you need to for your family."

He smiles. "I'll let you get your down time."

"You going to Tim and Abby's?"

"Yeah."

"Might see you there later this afternoon. Might just jell all day."

"Okay." He hugs her again. "Thank you. Come on, Mona! We're going to Tim and Abby's."

Mona likes trips to the McGees', so the morning looks like it's starting off well.

Tim wakes feeling like his entire body is screaming. He's a bit fuzzy on exactly how many breaks he has in his arm, nose, ribs, and foot, but he's sure he can feel his heart beating in a cacophony of pain in every single one of them.

He thought that half an hour where he didn't get his meds because he was talking to Jarvis was bad. That was a walk in the park compared to this.

He can barely breathe, because breathing involves moving his ribs. He'd call for help, but he doesn't think he can make any noise. He didn't know it's possible to hurt so bad you can't even yell, but he does.

He's slipping into panic mode, unable to think or plan, or anything, all he is right now is a bundle of throbbing, burning, all-consuming pain.

"Oh hey, you're… Oh shit. Pain meds!"

He hears Abby grabbing something, probably the bottle of pills, sprint to the bathroom, water running, and a second later she's pulling him into a sitting position (which he whimpers at, then starts full out cursing because nothing has ever hurt that bad) but she pops one of the pills onto his tongue and is holding water to his lips, so he swallows, and then she gently lays him back down again.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry! Kelly woke up, and Jethro's over and… Oh shit. I forgot you needed to take them. You kept complaining about them waking you up all the time in the hospital, so I wanted to let you sleep… And I just… I forgot. Shit!"

He thinks that's something he would have complained about, he remembers being annoyed by getting poked by someone in scrubs what felt like every ten minutes, but he doesn't actually remember complaining about it, and right now, he'd happily take someone poking him every ten minutes for the rest of his life if it'll make this pain go away.

He also sort of remembers waking up aching in the middle of the night, grabbing one of the pills and swallowing it, then crashing back to sleep before he was even really awake.

But whatever let him wake up then didn't fire this time, and now he's paying for it.

Abby feels so guilty she wants to throw up and cry. First night on making sure he gets his pain meds
and she failed.

Every five hours. Four really. Supposed to be five, but at the hospital he was usually getting restless and achy at four. They don't want too much in his system and they're supposed to work for four to six hours. So, enough to keep him not hurting too bad, enough to keep the levels even, but not so much they lose efficiency.

Every time in the hospital, he'd start to come up a bit, not necessarily wake up, but he'd notice he was hurting, stir a bit, and then get more medication.

And last night he did that, too. He woke at ten-ish, he woke at three-ish, and... she just figured he'd wake up this time.

Shit. No excuses. He's drugged, and healing, and a mess, and it's not his responsibility to make sure he gets his medication when he needs it. Right now, that's her job.

And she failed.

Abby calls Jimmy to see if there's anything she can do to get him feeling better, but there isn't. And she knows there isn't because even if there was some sort of miracle drug that instantly took pain away, they don't have it in the house, so she'd have to go get it, wait for the pharmacy to make it up, and bring it back, and by then what he's already on will have kicked in.

She can't touch him. She can see from how he's looking that every inch of him hurts right now and any touch will just make it worse.

"I'm so sorry."

He nods very slightly again, eyes closed, tears leaking from them.

Longest twenty minutes in the history of time, and he's including the time he was trapped in freezer in that count.

But eventually the pain does start to ease up some. Eventually he's noticing he's breathing deeper and not whimpering with each shallow exhale.

Eventually, he knows that he has precisely ten breaks in his right arm, four in his left foot, six in his ribs, and one across his nose, and he knows that because he can feel each and every one of them pulse each time his heart beats.

Eventually, it eases up even more, he starts to notice things like he's hungry, and he has to pee, and Abby's still sitting next to him, looking almost as bad as he feels.

"You feeling any better?" Abby asks.

He nods a little.

"Want help sitting up?"

"Sure." She gives him an arm up, and he looks around some. Home. In his bed, pills and water on his bedside table, crutch leaning against the headboard of the bed where he can get to it easily.

"I'm so, so, so sorry." She hugs him gingerly.

"I'll live. All the phones set to go off every time I'm supposed to get a new painkiller?"
She nods. "And the alarm on the stove."

"Good. I don't want to do that again."

"Once and done. So, food, bathroom, drink? What do you need?"

"All three."

He hears slight clicking sounds and then Mona plops her head on the bed next to his knee. She's looking up at him with big, I-love-you-pay-attention-to-me doggie eyes.

He reaches over and gently strokes her ears. She licks his hand. "Yuck. Yes, you're glad to see me, great. Stop that."

She does, nosing his hand as he pets her.

"I take it Gibbs is here," Tim says as he starts the very slow process of twisting around so his legs are off the side of the bed. Abby grabs the crutch for him, handing it over, and nods at his assessment on Gibbs.

"Think you need to switch to sleeping on the other side."

He nods slowly. His right side is the part of him closest to the head of the bed/nightstand, so he can't easily grab for the crutch once he's sitting up.

He takes as much of a deep breath as he can (not very deep) and steels himself for letting some of his weight slip down onto his right foot and the crutch. A small pained 'uhn' escapes when he does that.

"How long until I can get up and not hurt?"

Abby shakes her head, hovering next to him, ready to catch him if he loses his footing. "I don't know. Visit with the orthopedist on Thursday. He might know."

"I guess." One small step forward. And then one more. And another. Small, slow, each one spent very carefully placing the crutch and his foot, trying to minimize the ache in his leg and the tearing sensation along his ribs and shoulder.

"Do you want to get a shower? Or just take care of business and get some breakfast?"

"Shower eventually." He thinks about how much standing hurts right now. "Okay, bath eventually. Maybe this afternoon. Really am feeling hungry."

"Eggs? Coffee and eggs?"

He nods, that sounds good. Five more steps, and with each one he is going a little further, noticing that he can extend the step a bit more and not hurt himself too bad. Once he gets into the bathroom, Abby shuts the door, and heads off.

As he's staring at the toilet and sink, it's hitting him that with how long it's going to take him to 'do his thing' Abby could probably go and buy some chickens, let them run around the back yard until they lay eggs, then gather them, then cook them, and she'd probably still have his breakfast done before he's gotten halfway down the steps to the kitchen.

Sigh.

Get to it. Not going to get any easier or faster just sitting on your ass not doing it.
And so he does.

Tim's never felt like they have a particularly big house. Four bedrooms and an office, so it's a good size. It's not tiny. But it's not a mansion, either. Twenty-five hundred square feet is comfortable.

But right now, with the trek from his room to the top of the stairs to the kitchen…

God, it's probably about an eighty foot walk (crutch).

One step at a time.

By the time he gets to his bedroom door, he's fairly sure that as soon as he gets done with this, he's going to be getting a nap. Then breakfast. He's so tired.

He can kind of hear Jimmy saying, 'Well, you haven't moved for almost a week, of course this is hard.'

That triggers a memory. Did Breena really kiss him last night, or did he dream that? He thinks it happened. He kind of remembers how it felt. But by that part he was hurting and tired and… just really out of it.

Pondering that gets him to the steps. He's with it enough to know he's not walking down them.

Abby pops up from nowhere (which makes him think the drugs are effecting him more than he noticed) and takes the crutch from him.

"Okay, the physical therapist at the hospital said on your butt, foot goes down to the next step, stabilize with your arm, and then scoot down."

He nods, starts to lower himself down, wobbles, and Abby wraps an arm around his hips quickly, giving him some extra stability as he gets to the floor.

She lets go of him, but stays next to him as he keeps easing down the steps.

"Think I'm getting a nap."

She nods. "I think you getting a nap is a really good plan."

Mona bounds up the steps and tries to lick his face. "Mona! Yuck!"

Abby grabs her collar and gives her a stern look. "Down girl. Just because we're on the floor doesn't mean it's licking time." Mona mopes at that, but she stays a few steps in front of Tim, if there's any chance of him falling, she'll break the fall.

They're halfway down the step when Tim asks, quietly, "Did Breena kiss us last night?"

Abby nods. "Yeah, she did."

"It wasn't just friendly, was it?"

"Nope."

"Oh." She wraps her arm around Tim's shoulders, very gently, and kisses him. "Nap, food, healing, that's on for today, and tomorrow, and at least a few more tomorrows. All of this'll be waiting for when you're not filled with drugs, and we all know it."
"Yeah."

Two more steps, and he sighs. "I need to call Sarah."

Abby nods at that, too.

"Don't think that can wait until I heal up."

"Not if you want whatever you say to really hit. Not if you don't want to have to say much. Right now your body says more than your words can."

"Yeah. Don't know if I can hold it together to talk to her."

"She's your sister, Tim, you don't need to hold it together." She's gently rubbing his back as she says this. "You and her and Penny, you need to talk, and it's okay if you flip out or cry or yell. Or all three at once. And, look… You know they won't clear you for work without a psych eval, and I know you'd rather drill your own teeth, but, please, at least think about really talking to Wolf, you know, more than once. I know you can pass the eval. I know you know the right answers, and with the whole classified thing, you can probably flat out BS what happened and never really talk to him about it, but… Eventually you're going to have to sleep without pain medication."

"Okay."

"Okay?" Her eyebrows shoot up. She was expecting arguing. Then her eyes narrows, she did not just meet this man and 'okay' has some wiggle room. "You'll talk to him? Or okay, you're acknowledging that what I'm saying is true?"

He shoots her his exasperated look. "I'll talk to him, really talk."

"Thank you." She stands up. "And look, we've hit the bottom." She hands the crutch over, and helps him stay steady as he goes from the stairs to standing. "Sleep first or food?"

"I'm tired."

"Futon in your office or the sofa?"

"Futon."

"Okay." And together they get him to his futon for a mid-morning nap.

---

Gibbs is in the kitchen when he finally hobbles in (three hours after he set out this morning).

"Morning," Tim says, looking around noticing everyone else is eating lunch. "Afternoon?"

"Hi." Abby pulls out a chair for him, and nods.

"You woke up just in time," Gibbs says, getting up, heading over to the refrigerator. Tim's not really paying attention to what he's doing, right now he's just steeping in how normal this is. He's at home, having lunch with his family.

Kelly's babbling at him, and Abby scoots her highchair over so he can touch her.

"Hey, Babygirl," he strokes her face, wanting to pick her up, but he can't, not yet.

"Dada!" She's grabbing his finger, and that feels excellent.
"You want lunch or breakfast?" Abby asks.

He glances around, sees that everyone has bowls of chicken and broccoli, which actually sounds really great right now.

"Lunch."

"Great," she stands up, getting him some.

A minute later she's got a bowl in front of him, and a fork, along with a glass of iced-tea (and more pain meds sitting next to it). He's about to take a bite when he finally notices what Gibbs is doing. Namely, carrying a cupcake with a lit candle on it over to Kelly, singing Happy Birthday.

Kelly sees it in front of her, delighted, and is about to grab the candle, so Pop yanks it back out of range, stopping the song mid-verse for a conversation about how we don't grab fire, how it's hot, and how to blow the candle out.

"Blow, Kelly." He demonstrates, blowing it out.

"NO! MINE!" She's extremely irate at the flame going away.

Tim watches Gibbs look at Abby and him with an amused smile on his face. Then he pulls out his lighter and relights it.

"Yours. Blow."

A big, wet, slobbery raspberry of a breath makes the candle flicker a little, but doesn't blow it out.

"Try again, Kelly." Abby says, smiling.

Second try is a charm, and the candle blows out, and Kelly looks disappointed because the fire is gone, and she liked the fire, but the presence of cake rapidly overcomes disappointed, and she's happily tearing into her cupcake.

"So, did you get more than one of them?" Abby asks.

"Eat all your lunch and you can find out," Gibbs says in his best dad voice.

Tim watches Kelly eating her cupcake and says, "Better late than never."

Abby gently pets his hand. "You lost a day, baby. Her birthday's today, not yesterday."

He blinks. "Really?"

Abby nods. "Really, we made it home in time."

He smiles at that, and feels tears come to his eyes. "Happy Birthday, Kelly. Got some presents somewhere."

"I'll go find them during her nap. This," she gestures to their daughter demolishing her cupcake, ecstatic on sugar, chocolate, and frosting, "is probably enough excitement for right now."

Tim smiles, wipes his eyes (very gently, anything near his nose hurts) and takes a bite of his lunch. It's just chicken and broccoli, same stir fry they've gotten from Chen's two hundred times before, but it's food, at home, and that feels good.
He takes another bite thinking about the five minutes it took to get from his office to the kitchen table. (Total distance thirty-two feet.) At least he can feed himself easily. That's a start. Though as he's chewing his chicken, it hits that he can feed himself this easily. Right now he can't cut anything. Hell, for the next six weeks he can't cut anything.

Actually, no. For the next six weeks he's in this cast. Then comes the wrist and finger braces. He probably can't cut anything for months, because his hand won't be up for anything until after he's been doing PT with it, and that's not happening until whenever the hell he finally gets out of all of this gear.

Tim flashes to the memory of being sixteen, at home, arm in his cast, The Admiral (who was The Captain then) saying, "You'll cut your own food, or you won't eat!"

His dad had already chewed him out, up, and down and inside out for wrecking the car. He'd actually called to chew him out, which was unheard of. (Use naval resources to communicate with his family? NEVER!) Normally, Tim wrote once a week (five hundred words, on the dot), and got a letter back once a week, and then they'd see/speak to each other when The Captain was on land. (He figures that's the only thing that kept him sane all those years.)

But then The Captain got home. He'd been in the cast for a week at that point, and no matter how good he was getting with his right hand, his left was in a cast, only the tips of his fingers sticking out, so he couldn't cut his own food.

His mom or sister had been cutting his food for him, but when The Captain got home that was the end of that. If he wanted to eat, he had to do it for himself. You are sixteen years old, more than old enough to fend for yourself. You got yourself into this, and you will deal with the consequences on your own. You'll cut your own food, or you won't eat!

Three weeks of sandwiches, soup, eggs, mashed potatoes, pasta, and veggies. The only meals his mom cooked with meat he could eat in them was stir fries, which was only once a week. (And the only reason he got to eat meat then was because she didn't keep chopsticks in the house. If, God forbid, they had gone to a Chinese or Japanese restaurant, the Captain would have demanded he use chopsticks, and he couldn't do that right-handed.) And, of course, since the crash was his birthday, and the Captain got home Christmas Eve, it meant he missed out on Christmas and New Year's dinners.

Finally The Captain went back to sea, and his mom started putting plates with the full meal on them, cut up, in front of him at dinner time again.

Abby can see something is going wrong. Tim is eating, fork in hand, chicken on fork, starting a conversation with Gibbs, and then it stops.

He's just sitting there, staring at the chicken.

"Tim?" she asks gently.

He looks up at her, very fragile air about him, eyes wet again, and says, "Stir fry." And then he burst into tears.

Lunch is stone cold by the time he's done crying, and Tim's exhausted, all he wants to do is crash and not wake up again until it's time to get out of his casts.

Abby and Gibbs are staring at him, not sure if they should be asking or not, because they don't know
that story, and Kelly's fussing, because if anyone is crying, she's going to join in, too.

Tim shakes his head. Later. He can tell that story later. Or better yet, never.

He starts to push himself up to go back to the futon for another nap, when the fact that he's had one bite of food all day and he's hungry really hits. So he sits down, shoveling the food in, just trying to get himself fed so he can sleep.

Abby's told him about feeling crazy, like she had no emotional control when she was on the painkillers after Kelly was born, and obviously, it's not precisely the same, but right now he feels the same.

Like he's got no emotional reserves at all. Anything that hits the top of his brain is going to come out.

And he hates that.

So, sleep. Sleeping is good. Sleeping means not feeling, so bring on the sleep!

He finishes the last bite of food, pushes himself up, and starts the very slow journey toward his office.

Abby stays near him, helping him get settled onto the futon again, and he sacks out.

Neither Abby nor Gibbs are strangers to dealing gently with traumatized people, but the fact that it's their person makes it harder.

It's fairly nice outside, so Abby scoops up Kelly, and a blanket, and heads them outside. Kelly gets a prime bit of sun-shade dappled grass to hang out on, and she and Gibbs sit on the porch, where she can hear if Tim makes any noise, but they're far enough away they shouldn't disturb him.

Abby sighs, "On the upside, he's so drugged he literally can't just keep it in and let it fester."

Gibbs nods in agreement, and shakes his head, too. "Probably doesn't want this all out in front of everyone."

"I know. So prepare for an extra big helping of prickly, annoyed, irritable Tim to go along with sad, angry, hurting Tim. Not going to be a fun couple weeks at all."

Gibbs shrugs. Not like he's any fun to be around when he's in a bad mood, either. And he's hit them with pissed off, prickly, annoyed Gibbs for much less good reasons in the past.

"Dished enough of it out over the years. I can handle some taking it."

"Me, too."

It's about an hour later when Abby's cell buzzes. For a second she thought she'd lost time, and Tim needed more meds, but then it hit that she had a text.

*Up for visitors? From Penny.*

*Think so. She types back. Really low key, and quiet, and he may be asleep, but yeah, I think he'd like to see you for a bit.*

A thought hit, everyone was supposed to come over tonight for Kelly's birthday party. And best she
knows no one has told Sarah anything. But she's supposed to be in their living room in six hours, and this is going to be a hell of a shock if she shows up in Happy Birthday mode and walking to assault/child abuse case from hell.

Abby looks at Gibbs. "He said he should talk to Sarah. Sooner rather than later. Penny's getting ready to come over, so… Should I ask her to bring Sarah?"

"Better question for him."

"I know, but I don't want to wake him up. And either we call Sarah in now, or I send her a text and tell her the birthday party is off, so… What do you think?"

"Penny knows here better than you and I do. Ask her."

*Think picking up Sarah and bringing her along is a good plan?*

*Depends on Tim.*

*He said he wanted to talk to her, but he's sleeping right now, so I don't want to wake him up to double check.*

Long silence on Penny's side. Then comes. *We'll be there in an hour or so.*

*Okay.* Abby texts back.

"So, what's got you sounding so depressed?" Sarah asks as she opens the door to Ducky and Penny. Penny had called and asked if they could talk, but wouldn't give her any details.

They both glance at each other, and then at her, and just because Sarah isn't "the super smart one" doesn't mean she didn't get the McGee brains double-barrel as well, and she knows that look can't mean anything good.

"What? Is it Dad? Or Tim? Or… Mom?"

Penny and Ducky head in, sitting on the sofa, as Sarah sits on the chair next to them, leaning in toward them to hear what's coming, but holding the arms tight, like she's bracing for impact.

Penny sighs, and her eyes are tearing, which makes Sarah even more nervous. Ducky waits a few breaths to see if Penny can say it, but she doesn't, or can't, so he does.

"Do you remember, last week, Timothy was going to be taking a mission that had everyone nervous?"

She nods. "Oh, God, yeah. Gibbs was edgy, really edgy, I remember that. Is he okay?"

"No." Ducky says firmly, and Sarah winces. "He will heal, eventually, but no, Timothy is not okay. And he is unlikely to be 'okay' any time soon." Ducky exhales. Sarah's already looking hurt and angry, but very curious, too. "The mission is still classified, so… You understand how this works. He boarded *The Stennis,*" she goes white when she hears the name of the ship, "to run a test on the readiness of the Cyberteam to handle a cyber-attack. They failed. Your father was upset by this and attempted to have him murdered. He did not succeed. Timothy fought four attackers, spent the last week in the hospital, and was only able to come home yesterday. His doctors think, that with a lot of work, he will eventually regain the full use of his right arm and hand."

For a moment Sarah sits there, silent, shocked, unable to even begin to process that idea.
Finally she says, "It… just… No! You've got to be wrong. Okay, they don't get along but… No. Dad wouldn't… No."

Penny nods.

"No!" Sarah's tearing up. "NO! It can't… NO."

Ducky's using his 'calm' voice, honed by more years than Sarah's been alive of telling people horrible things they don't want to hear, and trying to, by tone alone, soften the blow of scaldingly painful truth. "Yes, Sarah. John ordered the attack that almost killed Timothy. His personal secretary arrested Timothy on trumped up espionage charges, pulled him away from the crowd, stuffed him in a jail cell with four other men who he told had just had family members killed by your brother, and they almost beat him to death before SecNav was able to get him out of there."

"So, wait…" Sarah latches onto that, desperate. "He didn't do it personally. So, he might not have… I mean…"

"Sarah," Penny speaks for the first time, "What did he always say if you tried to blame something on someone else?"

"Everything that happens on your watch is your responsibility." Sarah curls into herself, silent, shaking. She calms after a few moments. "But… He couldn't… Not…" She's looking for a way to get her dad out of this, because he's her dad, and the cold, hard fact that both of the people sitting in her living room believe he tried to kill her brother is sinking in and hurts worse than she could ever imagine anything hurting.

"Have you met Lt. Mane?" Penny asks.

Sarah nods. "Yeah." She presses on her eyes, trying to stave off crying. "Um. I mean, I don't know, but... I know enough not to ask, 'cause he'd explode, but, I think he's Dad's boyfriend."

"He loves your father?" Ducky asks gently.

"That's always the sense I got from him. Maybe he's just really devoted, but, I always thought there was more. Little things like turning the handle of the coffee cup in toward him when he'd give it to Dad, or just… nothing blatant, but just little courtesies you do for someone you love."

Ducky nods. That fits his idea of John fairly well. "Your brother's attack on The Stennis made the ship think it was under attack. It made everyone on board think that they had targeted another ship, and the people in the computer lab thought they had fired on the Borealis. Things like that happened through the entire carrier group. After the red alert ended, and they moved onto trying to track the hacker, Mane found four people on board who had family on the Borealis, he told each of them that their loved one was unaccounted for, and that more than 200 people were already confirmed dead."

Sarah gasps at that, knowing exactly how that'd go over.

"Then he told them the man who made the ship fire was on board. He isolated them so they couldn't learn The Stennis didn't actually fire. He arranged for them to all be waiting in the brig for Timothy. He 'arrested' Timothy. He brought him down there. He told the Warden to 'take a walk', and then he locked your brother in a cell with those four men. Would he have done that to his lover's son without express permission and approval?"

She whimpering, unable to stop her tears any longer.

For several moments, Ducky sits between them, rubbing Sarah's back, and holding Penny's hand.
Sarah eventually pulls herself together, eyes red and puffy, voice rough. "May get the use of his right hand back? What did they do?"

"They broke his nose, one tooth, dislocated his shoulder, broke his arm in four places, dislocated his wrist, broke it in two places, and then broke his thumb, index finger, twice, and middle finger. They broke his ribs in six places and dislocated his ankle and broke his foot in four more places. They gave him a concussion and bruised probably eighty-five percent of his body."

Sarah whimpers at that, biting her lip.

"He spent the last week in the hospital in traction, and just got home last night. We were hoping to see him, and wanted to know if you'd like to come with us."

She inhales in a quick gasp. "Um, yeah. I do. Dad?"

She sees Penny's eyes narrow, and she knows that look, it's very hot and very dangerous. But Penny still doesn't say anything, so Ducky answers. "Lt. Mane, orchestrated the attack, and then killed himself, leaving a note saying it was all his idea. Your father is in his ship, and last we heard, heading toward Pearl Harbor."

"No one else thinks he did it?" She grasps on that hope, that maybe he didn't, and Ducky can see what's happening with this, anything to try and keep the illusion intact. He crushes it.

"My dear, everyone knows he ordered it. No one can prove it. And, when you are an Admiral, you can get away with whatever you like, as long as there is no concrete proof of what you have done. Mane made sure he could never talk, and thus made sure there could never be any concrete proof against your father. However, as of this morning, he had been quietly dropped from the Presidential Counsel on Drone Warfare. I'm keeping an eye on it, but my guess is that he is likely being quietly dropped from the different high ranking assignments he has as well as the charitable boards he's part of, too. That should tell you everything you need to know about what the people around him think happened."

She's still biting her lip, hard. "So, what, he just gets away with it?"

She sees a quick glance between Ducky and Penny, and then Penny says, "No."

And Sarah, who grew up in a house where some things weren't asked about and other things weren't talked about (like for example, in ninth grade she took biology, and noticed that not only was it impossible for her to have brown eyes, what with no one else in her family having them, but she is also the only member of the family with a cleft chin), sees that glance and does not ask any other questions.

"Hi!" Abby manages to sound fairly perky and excited when Penny and Ducky and Sarah pull up. She smiles at them, and then pulls Penny into a warm hug.

She's not sure, what, or how to convey, I'm really sorry you're hurting, and I don't want you to be hurting, but your son is evil, and if I wasn't following Tim's lead on this I'd hunt him down, capture him, drug him, give him to Jimmy, who'd work him over for months, until every single cell of his body screams for relief, then he'd give him back to me, and I'd make him realize that Jimmy doesn't even know how to find pain on a map, let alone really inflict it. And really, it's probably better not to convey that, so she just hugs Penny, and then Sarah.

Gibbs and Penny look at each other, and there's a lot in that look. A whole lot. Thousands of words about pain and loss and hate and revenge and mercy all distilled down into one long look. Then
Gibbs takes a step forward, pulls Penny into a hug, and says, so softly she can barely hear it, and no one else can, "He doesn't want it, so I'm not doing it."

She pulls back from Gibbs, another long look passing between them, and whatever might be going on, they appear to be at some sort of peace. Gibbs holds open his arms and Sarah heads in close for a hug.

"I take it you're getting some sun and letting Timothy rest?" Ducky says as Gibbs holds Sarah. He picks up Kelly, "Hello, Birthday Girl." She smiles wide and bright at her Duck picking her up.

Abby nods at that. "Yeah. Felt like I was inside that hospital room for months."

"Sunshine will help with that."

Gibbs quietly says, "Hoping to get him out here, some, too. Fresh air never hurt anyone."

"May we see Timothy?" Ducky asks.

"He's probably sleeping, but yeah, head in," Abby says. "He's going to need some more pain meds soon, so when you hear the alarm go off——"

"I know what to do." Ducky smiles gently and hands Kelly over to Abby.

They're about to step into the house, when Ducky gently squeezes Penny's hand. He saw the photos that went with Tim's medical records, but he deleted them before the others could, mostly to make sure that Tony and Ziva didn't immediately run to San Francisco and kill John.

But, because he'd done that, Penny knows intellectually, but not viscerally, what they're about to walk in on. And Sarah, who only got the second hand account without any of the real details, is going to have an even less concrete understanding of what they're about to walk in on.

"He's going to look terrible."

They nod. He knows Penny thinks she's ready to see this. Thinks she has an idea of what is waiting for them, but… he knows she doesn't. And Sarah… He's not sure if Sarah's even seen anyone wounded before, let alone the shape Tim's going to be in.

And unfortunately, 'terrible' is pretty much all he can offer. He can list swelling and bruises, and cuts and all the rest of it, but until you actually see it, and feel seeing it, it's at best… academic.

"Sarah," Abby says, catching them on the porch. "Hey, how about one at a time? Besides, I've got a question for you, and…"

Sarah nods, feeling her stomach knot up, getting a sense of exactly how bad terrible has to be.

He's sleeping, on the futon, left leg propped up on a pillow, right arm bound by his cast and sling across his stomach.

And for a second there, before anything else really hits, he could just be grabbing a nap.

But it's only a second because between that first glance, the one that sent the 'reclining grandson' message to Penny's brain, and the next, the part of her brain that registers details like color begins to scream. From what she can see almost none of his skin is… skin colored, his skin colored.
She steels herself to look more closely, see the bruises, see the bandages, the casts, the swelling, the fact that he's asleep and on a pile of pain medication and his face is still pinched and tight, and as all of that filters through a small, involuntary cry escapes the lips she's biting, hard.

"Oh, God, Ducky," she whispers it.

He's holding her hand, other arm wrapped around her back. "I know, dear. I know." He's stroking gently over her back. "He will heal."

She nods, still biting her lip.

"So, what's the question?" Sarah's still looking at the house, like she could look through it and see Tim.

Abby feels a little off asking this, but Tim didn't say, and she wants to know, and more important, she wants him only dealing with one new person at a time, so... "This has... obviously, got him thinking about the stuff with your dad, and... he's on a ton of pain meds, too, so it's not like his filters are really working, but... We're eating lunch, and he looks at it, says, 'Stir fry' and bursts into tears. By the time he got done, all he wanted to do was sleep, so we didn't press him, but if you know..."

"Shit... Yeah." She sighs. "Yeah, I do. He got that car, first car, sixteen-years-old, has his license, and" she hits her palm with her fist, "the bus hits him like a bug on a windshield. Broken arm, traction, finally gets home, and two days later, Dad shows up, chews him up something fierce about being stupid and irresponsible, and then it's dinner, and I'd been cutting up Tim's food because he couldn't cut anything for himself, only the tips of his fingers were sticking out of the cast. Dad says no. Tim's got to cut his own food if he wants to eat. He's okay with vegetables and potatoes and stuff like that, stuff that's small or you can cut with the side of your fork, but he can't eat meat because he can't cut it himself. So, pretty much the only meals where he got to eat everything was when Mom made stir fries."

"Oh."

Gibbs looks ready to ship out and take care of John right now. That level of meaningless pettiness, on top of everything else...

"It was Christmas holiday, so no ham, no turkey, no roast beef. We did lots of holiday parties that year, at least, I think we did, they kind of blend, but I think that was the last year he was still a Captain, pushing toward Admiral, so, lots of sit down dinners, and Tim had to keep turning down food and explaining why. First time he told the truth, and that got one of the other officer's wives looking at Dad like he was a monster, so Tim got chewed out for that, and for all the rest of the parties he had to pretend to be a vegetarian. Navy holiday parties, he took a lot of shit from a lot of guys over 'not eating meat,' and I think Dad kept ribbing him about being gentle and not wanting to kill things, and about not showing proper respect to his hosts by refusing their meals.

"That one really pissed Tim off. We were... I don't remember, but the meal was lamb, and it was good, and he likes lamb, and he turned to Dad and said, 'You're right, this is terribly rude.' He turns to our hostess, I'm sorry. I don't wish to offend you. I can't cut anything right now, but if you don't mind my sister cutting it for me, I will be happy to eat anything you offer and accept it in the spirit you've offered it.' Perfect military posture, the right manners, proper little officer in training, which really impressed the hostess, and when he started complimenting her on how good the lamb was, he got a few extra helpings of it, which he enjoyed, until they got home, and then I got sent to my room, and there was a lot of yelling." Sarah's sitting on the porch step, watching Kelly roll on her blanket, but not really seeing it.
"Stuff like that isn't normal, is it?"

Abby rubs her back. "No. Families fight, and yell, and piss each other off, but… No, that's not normal."

Tim wakes up and finds Penny sitting next to him.

"Hey, how you feeling?" she says, managing a really fake looking smile.

He snorts and winces, because that hurts, and says, "Probably about the physical equivalent of where you are."

Penny nods. "Yeah. It's been a shit week for both of us."

"I'm sorry." His eyes are tearing up at that. "If I hadn't—"

"You hush now." She shakes her head. "None of that. You've got nothing to be sorry for. You should be able to do your job without it antagonizing your father so badly that he…" She can't finish that sentence. "It should have been okay."

He nods, tearing up, hating that everything is making him cry. "Yeah." He reaches out his hand and she takes it. "But, I'm allowed to feel sympathy for you, right? This can't be… easy."

"Yeah, it's not," she manages a real, but very sad, smile.

"I'm sorry."

"I know. I am, too." She wipes her own eyes. "I'm so sorry."

Tim swallows, hard. "I know." He breathes as deeply as he can without hurting himself. Not all that deep. "Not your fault. Not mine. Empathy, not blame. It just is how it is." He's got a feeling he'll be telling himself, and her, that, a lot, in the months to come.

"Abby says you'll be out of this stuff soon."

He tilts his head, looking annoyed. "Sooner than if it was a collection of old-fashioned casts, but not 'soon' on any real scale. Probably be winter before my right hand really works again."

She's stroking his hand, deep sorrow, very nervous, some fear mixed on her face. "What happens now?"

He's too drugged to lie convincingly. And it's probably really obvious that he's picking his words carefully. "Out of our hands, now. How much do you know?"

"We have read the report Agent Burley sent," Ducky replies. Tim jerks a little, noticing for the first time that Ducky's in the room. "I've been doing some googling on your father, and saw he was dropped from the Presidential Commission on Drone Warfare. Do you know more?"

"SecNav made it clear that The Admiral is too high up to hit, not without real proof. But this stinks enough that he's political plutonium. He's being cut out of the picture so he can't damage the chances of all those assholes who always ignored who he really was so they could use what he could do."

Tim realizes it's literally the same assholes. Twenty years passed and the exact same people are just shuffling their positions around. He winces at that.
Ducky sees it and asks, "How is your pain?" while helping him to sit up.

"Not too bad right now. Head's swimming every time I move, but I only ache all over."

Ducky nods. "Do you want more medicine now, or would you like to hold off for an hour or so?"

"More now."

"I'll get it."

He sits still for a few seconds, then starts to shift around. Ducky and Penny are both awfully spry for octogenarians, but neither of them finds it easy to sit on the floor. "If you'd give me a hand up, I can get to the sofa."

Penny does, and he slowly gets himself up, and begins the trip to the sofa, one small step at a time. His speed is getting better though, because it only takes him a minute to get there, and once he's down, he opens his arm toward Penny, offering a hug.

She sits next to him, accepting his arm around her, very carefully settling in against him.

"This okay?"

"Yeah. Just, no sudden moves, and don't lean in. Got a lot of broken ribs. Right's worse than left though."

"Oh, baby."

"I know. So… Sarah?"

"Outside, talking to Gibbs and Abby. Didn't want to hit you with everyone at once."

He nods, already feeling tired, but he needs to see her, too. Ducky hands over a cup of tea and an apple along with his pills, which Tim takes.

"This is going to knock me out soon, so let's get her in here before I pass out."

"You want us to stay?"

"Think I'd like a minute alone with her."

Penny and Ducky head out to the front porch, and nod at Sarah. Abby scoops up Kelly, and decides to go in with her. She's got a sense that Tim wants alone time with his sister, but she also wants someone to be able to extricate him from the situation should the need arise.

So, head in, keep a discrete eye on things for a moment, and if all is well, put Kelly down for her nap.

They head in, and Abby starts to head toward the office, when she hears, "In here."

She turns them around toward the living room, saying, "Hey, up and moving around."

Tim takes a bite of his apple. "Sitting up and eating, too." Abby gently puts Kelly on his lap, and he puts the apple down so he can hold her close.

Sarah's stopped dead and is just staring at him, in horror.
He looks at her, tries to give her something of a wry smile, and says, "Tomorrow, I'll have some even more impressive tricks, like being awake for more than an hour at a time."

"Oh, Tim."

She starts to rush over, and then stops a few feet short, not sure if she can touch him.

He holds out his arm to her, saying, like he did to Penny, "Really gentle. Lots of broken ribs, but I can use all the hugs I can get."

Sarah carefully sits next to him, cuddling in with very tentative movements, watching him carefully for any sign of pain.

Abby decides they look like they're all right, so she picks Kelly up, getting kisses for her from Tim and Sarah, and then takes her upstairs.

They both sit there silently. Tim because his brain is slowing to a crawl, tired, pain meds, too much emotional stuff going on. Sarah because she just doesn't know what to do. It's not that she thought he was lying, or exaggerating, or making stuff up. She remembers some of it, and the bits she didn't see, she still remembers the feel of, that everyone walking on eggshells, afraid to make a wrong move and send the whole house of cards tumbling.

But the same man who did this to her brother is the man who knows she loves shot glasses and has brought her one from every city he's ever been to. (Even bought some plain glass ones and wrote things like Al Khobar on them so she had ones to mark the 'dry' cities he'd been to.) Same man who bought 1000 copies of her first book and gave it to every one of his officers with a pre-teen daughter.

And she didn't have a way to make that mesh. So, she filed what happened to Tim as 'very bad stuff that happened a long time ago when everyone was very unhappy and tense and didn't know any better.' Because back then everything was unhappy and tense and everyone was a mess and always fighting about everything unless someone else was watching, then they all plastered the stupid grins on their faces and pretended. But Tim moved out, and Mom and Dad got divorced, and everything got better.

There was air in her home again, and people could breathe again, even laugh.

Tim lived it longer than she did. And he took all of the brunt. And he missed the good years. She knows that, and that's why she didn't hold it against him that he couldn't forgive or forget. That's why she never expected him, too either.

But this didn't happen a long time ago. This is a fucking atrocity that happened last week. And it can't be overlooked, or pushed into a little box, or forgotten, and… And she doesn't want to be the kind of person who can forgive this, either.

She pulls back a little, so she can really look at Tim, see all the damage. His eyes are closed, and she can feel the tension in his body melting away.

"I'm still awake."

"Not for long."

"Yeah, well, pain meds."

"What are you doing in March?"
He licks his lips, thinking, and she realizes she might as well have asked him to factor a quadratic right now. Finally he says, "New baby." He doesn't see Sarah's eyebrows shoot up, and it doesn't hit him that they hadn't let the wider world know about Sean, yet. "Not sleepin', changin' diapers, gettin' spit up on."

She smiles and kisses him gently. "Think you can take a break from that for a few hours, put on your fancy kilt, and give me away at my wedding?"

"Yeah," he nods, and she sees tears slipping down his face.

She kisses him again. "How about you get horizontal and take another nap?"

He nods, and she helps him get lying down, foot propped up, and then heads outside to sit on the porch.

Penny moves closer to her, but she just shakes her head. Lots of thinking to do. What do you do with something like this? Somehow screaming doesn't seem like enough.

"Now what?" she finally asks. "He's still out there, on his ship, sailing around. What happens now?"

Ducky and Penny and Gibbs all have answers to that, but they aren't necessarily answers they want to share with her.

"I mean, he doesn't just get away with it, right? Something's supposed to happen?"

"Something'll happen," Gibbs says, guardedly.

"What, you going to dust off your rifle and get some extra-strength glasses?"

"He's asked me not to do that." And that's as close as Gibbs is willing to get to saying, in front of Penny, that that's exactly what he was going to do.

"Why on Earth would he ask you not to do that!"

Gibbs sighs. Part of him wants to yell the same thing at Tim. But he knows why, knows the logical reason behind it. "Because protecting his family is more important to him than revenge. Because he's a good father, husband, brother, and son, and he loves the people around him enough to not put any of them in a sticky situation."

Most of the time Sarah spends with Gibbs these days, he's in Pop-mode, fun, soft, little goofy, doting over his baby girls. But saying that reminds her of the fact that there's a killer in there. A man who really would have killed her father, and from the looks of it, enjoyed it, and that the only reason he hasn't is that her brother doesn't want it.

"He's in the Pacific?"

Gibbs nods. "Think they shipped out on Monday."

She nods at that, pulling her cell out of her pocket. She hits his contact button, heading over to Penny's car, getting in, not wanting the entire neighborhood to hear this conversation, but not wanting to head inside with it and risk waking up Tim or Kelly.

He's looking sleepy and disheveled when he clicks on Skype, and from the dark lighting and the Navy t-shirt, she's sure he was asleep when she called.
"Tell me you didn't order it," her voice is hot.

"Sarah?"

"Tell me you didn't order it."

He blinks, sitting up, turning the light on, stalling. "Order what?"

"Surprise inspection of the flight deck! I'm calling you in the middle of the fucking night the day my brother got home from the hospital. What the fuck orders do you think I'm asking about?"

He looks nonplussed. "I take it you've talked to them." There's disdain in his voice on 'them' as if he's speaking of some sort of subhuman creature that disgusts him.

"That's not an answer."

"I refuse to dignify those accusations with an answer. The case is over. The men who assaulted your brother are in prison and will stay there because they have all pleaded guilty."

She's watching him over the screen, staring at his face, he's tired, he's angry, he's… not lying because he hasn't made any claims, but, he's not being forthcoming either.

"He's your son. How could you… And even if you hate Tim for being Tim, he's my brother and Penny's grandson, and he's a dad and a husband and… How could you do it? You don't give a fuck about him, fine, but how could you put Penny and Mom and I through this?"

His eyes narrow. She can read the annoyance on his face. "I have not put you, your mother, or grandmother through anything."

She spends a quiet moment just looking, and then says back, "Everything that happens under your command is on you. How many times did you chew out Tim because I misbehaved while he was in charge? How many times did we hear that line?"

"I have thousands of men under my command. Your brother was in charge of making sure a seven-year-old cleaned her room. They are not analogous situations."

"I know Mane set the attack. And he is not 'thousands of men.' He was your man. I know he was in love with you. I know you were fucking him. And I know he wouldn't have done it if he thought it would have made you angry, because he spent his whole life tiptoeing around you the same way Mom did, trying to make sure everything was just perfect for you so you were happy. So… quit the shit and be honest for me for a moment, why? Why do that to him?"

Sarah's never actually seen her father go apoplectic before. She's heard it, but that sort of thing was always kept behind closed doors, and kept to a muffled roar when she was supposed to be 'asleep.'

His face has gone red, his eye is twitching, and she knows she's hit every button he has and is absolutely pounding them.

"You shut your bleeding cunt mouth about that, you ignorant whore. And you don't say another word until your brain is thinking again and not that gutter filth spewing out your mouth. You do not know a single fucking thing about anything involving Lt. Mane and I, and you never have. And if you think anything like that you're the dumbest bitch to ever walk this earth. I'm not a fag and neither was he, and don't you ever go disrespecting his memory again. Mane was a good man, and a good sailor, and… and if you were young enough I'd get off this damn ship and teach you some manners for even suggesting that such a thing could possibly happen!"
"You're more angry about the idea of Mane being gay than the fact he tried to have Tim killed."

"He was doing his job! Protecting me!"

"From what? A test? Ordered by the SecNav? What the hell did Tim do that required his death to avenge?"

John doesn't answer. She can see his pulling his brain back online, can see the controlled part coming back into play, he knows there's no good answer to that question, knows how much he revealed with the 'doing his job' bit. His eyes slowly close, and then open again.

"We're done. I'm not talking to you when you're hysterical."

"We are not done. You are going to listen to me or you are going to pay the consequences and you will not like them." She can see him reaching for the off button as she says, "The statute of limitations for child abuse is twenty years. That puts Tim out of play, but not me."

His hand stops, and he looks concerned. "I never touched you!"

"I will lie. I write fiction. I make shit up ten hours a day, and I'm damn good at it, and right now, I'm less than twenty feet away from a cop who's dying to go after you and a forensic scientist who will make me evidence to frame you if I ask her to. On top of that, I don't care if everyone on earth ends up knowing I was lying. Hell, lying to hurt a child abuser means I'm going to sell a shit ton more books, so it's all good for me. And it's all pain for you because everything you've ever done to Tim will come out in that trial, too, and maybe you can't be convicted of anything, but right now I don't care about that, all I want is pain. As much pain as I can lay on you. So that's what. You're going to resign, give up the Navy, lose everything you've ever loved, or I will go to the cop who is standing less than twenty feet away from me and file formal charges against you."

"Sarah—"

"No. SecNav, or the President, on your phone, right now, three way Skype, I am watching you resign, or trust me, I will file the report and my 500,000 Twitter followers will very shortly know that I filed the report and every news agency and scandal sheet on Earth will be waiting for you at Pearl when you land."

He's silent, and she can see him touch his phone several times. A few seconds later she hears ringing, followed by who she assumes is the Secretary of the Navy, looking very surprised to see her father (and her likely) on his Skype.

"As of 04:47 this morning, I am resigning my commission," John bites out.

The SecNav smiles, but his eyes are cold, and that one glance tells Sarah everything she needs to know about what happened with Tim. "The President will be pleased to hear it. When you reach Pearl formal papers will be drawn up and we'll take care of the particulars. Your country thanks you for your service and your excellent timing in regards to your well-deserved retirement."

John nods curtly and hangs up on SecNav. "Satisfied?" he asks Sarah.

"Enough. Don't call me. Don't look me up. Don't drop by to visit again. We are done. You cannot do that to my brother and expect to keep me in your life." And then without another word she hangs up.

She can feel herself shaking, part mad, part nervous, part just… everything.

Then she gets out of the car, tucks her phone into her pocket, and sees Gibbs, Abby, Ducky, and
Penny staring at her.

"As of a minute ago, Dad resigned his commission."

"What did you do?" Penny asks.

"I told him I'd bring formal charges against him for child abuse. Told him the statute of limitations is twenty years, but... Hell, I don't know if it is or not, but... I told him Tim might be out of the game for that, but I wasn't, and that I had no problem whatsoever lying about it to smear him. Told him he'd have every press service on Earth waiting for him in Pearl if he didn't do it while I was on the phone."

She can see them all staring at her, not sure if that's shock, or doubt that she could do it, or what, so she goes a bit further. "In the old media days, the main job of a publishing company was to make books. Books are easy now. Hell, I could teach Gibbs to make one in less than fifteen minutes. These days it's about drumming up publicity to sell books. Tim hires his publicity out. I make my own. I've got hundreds of thousands of fans, their families, friends, writers, and publishers all following me on Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook. Even if it came out I was lying to get payback for my brother, who actually was abused, I'm still gonna be a hero. So, a threat where I'd ruin him and make myself even more popular, a crusade where there's no downside for me, and all downside for him... It made him fold. He called SecNav, and he's done."

Abby, Gibbs, Penny, and Ducky stand there, remembering why it is you do not piss a McGee woman off.
Happy(Ish) Birthday

Abby blinks at Sarah and says, "Holy shit!"

"Indeed," Ducky adds.

Sarah shrugs a little. "Can't just let him get away with it, right?"

Everyone shakes their heads. "You think I should tell Tim when he wakes up, or hold onto it for a few days when he's a bit less groggy?"

"When he wakes up is good," Abby says. "I think he'll like hearing about it."

Penny sits down on the porch steps. "So, he's just... done?"

"According to SecNav, everything'll get wrapped up when he gets to Pearl."

Abby's looking at Gibbs, both of them wondering, what, if anything this is going to do to or for Tim's 'deal.' And it's completely clear that neither of them have any idea.

Penny's got a more immediate concern, she can see Sarah's agitated, pacing around, temper all but crackling off her skin. "Are you all right?"

Sarah's shoulders slump, and she goes to sit next to Penny. "No. No, I'm not. All of this is really hitting. He tried to kill Tim... He was more upset about me saying he had a boyfriend than what he did to Tim... Nothing about him was real." She wipes her eyes. "I couldn't see the monster under the mask. But he's still Daddy. And this is just..." Penny holds her near as Sarah starts to sob.

Given the massive shit storm of emotional trauma that just opened up on the family he's about to marry into, Glenn Holland sprang into action pretty well. He'd been... wary's probably a good word for it... when he got a text from Ducky asking him to show up at Tim and Abby's early.

The birthday party is today, but it didn't start until 6:00, so why he was heading there at 3:00 had him curious with a side of dread.

He felt ice down his spine when he saw most of the McGees on the front porch, minus Tim, with Sarah sobbing in Penny's arms.

Then he got the story. Ducky and Abby did the telling, and he's honestly not sure if what actually happened is better or worse than what he was thinking had happened when he saw most of the family outside without Tim.

What he does know is that, 'Dad and Tim don't get on,' needs a whole lot of filling out, and he's also got a lot of pointed questions about Sarah's mom that need to be answered, but not right this second.

Right this second, he's petting his wife-to-be and telling her she did the right thing.

When Glenn comes over, Abby heads back into the house. Tim's sleeping. He wasn't sleeping this much the last day at the hospital, but he also wasn't moving around, so maybe this is just a reaction to actually doing something besides laying around.

Maybe.
Or maybe this is enough emotional crap that he can only take so much, so he's checking out.

Probably a good plan. If he needs to take himself away for a while so he doesn't get swamped, then she'll do what she can to give him a space to do that.

But right now she also wants to be near him. Feel his skin on hers. Not much room on the sofa for both of them, not with him lying on his back, so she sits on the floor, and tips her head back onto the seat. The crown of her head is resting against his hip. It's not enough, but for the time being, it'll do.

She sighs gently, wondering if what Sarah did was a good move or not.

Good for her, for the sense of doing something for her brother, for trying to avenge him if she couldn't protect him, good for all of that. Abby gets that.

But she's not sure if this is good for Tim. 'Sarah was bold…' 'Sarah was brave…' 'Sarah was fearless…' That's how Tim thinks of her. Sarah's active, bright, fire-y, wild. She does whatever needs to be done, when it needs to be done, damn the consequences. He's passive, thoughtful, cautious, laying out ideas and not moving until every option's been considered.

And especially with their Dad… Where he was always smacked for being the cautious one, and she was praised for bold…

She took charge, took the active role, forced John's hand. Tim took the quiet role. Things were put in play, quiet, thought out, plans within plans that would have taken at least six months to come to a head. But they were invisible, and handed off to someone else to execute.

Sarah handled it herself, immediately.

The only thing stopping Tim from that exact same play was a boat-load of drugs and a lack of devious nature. After all the idea of just threatening to press charges, (in Virginia, there is no statute of limitations on any felony, and child abuse is a felony) to blackmail John into retirement hadn't occurred to her, and she's sure it never crossed Tim's mind. And she's sure it never would have crossed either of their minds, either.

She sits there with him and hopes this will be good news. She hopes it will be satisfying. She hopes it won't spiral him into a deep well of doubt. He's got more than enough of that coming, this on top of it?

Another sigh.

It's a bizarre sensation. He's not really asleep. He's aware of Abby nearby, but he can't talk or do anything about it.

Sleep paralysis? Maybe. But he's not hurting or panicked, so all in all, he's not in a hurry to try and shake it.

He can hear voices from outside. Bits of conversation, but he can't make out words, just sounds and rhythms. Some crying. He thinks that's Sarah.

He's idly thinking that at this point they're zero for two on happy first birthdays, and maybe it'd be nice if by the time December rolls around and Anna turns one that they could get a first birthday where no one is crying.

His brain keeps flitting about to little niggly things. Like, where's his computer? When should he go
back to work? What might be for dinner? And he didn't get much of a look at the new wrist cuff, so he'd kind of like to really look at it. (His arm and eyes do not cooperate at that, so he doesn't get a view of it.) He'd gotten to pondering what happened in the episode of Twin Peaks that they missed when he slides full on into sleep.

Tim wakes up again to the sound of the stove beeping. Time for more medicine, apparently. He sits up slowly, thinking about how long it would take to get from the sofa to get his meds from the kitchen…

Oh, they're on one of those little folding tables they got as a wedding present from Fornell. Next to a glass of water. Nice.

He swallows one of the pills, and looks around. He's on his own in here, though he can hear footsteps coming in from the porch, so apparently he doesn't have to get the alarm on the stove himself.

"Hey." Sarah's voice, though she appears to be heading right into the kitchen, because he can still hear footsteps but doesn't see her. Abby heads in too, sitting on the sofa, snuggling in next to him. He starts to rest his face against her shoulder, but that aches, so he settles for just having his arm around her.

Sarah's back a few seconds after the beeping lets off. "So, I talked to The Admiral."

He slumps. He doesn't want to hear about how he didn't really mean it, or it wasn't really his fault, or anything. The Admiral always managed to make Sarah look the other way, and he just doesn't want to hear anything else about that, at all.

Sarah sees the defeated look on Tim's face and shakes her head. "Nothing like that. Remember Pop teaching us to play poker?"

"Okay." He remembers Pop saying that. The five of them, both kids, Mom, Gran and Pop at the kitchen table, Sarah having a hard time holding all her cards because her hands were little, and Pop talking about how, with the kind of poker they were playing (seven card draw, aces or better to ante, two cards up, no wild) that the key to a good bluff was knowing what was in your hand, what you were showing, what everyone else was showing, and who anted.

"I told him that if he didn't resign immediately I'd have Abby fabricate evidence of child abuse then make a formal complaint against him to Gibbs and that by tomorrow every one of my hundreds of thousands of Twitter followers would know he was a child abuser and that by the time he hit Pearl every news organization on Earth would be waiting for him."

Tim's mouth opens, and then it closes, as he blinks. He sits there for a good minute not sure how to react or feel or anything. He's just stalled out in shock. Eventually he gets out, "What happened?"

"He called SecNav and resigned. He decided I had a hand he couldn't beat."

"If you were willing to use it."

"Yep. Apparently I can do a pretty convincing I-am-going-to-lay-waste-to-everyone-around-me rampage when I want to."
Tim nods, not sure what he's feeling about that. Good... ish? Relieved... maybe? He looks at Sarah more carefully, seeing the puffiness around her eyes.

"You've been crying?"

She nods. "Just because he deserved it doesn't mean it doesn't hurt."

"I know."

He's munching on the apple, sort of aware of the fact that he hasn't exactly been doing too hot on the whole regular meals stuff, but, without an IV you can't eat and sleep at the same time, and right now sleeping is better than eating, so, sleeping rather than eating.

People are filing into the house. Penny and Gibbs and Ducky and... Okay, Glenn's here, too. He's not sure when that happened, but... Why not? (Because he's something of a stranger and right now Tim's got no desire to try and even pretend to hold it together, but also no desire to really let go in front of this guy who will marry his sister soon.)

He looks around the room some, and notices that next to his meds are the electronics for his cast. "Anyone explain how this works?" he asks. Sarah and Penny and Ducky should find this interesting.

Ducky nods. "Jimmy called to ask what I knew about them when it was clear you were a candidate for one. I've never seen one before. Would you like a hand setting it up?"

"Yeah. Thanks." Ducky takes the vibration head, and slips it into the first of the slots, then flips the device on. It makes a quiet hum.

"How's it feel?"

"Right now, fine. Little buzz. By the time I've done it for twenty minutes on ten breaks, and that's just my arm, I may have a different opinion."

"They gave you one vibrational head?" Ducky sounds appalled at that.

"Yeah."

"For..." Ducky's counting the slots that are designed to have the head in them. "For fourteen breaks? They expect you to have this going two hundred and eighty minutes a day?"

"I guess."

Ducky stands up, pulling his phone out. "I have calls to make."

Tim's asleep again when Ducky's off the phone, an hour and a half later. Abby's sitting next to him, gently moving the vibrational head from slot to slot as time elapses, talking quietly with the rest of the family.

"News?" she asks, voice low.

"Some days I am sure the FDA is more trouble than it's worth. They have taken 'do no harm' to mean strangle innovation and glorify paralysis. There are only fifty of these devices allowed in the United States for testing purposes. And, for all my contacts and colleagues, I could not pry one free. Approval in the US is dependent on positive testing data. Timothy can only be one data point for the testing, no matter how many of the units he's using, so no one is willing to reduce the amount of
testing data they can get by letting me have one."

Penny can see the anger in his eyes. "They're approved in Europe and Israel, right?"

"Precisely. Japan as well, and Canada, and Australia. Hence more trouble than it's worth. Even though there are extensive studies abroad, those studies aren't good enough for our FDA, so we have re-do the same tests, over and over until someone at FDA gets the correct pay off and allows these devices to be produced and used in the US."

"But, you've got some good news, too, right, Duck?" Gibbs asks.

Ducky smiles dryly. "A friend of a friend is sending us one from Bern. So, as of Monday, we can cut Timothy's time attached to this device down from almost five hours to two and a half. Another friend in Kyoto is hunting around to see if she can lay hands on one more, but that may be a forlorn hope."

Tim doesn't open his eyes, but he does say, "Thanks, Ducky. Any idea if they're supposed to hurt?"

"Minor pain is listed as a possible side effect. The tiny vibrations are supposed to encourage quicker bone growth by making your body think it needs to build a stronger bond. Not enough motion to move anything out of place, but enough to make your body think that it's under assault and respond accordingly."

"Okay."

"Does it hurt, Timothy?"

"First two weren't bad, but everything aches now."

He hears Abby's phone buzz, followed by no sound, so it must be a text.

"What's up?"

"Tony and Ziva want to visit."

"Sure." He opens his eyes, looking over at her. "I'm not real exciting right now, but bring 'em on. Hell, we're supposed to be having a birthday party, right? Tell 'em to pick up more cupcakes, let Jimmy and Breena know we're on, and let's have a bit of happy tonight."

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Penny says, a not entirely forced smile on her face.

Tony hates visiting sick people. He feels completely useless and helpless and just, wrong, so goddamned wrong. All the jokes in the world don't make any fucking difference at all, (Shut it, Patch Adams, if jokes could save lives, Mom would still be here. Okay, yeah, that's a touchy subject for him.) and in a sick room all he's got are jokes.

Jokes that are mostly to just keep him going.

So, he'll admit that he'd much rather go off and kill John (He's checked, John's due in Pearl in six days. Wouldn't be too hard to get over there and take a shot. Not like he doesn't have his own sniper handy. Sure, Gibbs gets all the glory for being a sniper, but Ziva's got better eyes and can hit anything within 500 meters.) but in the end, they've been told to leave it alone, and if John ends up dead ten hours after they hop a flight to Hawaii…

He sighs. They aren't above the law. They can get around it, but they still have to be subtle and clever.
However, he does have the sense that since his MCRT has been handling more terror cases, and since they travel for terror cases, that, should one of them provide him with an opportunity to get in range of John, he'll take it.

Another sigh. Fantasizing different ways to kill John isn't dealing with what's about to happen.

Work is over, and he and Ziva are in the car, with food, heading toward Tim's house, to go see him, and… And he doesn't know what. Not like showing up is going to make him feel better.

A kill shot on John might have made him feel better, but this…

"Fuck."

Ziva squeezes his hand. She knows exactly how useless he feels because she feels it herself. She'd rather be doing almost anything than trying to comfort a hurting person.

"Think I can slap him upside the head?"

Ziva looks at him curiously.

"I told him if that test went FUBAR and he got hurt, I'd slap him for being stupid. And right now, I don't care if Gibbs fines me for it."

"I don't think that's a good plan, Tony."

"Gotta do something, or…"

"It's enough to just be there."

"No it's not! Being there doesn't help."

She gently squeezes his hand. "It is. That's all he and Abby really want or need right now."

He rolls his eyes.

"That's all your mother or mine ever wanted or needed, too."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I know it. It's all I would want."

He shrugs at that. "Does it help?"

"No." Because it doesn't. Because just being there, when being there doesn't solve the problem doesn't feel like much.

It's worse than Tony thought it'd be. He didn't think that was possible, but it is. He can't even pull off a half-hearted joke. He looks at Tim and just… "Oh, God, Tim."

Tim looks back at him, face battered, and says, "Don't look at me like that, Tony, I'm not dying."

Tony can see that if he doesn't muster up some sort of cynicism on this, both he and Tim are going to start crying, so he steps closer to Tim, helps him get sitting up just a bit more, and very, very, very lightly (wincing while he does it) taps Tim on the back of the head.

"Ow." It's a token protest. Even as badly hurt as he is, barely having his hair brushed by Tony's hand
doesn't result in actual pain. (At least, not right now, with lots of pain medication flowing through his system, this morning would have been a different story, but this morning air molecules bouncing against his skin hurt.)

"Don't you ever do something that stupid again."

Tim nods.

"When everyone you know tells you not to do something, don't do it. And when you heal up, you're getting the full ass-kicking for making everyone worry like this."

Tim nods at that, too. He's having a much easier time dealing with angry Tony than concerned, sad Tony.

Then Tony very carefully hugs him, for a long time. He pulls back, biting his lip. "Okay, gonna help Ducky get dinner ready," he says, pretty much sprinting out of the living room.

Ziva switches over from sitting on Tim's right side to his left, and also hugs him, gently. He gets a light kiss on the forehead, too.

"I thought dinner was take out," Tim finally says.

"It is," she says gently.

He nods again.

Breena heads into the living room, kissing Ziva and Tim. "Feeling any better from yesterday?"

"Little bit," he looks over at Ziva, "Plane travel with…" he can't figure out how many there are, "that many broken bones is not fun."

"No, it is not," Ziva replies. She had broken ribs and a chipped clavicle when they came back from Somalia. She knows exactly what he's talking about.

"I was pretty out of it last night."

"I would imagine."

Molly comes tearing in, or at least trying to tear in, her daddy's got a pretty good hold on her hand right now, but she's trying to pull free. "Aunt Ziva! Uncle Tim!"

Ziva scoops her up into a warm hug and keeps a close hold on her while she leans in to get a kiss from Tim.

Jimmy heads over and kisses Ziva's cheek, taking Molly back while saying to her, "And what did we say about Uncle Tim?"

"Very gentle," she answers seriously, "Like Anna."

Tim nods, also serious. "Just like with your baby sister."

Molly looks at him carefully, eyeing him all over, lips pursed, signs of intense concentration on her face. "Why purple?"

"I got hurt."
"Stay that way?"

"No."

Jimmy lifts up her foot, and kisses the two bruises on her knees. "Uncle Tim's got bruises, just like you do."

"Fall down?"

Tim nods. "Something like that."

Molly nods back, and squirms forward a little, and then, very gently, barely touching his skin, kisses each of the bruises on Tim's face. "All better."

He smiles at her, feeling his eyes water. "All better."

"Okay, come on, let's go see Uncle Jethro," Jimmy says brightly, picking Molly up so her back's to Tim, knowing he doesn't want to explain why he's crying and why the kisses didn't make it all better.

It's a very low key party. Partly because pretty much no one knew it was actually going to be on, so the presents are... haphazard at best. Pop was on the job, so Kelly's got some new onesies in bigger sizes, and her very own little, stuffed black lab (Little Mona). And Breena likely picked out Kelly's birthday present back in October (plushie skull), so she had her bases covered.

But the rest of the crew either didn't have (Penny) or didn't bring with them (Sarah) presents for the birthday girl, who, in true one-year-old fashion, could not have possibly cared less.

But Mom and Dad care, and everyone together to sing Happy Birthday matters. So they do sing. And Kelly impresses everyone with her candle-blowing-out-technique. And, in the video (which they don't watch for a while) it's easy to see Gibbs coaching her, and how proud he is that she got it right.

Mom and Dad also didn't have baby presents ready. But, there was one thing Tim did have, and he's feeling really pleased that he's remembered this, and bummed that he can't just hop up and grab it himself, but he does grab Jimmy, whisper some directions to him, and in a minute Jimmy's back with the box in his hands.

Abby's sitting on the floor, moving Little Mona around, making her hop and jump between Kelly, Anna, and Molly, (Big Mona wants to play, too, so she's bounding around the girls, adding her own excitement to the mix) so Tim quickly flips open the lid, check to make sure it's looking right (it is.)

"Abby."

"Mmm..." she's bopping each girl gently on the nose with the stuffed doggie, and just did Mona, who looks really confused by that.

"Abby..."

She looks up at Tim, and he sort of tilts his head to his side in a come here gesture. She hands Little Mona to Kelly, who's vigorously hugging her, and goes to sit next to Tim.

"It was a really big day for you, too." He kisses her gently. "And I wanted you to know how much I love you, and Kelly, and that..." he's crying again, and just leans over to kiss her, long and soft and deep. He feels her fingers very gently wiping away his tears, and he presses the box into her hands.
"Thank you for my babies."

She kisses him back, just his lips, lightly brushing her words to him. "I love you." She pulls back a bit, and opens the box, for a second just staring and then, "Oh, Tim…” She's about to say, put it on me, but he can't, not with one hand, so she slips puts it on herself, looking down at it.

It's a blood opal pendant. A perfect round cabochon in gleaming red with flecks of purple and blue on a cast silver backing of ivy leaves.

He kisses her again, lips just below her ear, "I was planning on giving it to you when we were alone, but, I'll be asleep by then, and I didn't want to miss today."

It's a heavy moment, not bad, but intense, and Tony, who's been cracking jokes all night, doing a very good job of keeping things light, making sure they don't get bogged down in too much emotional stuff, says to Glenn, "And this is why none of us ever wins Husband of the Year. We've got to compete against this dork, who might as well be a girl for as good as he is on this whole romance thing."

Tim doesn't pull away from kissing Abby, but he does stop cupping her cheek in his hand to flip off Tony, who snorts at his response.

And Jimmy's saying, "Speak for yourself, Tony. He's taking his lessons from me," as he winks at Breena, who gently shoves him while smiling.

Tim, still smooching Abby, shifts that bird toward Jimmy.

Party wraps up early. The main guest of honor goes to bed at 7:30, and with being excited from the party and even more cake and everyone over, she was a bit frazzled by the time bedtime rolled around, so a quiet, easy, tubby followed by stories with Pop worked a treat for getting her down.

The other 'guest of honor' didn't make it to 7:45. Tim was pretty much asleep on the sofa by then, so Abby and Jimmy helped him to bed, where he crashed hard.

Since it was a 'party' no one talked about the assault or what was happening with the Admiral but there's a definite sense of curiosity about what's going on.

And another sense of tentative boundary laying. Who gets to know what, when, and how. So, toward the end its fairly clear that everyone is 'lingering' so they can get a shot to talk to each other about what's going on.

Finally it gets to 8:30, everyone is hovering, and Abby's tired. "Breena, Jimmy, Gibbs, give me a hand. All the rest of you, I love you, but I'm fried, and I want to be in bed by 9:00, so off you go."

It's not a great lie, and they can all see that the group who went to California is getting pulled in for the first level of consultations as to what happens next, but they aren't willing to fight it, either.

Hugs, kisses, plans for more visiting (but not tomorrow, Abby's got plans for tomorrow) pass between them, and then she's at home with Gibbs and the Palmers.

Gibbs explains what Sarah did. Breena looks impressed, and Jimmy whistles long and low at it.

"How's he taking it?" Jimmy asks Abby.

Abby shrugs. "Not sure if it's sunk in. That's part of no visitors tomorrow. Heather's coming over and
taking Kelly, and we're spending the day in bed, just resting and talking and touching and healing."

Breena nods at that. "Probably a good plan."

"The other question is, what, if anything, does this do to Tim's deal with Jarvis?" Abby says.

That also gets all of them just looking at each other, because none of them know. However, both of
the girls can see that quick non-verbal something that flickers between Gibbs and Jimmy.

"Good God, how many conspiracies can we have on this?" Breena says. "Out with it, both of you. I'm not getting blindsided by whatever you're planning."

Jimmy takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. "Sniper training starts Saturday morning. He's got a
year, and if John's still walking around after a year, then… Then he's not going to be doing it
anymore."

Gibbs looks at the girls and shrugs a little. "Trust but verify, right? Jarvis does his part, great. If not,
we'll be ready to handle it."

"Tim know that?" Abby asks.

"He will," Jimmy replies. "Probably a good plan to have him have a chat with Tony and Ziva about
sitting on their hands for this."

"Better if it happens at Shabbos, and we're all there," Breena adds. "Penny and Ducky'll hear it, too.
That matters, right? That's why we're not all chatting together about it?"

Abby and Gibbs nod.

"Penny and Sarah hate this," Abby says. "Just because someone's evil doesn't mean you didn't love
them, and it doesn't mean that love just vanishes. This hurts both of them, bad. I'm thinking we don't
ask for clarification on the deal. If something happens to John in the next year, we'll just never know,
for sure. And not knowing'll make lying easier. And if he is still walking around a year from now,
we'll handle it."

The other three nod. That's a functional plan they can all handle.

Yes, there is a pic of the pendent on the blog.
"How's Tim doing?" Heather asks as she heads in to take over on Kelly for the day.

Abby winces a little, not entirely sure how to answer that question. He's better than he was right after the attack, but he's not, by any stretch, good, and if you've never seen someone really hurt, exactly how bad he looks can be pretty shocking. So... "Have you ever seen anyone right after a bad car accident?"

Heather nods. "Got t-boned when I was twenty by a drunk driver. Broken arm, broken leg, bruises all over."

Abby half-smiles. "Then you know."

Heather nods. She knows that Tim wasn't hit by a car, but other than 'hurt in the line of duty' she's got no real information, and enough sense to know everyone she's spoken to about this is very clearly projecting 'Don't Ask' vibes.

"Plan for today?" Heather asks while taking Kelly.

Abby shrugs. "Sleeping, food, didn't really get any time with just each other in the hospital, so... Being married. Quiet, intimate time."

Heather smiles at that. Not a dirty grin or anything, because the way Abby's talking about it isn't lascivious, just happy, pleased. It's nice to work for a family where Mom and Dad are really and truly in love with each other.

"Enjoy!"

"As much as we can. Not sure if Tim'll come down, or just rest upstairs today, but I'm sure you'll see him soon. We don't know when he's going back to work, but he's home for at least another week."

"Do you want me to come by?"

"Oh yeah. He can't pick Kelly up, let alone walk with her, yet. And he really is supposed to be resting, and you know..."

Heather does know, taking care of a baby is not restful. "No problem."

When she heads upstairs, Tim's sleeping. On his back, looking fairly peaceful. At least, as peaceful as someone in two casts and covered in bruises can look.

On the upside, the bruises are sliding from black-blue-purple, to purple-green-yellow. The skin colored bits are not in the majority yet, but well above twenty percent now.

Abby shuts their door, slips out of her clothing, and puts the pendent back on. She's fairly sure that this, naked, wearing only it, is what Tim was hoping for when he mentioned giving it to her when they were alone.

She gingerly slides into bed, scooting in toward him, resting her neck over his arm, and lightly curling her back in against his side.

There is a story that Ziva's told them. Well, her and Breena, probably Tony, not the others, and they
probably don't need to know, though, it's possible Tim may find it useful at some point.

It's about what happened after Somalia. After the cold, sterile poking and prodding of the doctors, after swallowing down all the antibiotics and antivirals she could hold, after getting out of the hospital, after getting back to 'normal.'

But normal didn't make her body feel like it was hers. Normal and hours in the shower didn't wipe away the feeling of being wrong, didn't take away the sense of being used and filthy.

She'd always been sporadic about synagogue attendance, partly because she'd never had the sort of job where it was easy to get regular Friday nights off, partly because Shabbos at home always mattered more to her.

But she was lost, and hurting, and couldn't talk to her guys, because any pity or sympathy would kill her, and because they were guys. And she didn't have the relationship where she would have talked to Abby about it, not then.

She spent a lot of nights walking, or running, and it didn't help. Couldn't out run or out walk herself.

She'd go by Beth Shalom Synagogue. Often. And eventually she knew why she kept going past it, why every run brought her near.

She started to go in, for quiet, for a chance to pray.

The Rabbetzin was kind and gentle, and knew not to ask too many questions. She could see the woman in front of her was wounded and trying to heal. She could feel Ziva's walls, and knew that trying to get too close, too fast would send her running away.

But when two months of Ziva stopping by, chatting, occasionally talking, a little, about her work, her father, some of her older missions, went by, Miriam asked her if she'd like to use the mikva.

"Whatever you are struggling with," and by that point Miriam had some, not entirely correct but not wrong either, idea of what was going on, "it will help, if you let it."

Ziva sighed. She knew that's why she kept coming back, that she wanted to let this help, wanted to get back to feeling like she was herself again, not just a body wearing a Ziva-costume. But she didn't know how it could help.

She shrugged at Miriam.

"Come, Ziva, let's try."

She had had to explain, at that point, what a mikva was to Abby and Breena, because neither of them grew up in a cultures that believed in either ritual purity, or the idea that regular immersion in a pool of water is part of that. But it didn't take more than a few words to paint the picture of a small pool of water that people would dip themselves in. And for this particular congregation, the mikva was old, below the earth, a pool from a living spring, in a room of living rock. It smelled damp, green, (there was some moss growing between some of the rocks) and the water was cool, verging on cold, so Ziva didn't linger too long as she undressed.

She stripped off her clothing and slipped into the pool, letting the water wash over, and around, and in her. She stayed under for a long time, until the little lights began to dance behind her eyelids, and then broke the surface, gasping air, and slipped under again.

She did it several times, and when she finally felt ready to come out, Miriam was waiting, with
warm, fluffy cotton towels, and wrapped her in them.

"Our bodies are sacred, but they collect profane things, marks, stains, thoughts." She gently patted Ziva dry. "This takes those marks away, washes off the stains, and reconnects us to Hashem. Not because He ever goes away, but because we find him hard to see from behind the marks. Beautiful Ziva, beloved of Hashem, your body is yours and His, and no one else's. You are reclaimed by Him, made sacred by Him. The marks are gone, and will stay that way if you can let them go."

Ziva nodded at that, and burst into tears, sitting in the cool air, holding onto a woman who held her like the mother who had been gone from her life for so long.

Abby doesn't have the exact same plan, but that story's the root of where she intends to go today.

Today, she's reclaiming Tim's body, reminding it that it's hers, and that it was designed to be touched with love, and joy, and reverence. That it is a sacred vessel, holding the person she adores beyond all others.

Thinking about how she's going to do that, lulled by the feel of his pulse and breath against her back, Abby falls back to sleep.

For a second, a very short second, it could just be morning. He's waking up, the sun is bright, Abby's warm and smooth next to him.

Then the pain crashes back into him. He tries to twist around to check the clock, but Abby's on his arm and his body doesn't want to turn enough to see what time it is with his arm under her neck, and it also doesn't want to lift up the way he would normally do to see his phone, so…

He's really sore, and aches all over. Not that that's new, even when the pain meds are working he's sore and achy, but he's a good few steps past that level of sore and achy, but nothing is throbbing yet, so he's not too far over time for his next pill.

"Abby."

She doesn't move or make any noise. Pregnant sleep, she may as well be in a coma. His working arm is under her, so he jiggles it a little, and she scoots in closer to him, which is a bit uncomfortable but no more painful than anything else.

"Abby. Roll off of me, baby." He nips her shoulder, and that gets her shifting over a bit, so she's on her stomach and he can get his arm free without hurting himself.

Little after ten, he sees when he finally gets his… When he finally gets her phone in view. He sighs as he remembers that his was shattered and likely doesn't have a replacement, yet. Means he made it a bit more than five hours between doses of Percocet. He wonders why the alarm didn't go off, but not enough to mess around with Abby's phone to see how she set it.

Tim supposes more than five hours is a good thing as he takes the next one and begins the very long trek to the bathroom.

Everything in the world is built for people who can stand up. And it's not that he can't stand up, it's that it's exhausting and hurts more than sitting or reclining.

It's kind of embarrassing to admit how long it took him to figure out that he is not required to pee standing up. He's chalking that up to pain killers.
And tooth brushing… sigh… it took more than a few seconds to figure out that his bathtub is basically a large sink with a ledge he can sit on. (Though there's a tiny little voice that thinks brushing his teeth using the bathtub is kind of gross, but he can't figure out why that would be true. Not like he's talking about using the toilet.)

Teeth done, he eyeballs the tub, thinking about getting a bath now or holding out for later.

Later. If Abby's still in bed with him, it's because she intends to be with him today, so, he can hold off for when she's awake.

He gets out, sees Abby still sleeping, and notices his computer is on his dresser. He's thinking that maybe he'll grab that, log in, check in on work a little, until Abby wakes up, when it hits him that his dresser is four steps from his bed, and that right now he cannot walk and hold anything. He can crutch his way over to the dresser, but unless he wants to throw the computer onto the bed, or (and just the idea of this hurts so bad he winces) grab the computer and hop to the bed, he can't get it from the dresser to the bed.

So much for that plan.

Abby's phone is on the bedside table, so, that's the next plan. He gets back onto the bed, arranges the pillows as well as he can one-handed and unable to twist, (His ribs do not appreciate anything that involves bending, twisting, stretching, or inhaling deeply.) grabs her phone, and…

_Really?_ Exactly how frustrating being down one arm and one foot is slams into him like a freight train. He can hold the phone, or he can input information into it. But not both.

So, sitting in bed, Abby's phone on his leg (where it's not exactly stable) he starts trying to unlock it.

She's got a five digit passcode. That's the first layer. There's a password after that.

On the sixth try, he gives up. He can't type for anything right now. Five numbers, how hard is it to hit five numbers on a keypad? But for whatever reason his hand just won't do it, not correctly. He got really close the third try, then the damn thing slipped off his leg and reset on him.

He's crying with frustration and wants to throw the phone against the wall, hard, but they need at least one working phone so he puts it, carefully, back down on the bedside table and picks up his Kindle, which does not have a password, or a passcode, and just requires him to swipe his finger over the screen, which he manages (on the second try).

Next to the kindle, there was a plate with melon kebabs. Bite sized chunks of cantaloupe and honeydew wrapped in ham or smoked turkey on wood skewers. Tasty, good for him, didn't matter if it got cold, easy to eat with one hand. The cup of coffee next to it is cool, but it's not like cool, cold, stone cold, and so damn overcooked that it'll do for battery acid in a pinch coffee haven't been on the menu in the past.

It's bitter and sweet and coffee-flavored, and sure, no caffeine, but it tastes okay, so that's all he's looking for.

He tries reading a little while he eats, but his eyes aren't tracking the text well. He's getting lost in the pages and rereading the same line over and over or jumping entire paragraphs.

Tim makes a mental note that he is getting off of Percocet as soon as he possibly can, notices that he doesn't have earbuds, and hopes like crazy that with one or two lines of text on the screen, he can follow closed-captioning, and then flicks from books to TV and goes looking for a light, fluffy, stupid comedy.
Abby wakes up hungry, with Tim clinging to her back, dead asleep, and the rather bizarre sensation of something hard and smooth against the back of her thigh, along with the slightly rough sensation of his cast against her back.

When she gently gets herself peeled away from him, she finds the hard, smooth thing is his kindle. He must have been reading/watching something, fallen asleep and ended up with it pressed between them when he snuggled in.

As she gets up, he tries to do his usual Abby got up, I roll into the warm spot where she was technique, but as his weight hits his arm, he jerks, hisses, and rolls back to his back.

She's not sure if that woke him up or not, but quickly gets an answer when he asks, without opening his eyes, "You still in here?"

"Yeah. Just got up. Was planning on getting us some lunch."

He nods at that, eyes still closed. She's fairly sure he's drifting back to sleep. "Then what?"

"Eat, sleep, talk if you want to, make love is you're up for it, spend all day snuggling and napping if that's where you are.

"Napping now. See about the rest later."

She kisses him. "Okay."

He's still on his back, still asleep, when she comes back up. She'd been out for an hour, decided to go get them some sushi. Soups, salads, wraps are pretty common lunch food for them, but none of them are very good eat in bed with your fingers food. (Granted, she doesn't want soy sauce dripped all over her sheets, either, but as things they often have for lunch go, this is one of the least messy, and definitely requires minimal fork work.)

And more importantly than that, she was with him the first time he had sushi, so she absolutely knows he's got no memories of it in his childhood.

He starts to stir as she's unpacking everything. No way to get food out of plastic bags and trays without making some noise, and, honestly, she thinks getting him up enough so that he eats at least three times a day is a good plan.

He looks groggy, but perks up some when he sees what she's laying out.

"Hungry?"

He nods. "Yeah."

"Good. I'll go grab drinks, and we'll eat. What do you want?"

He looks at the food in front of him, carefully trimmed and rolled bits of fish, and what he wants is sake, but he's not having that, so… "Green tea?"

"I can make some. Back in a minute or two."

By the time she's back, he's sitting up, and opened the trays, making them a bed picnic. She places his mug of tea on the bedside table, and then sits next to him, snagging a shrimp roll.
"I was thinking about the first time we had sushi," she says, dipping it in the mix of soy and wasabi he'd made for them.

"First date."

"Yeah." Lunch date. No real set plan other than to actually meet the mysterious Agent McGee. He wasn't as young as Tony suggested. She'd been expecting a twenty-two-year-old, right out of college, so almost twenty-five with a masters in forensic computing was a nice surprise. But he was as green as Tony had said.

They'd done the traditional, what-do-you-want-to-eat,-whatever-you-want-is-fine-with-me dance. Finally she said, "Do you like sushi?"

And he said, looking adorably nervous, "I've never had it."

"Great. Let's go!"

She could see he was worried about not liking it, worried about looking like a wimp for not wanting to eat it, worried that he was making a bad impression or turning her off or… He was just all over nervous.

"I promise, McGee, it won't bite you back!" she said with a smile, linking his arm in hers, and heading them out of the lab.

She took him to Gibbs' favorite, where she knew the restaurant would be quiet and the chef would take care of them. And he did.

"So, McGee," He'd already said she could call him Tim, but he didn't correct her when she called him McGee. "Where are you from?"

"Boston, most recently…" and from there they talked about MIT, her work at the lab, FLETC, and the most recent case.

The food came, and he looked at it, skeptical, looked at her, chowing down happily on it, picked up his chop sticks, (She was pleased to see he knew how to use them. Good with chopsticks usually indicated a certain level of manual dexterity away from the dinner table, which Abby greatly approved of.) determined to rise to any challenge she'd set him, and took a bite.

Abby remembers how his face melted from braced-for-something-gross to approving. "Pretty good!"

"Afraid I was going to steer you wrong?"

He brushed that off, lots of people had thought it was awfully funny to steer him wrong over the years. "Didn't think tuna got better if you didn't cook it." He pointed to the soy-wasabi mix. "What's that…"

Tim's sitting on their bed, back propped against the pillows, nibbling a piece of salmon. "Fourteen years ago."

"In November."

"Kind of expecting you to bring pho."

She smiles at that, too, knowing what memory he's hooked into. "You get steadier with that hand, and all the pho you want will come your way."
"Good."

Lunch doesn't take too long. She gets everything tidied away, and then heads into the bathroom.

Tim's watching her, wondering what she's up to. He's been living with this woman for long enough to know those aren't usual just taking care of business bathroom sounds.

He hears the water turn on, and can see steam starting to float out of the open door. A few seconds later, Abby's back out. "Start heading in, if you beat me in there, don't take off your pjs. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Okay." So he starts toward the bathroom.

She does get back into their room before he's all the way in, and he sees that she's got a few of the LED candles, and several more towels than are usually involved in getting a shower.

By the time he gets in there, he can see she's got the candles on the sink and the back of the toilet and lit. Towels are piled next to the tub, so's the bath oil, and one of the perfume bottles (he can't tell which from this far away.)

Once he's in, she's standing in front of him, hand on his left bicep, other hand on his right hip, and gently, carefully kissing him. He relaxes into it, but not too much because staying standing takes effort.

"Shower first, all washed off and clean, then bath."

He nods, that sounds fine to him.

She kneels, quickly peeling off his pants, and letting him know to sit on the edge of the bath. Once he's seated, she takes her time, stroking hands from his toes to his hip on his right leg, gentle pressure, he's got a lot of bruises, but making sure she touches every inch of him. Again on the left, lighter, fingers ghosting over the cast, still making contact with the skin between the holes in the cast, then up over his leg, cupping his knee, circling as much of his thigh as she can with her fingers.

She kisses both knees, smiling up at him, then starts to help him get the shirt off, carefully threading his right arm out of the sleeve.

Abby kisses his left palm and wrist, the crease of his elbow, and where arm meets shoulder, over the code on his delt. She strokes her hand along his arm from pinky fingernail to throat.

He's sitting on the edge of the bath, the sound of the shower spray spattering on the shower curtain behind him. She's kneeling between his legs, cupping the base of his skull in both hands and looking him in the eyes. "I love you, Tim." Her fingers thread in his hair, and she kisses his lips, and his eyebrows, his jaw, and each ear. "I love you."

His eyes close, and he sighs, relaxing further into her touch. His hand finds her shoulder, and gently strokes down over her back.

Abby kisses back to his lips, wrapping her arms around his waist and pulling in as close as she can without pressing too hard on his right arm.

Deep kiss, gentle (like all of this has to be) and slow, tongues wet and loving. She pulls back when she feels his dick start to respond. This will be erotic, but she doesn't want it to go there, yet.
Abby pulls back the shower curtain, letting him know to get into the bath. "Sitting?" she asks.

He nods, that'll be easier for him than standing. So, while he gets comfortable, she stands up, grabs the shower head, and pulls it down.

The water's nicely warm, not too hot, and she plays it over him, rinsing him from head to toes, making sure he's completely wet before putting the shower head back up top, letting it rain over them, and grabbing his shampoo. She sits behind him, pulling him back a bit, so he's leaning into her, and starts to lather up his hair.

"This okay?" she's using firmer pressure on his scalp than she would anywhere else. According to his medical records, there weren't any injuries there, and he hasn't winced away from being touched there, but she wants verbal confirmation, too.

"Yeah, it's good." His eyes are closed, and he's resting against her, making a soft, content sound deep in his chest as she massages his scalp, rubbing her fingers in small circles. She takes her time, continuing the massage long past the point of where the shampoo's rinsed all the way out of his hair.

From his hair, her fingers caress over his face. "Shave?" she asks.

He nods. She gently presses on his shoulder, letting him know to lean up. She gets up, grabs the trimmers, his razor and shaving cream, along with the shower head. A second later, she's back in the bath, sitting carefully between his legs, running the trimmers over his goatee. It takes about thirty seconds to get his beard down to a sixteenth of an inch long, another few minutes, in which he sits very still, for her to get that last fraction of an inch off.

After she puts the razor down, Tim takes her hand in his, and kisses her palm, rubbing his now very smooth chin against her hand, and quietly says, "I'm never growing that back."

"Fine with me."

She stands up again and begins rinsing him, and the tub, off. Takes longer than it would if he wasn't in the tub, but eventually all the stray bits of stubble are gone.

"Soap?" She knows he only washes certain bits of himself every day, and that most days his skin is happy with just a rinse.

"You applying it?" he asks with a smile.

Abby smiles back. "Does your answer change if I am?"

"Maybe."

She kisses him again, smiling.

"Once you're all washed off, I'm adding a bit of Light of Mens' Lives to the bath oil," She gestures to the tiny perfume bottle, a soft, warm, slightly smoky, vanilla scent. Comforting more than sexy. "and then I'm running a bath for both of us, and we're going to lay around in the water while I gently rub you all over with scented oil. So, yes to soap, no to soap, you're still getting gently touched all over while nice and warm and somewhat weightless."

"If you're going to take care of me like this, remind me to get beat up more often." She glares at him. And he holds his hand up, defensive. "I'm really kidding."

"You better be!"
"Trust me, I never, ever want to do this again."

"Good." Another long, soft kiss, and this time he can feel some of how scared she's been, how long this last week's been for her, expressed in that touch.

"Never again, Abby."

Another kiss. One more. She pulls back a little, wiping her eyes, and he smiles at her, wiping her cheek with his fingers, too.

"I'm sorry."

"Gibbs and Vance were here at four in the morning. It took a good ten minutes before I got calm enough to hear Gibbs saying you weren't dead."

He kisses her this time, hand wrapped around the back of her neck. "Oh, baby."

"I couldn't break myself out of the panic. Woke up with Gibbs leaning over me, jogging my shoulder gently, and Leon was in the doorway, both of them ready to kill someone."

He kisses her again.

"It was worse than when the State Troopers came about my parents. At least then, I didn't know what was coming when I opened the door."

He kisses her one more time. "I'm here."

"I know." Her eyes tear. "But I didn't then. I was thinking that that's why you went to Cybercrime, so this wouldn't happen."

"It is. Why I'm in Cybercrime, why you've got lab assistants, why we changed, so we could be here, for each other, for a long, long time."

"Yeah. What'd you say, 'A thousand years isn't long enough, but I'll take the fifty we're owed'?"

"Something like that." But he knows he said that the last time, which was supposed to be the last time he almost got killed doing his job. And he can see by how she says the next bit that she knows it, too.

"I want all fifty of them."

"Me, too. November 1st, 2064, huge party with the kids and grandkids and maybe great-grandkids. Like Penny and Ducky, we'll shock them because old doesn't mean love or desire goes away, just gets a little less nimble and flexible."

"Speak for yourself."

"Actually, speaking for you. I intend to be a hell of a lot more mobile at eighty-eight than I am right now." He smiles at that, and she laughs a little.

She sighs. "So, soaping up?"

"Yeah, privates, at least. The rest of me feels okay."

"Underarms?" She winces a little at that slip up. "Arm?"
"Sure. You want me to try standing up?"

"No. You look pretty comfy where you are."

"I am."

"Then just stay there, I'll move around you."

She's already between his legs, so she knows where she's starting. She stands up for a moment, re-adjusting the shower head so the water's hitting against the back wall, and grabs the soap, lathering up her hands.

Abby read Tim's medical record. She knows that crouched in bloodless medical language was something that translated into, 'At least one guy, maybe more, kicked your husband in the balls, hard, several times,' along with a comment along the lines of, 'Though this was classified as 'minor' trauma and there had been no rupture, it might be worthwhile to get a semen sample at some point three months or so from now to see if there's been any lasting damage.'

She did not find that comment particularly comforting, but Jimmy pointed out that's pretty much boilerplate for anyone who takes a shot to the nuts, and really, probably not worth worrying too much about unless they start to hurt.

And, yes, she has seen him naked once before at this point, but, well, beyond a general 'you're beat the hell up,' she hasn't exactly studied that particular area.

The sight of it's enough to make her want to wince, and she doesn't have balls. It's been a week, but they are still very much not back to their normal, slightly pinker than the rest of his skin selves.

Last time she saw anything that looked that bruised and swollen… It was a few years ago, and they were watching a video, femdom, Goth girl pegging her guy, which they like watching, but they don't tend to watch a lot of that because those videos can take a bad turn really fast, and unfortunately that one did. One second it was really hot, and the girl was getting out a cock ring, which was good, both of them were liking where that was going, and then a few minutes later she got out a stretcher and a cage, which started both of them scrambling for a remote, but by the time they found the remote, let alone got a hold of it with a non-slippery hand to turn it off, the poor guy was screaming, not in a good way, and neither of them wanted to have sex that night.

So, to say she's got a tentative hold of Tim would be something of an understatement. "This okay?"

He nods. "Yeah, real light touch." His right foot is next to the edge of the tub, and since that's the side that's okay, he lifts that leg, so it's resting on the side of the bath, giving her a bit more room to maneuver.

She's very, very gently slicking him up with the soap, rubbing her hands across his balls, mostly focusing on where his legs and pelvis join, or his dick, both of which are much less bruised. (And yes, he does have a bruise on his dick, it got kicked, too.) So it's a pretty fast wash, very gentle, and she's not shocked that it doesn't get him hard.

His armpit is pretty fast, too, mostly because he's ticklish and there just isn't a good way to do that without him wanting to squirm, and right now his ribs do not want to be involved in anything along the lines of squirming.

Rinsing off is more comfortable. And after several moments he's all washed off, rinsed off, and she's padding the back of the tub with the extra towels, and mixing up the bath oil as the tub fills.
She settles in behind him, oil warmed between her palms as he leans forward a little, and she rubs over his back, tracing his spine, skirting the edge of his cast, and the spattered purple-green patch of where his ribs broke on the left side. She kisses the nape of his neck while her hands circle his hips, then she nudges him back so he's lying against her, and her hands come up over his stomach to his chest, again skipping over the bruised splotches on his left and right (the other two spots his ribs broke), she pets his chest, tracing the edge of the cast from the front, the line of his collarbone on his left, and ending by stroking down his left arm to twine her fingers with his.

She kisses his temple, holding onto him, letting him rest, cradled by warm water and her body. She's half-thinking he's going to fall asleep, half-thinking he'll start talking.

Talking wins out.

He takes her right hand, wrapping it snug, as snug as he can stand, around his chest. The other one he slips down to his balls, not stroking, nothing sexual in the sense of trying to turn him on, just touching.

He licks his lips and swallows hard. "When I first got to Alameda, they asked if I needed a rape kit."

She nods, feeling ice down her spine, not sure where this is going and very, very afraid. She kisses him, holding him close, trying to be calm.

"I said no."

"Okay." She kisses his neck and shoulder, still holding onto him, trying to get her own mind calm enough so that he can feel that no matter how he answers her next question, he's still hers, still loved, still wanted and adored and, still, above and beyond everything else, still her husband. "We're you lying?"

"No." He shakes his head, and she relaxes a little. "No. But, I'm remembering it. You washing me, and the way they had to process me."

Another kiss. "Okay." One more kiss. "No matter what happens, you're still mine, you know that, right? That never changes. You're mine."

She can see him trying to build context for this. A frame to organize it. "That probably works. Your sister and Penny think he's gay. Fixated on you to try and destroy what he hated about himself."

"Great," Tim says, voice dead. "Mane his boyfriend?"

"Maybe. Sarah thinks so."

He snorts at that. "Fuck toy maybe, you've got to actually care about someone to have a boyfriend."

Abby kisses his shoulder. He doesn't talk for a long time after that, just thinking, and she's content to hold him and let him think.
Tim's a water person.

That thought would probably horrify him. But, it does seem that in the moments where she's held
and comforted him, in the moments of their most intense, most dark, intimate connections, that not
just the comfort of her touch was there, but the embrace of soft, warm water, too.

Granted the only other time things were this bad, he'd almost been killed in a freezer, and the water
was as much there to be warm as anything else. So, maybe this is just her being imaginative and
magical, but, something about it feels right. In the bathroom after almost freezing, the shower after
Kelly was born, the 'sponge bath' after he started talking about the abuse, after that first case back
from Kelly's birth, and now, here, in the bath again, maybe it's not entirely fanciful.

Once again they're in the bath, and she's holding him close and warm, and letting him talk, just
letting it flow, and pour, and spill and all those other water-oriented words, out of him.

Listening is hard. Living it was a million times worse, and she knows that, so she listens, and forces
herself to stay calm, holding him, taking the weight from him, sharing it. Like she said to Heather,
'being married.'

He starts with the fight, which apparently he remembers in a lot more detail than she would have
expected. There's the vicious, savage, and unfortunately short-lived joy at how the actual test went.
From the sounds of it, he utterly reamed the Third Carrier Group, and enjoyed every second of it.
She hears about dinner, about out-maneuvering John with the pictures of Kelly, and how it was
going really well. How… how there was a sense of actually winning for once. How, for a moment
there, he got to be in control.

He moved back from that, talking about laying the trap about the Irish Spy, and about how good it
felt to show to Jarvis that John's team was cheating. He didn't just produce a test that they couldn't
pass, he proved that they couldn't even solve the puzzle without cheating. That had felt good.

And how it all fell apart when he realized that his father had never been kidding about death before
dishonor, and he was going to kill him, or at least try, for this.

She pets his shoulder and chest, light, so light touches, just enough to make sure he's still aware of
her being there, makes sure he feels safe, makes sure he's still here, with her, at home, in the present,
instead of falling back into it. (Especially with the amount of Percocet he's on, she is worried about
his ability to separate out his memories from his present.)

He does go back, telling stories she hasn't heard. Most of them are like Sarah's version of the stir-fry
story, stupid, evil, petty cruelty for the sake of being cruel. And the only blessing she can think of is
that John was on a ship most of the time, because she's fairly sure that if he had been on land more,
he would have broken Tim.

Some of the stories he sounds detached from. Some he's sobbing at. Some just generate tears, some
are full-on, shaking, verge-of-panic-attack tales, but he keeps talking, he doesn't shut down or shut
her out, and she keeps encouraging him, petting him, telling him how much she loves him, how
precious he is, that she adores him, and that he's safe. He survived, and he's safe. Now and forever,
he's home and he's safe.

The water's cold, and he's drifting toward sleep before they get to the deal with Jarvis or what Sarah
did. So she gets him up, and out, and hastily dried off and back into bed.

She's not feeling very sleepy. Angry, hurt, weary, all of those, but not sleepy. But when she gets him
to bed, he doesn't want to let her go, and she's fine with that. If he needs a warm human teddy bear to sleep with, she's up for it.

So he sleeps, doesn't appear to be dreaming, and she lies there, thinking, resting, and eventually drifts off, too.

He's staring at the wrist cuff when she wakes up. He can see the top bit of it from where his hand rests on Abby's shoulder.

"You and Jimmy picked it out?"

She nods a little, kissing his palm. "Breena helped, too. You were out of it when we got the list of what was coming back. The cuff wasn't on the list, so Gibbs called Burley, found out why it wasn't coming back." She gives him a quizzical look, not sure if he knows why it didn't come back. He nods, he remembers someone telling him they cut it off him to preserve any prints that might have been on the snaps.

"And I know you got your own dress code shifted, so it's not like you can't have the lip tattoo visible, but… We thought you'd miss it. So, we got confabbing. Bad wifi in the hospital. You could get a signal and eventually get information but it was so slow, so Jimmy and I talked to Breena, and she got online and found the shop. Then we went and looked around, and I knew that you liked the old one because it was plain—"

"And yours. I liked that it was yours."

"This one is yours." She rolls over to face him, and gently kisses his lips, and then shoulder, her hand flat and light over his heart. "And you're mine."

He smiles. "Yeah."

She pulls back enough so he can get his arm where he can see the cuff in the afternoon sunshine. Black, Celtic-looking dragon, two silver snaps. It's wider than the previous one was.

"Thought I needed another dragon?"

She nibbles gently on his nipple. "My dragon!" She smiles up at him. "Actually, I was looking at one pretty similar to the last one. All black, embossed swirls, mostly just plain, but Jimmy sees this one and pulls me over to it, going, 'That one! The McGee dragons, right?'"

"So I nod at him, and we try it on Jimmy, make sure it'd fit." Obviously it did. It feels right on his wrist. "I tried to convince him to get one for himself, because he's one of the dragons, too, and he told me that Hell would freeze over about six weeks before he got," she air quotes, "'matching bracelets' with you, and we bought it and took it to you."

Tim snorts a bit at the matching bracelets idea, but six weeks after hell freezes over is just about when he'd be willing to wear matching cuffs with Jimmy, too, so it's good to see he's on top of things.

"Don't suppose there's a collar that goes with this?"

Abby smiles at that. After all, her collar, the one she wears when he Doms matches his old cuff.

"Would you like me to wear one that matches this? Or do you prefer the memories attached to the old one?"
"You saying you did get a matching collar?"

"Of course. And the other cuff."

That surprises Tim some. Six weeks after hell freezes is pretty clear on the whole, not gonna do it front, so, it's obviously not for Jimmy. He's never worn two cuffs at once. Abby does sometimes. "For you?"

"Could be, or both on you, or… I got a second collar, too."

He blinks, surprised at that, not sure who the second collar is for. He likes his collar and doesn't want a new one. Then a second thought hit, because after all, it's not like both of them wear the collar at the same time, that's very much an either or type of thing, so there wouldn't be any need to have two of them. He swallows, hard, as why you'd have two of them, why you might need two of them, hits.

"Was this before or after you and Jimmy and Breena had that chat about how we are going to be talking more about what we're doing?"

"After."

He nods. "So… that second collar would be for… Breena?"

"Or Jimmy, maybe. Eventually. If we go there. If not, it's just a pretty piece of leather. I ordered the second cuff and collars online. Jimmy and Breena don't know about them. We talk, we decide, for ourselves, first. But… I like the symbolism of it, so if we ever go there, we're ready. And if we don't, that's fine, too."

"Ah." Tim's not sure what to do with that.

"But, like with the rest of this," he knows she means, today in general, and Jimmy and Breena in specific, that they're talking about anything, but just talking, "we can talk, but we're not making any decision about anything until you're sober again."

"Good plan."

Abby's fingers trail down his chest, down his stomach, intending to just pet him, but finding that part of him is up. "Some of you likes that idea."

He smiles and rolls his eyes some. "Yeah. I'm hurt, not dead. You, Breena, naked, matching collars, ready to be played with. Or… Like you said in the club, having Breena and I sub while you and Jimmy play, okay, yeah, I liked that fantasy, and I still like it, and knowing you've got some costuming coming for it…" He shrugs a bit with his left shoulder.

"So, how hurt are you? This," her hand trails over his dick, still a very light touch, she's got no idea how it feels to get an erection if your balls and dick is bruised up, "looks like it's working."

Tim's eyes drift shut, and he hums with pleasure. "Yeah, that's working just fine." They laze open again, and he shakes his head a bit. "Gentle. The bruised parts are really sore, and everything that isn't my dick aches. Honestly, the idea of you on top even, just makes my hips hurt."

"Scooping?"

"Shoulder and arm hurt when they get pressed too close to my chest, so the kind of loose spooning I need to do to keep my arm okay means about a half inch of my dick can get into you."
She's thinking that he's not really thinking through that, but he's also really drugged, so she doesn't expect him to be Mr. Kama-Sutra right now. However, in that she can bend at the waist, getting her bum snuggled up against his pelvis and lots of room for his arm isn't precisely an issue, but she'll roll with it.

"Okay. I know what to do. Lay back, get as comfy as you can. Today's all about you. Tomorrow or the next day or whenever your hips are working, you can owe me one."

He's got a pretty good idea of where this is going and approves.

She gets up, and resettles herself between his legs. "Good, comfy?"

He nods, and she bends, gently licking from the base of his dick to the tip, tongue slipping over and over on him as her hand gently holds him steady.

A soft breath slips out of his mouth at that, making his ribs ache, but she eases her mouth down him, enveloping him in soft, wet heat, erasing that ache.

His body goes limp, relaxing into the bed as he closes his eyes. Feels so good. Feels amazing. This is probably the first time he's been awake and not hurting (mostly) in what feels ages, and if he watches, he's going to come, and right now he wants to stay right here for as long as he can.

She either senses that, or just intuitively gets it, or can read what he's doing by not watching, but she keeps up a slow, steady pace, mouth sliding up and down, light and wet and slick. No suction, she's not sure if that would hurt the bruises, her hand just holding him steady.

But she can't keep him there forever, even with a holding pace, he's ramping up. It has been a long time since she's touched him like this, and his body is more than eager to get off. It's building in his balls and the pit of his stomach, thighs growing tense and tight, left hand fisting, hips rocking against her mouth.

She shifts her position, straddling him, slipping most of him into her, but not settling all the way down, keeping her body, her weight, off of him.

He cries out at it. Feels so good, hot wet pussy slipping most of the way down him, breasts and stomach just lightly brushing against him, and a second later it's better, she's kissing him, deep and wet, lips on his. She pulls back a little, to look him in the eyes, stroke his face, smile.

"Love you. Always, Tim." Another kiss, and that does it, friction and love and wet and thrust and he feels like he's coming apart in the best possible way, tingling from toes to head and everywhere in between while happy, wet pulses and muscle spasms rock his body.

For about a minute, he's really, really good. Happy, comfortable, feeling excellent. And then the aches and everything else comes back. And if he's being honest, he hurts worse now than he did before; he did tense up enough that his body isn't happy with him, but he doesn't much care, because what got him in this situation was worth it.

Abby's still supporting herself on her hands and knees, staying close, his body still in hers, face just above his. He'd like it if she could spoon up and snuggle against him, rest her head on his shoulder, drape her legs over his, but that would hurt, a lot. So, she's in a good place. He pets her hair, kissing her.

After another minute, she grabs a tissue, and then slips off of him, to cuddle as close in as she can on his left.
He kisses her again and says, "So, I'm going to need you to take a leave of absence and do that about... every fifteen minutes for the next three weeks or so."

She looks up at him, chuckling, kissing his chin. "Uh huh. And is Jimmy writing you the script for Viagra?"

"He'll understand. It's a pressing need. First time in way too long that nothing hurt."

"Good." She smiles, looking him over carefully. "How about now?"

He winces a little. "Sore. I'll live. I... I get it now. When I almost got killed right after Kelly was born, and it hurt but you said you needed it... I get it."

She smiles at that.

"And, I bet there's something you need, and if you're careful, I bet I can return the favor."

"You want to?" She looks a little surprised by that. He gets the sense she was expecting him to crash into another nap, and he'd be lying if he said that wasn't appealing, but he wants her pleasure, wants the completion of both of them getting off, even more.

"Oh yeah." Though exactly how successful he's been at anything requiring any sort of fine motor control today flashes through his mind, and he looks a little sheepish at that. It's been a long time since he didn't have the skill to reliably get her off. But he still wants it, still needs her pleasure, too, and it's not like he's just a body, there's a brain and a voice, and they both still work even if his body's kind of clumsy. "And if I can't, 'cause honestly, I have no idea if I've got the fine motor control for it right now. I couldn't log in on your phone, so I may not be able to do this, but, if I can, then I want to, and if I can't, then I want to hold you while you do it for yourself. Come on up here."

Getting a working position is a bit awkward. Her usual straddle-his-face routine involves her feet resting on his shoulders or chest, and that isn't going to work. But, he can lie on his side, and her thigh works as a pretty good pillow, but the correct answer is, no, he can't, not yet.

He can get close. Get her warmed up with gentle licks and soft sucks, but trying to use the hand that's attached to the arm on the side he's lying on doesn't work all that hot, (Which is why he usually sleeps on his right side, her snuggled up next to him, so his left hand is free to roam around and make them both happy.) and he can make nice little circles with his tongue, but not fast or focused enough.

The second time she's tensed, making happy noises, and he slips off target, earning a somewhat frustrated groan, he kisses her gentle and deep, pulls back, and says, "Okay, not going to happen, not like this."

She sits up, kissing him, little disappointed, but also relieved that this isn't going to be an orgasm death march, where she feels like it's never going to happen, but the guy's not going anywhere until it does, and she's got to fake it to keep from having her clit rubbed raw. (Fortunately, this has never been an issue with Tim.)

"Flip around, on your side, facing me, want to feel you do yourself."

And she does, resting her neck over his arm like she usually does, close enough for eye contact and kissing, close enough to feel the heat of his skin, and the plastic of his cast just lightly brushing her stomach every time she breathes.

His hand cups her shoulder and he kisses her, soft and deep; she responds, gently sucking his tongue.
Her hand slips down, between her legs, and he can feel the back of it lightly brushing his hip.

"Feel good?"

"Yeah."

He kisses her again, drawing a pleased hum from her. "A week, hopefully, and I'll be off of this stuff. And... let's see..." He's going through some mental positioning acrobatics, trying to find something that'll maximize his ability to use the functional bits of his body on her. "I'll sit on the floor, back against the wall. You'll stand up, facing me."

She smiles, knowing how that'd work, breathing a little faster as her fingers speed up. She'd been pretty close a few times, so it won't take much to get there.

"I'll spread you open and lick you to your heart's content. Eat you out and make you come over and over until your knees won't hold you up anymore." He licks her lips, soft, gentle, and then pulls the bottom one between his for a wet suck.

"Just like that. And my fingers. Gonna do good things with them. Spread you open, slide and thrust all wet and slick. Pinky up your ass, other three in your pussy, thumb and tongue making sure your clit gets lots of attention."

She whimpers at that.

"Yeah, just like that. Alternate it, wet licks, so soft and delicate with my tongue, and firm, focused circles with my thumb. Take you good and high with that, feel your whole body clench on my hand."

She is clenching up, muscles getting tighter as her hand moves faster and she pulls his mouth closer for another kiss.

He pulls back just a hair, so he can talk while his lips brush over hers. "Feel it? My mouth on you, hand in you. Feel your body pulling tight? Feel me lick faster, harder, over and over? You're on edge, right? Body hovering, just about to fall over, tingles a breath away?" Another wet kiss as she rubs herself closer to the edge. His tongue traces over her bottom lip. "Gonna lick faster, harder, fingers curling into your g-spot—" He feels Abby twitch, hard, and start to shudder. "There you go." He kisses her gently, forehead to forehead, lips to lips as she rides her orgasm. "Perfect. Love you so much, my beautiful girl."

The sun's setting the next time he wakes up.

Means he slept through dinner and Kelly's bedtime. He feels a little bad about not at least getting a hug in, but... But she won't remember, and there's always tomorrow morning. Maybe he'll feel like hobbling downstairs and stacking up blocks for her to knock over on the rug tomorrow.

Or maybe Abby'll bring her in here and they'll have naptime together.

He's thinking he's not going to be feeling like doing all that much more tomorrow than he did today.

More sex and less crying would be nice, but he's got the sinking suspicion that as long as he's on Percocet he's not going to be very good at the former or have much control over the latter.

He doesn't see Abby, or hear any breathing, so she's probably not in the room. He's tempted to sit up and make sure of that, but he's fairly comfortable right this second, so he stays put, lying on his side,
left arm stretched in front of him.

He stares at the new cuff, late evening sunlight bringing up the red highlights in the leather. It really is beautiful work. Tim carefully rolls onto his back, and tries to get the cuff under the fingers on his right hand. The cast is rigid, but it's also a web, so his fingertips are exposed, he can, sort of, if he can get his wrist into the exact right place, actually touch the cuff and feel it.

He eventually works it under his fingers. It's smooth, supple, faintly warm like leather worn on skin should be. Tim gingerly gets it out from under his hand and sniffs it. Doesn't smell like him, or skin, or Abby, or cologne yet. (All of which, assuming he wasn't just imagining it, his old cuff smelled like.) Just smells like new leather. Nice enough, but not a little bit of home he carried on his body.

Not a tangible reminder of Abby running his body, pulling pleasure out of each cell, making him so hard, taking him so high he ripped the bed apart. It doesn't have that wide open, naked, completely in her hands, at her mercy, letting himself be cared for and played with feel.

He wore it on his left wrist, only took it off to shower or swim. He's licked and wiped cum, his and hers off of it. He's felt Abby bite down on it when she was close. It had his and Jimmy's blood on it from different times when they fought it out together. There was salt from sweat and tears in that leather. Happy and sad tears. And not just his. He's wiped Abby's and Jethro's and Jimmy's and Breena's tears while wearing that cuff. He wore it the first time he touched his daughter and nieces, and it's had every fluid a baby could spew wiped/scrubbed off of it.

Okay, obviously he's got way too damn many drugs in his system if he's getting sentimental about scrubbed off baby puke.

But... As he thinks about it more, this is starting to feel a little gross... But, it was in a very real sense, alive, with his family and history and loves.

The sun is getting low, his room is dimming down, but there's still enough light to make out the dragon on the new cuff. This one has none of that. Can't, not yet.

But his loves got together and got it for him. All three of them working together. He flips his hand over, looking at the dragon from head to tail.

The swirls on the first one were random, energy coalescing, getting ready to become something, but not yet formed.

This one is energy formed, destiny… That feels a bit too weighty for a wrist cuff. Personality, that'll work, formed.

This is who he wanted to be, his own man… he laughs a little at that… his own dragon.

"You laughing at something?" Abby asks, sitting on the bed next to him.

"Hey. Just get Kelly to bed?"

"Hour ago, you were sleeping, didn't want to wake you up, but thought I'd check in, you're due some more meds soon." He nods at that. "So…"

"Pretentious thoughts."

"Oh my." She looks at him expectantly, and he shakes his head. "Silly stuff. Jimmy picked out the dragon?"
"Yeah."

"It's beautiful."

"Yeah, it is. Thinking about it?"

"Little bit. I was really attached to the old one, you know?"

"Yeah, I did. It and your wedding ring were the only things you kept hold of. Watch, phone, computer, wallet, you let them have all of that, but you kept the cuff and the ring. I saw that on the inventory… I knew. I wish I could have kept the old one for you. If we had run it…"

"I know." And he does. If his people had run the investigation, he would have gotten it back in one piece. "This is good. Just… needs some living and loving in it."

Abby kisses him, then kisses his wrist, on the cuff. "One day at a time, just like the old one. So, getting hungry?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I've got something you want, downstairs."

His eyebrows lift, pleased and curious. "You've got something I want, up here, too." He smiles and winks.

"It good to see you coming back."

He kisses her. "Yeah. So what's downstairs?"

"Well, the next episode of Twin Peaks is queued up and ready to go," he makes an approving noise, "then there's the one that's on tonight, your next Percocet is down there, and there's some grilled chicken legs and veggies waiting for you down there, too."

Tim nods, all of that sounds good. "Okay, help me up." He starts to swing his legs to the side of the bed, and she heads over to help him stay steady and get his crutch within easy reach. Once he's up, he leans in and kisses her, then he looks down, notices he's naked, and says, "Are we the only ones here?"

She smiles. "Think I'm bringing you down in the buff to entertain Gibbs?"

He laughs at that, too. "He's seen it before. I don't think he found it particularly interesting."

"Bad taste on his part."

Tim starts to step forward. "Let's not go there. I don't even want to think of how complicated this would be if Gibbs had been interested," he says, light, joking.

Another step.

"You know, in some lights your hair is kind of reddish," she says with a smile.

"I thought we weren't going there." He stops and pokes her gently.

She nibbles his ear lobe. "Come on, let's get you fed."

He kisses her again. "Thank you."
She nods. "I love you."

"I love you, too."
This Is My Rifle

This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine…

HTR 2000. Smooth, black, deadly, nestled in gray foam and a milled steel case. This is not Gibbs'. It never has been. It never will be. This one is Jimmy's. Gibbs closes the case. He has never touched this weapon, and he never will. He has touched the case and so has Abbi, so right now he is very carefully cleaning it, wearing gloves.

Rule one on this rifle is no one in their family is touching it skin on steel.

There was a time, and it really wasn't all that long ago, that the idea of giving Jimmy any sort of loaded weapon would have literally never formed in Gibbs' mind. Jimmy was the guy you gave the gun to… Actually you never gave him the gun, he grabs it after everyone else who can shoot is dead. He would have been the absolute last line of defense, the guy who just sprays bullets all over the place, full well knowing he's going to get killed, but he does it so the women and kids have that much more time to run or hide.

He remembers, after Tony opened the plague envelope, and Jimmy showed up with the cell phones and the officer in charge of the munitions locker. He said they wouldn't trust him with the weapons, and Gibbs had said he wouldn't either.

He sighs. Twelve years is a long time and brings a lot of changes.

My rifle and I know that what counts in a war is not the rounds we fire, the noise of our burst, nor the smoke we make. We know that it is the hits that count. We will hit…

Somehow Gibbs thinks the Rifleman's Creed likely isn't the correct way to go about teaching Jimmy how to be a sniper.

After all, this isn't a nervous, wet behind the ears, green as green can be eighteen-year-old with fifty other eighteen-year-olds next to him. And, as Gibbs well knows, a sniper and a rifleman are not the same thing, at all.

This isn't war, either. Just a man. A man, and a job, and maybe a hint of justice, or a little peace.

Maybe.

Maybe it won't even be necessary.

Maybe.

Gibbs's heard the whispers about Jarvis. He's seen the man in action, the way he's willing to compartmentalize, his lack of caring for the people, tools, he uses.

And Gibbs knows that what Jarvis has done is bought himself time. A year, or six months, or… whatever. It's more important to keep Leon happy than it is to keep John happy, at least until the election, so Jarvis will sacrifice John for the sake of Leon. But he's set it so he won't act immediately, and should the scales shift, should John become more valuable, or Leon less, then Gibbs is highly skeptical of the likelihood of anything happening to John.

And, if, as he suspects, John's still walking around a year from now… How'd Jimmy put it? "He
We will hit…

That's it. That's the Sniper's Creed. Everything else gets stripped away. No matter what, we will hit. Set up days in advance, spend hours on your stomach, laying in your own piss if need be, perfectly still, perfectly invisible, waiting for that second where time stops and the world narrows down to a head or chest and the feel of the trigger under your finger.

No matter what, you can't miss. You can not take the shot. You can scrub the mission, go at it again later. You can set it up at a different angle or a different time, but you can't miss. If you miss, you basically never get a chance to shoot again.

There have been shots, long shots, difficult shots, ones where he had to slow everything down to the point where Gibbs felt the firing pin engage before he heard the shot. But he did it, because you never get to shoot twice.

Saleem was like that. He was in place before Tim and Tony even went off to get captured. He spent thirty hours on that ridge, waiting. Day, night, day, not moving, not shifting, just watching and waiting.

That was probably the hardest shot he ever took. Not because it was longest, not because it was technically the most difficult, but because he had to master himself. He couldn't be scanning around looking for Ziva, he couldn't move the scope to see if Tony was still talking or if Tim was moving.

One shot. We will hit. And he did. Because that's what a sniper does.

"Gloves and coveralls?" Jimmy asks as he pulls up next to Jethro's truck and sees what's next to the rifle case.

Gibbs nods. "None of us ever touches this. It's going in the boat house, under a bunch of scrap, and if anyone ever finds it there'll be no proof any of us even knew it was there."

Jimmy looks irked by that. "Everyone will know it belongs to one of us."

Gibbs glares at him. "Point is not to go to prison. Circumstantial evidence doesn't get convictions, and that's all they'll ever get."

"Okay. Was kind of hoping we'd get rid of this after, so if any of us touched it, it wouldn't be an issue."

Gibbs nods at that. "I was thinking about before. I've had my place ransacked, I know Tony and Ziva have, too. Don't want anyone finding anything. Don't want anyone able to put a rifle in your hands, ever."

Jimmy nods at that, too, pulling on the coveralls. "So, should we be out here?"

"Not for long. Just waiting for you to get your gloves on."

Two seconds he's got them snapped on, and Gibbs looks at the case. Jimmy picks it up, and they head toward the boat house.

"Lighter than I thought it'd be."
"It's not a hunting rifle."

"Not deer, at least."

Gibbs inclines his head. "Won't be too light by the time we're done. Gonna get Abby to modify the case. Set it with a thermite charge. Take the shot, hit, light the son of a bitch, and out of there."

Jimmy thinks about that. He's seen thermite burns on TV and Youtube; it's not subtle. "Won't smoke attract people to where I'm shooting from?"

Gibbs has his *I'm trying to be patient* look on his face. "It's a sniper shot, Jimmy. And it's not like you're going to be doing it from a mile away. There is going to be a very small number of places you could be shooting from, and any investigator who's got a laser pointer or a piece of string will figure it out as soon as he's got a medical report. Might as well make sure you can't be caught with the rifle, and it'll be too destroyed to be useful for anything else."

Jimmy nods. "Put the charge on a timer…"

That's better than lighting it by hand. "Give you a few minutes to get clear. Depending on where he is and how we do this, we'll make sure the first responders are busy elsewhere, and by the time they get to the scene, all they'll have is a scorched smell and ash."

Jimmy's looking a little worried. "How are you going to make sure they're busy?"

"Bomb threats? Reported fire? Something. Few calls all at once, get them all busy elsewhere."

"That'll screw anyone with a real emergency."

Gibbs shrugs. "We'll work out the kinks later. If we're lucky, he'll decide to go camping or for a sail on his own, or something away from everyone else."

"We're not that lucky."

Gibbs doesn't disagree with that.

They get into the boathouse, which is currently sans boat, but not sans piles of random stuff the previous owners hadn't bothered to get rid of. Among them, a workbench. Gibbs points, and Jimmy puts the case on it.

"Now what?"

"You open it."

"Oh, yeah, right." Jimmy flicks open the latches and pops the lid open. He stares at it for a moment, and Gibbs waits for it to hit, that this is a rifle, a weapon, designed primarily to kill people. He can't tell if Jimmy's really getting it or not, but he lightly touches it, first two fingers stroking over the barrel.

"What's first?"

"Gonna learn how to put it together, how to take it apart, how to clean it."

"Okay. Show me."

Gibbs shakes his head. "Learn how to do it by feel."
"Let me at least see it once. I need the images in my head so I can get it oriented right and then do it by feel."

Gibbs nods at that, pulling on his own gloves. Jimmy's pleased to see he brought his own, as well. He talks Jimmy through it, showing him how each piece fits together, how to slip and twist them apart. Jimmy takes it from Gibbs, fitting the pieces back together, watching himself do it, and then takes it apart again, and goes through it again beginning to end, watching.

From under the padding the rifle had been resting in Gibbs pulls out… Jimmy doesn't know what it is. Looks like a very large chunk of parachute.

"What is that?"

"Silk bag." Gibbs puts the rifle into it, pulling it, snug isn't the right word, the whole thing is very baggy, not snug at all, except for the drawstring at the top, where the sight is sticking out, which is tied, tight.

Jimmy raises an eyebrow. "Okay, and you've got one tied around the rifle because…"

"Because it's light, doesn't mess with air flow, covers mussel flare, thin and flexible enough you can feel everything through it, but the weave is tight enough that you can fire and not come up positive for gunshot residue."

"Oh." That sounds good.

"Yes, all of your training with this will be with the bag over it. You'll take it out to clean and load, but everything else will be through this."

"Why am I wearing gloves then?"

"Sight's out." And it is. That's the only part of the rifle sticking out.

"Got a ski mask in there, too?"

Gibbs nods, not in assent, he doesn't have a ski mask, but he's realizing that skin on the face is just as likely to leave DNA trace as skin on hands. "I'll get one."

"Won't training involve shooting, regularly?"

"Got a few of them. Burn the used ones when you're done."

Jimmy looks at the rifle, swathed in silk, in his hands. "Shooting?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "Not today. Not for a while. Only thing you're going to learn on this is how to hit with it. Everything else you'll train on a different gun."

Jimmy notices Gibbs has two more cases on the floor below the workbench. "Those are yours aren't they?"

Gibbs nods, picking up the top one, taking it and them to the dock.

"So, what are we doing?" Jimmy asks as the get to the end of the dock.

Gibbs sits down, feet hanging off the edge of the dock. "Waiting."

"All day?"
"Few hours at least."

Jimmy nods.

Gibbs unpacks his own rifle, lifts it, sights, and then points out a flower on the other bank. Probably five, six hundred feet away. Without a scope, Jimmy can just see a small pink dot. Without a scope, he's not sure if Gibbs can see it, period. Then he hears the sound of the shot, and that dot vanishes.

Gibbs starts disassembling his rifle. "That's the easy part. You can train a monkey to do that. But we only get one shot. Shoot and miss, and he'll never get into a place where you can shoot again. So, you've got to hit. You've got to be able to sit there, and wait for the right second. Might be sitting all day, just waiting. That's the hard part."

"What if you miss the right second? Wait too long."

"There's no such thing as too late. Not for an assassination. Not like this. As long as you don't shoot, you get to try again, later. Unless his heart gives out or someone else gets a hold of him first, we've got all the later on Earth. But if you shoot and miss, we're all screwed. So, we wait."

Jimmy sits and waits.

He doesn't particularly love just sitting on his ass doing nothing. If given the option of fun things to do on a Saturday, it's not on the list. And he's not sure if this is training so much as just proving that he can do it.

Either way, he's going to do it.

He looks at is as a mental discipline. Death yoga. Sniper pose. Hold, focus, breathe.

Two hours.

Gibbs is impressed. He had no idea that Jimmy could just sit, for two hours, doing nothing. He was expecting questions and fidgeting and motion and... And just stuff. He doesn't think he's even seen Ziva go still for this long. He knows she can do it, but he's never been in a position where she's had to. He's honestly not sure if Tim or Tony can, and he absolutely knows Abby can't.

But Jimmy did it.

He stands up and offers Jimmy a hand. "Could have done good things with you twenty years ago."

Jimmy takes his hand, stands, and begins to stretch out again. "I couldn't have done that twenty years ago."

"Nah, but I could have gotten you there."

Jimmy rolls his shoulders. "Weren't you already at NCIS twenty years ago?"

"Thirty years ago."

"I was eight."

Gibbs shakes his head and picks up his rifle. They head back into the boat house, where Gibbs deposits his rifle and gets the other case. Jimmy's looking at the weapon he removes from it with narrowed eyes. "That's not actually a rifle, is it?"
"Paintball rifle."

"Ah."

"You've never actually shot anything like this, right?" Gibbs asks, handing it over.

"You mean a paintball gun or a rifle?" Jimmy responds, feeling the paintball rifle in his hands. If he thought the sniper rifle was lighter than expected, this one is practically, okay, actually, a toy in comparison.

"Rifle."

"Right. Just handguns with Tim."

"We're going to start with this. Getting used to aiming. Learn how to find a vantage and use it. How to read a target, get a feel for where to shoot."

"Why not with the real one?"

"Don't need bullets for that. You gotta learn to figure out where the target is going to be, and you’ve got to figure out how to find a place where you can be invisible."

"Okay."

They head back to the dock, this time with the paintball rifle, a ball of twine, and a basketball.

Their patch of waterfront property is almost five hundred feet long, and there's no one else nearby. A good place to do something you don't want anyone to see. Better yet if you want to teach someone how to shoot something small and slightly moving.

Gibbs has a basketball attached to three hundred feet of twine.

It's, for a beginner, a far shot.

And it's going to be a moving one.

He tosses the ball into the river, and ties the twine to dock. The ball gently floats out, caught in the current, heading downstream.

He hands Jimmy the rifle. "Look in the scope, figure out where it is, where it's going, and aim for where it's going to go."

Jimmy sets the scope to his eye, glad he wore contacts today, tracks the ball, following it for several seconds, getting an idea of how fast it's going, where it's going, and then aims for where it's going to be and pulls the trigger.

His paintball overshoots by less than two inches.

Gibbs nods, and Jimmy gets a little pat on the shoulder. For someone who's never done this before, that's a good shot.

"Again. You see where it is, find where it's going to be. Just like when you were learning how to track where Tim or Ziva was going to hit you."

Jimmy misses the second and third shots, too. He's close, but not quite on.
"Were you tracking ahead, or did you see it was out of string?"

"Out of string." Jimmy answers as Gibbs begins pulling back the ball. "Easier to hit with this than a gun." And it is. He didn't do this well with a hand gun and a target twenty feet away the first time he went shooting with Tim.

Gibbs nods at that, too. There's a reason why they aren't starting with a stationary object, you really can train a monkey to shoot correctly with a rifle this well designed if whatever you're shooting at is staying still.

He gets the ball back up on the dock, and then tosses it out again.

"The skill is finding where your target is going to be. Most of the time people don't just sit around and wait for you to shoot them. They move. They pace and walk and shift and look around. You get into the target's head, figure out where it's going, and you shoot there."

Jimmy's shuts his eyes for a second, centers, and then sits down, takes his shoes off, and wades into the river.

He shoots again, able to feel the water, and this time, he doesn't miss.

He does, however, reveal a flaw in Gibbs' training plan, namely hitting the ball a second time smacked it with enough force the string snapped or detached, or something, and it began rapidly bobbing its way down the river.

"Have at it," Gibbs says as the basketball is heading for the Atlantic.

Jimmy shoots quickly, five more times, but he's not centered or feeling what's happening or where the ball is going to go, so he misses all of them.

With the basketball rapidly heading out of sight, it's time for new targets. Gibbs isn't quite willing to offer up his own skin until Jimmy's a bit better at the aiming thing.

Well, they're on the water, there are trees all over the place, and there's something of a breeze…

"Oak tree, hundred feet down river, see if you can get a leaf."

Jimmy just stares at Gibbs for a moment, then he licks his lips and says, dryly, "I'm not the ex-Boy Scout. Best I can do is look down stream and say, 'Yep, those are trees.'" Jimmy hands over the paintball gun and heads back into the boat house.

He's back a minute later with a life jacket.

"This on the other hand…" Gibbs starts tying more string to it, and tosses it out.
Being in the water helps. He's got a much more concrete feel for how the life vest is going to move with the water swirling around his feet and knees. The current is faster, smoother where the vest is, but having the eddies of the edges helps him.

Gibbs has said that when he's shooting for real, he'll take wind markers, because that will matter more for where the bullet goes, but for right now, using the water is a fine way to start.

Hell, maybe if he's lucky, John'll feel like getting a swim.

That thought in mind, Jimmy nails the life vest a third time.

---

Gibbs calls time as it's getting onto lunch. Partially because it's a good plan to have breaks in place. Partially because Ducky, Penny, Tony, and Ziva are all coming at lunchtime to work on the house some more.

They pack up the paint gun, and Jimmy strips off the wet coveralls and puts his shoes and socks back on, neither of them talking about what they just did.

"Practice when and as you can. Next week, we'll get some balloons and tie them onto the trees. Good way to track how something moves when it's not steady like the current."

Jimmy nods at that.

As they're walking back toward the house, Gibbs asks, "You okay?"

Jimmy shrugs a bit. "Think so."

"If you're not… You don't have to do this."

Jimmy stares at Gibbs, eyes cold and steady. "I want to." He smiles a little, but it's not a happy gesture.

"You want to for you, or to keep me from doing something stupid?"

"Both." Jimmy's not sure how to say, or get into, or even really think about, for that matter, what Tim is to and for him. He doesn't really have words. Best friend… sounds like something a fifteen-year-old girl says about another fifteen-year-old girl who'll be gone from her life by the time she gets to twenty. Tim's the man he trust to raise his children and take care of his wife if something happens to him and he can't do it, but that's only part of it. He's the person, next to Breena, that Jimmy most enjoys spending time with, but that's only part of it, too. Brother, friend, whatever, Jimmy doesn't have a good word for it, but he feels it in his guts.

He can see the way Gibbs is watching him, and he knows Gibbs gets it.

Jimmy nods quickly and adds, "And for Tim, and Abby, and… because I can. Because I've got the best shot of getting away clean. Because…" Jimmy's staring into the distance, and shakes his head. "Because I would have set myself on fire if it meant I got a life with my son, and he threw his away." He shakes his head again. "Lots of reasons. But I know I can back out. I know I don't have to do it. But late at night, especially in the hospital, when Abby and Tim were sleeping, I was hoping that Jarvis would back out or fuck it up, because I want John dead and I want to do it myself." Jimmy stares at Gibbs for another second. "Only one man I'm willing to hand that rifle to, and it's Tim. He wants it for himself, and I'll bow out, otherwise…"

Gibbs nods. He understands.
The Long Road

If you had asked Tim what he would have thought of a three-week-long vacation where all he had to
do was lay around, eat, and sleep, he would have told you…

He would have told you that sounded boring.

A week. Sure, a week of laying around sucking up time with Abby and Kelly, maybe playing in the pool or on the beach, great. Lots of time to read and game, wonderful. Hours to write, excellent.

But after a week, he'd want to get back to work, check in at least. Because he loves his job, and he's great at it.

So the fact that shortly after he logged in on Monday (from home, and yes, it took six attempts, because he can't bloody well type one-handed, and it's possible the Percocet he's on isn't exactly helping his accuracy in said matter) to check in and see what was going on in the office was met by a call from Leon whereby he explained that: A: Just because Tim has hit Director level does not mean he can get back to work after almost dying without a psych eval. That is utterly non-negotiable. B: As long as he is on narcotics he is not to be doing anything involving the computer systems, and if need be Leon will hunt down his three best techs and task them with keeping him out of the computers. And knowing how Team Gibbs and the remnants of Team Gibbs works, Leon wants a clean piss test, proving that Tim's no longer on narcotics before he's allowed to do anything beyond supervise. And given A and B, C is their natural successor, namely Leon does not want to see Tim doing anything even remotely case related for at least three weeks. However, should he desire to head in to fill out paperwork, approve time off requests and the like, he is more than welcome to do that.

Tim had some exceptionally choice words in response to said orders, which left Leon staring at his phone in shocked wonder, and reiterating that his 'No one on Narcotics works a case' rule is sound.

If you were to ask him, Tim would tell you the worst part of this is that he's still doped to the eyes on painkillers, so he's got no filters, so the loud and very profane tirade that went with not being allowed anywhere near anything work-related made him feel even worse than the vast horde of broken bones because it did a masterful job of proving Leon’s point that he's not fit to work.

Having Heather poke her head in his office, ask if he was, "Okay?" and then basically snarling at her, really didn't improve matters much, either.

It's not her fault that he's a mess right now, but she's having to be near it, which he finds horrifyingly embarrassing. (And he doesn't even want to begin to get into how his year-old-baby-girl knows words, fortunately so badly pronounced as to be unrecognizable, such as bastard, fuck, shit, asshole, and on and on. Let's just say Sunday involved an epic meltdown when he couldn't get his new phone working.)

He's useless (or as Abby says, "resting" and "healing"). He can't work. Sure, he can check in, log on, and keep an eye on things, but the amount of time it takes for him to type his password in with one bruised up left hand is also killing him.

Not being able to type also means he can't really write. (Because if his keyboard on his computer is giving him trouble, the manual action on his typewriter is going to destroy the only hand he has that still works, sort of.)
He can't game one-handed. At least, not anything more complicated than Myst or Sudoku, both of which he's way too drugged to actually win at.

He'd be okay with watching TV, except right now there's only three things he's really watching, and he wants to see them with Abby, who did not just suddenly get a month-long paid vacation. And who is, in fact, back at work, doing useful things with people she likes, instead of sitting around like a wart on the ass of a frog.

He's stuck in his office, alone, cursing quietly and crying, feeling absolutely defeated.

Eventually he pulls himself together again, eventually it's time for more meds, he takes them, and he heads to the futon so he can get a nap.

"Healing" means he's basically on a twenty-four hour cycle. He sleeps about two and a half out of every four hours, but he's doing them in four hour cycles. Wake up, eat, mess around, vibrate his bones, (Thank you for tracking down another vibrational head, Ducky! Yes, it does ache, but now he's only got two and a half hours of even more intense aching instead of five.) be bored, get meds, go back to sleep.

The bored, especially at night, is killing him, too.

When he's awake, he's very awake. Not like he can just shut his eyes, snuggle in closer to Abby and drift back to sleep. No, his eyes jerk open, and he's AWAKE, mind racing around to places he'd rather it wasn't.

Hours of nothing to do but think.

Thinking about the attack. At this point, he's not sure how much of what he's thinking about is memories of the attack, or his brain just working on scaring the shit out of him over and over, but it seems like each of these memory cycles involves more images of the fight, in more detail, and more terror, and more pain. Abby's mentioned that when she was still on narcotics after Kelly that she had a hard time pulling out of bad thoughts and memories, and he's really hoping this is just a side effect of the meds.

Thinking about his dad. He's out there, somewhere, doing God alone knows what. Completely free. Not like he's got a fleet to take care of anymore. Sometimes it leaves him shaking, scared. He's out there. He's lost everything that ever mattered to him. God alone knows what he's going to do, but Tim wouldn't put it past John to blame him for it and come after him.

Most of the time it leaves him shaking, angry. He knows that Jarvis is out there, planning whatever happens next. They aren't talking to him about it, because he's still on drugs, but he know Jimmy and Abby, and Gibbs have something in the works, too. But right now, good reason or not, he's not in the loop, and that adds to his anger.

Half of the time he wishes he hadn't taken Jarvis' deal. Half the time he wants to heal up, get a gun, and show his father, first hand, that he can tie John to a goal post and then hit every joint in that man's body from the fifty yard line on a football field. When he's thinking like that, he almost wishes his father would come for him, let them finish this. Because whatever this is, it's not finished.

Half the time he's crying about it. Sorrow for not being wanted. Sorrow for not getting his own back. Sorrow for… sorrow. For the fact that this whole 'family' was a screaming disaster and he had to be born into the middle of it.

He's thinking about life and about what happened to him, and his mom and this absolute fucking
mess of a birth family. Even with his Dad not going, he's still dreading running into his mother at Sarah’s wedding.

Too many hours thinking. Way more crying than he'd like. Way more *everything* emotional and messy and painful, than he'd like.

And then enough time goes by, and he sucks down another Percocet, and it starts to knock him out, and he cuddles into Abby if she's nearby, keeping her close, because her body and breath keep the nightmares away.

On Tuesday, Wolf came to visit. He introduces Kelly (who Wolf coos over appropriately) and Heather, and they both head to his office.

"Thanks for coming."

Wolf looks at the crutch, the casts, the bruises. (Tim's cursing his pale skin, on Tony or Ziva ten day old bruises are pretty well-faded. On him, they still stand out.) "Not a problem. I take it you can't drive?"

"Not yet. I probably could if I absolutely had to, but the medication means it's a bad plan."

Wolf nods. "You're the Director of Cybercrime now."

"Since January."

"Congratulations. I take it, though, this wasn't a standard operation," Wolf says as he sits down.

Tim shakes his head. "I have clearance to talk to you, because I need it to get back to work, but… Classified Op, on a lot of levels."

"Leon told me to clear my afternoon for this, so… As you know, everything is confidential. Anything you tell me, about this op, about the fallout from it, about anything, stays between us. The only thing I keep notes on is if you're ready to go back to work."

"According to Leon, that won't be true for anything other than paperwork until I'm off the pain meds."

He can see Wolf cataloging how beaten he is. "Probably a wise decision."

Tim shrugs. For a second, he's about to say something about hating being useless, but he knows that's just a way to keep from having to get into it. Wolf watches him, seeming to see the way he's shifting topics, not ready to start.

"How about you start at the beginning? What was the op? Other than the fact that you were involved in it and it didn't happen at the Navy Yard, I'm completely in the dark."

Tim licks his lips, sighs, and says, "This begins more than thirty years before the op."

That catches Wolf's attention. He's looking very curious.

Tim takes another deep, steadying breath. He exhales as slow and smooth as he can without making his ribs ache. He's looking fairly intently just behind and to the left of Wolf, and very much wishing he'd set this for a time when Abby could have been here to hold his hand. He inhales, about to speak, getting ready to form words, but they don't form, not the first shot, he's just sitting there with his mouth open. So he closes it, tries again, and this time gets out, "I was an abused child." His voice
breaks on it. He's talked about it, but... he's never named it, not like that. He's never specifically said those words about himself. "Umm... from... probably about the age of six until I cut ties for the last time at twenty-six my father threw every hard, painful, terrifying word he could at me. It was never physical, but..." he licks his lips, then wipes his mouth, "everyone who knows the details is willing to call it abuse, including his Mom. He kept me terrified pretty much my entire childhood, and I stopped talking to him the first time at seventeen, made up, sort of, when my grandfather died, talked a bit from nineteen to twenty-six. Not a lot. He'd yell at me for not joining the Navy. I'd hang up. My mom would complain about how it wasn't good for us to just not talk. I'd call back a few months later, he'd yell some more, and the cycle would repeat. That kept up until I got on Gibbs' team, number one MCRT, and it wasn't good enough for him, so I hung up, and I didn't call back for seven years. Tried again one more time. It was a disaster. That was the end of it."

Wolf is nodding, not taking any notes, watching Tim carefully.

"He's Admiral John McGee. Or was. I guess. He resigned on Friday. My sister blackmailed him into it. But, before Friday he ran the Pacific Combat Theater from the USS Stennis. The op was a Cybertest. I hacked his Carrier Group, made the different ships think they were attacking each other, and then watched to see how they'd handle it. They failed the test." Tim looks at his arm. "And he tried to kill me for it."

The dryly ironic part of Tim's mind is a bit gratified to see that he's come up with something that actually shocks Wolf. He bets that doesn't happen very often. It'd be a lot more satisfying if it hadn't happened to him personally, though.

They talk for about two hours, as long as Tim can stand talking, which leaves him exhausted and feeling crushed. No defenses, no filters, means everything comes pouring out in a great, uncontrolled, profane, angry, spiteful torrent of pissed-off invective.

Wolf seems to think that's a good thing, but all Tim wants to do is curl into a ball and hide for the next ten years.

No luck on that. Wolf's coming back in a week, to talk more. Tim's got the sense that's going to happen a lot. And he knows for a fact that Abby's going to be with him for the next chat, because that would have been a lot easier with her right next to him.

He's not exactly enjoying being around people right now. Mostly because he's got the emotional control of an overtired toddler. An overtired toddler on drugs.

He's crying, a lot. Which is, supposedly, normal and, supposedly, good and, supposedly, something he should be doing because that was a horrendously traumatic experience and just burying it isn't a good thing, and supposedly actually feeling the pain and dealing with it is useful, but, really, right now, he'd MUCH rather stuff it back into his subconscious and leave it the fuck alone.

He got many good years, decades even, of not dealing with this shit, and he'd really like to get back to that.

Wolf says this is normal and part of healing, and that he will flash back to memories of the Admiral, and the fight, and all the rest of this, but it'll get better, happen less often, and he'll develop better coping mechanisms for it.

But, for the first time, he's really grasping the desire to drink yourself stupid.

He's not going to, first because he can't take his pain meds and drink, and secondly, because from
everything he can see that'll just mean he has to deal with even more of this shit.

Plus, he still can't carry anything and walk at the same time, and he'll be damned before he ever admits out loud that he wants to drink like that.

Gibbs has been over a lot. Partially as a buffer between Tim and Heather. She didn't hire on to be his nanny. And she does know that this is not usual Tim, that he's drugged to the eyes, and that he's horribly embarrassed by the guy he is right now, but that doesn't mean she's enjoying it. Partially because Tim is hurting, and Abby's working, and he might as well have someone nearby who knows something about hurting and healing. Partially because, even though Tim isn't exactly a boatload of fun to be around right now, he's still Jethro's, and he takes care of his own.

Though it's true that the look Tim is giving Jethro is… skeptical, (that's the polite version, the more accurate one is probably *are you out of your ever-loving fucking mind?*) as he's driving them to the house on Thursday.

"You do realize there's literally nothing, at all, I can do, that's even remotely useful out there?"

"Keep Duck, Penny, and I company."

"Oh God." That involved an epic adolescent-know-it-all eye-roll.

"Hush it. You're getting out of that house and out of Heather's hair, and into the sunshine. And if I have to drag your ass out of this car and plop you in the middle of the grass to do that, that's what I'm going to do."

"As opposed to?" Tim bites out. "If you don't do that, all I can do is just sit in this goddamned truck and get slobbered on by your bitch." (That's Tim feeling sorry for himself. He can get into and out of the truck, it's just very slow, and it makes him ache.)

Mona looks hurt by that. Yes, she has been licking his face, and he's been trying to push her away, but she can tell he's not in a good mood and she's trying to help. Licking cheers Gibbs up, and it makes the girls stop crying, so she's doing her best for Tim.

Gibbs narrows his eyes. "As opposed to me tossing your ass in the river and letting you swim."

"I'll drown," Tim says with a glare.

"Not in two feet of water, you won't." That gives Gibbs an idea. He looks Tim over, thinking about the casts and everything. "Call Jimmy, ask him if you can swim."

"I *hate* swimming." That's not precisely true. He doesn't particularly like swimming, that's true. But he doesn't mind playing in the pool or the ocean some. It's just not anything he'd ever do on his own for fun. After all, cold isn't his idea of fun, and all the pools he has access to are cold.

"You hate everything right now. Give him a call. Ask if you can swim."

"I can't fucking swim, Jethro! You need two fucking arms to fucking swim!"

Gibbs' turn to roll his eyes. He mutters something about Tim having been a bastard as a teenager and then says, "Call him, ask. You can swim with no arms, and you can definitely float without them, so get on the damn phone, call Jimmy, and find out if I can drop you in the pool and get you doing something again so you stop sulking twenty-four seven."
Tim glares, but calls.

"Gibbs wants to know if I can swim," he says as soon as he hears Jimmy pick up.

"Hello to you, too, Tim."

"Hi." Tim takes a breath, trying to be less of a pain in the ass. "He thinks dropping me in the pool might make me feel better."

"I don't think it would hurt. Not like you'll feel worse, and you do need to build up muscle strength and lung capacity again, should be good for that."

"Great."

"Yes, it is. The more things you can do, the better you're going to feel. But, skip the pool at NCIS and go to the one at our gym. They've got saltwater pools, and right now soaking in chlorine isn't good for your lungs." Salient point. Even when he doesn't have a pile of healing ribs, Tim's lungs don't exactly relish spending lots of time breathing in chlorine.

"So, what's he got you doing today?" Jimmy asks.

"Dragging me to the house."

"Good."

Tim rolls his eyes again. "For what? I've got one hand, and it doesn't want to do anything even remotely like work. I can't even weed flowerbeds right now."

"Then it's a good thing we don't have any flowerbeds," Jimmy says.

"You can still go over electrical schematics and start working on the new wiring layout," Jethro says.

Jimmy hears that and agrees.

"Uh, yeah, if you want the house to burn down. You do not want me planning electrical systems right now. It takes me six tries to log into my computer, and you want me to lay out the wiring? Are you completely insane?"

"Okay, I'm going to leave you two to that," Jimmy says, getting ready to hang up. "Go swimming tomorrow, though."

As Tim tucks his phone into his pocket, Gibbs stops the car and turns to look at Tim. "Do you want to be sitting at home?"

"No." And he doesn't. He's sick of home.

Gibbs gives him the Well... we're not at home look.

"There's nothing I want to do that I can do right now. I can't write, I can't read, I can't work, there's no TV show I want to watch, I can't game, I can't drink, I can't fight, there is NOTHING I enjoy available at this point in time, and everything and everyone is pissing me off, and I hate that, too."

Gibbs sighs. "I know. Been there, done that, I know."

"I just want to be done with this." He's crying again, hating that, too.
Gibbs rubs the back of Tim's head. "One minute at a time, Tim. We get through now, and then a little more now, and some now on top of that, and next thing you know, it's tomorrow and you're one day closer to normal again."

"What if I can't ever find normal again? What if this anger and pain..." he wipes his eyes again, "What if this fear..." Abby knows he's scared, because she sleeps with him, and Wolf does, because he's said, but until now, he hasn't said it to anyone else. "Doesn't go away? He's out there, no job to keep him busy... I used to be able to go months without thinking about this, and now... Now I can't go an hour without it popping up. Because he's out there."

Gibbs' voice is quiet, soothing, but the look on his face is terrifying. "Not for a second longer than you want him to be. You heal up some more, get off the drugs, and once they're out of your system, we'll talk, and if you're still scared, that's the end of him. Deal, no deal, doesn't matter, he's dead. He's a walking corpse, Tim, and all it boils down to is time and who's going to pull the trigger."

"You?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "Not unless you want it right away. We can wait, let Jarvis handle it. Or it'll be Jimmy. We're working on that. Or you, if you like. Or Abby, if she gets too impatient. When's his birthday, Tim?"

"April 18th."

"He won't make it to his next one, unless you want him to. He won't get within a hundred miles of you, unless you want him to. We can shut down his travel authorization, freeze his finances, stick him on the no fly list, make it so his prints identify him as a dead terrorist, whatever you like. You are a Director at a Federal Agency. You can pull a Jen on him if you like. Not like Leon's gonna fuss if you want to run a coup against him, as long as you keep doing your job, too." Gibbs gently squeezes Tim's shoulder. "You're the one in control now, not him."

Tim blinks, wipes his eyes, squeezes Gibbs' hand, and nods. "The brain knows; the heart doesn't."

Gibbs kisses his forehead. "Yeah. I know. Come on, let's get to the house. Get your mind off this."

"Okay."

Turns out one thing he could do at the house is sit with Penny, and between the two of them start sketching out ideas for how they're going to rearrange the interior of the house.

They start with a sketch of the outside walls, none of which are moving, and the load-bearing walls, which likely aren't moving. From there they break the house into nine sections.

The main room, entry/living room/dining room/kitchen area. It's big and open, fireplace in the center. Kitchen, entry, stairs to the second floor are on one side, living/dining area is on the other, and both open up onto the patio/grill area.

Five "family suites" that are, for the time being, just exterior walls, are scattered throughout the house. Figuring out how to configure what'll go in those sections will be up to each branch of the family. Penny sketches out the space that'll be his and Abby's suite, and he makes notes on that for what he's thinking. Talking it over with Abby tonight will be a good thing.

Their suite is right where they were talking about back when they saw the house the first time. Off on the west wing. It's a long hallway with rooms to the left and right. Now, as Penny's sketching, they're keeping that hallway, McGees on the right, Palmers on the left.
He's thinking a little about the other thing no one's willing to really talk to him about until he's off of the pain medication, and that's whatever's brewing with them and the Palmers. He can see that hallway, and part of him is thinking that those aren't load bearing walls. That they could scrap that hallway, split the wing in half, set up a large open area on one side, space for the adults, space for the kids, some sort of nursery area, then on the other side, they could set two suites, one for him and Abby, one for Jimmy and Breena, put a large, all decked out shared bath in between them. Space for time on their own, easy access for time together, nothing so obvious that it'd cause too much talk.

"Tim?" Penny asks, he's very clearly not paying attention to what they're doing. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just thinking."

She's looking at him, deeply, trying to see if he's really okay.

He nods. "Not thinking about him right now. Talked a little about sharing a nursery with Jimmy and Breena..." That's close to what he's really thinking about.

Penny nods, and gets her eraser out. "One large area, here?"

"Maybe. Only mentioned it once."

"You thinking about having rooms for each of the kids?"

Tim shakes his head. "Don't see how we can do that now. No idea how many we'll end up with," and that gets them talking about the next area of the house.

The basement is being turned into a kids' play zone/dorm. He's fairly sure that, for the time being, having babies in their own little nurseries near mom and dad is be a good thing, but eventually, these kids will get older, and the potential for say, six? (More? Likely there'll be buddies coming to visit, too, so maybe a whole lot more?) teenage kids all sharing a space with them doesn't sound great.

So, eventually, they'll wall the little boogers off in their own space, where they'll have some privacy and won't be entirely underfoot.

Eighth section is the entertainment/game area. Fairly small. Tim's writing up what should go in there, so Tony can watch movies the way he thinks movies are supposed to be watched, and he and Jimmy and Abby can do full sensory Call of Duty or Warcraft or whatever.

Last section, on the fourth floor, is the library/computer/reading zone. Some place comfortable and quiet to curl up with a good book/study/work. Tim's hoping that they'll manage to turn out at least one bookworm, and whether the kids like school or not, they'll still need quiet spaces to work, and the kid zone down in the basement is not going to be a quiet place.

Penny finishes up the last line of the last zone, while Tim finishes up his notes for what goes where, and they both look at each other, noticing that for the last two hours, focused on building their futures, the present didn't hurt so bad.

She smiles a little at him, and he squeezes her hand, kissing her forehead.

When Abby gets home, Gibbs is on the back porch grilling away. Kelly's on a blanket behind him, on all fours, rocking back and forth, doing that I'm almost ready to crawl but just haven't figured out the whole pick my hands and knees up motion.

She kisses Gibbs cheek and picks up Kelly for a hug and quick snuggle.
"Tim snoozing?"

"Yeah."

Abby nods. "Okay, let me say hi to him and get changed, and I'll be down in a minute. Got something you might find interesting in the meantime." She pulls a piece of paper out of her purse and hands it over.

Gibbs unfolds it, reading the Stars and Stripes announcement of the retirement of Admiral McGee. Looks like pretty standard bullshit about service and loyalty and all the rest of that, but he does catch what he assumes is why Abby gave it to him.

A minute later, she's on the porch in comfy drawstring pants and a t-shirt.

"He still sleeping?"

"Yeah, just gave him a kiss and petted him some. He didn't even stir. You keep him up a while today?"

"We were at the house for five hours. He was awake the whole time. Sacked out on the ride home. Got him into bed and he just crashed."

Abby nods.

Gibbs holds up the paper before crumpling it and shoving it into his pocket. "Said here Admiral McGee's unexpected retirement was due to 'health issues.'"

Abby smiles a bit. "Yeah, it does. Could be just providing cover for why he left all of a sudden. Could be setting things up so when he drops dead of a heart attack in a few months that no one asks any questions about it. We read Jarvis' file. He's qualified to do this right. I mean to the point of planting false medical records showing John had heart trouble ahead of time. I don't know if he will, but he certainly can, and..."

Gibbs nods, that line about 'health issues' certainly sounds like Jarvis may be getting his pieces into play.

---

"Burley."

"Hi Stan." Tim feels a little sheepish as it hits him that it's two in the morning. After all, not everyone is on a twenty-four hour cycle these days. Then sheepish fades away because Stan's in Hawaii, and while it's true that off the top of his head that Tim has no idea what time it is in Hawaii, he's fairly sure it's not the middle of the night.

"Tim?" Burly sounds excited to hear from him. "Hey, how are you doing?"

"Better. Healing. It's slow." Which is code for woke up from another nightmare in a shaking cold sweat, spent half an hour clinging to Abby until his heart stopped pounding, trying to force himself to pull into the present well enough to know that he's not fighting for his life while being screamed at. "Stan, is he still in Hawaii?"

Stan doesn't need to be told who 'he' is. "I can find out. Why?"

"Did you hear he resigned?"

"No..." There's a pause. "That's interesting."
"Uh. Yeah." Tim can hear what Stan's asking by 'interesting,' but he doesn't want to get into it.

"You want me to keep tabs on him?"

"If you can. When I get back to the office, I can take care of it myself, but…"

"Say no more. I'm allowed to keep eyes on anyone who looks hinky, and your Dad's got hinky written all over him."

"Thanks." Tim exhales, feeling a little calmer. "Um… Are you checking into the history on any of his ships?"

"Tim, some of the things the guy who ran the brig said got me interested. Yeah, I've been looking. A few guys have disappeared from ships your dad has run. Don't have anything concrete yet, I may never get anything concrete, it may not even be related to him, but I'm looking."

"Okay. Good. Thanks."

"Really, just doing my job. Nice that I can do my job and maybe also help a friend. I'll keep you in the loop. You won't end up getting surprised."

"Thanks." Tim hangs up. He wants to get onto his computer and start hacking and tracing. He wants to know every move The Admiral makes. He wants to know where he is, where he's thinking of going, and what he's spending his money on.

But wanting isn't having, and right now he's sure that if he tries, he'll get caught. So, at least for the time being, he's got to depend on someone else.

At least Stan really is good at his job, and when he says he'll watch, he means it. That helps. Some of the knots in his neck and shoulders, the ones that have been there because of fear and not because of his injuries start to ease, a little, at least.

He tucks his phone into the pocket in his pajama pants and begins the long, slow trek back up the stairs. Eventually he gets back to his room, eventually he peels off the PJs, gets himself onto their bed, and scoots up close to Abby.

He hates the cast. At least, he does right now. It keeps his arm bent at a ninety degree angle at his elbow, and folded across his stomach. Which means he can't really spoon Abby. He can snug up close (ish), too close and his shoulder aches (even more), and she can sleep with her neck over his arm, but his arm is in the way. His chest isn't against her back, he can't wrap both arms and his leg over her.

He wakes her up as he gets back into bed, and feels bad about that.

"Sorry."

"Roll over, Tim."

He does, so his back is to her, and she snuggles in close against him, wrapping one arm under his neck and the other across his chest. "Bad dreams?"

He nods.

"Wanna tell me?"

"Not really." Right now, he doesn't remember the details anyway, just the terror.
She squeezes him gently. "Okay."

He twines his fingers between hers. She kisses the back of his neck.

"Gonna be able to sleep?"

"I hope so."

She kisses him again, already starting to drift off again.

Eventually the drugs and tired hit him hard enough that he does, too.
"Looks like something put a spring in your step," Jethro says as he picks Tim up for swimming, giving him a hand up into the truck.

Tim rolls his eyes. Yes, he's in a better mood, having Burley keeping an eye on things is helping with the nagging fear that still won't go away, but is quite a bit less insistent now, but 'spring' let alone 'step' are vast overstatements. (For that matter, better and good are not synonyms, either. He's not feeling quite so angry right now, and the entire universe isn't annoying to him, but that's not exactly a 'good' mood.)

Gibbs closes the door, and gets in on his side, turning the engine on. They're out of the driveway, heading toward Jimmy's gym when Tim asks, "Swimming? Seen you play with the girls in the pool, didn't know you swam."

"Do it some mornings with Abbi."

"Oh." Tim's a bit surprised by that.

"Some mornings we run for me. Some we swim for her."

Tim smiles at that. "She's back at work?"

Gibbs nods.

"I'm glad you let her come out for you."

Gibbs nods at that, too.

Tim spends a moment eyeballing Gibbs' swim trunks. A bit shorter and tighter and more colorful than the shorts he remembers Gibbs in from last summer. Granted, he weighs less than he did last summer, so he could have just gotten new swim trunks, but… Tim doesn't see Gibbs as the kind of guy who buys himself fancy swimwear. Gibbs, shopping for Gibbs, is the guy who heads over to the swim trunks at Target and gets the plainest, least expensive pair they have, and the trunks he's wearing, are, unlike Tim's plain black ones (which he bought for himself), bright blue with vague geometric splotches of orange and green.

"So… you develop a sense of style, or is Abbi actually buying clothing for you?"

Gibbs looks amused.

"Hmmm…"

"What?" Gibbs asks, looking at Tim.

"She drops everything to go to California for you. You're wearing clothing she's picking out. Merging your workout routines… Do I need to get my jeweler on speed dial for you?"

Gibbs rolls his eyes.

"I'm only half-joking. He does really good work, you know?"

"I'll let you know if the need arises."
"Talk about dodging the question."

Gibbs smiles at him.

It's a nice pool. Salt water, so there's no chlorine to mess with his lungs. (One of the reasons Tim generally isn't a huge fan of swimming, chlorine pools make his asthma act up. And right now he really doesn't want to be coughing or wheezing.)

Tim's feeling a bit tentative about getting to the edge. He's not particularly stable crutching around and the area around the pool is wet, but Gibbs hovers behind him, ready to grab him if he slips, and eventually Tim does get to the edge of the pool, gets himself sitting on the ledge, feet and legs in the water (which is actually quite a bit warmer than he thought it'd be, and that warmth is much appreciated). Gibbs takes the crutch from him, props it against the far wall, and Tim slips all the way into the water.

Being in the pool feels vastly better than he could have imagined. He can move, awkwardly, his gait isn't exactly smooth, but still, he can MOVE on his own. The compression of the water against his chest actually feels pretty nice. And, yes, it's cool and wet, which aren't his favorite things ever, but it's not cold and wet, and he can MOVE!

Gibbs is whipping through his laps, doing his best shark impression, while Tim sort hobbles/bounces/you could even possibly, if you were feeling really charitable, call it walking his own laps.

They stay for an hour before Gibbs gets out and grabs Tim's crutch, handing it to him. He hobbles up the steps, regaining the full feel of gravity on his body and not appreciating it. Pool time is definitely going on the list of things he's doing more of.

Tim take his time getting dried off and dressed post-shower. Partly because everything he does now is slow, and partly because he's really looking at himself. He's in the 'assisted change room' because that's got a seat in the shower, and he's really not in any condition to be standing if he doesn't have to. It's also got a full length mirror on the back of the door, so he can really see himself as he dresses.

He's healing. The bruises are fading. None of them are black anymore. With the exceptions of the ones over the broken bones, none of them are blue or purple, either. He can see his tattoo under the cast, black and red ink distinct on his skin. When he got home the bruises hid it.

The swelling is starting to go down. The cast on his arm is starting to get too big, the one on his foot definitely is. He doesn't remember precisely when, but he knows he's got an appointment for new casts soon.

His nose is still swollen, and he's still got purple-green circles in the corners of both eyes, but the rest of the bruises on his face are faded to yellow-green or gone. It's almost his face again. He pokes at the cut bisecting his left eyebrow and winces, that stings. He's thinking that'll scar, and he wonders how odd it'll look to have that line through his eyebrow. He wonders if it'll be really noticeable when it fades to white.

Gibbs knocks as Tim's checking himself out. "Need help?"

"Just slow. Out in a minute."

"Okay."
And in much closer to five minutes than he would have liked, Tim's gotten himself put back together, almost. When he gets out, he hands Gibbs his wrist cuff, which he can't put on himself, and Gibbs does it up for him without a word about how Tim can't put a cuff on his left wrist with his left hand.

He does say, "I like this one."

Tim looks surprised at that. "Thanks. Abby and Jimmy picked it out."

Gibbs nods. "I know. They showed it to me when they got it."

Tim smiles. He's getting what Gibbs is saying and why. No, Gibbs did not just suddenly become interested in Tim's fashion statements or wrist cuff. He is, however, very interested in Tim being able to roll with the punches and adjust to the new realities of his life. He's very invested in Tim not getting stuck of pining for what's lost.

Tim nods. "I'm getting used to it."

"All you can do."

Out of the shower, dried off, clean clothing, in Gibbs' truck, Tim's feeling a whole lot more human. Tired. Bone tired. But not the wasted, wrecked exhausted he'd been feeling. This is much more of a my body's done everything it can, and now it wants a nap tired.

He's also aching again, but, and this is a sign of things moving in the right direction, it's been almost five hours since his last pill, so… Yeah, healing up.

He takes his meds and falls asleep on the way home.

So, yes, Wednesday morning was better than any morning he's had since he left for the Stennis. But Wednesday afternoon, he's back to the same problem.

BORED.

So bored. All he's got up for his afternoon is vibrating his bones. And with bored comes thinking, and thinking means feeling like shit and crying and wishing he never got anywhere near that ship.

He's napping again when Abby gets home, which works out well, because she wants to mess with his computer. So, upon getting home, Abby and Kelly head into his office and do a little recon. There's a program Zelaz suggested might be good for Tim, and she wants to look into it further.

It takes her a few minutes, but she does find it, and it does look like exactly the right thing, so while she's making dinner, it's downloading.

Tim wakes up for dinner, and is in a better (at least compared to yesterday) mood.

When food is done, and dishes cleared away, she grabs Kelly, and nudges him toward his office.

"Come on."

He starts the slow process of hobbling toward his office, looking at her skeptically, and once he gets seated, she puts Kelly in his lap.

"I got something for you."
"What?" Kelly's trying to stand in his lap, and he's trying to keep her from toppling over, which is tricky with one useful arm.

"Hopefully the answer to you going out of your mind because you're so bored."

She flips open his lap top, punches in his access code, and then fires up the new icon on his desktop. A second later, a program opens.

"Dragon?" He realizes he knows what it is, but the idea of it never occurred to him. (Yet another hint that the Percocet is taking a toll, because, that was an obvious fix, and he should have thought of it himself.)

Abby takes his question to mean what is it? "It's a verbal word processor. You talk to it, and it turns your words into a document. You can work on your story, or do your report for SecNav, hell, code even. Anything you want to do, you can, without having to delete every third character."

He smiles at her, seeing that this really is going to open a lot of doors for him. "Thanks."

Abby smiles at him. "Okay, Kelly and I are going to do tubby time. You play with this some."

Saying his work, out loud, feels ridiculously stupid, especially since he's got to add in the punctuation in, too. (Actually he doesn't, but he won't know that for a few paragraphs. Likewise, it'll take him a day to notice it does much better with him just talking to it, instead of slowly and carefully over-enunciating each word.) "Daegan sheathed his sword comma satisfied at the terror he could see radiating off of Malindra period." But at least he's doing something, and it is satisfying to see the words popping up on the screen.

Abby's back down half an hour later, with a fresh, clean baby girl. Tim takes over on story time, which he can still do, though it does help that Kelly's pretty quiet and sleepy, not too squirmy, and she settles in on his lap, quickly.

Usually, he'd hold her against his chest, but that's just not going to happen. So she sits on his leg, head against his tummy, as he quietly recites Goodnight Moon, and then hums a few lullabies.

He gets a drool-y baby kiss and then Abby takes Kelly up for sleeping time.

Abby comes down again and settles onto his desk. He'd rather she settled into his lap, resting against his chest, so he could wrap his arms around her, but they both know that'll just hurt right now. "So, writing, TV, sex? What are we doing tonight?"

"Sex is good," Tim says with a smile. "Feeling kind of meh on TV right now. Bored with the old storylines, and you want to watch the new ones with me."

She smiles. "What if I told you I got a recommendation for a series you'd probably like, that has like, two hundred episodes, and it won't break my heart to miss most of them?"

"I've already seen Dr. Who," he answers, flat.

She rolls her eyes. She knows that. "And it isn't Dr. Who, but you're in the right neighborhood."

"I've seen Torchwood, too," he says deadpan.

She sighs, hoping he's playing but this has too much of a tinge of annoyed, bored Tim to feel like playing. "Not Torchwood. I'd want to watch that with you."
"Yeah, you and Jack Harkness, I know." Eye roll, little smile, bit of playful comes back. "What's your mystery show?"

"Literally. Midsomer Murders. Tidy little mysteries. Sixteen seasons. If you like them, that should keep you occupied for a while. Apparently Ellie and her husband like them, so she suggested them to me when I was asking for TV ideas."

"You were asking for TV ideas?"

She strokes his left hand. "I don't want you home and bored all the time."

"Come here."

She leans in closer, and he kisses her. "Thank you."

"So, sex and TV?"

"Sex first?" he asks with a smile.

She smiles back at him. "Always."

Thursday means the first of his post-home orthopedic appointments.

New x-rays, more poking and prodding, getting his arm re-scanned, which he's trying to ban from his memory because that hurt. Not the scanning per se, but the position they had to get him into to do the scan.

"Just hold still, Mr. McGee, this won't take long," the Doc says with that infuriatingly calm voice medical practitioners use when they're going to torture you.

He's about to bite through his lip because it feels like his shoulder's on the verge of being ripped clean out of its socket again and every single bone and muscle in his arm is screaming because it no longer has the cast for support.

Seriously, what sort of sadist casts your arm so it's internally rotated across your body, leaves it in that position for a full week, and then expects you to externally rotate it to its full extension and then hold it still while x-raying and scanning you?

"Few more seconds… You're doing really well… And… There we go." Dr. Kent lifts the scanner away from Tim's arm, and refits the cast onto him again. "I know that's uncomfortable. Okay, leg next."

Tim glares at him.

"Your leg is just fine where it is. All we have to do is take the cast off."

"Okay."

Getting his leg re-scanned doesn't hurt. Doc wasn't lying about that. He's keeping it in the same position it's been in for about two weeks now.

"So, we're going to be changing things on this cast. You still shouldn't be walking around, but your ankle no longer needs complete immobility. We're going to print a cast that goes from your heel to the bridge of your foot down to your toes. That'll provide support and keep your tarsals in the right places, but you'll be able to start moving your ankle.
Tim's not having an easy time imagining what that cast will look like, and it seems like the Dr. Kent understands. "Have you ever seen an ankle sock?"

Tim nods. Breena's got some of them. "It'll look like that. And on top of it, we're going to add some wrapping for support. You'll be able to move your ankle in every direction, but not too much."

"Dislocated ankle your bracing, but re-casting the dislocated shoulder?" Gibbs asks.

"Yes. In two weeks, when you're back for the next set of x-rays and scans, we'll see about making the arm cast smaller."

"Okay, why?" Tim asks.

"The ankle is a simple dislocation. The shoulder was ripped so far out of joint that the tendons tore free of the bones. They've been reattached, but you've basically got two little breaks where the bit of bone the tendon was attached to broke free of the rest of the bone. So, everything up there stays immobile until that bone is good and secure."

"Ah," Tim says.

"So, everything is looking good and healing up well. We'll have the casts printed out and ready to go by the time you're back tomorrow. Now, do you have a physical therapist picked out yet, or do you need a recommendation?"

"I've got one," Tim says, definitive.

"Great. Make sure the office has his?" Tim nods. Jimmy's a guy. "Contact information, and we'll get everything sent off to him. I want you to start working on range of motion exercises on your ankle."

Tim nods.

"How are you doing on your pain medication? Do you need another prescription?"

"Think I'm good on that, too."

"How much are you taking right now?"

He fishes the pill out of his breast pocket, not sure what exactly the dose is, but knowing that he'd be out when he wanted his next one, so he brought it with him. "One of these every five hours, now."

"Okay, good. How's the pain level with that?"

"I ache all the time, all over, pretty much, but it's not excruciating."

The Doc nods at that. "That's where you should be."

"I'd rather be not hurting, at all."

"Give it time." Dr. Kent smiles; he's heard this song before. "Much more than what you're on now and you'll start running into the potential for unpleasant side effects and the risk of dependence goes up."

"Yeah, I know."

"On the upside, probably only another week on the Percocet, then Tylenol 3, and one more week and you should be back down to over-the-counter pain killers."
That actually is good news. Tim's thinking he's going to be a hell of a lot more like himself once he's off the Percocet. And then one week of Tylenol 3 and he can finally start doing some real work again.

And so they head off with a little more mobility, another inch closer to back to normal.

Three hours later, once he's home, and asleep, Tim wakes up to his phone ringing. "McGee."

"Old habits die hard, don't they? You know you're not actually at work, right?"

"Jimmy?" He's sure that's his voice, but he can't think of why Jimmy's calling him right now.

"Yeah."

"What's up?"

"Couple things. First of all, I'm really pleased that you've got so much trust in me, but I'm not actually a physical therapist, and I don't have all the goodies a real physical therapist would have, so… how about you go hire a real physical therapist to actually oversee getting you all up and functional again?"

"Gibbs said you did a better job than the guy he was seeing."

"That's nice of him. He's wrong. I did a more thorough job than the guy he was seeing because he would actually talk to me, and I kept better track of him." Tim knows that's a polite version of 'I kept badgering him to do everything he needed to do and then some.' "And I'll do the same thing for you. But you need someone to do the actual heavy lifting, so, you've got an appointment with the same guy Gibbs saw for Monday morning. I figured you wouldn't be busy."

"Let me check my calendar. Yep, I've got napping and taking a swim whenever Gibbs can get me out there."

"Okay. Swimming working out for you?"

"Yeah it is. Once my lungs are feeling better we'll switch back to the NCIS pool. What else is up?"

"You guys want us all over for Shabbos tomorrow night? We'll bring the food."

"Yeah. Abby definitely wants some company. I might be crabby, but if I get too obnoxious, just ignore me."

Jimmy laughs at that. "Breena and I'll show up early or stay a bit late. I'll get you started on what to do with your ankle."

"Thanks."

"Fuck!" Tim's eyes are screwed shut and he's whimpering lightly. "How can this possibly hurt that bad?"

"You haven't moved it, at all, for two weeks," Jimmy replies, holding Tim's ankle. "Again."

"Again? You're fucking kidding me."

"Come on, keep at it. Baby it now and it's just going to hurt that much worse for that much longer."
Tim tenses up, but he does flex his foot, about an inch.

"Good job. Five more times."

Now he's staring at Jimmy like he's been mortally betrayed.

Jimmy wiggles his fingers, indicating get moving.

Tim flexes his foot again.

"One. Four more."

"You're a sadist."

"And you're a right little ray of sunshine. Four more. Bitching about it isn't going to make your ankle any stronger or more flexible."

Tim flexes his foot again, cursing.

"Three. And now you know why I'm not a physical therapist. None of my usual patients curse at me."

"None of your usual patients," he flexes again, "are hurting this bad," one more flex, "and you aren't sitting there, fucking smiling at them," final flex "while they're hurting."

"Done. Laterals next. Would you prefer I scowled?"

Tim rolls his eyes. "Laterals?"

"Your ankle rotates." Jimmy stands up and demonstrates full range of ankle motion. "We've just done up and down. Got 360 degrees of motion to take care of here."

"This is going to kill me, isn't it?"

Jimmy snorts. "Those fuckers on the ship didn't manage it; this isn't going to do it, either. Okay, get to it, five to the left."

He's working on rotations when Ziva and Tony come in.

"You are moving McGee!" she sounds pleased and excited by that. "We'll get you training again in no time."

Jimmy looks over at her, and Tim catches the flavor of that look. "What was that?"

"One more rotation." Tim does it, still staring at him, waiting for more. Jimmy shakes his head. "Not no time. Not... not anytime in the next year."

Tim winces. "January?"

Jimmy cringes, shaking his head. "Three hundred and sixty-five days, year. You'll be moving around a lot sooner than that, and swimming and yoga or pilates, definitely weights, but... Bones heal stronger than they were before. Break it once, you're unlikely to break it in the same place again. Muscles, tendons, and ligaments are all different. Tear, dislocate, strain... they all heal weaker. They all slip out of joint easier. Pretty much a healed bone is just more bone, a healed muscle or tendon is scar tissue, and that's not as strong or flexible. So, you're not throwing a punch or anything else
involving hard, jarring impact with your right arm for at least a year."

Tim deflates. "You're letting Gibbs fight." Then he gets embarrassed, because that sounded terribly whiny.

"With one laterally dislocated knee, that's wrapped, and he's not doing any knee strikes with it or kicks. And if it was just your ankle, I'd let you back after six months too, with the same previsions. But we're not screwing with your arm until it's rock solid. What did you want to train, Ziva?"

"Knife fighting."

Jimmy thinks about that for a moment. "Start taking me through it at Bootcamp. It's more slashing and dodging and maybe some grappling, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay, that we might be able to get you doing in less than a year. So, knives?"

Tim shrugs (just his left shoulder). "Nine, right?"

Jimmy nods. Ziva and Tony gather nearer to hear this.

Tim's not sure if he wants to talk about it, not sure if he can without crying, so he sounds tentative as he says, "I was already getting pretty sure that something bad was going to happen by the time they got me walking down the hall toward the brig. And I was a 'prisoner,' so I was getting processed, and they took everything, including roll of quarters Ziva gave me, and the knife I usually carry, away. I would have liked to have kept it, for a second at least, then I realized that I don't really know how to use one." Tim licks his lips. "If there's ever a next time, they won't get my knife off of me, and I'll know how to use it."

Ziva nods at that. "Yes, you will. If there's ever a next time, we'll talk more about how to hide weapons on your body."

Tim inclines his head. "They frisked me pretty thoroughly. The guy doing it thought I masterminded an attack that could have killed hundreds of people. They didn't want me to have access to anything dangerous."

Jimmy taps Tim's foot, reminding him to keep going while he talks, so he does.

"Processing was pretty standard for how we handle guys we're certain are guilty. Competent, professional, not particularly kind or polite." Wolf had mentioned that telling the story may help. That for some people quiet is easier, for others telling and retelling builds up a sort of tolerance to it, numbs the fear response. Tim's willing to try. "The one guy intentionally broke my phone."

Tony looks alarmed by that. "Damn lucky he didn't blow his hand off."

"Nah, it really won't go off unless you put in the wrong code or try to open the case. It's stable." Tim sighs. He's got a new phone, but, of course, it doesn't have all of his extras in it yet, and, given what Jimmy just said about his hand, it'll likely be a long time before he's got the dexterity to get it wired properly.

Jimmy can see Tim's looking distressed and decides to get him off this train of thought. "Okay, foot's done. Shoulder time."

That worked just fine; Tim's staring at him like he's utterly insane. He gestures to his shoulder.
"Okay. I'm wearing a shirt, so I know you can't see the whole thing, but the cast goes from my nipple to my pinky finger, what do you think I'm going to do with my shoulder?"

Jimmy smiles a little. "Your shoulder moves up and down," he demonstrates with a shrugging motion, "back and forth," he scoots his shoulder foreward and backward. "It rotates, which you can't do right now, as well as adducts and abducts, which are also off the menu. Basically, anything where the motion is coming from your traps or pecs, you can still do, anything from the glenohumeral fossa is out."

Tim is staring at Jimmy like he just bit the head off of his favorite puppy.

"What's your comfortable range of motion?"

Tim just stares at him.

"Dumb question, everything hurts all the time, right?"

Tim nods.

"And that's why we're starting this now, because honestly, I don't think you want to spend too long thinking about how much this will hurt if you don't move it at all for the full six weeks you're going to be in this cast." That, unfortunately, is a relevant point. "Okay how far can you lift it without it hurting more than the baseline?"

Tim sighs again. "We'll find out."

"You haven't tried to lift it?"

"Not really. I'm doing as little as I possibly can with this arm."

"Yeah. That's usually how it works. Okay, gently, lift up."

Tim's whimpering as he does it, but he does manage to lift his arm in a shrugging motion. "There!" he says through clenched teeth.

"Okay, three inches. That could be a lot worse. Have at it."

Through gritted teeth Tim says, "How many of these am I doing?"

Gibbs heads into the living room, holding Anna, kisses Ziva, and says, "Until you're sweating, right?"

Jimmy smiles at Gibbs. "'Until you're sweating' is my Crusty-Old-Drill-Sargeant-With-A-Bad-Attitude workout plan. I think for Tim we're aiming at 'until you're swearing.'"

Tim glares a little and says, "Fuck. Are we done, now?"

"Not until you mean it." Jimmy says with another smile.

Tim lifts his shoulder, grimacing. "So, what's the scuttlebutt at work?"

Tony hops in on that. "Officially, you were in a car accident. But, apparently Vance told one of the Minions you were war gaming, so there's something about that. And you told them you were 'at a conference' so every form of gossip you can imagine is running wild."

Abby, who had been helping Breena and Penny in setting up the table, heads in. "Food's on."
Howard's popped in a few times to check up, ask how you're doing. I'm sticking with the 'car accident' story, too, but none of them believe it.

"Is there an official file?" Tim asks, fairly sure that if they were really curious his Minions would have looked.

Tony nods. "Yeah, but it's been John Doed, so you've got some privacy. Unless you know what to look for, the case is invisible."

"But there's no police report for my 'car accident' is there?"

"No," Ziva shakes her head.

"How'd you find my case?" Tim asks Tony.

"Stan cced us."

"On your work email?"

"Yeah."

Tim sighs. He'd have it broken open in about ten seconds. He's not sure if any of the Minions are devious enough to hack his old partners to find out what happened. Might give out some brownie points to any of them that did.

Jimmy's been gently cradling his elbow as he's been lifting at his shoulder, keeping him moving his arm only in the directions Jimmy wants it moved. He lets go and says, "Done."

Tim raises his eyebrows.

"See, you get distracted, it doesn't hurt so much, and it's a lot easier."

Tim nods. He supposes this'll be his new thing to go with watching TV. Laura Palmer and shoulder lifts. DCI Barnaby and foot rolls. Could be a lot worse.

Monday, or whenever it was that Abby noticed the Stars and Stripes announcement on the Admiral, she and Tim had a conversation about what the rest of the family was thinking/doing in regards to him.

So, Tim knows that Jimmy and Gibbs are off shooting things.

And he knows that Tony and Ziva have some, as of yet undetermined, thing they're working on.

And of course, there's the deal he's got set with Jarvis.

And Burley's doing his thing.

So, as dinner rolls on, and they sit around the table, eating what's very tasty barbecued chicken, Tim knows that he's got to say something, because there are a lot of threads in the air right now, and some of them he wants to get shut down.

The way he's thinking right now, though he reserves the right to change his mind about this when he's not high on Percocet, is that he'd really like Burley to catch the Admiral at something. First and foremost he wants him disgraced. Resigning with his commission intact isn't enough. He wants headlines and, hopefully, a nasty, embarrassing murder trial.
Barring that, for the sake of family harmony, and not seeing any of his loves end up in jail, Jarvis's 'heart attack' plan works just fine.

But, drugged though he may be, he's with it enough to see that Gibbs and Abby are not nearly as certain about Jarvis doing the job as he is, so they've got another back up plan in place. He's sketchy on the details, but he thinks they're working the idea of Gibbs'll be out in public, probably with Penny, and then Jimmy'll be the one who takes the shot, which as plans go, he likes because no one would ever suspect Jimmy, and that lets Penny pretend that her son wasn't murdered by the rest of her family.

But that does mean shutting down whatever Tony and Ziva have going, and it means saying something to everyone about how he'd really prefer they didn't murder the Admiral, and it means doing it in front of Penny and Ducky.

So, when they get to a quiet part of the meal, he says, "I talked to Stan a few days ago..." and he fills them in on how Stan is looking into things, and he mentions to Tony and Ziva that if they felt like helping Stan look into things, he'd really appreciate it. Then he wraps that with, "I know there are... things... you'd all like to do or see happen to the Admiral." He smiles a little. "Things I want to see, too. But look, if you guys can't make a case for something against him, then... Then it's going to be up to me. I want to handle it. I don't need or want you off risking your lives or job or... or anything, on revenge for me. Okay?" He's staring at Tony and Ziva as he says that. Neither of them are happy by that, and he can feel Gibbs and Jimmy staring at him, hard. "I'm not saying forgive or forget. 'Cause I'm not forgiving, and I'm sure as hell not forgetting, but he's mine. Anything that happens beyond the bounds of a regular case, I'll be the one who does it."

"You don't need to do that for me, Tim," Penny says, quietly.

"It's only half for you. Yeah, I mean, you'd rather not be sitting down to dinner with the man who killed your son, right?"

Penny nods.

"You and Sarah are all I've got of my birth family, and I don't want to lose either of you. And, one of us killing him... I'll lose you on that. So, no."

"You're not going to lose me, Tim. I'm not... It'd break my heart, but I'd understand." She's shaking her head. "I know what he did, and I know you deserve whatever peace you can get."

"He's still your son, and you still love him, and you hate what he did and who he's become. I get it, Penny. I know. So, let's not hurt each other. Our family has too damn much of that. So, we'll skip it for you and me. Like I said, though, it's only half for you. Part of it's for me. I want to own it. I want the same thing I wanted when I got on that ship in the first place, I wanted to be in control of it, for once. I got that, for a little while, and I want it back."

"So, I don't know what's going to happen. Don't know what I'm going to do. But it's going to be me, okay?"

And then he waits for everyone at the table to respond affirmatively. They do, and he says, "Okay. Good. That's all we need to say about that until Stan comes back and says a case can't be made. Can one of you pass me another chicken leg."

There's a lot of tension over the course of dinner after that. With the exception of Penny, who's relieved, and Abby, who knows what he's planning, everyone else is stewing in it, and making plans to have a serious chat with Tim about this once he's off his pain pills.
But he knows, whether Tony and Ziva think he's crazy or not, they will respect his desire to handle it himself, and that's all the space he needs to buy on this one.

As the night is wrapping up and everyone is going home, he hugs Jimmy goodnight, just like he has a hundred times before at other Sabbaths, but this time, instead of saying good night, he whispers in his ear, "Don't skip sniper practice tomorrow."

When Jimmy pulls back, his eyebrows are high, but he nods, heading over to give Gibbs his goodbye hug, which then results in Gibbs looking a little surprised and then staring at Tim, who nods very slightly.
Jimmy is not in any way surprised to see Gibbs' truck sitting in Tim's driveway when he pulls in the next morning. They hadn't called each other or planned it out, but apparently he and Gibbs are both on the same track. Namely the check in and make sure no wires are crossed track.

He is, however, as he walks past the truck into Tim and Abby's home, a bit surprised to see three Mylar Happy Birthday balloons floating in the cab.

He guesses they're his next target.

'Practice when you can' means that Jimmy was able to do not much of anything at all involving any sort of weapon, whatsoever.

He wasn't kidding when he mentioned he wasn't going to have a lot of time for working on the house this summer because he's got Continuing Education Units he's got to get done before the end of the year. (Two of four classes just got bumped back to the fall because he was in California instead of attending them.) Monday night meant the first of his historical pathology seminars. (Okay, yeah, it's not vitally useful in terms of building skills, but it is interesting, and he's got the time for it, and, and this was a big deciding factor, only two of the seminars required him to actually go to a lecture, and the exam is open book pass/fail.)

So, school's eating up time.

Then work's eating up time. Eating up his usual time, and on top of that, he's got backlog from when he was out. Ducky handled Autopsy while he was out, like the pro he is, but once he got back, Jimmy still had to double check everything, make sure nothing got missed, and then, even with the computer spitting out the paperwork (which made this vastly faster, otherwise he'd be in the office filling out forms until July) he still had to initial and sign everything.

Plus a week away meant he wanted to spend as much time with Breena and his girls as he could get. He doesn't regret or begrudge the time he was in California… At least, not for Tim or Abby or Gibbs, for them he was fine with being there. Wasting a week of his life because John McGee's a fucking bastard who wouldn't know a good son if one walked up and kicked him in the nuts (which Jimmy would entirely approve of happening) is a different story all together. But he did miss Breena, and anything that reminds him of how fragile life and joy are makes him want to cling to her.

Which means, that while he did go through taking the rifle apart and putting it back together in his head several times, he didn't do any actual, hands on work with the paintball rifle.

Jimmy opens the door quietly, and doesn't hear anything. Or see anything for that matter. He checks Tim's office as he heads through the downstairs, but he's not napping on his futon in there, or crashed out on the sofa, which means everyone is upstairs, or in the backyard.

He heads to the kitchen and looks out through the sliding glass door, everyone's on the porch, having breakfast from the look of it. Jimmy can smell coffee perking away, so he makes a detour to fix himself a cup. A quick sip at half way full to make sure it's Tim's blend and not Gibbs' lets him know how much to pour. It's Tim's, so he fills the cup three quarters full, and tops it off with milk. Then he heads out.

No one's surprised to see him as he steps out saying, "So, we're lying to Grandma?"
"Don't ever let her hear you call her that," Tim says.

Jimmy sits down at the patio table, next to Abby, who has Kelly in her lap. Both of them get their cheeks kissed. "Yeah, because Grandma's the tricky bit."

Tim rolls his eyes at that. "Technically I am not lying and neither are you two. I am practicing mental reservation, and, assuming you're not stupid, you just won't say anything. Then, if plan A and B both fail, and The Admiral drops over dead from a bullet wound, Grandma will know that I asked you not to do anything, and she'll know that Gibbs was in the room with her when it happened, and she'll know that I'm not a sniper, and she'll know that John has a lot of enemies from his drone work, and she'll be able to pretend one of them took care of him."

Jimmy nods, curtly. He's not upset about how this is working out, but he does want to make sure everything's all in place. He doesn't want to get burned on some loose detail.

"What's the mental reservation?"

"I said I wanted to handle it. And I do. And right now, trusting you to take care of it is how I want to handle it."

Jimmy's not sure what he feels at those words, but it's something proud and intense. He smiles at Tim, and Tim smiles back.

"And look, I may change my mind, but you're still learning, so we've got time, right?"

Jimmy nods and Gibbs does, too. "We've got a lot of ground to cover. Sniper school was ten weeks for Basic and another twelve for Advanced and all we did was hide, stalk, shoot, work with our rifles, and learn how to put the shot where we wanted it."

"So, I don't have to decide for real for a while. I meant it, I want Stan to find something on him. That'd be… I want that." Tim says with a desperate smile. "But… If it doesn't happen. If it can't… There's still the deal with Jarvis, probably, in play. And in a year or two, if that hasn't happened… I don't know. You'll be ready to act. Or maybe I'll do it myself, frame him with kiddie porn or something…" Tim shakes his head. That doesn't feel right. "I want him disgraced, and I want him to do hard time, but I want it to be for something he did. I want who he really is to come out and be seen by everyone. If I can't get that, dead's a good second place." Tim takes a sip of his coffee. "But if dead's the answer…" He looks at Gibbs and Jimmy, both of whom have buried children, and he doesn't need to say any more than that, lying to Grandma, making it that little bit easier, they're on board for that.

After a minute, Jimmy says, "So, why doesn't she like Grandma?"

"Same reason she didn't go by Mrs. McGee or Mrs. Mallard. She wants to be known by the person she is and the things she's accomplished, not the relationships or men in her life."

Jimmy thinks about that for a minute, he can understand that. Then he looks at Abby. "Mrs. McGee doesn't bug you at all, does it?"

"No! I like it. But I had a choice about it. When Penny got married people, everyone started calling her Mrs. Nelson McGee. Penny Langston literally vanished. That didn't happen to me. I gained a husband and a family, I didn't get absorbed by them."

Jimmy nods, then sighs. He takes another sip of his coffee. "So, we should probably get going if we're going to get any shooting in before Penny who is not Grandma and Mr. Langston show up at the house to work on windows some more."
Gibbs nods, standing up, and Tim smiles. "Call him Mr. Langston in front of her, that'll make her
day."

Jimmy chuckles at that as he and Gibbs head off.

"Where's Mona?" Jimmy asks as they get to the house and he notices that part of their party is
missing.

"Decided she wanted to sleep in with Abbi."

Jimmy smiles. Gibbs grabs the balloons and hands them to him. Jimmy notices he's also got a ball of
twine and a bag of the basic, blow them up yourself balloons as well.

"Late case for Abbi?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "Likes to sleep in when she gets the chance."

Jimmy smiles at that, too, as they head to the boathouse. "We need these right away?" he asks about
the Mylar balloons.

Gibbs shakes his head, and Jimmy finds a block to tuck the ribbons under so they don't float away.
While he snaps on his gloves and gets the paintball rifle set up, Gibbs blows up several of the regular
balloons and wanders around their property tying them to different tree branches.

Not much in the way of clear shots. The bit right around the house is mowed lawn, but most of their
land is woods, and Gibbs is tying the balloons in the wooded section. There are other trees, branches,
bushes, scrub, leaves, vines and all sorts of stuff between Jimmy and the balloons, and on top of that,
Gibbs has not secured the balloons tightly to the branches, they're dangling off, swaying in the
breeze.

The only upside Jimmy can see is that they're bright yellow, pink, blue, and white. They do not
blend in with the surroundings.

"Instructions?" Jimmy asks when Gibbs gets back to him.

"Shoot 'em."

"That's what I figured. Anything else?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "Right now, just track how they move, and shoot them. Find wherever you
need to be to hit. Like when we were working with punching, if you've got to do it from ten feet
away, do it from ten feet away, just make sure you hit."

Jimmy nods, and starts towards the closest of the balloons, a small pink one. He spends a while
walking around, occasionally sighting with the rifle.

"Tell me what you're doing," Gibbs says to him.

"Looking for a good vantage point. I don't want to shoot from ten feet away, but I don't want too
much stuff between me and the balloon."

Gibbs nods. "Even a paintball is traveling fast enough to go through a lot of this scrub."

"That part of why training you took six months?"
"Yeah, I can figure what sort of rifle and bullet to use to shoot through a car if need be."

Jimmy stares at him, wondering why you'd want to shoot through a car. "How can you even see where the person you're aiming for is if you're on the other side of a car."

"Shot like that, the target isn't moving."

"Do I want to know?"

Gibbs shrugs. "Do you?"

Jimmy thinks for a second, and realizes he does. Not just because he's curious, but as best as he can tell Gibbs doesn't talk about this part of his life, and talking about it might be good.

"Shot was set days in advance. Car was there intentionally. Target had security. Security checked and monitored all clear lines of sight. Half a klick behind the car, I was in the clear, no one watching or checking. I had all the time I needed. Marked the car, knew exactly where I had to hit on it, to send the bullet straight through to the Target. Spotter closer to the Target let me know when he was in place. Target got up to give a speech, he didn't finish it."

"Was he just a target?"

"To me."

"You'd just... go in and do this cold?"

"It's a lot easier when you go in cold. Two hardest shots I ever took were Hernandez and Saleem. Targets are things you can be cold about. It's a job, and you do your job well. Even if you hate someone, that someone is a person, and killing people is hard. Neutralizing a target isn't easy, but it's easier."

Jimmy nods at that. "John's a person."

Gibbs nods. "We hate him. Hate the pain he's caused. But hate means we feel for him, about him. Means we feel for the people at home in relation to him. Means Tim and Abby and Penny and Sarah are all there when you're shooting, ghosts in your head. With a target there are no ghosts. There's just time, distance, wind, and fire. God willing, you're only ever going to have to take one shot, but those ghosts'll be there, talking to you while you wait for the right second."

"We'll pick a time and place where I can get you in the right spot for the rifle we've got, so all you've got to do is shoot. You're not going to need months of math and aiming technique or which caliber does what, when, and how. But mastering the ghosts, that'll be on you."

Jimmy nods at that. He scans the woods, looking at the pink balloon swaying gently. "Were Kelly and Shannon happy when you shot Hernandez?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "No. They knew it wouldn't fix anything. But they knew I needed to do it if I was going to do anything other than self-destruct."

"Buying yourself enough time to heal."

"Something like that."

Jimmy lifts the rifle to his eye, sights the balloon, watching it move, trying to track it, trying to feel where it's going to be, and fires. He nicks it, sending it snapping into the branch, where it pops.
Gibbs nods again. "Right now, do whatever is comfortable, you're learning how to put your bullet where your target is going to be. But when you shoot for real, you probably won't be standing up. Lying on your stomach, crouching behind something, you'll be more stable, have an easier time making sure the bullet goes where you point it."

Jimmy nods at that. He can be very still for a long time, but that's not the stability you get from leaning on something. He goes looking for a different vantage for the next balloon while Gibbs takes the string and dead balloon down from the tree.

He heads over to a downed tree and uses that as a prop. He misses the next balloon he's shooting at twice, but nails it on the third shot. From the tree he can sight another of Gibbs' balloons so he goes after that one, too. Much longer shot, and this one's got a lot of small branches, leaves in the way, but the air is still, and it's just hanging there, barely swaying.

One shot and Jimmy hears it pop with a sense of satisfaction. He knows John probably won't just stand there and wait to be shot, but one pull and gone felt really good.

Five more balloons tied in the woods, and Jimmy hits all of them, eventually.

Gibbs watches, satisfied. Training won't be fast. The difference between how a paintball rifle shoots and a real one is massive, but the basic level, where is the target, where is the target going, that's the core of this, and that skill stays the same no matter what you're aiming with.

"Ziva's gonna teach you knives?" Gibbs asks as they head back to the boathouse.

"That's the idea. Want to see what's involved before okaying Tim on it."

"Not really learning for you, then?"

Jimmy shakes his head. Then he inclines it slightly. "You don't ever want to go up against me with a knife. You really don't want to go against Ducky. I mean, yeah, I don't have any defense, but one, two hits tops, and you're dead, so I probably don't need much. Spend twenty hours a week taking people apart with knives and you get a really good feel for what to hit if you ever have to."

"How good?" Gibbs asks.

Jimmy takes two steps in front of Gibbs, and walks toward him, tapping him lightly on the upper, inner thigh and then stomach as they pass each other. "Get medical attention in the next two minutes or die from blood loss. I've just severed your femoral and aortic arteries."

Gibbs stops walking and glances at the paint gun. "Why are we doing this?"

"For the same reason I'm pulling the trigger. The Admiral gets a sudden case of extremely precise scalpel wounds, and I'm the top of the suspect list, or Ducky."

Gibbs nods, that makes sense.

"Probably be easier to stay calm if I'm far away, too. Go in hot, and it's probably easier to miss."

"It is."

"So, walking up next to him, having to touch him, not sure I can do that and not just start beating the shit out of him."

Gibbs nods, he's gets that. He's not sure he could get in touching range of John and pull off a calm,
precise hit. Actually, that's not true. He could do it. He would. He's always been able to shut down and do the job, but it wouldn't be easy.

Jimmy's holding the paintball rifle already, but he can do that one handed easily. The fingers of his right hand trace over the barrel. "I figure with this I can stay far enough away to kill him and leave no trace. Stay far enough away that I won't get tempted to go for pain or fear. Just one hit, fast and done."

"Good plan."

"So, what are these for?" Jimmy asks as Gibbs grabs the Mylar balloons out of the boathouse.

"People aren't on tethers. They move all over the place."

"You're going to let them free and I'm going to shoot."

Gibbs nods again, and they head out to the end of the pier. No chance of getting the balloons tangled, at least, not at first, if they're over the water.

"Give it a five count before you aim." Then Gibbs lets the first one go.

Jimmy counts, tracking the motion with the scope, and on five he fires, and misses. He does it with the second and third one, too. He's annoyed, but Gibbs isn't.

"Get all three, and you get to start shooting people."

Jimmy looks alarmed by that.

"Get good with air and wind currents, and then you get to try to hit me."

That gets a smile.

"I'm going to snipe you?"

Gibbs nods. "When you can get me, without setting off my danger sense, then you get to start working with a real rifle and real bullets."

"And when do I get to go after John?"

"When you can take the head off of a turkey."

That makes an awful lot of sense to Jimmy.

Tony and Ziva pull up shortly after that, and find Jimmy and Gibbs working on popping the first of today's windows out of the house. It probably would be faster if they could just pop them all out and then put all the new ones in, but that's still not a good plan.

Tony peeks under the tarp covering the windows that haven't been put in yet, and says, "Five hundred down, twenty six million to go."

"It's not that bad, Tony."

"Not that good, either. You guys just get here? Doesn't look like you made any progress!" Tony calls over to Gibbs and Jimmy, grabbing yet another window and heading fifteen feet further down the side of the house from them.
Jimmy smiles to himself on that. No it doesn't look like they've made any progress, because nothing's been done on the house.

"Just got started," Jimmy says, hearing another car pulling up. Ducky and Penny this time.

They amble over to where Jimmy and Jethro are in the process of getting another window out.

"Hello. Jethro, Jimmy, I see you are hard at work."

"Getting there, Duck."

There are rhythms Ducky and Jimmy have for working together, long practiced, which, even though this is building a house and not an autopsy, both of them tend to fall into them easily.

"Good morning, Mr. Langston," Jimmy says in a perfect mirroring of his usual greeting Ducky while working routine.

Ducky arches an eyebrow, and says precisely, "That's Doctor Langston, thank you very much."

Penny smiles at that, laughing, amused by the whole thing. "I take it you had some sort of chat with Tim and Abby?"

Jimmy nods. "Tim didn't exactly dare me to do that, but he did want to know what happened if I did."

Penny laughs some more. "And what brought that up."

"I was wondering why Tim doesn't call you Grandma or something like that. He got into it. Same reason you aren't Mrs. Mallard or Mrs. McGee."

Penny smiles, warmly, realizing how much of her life Tim never saw. "I was Mrs. McGee for a long time. And even now, were I to change my name, I'd hold tight to Doctor."

Ducky appears interested by that. They've never spoken of even the possibility of her changing her name. "And would you have been Dr. Mallard?"

Penny smiles back at him, turning the tables. "Would you have been Dr. Langston?"

Ducky shrugs. "My sense is that it's easier for all involved if we do not have identical professional names."

"They're only identical when spoken," Jimmy adds, helpful, grinning.

"Which is more than enough. How many calls do we need to get for Doctor Langston or Doctor Mallard if the one title refers to both of us before it becomes unwieldy?"

Penny's nodding at that. Ducky still gets calls from colleagues, and her students all call her Doctor Langston.

Tony hands over more crowbars, eyeballing Ducky, "You know… I never did get a good nickname for you. What'd'ya think Penny, should I call him Mr. Langston?"

Penny laughs at that, and Ducky says, "Anthony, you do know that my given name is not, in fact, Ducky?"

"Of course I do, Donald, but it's not much of a nickname when you introduce yourself with 'Call me
Ducky. Everyone else does."

Ducky smiles, remembering the first time he met Agent DiNozzo. "By all means then, especially compared to Autopsy Gremlin or McWhatever I will happily be christened Mr. Langston."
Writing

Dragon is a godsend. Being able to write again is making Tim's life about ten million times better. Sure, he's still loopy, so he's fairly doubtful that any of this is going to make the final draft, but he's plot dumping away, and, because he can write, he can deal with "dad-stuff" as he's been calling it, with the shield of his character, Gabe, in place.

It's a lot easier, safer, to handle it that way. It's also clear that whatever this story ends up being, father-son relationship stuff is definitely going to be a major theme.

It's also clear that he needs Lorcan (Gibbs) in the place of step-dad/adopted-dad/mentor-dad/choosen-dad whatever, but not in the place of birth-dad. And that for as much as this is about dealing with Fairrge (John) in this story, it's also about creating something that honors Gibbs and who he's been for him these last few years.

He's not sure what he's doing with Fairrge in this, beyond killing him/shaming him/destroying him in numerous exceptionally messy and violent ways.

That's not entirely true. He knows that he wants them, him, Daegan (Jimmy), Brigit (Breena) and Lorcan to be shape-shifter dragons. He knows that as he's setting up the stories the Dragon Knights are a thing mostly of the past, few and far between. Thought to be legend by the common people. Even in family lines, like the M'Gy (Earliest spelling of his family line that Ducky found when he was looking up the tartan for his clan, and eerily similar to how Gibbs pronounces his name.) the Dragons are going to be rare.

He's thinking that Gabe'll be a dragon, but Fairrge won't. That'll be tension line number one. Fairrge will be a loyal knight in whichever King's army. Gabe won't. Said King, (Tim doesn't have a name for him, yet) will be at war with some other guy, and Lady Skye (Abby) will be working for that side. Eventually, he'll run into Skye over the course of the fight, they'll hook up, and break away from both sides, setting up a third line. End there, Fairrge dead, Skye free from her overlord, and the M'Gys setting off for some new land of their own, and that sounds like a good first book to him.

Those are "working" thoughts. The part of his brain that's in charge when the painkillers are fading away. When he's got plotting and longer arc functions going.

The more drugs in him though, the more violence comes out.

He's gotten to the point in his life where he's not ashamed to be writing really horribly violent graphic murders of his father. He's fairly sure that five years ago, he couldn't have done this. He could have thought about it, but not written it out. Now he can. After all, he's made the deal to have the man killed for real, compared to that, this is just... just letting the dark out. Letting him play with it and then let it go. He does notice that as the days pass, the first few scenes got more and more violent, but he's getting less interested in them.

By the time he's written four versions of it, he's done. He doesn't need to do that again. It's getting boring.

He knows he's not done with writing about his dad, but he's done ending him.

And from there, writing can turn to more pleasurable things. And, as Friday turns into Saturday into Sunday and onto Monday and on... It also becomes clear that whatever else is true about this project, it's also a massive smut-fest.
Smutty, smutty, smutty, smut! All over the place. As of right now, he's got at least a hundred pages of smut, which means this is either going to be an awfully long novel, or it's going on the paranormal erotica shelf. He's got some suspicions as to why this is true, beyond the fact that he likes sex. After all, he was just as fond of sex as he wrote all of the Tibbs books, and none of them contain even one explicit scene.

First and foremost, there's that golden three or four minutes where he's close to getting off, getting off, or just gotten off where he's not hurting. At all. Yes, he's on pain meds, a lot of them, and they are keeping him "comfortable." They are not keeping him pain-free. They're not keeping him in the range where he can just forget he's hurting either. What they are doing is making sure he can function, more or less.

So, if he can't be in those moments, he can be writing about them.

Part of it is that sex is how his body knows it's alive. On a really basic, biological level, fucking keeps him centered on the fact he didn't die. And unlike all the other times where he almost died, he healed up pretty quickly. Pretty quickly isn't on the menu for him, not this time. It's getting onto two weeks later, and every time he moves, every step, every time the habit part of his brain tries to reach for something with his right hand, all of it is a constant reminder of almost dying. (And all of it hurts, which just goes back to point A about chasing time where he's not hurting.)

But, though he's been exceptionally affectionate whenever she's home, Abby does still have a job, so, if he can't be fucking with her, he's writing about it. (And sending what he's writing to her, which means she's usually in an awfully frisky mood by the time she gets home.)

Part of it is wanting to fuck. Pretty much, right now, they've got cowgirl, and reverse cowgirl, soft and gentle and slow, and that's nice and all, but he really wants to fuck. He wants to pick Abby up and rock her world. Wants the feel of his body moving fast and hard, sweat and lube slick skin, breathing hard, flushed, hot, aching full-on, fucking sex.

And that's not happening anytime soon.

So… he's writing about it. In explicit detail. On a pure neurochemistry level, his brain can't tell the difference between real sex and sex on the page. (Sure, it knows the difference between arousal and climax, but chemically porn, fantasy, sex, all of it triggers the same pleasure centers of the brain.) Likewise, he knows it's imaginary, but his dick's a bit fuzzy on that idea, and the only message it's getting is get hard, stay hard, and pounce (in a very slow, gentle, being easy on a whole mess of broken bones sort of way) on Abby when she gets home.

Part of it isn't sexual so much in an erotic sense as in a post-traumatic experience sense. In a very real way Abby, and to a lesser degree Jethro, Jimmy, and Breena all signal safety to Tim. When she's home, and he's awake and can stand to be near people (because he's still having porcupine days, too) he wants to be within touch range. He wants to have Abby holding his hand or a warm arm around his shoulders. And touch feels good, and sex feels better, so hugs turn into stroking which turns to kissing and merges into sex and from there more cuddling and sleep.

He's very, very glad that Abby doesn't mind ending the evening or starting the morning with sex, and then getting some very hot notes during the day to go with it. He thinks the last time they had this much sex, they were on their honeymoon.

And he's also very glad that she's putting up with his mood swings as well, which is another reason to keep writing about sex, because it keeps him on the perky side of things. When he's not focused on sex, he can go from doing okay to crying in less than a minute, and he hates that.
So, at least for the time being, the only downside of the vast wodges of smut he's producing is that occasionally, when he gets a chunk of "writing" done (because after all, he has to *speak* to his computer to "write"), he'll hobble out of his office, and Heather will just stare at him, which is making him wonder exactly how bad the sound-proofing in their house is.

Another Wednesday, another day home, but today, he's noticing something. There's only one Percocet left, and he's not feeling any sense of panic from that. He can go the full six hours between doses now, and shifting down to Tylenol 3 seems like a good plan.

Seems like it will work.

He knows Tylenol 3 is also a narcotic, but it's a much less strong one than the Percocet, and he's really, really hoping that he can take this last one, let it meander out of his system, start up on the new stuff, and get some more control back.

He swallows it down, and tosses the bottle toward his trash can. He misses and sighs. Time to move the vibrational head to the next break, then more ankle flexing and shoulder lifts.

That's also getting less painful, but he knows that as soon as he's got full range of motion on his ankle, Jimmy's going to want him to start working it with weights, and that'll just drop him right back to square one on the pain level.

The Tylenol 3 is mostly getting the job done. He's back down to a five hour pain pill cycle, but he feels a lot more like himself. He hasn't broken down crying for (what he considers) no good reason for two days.

Heather graciously accepted his apology for being such a bear the last few weeks. Told him he didn't need to apologize for it, but he knew he did. Even if only to make himself feel better.

No Percocet means his one-handed typing is getting better, and Dragon means that mostly all he's doing with a keyboard is fixing spelling and formatting.

No Percocet also means that today, he's got a job to do.

It's time to start writing up that report.

It's slow. Partially because he still has to get fairly frequent naps. Partly because he can't work on the report without thinking about what was going on, and as Wolf said, flashing back to the fight, and to the life before is normal, and working on the report triggers it. And unlike the story, there isn't the safety of Gabe here. Here he's reporting, not creating, so he can't shift and tailor the story to make himself feel safer.

But he keeps working on it. Keeps making himself put it in the past. He's home, at his desk, safe, working. He's not on a ship. His father is nowhere nearby. (He got an email from Burley about that. For the time being, The Admiral's rented a place in Hawaii. Alas, for the time being he's also not finding much in the way of anything useful in any of those missing sailor cases.) And yes, some of his work he's done with Abby right next to him, keeping him grounded in now, but he's kept working.

The great thing about drafts is that the first one can just be miles of crap spewed out on a page. You keep the good stuff, shuffle it around, and delete the embarrassing bits.
And that's what he's doing.

Tim's going over the feeds. He starts with the ships he wasn't on, viewing their data feeds, checking their techs, seeing what they did. He knows how things went on The Stennis, but that's not how things went on all the other ships. Some got communications back faster, some slower. One took a full two hours before they got their internal communications back online. One did it in fewer than two minutes. (He wrote up a separate recommendation for that tech, wanting to make sure he got some sort of a pat on the back for a very good job. Then he made a note to see about looking him up in eighteen months when his hitch with the Navy is up.)

Once communications were fully restored among the entire Carrier Group, they began working together on tracing the hack, and did, eventually, figure it out.

But Tim was on land and unconscious by the time they worked it out.

He writes up a review on how the attack worked, and a plan for how to pull a similar trick. He doesn't want whoever does this next to use his style verbatim; it's got to feel real, and it won't if the same attack keeps happening, but he can put useful parameters in place. Likewise, he dissects the response, pointing out who did well, who didn't, how standard Navy cyber-attack operating procedure worked well, how it failed.

He eyeballs the draft, sure this isn't anywhere near ready to go out, but it's a start.

______________________________

Thursday. Swimming with Gibbs. That's good. He can actually walk when he's in the pool now. Yes, like with the rest of the ankle exercises, it aches when he's moving, but he is moving all the way through the correct placements and motions of walking.

When he's doing that he can also feel why he's still got the cast on his foot. Place weight on your foot and all those little bones in the arch of your foot, which on him are in various stages of healing back up again, spread apart and flex. Even with the cast they shift a bit, and that's not comfortable at all.

He's dreading putting his full weight back on that foot, but a week and a day, and this little cast comes off, and with it, even more rehabbing.

______________________________

Wolf again. Sigh.

Fridays are supposed to be days of rest, right? What with the whole their family does Shabbos thing, right? It's in the rules. Ziva's told them avoiding unpleasant topics of conversation is one of the rules. And this is the mother and father of all unpleasant topics of conversation.

He is going on about that when Abby, who took off work to be here with him for this, looks at him, kisses his forehead and says, "You can cancel."

He slumps a little and shakes his head. He knows he's got to do it. Canceling just puts it off for next week or the week after, and that just pushes off him getting to actually go back to work even further. So, he doesn't want to cancel, he just wants to bitch about it and then get it done as fast as possible.

It's nothing personal against Wolf, but… he doesn't want to be talking about this stuff. Tim would much rather just ignore it.

But he can't.

And at least this time Abby's with him, holding his hand, like she promised to do back when they
first started talking about this, back before Kelly was born.

They settle into his office, drinks all around, and begin.

They talk a little about how his body is doing, how healing up is going, and then get to the meat of it. Back to California and being a small child and getting on a boat for the first time.

And from there it only gets worse.

Abby hasn't heard a lot of these stories. Tim's never told most of them. Takes two hours. He's not sure what the point of this is, other than to rip his heart out again, but Wolf seems to think it's useful, and Abby's holding onto him, so… So he keeps talking.

He's not sure if he feels any better, or different, or anything positive really, when he's done.

Tired. He feels tired. Like he's been wrung out. Like he's run fifty miles and done a million jumping jacks and infinite push-ups, and… just tired, all over, in all ways.

Abby sees Wolf to the door, and then heads back to him, snuggling in close, holding onto him as well as she can, and there's a faint spark of wanting to talk to her about it, but lulling tired wipes it out of his mind.

"You just want to rest?"

He nods.

Abby kisses him. "Then you rest."

It's two in the afternoon, and they're on the futon in his office. He's so sleepy, aching tired, all he wants to do is sleep right now, but there's one other thing he needs. "Stay with me? Guard my sleep?"

One more kiss. "Anytime."
At any other time, six-week-pregnant Abby would have no trouble at all settling down for a nap with her snoozing husband. In fact, at any other time, simply being horizontal and six-weeks-pregnant would mean instant asleep for Abby.

But, it's not just another day, and Tim's not just catching a few zs over the course of a lazy afternoon. Hell, this isn't even healing up napping.

She's taken to thinking of it as defensive sleeping. After enough mental trauma, Tim checks out. The little switch in his head says, "Okay, you're done, sleeping now," and off to sleep he goes.

She's not sure if dreaming gives him better processing time, or if he really does just need some blank space to get himself right again, but she's seen a lot of this over the last three weeks. Abby supposes this is good. Jimmy and Wolf have both said it's a lot healthier than other things he could be doing to cope, so there's definitely that, but he doesn't rest easy when this happens. He certainly dreams, and from what she can see, they don't appear to be good dreams, though he doesn't seem to remember them unless he gets woken up mid-dream.

She's been doing everything in her power to not wake him up mid-dream.

She's trying to not think about the stories he told, because right now if she goes off on a rage, that will not mean sleeping Tim.

She's been doing that a lot, stuffing her own anger down, trying to cope with it quietly, trying to be solid and calm for Tim. She's honestly not sure how much more of this she can do without some sort of release valve for herself.

Seems like everyone else has one. Breena and Jimmy are both moving forward (with her) on the four of them becoming more. That's a good, positive step, life affirming, love affirming. That's about healing and making things whole and right. And it helps.

Jimmy and Gibbs are working on death. On teaching and learning how to destroy John, and that's good, too. That's something Abby wishes she could be part of, but right now she knows they won't let her shoot, and her own preferred methods involve working with chemicals she really shouldn't be messing with for another year (at least, probably two, breastfeeding and neurotoxins are not a good combination).

Tony and Ziva have been offering 'help' to Burley on the cold cases, and keeping a "discrete" eye on John. (In the sense that all of his credit card transactions, bank transactions, and email and text communications are being monitored.) They've dug into the cases along with Burley, spending any spare time they have on them, and chatting with people who are related to those cases who are within a hundred miles of DC. No slam dunks yet, but they're working it.

She's run and rerun every bit of trace on those cases, checked and double-checked all of the physical evidence, but, and she never thought she'd be disappointed by this, the people who ran those cases the first time knew what they were doing. She's found nothing new, nothing that points toward John, which means that work isn't a release for her. It's not a way to channel anger and get it out. It's just more anger, because by now she's certain, based on nothing beyond her gut, that John's personally responsible for all three of those sailors who went "missing" from the ships he was on, and she can't prove it.
Tim's writing and talking and writing more. He's thinking and sleeping and healing.

But she feels like she's got nothing on this. Nowhere safe to rage.

And each word out of his mouth, each sentence of those stories…

There were pictures of Tim as a child at Tori and Ben's place, and Abby snuck shots of several that Tim doesn't know about, so she's got an idea of what he looked like at six, adorable, big green eyes, insanely long eyelashes, that cute pouty lower lip, buzz cut gold-blonde hair, little plump, but more puppyish, getting ready for a growth spurt than really overweight. (Penny confirms that Tim didn't really have much in the way of weight issues until he started having problems with asthma around the age of nine, and they began treating it with inhaled steroids.)

Her beautiful Tim, young, innocent, hopeful. He's grinning, wide and happy in the shot she's got, no fear or nervousness in his eyes. Not a lot of shots like that after that one. The shots after that, even the happy ones, show the marks of what happened. There's always that ghost of nervous. Her Tim sad, scared, sick, crying. Her Tim, six, eight, nine, ten, and it just kept going and got worse until it (pretty much) ended at seventeen. At least, that's when the stories ended. Though she knows there's at least two more because Tim stopped talking to John at seventeen, and again at twenty-five, and there was the time after the case with Penny, when he called John up, and then didn't talk to him again until he got on that ship and saw him standing there, annoyed that a dead man was messing up his schedule.

And she has to stop thinking about this, because she's shaking with anger, and if she keeps vibrating, she's going to wake him up.

Abby's too keyed up to sleep. So she nestles into Tim, snuggling him, looking at his body in front of hers, feeling his skin, warm and finally, (mostly, right over the breaks is still green-yellow) unbruised, next to hers.

She knows from his comment to Jimmy about gaining weight that he didn't notice, but almost a week on pretty much all liquids, plus pain killers making him sleep all the time means Tim missed a lot of meals.

He lost weight those first ten days. It was hard to tell the first week, but as the swelling receded, it became pretty obvious. Clavicle, carpals on his left wrist, hip bones, all of them were too visible beneath his skin.

He's pretty close to back where he was, little softer, which'll probably bug him when he notices, but hopefully he won't notice anytime soon. Nothing he needs to be doing about that anytime soon.

She notices that the cast on his right arm is starting to get a bit too big again. One more week with this, then another new cast, maybe he'll start to get to use his shoulder again. He'd like that. Supposedly that'll be the end of the cast on his foot, still have a brace and use the crutch until he can put weight on it easily, but it'll be another step closer to looking like himself again.

Abby takes a deep breath, letting it out slow. He's healing. He's alive and here and healing, and eventually they'll be okay. But like his eyebrow, which her finger ghosts over, he'll be marked by this for the rest of his life, they both will.

Since she took the afternoon off, Shabbos is at their house today. Nothing horribly complicated for dinner, chicken on the grill, and the veggie co-op sent a box of mostly greens, so they're getting cooked up New Orleans style along with a big pot of baked beans, and they're subbing out challah for a huge cast iron skillet full of cornbread.
Tim's sitting at the kitchen table, one hand holding Kelly's as she wobbles on her feet working on standing by herself, while Abby mixes up the corn bread batter.

"I need to make an appointment with the OB."

Tim nods. He's fairly sure when they made Sean, so he thinks of Abby as being six weeks pregnant, which is about when you're supposed to go check in, except that they don't figure out how pregnant you are based on when you conceived, but when your last period was supposed to be.

"You're supposed to be what, eight weeks along?"

"Something like that. I'll give them a call on Tuesday."

He nods at that. "Except for Friday morning, my calendar is open."

She smiles at him.

"Actually, I was thinking of heading in on Monday or Tuesday."

Abby's eyebrows shoot up as she cracks eggs into the mix.

"Nothing strenuous. Can't work on anything for real until I'm off the Tylenol 3…" A thought hits Tim there. "How long does it take narcotics to get out of your system?"

"Two to four days."

"Okay, there is no way I'm waiting four extra days after I'm done with Tylenol 3 to go back to work. Do you think Leon knows it takes that long to come up with a clean test?"

Abby shrugs. "Maybe he's making sure you've got time to really heal."

"Maybe. Don't suppose you'd fake a test for me."

Abby just stares at him.

"You'd be the one running the test, right?"

She nods.

"Well?"

She looks up him and down carefully, looking extremely doubtful as to this being a good idea, but not completely opposed to it. "We'll see how you're doing. If you're actually up for it, it'll be your job to find someone to donate clean pee."

Tim sighs at that, but Jimmy or Tony would probably do it.

"So, what are you hoping to do by going back?"

"Just, get back in, make sure the place didn't burn down, take a few hours to remind Manner I'm still his Boss. Brand's supposed to be starting up soon, probably be a good idea to actually be there her first day. Just, I don't know, a normal Monday, ish."

"Monday's Fourth of July, so not Monday."

Tim's eyes narrow. "June's gone?"
Abby nods. "As of today."

Kelly tries to take a step and overbalances, falling on her bum and squawking indignantly. Tim leans over a bit to help her up, and his ribs ache as he does it, so he adds his own growl of frustration to the mix. But she grabs his hand, and he helps her stand, and he straightens up into a more comfortable position.

"You think Jimmy's going to add some sort of physical therapy for my ribs?"

Abby shakes her head. "You're breathing. That's probably all they need."

He shifts a little more, trying a very tentative side bend, and whimpering slightly. "Nope." Another slight whimper as he straightens up. "That's not all they need."

"Once you get standing on that foot, you can probably start adding bends and twists back in."

That sounds logical, but he's feeling this sudden need to be really working on getting his body back to where it needs to be. Probably the same need to get working again. He need to be himself again, and this limbo healing space isn't it.

Besides, he can do twists sitting down. In fact he often does them sitting down, so… He makes a mental note to ask Jimmy about that when they get there for dinner.

"No weights?" Tim asks as he shows Jimmy that he's got (almost) full range of motion in his ankle.

Jimmy shakes his head definitively. "No! You've still got four healing metatarsals and your ankle's not solid, yet. Right now we're just getting those muscles used to moving around again. Let's see what you're doing with your shoulder."

So Tim shows him. He can, once again, shrug with both shoulders. It's not smooth, by any stretch of the imagination, but he can move his shoulder joint in pretty much any direction, as long as the motion's coming from his traps, pecs, or lats.

"How's that feel?"

"Sore, achy, not as bad as last week. I was wondering about my ribs, thinking about adding some bends or stretches."

Jimmy stares at Tim, wondering what exactly this is, but he nods a little, and says, "Gotta check with Gibbs, make sure we're not getting an early start at the house tomorrow…" They're in the living room, and Gibbs is in the dining room, helping Penny set the table, so he can hear what Jimmy just said.

He shakes his head. "Raining all weekend. Bootcamp on Sunday. No carpentry. Maybe cookout at the house on Monday if the weather cooperates."

Jimmy nods. "Study time, then. Yay. You wouldn't believe how much reading I've got to get done. Tomorrow morning, I'll take a break, swing by here, grab you, and we'll get some x-rays in Autopsy. If your ribs look good, then sure, we'll work on adding some twists and bends and get your back and abs working again." Tim nods at that.
Tim decided to go to bed early on Friday night, while the Shabbos gathering was still on. No one’s surprised by that; he’d been drooping for most of dinner, and they all knew that he had another meeting with Wolf, and it’s really obvious that Abby’s not her normal self. They’re both trying to be cheerful, and having everyone over helps, but it’s obvious they’re hurting.

As they’re breaking up, Tony nods to Ziva, and she catches a ride home with Ducky and Penny. He helps Abby get the last of the dishes dried off and put away, and then heads off to the TV, searching around for something.

"Where’s McGee keep the games?"

"Tony?" Abby’s not sure what’s going on or why Tony wants to sit at her place and play games, but… "Pull up the main menu, then go to games, then—"

"Okay, I got it." He searches around for a bit, and then decides that Call of Duty should do the job. He picks up a controller for Abby, too and sits next to her on the sofa, facing her. "So… you know there was that time between taking care of…" Tony’s eyes fill in the name Bodnar, because they still don’t speak of him, "and Ziva and I really dating."

Abby nods, starting to get an idea of why Tony might still be here.

"And, uh, part of that time was her telling me about what happened in Somalia, about the scars she still had, about…" He shakes his head, some confidences he won’t tell, no matter what. Telling what she came home with is up to Ziva, and he’s not going to say a word about it without her express permission and her present, neither of which are true right now. He smiles, but not happy, "And," he bites his lip and shakes his head, "And there’s just hearing it, and not being able to do anything. Cause she had to live it, and I couldn't flip out on her by just hearing it. But I wanted to. Wanted to catch a plane and hunt them all down and kill every one of them we didn't get. Wanted to do more than kill them. But they're fucking ghosts, you know? A lot of them are literal ghosts, now, and the rest, not like they properly introduced themselves before..." He shakes his head again, still biting his lip. "And there's nothing you can do but listen, and you can't make it right, or better, or fix any of it. All you can do is sit there and take it.

"And until she almost died in that bomb last summer, sitting there, listening, making myself be calm and let her fall apart was the hardest thing I’d ever done. I beat the shit out of the next two perps who tried to run, and that didn't help much. Because nothing does, not really. It's still your person and they’re still hurt and there's nothing you can do about it." He sighs and flashes her something vaguely smile-like. "But, it does get better. Slowly. As he gets to being himself again, it'll get easier. When we bury John," Tony’s eyes are cold, and Abby’s awfully sure that he does not mean bury John in any sort of metaphorical sense, "that'll help, a lot.

"You know I'm not really happy about the counseling stuff, but… It's useful, and when you get back to work, checking in with Wolf, spending some time talking to him one on one's probably a good plan."

Abby nods. "I know." She blinks, starting to cry. "God, it's so hard! And I feel horrible saying it because all I have to do is listen. He had to live it."

Tony nods while Abby burrows into his arms, crying.

He kisses the top of her head. "I know, Abbs, I know." And after a while, ten maybe fifteen minutes, she starts to calm down, and when she does, he hands her the controller. "And until it gets better, or until you've got a way to get it out, we can utterly destroy some Nazis."
Abby wipes her eyes and smiles a little. "Little ultra-violence to soothe the pain?"

Tony nods and kisses her forehead again. "That's the idea."
There are moments when Jimmy is sure there is something wrong with him. Usually these moments are the result of his tongue getting away from him and some god-awful embarrassing thing spouting out of his mouth.

He has this filed under "No Foresight", and has routinely cussed himself out for not having the foresight God gave a turnip, let alone a fairly intelligent grown man.

And he is, as he's holding Tim, rubbing his back, and gently saying things like, "You're okay. I've got you. You're safe," cussing himself out inside his own head with a virtuoso performance of profane invective.

Because he's the moron who couldn't figure out that taking his dearest friend, who was almost beaten to death less than a month ago, to a FUCKING MORGUE, and then laying him down on one of the tables that they use for the corpses to get chest x-rays, might be a bad plan.

He's the moron standing there, shifting the camera a bit, making sure he's got the markers on Tim's chest so he can see where all the breaks are, telling him to stay still, (once again, in the FUCKING MORGUE on one of the tables where they autopsy the bodies) and completely missing the fact that at some point during this endeavor Tim went from talking to him about possible therapy exercises for his back, chest, and abs, and then quietly turned white, started sweating and shaking.

It wasn't until he was done with the x-rays, and had taken off the lead shield, and rolled the portable x-ray scanner away, and was in the process of reaching toward Tim to help him get sitting up that Jimmy realized Tim was in the middle of a massive panic attack and that wherever his mind was, it wasn't safe and sound at the Navy Yard.

So, he's got Tim sitting up, and is sitting next to him on the table, holding him as he shakes and sobs, petting his back. "You're okay, Tim. I've got you. Come on back to me, okay? You're here at the Navy Yard, and you're safe. Come on, come on back…" He keeps up a soothing mantra of statements like that, hoping his voice is lulling and that it'll help pull Tim back to him.

It takes a few minutes, but eventually Tim seems to pull out of himself, comes back to where he is, and who he's with, and afraid slips into angry and embarrassed. He pulls away from Jimmy, or tries, Jimmy keeps a hand on his back.

"Shit." Tim finally says, as he wipes his eyes and reaches for his shirt.

"You're okay." Jimmy's not rubbing his back anymore, but his hand is gently cupping the back of Tim's neck, keeping contact, keeping him grounded in the here and now.

Tim snorts at that. "That makes it worse. I'm flipping out over nothing."

"Did you think it was nothing when, for months after Jon died, everything set me off?"

"No."

Jimmy gently squeezes the back of Tim's neck. "Back at ya. Come on, let's get you up."

Jimmy helps him get his shirt back on, staying close, being calm. Once he's completely dressed, Jimmy's thinking that now is probably not a fantastic time to leave Tim sitting alone on one of the tables while he does the work necessary to turn those images into the digital scans they started using
two months ago.

So he helps Tim up, heading toward his desk, and asks, "You seen our new toy?"

One of the first thing Tim did when he got a hold of his budget was make a list of the software they were currently paying licensing fees for, and figure out which of them could be outsourced to shareware to free up some of his funding.

Jimmy, when he got a hold of his budget, decided that he was going to make a pretty big expenditure outlay, that would, in the course of the next two years pay for itself, and from there on out, save him about fifteen thousand dollars a year.

He upgraded autopsy to a digital x-ray. No more films, no more waiting for image processing, no more light bulbs for the light board (which are stupidly expensive), no more constantly having to buy new plates, and best of all, less radiation. Granted, his patients don't care much about the radiation, but he's still pleased to be zapping himself and Dr. Allan with fewer rads.

Tim shakes his head; he hasn't seen the new x-ray in action. Jimmy takes him over to the computers, so his back is to the tables and drawers. "Check this out." He's got a new plasma screen over the area that used to just be his and Ducky's desk. His and Dr. Allan's desk now. He pulls out the keyboard that sits on a small shelf under the writing surface of the desk and begins messing around with it, and after a few seconds... "There they are, your ribs." Jimmy's looking and nodding. "Looking pretty good." He points out the fractures and how they're healing up. "Let's say you've got another week of just resting before messing around with any sort of exercise, but come Friday, when you get out of that cast, you can start working with your ribs, too."

Tim nods.

"They really are looking good," Jimmy says, flipping off the plasma.

"How can a bone look good?" Tim's less impressed by this, because the answer he wants is, 'Let's get working out right now.'

"Nice straight healing. No deformities. Nothing's been pulled out of shape."

"Small blessings."

"Large blessings. Bones that heal up wrong hurt for basically ever, so let's put this in the win column."

"Okay." Tim sighs.

Jimmy squeezes his hand. "You want to head over to your office? I'll keep you company."

"Don't you have to study?"

"Book's on my phone. I can read in your office as well as I can anywhere else, and probably a lot better than I can at home."

"Sure, then. Might as well take a moment to see what's going on."

Jimmy stands up, handing Tim his crutch, and Tim stands up, too. "Let's go."

Tim relaxes a little as they get out of Autopsy and to the elevator, but Jimmy can see he's squaring his shoulders and putting himself into Boss mode as they descend to the basement.
"You really good on this?"

Tim nods. "Good to get back into the larger world, even if all I'm doing is reading emails."

Jimmy nods.

Tim flips off the elevator. "Actually… Okay, this is stupid and kind of embarrassing, but… Leon won't let me back on the job, for real, working cases until I can pass a piss test for narcotics."

Jimmy thinks about that for a moment and says, "Not unreasonable."

That is also not an answer Tim wants to hear. "According to Abby it can take a few days for them to work their way out of your system."

Jimmy nods at Tim. That's true. Tim stares at him, eyebrows high, asking something without saying anything. It takes a second, but Jimmy suddenly gets what Tim isn't asking.

"No."

"Jimmy!"

"No! You taking two or three more days to really heal up and get clear is a good thing. Besides, even if I didn't agree with that, you can't use my pee to pass the test because if anyone double checks, the fact that you aren't diabetic, and the pee will show screwed up insulin levels will be a dead giveaway that you aren't the guy it came from."

"Oh."

"Yeah." Jimmy flips the elevator back on. "And don't ask Tony, either. Just take the time off. It's like being drunk, you think you're okay, but you really aren't, and you do not want to hit the wrong button when you're putting in an account number or something. Don't blow a case because you can't type."

That makes a distressing amount of sense and that's loud and clear in Tim's disappointed expression.

"I know. Two-three extra days isn't the end of the world. Hell, shift down to over the counter meds on Thursday and back to work you'll go on Monday."

Tim nods at that, too. That's a fairly decent plan. Assuming his body cooperates with it. With his luck, he'll feel ready to shift over on a Monday and miss and entire extra week.

The elevator doors open, and Tim heads over to his computer, feeling, actually, really normal for a moment. Okay, maybe not normal but a hell of a lot closer to it than he's been in weeks.

Work is work, it looks the same, sounds the same, smells the same. He sees one Minion crashed out on the sofa, and glances around a bit, noticing that Ngyn's working, which is just about right. When they went onto 24/7 with the whole world-wide crew, night and weekend shifts became less of a big deal. It's much less effort to keep five people on at any given time when they're spread all over the globe.

He sits down, and rapidly drops out of normal when he starts trying to log in. Why people like Tony (horrible typist) have EASY passwords is immediately becoming clear as he's having trouble coping with the fact that his password is fifteen character long collection of randomly generated letters, upper and lowercase, numbers, and symbols.
Fortunately, as he's on his third try, Ngyn notices he's back, and heads in, distracting him from the Sisyphean task of logging on. "You're back!"

"Hi, Ngyn."

"How are you feeling?" His eyes flick to Jimmy who's out of Ngyn's direct line of view. *Car accident* he mouths to Tim.

"Like I got hit by a truck."

She winces at that, looking at his arm in the sling and the crutch that's propped against his desk; her eyes linger on the bisected eyebrow, and for a moment Tim's feeling very battered.

Then he sees her move in further, looking at Jimmy, and shut the door. "Howard and I know you weren't hit by a car."

Tim nods, not shocked. They were the two he pegged as most likely to find out what really happened. "Okay. Don't spread what happened around, please."

"No problem."

"How'd you find out?"

"Vance asked me to clean a rifle. Told us you were war gaming. Next thing we know you've been 'hit by a car.' But we can't find a police report. Howard had the idea of hacking everyone's email. She and I split it up so we wouldn't use the same techniques. That way..."

"If anyone checked it wouldn't all come back on just one of you."

"Yeah. It was in Agent DiNozzo's inbox, from there, what happened wasn't hard to track. Look, I wanted you to know that rifle is clean. It doesn't exist. It's never existed."

"Thanks, Ngyn." He nods, and glances to Jimmy, who looks pleased to hear that.

"So, are you back?" He's in jeans and a t-shirt. Normally that's his just stopping in for a minute look. It's true that he scaled back the dress code, but that's a bit more dressed down than he usually is. Most of the time he wears what he did as Agent McGee, nice jeans, button down, jacket. Beyond the occasional nail polish (and when he's sometimes dressing for the purpose of producing a certain image) he pretty much looks like the poster boy for office casual computer guy.

"Hoping to be in and out the next two weeks. Can't really work, but I can sit here and look like I'm not totally useless."

She smiles at him. "Really working or not, it's good to see you back."

"Thanks."

She nods at him and heads off, and Tim returns his attention to his computer. A minute later Jimmy notices Tim glaring at his computer.

"What?"

Tim looks at him, tired, frustrated, angry. "Can't get in."

"They change your password?" Jimmy wouldn't put it past Leon, but last he heard Tim was allowed to do administrative stuff.
Tim shakes his head. "Can't type well enough to get in."

"Oh." Jimmy thinks about it. "But once you're in, you can do stuff right?"

Tim rolls his eyes. "I thought I could. If I can't get my password in, I'm not going to do well with anything else."

Jimmy doesn't know what to do with that. He thinks for a few more seconds, knowing what sort of stuff he does on admin, and pretty much all it takes is a pulse and the ability to click on things. He looks around Tim's office and finally finds a pen and a pad of memo paper.

"Write down your password. You're up and talking, so I'm sure that means you can respond to emails, so let me get you in, and you can take over."

Tim glares at his right hand, and then takes the pen from Jimmy, writing quickly as Jimmy holds the paper in place.

Jimmy stares at the password in front of him. "No wonder you can't get in! I don't know if I can get that in there." Tim's chair is on wheels, so Jimmy just pulls him over to the side, and begins to type, slowly, one character at a time, hunt and peck style, hits enter, and Tim would have to admit that he's satisfied to see Jimmy can't get in on the first try.

Jimmy glares at the password, starts deleting, and says, "You don't have some sort of whammy in here where if you get it wrong too many times the system dies or something like that?"

"Not on this level."

"Great. Well, we're not doing anything where I've got to get this right on the first run. Is this a one, an l or an uppercase I?"

"Uppercase I, and that one's a zero."

Jimmy rolls his eyes. "Trust you to come up with a password that's impossible."

"Yeah, well, I didn't expect to need to have someone else put it in."

"Where'd you even get this monster, anyway?"

"Random character generator. Pretty much programming 101. I wrote a quick script, told it how long I wanted the password, what characters it could pick from, and what characters I wanted in the password, and two seconds later it spit out fifteen of them."

"And then what..." Jimmy hits enter, and this time Tim's computer decides to play ball, and logs on, "you memorized it?"

"Memorized four of them. I've got a laptop, a computer, a netbook, and a computer at home with secure stuff on it."

"Lord." Jimmy shakes his head. His own password Dr.Grelmin (yes, he intentionally misspelled it so Tony wouldn't crack it) is looking like child's play right now. "Well, you're on. Have fun. I'm going to get some coffee. You want your regular?"

"Yeah. No caffeine."

Jimmy smiles at him. "Trust me, I'm not going to forget SJ's in the works, which means both of you are off caffeine. Abby make her doctor's appointment yet?"
"Tuesday."

"Good," Jimmy's at the door to the office. "Can't wait to see the image of your new little guy."

Tim smiles, a real smile, untouched by anything but joy and love. "Me, too."

Tim spends about two hours, mostly just going through email, and by going through email, what he's doing is deleting the stuff that's either too old to do anything about or useless, and shuffling the rest into his 'do something about once I get Dragon uploaded on this computer folder.' (It's downloading in the background as he's going through his email.)

By the end of that, he's achy and pretty beat. He takes his Tylenol 3 with the last sip of his coffee, leans back in his chair, winces when the top of the seat hits him right in one of the broken ribs, and straightens up.

Jimmy looks up from his phone. He wasn't kidding about being able to read wherever. Once he came back with the coffees, he pulled one of Tim's chairs closer to the desk, propped his feet up on the corner and got to it. Occasionally Tim would hear the very soft sound of Jimmy repeating what he was reading, but it wasn't loud enough to make him lose his place in the stream of emails.

"You done?"

Tim nods. "Yeah. Got through the first two hundred emails. Only…" he sighs, wishing he was exaggerating, "five hundred more to go."

Jimmy nods, knowing how that works.

"How long until I can drive?" Tim asks as Jimmy shifts his car into reverse, pulling out of his spot in the Navy Yard parking lot.

"Same with work, once you're off the narcotics, you can drive again."

Tim give him his I'm not completely stupid look. "A manual."

"Oh, right. Forgot that the roadster's a manual." Jimmy thinks. "New Year's? I don't know Tim. Your right arm's a mess and it will take time to heal up. For things where you don't need split second timing, or really delicate fine motor control, your arm'll be ready before Halloween. Probably before the end of the summer. Beyond that… How hard you work on rehabbing, how much scar tissue is in there, if there's any lasting nerve damage, how solid the joints are when they heal up, that's all going to come into play. But you will drive a manual again. You'll get it all back.

"We've got bootcamp tomorrow, I'll have Ziva start showing me what she wants to do with how to use a knife, and I can use that to figure out how to get you rehabbing in that direction faster, but…" Jimmy kind of half smiles at him.

"But it won't be fast."

"No." Jimmy shakes his head. "It won't. What's the rush?"

"I want to be me again."

Jimmy takes his hand off the wheel and gives Tim's hand a squeeze.
Jimmy notices that Abby's car is missing from the McGees' driveway as they pull in.

"Abby out and about?"

Tim nods. "She was talking about heading over to Gibbs' with Kelly."

"You mind if I hang out here? Breena was expecting me to be with Gibbs today, so she's got the MOPs group at our place today, and..."

Tim nods again. He's got no problem at all figuring out that the weekly meeting of the Mothers of Preschoolers is not going to be a quiet environment for studying. "Sure, I was going to get a nap, so feel free to get comfy."

Jimmy nods back, getting out of the car, crossing over to Tim's side, grabbing the crutch out of the backseat and getting the door for him. As Tim gets out he says, "At least when I can drive again, I can open my own door." Between the broken right arm and the broken ribs, twisting and shifting enough to open the door on the passenger side is an issue.

Jimmy shuts the door behind him, and waits to see where Tim's going to go. They're closer to the sliding glass doors in the back of the house, but the porch is elevated over the backyard, and that means going up four steps. The front door is farther away, but that requires two steps, and while Tim can do steps, they're slow and annoying.

Jimmy sees him start off toward the back, and follows along with him. As they get closer, he heads to the back door, opens it, and sees Tim propping the crutch against the steps. Jimmy shakes his head. He knows that to get up steps on his own, Tim's got to sit down on them and push himself up. With one crutch and one working arm, both on the same side, he doesn't have the balance, or ability to catch himself, to get up steps standing up.

"Come on, I've got you. Arm over my shoulders," Jimmy says, standing next to Tim. Tim wraps his arm over Jimmy, and Jimmy gets a good hold on his waist. "Okay, first one." And up they get.

"You want your crutch back, or is this okay?" Jimmy asks when they get to the top of the steps.

By that point the pain meds are really hitting Tim, and he's starting to feel a little woozy, so holding onto the rail with one hand, balanced on one foot while Jimmy grabs his crutch isn't sounding too appealing.

"This is okay." So they make their way inside.

Tim's figuring he'll head for the futon and sack out there. Jimmy's not in on this plan and assumes that naptime means bed, and is steering them toward the steps.

"Door's back there," Tim says as they step past it.

"You want to sleep in there?"

"It's close and easy."

"Oh. If that's what you want. But I can get you upstairs pretty easy. What's more comfortable?"

Tim thinks, and yeah, laying all the way out on his bed sounds good. "Bed."

"Okay, then up we go." Takes a few more minutes. They aren't getting near setting any speed records, but eventually Tim and Jimmy get up the steps, and Tim's sitting on the side of his bed,
pulling his shoe off. "Let me get your crutch," Jimmy says, heading down to the porch to grab it.

It started raining again while they were heading up, so his next step is to grab some paper towels and get it dried off in the kitchen before taking it up.

Jimmy thinks Tim's asleep (he's on his side, eyes closed, under the blanket, breathing easy) when he gets up there and quietly puts the crutch so it's resting against Tim's bedside table. He catches his reflection out of the corner of his eye as he's straightening up, and suddenly gets Tim's bit about knowing where to put the mirrors in his room.

Jimmy's been in Tim's room before, but only twice, and he wasn't thinking about the room as a room, either time. He didn't bother to really look.

Today he's looking. The mirrors are set so you can see anywhere on or near the bed really well. Really well. And there is a very faint whiff of sex in the air. Mostly all he smells is the scented candles and the perfumes/colognes that Abby's got out on top of her dresser, along with the scent of clean laundry. Jimmy assumes his room smells like this to anyone who doesn't spend half their life in it. (He can't smell his own room.)

But he can smell Tim's, and he can remember what happened the last time he was up here, Breena kissing all three of them, and the time before, getting dressed up to go clubbing, watching Tim and Abby touch Breena. He can remember what he heard coming out of this room while he and Breena were in the guestroom, and he's thinking of talking with Breena about the four of them taking the next step.

Except, they don't actually know what the next step is, or might be.

"Jimmy?" Tim's eyes don't open, but apparently he's awake enough to have noticed that Jimmy hasn't left the room.

"Yeah?"

"You need something?"

"Uh no. Just thinking."

"Okay, well, either talk to me or head out. You just watching me sleep is creepy."

Jimmy laughs at that, and then, feeling kind of bold, he sits on the side of Tim's bed. He can't remember the last time he sat/laid down on a bed that belonged to someone else, let alone with someone else in it. It comes to him, girlfriend before Breena. Long time. "You weren't kidding about the mirrors, were you?"

"That's what you're thinking about?" Tim sounds... Jimmy's not sure. He sounds like he's trying to be amused, rather than actually is amused.

"One of the things." Tim nods a bit, eyes still closed. Jimmy's fairly sure he's not entirely awake. "I should get out of here, let you sleep."

"What else are you thinking about?"

"You want to talk?"

Tim opens his eyes, looking scared, and Jimmy suddenly gets what trying to be amused is. "I keep feeling that table under my back." He smiles a little, licking his lips, biting the bottom one, trying to
shrug it off. "It… um… reminded me what would have happened if Jarvis had shown up a few minutes later."

"Shit. I'm sorry. I should have known better than to take you to Autopsy."

"I should have known better than to go." Tim shakes his head, closing his eyes again. "I'm alive. I know it. I can feel it. But…" he exhales…"Sometimes the fear of the fight hops up, you know?"

"I know." Maybe it's not exactly the same, but the fear of losing Jon would hit Jimmy for no good reason for months after they lost him. Still does, every now and again. He can look at his girls and just feel his heart stop when he thinks about how easily he could lose them. "You're home."

"I know. And when I was fighting, I knew Jarvis was coming. That was the plan. He was coming for me. But… Um… I fought as long and as hard as I could, but… when they got my arm, I felt it, and heard it…" He doesn't mention seeing it, but as he says it, he remembers how it looked, and why when he saw his hand palm up, but his wrist down, he threw up. Tim swallows hard, and feels the pressure of Jimmy's hand on his shoulder increase just a little, pulling him back to his room, back to now. "And I dropped. Couldn't keep standing or fighting, and no idea if I'd still be breathing when he got there." Tim curls in on himself a bit more. "Anyway, distraction is good. At least, until I drift off. Might not be listening that close, or make a lot of sense if I answer, but another voice is good."

"Okay." Jimmy stands up and heads over to Abby's side of the bed, kicking off his shoes, sitting down, back against the headboard, and rests his hand, very gently on the back of Tim's neck. He sighs a little, thinking how, bizarre, for lack of a better word, this whole situation is. "I was thinking about Breena kissing you."

Tim smiles. "That was nice."

"Nice?" Jimmy's not sure if he should be thankful for that or insulted by it. It looked like a really good kiss to him, and he knows the one he got right after was really good.

Tim shrugs a little. "Really nice? I don't remember it that well. I wish I did. I know it happened. But, tired, drugs… It's like something I read about."

"Oh."

"I remember feeling safe and appreciated and loved. That was good. That was really good."

Jimmy nods. "Was thinking about that, and… not being pissed off by it. Should have been, right?"

"Mmm."

Jimmy's not sure if that's Tim being non-committal, or just not really tuned in, so he keeps talking, "I watched her do it, and then she kissed Abby, and she kissed me, and… It didn't take anything away"
It didn't make us… less…” Jimmy's not sure what he's trying to say here, but Tim's not really responding, so either he's following along or out of it. Jimmy can feel the tension in Tim's neck lessening, so he's probably slipping further into sleep. "We went home and put our girls to bed and made love and held each other and… And nothing about us changed.

"Don't remember what day it was. Time goes wonky in a hospital. You were hurt and out of it. Abby was napping. And we were talking. Breena was so scared…” He very gently strokes Tim's hair. "We both were. By then we knew you'd be okay, but we didn't, not at first. Long flight. Really long, and all we knew was you were hurt, bad enough that Leon had gotten a clean rifle for Gibbs.

"You got on that damn ship and you got hurt. And if Jarvis had been a little later… that would have been it. End of the story.

"So, we're dancing around it. I'm telling her what's wrong, and that you're going to get better, and how bad your arm is, and how angry I am, and how… How everything was just fucked sideways, and how I couldn't fix it.

"Abby's hurting, too. And I'm dying for her, because I can imagine it. I know how wrecked I'd be if it was Breena in that bed, beaten to shit.

"I'm telling Breena about that, too, and she's listening, also scared and angry and hurting. We were hurting for you and Abby, hurting bad.

"Finally Breena says to me, 'We aren't just friends with them. We're more than friends. Maybe not lovers, maybe never lovers, but… We're not friends. And when you get home, we're all going to talk about it and figure it out, okay?'

"And I said, 'Okay.'" He gently squeezes the back of Tim's neck. "And she kissed you when we got home, and it was okay, and I wasn't pissed because we're not friends, and because it didn't take anything away from us, and because it was right."

Tim doesn't say anything to that. From everything Jimmy can tell he's gone. So he settles back, pulls his phone out of his pocket, and gets back to doing his reading, keeping his hand on the back of Tim's neck, making sure he feels secure.
It's November 1st, 2014, so in whichever alternative universe where all fiction is real, today's the day Tim McGee and Abby Scuito get married.

"So this is what you two do when I'm out?" wakes Jimmy out of his doze.

He looks up and sees Abby grinning at him, and promptly realizes he's in bed, in her bed, with Tim, and apparently was asleep.

He stretches a little, sees that Tim's still asleep, and notices his phone on the bed next to him. What happened starts to slide back into his mind: bed, comfy, boring reading, somewhat dim light, sound of rain, and off to sleep he went.

He rubs his eyes, sees Abby still grinning. She gets (gently, Tim's still asleep) into the bed, between them, and quietly says, while poking Jimmy, and still grinning. "So..." She's enjoying this way too much. "What sort of fun did you two get up to that got you so tired out?"

Jimmy rolls his eyes, but notices that Tim settles in against Abby. He doesn't appear to have woken up, but he knows she's near and has snuggled in closer. He smiles a little at that. Breena does that when he comes home late and slips into bed without waking her.

"Kelly?" Jimmy asks.

"Naptime for her, too. I was just going to crash. You want to hang out here, you're welcome."

Jimmy checks the clock, little before two. He shakes his head. "Nah. Gotta eat." He sits up and stretches. "MOPs'll be done by the time I get home. Play with my girls some, and do some more studying."

Abby kisses his cheek. "Have fun."

Jimmy smiles, tucking his phone back into his pocket and slipping his feet into his shoes. "I will."

Breena's in an exceptionally good mood when he gets home.

"Hi." He kisses her before heading through the living room to the coat closet by the front door. The trashed living room. He gets the point of the MOPs group. How they alternate between each other's houses, so seven weeks out of eight, Breena gets some time to socialize with other adult women with kids, have a good cup of coffee, yummy snacks, and what she refers to as 'girl talk', the kids can run around and wreck someone else's house, and having eight sets of adult eyes to watch fourteen kids is a hell of a lot easier than one set of eyes and two kids.

So he gets it, but, Lord, his living room looks like a tornado went through it. They're gonna need Federal disaster relief to get this cleaned up.

"I take it, it was a good meet?" He tosses his shoes into the closet and heads back to where she is, at
the kitchen table, looking over the PL statements for the last quarter for Slaters'.

She smiles up at him, and he kisses her again.

"Good meeting, and Abby just sent me the cutest photo ever." There's a massive grin on her face.

Jimmy rolls his eyes again, and heads to the fridge. "She took pictures?" It's possible he sounds a tad whiny at that.

"Of course!"

He opens the door. "You want anything?"

"Nah. Everyone brings food, and Elise made it this week…" He knows Elise is the baker, and when she comes she always brings some sort of amazing, high calorie, chocolate-intensive thing that the girls regret eating but usually snarf down in about ten seconds. Elise runs a bakery that handles catering a lot of the post-viewing/post-funeral wakes that Slaters' throws.

Actually, he thinks about it more, a lot of those women run businesses that work with Slaters'.

Ed and his brothers are part of a bunch of businessmen's groups, where they get together and do whatever it is they do over golf and beer or whatever. Jimmy's fuzzy on the details what with never having attended any of those meetings. He's heard the extended Slater clan talking about it at Sunday dinner, though, and it sounds very nineteenth century.

Breena and her friends are doing the same thing, at home, while watching kids. Pulling this tradition into the twenty-first century and multi-tasking it.

Jimmy closes the fridge door, and heads over to Breena. He hugs her from behind, and she absently tilts her head, the way she usually does when she's expecting a kiss, but paying attention to something else. He shifts over a step, tilts her head toward him so she's looking into his eyes and says, "I don't tell you how amazing you are nearly often enough."

She smiles at that. "What's bringing this on?"

"You." He kisses her again.

"I'm really not bugged by you catching a nap with Tim."

"Huh?" He pulls back, confused.

"I'm cool with it, you don't have to get extra sweet with me because of it."

"Uh… Okay." His eyebrows furrow. He doesn't think that's what he's doing. He thinks for another second. "No. That's not happening. I was thinking about how you're handling the girls and your business all at once, and how you're just on top of everything."

She looks very pleased by that. "Oh! In that case, yes, I'm awesome." She grins at him again, and he gently shoves her shoulder, heading back to the fridge and locate lunch.

"I saved the lettuce wraps Chloe brought to the meeting."

"Mmmm…" He sees them and grabs them. "You really are awesome." He doesn't know how she makes them, some sort of secret recipe that shall not be divulged, but they're hummus and red peppers and black olives and pine nuts all mixed into some sort of paste with a bunch of yummy herbs wrapped up in romaine lettuce and if he ever had leftovers he'd take them to Abby and ask her
to analyze them so he could make them for himself. But he's never had the self-control to have leftovers.

He sits down next to her, happily chewing. "So, you think I'm being extra sweet to you for catching a nap with Tim?"

She shrugs. "Wasn't sure entirely what that eye roll was. Hoping you're not feeling guilty."

Now he's slightly alarmed. "What the hell do you think we did?"

"Slept."

Okay, that's right. "Then why would I be guilty?"

"I don't know? You shouldn't be. It's not a big deal."

"I'm not. And you're acting like it's a big deal."

"There was some edge in the way you shrugged at me."

Jimmy thinks about that. Some edge with Abby, too. Okay, why? "Irked," he says after a few seconds. "You and Abby are petting and praising me like I'm a toddler who successfully peed in the potty."

Breena lights up. "Not to derail this, because this is important, but I might forget to tell you otherwise…" Jimmy nods. They have a lot of conversations where they start on one topic, flip over to another one, and eventually get back to the original one. Just part of busy lives, two full-time jobs, parenting, friending, and all the rest of it. "Molly did successfully notice she had to go, stopped playing with her toys, and got to the potty in time."

He smiles at that. "Way to go, little girl!" Molly, if asked, will make it to the potty in time, but if she's doing something she finds interesting, she usually doesn't notice that she has to go until she's sitting in a puddle. "Have to do something special for that."

"Already in place. Rented a new episodes of the Hoobs. When she wakes up…"

"She gets to see the new episode as a reward, and we've got a quiet twenty minutes to get the living room tidied up."

Breena nods. "That's the plan."

"Okay, good. I can do that." Jimmy waits for a beat, sees Breena's done with that, and shifts gears from dad and back to lover. "However, the point I was making… comforting someone you love when they're hurting shouldn't get you a medal."

"Yeah. It's… I don't know, kind of related to that, but not that. It's not you taking care of him, though that's good, too. It's… Okay, if wherever we go next involves sex, it'd be a lot easier if you and Tim are physically comfortable with each other. I know you don't want to f**k each other. And, I'm not talking about that, or you guys ever going there, but if you can be close and touch without freaking out, that makes everything easier."

Jimmy hadn't thought about that. In fact, any of the physical mechanics of the four of them that involve him with Tim, he hasn't been thinking about. "And that's why you and Abby think me snoozing next to him is cool?"
"You haven't seen the picture, have you?"

"I was there."

"Uh huh." Breena knows how Jimmy wakes up from naps. He's usually out of it enough he doesn't know his name. She pulls out her phone, opens the shot and shows it to Jimmy. It's exactly what he's expecting. He drifted off reading, sitting against the headboard, but apparently he slumped down, so he's back on the bed, in his usual arms and legs akimbo sleeping position, one hand on Tim's neck.

He looks up at her. "Uh, yeah. He was having a hard time." Jimmy sighs. "Look, I'm the fucking moron who put him in the morgue to take x-rays. Understandably enough, that freaked him out. We spent some time with him in his office working, once he got tired, I got him home for a nap, he was still a little freaked out so I sat next to him, and, I can't put my hand on his shoulder. He's got it in a cast, and the damn thing still hurts, so yes, I'm holding his neck."

Breena smiles. "It's sweet."

He rolls his eyes again. "It's not a big deal."

"Yes and no. No, comforting a friend isn't a big deal. Allowing yourself to be comforted by a friend isn't a big deal. It's normal. People do it all the time. But, come on, could you touch Tony like that, in his bed?"

Jimmy shrugs. "Not right now." They're better, but there's also still an edge between them from the Jeanne thing. "I like to think that if he needed it, I could, but I'm fairly sure he'd never let me see that he needed it."

"What'd you do when things were going bad with Ziva? I know you were willing to hug her." Because last summer Ziva had stayed with them when she and Tony were in the weeds, and Jimmy had been willing and able to listen and offer hugs as needed, they both were.

Jimmy sighs, remembering. "Hand on his shoulder, or holding his hand. We were getting along as well as we ever had, and he was hurting worse than he ever had, and I didn't hug him."

Breena looks at him, smiles a little, and he nods. "Thinking about that some when Tim was sleeping. You're right, we're not friends. Tony's my friend, and I couldn't offer him that sort of comfort."

Breena nods.

"But I don't know what Tim and I are. I've got words for you and me. And, whatever happens with Abby, between us, or you two, there are words for that, too. Lover, girlfriend, wife, mistress, whatever. But I don't have words for Tim. I love him more than anyone who isn't you or the girls, but...I don't want to have sex with him. If it'd have been Abby or Ziva, or any other reasonably in shape woman in bed with me, that little lizard part of the brain would have thought about it. Wouldn't have done anything, but I would have at least fantasized about it."

Breena smiles at that, too. She knows Jimmy inside and out, and they are long past pretending they only find each other sexually interesting.

"So, what were you thinking about, if not hot Tim fantasies?"

"First off, I do not have hot Tim fantasies. Ever. I have hot you fantasies. And I have hot Abby fantasies. And I have scorching hot you and Abby and me fantasies. And when you tell me your foursome fantasies, I like them just fine, and I think they're hot, but if we're just in my head, and I'm thinking about sex, Tim more or less ceases to exist."
Breena laughs while shaking her head. "So, what were you thinking about?"

"How you kissing him didn't freak me out." She nods; she knows that. "And how I do think you're amazing because you can love so deep and sweet. And because you are who you are, you can kiss him, and I still feel secure and adored because I know you've got more than enough love for all of us. Because it's not an either or thing. Because we went home after, and you're still my wife." He's smiling gently at her. "You're my world, and because it's you, I get the chance of a bigger, grander, richer world, but no matter what, you're the center of it."

She leans over and kisses him deep and slow.

"I love you so much."

She cups his face in her hands. "Love you, too."

He smiles at her, eyes sparkling, and then says, "Also, I was thinking that Tim really knows how to put up mirrors, and when he can stand without a crutch, I'm getting him up to our room, and we're doing a little redecorating."

Breena laughs at that. "Uh huh. Got something in our room you want to see more of?"

His hand drops lightly to her breast and his eyes follow, then jump back up to hers. "Oh yeah!"
Tim wakes the same way he's woken up every day for the last three weeks. Hurting. It's not too bad right now, which means he hasn't gotten to time for his next pill, but it's there, it's almost always there, and it's the first thing he notices.

From there, comes the slow realization that there's a body spooned up against his, which is nice. And then the very startled sensation of uncertainty as to whose body is spooned up against his, because he's pretty certain Jimmy was in the room when he went to sleep, and he's pretty much hoping that Jimmy is not full body cuddling him, if for no other reason than because when he got into bed for his nap, he took his pants off.

He's not exactly panicking at the idea, but it is somewhat uncomfortable. Eventually extra details filter through, like the legs pressed to the back of his are smooth, and so is the face that's pressed against his neck, plus, there's no way Jimmy's wearing that scent (Breena did get him a few colognes, but none of them have jasmine or almond as main notes), so… Okay, this can't be Jimmy, which means Abby's home and she's napping, and he's a lot happier having figured that out.

He stretches a bit, and looks over, seeing that it's a bit past three. So, Kelly's probably got another hour of naptime.

Abby's arm is carefully threaded under his cast arm, low on his abs to avoid the broken ribs. Right now he wishes he could hold her hand. Hold it without thinking or shifting around. Just let the natural inclination to slide his hand into hers become real. His left arm doesn't easily bend to where her hand is, not when he's lying on it, but his right hand is only a few inches from her hand. Normally, he'd just thread his fingers in hers and give her a little squeeze. Not happening today.

He feels her kiss the back of his neck.

"Hi," he says, quiet and tentative. If she's petting him in her sleep, he doesn't want to wake her.

"Mmmm…"

Just waking up, or still sleeping. He goes quiet and still. Not like he's got anything to leap out of bed for right now. Not like he could leap even if he did.

She kisses the back of his neck again, and her hand moves a few inches further down his abs. He smiles as she gently cups him. Maybe he's got something to do for the next hour.

Like all the sex they've been having lately (as opposed to the sex he's writing, and she's reading) this is slow and soft and gentle. It feels good. Her body on his always feels good. And right now, there's the extra layer of safe and warm and comfort and love. The sense that when they're together, like this, the rest of the world fades away and cannot touch them.

And that's so good. He needs that bubble of safe around him, and she does, too.

But right now he's missing holding her tight to him, missing the feel of her full body up against his. Even with her on top, his arm is in the way. Real sex, weeknight sex, morning sex, the kind that makes up probably ninety percent of the sex they have, usually begins with facing each other, on
their sides, pressed up close, kissing and petting, rubbing against each other.

It starts with his right arm under her neck, and his left stroking back and butt and leg. It starts with kissing, lips to lips, belly to belly, her hand in his hair, the other one stroking his face, her leg over his hip. Soft words, soft kisses, face to face, skin to skin, bodies flush against each other.

Sometimes it ends there, both of them on their sides, rocking together. Sometimes he rolls onto her, or she rolls onto him, sometimes kisses travel down bodies, for different flavors of sex, but real sex almost always involves that close, face to face, body to body, kissing while making love aspect that's been stolen by the position of his arm.

She's straddling him, rocking up and down, that vertical and horizontal grind that's so good for both of them. A lot of real sex shifts to this position for climax time, good view, easy clit access, easy movement. His left hand works just fine, so he's able to stroke her clit and ramp her up until she's flushed and shuddering over him, until her body clenching on his sends him twitching and gasping, and, for a moment, not hurting.

She rests over him, braced on her palms, kissing gently, the tips of her breast rubbing against his chest. That's good, too, but he misses the weight of her collapsed on his chest and hips, misses the feel of her butt under both of his hands as he kisses her forehead, feeling her hair against his neck and chest and shoulder.

It must be showing in his eyes because she asks, "You okay?"

He smiles a little, "As well as I can be."

"What's wrong?"

"Missing all of you on all of me. Wishing I didn't have this stupid dead arm strapped to the middle of my torso. Wishing my ribs could take your weight."

She kisses him, then reaches for the tissues, quickly cleaning both of them up, and then nudges him so he's on his side again and she's flush against his back, leg draped over his hips, arm around his waist.

"Better?"

"Some." He shifts around a bit, until his left hand finds hers, and lifts it to his lips, kissing each finger. "Want to kiss you, too. Wanna be able to fuck like this."

She squeezes him very gently, snuggling tight to his back, slipping her leg along his, and kissing his neck. "Nothing I can do about kissing lip to lip, but if you feel up to doing the prep work, tonight we can definitely fuck like this."

His eyebrows shoot up. That wasn't what he was thinking of for fucking. He's not sure why; he likes it and it's a pretty obvious fix, but it hasn't crossed his mind in a while. But… yeah, that'd do the trick. He's not sure if he can get himself prepped. He and Abby are beyond intimate, but the cleanup for anal is not something he wants help with.

"If I can get myself cleaned up, I will happily take you up on that."

He can feel her grin against his back. "You know, I bet I can wear the strap on and the butterfly at the same time. I'll do you, and you can control the vibrator."

Tim bites his lip and whimpers lightly, many good images flooding his mind. "That'll work."
"Excellent!"

They mosey through getting up and dressed and are entirely ready for the real world outside of their bedroom by the time Kelly starts fussing.

Tim starts to get up and then stops. Abby smiles at him. "Soon enough."

He shakes his head at her as she goes to get their daughter. "No, it won't be." And while he doesn't mind not having to change diapers, yesterday isn't soon enough to get that arm working again so he can pick his daughter up.

He can hold Kelly in carefully controlled circumstances. Like, if he's already on the floor, or on the bed, he can hold her because there's no danger of dropping her. At a year old, she's very squirmy, and will try to throw herself out of his arms, and with only one arm to hold her, he has lost his grip on her several times.

Likewise, with only one arm, he can't pick her up. Someone has to hand her to him, like Abby is, right now.

Abby does hand her over, and Kelly, who is still looking a little sleepy, lays in his lap, feet on his tummy, looking up at him. "Hi, baby, you have a good nap?" he asks as she's watching him.

"Yes!"

"Wonderful. Me, too."

"Nap?"

"Yeah, Daddy got a nap, too."

He's read somewhere that one-year-olds more or less think the entire universe ceases to exist when they sleep, or that their dreams are real, or… Honestly he's thinks the guy who wrote that was just making it up based on what looked plausible, because how could you tell what a one-year-old really thinks about anything less concrete than: cookies yay or nay?

But however it works, she does seem surprised that Daddy got a nap, too.

"How was your morning?" he asks Abby as she sits down with them.

"Good. We went over to Pop's and played with Mona."

"Mona!" Kelly's got that concept down pat. "Woof! Doggie!"

"Mona is a doggie," Abby says.

"Bwack doggie. BIG, bwack doggie!"

Tim nods at her on that. "Big, black doggie." He exaggerates the L sound, but Kelly doesn't seem to notice him doing it. He looks to Abby. "Working on describing things?"

"Yeah. Kelly learned that she could sit in Gibbs' lap, throw a tennis ball, and Mona would bring it back to her."

Tim can imagine that, and then he doesn't need to. Abby pulls out her phone, and there's video of Kelly on Gibbs lap, her little hand trying to hold a tennis ball, his bigger hand holding hers and the
tennis ball, moving her arm gently through an overhand toss, and then Mona gleefully tearing off to grab the ball and bring it back.

"That's adorable." Tim says, grinning.

Abby nods.

"So, besides fetch, what'd you guys do?"

"Mostly fetch." She doesn't say more.

He's looking at her, wondering what she's not saying. His eyes ask, even though his lips don't. For him that's a halfway communication, a way of signaling, *I want to know, but if you don't want to talk, I won't press.*

"Talking with Gibbs some about how to deal with anger."

Now Tim's looking confused, and Abby sees it, so she explains more, "About John and Torri. You talk about it, and it make me so angry and…"

He shakes his head. "I get that. I can feel you boiling under the surface when I talk, and… I appreciate you keeping control, makes it easier for me to keep control, too, but I know how hard it hits you." Abby nods at that. That's why she's doing it. He doesn't need to deal with this and her on top of it. "Just, Gibbs?" Gibbs is not the first, second, or probably tenth guy Tim would go to on how to handle being angry in a constructive and socially acceptable manner.

"You know anyone angrier than him?"

Tim inclines his head. That's a good point. He doesn't know anyone who ran as hot as long as Gibbs did.

"Thought he might have some ideas."

"Beyond build boats and kill perps?"

Abby rolls her eyes a little and shakes her head. "No!" Then she goes very serious, staring right at Tim. "I wanted permission to go kill John. Figured he'd be the guy to give it to me."

Tim's not sure how to respond to that, though he can see how if what you want is external validation for murder, Gibbs would indeed be the guy to go to. "What'd he say?"

Abby looks disappointed. "That I couldn't kill him for the same reason he couldn't. Too obvious and no one was better off with us in jail."

Tim nods at that. "What'd you do with that?"

"Played more fetch. Focused on the fact that my loves are alive and here and healing. Tried to put it in the past. Talked shop with Gibbs about rifles and bullets. Jimmy's going to be getting some custom made rounds."

"Made by you."

She smiles savagely. "Yes."

Tim can imagine that, and then, in what is probably a horribly inappropriate response, he starts to giggle.
"What?" Abby really isn't expecting him to break out in giggles at the idea of her making sniper's rounds.

"Just imagining you signing them. You know, the way they used to do bombs? Some sort of mark. Little skull or something. I know you'd make sure it'd vanish before anyone could dig it out of him, but, the image of you painting a little skull on them… World War II pinup style."

Abby smiles at that, shaking her head a little. "You're feeling kind of goofy right now, aren't you?"

He nods. "I guess."

She thinks about it. "I could put a tiny little version of the picture of you from the Abby's Lab For Dummies in the coating. Paint it on first with the moly coating, then coat the whole round. No one would ever see it, but we'd know it was there."

Tim nods at that. "So, you're building bullets, Gibbs is training, Jimmy's shooting, and I just, what-"

He's about to say something like 'lay around being useless', but Abby cuts him off before he gets there with, "Heal."

"You're not going to wait to see if Jarvis comes through?"

Abby shrugs. "Not sure if waiting matters. It's going to take Jimmy a while to get the point where he's practicing with bullets, let alone firing them."

"So… you don't think Jarvis will do it?"

She nods. "We love you. He doesn't. I don't see him sticking his neck out for us. I can see him saying he will to kick it down the road, hoping it'll just go away, and then, when it doesn't go away, he'll leave it lying there, knowing we won't go against him if he doesn't go through with it. And by the time we know he didn't do it, the election is over and it won't matter so much if the whole thing blows up."

Tim sighs. That's a very logical take on this. Still… "So, if Jimmy's not going to ready to go anytime soon, why am I still healing? I am not going to be gimping around on this crutch a second longer than I need to! And I am getting my arm back. By the time you've got Jimmy ready to do it, I'll be healed up and then some, and I actually can shoot."

"From how far away?"

Tim thinks about it. He's never tried distance shooting, but… "Got to be faster to pick it up after you've already mastered rifles and hand guns than going at it cold."

Abby nods at that. "And you can do the math in your head."

"If I needed to. Or I can have my phone do it and cover my tracks on the phone so no one can find them. That's just detail work. That comes into play once we've got the target set."

"So, are we waiting for you to heal?"

"I'm waiting for Burley and Tony and Ziva. If they can't pin anything on him, then I'm waiting for Jarvis. If he doesn't move… It's not just about me. I need it, but, it's also…" Tim stops, trying to think of how to put this concretely. He's a cop. Most of his loves are cops, soldiers, and one assassin. He voluntarily shares his life with people who kill other people for a living. He's personally killed more than ten people himself. So, no, he doesn't ascribe to the idea that there's some sort of special malice
that leaves eternal blackness upon your soul if you kill someone. But he also knows that it's not easy. Sorting that out, let alone in a way for Abby takes him a few seconds, but eventually he's got words for it. "Okay, look, I'm not JK Rowling, I don't think there's some sort of extra-special ultra-evil that goes with killing people. Sometimes you've got to do it. Some people need to be killed. The Admiral is one of them. But it's still hard, and Jimmy's had enough hard. He doesn't need this on his conscience."

Abby gives him a skeptical look. "You're saving Jimmy from himself?"

Tim shrugs some, winces, and hopes he can count that toward his shoulder exercises for today. "Some. I want to do it. I need to do it. If it saves him some sleepless nights, why not?"

Abby nods, stroking the back of his hand. "Your right and wrong about needing this. Just like me, he needs something to do with his anger, so does Gibbs, and training for it is good. So, don't take that away, not yet. I mean, he's flat out said he's cool with you killing John if that's your preference, so he doesn't need it like that, but…"

Tim nods. He completely gets that. "I don't need him to stop practicing. It's a good skill to have. Maybe we can both set up for it. See who's got the better shot when the time comes. Or both shoot. That'd screw with the investigation, double-teamed by snipers. Get in and out completely clean, two angles, two trajectories, two shooters, do it right and they'd never know which bullet was the kill shot."

"You've got the plot for your next Tibbs novel, don't you?"

He smiles a little at that. "I might have to write that down. Except, I can't publish it if I use it."

"Good point. Better point, don't write it down."

Tim nods. Last thing he needs is someone subpoenaing his notes and finding his kill scene set up. Kelly's really starting to wake up, trying to squirm away from him, wanting to work on her crawling. Abby sees it, and says to their daughter, "Okay, let's get you onto the floor." She takes Kelly from Tim, and he stands up, grabbing for the crutch, getting ready to head downstairs. "Talk about bizarre conversations to have in front of our child."

Tim nods. "Once she can repeat what she hears, conversations like that, and probably a bunch of the work ones are going to be signed."

"Yeah. Though, with any luck, this is the last topic where we don't want the kids repeating what they hear."

Tim sniggers at that, looking Abby up and down, absolutely certain he is going to say things to her about what he wants to do with her in the future that might possibly make them blush should they be repeated to the neighbors or the other pre-school moms.

"Okay, conversations we can't have them repeating, as opposed to it'd be embarrassing."

He nods at that, and they begin the trek downstairs.

They have two hours before getting dinner ready. Nice afternoon like today and normally they'd strap Kelly into the snugli or stroller go for a walk or something.

Obviously, that's out. At least, assuming they want to get further than the end of the driveway in less
than half an hour.

Abby puts Kelly on the floor, and stacks a bunch of her toys around. Some are in reach, some require her to get those little legs moving and crawl toward. They'll see if she can get to them. She pulls the coffee table over, too. Kelly's not crawling, but she does like to stand up, grab something, and lift her legs up like she's about to take a step. Hasn't mastered it yet, but she's trying.

"Think she's going to skip crawling and go straight to walking?" he asks Abby as she sits next to him on the sofa, and Kelly starts to eyeball the coffee table.

"That'd be our kid. 'Gotta crawl before you walk.' Oh no. Not for Kelly McGee."

She looks at them as she hears her name, watches for a second, sees that nothing interesting is going on, and goes back to trying to get up to grab the coffee table.

Abby kisses Tim and heads off for a moment. Then she's back, flicking on the TV and the PlayStation. Call of Duty comes up, and she's got a controller.

He's looking pouty. Yeah, sometimes he likes to watch her game, but not right now, not when all he can do is watch. "I can't game."

"You can't shoot. But you can be a spotter for me." She grins, handing him a laser pointer. "Killing everything that moved last night was a good thing. Do it with me?"

He nods and clicks on the pointer. Snipers have spotters. Might be good to work on that skill, too. Especially if it turns out that Jimmy's actually better with a rifle than he is. "So, what?"

"Point out what I need to be shooting at next."

"Okay."

Abby tells him about doing this with Tony last night. Tim keeps his eyes moving across the screen, flicking the pointer at targets, enjoying seeing Abby blow them away. It helps. Tim's pleased that Tony thought of this, because, sure he can't fight in the game, but as you get into it, it does bring up your adrenaline and fight or flight chemicals in a way just writing doesn't, and getting to shoot things, clear the board, kill the bad guys, helps banish some of that need to fight sensation.

No, it's not as good as going to Bootcamp, but he's got nothing in the way of options for that for probably months, so he'll take what he can get.

"So, was Jimmy here when you got home?" Tim asks as Abby comes into the kitchen with the delivery Chinese they're having for dinner.

"Yeah." She's grinning again. "That was really cute."

Tim's eyebrows go up. "Cute how?"

"He fell asleep, too, and was laying there, bed hogging away, taking up like three quarters of the mattress. Breena talks about that; how it doesn't matter how big the bed is, he just expands to take over all of it. He was cupping the back of your neck. I got pictures if you want to see."

Tim shakes his head. "I'm good."

"It's really cute."
"And I'm sure Breena appreciates the fact you got pictures." He wrestles the box of chicken and broccoli open one-handed, and then gives it to Abby, who spoons it out while he starts on the mixed veggies.

Abby laughs at that. "Why are you asking?"

He closes his eyes and opens them and she can feel *I think this is kind of dumb, but it's real, so I'll tell you about it* radiating off of him. "I fell asleep with one person and woke up with another. Literally. That was just weird."

"Did you think Jimmy was snuggling you and freak out?"

"I did not freak out," he says, defensively.

She stares at him.

"I was a bit concerned that may have been happening. I did not freak out."

"Uh huh." She takes the mixed veggies from him, and adds them to each plate, too, and he starts on the sweet and sour shrimp.

"Swimp!" Kelly loves the sweet and sour shrimp and knows them by sight and smell.

"Of course Mama got you shrimp. And look!" Abby grabs the bag with the spring rolls and pulls one out.

"Wowls!" Kelly loves spring rolls even more than sweet and sour shrimp. Her little hands are reaching out, tiny fingers extended. Abby hands over a spring roll and a huge smile spreads across Kelly's face as she snatches it close and starts to gnaw on the end.

"That sounded like it had some l sound in it," Tim says. "Good job, Kelly. Rolls." He pronounces the word carefully. But by that point Kelly was eating the roll and had no interest in talking about it.

"So what does concerned mean?" Abby asks.

"Mostly that I wasn't wearing pants and didn't necessarily want him rubbing against my ass."

Abby sniggers a bit at that. "Necessarily?"

Tim's got an expression on his face that Abby considers the physical equivalent of "Eh."

"Wouldn't have been terrible or anything. More comfortable than waking up with Diane, which I did freak out about, but getting spooned by Jimmy isn't exactly on my bucket list, you know?"

"He's good at it."

"I'm sure he is." Tim's about to say something like *I don't need him humping my ass* when it hits him that, not only was no one suggesting that, it also wasn't even being hinted at, and, in fact, if the body he woke up against had been Jimmy, and not Abby, all that was happening was cuddling, there was no rubbing or humping or anything else involving his ass going on. So whatever's causing this is coming from him, but not from whatever happened or may happen with Jimmy.

Since it's not actually a concern that's anything other than in his head, Tim doesn't mention it, and fortunately, Abby's cutting up the shrimp into littler pieces for Kelly, so she doesn't see that pause in Tim's train of thought.
"Still a little startling to fall asleep with one person and wake up with another one. Took way longer to figure out what was going on than it should have."

Abby nods at that. "Yeah, I can see that being disconcerting. So, why was he sleeping with you in the first place?"

Tim sighs. "Both of us being stupid, and the bad consequences thereof…” And he tells her about adventures in Autopsy, and why it's a bad idea to get x-rays there if you don't have to.

Abby winces along at his story, but she's pleased to see that as he's telling it, he's got some distance between now and what happened.

Of course, having Kelly up and active and constantly breaking into the conversation to make little statements like "Mowr swimp!” does wonders for keeping you pinned into the present.

Clean up for anal, is, by its very nature, messy. No two ways about it. There's no refined or dainty way to take care of that chore.

Or, put more concisely, Tim is well aware of the fact that his shit does indeed smell.

That's the majority of why Tim doesn't like having an audience for it. After all, it's not like he and Abby are still in that relationship phase where they're under the impression that the other one doesn't have biological functions. Hell, they're long past the phase of being embarrassed about it, too. Still, there's a difference between debating buying a dog so you can pretend all nasty smells come from it, and wanting to show off exactly how long and loud you can fart.

Not wanting an audience doesn't mean he doesn't like what he gets out of it, though. He likes that just fine. Just some things Abby doesn't need to see him do.

So, even though it's messy, and a bit on the uncomfortable side… Okay, fuck, a lot on the uncomfortable side. In fact, way more on the uncomfortable side than an enema's ever been.

Tim takes a moment to try and figure out what's going on here. He's gotten through step one: get naked, with minimal issues, and had moved to step two: enema, (traditionally followed by step three: wash off thoroughly) and stopped dead because this does not feel the way he expects it to feel. He doesn't think he sustained anything that would be an injury to his anus. He knows they got him in the balls and thighs and, no… he's poking himself gently, and that doesn't hurt, so no way he's got a chipped tailbone, and all the other bruises are cleared up, so even if he got bruised up, they'd be healed by now.

All systems have been functioning normally since he started eating again. If it was an injury, out should have been just as uncomfortable as in…

So, what the hell is going on? He's on medication that relaxes muscles. This should be easier than it's ever been, not harder. First time he did this, when he didn't have a clue, this part wasn't this difficult. The little tube bit's smaller than a pencil and lubricated; anyone can take this. Something is really wrong.

He puts everything aside and hunts down one of Abby's compacts. Blush with a mirror will do the job. He checks himself, definitely not injured. Everything looks (as well as he knows, not like he's spent long gazing at his own ass) normal.

He's snapping shut the compact when what the problem is finally decides to go wandering out of his subconscious and hit his functional mind, and why he's been edgy about Jimmy getting too close to
his rear is also bugging him.

This… anal sex on the receiving side... was part of the Admiral's torture plans. This was a huge part of the 'fate worse than death' scenario he used to terrify Tim. His body is scared. It doesn't want to get anything anywhere near his anus. It's fighting.

"No." It comes out low and savage. "No!" The Admiral does not get to touch this. He's stolen weeks of Tim's life, the use of his arm and his leg, weeks of his job, the ability to pick up his little girl and make love to his wife however he likes. His bloody fingerprints are all over Tim's life and body. Not this, too. *This* he doesn't get to touch.

Tim grabs the enema, bears down hard, gives it a shove, and takes care of business.

And yes, it burns, and hurts, but he's not going to let The Admiral win. Not on this.

---

Abby knows something is wrong by about two seconds after she's walked into the room.

Tim's naked and in bed. That's a good sign. He's not looking happy. Not a good sign. He's also so tense she can see it from the other side of the room.

Obviously something happened between now and dinner, but she's got no clue what it might be. She heads over to their bed, sits next to him, and says, "So… we get bad news?"

"Huh?" He looks surprised, but still tense and angry, so whatever it is isn't coming from the outside world.

"You're so angry and tense I could see it from the doorway."

"I'm fine."

She nods slowly, and gets up to brush her teeth. After a few seconds, he grabs his crutch and follows her into the bathroom.

"You're just going to let it go?"

"If it's so touchy you're going to lie about it, I'll let it be."

"Thanks." He sighs. He knows better than to try to lie about stuff like this to her. At least she's not pissed about it.

"But I don't want to. And I don't think much of anything else is happening until we talk."

His shoulder slumps and he leans harder into the crutch. "Don't want to talk. Don't want to think about it. Just want to be done."

Abby smiles gently. "I want that, too. But it doesn't work that way."

He licks his lips and is looking at the wall behind her. "Every minute I spend on this is another minute he's stolen from me."

Abby's eyebrow rises and she puts the toothbrush down. "Tim?"

"I'm here fucking with all of this shit, which means I'm not living my life, being me, enjoying my loves and doing the things I meant to be doing. All of this is time he's stolen. I don't get it back. I'm stuck dealing with all this crap instead of moving on."
"You deal with it, and take the time, because otherwise it comes back to bite you later. Neither of us want to be dealing with this when we're in our fifties."

That's true but doesn't help. "That doesn't make it any better! It's still things I want to do, gone. It's my physical body, weeks of my life, my… gone. So, I don't want to talk about it, and I don't want to waste time on this, and…"

Abby knows something hit a red hot nerve on him, and she's starting to get an idea of what, because she knows what he was supposed to be doing, and she remembers what he said about sexuality abuse, and she knows the 'fate worse than death' scenario, and she's not stupid, so she's got a clue, but she doesn't know how to salvage tonight or make this any better without talking about it.

She picks her toothbrush back up, and starts on her teeth again.

"I don't know what that means," he says, unsure what she's doing. He expects some sort of, 'we've got to keep talking' sort of response, but she's not saying anything.

"I don't, either. Just… let's get done, and go to bed, and maybe we'll talk, but not about whatever this is." Not directly, she thinks. She's starting to get a plan together. "Or maybe we won't. But we'll touch and be with each other."

"Okay." He steps closer and kisses her shoulder. She can still feel how tense and defensive he's feeling, but there's also some relief because she's backed off a bit from the main issue.

They head into the bedroom, and she sees he's got the butterfly, the strap on, lube, and the dilators out, as well as towels on the bed. He did get everything set for tonight.

"I want you sitting on the bed."

Tim nods and settles himself on the bed.

Abby heads over to their toy box and takes one other thing out of it, his collar. He can't kneel with his foot in the cast. It still doesn't want to extend that far, and she doesn't want him putting that sort of weight on it, and, of course, he can't clasp his hands behind his back. But he's still hers, and that's not ever changing. Time to remind his body of it.

"Head down."

He bows his head. They don't do this a lot. Not this level of subbing. Usually it's a game. Usually it's her setting the rules for the night and him living up to it or vice versa. But there's another level of it, one she thinks he'll respond well to. The part they usually don't play is opening the sub up, breaking down his walls, taking him out of his head, and making sure that he knows he is utterly owned, completely protected, cherished, and totally safe.

Tonight she's doing that. She fastens the collar around his neck and sees some of the tension bleed off of him. He wants to play tonight, wants to forget, and that collar means playing.

She glances at the dilators and notices the smallest one is missing. "You wearing one?"

He nods.

"Take it out."

Tim does, shifting around a bit, slipping it out, and holding it. He knows how this game works, and
above and beyond anything else, when he subs, he is a very good sub. He hasn't been told what to do with the dilator beyond take it out, so he just holds it.

Abby takes it from him, places it next to the others, and then cups his chin, lifting his face so he's looking her in the eyes. "My fingers, my hands, my body. You're mine, and it'll be me, not some cold piece of glass, that gets you ready."

Tim nods at that, holding her gaze.

Abby kisses him, and then asks, pulling back, "You remember the first time we did this?"

Tim nods as she sits behind him on the bed.

"Tell me about it. Tell me how it felt to you."

Tim thinks for a second. "First time I did it to myself for you to watch, or the first time you did it to me?"

Good point, they do have two first times for this. Abby pets along his back and down his sides, feeling the tension in his hips, thighs, glutes. She knows this isn't going anywhere anytime soon; they've got time for lots of stories. "Both. Start with the first time you showed me."

She's watching in the mirror and sees he's closed his eyes, bringing the memory, the images and sensations to mind. She keeps petting him, hands gentle, stroking over his hips and thighs, stomach and chest. She's not touching his butt. (Yes, he's sitting on most of it, but the top bit would be in easy reach.) It's hitting her that reclaiming him is probably going to be a job with layers. Probably going to happen again and again. Time will shift, things will happen, memories and images will come back, and he'll move back to hurting, back to scared.

And it's his job to pull himself out, because it won't work if anyone else tries. It's her job to help him get himself out. Her job to keep his conscious mind aware of their home and his safety. He's got to run the race, but she can keep cheering and be the reward at the end.

He takes a quick breath and says, "It was a Sunday. After Jimmy and Breena's wedding, before we were out in the open. Long week, two cases back to back, and we got back to my place late on Friday and pretty much slept straight through Saturday."

She strokes his hair, gently rubbing the back of his neck. "You made me French toast."

He nods, remembering that, snorts a little. "Barely ever cooked then. Had the stove too hot and the outside scorched and the inside was still wet."

"Yeah." She kisses his shoulder. Still moving her hands slow and gentle. "Still tasted good."

"Stick enough bacon on it, and everything tastes good." That was his special breakfast treat for himself back then. Usually he'd order it out, and then put it together himself once it showed up. But they were tired, didn't much feel like getting dressed or going out. He had eggs, milk, bread, bacon, and sugar. He figured he could make it himself. "Used to get that when we'd go out for breakfast."

"I remember that. French toast and bacon sandwich. Easier to eat." She'd asked about it the first time she saw him do it, years and years ago, first time they were dating.

He nods. "Flip the sides with the powdered sugar into the insides, pile on the bacon, pour the syrup over top, next piece of toast on top, and eat."
"Tomorrow morning, you tell Elaine about that, and I bet she'll make it for you."

"Yeah, she would." He doesn't mention that he's not sure he wants to eat it. Yes, he wants it. But he's not getting any exercise and piles of carbs, no matter how yummy, isn't a good plan right now. He hasn't had that breakfast in years now. Maybe when he can actually work out again…

"Tim, what happened after breakfast?" Abby gets him back on track. She knows talking about the food is part of getting him settled and comfy, but she doesn't want him stalling here forever.

"Mmmm…” Verbal placeholder, letting her know he's thinking. "TV. Then we got a nap?"

"Yeah. Lazy day." She doesn't say more, just keeps up the gentle petting.

"Woke up with you pressed up tight to me. Liked that, a lot." He squeezes her hand. "Still do. Always will."

Abby kisses the back of his neck, just above his collar.

"I was kissing your neck and shoulder, rubbing against you. You woke up with a smile, rubbing back against me. We still wore pajamas then, and you had on those fleece drawstring pants. I remember the way they felt, soft and fuzzy against my hand when I slid it under them. You arched into my hand, rubbing your butt against my dick."

"Mmmm…” Abby murmurs, remembering that sensation, just waking up, horny Tim wrapped tight around her, finger slipping between her lips.

"You woke up a little more, and then asked if I was thinking of this as snack sex or if this was the main course for the day. Then we got into a conversation about what snack sex was."

She can feel some of the tension sliding away from him, so on the next stroke over his hips, her fingertips graze the side of his butt, and he doesn't seem to notice.

"We decided this was main course sex. And by then you had rolled over and out of those pants, and I wasn't wearing my t-shirt anymore, but I still had my boxers on. Then you sat up, and straddled me, holding my hands to the bed, and you kissed me on the tip of the nose, and I could feel you warm and wet through my boxers, and I could see you had something in mind, wanted to play, so I grinned up at you, and you grinned back, and said to me, 'I know you've got some toys, so let's play with them.'"

Abby can hear the pleasure in his voice at that memory, and she smiles, too.

"How did that feel?" She tugs very gently on his collar, reminding him of the instructions she's given him. They're not just reminiscing. She's taking him back to when this was just about safe and love and playing and pleasure.

"Um…” He's thinking about that. "Good. Liked the idea of playing with the toys. Little nervous, wondering if you'd be cool with what I had. Little unsure, kind of playing with the idea of not showing you all of them. Horny. Thinking that I'd get to tie you up. Then even more turned on, maybe you'd tie me up.

"I got up and grabbed the box, and I remember you looking surprised that I had them there."

"Didn't think you'd have them on your dresser, where Tony might just walk on in and rifle through them. Or Sarah. Didn't notice the special catch on the bottom until you showed me."
"Yep." They don't use that toy box anymore, too small. It just looked like a nice wood box on his dresser. Hinges on the back of the lid, little lock looking thing on the front. Tiny little catch on the underside popped the lid and showed that the hinges and lock were just for show and the top lifted off. "I took it to bed, showed you how to open it, and held my breath while you rifled through. You approved of the ropes, scarves, and the cock ring, giggled at the fleshlight, didn't much like my choice of lube, and then saw the butt plug, picked it up, looked at me and said, 'You like this?' like you'd never even dreamed I might go for that."

"I thought I'd get you there eventually. Didn't think you'd gotten there on your own. How did that feel?"

"Weird. Relieved because you didn't think it was gross. Little apprehensive because your next question was, 'Are you bi?' but you believed me when I said no, and you held it in your hand, sort of weighing it, playing with the base, and then said, 'You've got to show me what you do with this.' And that felt good because you were really cool with it. And again, a little nervous and apprehensive and really turned on."

"Worried about letting me see?"

"Yeah. Never had someone watch me do that before. Never had someone watch me jerk-off period before that. Wanted you to, but I was kind of afraid you'd laugh or freak out or… or whatever."

She's still stroking him, but a firmer touch now, focusing more on his low back and hips, still grazing his butt from time to time.

"I think I said something like, 'Right now?' when you said I had to show you what I did with it. You asked if I had what I needed to use it, which was also good, because that meant you knew how it worked, and that it wasn't the sort of thing you just did with no prep. I think I blushed a little, but said yes, and you said, 'Well, get to it. I'll order some food for dinner. Couple hours from now, we'll be tired and hungry and the magic food fairy will come and bring us sushi.'" She giggles a little at that, not having remembered that part, but it seems in character.

"I was nervous about cleaning up. Wanted to do it fast. Wanted to get really clean. I was way more turned on than I usually was when I did that, so I was playing with myself a bit more than I usually do when I clean up."

"You play with yourself when you do that?" She didn't know that about him.

"Usually. Not always. But if we're having sex right after clean up, yeah." He stops there. "Didn't do it tonight. Need two hands for that."

Abby nods against his shoulder. Probably didn't hit his front brain, but just another reason why his body knew things weren't right.

"Got cleaned up, feeling… really sexy and really nervous."

"I remember how hard you were when you got out of the bathroom, and your skin was already starting to pink up."

"Yeah. I think I just stood there for a few seconds, watching you, and you were watching me, and I finally said, 'So, you just want to watch?' You grinned at me. 'That's where I'm going to start. Might touch later. Right now, I want to see what you do with it.'" Tim laughs quickly, remembering the next bit. "I picked it up and rubbed my shoulder with it, said how good it was for getting the knots out, and you pouted and slapped me in the chest."
Abby laughs at that, too, her hand straying from its soothing mission to see how the story's effecting his dick. Good memories are helping, he's half-hard, and she gives him a few gentle strokes to add to it.

He smiles at her touch, enjoying that. "I grabbed the fleshlight and you looked like I'd given you a bait and switch, and I remember feeling a little sheepish, but saying that I liked some distraction while I got the plug set. You said you'd handle it, looked me dead in the eyes, and licked your lips."

She smiles at that, too.

"Then you said something about how that'd give you a pretty good view, and I think I blushed because I hadn't realized you were going to be watching that closely."

"What did you think I was going to do?"

"I didn't know. Didn't expect you'd have your face four inches away from the action. I just about jumped back into the bathroom to clean up again."

She laughs at little at that. "Didn't realize you were that nervous."

He shrugs again, and she kisses his shoulders, hands on each hip, fingers rippling against the sides of his glutes.

"I'd been planning on kneeling on the bed, because that was how I usually did it, but then all you'd have was a view of was my pubic bone, so I laid down on my side."

She breaks in, shifting back from him. "Want you to do that."

So he does, but he can't lie on his right, the way he did the first time. "Wrong side."

"I remember. But this will work. Touch yourself, slow and easy. Don't want you getting off, yet." She cuddles up close to his back, spooning him, still stroking his hips and thighs. He begins a long, slow stroke, up and down his dick. She sees him doing it, and then stops cuddling him to reach back and grab the lube off the bedside table. He knows what she's doing and holds out his hand to take the drizzle of it and warm it before stroking it over himself. "Good?" she asks as she snugs up again, and goes back to stroking his hips and low back, slowly inching toward his butt.

He nods at that while taking himself back to the memory. "You took the pillows, put them under your head and shoulder, then slid my balls down, so they weren't blocking your view, and began to suck on just the tip of my dick."

"I remember. Feel good?"

"God, yeah. Felt great! I was well and truly distracted."

She smiles. "That wasn't the only thing distracting you."

"No. Your pussy, right in my face. Wet and smelling so good. I started kissing you. He's rubbing the tip of his dick the same way she was sucking him, or as close as he can get with a hand. "Took me a few seconds to remember what we were doing. I got the lube and slicked up my fingers, got started, just shoving it in. Hadn't really figured out the 'in' part of it yet. I liked how it felt once it was in place, but tended to see getting it there as something to just get through. Got the finger in, and just waited to sort of relax around it, until it stopped hurting."

"You were rushing."
"Yeah, too excited to go slow. Granted, never really bothered much with slow at that point. And like I said, I was really distracted."

"How'd it feel?"

"Hurt. It always hurt back then. Okay, not always, sometimes it was just sort of there, but getting ready wasn't the good part. Not until after our honeymoon was getting ready the good part."

She smiles at that. If they take this slow enough, they'll get there, too. She hadn't figured out until after she was the one on the catching side of anal what level of ouch Tim might have been going through to get to his prostate. Because she knew how careful he was with her, and she knew how that felt, and she knew how careful they were with him, and she could guess how that felt. And, until she was on the receiving side, he hadn't bothered to do the research to see if there was a way to do it that was more comfortable. He was willing to take that level of pain for that level of good orgasm. He wasn't willing to put her through it.

Once she had a better idea of how that worked, she started taking more care with him, and by their honeymoon she had a plan that really worked, that had him all but begging through the getting ready part. By the time he finally got talking about The Admiral, and, as she thinks of it, 'stopped guarding the area so intensely,' things got a whole lot easier, and it stopped taking so much slow and gentle prep to get him ready.

They're back to square two. At least they know what to do. She kisses his neck. "It's all supposed to be good."

He lets go of himself and squeezes the hand that's rubbing his hip, digging into tight muscles, trying to relax him. "It is."

"What happened next?"

"Sliding it in and out some, trying to stretch muscles that were pretty firmly convinced that closed tight was the right idea. Stuck between sore, burn, feeling like I was going to come any second, kind of embarrassed to have you watching me that close, kind of thrilled to have you watching me that close, never been that naked before, and you kept making those little happy noises each time I'd move, and the idea that this was turning you on, 'cause I could taste and feel how wet you were, all of it was blowing my mind.

"Pain helped with control. Toned down the need to come. Usually did two fingers to stretch but I didn't think I'd last that long. I grabbed for the plug way too soon, and decided if I just went really slow it'd be okay, and… It was, sort of. Hurt, more than I was expecting, but it did walk me back from the edge, and you moaned as I slid it in, easing your mouth all the way down my dick the same speed I was slipping it in and my brain melted.

"Once it's in, it's all good. The handle is small, no problem, and then there's just that sensation of fullness, and how it'd rub against my prostate and… fuck. You pulled your mouth off, and I wasn't on board with that plan, and then you rolled away, and I think I pouted at that, but you just sat there on your knees, looking at me, and said, 'So…'"

Abby begins to really stroke his butt, touching all of it, with her whole hand, palm cupping, squeezing gently, working tight muscles. It's sensual, but not sexual; she's staying away from the cleft and focusing on tense muscles.

"And, of course, I'd never played with it with another person around, so, no idea what all it could really do with a partner. I think I blushed a little, but I headed over to my arm chair and straddled the
arm, and you looked surprised at that."

"I was. Didn't think that's what you'd do with it."

"It worked. You were wondering why I'd done that, so I told you how if I straddled the arm, I could rock back and forth a bit, and that kept the plug pulsing over my prostate and left both hands free for whatever else I might want to do."

"And I asked what else you usually did with them."

"And I looked at the remote for my tv and the Fleshlight and you decided that you might want to see what I did with it, but that'd be kind of boring." Using his hands is a lot more visually interesting than the Fleshlight. The Fleshlight feels better, more real, warm it up, put on a condom, and close his eyes, and by feel alone, Tim can't tell the difference between it and a real woman. (Without a condom, it's distinctly different. Which is why he usually used a condom with it. After all, at that point he'd never had sex without one, and it made clean up a hell of a lot easier, so, why not?)

"Did that bother you?"

"Uh… no!" Even lying on his side, he can see her in the mirrors, and he flashes her his are you kidding me look. "Have sex with you? Have sex with whatever the hell that's made of? You win. Made me really happy when you grabbed a condom, put it on me, and then wrapped your legs around my hips and slid onto me. For a few seconds, I was a little afraid the chair was going to topple over, but it didn't, and it turned out that rocking back and forth was good, thrusting was better —"

"How? What was different about it? How did it feel?"

He swallows and thinks, trying to translate those sensations into words, trying to sort them out. "Okay, you clench your ass and it presses really nicely. Some guys can get off from just that, I'm not one of them. Rocking back and forth, that's better. It's got that handle so it doesn't get lost inside you, and that's not just so it's easy to get a hold of with lubed hands. The curved bit can get your prostate from the outside, pressure on the perineum, and of course, the plug gets it from the inside. So, if I was rocking back and forth, when I'd rock forward the plug would move back and the handle would press from the outside, rock back and the handle backs off the plug presses from the inside. And… it feels like cumming. Each press feels like the pulsing part of getting off. That and a Fleshlight is really nice. That and you, rocking back and forth… and to thrust I've got to tense back and hips and butt which shifts everything around even more, and that's amazing. More tension, more build, more sensation… I came so hard I thought I was going to pass out."

"Came hard enough I could feel it even with you wearing a condom. Don't think that ever happened again."

"Didn't use condoms all that much longer. But, yeah, play with the prostate, produce more fluid, and I end up giving myself a facial, and you giggle about it."

Abby does giggle about that, and it segues nicely into the next bit. "Tell me about the first time I did it to you." She adds some lube to her own hand, and begins to stroke it over the cleft of his ass, not between yet, just getting the edges. She feels him tense a little, and then force it down, breathe deep, and make himself relax.

She hates that moment of tension, that second where his body's not happy, and retreats back to his buttocks. She's not rushing this, at all. He's her man, and he's here in their home, their bed, and if she's got to spend all night and tomorrow night and the next and as long as it takes to convince his
body of that, she'll do it.

She bites gently on his collar, pulling it tight for a second, and letting go. "First time I did you."

He smiles at her, presses back against her, and does wiggle his ass against her, which she appreciates. "First time you nailed my ass."

She kisses his ear, sucking the lobe, and pulling off with a soft pop. "When I popped your cherry."

"Does it count as cherry-popping when I'd already done it myself?"

"You got yourself off, what, a million times before you had sex?"

"In just the month before alone."

She laughs at that, too. "Yeah, you've got to do it with someone else for it to count."

"It was the next weekend or the one after. Before Christmas, I know that because we still weren't out yet, and after Tony caught us, I told us he'd wet his pants if he ever walked in on us when we really got going, and the image I had in my head when I said that was you doing me."

She licks his neck, stroking both hands, now very slick, over his hips and glutes, long, deep slide. He moans at that, and she jerks back afraid she's pressed too hard on a sore spot or nicked a broken rib, but he pushes back, letting her know that it feels good, not that she was doing it too hard. She repeats the stroke and says, "Bent over on my bed, that gorgeous ass of yours in the air, hands tied in front of you to the headboard, whimpering as I thrust."

"Exactly." His eyes close, and she knows he's feeling it again, and his ass does press back against her again, and she goes back to kneading it. "Night time. We're tired, another long week. We're having a very late dinner, and you said not much was going to be happening that night, but in the morning you had some surprises for me. I asked what they were, and you told me they wouldn't be surprises if you told, and not to even try peeking because you'd know if I looked ahead of time."

"And did you peek?"

"Thought you said you'd know," his voice is sassy as he says that.

"I may have been bluffing," she says, nipping his shoulder.

"No. I couldn't find them while you brushed your teeth and was too tired to really look."

She smirks at that. "What were they?"

He stops jerking himself to touch the collar. "This is one of them. The other was the strap-on. We hadn't been through your toys at that point. Did you already have it, or did you get it for me?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yeah." She can feel that's real. He's comfortable enough right now, in her and her devotion to him that her past, unlike his own, isn't going to intrude unwelcomely here.

"It pre-dates you."

"Use it on another guy?"

"Nope. Always hoped to, never found anyone else who was game. Most guys act like you've
mortally insulted them if you even suggest it."

Tim smiles at that. He's spent more than enough time hearing other guys going on and on about trying to get their wives/girlfriends to let them have anal sex, but they're never talking about being on the receiving end of it. Then he's feeling really turned on, because if she never used the strap-on with another guy, that means it got used with girls and he's all over that. He moans quietly at that image.

"You like that, do you?"

"Yeah. A lot."

She kisses his shoulder. "Be good and maybe one day I'll let you watch me do Breena with it."

He moans at that idea. And she gently nips his shoulder reminding him what "good" means for right now.

"Late morning. We'd slept in, eaten something, and I was being a little bit bratty because I didn't want to wait to see what you'd gotten me, but you said we had to eat first, and you used that voice that let me know you were in charge, so I got into it as a game and let you Domme me through breakfast. You kept grinning at that, really enjoying it." They'd played like that before, but not a whole lot. Probably the second time she'd run the game, and he'd done it once. "Then we finished and you took me back to bed, told me to kneel on it, bow my head, and close my eyes, and I did, feeling very excited wondering what the surprise was going to be. I heard you opening drawers, and the sound of clothing rustling. That apartment had hardwood floors, and I remember the sound of two long zippers zipping, then boots on wood, more rustling, the sound of leather moving through buckles, and then you said look up, so I did, and you were standing in front of me in knee high boots, the strap on, black gloves, a black collar, and holding another collar in your hand, offering it to me. You didn't say anything, because that wasn't part of the game, that was outside the game, setting play but not part of it, and I remember my mouth went dry because that was almost too much at once, and I stood up, and took the collar from you, kissed you, and then gave it back and bowed my head."

"I buckled it on you, and told you I loved you, and that I wanted to make you feel so good if you'd let me."

"I remember." He sighs and shivers a bit. "I remember how that felt, too. So good. Home. Felt like home's supposed to feel. Then you patted me on the butt, told me to get cleaned up and be out on the bed in ten minutes."

"Spent all night waiting and dreaming, I was getting impatient."

"I know. I think I was done in seven, and then stood there waiting by the bathroom door for the final three so I'd hit the bed at exactly ten minutes."

"You always are good about that."

"I try to be." He thinks for a moment. "You asked me what my safeword was, which made all my blood go rushing to my dick and made me worry a little, too. Really turned on, little nervous. We'd already set the hard rules, no pain, no humiliation, but never played hard enough to have safewords, and I was a little worried about where you were going to go."

"Really excited by it, too, right?"

"Yeah. Like creeping up to the top of the rollercoaster. Or, I guess that's how it feels to people who like rollercoasters." Tim doesn't. "I know we messed around some, but I don't really remember it.
Just remember the anticipation. My next clear memory is you telling me to get on the bed, kneel, and then tying my hands to the headboard."

"I asked how you wanted it. You picked elbows and knees."

Tim shrugs. He certainly may have, but he doesn't remember that part. He does remember, very clearly, what came next. "On all fours, knees and elbows, Ass in the air, legs wide, hands tied to each other and the base of the headboard over my head, never, ever been that naked or open or vulnerable. Felt crazy, so turned on, so nervous, almost safeworded because I could see in my mind what I looked like from your point of view and that was kind of uncomfortable." Tim has always thought he's got a fairly nice butt, and Ziva's four out of five (even if he did probably get a point just to annoy Tony) helped to boost his ego on that, still, there's fills out a pair of pants nicely, which is one thing, and naked, spread wide, everything on display, and wondering exactly how fuzzy you really are back there and if your asshole looks as dumb as you think it does, which is something else all-together.

"Delicious. You looked delicious from my point of view. I was so wet the harness was soaked, and my mouth had gone dry, and you were all spread out for me, tied down, opening yourself to anything I might want to do, and that felt amazing."

He nods. "Liked that. Being able to relax into it. I felt the shift in my mind, you were walking around the bed, looking, and I was getting more tense about it, and then I just… surrendered, that moment where I knew I was out of control and that it wasn't up to me anymore and nervous bled off because you were running things and you'd take care of me. I relaxed my head, resting it on my forearms, and felt the mattress shift as you got up behind me, and your fingers trailed up my leg. You were still wearing the gloves, and I remember the feel of silk over your fingers slowly dragging up my calf."

She can't reach his calf from where she is, but she can trail her hand up the back of his thigh, and she does.

He smiles.

"You kissed the back of my knee, which I wasn't expecting."

"What were you expecting?"

"I don't remember. Just the sensation of anticipation and the feeling of, 'Oh, that's nice.'"

"Only nice?"

"Yeah. It was a nice kiss, but I've got places that rev me up a lot more than the backs of my knees."

Her hand snakes to the front of him and she gives his dick a long, gentle pull. "Like that."

"Oh, yeah." He swallows as her hand goes back to his butt, still kneading his glutes. Speaking of nice… He can feel his hips starting to relax, feel himself shifting into sub mode, letting her take over, putting himself into her hands. "You kissed up the back of my leg, biting a little, and then patted the inside of my knee, letting me know to spread my legs wider, God, I was so hard then, shifting stance, expecting to feel your hands or the dildo or lube, but you didn't do that, you sucked my balls, each one, and I shuddered all over because that feels amazing, and then you licked from the back of them to my tailbone, and I think I just about jumped off the bed I jerked so hard at that, because I really didn't expect it and it was one of those things I'd read about but didn't know anyone ever did."

"You made this really adorable startled sound, and then on the second lick started to groan."
"It felt amazing. It's just… God. Hot and wet and squirmy, but in a really good way, and everything there is so sensitive, and fuck, that position, so open, so on display, the whole thing was just so damn taboo, just… wicked. Dark and dirty and wrong and it felt…" He shakes his head. "No words. Felt… Felt like all those fantasies you're ashamed of all coming true at once with someone who loves them, too."

She stops stroking his butt and hugs him as tight as she can without hurting him. Then she shifts up, reaches over, and kisses him on the lips. They smile at each other for a heartbeat, and she goes back to lying behind him. This time she starts to rub gently over the cleft of his butt, and he doesn't flinch or tense. She stays with a gentle up and down, just touching all of him, stroking between his glutes, very light pressure.

He makes a pleased sound and wriggles in a happy sort of way.

"Good, Tim, good," she coos at him. "Keep relaxing into me, baby."

He purrs a little.

"I didn't just lick you that night, did I?"

"No. Though I would have thought I died and went to heaven if that's all you had done."

"What happened next?"

"God, I was rocking into you, and you were tonguing me all over, and eventually you pulled back, and I whimpered and pouted—"

"Cursed like a pissed off sailor."

Tim raises an eyebrow at that. He doesn't remember it that way. Abby grins at him in the mirror. "'Goddamn it to hell woman, get back there and fuck me with your tongue!'"

Tim laughs. "I said that?"

"Yeah. And I gave you a quick slap on the ass and told you to hush up."

He nods. "That I remember. You came around so I could see you, slowly took the gloves off, and I felt like I was going to die, in a bad way. I was so hard and so turned on and you were messing with your gloves and I did not want to sit there and watch you mess with gloves."

"You were cursing at that, too. Growled a little." She strokes his hair. "But you were good and held position and waited for me."

"I really don't remember that at all. I remember you finally got the gloves off, and reached for the lube, drizzling a lot of it into your palm. And then you were pumping that cock, slipping it through your fist over and over and I almost died, in a good way, watching that, never thought something like that might get to me, but it did. I could feel my pulse in my eyes and ears and dick and felt like I had three extra guys' worth of blood pumping around in me, watching you jerk that cock."

"You tilted my face up, licked your lips, blew me a kiss, and then headed back to my ass, and I was kneeling there, bowstring tight, waiting to feel you touch, not sure what you'd do, and then it was your whole, slick hand sliding over me, rubbing everywhere, stroking my ass and my perineum and balls and dick and if I could have figured out how to thrust my cock and ass at you at the same time I would have."
"Then I felt the mattress shift, and you were kneeling between my legs, sliding the cock between my butt cheeks, over and over." Her fingers start to mimic that motion, slipping over and over, up and down between his cheeks; this time deep enough to touch his asshole and perineum and the back of his balls. Tim's voice stutters at that touch, but he doesn't tense, so she doesn't stop. "It was cool," short, sharp inhale as she nudges his leg so he rests it on her hip, spreading himself a bit, "smooth, slick, uh" another slightly panted exhale as her fingers start to circle his anus, slipping a little further down to press his perineum every few circles, "good. It felt really good. I was rocking against you, wanted more, wanted you fucking me. You were circling my anus with it, just pressing a bit, not in, but on, and then you angled down a little, so it was rubbing my perineum and nudging the back of my balls, and you slipped one finger in." He pauses, waiting for a breath, wondering if she's going to do it in real life, but she doesn't, just keeps up firm, slick circles with the pads of her fingers.

"Burned, less than usual, but the burn and stretch was still there, and you were rubbing me all over, your other hand, and it was wet and slick, stroking my cock, dildo rubbing me. I have no idea what I was doing. Just feeling it, all over. So good and so much pleasure, and more burn and stretch and some sort of twisting, and everything was so slick, fingers, ass, cock, everything slippery and sliding against more slippery. Dull ache, wanted to cum, you weren't quite getting it, but my cock was so hard. Frustrated, almost there but not there. Could see there, couldn't touch it, trying to shift my hips to get you there. Wasn't helping. More burn, too much, long slide, realized that was the dick, felt like it was a yard wide and a mile long, went on forever, but then you hit my prostate on the way in, and I almost lost it. So keyed up and turned on I didn't care how much it hurt as long as you got it again. Rocking back and forth on my hands and knees, fast, dick in your hand, feeling it slide through your fist each time I moved, burning, but every time I slide forward you bump over it, that first few inches of sliding back out gets it again. Trying to get a shallow rhythm, keep you in the right spot, takes a few strokes before you get it, but you do, and then there's just white hot pleasure and burn and full and so, so full, dick leaking, so hard, balls tight and full and falling into a climax that burns and pulses and rips through me. Sky high, purring, twitching, wondering why my face was wet, you cuddling me, giggling when I asked. Thought I might have been crying toward the end, got off so hard. Not being able to stop twitching. Endorphins crashed and you pulled out slow, but it still really hurt, for like, a day, but so worth it. Knew I'd do that again as often as you were willing."

Abby can tell he's slipped full into subspace. He's relaxed, right with her, here, and everything else is gone. She's just starting to edge the tip of her index finger into him, and he's soft and happy in her arms. She wishes she had had a better idea of how that felt to him when she was doing it the first time, but she knows now, and it's different now.

"Tell me about our honeymoon."

"So soft and relaxed. I felt loose and calm all over." Two-hour long four-handed massage will do that. She's thinking that as soon as he's all healed up, they're doing that again. "We were in the hotel with the four post bed, and you wanted me all loose and bendy so you could tie me up and fuck me blind."

"And I did, didn't?"

"God, yes. New tattoos so you couldn't tie my wrist, told me I had to keep my hand on the headboard. You had me laying across the bed, and tied my ankle up high on the post, few pillows under my hip, so my ass was right at your waist level. You went really slow."

"Like I am now?" She's just about one knuckle deep and is very gently twisting her finger around, wiggling it a little, with short, little in out motions.

"Yeah. Blowing or tea-bagging me while you did it. And you were wearing that corset and your breasts were trying to spill out of it, every few strokes you'd sit up some and rub them over my cock."
Love the way that looks. Mouth feels better, but boobs looks amazing."

She smiles and kisses him, easing her finger a bit deeper in. He moans at it.

"So slow. No burn. Little stretch, but not bad. Like holding a pose a bit deeper than is easy. Better lube, really slick, very slippery, no drag." One of the downsides of doing this with a dildo is that what feels really slick from the doing side doesn't necessarily feel as slick from the receiving side. They figured that out the first time they used the lube he got for anal with her on him. It made a huge difference. Basically the water-based stuff got a bit tacky around the same time that Tim was so turned on he couldn't feel the difference anymore. "Took forever doing it. Then you were lubing the dildo up, making sure I was watching, lubing your hands too, and lined up and slide in slow and shallow while fisting the top two inches of my cock."

One finger all the way in, and she spends a few strokes gently rubbing over his prostate, soft, wide circles. A half-whimpered moan slips out of Tim. "That's it baby. Gonna make you feel so good. Love on you all over."

He's quiet, rocking gently against her, lightly, just the tips of his fingers, stroking over his dick. She knows that move, she hasn't told him to stop touching himself, but if he does it any faster or harder, he'll ramp up too fast and get off before she's told him to.

"What did I do next?" She slowly begins working the second finger in, steady, gentle pressure, letting his body open and take it.

His hips are starting to roll against her, encouraging her to get back to playing with his prostate.

"My ankle was tied high. You weren't sure I could keep my leg up that high that long on my own. You stepped close, all the way in, grinding your pelvis against my balls, making the dildo circle. Used a shorter one that night, getting me just right over and over." Tim's not a woman, so as Abby got better at figuring out how to do him, she realized that a dildo for him didn't need to be long or thick. His prostate's slightly smaller than a walnut and only two inches in, and while she can get close, he's still got legs and butt cheeks so there'll be some bits of the dildo outside of him, but still, anything much longer than five inches is just wasted length. She's not doing him any good with a mile long dick. So, after she got more experience with him, she downsized, shorter, less girth. The results have been good.

She's gotten the second finger in, and rubs over his prostate with both of them. He's biting his lip, and his eyes have dropped into that three-quarters closed droop they slip into when they want to shut but they don't want to stop watching.

"You started to thrust, up and in. Getting your knees into it."

She keeps pressing his prostate as he's talking.

"Wouldn't let me touch myself. So hard, and so desperate, and you wouldn't let me come. Cockring. You got that slipped over me. Felt like my dick was the size of a baseball bat, so full. Precum dripping off it. Little puddle on my tummy, and you kept nailing me, over and over, up and in and each stroke another little drip easing down my dick."

She sucks his earlobe, breath warm and moist on his neck, fingers twisting and stroking him. "You loved it, didn't you?"

"Oh, God, fuckyes!"

She slips the pads of both fingers over his prostate, up and down. "You love this, too, don't you?"
He thrusts back against her. "Yes!"

"Want more?"

"Please!" All moan on that word.

Abby starts working her third finger in. "Keep telling me what I did next."

"Uh." He's biting his lip, and she can see what the issue is. He's just barely touching his dick, because she told him to touch himself, but he can't keep doing it and not get off.

"Okay, we're going to shift around some. You stay put for right now, okay?"

He nods, and whimpers a little when her fingers slip out of him. Then she moves so she's standing in front of him, first slipping the butterfly on, and his eyes devour the sight of her making sure it's properly in place, nestled between her lips and right over her clit. Next comes the strap-on. Little short, not very thick, dark purple and sparkly, it doesn't look much like a dick at all, but it does exactly what it's supposed to, and it does it very well. Abby props the pillows up on the side of the bed, then she shifts the supplies over to Tim's night table. She sits up, so she's back against the headboard and pillows, spreads her legs a bit, and then pats her lap. "Straddle my lap. I'm close enough to the side your foot can be off the bed so it doesn't have to flex too far."

Tim scampers into place, and is about to lower himself onto the dildo when Abby shakes her head. She touches her thighs. "Here. You rest right here. Not ready for this," she strokes the dildo, "yet." She hands him the remote on the butterfly. "You get to play, too."

He grins at that, staying steady on her lap, snuggling up to her as close as he can. She's not touching his dick, but it's right next to the dildo, rubbing against it when he shifts. Her arms wrap around him, one on his waist below his arm, mostly just hugging, the other one snakes around his left glute to get back to what she was doing. She starts again with one finger, and then quickly two, she takes a moment easing into three, because they hadn't been there long, but he's rocking on her lap, bent over enough for them to kiss easily.

"Good?"

He moans.

"Talk to me, Tim. Feel good? Arm and foot are okay?"

"Yes."

"Back okay?" Two of the broken ribs are on his back, and he's a little hunched to get his lips to hers without his arm flush against her.

"I'm good, really good." He turns on the butterfly, and Abby closes her eyes briefly as the gentle buzz of level one caresses her. "You good?"

"Yeah. Keep talking. What'd I do next?" She's reaching for the lube.

"Scooted me back some. Bout a foot. Far enough you could get on the bed, too."

Abby nods, dribbling the lube down her dildo. "Get it all slick, okay?"

"Oh yeah." He swallows hard while he strokes the lube all over the plastic dick. "You got on the bed, between my legs."
She rocks all three fingers in him, making sure to get his prostate firmly, and watches as a drop of precum meanders down his dick. "So pretty, Tim, you all pink and hard and wet for me. You were all wet and hard on our honeymoon, too."

"Yeah." He pants it, rocking back on her hand, moaning as another drop slips out of him.

"And then what? What did I do once I was on the bed?" Her hand on his hip lets him know to shift up, and she pulls her fingers out, getting the dildo in place.

Tim hovers, waiting for permission to slide down. Abby waits, and then he knows what he has to do to get it. "You were between my legs," he's talking fast, rushing between words, "and took the cock ring off, and you were on top of me, kissing and thrusting," she tugs on his hips letting him know he can slip down, and he does, groaning, eyes almost closed, head back. Abby rolls her hips slightly, and pulls him lip to lip on her for a long deep kiss.

She breaks the kiss for a second, saying, "Ride me however you like. Don't hold back unless you want to," then her lips are back on his, kissing him deep, one hand stroking his face, the other on his hip.

He hasn't done a lot of this sort of up down motion lately, but his body still knows how it likes it, and it doesn't take him long to get back to it. He's rocking on her, not breaking their kiss, left arm stroking her face and hair. On each stroke, his dick rubs against her stomach, and he knows he's not going to last long if he keeps moving, and right now he wants to stay here, in this moment.

He stops rocking, nudging the speed on the butterfly up (he can feel a very slight vibration from the inside, and his balls are buzzing). Abby's kissing him, harder and deeper. She's close, too. Can't spend an hour listening to that, doing that, and not get turned on by it, add that delicious buzz in exactly the right place, and she knows she's good to go for this.

Tim can feel her rocking against the butterfly. "Faster?" he asks between kisses, still not moving on her.

"Yeah."

He kicks the speed up again, kissing her deep. "This," he says, breaking the kiss for a second, then raising and lowering on her, making sure to rock the dildo in exactly the right spot, feeling that cumming pulse as the pressure slips over his prostate. "Our honeymoon. We did this. Kissing. You on me, in me." He lets himself slide down her, dick trailing over her stomach. "Face to face."
Another kiss, wet, deep, sloppy. He's breathing hard, each time he shifts, his dick rubs against her, and he's so sensitive right now; it won't take much.

Her eyes are staring into his, and her face is flushed, beautiful pink slipping down her throat to her breasts. Very close now. He nudges the speed up one more notch, full force, and starts to ride her, fast, shallows thrusts, getting his prostate over and over as his dick rubs against her belly and his lips and tongue strokes hers.

He doesn't feel her first shudder, but he sees it in her face, that exultant look of climax, and he does feel her crushing against him, lips and tongue hard, hand clenched in his hair as he slams down onto her once more, pulling up fast, rubbing into her as hard as he can and then feeling his whole body spasm as his vision goes white and he tingles all over from his climax.

He feels completely drained and limp when he comes back to himself. His lips are pressed to her forehead, his chest and tummy is wet and so are hers, and he's got to be getting heavy on her lap, so he gently pulls off and rolls onto his back next to her, flicking off the butterfly, hoping it wasn't on
too long, too fast.

Abby's feeling very pleased with herself as she grabs for the tissues. He's lying on his back, blissed out, relaxed. She takes a moment, getting out of her gear, cleans them both up, and then snuggles in against his left side, kissing the top of his shoulder. She tugs very lightly on his collar. "Mine."

He nods, eyes closed, drifting toward sleep. "Yours, always yours."

Chapter End Notes

If you're curious, the prostate massager is an Aneros MGX Classic.
On Sunday, Tim wakes up to something other than the fierce ache of time for more pain medication. He wakes to the sound of retching, and Abby saying, "Oh god."

It takes him a bit, but he gets his crutch, and into the bathroom, where Abby is kneeling next to the toilet, skin ashy, hair sweaty, and looking utterly miserable.

"Are you okay?"

"No," Abby looks like she's about to say something about asking stupid questions, but her body has other ideas, and she's retching again. He hobbles over, slowly gets himself sitting on the floor, and gently pets her back.

When the spasms pass, she looks up at him and says, "I'm going to die," and begins to retch again. He gently rubs her back again. In all the time they've known each other, he's never seen her get any sort of tummy bug. Then he realizes this isn't a tummy bug, and smiles, but in a way where there's no shot of her seeing him do it.

He lumbers up, gets her a Dixie cup of cool water so she can rinse her mouth, and rubs her back again as she sits back on the floor.

"You didn't have that conversation about no morning sickness with Sean, did you?" he asks as he works one of the anti-nausea points on her wrist.

"Didn't think I needed to." She looks at her tummy. "No making Mom puke, you hear?"

Ten minutes later, when she was throwing up again, it became fairly clear that Sean appears to be indifferent to said command.

Tim's been more than annoyed at his current physical limitations, but right now he wants to scream. Abby's throwing up, Kelly's fussing, and he can't really help either of them.

He hobbles into Kelly's room, talking to her, telling her good morning and stuff like that, but he can't pick her up because he needs the crutch to stand and he needs the only arm that works to use the crutch.

Okay, there has got to be a way to do this. Kelly's melting down, she's hungry and upset, and him just standing there, shushing her is not getting the job done. The changing table is literally three steps away from the crib. Once there, he can get her cleaned up (he hopes) and get the snuggli in place (maybe) get her into the snuggli (err… yeah, this is sounding like a worse and worse idea by the moment) and then get them downstairs to where the bottles are and she can start breakfast.

He nods at that plan, rests the crutch on the side of the crib, shifting weight to try to pick her up, and then mentally slaps himself upside the back of the head for being an idiot. Kelly is yelling because she is hungry. Fix the main problem, hungry, and the smaller problems (still in crib, wet diaper) won't bug her so much.

"I will be back in a minute." He grabs the crutch again, and she fusses even louder, appalled at the idea of him leaving her in her crib. He quick times it (just about normal walking speed) to the stairs, slides the crutch down, gets himself down, hobbles to the kitchen, makes up the bottle, tucks it between his cast arm and his stomach, and hobbles back up.
Kelly's yelling even louder, but she's rapidly mollified when she sees what he's got.

"I know we don't usually do it this way, but I don't want to drop you," he says, handing her the bottle so she can eat in bed.

She snatches the bottle and starts gulping quickly. Tim sees she's set, currently occupied, and heads back to his room in search of PJ pants, and more importantly, his phone.

He sends off his first text to Gibbs: *Help! Need an extra set of hands as soon as you can get here.*

The next text goes to Jimmy: *If I can find those anti-nausea pills you gave me, can I give one to Abby?*

Jimmy gets back to him first. *Yes. Do you have them handy?*

*No idea. Don't know where anything besides my computer ended up.*

*The girls and I are already up. I'll get a script written and filled for Abby. I take it morning sickness came to visit?*

*No fever, throwing up, wishing she's dead.*

*Sounds like morning sickness. Got any saltines? Flat ginger ale?*

*I know the routine.*

There's a minute long pause while Tim struggles into his PJ pants and tells Abby what he's doing while she lies on her side on the bathroom floor.

*On my way.* Pops up on his phone from Gibbs.

*Thanks. Abby's feeling sick, and I shouldn't get Kelly out of her crib.*

*Stay put. I'll be there soon.*

Abby pushes herself up, sways a little, but gets standing. "I think I'm done."

"Good."

She heads toward Kelly's room, still looking shaky, and Tim follows behind, not sure what the hell he's going to be useful for, but going along anyway.

Apparently what he's going to be useful for is getting in the way. Abby gets in there, catches one whiff of the formula that Kelly starts her day with, and is sprinting out again, practically running him over, back to the bathroom and dry heaving.

Tim closes his eyes, sighs, and heads into the nursery. "I'm going to hang out here with you."

Kelly smiles at him, bottle in her hand, she's content to hang out in her crib.

---

Gibbs lives half an hour away. Even assuming he hopped directly out of bed and drove like a maniac, it'd still take at least eighteen minutes to get to Tim and Abby's.

And Tim can't just sit there, doing not much of anything useful for that long.

So, he devises another plan. He needs the crutch to go from point A to point B. Once he's where he
needs to be, he doesn't much need it.

Kelly's gotten awfully stinky. That diaper is in real need of a change, and he's not about to go and ask Abby to do it. She doesn't appear to be puking anymore (at least he's not hearing anything) but he's not calling her back in until he's got a squeaky clean and yummy smelling little girl in his hands.

It takes a few minutes, but he eventually gets all of the baby changing gear on the floor right next to the crib. He gets clothing for Kelly all set. He puts the diaper trash can next to the whole set up. Now, all he has to do is get Kelly from inside her crib to on the floor, and then hope she agrees to just let him clean her up.

She's looking up at him as he leans against the crib.

"Okay, Kelly, this is going to be a team effort."

Other than her name, none of those words mean anything to her.

"You need to come to me, okay. Stand up, right here, right against the crib." He pats the edge of the crib, saying things like, "Right here. Up, Kelly, up."

Eventually she decides to play along, scoots to the edge of the crib and stands up. He gets her against his side, one good arm wrapped around her, and manages to get her over the edge of the crib without catching her leg on the side too badly.

"Shit." He did not expect to be nearly this wobbly. He shifts again, back against the crib, and just lets himself slide down it. Kelly makes an excited sound because he went down faster than he intended.

"Never a dull moment at the McGee household." He'd rub his butt if he could. (He went down way faster than he intended to, and landed square on it.) Kelly's smiling at him. He gently puts her down and gets her onto the changing mat.

"Okay, baby, you've got to work with me on this. You try to go wandering off, and this isn't going to happen. So, I need you to just stay put."

None of that means anything to her, either. But she's very interested in what's about to happen, because this is very much not her normal morning routine.

He rolls her onto her back, and starts fighting with the snaps on her onesie. Those little bastards are just not opening. At all. If he had a knife he'd be cutting her out of the damn thing, but he doesn't. The snaps are at the crotch of her onesie, and that's an awfully full diaper, so he's not about to try and use his teeth to get it open.

He's muttering about how there is no possible way he's the only father with one functional hand, and that somehow other parents have to have figured out ways to get fucking snaps open (Kelly's being very good about staying still, just chilling on her back, watching her Dad in amazement.) when he realizes that if he worms two fingers between two snaps and then spreads them apart, they'll pop open.

"Now we're getting somewhere. Up you go." He helps Kelly sit up and pulls the onesie off. Into the laundry hamper it goes. "And back down." Time to diaper wrestle.

On the upside, those little paper Velcro-ish straps are a lot easier to get open one-handed than snaps. On the downside, he's now in charge of cleaning up a mess that would have made him mutter if he'd gone after it with two hands. One hand and he's shaking his head wondering why the hell he didn't just wait for Gibbs to get here.
But, after only seven minutes, roughly 17,000 diaper wipes, and two false starts on the clean diaper, he does indeed have a cleaned up, dressed, and ready for the day baby sitting in his lap.

Kelly's looking up at him, and he's probably reading his own feelings into her, but he feels like she's proud of him for having taken care of it. He know he's feeling more useful than he has in weeks.

"Now what?"

"Snoopy!"

Tim nods, grabs his phone, gets Netflix up, finds the Peanuts section, and puts on Snoopy. They both sit there, watching the show until Gibbs shows up.

Gibbs missed morning sickness. Shannon had it, but it was over by the time he got back. So, until Breena got pregnant with Molly and was tossing her cookies every five minutes, he had an, at best, nebulous concept of how exactly this worked.

And then Breena did get sick. He knows there's a fancy term for really bad morning sickness, and he knows that Breena didn't have that. But he can't imagine how bad that stuff has to be, because what Breena had looked awful, and she was on medication to keep food and fluids inside of her.

He's really hoping, on numerous levels, that this isn't what's going on with Abby. Primarily on the level of he doesn't want anyone he loves feeling sick for months at a time, but on a more practical level, if she is that bad off, he's basically moving in for the next however long because Tim really shouldn't be trying to carry anything until he can actually walk again, which, if Gibbs remembers right, is still about three weeks off.

He debates getting there as fast as he can versus picking up some ginger ale and saltines on the way over.

Getting there fast wins out. He can't imagine that Tim didn't text Jimmy, too, in search of the medication that makes Breena feel, not exactly better, but lets her keep food down, and he's got way more practice in the care and feeding of a morning sick woman than Gibbs does.

So, in twenty-seven minutes he's pulling into Tim and Abby's driveway, hoping Abby's just dealing with feeling a little green in the morning, and Tim was patient enough not to do something stupid in an effort to be helpful.

He finds Tim and Kelly first, in her bedroom, sitting on the floor, watching… "It's the Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown? Aren't you a few months off for that?"

"Pop!" Kelly says brightly as he sits next to them.

Tim shrugs a little, handing Kelly over. "She's got no idea what season it is." Once the transfer is complete and Kelly's hugging Gibbs, Tim says, "Thank you."

Gibbs surveys the set up around him and nods a bit. "Looks like you did okay."

Tim rolls his eyes. "She's had her bottle but no solid food."

"Okay." He kisses Kelly's head. "Come on, Kelly, let's get the rest of breakfast." Then he looks at Tim. "Can you get yourself off the floor?"

He nods. "It'll take a while, but yeah. Then I'll go see if Abby's moved."
"Want me to make her some tea and toast while I'm down there?"

Tim shrugs. "If she feels like moving, I'm sure she'll come down."

"Jimmy here soon?"

"Going to pack up the girls, get the meds, and come here. If you've got any idea what Abby did with my stuff when we got back, I had some of those pills on me when I got on the Stennis."

Gibbs shakes his head. "Standard procedure, all medications are destroyed."

"Great."

"No way to tell what's really in them. We do it, too."

Tim nods; he remembers that. "Yeah, okay. I'll go catch up with Abby." He starts to pull himself up. She's laying on the bathroom floor again, so he's guessing, "How are you feeling?" is a stupid question.

"Gibbs's here. Do you want him to make you some tea and toast?"

Her eyes are closed, and she shakes her head.

"Want a blanket or some pjs or something?"

"PJs."

Tim hobbles off in search of her loosest, softest, most comfy PJs. It takes a moment, but he finds them, slings them over his shoulder, and hobbles back.

"Here." He sits down near her, handing over the pjs.

She sits up, slowly pulling on the black flannel jammie pants with the pink skulls on them, and one of his gray t-shirts. "I've had Goldschlager hangovers that were more fun than this."

Tim winces. Like everyone else he did Goldschlager shots (okay, in his case shot) in college, and that stuff was wretched going down, coming back up isn't something he wants to imagine.

"Sorry."

She shrugs. "Could have the flu." Then she sighs and slumps onto the floor, her forehead resting on his outstretched leg.

He touches her forehead. "No fever. We had the same dinner. I'm not sick and neither is Kelly."

She pouts, and he pets her hair. "Don't tell me I've got six more weeks of this crap."

Tim doesn't say anything.

They hear another car pull into their driveway, along with the sound of car doors opening, and Gibbs and Jimmy's voices, along with Molly's much higher-pitched one.

A few minutes later, Jimmy's back up in Tim's room, calling out, "You guys up here?"

"In here," Abby says.
Jimmy heads into the bathroom and jiggles a Target prescription bottle. "Got some goodies for you."

Abby sits up, holding out her hand.

"Oh, you look like you feel like shit," he says as he hands over the pills.

Abby nods slowly, getting the bottle open, peeling open the pill and putting it on her tongue. After thirty seconds, it's dissolved and she says, "At least, according to Breena, they work fast."

Jimmy nods. "They do. But for her all they do is let her keep food down. They don't actually touch the feeling sick part of it."

Abby's leaning heavily against Tim. "I've thrown up five times already this morning. I'll take just keeps food in place."

"Okay." Jimmy kisses her forehead. "I'm meeting Breena, Tony and Ziva, and Ducky and Penny, at the diner. Jetho's gonna take Kelly and join us. You come if you want, lay around otherwise, okay?"

Abby nods, that sounds pretty good.

"You want to come?" he says to Tim.

"I'll stick with Abby."

"All right. As of last night, Ed and Collin are talking again, so we're tentatively on for church and Sunday dinner, too." Jimmy's not in his usual church suit, but he's also talking about hitting the diner earlier than usual, too, so he'll probably get dressed up after breakfast.

Actually, given how many members of this group end up with food all over them each time they attempt to eat something, and then get it all over whichever adult is sitting next to them, casual breakfast first followed by getting dressed and then church is probably a good plan resulting in fewer outfits which have been hastily cleaned with diaper wipes.

"We'll text if we change plans."

---

Tim sits with Abby, both of them quiet, resting. She's on his good side, and he's got his hand around her shoulders, so he can't pet her tummy, but he'd like to.

He kisses her cheek.

"I read somewhere morning sickness is worse with boys than girls."

She rolls her eyes at that.

"Yeah, I know it's an old wives tale." Another quiet moment. "Supposed to mean lots of hair, too."

"He's not going to have a lot of hair. We're both green-eyed blondes, this is going to be another green-eyed blond."

"Kelly's eyes are still pretty blue."

Abby pokes him gently. "She's getting green-ish."

"Uh huh." He says dryly, with a little smile. "It's a good thing I know your second-best-guy pretty well, and his kids."
"Oh! You did not just say that!" She's shaking her head, and kneeling in front of him, mock appalled.

He sticks out his tongue at her. "I think you're starting to feel better."

That stops her for a second, and he can see her self-assessing, then she stands up, and says, "Yeah. I am. Okay, whatever this stuff is, tears of angels and unicorn manes, it's amazing. Also, I'm now officially horrified at how bad Breena's hurting when she's pregnant, because I actually am feeling fairly decent. I don't want to run a mile or anything, but I might want to try eating something. You want to go to the diner?"

"You want to be in a room filled with food?"

"Eh. I know Elaine will hook me up, right."

Tim pushes himself off the floor. "Then let's go."

"Oh, good Lord, look at you two. Sitting down first, then hugs!" Elaine says as they slowly make their way into the diner.

They do get seated, and Elaine does provide hugs, and though the official reason why Tim and Abby weren't there was 'Tim's not feeling good' (After all, they aren't out about Abby being pregnant, yet.) she takes one look at the two of them, snatches the cup of coffee Tim's about to take a sip of, saying, "You'll be wanting decaf, right?"

He nods at that, and she's back a few seconds later with a cup of decaf coffee for him and a tall glass of cool, (not cold, there's no ice in it) flat ginger ale.

"When are you due?"

Abby smiles. "Beginning of February." She sips the ginger ale. "Thanks. This helps." Then she looks at Jimmy and Breena. "And those pills really help. And Breena, next time you get pregnant, I'm filling your freezer with food Jimmy's just got to heat up, because I set one foot into Kelly's room, smelled a whiff of formula and almost died. I'm sorry. I didn't get how bad you're hurting when you're sick. I've got a hint now, and we're doing what we can to keep you out of the kitchen next time."

Breena smiles at that, kissing Abby's cheek. She and Abby and Elaine and Penny talk about the joys of morning sickness for a few minutes, then Elaine's son shows up with two more plates, very lightly buttered rye toast for Abby which she looks at curiously, but takes a nibble of and it seems to do the trick, and (Tim shakes his head when he sees it. He's eaten it here before, but not for years) a French toast and bacon sandwich for him.

Once the food's down, Elaine looks them both over and says, "Gotta build you two back up if you're going to be ready to get chasing this little girl of yours around. She's gonna be walking any day now."

Abby nods at that, and Tim smiles.

"Church?" Abby asks as she, Tim, and Kelly head home after breakfast.

"If you want to, sure. I'm good with skipping it though."
Abby thinks about that. She is good with going. She's been doing a lot of praying lately, and spending some time in a church feels good to her.

"I'd like to go."

"Then we'll go. Probably not going to want to do Slater-family supper after."

Abby nods, she can easily see that being a bridge too far.

He's staring at his closet as Abby meanders around the bedroom, getting dressed and made up, and Kelly plays on the floor.

Tim's been wearing kilts a lot. Pretty much, with the exception of the morning he went into NCIS with Jimmy, he's been wearing kilts or the pj pants he works out in, because trying to get a broken and braced foot into a pair of non-stretchy trousers is a literal pain.

So, he's staring at his suit, and thinking about how getting his foot into it will go. It's not like the legs are that tightly tailored, and it's not like he can't flex his foot into the right position to get the damn thing on, mostly it's just that he doesn't want to.

He grabs his plaid kilt and tosses it onto their bed, along with a white button down, the green tie, and the black vest. For a second, he eyeballs his black suit jacket, and yes, right now he prefers button downs, only has to drag his arm through one sleeve that way, but threading his arm through a jacket in addition to the shirt… No.

It's very much not what he wears to church normally, but it's dressier than usual, and it's July outside. It's hot as balls out there and an excuse to not wear a full suit strikes him as a good plan.

After all, what's the worst thing Ed's going to do, stare and make a snide remark about the dragon tattoo and the skirt? Fuck that, Tim's done with it.

The correct answer is Ed will do precisely nothing beyond shrug slightly at his brothers while Jeannie fusses over him. Which is when Tim remembers that Ed's seen him in this before and that it's not new and shocking, on any level, for him.

Said brothers will give him the big hairy eyeball, looking over the tattoo and kilt, but when you're literally 'walking wounded' from an unnamed, top secret 'war gaming activity' the hairy eyeballs tend to skitter off to the side pretty quickly. Especially since the Slater family is a crew of people who have never served but are very pro-military. So, 'classified mission aboard the USS Stennis' (with Breena adding, 'That's a nuclear aircraft carrier.') were the magic words that ended any uncomfortable scrutiny of his wardrobe choices.

And there is something deliciously satisfying about having the Pastor's husband come over to greet him as they are leaving, mention how they've all been praying for his quickly returned health, and then ask about the kilt, if it's comfortable, and suggest that it seemed like a very reasonable way to deal with the summertime heat.

All in all, he was ready for a nap by the end of church, but it had been a very successful outing.

Monday afternoon, Abby looks up from his report and says… "So, do you really want this little bit here in the 'Troubleshooting For Future Tests' section where is says, 'For optimal test results, avoid testing ships run by murderous child-abusing psychopaths'?
He thought he had deleted that bit two drafts ago. "Too much?"

She nods. "I mean, if you want to write that into a version that just Jarvis gets, fine, but for wider distribution, I'd probably just stick with your bit about how using your hack through the Norfolk computer hub allows the tester to avoid setting foot on the actual ship/ships in question, thus providing a completely blind test."

He had come to the conclusion that for optimal testing data and results it was probably much better to hack both the ship and the security feed from land and just keep watch from afar. Pretty much, it's not impossible that should someone get onto a ship and everything go haywire, especially if it's a small ship, that person might end up having a very bad day, and Tim's thinking that it's a good plan to make sure no other tester has to deal with that issue.

Tim nods.

"You really sure about this?"

"I'll rewrite, but yeah, I'm sure."

"Good. I was actually asking about you wanting to go in tomorrow."

"Oh. Yeah. I want to get back. I'm going crazy, and it looks like I've got enough of my brain back that I can at least read reports and maybe write some. I can supervise and problem solve. Friday's supposed to be my last day on the Tylenol 3, if I bite the bullet and stop on Thursday, maybe I'll be able to do some real work on Monday."

Abby smiles at him. "You get sore or tired or start to feel off—"

"I'll have Jethro take me home."

"Okay. Bright and early tomorrow morning, back to NCIS."

Tim smiles at that, pulls out his phone, and sends out an email to his Minions and the wider NCIS Cybertechs. He's back in tomorrow morning, and he'll be providing a quick get up to date briefing once he gets there.

So, on Tuesday, July 5th, two full weeks before he's supposed to be doing anything other than taking an hour or so a day to log in and make sure the building didn't catch fire, Tim hobbles into work. Very, very many promises that if he gets tired or sore he'll call Gibbs and get an immediate ride home, in addition to the fact that he's only going in for a half day, were required to get Abby to take him in, but finally she agreed and only almost took him home again twice when the car bumped over different pot holes and he winced.

But, he limps into his office, where the ten of the techs who are in the office flood in to say hello, welcome him back, and gape openly at how beat up he still looks weeks after the fight. He gets his computer up and running, and gets the camera feed up, so he can talk to everyone.

The ones in his office are milling around, staring, but trying not to. He can see another 90 of his team members are logged in, but because so many of them are online, they can see him, but he can't see them. He assumes they're staring, too. His bruises have faded, but his right arm's in a cast, he's got a brace on his left foot, a crutch leaning against his desk, and a newly split eyebrow. He smiles at them, says, "Just look all you want and get over it. And then I want you to understand that this is why you will have your gun and martial arts proficiencies. I didn't have my gun. I did have my fists, and I'm alive because of that. You're ever in my place, I want you to come out alive, too. Okay?"
They all nod, really shocked.

"I can't say what I was actually doing. I know you all have theories, and I know you've figured out it wasn't a 'conference,' and that I was not in a car accident, but that's all I'm saying about what I was actually doing. Though, if any of you know what I was doing, not have a theory, or feel like you figured it out from clues, but if you did the research and know drop by for a private chat or email me, and we'll arrange your paid day off."

"You want us barging into your private life?" Manner asks.

Tim smiles at that. "No. I'd prefer you didn't. But if any of you did track it down, that would have taken some persistence and out-of-the-box thinking, and I reward that. Which is not me saying, go find out. If you don't know by now, leave it alone. If you do know... well you know, don't spread it around, it's private. And likewise, if anything even remotely like this happens in the future, leave it alone! I do stuff you're all better off not knowing about, so don't find out. And if any of you go snooping in the future and I find out, you won't be getting cookies for it." He gives them all his fear of Boss look, and they stop staring at him, looking away, so he figures he's done well with it.

He nods at the target with the smiley face shot into it, then moves the camera so the rest of the crew can see it. "There's a reason why I want all of you to be able to do that. What I was doing was supposed to be safe. It was supposed to be routine. It wasn't safe. It wasn't routine. They almost killed me. They didn't. And they didn't because I knew how to fight. I want you to know, too."

He shifts the camera back to him. "Not saying it's a guarantee of safety or anything, not saying you'll make it out or come back in one piece, but if you can't win, you can at least take as many of the bastards with you as you can. Someone lays hands on you, you make 'em pay for it, right?"

They all nod at him.

"Okay, let's get back to work. I'm still really slow, and at noon they'll drag me out of here and make me get a nap, but it's a start."

Three hours later, when Gibbs comes in to get him, Tim is amazed at how tired he is. All he did was wade through more emails. Not like he actually used his brain for much, but he's exhausted. He's giving Abby a run for her money on tired right now. Gibbs smiles at him when he dozes off in the car on the way home, and gently gets him up when they get home.

Tim eyeballs the steps up to his bed, feels the ache deep in his foot and shoulder, and decides he's not going to try to get up the steps to finish his nap. He turns toward his office and Gibbs looks curious. "Everything aches," Tim says by way of explanation.

"Orthopedic specialist again on Friday. See what he says."

Tim nods, easing onto his futon. "Rest, ice, take it easy, let yourself heal up, keep weight off of it. I know what he's going to say. You sticking around?"

"Little while at least. Play with Kelly some. Take her and Mona out for a run or something. Give Heather a break. Go get some rest. I'll still be here when you wake up."

"Okay. Jethro, thanks. For all of this."

He sitting on the futon next to Tim. "No problem. Hit the pool when you wake up?"

"Yeah, if you want."
Bootcamp without Tim is just weird. Not that Tony's been doing this all that long, but it just feels odd not to have McGee there.

After the first two months, when he started to wipe the cobwebs of not having really fought in years out of his mind, and got back into it, it became really fun.

And not just fun, but useful. First off, he's honing skills that have been rusting for a while. Secondly, this is vastly more interesting than any sort of aerobics or running he's ever done. On par with real sports. Because you have to think, watch, and react. He does kind of wish he could get this crew on the court, (they'd go home with a lot fewer bruises if he could get them playing basketball) but he's thinking that's unlikely. (When it comes down to it, he suspects the Wonder Twins both get off on telling people they're into MMA. It may be possible that he, sort of, gloated, a little, when talking to one of the CIA spooks about how he was keeping in shape with hand to hand when said Spook was talking about Pilates.)

And Tony is in better shape, now. (Not where he's wanting to get, not yet, but better. Fight Club was right, fighting turns men from cookie dough into carved wood. Say what you will about solving problems with words and whatnot, but he hasn't had arm or shoulder definition like this since Bush was in office.) In fact, it's possible that mesh shirt/leather trousers combo might come out again for Halloween, which is a bit earlier than he was expecting, and would please Ziva to no end.

He also thinks that it's good for him and McGee. As the last few months of working together showed, they need a space for competition. He knows he doesn't feel that with Gibbs or Palmer. He can fight with either of them and it's just about going through the moves, the exercise, working/fighting hard.

But that's not all it is for him and McGee. Gibbs has been and pretty much always will be Tony's Boss. That's part of why they can't work together any more. Tony can't be the Boss if Gibbs is around. And Jimmy's never been part of the chain of command. It's not that Jimmy was so far down on the pecking order that it never mattered, as that he's not actually a rooster, so he was never part of the pecking order. But McGee… Part of Probie-ing the ever living shit out of McGee was making sure he knew his place. Part of it was making sure Tony knew his. And when they fight, that history is part of it.

For the most part, they're past that now. McGee knows his place. Tony knows his. They each own their own places. But they've still got that edge of jockeying for who's on top. And that comes out when they fight each other. Tony can, as much as it's possible, relax when he's fighting Palmer or Gibbs. He can't relax when he fights McGee, because that edge is still there. Which means, of all of his sparring partners, McGee's the only one who really gets him fighting when he fights.

And he misses that.

"How's Tim really doing?" Collin asks as they finish up Bootcamp and are unwrapping their hands. He saw Tim at church and tried not to stare too much. He knew Tim got the shit beaten out of him. Amy had told him about that, but knowing and seeing are not the same thing. Seeing, and then of course, imagining, because you can't see a guy you regularly spar with hurt that bad and not imagine what had to put him there, made Collin want to throw up.

He's fought Tim, one on one, two on one, two on two, three on one, all sorts of combos. He knows
Tim can fight. Sure, when they're doing it, they're pulling punches and trying to not actually kill each other, but… The guys who did that to Tim had to be the size of trucks.

He's looking at Jimmy for an answer, who notices that everyone else is, as well.

"As well as can be expected. He's messed up. He's hurting. He's not going to stop hurting anytime soon. It's only in the movies that someone goes through that and bounces back two days later."

Tony snorts a quick laugh. "Or they're him." He jerks his head at Gibbs.

Gibbs shrugs, unwrapping his fingers. He knows he always did heal up faster than most of the people around him. "Even I don't bounce back that fast."

"I've had hangnails that have taken longer to heal than you with bullet wounds," Tony says. "Still, I know McGee wanted to get started with knives, any ideas on…"

"Knives?" Collin asks.

"Tim doesn't have a knife combat proficiency, and he wants one. Eventually, when Jimmy says he's ready, we will begin training," Ziva says.

"He's got to get walking first, without a crutch, and that's at least three weeks, probably six, off, and he's not doing anything until his arm is out of the cast, probably another two months for that. So, best case scenario, he's back with us in fall. And just to work out, no one's fighting him then. As badly busted up as his arm was, it's going to be a long time before he's doing anything beyond rehab. And that's a really hopeful forecast. And…" Jimmy stops, thinking for a moment about Tim in Autopsy, not sure about saying it, but… "Look, he's saying he wants to fight, and that's fine, but… once he actually gets fighting, he may find very quickly that he really doesn't want to fight. I know I didn't want to shoot a gun after I had to do it for real, and even safe, with Tim, in a well-lit shooting range, once again safe, that first shot brought back a lot of the feelings of fear and danger that went with doing it for real." Jimmy shakes his head a little. "Once someone's actually going after him, Tim might flash back to it. Since he's making his guys keep up their martial arts proficiencies, I'm sure he will, too, but… It might be a long time, it might never happen, where this is fun for him again."

Ziva's nodding when Jimmy mentions that. The guys catch that nod, know what it means. Jimmy's giving her a you want to add anything? look, but she shakes her head. Some things she doesn't like talking about.

---

Tony and Ziva are heading home. He's driving. She's looking out the window, watching cars blur by.

"How long?" Tony asks. Seeing her nod, it hit him that his Ninja knows all about going back to it after a long hard fight.

"Until fighting didn't bring Somalia back, or until I enjoyed it again?"

"Both?" They still don't talk a lot about Somalia. They have, he knows what happened and how she dealt with it, but neither of them like dwelling on it.

"A year before I could strike and not feel a second of panic. When I was taken, I knew they were going to win. I knew how to read a fight well enough to know I couldn't get out, and then… Then it was all about making myself as expensive a target as possible. For a year after I got back, every fight, no matter how easy, I felt that second of realizing I couldn't win. I was able to master it, control it, shove it into the back of my mind and not deal with it, but I felt it."
Tony nods at that. "Enjoying it again?"

She smiles, and it's a cold, hard, deadly smile. "Bodnar."

Tony nods at that, too. He'd told her, all those years ago, 'I will hold him down while you kill him.' He didn't need to do that. When he saw what Ziva did, when she went full out, no holds barred, no reserves in her mind, when she was fighting to inflict not just maximum damage, but maximum pain, he realized exactly how stupid that offer was. He'd meant it, and it was sincere. It was just… less necessary than offering to hold down an opponent for Superman.

All he did was occasionally kick Bodnar back toward Ziva when it looked like there was a shot of him running, and then limping, and then crawling away.

"You should talk to him," Tony says.

"I will. When he's a bit more healed, when he's had time to come to terms with the fact that this will always be there. You should talk to him, too."

His eyebrows furrow. "About?"

"He is your friend, he was hurt, you two have not had any time alone with each other since. Tuesday, if we don't have a hot case, have lunch with him. I will mind the store."

There is a case. Tuesday and Wednesday they're hunting down clues, interviewing suspects, putting the pieces together, but, by early Thursday morning Ziva's lounging in the back corner of interrogation, while Bishop breaks her first perp, pulling a full confession out of him.

Once the words are out of him, all that's left is writing up the paperwork and getting his signature.

Ziva heads out with Bishop, sending her back to her desk to start typing. She stops into Observation and says to Tony, "I have got this. Go have lunch with McGee."

He smiles at her, nodding, and pulls out his phone. Tony flashes a text to Tim. Lunch?

Sure.

Comes back a minute later. Got a place in mind?

We'll figure it out. I've got to take you, right?

There's a minute long pause, where Tony is sure that Tim's being annoyed about the fact that he can't drive, but then, True pops up on his phone.

"So it hit me," Tony says, heading into Tim's office, carrying a bag and closing the door, "that you've got an actual office now. Which means," he's putting the bag on Tim's desk, and tugging a chair over, "that I can bring food to you a hell of a lot easier than I can get you to food." It also hit Tony, when he decided what he wanted to eat for lunch, that the place in question didn't have much in the way of seats. It's way more of a delivery/take out spot, and dragging Tim to somewhere he can't really sit is a bad plan.

Tim inclines his head in a somewhat annoyed gesture. It's not that Tony's wrong. He's dead on right; Tim's best crutching speed is about a third of Tony's walking speed, and, in his attempt to get back to real work on Monday, the only pain killers he's had are Alevee (the absolute maximum number of them Jimmy says he can have at his weight), so he's aching all over and crutching even more slowly than normal. And, with hurting all over he's in a bad mood and annoyed by everything that makes
him remember he's hurt, like not going to places, or, even more basic things, like breathing.

He closes his eyes and tries to pull away from the hot knot of annoyed festering in his head. "What'd you get?"

"Cheese steaks." Tony smiles. "New place on 35th claims they know how to make them."

This is a conversation they've been having for years. Tony's been on a quest to find a real Philly Cheese Steak since leaving Philadelphia. Apparently there are passable replicas in Baltimore, but once you get any further south than that, they vanish, replaced by something called "Philly Cheese Steak Subs" which are, in no way, shape or form, "real" cheese steaks.

Tim's gotten to the point where he no longer believes in the existence of a "real" cheese steak. He's thinking that Tony's built them up so much in his mind that they could go to Philadelphia, get the steaks, eat them there, and they still wouldn't pass muster.

"The unicorn hunt." Tim pushes his keyboard out of the way as Tony hands over a silver foil wrapped sub that smells pretty good, and puts a large container of fries between them.

"Always." Tony snags a fry while opening his. "Fries are good."

Tim munches one. They are. "Yep. Good omen. Maybe there's an actual unicorn in there."

Tony snorts at that. "Kind of horn-shaped." He inhales deeply as the scent of fried beef, onions, and…

"Cheeze whiz?" Tim winces. He can't imagine anyone intentionally putting cheeze-whizz on a sandwich, let alone wanting to eat a sandwich that has cheeze whiz on it.

"That's how they're supposed to be made. Yours has Swiss."

"Thank you." Tim manages to get his unrolled, and it looks pretty good. He's perfectly happy with not getting the 'authentic' experience. He takes a bite and his eyebrows shoot up, that's a really good sandwich. Not barbecue good, but fried steak, onions, mushrooms and Swiss cheese, on a roll with a crispy crust and a chewy crumb is definitely going onto the go-get-it-again list.

Tony's humming with pleasure. "Hard roll, processed cheeze, just enough grease… It's perfect. And look, no lettuce, no tomatoes. I didn't even have to tell them to skip the mayo."

Tim nods along. "Tasty." They eat quietly for a few bites, just enjoying the food and sitting with each other.

Tony looks out seeing the Minions (two of them are in right now) working away. "Didn't you have more of them?"

Tim looks out. "Twenty-four/seven and a lot of night owls. Any given time I want five of them on. Right now two of them are here, one's in the Great Lakes office, two more in Europe, and I think I've got one in Okinawa, one in Perth, and one in Istanbul. While I was out, Sturm came up with a scheduling program, you put the hours you want to work in, and then log in when you're working, and once five people are on, it lets everyone know the slots are filled. You can work or not as you like, it's fine if more than five people are on, and for a lot of shifts we've got more than five on. If we ever drop below five, it sends out a note to everyone who's got that time listed as one they want to work. It keeps beeping everyone on that shift who hasn't put their forty hours in every two minutes until someone logs on. If it goes for more than twenty minutes without someone logging on, then it opens it up to all of us. If another twenty minutes goes by, it lets me know, and I go kick some ass
until someone logs on and we're up to full strength."

"Cool."

"Yeah." Tim watches Tony chew for a second, and then, once he's between bites asks, "How's it going with Bishop and Draga?"

"Smother than you're walking."

Tim rolls his eyes some. "What isn't these days?"

"Good point. It's... I don't know. A quarter of the time I look over at the bullpen and want to ask who the hell all these people are and what they think they're doing in there. Fornell was in last week and he had the same response. Just stood there, stared, shook his head, sighed, and then got on with it.

"The cases are different, so the work has to be different, right? Homicides are still about the same, just wrapped one of them, but the big ones... We're getting intel from everyone, coordinating hunts from all over. We'll get a case, and the first week is just working through data from FBI, NSA, CIA, and Homeland. It's my job to track down who has what and make the bastards share it. That's why Fornell was in. Bishop slices and dices and give us some sort of projection of who we're looking for and what sort of stuff they're likely to do next. She's really excited about this, because back at NSA all she did was write papers about what could happen, and here she's getting to come up with her forecast and then work with us on what happens next. Ziva and Draga spend hours reading through cases, getting the details, putting the picture together.

"It's July, we've been on this since January, and the only one we've moved on was that London case. Maybe we'll be ready for another one of them by November. Nothing gets taken care of right away. We've always got something cooking, and we just shove it to the side to deal with murders. We don't even have paperwork days anymore. There's always a massive backlog of intel that needs to be gone through to add to whatever picture we're working on. We're adding cases a lot faster than we're clearing them."

Tim smiles at that. "Sounds like you've become the CIA."

"Really. You know how we'd walk into something and some local LEO would give us crap about trampling into a year-long case?"

Tim nods.

"Yeah, well, I've got the year-long cases now. I've probably got three-year-long cases now."

Tim nods at that, too. "Got a bunch of them cooking. We set up a lot of electronic surveillance for you guys."

"That's what Draga's been doing. Something about 'passive intel gathering.' He's got the computers watching email and chats and texts and Facebook and whatever, searching for key terms Bishop dreams up."

"We do a lot of that, too. Coming up with anything?"

Tony shrugs. "I'm here eating with you, not in Istanbul busting up an ISIS cell."

"Good point."
Tony puts his sub down. "Okay, I may be messing this up, but Draga and Bishop were talking about it. You know we're on Silk Road 4 now?"

That's an oversimplification of the situation, but it'll work. "Yeah."

"Bishop wants Draga to figure out a way to break into it, and just watch. Not shut it down. She thinks it's a hell of a lot more useful up and working, because then we can see what's going on and who's doing what and where."

"If Draga pulls that off, I'm stealing him. I can pay him better and give him better hours."

Tony looks at Tim. He doesn't say out-loud that that's beyond Draga's skills, but it's clear in his eyes.

Tim looks back. "You know how to upload a job as well as anyone else. Put it in the system and we'll take a swing at it. Can't promise we'll get it working, let alone anytime soon, but, hell, we do that and we'll have every member of the alphabet soup begging for our data feed." Then Tim stops. Brand's first day is Monday, and sure, she's going to need some time to get up and running, but busting into Silk Road to monitor it might be a good match for her skillset, especially if she's got a decent team with her. Even if Tony doesn't put that in the job queue, he's thinking they're going to get on that. Then another thought hits. "Of course, there's always been this rumor floating around about Silk Road, that CIA's been running it since version 2. So, you may want to ask them pretty please and save me thousands of man hours."

"I know a guy who might know."

"Check in with him, and…" Tim thinks even more about the logistics of that case. "Hell, okay, if the CIA is running it; they don't want that getting out. So, if you get the sense that you're being stonewalled, we may go poking about in their data feed. Not like they're going to report us for piggybacking onto their top secret op. They don't want the fact that they're running it getting out, especially since if they're running it they aren't sharing what they're getting out of it. The Congressional hearings alone on that would take years."

Tony smiles at that and takes another bite of his sub. "Is Abby going to need to start up another McGee Defense Lawyer Fund?"

"I'm better at this now than I was then, and I've already done it before, so I know what mistakes I made the first time." Tim smiles at Tony.

"And ever since you got that Director title next to your name, you've been feeling pretty cocky about everything."

Tim inclines his head, not disagreeing about that.

Tony shakes his head a bit. Tim most certainly has his place now.

Another quiet minute while they both eat. Since they're kind of on the topic, Tony decides to say something about it. "I got an email from Burley this morning."

Tim's eyebrows rise.

"He's double and triple checking every case Mane or your dad could have been involved with."

Tim nods, he knows that.

"He's not coming up with much."
Tim also knows that.

The door to Tim's office is closed, but Tony glances at it to double check, anyway. "So, really, you don't want us doing anything on your dad, or was that just about cover in front of Penny?"

Tim glances away from Tony, to the target on the wall behind him, then back to him. "You and Ziva are working on catching him at something, right?"

"Yeah."

"That's all I need."

Tony's not buying that. Tim can read his So, are we not talking about this because we're at work, or is there more going on here? look.

"I'm good." We're talking, just keep it vague. Tim's face replies.

"Bullshit. You aren't good. You can't be good!"

Fine. I'm not good, there's a plan here, okay? Tim's eye roll tells Tony.

Tony nods at that.

This part's in bounds, so Tim says it out loud. "I want you guys to find something on him. I want him disgraced! That's what I want. More than anything else, that's what I want."

Tony nods at that, too. "You know, we can…" Fake the evidence. You want something pinned on him, and we'll make that case Chip put up against me look like amateur hour. At least, that's what Tony's trying to say with a look.

Tim gets it loud and clear. "No. I need him to go down for something he actually did."

"And if we can't? Burley's not finding shit. Ziva and I aren't, either. Mane's got lots of hinky stuff on him, but he's conveniently dead."

Tim hits Tony with a trust me, it's covered look.

"Sure?"

Tim nods. "But, maybe…" He tries to think about it like a lawyer and how the patterns would work. "Okay, go through all the other secretaries and pets. If you can get stuff on all of them, that would be grounds for a conspiracy case, right?"

Tony nods. "Shaky, but better than nothing."

Tim puts his sub down, thinking about what happened to him, what triggered his Dad. "Um… long shot, but…" He rubs his face. "Check the cold cases, December 29th on to January of '95."

Tony grabs his phone and sends that as a text to Burley. "Okay. Why then?"

Tim knows Tony's asking not just because he's curious, but also because a twenty-year-old cold case is going to be almost impossible to solve, and unless it's a murder or kidnapping the statute of limitations on it'll be over.

"I've been talking to Wolf about all of this, and he says that domestic abusers usually have one victim. That, there's something they get out of going after that one person. December 24th 1994, I
told him I wasn't going to Annapolis. That fight was so bad that they didn't let the two of us spend any time alone with each other after that. He was back on his ship by the 29th. That was the end of me as his target. It was clear he'd never get another shot at me, so… maybe he found someone else?"

Tony nods slowly at that. "Okay. We'll check." Tony puts his cell down. "You never said how bad it was."

Tim shrugs. "Took a while to get enough perspective to see how bad it was. Not like he did this," Tim looks at himself, getting across what this is, "to me when I was a kid. Just words. Lots and lots of words."

"That's what was going on before Kelly was born?"

"Yeah. It's why I'm not talking to my mom anymore."

"Ducky said it was… bad."

"He tried to have me killed, yeah, it was bad. Guys who get along don't do crap like this to each other."

Tony decides to leave it alone. He poked because he was curious, and to see if he could get Tim to expound on bad, but Tim's not touching it, so Tony's done, too. He might want to know exactly how bad bad was, but he's not going to press.

But after a few seconds, Tim does start to fill him in on details. One of the things Wolf's suggested is that talking about it'll numb some of the force of it, so, Tony's here, he's offered to listen, he's safe. Tim adds more, "It was bad enough that once I ripped up my acceptance letter, and that fight ended, they wouldn't let us be in the same room alone. My mom and Gran were afraid we'd really hurt each other. Six months later, I'm graduating. He'd already set it up so he had leave for my high school graduation and was land based that whole summer, but I wasn't going to Annapolis, so he didn't attend. Then they got me out of there. I got my diploma at something like 5:30 in the afternoon, and I was in the air first thing in the morning to go live with my grandmother until I could get into the dorm for college. I lived with her that summer, didn't speak to or see him again until my grandfather's funeral two years later.

"He was out of Alameda that summer, so… Summer '95, might be a good place to look. He was never happy on land, but he was there, because… I don't know, I guess there was supposed to be some sort of getting me ready for Annapolis crap, which probably would have meant sticking me on a boat until I'd thrown up enough weight to look good in uniform. It didn't happen, and my mom started the divorce proceedings that winter, so it must have been a worse summer for her."

He sees the light in Tony's eyes and knows what he's thinking.

"Yeah, she may have been his target of choice if I wasn't around. I don't know. Whatever happened, she wasn't telling me, and it finally got bad enough she decided to get out. Or my grandfather got so loopy with Alzheimer's that he didn't know what was going on in her marriage anymore. Pop was very, very Catholic and Mom and the Admiral divorcing would have killed him."

"Oh. Would have freaked my grandparents out if they'd been alive when Dad started getting divorced every two years."

"Yeah. That was a bad few years for my Mom. Pop faded away, she and The Admiral," Tony notices that Tim never calls him 'Dad' anymore, not that he used to, not a lot, but every now and again it'd pop out. It doesn't anymore. "got divorced, Gran was sick, but we didn't know. She
thought she was just run down because taking care of Pop was three full time jobs. They died within a year of each other, and Mom was taking care of them and Sarah, and trying to get on her feet again."

"California didn't have no fault divorces back then, did it?" Tony's thinking he may look into their divorce papers, too. The custody set up for Sarah may be informative of what was going on.

"Don't know. But even if it went 'well' which it probably did, a long, messy divorce would have looked bad so he would have tried to avoid it, it would have required breaking everything up." Tim's feeling pretty tired and listless just going over that and Tony can see it.

"Sorry, this sucks to talk about, doesn't it?"

"Rumor has it, it gets better."

Tony shrugs at that, not in his experience. "She's been gone forty years, I don't find talking about it any easier."

Tim sighs. He knows the 'she' in question is Tony's mom. "Yeah." He taps his fingers on the top of the desk. With the situation with his own parents being so messed up, Tim's never really asked any questions about Tony's family. Tony's told him things, and Tim listens and nods, but he never dug any deeper. "Tony, what happened to her?" He's heard stories about her, about who she was and the sort of things she'd make Tony do. When he was new to the team those stories focused on the Little Lord Fauntleroy obsession, and the vampire themed home and just weird stuff. As more time went by, they got stories about going to the movies and quiet time, and… And he doesn't know what happened to Tony's mom.

Tony smiles softly, sadness in his eyes. "I don't really know." He exhales. "I think, but I don't know, she was schizophrenic. There were times when she was normal and good to be with, and we'd see movies, and go into the city, and I think she was on medication then. And then there were times where she'd be ripping out the electric lights and making sure everything was lit with candles because it'd keep us safe. Or drinking all the time and fighting with my Dad. And, uh… One day I come home from school, and the housekeeper takes me to the hospital, my dad was already there and she was 'sick,' and for three days we stayed there, but she didn't get better. I think she ODed on something." Tony blinks, hard, and gives Tim a see, forty years, not getting any easier look, and Tim nods. "I never looked into it any deeper. She just got sick one day and died, and then I was in boarding school until I went to college."

They sit there quietly for a few more seconds and then Tony forces a grin onto his face. "God, that's depressing. So, Silk Road 4, is that something you can do?"

Tim picks up his sub and takes a bite from it. "Not easy, but yeah, I think we can."
More doctors' appointments, must be Friday.

"It's looking good, Tim. Your tarsals are coming along nicely. The vibrational heads have gotten them healed up a lot faster than expected. You're going home cast-free on your foot, which means you can start, gingerly, putting some weight on that foot."

"I can stop using the crutch?" Tim asks.

Dr. Kent nods, but not enthusiastically. "For about two steps at a time. You can start working on putting some weight on your foot, but not all the time. We're going to stay with the braces for now, bones heal a lot faster than the ligaments and tendons that ripped when your ankle dislocated, but no more casts. Time to work on just getting everything moving again."

Tim exhales, happy to hear it. "How about?" He touches his right arm.

Kent shakes his head. "Nothing new for that today. Next Friday we'll rescan, see how your shoulder is doing. At the very least, we'll size down some-" That annoys Tim. Yes, he's not moving his arm at all, so he's losing muscle mass, but he doesn't want to be. "And if it looks like your shoulder joint is solid, we'll see about moving you down to a cast for your wrist and hand. So, with any luck, another week and you get to start working on shoulder and elbow range of motion again." Kent checks his notes. "Actually, no matter what, next cast you get to start using your pinky and ring finger again."

Tim supposes that's good news, but it's not like he can type with seven fingers, not when the three missing ones are the ones he does the most with. But still, that's a little bit more of himself he's getting back. Another inch closer to getting his body back.

He'd be happier about that inch if the finish line wasn't ten miles off. But, if an inch is what he's got, an inch he'll take.

"Only four?" Tim's hobbled his way down to Autopsy to go visit Jimmy and talk about his pain medication.

He's sitting on Jimmy's chair while Dr. Allan hovers about in the background shuffling something, trying to look like he's not listening.

Jimmy's leaning over his desk, next to Tim, initialing papers while talking to him. "1000 mg a day. 500 for the first shot, and either 500 twelve hours later, or one 250 at twelve and eighteen. Take your pick. Or stop being a twit about it and take the damn Tylenol 3."

Tim's looking up at Jimmy, how tempted he is to get a pain killer that's not fighting out of its weight class clear on his face. He sighs. "I want to start really working again."

Jimmy pats his good shoulder, sympathetic, but his voice has an edge to it. "Then you're going to hurt. I'm not letting you screw your stomach or stroke out because you're too stubborn to take a narcotic."

Jimmy can see Tim's got frustrated all over his face.

"It's not a race, Tim. Take the pain meds. The better you feel, the more you'll move, the more you move the faster you'll heal, faster you heal, the less medication you'll need in the long run."
That gets an eye roll, but one that's resigned to the fact that Jimmy does know what he's talking about. "I am so bored!"

"Sorry."

"I'm done my email backlog. I've got all the requisitions done. All I'm doing in there is sitting on my ass collecting dust."

"You've got that much free time?" Jimmy can't believe that.

"How long would it take you to get done with your housekeeping if you didn't do anything but it?"

Jimmy inclines his head, especially with the automated paperwork taking most of the housekeeping off his plate, that's a good point. "Go home, write, do something useful. Get the welcome packet ready for… Brand right?"

"Brand does start Monday. Which I'm looking forward to. But, I've already got the welcome packet done, and all the stuff she's got to fill out is on her desk, already." It'd taken him a lot longer than he'd like to admit, but he was bored enough to go down (up, eventually he'll get his mental compass used to the basement instead of the third floor) to HR, and pick up all of the forms (fortunately there were enough of them he could tuck them between the cast and his side, and they didn't slip out) and then hobble back to her desk and set her up.

"Good God, you are bored, aren't you?"

Tim nods. "I can't go home because I can't drive, and Gibbs dropped me off here and headed to the house after, so I'm here until Abby takes me home. Can't write here because I can't type, and I'm not about to be saying that story out loud in my office."

"You've got a door."

"Yeah, but they come in, and I'm not getting caught saying…" Which is when Tim notices that Dr. Allan isn't even pretending to mess around with whatever it is in the back of Autopsy and is just happily leaning against one of the tables, listening away to the two of them. Allan doesn't need to know precisely what he's writing these days, so Tim edits mid-sentence. "It's NSFW and that's that. I don't want my guys messing with stuff like that here, so I'm not, too."

"So, you're saying the next bits are interesting?" Jimmy looks intrigued. He's heard second-hand that Tim's written some chapters of the book that Abby really liked.

"Uh… Yeah."

"Breena and Gibbs and I still in it?"

Tim may be blushing at this point. He's written some non-smutty bits, but not a lot of them, and yes, Breena's in some of the smutty bits, and Jimmy's (sort of) in a few, but no Gibbs, and with the way Jimmy said that last bit, it sounds like all three of them may be in the interesting bits, and he really doesn't want Allan whispering that around work, so he modifies his answer some. "Mostly writing stuff with Abby and I. Not so much with you guys, yet. Outlining stuff with you in it, but no real writing."

Allan definitely looks intrigued by this, and Tim's wondering if Jimmy's cool with him knowing about it, or, if, given that Jimmy's back is to Allan, he just doesn't know that Allan's listening in. Tim glances, meaningfully, toward Allan, and Jimmy's eyes follow his, but he doesn't seem to be bothered by the fact Allan's just hovering around back there.
"Well, write some boring parts that the Minions won't mind if they walk into. Gotta do set design and stuff like that, right?"

Tim nods. He's bad at setting. Not describing it, he's good at describing a setting, but the reason why all of his books to date happen in the real world with real people is that making things up whole cloth isn't his strong suit.

But he's got an internet connection, two hours to kill, and an idea of the vibe of the place, he can kill two hours on research.

He stands up slowly and takes a step, wincing, not reaching for his crutch. Jimmy just about leaps to his side, getting a hand under his good arm, steadying him. "What are you doing?"

"Doc says I can take a few steps without the crutch."

"Not in here you aren't! Not like this. There's nothing on your good side for you to grab onto if you wobble, and the floors in here are linoleum over concrete. You fall here, and it'll hurt." Jimmy grabs Tim's crutch and hands it to him. "The idea is to heal, not injure yourself even more by doing too much, too fast, stupidly. Breena and I are coming over to dinner tonight." Once again, Shabbos is at their house, though with the way he's healing up and hopefully walking more soon, and maybe, if things are really looking up, able to walk up steps, this is probably the last week at their place. "When we get there, we'll redo your PT plans, okay."

"Fine." Tim takes two steps. "It's going to hurt, isn't it?"

Jimmy nods. "Take the Tylenol 3, even if you don't want it in your system when you're at work, take it so we can work on your PT and you can sleep easier."

Tim sighs. "Okay. When I get home."

"Good. See you tonight."

"Thanks, Jimmy." And Tim slowly makes his way out.

When he sees the elevators close, Jimmy turns to Dr. Allan. "Enjoying that?"

Allan inclines his head to indicate, yes. He is finding the dynamics and relationships of his new job interesting. "I thought we aren't supposed to treat our family and friends."

Jimmy shrugs. "We're not. He's got a real PT he's seeing, and I'm not handling any of the real work. Mostly I'm... I don't know, keeping him pointed in the right direction and trying to save him from being stupid."

Allan looks amused by that. "Full time job?"

"Not usually. You know how it is, healing is long and frustrating, and it's easy to want to take short cuts."

Allan nods at that, and Jimmy wonders if he knows about it from a physical level or just the emotional one. "He writes books?"

Jimmy nods.

"Like real books, ones I could go out and buy?"
Jimmy nods at that, too.

"And you're in them?"

Jimmy can see that Allan finds that idea uncomfortable. "When he's writing, he's Thom E. Gemcity. The last of his current series comes out in November. They're mysteries based on us."

"Last?"

"He's starting on a new… not sure if it's a one shot or series. I don't think he does, either."

Allan thinks about that for a moment. "Is it odd, Dr. Palmer, to see yourself through his eyes? I mean, that's how the books work, right?"

Jimmy's never thought about it that way, and he's suddenly thinking about going back and reading The Traitor Within, where Pimmy Jalmer dies and James Relamp shows up. He does know, though that level of it never hit him, that he likes Relamp a whole hell of a lot better, because Jalmer was this cross between awkward, goofy, and creepy that set his teeth on edge.

Which also gets him thinking if that's how, back then, he looked to other people, too. In which case the whole 'Autopsy Gremlin' nickname makes a hell of a lot more sense.

He also knows that Relamp is the version of him that Tim saw after they got to know each other, and that Relamp reflects a version of himself that he likes. The image he wants to see in the mirror. He wonders if Daegan M'Gy will be someone he likes even better.

Allan's still waiting for him to say something, so Jimmy pulls his thoughts together and says, "Everyone you ever meet will see you somehow, and even with your dearest loves, you'll never really know what it is they see. With Tim, you know. If you read the books, you'll see, especially the first one, all of the characters besides Amy and Cathy." Tommy's partner who had been killed, off screen. The series starts up with the hunt for her killer and a new member of the team, Lisa, joining up. "Are mean and rough." Jimmy smiles a bit. "A whole bunch of jerks who sort of all tolerate each other. That gets a lot better over the series, the characters get backstories: they learn how to deal with each other. That's fifty-fifty us getting better with each other, and they're stories, so he can't just dump it all in at once. But if you read all of them, you'll see us go from a bunch of jerks who sort of tolerate each other into a family."

Allan's looking interested, like he might actually read those books.

Jimmy sighs, there's a downside to reading those books. "Just, if you do read them… Nothing, and I mean nothing that Pimmy Jalmer does ever actually happened in real life."

Allan looks disturbed. "How bad is it?"

Jimmy shakes his head and rolls his eyes. "I don't care what he and Breena say about it being a dream and symbolism, I'm a freaking saint for putting up with him."

---

Penny Langston is used to waiting for the other shoe to drop. She spent a good third of her married life with her husband actively fighting, waiting for the sound of footsteps on her front porch. For four months, her husband and two oldest sons were in Vietnam. For the years that followed, at any given time at least one of her men were in active danger, somewhere.

So she's used to that faint nagging pull of fear.
Which does not mean she likes it.

She's feeling it for John right now, very strongly. And for everything else that's going on with him, for all the pain and horror and anguish of the quagmire of shit, she still doesn't want him murdered, but for all Tim said about not going after him, she is not stupid, and she is not unaware, and she is not bad at reading people.

Something very bad is going to happen to John, and the only hope she has for it is that Tony or Ziva or that other Agent will find something he did and get him in jail before Jethro or Tim kills him.

The worst part of waiting is that she's still part of this family. She's with these people every few days. Right now, she's at the house, spending hours with Ducky and Jethro.

On the surface, everything is calm. They're wrapping up the stone facing on the bottom three feet of the house, getting all the masonry looking nice, filling in the tiny bits, stuff like that. They're talking, working together, but the tension is there.

She can feel Jethro's anger, because she feels it, too. Every time she sees Tim she wants to rage, wants to scream at that idiot child of hers for doing this, wants to hit him, hard, wants to make him hurt and make him grieve. She just, unlike the rest, doesn't want him dead. She wants him broken, repentant. She wants him to have the full on Come-to-Jesus-epiphany, wants all of the anger and pride and rigid identity to shatter and... On one level, even if it happens it doesn't matter; she knows there's no shot of John ever coming to terms with the rest of the family. She knows he will never be welcome in any place that is Tim's home, which means here, or the home she shares with Ducky, let alone his own home, or Jethro's, but she can hope, at least, or dream maybe, of a day where they might at least talk on the phone again, or maybe, if he ever really got it, have a cup of coffee face to face again.

She places another tiny bit of stone, covering a few inches of wall, shaking her head. It's not going to happen. She misses his voice. It feels stupid, but she wants a few more words, real, spoken words, not invective screamed at each other.

But she can't get them, because for all she hopes, and for all the dreams, she knows John isn't going to change.

Which means waiting, tense, to see how the other shoe falls, dreading how bad it will hurt.

There are, hopefully, distractions from this. Something that gets their mind off of it, and gets them working, together, on something good, something useful and healing.

"Next Friday, I've been invited to join a meeting of people who feel that current immigration laws are problematic," she says as they break for lunch.

Gibbs looks startled for a second and then nods. "Been so long since I thought about that, I almost forgot it."

Ducky unpacks the lunch box he brought. "We have been a bit distracted of late." He, too, thinks getting them working on something other than John is a good plan, if for no other reason than his continued domestic harmony. Living with a woman who is, rightfully, tense and jumpy is not fun. Not that he doesn't understand and sympathize, but, it is his experience that any emotional difficulty goes better with long, hard work on a worthy cause. At least, that's how they've always dealt with problems in the past.
"Problematic how?" Gibbs asks, taking a sandwich from Ducky, and opening the cooler of cold drinks, handing the first of the icy Gatorades to Penny.

"Thank you, Jethro." July on the Potomac. It's got to be close to 95 degrees, and even with boat loads of water and working on the shady parts of the house, they are **hot**. "Specifically, they want to talk about people in need of asylum and how to get it for them."

"Interesting?" Gibbs isn't sure if she's being vague to be vague, or if that's all she's got on this.

Penny inclines her head a bit, indicating that she also doesn't know if they're going to be talking about a specific person in need of help, or if this is a political meeting about lobbying for change on the rules for asylum seekers. "No promises or anything, but… Maybe it's time to get that boat ready to hit the water."

"Just got to stick a name on her, and she's ready to go."

"Then pick a name, Jethro. If there's something for us to do, I want us to be ready."

He smiles at her, but she doesn't smile back. "Whenever you need to go, I'll be ready."

---

Abbi didn't make it to Shabbos that week, which actually suits Jethro just fine. It's not that he doesn't want her there, he does. He's hit the point where seeing her is the highlight of his week, and he feels a little boost in his mood when her number pops up on his phone.

But, there's something that he wants to toss open to the family, but doesn't necessarily want to talk to her about.

So, today's the day.

"We're working on the house tomorrow." They all nod at that. Another bright and sunny Saturday means working on the house. "And Jimmy's going to help me get the boat into the boathouse."

That's the first Jimmy's heard of that, but it's good cover for another week of sniper practice. It's been raining a lot so he hasn't gotten much practice in beyond working on taking the rifle apart and putting it back together. Which he can now do with the rifle in its silk bag. He doesn't need to see, or directly touch it, anymore. Supposedly that's progress.

"You all know she was supposed to be Shannon," Gibbs says. He doesn't want to make a big deal out of it, but they all know about this, and he might as well just get it out and say it, rather than pretend he doesn't hear them gossiping about it later. "But… like Jimmy said, she can't be Shannon if I've got a future beyond living in the past. Can't be Shannon if I'm hoping on taking Abbi out there. So, I need a name for her, and I don't have one. I'd like it if you'd all think about names."

"Do you have any themes? Ideas for what the name should focus on?" Ziva asks. "Or should it just sound nice?"

"Hope. The future. Better days ahead, hard days behind."

"I like Better Days," Abby says. "Or does it have to be a girl's name?"

"Hope's a girl's name," Tony adds.

"It doesn't have to be a girl's name, and I like the idea of 'Hope' but I'm not christening her that. Want something more… I don't know. Something."
Penny puts her wine glass down, and looks at Jethro, "I like Better Days, too. It's light, relaxed, like a boat ride's supposed to be."

Tim says something under his breath to that, which may have been, "Or it's the Bataan Death March," but he's quiet enough no one hears him.

"Eos, the dawn of a new day. Elpis, the personification of hope. Antevorta is the goddess of the future. Amphitrite was the consort of Neptune and the goddess of the sea. There's also-

"Duck, it'd help if I could spell them."

"Does it have to have a name?" Breena asks.

Gibbs nods. "Yes. Can't register it without one, and I can't take it out of the boathouse and onto the water until I've got it registered."

"Hoping to get sailing soon?" Jimmy asks, thinking that might end up being part of their training exercises. They're less than three hours from international waters, so load up, grab some targets, and it wouldn't take long before they were not only nowhere near anyone else, but outside the reach of US law enforcement.

"Yeah. Not sure when exactly, but when the weather breaks, and it starts to cool down again, I'd like to get out. Nothing like fall sunset and night on the ocean." And, while that may not have been something he was planning a minute ago, he is now, because that's true, there really isn't anything like a warm day and cool night, out on a calm ocean, billions of stars overhead, water lapping gently at the hull below.

Penny's smiling (something they've seen all too little of lately) and nodding at that. "Nothing else like that, at all."

"We'll have to do that. You and I, some fall night." Part of this is cover for whatever they may be doing in the days ahead, part of it is a genuine invitation to spend time together, both of them doing something they love.

"Certainly."

---

Jimmy and Breena and the girls stay late after dinner.

"Well..." Jimmy says, staring at Tim. They're downstairs right now, while Abby and Breena handle tubby time.

"Uh, yeah?" Tim says back. He's feeling pretty relaxed and mellow right now. Possibly having something to do with two glasses of wine, a Tylenol 3, and a very good dinner.

"Lots of stuff to grab, soft, carpeted floor, and sofas all over the place to land on. Up you get."

"Now?"

Jimmy wiggles his finger, a gesture that means up. "Get your ass up. You decided you wanted me as a physical therapist, well, guess what?"

Tim sighs. "Great. You were a drill sergeant in a past life, weren't you?"

Jimmy giggles a bit at that idea, and so does Tim. After a second, Jimmy gets serious again. "Quit yapping and get to it."
Tim scoots himself to the edge of his seat, and stands up. It's hard and it really hurts. He's biting his lip and has his eyes closed. He can feel each break in his foot, and there is way more play than he likes in his knee and ankle, but, for the first time in weeks, he is standing on his own feet, without any help.

For about three seconds, and then down he goes again. Jimmy shifts a bit, gets a hand behind him, so he doesn't hit the sofa at full speed, but hit it he does, cursing with relief.

"Okay, that's good. How bad does it hurt?"

"Bad enough I'm considering the exercises you're making me do for my ankle mild discomfort. And given how much pain medication I'm on…"

Jimmy smirks at that. "I'll call that a five on the one to ten scale."

Tim nods a bit. "Only because it's fast. I can feel everything when I do that. Breaks, dislocations. I stand on it and everything screams."

Jimmy nods, sitting in front of Tim, carefully palpating his foot.

Tim jerks his foot away. "That hurts!"

"Yeah, I know." Jimmy grabs his foot again, continuing his examination, a bit more gently this time. "Trying to see how messed up the soft tissue is. The thing about broken bones is they're not broken or healing in a vacuum. There's all these muscles and tendons and ligaments and nerves and blood vessels around them, and if you're going to have functional limbs you need to make sure they haven't just turned into one big knot of scar tissue."

"Great. How's it feel?"

"Like a foot."

Tim flashes him a *quit dicking with me* look. "Like a foot's supposed to feel?"

"Yeah, more or less. Everything is going to hurt for a while because you haven't been moving it much, but the more you do, the better it'll get." Jimmy sits back on his heels. "Look, if you can stand the boredom, keep taking the meds. The more you walk, the more you flex, the stronger and more flexible, and the *faster* everything heals. There's the reason your OB had Abby up and walking around twenty-four hours after the c-section, and that was to make sure the scars healed up strong and flexible. Your Ortho and PT is making you move as much and as quickly as possible for the same reason."

Same choice staring him in the face, use his body or use his brain. "I hate this."

"I know. But… look, I know you, you'll be off the narcotics by the time we get to any of the real work on your shoulder, so, at least now, while you can, baby yourself some. There's nothing you're doing down in the basement right now that's worth this pain."

"You don't know that."

"Please," Now Jimmy's flashing his *quick dicking with me* look. "You'd have gone cold turkey and dragged me up to Leon to tell him you could work if that was the case."

Tim inclines his head a bit; Jimmy's right about that. "What would you have said?"
"At your size, twenty-four hours off means you're safe to work. Won't necessarily be as sharp as cold sober, but if it's an all-hands-on-deck emergency, you're clear to hack. Especially since you've got that software in so you don't have to try to type."

"Thanks."

"No problem." They hear a loud splash and giggling from upstairs. "I think Molly just showed Kelly and Anna her latest trick."

Tim can hear Abby and Breena corralling babies who are laughing uproariously.

"What's she doing?"

"She's figured out how to pull herself up on the arm rail and cannonball off the side of the tub, and she's really fast at it. Little booger waits until you're holding Anna, washing her off, and scoots up there in a flash, next thing you know everyone is soaked."

Tim's biting his lip, trying not to laugh.

"Yeah, just you wait until you're on tubby time again."

"Tubby time means I've got two working arms. I cannot wait to do tubby time again."

Jimmy smiles at him. "Yeah, I know."

"So, I'm guessing I'm supposed to actually go to your house and mess around with your boat?"

Jimmy says into his phone. He's in his car, heading to Gibbs' place, figuring that the best way to lie is to actually tell the truth.

Gibbs nods and then says, "Yes," because while Jimmy's gotten pretty good at reading his different forms of quiet, it's not exactly easy to do that over the phone.

"I'll be there in fifteen."

It was actually twenty-four minutes later, but, in that he's got cups of coffee, (hot for Gibbs, iced for him) and a collection of cold snacks (high today, 97) he's forgiven for being late.

"So, what do we do?" This doesn't look terribly difficult to Jimmy, from everything he can see the boat is on the trailer which is attached to the truck, so, to him this looks done, but he's also never done anything like this before.

"Nothing, right now." Gibbs tosses Jimmy his keys, opens the door, and Mona goes bounding into the cab, excited by another day out and about at the house.

Jimmy nods at that, slowly. "Are we doing anything at all with her?"

"Lot easier to get her in the water with two guys."

"All right."

They're on the road when Jimmy asks, "So, this is boat number…"

"Three. Built one after everything went wrong with Diane. Built Kelly. Now this one."
Jimmy knows what happened to Kelly, shot full of holes, disassembled by Abby, logged as evidence. It's probably, still in a million pieces, in the deep storage evidence lock up for NCIS. "What happened to Diane's boat?"

"Finished it a bit after Stephanie and I split, filled it with newspaper and gasoline, lit it, and pushed it into a lake."

"You spent years building a boat to set fire to it?"


"I'd imagine a wood boat filled with flammable materials would be." Another thought hits Jimmy. Gibbs gave Kelly away. "Um… Is this the first one of these you've actually sailed?"

Gibbs nods.

"You do actually know how to sail, right? This isn't something you did once three decades ago, right?"

That gets Gibbs' don't be a smartass look aimed at him. "Just checking."

Five silent miles later Gibbs says, "Everything about Diane burned. How we started, how we ended, all of it. And Stephanie was more fire. By the time that one was done, so was I. Done with them. Done with married. So, out to the lake, a lot of bourbon in me, a lot of gasoline, kindling, and two wedding rings in Diane, and up in smoke they went."

"I could build Kelly, but I couldn't sail her. Too many memories. Building her was good, giving her away was good, Leyla and Amira and Mike had some great times with her." Gibbs shrugs. "Just like her namesake, I hated how she ended up, but it was out of my hands."

Jimmy listens to that, and sighs quietly. "Yeah, you really need a name for her."

"Ideas?"

Jimmy shrugs. "Don't ask Tim. He's terrible with names."

Gibbs rolls his eyes at that. Not that he disagrees, after all he's read most of Tim's books, (he decided not to go find the sexy ones) so he knows that Tim is bad with names. He also wasn't desperate enough to ask Tim for a name.

Once she's in the water, bobbing gently against the trailer, a thought hits Jimmy. "Um… Isn't it easier to get the name on her if she's not swaying in the water?"

Gibbs nods at that. "So… We taking her back out again in a week?"

He shakes his head. "I'll put her name on clear vinyl, and then attach that." That's not standard operating procedure for naming a ship, but, if he wants to put a new name and numbers on it quickly and easily, that's the way to go about doing it.

Actually, he thinks about that some more. Ducky and Penny have that lawyer on standby, if he were to… build a corporation or a non-profit or whatever the hell they do, that corporation could own a
boat. That boat could be registered out of… wherever works best. The fact that that boat would be identical to a boat owned by Leroy Jethro Gibbs, but had a different name, tags, and flag, would just be convenient. He could swap out his tags if he needed to, and because they'd both be legit, he wouldn't have to worry about a deep background check on them.

He makes a mental note to mention that to Duck and Penny, and then sighs quietly because now he needs two names.

"Okay, you unhook her, and I'll sail her into the boat house."

So, Jimmy gets to it.

Saturday had been a long and full day. Ducky and Penny had spent close to eight hours at the house. Today's job for everyone who isn't Tim: attach the log cabin looking siding to the house. With the whole crew working they got the entire first floor and half of the second floor attached. (Tim continued to work on floor plans. As the only one besides Penny with any engineering background, and unable to do any heavy lifting, he's become the unofficial architect for the house. To say this makes him nervous is an understatement. To say that someone who actually has a degree in architecture is going to look over this plan of his before they start ripping out walls is a fact.)

That's a good day's work for eight hours.

And so, 'round dinner time, Duck and Penny head home to a quiet night of take out, hot showers to soothe sore joints and muscles, ice packs to cut down on any swelling and inflammation that may arise as the result of said day of hard work, followed by a lazy night of reading and talking.

That's how most of the night went, pleasant, warm, and comfortable. In that Penny isn't crying or, from the looks of it, wrecked by anger and guilt, this is one of the best nights they've had in weeks. As they settle into bed, light sheet and blanket draped over them, Penny, who had for the last few weeks turned her back toward Ducky, a sign of a need for comfort, snuggling, and sleep, tonight reached for him, facing him, a sign of desired kisses, it turned into a very good night, indeed.

While it's true that anyone who knows Ducky knows that he likes to hear himself talk, it's also true that there is a select group of ladies who are familiar with the fact that, properly relaxed, and in a splendid post-coital mood, that he can wax poetic and often goofy toward his companion, and in that tonight was the first time in weeks that he's been in such a mood, he is feeling especially effusive.

"I have always felt there was a special melody to the name Penelope," his soft Scottish burr caresses the syllables of Penny's name as his hand slips over her arm that's resting across his chest. By this point, she's well-used to his post-sex chatter and finds it soothing and relaxing. "Donald, of course, is frank and boring, no music at all, but Penelope, beautiful sounds flowing one after the other."

"Mmm." Penny's never been very impressed by her name. It's just a name to her.

"Rhymes with Calliope, muse of epic poetry, which is fitting I suppose, in that Penelope is the leading lady of an epic poem."

Penny exhales, slow and deep, drifting, her lips pressed to Ducky's shoulder. "Uh huh." She knows all about Penelope from the Odyssey. Long ago, before feminism, before learning to stand on her own, she was a child bride with a husband often away for long stretches of time. "Penelope is faithful," she wore that on her heart and kept it close as a mantra. If that Penelope could wait twenty years, running her husband's home, keeping gold-digging suitors at bay while raising her son, she could handle six months or a year.
And she did, but they were long months and longer years.

Ducky's thinking along a similar line, remembering reading the Odyssey years ago, and two words, inspired by his beloved's name and the hunt for another name spring to mind, "Semper Fidelus."

That wakes Penny up a bit, those aren't words she's expecting. "Mmm? Semper Fi?"

Ducky kisses her forehead. "Jethro's boat. The hunt for a fitting name, something that captures what that boat was supposed to be about, a testament to his loves, and to who he is and who he hopes to be, faithful to his need to protect people."

Penny thinks about that. "Shannon and Kelly are not forgotten, but not the bedrock of his life anymore, shifting his passion and focus to what comes ahead, and promise of his faith to that, plus all of his Marine life wrapped up in it." She's smiling at that. "I think it works."

By Sunday, Abby's got a new morning routine. Wake up, feel like crap, grab Zofran, take Zofran, stay very, very, VERY still for about ten minutes, tentatively sit up, nibble a few saltines, sip some lukewarm ginger ale, and, by then, she's not exactly feeling spiffy, but she's good enough to face the day.

Usually, by noon her hormones figure out what they're doing, and she's feeling better.

Thus, she is, according to a not very scientific survey of Breena and Penny, the only woman in existence to ever have morning sickness only in the morning.

By Sunday, Tim also has a new morning routine. He wakes up, grumbles a bit, grabs his pain medication, dry swallows it, sits himself up and starts on his range of motion exercises. He pretty much has to start with them, because apparently his body is under the impression that all of his injured areas should fuse tight while he sleeps, and if he doesn't start out stretching, he's pretty much not going to be moving anytime soon.

Abby's still mid-stay very still and he's very tentatively starting on his torso twists (which Jimmy said he could start today) when he says, "Remember how we used to wake up? All snuggled together, maybe a little sex, warm and comfy?"

"Yeah."

"Then we did some yoga, grabbed Kelly, and got on with the morning." Yoga in the sense of quiet, meditative time together more or less died when Kelly was born. However, they did usually manage to get ten or so minutes of stretching out, and then one of them would grab her and take care of her morning routine and breakfast for them while the other one finished working out and got a shower. Next day, they'd swap. Little hectic and crowded, but it was getting the job done.

And now it's not. Abby's sleeping every second she can, and Tim's just getting to the point where he can do a few, very basic, seated poses and hip openers. He's mostly doing his breathing, then working on stretching out his calf and shoulder a bit, today he's adding in the twists for his ribs, and if all goes well, he'll eventually stand up and take a few steps.

"Yep." Abby reaches for a saltine and sits up.

"That's my anniversary goal. October 23, 2016, four years after our second first date, we're starting the day wrapped in each other, feeling good, making love."

Abby smiles at that. "End the day that way, too."
Sunday was another bright and sunny day, which meant another day at the house, and by the end of it, when the rest of the family had headed off to their own homes, Ducky asks to see the boat.

"Sure, Duck." Jethro'd done the grand tour yesterday, but he's fine with showing her off again.

The three of them head to the boat house, and for a moment stand there, watching her bob slightly with the gentle rise and fall of the water.

"I think I may have stumbled upon a name for her."

Jethro looks pleased at that and his face is telling Ducky to say more.

"Semper Fidelus."

Gibbs smiles at that. He can see the angles on that, and he also deeply approves of a name that is welcoming to Abbi as well as summing up what this boat meant and means to him.

Penny rests her hand on Semper's bow, "She's a symbol of faithfulness, to the past, to the future, a commitment to doing the right thing."

Gibbs nods. "I'll get to work on it. Now all we need is another one." This time Penny and Ducky are staring at him in confusion, but the minute or two in which he explains what he's looking for in the way of two registries has them both nodding in concert. "Come on up and in."

He gives Penny a hand up, and Ducky as well, though both of them are capable of climbing in themselves. Below decks he has several storage areas, and, towards the bow, built in above a small desk area, is a small, letter-box looking drawer that he taps. "This one's for carrying her papers. Every boat has one, where you put your charts, your registration, whatever other information you need." He opens it, and it's about five inches deep. "I'm thinking I can modify this, put two shelves in and a lock. Turn the key half-way, and only the bottom shelf opens, turn the key the whole way and the top shelf will open, giving you the second one. Keep whichever set I'm supposed to show in the bottom one, and the second set in the top, only pull them out in an emergency." He takes one step over to the bunks. The top bunk is small, a good size for a child, but an adult won't fit up there. He gently taps the wooden planks that support the top bunk. "Hollow one or two of these out, and I can carry the alternative registration and name in here. Things get hairy, I can swap names and regs in less than five minutes. As long as I've got a bit of heads up, I can sail right past whoever's looking for one ship by carrying the marks of the other. Name her Semper Fidelus and fly the Marine flag as well as the US one and no one'll look twice at her, unless they're actively tipped off."

Ducky and Penny look impressed by that.

"So, tomorrow, I'll get her registered. You guys see about getting the second registration up, and… come Friday…"

Ducky feels a rush of anticipation. He knows that most likely all Friday will accomplish is introductions to another set of people who may, or may not, get them one step closer to the active part of their plan, still there is the thrill of the grand conspiracy moving forward and he's enjoying it.

"Come Friday," Ducky says.

"Friday," Penny finishes.
Brand

Tim's eyeballing his dresser. He's standing, sans crutch (though most of his weight is on his good leg) and getting ready to grab something, and then actually, while holding said something, walk (two steps) back to his bed.

It's progress. He grabs his boxers, socks, and jeans, and limps the two steps back to his bed.

Even though the last cast only covered his foot, it's still a lot easier to get dressed without it. He's not worried about catching it in his boxers or jeans, which is nice. And, in a 'look on the bright side' sort of way, holding his foot extended so he can get his jeans on is sort of like PT, getting all those muscles stretched out again.

Plus, first time in weeks he's been able to wear socks and shoes on both feet. Sure, the sock goes under the ankle brace and the shoe over, but, as he checks himself in the mirror, fully dressed, he's back in what he considers his 'real clothing' and that feels good.

Feels more like himself, less like everyone is staring.

He grabs the crutch and begins to head off to face the day.

"You text Jimmy? Let him know you need more pills," Tim asks as they idle at a stop light.

"Nope. OB appointment tomorrow," Abby replies.

He smiles at that. "Get to see little dude!"

She's smiling back. "Yep!" They're both quiet for a few seconds. "Need to talk to Heather, ask if she's on board with taking care of two baby McGees."

Tim sighs. "I really hope so. I love Heather. She's awesome. And I don't want to have to find a new nanny, once was enough. What did she have in her profile?"

Abby shrugs. "I don't remember. But even if she had it listed that she was cool with watching twelve kids, we still need to talk to her."

Tim nods.

"McGee." He's sitting at his desk, looking at pictures of the Isle of Skye, when his phone rings and he answers it.

"There's a kid here, says you're expecting her," says the familiar voice of Burt at the front desk.

"Assuming she's Kristin Brand, she's right. Newest Cybercrime hire. Send her down."

"Her ID checks out, but you still need someone to escort her until she's got her badge."

"I'll be up. Tell her it'll take a bit, okay?" Burt knows why Tim's not going fast these days. He puts the phone back, grabs his crutch, and begins the trek to the first floor.

As he's hobbling out, he sees Manner working away at his desk. He did a good job of making sure Cybercrime didn't imploded while he was out. Actually… That's a combo that could work really
well. Brand has talent coming out her ears. New ideas, new theories, lots of enthusiasm. Manner has a lot of skill, lots of experience. He knows how and why things work. Assuming they don't end up killing each other, they could learn a lot from each other.

He smiles as he heads up. He'll get Kristin settled and once she's in place, say a month from now, she's going to get some assignments with Manner.

---

Kristin Brand feels overwhelmed. She's in her most 'adult' outfit, (a very conservative navy blue suit, cream blouse, pearl necklace, hair pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck) trying her best to not look twelve, but everyone else around her is eyeballing her like she's some sort of interloper who accidentally got lost from the career day field trip and needs to get back to her class before the bus leaves without her.

Burt referring to her as 'a kid' didn't help. And standing there, waiting, and waiting, and waiting isn't making this any easier.

But, finally, she sees Mr. McGee, he waves, heading slowly toward her, and after a second, when he gets past the metal detectors and she can see all of him, including the crutch and the broken arm, and her eyes go wide.

"Hi, Brand."

She goggles a bit, and finally says, "Hi."

He smiles at that, giving off a relaxed vibe, and if she had been staring at anything besides the cast arm, she would have noticed it.

"Come on down, let's get you processed and settled in."

She nods, meeting his gaze, finally sees that he's not annoyed by her staring, and feels a little better. "Okay, sir."

Tim shakes his head. "McGee or Boss, Brand. I work for a living."

She nods at that, too, not getting it, but not about to argue or ask. As the doors to the elevator are opening, she's kicking herself for doing this. Her friends are still at home, getting ready for college. They're playing or messing around with summer jobs, enjoying the last rush of freedom before school starts for real.

She's alone, in a new city where she knows literally no one, with a driver's license so new that it still smells like hot plastic, a brand new car, and a tiny, furnished apartment her parents had to co-sign for. Everything she owns is in six boxes, four of which are still packed, and right now she's wishing she had stayed home.

They head toward McGee's office, and once in there, she looks around again, really seeing it this time. (She's not sure she got this far last time. She knows she messed around with Howard and Ngyn —Brand looks around but doesn't see them here right now—but she doesn't think she was in here.) So, as McGee sits down, saying, "I'd pull a chair over for you, but can't really do that yet," she gets the hint she's supposed to sit down, and does so.

As she sits, she sees the target with the smiley face shot into it, then looks back at McGee, broken arm, walking with a crutch, and sits there, staring, unblinking, wondering what on earth she could have possibly just gotten herself into.
Tim smiles to himself as he hears the elevator bong. He quickly glances up and can see Manner's look of annoyed shock as he walks Brand past his desk. *Gonna be fun.* He's sort of happily anticipating sticking Manner with Brand in a sick sort of way. He's got the sense that this is how Gibbs probably felt about sending him and Tony out together for the first time.

He's sitting down, getting comfortable, and Brand is staring at him like he's a train wreck. He can read the *What the hell did I get myself into?* look on her face. So he lets her stare, lets her get her bearings. He tries a gentle explanation for what he was doing, but she's still too shocked to really engage with him.

Finally he says, a little louder than the first two gambits, "Do you want to know what happened?"

She jerks a little at that, his voice having finally gotten through, and blushes, embarrassed at having been caught staring. "Uh, yes, sir."

Tim sighs, he's got a feeling they'll be doing this a lot. She's got to get comfortable before she can get out of her how-to-deal-with-adults politely training. "McGee or Boss. I intentionally did not become, sir. All of your co-workers, call them by their first or last names. They'll let you know which. You're a full member of this team; no one in Cybercrime is Mr. or Mrs. to you. Field agents are Agent Insert Last Name Here until you're invited to use their names. Everyone else, Mr. or Ms. is fine. If you run into Leon," she doesn't know who that is, "Director Vance, you can call him, sir." She's sitting on the edge of her chair looking like she's about to leap out and run away. "You can breathe, Brand. It's okay to relax here." He eyes her outfit, wondering if that's part of why she's acting so nervous. "It's in the employee handbook, which you'll eventually have to read and initial, but the dress code down here is casual. If you're dressed like this because it makes you comfortable, that's fine. Be as formal as you like. If this is what your parents picked out thinking it'd make a good impression/make you look like an adult, wear what you like. Down here, you don't have to pretend to be anyone you aren't."

"Uh, yes." She's still looking very fish out of water.

"Official story for this," Tim gestures to himself, "is that I went to a conference and got in a car accident on the way home. The official story is bull. The real story is classified, and I'd prefer it stays that way. But suffice it to say, there is a reason why you and everyone else on this floor will have and maintain FLETC martial arts and firearms proficiencies."

"This happened to you at work?" Brand looks horrified by that.

Tim's realizing that she probably did not sign up with the idea that people would beat the shit out of her in this job. So he quickly fills in, "Not here. I was a field agent for fourteen years, so I get sent on some interesting jobs. You are not a field agent, nor are most of the people around you. You'll likely never run into a situation where you'll need to do anything more violent than staple paperwork. *But* if you ever need them, you will have the skills to defend yourself."

She doesn't look like she's buying that.

"DC can be a scary place. I'm 6'1", have a martial arts proficiency, and will not voluntarily go into some parts of it without a gun. My wife can shoot. When my daughter is your age, she'll be able to shoot, too. Trust me, this is a skill that's way better to have and not need than it is to need and not have."

"Okay, so…"

"It's in the handbook. We offer classes here. They won't issue you a gun because you're not a field
agent, so you'll have to buy your own."

"I don't like guns."

Common enough. "That's fine. You don't have to like them. You still have to be able to use one, and that'll be a lot easier if you own one to practice with. I try to get everyone to the range at least once a month; you can come with us or not as you see fit, but you do have to learn how to use a gun."

She's looking really unhappy about that, and he's wondering if she has some of the same issues he did, great with her brain, not so great with her body. "How long do I have to learn this?"

"By the end of your Probie year, you've got to have your certifications, and re-cert every year after. Trust me, you'll get it. I got it, and I was awful with a gun at first. Plus, it's a really good way to blow off steam and clear your head after too many hours online."

That gets a tiny smile as Brand seems to remember that Tim actually does know his way around a computer.

He stands up, wishing he'd thought of this before they got seated. "Come on, let me show you around."

It's a pretty quick tour, partially because she's seen all of Cybercrime before, partially because Tim's not taking her anywhere out of the way. He directs them to her desk. "This is yours. Set it up however you like. If you want or need something you don't have, shoot me an email and I'll see if we can get it for your or figure out how to jigger something up to make do with. That pile of paperwork," he points to the three inches of forms next to her computer, "all need to be filled out, in black or blue ink, perfectly, or else Delores the HR Troll comes up and yells at us. I'll probably be gone before you get that done." He's still not back full time, and having gone back on the Tylenol 3, he's got a nap and more PT up for this afternoon. "But, get that done and have Manner," he points to Manner's desk, "show you the system. He can run you through how we work cases. That'll probably be all of today for you.

"Hours are flexible. You need to be logged in and working forty a week. Since we work world-wide now, it doesn't matter which forty you're here. You need to have at least ten off for every sixteen on, though. And if we end up with shifts that need more coverage, I ask the computer to start picking ID numbers at random until we've got those hours covered."

It hits Tim that last month this girl was a Senior in high school and someone else set her whole schedule. So he makes how it works in the Dungeon even more plain. "You come in when you like, you leave when you like. You get lunch when you're hungry. You work the jobs as they come in, and you work until you hit a stopping point. If you've got a week where you do sixteen hours the first day, crash ten on the sofa, sixteen up again, crash again, and then do sixteen again until you are done with the case, that's fine. Overtime is in the handbook. If we've got a light week and you decide you want to do five hours a day each day, that's fine. You want to do four ten hour shifts, that's also fine. Be here when you need to be here, do the jobs that need to be done, and beyond that, you set your schedule however works best for you."

Tim can see a gleam in her eyes at that. He thinks he recognizes the look of a teenager given vastly more freedom than she's ever had before. Brand nods, looking at her desk. Right now there's a monitor, a keyboard, a stack of paperwork, and four black pens. The rest of it is up to her.

"The girls I was talking to last time?"

"Ngyn and Howard."

"Yeah. When are they usually here?"
"Howard's usually in around two in the afternoon. Ngyn usually gets in after midnight. For the next month, you'll be mostly shadowing people, so if you want to shadow them, that's fine." And for the next month, until she's on her feet, that is fine. But he's going to be getting her working with Manner more. He's sure her style needs some discipline, and he knows Manner's needs some fresh air. "Both of them will be happy to help with whatever you may need. So am I." Tim flips open the handbook, and since he's taken over, page one is McGee's rules. "Never be unavailable. You need something, call or text. Someone on the team will always respond. Okay, I'll get out of your hair and let you fill out forms."

She smiles and gets to filling out.

Manner heads into his office about twenty minutes after Brand's started filling out her forms. He shuts the door, pulls up a chair, and sits down across from Tim.

"You hired a nine-year-old."

Tim flashes his amused look at Manner. It's not that there's been a radical change in their relationship. Mostly Manner's been doing his job, keeping his head down, and doing his best not to have to interact directly with Tim. He might like the challenge of actually being a real law enforcement officer, but he's also still wary of Tim's fast and loose with the rules style. But, especially after having more or less run the place while Tim was out, he's feeling like he's earned the right to speak his mind freely.

Which Tim doesn't mind. He may not like what Manner has to say, but he'd rather Manner just outright say it rather than hiding and being a pain in Tim's ass about it.

So, it's with a somewhat relaxed and sassy attitude that Tim says, "You were young once, too."

Manner's not annoyed, yet, but Tim can tell annoyed in on the horizon. "The difference is, when I was young, I wasn't pretending to be a Federal Agent."

"She's not pretending. Her ID, once they print it up, will be just as real as yours."

"That's worse!"

Tim doesn't like the edge in Manner's voice as he says that. "You going to give her crap on it?"

Manner rolls his eyes. "What crap could I give her? I figured you'd know this by now, what with all the pictures of Kelly you've got up. The thing about babies they give you crap. Not the other way around. We're going to be cleaning up her messes day in and day out."

Tim shrugs. "Maybe. But that's a possibility when any new hire."

"No, it's not. Any other new hire would have at least proven they could get through college. You don't know if she can hack nine to five well enough to graduate from... Where'd she get in?"

"MIT."

Manner's not impressed by MIT. "Let alone actually do this job without cracking."

"Let her do her job. Treat her like any other Probie, like Howard."

"Howard belongs here. She graduated college. She graduated FLETC. She got hired by... NSA?"

Tim nods; he thinks that's right, but doesn't really remember. "She proved she's up for it."
"Brand's proven she belongs here. These days the ticket to Cybercrime is skill. She's got it. We'll work on the rest of it as we go along."

Manner is very determinedly not rolling his eyes.

"Remember, we're not bookkeepers anymore. We go out and take down bad-guys. She took out Anonymous. That's more bad-guy-taking-down than you've done in the last five years, and it's more than I've done with a computer, ever. And part of why she could do that is she, unlike you, unlike me, doesn't code like a middle-aged white guy who's been doing this for decades. The bad guys know our style, so we're getting people with new styles so we can take them down."

"Took 'em down. Yeah, she took down Anonymous. No convictions. Nothing she's got can stick because what she did was illegal, in that she's not a cop and just want traipsing all over the place. All she did was scatter them to the winds. That's where you want us going?"

Tim thinks about that for a second. "Sometimes. We'll get convictions as much and often as we can, but I'm sure there'll be times where fast and done will matter more than by the books. When that has to happen, that's what's going to happen."

Manner's giving him that I hate dealing with unruly cowboys look.

"Yeah, I know. You're happier by the book. I'll keep that in mind the next time we've got a few hours until an ISIS cell goes hot and kills thousands of people."

That gets another quiet glare.

Tim shifts topic. "You did a good job keeping on top of everything when I was out. Thank you."

Manner inclines his head. "Yeah, well, that's why it's a good idea to put administrators in charge of departments instead of agents. I know what you did. It was important. Navy's happy. But you weren't running the ship while you were doing that. Vance doesn't investigate crimes anymore for a reason, you know?"

Tim sighs, and nods. Yeah, there is something to that. "Anyway, thanks."

"You're welcome." Manner stares at Tim for a second and then his eyes go wide and his shoulders slump. "Oh, God, you're going to make me babysit her."

Tim smirks. "Not anytime soon. I want her settled in and feeling a bit more confident before that happens, but yeah. She'll need more discipline, and you haven't learned a new trick since Hannibal was eyeing Carthage."

"Hannibal was from Carthage," Manner doesn't say 'you twit' out loud, but Tim knows it's there. "He didn't sack it."

"That just means it was even longer ago than I was thinking. It'll be good for both of you."

That time Manner does roll his eyes, and he heads out.

Tim smiles as he does, finding that whole experience perversely satisfying.

Dealing with Manner gets Tim thinking. While he was out, Manner took over the administrative stuff. Is got dotted, ts got crossed, and while he did have a huge stack of papers to be signed, emails to go through, and stuff to do when he got in, his department did not stop doing its job.
But Cybercrime doing its job isn't just about getting all the forms filled out. (And yes, there are still forms. New ones popped up today.) They still had cases to work, two big ones in fact, and Howard stepped up and took over coordinating the efforts for that, making sure that the right people did the right things at the right time all over the world.

She won't be in today until after he goes home, but he does think it's important that, like Manner, she gets some petting for doing a good job while he was away. He writes up an email thanking her for stepping up and doing the job well.

That done, he gets onto that stack of paperwork. After all, someone has to sign the requisitions for staples.
McScuito Mark II

It's different the second time. Not that it's less exciting, but… there's a sense of calm this time.

So, they're only almost bubbling out of their skins with excitement at getting to see McScuito Mark II.

Abby's already on the table, holding Tim's hand, both of them waiting to get the show on the road as the Ultrasound Tech gets her stuff set up.

New one from last time, but Tim doesn't remember the last Tech's name. According to her nametag, this one is Nancy.

"So, are we thinking this is a boy or a girl?" she asks as picks up ultrasound wand and applies lube to it.

"Boy," she answers.

"Okay, then let's get some shots of him!" And after a few seconds, a little humming from Nancy, and Abby stiffening up slightly, and then relaxing (Tim's working on not paying too close of attention to how they get those pictures. He's afraid his brain might decide it's sexy if he watched and that'd just be… well, probably icky and horrifically inappropriate, so he's watching the monitor) they find the familiar little white on black shrimp on the monitor.

"And there he is!"

And like the first time, Abby's hand clenches in his in excitement, and he feels a hot rush of excited pleasure as he kisses her, eyes never leaving their baby.

"His heart's beating fine." Nancy zooms in so they can see the blood thrumming through him. "Uh huh… Yep…"

That sounds a little off.

"What?" Abby asks, sounding a little scared. Neither of them are experts in this, but from what they're seeing everything looks good.

"How far along do you think you are?"

Abby thinks, remembering that she's got to add two weeks to the right number. "Ten almost eleven weeks? Why?"

Nancy nods. "Yeah, that looks right. Did you want to do a Nuchal fold test?"

And Tim and Abby remember that you've got to do that before the twelfth week. "Yes."

"Okay, let's get that measured, too."

"I was going to ask why you two waited so long to come in, but… You've had some excitement lately, haven't you?" Dr. Draz asks as she walks into the office, looking at Tim.

Tim and Abby nod. Tim adds, dryly, "You could put it that way."
"What happened?"

"Ever hear the phrase 'I feel like I got hit with a truck?'' Tim points to himself.

Dr. Draz winces. "I'm sorry. They catch the guy?"

Tim and Abby glance at each other, since they've never tested out the cover story, they've never answered any questions about it before.

Tim shakes his head. "No. But," Draz knows he's a cop, "I've got good people checking into it for me."

"Good. Okay, I'm sure that's more small talk than you'd like."

They're both nodding at her.

She opens up her folder. "Everything looks fine. Nuchal fold is exactly the way it's supposed to be. Heart, lungs, brain, spinal cord all look exactly like they should for almost eleven weeks along. All in all this looks like a perfectly healthy small person."

Tim and Abby both beam at that.

"I do have a question for you, I see you've got a prescription for Zofran?"

Abby nods.

"Who's Dr. Palmer, your PC?"

Also a question they don't precisely know the answer, too, though both of them are familiar with the idea that your buddies are not supposed to be writing prescriptions for you. "Yeah," Abby answers. "We've been seeing a lot of him lately."

Draz eyes Tim again. "I'd imagine so. Well, first off he's a few months off of cutting edge, we've got something better now, it's called Flarlan. Zofran works for four to six hours, and this works twenty-four. Zofran was designed to deal with chemo-induced nausea, and Flarlan was designed to deal with morning sickness in specific. If you especially love Zofra, we can stay with that, or I can switch you to Flarlan."

"I'm usually feeling pretty good by noon, so, do I want something that works for 24 hours?"

Dr. Draz shakes her head. "Always a good plan to use as little medication as'll do the job. I'll write you up a longer scrip for more Zofran. We've also got another new goodie. We test your pee and can tell the baby's sex from it. Insurance doesn't cover it, but if you don't want to wait the nine weeks…"

"Scary expensive?" Tim asks. 'Not covered by insurance' are words he often hears bandied about in horror as he's been sitting in different waiting rooms. Fortunately as government employees, they've still got insurance that covers everything, and as an agent hurt in the line of duty, he's got an extra layer of coverage, so those are not words that have slipped out of his lips. (For which he's grateful. He got a hold of one of the itemized price lists of what his treatments are running and almost passed out because he thought it was a bill.)

"Not too bad. Seventy-five. We can do it here and it doesn't take long, so…" She's looking at Abby.

"Oh yeah! Lead me to the specimen jar."

"Once we're done with this part. Any extra concerns? It's pretty much the same routine as last time."
Tim can't believe he didn't think of it until now, but he didn't. "Where's the placenta?"

Dr. Draz smiles. "Exactly where it's supposed to be, right up top. Though that reminds me, the hospital you used last time doesn't allow VBACs." She can see Tim and Abby's blank looks. "Vaginal birth after C-section. It's a liability and expense issue. Closest one that does is about an hour away from here in Alexandria."

Tim's ready to say, "Another C-section's fine," after all, it seemed to go smoothly to him, and he likes their hospital a lot, he especially likes how close to their home it is, but in that he is now a veteran pregnant daddy, he doesn't say that, and just waits to see what Abby has to say.

"I'll research. The C-section wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it'd be."

Draz nods. "And if you opt for another one, this time we've got a much better idea of what pain medication agrees with you, so post op should go better."

Abby crosses her fingers. "If we do a c-section, we schedule it ahead of time, right?"

"That's the idea. Up until they put the epidural in, you can always change your mind, but if you wanted to, you could leave here today with a birthday set. Assuming your baby cooperates."

"Huh." Tim can see Abby's desire for the "perfect" natural birth warring with heading out of here with a set date and time. The scientist loves order and precision, and that's definitely where she's most comfortable. The Goth likes natural and organic. He's not sure which side she'll come down on. "So, we could schedule today, and if I did my research and decided to go natural instead?"

"Not a problem. If we schedule today… We're pretty far out, so obviously things can and likely will change, but this makes sure there's an operating room and an anesthesiologist and all the rest of that aware of the fact that sometime in the general vicinity of your due date, they're going to be swinging into action."

Abby nods at that. "Grab your calendar. Let's get a date scheduled."

Tim smiles at that. He likes order and precision, too.

"So, due date is February 5th. We like to do repeat c-sections at 39 weeks, because you're less likely to have started real labor by then, which minimizes the chance of rupture. How does January 28th in the morning sound?"

Tim feels another hot, tingling rush at those words. He's grinning like a dork, but just so happy he can't not let it out.

Abby's squeezing his hand, hard, and nodding at Dr. Draz "Sounds awesome!"

"Wonderful. Anything else?"

They both shake their heads.

"Okay, let's get you set up for the sex test, and then off you go!"

Smiles broke out across the Gibbs clan as they each checked their phones and saw the tiny, grainy shot of the ultrasound, along with the caption: Sean James McGee, ETA January 28th, 2016, 10:00 AM. More details when we see each other in person.

And Jimmy would have to admit, as he was showing the shot to Dr. Allan (and anyone else who
stayed still long enough to be badgered into seeing the shot), to being in an especially fine mood.
Tim gets into his office in a very good mood. He opens up his computer, uploads the shot of Sean, and begins printing it out to put on his door. He figures that's the most efficient way to get the news out to the wider world that another McGee will be joining it soon.

He's in an even better mood as he gets to walk from his desk to his door, holding the picture and a piece of tape.

Jimmy's onto something with the whole keep taking the real pain meds and move around more thing. This still hurts, but a lot less than it did on Aleve, and a lot less than it did on Friday with the Tylenol 3. He's not sure if that's because he's moving more, or if it's just a matter of Tylenol 3 being built up in his system enough to really do its job, but either way, he can walk several steps at a go somewhere between mild pain and moderate discomfort. Both of which he considers better than how walking used to feel and vastly better than not walking at all.

He's taping the picture up when his computer chirps at him. He stops taping. He hasn't heard that chirp before. It's not his go check your email chirp, or his you've got an IM chirp, doesn't sound like Facebook (which he's rarely on at work and hasn't logged onto yet, anyway). It's not the 'a job you're on the hook for just came up' chirp. And he's fairly certain it's not the 'we're low on hackers get over here and do your job' chirp, either.

But, he knows he did tell the computer to let him know when all sorts of things were up. (He can very easily get so into his work that he needs some sort of alarm to let him know to shift focus.) And he knows that if this is a chirp he doesn't remember setting up, he's getting a Zebra alert instead of a Horses alert, so this is some manner of exotic thing looking for his attention.

The computer's on its third chirp by the time he gets to it, and when he sees what's up, he's cursing that he's only got one hand.

He sends out the All Hands call fast, anyone who is not actively on a priority one job (terrorism threat, kidnapping) just got called into work.

Someone's attacking NCIS, trying to break his firewall, using their intranet mail servers as an attempted entry point.

Manner, Howard, and Brand are all heading toward his office as soon as he's finished typing up that alert, but he's already switched onto job number two.

"Palmer."

"Jimmy, remember that all hands on deck scenario?"

"Uh, yeah, sure?"

"Meet me in Vance's office in ten minutes, okay?"

"Okay."

Tim turns off his phone, and checks his computer to see who's up and on by now. Three techs in his office, and twenty-two more around the globe.

Good place to start.
"We've got an attempted security breach in progress."

Brand's eyes go wide. This is her second day on the job and they've already got a hot case. She's happy and excited and a little nervous. Manner doesn't look impressed. Feds get hacked all the time, usually those hacks fail.

"Looks like they're trying to use our email system to get in."

Howard also looks bored by this. They know how to shut this down. "So, we're all hot and bothered, why?"

He smiles at her, and by extension anyone who's watching this through his video feed.

"First off," he gestures so they can see what's on his screen, and hits the commands, curses under his breath when he hits a few wrong keys, and then hits them in again, slowly, so that the rest of his crew can see it on their computers, "this one probably would succeed if we just left it alone." They can all see that's some sophisticated code aimed at them. "Second of all, we aren't usually a target of this kind of attack, so they're looking for something specific." They get hit two or three times a day, but usually by people who are just messing around. This attack looks like something that could make it through his firewall, given enough time. "Third of all, I want to see how fast we can get an NCIS mirror system up, and then, while they think they're raiding the place, and we're spooning them crap information, I want to see what they're looking at, who they are, and what they're using the information for. This attack looks like it's got some brains behind it, not just kids messing around for kicks, so let's get to it."

And suddenly everyone who's listening knows why this is an all hands situation. Shutting the attack down would take a matter of minutes. Building a mirror site will take hours, if not longer. Containing the attack so that the hackers think they're getting somewhere until they get the mirror up and the hack switched over to the mirror site is yet another level of something all-together.

"Okay, I've got to go see Leon, you all know your specialties, break off into them, and get moving."

Brand's looking elated at the idea of dealing with this, and a bit lost because she's not sure what team she should be. "Good time to start, Brand," Tim says. "I want you with Howard working on finding out who is doing this. Subtle enough so they don't know we're tracking them back, right?"

"Yes, Boss."

"Manner, you know what you're doing, right?"

Manner nods. He's already got his phone in hand, checking to see who else is up and working. "Yeah, Blake, Tomishido, and Frederickson are on, too. We've got making the hackers think they're getting in without letting them see anything interesting."

Tim smiles at them, and gently pats the back of Brand's head as he grabs his crutch and heads, as fast as he can, toward the elevator.

"So, I take it there's something interesting going on?" Leon asks as he eyes Tim and Jimmy in his office.

Tim quickly explains what is going on, and why he wants the clean piss-test waived. Jimmy quickly adds in the bit about being okay to work, before Leon asks why he's there.

Leon smiles and nods. "I did not, for one moment, think you'd actually obey that order. I was
thinking, that at best, I'd be able to get you to take an extra day or two off before you got Agent DiNozzo to pee into a cup for you. I'm impressed, Dr. Palmer, that you've done such a good job of reining McGee in. Yes, go work, do your magic, report back when you know what's going on."

Tim sends a glare that's halfway between annoyed and bemused to Leon, and then starts to hobble toward Cybercrime.

He's at the door when Leon adds, "By the way, I got your email. Congratulations!"

Tim actually has to think for a second about what Leon's talking about before it hits and he feels tremendously stupid for forgetting. "Oh, yeah, thanks! We're over the moon about it."

Leon smiles at him, nodding. "I understand."

If he could be bouncing on the balls of his feet, he would be, but he can't, so instead of actually bouncing up and down, Tim's just giving off the impression of wanting to bounce up and down.

"I take it you're eager to be back?" Jimmy asks.

"You have no idea. It's a great case. Whoever's behind this is using an…" and from there very technical words start spewing out of Tim, and Jimmy just stands there, nodding at him.

When Tim pauses to breathe Jimmy says, "You realize you could be saying this in Klingon and it'd mean just as much to me?"

"Oh, yeah. It's a good case."

"So, I gather. Don't overdo it, okay?"

Tim nods, then deflates a little. "You're serious about being on Tylenol 3 being like being drunk, right?"

"Yeah. I was."

"Great. My last one was this morning. Seriously, should I just be supervising?"

Jimmy thinks for a minute, too. "Drunk" is very subjective and ranges from out of your head to mildly impaired. "Sixteen plus thirty-seven plus fourteen minus three."

"Sixty-four," Tim shoots back almost before Jimmy's done talking.

"If I gave you a quadratic could you factor it?"

Tim smirks at that. "If you could remember a quadratic to give me, then yes, I can factor it, in my head."

Jimmy inclines his head. Tim read his bluff. At this point he's not even sure what a quadratic is anymore, beyond something he used to do in high school. "If it absolutely has to be right, make sure someone else gives it a one over. This is going to take a while, right?"

Tim nods.

"Like all day?"

"And then some."
"I'll check in before I go home, see how bad you're hurting. You haven't worked a full day, brain on, for a while, sack out and get a nap, or two, if you need to, okay?"

"Okay." The elevator bongs, letting them know they're at Autopsy. Jimmy's about to step out when Tim asks, "Do you have any Novocain or something like that?"

"No, but I can probably get some. Not a good long-term solution, but if you've got like an hour's work and the pain is driving you buggy, we can see about trying it."

"Thanks."

The doors slide shut, and though Tim had hit the button for the basement, he also presses the button for the Lab, as well.

He hobbles in, sees the LabRats ratting away, wrestling data out of samples and Major Mass Spec. Abby looks up from her pipettes and sees the look on his face.

"You've got a real case."

"Yeah, and I'm cleared to work it. Not sure when I'm heading home, but…"

She smiles at him, seeing how happy he is to be working. "I know the drill. When I get lunch, I'll bring you some?"

"Thank you." He kisses her gently, fingers brushing her tummy. "You let them know?"

She turns away from Major Mass Spec to her computer and points at the shot of Sean on it.

He smiles again. This is a very good day.

Okay, once upon a time Tim did this whenever he needed to. Code all day, code all night, vanish into numbers and symbols and make the computer sing his tune in its sweet little hum of a voice. No problem! Bring on the code. He was the code master, and it was his willing tool.

Not today.

First off, he can type faster than he can talk. At least, he can type faster than he speak code. Sigh. By the time it's out of his mouth he's often getting lost in the details.

Second of all, while it does appear that what eventually does hit the screen is good, it's tiring him out a whole hell of a lot faster than he thinks it should. He used to do this for hours, slurping down coffee, fingers flying, brain firing on all cylinders.

It's been three hours, his eyes are already blurring and he's having a hard time staying focused. Part of it, he absolutely knows, is the lack of caffeine. Large quantities of mild stimulants help keep his brain on track. Part of it, absolutely, is the Tylenol 3. In addition to not being able to focus the way he wants to, he's also feeling it leach out of his body, which means he's starting to ache, which is also not helping with his focus. And part of it, though he doesn't like to admit it, is that his body is already working double overtime healing up and doesn't have much energy to spend on things like deep, intricate thought.

He's (according to him) pathetically grateful when Abby comes in with lunch, thus giving him a good excuse for a break.

"How's it going?" she can see he's less 'go get 'em' than he'd usually be this far into a coding spree.
He rolls his eyes and sighs, pulling the bag toward him. "What's for lunch?"

"Cold cucumber-dill soup, smoked salmon sashimi, iced mint tea."

"Sounds good." He's looking really tired as he takes the straws and glasses out of the bag.

"You're fried, aren't you?"

"I shouldn't be."

She shuts the door and then kisses the top of his head, sitting on his desk, resting her feet between his legs on his chair. "You are allowed to be fried the first time you go back to doing something strenuous after you get really hurt. I didn't go back to work for three months after Kelly was born, remember?"

"Yeah, but you also didn't get to sleep after she was born. I'm sucking up twelve hours a day."

"Which you need." She turns the monitor toward herself and can see where he left off, and suddenly more code starts filling in on the screen. "See, someone else is taking over for you."

He squints a bit, then makes himself not squint; he does not need to squint to read a computer monitor five feet away from his face. "Harrison out of the Great Lakes office. He's good."

"Wonderful. Let me guess, there's no way I can get you to go home."

He shakes his head. "Can't go home. I can take breaks, catch a nap on the sofa, but as long as I'm saying we've got to turn this into a trap for the guys attacking us, I've got to keep watch on it."

She nods. "Then get a nap, okay?"

"After lunch, I'll get an hour down."

"Good."

Okay, two hours. It was supposed to be an hour. He was sure he wasn't going to sleep. Just lay down on the sofa and rest a bit. Next thing he knew Jimmy was gently poking him.

"I guess you can't be in too much pain."

Tim sits up, gingerly, wincing. "I wasn't." As soon as his brain realizes he's awake, it starts sending flares of pain through his shoulder, arm, calf, and foot. "Umng!"

"That's why I poked you, would have let you sleep but your neck and shoulder were all squashed up, figured you'd hurt even worse if you spent more time like that."

"Thanks." Tim's very gingerly lifting and lowering his shoulder at the collarbone, feeling pain sparking through his pec and shoulder.

"So, moment of truth time, more Tylenol 3 and just supervising, or Aleve and working?"

"If the Aleve isn't doing the job and I can't focus, can I take the Tylenol 3 and just supervise?"

"Let me check." Jimmy does some googling. "It's not great for you, but yeah, once, it's okay."

"I've got Aleve in my desk and Tylenol 3. With any luck the Aleve will take the edge off, and the
work'll keep my brain off my body."

"Here's hoping."

Tim grabs his crutch and stands up, and Jimmy rises from his seat on the sofa next to him. "I thought you were going to check in before you left. It isn't that late, is it?"

"Nah, half past four. Got a case. Not sure when we'll be back. Allan's gassing up the truck, figured I'd stop in and check on you."

"Thanks."

"No problem. I told Abby I'd poke in when we get back, mostly likely after she's headed home. If you need a ride home tonight and I'm still here, I'll give you one."

"Unless this wraps a lot faster than I think it will, I'm not going home tonight."

"Okay."

"Have fun with the bodies."

Jimmy waves, heading out of Cybercrime.

Tim swears that once upon a time, he had stamina. He's absolutely certain he used to. But for the time being it's AWOL, and he's the grumpy MA looking to drag its ass back on board and throw it in the brig.

Or he would be, but he's too damn tired to go looking for his lost stamina.

Right now, he has successfully kept an eye on everyone, planned but did not execute how to backtrack the attack, and ordered pizza and burritos for the whole team.

He'd like to get another nap, but the sofa and both beanbag chairs are currently in use. Manner went home at his normal time, punting his job off to Connon. Howard and Brand both hit sixteen on and were sacking out for their mandated ten off. Trevet had hit ten on and was grabbing a nap to clear his head. Really more than ten hours at a go isn't a great plan, but some hackers do hit their stride after that. (Brand was actually sulking about having to break at 16. Meanwhile, Tim's wishing he had her energy.)

The NCIS mirror decoy is up and running. Tim's made a mental note that that's going into their permanent defenses. Anyone who breaks the firewall is going to get a mound of crap. The pirates who are going after them right now are getting piles of it, meanwhile his crew is getting to see what they're going after. They're mostly pulling up employee data files, Vice Director Craig's travel itinerary for the last six months, but not for the six months coming up, the location of several hundred cases' worth of stored evidence, and case notes for two hundred more cases. His guys haven't found the pattern behind what they're taking, and in that they're still taking stuff, it's readily apparent that they haven't yet figured out that what they're getting is just strings of random numbers. With any luck, they assume that what they're getting is encrypted.

Meanwhile, NCIS has the location of the hack down to somewhere in Mexico City, and in only ten more hours, they should have it down to a street address. That is, assuming that this stop in the track back is the real one. He's got people checking to see if it can be backtracked any further, other people trying to get a fix on where in Mexico City, while a third group attempts to figure out who these guys are, and the fourth (which he is theoretically in charge of) attempts to figure out why they want this
particular pile of stuff.

Tim's feeling especially stupid that it takes him this long, but he's tired, he's hurting, he's out of practice, and he's not nearly well-drugged enough to be thinking clearly about anything that isn't the case, but finally as the clock hits 01:30, he remembers that upstairs, there's a person who specializes in putting together vast wodges of data, sorting through them to find patterns, and then explain what they mean.

"DiNozzo." Tony sounds distracted when he answers.

"You guys still here?" Tim asks.

"Yeah, case up here went hot this afternoon. Just got the scene processed. We found the body of Herico Juaras, personal secretary to Emilio Ventente, the head diplomat from Mexico."

Tim feels something click when he hears that.

"How'd we get the case?"

"Long story. Part of my multi-year long terror cases. What's up?"

"I need you to send Bishop down. We're getting hacked, as of ten thirty this... yesterday morning, from Mexico City."

Tony says something under his breath, possibly, "Eight" but Tim's not sure. He does say, loud enough for him to understand. "According to Ducky our time of death is roughly 10:00 yesterday morning."

"Interesting."

"Yeah. Bishop'll be down soon."

"Thanks, Tony."

There are patterns, and there are patterns inside patterns, and then there are patterns that require the lens of a certain kind of mind to see.

And then there's junk.

Ellie's looking through what files are being taken. She's sitting on the conference table, shifting things around on the plasma, making notes, munching on a never ending bag of Swedish fish, sipping her coffee, and shaking her head.

Meanwhile, Tim's in his office, feeling awake and pretty good because he's on crimes solver mode and that's giving him a decent second wind. He doesn't want to think too hard about how he's going to feel when he crashes.

"Okay, so, crime scene photos…"

Tony's got them up on his phone. Leon already knows they're building files for the hackers to find and that the real ones are going to be entered in a few days under a different case name and lead investigator.

Tony keeps flipping through, and finally says, "All set. Should hit your inbox…" and Tim's
computer beeps.

Tim glances at his inbox and shifts the photos to the right file. "That's most of them, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Cut a few out. All the ones that indicate we know there were two guys there. We're going to make it look like we know Renuald Transez was the killer."

"All right, and he is?" Tim asks.

"Wet works for a group that makes its money ensuring safe travel for drugs over the border."

Tim nods. "Okay, and... once again, you've got this case why?"

"They use that money to help fund a group that's been trying to shut down the Panama Canal."

"Oh. Haven't we been out of there since..."

"'99. Yeah, we ended up with it because we had more boots on the ground and better intel."

"Ah..." Tim's hit the point where he's too tired to get all of these details. He uploads the photos. "Anyway. New files are up and in. If they grab them, we'll know."

Bishop hops in as he says that, still shaking her head. She takes a long drink of her coffee. "Judging by what they're taking, my best guess is that they want something we've got in evidence, and they want to know who worked the case. They're probably hoping that if anyone notices the breach that they won't be able to tell what they accessed because they grabbed so much stuff."

Tony nods. "Okay, back up to the lab. Let's see what we found but didn't know about."

Two hours later a PAY ATTENTION TO ME I'M FREAKING RED ALERT IMPORTANT chirp blares out of Tim's computer.

He jerks awake, says some extremely profane things at how bad he's hurting from falling asleep at his desk, rubs his eyes until they focus, and then ineffectually whacks at his mouse to get his computer to shut up.

The third time he successfully manages to do it.

His eyes scan over the screen, smiles, and he sends back a very quick IM. Good job! A round of whatever the hell your team likes to drink is on me. Paypal me the bill!

He stands, sways, pain shooting through his arm and leg, grabs his crutch, no way in hell he's walking without it, and then hobbles into the main conference area.

"Jimenez and Smith out of Rio got the address! We know where those bastards who are hacking us are. I'm heading upstairs."

By the time the elevator gets to the bullpen, Tim's really hurting. He thought he was hurting before. He was wrong.

He's making little whimpering noises each time he steps, and knows in a way that he never has before that these days he literally cannot make himself pull an all-nighter.

Draga and Ziva aren't at their desks. Tony's not at his, either. Bishop is at hers, still munching away,
"files spread out all around her.

"We got the hackers' address," Tim says, and notices that she doesn't look up. He looks closer and sees the cords on her earphones.

"Bishop!" She turns to him, and he hears a groan from behind Tony's desk as Tony slowly pulls himself up from the nap he was getting on the floor. For a second, he and Tony share a quick 'we're too old for this shit' look, and then Tim says, "My guys got the address of the hackers. We know where they are. So..."

Tony nods. "Ziva and Draga are driving down to Norfolk to talk to a lead. Is this the sort of thing where we've got time to get to Mexico ourselves, or should we send in the guys on the ground?"

"I'd send in the guys on the ground. I mean..." Tim doesn't know the Mexico City field team. In fact, he's not entirely sure Mexico City has field agents, what with the whole it's several hundred miles from the ocean and not a big spot for US Naval presence. He knows that his guys are there because they're stationed out of the consulate, thus giving them the best shot at rock solid communications and good security. "Where are your guys on the ground?"

Tony rubs his eyes. "Um... San Diego?" He stretches, winces, twists his neck and it pops loudly. "Think Leon's still here?"

"Let's go check?" Tim's got no idea of Leon's here or not, after all, not like he can see Leon leave from his office these days.

They head up.

"No Vera," Tony says. Vance's new secretary isn't at the desk.

Tim knocks on the door, no answer, so he pokes his head in, no Vance. He shakes his head at Tony.

"So, Mr. Fourth-in-Command. Can you order a strike team?"

Tim's never thought about that before. "Probably. Question is, do you want to shut this down, or leave it in place and see if they come for whatever you found."

Tony shakes his head. "Already know what they want. Jimmy found it in the autopsy. Henrico had five data chips sewn into his arm. The Lab's cleaning them up, and in the morning Abby'll start messing with them. I'm sure you'll get called in on them, too."

Tim nods. "So, then, you want me to call in a strike team, or grab the jet so you can go yourself?"

Tony sighs. Then he laughs a little, pulling out his cell phone. "That's how Gibbs would have done it. I need to call the CIA. They'll get pissy if I don't let them in on this, and I know they've got boots on the ground a lot closer than we do. But, if you can get it up on MTAC so we can see what we're dealing with, and brief the Spooks, that'd be great."

Tim nods, tired. "That I can do."

It's been years since Tim's watched a mission he broke go live in MTAC. But he's sitting there, in one of the observation chairs, not in his usual seat at the com (Draga's handling that now) watching the glow of three CIA agents and ten SEALs swoop down into what looks like a small auto body shop in downtown Mexico City and "neutralize" the "targets."
Once the targets are "neutralized," he sees two more bodies, his guys from the Mexico City office, hurrying in. They're taking custody of the computers. It took a major pissing match between Tony and Hullen (CIA contact for this op) but somehow Tony won control of the scene and the evidence.

CIA's getting credit for the bust.

Mexico is happy to see another branch of what has been a problem for them go up in smoke.

All around, it's been a good day.

And when he steps out of MTAC, and sees Abby standing there, waiting for him, he very happily lets her lead him out of NCIS and home, to a long, drugged, and blissful sleep.
Tim worked straight through Tuesday, 'round the clock, in at 11:00 to the next 11:00 to the one after it on Wednesday morning. And then on Wednesday he basically slept 'round the clock, too.

Abby took him home, grabbing a quick bite on the way there, and then he staggered off to bed, Tylenol 3 and Aleve coursing through his system (and if he still had any Percocet he would have found that and taken it instead) and crashed into a deep sleep where he woke up briefly to have dinner with his wife and daughter, and then back to sleep again for the rest of the night.

Thursday morning, usual wake up time, he's moving again, groggy and sore and planning on another 8:00 PM bedtime (and probably a nap in the afternoon) but he's moving because there's 200 emails in his inbox and most of them are not requisitions for more staples or time off.

He's feeding Kelly, while asking Abby, "Tony said something about there being 'data chips' in…" he doesn't remember his name, "the victim's arm. Did you guys get into them?"

Abby shrugs and takes a bite of her graham cracker. She's been craving them since yesterday. No idea what about graham crackers Sean wants, but he's getting a lot of them. "We got into them all right, but it's gobbled-y-gook. So, once we got them up and running, off to your guys they went. Last I heard, there's a guy out of Rota who's an encryption specialist—"

"Atherson." Tim nods. They haven't worked together yet, but he's thinking that if the mirror site he wants to add to his NCIS defenses works the way he wants it to, they'll need to. He's thinking that a hard but not impossible encryption placed on files that are actually collections of random numbers should drive anyone who tries to break into their stuff full-on raving insane.

"Anyway, we got them cleaned off and running a bit before I took you home. From there the data went to him, and the actual chips went to evidence."

Tim nods again as he wipes cereal off of Kelly's chin.

They hear the sound of the sliding glass door open as Heather comes in. "Morning! Oh, there's my girl!" She sweeps over to Kelly, giving her a kiss, and then turns to the adults. "Good to see you back here, Tim, Abby said you were on a case. They're not treating you too rough, are they?"

He smiles at Abby before replying to Heather. "This time the dark circles under my eyes are just from being tired. Apparently my working-round-the-clock skills are rusty."

Heather smiles at that. "So, is now a good time?"

Abby says, "Yeah, I think so," and then fills Tim in, "Yesterday, I told her we wanted to talk to her when all three of us were able to get together."

"Right!" Tim can see by the look on Heather's face that she knows where this is going and is happy about it. "How would you feel about being a nanny to two little McGees?"

Heather grins. "Two little McGees sound awesome."

"Wonderful!" Abby hugs her, very happy, and then puts her hand on her tummy. "Say hello to Sean James. If all goes according to plan, he'll be on the outside January 28th!"

"Hello, Sean! Oh, we are going to have so much fun."
Kelly's looking very confused by all this, which is when it hits the grown-ups that they have not made any sort of specific comments to her about all of this. Abby says to her, "You've got a little brother, here, inside Mommy's tummy."

Kelly's eyes narrow. That is not information that means anything to her. She does reach out and poke Abby in the tummy, but nothing happens, so she's not satisfied by that response.

Tim tries from this direction. "You're a big sister. And in the winter, when it gets very cold outside, you'll get a little brother to play with."

"Molly?" Kelly asks.

"Just like Molly! Anna is Molly's little sister. You've got a little brother growing inside your mommy. He's too little to come out, yet. But when it gets cold he'll be all grown and ready to come out."

Okay, she's looking a little more steady with that. She knows who Molly and Anna are and how they relate. "Bwofer?"

Good point, no one in their family has a little brother. (Okay, not true, Abby has Luca and Kyle, but Kelly doesn't know who they are, and Jimmy is the little brother, but no one's ever even met the illusive Clark.) And as of yet they have not gotten into what Aunt or Uncle means, just that that's the title certain people in the family have.

Heather's smiling at her. "You and your cousins and your mommy and I are all girls. The baby, Sean?" Tim nods, she's got the name. "Is a boy, just like Daddy."

And at that Kelly bursts into sobbing tears because she's got no idea what a boy is, but she knows that Daddy is bigger than Mommy and she doesn't see how anything that size can fit inside her without hurting her mommy. Unfortunately the adults have no idea what's set her off, and she's woefully ill equipped to explain what the problem is.

Finally, Heather says the magic word 'baby' which is when it finally clicks for Kelly that whatever a brother is, it'll be small, and she begins to calm down.

So, on Thursday, both Tim and Abby are twenty minutes late into work, and somewhat frazzled when they get there, but get there they do.

First matter of business, before heading into the basement, before battling his emails, is to head up to the Bullpen and check in on Tony. Namely, just because he had gotten his end of the case (and a bunch of other cases) dealt with, did not mean that Tony actually had a shooter… two shooters, Tim thinks Tony mentioned something about there being two of them, in custody.

When he gets up there, he doesn't even bother to get out of the elevator. He can see no one in the bullpen, which, hopefully means they've caught the guy and are all having a late morning, or are out getting him, as opposed to they're all out hunting down new leads.

Tim pulls his phone out of his pocket and then puts it back. He can't text and hold the phone at the same time.

Back down to his office, he flicks on his computers, and as they boot up he sends to Tony: Got your guy yet? Any specific information you want from what we get off the drives/computers?

Nothing comes back, so he hopes that means Tony's sleeping.
Next step: What the hell time is it in Spain? He checks. Six hours ahead. So he pulls up Atherson on
his computer for face to face time. He'd expected Kim Atherson to be female, but a middle-aged
Black man is facing him on the other side of the screen.

"Hi. I was wondering if you could update me on what you getting off the data DC sent over?"

Atherson snaps to attention at that. Tim might not have known him on sight, but he knows Tim.
"Nothing, yet, Boss." Tim's itching to check Atherson's background, that's a very Marine sounding
'Boss.'

"Corrupt data or nasty encryption?"

"1024 bit key."

Tim knows that's code for this is impossible. "So, right out of the Cryptonomicon?"

He's not surprised that Atherson gets that reference. He's also not surprised to see that makes
Atherson relax a bit. "Exactly. If you can find a key for it, if you can find me part of the key for it…"

Tim nods; he gets it. They don't make computers big and fast enough to break that encryption, not
without help.

"That all, Boss?"

"Almost. I'm thinking of spiffing up out cybersecurity. We've got that mirror site in place right now,
and what I want to do is make a fully functional version, with all of our files. I want file names,
dates, and who is on them encrypted, tough but not unbreakable, and then I want all of the details in
those files to be encrypted piles of random numbers and letters."

Atherson smiles. Anyone who breaks the first layer will assume they've got a dual encryption going.
He laughs at McGee's idea. "You are sick."

"Thank you!" Tim nods, smiling. "Once we've got the full mirror up and in place, are you set to
handle that?"

"It'll take me less than a day to write the scripts…" He pauses and thinks. "You just want me to do
the encryption, right? Someone else is handling the script that produces a mirror file for every real
one?" Tim nods. His crew in DC will handle that. "Just promise me, if anyone does get into it, that
you'll make sure I get logs of the back tracking so I can see them try to break it." Atherson is
grinning at that idea.

"Oh yeah. That'll be fun to watch. Trust me, we get someone take a whack at it, it'll be movie night
for NCIS Cybercrime world over."

Atherson laughs at that. 'I'll bring the popcorn."

"Thank you, Atherson."

"No problem, Boss."

Tim logs off from that and then calls up his Mexico City team. No one answers and he realizes he
should have checked the time there. It's… no they're only an hour behind, so... He double checks.
He's only got two guys out of Mexico City, and they're on shift together, from about 10:00 to 14:00
and from 18:00 to 22:00. Interesting schedule, must have built in siesta time. But so far it's working.
He sends an email to them asking for facetime once they get in.

Then it's back to his email backlog.

999 emails to read

999 emails

Open one up, deal with the muck

999 email to read

He swears the damn things are coming in just as fast as he's dealing with them. It's occurring to him that part of being able to get through with his back log was doing nothing but emails, but part of it was also that no one was sending him anything of any substance. But as of Tuesday, he's really back, which means that, in addition to requisitions for staples, he's also getting case work, thorny code issues, and requests for 'opinions' (aka, please tell me what to do) on sticky cases.

It feels good. Sisyphean, but this is the hill he wants to be rolling a boulder up. (At least now, in a week or two the shine may wear off.)

He's absently rubbing his ankle, reading over a request from one of his Techs in the Seattle Office for how to translate what he just did so the Agent in charge understands and is able to use the information he's found, let alone get the right stuff for him once he's out again, when it hits him how much he's not hurting right now (only a mild ache in his foot and shoulder), and apparently the combination of light work and adequate sleep is very good for keeping his brain off of his body.

Another hour after that he gets face time with Valenz and Droit, his agents in Mexico City.

"What have you found?"

Valenz, who judging by both accent and skin tone, actually is Mexican, replies, "Lots and lots of data, but nothing useful, yet."

"1024 bit encryption?" Tim asks.

Droit, a woman in her early twenties, shakes her head. "Word files."

Tim stares at them. "Word? Word for Windows?"

They both nod, looking forlorn.

Valenz adds, "None of them are less than a thousand pages long, they're just blocks of random numbers and letters. No spacing. No punctuation. No paragraphs. Just millions of characters."

"Some sort of code?"

Droit shrugs. "Maybe. Since it's in Word we can't even use our usual tools on it. Right now we're trying to get them into a form the computer can mess with."

Tim nods, not like you can give the computer a .docx and tell it to decrypt.

"Um…" He's thinking. While he does write on his typewriter, he also writes on his computer for any sort of second or third drafts and all of his editing, and he knows Word inside and out. "Okay, so, either you produce your information, encrypt it, and then…" He winces. His computer geek wants to
scream at this, and the writer is appalled at the work involved. "God, this is messy… Cut and paste it into Word. Which version is it?"

"Word 2015."

"Newest version. Give me a second." He pulls his version of it up and fiddles around. "Okay, open one of the files."

He sees Valenz and Droit focus on the screen, and Droit's hand moving over the keyboard. "Top of the page, see all those options on the toolbar?"

Droit nods. It's similar, but not identical to Open Office, which is the software his team is using. (Tim prefers Word for writing novels. He doesn't write novels at work, usually. His employees really don't write novels at work. Switching to shareware software for anything he didn't absolutely need the licensed version of saved his budget 500k a year in licensing fees. He's fine to swap that out for a bit less functionality.)

"See the 'Review' tab?"

More nodding.

"Go to versions." At the very least, the versions tab will show him what changes happened between saves, and if everything was uploaded all at once, he'll be able to see that, too. "Open the most recent version, open the version before that." He's half waiting for Droit (who's doing this) to say there aren't any other versions, but she's clicking away. "Okay, save both of them with different names." He waits a few more seconds. "Over to compare." He uses that all the time when he's writing for his edits. It's an easy way for him to merge two versions of the story into each other. "Put both versions up, and let's see how different they are."

They all wait, Compare takes a while on big blocks of text, and this is supposed to be thousands of pages long. After ten minutes of heel cooling, he sees his tech's faces light up, smiles spreading wide.

"What?"

"Lots of letters are popping up as different between the newer version and the old one," Valenz says. His eyes are skimming over the screen.

"It's in Spanish, one letter at a time, but no code beyond being buried in this. A meeting place and time."

Droit adds, "Maybe fifteen words buried in thousands of pages of text."

Tim's thinking that's actually a clever way to hide a text. A book code of sorts. As long as you had the base document to compare it to, you could hide whatever you wanted in it and it'd be impossible for anyone to find. And unlike a book code, you've actually got to know your way around the software in question to find the cipher.

Tim's smiling as he says, "Dig the good stuff out and let us know what's going on. You're up to date on the fact that the CIA's read into this, too, right?" He catches some less-than-perfectly professional eye rolls between his techs and sympathizes. "Yeah, I know, it'd be a lot more fun to 'share' everything we know and just give them the raw files, and let them stew until someone figures out how to use Word, but sooner or later we'll want them to be nice to us, so suck it up and hand it over."

"On it, Boss."
"Hi, Ziva." Tim looks up from his computer as Ziva heads into his office. It hits him that he texted Tony hours ago and hadn't yet heard back. "Everything okay?"

"Yes, McGee. Tony sent me a text. He'd apparently just gotten one from you, but right now he and Bishop are in Kazakhstan."

"Because why wouldn't they be?" Phew, he breathes out, happy his part of this case is keeping him nice and comfy in DC. "So, I guess you want the heads up?"

"That would be nice."

"Pull up a chair. It's good."

Ziva nods and sits next to Tim.

"First off, those chips in…"

"Juarez."

"Yeah. They have the encryption of the gods on them. Without help, there is no way to break them." Though he had sent Atherson a heads up to compare the encrypted files to each other to see if possibly there was a similar sort of code that they were using with the Word docs. He knows that it's a beyond long shot that they'd use the exact same encryption on the almost same base documents and end up with a letter for letter comparable text, but, in that they're getting precisely nowhere without the key, it was worth a shot. "No news back on that, yet. However, if you've got anything, or the CIA has anything they think might be an encryption key, or part of a key, we need it."

Ziva's paying attention, looking through her notes. Back when they did just plain murders she could keep it all in her head, but with cases like these, where there are hundreds of actors moving through years' worth of data, she needs notes.

"I'm not seeing anything listed as a key."

"Okay. It's worth keeping an eye open for, and if CIA has tech guys with more data, it's worth pressing them to see if they can find anything."

She nods and makes a note of that.

"Next part, how many Word files have you run into?"

That does seem to trigger something for Ziva. Her eyes light up. "A lot of them. They're sending emails back and forth to each other with these files on them. CIA has been over them with a fine tooth comb, and they know there has to be something there, but not what." She's flipping through data pages on her phone. "Like this one. A Word document with 400 pages of the New York City phone book on it. CIA thinks it's a book code, but they haven't found the matching cipher, yet."

"That one's older isn't it?"

Ziva nods.

"They figured out some new tricks. Anything that matches something else, something you can check… Okay, this is going to be boring, take a lot of time, and probably not get you any information you haven't already figured out, but here's how it works. Someone scanned in the New York City Phone book. Then they went through and just added letters and numbers to spell out whatever it is. To anyone looking for a code it'll look like typos. Anyone who has the real version"
scanned in can use Word, which has a compare feature, to compare the old version to the new version, and it'll light up all the changes.

"Now, the ones that my guys pulled out of Mexico City are blocks of random numbers and letters. Nothing you can compare to, unless you've got the original, or they've written them on Word 2015, and you know how to use the Versioning Tool."

"So, you are saying that I need a herd of interns to scan documents so we can compare, and the secretarial staff to start going through any of the new ones we've got?"

"Unless you want to do it yourself."

For a moment Ziva looks overwhelmed, and the she smiles. "You know, I think this looks like a job for all of those students at Quantico."

Tim has an evil smile on his face, too. "I'd think that pulling a class of CIA wannabes off training and making them scan documents seems like a fine way for them to grasp the truly grueling nature of spy work and how remarkably unglamorous this whole thing can be."

Ziva's getting up when it hits Tim that he's got no idea how the actual case from upstairs is going. "So, you guys have your shooters?"

She shakes her head. "That's why they're in Kazakhstan."

"Your shooters ran there?" Okay, yeah, it's probably a good place to hide out, but McGee wouldn't ever want to be there. From what he knows about the place, ever since it lit up in civil war back in early '15 it makes Afghanistan look like a garden spot.

"No. Or at least, we do not think so. We think the shooters may be in Belize. The CIA and the Mexican Federales are tracking them along with the Local LEOs in Belize. The explosives that were taken from the site of the shooting ended up being used in Kazakhstan ten hours after the shooting."

"Why would the personal secretary of the main Mexican Diplomat have explosives in his possession? And what the hell were they flying to get them there so fast?"

Ziva sighs. "And this is why I will now take a quick and easy murder any day of the week over one of these."

I love you, McGeek! Pops up on Tim's phone a few hours later.

Got cell service, I see. Tim writes back.

For the next five seconds. Bishop's been complaining about those damn Word documents since we got this case dropped in our laps four months ago. Everyone knew there was something up with them. No one could find what. CIA has whole teams of cryptographers going through everything we found trying to find the ciphers for those damn things.

Glad it's useful. Mexico City's team is handing over everything it can find. Can you get me in touch with whoever's in charge of Cryptography at CIA on this case? I've got my own specialist and some really encrypted stuff from your victim.

Sure. Okay, moving again.

Stay safe, Tony!
Ever since last summer, Tim has (and this is putting it mildly) not been the CIA's biggest fan. And apparently, as he's dealing with this CIA cryptography asshole with a chip the size of a nuclear submarine on his shoulder, the feeling is mutual.

"Look, it's a simple question; have you guys found anything that is or might be an encryption key?"

"I'm really not authorized to share that information with you," CryptoAsshole says, smirk in his voice. "You are not read into this operation."

The first response, which Tim bites down before it gets out of his mouth, is that if this fucker ever wants to get a look at what he's got on those five chips, let alone what comes out of Mexico City, he better damn well get read into this op, as of the day before yesterday when his team found them a functional terror hub with all of the computers intact and in play.

He's feeling pretty proud of biting that back because that means he's not screwing up Tony's delicately balanced team of alliances.

The second response, which actually goes get out of his mouth, is this: "If I'm not cleared for this information, why do I know you're the person to talk to about it, what precisely it is I need from you, and what exactly I need to do with it?"

"I wouldn't know, Agent—"

"Director."

CryptoAsshole is very clearly not impressed by Tim's level. He might have just as well proclaimed himself director of a local pre-school. "Director McGee, but I can't be too careful. Once I get the OK from my higher ups, I'll answer the question. Until then, I don't know you, I don't know your agency, and I don't know anything about this case you're asking about."

Tim hangs up. "Asshole." Now would be a really great time to have a secretary, because he'd love to say, 'Get me the head of CIA Cryptography,' but there's no one but him to go about getting this person. Instead he scoots his phone over an inch and starts typing. CryptoAsshole won't talk to me.

Ha! When did you get good with nicknames? I call him Smithers. He gets back from Tony eight minutes later.

?

If you're ever in a room with him and his boss, he's right out of the Simpsons.

So, his boss is Mr. Burns?

Pretty much.

Don't want to upset your apple cart. Want me to go hardass on his Boss's Boss? Or you want to handle it?

Boss's Boss?

Think Leon's going to be happy if I tell him some CIA pissant won't give me the encryption key I need and is claiming he can't because I'm not read in. Next step on my side is to have a chat with the Director of Cryptography at CIA.
(Laughing) Let me make a few calls. Yes, I'd love to see the look on Smithers' face, but I want them to keep playing nice with me. Give me an hour, let me see what I can pry loose.

Okay. How's it going on your side?

Sifting through debris, body parts, and explosive residue. Mostly Bishop and I are making sure someone who knows how to handle a crime scene is keeping an eye on things. Hope to be home with a pile of forensic evidence tomorrow morning.

You know, I don't miss that, at all.

Yeah, I could handle a bit less hot, dry, dusty middle of nowhere, everyone hates us, body armor chafing from the sweat, you're afraid to take a step for fear of ending up with someone's liver on your shoe, and only catching cat naps sitting up riding/flying between stops.

Ugh. Tim's having vivid flashbacks to Afghanistan and how much he did not enjoy that trip. How many died?

Not sure. At least six.

Sorry.

Yeah, I know. Bishops looks ready to puke, and I'm sure Flyboy wouldn't be doing any better.

Tim nods, staring at his phone. He can remember his first meat puzzle case. Not good at all.

Just got an email from your guys in Mexico City. Tim's computer just chimed, too. Time to do some reading.

Yep. Me, too.

If you don't have what you need from CIA by... 20:00 feel free to go hard ass on their Cryptography department.

Thanks.

An hour later, his computer chirps to let him know someone wants face time. It's Atherson.

He's smiling. "I don't know how you did it, but I've got a key in my inbox."

Tim smiles back, shaking his head. "Not me. Agent Tony DiNozzo and the miracle of how charm, a smooth delivery, a talent for BS, and a spine of steel works wonders for inter-agency cooperation."

"Good. There's a ton of stuff here, and it's late. I'm setting it up, making sure the guys in Okinawa," where it's morning and not almost (or way past) quitting time "keep an eye on it so there're no surprises."

"Sounds great. Have a good night, you've earned it."

"Night, Boss."

He grabs his phone again and fires off. Got key. Prepare for massive data dump in the morning, to Tony. Tim checks his computer, it's a bit after five. Abby should be down soon. Heading home soon. Ortho appt. in the morning.
"You look really tired and really satisfied," Abby says, leaning against the door to his office.

Once he put his phone down and realized he was done for the day, Tim started to crash.

He nods, beat. He really should have gotten a nap this afternoon, but until two minutes ago he hadn't noticed he needed one. "Good day. I love my job!"

"Well, come on, let's wrap it up with a good night." She heads in, wraps her arm around him, gives him a kiss, and he slowly lurches up. They head off, him leaning heavily on her, and she holds his crutch.

As they're heading out, Brand is snoozing on the sofa.

"That's your new cyberbaby, right?"

He nods, and sees she's looking chilled, all curled up on the sofa in a little ball. Tim grabs the blanket that's on the back of the sofa and tucks her in.

He straightens up, noticing she didn't even move when he did that. "Sound sleeper."

Abby nods. "Um… I saw her when I dropped lunch off on Tuesday. Is she wearing the same outfit?"

Tim looks at Brand. He can't tell what she's wearing anymore, because she's covered now, but, best he can remember she is wearing the same outfit, and she's been here the whole time he's been around. He can see her hair is looking pretty greasy, and… he inhales… yeah, she's a bit whiffy, too. It's a much milder version of a smell that immediately pulls him back to grad-school. Hacker that's been on a coding-binge. On the upside, she's a teen girl, instead of a teen guy, who, in his memory, tend to smell so bad after three days they can knock a person out.

He gently shakes her shoulder. "Teenage hacker with no set hours overdoes it, alert the media."

Abby smirks at that.

"Brand, come on, wake up. You gotta go home."

"Mrghm." She flails a hand at him. "Too tired."

"Come on, get up. I'll drive you home. Well, Abby will."

"Mmm?" He hasn't introduced Abby, and Brand doesn't know who that is.

"Abby, Mrs. McGee, my wife. I haven't been driving since I got hurt, and I'm not starting tonight. Come on, get up. You need real food, real sleep, and a shower."

Brand sits up slowly, glaring at him, teen whininess and coding funk radiating off her skin. She's about to complain when the part of her brain that knows who she's talking to (namely her boss and not her parents) snaps into the front of her head, and she blushes hard.

"I'm fine. I don't need to go home."
Abby picks up what's going on before Tim does. "Home's kind of spooky and lonely all on your own, isn't it?"

Brand rolls her eyes, but nods.

"Okay, you're coming home with us. We've got a guest room, bed's made up. Come home, have something to eat, and crash. Your place'll be a lot more comfortable when you're not running on empty."

Brand stands up slowly, shuffles back to her desk, looking like she's sleep walking, grabs her purse, and Abby leads her tired man, and his tired tech, to their car.

Brand's awake enough to say, "Cool car," but she's pretty much asleep again by the time Abby's got the car in gear.

Abby chuckles at this as they head home. "Gibbs did this for me. First major case on my own, running my own lab. It was the dead of winter, snow on the ground, and I'd never driven in it before, never seen more than an inch of it in real life. We'd been working the case for three straight days, and I was dead on my feet. He took me home, tucked me in on the sofa, and made sure I got fed in the morning. Only time I ever saw Stephanie look like she approved of something he had done."

"I didn't know you knew him when he was married."

"Only saw them together a few times. They were usually fighting then."

"Is that how he adopted you?"

"Step one." She checks Brand in the rear view mirror; she's dead asleep in the back seat. "We adopting a teenage hacker?"

Tim chuckles at that. The idea that he's old enough to be the father figure to someone out of diapers is vastly amusing to him. "Maybe. Let's see how it goes."
Right Hand

Tim's up at his usual time, going through his usual routine (today he gets stretch out and slow shower time, yesterday he was on feed Kelly/make breakfast) and thinking about what to do with the teenager who is likely still sleeping in his guest room.

He's thinking it'd probably qualify as creepy to head in and leave a note for her.

Which is when he remembers that he lives in the 21st century and that the teenager sleeping in his guest room is more or less surgically attached to her phone.

So, he gets out of the shower and sends her a little note.

Morning Cristin,

You're at my house. He's not sure how much she remembers from last night. Pretty much she got in the car, fell asleep, slept walked out and into their kitchen, stared at them, glazed and wrecked, through eating a slice of pizza, and then immediately crashed into the bed in their guestroom, and from the sound of it, hasn't moved since.

We're out doing morning things. Heather (nanny) and Kelly (little girl, you met her last night) should be down there when you wake up.

Eat something.

Go back to sleep.

Shower's down the hall if you want it. Got clean t-shirts and sweats on the chair. Abby's old T-s and the smallest sweat pants (his) they had. They're still too big for Brand, but they are clean.

I'll check in when my ortho apt. is over. Give you a ride back to your car if you're awake. Let you sleep if you're not.

You're off until Monday. I checked, 55 hours in three days is okay for a job like we just had, but once that's done (and it is) you go hand it off and rest.

McGee

Gibbs eyes Tim as he slides into the truck.

"You're in a good mood."

Tim nods. "Got to work a real case." Then he gets Gibbs up to date with what's been going on. He wraps up with, "Before Kelly was born, we were wondering if I could do stay at home dadding." He shakes his head. "Pretty clear the answer is, 'No.' Even the injuries hurt less when I'm working. Well, working with a decent amount of sleep. They hurt something fierce when it's crash time."

Gibbs smiles, he knows all about that. "Driving yourself soon?"

"Supposed to wait until I'm off the narcotics, but…"

Gibbs' eyes narrow. "No buts."
"Then, no. I've done two days off, and I'm sharper on them and in less pain than I am off them and hurting, and even more sharp without the meds and not hurting."

Gibbs nods at that, too.

They drive a few more, quiet miles, then something hits Tim, speaking of not being all that sharp, "Jethro…"

Inclined head that means, *I'm listening.*

"I know how much difference working is making for me. Are you okay? Abbi, Mona, the house, taking care of me, is that doing it for you?"

He sees Jethro go still, carefully not answering, and gets the sense he's caught between not lying and not telling the truth. Tim's eyes narrow at that as he tries to decide if Jethro is trying to prevent Tim from worrying about him, or if there's something else going on.

Finally Jethro says, "You know how you told your guys not to poke into how you got hurt?"

"Okay," Tim says slowly.

"Don't poke it."

"I told them not to poke because I didn't want everyone at NCIS knowing the Admiral tried to have me killed. Because that's private, and I didn't want the whispers or stares. You and me, we don't have private."

Gibbs laughs at that. "Maybe you don't."

"Fine." There is a certain lopsidedness to Jethro knowing everything about them, and them not knowing everything about him, though Tim likes to think it's evening up. Though as he looks at Jethro, he does wonder about that.

More scans. They ache. They burn. One position feels like his whole arm is ripping in half. Tim supposes this is better and easier than the first scans, back when he was getting the first of the casts, but this isn't fun by any stretch of the imagination. Anything even remotely connected to his right arm is registering extreme displeasure at the idea of moving in any direction, let alone moving and being held in any position other than the one he's been in for the last six weeks, but he grits his teeth, eyes tearing, and does it.

Then it's time for more waiting. He and Gibbs just sit there in the Ortho's office, waiting for the images to come back. "Starting to feel like I live in doctor's offices."

Gibbs nods. He's starting to get that feeling, too. With Tim not driving and Abby working, he's been to all of these appointments, too.

"Bet the last one was fun."

Tim smiles. "Last one was fun." He's grinning from ear to ear and shaking his head. "Kind of stupid, I mean, I love Kelly so much, all the girls, but…" he bites his lip, still grinning, "little boy."

Gibbs smiles, too, he gets it. "Yeah. Ten years. You, me, Sean, Jimmy and Donny, Tony and Third."

"Not gonna be a Third. If they have a son, they're thinking David."
Gibbs grins at that. "Dave. Dave DiNozzo. Little guy, curly hair and brown eyes like Ziva, sassy, little wise-ass like his dad."

Tim's watching that grin. "You know something we don't? Like why Ziva's stateside and Bishop went to Kazakhstan?"

Gibbs shakes his head. If anything along those lines is up, he hasn't heard, yet. "Just seeing it."

"Okay."

"Gearing up, going camping, guys-only weekend in the mountains."

Tim's grinning at that, too. "S'mores, fresh fish from a lake, stories around a big bonfire?"

Gibbs nods.

Then Tim pokes a bit. "Jack Gibbs? Red hair, blue eyes? Say, five-years-old? He gonna be there, too?"

Gibbs rolls his eyes and shakes his head. "Already had that conversation with Abbi. I'm done with that. I've got my kids. Seven of you buggers is enough."

Tim smiles at seven, not even sure why that lights him up so much, but enjoying it. "Okay. But you have had that conversation with her?"

"Don't date a woman pushing 40 if you don't want to have kids and she does. Not a kindness for anyone."

"And Abbi's still here, so she's cool with it?"

"Yeah, she is."

"Good."

Dr. Kent heads in a moment later, new cast and sling in hand. "Good morning," they do the small talk routine and finally get to the meat of it.

He's putting the scans up on the plasma screen on the wall. "So, this is your shoulder." Tim'll take his word for it. For all he knows, that could be anyone's shoulder. Though, as he looks closer and sees the small scrap yard worth of metal holding the arm together, he decided that this does have to be his shoulder and arm.

Kent blows up the shoulder scan. "When your shoulder was ripped out of joint it tore free at the Corocohumeral ligament, Glenohumeral ligaments, and the Capsular ligaments. We put the humerus back into the glenoid fossa. The Corocohumeral and Glenohumeral ligaments ripped free of the bone taking tiny chunks of bone with them. You can see the staples we used to make sure those ligaments hooked back into your humerus properly. And, as you can see," he's moving his finger over the brighter white areas near the dead white staples, "those sutures there show that the bone reattached and knitted back together properly. So, it looks like your shoulder is stable enough that it doesn't have to be immobile any longer."

He tosses up the next shot. "This is your wrist and hand." Kent shakes his head. "Wrists heal up slowly in the best, cleanest of breaks, there're just so many tiny bones and ligaments. It's looking a lot better than it was." He splits the screen and Tim can see a shot of his wrist from right after they got it
set, and the shot from now, but he's not sure what he's looking at that makes the current one better. Probably all those brighter, white lines where there were just empty black spaces and screws before. "But you're not ready to go cast free, yet."

He zooms into Tim's hand and fingers. "Fingers are looking good. All of those little defensive breaks are healed up. Metacarpals, the bones in your hand, are almost there. Just like the ones in your wrist, they're tiny and have a lot of ligaments and muscles involved, and heal up slow in the best of circumstance, and this isn't the best." Kent makes the picture of Tim's hand even bigger. "Here and here, first and second metacarpal" he points to two screws in Tim's hand, the bones that attach into his first and middle finger. "These are right under the tendons that move your first and middle finger. Right now, I'm keeping those fingers immobile to let everything in here get really rock solid.

"Your new cast is going to cover your hand, wrist to mid forearm, and your first two fingers. Since your last two fingers didn't break, and none of the metacarpals under those tendons snapped either, we're going to let them start moving around again. But take it easy." Kent wiggles his pinkie and ring finger. "The tendons that move these have to go through your wrist. Getting moving again is going to hurt, beyond just you haven't been moving. There's a ton of scar tissue in there that is not going to want to be moving around. Same story with moving your thumb, with a side of your thumb did break and get dislocated. Moving it is not going to be fun, keep at it, but do it slow and gentle, okay?"

"Okay."

"I've sent everything to your PT and CCed Dr. Palmer, as well. I've also emailed them suggestions for someone who specializes in rehabbing hands."

"Oh good, more doctor's appointments," Tim says dryly.

Kent nods. "I know; you're so excited. Part of my job is managing expectations. Balancing hope with reality. Reality, this is going to be long and hard and take way more effort than you think it should. Things you use to do on automatic will require effort and thought for a lot longer than you think they should. But this is also reality, if you don't give up on it, if you don't decide, 'I've got 80% of what I had back, it's good enough,' you will get full function in your hand back."

"I'm a programmer and a writer, I need both of my hands working at 100%. So, how long…"

"One hundred per cent? Spring? You'll be typing long before then, but, you're really good and fast at it, right?"

"Yeah."

"Spring."

Tim sighs. He doesn't want to hear "Spring." He wants to hear "last week."

Kent looks at him. "I know."

Tim's got doubt it all over his face. Kent rolls up his sleeve and shows Tim the scars all over his forearm and wrist. "Skiing accident. I've got enough metal in my wrist to make yours look clean and tidy. Two years of rehab, but I am a fully functioning orthopedic surgeon again. Trust me, put the work in, and you will get it back. After all, you hit the wrong key, you go back and delete. It's a little different if I don't get the scalpel in the right place."

Tim nods at him. "Okay. Got it."
"Good. I'd like to set your next appointment for two weeks out. If all keeps going well, you'll be down to just a wrist/hand brace and sling then."

"Yippie?"

Kent nods. He gets it. "Let's get the new cast on."

It's still warm from the 3d printer and smells strongly of melted plastic. He almost feels a little naked with just plastic from his mid forearm to fingers.

"So, let's see what kind of range of motion you've got. We're going to start at the top of your shoulder and move each joint as far as you can without pain."

Tim sighs at that. At least since he's been doing some movement with Jimmy, his shoulder isn't completely immobile. He lifts it up and down, back and forth at the collarbone, and Kent hums a bit at that.

"Your shoulder has been adducted and internally rotated." Which Tim knows means his arm's been across his stomach for six weeks. "First off, try to rotate your arm."

Tim's able to move it almost a centimeter away from his stomach before it hurts. He's feeling pathetic about that, but Kent looks pleased. "Believe it or not, that's good. Next, abduction." Tim remembers from college that means move your elbow away from your side and toward Gibbs. And again, he's got about a centimeter before his shoulder screams at him. Kent's nodding along at that, too.

"Extension." Moving his arm forward and up, and in that direction his shoulder is telling him in no uncertain terms that it's not doing jack shit, thank you very much. "Okay, we've got to see how much your elbow is ready to move before we get retraction. So, onto your elbow." Pretty much the only part of Tim's arm that didn't get hurt was his elbow. He's got three full inches of extension before his tricep says no more, and a similar distance of retraction before his bicep goes on strike. "That's looking good. With as badly broken as your humerus was, and the amount of surgery they had to do to put it back together, I was afraid you'd have more damage to your muscles. You'll have full range of motion in your elbow first. Okay, palm up." The cast kept his palm facing his stomach for the last six weeks. He gives it a try and just like with extending his shoulder his body is sending very clear, 'Oh FUCK NO!' signal to him on that. Kent keeps nodding. "Palm down." Exact same response.

"Thumb?" It twitches slightly without pain, and he can almost wiggle the top joint. "That's good. Pinky?" He can bend the middle joint almost a quarter inch without pain, but the bottom one aches when he tries to move it, and he doesn't have the control to do anything with the top one. His ring finger is in the same boat.

"Okay, given how badly everything was broken, this is a really good place to be starting."

"I'll take your word for it."

"That's why you're paying me," Kent says with a smile. "Cast feels good?"

Tim nods.

"Good. We've got a new sling for you." Kent starts to open it up. "The cast kept your arm in position before. This is a little firmer, little more snug, than the sling you were using with that cast. He fits it around Tim's arm and shoulder, and adjusts the strap that goes around his waist. I've got it set so you've got about two inches of play for internal/external rotation of your shoulder, and a similar amount for extension and retraction. If you're getting tired and achy and want more support, just pull the straps tighter." Tim's noticing that this has four different Velcro straps that attach to his waist and ribs. "Once it's tight, it'll hold your arm the way the cast did. Loose means more movement. Try to
"keep it loose as much as you can, okay?"

Tim nods.

"Ultimately, you'll only have it tight for sleeping, but you're going to have to play that by ear. If it's more pain meds or tighten it up, tighten it up."

Tim nods at that, too.

"Okay. Speaking of pain meds, everything doing the job the way it should?"

Tim nods at that, too.

"Good. I'm going to write you another script for more Tylenol 3, and then you're set to go."

"Thanks."

"No problems. See you in two weeks."

"Back to work?" Gibbs asks when they get into his truck.

"Maybe. Gotta check at home." He pulls his phone out and texts. Awake?

A few seconds later, as Gibb is pulling out of the parking lot he gets back. Yes.

Be home in about twenty minutes. Then we'll take you back to your car, okay?

Sure.

"Gotta stop home."

"Picking something up for Abby?"

"Not quite." He explains who is home and why they need to get her.

He sees Gibbs' hand leave the steering wheel, start to head in the general direction of his skull, then stop and go back to the steering wheel. Gibbs then closes his eyes for a second and bites his lip before saying, "You took your exhausted, teenage, female, employee home with you? Are you fucking insane? is clear on his face.

"I tucked a sleeping agent in, at work, last night. Which is right out of your playbook, right? Abby took the teenage girl home. Which is right out of hers."

"Tim…"

He knows what's got Gibbs worried. It's also why he wasn't immediately all, 'let's go adopt a teenage hacker' when Abby suggested it. He's the Boss. She is his VERY young employee. This could be a disaster of epic proportions if it went badly. "I'm being careful. I was telling her she had to go home, and that we'd drive her, because she was too tired to drive home, and then Abby's asking if home alone is spooky and lonely and next thing I know she's sleeping in my guest room. I haven't been alone with her, and I'm not going to be."

"Okay."

"Heather's home right now, you're coming in with me, we're giving her a lift back to her car, and
"That's it."

"Good. She's too young to be... You can't be giving her favors. You can't have her getting a crush on you, and you can't be in a position where she might get the wrong idea."

"Speaking from experience?"

"Yes."

Tim digests that for a moment, wondering exactly when Gibbs learned that, then... "Wait, Abby told me you did the same for her when she was brand new at NCIS."

Tim catches a sheepish look on Gibbs face. In fact, if this was anyone but Gibbs, Tim would characterize that look as trying not to blush. Then he knows what Gibbs was doing that night. "Wait, with Abby? We're you trying... You were married!"

Gibbs shrugs. "Stephanie wasn't supposed to be home."

"Jethro! She thinks you were being all sweet and protective."

"By the time she fell asleep in my car, I was."

"But you weren't when you offered her the ride?"

Gibbs shrugs again. "Long case, bad case, Stephanie was supposed to be out of town, Stan and Abby'd already been out clubbing once, apparently she was fine with friendly and casual, and I just wanted to drink and fuck, thought she'd be up for it, too. Didn't realize how out of it she was until she fell asleep in the car. Then I realized how out of it I had to be if I'd misread the signals that bad. So home, tucked onto the sofa, Stephanie smiled at me for the first time in a month, and I went upstairs to my own bed to crash, too."

Tim grits his teeth and sighs.

"Don't you look at me like that. You did the exact same thing the first chance you got, and unlike me, you didn't strike out."

"Probably because she knew we were going on a date," Tim says dryly.

"Would have helped."

Tim's not sure what to do with that. "You ever try again?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "Got the little girl too firmly in my head after that to ever do more than flirt."

Tim nods, feeling a little relieved at that.

Then Gibbs turns to him and smiles. "Bet that feels a bit like walking in and seeing you spooning Diane."

Tim rolls his eyes and shakes his head. "I thought we were never going to talk about that again."

Gibbs nods, changing the subject a little. "So, how's Brand settling in?"

"So far so good. At some point I'll sit down with Howard and find out exactly how she was doing, but she was on 55 of 72, just kept working it until there was nothing left to work."
Gibbs looks impressed by that.

They're home five minutes later and Tim is about to get out of the truck when Gibbs stops him. "It'll take you ten minutes. I'll get her."

"Can you grab me a towel, too?"

"Why?"

"Hand towel. Fold it up, wedge it between my wrist and my stomach, it'll force everything to stretch a little, and improve my arm stability."

Gibbs nods. "Biomedical engineering, huh?"

"Magna cum laude."

Gibbs heads in and finds the infamous Brand. He's happy that he did not roll his eyes. She's sitting at the kitchen table in way too big clothing, with her hair long and wet, looking like she's, at most, twelve-years-old.

She's also having a pretty good conversation with Heather (who, as of five minutes ago, he thought looked twelve, but she's a paragon of maturity next to Brand) both of them chattering away while Kelly rides Heather's hip.

She's the one who sees him first. "Pop!"

"Hey, Jethro," Heather adds, bringing Kelly over for a hug and kiss.

"Heather," she gets an affectionate kiss on the cheek as he takes Kelly from her, and Kelly gets a big hug and a big kiss. "Hey, Kelly girl."

"Pop!" She's happily slobbering kisses all over him back. "Pway? Mona?"

"Not today, baby. Just picking up Brand," she leaps up as soon as he says her name. He extends a hand. "Leroy Jethro Gibbs. You can call me Jethro or Gibbs."

"Hi. I'm Cristin." She looks very shy, and even more achingly young as she blushes with him staring directly at her.

"Tim's in the truck. Head on out. I've got to grab a towel."

Both the girls are looking at him like he's insane. Gibbs starts to explain and then stops. "It'll make sense when you see it." He kisses Kelly again. "Go have fun with Heather."

Kelly nods at her Pop as he hands her back and heads into the bathroom in search of a hand towel.

When Gibbs gets into the truck, Brand is already in the backseat, looking pretty nervous. Tim's making small talk, asking if she's feeling okay.

"You introduce yourself?" he asks Gibbs while taking the towel and folding it up.

Gibbs nods.

Tim inclines his head toward Gibbs and says, "My dad."
Tim’s done that before, introduced Jethro as his dad, but like with the various Slaters, there’s usually been some sort of qualifier. ”My dad, or close enough,” or ”Dad’ll cover it,” something like that. It’s the first time he’s said it and just left it there. Gibbs smiles at that.

Brand’s nodding, watching him stuff the towel between his hand and stomach, and without missing a beat Tim starts to explain what he’s doing, as clearly as he can with his teeth clenched.

”Hurts?” Gibbs asks.

”Yeah. Got it a quarter inch past comfortable. Figure that’s the fastest way to start getting more range of motion.”

”Run it by Jimmy when you get in, okay.”

”I will.”

”We picking up pain meds on the way?”

”Got some in my desk. Abby and I can get the rest on the way home.”

Gibbs waves that off. ”Heading to the house this afternoon anyway, going by the Target, might as well pick it up for you. Got some of my own errands to run, and might as well save you a few more minutes.”

”Thanks.”

”No problem.”

Gibbs drops them at the door at NCIS. ”See you tonight.”

Tim waves. Brand scoots out. ”Thank you, Mr. Gibbs.”

Gibbs nods at that, smiling.

Tim starts slowly hobbling toward the office, as Brand says, ”It never actually ends, does it?”

”Hm?”

”They take care of you forever, right? Been talking to my parents about that, especially the last few months,” she rolls her eyes, ”tired of being babied, you know? I’m not a little kid. Mom pretty much wanted to move here with me.”

He nods. ”Yeah. I know. I moved 3,000 miles away when I was seventeen. Jethro joined the Marines the second he turned eighteen. You need time on your own, so do they, but if you have a good relationship, they never stop caring, and neither do you.”

She nods at that, catching Tim calling him ”Jethro” and he starts to turn again, but stops as she says, ”Why do you have different last names?”

”I’m adopted.”

”Oh. Okay. So… not until Monday?”

Tim shakes his head. ”No. Not until Monday. Go home, rest, play, explore DC. Summer session’s in full swing at American and there are piles of students your age, also all away from home for the first time, head over and socialize. Or call your buddies back home, but you do not come in again until
Monday, got it?"

She nods and heads off to her car.

A/N: I know, apparently all of you are really gung-ho on the adopt the teenage hacker issue. (Abby agrees with you!) And, it'll come more and more into play, but, guys, Tim's a 38 year-old-guy. She's BARELY 18. He doesn't know her, beyond her resume, at all. He's brand new to being the Boss and CANNOT be seen to be offering special favors/treats/affection to the girl he just hired out of Parochial School. Even if, and we all know this is Tim here, it's entirely innocent and fatherly on his part, Brand may not see it that way, and he can't risk her getting his signals crossed. So, this is going to be a tread with caution relationship, that I intend to have a lot of fun messing around with.

As for the medical stuff, that's the official way of saying that they shattered the long bone in Tim's arm, ripped it clear out of his shoulder joint, shredded his wrist, and broke his hand and fingers. Carpals are wrist bones, metacarpals are hand bones, phalanges are finger bones, etc. etc. Pretty much, it's a nice way of saying his right arm is BEYOND fucked.
A/N: For those of you who aren't into American Politics, the more conservative of the two main parties (and usually less pro-immigration) is the Republican party, both the color red and elephants are its markers.

"There's absolutely no shot of me getting you to take that thing off, is there?" Penny asks Ducky as they head to American University's chapter of No Illegal Humans.

Ducky touches his bowtie, his red, elephant-bedecked bowtie, knowing immediately what the offending garment is.

"My dear, if they cannot stand this level of mild provocation, how are they possibly going to work with Jethro?"

Penny inclines her head, that's a point. And she did get him to take the American Flag pin off his suit, so that was saying something. She sighs. Ducky has been a welcome and charming companion for all of her interactions with the adult, science activities on campus. She is, however, somewhat wary of bringing what is very obviously a cis-het-white-male-oppressor into the younger, political side of things.

But, wary or not, they're going.

"Shall I be Dr. Langston or Mallard?" Ducky asks as they stroll across the campus.

Penny smiles at that and then shakes her head. "If you're Langston, they'll assume I took your last name, and that loses both of us points."

"Mallard-Langston has a ring to it, don't you think? And if I've got the hyphenated name…"

Penny smiles. She'll be amused to see how the twenty-something activists will parse that. "Sure, Dr. Mallard-Langston. Though Ducky will probably work well, too. Most of these kids go by first name only."

Ducky nods.

It's a pleasant group. More welcoming, especially toward Ducky, than Penny was expecting, but… It's boring. She supposes there's a possibility that they are keeping things tame because she and Ducky are new to the group, and old in years, and thus presumed to be conservative about law breaking and whatnot, but…

It's a letter writing campaign.

Apparently one of the kids, a poly-sci major has been working on a dissertation on maximizing political responsiveness while minimizing representation. (He's trying to prove that Congress and the Senate should be one body of 1,425 representatives. In other circumstances, both Penny and Ducky would find his research interesting.) However, in his number crunching, he's come up with a formula for exactly how likely a given politician is to sway an opinion based on how many letters he gets, pro or con, from registered voters in his district.
He's got numbers on how much more valuable physical mail is over emails, let alone petitions. Apparently physical mail indicates an older person. Older, registered voters are much more likely to vote than young people... So, they've got paper, envelopes, stamps, pens, and lists of names of registered voters they're going to pretend to be, from districts all over the country. Then over the next week, different members of the group are going on road trips to mail the letters from the right Post Offices.

In that Penny and Ducky have "grown-up" or "classical" handwriting ("Old" is the word the kids are trying not to use. Legible cursive would be the most descriptive term for it.) they're actually quite popular with this group.

Some of them are copying a few of Ducky's letters verbatim because his writing is clear, attractive, and does not sound like it was written by a twenty-two-year-old.

As they head off, Ducky says to Penny, "Do you suppose I should have mentioned that if you do write an actual letter to your Congressman, he will send one back, and a large number of very surprised people will likely be calling their Congressmen soon?"

She laughs at that. "They'll figure it out. Coffee?"

"Certainly."

Once they're seated in a small café on campus, Ducky sends a text to Jethro. Meeting accomplished.

A few minutes later, as Penny comes back with a raspberry Italian soda for herself, a cup of iced-coffee for Ducky, a mug of black coffee for Jethro, and a plate of cookies for all three of them, he gets back. Just dropped Tim off. Over in a few minutes.

"And how is Timothy?" Ducky asks as Jethro sits down. He's always a bit on edge when Duck or Penny picks the place. Ducky because he usually goes for spots that are way too damn fancy, and Penny because... because she picks places like here, where everything just feels... off.

He can't pronounce half the drinks, and all of the food is organic, fair trade, vegan, granola and sprout-oriented stuff that he probably would like if Breena was serving it, but his Marine soul is rebelling against it here. The tables are tiny, almost afterthoughts, the seats are all fluffy, the art is... eclectic, that's the nice word, right? Ugly as sin and clashes with everything is the less polite version, and the music annoys him on principal alone.

Penny's grinning at him, enjoying this way too much.

At least the coffee is good.

"Doing okay, Duck. My truck's got less metal in it than his arm." Every time they look at the scans his knee aches in sympathy and his stomach clenches. "Doc says spring before he gets full use of his hand back. But he's down to just a cast on his wrist and fingers, and they're starting up on getting his shoulder moving again. That's good, right?"

"Yes it is."

Gibbs takes a sip of his coffee, and for as much of the vibe of this place annoys him, he's going to have to buy a bag of whatever this is, because it is tasty. He glares at Penny again and she smirks, very pleased with herself. Gibbs rolls his eyes, he's seen that look on Tim, too.

"How'd your meeting go?"
"We impersonated members of different congressional districts and wrote letters," Ducky says dryly. Gibbs shakes his head. "Mail fraud? You guys really know how to skirt the edge, don't you?"

"You know us dangerous radicals, right Jethro?" Penny adds.

"We impressed a cadre of children by having functional cursive skills and a command of basic written English." If Ducky's delivery was dry before, he's verging on Saharan now.

"No dice, then?"

Penny shrugs. "One of the grad students looked... I don't know. I got the sense he may have been looking for more, too."

Ducky nods. "It's only a feeling. And more may be anything from protesting in the streets to doing something useful. I have no idea if he may have any deeper connections."

"Just a feeling of restlessness."

"Cop?" Gibbs asks.

"No." Ducky shakes his head definitively as he takes a drink of his own coffee. "I'm sure I would have made him if he'd been a cop. Not that sort of restlessness."

Gibbs nods, undercover cops usually have a sort of feel to them. He can usually pick them up pretty easily. "Mosque on Thursday?"

Penny nods. "Yes. I'm running a talk on how to register to vote. Some of the ladies are newly citizens and have never lived anywhere they've been able to vote. Some of them were born here, but their husbands/fathers/brothers are not enthusiastic about them voting. The Imam is though, and was happy to let me grab one of the side rooms for a quick how to register and how to vote—"

"How?" Jethro's got an eyebrow up.

"The literal mechanism. How the machine works."

He holds his hands up. "Just pokin' ya."

"Uh huh." She's giving him the smartass look.

Gibbs grins back. "Semper's all set. Got her registered yesterday. She's water legal now. How about your end?"

"As of Wednesday we are the registered officers of Sojourner Inc," Ducky replies.

"Sojourner?" Gibbs asks.

"Penny thought there was a certain eloquence to naming the company after a woman who led others through dangerous lands to set them free."

"That's also the name of the boat," Penny says. "Paperwork for that should be done by Monday."

Gibbs nods. "I'll get her set to carry either registration as needed."

Ducky fiddles with his glass. "So, as of now, all we are waiting for is the proverbial damsel in distress?"
Penny laughs. "It would appear so." She takes a sip of her drink. "Were you serious about having me come along?"

"If you wanted to. I'd think being stuck on a tiny boat with a man you don't know, and a dog, would be unsettled for a lot of these girls. I'd think we'd want them looking and acting as… western… as possible when we get in sight of land, round here, this time of year, that's shorts and t-shirts and pony tails, and… And compared to Pakistan or Afghanistan or where ever, that'll be hard enough, with just me for company… Don't want them feeling… abused by it, ya know?"

"It will be easier to be the kindly old grandfather if there is a grandmother around, as opposed to being the dirty, old letch?" Ducky adds.

Gibbs nods. "Yeah." He fiddles with his cup. "Been thinking about that some. Trying to figure out how to keep 'em covered enough so it's not too uncomfortable, but western enough so I can sail 'em on past without getting a second look. Long t-shirt, those flannel PJ pants Abby likes, bandanna or something like that for the hair…"

"Let's actually meet the girl before we get planning, Jethro. For all you know, she'll be happy to hop into whatever makes it easiest for her to get into the country."

"Yeah. I can hope, right?"

"We can hope."

"I know we're all gathering at Abby's house for dinner tonight, anything to fill your time between now and then?" Ducky asks.

"Heading over to the house for a bit. Got some errands to run." Gibbs's phone buzzes. He pulls it out and sees it's a text from Ziva to him and Abby.

"Case is still hot. No Tony or Ziva tonight."

Penny squeezes his hand as he says that. "Missing it?"

He nods. "Yeah. Tim's all fired up, tech stuff coming out at a million words a minute. Abby's guys are finding trace in places we didn't use to know to look for trace. Jimmy's done on this one, unless Tony gets custody of the bodies, and he doesn't think he will. Tony's running a case with four other agencies over three continents. I see what they're doing with it, and yeah, I miss it, a lot."

Ducky smiles at him. "While Jimmy was in California, and I was back, overseeing Dr. Allan, that felt remarkably useful, in a way I hadn't for months and am afraid I'm not going to, again."

Gibbs nods. "Yeah. One of these day's a ghost'll pop up and they'll call me back in, but… Yeah, I miss it."

They both take sips of their drinks, and Penny watches them, wishing she could help fill the hole careers that were entire lives left in their wake.

"One day at a time."

Gibbs takes another drink. "Yep." Then he stands up. "Gotta get moving if I'm going to be at Tim and Abby's by seven. See you there."

He makes it to the house in less than an hour. Given traffic and where the coffee shop was (wrong
side of DC) he made epic time.

There's really not much he needs to do here, today. There are things he can do. More siding needs to go up. He could start arranging piles of shingles around the place so once they're up on the roof they're easily located. He could start ripping out drywall.

But he's not.

He heads over to the boathouse and opens the doors, and then scrambles up Semper's side and into the cabin. He supposes there should be more hoopla for a maiden voyage, but he also likes the idea of the first time out being just the two of them.

He gets her engine going, and pulls her out. Once he's free of the boathouse, he shuts it off, and begins to set his sails. Won't be out too long, but he wants some time with her.

Jimmy's not nearly as joking as it could have been comment about the last time he did this wasn't dead on, but it wasn't as far off as he wishes it was. It's been twenty-five years since he was on a sailboat. But he did do it way more than once.

But the last time he was on one, in the water, it was a rented boat, his girls were with him, they were on the Pacific Ocean, and it was a balmy winter day.

So, right now, beyond the gentle sensation of moving water and the feel of the ropes under his hands as he goes about catching the breeze, this is basically nothing like the last time he did it.

He can see them, both sitting on the rail of that boat, watching him, talking, laughing.

"Do you like it?" He wishes Shannon would answer, but he knows, in a way he didn't before, that he's talking to himself, just getting the ideas out. And he also knows, as he feels the tug of the wind catching sail, that he's not just talking about Semper. "I hope you do."

He nudges her over a bit, heading into the current. "I think you'd like Abbi. Feels weird to say that. Would have liked you to have met her." He shakes his head at that, too. "Okay, that feels even weirder." Which doesn't mean it isn't true. He remembers Penny saying that Ducky and Nelson would have gotten along. Maybe he'll talk with her about this when they get on the water together.

"Don't know what you would have said about John, or training Jimmy. Wonder if that's the sort of thing we wouldn't have talked about. I would have done it, and you would have known, and just sort of, given me that look, when I'd head out, the one that said it was okay." He smiles at that memory. He had more than a few missions where he couldn't say what he was doing, but she'd always nod at him when he left, tell him to be careful.

"I'm being careful." He stares into the blue sky above, feeling the wind on his face. "And I'm filling up the hours, some more useful than others. And there are a lot of things I'd like to say to you, share with you, but... but not getting to say them doesn't hurt so bad anymore."

He tacks starboard, seeing how she handles. Semper swings easy and responsive through the turn. Gibbs nods.

"She's sweet and solid, got a good feel to her, and I want to do good things with her. Make a difference.

"Maybe get the Palmers out here on Sunday. Not sure if Breena wants Molly on here, though. She's a little too happy to hop into the water first shot she gets. Might decide to try that cannonball trick off the side." Gibbs laughs at that idea. "Gotta get some little life vests." He realizes he's not wearing
one. "Get some big ones, too.

He tacks again, aft this time, and Semper's just as sweet in the other direction. "Kind of wish I could get Tim on here. Penny wonders how much of him getting seasick is actually about boats. You remember that movie you made me watch, stupid comedy thing, with the guy who drew comics about cute and fluffy bunnies and didn't like boats… Kind of wonder how far a good experience on a boat would go to helping with all of this." He takes a sip of the coffee in his thermos. "Probably not far enough. Don't think I can get him on one voluntarily. Not unless it's a crime scene, and these days…" Gibbs shakes his head. "Don't think he's ever getting back on a ship. Not if he can help it." Thinking of Tim makes him think of Sean.

"Got our first boy." He smiles at that. "Yeah, I know. Still makes me smile. Wondering if Ziva's got one in the works. Could be Tony's just making sure Bishop gets good experience. That'd make sense. I'd do that. Ziva knows field work better than any of them; she doesn't need practice. But, if you're going abroad, usually you take the person who speaks the languages, right?

"She says the case is still hot, won't be at Shabbos tonight. Not sure what can be that hot. Tony's not getting back until morning. Manhunt's been handed off. They both tell me about how cases now just go on and on. All the intel Tim's getting will take weeks to go through, not like burning the midnight oil will help. But if she's tired, or feeling off, or doesn't want all of us immediately noticing when she skips the wine… That'd make sense," Gibbs grins. "Wonder if Tony knows, yet." Then he laughs, imagining telling Tony his first child is on the way. "That'll be fun."

He ties off the sail, happy with the direction they're going, and sits, comfortably, on the rail. "Or maybe I've got grandbabies on the brain."

His eyes scan the banks, watching what looks like unbroken miles of trees passing by. Of all the places and ways he could have ended up, this one seems pretty good. "You remember, back in the diner, telling me I couldn't have both? Couldn't have you and NCIS. I wanted both. Still do. But… I'm okay with what I got."
Tim's wondering, as his grandmother (as the family matriarch) sings the prayers and blessings, at what point you qualify as Jewish.

It's an idle thought, mostly amused. Tony and Ziva aren't here. But they're still lighting the candles and doing the blessings and singing the hymns and... all of it, because, apparently they all like their rituals and no one in this family has any problems with saying thanks for a good week and good food.

So, yeah, at what point does this stop being something you do because some of the members of your family are part of it, and start being who you are?

He doesn't have an answer for that, especially since he'll likely be going to church and supper with the Slaters on Sunday.

"Nope." Jimmy grabs Tim's glass of Riesling and puts it at his place as they pass drinks and food around the table.

"Nope?" Tim's staring at the glass; he'd been looking forward to that.

Jimmy shakes his head and pulls a prescription bottle out of his pants pocket. "Percocet tonight. We're working on your shoulder, biceps, triceps, pec, rotator cuff, and inter-costals."

"Should I be happy about this?" Tim's feeling some trepidation, wondering how much this is going to hurt, but he takes a Percocet anyway. It should be really working by the time Jimmy gets started on whatever comes next.

Tim's looking at the bottle, five more pills in there, as Jimmy says, "Probably not. But, you'll like what it gets you."

"What's that?"

"More movement, faster, less pain in the long run."

Tim nods. He wants that, and he wants it yesterday, and if he's got to hurt to get it... Then bring on the Percocet. Abby's putting a piece of grilled salmon on his plate as he holds the platter (can't hold and take at the same time yet). "So why do you get my wine?"

"Because I'm gonna have to listen to you whine about it, and I don't get to have any Percocet for that."

Tim laughs. "I'm not that bad."

"Keep telling yourself that." Jimmy takes the platter from Tim, and sends it down the table toward Jethro.

"So, I get why Tony's not here. He's en route, right?" Breena asks. "Where's Ziva?"

"Last I heard he, Bishop, a pile of evidence, and a suspect are on their way back. I think she's meeting up with them at Andrews so she can Draga can take a swing at the suspect as soon as they get him in." Tim's been texting back and forth with Tony and Ziva all day, his guys hunting through...
the data dump they've got for things that may be useful to interrogating their suspect.

"So, weekend interruptus for the rest of us?" Jimmy asks. Evidence for a bombing often involves bodies, and Abby's nodding along as well.

"Maybe," Tim answers. "Not sure. I think they're escorting the evidence and CIA is getting it. Ziva tells me that she and Tony are getting a reputation as the people you send suspects to when you want them broken, but you also want to be able to show it was clean. They've got black sites for when they want it done yesterday, or messy, but when they want to look like boy scouts, they send them to us, now."

Gibbs smiles at that, something of the proud daddy look on his face.

"Looks like all of your training is paying off," Penny says to him.

He shrugs, modest, still smiling.

Of course, Gibbs didn't just train two investigators. And number four is staring at him, thinking there's something else going on with that smile.

"Okay, what's up?" Tim asks.

Gibbs spreads his hands in a nothing gesture.

"Nope. As Ziva would say, you look like the cat that ate the canary. What are you thinking?"

Gibbs takes a sip of his wine and shrugs. "Nothing."

"Gibbs!" Abby says.

He shakes his head. After a few seconds he says, "Your guys still pullin' data for her?"

Tim nods. "By now, it's Okinawa doing it again, and a few of my night owls."

"So, she's probably at Andrews, readin' up?"

"Should be. Last I heard Tony was due in round 05:00."

Abby looks up at that, smile on her face, and Breena gets it after a tenth of a second, too. If Tony's getting in that late, Ziva normally would have had dinner with them, gotten a nap, and then headed over. So, if she's not here right now, it's for a different reason.

Like, maybe the bottle of wine, the blessing and drinking of which is a big part of each Shabbos.

Or maybe, if she happened to have some really good news she hadn't shared with Tony yet, that she didn't want to let out before he knew it, she could be hiding away.

Or they could all be a bunch of ninnies with overactive imaginations and she's just putting in the due diligence to do her job right.

Could be… But speculation is fun.

At the end of dinner, after everyone besides the Palmers have taken their leave, Tim heads upstairs to swap out his work clothing for a pair of PJ pants. He's not sure exactly what Jimmy's going to do to him, but it doesn't sound like something he'll need a shirt for. Plus, not like anyone in this crew is
bothered by him in his PJs.

Once out of his shirt, he takes a moment to really look at his arm. First shot since before the cast.

It's so thin. He feels stupid thinking that, because it requires him to admit how proud he was of what he had done with himself over the last two years. And being the guy who checks himself out isn't part of his self-concept, but… It's so thin. Thinner than it was the first time he lost weight. He's got have lost at least four inches around over the last six weeks.

New scars, thin and red and angry. He guesses the two around his deltoid must be from putting his humerus back into the socket and reattaching his ligaments. More scars, long lines, one on the inside of his arm, other on the outside, right below his tattoo, he guesses that's where they had to open his arm up to screw his humerus back together.

He can see at least two more hiding under his wrist and hand cast.

His fingers hover over his shoulder, he hasn't touched, explored, yet. Tim figures they won't mind if he takes a minute to get a feel for his own body before everyone else hops on.

He makes contact, letting himself touch for the first time in weeks. For just light, gentle, stroking touch, it doesn't hurt. Feels kind of nice actually. The scars are numb, and so are several areas under them. He wonders if that's supposed to feel that way.

Soft pressure is okay, too. As long as he's not moving anything, placing his finger tips on his shoulder and lightly poking isn't an issue.

He gently circles his knuckles into his pec, right where it meets up with his shoulder and winces, that hurts. A light squeeze to his deltoid is fine. Slightly more pressure burns and aches.

He can remember looking at his arm and puking. By then he was in shock so hard and had so many endorphins flowing through him that he hurt, but couldn't really feel how bad it was. And then he looked, and… and he can remember the feeling of puking, and the resolution that he wasn't going to look again. But, beyond that one second of recognizing that his palm was up and his wrist was down, his mind blocked out exactly how bad it was.

Looking at the scars, he's feeling very glad he doesn't remember exactly how bad it was, and hopes he won't.

"You okay?" Abby asks, popping her head into their room.

"Oh. Uh… Yeah. Probably. Just… getting reacquainted."

"Oh." She smiles and walks over to him, fingers hovering over his shoulder. He nods at her, and she gently strokes them down his arm. "Hello, arm." She lightly kisses the top of his shoulder. "Hello, shoulder, been a while. Looking forward to resting my head on you again."

Tim kisses her. "Me, too."

"That feel okay?"

"Yeah. Anything more than," he gently squeezes her hand, "hurts, but very light touches like that are fine."

"Good."
"Can't feel the scars."

She nods at that. "Join the club." Right after her c-section the numb area at the incision was almost four inches wide. It's down to closer to one now. She's figuring she'll have full sensation back just in time for Sean to come out. "Feeling'll come back, sooner or later."

He inclines his head and they head downstairs.

"So, how does this work?" Tim asks when he gets back into his living room.

At his physical therapist's office there's an exam table, and exercise equipment, and elastic bands for stretching, electro-stim equipment, various oils and gels that make his skin heat up or cool down, and just piles and piles of stuff.

If there's any stuff beyond Percocet and Jimmy, Tim can't see it.

Jimmy's just sitting on his sofa, talking to Breena, and the only concession to the idea of doing something with his hands is that his sleeves are rolled up.

Jimmy leans forward and pats the floor between his feet. "You go here. Abby, you've got some massage oil, right?"

"Of course." She goes back upstairs to get it.

Tim's getting himself settled on the floor. "Facing away, right?"

"Yeah, back to me." Jimmy taps his knee. "Head goes here."

Tim feels really bizarre sitting on the floor between Jimmy's legs with his head on his knee, but… Okay, first off Jimmy's a doctor. Second of all, they're friends. Third, Jimmy's still in his work clothing, not his usual weekend in the summer time shorts, so it's not like he's snuggling his cheek against Jimmy's bare knee. And having done so, he's got an idea of what Jimmy's hoping to do, because like this his neck and shoulder are easily accessible and he's not using his neck to hold the weight of his head.

Abby's back, with their massage oil, and some towels, and a few pillows, too.

He's got the sense she's got a better idea of what's coming next than he does.

She puts one of the pillows in his lap, which is when he notices that he's been holding his arm in place. (After all, the sling is still sitting up on his bed. Right now it'd just get in the way.) He lets his arm rest on the pillow, which does involve a little straightening at his elbow, but it's within the comfortable range.

Then Abby hands the massage oil over to Jimmy. "Don't have any unscented, hope this is okay?" Which is when Tim remembers that the only massage oil they have right now is 1001 Nights scented, which means he's got a lot of very strong sensual and sexual images, memories, and sensations attached to this fragrance and that maybe if they do this again having a bottle of unscented might not be a bad plan.

Of course, depending on how much this is going to hurt, thinking about sex and pleasure might be a good distraction.

Jimmy opens the bottle oiling up his hands, and Breena says, "Oh, I like this one," while slipping
around so she's sitting with Abby on the love seat, instead of next to Jimmy on the sofa.

"What are we doing?" Tim asks.

"Right now," Jimmy lays his hands, gently on Tim's neck, right below his ear, and slowly strokes down his neck, over his shoulder, cupping his arm, to his elbow, "we get everything warm and soft. Happy muscles, happy limbs, are soft, and flexible, and pliable. The skin slides over the muscles underneath, muscles slide over bone, ligaments can bend and flex, and everything is in this web of soft silvery stuff called fascia."

"The stuff between the chicken breast and the chicken skin?" Breena adds.

"Exactly." Jimmy pulls his hands up Tim's arm, cupping his palms against the skin, and when he gets to the top of Tim's shoulder, he presses down gently and pushes to the left a bit. "Yeah, see the skin should flow over the muscle. Everything should be able to move together and move around each other. The fascia keeps it in place, but allows for some glide." He pokes, gently, again, and Tim feels some burn with that move. "You're not gliding.

"When your body is working properly it uses its strength to do whatever it is. Strength is good, everything is doing its job right and is able to do that job. You get hurt, and suddenly your body doesn't have the strength to do the job anymore, so it replaces strength with rigid. Things get stiff, they stop moving, the lymph and other fluids don't flow properly, fascia dries out, and you end up stuck. Right now your arm is all stuck together like a dried out piece of jerky."

"Vivid image." Tim says dryly, though given what he was thinking about his arm being so small, there is a sort of withered vibe about it.

Jimmy nods. "Step one, get everything warm and soft. Taking a pinch of your skin and pulling it away from your arm shouldn't hurt." He does it on Tim's left arm, and it doesn't hurt. He tries on his right and it does.

"What's step two?"

"Unsticking the muscles."

"Let me guess, that's the Percocet part of this?"

Jimmy nods.

"Okay then. And five more Percocets means this isn't all happening tonight?"

"Exactly. We're not even touching step three tonight, which is where I start going after the ligaments."

Tim nods at that. "Do I need to do anything?"

"Relax as much as you can and don't fight me."

"Will do."

Okay, honestly, this feels pretty nice. Getting a shoulder rub from Jimmy's a little weird, but he's getting used to having a guy rubbing on him. The PT does it for his foot and ankle, and, so far this feels a lot better than that.

Jimmy's either really good at giving massages, or the euphoric side of the Percocet is already kicking
in, and maybe it's both, but right now, this is awfully nice.

Abby and Breena look like they may be enjoying this a bit too much. They're both really, really watching and he can see them tracing the path Jimmy's hands are making over his arm, shoulder, neck, and chest, but, hell, if it's making them happy and doesn't hurt... why not? Plus, he's in favor of getting really well-laid tonight, and they're lapping this up like two kittens with an extra-large bowl of cream.

Two, happy, sexy kittens, talking with each other, watching him, and he's sort of idly thinking about having them head on over and help out, because, he's got an arm and leg that don't hurt and wouldn't mind some rubbing when, "Feels weird being half-naked and all of you are dressed," comes out of his mouth.

It occurs to him that this could possibly be the Percocet talking.

The girls are glancing at each other, and then look at Jimmy with big kitten eyes. He rolls his eyes, sighs, stops, and strips his shirt off fast before going back to working on Tim.

Tim pouts at that. "You weren't the one I was hoping would take some clothing off."

Jimmy rolls his eyes and adds a little more oil to his hands. (He's also in favor of getting very well-laid tonight and has I really hope you enjoy this all over his face and aimed at Breena. She's beaming back at him, grinning, and then licks her lips. He gets the I am message loud and clear.)

"Yeah, but we were, so you got out-voted," Abby says.

Tim looks at the girls, and then looks at Jimmy, counts, blinks, and says, "Okay, I know I'm on drugs, but... There are two of you and two of us, how did we get out-voted?"

"He didn't vote." Abby says.

"I'm voting!" Jimmy sounds surprised at the idea that he didn't vote. He was eyeballing Breena at the suggestion of less clothing. "If the question is, do you want to see more skin on the girls, the answer is always YES. The only time I'm going to tell you to put more clothing on is if you're in danger of sunburn or cold. Oh look, we're inside, at night, in a pleasantly temperate house. Hmmm..."

Breena stands up and twirls around, which both Tim and Jimmy enjoy because she's wearing this cute little sundress and that flares the skirt some, flashing her panties. Tim, on the floor, gets a bit more than a flash and he approves heartily. "I'm already half-naked." Then she sits back down again.

"Abby?" Tim asks.

"You okay with it?" She's once again at that stage of pregnancy where her real clothing is snug, but not quite ready to move into maternity gear. So, lately she's been wearing one of his button downs with the sleeves rolled up, leggings, and boots.

"Trust me, I'm good with this." And right now, he doesn't care if Jimmy's watching, too, he's really good with it.

She slips off the leggings. Since it's one of his shirts, it's long enough to cover her butt, but that's all it covers. It's shorter than her shortest skirt.

Tim's eyes are slipping all over her, enjoying naked legs, and liking that quite a bit.

"Feeling more comfortable?" Abby asks, standing up, reaching over on the coffee table, making her
shirt inch up just a hair, getting the bottle of wine they didn't finish at dinner, and pouring the last of it into a glass for Jimmy and Breena.

Tim nods, very happy. "Yes, thank you." He eyeballs the glass, and then looks at Jimmy. "Not going anywhere, certainly not driving, and you want me relaxed, right?"

Jimmy thinks about it for a few seconds while he keeps rubbing his fingers over Tim's bicep. He increases his pressure slightly and feels Tim wince. That's just the pressure level he's going to need to get the skin mobile, getting into the muscles will be worse. "Quarter glass. Start seeing double or having any trouble breathing, you let me know, right away."

"Sure." Tim takes a sip, and yes, it's as good as he was hoping it was going to be. "Read a review of this online, wanted to try it with the salmon."

"It was really good," Breena adds.

"Have to get more for next week." Another sip, and Tim starts to slide into a very relaxed headspace.

"Shit, that hurts!" Tim yelps, jerking up and away from Jimmy's hands.

Jimmy gently presses, letting Tim know to put his head back on his knee, and returns to the long, slow stroke he'd been using on Tim's pec. Tim does, but this time his body is wary, and it's harder to just melt.

Tim had been just chilling out, leaning against Jimmy, kind of aware of the fact that there's a conversation going on, but mostly just relaxed and happy. All was good and right with the world and he was thinking that he really wouldn't mind spending more Saturday evenings like this. (In fact, to be really precise, he was thinking about how Percocet with a little alcohol when you aren't really hurting is a really nice sensation and that anytime Jimmy wants to drug him and rub his shoulders, he's game for it, and if one, or better yet, both, of the girls would get over here and make out with him, this would be the literal definition of heaven.)

And now Jimmy's ripping his arm off.

"Level two, Tim, stripping scar tissue hurts. Gotta break it down, stretch it out, get it soft and pliable again, or you're never going to get full use of this shoulder back."

Tim whimper, as Jimmy slowly, with deep, firm pressure, strokes his thumb across the underside of Tim's collarbone. He thought that Jimmy working on his foot was awful, but this is almost as bad as when he first got hurt. Okay, not really, when he first got hurt he was on a boatload of narcotics and felt this bad, and right now he's just got the one, but this still HURTS.

"Do you have to do it that hard?" Tim asks, trying to make himself relax and having a very hard time of it. Jimmy's 'don't fight' instruction is going to kill him.

"Harder!" Breena says with a giggle, causing both of the guys to stare at her. Yeah, it sounds silly, but she's hoping this'll distract Tim from how bad this hurts. "Oh come on, this is fun to watch!"

Actually what Jimmy was doing to Tim was fun to watch. She didn't think that watching Jimmy give Tim, or any other guy, a massage would do much for her, but... yeah, Jimmy's hands, warm and firm, slipping all over Tim's shoulder and chest. That was working just fine for her. But as soon as he hit the point where Tim jerked and started wincing, it got a whole lot less fun, real fast. She knows Abby feels that, too. She glances at Abby and they're both on the same page, Mission: Distract Tim. And if anything is going to distract Tim, it's sex.
Abby nods. "Watching you two play doctor is pretty nice."

Tim sighs and grits his teeth, and Jimmy sputters, "It's not playing doctor if you've got an MD!"

Breena looks at him, sweet and sexy. "You and I have played doctor."

Tim flashes him a curious look.

"Oh, like you haven't done something similar," Jimmy shoots at him, rippling his fingers over Tim's pec muscles.

"They play dragons," Breena adds, and now it's Jimmy's turn to give Tim the curious, rapidly morphing to full-out stupefied, look.

"How does that even work? What, do you pretend to sit on eggs or something?"

Tim rolls his eyes, staring at Abby. "You told her that?"

Abby shrugs, about to say something when Jimmy (who is, because he's a professional and very good at what he does, and likely has some idea of what Breena's ulterior motive is, still working on Tim's shoulder) says, "Holy shit!" he's staring at Tim. "Oh my God, your dragon story! Is that where that comes from? Are you writing a novel about your sex games, with all of us in it?"

Now Tim's really staring at Abby with a really, you had to tell her that? look. She shrugs, looking innocent, letting him do the explaining.

He shifts a bit, so he can easily look up at Jimmy, who as he shifts slides his hands over to Tim's deltoid and begins stripping there. He mentally sighs, the whole thing is locked up with rock hard muscles, dried out fascia, scar tissue, extra bone calcification, staples, and ligaments that haven't moved in weeks. To say Tim's deltoid is a mess is to say the ocean is damp.

"They're shape-shifter dragons, Jimmy, and in human shape when there's sex happening, and…" Tim grunts as Jimmy starts to apply some real pressure, "And if you had even half of my imagination," said through clenched teeth, "you'd do it, too, Dr. Palmer."

"Has he let you read some of the sex scenes?" Abby chirps. "Oh my god, they're so hot!" She looks at Breena. "You know, soaked panties, squeeze your thighs together and get off, hot."

Breena looks impressed. "And why didn't they end up in my inbox?"

Tim's staring at them, feeling kind of lost, and wondering when they started sending each other smut. Though… Yeah, Abby did give Breena his smutty books, and Breena gave Abby Fifty Shades, and that's the only one he heard of, but for all he knows they may be swapping erotica right and left. He does know that there have been, 'Hey, let's try… insert new position or thing here' nights, so… maybe that's where the inspiration was coming from.

He gets the sense he should say something before those stories do end up in Breena's inbox. "They're just for you. I was stoned off my ass when I wrote them, they're never seeing the light of day."

"They should, Tim. They're smoking hot."

"They need at least a rewrite before anyone else sees them."

"So, wait, Breena said some bits of the Dragon book were sexy. I thought it was like… Like Song of Fire and Ice. How smutty is this thing?" Jimmy asks.
Tim shrugs with his left shoulder; he's gotten pretty used to gesturing with only the one side. "Right now about two thirds of what I've got written is sex. I was home, doped up on pain meds, not like there was any real work I could do, so I wrote, a lot. Anyway, apparently if you take away most of my higher level mental function, I spend a lot of time thinking about sex."

"You mean you don't normally?" Breena's curious.

"There's usual being a guy thinking about sex, and then there's spending six hours a day on it." He quickly looks at Jimmy, "And if that's how long you usually spend thinking about sex, I don't want to know."

Jimmy laughs. "I don't think even Tony spends six hours a day thinking about sex."

"At least, not since he hit forty," Tim says, making the other three laugh. "Anyway, can't work, bored, horny, I wrote a lot of other stuff, too, but yeah, lots of sex scenes, and you didn't mind getting sent them in the middle of the day."

"Anytime you want to send me smut, I'm happy to receive it." Abby says with a smile. "I think Percocet just gets you horny."

"Uh…" Well, that could be true, he's, well, was, in a pretty mellow bring-on-the-sex sort of mood, which was just perfect and probably would be again in about two minutes if Jimmy would quit trying to shred his arm, but… "I think horny might be my default setting and Percocet just peels everything else away. But, once again, I think that's just being a guy, too. How about it, Jimmy?"

He makes a non-committal noise. Tim's relaxing some as he talks, and he's getting into his delt a bit deeper, running the edge of his thumb along the grain of the muscle.

Abby looks at Jimmy. "So, playing Doctor? Anything you really like, Dr. Palmer?"

That does a better job of getting his attention, he looks up from Tim's arm. "Hey, everyone has a playing doctor fantasy, and who says I'm the doctor when we're playing?"

Abby's interested in that. She knows Jimmy and Breena role play some, but this level of detail hadn't been brought up before. "You aren't?"

"Well, it's not exactly playing when you've got the MD, now is it?" Tim and Abby are staring at him. Breena's grinning, very pleased. Jimmy rolls his eyes. "About half and half. And it's not playing when the person you're working on is actually hurt, and what you're doing helps…"

"And it hurts like a fucking son a bitch." Talking about what they're doing not being playing doctor refocuses Tim on how this actually feels. "Back to my question, do you have to do it that hard?" Tim asks, because really, this is so far away from an erotic massage they're not even on the same continent.

"Depends, do you want it to work, or you want me to just oil you up and play with you?"

"Uh, I'm all for the oiling and playing!" Abby chirps.

"Maybe we could oil you up, too," Breena say to Jimmy.

"Keep that up, and you don't get to watch next time," Tim says. "This couldn't be less sexy if we tried."

Abby laughs at that. "You're way the hell out of it right now, aren't you, baby? Have you noticed
what we're talking about?"

"Yeah, what we're," he gestures his left hand at him and Breena and Abby, "doing is sexy. What he's doing to me really isn't."

Breena and Abby pout. "For you. Different story for us," Abby says. "Your skin is all slick and pink." She goes to sit next to Jimmy, and kisses Tim. "And he's rubbing all over you. Trust me, Breena and I love this show."

Both the guys kind of sigh at that. They know they're playing with it, but it's easier to play with if the girls don't flat-out say they're getting off on it. Tim's starting to feel a little self-conscious about it, and Jimmy's hands have stopped working.

Looks like Abby notices she and Breena pushed them a step too, far, so she scoots right next to Jimmy, her hip against his. "Okay, show me what you're doing so I can do it." She gently kisses Tim's neck. "Would that be better, me doing it? Or me and Jimmy doing it together?" She looks at Jimmy. "We've got… the rest of the deltoid, rotator cuff, and bicep to work on, right?"

Jimmy nods. "Traps, too."

"No reason we can't do you together. Intercostals after, too, right?"

"Yep."

"Wanna help, too Breena?" She kisses Tim again. "All three of us on you at once?"

The addition of the girls to the mix is perking Tim up quite a bit. Okay, yeah it hurts, but if they're willing to rub on him some, too, that'll go a long way to keeping him nicely distracted, and… "Can I have more alcohol?"

Jimmy shakes his head. "Want you relaxed and happy, not unconscious and having a hard time breathing."

Tim sighs, then Abby starts rubbing her hands up and down his neck, focused, firm, not hurting pressure, helping distract him from what Jimmy's doing to his deltoid and…

"Why are you working my armpit?" Tim asks, jerking, that hurts and tickles.

"Because your shoulder joint is three dimensional and the muscles that bring your arm closer to your body are here."

"Come on, Breena, grab a part." Abby adds.

"Uh… I don't know what I'm doing with this. Not like I've got an MD or Rolfing certification," Breena says, looking a bit nervous.

Tim's enjoying the idea of the girls helping out with this a whole hell of a lot better than just Jimmy manhandling him. "It's extremely unlikely that anything you do'll hurt worse than what they're doing to me intentionally."

"Nah. Not going to hurt at all," Abby says. "At least one of us should do something that feels good. Foot rub?" she asks Breena.

"That, I can do!"
There's the flirty, and beyond flirty talking they were doing before. And, the all of them not entirely dressed bit, too, and for a while, that helps keep up the lightness, helps keep Tim distracted, and makes this… fun.

But, when it comes down to it, this isn't fun.

Jimmy's not even trying to go after the joints or ligaments. He can feel Tim shaking under what he's doing just trying to work muscle, and with Abby working, too, they're doing it twice as fast, but it's still taking too long.

He's torn between backing off, doing this softer and more gentle, because that's an option, but it takes so much longer, and every day he's not really moving is another day of everything stiffening, sticking, holding in places it's not meant to hold.

He knows Tim wants himself back as fast as possible, so he's pushing, taking him right to the edge if not very slightly over what's a good idea, but as they're getting to the end, with Tim lying on his side, crying, while Jimmy's working the muscles between his ribs and Abby gets his traps and rotator cuff muscles, Jimmy really wants to stop. He can see Abby does, too.

"Almost done, Tim."

"Good." That's a whimper.

"We can stop now, don't have to—"

"Just finish it. Done this much, I can take a little more."

"Okay."

Breena's been down at his feet, gently stroking and rubbing his right foot and calf, but she stops at that and scoots up to hold his hand.

"Hey, come on, focus on me, okay?"

He looks into her eyes, tries to smile some.

"Really hurts, right?"

He nods.

"Okay, keep looking at me." She's holding his hand, stroking her fingers between his, then lays on her side, facing him, still holding his hand, but stroking his cheek, too. "I've got you. Just keep breathing. They're almost done, and you're gonna feel so much better after. We'll ice you down, and tomorrow you'll be able to move your arm more, hurt less. Maybe get you sleeping on your side again, soon. Know you miss that." Her forehead touches his and he's staring into her eyes. "Almost done, Tim, almost done."

He kisses the palm of her hand, and she kisses his forehead. "Almost done."

She keeps murmuring her little pep talk while petting his hair. Not making a whole lot of sense, but her voice is soothing, and Tim doesn't look like he's listening to her words so much as her tone.

Jimmy and Abby wrap up. It only takes them two more minutes, but they're a long two minutes.

And when they finish, when he's lying there, aching but no longer burning, with the three people he loves best, all with their hands on him, there's a heaviness to that moment, a sense of something
They all feel it, know what rationally comes next from here, can all see the next move, where Tim scoots into Breena a bit more and kisses her, and Abby spoons him from behind and Jimmy... Tim's not sure what the hell Jimmy does, but he's got the basic game plan down for what's supposed to happen next.

Though that sense of what's supposed to come next is unspoken, the desire to back away from it is also clear. Even out of it, Tim's not willing to jump off that cliff yet, and he can feel they all want thinking time.

Tim sits up slowly, and there the moment breaks.

Jimmy gets up and grabs ice packs and as he's heading back in he sees Tim gently squeezes Breena's hand, and kisses it again. "Thanks." He turns to Abby, pulling her into his lap. She gets a kiss, too, and Jimmy gets a hand squeeze as well as Abby takes the ice packs and starts draping them over Tim's arm and shoulder. "I know I'm a pain in the ass about it, but, thanks." It's getting late, and he wants time to be with Abby, and think. "You guys can crash here if you want. Guest bedroom's made up."

"Thanks." Jimmy's shaking his head. Normally he'd say yes. Girls are sleeping. The guest room is comfy, wouldn't be the first, and won't be the last time they stay over after a late night. But not tonight, he's already pulling his shirt back on. "Think I want to sleep in my own bed."

Breena nods at that. "But, tomorrow night, dinner, all four of us, we've got talking to do, right?"

"Yeah." Tim replies.

Abby nods. "Yeah, we do."

A/N: Okay, I probably don't need to spell this out, but, just in case, mixing Percocet with alcohol is not a good plan. It's right there on the bottle that you're not supposed to take it with alcohol. Euphoria is a side effect of Percocet, and alcohol does make that more intense, but they're also both depressants which can make you so relaxed you stop breathing.
Knowing

Ziva is not, in fact, at Andrews.

She's home, on her sofa, cup of tea next to her, laptop open, "reading" the reports that are flooding in from Okinawa now. She's "putting together questions," "getting background," and, sporadically, texting with Bishop to see what she's putting together on the flight home.

What she's really doing is staring at her computer, wondering if today's the day her whole world changes.

She's late. Sort of. Okay, not really, not yet. Her period should have showed up today. It should have, like it has every twenty-nine days since she stopped taking her pills, decided to grace her with its presence at some point last night.

She's usually so regular that the night she expects her period to show up, she sleeps with a tampon, and as of this point she's never woken up with a clean one in the morning.

But she did today.

So, she's late, ish, maybe. Lot of long nights this last week, and that can mess a cycle up (though it hasn't before.)

She has the test, in the bathroom, where it's been since they started 'trying.'

Part of her wants to leap up right this second, take the test and find out. Cheering along is the part that's afraid Tony will flip out when this goes from a somewhat nebulous concept to something that's 'real.' That part knows he'll come around, but it also wants some alone time to savor this without having to deal with a terrified man.

Part of her wants to take the test with him. He's been there for every other bit of this baby-making thing, he should get to know the same time she does. Cheering that part on is the fantasy of the little gray screen flipping to pregnant and him leaping up, jumping for joy.

Part of her is afraid that they'll take the test together, it'll come up negative, and she'll have to look at him and see relief in his eyes. It's not too much to ask him to be enthusiastic about their child. She's comfortable with that. She's also sure that asking him to be disappointed by a negative result is too much. He won't, can't feel that, because for him, negative means at least another month in his comfort zone. For him, negative is another month of getting to swim along with a life vest before getting dumped naked into the deep.

Part of her, the part that's noticed another text from Bishop and quickly replies to it, knows she's going to have a hell of a time interrogating anyone with this on her mind. That part is also aware of the fact that Tony will notice she's off while she's interrogating, ask about it, and in the observation bay is not how she envisioned telling Tony about their baby to be.

Of course, as she finishes texting, it's not like not knowing is doing much for her concentration, either. She's re-read the same update three times now.

Eventually, the tea she's been drinking works its way through her system. (As tea and all liquids are wont to do.) Which means a trip to the bathroom, where the test is, with her very unmade-up mind whirling around with images of little baby David-DiNozzo.
Brown hair and eyes. That's a given. Well, okay, it's not absolutely impossible that she might have a different combination. Ziva's grandmother's family was from Poland originally. Her grandmother had blond hair and blue eyes, and because she looked Aryan, she was able to be smuggled out of Poland as a child. Her grandfather was also from Poland, dark hair, dark eyes, didn't look Aryan. He made it out of Warsaw, made it to the Polish Resistance, but they turned him in to the Nazis. He escaped again and began the trek to Palestine, done with Poland, done with Europe, and sure that no Jew would ever be safe until they had their own country. Her father's family was Iraqi, dark hair, dark eyes. They fled to Israel when Iraq forced them out. Her father was young enough at the time that he doesn't remember it, but her grandparents did. They changed their name when they got to Israel, a sign of burning the reminders of a land that tossed them out.

She shakes her head, not the time to be thinking about that.

Brown hair, brown eyes, easy smile. She'd had an easy smile as a child. Tony still does. And this baby… This baby is going to grow up fat and lazy… That's not quite what she's looking for. Safe. That is. She won't worry about being killed on a bus. Her school won't have armed guards. She won't get her first gas mask as a baby. She won't have rocket drills at school.

She'll join the military only if she wants to.

Knowing this family, she'll know how to use a gun and fight by the time she's in middle school, but she'll never have to worry about defending her home with it. She won't watch the people on the street and wonder if they have bombs under their clothing.

Ziva's fingers touch her belly. Whatever she looks like, this child will be fearless.

And right now, she will be, too.

There are situations where Ziva finds patience easy. Give her a sniper's rifle and set her on top of a building, she can stay calm and focused all day.

Staring at a little gray screen watching the tiny grains of sand drop from one side to the other of the hourglass to the other is, however, not a situation where Ziva's patience kicks in.

No, right now, speaking of kicking, she wants to be kicking things, speeding up time by distracting herself. But she can't look away from the screen, because if she looks away, she won't see it turn, and she can't miss it.

So she doesn't. The hourglass vanishes, the screen goes black, and then PREGNANT pops up, and she's jumping for joy, awash in the happiness of this moment.

Knowing is way better than not knowing. How that could have ever been in doubt is something she's finding immensely silly.

Knowing is… perfect.

Because right now, this is perfect. Right now, there's one more person in the world. Right now things are clear and sharp and bright and beautiful.

Right now is a future she'd given up on for a long time, a future she'd occasionally dream about, but banish when she woke, because those were the dreams of someone with a future, someone attached to life, living in its service, not a dealer of death. Not someone with a shelf-life of maybe 30 years.
She texts Draga, Tony, and Bishop. *Change of plans. Get him home and let him sit. At least twenty-four hours, forty-eight will be better. No contact, no one speaks to him. All alone except for the two minutes when someone brings food. Then we're going to break him.*

She gets back from Tony. *Why are we changing?*

*Got some intel that makes waiting work better. Fill you in when you get home.*

*Won't mind a good long sleep and some decompressing time before going after this asshole. Sounds good to me. Still going to pick us up?*

*Sure.*

The only reason she can pull this off is because Tony and Bishop are *tired.* They're asleep on their feet. Otherwise, they would notice a certain bubbliness that's been hitherto uncharacteristic of their Ninja.

Tony's crashed out in the passenger seat. Bishop's laying across the backseat as Ziva drives.

"So," Tony says, slow, tired, "What'd you find?"

"Do not worry about it, Tony. It's complicated, and you'll do better with it when you've got some sleep."

He sighs, looks at her, lots of gratitude in his eyes, and kisses her hand. "Sleep sounds awesome."

"Mmmm…” Bishop says, eyes closed, holding up one thumb in an *I agree* gesture.

Tony DiNozzo is a crack investigator of the highest caliber. He is also practically unconscious. This is a good thing because his wife, who is also a crack investigator of the highest caliber was a bit distracted after taking said pregnancy test and didn't do a good job of cleaning up the evidence.

Which is sitting in the bathroom trash bin, right on top, just waiting to be seen.

Which is not one of the seventeen ways she envisioned telling Tony. Fortunately, he gets in there, does his business, brushes his teeth and crashes right into bed (still wearing his jacket and shoes.)

Thirteen hours later, he's out of bed, looking rumpled, but a lot happier, wearing his usual laying around the house Ohio State T and shorts.

He wanders around their apartment for a second, wondering where Ziva is, and if she got called in or something, and the notices her sitting on their tiny balcony, watching the sun set between the high rises.

He opens the door, stepping out, joining her. "Hey, beautiful."

She stands up, eyes sparkling, and kisses him. "Missed you," comes out several seconds later, along with a huge grin.

He sits down in the chair she just vacated, pulling her into his lap. He's about to break into what happened while he was away, what new evidence they had, but… he's not feeling it. Right now he wants to sit with his wife and enjoy the sunset.
In the Jewish calendar, days begin and end at sundown.

Ziva approves of that. She knows it's less precise and more complicated than days beginning and ending at exactly the same time every single day. But, even knowing that, she still prefers a concrete mark of one day passing to the next. She likes the poetry of one day bleeding away, finally extinguished, and a new one born.

There's not much light left. The sun's almost all the way past the horizon, and the lights of DC are starting to dim what's left of sunset.

It's a good time.

Her voice doesn't catch, there's no nerves, and for all the worrying she was doing earlier about it, right now she's sure it'll be good.

"I am pregnant." She's looking at that sky as she says that, trails of red and orange still bleeding into black, and feels him jolt at it, then she looks to him, smile vibrant on her lips, peace deep in her eyes.

He's smiling back, mega-watt smile, she's seen the fake version of it a million times, but this one is real, holding her close, petting her hair and kissing her. When he pulls back, he says, "Wow! I…" he swallows hard, looking just so in love and so blissed out and so ecstatic right now. "I didn't think I could feel like this."

She's grinning from ear to ear, kissing him again, because right now there aren't words for this, but there are actions, so she'll take them.

It's late. Really late. Ziva's sleeping, and Tony should be, too. He would be, but his internal clock is skewed from travel, and right now he's just too excited to drift off.

He kisses Ziva's hair, and decides he better get used to her sleeping a lot. If Abby and Breena are anything to go by, any day now she'll be sleeping 24/7, or at least want to.

Maybe it'll be different for them. He snorts a little laugh at that, somewhat amused at what Sleepy Ziva might be like.

He gets out of bed and heads over to his dresser. There's a cigar box in there, with five cigars in it. (Three of them are real tobacco, good tobacco. The other two are sugar-free chewing gum. He knows there's no way McGee or Palmer will smoke a cigar.) It's something he brought himself when they started trying for real, a promise of sorts that he wasn't going to disappoint her on this. He is going to be a father, and he's going to do it right, and doing it right means celebrating this child for every day of his life.

He takes two of them out, tosses on some going out clothing, and heads to his car.

He'd forgotten that Gibbs sleeps now. Somehow that doesn't work in his mind. He's very firmly got the idea of Gibbs=awake in his head.

He's also forgotten that Gibbs has a friend now who will bound to his front door and bark bloody murder if you try to just walk on in in the middle of the night.

And he'd forgotten that Gibbs locks his door, too.

He's a bit distracted right now.
But, after a minute, as he stands on the porch thinking this might not be the best idea he's ever had, and that possibly Gibbs does not want to be rousted out of bed at 4:36 in the morning, no matter how good the news is, when a very sleepy, rumpled, wearing only a pair of sweat pants Gibbs opens the door.

For a second he looks surprised, and then that smile breaks out all over his face.

Tony grins back at him.

This… ability to just know… no words spoken, no need for filling up the space around them with sounds, this is something Tony has always appreciated about Gibbs. He's one of the few people Tony can be silent with.

Tony pulls out the cigars. "Smoke 'em with me?"

Gibbs nods, solemn and joyful, and then pulls Tony into a long hug.

By 04:40, Tony and Gibbs are sitting on his back porch, smoking away, not saying much, just being with each other. Between puffs Gibbs puts down the cigar, and says, "You're gonna be good at it."

Tony nods. "I know. I didn't. But… I do now."

Gibbs pets the back of Tony's head. "Atta boy!"
Tim didn't get a lot of thinking done after Jimmy and Breena and the girls left.

He'd meant to. He and Abby went upstairs, he got his sling back on, and for all of the looking forward to having some sex after Jimmy and Breena went home, he was awfully tired, sore, physically drained, and drugged.

He fell asleep waiting for Abby to finish brushing her teeth.

Morning, though. Morning's turning out very nice. He wakes up with Abby warm and snug against him. Even better, he's not feeling her usual go stiff, lay very still, reach out for Zofran and wait for nausea to pass behavior, either.

"Hi," he says gently, wondering if she's awake.

"Morning."

"You feeling okay?"

She wriggles a little bit. He knows that usually it's the first few moves of the morning that lets her body wake up and decide if it's nausea time. "Actually, yeah."

He kisses the back of her neck and then eyeballs the clock. They've got maybe fifteen minutes until Kelly wakes up. "Quickie now, or naptime?"

Abby rolls over and quickly kisses the tip of his nose. "Naptime. I've really got to pee."

He's sitting up, starting his morning stretches and foot PT, when Abby gets back out again. "How's your shoulder?"

"Tender." Really tender. Right now he feels like he worked it way too hard last night. The part of his arm that's visible under the sling is bright pink. He's mildly surprised to see no bruising. With as bad as that hurt, he expected bruises.

He finishes with the exercises on his foot, takes his brace off (shower soon), and then takes the sling off his arm. "That feels better. That's way too scratchy to wear without a shirt on underneath." Last night he hadn't noticed, but this morning, all of the Velcro straps feel really rough and scratch against his skin.

He's looking at his arm, like it's some sort of strange creature that somehow ended up attached to him. "Let's see how this goes. Want to see how far I can move without hurting myself. Pretty much had no range of motion yesterday." He grits his teeth and begins by trying to lift his arm. That was the move that caused his arm to say, "Oh, fuck NO!" to him at Dr. Kent's office. This morning, it shifts about an inch.

His eyebrows dart up at that, and Abby asks, "Is that good?"

He nods. "Couldn't move at all in that direction." He tries adduction and rotation, and he's got at least 90% more range of motion in every direction. Tim stands up, and tries to extend his arm at the elbow. "I was best at this before." And he still is. It's almost half way between the 90 degree angle it was cast in and straight. He can even, with a little work, some mild cursing, and gritted teeth, get his
arm twisted enough so that he can try extending it behind him. Attempting that gets a definitive "WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU?" message from his shoulder, but in that it was a question his arm couldn't even ask yesterday, he's feeling awfully satisfied.

"Jimmy's a miracle worker." Then he leans over and kisses Abby. "And so are you."

He's out of the shower, and trying to roam around the house crutch-free. He still can't tackle stairs just by walking, so he does sit and scoot down, but the rest of both upstairs and downstairs are coming along well as he hobbles/limps from place to place.

His foot isn't loving him putting his whole weight on it, but given how mobile his shoulder is today, he's done babying his foot. He's getting it working again, pronto, and that's that.

(That there might be issues with this plan, in that, unlike Jimmy he's not a physical therapist or doctor, so he does not, in fact, know what he's doing is not occurring to Tim. He's doing much more of a 'if it hurts it must be working' sort of thing.)

Meanwhile, he's got ice packs all over his shoulder and chest, is taking the maximum amount of Aleve for his weight, and is hoping that as the swelling in his arm backs down, he'll be able to move even more.

"You mind if I head into the office for a bit?"

Abby's got her music on and is bopping away with Kelly. She looks a little disappointed by that idea but, says, "Sure, if you want. Just, let me wrap…"

"I can drive myself."

Her eyes narrow. She's looking him over as he stands in their living room, weight on both feet (mostly), he's got on his kilt and boots, and a button down to keep the sling off his skin. He certainly looks ready to go out.

Her eyes narrow a bit more. "What pain meds are you on?"

"I checked. Tylenol 3 isn't anti-inflammatory. Jimmy doesn't want me taking Aleve with Tylenol 3, so I took the Aleve instead, since it'll do more for my arm. Percocet's been out of my system for hours. I can drive. Want to head in, lay eyes on what's out of Okinawa, then head home, pick up another bottle of that Riesling, and maybe get us some lunch."

"You sure you're feeling up to it?" Abby's looking at him, full well knowing there's nothing he wants to do at work that he can't do from his computer here, pretty sure that what he really wants to do is go drive some.

He shrugs. "If I'm not, I'll come home."

"Okay." She nods, sounding tentative. "Have fun."

He nods back, looking very eager. "I intend to."

Tim supposes this is what driving, alone, for the first time was supposed to feel like. He doesn't remember how he actually felt because he got less than 500 feet before being t-boned by a bus.

This, however, is very nice. This is power and freedom and control of himself and anything else he
wants to do. This is not needing to wait for someone, this is not being dependent, hell, this is not needing to be polite about being schlepped around all over the place like a bag of groceries. He LOVES this.

This, he thinks, is how car guys are born. That first few seconds of pure, unadulterated freedom spiraling out from the steering wheel to the road. Right now he really wants his Porsche back. He wants to open her up and do something insanely fast and stupid.

Especially given he's only driving with one hand.

He sighs. That's a good sign of being middle aged. The part of his brain that's mature and responsible reins him in. He's just, barely, functional again, now is not the time to go tearing around and get into a car accident.

So, he was going a little faster than he usually does, with the windows down, which he usually doesn't, music loud, which is something he only does when he's on his own, sucking up speed, and wind, and sunshine, as he heads toward the Navy Yard.

"No crutch?" Burt asks as Tim heads through the metal detector. As per federal guidelines, it's got to get x-rayed every time he goes in or out.

"Not right now. I'll get sore enough later, but right now, it's in the car."

"I hear that. Broke my foot skiing six years ago, couldn't wait to get walking again."

Tim nods in agreement, heading down to his office.

He waves at Connon and Trevet as he heads in. They nod in his direction, not really paying attention, working away at whichever jobs they're on.

He takes a minute to read through his emails, nodding along, pleased to see that as of 06:17 the entire cache of data from the chips had been decrypted, and all of the documents they could use the versioning tool for were done, too.

Meanwhile, Quantico is telling him that hell will freeze over shortly before they let him use a bunch of students to scan things like the New York City Phonebook, and that maybe he should go poke Homeland about getting some bodies to do the busywork.

He's not surprised to see that, but he's also not worried about it. Figuring out how to solve the problem is in his backyard, using the solution belongs to someone else. He forwards the email to Tony, figuring that making people do things they don't want to is something he's better at anyway.

Then, given that he's got the architecture planned out, and has six coders working on it already, he sends Leon an email detailing the current NCIS Cyber-defenses overhaul.

He's using his crutch by the second stop. At the wine shop, his body is telling him in no uncertain terms that it needs help.

Moving around on his own, running errands, just being out and about alone, that still feels good, but, he's getting tired; he's hurting all over.

He knows lunch is a bridge too far.
Back in the car he texts Abby. *Got to work, got wine, am done. Coming home soon.*

"Tim!" he hears from Abby as soon as he gets in.

"Hey."

"Get in here, right now!" So, he scoots as fast as he can into the living room just in time to see Kelly take one step before landing on her tush.

"Walking!" he says to Kelly, huge smile across his face.

Abby's nodding with a very wide smile.

"Up." Kelly says. Abby takes her hands and Kelly pulls herself into standing position. Kelly looks up at Abby and says, "Walk," very seriously.

Abby lets go. "Okay, you walk, baby."

Tim's getting on the floor as fast as he can (not very fast) wanting to be able to catch her, or have her walk to him, or just, something, he doesn't know what. He's just really happy and excited. He reaches his good arm out and she takes three toddling steps to him, and then grabs his hand, and he's grinning all over. "You're walking!"

Kelly nods, looking very sure of herself, very pleased.

Abby's giggling. "That's the same look you get when you've done the job right."

He smiles up at her, pulling Kelly in for a hug. "Well, she has!" He kisses the top of her head. "That was perfect, baby."

He might not be good for much in the way of grown-up walking around, but sitting still and just holding Kelly's hand is something he's okay at.

So, while Abby gets lunch ready, he's on "Up" duty.

Kelly's taking this very seriously. She's completely focused on making her feet go where she wants them. He knows he does this when he's learning something new, and he thinks Abby does, too.

What's new, or different, or just Kelly being Kelly, is that when she falls, or the foot doesn't end up where she wants it, she doesn't seem to feel any sense of... of anything bad. She just stands back up, or picks the foot back up, and tries again.

He knows, as far back as he can remember, getting anything wrong was a cardinal sin. It was inside him, the feeling of shame and discouragement and horror that any little failure inspired.

He's not sure how much of that is him being him, or things trained into him from long before he can remember. He wonders if, when he took his first steps and fell down, he cried because that's who he is, or if he fell and got chewed out for it, and that taught him to cry whenever he fell.

He doesn't know, doesn't remember, and right now, he's having way too damn good of a day to ask Penny about it.

Tim puts down his phone as Abby comes into their bedroom. She's just got Kelly down for naptime.
"Just got a text from Jimmy. Anna's cutting a new tooth, and they're thinking she'll do better sleeping in her own crib tonight, so dinner's at their place."

Abby nods along with that. "Sounds good. We bringing anything?"

"We're on salad and drinks."

"Easy enough." She lays down next to him on their bed. "So, we okay with last night?"

He exhales. "Um… yeah. I'm really okay with all three of you taking care of me like that. That was… I don't know." He touches his arm. "It hurt, you know, but… It was really safe, too. It was… intimate, and… loving. You remember telling me, when we got these," he touches her cuff tattoo, "that it hurt, but it didn't matter because you were safe and nothing bad was happening?"

Abby nods. She doesn't specifically remember saying that, but that's how she feels about tattoos, so it likely did come out of her mouth.

"It felt like that. Very safe, very… cherished. Sexy, but not by the end, at least, not the way it was in the beginning, but… It kind of felt like sex was supposed to be the next step, like I could see myself kissing Breena and you snuggling in, and… and I didn't know what the hell Jimmy was supposed to be doing, but I didn't want him to go away, either." Okay, that's not enough to get what he was feeling across. "I actively wanted him there, but… I was actually wondering what he would do, and not in a 'I can't predict his behavior' sort of way, but in a 'Both of the girls are with me, so you, what, watch? Join in?' I just… didn't know."

Abby nods at that. "I think all of us having some breathing time was a good thing. That was really intense."

"You okay with it?"

"Oh yeah. I could see the way you were looking at Breena when we stopped, the way she was looking back at you, trust me that kiss would have been welcome, and I was rooting for you to kiss her. But, I also think this is too important, to all four of us, to just go with the flow or get caught in the moment. Any steps we take, we need to talk and think about ahead of time, because we can't mess this up."

Tim nods at that. "So, what's the next step?"

Abby shrugs. "That's what we're talking about tonight. Not a decision we get to make on our own."

He nods at that. "But, you're still in favor of all of it. The four of us together, like, um… a quadruple?"

"Yeah."

"But you and me… we'd still be you and me, right?"

"Yeah." She strokes his face. "Always. Anything that might mess that up… No. Don't want to even get near that."

"So…" Tim's trying to think of a word to cover this. "Swinging?"

Abby thinks about that. "No… Not really. We're not just swapping out partners for fun. It'd be all four of us, together. And, I don't see this being temporary or just the occasional treat. But, it wouldn't be an every night, thing, either."
"Going steady?" Tim says dryly.

"My second best guy and your second best girl?" She laughs at that. "Something like that. Is that… okay?"

He shrugs and sighs, looking up at the ceiling. "I don't know. I'm really good with me and you and Breena. All sorts of good with that, but…"

"I know."

He shakes his head. "Not this one. Kind of feel like I shouldn't be okay with Breena if I'm not okay with Jimmy."

That does catch Abby's interest, and isn't something she expects.

Tim's having a hard time putting it together, too, because it's a new sensation/idea for him. "I mean, when I started fantasizing about her… Neither of them were real people, you know? She was just a pretty body, and he was that kind of weird guy down in autopsy, comic relief for some of the intense scenes in my books. But, they're really people now, really, really people. And, they're in our lives, and we love them, and… And I don't know."

"They're a package deal?"

"Something like that. Or… it doesn't feel fair to have Breena if I'm not cool with him having you? And… he matters enough to me that fair matters?" Tim thinks that's getting closer to it.

"Love is when someone else's happiness is vital to your own."

He smiles gently at her, nodding a bit. "Yeah."

Abby inclines her head. "You do want her."

He nods.

"And I know you want me."

He nods at that, too.

"You know he wants me, too, right?"

"Didn't go blind or stupid recently."

"Is it a problem?"

"No. But wanting isn't having, and… watching him touch you will either turn me on so hard I won't know what to do with myself, or I'll hit him so hard we both feel it for a week. And I'm kind of afraid I'll get off on watching, feel bad about it later, and then be an asshole about it after."

Abby kisses Tim, lips soft and lingering on his. "That's why we talk. Why all four of us talk."

Tim nods. "Kind of afraid everyone else is ready to leap in, and I'm the only one who's scared."

She kisses him again. "Love and respect, Tim. If this is where the line is, this is where the line is, and that's it. No cajoling, no pouting, no trying to pull you or anyone else a single inch further than they're ready to go."
This time he kisses her, his leg gently stroking along hers. For a few minutes they're both quiet, thinking, kissing, petting each other.

"Kindness," he eventually says. "That's part of this, too. Thinking back, I get all you and Breena were doing to keep me distracted. That was a kindness, and it really did help. Especially on narcotics, I think sex is the most distracting thing you could possibly do for me."

"It's not always?" Abby asks with a laugh.

He shakes his head and then grins at her. "Come on, you've seen me code. I've been in it so far you could set the house on fire, and I won't notice. I don't think we've had the sort of sex where I won't notice a fire alarm," he teases.

Abby grins at that. "That sounds like a challenge."

Tim smiles back at her. "Uh huh. Well, we've got two hours before Kelly wakes up…"

"You know we were planning on hitting the beach house in August…" Tim and Abby nod as Breena says that. They do know that the Palmers were planning on some down time for the first weekend of August, which is two weeks away. "Come with us?" Breena asks.

That's a way to get this conversation started. It'd been sort of lingering behind the light conversation and interactions while the girls were up. All of them aware of it, but not touching it because they don't want to be fussing with babies while trying to have this conversation. So, they'd gotten together, had a pleasant dinner, played with little girls, got some insanely adorable shots of Molly helping Kelly walk, then got babies tubbied and put to bed, and now all four of them are on Breena's back porch.

Jimmy and Breena have several of those chaise lounge porch recliners, and for this conversation, for this night, they've got them drawn close together, small table between them, with the remnants of the wine and fresh peaches and strawberries for nibbling. Tim and Abby are sharing one lounge, Jimmy and Breena have the other. Add in some togas and it's got an Ancient Rome sort of vibe, of course (as Ducky would tell them if they asked) the Ancient Romans perfected the intimate dinner party, so it's not a bad vibe to have. Add in the fact that the lights in the house are off, and all that's illuminating them is the glow from the citronella tiki torches set around the porch and the moon, and it's a very close, very 'romantic' setting.

Jimmy smiles a bit. He's leaning on his right side, Breena sitting in front of him, leaning back against his stomach, her feet propped onto Tim and Abby's lounge. He sips his drink, and says, "This was supposed to be my summer study break. Since I had to shift two of my continuing education classes to the fall—"

"Sorry about that," Tim says. Like Jimmy, he's leaning on his side, curled into a question mark shape, unlike Jimmy he's on his left. Abby's lying on her back, in front of him, legs draped over his thighs.

"Don't be sorry. I've got to get a minimum of 50 clinical hours, and I can sub out classroom hours for clinicals, so I was able to clock all that time I was with you for that, which means I'm actually ahead of where I would have been if I'd gone to those classes."

"So, are you getting credit for all the PT?" Tim asks.

Jimmy nods. "Yeah, I switched out historical clinical pathology for myofascial rehab. Technically you're my guinea pig, and I've got some evaluation forms you're going to need to fill out. And I'm…"
kind of learning some of the techniques the night before doing them to you, but-

"You're saying I have to grade you?"

"Uh, yeah. Jethro's going to have to, also. I'm using all the hours I worked on him, too. Anyway, with only two CEU courses over the summer now, I don't need three days where Breena and the girls have something fun to do and I can spend all day buried in a textbook or watching medical seminars online."

"So, come with us," Breena says.

Tim's starting to wonder if the wine's a good idea. He's had one glass, Abby's, of course, had none, and between them Jimmy and Breena have finished all but the last inch of the bottle, so… Okay, actually none of them have had more than a glass and a half. So, just enough to make everyone feel a little bit loose, not enough to cloud thinking.

Okay. That's good. Tim and Abby look at each other. They knew they were going to be chatting about this, but 'beach weekend' is a bit more vague than either of them needs. So… "Just the four of us hanging out, having fun on the beach or…" Abby leads.

"I don't know," Breena replies. "But especially after last night, I want to find out. I'm officially starting our conversation on 'or.'"

"'Or's' a kind of stupid name. Can we get something better?" Tim asks.

"I'm sure we can get something better," Breena says, sassy, "once we figure out what the hell we're doing."

"Sex." Abby says, very definite. "We're talking about all of us having sex, with each other. Or not. Or watching each other have sex. Or touching but not sex. Or playing with hard boundaries. Or…" Abby squints up at Tim a bit. "Actually, right now, 'or's' a really good name for this."

"Okay, fine. You guys talked about this some, right?" Nods from the other three. "While I was unconscious, what did you three come up to with regards to us 'orring'? I mean, that's when you got talking about this, right?"

Jimmy laughs at 'orring.' "Not much of anything, at least not decision-wise."

"Mostly took the plunge of saying, out loud, to each other, that we'd regret it if we never at least tried," Breena says, staring at Tim. "You almost died. And if you had…" She shakes her head. "That would have been it, game over, no chance to explore us… 'orring' away, and like I said, I don't know where this is going. I'm not sure where the lines are and what we'd be comfortable with. But if something had happened to you, I know Jimmy and I wouldn't have just mourned the loss of a dearly loved friend, but also the opportunity for the four of us to be more than what we are now."

Tim looks at the other three and says, "So, do we want more? I mean… This is good. This is warm and comfortable and easy and good. I love what we have with each other." He can see they all agree with that, and he can see the same sort of fear he's feeling in Jimmy's eyes. "And more… if it works…" He sighs. If it works… Who doesn't want this? If it works. "Like I said to Jethro, I know I've already got the cake with the frosting, the ice cream on top, along with whipped cream, cherry, and sprinkles, too, but apparently there's a possibility of coffee to go with it. Which would be awesome, but, I don't want to mess up the perfect dessert because I got greedy for coffee." He looks at Jimmy and Breena, "And I don't want you guys fucking up your perfect coffee because cake was looking good, too."
They nod at that, and Breena gently strokes her toe against Tim's shin.

"We could call it coffee if you don’t like orring," Abby says, keeping her voice light. She knows this is serious, but like anything serious, being able to laugh through it is important.

"Nope. You don't like coffee," Breena says to Abby. "Can't do this if you don't like it. And… that's our bedrock, we don't do anything anyone doesn't like. We just… keep checking in, making sure it's okay. That's why we've got perfect coffee and perfect cake, because we're honest with each other, and trust each other, and really love one another. I mean… We're sitting here talking about this, with all four of us, and… I'm not afraid to say anything right now, and I really hope you aren't, too, because, anything, it's all on the table because this won't work if we can't do that. If we can… That's how we made it to two couples, right, kept checking in, kept making sure we were all good?"

Jimmy sends Tim a look, and Tim knows what that looks means. He figures Tony or Gibbs would get it, too. Namely, there's a point, with sex, where checking in and thinking, and making sure everything is okay becomes really difficult, and stopping is even harder, and part of building a good relationship is not getting yourself into a situation you can't get out of until you know you won't have to get out of it.

And, for Tim, if there's anything likely to get him past the point of able to stop, it's Abby and Breena naked and happy and wanting more.

He looks at Jimmy, Jimmy's looking back, so he guesses he's the one who gets to explain this. "You know, if we do this, go to the beach with you, just the four of us…" Tim sighs. "Okay, I know me, and when we went clubbing, it was hot, really hot, balls in charge, brain checked out, holy shit, all I want to do is fuck, hot. And, I don't know, maybe girls don't have this problem, but there really is a point where my brain literally stops working, and I'm fairly sure Jimmy's got a point like that, too," Jimmy's nodding enthusiastically, "and… And… If just the four of us go… Okay, one night, sure. I can keep the big head doing the thinking for one night. Two…" He's cringing a bit, "probably. I can likely keep my brain in charge for two nights, keep checking in, making sure everyone is cool. Three nights on our own, baby girls all sound asleep, we're fucking," he says voice absolutely showing this is a foregone conclusion. "At least, I'm going to want to. A lot. And no matter what the big brain is thinking, my dick will have rationalized a way to get what it wants, and it can be VERY convincing when it wants to be."

The girls giggle at that but Jimmy's nodding; he knows exactly how strong that desire can be.

"Hell, I want to, now. We're all dressed, mostly sober, not touching, just talking about it, and yes, I want to do it." And right this second, all together, quiet night, alone, talking, he does want that. He wants it a lot. "I want all four of us, upstairs, in bed, naked, fooling around. I don't know if I've got the control to say no if we're all messing around. And I don't know if I'd be cool with it in the morning. So… Limits. We need some sort of limits in place, ahead of time, so I know where the lines are and what's on the menu and what's not."

He licks his lips. "That's really… that's what made clubbing work. I knew we had rules. I knew you two," he means the girls, "knew that we had hard lines, and that you weren't going to push them. And, once that sunk in, I could really get into it and enjoy playing."

Jimmy's been nodding a long with that. "Yeah. Actually, night three is probably optimistic. Either it goes well, like clubbing did, and by the time we're naked I'm going to want to do it, or it'll go badly, and I'm still going to want to do it, but I'm going to regret it when my brain's in charge again."

"Just go for a night?" Breena asks. "I mean, you both think you can handle that, right?"
Tim and Jimmy are nodding. One night of blistering hot sex all over the place, feeling their way through… Yeah, that's temptation they can endure, and more importantly, enjoy.

"We could do that now," Abby adds. "Here, now, tonight." She can see both of the guys are ready to jump at it, and can feel that Tim's body has tensed, ready to move. Just from seeing that, she knows that if they just jump at it, all of them in bed together is going to end up with all of them in bed together because messing around is going to create a positive feedback cycle where every time they all check in and make sure the next step is good, they're going to say 'yes.' "No, bad plan, part of what we're looking for is a way to set this aside from our usual routine, build in some enforced thinking time. So, us, together, doesn't happen at home, ours or yours, not yet. But off at the beach, that's good. That's a separate space, help organize things…” They can see Abby's putting this together in her head, so they wait for her to finish getting it together. "Okay… Four bedrooms, right?"

Breena nods.

"Five couples. We invite everyone else. We'll share a room. Master bedroom's big enough for that. We can… whatever, but the girls will be sleeping in there, and everyone else will be down the hall, so we'll have to stay quiet. Can't go full out. And I'm fairly sure having to face everyone…” Eh, everyone… not that big of a deal. "Gibbs…” Much bigger deal. That steely blue gaze giving you the 'don't be stupid look' will work wonders for this plan. "The next morning should keep brains in charge. If it's good… Okay, no, we need set rules for this, too. We share the bed for sleeping, get comfortable with each other, watch each other, enjoy watching, but only play as couples. Take clubbing one step further. If it's not good, we'll sack out on the floor, you take the bed, and we're all still friends when we go home."

Tim, Jimmy, and Breena are all looking at each other, and then Abby, and then each other again, and, yeah, that feels good. That's a decent next step, little further down the road, but not doing anything they can't back out of.

"And, if it is good, and we're happy…” Jimmy leads.

"Then we stay where we are or go further. We'll feel our way through it." Abby smiles; she knows how to set this up. "You guys ever really Dom/sub?"

"Read 50 Shades, but you already told me that was terrible," Breena says. "Why?"

"Yeah, it is. Especially in regards to why I'm bringing this up. Okay, so, not a big shock, what with the collars and all, but we do, sometimes, for real. And we've both got some experience with it with other people," Abby says.

Tim knows where this is going and thinks that this'll definitely have some really good guidelines for how to get into, and out of, something that might be sticky, and keep everyone happy and friends.

"It's a game," Tim says.

Abby smiles. "Best, most fun game, ever. But games have rules, made by the players, all set out, sometimes in writing even, though I don't think we need to go that far, and agreed on, ahead of time."

"And just like a game, at any time, anyone can back out. Anyone can call time or stop. And if the rules aren't working, you break play and rewrite," Tim adds.

"So, that's how we do this? Set rules ahead of time, like right now, the rule is we're playing with our
own spouses, watching, and that's where the line is," Breena says, "And if the game isn't fun, we just, stop?"

"Yeah," Jimmy's liking this. He can follow rules. "And if it's good, we can learn and rewrite from there. And if we don't like it, we won't play that game again."

Tim nods, feeling… he's not sure, something of an excited rush and a sense of stepping up to the edge of the cliff and looking over, and a sort of… quietly anticipating joy. "Weekend at the ocean." He smiles. "I think we're going to like this game."

Breena stands up, kisses Jimmy, and heads into the kitchen. Two minutes later, she's back with her phone, snuggling into Jimmy. "And everyone has been invited to a weekend at the beach."

That feels… Tim's not sure, awesome he guesses. Whatever it is, it's big and good and soaring.

"So, rules… We set them all out, clear, ahead of time. For right now, as we're working this out, rules get set at least a week before play; that gives us all lots of time to think." Abby says. Everyone nods. "Okay, me and Tim, you two together, no touching beyond that."

Everyone nods.

"Anyone can break play for any reason, at any time, and we're all cool," Tim adds. "Doesn't matter what it is, or how stupid it seems, too cold, sheets are the wrong color, you think my cologne smells annoying." Breena waves that off. She helped pick more than half of them. "Anything's wrong or uncomfortable, and we talk about it."

More nodding.

Tim looks at his arm. "For example." He gestures to his right arm, feeling a little silly, but A: he wants to make sure that everything is on the table, and B: he doesn't want to be self-conscious about it. "I usually have a few more tricks at my disposal."

Abby laughs and nudges him. "Everyone knows you aren't bringing your A game yet, no one cares."

"Still feels a little dumb," he's looking at Breena as he says this, "you're watching, but won't get the whole show."

"Do you want to wait until your arm is better?" Breena asks.

"No!" Spring or whenever he's really got full use of his hand back… No. Too long to wait. "Just… I'm usually less awkward, and the cast and sling are sort of scratchy, so I don't like the way it feels against my skin, so I'm usually a lot more naked and…"

"And you're injured, and we all get it," Jimmy finishes. "Trust me, we've both figured out you're not particularly shy anymore."

"At least, not with you two. Just, the reverse of last night, it feels a little odd to be wearing a shirt when everyone else is naked, and…" this feels stupid, too, but he does want to lay it all out, so rolling his eyes he says, "a hard-on and a t-shirt looks kind of stupid, you know?"

That gets a laugh. Tim can see kindness in all three of the sets of eyes watching him, and that makes him feel better about it.

"Speaking of shy, we're not telling anyone, besides Gibbs, about this, right?" Breena asks. "He's
already talked to you two, so he's going to know what's going on as soon as he figures out there's one more couple than there are beds, and we're not making Tony and Ziva sack out on the sofa."

The other three nod. But it's clear they're thinking about it.

"For now," Tim says, but this sort of gets into what he was talking about with Abby, and a few of the other thoughts he's had bouncing around in his head. "This goes further… I mean… If this is something we just do, sometimes, you know, for kicks then… Then it's like the other stuff we do for kicks, private. Like, okay, I know you girls basically don't have limits about what you tell each other, but I don't tell Tony about what Abby and I do in bed in any detail, and…" he's looking at Jimmy.

"Yeah, I don't go into it in any real detail with Tony or anyone, really."

"We talk," Tim says.

"Well, yeah, we talk, but you're not anyone."

"Thanks. And even with each other, we're still—"

"Intentionally vague," Jimmy fills in.

Tim nods. "Anyway, if it's more than… more than a shiny new toy, we'd probably have to tell everyone else, eventually at least, right?" Tim thinks about the sketches he was working on for the house. "Like, if this is just fun... Our rooms at the house are across the hall from each other, on our own little wing. And if this is just fun, then, that's fine. We sneak over to your room or you to ours some nights. But… I mean, we're not building the interior anytime soon, not really, and if this is more… Are we going to want just one space for the four of us?"

"I guess that's part of what… what this thinking time is for," Breena says. She smiles at them. "Before we get to touching each other…" She's looking at Tim, bites her lip, thinking, and the other three wait for her. She smiles again, maybe feeling a little silly or uncomfortable, but this we talk everything out thing is very real, so they will wait for her to get comfortable enough to say it. "Sex matters to me. I mean, in a way it doesn't, didn't to you three. And I know I'm the one who started this conversation going all those years ago, but… For me, if we touch," and everyone knows she's talking about Tim. Obviously, given those Valentine's videos, whatever's gone before with Abby doesn't trigger the concern she has here. "If I'm going to make love to a man who isn't my husband, this has to be real, it has to be about love. It can't just be… something we do for kicks. Can't just be about horny, you know?"

Abby's nodding first and fastest, but Tim thinks he gets it, and Jimmy reaches over, hand cupping gently against the back of Breena's neck, and he looks at her, love in his eyes, and kisses her, soft and gentle.

When Breena pulls back from Jimmy's lips, she shifts back a bit, so she's fully spooned into him, draping his arm over her waist, drawing strength or comfort from his touch. "We have sex; it's forever. We don't cross that line until we're sure in our bones and guts and balls and sure that we can keep this going for the rest of our lives. Otherwise, it's look, don't touch, just a show we put on for each other for fun."

And that's the line, that's where the most tentative one of them is comfortable, so that's it, and none of them will push it.

Breena takes a sip of her wine and looks at Tim, "So, a space for all of us?"

He shrugs a little. "Thinking about it, some… I mean… Okay. I'm always going to want some time
with just Abby, you know?"

The other three nod, they all get that. They may be thinking about a quadruple, but they are also two very happy couples, who would like to stay two happy couples.

"But, we've got the right side of the hall, and you've got the left, and... I mean, we can keep that hall there and just wander about. Or we can wall our wing off, take that hall down, really mess around with the floor plan... I'd still like us to have our own rooms, but... that whole section could be space for 'our' family. We're building up space for the older kids to be off on their own up on the top floor, so, our room, your room, some sort of central space, bathrooms, nursery for little kids. But whatever it is we're doing, sex or no sex, that sort of set up is making it loud and clear to anyone who comes to our home that we don't have the sort of relationship the rest of the family does."

"You think this would bug them?" Jimmy asks. "Gibbs knows, and I was honestly surprised at how calm he was about the idea. I was expecting death threats, and he was all, 'just make sure you really think it through.'"

"Ziva already knows we're thinking about it. She's the one who got me thinking about it," Breena says, "which got me talking to Abby. So, she's never seemed shocked by the idea."

"If Penny's lectures about monogamy being a tool of the patriarchy to devalue the economic contribution of women while simultaneously capturing and enslaving them was more than just her blowing off steam, I'd imagine her being okay. At least, I never got the sense that she was big on the marriage is a sacred arrangement ordained by God that cannot be violated or rearranged in any way," Abby says.

"Tony's told me about his threesomes, and Ducky's... eluded to having been involved in at least one orgy, so they're at least familiar with the idea. I can't imagine they'd be shocked," Jimmy adds.

"Can I be shocked?" Tim says. "Duck was part of an orgy?"

Jimmy wiggles his hand indicating he's not sure. "He didn't flat out say it, but... he's never been a monk or asexual. He's been happy to let me know the sixties were a lot more wild than they typically let on, and no one was kidding about the free love thing, and... Wait, wasn't your grandmother part of all of that, too?"

"She was married to my grandfather at the time. And that's all I want or need to know about that," Tim says while shaking his head.

Breena laughs at Tim's answer. "When it comes down to it, that's all I want or need to know about that," Tim says while shaking his head.

Breena laughs at Tim's answer. "When it comes down to it, that's probably all any of them want to know about us, too. I doubt they'll want the details."

Abby laughs. "You've never really had a conversation with Tony, have you?"

Tim and Jimmy are nodding. "He'll want the details. He wants all the details."

"Oh come on, like you don't," Breena elbows Jimmy.

He shrugs. "Sort of. Yeah, I'm curious, but... I try not to be creepy about it."

Abby and Breena giggle at that.

"Stop it. I know you two are curious, too. You think I go deaf when you get chatting about Gibbs or Draga in the next room?"
"You heard that?" Abby asks, little guilty.

Jimmy nods, staring at her, and then at Breena.

"Heard what?" Tim asks.

"For Draga, they want to know if the carpeting matches the drapes."

Tim smiles a bit. "I know the answer to that."

They're looking at him curiously.

"We shared a room on that one case."

Nodding, both girls staring at him, waiting for the answer. Tim rolls his eyes a little, but he's enjoying teasing them. "Yes, he's a natural redhead, no he's not usually as hairless as he was at last year's Fourth of July, looks like he shaved his chest because he was kind of stubbly when we were rooming together. What did they want to know about Gibbs?"

Jimmy shakes his head, pretending to be a lot more horrified by this than he actually is. "You don't want to know, and they shouldn't have been asking. Especially you," he gives Abby a mock you should know better look. "He's practically your dad."

Abby shakes her head. "But he's not actually my dad, and I'm allowed to be curious. I'm curious about everyone I meet that I'm even vaguely attracted to. In fact, as a scientist, it is in my job description to be curious about everything!"

Breena's been giggling through this, and Tim has to admit that now he's curious. Jimmy's probably right, he likely doesn't want to know, but... too much build up. "What were you asking about?"

"She wanted to know if he liked getting spanked. You know, handing out the head slaps and all, some sort of reverse repressed desire thing."

Tim closes his eyes and rests his face in his hand. "Yep. I didn't want to know that."

Jimmy's still feeling pretty perky, and Abby did open the conversation along those lines, so... "You're curious about spankings for everyone?"

"Not spankings specifically. But, I watch people, see what they do and how they interact with each other, and that makes me wonder what they like in bed. Tim was so shy at first, so... It made me wonder if he liked being in charge, you know, if that was one of his fantasies, and lo and behold, he did."

"What'd you wonder about me?" Jimmy asks.

"Took a while to get a good sense of you. At first, I was mostly wondering if you'd ever had sex before."

Breena's staring at Jimmy, smiling and shaking her head. "Were you really that awkward?"

Jimmy cringes. "I may have been."

"He asked me to please call him Jimmy two seconds after I had just called him Jimmy. He's offering me tissue samples from a dead guy and says, 'White meat or dark?' He superglued his hands to my wrists because he was so moonstruck being in the same room with me, then Tim walked in and once he got us unstuck he chewed him out so bad he almost made Jimmy cry."
Jimmy opens and closes his mouth. "I wasn't crying."

Abby raises an eyebrow, staring at him.

"He ripped the skin off my palms so your delicate little arms didn't take the full force of getting us apart. It hurt!"

"Uh huh," Tim says. He can write a book about getting the skin of your hands ripped off by removing superglue, and it stings, but it's not that bad.

Abby looks back at him, "And yeah, it was kind of hot to see your alpha side actually pop out for once back then, but flipping out on Jimmy who was in no way a threat wasn't very cool, either."

"Don't have to be cool if you thought it was hot. 'My girl thinks it's hot' is all the excuse any guy has ever needed for anything," Tim says, smugly.

That gets a laugh.

"Anyway," Abby gets back to answering Jimmy's question now that she's thought of a decent lie. Her real answer, that she caught him mid-trysts with Lee in Autopsy (they'd forgotten that Ducky had that camera on, so she got an eyeful one night when she was calling down to ask for more samples) and was wondering whether or not the corpses in autopsy were a turn on, or just something he was so used to they didn't hit his radar, would likely bring up bad memories. "You were the main witness on that one case, and we hypnotized you, and you started talking about our shoes. That got me wondering about you. Did you like to wear them? Smell them? Look at them? Were you a foot guy? Or was it the actual shoes? You always looked really buttoned up, but I was wondering how kinky you really were under those conservative little suits."

Jimmy smiles at that, then he kisses Breena. "We gonna let them see and find out?"

She smile back at him, giving him a long, wet kiss. "Think they'd like that?"

Jimmy's staring at Abby, eyes sliding all over her. "Ten years is a long time to be curious." He grins at Abby. "But I think you'll think it was worth the wait. And, maybe, if everyone else goes to sleep early, you can find out if I like spankings."

Abby grins back at him, and then looks at Breena. "First time we met in person, really met, not just got a glimpse of you, you guys were working on wedding planning, and it was Jimmy and I and you and Amy and we're talking about the wedding costumes and what the ladies of honor would be wearing, and you were so pretty and pure and nice and sweet and... And I wasn't wondering so much as fantasizing about getting you all hot and dirty, and having Jimmy watch us, see him react to it, and then having him join in."

Jimmy closes his eyes and bites his lip at that. Breena kicks it up a bit by wiggling in his lap a little. His hands grasp her hips, keeping her still, then he kisses her gently.

"Then he let slip you were a virgin until you got married, and that got me wondering," Abby shrugs a little. "But we've talked about all of that by now, so..."

Breena nods. "Well-covered territory."

"Uh, we'd probably like to hear you talk about that," Tim says, looking hopeful. He's been enjoying this conversation a lot, as Abby knows, because how much he's liking it is poking her in the hip.

Jimmy's looking very interested. "If we're making rules and all, I'm always in favor of listening to
you two talk about sexy stuff."

"Me, too," Tim adds. "This… talking, teasing, I like this."

Jimmy's happily nodding along. "This is good for you, too, right?"

Abby and Breena smile, looking at each other.

"Yeah, it's good. This is fun and safe and easy," Abby says.

"You still want to hear about virgin until married?" Breena asks, and both guys nod, eyes wide, liking this a whole lot. Breena grins at them, and inclines her head, letting Abby know she gets to tell this.

"You really sure?" Abby asks, licking her lips.

Now both guys are looking, very, very interested.

She smiles sweetly and then says, "Okay, but it's not sexy." The guys don't pout, but they kind of look like they wanted to. "New Orleans is very Catholic, and so is white Louisiana, but most of the south is Baptist, so I grew up with a lot of 'no sex until marriage' types, but they were always… sanctimonious twits about it. And Breena's not. You're just a big ball of love with some skin on you, and I'd never met anyone who made that choice who wasn't…" Abby's looking for a nice way to say it.

"An uptight prude?" Breena adds.

Abby nods. "Maybe not that far, but never met anyone who was really comfortable with sex, liked it, thought it was good and holy and treated like it really was a gift from God, something glorious to be enjoyed, who decided to abstain. I mean, okay," Abby doesn't talk faith or religion much with Jimmy or Tim because neither of them care much about it, but, they've asked, so…” To me Christianity has one core, love. God loves us, He wants us to love each other. Part of love is sharing the good things, freely giving what makes life good. And I never got how you could base a faith on the idea that it is the duty of each of us to share the good things, all the good things, charity isn't just giving money to the poor, it's about giving all things to anyone who needs them, and then say sex is awesome and holy and beautiful and something God created so humans could revel in the joy of loving each other, but don't share it. That's the only thing you don't share. Keep it tucked away, just you and this one other person, hog it all up and be greedy with it. Everything else in the universe that's good, give that away with abandon to anyone who crosses your path, but not this. That never made any sense to me."

"So, that's what we were talking about. It was a lot heavier on the theology and much lighter on both of us giggling and saying suggestive things than you'd probably like," Breena finishes.

"Oh." Tim nods. "Yeah… That's, um… not bad or anything, but, you're right, not what I was expecting."

Jimmy nods, too. "Stranger in a Strange Land, right?"

Abby smiles at that. "The Gospel according to Heinlein? Yeah, that probably helped my thinking along, but I was on the way there before I got my hands on Bob. I was… I don't know, eight? And I figured out that I liked kissing. So, I'm at Sunday school, kissing everyone, and one of the nuns had a fit about it. Then she had a bigger fit when I told her that Jesus wanted us to share the things that make us happy, like cookies and toys, and kissing made me happy, so I was sharing it."
All three laugh at that.

"She didn't have an answer that made sense to me. Finally, she huffed off and got my mom, telling her that I was being 'inappropriate' and that I couldn't come back to Sunday school until I could control my 'base urges.'"

"What'd your mom say?" Jimmy asks.

Abby smiles. "She told me no kissing boys who weren't Papa or Luca or Uncle Max until I was sixteen, and then we went over what cold sores were, and how to tell if a guy had one, and why not to kiss him."

"Your mom was awesome," Tim's saying as Breena's phone buzzes.

She picks it up, reads, smiles, and texts back, and then says, "And Ducky and Penny are in for a weekend at the beach."

"What are we going to do if they don't all go?" Tim asks.

"Have a good time, sleep in our own rooms, and maybe get a night out just the four of us the next weekend. One night on our own sound like an okay Plan B?" Abby says.

They all think about it, and slowly nod. "That works."

Another buzz. "Gibbs is in. Abbi can't come until Friday evening."

"Uh, when did you set this for?" Jimmy asks.

"Same time we were going, Thursday night go there, Sunday come home."

Jimmy sighs. "Sunday back traffic is always nasty. Getting down there isn't too bad, but coming back… Yuck."

"Friday night down was also a bear, so, hard time down, hard time back. Decided it was better to go after the nasty traffic relaxed and rested than it was to face it after a long week."

Tim shakes his head a bit. "Does this feel bizarrely surreal to the rest of you? Foursomes to summer vacation traffic and back again?"

That gets a laugh.

Breena's staring at her phone. "Wonder why we haven't heard back from Tony and Ziva. Think they're okay?" One of the side effects of Rule Number 3 is that with this group, if you text, you get a response within minutes usually.

"Tony was up all night traveling. And Ziva was supposed to be on all day interrogating." Tim squints at Breena's phone, but from where he is, he can't read the numbers. "What time is it?"

"Bit after ten," she answers

"Probably just saying hello again," Abby says. "Plus, part of why you usually don't send the whole team out on any given job is so there's always someone left who can raise the red flag if you don't check in. Draga or Bishop would have fired off the all hands on deck if they were in trouble."

That feels right.
"Plus, if there was trouble, Gibbs would have sensed it and gotten all of us looking," Tim adds.

Abby nods along with that. "Big time." She stretches a bit. "So, another bottle of wine and talking and chilling out, or early night?"

"You guys planning on staying over? Guest room is made up," Breena asks.

"I'd like that. It's always easier not to move the sleeping baby," Abby says.

"Amen on that. And I'm good for more wine. Besides, I haven't gotten you up to date on the latest Slater Funeral Home Drama."

Jimmy gets up to go get said bottle of wine, and as he's heading into the house he sighs. "Drama's the right word for it. I'll be out in a sec, you start getting them up to date."

"So… As you know, my Uncle Wes…"
"Good weekend, Dr. Allan?" Jimmy asks as his assistant heads in.

Allan nods as he hangs up his jacket and rolls up his sleeves. "Very. Starting to feel like I'm getting the lay of the land."

"I take it you didn't get lost this time?" Allan has been working on getting around DC, so each weekend he's been setting a list of places to go and see, and as of yet, he has not had a weekend where he didn't end up somewhere he didn't intend to be.

Allan smiles. 'I successfully used the Metro to get to the Zoo, the Smithsonian, then down to Alexandria, and back to my place.'

"Good job. Next thing you know you'll be debating getting rid of your car and finally qualify as a real Washingtonian."

"Wouldn't mind not paying for parking. Though, I was thinking I might like a bike."

Jimmy nods at that. "Good exercise, easy to take with you…"

"Motorcycle."

"Oh." He thinks about that for a second. "Those are cool, too."

"So," Allan looks at Jimmy, already in his coveralls, "I take it we have customers today?"

"Indeed, Dr. Allan, indeed." After it falls out of his mouth, and Allan's heading off to grab his coveralls and gas the van, Jimmy wonders briefly if he said that last bit with a Scottish accent. He shrugs, if he did, he did. Allan already thinks he's kind of weird.

It's okay; six months into working for Ducky, he thought Ducky was kind of weird, too.

There is a certain walk a man who just got his woman pregnant for the first time has.

It's the physical manifestation of the understanding of, finally, having fulfilled this whole, 'man' concept. Talk all you want about duty, honor, blah, blah, blah, on a biological level, the body knows what it is to be a man, and that's to make other, little men.

On an evolutionary level, manhood means finding a woman, getting her pregnant, keeping her pregnant until the baby comes out, healthy, and then making sure her and your young survive.

So, having achieved this, the male body wants to show it off. Its very favorite part, doing its very favorite thing, just did the most important thing it can. This makes it very happy, and very proud.

Thus the walk. Or, more precisely, strut, of the newly pregnant daddy.

Had anyone been watching closely, they would have seen it on Jimmy the day after he found out Molly was on the way, (The day of he more or less floated around in a stunned somewhat silent headspace. It took a few hours for the whole, holy shit, I made a kid, AWESOME! part to kick in for Jimmy.) but, in that there was a dead body the day he found out, he sort of blended into the background without attracting too much notice.
Had Tim been able to see himself from the outside the day before his wedding, he would have recognized that was not his usual gait, and he certainly would have known why he was strutting around, but, in that it was the day before his wedding, everyone else who saw it assumed this was Groom-related strutting, and besides some needling from Jimmy and Tony about being full of himself at his bachelor party, no one looked twice. After all, if there is a second runner up in the strutting department, getting the woman you're going to have the babies with is it.

Gibbs, well, remember, part of the point of Marine posture and training is to look as big and male and impressive as possible, so add that to the 'baby on the way' strut, and Gibbs was marching around with his (metaphorical) dick so far out he was practically tripping people with it.

And, of course, Tony DiNozzo, newest member of the Daddy club, is in no way immune from this phenomena. If Tony was a bird, he'd be in full Peacock mode, plumage displayed, showing off to anyone who knows how to look, that he is a MAN!

They were planning on telling everyone at Shabbos, but once they got the beach weekend text, that looked like an even better idea, so, for the time being, Tony and Ziva are (besides having told Gibbs) keeping quiet about 'Little D' as Tony's been calling her.

Which means, in a life filled with cops, somehow, not spilling the beans, for two weeks.

Ziva's (privately) thinking that Tony'll get to… noon… before someone who knows what that strut means sees him and figures it out, but, and this makes her smile, she doesn't mind the news getting out early.

Ziva and Draga head down to Holding to grab Alvin Harris, their current suspect, though at this point Tony's thinking suspect is a bad term for this. Information sink is probably better. They aren't holding Harris for any specific crime; they don't think he masterminded the bombing that got them into Kazakhstan in the first place; they do think he's a 'person of interest' in relation to an 'ongoing terror investigation.'

As he and Bishop head to the observation bay, she looks up at him. "Did you hurt your back this weekend?"

"No."

"Knee?"

"I'm fine, Bishop."

"Huh." She watches him take two more steps. "You're walking weird."

He glares at her a bit and opens the door for them.

While Tony is strutting his way into NCIS, with Ziva rolling her eyes a bit, and handling new baby in a much more female sort of way (namely she's quietly glowing all over the place and smiling a whole lot), Tim and Abby are pulling in and ready for another day, as well.

"Sure you don't want me to come?" Abby says to him as they get out of her car.

Tim's nodding. "No need to take even more time away. We're just talking about work."
"Okay."

He's been talking to Wolf at home, four times now, and last time, since he was getting back into working, Wolf suggested that they actually meet at work and talk about work, at their next appointment.

Which is six hours from now.

Tim's still not enjoying talking to Wolf. To him it feels like the emotional equivalent of PT, and unlike Jimmy, Wolf doesn't hand out any happy pills to make it easier. This is why, for the most part, he doesn't want to do it at work. If he's going to be wrecked for an afternoon, he'd rather not have the Minions see it. And Wolf gets that, so he's been willing to continue making house calls, but today's topic is actually work, how he's getting settled back in, what he's planning on doing, any challenges that are arising, stuff like that.

Since, technically, Tim was in a 'car accident' he didn't have to be psychologically 'cleared' to go back to work. There will never be any paperwork filed on this. He assumes Wolf and Leon have some sort of deal where if Wolf gets worried, he'll talk to Leon, and then Leon'll pull him out.

But it hasn't happened, yet.

Thinking about work, and about settling in, from the point of view of talking to Wolf about it reminds Tim of something he hasn't thought about for a while. He'd written up his, 'not quite, almost, looks okay, let it sleep for a while, give it one more re-write draft' of his report on the CyberTest of Carrier Group Three, and then let it sleep, and promptly forgot all about it.

He's feeling pretty stupid about that. After all, that report is the entire reason he's in the shape he's in. He got beat the hell up in an effort to produce a test, run the test, and then ascertain and distribute information from the test.

So, as soon as he sees that there are no major fires in need of his immediate attention, he pulls the report back up and takes another whack at it.

Jimmy and Allan pull up to the crime scene, or not, it's where they found the body, he may or may not have been murdered here, and like always the various Agents part for them.

Pleasant suburban house. Even has the white picket fence around the back. Jimmy's looking for Agent Carter, who placed the call this morning letting him know there was a body. Allan's getting out the gurney.

"Get lost?" Carter says, sarcastic, coming up from behind Jimmy.

Carter usually works car thefts and drug cases, so he and Jimmy rarely cross paths. In fact, Jimmy thinks the two of them have only worked four cases together in the last six years, and all of them are from before Jimmy took over as lead ME. But, apparently, every now and again, a drug case turns up a body, which brings his part of NCIS into the case.

"Accident on 495," Jimmy says, turning around to look at Carter. "Took twenty minutes to get to an exit and re-route. Where's the body?"

"'Round back." Carter gestures, and Jimmy follows, Allan trailing behind. "We had a warrant for the place. It belongs to Lance Corporal Henry Fling. He's been missing for the last two weeks." Jimmy walks back with Carter. "Agent Dawson saw the deep freezer on the back porch, saw it was
"Put two and two together and decided to check," Jimmy says with a nod.

"Exactly."

They round the corner, and Jimmy feels his heart stop. His fist clenches, and then releases, and he stops walking, staring at the deep freezer. "And, is it Lance Corporal Fling?"

"No." Carter looks impatient, not getting why Jimmy isn't walking any more. "Don't know who this is."

"Uh huh." Another slow, steadying breath eases out of Jimmy. Allan can tell something is wrong with Jimmy, but Carter doesn't know him well enough to know he's pissed, and Allan can't see what's wrong. "And... when Agent Dawson opened the freezer, did..." Jimmy looks around for Agent Dawson.

Carter nods to Dawson, who springs into attention and practically runs over to them. By the looks of it he's been doing this job for maybe eight minutes. "Did you think to close the freezer back up again?"

Allan gets it, winces, looking over and seeing the chest freezer sitting there, lid open. It July. It's at least 90 degrees out. The freezer's in full sun. They've been in the car for an hour and a half, and the call came in before that. And their body, which had been perfectly preserved in its own tidy little chamber of frozen evidence was now sitting in a melted puddle.

Dawson looks horrified. "Was I supposed to do that? Agent Carter told me to get pictures."

Jimmy smiles at him, not wanting to chew out the Probie acting on orders of someone who should have known better. "Yes, Agent Dawson, it is standard procedure to maintain the location of the body, precisely the way you found it, until the Medical Examiner comes."

"Oh, God. I'm so sorry. Is this... I mean... Shit!" Dawson looks like he's going to pass out.

"Is this your first case?"

"Yes." He's cringing.

Jimmy stares at Carter but talks to Dawson, "No one expects you to know how to run a crime scene right off the bat."

Carter's eyes narrow, he gets the message the he was supposed to know, loud and clear.

Jimmy ignores him, heading over to the deep freeze, getting ready to see how bad it is.

Tony cheats a bit on Ziva's timeline. Mainly because he's in the observation bay, watching her and Draga interrogate away, until 13:57.

In fact, a few times, entire minutes go by where Tony's not thinking about the baby.

He gets a text from Tim around 11:00. We still on for debriefing?

Later. Still interrogating. Let you know when I'm done.

Cool. If Bishop gets a free minute, send her down, want to give her all of the intel we've got.
I've got a better place for her to spread it all out and look at it than you do. Tony thinks about Tim's collection of touch screen plasmas, white boards, and conference table, and decides that he's likely right about that.

"McGee says he's got more intel. Feel free to head down and play with it."

She nods absently. "I'd like to keep watching this. You see how his eyelid twitches every time Ziva touches her star?"

Tony nods. (He considers it the height of professionalism that he did not leap up and strangle Harris the first time it happened. No one twitches at the mother of his child!)

"Alvin Harris is supposed to be a mercenary, only thing he believes in is mayhem. He's not a true believer. This is the wrong guy or something about him has really changed over the last few years."

Tony doesn't like that, but... Alvin Harris is supposed to be an ex-Royal Marine, dishonorably discharged after going AWOL in Afghanistan back in '07, but every now and again he says something that sounds just slightly off to Tony. The r sounds are not quite what he expects. He's biting his lip, staring at Harris. "You were there; we've got a fingerprint match."

She's looking up at him, exasperated. "We've got what the CIA told us was a fingerprint match. We didn't run it ourselves, and we don't know where the comparison prints are from. You mind if I have Abby run facial recognition? I'm wondering if we've got someone who just looks like the guy."

Holy Shit! Tim thinks as he reads through his draft. Jimmy really wasn't kidding. Being on narcotics is like being drunk. You think you're fine, or only mildly impaired, and you go do whatever the hell it is, and then see video of it later and want to die. Yeah, that's how Tim's feeling about this draft of his Cyber Test report. (He's got a sinking suspicion he's going to be just as horrified when he opens up the M'Gy Dragons and actually re-reads what he came up with.)

At no point while he was attempting to work did Tim think he was that impaired.

He's also thanking any and all higher powers that he did not send this version on. This is scary bad.

So, while Cybercrime hums around him, Tim gets writing.

He's got that first re-draft done, looks up, notices it's past eleven, remembers that he and Tony were going to talk, and fires off a text.

We still on for debriefing?

Later. Still interrogating. Let you know when I'm done.

Good God, who is this guy? Ziva's been on him since Saturday and they're still going? Wow! Tim replies to Tony. Cool. If Bishop gets a free minute, send her down, want to give her all of the intel we've got.

Email it?

Okay, yes, he technically can do that, and pretty much crash their servers. It's a lot of data. Plus, he's seen Bishop work, the entire third floor'll be covered in files if he sends this up to her. I've got a
Tony doesn't respond to that. Tim reaches for his coffee, sees it's empty, and decides to get a refill, without taking his crutch. *Way to walk on the wild side, right McGee?* Tim shakes his head wryly and gets to it.

He hears the knock bare seconds before he hears, "You look comfortable."

Tim smiles at Wolf. "As much as I ever am these days. But, this is day three of just over-the-counter pain meds, so that's something, right? Come on in."

Wolf does, shutting the door, looking around his office. He pulls up one of the chairs, and nods at the skull picture. "I remember that one from before."

Tim nods. "Abby gave it to me, a long time ago. We'd gotten this new software that'll scan a skull and make a picture of the face. I made it work in reverse, and then she sent me a picture of my own skull."

Wolf nods at that. "Romantic?"

Tim laughs. "Only if you've got a really weird definition of romance. We were just friends back then."

Wolf's still looking at it. "So, why did you make it work in reverse? It's not… I mean, what would you use it for?"

"You mean, you've already got a face, so wouldn't you just scan that in and search?"

"Yeah."

"Proof of concept. Just wanted to see if I could do it. The program works by having this huge database of information. Put the skull in, and it takes the measurements, uses its data, and builds a face. I wanted to see if I could make it scrape a face away. It did."

Wolf appears amused by that. "Is that the sort of thing you do for fun on the weekends?"

"Depends on the weekend," Tim says dryly. "Didn't have so many interesting things at home when I did that."

"Ah." Wolf keeps looking around, eyes scanning over the wedding pictures, the target, his shelf of books, the computer gear, how tidy everything is. Tim's not feeling too laid open by this, Wolf's been in his home and seen him in his laying around gear, seen him sobbing in Abby's arms, and that's a vastly more intimate experience than this. This is him, getting a sense for who Tim is at work now. Getting acquainted with "Boss."

"So, do I look like I belong here?" Tim asks after several moments of Wolf just looking around.

"Yes. You do. You like it here?"

Tim nods.

"Do you miss the field?"

Tim spreads his hands wide and opens his mouth slightly, and then closes it. He thinks for a few seconds. "I miss being with my team. But, no I don't miss knee deep in body parts, taking orders
from Gibbs or Tony, I don't miss the fear, I don't miss wondering if I was going to kill someone any
given day. I don't miss paperwork, but I do miss paperwork days, where we'd all be sitting around,
filling them out, just quiet, BSing with each other while we did it."

"How about here, what do you like about this?" Wolf asks as he looks out at the Minions (all three of
them) working away.

That takes another few seconds for Tim to process into a good answer. "I can do so much here, in a
way I couldn't before. Take paperwork days, as a Director, I was able to get my guys to build a
program that would take the information out of our computers when we put it in, and use that to fill
out the paperwork for us while we go along. Now all they do is hit print and sign the damn things.
That's not as dramatic as 'got in a shoot-out and saved the day,' but... I basically added an additional
half as many agents by doing that. We used to spend almost a third of our time on paperwork, and
now they're using those hours to actually be out there and deal with crime. When Leon actually
notices how much further I just stretched his budget, he's going to be ecstatic.

"Or... The guy before me didn't run this department well. He wasn't a bad guy or anything, just not a
great ideas guy. So, I redid how we do the job. Rescheduled us. Changed how we picked up jobs.
Changed who works what, and how, and... Okay, we're not directly saving lives. If I'm lucky I'll
never have to shoot a gun at a living person again, but the guys out there who are doing that are
getting intel from us so much faster now. They're waiting days instead of weeks or hours instead of
days for information that lets them make the next move.

"So, I love that. I've got six guys rebuilding our Cybersecurity right now. Anyone hacks us again,
and we're going to spoon feed them crap while tracking them down. I can do so much more with
this, so yeah, it's good."

"Anything you don't like about this?" Wolf asks.

Tim wiggles his hand a bit. "Not sure yet. It's likely there'll be a point where I'll need to be more of
an administrator and less of a tech, and that shift may be difficult. Right now I've got pretty much
two seconds in command. One of them was supposed to have this job, and he's an administrator. I'm
trying to turn him back into a tech guy, but as he pointed out when I got hurt, he was running the
ship because I was off slaying dragons. These days, it's my job to point out the dragons and send
someone else to go slay them, and that may be difficult."

"But you're not sure." Wolf is splitting his attention between watching Tim answer and checking out
the little bits of his life that Tim has littered around his office.

"I've got six other guys building the new security system. I came up with the idea, sketched it out,
sent it off to them, they'll muck around and build an alpha version. I'll get that back and mess with it
until it's a beta. Then we'll set it live and let the whole department take a whack at it until it's ready
for a production model. So, for things like that, I'm administrating away. Give me a case where
actually getting into the field again is part of it, and I don't know what I'll do." Tim looks at his arm.
"Got burned bad enough I may have learned some caution about going out again. But I'm still a field
agent, so I still feel like I should be able to handle anything that gets tossed my way." Tim smiles a
bit. "I'll set fire to that bridge when I come to it."

Wolf nods. He stands up, looks around again. "You know, for everything that's been tossed at you,
you really are doing quite well with it. I know it doesn't always feel that way." Tim's giving him the
no shit look. "But you are. I'm standing by my original 'mentally stable.' You've been through a ten
on the Richter scale earthquake, and a lot of things are fallen down and in need of clearing out, but
you've got a good foundation. So, we're good with work. You want to talk again next week, at
home, personal stuff? I've got Monday morning free."
Does he want to? No. But, he will, because he can't rebuild on that good foundation until all the rubble's been cleaned off. "Let me check." Tim pulls his own calendar up. "Yeah. I think that'll work. Got a PT appointment at 10:00, so we've got to be done by 9:30, that work for you?"

"No problem."

It's 15:42 and Jimmy is ready for today to be done. This jacked up little turd of an investigator is demanding a time of death from him and he is trying to be polite.

"I'm sorry, Agent Carter, but when you find a body in a deep freeze, there's no way for me to give you a time of death. I've got cause. I can tell you approximately how long passed between death and freezing. But once he froze, time basically stopped. Fortu-"

Carter's glaring at Jimmy, cutting him off before he gets to the part of this that is 'good news.' "Ducky would have."

Jimmy stops being nice. He'd been trying to keep from laying into Carter, because he knows Carter rarely handles murders, and this was a tricky scene, but with that… Nope. He's done being nice. Carter's about to take all the abuse Jimmy wanted to toss on him from the moment he saw that freezer was open. "Ducky would have chewed you out, in front of your men, for opening the deep freeze, seeing there was a body in it, and then leaving it open to get pictures. The only possible way anyone could have told how long this body was in there would have been based on the ice crystals around the body, but, between the open door and bright lights, I don't have any ice crystals to work with." Jimmy pulls up the pictures from the crime scenes. "You didn't even get good pictures of them."

Carter's puffing up, annoyed. "I didn't realize that I needed to be taking pictures of the crystals."

Jimmy steps closer to him, and Carter may be taller, but Jimmy's way more pissed off and on the side of the angels on this one. "You didn't need to be taking pictures of the crystals. You needed to do your damn job and secure the body, keeping it and the environment it was found in pristine, until I could get there and release it to you! I've handled hundreds of crime scenes and every single other one was run by someone who understood that it was imperative to preserve the environment the body was found in. But somehow, maybe you were sick that day at FLETC or just didn't have the brains to pass basic police work 101, you didn't get that message. So, instead of me having exact measurements of how deep the frost around the body was, and instead of using the deep freeze and a dead pig to figure out exactly how long it takes for that frost to form around a fresh corpse, thus giving you exactly how long he'd been in the deep freeze, this poor bastard is going to sit in my morgue, until you manage to stumble, by blind luck alone, because I seriously doubt you've got the chops to actually locate evidence, into something else incriminating, and can run the case based on that." Jimmy glares back at Carter. "Other investigators, they get to poke around, look at the scene, start taking pictures while they wait for me to get there. You no longer have that privilege."

"I've been a Lead Agent—"

"Stuff it. As of now, the only thing you get to do before I show up is wrap tape around the perimeter and keep people out of what's inside. As of today, if you or yours finds a body, you turn into a traffic cop, and all you do is direct the flow of people around the scene. We've run the prints, they've come up negative. Abby's on DNA, and I've got Dr. Allan working his dental records. If those don't pan out, we've got a John Doe with no time of death, making this man impossible to identify and his case impossible to solve, all because you didn't properly secure the body!"

Carter storms out, and Allan, who vanished about two seconds into Jimmy reaming Carter, rematerializes. "You going to tell him Abby's already matched the DNA?"
Jimmy shakes his head. "I was, originally, but now, not for an hour or so. I want him to stew on that. If Mr. Alm here had been a John Doe, what he did would have destroyed our chances of figuring this out."

"Lucky for Mr. Alm that we know he went missing fourteen weeks ago."

"Yeah." Jimmy smiles.

"I will take clean murder over this terror crap any day and twice on Sunday!" Tony says as he struts (annoyed, frustrated strut, but strutting nonetheless) into Tim's office.

Tim, who's working on the clean up draft of Carrier Group Three CyberSecurity Test, looks up at Tony, who's pulling a chair over while closing the door to Tim's office.

"Interesting development?" Tim asks as Tony sits down.

Tony's got that gleam in his eye, the one that shows up when he's annoyed, disbelieving, and needs to blow off some work related steam. "Don't you know it! Our suspect? Not a terrorist. Nooo. That'd be too damn easy. No, this guy, he's a deep cover plant trained by MI6 to infiltrate other terror organizations, recruit people he thinks are 'talented' and then they go 'work for him' which is code for one way trip to wherever the hell the Brits keep people like that. Meanwhile, they've got a crew of mostly MI6 guys and a few actual terrorists who blow shit up and mess around with things so Harris has things he can 'take credit for.'"

Tim thinks that's actually a fairly clever way to go about getting bad guys out of circulation. "So, how'd you get him?"

"We didn't. We're supposed to have him. Part of what's going on right now is that he's supposed to be captured by us and getting his butt into our prison system so he can keep 'recruiting' guys who are about to get out. Once they do, they go hunt down his company and then get swept up by the Brits."

"That would have been good to know."

"Yeah." Tony's rolling his eyes. "Apparently, it's some sort of deal with the Brits. We let guys out of Gitmo, which looks good and gets us good PR or something, and they use guys like Harris to pick them up again, so we don't have to worry about 'recidivism.' Someone could have given us a heads up on that. Apparently CIA knew, that's why they gave him to us because we're the 'nicest' route to Gitmo, except, joke's on all of us, we don't have the right guy."

Tim's eyebrows scoot together. "Who do you have?"

Tony shrugs. "Not Alvin Harris. Which is news to MI6 and the CIA." Tony takes a sip of his coffee. "Abby's got her guys working on figuring out who this is, but face to face comparison didn't match. Anyway, that's the update on my side. What do you have?"

Tim shakes his head and sighs. "A new and unending love of my side of the problem."

"Yeah, I figured. Anything else?"

"Data. Lots and lots and lots of data. Those five chips…" Tim's about to rattle off specs, but realizes that Tony's already nebulous on what a gig is when it comes down to real world information and getting into terrabites is just going to confuse him more. "Imagine my whole office filled with paperwork, info on both sides, in tiny, tiny letters."
"We've got that twice over and then some on each chip. Whoever your diplomatic assistant was, he had the goods on everyone and thing. It's all decrypted; all we need now is for someone to do something with it."

Tony shakes his head. "I've never wanted someone to get killed so badly in my life. We go out, we go through evidence, we get leads, it all of it fits in one, maybe two boxes. How is anyone supposed to keep all of this straight?"

Tim laughs. "I think that's why you've got computers. No one can keep this in one head." Then he remembers what Bishop does. "Or… I mean, is Bishop running this in her head?"

Tony lifts a hand, showing he has no idea how she does it. "She might be. She's got her ten million files all spread out and scattered around, then she does her thing with them and her laptop and tells me something and I nod and say, 'Okay,' and do it, because it sounds okay, but she might as well be getting those suggestions from voodoo for all I can tell."

Tim laughs at that, too.

"Actually… That's something I want to talk to you about. We can't keep this all in our heads and the paper folders are useless. Draga's been asking about trying to build our own terror database. According to Bishop they had this huge searchable file of the Gods back at NSA. Anything and everything you ever wanted had already been scanned, loaded, and you could just get it out by typing words in.

"That would be good."

"Yeah. We don't have that."

"You don't have that for murders, either. And, unless Draga's secretly two hundred database wonks, he's not building it for you."

"I know. But I need it."

"I think I can get you murders, because that's our in-house data." Tim's already writing his next project down. Though, technically, this should be a job for record keeping and IT, and he's probably going to have to run it through them, but... He can't imagine he'll have a hard time getting Leon behind it.

When Tim gets done writing, Tony says, "So these chips and your full city block of data… You think I've got enough goodies in there to barter that into access to the NSA's database?"

Tim shrugs. "I don't think I could do it. But… You got someone at NSA who's persuadable?"

"Maybe. Gotta figure out how to play this so I get what I want and don't end up with us getting it all confiscated."

Tim waves that off. "I've got back-ups of back-ups that no one knows about. We're not losing this. Whether we've got the resources to do anything with it is a different story, but it's not going anywhere."

Tony nods, he slumps a little, grits his teeth, then stands up, flashes his million watt smile, and says, "Okay, let's go see if I can do anything with this encyclopedia."
Tim smiles and waves him on, as he's at the door, Tim adds, "Hey, beach weekend soon. Sun, sand, water, no computers."

"Amen!"

And with that, Tony heads off, Tim reburies himself into his computer.

"What'd'ya got, Abbs?"

"A sense of Deja vu. When'd you start channeling Gibbs, Tony?"

"Probably when I got far enough into this case that I began longing for a murder."

"Jimmy's got one. Well, technically Agent Carter has one."

Tony's surprised by that. "Isn't Carter on drugs and autos?"

Abby nods. "And he's way out of his league apparently. Looks like Jimmy wouldn't mind if you had a murder, too."

"Great. Unfortunately, doesn't work that way."

"Yeah, I know." Abby smiles at Tony. "But, I've got some fortunately for you."

"Please!" He looks relieved. "Give me good news."

"Follow me," she heads into the auxiliary computer bank, and then waits for him to follow, standing next to her computer. He's a few steps behind, and sees her watching carefully as he walks in.

"What?"

Abby smiles, eyebrows flicking up, and then shakes her head. "You'll tell us when you're ready. Anyway, we don't have a complete DNA match, so I can't tell you who the guy in Holding is."

"I thought there was supposed to be some fortunately in this."

"There is! I can tell you he's a bin Laden. Son, brother, cousin, no idea, yet. But, y chromosomes don't lie. This guy is part of the clan."

Tony's eyes go wide as he absorbs that. "Wasn't Osama bin Laden one of fifty kids?"

"Something like that, and he had a pile of his own, as well, and I'm sure his dad wasn't an only child, either. I googled, didn't find the exact number, but they think there may be 600 of them. Here's the other bit that may help narrow this down some, he's got a few markers on his x chromosome that are associated with Northern European populations."

"So… Mom's from Europe?"

"Or Grandma. Or great, great, great grandma."

"Okay… Better than nothing." Tony thinks about that some more. "Actually…" He hurries two steps forward, kisses Abby on the cheek. "Thanks, Abbs. As soon as Sean's out, I owe you all the Caf-Pow you can drink!"

She smiles at him, watching him strut off, and says, "That's a lot of Caf-Pow."
"It's worth it." She hears from the main lab.

Ziva hears a knock on the interrogation door. That surprises her. She and Draga have been at this all day, save for a quick lunch break. She feels like she's just starting to put a dent into Mr. Harris, and that if the way he's squirming about in his seat is any indication, he's just about hit the edge of his rope.

Tony pokes his head in, looks at Harris, smiles at him, wide and happy, and then waves Ziva and Draga out.

Ziva heads out, not happy about that, but follows Tony to observation. "What?"

"Damn it!" Draga's watching through the window. As soon as they were out of there, Harris grabbed the water pitcher and relieved himself. Now he's glaring at Tony. "It took us hours to get him that uncomfortable."

Tony shakes his head. "It took hours to get him playing that uncomfortable. Trust me, you weren't touching who this guy really is."

"We were starting to get intel on attacks in Bahrain and Gibraltar," Draga says.

"That's one of the cover levels. Top cover, Alvin Harris, British mercenary/terror for hire. Next level, Alvin Harris, not actually dishonorably discharged, didn't actually go AWOL in Afghanistan, deep cover MI6 Operative."

Ziva's shaking her head, looking mad, she doesn't like that at all.

"Fuck," Draga says.

"Next level, this guy isn't actually Alvin Harris. MI6 is reporting now that the last contact they had with Harris where they absolutely knew it was Harris was over a year ago."

"Well, who the hell is that?" Draga asks.

"One of the multitudes of Bin Ladens."

"What?" Ziva can't believe this.

"How?" Draga asks.

"We don't know, and guess what, we don't have to find out, either! What we have here, in addition to all that spiffy new intel McGee got for us, is the engraved invitation to the NSA and CIA databases. In exchange for free access to their intel, I am allowing them to fight over who gets this asshole, and letting them deal with him."

Tony hands over two thumb drives. "There's one for me, and one for Bishop, too. These are our new, spiffy, and fully functional passes to the NSA and CIA computers." He kisses Ziva. "Now, Mr. Whoever the Hell That is Bin Laden, can sit in there, and we're all going out for a celebratory dr... milkshake, and then, tomorrow, we're rounding up our best leads on our best cases and seeing what NSA and CIA have on them for us."

And by the time that news got out, no one was wondering why Tony was strutting anymore. They were wrong about why, but not wondering.
Tim hits save on his report. It's a lot better this time. Still, a lot better doesn't necessarily mean done. He'll give it a day or two to rest, then one last read through and re-write, and off to Jarvis it goes.

He looks over the draft of the email for the reworking of their internal criminal database. Technically, this is IT's backyard, which means it's actually Leon's problem. He's already simplified the language twice. He knows Leon isn't Gibbs and that he actually knows (sort of) what a computer can do, but he doesn't want it to be too tech-y, because he wants Leon to understand what this needs to do to be better than their current system.

He's hoping he threaded that needle.

Tim glances at the clock. Almost going home time. He opens up the work documents for the new version of the cyber security his guys are coding away on, and give it a glance through. Nothing's jumping out as a problem.

"Hey." Abby's leaning against his door.

He looks up at her. "Hi. Almost done. Just gotta log out."

"Okay."

He scans over a bit more, decides it's good, and logs out. "You know, I think I'm going to be okay at this Administration thing."

She blinks at that. "Okay. Of course you are. What's bringing that on?"

He shakes his head, standing up, grabbing his crutch, but not really using it. "So, good day?"

"Oh yeah. Got some news, too."

"Good new?"

"Oh yeah. Come on, let's grab Jimmy."

"There you go, Mr. Alm. All set for the night," Jimmy says as he tucks Mr. Alm into his drawer. "Your family will be here to see you, tomorrow."

"I'm not looking forward to that," Dr. Allan says.

"I know. Not my favorite part of the job, either." Jimmy sighs. "It's a comfort though, to be able to touch and see and say goodbye. So we offer it, and we stuff how uncomfortable it is down and away because no matter how uneasy it makes us, it's much worse for them."

Dr. Allan nods at that. "Yeah. Is that how you can do this, day after day?"

Jimmy shrugs. "I don't know. I just do it."

"Were you always this good at it?"

Jimmy laughs at that. "No. Have a good night, Dr. Allan."

"Good night, Dr. Palmer."

A minute later, as Jimmy's turning off his computer equipment and lights, he hears the doors swoosh
open, and "Jimmy!"

"Hi, Abby." He's facing away from the door. "Got, Tim, too?"

"Yeah. I'm here."

Jimmy flicks off the last of the lights and heads over to them. "Hi. Did you have as long of a day as I did?"

"Mine went pretty fast," Abby's bubbling away, "And I think I've got some news."

"She wouldn't tell me until we got you."

"Well, you've got me, what is it?"

"Ziva's so pregnant!"

"You sure?" Jimmy asks.

"Not one hundred percent, I didn't see her today, but Tony was strutting all over the place, and I've seen that walk before."

"I saw him, too..." Tim's thinking back, but he doesn't remember. "No idea if he was walking different. So, really, you can tell when a guy has a baby on the way by how he walks?"

"Oh my God, yes! You can't?"

Tim and Jimmy are both shaking their heads, as she takes Jimmy's hand and wraps an arm around Tim, leading them out of Autopsy.

"Oh, Lord, you should have seen you two strutting all over the place..."

They both look mock-appalled at the idea that they may have been involved in such activities.
Full house for Shabbos this week, and for the first time in a long time, Tim's moving around well enough to make getting up and down the stairs leading into Tony and Ziva's building something less than a monumental chore.

So they're gathering at Ziva's place, and she's having a grand time of it.

Ziva loves to cook. She always has. And cooking for other people is even better than just cooking to make food.

This week, putting around her kitchen, mixing up bread dough, chopping fruit for sweet nibbles, laying out olives and nuts for salty nibbles while the chickens roast, she's having a blast. She is in a full on celebratory groove, bopping around her kitchen, music on loud, scrubbing the veggies for the salad, and mixing up pitchers of cucumber-lime (virgin) mojitos. (Officially, they're standing in for the wine so that Abby can partake along with everyone else.)

Tony's leaning against the door to their kitchen, just watching. After a few beats, where she does not appear to notice he's there, he steps in and catches her mid-dance step. "Dance with me?"

She grins up at him, and lets him lead a few steps.

"So, anything I can do to help in here?" he asks after dipping her low at the end of the song.

"I think I've got in here covered. But setting the table and putting food on it would be good."

"Then I will set the table." He heads out of the kitchen, and then pokes his head back in. "Everyone, right?"

"Full house."

Tony's putting plates on the table, and given that it's summertime, which means the sun sets after baby girls are all tucked into bed and snoozing, they're feeding fewer people than usual tonight. "We better hurry up on getting the house done. Add one more high chair and there's no way we're keeping this herd of people in our place."

Ziva grins at the idea of one more highchair, and then a thought is triggered by 'house.' "Did Senior get you?"

"I saw he called, but we ended up playing phone tag, what's up?"

"He's got a house he wants to move on for us. He would like us to see it before starting the bidding."

Tony's eyes go wide open. "Oh. Uh. Okay… He tell you where?"

"Georgetown."

Tony thinks about that for a moment. "Oh God. If it's in bad enough shape for us to afford it in Georgetown, it's about to be condemned."

Ziva shrugs. "He says it is a great neighborhood and a very good school district."

"Scratch that, it is condemned."
"Tomorrow morning, we'll go, we'll see. He invited Gibbs, too."

Tony can see it; the more this place looks like the ruins of urban warfare, the more Gibbs'll love it. "That'll be fun. You want to tell Dad then?"

A huge smile breaks over Ziva's face. "Oh yes. Do you think Gibbs told Abbi?"

Tony's mouth opens and then closes. "I don't know. Is it stupid that I keep forgetting he's got this extra person now, who he's actually trying to tell things to?"

"Yes." Ziva winks at him and goes back into the kitchen, coming out a moment later with the salad. "Abbs keeps watching me, looking like she's expecting to be told something."

"Yeah, Palmer and McGee keep giving me stupid grins, too. So, tonight? Or make them wait for next week."

Ziva smirks at him. "I think we should make them wait."

Tony laughs.

"Stories!" Molly Palmer knows exactly what she wants, and she's homing in on it. Namely, she wants her (new) very favorite story (Madeline) with her very favorite Uncle (Uncle Jethro) and she wants it now.

The thing about summertime Shabbos is dinner starts at sunset. In Washington DC, in the last week of July, sunset is at about 8:30, which is also known as an hour and a half after baby girls go to bed. They've tried a few dinners with the girls up, and basically found that no one was having a good time. Sure the girls liked it, and Molly especially was being extremely vocal about not being tired at all, but between having to deal with exceptionally grumpy tiny people during dinner (not fun) and then having to deal with tiny little bears with sore paws the entire next day (really not fun) the adult members of Clan Gibbs have decided that babies get to sleep through supper when it happens after bedtime.

So, these days, the first order of business is get everyone greeted, followed by story time with Uncle Jethro (and Dad, though whether Dad means Jimmy or Tim depends on how little girls are doing.)

Jethro scoops up Molly, who already has her book in hand, and says, "Hello Molly."

"Uncle Jetro!" He gets a big wet kiss on the lips. "Madeline!"

"I see." She's holding it right up in his face. Gibbs leans back a bit and grabs it from her. "'Twelve little girls in two straight lines, the youngest one was Madeline,' right?"

Molly's astonished by that. "How do you know?"

"I used to read this book a whole lot."

"Oh." Molly's impressed by that. "Is it your favorite?"

He shakes his head. "Nah. But I like it a lot. Is this what we're going to read tonight?"

Molly nods her head. Tim and Abby head in at that, and as Tim's giving Molly her hello kiss, Molly turns in Gibbs' arms, trying to get into Tim's, which isn't going to happen, but she's really excited about something. "Uncle Tim! Madeline has a hurt arm, just like you!"
Tim's looking around, not sure who Madeline is, but Abby's grinning. "Yes, she does, doesn't she, Molly?"

Molly nods in agreement, looking intently at Tim. "It gets better."

Tim nods. "My arm's going to get better, too. See." He shows off how much less of his arm is in the cast now. He's not sure how aware of what's under the sling the girls are, but Molly seems impressed.

"How much better is it?" Abbi asks.

Tim kisses her cheek. "Well, Jimmy comes over and tortures me twice a week, but each time he does it I get another two inches of range of motion, so…"

"So, it's worth it, and you bitching and moaning is just sympathy seeking," Jimmy says with a smile. "Jethro, Abbi," both of them get hugs. "Showing off your new book?" he takes Molly from Jethro and kisses Abby's cheek. "Hey."

"Anyway, as I was saying, if NCIS doesn't work out, Jimmy's starting Master Palmer's House of Pain."

"Oh come on!"

Tim winks at Jimmy.

"Master Palmer?" Jimmy rolls his eyes.

Tim just grins.

"Dr. Palmer's House of Pain sounds kinkier," Tony adds as he heads over.

Molly's listening and watching and can tell there's a joke of some sort, because the adults are all goofing around but she doesn't know what's going on. "Daddy?"

Jimmy kisses her forehead. "It's okay. Uncle Tim and Uncle Tony are teasing me."

She glares at Tim and Tony. Everyone at daycare is very specific about how it's bad to tease people. "No teasing!"

Tim nods, seriously. "No teasing. I'm sorry, Jimmy."

That satisfies Molly. Now she staring at Uncle Tony, who's staring back, trying to figure out what to do with this. After all, there's no way he's going to say he won't tease Jimmy, he'll get ragged on that until the end of time. "C'mere."

Now everyone is looking at Tony, wondering (okay, internally smirking, they all know what's going on) as he takes Molly. She's looking a little startled, too. Uncle Tony's good for rough housing, not so good for cuddles. He's never done story time before. "How about Uncle Jethro and I read you and your sister some stories?"

Molly thinks about that, looks over at her Daddy, who nods, it's fine with him if the usual Friday night routine varies a bit, then she looks at Jethro, who also nods. "Uncle Tony's new to this story thing, so we're going to have to show him how to do it."

That makes Molly happy, because if there's anything a two-year-old loves, it's getting to boss people around.
Especially adult people!

As Gibbs quietly closes the door to Tony and Ziva's bedroom behind him, he looks at Tony and grins. "Not so bad?"

Tony grins back, then shrugs. He's still not awash in overwhelming and unending adoration for the little rug rats, but that wasn't bad. "Still like big people better."

"That's fine. You're allowed to."

"Wasn't scary. Felt like I wasn't completely out of my depth."

Gibbs wraps an arm around his shoulders and gives him a squeeze.

"Looking forward to doing that with Little D."

That turns the squeeze into a hug.

"Really don't like changing diapers. There're all those little folds the poop hides in. Ylghrk." Tony shudders.

Gibbs bursts out laughing at that. "Better get used to it. Ziva's not going to let you be a 1950's dad."

Tony shakes his head wryly. "Yeah. I know."

"So, McComputerMaster, I've got a question for you.‖ Tony asks once the blessing is done and they're all eating.

"Shoot, Tony. Looking to upgrade at home?‖ Tim asks, lifting a bite of chicken to his mouth.

"Uh, no… Why, do I need to?"

"No, just…‖ Just he knows Tony's laptop is four years old. "Never mind, what's up?"

Tony puts his glass down. "So, once we off-loaded our Bin Laden and started playing with our new data, Bishop had a really devious thought.‖ Everyone is nodding, following along. "Basically, she pointed out how, yeah, it's great that we have all this access now, but with how they gave it to us, they can take it away with just a few keystrokes."

"That's how every well-designed secure system works, Tony."

"Great.‖ Tony rolls his eyes a bit, indicating that isn't exactly a revelation to him. The revelation is what that means. "We're using it, making more headway, putting things together faster and easier than ever before. It's wonderful, but… Anytime CIA or NSA says jump, we're gonna be going 'how high' because we can't afford to lose access, now."

"Double edged sword,‖ Ducky adds.

"Yeah. So… Can we make a copy? I mean, I give you my access stick, can you make me my own NSA database?"

Tim sniggers. "Can you get me the fifty million dollars of storage I need to hold it and the fifteen or so people I'll need to run it?"
"No."

Tim just looks at Tony. "But if you get me authorization from Vance, I'll build you a backdoor so you've always got a way in."

Tony's smiling for a second, because how hard can that be, then he sees the look on Tim's face. "Vance won't give me authorization, will he?"

Tim shakes his head. "He's looking at prison time if we get caught. I am, too. However, Draga can, and this is legal, set up a program on your team's computers so that every time a new screen pops up it takes a screenshot and saves it. He'll have to build your own database for it, but you won't be able to lose anything you've accessed."

Tony likes the sound of that. Especially since he's building a web of hopefully related cases, so what gets used in Case A will hopefully come in handy for Case B. "That's a start."

"Yeah. Step two, and Draga shouldn't have any trouble with this, write a program so that whenever you aren't actively using your computers, they're swimming through the databases, constantly pulling stuff up and getting shots. He can talk to me if he needs help turning those shots into searchable data. When you get enough of it, we'll have a chat with Vance about your storage needs."

Tony nods. "Ah. And this would be… legal?"

Tim shrugs. He thinks so, but he hasn't seen the fine print on whatever agreement Tony got up with either group. He's fairly certain Tony hasn't seen the fine print, either. "A hell of a lot more legal than me attempting to copy restricted databases or hack a back door into them. So long as we're just messing with our own stuff, it should be fine."

"Ah." Tony's looking at everyone else at the table. "So, I guess we're all pretty much up to date on what I've been doing this week, then?" Nods. "So, how about it, Abbi, haven't seen you for a while, what CGIS doing to you?"

Abbi sighs. "New fiscal year starts September 1st, and this year we've gotten notice that the GAO is coming to audit us on September 2nd, so, as you can guess, this year is mayhem. They want not just Fiscal 2015, but the five years previous, too."

"Fun!" Tim says, nodding.

"Oh, yeah, excellent. Add in the fact that I wasn't in charge for '11, '12, or part of '13, and that Swissin, the guy who had the job before I did, needed to take his shoes off to count to eleven, and conveniently died last year." She's glaring at the mental image of Swissin, wishing he was still alive so she could blow off some steam by reaming him out properly. Gibbs gently rubs the back of her neck. "So, I can't even hunt his ass down and grill him, and I've got the least fun accounting nightmare you've ever seen." She stabs a bite of her salad, picks it up on her fork, and then puts it back down. "I've got full quarters where there's nothing, not even files. My computer guys keep telling me there should be information around here somewhere, that we keep copies of everything off site as well as locally, but they can't find them.

"My boss is fussing about bringing in forensic accountants to go figure out what's going on because he thinks it looks bad. He wants to just stonewall the GAO and hope they're unwilling to call a Congressional investigation, which is making me wonder if he's involved in those quarters being gone."

"IA reports to him, so I can't exactly call them in on this without him finding out about it, and since I
mentioned the forensic accountant, expecting him to go along with it, he's got the heads up that I'm onto something here and is likely scrubbing things clean as we speak." Abbi chomps her bite of salad.

The rest of the table is sitting there silent, very aware of how big of a deal this is, and that they cannot talk to anyone outside of the room about it.

"You've got a work laptop with access to everything on it, right?" Tim asks.

Abbi nods.

"Bring it with you to NC. At some point, you're going to turn it on, log in, and go for a walk, at the very least I'll probably be able to tell you if your computer guy knows what he's doing or if he's BSing you, too."

"Thanks, McGee."

"So, if this is more than just… incompetence, where do you go with this?" Penny asks.

Borin shrugs. "Officially, as head of the Chesapeake Region, I'd report it to the head of our IA department, and then he handles it. As the person who's going to have to answer to the GAO, I'm thinking those forensic accountants are showing up whether Tom likes them there or not. I want to have something to show beyond a bunch of blank spaces." Abbi takes a drink. "The real question is, do I think IA is going to do something? This feels wrong."

"Hinky?" Abby asks.

"Yeah. Those files are supposed to be off site and if they're missing, too... Lots of hinky." Abbi shakes her head. "Swisson just up and gave notice. Just retired out of the blue one day. Next thing I know, I'm in charge of the Chesapeake Division. Cases always ran smooth. He had a good handle on all of the crime stuff, but Swisson was an awful administrator. And I don't know, maybe he got promoted too high. Maybe he was on the take. But this smells bad, and it's biting me in the ass."

Gibbs has been holding her hand. This is the first time she's said that much about this all at once. He's been getting bits and pieces, but he's guessing something really shifted today, probably the information not being in the backup storage area. She smiles a little at Gibbs, and then turns to Breena and Jimmy saying, "Right now, I cannot wait for five days at the beach. Thank you so much for the invite!"

Gibbs winces a little at that, but Abbi's not looking at him, so she misses it. Jimmy and Breena are looking a little curious about five days, but not saying anything. So's the rest of the group. They're all letting five days lie. One of the good thing about a family full of cops is that when one member lets slip with something all the rest of them know is wrong they all come, very quickly, to the conclusion that there is something planned that they are not yet party to, so leave it the hell alone.

"Okay, enough of the fun of CGIS," Abbi gives Ziva a long look, smile tugging at her lips. "Have an exciting week, Ziva?"

Ziva smiles. "Quite dull really. Computers, more computers. I have been in the office every day this week. Onto more exciting things, for example, are we drawing straws for who's camping out next week?" she asks Breena.

This produces curious looks from Ducky, Penny, Abbi, and Gibbs, and something that could be called, maybe, if you were looking carefully, restrained glee from the Palmer/McGee contingent.
"No worries on that. We're" Breena gestures to her and Tim and Abby, "sharing the master bedroom..." Gibbs had been listening, cutting his chicken, but he looks up fast at that, and stares long and hard at Tim and Jimmy. Breena's going on about how the master is huge, has a little sitting area, and a walk in closet that's currently empty, and how it's just easier to use that as a nursery for all three girls, and keep all the grown-ups who respond to them in easy earshot.

Ducky, Penny, Tony, and Ziva all seem to think that makes perfect sense, and in that it means they all get their own bedroom and don't have to share or camp on the sand, they're just nodding along.

Abbi's noticed something is going on with Gibbs, and since he's already mentioned the possibility of the Palmers and McGees becoming more than just friends, she's got a pretty good sense of what's up with him.

Jimmy and Tim can feel Gibbs still staring at them.

Tim's close enough to Gibbs that he catches his eye, looks down at his left hand, and sees Gibbs follow his gaze, and then he quickly signs (by spelling the words out) w-e-r-e-f-i-n-e-t-a-l-k-s-o-o-n.

Gibbs looks back up at him, and there is very much a promise of talking soon in his eyes.

"How about you, Tim?" He jerks slightly, not noticing that Breena, having finished explaining both how the set up for the house works and who is sleeping where, had tossed the spotlight onto him.

"Um..." For a second he can't think of what he did this week. Then it comes back. He looks down at his right arm. "So, the Third Carrier Group Cyber Attack Readiness Evaluation as well as the Paradigms For Effective Surprise Cyber Attack Tests are officially finished. My reports are done, and as of 16:45 in Jarvis' inbox." Everyone goes quiet at that, not sure if this is the sort of thing where congratulations are in order. Tim sympathizes; he also felt awash in a lot of things, not sure what, really, as he hit the send button. "Got a note back from Jarvis, just as I was heading out, he hadn't had time to read them yet, but he was surprised and pleased to see I've written them." Tim swallows and sighs. "He says that I'm getting a Navy Distinguished Civilian Service Award, for going way above and beyond the call," another sigh. Everyone stares at him, he hadn't even told Abby about it, yet.

"You're not looking thrilled," Jimmy says.

Abby's petting his thigh as he shrugs. "Am I getting it for going above and beyond, coming up with a test no one else could, and doing the job better than anyone else, or for shutting up about what happened to me and not making a fuss during an election year?" Tim shakes his head. "Well, that's a grim reaction to good news. Penny, what have you been up to?"

"I had a very good week..." And Penny begins to tell them about a breakthrough one of her study groups had this week.

Ultimately, in perfect world, Gibbs would be shanghai-ing the boys before heading over to the house tomorrow. Fine sunny day tomorrow, they're all heading over to the house to try and get some hours in. (Especially since no work will be happening next weekend.)

Except, tomorrow morning, when he would normally engage in said shanghai-ing, he's meeting Tony, Ziva, and Senior at a brownstone in Georgetown to give it a once over and see if it deserves a bid.

So, no pre-house-work talk.
He could talk to them tonight, but he doesn't want anyone else wandering into this conversation, so here at Ziva's is out. And with Tim only having one functional hand, it's not like he can stuff the three of them into the kitchen for some dish washing and alone time, either.

He might be interested in drawing them off before heading home, but he wants to talk for more than five minutes, and with Abbi working like crazy lately, and her just managing to claw tonight free, (she'll be back tomorrow morning) so he's sure as hell not cutting his time with her short.

So, as much as his Dad-sense is in overdrive, he's also got a week before those two twits do whatever brilliant plan they've got in mind, so this hasn't hit emergency levels, yet. Still, the four of them, at the house, with everyone else there. Oh, Lord, what the hell are they thinking?

They're heading home, and Abbi's watching him drive, seeing the worried Dad vibes pouring off of him, looking mostly amused by it.

"So, I take it you didn't know there were only four bedrooms at the Slater's place?"

He licks his lips. "Yeah. Never been there before, and Breena left that out when she sent the invite."

"You okay?"

He shrugs. "Afraid." He shakes his head. "Hopin' those two twits have some clue as to what the fuck they're doing."

"Two? Last time I counted there was four of them."

"I'm not worried about the girls. I know they'll be okay with each other. I'm worried about those two getting their rocks off and then getting stupid about it."

Abbi raises an eyebrow. "They look happy. Neither of them have much of a poker face, and they certainly looked like they were planning on having a very good weekend."

"I know. Now. While it's still a fantasy. Most guys can't take seeing their woman with someone else."

"Most guys don't like thinking about it, either."

That's a good point, but... "Are they thinking about that, or thinking about getting to try out a new woman?"

"Oh."

"Yeah. Worried they're so caught up in one half of the fantasy they're missing the other half."

She touches his hand. "So you'll be the dad and point it out to them."

Gibbs shakes his head.

"Yeah, I know, conversation you never wanted to have."

Another sigh.

"And you don't want to get nearly that deep into their sex lives."

"Could go the whole rest of my life without getting' into that."
Abbi nods in agreement, then she shifts the topic a little, to something he is in control of. "So, everyone else seemed a little surprised by the idea of a five day beach weekend." Abbi smiles at him.

Gibbs looks a little sheepish. "You caught that, huh?"

"Kind of hard to miss."

"Thought you could use the break."

She smiles. "You know I can. So, are we staying at the Slaters'—"

Gibbs shakes his head. "Got a surprise in the works."

Abbi looks pleased by that. "Then I'll look forward to being surprised."

"There is no way this is it," Tony says as he and Ziva pull up in front of a street of appealing brownstones in Georgetown.

"Your father is standing over there. Gibbs is next to him. And they are both staring at the same building."

Tony's looking at it. From everything he can see it's a normal, attractive, expensive townhouse on a fashionable street in a good neighborhood. "It's haunted, there was a murder in it, the inside is burned out, something has to be really wrong with this place."

She's looking at it. It's brick, flush to the sidewalk, no front yard of any sort. Parking is on the street, and like all the homes in this neighborhood it shares sidewalls with the homes next to it. It appears to be three floors high (though there also appears to be an entrance on the front to a basement, so maybe four floors) and the main door is at the top of a narrow staircase on the second floor. It's true she can't see into it from here, but the windows are clear, there are flowers in boxes on the windows, it looks fine.

"I do not see anything wrong."

"There's got to be something! This is… these houses go for six million dollars. Unless it's condos on the inside, tiny, tiny condos," Tony's holding his fingers close to each other, "glorified studio apartments, that we're going to have to fix up, we can't afford this."

Ziva shrugs. "He knows what our budget is. Let's see what he is thinking."

Tony rolls his eyes. "Oh God."

They head out of Tony's car and into the July sunshine.

"Ziva!" Senior opens his arms wide, embraces her, then steps back for a second, looks her over, a massive grin breaking out across his face, then he elbows Tony and says, "I told you. I told you she'd be so beautiful you'd risk your eyesight by staring directly at her when she was pregnant! How far along are you?"

Ziva glances at Tony, and he shrugs.

"Two weeks? So much for telling you."

"Ohhh…" He hugs Tony and then Gibbs, too, who looks really startled by that, and then hugs Ziva again. "Spring baby!"
"How'd you know, Dad?"

Senior waves it off. "Please, you can always tell. No makeup, perfume, ten thousand dollar dress, nothing, makes a woman more beautiful than a baby on board. Lights a girl up from the inside, anyone with an eye for women can see it." Senior winks at Ziva. "Looks like this isn't a moment too soon. I want to show you this" he points to the house in front of them, "first. This is John Ellreth, a good friend of mine's, house. We see this, and you'll get an idea of what you can do with this sort of place. Then we'll go see the house we're looking at for you."

Tony sighs with relief. No way they could afford this neighborhood. "So where's the actual house?"

"Not far. Two blocks down, one over."

So much for that relief.

As they're heading in Tony says, "Uh… Dad, that budget I gave you, really, we can't take a mortgage for more than three hundred thousand."

"I know." He's smiling as he opens the door. "This is a traditional DC row house. The rooms are all in a row, usually, with one long hall and the stairs on the side."

Gibbs is nodding along. They're looking at a much larger version, in a much more expensive neighborhood, of what Abbi has.

"These are four floors and you can generally keep the floor plan as open or closed as you want. Some of the interior walls are weight bearing, but because these houses are so narrow it's usually only one wall per floor." Senior knocks on the wall of the hallway. "I've seen people keep narrow doors to each room, or take this wall out all together to that everything flows together."

"Abbi's place is like this," Gibbs adds. "Kept the downstairs in small rooms, upstairs is one big room."

In other circumstances Tony might have teased Gibbs about that, but right now he's quietly freaking out about how, yes, this particular house they are looking at is awfully lovely, and yes, it's classic and elegant and beautiful, and he'd love to live there, because if you were to go out of your way to design a home for Tony DiNozzo a classic, elegant brownstone in Georgetown would pretty much be it, but short of cleaning out all of the drug money they have in evidence, he doesn't see any possible way he can pay for something like this.

Ziva's looking around, asking good questions, getting ideas in place.

Finally, after about twenty minutes, Senior says, "So, you feel like you've got an idea for what to do with a place like this?"

"Yes." Ziva says, looking pleased. Tony nods.

"Great, let's take a walk." Senior's got a massive grin on his face as he says that.

"I told you!" Tony says as they get close to the place they're looking at. He can see it from the end of the block the one Senior has to have in mind, so can Ziva.

"It's a little rough."

"It's a burned out hulk, Dad!"
"Can we go inside?" Gibbs asks.

Senior nods. "Just, watch where you step. The Fire Department cleared it last week, but it's not rock solid stable."

"Oh God." Tony's not sure if this is a panic attack, or the feeling that goes with knowing this house is pretty much his relationship with his Dad, look's okay from far enough away, but the inside is hollow, charred, and filled with disappointment.

Senior takes the caution tape off what's left of the splintered and charred door frame. "This was being renovated as a historical restoration, and… Apparently they didn't quite know what they were doing. Anyway, once the fire got put out, they'd burned" Senior looks pleased with that pun, "through most of their renovating budget, so, it's on the market again." He takes Ziva's hand and leads her in.

Gibbs looks approvingly at the town house. Okay, yeah there is some (Tony's whimpering) fire damage, and the carpets all need to be ripped out (water damage from putting the fire out) along with the drywall (technically it's plaster and lathe), and the wiring (the reason for the fire) is original from 1910, there's no HVAC, but there is a furnace (coal burning) from the 1880s in the basement, that from the looks of it likely still works, like all houses built in the 1880s, it's got one (tiny) bathroom, the windows are broken, but they'd rip them out if they weren't because they're tiny panes of glass in wood, but the side walls are brick, the foundation (stone) is solid, the roof (slate) is in great shape, the spiral staircase (wrought iron) is in one piece, and the beams are aged oak and hard as iron.

Gibbs is grinning from ear to ear on this. If Tony and Ziva don't take this, he's tempted to, just because it'll be fun to rebuild.

Tony's staring at this albatross like he can't believe anyone would go for it, let alone seriously suggesting he hang it on his own neck. Ziva's poking around, smiling. After a few minutes she says, "What are they asking?"

"Three-ten, but we're going to get it for one-seventy-five," Senior says, cool as can be about it.

"How…" Tony asks, gingerly poking at one of the walls, feeling his finger sink into the crumbly, water soaked and smoke stained plaster.

"It's complicated, just trust me on it."

"Dad. I can't 'just trust you on it,' not if I'm going to end up on the hook for paying for it."

"I promise you, let me work this deal. You'll get a mortgage for the full three hundred thousand because you're going to need the money for fixing things up. You're not going to pay more than one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars down for the house. The rest of it's going to be tax credits to the seller, points in a few other operations, redevelopment credits to the sellers, and a few other issues, but all you're paying for is one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars."

Tony's eyes narrow. "Is this legal?"

"Yes. At least five lawyers will swear to that by the time we're done."

"Five?"

"Of course I'm going to run it by my contract department before finalizing it. Not going to leave you high and dry on this."

Tony hadn't realized Senior was on enough of an upswing to have a contract department again.
"Are we going to have to do anything besides fix it up and move in?" Ziva asks.

"There's a neighborhood association you'll have to conform to. And you're not allowed to change the outside, the Georgetown Historical Department has rules about that. Beyond that, no."

Tony's staring at his Dad, sure this is too good to be true.

Senior sees that look, reads it right. "If I can't get it for you, clear, on less than 175, we'll walk away."

"Oh God. Dad…" Tony knows all about too good to be true, and right now, this is WAY too damn good.

"Exactly. Dad. I know I've screwed up in more ways than either of us can count as your dad, but… Let me be your Dad for once. This is the one thing I'm really good at, let me do it for you."

"You've been broke more times than I can count, too!"

"How do you think I kept getting unbroke?"

Tony realizes he has no idea how his Dad does that. Just sometimes he's flush, sometimes he's not. "I love the deal, and real estate isn't about the deal, not this level at least. This is just find an opportunity and muck about with tax law. I can do this in my sleep. It's boring. This is how your grandfather and I got rich in the first place."

"Then why did you stop?"

Senior touches the brick wall behind him, patting it gently. "Because all this gets you is money, and money is boring." He glances around, noticing that Gibbs and Ziva have the good sense to give him some time alone with Tony. "A good deal is gambling and sex and… and… a good deal hits all your feel good buttons at once. It's like a drug. It uses everything, brains, charm, guile, knowledge, everything to get a ton of people all together to make something better than they could do on their own. This… this is…" Senior shrugs. "This is easy. Since Delphine and I have gotten together, I do at least one of these a month, make sure we've got steady income."

Senior's staring at Tony. "Junior, I know you won't take money from me. I know you don't want it. But… This is your nest egg. Once it's fixed up, you can live here or not. You can take piles of equity out of it to keep you flush. You can sell it for market value for at fifteen times what you put into it. It's up to you to take it, all I'm doing is laying it out for you."

Tony looks around at the charred wreck. He can hear Gibbs and Ziva joking about something. They sound happy.

"Gibbs!" They rematerialize. "One seventy-five a good price for this place?"

Gibbs nods, then looks at Senior, "If he doesn't take it, I will."

Senior smiles.

"How long to get it livable?"

Gibbs keeps looking around, thinking, working out what sort of man power he's got for this. "You're helping, right?"

Senior nods, smiling.
"Start working after you close… Baby's due in April; we'll get you home by Valentine's."

"Ziva?"

She heads over to Senior, eyes warm and happy. "Make the deal!"

Senior's grinning! "Wonderful. Lunch is at my place. Delphine's making crepes and we're all invited!"

After Tony and Ziva are in their car, out of earshot, Gibbs says to Senior, "You realize, when you die, and he's going through your things, he's going to find out that one of your companies bought this thing full price, sold it to another one, held it, and then put it on the market again, holding out for him."

Senior smiles. "Technically, one of Delphine's grandson's companies bought it full price as a tax write off, then sold it at a loss to a shell corporation out of the Bahamas that I have nothing to do with. Unfortunately when that corporation was looking to fix it up, they got some bad news, black mold. Black mold meant this dump was so expensive to fix up that they decided to give it to a charitable trust a friend of mine runs, for another tax write off, and that trust held it until they could get the credits for rehabbing the place. Last week they got the certification showing that they had taken care of the black mold problem and received the tax credits for both the historical rehabbing and EPA compliant toxic fungus clean up, and then," Senior snaps his fingers and makes a frowny face, "the place caught fire, right after they'd paid out enough of their rehabbing budget that it's now too expensive to finish the rehab, and now they are selling it to him and only him as the terms of being given it in the first place."

Senior smiles at Gibbs. "I've only had since Christmas, so this is as fast as I possibly could pull it off. And no, he won't find out, because not only is that end of the deal in the keeping of the trust, but he's also not the executor of my will."

Gibbs is mildly surprised to see Senior's got that many levels going on.

Senior smiles. "Like I said to him, I'm actually good at this."

Gibbs smiles. "So, when's closing?"

"They're usually six weeks out, so we'll do it that way. I'll have some sort of minor hiccough pop up about a month from now, so it doesn't look too slick. But, come September, we'll be ready to start up."

Gibbs looks amused by that.

From lunch, they head back to the other house he's working on. Everyone besides him and Tony and Ziva are there, working on getting more of the siding up.

It does look like maybe, if they really push, they'll get the siding done today. Which means that they finally have something, that from the outside, looks like a functional house.

It also means, likely on Monday, they start the job that makes him really nervous, which is roofing with Ducky and Penny. He knows a fall off the roof isn't going to do him any good, but he's also sure that these days neither of them will bounce.

Gibbs shakes his head and buckles on his tool belt. One way or another, that roof has to get on. And
he's thinking that it's extremely unlikely that Ducky or Penny is going to be easily told, 'It's too dangerous for you up on the roof, so how about you sit this out?'

News of a house for the DiNozzo family sets off much in the way of happy congratulations. Tony gets a chance to wax nervous about this 'deal' his dad has set up, and Gibbs is pleased to see both Tim and Jimmy backing him on being nervous about it, and suggesting that he makes sure his own lawyers read through everything before he actually signs his name to it.

But for the most part, there's a general sense of pleasure and anticipation at the idea of the last of the nests being purchased and set to go.

"All grown up!" as Breena said.

Tim grins at Tony, "You know what happens when you get a house…"

Tony rolls his eyes, remembering saying something very similar to Tim along these lines, when he and Abby got their first place. "Yeah, yeah, babies to put in the house."

Everyone stares at him and Ziva, and Tony just smiles. "So, how are we going to balance working on both places?"

"Should be done on all the outside stuff here before you get to closing on your place. After that?" Gibbs shrugs. "Try to get ready to get working as soon as you take possession. Get the heavy work out of the way fast… Gotta figure out what all we're doing, first. Meantime, try to get the heavy work done here before moving onto your place."

"When's the lease on your current place up?" Penny asks.

"April." Ziva answers with a smile. "Have to have the new place ready by the end of March."

"Was hoping to have this one functional, maybe not done, but all the main parts in play, by Christmas," Gibbs adds. "Kind of like to have the party here, this year. Got a lot to celebrate."

"So, if we're ready to roll here by the beginning of December… How rough is this place you're getting?" Tim asks Tony.

"It's a death trap."

"Tony!" Ziva says. Then she hands her phone over so everyone else can look at the shots.

Tim's looking through the pictures and… "Tony, much as I hate to say it, but… you're right. How are we going to get this livable?"

Gibbs just smiles. "Trust me. You two figure out what you want the finished project to look like, and we'll get it there."

They're breaking up for the night, everyone getting ready to go to their own homes. (Gibbs notices that the McGees and Palmers already have plans for dinner together, apparently Jimmy's "torturing" Tim again tonight.) So, as they're packing up, he heads over to Breena and Abby, "I'll bring 'em home."

Abby looks up at Gibbs. She and Breena know exactly what's going on here. "We're gonna be okay."
He kisses her cheek. "You" he's looking at Breena, too, "aren't the ones I'm worried about. I'll bring them and some food home. Get little girls settled, and we'll have dinner, okay?"

"Okay." Abby looks at Breena. "What are we in the mood for?"

"Ohhh… Barbeque!"

Gibbs nods; he won't have any problems getting that for them.

"Sharing the master bedroom?" Gibbs asks as soon as he's got Jimmy and Tim alone. All three of them are sitting in the shade on the back porch. They've both been expecting this, so it's not like it's a shock this is the first thing he says to them, but though they've been expecting it, they don't exactly have a plan of what to do with it.

"Five days?" Jimmy counters with.

"You first." Gibbs shoots back. "The only thing I'm risking is a sore back on mine. What are you doing?"

Though both Tim and Jimmy look like they've got a pile of snark they want to bring out, neither of them does. Instead Tim comes up with, "I thought you said, if we were okay, you would be, too."

"I know. I'm trying to make sure you're going to be okay!"

"We are. We've got rules in place and…" Jimmy glances from Tim to Jethro and back to Tim. "It's gonna be okay."

Now Jethro's staring at Tim, who says, "It is. We're good, we're, all four of us, comfortable with what comes next, looking forward to it. And… anyone can back out at any time, and we're all good, and we don't go any further than what we've got planned without at least a week of thinking time, so, we're good. We're taking it slow, and not shooting ourselves or anyone else in the ass."

Gibbs eyes narrow as he looks from one to the other. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." Jimmy says.

Gibbs relaxes a bit, still staring at them. "With each other? Not the girls, but you two."

Tim and Jimmy look at each other, and then back to Gibbs. "Yeah, we're good Jethro."

Gibbs isn't sure if they understand what he means by, "with each other." "You're gonna watch him sleep with your wife, and you're okay with that?"

He sees that sends a flare of nervous through Tim and Jimmy.

"Uh…" Tim says, staring at Jimmy.

Jimmy inclines his head a bit, seeming to be saying, sure, they can talk to Gibbs about this in detail. Tim nods. Then Jimmy says, "Honestly, we don't know. And we really don't want to guess wrong on that. But that 'rules' thing we were talking about draws the line well short of that, so… At least this weekend, we're not finding out."

Now Gibbs looks confused. "So… what are you doing? Like, just, sleeping together?"

Tim shrugs. "You really want the details?"
Gibbs isn't sure. Then he shakes his head, no, he doesn't need the gory details. "You made rules, hard rules?"

"Yeah," Tim replies, "Really hard rules, and built our play time to enforce them. Tonight, we're going to my place, and we'll have dinner, and we'll talk and flirt, and all three of them'll work on me because that makes the stuff Jimmy does to me bearable, then they'll probably stay over," Jimmy's nodding, they're planning on staying over, "in the guest room, and it'll be fine. We won't play at home because it'll be too easy to cross the line."

Jimmy takes over. "Next week, all of you guys down the hall, that'll do a good job of keeping everyone on the right side of comfortable. So, we go, we play, we see if we like the game, and if we don't, we don't do it again, and if we do then we'll stay there. If we think more may be fun, then we'll talk about that. But, nothing happens without at least a week of thinking time between suggesting going further and going further."

Gibbs nods slowly, that sounds like a very rational way to do this. "Okay." He's not sure if anyone can be that rational about sex, but… he's not seeing any tension or friction between the guys, so… "Okay. Don't be stupid. Don't let your balls do the thinking."

"We're going to be okay," Tim says. "We're all well aware of where the balls want to go and what they want to do, and set this up so brains are in charge."

"All right," Gibbs nods slowly.

"So, five days?" Jimmy asks.

"This accounting thing's been going pretty much non-stop since we got back from California. Wanted her to get a break. Didn't think she'd say yes to the long weekend, but she did, so I stretched it out some."

Tim and Jimmy are just looking at him, pleased, waiting for more details.

"There's a… B&B in Virginia, was there years ago. Nice place, on a lake, fishing, swimming, horses, thought it might be a good way to add a few days off. After three days of babies, some grownup time sounded good."

Jimmy and Tim are both sitting there with huge grins on their faces.

Finally Tim says, "What had you at a B&B?"

Gibbs smirks. "The same thing that'd get you to go to one."

"Okay, who had you at a B&B?" Jimmy asks.

Gibbs shakes his head.

"You made sure it's still open, right?" Tim asks.

Gibbs rolls his eyes. "I'm not so bad at this that I don't know to make the reservations before driving 200 miles out of my way."

"What's happening with Mona? You need us to take her?" Jimmy offers.

"Coming with us. They let you bring pets."

Jimmy nods, relieved that he doesn't have to figure out how to get Mona into his van along with both
girls and the twenty-seven-million pounds of baby crap any trip involving babies requires.

For a moment they're all sitting there, pressing matters taken care of, then Tim says, "So, Tony and Ziva pregnant?"

Gibbs smiles, laughs, and says, "Not telling!"

Jimmy sees that look, grins, and says, "Oh, they are. Okay, he was at your house at two in the morning with cigars or throwing up, which was it?"

Gibbs shakes his head again, still grinning.
OBX

Chapter Notes

OBX is the common abbreviation for Outer Banks, NC. People who really like it there tend to have OBX stickers on their cars and whatnot.

"I was just thinking," Tim says as he shuts the trunk. (After all, he can't load any of their luggage or get Kelly strapped in, so the least he can do is shut the damn trunk and not feel like a totally useless barnacle.) "Do you remember how we packed everything we needed for a ten day road trip, plus enough gear for a portable MTAC in the trunk of my Porsche?"

Abby smiles at him, Kelly on her hip, as they head toward the front seats. "Yeah."

Tim opens Kelly's door, and looks inside their car, their packed SUV, which is four times the size of the Porsche, yet is filled to bursting with stuff for a three day trip.

Abby gets Kelly into her seat, and strapped in. Tim gives her a kiss. "You have a good nap, baby." He shuts the door, opens Abby's, shuts hers once she's in, and heads over to the far side of the car for his seat. "So, why is it, that by adding one 22 pound person, who is smaller than the average Thanksgiving turkey, we've quadrupled the amount of stuff we need?"

Abby looks at him, grins, puts the car in gear, and then says, "Both of us know how to pee in a toilet. Take the diapers, wipes, ointment, and related baby poop gear out of the car, and that's at least half of the stuff we're dragging around with us."

Tim looks back at the piles of stuff behind them and thinks that Abby may not be entirely right, but she can't be far off, either.

Abby's foot hits the gas, then she says, "Just think, this time next year, there will be literally no room at all for our own stuff. We'll still have two small bags, that will ride down in Gibbs' truck, and we'll just be lugging baby gear."

Tim laughs at that, half afraid she may be right.

Road trips just the two of them are fun. They've been all over the US together, and had a blast doing it.

Road trips with Kelly, while she's asleep, are fun. They got through Virginia, listening to music, talking, enjoying each other, having a good time, until they were just over the border of North Carolina…

Road trips with a baby who's awake (Afternoon naptime only lasts three hours, and though they left right before naptime, and Kelly conked out shortly after they got out of their neighborhood, the trip to the Slaters' place is gonna run four and a half hours... er... five... and a half... make that six hours) is not all that much fun.

What had been driving along, steadily zooming through the miles, rapidly turned into stopping every forty minutes to get out, let Kelly toddle around a little bit, apply snacks, change diapers, and then
pack everything back up again.

Tim's rapidly coming to the conclusion that there may be something to those cars that come equipped with video players, because, as they're stopping, yet again, he's deciding he would happily listen to six hours of Barney if it could get him back up to averaging 75 miles an hour.

They aren't surprised not to be the first ones there. Ducky's Morgan is already pulled up in front of the house. They know that means that Gibbs, Ducky, and Penny are here. (Abbi's getting in tomorrow sometime, and she and Gibbs are continuing their adventures in her car.)

Jimmy and Breena's van is also there.

No Tony and Ziva, but he knows they were going to do a half day today before heading off. Depending on when they got out of DC they could be hours or minutes behind them.

They pull up alongside, and Tim remembers something he'd forgotten about Ed and Jeannie's vacation home. It's on stilts. The porch (which he remembered vividly) wraps around the entire house, but that porch (and the rest of the house) is still twelve feet in the air. He can do steps now, but they aren't his favorite thing. Apparently when he's on the beach (or in the house), he's going to be staying there for a while.

Tim watches waves cresting against white sand, then looks up at the house. There are worse fates.

"Hello!" Abby calls out as they get into the house.

Breena sticks her head out of the master bedroom calling down the stair. "Hey! We're up here. Gibbs is on the sand with the girls. Not sure where Ducky and Penny got off to."

"The back porch," Ducky replies, heading in. Tim stops in his tracks. He's seen Ducky in his relaxing gear, even pool gear before, but apparently Duck has an idea of 'beach gear' as well. Soft, rumpty, drawstring linen trousers, bare feet, and a Hawaiian shirt, but without the loud pattern (Tim's sure there's a name for that, but he doesn't know what it is) along with sunglasses and a wide straw hat.

"You look ready for the sand."

Ducky nods. "But first, let me help you carry in your gear. I assume, like Jimmy and Breena, you have a lot of it?"

Tim nods. "My ancestors got here from Ireland with less than this."

Ducky chuckles. Abby hands Kelly over to Tim. Since he can move his right arm around some now, he can get a decent (one handed) grip on her. He walks over to the back porch, where Penny is getting the lay of the land, sitting on one of the lounges looking around. He sits next to her, and once he's down, he sets Kelly on the porch and holds her hand, letting her work on her walking.

"No limp?" Penny asks. He did manage to walk from the car to the lounge without a limp, probably close to two hundred feet (and fourteen steps). Though, having done it, his foot is aching.

"One step at a time. PT says the more I can walk, and the more normally I can do it, the better it'll be, so…"

"So your crutch is in the car, waiting for when you're really hurting?"
"Exactly." Tim looks out over the beach, images of the crutch immediately sinking into the sand. "Probably won't be very useful out there, anyway."

Penny shakes her head. "Probably not. I take it Ed and Jeannie are serious about beach nights."

Tim nods. Everything is where he remembers it. Grill, table, chairs, several lounges, an awning and two large umbrellas to keep the sun off, and a fire pit in the middle. The lounge he's sitting next to Penny on is right against the edge of the porch.

"Fire pit's good for marshmallows. We did that last time."

Kelly's been taking two steps in pretty much every direction, checking out everything, but she's feeling very tethered. So, without announcing her intent, she plops onto her tush, Tim lets go of her, because once she's on her bum, she's not going anywhere. She looks around a bit, noticing this is somewhere completely new, with furniture she hasn't explored, and a floor she's never seen, and she's off, crawling, fast.

"Woah!" Tim's lunging for her, losing his own balance and hitting the porch in the process, as he grabs her. Kelly squawks, really startled by Tim lunging for her. For a second he sits there, holding her tight, and feels his heart slowly calm back down again. Finally he sighs and says, "Okay, I'm glad to see you're crawling now, but how about we try doing that more than two feet from the edge of the twelve foot drop?" He's suddenly very nervous about the fact that the porch rails are at eighteen inches and three and a half feet high. He stands up and puts Kelly down, "Here, hold my hand, we'll walk."

"No! Up!"

Tim looks down at her. "You want to be carried?"

"UP!"

Penny scoops her up, firm, two-handed grip. "Better view from up here, right?" Kelly looks pretty satisfied. "Can I take her to the water?"

"Fine by me. Might want to run it by Abby, make sure she didn't want to be there for her first dip in the ocean."

Penny nods as she carries Kelly out, saying to her, "Let's go play in the sand."

Abby and Ducky are lugging stuff in, so Tim starts the long slog up to the master bedroom. He knows where it is, but last time they were here, he never went in it.

No last time, he went up the stairs, all the way down the hall to the last (only) room on the left.

The master's immediately at the top of the stairs on the right.

Breena wasn't kidding. It's really big, and L shaped, a sitting/dressing/closet area right in front of the door, along the short side of the house, and the sleeping/bath area stretching along the length of the house.

"You made it!" she says as he's looking around.

"Yeah, all in one piece. Only had to stop four times. You guys?"

Breena inclines her head and smiles wryly. "Naptime was good."
He nods, yeah. "So…” He's standing in the sitting/dressing area of the bedroom. The walk in closet, which from what he can see is about the size of his dorm room at John's Hopkins, is to his left on the far wall. (And has a window. Who has windows in their closet? Apparently Ed and Jeannie Slater.) Jimmy's inside it, laying out an inflatable twin mattress. Once it's all blown up, add a sheet, and they've got sleeping real estate for little girls. Just like what they do at Gibbs' place.

The part Tim's in is open and airy, cool white and beige décor, French doors leading to a small porch, several overstuffed chairs flanking a sofa and coffee table, all facing him. Behind him, on the wall next to the door, is a flat screen TV. He can see Abby and Ducky have most of the stuff up. "If you help me push the chairs out of the way, I'll get our mattress set."

Breena smiles, amused, sparkles in her eyes, and nods, and they get to pushing furniture out of the way.

Abby and Ducky put the last of the stuff in the room, and Tim says, "Thanks, Ducky." Then to Abby, "Penny's got Kelly on the beach, if you want to go play, I've got unpacking."

Abby stares at him. "You sure."

"Yeah, go play. Let me do something vaguely useful."

"Okay!" She snatches her bag, and heads into the other half of the room, getting ready to change into her bathing suit.

Breena's got the furniture pushed back as he's unrolling their inflatable mattress. Ducky's no longer up there, so she says to him, "Really think you're going to need that?"

Tim grins at her. "Hope not. Still going to set it up anyway. Never know who's going to pop in, when. Might as well look like we're sharing the room."

"Good point."

Breena heads to the other side to go visit with Abby.

Jimmy comes out of the closet. Behind him, Tim can see the set mattress, pillows around it, Molly and Anna's prize stuffed animals already set. "All we need is Kelly's stuff."

Tim nods. "Got Mr. Boo here somewhere," tiny stuffed skull Abby got her when she was still pregnant. He finds Mr. Boo and a collection of pacifiers and lays them on the mattress. "Need to get something like this for Sean. He doesn't already have his own zoo's worth of stuffed animals."

"Second baby fun. Not quite as insane on the buy everything that isn't nailed down front," Jimmy says.

"Yeah. Also, we've been a bit busier this time around."

"That, too."

Tim looks over at the closet. "Those cross bars are handy." Normally you'd hang clothing on them, but right now the closet is empty, which means they've got yards of space for hanging the mobiles the girls like to look at as they drift off.

Unpacking isn't too hard. Slow, because he's pretty much doing it one-handed. He's got more motion in his right arm, but it still can't hold any weight and he still can't use his right hand for much of
anything. (He can cut his food again, now. Tuck his fork between his thumb and the cast index finger. It's amazing how intensely good it felt to be able to do that for himself again.) Getting Kelly's stuff tucked into the closet/makeshift nursery isn't tricky. Hanging up her mobile works just fine. He and Abby just have the two bags, so when he gets to them, he heads over to the sleeping part of the bedroom.

Breena's laying on the bed, relaxing, Jimmy's half-sitting, half-reclining on it.

"Nice." Tim says, eyeing it. Large bed, really big. There're what looks like smooth, crisp, light blue cotton sheets, a nubby, warm beige blanket, and a herd of pillows ranging from those little round ones he doesn't understand to four of those big ones Abby likes to sleep wrapped around when she's pregnant. "That's bigger than a king, isn't it?"

Breena nods. "Longer, at least. California King. Dad," Breena smiles, indicating this is kind of silly, "has this thing about sleeping diagonally. He wants to be able to sleep straight up and down on his bed, not at an angle, so these are longer beds, no diagonal sleeping."

Tim shakes his head at that, but right now Ed's weirdness is working out well for him, so... Why not?

He puts his bag on the dresser, next to Abby's. "Top two drawers are for you and Abby," Breena says, and he starts pulling out clothing, feeling the somewhat surreal sensation of unpacking his clothing in Breena's parents' bedroom, while chatting with them, lounging in bed, that, tonight, he'd be joining them in.

Eventually, as he's tucking his boxers, lube, the one vibrator, and cock ring they brought into the dresser, he starts to giggle.

"Tim?" Jimmy's asking.

"I'm okay. Just... kind of goofy moment, you know?" He's looking at them in the mirror in front of him. He rolls his eyes a little, then holds up the lube. "Was trying to think of a way to tuck it in without flashing it all over the place, but..."

Breena smiles back. "Almost started laughing when I saw you lay out that air mattress. And once Abby found her swim suit, she started to head to the bathroom, stopped, stared at me for a second, then giggled a bit, and quickly got changed."

"I missed that?" Jimmy says.

"You were getting the girls stuff all set."

He shakes his head. "Miss all the good stuff."

Tim nods, then closes the drawer, all of their clothing is put away. He grabs the bag and heads to the bathroom. "Damn!" slips out of his mouth as soon as he gets in there.

He hears Jimmy laughing in the other room. A second later, Jimmy's standing next to him, looking at the huge soaking tub, granite and glass shower with multiple shower heads, dual sinks... every bell and whistle he could possibly imagine is included bathroom. "They did this part up right."

Tim's still staring around. "I'll say. You can swim laps in that tub."

Jimmy nods. Tim turns around and notices... "Is that a bidet?"

Jimmy's still nodding.
Tim investigates. "You know, I've never seen one of these in person before."

Jimmy laughs at that. "Thought you said you've been out of the country."

Tim rolls his eyes a bit and looks at Jimmy. "Shockingly enough almost all of my out of the country has landed me on Marine or Naval bases, not a lot of posh bathroom equipment for the Jarheads. They consider stalls between the heads to be the height of luxury."

Tim puts their toothbrushes on the sink and tucks the rest of their toiletries into the shower. Since Jimmy's right next to him, he can see that he's not got an empty bag, yet. Jimmy's eyeing it. Tim's feeling a little… uncomfortable is likely the right answer, but… part of this is having them watch, so…

He tucks the rest of their gear into the medicine cabinet. Jimmy's not really paying attention to Tim's pain meds or Abby's prenatal vitamins and anti-nausea meds, but the enemas get a raised eyebrow.

Tim shrugs. "Anal's fun. Not sure what we're doing this weekend, but we're equipped for it."

That gets wide eyes and a nod. "Oh."

Tim's eyebrows furrow. Jimmy's looking really surprised by this. "It's not gross, I mean, for you, right?"

"God! No." He's pretty adamant about that, so Tim's fairly sure that's true. "Just… wasn't expecting to see something like that."

Tim shrugs. "You guys brought some goodies, too, right?"

"Uh, yeah… Not… like that, though."

"Like what?" Uncomfortable is rapidly fleeing in the wake of sexy and curious.

Jimmy smirks. "You'll see."

Sand between her toes, warm and soft, and ow… prickly. East coast beaches always have bits of sharp shells sticking out of them.

Oh well, still feels good for the most part.

Abby's enjoying being on the water again. Sun's getting low behind them. They should get some dinner soon, and little girls have had a big day, bedtime for them soon.

Bedtime for grown-ups, soon, too.

Abby smiles at that.

She gets past the dunes and sees Anna laying on a blanket, under an umbrella, chilling out, chewing on her toy rings, Mona keeping guard right next to her. Gibbs, Ducky, and Penny are about twenty feet away, standing in the low surf. The waves are rushing about mid-calf high on them. Gibbs is holding both of Molly's hands, pulling her up so she can 'jump' each wave as it rushes in.

She's shrieking with laughter and joy.

Kelly's in Penny's arms, watching the water, from the looks of it, entranced. Abby scoops up Anna as she gets closer, and quickly realizes why Anna's chilling on the beach, as soon as her feet hit the
water, Anna starts to cry.

"Shhh…" Penny and Gibbs both shake their heads as she tries to sooth Anna.

"Don't think she likes the noise," Penny says. Gibbs looks at the blanket. "That's about as close as you can get her and have her stay calm. She seemed to be doing fine with Mona though."

"Okay." Abby's patting Anna's back, and starts to take her back to the blanket. And once she's back on the ground, no longer in danger of being taken into the water, Anna calms right back down again.

"You okay here?"

Anna coos.

"Okay, I'm gonna go play in the surf a bit. You holler if you need something." Mona shuffles a bit closer, making sure her baby is safe and comfy. Abby pats her on the head as she stands up to get closer to the water.

"So… that one's not a water baby," she says when she's within talking range.

"But, I think we've got a water baby, here!" Penny says, bouncing Kelly, who's watching the ocean, entranced. "Water BABY!" Molly shrieks between leaps.

Gibbs lifts her into his arms. "Know we got one here!"

"Think?" Abby asks Penny.

"Decided we'd wait for you to let her see what she thought about it."

Abby smiles at that. "Thanks." She wades out and hugs Gibbs, who's soaked, and from the looks of it, having a very good time. Apparently covered in salt water and sand, little girl basking in his attention and the ocean, light breeze whipping his hair around, makes for a very happy Gibbs. He's glowing.

Penny smiles at Abby, takes her hug happily, and goes back to enjoying this. She's also looking very at home here, large straw hat shading her skin, loose sarong wrapped around her, also whipping in the breeze.

Ducky's got his pants rolled up, holding onto his hat, which seems to want to fly away, looking pensive. "You okay?"

He nods, still quiet. "Last time I went for a walk on the beach the consequence were not quite so pleasant."

"You wanna be here, Duck?" Jethro asks.

"Certainly. Still, it is hard to feel the water on my legs and not remember. So I am here, hoping to build new memories." He smiles at them and takes Molly's hands. "Shall we jump the waves, my Molly?"
"JUMPING!"

Abby takes Kelly from Penny, and says to her, "So, we gonna get wet?"

Kelly's looking down at the water swirling around the grown-ups legs. She's looking pretty ready to just leap on in.

"Come on, let's go where it's shallow." Abby takes her to the edge of the water, where the sand is dry and hot, and then carefully puts her feet on the sand. Kelly looks very startled by this, not sure she's loving this, but she takes two steps forward, holding her Mama's hands, and finds the cooler, damp sand, and appears to appreciate that. She flops down, so she can get her hands into the sand as well, and she's digging in it, squishing it between her fingers and toes.

Penny's chuckling at this, and Gibbs is grinning as Kelly keeps messing with the sand.

"Third time in a row watching this," Penny says.

Abby looks up; she's kneeling next to Kelly, who just put a handful of sand in her mouth and is spitting it out, looking horrified. "Doesn't taste good, does it?" Then she says to Penny, "John and Tim, too?"

"All of my boys, and yes, Tim, too. Guess he was about Anna's age first time we got him to the beach." That makes sense, just like Anna, Tim has a December birthday, and assuming they had him out his first summer, he'd have to be about the same age. "He liked this part just fine. Had a blast on the sand. Loved the feel of crushing sand castles under his hands, or mounding the sand up." Penny laughs a bit. "He was a kind of fussy napper, but on a blanket, in the shade, warm soft sand under him, and he was out like a light.

"But he didn't want to get into the water. He wasn't crawling yet, but every time we looked like we were going to put him in, he'd start fussing. Took all day to get him down to it, and…” Penny looks down at her feet, and takes three steps so she's in the surf, feeling it wash over her. "There's a lot of force in these little breakers. We forget that, because we're big. We had him on the sand, working on the idea that the tide was coming in, so the water was getting closer and closer, and he looked like he was enjoying it, seeing how close it would come, then the first bit got him, and it splashed up, got in his nose and face, and the next one pulled back hard enough he must have felt like it was going to pull him out to sea, because he started screaming. Tori and I got him out of there, and washed off, and he didn't go near the water for the rest of that summer. The next summer he was fine with it. Would have been a year and a half or so at that point, and like what Molly's doing, he was good with being 'jumped' over the waves."

Abby says to Kelly, "You want to go in the water, or just stay here?"

Kelly looks up from the sand, notices that there is more going on here than just sand (which is awesome and kind of overwhelming for a year-old mind to process) and then starts to crawl toward the water.

Abby's eyebrows rise. "When did you start doing that?"

"Ten minutes ago. Tim put her down on the porch thinking she'd stay put, and she just about gave him heart failure when she made a bee-line for the edge."

Abby feels her heart skip a beat at that, too. "God."

"He grabbed her. Tripped over himself and the lounge to do it, but she didn't get within eighteen inches of the edge."
"Kelly." She looks at her mom. "Here, up! You don't want to crawl face first into the ocean."

Abby doesn't know if that means anything to Kelly, but she does allow herself to be lifted into walking position and starts toddling to the water.

Her foot hits the wet sand and she stops, one foot in the sand, one lifted, wobbling. Abby's not sure if she likes it or not, but she isn't crying. The second foot drops, and she just feels it. "Here comes the water!" Abby says, as the tail end of the wave skitters up the beach to wash around Kelly's ankles and Abby's toes.

Kelly lets out a surprised half-shriek, half-laugh, and then drops down to her bum to try and touch the waves with her hands, laughing.

Penny nods. "This one's a water baby."

Abby laughs at that. "Yeah."

As the water pulls away, Kelly starts to cry. "No, baby. No crying, not for waves." Abby says, sitting next to her, "They're coming back!"

And a few seconds later, when the wave comes back foamy water rushing over Kelly's hands and feet, she laughs again.

Last ones here pick up dinner. Ziva reads on her phone. It's a text from Breena.

We are about half an hour out. Are the girls already in bed?

Almost. Getting them washed off is a bit more interesting than we were expecting.

Ah.

Beach going with six grown-ups is one thing. Play in the water, get sand all over, head to the house, use the outside shower to quickly rinse all the sand off, and then wash up inside.

Yeah… Babies… Let alone a dog… Nope, not that easy.

First off, there is, at any given time, three hundred times more sand than there could ever possibly be on any baby who's even been near the beach. And even though Kelly, Molly, and Anna have all been stripped of their clothing, all of it, and rinsed off twice, Breena and Abby are still finding more sand on them.

Second of all, the dog is not going to just meekly head over to the shower and get rinsed off. Oh no! Mona is firmly convinced that showers are something that happen to other people. The pink hairless ones. And that people of her kind (four-legged, fuzzy ones) should not ever have to be involved with the indignity of having someone spray water all over them, let alone in an attempt to remove sand from her tummy. According to Mona, if God had wanted her belly sand-free, He'd have removed it himself, and Gibbs, in his attempts to get her clean enough to let her back into the house, is engaging in high blasphemy.

So, to say the pre-shower routine of attempting to de-sand the various smaller members of the party is taking quite a bit longer than anyone had anticipated, is something of an understatement.

But, eventually, after three rinses Abby and Breena declare the girls are finally sand free. At which
point Jimmy carries them, one at a time, upstairs into the house in an effort to get them to dinner and bedtime, while remaining, sand free. And eventually, Mona (who is moping, as only a big, black dog can) is deemed to be sufficiently cleaned up enough to go back into the house.

And eventually, Tony and Ziva show up (with both food, and their one, tiny, carefree, we-don't-have-babies bag of luggage).

Which means the long weekend has really started.

"They down?" Breena asks as Jimmy heads down from their room. She's in the kitchen, unpacking the food that Tony and Ziva brought.

He crosses his fingers. "They're tired. But new bed, new room, really revved up. Tim's still up there, just lying on the floor being quiet with them. Hopefully they'll drift off soon. Something smells good." He doesn't see Tony or Ziva, but he can see everyone else milling around outside, drinks in hand.

"Seafood joint a few streets up. They got three of the 'ultimate sampler meals,' clams, flounder, and a bunch of other stuff. Once Tim's down, it's food time."

"Good, I'm starving." Breena gives him a look, and he inclines his head. "Not really. You know I know better than that."

"Kind of crazy day."

"I got a snack an hour ago."

She kisses him. "Good."

"Okay, what else has to go out?" Penny asks, coming in from the back porch.

"I think these can go out," Breena gestures to the two trays in front of her. "I'm gonna keep these," she points at the bags next to her, "in the fridge until we need them."

"What's in those bags?" Jimmy asks.

"Oysters and raw clams. Thought we'd keep them cold until we got through the ones that are already out there."

"There's more!" Jimmy's eyes light up. He loves oysters.

Breena nods, and Penny says, "Local shrimp and crabs out there, too."

They hear more footsteps coming down the stairs. "Some scallops, too. Just lay off the flounder, that's for Ziva," Tony says.

Ziva raises an eyebrow at him. It's supposed to be for him, too.

Tony smiles, "God and I have a deal, I'm allowed to have shellfish when it's local and fresh and I'm celebrating."

Ziva laughs at that. "And is that deal why you bought out the shellfish section?"

Tony nods solemnly. "Yes."
Jimmy grins at them. "And what are we celebrating?"

Tony grins back. "Fresh, local shellfish!"

Tim flops down next to Abby on one of the lounges fifteen minutes later. "And they are all asleep."

"Yay!" Abby says. "Baby monitor in and on?"

Tim nods, pulls his part of the monitor out of his pocket, and puts it on the table in front of them. "Oh…" His eyes light up as he sees what's in front of them. "Are those soft-shell crabs?"

Tony nods. "And now that we're finally all here, we can dig in!"

Tim snatches two of them, fast, and says, "Tony, I love you!"

"So, do we have actual plans for this weekend, or are we just laying about and enjoying?" Ducky asks.

"I'm in favor of laying about and enjoying," Tony replies.

"Beyond making sure I get a hold of Abbi's computer, I've got nothing," Tim says, eyeballing another crab. He's comfortably full, but they're sooo yummy. Abby strokes the back of his hand, and no matter how yummy they are, not feeling like he ate a bowling ball later tonight wins out.

"Cooking!" Ziva says, happy.

"Oh, God," Penny stares at the mounds of seafood detritus in front of them. (She did not practice enough restraint to avoid eating more of the oysters than she should have. She is also not regretting that in the least.) "How can you possibly be thinking of food again?"

"Abbi and I both like to cook. Tomorrow, once she gets here, we've got the farmer's market, and then cooking! You were going to help, too, right?"

Tony shrugs. "I think I volunteered to taste anything you came up with and carry the groceries." He grabs the last clam, sucking it down gleefully. "I want to get in the water. Been too long since I've done some body surfing."

Gibbs is quietly munching one of the last crabs, then he says, sounding almost tentative, "Up in Duck, the town just north of them, "they've got dancing on the beach Saturday night. Thought I'd take Abbi to that. Anyone else who wants to come is welcome. Bonfires are legal here, on the beach, thought maybe tomorrow night, might do something like that." Gibbs looks at the fire pit near them crackling away, which is nice, but it's not roaring flames and air kissed with driftwood smoke on the beach. "If it doesn't mess with the dinner you're making, maybe, roast up some marshmallows. See if the girls like s'mores."

"I think we can make room for s'mores," Ziva says. "What sort of dancing?"

Gibbs shrugs. "Don't know. Live band, bonfires, two drink minimum, no shirt, no shoes, no problem. Sounded fun."

"That does sound fun," Ducky adds. "Penny?"

She grins at him. "Of course we're going."
Tim looks to Abby, Jimmy, and Breena. "You three want to go, and I'll baby wrangle. Not like I've got much in the way of dancing skills right now."

Jimmy gently shoves him on his good shoulder. "Not leaving you here all by your lonesome to watch girls. Besides, we got Age of Ultron and Civil War. Next time, we'll all go. This week, Marvel Movies the rest of them would rather poke their eyes out than watch."

"You sure, we can watch the movies at home next week?"

Jimmy snorts. "You didn't check out the entertainment system that Ed's got up there. Complete surround sound that blows anything either of us have at home out of the water."

Tim looks from Jimmy to the girls. "Okay, we've got his vote, you okay with this?"

Abby pets Tim's hair. "I can't drink, my favorite guy can't dance, and these days 10:30 is a late night for me. I'm good with watching movies."

"And if you three are staying home, I will, too." Breena wraps with. "So, what do you say Ziva, gorgeous men in spandex saving the day or real life ones on the beach dancing?"

"I think I am going to have to go for dancing. Unless you want gorgeous men in spandex?" she asks Tony.

"Hmmm… You know, not that I lean that way, but Chris Helmsworth…" Tony winks at Ziva as she swats his shoulder.

Breena shakes her head at that. "Chris Helmsworth? Really? When Robert Downy Junior is in the movie?"

"Oh God, this is our James Bond homoerotic wank-fest all over again, isn't it?" Jimmy says, causing Penny, Ducky, and Gibbs to all stare at him in amazement. "We're here last time, and," he points to Tony, "brought the movies, including something like three Bonds, but they were all the Daniel Craig ones."

Ducky makes a distressed sound while shaking his head. "Anthony!"

"And just like last time, Craig is Ziva's favorite Bond. If it was just us guys, it would have been Connery all the way. But it wasn't just us, so I got ones that the girls liked watching, too."

"I'm still not getting the homoerotic wank-fest aspect of this," Penny says.

"That's what Palmer called the Craig Bond movies," Tony says.

"They are! And look, I get the Connery and other ones are all straight wank-fests."

"Reinforcement of patriarchal power fantasy norms?" Penny adds dryly.

"Sure," Jimmy says. "Wank-fest gets to the heart of it more quickly, but if you like the PC version, have at it. Anyway… the reason I'm remembering it was Tony said the thing about Ziva liking Craig, which then got the girls going on about which Bond they liked better, followed by why they liked those Bond's better, and if Breena gets started on Robert Downy Jr. we're never getting out of here, because then Abby will start talking about Tom Hiddleston and Ziva'll get into Anthony Mackie, and next thing you know we're" he gestures to him, Tim, and Tony, "all sitting around pretending to be deaf because none of needs to know in anything like that level of detail what, exactly, it is about those three guys that they like."
Breena, grinning, hops up and sits in Jimmy's lap, petting him a bit, then gives him a quick kiss, and says, "He's a little peevish because, unlike Robert Downey Jr., he can't grow a decent goatee."

Jimmy's eyes go wide and his mouth drops open. "Oh, you didn't!"

Breena laughs and sticks her tongue out at him, and that gets the tickling started.

It's not horribly late when they break up for bedtime. Good dinner, fun conversation, little girls that'll want to be up and playing early. Hitting the sack before morning seems like a good idea.

Once dishes are cleared, washed, and put away, and they're moseying on up, Gibbs gives all four of them a long look. "I can sack out on the sofa."

"We're good Gibbs," Breena says with a smile and a lot of certainty in her voice.

He looks at Jimmy and Tim. "Sure?"

They nod.

"Besides," Breena adds, "you may be willing to sack out tonight, but tomorrow, Abbi's getting here, and I'm pretty damn sure she doesn't want to sack out on the sofa. So," she kisses Gibbs' cheek. "Rest well, see you in the morning."

They don't run up the stairs and start tossing off clothing the second they get into the bedroom. Which isn't to say there hasn't been a current of happy anticipation, but there's also a sense of, 'how do we get into this?'

So, actually, they're up, in the bedroom, all sort of standing around the bed, and just looking at each other. Finally Abby says, "So, we're not touching. Just watching."

"Okay."

"Sure."

Tim thinks about it. Abby and Breena are next to each other. Abby in a skirt and t-shirt. Breena's got one of those sun dresses she seems to live in during summer non-work hours. And as he's thinking, Tim's noticing that Abby's really watching Breena. Which is when something hits him, that probably should have hit him a long time ago, but didn't. Abby's bi. He knows this, but... he didn't really know it. And now, seeing her watch Breena, it's really hitting him. Abby likes girls, for real, not just in a fun way to rev him up sort of thing.

But, it does rev him up, and they're both here, and God, he really doesn't mind, at all, if the girls want to play with each other. But there's no way he's going to just whip that out in front of all four of them without talking to Abby about it first. Tomorrow night, that'll do.

But apparently he paused too long and all three of them are watching him really closely.

"Second thoughts?" Jimmy asks.

"Um... No, not really. Not, don't want to do this..."

"But..." Abby says, she can see there's something going on.
He sighs, or they can try to have it out, now. "Just, kind of stupid, something that should have hit me a long time ago but didn't, and..."

"And..." She's leading him on, wanting to figure out what's up.

He knows signing in front of people who can't is rude. He also knows that pulling her out of the room to talk about this is rude. And he knows that they're all sort of nervous and working very hard to make sure that everyone is comfortable and anyone not being comfortable will kill this, so if it looks like he's getting cold feet, they'll sleep on the floor, and Jimmy and Breena in the bed, and sex this weekend'll be catch as catch can.

So he signs (as well as he can, one hand in a cast with your arm in a sling makes for some awkward sign language). You're b-i. (He has to spell it. Doesn't have a clue for what the sign for that is.)

So? You know that.

Well, yeah, but... I'm just getting that you really like Breena the same way I like her.

Duh. What did you think...

That you liked her in a 'fun way to turn Tim on' sort of way. And, yes, I do know exactly how self-centered that is.

Abby's outright laughing at that, and Jimmy and Breena are watching this with very obvious curiosity.

Okay, so you got to the party a bit late. Glad to see you're getting it. Is this a problem?

No! Just. It doesn't bug me if you want to fool around with her. At all. And it's hitting me that she's here, and you're here, and I know it doesn't bug Jimmy, and gosh, look at that nice, big, soft bed that we'll all be in soon... So... if you wanted to amend the no touching thing so you two can fool around... Wanted to talk to you about that first, before saying it to them.

She smiles at that and then turns to Jimmy and Breena. "I guess you'd like an explanation on what that was?"

They're both nodding.

Abby looks pointedly at Tim. It's his job to set it up. He sits down on the bed, a very clear signal that yes, this is shared space for them, and whatever it is that's going on, it's not about him being afraid of this.

"Okay, in my defense, I'm really, really straight. And kind of stupid. And yes, I know Abby's bi. But, in that I'm not bi, it took a while to get the idea that she likes you" he says to Breena, "the same way I like you. And that you two messing around, at least for her, isn't just about turning me on."

"That's a big part of the kick, too," Abby adds.

"But not all, or..." he looks at her, thinking, "most?" Abby nods. "Of it. And, now that I'm thinking about it," he turns to Breena, "I don't know what you get out of it, either. Are you straight?"

Breena smiles, and also sits on the bed, pulling Jimmy along with her. And as she speaks, Abby scrambles on, next to Tim. "At this point, I don't think it matters. Making out with Abby is fun." She strokes Abby's hand, and Abby smiles at her. "I'm not particularly attracted to you. I don't fantasize about you when I masturbate. But I love you, and this is fun, and you're beautiful, and it feels really
good, so I like it. You're all soft and smooth and pretty, and that's a really nice change of pace. And the way you two react" she looks from Jimmy, who's just quietly listening to this, to Tim, "makes me feel like a sex goddess, which is amazing, so, it's all this wonderful package of love and good. But it's not like I check out girls at the gym or anything."

"Okay," says Tim, "So, what I was thinking, and realizing I should have said to Abby earlier, and would have if it had occurred to me, but it didn't, is that I can be a great husband and a great lover and a great dad and all the rest of it, but I can't be a woman. That's literally the only thing I cannot ever be for you," he stokes Abby's cheek, "And, so... I mean," he's looking from Abby to Breena, "you're right here, and it doesn't bug me at all if you and Abby want to fool around. I mean, look, I'm not comfortable with you," now he's looking at Jimmy, "touching Abby, not tonight, at least. But, however it is I'm wired, Breena doesn't set off that, 'My Woman, Back the Hell Off,' reaction."

"Like you said, 'you can't be a woman' so we're not competing. I can fill a need you can't and vice versa."

"Probably. So, if it's okay with the three of you, I'm fine if the girls want to touch. I will more than happily watch and take turns. Or both of us touch Abby but not each other, and vice versa for you and Jimmy, or just each of us with our own spouses and watching is good, too."

He and Abby have no trouble recognizing the want to talk look that flashes between Jimmy and Breena, so both of them give them some privacy by simultaneously deciding it's tooth-brushing time. When they get out, after a very long, very thorough tooth-brushing, face washing, getting ready for bed in the bathroom with the water running so as not to hear what was going on in the bedroom, Jimmy pats the bed next to him, and Abby heads over to sit next to him, Tim following.

He leans towards her and gently, mouth closed, brushes his lips across hers. Friendly kiss, less than a second long, the kind that says hello, but there's heat in his eyes, a lot of it. Then he pulls back and says, "If I'm less than a foot away from you in bed, naked, watching you make out with my wife, let alone helping you do it, my brain is going to skitter off," he makes a little hand gesture of his fingers running off, "and my balls will be in charge, and I will join in, and I will touch both of you. I will rub up all over both of you, and I'll kiss both of you, and I'll fuck both of you, and," he looks over at Tim, holding his gaze, "if you think you'd be doing anything different you are lying to yourself. That little voice saying, 'Let's watch the girls make out; it'll be fun' is your dick trying to get your brain to fuck off so it can be fucking the girls. If Abby's back is to you, and she's petting with Breena, you will be on her, and your hands will wrap around them, pull both of them up close to you, and you'll be kissing and petting and fucking both of them, and if you're doing that, I'm joining in, too, because that's just who we are."

"And I'm not ready to cross that line. Not tonight. I'm sure we'd really like it while we were doing it, but... No. We're sticking to the rules we laid out. So, tonight, tomorrow, Saturday. Me and Breena. You and Tim. We set this up so we'd have extra thinking time before touching each other, so that's what we're going to do. We'll watch and play, and share the bed, and if we're still good with each other, then we'll talk again about going further, but right now, that's the line."

"Okay." And it is, and no one's going to push it, because that's how they play. Because that's what love and respect look like.

It's a little awkward at first, because they aren't at a club, and they're not going at it hot on their own, then showing off. No, they're starting cold.

Okay, lukewarm, they all like the idea of this. They're all anticipating this and have been all week.
But the logistics are a bit off. Once Jimmy and Breena are out of the bathroom, done with their nighttime routine, they have another minute of now what?

Tim and Abby both brought pajamas, but didn't exactly intend to wear them, and Tim's not sure if this is just strip right off and go about your normal bedtime play, just with an audience, or if they're all putting on a (quiet) show.

Add in the fact that there's just no erotic way for him to get out of a shirt right now. (His sling keeps his arm secure to his chest with four Velcro straps, so, he's got to get out of that first, then out of the shirt, carefully, all button downs all the time these days, and then back into it, because he's not supposed to have that arm free for more than a few minutes at a time.) Plus, okay, he wants to take his shirt off, because he thinks he looks god awful dumb with a hard on poking out from between the front pieces of his shirt, but, he wants it on, too, because the sling is scratchy, and he doesn't like the way it feels on bare skin.

So, for right now, they're all on the bed, all dressed, and all, kind of… well, stuck.

He sees Abby and Breena looking at each other, having one of those silent conversations, and then Abby's in his lap, pulling off her t-shirt, and Breena's tugging off Jimmy's shirt, and they aren't stuck anymore.

For a few seconds, once all the clothing (except Tim's shirt) goes flying, there's just looking. They've all seen each other in bathing suits, and caught some little glimpses of the usually covered bits at the club, but this is the first time they've been able to just look as much as they like.

And Breena's worth looking at.

Really worth looking at. And yes, like Abby, her breasts aren't rock hard or sky high anymore, and she's got a bit of a tummy, her hips and butt are probably bigger than she'd like and decorated with pink stretch marks. But she's also all warm gold skin and warm gold hair and big blue eyes and joy beaming off of her.

"God, you're beautiful," goes spilling out of his mouth before he gets it together enough to wonder what Abby may think about that. (She's smiling, so he gets the sense that she agrees.)

Breena smiles at that, little self-deprecatingly. "Should have seen me five years ago."

Tim shakes his head. "I'm sure you were smoking hot then, too, but, no. You're beautiful now. I want you, like this, now, in my head."

Jimmy kisses the back of her neck, gathering her hair so it's draping down her shoulder. "He's right."

His eyes slip over Abby (which they'd been doing more or less non-stop since she tossed her shirt to the side). "And Abby, just… fuck! Been waiting fourteen years to see you naked and you're more than worth the wait."

Abby grins, enjoying the compliment, and the look on Jimmy's face. Her eyes go trailing down his body, then to Tim's, and back to Jimmy. "We are lucky, lucky, lucky women."

Breena giggles, staring at Tim, eyeing him up and down, licking her lips in a way that makes him think of at least half a dozen things he wants her to do to him with her mouth. Her eyes settle on his dick, peeking up from his un-buttoned button down. She doesn't seem to think the shirt and hard-on combo looks stupid. "Oh yeah."
Positioning is kind of odd. Find something that feels good, looks good, and where you can see what the other two are doing. At home, this would be easy. He's got mirrors all over the place. Any angle you want to see on his bed, you can see.

Apparently Breena's parents are not quite so into sex. (Or, and Tim finds this is a somewhat distracting thought, they prefer it in the bathroom. They certainly spared no expense in there. Okay, enough of that.) They've only got one mirror in the room, and unless you're directly in front of it, it's not set to give a particularly good view of anything that's happening on the bed.

It's further complicated for Tim by being one arm down. He can't lie on his right side, yet, so spooning (assuming he wants to do anything besides fuck) is out. Missionary is out. Standing, out. (sort of. He can't lift her.) With his arm strapped to his torso, anything where Abby's on top, lying against his chest, is out. Cowgirl, doggie, or any sitting position is pretty much all they've got going right now.

Fortunately, they like all of those options, and while the Slaters might not have given much thought to the location and number of mirrors in this house, they did invest in a four post bed which means there's an excellent place to lean his back if he's sitting up, and as long as he's sitting kind of diagonally across the bed, Abby can either sit facing the Palmers, and look as much as she likes, or facing him, and she can catch sight of some of what's going on behind her in the mirror.

In some ways, it's like sixty-nining. There's the split focus, feeling, enjoying, and paying attention to what's going on with you, and then there's watching and enjoying what's going on with them.

There's the feel of Abby's lips on his, soft whispered words, theirs and Jimmy and Breena's, the jostling sensation of the bed moving beneath them, and sometimes he's focused narrowly, Abby's tongue against his, her breasts against his chest, the feel of her hair on his face and throat. Sometimes his focus goes wide, Jimmy and Breena kissing, petting, nibbling and exploring.

He's sitting back against one of the posts, facing in toward Jimmy and Breena. They're laying on their sides, also on something of a diagonal. He thinks they're good positions, everyone can see what's going on. (Jimmy has to turn his head to see, but he's not doing that much. Tim wonders if Jimmy's getting off more on being watched than watching, because he certainly looks like he's having a VERY good time, but he's not looking back at them much.)

He thinks he could easily just sit here and watch. He could probably just play with Abby, tune them out and focus entirely on her. (Though he doesn't want to do that. He wants to watch.)

Breena rolls Jimmy onto his back, straddling him, resting on his chest and hips, full body stretched out along his, as they continue to kiss and rub against each other. She leans up a bit, breasts and belly and pussy rubbing over Jimmy, but she's watching Tim and Abby make love, her eyes skimming all over their bodies, and that feels amazing to Tim. Makes him feel hot and sexy and desirable and... and all the good emotional feelings that go along with sex kicked up about twenty notches, because it's not just Abby petting him, desiring him, it's Breena, too.

He catches Breena's eyes, makes sure she sees him watching her, making love to her with his gaze, and she smiles at him, then kisses Jimmy, wet and deep, and Tim sighs, liking seeing that a whole lot, too.

And then it's better, Abby's kissing him, running her fingernails through his hair, rubbing her body all along his.

So much better.
She turns around, so her back is to him, nudging his legs a bit, so they're a little closer together, and then she's straddling him, sinking onto his dick, and his head rolls back, resting against the post as the intense pleasure of her body on his and hearing and seeing Jimmy and Breena all rush through him.

Jimmy's laying down, on his back, Breena straddling his face as he eats her out. Tim practically wants to pass out that's so hot. Abby riding him, watching the Palmers, so much sex, all over, sounds (quiet sounds) and smells and slick bodies moving against each other.

Breena flips around, onto her hands and knees and takes Jimmy's dick into her mouth, and Tim's got to close his eyes at that.

He feels Abby stop riding him, and giggle. He opens his eyes, and sees her half-turned in his lap, smiling. She kisses the tip of his nose. He pulls her lips down a bit, and kisses her, deep and wet, tongue slipping between her lips.

"Want that?" she asks, when he breaks the kiss.

"God, yes."

She begins to shift off of him, but he holds her hips. "Want to do it, want to watch them do it, can't see how to do both at once."

"Oh." She slows down, barely moving on him, just rocking gently. "Watch then do?"

"Okay." His fingers find her clit for a light, slow stroke to keep her simmering along.

So they watch, enjoying it. He's not sure which he's liking more, the sight of Breena sucking down Jimmy's cock, her wet pink lips slipping up and down over his dick, tongue caressing the tip, or Jimmy licking her pussy, tongue and fingers stroking her. They're both mind-meltingly good.

Jimmy's getting close. Tim knows how to read balls more than well enough to know what it means when they pull up tight like that. He knows how it feels too, getting closer and closer to the edge. He's not quite there, yet, but he will be, soon. And when Breena pulls off, and Jimmy half-moans and curses under his breath, Tim completely understands that sound and how that feels, too. That 'So close, God, come on, almost there! Wait? What? No! Do not go wandering off, get back there and fuck me woman!' crying frustration of when she decides 'we're going a bit longer' and all you want to do is come.

Breena switches around, kissing Jimmy sloppy and deep as she sinks onto his cock, and both Jimmy and Tim moan at that, because nothing feels like that, being an inch from the end, gritting your teeth at not going over, and then having a hot, wet pussy envelop you. That's almost worth getting yanked back from the edge for.

He can see it happening to Jimmy. He can feel his own memories of it. And Abby's in his lap, wet and soft and gliding over him, so he can feel it right here, right now, too, all of it taking him so high.

Breena flips him over, so he's on top, and Tim can't really see all that much. Mostly just Jimmy's back and legs, but hears Breena say, "Fast," sees her hands cupping his ass, pulling him deep and hard against her, and Jimmy's off, fucking hard, body tight and quivering, muscles flexing, each thrust punctuated by a soft, quiet grunt.

Her legs wrap around his back, then higher, one over his shoulder, as she's thrusting up to meet him, both of them keeping the other one muffled with deep kisses.
Tim's rocking along with them, and Abby is, too, sure they may be watching then doing, but this is too hot to not 'do.' There's no way to just watch this.

His fingers speed up as she begins a fast, hard grind on his lap, and right now that's exactly what he wants.

No. It's not. It's good, so good, but…

He taps her thigh. "Up, off me,"

She gets up, surprised by that. "On your back. Hips on the edge of the bed."

She smiles, knowing where this is going; he smiles back at her. She scoots to the edge of the bed, wrapping her legs around his hips, her head a few inches from Breena's hip. So, however she's looking, she's got a great view.

He starts that slow, deliberate pace she loves. All the way in, all the way out, making sure to keep his thumb rubbing over her clit again and again in long, slow circles.

Jimmy's moving faster, Breena clinging to him, starting that fine, muffled panting that sounds to Tim like about to get off but not wanting to provide the whole house with a concert.

He's speeding up, too, wanting to go slow and drag this out, needing to go fast, get off with them.

Abby's legs pull tight, urging him faster and deeper, and he doesn't need to be told twice, he speeds up, rocking into her deep and fast, every inch of him buried in her, as she arches against him, encouraging him with her body.

He misses her voice, misses those the moans and the words, wants to hear her screaming out his name as he pulls a long, shuddering climax out of her, but they aren't alone, and the girls are in the room, too, so they can't be loud, and her body, sweet and tight on his is good all on its own.

Breena's eyes close and she pulls Jimmy against her hard, biting his shoulder, as she twitches, and Jimmy goes tense, grinding hard into Breena, once, twice, third time, and one more, before collapsing against her.

Tim's thrusting harder, deeper, rubbing against Abby, going fast and focused, feeling her legs start to tremble, and as soon as he feels that rolling twitch, first of many soft rippling pulses, he lets go, pleasure jolting through him in hot, wet spurts.

The bed's a California king. Tons of space for two people, and snug quarters for four, but they don't have to all spoon or sleep on top of each other.

Clean up is quick, mostly just wiping up with the tissues, and they all crash, with enough room to sleep in their usual (ish) positions.

Jimmy's on his back, taking up the most room of the four of them. Tim guesses that if it's just him and Breena, his arms and legs take up most of the bed, but he doesn't have quite that much room, so he's keeping himself fairly small.

Breena's on her side, to Jimmy's left. She's facing him, neck over his arm, her arm across his chest, leg over his.

Tim supposes that normally he'd be next to Jimmy, back to him, spooned up against Abby, but in
that he still can’t sleep on his right side, Abby’s in the middle, also facing Jimmy, but not touching him, Tim spooned up against her back, both of them on their left sides.

He's in bed, naked, glowing from an insanely good orgasm, his wife warm and snug beside him, his two other best friends? Loves? Lovers? in bed with him. It feels surreal. Good, very good, but part of him can't believe this is real.

He's laying on his left side, Abby's neck is resting over his arm, and he's sure that if he flexes his fingers a little, he'll end up brushing Jimmy's shoulder.

It takes him longer to drift off than normal, two more bodies in the bed, lots of little baby noises coming from the closet, and apparently Breena has a soft, quiet snore, but eventually his brain settles down, decides this is all right, and he falls asleep.
Thinking Time

Tim wakes up to the feel of the bed shifting next to him. Strange sensation. He's familiar with the feel of Abby getting in or out of the bed, but usually, if it's rocking like it is now, he's having sex, but he's not having sex. (He might be pretty sleepy, but he's awfully clear on that.)

As he comes a bit more awake, he notices that not only is he not having sex, he's also not snuggled up against anyone else.

So, if he's alone, the bed should be still, because he knows he's not the one rocking.

Which is when the whole, not in the bed all alone thing hit, as well as why the bed is rocking.

He's lying on his side, and one eye lazes open, seeing Jimmy and Breena making love about ten inches away.

It's beautiful. He feels a little dumb thinking that, but it is. She's on top, rocking back and forth, breasts and buttocks swaying with each thrust, sunlight gleaming on her skin and hair.

Jimmy's on his back, hands on her hips, guiding her, watching her, looking at her with such tenderness, love, and desire.

She leans down, kissing him, lips open, wet, moving faster.

They're both being quiet. (Baby girls are still, thank you God, sleeping.) Their moves are soft, comfortable, well-practiced, and beautiful.

That's really the only word he can think of for it. Okay, not the only one. Erotic springs to mind, too. But lots of things are erotic but not necessarily beautiful, but this is.

It's hitting him that he's never actually seen someone else make love before. Yes, last night they were watching each other, at the club they were watching, but that was putting on a show. Getting off on being watched, pulling out all the tricks (quietly), trying to look good as well as feel good.

That was about all four of them.

This is Jimmy and Breena, and them loving each other. And, for a little bit, at least, he's getting to share in on that.

He feels Abby slide back into the bed, snuggling in front of him, so they're spooned together, and she can watch, too.

"Where'd you go?" He practically breathes it against her ear.

"Pregnant bladder," she whispers back. Just because Sean's the size of a golf ball doesn't mean that her bladder knows that. It's under the impression that she needs to pee the first second she wakes up.

"Sorry."

She shrugs, rubbing up against him in a fairly deliberate way.

"You up for this?"

She nods, and rocks against him. "I can feel you are."
He smiles against the back of her neck, kissing gently. With his right arm in the sling and his right shoulder still healing, he can't, yet, lay on his right side. Which means, if they're spooning, like they are now, his functional arm is on the bottom, under Abby's neck. Which means his left hand isn't doing her all that much good.

He can't get it anywhere that really needs to be touched in this position.

She's mostly taking care of herself, and watching Jimmy and Breena, who are moving faster, kissing deeper, is ramping them up, too. He's kissing her back, nibbling on her neck and shoulder, rubbing the tip of his dick over her clit as much as he can. (Also a bit tricky from behind without hands.)

She shifts her angle, and he slips in. She's not all the way turned on, still a little dry, so more friction than usual and he hisses, biting her shoulder gently. Slick is good, slick is very good, but so is tight friction.

He thrusts gently, short, shallow strokes, and he manages to get his left hand to her breast, rolling her nipple between his fingers.

Wet comes, slick joins it, he's moving easier, slipping in and out, shallow thrusts, getting her g-spot over and over, feeling her fingers brushing against his dick as she rubs herself off.

Morning sex, since the addition of Kelly to the mix, is fast. Not necessarily fast as in frantic thrusting, but not drawn out. No multiple orgasms, and neither of them tries to spin the other out. It's usually, when they manage to get some, done in less than ten minutes. Just a happy, gentle boost to set and hold a good mood for the day.

And today's not an exception to that rule.

When he feels her go tight on him, he lets go, thrusting faster, deeper, trusting her to get herself there with him, and she does, body sweet and pulsing around his as his pleasure arcs through him.

He's blissful and quiet, enjoying her warm and wet and gently twitching on him, watching the fine hairs on her shoulder, and the way the sun lights her skin, when the fact that Jimmy and Breena just watched that hit.

Watched them have real sex, not put on a show.

It feels okay.

Feels better than okay, really. Maybe it's the post-sex oxytocin pulsing through him, but he's really pleased at the idea that they got to share that with them.

"Can you reach the tissues?" For a second, he wonders why Abby's asking because there's no possible way for him to reach anything. The only arm that reaches is currently wrapped around her from beneath. Then he realizes that she's asking Jimmy, who can, and does.

A few seconds later, she's off of him, and they're wiping up.

A second after that, Anna begins to chirp, and morning really begins.

Sharing the room is intimate beyond just the scorching hot sex level. Once Anna's up, Breena heads over to fetch her, and the quiet, every-day morning routines begin.

She's sitting on the bed, back against the headboard, still naked, and nursing Anna.
Tim unstraps his arm and starts his morning PT. These days he double times it. Getting his foot exercises and stretches in while he works with his arm. So, stupid though he thinks it looks, he's standing next to the bed, rising onto his toes and down again (both feet at once) and then moving onto standing on just the one foot, while working on raising and lowering his arm, moving it in every direction.

Jimmy's eyeing his progress as he's changing Molly's diaper, nodding along. "We working on you tonight?"

That's their usual Saturday and Wednesday nights right now.

"Hoping to be doing something more interesting Saturday night?" Tim asks.

"Got the house to ourselves for the evening, we can tuck the girls in Jethro and Abbi's room and make all the noise we want, so, yeah!" Breena adds.

Kelly starts her morning chirping and Abby, wrapping up her tooth brushing, goes to grab her.

"Okay, Molly, you're all set," Jimmy tells his daughter. "I want you to go get a bathing suit and a t-shirt, okay?"

"Yes, Daddy."

Jimmy heads to the bathroom, washes his hands, and then comes back out. He opens a drawer in one of the bedside tables and takes… Tim's not sure what it is. Jimmy can feel the way Tim's watching him.

"Blood sugar. I have to check it every night and every morning. And if I go overboard on the carbs, I need to check it again."

"Oh." Tim watches as Jimmy pokes himself in the arm. "Didn't know you did that."

Jimmy shrugs. "Try to be discreet with it." He waits a few seconds. "Eighty-six."

"Is that good?" Abby asks, getting Kelly changed and dressed.

Breena nods. "Yeah, it's supposed to be between seventy and one hundred first thing in the morning."

Jimmy adds, "Those are 'normal' levels. It was over 600 when I slipped into the coma that got me diagnosed."

"Did you check it last night?" Abby asks.

"Yeah, while we were talking." He shrugs a little. "If you've never seen it before, it can be off-putting, so... Didn't think whipping it out when we were getting ready for sex was a good plan, is unspoken but they all get it.

"Oh." Abby says. "It's fine, you know? Don't ever have to feel like you've got to hide this stuff, okay?"

Tim nods. "Not from us, not from the rest of the crew, either. Not like anyone's going to pass out from that microliter of blood."

Jimmy smirks, and then says, a bit more seriously, "It's not that... Don't want to be treated like I'm fragile. Special diet is enough crap... Don't need you all constantly aware that I'm sick. I prefer you
not thinking about it."

Tim opens and closes his mouth. He hadn't thought much about that, not in regards to Jimmy, because he doesn't usually think about Jimmy being sick, but with people carrying things, and opening doors, and all the rest of the special treatment he's been getting lately, he's certainly aware of how good it feels to just be normal and invisible.

For the most part, Tim would very much prefer to have two perfectly working arms, thank you very much. However, there is a certain amount of babying he's been getting that he is appreciating, and right now, Abby shampooing his hair is his favorite of the bunch. Morning sex, getting to watch Jimmy and Breena, and his hair washed, he's liking this quite a bit.

Add to that the fact that when the Slaters built this place, they went hog wild on the bathroom, so the shower is not only huge but has multiple shower heads, and yes, he is one very happy Tim. (He's also thinking that when they re-do their bathroom, they are definitely getting multiple shower heads, and that this is going on the list of things that will be true about their bathroom at the house, as well. As best he can remember, the last time he and Abby were able to get a shower, together, and no one was out of the water, freezing his/her ass off, was their honeymoon.)

So, he's sitting on the floor of the shower (easier for Abby to reach all his hair, and hey, plenty of room, so why not), eyes closed, when he feels a draft and hears Abby saying, 'Hi.'

One eye peeks open, and now Breena is in the shower, too, which… Okay, he guesses that makes a certain amount of sense. Jimmy's apparently on making sure someone is awake and in the room with babies, so now would be a good time for Breena to get a shower, too, and after all, it's not like they've never seen her naked or anything.

They didn't specifically say anything about this, but he figures Jimmy has to know she's doing this. They don't just… mess around like that, she wouldn't just hop in without mentioning it to him first, but… He's not sure where the lines are.

"You're thinking too hard," Breena says to him, reaching over him to grab her shampoo. (Speaking of things Tim's enjoying, Breena's breast dangling over his head when he's inches from her pussy, while he's in the shower, getting his hair washed by Abby, is rapidly leaping up his 'Things-I-adore' list.) "Not going down smelling like sex, not when we're sharing a room. Jimmy'll hop in as soon as one of us is out."

That makes sense to him.

Abby gently nudges his shoulder and he stands up, back to the nearest shower head, letting his hair rinse out.

"Shave?" she asks him.


She grins at him, kisses his left shoulder, and heads out. "I'll go spell Jimmy."

He'd have to admit that it feels a little odd to be naked, in the shower, alone with Breena, but, really, only a little. If anything, the weird bit is how normal this is. Just getting a shower with his best girlfriend, no biggie. That feels weird.
There's no mirror in there, so he's shaving by feel, also tricky with one hand, but not impossible. (Shave, rinse, put down razor, feel, repeat as needed.)

"You need help with that?" She says as she's sudsing up her hair.

"Uh… I… I mean I don't need it, but… if you're offering…" Breena nod, lets her hair rinse out, and then steps closer to him, and holds out her hand for the razor. He's pretty grateful that he got off less than half an hour ago, because he's really not sure what the lines are for when the other two aren't with them, and in any other circumstance naked Breena, in the shower, let alone naked Breena, in the shower, touching him, would get him hard.

"Not like I don't do this for a good forty percent of my clients."

"Oh." He hands her the razor and stands very still. She tilts his head up and to the left a bit. "Obviously, some of the guys we get in are still shaving, but, a lot of them are old, and sick, and" she's gently slipping the razor over his skin, "and maybe the people caring for them might have done it, but, usually it's not on the list."

She's lifted the blade away from his skin when he feels another draft of cold air, followed by Jimmy getting in. He looks at Tim, shakes his head, and says, "God, you're milking that arm for all that it's worth, aren't you?"

Tim opens his mouth, and looks from Breena to Jimmy. She gently shuts it, tilts his head to the right, and runs the blade over his chin. "I offered. He was doing it one-handed with no mirror, and from the look of it, he'd've been done just in time for Christmas."

Tim waits for the blade not to be on his skin to say, "I wasn't going that slow."

She grins at him, stroking the blade over his upper lip. "You weren't setting any speed records, either."

Once again he waits for her to pull it away, rinsing off stubble and his shave lotion. "I don't do anything that involves a blade on my skin fast."

Jimmy sneers at that, stepping fully into the spray, getting wet all over, and enjoying the water for a moment. He's reaching for the shampoo as he asks, "You gonna do me next?"

Breena lifts the razor away from Tim's jaw, and gently strokes her fingers over his cheek. "And you're done."

"Thanks." He smiles at her, and then kisses her palm before she can pull it away. Tim rubs his face, and it does feel smooth. Then he ducks under the water to finish rinsing off. While he's rinsing off, she turns to Jimmy. "And I already did you, or were you too sleepy to tell?" she says, patting Jimmy on the ass.

"Not to talk down your skills with a razor, but… That looked a lot more fun than a shave," Tim says with a grin.

Jimmy nods, cocky, then kisses Breena's shoulder. "Oh yeah."

Breena's still holding the razor, eyeballing Jimmy up and down, thinking. "If I were to, 'do you' how
much of you would we be talking about?"

Jimmy thinks about it seriously, looking at his pubes, still neatly trimmed, and then says… "Just face. I know I've only got the one blade, and I'm guessing Tim didn't bring a back-up, either, and that's nothing I'm trying with a used razor."

Tim shakes his head. "Just got the one." He's all rinsed off and his shoulder is starting to ache. He's been out of the sling for at least half an hour at this point, which is about as long as he can support the weight of his arm comfortably. "Anyway, time to head out and get dressed. Help keep an eye on little girls."

---

Tim's pouring Cheerios into Kelly's bowl, when Abbi (who he thought was coming today, but must have showed up last night) heads into the kitchen. "Morn…ing."

He looks at her, curious, trying to figure out what got that sort of a pause, and rapidly comes to the conclusion that he, Abby, and Breena are all sharing a room, with one bathroom, and they all have wet hair.

Which means they all got out of the shower recently.

And, if… say you happen to be in the room that backs up against their bathroom (like Abbi and Gibbs are) you might have noticed only hearing the shower on for twenty minutes, and that it never shut off, which would not necessarily produce the look that's on Abbi's face, after all, he and Abby may have gotten a quick shower, left the water on, and then Breena just darted in after…

But, if you happen to be dating the only other person on earth who has been let in on this whole thing they're inching toward… A person who has been given express permission to tell you what is happening. You might be staring at all three of them, one eyebrow high, having come to what is likely to be an extremely accurate conclusion as to why all three of them are sporting wet hair at the same time, likely with a somewhat inaccurate conclusion as to what exactly happened before getting said shower.

So… how to respond to Abbi staring at all three of them looking, maybe three-quarters curious with a little alarmed in there for good measure?

*No shame!* "Morning," Tim says, smiling at her.

"I'm on eggs," Abby adds. "Want some?"

"Uh." Abbi shakes her head a bit. "Sure, yeah, that sounds good."

Breena hands her a cup of coffee, which Tim snags en route to Abbi and takes custody of for himself. "She likes that black tar stuff Jethro does. Besides, this is decaf, for me."

"You drink decaf?" Abbi can't believe anyone who's ever worked for or with Jethro could possibly drink decaf.

Tim sighs. Not like he loves decaf. "I do when she's pregnant. No caffeine for her, I can skip it, too."

Abbi thinks about that, while Tim resets the coffee pot with Black Death, making a mental note to get one of those K cup machines for when they come back. 'Course, this time next year, the house will be done, so they may not be coming back here. He's figuring out which one he's going to get for the house when Abbi says, "You drink alcohol, though."
Tim nods, shrugging a little. Never occurred to him to stop drinking alcohol.

Abby says, "Caffeine's a daily thing. Cutting it out hurts. I'd normally, at most, have a glass or two of wine a week, so saying goodbye to alcohol isn't a big deal. I'm not staring at him, jonesing for a drink, when he's got a cider or something, but the first week I was pregnant with Kelly, there were times I wanted to drink his coffee I was craving caffeine so bad."

"Abby doesn't like coffee," Breena adds in, not sure if Abbi knows that or not.

Abby winces. "Really don't like it."

"So, it's your honeymoon, Abby's barely pregnant, going cold turkey, and you're still drinking coffee? When'd you stop drinking it?" Abbi asks Tim.

"When we got home from our honeymoon. We didn't both need to be going through withdrawal at the same time. At any given time we get on a whole lot better if at least one of us is sane. So, she got to go through withdrawal and I stayed sane. Then we got home, and she was perky and happy, and I was the massive pain in the ass. Wasn't nearly as bad this time, since neither of us was as badly hooked—"

Abby laughs. "For you. What with the whole you were unconscious for most of it thing."

"We both cut out the caffeine when we were trying for Sean." Abby gives Tim a I did not just meet you look. "Okay, I'd been down to a cup…" she's still eyeballing him, "or three at work when that happened. Actual cups, in mugs, and most of them were decaf!" He gestures with his fingers to indicated small cups. "I was cutting back! Anyway, we're kind of crabby and annoying during the first few days of cold turkey. No one's fun to be around when they've got a splitting headache."

"Is that why you were such a bear when you got home?" Jimmy asks, heading into the kitchen, wearing his swim trunks and traditional, 'I'm-on-vacation-showing-off-my-abs-unbuttoned-hawaiian-shirt.' (Also with wet hair and obviously fresh out of the shower. Tim sees Abbi take note of that, and wonders what she's thinking.)

"Yeah. Splitting headache that lasted for three days."

"Thought you were just grumpy because you had to be back at work."

"Some of that, too. Mostly splitting headache."

"So, when did you get in?" Breena asks Abbi.

"Not too late. Bit after eleven. Got our meeting wrapped, thought about going home, sleeping, and coming in the morning and just… Nope. Done with DC, done with work, the ocean's calling and I want back on it."

Jimmy smiles at that. "Do you miss that about office work, less time on the water?"

"Yes! I never even saw the ocean until I was nineteen and they were flying us to Germany—"

"Germany?" Breena asks.

"Dover to Berlin to Saudi to Iraq. Got to sit near a window, saw the ocean for the first time from ten thousand feet up. Wasn't anything I grew up with or felt drawn to, but, now… Go too long on land, and I start to ache for it."
"Then it's a good thing you know a guy with a boat," Gibbs says, walking into the kitchen, patting Abbi on the rear, looking very relaxed. All little girls get good morning kisses, and so do the big girls, and by then the coffee's done, so Gibbs ambles over and pours a cup for Abbi and himself.

"Don't suppose we've got a newspaper?" Gibbs asks.

Jimmy stands up. "Let me get my iPad, any paper you want is on there."

"I know that. My phone's in my pocket. Just seems like a morning where an actual, physical paper would be nice. Sip coffee, eat breakfast, go lay on the porch and do the crossword, in pen."

That gets some chuckling.

Abby's got the eggs done and is ladling them out. "Got toast popping up in a sec, too. Anyone want anything else?"

"I think we're good," Jimmy replies. "Thanks."

"No problem."

Abbi ferries plates from the counter to the kitchen table, and after a moment, toast is up, and everyone has breakfast.

"I know Ziva and I have a date for the farmer's market, but, what else is up for today?"

"Whatever you like. Once the dishes are done, I'm taking the girls down to the beach. We've got some splashing around to do," Breena says.

"I'm helping with that," Abby adds, she pets Kelly's hair. "Looks like this one loves the water."

"Waves! Jumping with Uncle Jetro!"

"And Molly's voted for her plans," Jimmy adds. "You make sure Uncle Jethro gets to play the games he wants to, too. He might want to spend some time with Abbi. Maybe do some cooking with her and Aunt Ziva…"

Gibbs holds up his hands. "Like Tony, I've volunteered to carry groceries and be a lab rat for recipe testing purposes. Only thing I'm cooking is s'mores. Molly, do you know what a s'more is?"

She shakes her head no.

"They're yummy. Tonight, if you eat dinner, and Mama says it's okay, we're gonna make some."

"How do we make them?"

"We're gonna go on the beach and find lots of driftwood, and we're gonna build a big fire. Then we'll get some sticks and put big marshmallows on the sticks, and roast them over the fire, and then we'll make sandwiches of the marshmallow, graham crackers, and chocolate."

Molly's eyes are wide, and she is so ready to do that. "Now!"

"Soon. Breakfast, and then sun block, and then down on the beach we go!"

"Looks like you've got morning plans set," Abby says to Gibbs.

"Looks like."
"Any idea when you and Ziva are hitting the Farmer's market?" Tim asks Abbi.

Abbi shrugs. "They've got to get up first. Didn't hear any signs of life from their room when I was coming down."

There's a bit of smirking around the table at that. "You know, Ziva's usually up at the crack of dawn..." Tim adds.

"If not before. She gets up at... 05:00 to run," Abby says.

"Maybe she's feeling sleepy," Jimmy says, staring at Gibbs, with another smirk.

Gibbs shrugs.

Abbi's watching all of them, knowing she's missing something going on here.

Breena fills her in, "We all know she's pregnant. We all know he knows she's pregnant. But he still won't say."

Gibbs grins, shaking his head. "Nothing to say."

"Uh huh," Abby says. "Sure. If I go into your basement, I'm going to see the start of some sort of baby thing down there."

Gibbs nods. He does have some baby stuff started. "Sean's gonna need a crib, too." He's also got a rocking chair for Little D and a crib as well, in the works. He may have said the rocking chair that Tim and Abby got had strings on it, but when he said that he hadn't realized both families would have nursing infants at the same time. Since the one chair is already home with the McGees, the DiNozzos are getting a new one. "Can't have my boy sleeping in a drawer."

That also gets a smile, and effectively changes the topic away from Little D.

Breakfast is fast, and soon done. Since Abby and Breena did most of the cooking the guys are on clean up. Jimmy's at the sink, Gibbs is ferrying dishes back and forth, and Tim's keeping them company. After the first round of dishes, Gibbs heads back toward the table, back to Jimmy, so he doesn't see what comes next, but Tim does.

He's feeling proud of himself for not giving it away. Gibbs is bending over the table, saying something to Abbi, who's leaning against the fridge. He sees Jimmy reach for his waistband at his back, under his shirt, and Tim knows that motion. If he saw it on the street, he'd be jumping for cover, and even knowing that there is no possible way Jimmy's about to pull a gun, his hand does scramble toward where his gun should be just on sheer reflex alone.

No, Jimmy's not pulling a gun from under his shirt, it's a water pistol, that, apparently he had tucked into his swim trunks, under his shirt, and he quickly aims, fires, and hits Gibbs, causing him to go leaping and turning into the air, while grinning and saying, "Got ya!"

For a second, Tim's a little scared that Gibbs is about to kill Jimmy, that his I've been attacked reflex is in charge and his brain is checked out, but it's only a second, and then Gibbs stops looking like a cat that's just been dumped into a bathtub full of water and starts to laugh, long and loud.

"You're dead, Palmer."

Jimmy's grinning at him. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. There's nine more of them in the living room. Load up
and put your money where your mouth is, old man!"

Abby's already darting out, pulling Abbi and Breena along, grinning and bubbling at the idea of no-holds-barred water pistol war.

Tim's feeling a little mope-y because he's a bit too hurt to really play with this, and he's got nowhere good to hide a water pistol. At least, not without a thigh holster, and even then, he thinks it'd probably look pretty lumpy under his kilt.

"So, I guess I'm babysitting while you all run around and shoot each other."

"Good plan!" Breena says. "Come on, let's get everyone on the beach."

On the upside, it's really easy to entertain very small babies on the beach. He makes sandcastles, Anna smashes them. Little, tiny eight-month-old Hulk Smash. Kelly likes that game, too. Molly also appreciates the Godzilla game where he makes a bunch of little castles and she stomps through them making little, high-pitched roars. By the time the adults are done shooting each other, he's built several small cities that have been utterly destroyed by three tiny girls having a very good time.

Toddlers and destruction, that never gets old. He's thinking he can build up the whole beach and they'll just happily keep smashing.

And then, after mid-morning snack time, Anna has her morning nap, (on the blanket on the sand, next to the beach chair Tim's relaxing in) and Kelly and Molly went off to play in the water with the rest of the grown-ups.

Which means, Tim's got thinking time. And, after last night and this morning, a lot of thinking to do.

Like, about sex. Doesn't matter how much porn you've seen, real sex is different.

And Tim knows that. He's had more than enough real sex to know that what he's doing and what's on the screen aren't the same thing. And he assumes that other guys, real guys, are also not having porn-style sex in their real lives. (Or, at least for the sakes of their wives/girlfriends/hookups whatever, he hopes they aren't.)

So, yeah he's seen sex, choreographed, scripted sex, but he's never really watched someone else have sex.

He really likes watching. Not just in a, damn this is fucking hot, sort of way (though it is. Good Lord, yes, it is!) but…

Porn is all about getting you off. You pick whatever you like, skim over the "boring" stuff, and get right into it. For the purpose of getting you hot, hard, off, and done, in say, six minutes, porn is great. (Not to say that Tim's doing much with porn these days because… well, he's got a finite number of orgasms in him a day, and these days Abby's got first dibs on them. But back in the day, he watched more than enough porn to feel comfortable making generalizations about it.)

However, were he to be watching porn, Tim will never voluntarily sign up to watch a heterosexual couple neck for ten minutes. (Two girls is a different story altogether. He'll watch that all night.) If there were ten minutes of necking on one of his videos (there never has been), he'd fast forward.

But, he'll watch Jimmy and Breena neck, and enjoy it. Part of it is that they're enjoying it. Maybe there's porn out there where the people doing it genuinely like each other and enjoy kissing and whatnot, but if so, he hasn't seen it. Most of the porn he's seen has involved professionals doing a
job. They don't really look like they're enjoying themselves. (But again, that's not why you watch porn.)

But Jimmy and Breena love each other, and love sex with each other, and love the pleasure of this time where... it's not hot and heavy, but... It's close and warm and intimate.

And... look, he and Jimmy are both thirty-eight, and thirty-nine is a hell of a lot closer than thirty-seven these days. Kissing alone no longer sends dicks leaping to full attention in twenty seconds or less. Kissing and rubbing, that's good. Kissing with fantasy/story time, that'll do it, too. But, just lips on lips... takes a bit more than that these days.

But just because it's not instilling instant hard-ons doesn't mean that it's anything he'd want to skip. The pleasure of ramping up is good. A physical act of that gentle communication of bodies, of shedding the rest of the day and focusing on each other, that's important.

He's guessing that's what Jimmy and Breena get out of it, too.

Or maybe not.

But it's clear they like it. And watching someone else experience pleasure makes you feel good, too. Feel really good.

And when things do get hot and heavy... Okay, look, he's never going to turn down getting to watch a beautiful woman climax. That's something he's always in favor of seeing. But again, in porn it's all faked. But this is real. Breena's really having a good time, skin flushed, muscles tight, nipples hard, body twitching, that's gorgeous. Crazy hot, but beautiful, and so intimate.

So, real.

Watching Jimmy is a surprise. He knew he was going to like watching Breena get off. Knew that'd get him right in the balls. That was a no brainer. He didn't imagine he'd find watching Jimmy get off particularly... anything really.

Scratch that. He didn't think he'd watch Jimmy get off. It'd just be something that happened while he was watching Breena.

Guys in porn are either props or a point of view to piggy back into the action on. And, when he's watching, since he's usually pretty far removed from even the idea of the character of the guy in the porno, Tim treats them like props. Just something the girls are playing with. He was expecting that's what would happen when he was watching Jimmy, he'd be a prop, too, something making Breena feel good.

And he knows this sounds dumb, what with the fact that pretty much every porno with a guy in it all end the same way, but... Guys in porn aren't having a really good time. Just like the girls, they're pros doing a job.

But, Jimmy's a guy, a friend, a... lover? whatever, not a prop, very much not a prop, having a very good time. Turns out Tim likes watching the guy having the very good time, well, at least if he's Jimmy. And Tim is really surprised to see his eyes didn't stay glued to Breena when they're fucking. More surprised to see that he likes watching Jimmy, too.

He's not precisely sure what, if anything, beyond the fact that people he loves fucking each other turns him on, that means, but... He's also not worried about it.

Part of it is just actually seeing what other real people do. Sure, they talk about sex, but... Never with
that sort of detail. (Well, the girls do, he and Jimmy and Tony don't. They tend to talk about sex in
nouns, one word declarative statements of what happened. "Laid" "Oral" and the like. "Leaned back
at a sixty degree angle, her leaning forward playing with your balls while you rub her butt" not so
much.) It's just… okay… cool really. As both a cop and a writer, Tim is interested in people. He
likes to study them, see what they do, and how.

And this is a lot of new what people do and how.

So, even if this is as far as they ever go, even if they never do this again, he's really liking this.

And, honestly, he's hoping they do this, or more, again.

He doesn't remember falling in love with Abby. Sounds dumb, but it's true. He remembers liking her,
really liking her, and being so nervous about saying anything, but finally, they went to that poetry
slam, and he got up on stage and laid that poem on her, and she kind of froze at it, then, because he
didn't have the sense God gave a bug back then, he doubled down and told her he really liked her,
and she flipped out.

Turns out she liked the poem (even the finger snaps). She's still got a copy of it. (That makes him
smile.)

Not long after that they weren't dating any more. (Turns out she really liked him, too, and that was a
problem, for her…)

But somehow, over the years, and ups and downs and in-betweens (because there were all of those
things) 'really like you' shifted to, 'I'm not sure what I'd do if you weren't in my life.' When Mike
died, that was true. He knew it absolutely. And between whatever was happening with Cade, and his
own fear, he didn't do anything for a year.

But, by the time he got his head out of his ass, by the time he was ready to move, he loved her and
had loved her for quite a while.

These years have deepened it, strengthened it, but that love's been their foundation, the whole way
through.

He wonders if what this thing with Jimmy and Breena is qualifies as falling in love with them… Or
not. He loves them. He can… maybe not pinpoint when it began, but he knows there was a time he
didn't love them, and there was a time when he did. So somehow, sometime between Laser tag and
losing Jon, they went from friends to loves.

He thinks more about it, wondering how much, if any, difference there is between love and in love,
or if really, it's all about the sex. You're in love with people you want to have sex with, you love the
people you don't.

Maybe…

He loves Tony and he loves Gibbs and he loves Jimmy… And he's absolutely certain he does not
want to have sex with any of them. At all… Probably… Okay, there'll be more thinking about that,
too, because watching Jimmy fuck is vastly hotter than he thought it could be.

But, as his brain goes tumbling around on this, the point he's searching for is that at least on a surface
level, he doesn't want to have sex with Jimmy, and he does want to have sex with Breena (A lot, in
every position imaginable, and he wants Abby to help, and he wants Jimmy there, too, and…
yeah…), and if you asked him, "Are you in love with Breena?" he'd have a really easy time saying
yes to that. And if you asked him 'Are you in love with Jimmy?' he'd probably say no.

But he'd be absolutely damned if he could tell you what emotional difference there is between how he feels about them, besides the fact that he doesn't want to fuck Jimmy.

Are you in love with Breena… Yes… That feels comfortable. He's good with that answer. Nothing about that is wrong or forced or anything. It feels solid and easy.

Do you feel the same way about Breena that you do about Abby?

No. And that's absolutely true, too.

He thinks about that more, too, trying to place it, because he thinks it's more than just years of life with Abby.

More thinking and he comes up with this, if something happened to Breena, it would be devastating. He'd grieve and ache, physically, mentally, on every level he'd hurt from her loss. But he'd still be himself without her.

But if he lost Abby, it would change him. It would alter who he is in a way that the loss of any other relationship couldn't.

Abby's husband… that's his core. That love, that relationship, like he said in his vows, that's his bedrock, and he doesn't know who he'd be if he lost that love. He'd survive it, because he'd have to, because at least one of them needs to be there for the kids, but… it would break him in a way he'd never fully come back from.

And that's not true about Breena.

"Deep thoughts?" Gibbs asks, sitting on the blanket next to Tim.

Tim inclines his head. "Yeah." He looks at Gibbs, knows he's checking in on all of them. "We're really okay."

Gibbs nods. "You guys look it." Abby, Jimmy, and Breena are playing in the surf with Ducky and Penny, and the girls. Tony's showing off, bodysurfing. (Abbi and Ziva have headed off in search of goodies for dinner.)

"Yeah. It's good."

"So…" Gibbs roots around in his bag for a moment, comes up with a tennis ball, and tosses it into the water. Mona sees it and goes tearing off into the surf after it.

Tim shakes his head a bit. "Love stuff. Just sorting things out. Feels okay, but, you know me, I want labels and boxes and context for it all."

"Okay."

"So, you told Abbi? Not that it's a problem or anything…"

"Yeah. While back."

"And she's cool with it?"
"It doesn't bug her. If she's got anything against it, it's the same thing I do, neither of us know anyone who managed to do it and keep it going."

Tim hadn't known that. "You know people who…"

"I was there for the seventies and early eighties, remember? I knew swingers… Knew of them, at least."

"Oh." Tim thinks for a moment. He and Abby talked about that some, and at least right now he feels like he's got an answer for that. "This isn't that. That's kind of what I'm thinking about. That's mostly sex, right?"

Gibbs shrugs. "Maybe? Knew of them, never did it."

Tim doesn't say anything for a bit. Still thinking. "The world's full of hot people."

Gibbs nods; that's not a controversial statement. Mona's back, so he tosses the tennis ball again.

"And… Between some of the clubs Abby and I like and the internet, it's not like it'd be difficult to find people to fuck if that was it."

Also not anything Gibbs is going to quibble about. He certainly never had any problem finding warm bodies to keep him company back when he was Tim's age.

"So, I'm not saying sex isn't… part of it, a big part of it, but… You ever do that thing... with sex... in high school, probably... You can go this far, but no further?"

Gibbs nods again and smiles dryly. "Didn't lose my virginity until my wedding night. Know all about lines and rules."

Tim feels a little foolish; he'd forgotten that. "Good point. Well, we've got that line. But… it's still good. Even if that line never goes away, it's still good. It's still close and intimate and love and… It's good." He thinks some more, watching the other three playing in the surf, and for the first time he's thinking that, yeah, they probably can go further and he's not going to flip out and this is going to be okay. But he's thinking it, not feeling it, yet. "Probably be better without the line, but… this is good."

"So, you weren't kidding, you're not…"

Tim shakes his head. "Not yet. Taking it slow. Playing. Feeling our way around, making sure everyone is comfortable and good. I don't know anyone who's made this work, either. Abby says she does. Friends of friends who've been in a stable foursome for twenty years now. According to her there's a whole community for this, support groups, social groups, all sorts of stuff. Not sure I want or need all of that, but, it's out there."

"Okay." Gibbs isn't sure exactly what playing means, but… "That line might not matter. If your heads are right, the bodies'll follow."

Tim nods at that; it matches his own thoughts on the subject. "I think you're right. But… slow's probably real good. Make sure heads are rock solid on this before tossing bodies into play."

"Good plan."

Another quiet moment. "If it weren't Jimmy and Breena, then sex would have never come into it." Tim says, about half-taking to Gibbs, half-feeling it out for himself. "Back in the beginning, when we were starting out again, we'd talked about other people, and the idea was fine, but practice…"
We'd both be way too jealous for it, and honestly, there's no other guy on Earth I could even think about doing this with. Just… doesn't matter how hot he is, or how much Abby's drooling over him, not gonna happen, don't want or need another guy in my bed. That was a deal breaker.

"But we love them already. That comes first. Our… friendship… or whatever this is, and that opened up more options. Or… Hell, I don't know. Liked Breena from the first time I saw a picture of her. Long before she was a person to me, she was something desirable. But… I'm pretty sure that the friendship allows the sex, or not sex, or whatever this is and ends up being to happen. That without that, it'd never be more than hot stories we tell each other to get revved up." Tim shakes his head. "I'm rambling."

"It's okay. Do as much thinking and rambling as you need on this one." Gibbs stands up, Mona's back with the tennis ball, and he feels like he's all checked in with Tim here.

Tim nods. "Jethro?"

"Yeah."

"It matters… to me, that you're cool with this. You know, in a way that it doesn't for the rest of them. And… I get this probably isn't your idea of normal, but… thanks for not flipping out."

Gibbs nods, reaches down, ruffles Tim's hair, and says, "All part of being a dad."

Tim smiles up at him. Gibbs smiles back and heads to the water. Quietly, more thinking it than speaking it, Tim says, "Thanks, Dad."

Sex to love to family to love and back to sex. He's thirty-eight. He's married. He's got people who love him. Whatever the hell sexuality he may happen to have, it's not a problem.

But, as a guy who has very comfortably referred to himself as straight for, basically, as long as he's known it was an option, the fact that he is enjoying watching Jimmy, too is, not disturbing, but certainly feels like something that requires more thinking about. And with Anna still napping away, Tim's fairly sure this is his prime thinking time.

You can't grow up with, or live in Penny's world, without being aware of the idea that gay is one end of a spectrum and straight's on the other end and Asexual makes up an entirely different line. And she'd certainly tell you that people are born somewhere in the middle and usually end up pushed to one side or the other by societal expectations, but naturally, all people are gender and preference fluid.

Tim's skeptical of that, on all levels, not just sexual. He tends to think you're wired to like certain things, and you may wiggle around a bit on those things, but pretty much, you like what you like and that's that, and no amount of cajoling will make you like something you don't. After all, if you could be pushed into liking something you don't, he'd be a fucking sailor by now, right? And happy about it.

But, he also knows that he is not the vast font of all knowledge and given there are billions of people on the planet, it's likely that for at least some of them, both he and Penny are right.

There was certainly a time where he was worried he might have been gay or bi. His dad called him a fag all the time, and made it exceptionally clear that was a bad thing. He knew being a fag was a bad thing before he knew what it meant to be gay. Tony told the girls at work he was gay. Having figured out that anal play was something he liked made him wonder some. He knows for a fact he's significantly more femme than Joe Average, but… As best he can tell the defining characteristic of
being a gay or bi male is wanting to have sex with other males, and, well, he doesn't.

Best he can remember, he never has.

He has and had gay acquaintances, he had gay friends in college, and at no point did he ever feel himself thinking, "Hey, let's try that out." Yeah, back in college he wasn't exactly rocking anyone's world, but he had horny gay friends; he's fairly sure that at least for a one off to blow off some steam or something one of them would have agreed. But asking or trying or even thinking of asking never hit him, even though he was often climbing the walls horny himself.

'Cause, they were guys.

And he's not attracted to guys. He doesn't dream about them. He doesn't fantasize about them. The only dick he's interested in touching is his own. (And about five out of six times when he does that, he's pretending someone else is touching his dick, a female someone else.)

He thinks about that. It feels right. Still. He really liked watching Jimmy. Head back, hands clenched, gasping quietly, legs tight and quivering, cock slowly sinking into Breena's pussy. Yeah, he liked watching that a whole lot. At first, he was just watching the sex. Cock and pussy, pink and wet, spread wide and slippery and… maybe he could be thinking a bit less about that because his dick's enjoying that image a bit more than is strictly necessary for sitting on the beach, baby wrangling.

He shifts a bit, and wishes he had an honest-to-goodness book. His cell phone is not particularly well designed for hiding an erection should any of the rest of the crew come wandering over.

He brings that image back to mind, trying to keep the focus on Jimmy, and on what exactly he was enjoying about seeing that. Basic aesthetics? Jimmy is attractive. In a kind of goofy, sort of dopy… No. That's not it. Jimmy was in the shower with them, just as naked, same damn body he had ten minutes earlier when he was getting off, and that did precisely nothing for Tim.

Breena in the shower was good. He liked that. Enjoyed seeing her get washed off on several levels beyond mere aesthetic appreciation. But Jimmy… eh… he was mostly just there. He's seen Jimmy naked dozens of times, and with the exception of when Breena and sex have been added into the mix, naked Jimmy's never gotten so much as a second glance from Tim.

So, it was definitely the sex. That was hot. That was amazing, scorching hot. He thinks about it more, potential erection be damned. He can pretend to be napping if need be. Guys get hard when they sleep. He puts the phone down, scoots a bit lower on the beach chair, and lets himself look and feel sleepy. (Maybe he will get a nap. Nap sounds pretty damn good right now. Probably good things on tap for tonight, might be nice to be well-rested for them…)

Jimmy on his back, Breena straddling his face. He's licking her. Tim was watching, liking that a whole lot. Liking the… sense memory of having done the same thing (with Abby, obviously). Jimmy was stroking himself with one hand, fingering Breena with the other, and that… Yeah, Tim liked that, too.

He's got his own memories of that. Abby's pussy on his face, the smell and wet and taste and feel. His hand slick with her cum, stroking himself. How, short of 69ing, that's as close as you can get to full sensory sex.

He was sitting up, Abby in his lap, facing away from him, slipping up and down on him. He liked that a whole lot, too. He remembers fantasizing of Abby shifting a bit, leaning forward, sucking Jimmy down. He remembers wanting to see how Jimmy would have responded to that. (Still does. Would like to be the guy at the bottom of that pile, too.)
Abby on her hands and knees. Him behind her, fucking slow and smooth. Jimmy's cock in her mouth, and her long, nimble fingers rolling his balls. God, yeah, that's really good. He shifts a bit more, so he's reclined on his side, and really hopes he looks asleep.

He keeps thinking of that, and images like that, but... Yeah, no desire at all, no fantasy, of him actually touching Jimmy.

He makes himself imagine it. Breena's riding Jimmy's face. He reaches over and gives Jimmy a hand. And it's not disgusting or anything, but... it doesn't hit him right. There's nothing sexy about it. Mostly the idea of doing it makes him want to giggle. (Possibly because he can't imagine it without Jimmy jerking up, looking at him really confused, saying 'The fuck, Tim?!' while swatting his hand away.)

The image of blowing him. Tim sets that up. Say, he's on his hands and knees, and Abby behind him, fucking him good and hard, getting his prostate over and over again, she's got him feeling crazy hot, to the point where he'll do anything to keep feeling so good, and Breena's riding Jimmy's face, flushed and moaning, but Jimmy's dick's just there, all alone, red and hard, a strand of precum between the tip and his belly, just a few inches from Tim's mouth and he leans forward opens his mouth and... Nope. That image just doesn't work. It's nothing he wants to do. He wants to watch Breena flip around and suck Jimmy. He wants to see Abby do it. Hell, Jimmy touching himself, even. He wants to see Jimmy get off, hard, flushed and shaking and moaning, cumming all over the place.

Do it himself... Uh... No.

It's not disgusting. He's not feeling any sort of visceral aversion to it. Not like being sat down in front of a big pile of cottage cheese and maggots and offered a spoon while the cook says, 'Eat up.' Just the idea of that gets his gag reflex going, and the idea of going down on Jimmy doesn't do that to him.

And there's certainly no sense of fear. Fear he knows inside and out, and whatever's got his brain going NO in no uncertain terms isn't fear.

He's fairly sure he's not finding the idea embarrassing. Maybe... Might be some of that in there. (The desire to giggle might be a less than subtle hint that there's some embarrassment in there.)

He's thinking that it's like running a marathon. He can do it. (Probably. Okay, not right now, but before the test he could have.) It's not bad or evil or anything like that. But he doesn't want to. It doesn't sound like fun, and there are way, way, way better things he'd rather spend his time on. (Like the naked girls who are also part of that fantasy. Much, much more fun!)

He hasn't had any particularly in-depth conversations with Abby about how being bi works, but he's fairly certain that it involves some sort of desire to actually engage in sex with people of the same sex. That it's not just a watching thing. And that it's really not just a, well, this isn't disgusting, sort of thing. He's thinking there should be some level of enthusiasm for something along the lines of touching or being touched by the other person...

He can see Jimmy and Breena and Abby in the surf, playing, and he likes watching that. They're having fun, together, with their babies. He really likes watching the girls. Abby's in a little two piece, tummy just starting to swell with Sean, warm, soft, big, pregnant breast bobbing around each time she moves, her butt also round and swaying with each step. God, yes, he loves that. White skin and black ink and black bathing suit. So good! And Breena, she's in this little coral one piece, but it's got the middle cut out, so he can see tummy and back and every time she steps she sways and jiggles and, yeah, that's utterly fantastic. Long, wet hair trailing over her shoulders, kissing the tips of her
breasts. He will happily watch that any time, any day, for as long as it's available.

Jimmy in board shorts? Tim's aware of the fact that Jimmy's got a good body. Probably better than good. But, nope, it's just not doing anything for him. Beyond liking watching him have a good time with the girls, nothing's happening.

He's not sure what that means, or if it matters, or anything else along those lines, but, he's feeling pretty comfortable with it, and right now, baby snoozing next to him, and likely very good things coming tonight, that nap is calling.
Skin

After lunch, Tim heads back into the house. The girls are getting their long nap, and Abby decides to join them. Jimmy and Breena are laying around on the porch along with Ducky and Penny. Abbi and Ziva are cooking. Gibbs and Tony are lurking about the kitchen keeping them company, occasionally being put to use for prep cook work, chopping up ingredients or measuring things out.

For a moment, Tim's watching, he's not sure what the girls are doing, but he's got the feeling he's going to like it. He can smell yeasty-bready things, and there's some sort of tomato concoction bubbling away on the stove, and Ziva's mixing up some sort of meat thing.

"Pasta?" he asks.

"No!" Abbi says, smiling. "Grilled pizza. Tomato sauce is cooking, fresh mozzarella's in the fridge. Ziva's mixing up some kosher sausage."

Tim smiles at that. "I don't tell either of you how awesome you are nearly often enough!"

That gets some laughing from both girls.

"Anyway, if I can pry you away for a moment," he says to Abbi, "and if you were to just happen to leave your laptop open and on, maybe I can get something useful for you."

Abbi nods, washing her hands. "That's worth it."

It reminds him of some of his most content moments as part of Gibbs' team. He's on the sofa, laptop in his lap, working away (Slowly, but, and this surprised him, he is coping pretty well with two fingers not typing, having his thumb, ring finger, and pinky back is actually helpful.) digging through layers of data and metadata, listening to the rest of his team (plus Abbi) working away, joking and playing a bit.

It's a lot like a really good paperwork day. Happy people chattering around him while he does something uniquely him and useful.

By the time he feels like he's got a pretty good handle on what's going on at CGIS, even better smells are drifting out of the kitchen, and off the porch, where the girls have the grill running and apparently Gibbs has been enlisted to do something involving fire, meat, and… and honestly Tim doesn't know what all else is going on, just that he smells something sweet and smoky, and approves greatly.

"You at a good breaking point?" Tim asks Abbi.

She nods. "Yeah. Nothing to do on the pizza until we get the crust on the coals. Jethro's keeping the pie and sausages company, making sure nothing scorches, Ziva, you've got ice cream, right?"

Ziva nods.

"You're making ice cream and pie?"

They nod and smile. Ziva's looking really happy. "Fresh peaches and blackberries the size of Kelly's hands. Glossy black, bursting ripe, and taste like sweet wine."

"And you didn't save any for me?" Tim says, mock appalled.

Ziva holds up a wooden pint basket, showing Tim that there are, in fact, a few of the berries left,
with his name on them. Abbi finishes washing her hands, and grabs them, heading over to where Tim's sitting in the living room.

"There was a dairy stand with local cream, butter, and the mozzarella," Ziva continues. "Tomatoes are in season. Gorgeous basil. One vendor had free-range chicken and eggs. So, yes. Grilled pizza, with homemade sauce and chicken sausage. Peach-blackberry pie, cooked on the embers from smoking the sausage."

"Scoops of ice cream on top," Abbi adds.

"It is more peach sorbet than ice cream," Ziva clarifies. "We had more peaches than we needed for the pie, so, freeze the extras, then into the blender with the cream, a few basil leaves, little vanilla extract, and we've got a no sugar-added dessert for Jimmy."

"Which I appreciate," Jimmy calls out from the porch.

"S'mores on top of that…" Gibbs grins, sitting on Abbi's other side as she sits next to Tim.

"Thought you were on the grill." Abbi says.

"I deputized Duck to handle it." He snatches the berry that Tim hadn't eaten. "Gonna be a good night. When the girls wake up, we'll go on our driftwood hunt."

"So, basically, the plan of this weekend is to see exactly how fat you can get all of us?" Tim asks.

"Fat and happy!" Abbi says. "On a less happy front," she looks at her computer, and he nods.

"Less happy is right. So, every time you do something on your computer, it doesn't just do whatever it is, it makes records of it, too. Sort of like how you can't walk on the beach without leaving tracks."

"Metadata, right?"

Tim nods and smiles. "So, for those months where you've got no files, you've also got no metadata. There's nothing. At all."

"That's what they said before."

"Yeah. So, here's what this is telling me, whoever did this wants me to think no files were ever made."

"Think?"

"Yeah. Look, there have to be records." He's pointing at a screen that's supposed to show payments rendered from CGIS from October of 2011. "You guys got paid, right? You expensed things and money came back to you?"

Abbi nods.

"How did that happen?"

"Depended on what it was and who you were. Cash for little things. Direct deposit for bigger things. Checks if that's what you preferred."

"You guys have credit cards for bigger things?"

Abbi nods on that, too. "Some of us do. I used to have one. Spend four nights out of seven on the
road and it's just easier to use their card than to keep receipts for everything."

"That's how we work, too. So, on the most basic level, it is absolutely impossible that entire quarters could go by without any records being made. I mean, you don't even have bank statements here. And I really doubt VISA or whoever does your cards went months without getting paid. Whoever cleared this out wanted it to look like your boss was just a screw up, didn't keep records, and for all I know that could be true, but it's also true that records got wiped out of here. This is way too empty for just bad bookkeeping."

"Wonderful, now what?" Abbi says, dryly.

"I'm emailing you, on your personal account, what needs to go to IA, what conclusions the 'independent investigator' you've got looking at this is drawing, and I'm going to suggest that you need to make hard copies of this, and mail it priority, sign on receipt, to whoever is in charge of your IA department, personally, so when this blows up you can show copies of what you sent, to whom, along with the receipt of them having gotten it. That should keep you covered, and yes, first thing when you get back in, get those forensic accountants on the job. Someone with access to your bank accounts will hopefully have an easier time figuring out where your money went."

"Any idea who cleaned everything up?" Abbi asks Tim.

He shakes his head. "Best I can give you what computer did the wiping, and I did, it's in the email, but… These got wiped clean more than three years ago. That computer may not exist any longer. Or it may, but the person using it…"

Abbi nods, she understands. "So, if I'm insanely lucky that computer belongs to someone who is still working for us, and used it to do that."

"But you aren't that lucky, because whoever did this knew enough to clean the metadata, too. So, if that computer still exists, and is still in the possession of someone at CGIS—"

"That's not going to be the someone who wiped clean my records."

Tim nods, handing Abbi's computer back to her. It's only once he's doing that that he starts to feel a little bad about this, hoping that he didn't just start up the 'crime solving' itch that's going to screw Gibbs and Abbi's vacation. But she takes the computer from him, skims the email he sent her, adds her own note to it, and then fires it off to IA.

"We gonna be somewhere there's a post office on Monday?" she asks Gibbs.

He nods.

"Quick detour Monday then to get this mailed out and the rest can wait until I get back, Wednesday morning." Both Tim and Gibbs look a bit surprised by that. "I haven't taken a real vacation in years. I'm taking one now. So, McGee, what do I owe you for your 'independent investigating'?"

Tim shrugs, no one's ever offered to pay him for his extracurricular computer work before. "Pizza crust recipe?"

"I'd give you that, anyway. No, real cash. If I've hired an 'Independent investigator' to look at my problem, I need to actually hire you. Don't want IA thinking this looks off."

"Oh… um… what do people in the real world get paid for stuff like this…"

Abbi shrugs, not like she's ever hired for someone like this before. "What's your hourly rate at
He thinks that through and blushes a bit. "Let's call it two hundred dollars for two and a half hours."

Abbi raises an eyebrow, that sounds a bit lower than what she assumes Tim makes as a Director, more on par with what she makes as a Division Head, but maybe they do things different at NCIS. Or maybe he's counting the hours he actually works as opposed to the hours he's supposed to work. She'll ask Gibbs about it when Tim's not around, because he's not looking comfortable getting into it in detail.

"Look who's up!" Abby says as she heads down the steps, holding Molly's hand with Kelly riding her hip. "Anna's still snoozing, but probably not for long, she was making little chirpy getting ready to wake up noises when we decided it was time to come down."

Molly scrambles up into Gibbs' lap. "S'mores?"

"Soon. Driftwood time. We've got to go find the wood to make the fire with. Think your Daddy wants to come along and help with that?"

"I'm in!" Tony adds. "Unless you need more stuff cut up?" he asks Ziva.

"We are good for dinner. Breena!"

Breena heads in.

"Do you and Abby want to feed the girls first, then S'mores and bonfire, then Shabbos dinner at sunset, or Shabbos early, followed by bonfire?"

Abby shrugs. "Don't think it matters much for Kelly. Molly's the one really looking forward to this, Breena?"

"Is dinner for all of us early a problem? I'm thinking for everyone involved it's probably easier to eat all at once, and then head down to the beach. Then we can enjoy the fire as long as we want."

Ziva nods. "I can work with that. Abbi?"

"I'll put the crusts on the grill at 4:45, we'll be ready to eat by 5:30, plenty of playtime after for Gibbs and the girls, and then bedtime and adults by the fire."

And thus, with a plan, everyone broke off.

Gibbs has his arms full of pieces of driftwood. Molly's running all over the beach grabbing pieces for him. Tony's off a bit, stacking them up, getting them into burn position. Jimmy's got Anna in the snuggli on his chest, standing next to Gibbs.

"Doing it with a water pistol from ten feet away doesn't count as sniping," Jethro says quietly to Jimmy.

Jimmy laughs a little. "Uh huh. Your guard was down and you didn't have a clue it was coming. I know it doesn't count for the shot, but..." Jimmy grins at him. "It was fun. And I had to get through an entire breakfast with you and all the rest of the family, with it on my back, and not let on something was up. I thought that was good practice."

Gibbs smiles at that. "You're right, it was."
"Plus, I set it up so I was at the sink, behind you, water on, to cover the sound of me pulling it out, taking advantage of the fact that I like wearing my shirts open on vacation, so none of you suspected, and I still had easy access."

"You set it up good, for a water gun fight. For real… too close, no escape route… Getting out clean's more important than hitting the target."

Jimmy nods a bit. "I know. But three years ago, I'm not sure I could have set up a good water pistol ambush, let alone done it without telegraphing I was going to do it."

"Yeah." Gibbs agrees with that. He heard some stories of Jimmy and laser tag and his lack of skills. "You're learning." Then Gibbs grins. "Got all day tomorrow and Sunday morning to show you how to do it right."

Jimmy's smirking at that. "Uh huh. You can try."


It's not a traditional Shabbos dinner. The bread they're breaking is actually three grilled pizzas. Sunset's still two hours off. The "wine" is the sugar-free vanilla soda that Breena makes and Jimmy loves. And, technically, the two pizzas with sausage aren't kosher.

But that doesn't matter much. It's the Sabbath, and a day of rest and celebration and thanksgiving is definitely in the cards.

The candles are lit, flickering softly in their cups, along with tiki torches, and sure, the sun's still up, but somehow fire makes things feel more intimate.

The prayers have been said, and blessings given.

Hands are washed, bread is broken. The Sabbath is in full swing.

There's a little lull in the conversation. Ducky had finished telling a story about his adventures in Naples. (Birthplace of pizza, at least, Tim thinks that's how they got onto this.)

Ziva looks at Tony and smiles, and he grins back at her. "So, we have news," he says, smile threatening to split his face. Everyone else is smiling, too, they all know where this is going.

"As you have all figured out, I am pregnant!" Ziva says, glowing at them. "If all goes well, come the beginning of April, we'll be adding another place to the table."

That gets a lot of happy noise. Congratulations offered, and hugs. Abby woops at it, and Breena is giggling with happiness.

Ducky's chuckling, and Penny's grinning, shaking her head. "Oh, Lord, five babies under the age of three and a half. This crew is going to be a handful."

"Can you imagine when we've got the house done, say Christmas five years from now, all of them bounding around the house high as kites on sugar and excitement, presents all over the place?" Abbi adds.

Gibbs is grinning at that, not just the image of it, but that Abbi's seeing his/their family five years from now.

"Might need another dog," Gibbs adds with a smile, "something that herds. Keep 'em all in one
place."

Abby claps her hand over Gibbs' mouth. "Don't you dare say that! Mona's doing a great job of herding babies. You apologize to her!"

Mona, who had been laying on the porch, right at the sliding glass door, looks up at the mention of her name, but no one's offering food, so she goes back to snoozing.

"She knows I'm foolin' with her."

"Are we finding out if it's a boy or girl?" Penny asks.

Tony shrugs. Ziva doesn't. "He wants to know. I do not. But we still have a while to decide. The test they did for you… That was earlier than usual, right?"

Abby nods. "Yeah, instead of taking a peek with the ultrasound, this is a DNA test. Do you have your first OB appointment, yet?"

"No. We're going to make it when we get home," Tony says.

"I don't know if there's a deadline, but we were at eleven weeks when we went in." Abby replies, then says to Ziva, "So, it looks like you're feeling good."

Ziva smiles at that, too. "A little sleepy, and a little more sensitive, but otherwise, yes, feeling good. Of course, I am also only a month pregnant."

The girls laugh at that.

Jimmy's looking at Ziva and starts to say, "How long… Are you planning on… Uh… What are your thoughts on maternity leave?" He stumbles a bit looking for a PC way to ask that question.

Penny smiles, approving of his effort.

"I do not know for sure. Right now I feel fine, so working is not an issue. If that changes… I do not think it is fair, or safe, for the rest of the team if I cannot bring my A game to the field. It is one thing to be tired for a day or two, another thing to feel like you're going to fall asleep at any moment for weeks at a time, and if you have to throw up six times a day…"

Breena and Abby are nodding along. "Yeah, your job, cat naps, and morning sickness don't go along together well," Abby says.

"Let alone trying to run someone down when your joints go all loose and your balance goes sideways." Breena adds. "But, that's not a problem for everyone, I mean…"

Ziva nods. "I know. So… I don't know how long I'm staying, but…" and though Tony and Gibbs know this, it's not something she's said to anyone else in this crew. "But after, I'm not going back."

That gets a few seconds of shocked quiet, followed by, "Oh… wow!" from Breena.

Then, "That's so cool!" from Abby. "Stay at home mom… For good, or…"

"I think for good. I've been ready for a change for a while now. It's time to dedicate life to nurturing life. Eventually she'll… and maybe a little brother or sister or both," she's beaming a smile at Tony, "will be in school, and I'll be looking for something else, but while they are still babies, I'd like to be home."
Tim's watching Tony as Ziva's saying this, and he catches a bit of panic in the back of his eyes, but it's not nearly as bad as he would have expected it to be. Granted, he expected this to be curl into a ball, rocking back and forth whimpering in the bathroom, full on panic attack, so the fact that he's still sitting there, looking calm-ish, and mostly happy and insanely proud, is a very big step.

He watches Penny, wondering what she's thinking. She hasn't said anything and right now her face is unreadable. He gets the sense that she's going to want to talk to Ziva alone, make sure she's not feeling pressured into doing anything, but... But he doesn't know.

In that Abbi and Ziva cooked, they do not have to do dishes. So, shortly after dinner breaks, they head to the beach for lighting the fire.

Penny offers to head down with them.

They're about four steps out of the house when she asks, "Do you really want to be a stay at home mom? It can be… so limiting and dull and… Just, don't let anyone pressure you into it." It's clear that by anyone she's thinking Tony or Gibbs.

Ziva smiles at Penny. "No one expects me to be a stay at home mom. If it is limiting and dull and I do not like it, no one will give me any trouble about going back to work. Sure, I will not have my space on Tony's team. He will have to hire someone to replace me when I leave, but I will not find it difficult to find work. And… like with McGee and Abby, one of us should have a safe nine-to-five job if we have children at home."

"Are you sure? Men can be-"

"Penny, it's not about that. If anything, Tony would prefer I kept working." They've gotten to the wood, and Ziva starts messing with the matches, looking to put this into words.

"I'm done. I've been done for a while. I still love the job, and I'm good at it, but, it's not my life anymore. And more than that, I do not want it to be my life anymore."

Abbi's listening quietly to this, looking to learn more about Ziva, and Penny's watching her intently as she speaks, making sure she's not rationalizing and internalizing external pressure.

"Death has always been part of my life. I was thirteen when Tali was killed. By fifteen, my parent's marriage was dead. At eighteen, I was in the army and had killed my first man. Twenty, I was working for my father, traveling all over the world, killing people because they needed to die. I was twenty-three when my father made me my half-brother's control officer, hoping to keep him tied to our side, and before that year was over, I had killed him. That was the first turning point, I was done being an agent of death. I started working with NCIS and became someone who preserved life. But on our best days, we save what is already there. Most days we sweep up the shards of someone else's shattered life. That is important, and vital, and honorable, and necessary. It is a good job, a good life, but as I told Gibbs, we preserve, but we don't create, and I want to create. I want to focus on life, and living, and make things, make people. I've been dedicated to death for a long time, Penny, and now… I'm done. So, perhaps not today or tomorrow, but when I leave NCIS I'm not going back."

Ziva smiles at her. "I'm going to help Gibbs work on our home, the one for Tony and the baby and I, and the one for our family. I'm going to learn how to take real pictures, something I've always wanted to do, but never got to. I'm going to get fat and sassy and waddle around with this child growing inside of me and eat ice cream and work on building a nursery and a home." She's got tears in her eyes as she says that. "I'm going to be alive, and I'm going to dedicate myself to growing things, people, love." Ziva blinks at that. "I'm going back, to the little girl I was, and the woman she thought she would be. I'm getting the life that was stolen from me by a bomber in 1997."
Penny nods, hugging Ziva close, and quietly says to her, "L'chaim, Ziva."

"Exactly, Penny."

Abbi's standing there, not sure how or what to do, for a second, and then Ziva grabs her and pulls her into the hug, too.

If there's anything cuter than Gibbs kneeling on the sand, his arms around Molly, as she holds a long stick with a marshmallow on the end, at first too far away, and then too close to the fire, giggling happily as it toasts and then bursts into flame, no one sitting around the fire knows what it would be.

The girls are in the house, putting babies to bed, and Gibbs grabs something out of the bag he had with him. Something that isn't chocolate or marshmallows or a tennis ball for Mona.

"Ohhh…" Tony says, looking at the very good bottle of scotch.

"Indeed," Ducky adds as Gibbs opens it. "I don't suppose you've got some glasses in there, Jethro?"

Gibbs shakes his head, takes a sip, and then passes it to Tony. "Got this the day you told me you were going to ask Ziva to marry you. Been holding onto it, waiting for the day all of my boys were Dads."

Tony hands it to Tim, who takes a small sip. He knows what Jimmy's got planned for him, already taken the Percocet, so he can't have too much alcohol, and this is a hell of a lot stronger than the wine he's had with the pain killer before.

It's good though. Scotch is his hard drink of choice, and this is smooth and dark with a bit of smoke (made more intense by sitting in front of a fire) and just rolls down his throat. "Thinking of us drinking this by a fire?" he asks Gibbs.

"Picturing it at my house, in front of the fire place, but this works, too."

Tim hands it over to Jimmy, who has a somewhat larger swallow, but also isn't going overboard. Tim's just got to keep from ODing, he's got to keep enough of his brain and fine motor control in place to do delicate work.

"Nice!" Jimmy says, handing it to Ducky.

Ducky almost looks like he's uncomfortable with drinking from the bottle, but then he winks at Jethro and takes a healthy swig. "To the next generation!"

Gibbs takes the bottle back from Ducky and takes another swig. He lifts the bottle to each Tony, Tim, and Jimmy, and then says, "To the boys you were, the men you've become, and the children you're going to raise."

And maybe it's the drugs he's on, but that actually makes Tim's eyes tear up a bit.

Tony takes the bottle again, and adds, "To our wives, who make all of this possible, and who will likely be back in a few minutes and laugh themselves silly at this."

Tim chuckles at that, and the rest of them are laughing, too. He finds the bottle in his hand and takes another small sip. Just enough to get the flavor on his tongue. "To the men who are showing us what being a good Dad looks like."
He hands it over to Jimmy, who takes another drink, and shakes his head. "Great, leave me last… Um..." He grins. "'Blah, blah, blah, alcohol is fun.'" Then he winks at them, and Tim's got the feeling that he's supposed to know what that was in reference to, but he doesn't. Jimmy takes another sip, and says, seriously, "To the love that binds us, that made a bunch of strangers into co-workers, co-workers into friends, and friends into family." He takes one more swallow. "And to the loves we have not yet met, the children yet to come, and our loves who have passed away." He takes one last drink on that, and passes the bottle to Ducky.

Ducky sips again, and says, "Amen." Then his eyes slip further up the beach, toward the house. "And I believe the ladies are about to rejoin us."

The girls were heading down, and they did join them, and soon they were lounging around the fire passing the bottle, toasting marshmallows, enjoying each other. Tim thinks, as he's sitting on a little folding chair, Abby between his legs, resting back against his chest (he took the time to undo the sling and rearrange his arm so she can nestle in) as flames and sparks jump to the darkening sky, his whole family laughing and joking around him, that this is what contentment is.

And then they were back in their room. Tim's sure something, like walking up to the house, happened between these things, but, Percocet and alcohol, beyond being in an excellent mood, he's fuzzy on the details. And Jimmy was working on ripping his arm out of its socket, (releasing the joint) and he's thinking that this, no matter how much he needs it, and how useful it is, is not contentment.

Apparently he said something less than complimentary about the whole situation, because Jimmy responded with, "Like I said last time, you trying to get me to just oil you up and play with you?"

"No. Want you to oil Breena up and play with her," that popped out long before Tim's brain got a chance to provide any input.

Jimmy's staring at Breena; then he grins at her, and she smiles back. "That can probably be arranged."

And once his arm was done, it was, and yes, Tim (and Abby) enjoyed watching it, and it certainly looked like Jimmy and Breena had a good time with it, too.

And, all in all, (even if he is fairly fuzzy on the details) Tim would highly recommend sex with your wife, watching your best friends, high as a kite on endorphins and euphorics after an excellent meal with everyone you love.

Jimmy wakes with a jerk, not sure what he's hearing, just that it's setting off his 'someone's hurt, gotta help' sensors. He's practically out of the bed before it occurs to him that he's not hearing either of the girls.

No, the crying, and… yeah, those are words, are coming from a much deeper, but broken and quiet, voice, a whole lot closer than the closet.

He looks over and sees that Tim's crying, cursing in his sleep, and Abby's wrapped around him, rocking him gently, making soft, soothing sounds.

"Stop that fucking crying!" His voice is soft, murmured, but very intense.

"Shhh…" She's whispering it, lips near his ear. "Come on Tim, you're dreaming, shift out of it."
"Only babies and fags cry!" He's shuddering and crying between words.

"Shhh… You're dreaming, Tim. You're safe in bed. Come on, baby, shift out of it."

Jimmy's not sure what to do. Abby's holding onto him from behind, cuddled around him, murmuring softly to him. He takes Tim's clenched left hand and gently works on relaxing his fingers.

Tim goes quiet, but Jimmy can see from the tension in his face and shoulders that he's just not sharing what's going on with the wider world, he hasn't slipped into dreamless sleep.

"Should we wake him up?" he asks Abby, also keeping his voice in a low whisper.

"No. He'll remember the dreams if he wakes up. I just try to slide him out of them."

"Of course it hurts. It's supposed to hurt. Stop being a little cunt and take it like a man."

"I've got you, Tim, shhhh… shhhh… You're safe and in bed. Pull out of it, baby."

Jimmy's holding his hand, but it doesn't feel like enough. He can see the tension on Tim's face, the tears. He can see the child Tim must have been, crying, cringing in terror. Jimmy's free hand comes up to Tim's face, and he gently wipes away the tears, lightly stroking over his cheek and forehead. "You're okay, Tim. You're home and safe, and we've got you. Time to go back to sleeping, okay?"

More quiet, face still tense, fear still wrought large over his body, Jimmy can even smell it. Abby's still rocking him cooing softly at him, then Tim shudders all over, sighs, snuggles in closer to her, and relaxes completely.

She lifts her head a little, half-smiling at Jimmy. "He's okay now."

"How often does this happen?"

"Only about twice a week, now."

"PT nights?"

She nods. "Muscles hold memories, feelings, get them open and moving again, and it shifts what's in your head, too. Every time we've done this, he's had nightmares after."

"Shit." Jimmy's ready to kick himself about that.

"No. He needs his arm working, and I think… I don't know. I think this is processing for him, too. I think this is stuff he still can't let himself deal with when he's awake."

"Great."

Abby shrugs. It is what it is. And the only direction they've got is through it. There's one other thing going on, too, namely pregnant bladder and right now she's really got to go. That's what woke her up in the first place. "Look, I've got to pee, you got him for a few minutes?"

Jimmy nods.

Abby carefully shifts Tim over, and Jimmy takes hold of him. Cuddling him in a full body hug.

If anyone had ever suggested that there would be a day when he'd be naked, in bed, Breena on one side, an equally naked, sleeping Tim, on the other, wrapped in his arms, he would have laughed so long and hard he would have been in danger of rupturing both lungs.
It does feel weird, and a little uncomfortable (though Tim doesn't appear to mind or have noticed that it's not Abby snuggling him) but Jimmy likes to think of himself as the kind of guy who can go the extra mile to do what his friends need when they need it, and he'd hate to think that he couldn't provide a hug when a hug is needed.

Especially if (and he hears the toilet flush) said hug is only needed for two minutes.

Abby gets back, and snuggles in front of Tim (between him and Jimmy, which makes Jimmy feel more comfortable again) and Tim gloms onto her the same way the girls do with their favorite, most beloved stuffed animals.

Abby's facing Jimmy, and she takes his hand in hers, squeezing gently. "Thanks. I know that was weird for you."

Jimmy shrugs a bit and squeezes her hand back. "All part of the job."

Abby smiles at him, closes her eyes, yawns, and very quickly drops back off to sleep.

Jimmy doesn't drift off that quickly. He's not sure what he's thinking or feeling, just… how strange is it to love someone so intensely that you will happily kill someone for him, but to feel odd about holding him… Holding him naked. He's hugged Tim, and that's never been a problem, and when they lost Jon, he slept with Tim and Abby holding him, and that was fine, but they were dressed.

Somehow that mattered. Skin… skin's taboo. They can touch as long as it's not skin to skin. They can look as long as they don't touch. He remembers Breena saying something about how much easier this, whatever this is, will be if the two of them can be physically close without flipping out…

He didn't flip out. He's fairly sure it wasn't scary on any level. It's just a touch, skin on skin. But skin means sex… Except it doesn't. He sleeps naked with Breena most nights, and most of that sleeping is just close, skin to skin touch. He's got no problem cuddling his girls when he and they are naked. That's skin, but it's not sex.

And hugging Tim isn't sex. Really not sex. It's just comfort. Just skin on skin and warmth and another body holding you close when you hurt.

Jimmy feels… he's not sure, something, bad isn't quite it, unsettled, that's probably closer to right, about the fact that this matters to him. It's just skin. Why should it matter? His… Tim… (He still doesn't know what Tim is to him. More than a friend, that much he knows, but beyond that, he doesn't have a good word for this relationship.) is hurting, and needs comfort, and if he'd been dressed he would have held him without so much as a second thought.

But it does matter. And he's not sure what to do about that. He thinks about it, and decided it would matter to Tim, too. Reverse the situation, and Tim would hold him if he needed it, but, both of them naked and touching would make him pause, too.

Tim's as curled around Abby as he can get. She's on her side, snuggled up against his chest, and he's got her flush against him, leg over hers, left arm under her neck, face pressed against her shoulder, totally cuddled into her.

But his hand is in reach. Jimmy shifts around a bit, feeling Breena return to her usual spot snuggled into his left side. He kisses her, and then reaches over, taking Tim's left hand in his right, just holding it, getting used to touching him, skin on skin.

Eventually, he drifts off.
A/N: Okay, I'm going to try and get a chapter up for Christmas, too, and then... I have no idea. It's that time of year again when the boys are home from school, so I've got, at most, two hours a day to write. With any luck I'll have stuff up and out soonish, but... It might be after New Years when I get time to really write again.
Jimmy feels something wet hit him, right at the base of the skull, and then dribble down the back of his neck. He jerks at it, looking around, but doesn't see anything.

Probably just some spray or something. He's in the ocean, waist deep, boogie board in hand, waiting for a breaker. Storm's rolling in, this time tomorrow the whole coast will be drenched, but right now, the sun is shining and the waves are high, which means he, Tony, and both Abbies are getting as much surf time in as they can.

A thought hits as he's looking at the waves which are not really likely to be providing the sort squirt of water he just felt, and he tentatively reaches back to check. Good. Not a seagull.

The next squirt is definitely not a bit of spray. It hits in exactly the same place, and there is no chance that this isn't water pistol fire. Jimmy quickly searches the beach, making sure that Jethro isn't on it, and no, he's not. So, where the hell is he shooting from? It's a water pistol, not a rifle.

Granted, it would be easier to tell what was going on if he had his glasses or contacts in, but he's fairly sure that even without them, he can see something the size of Gibbs that should be less than thirty feet away. But no, all he's got in range is water, more water, a little water to the left, and water with DiNozzo and both Abbies to the right. (And none of them are firing a water pistol at him.)

One more squirt, this time to his chest, which means he should be staring right at him, but he can't see where he's being hit from.

Jimmy does another 360, looking everywhere, but he can't tell where Jethro is, or where he'd been shooting from. Then, a few seconds later, he's staring at the beach again, and there's Gibbs, sitting in the sand, rubbing Mona's ears, and tossing the tennis ball for her.

He's also head to toe, dripping wet.

Jimmy catches the next wave, rides in, and lands near Gibbs. "You were shooting from under the water?"

Gibbs smiles, very satisfied. Then he holds up two plastic bendy straws. "Always take advantage of your location and the tools around you."

"You kinky bastard!" Tony says, sounding sly, bringing the plate with all of the chicken breasts over to the grill. Tim's on grilling duty. (He volunteered, thought it'd be good exercise for his foot and ankle. So far that appears to be right.)

Tim jerks a little at that, feeling startled by it. "Uh..." He's looking at the chicken breasts, laying them on the grill.

"Got a late swim last night, heard you and Abby."

"Shit." Yeah they were trying to be quiet, but apparently not succeeding. Though, he'd have to admit he's a bit fuzzy on what exactly happened last night. He can clearly remember really liking it, and he's got some interesting bruises on his chest which have a few clear memories attached to them, but for the most part he just remembers feeling really good, about the sex in specific and the universe in general.
"In the room with Jimmy and Breena sleeping, and the girls... Damn! I get you like the thrill of almost getting caught, but... That's really taking it to the edge." Tony's got a happy, dirty grin on his face, and Tim's got the sense he's sort of cheering Tim on with this.

Still, it looks like Tony doesn't know precisely what was going on last night. Granted, Tim doesn't either, but he's got a much more accurate version than Tony does. Tim shrugs a bit, deciding that Tony doesn't need to know what was actually happening, after all they still haven't decided exactly what they're telling anyone who isn't Gibbs.

"What'd you hear?" Tim's curious because they were trying to be quiet and while he knows they weren't silent, he didn't think anyone was moaning or groaning. He knows one of the bite marks on his chest is from keeping Abby's mouth quiet, so...

"Your room's right over the kitchen. Kept hearing a little shifting noise and a thunk when we got a drink after the swim. Shift, shift, shift, thunk, and repeat. You guys are in the bed right? Not sleeping on the floor with your arm like that. Or is Palmer the kinky one?"

Probably Jimmy and Breena going full speed toward the end while Tim and Abby were chasing their orgasm, too. Bed was definitely rocking then. (Tim makes a mental note to see if there's a screwdriver around here anywhere, probably a good idea to tighten up the joints before they leave, or else Ed and Jeannie might wonder what happened to their bed when they sleep here next.) Tim nods and grins. "Palmer's always the kinky one, but no, we're not sleeping on the floor."

Tony smiles wide and elbows him gently. "Glad to see all of the important bits healed up and are working just fine."

Tim laughs. He takes another sip of his cider, then sticks out his tongue and quickly wiggles it. "Yeah, they do."

Tony almost chokes on his drink he laughs so hard at that.

"What has you two giggling away?" Abbi asks, heading over to the grill with shucked corn on the cob.

"Rule 69."

Abbi looks confused. "Never trust a woman who doesn't trust her man?" That doesn't sound like the punchline to a dirty joke to her, and that kind of laughter goes with a dirty joke.

"Some numbers have multiple rules. Gibbs doesn't know we've co-opted sixty-nine for this one, but it is one of his rules." Tim says, smirking even wider.

"Oral always counts," Tony says, grinning.

Abbi closes her eyes for a second, laughing quietly, and then puts the corn down. "And what got you guys making that rule?"

Tony squints a bit, remembering. "That was your bachelor party, right?"

Tim nods. "Yeah. He might have said it before then, but that's where I'm remembering it from."

"And what were you talking about?" Abbi asks, sure she knows.

Tim and Tony shake their heads. Tony replies, "Even if we could remember, we're not saying. You wanna know, you've got to ask him."
"Uh huh..." She looks at them dryly before heading off, still chuckling.

Tony looks at Tim. "You still at seven?"

Takes Tim a minute to remember that was the number he gave for how often he was getting off a week. "Ish. This weekend's bumping me up some," he looks at himself, getting the injured idea across, "but most of this summer's been pretty dry."

Tony nods. "Jimmy was right, getting married was great for sex."

Tim grins at him and turns the chicken breasts, then adds the corn to the grill.

---

Tony's looking at Jimmy, Breena, and Abby. "You guys can go out. I'm good with babysitting." It's a token protest, just because that's the sort of thing he would say, and they all know it. Right now, he'd be pretty mopey if they left him to go dancing and he ended up with Marvel movies and his left hand for company.

But, in that most of this group does not know what's going on, and it is the sort of thing he would say, he does say it, and Jimmy and Abby and Breena all do their part of saying, 'No, we're good at home with you, no problem' sort of thing.

So, once dinner's cleaned up, and after babies have been put to bed, the four of them are lounging around on the sofas in the living room, Age of Ultron queued up, popcorn popping, waiting for the other half of their crew to head off.

They're about ten minutes into it, watching Thor get all cocky about Mjolnir, and then silently freak out when it looks like Cap can shift it, (Abby's talking about how Cap can totally lift it, but isn't because that really would freak out Thor, and he's too nice of a guy to do that) when everyone else comes down. The girls are in pretty sun dresses and flip flops. The guys... Tony and Ducky have both opted for the linen pants, short sleeve button-down, right off the beach in Jamaica look. (Jimmy makes a comment about pink really being Tony's color.) Gibbs doesn't appear to own linen pants, because he's in cargo shorts, bare feet, and an NCIS t-shirt.

All in all, they look ready for a night of alcohol, sand, and music.

"Don't wait up!" is the last thing Penny says as they head out.

They actually do watch all of Age of Ultron, for several reasons. One, if asked they want to be able to answer questions about it. Two, it'll look really suspicious if there're bowls of uneaten popcorn sitting around/popcorn in the trash when everyone gets home. Three, if something goes wrong and they end up coming home early, it'd be really odd if they were all suddenly not watching the movie. And four, it's a good double date, sitting on the sofa, petting and necking movie. After all, in that many minutes of the movie can be condensed into: Big Ass Fight Scene it's not like they miss much in the way of motive plot by not having eyes glued to the screen.

So, by the time Ultron is over, they've eaten the popcorn, are sure no one 'forgot' anything and needed to run home to pick it up, and two hours of necking and petting means they're all in a pretty good sexy mood, too.

---

There's an idea Tim's been playing with all day. He remembers that Jimmy and Breena like sexy stories, and he knows Abby and he do. And, as much as he's been loving watching Jimmy and Breena play, he also wants something interactive, but not too interactive. He doesn't want to break the rules they've set. And this wouldn't break any of the rules they've got set up, but it's still a step
past just watching.

Also, he's thinking, if this story goes the way he thinks it will, then that'll take him and Jimmy a quarter step further toward the idea of playing with each other's wives, and if it's good… then it'll be really good. And if it's not, if they can't easily play with just the idea, voice and images and stories, then they know they can't do it for real, and they get to find out that they can't cross that line without getting hurt.

Plus, when they get upstairs, Abby heads to the drawer that's got the lube in it, and grabs it and the cock ring, dropping them on the bed, and then says, "Gotta clean up first."

Tim grins at her, knowing what that means, and licks his lips. So, with that in play, he knows that he's got at least fifteen minutes of gentle slow stretching time to fill, so… yeah, story time.

Breena sits on the bed, and picks up the cock ring. "You like these?"

Tim nods. "Got two more at home." Breena's stretching it between her fingers. "That's the plain one. Also have one with a bullet, and a leather one."

Breena looks away from the ring to Tim. "Don't like the ones that vibrate. They're more of a distraction than a turn on."

Tim pretty much agrees with that, but the bullet ends up at the base of his cock, and buzzing there doesn't do much for him. It's more fun for Abby. "So, you've got some of these at home, too?" Tim asks, thinking he'd really like to see what sorts of toys Jimmy and Breena have.

She nods. "Kind of like this, silicon, it's got a little nub for clit stimulation. Good for grinding together." She looks at the ring and then back at Tim. "Doesn't it make it harder to come?"

He grins at that. "Sometimes I can use all the help I can get. Plus it's a really nice combination with anal. And harder is always a good thing. Right Jimmy?"

Jimmy's been leaning against the edge of the dresser, watching this conversation the look on his face somewhere between curious/learning and turned on. "Feels good to me." Jimmy pauses for a second, not sure if he wants to say what's in his head, and then decides to say what he's thinking. "Tend to like the way they look, too."

Tim nods; that's not something he's ever said out loud before, but… it is part of the appeal. "That's why we've got a leather one, too. It's not as functional, but it looks cool."

"So, this is jewelry for you guys?" Breena asks, not looking like she buys that.

Tim shrugs and Jimmy shakes his head, because no, that's not quite how it works. "It's not how the ring looks, per se," Jimmy adds, "it's how I look wearing one."

"Sounds like jewelry," Breena says. "And if you like the leather one…"

"Okay, I know for some guys they really are like jewelry. They make metal ones, and yes, some of them look cool, I've seen some I did really like, but I'm not comfortable sticking my dick and balls into something that compresses blood flow and then just hoping I'll be able to get it off after. The absolute last thing I want to do is end up hoping that the guy with the bolt cutter won't take my dick off." Jimmy's cringing along in sympathy at that. "But, even with that, it's more that they make my dick look great, and above and beyond that, bigger, fuller, more sensitive and it takes longer to get off is an awesome combination, especially with anal sex. And, if that's why girls wear jewelry, then yes, it's like jewelry."
Breena giggles. "That's not precisely why I wear jewelry, but that's some of it."

Abby opens the door to the bathroom, naked, smiling, and says, "You all look way too dressed for this party."

"You guys like stories, right?" Tim asks after they're naked and in bed.

Jimmy and Breena nod.

Tim grins. "Then we're taking turns tonight. You two watch, enjoy. Touch each other all you want, but no touching us."

"I thought that was already the rule," Jimmy says, looking confused.

"Making sure we're all clear on it. I tell great stories, but they're just stories. Not an invitation. Not tonight, at least. Tonight, you guys get to listen in, but don't do, okay?"

"Okay." Jimmy says, looking at Breena and then back at Tim and Abby.

Tim grins and kisses Abby. They're naked and sitting against the headboard of the bed, Abby across Tim's lap. Jimmy and Breena are at the footboard. It's a slow, wet kiss, deep, tongues stroking and petting. When Tim pulls back from Abby, he asks her, "You remember that story we started at the club?"

"When we were dancing and they were fucking in the booth?"

"Yeah."

Abby grins, looking at Jimmy and Breena all over, enjoying them naked and turned on, licking her lips. "Couple of them."

"Yeah." Tim kisses her ear. "You think they may want to hear something like that?"

"Maybe." She grins and then kisses his bottom lip. "You going to tell it the same way?"

Tim shakes his head. "Nope. Gonna play with it. Can't not play with my stories." He kisses her neck, fingers falling to her breast, gently circling her nipple. He looks up to Jimmy and Breena, "Stories are never done, not really. Sometimes you let them out so other people can see them, but you'll always want to fiddle with them."

She grins at that. "So, where are we starting then?"

"Hmmm…" Tim's eyes droop to half-closed, he's seeing the set-up, feeling Abby on him, and getting into story-telling mode. He's also watching Jimmy and Breena, who are sitting across from him, Breena in Jimmy's lap, kissing a little, but mostly watching, listening, looking eager for what happens next. "I think we're at home. Babies are spending the day with Pop and Ducky and Penny, so we've got hours and hours just to ourselves." He kisses Abby again, staring at Breena while he does it, and then looks to Jimmy, licking Abby's lower lip while he does that. Abby sucks his tongue, and Jimmy squirms a little at it.

"Black silk ropes," Tim says when Abby lets go.

Abby grins at that, too. "Good place to start." Tim runs his hand through her hair, tracing his nails down her neck and spine, feeling her shiver on him.
"Yeah, really good place. Breena's going to come over and spend some time with me." Tim looks at her, eyes hot. "You're going to sit in my lap, and we're going to kiss." He kisses Abby, hot and wet, deep and slow, making love to her with tongue and lips, his fingers trailing over her throat and breast. Tim breaks the kiss after a moment. "Just like that. Wet and slippery and however you liked to be kissed. You're going to show me what you like, and then I'm going to do it. And Abby's going to get up, and she's going to take Jimmy's hands, and get him nice and comfy, sitting like I am, against the headboard on our bed. It's wood, you know, mission style, two inch slats three inches apart. She's going to make sure the pillows are set nicely behind his back." Another long kiss, and Abby either knows where Tim is going with this, or she's leading him. She shifts a little, so she's straddling his legs, facing him. His hand trails down her back to cup her butt. "Perfect, baby." He's looking up at her, eyes sparkling. She leans down a little, so her lips brush his as he says, "You're on Jimmy, just like this. Soft, warm body on his lap." Abby drops her face a fraction of an inch, kissing Tim, and when she pulls back, he says, "You kiss him like that? Just a little tease."

"Oh yeah. Think he likes it?"

Tim grinds up a little, so she can feel his dick, not quite full hard, but getting there fast, against her pussy. "Yeah, I think he does." Over Abby's shoulder, he can see Jimmy nodding. He's not sure how interactive the story is. And Tim gets that. "You guys can both talk, add to the story. I can run the story with all four of us playing, or you can just lay back and let me tell it."

"What next?" Breena asks, as Abby sits down a bit more firmly on Tim, and he grinds against her again.

"Black silk ropes," Tim replies. "Abby's in Jimmy's lap, rocking against him, kissing him deep and steady, then she reaches for the rope and ties one wrist and then the other to the headboard. Sorry, Jimmy, you're just watching this round."

"Asshole." Jimmy's sounding pretty disappointed at that.

Tim grins at him. "Don't worry, you'll love the show. 'Cause you get to watch Abby and I fuck Breena until she's flushed pink, quivering, and screaming with pleasure."

Abby adds a little to it. "Don't be cruel, Tim, not just watching. Once you're tied, I'm going to undo your jeans with my teeth, and then slip them off. You're wearing a button down, and I'm unbuttoning it. Still on, can't really take it off, but open." Breena's smiling, she likes this image, and Jimmy's watching Abby, his eye's hot, waiting to see where she's going to go with this. "Tim's right, then you're going to watch. You're going to hear every moan, see every gasp, watch Breena go pink all over. You'll see me licking and fingering her while Tim fucks her."

Jimmy's eyes close and he groans, teeth clenched. Breena eyes light up and she smiles, delighted.

Abby turns away from Tim, so she's still in his lap, but facing Breena and Jimmy. She's rubbing her butt against him, and Tim spends a moment, head back, feeling it, watching his dick sliding between her butt cheeks. He's got the lube within reach, and grabs for it. "You prep yourself, want to be able to keep using my hand." He says, kissing along her shoulder while he drizzles the lube onto her hand.

He puts it down and goes back to stroking her nipples, feeling her hand brushing against him as Abby plays with herself. Then a second later he's moaning softly as she gets the cock ring set. Very full, very hard, yeah, he loves how that feels. Once he's got his voice back, he says, "I think, so Jimmy's got a good view, we need to be right in front of him. And Abby's already in his lap, so Breena, how about we go stand in front of them?" Tim licks Abby's earlobe, while Breena nods at his suggestion.
"How do you want me?" Breena asks.

Tim smiles at her, licks his lips, and looks her up and down. "Every possible way you can think of, and probably a few you can't, and once we've done all of them we'll go online and find some more."

Breena beams at that.

"Showoff," Jimmy says quietly as he realizes that his hands are not in fact tied (he's been sitting with them just pressed to the footboard. He jerks a little when he moves one and breaks the illusion of the story) and are free to pet Breena. "Get over here, you." He pulls Breena into his lap and a deep kiss.

"The wall's right behind the headboard, so, he's sitting back against it, Abby's in his lap, facing you. You're going to face her, and him, and the wall, leaning your weight into your arms, hands flush on the wall above their heads, so she can kiss you, and he can watch from two inches away."

"Where are you?"

"Right behind you. Your hands don't leave the wall. If you take them away, Abby and I stop."

Abby's looking at Jimmy carefully, and then Breena. They're sitting on the far side of the bed, not doing anything besides holding each other, waiting to see where the story is going to go next.

"Jimmy, you're, what, an inch shorter than Tim?"

"Something like that, yeah." He blinks, not expecting that.

"And Breena, you're… 5'5'?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I stop straddling Jimmy, let him know to spread his legs, and then sit between them, back against his chest, hips against his dick. Otherwise I'm too tall, and I won't be in the right spot to do a good job licking you. Plus, he's going to want to see more than just the back of my head… So, yeah, you and Tim are going to take a step to the left, okay? Need you two at something of an angle, otherwise he won't have much of a view."

Jimmy closes his eyes, seeing it in his mind, and then opens them, kissing Breena hard, before saying, "You're trying to see if you can get me so turned on my heart blows, aren't you?"

Breena kisses Jimmy at that, quick peck. "Time to put all that cardio training to the test." Then she kisses him long and slow, rocking in his lap. He growls a little at her, looking like he's enjoying the teasing, and enjoying teasing back about being annoyed. When they break the kiss, Breena says, "So, I'm standing there, hands on the wall, between Tim and Abby, what happens next?"

"I think you need to get naked," Abby says.

Breena kisses Jimmy at that, quick peck. "Time to put all that cardio training to the test." Then she kisses him long and slow, rocking in his lap. He growls a little at her, looking like he's enjoying the teasing, and enjoying teasing back about being annoyed. When they break the kiss, Breena says, "So, I'm standing there, hands on the wall, between Tim and Abby, what happens next?"

"I think you need to get naked," Abby says.

Tim grins at her. "Oh yeah. Very naked. I think Abby's going to slip her hand up the insides of your legs, light and soft, just the pads of her fingers skimming along your thighs. I'm going to unbutton and unzip your skirt, and you'll kick it off. What do you think, Jimmy, what's she wearing on top?"

Jimmy closes his eyes, hand falling to Breena's breast, stroking lightly as he sighs. He strokes her hair with his other hand, kissing her hard. Then he pulls back and says, "White t-shirt. That small, tight one."

"Bra underneath?" Tim asks.
Jimmy smiles, kissing Breena's shoulder. "You wear a bra to a party like this?"

"No!"

She looks over to Tim. "I'm going to take your hair and drape it over your shoulder, that way your ear and throat are bare. Then I'm going to kiss your earlobe, and throat, and down to your shoulder. 'You can take your hands off the wall.' Feel my breath on your neck, hot breath, wet skin? Is it giving you goose bumps?"

"Yeah." And Breena does shiver a little at that, as Jimmy mouths, wet and soft, against her neck and shoulder. "I take my hands off the wall."

"Good girl, lean against me. 'I pull the shirt off, and then put your hands back on the wall. Abby's watching us, and you're standing there in your panties. Which pair, Jimmy?"

"Little pink satin ones. Bikini cut."

"Abby's fingers go from your inner thighs to your panties. She starts by tracing the edges, the straps on the hips, then she drags each index finger down the edge to the crotch, pulling the fabric tight to you, and scraping her fingernails over your pussy." Breena whimpers at that idea. "Oh, honey, this is just the beginning. Wait 'til she gets her mouth on you."

"You're so soft, Breena, so smooth. I'm touching the lacy edges, right along that line where your leg and pelvis come together. Not quite grazing your pussy, but dragging over the fabric enough so you can feel it."

"She's teasing you; I'm stroking your nipples. Show me how, Jimmy. How does she like it?" Jimmy's hands return to Breena's breast, starting with a slow, firm circle around her nipples. "That good Breena? Want to feel me do that, too?"

"Yes."

"Want to feel it while I slip one finger under your panties?" Abby asks.

"Yes."

"Are you wet? Or do I need to lick my finger so it slides over you all slick and easy?"

"So wet, can't you smell it? See it on the satin?"

Abby smiles at that, and Tim's fingers slip down between her lips. "Abby's wet, so wet. Just talking about this is getting her so hot."

"What's it doing to you?" Breena asks Tim.

Abby rolls her hips against him, moaning softly. "Standing at attention like the Marines at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier."

Breena laughs at that.

"You liking this, Jimmy?"

He nods, smiling. "Doing just fine for me."

"How about this," Abby asks, "want to see my fingers stroking over Breena's panties while I slowly kiss from her belly button down to the top edge of them?"
Both he and Tim whimper at that visual. Abby's still grinning. "Think that's a yes, Breena?"

"I think they want to see you peel those panties off with your teeth."

Jimmy inhales sharp and shuddering.

"But first I'm going to mouth all over you, kissing you through them. I'm going to take my time at that, until you're rocking against me, and Tim's still playing with your breasts, kissing your lips. When you're moaning, and grinding on my mouth with that sort of frustrated rocking motion, the 'you're not quite where I need you' move," Both Abby and Breena know that motion intimately, "I'm going to take the little bow at the front top between my teeth and peel those panties off of you."

Abby's still prepping herself, and Tim's petting her, stroking her pussy gently, not focusing down onto her clit yet, just feathering his fingers over her lips.

"You feel my dick, hot and hard against your ass? Abby's told you about that, how I love a perfect, round ass? As Abby's pulling your panties off your feet, I'm rubbing against you. And as soon as she's got them off, I reach to your front and spread that succulent pussy open for Abby, so that when she kisses you it's her wet pink lips right against yours."

Breena slips up onto her knees, sinking down onto Jimmy, both of them hissing at it.

"Don't come, Jimmy," Tim says, also wanting to hiss at Breena slipping onto him. He knows how that feels, knows Abby's a few minutes away from slipping onto him, "this story's got a few chapters, and Breena's just the first one."

Jimmy nods, kissing Breena, eyes closed, listening to the story, feeling her moving on him.

"She's sitting in front of you, Breena, and you're wide open. Can you feel her breath, that whisper of contact before her lips touch you?"

"Yeah," Breena breathes. Jimmy's rubbing her clit, but stops, holding his fingers near but not on her clit, starting to mimic the story.

"Then her tongue flicks out," Tim says. Jimmy follows with his index finger, and Breena shudders.

"God, you taste so good, Breena." Abby picks up, from Tim. "I kiss you long and soft, just slipping over your pussy, not to your clit yet, feasting on you, and then turn to kiss Jimmy, let him lick you off my lips, and show me how you liked to be licked. He's going to treat my lips like your pussy, and then I'm going to turn around and do it to you."

"And while they're kissing, we are, too. You can feel my hand on your breasts, fingers on your nipples, tugging just a little, circling slow while I suck your tongue. I'm pressed right up behind you, and you can feel me, hot and hard, rubbing against your gorgeous ass. I break the kiss, and shift my left hand to right behind your head, making you look down, watch Abby and Jimmy, and then I kiss my way down your spine, one soft, wet, open-mouthed, sucking kiss after another. I'm kneeling behind you, palming your ass, kissing that perfect little dimple on your left cheek, gently biting that soft, fleshy bit where your butt and leg come together, and then lightly licking between them, working my way back up your spine, back to your throat.

"By the time I'm up there again, Abby's licking you, sitting between Jimmy's legs, squirming as she does it, because tasting you is driving her wild, making all three of us crazy with how hot this is. I'm so hard I could pole vault with it, and Jimmy's so turned on he can't think of a snarky comment to shoot that down."
Jimmy doesn't say anything at that, he's kissing Breena, hard, hand flying between her legs while she rocks up and down on him.

"Are you getting close, Breena? Abby's licking you, so fast, getting you exactly right. I'm rubbing my dick between your lips, feeling how wet and swollen you are. Sometimes Abby licks me, too, her tongue slipping from the tip of my dick to your clit, or back, but mostly I'm feeling you, so wet and so slick. Is this good? Do you like me rubbing against you like this?"

Breena moans.

"What do you want, Breena? Say the words, baby."

"God, Tim, fuck me, please."

Tim smiles at her, he can see she's on edge, Jimmy's just about got her over.

"Oh, yeah. I wrap my arm around your waist, and lift your foot, so it's on the headboard, right next to Jimmy's head. He's watching Abby eat you out, eyes glued to her mouth on your pussy. He can see my dick slipping over you, again and again. Not in yet, just brushing over you. I want to feel you pulsing around me as I sink my cock into you, want to feel your gorgeous pussy wrap slick and tight around me. You want that, Breena?"

"Yes!"

"Good. You want that Jimmy? Want to see me fuck her? Want to watch your wife come on my cock and Abby's tongue?"

"Yes!" rips out of Jimmy, half-whimper, half-groan, and that, his voice saying yes, tips Breena into a full body, shaking orgasm.

Tim's staring, watching her ripple and twitch, skin pink, nipples hard, body glowing with pleasure, almost forgetting everything else, then he feels Abby shift a bit. She's coating him with more lube and he knows what's coming next and smiles. He kisses her, focusing back on his wife, and says, quietly, "Good timing."

Abby's hand is stroking over him, making sure he's oiled-glass slick, and then kneels, facing away from him, over his lap and begins a very slow slide down.

"Ohhh..." slides out of Tim on a breath. His forehead is resting on her shoulder, and his hand and jaw clenches at how good that feels. "Ung." He's panting lightly through the sensation of her body so tight creeping down him. Finally, after an amazingly intense forever, she's settled in his lap. Tim lifts his head from her shoulder, and turns her face to his for a kiss. "Love you."

She smiles, enjoying this, enjoying how much he's loving this. "I know. Love you, too, baby." She nips his bottom lip with her teeth, sucking it gently. She looks back to Jimmy and Breena, who are snuggling each other, Breena looking very content, and Jimmy looking like he's enjoying this, but very eager to get back to the fucking.

"Ready for round two?" Tim asks.

Breena nods. She's still blissed out from her climax, but she wants to see what comes next, and she really doesn't want to make Jimmy wait too much longer to get off.

"Abby's chapter is next."
Jimmy bites his lip. He knows Abby's chapter means they still aren't getting off, yet. He gently taps Breena's hip, letting her know to slip off of him. It took basically every ounce of control he had to not come when he said yes, and he's certain that this isn't about to get any less hot, so if he's going to make it through the next round without getting off, he can't be balls deep in Breena.

Once Jimmy and Breena are sitting next to each other, Jimmy wraps around Breena, very lightly stroking her nipples. Tim begins slowly rocking against Abby. Slow, shallow thrusts, as his fingers slip over her clit. He wants Abby glowing ember hot, but he wants himself under control, so he keeps his speed slow. He kisses her ear, "Feels so good, Abby, so good." He spreads his legs a little wider, spreading her open, so her pussy's on full display for both of them.

"She looks good, doesn't she? All wet and smooth and open." Tim pulls his fingers away, and Abby whimpers as he licks them. Then he lets her suck his fingers, too, pulling the last of her flavor off of his skin. He makes eye contact with Jimmy as he says, "And she tastes so good."

His fingers return to her clit, gently stroking over her, soft, light little stroke of wet finger tips on wet clit.

"Breena's tongue." He kisses her throat. "Feels good, doesn't it?"

Abby moans. She's relaxing on him, eyes closed, submersing herself in the fantasy he's weaving for her, letting him take over, run the story.

He flicks his finger tip lightly, and then circles it over her clit. "Her perfect pink lips kissing your pussy. That soft, wet, pink tongue of hers slipping over your clit, over and over. Her face is so smooth, and so soft, no missed whiskers, just her beautiful mouth all wet with your juices." He kisses her neck, still slowly and gently rubbing her clit. He's barely thrusting anymore, just keeping up a little slide, enough so she can't forget she's on his dick.

"She'd have to be on her hands and knees to lick you. Ass in the air. You know Jimmy can't resist that. No way he can watch her eat you out, lick after lick after lick, with her pussy, dripping wet, lips swollen and puffy, pink and spread, right in his face."

Jimmy groans, that image is not helping him get through this. "God, you kiss your baby with that mouth?"

Tim grins at that. "Gonna kiss your wife with it, too. Reach down, gently pull her up, and lick Abby's cum off her lips. And if she's high enough to kiss me, that means her breasts are in Abby's face, so she's going to start licking her nipples, sucking them. You want to lick Breena, right?" He rubs her clit just a little slower, little harder.

A long guttural, "Yes," eases out of Abby.

"Good, I want to see you lick her. Didn't have much of a view last time. We're going to slide onto our sides. And she's going to come with us. Both of you, sixty-nining. I'll keep this up. Slow, gentle, just fucking you out of your mind, while she's lapping at your pussy, those long, pretty fingers of hers spreading you open.

"Her pussy is right at our lips."

"You get the first taste. I want to watch you eat her out." Breena groans at this. Jimmy's been touching her, just getting her interested again, and Tim can see Jimmy's so hard he has to hurt, but they aren't fucking yet, and he's fairly sure he knows why.

"I think she likes it. You know Abby's done this before? Made love to a woman with her mouth, and
her hands, and that strap on in our toy box, I'm not the only one it's ever been used on. She's going to spread you open, and I'm going to watch, learn, see exactly how she pleases you. When you arch your back, or clench your fists, when your legs go tight and your body starts to shake, I'll be paying attention.

"And when you're lying there, wet and limp, I'm going to kiss your juices off of her, and then start up and show you why I was always the best student in any class I've ever been in."

He kisses Abby, speeding up his fingers on her clit a little, thrusting deeper, not faster, but making sure to get his full length into the game. "You get to lie back, feel me fucking you, feel Breena licking you, you know she's good at it, always wanted to taste you, and now you're all spread out in front of her and she's feasting on you. Close your eyes and you just feel it, smooth," he rocks into her, "hard slide, and wet, circling tongue. Open your eyes and you can watch me eat Breena. Watch my tongue lapping away at her, watch me mimick your moves, and hear her moan at them."

Abby's starting that quicker, panting moan, and Tim knows she's getting close. He starts stroking her clit faster, little harder.

"How about it Jimmy? You want to watch Abby and I eat Breena out? Want to see her come on my tongue while Abby's got three fingers buried in her?"

Jimmy looks pained. Very intense sexual arousal on his face, and his dick is leaking. He grunts at Tim's question.

Tim's feeling the tension in Abby's body increase even further, hearing her voice go a little higher on her moans.

"I know you do. But maybe there's something better for you than just watching. Breena's eating out Abby, remember? Her pink lips on Abby's pink clit. And she's wide open, so open, and empty, and I bet she'd love the feeling of another hard, thick cock filling her up, while Breena licks her clit."

Jimmy swallows hard, and Abby's whining at that. "God, Jimmy please! All of you!"

"That's right baby, all three of us at the same time." Tim's thrusting harder, deeper. "You want that? Him slipping in while I slip out." She's so tight right now, just on the edge. He switches his hold, slipping his fingers off her clit to thrust into her pussy, as the heel of his hand grinds against her clit. "That's it Abby, all three of us together, fucking you hard. Breena licking you, Jimmy in your pussy, me in your ass."

She's writhing against him, just needs a little bit more. "You imagine being that filled? Your glorious body tight around us. Feels so tight and so amazing. I can feel him against me, too, through you, rubbing both of us just right, feels so good." He's thrusting hard now, with his cock and fingers, and twists his hand a little, so the ball of his thumb is right over her clit, and that does it, that little extra friction sends her body pulsing against him, and he bites his lip hard, pulling his mind away from his dick, not wanting to topple over with her.

She's panting against him, shaking slightly, twitching and purring. He gives her a moment to calm back down, and then says, "Hands and knees, baby."

She grins at him, enjoying that idea, scrambling onto all fours. It takes him a few seconds longer to get on his knees, properly balanced, "Toss me the lube." It's on his right side, closer to Breena than his left hand, so she hands it over, and he dribbles a little more on Abby's ass, gently rubbing it all over her before slipping back in with a hiss. "Feel good?"
"Yeah," she moans back. She's facing Jimmy and Breena, palms on the bed between Breena's legs, swaying back and forth gently against Tim.

"What would feel better, baby?"

"I get to pick this time?"

"Yeah, whatever you like. Long as this one can end with Jimmy and I getting off, too."

Jimmy moans as he says that.

She straightens up and kisses him, slow and deep, then says, "Party ends when you get off."

"Then you better get all the bang you can for this one." He pushes her down again and bends to kiss the small of her back, as his fingers find her clit again, once more touching with very light, soft touches.

"Daisy chain, all of us together."

Tim smiles, kissing her back again, speeding up just a little. "On your elbows." She lowers herself down a bit. "Perfect. Just right. Jimmy's on his side, facing you, dick about an inch from your nose."

Tim and Abby watch Jimmy shift into position as well. His dick is about an inch from Abby's nose, if she stuck her tongue out, she'd lick him. And Breena knows where she goes, moving to Jimmy's face. He pillows his head on her thigh and begins to lick, fingers deep in her, no teasing, not real finesse, they're both way too turned on to play with this.

"How would you do it? Hold him in your hand and then suck him down fast and deep?" They watch Jimmy grab a hold of himself, firm grip, and then begin a slow, steady stroke, knuckles almost grazing Abby's lips.

"God, yeah," Abby moans, and Jimmy shudders, able to feel her breath on his dick. "All the way down. Then pull up, sucking, just let my teeth stroke over him, no bite, but smooth sharp slide."

Tim thrusts a little faster at that. "God, I wanna see you do that. You watching him on Breena? See the way he's kissing her?"

Abby moans at that, and Breena does, too.

"Feel good Breena? Like his fingers in you, tongue on you? Want my tongue on you, too? Want me sucking your nipples while he licks your clit?" Breena whimpers, and Jimmy licks faster, holding the base of his cock, tight, not moving his hand at all.

Tim knows what that hold means, knows how turned on they all are right now, and when Breena starts to twitch he almost loses it, he feels the build in his balls, and he's so close but, not yet… He's got no idea what he's waiting for or why but, not yet.

Jimmy pulls back from Breena, face shiny, wet, fingers wet, too, he holds two of them up in front of Abby's mouth. "She's sweetest right when she cums, wanna taste?"

And Abby does, she licks her tongue down Jimmy's fingers and then sucks them into her mouth, moaning at the taste, and that does it. Tim's thrusting hard, gone at the sight of that, of Jimmy's fingers in her mouth, wet and slick with Breena's cum, Abby's lips red and wet and wrapped around him, sucking as she moans like it's the most delicious thing she's ever had in her mouth. Tim's coming so hard he can barely see, even though his eyes are open.
He's still sparking with pleasure, sweaty and tingling, but watching, can't not watch, can't close his eyes, can't miss what comes next. Abby's rubbing herself off now, he's too gone to do much other than watch. He can see that sight alone, Abby sucking his fingers, Tim getting off on it, almost tipped Jimmy over. There's a thin line of precum oozing down his dick, and his whole body is bowstring tight. Then Breena sits up, licking his dick from base to tip, flicking her tongue off the tip, then shifting again, just a few inches, and kisses Abby, full-on tongue kiss, slipping her Jimmy's precum while pumping his cock, and Jimmy's gone, lost, shouting at how good that feels and how good it looks, and that sets Abby off, her body quaking on his as Jimmy spurts onto Breena's arm and hand, and if Tim could have multiple orgasms that would have done it for him, but he can't, so there's just this incredible, warm rush of holy shit that's the hottest thing I've ever seen.

For a few moments, there's just lying there, wet and sticky, breathing hard, high on endorphins and sex. Then there's a very slow mosey toward the bathroom for clean-up, followed by crashing into bed.

The last thing Tim thinks before falling asleep is that it's probably a very good thing tonight's the last night here, because there's no way, if they were going to be here tomorrow night, they wouldn't all end up fucking each other.
Deep Thoughts (Reprise)

Tim is a snuggler. He wasn’t always. Back before they were dating he was very careful about touching people, and making sure not to invade anyone’s personal space. But now… that’s part of how Abby can tell that Tim’s feeling happy and comfortable; he’ll touch people.

And sleeping Tim… Sleeping Tim has always (well, as long as she’s been sleeping with him, granted, in the coffin it’s not like there was much in the way of non-snuggling options) been a snuggler. Abby has mentioned to both Breena and Ziva how, no matter how big the bed, or hot it is, Tim will immediately snuggle himself against her. If she’s in a ‘don’t touch me’ mood, he’ll keep his hand near her. If she leaves the bed, he rolls into the warm spot she’s left, and as soon as she gets back, he’s glued to her again. It’s cute, and, especially in the summer, kind of hot and sweaty, but she’s well-used to the fact that she’s got a large, affection-seeking teddy bear in her bed at night.

She’s also noticed, that since the attack, he’s even more snuggly. If she’s in the bed, he wants to be wrapped around her. And, especially right after the attack, he’s wanted physical contact, with her, or Kelly, or Gibbs or Jimmy or Breena or anyone who happens to be nearby.

Abby’s not even sure if he’s aware of the fact that if he’s sitting next to someone, he’ll have his hand or foot brushing theirs. She does know he’s aware of the fact that whenever she’s near, he touches her. And all of this makes perfect sense to her.

However, in that right now pregnant bladder makes her want to leap out of bed the second she’s awake, and in that Tim will scoot into where she was, in search of someone warm to wrap around, she and Breena have been running a private pool as to exactly how long it would be before Jimmy wakes up with Tim hugging him.

They’ve both been amused to see Tim’s keeping just enough of his awake mind in place that when Abby gets up, he’s not snuggling into Jimmy. He stays put when Abby gets out of bed.

Until this morning.

Like every other morning, Abby’s woken up feeling like her bladder is the size of a thimble and trying to hold a Mega-Gulp Caf-Pow. But, unlike the last three mornings, this time, as she heads back, she sees that Tim has indeed snuggled up to Jimmy, who is also, apparently, deep enough asleep to not have noticed.

She feels a huge smile spread across her face, and detours to the dresser for her phone. Ten or so photos later, she’s done. Jimmy’s on his back, face pointed toward Breena, lips against her forehead. She’s on her side, neck over his arm, leg over his, arm across his chest. Tim’s on the other side, fetal position, as close as he can get with his face against Jimmy’s shoulder, and his lower shins against Jimmy’s hip and outer thigh.

Abby hops into bed, snuggling up against Tim’s back, resting her arm against his hip, waiting to see what happens as the guys start to wake up.

Jimmy’s very used to waking up to the sensation of someone breathing on his shoulder. That’s an every morning sort of thing.

So, he’s pretty sure that’s not what’s jerking him from asleep to ‘something’s really wrong’ full-on awake.
It takes him a second to place himself, and okay, yeah, Breena’s exactly where she normally is. Okay, good, so… what…

He turns his head and notices that warm, damp, scratchy sensation on his right shoulder is Tim, sound asleep, curled up between him and Abby, who is propped on her elbow, watching this with a huge smile on her face.

*Morning.* She mouths silently at him.

Jimmy closes his eyes and tries to rub his face, but as he lifts his right arm, Tim snuggles in closer, one of his legs slipping over Jimmy’s. He’s not yet awake enough to notice the person he wants to be rubbing that hard-on against is behind him and not in front of him.

So, Jimmy just lays there, not sure what to do with this, kind of wishing Abby wasn’t grinned so much about it. It’s not bad or anything, kind of annoying. Stubbly chin pressed into his shoulder is making him think that he’s got to be a bit more careful about what he does with Breena first thing, because if his face is really that scratchy, that’s kind of appalling.

He’s looking at Abby with a sort of *Would you please get between us* expression.

And she looks back with *No room.*

After four mornings of waking up together, Jimmy’s pretty sure what Tim likes to do when he wakes up, and he’s just not really interested in having another guy’s morning wood rubbed against him. He can already feel it hot on his hip and that’s a bit more closely acquainted with Tim’s dick then he ever hoped to get.

So, he gets his right arm up and gently pokes Tim. “Hey, wake up.”

Sleeping, nice, warm happy sleeping. “Hey, wake up.”

Tim doesn’t want to wake up. He wants to be sleeping, but there’s an arm moving around and… Okay, body heat on both sides of him, and that’s nice, he likes that a lot, so he shifts further forward, leg slipping over the hip in front of him, feeling… *Wait… Hair, lots of hair… Okay… This is not… Shit, is that a testicle on my leg?*

Tim makes a very confused sort of sound.

*Yeah, it is.* He goes perfectly still and stiff, not even breathing, as he tries to figure out what the hell is going on. Warm on both sides, the body in front of him is VERY much not Abby. *Jimmy. Oh God.* Tim knows how he usually wakes up rubbing against Abby, and he feels a flash of mortification, hoping he wasn’t just sexually assaulting Jimmy. Then it hits him he’s still cuddled up against him. A second after that, eyes still closed, he scoots backward, leg slipping off Jimmy’s, while mumbling, “Uh, sorry.”

“No problem. Just, know how you like to wake up. Would have been awkward.”

“Uh… yeah.” *Because this isn’t awkward, at all.* Tim can feel Abby behind him, and starts to roll in that direction, until his arm reminds him that he still can’t lay on his right side. He’s on his back, and she’s on her side next to him. He lightly nips her on the shoulder quietly saying as he nods to
between him and Jimmy, “Would you get over there?”

So she does, quietly giggling, spending a moment straddling him, taking advantage of his supine position and morning erection (which he enjoys), before settling herself between him and Jimmy, on her side, completely naked, only two inches from Jimmy as Tim cuddles up against her back.

“Better?”

“Mmmm…” He’s still sounding very sleepy, (feeling sleepy, too, wondering how much earlier than usual they woke up) rocking gently against her, face pressed against the nape of her neck. “His hip is pretty boney. Yours isn’t.”

She can see Jimmy roll his eyes at that, as she grins.

“Hairy, too.”

“Speak for yourself, sandpaper chin.”

He very lightly rubs his chin against Abby’s neck. “It’s not that bad, is it?”

“Not like that, it’s not. But you were full-on pressed into his shoulder. That can be prickly.”

“And drooly.” Jimmy adds.

“Oh.” He gently strokes against her neck again, and she shivers a bit. “But this is good, right?”

“Yeah, that’s good.”

He does it again, slow and light, followed by a slow, light kiss to the back of her neck as he rocks gently against her bum. “That good, too?”

She shifts him a bit, so he can slide between her legs. “Mmmm…”

“He’s close enough you can feel how warm he is, right?” Tim asks. Blankets are all about hip high, and Abby’s maybe two inches away from Jimmy, so her bare torso is very close to his.

She nods.

“Like to wake up like this? Between us?”

That gets a little, content purr.

“Barely awake, not sure who’s doing what.” His voice is low, basically just whispering the words. Jimmy can hear them, but Tim’s hoping that if Breena’s still asleep, they won’t wake her.

“Dreaming of us, not sure if it’s real or not.” Her leg hooks over his hip, and she takes him in hand, giving him some help with the angle as he slips into her, biting gently on her neck, inhaling sharply at the feel of her on him. “Waking up all wet and slick, aching for it.” He thrusts gently, looking up over her shoulder for a second. He can see half of Abby’s face, so he knows her eyes are open, and she’s smiling. He can see all of Jimmy’s, knows how the two of them are watching each other. Faces inches apart, not kissing, but holding smoldering hot eye contact. Jimmy’s very lightly stroking himself, just the tips of his fingers dragging over his dick. Abby’s rubbing herself, too. They’re close enough her knuckles are probably brushing Jimmy’s hip as she does it.

Abby’s pace is quick and steady, like all morning sex, this is fast. “Should I hold your hands, Abby? Both wrists above your head? I’ll thrust, and Jimmy can rub you off.”
Jimmy’s eyes jerk up to Tim’s, not sure if this story is real or not, and he gives a little shake to his head, not because he doesn’t want him to touch Abby, but because Breena’s still asleep, and this isn’t a line they’re crossing without all four of them in on it, awake, and sober.

Abby’s moving faster, getting close, and Tim pulls his eyes away from Jimmy, focusing on the wet, tight slip of her body against his, the rising crest of the pleasure of this. He lets himself go, steeping in the way she feels on him, and when she starts to pulse, he thrusts a little faster, joining her in a few strokes.

Long drive home with a sleeping baby means lots of time to talk, and given how this weekend went, Tim’s thinking talking is a good plan.

“So… how does being bi work?” he asks as they get onto 95, starting the trek north.

Abby laughs a little at that. “Weekend got you thinking?”

“Yeah.”

“Looking at Jimmy different?”

He opens and closes his mouth. “Sort of… maybe… Shit. I don’t know… I don’t want to fuck him, but…”

“But you liked watching. Liked watching in a way you usually don’t?” After all, she’s seen how Tim watches porn, seen how he reacts to that, and to Jimmy and Breena, both at the club and this weekend. “And waking up snuggled with him wasn’t bad, was it?”

Tim rolls his eyes a bit at the snuggling suggestion. No, it wasn’t bad but… It wasn’t comfortable, either. But, it’s also something he hasn’t thought nearly as much about as the sex stuff, so it’s going on the back burner until he’s got some processing time.

The sex, on the other hand, that he’s thought about. “Thought it’d be…” he feels a little silly about this, but it’s true, “live action porn, you know? Extra sexy because it’s real, but I’d be staring at Breena, enjoying her, and Jimmy’d just sort of be there.”

“But that wasn’t it, was it?”

“No, and… So… How’s it work?”

Abby laughs a little at that. “I’ve never been anything but bi, so… I don’t know. How’s being straight work?” She’s mostly asking because she wants to understand how this works for him, because she’s going to have a much easier time building off that than going into this based on how she assumes he reacts to the women around him.

Tim shrugs, and thinks for a mile, watching the traffic, then says, “Okay, I’m aware of the fact that the world is filled with guys and girls. And the girls, even ones who aren’t very pretty, are all much more interesting to me than the guys. And the ones who are very pretty are more interesting to me than just about anything else. And the guys… I’ve got friends. There are guys I enjoy, guys I love, but… they’re personalities, and I don’t care about, or even look at, much, their bodies. My guy friends could be brains in jars with a voice for all I care about their physical bodies. I know what an
‘attractive’ guy looks like, but, beyond trying to see how I measure up to them, which I don’t really do anymore, it doesn’t matter to me. For girls… it took an embarrassingly long time to get to the point where I routinely started seeing the person in the body rather than the body. I mean… you know I’ve done a pretty good job of not… acting like it. I can be friendly and professional and… I can… not shut it down, but keep it in the background, but it’s always there. I always see the body first, and it used to be a lot more intense than it is now. ”

Abby smiles at that. “What’s an embarrassingly long time?”

“I got honey trapped by a pair of big blue eyes and really nice boobs when I was in my thirties. An embarrassingly long time.”

“After we hooked-up?”

“Yeah. Apparently, it’s easier to see women as people and not sex on legs if I’m getting laid regularly.”

Abby giggles at that. “I love the fact you’re honest about stuff like this.”

“With you.” He glances away from traffic to her. “Penny could tie me up by my toenails, and I’m never admitting that.”

“That’s because you aren’t stupid.”

He inclines his head, accepting the compliment. “Sooo…” Tell me how it works for you.

“Sooo… Okay, my sense is I’m not typical on this, but I rarely just look at someone and think, ‘Wow, gotta get some of that!’ It happens, but it’s not common.”

“Does it happen with both sexes?”

She nods at that. “Guys more often than girls, but yeah, with both. What happens much more commonly is that I see someone who makes me interested for some other reason… I liked your voice. You sounded adorably nervous and a little flustered, and that got me intrigued because that’s not a usual personality for a cop. So, how’d you end up with a badge? We had lunch, we hit it off, and… well, usually, if I like someone, and I’m interested in them, then I want to know all about them, and sex is part of that. So… I haven’t slept with everyone I’ve been friends with, haven’t wanted to, but most of the people I meet and like, then I want to see what sex with them is like.”

A horrifying thought hops into Tim’s mind. “Are you saying you would have done Tony?”

“Eww… no! I knew he’d be good for a good time, but he’d never respect me after, so he went on the NOPE column. Actually, that was a big reason for not making a move on Gibbs beyond flirting. I could see that the next morning he’d get weird on me. And God was I right. You remember him and Jen? He had no idea how to deal with her. But the first time I saw Kate, I knew she was special. Would have jumped her in a heartbeat. And… if Ducky had been fifteen years younger--”

“Wait, you met him back in… 1999? Right?”

“Yeah.”

“So, he was, what sixty-five then?”

“Sounds about right. I was twenty-five, and twenty-five years older than me is my upper limit, so… yeah.”
That astounds him. He knows Abby’s got really specific dating rules, but he didn’t know they were *that* specific. “You actually know, in that much detail, where your upper limit is?”

“You don’t?”

Tim shakes his head. “No. I’ve never given it any thought.”

Abby shrugs. “You probably didn’t get hit on a lot by older women.”

Tim nods. “Yeah… Let’s see… You. Diane. And, yep, there’s the end of the list.”

“I’ve been getting hit on by older guys since I was sixteen. Good plan to draw the line early and stick to it.”

“Ah.” He thinks about that for a moment. “So, you’re basically saying, that if you like someone enough to be their friend, you also like them enough, most of the time, to sleep with them?”

“Yeah, that’s how it works for me. Unless there’s some sort of warning sign or red flag saying, ‘Nope, this’ll turn out bad,’ I’m interested.”

Tim thinks about that for a moment. “Yeah, that’s really not what’s going on.”

Abby smiles and nods. “Like I said, I’m probably not typical. And no one expects you, or Jimmy, to suddenly decide that after thirty plus years of only wanting to sleep with girls, that now you’re all hot for each other.”

Tim nods at that.

“Look, whatever level of messing around and playing you want to do, I’m going to be supportive of. This is fun, and love, and… playing… really, that’s it. This is playing with our best friends, exploring things that make us happy. And if it’s ever not that, then we won’t do it. So, we stay where we’re comfortable, and… if you want to play with Jimmy… I mean, I don’t know where his comfortable zone is. Like you, he’s probably doing a lot of thinking, but you were having pretty bad nightmares the one night, and once we got you calmed down, he snuggled you while I was in the bathroom.”

“What?” Tim had not known that. He’d certainly noticed waking up snuggled into Jimmy, and feeling weird about that, but…

“No biggie. He looked a little weirded out by it, because you were both naked, but he did it, because love and comfort and supporting each other is part of this.”

“How weirded out?”

Abby shrugs. “I don’t know. Like it was making him think. We didn’t talk about it. He was more weirded out by you snuggling in while he was asleep.”

“Well, yeah, another two seconds and I would have started frotting on him, and that would have been weird.”

“So, there’s your line. No sex. If it changes, it changes. If it doesn’t, it doesn’t.” They drive for another few miles. Abby’s humming along with the music; she can see Tim’s thinking, then something else occurs to her. Tim really likes labels. He likes order and knowing what goes where and when and how. And whatever is going on, this is probably challenging his deeply internalized labels.
“Most of the queer people I know pick their terms by what they *usually* like. First and foremost it’s about attraction, not action, and secondly there are no hard and fast rules on this. One of my lesbian friends is married to a man. She likes girls. That’s her main thing. But this one guy showed up and he was really special, and they just clicked, in a way no one else ever clicked for her. But she’s not straight because she’s married to a man. She’s not bi because she’s not attracted to *men*. She loves this one specific guy, and the fact that that’s true doesn’t make her suddenly not a lesbian, and the reason it doesn’t make her not a lesbian is because women are what turns her on. I didn’t stop being bi because we got together. The fact that I’m primarily having sex with men didn’t suddenly turn me straight, and if I’d hooked up with Kate, that wouldn’t have made me a lesbian. Breena likes men. She’s straight. She’s still straight when she’s making out with me because it’s about attraction, not about who you’re playing with. If you and Jimmy ever get to the point where you’re seriously playing with each other, you’re still straight, too. If you ever get to the point where you are checking out the guys in the gym and getting flustered at them, having a hard time seeing the guy in the body, *then* you’re bi.”

Tim nods at that, and Abby’s thinking she hit what was running around in his head.

---

Long drive, good thinking time, especially with two napping infants in the back.

Jimmy’s watching the road, glad that Breena’s either thinking, too, or knows that he needs some time in his own head today.

He said yes.

“*Do you want to see your wife come on my cock?*”

“Yes.”

Breena came when he said yes. He could feel it, she was so tight and so close, but not quite there, and he was, too. So close. And he said yes, and she moaned and twitched, shuddering on him, rippling against his body, nails digging into his thighs.

He’d been so in it. When he and Breena tell stories, he’s always still in his real life. Usually he’s more focused on what they’re actually doing than the stories. He likes them and all, and they’re good and sexy, but he never falls into them, not like he did last night.

Eyes closed, all four voices, Breena rocking on him, he could see it, and feel it, there were times when he had a hard time remembering he could use his hands, and… God, he *wanted* it. He said yes because he wanted it. Only reason he didn’t come when he said yes was that Tim had told him not to. He’d been so close, felt his balls go tight and the tingles a breath away from starting, he’d even pulsed once, one hard twitch, before he yanked his brain away and gave his balls a really hard squeeze to shut it down.

He could see it, Abby between his legs, squirming against his dick, her back soft and warm against him, and Breena in front of him, Abby licking her out, Tim standing behind her, holding her leg and breast and slipping over her again and again, his dick wet and shiny with Breena’s cum, slipping between her lips, just edging her closer and closer, and finally asking him, and that ‘yes’ just ripped right out of him because he wanted it, all of it, so much.
Tied up, helpless, watching another guy fuck his wife.

He said yes.

He’s not supposed to want that. Right? That’s the bridge too far. Right? It’s one thing to share a woman, plenty of guys do that, but… he wasn’t sharing, he was letting Tim and Abby take over. Let them turn him into a passive watcher in that fantasy.

But it was so hot, hit buttons he didn’t know he had, and when he said yes, he wanted it more than pretty much anything he’d ever wanted before.

For all the kinks Jimmy’s got, and he’s got more than a few of them, watching another guy fuck his wife isn’t (wasn’t?) one of them. Sex in public, sure. Quickies where anyone can find you, oh yeah. Being watched, loves that. Shoes, God yes! Spankings, not often, but when he’s in the right mood, yes, please! Watching, yes, he likes that, too. But, tied up, helpless while another guy fucks Breena two inches from his face, makes him watch, gets her off, makes her moan and beg…

“*God Tim, fuck me, please!*”

They’ve played with this idea before. Breena’s told him stories of the four of them. He was watching Tim and Abby go at it all weekend. And he knew, saying yes to this, that he’s moving them closer to swapping or swinging or foursoming or… oring, whatever.

He knew he was going to like anything involving the girls with each other. When Tim first suggested that, his dick was more or less jumping up and down cheering on *that* idea. He was fairly sure he was going to like watching Tim and Abby together. Live porn! What’s not to like? Watching them at the club was awesome, and they didn’t even get the full show then. He knew he was going to like getting watched. He’s known that about himself for a long time. Part of loving quickies and danger sex is loving the rush of the idea of someone else catching him, seeing it. (Hell, he’s had this fantasy of someone else watching, getting so turned on they can’t not touch themselves, and jerking off from it for *years*, and this weekend hit all of those buttons with a sledge hammer. That was amazing!)

But he didn’t expect he’d want to see Tim fuck Breena. He was kind of aware of the idea that it’d probably happen sooner or later. And he thought he was okay with the idea, because he’d be sharing Breena with Tim, or fooling around with Abby at the same time, but he didn’t expect to be more than okay.

He didn’t expect saying yes to make his cock twitch and practically spurt.

It was just a fantasy, but he fell into it so fast. He can’t believe how fast he sunk into it, how deep he went. Could feel the silk on his wrists, could see Breena standing over him, Abby’s lips on her pussy, Tim’s hands, mouth, and dick on her, and…

“You okay?” Breena asks.

He jerks slightly at that. “Uh. Yeah… Think so. Why?”

“You want me to drive? You don’t look all there.”

“Um… No. I’m good.”

“Sure?”

He shrugs. “Thinking.”
“About last night?”

“Yeah. You got off when I said ‘yes.’”

Breena nods at that. “Liked hearing you say it.”

He nods, too.

“Felt you twitch when you said it. Thought you’d gotten off, too. You were really close, right?”

He nods again. Good thing Breena was already coming, because he had to pull his hand away from her to stop himself getting off. If he’d been less deep into the fantasy, he would have realized he had two working hands, but he was sure his left hand was tied.

“Was that okay?”

He shrugs. “Thinking about it.”

“Me and Tim and Abby?” They’ve played versions of that fantasy before, and it never seemed to bug him in the past, but she can feel an edge to him right now, and isn’t sure what’s causing it.

“Maybe…” He smiles at her, trying to be reassuring. “I’m… good with all three of you. That didn’t change. I’m not quietly melting down or freaking out over here, at least… not on that level…”

“Then…”

“It’s silly.”

She shrugs, silly isn’t a problem. “Doesn’t matter. Something pops up, we talk about it. That way something that’s silly now doesn’t turn into trouble later.”

He smiles at that, too.

“Pops up, that’s a way to put it…” He shakes his head and bites his lip. “I almost got off when I said yes, too. Would have if I hadn’t grabbed myself.”

She’s watching him carefully, waiting to see what else he says.

He shakes his head again.

“Me and Tim, that’s bugging you?”

“No… not… how I’m reacting to it is bugging me.”

“Thought you liked it. That’s how it felt.”

“I did like it. That’s why it’s bugging me.”

Breena’s eyes narrow. “Would you rather be pissed at him?”

“No! But… It wasn’t just nice… I really liked it. I liked all of it. Tied up, helpless, watching him and Abby fuck you. I’m half-hard just thinking about it. I’m having a much easier time dealing with holding him naked and feeling him rubbing up against my hip this morning than that.”

Breena’s eyebrows scrunch together. She’d woken up at the tail end of Abby getting off, and immediately had her hands full of very horny Jimmy. She and Abby got a few minutes alone to talk
while they were getting packed up. Basically, the guys woke up together (which was insanely cute, she cooed over the pictures) and then both of them kind of freaked out, followed by Tim more or less tossing her between the two of them and both of them proving exactly how heterosexual they are by hopping on her immediately. And, given exactly how enthusiastic Jimmy was this morning (not that she minded or anything, but morning sex is usually a lot more relaxed)... she’s not thinking Abby’s diagnosis as to what was going on was far off.

“You like watching people have sex…” Breena leads, trying to help Jimmy work this out.

“Yeah. I know. Part of why feeling weird about this is hitting me. And, yeah, deeper level, the idea of watching you and Abby was just fine. I liked that a lot and I’m not feeling weird about it at all. Hell, I even know the anthropology about sperm competition and how some male mammals get off on seeing their mates with another male. I intellectually know how this works.” He bites his tongue. “But it still feels weird that it hit me that hard…” He sighs and puts it into words. “This weekend was an amazing cornucopia of sex, and the thing that hit me hardest was him asking my permission to fuck you.” Jimmy thinks for a second, that’s not quite right. “No… he didn’t ask my permission, he asked me if I wanted to see him fuck you. That hit harder than watching Abby suck my cum off your tongue, and… I don’t know what to do with that.”

“Do you have to do anything with it?”

He shrugs at that, too.

“Only fifty miles to go!” Abby says, looking at the GPS display on their phone. Traffic snarled in Richmond, and all of the alternative routes they could find were also moving at about ten miles an hour. Finally, they’re starting to pick up speed again.

“Yay.” Tim says weakly.

“At least Kelly’s conked out again.”

“Amen on that.” In order to get out of the traffic, they stopped for an early dinner, hoping it would have eased up by the time they were done.

Didn’t work that way, they ate, let Kelly run (toddle) around, got back in the car, drove for a nicely zippy ten miles, and found themselves right back in the same snarl, just slightly further down the road.

“What was I dreaming about? You know…”

Abby nods. “The usual.”

“Anything new?” He doesn’t remember the dream, or any of it.

“Something about it’s supposed to hurt, stop crying and taking it like a man.”

Tim thinks for a few minutes on that, looking for what memory that was. “Oh.” Been years since he thought of that. “He was on land when my first real girlfriend broke up with me. Somehow my mom had the insane idea that we should have some sort of man to man talk about it.”
“Oh God.”

“Yeah, it went just as well as you think it did. He was okay with the idea that I was bummed out about her dumping me, and if he could have taken me out for a beer and a strip joint, he probably would have been able to deal with it, but that’s not appropriate with a fifteen-year-old. So, he didn’t know how to cheer me up, and I was crying over it, and I couldn’t stop crying, and he got more and more upset about me crying, and then he decided since yelling at me to stop crying wasn’t doing to job, to double down and hit me on every reason why a girl would break up with me, supposedly ‘giving me pointers for next time’ and… Yeah, that was one of the less pleasant days of my life.”

“Fucker.”

Tim nods his head in agreement. “On the upside, Mom had gone out with Sarah, left us together for ‘man time’ and apparently she had some sort of little fantasy of us talking and commiserating and getting closer together or something. She gets home, he’s got steam pouring out of his ears, and I’m in my room, sobbing. She left Sarah with him, took me out for ice cream, told me it was okay to cry when you lose something you love, and that he was being a dork about it. That made me feel better. Then we got home and she yelled at him for not doing his job right, and that his job was to comfort me, not make me feel worse. So, bad day, but that was one of my better nights.”

“What happened next?”

“He turned bright red, stormed out, and we didn’t see him for two days. I think he called, because Mom was in a really sad mood the next day, and she wouldn’t say why, just shook her head when I asked.”

The idea that that’s one of his better nights makes Abby’s heart hurt.

He squeezes her hand, maybe it is the talking about this stuff with Wolf, or just… letting it out more, but stories like that are starting to hurt less in the telling. “So, what happened? I’m doing my usual talking in my sleep, and you’re cuddling me…” He knows she does that, because sometimes he wakes up in the middle of it, and sometimes she tells or asks him about it later.

“He woke up in full-on ‘go get crying baby’ mode, took a few seconds to realize crying baby wasn’t the problem. I kept cuddling you, trying to pull you out of it, he petted your face a little and added his voice to it, you slipped back into normal sleep, and by that time my bladder was going to explode, so I gave you to him, took care of business, came back a minute later, and snuggled in between you two.”

“You said he was acting weird about it. What do you mean?”

She waves that away. “Nothing concrete, just the sense that it had him thinking. Once I got back into bed, you curled around me, and he scooted a few inches over, back into Breena. I fell asleep pretty quick, but I noticed as I was drifting off that he reached over and held your hand. He was still doing it when I woke up in the morning. Beyond that, you’ve got to talk to him about it.”

“You and Breena didn’t?”

“Yeah, Breena and I did, but neither of us are Jimmy, so…”

“Okay.”

“We talked about this morning, too.”

“Of course. She okay?”
“She thought the pictures were adorable.”

“You took pictures?”

“Yeah! My three favorite people are snuggling, of course I’m taking pictures.” She’s driving right now. “Go in my purse, get my phone and look at them.”

“Why?”

“Why don’t you want to?”

“I…” That’s actually a good question. He goes and gets her phone. Not too hard to find the photos, they’re the newest of the bunch. He’s analyzing composition and lighting, which makes him think that he’s got some walls up against really dealing with the image.

Walls he’s trying not to have.

He looks, really looks. They’re sweet. Any other three people on earth and he’d, well, not coo, but that shot (of three other people) would cause a warm feeling of, ‘oh, how nice.’ In that it’s him, Jimmy, and Breena… he doesn’t know what he’s feeling.

He looks at Abby, putting down the phone. “Why does this matter? If you or Breena were in the middle, it wouldn’t be an issue. If she was snuggled into his side, and I was spooned up on her back, we’d all be happy and fine. Even just sleeping, the three of us, not sex at all, it’d be fine.” He touches her phone, indicating the pictures. “It’s not sex. Him hugging me, me cuddling against him, it’s not sex, so… Why does this feel weird?”

“Why does the sex part matter? You’re not attracted to him, that’s fine, but… Breena’s not particularly attracted to me, either, but the two of us making out isn’t ‘weird.’”

He stares up at the car ceiling. “Uhhh…” That’s nothing that’s ever occurred to him. Of course sex would be different, right? He looks at the shots again, flicking through them, then through the much sexier ones that Abby took. (Apparently she took pictures of Jimmy oiling Breena up and playing with her. He’d been far enough out of it that he hadn’t noticed. He flips a bit further, and realizes he took some pictures, too. Some really good pictures… Abby’s butt and Breena’s boobs in one shot, he likes that a lot, and decides now is a really good time to close the photo app because he does not need to get distracted.) “I don’t know, but… It does, you know?”

“If I had to guess, it’s that you spent your whole childhood being told that this was the most awful thing you could do or be, and your brain knows it’s not, but it’s still in there, and that’s why this feels weird, and why the fact that it feels weird annoys you.”

He shrugs, that’s likely true. “I was thinking about it, on the beach, making myself imagine playing with Jimmy, and it wasn’t gross or scary, but, I didn’t want to do it.”

“That’s okay.”

“Yeah, but… okay, love and care and joy and… and it feels weird to get comforted. On the beach, I felt cool with this and now it’s less cool and I just… I don’t want it to matter. He’s a guy, so what? It shouldn’t matter. Love the person, not the body, that’s what you and Penny say, right?”

Abby nods. “You do love him, right?”

“Yes. A lot. Probably,” and he feels weird saying this but he does, because it’s true, “more than anyone who isn’t you.”
“Well, sex and love aren’t the same thing. You love the person, great. Maybe you’ll never be comfortable with too much in the way of touching.”

“Fuck that! That feels like a massive, steaming pile of homophobic bullshit, and I am better than that!”

Abby sighs, wanting to pull over, curl into his lap, and kiss him.

“Patterns don’t shift overnight. Remember how long it took before you could bottom without it hurting? Your brain was into it way before your body got there. But it got there, because you wanted it. You want it to not matter, and you’ll get there. One touch at a time. This time five years ago, you couldn’t have slept naked in the same bed with him. Or… when he hugged you guys for the wedding presents—”

“You saw that?”

“Yeah, I was coming up and saw him pull the three of you in for a hug and you looked really surprised and jerked a little when he touched you, but you slid into the hug anyway. You don’t do that now.”

“Yes.” He shakes his head a bit. “I don’t want to stop doing this. This weekend was awesome, and I loved it.”

“Yes.”

“And not just hot sex all over the place, you know? Close and intimate and warm and it was really good.”

She’s smiling at that.

“But I don’t want to feel like I’ve got to jerk away if I touch Jimmy, and I don’t want to feel like I need to grab you if I do and show off how straight I am.”

“You heard that, huh?”

He nods. “And you’re probably right, that’s part of what I was doing. My first thought on waking up was how nice it was to be warm and snuggly on all sides, I really liked it, so I scooted in further, then I figured out that soft fuzzy thing against my thigh was a testicle, and not one of mine, and I kind of freaked out at that. And Jimmy didn’t exactly feel relaxed about it, either, and… Shit… I don’t know. There’s got to be something in between wake up and give him a hand with his morning wood, and wake up and jump back as soon as I notice it’s not you or Breena.”

Abby nods. “Wake up, cuddle some, kiss him, kiss me, roll over when your arm’s up for it, and have at it while he’s at your back. That’s probably his skin not freaking you out, but you’re not actively fooling around with him, either.”

Tim thinks about that. Then he nods. “Not sure about kissing him, but… yeah, that’s the basic idea.”

They’d gotten on the road about an hour after Tim and Abby did, so they got the *Stay the fuck away from Richmond; it’s a mess!* text well ahead of the mess.
So, as Tim and Abby are finally just starting to pick up speed, Jimmy and Breena have parked the car, pulled the girls out, put them to bed, and crashed on their own sofa.

Unpacking can wait until tomorrow.

There’s a thought that’s been bopping around in Breena’s mind. Something Jimmy mentioned but didn’t stress, something she’s wondering about. She’s not sure if he’s aware of it, or if she’s on the right track or…

She’s just not sure.

So, yes, when she saw Abby slip that collar onto Tim, she knew what it meant and why Abby would do it. She was a bit surprised to see it there, and given the answer (and Abby adding in the next day that Tim’s a switch and can Dom or sub as the mood takes him) her surprise wandered off. That he’d like to have times where he’s not in charge, and others where he’s running the whole show, makes a lot of sense to her.

She doesn’t like running the show. She just doesn’t. They read 50 Shades, and she noticed that Jimmy seemed intrigued by the idea of power games, and she’s happy to sub, she likes having a set task and doing it perfectly, but she doesn’t like giving orders; that’s being at work; it’s not fun for her. But… she’s wondering, because Jimmy was interested, and maybe he wasn’t just interested in being the guy giving the orders.

It never hit her that he might like having someone take him over, partly because that’s (was, at the time) his job.

But that’s what Tim did. He ran the story, and Jimmy dropped right into it, and now she’s wondering if that hit him so hard because sometimes he wants someone else in charge.

“Helpless, tied, watching…” he mentioned all of those things.

Jimmy’s laying back against the sofa cushions, head back, glasses off. Breena scoots around a bit, pushing him a few feet over, so he’s on the far end of the sofa, and she can comfortably lie with her head in his lap. For a few seconds, he just rests there, and then she feels his fingers gently slipping through her hair.

“Mmmm…” That feels nice.

He starts gently rubbing little circles into her scalp, knowing how much she likes having her head rubbed, especially at the end of a long day.

She licks her lips, debating if she should just let him think about it, or if she should ask and see what happens.

Ask. This works best if they talk. “You know I like it when you tie me up and play with me.”

He nods.

“I never asked but… would you like that?”

His head shifts off the back of the sofa, so he’s looking at her, surprise on his face. “You don’t like doing that.”

“I know, but, I never asked; do you like being on the subbing side of it. Maybe… That could be why you slipped into it so fast and hard. If you like it, but I don’t, it’s something you want that I’m not
giving you, and you’re not getting it at work anymore, so…”

He’s holding up his hands, looking appalled. “Getting it at work?”

“Not sex. Just, if you like having someone make the decisions and tell you what to do. If you like playing the game instead of making the rules… You used to do that every day, and you don’t, now.”

“Oh. Um…” He’s never thought much about that, let alone in any context along these lines. “It’s not something I’ve ever looked for. I don’t jerk off to fantasies of you tying me up and telling me what to do.”

She nods. They’ve talked about their fantasies, and it’s nothing he’s ever mentioned.

He thinks about it. It doesn’t feel quite right, but, maybe it’s next to whatever’s going on, or part of it. He thinks some more, gently rubbing Breena’s head, enjoying not driving, and finally comes up with this, “Tim and I have always been equals. Started the same time. Same age. Same low man on the totem pole. I’ve never been in competition with him for anything. I’ve never had to defer to him, not really. And… maybe you’re right, maybe falling into it so fast was wanting to be taken charge of, but, I think feeling weird about it comes from the fact that he’s not supposed to be in charge of me.”

He thinks about that more, the second, third and this morning’s story hadn’t hit Jimmy as hard, but they also didn’t weird him out. Him and Tim and Abby, that was fine. Watching (in the fantasy) Tim and Abby sixty-nine with Breena, that was hot, and it’s not hitting him the way the first story did.

“Do an experiment with me?”

Breena smiles up at him. “Always. Tonight?”

He shakes his head. “Tonight I think we’re resting until we’ve got enough energy to brush our teeth, then going upstairs to bed and crashing.”

“Sounds like a plan. So, what’s the experiment?”

“Tomorrow, the next day, when you’re feeling inspired, tell me a story where you or Abby takes over. I want to see how that hits me.”

“No problem.”

When they get home, Tim’s not exactly feeling sexy. Mostly he’s feeling tired. They put Kelly to bed as soon as they got in, and he’s thinking that’s what he’s going to do with himself, too.

Unpacking can wait for tomorrow. Everything else can wait for tomorrow.

Abby seems to be on the same page he is with this. It’s 9:30 and she’s brushing her teeth, getting ready for bed. He joins her on that, tossing off his clothing, ready to crash.

They’re in bed, and have been for about a minute, and he’ll admit a good long sleep, especially with work tomorrow morning, sounds really good.

But, as he’s starting to drift one thought hits, and it gets his lips moving from his usual sleeping
routine of pressed to the back of Abby’s neck to kissing her.

She murmurs something, not really words, but not ‘back off’ either. On the second try she gets out, “Thought you’d be all fucked out.”

He smiles a little. “I am.” He lays a wet kiss on the back of her neck. “But I want you to know that it’s still you. It’s always you. I love them, and I want Breena, and that was insanely hot, but at the end of the day, at the end of the journey, it’s you.”

He feels her smile, and then she rolls over to face him, her lips finding his. “Always you.”

“Always.”

It’s slow, and sleepy, and compared to the sex this weekend, nothing special, just their average, late night, checking back in with each other, sex. But that’s the point of it, too. It’s them with each other, coming back to each other, and that matters more than all the firework sex on earth.

Or like Jimmy had said to him, ‘We went home and made love and nothing had changed, I was still hers, and she was mine, and we hadn’t lost anything.’

And, as he’s drifting off, he knows that there’s probably a lot of thinking left to do about this weekend, but his bedrock is still there. Nothing was lost, and a lot was gained, and he’s eager to see where this goes next.
Happy New Year’s everyone! Hope you all have a lovely night. (We’re rocking it in in traditional parent of small child style by watching a movie and going to bed by 10:00. ;)

Stay safe, everyone, want you all back to read the next update!

It’s Wednesday when Jimmy gets a free lunch period and heads down to the Dungeon to find Tim. He’d been hoping to get some time to talk with him, but between the dead body they collected on Monday morning and giving himself some thinking and experimenting time, Wednesday’s the first day he’s been ready to really talk.

“Got time for lunch?”

Tim nods. “Yeah. What are you thinking?”

“Pretty nice out today, how about the Smithsonian? Grab some food, eat in the sculpture garden.”

“Sounds good.” He takes a moment, logs out of whatever he’s working on, sends a quick Out for an hour or two text to the Minions (he’s been wanting to talk to Jimmy, too.) grabs his crutch, and off they go.

As they head toward the elevator, Jimmy watches how Tim’s walking. “Looking pretty smooth.”

Tim nods. “If we were staying closer, I’d have left it in the office.”

“Good.”

“I guess. Friday I might get my last two fingers back.” Tim holds up his cast hand. “Or he might take a look at the scans and give me two more weeks in the cast.”

“Either way, by the end of the month you’ll be down to the wrist cast. By the beginning of September, you’ll be out of them, period.”

“Yeah.”

It really is nice out. A day that belongs in May, cool, breezy, bright sun, not the traditional hot, sticky, smog, walk outside and feel like you’ve been hit in the face with a steaming hot, wet, wool blanket that’s a usual August day in DC.

Perfect day to grab a bite amid the artwork.

Better yet, in that it’s August, the place isn’t covered with tourists. Most people know to show up in the Spring or Fall, so the Smithsonian Sculpture garden isn’t abandoned, there are several people hovering around snapping photos, and a few locals, like Tim and Jimmy, taking advantage of a lovely day, but for the most part, it’s pretty empty. Which suits Jimmy just fine. He doesn’t mind if
strangers overhear this. Two nameless, faceless guys talking about something personal, no big deal, but they’re well away from the office for a reason.

Jimmy’s been looking for a way to start this conversation since last night, when Breena assisted him in a very successful experiment, which did indeed help him figure out why he slid into that fantasy so fast and hard, and also why he’s somewhat uncomfortable with Tim running the show.

So, yes, turns out that he does, really like having someone else run the show for him. (At least, as a fantasy, they haven’t tried for real, yet. Given how much he liked it as a story, Breena’s intrigued about trying in real life.) A story of Breena and Abby tying him up and playing with him, telling him what to do worked just fine for him. A very good time was had by all, and there were no lingering concerns about why that was a big deal.

But he’s damned if he can think of a good way to say to Tim, So, yeah, I loved the stories, those were hot as fuck, but don’t Dom me, that’s squirmy.

Instead, he ends up saying, “So, you do anal bareback? Isn’t that… risky?” because it’s easier to talk about the mechanics of sex than the emotions, and he’s sure they’ll get to the emotions sooner or later. (Plus he is curious about this, too.)

Tim shrugs. He knows it can be, but so far he’s been careful and lucky. “I’ve never gotten a urinary tract infection, if that’s what you mean.”

“Some. Kind of messy?”

Tim’s looking at him with dry humor in his eyes. “I’m sorry, didn’t you spend your whole morning elbow deep in a corpse?”

Jimmy raises an eyebrow at him and replies, also dryly, “Yes, but I was wearing gloves.”

Tim nods, chuckles a bit. That’s a point. “Yeah, it’s messy if you don’t prep for it. I mean, look…” Tim’s searching for a way to say this that isn’t too gross. “It’s obviously not something you want to do without hitting the head first, and especially if there’s going to be rimming, you don’t just take a shit. You do need to really clean up, inside and out. But anal’s not an on impulse thing, usually. Between the lube and the prep and… most of the time whoever bottoms puts it on the menu and makes sure to clean up properly. And in that case, it’s not any messier than any other sex.”

Jimmy nods, remembering that comment about Abby’s strap on, which he assumes is a dildo of some sort. He’s not sure if he should ask, though. Apparently it shows on his face.

“Just ask,” Tim says, taking a sip of his iced coffee.

“Whoever bottoms? And is bottoming what I think it is?”

Tim looks a little amused a little bemused. “I’d imagine so.” He takes a bite of his tuna wrap. “And yes, both of us can and do end up on the receiving side of anal. I take it you’ve never tried that?”

Jimmy’s not sure if he’s feeling shocked at that or not. No… he was kind of expecting that answer, so… mostly curious. He’s not seeing why anyone would want to do that. He gets why being on the doing side would feel good, but when he tried with Breena, she said it hurt, so… He’s not getting the appeal. “Uh. No. Don’t have anything against it, but… Just never thought about it.” Not entirely true. Like most guys he’s been teased about it, and responded with the traditional and expected ‘over my dead body’ line. But that’s a knee-jerk reaction coming from being teased and poked at by other guys. Beyond that, it’s really not anything he’s ever thought about. “Is it good?”
Tim smiles, many happy memories in mind. “You ever hear the line, ‘Beer is proof that God loves us?’”

“Yeah.” He’s staring at Tim wondering how those two things could possibly be related, but Tim’ll get there soon.

“Okay, I can take or leave beer… and God for that matter, but, I’m sure, that if there is a God, your prostate is proof that God loves you and wants you to have a very good time. Yes, it’s good.” He nods at that. “Not if you do it wrong. Hurts like a bitch if you do it wrong, but just like when you’re doing it to her…” Tim realizes he’s making some assumptions here. “Um… have you done it with Breena?”

Jimmy shrugs a bit. “Once. Didn’t seem worth it…” Felt good to him, really good, but Breena said it hurt, so they didn’t get past two strokes. “…And especially since Molly, that’s a no-go area.”

“Oh.” Tim was thinking that maybe Jimmy just didn’t know what he was doing, but some vivid, overheard conversations about how bad post-baby hemorrhoids can be spring to mind, and that’d put him off anal, too. “Okay, well, anyway, you take your time, lots of lube, lots of slow prep, but yeah you do it right and it’s blow your mind, cum like a geyser, maybe pass out, good.”

That has Jimmy looking intrigued. He’s all in favor of ‘cum like a geyser.’ “So, that comment about Abby with a strap on…”

“Yes, she really has one. I wasn’t just making that up for the story. It’s fairly plain, dark purple, kind of small, and she really knows how to use it.”

“Huh.” Jimmy slowly chews a bite of his salad.

“Why are you asking? Want pointers? I’m sure Abby’d be happy to talk Breena through it, especially if we get to watch.” And suddenly watching Breena bugger Jimmy hops onto the long list of things Tim wants to see. Even better if Abby’s playing with him, too. Tim swallows and licks his lips. “I mean, really, it’s well worth trying.”

Jimmy shakes his head. “Wasn’t exactly what I was thinking.” He’s not entirely sure what he’s thinking. But… Tim likes that, and he just scooped Jimmy up and started playing with him, he woke up with the guy wrapped around him, and Jimmy knows Tim was watching him, getting off on it… And, Tim’s got that excited look in his eyes at that idea… So…

Tim eats some of his tuna wrap, waiting for Jimmy to say what he’s thinking.

“Are you straight?” Jimmy asks.

“Uh…” Tim kind of remember mentioning that, but… that was before they started playing, and… okay, he’s been thinking about it, so Jimmy probably is too. Plus, there’s a few directions Jimmy might be interested in taking this, and Tim’s not sure where he’s going, so might as well get it out. “Yeah…Probably. I think so. Abby says I am. Why? I mean, does it matter?”

“Just, you like that, and you were watching me…” Jimmy says, quietly, fiddling with his fork.

“Because it feels good! And… you were watching me, too,” Tim shoots back.

“Well, yeah,” Jimmy looks back up to Tim, “because it was hot.”

“Exactly,” Tim pauses for a moment, another possible direction this might be going, and why Jimmy might be asking springing to mind, really surprising him, because he never got even a hint that
Jimmy might be interested in something along those lines, but... well the can of worms is open, so might as well deal with it. Still... and Tim’s thinking this is a pretty definitive sign of not being bi, the idea of Jimmy topping him is really squirmy, and not in a good way. “Uh... I don’t want you to do that to me. Abby or Breena and a strap-on is fine, but... not you.”

Jimmy jerks at that, looking utterly stunned, and Tim can see, even before Jimmy starts to talk that he completely misread that situation. “What? Okay, I was so not offering! And...” Jimmy cringes, and Tim’s sure he’s thinking through the mechanics of how that would work. “I don’t think I could, even if you wanted me to.”

“But I don’t.”

“Okay. Umm... Good, right?” Jimmy’s intensely staring at his food right now. “Just, it really was hot, you know?”

Tim nods.

Jimmy looks back at him. “Been thinking about that.”

“Me, too. Thought it’d be all about watching Breena and Abby, but... It wasn’t. But, even with as hot as that is, I don’t want to have sex with you.”

Jimmy nods at that. “Me, either. But I want to watch you fuck the girls.”

Tim nods emphatically at that. “Yeah. Same thing. Or watch them do you. Don’t want to do you myself.”

Jimmy nods again. “Okay, good, on the same page.” He takes another bite of his salad, and says, quickly, “I loved the stories, but don’t Dom me again.”

Now it’s Tim’s turn to look really surprised. “When did that happen?”

“What do you call it when you tie someone up and tell them to just sit there and watch while you run the show?”

For a second, Tim’s about to say, It was just a story, I didn’t actually do it, but decides that the heart of this is not whether or not he actually did it. The heart of it is that even the idea of it was weird for Jimmy, so instead he says, “Oh. Yeah. Shit, sorry. Um... I like that, so...”

“It’s not that I don’t like it... It’s, I don’t want you to do it. Just like anal, the girls can do it and it’s fine, but, not you.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Would you like it if I ran that story?”

Tim thinks about that for a moment, it’s not making him feel weird, but he’s also going at it as a thought, not a reality. Of course, being topped by Jimmy was a thought, too, not a reality, so... “It’s not hitting me wrong, but it’s not real, either.”

“Why tie me up?” That’s been chewing at the back of Jimmy’s mind, too.

Tim shrugs again. “Like I said, I like it. I thought you’d like it, and I was working off a story Abby and I had already started so...”

“What story?”
“When we were at the club, Abby set the story, all four of us, in bed, me on my back, wrists tied to the headboard, Breena on me, hands tied behind my neck, you doing her, anal, from behind, Abby lying next to us, necking with me and Breena, controlling the vibrator in my ass. We don’t get to move. You and Abby run the show.”

“Fuck!” Jimmy’s not sure he could even say that out loud, let alone to Tim. “That’s the story you were telling? And once again, you kiss your baby with that mouth?”

Tim shrugs a little. “How do you think I ended up with that baby I’m kissing?”

Jimmy snarls at that.

“Anyway, that’s the story she told. She and you were running the show. You’re setting the pace for half of the action, and Abby’s got the control on the vibrator, so she’s got the other half, and Breena and I are just going along for the ride, completely in your and Abby’s control. So, I’m telling the story now, and all of us are there, and I want to keep some of the themes, but I want to play with them too, so, you get tied up and watch, Abby goes from watching to involved, but since she was running it before, she’s not getting off, and Breena and I are untied and get to play.” Tim thinks about it more, searching, making sure that’s what he had going through his head. “And I knew the girls would like seeing you tied up. Abby especially. She really likes that.”

Jimmy nods.

“So, you liked it though… If Abby had run the story…”

“It would have been fine.” Jimmy notices one of the tourists is getting closer than he wants for this conversation, so he drops his voice, and Tim leans in a bit to hear better. “You asking if I want to watch you fuck my wife is one thing; Abby doing it is something else.”

Tim nods at that. “Yeah, been having some thoughts like that, too. Are you straight?”

“Always thought so.” Jimmy rolls his eyes some. “Part of why this weekend’s got me thinking. You know, you watch porn, and there’s a guy in it, but…”

“But he might as well be furniture, and you’re mostly watching the girl?” Tim finishes for him.

“Yeah. You can take him out of the show and it’ll be just as hot. But it wouldn’t have been as hot without you.”

“Thanks.” Tim says with a smirk.

Jimmy whacks him on his good arm with the back of his hand. “I’m being serious here.”

“I know. Okay, honestly, I spent most of my babysitting time thinking about this, and my great revelations on the subject came to this: A: It doesn’t matter if I’m straight or not. My number of sexual partners from here on out is maxed at… two… three… Shit. Do you count as one of my sexual partners?”

Jimmy rolls his eyes and shrugs.

“Anyway, I mean, none of you care, right?”

Jimmy nods.

“So it’s a moot point. B: Watching real people enjoy real sex is hot. C: If you subtract Breena and
Abby from the mix, your naked body is just about as sexy as over-cooked cauliflower to me.”

“Are you saying I’m white, lumpy, and mushy?”

Tim just looks at Jimmy. Then he smiles and continues on with, “D: I think it’s mostly an empathy thing, been there, done that, it was fucking excellent, and I’m getting off on getting to see you enjoy it, too.”

Jimmy thinks about that some. Those seem like fine points, but he’s got the feeling that he’s interacting with Tim’s brain right now, who Tim wants to be, not his guts, who he is, and that there might be some deeper levels here that he’s working out for himself. He thinks about holding Tim and waking up with him, and how all of this… stuff… fits together. Then he puts his salad on the bench next to them, fork in the bowl, and takes Tim’s hand in his, twining their fingers together.

For a millisecond, Jimmy thought Tim’s going to jerk away, but he doesn’t, and once again Jimmy’s got the sense that the brain wants one thing and the body wants something else, but the brain is winning.

Meanwhile, brain in charge, Tim’s looking at him, curious about what’s happening with their hands. “Experimenting?”

“Yeah. Remember the first time you held Abby’s hand?”

Tim thinks, but that’s lost to memory. He shakes his head. “I remember the first time I touched her.”

“All sort of sharp and tingly and your whole body lit up?”

“Yeah. We had a lunch date, and I headed down to the lab, and she looked up and said, ‘Hi! You must be Agent McGee,’ then she came over and hugged me.”

“What’d you say to her?”

“Hi. Call me Tim.”

Jimmy snorts at that. “And only fourteen years later…”

“Eleven years. Okay, yeah, it took a while. It happened.” He looks down at his hand in Jimmy’s. “This doesn’t feel like that, does it?”

Jimmy shakes his head, letting go. “Feels a little bit like holding Breena’s hand now. There’s no rush at it these days. It’s warm and comfortable. Feels good, reassuring, but not sexy.”

Tim nods; that’s a decent description. He’s not entirely sure about comfortable, but he’s not feeling any sort of negative sensation from it right now. Of course, they’re dressed and in public, and it’s definitely not erotic. This couldn’t be less sex if they tried… Okay, it could, they could be talking about work, but, that was very clearly a platonic hand hold. And… and he’s rationalizing… more than whatever it is, he wants it to be comfortable, and if he’s got to tie his brain in knots to get there, that’s what he’ll do.

But that touch hints something else, making him think about comfort, and about his time thinking on the beach, and the first time he touched Abby, well, the second first time, because that time he knew he was in love with her. “Are you in love with me?”

“No!” Snaps out of Jimmy. He’s giving Tim the what the hell is wrong with you even thinking of asking that look. It occurs to Jimmy as he says that, that it’d be easier to wake up naked with Tim in
his arms every morning than say, ‘I’m in love with Tim McGee,’ out loud. Great something else to ponder.

Tim hits him with his I’ve got a point here look, and deliberately takes Jimmy’s hand in his again. “Do you love me?”

Jimmy glances at Tim’s hand in his, wondering what he’s doing with this, but then looks back to his eyes and says, “Yeah.”

“What’s the difference? Been thinking about that a lot this weekend, too.”

“Oh. I…” Jimmy thinks about it, there’s got to be a difference, right? The romance thing, right? But… he’s felt the full-on hearts and flowers romance thing without being in love, and he’s been with Breena more than long enough to see that romance comes and goes, but the love doesn’t. “I don’t know.”

“You’re in love with Breena and Abby, right?”

“Yeah.” That one’s easy to answer, doesn’t make him feel off balance.

“Only thing I can come up with is that I want to have sex with them, and I don’t want to have sex with you.”

Jimmy squints a little at that, like he’s thinking hard. “There’s supposed to be more to it than that... Right?”

“Yeah, but I can’t find it.” Tim taps his fingers on the back of Jimmy’s hand. “I love you. I love Gibbs. I do not feel the same about you as I do about Gibbs.”

“Oh…” Jimmy thinks about it, there’s got to be a difference, right? The romance thing, right? But… he’s felt the full-on hearts and flowers romance thing without being in love, and he’s been with Breena more than long enough to see that romance comes and goes, but the love doesn’t. “I don’t know.”

“You’re in love with Breena and Abby, right?”

“Yeah.” That one’s easy to answer, doesn’t make him feel off balance.

“Only thing I can come up with is that I want to have sex with them, and I don’t want to have sex with you.”

Jimmy squints a little at that, like he’s thinking hard. “There’s supposed to be more to it than that... Right?”

“Yeah, but I can’t find it.” Tim taps his fingers on the back of Jimmy’s hand. “I love you. I love Gibbs. I do not feel the same about you as I do about Gibbs.”

“Okay.” Jimmy flashes him a smirk. “Probably be kind of awkward if you did.”

Tim elbows him gently. “I love Tony and Ducky, too, and all of those relationships are different.”

“Got you.”

“But I don’t feel like there’s a huge difference, besides the sex, between how I feel about you, and about Breena. I mean, there are some differences… Like… I think I’d be more protective of her than you, but that’s because she’s a girl and I know you can fight, not because I feel differently about her than I do about you.

“And I want to do nice things for both of you, but I don’t check in with either of you a few times a day, like I do with Abby. But I actively miss you if I go a few days without seeing you. And I run into things over the course of the day that I want to tell you about, and I make note of them so I can tell you about them the next time I see you. And I don’t tend to feel that way about Tony or Ziva. I’m always happy to see them, but if we don’t cross paths at work, Friday’ll be soon enough. But I’ll text Breena a few times a week just to see how she is and what’s up, ’cause I know I won’t see her until Friday. I don’t know what, if anything, that means, but I’ve been thinking about it.”

Jimmy shrugs. Tim knows Jimmy’s got more thinking to do, and for that matter so, does he.

“Best guess,” Jimmy says, “just like if either of us qualifies as straight anymore, I don’t think it matters. It’s love; it’s making us happy; that’s enough.”

Tim nods then he looks at his hand in Jimmy’s. “Is it making you happy?”
“Yeah. Confusing as fuck. I’ve never spent this much time thinking about love stuff, but yeah, it’s making me happy.”

“Me, too.”
Bad Shoot

For a split second, Tony glances at Ziva, shooting her the, *I really wish these assholes would stop running* look, before they break into a run after their suspect.

Where the hell does moron think he’s going to run? He’s in a tenth floor apartment. What’s he going to do, fly?

Ziva tacks right, through the living room. Tony takes left, into the kitchen.

The perp is cornered in the dining room. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. Two ways in, and each of them has an armed Federal Agent pointing a gun at him standing in the middle of it. He puts his hands behind his neck without being asked and smiles at Tony and Ziva.

It’s automatic. They’ve done this so many times they barely have to think about it. He keeps his gun on the Perp. She lowers hers, grabbing her cuffs, heading (wide) to cuff the perp. They’ll take him to the car, toss him in the back, then down to the Navy Yard, Processing, Holding, and Interrogation.

It’s textbook.

He’s looking at Tony, and something’s wrong. He’s still smiling. He’s *looking* at Ziva. He’s not acting caught.

Something is wrong. Tony feels it all through him. *Something* is wrong.

Tony fires before anything other than *wrong* can form in his head.

“Oh God!” *Oh godohgodohgodohgodohgod please, please, pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease*. Tony feels like he’s going to shit his pants, puke, and pass out all at once, and the only thing stopping that is that he’s got to see if the man he just killed has a gun.

He’s never… He’s shot people before, but never… SHIT. Ziva’s just staring at him, stunned, and he can’t move, can’t do anything but stand there, too awash in too much everything to even see if his life is about to end, too.

Bad shoots happen. That’s just part of being a cop. You get twitchy and someone moves wrong and FUCK! He can feel the tears starting. He didn’t wait. He didn’t see. He didn’t say stop, or freeze, or hands where I can see them, or anything. He just fired, three shots, all in the chest.

Ziva finally moves, to the body, not bothering to check if he’s still alive, they can tell by the smell and the puddle of urine to go with the blood that he’s gone. She reaches behind his neck, guessing that’s got to be what Tony saw, and then says to him, “He had a gun. It’s taped up between his shoulder blades.”

Tony nods once, exhales long and shaky, and then his knees go out, and he hits the floor, shaking.

When he’s got control of himself, he notices Ziva’s moved something. Their perp (victim) had been standing behind the dining table in his home. Behind that table was a painting of a woodland scene. Ziva’s moved it, swapped it out. Now there’s a mirror over the table, and he guesses the woodland scene is wherever the mirror was.
She’s calling it in, officer involved shooting, no need for an ambulance. AI will be here soon. He’ll give them his statement. Perp had a gun and went for it. Cut and dried…

“Tell me what happened,” Ziva says, crouching on the floor next to him.

“I don’t know.” Because he doesn’t. Not really. That’s not true, he does know. He knows exactly what happened. Someone made a threatening… something… not exactly a move, but something, toward his wife and child, and he killed the man for it.

“Wrong answer.” Ziva’s cool, and in control right now. She’s in clean up mode, and he wonders, vaguely, how many times she’s done things like this. Made a bad kill look good.

He rubs his forehead, takes a deep breath, lets it out, swallows, and then says, voice calm, “We chased Darner in here. I pulled my gun and told him to stop. He looked around, saw there wasn’t an exit, then turned to face us, hands up. He put his hands behind his neck. I nodded at you, and you holstered your weapon and proceeded to take your cuffs out. I kept my gun on him. You were going through his rights. I…” He doesn’t know. He’s not sure if he saw it, felt it, sensed it, or just knew, but somehow, something, maybe a twitch, maybe his arm tightened slightly, maybe it was a little move (maybe he was just going to scratch an itch, the little, and not very helpful, voice in the back of Tony’s mind says) but whatever it was, Tony read it as a threat, to Ziva, and he open fired without warning. Tony’s eyes flick to the mirror, and what Ziva’s given him with that. “…saw him reach for his gun. I told him to stop. He didn’t. I fired three times.”

Ziva looks at him, eyes steady. “Exactly.”

AI takes hours. Jimmy and Allan have come, taken care of the body, and gone while they’re still talking. Warner’s team has come, cordoned off the building, and processed the scene, and he and Ziva are still talking to AI.

Their stories match, but not perfectly. They know how this works. They’re pros. The main details are all the same, but Ziva remembers him saying ‘Freeze’ he remembers it as, ‘Stop.’ Little details that get muddled when you look at real eye-witness statements are different, instead of rehearsed, prepped statements you get from people who don’t know how to do this.

Ziva claims she saw Darden shift his left hand toward the gun. Tony claims right. Tony was watching in the mirror. Ziva saw it from in front of him. Just little things like that, easily explained by people being people.

It’s not a fun six hours, but when it’s done, it’s done. Tony’s a good cop, with sixteen years at NCIS and a clean record. The wrong guy tried to see if he could get the drop on the wrong cop.

“You gonna yell at me for this, too?” Tony asks Jimmy as he steps into Autopsy. (He’d gotten a text saying, Come down.) “Gonna wake up and find you’ve pulled some cruel shit to go with another bad decision?”

Jimmy raises one eyebrow, and Dr. Allan decides now is a very good time to dematerialize. Two seconds later, he’s vanished, and Jimmy says, “Guy draws on your pregnant wife, you can shoot him as many times as you want and then cut his balls off and wear ’em for earrings, and I won’t say boo.”

Jimmy takes two steps over and gives Tony a hug. Tony stands there, stiff, not letting himself be comforted. Jimmy sighs, so much for trying that. He steps back.
“I called you down so you can run me through it. If anything doesn’t match your version, it’s not going to make the report.”

“You don’t need to--”

“You’re right, I don’t. But I will. Because you did the right thing, and I see no reason for you or Ziva or your child to suffer for it.”

That gets through where the hug didn’t.

“I don’t know that I did.”

“He’s dead. She’s not. You did the right thing.”

“I shot before he reached for it. I think he was thinking about it, but…” Tony shakes his head, leaning heavily against one of the autopsy tables, staring at Darden, who is lying on the other table. “I didn’t see him move.”

“Shit.”

“He was looking at her, and…” Tony’s replaying it, again, trying to find the trigger, what made him move. “It felt bad. Something was wrong, but… I didn’t know about the gun until after he was dead.”

“Ah fuck.” Jimmy bites his lip and says, “All the more reason to make sure everything’s clean then.”

Tony narrows his eyes. “You ream me out for Jeanne but give me a free pass on this one? This one is dead because I fucked up.”

“You’re a good cop. No one has ever doubted that. It felt bad or wrong… So you got him before he went for it? You don’t spend half your life training your gut to scream when something’s wrong to ignore it. You don’t have to let him take a shot at Ziva, not for me.”

Tony’s eyes are narrow, and he’s not looking relaxed or comforted.

“I didn’t ream you out on Jeanne for making a mistake. Jeanne wasn’t a mistake. It was wrong and you knew it and you did it anyway. This, at worst, is a mistake. People make mistakes. It happens. Place a credible threat against Breena, and I’ll attack, too. Tim’d do the same for Abby. Anyone who tries to mess with Abbi Borin better be ready to have so many holes in him he’ll work as a sieve. And that’ll be before Gibbs even gets to him…” Tony flinches. “What?”

“Gibbs’d have to get in line, because Abbi can take care of herself and she’s got all of those years of training and a gut that yells when there’s danger.”

Jimmy nods.

“Ziva didn’t feel it. She was relaxed enough in it that she was looking down and getting her cuffs.”

Jimmy winces, too. “Nothing?”

“After, she looked at me, and she was surprised. That I remember.”

“Then you made a mistake. It happens. And this wasn’t some unarmed, innocent bystander, and it’s not like you were gunning for him because he wasn’t paying taxes or had a joint on him. He’s wanted for…” Jimmy waits, letting Tony fill in the blank, hoping that saying it out loud will help.
“A few bombings, believed to have killed three cops in the UK, mostly he’s a courier. Gets things from point A to point B.”

“So, this,” Jimmy points to him, “was not a good guy. This is not Mr. Wrong Place Wrong Time, and he’s sure as hell not Mr. Even If He Is Guilty of What You’re Saying He Did, That Doesn’t Deserve the Death Penalty. If you brought him in, and he didn’t deal, we’d have fried him.

“And, here… haven’t sent them over to Abby and trace yet, but…” Jimmy grabs the bag that has Darden’s belt in it. It looks like a plain, black leather belt with a silver tip on the tongue. Jimmy tugs on that tip, and out slides an inch long knife. “Razor sharp. Can’t stab with it, but it slashes just fine.” He places Darden’s boots on the table next to Tony, flips one of them over, and turns the heel. There are lock picks in there. “God knows what else he’s got hiding that I haven’t found, yet. What else he may have had in that room. Take me through the shooting.”

Tony shakes his head. “Don’t need to. It’ll all match up right. Everything in the story happened the way it really did. Only difference was I saw him go for the gun in the story and told him to stop.”

“Okay. AI done with you?”

“For now.”

Two days later, his gun is back in his holster, and the case is behind him. Professionally. Personally… Not even close.

He can’t talk about it. Not yet. Not to Ziva, not to anyone. He can give the route answers as to “what happened,” but they’re lies.

He fucked up. That’s what happened. Doesn’t matter what he had tucked away. Doesn’t matter that Darden wasn’t a good guy and the world is better off without him. He fuck up. There are procedures. There are steps in play to make sure you take the guy, and all of the information in his head (which was why they wanted him) into custody, alive.

He and Ziva were out there. A man, who he didn’t know was armed, made a move (probably, something had to set his threat sensor off) and he took him out. All of it happened before the part of his brain that actually thinks got into the act.

On a sub-thought level, he knows they were chasing Darden because he was part of a trafficking ring. He ended up on their radar as a link to a link that Bishop pulled out of their data feed. He was, of all covers, pretending to be a Petty Officer working for the Quartermaster out of Norfolk. Not a bad way to get things from here to there. He could find a ship, add an extra box of, something, and whoever else he had in his circle could pick it up later. He was wanted for moving humans, drugs, guns, money, anything that anyone might want, into and out of the country. According to Interpol, ‘he was a person of interest’ in two bombings (thought to have been the guy who got the explosives from point a to point b). He had successfully escaped capture three times, and killed cops twice to do it.

When Tony thinks about that, he feels better about jumping the gun. (Literally.) Obviously this guy had some sort of ace in the hole. (A plastic derringer taped to his back. And lock picks in the heel of his boot. And a tiny knife hidden in his belt. But he didn’t know that until after.) Tony likes to think all of that was processing in the back of his mind, and that, plus that move (that he doesn’t know if
He actually saw or not) made his body fired before Darden could get the drop on him.

When he thinks about the fact that there are no good reports on how Darden had killed those cops, (bodies were found burned to skeletons and parts were missing) that there was no way for Tony to have known he had a gun, that he shot on blind panic, that he does not, in fact, remember seeing a move, he feels terrible.

Bad shoots happen. They just do. The cop who’s never screwed up is like the surgeon who’s never lost a patient, one who’s been on the job for such a short time the opportunity just hasn’t arisen.

If you’re lucky, like Tony, you’ve got cover, you guessed right, and the next day you go back, promising to do a better job.

If you’re not, that’s the end of the perp, and it’s the end of you, too.

But the fact that it happens. That everyone has one… That’s not making it easier to deal with the little voices in his head.

It’s been a week. It’s well after midnight, and he’s not sleeping.

He rolls out of bed and grabs his phone. You up?

Five minutes later, when he’s decided that Gibbs probably is sleeping, or might be at Borin’s or something, he gets back. Door’s open.

Gibbs is in his basement, working on Little D’s rocking chair. He’s actually been up all night working on it. After dinner he hit his groove and has been happily crafting away. The only reason it took him so long to respond was he didn’t hear his phone buzz. He’d been sketching out the shapes he wants each piece to be on the wood he’s using and decided his pencil was a bit duller than he likes for this kind of work. When he turned to the bench to sharpen it, he saw the text icon on his phone, and replied.

He knows that Tony killed someone last week. They talked about it a bit at Shabbos, but he blew it off, and Ziva gave them that little headshake that said, ‘Sensitive, don’t poke.’ So they didn’t poke.

But Gibbs knows that look. He’s worn it himself. He’s seen it on Tim. He’s seen it on Fornell. And he’s seen it on Mike. No matter what actually happened, Tony thinks it’s a bad shoot.

And he knew, when he saw Ziva’s headshake, that Tony’d be here, sooner or later, when he’s ready to talk.

By the time Tony gets there, Gibbs has two more slats sketched out, and the bourbon poured.

“She had to move the mirror,” Tony says in lieu of Hello.

Gibbs would have to admit that that’s a tad more cryptic than he’d like, but he can pretty much figure out what Tony has to be saying by it. Only one she he could be talking about, and only a few reasons to move a mirror.

Gibbs hands over the drink, and pretty much puts Tony onto a stool. “Start at the beginning.”

So he does.
Tony gets to the part about seeing or not seeing or whatever it was, and Gibbs interjects, “The gut knows.”

“Try telling IA that.”

Gibbs inclines his head. “I know.” Then he looks at Tony, waiting for the rest of the story. And, finally, the mirror comment makes sense.

“She gave you cover, something you could explain to IA.”

“Yeah. She knew it was a bad shoot—“

“Stop that. Your wife and child are breathing. Any shoot that accomplishes that is a good shoot.”

“Jimmy said that, too, but I didn’t know Gibbs, I panicked.”

“You knew. You knew he was dangerous. You knew he was in his own home. Why run into the room with no exit in his own home? Not like he got lost. You knew he’d killed other cops. You didn’t know how, but you knew he’d done it. He puts his hands behind his neck, not his head, why? Without being told, why? You knew.”

“Felt like panic. I’ve made good shots, besides the first one, I never almost pissed myself or hit the floor. Never didn’t sleep for a week after a good shot.”

“But all of those things did happen the last time you almost lost Ziva.”

“Yeah. That’s why I panicked. That’s why I didn’t say stop. I shot before anything…”

“And it was a good thing you did. He had lock picks in his boot, a hidden knife in his belt. You yell stop. He stops. Ziva grabs the gun, cuffs him, hands behind his back. Into the car you go. Call it in. On the road, he picks the lock, pulls the knife, holds it to Ziva’s throat until you stop the car and let him out. Maybe he takes your gun, too. Maybe he slits her throat before he runs, knowing that calling for help and trying to keep her from bleeding out means you won’t follow. The gut knows. You knew.

“As a husband and father, as the man guarding my daughter and grandchild, you did the right thing. As your father-in-law, friend, mentor, whatever it is we are to each other, I am proud of you. Your family comes first, above and beyond everything else.”

“As your ex-boss, as a cop, you fucked up, and not because of the shot, but because you had the person you’d take a blind shot for on your team. That’s why you were ready to piss yourself, not because it was a bad shoot, but because Ziva was the one next to you. You wouldn’t have taken that shot if Bishop had been there, and knowing how close to FUBAR you could have gotten wouldn’t have hurt so bad if Draga had been in that car with you.

“There are a lot of good reasons for 12, and that’s one of them. I have been exactly where you are, and the only reason I was even around to ever be your Boss is when Jen and I finally got the shit cleaned up, enough people had stopped breathing that no one besides us knew what had happened.

“Jen and I split after that. Lots of reasons, but one of them was I’d made it clear I couldn’t work with her. Same for you. You’re done. You can’t work with Ziva. Since you’re the problem and she isn’t, normally I’d say you need to hand in your badge, but you know she’s planning on leaving soon, and there’s no one else you’d make that mistake for.”

Tony nods, feeling absolved.
“But don’t put that gun back on if you go out with her. Better yet, don’t go out with her. I know it’s early days, but it might be time for her to leave, or go on desk work, or whatever it is she wants to do.”

Tony shrugs. “She’d been talking a bit about working with you on the houses.”

Gibbs smiles at that. He’d like having Ziva working with them.
Tony supposes there has to be a better way to start this conversation than, “I fucked up, but you’ve got to quit,” but he doesn’t know what it is.

He supposes he can offer to go, she’ll tell him no, she’ll go, and that’ll be that, but… That’s a show, and supposedly they’re past that, by now.

He can admit, to her, that he fucked up. That’s a start. He hasn’t said that, not to her, not yet. Of course, he hasn’t felt like he’s had to say it, either. She’s the one who moved the mirror. She knew. He saw it in her eyes when she was looking at him.

Sun’s not up yet. Will be soon.

Normally, that’d mean that Ziva’d be up soon, too, but she’s sleeping hard now. Sacks out as soon as she hits the pillow and stays that way until he pokes her up in the morning. It’s the first time, since they’ve been sleeping together, that he’s had to use his alarm clock.

Not today though.

He gets into their place, takes his phone out of his pocket and sends a not coming in today text to Bishop and Draga. They’re still working on unraveling who Darden was working with, so another day in front of the computers matching staff names to bank accounts to potential points where they could have come in contact with each other isn’t something they need him for.

(Yet another reason he’s pissed about killing Darden. The man ran, from what they can tell, at least 200 contacts through Navy bases all over the world, entirely in his head. They know what got shipped to where, but not who handled it.)

Tomorrow will be soon enough for that.

He strips out of his clothing, dropping it quietly into the hamper, and then slides into bed next to Ziva.

She stirs very slightly, but doesn’t wake.

He lays on his side, propped on one elbow, watching her sleep as their room slowly grows brighter.

It’s ironic, he guesses, but, since he hired Bishop, he actually read the sexual harassment and discrimination guidelines, and more importantly, internalized them, so, for once he’s about to break them knowingly, and without any sense of naughty thrill.

Three quarters of the fun of messing with the rules is messing with the rules, but not today.

As Ziva’s Boss, as long as she can do the job, he cannot, in any way, suggest that her being pregnant is an issue. Not like she’d sue them, but that’s still there, in the regs. Hell, technically, he’s not even allowed to ask if a female employee is pregnant or intends to become so.

He sighs. More reason for twelve. Won’t be nearly as worried about that little bun in the oven if it isn’t yours, and it won’t be yours if you never even get to the dating phase. He supposes, at this point, with all of them but Draga married, maybe it’s time to retire twelve. Of course, new team
member soon… Maybe not.

He supposes he should be relieved that Draga and Bishop get on well, but in a brother/sister like to
prank each other and snark sort of way. Reminds him a lot of him and Kate, but with Draga having
the good sense to not sexually harass Bishop.

He wonders how Gibbs felt when he saw him and Ziva together at first. Or, Lord… (He feels
embarrassed remembering it.) Him swanning around with his dick out on that undercover mission.
What was I thinking? He knows what he was thinking, hoping Ziva’d see and decide she wanted to
do more than look. Hoping Tim’d see and assume they were doing more than playing a role.

He sighs at that. There are a few strands of hair across Ziva’s face, so he gently brushes them aside.

She sniffs at that, shifting her face toward the warmth of his palm. He cups her cheek and she
murmurs something, sighs, and burrows a little further into the warmth of blankets and pillows.

He strokes her face with his left hand. For a moment he lays there, looking, seeing the gold band
around his ring finger, remembering the words, the promise, hidden under it.

I will live.

He doesn’t remember what day that was, but the case was the beginning of August, so about a year.

A year of a lot of talking, and counseling, and more talking with each other. A year of trying to
manage fear in constructive ways.

They’re better, maybe not great, but better. He did not immediately demand that Ziva go on desk
duty the second the pregnancy test turned up positive. And he didn’t do it because of how last year
turned out. They’d already been through that. They’ve had that fight, and he knows that she cannot
stand him issuing one-sided ultimatums.

And above and beyond all of that, he knows that he wants to issue them because he’s scared. Scared
stupid. Pure, irrational, balls in charge, brain checked out, fear.

Their counselor even went over the relative danger of their job versus getting in the car and driving
to work. Turns out the drive into work is a lot more dangerous than the job. (He made a joke about
Ziva’s driving skills at that, and then the counselor decided that was worth a good long talk about,
too. Which he thought was stupid until they got to the meat of it, namely that work was scary
because it’s out of his control, while driving, which not only is Ziva bad at, but is actually more
dangerous than being a cop, isn’t scary because of the illusion of control.) So, his brain knows that…
His balls, not so much. But right now, they aren’t making the decisions.

And that’s his promise to her, that he’d do a better job managing it. He thinks he has. Mostly.
They’ve got a baby on the way. That’s been his biggest fear for decades, and he’s mastered it. He
didn’t completely melt down at the idea of her not working. He kept himself in check when she
decided to shift the fear from child entirely dependent on him to her and child dependent on him.

He knows he’s a work in progress, but he feels like he is making that progress.

And, over the course of the year, she’s done her part, too. She hasn’t taken any unnecessary risks.
She’s even, twice, run away from danger when her running into it wouldn’t have helped.

And part of the shift to more terror related cases means they’ve been spending more time digging
through the data and less time running around, chasing bad guys. The bad guys they do chase now
are generally much worse guys than the ones they used to go after, but they are spending a lot less time in the field.

So, better. But doing better with it doesn’t mean it goes away.

Obviously. Darden is dead because the fear is still there, still sharp, still real.

She wakes with a jerk about an hour later. He can see that first rush of slept too late, gotta run now on her face, followed, almost instantly, by the realization that the sun is full up, and he’s just lying there next to her.

She relaxes into the pillows, and the moment of gotta run bleeds off.

“I take it we are talking?” she says, watching him.

“Yeah.” He nods at her, and strokes her face, followed by a soft kiss. “I can’t do this. We’ve been at it a year. I’m doing better, but… I can’t. Not anymore.”

“Which this?” He thinks she knows, but it’s also two seconds since she woke up, so maybe not.

“I can’t watch you be in danger. I think about it, see it in my head over and over, and best I can tell, best I can tease it out, I killed a man for looking at you.”

“A dangerous man.”

“You didn’t think so. Your danger sensor didn’t go off, and yours is sharper than mine.”

She shrugs. “He was armed, he was dangerous, and mine didn’t fire. That worries me. Makes me think I’ve been at it too long. That I’m getting sloppy.”

That’s an olive branch. He knows for a fact that if she thought she was getting slow or sloppy she’d have handed in her resignation that day. “Makes me think that whatever he had planned, it wasn’t for right that second.”

Ziva shrugs. “Maybe. Maybe I am slowing down.”

Tony shakes his head. He doesn’t think that, at all. He thinks he got ahead of himself.

“What do you want to do?” Ziva asks him.

He sighs, looking away for a moment, and then looks back at her. “You to resign. Now. Not… two or four or whenever months from now. I know I’m the problem, but…”

Ziva nods at that. Like she told Penny, she’s done. A few more months would be good, and, with what she’s about to say next, she’s trying to keep her options open. Just because the pregnancy test turned positive doesn’t mean it will stay that way, as she knows all too well from both Breena and Abby, and she’d really rather not quit her job today just to start her period tomorrow. But, all in all, she’s fine with getting out of the line of fire. Fine in a way she wasn’t last year.

“Keep me on a desk until you have a replacement?” They both know things run better with four than three. And that will give Tony time to find the right person for the job, rather than settling for the best of the bunch he can find right this second.

“Will you be okay on desk duty?”
She shrugs. “Bored. But more field time for Draga and Bishop is good, especially if the behind the scenes work doesn’t get put on hold.”

“And… resigning… is that…” he looks nervous asking, “okay?”

Ziva nods and pets his face. “Yes. Sooner than I would have gone on my own, but, yes, it is okay. I don’t want or need you scared, and I don’t need the job. Not the way I used to.” She smiles at him. “I have new jobs I’m looking forward to.”

Twenty-four(ish) hours later, the team takes it well. Congrats from both Bishop and Draga. (And a ten dollar bill going from Bishop to Draga, along with a very smug look on Draga’s face.)

Draga’s actually looking at Tony with something that could be called respect. Real, genuine, you did the right thing and it was hard but I’m proud of you, respect.

They’re in the car, heading toward the NCIS deep storage warehouse. Apparently, two guys they (not them personally, but NCIS) busted for drug smuggling last year, may have been part of Darden’s ring, and since they’ve got them in custody, and would be happy to get more information, they’re off to pick up more files.

This newfound respect irks Tony. Because, while it’s true that Draga no longer looks at him like the man who got promoted to team leader because everyone else who could do the job vanished, he’s never really gotten the sense that Draga feels the way he did about Gibbs.

No sense of this is the kind of man I want to be. Not that, back in the beginning, he really wanted to be Gibbs, but… He appreciated and needed that sense of certainty and rightness. Everything else was in flux, but if he was standing next to Gibbs doing what Gibbs told him to, he was doing the right thing, and especially with the Wendy thing going sideways and the way Baltimore ended up, he really did need that bastion of certainty.

And he knows Draga doesn’t feel that way about him. His Draga’s Boss, not his mentor.

“I’m sure she’s not loving being on a desk, but that was the right call.”

Tony just eyes Draga, and then looks back to the road.

“She’s good at hunting down leads, she’s good in interrogation, and I know how I felt about my ex when she was pregnant, and we weren’t even together then. And for as much flack as I’m sure you’ll take for sidelining her, you’re going to do your job better, she’s going to do her job fine, and everyone is going to be better off.”

Tony raises an eyebrow. “You think I’m taking flack for this?”

“You aren’t?” Draga looks startled. “I have yet to meet a pregnant woman who thought the ‘I’m going to make you stop doing what you love because I’m scared line’ made any sense.”

“Keep working on your deduction skills, Draga.”

Now Draga looks surprised. “You didn’t just boot her out because you shot Darden?”

Tony closes his eyes, and then opens them slowly, looking at Draga. “You think anyone can force Ziva to do anything she doesn’t want to?”
Draga nods at that. “Okay, not, forced, but… Looks like you flipped, and she’s paying for it. I get it. I really get it. Ever since you started strutting around, and she switched to decaf, I’ve been keeping a close eye on her, and being extra twitchy when we’re out, too, because that’s just what you do. It could have been me just as easy as you. We, and anyone out there, are better off if she’s riding a desk while pregnant.

“And look, you don’t say it to them. God, not if you want your balls to stay attached to your body. Lisa could go from normal to bumblefuck-full-on-insane in three words if they were the wrong words, but you feel it, and she feels you feel it and everything goes sideways, so… Thanks.”

Tony has no idea what to do with that, so he nods.

Bishop does not look impressed with him. All four of them are reading through files, finding out who else they thought might have been involved in this, and if they can find anything useful to tie these guys to Darden. He keeps getting side-eye glances from her. So, later, as they’re heading off to snag coffee, he takes her along.

“Just say it.”

“She’s pregnant, not crippled. And she’s not far enough along for it to affect how she does her job.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you punishing her?” He’s got all 109 pounds of self-righteous blonde staring up at him, getting ready to defend his wife. He sighs, glad to see the solidarity and that Bishop’s got Ziva’s back, but… it’s misplaced. “Not like she got pregnant on her own!” Bishop glares up at him.

Interesting word choice. Punishing he wonders, idly, what’s going on with her and Mr. Bishop these days. “You think I’m punishing her?”

“You’re pulling her off of everything she likes doing about this job. She doesn’t love computers. Hunting down a lead through gigs and gigs of data isn’t her idea of fun. You’re punishing her because you’re scared!” Grow a pair and get over it goes unspoken, but is staring up at him intently from Bishops very brown eyes.

Tony rubs his eyes. “Was she looking punished when we talked to you?”

“No, but…”

He looks down at her. (Has she always been this tiny?) “No.” To him that’s the self-evident, trumping argument for anything that might be going on.

“She’d cover it if she felt it was unfair. She does that. If she’s annoyed at you, or thinks you’ve made a bad call, she doesn’t want us to see it. Draga’s mentioned that.”

Tony’s mentally cursing the fact that Draga sees every damn thing that happens in front of or near him. Then he puts two and two together and decides he needs to talk to Ziva again and make sure she really is cool about this and his own fear isn’t blinding him to what the two investigators working for him are picking up.

“You think I’m being unfair to her?”

“Yes! As long as she can do the job, she should do it.”
“Noted.”

“Noted?” Now Bishop looks surprised. She’s expecting some sort of argument beyond Tony just calmly telling her that he’s aware of her issues.

“Noted. Anything else?”

Bishop, looking wary, like something’s about to jump out and bite her, shakes her head. Tony hands her her coffee and Draga’s Red Bull/smoothie combo. “Back to work.”

He takes Ziva’s green tea, and his own coffee (not decaf, he’s fairly sure that at his age if he tried to go cold turkey it’d kill him) and flashes Ziva a text. Observation?

Why? comes back a second later.

Wanna talk alone.

Okay…

“What is going on?” Ziva asks as she steps into the observation bay.

“Are you really okay with this?” He’s staring at her, watching, all of his investigator sensors on high.

“Yes,” her eyebrows are furrowed, and she’s looking perplexed.

“Really?”

She nods again. And he feels pretty satisfied. He knows she’s a great liar, but that feels real to him.

“Okay. Just double checking. Draga’s assuming you’re yelling at me at home, and Bishop thinks I’m punishing you, so I wanted to make sure I didn’t miss something.”

Ziva laughs at that. “And I think you now know all you need to about why Draga is no longer with his ex, and what Bishop fears will happen if she gets pregnant.”

“So, they’re seeing their own pasts/present.”

Ziva smiles at him. “I think so. I also know we’ve got a few free minutes and Vance does, too. Shall we go up and tell him?”

“Yes.”

On the stairs on the way up, he almost wants to say, ‘You can change your mind.’ There’s a second where the fear of her not on his team, of not seeing her in that desk across from him every day hits, and hits hard.

But it fades after a few more steps.

Things change. They have to. And this… this is the change that’ll let him sleep at night.

It doesn’t take being a cop to figure out that if both Agent DiNozzos want to have a chat with him, that there’s a small DiNozzo on the way.
Okay, there could be other options. Could be lots of other options, but paired with yesterday’s day off and last week’s shoot, and Leon’s awfully sure why the DiNozzos want to chat with him.

They walk in, smiling. Tony’s got that walk he remembers from when Jackie was pregnant with Jared. And Leon knows.

He’s not sure what he’s feeling.

Happy for them, of course, but part of him is dreading that Ziva’s staying on. He knows he is not, in any way, able to suggest, hint, or provide any level of unspoken context that indicates he thinks pregnant women don’t belong in the field. He’ll have his ass booted out of his chair so fast the chair’ll spin if he tries to violate that rule and gets caught on it.

And he’s rather fond of that chair.

But, especially since Jackie died, he hates seeing his female employees at risk, and the pregnant ones are worse. He can’t act on it. He knows it’s irrational. But it’s real.

So, after he’s made the correct congratulations, after he’s asked the right questions, he feels a massive wash of relief when Ziva says, “I would like to formally give sixty days’ notice.”

“Until you start your maternity leave?”

“No Director. Until I resign.”

Leon nods at her. That’s a step further than he was hoping for. And then looks to Tony. “May we have a few minutes alone?”

Tony nods and heads off.

“Agent DiNozzo, as happy as I am for you and your husband, I’m sad to hear that this makes you want to leave us.” And that’s true, too. He might not want pregnant agents in the field, but he doesn’t want to lose Ziva, either.

Ziva nods. “It has been a very good eleven years, Director, and I’ve enjoyed being here, but it’s time for something new.”

“Any idea what these new things are,” he smiles at her, and for a moment, they’re Leon and Ziva, not Director and Agent DiNozzo.

She smiles back, touching her stomach. “Beyond the obvious, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“I never got to go to college. That’s one thing. I’d like to take some classes, explore the things I never did. We’re buying a house that is going to take a lot of fixing up—”

“And Jethro’s on top of that.” Leon’s smiling at that image.

“Yes. Senior has offered to help, as well as Ed Slater...” She’s not entirely sure if Vance knows who that is, but he nods, and smiles in a way that suggests he finds the idea of the three of them working together especially amusing, so apparently he does. “Ducky and Penny have been working on the house, too, and will likely give a hand with ours. So, for as long as I’m able, I’ll work on that. After that... I do not know. Maybe I’ll do that thing, with the yarn and sticks.”

“Knitting?” Vance asks with a little laugh.
She shrugs. “It could be fun. Fat and round and making tiny little booties? That is the idea, right?”

Vance smiles, feels his eyes burn slightly, and then says, “That’s one of my favorite memories of Jackie. Jared was born in January, and in September she started working on a blanket for him. Crochet, I think. She knew he was going to be a boy, so it was green and blue and brown. She made twelve little squares, sewed them together, and he was wrapped in that blanket when he came home. He loved that thing as a baby, slept with it, chewed on it, wore it ragged.” Leon stands up, takes a few steps over to his bookshelf, and finds the shot he wants, and then hands it to Ziva. “That’s it in his hands.”

“He’s adorable. How old…”

“That’s his first day of preschool. There are still a few squares of it left, in a box, up in the attic.”

“Did she make one for Kayla, too?” Ziva hands the picture back to Vance, and he carefully puts it back.

“Yes. She was sure Kayla was a boy, too. So, Kayla’s is blue and lighter blue and purple. She was born in June, and it was too hot for the first few months of her life to wrap her up much. She didn’t get attached to it. I think it’s up in her baby box, too, but it’s in perfect condition.”

Ziva smiles at that.

Vance steps closer to Ziva. He gives her a hug, and kisses her cheek. “Enjoy it, Ziva, you’ve more than earned it.”

She grins back at him, hugs back, and says, “I intend to.”

Then the Boss comes back. “And if you ever change your mind, if you ever want to come back… I will stick you on any team with an opening, or make one if there isn’t one.”

“Tony’s?”

Vance shakes his head at that. “No. I can read between the lines on the report, and I understand your timing on this. Not his team. Anyone else, anywhere else. If I’ve got the budget for it, I’ll give you your own team. You will always be welcome at NCIS, but just like Gibbs, you only get to come back to Tony’s team for 10 days a year, and they better be days that you’ve got a connection to.”

“Yes, sir.”

Vance smiles again. “I want pictures of you fat and happy and knitting.”

“I’m sure Tony will have them up, but if he doesn’t, Abby will share them.”

“I’m sure they will.”
Chapter Notes

Few quick ones in a row here. (Probably.) We’re moving back in time some, and following what everyone else has been doing over the last ten days while Tony’s been in angst-land.

Tim’s working his way through an attack on NCIS. They’ve (supposedly) got the mirror site up, and he wants to put it through its paces, see if it really does what it’s supposed to.

So far, it’s doing well. He’s coding as fast as he can with only seven fingers that type. (Once he started really doing it again, he was surprised at how fast he could go without his thumb, index, and middle finger.) His accuracy isn’t nearly as good as he’d like, but it’s still faster than trying to speak code into Dragon.

His last two hits didn’t get into the mirror site, and he’s hoping this one will fail, too. He wants their defenses difficult to breach, but not impossible. Anyone trying to hack his playground is going to have to work for it, but he still wants some of them to get in, and then get to play with the fun that’s the mirror site, while his guys hack them right back.

Once he’s gone through the code, and once again, making sure he’s cleaned up the typos, he notices that someone is watching him.

He jerks slightly when he notices that someone is Jarvis. Apparently he had time to come in, shut the door, and is sitting in one of his chairs looking really amused.

Tim pulls his earbuds out, and says, “Clayt?”

“Do you know how refreshing it is to see someone who does that because they’re actually working as opposed to making themselves feel important by making you wait?”

“No.” Best of his knowledge no one’s ever pulled that on him because they were really so into it they didn’t notice him. Of course, guy standing in front of you with a gun and badge who’s there to ask you questions isn’t exactly subtle. “My guys know to poke me if I’m into it and they need my attention. What can I do for you?”

“I finally got the time to read all the way through your report.”

Tim stares at him, waiting for the next bit.

“I’ll admit, after what happened, I didn’t expect you to write it.”

Tim looks confused by that. Given how things worked out with The Admiral, if he hadn’t written that report the whole thing would have been a complete waste.

“Thought it might be traumatic.”

Tim chooses not to comment on that, because writing it was, but he doesn’t want Jarvis to get that deep into his head, so instead he says, “Not much point to going through all of that if the report never
Jarvis nods at him. He’s thinking something, but Tim doesn’t know what. Then he says, “It’s solid. I liked what I saw. I’ve sent copies to Admiral Finnegan and General Meade, heads of Cybersecurity for both the Navy and Marines. From here they’re going to work with what you’ve set up. I’d like to know if I can volunteer you for an oversight position for building the official protocol.”

“You can. But part of the point of this was not to have an official protocol. They’ll start to get a feel for it if you’ve got a set protocol.”

“Taken into account. Mixing things up regularly will be part of it. And if they aren’t modifying things often enough, you’d be in a position to point that out.”

“Okay. That’s fine by me.” Tim thinks for a second about that. “You’ve already checked with Leon, right?”

Jarvis nods.

“Then, sure. I’ll send off an introductory email to the General when I get a chance.”

“Thank you.” While he waited, Jarvis had been looking around McGee’s office, seeing what he surrounded himself with and what he chose to represent himself with. His degrees are on the wall. The books he wrote are on the shelves. The target is a clear sign of who this man is. He’s got things he’s earned all around him. “You never responded to my letter about the Distinguished Civilian Service Award.”

Tim licks his lips. He had been hoping, on some level, that if he just ignored it, it would go away. “Didn’t know what to say.”

“Thanks?”

“Thanks,” he says it dry and flat, inclining his head slightly. “Don’t want it.”

Jarvis looks at him curiously.

Tim’s eye flick to his door, making sure it’s closed. “Feels like more being bought off.”

Jarvis looks untroubled by that. “It is. Partly. However, you also more than qualified for it. One possible route for this is scientific advances of significant value, which this test represents. Another is innovative leadership and successful programs that are felt well beyond your own command. I’d say you qualified on that level, as well. Part of it is that it’ll drive you father apoplectic. I remember what he had to say about you when we were chatting at dinner. Once this gets out, the people who matter to him will be offering him congratulations right and left for his brilliant son who covered himself in honor on a covert mission for the Navy.”

Tim hadn’t thought of that, but… yeah, he does like that. He smiles a little at it. Then another thought hits. “Have you seen him?”

“No. Not since he retired. However, I understand he’s in Hawaii these days, and Lt. James tells me I’ve got a tour of Pearl in February. So, I’ll make sure to look him up.” He keeps his voice light and pleasant as he says that, but Tim understands what he’s saying. He exhales slowly, feeling it tingle through him.

“Give him my regards.”
“I intend to. So, can I get you to agree to some sort of medal ceremony? Or will this just be a brief write up in Stars and Stripes?”

“Just the write up. I don’t want a fuss.”

“Yes, Leon suggested that’d be true. He tells me DiNozzo has a drawer full of Gibbs’ medals, and that he expected you to follow the same pattern.”

“You’re welcome to ask Tony if he wants to have a big celebration that I’ll skip out on.”

Jarvis shakes his head. “He’s not my biggest fan.”

“Ah.” Tim’s not sure what to do with that. He knows that Jarvis and Tony did, something, a while back, but not the details of it.

Jarvis scoots over a few feet, so he’s got a better view of Tim behind his desk. “So, you’re typing… I can see skin that isn’t covered in bruises. I don’t see a crutch anywhere. You’re healing?”

“Yeah. Mostly. The last five minutes of work I was doing was erasing mistakes because I’ve only got seven working fingers, but, yeah, more than two months on, and I’m down to one cast, I can walk, but not as far as I’d like. The crutch is in my car, because there and back is about my limit. I can drive again, that’s good. I’ve got maybe fifty percent of my range of motion in my right arm back. Little eyeliner…” He touches his eyebrow. Most of the time at work, he covers the scar. “And the most visible scar vanishes. But the Ortho’s saying it’ll probably be a year before I’ve got full function in my right hand back. Jimmy’s thinking it’ll be at least another two months before I’ve got full range of motion in my right arm, and probably about that long before I can start trying to run again. It’s slow.”

Jarvis nods at that. “I know it’s probably not useful, but you’re looking a whole lot better, a whole lot faster, than I expected the last time I saw you.”

Tim knows that means when Jarvis saw him in the cell, he wasn’t expecting his arm to ever heal all the way up. “That’s something, I guess. Othro thinks I’m healing up in leaps and bounds, too. Still too slow from my side of it.”

“I know that.” Jarvis stands up. “I won’t keep you any longer. It looks like you were doing something useful.”

“Thanks.” Tim starts to stand, and Jarvis shakes his head.

“No need to see me out.”

Tim nods, and looks back to his computer, but catches Jarvis laying a small box on his desk. As he walks out, Tim pulls it closer. Small, navy blue velvet box, with then Navy Crest on it. Looks like it’d hold jewelry, and he guesses, to some extent, it does.

He opens it up and a gold disk with the Navy crest, eagle over an anchor, rimmed in navy blue, Department of the Navy, Distinguished Civilian Service circling it, on a navy blue ribbon with three gold stripes, stares up at him.

He supposes he should feel something with it staring up at him, but… It’s just a thing. And not a thing he needs or wants.

He snaps the lid back down, and tosses it into his “junk” drawer. He’s got more important things to do than musing about this.
Juneau

Chapter Summary

Still catching up to the DiNozzo storyline.

It feels odd to Tim to be so far out of it. They’re at Shabbos, and Tim is listening to Ziva, Jimmy, and Abby talk about the case. (Tony’s not saying anything about it, and he knows that don’t wanna talk look on Tony’s face.)

They’ve got leads, and suspects, and puzzle pieces that all fit together.

And, these days, Tim’s outside of that. He’s working his own puzzles.

He’s sure that Gibbs and Ducky feel it, too. The outside looking in sensation. He doesn’t feel it when Abbi’s talking about her newest adventures in forensic accounting, though he’s just as much outside of that, but he was never in, so that’s probably why it doesn’t feel weird.

“They giving you any flack about your ‘consultant’?” Tim asks as she winds down about how her boss is giving her a lot of running around on getting someone else to audit everything.

“Not after I let him know you’ve got the same clearance level that I do. I think he wanted to, but… I don’t know, I’m half-expecting that any day now I’ll walk in and find that I’ve been reassigned to run the North Pacific Office or something.”

“They’re not allowed to retaliate against you for doing your job,” Penny says.

Abbi snorts at that. Allowed and reality are things that overlap in some places, but often don’t. “Technically a move to the North Pacific Region would be a promotion. More territory, better pay. But everyone knows that’s a punishment post.” For a second, Abbi can see they don’t get it, so she adds, “North Pacific Region is Alaska and the Aleutian Islands. You’re stationed out of Juneau, but you’re never there. It’s 300 days a year of hopping from tiny island to tiny island to tiny coastal village, and most of the job is making sure the locals aren’t violating anti-whaling treaties. No one’s lasted more than two years out there. It’s where they send you when they want you to resign.”

Jethro looks a bit alarmed at that, and she gently squeezes his hand. “No one’s saying anything about it, just… You know how it works, you can feel when the Perps are nervous, and my boss is nervous. And I’m wondering if he’s nervous enough to try and get rid of me. I’m also, apparently, the only person ever to contact the CBO and ask if we can move the audit up. Boss isn’t thrilled about that, either. CBO Auditor is, though. I’ve got a new best buddy who sees this as the making of her career.”

“That’s good, for you, right?” Breena asks.

Abbi shrugs. “I hope so. Tune in next week for the next thrilling installment of CGIS: Where Did The Money Go! How about you, McGee, is that less cast than you had last week?”

Tim holds up his right hand. His current web of black plastic now just covers the last third of his forearm to just below his knuckles. He’s got, once he gets the stiffness worked out, all ten of his fingers back. “Yes. Down to just the wrist cast now. Two-three more weeks, and I’ll be cast-free.”
“Feels good?” Penny asks.

“Sure.” He wiggles his fingers and seven of them move. His thumb, forefinger, and middle finger twitch a little. “Be better when I can really type again.”

“We’ll get working on that later tonight,” Jimmy says, and Tim nods at him.

“Anything interesting at American, Penny?” Tim asks.

Penny shakes her head. “Gearing up for the end of summer session. I can already feel the excuses coming. ‘But I didn’t know they were due…’ Only have the due date in nine places on the syllabus and have reminded them every week for the last month.” She sighs at that. “For as much as I love the students I’m researching with, the ones in my classes are irksome.”

“The joys of academia. Every week you remind me why I was happy to have only one student,” Ducky says with a smile at Jimmy. “How is your protégé getting along now that he’s been on the job for a few months?”

“Learning. Keeping me on my toes. He seems to enjoy the work, and will probably be qualified to be on his own in a few years… He’s on a quest to learn his way around DC, so every week I get to hear about where he’s been exploring over the weekends. Kind of amazing how much of the city I’ve missed since I got here in 2000. Adding places to the ‘we’ve got to get there someday’ list.”

“And does ‘we’ mean you and I?” Breena asks.

“Sorry, forgot to mention this week’s. Been kind of distracted. Apparently, if you head south there’s this cool little neighborhood…” And from there Jimmy tells them about a bit of DC none of them had managed to find, yet.

Jethro puts the key in the ignition, and as soon as they’re moving he says to Abbi, “Juneau?”

She shrugs. “Probably not.” She shakes her head. “This feels wrong. Hinky. Really hinky. You remember, right when we started dating, I was telling you about how my HR department was embezzling money?”

He nods, sort of remembering that. He doesn’t think he ever heard how that turned out. “Yes. Don’t remember how it worked out.”

“He was union, so couldn't just flat out fired him. I got everything together, kicked the proof over to IA, figuring they’d do something, and then put him on administrative leave. Just checked in again last week. Nothing’s happened with it. I asked why he wasn’t prosecuted or fired or something, and they acted like they didn’t know who I was talking about. It’s a mess, Jethro.”

“Sounds like it.” He thinks a bit about the files Mike Franks left him. All the people he was bribing/blackmailing to get people into the country. Some of them were Coast Guard. “I might have some useful things for you.”

She looks surprised by that. “How?”

He looks away from traffic to her, not saying why he’s got it, but his look indicates this is part of the
extra-curricular activities he and Duck and Penny are trying to get started. She seems to get what his look is conveying. “Got at least twenty guys who used to be, maybe still are, on your payroll, who were able to be blackmailed or were taking bribes.”

“Am I going to be able to do anything with it?”

Gibbs shrugs. “Chain of evidence is going to be shady as hell, and… I’d prefer you didn’t let everyone know how you found out, but, maybe something useful in there.”

Borin nods at that. “Thanks.”

They drive for a few more miles. “Would you go?” Gibbs asks.

“Hmmm?” She’s watching the street, thinking about what might be in those files, and hadn’t followed what he was asking.

“If you got reassigned to Alaska, or wherever, would you go?”

She exhales, thinking. “Maybe. Depends where and why. A genuine move up? Mid-Atlantic, New England, Pacific, or Gulf? Yeah, I’d take them. Lateral move, or a death post, like North Pacific.” She shakes her head at that. “Say I got offered Pacific, that’s all of California. It’s the largest and most important of our regions. I’d be out of San Francisco. I’d probably take that. Would you come with me?”

Gibbs’ turn to think. “Depends. If it’s like Juneau, you gone 300 days a year, no. We’d skype, and I’d come out to visit, but I wouldn’t move. Not missing my kids for an empty house. If you’d actually be home at the end of the day, most days, yeah, I’d go. Rather stay here, but…”

“I’d rather stay here, too.” She looks at him, and smiles a little. I'm probably just getting jumpy. Find bad guys, get evidence, charge ‘em, put ‘em away. That’s easy. That’s straightforward. I know how to do that. This is murky. And I’m half afraid I’m giving the bad guys the information they need to hide what they’re up to.”

He squeezes her hand and half-smiles, not sure what, beyond the contents of his files, he’s got that can help.

“You want to just pretend you don’t know where I hide stuff, or would you rather not know?” Gibbs asks after they get in and give Mona a few affectionate pats.

“If it ever comes up, I’ll pretend I don’t know.”

“Good, help me move books.”

Getting to his secret stash of information is a lot faster when he’s not the only one taking the two shelves of books out of the way.

Abbi’s keeping a close eye on the wall behind the books, nodding. “Good work.”

“Thanks. Hid the seams behind the shelves. Got a few cryptic letters tucked into some of the books. Anyone goes through here, they’ll stop before they mess with the wall.” Then Gibbs pops the wall out of place, and pulls out the box of Mike’s files.
He’d burned a lot of what Mike had given him, but this bit, his most recent activities, he’d kept. He also hadn’t really sorted it. “Lot of stuff in here,” Gibbs says as he sets the box on his coffee table.

Abbi nods, staring at what has to be at least a thousand pages of information. The first file is an FBI agent. “You tell Fornell about this?”

Gibbs shakes his head. “Just you, Penny, and Duck.” He picks up the file. Since he doesn’t intend to do it the way Mike did, maybe it is time these things find their way to Fornell. If he’s in a position where he needs to bribe the FBI, something’s gone really wrong.

They spend about twenty minutes just going through, sorting out people who worked for the Coast Guard. They’re about halfway through the stack when Abbi, who hadn’t been talking much, went completely silent.

“What?” Gibbs squints over at her pile, pushes his glasses up, and comes to the conclusion he might need a stronger prescription for reading things up close.

“He’s the head of IA now.”

Gibbs can feel Mike behind him, hears, Lord, Probie, he was an obnoxious little weasel. Willing to do anything for the right price. Coast Guard’s in trouble if he’s one of the high ups.

“Mike doesn’t like him.” He wants to bite his tongue as soon as he says it, not sure if Abbi knows that he got these files and what Mike was doing, after Mike died.

She’s distracted enough she doesn’t seem to have noticed the tense he used, either. “Don’t like him, either.”

And together they start reading.

It’s an hour later when they’ve pushed the paperwork back, and are sitting there, staring at the fireplace, wondering what to do next.

Rob Riccerson had a few expensive habits. A wife in Miami, a mistress in Panama City, and a girlfriend in Orlando. None of whom seemed to know about the others. Add in what looked like a taste for cocaine (or a taste for the money cocaine brought in, Mike wasn’t entirely sure what he was doing with the coke that didn’t make it into evidence) and he was easy to manipulate.

A bit of money here, a bit more there, and he was more than willing to turn a blind eye to anyone who needed one.

Finally Abbi says, “He’s married to this one,” she points to the girlfriend, “now. Saw her picture when I was in his office handing over what Tim had found.”

“How long has he been at IA?” Mike’s files on him stop in 2009. Gibbs is guessing that’s the last time he used Florida as a way to move someone into the country.

“Since 2010.” Borin looks spit-nails level frustrated. “Come on, let’s see who else is in here.”
On the upside, her boss isn’t in Mike’s pile.

On the downside, he’s the guy who moved Rob (and two others) into positions of authority over the last five years.

So, there’s a chance that this is a coincidence but, as per 39, nope. Neither of them are buying it. Both of them have their cop senses flaring away in brilliant sparks of this is wrong, go out and bust the bad guys.

The problem is, what the hell to do once they start busting people? Not like she can just drop this all nice and tidy in IA’s hands.

He’s almost tempted to call Tim, get Jarvis’ number, and bounce it to him. Though, he’s guessing, that like with John, this is the sort of issue that gets covered up until after the election.

Gibbs tries to think through what he’d do if Leon was going way off the reservation. Hell, better example, what happens when the Director of a Federal Agency decides to run her own little off the books vendetta against someone she’s not no credible jurisdiction on for her own personal reasons.

Nothing. That’s what happens. Nothing at all. Especially if no one goes outside the agency.

Gibbs pulls his phone out and starts googling. That lasts about five minutes while Abbi makes notes on who and what information she intends to pull.

“No finding what I need. Everyone has their version of IA, but nothing on who you call when you think IA’s been compromised. You know anyone in Congress?”

She shakes her head. “Not well enough to take this to them. You?”

He knows people in Congress, but not well, and not who are likely to be interested in doing much with something like this. “Penny might.”

“Maybe. I’m thinking I’ll put it together and see if Zukunft will give me the time of day.”

Gibbs nods, the Commandant of the Coast Guard might indeed be a good place to go.

“Want to have more than just this before I go see him.”

He nods at that, too. “Want some help finding stuff and not getting caught?”

Abbi shakes her head. “Not yet. If I get really stuck, I’ll call McGee myself. Until then, let’s see what I can find the old-fashioned way.”

“Lot of late nights coming up.”

“Yeah.”

“Might have to drop by and keep you company.”

She raises an eyebrow at that.

“Always have someone on your six. And…” he smiles, bit of a dirty grin on his face, “if you get caught in the deep storage records with me at midnight, maybe you’re looking for something other than old case work?”

Abbi laughs at that.
“Okay, so you’re all talking about the case, but Tony’s gone mute. What’s up?” Tim asks as they get back to Jimmy’s place after Shabbos. “Last time he was that quiet, Ducky had told him he couldn’t talk and it was killing him.”

“Long story,” Jimmy replies. He notices the level of talking about it they were doing at dinner left out a lot of what Tony had said to him. “Let’s get the girls down, and then go through it.”

This late at night ‘getting the girls down’ means putting Molly into her room, and Anna and Kelly in Anna’s, making sure they’re all tucked in, and then heading to Jimmy and Breena’s room.

“So, what’s the long story?” Abby asks. She’s noticed she hasn’t seen hide nor hair of Tony for days, but she also knows that a good two thirds of the time these days he sends Draga or Bishop down for info from the lab.

This is the third weekend of them sleeping together. And it’s good. Lots of extra fun on the weekend. They were at Tim and Abby’s last weekend, and Jimmy and Breena really enjoyed the level of thought that Tim and Abby put into making sure their room was well-designed for playing. And all of them really liked how the mirrors worked, because if the point of it is watching, then being able to see everything from every angle makes a lot of difference.

And all of that is good, a whole lot of fun. Until the sleeping part came into play, which is when the fact that Tim and Abby’s custom-made bed may have been perfectly designed for all sorts of playing, but it wasn’t designed for four (adult) people to sleep in became abundantly clear. It’s a queen. Sixty inches wide. That was intentional. They both wanted a bed that’d keep them close to each other. And it’s great for that.

But, four people? If they’re going to crash in Tim and Abby’s bed, they do, literally, have to sleep on top of each other.

After an hour of not really being able to relax for fear of falling out of the bed, Jimmy snatched up Breena, and they ended up in the guest room. (Which pleased Tim, because he was still wide-awake with his ass hanging off the other side.)

So, tonight, they’re at Jimmy and Breena’s, where the bed is a king, seventy-eight inches wide, which means they’ve enough extra space to not be afraid of falling out of the bed.

And tonight, as they head into Jimmy and Breena’s room, Jimmy nudges them toward the bed, which, in addition to being a good place to play, is also a good place to just lay around and talk comfortably with your family.

They take a moment, tossing off shoes and belts, (Abby takes her pants off, too. As of tomorrow, the maternity clothing is coming out storage.) getting into lounge mode, and then get into bed, Jimmy and Breena up by the head (handing a few pillows over to Tim and Abby). Tim’s propping himself against the footboard, Abby curling onto her side, lying her head in his lap, but Jimmy shakes his head. “Over here.”

Tim squints at him, and Jimmy reaches a bit and gently taps his hand.

“Oh.” Tim scoots forward, so he’s cross-legged in the middle of the bed, facing Jimmy, who’s sitting against the headboard. Abby follows, lying across the bed, behind Tim, her cheek on Jimmy’s thigh, rest of her curled around Tim’s back.
Breena’s already heard this part of the story, so she says, “We drinking? Anyone want something?”

Tim gives his hand to Jimmy. “What are we doing with this?”

“Not much. Just poking around. I’ve got better things to rub on than you, tonight. Though, I wouldn’t mind a glass of wine to go with talking.”

Abby sighs, wistfully. “Me too.”

“You can have one,” Breena says. “No one’s found any problems from the occasional drink. And we’re not going to rag on your for it.”

“I know. I’d worry anyway. I’ll rag on me. Which is why I can’t have one. You have any of your cream soda?”

“Always. Tim?”

“Sure, whatever you’re pouring for Jimmy.”

“I’ll just bring the bottle up,” Breena says with a little smile.

“Thanks,” Tim says, and then winces as Jimmy starts to work on him.

“Tony thinks it was a bad shoot,” Jimmy says as he carefully flexes Tim’s fingers.

“What do you mean, thinks?” Abby asks. She knew Tony shot a perp. They all did, but in the lab, unless there’s some sort of question about what happened, like when Tim shot Benedict, they don’t do much with it. So, beyond standard processing of the perp’s clothing, and running that gun of his to see if it was involved in any other shootings (no) they hadn’t done anything with the case.

“He says he fired before he saw Darden go for his gun.”

Tim and Abby are wincing at that. Tim especially gets how that feels. He makes a note to let Tony have some processing time, but in the next week or so, he’s going to make a date for them to have some lunch together.

“Fired before he saw there was a gun. Did it on gut alone. And, look, you ask me, he made the right call.” Jimmy’s talking to Tim on this. Abby already knows what Darden had hiding in his clothes.

“When we got the body we found a hidden knife and hidden lock picks on him, and the gun was one of those plastic things that don’t set off metal detectors. Tiny little thing, only one bullet, taped up between his shoulder blades, smaller than Breena’s hand. Tony said his hands were behind his neck, so less than an inch from the grip.

“Something about the guy set him off, and now he’s dead, and Tony’s unhappy about it.”

“He’s really not talking. How’d you get the story?” Abby asks.

“Only reason he talked to me was I asked for the story to make sure the records matched up right. Didn’t want anything in the autopsy making IA come down on him.”

“Did you need to fudge something?” Abby asks.

Jimmy shakes his head, gently curling Tim’s thumb.

“Ow. It really doesn’t want to bend.”
“Just checking.” He gently flips Tim’s hand over. (Technically, that’s motion at his elbow, not his wrist, but it’s not something his arm does easily, yet.) “How about this?”

Tim’s biting his lip. “That’s not great, either.” He tries to not think about his arm. “So, is he okay? I mean, he’s not talking, but… is this a ‘I’m a dad’ flip out or a ‘I shot the wrong guy’ flip out?”

Jimmy’s gently holding his hand and extending his fingers back. “I don’t know. Both? Either way, neither of us are poking at him for overreacting on protecting his pregnant wife.”

Tim nods along with that. It’s one thing to poke a guy when he’s glaring at someone for daring to talk to his wife, whole other story in this case.

“This okay?” Jimmy asks as he pulls Tim finger back slightly further.

“The correct answer to all of this is, no, it’s not okay. It all hurts.”

Jimmy nods. “Fine, tomorrow, Percocet with dinner, and after-dinner, we’ll get into it.”

“Thanks.” Tim takes his hand back and rests it on his knee. “Ortho thinks you need to open up your own PT practice. Says you’re doing great work. Wants to start sending people to you.”

Jimmy waves that off, and they hear Breena heading up the steps. Abby hops up to go and help her carry in the drinks.

A second later, they’re both back, poking Tim and Jimmy further into the center of the bed. Abby’s got her own glass, a tall water-glass with lots of ice and sparkling vanilla cream soda in it. Breena hands Jimmy the wine glass she has, and then pours it almost full with Pino Grigio. He takes a sip as she’s putting the bottle on the bedside table, and then hands it to her.

“I like this.”

She takes a sip, too, thinks about it, and hands the glass to Tim. “It’s okay. Little drier than I like them.” She hops onto the bed, on Jimmy’s left, lying on her side, leg draped over Jimmy’s. “We still talking about Tony?”

“Yeah, probably wrapping him up.” Tim also takes a sip. “This is good.” He takes one more sip, hands the glass back to Jimmy, and then leans down to kiss Abby, who once she got onto the bed, settled herself on her side, propped on one hand, other holding her glass, body curled around his back. “You like it?”

She smiles up at him. “Almost everything tastes good on you. But, yeah, when you get your phone in hand again, put it on the grocery list.”

“Has Ziva talked to you guys about it?” Jimmy asks.

Abby shakes her head as Breena says, “Nope. She knows what happened, right?”

“Yeah. She fudged the scene for him.”

“How bad?” Tim asks, cold feeling in his gut. That level of messing around can come back to bite you, hard.

“Don’t know. Nothing was obviously out of place when we got there. Whatever it was, I didn’t see it.”

Tim sighs at that. “If he hasn’t come down to talk to me by next weekend, I’ll go to him.”
“Feel like you know how this works?” Abby asks, gently.

“Got some common ground on this one.” He takes the glass back from Jimmy and takes another sip, and then hands it back. “Something else happened today. Didn’t mention it at dinner, but… wanted to tell you three, and Jethro, too.” He pats Abby gently, and she shifts so he can get into his pocket. He pulls out the medal. “I got this today.” He lays it on the bed in front of Abby as she’s laying back down.

She gently strokes her fingers over it as Breena looks closer. “That’s… the medal you were talking about, before?”

“Yeah.”

Jimmy picks it up, looking more closely at it. “Never seen one of these before.”

“Me, either. Jethro’s probably got one, or more, though. He’s got the whole rest of the damn ribbon salad tucked into Tony’s desk.”

He hadn’t even mentioned it to Abby on the way to Shabbos, so she’s watching him very closely on this. She sits up and pets his face. He’s still looking at the medal in Jimmy’s hand. “You okay?”

Tim shrugs. “I don’t know. Probably. I got confirmation that Jarvis is going to be heading to Pearl in February. He intends to ‘give the Admiral my regards.’ So, that’s good.” He smiles a bit at Jimmy. “Maybe you don’t need to head off first thing Saturday mornings for ‘quality time with Jethro.’”

Jimmy’s not sure what to do with that. It feels… odd. Almost like something’s being taken away from him. He pushes it aside, nothing he needs to deal with right this second.

“And, he admitted that part of this is buying me off. Part of it’s pissing him off. There’ll be a write up in Stars and Stripes, so that should get attention among the people The Admiral respects. I’m sure the words ‘Son of Admiral (Retired) John McGee, will show up in that write up. Make sure everyone knows it’s not just a common last name.”

“And part of this is earning it?” Breena asks, taking it from Jimmy and really looking at it.

Tim shrugs. “I qualified for it…” He shakes his head, taking it back from Breena. “You grow up in a military house, officer’s house, you can’t not know how much of these things is doing the right thing at the right time with the right witnesses. SecNav saw, he was there, he’s the one who gives these things out, so I get one. Yay.” His voice is painfully dry on that. “Change the circumstances a bit, do the same test, say from land, and it’ll do the same work, save the same number of lives, all the rest of it, but it’s not flashy and I don’t end up with the guy in charge feeling like he owes me, so no medal.”

Tim takes it back from Breena, holding it by the ribbon, watching the light flash off the medal as it sways a bit in his grasp. “He spent his whole life chasing little bits of ribbon like this. Has a fucking shrine to them in his office. Little dangly bits of metal saying the right guy saw the right thing. Wear ‘em on his chest so everyone else would know what a huge fucking hero he was.” Tim tosses it toward Jimmy and Breena’s trashcan. It makes a satisfying clinking noise as it hits the edge, followed by a much less satisfying plop as it lands on the carpet next to the trashcan.

Abby squeezes around him more tightly, and he shakes his head. “Sorry, that’s… grim.” He knows that’s how he thought of it last time, too. “Anyway. Besides the new cast, that’s my big excitement for the day.”

“Jarvis’ trip to Pearl sounds exciting,” Breena says, looking at Tim, but stroking Jimmy’s shoulder.
She can feel Jimmy’s off on that, and knows they’ll be talking about that some, when he’s got a chance to get it right in his own head.

“Yeah, that part is. I asked if he had seen him, and he said no. Hadn’t seen him since he retired, but he was supposed to be in Hawaii and James… His personal secretary… Had already set the trip to Pearl. Feels good to think that he might actually keep his word on that. Nice to think it wasn’t just BS meant to keep me quiet.”

“Might still be BS meant to keep you quiet,” Abby adds. “I don’t trust him.”

Tim shrugs and kisses her. “We’ll find out. Figure I’ll mention it to Jethro tomorrow, let him know about it, and from there…” He doesn’t need to say that from there, they all shut up about it. If John does have a heart attack or something come February, they want Penny to be able to feel like it’s just an accident, and the fewer people looking smugly pleased when it happens, the easier it’ll be to sell that lie.

“Speaking of Jethro,” Breena decides now’s a good time to get them off of The Admiral. “Did you see the way he looked when Abbi mentioned Juneau?”

“Like he was going to pass out and swallow his tongue all at once?” Abby adds. “Yeah, noticed that.”

“I really hope they don’t try to transfer her.” Jimmy says, shaking his head.

“Me, too. But whatever’s going on, it’s deep. I could see that going through those records for her. Hope IA’s on top of things for her.”

“You think he’d go with her?” Breena asks.

“Show the grizzlies what a bad mood really looks like?” Jimmy says with a chuckle.

Tim thinks about it, feeling a bit unsettled by the idea of Gibbs leaving them.

Abby sees it. “He’d come back. A lot. Probably keep the house. After all, if she’s not really there, he wouldn’t relocate. Visit a lot, but not move. Think she’d go?”

That gets a series of interested looks out of the other three. None of them know. “I can see her doing it just as a way to give whoever sends her there the middle finger. You know, a ‘You think you can make me quit, well, screw you,’ sort of thing.” Breena says, taking another drink.

“I can see that, too,” Abby says. “Or I can see her resigning and then going to war. Take out everyone who’s trying to keep this covered up. Can you see her, all no-nonsense, testifying before Congress?”

That gets nods and satisfied looks.

“If it was a book, she’d do that, and then after they bad guys got sent away, she’d end up in charge of the CGIS,” Tim says, starting to like this fantasy, also taking another sip of his wine.

“Political thriller, creeping around the file rooms late at night, picking locks and scooping up incriminating documents while the bad guys try to shut her up…” Abby spins the story further.

“They kidnap Gibbs, hold him ransom for her silence!” Breena takes it another step and all three of them laugh.
“Concurrent storylines, she’s getting all the evidence she needs to shut them up, playing along with being silent, that’s why she resigns, to ensure Tibbs’ safety, meanwhile, his team springs into action, only to finally track him down and find him cooling his heels with six dead kidnappers, and saying, ‘What took you so long?’”

“Tibbs?” Jimmy asks.

“Yeah. I’m gonna steal that for the next LJ Tibbs story. Gonna call it ‘Retired.’” That gets some laughter, too. “Plus, if I actually write him a girlfriend, maybe so many of my fans will stop shipping him with ‘Tommy.’”

“Tony and Gibbs?” Breena looks confused by that.

“Everyone actually, but that seems to be the most common one,” Tim replies.

“Everyone?” Breena asks, looking at Jimmy and Tim, very amused.

“Yeah,” Tim says slowly, seeing where she’s going with this.

“So, you’re saying that there are stories with McGregor and Relamp?”

Tim glares at Breena. “A few, I suspect Abby writes them.”

Abby laughs. “Don’t you wish, baby.” She sits up and kisses Tim. “All your favorite kinks.”

He glances at Jimmy. “They’re a lot less interesting with him.”

Jimmy nods along with that.

“You sure about that?” Abby asks, getting up, putting her drink on the bedside table, and pulling Breena up out of bed, too.

“Probably. Why?”

They both grin, and Abby grabs the bag she packed for tonight. “Both of you, get ready for bed. We’ve got some things to do. Want to find you naked, in this bed, and ready to play in ten minutes.”

Tim and Jimmy nod, both looking very happy at this idea.

Once upon a time, Tim could not have just sat in bed, naked, with another guy, relaxing, touching himself (He’s not entirely certain exactly how ‘ready to play’ the girls want them, but he’s not taking any chances of disappointing them. Jimmy’s doing it, too.) sharing a glass of wine, eagerly anticipating what may come next.

Of course, once upon a time, he also could not have imagined a situation where this might have happened, either. Not as any sort of ‘could happen in the real world’ sort of way.

Granted that time was less than three months ago. But, it is happening, and he’s awfully pleased that it is.

“What did she pack in that bag?” Jimmy asks, getting himself settled. They each take a side of the
bed, so he’s at the headboard, and Tim’s sitting at the foot, on the opposite corners. Gives them the maximum amount of space to spread out and play.

Tim shrugs. “I didn’t pack it. She mentioned my kinks, and you, and… Have to be stories, no touching, so… Ropes? Collar? They both know we like watching each other so… I don’t know. What’s Breena mentioned to her along those lines?”

Jimmy smiles, remembering the next step in his ‘experiment’ with Breena. “We tried with her running things, not just talking about it, but actually doing it and… that was good, so…”

Tim nods, grinning.

“You think they might tag team the story?” Jimmy asks.

“I can hope, right?” Tim responds, reaching over and taking another swallow of the wine.

A minute later, they look over as the girls walk in. Breena’s in a little, black silk nightie, all femme and lace, the hem just skimming over the swell of her ass. Abby’s in black leather (probably some sort of vinyl, actually, but they look like leather) gloves that go all the way up her arms, and black leather (once again, not actually leather) stockings up to her thighs. Breena’s got a string of black pearls around her throat and a little pearl anklet. Abby’s wearing the dragon collar that goes with Tim’s wrist cuff.

Both of them have black silk ropes draped over their shoulders.

Tim stares at Abby, and then at Breena, and then to Jimmy. “We are literally the luckiest men on Earth.”

Jimmy nods, slowly, staring at Breena and Abby and Breena again. He swallows hard, his mouth having gone dry, but finally he gets out, “You and Abby have a little chat about our latest experiment?”

Breena smiles at him, eyes sparkling. “Oh yeah.”

Abby saunters over to the bed. “Story time’s going to be somewhat interactive tonight.”

Tim is all in favor of interactive story time. He’s also all in favor of seeing some of his kinks played out on Jimmy.

Abby saunters over to him, kisses him long and deep and then pulls back saying, “Right now, your job is to sit still and watch.” She gently places both of his hands on the footboard of Jimmy and Breena’s bed. “These stay here. Be good, don’t move, and I’ll make it so worth your while.”

He licks his lips, going silent, nodding at her.

Abby kisses him again, long and deep, but just her lips on his, she’s not touching him anywhere else,
and he kisses back, still silent. “You can make whatever noises you like. All of us want to hear how much you like this. You just can’t move.”

“Okay.”

One more deep kiss, and then Abby switches around. Focusing on Jimmy and Breena.

Jimmy’s sitting back against the headboard, legs stretched out in front of him. Right now, Breena’s right next to him, kneeling on his left, kissing him, and he’s happily kissing back, one hand on her butt, other on her breast. Abby waits for them to break the kiss, and when they do, she shuffles a little closer to Jimmy, on his right, and gently pulls the first of the ropes from around her shoulders. “Breena told me you two played a little with her in control. Told me how much you liked having her take you over. How much she liked you liking it, and she wanted some pointers. So, I’m going to help her get you set, and we’ll see how it goes from there.”

Jimmy looks very happy with that, and is watching them both intently.

“First off, you need to scoot into the middle of the bed.” Abby continues explaining where Jimmy needs to be, and takes his right wrist in her hands, showing Breena how to set a comfortable knot that’ll hold firm, but not cut off circulation to his hand.

Tim’s watching and really wishing he could touch himself. Abby’s kneeling, back to him, so he’s got a great view of her ass and back, she’s leaning over a bit, tying the other end of the rope to the small post on the right corner of the bed.

The way Breena’s watching, learning, and the look on Jimmy’s face, the ‘oh God this is real and it’s gonna be amazing’ written all over his expression plus his view of Abby, and his heart is beating faster, blood galloping to his dick.

Once she’s got his right hand tied, Abby scoots over a few feet, settling herself so she’s straddling Jimmy’s thighs, well back from his crotch, her body almost, but not quite touching his. He has to be able to feel the heat of her thighs against his, and then she watches as Breena starts to tie his right hand, making sure she’s doing it right.

Tim’s jealous. Abby and Breena are tying Jimmy up, and Tim wants that. There are a lot of things he likes about being tied up, and depending on which mood he’s in, those knots hit different needs and desires.

Sometimes it’s about how it looks. Tied up, vibrant or dark ropes across his skin, high contrast, knowing that Abby took the time to wrap him in silk, he loves that.

Sometimes it’s about how it feels. Silk on his skin, rubbing against him every time he moves.

Sometimes it’s about submission, about laying himself at Abby’s feet and letting her completely take him over.

And sometimes, like tonight, what he wants is the power of it. Nothing focuses him on what his body can do, how strong it is, like struggling against the ropes. Every muscle goes tight, every inch of him pulling, fighting, seeking more pleasure, more friction and pressure and more everything. He can feel the ropes keeping him down, Abby and Breena teasing him, ramping him up hotter and
harder. And God, he wants that, so bad. And tonight, it looks like Jimmy gets to have it.

Makes him so hot, watching the girls tying him up, and so jealous.

He looks at his hands on the foot of the bed. Abby could tie his left hand. Right’s still out of business for that. Same (but reversed) on his legs. Left foot’s still too sore for real tying. If it was just about submitting, he can do that (and likely will) just fine without the ropes. Right now he wants the constant awareness of the power of his own body, and right now he knows it’d hurt too bad, all over, to get himself that tense.

But he really wants it.

They’ve got Jimmy sitting in the middle of the bed, hands tied to each of the posts on the headboard, he’s all spread out and open and waiting for whatever comes next, and…

Abby flips around, returning to him from helping tie Jimmy, and sits in his lap. She kisses him soft and deep. “That’s your birthday present. December 17th, we flip this around. You’ll be all healed up, and I’ll tie you down, make your month, and Jimmy’ll watch.”

He smiles at her, liking that idea, kissing back, murmuring “Good” against her lips. He pulls back. “Want it now.”

“I know.” Another soft kiss. “Want to give it to you, now, too.” She’s still got one rope around her shoulders. “It’s not the same, but it’ll still look cool.” It’s thinner, more like a thick string than a rope. She loops it around his ring finger, a small, firm knot, and winds it up his arm across his chest, around his torso, and then down his leg, securing it to his big toe. It does look cool. Black silk striping his skin. It feels good, just snug enough he can really feel it, not so tight that it’s cutting into him. It’s a familiar knot, with some good memories attached to it.

“Last time you did this to me, I broke the bed.”

She smiles. “Don’t break Breena’s bed.”

He kisses her gently, and says, “Yes, ma’am.”

Abby smiles at him, kisses him once more, then shifts back onto her heels, looking at him. “Not quite done.”

Tim likes the idea of not quite done. He likes the way Jimmy and Breena are watching him, excited to see what else might be involved in ‘not quite done.’ Abby gets up, going back to the bag, and Jimmy asks, “You broke the bed?”

“They had long posts, not these little nobby things this one does.” The head and footboards of Jimmy and Breena’s bed are long rectangular expanses of golden-white maple, with small, four inch or so, columns at the corners. “Couldn’t move my hips. That was the challenge. Keep my hips still. She didn’t say anything about my arms, and I pulled one of the posts off the bed when I got off.”

They’re both staring at him in amazement at that.

“What were you doing to him?” Jimmy asks Abby, who’s still messing around with her bag, looking for whatever’s left.

“Be a good boy, and maybe you’ll get to find out,” she says with a smile. “There it is. Downside of black accessories in a black bag with a black wallet and black clothing. Takes a while to find things.”
Abby straightens up, holding Tim’s collar, laying it on the bed next to him.

He licks his lips and smiles at that, knowing what comes next.

She stands behind him, gently stroking her hands up his shoulders and neck, massaging as he leans his head back against her and sighs.

She kisses his forehead, and he purrs at her, feeling himself letting everything else slip away.

“The point of this, the heart of it, isn’t kinky sex, or ropes, or knots, or commands. That’s all part of it, sort of like how croutons are part of the salad. Yummy. But it’s still a salad without them.” Her fingers stroke, firmly, up his neck, stretching lightly, rubbing into the tight muscles where his head and neck connect, and as she does so, he drops his head forward, giving her better access.

“The heart of it is care.” She’s making small circles in his hair, rubbing his scalp, and Tim’s purring at it. “It’s providing a space where you can completely surrender, drop all your walls, and know that all your needs are going to be met, without any fear or judgment.” She kisses the top of Tim’s ear, nuzzling against him, and he sighs, a very content sound. “That’s what a good Dom does, gets off on making the sub happy.”

Abby picks up Tim’s collar. “When you play like this, it’s a one-sided deal. Dom’s running the game, and that game is all about caring for the sub. When he’s wearing this, he’s completely safe, owned, cherished. Everything he needs will be provided.” Tim drops his head a little further, and straightens up slightly, so she’s got great access to his neck. “He knows I’m going to go out of my way to make him happy. Sometimes, what he needs may be in conflict with what he wants, but, when he’s wearing this, it’s my job to make sure he gets what he needs, and once he does, he’ll have all the want he can take.” Abby kisses the nape of Tim’s neck, gently scraping her teeth along it, and he shudders at the sensation. “He knows I may ask him to do difficult things, but I’ll never push him too far, never set a task he can’t do, and that when he does it, when he makes me happy, I’ll lavish him in love, affection, petting, kindness, and scorching hot sex.”

She slips the collar across his throat, and pulls it snug, buckling it, and then kisses above and below it. “This is his.” Abby gently taps Tim’s chin and he lifts his head. Her fingers play over the strands of leather braided together. “The mark of him belonging to me. Kind of like our rings, but covering a more specific, and when he’s wearing it, one-sided, aspect of our relationship. Wearing it hooks into different memories, feelings. It’s a physical mark that makes it easier to put the rest of the world aside and slip completely into playtime.”

Abby takes the collar she’s wearing off. It’s one of the ones that match Tim’s wrist cuff. “I got this, and one that matches it, when we got Tim’s wrist cuff.” She lays it in the center of the bed. “These are community property. Whoever’s wearing one gets taken care of by the rest of us.”

Jimmy’s staring at it. So’s Breena. Abby and Tim are watching them.

Breena leans forward, picking it up, then looks at Jimmy, “You want it?”

He sighs, eyes hot on her, licks his lips, and softly says, “God, yes!”

She smiles, and then takes the collar, slips it around his neck, and snaps it shut. “Feel good?”

He shifts around a bit, twisting his neck. “Little odd. It’s pretty stiff. Never worn anything like this. Not too tight, though.”

Jimmy’s watching Breena eagerly, and so is Tim for that matter, wanting to see where she’ll take them next.
Kissing. That’s where they’re going next. Abby’s still behind him, still firmly rubbing his neck and shoulders, which feels great, and Breena’s straddling Jimmy’s lap, stroking his face with one hand, her other resting on his chest while she kisses him.

It’s warm and gentle, lips rubbing against each other as her hand cups his cheek. Their eyes are shut and both of them are making happy sounds. She strokes her fingers through his hair once, twice, and then her eyes open and she grins, getting a firm grip on his hair, tugging his head back, sharp and sudden.

Jimmy gasps at it, and Tim thinks he does, too.

She’s kissing over his jaw, and down his throat, wet, open mouthed, sucking, interspersed with little nibbles, kisses.

Jimmy’s eyes are closed and his mouth is open as a soft moan spills out of him.

Breena’s fingers trail from his wrist to his nipple, gently scratching with her fingernails and his hands clench against the ropes as he squirms at that touch.

Abby follows that touch, as close as she can, gently scraping her nails (the pads of her fingers, unlike Breena she doesn’t have much in the way of fingernails) up the inside of Tim’s untied arm, and he shivers at it.

Breena settles onto Jimmy’s lap, rocking gently back and forth against his thighs, rubbing herself against him, as she leans forward, sucking his nipple.

(As Breena’s licking Jimmy’s nipple, he starts to rock against her, seeing if he can rub the tip of his penis against her tummy or chest.

Abby’s fingers find Tim’s nipple, stroking around it in focused circles while she sucks the top of his ear. He licks his lips and tries to rub the back of his head against her breasts, but she whispers in his ear, “Still” so he stays put.)

As Breena’s licking Jimmy’s nipple, he starts to rock against her, seeing if he can rub the tip of his penis against her tummy or chest.

Tim thinks he succeeds, at least once, because Breena pulls back and shakes her head at him. “First and only warning. Do something I don’t tell you to do, and it’s punishment time.”

Jimmy lights up in a huge grin at that. Tim’s wondering what ‘punishment’ is, obviously they both know because Jimmy’s looking way too happy for it to be a surprise, but, whatever it is, Tim’s looking forward to it. If it’s putting that big of a smile on Jimmy’s face, he’s going to like watching it.

Breena scoots a little further back on Jimmy, which means her foot is in Tim’s lap, and then she’s on her hand and knees, sucking Jimmy, which looks so good it almost hurts. Her beautiful, golden-hair framed, naked pussy is maybe a foot and a half from his face, close enough he can smell her musk, and he can see her sucking Jimmy’s cock.

Abby’s whispering in his ear, “Looks so good, doesn’t it? One day, you’ll be on your knees behind her, slipping into her while she blows Jimmy.”

He turns his face towards her, getting another long, wet kiss. “And what will you be doing?”

Her fingers slip over the collar. “If you’re wearing this, I’ll be fucking you into her. Same speed I move into you, you move into her. Can you do that for me? Fuck her exactly the same way I fuck you?”

“Yes.”
“Good.” Abby turns his face back from her to Jimmy and Breena. “Watch.”

Breena’s pulled back from Jimmy’s dick, sitting on his legs again. He’s watching her, eyes wide, looking half-disappointed that the blow job is over, half-anticipating what comes next.

Her hand pulling over his dick comes next, along with a somewhat cryptic, “Not slick enough.”

“You want lube?” Abby asks.

“Got my own.” That gets a very pleased look out of Jimmy. And a second later, when she slips onto him, a very pleased groan as well. She rides him for a few strokes, soft, almost sub-vocal sounds of pleasure slipping out of her on the downstrokes.

Her breasts are right at his lips and he’s staring at her, “May I?”

“Yes.”

His lips find her nipple and begin to gently suck. A rich, happy moan slips out of Breena.

He whimpers slightly when she gets off of him, and she kisses his lips, saying, “You’ll like this.”

There’s a hint of I better in his eyes, and she raises an eyebrow, You’re the one who wanted me in charge, remember.

Jimmy nods.

“Good.” Breena reaches behind her neck, and takes the pearls off. Tim’s eyes go very wide, because he knows what Abby would do with them, and if Breena’s going to do that to Jimmy… God, that’s every flavor of hot he’s ever imagined and he also really hopes she at least mentioned it to him ahead of time because that’s a hell of a thing to surprise a guy with.

He can hear Abby chuckling, stroking his arms and chest again. And as Breena doesn’t do what he thought she would, as she wraps the pearls around Jimmy’s dick (which he’s thinking probably also feels good) Abby reaches down and wraps her hand around his dick.

He exhales sharply at that, feeling her hand warm and tight around him as Breena’s jerking Jimmy with the pearls. Jimmy’s got his head back, eyes closed, and is rocking against each stroke, making soft, almost-pained, panting sounds.

“How’s it feel, Jimmy?” Abby asks.

He makes a noise somewhere between a grunt and a whimper.

Abby gives Tim’s dick a nice, firm squeeze before letting go, and moving around to sit in front of him. She leans forward, taking hold of him again, and begins to suck, gentle, wet pulses on the tip of his dick. She’s just playing with the tip, letting it slip between her lips, her teeth gently sliding over it, as Tim moans.

It’s almost too much of a good thing. Jimmy’s head back, hands clenched, thighs tight, eyes closed and moaning with each stroke, and Tim’s got Abby in his lap, her wicked-brilliant lips on him, while he watches Breena take Jimmy apart.

He doesn’t know if Jimmy’s really that close to getting off, or if he’s getting into the game, using his own arousal to turn Breena on, but whatever it is, between Abby sucking and the way Jimmy’s moaning Tim’s edging toward his own orgasm.
And then he’s not because Abby’s not sucking him anymore. “Not yet, baby. Want you to remember this for weeks.”

“Get back to it, and I promise I will.”

“Want you to feel it, too.”

He’s pouting, but licks his lips, and waits to see what comes next.

Breena also pulling back, letting go, (Jimmy’s cursing in a much less resigned manner than Tim) and saying, “Not time, not yet. I’ll get you there, and you’ll love it. But not yet. You’ve got five minutes to get me off, just tongue. And if Tim can get Abby off faster…”

If Jimmy could grab Breena he would, but he can’t so, he says, “Then get the fuck over here, and let me do you!”

Tim’s sure this was set so he’d win. Extra sensitive pregnant wife. Right now he’s the king of fast oral sex orgasms. Abby’s kneeling in front of him, and he spends a few seconds nuzzling her gently rounded belly. Then he slips down a bit, and says, “Scoot up an inch.”

Abby smiles down at him, eyes very flirty, and does so.

Then he’s kissing her. Starting light, not exactly taking his time, but not rushing, either. He gently traces his tongue over each fold, feather light touches that wake all of her nerves up and get them calling for more pressure.

She’s rocking gently against his face, and he begins delicately nibbling, mostly sliding his teeth over her lips. Just so there’s a slight scrape to go with the soft, wet, smooth of his tongue.

Abby’s making very happy sounds, and he can’t see what Jimmy’s doing to Breena, but he can hear her moaning as well.

Maybe time to go a little faster. His tongue darts out to find Abby’s clit, stroking the length of it over her in long, slick touches. He scoots a little further down, enjoying the fact that he’s got more mobility than Jimmy does, and gets to the stroke he knows Abby loves, that firm, focused circle, slipping around and around, over and over as her thighs go tighter and her fingers clench in his hair while her hips start to thrash.

Three minutes. That’s a record even for them. He wonders how much of this is her getting off on being watched in addition to what he’s doing, or if she was fantasizing hard. Either way, he’s looking forward to whatever his reward is.

He pulls himself back up and Abby curls into his lap, snuggling against him, wiggling her butt against him in a way he’s greatly appreciating, and that foretells good things on the getting off sometime soon front.

“What’s my reward?”

She kisses him. “Patience. Right now, we’re both getting to watch.”

And yes, watching Jimmy eat out Breena, both of them making very happy sounds as he licks and sucks her to a shaking climax is a very good thing.

After she takes a second to come down, Breena pulls back a little bit, shifting to her hands and knees, over to the left, so they can both watch her kiss Jimmy slow and wet, licking her cum off his lips.
He’s moaning at it, so turned on. His lips and cheeks are flushed, face and neck wet, eyes glazed, dick rock hard.

Breena pulls a bit further back, trailing her hands down his shoulders and chest, giving his dick a long, firm pull. “Oh… bad boy. Not fast enough.”

Jimmy’s looking extremely pleased at having lost that contest. Abby strokes Tim’s face, kissing him again.

Breena unties Jimmy and sits at the headboard next to him. “Laying across my lap.”

Jimmy’s glowing eager for this, wiggling quite a bit as he gets into place, not doing a very good job of not smiling.

Tim starts to feel cold. He knows what comes next, and he can see how much Jimmy’s looking forward to it. This is fun for him. Judging by the way he’s getting settled, he and Breena have done some sort spanking-type thing before. And Tim vaguely remembers some sort of joke Tony was telling about Ducky trying head slaps with Jimmy, but he seemed to like them, so it didn’t work, and… this shouldn’t be a problem. He’s hit Jimmy at least 200 times, and a hell of a lot harder than Breena’s doing it, and Jimmy seemed to be having a hell of a lot less fun when they were at it, but…

The sound. Skin striking skin, and Jimmy’s moaning, and it doesn’t quite sound like pain, but… Two spans into it, he can’t take it anymore. Tim’s feeling nauseous, and his dick’s completely limp.

“Abigail.”

Abby immediately gives Breena a firm yank on the arm, stopping what she’s doing.

They’d talked about how anyone could stop play, but hadn’t gone into safewords, so both Breena and Jimmy are looking confused, and Jimmy’s actually pouting.

Tim feels bad for it, because Jimmy really was having a good time, but… He’s smiling, uncomfortably, feeling embarrassed by it as he says, “I can’t watch this. I’m sorry. No hitting’s always been one of my hard lines, and… uh… even not happening to me… It still is.”

“You’ve hit me way harder than this.” Jimmy’s sounding annoyed, probably because he was well on track to get off, and get off good, and Tim’s blushing over wrecking that, but… It’s a hard line. And if it was a hard line before because it make him uncomfortable, now it’s way past that. He can’t watch this.

“I know. But…” And he’s suddenly getting, in a way that never occurred to him before, that he may never want to go back to MMA. “When I’m not here, have fun with it, but…” He’s shaking his head. “Much more of this, and I’m going to throw up.”

“Whoa. No more spankings,” Jimmy says, fast, sitting up in a hurry. Once his head cleared enough for him to get over not getting spanked, he knows what’s going on, how this is more than just an aversion to a sex act. “Not a problem.”

“I’m sorry, Breena.”

“Really not a problem.”

He feels silly and starts suggesting alternatives that won’t set him off. “Ummm… I’m good with biting and hickies, and tickling, and getting spun out for an hour or so… That’s worse punishment than any spanking ever. But… At least right now…” Maybe the memories will fade and that sound
won’t set him off, but right now, it’s way too fresh.

“IT’s really not a problem.” Abby says. “You better tell them the rest of your hard lines, while we’re at it.”

“No humiliation. Talk dirty all you want, but not mean. I don’t like the word cunt, not… not for anything like this. Can’t imagine it’d come up, but I don’t like fag, either. My safeword is Abigail. I say that, and she knows that play stops dead. Immediately check in and see if everything is okay.”

Abby nods. Now Jimmy and Breena are looking at her.

“Do you have hard lines?” Jimmy asks.

“Eh…” Abby shrugs. She does, but they’re so far off the beaten track she can’t imagine anyone in this group even getting near them. Not only that, but she’s sure they’d find them gross enough that it’d kick all four of them out of a sexy mood for the rest of the night. “I’ll try anything once. Just gotta ask first. I don’t really like getting cummed on, but it’s not a deal breaker, especially in the shower. But, in general, I’m happy with his safe zone.”

“In general?” Breena asks.

Abby strokes Tim’s arm and shoulder. “He said no hitting, but it’s a little broader than that. No intentional pain for the sake of pain. I like the occasional spanking, had a lot of fun getting my tattoos, well, after, when the endorphins really kicked in, and hot candle wax can be fun in the right place at the right time. But it’s not so much fun as to make going past one of his hard lines appealing.”

Tim kisses Abby, and then stares at Jimmy and Breena. “You three ever play without me, and more power to you. In fact, right now, I’m making a rule where if you three do want to get together and do… whatever… that I can’t take, it’s fine with me. Enjoy it. Just, don’t leave bruises I can’t pretend are hickies, and no welts from the wax.”

Abby’s shaking her head. Partially on Tim offering that, because she’s fairly sure he’s overcompensating for stopping play, and partly because of his welts comment. “You got the candle way too close to your skin when you did that. If you do it right, you shouldn’t have welts.” They’ll talk about overcompensating later.

Tim shakes his head. “Not trying that again. Once was enough, and no matter what should have happened, trying to yank hardened wax off of burned skin and chest hair wasn’t fun. So, you two, hard lines?”

Jimmy just shrugs, he hasn’t run into anything he’s completely unwilling to try. “We’ll find out. We come up with some sort of safeword and just stop if something’s wrong.” He thinks for a second. “Why not stop or no?”

“We make our own rules, so for the four of us, it can be ‘stop’ or ‘no,’” Abby says.

“It’s not ‘stop’ or ‘no’ for us, because sometimes being able to pretend that you’ve got no say in the matter is fun. Although, if Abby did say ‘no,’ it would stop me dead. Sometimes, I like being able to say ‘no,’ or ‘too much,’ or ‘stop,’ and not actually mean it.”

“Why?” Breena’s looking intrigued by this.

“She knows my lines, completely. I trust she won’t go over them. So, everything else is in play. And if I’m saying ‘no,’ it’s another step to sell the illusion of being completely out of control. If she slips
over one accidently, ‘Abigail,’ puts control right back into my hands and it stops the game. One time, we’re standing up, and she had her boots on, and was on my toe. So, it’s not like she’d forgotten a line, or found one I didn’t know I had, it was just a matter of not being able to feel much of what your feet are doing if you’ve got four inch platform heels on. Stupid stuff like that, but without a clear way to break play, that would have been a problem.”

“My safeword is Timothy, and the times I’ve used it, it’s been about breaking play so it’s clear that whatever comes next isn’t in character. You roleplay sometimes, and there are things the character might do that you wouldn’t, and it’s good to slip out, make it clear that everything’s still good, that you’re in character, and then hop back in. Kind of like what we’re doing right now. So, for right now, ‘stop,’ ‘no,’ anything like that, breaks play. Breena? Hardlines?”

From the way Abby’s asking, Tim knows she’s got to have some, so it’s good to get this done now, and then back to playing.

“I also don’t like getting cummed on. I’m already wearing a ring, changed my name, and had your kids, your territory is marked, no need to spray me as well.” Abby giggles at that and both of the guys look a little chagrinned. “Anal’s off limits.”

“Just for you, or is that a no watching thing as well?” Tim asks, wishing he’d known that before their first weekend together.

“Just me. All of this is just for me. Molly left me with some presents, so anal hurts too bad to be worth it. And I’m okay giving the spankings, but I don’t want to receive them. Same with hickies or bites hard enough to leave marks.” She looks at Tim, seeming to be thinking about this, and then says, “If it’s ever an issue, I don’t want to be picking your pubes out of my teeth if I go down on you. Trimmed short or bare.”

Tim nods. He’s not exactly wild and wooly, at least, not standing next to Tony or Gibbs, but he’s also not sporting manicured pubes like Jimmy. “We ever get there, I’ll give you the razor and let you shape ‘em however you like.”

Breena laughs at that, and then says to Abby, “What do you think, bare with a little heart” she draws a tiny heart with her fingers, “right over his dick.”

Abby seems to think that’s hysterical, and Tim’s wondering if giving Breena carte blanche to play with him is a good idea.

“When we work out, Gibbs and Tony see me naked in the locker room after. Don’t put anything on me you don’t want Gibbs rolling his eyes at or Tony asking about.”

Now Breena and Abby are really laughing at the idea of that conversation.

“Okay, so, we’re all good?” Abby asks when she calms down. The rest of them nod at her, and she twists around in Tim’s lap, facing him, wrapping her legs around his hips and kissing him. “Good, because I really want to get off.”

Tim murmurs, “At your service, my lady,” and they both giggle at that.

Doesn’t take long to get back into it, everyone was very turned on before Tim broke play, and none of them were so turned off by him breaking play to just throw in the towel and go to sleep. For a few minutes, there’s kissing and petting, slipping back into it, and then Breena’s taking Jimmy in hand again.

“Kneeling, right here, facing Tim and Abby.” Jimmy nods at that, and does so. “Hands here.”
Breena places both of his hands on the headboard, behind his back. “They stay here, and I keep playing. You take them away. I stop.”

Jimmy’s staring at her, pleasure all over his face. “Keeping hands still.”

“Good.” Breena grins at him and strokes his face. “Like this? Everything good?”

He nods.

“Everyone watching you, all naked and hard and on display for them.”

Another nod, this time with a smile.

“Wanna show them exactly how kinky you are?”

“Yes!”

“Good.”

He kisses her, and she lets him, pressing in close to him, hugging him while he does it. Then she pulls back, kisses him on the lips, one last time, lightly, and slowly strokes her hands down his chest to his hips.

“So… No bootcamp on Sunday, right? Supposed to be nice and sunny, which means working at the house.”

Jimmy nods at that.

Breena looks over her shoulder. “And you don’t mind biting or hickies, scratches are okay, too right?”

Tim nods.

She smiles up at Jimmy. “Too much, don’t like it, just say stop.”

“We’re good.”

Breena settles herself, cross-legged, in front of Jimmy. She’s kissing his stomach, and hips, and legs, all around his dick, but not his dick. He’s alternating between watching her nuzzle and kiss him, and watching Tim and Abby, who, right now, are just quietly petting and watching them.

She moves in closer, still staying with closed-mouth kisses. Rubbing her lips all over his dick. Very light, very soft strokes, and he’s arching toward her, trying to get more pressure.

Tim sees her open her mouth, and feels his own dick twitch in anticipation, sees Jimmy’s eyes light up and his body go a hair tighter, but she doesn’t suck him into her mouth, she shifts a half inch and bites him firmly on his hip, while squeezing his dick with her hand.

Jimmy groans at it. His eyes close and his hands clenches on the headboard. “More.”

Her tongue laves soft and gentle over the bite mark. It’s bright red, but probably not hard enough to bruise. She pulls her hand up his dick, slipping it firmly over him as she shifts up and bites his nipple. Jimmy groans again, shivering all over. “Oh, yeah. That’s…” he’s licking his lips, watching her as she sucks his nipple, hard, gently rolling his balls in her hand. “Oh…” Her tongue slips out to lightly, delicately skim over his nipple as she jerks his dick fast. That gets a whimper. “Please.”
“Please what?” She’s looking up at him, big blue eyes staring into his as she gently trails her fingers up and down his dick.

“More.”

She squeezes his dick again, nice and firm, setting the sort of pace that makes Tim want to rock his own hips along with it, a few more strokes, as Jimmy’s thrusting along, she goes back to his nipple, biting again, and he groans, then licking again, alternating hard bites and soft, gentle tongue work.

Tim’s never been into intentional biting. Not the sort they’re doing. A nip here, a nibble there, and the so turned on my jaw clamps down are all things he’s done/had done to him, and liked, but this is new.

And it’s hitting him hard. He’s watching the way Jimmy’s chest is flushed, the little red marks Breena’s leaving, hearing Jimmy moaning at it, seeing his hips jerk every time Breena sucks. He can see Jimmy’s dick go wet and shiny as Breena’s rubbing his pre-cum over him, her strokes flowing faster and easier, ramping Jimmy up higher.

Tim feels his own jaw clench, getting caught up in how much Jimmy’s enjoying this. Abby sees it, how hard this is hitting him, how much he’s liking it, and she shifts from the somewhat general petting they’d been doing to slipping onto him.

Tim hisses at it, the feel of Abby’s body wet and silky slipping onto his. Jimmy’s eyes jerk open when he does that, seeing Abby riding Tim, feeling Breena pull away from his nipple and start to lick the tip of his dick while she keeps pumping. His knuckles go white he’s gripping the headboard so hard.

Breena turns around, hands and knees, sinking back onto Jimmy in one fast, deep thrust, and he groans again, loud, sincere. She straightens up, so her back is to his chest. Her back rubbing against his sore nipple with each thrust. “You can move your hands.”

Jimmy wraps his arms around her. One hand finding her pussy, fingers stroking fast and firm over her clit, the other keeping her pulled tight to him as he thrusts hard and fast. Breena’s got one arm wrapped around him, her other hand knotted in his hair as they kiss deep and sloppy.

Tim’s almost there. He can see the edge and the only thing keeping him from toppling over is Abby hasn’t given him permission to go. She’s playing with herself as she rises and falls against him in a deliberate, maddeningly slow pace.

“God, Abby, little faster…”

She smiles and kisses him. “Like this?” She speeds up, slipping over him like hot, wet silk.

“Yes,” he thrusts as well as he can.

She’s moaning as he arches and grinds into her. Tim’s hit the point where he’s babbling. He knows he’s doing it, but not really aware of what he’s saying, other than it boils down to please, please, please, get me off.

He feels her tense, speeding up even faster, and then rippling against him while saying, “Now,” and that’s all it takes. Tim’s sparking with pleasure, feeling it pulse through him, hot and wet waves of release.

By the time he’s back to himself, Jimmy and Breena are snuggling, close and soft and happy on their side of the bed, and he’s very content to be wrapped around Abby.
He doesn’t want to move, but he is kind of curious, so he says to Jimmy, “Body can’t tell the difference between pain and pleasure endorphins, can it?”

“Mine can’t.” Jimmy sounds drowsy and very content. “You get off harder after therapy night, right?”

Tim thinks about that, and actually, yes, he does. “Thought it was the Percocet.”

“Probably helps.” He shifts, reaching over to the bedside table, and grabbing tissues, handing half to Breena and half to Abby.

“How’d you figure that out?” Abby asks, wiping up and then cuddling back into Tim, both of them comfortably spooned at the foot of the bed.

“Story for when I’m not about to conk out.” He lays down, and Breena slips into her usual sleeping position. Tim and Abby switch around, settling in next to them, pulling the blankets over the four of them.

And in a few minutes, the room’s gone quiet, filled with the soft, content, sliding into dream sounds of four people.
This time, it’s the motion that wakes him up. Tim’s not making much noise, but Jimmy can feel both Abby and Breena are snuggling him, cooing something soft and quiet to him.

“Nightmare?” he asks Breena, feeling her nod against him. He kisses the back of her neck, flipping over, spooning her, wrapping his arm around her, and resting it on Tim’s shoulder.

“How often?” Breena asks very quietly.

“First time this week.” Last week, they’d slept over after therapy night, and that was the first time they’d worked on his arm and shoulder and it didn’t trigger any nightmares. “Shhh…” She kisses Tim’s forehead. “Probably that damn medal.”

“Not the spanking?” Jimmy’s feeling guilty about that. He’d had the sense to tell the rest of the sparring group that Tim might not want to go back to that, that there might be too damn many bad memories attached to those actions and sounds, and then completely forgot about it when the chance to get off on it sprang up.

Abby shrugs. It hadn’t bothered him when they talked about it before. But talking and seeing aren’t the same thing.

Jimmy feels Tim tense even further, followed by some mumbled words he can’t make out. Breena and Abby both hug him, petting his arms and face.

“Come on baby, just slide out of it. You’re home and safe and in bed. Shhhh…” Abby whispers to him.

“Wolf know about this?” Breena asks.

Abby nods.

Tim jerks, sits up, fast, looks around, and then slumps back down between the girls, quiet, soft and breathing evenly. The other three look at each other, wondering if that’s the sign that Tim’s done, guessing it is, because he burrows in against Abby even further, and then melts against her.

She kisses his forehead again, and the rest of them settle back down.

Jimmy lays there for a long time, Breena snug against his chest, his hand on Tim’s shoulder, he realizes he’s more than half-hoping that Jarvis won’t go through with it. He wants his shot at John, wants to be the nightmare that keeps him from sleeping well.

Saturday morning, Jimmy heads out for, as Tim put it, ‘quality time with Jethro.’ The rest of the crew will show up to work on the house later, but right now, these early morning hours are just the two of them.

Precision shooting today. Gibbs has set golf balls all over the woods, and it’s Jimmy’s job to hit them from as far away as he can. He’s gotten three of the last four that he’s aimed at. He sights another one, takes the moment to make sure he can see where the leaves are blowing, adjusts his aim, and nails it.
The golf ball goes skittering away from the crook of a branch where Jethro had put it. Jimmy nods at the shot, and then lowers his paintball gun and looks to Gibbs. “Jarvis came to visit Tim on Friday.”

Gibbs nods at that. “What’d he have to say?”

“That John’s in Hawaii, and he’s got a visit to Pearl planned for February. Offered to give John Tim’s regards.”

“Ah.” Gibbs looks at the paint ball gun in Jimmy’s hand. “Do we need to keep doing this?”

“Unless you want to stop, I’d like to.”

Gibbs nods at that, too. There’s a brittleness in Jimmy’s voice, and he’s not entirely sure what it means. “Okay.”

Jimmy lifts the gun to his eye and targets, firing, knocking the golf ball off a tree branch a good thousand feet away. Gibbs watches, thinking.

He’s talked to Tim about whatever’s happening with the four of them, but not Jimmy, not one on one. He’d also assumed, (stupid, don’t assume) that whatever is going on is between each guy and the girls, but beyond close friendship, whatever this is, isn’t between the guys.

Because, if you had ever asked him, he would have said, and, in Tim’s case, been entirely certain, and in Jimmy’s, ranging above 98% sure, that both guys are straight.

Which means, whatever it is, it couldn’t be between them.

But, he’s watching the way Jimmy’s firing, thinking about how Jimmy talks about Tim when they work on this, and begins to wonder more about that.

“You gonna be alright if Jarvis does it?”

Jimmy fires one more time, missing the ball, and lowers the rifle. “That’s the question now, isn’t it?” Jimmy thinks for a second. “How would you have felt if Vance had killed Cobb all on his own? Or if Mike had crossed the border and taken out Hernandez.”

Gibbs inclines his head a bit. That is a good question. He shrugs, honestly not sure how it would have felt if someone else had taken down Mike’s killer or Shannon and Kelly’s. “Don’t know. Tim wants Jarvis to do it. Mike, he wanted me to do it.” He doesn’t know what Shannon would have wanted in that case. For a second, he wonder if he could have gone back to being a Marine, back to his own life, if Mike had grabbed Hernandez and he'd gotten “justice” through Mike’s bullet or the courts. Jimmy nodding tears him away from that thought.

“I know. He doesn’t want any shit sticking to us, and I get that, but…” Jimmy shakes his head. “He’s still having nightmares, and… When it happens, I just want to rip John’s head off and use it for target practice.”

Hearing that Tim’s still having nightmares makes Gibbs want to rip The Admiral’s head off and do obscene things to it, too.

“Lot of nightmares?”

“Abby says down to about once a week now. Which is less than it was when he got home, but still once a week more than we want.”
Gibbs squints at that. Now he’s not sure what’s going on. “Abby says?” He doesn’t want to know what’s going on with them, not in any explicit details, but he also thought they were sleeping together on a somewhat regular basis so…

“We’re only sleeping together on the weekends. So, lot of nights I can’t find out for myself.”

Gibbs nods at that. “Everything still… going okay?”


“Confusing?”

Jimmy shakes his head, and Gibbs withdraws, not wanting to poke too far. But, after a few more shots, and a chance to get his thoughts in order, Jimmy finally says, “You get to a certain age, and you think you’ve got yourself figured out, but… Things change, and… And you’re in bed with your wife and your girlfriend and your…” Jimmy stops for a second, looking for a word, and then says, “boyfriend, and it’s good, really good, but it’s not anything you ever expected.”

Gibbs nods, slowly, thinking about that, understanding why that’d be confusing, and noting that pause before boyfriend he says, “So, Tim’s… your boyfriend?”

Jimmy shrugs. “No. Not really. But, for lack of a better word, it’ll do.”

Gibbs tentatively asks, “Are you his?”

Another shrug. “Once again, for lack of a word that covers whatever the hell it is we are to each other, sure. That’s part of confusing. What do you call someone you love, really love, like romantic love, but not romantic, because there’s no hearts and flowers. You know, like when the romance isn’t going hot and heavy. That settled, been together forever, calm and deep, protective… cherishing… love, but you don’t want to have sex with them?”

Gibbs shakes his head; he’s got no idea. He’s not even sure how that’d work. The closest he can come up with is how he feels about them, his kids. But Jimmy’s got kids, he knows how that feels, so, if this matched that, he wouldn’t be confused.

Jimmy shrugs at that, too. “We’re not just friends. Breena said that to me when we got him home, and it’s true, whatever we are, it’s not friends, not anymore. It’s too intense for that. Too intimate. We aren’t brothers, because… I have a brother, he’s got a sister, this isn’t that, and it’s probably a good thing that it’s not.” Jimmy shakes his head a bit, and licks his lips. “Given what we’re doing in that bed, brother is going to bounding into icky territory real fast.”

Gibbs can’t believe he’s about to say this, let alone to a man who’s happily married, to a woman, but, “It’s okay if you want to have sex with him.”

Jimmy waves that off. “I’m not the one of us who needs to hear that. I know it. Though, it’s probably a good idea to say it to Tim every now and again. Especially for you to say it to him.”

Gibbs squints at that. If Jimmy’s right about the not wanting to have sex part, he’s a bit fuzzy on why saying it would be important.

Jimmy shrugs. “Like I said, confusing. It’s just… for us, having sex is not really part of what’s going on. Dealing with sex is. Either way, he’d probably like the reassurance of knowing that whatever it is, you’re still okay with him.”
“Okay.”

Jimmy watches the trees. “It’d almost be easier if this, what’s between us, was about sex. I’d have words for this if that was what was going on. Okay, I’m 38, almost 39, I like girls, I like guys, or at least Tim, and hey, everyone else in my little party’s good with that, too. Yay! I can call myself bi, the girls are all happy about it, and Leon gets to make NCIS look even more PC and get credit for hiring and promoting under-represented minorities and all is spiffy, right?”

Gibbs nods slowly.

“So, I’ve got a map for that, you know? I’ve got a shape of what it is and how it works. I know where all the pieces go and what to do with them. I don’t have a map for this. Someone beats the shit out of you or Ducky even, and I’m not going to feel this way. I mean… this feels like waking up with Breena crying. Especially that first year after we lost Jon. Feels a lot like that, not as deep or hard, it’s not nearly that bad, but same flavor, not as strong. That same flash of rage I can’t do anything with.

“At least this time, I’ve got something, someone, to focus it on. Not like I’m just screaming at fate here.” Jimmy nails two more golf balls. “But if Jarvis actually does the job, then what? It’s just done. He’s my… Tim, and he’s hurt and… We don’t ever get it back, you know?” Jimmy rubs his mouth as he says that, staring across the woods, looking for another golf ball.

Gibbs gently puts a hand on his arm. “You’ve got them all.” Then he sighs. “Come on.” Gibbs leads him to the boat house, and packs up the guns, and then takes them to the pier, leading them to the end of it. He sits down, takes his shoes off, dipping his feet into the water, and Jimmy watches him.

“Training?”

“Nah. Feels good. Water’s cool. Hot day. Sit with me.”

So Jimmy shucks off his shoes and socks and sits with Gibbs, letting the river wash over his feet.

“I killed the man who killed my girls. I killed the man who killed Mike. I killed the man who bombed NCIS and screwed your wedding. I didn’t kill Ari, but I set the trap that got him killed, and watched him die from less than ten feet away. Still got his blood on my back wall. So, if you’re ever going to believe I know what I’m talking about, this is the thing to do it on. You don’t ever get your own back. Not like that. All the bullets in the world, all the blood they can spill, and it never comes back.”

Gibbs points down river, quite a ways. There’s, what looks like, a tiny rock outcropping down there. In reality, it’s probably about the same size as the pier they’re on. “Hernandez was about that far away. Bullet I used was about the size of your pinkie.” He looks at Jimmy’s hand. “Little thicker. Through the glass of his windshield. Took his fucking head clean off. Had to do a closed-casket funeral for him. But they were still dead when I got home. I can never and will never get my own back. Not for my girls, not for Mike, not for Kate…”

Jimmy kicks his feet in the water. “Then what are we doing?”

Gibbs sighs. “Keeping going. Every day we get further away from it, and everything else gets a stronger hold on us. Raise the kids, live with our loves, build the house… You never get your own back, just doesn’t happen, but… you find other stuff so you don’t miss what you lost so much.”

Jimmy looks at Gibbs, thinking hard, not sure how to put this into words. “I know it won’t make him unhurt. It probably won’t help much with the nightmares. Some, because there’s no ‘he’s still out
there’ fear, but a lot of it seems to be memories working their way through his head. It won’t let him be the man he was in May. I know that.” Jimmy smiles a little. “But it’s something. Revenge or justice or something. And it’s something I want to give him.”

Gibbs licks his lips and nods. “Know all about that.” You’re late, Gibbs, but Kate smiled as she said that, because once Ari was dead, she’d forgiven him for getting her killed. But if Ziva had done it on her own, if he hadn’t been part of it, she would have never forgiven him. That was something he had to give her.

Of course, it’s entirely possible that Kate was a figment of his imagination. That it was something he needed to give himself. “Something you want to give yourself?”

Jimmy nods at that, too. “And Abby, and Breena. But mostly Tim.”

“I know about that, too.” There are things Jethro wishes he could give Tim, too. And Dead John is on the list. He’s sure Abby wants that, too.

“So, now what?”

Gibbs shrugs. “Keep training? Might not make anything better, but if Jarvis doesn’t do it, taking care of John’ll feel good.”

“And if he does?”

Gibbs shakes his head. He doesn’t know.

They watch the river flow on by for a few more quiet moments, and then they hear the sound of car tires on gravel and know the next member of the family is here.

Time to start really working on the house.
Ergk... Bit of pooch-screwing on my side of things. Abbi's auditor is from the GAO (Government Accountability Office) and not the CBO (Congressional Budgetary Office.) Oops.

Am fixing that up.

Roofing means not a whole lot Tim can do. He’s on playing with little girls and making sure Mona doesn’t wander too far off the beaten path.

He’s got the girls corralled in a shady spot near the back patio, all of them splashing around in the baby pool. Right now, his job is to get splashed, apply and re-apply sunblock, (Anna’s especially resistant to this idea, and as a small, wet, squirmy eight-month-old, she might as well be made of Teflon for as well as he’s doing at grabbing hold of her and getting the goop rubbed on.) make sure everyone else has a steady stream of readily available cold drinks, and in a few hours, he’s on lunch duty.

It’s not the level of useful he’d like to be, but he’s here, he’s doing something that needs to be done, and no one is spending any time or energy taking care of him, so, it’s all steps in the right direction.

Still, he thinks he prefers playing with power tools to solo baby wrangling.

The roof is going up. From the look of it, Gibbs, Ducky, and Penny got about a quarter of the roof up during the week they were on their own.

They’re moving a lot faster with everyone (including Senior, who apparently actually knows which end of the hammer whacks the nails. He said something about getting back into practice before Tony and Ziva closed on their place) working away.

Most shingles are long rolls of asphalt, paper, and wood fibers. They’re almost like a fabric. Roll ‘em out, nail ‘em down, get to the end and cut, scoot up the roof a bit and do it all over again.

That’s not what they’ve got. They’re real shingles. (That got Senior and Gibbs reminiscing about how things were built back in the day.) They look like cedar. They aren’t. They’re lighter, stronger, better insulation and should last through the next thousands years because they’re some sort of plastic/wood fiber composite. But they do need to be nailed down one at a time.

Tony, Jimmy, and Breena are all on lugging shingle duty. They grab stacks of them and then schlep them up the ladder, drop them off with the rest of the crew, who are nailing them down, and then back down they go.

Tim’s not thrilled with Abby on the roof, and he can see Tony’s not thrilled with Ziva on the roof, too, but he can understand what’s going on. Once you’re up on the roof, you don’t move around much. Risk of falling, fairly low. If you’re the guy grabbing the shingles, you’re also the guy...
walking around on the roof, and going up and down the ladders. It’s physically harder work, and the risk of falling is a lot higher. During the week, Gibbs was on schlepping duty. With a crop of younger and stronger family members available, he’s been moved onto nailing duty.

Tony stops by about ten trips in, grabbing a drink. He’s still not doing much talking. Mostly about what’s going on today. Tim’s got the sense he’s trying to keep up the image of Tony so Senior doesn’t ask much in the way of questions.

“You doing okay?” Tim asks as Tony puts the Gatorade down, grabs the hose that filled up the baby pool and sprays himself off.

He rolls his eyes.

“Okay. I’m not poking. Just, been there, you know?”

Tony shrugs that off, too, and Tim nods. All the been there on earth doesn’t really touch it when you’re in it.

Tony picks up the Gatorade and gulps more of it down.

“You want or need to talk, you know where I am, okay?”

Tony nods and heads back to the shingle pile.

Saturday morning, Abbi Borin goes to work. Mostly she’s getting things ready for the audit, collecting data for the GAO, *doing her job*, but as she’s working, she’s thinking more and more about what she got at Gibbs’ place last night, what she can do about it, and how to use it.

Her fingers hover over her keyboard. For Riccerson, the current head of IA, she’s got dates, payment amounts, account numbers, and a very good idea of what sorts of things he looked the other way on.

What she’d like to know is what else he was up to: what didn’t get solved on his watch, what’s still not getting solved. She wants to know what, and likely who, IA’s ignoring.

Every complaint, every investigation produces a paper file. Those files get put into storage once the investigation on them is over/stalled out. The ones that are less than two years old are here, on site. Deep storage for the older ones. But she can’t just go down and wander around in there. Well, she can. There’s nothing physically stopping her from doing it, and no one will say anything if she just walks down to the basement and starts looking. No one will notice. It’s Saturday, almost no one is here right now.

But, all of those files are stored by code number. None of them have names. None of the codes are generated in a way that you can tell what’s what just by looking.

You need to get into the computers to do it.

And right now, she’s fairly sure that if she uses her own log in to get into Riccerson’s files, let alone the ones he doesn’t want anyone looking at, she’ll be sending up a massive neon sign for what’s going on.

So, for all of her intent to get into this on her own, she’s realizing she’s hit the point where she needs
a computer guy a whole lot faster than she thought she would. A computer guy she absolutely knows isn’t part of this. One who’s got a history of getting into and out of sticky spaces without leaving a trace.

She calls Gibbs. If anyone is keeping track of her phone records she wants as few direct links between her and McGee as possible.

“Gibbs.”

“Hi.”

“Hey.” She can hear the smile in his voice, the sound of voices in the background, and wonders what he’s up to right now.

“Got McGee nearby?”

“Not within arm reach, but I can get him easily enough.”

“Would you?”

“Sure.” She hears him putting things down. “Let me call you back.”

“Thanks.”

While she’s waiting, she’s appreciating that Gibbs didn’t ask why she called him if she wanted to talk to Tim. She’s enjoying that she doesn’t need to tell him to call her back, as opposed to have Tim call her back.

And, in a minute, her phone chirps, Jethro on the caller ID.

“Hi.”

“What’s up, Abbi?” Tim’s voice. She can hear splashing in the background. Baby girls are laughing, and Mona’s barking.

“Sounds like you’re having a good time.”

“We’re doing okay. You’re always welcome to join us. Tony, Jimmy, and Breena would love an extra shingle schlepper.”

“Uh…” Actually right now, being out in the sunshine working on the house sounds really good. She’s not entirely sure about shingle schlepping (when Gibbs told her about doing it with Penny and Ducky it didn’t exactly sound like her idea of fun), but compared to what she’s looking at… “Maybe next week. Got a favor to ask.”

“I guessed. A cloak and dagger sort of favor, too, right?”

“Exactly. You have a computer handy?”

“Just my phone. You actively on a case right now?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then go to my place, grab my computer, and come over to the house. I’m on baby duty, and that’s awfully light when they all get their afternoon nap. Plus, since I’m on Gibbs’ phone, I assume we’re pretending you’re talking to him, so a three hour phone conversation between you two would be
“way out of character.”

Abby smiles at that. “So, where is it?”

“On my desk in my office. Might want to pick up a few bags of ice and an extra case of Gatorade or two.”

“A reason for me to be coming by?”

“Ice is melting pretty quick, and we’re sucking down the drinks faster than usual.” It is hot outside, so that's a plausible lie. (But it is a lie. Between Jimmy and Ducky keeping an eye on things, no one's coming down with heat stroke. They have enough ice and Gatorade that he could fill the baby pool with it.) Then a thought hits Tim. “Oh.”

“Oh?”

“Senior’s here.”

“Oh.”

“He’s up on the roof, working, but…”

She’s nodding. Senior might be family, but he’s also an outsider. And while Abbi didn’t think twice about talking about what’s going on at CGIS in front of Penny, she’s not nearly as sure that Senior can keep quiet.

“You still want to come?”

“No. What are you doing for dinner?”

“Jimmy and Breena’s. They’re pumping me full of drugs and torturing me again.”

“Therapy night.”

“Yeah. See how much use of my hand I can get back. If you and Jethro want to come, join us for the eating part, lay it all out, that’s cool. I won’t be able to get into anything until tomorrow, but we can talk about it. And you can be making this call to set up a dinner date.”

“Okay. You guys usually quit around five, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Hour home, get showered and changed, feed girls and get them to bed?”

“That’s the usual drill.”

“Then I’ll be at Jimmy and Breena’s place with food for the six of us by seven.”

“We’ll see you then.”

By the end of the day, the roof is done. That feels awesome and looks amazing. From the outside, the house is done. The angles and layout still look awkward, but it’s no longer ugly as sin.
No, now they've got a huge log and stone cabin on a "rustic" (that's code for mostly woods and unkempt lawn) lot, with lots of big windows to let the light in. It kind of looks like some of those big B&Bs/small hotels in Colorado and Wyoming that people who enjoy skiing like to visit.

An by the end of the day, everyone, but especially the shingle schleppers, are beat. They all worked hard to get the roof done, but the amount of up and down to get those shingles into the hands of the people nailing them up was especially hard.

Tony looks like he was ridden hard and put away wet. Senior's gently ragging on him about how when his grandfather was his age, they used to do this all day every day. Tony waves it away as he, Senior, and Ziva, head, slowly, toward her car, ready to go home and crash.

Jimmy and Breena are beat, too. Tim offers to drive them home, so they can just crash in the car on the way back.

“I don’t care what it’s like tomorrow, I’m not lifting a finger on the house,” Breena says as he's pulling into their neighborhood. First sound he's heard out of either of them in almost an hour.

Jimmy nods at that. The shingles, by themselves, are not heavy. Each one weighs less than an ounce. But, if you’re grabbing them in ten pound stacks, and then lugging them up a ladder, somewhere between three and one stories up, then carrying them over to whomever needs more, then heading back down the ladder, you end the day with every muscle in your body exhausted, twitching, and yelling at you for working them so hard.

Just the bending down to pick them up, and put them down, (over and over and over) is enough to get quads quivering. (And not in a good way.)

Abby’s in her car, making a quick stop back to their place to pick up clean clothing, but Tim’s feeling like she won’t mind at all if he makes this offer. “Abbi’s feeding us, so how about we get home, I’ll get the girls fed and put down while you two get a shower, then dinner, and, instead of you ripping my hand to shreds, Abby and I’ll work on you guys tonight.”

“Please!” Breena says.

“Home, hot water, hell, if you’re still in the shower when she gets over, I’ll send Abby up to wash your hair…”

Jimmy groans at that idea. He got two stacks of shingles for every one Breena did, and probably six for every five Tony did. His arms are dead, and having someone else wash his hair sounds like heaven.

“What about your hand?” Jimmy asks after a minute of thinking, blissfully, about being rubbed all over tonight by someone who’s got the energy to do a good job of it.

“It’ll still be attached to me tomorrow.”

“You’ll do anything to get out of PT.”

Tim smiles wryly. “Not exactly like offering to work on you guys is painful. And…” Tim looks at his right hand, currently resting on the steering wheel. He’s really driving one-handed, it’s just sitting there because the only fingers that really move are the last two, but, without a cast or brace, the first three are getting some exercise these days. “They’ll have to do some work to get the knots out.”

“Okay, as your doctor, I’m prescribing an hour of massage.”
“Thanks.”

“I’m also prescribing, and I know you’ll have no problem complying with this one, at least ten minutes a day gaming on your console.”

Tim nods and sighs, looking at Jimmy in the rearview mirror, smiling at him. “It’ll be difficult, but I think I can manage it.”

“Try not to let your Minions laugh too hard when you get started on it.”

They drive for another minute before Breena asks, “So, who are you offering to work on?”

Good question. He’d been thinking her, but… okay, assume for a moment he wants to do a good… er… therapeutic… job on this massage. He’s pretty sure he can manage that with Breena, but he’s even more sure he can actually focus on giving a real massage if he’s working on Jimmy. Except, of course, if he’s working on Jimmy, then he’ll be watching Abby give Breena a massage, and that’s going to be exceptionally distracting to him, and Jimmy’s going to be in exactly the same situation.

“Ladies’ choice. You and Abby get to pick.” That seems like a safe solution.

Breena chuckles at that, tired, but amused. She knows exactly what mental calculations he went through before offering that answer. “So, why is Abbi feeding us?”

“More fun with conspiracies. I think we’re hacking CGIS.”

“Have fun. Think she’ll mind if I drift off during that conversation?” Jimmy asks, only half-joking.

“Nope.”

They pull into Jimmy’s driveway and notice Abbi’s car is already there. Even better, as they get out they can smell something savory and yummy on the grill.

“This is getting better and better,” Breena says as she gently pokes Molly toward the back porch. “Go say hi to Abbi.” Molly goes tearing off, Breena hands Anna to Tim, and holding Kelly’s hand, leads her toward the back porch.

It’s hitting the three of them that Abbi has at least some idea of what’s going on with them. They don’t know how much detail she's got, but she was there when they were down in the morning at the beach, all wet from recent showers with only one bathroom, and Gibbs has said he's told her about it. So, she knows something, but they don’t know how open they are about it, yet. Not sure if it’s a somewhat open secret, or if this is something they let Gibbs and Abbi actually see.

Tim quietly asks, “You want me to send Abby up when she gets here?”

All three of them are looking at each other. It’s one thing to all be down in the morning with wet hair, that hints what’s going on, but doesn’t flat out say. And they all know that Abbi knows but there’s knowing, and there’s seeing, there’s actually setting it out, and showing this is real and going on and…

“I’m fine with it. She already knows. And she and Gibbs aren’t talking about it, so… Yeah, send her up.” Breena shrugs. “If Gibbs gets here early enough, come up yourself, too.”
“Jimmy?”

He nods. “Quiet because I’m tired. Not having a problem with it. You?”

“Gibbs isn’t going to get here in time, because he’s going home and getting a shower of his own, but if he was, I’d take you up on that offer.” As the only one of them who wasn’t doing any sort of hard physical labor, Tim’s the one who’s least in need of a shower. He’ll probably grab a quick one once the girls are down. It was a hot day, so he’s sweaty, and covered in sunblock and bug spray, but unlike Jimmy, Breena, Abby, and Gibbs he didn’t sweat through his clothing.

“So, we’re good.”

“Yeah, and I’ll ask Abby in a way where she can turn it down easy without making it clear what’s going on.” Then Tim shakes his head. “Or, I’ll pull my phone out, ask her point blank, and leave it up to her for what she’s going to do.”

He takes his phone out and begins texting.

They amble in the direction of the porch and find Abbi sitting on one of the chaises, Molly giving her a big hug, her computer pushed to the side, and Tim’s on the table.

“Whatsoever that is, it smells awesome,” Jimmy says. “I’d give you a hello hug and kiss, but I’m pretty rank right now.”

Abbi smiles, nods at him, and says, “I appreciate it. Jethro usually just heads straight to the shower when he gets home from house days.”

“We think that’s what he’s doing now.”

“Yep. Got a text a few minutes ago. He’s about an hour out. As for what that is, it’s me making good use of your grill's rotisserie attachment. Got three ducks on there, slowly cooking away, and some potatoes and onions roasting in the drippings. Salad’s in the kitchen.”

“You’re perfect,” Breena says, sincerely. “If Gibbs doesn’t marry you, I will.”

Abbi chuckles. “Wait ‘til you see what I’ve got for dessert.”

“Good?”

“Sooo good.”

“You’re going to ask me to do something ridiculously illegal, aren’t you?” Tim asks.

Abbi grins at him. “You like food bribes, right?”

He laughs at that, sitting on the chaise next to her, setting Anna between them.

"Key lime mousse with blackberry whipped cream," Abbi says with a smile.

"I'm yours. Point me to your felony."

“We’re hitting the showers and getting ready for dinner. He’s on babies,” Jimmy says, and Abbi waves them off.

“You said the salad is in the kitchen?”
“Yeah. Got some food for Kelly and Molly, too.” They’re both in the grass. Kelly’s messing around with Molly’s (currently turned off) sprinkler, and Molly’s on her swings. “Figured that chicken nuggets would go over well.”

“They always do. Let me get food assembled, and then we can talk.”

Abbi looks at him, squints for a few seconds, and then says, “How about I get it assembled?”

“I can—“

“I know. I’m faster, and I want to talk.”

“Okay,” he says, grudgingly. Though, in retrospect, it would take him a long time. He wasn’t setting any speed records for lunch, and all he did for that was lay food out. Everyone else mixed and matched cold cuts, bread, veggies, fruits, and nuts into meals for themselves.

He’s not quite done thinking that when Abbi’s back out with a bottle, rice cereal, and mashed bananas. “This one’s easy to cook for,” she says, stroking Anna’s face.

Anna’s not paying much attention to her. She’s watching the bottle. Tim sits back onto the chaise, gets her settled in his left arm, and after a bit of nudging and messing around, manages to get the bottle into his right hand with some, mild (ish) pain. (He’s got to stretch his thumb and index and middle fingers apart to hold the bottle. He’ll call it part of his therapy routine and leave it there.)

Anna gloms onto the nipple and begins eagerly slurping away.

“You’re getting ready for another growth spurt, aren’t you?”

She, of course, does not answer.

He calls out to Abbi, “Probably want to grab another one of the bananas.” He smiles at Anna. “This feels good. Haven’t done it in a while.” Kelly’s been weaned since she hit a year old. That wasn’t precisely intentional, but with Abby away for a week, and Kelly eating almost entirely solid food, it was just easier to switch her all the way over than to try and keep her on a bottle. “You’re helping me get back in practice. Your cousin Kelly did that for your dad while you were cooking, too.”

They spend a quiet moment, Anna nursing away, Tim holding her, relaxing on the back porch, really enjoying the scent of what Abbi’s got cooking.

Not too long before Abbi’s out with food for the older girls. “Dinner.” Molly comes tearing from the yard to the table, she’s hungry, and Kelly starts to toddle over. Abbi meets her halfway, and gives her a hand getting to the table.

Tim watches her with a smile on his face. She’s got Molly set just fine. She’s two and a half, and tall for her age, so sit her down, put the food in front of her, and she’s fine. Kelly, at fourteen months, needs a bit more help. For a second, he’s quietly giggling, seeing Abbi sit Kelly on one of the chairs, and then realize the top of her head just comes to the top of the table.

“They’ve got booster seats somewhere in there. Otherwise she needs to be on someone’s lap.”

“I’m getting that sense.” Abbi picks Kelly up again. “You okay eating with me?”

Kelly eyeballs Abbi, looking a bit uncertain about this endeavor, but her Dad’s right nearby, so she decides to chance it. “Yes.”
Abbi looks at Tim, feeding Anna, and says, “When she’s with Jethro and I, she sits in his lap.”

He chuckles. “I’m deeply shocked.”

“Yeah, figured you would be.” She pushes Molly’s plate a little closer to her, and starts breaking up Kelly’s nuggets. They’re too big for her the way they are. “Last night Jethro showed me some of the files Franks left him.”

Tim doesn’t know what all Franks had, but if anyone was going to have the goods on everyone, it would be Mike Franks. “Troubling stuff in there?”

“Head of IA was taking bribes. My boss promoted him and two other sketchy guys. So, I know the guy in charge of IA was on the take, so is the guy in charge of Accounting, and the guy who runs our Compliance Office.”

Tim winces. “Ouch.”

“Yeah. I told Jethro I’d look into it on my own before pulling you into it, got to work, and realized that I need someone to get me into my own system, invisibly, so I can even find what I need to be looking for.”

“And let me guess, no shot at all of there being a warrant involved in this?”

Abbi laughs. “I need the proof to get the warrant to get the proof.”

“Fun of dealing with a ‘sensitive’ investigation.”

“Yeah.”

Tim thinks about it. “So what do you actually need?”

“I’ve got dates and places and payouts. What I don’t have, other than a bunch of Mike Franks’ files, which I can’t use, is proof. So, I need to get into their backgrounds. Need to see what they were working on, where the money went, which cases got buried and passed off.”

“You need everything.”

“Yeah.”

Anna’s bottle is dry, so Tim shifts her so she’s facing him, and she starts to fuss. “Oh, yeah. We don’t do that anymore, do we?” He’d forgotten that you don’t need to burp an eight-month-old. Tim grabs one of the jars of bananas, looks at it for a few seconds, and then tosses it to Abbi. “I can’t open these one-handed.”

She opens it, and then heads over, getting the second jar, along with the tub of cereal.

As she’s sitting back down, Tim asks, “Do I want to know why Mike Franks knew this stuff?”

Abbi shakes her head.

“Okay…” He keeps thinking about how to do this and not land both of them in jail, or worse, end up with a case where they’ve got piles of evidence, but it’s all inadmissible because of how they got it. “How gung ho is your GAO buddy?”

“You mean is she willing to go to the wall and get the warrants and bust heads because it’s not her organization that’ll look bad?”
“Yeah.”

Abbi shrugs. “Maybe. But best I can tell, even if she goes on the warpath, all she can do is call a congressional investigation, and you know how they work. They request or subpoena documents. Those documents ‘tragically’ vanish, everyone blathers about how they had no idea anything was going on, six months later the outside world’s forgotten, and everyone goes back to doing what they were doing before.”

“So, you want a criminal case.”

“That’d be nice, but if IA’s in on it, who do you call? That’s part of needing to get into this deeper. I don’t know who’s involved.” She sighs, and reaches for a few of the grapes on Molly’s plate. “Eat up, honey. Can’t just have nuggets.”

“No!”

“Molly…” Tim’s whipping out his Don’t cross Dad voice. “Abbi tells you to do something, you do it.” She pouts, but eats the grape. “They were running around outside all day. Quick dinner, quick tubbies, and down they go. We’re on borrowed time before they start to melt down.”

Abbi’s looking amused. “Didn’t know you could sound like that.” Kelly’s too young for the voice, and this is the first time she’s been with the Palmer kids without an adult Palmer around.

“You should hear me ordering the Minions around. So, you need a pile of information, and ideally, someone to give it to.”

“Yeah. I mean… Push comes to shove, and I’m on my own on this, I can get the warrants, and I can arrest them all when they come into work. But… You know, it’d be nice to have someone higher up watching my back. I was thinking… if I can get enough proof, of taking it to Admiral Zukunft. If he’s standing next to me when I start slapping on the cuffs, this is going to go a hell of a lot smoother.”

Tim nods at that. He’s figuring out how best to do this, when Abbi, who had been cutting up grapes for Kelly, stops.

“Shi--oot.” She very rapidly censors herself.

“What?”

“Now I’m wondering if Swissin, my boss, the guy whose job I took, left in a hurry because he was part of it, or because he wasn’t.”

Tim’s eyes go wide as he remembers something else Abbi had said about her successor. “He died recently, right?”

Now it’s her turn to wince. “Yeah.” Once again she’s very visibly censoring herself. “Car accident. Ran off the road late at night. We handled the investigation.”

“This is bad.”

“What’s bad?” Abby asks, as she walks onto the porch. “Hey!” Abbi gets a kiss on the cheek, so do the girls, and Tim gets one on the lips.

“Long story. You want to hear it now?”
Abby shakes her head. “Getting out of these clothes, into the shower, and then into something cool and clean. Down in half an hour or so. Then I want to hear all about it.”

They both nod at her, and watch her head up. For a second, Abbi looks curious about it, but with everything else going on, combined McGee-Palmer shower time really isn’t that big of a deal.

“Okay, so first things first, we need proof. We need to get into the files without anyone knowing we’ve gotten into them. You’ve got the GAO investigating, and I think I’m going to use them as a shield. If I do it right, and anyone notices, they’ll assume the GAO is checking all of you out. I’ll investigate everyone who’s a Director level or above.”

Abbi nods, that sounds good.

“Swissin… Assuming your higher ups are any good, they’ll have that file double and triple locked. Anyone looks and red flags will be waving all over the place.”

“If you can get the case number without setting off those flags, I can get into the physical files without tipping anyone off.”

“You think there still are files?”

Abbi shrugs.

“Juice!” Molly demands, sees the look Tim shoots her and quickly says, “Please.”

“Good girl.”

Abbi gets up, taking Kelly in one hand and Molly’s cup in the other, and fetches more apple juice. While she’s off, a horrifying though hits Tim.

“How do we do this and get you a protection detail, without tipping anyone off,” he asks as she’s sitting down.

“McGee…” It’s clear by the look on her face that she thinks a protection detail is beyond stupid.

“Nope. You think with his past we’re taking any chances with you?”

“Let’s at least see if Swissin died under suspicious circumstances before you set round the clock surveillance on me.”

Tim narrows his eyes, but… Probably a good point.

“If it’s even remotely hinky…”

She nods. “If it’s hinky, we’re going to move fast. In, out, and done. I’m going to want to have it finished before they know it’s started. You get everything you can. I’ll get the files. If it’s hinky, I’ll get the warrants that night. I do have a few judge friends who’ll ignore the timeline on how I got hard evidence as long as I can get my hands on hard evidence. Next morning, I’ll be arresting people. We’ll sort it out with them in my holding cells.”

Tim nods at that. “Why is that not comforting?”

Abbi smiles dryly. “Because we’ve both been around the block enough times to know what men do to keep their power.”

“Yeah. Okay. So… specifically, what do you want from me. I mean, what do you want me to get?”
“File numbers. Swissin’s case and autopsy. I want to know if IA is protecting anyone. I want to know if anyone besides me has talked to the Forensic Accountant I called to look into this.”

“He’s from outside the Coast Guard?”

“Yeah. Adam Sanderson, supposed to be good. Worked for the IRS Tax Evasion division for twenty-five years, retired last month, and is now taking the occasional freelance case.” Abbi thinks.

“To start off, I need links between Adama, Seth, Brandis, and Riccerson.”

“Your three guys Mike had the goods on and your Director?”

“Yeah. Need to know how they fit together. Bank accounts, stuff like that.”

“Leave that one to the auditors. The amount of hacking I’m going to need to do to get into private banking records, especially since we don’t know where they’re keeping their money, will be better used elsewhere.”

“Okay. I’ll need the files more, anyway.”

Tim’s nodding at that. “Tomorrow I’ll…” he remembers exactly how much Abbi knows about this sort of stuff. “Wave my wand, say some magic words, and next thing you know CGIS will be under the impression that the GAO is double checking everyone. Buried in there’ll be a search through all the IA files, see who’s doing what, and I’ll make sure they pull cases, a lot of them, at ‘random,’ your boss’s will be one of them.”

“Thank you.”

“So, the files… are they all on the computers? Can I just set it so anything that looks like trouble just pops up in your GAO contact’s inbox, as well as, say General Zukunft's inbox, and maybe a few journalists?”

“I wish. We use the computer as a way of keeping track. It’s a glorified card catalog. All of the details beyond name, date, who handled the case, and it’s status, is in the paper files.”

Tim winces.

“Yeah, it’s ugly.”

“It’s also a mess. I have to have some way to narrow this down, otherwise I’ll be giving you so many files there’ll be no way for you to find what you need.”

“Okay. All IA reports about any of the four of them. Especially ones where Riccerson handled a complaint about one of the other three.”

“That I can do. Your medical examiner ran the case on Swissin?”

“Yeah.”

“Anything involving him, too. And… any other agents die suddenly?”

“Not that I know of, but…” Tim knows the but on that one. He couldn’t tell you if anyone at NCIS outside of his group had died recently/suspiciously, either.

“I can do a quick run into your pension system, see who’s getting payouts, cross reference that with cases.”
“Thanks.”

Tim looks at two empty banana jars. “You really are whipping through this. Cereal time?”

Anna tries to grab the spoon, so he assumes that means yes.

“I’m not kidding about making sure you’ve got some sort of protection.”

Abbi shrugs that off.

“Don’t do that. I know every verse of this song and have sung it myself a few times on top of that. As soon as I get into this, I want you at least wearing a vest all the time and don’t go anywhere without someone keeping track of you. I’ll put and keep a trace on your phone if you’ll let me.”

“McGee…”

“I can’t do it now, won’t be able to for a while, but everyone on my team has an emergency alert wired into their phone. Someone tries to shut it off or disable it, and it sends a help call. I want to put one on yours as soon as I can. I won’t snoop, but… we’ll all sleep better knowing you won’t just vanish one night. Even if you get everyone arrested in less than 24 hours, they’re not going to trial that fast, and you know…” he lets his eyes finish that sentence.

She nods. “Yeah. I know. Okay. As of tomorrow, I’ll have a vest under my clothing, and I’ll get a second phone, little one, keep it on me somewhere. Anyone tries, they can grab my main phone, won’t look for another, and I’ll have active GPS on me. What about you?”

Tim shrugs.

“What, I have to cover myself in protection and you can go out naked?”

“No! I’m going to be invisible on this. Anyone who notices someone going through your files will trace it back to the GAO. Basically, I’m going to use an anonymizer.” Abbi doesn’t seem to know what that means. “It’s complicated. Here’s the quick version. My computer logs in, it goes to the anonymizer service and gets a number, that number goes to another computer which gives it another number, and on and on, finally a new number goes off to do whatever I want it to do, there’s no way to trace the numbers back. So, usually when I follow a trace, I’ve got a number and keep following it back. This way, you hit the anonymizer, and it’s a dead end. No one will be able to find what computer the hack originated from. Then I’m going into the GAO and stealing one of their computers. From there, I’ll break into your stuff, make it look like some eager beaver at the GAO is jumping the gun on the investigation. With the anonymizer I use, it’s literally impossible to tell where the hack originated from.”

“It’s not impossible to figure out you’re the only computer guy I know.” That’s a good point.

“I’ll be careful, too.”

They spend the next few minutes working out details when another thought hits Tim. He’s just been assuming, since these are Franks’ records she’s working off of, that Gibbs is part and parcel of this job. But he’s assuming.

“Is Gibbs in on this?”

She nods.

“And… is he going to be… helping?”
“Maybe.”

Another nod.

“And… um… are you planning on telling him what you think may have happened to Swissin?”

Abbi’s mouth opens, and then shuts. Her automatic answer is yes. Her thinking about it more answer is… “I should tell him.”

Tim nods.

“He’ll notice the vest.”

He nods about that, too.

“Is he going to get weird on me?”

“You mean like hyper-over-protective?”

She nods.

Tim does, too. “Tell him anyway. If you’ve got a choice of someone to watch your back, you want Gibbs.”

They hear another car pull up into the driveway.

“Speak of the devil,” Abbi says

“Sounds like it.”

Gibbs, after kissing Abbi hello, takes one look at Tim, who’s still in his work clothing, and currently sporting some attractive banana smears to go with the sweat stains, and says, “Go get cleaned up. I’ve got the girls.” Then he picks up Anna, who’s looking a little surprised by this, but she’s done eating, so she’s willing to go for a trip, and heads over to sit next to Abby and help with the older girls.

Tim looks at that, nods, and heads up.

The other three are out of the shower by the time he gets up, getting dressed in a very slow, tired, starting to feel better, but still looking a few gallons low on the fuel tank sort of way.

“It smells even better out there, now,” he says by way of encouragement to get them moving as he strips out of his t-shirt and jeans.

“Abbi say anything about,” Breena gestures to the three of them, all in various stages of getting dressed.

“Abbi say anything about,” Breena gestures to the three of them, all in various stages of getting dressed.

Tim shakes his head. “We talked shop. She looked a little surprised when Abby headed up,” he tucks his clothing into the bag Abby brought while looking around for a dry towel, “but the level of messed up CGIS is right now is taking precedence.”

“And since you’re up here, I take it Gibbs is here, too,” Abby says, pulling on a tank top. They’re all in very relaxed, pajamas or very close, clothing. She’s got on light flannel jammy pants and a white
tank top. Breena’s pulling on one of those little sundresses she likes, and Jimmy seems to be debating if he’s going to do the work necessary to put a shirt on in addition to his shorts.

“Got here, kissed Abbi, grabbed Anna, and sent me up to get cleaned off,” he grabs a towel out of their linen closet.

Abby hugs him and then sniffs delicately. “Which you definitely need.”

He looks mock appalled while goosing her, slings the towel over his shoulder, and heads into Breena and Jimmy’s bathroom.

If there’s anything that perks up tired, hungry people it’s sitting down in front of plates of glorious food. Breena, Jimmy, Abby, and Gibbs are all looking significantly less tired as they start tearing through their duck.

“Seriously, your talents are wasted at the Coast Guard. You need to be running your own restaurant,” Abby says to Abbi as she’s biting into the duck.

She’d rubbed them in mix of Chinese mustard, soy sauce, ginger, garlic, and five spice powder, and then set them over the grill on the rotisserie where they circled and circled, all of the fat slowly rendering off leaving them wrapped in almost bacon-like crispy, caramelized skin, the meat spicy and smoky.

“I’d get bored in a kitchen. Every now and then though…”

“Yeah, Shabbos is at your house next week,” Jimmy adds.

“Might be busy next week,” which is how Abbi starts telling the rest of them about what’s going on.

They listen to it, and as she gets to having to get the paper files, Abby adds, “So, are you going to try to carry the files out or take pictures?”

“Thinking pictures. Grab some of the originals, too, just so they can’t ‘vanish.'”

“Good plan. Before you do this, let me grab your phone and Gibbs’, I’ll set it up so anything you take a picture of automatically uploads to the cloud, and then deletes from your phone. That way, if someone grabs you, and checks your phone, they can’t prove you took the pictures, and they can’t erase them, either.”

Abbi nods at that, nipping a bite of her drumstick. “Sounds good. How long would that take to set up?”

“Not too long. Call it an hour. Are we going to run this like a full investigations, have Tim hack your security feeds, keep an eye on everything while you’re doing it?”

Abbi’d been thinking of just going in on her own, maybe with Gibbs, getting to the file storage, splitting up, grabbing shots of everything, and getting out, fast, but, having eyes on them…”

“Yes. Is…” She’s looking at Tim as she thinks about what level of backup she’d want or need for something like this.
“I can run that from home.”

“Shouldn’t you tell Vance?” Breena asks. “I mean, if you’re basically running an off the books sting on a different agency…”

That’s also a good point.

“We can’t start tomorrow if that’s the case,” Tim says.

“You can’t get this going tomorrow anyway. If you want to do it fast, you’re going to need to set it up first, proof it, let it rest, proof it again, then put it into play,” Abby says it gently, and it’s true, but Tim doesn’t really want to hear it.

He’s looking a bit deflated. “She’s right.” He holds up his right hand. “Can’t just hack this on the fly. Not fast enough right now.”

“Then how about, tomorrow, you and I have a lunch date, where we ‘run into Vance.’ We’ll tell him what’s going on, and why.”

Tim’s nodding at that. “What about your judge friend. If we’re bringing Vance in, this is on the books now, so… will he trust you on the warrants based on your hunch?”

Abbi sighs, looking at Gibbs. She’s got more than a hunch. She just can’t use her more than a hunch. Franks kept files with each payment, how much, which account the money went from and to, and what he was buying. There are tapes, too, though they haven’t listened to them yet. (Don’t have one of those tiny recorders to play them on.)

“Got more than a hunch,” Gibbs says, though he’s not thrilled with the idea of giving up those files. He can feel Mike hovering behind him. *I’m dead Probie. Not like they’re gonna dig me up and arrest me. And it’s not like I left any trace of what we did with Leyla. There’s nothing in there that can burn you or her. You finally went through my stuff yesterday, now you’re giving it to the people who need it. Fornell’ll have some fun with it, too. That ex of yours… IRS girl…Give her the rest of it. At the very least, she’ll be able to get them for unreported income. “I’ve got the paperwork. Got the trail. We’ll talk to your judge after dinner. While you and Tim have lunch, I’ll get Fornell and Diane together, and give them the rest of it. By… Wednesday?” He’s looking at Tim, who nods, “We’ll be ready to run this.”

He can feel Mike smiling at him. *You know, by giving all of my stuff up, you’ve just made yourself bullet-proof. No one is going to believe you turned everyone in on my smuggling ring, and then went out and did it yourself.*

He hopes Mike’s right about that.
Boundaries That Want to be Pushed

Talking to Abbi’s pet judge means Gibbs and Abbi leave when it’s still fairly early.

The amount of hacking he plans to get ready tomorrow, along with the ‘accidental’ lunch he and Abbi and Leon have scheduled, means Tim’s got an early start for tomorrow.

And, though food helped perk both Jimmy and Breena up, they’re both awfully tired.

So, all in all, it’s going to be an early night.

They get everything cleaned up and cleared away and head straight up to Jimmy and Breena’s room.

“Abbi say anything about us getting a shower together?” Jimmy asks as they get ready for bed, the four of them going through their nightly routines.

Tim shakes his head, thinking Jimmy really was out of it before dinner since they already covered this, as he squeezes his toothpaste onto his brush, then handing the tube to Jimmy. “Bigger fish and all that.”

Jimmy nods. “Our sex lives, multi-person conspiracy she’s on the verge of busting, possibly costing her her career… Yeah… I can see how we’re not a burning issue for her.”

Breena steps out of the bathroom, lighting a few candles in the bedroom. “Are you,” she’s talking to Tim, “going to be okay on this? If she’s wrong, her career is over. What happens to you?”

Tim shrugs, finishing up brushing. “Probably not much.” He grabs a glass, and rinses his mouth out. “Unless Leon flat out tells me to leave it alone and I don’t, I think I’m okay. Especially, if she gets that warrant.”

He leaves Jimmy in the bathroom on his own, seeing Breena lighting the candles, and Abby already sitting on the bed, holding the bottle of massage oil.

Breena puts her lighter down, and strips out of her sundress. Abby’s already naked, and Tim, who hadn’t thought much beyond, sore loves worked hard and need to get rubbed on, has come to the conclusion that this appears to be co-ed naked massaging night, which is… new.

Therapy night’s always involved clothing in the past. (Not necessarily a ton of them, but everyone’s stayed dressed.) And, okay, yes, given what happens right after therapy, keeping said clothing in place is probably stupid. (At least, the girls seem to have come to the conclusion that it’s unnecessary.) But that’s the way it’s been.

He’s glancing at both of them, and then watches Jimmy head out of the bathroom, over to the bed, flop into the middle of it on his stomach and groan.

He’s also naked, and it’s occurring to Tim that there may be more of a plan in place than he’s aware of. So he pulls off his clothing and heads over to the bed.

“So, who’s working on whom?” Tim asks as they all get settled into Jimmy and Breena’s bed.

The candles are lit, blankets drawn back, windows open, keeping it nice and warm in the room, Abby’s got the oil in hand, all he needs now is to know who goes where.

“Change of plan while we were in the shower,” Breena says.
Abby smiles at him. “Remember how good those four-handed massages were during our honeymoon?” He grins at that. “We’re going to work on both of them together.”

Tim likes that idea, a lot.

“I’ve got the bottom two thirds, you’re on head, neck, shoulders, and arms. Jimmy’s up first because he did the best job of looking like a whipped puppy while we were getting cleaned off, so Breena and I took pity on him.”

“If it gets me first massage, I have no compunctions about looking like a whipped puppy,” Jimmy says in a very dignified sort of way. (At least, as dignified as it’s possible to be while face down, naked, and in bed.)

Tim’s looking at Breena, wondering what she’s up to, and she lays next to Jimmy, on her side, gently touching his hand. Apparently, she’s watching and relaxing.

Abby nudges Jimmy’s foot so he spreads his legs a bit further apart, kneels between them, opens the oil, scent of amber, vanilla, and musk wafting from the bottle, slicks up her hands, places one on each of Jimmy’s ankles, presses her weight into them, and then slowly slides all the way from his feet to the bottom of his ribs.

Jimmy groans, loud, sincerely appreciating how good that feels.

Her hands lighten their touch and begin to skim down his back and the back of his legs. “That’s as much reach as I’ve got. Anything above that’s all you, Tim.”

He nods, holding out his hand, and Abby pours a little oil into it. Normally he’d rub it between his palms, warm it up, but the cast still covers most of his palm, so he stares at it for a second, rubs his fingers against his palm, hoping that does a good enough job, and then quickly says, “I hope it’s not too cold,” and strokes his hand over Jimmy’s shoulders.

Jimmy doesn’t tense when they touch, and quietly says, “Feels fine.” So, with that, Tim gets to work.

This shouldn’t feel weird. Jimmy’s worked on him many times. He’s just returning the favor.

And it doesn’t feel weird, at least not in the sense of being wrong. In the sense of being different. Yeah, it’s different. Really different. Skin to skin, he’s only worked on girls, and Gibbs’ foot that one time.

Part of different is the anatomy. Jimmy’s got very muscular shoulders. In a way the women Tim’s worked with just don’t. Ziva’s very strong. She’s extremely well-toned. She’s not built like Jimmy. His sense of scale is off. Even with Abby, who is not all that much shorter than he is, she’s still smaller. He feels like his hand, pinkie to thumb, should be able to cover an entire shoulder, and that’s just not the case here. Likewise, he feels like his whole hand should be able to cup all the way around whomever’s arm, once again, that’s just not happening. Jimmy’s bicep is wider around than Abby’s neck.

Part of different is positional. If he was working on a girl, especially a girl he’s on good enough
terms with to be naked in bed with her, he’d be straddling her hips. But he’ll be in Abby’s way if he
straddles Jimmy’s hips, and even if that wasn’t an issue, he’s not sure he would willingly get into a
position where his dick’s going to be trailing over Jimmy’s ass and back.

He’s off to the right, knees next to Jimmy’s ribs, working across him.

And, of course, part of it is figuring out how to do this one… one and a half… handed. His left hand
is doing what it usually does in a massage. It’s the lead hand, and, okay, yes the muscles are bigger,
and the voice that’s happily moaning at this is a hell of a lot deeper, but it knows what it’s doing.
Stroke, pet, dig into tight spots, apply pressure to anywhere that feels like it needs it. That side is
doing fine. His right… He’s got some use of his fingers, but he can’t put any real pressure on them,
and his cast covers most of his palm, so he can’t really pet with his hand, and even if he didn’t have
the cast, his hand still doesn’t bend at the wrist, so he’s very limited in where he can even get his
fingers. He’s mostly just holding them on the top of Jimmy’s right shoulder.

Abby’s digging into Jimmy’s thighs, and he’s purring at it, very happy at what she’s doing,
especially as she’s squeezing and kneading. Then she strokes her hands to just above his knee, and
lays her forearm across his leg, leaning her weight into it, and slowly strokes up the back of his leg.
That shifts Jimmy from purring into full-on groaning, and it gives Tim an idea of something he
might be able to do with his right.

He scoots around a bit. He’s still next to Jimmy, but instead of facing across him, he’s facing the
same direction Jimmy is. He carefully puts his elbows on each side of Jimmy’s spine and gently leans
into them. His right shoulder starts telling him after much less pressure than he wants to use that he’s
doing this as hard as he can, but Jimmy’s not complaining, at all, as he strokes up his back with his
elbows.

Nope, Jimmy’s sounding pretty pleased with how this is working.

In fact, if Tim was eavesdropping, he’d assume Jimmy was in the middle of a world-class blow job,
given how happy he’s sounding. (He doesn’t talk a whole lot when he’s getting off, but he certainly
isn’t shy about making noise.)

Tim repeats that move a few times, then, as he gets to the top of Jimmy’s shoulders, he slides over
and starts kneading his delt and bicep. Jimmy groans at that, too. Loud.

“Too hard?” Abby’s asked that a few times, too, as she’s been getting into his legs.

“No!”

Breena sits up. She scoots over a bit as well, and starts to match Tim’s pace and style. He’s using his
left hand on Jimmy’s right side, and she’s using her left and right on his left.

“Second wind?” Abby asks, rippling her knuckles in deep firm circles over Jimmy’s glutes.

She smiles and kisses Jimmy’s back, right where his neck and shoulders connect. “Feeling inspired.”

Jimmy lifts his head and kisses her hand. “I love when you’re inspired.”

Flipping over, working on side two, is different, too. Tim knows what’s going to be looking up at
them when Jimmy flips over. Not only has he seen it a bunch of times, but he also knows how he reacts to a decent massage (at least one that doesn’t result in him hurting all over), let alone one involving as much thigh and ass work as Jimmy just got, and Jimmy doesn’t appear to be wired any different.

Not like it’s a massive, throbbing erection, but it’s not that just-thinking-about-getting-hard, somewhat-longer-and-fuller-but-still Pretty-flaccid-minor-stiffie, either. It’s proper, ready for action, but not about to get off, wood.

Tim remembers what Abby said about blankets, and draping, and this being normal and all the rest of it, but…

Yeah, it feels weird to be touching a guy with a hard-on, even if he is only one of the three people doing it.

For a second, he almost wants to drape a blanket over Jimmy. Which makes him feel silly. Not like he hasn’t seen this dick in action, and after action, drooping away just laying on Jimmy’s thigh, and just being a dick swinging around as he goes about his post-workout routine, too, so…

So he stuffs it down and runs headlong into another issue.

Okay, so, Breena’s heading down with Abby to work on Jimmy’s feet. Fine. He’s got Jimmy’s head. That’s, fine…

He’s just sitting next to Jimmy, hand resting lightly over his collarbone, stuck.

If this was Abby or Breena, he’d know exactly what to do next. Sit cross-legged at his head, and let his head rest on his feet/ankles. From there, Jimmy’s got good head and neck support, and Tim’s in good position to get to his face, neck, head, shoulders, arms, and chest.

And if this was Abby or Breena, Tim would already be gently slipping into position to work on them.

But this isn’t Abby or Breena.

This is Jimmy.

Naked Jimmy, with a hard-on, purring and groaning as the girls each work his feet.

So, Tim’s not entirely comfortable having Jimmy’s head in his lap, hair brushing against his dick. (That being part of why he likes that position for giving naked massages to girls.) Especially since his own dick is not exactly unaffected by the fact that he’s been watching two naked girls work on Jimmy, and hearing him sound extremely pleased in a very sexual sort of way.

He’s also not comfortable doing a bad job of this.

And he’s not comfortable being uncomfortable.

He’s mentally rolling his eyes at himself. It’s just touch. It shouldn’t be a big deal. He gently raises Jimmy’s head, and sits cross-legged, placing his head in his lap.
When they did the four-handed massage on their honeymoon, the one therapist was working on his feet, and the other one was rubbing his scalp, and Tim was happily floating along, purring away, absolutely adoring how that felt.

The girls have Jimmy’s feet. And his head is in his lap. So, that in place, (and it is a bit more tickly than he was expecting) Tim’s got a plan.

When he was the one getting rubbed, the therapist started by running her fingers through his hair. Soft and gentle, and then briskly, tugging a little all over, and then moved onto slow-firm circles all over his scalp.

Tim likes playing with Abby’s hair. It’s very soft, and fine, and silky. She puts stuff in it that smells good, and he’s got lots of good memories that involve the feel of her hair between his fingers, or brushing against him.

He’s a little surprised at how different Jimmy’s hair feels. Little surprised at how surprised he is. Of course it feels different, first of all it’s really short. Even after Abby cut her hair, it’s never been anywhere near this short. He’s never dated anyone with hair this short, either, so it’s a new sensation. Hell, his own hair isn’t this short, and hasn’t been for years.

Jimmy’s hair is also a lot thicker and coarser than any other hair he’s played with. It doesn’t feel bad, but it’s not that silk-smooth sensation he’s got in his mind as hair. It’s got a kind of springy texture that Tim sort of wants to play with some, but he’s not sure if that’d go from massage into annoying patting, so he keeps himself to stroking his fingers through Jimmy’s hair in a slow, relaxed, feel good sort of way.

He’s not sure if Jimmy’s purring at him or the girls, and doesn’t much care one way or the other.

When he starts gently tugging on Jimmy’s hair, his eyes pop open and he stares up at Tim, looking startled and curious.

Tim’s not sure what’s going on, so he asks, “This okay?”

“Yeah, feels good.”

“Okay.”

Jimmy closes his eyes again, and relaxes back into what they’re doing. Tim wonders what set that off, and he’s almost done with Jimmy’s hair when he realizes he’s seen Breena do this, tug on Jimmy’s hair, as he’s getting close to getting off.

No wonder his eyes went springing open.

“When we were on our honeymoon,” Tim says, shifting his hand so it’s right over Jimmy’s left temple, and starts firm circles with the pad of his fingers on Jimmy’s head, “we got four-handed massages. The lady working on me did this. Playing with my hair and scalp while the other one worked on my feet. I’m just running her playbook.”

“Ah,” comes out of Jimmy, who relaxes a little more. “Good thing you’re a fast learner. This is awesome.”

He gently pats Jimmy’s cheek. “You’re welcome.”
When Jimmy was face down, Tim’s back was to Abby. He was working up Jimmy’s back and across his arms.

Now he’s facing Abby and Breena, watching what they’re doing, hearing/seeing Jimmy respond to it.

He already likes watching Breena play with Jimmy. His brain has that firmly wired into the sexy camp. And this may be a ‘therapeutic massage’ but Jimmy’s groaning like he’s on the edge of getting off, and those sounds are also something Tim has firmly wired into the sexy part of his brain. Add in Abby working on Jimmy, too, sitting cross-legged, naked, his calf propped on her shoulder as she strokes and kneads his quads, and Tim’s having a hell of a time finding where the hell the line of sex/not sex is.

So, by the time he’s digging his fingers into the back of Jimmy’s neck, working the little (and not so little) knots, Jimmy’s not the only one sporting, full-on, ready-to-play wood.

He’s hoping Jimmy didn’t notice, but he can’t tell if he just didn’t realize what rose up against the back of his head, or if he just doesn’t care, or if he’s doing a good job of pretending he’s completely unaware of it, because that’s what he’d hope Tim would do in the same situation.

It’s not the first time he’s gotten a hard-on giving a massage. Not like this is new. (Not like both times he worked on Ziva, he wasn’t thanking all that was good and holy that he was wearing jeans and not dress trousers, because jeans do a better job of keeping everything snuggly pressed against his body, while dress pants tend to have enough room for tenting.) It’s just also not something he was expecting. Especially on the car ride home, when he suggested this.

He’s not setting any speed records. In the time he’s worked on Jimmy’s head and neck, the girls have finished his feet and legs, and have moved up, each one taking an arm.

Right now, he’s working on Jimmy’s shoulders, getting his traps, as each girl rubs his hands.

Tim’s thinking that this would be an excellent addition to his own therapy nights. Sure having his hand worked on will hurt, but the rest of this combination would likely feel awesome.

Even better if say, one of the girls was rubbing his head while another worked one hand and Jimmy got the other.

He can see it in his head, especially the first bit, while the pressure is light and the stretching minimal, while Jimmy’s just getting the skin and fascia warmed up…

Whenever they get round to the next therapy night, he’s asking for this.

Eventually, even the best massage ends. Tim’s back to working on Jimmy’s neck and head as the girls get his chest and stomach.
Strokes are getting softer, gentler, and Jimmy’s making less noise. He may be asleep, or so close it doesn’t matter.

He’s, *mostly*, soft, relaxed, quiet, and looking very happy.

*Mostly*. Part of him is standing tall and proud, still looking quite alert and interested in playing.

And for as sexy as this has sounded, and for as good as it’s felt, no one has deliberately crossed the line from massage to sex. Even Breena kept her hand off of Jimmy’s privates. When they worked his pecs, no one touched his nipples. Tim’s had sole providence on Jimmy’s head and face, and he’s gone nowhere near Jimmy’s lips.

All the touch has been sensual. All the sexual’s been in their heads.

Breena’s hands are low on Jimmy’s stomach, making slow circles. She looks up from that to Tim and Abby, very pointedly looking at Jimmy’s dick and shrugs, seeming to be signaling, *Is this okay?* Abby nods, wide grin on her face. She shifts back a bit, lying on her side, next to Jimmy. And while Tim’s feeling a little odd on all of this, he also knows how he likes a good massage to end, so he nods, too.

Breena curls her hand around the base of Jimmy’s dick and sucks him into her mouth.

Jimmy gasps, hands clenching, raising his head, (rubbing the back of it over Tim’s dick) looking at Breena as her mouth slips down him. He may have been almost asleep, but he’s not any more.

“Fuck baby, read my mind.”

Breena pulls back and giggles. “Wasn’t too hard to do. Just relax.”

He does, laying back into Tim’s lap. (Once again, rubbing over him, and Tim closes his eyes and bites his lips, because especially after an hour of listening to what’s sounded like really hot sex, that felt really good.) “Oh, yeah. I so owe you.”

“Tomorrow.” She licks her lips and sucks him back down again.

“Mmmm…” His head is back, eyes closed, mouth slightly open, and he’s panting softly with each stroke.

Tim’s not sure what he should do. Abby stopped working on Jimmy when Breena knelt down, but didn’t let go. She’s lying next to them, on her side, her calves flush against Jimmy’s hip, holding his hand, lips resting on his shoulder.

Jimmy’s head is in his lap, so it’s not like he can just scoot away without some serious rearranging. He’s also not sure if he’s supposed to scoot away.
Breena’s blowing Jimmy, but she’s looking up at Tim, grinning, at least as much as she can with a dick in her mouth. Her eyes look like she’s enjoying this a hell of a lot.

He tentatively pets her face, which feels good, not so much on a physical sensation level (because soft skin on his fingers is nice, but not earth shattering) but the intimacy of touching her while she’s giving Jimmy this much pleasure feels awesome and helps to ground him some as he’s trying to figure out what the hell he’s doing.

He tries to think of what he’d like if he was in Jimmy’s position.

Kissing. He’d like kissing. Can’t kiss while you get a blow job, and if he could do both at once, he would.

He looks away from Breena to Jimmy and… Okay, yes, Jimmy is looking really happy. His head is in Tim’s lap, and his eyes are closed, his mouth slightly open, tons of naked pleasure on his face, but… Nope. He’s not kissing Jimmy. He’s not sure if his back’s regained enough flexibility for him to do it even if he wanted to.

But, doing it, thinking about doing it, feels squirmy in a way he doesn’t like, so not going to happen.

Instead he lightly touches Jimmy’s face. Doing that with Breena felt good, and he likes it with Abby, too. Deep, intense sex is often punctuated by eye contact and a cupped cheek.

Jimmy doesn’t open his eyes, but he does turn his face into Tim’s touch.

Tim licks his lips, feeling a little nervous about this, half-worried he’s crossing lines he shouldn’t, and half-trying to process the fact that he’s gently petting his best friend while he gets a blow job. Nervous aside, there’s a sense of pushing boundaries that want to be pushed. He carefully strokes over Jimmy’s eyebrows with the tips of his fingers, then to his eyelashes, surprised at how soft they feel on the pads of his fingers. From there, he traces the backs of his fingers across Jimmy’s cheek, feeling the rasp of weekend stubble, and down his jaw. He finishes by tracing along his lips, outlining them, with the tips of his fingers.

He’s never touched another man’s mouth. Not anything like this. Not on any level, not that he can remember. (He wonders briefly if punching Jimmy in the mouth accidentally counts. He’s still got a tiny scar on his knuckle from that misstep.) He’s finding himself cataloging it, almost like he’s assessing a problem that he intends to go back to later. Raspy stubble. Thin line of smooth skin between his lips and where the hair grows. Slightly dry lips (of course, Jimmy’s also been moaning and panting and working outside in the sun all day, not like they’ve been slicking him up with lip balm while doing this.) Hint of moisture as his finger skirts the edge of where lip becomes mouth.

It’s just a mouth. Feels a whole lot like Abby’s. (Except for the stubble.)

He’s almost pulling away, getting ready to pet Jimmy’s hair and neck, when Jimmy kisses his hand.

Tim doesn’t know if he’s so into all of it that he doesn’t know which one of them is petting him. (As Tony once said, Tim’s got really soft hands, and neither he nor Abby have much in the way of fingernails.) Or if he’s so far into it he doesn’t much care one way or another. It feels good, and he wants to kiss, so he’s happy.

Tim bends down (looks like his back will go that far) and kisses Jimmy’s forehead, then drags his fingers down Jimmy’s neck to cradle his head.

When he looks up, Abby’s staring at him, and he knows most of that look. That’s the *that’s the hottest thing I could possibly imagine you doing* look. Mostly. There’s something else going on in
there, too, but he’s not sure what. The smile aimed at him looks very pleased. Genuinely happy in addition to turned on, so… They can talk about it later.

Jimmy’s gasping. That yanks his attention back to what Breena’s doing. Tipping Jimmy over the edge into what looks and sounds like an awesome orgasm. Jimmy’s holding Abby’s hand tight, other hand knotted in Breena’s hair as he goes tight and twitching, pumping into Breena’s mouth with a long, content moan.

The last thing he says, before he’s completely out, is, “Anytime you three want to do that to me again, you are more than welcome.”

---

Working on Breena is not weird.

He’s got this. Everything is exactly the way he expects it to be, and this feels normal.

It is, however, especially after the happy ending Jimmy got, quite a bit more difficult than working on Jimmy. He wants to do a good job. He’s trying to do a good job. He’s carefully remembering each and every single complaint he’s ever heard or read about how guys cannot give a decent massage because they only focus on boobs and butt and they rush because they want to get to the sex.

He’s beating himself with those memories, trying to use them to make himself focus on giving Breena a good massage instead of trying to find a way to rub his dick against her.

But if Abby and Breena spent a week planning on a way to drive him sexually insane, having Breena lying naked and oiled in front of him, moaning, while Abby plays with her, (errr… works on her. It’s really not sexy, other than it is.) and he’s touching her, too, after spending an hour listening to what sounded like incredibly good sex, is what they’d come up with.

After Jimmy rolled off of him and more or less slipped into a coma on the far side of the bed, Breena hopped into his place, face down, Tim at her head.

As he’s still sitting there, watching Abby work Breena’s legs and butt, feeling every drop of blood he can spare racing to his dick, doing an intensely lame job of sort of petting her shoulders, Tim finally bites his lip, hard, and scoots around so his back is to what Abby’s doing, and he starts cataloging each muscle in Breena’s neck and back, trying to remember his anatomy classes from college, as he focuses on the anatomical drawings they learned from, because he’d rather gouge his eyes out than do a bad job at this.

---

By the time Breena’s ready to flip over, he’s ready to excuse himself, run to the bathroom, and jerk off. He’s so tempted. He eventually got himself under enough control that he could do an… honestly, high mediocre to maybe almost good job of rubbing shoulders, (so, so soft) arms, (soft and small and she made these little happy gasp noises as he was stroking up and down them) and neck (sooooooft, and fit in his hand just right, and fine wisps of hair, and… whimper, moan, bite lip even harder, this is going to kill him.)

If it wasn’t for the fact that it’d be blindingly obvious that that’s what he did, he’d be out of the bed, doing it.
But it would be obvious. Really obvious. Can’t walk out of a room with rock hard wood, and then come back five (optimistic, two) minutes later with it drooping, and not have the other people in the room know what you did.

And he supposes he could just explain what’s going on, ask for a hand, (once again, wouldn’t take more than a few minutes, probably even less if one or both girls was helping) and then finish up with the second half of Breena’s massage, but… He’s a grown man, not a horny teenager. He should have the control to do this.

And besides, Abby’s just as turned on. He knows. He can see it. He can smell it. (This is also part of why he’s having a difficult time with this. Breena’s turned on, too, and yes, he can smell her, too. If Jimmy wasn’t sleeping so hard he’s borderline unconscious, he’s be having just as difficult a time. Tim’s not sure if he should envy Jimmy or brag about this later.) And she’s not doing a half-assed job or letting it get in the way.

Hell, if anything, she’s doing an extra-good job. (Or maybe it just looks that way. After all, girl on girl petting is something that hits him straight in the dick, and he’s getting to watch a ton of it, up close and personal and starring his two favorite women. It’s possible that he’s missing some of the details of the technique because he’s so turned on by this.)

But they do get to the point where Breena’s flipped over, and he’s still determined to do a good job.

But, God, her head is in his lap, and her hair is soft and rubbing on his dick, he’s got a perfect view of breasts and pussy, and Abby’s sitting between Breena’s legs, just like with Jimmy, one leg up on her shoulder, rubbing Breena’s quads and adductors, and just like with Jimmy, Breena’s moaning at it, because after as many trips up and down the ladders as she did today, her legs are sore and this feels excellent, but unlike with Jimmy, every time she does that, he catches a faint whiff of cum on her breath, and this is more sexual stimulation than any man should have to take while being expected to do something other than sex.

He’s trying to gently rub her head, stroking her hair, the same way he did with Jimmy, but he keeps thinking about how if he lifted up just a little, she could be deep throating him while he kisses Abby, and then both of them could be kissing Breena.

When he notices that he’s rocking gently against her hair, he calls a stop. He carefully holds her head and scoots back and away, laying it on the bed.

That has both of the girls looking at him, but he’s not getting a sense that they’re curious about what’s going on. They know.

“Much more of this, and I’m going to cum in your hair.” He smiles weakly at Breena. “Sorry, I want to do a good job, but… I just… Like I said, there’s a point where the part of the brain that thinks, that can say no, bad idea shuts up, and I can see where that point is and it’s way closer than is comfortable.”

“It’s okay, Tim.” Breena says, gently. “Rather have you pull back before you get to the line, than try to put the pieces together after going over it.”

“Can I wrap up with Breena, or is just watching too much?” Abby asks.

“I can watch. Though you’re getting fucked through the mattress as soon as you’re done.”

Abby smiles brightly at that. “That’s where I was hoping this was going.”

“Yeah, you two have done a great job on that.” He’s not joking, at all, and there’s a slightly brittle
tone in his voice that’s going with not immediately jumping Abby.

Breena smiles at that, too. “Well, since I’m not getting a happy ending, I want something worth watching while I do myself after.”

Tim groans at that, biting his lip. “Okay, um... yeah. Just... Look, if you want to get to the end of this massage, now is not a good time to tease me. Like I told Abby, there’s a point where this stops being fun, and starts to edge into pain, and we’re awfully close to that line.”

They nod, and Tim retreats to the other side of the bed, lying on his side, watching, intently, making himself not touch himself, (which he wants to do, very badly) as Abby finishes working on Breena’s legs, then scoots up a bit further to work her stomach, arms, and pecs.

That’s almost killing him. Abby’s doing a good job, working on sore muscles that did a lot of lifting, and Tim’s quietly rooting for her to stop doing such a good job and start playing with Breena’s breasts. Each stroke across her pec gets closer and closer to fondling her breasts and he can feel himself leaning in further, wanting to join Abby, both of them laying next to Breena, each one gently kissing and sucking a breast while he ruts against her hip. He knows exactly how soft her skin is now, how wonderfully slippery it is with massage oil and he can almost feel his cock rubbing up against it as he pulls gently on her nipple with his lips as his tongue flicks the tip. The fact that Breena’s softly moaning as Abby works out the kinks pushes him that much further into the fantasy.

Abby finally ends up where he was, at Breena’s head, and she’s carefully working Breena’s neck and head, doing the job Tim wasn’t. And like with the rest of her, Breena’s enjoying it, vocally, and all Tim can see is a variation on the theme of his earlier fantasy. This time Abby kneels up a little, Breena eating her out while she’s sucking Breena off, and they scoot down the mattress just a bit, so there’s enough room behind them for Tim to slip into Abby.

He can feel it, fast and hard and deep, both of the girls moaning and groaning. Abby’s wet and slick, and he can feel Breena’s hair on his balls as he plunges into Abby, and he’s biting his lip again, pulling himself out of the fantasy because he can feel his real life body getting way closer to the edge of getting off than he wants.

It’d be nice if Abby actually gets into the game before he gets off.

He makes himself see what’s really going on. Abby gently stroking Breena’s face, slowly. Breena’s quiet, looking awfully sleepy and relaxed. Abby bends down a bit, like she’s going to kiss Breena, decides Sean’s got to the size where that’s just not going to happen, lifts Breena’s head, puts it on the mattress, and then kneels next to her and kisses her forehead.

Breena makes a content little, “Mmmm...” sound. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

Breena scoots back a bit, so her back is against Jimmy, her top leg draped over his hip, and her fingers already stroking her clit.

Abby turns to Tim. She smiles at him, wicked and sexy. “Liked that, huh?”

He sits up, fast, grabs her hand and pulls her to him, also fast. “’Bout eight steps past liked,” he just about growls into her ear, as he tries to get her on him in one fast stroke. Not working. Not with only one hand. What he’d like to do is grab her by the butt and lower her onto him, but... Nope.

Instead they end up with a tangle of legs and his arm, and... This time the growl’s a bit less sexy, and a lot more frustrated, as he pats her on the ass and says, “Hands and knees.”
That gets another grin out of Abby as she scrambles into place.

“Want you touching yourself.” Normally he’d take a second to look and enjoy. Normally bare, wet pussy, ripe and open for him is one of his favorite sights. (Let alone, bare, wet pussy that Abby’s playing with.) That’s the problem. He knows he’s on a short fuse, and if he spends too long looking, (let alone at Abby and then Breena playing with herself) he’s going to be done before he’s all the way in.

His eyes close as he slips into her, fast and hard, a sharp, inhaled hiss that turns to a groan escaping his lips as he’s enveloped in hot, wet, silky, slick, snug, so good, so sexy, so everything he wants all at once all around him.

Abby’s making high-pitched, gonna come soon noises, too, and he hopes they’re real and that she’s that turned on because he’s not going to last long enough to make sure she’s done first.

And he doesn’t. He’s thrusting hard and fast, so many good images behind his eyelids as his focus narrows down to the tingles starting deep in his balls and the hard, thrusting, pulsing clench of his orgasm starting followed to the glorious rush of euphoric pleasure.

When he comes down enough to be back on earth, he can feel a few gentle twitches from Abby, which makes him happy. He opens his eyes, and catches sight of her starting to straighten up. He wraps his arms around her, and kisses her neck and shoulder as she turns her face to catch a kiss on her lips.

After Abby breaks the kiss, she looks over to Breena. “You good?”

Breena smiles at them, eyes closed, and snuggles in a little closer to Jimmy. “Don’t forget to pull the blankets up.”

Tim nuzzles Abby’s neck and hair, holding her close, feeling splendid all over and so happy.

After another second, Abby leans forward, grabs some tissues, and cleans them up. She hits the head, and a few minutes later, is back in bed, pulling the blankets up.

They’re settled in, drowsy, when she notices something. “You’re on your right!”

He thinks about it, and comes to the conclusion that she’s correct. For the first time in months, he’s spooning her, lying on his right side, able to take his own weight on his shoulder, able to move it into a position where Abby can rest her neck on his arm, and able to take the weight of her neck on his arm.

He kisses the back of her neck, curls his left arm around her, hand cupped on her breast (exactly where it’s supposed to be) and slips into dreamless sleep.
Abbi and Jethro are heading toward her judge friend’s house, a large box filled with everything Mike had on any member of the Coast Guard in the backseat of her car.

“Good friend?” Jethro asks.

Abbi nods. “Was a drill instructor when I went through Lejeune.”

Gibbs nods. That’s part of what he’s asking, but since she's clearly not answering what precisely he's asking, he's not going to press. He probably doesn't want to know, not really. “How’d he become a judge?”

“Got too close and personal with an IED in Iraq in ’96. They don’t let guys with above the knee amputations back into active service.”

Gibbs thinks about that. Twenty years from then to now. “Fast rise.”

“In Virginia, judges get elected by the Legislature. When Daddy and Dad-In-Law are part of the legislature, and Grandpa was part of it, it’s easy to get elected. He’s been a judge since 2005.”

Now Gibbs is squinting at Borin as she drives. A guy who plays like that doesn’t sound like he’d be much of a friend. Not for Borin, at least.

“He’s okay. Not what you’re thinking. He had some things he wanted to do, and when the opportunity arose, he took advantage of it.”

Gibbs doesn’t say anything to that. “Emergency back-up judge?”

“Yeah, he’s the one who’ll let me have some wiggle room as long as I don’t ask to often and I don’t bring him crap. He’s stuck his neck out for me, and so far, no one’s tried to chop it off, so we’re good.”

Gibbs nods at that, too. He’s got a few judge buddies like that, too. “He got a name?”

“Sure. Murray Harlan.”

Gibbs smiles, laughs quietly, then shakes his head. “Small damn world. Tall guy, white-blond hair, brown eyes?”

Abbi nods.

Gibbs smirks. “Bleach.”

“Bleach?”

“Bleach, Hickory, Speedy,” Gibbs points to himself, “and Grave. My first team. Called him Bleach because no one believed his hair naturally grew that color.”

Abbi laughs at that. “Grave?”

“As in, ‘silent as the.’”

She smiles at that.
“You have one?”

“Nickname?”

“Yeah?”

“Same one every other redhead has, ‘Red.’”

He inclines his head in agreement at that. He’d run into some creative nicknames over the years, but no one with ginger hair got one.

They wait at the door, Gibbs holding the box, Abbi knocking.

“Come on in,” rolls out from a nearby room. So, she opens the door and in they go.

Bleach is behind his desk, working on his computer. It’s a Saturday night, getting onto late, so he’s in a golf shirt, what Gibbs assumes is his laying around clothing these days.

Gibbs is shocked by how old Bleach is. Okay, sure, obviously getting your legs blown off isn’t going to be good for keeping up a youthful appearance, and the last time they saw each other it was 1980, so his mental image of Bleach is well out of date. But, well, he’s not Bleach anymore. Mr. Clean maybe, not a trace of hair on him save for his eyebrows. But this is very much not the man he’s got as Bleach in his mind.

He hits something on his keyboard, looks up at Abbi, smiles at her, and starts rolling in her direction before stopping dead, staring at Gibbs, probably the same, how the hell did you get so old look on his face that Gibbs has on his.

“Grave?”

Gibbs nods, slowly, puts the box down, and steps toward Bleach for a hug. “Bleach.”

As he pulls back, Bleach is staring up at him. “Damn man, you got old! Gonna start calling you Bleach now, you’re whiter than I ever was.”

Gibbs snorts at that.

Abbi steps over and also gives him a hug. “You told me you had a new pet Marine, I didn’t expect you to bring this fossil to my house. Good, Lord…” He’s looking at Gibbs. “Last I heard you were in… God…” Bleach is thinking. “Nicaragua?”

Gibbs nods, as Bleach points to the sofa. “Sit down. You still with the Corp?”

Gibbs shakes his head at that. “Abbi says you’re a judge now?”

“You know I always liked to argue.” That was one of the in jokes. Bleach talked enough for himself and Grave, who never talked at all. “When I got back here, Dad suggested law school, and…” he spreads his hands in a, and here I am gesture. “How about you? Never thought you’d leave. They finally boot you out for hanging around too long?”

“Nah. Explosion back in ’91. Vision’s still good but wasn’t good enough. No use for a sniper with
bad eyes." Gibbs doesn’t want to go into why he’s really not a Marine any longer, and he’s very
much hoping Bleach, who was there for his courtship and marriage to Shannon (he’s one of the guys
in the wedding pictures), doesn’t ask why he’s got a new redhead.

Bleach shakes his head. “That’s hard.”

“Long time ago. Joined NCIS. Was with them until January.”

“And now you’re… moonlighting with the Coast Guard?”

Gibbs smiles wryly. “Something like that.” Abbi’s been sitting next to him, and he’s thinking that if
he’s her ‘pet Marine’ then what they are to each other has been made clear, but, just in case, he takes
her hand in his. “You want to tell it?”

“I can start, at least. The GAO showed up a few weeks ago. They want to audit my division. I’m not
thrilled because it’s a lot of hassle, and I’d rather be doing my job than jumping through hoops for
them. But, I’ve been staring at my budget sheets the whole time I’ve been here, wondering why
we’re so strapped for cash, so, instead of dragging my feet, I start trying to get the information
together for them. They want five years. That’s twenty quarters. The first twelve of which, I wasn’t
in charge for, and of those twelve, five are missing.”

“Missing how?” Bleach asks. The mask of the kindly, old southern grandpa that he’d been wearing
slips away and a very sharp, very interested look comes to the fore. Hair’s gone, eyes are lined and
depth set, and the hands resting on the arms of his wheel chair are veiny and spotted, but that look,
that caught interest and laser focus, that’s the Bleach Gibbs remembers.

“There’s nothing to report. At all. No numbers. No records. No nothing. I had someone who’s
discrete and very good with a computer look into it, and he tells me they’ve been deleted. Someone
went in and got rid of the files, and the data that gets made when you make the files. I took
everything he gave me and forwarded it to our own IA and also to the GAO Auditor.”

Bleach is nodding. “But the story doesn’t end there, does it?” Because if it did, she wouldn’t be here.

“No. This whole thing has been off. My own, boss, Norman Brandis, the Director of CGIS, he’s
been acting squirrelly. Doesn’t want me bringing in a forensic accountant, is telling me to just put the
GAO off, stall, and kick the problem down the road.”

“Did you bring in a forensic accountant?”

“Yes. My division. I can bring in who I want. Not sure how I’m going to pay him, budget is tight—“

“Because your HR guy was embezzling,” Gibbs adds.

“That’s the first thing I ran into that didn’t seem right. I had way less money than I thought I should.
So, eventually I track down where the leak is, and I’ve got this guy in my HR department. He’s the
guy who makes sure that everyone gets their reimbursement checks. He’s been skimming for years. I
couldn’t fire him, so I put him on leave, bounce everything to IA, and… nothing happens. They
don’t know who he is. There’s no case on him. I put him on leave in February, and didn’t think to
check in on him until now. And now, there’s no case against him. I looked into it deeper yesterday.
He quietly resigned in March, and everything else just vanished.”

Bleach is looking worried by this.

Gibbs sees it and takes over, because this is where his part of the story starts. “When I left the
service, I started up with NCIS. My first partner was… not well known for playing by the rules.” He
figures that’s a good way of putting it. “We were always close. You remember Shannon?”

Bleach nods. Gibbs can see he’s been wondering about this.

“Mike Franks, my first partner. He’s the man who investigated her murder.” He doesn’t mention Kelly. She was born after the last time they saw each other.

Bleach winces. “God, Grave, I’m sorry.”

Gibbs shrugs. “I am, too. Anyway, he pulled me out of the dark when I was eyeball deep in it.”

Bleach understands that, he’s been more than eyeball deep in the dark, he nods.

“Few years ago, Franks died, and he left me all of his stuff. This weekend I was clearing out my attic. I started to go through his boxes, figuring out what I’d want to keep. He wasn’t just playing fast and loose with the rules… You ever get to Iraq? Tribal areas?”

Bleach nods and looks at where his legs used to be.

Gibbs nods minutely back. “Remember the shit they put the women through?”

He nods.

“Mike was getting them out of Iraq and bringing them here, illegally. Mostly young girls. Child brides. To do it, he was bribing or blackmailing anyone and everyone he could dig up a secret on.”

“And this is when you tell me that you’ve got something on her people?” Bleach says, dryly.

Abbi jumps back in, opening the box, “This file is on Bob Riccerson, head of IA. This one is Tyler Adama, our Chief Compliance Officer.” She hands over another huge file, and then one more. “This last one is Chase Seth, the guy who runs our Accounting department. Gibbs, or Franks, didn’t have anything on Brandis, but he’s the guy who promoted all of them, and he’s the one who gave me the run around on getting into it.”

Bleach nods, slowly, looking at the files in front of him, and the more in the box. “What do you need?”

“Warrants for everything, and to make sure no one knows I’ve got them until I’m at their door with the cuffs in hand.”

Another slow nod as he starts paging through the files. “Let’s get working on what, precisely, everything is.”
Getting the Pieces in Place

It’s a little before seven when Tim feels the mattress next to him dip, followed by a small person climbing over him to cuddle with her mom.

Abby grunts as Molly topples over her and lands on Breena. He sits up slowly, blinking, as Molly burrows under the blankets.

“This new?” Didn’t happen yesterday, and neither Jimmy nor Breena has mentioned visits from Molly.

Breena’s looking surprised and three quarters asleep, as well. Molly’s never gotten out of her crib before. “You do some climbing this morning?”

“Snuggles!”

Breena also sits up, and grabs her daughter, holding her tight, and then wrinkles her nose. “Clean up first! No smelly babies in the bed!” She half sings it, while hoisting Molly over her shoulder and heading back to Molly’s room.

“I take it we’re up?” Abby says, quiet, sleepy, eyes closed.

“I’ve got Kelly. You sleep.” He kisses Abby.

Jimmy groans a bit. Everything he did yesterday slamming into him and making him ache from his hair to his toes.

“You get to sleep more, too.” Jimmy gets a pat on the shoulder.

Tim gets up, in search of his pj pants, and then heads into Anna’s room, finding both baby girls up and quietly… it’s not talking, but they’re looking at each other and making sounds.

“Morning.”

“Daddy!”

Anna looks at him.

“Oh, okay Kelly, you’re up first.” He still can’t do a two-handed baby pick up, but he can hold his left arm over the side of the crib, and Kelly can sit herself on it, and then he uses his right to keep her from toppling over as he lifts her over to the changing table.

“Get you all cleaned up. And then Anna. Then it’s breakfast time.”

“Os!”

Kelly’s been a big fan of Cheerios, lately. Anna makes a little excited noise, too, which could mean she’s in favor of Cheerios, too. (They’re one of the few solid “solid” food she’s eating.) Or she could just be burbling to burble. Hard to tell with an eight-month-old.

Either way, he gets Kelly cleaned up while hearing Molly singing with her mom. Just about the time he’s got Kelly in her clean diaper and clean onesie (he sees there’s church clothing in the bag, but that can wait until after breakfast and the diner) Breena heads in with Molly.
“I told Abby and Jimmy they could sleep in.”

Breena nods. “Fine by me. We get to sleep in next weekend.”

Tim smiles. “I’m good with that.” He hands Kelly over, and Breena puts her on the floor. (Lateral transfers are easier than up and down.) “If you grab Anna, I can get her, too.”

“Thanks.” She picks Anna up, kisses her, spends a moment saying hello and good morning, and then lays her on the changing table. “Can you get her downstairs from here?”

“Probably. I’ll yell if I can’t.”

Breena nods, lifts Kelly to her hip, (she’s not doing stairs, yet) grabs Molly’s hand, and starts them downstairs.

Fornell steps into the diner, takes one look at what’s sitting across from Gibbs, namely Diane, and an untouched plate with banana pancakes and a whole lot of bacon, and his shoulders slump.

“I take it you weren’t just missing my company?” he asks Gibbs as he slides in next to Diane, kissing her cheek.

“Morning, Tobias,” she says, sneaking a piece of his bacon.

He glares at her as she does it, but doesn’t say anything. If she’s eating it, too there won’t be any ‘too much fat' lectures.

Gibbs nods at him as he sips his coffee. “Stick around for an hour, and this’ll be a social call.”

“Rest of the crew due in then?” Fornell knows about Sunday breakfast at the diner.

Gibbs nods, “You’re both welcome to join in. Might not want to when you see what I’ve got.”

“How bad is it?” Fornell asks.

“You both remember Mike Franks.” It’s not a question. Between working together on a few cases (how he actually met Fornell, back in the day) and two bachelor parties, Mike and Tobias knew each other. Mike was his partner when he and Diane married, but Mike didn’t want to be ‘hip deep in that lovey-dovey crap’ so he didn’t spend a lot of time off the job with Gibbs those days. But they spent at least a few hours together over the years.

He can see by the looks on their faces that, yes, they remember Mike, and they’re sure if he’s bringing him up this is going to be a doozy.

“When he died he left me his ‘insurance policies.’”

Diane and Franks sigh.

“I’m cleaning out my old stuff, and run into his boxes again.”

“Making room for some new things?” Diane asks.
Gibbs shrugs.

“Want space in your home for Borin?” Fornell asks.

“Borin?” Diane sounds like she’s tasting the name. “Do I know her?”

“Nope…” Fornell’s shaking his head. “Wait, you ever work with Coast Guard?”

“Nah. Don’t audit other Feds. So, she’s with the Coast Guard?”

Gibbs can feel that he's not going to be able to get into the work part of this until he's given Diane at least a little about Borin. “She runs the CGIS Chesapeake Division, we started dating in February, and that’s all I’m saying until after I get through this.”

“She was a Marine, too, and has red hair.” Fornell’s enjoying this too much, and Diane looks very amused.

Gibbs is glaring at them.

“Okay! Back to business. Fine.” We are so talking about this later is all over Diane’s face. Then she turns to Fornell you’re in trouble for not telling me about this sooner is clearly aimed at him.

Gibbs waits for the silent conversation to end, and then says, “Best I can piece together, he was smuggling girls into the country.”

Diane’s eyes just about pop out of her head as Fornell says, “Holy mother of God.”


“Not like you’re thinking. His daughter-in-law is Iraqi. Her mother ran one of the tribes. I think… they were getting girls in a bad situation out. She’d find them, and he’d get them into the States.”

That settles Fornell and Diane down. “What’s the problem, then?” Fornell asks. Young girls married to men three times their age is a hot button issue for him. Gibbs’ place has always been Fornell’s haven for days when he needs time to not bring the case home. (Which Wendy both understands and approves of.) Last time that was true, Fornell had busted an underage sex trafficking ring. Gibbs knows all about how Fornell feels about not killing the guys running that ring. (To the point where, when Fornell retires, Gibbs has a proposition for him that he’s sure Ducky and Penny will approve of.)

“The problem is sitting in two boxes in my car. One for each of you. He was bribing or blackmailing a whole lot of people to do it.”

“What’s a whole lot?” Diane asks.

“I’ve given Abbi… Borin,” he says for Diane, who hasn’t heard her first name before, “twenty files on different Coast Guard members. I’ve got thirteen more for you, Tobias, and everyone else, one hundred and twenty-seven files, local LEOs, port officials, customs inspectors, are all in a box for you, Diane.”

Fornell whistles softly. “He didn’t go about this half-assed, did he?”

“No.”

“So, you want us to go after them or look the other way?” Diane asks.
“Case by case? Some of the port guys he was paying a few hundred a month to look the other way. I don’t care about them, but they’re in there. If they’re otherwise clean, forget about them, that’s fine with me. As for the rest…” this isn’t much of a revelation, they both know this about him, and given they are the parents of a teen girl, likely agree, “you ask me to look the other way while he slips a thirteen-year-old away from her ‘husband,’ and I’ll do it for free. I’ll help.” There was a list of guys who did do it for free. Gibbs still has it. At some point he may try to use it. “These guys all had to get paid.”

“Anyone I know?” Tobias asks, chewing a bite of his pancake.

“No one I recognized.”

“Anyone you knew?” Diane asks.

“Yeah, a few. All but one of them is dead. He stopped working with NCIS in ’96. Twenty years weeded most of his secrets that I knew out. He didn’t just have stuff on this. He had stuff on everyone.”

“What’s the chain of evidence on this?” Fornell asks.

“Go ahead and tell it like it is. They’re Mike’s. I gave them to you. Don’t need to pretend you’ve got an anonymous source.”

Fornell sighs. “Jethro, did anyone ever tell you the meaning of the word, weekend?”

“I’m retired. Every day’s the weekend to me. I’m screwing your Sunday, though.”

Fornell sighs again and takes another bite of his pancakes. “Yeah, but at least my ex won’t bitch at me for missing out on the day I’m supposed to be with our daughter.”

Diane glares a bit at him on that. Her Sunday’s gone, too now.

“Emily can come with me. Got the roof up yesterday, so today’s clean up.” Which is true, but unless things go very differently than he’s expecting, he’s not planning on being part of clean up. Still, if they need someone keeping an eye on Emily, it’s the least he can do.

“The roof is done? Weren’t you moaning about it taking forever with Duck and Penny carefully, precisely nailing each and every shingle in exactly the right place?”

“Whole crew there yesterday, and Senior, sped things up.”


“I’m redoing a house.” Gibbs gets out his phone and shows them the picture of the now roofed house. “Duck and Penny decided to get a place for all of us. Senior is Tony’s dad.” Diane doesn’t know Jack passed, and he’s got no desire to bring it up. Fornell does, and judging by the way he’s looking at Diane, he’ll probably mention it to her sooner or later. “He used to do construction and still remembers the basics.”

Diane’s staring at it, eyes wide. Fornell’s nodding in approval. “Looks good.”

“Thanks. Inside’s a wreck, but now it’s not getting any worse. Today, we clean up roofing stuff, and start tearing down the drywall. Emily’d like that, right?”

“Spend the day on her own with her buddies, unpaid manual labor with a bunch of old people.”
Diane shakes her head. “Nope. You’re not winning on that one.”

“And I think she and Wendy have some sort of pre-wedding stuff they were doing today.” Tobias thinks about it. “Hair. They’re doing trial hairdos for the wedding. I think I’m supposed to not be there for that.”

“Speaking of which, Emily tells me you’re the best man.” Diane is grinning way more than is warranted at this idea.

Gibbs nods, looking wary.

“Oh, I can’t wait to see this!”

“So, you are coming?” Fornell asks.

“And miss Jethro give the best man speech? Not a chance. I’m going to get video of it!”

Fornell is also grinning way more than is warranted at that idea.

“How are you feeling?” Tim asks Breena once he gets down and has Anna in her highchair.

She rolls her shoulders a little, stretches some, and twists her neck. “Sore. I know I worked hard. Not as bad as I would have been without last night.”

Tim nods. He’s still feeling a sense of shame over having to bail out last night.

“None of that. I had a great time last night, and you’re allowed to have limits.”

He shrugs, and she decides to drop it. “So, what’s on for today? You and Abbi have some sort of plan, but I was paying more attention to the duck than the details.”

“I’ve got her laptop, I’ve got my laptop, so if you don’t mind somewhat absent baby wrangling from me, I’m going to get into her laptop, and start laying the groundwork for the sting.”

Breena nods at that. She’s pouring bowls of Cheerios for the girls. “Want one?”

“Coffee’d be great if you’re making some. Might mix up some eggs, too.” Usually he doesn’t eat breakfast on Sunday’s because he knows breakfast at the diner is coming up. But he’s skipping the diner today so he can have something useful to give Abbi when they meet up with Leon for lunch.

“I am making coffee. Breakfast at the diner in two hours, so you’re on your own for eggs.”

He stands up. “No problem.” He’s been part of enough meals here that he knows where the eggs are and the egg pan, and the care and feeding of the egg pan. (This is Breena’s favorite pan. It’s non-stick and is only used for cooking eggs. If you even look like you’re thinking of using a metal utensil on it, or, worse, spraying it with oil, she will snatch it out of your hands an lecture you on the proper maintenance of the egg pan. Tim only had to hear that once. He’s got it down now, and he’d have to admit, he’s got his own egg pan at home now, and he uses the same procedures, and the eggs never stick, clean up takes less than thirty seconds, and that pan may as well be the ones they show in the infomercials for how well it cooks eggs.) “Think Jimmy’ll want some for when he’s up?”

“Some. He should eat something pretty close to getting up every morning.”
Tim thinks about that for a few seconds as he’s cracking eggs into the pan. “How out of it he was last night… Was that worked too hard, or not enough snacks?”

“Both, probably. Maybe a little dehydrated, too.”

“And good snacks are… nuts?”

“Sure. Roasted edamame. Sunflower seeds. Veggies usually. If they traveled well, I’d try to keep an avocado on him at all times.”

“High fat, protein, no carbs?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Just thinking of adding a tub of hummus or something to the go bag.”

Breena’s got a wry smile on her face as she shakes her head. “That’s sweet. And, you’re gonna get exactly nowhere on that. He’s got a mom; he doesn’t need or want another one. And if you try to be his mom on this, he’s gonna resent it. Trust me on this, I’ve already fought this battle, you don’t need to, too.”

“Okay. Just, never seen him that out of it. He was asking about stuff we’d already talked about.”

“It happens. He knows how to handle it. He checked his blood sugar when we got home and adjusted it with some insulin. Usually, at work, he’s never more than a few feet from a drink or snack, and he doesn’t really need to break stride to grab a quick bite. Not as easy when you’re three stories up lugging stuff around.”

Tim nods, reaching for the plastic spatula.

Breena’s running herd on the girls, making sure they’re getting Cheerios into their bodies (as opposed to on the floor) while she nurses Anna.

Tim splits up the eggs, putting half on his plate and half on one for Jimmy (and puts that in the oven on low) then makes a few trips to get his food on the table along with coffee for him and Breena. He sets her cup of coffee (done the way she likes it, half coffee, half milk, teaspoon of maple syrup in it) in front of her and she looks up at him, question on her face.

“So, you grab Abbi’s laptop, and you go in and check everything out…”

“Yeah?”

“Can you tell if anyone’s watching her computer, seeing what she’s up to? I mean… That’s why she’s got you doing this in the first place, so no one can see what she’s doing.”

Tim nods at that. “Good idea. I need to check her phone, too…” He looks at his hand. “I need to have Abby check her phone. Make sure it’s not bugged or tapped. Part of going in from the GAO is cover. Part of it is it’s a lot easier to see if someone is watching by tripping the trap and then seeing them react than finding the trap and not springing it.”

“So, as the GAO, you’re going to go in like a bull in a china shop, stomping all over the place, knocking things over, and keep an eye on who runs over to what bits of broken crockery?”

“Yeah. That’s almost exactly it. Plus, I’ll be looking through to find out who made what dish, and what those dishes are supposed to have in them.”
“Okay. Sounds like fun.”

“If my hand cooperates, it will be.” Tim smiles a bit. “It’s… um…” he’s lightly biting his lip, bit of a naughty expression on his face, “proving to the world that you’re smarter and better than they are can be awfully satisfying, you know?”

Breena laughs at that. “No! You get off on being the smartest kid in the room! Say it ain’t so!”

He gently shoves her shoulder and takes a bite of his eggs.

Both Fornell and Diane decide to skip out on the Gibbs family breakfast. If what he’s got is good, they’ve got a lot of work to do.

While he’s shifting boxes from his car to Diane’s she says to him, “Dating since February, huh?”

He nods.

“Got an engagement ring, yet?”

He gives her a look, and she holds up her hands, “Just messing with you.” Diane looks him up and down as he closes the trunk of her car. “This one’s good for you.”

He doesn’t ask out loud, but she knows he wants more explanation.

“I can see it on you.” She gives him a hug and kisses his cheek. “I always wondered what you’d look like if you were really happy. This is it.”

“We had some good times.”

She nods. “We did. But you weren’t happy, and I wasn’t, either.”

He nods at that, too.

“She moving in?”

He shakes his head. “Not yet.” He comes up with a quick lie for why he was making room. “Already got a little girls’ nursery at my place, got a little boy on the way now, too. And one more, he feels like a boy to me, too.”

“Decking out the spare room in blue?”

“That’s the plan. Just like Emily, they stay at my place sometimes. Now, it’s about giving their parents some time off. Fast forward thirteen years, might be about giving them some time off.”

Diane smiles at that, too. “Good to see you being a dad.”

“Good to be a dad.”

She lays her hand on the trunk. “How you doing with handing this off?”
He shrugs. “Stings. Abbi’s letting me tag along with her investigation. Good to be in it. Stings to be tagging along, providing back up.”

“Don’t want her running the show?”

He shakes his head. “No. She knows what she’s doing, she’s good at it, she outranks me. Taking orders isn’t a problem if they’re good orders.” Hell, he’s taken Diane’s orders when they’ve been good ones, and she knows that. “I’m fine with her running her cases. And if the only way I can get a case is to tag along and try to be useful, then I’ll tag and try, but I want my cases back.” He sighs. “Not gonna happen. So, I’m being useful.” He smiles a little, and she can see the edge on that. “And I’m not hovering over her shoulder like an overprotective father.” Diane smiles at that. He sees a car pulling in, Borin’s Taurus. “You want to meet her?”

“You’re going to introduce me?”

“Would have met at the wedding. You’re here, she’s here, why not?”

Diane looks supremely amused. “Lead me to your newest redhead.”

Working Tim is different than Home Tim.

Working Breena is different than Home Breena, too, so she assumes that’s true for just about everyone, but she’s never seen Working Tim before.

She wraps up breakfast, and he rides herd on the kids while she gets her shower, then once she’s down again, (and sounds of life are indicating that Abby and Jimmy are moving around up there, too) he sets up the computers on the dining room table and gets to work.

“Absent baby wrangling” is code for completely absorbed in his work. Anything short of a screaming baby is not going to pull him away from what’s on those computers.

When Abby gets down, she sees he’s into it, and smiles. “Love seeing that.”

Breena raises an eyebrow. She’s not sure if he’d notice a fire alarm right now.

“Right now, he’s not hurting, he’s not sad, he’s doing something he loves for someone he cares about and he’s the only one who can do it. Assuming he’s not completely fried, he’ll be fun tonight.”

“What kind of fun?”

“Happy, playful, content, fun.”

“Fried?”

“You’ve seen fried. Problem with this sort of work is that putting the brakes on it is difficult.”

“She says from experience.”

Abby smiles wryly as Jimmy heads down. “Mine and his.”

“Tim’s got eggs in the oven for you,” Breena tells him as she heads closer for a kiss.
“Thanks,” he calls out, and then meets Breena’s lips with his.

“Mmmm…” come out of Tim. So, he’s at least tangentially aware of the fact other people are in the room.

Jimmy eats quickly; they’re already running late. “Sleeping in was good.”

“Yeah,” Abby adds. She did not want to move when Molly went tumbling over her. That extra hour was very nice.

“You both look like you needed it. Tim and I get a lie in next week.”

“We can do that,” Jimmy says, moving a little slow. He’s a bit sore, but way better than he would have been without last night’s pampering.

Abby heads over to Tim, kisses the top of his head, and says, “We’re leaving in a few minutes. You’ve got the car.”

He nods at that.

“Your phone’s going to chirp at 11:00, don’t ignore it.”

He looks up from the screen to her. “I’m not going to miss the meeting I’m doing this for.”

Abby smiles. “I know.” She kisses him, a real kiss not just a quick morning hello. “Just wanted your undivided attention for a minute.”

He pats her softly on the butt. “And tonight you’ll get it. Have fun at breakfast. I’ll probably have Abbi come back with me after lunch. We’re going to play with her phone.”

Abby smiles at that, too. It’s been too long since she’s done this sort of work with him, and she both enjoys and misses it. “Good.” She picks up Kelly. “Come on, honey, we’re going to breakfast. Can you say bye to Daddy?”

“Bye!”

Molly comes over and gives him a hug and a kiss. “Bye.”

A few more waves, and he’s alone, in Jimmy and Breena’s place, with two and a half hours before he has to get a shower and make himself look presentable for a not-so-clandestine meeting.

“Hey,” Abbi says as she steps out of her car and sees Gibbs and what must be Diane, who is smiling widely at her, waiting in the parking lot of Elaine’s.

Gibbs steps closer, gives her a hug and kiss, his usual hello, not showing off or getting stiff and embarrassed, both of which Abbi appreciates. Then he pulls back, and says, “Abbi Borin, Diane…” He’s looking at Diane. “What are you going by now? Still Sterling?”

She shakes her head. “Anderson.” She offers Borin her hand. “That’s the name I started out with, and these days I’m thinking it’s easier to just hold onto it.”
“Hello. Jethro get you and Fornell up to date on our excitement?”

Diane nods. “Oh yes. So much for my lazy weekend. Anyway, I’m going to head off and get working on it. Have fun!” She waves brightly, squeezes Gibbs’ hand, and heads off to her own car.

Abbi’s staring at Gibbs with her eyebrow raised. “What was that?”

He shrugs, not entirely sure. “Things getting better? How’d your morning go?”

“I got Morrna, Conner, and Jamies together.” Her old team, men she trusts above and beyond anything. “Told them what’s up. When we go in, they’re going to cover deep storage. We’re going to do recent storage. That way we move even faster.”

Gibbs nods at that; he likes the idea of move even faster. He doesn’t have a bad feeling on this one, but he’s also not interested in taking any chances they don’t have to.

Tim’s plan, what had him working away so steadily while Breena looked on in wonder, was to make sure Abbi’s computer was bulletproof. He wants her to have a safe, secure means of communication with them, and each other, and to be able to go into her own systems and pull whatever she might need.

Just because they’re going to cloak and dagger the first round won’t mean there won’t be second and third rounds, nor does it mean they’ll find everyone in the first sweep. So he wants to make sure sweeps two, three and however many others don’t tip off someone they haven’t caught/won’t catch until later.

So, as little girls play, he opens up his computer, and hers, networks them together, and gets going.

Most of what he’s doing on hers is basic housekeeping. The sort of stuff anyone might do if they were spending a Sunday morning tuning up their computer. He’s virus scanning and defragging, and all sorts of little things like that. On her computer.

On his, he’s got his system going through hers and searching every program, every power feed, looking for stuff that shouldn’t be there. He’s hunting for hidden crap that’s mucking things up or sending information where it doesn’t belong.

He finds something not too long after they’ve left. Something inside Borin’s computer is sucking power. Something that shouldn’t.

He’s got a few ideas what it might be. Two really. It’s either a bug or a keystroke logger. He’s hoping it’s a keystroke logger.

If it’s a bug, they’re already screwed. Her computer was sitting there through that whole conversation last night. If it’s a keystroke logger, they’re in luck. He can use that, or at least lay it in front of Abbi as an option for something they can use.

Only one way to find out. And though he’d prefer to do this at his place with his own tools, if that thing’s a bug they’re on borrowed time, so he’s not wasting the half hour it’ll take for him to get it home.

He grabs his phone and texts Jimmy. Where do you keep the tiny screwdriver you use on your glasses?
Sock drawer, in the back. Do I want to know why?

Gotta fix my glasses.

After what he assumes is a somewhat puzzled minute he gets back. Good luck. Abby want to know if you need help with that.

I’ll let her know if I do. Think I can pull this off.

It takes him a few minutes, but he does locate Jimmy’s eyeglass maintenance kit, finds the tiny screwdriver, and heads down to get into Borin’s computer. He tells his own to keep watch on what’s going on, make sure it keeps track of any signals her computer might send. He doesn’t think this is going to blow up, this isn’t Kahn’s computer, but he’d rather be over-cautious than under.

He pops the keyboard open, and finds a tiny device that doesn’t belong, and… This makes him happy, it’s a keystroke logger.

He picks up his phone again, and this time texts Penny. Give Abbi your phone.

Abbi here.

You’ve got a keystroke logger on your computer. When was the last time you left it alone for… shoddy work, they did a quick job, say fifteen minutes?

He waits a minute. It’s in my office, locked, every day I get to have lunch.

Has your phone been out of your possession?

I don’t think so, but I sleep, at work sometimes. One night last week.

Okay. He doesn’t have to send a text to tell her to act like her phone is bugged. She knows. Have you done anything on this computer with this case?

Not since before Gibbs gave me his stuff Friday night. I was about to, then decided I wanted to go in without leaving any tracks.

Good. Two options. This is a lame job, so, either your computer can have a tragic accident involving a short, or we can know it’s there and use it.

I’ll think. What are you going to do?

Go check out the GAO defenses. You have the new cell phone, yet?

Yeah. Got it this morning.

Good.

A minute later he gets another text from a new number. This is the new one.

Keep it on and on you, okay?

Not a problem. See you at lunch.
Abbi’s scowling at Penny’s phone. Gibbs has been reading over her shoulder, and he’s scowling, too.

“Bad news?” Penny asks. Obviously she knows something is up, but…

Abbi digs out her old cell phone, puts it in the middle of the table, looks at it significantly, mouths BUG and then says, “Just annoying. Apparently my phone didn’t ring, so he texted you instead. Yep,” she clicks the volume control a few times. “Just had it too low to hear. Lunch date’s been changed.”

“Oh,” Penny says.

“Yeah, he’s still working hard,” they’d mentioned that Tim wasn’t here because he was working. “So we’re bumping it back to Wednesday.”

“Same place?” Gibbs asks, seeing the trap she’s laying.

“No. We’ll figure it out closer to time.” She smiles very dryly, putting her phone back into her purse. “Problem with being a part of the brass, finding free time sucks.”

“You’re still invited to dinner at my parents’ house,” Breena adds.

“Thanks. Might take you up on that. I’m on call, so I may not be able to, but if I can…”

Tim’s eyeing the keystroke logger. It really is a shoddy job, big globs of solder, and given where it is, it should be mucking up the function of the q key. (Though it’s possible Abbi doesn’t type enough to have noticed that.)

Question is, this bad of a job, will there be prints or DNA?

That’s a question for Abby. He pops the keyboard back into play, persevering everything the way he found it, and grabs his own computer. Obviously the logger has to send information out somehow. Time to figure out how it’s doing that.

His phone buzzes again. It’s a multi-text from Abbi’s new phone going to him and Leon. Borin here. Phone may be bugged. Moving lunch. Farlane’s at 1:00.

Sure. Tim sends back.

He can feel Leon’s tone when he reads. Why do I think I’m fifty pages behind on this?

Because you are. Getting you up to speed is the point of lunch. Tim shoots back.

Do I want to be up to speed on this?

Yeah. Abbi sends.
The plan is that he and Abbi are meeting for lunch. Why? To chat about his paperwork software. At least, that’s the answer if anyone asks.

Leon is, a few minutes later, ‘going to bump into them.’ He rolled with the ruse without asking too many questions, knowing that he couldn’t and that they’d answer him when he got there, but he wasn’t sounding ecstatic about getting dragged into whatever CGIS drama this was, let alone Gibbs’ personal life. But he knows the people asking him are pros, and if they need his help, something is up.

Farlane’s on Sunday during the middle of the brunch crowd is a very good place to do this. It’s completely packed. Loud enough to cover voices and confuse a bug, and were you to see someone you knew who was already seated, you would go sit with them, because otherwise you’re not sitting down anytime soon.

Tim gets in early, eyes scanning, turning down the first two tables offered him because they had clear line of sight from the windows. No, he’s not particularly worried about a sniper, but he is worried about a directional mic.

He absolutely knows his phone is clean. It’s new. It’s always on him. And, with his own tech department at his disposal, it was wired to blow shortly after he got back to work full time. (His ‘phone modifications’ are now standard gear for NCIS Cybercrime.) In that it’s still in one piece, and no one at CGIS is missing any fingers, his phone is secure.

Similarly, he’s awfully sure Leon’s phone is secure. Among other things, he gets a new one every month. And, though it won’t blow a man’s hand off, it does have its own bells and whistles to keep it secure. (With two kids in the house who ‘borrow’ his stuff, Leon decided he didn’t need a phone that could blow up.)

No way to tell on Abbi’s until they get it home and Abby takes a whack at it.

Because he skipped the first two tables, he’d only been sitting down for a minute when Abbi and Gibbs get there. (The waitress is going to hate him. He asked for a table for two, it’s supposed to be him and Abbi, turned down the first two, now he’s got an extra person, and in ten minutes, he’ll have one more. She’s getting tipped very well.)

They go through the usual hugs and hellos and whatnot. Gibbs steals a seat from the table next to theirs, and for a moment they chat pleasantly about nothing much while the waitress watches them.

She comes over, gets drink orders, and goes about doing her job.

Once she leaves, Tim says, “I started running diagnostics on your computer, found something was sucking power that wasn’t supposed to, opened it up, and found the keystroke logger. It’s tiny, and was put in place by someone who doesn’t solder much. With any luck there’ll be a print or some DNA or something.”

“Great.”

“It piggybacks onto the local wifi, so as long as you’re in a dead spot, it won’t transmit. Likewise, it pulls power from your computer, so turn it off, and it’s dead. Given its size, I’m going to guess it can’t hold more than a half an hour or so of typing. But that’s a guess, and I could be way off.”

“Half an hour?”
“Yeah, I type 150 a minute, at least, I used to. So, call it 4,500 words worth of keystrokes.”

That sounds like a huge amount of data to Abbi. “Might be a whole day for me.”

Tim shrugs. “Remind me at some point to actually talk to you about my paperwork software. You’re doing way too much work with a pen.”

That sounds promising to Abbi and she nods. Then Tim adds, “Its edge is under the corner of your q key. Has it been giving you any trouble? Have to whack it a few times to get a q to type?”

Abbi shakes her head. “Not that I’ve noticed.”

So much for that as a way to figure out when the logger got installed. “Then assume that everything you’ve written about all of this, including everything I found on your computer about your missing data, is in someone else’s hands.”

“And we’re assuming my phone is bugged, too.”

Leon steps by and smiles at them. “May I join you?”

And once again they go through the happy friends bumping into each other charade, and once more Jethro snags a chair from another table, the waitress comes over to get a drink order, and given how they’re just buddies having lunch, both Leon and Gibbs have beer. No on duty cops at this table, Oh NO!

On the upside, four people at a two person table means they are close. They don’t have to huddle in to talk quietly, they already are huddled.

“We’re assuming your phone is bugged?” Leon says quietly. They’ve all got the hang of talking under the buzz of many conversations around them.

Abbi nods. “Yeah. Let me start at the beginning.” So she does, Gibbs and Tim filling in bits and pieces as they have them. (Tim’s pleased to hear they now have warrants for all of this. He’s even more pleased to hear that Bleach has offered to have a chat with him later today about what sort of warrant he’s going to need for what he wants to do with his hacking plan.)

Leon sits back, sipping his drink, looking like he wishes he had a toothpick to play with. “And you’re telling me…”

“Because I ask for permission before using NCIS resources to help run a full investigation on a friendly Federal Agency,” Tim replies.

“How many resources are you thinking?”

“We haven’t had the chance to full out plan, yet,” Abbi says.

“But I’m going to go in and raid their files, and then she and Gibbs—“

“And my team.”

“And her team, are going in to their storage to retrieve those files. So, I’d like eyes on them when they do it. Pretty much I’m going to hack the hell out of their systems, and use the GAO, which I’ll also have to hack, to do it.”

“Want tactical support on the file raids,” Gibbs adds. “Gonna ask Tony and Ziva to keep eyes on us. Make sure no one else is sneaking up.”
“Going to need to borrow Jimmy, at least to look over Swissin’s autopsy files, maybe more if he needs to be dug up.”

Leon nods, thinking. “You think this is necessary?”

“I hope not,” Abbi says. “I’d really like to be wrong about this. But… if three of your top five guys were on the take, is there any possible way you wouldn’t be in on it, too?”

Leon nods. No one that stupid is in charge of a Federal Agency. Corrupt, intentionally blind, sure, but no way Brandis doesn’t know about this. “When do you want to move?”

“I’ll be ready to get the file information by Tuesday. Spend most of the day grabbing it and finding what they’re going to need,” Tim says.

“So, early Wednesday, we want to move,” Abbi adds.

“Then I’ll look forward to enjoying the show with Director McGee in MTAC.”

“What’s the next step?” Gibbs asks.

“I’m thinking you guys come home with—“

They hear Abbi’s phone buzz. She picks it up. “Borin. Uh huh… Okay… Yeah… Text me the address.” Tim quickly knocks her phone out of her hand, and Gibbs, knowing where this is going, stomps it, hard, cracking the shell. One more stomp and that is a very dead phone.

Abbi looks at them, never having seen them coordinate like that, let alone on the fly, non-verbally, she nods at it, and so does Leon.

“I assume we’re not worried about your phone being bugged anymore,” Leon says, amused look on his face.

“I guess not,” Abbi adds.

Gibbs hands her his phone and smiles. “This one’s got a nasty bite if anyone tries to mess with it.”

“Thanks.” She calls Morrna back. “Sorry about that. I’m in a crowded restaurant, and the ass next to me knocked my phone out of my hand and the idiot on his other side crushed it.” Tim and Jethro snigger about that. “This is the number you can get me at until I get a new one. So, what’s the address…”

She listens, nods, and hangs up. A second later, the phone buzzes again, and there’s a text with a location that Tim puts into his phone.

He checks it out, and nods. “It’s a real case. There’s a police report of a skiff found with two bodies in it.”

Leon’s staring at her. “You’re still in the field?”

“On call one week a month. Told you, our budget is tight.”

“That’s too tight.”

Abbi nods.

“Still got that second phone?” Tim asks.
Abbi pats her ribs. “In my vest. Tucked between one of the plates and the fabric.”

“Good.”

Abbi gets up. “Duty calls.” And then they do the buddies saying goodbye routine.

Gibbs goes with her to the parking lot, seeing her to her car. “Be careful.”

She smiles at him, and gives him a quick kiss. “I am.”

He stares at her for a long minute, eyes on hers, worry on his face, and then kisses her again. “You better be.”

She kisses his cheek, quick peck, and gets into her car.

When Gibbs gets back in there, Tim’s scooped up the bits of Borin’s phone, tucking them into his pocket. “Abby’ll take a look at them, see if that was necessary.”

“She trust the guys she’s with?” Leon asks as Gibbs sits down.

Gibbs nods. “Her old team. They’re at full strength, but she takes on call time to make sure they each get some guaranteed down time.”

“How you know Brandis?” Tim asks.

Leon shakes his head. “I’ve met him. Don’t think I could pick him out of a lineup, though.” Then he shifts focus, “So, going through Mike Franks’ things and you found some stuff?”

Gibbs nods.

Leon glances at McGee, looking like he’s not sure if he should say this, but not wanting to not say it. “Anything from our branch?”

Gibbs nods at that, too. “Nothing from after he left, though.”

“Ah…” Tim can see something that almost looks like a frantic bit of non-verbal communication going on between Vance and Gibbs. He knows Vance is very nervous about something, and Gibbs isn’t.

“Yeah. Most of it was about dead men. Just burned that.” That must be the right word, because Leon relaxes at that, and Tim can see that Gibbs wants him to. “Lot of it was on dead cases, burned those, too. Got a few bits on cases where the perps are still in jail, I’ll give ‘em to Tony. But I didn’t see any reason to pile shit on dead men, Leon.”

Leon nods. “Different time back then, Jethro.”

“I know. Even more different when Franks came on in the late ‘70s.”
“What was Leon nervous about?” Tim asks as he’s driving Gibbs back to his place.

Gibbs shakes his head.

“Look, if Mike dug up something on him, there’s probably other copies of it somewhere, and I’m in position to make sure they beyond vanish.”

Gibbs shrugs. “I don’t know. Never opened the file. But when Franks showed up, Leon let him work, and he probably shouldn’t have.”

“Never?”

“Few times I was tempted, but… never needed to, and by now. I don’t care who or what he was. I trust who he is. Burned his file along with all the other insurance Franks had on dead men.”

“Lots of it?”

“Enough. Like Leon said, different age. Only one rule, don’t get caught, and they weren’t being very careful about following that one, either.”

Tim watches the road for a moment. “But we are.”

Gibbs nods at that, too.

One of the things about being the Boss is that Gibbs really didn’t have any idea of what the hell it was Tim or Abby did when they were down in the basement mucking about with the tech stuff.

He’d bark some questions at them, they’d go do their thing, and a few hours later, he’d bark some more and they’d have some answers for him.

Pretty much for all he knew, Abby was some sort of information vending machine that took evidence in one side, and spit out information from the other upon receipt of Caf-Pow, and as for how Tim does his stuff, he’s got that titled in his mind as “magic.”

But, right now, he’s in Tim and Abby’s home, while they’re working away, so he’s actually seeing what they’re doing.

Tim’s doing something with his computer. Every now and again he mumbles something extremely profane, deletes a whole lot of what he’s doing, and then goes back to it grumbling about his fingers. But, even with three of them not typing as fast as he thinks they should, he appears to type faster than Gibbs does with all ten of his.

He’s trying to be useful to Abby, because unlike Tim’s magic, he can at least follow what she’s doing by watching it.

Mostly, right now, she’s got Abbi’s computer open, and is staring at it. Glaring really.

“Can I help?”
“Not unless you know the answer to if Abby wants her computer to keep working.”

Gibbs shakes his head, he doesn’t know the answer to that.

She almost touches the keylogger with the point of a pen. “It would take me maybe two minutes to pull this out, log into my database at work and find out who made this, who sells them, all the rest of those goodies. Then I can swab around for blood. Then into the chamber for prints. The problem is, this computer will be a brick if I do it. And if she wants to be able to use the keylogger to send messages back or throw whoever is watching off her trail…”

“It’s got to work.”

“Right.”

He stares at it. Big mess of circuits and wires and other stuff.

Abby’s eyes go wide, and she hustles out of Tim’s office. A minute later, she’s back with another laptop. “Can I borrow this one?”

Tim waves at her absently.

It’s a tiny one. He thinks he remembers it as being the little one Tim used to take to crime scenes.

“Right now, her computer is off, so the logger isn’t sending any signals, at all. It’s just hanging around, doing a whole lot of nothing. The thing to remember about how these work is they only let the person who installed them know what keys have been hit. They can’t see what’s on the screen. The screen can be blank, it can be a Sudoku puzzle, doesn’t matter, as long as you’re whacking keys, that’s what the person who reads this gets.”

Gibbs nods, feeling like he can see where this is going.

“So, I’m thinking Mr. Keystroke logger is going on a bit of a trip. Feel like helping me do some soldering?”

Gibbs can solder. “Sure.”

While Abby sets things up, Gibbs snaps Abby’s cell and texts his Abbi about what they’re doing.

Sounds good. Let me know what you find. She sends back.

As soon as we know. Any shot of you getting home tonight?

Still got hours of processing. Then paperwork. Be at least one before I’m home. Don’t wait up.

Like there’s any shot of that happening. I’ll leave the lights on.

He holds the wire of solder as Abby delicately reattaches the logger onto Tim’s go-bag computer.

Then she turns it on, sees everything looks like it’s working properly, and then sends her own text, So, today we’ve got your computer and are doing a tune up on it. It’s been down for a bit while Tim and I’ve cleaned it up. But it’s ready to turn on again. What’s your password?
Nice! I’m typing it in, and what would you normally do first?

Check email.

Any typing involved in that?

Just mouse work, unless I was about to respond.

Okay. We’re just making sure everything powers on right. And shutting down. Whoever’s watching knows your system is up and running again at our house.

Thanks. Was my phone bugged?

Once we get through digging into your computer, we’ll find out.

“God, Gibbs, you really stamped the hell out of this.” Abby’s staring at the pile of shattered phone bits sitting on her kitchen table.

He shrugs.

“Umm…” She’s poking gently at the bits with a chopstick. “Okay. I don’t think any of this is a bug. But… Until I get it to the office and look at it under a real microscope, no way to know.”

Gibbs is giving her the and you’re still here why look.

“You sticking around to get Kelly when she’s up from her nap?” Abby nods in the direction of Tim’s office, with what he’s doing he’s pretty much useless on Dad duty.

Gibbs nods. “Got her.”

“Then I’m packing up and going to the lab.” She gets a zip lock baggie, and brushes all the bits into it. Then she heads into Tim’s office. “Give me your pants.”

He misses it the first time she says it. So she does again. His typing slows down, stops, and then he looks up at her curiously. He blinks, and then says, “Did you just ask for my pants?”

Abby nods and smiles at him. “Always want to get into them.” She winks. “Going to my lab to really get into Abbi’s stuff. You had the phone in your pocket. Want to make sure some little bit isn’t stuck in there.”

“Okay.” He stands up, takes his jeans off and hands them to her, notices he’s out of coffee, and wanders back into the kitchen for a refill. Pretty much the whole time he’s on that, his brain is still working on what he’s got on his computer.

Gibbs sees him strolling around in his boxers and t-shirt. He’s in the kitchen, bagging up Abbi’s computer for the trip.
“We’re going to see Bleach in two hours.”

Tim nods at that as he sucks down a quarter of the cup of coffee he just poured for himself, then pours more to top it off. “Won’t try to leave the house in my skivvies.” With that he’s heading back to the computer so he can get his brain back in front of the problem he’s working on.

“Bleach?” Tim asks. Once they’re in the car heading to meet the judge who’s in giving them permission to do all of this, he’s able to pull his mind far enough away from his coding to realize that might not be the guy’s last name.

“In Basic you get sorted into Teams. Two teams to a squad. He was one of the guys on my first team.”

Tim shakes his head. “Small world. And he knows Abbi?”

“One of her instructors when she went through.”

“Of course. You’ve got heroic stories of saving each other’s lives and the like?”

“Eh…” No not really. The late ’70s were actually kind of quiet. Vietnam was finally over and Carter wasn’t sending them all over the place willy-nilly. “Stories of bitching with each other about how much we hated the drill instructors. Only served together for eighteen months. Then I went to sniper school and he ended up in Germany. We’d meet up a bit every now and again. Kept close until the early eighties. Lost track of each other.”

Tim thinks about that, driving a few more miles in comfortable quiet. “Does he know about Shannon and Kelly?”

“He was part of my wedding. One of the guys holding the swords we walked under at the end. When I explained who Franks was, I mentioned Shannon had been murdered. That covered why I knew him, how I got to NCIS, and why I had a girlfriend all in one sentence.”

Tim nods. “He doesn’t know about Kelly?”

“Lost track of him before she was in the works.”

Tim nods again. “Okay. One of the guys? What happened to the rest of them?”

Gibbs shrugs. “Don’t know about two of them. Marsh, my best man, died in Lebanon not long after we got married.”

Tim winces. Then he says, “Marsh?” He’s curious and a little appalled at the idea of how someone gets that as a nickname.

“His last name. Bill Marsh. He was a hell of a scrounger and deal maker. Anything you wanted or needed, he could get. Survival training in the fucking desert. 100 degrees out. Miles from anything. We’re passing out right and left from heat stroke, desperate for water, let alone anything cold, and he comes up with ice cream.”

Tim stares at Gibbs for a second before jerking his gaze back to the road. “Do I even want to know how that happened?”
“Even if you did, I couldn’t tell you. All I know is that we’re all half dead, and he wanders into camp with a box of Popsicle and a box of ice cream sandwiches. ‘Eat fast, they won’t last long,’ then he’s tossing them around to everyone.” Gibbs shakes his head a little. He hasn’t thought of that in years. “Sometimes they’d call him the Wizard, because of the things he could come up with, but he’d just say, ‘God provides for those who ask,’ then some other asshole would go asking for a beautiful blonde, and Bleach would bat his eyes at him and say, ‘Right here, lover’ then they’d all laugh it off.”

Tim’s turning into Bleach’s driveway. (Starting to understand why he may be called Bleach.) “I like hearing those stories. I mean, if you like telling them, or ever want to, I’d like to hear them. Abby would, too. Probably all of us, really.”

Gibbs nods. Some of them are good stories. But telling them means remembering lives that are gone.

Gibbs knocks on the door. He’s got Kelly on his hip, and she’s watching everything eagerly. Tim’s got his computer in his go bag, slung over his shoulder. Feels good to be on the move with his equipment, even if it is only to go over the particulars to get a good warrant. Feels odd to be doing this with Kelly in tow, but Abby’s still in the lab, so Kelly’s coming along for the ride.

This time, instead of a ‘Come on in,’ a tall woman with dark hair and warm brown eyes opens the door. She greets them with a smile. “You must be Grave, and…”

“My son, Tim,” Gibbs says as he’s offering his hand. He kisses Kelly’s head. “Sleepy girl here is, Kelly. You must be Linda?”

She nods. “Oh, you are so darling!” She coos over Kelly. Kelly, being extra super darling, smiles big at her, says, “Hi,” and then ducks her head, all shy, under Gibbs’ chin. Linda coos some more at her, coaxing another smile out of Kelly. Then she seems to realize they’re just standing on the front porch. “Come in, come in.” She ushers them in. “Murray was so excited to hear from you. He was telling me all about it when I got home. He’s on the patio.” She leads them through a tasteful and expensively decorated one floor home. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Coffee, if you’ve got it?” Gibbs says.

“Sure. How do you like it?”

“Black as sin and strong enough to chew through the spoon,” Tim says.

Linda chuckles at that. “Must be a Marine thing. That’s how Murray likes his, too. Tim?”

“Coffee’d be great. Even better if it’s got milk, sugar, and if we’re going outside, a lot of ice in it.”

“Not a problem. For your girl?”

Tim shakes his head. “I’ve got apple juice in my bag.”

She leads them to a screened in back patio overlooking a lush green yard. “Your buddies are here.”

Murray/Bleach looks up from the paperwork on his desk and smiles at his wife, and Gibbs.
“Hello.” Tim rapidly notices why he didn’t come to the door to let them in. Right now he’s got a lot of sympathy for not being wildly mobile, and is once again thanking any and all higher powers that he didn’t have to spend a minute longer than he did in a wheelchair. Gibbs heads over to sit next to Bleach, and Tim does, too, offering his hand in hello.

“You’re Grave’s boy?” Bleach is looking him over, and Tim wonders what he’s seeing. Wonders if he’s trying to see how much of Gibbs and Shannon there is in him. Wonders if he can even pull off being ‘Grave’s boy.’ Before the fight, he thought he looked younger than he is, now... between the split eyebrow and his hair seeing if it can sprint into gray territory, he figures he looks like he’s in his early forties.

“One of them. There’s three of us. Little girl in his lap is my daughter. Kelly, you wanna say ‘Hi?’” She shakes her head and cuddles against Gibbs.

“Apparently she’s feeling shy right now.”

Bleach nods at that. “Know all about that. Got two of these little guys of my own. Though mine are a bit bigger now.” He spends another moment looking over Tim. “So, how many kids did you end up with?”

Gibbs shrugs. “By the time the weddings were all done, I had seven of ‘em.”

Bleach shakes his head. “Seven… Any other grandbabies?”

Gibbs smiles and nods. Tim pulls out his phone and finds a shot of Gibbs with the three girls.

“They’re all babies! All girls?” Little difficult to tell what Anna is in that picture.

Gibbs nods. “This one’s got a boy on the way. And we’ve got one more in the works but we don’t know what it is, yet.”

“Congratulations.” Bleach says to Tim. “And you’re still so technophobic you don’t carry your own pictures on a phone? This one still had a record player when we knew him, didn’t want to get involved with those new-fangled cassettes.”

Tim laughs at that, smiling. “You’re not wrong about that. Took a while to get him a smart phone. But, unfortunately, that’s not why he’s not showing you his own pictures.”

Bleach looks interested.

“I’ve got Abbi’s computer. This morning I got into it, and we found a keystroke logger…” Tim pauses, seeing if he needs to explain to Bleach what that is. He doesn’t. Bleach knows. “Next assumption, her phone is bugged.”

“Reasonable. Is it?”

“Don’t know yet. My wife is back at our lab getting into it.”

“Are all of your kids feds?”

“One’s retiring soon. One never was. Most of them work for NCIS.”

Bleach seems to process that. Probably wondering how many of Gibbs kids are adopted/in-laws.

He lets that go and gets back to the case. “So, your wife is checking things out, but at the very least
you know someone was keeping tabs on Abbi’s computer?”

“Yeah. And I know it was sending information to the same computer that wiped all of the data for her missing quarters. What I don’t know is who has that computer.”

“So, you want a warrant specifically for that computer?”

“Right, and given enough time, and assuming it’s on, I can find out where it is, but as of right now, I don’t know. Technically, ‘I’m Abbi’s computer savvy friend who’s just giving her system a tune up.’ When she ‘gets her computer back from me’ tomorrow morning, she’ll turn it on and mess around with it, and I’ll use that to find out where the information goes. If whoever’s doing this is properly paranoid, that computer’s been dead since she showed up for work without her laptop, but I can hope.”

“So, they keylogger still works?”

“Yeah, it’s in one of my computers. Abby’s got Abbi’s… My wife is Abby, his girlfriend is Abbi, and… Anyway, my Abby has his Abbi’s computer, and she’s checking it for prints and DNA, meanwhile the keylogger is alive and functional, sitting in a different computer, waiting to go live again and transmit whatever it is Abbi wants transmitted. I’m hoping, given how poorly the keylogger was installed, that these guys are not the cream of the crop, and they won’t immediately burn their trail.”

“Ah. What else do you need a warrant for? Abbi and Gibbs tried to explain it, but we all got lost.”

Tim nods. “Okay. Obviously you know how when we’ve got suspects we’re allowed to lie to them up and down and left and right to get a confession out of them.”

Bleach nods. That’s boilerplate law. The cops can tell you anything they want to get a confession out of you.

“So, I want to kind of play with that.”

Bleach raises an eyebrow.

“They’re already being audited by the GAO. They also already know where the incriminating evidence is. We know it exists, but not where it is. We also don’t want them immediately burning everything, or going after Abbi. So, what I want to do, and I’ve gotten the okay from my Director for this, is sit down at work on my computers, hack my way into the GAO’s system, then hijack their system to hack into the CGIS. From there I’m going to grab a ton of data. Anything that isn’t nailed down is going to get sucked up. I’m also going to keep watch on what gets the higher ups nervous. I want phone taps on Brandis, Riccerson, Adama, Seth, and Prelu. Abbi tells me their computer system is basically just for filing. All of their hard data and evidence is in lock up. So, what I’m doing is going through that pile of data, and finding out which paper files to send them after.”

“And why are you going after the GAO? Can’t you just do this from your own system?”

“Sure, I can do it from my system. I’m doing it through the GAO because I want to see what they get nervous about, but I don’t want them so nervous they immediately sprint to storage and start torching files. If anyone there has a brain, they’ll see how much information has been touched on, know that most of it is just file numbers and has no intrinsic value on its own, and assume that someone at the GAO is an overactive eager beaver.”

“So, the lie you want to tell is who’s doing the looking.”
“Yeah.”

“Is there a way to do this that just makes it look like you’re the GAO instead of actually hacking through their system?”

“Yes. But if they’re any good… You have to be as good as I am to pull off this hack. You don’t have to be as good as I am to spot a fake. I know they aren’t as good as I am. I don’t know how not as good as I am they are.”

Bleach nods. “So, you want…”

“Blanket permission to do an absolute ton of completely illegal things involving three Federal Agencies.”

Bleach nods slowly, then says to Gibbs. “Well, that one got your b—“ he sees Kelly watching him carefully, “guts.”

Gibbs chuckles.

“Okay. I can’t just give you an open warrant to do whatever it is you want. Let’s see if we can narrow this down?”

“Too much narrower and we’re going to tip our hand.”

Gibbs thinks about that. “Leon says he’s willing to give you tactical support.”

“Yeah.”

“And you were going to hack your way into the security feeds, right?”

“That was the plan. Easier than planting our own cameras.”

“Hack the feed first. Then go in… Abbi said something about anonymous.”

“I can do that… uh…” He’s looking at Bleach.

“What he’s not saying is that if the anonymizer he uses is any good, it’s illegal and he’s legally bound to turn them in.”

Gibbs winces.

“I went temporarily blind, deaf, and dumb a minute ago and won’t regain those senses until I get to the end of this sentence.”

“Thank you.” Tim says. “So you want me to hack the data feed, do it so they don’t know who’s doing it. Go after just the sorts of cases we want, keep guys watching on standby, and if they go running for it, we go after them, and if they don’t, then proceed with you and Abbi and her team retrieving the files that night?”

Gibbs nods.

“If you can write the warrants. I can do the hacking. Tony’s team should be willing to do standby.”

“Abbi’s will, too.”

Bleach smiles widely. “Then we have a plan.” He’s got a stack of blank warrants on the table next to
him. “Let’s get writing.”

Bleach is working on the warrants while Tim is half keeping an eye on what he’s writing up, and half watching Kelly as she works on toddling around the patio.

His phone buzzes, and he checks it. Text to him and Abbi.

_And I’ve got prints inside your computer._

_Vo_ whose? Tim texts back, and a second later sees the same thing pop up from Abbi.

_Million dollar question. I was about to run them then I got thinking. What if they’re there on purpose? We find them. We run them. They’re flagged and whoever they belong to now has a heads up that we know about them._

_Good plan._ Pops up from Abbi while Tim is glaring at his phone. The up (or down) side of being a mystery novelist.married to one, is that you can see about twenty-six steps ahead. Plans within plans within plans, which is great, sometimes. For example, if those prints really are flagged, this is excellent. If they aren’t, they’re losing time and focus worrying about ghosts.

“Bad news?” Bleach asks.

“Ish. Prints on the inside of Abbi’s computer. Not gonna run them until we’re in the thick of this. If they’re flagged, we don’t want to let them know we’ve found the prints. Can you write an arrest warrant for a set of prints?”

Bleach shrugs. “They’ve written warrants for DNA profiles, I don’t see why I can’t do one for a set of prints.”

_Phone?_ Tim sends back to Abby.

_Unless the bug is sitting on the rug where Jethro squashed it, it’s clean._

_I got every bit of it._

_Good. It’s clean. Sorry for your phone Abbi._

_Wasn’t too attached to it. I am going to need a functional computer again, soon._

_No problem. That’s my last trip out today. Abby, is the case salvageable?_

_Had to use superglue to lift the prints._

_No then. Okay. Send me the make and model. Abbi, you’re at Gibbs’ until this is over, right?_

_Yeah, McGee, good to have two sets of eyes watching my back when I sleep._

_Good. When you get to his place, Jethro will have a new computer for you. Just don’t send anything out on it until you’ve swung by my office, okay?_

_Okay. First thing tomorrow?_
Sure. I’ll be in by eight. We’ll go over the fun with your computer and your brand new attached to your keylogger computer as well.

Can’t wait.

Gibbs gestures for the phone, and Tim passes it over. *Jethro here. Might have a change of plans for the attack. How long to wrap the case you’re on?*

*Colton.* The man who replaced her on what is now Morrna’s team. *Is off tomorrow, too. I’m on until Tuesday.*

Then we’ll keep the same time frame, Tuesday attack the files, go in early Wednesday.

What’s changing about the plan?

Face to face.

Okay. See you tonight.

The last piece of business for the day, at least for Tim, is shopping. So, he and Gibbs and Kelly take a trip to the nearest strip mall.

“Drop me off here, and go grab some dinner for us,” he says as they pull up in front of Target, where he’d only buy a computer if he needed one right this second and it didn’t have to be any good. Fortunately that’s exactly what he’s in the market for. It just has to look like Abbi’s old computer enough so that no one notices in the next two days that it isn’t her old one.

It’s the right size, right color, right shape, and once he and Abby print out and slap some new badges onto it, it’ll pass. He grabs it, and heads to the counter.

By the time he’s out, Gibbs and Kelly aren’t back yet, so he leans against one of the giant red cement spheres in front of the Target, puts his bag down, and sends a text to Abby. *Home?*

Almost. Took a while to see if there was a way to search AFIS without triggering a red flag on a flagged print.

Any luck?

Maybe. Found a work around. Sort of. Feel like some more hacking tonight.

Bring on the hack!

Good. I can’t get into the prints without triggering the flag. I think you might be able to get into who’s requested a flag.

Mmmmm... Interesting. He’s smiling at the phone. That’ll be fun. Dinner, get Kelly down, hack into AFIS, see if he can find out who at CGIS has requested a flag, and what they’ve flagged. Depending on how that goes, he might even get to bed in time to do something other than just collapse. *And here comes Gibbs and Kelly. Home soon.*

See you there.
Dinner was good. Gibbs and Kelly got Chipotle, which went down a treat, and after dinner, Gibbs spent a few minutes watching Tim and Abby hover over his computers doing more magic, and decided he wasn’t really necessary to this endeavor, so he headed home.

Meanwhile, on Tim’s laptop and desktop, he and Abby began the assault on AFIS.

The thing about AFIS is that it’s got to be useable by literally thousands of people making tens of thousands of requests every day.

So, if you’re going into it cold, from the outside, it’s very secure. If you have a log in and password, you suddenly have a very easy way to get in and start mucking around.

Likewise, AFIS is under the impression that the gold in its vault (so to say) is the fingerprints. And that’s not wrong, it’s just a fortunate happenstance for Tim and Abby.

So, while it would be extremely difficult to hack your way into any print you don’t have access to. It’s not that hard to break into the rest of the system. (Especially if you have Tim’s clearance and hacking skills.)

All in all, it takes about an hour and a half to find out that Brandis had put a flag on a set of prints. His own. And on the prints of ten other people, all of whom work for CGIS, five of whom are senior staff and on their radar for this sting. It takes another twenty minutes for Abby to do a quick sight check and decide that she’s got two four point matches. She likes at least six, but warrants have been gotten on single point matches before. Not great, but the prints she lifted are tiny partials.

A little digging into the CGIS website, looking at official Bios tells them all they need to know.

Before Brandis became the Director of CGIS. Before he was CGIS management. Back in the old days, Brandis ran the tech on the CGIS fleet out of Miami.

Once upon a time, a long time ago, Brandis was a tech guy. Back in the day, he was probably good at it, but fifteen years in management has made him rusty. His fingerprints are on the inside of Abbi’s computer.

They go to bed stoked. It’s always been that way. Breaking a case feels good. Breaking a case when you aren’t completely exhausted and dead on your feet is even better.

This is victory and working together and a good mystery and all of it wrapped into one tidy package feels great.

Tim knows exactly how he wants to celebrate, and as he’s settling into bed with Abby she seems game for it.

He’s lying on his side, his right side, the side that’s been a ball of ache for months. But yesterday he slept on it and woke up in no more pain than any other day, so tonight, he’s on his side, pulling
Abby next to him, and kissing his wife, deep and slow and wet, while he makes love to her.

This is weeknight sex. Plain, vanilla, at least four times a week, just saying goodnight properly sex. This is close and warm and his whole body against hers without his goddamned arm strapped between them.

This is her belly and breasts against his tummy and chest.

It’s soft, wet kisses while he can feel the rise and fall of her chest against his and the faint tremor of her heart.

It’s having his left hand, the hand with all the dexterity, the hand that isn’t still strapped into a plastic cage, free to pet and stroke and trail and cuddle. It’s his fingers in her hair and on her cheek and tracing her eyelashes and lips and earlobe before slipping along her shoulder blade and spine.

It’s her leg curled over his hip, bodies snug and tight against each other, and being able to reach around from behind and under her leg to stroke her pussy while he thrusts gently against her tummy.

And kisses, and more kisses, and wet, stroke, suck, pulse, face to face, intimate, glorious, so good, missed this so much.

It’s her rolling on top of him and rising up (though they’ve been able to do that since he got home), rocking back and forth, bodies sweet and slick, lovely and sparking joy.

It’s her gasping and shuddering, collapsing onto her hands, still an inch above his chest, and then gently pulling her down the full way, her whole body, whole weight, on his chest, and the exquisite closeness of her breath against his neck and his lips on her forehead as they both come down.

And eventually, much too soon, his ribs send him a none-to-subtle reminder they it hasn’t been that long since they were broken, and she’s got to back off. And for a moment, when she comes back to bed, he’s still lying on his back, and he extends his right arm for her to cuddle in against him, and it also, in no-uncertain-terms reminds him that it is sure as hell not extending straight out from his shoulder, yet. But, she gets settled, right where she belongs, neck over his right arm, and he shifts onto his side, exactly where he belongs, spooned up warm and close, and they go to sleep.

For the first time in more than two months, Tim feels whole.
Okay, apparently this is confusing. Tony's 'bad shoot' storyline took the team to the middle of August.

Then I switched over to the McPalmer/Borin storyline, backtracking to the beginning of the Tony line.

Now, in this chapter, both storylines are synching up again. Next chapter will get us up to date with Tony and start both sides moving forward together again.

When Gibbs gets home he sees something... he squints and has the feeling it’s time to go visit the eye doctor again... his phone, sitting on his kitchen table. Short note resting on it. *Morrna got me a new phone while he was taking statements. Thought you’d want this back. See you tonight.* —Abbi

He picks it up, plays with it a bit, still looks like his phone, and then hits her contact button.

“Hey. Found the phone?” she asks.

“Yeah. You okay? If you aren’t, say yes.”

“Just dandy.” He hears her say, “Yes, he’s checking in,” to someone other than him. “Morrna wanted to make sure it was you. We’re on the way from the scene to the office. Got piles of papers to fill out.”

“Okay.” He doesn’t say anything else.

“I’m fine.”

“Good.”

“See you tonight. You can send out the Mounties if I’m not back by two.”

“Setting my clock now.”

“Bye, Jethro.”

He’s got a dead line on his hands, and a lot of hours between now and her getting home.

He heads into the basement. Lots of work to do down there. He’s got cribs to make and another rocking chair.

Back when he gave the first chair to Abby and Tim, he wasn’t expecting them to have a nursing baby at the exact same time Tony and Ziva have one, too.

So he’s not yanking the chair from one home to the next, not when they both need one, so, first up,
rocking chair.

He’s been messing with ideas for it. Something that feels like Tony and Ziva, fresh, comfortable, classic.

An hour into it, he’s got some sketches he really likes, something that the wood likes, too. He got the wood after Tony told him they had a baby on the way, mostly white oak, but he’s got a few smaller bits, accents in cherry, that he’s got a plan for.

He’s happily sketching away, taking a small drink every now and again, thoughts of the wood in front of him and tomorrow’s case mixing and mingling in his head.

He always liked this. He’d work, he’d focus on the wood, on the feel of it under his hands, or, like now, the feel of his pencil sliding over wood as he marks the lines he wants to cut, and that focus allows him to see the forest for the trees.

Nothing planned for tomorrow. Not yet. Tim’ll give Abbi the computer with the keystroke logger, and they’ll decide what, if anything, they want to do with it. Tim’ll get his attack ready to go. They’ll start carefully pulling banking files (got warrants for them now, so according to Tim that’ll be a breeze), and looking at communications. A day of work. At his real job.

And for a day, while Abbi does her job, and gets out in the field, asking questions, tracking down leads, he’ll get to do it, too.

That’ll be good.

He’s feeling peace and energy cresting through him. He’s really looking forward to tomorrow.

He takes another drink, finishing the curve he wants on the bit of oak in front of him, and then heads over to his workbench to pour more. His phone is there, and he sees it’s buzzed.

For a second, he feels a flash of fear. Someone called and he didn’t notice. He whacks it fast to see who called, and it’s a text, from Tony.

Gibbs sighs. With all of this, he’d almost forgotten what was going on with Tony. He’d certainly pushed it to the back, sure Tony’d show up when he was ready to talk. He sends back a quick Door’s open and hopes he’ll be able to help get Tony’s head back where it belongs.

By the time Tony gets there, Gibbs has two more slats sketched out, and the bourbon poured.

“She had to move the mirror,” Tony says in lieu of ‘Hello.’

Gibbs would have to admit that that’s a tad more cryptic than he’d like, but he can pretty much figure out what Tony has to be saying by it. Only one she he could be talking about, and only a few reasons to move a mirror.

Gibbs hands over the drink, and pretty much puts Tony onto a stool. “Start at the beginning.”

So he does. Gibbs sighs at this. He’s been there. Literally. He’s done it, though he was lucky enough to have been in a very dark place, and he got shot, so at the end of the day no one else was asking any questions.
But he knows it was a bad shoot. He knows he panicked. Jen was still new. It was her first undercover mission, and things got beyond sticky, she made a bad move, everything went sideways, and when it was done their asset was dead, he was bleeding, and the only reason they even got out of it was because the guy they were trailing was dead, too.

Throw enough corpses all over the place, swap around the guns, get lucky with the weather (hard rain), and you can tell pretty much any story you like.

Tony gets to the part about seeing or not seeing or whatever it was, and Gibbs interjects, “The gut knows.”

“Try telling IA that.”

Gibbs inclines his head. “I know.” And he does. He really does. He’s been there, too. Trying to get permission based on how he feels about something. That’s finally what brought around eighteen. Get turned down too many times, get proven right, because the gut does know, and he stopped asking. He’d rather burn for it after than fuck it up by not moving in the first place.

The gut knows. That’s part of what’s going on right now, feeling what’s going on with Borin, what he’s almost afraid of. Right now he’s feeling settled. Right now he’s sure they’re still under the radar and two steps ahead, but he can feel the thread that’s hanging by, and he’s starting to get nervous about when that snaps.

Tony’s telling him the rest of the story. And, finally, the mirror comment makes sense.

“She gave you cover, something you could explain to IA.” Because that’s what you do. You hope to never be there, but if you are, you take care of it. Nobody’s any better off by crucifying yourself over someone who doesn’t deserve it.

“Yeah. She knew it was a bad shoot—“

“Stop that.” His voice is sharp as he says that. “Your wife and child are breathing. Any shoot that accomplishes that is a good shoot.” And he means it, but he can see that Tony’s over-thinking it.

“Jimmy said that, too, but I didn’t know, Gibbs. I panicked.”

“You knew.” He’s starting to get a sense of what’s going on here, what’s deeper than feeling like it was a bad shoot, but bad shoot has to get taken care of first. “You knew he was dangerous. You knew he was in his own home. Why run into the room with no exit in his own home? Not like he got lost. You knew he’d killed other cops. You didn’t know how, but you knew he’d done it. He puts his hands behind his neck, not his head, why? Without being told, why? You knew.”

Tony shakes his head, but it’s half-hearted. He’s thawing. “Felt like panic. I’ve made good shots, besides the first one, I never almost pissed myself or hit the floor. Never didn’t sleep for a week after a good shot.”

“All of those things happened the last time you almost lost Ziva.” Because it’s not about good shoot or bad shoot. It’s about the target.

“Yeah. That’s why I panicked. That’s why I didn’t say stop. I shot before anything…”

“And it was a good thing you did. He had lock picks in his boot, a hidden knife in his belt.” Jimmy’d given him the heads up on what they found. “You yell stop. He stops. Ziva pats him down, grabs the gun, cuffs him, hands behind his back. Into the car you go. Call it in. On the road, he picks the lock, pulls the knife, holds it to Ziva’s throat until you stop the car and let him out. Maybe he takes your
gun, too. Maybe he slits her throat before he runs, knowing that calling for help and trying to keep her from bleeding out means you won't follow. *The gut knows.* You knew.

“As a husband and father, as the man guarding my daughter and grandchild, you did the right thing. As your father-in-law, friend, mentor, whatever it is we are to each other, I am proud of you. Your family comes first, above and beyond everything else.” He’s saying it to Tony, and he means it, completely, but he’s hearing it in his own head, too.

“As your ex-boss, as a cop, you fucked up, and not because of the shot, but because you had the person you’d take a blind shot for on your team.” Can’t run a career like that. But Gibbs isn’t the team leader, now not. He doesn’t have a career, not anymore. But for this op, he wants the man who will take a blind shot at Abbi’s back. Because that’s what a husband should do. But that’s not being a cop, that’s being a husband. And the two shouldn’t overlap. “That’s why you were ready to piss yourself, not because it was a bad shoot, but because Ziva was the one next to you. You wouldn’t have taken that shot if Bishop had been there, and knowing how close to FUBAR you could have gotten wouldn’t have hurt so bad if Draga had been in that car with you.”

Tony’s a cop. But he’s not, not anymore. He’s a man, going along with his woman, as back up. And he will be the best damn back up she’s ever seen. Because he’s not a cop, but he might be, wants to be, a husband, and being the man who will, on gut alone, take the blind shot to protect his woman is a husband’s job.

But that’s not useful for Tony. Back to him. “There are a lot of good reasons for 12, and that’s one of them. I have been *exactly* where you are, and the only reason I was even around to ever be your Boss is when Jen and I finally got the shit cleaned up, enough people had stopped breathing that no one besides us knew what had happened.

“Jen and I split after that. Lots of reasons, but one of them was I’d made it clear I couldn’t work with her. Same for you. You’re done. You can’t work with Ziva.” Not as a cop. Not anymore. He can be a husband, but the job is more than just protecting your loves. “Since you’re the problem and she isn’t, normally I’d say you need to hand in your badge, but you know she’s planning on leaving soon, and there’s no one else you’d make that mistake for.”

Tony nods, looking like this is helping.

“But don’t put that gun back on if you go out with her. Better yet, don’t go out with her. I know it’s early days, but it might be time for her to leave, or go on desk work, or whatever it is she wants to do.”

Tony shrugs. “She’d been talking a bit about working with you on the houses.”

Gibbs smiles at that. He'd like having Ziva working with them. Be nice to have someone else who can be quiet. Ducky and Penny get going and going and going and never shut up. He likes working with them, but it’s not, by any stretch, restful.

Gibbs thinks about mentioning what they’re working on, bringing him into the loop, readjusting the plans if Ziva won’t be part of it, but he decides not now. They’ve got time before they have to move, and Tony's exhausted.

“Go home. Sleep with your wife. Talk to her.”

Tony rolls his eyes a bit. “Easier to talk to you.”

“Yeah, but I’m less pretty.”
Tony laughs, and they hear the door open along with a friendly bark from Mona. “Oh, I see why you’re booting me out. Got your own pretty you want to be snuggling with.”

Gibbs smiles some at that.

Tony puts his glass down and says, “Thanks.”

“You trust this phone?” That’s the first thing Tim says after hello as they step into his office. Abbi had sent a mass text to everyone with her new contact number this morning. Apparently, Tim had gotten it.

Abbi nods. “If Morrna is screwing with me, I don’t… It’d be like the sun turned blue.”

“Still…” He looks at the department in front of him and the three people in it. “Connon could check it out and have it back in less than five minutes. If you want it to go boom if someone messes with it, that’d take twenty minutes.”

Abbi hands it over, boom, seems like a good plan, and Tim takes it out to one of his techs. A minute later, he’s back and they see the tech messing around with it in the far back.

“Just remember, don’t turn it off, don’t let it run out of power. He’s putting a tiny battery in there that’ll keep it going for three seconds after the power dies. Long enough to send a distress call and fire the explosive.”

Abbi nods. “How big of a boom?”

“If you’re holding it in your hand, it’ll take it off. More than a few feet away, it’ll hurt. More than, say, twenty, and it’ll make a mess and sting, but won’t hurt you unless you get the wrong bit of shrapnel in the wrong place.”

“Strong firecracker level?” Abbi asks.

“Yeah. If you have your hand open, and it’s just resting on your palm, you’ll likely end up with burns and cuts, but everything will still be attached. Close your hand around it…”

“I get it. So, keep it charged.”

Tim nods. “All the time.”

“Unless you want to use it like a tiny grenade,” Gibbs adds, finally saying something.

It hadn’t occurred to Tim, but, by turning the phone off, it would work like a small grenade. “It would work for that, too.” He smiles for a second. “I’m starting to feel like Q in a Bond film.” Even Gibbs gets that reference. “So, computer time. Gibbs give you the one that works?”

Abbi nods. “Going to spend a bunch of this morning setting it up.”

“At work?”

“Yes, but not where you’re thinking. Since I got promoted, I work out of our main office. Morrna’s team is still out of Norfolk. I’ll be down there for most of today, working with them.”
Tim smiles at that. “Good. You going, too?”

Gibbs shakes his head. “I’m on recon today. Going to check the deep storage layout and do a double check of her office. Just the outside perimeter, can’t get in, but I can find where the blind spots are and where traps can be set.”

“Let me know where the trouble spots are. Snaps of any cameras you see. When I get things up on MTAC I can get feeds from them. Give us more line of sight,” Tim says, pulling his netbook out of his desk.

Gibbs nods at that, as Tim puts the netbook in front of Abbi. He flips the top up and turns it on. “And here is your keystroke logger. As long as it’s on and in a wifi spot, like right now, any keystroke you make gets sent out. Turn it off, no more intel. Go out of wifi and the logger stores whatever you’re doing in memory, then uploads it as soon as it hits a hot spot again.”

Abbi’s picking up the tiny computer. “These are really light.”

Tim nods. “Not much memory, but good for quick work with a real keyboard.”

She seems to be thinking about getting one. “So, anything I type in and off it goes.”

“Right. And just what you type in. It has no idea what else is going on. So, the screen can be blank. It can be set to a word processor. Whatever you want. It can’t tell what you mouse on. It has no idea what programs are running. Just what you type in.”

“When I’m logged into our intranet, they can see what I’m doing?”

“Probably. If they’re looking. It’s a good idea to have someone typing on this one if you do any traceable work on your computer.”

She nods at that, too. “You can trace it back.” Statement, not a question.

Tim smiles, looking very pleased with himself. “I already know this is going to the same computer that wiped your financial files. Once you get your other computer set up, let me know, you and Morma or whoever can double team it, so the keystrokes match whatever you’re doing, and I’ll trace the signal back to where the computer is. Assuming it’s in your building, you’ll have an extra stop to go with recent storage.”

“And if it’s not?” Abbi asks.

“I’ve got a warrant for it. Tony’s team can get it, or run back up for you. I could—“

“Keep your butt in the building and go nowhere near it. You haven’t healed all the way up from last time,” Gibbs stomps that idea flat. “If Tony and Ziva can’t get it, we’ve got other people.”

Tim inclines his head a bit. “Bleach suggested that if we’re low on manpower to call in the FBI. Apparently they’re the guys you call when you’ve got a massive public corruption case. Gibbs has already given Fornell a heads up.”

Abbi smiles at that. She can work with Fornell. “So, what’s going on on your end?” Abbi asks Tim.

Again that grin pops up. “Tracing your keystroke logger as soon as you take it live. Did Gibbs tell you we’re going straight at CGIS?”

Abbi nods. “Last of the red hot lovers over there has an interesting definition of pillow talk.”
Gibbs raises an eyebrow, and Tim smirks. “Breena’s got a few comments along those lines, too.”

Abbi sniggers. “Anyway. You’re going straight in?”

“Yes. Today I’m on financials. Tomorrow… For the main bit, getting what files we need, I’m going straight in. No finesse, no hiding. I’ve got a warrant for it, so I won’t be sneaky. The sneaky bit is that I’m going to hack your security feeds. That’s going on today, too. If anyone gets hot or bothered and goes skipping off to your storage facilities, I’ll give you the heads up and you swoop in, grab them with the files in hand. Otherwise, I’ll be going through, sorting them out, and sending you the data as I get it. Hopefully, you’ll be ready to go in after dinner.”

“Dinner time, we go in, head to file storage, and start grabbing what we need.”

Tim hops up, grabs Gibbs’ phone out of his jacket, and heads out for a moment. Then he’s back. “I told Connon to set your phones so that if you take pictures with it, it’ll send the picture to the cloud and immediately erase it from your phone. You can’t be caught with the photos on you, and they can’t be erased if someone grabs your phone. Swissin’s file, that’s the first thing you’re grabbing, get shots of it. While you’re going through other stuff, Jimmy can be double checking his file, seeing if anything hinky was overlooked.”

“We’re not just carrying things out?” Gibbs asks.

“More than we can carry,” Abbi replies. “Some of it, sure, but most of it…” She shakes her head. Most of it we’re…” She stops. “We have warrants. We don’t need to cloak and dagger this. We can just go in and take what we need.”

That doesn’t sit right with Gibbs. He’s shaking his head. “No. Yes, we can, but… Feels off.”

Abbi looks at him. Looking for an adventure?

He doesn’t roll his eyes, but looks like he wants to. “I’m not just trying to have some fun. We go in there brandishing warrants, the entire Legal Department is going to be on us, with a pack of other pet judges. You’ve got a pet judge. They do, too. They’ll file injunctions. Bleach’ll do whatever it is he does. Six months from now we’re still in court, the documents have all vanished, they’re still running the place, and you’re off counting the paper clips in Alaska. No.”

That, unfortunately, is much too true. “Then we go in. We take a lot of pictures, grab as much as we can carry. Mormna’s team is lucky. Deep storage is a warehouse in the old complex off of MLK Avenue, with a drive-in loading area. They pull in and can fill a van. We’re in the basement, so only what we can carry.”

“Two backpacks’ worth,” Gibbs says.

“Something like that,” Abbi says. “So, tomorrow, when are you going to start?”

“Longer I’m pulling files, the more time they’ll have to catch me. Longer I’m pulling files the more files I can pull. What do you want? Lots of incriminating information, or me in and out fast and clean?”

Abbi thinks about it. “What’s the middle ground look like?”

“Get into the security feeds tonight and tomorrow morning. If that computer’s in the building, I’ll get eyes on it, too. Then, say, every file involving your top five, and all of Swissin’s stuff that I can locate in four hours.”
Abbi thinks about that, too. She nods curtly. “Given who put the logger in my computer, I’m willing to bet it’s in Brandis’ office.”

Tim nods, acknowledging that. “Not a terrible bet. Start pulling files a bit after lunch, by the time you’re ready to go, I’ll have a few hundred for you and Jethro, and a van full for your team.”

“Then we go in, and if everything goes smooth,” she stops for a second and all three of them share a *when has everything ever gone smooth?* look, “we’ll be out in a few hours with all of our files. Then it’s rounding people up, putting them in cuffs, and trying to figure out who handles the prosecution of a case against IA. I’m thinking Bleach is onto something with the FBI. Just hand everything over to them and let them dig through it.”

Connon knocks and pokes his head in. “Phones are done, Boss.”

Tim smiles at him. “Thanks, Connon.”

Connon’s watching him, staring at his wrist still in the cast. “You being careful?”

“Connon. This is Special Agent Abbi Borin. We are aiding her in an investigation by providing technical support. You’ve met Gibbs, right?”

Connon nods, looking satisfied by that. “Good to know.” He hands Abbi her phone. “It’s clean and ready to go. Don’t turn it off.”

“We’ve done the safety spiel,” Tim says, dryly.

“Okay. Don’t take any pictures with it you don’t want the rest of the universe able to get a hold of, either, Agent Borin.”

Abbi nods at that, too.

“Same for you Mr. Gibbs. Everything is working just fine, and we can change the settings once you’re done, but right now anything you snap is accessible by everyone.”

Tim nods at him. “Thanks, Connon.”

“No problem, Boss.” And with that Connon heads off to get back to the case he was working.

“You talk to Tony about back up?” Tim asks.

“Not yet.”

Tim’s reaching for his phone.

“He had a long night and probably a long morning. Tonight or tomorrow’ll be soon enough,” Gibbs says.

Tim raises an eyebrow at that. “The shooting?”

Gibbs nods. “Getting that taken care of. He and Ziva have stuff to work out.”

“Oh. I’ll… leave a message on his work email. He’ll get to it whenever.”

“Good plan,” Abbi says. “You going to make sure Fornell can bring in enough cavalry if you can’t?”
“Part of what I’m doing this afternoon,” Gibbs says with a smile.

“So, what are we doing?” Fornell asks as he strides over to Gibbs, who is comfortably leaning against the Metro sign in front of the Coast Guard DC Headquarters.

“Just two old guys chatting.”

“Uh huh. This is your girlfriend’s office, right?”

“Yep.”

“So, they’ve seen you here before, right?”

Gibbs nods.

Fornell eyes the building and the ones around it. “So, you’re what, waiting for her?”

“Something like that.”

“At the bus stop? Didn't think you were that cheap of a date.”

“Best view.” He nods quickly up and to the left. “Don’t like that corner.”

Fornell takes a quick glance. There’s an office building on the next block up. It’s large, at least fifteen stories, filled with shiny windows, and all of them have perfect line of sight to the entry to Abbi’s building. Stick someone in any of those rooms, and they’ve got the whole place covered, along with an invisible exit. No way to tell if anyone is there until it’s too late.

“You really think there’ll be shooters?”

Gibbs shrugs. “Not feeling it. Don’t want to get taken by surprise.” He doesn’t have to say how badly he’s been bitten by a sniper he didn't feel in the past. He’s taking a lot of extra caution on this.

Fornell’s eyeing the block. “Want me to take a look around back?”

“Yes.”

“Got it.”

“Give me a call when you’re back there.”

“Sure.”

Tobias heads off. A few minutes later, Gibbs’ phone rings.

“They’ve got a parking garage entrance in the back. It’s better, but still not good.”

“Okay. Yeah. Tonight then?”

Fornell smirks. “You getting stood up?” Obviously, this is supposed to be the call explaining why Abbi isn’t coming down to meet him.
“Uh huh. I’ll have dinner ready.”

“My my, you are getting domestic.” Fornell can feel the glare Gibbs would be giving him if he wasn’t pretending to talk to Abbi. “My car is six blocks down, and three west.”

“Bye.”

“What, no ‘love you?’”

Gibbs hangs up and starts to amble in the direction of Fornell’s car.

“You do know, that if they’ve got the brains to be watching you, they’ve also got the brains to have someone watching her phone. If it’s not bugged, they’ll at least be seeing who and when she’s calling,” Fornell says as Gibbs gets into his car.

“Shit.” His team would have live records for his phone and hers. He’d forgotten that. He sends a text to Tim. Can you see if anyone is watching my phone and Abbi’s? See who we’re talking to?

Sure. Give me a bit.

“Got McGee on it?”

Gibbs nods. “Seeing if anyone’s watching our phone records.”

Fornell nods. Nothing else to do for it now. “In the back there are two street level entrances, and the main one that leads to the underground parking garage. Other side of the street is the back of another building, no good line of sight, and the angle from the top is too steep for anyone to get a good shot. Building two down to the south is four stories tall, has good line of sight from the roof, and that’s where I’d put a shooter.”

“Then that’s where we’ll put Tony.”

Fornell raises an eyebrow. Tony’s good with a rifle, but he’s not Fornell’s first choice for that position. “Not Ziva? She going in with you?”

Gibbs shrugs. “Not sure. That’s between them.”

That gets a grin out of Fornell. “New grandbaby?”

Gibbs holds up crossed fingers. “All goes well, late March, early April.”

“Congratulations!”

“Thanks.” Gibbs is smiling at the idea of baby DiNozzo. “You don’t know that, yet.”

“No problem.” Fornell looks at the two cups of coffee in his coffee holder. “One on the right is yours.”

Gibbs nods his thanks, reaching for the coffee. “You get into what I gave you?”

“Just enough to look through and hand it off. I dropped it in IA’s lap.” He nods in the direction of Abbi’s building. “Unlike those guys, mine are on the up and up.”
Gibbs sips his coffee.

Fornell sips his, too. “So, Mike was smuggling abused girls into the country.” Not a question.

“Best I can tell.”

Fornell nods slowly at that, staring at Gibbs. He sips his coffee again, still staring at Gibbs. Gibbs stares back.

“Don’t get caught.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh huh,” Fornell says dryly. “And let me guess, for as long as I’ve got a badge, that’ll be true.”

Gibbs inclines his head.

“And when I don’t have one?” Mandatory retirement’s coming up fast on Fornell. May 2017 is his expiration date.

Gibbs sips his coffee again, staring Fornell in the eye.

Fornell shakes his head gently and smiles. “Glad we had this chat.”

“Anytime. We’re going in tomorrow after dinner. Haven’t talked to Tony, yet, so I don’t know how much backup we’ll need on this end, but Abbi’s hoping for a team covering her team in deep storage.”

“I can do that. I can shift a team here, too. Secure the roof of the other buildings. Keep an eye on those windows. How do you think you’re going in and out?”

“Hopefully the garage. Have the car by the door and ready to go. Get out of there, dump all of the evidence in your lap, and then we start arresting people.”

He sips his coffee again. “You always do bring me interesting cases.”

Gibbs smiles. “What are friends for?”

Leon heads down close to the end of the day. “How’s Operation Clean The Beaches going?”

Tim smiles at that, approving of the name.

“Going well. I’ve got live feeds for all of the security footage at CGIS, and a script set that sends me an update if anyone goes into or out of the file storage systems.”

“Nice.”

“Something to be said for having to enter in a key code. Found someone else has a trace on that, too. I quietly dismantled it. Did the same thing with the trace on Abbi’s new phone. That one won’t hold for long. Whoever’s setting them will notice he’s not getting any data on that and reset it.”

“Who’s watching?”

“Same computer that’s done everything else.”
Leon nods. “Abbi’s keystroke logger?” Because there lies the answer to what computer is doing all of this.

“Is sending information to a computer in Lexington, Kentucky, which is sending information to another computer in London, to one in—“

Leon’s not looking impressed, and it hits Tim that he doesn’t need to go rattling off quite that much detail. He’s already been promoted as high as he can in this line of work. The guy who needs to know how good is knows. “Do you know where the information ends up?”

Tim smiles. “Yeah, room 406. Apparently that’s two floors up from Abbi’s office.”

“And who is in room 406?” Leon asks, looking amused and dangerous. Ready to go in for the kill on whoever’s in 406.

“Technically, it’s a conference room with a computer so that whoever’s in there has internet access on the fly.”

“Ah.”

“Yes. They’re not complete idiots.” Tim’s voice lingers on complete, so Leon raises an eyebrow. “One of the security cameras gets a view of the door to 406. I don’t know what’s going on in there, but I know everyone going in and out. I’m downloading the footage for the last month as we speak.”

“Good.”

"Even better, I was cc'd on Abbi's new phone number email. So, when I put someone who got that email in that room." 

Leon grins. "Anything interesting in the bank records?"

“First blush, they’re all living way beyond their paychecks. Adama, the guy running the Compliance Office, his mortgage payment is bigger than what he and his wife are depositing as income. Beyond that, I’ve handed it off to Abbi’s Forensic Accountant. It’d take me days to wade through it enough to find out where all the bodies are buried in there.”

Leon nods at that, too. He prefers that his command team delegate things that they aren’t specialists in.

“So, we’re ready for the show to begin?”

Tim nods. “This time tomorrow, pop up some popcorn, and settle in at MTAC. The show’s about to begin.”

Leon smiles. “That’s what I want to hear.”
Go Time

When Tony and Ziva made an appointment to chat, Leon was expecting them to want to talk about tonight’s mission. He was not expecting this to be Ziva shifting onto desk work, let alone giving notice.

Leon would have to admit, that on the morning of a major investigation starting up, finding out that one of his most trusted Agents won’t be there isn’t making his day.

He’d also have to admit that, given how many different ways this particular mission can go south, that he’s not completely unhappy to have his pregnant agent out of the line of fire.

As Ziva heads out of his office, he sees Tony’s still lingering on outside, waiting for her, and he waves him back in.

“Director?” Tony didn’t think they had anything left to discuss.

“Have you had a chat with McGee today?”

“Saw he sent an email, haven’t gotten into it.”

Leon nods at him. “Might be a good idea to read that as soon as you’re back to your desk.”

Now Tony’s looking disturbed. “What’s going on?”

“Agent Borin’s case has gone hot, and we are providing assistance.”

Tony squints for a moment. He knows something was happening with that, but he’s been so wrapped in his own world of babies and bad shoots and dealing with his dad and the new house and everything else that he wasn’t paying much attention to that.

“What’s the case?”

Now Leon looks surprised because he assumed Clan Gibbs had regular pow-wows and all got together and did family type stuff regularly. But maybe they don’t talk shop when they do that.

“You don’t know?”

“Been dealing with my own stuff.”

“Oh. Tonight we’re storming the Coast Guard HQ to get documents out of it to confirm the existence of a conspiracy between their Director, Chief Compliance Officer, and the Heads of their IA, Accounting Department, and maybe their ME.”

“Good Lord. And what am I doing?”

“Going down to chat with McGee, he’s running point on keeping us in the loop with Borin.”
long enough.”

“Leon gave me a quick heads up. So, what’s the line, ‘I’m out of it for a little bit, and you all get delusions of grandeur?’”

Tim smiles at him. “Something like that. Pull up a chair, and I’ll get you up to date. Ready to work late tonight?”

“Yeah.”

Tim pulls up the Google Earth version of Abbi’s office. He taps the back parking garage entrance. “Okay, Gibb and Abbi are going in here.”

“Great.”

“Fornell—”

“Fornell’s in on this, too?”

“Yeah. We weren’t sure if you and Ziva were in—“

“I’m in. Draga, too. Not Ziva. Were you just thinking two of us?”

“Why not Ziva? Is she okay? Did something happen? You were out yesterday, Gibbs said…” Tim’s looking very nervous.

“Ziva’s fine. Little D’s fine. Ziva’s on a desk for the next two months, then she’s leaving.”

Now Tim’s looking really startled. “Why? Is she feeling sick? Throwing up a lot? They’ve got meds for that.”

Tony doesn’t want to get into this with Tim, not now. “Could we maybe have this conversation later, when we’re not planning a full scale invasion of another government agency?”

Tim’s eyes narrow. “She’s really okay?”

“Would I be this calm if she wasn’t? It’ll me and Draga.”

That’s a good point. Tim nods curtly. “Okay. Fornell and Gibbs have scouted it out. They want one of you on top of this building here.” He gently touches one of the buildings on the map. “They want another one inside this building, at the window.”

Tony’s nodding, getting the sense of who goes where. “Okay, why are we doing this?”

“It’s probably not going to be an issue, but we want them to have cover and a clean way out. Fornell and Co. are going to be getting the evidence from them, and then they go in or out, or wherever, and start slapping on cuffs.”

“Why aren’t they getting the evidence?” If the FBI is going to run the investigation, it makes sense they’d gather the evidence.

“Because we don’t want to spend the next six months with different dueling judges trying to see which one out-injunction the others.”

Tony nods, good point. FBI does tend to dot all the is and cross all the ts on things like this. Plop the evidence in their laps and they’ll move a hell of a lot faster.
“Gibbs and Borin are going to go in, get it, get out, hand it over, and then the FBI starts the clean up.”

“Uh huh. And why do I think this is not going to be anywhere near that easy?” Tony says, settling back in his chair, looking at the map.

“Because you’ve done this before?”

“Yeah. Now, why don’t you guys think this’ll be that easy?” That’s a better question.

“Remember when Abbi mentioned her old Boss was a twit, and he just left one day?”

“Yeah. Huge holes in her budget and he’s the moron who can’t count to twenty-one unless he’s naked?”

Tim winces a bit. “Maybe he was less of a moron than she thought. He died less than a year after leaving. In a ‘car accident.’”

Tony knows how to put two and two together for this. “Shit.”

“Yeah. So we’re going in fast, we’re going in careful, and loaded for bear.”

Tony nods. “When does the fun start?”

“Gibbs is going to call as soon as they leave Norfolk. Round about 15:00 we’ll know for sure.”

Tim’s computer bleats at him. (He’s added some new sound effects. He’s got so many damn alarms on it at this point that all the chirps and buzzes have been used up.)

He clicks on the live security feed from CGIS headquarters, and backtracks by a few seconds.

Yep, someone just walked up to records, keyed in a number, (he’s searching to see who it is) and walked in.

No cameras on the inside of the storage room. But they do have a view of the only door in and out, as well as a key code to get in.

He wonders if that’s a way to save money, or if enough people use it for quickies that it was just better off without any footage on the inside. Either way, his computer is telling him that 33862 belongs to Kyle Severs, and that he’s an Agent out of the Baltimore branch, and currently working on an active case.

He grabs his phone and waits a few beats until he hears, “Fornell.”

“Hey. Kyle Severs just headed into the storage locker at the HQ. Can’t tell what he’s up to in there.”

“Okay. He take anything out?” Fornell and his people are already in place outside the building. For exactly this reason. As soon as Kyle comes out, a discrete FBI Agent will snag him so they can ‘have a word.’

Kyle’s not going back to work today.

“Still in there. You moving someone in?”
“Yes. Should be there soon.”

Tim watches a line of people moving up and down the hall, none of them going in or out, and after a moment, one stops in front of the door.

“He’s in place.”

A minute after that, Kyle walks out of the storage locker. He looks shocked to see an FBI Agent flashing his badge discretely, but after some soothing bullshit about him being needed in an overlapping case, Kyle scoots the bag that’s slung over his shoulder up a bit more, and heads out quietly.

“What’s your guy going to do?”

“Take him down to our HQ. We’ve got our morgue set out as a clean room. Our ME’s in isolation gear. We’re going to tell him that we’ve gotten word of a biological contaminant, and we need to test his belongings now. If he’s fussy about it, we’ll toss a ton of BS at him, including a directive from a non-existant CDC branch, and then ask him for his things again.”

Tim shakes his head. There’s lying to suspect to get permission to rummage through their stuff, and then there’s lying and Fornell sounds like he’s having way too damn much fun with this.

“Enjoy.”

“Dr. Page,” their ME, “intends to.”

It’s an hour later, as Tim’s pulling file numbers right and left, and sending them off to Abbi and Gibbs to slice and dice and pick which ones they’re going to get that he gets a call back from Fornell.

“Kyle was clean. He’s working a case that they think is involved with another case, and he grabbed the case file for the other case. Nothing to do with your guys, at all.”

“Okay. What happens to him now?”

“He’s in ‘isolation’ for the next twenty-four hours to make sure he doesn’t ‘get sick.’”

Tim smiles, shaking his head. “Way too much fun.”

“It’s that or have him go back and mention how he got scooped up by the FBI,” Fornell says dryly.

“Which none of us want.”

“Yep. Anyone else head in there?”

“Quiet as a church on Tuesday,” Tim says.

“Good.”

“You don’t have to come along.” Abbi says as they get into her car, ready to ‘head into work’ for the day. Just, ‘dropping off a few things and grabbing a few more before heading out to dinner’ tonight.
She’ll be ‘back in the office tomorrow.’ (She’s put that into the email she sent to everyone, and her keystroke logger happily reported it to whomever’s watching that computer. Tim’s kept eyes on the door, but tons of people have been in and out, and he’s found out that it’s got adjoining doors, from the inside, to two other rooms that he can’t see.)

Gibbs just looks at her. He won’t say, Don’t be stupid out loud to her, but it’s pretty clear on his face.

“Don’t want you getting hurt on this.”

He shrugs at that. He’d much rather have trouble bite him than her.

She sighs at that. It’s always going to be that way with them. Both of them are the protector, neither is the protected.

He smiles, wryly, catching what she’s thinking, and licks his lips. “Tim’d probably say we’re both trying to be the knight saving the damsel.”

She laughs a bit at that. Then she raises an eyebrow at him and gestures to herself, “Do you see a poofy pink dress, long pointy hat with a train, or a dragon?”

He looks right back at her and dryly asks, “Do you?”

She laughs more at that and then puts her car into reverse. Three hour drive to DC, time to make it.

It’s a few miles later when he says, “Do you even have a pink dress?”

“Do you?” She arches an eyebrow at him.

“DiNozzo tells me I look fabulous in it.” He breaks into a huge grin at that.

She laughs again.

“Might like to see you in a pink dress.”

She laughs at that, too, shaking her head. Then she looks over and realizes he’s serious. “As long as it’s not poofy, that could be arranged.”

He smiles at her.

They hit NCIS first, get briefed by Tim, and, this pleases Gibbs, Leon pulls him aside and hands him his badge back.

“In case you need it.”

Gibbs nods. ID on something like this, supposedly going in on a warrant to retrieve information, looks good.

“Thanks.”
“We’ll be keeping an eye on you.”

“Hopefully it’ll be boring.”

Leon looks at him wryly. “Here’s hoping. When are you going in?”

“20:04.”

“Okay.”

God is testing her. That’s what this has to be. Her first day on desk work, and it’s a full scale mission with Gibbs, that needs someone who’s got experience and training in high stress missions and is handy with a rifle.

To say that Ziva is a buzzing ball of not happy about this as she’s pacing about the back of MTAC is not an exaggeration.

“How do you do this, McGee?” He’s been in here, watching, doing whatever it is he does, on a lot of their missions. This is the first time it’s been her job to sit, wait, coordinate, and… nothing. This feels like a big pile of nothing.

She knows how Tim does it. He’s actually working. (As evidenced by the fact that he didn’t notice she’d asked something.) He’s getting everything up live. He’s feeding numbers to the Morrna, Abbi’s second in command, who’s running the B-team on their mission to grab files from deep storage.

She’s sitting.

Jimmy comes in a few minutes later and asks, “We ready?”

She shrugs. This does not feel like ready to her. Then they hear Tony’s voice on. “DiNozzo, in place.”

“Draga, in place.”

“Fornell, in place.”

“Hear that, guys?” Tim asks.

Gibbs’ voice and Abbi’s both check in with, “Yes.”

“Good, we’re just waiting for you to pull in, and we’re ready to go.”

20:03. He and Abbi are pulling in. Tobias’ guys are well hidden. Gibbs looked and has no idea where they are. As for Tony and Draga, he knows where they are, but couldn’t see them, either.

“We’re in the lot. Closest empty spot to the entrance is three cars down one row over.”

“Got it,” he hears Draga say. A second passes. “Okay, I can see you from where I am. You’re getting out and heading into the office.”
Gibbs nods, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. Abbi’s got her go bag, because that’s all she would normally have on her. Both of them have vests on under their shirts, and both are carrying.

“They let you just go in a side door?” Tony asks Abbi. At NCIS everyone goes in through the main doors. Everyone gets checked. There aren’t supposed to be any exceptions, though they sometimes play fast and loose with that.

“Car and facial recognition software at the garage entrance. Sensors to tell if the car weighs too much. If you aren’t the right person, driving the right car, you can’t get in. Scans your visitors, too. Gibbs is already on the approved list. If I tried to bring you in, the gate wouldn’t rise, I’d have to park on the street and go around the front.”

“Man, you guys have fancy toys,” Tony says.

“Perks of moving into a new building in the last two years.”

They stop for a second in front of the door. Gibbs hasn’t felt this alive, this usefull since he handed in his badge to Leon.

“Relax Gibbs. In, out, and done.”

“I know.”

“Good.” She scans her keycard and the door opens.

“Where to?”

“Storage is one floor down. Far side of the hallway.”

They’re in a long, narrow hallway, not much of anything around them. “What’s here?”

“There’s a door on the left,” Abbi points way down the hall. “That’s the armory.”

“One way in and underground.”

“Yeah. We don’t take any chances with it. Elevator doesn’t stop on this floor, either. You want to take a ton of stuff out, you’ve got to hump it yourself.”

Easy enough getting in. Walk down the hall, pretty empty this time of day, but not deserted, Abbi put her code in, and through the door they went.

It’s huge. The NCIS storage bay is large, this one is huge. Gibbs just stares at it.

“Everything gets shipped here. You’ve got your files somewhere near your hubs right?”

He nods.
“Our only other recent and deep storage facilities are on the West Coast. This is Atlantic, Great Lakes, and Gulf Coast storage.”

Gibbs shakes his head and sighs.

“Abbi, you and I are really going to have a chat about updating this at some point.” They hear Tim say. “That’s appalling.”

“I know. Not now.”

“Nope. Jimmy’s here and waiting. Swissin’s file first.”

Not much of a show. Right now they can’t see what Jethro and Abbi are doing. Tim’s got the camera on the door to storage up. He’s got views of the hallway where they are up. And then cycling views of the rest of the building.

Then the files start coming through. Jimmy’s putting the shots of Swissin’s files up on the big screen in front of them, reading through as fast as he can.

Leon’s keeping watch on that, too.

Ziva’s pacing around in the back, eyes flitting from one outside feed to the next, looking for anything troubling or suspicious.

“Anything interesting on your ends?” Tim asks.

“Nothing over here.” Tony replies.

“Quiet.” Fornell says.

“Morra?” Tim asks. For all the focus they’ve got on the A team right now, it’s a good plan to keep the B team in mind.

“We’re the only ones here. Piling the boxes in fast and steady.”

“Good.” They hear Abbi say.

“Doctor?” Leon’s asking. Staring at the X-rays on the screen in front of them.

“Yes, that’s what you think it is. Fornell, get your guys moving on David Graham.”

“Which one’s he?”

“The Medical Examiner who certified that a man with a bullet in his spine died in a car accident from blunt force trauma.”

“How do you miss something like that?” Fornell asks.

“You don’t.” Jimmy says, voice flat.
Tim’s looking away from his feeds to check the x-ray. “Why on earth would you put that in the file? If I was running this scam I’d toss that x-ray.”

Abbi and Jethro can hear what they’re saying as they take pictures of files as fast as they can. “Because you know no one’s ever going to open it back up to look,” Abbi replies.

Jimmy’s shaking his head.

“Why didn’t the family or the funeral home…” Leon’s starting to ask. He’s not as intimately acquainted with how embalming works as Jimmy is, but he figures that just about anyone should notice a bullet wound.

Jimmy’s wondering that, too. Then they get to the next shot, which is a picture of Swissin’s body. And then they both know. The car caught fire. Swissin was so burnt the only way anyone was going to notice anything was with an x-ray. No funeral home would even try to do anything with his body beyond suggest cremation or particularly attractive coffins.

Tim’s used to bodies in bad shape, but that level of bad shape combined with the fact that Jethro and Abbi are in that building with the guys who put Swissin into that shape makes his dinner want to run away. He swallows, hard and takes a deep breath. “Tony, Fornell, eyes open. They did a number on Swissin to keep him quiet.”

They hear Fornell muttering something indistinct, then he’s back. “Just sent another agent to go talk to his widow. See if he kept anything.”

Something’s about to go—“ The fire alarm starts blaring and cuts Tim off. “wrong.”

“Ya think?” Gibbs says dryly through the blare of the alarm.

“What’s going on?” Abbi asks.

“Fifth floor. Someone just pulled the fire alarm.”

“Who?” Abbi asks.

“I’m sending you the video.”

A second later Abbi’s phone beeps and she checks. “That’s Adama.”

“Okay, I’m keeping eyes on him. He’s heading one floor up… Damn it… He’s out of camera range. I’m looking for him… Too many people… Um… Okay, got him again. He’s on the sixth floor going into… 643.”

“That’s Brandis’ office.”

“They aren’t leaving. Something’s about to happen, and they’re getting everyone out for it.”

Gibbs and Abbi can feel the question Tim isn’t asking. Bug out now? Keep going?

They’ve got all of Swissin’s files, and most of their list. Now would work. “We’re pulling out. Blend into the crowd, go from there,” Abbi makes the decision.

“Everyone got that?” Tim repeats.
“Got it,” Fornell says. “Exit on the south east corner has the least people coming out of it. Head for there, and we’ll get eyes on you fast.”

“Should be there in less than sixty,” Abbi’s tucking the last files into her bag as they both head to the door.

“Shit.” Gibbs’ voice. That’s not what any of them want to hear. Ziva’s not pacing anymore, she’s standing, fists clenched, wishing she was there. If they can’t get out, she could be getting in.

“Gibbs?”

“Door’s locked.”

Abbi tries it and it won’t budge.

“McGee?”

“I’ve had the camera on your door the whole time, no one’s jammed it.” He shakes his head. “I’m in. It’s got an electronic system for getting in, someone probably used that to lock you in. Hunker down, it’ll take a minute to get it open.”

Tim’s hacking away.

“Is there another exit? Window, something?” Leon asks.

“No.” Abbi says. “We’re in the sub-basement under two floors of parking garage. All of the files, all of the current evidence, and our computer systems are down here. They wanted them secure.”

Leon nods. Cybercrime is in their basement for the same reason. “McGee…”

“If I’m updating you, I’m not focusing on what I’m doing.”

Leon takes that as a back off signal. “What are you seeing, Fornell?”

“People all over the place. Radio’s lit up with first responders. Jethro…”

“Tobias?”

“The guy we grabbed. He didn’t take anything suspicious out, he might have put something in. The files are paper, right?”

“Yeah.” Gibbs says, staring what looks like acres of paper files stacked in cardboard boxes behind them.

“Hurry up, McGee,” Fornell says, voice tense. “If you wanted everything to vanish, a fire, set in the file room, is a good way to do it.”

“Where was he?” Abbi asks, eyeing the files around them, if there is something in here to start a fire, and if they can find it…

“Already out by the time we grabbed him. McGee?”

“No cameras in there. I know he went in, I know he left. He was in there for less than five minutes. He had a bag over his shoulder when he went in and left. Standard looking book bag. So if there’s an incendiary in there, it’s small.”
Abbi’s looking around, scanning the walls and boxes of files, looking for something out of place. Then she sees it, and she nudges Jethro, “The AED is missing.”

He also sees the empty spot on the wall. Federal law mandates that an AED be located on each floor in every Federal Building. They’re small cases, containing a defibrillator, a canister of O2, aspirin, and assorted first aid materials.

Or, everything you need to make a fire bomb, assuming you’ve got the training for it.

They’re in the basement, thousands of square feet of files that would take hours to search, with a fire alarm that just went off, and a bomb that they’re awfully certain is going to explode the second Brandis decides enough people are out of the building.

“McGee…” Abbi’s asking, wanting to know when they’re getting out.

“God can’t do this faster than— Shit. SHIT. SHIT!” Tim’s clicking keys fast, right and left, trying to get, anything, up online again. All of his screens just went black. He’s got nothing, no camera feeds, the command codes for the door just vanished. There’s nothing on the other end anymore. “Come on, Gibbs, talk to me. Tony? Draga? Fornell? Come on guys, where the fuck did you all go?”

“McGee?” Leon’s staring at all black, hearing just as much nothing as Tim is.

“Tim?” Jimmy’s been quietly going through Swissin’s file, but now he’s looking very worried, too.

“I’m still here,” they hear from Morrna. “What’s going on?”

“Yeah, Morrna, I know that. Everything’s okay with you guys, but everything’s black with Abbi’s team. Grab what you’ve got and get the hell out of there. Over to your HQ. I need someone on the fucking ground to—“

His phone buzzes.

He grabs it, but it’s with his right hand (left is still typing fast, trying to get communications back up) and fumbles it. “Fuck!” He grabs it off the floor and whacks it onto speaker.

“McGee.”

“Everything just went black inside the building, and all the buildings around it. I had to pull a mile back before my phone would work again.” Fornell’s voice.

“Where’s DiNozzo and Draga?” Leon asks.

“Holding in place.”

“What do you mean, black?” Tim asks.

“Black. All the lights on the damn block went down. The phones, our wifi, everything died. Then the building went into lockdown. The bombproof doors just slid into place.”

“Oh fuck.” Leon's cursing. And that means something very bad just happened. Leon’s grabbing his phone. “I didn’t think…”

“What’s going on?” Tim asks, voice cold with fear. Jimmy’s not saying anything but he’s standing there, watching Leon, looking very scared. Ziva’s in the back of the room, vibrating with the need to do something, but she doesn’t know what something is. Even if she runs to Fornell right now, she can’t get into the building.
Leon shakes his head. “I need to talk to Robert Johnson, right now. RIGHT NOW.” He glances back to Tim. “It’s a defense protocol. All of our headquarters have or are getting them. If there’s a terror attack, the Director has a password to shut the building down, put it into full lockdown mode, kill the power to everything, and it sends an immediate SOS call to the FBI Anti-terrorism Task Force to storm the building.” Leon’s eyes flick back to the black screen as he waits. “I know he’s busy. That’s why I’m calling. He’s about to storm my op!” Leon’s glaring at the black screens, and if a machine could be forced to work by the sheer willpower of the person staring at it, Tim would have live video again. “Bob, good. You just got a distress call from Coast Guard, right?... Yeah… Stand down. Do not send anyone in there. Those are my guys in that building… You’re people are already there, keeping watch from the outside. Agent Tobias Fornell. No, I’m not kidding… We’re running a joint sting on the Director of CGIS, he’s making sure that the evidence doesn’t get out of the building and my guys are trapped inside of it.”

“You get that, Fornell?” Tim asks.

“Yes, McGee, I’ve got it. I’m calling in my own guys, and seeing if we’ve got any sort of override.”

Leon shakes his head. “Gotta break in or wait for Brandis to turn it off.”

“Leon’s saying no on that.”

“Okay. Our own tactical guys are going to see if we can get in. How many people should be in the building?”

Tim shrugs. “Best I could tell, almost everyone left when the fire alarm went off. But all I can see is whoever’s in front of a camera. I know that Adama went up to Brandis’ office after he pulled the fire alarm.”

“There was one man in the south stairwell who was just standing there when the lights went, another lingering outside the Armory,” Ziva adds.

“Assume at least four.” Tim says. He figures there’s no chance Adama was heading up to an empty office.

Leon hangs up his phone. “Shit. Anyone who’s still in the building and on security knows that protocol means head to the armory, load up, night vision goggles, shoot first and ask questions later.”

Now Tim’s staring at Leon. “Why don’t I know this?”

“I didn’t…” He hadn’t remembered it until he’d seen it happen. He didn’t even know CGIS had it. “We’re not getting ours installed for another fifteen months.”

“Oh.” Tim keeps messing with his computers, trying for any live views. “Even killed the street cameras.”

Leon nods. “That’s the point. No one gets in, no one gets out, nothing gets out, hunker down and wait for the cavalry to come to the rescue.”

“Who else has this?” Ziva asks.

“NSA got it first. Not sure who else has it. Part of why some of us have changed locations over the last five years. Especially for sensitive documents and computers.”

“Great.” Tim rips off his ear piece and stands up. “Come on.”
Leon nods. Nothing they can do from here. Jimmy’s looking eager to get moving, too. Right now they’re all useless, just standing around.

“Fornell, we’re coming to you.”

“No offence McGee, but I don’t need three more bodies milling around being useless. You’re not storming the building. Stay put. Get communications working again. Leon says it can’t be done. Do it. You’re the wizard hacker. David, you still there?”

“Yes.”

“See you in fifteen.”

Ziva races out of the building getting ready to set the land speed record from the Navy Yard to CGIS HQ.

Tim’s staring at the vast expanse of electronic nothing in front of him. “Even God can’t hack a computer that’s turned off, Fornell.”

“Then turn the fucking things back on again.”

Jimmy seems to think of something and grabs his cell, holding it to his ear, muttering, “Come on. Come on…”

Tim growls to himself, but picks up the ear piece and sits back down. “Okay. Street cameras. Unless they’ve been shut off with a mag pulse?” It’s a question aimed at Leon, and he shrugs. NCIS doesn’t have whatever the hell this thing is yet, so he’s got no idea how it works. “I’ll get on them. Keep talking to me, Fornell.”

“Okay. Bomb blast doors are in place over the main entrance. Fire Department is clearing people out of the way. They’re gonna see if jaws of life can break ’em, and we’ve got our own breaching team heading in if that doesn’t shift it.”

Tim’s nodding, breaking into the city’s power relays.

“Fornell, where are you? Within a mile right?” Jimmy asks.

“Across the street. Why?”

“How is your phone working? I can’t get Tony or Draga on my phone.”

“It’s not. My end is radio.”

Tim nods at that, too. “Leon, find out where the nearest cell tower is and have a chat with whoever runs it. Get it back up again.” He starts fiddling with his own controls, getting radio up. “Tony?”

“Where the hell have you been?”

“Long story. You talking to Draga?”

“I’m here.”

“Good. What channel are you on, Fornell?”

“87.3”
“Okay,” Tim takes a few more seconds to get everyone switched onto radio. “Everyone talking again?”

They all check in. Fornell, Tony, and Draga, coordinate and replan for what they’re going to be doing. Which is bugger all. Gibbs and Abbi are on the other side of foot thick steel and concrete. Tony makes some unhappy noises about Ziva joining the party, but since the current plan is ‘bugger all,’ it’s not like there’s much danger. The FBI Anti-terror Assault Team is rolling in with their specs for the building, starting to lay out how they’d be getting in if they had to, but right now the quickest plan still seems to be cut through the bomb doors.

Leon’s watching that, listening, and then asks Tim, “The cell tower, how?”

“Ask nicely? I can’t hack the power department and the phones at the same time.” Leon looks relieved to have something to do, and then another idea hits him. “Send out a call on your bat phone.”

Tim sighs. “Thanks.” He’d been so into take charge he’d forgotten that he has employees who specialize in this sort of stuff. He takes a break from trying to get the cameras back online to write up a fast, All Hands On Deck, and send it live.

“Okay, in the next five minutes everyone who’s on shift for all of NCIS Cybercrime will be attacking anything even close to where you are working on getting it live again.”

Fornell comes back on the line. “Jaws of life didn’t do it. Arc welder time.”

“Those are hardened doors. They’re supposed to be able to take a bomb blast,” Leon says.

“I know. This is the tool they use to cut through the hull of a battleship. It takes time, but there’s nothing this baby can’t cut.”

“God can’t do th—“ And everything goes silent and dark.

“McGee?” Abbi says, not sure why she’d doing it. He cut off mid word the second the lights went. Not like this is a joke and he’s just screwing with them.

“Power out?” Gibbs asks.

Abbi’s checking her phone. No bars, no wifi. “No. New defense protocol. He’s put the building in lockdown. Nothing gets in or—“

They hear a quiet snick sound, followed by something hissing, and both of them drop to the ground, fast, as flames explode in the far corner of the room and begin the dance through the files.

Gibbs yanks on the door again, and it’s still locked. Apparently power out didn’t effect that lock. He grabs his flashlight, intentionally ignoring the flames that are getting stronger and hotter behind him, and starts really looking at the door.

“Got fifteen bullets.”

“Me, too.”

They both have Sigs.
“Don’t want to waste them on the hinges.”

Abbi nods, digging through her go bag. She doesn’t have tape. She does have Band-Aids. She already knows where Gibbs is going with this. As she’s ripping open the box, and he’s trying to see if he can get his phone wedged in between the door and the door jam.

“Won’t fit,” he reports back.

“Tape it on, hit the power button, and then push stacks of files in close.”

He’s grabbing boxes of files and stacking them up in front of the door as she’s opening band aids. “Hell of a way to make a shape charge.”

“Let’s just hope this works.” She’s got her phone taped to the bottom hinge.

He’s got one stack of boxes right next to the phone. He’s piling up a second stack that he’ll push into place as soon as she hits the power buttons.

With any luck they’ll be out of the way by the time the phone blows.

She hits the power button, and he shoves the boxes of files in as quick as he can, and they both run for it.

Not very far to run. The smoke is getting thick, and it’s getting hotter by the second in there. The liquid O2 in that canister did a great job as an accelerant for this fire. It’s growing fast.

They hear a much smaller whump sound than either of them wanted, and see the boxes smoldering, files scattered all over. Gibbs is pushing them away, pulling new boxes of files toward them.

They also see a shattered hinge. “It worked!” Abbi’s grinning. “When we get out of this, I’m making sure exploding cell phones are standard procedure for all of my guys.”

Gibbs nods.

She’s taping her phone into place, and he’s grabbing more boxes, trying to stay low, below the smoke level. He’s got the sense they’re going to need good wind for the rest of tonight, and gasping like a fish out of water with burned lungs isn’t going to get them out of this.

Second time works, too. Papers and boxes all over the place, but the top hinge is shattered. Gibbs pulls his knife and wedges it between the door and the frame, while Abbi grabs the handle, a good firm pull from her and a hard push from him, and they pop it out.

New, fresh air sweeps in, feeling good for a second, followed by the hot rush for fresh fuel to the fire behind them.

Gibbs grabs his pack, tosses Abbi hers, and they run.

“Smoke,” Tony says.

“Smoke? What’s burning?” Leon asks.

“Can’t tell. I can smell it, not see it. Fornell?”
“No visual. Draga?"

“Got smoke coming out of one of the southwest air vents on the ground floor.”

“Tell me you’re almost through the blast door,” Leon says as Tim types faster, breaking into the internals of the power company, finding out why the cameras aren’t working.

“Got about three feet done.”

“Not fast enough,” Leon mutters.

“I know.”

Only one way up and out of the basement level. Okay, not true. Only one way they can use. The elevators locked down as soon as the building went on lock down. Doors shut tight, emergency exit locks. No way into or out of the elevator shafts without a torch.

Which means they’ve got to get up three flights of stairs to get to the lobby. Or one flight of stairs to get to the parking garage, then up through the parking garage to get to their car.

“Armory?” Gibbs asks. It would have night vision goggles. They’ve got flashlights, but they’re almost more trouble than their worth, just highlighting how dark the dark around them is.

“Protocol for this is power goes down, anyone trained in security tries to get to the armory which is on the floor above us, and gears up. Some of us are in charge of defending the civilians in the building. Some are on attack.”

“Which are you?”

“Attack.”

“So what’s the plan?” He doesn’t like staying here. There in a long hall without any real cover besides the smoke-filled dark.

“Shoot anything that’s not wearing a Coast Guard insignia.”

“You mean, like us.”

“Exactly. Come on.”

“Going up?” he asks.

“Yeah. You ever use night vision goggles?” She has. She remembers how the ones they had in Iraq could pick up a cigarette from a klick away.

“Long time ago.”

She clicks her flashlight on and off. “Then you know what happens if you hit someone wearing them with one of these.”

Gibbs turns off his light and grins.
Down the hall, to the door, door leads into the stairwell. Up and out. Easy as pie, right?

They’re moving quietly, but not quiet enough. Gibbs stops them, pulling off his shoes, and nodding for her to do the same. His eyes may not be a quarter of what they used to be, but his hearing is still as sharp as it ever was. Blind fighting seems like the perfect time to use that to his advantage.

“Those goggles see heat?”

“No. Just night vision.”

He nods. Good to know they can’t see them through the door.

“Armory’s one floor up?”

“Yeah.”

“Flash bangs?”

Abbi likes that plan. If they can get there, they can get into something a lot more troublesome for night vision goggles than a flash light. That’s worth a detour.

“If we get to the garage, can we get out?” Gibbs asks.

“I like my odds against a bomb blast door if I’ve got a truck I can drive into it better than if it’s just me on my own.”

He nods curtly. “Armory, gear up, garage.”

“Good.” She kisses him, fast and hard, and then jerks her head to the door. Three fingers up, two, one. They go.

Only so many ways you can go through a door. Luck and skill was with them. They go through low and the first shot echos through the stairwell, zipping over their heads by not nearly enough distance. Gibbs went through first, keeping the door open. Abbi’s behind, covering. They hear a strangled yelp when she hits the gunman full in the face with her flash light, followed by a low gurgling curse as she shoots him.

She’s first up the stairs, Gibbs covering. He grabs the man’s gun, frisking him for weapons. He’s alive, knee shot, crying and yelling. Abbi cuffs him to the railing. “Why would you do this?”

Gibbs yanks off the goggles, stuffing them into his bag. It’s Adama. “Better this than jail.”

Abbi snorts at that. “Looks like you’ll get to enjoy both.” She ties off his leg efficiently, slowing the blood loss. “FBI’ll be here sooner or later.”

Adama’s looking at the bags. She can see in his face that he knows what’s in those files. “You’re not
getting out with those.”

“Try us,” Gibbs says as Abbi clicks off the flash light, getting ready for the next flight of stairs.

“Anyone in the hall above?”

“No.”

Abbi wishes she had a clear view of Gibbs face. She’s sure Adama is lying, but it’d be nice to know what Gibbs is thinking, too.

Doesn’t matter, they’re going up, carefully, covering each other, quiet. They get to the door to the next floor up, the armory and parking garage, and Gibbs points up, Abbi thinks she knows what he’s thinking. If they go a few more floors up, and then cross the building, and then go down, they can come in from the side everyone isn’t watching.

Ten floors in this building, and they don’t think there are enough guys to watch all of them.

“Okay. Uh huh. Thanks.” They hear Fornell say.

“What?” Tim asks.

“Doc’s not at home. According to his wife he’s ‘working late’ tonight.”

“Fuck.” Jimmy mutters it. He’s going through as many medical files as he can find in the mass of pictures Gibbs and Abbi uploaded. “Got at least three cases where he’s slapped the wrong cause of death on a body. How about his assistant?”

“I’ll get someone on it,” Fornell says.

Abbi’s office is on the third floor. So, that’s not a good floor. Fourth floor has the computer they want to get their hands on, which means it’s likely got someone on it. Brandis’ office is on the sixth floor, so there’s probably someone, maybe Brandis, on that floor.

Second floor, Accounting and HR, it is. Once again, they go in low and quiet, flash light out to blind anyone, but no one makes a noise as they move in. No sound. No sight. They’re above ground now, so tiny bits of outside light are filtering in. It’s dark but not the inky, smoky black of the basement.

Everything is dead. Computers are silent. No glow from any lights. Not even the tiny green glow of the on button on a phone. Nothing.

It never occurred to Abbi how loud an office building is, even when it’s quiet. But right now, there’s nothing. Not the hum of the AC, or the computer fans, or anything. Just the sounds of them breathing, and quiet, steady footfalls as they cross the floor as quickly as they can.

There’s a conference room to their left. Abbi nods into it. Gibbs follows, wondering what’s going on.
She touches the window. “Bullet proof, bomb proof glass. But, they can look out and see everything. At least two hundred people, fire trucks… Tony!

Gibbs starts flashing his light. Basic distress call SOS.

“I’ve got ‘em!” They hear Tony’s voice over the radio. “Goddamn it. It’s Morse code. I don’t…”

“Can he see me from where he is?” Fornell asks.

“No. No LOS on you or Draga.”

Tim’s all over this. “Okay, listen up, Tony. Dot’s a quick burst, dash is longer. Where are you cutting through?” Tim asks Fornell.

“Front lobby door. If they can get there, we can get them out. Maybe five more minutes of cutting.”

Tim starts telling Tony a long list of dots and dashes.

“What’s that?” Tony asks when he’s done.

“Front lobby, five minutes. What’s he sending back?”

Another string of dots and dashes.

“Got it,” Tim says.

“Yeah, I know,” Tony replies.

“No, that’s what he’s telling you.”

“Getting more.” And Tony rattles off more dots and dashes.

Tim writes them down. “Adama’s taken care of. Cuffed to the banister in a stairwell.” He hits Tony with another long string of dots and dashes. “Letting him know the Doc and his assistant are in there somewhere.”

“Dash, dash, dash, pause, dash, dot, dash,” Tony says.

“Means OK.”

More dots follow and by now Tony’s figured out what means what. “He wants to know if we’ve got sight of anyone else?” Tony flashes back “No.”

One more series of flashed dots and dashes that translates into, “Got it. Lobby in five,” comes from Gibbs.

“Five minutes. We can just hole up, wait, and then make a run for it,” Abbi says.

Gibbs nods, looking at their current position.
“Not right here, though.” Abbi’s agreeing with what he’s not saying. With the light from the windows they can see well in here, and it’s not a great place. One door. Glass walls. No real protection. They want walls that can’t be shot through around them.

“No. If anyone is watching from the outside…” Or the inside. Anyone who knew Morse code could see the flashes flying about. Even if you only got sight of half of the conversation, you’d know where they’re going. And even if you don’t know Morse code, you know where they are.

“First floor, stairwell. Make a run for it as soon as they’re through.” Abbi knows they can see the lobby doors from the stairs.

“Okay. You first out the door, I’ve got you?”

“Sure.”

They shift their weight, ready to move. Abbi holds up three fingers again. Three, two, one.

Through the door. Left, right. Check the hall. Check the flanks.

Gibbs doesn’t see it. Couldn’t have. Too dark, too far away, but he did hear it. Sound of a rifle bolt. He heard it, and knew, and before anything other than his gut could check in he’s turning to face Abby, grabbing her, dragging them down.

He felt the hit, the silent, dull splat of a bullet to his back, felt one more, higher further out, burning tearing holy shit fuck pain through his arm and then numb, then his hearing went because Abbi, wrist over his shoulder, gun an inch from his ear, is returning fire.

Then they hit the floor.

He’s not getting off of her. He’s covering her body with his, ears ringing from the close up shot. She can see (as well as anyone can in this dark). He’s got a view of the floor under them. She’s saying something, trying to move, but he’s not going anywhere, and his ears are too fucked to make out what she’s saying.

Finally, she physically tilts his head, and his body, which is not interested, at all, in moving, flops over enough to see the man who shot is lying on the floor, not moving. Abbi gets up, tentative, gun trained on him, flashlight scouring the floor they’re on, and begins to move toward the man.

She stops two steps into that, noticing that Gibbs hasn’t moved.

He tries to sit up, but that doesn’t work on the first, and then the second, or the third try, which is when they both realize that he’s hit a hell of a lot worse than he thinks he is.

“Fuck.” She quickly sprints over to… Brandis, or what’s left of him. She thinks he’s dead, but she’s not sure and doesn’t want to waste too much time on it. She kicks the rifle away from him and frisks him fast, finding two pistols. She grabs them, and then runs back to Gibbs.

“Dead?”

“Or close enough.” She doesn’t like how Gibbs’ voice sounds. There’s a wet, sloppy tone to it that makes her blood run cold.
She’s messing with his vest, trying to get him sitting up, trying to find where he’s hit. Something got through, and it’s not just that shoulder wound. That would hurt like a motherfucker, but it wouldn’t make him sound like this.

She gets the back pack off of him, and wrestles with the vest, finally feeling hot, sticky mess on his back.

Gibbs is groaning. Everything hurts now, hurts really, really bad, hurts all over waves of red nauseous bloody hot pain.

She’s talking to him, but he’s not tracking it, not really.

He’s having a difficult time focusing on that. On anything really.

There’s just pain, and wet… Oh…

That’s when it hits. The shot in his… back? Under his shoulder blade? this hot, red, blinding white ball of pain, that’s where the bullet went through his vest. And from the feel of it, because he’s getting bits and pieces into place, so he can tell his front isn’t wet, it didn’t go all the way through him.

He knows where he was. He knows how much of himself he got in front of her. After some chunk of time it occurs to him, that if he’s shot in the back, it also means he was shot through the evidence in the back pack he’s wearing.

He thinks, assuming she can get the bleeding stopped, that this won’t kill him. (Though given how detached he’s feeling about that right now, there’s probably too much blood coming out.) He knows, given where he was in relation to her, that if that bullet had hit her, it would have been a dead center chest shot through one side of the vest and maybe out the other.

He’s smiling up at her as she’s stuffing her jacket between his vest and back, pulling the vest extra tight, using it as a makeshift pressure bandage. “I saved you.”

She looks up at him. “And if you survive this, I’m reaming your ass out so hard you won’t walk for a fucking week for doing that. I’m the cop, you’re the back up, you do not go throwing yourself in front of a bullet for me.”

He smiles again. “Too damn stubborn to die here.”

Her hands are shaking, and he’s getting cold. “You damn well better not.” She puts his gun in his hand, and he drops it, fingers aren’t doing a good job of holding tight. “I’ve still got to get us out of this. And we’ve got at least two unaccounted for. You stay put. You stay awake. That is an order, Marine.”

He nods, very slow, very tired. He can taste blood. That’s not good. And there’s a burbling sensation when he breathes, which is worse. “I’m bleeding on the evidence.” She’s got him propped up on the back pack he’s got filled with files. The back pack that was on his back when he got shot. “He had a rifle.”

“I know, Gibbs, big one.” His eyes are sliding closed.

She slaps him, hard, and his eyes jerk open again. “Stay the fuck awake. You do not fall asleep and you sure as fucking hell do not die on me, you hear?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” His eyes are drooping.
Abbi runs, as fast as she has ever run before, for the doors. How long did it take to get Gibbs patched up? How long do they have?

She stops, skidding, in front of the doors. Sparks, welding sparks, and a long, red hot on one side and cold black on the other, cut through the door. Soon. Just gotta hold tight. Her back is to the wall, no one can get her from that side, and she’s watching for any movement.

Clank. The cut bit of door crashes into the floor. She’s sprinting again as Fornell’s coming in. “Abbi.”

“Ambulance. Now!”

He’s barking orders, and she’s heading back to Gibbs.

“Is he alive?” Tim feels the fear high and tight through his whole body.

“I don’t know, McGee. Abbi’s in one piece, but bloody. We heard shots fired. The EMTs are fifteen feet behind me. What’s Gibbs’ blood type?”

“I don’t…” He’s getting into the HR database as fast as he can. But Gibbs isn’t there anymore because he’s not an active employee.

“Pump him full of O,” Jimmy says.

The EMTs know that. Tim knows they know that. Hell, it’s likely the only blood they stock. More hunting, service records, have to be here somewhere. “A positive.”

He hears Fornell say that to someone else.

He can hear feet pounding, and Fornell breathing hard.

“You see him?”

“No, just stepped over a body, but it’s not his.” More running and rasping breath. He hears EMTs saying something indistinct, and gets the sense that they just passed Fornell.

“They’re putting him on a backboard, and running an IV line. Picking him up, he’s holding Abbi’s hand, won’t let her go.”

Tim feel the vice around his heart relax. “He’s alive.”

He can hear the relief in Fornell’s voice, too. “He’s alive.”

“What hospital are they taking him to?”
Fornell asks, and a second later says, “Mercy General.”

“Abby and I are his next of kin,” Leon nods at him. The FBI’s got control of the investigation now. Tim’s running out, Jimmy close behind. They get to the parking garage, and Jimmy says, “You go to him, I’ll get the girls.”

“Thanks.”
Tim rarely drives like a maniac. Which doesn’t mean that he can’t do it. He just doesn’t like it. But, between Gibbs and Ziva he’s learned from the best when it comes to driving like Mario Andretti on speed, so flashers going, he races to Mercy, and manages to beat the ambulance there.

Flashing his ID all over the place gets him a prime place to wait, and when the ambulance does come in, EMTs rush Gibbs past, shooing Abbi and Ziva away. He gets a glimpse of Gibbs, unconscious, blood everywhere.

Abbi’s standing next to him, vibrating with scared and angry and too much everything, and then she turns, punches the wall, hard, denting the drywall, and collapses into Ziva, sobbing.

Roughly twenty million years go by before the first of the surgeons come out (though it’s before the rest of the family has gotten there, so realistically it’s been less than twenty minutes). “Are you Tim McGee?”

Tim nods. Abbi and Ziva also staring at the surgeon, all three of them quivering with nerves. “Yeah. How is he?”

“Insanely lucky and very hurt. The bullet entered below his right shoulder blade and chewed the bottom lobe to bits.” The surgeon shakes his head. “Never seen a bullet that big in someone still alive. We’re prepping him for surgery. The right lung has three lobes. The bottom one can’t be saved, and we’re not sure about the middle one, either. Top one’s taken minimal damage, we know we can save it.”

“What does that mean? Will he survive this?” Abbi asks.

“Barring unforeseen complications, yes.”

Tim feels himself, Abbi and Ziva relax a hair. But there’s survive and then there’s living. "Will he be on oxygen for the rest of his life?" Tim asks.

“Depends on how much of his lung we have to take out. If it’s just the bottom lobe, he’ll be more or less okay. Once he heals up, he won’t notice it except if he’s working hard. Take two thirds of a lung out, and it’ll start to slow him down in day to day life.”

“But he’ll live?” Abbi asks again, needing to hear it again.

“He should. We’re pumping him full of blood, and the faster we can get everything tied off the better his chances are. People have survived with only one lobe. He’ll have at least three of them when we’re done.” The surgeon checks his watch. “He should be ready to go by now, which means I’ve got to go. We’ll send a nurse out when he’s done.”

Another million years before Ducky and Penny get there.
Penny sees Abbi, so tense, so angry, so afraid, and so hurt. She swings into comforter mode. “Come on, Abbi, let’s get you washed up,” she says gently.

Abbi looks at her hands and arms, her shirt and pants, and sees she’s covered in Jethro’s blood.

She nods, slowly.

Ducky sends a text to Abby, telling her that Ziva and Abbi need clean clothing. She’s bloody from Jethro, and Ziva’s (less) bloody from holding her.

Eventually, everyone arrives.

Ducky tells them that the amount of waiting they’re doing is a good thing. It means they can likely save the second third of the lung. A straight lobectomy is a quick thing. In, and tie it off, and done. In Korea, he’d seen surgeons do it in less than twenty minutes.

Five hours in means they’re patching things up, tying off bleeders, and getting him into shape to heal up.

Tim hopes that’s true and not just soothing bullshit.

Eventually a nurse does come in. He’s tall, with a deep gentle voice, and smiling. “Gibbs family?”

The fact that they all sprang up the second he entered the waiting room is likely a hint that he’s in the right spot.

“He’s going to be fine. They’ve got him in recovery right now, and in an hour or so they’ll transfer him to his own room.”

“His lung?” Ducky asks.

“We were able to save the middle lobe. He’s going to be sore for a while, but he’ll be fine.” The nurse smiles at them again, looking at this group of people standing around. “Okay. He’s going back to his room in an hour, and he’s going to be asleep for a long time. Next of Kin, you can stay, the rest of you, go home, rest, come back with lunch, which is about when he’ll be waking up.”

Everyone starts shuffling around, not happy about that, but not about to fight it either.

Tim quickly looks at Abby and she nods. He wraps his arm around Abbi, standing so her left hand is behind his back, hiding the lack of wedding ring, and says, “Okay, where do we wait?”

“Tim and Abby McGee?” Tim nods, and Abbi knows what he’s doing. “You can come with me. When he gets to his room, you’ll be there.”

Tim smiles a little. “Sounds good.”

The next hour of waiting goes faster. They know he’s okay. They know he’s going to be okay. And
they’ve got their respective higher ups demanding updates.

Granted, he’s just letting Leon and Fornell know what’s going on, but Abbi’s got Admiral Zukunft, Commandant of the Coast Guard on her phone, explaining everything to him.

From what Tim can hear, the Admiral is not having a great day. From what Abbi’s saying, he’s going to be spreading his not great day around all over the place in the not too distant future.

They’ve got the first of the sit reps done when the nurse comes back with Jethro. And, like he said, Jethro is asleep.

His skin is pale, and he’s got an IV in his left arm, a pulse ox monitor on his finger, and an O2 tube in his nose, and more tubes coming out from under his blankets. But he’s in one piece, and he’s alive.

Abbi’s right next to him, holding his hand, gently touching his face, and the nurse looks awfully sure that this is not Gibbs’ daughter.

Tim shrugs at him. The nurse shakes his head, small smile on his face, and leaves them be.

Another hour goes by. It’s late and they’ve both hit the crash part of the adrenaline cycle. They’re drooping. She’s slouched in the chair, snoozing, and he’s trying to find a vaguely comfortable position on the sofa. Tim thinks he’d just fallen asleep when the surgeon comes in and explains the case, how they were able to save the second lobe, how right now Gibbs is on oxygen and a lot of antibiotics, and has a drain in his lung, but, assuming everything goes well, they’ll take the drain out the day after tomorrow, and he should be off the O2 in a few more days.

Tim finally notices the bandage on Gibbs’ arm. “What’s?” he asks, pointing at it.

The surgeon checks Gibbs' notes. (He didn’t handle that part.) “Apparently he got clipped on the arm as well. That one’s fairly minor. The bullet took a chunk of his deltoid out. He’ll have a hard time raising his hand for a while, but with enough PT…”

Tim holds up his own hand in the cast. “I’ve heard this song before.”

The surgeon nods. “He should be sleeping the rest of the night and the morning. When he wakes up, we’ll talk with him about what happens next.”

Tim and Abbi nod at that, and the surgeon leaves.

It’s morning, not lunchtime, when Gibbs starts to shift a bit. His eyes open, and he sees Abbi, looking down at him. He smiles up at her, and she bends down, kisses him once, and then leaves.

Tim can feel the angry pouring off of her, and he’s sure Gibbs can, too.

“She’s going to kill you when you get out of here,” Tim says.

Gibbs looks over at him, surprised to see him here. “Hi.”
“Hi yourself.” Tim stands up, trying to get his body to stop yelling at him about what he just did to it, sleeping on the sofa. “So, looks like you’re alive.”

Gibbs is grinning. “Yep. What happened?” He touches the tube in his nose, but doesn’t try to remove it. “Feel like I was hit by a truck.”

“Just about.” Tim explains what happened, and Gibbs sits there, listening, fiddling with his tubes and the little button that gives him more pain meds, looking really perky.

Finally, as Gibbs is grinning at the ceiling, Tim asks, “So, you and morphine get along good, or are you just in a stupidly good mood for someone who just got shot?”

Gibbs smiles. “Happy.”

“Yeah. I can see. You’re smiling more now than we got married.”

“We got married? Didn’t think I was that out of it.”

Tim rolls his eyes. “When Abby and I got married.”

Gibbs giggles. Or tries to. He gets about halfway through the first laugh before his lungs let him know that’s not on the menu. So he grins. He’s in a ridiculously good mood. Tim’s not sure he’s ever seen him in this good of a mood. (He’s also wondering if he’s this goofy when he’s on Percocet, because from the outside looking in this feels really weird.)

He’s still smiling. “C’mere.”

Tim does, half sitting on Gibbs’ bed. Gibbs wiggles his finger, signaling closer. So Tim leans in and gets as much of a hug as a guy who’s less than a day out of surgery for a bullet to the lung, and one more that took out a chunk of his arm, can give.

Tim hugs him back, as long and intensely as he can without hurting him, another wave of how close he came to never doing this again hitting him. “Scared the shit out of me.”

Gibbs nods.

“I love you.”

Gibbs kisses him and ruffles his hair. “Love you, too.”

Tim wipes his eyes and leans back, but he’s still holding Gibbs’ hand. “I’m new to this having a Dad I love thing, but I do love it, so don’t make me bury you, not anytime soon, okay?”

“Okay.”

“My kids gotta learn how to sail, and they’ve got to learn how to build, and I need them to have memories of you. I need them to know who you are.”

Gibbs nods.

“And I need you. I need you here, in one piece, being you.”

Gibbs smiles at that, too. “Was being me.” He’s looking at Tim, so very earnest right now. “I saved her.”

Tim closes his eyes for a long second, and then opens them, and kisses Gibbs again. “Okay.”
He’d said it to his own Abby. Gibbs failed. Any man who was ever worth a damn has one goal and everything else pales next to it, and that’s to make sure his wife and kids outlive him. And Gibbs failed, and he carried that around so long and so far he’d forgotten what it felt like to not have it. And then Kate. And Jen, probably, too. They haven’t talked about Jen, so he doesn’t know if Gibbs feels responsible for that.

And for everyone he’s saved, for all the lives that have gone on and done big and beautiful things, the ones that mattered most to him personally, those he couldn’t save. Those he didn’t save.

Until yesterday.

Tim’s fingers hover lightly over the bandage on Gibbs’ torso. He can guess what would have happened to Abbi if that bullet had hit her. Only reason Gibbs is still here is because that bullet went through ten inches of files and a Kevlar vest. A direct hit to Abbi’s chest and that would have been the end.

Today Gibbs is smiling. Because last night years of would have, could have, should have, and soul scarring failure finally released their hold on him.

And of course, because he’s Gibbs, it took a bullet to do it.

Next time Gibbs wakes up, he hurts all over, and Fornell is sitting in the chair next to his bed. Fornell sees his eyes open and says, “The lengths you won’t go to to get out of having to give a speech.”

Gibbs begins to laugh, but that hurts. He tentatively tries talking, and that hurts too, but not as bad as he thought it might. “Told you’d rather die than give a speech.”

“Almost did. They dug a .50 BMG out of your back. Only reason you’re alive is it had to go through ten inches of paper and a Kevlar vest to get into you.”

Gibbs nods. He knew whatever hit him had to be the size of a rocket to get through all that.

“Didn’t get into her.”

Fornell nods. “She’s fine. Pissed at you.”

Gibbs nods again and rubs his eyes. He’s got no idea what time it is, and is starting to feel sleepy again. Though pressing that little button seemed like it was taking care of hurting. “How’s the case going?”

“Making Gillery… He’s the Agent who runs all of our high profile corruption cases… very happy. This one’s going to make his career.” Fornell inclines his head. “Abbi’s too. Admiral Zukunft just named her Acting Director of CGIS. She’s in charge until this case is done, and given the buzz, likely after, too.”

Gibbs smiles at that, too. “What are…” he realizes he doesn’t know who made it out, or for that matter who else was involved with this.

“What are the survivors saying?” Fornell asks for him.

“Yeah.”

Fornell smiles and shakes his head, his you’re not going to believe this look on his face. “Shitting us
about how Abbi’s part of the corruption ring, and that she wanted to take over, so she’s pulling a coup on them.”

For the first time all day, Gibbs is awake and not smiling. “Fuck that.”

“Yeah. That’s going nowhere. They’re claiming she planted the incendiary and was trying to burn everything that showed she was part of it.”

“Uh huh. They know about Severs?”

“You mean that we’ve got him, and his bag, which has explosive residue in it from the detonator he carried in it to set up his own little IED? No, they don’t.”

Gibbs sighs, that hurts too. “The lawyers are having fun.”

“Oh yeah.” Fornell can see Gibbs is drifting again. “Go back to sleep. Case’ll still be here when you wake up.”

Gibbs nods, eyes slipping closed.

There’s an in and out round robbin of people visiting him. That’s the whole first day. Mostly he’s asleep, but every time he wakes up, someone is there with him, and he does get at least a few minutes with everyone. Except Abbi.

Gibbs thinks that’s the second day, too. Time’s gone wonky for him, and he’s not sure when anything is happening. Though he does remember having the drain removed (that hurt, too) and Penny and Ducky were with him when that happened.

He remembers talking to doctors, and Abby there for that.

And lots of weird dreams.

He sees Tony and Ziva, and Jimmy and Breena are there at one point. He wakes up with Ducky holding his hand, and gets a stern lecture about how, as Ducky’s executor, it’s his job to outlive him.

Gibbs does a lot of nodding and smiling, and promising he’s not going to go off and die anytime soon.

Ziva tells him Abbi will come, but she’s not here, not now. She’s angry.

He can live with that.

She’s alive.

She’s alive, so he can live with pretty much anything right now.
On Thursday afternoon, Abbi slams the door shut behind her. She’s glaring fire at Gibbs, and he’s thinking it’s probably a good thing he’s stoned, because otherwise this would be scary. But as it is, he’s mostly just amused.

She is not happy, at all. And he’s realizing (as she’s getting into it) that this is her with however long it’s been to calm down. He’s had some pissed off red heads yell at him before, and this one… This is a furious, red-headed, Marine yelling at him. He’s never been chewed out this thoroughly in his life.

“I saved you,” he manages to get in during one of the bits about how could he possibly be so goddammed stupid.

That doesn’t slow her down, at all. Abbi’s still yelling at him, and he doesn’t mind. It’s all good. She’s here to be pacing around yelling. He’s fine with that. She can yell as long as she wants, because it means she’s still here.

He’s smiling at her, looking pretty goofy, and that’s not doing much for her mood, because having him grin while she’s chewing him out is not the level of contrition she’s aiming for. Finally she just stops, because this is not hitting him, at all, the way it’s supposed to.

When she stops he says, “You saved me. Fornell says you got him, shot him from fifty feet away with a pistol, in the dark, while I was taking you down. Another shot and that would have been it for me.” He grins again, big, stupid, dopy, happy grin. “Thanks.”

Abbi sighs, and sits on the edge of the bed, and glares at him while holding his hand. “Go back to sleep.”

He nods, head resting on the pillows. “Okay.” His eyes are dipping low, and he’s still smiling. “I saved you.”

She kisses his forehead. “Yeah, you did.” She ruffles his hair. “Scared the hell out of me, too.”

“Sorry.”

“No, you aren’t.”

He shrugs. “If it means you’re still here…” He pulls her a little closer and kisses her. His eyes slide shut and he feels her breath on his face. His hand skims from the back of her neck to her throat, touching her skin where her pulse thrums. “I saved you.”

She kisses him again.

Once Gibbs is completely out of it, Abbi’s got to get back to work. There is a lot going on right now, and she’s got to get briefed, give briefings, and see how bad the destruction is.

As she’s getting ready to head out, she sees McGee and Abby also getting ready to head out. Ziva’s here, as well as Breena, so Gibbs won’t wake up alone, but they’ve all got casework that’s got to get done.

“Walk with me?” she says to the McGees as they’re getting ready to go.

“Sure.” Abby says. Tim nods along, too.

“What’s on your mind?” Tim asks as they head to the doors.
“He keeps saying, ‘I saved you.’”

Tim and Abby glance at each other. They know Gibbs has mentioned Shannon and Kelly to Abbi, they don’t know how much she knows about it. They don’t know what she knows about Kate, or about Jen, either.

Tim looks at Abby like he wants guidance, and she shrugs, seeming to say, *Go ahead, worst comes to worst, he’ll be pissed.* Tim nods at her.

“Got time for a quick coffee on the way out?”

Not really, but she’ll get one. Abbi nods at him, and they head to the cafeteria. He and Abby both get lemonade. The coffee smells like burnt battery acid, and since he’s not getting any caffeine out of it these days, it’s not worth the taste.

Abbi gets coffee. But this stuff is bad enough she puts milk and sugar in it. Tim never thought he’d see coffee so bad she’d doctor it to make it better.

Abbi’s looking impatient, not really wanting to discuss her coffee.

“You know Gibbs is psychic,” Abby starts with.

Tim rolls his eyes a little, but he doesn’t have a better term for it. “The gut knows. And when Shannon got mixed up in that case his gut started screaming. And it kept screaming. He wanted to be home to make sure they were safe. He tried to get leave. But they wouldn’t let him have it. He was ordered to stay, so he stayed. Shannon kept telling him she was safe. She had DEA protection. Hernandez sniped them, hit the driver of the van they were in, the van crashed, and they died. He didn’t save them, and that’s been killing him for twenty-five years.”

Abby nods along. “He’s been wishing he’d gone AWOL, grabbed his girls, and gotten them safe for decades now.”

“With Kate, the gut knew.” Tim’s heard a little about this. Abby’s gotten more out of Gibbs. One day, a few months ago, after they’d talked about Mike, after a good Shabbos and a few glasses of wine, she had mentioned how she felt Kate’s spirit around right after she died, and she gently got him talking about it. “He was having nightmares about her dead. He knew Ari was bad news. Knew this was going to blow up. And they were on that roof, and Kate took the bullet for him. Full on Secret Service jumped into it, and took it. She saved him. They got the situation under control. Got the shooter. And they’re standing there, talking, and Ari pulled the trigger and… And she was less than two feet away from him and right in front of Tony, and…”

Tim takes over. “And you’ve got to get almost a full bottle of bourbon into him before he talks about that. He thought, that that was it. She was safe. She stood back up, the vest did it’s job, and they started to relax, and then she was gone.”

“Before she died, he told Tony and Ziva to keep eyes on Jenny. Keep close track of her. But Jen didn’t want a shadow. She wanted to go out in a blaze of glory. She ordered them off, and she outranked them, and she died,” Abby says, quietly, sipping her drink.

Tim nods. “He’s buried almost every girl he’s ever tried to save.” His arm tightens around Abby, who Gibbs has successfully saved. “He’s buried every lover, or… he and Kate never got there, but they both wanted it. Any girl he’s loved who’s been in danger, he’s put in the ground.”

Abbi exhales long and slow. She knew the bones of those stories, some of them, at least, but not all of that. “Shit.”
“Yeah. He’s not that smiley because he’s having a good time on morphine,” Abby says. “We’ve seen him on painkillers. He’s usually pretty crabby. But he saved you, so he’s Mr. Smiley right now.”

Tim adds, “And if you stay the Director of CGIS, that means this was your last run out into the field. From now on, the most dangerous thing you’re going to run into is boredom and paper cuts.”

“First time in years, he’s feeling like he didn’t fail.”

Abbi nods. “He saved himself.”

Tim and Abby nod in agreement with that. “Yeah. I think a lot of scars just released,” Tim says.

Abbi takes a sip of her coffee, thinking about that, and about what he said to her, ‘You saved me.’ For the first time since the shooting stopped, she’s getting a minute to feel that. She doesn’t carry the weight of thinking that she should have somehow gotten her team out. She doesn’t blame herself for Liam’s death. The weight of living when he didn’t, that’s been there for years, but… there was no way to know. One minute they were fine, the next they’d bumped the IED and it was over.

But she can see it from Gibbs’ mind. See her history touched by his experiences, and how he understands that.

She takes one more sip, and grimaces. “This is awful.” She stands up. “Gotta get back to work. Thanks for the background.”

Tim and Abby glance at each other and then her. “Okay.”

It’s ten hours later when she gets back to the hospital. Ziva’s in Gibbs’ room, holding his hand, reading while he sleeps.

She looks up and smiles at her as she comes in, quietly saying, “Done for the day?”

“For the next ten hours. Then back. Three quarters of our case files are gone. And that thing Brandis did to shut us down, it totaled every computer in the placed. Turned them all into paperweights.”

One of the briefings she went to explained what had happened, and to answer McGee’s question, yes it was a small EMP. The idea being that if anyone was breaking into the building to get access to the computers, this would kill anything they could get (and kill all of their electronics, too). Supposedly, there are back ups of everything off site so it’s not supposed to be that much of a loss, but, staring at a building with no functional electronics, and a strapped budget for refitting it, Abbi’s not having a good time.

Ziva nods. She knows how massive of a mess this is.

“FBI’s questioning everyone. Nothing’s getting done. I’m shifting all of our active cases to Baltimore, Norfolk, and Charleston. And even with that, they’ve got their own local FBI investigations going. No one’s sure exactly how far this goes and it’s going to be weeks before I’ve got enough personnel cleared to have a functional office again.”

“Sorry.”

Abbi smiles grimly. Then something hits her. “You just transferred to desk duty, right?”
Ziva nods.

“What’s your security clearance?”

Ziva knows where this is going. “High enough.”

“I need someone to help me get this up and running again. I need someone who I trust and who I know isn’t involved in this. Feel like spending some time getting CGIS up and running again?”

Ziva smiles. “I can do that. And I think my Boss will approve.”

Abbi sighs. Having another set of useful hands feels good. “Go get some sleep. Tomorrow morning, 08:00, my office. We start wading through everything.”

“Good.” Ziva stands up, gently stroking Gibbs’ face as she turns to leave.

“How’s he doing?” Abbi asks as she settles into the chair next to his bed.

“Sleeping. Asked for you a few hours ago when he woke up. Still in a really good mood. He’s being nice to the doctor and nurses.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.” Ziva shoulders her purse. “See you tomorrow.”

Abbi rolls her shoulders and kicks off her shoes. She should probably go home, get some clean clothing, get a shower, maybe eat something, but… nope. Right now she wants to be here. She scoots the chair around a bit, and puts her feet up on Gibbs’ bed, and then scoots down so her head is on the backrest. Time to grab some zzzs.

She wakes up feeling something rubbing her foot.

Sleepy blue eyes meet hers. “Hey,” Gibbs says.

“Hi.” She sits up, looking around, bit after 03:00 “You okay?”

“Yeah. More okay than I’ve been in a long time.”

Abbi nods. “Tim and Abby filled me in.”

He sighs. “Yeah.”

She leans in, taking his hand in hers, and kissing him. She’s looking into his eyes as she says, “So, how about we never do this again?”

He grins. “You know? I’m good with that.”

She chuckles lightly, and he starts trying to scoot over some. “What are you doing?”

“Making room. Wanna touch more than your hand.”

“Jethro…” She’s not too sure about him scooting over.
“If Abby could love on Tim when he was all beat up, you can snuggle me.”

“You’re not just beat up.”

“I’ve had worse.”

“Like fuck you have! They cut out a third of your lung.”

He shrugs.

She glares gently at him, but he’s all the way over, so she gingerly gets up onto the bed with him.

He smiles again, wrapping his good arm around her, holding her tight. That feels good. “Not like I was doin’ much with it.”

She pulls back at that, putting some space between them, looking him in the eyes. “Jethro, don’t! Don’t make light of it. Don’t joke it away. I am allowed to...” she doesn’t specify what she’s allowed, but he sees fear and anger and pain in her eyes, “And you laughing it off doesn’t help.”

More serious than he’s been since he got shot. “Okay.”

“I can still see your blood on my hands. Still smell it if I let my guard down.”

He nods and pulls her in close, kissing her forehead, feeling her warm against his side.

“And if you’re allowed to get shot for me, then I’m allowed to get mad and scared when you do it.”

He nods, kissing her again.

She pulls back again, wanting to be looking at him for this. “If this, what we have, is going to work, then... First off we’ve both got to be here. I’m not doing the dead fiancée thing again. I need a living, breathing man, not the memory of one!

“And I don’t need a hero. I’m the white knight. You’re out of the knight business. You hung up your armor and sword. From now on, you wear the pink poofy dress, and if need be, I’m saving your ass.”

He’s tempted to say, ‘you did’ but she’s on a roll, still lots of scared and angry needs to come out, and he knows breaking in right now is a bad plan.

“At the end of the day, I come home to you. That’s how this works. Every day. I come home to you. And I don’t get to do that if you go out there and get killed. So you don’t go out there and get shot! I don’t ever want to be scared like that again. Unless you’re donating it, your blood stays inside your body, got it?”

He nods, holding her face in his hands. “Okay. I’m okay.”

“I know.”

“Gonna heal up. Doc says my lung’ll expand to fill my chest. Won’t have quite as much wind, but as long as I keep working at it, I’ll get most of it back. Only got two lobes in the left side, right’ll be okay like that, too.”

“I know. I was there when you got out of surgery.”

“Right.”
She sniffs, and he realizes she’s been very determinedly not crying on him.

“I’m still here.”

“I know. But we aren’t doing this again.”

“Yeah.” He kisses her again. “Coming home to me every day?”

“Yeah.”

He kisses her once more. “I like that.”

---

In the end it was a ridiculously easy plan. Five guys, poker buddies, stationed out of the Miami Coast Guard, lamented how the people they were busting lived like kings, and they were scraping by on a beggar’s salary.

So, they came up with a plan. A way to build their own kingdom, get rich off the fat of the land, and still put the bad guys away. (Because, of course, in the plan, they weren’t the bad guys, and honestly, at first, they weren’t.) Simple really, be good at their jobs, really good. Get promoted, then promote each other, and once they had all of the power positions settled between them, they could do whatever they liked.

And, if they had stayed with just skimming off the drug money that flowed in with each bust, they could have lived like kings and probably done it indefinitely.

But they got greedy. When they started this plan, they didn’t realize that a King can burn through more money, faster, than they ever dreamed. They developed very expensive tastes. And expensive friends to go with those tastes. Which meant they needed even more money. And more money meant they needed help to maintain their operation, which meant more people learned what was up, and some of them were greedy too.

By the time Abbi had stumbled into it, the five kings had grown filthy rich, and covered in gnawing maggots level corrupt.

And like anything else so rotted it’s wriggling, all it took was a gentle push to topple it.

By the time Gibbs got out of the hospital, Abbi Borin, as the only Director at CGIS who was certain not to be part of the conspiracy, was the Acting Director of CGIS, in charge of “sanitizing” CGIS from the ground up if necessary.
The door doesn’t open. Gibbs is sure of that, just as sure as he is of someone else entering his hospital room.

He smiles because he knows who it is.

“Hey.” His eyes haven’t opened, yet, and he’s speaking in a whisper. Borin’s snuggled up next to him, asleep.

“Hi.” He turns his face to her, still smiling, and feels her stroke his cheek as he opens his eyes. Shannon’s smiling down at him. “Been a long time since I saw that smile.”

He nods.

“I missed it.”

He keeps smiling up at her. “Dreaming?”

“Maybe?” She shakes her head, saying, “It doesn’t matter.”

“Nope. Thought you weren’t coming by for a while.”

“You know what they say about plans, Gibbs. They rarely survive contact with reality.”

“Yep.”

Shannon’s studying Borin, and he gently kisses the top of her head. Shannon nods and smiles. “I do like her.”

“Good.”

“And I’m happy.” She squeezes Gibbs hand, kisses him softly, looks him in the eyes and says, “Don’t screw it up. This is the best thing that’s happened to you in a long time, so…” He knows that look, that, I know you, and I know your patterns so tread right, Mr. He didn’t see it a lot when they were married, but enough so he knows it, and knows she’s serious.

“I won’t.”

That gets another smile, and a gentle pat on his cheek. “Good. I love you.” Shannon looks kindly at Borin. “And when we finally get to meet, I’m gonna love her, too.”

“Really?”

“Of course! Why wouldn’t I love someone who helped to put that smile on your face?”

Gibbs doesn’t have words for that, but it makes him feel good, feel settled and right in a way he hasn’t for a very long time. So he smiles at his first wife, and kisses the woman he hopes will be his last wife, and Shannon nods at him, and fades away.

Gibbs wakes to the sensation of Abbi shifting around, getting out of his bed.
He’s got to get up, soon, too. His bladder is telling him time to get a move on. He supposes it’s a good thing they’re letting him walk around some, but he hates how out of breath just a ten foot walk makes him.

So, as she’s standing up, putting a call in for breakfast for them, he starts the slow process of collecting his various tubes, and shuffling to the head.

She comes in while he’s brushing his teeth, left handed, which feels godawful weird, but right now every time he does anything with his right hand his shoulder screams at him.

“Oatmeal and eggs coming soon.”

He gives her a half-hearted smile. “Don’t suppose there’s any coffee with that?”

She shakes her head. “If Ducky or Jimmy says I can sneak you a cup, I will.”

“They’re not going to say you can.”

“What a shock. At least you were on morphine the first few days.”

He nods at that. If you have to go from, on average, 120 ounces of coffee a day to cold turkey, being drugged to the eyeballs helps a lot. He’s also thinking this might be why, in addition to the pain killers, he’s sleeping so much.

Gibbs eyes the shower as Abbi gets in, but he still doesn’t have permission to get his bandages wet. Something about infection, and they only took the drain out of his lung yesterday, and just maybe it’s a good plan not to have a direct route for pathogens to get right into his lungs.

He’s making do with sponge baths, and supposedly will have to until he gets home on Sunday.

Home on Sunday.

He can’t speak loudly because of his lung, but he hopes she can hear him. “You serious about coming home to me?”

"Yeah." Apparently she can hear him over the sound of the water.

He pulls back the shower curtain, thinking he may look kind of silly, hospital gown, O2 tube still in his nose, hair sticking in fifty directions, but… Now, now’s right. “Then come home to me. Move in. Bring all your stuff and never leave.”

She’s staring at him, water pouring down her body, still a quarter asleep, and says, “Jethro?”

“Come home. Let’s make it home, for both of us.”

She steps out of the shower because she can’t pull him in, and kisses him, very gently. “Yes.”

Gibbs wakes up again several hours later. Abbi’s gone. Work’s eating up at least twelve hours a day right now, and would take more but she’s not letting it.
Tim and Tony are there.

“I don’t need you guys babysitting me.”

“Good morning to you, too, Sunshine,” Tony says.

“I never woke up alone when I was in the hospital, so you aren’t, either,” Tim adds.

“Besides, when you see what we’ve brought you, you’ll be happy we’re here,” Tony says with a grin, pulling a cup out of a bag.

Gibbs does look pleased to see that. He starts to sit up, and Tim reaches over to help him up.

Tony hands it over. “Just don’t tell Ducky or Palmer.”

Gibbs gently clasps the coffee in his left hand, reverently smelling the much too tiny cup of his one true love. “You’re good boys.” He takes a deep, savoring sip, and sighs, huge smile on his face, sublime joy lighting his eyes. “Missed this.”

“I’m sure,” Tim says dryly. He’s wondering if Gibbs is going to notice it’s decaf. (The ‘don’t tell Jimmy and Ducky,’ who of course know about this, is to help sell the idea it’s real coffee. Caffeine is a mild vasodilator, which means it effects blood flow to the lungs, and is, for the next few months, on Jethro’s no-no list.)

Gibbs looks up at Tim over the cup and smiles at him, again. “You know all about the first cup back after a while off.”

Tim nods. “And only five and a half more months until I get my next one.” Tim looks at Tony, “So, father to be, you doing anything…”

Tony shakes his head. “Unless Jimmy’s going to write me my own prescription for morphine for the next week, you don’t want to see me go cold turkey. You think you were annoying when you went off of it? I drink more coffee than you do and have been doing it for a decade… Hell, you started at like twenty, right?”

“Seventeen. Once I got to college, it was more or less glued into my hand. Every now and again before that, but it wasn’t a regular thing until college.”

“Okay, I’ve been doing it for fifteen years longer than you.”

Tim runs the math on that. “That means you started drinking coffee when you were eleven.”

Tony nods. “I was allowed to have a glass of wine with dinner then, too.”

Both Tim and Gibbs are just staring at Tony, with matching was your father insane expressions on their faces. “Not a big one. We were in Bern that summer. Dinner was long, started late, and if you were enough of a grown up to eat with the adults you got to eat what the adults ate. So, small glass of whatever went with the dinner, and coffee with dessert after.”

That lessens the insane looks a bit, but doesn’t entirely make them go away.

Gibbs takes another sip of his. “Dad always had a pot on. Back of the shop. When things were slow, he’d invite people to have a cup and hang out. Wasn’t allowed to have any until I was fourteen. ‘It’ll stunt your growth.’ Once I got taller than he was, I was allowed to have some.”

Tony grins. Gibbs is an inch or so shorter than he and Tim. “So, what, you should have waited
“another year or so?”

Gibbs almost laughs, but he catches himself, and then says, “Uh huh. So, you’re supposed to be what, six eight?”

Tony nods, standing up as straight as he can, looking taller. “Story in our family was that coffee puts hair on your chest. Should have started sooner, McSatinySmooth.”

“Yeah, as life goals went, a hairy chest was never on my list.” Actually, back when he was younger it was something he dearly wanted, and he was deeply disappointed in when his body quit at seventeen chest hairs, but he’s sure as hell not bringing that up in front of The Silver Wookie and Wookie Junior. “Would have just meant more time shaving.”

Tony and Gibbs do that thing where they look at each other and pointedly decide they aren’t going to ask.

“Don’t give me that. I know you’ve done it at least once,” he says to Gibbs, who looks very startled by that.

“When did that happen?” Tony’s not remembering any moments of not very fuzzy Gibbs. But, if given the option, Gibbs rooms with McGee… something about wanting peace and quiet… maybe he wouldn’t have seen.

“Scrubbing off the plague. Not a hair on him.”

Gibbs shrugs. “Elizabeth liked it.”

Tony lights up at that. “Nameless red-head has a name!”

Gibbs smiles. “Yeah.”

Given how good of a mood Gibbs is in, and the fact that he seems to be enjoying it, Tim presses a little more. “Current red-head was in a really good mood this morning.”

Gibbs nods, grinning, looking very pleased with himself.

Tony’s eyes go wide. “Here? With the nurses and doctors wandering in all the time. That’s a trick out of Palmer’s book.”

Gibbs glares at that. He’s not uninterested in sex, but it hasn’t gone beyond a mild passing fancy, and between the tubes, not having any real privacy, and the fact that he can’t walk more than a few feet without ending up out of breath, he’s not thinking that mild-passing-fancy is turning into anything real anytime soon.

However, both of the boys are looking exceptionally amused, and from the looks of it have misread his glare to mean that yes, that’s exactly why Abbi was in a good mood, so he clarifies. “Not why she’s in a good mood.”

“So, why was she in a good mood?” Tim asks.

“Moving party next week.”

Tim and Tony smile at that.
“You appear to be in splendid mood today, Jethro,” Ducky says as he ambles into Gibbs’ hospital room.

Gibbs smiles.

“I take it Anthony and Timothy’s pick-me-up helped?”

So much for not telling. Gibbs thought he smelled a rat on that. “It did. What happened earlier this morning helped more.”

“Good news from your doctors?” Ducky asks as he sits down.

“Nope. They’re still yammering about observation and antibiotics. Not letting me out until tomorrow.”

Ducky raises an eyebrow.

“Asked Abbi to move in and she said yes. Next week, we’re loading up her stuff and moving her in.”

Ducky smiles widely at that, too. “Jethro! That’s wonderful.”

“Yeah, feels good.”

Ducky nods. “As it should, my friend, as it should.”

Gibbs looks at Ducky’s wedding ring. “How long did that take?”

Ducky smiles widely, eyes sparking with joy. “Seven weeks. Are you thinking of making a purchase?”

“Was thinking it might be nice to have something to give her, her first night home.” That strikes Ducky as a very Gibbs sort of answer. None of the other wives lived with him before he married them, though Diane certainly ’stayed over’ a lot.

“If you want custom work, it won’t be done that quickly.”

Gibbs isn’t sure if he wants custom work. He also isn’t sure if he wants to wait. He is sure that Tim and Ducky both had rings make, and they look awesome. Jimmy and Tony bought pre-made ones, and those are good, too. He thinks for a second and realizes he does have options. “Her birthday is in October.”

“That might be doable. Where’s your phone?”

“In about two hundred pieces in the basement of CGIS. Tim’s supposed to be bringing me a new one tomorrow.”

“Ah.” Ducky gets out his phone, and fiddles with it for a few minutes. “Mr. Blandon’s,” his jewler, “website. These tiny screens make it hard to see what he does, but I believe he has a mix and match menu you can customize from, and” Ducky touches his own ring, “obviously, you can continue to customize from there.”

Gibbs squints at the screen, and reaches over for his glasses. “Never thought I’d say it, but I want my laptop.”
“I understand.”

Gibbs flicks around, looking at the pictures. “This used to be easier.”

Ducky chuckles at that.

“I’m sure you can still walk into a jewelry store, hand them a pile of cash, and get the largest, most sparkly diamond available for that pile of cash.”

Gibbs eyes narrow at bit. He’d done that for Hannah. Diane and Stephanie picked out their own rings. Shannon’s he’d actually spent some time looking for the right one. His eyes narrow further as he thinks of the rings that didn’t result in anything good. Empty promises and broken lives.

“Doesn’t have to be a diamond, does it?”

Ducky is very pleased to see the level of thought Jethro is putting into this. “Depending on the woman, not a diamond can be an enticement. Penny would have been appalled to see a diamond on her ring.”

Gibbs inclines his head. He’s heard Abby and Penny talking about conflict diamonds, with Ziva adding how, before they’re cut, there’s pretty much no way to know where they come from, and yes, there are certification processes, but they are only as good as they people doing the certifying.

He doesn’t know if Abbi likes diamonds or not. She doesn’t wear them. But she doesn’t wear much in the way of jewelry period.

Of course, having been engaged once before, there probably was a time she wore one.

He wonders what her first ring looked like. She’s still got it; he knows that, but he hasn’t seen it. And, beyond not wanting to get anything that looks like it, he doesn’t want or need to see it. She’s allowed to have her own past and keep it hers.

He’s flipping through options on Ducky’s phone, and there are a ton of them. He might not have anything by the time she moves in, but an idea of what he wants to do for her birthday is starting to shape up in his mind, and he thinks he may be able to get something that’ll work well for that plan.

Ducky sits next to him, watching Jethro scrolling through rings, and smiles. He introduced Jethro to Diane, and remembers when they were getting engaged, and while Jethro was happy and excited, it was surface happiness. Nothing about it touched him deep down. Of course, back then, nothing touched him deep down. Back then, Ducky didn’t even know Jethro had a deep down.

But right now, he can see this is what truly happy Jethro looks like, and he’s immensely pleased to have his friend finally get there.
No Shabbos today.

Between various job commitments, and the round the clock someone with Gibbs vigil, it’s not happening.

This week, it’s Shabbos on Sunday. Gibbs is supposed to come home on Sunday, and rather than try to stuff all of them, and food, and baby girls into a tiny hospital room, they’re going to wait for him to come home.

And then they will properly celebrate the Sabbath, and life, and love, and family.

So, for Tim, Abby, Jimmy, and Breena, Friday is a quiet night in. Dinner, movie, PT, sex. A very good quiet night in.

Tim loves sex. And these days, he’s getting as much of it as he could possibly want. (And, were you to sit down with 2012 Tim and explain his current life to him, it’d be completely honest to say he’s getting more sex of higher quality and vastly more variety than he could have ever, in his wildest and most debauched dreams, imagined.) He thinks that’s important to moments like this one, because he knows he can enjoy them more. It’s easy, when you’re content in your soul, when all your needs are being met, to lay back, relax, and really steep in the joy of your loves.

He’s at Jimmy’s home, on the sofa. It’s fairly early. Dinner’s been eaten. Little girls were hosed off and put to bed. Breena popped up some popcorn, Jimmy queued up Captain America: Civil War, and now, they’re on the sofa, actually watching the movie.

He’s enjoying this. They’re all close and happy. Later, they’ll work on his hand, and he knows he’s going to ask the girls to work on his head and other hand while Jimmy does the hurt one. Then go to bed, have sex, watch each other, and then all go to sleep. He’s been looking forward to this since they worked on Jimmy together. It’s been a nice, happy, little fantasy in his head. He’s enjoying that, anticipating it, but enjoying now, because now is really good, too.

But if he was getting less sex, he’d be too keyed up looking forward to later to really enjoy this.

Abby’s curled into his lap, head against his shoulder, holding Breena’s hand, feet across Breena’s legs, in Jimmy’s lap. Breena’s on his side, hip against his, head on Jimmy’s shoulder. Jimmy’s on the far end, but he’s got his arm around Breena, so his hand is on Tim’s shoulder.

The sofa’s really only made for three people, but they’re skinny and friendly, so they fit.

And he thinks, (as Cap saves the day) (and Bucky, can’t end the movie without saving Bucky) that, as much as he loves the sex (which he really does) it’s these quiet, content moments he’s loving best.

Getting his hand worked on takes quiet, content up a notch.
Today he’s on the bed, lying on his back, naked, warm and very comfortable.

“What’d the Ortho say?” Jimmy asks as he carefully takes off Tim’s cast.

“One more week. Then I’m cast free and ready to start real PT on my hand.”

“That’s good, right?” Breena asks. His head is in her lap and her fingers are making gentle circles in his hair.

Tim sighs, very happy. This was good with strangers doing it. It’s phenomenal with his loves.

“Yeah.” He looks over at Jimmy. “Why are you taking it off?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Abby’s holding his left hand, gently rubbing her knuckles into his palm. “That sounds ominous.”

“Not really.” Jimmy looks up from Tim’s hand to Abby, then to Tim, “Not like I’m going to be yanking it around or bending it. Just want it out of the way so I can get to all of your hand.” That makes sense, the cast covers the bottom half of his palm.

“Fine by me.”

And it’s exactly as good as he thought it would be. Not sexy per se, but really good. Just warm and happy and he feels good all over. (He’s got the sense that as soon as the girls move to the bottom half of him, this will ramp up a few notches on the sexy meter. Though given Jimmy’s also going to be really getting into his hand, they might just cancel each other out.)

“This should be a weekly thing. One of us gets worked on each week,” he says while Abby’s slowly stroking up and down each finger, and Breena’s rubbing his temples, and Jimmy works on loosening up his hand.

“Does that mean I’m up next week?” Abby asks.

“Oh yeah.” Tim grins up at her, looking forward to lying her out and rubbing all over her with Jimmy and Breena.

Breena’s grinning at that. Wide, happy smile. She shifts over a bit and kisses Jimmy, and then gently strokes Tim’s face.

“Want me to get video of it?” she asks Abby.

Abby’s grinning even wider than Breena at that. “You mean all four of us naked and both of them slicking me up and rubbing all over me together?”

Breena nods.

Abby kisses Tim, and looks up at Jimmy. “Oh, yeah, I want video of that.”

And from there it’s all good. Naked, in bed, his loves rubbing him all over, joking and talking and flirting all wrapped up in warm hands and loving touch. This is fabulous.

This is what he loves best.
Or not.

Holy shit, that’s... God, yes, more of that, please... Fuck! God and Fuck and...

Much later, they’re still in bed, laying around, warm, flushed, happy, enjoying another quiet moment. Those still seconds between orgasm and clean up, when everything feels gold. (The fact that they’ve got candles all over the place, so everything looks gold may have something to do with that sensation, as well.)

Abby’s lying on top of him. Her skin warm and damp on his. He can feel a fuzzy leg against his shoulder, and a smooth one is touching his cheek.

“You remember,” he asks Jimmy, though none of the other three know that yet, “when I was asking your for advice about dating Abby,” now Jimmy knows the question is for him, “and you asked me what I was afraid of, and I said keeping it going?”

He can feel a nod, though he’s too content to lift his head to look. Though he does kiss the top of Abby’s head, which is resting on his shoulder.

After a second, Jimmy replies, “Yeah. Said something to you like, ‘You’ve been in love with her for ten years, and you’re afraid, what, you start dating and you won’t be able to keep being in love with her?”

“So something like that.” He tilts his head to the side and nuzzles Breena’s leg, then kisses her ankle.

“This isn’t going anywhere. It’s not going to stop. It’s not infatuation or horniness. I’m yours,” Abby gets a kiss, “and yours,” he kisses Breena’s ankle, “and yours,” he tickles the bottom of Jimmy’s foot, and Jimmy jerks (he’s ticklish), “’til my last breath, and that’ll be true if we stay here, and it’ll be true if we move to the next level. It’ll be true if we never do this again. Though I really hope we do. I’m happy here, but I’d like to move on. Breena, you said it had to be forever, so… what marks forever for you? Vows and rings in front of everyone? You want another wedding?”

He can feel Breena smile, or imagine it, because he’s not looking at her, though she does gently stroke his cheek with her toes. “I don’t have a set idea of ‘marking forever.’ But I know it’s real. I know this isn’t going to fade away or break or… Our kids are growing up together, we’ll have pictures of each other’s grandbabies on the fridge, so, yeah, if it’s good with you,” they know she’s talking to Jimmy and Abby, “I’m good with moving on.”

“I am.” Abby says. “I think we stick to our original rules, make sure we’ve got more thinking and backing out time, because, at least right now, pregnant, really good orgasm oxytocin flowing through me, in bed with my loves, I’m just a big mushy ball of content and lovey. Though, I’m in favor of rings, maybe right hand rings, something tangible, something we wear on our skin to mark this. Jimmy?”

They hear a quiet snore. And Breena says, “And this is the problem with doing this right after getting off.”

Jimmy pokes her and laughs. “Not quite ready to pass out.” He kisses Breena and nuzzles Tim and Abby with his foot. “Thinking time is good, because I am about to fall asleep, but, yes, I want it all.”
Ducky shows up at Gibbs’ room a bit before lunch, which means it's time for Tim and Tony to move onto the second half of their day. Drywall time at the house.

Tim likes ripping out drywall. It requires no precision or finesse. He can do it one (and a half, ish) handed. Yes, he's slow, and he's sore all over doing it, but pulling his own weight around the house feels really good.

He also likes, as the walls are coming down, his ideas of how this house may look when they’re done with it. Obviously, weight bearing walls have to stay, but for the most part, they can rearrange however they like inside once they get this done.

Plus, as the guy who’s going to be doing the wiring (or at least as the guy who’s planning it out) it’s way easier to rewire from the studs out, than it is to fish wires through walls that are already up.

It’s him and Tony ripping down drywall on this side of the house. Jimmy’s around here somewhere. So’s, Breena. Abby and Penny have the girls today. (At his house. Abby’s having a sleepy day, so she’s taking it easy-ish, and Penny’s helping to keep an eye on everyone.)

Right now, he’s pulling down walls in what will, probably, end up being their great room and kitchen area.

But he’s thinking about the wing that’ll eventually belong to them and the Palmers. Thinking about one big bedroom for the four of them. Because, if this is forever… They want space where they have their own marriages with their own wives. But they don’t live here, not full time, and they likely won’t ever live here full time. So, this can be their space for when they’re together. That’s the plan. This home is for weekends and vacations, the times they’d get to be together anyway.

They’ll talk about that tonight, along with a lot of other things, he’s sure. But the more he works on the house, the more he likes the idea of them sharing one space here.

“You’re quiet.” Tony says as they yank down another panel of drywall.

And he is, because he’s thinking through his idea of how one room for the four of them would work, along with what they’re telling the rest of the family. The idea of ‘coming out’ seems very strange to him. Tim twitches a little when Tony speaks, and then says, “Just thinking.” After a second, he comes up with something to ask Tony about. “Okay, we’re not in the middle of an investigation, or cleaning one up. What’s going on with Ziva? She’s at Coast Guard now?”

Tony nods. “Yeah. She gave notice on Tuesday. Thursday, Borin offered her the job, and she took it.”

“Okay, I wasn’t actually asking for a rundown of the facts. I know what’s happening. I mean, why?”

Tony doesn’t look comfortable, and he’s very determinedly ripping down drywall as he says, “I shot a guy for looking at her. I got lucky because he had a gun and a knife and lock picks, but, all boils down, I shot him for looking at her. That was it. I can’t… I can’t work with her anymore. It’s just a matter of time until I fuck it up. ‘Till one of them isn’t really a threat and I… I can’t do it.”

Tim nods at that. He gently squeezes Tony’s shoulder and nods again.
“So that’s it? A nod?” Tony sounds defensive, like he’s expecting more.

“Yeah. I got out of the field so Abby wouldn’t have to deal with being scared for me. Not sure how I’d deal with it if she was in the field, let alone if I had to work with her every day. What’d you expect?”

“I don’t know. Some sort of lecture about respecting her choices and manning up and dealing with it better? Something about how if it’s my problem, I shouldn’t be forcing her out of her job.”

“Wrong generation of McGee. If you like, I’m sure we can arrange for Penny to give you that lecture.”

Tony winces.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t sign up for that, either.” One more block of drywall, and then Tim asks, “So, you got a line on a replacement for her?”

“Not yet. If… She’s only a month along, so…”

Tim nods at that, too. He knows what Tony’s too afraid to say out loud. So, he switches onto another topic they haven’t had the chance to talk much about. “How’s your house going?”

Tony smiles. “For once, so far so good. The bank’s happy with me. Mortgage is lined up. I’ve got a good interest rate. Closing date is October 1st.”

“Lucky you.” Tim says dryly. He’s still annoyed at the fiasco that was getting their mortgage.

“Yeah,” Tony smiles dryly, “amazing what happens when you don’t get your identity stolen seventeen times.”

Tim glares at the memory of the guy who basically turned him down for a mortgage.

“The paperwork is going great. Supposedly we get the inspection back next week. Though given how bad the house is, I don’t think there’s anything he’s going to say that could be a deal breaker.”

Tim smiles. “Guess we’re doing this for you soon.”

“Yeah.” Tony’s staring at the dry wall debris around them. “Gonna be weird without Gibbs.”

Tim yanks down another panel of drywall. “He’s going to be there. Not sure what all he’ll be doing. Probably like a crime scene, he looks like he’s doing stuff, but it’s really all us while he keeps watch and drinks his coffee.”

Tony smiles at that, but Tim can see some tension there.

“Some cloud to go with all that silver lining?”

“Feels unreal. It’s my dad, there’s got to be a catch somewhere. A big nasty one that poisons the whole thing. I feel like I’m waiting for the roof to fall on us.”

Tim shrugs. He certainly knows that feeling, and he’s seen Senior in action too many times to just say, ‘Don’t worry about it.’
Tim’s phone chirps at him as he’s whacking the wall.

_Help!_ It’s from Abbi.

_What’s wrong?_ He’s feeling a sharp jolt of fear at that, wondering if it’s Gibbs or if someone is coming for her. Just because the sneaking around phase of things is done, doesn’t mean they’ve found everyone, yet.

_I’ve had six vendors show me new computer systems today, and I am literally clueless as to what I need._

Tim sighs. Abbi’s told them that there was a small EMP, which killed all the electronics in the building. (He’s not sure why it didn’t fry their cell phones, but since they’re alive because of it, he’s willing to put it in the Acts of the God He Sporadically Believes In category and leave it there.) But, in that she is now the acting Director of a Federal Department, and in charge of a building that’s current filled with a huge collection of shiny paperweights, she has to get new stuff so that everyone else in that building can go back to work.

This is made more complicated by the fact that her head tech guy isn’t exactly looking squeaky clean right now. (Apparently there was a reason why all the files were on paper, and that reason appears to be a combination of making it harder to pin things on people and never upgrading meant there was that much more money to embezzle. She has found that CGIS _paid_ for a top of the line file system, they just don’t _have_ one.) And, on top of that, she’s got no idea how many of the lower downs were involved, either.

FBI’s handling the main investigation for that, and she’s got Ziva using her NCIS computer to run her own checks on people she really needs, right now, as well. But it’s slow. Even moving fast it takes half a day to clear someone.

_You got written proposals?_

_Yeah._

_Send them on. I’ll give them a look._

_THANK YOU!_

_What’s your budget for this?_

_HAHAHAHAHAHHAHAHA_

_We’ll have a chat about the miracle of ‘open source,’ too._

_You’re saving my life on this._

_No problem._

So, as the day wears on, Tim is not whacking down drywall. He’s sitting on the back patio, reading through a collection of proposals from different tech companies.

They look like they’re on the up and up, all of them are offering pretty much the same package for pretty much the same price. Little tweaks here and there depending on which vendors they use.
He spends an hour writing up his own proposal, what, if he were ever in the position of having to restock NCIS, on the fly, fast, with no budget, he’d want. He sends that back to Abbi along with a price range for what it should cost. **Send this to all of them, and whoever can get you this for the least amount of money/time wins the bid.**

**What’s this?**

**What’d I’d stock NCIS with if it was my job. Once you’ve got it in place, we’re gonna talk paperwork software and the joys of functional databases. By the time you’re up and running you’ll be two years behind instead of fifteen, and you’ll have the platform you need to get ahead of the curve in the next three years.**

**That’s the best news I’ve had all day.**

**More guys get caught?**

**Tell you about it in person tomorrow.**

______________________________________________________________

“Okay. Yeah. I know… Don’t work too hard… Uh huh… Yeah… Love you, too,” And Tony hangs up his phone.

“Ziva?” Breena asks. They’re wrapping up with the house. She, Jimmy, and Tim are all heading back to Tim’s for tonight. Tony’s supposed to be getting ready to have dinner with Ziva, but apparently she’s working late.

“Yeah. She’s still in the middle of one of the guys Abbi really wants cleared.”

“That’s got to be an awful job,” Jimmy says.

Tim nods along. “I think that’s part of why she’s got Ziva doing it. Someone with instincts you trust, who’s good at the job, but far enough away to not get personally into it.”

Breena nods at that. “She liking it?” They’ve seen Ziva for about nine minutes since she took Abbi’s job, and thus haven’t heard much about how she’s liking moonlighting for the Coast Guard.

“Yes, she is. It’s useful and important and she’s good at it…”

“And it’s safe,” Jimmy adds.

“That’s why I like it,” Tony finishes. “Feels weird to have her working somewhere else. Part of it’s great, end of the day we talk, and we’ve got stories the other one hasn’t heard, yet. Part of it’s hard. She’s not in the desk across from me. She’s not that shadow watching my back. It’s going to take a while to get used to that.”

Tim nods at that. “Yeah. Felt that way when I moved downstairs. Was really weird not seeing you all every day. Still feels weird not to head into the lab to work some days.”

“This mean you’re on your own for dinner?” Jimmy asks.

“Yeah.”
“We can toss an extra burger on the grill for you,” Tim says.

“Nah. I’m thinking Mona’s been pretty lonely. Going to head over and take her out for a good run.”

“Awww.” Breena’s grinning at him. In addition to round robin Gibbs-minding, they’ve all been dropping in to make sure Mona doesn’t go completely bonkers, but, even with a steady stream of visitors, she’s been missing her Gibbs.

“Think if I got a harness for her, I could sneak her into the hospital as a service dog?” Tony asks.

The other three laugh at that. “He’ll be home tomorrow. I think she can make it another night,” Tim says.

Abby and Penny are in the backyard with the girls when they get home. And, as they amble from Jimmy’s car over to them, she hops up, hugs all three of them, then steps back and says, “Agh! Drywall dust, mildew, and sweat! To the showers with you!”

Penny decides she doesn’t need to get immediate hugs in that case, and just waves.

It is true that there are three showers in Abby’s house. It’s also true that if you attempt to use more than one of them at a time you get a bare trickle of lukewarm water. (They found this out the hard way when Gibbs was staying with them last summer.)

And, it is also true that Penny was not born yesterday and that she and Ducky are neither stupid nor blind and have been privately wondering about what exactly is going on with the four of them. They hadn’t thought much about it when Breena mentioned sharing a room at the beach, until Penny noticed Gibbs swallow his tongue at it. Since then, they’ve been speculating about why the McGee-Palmer branch of the family does not appear to sleep on their own on the weekends anymore. (Actually, they started speculating as to if there was a McGee-Palmer branch of the family, and sort of took it from there.) They’d decided to gently breach the subject should an opening appear, and to Penny, three of them heading to the showers, together, looks like an opening.

(Penny and Ducky have also been speculating as to how the sexual dynamics of this work out, but they also figure that’s private and nothing they need to butt into, gently or any other way.)

“Feeling environmentally friendly?” she asks.

Abby smiles. “Save water, shower with a friend? Something like that?”

“Yes?”

Abby shakes her head slightly, looking at the dormant summer-brown grass and drooping leaves on the trees. “Well, there is a drought on, but no, not exactly.”

Penny nods, watching Abby carefully. Abby smiles.

“Big announcement soon?” Penny asks.

“Maybe? We’re still figuring stuff out. Talking more is on the menu for tonight.”

Penny nods.
“You okay with this?” Abby sounds like she’s testing the water.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” She sees relief on Abby’s face at that answer.

“Lots of people aren’t.”

Penny smiles wryly at her. “I’ve never been lots of people.”

“Which is why we love you.” Abby thinks of how best to put this. “We’re not hiding it, not exactly, but we’re not broadcasting it, either. Gibbs and Abbi know.” Which is another reason why Penny is not upset about it. She’ll be damned if there is ever a situation where Jethro out-liberals her.

“But Tony and Ziva don’t.” Not a question. It’s obvious to her and Ducky that whatever might be going on, those two are A: not part of it, and B: not aware of it, either. Ducky is somewhat worried that if something does happen that Tony won’t handle it well, but that’s not a conversation for today.

Abby nods. “They’ve got their own stuff going on, or they probably would have noticed something was up. And Breena’s family really doesn’t know and probably won’t ever.”

That is also, in no way, a surprise to Penny, and actually, given the delicate balance of Breena’s family/work situation, something she would counsel against telling them about. “I got it. You tell who you tell when you’re ready.”

“So, is Ducky okay with this?”

“You’ve heard the phrase there’s nothing new under the sun, right?”

Abby nods.

“Trust me, we’ve both seen versions of this before. Some worked out, some didn’t. You four… You look like it’s going to work out. If it didn’t, we’d be nervous, but, neither of us is feeling edgy about this.”

“Thank you.”

“Nothing to say thanks for. Just, make sure you can work it out.”

Abby nods. “That’s why we keep talking.”

“Good.”

They hear voices and see Jimmy and Breena heading onto the porch. A second after they make it out, she hears Tim saying, “Penny, you sticking around for dinner?”

She gives Jimmy and Breena a hug while heading into the kitchen, seeing Tim in the fridge grabbing ground beef. He gets a quick hug, too, along with, “Not today. Got a dinner meeting with a campus refugee action group.”

Tim smiles at her and kisses her cheek. “Sounds like fun.” Then he’s heading to the pantry, looking for the onions.

She looks at him, really looking, seeing that, yes, like Jimmy and Breena, he’s also right out of the shower, and looking quite pleased with himself and the universe right now.

“Timothy?”
“Yeah.” He’s got the onions and is debating burgers plain or adding some A1 to the mix.

She doesn’t say anything, so he shifts his focus and looks at Penny, curiously. She can remember a time where, if he’d been doing anything and someone said his name like that, he’d snap to immediate attention, looking nervous and guilty.

She nods to the back porch, where the rest of the family is. “Abby says you’ve got more thinking and talking, but, whatever it is you four decide, we love you.”

Tim’s a bit surprised by that. It feels good, but… “Not seventeen anymore.”

“I know. I figure you don’t outgrow wanting the people around you to approve of your choices.”

That’s true, but he’s still got a little itch going along with this in the back of his head. “And…” he looks over to the porch, where Jimmy and Breena are snuggling baby girls and listening to Molly’s version of what she did today, “you do approve? Not, you feel like I didn’t get enough of this as a kid so you’re pulling out all the stops now, but… this is really okay?”

Penny smiles at him, aware of what he’s seeing with this. “It’s really okay. I feel bad about the past, and I didn’t do enough, but not so bad that I’d give my blessing to something that looked like it would cause you trouble later because you want it right now. Remember, I wasn’t ever the person who bought you ice cream because I felt bad about something I allowed to happen.”

Tim’s eyebrows shoot up, and then it hits him that his mom did used to do that. Piles of sugary calories weren’t just about making him feel better. “I hadn’t put that together.”

“Oh.” Penny winces. “I…”

He waves it away. “I get the main point.”

She kisses his cheek. “Life’s too short to let convention keep you from what you want. Ducky and I are glad to see the four of you going after it.”

“Thanks, Penny.”

“No problem. You ever want to talk more, bounce some ideas off someone who’s seen everything and done a whole lot of it, too, Ducky and I are both around.”

He nods at that. “Not tonight.”

She smiles. “Thought so. Anyway, I’ll be late if I spend too much longer here. Tomorrow at Gibbs’?”

“Yep. Abbi’s bringing him home, and we’re helping Ziva cook.”

“That sounds great.”

“I think it will be.”

“Sooo…” Breena says to Abby, looking really happy while Tim’s mixing up the burger meat and Jimmy fires up the grill.

“You look like you’ve got the best secret ever,” Abby says to her.
“Not a secret, but it’s good.”

“What?!”

“According to him,” she nods at Tim, “Gibbs asked Abbi to move in with him.”

Abby squeals with pleasure at that.

Tim finally adds his own two cents. “He was looking really happy, we asked what was up, and he told us there’d be a moving party next week.”

“Awww…” Abby couldn’t be more pleased if she tried.

Molly’s watching this, not quite getting it.

“Uncle Jethro’s got something really happy going on,” Breena explains.

“Feel better?” Molly knows that Jethro’s not been feeling well. That he got hurt.

“I’d think this is going a long way toward making him feel better,” Tim adds.

“All of this is making him feel better. He’s still grinning all over the place,” Jimmy says.

Molly looks confused at that. Uncle Jethro’s generally a pretty laid back and happy guy in her experience.

The adults can see they’re just perplexing Molly, so they shift it a bit, “Are you going to help us get Abbi moved into Uncle Jethro’s house?” Abby asks.

“Oh yes! Pillows.”

Breena grins at her daughter. She’s been on a pillow kick lately. (First thing she did getting over here today was check out all the pillows in Tim and Abby’s house.) The chance to mess around with Gibbs and Abbi’s pillows is hitting her just right.

“If you ask, I’m sure Uncle Jethro will be happy to let you be the official pillow mover!” Jimmy says, before heading over to Tim to offer a hand with getting dinner ready.

Molly’s very pleased by that.

And like yesterday, like weeks before, dinner is light, and they talk about Ziva’s new job, and about Abbi moving in with Gibbs, or about how much better, in general, Gibbs is looking, but they leave heavy topics for when all conversations aren’t interrupted by feeding little girls.

But, eventually, babies are in tucked in, snoozing away. (Hopefully, Molly’s stared working on night-time potty training, so this’ll be interesting.)

Eventually, they’ve got time to talk to each other without interruption, and with a day to think about last night.

Once the girls are up, they settle in down in Tim and Abby’s living room. This is probably a bed conversation, but they’re here, at the McGee house, and in the living room, intentionally, to help provide a physical environment that encourages brains to be doing the thinking. There’s a lot of
things that go with this idea of forever, and them moving forward, that’ll bite them in the ass if they just jump in without brains doing the thinking.

So, he and Abby are on the love seat. Jimmy and Breena have the sofa. They’ve got drinks on the coffee table, but so far no one’s drinking them. They’re getting ready to talk, seriously, about whatever the hell it is that comes next.

“Would I be correct in assuming Penny’s look at us as we came down, and her little pep talk with you means she and Ducky have figured out what’s going on?” Jimmy asks.

Abby nods, and Tim says, “Not sure how much detail they have worked out, and she didn’t ask if we were sleeping together, but they seem to have the general idea and she tells me they approve. And are offering older, wiser, more experienced counsel if we want it.”

“I suppose if there was someone who could tell us everything there is to know about the history of… polyamory? Is that right?” Abby nods, that’s the right word. “It’d be Ducky. Not sure he’s got what I’d call practical experience in the matter, though,” Jimmy says.

“Ah yes, this reminds me of the time I was living in the tribal areas of Namibia…” Tim pulls off a fairly decent version of Ducky’s delivery and accent. That causes the other three to laugh.

“So, maybe not much useful experience, but approval is good,” Abby says.

“Yeah, it is.” Breena replies. “Of course, actually knowing whatever it is they’re approving of would be good, too.” That’s the crux of it. Tonight they come up with a plan.

“Yeah, well…” Tim’s looking from Breena to Abby and back again. “I had a script for how this worked with Abby, go out, get ring, get on knees, party a year later. I don’t have a plan for how this works.”

“You’re thinking of this as a marriage?” Jimmy says.

“That’s what forever means to me. That’s what it means to you, right?” he asks Breena, suddenly wondering if he and Abby missed something in what she’d been saying.

She nods. “Yeah. That’s how I’m thinking of it. Emotionally and sexually, at least. This is the four of us for the rest of our lives. We might not share a home… I’d like us to… Room for us all together, and as twosomes, but, not now, not… The kids’ll take crap on this if we’re too open. And my family will be difficult, which makes work difficult. But… twenty years from now…”

Those are legitimate concerns. Might as well get them out, now, before they go further. Because in the end it’s not just the four of them with each other, it’s also the four of them in the world at large.

“I was thinking about our home, sort of, today. When we were pulling down the drywall,” Tim says. “We get time on our own,” he pets Abby’s back, and nods to Jimmy and Breena, “during the week, when we’re at our own places. But, the house is supposed to be for weekends and vacations and… I’d be good with us having one big room there. That’d be the space where it’s the four of us together. Wasn’t thinking about merging households beyond that, but… not now, but eventually… I could see doing that.”

“I like the idea of that,” Jimmy says. “The house is safe. Anyone who’s there enough to see how the bedrooms are laid out is someone we trust enough they’d know about us anyway, so, that’s not an issue.”

Safe. Jimmy calling it that, and Penny mentioning approval has Tim thinking. “Breena, what’s
‘difficult’ mean for your family?’” Ed wasn’t exactly a pile of sunshine and kittens with Amy and Collin, and they’re talking about going so far beyond that, they may as well be getting the rocket ready for takeoff.

Jimmy says dryly, “They’ll go batshit insane. Like challenge us for custody of the kids, insane.” From the way he and Breena are looking at each other, they’ve already talked about this. “There’s a practical reason for an at least twenty year moratorium on us sharing a home.”

They all realize that, given the wrong judge, that’s a case they’d lose. Doesn’t matter how happy their kids are, or how good their grades are or how well-adjusted, get the wrong judge and their ‘degenerate’ lifestyle will be deemed worse for their kids than the ‘upstanding’ upbringing Breena’s parents could provide.

And now, when they’re babies, when they can’t say anything about what they want or like…

They wouldn’t even qualify for the extremely limited protections offered gay and lesbian couples because that’s not who they are.

“No.” Abby says. “That’s not…” She swallows. “We don’t risk that.”

Breena nods.

“So, our own homes, for at least the next twenty years,” Tim says.

“Until our youngest is eighteen,” Jimmy adds, “and, whatever else we do, at church and at their home, we’re just good buddies.”

Tim’s watching Breena. He’s the one with the experience in unhappy parents, people you love, whose approval you want, looking at you like you disgust them. “Breena… okay, none of us love Ed, but you do, and… if being able to be open about who we are matters, we don’t ever have to cross a line you can’t tell him about.”

She half smiles at that. “I’ve been thinking about that. Okay, first off, we already have. There’s no way I can tell my parents about what we do on the weekends. The genie doesn’t go back into the bottle. I mean, say we stop this cold, go back to just being good friends, no more sleepovers, no more snuggles, no massage night, we’ll miss this. That’s the thing about this loving each other thing, it doesn’t go away because it’s inconvenient. And, this matters more to me than keeping my Dad calm.

“But, I also don’t want to piss him off. I have no desire to find out what he’d do if he ever learns about this. Probably nothing. Probably, like with Collin and Amy, he’ll just sulk. But… I don’t want to see what happens with that. And, unlike Collin and Amy, I think this is unconventional enough that the rest of my family would get behind him. I don’t see my mom just humoring him on this, while privately telling him he’s being foolish. She’d side with him.” Breena looks distressed for a moment and sighs. “I think even Collin and Amy would side with him. And, that could make things very messy.”

“What does messy mean?” Abby asks.

Jimmy gently rubs her back while she thinks. “Among other things, they can force me to sell my shares of the business. I’m only a majority shareholder in the one branch, and with the way we’ve got the business structured they can buy me out. They have to pay market value for the shares, so, yay, we’ve suddenly got a lot more cash. I get everything I’ve put in back, plus some because the stock’s appreciated over the years, but I’m also unemployed, and with as close knit as this business
is, and how they like to keep the club closed, I’m likely not getting another job anytime soon.”

Tim winces, and Jimmy catches his eye, seems to be thinking the same thing. Jimmy says it, “And if it got out wider, even if your family was supportive, it could hurt the business because people may not want people like us in charge of burying deeply devoted Catholic Grandma.”

Breena nods at that, too. “Of course, that’s actually the best insurance for my family never saying anything about it, even if we are out to them. I make a fuss; I can tank the whole enterprise. A lot of our customers are referred by their family pastor, and we are not, by any stretch the only option around, so if we’re associated with something said pastor doesn’t like…” Breena smiles grimly. “Honestly, that’s part of my dad coming down on Amy and Collin like a ton of bricks. I feel a bit like Amy on this. I want you guys. I don’t want the crap that’ll go with being open about it. Not from them. Going through it once with Jimmy was enough.”

Abby heads over and wraps an arm around Breena. “This is supposed to be about love, and about joy, and pleasure. I’m fine with us never being out to… a lot of the world, if need be. It’s not their business. Life’s going to throw enough stuff at us we won’t be able to avoid, so… If there are things we don’t tell some people, there are things we don’t tell them. All your parents ever have to know is that we’re good friends who love each other. They never need anything more than that,” Abby says.

“So, we’re what… discreet?” Jimmy says.

Abby nods. “Our family knows. Maybe some of our co-workers. Jimmy, what about your family?”

He exhales, thinking. “Probably freak my mom out. Of course, since she ‘doesn’t like to drive’ which I think is code for ‘Bob,’ Jimmy’s stepdad, ‘can’t be bothered to get off his ass and leave Delaware,’ she hasn’t been down here since Jon’s funeral. We get up to visit once a season or so, and… unless you’re feeling a burning desire to meet my mom and step-dad, this is probably something that they’re entirely out of.”

“And Clark’s on the other side of the planet and unlikely to move back anytime soon,” Breena adds.

“Yeah. I get an email from him once a month, maybe. Last I heard, he’s working on getting Japanese citizenship. I don’t think he’s ever going to be an issue. What about Sarah?”

Tim nods at that. “I’d like her to know. Like Penny, I can’t imagine her being upset. I mean, have you looked at those books she’s publishing? We’re vanilla by their standards. So, I can see her being a little shocked at the idea of us doing this sort of thing, but I can’t see her being shocked by the fact it exists. Abby? Luca and Kyle?”

“Yes on Luca. He may not love it, but he’s not going to be a jerk about it. He’s really good on the live and let live stuff. Kyle’s not really part of our lives, so I don’t think I’d need to tell him.”

“And we just play the wider world by ear? Like… I’m pretty sure that unless Gibbs wants to tell him, Fornell doesn’t need to know,” Tim says.

“Vance?” Jimmy asks. They know they’re supposed to disclose, for legal purposes, which employees are with each other, but… They’re already great friends, so that’s known, and in the almost fifteen years they’ve been working at NCIS none of them has ever run into a lawyer who tried to run a you-guys-are-sleeping-together-so-you’re-faking-the-evidence-to-back-each-other-up play.

The three of them look at each other, not sure what the right answer is. Abby’s tapping her finger against the arm of the chair, putting the pieces together, and says, “If we got outed, that could be
used to embarrass NCIS, and he’d be pissed by being blindsided on that.”

“And if we just head over and say, ‘Hey, guess what, we’re all sleeping together,’ we’ll get head-slapped into next week for TMI overshare,” Jimmy says.

Breena nods at that. “Are you guys, I don’t know, covered by some sort of anti-discrimination thing or something?”

“Penny’d know for sure, but I don’t think there’s any law covering polyamory,” Tim replies

“It’s policy that if you start some sort of romantic relationship with another co-worker you need to tell your supervisor. For all three of us now, that’s Leon. He’ll be all, ‘Oh God, why are you telling me this,’ but he’s not going to do anything. He wants to keep his ship happily sailing along, which means us each running our own department, so he’s not going to muck with a system that works. But…” Abby looks at Tim, and wiggles her fingers in a ‘come here’ gesture. So he abandons the loveseat and joins the other three on the sofa. Abby kisses him. “Jimmy and I are as high up as we’re going to go. Not like telling Leon means we might get passed over for promotions. You aren’t. Jarvis talked about you taking Leon’s place when he leaves. If we tell him, that could be the end of Director McGee.”

Tim shrugs at that. “I don’t love the idea of running NCIS. I want time, at home, with you guys and our kids. Won’t get a lot of that if I’m the guy in charge.” They’re busy. Vance is busy. “I’d rather not be travelling too much, either. I know I’ll end up doing some, but, if I take Director, they’ll expect me to be all over the world. Regularly. So, I mean… sure, maybe in ten years it’ll look more appealing, but… Us. I want us. I love my job. I love what I’m doing now. I want to keep doing it. I want to come home to you,” he kisses Abby, “and as often as possible,” he strokes Breena’s cheek and squeezes Jimmy’s shoulder. “So, getting booted out of the running for Director doesn’t break my heart.”

They’re quiet for a moment at that thought, and another one, related to work and what they’re talking about hits Tim. “There’s one reason I’d take it. Leon won’t do anything with us. We’re good at our jobs, we keep the ship running, and he cares more about that than what we do in our off time. Next guy might not be like that. I’d take Director if that’s what’s necessary to keep us all working at NCIS.”

Jimmy nods at that. “That’s a long time off. We tell him because that’s the rule. Because in the end we don’t want him getting blindsided or screwed.”

“Rule number one,” Abby adds.

“He’s not exactly your partner,” Breena says, meaning the three of them.

Tim shrugs. “He’s as close to one as I’ve got.”

Jimmy nods again. “We keep doing our jobs and doing them well, and… Ten years from now someone who’s trouble ends up in charge, maybe we don’t work for NCIS anymore. But, the family doesn’t work if one of us has to be away all the time. None of us wanted to be part-time parents, so we’re not going to make you sign up for that to keep the other two of us employed.”

“Thanks.”

They all look at each other. “So, we’re doing this?” Abby asks.

Breena smiles, real joy beaming off of her, and that smile spreads, lifting Jimmy and Tim’s hearts, too.
“Yeah. We are,” Tim says, feeling the immensity of this go arcing through him. He starts to laugh, and maybe it’s not completely appropriate, but this feeling has to come out somehow.

“Wow.” Abby says, and like Tim laughing, it’s a little silly, but it’s real. “Jimmy?”

He’s smiling, but he doesn’t say anything.

“You okay?” Tim asks.

“Feels big.” He giggles at that and then shakes his head. “Anything I’m going to say will be horribly inappropriate.”

They giggle at that, too.

Jimmy kisses Breena, gentle and slow. When they break apart, he shifts a bit, leaning across Breena, and kisses Abby. They’ve never kissed like this, for real. Lips wet and soft, tongues stroking. Tim’s watching it, Abby in his lap while Jimmy’s kissing her, and he can’t believe how hard this hits him. This is… God… This is so hot he doesn’t know what to do with it.

He gently pets Abby’s hair and neck while Jimmy kisses her, both of them making pleased, purring sounds. He feels a small hand stroking his shoulder, and realizes that must be Breena.

After another second, Jimmy pulls back from Abby, stands up and takes a step over, so he’s in front of Tim, and very quickly pecks a very surprised Tim on the lips. Then he sits back on his heels in front of them, and says, “That’s usually how you seal this kind of deal, right?”

Tim nods slowly at that, licks his lips, and then says to Abby, “Until my last breath,” and he kisses her, remaking the promise that marks their life together. All the love of her, and their children, and this life is in his touch, and the love for Breena and Jimmy, and their children, and this new step, sharpens that touch, and the desire that goes with it. They break apart after a few seconds, and he shifts a bit, turning his head to Breena, wrapping his arm around her, licking his lips again, feeling the ghost of Abby’s skin on his, and the heat of Breena’s skin under his hand, as he says to her, “Until my last breath.”

She smiles at him, scooting closer, one hand on his, the other around Abby’s waist. “That’s all the forever I need.” She leans in and kisses Tim, and it’s so good. Different. It’s very much not kissing Abby. Her touch is slower, a bit shallower, more lips and less tongue, but it’s good. Tim lets her lead for a few seconds, feeling, noticing what she seems to like, and then starts to play with it, tiny little nibbles, and soft, light sucks. Breena moans, soft and rich, then breaks the kiss, staring Tim in the eyes, and says to him, “Forever, Tim.”

He blinks at it, feeling that word crest through him. This feels like in the bathroom with Abby, after the freezer case. This is the moment they’re married, and whatever else may go with it, this is what cements it.

Breena pets his face, and he quickly kisses her again, and she kisses back, then she places a finger on his lips and turns to Abby, meeting her lips in what starts as a chaste press of lips to lips and slips into wet and soft and gentle, and both of the guys groan at it. And then she whispers to Abby, “Forever,” kissing it to her. Abby takes her ‘forever,’ and kisses it right back to her, “Forever, Breena” fingers running through Breena’s hair.

Tim’s mouth is going dry, and his heart is beating much too fast, and they really should have done this at Jimmy’s house because their bed is too damn small, and none of that matters because right now is ripe and gold and… “We need to be upstairs.”
Jimmy’s nodding along with that, holding his hands out to Abby and Breena, giving each of them a hand up, and as Tim stands up, he looks at Jimmy, hooks his arm around his neck, and pulls him close for a very fast, closed-mouth kiss. “Until my last breath, Jimmy.”

Jimmy smiles at him and ruffles his hair. Then Abby’s in his arms, kissing him again, adding her own “Forever,” to the mix.

He’s got no idea how they got upstairs, just that it happened. And even once in bed, it’s surreal, almost fantastic, like a dream, but real.

Some degree of fantastic is that there’s so many more options and opportunities going on. Even having played with four way fantasies isn’t preparation for the real thing, where there are soft, happy bodies all over the place. Tim wants at least three more mouths. He’s kissing Breena’s shoulder and stroking Abby’s tummy, and he thinks the warm swath of skin at his back is Jimmy, but it might be part of Breena and more lips, they need to be kissed, too, a lot, and soft hair, Abby’s, between his fingers, and it’s sensual and soft, and almost confusing because there’s so much going on.

Too many sensations all at once, too many inputs, and all of them are good, but trying to focus down to one thing means feeling like he’s missing other things.

Like, for a moment, he’s watching Abby and Breena kissing, which is mind blowing hot, slippery pink lips stroking over each other, and both of the girls are making soft, needy sounds, and Abby’s hand is on Breena’s breast, which, God, that’s amazing, and it’s so hot it’s almost paralyzing. He’s just sitting there, watching, a lump of barely-breathing, twitching, horny nerves. And Abby turns, twists to kiss Jimmy, who’s kneeling behind her, hands on her breasts, softly stroking while he nuzzles along Abby’s neck, and there’s this second where Breena’s just sitting there, not doing much of anything, before Tim jerks out of staring at the show in front of him, remembering that there’s an entire other woman here, who might want some company.

He pulls Breena to him, his hands flowing over her body, her hands on his, stroking each other as breasts and chest and belly and dick all rub against each other, and he knows he’s talking to her, telling her how beautiful she is and how good she’s making him feel, and how much he loves all of them, but he doesn’t think he’s making a whole lot of sense as he does it.

He can taste her skin, the richness of that little spot where neck and ear meet, and the suede soft whisper of the dip of her collarbone under his lips, his lips meet her nipple, pink on pink, and he traces his teeth over the underside of her breast.

She’s purring at him, and he thinks the hand trailing down his back is Abby, but he doesn’t want to look away to find out.

He lightly pets down Breena’s belly, noting soft skin, and fine gold hairs. His lips follow, and she makes very encouraging sounds, lying back, taking him with her, so he’s kneeling over her, kissing his way down her tummy. He can hear her moaning, feel her pubic hair tickling his chin, smell the sex on her, and he wants to just dive in, kiss her right, but he looks up, makes sure he’s got permission, she sees him look up, and smiles. He looks over to Jimmy, who’s sucking on Abby’s breast, completely wrapped up in Abby, so Tim gently whacks the back of his foot, and Jimmy looks over at him, sees what he’s about to do, and nods quickly, before going back to Abby.
Breena’s wet and soft and gold and pink and sweet. She’s candied musk and succulent peaches, and all those metaphors for brilliantly sexy, and Tim really wishes he had two working hands because he’d love to really go to town on her, but right now he’s too excited to lay on this stomach and go down on her, which means he needs one arm keeping him stable, in addition to kneeling, so all he’s got tongue and lips and teeth.

So he uses them. And he revels in her taste, in her heat, and the sounds she’s making. He soars with her legs growing tight against his face, and the feel of her fingers clenching in his hair. And he’s good at oral, but he’s not a mind reader, and he’s never done this with Breena before, so there are a few false starts, where he got her close and then slipped off target when she moved in a direction he didn’t expect, but finally she’s tight and tense against him, breathing hard, legs quivering, and that last lick does it and she ripples all over, twitching and shuddering and he feels like a sex-god with her coming under his mouth.

He holds her close, very gently licking, soft little kisses as she comes down, and by the time she’s sitting up, pulling him to kiss her lips, he’s so turned on he can feel his pulse in his ears.

He can feel the bed rocking, and looks over, finally seeing what’s going on with Jimmy and Abby. Abby’s on all fours, sucking Jimmy, who’s got his head back, thrusting slow and steady, enjoying the ride, but trying not to get off, and that turns him on that much more. He feels like he’s going to explode, like he’s got way too damn much blood in his body, and if he doesn’t get off soon, he’s going to go insane.

He hops off the bed, ripping open his night stand, “God, Abby, tell me we still have condoms,” he’s searching through as fast as he can, and feels Breena’s hand on his wrist.

“No.”

“No?” Last night, Jimmy and Breena were using a condom, because it’s her fertile week, and they want to wait until Anna’s a year old before starting on another baby.

Jimmy and Breena are at least vaguely aware of what’s going on, and they’ve stopped, watching Tim and Breena.

“First time we make love, I don’t want latex between us.”

Tim hisses at that, feeling it hit him straight in the groin.

“And if we love each other enough to do this, it doesn’t matter if the kids have green eyes or hazel ones.”

That takes him another notch higher, because if there’s anything on Earth that gets to a man, it’s a fertile woman he loves saying ‘let’s make a baby.’

So, he’s feeling like this is the most self-control he’s ever expressed as he sits back down on the bed, pulling her into his lap, and says, “Yes, God, yes, please, and… No. Not tonight.” He kisses her hard and deep, grinding against her belly. “Not making a baby on a whim.” And though he almost wants to whimper at saying it, he does, “Tomorrow, we’ll talk more about that. Tonight…”

Breena grins at him, trailing her pussy over his dick, so wet and slick and soft, and he groans against her shoulder as she does it, and then she slips onto the floor between his legs and wraps her lips around his dick.

“Oh God!” So good. So wet and hot and slick and it’s different. And just like he doesn’t know all of her tricks, she doesn’t know his, which is probably the only reason he doesn’t embarrass himself by
getting off in nineteen seconds.

She’s using her hand and mouth, stroking them together, and he takes her hand in his, tightening her hold and slowing her down a bit. She follows what he’s doing, and he lets go, stroking her hair and face, murmuring how good this is.

He glances away from her, and sees Abby sinking onto Jimmy, head back, eyes closed, lips open, that pain-pleasure look he knows so well, and he’s got to close his eyes, because if he watches another second of that, he’ll get off, and this feels too good to end.

Abby and Jimmy are both groaning behind him, and Breena’s sucking slow and beautiful, and he feels so amazing, so happy and light and ecstatic. And even trying to make it last, trying to slow himself down, he knows he’s getting close, knows he’s ready to crest.

He opens his eyes, watching Breena’s head slip up and down, then looks over, sees Abby watching him, smiling, he strokes the back of Breena’s head again, and then takes Abby’s hand in his, and a second later he’s flying, orgasm cresting through him wet and hot, each pulse lasting a mini-forever of exquisite joy.

He comes down, cradling Breena’s head with his right hand, holding Abby’s hand with his left, feeling and hearing her and Jimmy still at it. Eventually, Breena stands up, and he kisses her deep and slow and intense, his tongue dancing with hers, and she kisses back, just as happy.

The bed really is too small for four people, so they’re hugging the edge, snuggled up against each other, as they watch Abby and Jimmy finish.

Abby’s on her hands and knees over Jimmy, kissing him, and he’s got one hand on her butt, the other one between them, working her clit as they both rock together.

And like when he was watching Jimmy and Breena do this, he’s thinking about how beautiful this is. How he wishes he had a better word for it, but he doesn’t. It’s beautiful. And just like with him and Breena, it’s not practiced or well-coordinated, but it’s still warmth and love and sex and joy.

It’s still beautiful.

It’s still two of his three favorite people making each other happy.

It’s still joy made touch made pleasure.

Abby’s sucking Jimmy’s tongue, and he knows those sounds she’s making, knows the way she’s moving, the tension in her legs and back and old friends. The lovely pink flush of her chest and face makes him feel warm and happy. Those high, breathy, panting moans are still the sweetest music in his world. (Well, at least right now, back when Breena was getting off, her orgasm song was the sweetest music in the world. Tim’s comfortable with having several favorite sounds.) Abby’s shuddering, twitching, coming loud and hard, and Tim reaches over to stroke her thigh while she gets off, feeling wrapped in an amazing wash of blissful joy.

Jimmy’s thrusting hard, rocking into her, hand clenched on her hip, small grunting breaths as he pulls her down against him, arching as deep into her as he can get, and Breena’s petting his shoulder as he climaxes.

For a moment, Abby lies on Jimmy, both of them breathing hard, looking peaceful and content. For another moment, they kiss slow and lazy. Then Abby pulls away and grabs the tissues, and they clean up.
When she’s back from the bathroom, she looks at their bed, and then starts pulling off the blankets. Breena figures out what she’s doing before Tim or Jimmy does, but, as she’s saying, “We’re sleeping together after that,” they get the idea. No way Jimmy or Breena are heading to the guest room after that.

Tim heads to the linen closet, they’ve got a few foam mattress pads, and he grabs them, tossing them on the floor, along with all of their pillows, while muttering about how first thing in the morning, they’re ordering a bigger bed.

After a few minutes, they’re all cuddled together on the floor. Tim’s got Abby in his arms, and Breena’s against his back, and Jimmy’s on the far side, and he honestly wishes there was a way to make sure everyone got snuggled on both sides, but that just doesn’t happen, so, they cuddle in, and are just about asleep when they hear a loud and bright, “MOM!”

Breena groans, and then calls back, “Go to the bathroom, Molly,” as she gets up, realizes she doesn’t have her bathrobe here, so she wraps herself in one of the blankets and heads out to make sure her daughter gets to the bathroom in time.

“Success?” Jimmy asks, sleepily, when Breena comes back to them.

“Bed is still dry, toddler is dry, and she’s back to sleep.”

Breena gets kisses from Jimmy, and Tim, and Abby on that, and then they settle into (what will hopefully be uninterrupted) sleep.
This time Jimmy’s the one who gets stepped on by a small girl (who is not in need of a diaper change) looking to get some early morning cuddles in.

So, to celebrate the first night of successful potty usage, Molly does get several minutes of snuggle time, in… “bed” with the adults. Which she laps up like a kitten with the bowl full of cream. Uninterrupted time with the adults is rare. Little sister/cousin are around a lot!

From there, it’s morning time. Anna and Kelly are also indicating they’d like out of the crib, along with breakfast. Tim and Breena get to sleep in this weekend, so Jimmy and Abby get the girls up, changed, and ready for the day.

Granted, for Breena, sleeping in actually means laying on her side drowsing through her morning nurse with Anna, Tim cuddled up behind her.

He’d slept through most of the getting up and moving, and didn’t actually start to wake up until Breena flipped over to nurse Anna on her other side, so for a second he was startled and lost in time. Waking up to the sounds of a nursing woman and child is something he hasn’t done in months, but after a few seconds he put himself back where he belongs, sorting out that this is Breena and Anna, and that he didn’t just dream the last four months.

His eyes open as he pulls the different threads of last night together and he sees Breena facing him, nursing Anna, gently stroking his side, and smiling.

Apparently, he didn’t dream last night, either.

He props himself on his elbow and kisses the top of Anna’s head. She’s looking at him curiously, because he’s very much not Jimmy, the guy who’s usually around for this, but she doesn’t appear to be bothered by him being there.

“Morning,” he says.

Breena gives him a quick kiss, neither of them have brushed teeth yet, so not much in the way of deep kissing is going to happen. “Back at you. Sleep well?”

Talk about surreal conversations.

“Yeah.” He sits up, stretching out, trying to work the kinks out of his arm. “Arm and shoulder don’t love sleeping on the floor, but… more than worth it.”

Breena smiles at him. “Yeah. So, bigger bed?”

He nods, resting his hand on her hip, amazed that he’s sitting here, touching her. “Much bigger bed. You think they make something bigger than a king?”

“You know, I’ve got no idea. I’m sure someone, somewhere does, but… the sort of thing you just grab at a store?” She shrugs, and Anna looks askance at the boob in her mouth moving. “Don’t you look at me like that, you love to latch on and then look all around the room, yanking my breast all over the place.”

If an eight month old can look irked, Anna is irked.
“Ten more inches than you guys have?”

“If you’re going to go that far, why not a full foot?”

He shrugs. “Why not? That’d be just as wide as long.”

“Plenty of room to play, and still comfortably snuggly.”

“That’s what I’m thinking. Keep it here for now. Move it to the house when it’s ready.”

Breena takes his hand and kisses it. “That sounds good to me.” She detaches Anna. “And I think you’re done. So, how about I take her downstairs,” she gently boops Anna on the nose, “You want some Cheerios, right?” Anna smiles at that. Breena looks back up to Tim with a little smile on her face. “And you get the water started in the shower?”

That sounds like a great plan to Tim.

Tim feels a moment of hesitation as he turns on the water. He knows what he wants to do when Breena gets up here with him. Okay, that’s already off the menu. He knows what the second runner up is, and that’s sending a warm, turned-on flush of hell, yes! All through him.

But, they also talked about this being something all four of them were there for. Can’t be wondering or jealous if you see what’s going on. Though, if they meant it, that this is a marriage, then, one on one shouldn’t be a problem.

He doesn’t think it will be, but, it’d also be nice not to mess it up on the first day.

The water’s starting to steam up the bathroom, so he steps into the shower, and lets it tumble over him. On one level that’s a disappointment, it’s rinsing away the scent of last night.

On another level, a few minutes by himself is a good thing. Last week, Jimmy and Abby did this, and it didn’t bug him at all. He didn’t even think about it. They got a shower. No biggie. He knows Jimmy woke up with morning wood, and he knows that it’s impossible to get a shower at Jimmy’s without some level of rubbing up against each other because there just isn’t enough room, and even if there was, they’d rub up against each other because it’s fun and it feels good.

And it didn’t bug him at all.

And right now, if he and Breena were down there, and Abby and Jimmy up here… No, it wouldn’t bug him. They could do whatever they wanted and that’d be fine. He wouldn’t even ask. He’d just assume they were playing with each other, because that’s what you do when you’ve got some free time in the morning and a co-ed shower with someone you love.

Sure, he’d like to be part of it, and would really like to watch, because, as he remembers, somewhat fuzzily, watching was awesome, too, but he’s not feeling any sense of jealousy or anger or… anything other than an eagerness to find a shower big enough for all four of them, and some time when they aren’t baby wrangling to take advantage of it.

He thinks wryly that there’s a reason why people go on honeymoons, and that if they can get a long weekend for themselves in the not wildly distant future that’d be a very good thing.
He feels the temperature in the bathroom shift, and knows Breena’s back. A second later, she’s pulling back their shower curtain, and stepping in.

There is enough room to not rub up against each other in Tim’s shower, so he steps back some, making sure Breena’s got direct access to the water. She sighs as it hits her, and tilts her head back, letting it flow over her.

They did this last night, too, though Jimmy was there. That was more of a just get cleaned up quick sort of thing. Not enough time to really enjoy naked Breena.

And later last night, he was enjoying naked Breena a whole lot, but there wasn’t much time to really focus or savor. He licks his lips and swallows, and then gently, almost tentatively, rests the tips of his fingers at the dip of her collarbone.

“This okay?”

She smiles. “Oh yeah. Didn’t get as much quiet time last night as I would have liked.”

He nods at that. “Yeah. Didn’t feel rushed, but… Just so much to look at and see and feel and…”

Breena steps closer to him, nodding, her palms on his chest. She gets it. Part of the reason to have a honeymoon after getting married is so you’ve got hours of quiet exploring time. “Still don’t have a ton of time. Twenty minutes, they’re going to want the shower, or we won’t make it to the diner for breakfast.”

“So, what do we do with our twenty minutes?”

She looks down at his erection, and lightly traces her fingers down his chest to curl around it. He groans quietly at that, stepping closer to her, and pulling her face to his for a kiss.

Can’t take too long, they’ve got to get washed up, too. “We’ve got to get some sort of honeymoon.”

Breena agrees heartily at that.

Tim gently presses against her shoulder, letting her know to turn away from him, and she does, facing into the spray. He reaches up and lowers it a bit. Breena’s shorter than he and Abby so if he’s got the water where they like it, it’s hitting her full in the face, which isn’t what he wants.

He pulls her hair over to one side, and kisses her throat and shoulder. “Abby’s shampoo or mine?”

“Abby’s.”

He grabs it, and starts to work it through her hair. She purrs at that, rubbing up against him. He laughs a bit at that, as her warm, soft butt is rubbing over him and he’s working on her hair.

“Funny?”

“We’re multitasking.”

Breena does laugh at that. “Like only veteran parents can.”

He spends another moment working on her hair, enjoying it wet and heavy between his fingers, enjoying her purring at him doing it quite a bit more. When he’s done, she turns in his arms, head to the water, letting it rinse out.

“You?”
“Hair’s good. Probably wash it tomorrow.”

Breena seems to think about that, and says, “So, what does get washed?”

“Skin and hair are pretty dry. They don’t like soap, even gentle stuff, every day. Everything got scrubbed yesterday,” because yesterday he did the kind of work that actually involved getting dirty, “so, today would usually just be armpits and dick.”

Breena grins at him. “I bet I can help with that.”

“I’d really like it if you did,” he says with a smile.

Breena reaches for his soap, and squirts a bit into her hands. Underarms is more tickly than erotic. It’s also pretty quick, though he gets the idea that one of these days Breena wants to go to town on him and find out exactly how ticklish he is, and exactly where. (The correct answers being moderately, and, with the right sort of touch, just about everywhere.)

Dick is a lot more fun. And a lot more thorough. He’s not sure if she’s being gentle, because she’s getting to know him, or if Jimmy just likes a lighter touch than he does, but this is good but not rocking his world.

She’s watching as she’s stroking him, and can see he’s into it, but not completely blissed out. Breena puts his hand on hers. “Show me.”

He curls her hand around him, snug and tight. “Tight. Like this.”

She kisses his shoulder, and says, “I can do that.” And she does, slick and tight and soapy, and that’s a hell of a lot better. She adds a little pulse-squeeze as she drags her hand up and down, and that’s even better yet.

Tim’s groaning at that, arms around her, watching her work him, loving the feel of it, and the sight of his dick slipping between her fingers. He’s thrusting against her, going for fast, wishing they had the time to linger on this, but they don’t. He wants to save as much of the time they’ve got for her, because getting him off is like driving an automatic. Anyone who’s even seen one can figure it out well enough to get from point A to point B.

Girls are like driving a stick. If you don’t know what you’re doing, the car doesn’t go anywhere and you just sit there, engine humming, cursing with frustration, in exactly the same spot you were when you put the key in the ignition.

He’s getting close, and remembers she doesn’t like getting cummed on, so, he tries to shift to the side some, and she reads him well enough to say, “If I’m giving you a hand-job, it’s okay.” He nods at that, once, and lets the pleasure overtake him.

He’s resting his head on her shoulder, and she’s petting his back and hair when he starts to come down.

He looks up and smiles at her. “Best way to start a day. How about you? What kind of clean-up do you want?”

“Usually soap everything up every day.”

Tim grins at her. “I can do that.”

She grins back. “I never doubted that.”
He likes this. Not lots of time, but some, to really look and touch. So, as he’s gently (And like Breena, he is using a more gentle touch than normal, because he doesn’t, yet, know exactly what she likes, but he’ll learn.) exploring, learning her body, mapping freckles and moles, tracing stretch marks with his tongue, noticing scars he intends to ask about later.

He gets to her pussy, carefully soaping her up, making sure to get every inch of skin foamy with lather, listening to hear if she likes what he’s doing, and she does sound pleased. Once she’s all rinsed off, he sinks to his knees.

“Tell me what you like. I know I wasn’t quite doing it last night.”

“It was good.”

“Could have been better, right?”

She nods, kindly, but she does nod.

He smiles. “Want to be amazing at this, but I can’t read minds. So, tell me. You can always tell me anything, and trust me, I want to know. I’m never going to act like you’ve cut my dick off if you tell me how to do this better.”

“Fingers. I like fingers. I can get off from penetration alone, takes a while, but i can, so, fingers and tongue are always going to be better than just tongue.”

He gently kisses her muff, and says, “You’re a unicorn. I’ve heard about women like you, but never met one.”

“Uh huh. Less talking, more sex.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” And he gets to it. And yes, adding his fingers to the mix does seem to make Breena happy. He loves the sounds she’s making, and the feel of her body wet and snug on his fingers has him thinking all sorts of delicious, wicked thoughts for whenever it is they finally get around to introducing his dick to her pussy.

She’s close, moaning, hands clenched in his hair, and he can feel they’re stalling out. He doesn’t know how to get her past this spot of almost there. And, while it’s true that he is dearly looking forward to laying her out, and then, with Abby, and Jimmy, keeping her an inch away from orgasm for as long as she can possibly take, and then completely blowing her mind when she gets off, getting stuck here isn’t exactly the best plan ever for a quickie.

“Up and down!” she finally gets out, and he's happy to adjust. Abby likes little circles on her clit, over and over round and round. Breena likes up and down. He can do that. Little awkward, takes a minute for his tongue to fully switch gears, but when it does, her hands clench tight, and her legs shake, and she’s quaking on his tongue and fingers and he’s very happy with this result.

And they manage to get out the shower a full minute before Jimmy and Abby come up with the girls.

Hearing Jimmy and Abby getting their shower, which they appear to be enjoying, while getting the girls ready to go to breakfast makes Tim very sure that this is okay. All he really wants is enough
time on their own for all four of them to do this together.

“Long time, no see, Stranger,” Abby says to Ziva as she wraps an arm around her when she slides into their booth at the diner.

Ziva kisses Abby’s cheek, and sees Elaine heading to them, plates in hand. Home fries, turkey sausage, eggs, and fruit salad are very welcome to the quite sleepy newest addition to the Coast Guard.

“You look pooped,” Breena adds. “We need to have a chat with your Boss about your hours?” she says with a smile.

Tony slides into the booth, too, looking pleased to see a mug of black coffee, corned-beef hash, scrambled eggs, and biscuits looking up at him. “Elaine, I love you.”

She waves that away. “You bringing my boy home, soon?”

“Coming home today,” Tim says. “And we can’t wait to bring him in. You’ve never seen him in such a good mood.”

Elaine looks exasperated. “That man. Of course, he practically gets…” she sees Molly’s following the conversation and decides not to finish that sentence. “Only Gibbs would be in a good mood after that.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not the…” Jimmy’s meaningful look finishes that sentence. “It’s the red-head that we’re helping to move in next weekend that’s got him all smiley.”

“Awww… I’ve been telling him that she’s good for him. Glad to see he’s doing something about it.”

“He most certainly is,” Ducky says, coming up behind Elaine, and kissing her cheek as he steps out of the way so Penny can slide into the booth before he does.

“That sounds like you’ve got more details than we do,” Ziva says as Elaine hurries off to get breakfast for the last two members of today’s meal.

Ducky sparkles at her. “I do indeed.”

“And are you intending to share them?” Tim asks.

Ducky shakes his head, smug little grin on his face. “Jethro will let you know when he sees fit to. Ziva! So, tell us, how is life among the Coast Guard going? I’ve been hearing from Abbi that you and Timothy are saving her life.”

“I do not know about McGee, but I doubt I am saving any lives. What I am doing is slow, and for everyone involved, annoying, but necessary. As Acting Director, Abbi has to have people under her still doing their jobs. And she has to limit access to everything to make sure that no evidence is destroyed. That’s crippling their ability to do the job. So, for right now, I’m clearing her Department Heads and Division Heads. Pick a department, and keep going down the chain until I can find someone to run the office.”

“Isn’t the FBI doing that?” Penny asks.
“Yes, but their priorities are different. They’re dissecting the conspirators, and following the leads they find organically, which is exactly how we’d follow that case, too. But we, and the FBI, don’t have to run the Coast Guard. Abbi needs everything up in place yesterday. So, in some instances, I’m sure I’m doing the FBI’s job for them, and in others I’m getting to people they probably will not get to for months.”

“Like her lead Tech guy?” Tim asks.

“Exactly.” Ziva mutters something they can only assume is extremely rude, in Hebrew. “She can’t have him run the re-stocking until he’s cleared. So, he was the first name on my list. And it took me three hours to find out that he does not get to go back to work. In fact, right now, we’ve got a warrant out for him and the FBI is trying to track him down. I had to go through him, his second-in-command, and the next four people down from him before I found someone in the Tech Department who wasn’t on the take.”

The rest of the table responds with appropriate dismay at that.

“That was my first two days. Now I’m weeding through the people in charge of Evidence, which…” She bites her lip and her eyes are hot. “A mess does not begin to cover it. From what we can tell, as soon as a case was closed, anything that went with it became booty. Open to whomever knew what was going on and wanted it.”

Abby’s looking angry on Ziva’s behalf. “Lord!”

Ziva nods. “This is what kept me up late last night. You know how police offices all over the country auction seized equipment?”

They all nod. They know about that. That’s how a lot of departments pad out their budgets. NCIS does it, too. And, assuming the case is fully over, and the object in question has been legally seized, and the auction is open to anyone who wished to bid, that’s completely legal.

“Instead of having each branch store their own evidence. As soon as the cases were closed, everything was shipped to here or a storage site in California. Then they were auctioning off the seized guns and drugs.” Which are supposed to be destroyed, not auctioned off. “If you knew the right people, the evidence lock up was a supermarket for illegal goods. And for legal objects, if you were among the correct people, you got to pick and choose what you liked.”

“Sounds like they’ll be cleaning up this scandal for years,” Breena says.

“That is the optimistic time frame,” Ziva replies.

Abby thinks about that. “How were they covering that up? I mean… Okay, I get a bullet that matches a gun that was supposed to be destroyed…”

“I do not know. My guess is that some time with a file or a mild acid bath would change the marks on a bullet and not effect accuracy that much, but I do not know. Perhaps they had deals that said weapons could only be used outside of the United States. Maybe their Tech guy destroyed all of the files that matched the guns. I’m sure that will all come out as the cases proceed. All I’m doing is trying to find someone who can run their evidence lock up.”

“And once you’ve found someone?” Penny asks.

“I think they will have to hire out or import someone from one of the field branches. But, once that’s in place, then I start working on the second, third, and fourth down in the Accounting Department. Nothing’s getting paid out right now, besides wages. The Auditors are tracking down where the
payments are going, and I’m tracking down someone who can run the operation.”

“So, are you on loan from NCIS or are you fully CGIS now?” Jimmy asks.

Ziva shrugs. “I have no idea. The work needs to be done. Leon does not appear to mind loaning me out. We’ll get it sorted out eventually.”

Elaine comes back then, with more coffee, and breakfast for Ducky and Penny, (Oatmeal and fruit cup for Ducky. Whole wheat French Toast for Penny.) which slows down the conversation some. They’re comfortable talking shop at the diner, but some things may not need to be broadcast all over the place.

Though, granted, right now the Coast Guard Debacle is all over every newspaper in the country, so getting quiet because Elaine’s over isn’t exactly top-notch secret-keeping.

Once Elaine heads off, they don’t immediately jump back onto what Ziva’s up to, so Tim says, “So, we’ve got some news.” He’s looking pretty pleased, and then very, very confused when he feels a firm kick to his shin.

From… Ducky?

He’s with it enough not to say, “Ducky, what the hell?” But he does look curiously at him, and Ducky looks back at him with a shut up sort of gesture, and though the rest of the group is wondering what’s going on, Tim shifts direction, trying to think of something that would qualify as ‘good news’ and comes up with, “Abby felt Sean move last night.” No, she didn’t, at all, he’s still about a month too small for that, but it’s the only thing he could come up with.

Tony and Ziva are looking at him, and each other, and Ducky, none of them buying that that’s what’s going on.

“Come on, what’s the secret you don’t want them spilling, Duck?” Tony asks.

“If I wanted you to know about it, I would not have shut up Timothy. You’ll learn in good time, Anthony.”

“Oh, come on! What…”

Ducky just shakes his head. “In good time, and not a minute before.”

At the end of breakfast, there’s this odd dance where Tim, Abby, Jimmy, and Breena all want to know what the hell Ducky was on about, but Tony and Ziva want to find out what it was Tim was going to say.

So, they end up lingering longer and longer over breakfast, and finally Tim says, “Look, I know what I was going to say, but I don’t know what he thought I was going to say, so I need to actually talk to him, okay?” to Tony and Ziva, who don’t look thrilled by that, but nod, and start the trek over to Gibbs’ place.

Once they’re off, in their car, pulling out of the diner parking lot, they’re all staring at Ducky.

“You were going to tell Anthony about the shift in your relationship, correct?”

“Well, yeah. Gibbs and Abbi know. You guys know. They’re the only ones who don’t, so, yes,”
Tim says.

Ducky shakes his head. “That’s not a conversation for the whole family, together, in public.”

“Why?” Breena asks.

“Because he will find it uncomfortable and upsetting, and you care for him enough to try and make this easier for him.”

There is that, and there’s this. “And you four are happy and excited, and when he isn’t, this has the potential for exploding into a lot of hurt feelings and anger. So let’s snip the red and blue wires before there’s any shot of an explosion,” Penny says.

“Very poetic, my dear.”

Penny smiles at that. “Thank you.”

Jimmy and Tim are looking confused by that, and the girls aren’t far behind, but Ducky’s the profiler, so…

“Ducky… um…” Jimmy stops for a second because this is a beyond frank bit of conversation, and while they’ve had many of them over the years, they haven’t in front of anyone else. “Tony’s the only one we know for sure has actually done something like this.”

Ducky smiles gently at that. “I’m sure he has. And, like a lot of the things he did when he was younger and acting out in a constant quest for reassurance that he had value, he likely finds it horrendously embarrassing, and he covers that with a lot of bragging and bluster.” Which given how these days Tony doesn’t talk about the Adventures of the DiNozzo Party Machine, that’s likely a good read.

“He was weird when he walked in on us,” Abby says, highlighting at least one situation where Tony was a lot more conservative than they were expecting.

“Okay, yeah, but…” Tim’s not precisely comfortable even hinting at what Tony walked into in front of his very curious looking ultra-feminist grandmother but… “He had reasons for that, beyond just… I mean… Sh…” He sees Molly and Kelly watching him. “Okay, um… He was concerned about some of what he saw, which… uh…”

“We don’t need the details.” Ducky decides to stop that before Tim’s head explodes from intense blushing. “His father was a serial adulterer. He has his own issues with monogamy and sexuality that I’m not going to get into, but I’m sure you can piece together on your own. He also has trouble with things changing. And… though he’s much better about covering it now than he used to be, he’s not comfortable with homosexuality as anything other than an abstract concept that happens in the outside world, either. When you open up to him about this, you are going to be pushing him way beyond the bounds of his comfort zone.”

“Uh…” Tim and Jimmy are both spinning their wheels on this, because, speaking of things you don’t necessarily want to get into with your grandparents.

Jimmy finally takes over, “We’re,” he points to him and Tim, “just, not. It doesn’t work in that direction.”

Tim’s not sure if he should be relieved or annoyed when Ducky looks surprised by that. Penny’s expression could best be categorized as give it some time. Tim’s not sure if that’s annoying, either. They look at each other, having a silent conversation of their own for a moment, and then both of
them shrug and Ducky says, “That’s fine. But it is something to keep in mind when you talk to him. This is likely going to open up all of his own history with broken marriages. It will likely touch on his fears. Fear of being unable to be a faithful husband or partner is part of why he spent so long single. When he talks about his father’s marriages, the problem he always brings up is his father’s affairs. If he talks about Ziva’s parents’ marriage or Gibbs’ ex-wives, that’s the issue he brings up. Deep in his mind, that’s what kills marriages. And, though I don’t know, though I do suspect, that goes even deeper for him, beyond just broken relationships. That, on a level he knows, rationally, is wrong, but he still feels in his gut, that’s the cause of his mother’s death.”

Tim winces. “He thinks she ODed. He doesn’t know. He never checked the files. He thinks she was schizophrenic and ODed one day.”

“And what he likely didn’t say is that he thinks how his father treated her exacerbated that issue. He is likely going to have a hard time separating out what you four are doing from what he sees as the thing that rips families apart and destroyed his childhood. Be gentle with him. Tell him in private. And be ready for him not to be supportive or approving, at first.”

They all nod, putting that into their mental files of things coming up, and then Ducky smiles at them, “So, you four are… a quadruple?”

Tim and Jimmy nod, and Abby and Breena are grinning. Abby speaks, “Yeah, we are.” She’s sitting next to Jimmy, and she just about leans in to kiss him, but she notices Elaine hovering at the counter, and shifts that into resting her head on his shoulder, which is an affectionate-Abby, sort of move.

“We’re telling you guys. And Leon. And Sarah. And, maybe some bits of the wider world at some point, but not Breena’s family,” Jimmy adds.

“Tim,” Penny’s got a very soft, comforting look on her face, and her voice is gentle as she asks, “every time we talk, you mother asks about you. Do you want me to…”

Tim shakes his head. “No. Just family, and Leon because it’s one of the rules.”

“This doesn’t need to go wider than that,” Breena says.

“We shall keep your secrets,” Ducky replies, “Though, we are also looking forward to a day, hopefully not long hence, when we can celebrate this as a family.”

Tim smiles at that, and sees the rest of them are, too. “We’d like that, a lot.”

They’ve got a few hours before they’re supposed to be at Gibbs’ place. Normally this would be church time, but… Not this week. Too much stuff they still need to talk about.

This time, they’re back at Breena’s house, and as much as it’s easier to have these sorts of conversations without babies being babies, now’s a pretty good time for it.

He’s sure the rest of them have been thinking about it. It’s been niggling around in Tim’s mind since Ducky said, ‘secrets.’ Niggling since Breena said no condoms.
So, as little girls splash around in the baby pool on the back porch, and they keep an eye on them, all four of them sitting on one of the chaises, Tim says, “So, if we’re keeping your parents out of the loop, how does that work if you’ve got a blonde kid with green eyes?”

“Bigger questions,” Abby asks, “are we…” she’s looking at the guys, who she assumes would be touchier about this than she and Breena are, “okay with this?”

“Are you?” Breena asks. “Tim and I make a baby, is that okay? I’m sorry about putting you,” she’s talking to Tim, “on the spot like that. I just, you know, got really caught up in it last night, and,” she kisses Tim, and he flushes a bit at the pleasure of that, “thanks for having enough functional brain cells to pull back, because right then, I didn’t.”

Tim nods. “Didn’t want to pull back. Really didn’t want to. Nothing gets to me like that does,” he can see Jimmy nodding in agreement. Nothing feels like a woman you love saying, ‘Make a baby with me.’ “I think we’re kind of supposed to be wired that way. But… Not something I’m doing on a whim. Not… not without making sure all of you are okay with it, first. Abby, Jimmy…”

Abby shrugs. “To some degree, I’m on the outside of this. By the time I’m fertile again, I probably won’t be. I’ll be creeping up on forty-five by the time Sean’s done nursing, so… It’s not impossible, but it’s not likely. And by that point, I’d love to have more babies, so I’m not looking any gift horses… gift babies? In the mouth.” She shrugs. “In the eyes? However it happens is good for me. But, look, it’s easier for us. I don’t have in-laws breathing down my neck if one of my kids has hazel eyes and brown curly hair. These days Tim’s hair is dark enough it’ll look like the color’s from him, and if need be I can stop straightening my hair, and that’s where the curls are from, and… Even if your parents got suspicious about it, that’s not the sort of thing they can raise too much of a fuss about because it’s not open or public. People don’t lose their kids for having affairs, and even if Jimmy and I were messing around, that doesn’t blow back on your business.”

Breena nods at that. Yes, if Abby ended up with another version of Molly and Anna, her parents would ask, and her dad would fuss, but it’s not the kind of thing you can take to court.

And if they swapped churches… stopped coming to Sunday dinner… Ed and Jeannie would almost never see Abby’s children.

“How do you feel about Tim and I making a baby?”

Abby shrugs. “I don’t know. Right now, it’s good. It’s great. I love the idea… For you and Tim or me and Jimmy…” Abby’s hands flutter as she tries to put this idea into words beyond happy emotive squeeing. “Something this big, and this important should matter, you know? It should change our world. You make love, and it should last. All this love and pleasure and joy… all of that coalescing into a beating heart. This is everything we feel for each other turned into a person. I love that. That’s,” her fingers caress over Sean, and she looks out at their girls splashing around, “why we did this, right? None of these little ones are ‘Oopses.’ But I am worried about the wider world, and I’m worried about your parents, and… If it was just us in a vacuum, I’d say yes in a heartbeat. But it’s not just us.”

Jimmy’s been listening to this, quietly. Tim knows he’s thinking hard, but not what’s in his head. Breena apparently knows he’s thinking hard, too, “Jimmy?”

He opens his mouth for a second, but nothing comes out, so he takes a quick drink, and starts again. “Before we knew neither of us were carriers of the trisomy gene, we were talking about how we’d have babies. Egg donor, sperm donor, adopt. If it had come down to needing a donor, we would have asked you guys. And, if I’d been the carrier, I would have had a vasectomy, and then we’d have had babies with a donor, might have been you, Tim, and those would have been my kids. That
would have been the beginning, middle, and end of it. My kids. The DNA wouldn’t have mattered
because of the love and care, and 2:00 AM diaper changes, and burps, and getting peed on, and first
steps, and first words, and all the rest of that. We're dads. We know the spurting cum bit of being a
dad is the single least important part of the whole thing. So," he leans over and kisses Breena, and
then kisses Abby, "no matter what, Breena's kids are mine." He looks away from Breena to Abby
and then Tim, "Abby’s kids are yours. And we don’t care what they look like or who donated the
DNA unless fifteen years from now they’re looking a little too friendly with each other.

“And if Ed’s got so little tact as to ask about my son who looks like you, we’re making sure that we
don’t have another trisomy child.”

They spend a few seconds feeling that, letting it settle, and then Tim smiles at the three of them,
because Jimmy's absolutely right. It doesn't matter, at all, which one of them provides the DNA.

Abby's looking at Breena and Tim very carefully, thinking, and then says, “Breena. He'd look a lot
like Breena. Fine light hair. They both have that. Tim’s green is dominant over Breena’s blue eyes,
but Tim’s got blue-eyed grandparents and parent, so that recessive is in there. Besides the lips, any
child of Breena and Tim would probably look a lot like Breena.”

Tim’s listening to that, but not as closely as he could be, there’s something niggling in his head about
eye colors and kids that don’t quite match up, and as the other three of them are playing mix and
match with potential offspring, Tim feels like he’s on the edge of something.

And then he knows what’s in the back of his head. “Serves that fucker right.” He says it low and hot
and the other three of them are now staring at him like he’s grown a second head.

“Tim?” Abby says gently.

“Sarah has brown eyes and hair. She’s always had brown eyes and hair.”

Abby’s eyes go wide, and she starts to laugh, but Breena and Jimmy, who don’t really have much in
the way of images of Tim's family don’t get it.

Tim can see they don’t get it. “That son-of-a-bitch. Mom pulled one over on him. She’s got green
eyes. He’s got blue eyes. No one in my family, besides Sarah, has brown eyes. No one!”

That gets the other two laughing. “So you’re saying, what? Your mom had a good friend ‘round
‘85?” Jimmy asks.

“We lived on base. Not like there’s any shortage of horny guys on a Naval base.”

Abby giggles a bit at that. “He’s also saying, that, as long as our kids are as observant as he is, they’ll
never notice.”

“Yeah, well, if she had that good friend, it was while I was at school. Never woke up with a guy
other than my dad at home. I probably would have noticed that.”

Which brings them back to the wider world and keeping this quiet. “Sooner or later they’ll get old
enough to figure out that most families only have two grown-ups sleeping together at a time,” Jimmy
says.

“So…” Tim sighs. “Two bedrooms at the house, say, stick the bathroom in between so they’re
adjoining but not right next to each other, hop from one bed to the next, and make sure we’re up
before they are… Or, just treat it like it’s normal and hope they don’t say anything about it at an
inappropriate time?”
“Like to Ed or Jeanie,” Abby finishes.

The kicker is, none of them know the answer to that. They know what they want, warm happy mornings where they wake up together and then baby wrangle and all the rest of it. Basic, just another day in ‘paradise,’ family life.

But they don’t know if they can have it.

“You know, I don’t ever remember talking about how my parents slept,” Jimmy says.

“I do. Speculating when I was a teenager about if our parents still had sex,” Abby replies.

“Okay, well, yeah, but… by the time they’re teens they’ll be old enough to get the idea that maybe some things don’t need to get spread around,” Breena adds.

“Which more or less promises they’ll tell everyone they know,” Tim says.

Abby shrugs at that. “Maybe. The more normal this is. The more it’s just how life works for them, the less likely they are to remark on it.”

Jimmy shakes his head. “No way to know. Either we hide it from them, and hope they aren’t too pissed when we finally tell them in two decades/find out on their own, or we let them know and hope they don’t talk to the wrong person. So… how likely is trouble if they know and blab, versus how pissed are they going to be if we spend their entire childhoods lying to them?”

They don’t know the answer to that, either.

“And suddenly Penny and Ducky’s invitation to talk to someone who’s been round the block a whole lot seems worth it’s weight in gold,” Tim says.

Abby grabs her phone. “They offered. Let’s take them up on it.” She hits the contact button and after hellos and are you busy right now, she says, “Did you mean it when you offered to give us advice?”

“Certainly,” Penny replies.

“We’re talking, and we’d like another set of ears on this. Feel like taking a detour to Jimmy and Breena’s before heading over to Jethro’s this afternoon?”

“We can do that. Be there in half an hour or so.”

“Thank you!” Abby hangs up her phone. “And they’ll be here in half an hour or so. I had one more thought on babies…” They look at Abby, waiting for her other thought. “You weren’t planning on trying again until Anna’s a year old. Do you actually want to change that plan, or was that part of getting caught up in it?”

Breena looks sheepish. “That was part of getting caught up. I meant it about not wanting to use a condom the first time.” Tim nods vehemently in agreement with that. He’s entirely on board with that plan. “But, with as sick as I get, pregnant and nursing at the same time isn’t a good plan. Too many calories going out, not enough going in.” They all nod at that. They also all get what she isn’t saying, and that’s she was nursing Molly and pregnant with Jon, and it’s true that the logical brain knows trisomy and possible lack of fetal nutrition aren’t related, the logical brain isn’t always the one doing the thinking. “And… brain in charge… It’s not like I’m aiming for a baby with Tim, if we’re only sleeping together on the weekends, probability says my babies will be Jimmy’s, but come baby making time, whichever one of you does it is fine with me. I’m good with us never finding out. It’ll probably be obvious, but… if it’s not, that’s fine, too.”
That feels really good to Tim. He watches Jimmy, who looks comfortable with this. He's thinking it's probably a good idea for them to talk about this with just each other, make sure they're both really good, but, right now, everyone is looking cool.

“So… how to tell Tony? Is that up next?” Abby asks.

“Probably. How about we don’t tank Gibbs’ first day home?” Jimmy says.

“That sounds like a decent plan,” Breena says with a sardonic nod.

“So… invite them over for dinner tomorrow?” Abby says. “That’s private and gentle, right?”

“When was the last time you invited them over for dinner, just them, on a week night? He’ll be jittery all day. The ominous thunder cloud hangs on the horizon, looming over everything. He’s going to think someone’s dying,” Breena says.

“Morgue is private. Next time he’s down…” Jimmy sees the other three wince.

“He’s going to be badgering us left and right all night, tonight,” Tim says.

“So, first off, damage control. What’s our good news?” Breena asks.

“Uh…” Tim snaps onto a quick idea, “Whatever the hell it is that Ducky knows about Gibbs.”

Abby shakes her head. “You said, ‘we’ve got good new.’”

“Damn. Ummm…”

“Tech him.” Jimmy says. “You got some new spiffy computer stuff. We means Cybercrime, and you just start spouting random words and letters, his eye’s’ll glaze over, and we’re good.”

Tim nods. That’ll more than work. Tony immediately stops listening to the tech stuff by the third sentence. “And Ducky thought I was going to spill Gibbs’s secret… He’ll want to know what it is, and I’ll be able to honestly say I’ve got no idea. Then we can focus on pressing Gibbs.”

That would work. Not perfect, but… good enough. “Tomorrow, or whenever there isn’t a case, one of us’ll call him down for lunch, and we’ll tell him then,” Jimmy says. “No looming cloud of doom in that case. We grab lunch the three of us every week or so… And you two tell Ziva… whenever it’s good?”

Abby nods at that. “They’ve got their first OB appointment on Monday, so we’ll make the date to snag her away from Abbi on Tuesday, and if the case Gods are kind, you’ll grab Tony the same day, possibly for the same reason, and we let them know quiet and gentle.”

“Ziva will be okay? Right?” Breena asks.

Jimmy shrugs. “We thought Tony would be. Maybe he will be, but… We’re okay with it, so maybe we’re seeing that in everyone else?”

“I think she’ll be okay. She’s the one who asked us if we were together in the first place,” Abby says. “And she didn’t seem bothered or disgusted, mostly just curious about the idea.”

“When was that?” Jimmy asks.

“Years ago.” Breena thinks. “Second anniversary clubbing.”
“That’s before we,” Jimmy means him and Breena, “even talked about this.”

Breena nods. “Her asking is what got me thinking about it. Thinking about it got me talking to Abby, and from there…”

“So, we need to get Ziva a thank you gift?” Tim says with a smile.

Jimmy laughs. “Oh, I can just see that. Into the florist I go, ‘So, um, yeah. I want a bouquet that says, thanks for giving my wife the idea that we should marry our best friends. Umm… what would that be? Lilies?’”

They’re laughing at that idea when Ducky and Penny show up.

After hello hugs, and a quick shift from girls in the baby pool to girls in the living room getting dried off and dressed to go to Gibbs’, they lay out their quandary of discreet, but what do the kids know to Penny and Ducky, looking a bit nervous and in need of guidance. Ducky looks to Penny, who nods briefly, and then says, “Timothy Raphael McGee, did I forget something, or are you the Director of Cybercrime for NCIS?”

“I thought you didn’t have a middle name,” Jimmy says, staring at Tim, confused.

Tim flashes him his You want to do this, now? look, but Jimmy’s still looking curious and Breena and Ducky apparently want some background on how Timothy No Middle Name McGee appears to actually have one. “I don’t. It’s my confirmation name.” He knows he’s getting grilled on that later, but to make sure later stays later he says, “Yeah, Director of Cybercrime, Penny, so?”

She arches an eyebrow, and says dryly, “And, am I incorrect in assuming judges are assigned to cases by a computer?”

In retrospect that was a blindingly obvious bit of information.

“If Ed so much as breathes wrong, you four will stand up, form a wall, and shut his ass down. You will fight for your family using every tool at your disposal, and between the four of you, you have a considerable box of tools to pick from. And, if, somehow, you cannot run him off by power of will alone, along with a direct threat to his family’s livelihood, you will make sure the judge who gets your case is hand-selected and that judge will toss this case before it ever sees the light of day.”

Ducky nods in assent. “Rule number one. No matter what, we will close ranks to protect our family, and that includes any possible threat to the children. If worst came to absolute worst, you would know about anyone moving against you before they took the first step, and among other things, between the four of you, you have not inconsiderable wealth, the ability to create new identities, someone with a means of getting you out of the country that does not require you to purchase tickets or set any sort of visible plan in motion. No matter what might happen or how it may work out, Ed, and any threat he or anyone like him may bring, holds no power over you. The only question is, are you the kind of people who will stand up and tell him directly to ‘fuck off’ if that is what needs to happen?”

“No shame,” Tim says it quietly, but Jimmy immediately gets the reference, too.

“Exactly,” Ducky replies. “It is good to be cautious, and discreet. The wider world does not need to know about this, and I can imagine that you’d prefer not to antagonize your parents, Breena, but do not let that fear shape your world or limit your options.”

Penny takes over. “Will your kids talk? Maybe. Will it be a problem if they do? Maybe. Given the structure you’re talking about where you maintain separate homes, they likely won’t twig to anything
being odd until they’re old enough to know not to talk about it. Will spending decades lying to them be a problem? Absolutely. Do not break trust with them. They’re people, small ones, true, but just like everyone else you’ve ever met, ‘I lied to you to protect you’ will go exactly nowhere with them. You grew up in a house filled with lies,” no one needs clarification to tell she’s talking to Tim, “and it was a disaster. Don’t do it to your kids.”

They nod at that.

“Speaking of lies…” Tim says to his grandmother. “Um, so we’re talking, about kids, and how… some of my kids might not look much like me, and some of Jimmy’s kids might not look much like him,” he can see from the look on her face that Penny knows where he’s going with this, but she won’t fill in the blanks either. So Tim says, “Sarah has brown eyes.”

Penny nods. “I have noticed that. So has Ducky,” who also nods.

Tim waits a beat and Penny still doesn’t offer anything. “Does The Admiral know?”

“I cannot imagine he did not at some point notice.”

“But he didn’t divorce Mom.”

Penny shakes her head. “Nope. Tim, just like you may eventually have some children that don’t look like you, I have a granddaughter who doesn’t look like me. That has in no way changed the fact that she is my granddaughter. And, short of you or her needing a bone marrow transplant,” because the highest possible chance of a match is between full siblings, “I do not see any possible circumstance where how she got those brown eyes matters.”

Tim hears that, and understands what she’s saying, and what she isn’t saying, as well. “But you and Ducky have an idea as to that, don’t you?”

Ducky smiles at that. “Of course we do. We have a great many ideas about a great many things, none of which need to be repeated to anyone outside of the two of us. However, if you are madly curious, you do know someone who can sequence DNA, so it would not take too much time or effort for any questions you may have to be answered.”

Tim takes that as a definitive mind your own business, and pulls back.

Abby gets Kelly’s foot tucked into her little sneaker, and with that she says, “And I think we are ready to head off to Gibbs’.”

“Good. And, will you be talking to Tony?” Ducky asks.

“Yes, but not about this, not today. It’ll hold for when we aren’t getting Gibbs home,” Jimmy says. Ducky nods at that. “Wise.”
Gibbs is ready to go home. He’s beyond ready to go home. Yes, he’s been in a very good mood, especially for him, and definitely for him in the hospital, but that doesn’t mean he wants to be here a second longer than he has to be.

He’s up, out of his bed, sitting down in one of the armchairs, messing with his new phone, dressed in real clothing, and ready to get out of here NOW.

But he can’t leave until he gets the OK from the Docs, and apparently, having heard that he was supposed to be discharged today every Doctor in the greater DC region bugged the hell out, and it’s just him, and Abbi, and a horde of nurses who keep telling him the Doc will be in soon.

Finally, some high school kid in scrubs and lab coat shows up, claiming to be one of the surgeons who worked on him, making Gibbs feel seventy million years old, but, right now, he doesn’t care if Doogie over there really is a doctor or not as long as he lets him out of the hospital. And he does. But, like everything else, it’s slow. Doogie makes him get out of the real clothing, for one last checkup. (Supposedly the one this morning, the reason he got into real clothing, in the first place, was ‘the last one.’) He gets gently poked and touched while Doogie makes some thoughtful sounds about how he’s doing.

Then comes paperwork. These guy need Tim to show up and beat their paperwork system into shape. Gibbs’s signing the stack of release forms, as well as he can, his right arm doesn’t want to do much of anything, and of course, he’s a righty, as the Doc drones on and on about what he’s supposed to be doing with himself when he leaves.

Gibbs can see it’s in the paperwork, and Abbi’s listening, so he’s not paying too much attention.

Unfortunately, apparently Doogie noticed he wasn’t paying too much attention and starts, apparently from the beginning, as soon as Gibbs looks up from signing the last form.

“Take it easy. Nothing strenuous. And for God’s sake,” the Doc gets up, grabs the 02 canister that’s on the opposite side of the room from Gibbs, “keep this nearby! It’s good to see you don’t need it
right this second, but that does not mean it should be out of arm’s reach for you. Your oxygen levels drop too low, and you can be unconscious on the floor before you can grab this, so keep it close.”

Gibbs nods, taking the canister in hand, and thinking as soon as he gets home, he’s got to see if Tim can find him a smaller one, maybe something the size of a pepper spray canister, because he can’t see lugging this fire extinguisher looking thing every single place he goes.

“You’ve got a follow up appointment next week, and if you start a fever, feel achy beyond the sore of the surgery, you get to a hospital fast. You’re missing a chunk of your lung, so you cannot afford to have any sort of infection on top of that.”

More nodding.

The Doc goes over his pain meds, and Gibbs’s mostly listening, and he explains how he’s supposed to just rest for at least a week, and after the follow up they can talk more about really moving around, and as he’s wrapping that up, it occurs to Gibbs that there is some moving around he’d really like to do when he gets home.

Gibbs looks at Abbi, who’s also been carefully listening to this, smiles at her quickly, and then says, “What about sex?”

The Doc licks his lips and looks at Gibbs for a second, something that appears to be saying, good to see you’ve still got it in you. Gibbs glares at him. He’s old and hurt, not dead.

“Once again, take it easy, keep your oxygen nearby, and don’t mess around if you have a hard time breathing. You know the signs of a heart attack and a stroke?” The Doc seems to be asking Abbi almost as much as Gibbs.

She raises an eyebrow at that, and Gibbs eyes go wide. Yeah, he does, but he was hoping it wasn’t going to be that dangerous. “You’ve just had major surgery. You exert yourself too hard, at anything, you might throw a clot and stroke out. So, slow, gentle, easy. That’s going to be as true for sex as for walking to kitchen to get a drink.

“You are on major painkillers, so your sense of touch is dulled down. Remember you’ve got three two inch spans of plastic mesh where you used to have ribs from where that bullet hit you. We had to pull aside or cut all the muscles between two more of them, then spread them apart, breaking the edges at the front and back where your ribs come together so we could do the work that saved the top two lobes of your lungs. Don’t let anyone lean against your chest.”

Gibbs nods at that, he’s been on his side or sitting up as much as he can, because just the weight of his own body leaning against his ribs aches, so someone else… Nope.

“If it weighs more than five pounds, someone else picks it up for you, and honestly, if it weighs less than five pounds and there’s someone else handy, have them pick it up for you.”

“So, now’s a bad time to ask you when I can go back to working construction?”

The Doc laughs out loud.

“Take it you’ve got some plans for when we get home?” Abbi asks as she opens the car door for
Jethro. He’s not loving that, but it does weigh more than five pound and his ribs really don’t like the idea of the effort involved in that, plus the seventy foot walk from the wheel chair they wouldn’t let him leave the hospital without to Abbi’s car has him out of breath. Still this little, lizard brained, male part of him hates standing there while she does it.

But he does like the question. So he kisses her, gently, and then sits down in the passenger seat. “Got some hopes,” he says with a big smile as she closes the door.

“Got a bunch of people who are going to be there when we get home, too.”

Gibbs nods. He knows that, and he’s looking forward to seeing them. And he’s looking forward to them going home, too. Then he smiles again. “Won’t stop me from thinkin’ about it.”

“Be good, don’t tire yourself out too much, and maybe you’ll get to do more than think.” Abbi says, deadpan, and then looks at him with a grin.

Gibbs grins at that, too.

Mona hears the car pull up before the rest of the party does. Everyone else is at Gibbs house, getting ready for him to come home, talking, joking, having a good time. But when she makes a ninety mile an hour beeline straight to the front door, barking at it, everything stops.

Abby’s got the sense to grab Mona before Gibbs gets to the front porch, because as soon as she hears his footsteps she’s trying to bound through the door to him.

They hear “Take it someone’s looking forward to seeing me,” as Abbi opens the door and Mona tries to leap out of Abby’s grasp to knock Gibbs over with slobbery kisses.

She doesn’t get free, and Gibbs shuffles over to her, looking at Abby, letting her know not to let go, and then kneels down and pets Mona all over with his head pressed to her neck. “I’m home. You’ve got to be gentle with me, okay? Can’t be jumping up on me anytime soon.” Ecstatic barking marks Mona’s response. “I missed you, too.” After a few more minutes of “Good girl!” and petting, Abby’s able to let Mona go without her leaping up onto Gibbs, and then he moves away, and she follows, right at his knee, as he goes into the house to get hugs from everyone else.

Hugs from everyone else also means that Molly gets basically the exact same ‘no leaping on Uncle Jethro’ lecture Mona just did, though Molly, at twenty-seven pounds, weighs less than a third of what Mona does.

Eventually, he’s been hugged and kissed and petted, and he’s sitting down at the head of the table, food all over it, home with his family for Sunday dinner.

After supper, little girls are looking droopy, so naptime for them. Tim and Jimmy head up to take care of that. Mona would normally go up with them, make sure they do it right, then keep watch on the girls, but her Gibbs is home so she’s not going more than two feet away from him.
Tim’s gotten to the point where he can, maybe not easily, but at least without any pain, get Kelly picked up, carried upstairs, cleaned up, and ready to lie down, and since he finally can do that again, he is, pretty much any chance he can.

The only hurdle left to clear is tubby time, and that’s not going to happen for a few more months. No one thinks it’s a good idea to have him with slower than average reflexes while both he and Kelly are on a wet, slippery surface.

He’s still looking forward to being able to do it again.

Like with any naptime where all three of them are in one room, he and Jimmy linger outside, quietly making sure they really go down. They’re used to sleeping together, and at Gibbs’ place, so this isn’t completely new, but it’s been an exciting morning for them, so spending a bit of time to insure they actually nap is worth it.

And, it’s also good for the two of them. They haven’t gotten any time together, alone, since last night, and checking in seems like a good plan.

Granted, everyone is downstairs, so it’s a very quiet, mostly non-verbal sort of checking in. A ‘Can we still sit here quietly and be good with each other?’ sort of checking in.

And they can. As they’re sure the girls are asleep, Jimmy gives Tim a hand up, and for a second after that, he holds Tim’s hand, thumb gently stroking over the back. Tim nods at that, it feels nice, and gently squeezes Jimmy’s hand in return.

And from there they head down to rejoin the welcome home party.

“Soooo…” Tony’s sidled up to Tim. He looks right, he looks left, Gibbs is talking to Ducky, on the other side of the room, and they aren’t paying any attention to them. “Quick, what didn’t he want to get out?”

Tim tries to look frustrated. “I don’t know. I told him what I was about to say, he stared at me said, ‘Oh,’ and that was it. I couldn’t get what he thought it was out. Probably whatever it is Gibbs is scheming about.”

“So, you don’t know?” Tony also seems to think that if Gibbs has something in the works, Tim would know about it.

“Hasn’t told me. Anyway, I wanted to say, we got the okay for the expansion of our IRQ units, which means the Rota office will be getting through its crypto-breaking fifteen percent faster.”

Tony nods, eyes glazing as Tim keeps telling him about how the IRQs supposed to work. Tim sees it and internally smirks. There’s no such thing as an IRQ, but Tony’s doing his usual routine upon having piles of technical information dumped on him.

Then Jimmy looks over, sees the two of them chattering away. He’s close enough to see, but not really hear, so he quickly decides that Tim might need some rescuing on the ‘what’s today secret front’ and pipes up with, “Tim’s got a middle name!” glee in his voice. (Or he might just want to tell. He’s got a somewhat smug grin on his face right now.)
Okay, on a pure tactical level, Tim gets this. Tony’s jumped on this like it’s a nail biter of an Ohio State game. After this, he’s not even going to remember Ducky whacked him in the shin to get him to shut up about something.

On a everyone knows about Raphael level, he’s less than thrilled.

“I do not have a middle name, James Milton.”

Jimmy whips around to stare at Tim, no idea he knew that about him. “How do you…”

“It’s on your driver’s license.”

“Did you go through my wallet?” Jimmy looks appalled at that idea.

“Yeah, when you tossed it to me and told me to pay for dinner, like two years ago. You were playing with Molly and didn’t want to deal with the delivery guy. Saw the M on the credit card and was curious.”

Jimmy does actually remember that, so he switches to defense on Milton. “Hey, I didn’t pick that for myself! That’s how confirmation names work, right? You pick them.”

Tony’s glowing at this. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of that. Of course, you’ve got a middle name. All of us who grew up in Catholic families have at least one.”

“Confirmation names?” Ziva asks. By now the whole crew is completely focused on this conversation.

“If you’re Catholic, you’re born into the church, but when you’re seven or so, you’ve got to reaffirm that you’re part of it. So, you take some classes, prove you know enough Catechism to pass the test, and then you get to fully join the Church. Usually there’s a big party, and you get a new name to signal that something’s changed. Like of like a Bar Mitzvah, but usually younger,” Tony explains to Ziva.

“What’s yours?” Ziva asks. Somehow, none of them had felt the need to explain this aspect of growing up Catholic previously, so Ziva had been completely in the dark about it.


“I thought you didn’t like Star Wars,” Abby says.

“I was confirmed before it came out. Just dumb luck that every guy on Earth picked it two years later. So, McDevious, what’s this name you’ve been hiding from us.”

“I did not hide it! None of you, except Abby, has ever asked what my Confirmation name was, and when she asked, I told. Likewise, I do not have a middle name. My birth certificate says Timothy McGee on it, and that’s all. So, I have never lied about that, either.”

“Half of us didn’t grow up with confirmation names and didn’t know to ask,” Gibbs says, “So get talkin’, Elflord.”

Tim rolls his eyes. “Just, remember, I was a kid. And you’re supposed to pick the name of a saint or angel. And… Okay, The Admiral had some picks he really wanted me to take, patron saints of sailors, and I didn’t want them.” Didn’t want them, and since he’d have rather died than spend time on a boat, he didn’t think St. Nicholas or St. Brandon, the patron saints of sailors would want anything to do with him, either. “So, I talked to our priest about what I did want, and he had a
suggestion, and I liked it better than Nicholas or Brandon, so… Raphael. The healer.”

Everyone’s quiet for a second, and then Gibbs shrugs. “That kind of build up, I was expecting Jedidiah or something like that. Hokey and Old Testament.”

Tim raises his eyebrow at Jethro on the idea that he’d say something about a name being ‘hokey and Old Testament.’ But, like with Milton, Jethro didn’t pick his own name.

And Tony’s looking amused, and like he’s thinking, but… he’s not coming up with anything, and suddenly Tim’s thanking God and all that’s good and or holy because when he was a kid Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were popular, but by then Tony was an adult, in college or something, and probably missed the whole thing.

And for a second, that feels good, until he catches both Jimmy and Abbi, who are grinning at each other, and softly humming the Teenage Mutant Ninja theme, as Abbi quietly says, “Heroes in a half-shell.”

Jimmy’s shaking with giggles by that point, and manages to gasp out, “Turtle power!”

This, of course, has everyone focused on them, and Jimmy and Abbi explain the wonder that was the Teenage Ninja Mutant Turtles, which means Tony’s got new nicknames for the next million years, and Tim glares at Penny, and says, very dryly, “Thanks, Grandma.”

She smiles back at him. “It’s a good name. It matched who you wanted to be, and has been used by great men. And,” she smiles a bit, lips starting to quiver with a giggle “apparently, one great mutant ninja turtle, too.”

Tim stares at the ceiling, then looks back at the rest of the family, nodding, voice filled with dry sass, “I’m killing all of you assholes in your sleep.”

“Gonna show off your ninja moves,” Jimmy says, nudging Tim’s shoulder with his own.

“Oh yeah, and you’re first.”

“Uh huh.” Jimmy nods slowly, not looking terrified on any level. Of course, Tim’s kidding, but he could at least try to look terrified. “He’s getting sulky. Someone find some pizza.”

Tim glares at Jimmy and then smiles. “You know, you seem to know a whole hell of a lot about this.”

“Of course! Watched it on TV every day. So did she.” He looks to Abbi, and she nods. “And I assume you. Everyone who’s our age did. I was at the movie on opening night.”

Ziva’s been watching this whole thing, mostly with a look of immense curiosity on her face, and finally she says, “What is a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle? How can turtles be ninjas? The shells…” Abby gives her a googled picture of the Rafael on her phone, (the Michael Bey version) and Ziva stares at it in horror.

“This is what you watched on television as children?”

Tim, Jimmy, and Abbi, who are all within two years of age of each other, all nod. (With mental images of the cartoon ‘80s version in their heads. Were they to see the Bey version, they’d be appalled, too.)

“How did you ever sleep? I would have had nightmares for years at this!” Ziva’s eyes are wide, and
she can’t believe this is appropriate entertainment for children.

“Abby…” Tim’s asking as he scoots over and sees what’s on that phone. “Good Lord, yeah. No! That’s… I don’t know what that thing is.” He grabs the phone and finds the right sort of mutant ninja turtle, which is a cute, almost cuddly, or at least as cuddly as a turtle can be, little ball of pizza and snark.

Ziva sees the cartoon version of them, nodding, looking relieved, and Tim points out which one is Rafael.

“I loved April,” Abbi says, “There were only two red-heads on TV and the other one, Daphne, was too girly. Couldn’t ever see myself in a little purple dress with perfect hair. But, April, an investigative reporter who fights crime with the turtles, she rocked.”

Ziva’s still looking through the pictures on Abby’s phone. “What is this brain-looking thing?”

Apparently, attempting to explain Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles was a very pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

It’s not late, at all. Like with some of the previous Shabboses they didn’t bother with waiting for sunset. The spirit of the thing matters much more than the timing. And an early night for Gibbs, who is looking awfully tired, seemed like a good plan to everyone involved. (Except for, maybe, Gibbs, who’s looking annoyed to be this tired at 4:30 in the afternoon.)

There’s the usual getting ready to go hoopla, made a bit less by the fact that at least right now little girls don’t need warm weather gear, but Tony and Ziva, and Ducky and Penny have said goodbye to everyone and pulled out long before Tim and Abby, or Jimmy and Breena, have collected all of the baby stuff and babies into their respective cars.

Of course, it’s also possible that both Palmer and McGee families were taking a bit longer than was strictly necessary to take care of that. They might have decided that having a full on heart to heart with Tony about what was up with them was a bad plan now, but they do want Gibbs and Abbi to know that their relationship has shifted.

There are many words, many ways to describe it, or lay it out, or they could just go for direct and simple. So, as with any gathering where they’re saying goodbye for the night, they wrap with hugs and usually the guys will kiss the girls on the cheek, but this time Tim hugs Breena and full on kisses her on the lips, and that seems to get the message across just fine.

They trade goodbye hugs and kisses, and by the time they’re done, Abbi and Gibbs are both grinning at them.

“I take it you figured it out?” Gibbs asks.

“Yeah, we did,” Breena says. “One day soon, they’ll grab you and fill you in on all the details.”

Gibbs looks uncomfortable at the idea of details, and Tim sees it. “Who we’re telling, stuff like that. Not details.”

Gibbs nods. Then he thinks about the timing on this, and the easy way they’re standing around with
each other, comfortable, casual touch that they weren’t doing when Tony and Ziva were there. He’s
got his arm around Abbi’s waist, and Jimmy’s doing something very similar with both Abby and
Breena. The kind of easy contact couples, or, apparently quadruples, share.

“Tony and Ziva?”

“Not yet,” Jimmy says. “Ducky suggested we do that one on one.”

Gibbs nods at that, too. “Good plan.” Abbi seconds that, “Very good plan.” Unlike the rest of this
group, she’s been hit on by Tony a few times, as well as got to hear about his ideal woman for
Gibbs, (who might have had more than a few shades of his idea woman for him, tossed in there) and
has a decent sense of where his lines are now, and much less of a sense of where his lines used to
be.

Tim hugs Gibbs. “Okay, enough of this. You’re ready to drop. Sleeping time. Healing up. I’ll stop
by for lunch tomorrow if I can swing it.”

Tim catches something in Gibbs’ eye on that, but Gibbs says, “Fine,” before starting to say goodbye
to everyone.

So, more hugs, more kisses, and then Tim and Abby are in their car, heading to their home, with
Jimmy and Breena in their car, heading to their home, and the weekend is, more or less, over.

“Quick honeymoon,” Abby says.

“Too quick. We’ve got to do something about that.”

Abby smiles. “Breena and I are already on it.”

Tim’s pleased to hear that, but a bit surprised they didn’t say anything. Though given it’s been less
than ten hours and they’ve been doing a lot of other stuff… “Were you going to surprise us?”

“Not exactly. Wanted to make sure we could track down baby watchers for a long weekend before
getting everything set.”

“That’s what that text was!” Halfway through dinner, Abby had gotten a text from someone, seen it,
grinned, quickly texted back, and then tucked her phone away.

“Yeah. Asked Sarah if she could take Kelly for a long weekend on the 17\textsuperscript{th}, and she said yes.”

“Cool.” Tim thinks for a moment as he’s watching the traffic around them. “Why not the 10\textsuperscript{th}? He
knows why next weekend doesn’t work, they’re getting Abbi moved. He doesn’t know why the
weekend after that doesn’t work.

“Think about it for a moment.”

It’s clear from Abby’s voice this is something he’s supposed to be able to figure out, but it’s not
making itself immediately clear. “I’m not getting it. No babysitting?”

“If right now is fertile weekend, two weeks from now will be period weekend. She usually starts on
Sundays, but we’d like to get a four day weekend and have all four days.”

Tim’s nodding, feeling a bit silly for not coming up with that. Though the Sunday comment explains
why he hasn’t seen Jimmy and Breena period sex, yet, which is likely why it didn’t occur to him. It’s
not that he’s got a problem with menstrual sex, but it does limit things to some degree, and especially
if Breena, like Abby, gets crampy and finds deep sex uncomfortable the first two days, it limits things a lot. He’d rather have the full list of options available, and he’s assuming the other three would, too.

“Come on, up you get.” Abbi’s got a gentle arm around Gibbs’ waist. He is tired, and breathing harder than she wants to see. “Naptime and some O2.”

He doesn’t glare at that, but he’s not thrilled, too. And with the kids gone, he’s willing to lean a bit more heavily on her.

“Yeah, I know that look. I’d rather you didn’t feel this way, too. Come on.”

He nods and they start the trek up to his room.

Being back in his bed feels good. Seeing her pillows on her side of his bed feels even better. Slipping in between her sheets is excellent. Trying to find a comfortable position, and getting used to not having a bed that raises and lowers itself as well as inclines, is a less awesome experience, but he does, eventually, get himself on his side, O2 cannula in his nose, more pain meds in his system, and by that point he’s just about unconscious.

But, just about isn’t the same thing as fully there, so he reaches over, and squeezes her hand. “You’ll be here when I wake up?”

Abby gently strokes his cheek, fingers skirting over the O2 tube. “That’s what come home and stay forever means, right?”

He smiles at her, “Yeah. It does.”

“You get a nap. Eventually we’ll have dinner and get you a shower, and if you’re feeling up for anything after that, there may be some sex.”

He really smiles at that, and then pulls her hand to his lips to kiss her palm.

Tim and Abby are getting ready for bed, doing the usual brush teeth, get undressed, put the day aside and move onto sleepy thoughts, routine.

And like usual, Tim’s in their bathroom, naked, brushing his teeth.

What isn’t usual is he’s feeling quite contemplative. He’s looking at himself in the mirror, and he looks pretty much exactly the same way he did this morning, and yesterday morning, and the morning before that.

He doesn’t expect to look different. But to some degree he feels like he should.

“You’re right, you know,” he says to Abby, who may be sensitive and definitely knows him better than anyone else on earth, but is not in fact a mind reader, so she’s pleased to hear she’s right, but she
doesn’t know about what.

“Good. What am I right about this time?”

“You do something like this, and it should change your world. When you’re touched by hands that love you, it should mark you. I look the same, but I don’t feel the same.” He finishes with his teeth, and turns from the mirror to her. “I did this, something like it, the when we got together, staring at myself, trying to see my body through your eyes, feeling you on my skin and in my heart and all of the rest of it.” He touches the cuff tattoo. “And I wear that burned into my skin, because it matters. Because it changed who I am, so it should show.”

She’s smiling gently at him. He takes another step closer, wrapping his arms around her, and resting his head against her shoulder. For a moment, he stands there, holding on, smelling her skin, feeling her body warm against his, very aware of her life and his and their love, and the life growing inside of her. Very aware of how these feelings move through them and shift their world.

“I do want to do something that marks this. Something that can’t be changed or forgotten or removed.”

Abby’s beaming up at him. “Tattoo ideas?”

“Yeah, a few. For me. I’d love something for all four of us, but I know it’s a bad idea for Jimmy, and I don’t know if Breena’d want one.”

Abby nods along at that. “That’s why I said I was in favor of rings. If Jimmy could get one, I’d be all over another matching tattoo, for the four of us. As it is, just on me, I’d love to get two more sets of lips.”

“Ohhhh.” Tim grins at her. “I like that! What are you thinking?”

“I’ve got your lips on my throat, love to have Jimmy’s on one wrist and Breena’s on the other.”

Tim’s still smiling. “Wrists?”

“We do go swimming sometimes, so… first choice, inner thighs, might cause some talk, especially if they aren’t matching lips.”

Tim likes that idea, too. “Have them kiss each other each time you cross your legs.”

Abby giggles at that.

“Put ‘em up high enough and have them kiss you.” He’s got a big grin as he says that.

She giggles at that, also, and then winces when she thinks about how healing up from that would go and how much of a massive kink having two healing wounds, one on each inner thigh, burning and itching, for weeks, would put in her, and by extension, Tim’s sex-life. “Uh, no.”

He thinks about it and figures out why she winced. “Wrists, huh?”

She nods. Wrists are safe.

Then reality shifts back again. “Are your lab rats going to ask why you aren’t wearing your cuffs and whose lips those are?”

Abby sighs. “Yeah. Damn it…” Her eyes narrow at that.
“Maybe next weekend, after we’ve got Abbi all moved in, we’ll get out the lip tars and put kisses all over you, see where you like that won’t get too many questions.” Abby perks up at that. Tim kneels and gently kisses the underside of her breast. “That’s not obvious.”

She laughs. “The healing up on that’ll kill me.”

“We’ll find somewhere.”

Abby definitely enjoys the idea of how that challenge will go. “What are you thinking? For you.”

He nods at their bed heading to it, and she wraps up with her teeth quickly, then joins him on their bed. He’s sitting back against the headboard, legs stretched out in front of him, fingers resting lightly on the dragon on his calf. The dragon she designed for him. The visual image of the guy he’s become. It’s a green dragon, mostly the light, warm-toned green of his eyes, but there are darker forest green scales on the belly and wings. It’s European-style, crouched on its back legs, wings high, tail curled around its legs. It’s eleven inches from feet to uppermost wing tip, and takes up the left half of his leg. Next to it, starting at the feet and looping his leg to the dragon’s tail, is the first band of knotwork.

Kelly’s band. It’s a ribbon of green and gold that twists and turns over itself in an eternity knot. No beginning, no end, just a long flow of colors that make up the start of what will, eventually be a full calf tattoo.

He strokes over the first band, the one that represents Kelly. The dragon is eleven inches long, so, assuming he keeps the bands small, there’s room for a lot of them. Kelly’s is about two inches wide. There needs to be some space between them, so, if he keeps the rest to an inch/inch and a half…

“You know I’m adding one of these for each of our children, and when we’re done, the idea is to add a band to the middle,” between the kids’ bands, “for us.”

She nods.

“In my mind, the middle band was a wide two strand knot. One color for each of us.”

“Okay.”

“I’m thinking of adding a band for Molly and Anna, and any other children Jimmy and Breena have, in addition to our children.” Abby’s smiling. She likes that idea. “And, instead of one two-strand knot in the middle, how about two four-strand knots at the top and bottom, capping the whole thing?”

“Tim, that sounds awesome.”

“You’re good with Molly and Anna on there?”

Abby nods.

“And… really… you’re good with the idea of some kids who may be Breena and I?”

“You good with some kids that might be Jimmy and I?” she counters with.

“Yeah.” He’s looking at his leg, but thinking of the girls, and Sean, and Jon who they never got to properly meet. “Yeah. I am.”

“Me, too.”
He’s still looking at his leg. “Do I put a knot on for Jon? Is that, good, or… too sad?”

“I think it’s good. They both wear his diamonds. I think they’d be touched that you remembered him.”

Tim nods at that. He seen the tiny flash of light that comes off of Jimmy’s medic alert bracelet when he moves his hand in the right direction, and the small diamond solitaire necklace Breena never takes off. The image of them in his mind is quite clear. Jon’s diamonds aren’t white. They’re a smoky gray-blue, and Tim’s thinking that’ll be the color of his knot.

He looks up at Abby. “So, all I need now is about twenty free hours to get it all done!”

Abby laughs at that. “Little by little, you know.”

Tim nods. “Yep.” Abby’s snuggled up next to him, lightly stroking the dragon on his calf. He shifts around a bit, and then kisses her, wondering if touching her after Jimmy has would feel different, or is there’ll be some sense of reclaiming her, or something…

But there isn’t. It’s Abby. His wife and love, and it’s her skin against his, and again he remembers Jimmy saying something about how he kissed Breena for the first time and nothing changed. How it didn’t make them any less. Abby’s kneeling between his legs, and he’s got his hand curled around her neck as they kiss.

Jimmy was wrong, everything’s changed. The world is different today than it was yesterday.

And he’s right. Everything changing hasn’t made him and Abby any less. He hasn’t lost anything. She’s still his, and he’s still hers, and nothing about them became less, but their whole world just gained a universe of more.

Love isn’t a zero sum game, and he doesn’t have to love Abby any less in order to love Breena and Jimmy more, and he knows they couldn’t have done this faster, that they did need the time to make sure they were okay, but he’s wishing he could have figured it out sooner, because love may be infinite, but his time on Earth isn’t, and he wants every minute of this life that he can possibly get.

Gibbs wakes up, sore and a little disoriented. It takes him a second to figure out that he’s back in his own bed, and the tapping noise next to him is Abbi working on her computer.

“Good nap?” she asks, as he blinks himself awake.

“Yeah. Weird dreams.”

She looks at him curiously.

“Don’t really remember, just felt like they were silly while they were happening.” He slowly starts to lift himself up, and once again wishes he had the sort of bed that inclines for him.

Abbi gives him a hand at that, helping him get the pillows behind his back. Once he’s up he says, “Working hard?”

She wiggles her hand indicating so-so. “Annoying, not hard. I’m writing up a briefing to our Union Reps who are screaming about how many people I’ve got on leave right now.”
“Not thrilled with guilty until proven innocent?”

“Not at all. If it wasn’t for the fact that I’ve got so many of them banned right now, I think they’d be threatening a strike.”

Gibbs quirks an eyebrow.

“At my office I’ve got six out of ten of them gone already. Nine out of ten on anything sensitive. Not like saying goodbye to the others will matter all that much. I’m already moving at a glacial pace.”

He sighs and rubs her shoulder.

She exhales, and flashes him her, I’m done with this shit look. “Start moseying toward the shower. By the time you get in there and the water on, I’ll have this wrapped up.”

Hot shower sounds great to Gibbs, so he unhooks the O2 tube, or starts to, but she gives him a little glare, so he leave it in place, and begins his mosey.

_____________________________________________________

Warm, humid air does make it easier to breathe, so that feels good. After a few breaths he takes off the tube and tentatively tries to breathe as deep as he can. His lungs and ribs tell him to stop that before he gets to anything that might be called a decent breath.

It takes Abbi a bit longer than she anticipated, so Gibbs takes a moment on his own to really see what happened to him. His shoulder feels tight, and hot, and sore, and swollen, and all of that is true. The divot on his delt has been sewed into a small, tidy scar, but the flesh under it looks like someone took an ice cream scoop and hollowed out an inch wide trench of his arm.

He’s got a long, thin scar that runs from one side of his ribs to the other between the second and third from the bottom ribs. Looks a bit like a smile. A smile he could do without.

He turns his back to his mirror, and checks the bullet wound. Part of his shoulder feeling so tight is they did stretch the skin to sew the wound back into a nice tidy line. But under too tight skin is a huge hole. The bullet took out six square inches of his back, just below his shoulder blade.

They built some sort of mesh to replace the missing rib pieces. Supposedly the bones will eventually grow into the mesh. Supposedly the two lobes he’s got left of his right lung will expand to fill his rib cage. Rumor has it the muscles that they reconnected and reattached and stretched all over the place will get stronger and start doing their jobs again.

Supposedly, he’ll heal.

But unlike Tim, no one’s saying anything about him regaining full use or strength on his right shoulder. And Gibbs doesn’t know if they aren’t saying anything because they’ve decided he’s just too damn old to get it back, or if it’s physically impossible for him to do it.

Either way, he intends to prove them wrong.
“Looks better than I thought it was going to,” Abbi says as she steps in and finds him naked in the bathroom looking at his back.

He makes a noncommittal noise at that. He doesn’t much want to get into her thinking he was going to die. He can guess how bad it had to have looked/felt when she was getting him patched up in that hallway. He’s been on the other side of that, and usually with worse results.

Her fingers trail over his scars, and he gets the sense that just because he doesn’t want to deal with this doesn’t mean he can avoid it, and now might be a really good time to work on his *don’t screw it up* technique.

So, unlike with Shannon, he doesn’t try to hide. That was beyond stupid the first time he tried it. Unlike with Jen in Paris, he doesn’t try to pretend he’s not hurt. (Speaking of stupid, attempting to pretend you’re fine to the woman who dug the bullet out of your leg is more or less the definition of stupid.) And unlike with Diane, or Stephanie, or... honestly, every woman he’s been with, he doesn’t try to run away from her angry and hurt and scared.

He turns to her, not sure, what, if anything, he should even try to say, probably with something of a hang dog look on his face, and she purses her lips and shakes her head at him. Then she nods to the shower. “Come on, before all the hot water goes down the drain.”

He nods and steps in, sighing happily as warm water goes streaming down him. Abbi strips off her clothing and gets in with him.

Gibbs smiles at her, eyes trailing over her body. “Missed seeing this.”

Her hands rest on his chest, very gently, and she steps close, forehead on his unhurt shoulder. She doesn’t say anything, but he can feel the edge of fear coming off of her. He starts to wrap his arm around her, but she shakes her head, so he keeps it at his side. She’s slowly stroking her hands over his arms and chest, hips and legs, from the back of his neck to top of his thighs. Her touch is feather light over the scars, and firmer, reassuring that he’s really there, over the parts of him that aren’t hurt.

She’s chewed him out up and down for almost getting killed. She literally yelled at him for breaking protocol, and how it was his job to clear the room, her job to cover HIM, not the other way around. Not until she had moved forward past him. (He’s got a somewhat different interpretation of what happened, but he’s sane enough to know *that* isn’t anything they need to argue about.)

Now though, they’re alone, no nurse is going to walk in, there are no doctors around, it’s just them, and he feels it when she starts to shake. Feels her drop the anger that’s been keeping fear and sorrow tamed down. He can tell the exact second she drops work, drops the ‘I’m okay’ façade she’s been wearing since Tuesday night, since she stuffed her jacket between his Kevlar vest and the hole in his back that was bigger than her fist.

He kisses the top of her head as her arms circle low on his hip (she wants to hold him tight, but can’t around his ribs) and she stands there, shaking, crying, silently. He doesn’t hear any sobbing, but he feels her shuddering.

He rests his hand on her back, between her shoulder blades, and holds on, letting her get it out.

Sad, scared, angry woman in his arms isn’t nearly as bad as it could have been. Of course, unlike the times he’s tried to get out of this before, he’s (most likely) not going back to what he’s trying to get her calm from.

The job came first. Even with Shannon, the job came first. It called, and he went. And he thinks part
of why he couldn’t stand this before, why he was willing to do anything to avoid it was that he knew the job would win, and that it didn’t matter how much it hurt the woman in question, he was going to go back to it.

And right now there’s nothing to go back to. Hell, the most dangerous thing on his menu right now is trying to get girls into the US, and that’s been put off for however long it’ll take to heal up, and after that… he’s not planning on getting into shootouts for that. He’s not planning on going into pirate infested waters, and the Coast Guard won’t shoot him if he does what they tell him to do (which he will.)

He smiles to himself as he thinks that, what with the fact that the whole reason he’s standing here, holding Abbi, is because the Coast Guard just shot him… Won’t happen again, though.

At least, not on the water.

He kisses the top of her head. She’s starting to slow down, and he’s fairly sure she can hear him over the water. “You come home to me. I promise.”

Abbi looks up at him. Her eyes are red, and she swallows hard before saying, “You damn well better.”

“I do. I’m going to be here.”

Her eyes search his, looking deep, making sure he’s on the up and up, and then, though he knows she wants to grab him, hard, and pull him tight to her, she gently reaches up and lightly kisses his lips.

He smiles at that kiss. “Not gonna break me. Kiss me like you mean it.”

Her tongue slips over his bottom lip followed by a quick nip, and he growls low and deep at that, very pleased, which sounds good and sexy for two tenths of a second until he starts to cough. She steps back, looking dryly at him. “Oh yeah, you’re so ready for this.”

He flashes her that hangdog look again.

She gently pushes on his good shoulder. “Turn around, let’s get you washed up, and we’ll see what happens when we get you back on dry land.”

Getting washed up feels amazing. He’s never appreciated having his hair washed the way he is today. And by the time they’re contemplating dry land, he’s decided that he will chew his tongue off rather than cough because there is no way in hell he will make any move that might derail them having sex.

Warm soapy hands all over his body have focused his mind with laser-like precision of getting both of them naked in bed and doing way more than just cuddling.

Finally, they get into bed, and finally she’s touching him all over, sitting in his lap, her skin on his in soft, ghosting touches that light his whole body up and make him want to pull her close and grind into her hard and deep.

He’s not doing that, and she’s touching him like he’s made of paper thin porcelain, so soft and slow and gentle, and he’s just about out of his mind at these gentle, teasing brushes of her skin against his by the time she slides down his aching dick.

He wants to groan, loud at that, but he keeps it to a soft whimper, which doesn’t use up too much
oxygen, and is vocal enough that she gets how much he’s liking this.

She’s rocking slowly against him, and in this position, he’s able to easily kiss and nuzzle her breasts, which he loves, seeing if with soft, wet sucks and gentle nibbles he can turn her on enough to get her to move faster, take him deeper, let him get off.

This soft and gentle ride is killing him. He’s close, can feel his orgasm a few inches away, but it might as well be miles because he can’t really move enough to get there.

His head is back against the headboard, and he’s trying his hardest not to breathe deep or hard, so these soft, little panting breaths are slipping between clenched teeth as she keeps up a slow, easy grind.

If he were even remotely near healed up, he’d be grabbing her by the hips, or better yet, thighs, and slamming her down onto him, pumping up to meet her, deep and wet and hard, and he’d be groaning, loud, telling her in quivering muscles and non-verbal song how much he loves this.

But he’s not, so he’s got a little bit of motion at his hips, and one hand knotted in her hair, as he’s trying to do her some good with his right hand, but getting it to the right place makes his shoulder and back ache, and eventually she grabs his wrist and presses that hand to the bed.

She’s doing herself, which he loves watching. Her fingers long and swift on her pussy as she slips, still so slow and soft, up and down on him.

He feels her body going tight on his, and he’s so close, and working so hard at not breathing deep, at keeping air moving in and out and in and out and he’s focusing on that and on her and the up down in out one two of sex and life and how it all blends and bleeds together, and she shivers all over, body twitching on him and it’s almost but not quite enough and he’s begging, flat out “Please, please, please,” begging her to move just a little faster.

And she does, still twitching on him, up down hard and fast and it only takes twice before he’s burning and pulsing all over with one of the most welcome orgasms of his life.

When he’s come back to himself enough to know what’s going on, beyond happy chemicals flooding his body and the feel of her (gingerly) against him, she’s watching him carefully.

He is breathing hard, but he’s not coughing. He gives her a lopsided smile. “So worth it.”

“You feeling okay?”

He nods, slowly. “Really, really okay. Haven’t felt this good in years.”

She doesn’t look like she buys that, but she kisses him gently, reaches for the tissues, pulls off of him and cleans them both up. Then she hands him the 02 tube, and he tucks it into place without any complaining, the extra oxygen does feel good, and maybe keeping it in place would be a good plan for next time.

It’s still not very late, but he’s wiped out. She’s in the head, finishing up her clean up, and carefully scoots himself down onto the bed, rolling onto the side that doesn’t hurt, then, feeling experimental, tries rolling onto his stomach, which… actually feels okay.

He’s drifting close to sleep when she comes out, pads over to the bed, and lays down next to him, resting her lips on his shoulder and her knees pressed into his hips.

He reaches over enough to kiss her and says, “Thanks.”
“Thanks?”

“Yeah. For not running off.”

“I’d never…”

“Not at HQ. After. From me. Five years ago, I’d have rather shot myself in the head than do what you just did. I would have run away from it. So… Thanks.”

She kisses his shoulder. “You’re welcome.”

He nods slowly at that. “I love you.”

He feels the smile against his skin. “I know. I love you, too.” It’s the first time she’s said it, and it feels brilliant, a beautiful flush all through him.

He smiles at that and kisses her again.
Chapter Notes

In this A/U version of the real world, Tailhook took place in ’94 instead of ’91.

Vance gets in at his usual time, a bit after eight. He does his usual morning routine, say hello to Vera, find out who he’s seeing today… which is where usual morning routine stopped.

Both McGees and Dr. Palmer want to see him, together.

He’s hoping it’s a vacation request. But with those three it could be anything from a twenty part murder-conspiracy on three continents, to them telling him in person that Gibbs took a turn for the worst and he’s got to get his funeral suit out, to some sort of new plan to streamline the way they handle physical evidence, to… he doesn’t know.

He’s hoping it’s a vacation request.

He’s getting a lot more of them these days. When he okayed McGee’s paperwork software he’d just been thinking about how great it’d be to be able to get through cases that much faster, and be able to find everything easily.

It’s been live for almost six months now, and he’s starting to see some real differences. More vacation time is part of it. His budget is going to look great this year because his people are actually using their off days, so he’s not paying comp-time.

And the case backlog… At this rate, that’ll be done in two years.

Cold cases… the MCRTs that, unlike DiNozzo’s, haven’t added to their umbrellas or shifted focus, they’re cracking into them. They’re never all going to get solved, but… it’s not going to be all that much longer before his cadre of retired officers who are working on the cold cases are going to get bumped from their positions because he’ll have active investigators doing the work.

He’s having a bumper year at closing cases. Which is great.

And next year is going to be great, too.

And the year after that, where, if his projections keep pace with reality, he’s going to have 35% more Agents than he needs, is not going to be great. By then they’ll have finished the backlog. The cold cases that can be solved will have been solved. And he’s going to have people sitting around twiddling their thumbs. Not a problem that needs to be solved today, but, it is something he’s aware of, and being made even more aware of with each passing vacation request.

After all, it’s a lot easier to take a long weekend if there isn’t hours of paperwork in need of filling out on Monday morning.

“Did McGee give you any hint what they want to talk about?”

“He submitted a filled out 453Q,” vacation request form, “for him and Abby, and there’s one from Dr. Palmer, too.”
Vance feels his spine unknot, no fifty part conspiracy then. At least, not a new one. He’s got a meeting with Abbi Borin to talk about possibly loaning her more agents while she’s vetting her own people. He’s fine with that, and wonders, briefly, if that’s part of how he’s going to deal with too many people when he gets there. Everyone else is short-staffed, he might end up being the Federal Temp Agency.

Or he’ll start giving out McGee’s paperwork software, using it as a bargaining chip when he needs information and access other Feds don’t want him to get. And, eventually they’ll all be overstaffed.

He shrugs to himself, and gets his cup of coffee. After all, as problems go, overstuffed and under budget is an awfully good one to have.

“So, how do we start this conversation?” Abby asks as she and Tim and Jimmy are in the elevator heading toward Vance’s office.

Last night, kissing each other had done a fine job of letting Gibbs and Abbi know what was up, but that doesn’t seem like an appropriate way to go about breaking this news to Vance.

“Follow up, do we really need to tell him?” Jimmy adds. Yeah it seemed like a great idea in the abstract, in the elevator, heading up, it’s seeming a bit less necessary. “I re-read the regs. None of us work together. None of us are each other’s Boss. We aren’t actually dating. So we don’t technically have to disclose this.”

Tim flips off the elevator. “We already made the appointment. It’s going to look weird if we don’t go in there. You getting cold feet?”

He shrugs. Not about the four of them. About telling everyone… “Feeling like I’ll get in there and start stupidly blathering away.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll kick you if you do. Get you to shut up way before you bury yourself.” Tim says.

Jimmy rolls his eyes. “That’s so much better.”

“Always here to help,” Tim says with a smile.

Abby steps closer and kisses him. “Come on. Right now we’re in a situation where if we ever have to seek forgiveness, it’s going to hurt way, way worse than giving him the heads up will.”


Tim squeezes his hand. “Yeah. Me, too.”

They’re barely in the door when Vance, without looking up from his computer, says, “Yes, vacation time is approved. Stay close enough to get back here fast if I need you. And next time, all three of you don’t need to come up for something like this, one of you is enough.”
He looks up when he hears Tim shut the door, and notices the other two are still in there with him.

“This is more than a vacation request, isn’t it?”

Abby nods, and Tim heads behind her and Jimmy, pulling the chairs over to the sofa, nodding at it, suggesting this would be a good place for them to be.

“Gibbs is all right?”

The three of them start nodding, quickly, realizing that given the timing on this, what they’re doing is pretty spooky.

“Yeah, Leon, he’s fine. Came home yesterday. I’m supposed to have lunch with him today if work allows,” Tim says.

Leon settles on to his sofa with all three of them staring at him, wondering what could possibly take this sort of kid gloves treatment.

“So, is this where you tell me that you’ve found something on Jackie’s case?” Which is the only other thing he can think of that warrants all three of them up here looking like they’re trying to think of the most delicate way possible to break some bad news to him.

They’re staring at each other again. Dr. Palmer blurts out, “No. Nothing with work, or with you, or with a case of any sort or…” Vance sees McGee nudge Palmer’s ankle with his foot and he shuts up.

“Then what’s with this… You three look like you’re afraid to breathe too hard.”

Tim sighs at that, and says, “Saying it out loud’s a big step. Okay… Um… Yeah… So…” Vance is still staring at them, wondering what the hell just brought back 2012 Agent McGee. This time Palmer gives McGee a little kick.

Abby looks at both of them, shakes her head, takes both of them by the hand, giving each one a little squeeze, and looks at Leon. “As per the rules, we’re here to tell you about a shift in our relationship. We, and Breena, but she’s not here because she doesn’t work here, so she wouldn’t be here, because she’s not covered by the rules…” Both of the guys are staring at her, but Vance has the sense neither of them are dumb enough to give her a small kick to the ankle. “Anyway. We, the four of us, are together, you know, romantic, and that’s not going to be changing, and we thought you’d rather get a heads up from us as opposed to just stumble into it one day. Because, if you end up stumbling into it, that probably means something’s gone really wrong, and we don’t want that to happen, but…”

McGee nudges her with his foot, and she stops.

Vance stares at them for a second, noticing, once again, that Abby’s holding both Palmer and McGee’s hands, and for a second, nothing forms in his head, at all. There just this blank, quiet, shocked out of his head moment.

Then he blinks.

And he swallows.

And then he laughs. Because he can’t think of anything else to do. Well, he could yell at them, but he’s not up on his sexual harassment regs, let alone any ones that might cover this situation, and he’s not sure if yelling at them for following the rules is the kind of response that could bite him in the ass later.
He gets up, pours himself a drink, not, even remotely, his usual 8:30 in the morning routine, and slugs it back.

Then he rubs his eyes. He can feel them, behind him, staring at him, waiting for him to say something. But he’ll be damned if he’s got any idea of what to say. That rule is there to shield NCIS from sexual harassment suits, and make sure that everything is properly disclosed to any lawyers who have to deal with their cases.

The problem is, if he knows this, then it has to go into those case filings, and if this goes into those filings, two of his most commonly called witnesses are going to be grilled, over and over, about how they can’t be good at their jobs because they’re perverts. Any decent defense lawyer worth his salt will have a field day with the idea of three-cornered inner-office hanky-panky messing up the chain of evidence.

Apparently, 2016 Director McGee decides to show back up, because McGee says, “We don’t expect you to disclose anything. You haven’t actually been told anything, and if anything happens, it’s all on us. We’re going to be discreet. We won’t be ‘out’ here, no out of line behavior at the Christmas party, nothing like that, but… We thought you’d rather know it was happening than get hit with it out of the blue. Right now, we’re here, telling you about our vacation plans, and you’re listening to them. In a few minutes, we’ll head out, and everything you’ll ever see with the three of us will be the same as it ever was.”

Leon nods. That covers things. “As long as that’s true, we don’t have any problems.”

Tim nods at that, along with Jimmy and Abby. They’re getting up, heading toward the door, when Vance asks, “This vacation, is it a honeymoon?”

“Yeah,” Dr. Palmer says.

Vance nods at that, too. Then he sighs. “Congratulations. I hope you enjoy it.”

“Thanks,” Abby says, brightly, “We will.”

The door to his office shuts, and Vance sighs again. There are a few moments of his career where he’s been proud of himself, where he’s felt like he fought the good fight and was working on the side of the angels.

Not a whole lot of them, but a few.

He looks at the picture of his daughter, who’s almost sixteen now, and in two years, assuming all goes well and she keeps her grades up, she’ll be a Plebe at Annapolis.

Anyone who looks at Kayla knows she’s black and female. No way to hide that. Not everyone knows that she’s got a girlfriend. And not everyone is, or would be, as tolerant of that as Vance’s family is.

Second generation of Vances at Annapolis, and he’s damned if she’s going to have to go through the shit he did.

The first black man graduated Annapolis in 1945, so it wasn’t exactly like someone with his skin
tome was some sort of new or exotic specimen when he got there in 1981. But that’s how a lot of the students, and upperclassmen, treated him.

And he wasn’t, by any sort of a long stretch, the first black officer, ever, but he still took his share of shit and about six other guy’s shit, too from his commanders, and from insubordinate assholes who didn’t want to take orders from any First Lieutenant, let alone one who looked like him.

And that’s just how it was. Bing a black guy in the ‘80s and ‘90s meant work at least twice as hard for half the results. It meant going selectively deaf and blind over and over and over again.

And he did it. He took the shit, climbed the ladder, fought, literally and figuratively, for every promotion he got, and even with that, even with a spotless record, that fucking asswipe McCallister just saw him as a pretty face to fill a coffin and start up the Cold War again. He didn’t pick any pretty white boys to go get killed to advance his career, nope he picked Leon.

“Why don’t the sharks go after black sailors?” “Cause they don’t eat whale shit.” Not like he didn’t hear that joke over and over.

Not like he didn’t know the guys who agreed with it.

But he never thought some fucker would decide to have him killed for it.

He was good at his job. He was great at his job. And it didn’t matter. He was Black, so he was disposable.

That was a crystalizing moment for him, in a lot of different ways. (Among other things, when he got home, he got real serious about Jackie. Life was too damn short to be dithering about her. He still thinks that’s the best decision he ever made.)

Professionally, that was the end of him just looking the other way at racism. Anyone who worked for him knew to toe the line and to be ready to get the shit beaten out of them if they didn’t. And a few guys, they needed some time in the ring to get the message, and Leon is still proud to have literally pounded equality into several half-wits who needed the shit beaten out of them to get it.

Tailhook was a wake-up call. He’d like to say he was always on the side of the angels at that one, but… He wasn’t. He knows, especially back at Annapolis and when he was a young officer, he did see his job as a boy’s club and resented the hell out of the girls who tried to sneak in. But there’s being irked at having women around, and there’s tolerating rape, and he was never cool with that.

When he got word of Tailhook, he was at NIS, and he was a husband, and he had a woman he loved more than his life, one who was dealing with her own issues of being a black woman in the working world, and though he personally wasn’t part of the team that started investigating it, he got himself onto that investigation, and several similar ones that followed it.

He was working one case, two years later, young Petty Officer, very pretty, roofied and gang-banged by the men who should have been her brothers. She was holding together by her fingernails, talking about loving her job, and how good she was at it, how she finally felt she’s broken through and was ‘one of the guys,’ and he could see how betrayed she felt, how, if it had been a group of strangers, that would have been one thing, but…

And he knew how that felt. Remembered being so happy about being picked by McCallister for that mission in Amsterdam, strutting around, looking like a “tourist,” and how it all fell away.

He got convictions on all five of them. That’s a case he’s proud of.
In the mid ‘90s you did not want to run into Leon Vance if you were a male sailor accused of assaulting a female sailor.

The leap from seeing women as real sailors to seeing gays as real sailors probably shouldn’t have taken as long as it did, but, he didn’t just do it instantaneously. It still took time, and effort, and honestly, he had to work on shoving down a whole lot of squeamishness, especially for the guys, lesbians never bothered him much, but he got there.

He got there because that’s what a good man does. Because that’s what a good officer does. Once someone puts on the uniform, that’s it. Black, white, male, female, gay, straight, it doesn’t matter. They’re his people, and it’s his job to keep them safe. It’s his job to make sure that if something happens to one of them that they find justice, or their nearest and dearest do.

That’s the job.

That’s working on the side of the angels.

He sighs and takes another drink. Running people is complicated. Justice is easy and pure. People are weird and mucky.

But he’s in the justice business. He’s in the making the world a better place, one case at a time business. And the only tools he’s got for that are people. Lots and lots of people. And, as he takes another sip of his bourbon, he’ll admit that the idea of McGee and Palmer and Abby and Breena makes him feel squirmy the way gay sailors used to, but he also knows that it doesn’t matter because three of those people do more to keep his ship running, keep his sailors safe, than any twenty other members of his staff.

He wishes they hadn’t told him. He’d be happier not knowing that about them. But he respects that they did.

And he knows, that if the shit does hit the proverbial fan, he won’t let them fall on their sword. They’re his people, and they do the job, and they do it right. Merit, who you are as a person, that’s the side of the angels, that’s where Vance wants to live. That’s the world Leon Vance is trying to build, the world he wants his daughter and son to live in, that’s all that matters.
“So… How did that go?” Abby asks as soon as they’re in the elevator.

“He wasn’t cursing at us,” Jimmy says. “So, that’s good, right?”

“Better than it could have been,” Tim says with a shrug.

“Anything less than we all got fired, is better than it could have been,” Jimmy says dryly.

“You know what I mean,” Tim says as Abby flicks off the elevator. “He laughed instead of yelled, and we got congratulations instead of head slaps, that’s good.”

“That’s a guy who’s really freaked out by something trying not to be an asshole about it,” Jimmy says.

“Which is way better than the guy who’s completely freaked out and doesn’t care if he’s being an asshole,” Tim says. He shrugs a bit. “I don’t need Leon to love this; I just need him to not be an asshole about it.”

“Yeah, but it’d be really nice if he at least liked it,” Abby says.

“I think that’s asking more than we can get from anyone who’s not family,” Jimmy replies.

Tim nods, and all three of them look at each other, thinking about Tony, wondering if that’s too much to ask from family, too.

“You make that lunch date with Tony, yet?” Abby asks.

“Sent him the email this morning. Haven’t heard back, yet,” Jimmy replies. “You and Breena and Ziva are all set?”

“Penny’s coming too, and if she can swing it, Abbi’s coming,” Abby says.

“That sounds like your lunch is mostly about baby DiNozzo, and we’re the side bit,” Tim says.

Abby smiles. “That’s the plan.” She flicks the elevator back on. “So, lunch with Gibbs?”

“Hopefully. Let’s see what caught fire since I checked in last night.”

Jimmy’s floor first, and before the doors open, he catches a quick kiss from Abby, and then heads down to see what of interest may be going on. No hot cases for him right now, though how long that’ll remain true is always a question.

Abby’s floor next, and Tim doesn’t have to grab a quick, discreet, hidden by the doors kiss, so he doesn’t. She winks at him as she bounces off, ready for another day of evidence galore. Jimmy may have a slow day, but in the lab, it’s never slow. Not anymore.

Tim stands there for another fifteen seconds, waiting to get to his stop, and then off he goes, time to get into it and solve some crimes.
That momentary little flicker that Tim saw, but didn’t really catch when he mentioned lunch to Gibbs is starting now. Specifically, Jethro isn’t sure if he is free for lunch. He’s got, along with Ducky, plans.

Jethro woke up, after Abbi had left, and, after a few false starts he got himself up, and medicated, and showered and dressed and all the rest of it.

He got a bit of time playing with Mona in. He tossed the ball, and she ran after it. (He’s distressed about how playing *fetch* gets him out of breath, but he’s also thinking that he’s got to keep doing things like this, or he’s never going to get his wind back. So he tosses the ball again, and maybe a little harder than necessary. Mona leaps after it, running full out, bounding into the air and catching it on the fly. She’s happy as a clam to play this hard and wouldn’t mind some tug of war and wrestling, too.)

But eventually, the smoothly purring engine of Ducky’s Morgan breaks the sound of happy doggy barks and small feet scrambling around on Gibbs’ back porch.

A moment after that, as Gibbs is tucking away the tennis ball, while promising Mona that he will come back, and he won’t be gone long, and she’s staring at him with the biggest, saddest puppy dog eyes in the history of puppy dog eyes, Ducky heads around to the back yard.

“I take it you’re getting some morning exercise in?”

Gibbs nods a bit, patting Mona on the head. “Lucky for her, Abbi’s willing to take her for a morning run, or she’d be going stir crazy.”

“I’d imagine.” He eyes Gibbs, wondering how stir crazy Gibbs will be by the end of a week at home “resting.”

Ducky notes that Gibbs is behaving. He’s not using his O2 tube, but he does have it nearby, along with the little back pack looking thing it lives in when Gibbs expects to go anywhere.

“You look ready to go.”

“I am.”

“Do you have your parking tag?” Ducky asks as Gibbs sits in the passenger seat.

“God, Duck…”

Ducky sends him a stern, *I’m taking no bullshit from you Mr., and if you want to get out of this house, you will follow the Doctor’s orders*, look.

Gibbs flashes him his *annoyed* look. “On the table.”

When Ducky gets back with it, hanging the handicapped tag on his mirror, Jethro glares at it. “Those spaces are supposed to be for people with real issues.”

“A third of your lung is in a bio-hazard waste dump. You have *issues*, Jethro.” Gibbs wants to glare at that, but, Duck’s right. And what’s worse, he’s really not up to walking more than a few hundred feet at a go and there might not be any other parking that close.

Still, he’s going to want to slap himself upside the back of the head if someone with a wheelchair
can’t park close because his sad ass is having a hard time breathing.

“Ducky!” Stephen Richards, Tim’s, and now Ducky’s, jeweler looks up, very happy to see him come through his door. (Of course, as a jeweler who does custom work, men with taste, money, and women they like to buy goodies for are extremely welcome in his shop.)

“Hello, Stephen,” Ducky says warmly.

“Is this the whole family? Do I now have all three generations?”

By way of explanation, Ducky says to Gibbs, “When I was working with Stephen to design our rings,” he gently touches his own wedding ring, “he asked how I had heard of him, I mentioned Penny is Timothy’s grandmother.” Gibbs nods, as Ducky says, “Stephen Richards, Leroy Jethro Gibbs.”

“Not your son then. Penny’s?”

Gibbs shakes his head, that’s territory he doesn’t want to get into. “Tim’s dad.” That’s true enough, keeps the relationships straight, and if Stephen wonders about Gibbs and McGee, he doesn’t ask.

Stephen takes Ducky’s hand, checking his work, and nods, satisfied. “I take it your plan went smoothly?”

Ducky smiles. “It did.”

“Wonderful, and did she enjoy Istanbul?”

“Yes! It was a lovely trip.”

“Istanbul? That’s where you went?” Gibbs asks.

“That is where we began and ended our trip. We made it to several port cities on the Black Sea.”

Gibbs shakes his head at that. After more than six months of mystery on where they’d gone… None of them had guessed there.

“And how is Tim?”

“Flourishing!”

“Wonderful. I saw him back in the spring when he was looking for a present for Abby to celebrate Kelly’s birthday.”

“And she loved it!”

“Splendid!” Gibbs is starting to feel uncomfortable with how excited and happy everyone is. He drifts off to go look at the rings while Ducky and Stephen gossip about everyone they know, and possibly the history of the Black Sea, along with how rings are made, and likely a few other things. He zones the gentle burr of the two of them chattering away out.

He’d been thinking about this for a few days now, trying to get a handle on what sort of ring he
should get Abbi. His first flush of inspiration was something with red gold and emeralds. Red and green, like her hair and eyes.

But that was just the first flash, and those colors mean more to him than to her. How she looks is an accident, one he quite appreciates, but not who she is.

Plus, though he saw some things he liked, none of them were jumping up and down yelling, PICK ME! I’M THE RING. (He’s starting to get some sympathy for Tim taking so long to find Abby’s ring. Though he does not share Tim’s patience with shopping for months on end.)

The thing that got him off of emeralds and red gold was a pearl. White pearl, wrapped in white gold, little white diamonds around it. He likes the idea of that, but it doesn’t look sturdy. It looks like the kind of ring where one wrong move and the pearl would be last seen skittering away.

He hopes that Abbi never has to fight again, but if she does, he doesn’t want some large, bulky, fragile thing on her hand.

He also doesn’t want a men’s style class-ring type thing either. Yes, that’ll put a dent in a guy if she needs it to, but… He wants something more elegant than that.

But he likes pearls. He likes the ties between her and the water. Likes the idea of the ocean on her hand. He likes the idea of this being something that comes from something alive.

So, he’s drifting along, looking at the already made pearl rings, and they all look so fragile. He’d be afraid of holding her hand if she was wearing one of those, for fear of accidentally whacking her hand wrong and breaking the damn thing.

“What are you thinking, Jethro?” Ducky asks, popping up from nowhere, with Stephen hovering on the other side of the counter.

The other part of doing this with someone else, let alone getting it designed, means having to put, into words, what he’s thinking about for this. Which isn’t exactly something he’s loving.

“Can you cut a pearl?”

Stephen looks appalled at that. “Yes, but… Why would you want to?”

“She works with her hands. Wears gloves a lot. Can’t have this bulky stone sticking out of the ring.” Gibbs is looking at the pearl rings in front of him. “Cut it in half, set it, and it wouldn’t stick out so much.”
Stephen is doing a good job of not visibly wincing. “Perhaps a smaller pearl? When you cut them… they never quite reflect the light properly after that. Which for a low grade pearl or paste jewelry isn’t an issue, but for a ring, especially… an engagement ring?” Gibbs looks up and nods. “I would assume you’d want the main stone to be as beautiful as possible. Why are you thinking a pearl?”

“She was a Marine, works for the Coast Guard now, her life’s tied to the ocean. Wanted to touch on that.” Ducky looks very pleased with that answer.

“And she works with her hands, and you want something strong and sturdy and beautiful?”

“Yes.”

“Colors?”

Gibbs shrugs. “I like red gold. She’s got green eyes.”

“Small hands?” Stephen asks.

“Not for a woman. She’s tall, 5’ 10’.”

He nods at that, too. “Do you want an engagement ring wedding ring combination, say a piece in two parts? She gets the first part when you propose and the second part when you get married?”

Gibbs isn’t sure what Stephen’s talking about on that, so he takes a few steps and grabs one of the traditional diamond engagement rings. “This band” and he twists the ring, and the band with the diamond solitaire splits off from the band with the tiny diamonds all over it, “Is the engagement ring. This band is the wedding ring.”

Yeah, this is way more complicated than it was when he did it last.

“Don’t know. Probably two rings. What are you thinking?”

This with a pearl.

“Mother of pearl…” Stephen’s sketching, fast and sloppy right now, but Gibbs can see the idea he’s working. There is a pearl, a smallish one, in the middle, and on each side of it is a band of gold with a mother of pearl inlay. It’s thick enough so the pearl doesn’t stick out, but small enough, thin enough that it doesn’t look like a class ring. Stephen leaves the sketch for a moment to go find a diamond ring. It’s the same basic idea, but there’s a diamond instead of a pearl, and prongs keeping it in place instead of the hovering the pearl is doing in his sketch.

"Like this, with a pearl."

Gibbs likes how it looks, but it’s just a pearl stuck between the bands of stone and metal. He’s not seeing anything to keep it in place. “Will it stay put in that?”

“Yes. Between the glue and the tension mounting that pearl isn’t going anywhere.”
“How do you size something like that?” Off the top of his head he doesn’t know Abbi’s ring size. That would have been good information to bring with him for something like this. He can estimate based on the memory of how her fingers feel between his, but…

“The inlay won’t go all the way around. Just down the sides, the bottom will be solid gold, platinum, titanium, whatever you pick. Otherwise the tension mounting wouldn’t work properly, either.” Stephen grabs a different ring, this one with a diamond between the band. “This part,” he touches the band, “is basically a spring. It holds the gem in place by wanting to snap shut. Add a touch of epoxy, and you’ve got a solid ring that’s never going to lose it’s stone.”

Gibbs sees that.

“Here…” Stephen head off, and comes back a moment later. “Don’t have too many of these. This is all the examples of mother of pearl I’ve got in stock right now.”

Gibbs’ ring

Gibbs looks at them, and immediately knows he’s found his wedding ring. They’re wood, beautiful, polished, burnished wood, with a mother of pearl inlay all around.

And he knows something else. The one he wears, the ring he hopes he’s buried with, and the one he’s going to put on her finger, is a ring he’s going to make.

He thinks for a second longer, about how Abbi would probably like some sort of engagement ring, and how wood does tension, too. He’s starting at the wood and mother of pearl rings in front of him. He can make one of them. Need to get a mini-lathe, and he’d certainly have to study up and practice, but that’s just a matter of time.

He can’t make the ring that’s sketched out in front of him. But he bets Abbi would like it. Really like it. And he can make a wood band that would fit into it, or around it, so that when it’s done, it’s a white pearl, held by… white gold probably, and silvery-purple-green watery mother of pearl, all cool and ocean, wrapped in some sort of golden-red, warm-living wood. It would be thick by the time it was done, but all of the girls, besides Penny, who’s just got the one ring, have two, and they take up
a decent block of space on their ring fingers.

“Can you make that?” Gibbs taps the sketch.

“Of course. All we have to do is figure out what you want it made out of. Would you like to look at loose pearls?”

Gibbs nods.

Gibbs is squinting at a collection of pearls (Which all more or less look the same to him. Really, it’s time to get to the eye doctor; his glasses can’t be strong enough.) when his phone buzzes.

Lunch? From Tim.

Sure. Duck’s with me, too.

Cool. Swing by the house?

We’re not home.

You want to come to me, or should I come to you?

Wrapping something up here. How about “What’s a good place to eat around here? Tim wants to meet us for lunch.”

“Beverly’s is two streets over. It’s a very nice little lunch spot,” Stephen says.

Gibbs nods and flashes Beverly’s? Forty minutes.

I’ll see you there.

Gibbs tucks his phone back into his pocket and goes back to squinting at the pearls. That one, little guy, about the size of a small pea, is a very pretty, luminous, just barely tinged with blue sort of white.

“This one.”

Stephen picks it up, staring at it, and starts sketching some more, making little humming noises as he does it. “Go look at the rings, find one with a metal you like.”

So Gibbs does that.

“What has you two out here?” Tim asks as he slides into the booth next to Gibbs and across from Ducky, noticing there’s a glass of iced tea waiting for him. He takes a quick sip. “Thanks. Hot out there.” Only a few days of August left, but they’re making up for it by being as fierce as possible.

Ducky raises an eyebrow at Jethro, asking if Timothy is going to be let in on their adventure.

Gibbs is still thinking about it when Tim says, “I mean, what’s even out here…” Then his eyes
narrow slightly, he sees Ducky grinning and looks at Gibbs. “Oh! You buy it premade or are you designing one?”

“Stephen asked me to tell you hello if I could do so without blowing our cover,” Ducky says.

“Well, tell him hello back when you go in to pick it up.”

“Designing.” Gibbs says, still feeling a little winded. He’s using his O2 right now. They were able to park next to Stephen’s. It’s right next to the handicapped spaces. They weren’t able to park nearly as close, even with the handicapped sticker, for Beverly’s. The resulting walk’s left him feeling a bit like a fish out of water.

He’s also feeling bad about the times he’s sent Tim into places that triggered his asthma.

Tim’s grinning at him, very pleased look on his face, and then it jolts up about a million watts. “So, wait, does this mean you’re heading to Montana to have a chat with her dad?”

Ducky seems to enjoy that idea, too.

Gibbs does not groan at that, but right now especially, Montana might as well be on the moon. And he’s never so much as said hello to Abbi’s dad. He’s heard of him, and seen pictures, and he assumes that at some point Abbi will likely mention that she’s moving in with him, but…

“Rhgh.” Is the closest approximation of the sound that comes out of Gibbs at this idea.

Tim gently nudges Gibbs with his shoulder. Very gently. “Come on, you’ve got lots of practice at this, right?”

Gibbs glares at him.

“No? Really?”

“Not since ’79.”

“Shannon’s dad is the last time you did this?”

“Eloped with Hannah, partly because her parents didn’t like me. Her dad would have said no if I’d asked, and he would have been right. Diane and Bill weren’t talking, so I didn’t have to talk with him. Stephanie’s dad was dead, and I never met her mom.”

Tim exhales, very surprised while shaking his head. “I wouldn’t have guessed that.”

“You do seem to have more of a reputation for maintaining traditions than that, Jethro.”

Gibbs shrugs. “Not much I could have done on two of them.”

“What are you going to do with this one?” Tim asks.

Gibbs thinks about it for a moment, but unlike the twenty-year-old Lance Corporal he was once upon a time, getting ready to ask his nineteen-year-old girlfriend to marry him, he cannot possibly make himself imagine doing that again. “Abbi and I are both too damn old for me to be asking permission. Especially since he’s not paying her bills or part of her everyday life. Almost feel like… some sort of slap to her.”

“But you want to do something to introduce yourself to her family and show that you’re an honorable man of good intentions.” It’s not a question as Ducky says it.
“Yeah. Something. When I talked to Shannon’s dad, Jack said to me that it was important, part of showing you’re worth being part of his family and his daughter’s life.”

Tim and Ducky nod at that.

“At least I’d met John a few times first. Wasn’t asking him cold.”

“Not like you aren’t use to just walking up to people and talking to them,” Tim says.

Gibbs shrugs, that’s not untrue, but that’s Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs and he can’t imagine pulling that on Abbi’s Dad.

“She’s moving in next weekend, maybe the next time she calls home, you could pick up the phone and say hello,” Tim adds.

Gibbs sighs at that, too. And then nods. Granted, talking on the phone to strangers is also something he’d rather have his toenails ripped out than do, but that’s probably how to do this. And by the time he’s got the ring done, he’ll have a better idea of what he wants to do with letting her family know they’re doing more than shacking up.

The waitress heads over with their lunch, which Tim is pleased to see, apparently Gibbs ordered lunch for him, too, which is fine because that means things go smoothly, less waiting around. Plus after more than a decade of stakeouts, late nights, and meals together, Jethro can reliably figure out what Tim wants off a menu.

Grilled chicken salad with spinach, strawberries, and walnuts is a fine summer lunch for him. Nice and cool.

When the waitress leaves, Gibbs says to him, “So, you’re getting me up to date on the details?”

“Oh, yeah. Okay, so… Tony and Ziva don’t know yet. The girls are telling Ziva tomorrow, and we’ve got a lunch date with Tony, so if the cases agree with us, we’ll let him know then. Leon knows—“

Gibbs looks shocked at that.

“It’s in the regs. Same reason why Abby told him we were dating.”

Ducky is looking… interested, not amused or worried, but very curious. “And how did Director Vance take your revelation?”

“He laughed, poured himself a drink, slammed most of it back, stood there, silently, not looking at us for a minute, and by then I’d gotten it together enough to say we were telling him so that he knew, but we didn’t expect him to do anything with it. Just so it couldn’t bite him in the ass unaware. He nodded again, sighed some more, asked if the vacation time we’d asked for was a honeymoon, and then said congratulations, dryly, without smiling.

Gibbs and Ducky look at each other and Tim. All three of them have that, well, that could have been a whole lot worse, look on their faces.

Tim shrugs. “I have no idea how that really went. We told him we weren’t going to be ‘out’ at work, and that he’d never see anything different from what he already knew. He said as long as it stayed that way, we wouldn’t have any problems. I don’t think he knows how it went, either, at least, not when we left. We wiped that dryly amused look he usually has clean off his face. But he knows, and we’ve done our due diligence, so, that’s out of the way.
“We’re telling Sarah, and Abby’s going to tell Luca at some point, but that’s it. Breena’s family…”
Tim shakes his head. “We’re not telling them. And if they ever ask about it——"

“You don’t want ‘em asking, don’t get caught,” Gibbs says.

“Not that way. Won’t be taking any risks on that. But… Some of Jimmy’s kids may have green eyes.”

Gibbs and Ducky look surprised at that.

“And if they get asking about that, it’s part of avoiding another trisomy child. They’re welcome to believe that Abby and I may be providing some extra genetic material to help them have healthy children. Which is kind of true and entirely misleading.”

Gibbs and Ducky slowly nod at that, both of them still staring at Tim, who’s starting to eat his salad. “This is good.”

Gibbs rubs his face for a moment, accidentally yanking the O2 tube off of his face, mentally cursing at forgetting it was there, and then, after tucking it back into place, he says, “Tim, are you sure going that far’s a good idea?”

Tim’s first response is a rather snarky one about how Gibbs didn’t sit him down to have a chat about this when he and Abby decided it was time to have a baby. But, he stops that, and backs up. Unlike his relationship with Abby, a lot of what’s going on with him and Jimmy and Breena isn’t public, and Gibbs doesn’t get to see how it works, only hears about it after the fact. And the fact he’s been hearing most about is if the four of them can juggle the sexual dynamics of this and not end up shooting themselves in their collective ass.

“Yeah. We’re not just fooling around. We’re not bored and horny and just spicing things up. It’s real, and…” Tim sighs. “That’s why you make babies, right? You know, when you do it on purpose. Because you love these people and you want your love of them to live. So, yeah. It’s a good idea. We’re good with it. And if I’m ever lucky enough to have a son with curly brown hair, and Ed’s tactless enough to ask… we’ll set fire to that bridge when we come to it.”

Gibbs and Ducky keep looking at Tim, and then at each other, and he can feel them thinking something to each other, but they aren’t saying it out loud, so…

“Just say it.”

“It doesn’t matter, Timothy. Just something your grandmother and I have been wondering about.”

“Then you’re in luck, I’m feeling talky, ask away,” Tim says dryly, not really wanting to answer anything and everything about them, but wanting to know what Ducky’s wondering.

Ducky looks infinitely more comfortable with speculating about this than asking it. He licks his lips, and says, “We understand how you and Abby, and you and Breena, and Breena and Abby, and Jimmy and both of the girls works.” Ducky pauses on that, sipping his tea. “How do you and Jimmy work?”

“Is Penny wondering if I’m bi?”

“Not precisely. Just trying to understand how this works.”

Tim shrugs. He’s also a little fuzzy on how he and Jimmy work. They just do. “Co-husbands? We’re not lovers, and no matter how many puppy dog eyes the girls give us, I don’t think we ever will be.
We aren’t friends anymore, either. It’s well past that. And beyond that, I don’t have a good word for it.” One more shrug. “He’s the guy I share a bed, two women, and as of right now, four kids with. You’re the walking encyclopedia, what’s the word for that?”

Ducky smiles at Tim’s answer. “I believe the word for that is husband.”

And in a moment Tim had literally, never, ever thought would apply to himself, he says, “Then you can tell Penny he’s my husband, and whichever one of you was betting in that direction owes me half the winnings.”

Ducky smiles dryly. “We do not bet.”

“Oh huh.” Tim doesn’t believe that for a second, though he’s more than willing to believe the stakes may be which one of them is the better profiler. “And, on the things you aren’t betting on… You don’t think telling Tony will go well, any suggestions for that? Both Jimmy and I ended up verbally tripping over our feet trying to tell Vance.” Tim shakes his head and takes a drink. “It feels great. You know, with us. Light and happy and good, but… trying to start that conversation cold, especially with someone you think might not take it well… Not fun. You’ve told many, many people things they don’t want to hear, any suggestions?”

Ducky thinks about it for a moment. He has told far too many people things they did not want to hear. “Be direct. Don’t dance around it, and don’t be coy. Give him as long as he needs to respond. Keep yourself in line and don’t get angry or upset. You’re not in an argument. This is a fact. You are telling him about it. It’s existence is non-negotiable, and he has no say in that matter. Likewise you are not defending yourself, or your loves, to him. If he gets mean or attacks you, back off from him. You don’t have to take any abuse from him, but attacking back is a bad plan for long term family harmony.” Ducky smiles at Tim, and reaches across the table to pat his uncast hand. “Most of all, you are not doing anything wrong, the rest of your family is fine with this and supports you in it, and he will, too, once he gets past his own personal baggage with this, which we will help him with.”

Ducky looks Tim over. “Tony’s occasionally been a stand in for the Admiral, taken some harder shots than were necessary because you were hitting him, too.” Tim’s never thought of it that way, but that does put a lot of the rougher bits of the two of them, especially the ones where he’s been the aggressor, into a perspective he hadn’t seen but makes a lot of sense. “That’s going to come back at you with this, with you and Jimmy playing the role of Senior. Let it roll off of you as much as you can. None of this, not really, is about you or Jimmy and your relationship with each other and the girls. It’s about Tony and Senior, and he will, eventually, get the pieces back into place, and he will get to okay with this.”

Gibbs adds one last bit to this, “You four are not on your own, and you do not have to close ranks and just take it. I’m sure he’ll be in my basement soon, and I’ve got your backs.”

And that feels really good to Tim. Then something hits him. Something he should have asked before they got onto him. “Hey… What’s it look like? I know you’ve got a sketch on you somewhere.”

Gibbs pulls out his phone and brings up the sketch. Tim stares at it and nods slowly. “Can’t wait to see it.”

Gibbs looks proud at that.

“Can I tell? Obviously not Abbi, but…”

Gibbs thinks about that, too. “Yeah, after they have their lunch date tomorrow.”

Tim smiles at that, too. He’s not sure how well Abby and Breena will do on secret keeping if all five
of them are together for one of their happy-girl lunches.

Tim doesn’t press for a time frame for when Gibbs might be moving to the next step. Mostly because he knows how ‘custom made’ does not always mean ‘shows up the day you expect it to.’ He does happily chew the next bite of his salad, because he’s very much looking forward to being at Gibbs’ last wedding.

“What did ‘not precisely’ mean?” Jethro asks after Tim’s headed back to work and Ducky is driving him home.

“Penny doesn’t wonder if Timothy is bisexual. She wonders if, given his family background, if that’s not a sexuality he can access or express. She wonders if there’s too much emotional trauma for him to be able to touch whatever level of sexual interest in Jimmy that he may have, and thus his psyche keeps it safely walled away from any level of conscious thought.”

Gibbs isn’t feeling that. He’s known guys who were in the closet, and Tim doesn’t act like they did. But if it is so deep down that he can’t touch it, then he also wouldn’t act like the guys who were in the closet, would he?

“She worried about it biting him?”

“With a different foursome, possibly. With this one? No. Jimmy seems sufficiently flexible and loves Timothy enough to roll with anything that comes his way. I’m sure that if the two of them can share children…” Duck looks at Jethro, and they both know exactly how big of a deal that is for most guys. Wife swapping is one thing, some guys get off on that, but raising another man’s kid, as your own, while he’s around… that’s an entirely different level. “…there’s enough love and respect to come to some form of common, mutually beneficial space in regards to sex.”

Gibbs inclines his head at that. “You two think of things that look like they may be rocks ahead, let me know, too. Too much on the line to go crashing into them blind.”

Ducky nods. “Unless doing so would violate some previous commitment to silence, we will. Right now, the biggest issue we’re seeing starts tomorrow. Even if a case derails Timothy and Jimmy from talking to Tony, it won’t stop Breena from talking to Ziva, and from there…”

Gibbs sighs at that. In all the talking with Tim and Jimmy about this, they kept focusing on making sure the four of them could work it out. The wider world hadn’t really hit Jethro, but, now that he’s thinking about it, this is going to hit Tony hard, and unfortunately he’s not seeing any solution beyond a lot of time.

Only way to prove that you can do what you say you’re doing is to do it. And for Jimmy, Breena, Tim, and Abby, that means keeping this going day after day. And that’s the only thing that’s going to set the part of Tony who’ll see this as every godawful bad relationship decision he lived through as a kid.

Gibbs just hopes Tony thaws out before they’re celebrating their tenth anniversary, let alone working on his house.
“You know, McGee’s got an office, with doors, and nice cushy chairs, and no dead bodies. Why on earth are we having lunch here?”

Jimmy shrugs. “My turn to buy.” That’s true, and he did buy, and it’s also covers the fact that usually if they’re getting lunch the three of them, they do eat in Tim’s office, because Tim’s office is all of the things Tony just mentioned.

It’s also really public, requires you to walk through an entire department filled with people to get to the elevators, and people pop into Tim’s office all the time. So it’s not ideally suited for a private conversation that might get “intense.”

Plus, in Autopsy, right now, they’ve only got two guests, both of whom are currently awaiting transport to the funeral homes that will handle their remains. It’s slow enough that Jimmy’s given Allan a provisional day off. (“Stay close enough to come back if we get a call out, otherwise, day’s yours.”) So, there is absolutely no shot of anyone just wandering down here to chat.

Or, put this way, no matter how “intense” things get, no one down here is going to complain about it.

Tim unpacks their lunches while Jimmy hunts up a third chair. Usually there are only two people down here, so it takes him a moment, but when he’s back, Tim’s got everyone’s food out and sitting neatly on his desk.

Jimmy gets settled and is lifting his tuna wrap to his lips as Tim says, “Come on, we haven’t seen them, yet!”

Tony’s grinning. He knows exactly what they haven’t seen yet. So he pulls out his phone and shows off his own, personal, grainy white shrimp-looking ultrasound shots.

“And there he is!” Tony’s beaming at the picture. “Dave DiNozzo.”

“You’re sounding awfully sure about that,” Jimmy says, looking at the tiny blob of person whose existence has all three men grinning.

“I’m feeling it. Ziva’s not so sure.”

“We’ll find out soon enough which one of you has the better baby radar. Due date still late April?” Jimmy asks.

“Doc thinks April 22.”

“Well, whoever he is, is everything checking out right?” Tim asks.

“According to the Doc, he’s exactly the right shape and size, heart’s beating the way it should, placenta’s in the right place, and other than that one second where the Ultra-Sound Tech thought it would be funny to joke about there maybe being twins, it went smooth.”

“Didn’t think the idea of twins was funny?” Jimmy asks with an eyebrow high.

Tony looks pretty horrified at the idea, and Tim and Jimmy are very amused at the idea of Tony with
twins. “Yeah, I’m not keen on signing up for that. If it happens it happens, but… I’d like to sleep again eventually, you know?”

Tim and Jimmy both nod. They both know how hard one at a time is, two… Yikes!

They’re all chewing quietly for a moment, and Tony looks up at them, squinting a bit. Both Tim and Jimmy are looking… off. He expects more, ‘Yay! Babies!’ out of those two, and they’re just looking at each other and eating. “What’s going on?”

“We have good news,” Tim starts again.

Tony grins. He told Ziva after they were heading home from Gibbs’ that the computer stuff was crap. “Oh, I so knew that computer stuff was BS! Nice save with the middle name bit there, Palmer. So, Gibbs’ secret? Not telling because Ducky was hovering around?”

Jimmy shakes his head.

Tim adds, “This is about us, and Abby and Breena, we’re, the four of us, together.”

Tony stares at Jimmy and Tim, and squints his eyes even further. Obviously Tim is attempting to communicate something, but he’ll be damned if he can figure out what. Well, more like he will be damned rather than figure out what, because there’s a pretty obvious interpretation of those words, but that’s just not happening, so he’s got to be missing something.

Both of the Wonder Twins are staring at him, waiting for him to respond, which, unfortunately, lends credence to the interpretation of those words that he refuses to even admit could possibly be happening.

Apparently, enough time goes by without him saying anything that Jimmy gently says, “Tony, you okay?”

Tony rubs the back of his head and finally says, “Together… how?”

“Married,” Jimmy says. “The four of us. To each other. Or as close as we can get without a lot of trouble from the outside world.”

Tony blinks at that, chewing his lip, nodding gently because, there’s no possible way for him to misunderstand that. “The four of you?”

They both nod.

He looks at Tim and Jimmy, licks his lips again, and says, “With each other?”

More nodding.

“And the girls?”

“Yeah, Tony, all four of us. Like a couple, but a quadruple,” Tim says.

Tony nods some more, not sure what this feeling that’s starting to scream in his head is, something between wanting to slap both of them so hard upside the back of the head that their ears ring for a week and throwing up. He is certain that he doesn’t like it, at all.

He swallows again, staring at both of them, who are just sitting there, watching him, looking concerned, and nervous, and like he’s the one with the problem because he’s the one freaking out, instead of both of them being massive adulterous perverts.
Adulterous perverts who are waiting for him to respond, and, apparently, approve of this. Insane adulterous perverts. Tony feels his sarcasm snap into place, walling him off from the feelings bouncing around on the inside, the wrecked, sad, sick to his stomach, betrayed, hurt, angry tumult of way too much everything right now.

He bites his lip one last time, pushes back from the desk, putting a few more feet of space between him and Tim and Jimmy, and starts to let the sarcasm and anger out. “I’m sorry, but… you know. I kind of remember your weddings, in that I was at both of them. And…” he laughs but it’s not a remotely happy sound, “maybe I’m just fucking insane,” and there’s a manic gleam of a grin on his face, “but I kind of remember you,” he’s looking at Tim, “repeating the words when the priest went over the forsaking all others bit, and I really remember you talking about your love for Abby being your bedrock, and maybe I zoned out, but I don’t remember anything about fucking other people on your list of options. But I do remember you asking me to stand up there, with you, and help you make vows you’ve broken.” His eyes skip over to Jimmy. “And you, with your fifteen hours of butterfly kisses and unicorn farts vows of testicle shrinking sappiness, where the fuck do you get off going back on that? Either of you? You stood there in front of all of us and you vowed on your lives, on your honor, on all of our love for each other, that you’d do the job for the rest of your lives. Where the fuck do either of you get off on skipping out on that, let alone looking at me like I’m supposed to be cool with both of you fucking over each other, your wives, and your kids!”

They look at each other, and Tim takes over on responding. “Tony, that’s not—“

“Stop!” Tony can feel his anger surging through him, tingling his fingers and making him want to fight. “Don’t give me justifications for this crap. Don’t pretend you’ve got some secret magic that makes you bulletproof. I’ve already heard every justification on Earth for ‘I got horny and couldn’t keep it in my pants.’ I’ve already heard every justification on Earth for ‘I got horny and couldn’t keep it in my pants.’ I invented two thirds of them! I don’t need you two parroting them back at me.”

“Tony, that’s not what’s going on,” Jimmy says.

Tony stands up, tossing his lunch in the trash. “Uh huh. Sure. Keep telling yourself how you’re goddamned special snowflakes, and it’s all going to work out perfect and happy. Keep telling yourself that when you’ve got lawyers coming out your asses and custody battles and kids who don’t want to talk to you because you’re the assholes who couldn’t play by the rules. Don’t sit there, staring at me, asking me to approve of you wrecking all of our lives and ripping our family to shreds. Don’t stand there and put my home in jeopardy so you can get your rocks off.” That’s too close to the truth, to the fear of divorce writ large across his whole family, of the house they’re building ripped apart and his loves no longer loves, and Tony can’t even think about that, let alone speak the words, so he turns away from them and stalks out of the morgue.

Tim looks at Jimmy and sighs. Jimmy rolls his eyes a bit. “Yeah, that went well.”

Tim nods slowly. “Good thing we didn’t do that in the diner.”

“Ya think?”

“Think the girls are having better luck with Ziva?”

“It’d be pretty difficult for her to take it worse than that.”
Tim nods at that, too, and takes a bite of his sandwich.

Ducky said give him time. So, they’re giving him time. They both want to get up and follow him, talk more, but he probably does need time to think and process and both of them standing around is unlikely to help.

But not jumping in isn’t easy.

Jimmy puts his wrap down after a minute and says, “‘Testicle shrinking sappiness?’ They weren’t really that bad, were they?”

Tim shrugs. If he’d been paying better attention, he might actually know the answer to that. “Like you said, Breena loved them, and that’s all that mattered.” Then he picks up his phone and begins texting Abby with how talking to Tony went.

To say telling Ziva goes better is a massive understatement. Granted it pretty much couldn’t have gone worse. Of course, the whole crew didn’t manage to make it, Abbi’s in a meeting with Leon right now, working on getting more boots on the ground for her, and Penny’s had ‘something come up’ which was disappointing, but time with just the three of them is good, too.

It’s not that they mind having Abbi and Penny there, too, but sometimes it’s nice to just have the three of them. Like in the old days.

After much cooing and rejoicing over baby DiNozzo-David, (who Ziva is convinced is a girl. She’s thinking that Tali Miriam DiNozzo is cooking away in there, and both Abby and Breena think naming her after her sister and mother is awesome.) Abby and Breena get around to the second reason for their lunch.

“So,” Abby says, taking a quick sip of her decaf chai, “do you remember, couple years ago, when you asked if the four of us were sleeping together?”

Ziva nods. She’s smiling, and the expression on her face could be best described as, took you long enough.

“‘It’s gone a bit past that,” Breena says. “This weekend, we basically got married.” That gets a big hug from Ziva. She’s pleased to see that if they were going to take that step, that they’d cement it, get it thoroughly planned out and make sure they could do it for real.

And for a moment, as she’s talking with Abby and Breena who are both happy and excited about this, she’s happy and excited, too. It’s been obvious that they’ve been moving in this direction for years now, an inch at a time. It’s also been obvious that they’ve been keeping their thoughts on this very close in, waiting until they knew what they were doing to take it wider, which Ziva appreciates. She’s a lot better with ‘this is what’s going to happen’ as opposed to ‘this might happen.’

Granted, given what happened at the beach, she assumed they’d jumped over the edge then, but she wasn’t entirely sure, and since they didn’t say anything, she wanted them to have the space they needed to figure it out and tell her about it when they were ready. She’d also been thinking, until Tim got hurt, that they were just thinking about this as extra-curricular sex. Close and frisky friendship.
Given what Abby and Breena are saying, that’s not what’s going on.

Which Ziva finds relieving. She’s thinking this is going to go much more smoothly if everyone involved is serious about it.

And they are. And that feels good. They’re so happy; they’re just glowing with it, and that glow’s contagious. Sort of like how yesterday, after getting into CGIS and showing Abbi the sonogram shots, both of them were walking around with grins on their faces.

And for a moment, this is wonderful. This is rich, and happy, and fully splendid.

For a moment.

Because as she’s enjoying this, and getting details about what’s been involved in inching closer to this, and how Tim almost getting killed was one game changer, and how once they found that they could touch each other, and PT/massage night sounds pretty sweet to Ziva, things cascaded pretty quickly from there, it’s hitting her that they are telling her on her own.

And it’s hitting her that if ‘this weekend’ means Saturday night, that this is what Ducky didn’t want them talking about at the diner, and why, exactly, telling them at the diner would be a bad idea all hits along with the fact that Tony’s got a lunch date with the guys, and she’s very rapidly going to have an extremely upset husband on her hands.

Abby and Breena are talking about how ridiculously hot it is when Jimmy and Tim touch each other and how they’re hoping they can get them comfortable enough to do more of that, because massage night is melt you panties hot, but they trail off on that as they notice Ziva looking less than thrilled.

“Ziva?” Breena asks.

“They are telling, Tony, correct?”

Abby nods. “Yeah. They’re having lunch today, too.”

Ziva winces. “That is not going to go…” Abby’s cell buzzes. “…well.”

She’s reading it, and also winces. “Uh. Yeah. That’s an understatement. He’s stormed off, and they aren’t sure what to do about it. Right now they’re letting him cool down. Tim’s thinking he’ll try again in a half hour or so.”

Autopsy is a secure area. It takes up around a third of the first floor, and the only way to get into it is from the loading bay out back, or through the elevator to the main hall. And although the Evidence Lock Up is on the same floor, the only way to go from Autopsy to Evidence is to go up (or down) a floor, and get into the secure elevator, or to go out the back doors, though the loading bay, logging yourself out with your ID card, and then walk over to the next bay, and log in with your ID card, thus opening the drive in door to Evidence.

This matters right now because there is no way out of Autopsy without letting the people inside of Autopsy know you are coming or going.

And Tim and Jimmy have not heard the sound of the elevator doors opening, nor have they heard the
loud, grinding groan of the loading bay doors, which means that Tony has to be stalking about the hallway, pouting in one of the storage closets, or kicking the hell out of the Morgue Ambulance.

They’ve finished lunch, and gotten confirmation from Abby that Ziva’s very happy for them (and nervous for Tony) and now, if they aren’t going to be talking to Tony, there’s stuff they could both be doing.

But for Tim that requires leaving Autopsy, and probably walking past Tony to do it.

Jimmy wads up the paper that had wrapped his lunch and tosses it into his trash can. “So… do we go to him?”

Tim shrugs. “Ducky suggested letting him have time to cool off and process. I took that to mean we wait for him.”

“I’ve got everything I need to do my job down here. You want to wait?”

“I’ll give it—“

They hear the doors swoop open and Tony storms back in, not looking very calm. “So, how does this happen? I mean, you two just wake up one morning and go, ‘Hey, I know, let’s completely destroy our whole family in search of some new pussy?’”

There’s a lot of angry in there, and some pretty deep hurt. Jimmy notices the hurt, and Tim feels the angry.

“Tony, that’s not what’s going on.” Jimmy says, while Tim works on keeping his own angry in check.

“Of course it is! Happy guys, well-married, content guys, guys who love their wives, don’t go out fucking other women. That’s like happy-marriage 101, you stick with your own wife. What I don’t get is what happened. You two…” Tony’s voice breaks on that. Enough of the hurt is coming through that Tim can get it now. Tony’s biting his lip and pulling himself back into control. “You look like you’ve got the dream. You look happy, and…” Tony sounds so crushed. “The idea that it’s a lie…”

“Tony…” Tim says it gently. “That’s not. It’s not a lie.”

“Then you’re lying to yourselves!” spits out of Tony, lots of venom in that. “Tell me about the other happy, in love guys who are fucking other women. Oh right, you can’t because that’s not how it works!” Tony kicks the wall and turns back to them. “You’re supposed to be the smart ones. You’re the ones who don’t think with your dicks. You’re the ones who are supposed to be able to figure out that what you’ve got is worth more than any snatch ever born…” He starts to trail off on that, and Tim looks like he’s about to jump in, but Tony shakes his head and says, “You’re the ones who meant it when you said ‘for as long as we both shall live’ and if you two can’t do it…”

Tony turns away from them.

Tim and Jimmy are staring at each other, neither having any idea that Tony hurt this deep on this issue. Tim’s wondering how many stepmoms he had to go through before he got so jaded he couldn’t be hurt anymore. Then he wonders if he actually ever got there, or if he just hit the point where he stopped allowing himself to get to know them so he couldn’t get hurt.

Jimmy’s a few steps ahead of Tim on this, or maybe Tim’s in Tony’s past and Jimmy is in Tony’s present. “Tony. We’re not bored, we aren’t horny, this isn’t a violation of our vows; it’s an
Tony snorts at that.

“No. Stop that.” Jimmy’s using his gentle talking Molly down from frantic voice. “You’ve been around the block too many times to have a definition of marriage so simplistic that monogamous sex is the be all and end all. We are married. ‘Til they put me in the ground, Breena and I are married. Tim and Abby are married. ‘Til their last breaths, they are married. That’s not stopping or changing or anything. We’re not swapping. We aren’t fooling around. We’re not bored—”

Tony turns to Jimmy, eyes hot. “If you say ‘we’re in love,’ I’ll lay you out and take the asshole penalty for it. You are not children, and you are not innocent. You’ve been around the damn block too many times to pretend ‘we’re in love’ are magic words that make everything work out. Between the three of us we’ve cleaned up too many dead bodies where ‘we’re in love’ didn’t do the job, so don’t even try that shit on me.”

Tim and Jimmy stare at Tony and sigh.

“That’s the answer, Tony,” Tim says, trying to focus on Tony sad and scared and not how angry this is making him. Right now, he wants to jump in and lay Tony on the floor for shitting all over this, and right now he’s very thankful for the heads up from Ducky because this could have been a clusterfuck of epic proportions, even for them. “We’re in love. And we’re not stupid, and we’re not innocent, and we didn’t just swig a few bottles of wine and jump into it one night. It’s not an accident, or a fluke, or however else you want to label it so you don’t have to see it for what it is. It’s love and respect and care of joy and sex and pleasure and, all of it. It’s everything we love about our own marriages multiplied and shared.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Yeah, you’re fucking Breena because you respect her. I’ve seen Breena, respect isn’t what’s getting your dick hard. I respect Breena, and you’ll notice, I’m not fucking her!”

Now Jimmy’s having a harder time keeping himself from getting angry, he’s not liking the flavor of Tony’s tone right now. He’s heading away from hurt and concerned and into flat out mean. “You saying he doesn’t respect her?”

“If you guys could even find respect on a map, you’d be keeping your own dicks in your own wives and not fucking around with each other. How could you be so goddamn fucking stupid? This is going to kill everything!” Tony’s looking down and rubbing his forehead, like he’s got a bad headache. He looks up at them again, “God, I hope you’ve got a good escape plan because Gibbs is going to rip your nuts off and stuff them down your throats and then set fire to your corpses.”


“I started telling him about it the week after you,” he’s looking at Tony, “got married. Got his advice then. Both Jimmy and I, together and on our own, and the girls have talked to him about this. Like we said, this wasn’t just a wake up and jump in thing. Literally years of thinking and testing and… falling in love… and more thinking’s gone into getting to this point. You’re right, we are the smart ones, so we weren’t stupid about how this happened.”

Tony’s staring at them, then he turns on his heel, and this time they hear the sound of the elevator opening.

They both wait for a few moments, wondering if Tony’s going to turn around and storm back in, but as one minute flees into the next, they start to relax.
Tim pulls out his phone and sends Gibbs a text. *Tony’s headed your way. NOT HAPPY.*

A minute later he gets, *You two manage to keep your cool?*

Yeah. “By my fingernails,” Tim mutters out loud. He can feel himself shaking right now, a lot of what he pushed down to stay calm is starting to come up. Jimmy’s staring at him, wondering what that’s about, Tim looks at his phone, and he reads over his shoulder, nods, and then rests his hand on Tim’s shoulder, comforting, and though Jimmy’s not baseline calm, he’s calmer than Tim is, so it helps. *He’s really flipped out.* Tim texts.

Jimmy squeezes his shoulder. Telegraphing, *he’s not the only one* to Tim. Tim rests his cheek on Jimmy’s hand for a moment, letting himself get back to calm. Then he decides to give Gibbs a quick play by play, so he’s got a good idea of what’s headed his way.

Once he’s done that, he gets, *Got it. Ziva take it okay?*

*Abby says so.*

*Get back to work. I’ve got him when he gets here.*

Gibbs closes his laptop (he’d been looking at mini-lathes and reading up on how to make wooden wedding rings) when he hears the sound of a car driving very fast, stopping very fast in front of his house.

“So, where is it?” Tony says as he walks into Gibbs’ house less than a minute later. Mona hops up to greet him, but Tony glares at her, so she gives him a little growly bark and retreats over to Gibbs side, ready to hop up if Tony starts trouble.

This not being anything Gibbs was expecting for a first line, he doesn’t have an answer to it. So…

“What’s what?” he asks while patting Mona.

“The industrial strength hallucinogens they’ve got you on so that you know and approve of this shit. ‘Cause right now, I’m not sure if I’ve got to get you off of them or ask for some for myself.”

“Tony.”

“Stop it! I’ve been called ‘Tony’ in that patronizing tone seventeen times in the last hour. Every single sentence they aimed at me started with ‘Tony.’” Tony slips into a viciously accurate version of Tim’s ‘patient’ voice and drops out of it as he finishes his name. “You are the Dad! It is your job to see where the problems are, and then keep them from jumping into them. You’re the one who’s supposed to say, ‘Bad fucking plan! Stop.’ You’re the one who’s supposed to *know* the sunshine and roses and ‘we’re all in love’ crap is crap, and that it’s balls thinking and not brains, and when they can’t get the big heads in charge, it’s your job to slap them upside the heads until they do. What the fuck happened that *you* fall down on that job? So, what, they’re drugging you? You’re ready for the old folks’ home? Explain this to me, how you’d voluntarily let them set our entire family on fire, and you’d sit there and cheer them on!”

“Sit down.”
Tony shakes his head. He’s too upset to be still and needs to move to burn some of this off. He’s pacing around the living room and more than anything right now, he wishes Gibbs was in good enough shape to go a few literal rounds with him, because having something to do with his body would help with this horrible, sick, unsettled, jittery mess in his head and stomach and skin.

“The first time Tim said anything to me, it was something like this, ‘I know I’ve got everything I’ve ever wanted, and a bit more on top of that, and I don’t want to be the idiot who screwed that up because I got greedy for more.’ He talked about how he wanted advice from someone who could think about it with his brain and not his balls.”

“And then you say, ‘Don’t get greedy. Stop looking at your best friend’s girl.’ That’s what not thinking about this with your balls looks like.”

Gibbs nods, because Tony’s right, to an extent. “If he’d just been talking about him, that’s what I would have said. If he’d just been talking about him, he never would have brought it up. The man’s not blind; he’s been horny. He knows how to deal with that. But by the point he’s talking to me about it, the girls were already interested in playing if the guys could do it, and they were starting to put out feelers to see if the guys could.”

Tony doesn’t say anything to that, and Gibbs wonders if he’s internalizing anything about the girls with this, beyond seeing them as the objects the guys are lusting over.

“The way I heard it, Ziva got Breena thinking about it, she asked Abby, both of them decided they guys would never be up for it, so they shelved it, but as they got to be better friends and closer, they decided it might be an option and put it into play. More than a year after that, they started to move on it.”

Tony doesn’t say anything to that, either. He does finally sit down.

“They’re not your dad. This isn’t about never being satisfied with what you have and always chasing the next big score.”

Tony laughs bitterly. “It’d almost be better if it was. They’ve got themselves convinced that this is fine. That they’re so in love and it’s all going to work out and they’ll be happy forever and…” He rubs his eyes. “After the first couple times, Dad stopped expecting it to work.”

“He did or you did?”

Tony shrugs. He stopped expecting it to work after the second one. Of course, he was also nineteen when he met the third one, and she was very pretty and younger than he was. Not by much, only three weeks, but… He didn’t go to that wedding. Didn’t talk to his dad for close to two years after that.

“They’re gonna make it.”

“You don’t know it. You, of all people, should know how bad this sucks. You and Fornell, you really okay? All these years later, you really okay. And even if you are, now, how were you back then? You think them all falling apart for a decade so they can then snipe about how stupid this was is a good plan?”

Gibbs licks his lips. “Diane asked me about that—“

“Good, God, she knows? What’d they do, take out an ad in the paper?”

“No. Just us, Leon, Tim’s sister and Abby’s brother and that’s where this ends.”
“Then…”

“The four of them had gotten together for lunch, back when you had Tim and I on punishment duty dealing with Diane and Fornell to break up that one case.”

Tony nods, he remembers that.

“Diane and I had lunch, were talking about… about a lot of stuff. Saw them heading in. Jimmy kissed Breena bye, Abby linked arms with the guys, they headed in. Diane asked if they were messing around.”

“They weren’t back then, right?”

“Just thinking about it. Probably not too hard. Kelly was brand new. She was saying she hoped they were smarter than we were. I said they were. Got thinking about it, what could have happened if Fornell and I could have shared. Still would have been a mess. Might have worked out better for Diane, but… Can’t build anything good on a rotten foundation, and we were rotten. I was rotten. Your dad, rotten. Tim and Abby and Jimmy and Breena, not rotten. They’ve got a solid foundation, and when you’ve got that, you can build whatever you like.”

Tony doesn’t know a whole lot about architecture, but he’s fairly sure that’s not true. “Uh huh. Build me a pyramid pointy side down. Doesn’t matter how good the foundation is if you’ve got a shape that can’t stand on its own. They’ll keep it going for a while. Anyone can balance anything for a little bit, and then it’s going to fall and…” Tony’s back up, pacing around Gibbs living room. “Two people is hard enough. You’ve got to balance you and someone else, and add kids to that, and…”

Tony’s looking at the pictures on Gibbs’ mantle. The girls and all of them together and happy. “They had the fairy tale, you know? Happily ever after and all the trimmings. The poster boys for how the book’s supposed to end after you ride off into the sunset. And now… Now it’s gone.”

“Nothing’s gone, Tony.”

Tony snorts at that. “Give it time.”

Gibbs gets up and walks over to him, putting his hand on Tony’s shoulder. “You ever trust my gut?”

Tony nods.

“Then trust it. They’re going to make it.”

“How can you feel that?”

“Just do.”

“Says the guy with three ex-wives. You’re not exactly the authority of on lasting marriages.”

Gibbs shrugs, that’s a fair shot. “Didn’t expect them to last.” That’s true, too. “Got married for a lot of reasons, love like they’ve got, or like you and Ziva, wasn’t one of them. They’ve spent more time figuring out if they could do this than I was married to Diane and Stephanie combined.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “It’s supposed to be you and someone else, forever. Just you two. Forsaking all others. That’s the promise, right? Not you and her and your best friend and his wife.”

Gibbs shrugs. Ducky’d probably have something about how that version of it’s been practiced somewhere else for hundreds of years, but if so, Gibbs doesn’t know about it.
Tony turns away from the pictures and looks at Gibbs. “If they couldn’t do it… If those two boy scouts with their perfect marriages and happily ever after all over the place with gorgeous women who adore them and gobs and gobs of sex, if they couldn’t stay on the path, how the fuck am I?” Tony sounds so defeated as he says that, and Gibbs sighs, wrapping his good arm around him.

The bourbon’s in the basement, and right now Gibbs really wants it. He doesn’t want to screw up the flow of the conversation by gasping away for the second half of it. “Go get a bottle.”

Tony shrugs, and then heads down to the basement.

While he heads off, Gibbs remembers a very frank, and explicit bit of man to man conversation with Tony before he married Ziva. Remembering that makes this make a whole lot more sense.

Tony’s a sex addict. That’s how he described it to Gibbs. That’s his drug of choice. Gibbs would head to his basement and drink himself stupid while working on the boat. Tony’d hit a club, grab a drink, find a girl, and fuck the demons away. That’s how those lingering ‘you’re not good enough’ voices shut up. That’s how he filled the hole of mommy died, and daddy didn’t love me, and Wendy left, and my Boss thinks I’m barely competent, and my partner thinks I’m a twit, and all the rest of it.

And that’s part of what terrified him about trying to make a functional marriage last. Because like with any other addict, he’s always going to be an addict. The voices quiet down, but they never go silent. It’s just a matter of not giving in to the impulse to do something stupid and hurt himself and everyone around him with it.

Ziva knows that about him. Gibbs imagines, given how the girls talk, that they know that about Tony, too. He’s not sure if Tim or Jimmy do, or if they’ve put it together, or if they just think he was a hornball back in the day.

Tony’s back a few seconds later, but he detours into the kitchen to grab some glasses and then sits on the sofa next to Gibbs, two shots in his glass, about a tablespoon for Gibbs. Gibbs appreciates that. He hadn’t remembered that alcohol and painkillers don’t mix. (More like he hadn’t remembered that he’s on painkillers, so he can’t drink. As this is occurring to him, he’s thinking that he’s on way better stuff than when he ripped up his knee, because at no point during healing up from that did he feel this normal. He’s sore, but… not angry or loopy.)

Tony slugs some of his back, and Gibbs takes a taste, then Tony says, “We were all in the same boat, you know? If I start getting edgy and bored, well, they’re there, too, paddling along with me. Anything they can do, I can do, too, right?” Tony looks away and takes another drink. Then he snorts, a very unhappy smiling lifting the corners of his lips as he shakes his head. “But, turns out, they couldn’t. Tim didn’t even make it two full years before he was hopping another girl.” He shakes his head again, staring at the wedding picture. “Forsaking all others. I don’t know anyone who’s done it.”

Gibbs eyes narrow at that on reflex and Tony snorts at that, too. “Don’t you look insulted. I was there for Stephanie, remember?”

Gibbs shrugs at that. “Not the one I was thinking about. If Shannon had lived, I would have been a one woman man. One. And I would have done it happily.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “We had this chat when I hired Bishop.”

Gibbs nods. He remembers. “You fucking her?”

“No!”
“Want to?”
Tony’s looking seriously disturbed by that. “NO!”
“Anyone else catching your fancy? Got a thing for Breena, too?”
“Gibbs!”
“Hot little girl at the diner, the new one, Stacy, she lightin’ a fire for you?”
Tony looks a little embarrassed. “I… I mean, I noticed her, but…”
“And you’re extra charming to her, ‘cause you want her to smile at you, but that’s it, because you love your wife and at the end of the day that’s what matters. You getting bored with Ziva? Gotten to the point where you’re making excuses, staying up late surfing the web for new girls online and jerking off with them rather than have sex with her?”
“God, no!”
Gibbs stares at him, that’s what a bad marriage looks like clear on his face, and then he finishes his tablespoon of bourbon. “Then it doesn’t matter what the hell those other two are doing. Your boat isn’t in any trouble. You’re paddling along just fine, and if there’s rapids ahead, we’re still going to grab ahold and steer you right.”
“How are they going to steer me when they’ve already crashed?”
“How about you wait for them to actually crash before you declare it a disaster?”
“They already crashed! Why do none of you get this? Fucking someone who isn’t your wife is crashing. Breaking that promise is crashing!”
“So, what, it’s all over?”
“Planes crash in the air, it takes a little while for the people on the ground to start getting hit with the wreckage. Just because you aren’t getting hurt now doesn’t mean the wreckage is going to magically just hover up there. One day what happened is really going to hit them and it’s going to hurt them and… And they’re gonna hurt each other, and us.” He looks so hurt, bone deep hurt at this. “And why the fuck would you tell them to go ahead with this?”
Gibbs licks his lips. “Same reason I told you not to date Ziva if you couldn’t marry her instead of saying don’t date her. The exact same reason, said almost the exact same thing, if it works, we’re going to be happy for you, if it doesn’t, you’ll rip us apart, so don’t do it if you can’t make it work. You and Ziva are making it work. I think they’re gonna make it work, too.”
Tony rolls his eyes at that.
“Don’t do that. If anyone can do—“
“NO ONE can do this. More than half of us can’t do it with one person. No one can manage two.”
“Three.”
“You think that makes it better? That makes it worse.”
Gibbs shakes his head. “Three’s the only way this can possibly work. They’re not swinging. They aren’t swapping. It’s not two bored guys getting their rocks off with a friendly, available woman.
That doesn’t work. That’s your pointy side down pyramid, impossible shape where everyone gets jealous and angry. It’s all four of them, together, and that’s a stable shape.”

Tony’s looking snarky about that, and then his expression shifts and he starts to look horrified. “Wait, all four of them?”

Gibbs is wondering what the hell Tim and Jimmy said to Tony, but he says, “Yeah. All four. It’s not just Jimmy and Abby and Tim and Breena, it goes all four ways.”

Tony blinks, hard. And then swallows, harder. “So, Tim and Jimmy are… With each other?”

“They’re not having sex, but yeah, they are.”

That appears to be the moment where Tony’s brain explodes. He sits there, silent, staring into the distance for a few minutes and then says, “So they’re what, gay in addition to insane?”

“I don’t think it works that way. Like I said, no sex. But…” Gibbs feels weird saying this, but, if there’s a way to pull Tony out of this, maybe this is it, “Lot of love. Maybe even romantic. I don’t know. Not sure they do, either. But yesterday Tim was calling Jimmy his husband, so, yeah, all four ways. Tim’s not…” as far as Gibbs knows, but he doesn’t, not really, “fucking his best friend’s wife. He, and Abby, and Jimmy, are fucking their wife. Bounce ‘em around however you like, but… that’s how it works. I think. Didn’t want to get too deep into the details. Ziva has ‘em by now, if you want them.”

“God.” Tony sounds horrified and disgusted. Though Gibbs can’t tell if it’s worse or better than when he came in here.

“You took a long time figuring yourself out, and then figuring you and Ziva out before you jumped in, but when you jumped, you knew you could do it. They’re not any different.”

Tony snorts at that, too. Drinking deep. “This what marriage looks like to you, Jethro? Really? We’re moving Abbi in this weekend, gonna have a chat with her about the whole monogamy thing being optional?”

“It’s not. Not for us.”

“Duck and Penny, they adding a third?”

“Don’t think so.”

Tony sprawls back in the soft, eyes closed, head resting on the back, glass in his hand on the armrest. “Because it’s not optional. Because that’s the thing, you build this relationship, you and one other person, and… It’s not a club. It’s you putting your life, your honor, your name, your home, and your heart in someone else’s hands. You do it for the rest of your life. You and them and no one else. That’s marriage. That’s the job. So, don’t tell me they’re not any different. Don’t tell me that whatever the hell they’re doing with the four of them is in any way comparable to what Ziva and I have, or what you and Shannon had. Don’t try to sell me that bowl of shit and call it soup.”

Right now Gibbs would give a year of his wages for Rachel. Or Ducky. Or anyone who knows what the hell to do with this. He’s in so deep over his head, he’s not sure if he can find the sun again. Finally, after a long minute of flailing around, he comes up with, “What makes it shit?”

Tony’s staring at him like he cannot begin to believe that Gibbs would ask him that.

“I’m serious. You’re not that religious. I know you don’t think there’s a literal old guy with a white
beard watching everyone and smacking anyone who doesn’t do it exactly the way it’s written in the book. You don’t know that it can’t work. Abby claims to know people who’ve done this for decades; I’m sure Duck does, too. So, someone’s done it. You think they’re in love now and they won’t be next week? Come on, you know all four of them, they don’t work that way. So, where’s the shit?”

Tony either doesn’t have an answer for that, or it’s so blazingly self-evident to him that he can’t articulate it. Either way, he doesn’t say anything, just sits there, watching Gibbs, until his phone buzzes. Gibbs doesn’t reach for it, until Tony says, “Go, look. Which one of the WonderTwins is checking up on me?”

Gibbs looks and shakes his head. “Your wife. Says she’s called and texted you and you’re not responding.”

Tony closes his eyes and sighs. He turned the ringer off on his phone because he didn’t want either of the WonderTwins calling him.

“She wants to know if you’re okay?”

He can hear Gibbs texting.

“What are you telling her?”

“No.”

“But she is, right?”

“Maybe you could talk with her about it?”

Tony glares at that. “Telling me to leave?”

“No. Telling you that you’ll do better talking to her about how she feels than talking to me about how she feels.”

Tony shrugs at that. Gibbs isn’t wrong. “Don’t think it matters, all of you seem to be gung ho on getting ringside seats for seeing how badly this can explode.”

“None of us think it’s going to explode.”

“Then you’ve all gone insane!”

Gibbs rubs his own forehead. He knows he’s not talking to anything other than Tony’s fear right now. What he doesn’t know is how to break him out of it. It’d be one thing if Tony could shoot this, but he can’t. He dithers for another minute, trying to think of any edge where he can get into this.

“Thousand bucks. Ten years from now, when we’re celebrating their anniversary, you owe me a thousand bucks. If they don’t make it, Abbi and I’ll watch the kids, and you and Ziva have a good long weekend.”

“You want to bet on this?”

“Never had a problem making bets I’m gonna win. Don’t recall you ever having a problem with it. So, a grand? Five? How high do I have to make it for you to get worried about losing?”

Now Tony looks annoyed, instead of sad, angry, and afraid. Gibbs hopes that’s a step in the right direction. “I’m not betting on this.”
“Why not? If you’re sure they’re going to set us on fire, you might as well get a consolation prize, right?”

“I’m not going to celebrate them falling apart.”

“No. You win, this is a ticket for you to get away from it for a few days, spend some time tucked into your own marriage, with your own wife, and no drama. It’s your out.”

“The only out I want is not getting into this damn mess in the first place.”

“Not an option. So… grand? Two? What’s it going to be?”

“I’m not betting on this, Gibbs!”

“Then what are you going to do, sulk? They’re happy and playing, and you’re… moping? Next weekend, we’re all moving Abbi, you going to cut them out, not talk to them? You close on that house; you going to tell them they can’t help you make it your home? With me down, we can’t get it done in time without them. They weren’t planning on telling Senior, so you going to out them because you’re feeling off? What’s the plan, Tony?”

Tony shakes his head. “Going back to work. That’s the plan. It’s two on a Tuesday. I’ve got stuff to do.”

Gibbs nods. “Then go do it.”

Tim gets a text that says, *I may have made it worse*, from Gibbs. *Know I didn’t make it better.*

Tim looks at that and stares at the ceiling for a moment. *Great.*

*He’s heading back to work.*

*Even better. Jimmy’s been called out. I’m still here. So’s Abby.*

*Don’t think he’s going to talk to Abby about this.*

*I’m shocked.* Tim figures Gibbs knows him well enough to read the sarcasm on it with a winky smiley face. *What the hell did we tap into on him? This can’t be… I don’t know what this is, but it’s not just this isn’t how to play the game. And it doesn’t feel like just whatever happened with Senior.*

*It’s not.*

*That’s not helpful.*

*I know, but if he hasn’t told you, I’m not spilling his secrets.*

*Gibbs! Trying to prevent a massive meltdown here, mine and his.*

*Like I said, I don’t know if I made it any better. So, trying the same stuff I did isn’t going to help. He’s worried about it blowing up.*

Tim rolls his eyes. *I know that.*
Yeah. Hoping Ziva’s got him.

Then I’ll hope that, too.

You okay?

Tim sighs. I’ve had better days, you know. But yeah, holding up okay. Mostly just pissed that he can’t take his head out of his ass and see who’s in front of him, and not the ghosts in his head.

Tim figures that Gibbs nods at that.

Going to do my own work. I’ll keep you updated if he decides to come visit again.

There are a lot of texts on Tony’s phone. Most of them from Ziva. (One from Bishop asking where he went. He answers that one fast.)

She’s happy, too.

That’s a kick in the balls.

He can read between the lines of her where are you? Give me a call. Tony, you okay? Texts that she’s just fine. She’s not upset. There’s nothing about the girls having gone insane and everything being upside down and inside out. All of her concern is for him.

Which means she thinks he’s the problem, and not the four twits who are going out of their way to fuck everything sideways.

He flicks to her contact and sends back. I’m okay. Dinner? Usual time?

Yes. Or take the afternoon off and talk to me?

Abbi needs you. Bishop’s about to send out the Mounties to find me. We’ve got work. This’ll hold. All of that’s true, but it’s not what’s really going on. He’s not sure what he’s going to do when he gets back to the Navy Yard. Right now he figures the odds are even between actually work, or go yell at Tim and Jimmy some more.

Okay. No working late tonight. Anything less than a dead body gets booted to tomorrow. Pops up on his phone.

Gotcha. See you at 6:30. I’ll bring home pizza.

Good. Tali wants pineapple and black olives on my half.

He smiles at that while wincing at the combo of pineapple and black olive. You mean Dave wants pineapple and black olive.

;)
When Tony gets back to the Navy Yard, he keeps eyeballing the elevator, but decides not to do it. He does have a job. Bishop’s putting together a web of new leads. Draga’s working up a plan for who to talk to on this. All goes well, and the day after tomorrow they can start pulling people in to try and nail down what happened on the USS Banton out of Rio ten months ago.

“Equipment malfunction” is the official cause for why they completely lost all communications and navigation functions.

And, as of yet, no one’s been able to disprove that. But Tony’s got his hands in the CIA’s database, and NSA’s, plus his own, and they’re on the case.

So, they might as well be on the damn case.

Working the case is a good thing. He’s been able to get into those files, see the ones Bishop’s flagged, caught a few she missed, and yeah… there’s something going on there. Only the one case involves the US Navy, but in the last ten years ships all over the world have had the same “malfunction.” So have several planes. And a few troop convoy.

All over the world. All different militaries. CIA thinks it’s hinky, but they haven’t put much together on it. Too far under the radar to be worth the effort for a real investigation.

And it’s possible they are just ‘malfunctions.’ SNAFU exists for a reason, after all. But, since he knows McGee could actually make that malfunction happen, Tony’s wary of the official story on this one.

He gets home feeling better. Okay, maybe not better, those four. His skin starts crawling as soon as he thinks of it. So, more settled maybe. Or just not thinking about it.

But he’s walking into their place, large pizza box in his hands, knowing he can’t just let this lie.

Okay, he can. If he tells Ziva to drop it, she will.

And then on Thursday when they meet with their counselor, she’ll bring it up there, because it’s bugging him, and that’ll bug her, and that’s their game plan these days. They’ll let the other one have a free pass until the next appointment, but it’ll come up then.

So, there’s no way to get out of this.

He sighs and hears, “Tony?”

“Pizza Delivery!”

Ziva darts in from the living room. She can’t have been home long. She’s still in her work clothing, though she’s kicked off her shoes and taken her hair down.

He gets a quick kiss and she steals the pizza box from him. “I love you.”

He smiles at that. “Dave’s insistent about his pizza, huh?”

“Tali’s insistent, yes. I have been thinking about this for hours now.” She opens the lid, inhales deeply, and sighs. “Mmmm…” She and the pizza are rapidly heading to their dining table, so Tony
stows his gun and badge, tosses his phone and wallet on the little table they live on, kicks off his shoes, hangs up his jacket, and is pulling off his tie as he follows her and the food.

She’s halfway through the first piece when he sits down.

“Easy there. Don’t choke the little dude!”

Ziva’s grinning at him and chewing. “Sooooo good!”

He shakes his head and kisses her. This this is a marriage. Just them and this easy, comfortable, secure, uplifting, making each other better love. This moment here, and the one before it and the one after and all the ones in between.

Ziva’s watching him. “You are looking sad.”

He picks up a slice of his own pizza. (Onions, pepper, and mushroom. Once upon a time there would have been sausage and pepperoni, too, but, they aren’t kosher. On the upside, his cholesterol count is down.) “And you are not.”

“No. It’s been a good day. I got to show off Tali, share good news with my friends, and, and this one Abbi’s loving, I was able to clear her head of HR, so she’s got someone in charge of hiring again, and someone else vetting the rest of her HR Department. So, yes, for me it’s been a very good day. But it has not for you, has it?”

“No.” He can be more open with her than with anyone, even Gibbs, so the hurt and vulnerable and all the rest of it is plain on his face. “How can you be okay with this? You remember how this works. You saw your dad walk out of your family. You saw your mother crushed by it.” He’s talking about her, but he’s remembering his own mother, and the first of the step-moms.

His mom cried a lot. How much of that was her marriage to his dad, how much was whatever was going on in her head, how much was life and the world in general, he doesn’t know. He was eight when she died. He knows they didn’t live in the city. He knows that his dad lived and worked there during the week, and on the weekends he came home to their home in the Hamptons. He knows some weekends he didn’t come home.

Some weekends they yelled at each other, a lot.

He was ten when his dad married Leslie. She was warm, and pleasant, and looked a lot like his mom. She was kind and gentle. She was quiet. There was no yelling. And there was no craziness. He was still in school most of the year, but when he was home he liked being with her. She wasn’t his mom, and she didn’t try to pretend to be his mom, (never asked him to call her Mom, stuff like that) but she was willing to be his friend. She liked movies, too. (In fact, though he doesn’t talk about this much, she’s the one who really got the movies kick going for him. He was too young to really remember the movies with his mom. Mostly he remembers being with her and going to the movies. Popcorn and soda and the trip into the city. With Leslie, he remembers actually watching movies.)

He was thirteen when she started crying all the time and his Dad kept working late and going away on business trips.

And he was fourteen when she moved out.

And he was still fourteen when his Dad married Sandra. He didn’t like her. She did want to be called Mom and tried too hard, and… and she wasn’t his mom and she wasn’t Leslie, so he froze her out. But he still heard the crying, and the fights, and he still felt off, unsettled, unhappy when she packed up and left when he was seventeen.
Not that he would have said that. He was busy setting the record for most military schools flunked out of in one year. But, because he managed to get himself tossed out in less than six weeks each time, he spent a lot more of that year at home than the previous ones. So he got to see a lot more of what a train wreck of a marriage looks like.

He was almost nineteen when his Dad called about Amanda. He met her once, found she was younger than he was, and then he lost the invitation to the wedding and his Dad’s number for the next two years.

Ziva can see him thinking about his past and gives him a moment with it before saying, “I can be okay with this because it is not what happened to my parents, or yours, or your father and all of your stepmothers.”

“Are you really going to defend adultery to me?”

“No. But I do not think this qualifies.”

He snorts at that. “I might not be you with your nine languages or McWordsmith with all of his books, but I think I remember the definition of adultery. It’s not a complicated concept.”

Ziva shrugs.

“No like sleeping with his protégée did anything good for your parents’ marriage, and it certainly never made anything better for any of my dad’s. Love, honor, cherish, forsake. We’ve got that written on our wall, and I remember that being part of their weddings, too, because that’s the non-negotiable part. If you’re not doing that, you’re fucking it up.”

She touches his hand gently.

“That’s what this whole marriage thing is about, it’s you and me, not you and me and our buddies. This,” he gestures to cover them, and then lightly strokes her belly, “is just us. No one else. It’s exclusive and sacred and… and… and you don’t break that because you can’t come back from it. The cracks are always there. And… And Gibbs knows that. He’s got the divorces to prove it. How he’s going along with this shit–”

Ziva kisses him.

“Why are you doing that?”

“Because you are upset.”

“Why aren’t you? They’re our best friends and we love them and they’re… they’re hurting themselves and their kids and our family and… How can you be calm about this? How do we ever get the fantasy of all of us together at the house, kiddies having happy Chanukah and Christmas if they aren’t talking to each other because they fucked it up by fucking each other?”

“Because I do not think they are fucking things up. I think they are happy, with each other, and this is happiness growing.” Ziva thinks about this for a moment, noticing something that might be a bigger, or at least more immediate problem than if the McPalmers can keep McPalming. “If they are okay, is this a problem for you?”

“First off, they won’t be ‘okay!’ That’s just… It won’t happen.”

“Why not?”
“Because no one is okay with this. There is not a guy on earth who can watch another man fuck his wife and not feel some sort of tiny sliver of ‘I’m going to kill him.’ Maybe right now they’re so horny and turned on they can’t feel that, but it’s there, and eventually they’ll stop thinking with their dicks and they will feel it, and it will kill everything. Back at his bachelor party, I watched Tim get ready to hit Jimmy for joking about it, so… No! They aren’t going to be okay with this. Maybe right now they’re having enough fun it’s all right, but it won’t stay that way. It’s like jumping out of an airplane without a chute, those first few seconds are great, but sooner or later you hit the ground and it hurts!”

Ziva kisses him again. “You do not want to see them hurt, right?”

He nods at that. There are probably some other squirrelly things in his head, too, but that’s the heart of this.

“Right now, they are not hurting. Right now they are happy and stable,” he doesn’t look like he buys that, but she keeps going on, “and in love, and all sorts of good things, but they are going to be very hurt if you go out of your way to make this into a problem. They are going to be hurt if you back away from them. And they are going to be hurt if you are mean about this.”

He bites his lip.

“Say it.” Too many hours of not saying things that needed to be said, and too many feelings left buried between them have never done them any good. Part of why they are working so well right now is that they do say these things, even if they think they’re too silly or too revealing.

“I’m protecting myself. I can control this. I get to break it on my terms, because it’s going to crush me when they fall apart. Next to you and,” his hand touches her stomach, “they’re almost everyone in the world who matters to me, and when they break, it’s going to hit all of us.”

She can feel his fear in those words. Ziva puts down her pizza, and puts down his, and then snuggles into his lap. “For all of us, all of our weddings, we were there not just to party… Okay, maybe not Palmer’s, we were there to party, but for ours and McGees, and Ducky’s, and whenever Gibbs and Abbi get married, part of being there was promising that we’d help each other be married. We wanted this life, and we were there, vowing to help each other get it. Keep your vow. Help them have this life they want, and help to secure your own happiness with it.”

There’s a lot of defeat in his eyes right now, and she’s sure he’s thinking something along the lines of what’s the point of keeping my vows if they didn’t keep theirs? but he’s also not arguing it. He’s just sitting there, arms around her, mouth pressed into her shoulder, holding her tight.

Chapter End Notes

Okay... So, a million years ago, back when I started this McPalmer idea, my original plan was everyone else in the family would be instantly cool with it, because... Well, why the hell not? It's love, lots and lots of love, and that's awesome, right? Everyone's cool with that, right? I'd do it slow, an inch at a time, and by the time they were ready to 'come out' everyone else would be cool because they'd have been seeing how all four of them were perfect together.

So, anyway, fast forward a year, and I'm writing two versions of this story because apparently a decent chunk of people are not just automatically cool with this, even with
dearly loved characters where the groundwork's been set up properly and all the rest of it, they just think this is icky.

So, given that that is true, I needed to work that into the story somehow, too. I write humans, not angels, and a lot of humans do not like this idea at all. So, how to try to do this in a respectful and *real* sort of way. Anyway, very limited cast of characters for this, and Leon's just too damn removed (and honestly has too much power) for him to be a useful foil, likewise Ed is too easy to brush off, so...

So, insert Tony. I have my own read on why people get upset about things like polyamory. It's... um... probably less charitable than it could be. (Though given some of the PMs I got about how disgusting it would be for Tim to love Jimmy, maybe not.) So, I'm not sure if I did a good job with Tony here, trying to make his reaction real, in character, respectful of the POV that thinks marriage is just two people and any other combination doesn't fly, and do it without too much of my own self coming through.

I hope this chapter worked. I'm afraid it doesn't. If Tony's coming off too wooden, it's because I'm trying to portray something I just don't and can't understand. (I got a lot of comments and PMs about why McPalmer was wrong, icky, wouldn't work, gross, evil, un-Christian, and on and on. The 'wouldn't work and people will get hurt' struck me as the only legitimate one of those concerns for any of my characters to have. I'm doing my best with it.)

Got one more chapter on this, Tony and Tim and really talking. Then back to Shards to get that updated.

Happy Monday, everyone!
Marriage, Sex, Love

Lunch? A one word text from Tim on his phone.

Tony’s glaring at it.

It’s morning. He knows he’s got to deal with at least one of the WonderTwins sooner or later (though he’d prefer a big helping of later on this) and right now, as he should be getting ready to do work, you know, his job, saving lives and making the world safer and hunting down terrorists and killers, and instead he’s getting ready to deal with McHornball and his evil twin, Too Damn Stupid to Breathe and Chew Gum At Once.

To say he resents the hell out of having to deal with this is an understatement by about six orders of magnitude.

Bishop’s squinting over at him. “Bad news?”

He waves it off. “Something I’ve got to deal with.” He picks up his phone and replies with Now.

Where? Comes back.

You’re the one with the office. Just close the damn blinds.

Done. Whenever you’re ready.

“How about never?” Tony mutters as he pockets his phone and heads to the elevator. He looks over his shoulder and sees both Bishop and Draga staring at him in wonder. He turns on his heel and heads back.

“If I’d seen Gibbs do this, our team would have been all over it. We’d have wheedled and poked and found out what was going on. This is personal, not work. None of your business. Either or both of you try to get into this and your butts never touch those chairs again.” He stares both of them down. They nod. “Good.”

He turns again, and Bishop quietly asks, “Are you okay?”

“No.”

Draga looks at her and then him. “Are you going to be okay?”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Everyone says I will. And I can and will be able to do our job just fine, so… Back to work.”

Bishop’s giving him the one more question look.

“Bishop?”

“Your baby is okay, right?”

Tony sighs. “Dave is okay. Ziva is okay. No one is hurt. No one is sick. I’m glad you two are concerned, but this is none of your business, and it better stay that way, got me?”

They nod again. Tony points to their computers. “When I get back I want a full on plan of attack, who we’re going after first, what we expect to get from him, where we’re going next. Might be a
while, so if you’ve got it done before I’m up here, send me an email and get moving on step one.”

“On it!” Draga says, turning to face his keyboard as Bishop hops over to sit on his desk.

---

As the elevator descends, Tony wonders if doing this with Tim is a good plan. They’re really good at pushing each other’s buttons and he can see this breaking out into a real fight too easily.

Of course, if that happens, it’ll hurt, physically, but he’ll be able to work some of this crap off, and Tim’s usually okay once he blows off his own fight. Meanwhile, Jimmy’s just, *vicious*, when he’s unhappy, so…

Okay, yeah, Tim.

Then Tony groans, if whatever the hell Gibbs is saying about Tim and Jimmy is right, then if he takes a swing at Tim to work this off, he’s going to end up with Jimmy on his back, and…

*God, when the fuck did that happen?* Though he supposes that sheds some light on what the hell Tim was doing with Jimmy during that mountain of Jeanne flavored shit. *Tim was*, ugh, this feels like two hundred shades of icky, *defending his man*.

He shakes his head. *Don’t go there.*

Last night was a *long* night. He did get to sleep eventually. And most of the stuff in his head is worried about them, all of them, as a family, and the pain he knows is coming. There’s a healthy side of feeling extremely frustrated that people who ought to know better, *I’m looking at you, Gibbs*, are all up in this insane fantasy, leaving him out on his own with this. Okay, sure, the girls fall for the romance of it. And Penny’s probably tickled pink at this idea, any weird sex thing is cool with her. Plus she’s got so much guilt about Tim’s childhood, she’ll go along with anything he’s interested in because she’s feeling like she’s got to be extra supportive now to make up for then. If anything ever bothered Ducky that didn’t involve people getting killed, Tony’s never seen it. Great. They’re all yay, this is fine.

But Gibbs? Gibbs should have *his* back on this. Gibbs is supposed to be immune to the KoolAid, not serving it up with them.

There’s disappointment. Tim and Jimmy are supposed to be better than this. Okay, yeah, he rags on them about being Boy Scouts, but he’s just teasing. He needs some Boy Scouts in his life. He needs honorable *men* in his life, and losing that feels like a knife to the guts.

Part of it is disgust. It’s Tim and Jimmy. (*Urghlk!*) He can at least understand the appeal of Breena and Abby. They are both beautiful, warm, funny, clever, and *women*. And they have all been married/monogamous for a long time, so, okay, maybe they are bored and this is a way to spice things up that’s ‘safe.’ But *Tim and Jimmy*. He winces at that, a whole lot of images he really doesn’t like dancing around in his head.

And he’s not stupid, he understands sharing a woman with a buddy. (He’s never done it. Never had a buddy he could have done that with. But he gets the basic idea.) But… you don’t do that with a woman you love or respect. You stop doing things like that when you’ve got a woman you love and respect. That’s you and a friend blowing off some steam. That’s not something you do with your *wife*. Not if you mean it about her being the love of your life.
Tony realizes the elevator has stopped the doors have opened and are closing as he jumps out. Time to face the firing squad.

Tim does have his blinds drawn, as well as *Private Meeting: text if you need me* on the whiteboard next to his door. He’s got coffee for both of them, though they’re also both decaf. He’s thinking that maybe Tony doesn’t need any stimulants to go with this.

He’s taking a moment to get himself as calm as he can because he doubts Tony’s going to be in a good place. He’s not arguing. He’s not defending. He’s trying to help his friend get used to a major shift in their reality.

And it doesn’t matter what he’s *trying* to do, because his door is opening, and Tony’s heading in. So now it’s all about what he *is* doing.

“Hey.”

Tony nods, sitting down in one of the chairs in front of Tim’s desk. Tim circles around his desk and joins him, handing over the coffees. They both drink for a moment, waiting for the other one to talk.

Finally Tony breaks the silence. “So, no shit, no… anger… no… whatever. How does this happen? Everyone else is all, ‘This is great, it’s gonna be so cool’” he’s got his sarcasm amped to the max on that, but manages to pull it back, before he says, “but I can’t see it, so, what are they seeing that I’m not?”

Tim bites back his own sarcasm and doesn’t respond with *reality*. He thinks through where this has gone and how it started and all the rest of it, trying to see what Tony’s not seeing, why he’s not automatically on board with it. He’s trying to figure out how Tony can see how good they are together in the rest of their lives, and not make the jump to them being good with more.

*Lay the groundwork. Build it up. Show him.* “How does it ever work?” Tim says. “Slowly. You’re friends, and you enjoy each other. Having them around makes you happy. Okay, that gets us to losing Jon. And they were hurting so bad, and we didn’t want them to hurt, and you feel it, that part of yourself that dies with them when they die. You know that, right? Feel it for Ziva if no one else?”

“I feel that for all of you. And yet I’m managing to not sleep with you.”

Tim flashes him a quick, *I thought we were trying to just talk* look, and Tony nods, reining it in.

“And there’s putting your literal body on the line try and make that better. That’s me and Jimmy beating it out when it got dark. I did it for him when he was in the dark, and he’s done it for me when I’ve been there. So, that’s what, the heterosexual guy equivalent of comfort sex?”

“In whatever Bizarro-world you two live in, sure,” Tony says, sipping his coffee. “Is this decaf?”

Tim nods. “Figured we were tense enough without extra chemical help.”

Tony half shrugs. Tim’s not wrong, but too much caffeine makes him edgy and lack of it makes him crabby.

Tim starts talking again. “There’s good times, talking and dinners. And nervous times, waiting in the
Doc’s office for them when they got the Nuchal Fold test for Anna. And scary times, like when Jimmy came and pulled us out of the previa panic. And, and a lot of stupid stuff, one conversation at a time, one good day, one bad day, the same way you fell in love with Ziva, and I with Abby, and Jimmy with Breena, just with more people. And the sex is there, because Breena’s beautiful and so is Abby, and neither Jimmy nor I are blind so, it’s there, but, it was just… flirty and not real. Nice scenery. Appreciating the view. I know you know how that works.”

Tony nods at that. He does. He’s been quite happy to “appreciate the view” of Abbi and Abby and Breena on numerous occasions, especially when they’re all dressed up pretty, and at the beach was a lot of nice view as well.

“But that’s all it was. People you love who love you back and you’re friendly and close and it’s good. And the girls get talking, and suddenly it’s maybe more than that. Maybe, if Jimmy and I could handle it, maybe there’ll be a chance for some ‘hands on’ view appreciating. And Abby and Jimmy have always been close and the girls just clicked too, but, I mean, you know Abby likes girls, too, right?”

Tony nods. He kind of remembers Tim mentioning that. It never really hit him, but yeah he knows, sort of the same way he knows that Abby does stuff with chemicals that gets them answers. It happens, but he doesn't have the details.

“So, we’re friends, and we love each other, and we’re attracted to each other, and Abby and Breena decide to play around a bit to wind Jimmy and I up and holy shit it does that just fine. Those Valentine’s videos were so hot they melted our phones, okay?” Tim stops on that for a second, remembering Tony talking about bored. “And it’s not that we’re bored in our own marriages. That’s not what’s going on. I am not bored with Abby. She’s not bored with me. If I had to only be with one person for the rest of my life, she’s it, and I’d be happy there. I… just, don’t have to. Being happy with Breena doesn’t mean I’m less happy with Abby, and I wasn’t eyeballing Breena because I felt like I was missing out on something with Abby.”

Tony’s not buying it. BULLSHIT is loud and clear on his face.

Tim tries to keep plowing on. “When Breena and I were talking about this, long before any touching or anything else happened, she was talking about how if this was going to happen it had to be about love. And how one love makes your other loves stronger… How if anything ever happened it would have to come from our love for each other, not be in spite of it.”

Tony’s still got BULLSHIT aimed at him.

Tim changes tracks. “Um… You do something you love with Ziva and it’s good, right?”

“Sure.” Tony sounds tentative, not sure what he’s agreeing to.

“Like, basketball games are more fun with her because you love her and you love them, and you wrap it all up and it’s good, right?”

That gets a tentative nod out of Tony.

“Same for movies and for the books she likes and all the rest of that, right? Sharing the things you love with people you love is awesome?”

“Yeah. I get it.”

Tim’s staring at him, intensely, looking very earnest. “Do you? Because that’s where this starts and that’s how it gets here. One thing at a time. Saturday at the Farmer’s Market, and laying around
relaxing while the girls nap, and sharing a bottle of wine, and all of that, one step at a time. And it’s
good because we love it and they love it, and we get to love it together, which makes us love each
other more and…

“And… taking care of each other. Abby’s having a rough time after Kelly and they were there, had
our backs, knew what to do, carried us through. And us being there for them after Jon. And Jimmy
heading to California after the Stennis while Breena took care of Kelly. Big things like that. Little
things like,” he touches his wrist cuff, “Breena found a place that sold them, and Abby and Jimmy
picked it out, because they knew I loved the old one, and it was destroyed.”

“What Jimmy’s doing with Gibbs.”

Tim didn’t know that Tony knew about that, but… “Yeah. He’s training to kill the Admiral, learning
how to snipe. How to do it for real. I mean, you and I have some marksman skills, but he’s got Gibbs
teaching him how to do it from a mile away. He’s putting his whole life on the line for me. What is
that if it’s not love?”

“Just because you love each other doesn’t mean you have to be sleeping together.” Tony gestures
between the two of them. “We love each other, and I really don’t want to hear it if you’re interested
in sleeping with me.”

Tim winces at that idea.

“Eloquently put,” Tony says, dryly.

“I don’t love you the same way I love them. And I don’t love Gibbs the way I love them. So I’m not
interested in sharing a bed with you guys, or since I’m straight and you’re guys, say Ziva, who is
female and hot and beautiful, and someone I love, but I have no interest in having sex with. And,
hell, I don’t want to fuck Jimmy either. ’cause I’m still a straight guy, but I want him to be there with
us, because it’s better when he’s there. Does that make sense?”

Tony shrugs. No, not really, not to him. He can’t wrap his mind around feeling that way about more
than one person, but he can see Tim’s genuinely feeling this.

“Do we love each other?” Tim asks.

Tony nods. Yeah, now they do. He knows that. He just doesn’t think it’s enough.

“If you accept that we do love each other, why shouldn’t we be sleeping together?”

And for a second there, Tim thinks he’s getting through, thinks he’s making some headway and that
Tony’s buying it, but that second ends when Tony snaps, “Because it’s a fairy tale, Tim! And no one
gets the happily ever after, and you and Palmer are idiots to even try.”

Tim’s shaking his head. “Just…” He glares at Tony, trying to unjumble the thoughts in his head.
“No! I’m getting the goddamn fairy tale, and Abby and Jimmy and Breena are getting it with me.
And why the fuck shouldn’t we? We’ve worked hard for this. We didn’t just wake up one morning,
‘Hey, let’s get naked and fuck!’ It took years to get here, and yes, once it actually got rolling it
moved pretty quick, but that’s because this is right. This is who and where we’re supposed to be,
and…

“And I don’t care about the fact that you are scared. It’s not that we’re not going to make it, because
we are, it’s you can’t see through your fear. I am not your Dad. Jimmy isn’t, either. That shot about
sleeping with Breena because I respect her, fuck yes! I respect her. I adore her. I love her, and
because of all of that she is drop dead sexy to me. So is Abby, and both of them together is over-the-
moon incredible, and I get to have that, both of them, and Jimmy and all of us together and free and happy, and… No. You don’t get to shit on that because you don’t understand it," Tim’s voice is getting higher and faster as he gets more excited.

“Then how about I shit on it because I don’t approve?” Tony spits out.

“Why wouldn’t you? Do you think I’m lying about this?” Tim’s staring at Tony, eyes hot, angry and earnest.

“No. I know you aren’t lying to me. I think you’re lying to yourself. I think you are wrong about how this will work. I think your dick is driving the bus right now, and it’s telling you any lie it can to get what it wants, but sooner or later your brain will kick back in and you’ll see what a mess this is and it’s going to hurt you, all four of you and your kids, so bad. It’s a fairy tale, Tim! NO ONE gets the fairy tale; they’re fiction. This doesn’t happen in the real world. Horny and stupid and bored happens in the real world. Those bodies we used to clean up together. That happens in the real world. Happy, stable, loving foursomes, they don’t exist.”

“Yes, they do!” Tim shoots back. "And you’re living right next to one, and raising your kids with one, so get used to it.”

“No. No, I am not setting myself or my family up for that. My nine-year-old isn’t going to be asking why Uncle Jimmy and Aunt Breena and Uncle Tim and Aunt Abby aren’t talking to each other anymore unless they’re yelling. I went through ten lifetimes of that, and I am not putting my kids through it.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not putting your kids through that, either, because it’s not going to happen! You can stick Happily Ever After on my tombstone if you want, because we are going to make it!”

Tony pulls himself back. His voice drops in speed and intensity. “Tim, you’re being unreasonable.”

Tim’s eyebrows shoot so high up they’re in danger of bonking into the moon. “I’m…” his mouth opens and closes. “Wait…” He pauses, nothing coming out. He’s with it enough to see how Tony just pulled himself out of fight mode, so he takes a second to try and do it for himself.

Tony takes that pause and presses on. “Reasonable people don’t risk everything they love for sex. Reasonable people realize they’ve got all the good anyone ever gets so they sit there, happy and content, and they stay with that. Reasonable people don’t intentionally torpedo their own marriages.”

“God, did you hear anything I said?”

“I heard it. And one day, you’re going to come down off your high and realize how stupid this is.”

That’s not hitting Tim right at all. “How can you possibly be this narrow-minded? We’ve talked about this, and back then, when you thought it was just me and Abby hooking up with some girl, you were cool with it. You’ve had threesomes. Nameless, unloving, jerking off with a few girls at once threesomes, so what is going on here?”

Tony looks startled. “When the hell did we talk about this before?”

“Remember, we were talking about kids bugging you and you were talking about looking at other women, checking out the waitress, and I mentioned even Abby checked out the waitress if she was hot enough, and you asked if we’d ever had a threesome, and back then you were cool about it.”

Tony pauses and thinks about it for a few seconds, and says, “You weren’t married then.”
“Of course I was married then.”

Tony thinks a little longer. “No. It was before Molly was born. You guys weren’t even engaged then.”

“Doesn’t mean I wasn’t married.”

Tony’s staring at Tim like he’s insane. “No, Tim, not being married is the definition of not being married. It’s an either or thing, either you’re married or you’re not, and you and Abby weren’t married then.”

Tim knows he and Tony don’t always see eye to eye on things, especially on love and sex, but he never realized they were this far apart.

“It wasn’t the wedding that made us married, Tony. Wasn’t the rings or the vows. Not to say I didn’t like it, or it wasn’t nice, but… that’s what it was, something fun and nice and a good day with each other and all of our friends. Married isn’t making a promise, it’s living the promise day in and day out, so… if a promise starts it, that promise happened well before you and I had that conversation.”

Tony looks a little annoyed by that, and seems to think it isn’t exactly on point. “Either way, fucking Jimmy and Breena happened way the hell after it. So you were married! And I’ve never had a threesome when I was married. And I’ve really never had one with another guy. And I sure as hell didn’t do it after I stood up in front of everyone on Earth who mattered to me and God and promised to spend the rest of my life having sex with only one woman. I was your best man. I was at Jimmy’s wedding. Both of you stood up for me at mine. This whole marriage thing is just one other person, right? It’s supposed to be sacred. You draw the line in the sand, and you pledge your life and your honor to not ever crossing it.”

Tim sort of shrugs at that. He doesn’t feel any less married than he did last week. If anything he’s way more married than ever before. He, thinks about it more, and… if they were just fooling around, he’d be willing to concede that Tony’s got a point. But they aren’t fooling around, and they aren’t fooling around because married is his bedrock, and he’s not willing to risk that for sex, even awesome sex.

Something else hits with that, that fight could have gone very wrong. There was a better than average chance of him never walking again. A little extra pressure, a slightly different position, and that would have been the end of his spine, and his sex life as he knew it. When that hits, something else does, too. It wouldn’t have mattered. Even if he'd ended up on a vent and all he could have added to this was his voice, they still would have gotten here.

He shifts from there, thinking about Breena, and how, technically they haven’t had sex, yet, and how it doesn’t matter, because it’s not the sex that builds this, it’s not the sex that defines it (though he’s very much looking forward to all of the flavors and colors of sex that are coming) it’s the love, and it’s living that love. And he knows, right now, in a way he didn’t before, that if he and Breena never cross that line, he’ll still be okay with this. He’ll sleep next to her and cuddle her and help her and Jimmy and Abby raise their babies, and that will be fine.

Because the sex is the icing on the cake, not the cake, and the cake is not the meal. And, yes, the icing is delicious, and yes, he loves the icing, but he wants the whole meal. It’s all of this together that nourishes him and fills the hollow places and lets him grow to be the man he wants to be.

He tunes back in and hears Tony say, “Or how about this: you and Jimmy were the only guys I knew who were doing monogamy forever and succeeding at it. You’re my role models for what a functional marriage looks like, ’cause I sure as hell didn’t have one growing up. Besides you two, I
don’t have any close relationships with anyone who made it work. What I had was a guy who screwed up seven marriages chasing other women, never satisfied with what he had. And another guy who screwed up three more trying to get the woman he lost back.”

Tim looks at Tony and says, “It’s not about sex. Not what’s between me and Breena and Jimmy and Abby, not what’s going on with you and us, none of this is about sex.”

Tony’s looking startled at that. That’s nowhere he expected Tim to take this.

“We could do all of this emotional stuff, but not have sex. We were having a good time with that. Just loving and watching and talking but not touching. If we go back to that, are you going to be okay with this?”

He’s looking even more startled, now.

“No fucking around, no getting our rocks off, my dick stays in Abby, Jimmy’s stays in Breena, but we still love each other, and we still sleep together, and we take care of each other, and we raise our babies together, and we share a bed and a home, but no sex, is that cool with you?”

Tony’s not sure what to say to that.

“That was the last six weeks. Since I got back from California, really. All the love, none of the touch, the sex was turning each other on by sight and voice, watching each other, but no touching. A big neon ‘don’t cross’ line. If we stay on the no touching side of the line, is that okay, Tony?”

Tony doesn’t like this question at all. He’s either got to come down on the side of ‘don’t love each other,’ or say that sex matters more than all the rest of it, so he still doesn’t say anything.

Tim’s got ideas whirling around fast and sloppy, so he hopes this makes as much sense to Tony as it does in his head. “Adultery is the symptom, not the disease. Whatever’s gone wrong in that marriage has led to secrets and lies and broken promises. But that’s not happening here. You have an affair, the time, energy, attention, and love you’d be spending on your family goes somewhere else. You’re taking yourself away from your home and your marriage. And worse than that, you’re keeping secrets and lying to them to do that. And most of the guys we see do that, are doing it because there’s something wrong, either with them or with the relationship, whatever, something is missing and they’re hunting for it elsewhere.”

“Everything you ever needed to know about my dad or Gibbs’ affairs.”

Tim nods along. He doesn’t have the ins and outs of all of Gibbs’ marital adventures, but that conversation about trying to get with Abby while he was married to Stephanie covered the bases just fine for him.

“Okay, so we’re good on that, right? When you run from your own marriage, you’re cheating.”

Tony nods along with that.

“Okay. The guy locked in his office having IM sex with someone who isn’t his wife, even if he and his internet girl never meet in real life, he’s cheating, right?”

Tony doesn’t look like he believes Tim would say that. “You’re going to pass judgment on cheating?”

“You going to tell me it’s not?” Meanwhile Tim thinks this is astonishingly self-evident and feels like Tony’s intentionally missing the point.
“Most guys don’t think it’s cheating.”

“Do you? You find out Ziva’s got an online boyfriend, that gonna piss you off?”

“Yes.”

“You got an online fuck buddy; you don’t think that’s cheating? ‘Cause if you don’t, Gibbs, Jimmy, and I are going to have a conversation with you and we will bring the baseball bats.”

Tony just stares at him for a second. “Are you really going to lecture me about adultery? You’re going to get all protective of Ziva, to me? Four days ago your dick was in Jimmy, and you’ve got the nerve to suggest that online sex is inappropriate?”

Tim’s not sure why Tony’s so hung up on the sleeping with Jimmy part of this. He can’t tell if Tony’s trying to piss him off, get them really fighting, or if he’s just not getting what’s going on. So, beyond a token, keep the facts straight, he’s going to skim over that. “Really, not fucking Jimmy, but beside that, yes. Because if you’ve got an online fuck buddy, Ziva doesn’t know about her, and that’s not cool at all. That’s those idiots claiming it’s not really cheating if it’s oral, or they’re away from home, or whatever lie they tell themselves to make it okay. Your wife doesn’t know about it, you’re cheating. So, online fuck buddy, do you think that’s cheating?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Okay, how about porn. I know what’s on your computer. Is that cheating?”

Tony looks uncomfortable. “Don’t even try that. I know what you’ve got on yours, too.”

“Not anymore, you don’t. And even if you did, it’s not about getting off on a woman who isn’t your wife. At least, not to me, but if you’re going to draw the line that high, we need to have a chat about what’s on your hard drive and in your video collection.

“It’s about the context. You chose to fuck those pictures instead of her, you’re cheating. You play with pictures of her or someone else when she’s not an option, that’s fine. But if you’re taking yourself away from sex with her so you can spank it on your own with someone else in your head, you’re cheating. Can we agree on that?”

Tony doesn’t want to agree with that, because he can see where Tim’s going, but he doesn’t disagree, either. That was one of the biggest shifts from single to in a relationship. Yes, there was a lot more sex, but it required another person so it wasn’t whenever he just felt like it. A quick jerk to blow off some steam at the end of the day became less appealing when he knew Ziva was going to get home in an hour or so. And since he’s not seventeen, that meant rearranging things so he could have sex with her, which meant not having the quick jerk after work.

So, finally, he nods at Tim, because he’s right.

“Okay, so, if you’re doing that, the only skin in that game is yours. But you’re still cheating, because skin and bodies don’t matter. Not for this. Trust matters, love matters, intimacy, time, and joy and commitment matters; that’s your marriage. At least, that’s mine, and I hope that’s yours. Skin and naked and bodies is just part of how you do it. So, either you’re in that space, where you’re together with your love, keeping your life centered on her life and joys, and if you are, then everything you do with her is in bounds. Porn can be a lot of fun, with her, right?”

Tony nods, yeah there has been some fun like that.

“Well, if watching porn together is okay..."
Tony knows where Tim is going but he shakes his head so Tim shifts, getting back to the heart of this. "If you love her and you're right with her, it's all right. Or you're not right with her. And if you're not, even if you are staying monogamous, you’re cheating. That guy who hides from his wife, stays up until after she goes to bed, jerks off in the shower, and hasn’t said a word to her about anything other than the kids in months is cheating. Because sex isn’t the issue, it’s just the way the issue is expressed.

“Either the relationship works or it’s broken, and if it’s broken it doesn’t matter how it’s broken, and if it works, then all of it works.

“And we work. Abby and I work as a twosome. Jimmy and Breena work as a twosome. All four of us work together, too. We play with each other and nothing’s being taken away from our marriage. No lies. No secrets. We’re all loving each other together, building on our individual relationships and adding even more good to them and enriching the four of us together at the same time. You do something you and Ziva love together, and it’s good, right? You feel closer to each other?"

Tony nods. They’ve been over this.

Tim’s taking it a level more explicit. “So, it works for movies, and it works for sex, too. Abby and I making love to Breena together. We love sex. It’s fun with just each other, and it’s fun with someone else in the middle, too. The girls doing me, and Jimmy getting off on watching it. Him and I pleasing Abby. Him and I playing with Breena. The girls doing each other and letting us watch. All four of us at once and on and on… That’s it. It’s sex, but it’s not about sex because…” Tim’s got to slow down and put it together, he feels like he can almost grab what’s in his mind right now, and fortunately Tony lets him get it, rather than listen to him stutter for a minute to just fill the void.

“Okay, when Abby and I got together it was sex that led into love. First time I saw her, first time I wanted her, it was about bodies. It was about how hot she was and what I wanted to do with and to her because of it. My dick was on board with the plan long before I knew anything about her. But that’s not how it worked with Jimmy and Breena because I was already more than content with all the sex any man ever needs when we got to know them. So with them we fell in love, and that got us to a place where sex could be part of it. That got us past jealous and territorial and the world’ll end if your hand touches his dick and all the rest of that shit. It’s absolutely fucking awesome to be on the other side of that, Tony.”

Tony squints a little, not entirely looking sure about that.

“Look, honestly, I’ve had a ton of sex. Wild, kinky, come so hard you black out, leather, ropes, in public, in private, doing and being done to sex. If you can imagine it, and it doesn’t involve inflicting pain or humiliation, I’ve probably done it. And trust me, I’ve done stuff you can’t imagine, too. And this weekend, which didn’t involve any of that, was amazing. For all four of us. And it’s not like Jimmy or Breena or Abby were timid virgins, either. And so were the weekends before that, the ones where we didn’t cross the line.

“And we could have been doing this for years, but Jimmy and I couldn’t get over ourselves. And yeah, that’s not easy to do. You kiss Abby; I’ll punch you into next week, and when you land Jimmy’ll kick your ass, and you know we’ve been practicing enough to do it. So it’s not like this whole, hey, 'let’s share' thing comes naturally to either of us.” Tim shakes his head. Really didn’t come easy, but nothing that’s really worth it comes easy.

“But… oh fuck… It was so worth it. I can’t love Abby more. There’s just no way. She’s my life and heart and soul. But I could love Jimmy and Breena more, and I do, because there is the extra bond that comes with pleasure and literally sharing your naked self with someone else.
“So, you want to know how I can let him fuck Abby? Because she was smiling when they did it. Because he was, too. Same thing for me and Breena.”

Tony shakes his head, eyes rolling. “You really believe that?”

“Yes! It’s love and sex and pleasure and joy. It’s waking up wrapped in people who adore you.”

“It’s waking up with another guy’s boner poking you in the ass.”

Tim shrugs at that; he was the one doing the poking. And sure, that had been disconcerting, but he’s sure as hell not letting Tony know that. Plus, he’s not sure if he’d find it disconcerting now, especially not after this marathon with Tony.

Tony’s eyes squint as he notices the shrug. “Oh God, you did wake up like that, didn’t you?”

He knows, hopes, he will get to the point of what Abby was talking about, where, sure he’s not fucking Jimmy, but he’s there and skin and touch and bodies is just all okay, no big deal. Where if he wakes up with Jimmy spooning him it’s not an issue. So, he answers from there. “It happens. If you’ve got four people in a bed, two of them will be in the middle and they will have people snuggled against them on both sides. It’s a really excellent way to wake up, warm and close and… It feels good all over. It makes you feel good all over. And that’s why we’re doing this.”

They just stare at each other for a long minute before Tim sighs asks, “So, what happens now. I can see you aren’t convinced or relieved or… anything really.”

Tony shakes his head. He’s not. They’re all floating along on big fluffy clouds of sex and love and… And they can’t see the real world because they’re too high on pleasure right now. “I can’t lose you guys.”

“We’re not going anywhere, you know? We get this is a big deal and we know you’re not going to be instantly okay with it, but… we hope you’ll get there.”

Tony’s not looking thrilled at that, so Tim pokes a little further. “You can’t lose us? What’s that mean to you?”

“It means… It means you’re my friends, and I love you, and I want you in my life, and you’re scaring the shit out of me. It means being the man Ziva wants me to be and being strong and useful and still standing up for that unspoken deal we’ve all got about trying to keep our marriages working. It means on Saturday morning we’ll load up Abbi’s stuff and get her moved into Gibbs place, and Friday night we’ll have dinner together, and I’ll pray you guys know what you’re doing and dread that you don’t. I won’t mention it. I won’t be an asshole about it. But you are freaking me out.”

“I’m sorry you’re freaked out. We’re not trying to freak you out.”

“Molly isn’t trying to freak you out when she breaks loose and tries to run into traffic, either. Doesn’t mean you want to watch it, or that it’s a good idea.”

Tim can feel that tight, choking sensation that goes with the idea of Molly doing that. He hates that feels. Helpless, out of control, everything that matters spinning away from you.

“Tony, I really am sorry this is distressing to you. We’re not going to be ‘out’ in the wider world. This is for home and family only, so… Would it be easier if you don’t see it? Keep it behind closed doors at our homes, and… we were talking about setting up our wing of the house with one bedroom for the four of us, it doesn’t have to be that way. You don’t flip out; we don’t rub it in your face. That’s… detente, right?”
“One room?”

“Yeah. Take out that hallway. Big play place for the kids, and some sort of nursery, and bathroom for them. Depending on where the supports need to be we might make that one really big open space. If we need some walls, might make it two or three spaces. We’ve got that bigger dorm area upstairs for when they’re older and want a lot of buddies sleeping over. Ten years or so, that space might be some sort of lounge area for all of us, or bedrooms for them. On the other side, a big bedroom with lots of space for us, bathroom. We can’t be too open about this, not in the rest of the world, because the kids will take crap on it, but at the house… It’s private. And a space for us is good… Even if the kids talk about it, and someone else asks, we’ve got the answer set, ‘Yeah, we’ve got a place by the river. Grandparents wanted us to have a place we could all spend time together on the weekends and holidays, but there’s five couples and kids, so bedrooms are at a premium. We get on well, so we share a room when we’re there. That’s what Mommy and Daddy and Aunt Breena and Uncle Jimmy sleep together means.’ But we don’t have to share a room,” Tim shrugs. He’s not willing to burn his joy to keep Tony comfortable, he is willing to prune it some. “You’d be in and out of our space, so… we can build it so you don’t have to see it. Have two bedrooms, keep you from seeing anything you don’t want to.”

Tony looks tired, and sad. “No… Build your home how you like. I don’t have to go in there if I don’t like it. And… Yeah, I don’t want to see you slobbering on Breena. But I don’t want to see you slobbering on Abby, either. Like we always do, keep it G rated and… It’s not fine, but… Shit… One room?”

Tim’s nodding. “Yeah. I mean, we’re with it enough that we know we really can’t live together, not when the kids are still kids. That’d make things difficult for them. So we’re getting all the on our own time we could possibly want. But it’s really not just fucking around, not just something to spice up weekends, either. It’s adding Jon and Molly and Anna and Jimmy and Breena to that calf tattoo. This is something I’m going to live for the rest of my life, and I’ll burn it into my skin, and build a home to protect it, and… it’s a marriage, Tony. Like Ducky said, I hope, one day, not too far from now, we’ll all be able to celebrate it.”

Tony doesn’t look like he’s ever going to get to ‘celebrate,’ and Tim’s really not sure if he’s buying the marriage bit, either, but he isn’t arguing.

Tim shrugs. “Tolerate’s good enough for now. If it takes a while for you to trust it, it takes a while. We’ve got time. August, 2036, you can dance at our twentieth anniversary.”

Tony sighs, puts his coffee cup down, and stands up. “Shabbos is at our place this Friday, tell Palmer.”

“We’ll be there.”

“Okay.”
“Good morning, Tim.” Dr. Kent says as he closes the door to the examination room behind him.

“Doc.”

Dr. Kent looks around seeing that, yes, it is just Tim in his office today. “Where’s your dad?”

“He’s had some excitement of his own.” Tim sighs.

Kent looks concerned. “Is he okay?”

“Eventually.” Given how okay Gibbs is in his heart right now, Tim almost has a hard time remembering that his body’s taken a hell of a beating. Almost. The O2 canister he’s lugging around and the tube in his nose is a bucket of cold water on the fantasy that he’s okay.

Kent knows that Tim’s a cop of some sort. He knows Gibbs is a retired LEO, so instead of asking for details he says, “Can you talk about it?”

A little incline of Tim’s head means, sort of. “You see any of that stuff about the Coast Guard?”

“That mess? It’s on ZNN all the time. I catch little bits of the coverage when I can. Love that pretty redhead. Those twits who keep hassling her with stupid questions get chewed up and spit out.”

“She’s his soon-to-be finance.”

Kent looks amazed. “Good on, Jethro! Give him my congratulations.”

“I will. Anyway, we were part of that op. He got hurt, and for the time being, isn’t driving.”

“If I can help…"

“I’ve got you on speed dial. But the only bones he’s got broken are ribs, so all they’re doing is taping them up.” Which is factually accurate without being particularly true.

“Pretty much all you can do with them. Speaking of broken bones.” Kent pulls up the latest of Tim’s films on his computer. Then he takes the wrist cast off. “You’re done with one of these. We’ve got a brace for when you get tired and achy.” Which they did with his shoulder, too. “But wear it as little as you can stand. Just like with everything else, the more you move the better you’ll heal up and the more functionality you’ll have.”

Tim nods. “Yeah. Jimmy… Dr. Palmer’s got me working with my hand as much as I can.”

“That’s the plan.” Kent looks around again. Just Tim sitting on the examination table, go bag next to him. “How much are you using your crutch?”

“Not much. Sometimes if I move around a lot during the day, I’ll need it. Or the night before a bad thunderstorm, I ache all over when that happens. Most of the time if I’m hurting that bad, I try to not move around too much.”

Kent nods at that. “Pain meds?”

“Tylenol or Aleve. Still on it all the time, but I’m down to over-the-counter stuff.”
“That’ll keep getting better, and same with everything else, the more you move…”

“The less I’ll need. Yeah. I know the song.”

“You do. Well, I’m sure you’d have rather never met me…”

Tim doesn’t want to go that far; he likes Dr. Kent. “Under different circumstances would have been good.”

“Yeah.” Kent feels that way about a lot of the people he meets. “Anyway, you’re done. We’ll set a follow up for six months on, just to make sure everything is good, but from here on out, you’re in the hands of the PT guys.”

Tim exhales long and slow at that, and then packs the brace, (he’s not going to wear it now) saying, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Keep working at it the way you’ve been, and you’ll be all ready to dance at your dad’s wedding.”

“I intend to.”

Shabbos. First time with all of them together since the big “coming out.” First time either of the guys have talked to Tony, who’s been “busy” since Wednesday.

Tim’s a bit nervous. Most of life is a matter of following a series of scripts, and right now he doesn’t have one, so he’s not sure where to thread the needle between getting to see his sweeties for the first time in a week (He’s texted Breena and Jimmy, but hasn’t seen her in person since Sunday, or him since they talked to Tony.) and acting like nothing’s changed so Tony doesn’t get too flipped out.

Abby’s happily humming away in the car next to him, very much looking forward to tonight, too. She’s looking him up and down as he’s driving, eyeing him all over like he’s especially yummy.

They went home from work to get Kelly, but besides grabbing stuff for the sleeping over at Jimmy and Breena’s, they just ran in and out. He’s in work clothes, jeans and his red button down with his sleeves rolled up. Looks a lot like he usually does, finally minus a cast. Which is nice, and he does smell good, (After all, he is looking forward to tonight, so he’s got a bit of the metaphorical something black and lacy on.) but… there are looks that say, I love you and appreciate you looking nice, and there’s your gonna get so laid tonight, and this is a whole lot more of the latter than the former.

“Feeling good?” he asks Abby.

“Oh yeah. Been looking forward to this all week.”

He smiles at that. “Yeah, me, too.”

She grins at that. She knows exactly what he’s been looking forward to. She’s been looking forward to it, too. “Can’t wait to see Breena riding you.”

Tim closes his eyes for a second and licks his lips, swallowing hard. “Yeah.” He’s been thinking about that, a lot, too. Judging by some of the texts he’s gotten from Breena, she is, too.
“Had this image in my head all week, you sitting on the side of the bed, Breena riding you, back to front, I’m kneeling in front of her, going down on her, while Jimmy does me from behind.”

Tim groans, blood flooding his groin at that image, as he pulls into the parking garage under Tony and Ziva’s apartment building. “You just love giving me erections in inappropriate situations, don’t you?”

Abby smiles brightly at him, slips her hand over to give him a quick squeeze, and says, “Of course!” She kisses his cheek. “Also, I could see you worrying. You’re not worried anymore.”

Tim parks, smiles wryly at her, she’s absolutely not wrong about that, and then he turns and kisses her.

Any questions as to what level of hellos and physical affection are appropriate are answered quickly by the addition of Senior to the mix. He and Delphine have been coming to Shabbos, especially at Tony’s place, a lot more often of late.

So, maybe he hugs Breena a tad longer and closer than normal, but he kisses her cheek, not her lips, and all in all it just looks like their usual, ‘Hey, haven’t seen you in a few days,’ hello.

From there, dinner flows the way it usually does. Little girls get a quick feed and put to bed, (though in the next few weeks sunset will slip back to before their bedtime and they’ll get to fully join the party again.) grownups participate in the blessing, sing the prayers, wash up, and join in welcoming the day of rest.

“You’re looking better, Tim,” Senior says, noticing that he’s grabbing the platter with the salmon on it with two hands, neither of which is in a cast. “Any word on the guy who hit you?”

Tim shakes his head. “As best as we know, he’s still out there, driving away.” His eyes narrow, and the anger on his face is genuine. He’s holding the platter while Abby gets fish for both of them. He can’t hold and grab at the same time. “Almost three full months later, and I’m finally out of all of the casts. Still can’t bend my wrist at all,” Tim gently twitches his right wrist, but that’s as far as it’s going to go.

“We’ve got a date for that later tonight,” Jimmy says.

Tim nods at Jimmy’ who’s across the table from him. “But, thanks to my miracle worker over there, everything else moves, and my physical therapist and ortho think I’m setting records for healing up. Speaking of whom…” Tim looks to Gibbs, who’s got the foot of the table, “Kent says hello and congratulations.”

Gibbs is looking at him curiously.

Tim smiles at Abbi. “He’s really impressed with the ‘pretty redhead’ who keeps showing up on ZNN and chewing out the idiots who pester her with stupid questions. I told him you were moving in together. Hence, congratulations.”

Gibbs smiles gently at that, looking very proud. Abbi rolls her eyes. “Would have let them keep running the place into the ground if I’d known how much time I was going to have to spend talking to idiots.”
“Well, you’ve got at least one fan out there, cheering you on,” Tim says.

“Great.” Abbi’s not in a good mood.

“More trouble?” Breena asks.

Abbi looks to Ziva who looks at Senior and Delphine. They freely talk shop among the all cop group. Little less free with the Senior DiNozzos in tow.

“Nah.” She rubs her eyes. “Just getting all of the moving stuff set. Getting everything boxed up and ready to go, along with all the rest of it, lot of late nights.” Tim reads people well enough to know moving isn’t helping with whatever’s going on, but it’s not the issue.

“Sorry. Didn’t love doing that the last time we moved, either,” Breena says.

“At least, I’ve got lots of help this time. Do we have a plan for tomorrow?” Abbi asks.

“Duck and I were working on that,” Gibbs says.

“We were thinking that having three groups, one at Jethro’s, packing up things to get rid of, and helping to unpack and arrange your things, one group at your place, loading things up, and one group driving things from place to place, would make for the smoothest relocation.”

“Let me guess, I’m on driving duty?” Tim says.

“It would seem to be a natural fit given your current limitations,” Ducky says gently. “Perhaps Anthony would go with you, and help get things into and out of Jimmy’s van. There are several loads of things going to Goodwill or the dump from Jethro’s so an extra set of hands would be a good plan.”

Tony nods. “I can do that. Catch up on what McCybercrime’s been up to.”

Tim rolls his eyes a bit. “It’s a riveting story. Code, code, more code, oh, look, more code. And then, on top of that, database testing and streamlining.”

“So, I’m catching up on missed sleep?” Tony asks.

Tim sighs. It’s been a really quiet week for him at work. “Unless you’ve got better stories.”

“I actually do…” And from there Tony starts getting them up to date, in a somewhat vague and mostly BS (entertaining BS) sort of way, as to what they’ve been doing on with their mystery ship malfunctions.

“Do you know what’s going on with Abbi?” Tim asks Abby as they drive to Jimmy’s.

Abby shakes her head. “If anyone knows, it’s Gibbs or Ziva.”

“Yep. Hope she’s okay.”

“Me, too. I’m sure we’ll hear more tomorrow.”
Tim inclines his head. “So… are we out to Senior and Delphine?”

“Thought that was a no, you rethinking?”

“If they’re going to be over a lot… Not sure if that’s asking for drama we don’t need. But, he helps out on the house some, might notice the layout, and if he’s going to be a regular at Shabbos…”

Abby shrugs. “Set fire to it when we come to it?”

“Okay. Along those lines Sarah and I have a gaming date set for Tuesday night. Probably tell her then.”

Abby nods. “At least that one’s going to go well.”

“Yeah. I think so.”

Veteran parents do a good job of transferring sleeping baby girls from cars to cribs. Tim’s on opening and shutting doors as the other three carry the girls up, and in a few minutes, they’re all tucked in and snoozing away.

From there they settle into Friday night PT/playtime.

Get ready for bed, strip out of work clothes, settle into Jimmy and Breena’s room, lights low (but not dark), a bottle of wine (and some, though he is down to half as much as he needed when they started on his shoulder, Percocet for Tim), Breena puts on quiet music, not much beat or lyrics, just some background melody, that’s a script they’re all having a very easy time slipping into.

Jimmy’s sitting back against the headboard, on Tim’s right. Tim’s facing him, sitting cross-legged, his right hand in Jimmy’s lap. Jimmy sips his drink, hands the wineglass to Breena, who’s on his right, lying down on her left, facing them, her leg draped over Jimmy’s. He takes Tim’s right hand in his, gently touching all over, getting a feel for his wrist.

“How’s this?” Jimmy asks as he starts gently trying to bend Tim’s wrist.

“Bad.” Jimmy applies a little more pressure. “Ow!”

“Just checking.” He starts bending from side to side, and Tim’s wrist doesn’t want to do that, either. “Can you circle it?”

Tim rolls his eyes and tries. His wrist moves a little. “You’re going to have more luck getting me flying than getting it moving easily.”

“Yeah, well, getting you flying is easy. All I’ve got to do is give you the other half of the Percocet, and you’ll be flying.”

Tim inclines his head, agreeing at that.

Breena’s watching Jimmy place Tim’s arm on his lap and oiling up his hands. “Does being ‘done’
feel good?"

Tim shrugs. "Not going to miss the casts if that’s what you mean."

Breena shakes her head. It’s not.

“I don’t know. Not sure if I can get to ‘done’ with him out there.” He thinks about that for a few more seconds. “‘Done’ is when a few sailors and a chaplain show up on Penny’s doorstep to convey their regrets.”

“February,” Abby says.

“Maybe,” Breena adds.

Jimmy’s expression tightens a little, but he doesn’t say anything about it.

“Jimmy?” Abby asks.

He shakes his head. Breena sits up and places her hand on his shoulder. “Hey…”

Jimmy’s focusing on Tim’s arm, working his fingers along the tight, stuck muscles of his forearm and wrist.

Tim looks at Abby and Breena, wishing he could hold three way eye contact. Abby nods at him, she knows where he’s going, and Breena smiles a little, so he nudges Jimmy’s face up to look at him, “I want this more than I want revenge. I want revenge, too, but…” He kisses each of the girls and for half a second feels like he should kiss Jimmy, too, but isn’t sure about that, so he strokes Jimmy’s face with his fingertips, “this is better.”

“And if Jarvis doesn’t do it? You going to be okay with never getting ‘done?’” Jimmy asks him, still staring him in the eyes.

“We’ll find out. And if I’m not, we’ll take care of it.”

Jimmy nods, curtly, blinks, and then goes back to working on Tim’s arm. For a few seconds there’s a lot of quiet tension there, problems that won’t magically go away, and aren’t going to get better anytime soon.

Tim’s thinking of something to get them out of this space, which is much grimmer than he’d like them to be, and a thought hits. He smiles. “So… I think I can talk about this now. When I had lunch with Gibbs and Ducky, they were down on Providence.” That doesn’t mean much to the other three of them. “Two streets away from Stephen’s.”
Abby lights up; she knows what’s going on.

“Stephen’s is where we got our wedding rings made, Ducky, too. Not sure when it’ll be done, but Jethro’s got Abbi’s ring on order.” That gets Jimmy and Breena smiling.

“So, maybe when we’ve got all of her stuff moved…” Breena trails off.

“No way. Not that fast. Even if he’d grabbed something already made, it wouldn’t be sized up in time. But… yeah… soon. We were talking about him heading out west to have a chat with her dad.” That gets some chuckling.

“Is he going to?” Breena asks.

“Talk to him, at some point, yes. Not asking permission, but, you know, introduce himself, show he’s a stand-up guy. Stuff like that. Probably try talking on the phone or skype first.”

“Bet that was something he never thought he was going to have to do again,” Jimmy says.

“Yeah. Hey, if it’s a disaster, at least he can ask you for ideas on how to deal with troublesome father-in-laws,” Tim replies.

Jimmy shakes his head a bit. “I’ll run a seminar on how to manage the guy who doesn’t want you anywhere near his daughter.”

“Oh, stop it,” Abby says, patting Jimmy’s knee. “They’ll be fine. Did you see a sketch?”

“I did. It’s some sort of silver-colored metal, a pearl, and a swoopy-looking inlay.”

The girls think about that and look at each other, nodding, approving of Jethro’s pick.

Jimmy’s stroking his hands down Tim’s right arm, thumbs pressing deeply into muscles that haven’t moved in weeks. It’s a long, slow, stretching burn, but he lifts his pressure a bit as he comes to Tim’s hand, and then lightly traces his fingers down Tim’s right ring finger. “So, are we doing rings, or something?”

“Tim and I are definitely doing some ‘or something’ and I’d like a ring or cuff, something we all keep on our skin.”

“Rings would be very visible,” Breena adds.

“That’s the point. Even if they don’t know what they’re seeing, I want other people to see this. Something to mark it.” Abby holds up her left hand. “Don’t really have room for another ring on this finger.” Between her engagement ring and wedding ring, most of the space on her left ring finger is taken. She picks up Breena’s hand and kisses her palm. “You don’t have a lot of room, either.” More than Abby does, both of her rings are thin, but she’s got less than half of the space between her knuckles free. “Or is visible a problem?”

Breena shrugs. “Depends on how visible and to whom. Add another band to this finger, and people will ask me about it.”

“Present from your husband?”

Jimmy smiles wryly at that. “True and misleading.” He’s still holding Tim’s hand. “Or put it on any other finger and it’s just something pretty. That’d work for the four of us. If we’re all wearing a matching ring on the same finger that means one thing to anyone who sees it. Same ring, as long as
it’s kind of non-descript, on different fingers, and the only people it’ll mean anything to is us.”

Abby jumps on that. “Couldn’t really do one on my ring finger, either, but… anywhere else… And Tim’s the kind of guy who’d probably go for a thumb ring.”

Tim shakes his head. “Never liked the way that feels.”

“You’ve only done leather ones on your thumb, metal’s different.”

He raises an eyebrow at Abby. That’s true, he’s done the thumb ring for clubbing, and it is leather, but he can’t imagine a metal one would be that different. “I’ll borrow one of yours and try for a day or two.”

She nods at that, with as much smaller than normal his right hand is, she probably does have a few rings that’ll fit his thumb.

Tim looks at his wrist cuff. “You know, they don’t have to match. You three got me this, and… That’s all I’d want from a ring, too. Something you guys got together and made/found for me.” He taps the cuff. “This could be mine, or a ring if you wanted, but, all I need is that it’s from you.”

The other three of them think about that, and he sees them start to nod. That would cover making sure there was a mark of this, but that wasn’t so obvious as to cause trouble.

“What were you thinking of for ‘or something’?” Jimmy asks Abby.

She grins up at him. “You’ll get to find out when we’re on our own weekend after next.”

“A mystery!” Breena adds. “Are we going to like it?”

“I think so.”

“Speaking of mysteries, where are we going?” Tim asks.

Abby and Breena shake their heads. “You’ll find out when we get there,” Abby says. “Beyond that, you don’t need to know.”

“Might make it easier to pack,” Jimmy adds.

“What makes you think you’re going to need anything you don’t come already equipped with,” Breena says with a sexy smile while drawing her hand up the inside of his thigh.

“Yeah,” Abby adds, kissing Jimmy’s knee, stroking Tim’s leg, “maybe our plan is to just keep you two naked and in bed all weekend long.”

Tim laughs at that. “Planning on getting a lot of sleep then?” He glances at Jimmy. “Even tag teaming, I don’t think we can go *all* weekend long.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m up for it. You get tired, I’ll spell you.”

Tim gently thwacks Jimmy’s shoulder for that. “Please. I didn’t just meet you. You go for an hour and you’re ready for a nap.”

Jimmy grins back at him, then at the girls. “Time’s relative, right? We can fit a weekend into an hour.” He lets go of Tim’s hand and kisses each girl. “And I can pack a hell of a lot of loving into an hour.”
“Really?” Abby’s grinning up at him, then glances at the clock, it’s edging toward late, and they’ve got a lot of work to do tomorrow. “Want to put that to the test, Breena?”

“Yes,” and she kisses Abby and Jimmy, “but not tonight. Got some unfinished business with Tim.”

Tim feels those words flush through him, all hot and slithery and good all over. “Yeah,” he breathes. Oral, anal, vaginal, hand job, it may all be sex, and he loves all of it, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have a preference, and that preference is something he’s been looking forward to all week. “Ovulation week done?”

Breena crawls over Jimmy, spending a moment in his lap, giving him a warm kiss, and then over to Tim, settling herself in his lap. “As of Tuesday.”

He licks his lips, feeling his focus narrowing down. He knows Jimmy and Abby are still here, but they’re slipping into the background, and the very warm, gorgeous, sexy, yummy woman on his lap is getting all of his attention. “You know, I do make house calls.”

Her fingers thread through his hair, and then wrap around the back of his neck as he scoots back a bit, so he’s sitting against the headboard next to Jimmy. “I wanted you thinking about it, fantasizing about it, not remembering it. Come on, you know this, right? Jimmy’s told you. I like letting anticipation build.”

His lips whisper next to hers, but not touching, yet. “Been anticipating all week.”

“And you are getting off so easy,” Jimmy adds, petting his hand down Breena’s back as Abby scoots over to him.

Tim turns to him, nudging his shoulder with his own. “You gonna tell me you haven’t been looking forward to seeing this?”

“No. Been looking forward to it, too. But compared to waiting years, a week, not so bad.”

“Time’s relative, right?” Tim says to Jimmy, smirking at him.

Breena pulls his face back to her. “Less him, more me. You two can make out later.”

“Errr…” Tim says. Jimmy’s not looking very thrilled with that idea, either.

“Oh please, just because you two don’t touch when you do it, doesn’t mean this,” she points between them, “isn’t making out.”

“Uh…” Jimmy says, not really wanting to think too hard on that.

She sticks out her tongue at both of them, and then pulls Tim close for a soft, wet kiss. He sighs at that, and, after a few seconds of slippery tongues and stroking lips says, “This is making out.”

“Uh huh.” Her hands slip through his hair again, and he sighs again, nails on his scalp does feel really good. His hands (as well as he can with the right) curl around her tush, making sure she’s nice and snug against him.

This is good. He’s sitting against their headboard, comfortable, and Breena’s in his lap, rocking gently against him as they kiss and pet. Her hair and skin and touches are soft, slow. This time, they’re taking their time, less of the frenzied, ‘Gotta get it all in at once’ of last weekend.

He’s slowly meandering down her body, having gone from lips to throat and now to kissing her
collarbone, dragging lips across her shoulder, as his hand closes on her breast and she jerks, not in a good way.

Tim pulls his hand back, fast, looking at her, worried. “Not good?”

She looks down at her nipple, and gently touches six, small, rectangular bruises. “Normally it’d be fine. Anna’s discovered her teeth and is on her final ‘no biting mom’ warning.”

“Ow!” Abby says in sympathy. (Jimmy’s looking a little disconcerted that she’s not paying attention to him… but… that’s what happens when you’ve got four people in the bed.)

Breena nods. “Yeah. She does it again tomorrow, and that’s the end of nursing for her.”

“Poor baby,” Abby says. Breena looks irked at that. “You, not her.”

“Oh.” Now she’s looking un-irked.

Abby gently trails her finger down Breena’s breast, and both of the guys are staring at that, all attention on them. Abby, who, like what Breena’s doing with Tim, is in Jimmy’s lap, straddling him, facing him, leans over a bit, cupping her hand around Breena’s neck, and kisses her soft and wet while very, very lightly stroking over her breast.

The guys had started out a foot or so apart, but they are rapidly inching closer to give the girls better access to each other. Watching them play is amazing, seeing it from inches away with them in their laps…

Tim’s mouth goes dry. That’s… God… Every drop of blood in his body is galloping to his dick. Abby’s still lightly stroking Breena’s breast, and she seems to be okay with that, so Tim joins in, following Abby’s lead, using the same sort of ghosting touch, and then slipping down Abby’s hand and arm, too.

Abby’s hand tangles in Breena’s hair, and Breena tightens her grip on Tim’s neck, pulling him up a bit. He’s kissing her nipple while Abby strokes it, and Jimmy’s kissing Abby’s shoulder, stroking Breena’s thigh.

Abby takes a second to stroke his lips with her finger, so he gives her a quick kiss and a tiny nibble, then returns his tongue to Breena’s breast. That gets a soft moan out of Breena, or maybe it’s what Jimmy’s doing. Tim can feel Jimmy’s hand lightly brushing his thigh as he’s stroking up Breena’s thigh.

Breena breaks the kiss with Abby, petting her, nibbling her lip, then inching forward to kiss Jimmy. By now, the guys are as close to each other as they can get, so the girls are able to hug and pet easily. That also means it’s easy for each girl to kiss the guy whose lap she’s not sitting on.

Watching Jimmy and Breena kiss is almost as good as watching the girls kiss. Soft and loving touches. Jimmy’s lips on her, while Tim’s hand gently strokes her breast, and then she’s back to him, more kissing and more rocking against him, and he’s awash in all of this, all of her.

Her body, soft and wet in his lap, the feel of her pussy against his legs. Her lips and breasts and tummy and legs and skin and all of it on his. Warm, and soft, and flush with joy and pleasure.

He’s so ready for this, hard and eager, as she raises up a little, shifting his dick slightly, and begins to ease down on him.

A soft ‘ohhhhh,’ slips out of him at that. He’s watching her face, seeing her experience this, feeling it
himself.

It’s different. Duh. Of course sex with Breena is different. She’s not Abby, or any of his other partners. She’s the only woman he’s ever had sex with who’s had a baby vaginally, too.

So, she’s is looser, but like Jimmy said, it’s not bad, just different. Good different. Soft and wet and slippery, but not quite as snug, which is helping him focus on heat and slide more than grip. And making him feel pretty secure about not getting off too fast. He figures he’s good for as long as they both want to go.

And then Breena squeezes around him, and he inhales hard. Whatever those exercises are, she must be religious about them because that was very tight and intense and if Breena can ripple like that, this is going to be VERY interesting.

He’s realizing that he’s got to feel different to her, too. He and Jimmy have fairly similar builds, but they’re not identical by any stretch of the imagination. Though, according to Abby, there’s mostly just a sensation of fullness and stretch and friction, so maybe they do feel a whole lot alike.

He’s at least done this with someone other than Abby before, but Breena doesn’t have a list of other guys to compare to, there’s just him and Jimmy. That hits him pretty hard, just the two of them. The stupid, possessive part of him is insanely pleased by that. He kisses her gently, and pulls back, eyes on hers, smiling at her. “It’s different, right?”

She laughs a little. “Yeah.”

“Good?”

She gently kisses the tip of his nose. “Yeah. You?”

She squeezes him again as she asks and a low exhaled, “Fuck…” slips out of his mouth followed by, “Yeah.”

Breena slides all the way down him, sighing as she gets settled. He can tell she’s thinking about something and wonders what, remembering the first time she and Jimmy did it? Just feeling this? He doesn’t know her face well enough to have much idea.

He does know that she’s watching him, eyes on his, and so beautiful. He licks his lips and kisses her again, and again, feeling her on him and getting used to the sensation of being in another body.

She starts with an almost tentative slide, up down in long strokes, getting a feel for him and how he’ll make her feel. He loves that, actually he’s good with all of it, but long and slow is a great way to start. Her pulling almost all the way off and then squeezing around his tip is even better.

It’s a little strange to not know where to put his hands. With Abby he doesn’t even have to think about it. They’ve got this down, and he just knows what to do.

Time to learn.

His hand finds her breast again, and again he’s touching slow and gentle, making sure not to get those tiny, sore bruises. Then he smiles, remembering… Fingers are replaced by tongue and lips, still soft and very gentle, and from there he moves to eyelashes fluttering over her skin, and she makes a slightly surprised sound at that.

He looks up at her, “Okay?”
“Tickly.” She pulls his head up and meets his lips for a hard, wet kiss to go with a deep grind on his lap. He groans at that, and she does, too.

That’s good. Deep and slow. Really good.

He sucks her lip, soft at first, and she seems to like that. Little harder, and she moans. Little harder yet with a tiny nibble and he feels her shudder all over. That’s going onto the things he’s doing again list.

She keeps petting his hair, playing with it, tugging on it a bit, so he tries that, too. Running his fingers through her hair, rubbing over her scalp, and then fistig his hand in her hair, leading her movement by the hold he’s got on her hair. That gets a very pleased moan, too.

She likes it when Jimmy takes charge. She doesn’t love being in charge, though she’ll do it. He remembers talking about that. He knows she likes it when he leads when they dance.

So, lead the dance.

He pats the underside of her thigh, letting go of her hair. “Up. On your knees, facing the headboard, hands on the top.”

Breena looks pleased by that, happy and curious, wondering what’s coming next.

He scrambles around her, getting into position behind her while she kisses Abby and Jimmy. (It hits him that this is good on another level, too. They can all easily see and play with each other.)

He kneels behind her, her back against his chest and for a moment he’s just kneeling behind her, hands roaming over her front to stroke breast and lightly play with her pubic hair, as he kisses her neck and throat. Then he nudges her legs a little further apart with his knee. “Give me a hand?”

She does, getting him in place as he slides forward hard and sweet. They both groan at that. He sets a fast pace, slipping in and out, pulling her hips back against him with each stroke. Not much he can do with his right hand, but he can hold it in place so she’s got something to rub against. That’s working better. Breena’s sounding a lot happier with this. He knows it’s feeling good to him.

He wishes there was a mirror in front of them. He can’t see her face as well as he’d like, not going this fast or deep in this position. But he can see the way Jimmy’s watching her, and the way Abby’s turned in his lap, so she can watch them, too. God, that looks good.

Abby and Jimmy are kissing. Lots of wet tongue and lips, and Jimmy’s hands on Abby’s breast as she rocks in his lap, lifting up and down. He can see the way Jimmy’s dick slipping into Abby’s pussy, feeling Breena slipping up and down on him, and fuck, that’s every shade of good there ever was.

They’re holding here, matching each other, stroke for stroke, as close to all four of them having sex with all of each other as they can get. So many sensations and memories all blending together. The girls are pacing each other, keeping all four of them together. He can see Abby’s breast jiggle with each thrust, and feel Breena’s in his hand. He can see the flush on Abby’s chest and throat, and feel the heat on Breena’s skin.

It’s intoxicating. Almost too much sensation, almost too easy to get lost in it. And he loves it. Wants more of it.

He’s kissing Breena’s neck, biting gently, watching Abby and Jimmy, as he whispers to her. “Hold up.”
Breena does, wondering again what he’s thinking. He scoots back from her for a moment. Missing the heat and slip of her body, but wanting all four of them together. Tim shifts over, so he’s straddling Jimmy’s knees, leaving a few inches between him and Abby. He kisses her quickly, smiling at her, and she’s smiling back, she knows where he’s taking this, and then crooks his finger at Breena.

A hot smile spreads all over her face as she scoots over, facing Abby, finding her place between them.

From there it really is all four of them. He can kiss both of the girls and Jimmy can, too. The girls can kiss each other, too.

There, four of them moving together, all touching and kissing, that’s the sweet spot, all of them together. That’s where the build really starts.

Details go fleeing away, replaced by sensations of rising pleasure and skin on skin. The taste of Breena, and Abby, and Breena again on his lips. The feel of Jimmy’s fingers under his as he’s guiding his touch, helping him rub Abby off. Little circles for Abby; Breena dragging up and down over his fingers, and hot, sweat and cum slick skin sliding against more skin. Abby’s breast in his hand and Breena’s shoulder under his lips. More hands on him: fingernails, must be Breena, that small callus on a thumb, Abby, larger palm, Jimmy. Sounds: he’s talking, he knows that, because that’s who he is. When he feels this good, he can’t keep it in, it has to spill out in hot, sexy, dirty words. Breena and Abby are moaning in some sort of sex harmony, voices high and low and singing every favorite song and melody he’s ever had. Jimmy’s groaning with each breath, a low exhale of breath and vibration, hard to hear over the other three of them, but for a second Tim’s got his hand on Abby’s back, palm at the top of her cross, back of his hand on Jimmy’s chest, so he can feel the sound coming out of him.

Pleasure looking to crest, but not yet. The girls are keeping them here, in this moment of rocking in and out and up and down slick and glide and so many kisses, so much skin, heat rising off of all four of them.

Breaking point, rushing, falling apart, rippling scorch of twitching pleasure.

He doesn’t know who gets off first. He doesn’t care, either. He knows he doesn’t close his eyes, can’t. He has to see them all, has to be in and with them in this moment. He knows, as his body goes tight and sparking with pleasure that his lips are on Breena’s shoulder, his left hand cupping Abby’s cheek, and his right holding Jimmy’s left hand.

By the time he’s back to himself, all the rest of them seem to be, too. They’re lazily kissing each other, and he’s wishing there was an easy way to lay around and kiss all three of them, but there isn’t.

Eventually, Abby and Breena get up and grab tissues and head to the bathroom. By that point, they’re not in between him and Jimmy, so he could easily kiss him, but he doesn’t. He does lift up and shift over a bit. Jimmy slides down, laying on his back instead of sitting up.

Jimmy’s looking awfully sleepy, content and completely spent, and Tim’s feeling that, too. He’s also wanting to snuggle in close, because cuddling feels good, because after that much body heat being on his own is chilly, because if you do something that intense with someone, you should keep petting and snuggling them after, not just leave them on their own. So, he lays down on his side and hugs Jimmy, arm across his chest, head on his shoulder.

Jimmy’s eyes don’t open as he turns his head and kisses Tim. Soft, easy kiss, just two sets of lips
brushing each other. It’s not erotic. (Granted, right now, both girls could come join them, ready for round two, promising to be part of any fantasy he’s ever had, no matter how kinky, and he’d just arrange them around him for snuggling and sleep. Tim is utterly fucked out right now and not actually capable of erotic sensation.) Then Jimmy sighs softly and turns his head back toward the ceiling. A second after that, the girls are back, Abby’s snuggling into Tim’s back, so he rolls over into their usual spooning position, and Breena’s got Jimmy’s other side, settling into her own usual sleeping-on-her-side-snuggled-up-against-him position.

Tim scoots back an inch, so his back is against Jimmy’s side, and from there, surrounded by his loves, lips on Abby’s shoulder, he falls asleep.
Another Saturday. This time there’s no lazing about in bed. Tim and Breena get the little girls moving while Abby and Jimmy get the first showers.

Molly and Kelly are in their high chairs, munching away on their Cheerios while Tim’s on making up quick eggs for the adults and Molly. (Kelly’s refusing to eat eggs this week.)

Breena’s holding Anna with one arm and grabbing a bottle and formula with the other.

“Not too optimistic about her not chomping on you, are you?”

Breena shakes her head. “I think it feels good to her, and she’s just too little to get the idea that it doesn’t feel good to me.”

Tim nods at that. Kelly usually looks shocked when she’s gnawing on someone’s finger and they object to it.

Breena gets everything set, and then sits down, opening her shirt and saying to Anna, “Okay, we did this yesterday and the day before, this is the last warning. No biting me. If you bite me, we aren’t going to be nursing anymore.”

Anna looks like she’s listening intently, staring up at Breena, and she very eagerly latches on. For a minute, it looks like things are going well. Tim can see Breena’s shoulders relax, and then, “OW! NO! Do not bite me!” followed by attempting to remove Anna from her breast.

“You okay?” He takes the eggs off the heat and heads over to grab Anna, sitting down with her, giving her the bottle.

Breena’s looking at her poor, chewed nipple. “I’ll live.” She bops Anna on the nose with her index finger. “You’re done. No more nursing.”

Anna does not appear to be bothered by that. She’s enthusiastically chewing the hell out of the bottle nipple while slopping away.

“You got her?”

Tim nods, and Breena, gingerly rubbing her nipple, takes over on getting breakfast out for the four adults.

By the time Abby and Jimmy are down, Anna’s done, and Tim’s looking at a shredded bottle nipple. “You’re working on some new teeth, aren’t you?”

Anna grins at him.

Four parents and three kids is way easier than two parents and two kids or two parents and one kid. They’re still moving quickly, but he and Breena are able to grab a fast shower and get themselves
dressed and ready for the day, and when they’re done with that, they find all three babies are also all cleaned up from breakfast, dressed, and ready to go.

Tim, the girls, and Jimmy’s van are all going to Gibb’s house. Abby, Breena, Jimmy, and Tim’s Highlander are all going to Abbi’s.

When he gets there, he finds a load of stuff on the front porch, as well as Tony, Ducky, Gibbs, and Fornell inside, drinking coffee, ready to get going.

Tim heads in, putting Kelly on the floor, Molly walking next to him, (one more trip to get Anna) and says hello to everyone. The girls are in the dining room, with a collection of small toys and Mona, for the moment they seem pretty content.

“So, what are we doing?” he asks while getting coffee for himself, taking two long swallows before he feels the caffeine and sadly tosses the rest of the cup.

Fornell stares at him, confusion on his face.

Tim shrugs. “If she’s got to cut out the caffeine, least I can do is skip it, too.”

Fornell continues staring at him, looking like he’s not sure what to do with that, and then says, “We’re loading up the van with as many of these dime store rejects that Jethro’s been collecting over the years and then you and DiNozzo are getting them out of the house.”

“We take them to the…” Gibbs glares at Tony as he’s about to say dump, so he shifts to, “Goodwill. Drop them off, then over to Abbi’s to pick up more stuff and bring it back here. While we’re out, they entertain babies and stick more stuff on the porch for us.”

“How much of it are you getting rid of?” Tim asks Gibbs.

“If I didn’t build it, it’s not staying.”

Tim looks around the living room, dining room, and kitchen. “So... the table by the door is the only thing you’re keeping from down here?”

“That lamp.” Tim notices that the lamp on the table next to the sofa appears to be a piece of wood. “And the books.”

Tim eyes the sofa. “I don’t know. That’s a good sofa. Comfy.”

Gibbs looks surprised to see anyone standing up for his sofa. “You want it, it’s yours.”

Tim opens and closes his mouth, trying to imagine what Abby would do to him if he brought it home. He shakes his head.

“You ever crash on it, Duck?” Tony asks, looking at the sofa, with its sad, worn plaid fabric and dated lines, remembering many good night.

“No Anthony, that sofa’s never been a bed for me.”

“Only one of us that’s true for,” Gibbs says.
“Didn’t you sleep on that thing for ten years straight?” Tobias asks.

“Something like that. Unless one of you needed it. I’d roll out a sleeping bag and kip upstairs if that happened.”

“Wait.” Tony stares at Jethro. “That’s why there was always a pillow and sheets on it when I crashed here? I thought you were just being a really nice host.”

“I was. You got to sleep on my bed.”

“If I’d known that, I’d have brought better beer.”

Gibbs shrugs. “Make it up to me at dinner tonight.”

“I’ll make it up for you at dinner in a week or two when you can really drink it.”

Gibbs eyes narrow, annoyed, but not at Tony, forgetting he’s on pain meds is bothersome to him.

“Pile of stuff to move isn’t getting any smaller. Let’s get loading,” Fornell says. “McGee, can you lift anything?”

“If it’s smaller than Kelly, and I can do it one-handed, yes.”

Fornell looks his daughter over. She’s sitting on the floor stacking blocks, while Mona stands next to her, making sure she’s okay. “Twenty pounds?”

“Basically.” Tim thinks about what’s on the porch. “I can probably get some of those little tables.”

Fornell nods at that. “Come on, DiNozzo, we’ve got dressers to move.”

“And off we go!” Tony says, slamming the trunk door on Jimmy’s van.

This run is to Goodwill, getting rid of things Jethro doesn’t need anymore. (There was some muttering from Tony that even Goodwill probably didn’t need furniture that was originally purchased from Goodwill fifteen years ago, but they know Gibbs wouldn’t be thrilled with just throwing out stuff that can still be used. They are, however, quietly tossing his TV, no one, even Goodwill shoppers, want that.)

This time, because there are light things like bedside tables and lamps Tim gets to be on the crew of people lugging things around.

And while physically doing it doesn’t feel good. (He knows he’s going to be aching tonight and tomorrow) being able to do it feels great.

“Good to see you really moving around again,” Tony says as they put a few miles between them and Gibbs’ place.

Tim nods, sincerely.

“Bet that feels good.”
“You have no idea.”

“I blew my knee out in college and killed what might have been a pro-basketball career.”

Tim winces. “Or you do.”

“Yeah, I do.” Tony looks over at Tim. “Still, you’re bouncing back faster than I expected.”

“Jimmy’s really good at PT.”

Tony squints at that. He’d been trying to stay away from the elephant in the van, but given that Ducky more or less shoved them into a van with just each other for, probably four hours today, he’s guessing this was set up to get them talking about it, so he says, “Is that where… this… started?”

Tim shakes his head. “Nah. Been moving in that direction for a long time. Getting hurt got us talking about it, not just thinking. This…” Tim holds up his right hand, “is just part of what showed us we could touch each other and not all freak out about it.”

“Oh.”

They drive a few more miles. It feels, different… He and Tony were never great at just alone and quiet. They got good at it because it was a habit they needed to work together and survive, but over the last almost nine months, they’ve fallen out of practice at just being alone together.

These days, most of the time they’re together, everyone else is with them, or they’re talking about work, or they’re working on something, like the house.

None of which is true right now.

“So, they’ll be what… three months apart?” Tony says.

Tim latches onto that, glad to get out of a not wildly comfortable silence. “January 28th, that’s what we’re hoping for. And you guys… end of April, right?”

Tony holds up crossed fingers. “See if we can get Palmer to start on one soon, and all three of us have one in one year.”

Tim shakes his head. It’s not impossible, but he’s not thinking there’ll be a 2017 Palmer. “Hoping for another boy, but not trying again until Anna’s a year old.” Tim’s intentionally being vague on who might be hoping and who’s trying. He’s thinking right now isn’t a great time to get into the exact DNA cocktail of the next Palmer. And, honestly, if the next Palmer does look like Jimmy, Tony probably doesn’t know there was a possibility of him not looking like Jimmy. Unless he outright asks, in which case… Tim’s not sure; he’ll figure that out if it happens.

Tony either fills in Tim’s blanks with his own information, or just doesn’t notice the lack of pronouns. “That’s December… Could still do it.”

Tim grins at that. “If we get the time, want to get that blue room Gibbs was talking about fixed up? Get it set for Sean and Dave, and maybe Don?”

Tony’s smiling at that idea. “Might want to have a chat with the Misses first, make sure she’s cool with us turning her extra room into another nursery.”

Tim shakes his head in wonder. “We’re really doing this. We’re moving his girlfriend in.”
“We’re moving our step-mom in.”

Tim rolls his eyes a little as he breaks for a red light. “I refuse to call a woman who is a year older than me any variation of Mom.”

Tony laughs. “You get used to it.” Then he really looks at Tim. “It’s really trippy when she’s younger than you are.”

“I don’t want to get used to it. I’m good with Abbi.” Tim says, completely missing that Abbi’s eight years younger than Tony.

“She’s probably good with Abbi, too.” Tony reaches over and gently slaps the back of Tim’s head. “Can you imagine the Gibbs’… Borinslap we’ll get if we call her Mom.”

Tim laughs at that, too, taking his foot off the break and heading forward. “Yeah, he wouldn’t do it, not anymore, but she would.”

“What’re Kelly and Sean going to call her?”

“I’m going to leave that to her. If mom feels weird, Gran or something like that’s going to be downright bizarre. How about Dave, is he going to be Pop for your kids?”

“Yeah. Or something like that. Ziva may have some pet name for him. Might be Pop to your kids and Saba to mine.”

“Saba?” Tim’s sure that’s something from Ziva’s past, but he doesn’t know what specifically.

“Hebrew for Grandpa.”

Tim nods. “And Uncle Jethro to Jimmy’s… This is getting complicated.”

“Yeah,” Tony says as Tim pulls them up to Goodwill, and they start to unload. Once the van is empty, and they’re heading toward Borin’s place, Tony smiles, cocky and pleased with himself. “‘She Who Will Not Be The Fourth.’ That’s what we’re calling her.”

Tim chuckles at that. “That’s worse than all ninety-seven versions of Probie.”

Tony looks pleased. “And that’s why we’re gonna use it.”

“Not where they can hear it.”

Tony laughs at that, too.

They grab some coffee between Goodwill and Borin’s place. After all, if he’s going to be driving all over the place, it’d be nice to have something to go with that.

Tony’s eyeing his cup.

“What’s the point?”

Tim doesn’t look away from the road. He does shrug. “Which point?”
“Decaf coffee?”

Tim shrugs at that, too. “Habit. Tastes good. Still has milk in it, that’s good for me, right?”

“Just something to do with your hands?”

“Yeah. Ever watch someone quit smoking? A lot of them like having something to chew on/hold.”

Tony thinks about that. “Think Vance smoked?”

That’s never occurred to Tim. “That might explain the thing with the toothpicks.”

“That’s never occurred to Tim. “That might explain the thing with the toothpicks.”

“Haven’t seen him chewing on one for years.”

To Borin’s they go. No parking near her place, so they’re going to be schlepping things quite a way.

Nothing to be done for it. Parking spaces are first-come first-served and nine on a Saturday means lots of people home and sleeping in.

But not them. Tim finally finds a spot only two blocks away, and they head over.

Like with Gibbs’ place there’s a load of stuff on the front steps. (Less stuff, because Borin has a front step and not a full porch.) Given how far away the van is, and the short space between it and the car behind it, they’re not going to be grabbing anything big.

As they head in, Tony says, “If any of you see a space open up near the house, grab it.”

“Already on it,” Breena says, carrying a box to the front step and pausing to kiss Tim en route. Just a quick peck, nothing deep or erotic, but it is on the lips and not the cheek. It, and the little pat on the butt he gives her, is actually very similar to the kiss and hug Abby gets fewer than thirty seconds later as they find her in Abbi’s living room wrapping up pictures and putting them in boxes. (As per Tony’s request, there has been no slobbering on either of the girls.)

Tim heads deeper into the house, saying hello to Ziva and Abbi, both are in the kitchen boxing up Abbi’s cooking tools, and both of whom get a quick hug. “Light stuff for this round, we’re not parked anywhere near here.”

They nod. “How’d the first run go?” Abbi asks.

“Jethro is now one dresser, six lights, two side tables, a television, and three kitchen chairs lighter, and Goodwill is wondering if they can dress them up and sell them as being ‘vintage’ and ‘retro.’”

Abbi smiles at that. “Good luck with that. Those chairs…” she shakes her head. “There’s a reason he always eats on the sofa.”

Tim nods. “Yeah, I think those kitchen chairs are made of 1979’s best grade of artificial vinyl.”

Ziva chuckles. “And how is he doing with no heavy lifting?”

“Frustrated. Not too bad yet, but I have a feeling it’ll get worse. Fornell and Ducky are with him, so he’s not going too stir-crazy with just him and piles of babies.”
“Good.” Abbi’s looking okay with that.

“So, last night… You guys okay?” Tim asks.

“Long story. We can get into the details at dinner,” Abbi replies.

“Fornell’ll be there.”

“Not a problem. He’s in on this, too,” Abbi finishes, strapping a long strip of tape over her box. She lifts it tentatively. “About ten pounds, you good on this?”

Tim nods. “Yeah. Plates?”

“Yep. Not that I use more than two or three at a time very often, but I’ve got decent ones.”

“Then I’ll be careful with them.”

Abbi smiles at that, and then she and Ziva go back to boxing up more stuff.

Tim finds Jimmy and Tony heading toward the house as he’s going back to the van. “You have a dolly or something like that at your place?” Tim asks, pausing. This would be easier if they could just load things up and roll.

“Nope. Got a wheelbarrow,” Jimmy says.

“Big enough to be worth losing the time and the space to get it here?”

Jimmy thinks and then shakes his head. “No. We could get maybe two boxes in it.”

“Okay,” and Tim heads to the van to add his box to it.

It takes them about twenty minutes to get the van all loaded up, one fairly light bookcase, and a whole lot of boxes, and off they go again.

“What?” Tim can feel Tony watching him. He’s not saying anything, but there’s a sort of tension wafting off of him.

Tony shakes his head, so, in the spirit of everyone getting along, Tim chooses to ignore the TENSE pouring off of Tony.

This lasts until the next stop sign.

“Not that I’ll think you’ll try… but last week you knew Breena was Jimmy’s wife—“

Tim’s eyes narrow. “Is. Not was. She is Jimmy’s wife.”

Tony continues along without stopping for that, “Ziva’s off limits.”

Tim’s eyes are in danger of falling out of his head he’s rolling them so hard, and he’s sure he’s got his absolute prize, ‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’ bitch face in place.

Tony shrugs. “Just, you know, there were rules last week, and… That’s still one of them.”
Tim sighs. “I have never, ever, in more than ten years, made a serious pass at Ziva. I’m not about to
start now. I know you two are exclusive.”

“Yeah, that whole ‘being married thing’ usually hints at that, doesn’t it?” Tony’s looking at him
meaningfully as he lets that trail off.

Tim glares at him, but there’s no heat in it. He supposes they have opened themselves up to a level of
this by breaking the traditional lines. “It’s just the four of us.”

“But it could be more, right? That’s your ‘as long as we’re all good with it and doing it together
lovey-dovey crap,’ right? Beyond everyone agrees ahead of time, you guys don’t have rules
anymore, do you?”

Tim has to think about that. He licks his lips and ponders. His kneejerk reaction is, of course they’ve
got rules, everyone has rules but… Actually, if he meant that about as long as they’re all good with it
stuff, then they really don’t.

“Given who we are, I don’t think there’ll ever be anyone else. But, yes, the only hard rules are we all
have to agree to it, and whatever it is needs to be brought up well in advance of actually happening
so we’ve all got time to think about it and make sure we’re really good with it.”

“So, Abby says, ‘Hey, let’s go hit up that new kink club on 63rd—’ “

Tim hadn’t heard about that and responds with, “There’s a new kink club on 63rd?“

This time Tony’s eyes narrow. “Come join me and the point, McGee. She could suggest you all
going out to do whatever, with other people, or objects, or whatever, and as long as you all mull it
over and decide it tingles your dangly bits, then it’d be good, right?”

Tim rubs his lips together. He’s not loving Tony’s tone, but it’s not a bad question, and he can feel
that Tony’s actually working on trying to figure out what’s going on here, so… “Okay, yes, if we all
agreed to it, but… I don’t see any circumstance where other people are going to be welcome to join
the party. I don’t think you’d be able to get all four of us to agree to that. Hell, Tony, you couldn’t
get Jimmy and I into a strip club for my bachelor party, what do you think we’re going to do with the
girls?”

Tony looks at him, and Tim can feel the dry that’s going to go with his voice before he starts
speaking. “Last week I had an answer to what I thought you might do with them. But I was
wrong about that, so I don’t want to speculate too hard on what you might actually do with them.”

Tim doesn’t have a response to that.

Another mile goes by, and Tony says, “I still can’t wrap my head around this. Strip club is off limits.
Breena’s not.”

Tim rubs his eyes. “Okay. Strip club was never ‘off limits.’ We never had a rule or anything. And if
we’d gone, Abby would have probably thought it was funny or hot. Not like I was going to get in
trouble for going. I didn’t want to do it. Jimmy didn’t want to do it. I’ve got really great sex at home,
with people I adore, and it’s not like I’m not a fan of naked women dancing around, but… it would
have been empty, and I’m not so hard up that empty sex is worth it.

“I’ve got awesome sex at home. Jimmy does, too. We’ve still got awesome sex, just more of it. What
I don’t get is, you also have awesome sex at home, so why were you trying to take us to a strip
club?”
Tony didn’t expect that to come back on him, so he’s got to think about it. “Because we’re guys, on our own, doing guy things, as a send off for you getting married, which was supposed to mean just one woman for the rest of your life… and we like naked women.”

“Well, yeah, but… I mean… naked Ziva at home. Naked nameless woman on stage. You love Ziva. You get to touch Ziva. Nameless woman on stage… Yeah, she’s beautiful but… I don’t know. Just makes me feel… lonely and frustrated.”

“I don’t stop loving Ziva or not get to touch her if I’m at a club.”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“Sometimes it’s good to come home revved up.”

“I get that, too, just… What’s at home does a better job of revving my engines than what’s on stage. I get that the woman on stage is hot, and… I like what I see, but… I want the whole package, I want to look and touch and talk. I want my brains and balls taken care of, and that’s just not happening in a strip club. Don’t you want that, too?”

“Yeah. I’m married.” Tony taps his wedding ring. “I bought the cow, even though I was swimming in free milk. At the end of the day, I want that. But… I like variety, you know? And I like… I like the way they treat you. I know you’re paying for it, but… It’s a nice fantasy to get lost in. You’re handsome and fascinating and brilliant and they’re all beautiful and they all love you and you’re walking sex and they all want a taste. I like that.”

Tim nods. He likes that, too. Just… he wants it for real. And since he has it for real, he’s not interested in the fantasy version of it, and he’s really not interested in paying for the fantasy of it.

“But, you have that.”

“I know!” Tim can see it very clearly that Tony does, absolutely know that. “I like a lot of it. I like it from a lot of girls.”

Tim’s getting a better sense of what Tony meant when he said he was a sex addict all those months ago.

“Would you go to one now? Gibbs’ll be asking Abbi soon enough. You know we’re taking him out. Assume for a moment that Jimmy and I are game for whatever you want to do, where’re we going for his bachelor party?”

Tony’s looking irked. “How did we get from you sleeping with Breena to here?”

“You’re the one who started it. No strip clubs and yes Breena makes sense to me. Breena’s about love and affection and the stuff you claim you like about going to a strip club, but it’s real. So, you’re married now, you’ve got Ziva at home, are strip clubs okay?”

“Like you, we don’t have a rule about it. She knew that’s what I was planning for your bachelor party and she thought it was okay. But, no. It’s not okay. I’m married now. So, the idea is that she’s the one, the only one, who scratches that itch.”

“Okay.” Tim gets that. Then he doesn’t. “But, you still look at porn, right? And there’s no way in hell I’m buying the idea you stopped jerking off.”

Tony opens and closes his mouth. Then he nods, quickly. Yes, he still has some porn, not as much, and he doesn’t look at it nearly as often as he used to, but his favorites are still on his hard drive.
“What’s the difference?”

Tony looks frustrated. “I don’t know! One’s okay, the other isn’t. You do, too!”

Tim shrugs. “Not a lot. Usually if I’m on my own these days, I’m in the shower in the morning, not exactly a great place to watch. Last time I was on my own, and not in a rush, I was looking at shots of us. Last time I was playing with porn, it was both of us together. So, it’s not off the menu, and it’s not that I can’t have it, but, say I’m called off to handle a job in Dubai or something, I’m a lot more likely to pick shots of the two or four of us, which hit all my buttons and have great memories attached to them, than I am to grab porn.” Tim thinks about that; it feels right. “When we were in Vegas one of the shows we saw was pretty risqué. Not a strip club, but as close as I’ve ever been to one, you know, not for work. That was fine. It was a lot of fun, and yeah, getting ‘revved up’ with her was a blast. But we went together. You and Ziva, going to a strip club together, that okay?”

Tony’s biting his lip, and looking very relieved to see that they are ten feet away from Gibbs’ driveway. “Saved by bell,” he says under his breath.

At no point in time did Gibbs ever think that he’d find not being the guy lugging the heavy stuff around frustrating. In fact, one of his pet kicks of being the Boss was making Tim and Tony and Ziva do hard, heavy, dirty, or smelly work.

But, as he’s watching Tony and Fornell and Ducky lug his stuff to the van, and Tim, who could barely move this time two months ago, carrying light stuff, he’s feeling horrendously useless.

It’s not true. Someone’s got to watch little girls. And it’s not like he minds being on baby duty. But, especially right now, while Kelly an Anna are down for their morning nap, and Molly wants to be helping the grownups carry stuff. (She’s got a collection of pillows she’s taking to the van.) He just feels useless.

He’s putting books he hasn’t read in more than five years in boxes. If it’s been that long, he doesn’t need them any longer. Supposedly, the up and down of reaching for a book and tossing it in a box is supposed to be good for him, but…

He’s so done with healing up. He wants to be healed. Not… stuck in this fragile limbo from where playing a rough game of toss (or putting books in boxes) can leave him out of breath.

He tries a deep breath, supposedly the more he pushes his lungs the sooner the hurt one will expand, the sooner he’ll get some (but not all, all’s no longer physically possible) of his wind back. It hurts. A lot.

He feels a hand on his shoulder, along with a gentle squeeze. “It’ll get better,” Tim says.

“Yeah.”

Tim nods at him, knowing how much it sucks to be the one on light duty. “Jimmy’s been researching. Once your ribs are healed up, he’ll have stuff for you to do.”

Gibbs nods at that.
Gibbs’ to Goodwill to Abbi’s to Gibbs’ to Goodwill to Abbi’s…

Tim’s not even entirely sure which leg of the trip he’s on when he says to Tony, “If there’s ever a next time, we’re pooling our money and just hiring a damn mover!”

Tony nods. “It’s entirely possible that’s the best idea you’ve ever had.”

Tim’s limping by the time he’s helping to lug the last of the things from Abbi’s house. His ankle and foot have not been enjoying this much walking around, let alone going up and down steps, and they are calling out, in no uncertain terms, for Tim to stop doing this.

In that he’s carrying his last box, he’s not about to stop until he gets it into the van. Then back to the house to say goodbye to everyone, and then over to Gibbs for unpacking and dinner and then back to Jimmy and Breena’s where, unless the magic-second-wind-fairy comes to visit, he’s not going to be good for much beyond warm, snuggly body heat.

Tony and Jimmy are at the van, trying to get Abbi’s kitchen chairs in there with moderate success.

Tim leans against his car and eyes the set up. “Yeah. You’re going to hate it, though. Everything comes out, one chair goes in on its side, the other three you arrange so the legs straddle the chair that’s lying on its side, then the rest of it goes next to the chairs or on the seats.”

Tim looks at the Highlander behind him. “Or you can just stick the chair in the backseat and have more people ride to Gibbs’ place in Abbi’s car.”

“That’s the best idea you’ve ever had,” Tony says grabbing the chair as Jimmy clicks the remote to Tim’s car, popping the lock.

“Uh huh,” Tim slowly starts to stand up, gingerly trying to not put much weight on his foot.

Jimmy takes two steps over to him, and without saying anything, wraps his arm around Tim’s torso, and helps him to the passenger side of his van. “How bad are you hurting?”

“I’ll live. When I get to Gibbs’ I’ll steal one of his pain pills.”

Jimmy’s not looking thrilled by that as he gets Tim settled in the car. “Let me see.”
“It’s my foot. It hurts. Just looks like a foot.”

“Uh huh.” Jimmy’s not buying that.

“You really want to be looking at my nasty, sweaty feet?” This isn’t the hardest he’s worked during a day by a long stretch, but even with that, his feet aren’t exactly shower fresh right now.

“Aren’t you the one who pointed out how I’m elbow deep in dead bodies all day?”

“Yeah, and you’re the one who told me you do that with gloves.”

Jimmy snorts a quick laugh. “Get that shoe off, Twinkle Toes. I want to know if you’ve just worked too hard or if you reinjured it.”

Tim toes off his sneaker and tugs off the sock, somewhat appalled to see how puffy his foot looks, and how many little sock fuzzies are glued to it. “See.”

Jimmy nods, holding Tim’s ankle gently. “Little swollen. Ice when you get to Gibbs, and get it up on any furniture you can lay out on. The idea is to end up with less scar tissue, not more of it.”

“Okay.”

Jimmy gently squeezes Tim’s calf, and Tim gives him a quick smile before he goes back to getting his foot in his shoe.

“Tony, I’m putting you in charge of making sure that idiot doesn’t hurt himself again. You get him to Gibbs’, help him in, and then hand him over to Ducky.”

Tony nods and salutes Jimmy.

“I was going to say goodbye to everyone,” Tim adds.

Jimmy shakes his head. “You’re going to sit on your ass, and in an hour when they’re all at Gibbs’ place you can see them again.”

“Yes, Doctor,” Tim says, a bit of playful sarcasm in his voice.

Jimmy nods, looking satisfied.

Two minutes later, he and Tony are on the road again. Tony’s got his eyes glued to the road as he says, “So… um…”

“Tony?”

“Yeah, so… what do you guys do?”

Tim looks at him, Really? on his face, and shakes his head lightly. “Among other things, tell our wives we were right about you. Breena didn’t think you’d ask. As for the rest of it, none of you fucking business!”
Tony’s got his okay, yeah I walked into that, but give me an inch, okay? look on his face. “Not… like that… okay, yes like that, but… not… just like that. Like…”

“You channeling a surfer dude on purpose?”

“No.” Tony’s looking irked and he pulls himself back into shape. “Like, four of you, that’s a lot of people in one bed.”

Tim shrugs. He’s got the sense that this isn’t precisely what Tony’s curious about, but it’s on the way to getting there.

“And you guys might be skinny, but you’re not tiny, so…”

“So both of our bedrooms exist in three dimensional space and none of us are lacking in imagination. It works.”

“What about you and Jimmy?” Yeah, that’s what he wants to know.

Tim glances away from traffic and notices that Tony’s lightly blushing. “Gotta be a little more specific than that.”

“You’re straight.”

“Yes.” Tim nods. “He is, too.”

“So… When we talked about it a million years ago, another guy was a deal breaker for you.”

Tim nods again. “And if he’s not Jimmy, another guy is a deal breaker.”

“But… shouldn’t Jimmy be one. I mean… he’s still a guy. Another guy looking at you, right there… next to you… naked…” Tony licks his lips, looking uncomfortable, resolutely not looking Tim in the face. “He’s… right there, right?”

In that this was his default position a year ago, Tim’s trying to not get bothered by this, but right now, seeing it coming from Tony, he’s having a really easy time understanding why Abby thinks he and Jimmy are being silly when they get weird about getting too intimate with each other. “This would be really creepy if he wasn’t part of it. It doesn’t work if we aren’t all part of it. Haven’t you done something like this? You said something about your frat buddies watching…”

Tony rolls his eyes. “When I was blind drunk. The only reason I know I’ve done it is they taped the photos to my door. I don’t remember doing it.”

“Oh.”

“And, from everything I could see in those photos, I was the only naked guy in the room. But even if there were a few other guys also naked and fucking away, it’s not the same. I’m assuming you guys are… you know… making love?”

Tim nods. “Yeah. And yeah, it’s usually all four of us, and it’s close and warm and… Yeah, he’s there. I’m there. And yes, there’s a lot of watching. And no, it’s not weird. Being watched is kind of a kick, you know? And watching is good, too.”

Tony looks curious. “Usually?”

“Yeah. We still have three kids. Someone’s got to be on baby watch in the morning. So, two of us get to sleep in, the other two get the babies, and if he’s baby wrangling, then I’m on my own with
Breena. But other than someone stepping out to grab a kid when a kids needs to be grabbed, we’re all together for this.”

Tony thinks about that, then asks, “You kiss him?”

“What are we, fifteen-year-old girls?”

Tony shoots him a I’m not just being a twit look. “I’m trying to figure out how this works, who goes where, and all the rest of it. So, yeah, call me a fifteen year old girl if you want, but…”

Tim gets that. Tony’s reboxing everyone, rearranging them so they all “fit” again. “Yeah, couple times.” Last night alone. Maybe. He’s a little fuzzy on exactly how that went, and he hasn’t spent any real time thinking about it, yet. “How do you seal wedding vows?” That’s safer and something he very clearly remembers.

“Oh. Vows?”

“Really wasn’t kidding about it being a marriage. We can’t…” Tim stops. “I almost said ‘do it for real,’ but that’s crap. The paper isn’t what makes it real. Ducky and Penny are just as married as you and I. We can’t get the paper, and we can’t live together yet, but… It’s real. Everyone who can know about this without risking our kids, does. Maybe one day we’ll have the party, and I know there’ll be rings sooner or later.”

Tony nods at that. “Gibbs said you called Jimmy your husband.”

“Yeah. That’s how this works. He’s not just my buddy I share girls with.”

Tony thinks about that for a long minute. “How was it?”

“How was what?” Tim hopes Tony’s not asking him how sharing the girls with Jimmy was.

“How was what?” Tim hopes Tony’s not asking him how sharing the girls with Jimmy was.

“Kissing Jimmy.”

Tim closes his eyes, inhales deep, and lets it out slow. He’s not sure if that’s a better question or not. He’s also not even sure how to go about answering that. “Quick. It’s not gross or anything, but kissing the girls is a lot more fun.” Tim can feel that’s not enough. He licks his lips, trying to put it into words. “Kind of like getting a hug, or holding hands, it’s warm and feels nice, but not sexy…”

Tony looks away from traffic to Tim for a second, like he’s trying to lay him open with his eyes. “Do you guys cuddle?”

Tim shoots his bitch face back at Tony, and he backs off. Another silent moment passes where Tony works on fitting this together. “What did you vow?”

“’Until my last breath…’ Same vow I made Abby. I remade it to her. Made it to her the first time at Jimmy and Breena’s wedding.” The writer in Tim wonders if that qualifies as irony or foreshadowing. “That’s… that’s how I’ve got it in my head, you know? That’s the one that covers everything else. The one I made myself, to myself at first, and then to her, and to our kids, and now to them and their kids. Literally, nothing’s broken, just expanded.”

Tony thinks about that, too. Then asks, “He do another thirty minute sermon of goo?”

“Whatever was in his head stayed there. Jimmy’s were silent, kissed to all three of us.” Tim’s wondering if they ragged on Jimmy about his vows so much that he just didn’t say anything. Now he’s wishing they hadn’t; he would have liked to have known what Jimmy was thinking. He reminds
himself to ask about that tonight.

“Do the girls… with each other?”

Tim bites his lip and mentally sighs. Then he says, “Tony, I’m really glad you’re working with this, and trying to understand, but… It’s our marriage. I don’t want to talk too specifically about what we do in bed. It’s private. And I know Jimmy doesn’t like talking too much either. You wanna ask the girls, I’m sure they’ll leave you swimming in TMI. But, I’m not… All you need to know is that emotionally it works in every direction, and sexually is none of your business.”

Tony thinks about that for a few more breaths, and then says, “But you’re straight.”

“Yep.”

“So, what do you and Jimmy do? How do you work?”

“We don’t have sex with each other.”

“Okay. Yeah, you keep saying that, but… You say it works all four way emotionally. If you love him, really love him… Doesn’t that make you… gay… bi or something? And… if you do love him, and you’re kissing and snuggling him, why wouldn’t you want to have sex with him?”

Tim shrugs. Tony’s hitting another question he’s been working on for himself. “I do love him. I don’t want to have sex with him. And from everything I can tell, I’m not bi. He’s not, either. If either of us leaned in that direction, I’m sure we’d know by now. And I don’t know how or why that works, I just know that that’s what’s going on in my head.”

Tony nods, quickly, and Tim’s not sure what he’s doing with that, but he seems satisfied with it.

“You okay?”

Tony shrugs. “We’re building a home today. Jethro and Abbi’s. Just gonna be them, maybe a kid, I guess. Not impossible, right?”

Tim shakes his head. “Gibbs says no on that. Not going to happen. He sounded really certain about it, too.”

“Oh. Then just them. You guys did it for Ziva and I. We did it for you and Abby. You and Jimmy got Penny and Ducky set. That’s what we’ve been doing these last few years, moving our home out of the Navy Yard and into actual homes, with loves and people and children, not just unending work.” Tony shakes his head. “Don’t fuck it up, Tim. Your four go, and it’ll break all of our homes.”

Tim nods. “We know.”

Tony snorts a little. “It’d be easier to buy if you were fucking Jimmy, too.”

Tim doesn’t get that. “Why?”

“Spent some time googling this.” That completely stuns Tim. “Read up. Some guys get off on seeing their wife with someone else. Okay, great. Apparently it’s pretty common, another guy with your woman revs you up because now you’ve got something to prove. Faster recovery time, get back in there faster. Sperm competition or something like that, and apparently that’s why our dicks are shaped the way they are, push the other guy’s cum out. Great.” Tim’s wondering where the hell online Tony ended up. “But there’s only so long that’s going to keep you hot. It’ll fade away. You’ll get bored and… And if it was all four of you, with each other, there’d be more to tie you together.”
“Uh…” Tim’s not entirely sure what to do with that. On probably several levels, Tony’s right. But…
“I’m as attached to Jimmy as it’s possible for a straight guy to be.”

“Be more if you were his lover, too.”

Tim tries rolling that around in his head. “I don’t think so. I don’t know, and don’t expect I ever will, but… Just like him not being there would be creepy… having sex with him would be… I don’t know… Imagining the girls gets me revved up. Imagining Jimmy… it’s not a turn off, it doesn’t make me feel bad, but it doesn’t do anything for me, either. It’s kissing your best friend. It’s not bad. Lips are lips, they feel good, and Jimmy knows what he’s doing with them, he’s a good kisser, it’s a pleasant sensation, but it doesn’t get me hard.”

“That sounds like more than quick.”

Tim shrugs at that, too. “Tony, I’m sitting here, in a car, with you, telling you that there’s a guy I consider myself married to. How much more than that do you need?”

Tony sighs. “I don’t know. Enough time goes by…” He shakes his head a little. “Sooner or later enough time will go by, and I’ll trust it. But I can’t, not now.”

Tim nods. “We’ll still be together when you get there.”

Tony looks away from traffic to Tim. “You better be!”
Once Tony and Tim head off, for Gibb’s part of the group, there’s not a ton of stuff to do. They’ve already got the next load out on the porch, and they don’t yet know what’s going to be coming back from Abbi’s place, so they can’t anticipate too far on getting things moved out of the way.

So, for a moment, Gibbs, Fornell, and Ducky stand around in his living room, staring at the sofa, which hasn’t gone, yet, and where the coffee table used to be, but isn’t any longer, then Fornell heads into the dining room, and grabs the fishbowl.

It’s been sitting on that little table the entire time he’s known Gibbs and he’s never seen a drop of water in that bowl, let alone a fish.

“You ever have a fish in this?”

Gibbs shakes his head. “Kelly did.”

Molly looks up from playing tug the ball with Mona, (Mona’s letting Kelly win, because at three times her size there’s no shot of Kelly wrestling away a tennis ball from her unless she wants to lose the tennis ball.) and says, “Fish?” She knows what fish are, they’ve got three of them at her daycare. She’s looking from the bowl to Kelly to the bowl again, very curious about the idea that Kelly gets to have fish, and as of yet, she has not been allowed to have any fish.

Jethro shakes his head at Molly and slowly heads over to sit next to her. He pulls Kelly into his lap and kisses her head, and then gives Anna and Molly kisses, too. “A long time ago, my little girl, her name was Kelly, too, and you’re,” Kelly gets a little hug, “named after her, lived here, and in that bowl she used to have two goldfish. One was bright orange and white, and his name was Flame, and the other one was orange all over, and her name was Pumpkin.

“She was in second grade, and her school had a fall carnival. And there was a big table covered with lots of little bowls, just like that one, but tiny,” Gibbs takes Molly’s hands in his and cups them into a little bowl. “And in each one there was a goldfish. And for a dime, anyone who wanted to could take a ping pong ball…” That doesn’t mean anything to Molly, and Kelly and Anna are just listening to his voice. He’s completely lost them because they don’t know what “dime,” “fish,” “school,” “fall” or “carnival” means. He looks around and doesn’t see anything even remotely like a ping pong ball, so he picks up Kelly’s hand, and says to Molly, “A little white ball, about this size, but very light, it would float on the water, not make a splash. Anyone who paid a dime got two ping pong balls, and they got to throw them at the bowls, and if the ping pong ball landed in one of the bowls, they got to keep the fish.”

“Kelly got fish?” Molly’s eyes are wide.

Gibbs nods. “Kelly won one fish, and I won one for her. Kelly’s mama went three times, but her ping pong balls kept bouncing off the rims of the bowls, so she didn’t win any fish.”

Molly’s staring at the bowl, eyes slightly squinted, like she’s thinking hard about something. Finally she says, “New fish?”

Gibbs looks at the bowl, which is sitting on the kitchen table, which he’s not keeping. “Yeah, we can get some new fish.” The bowl is dusty and dingy. “How about we put it in the dishwasher, get it all cleaned up, and when I can drive again, you and I’ll go and get some fish as a welcome home
Molly looks satisfied at that idea. She nods in approval and says, “Good.”

Fornell takes the fish bowl to the dishwasher and sets it on the bottom rack. Then he grabs the table it had been sitting on, and lugs it outside to the front porch.

An hour later, as the girls are having their morning snack, and as Fornell’s eyeing Gibbs’ walls while thinking about where they’re going to put Abbi’s TV. (Still at Abbi’s house, but apparently it’s a 23 inch flat screen, so it’s got to go somewhere, and the corner Gibbs kept his TV in isn’t going to work.) Ducky quietly asks Gibbs, “The fish outlived them, didn’t they?”

Gibbs nods. “Yeah. We were in California when they died, and… I ended up driving back here. Had to come back for FLETC. Just me, and the pictures, and those two damn fish in that bowl, buckled up in the front seat. After the second time, no one asked me why I brought two goldfish to FLETC.”

Gibbs sighs, and cuts that short as he feels his ribs catch on the exhale. “Got in more than a few stupid fights with different exes about why I wouldn’t get rid of that damn bowl.”

Ducky nods at that. Then he smiles. “It’s good to see you bringing life back into your home.”

“Thanks, Duck.”

Gibbs can’t carry the girls, so Fornell’s got Anna and Ducky has Kelly, but he can hold Molly’s hand as she heads up the stairs to “their” room.

(Molly is proudly proclaiming that she doesn’t need a morning nap anymore. But she’s coming along to listen to stories because she likes stories with “Uncle Jetro.”)

Ducky’s done many a morning nap, with all three of the girls, so he knows what he’s doing, too. The routine of get girls fed, cleaned up, snuggled, and settled down is old hat to both him and Jethro.

Fornell, on the other hand, hasn’t done this in fourteen years. (Emily stopped napping at almost four.) Plus, he’s not exactly heartbroken to avoid diaper duty. So, he’s entertaining Molly, both of them are going through Jethro’s collection of books for little girls, picking out which stories they’re going to do while Gibbs and Ducky are on clean up duty.

Gibbs didn’t keep Kelly’s books, or with the exception of a few of them that he made, her toys. He just… couldn’t. His girls were gone, and he was alone, in on-base housing, in a house filled with stuff that somehow the rest of the world expected him to deal with.

He didn’t do anything with any of the stuff before Hernandez because he wasn’t expecting there to be an after, and once there was…

He got back from Hernandez, talked with Mike about what came next, spent one night in their home in California, and then got out of there. Just him, the photos, and the fish. (He had their bed shipped home.)

Mike called Goodwill for him, and they came and took everything else.
When he got back to their home, here, he didn’t go into Kelly’s room for almost two years. It was mostly empty. (So was the whole house.) They’d packed and moved the furniture and most of her things when they went to California, but her baby stuff was still here, and some of her toddler stuff, too. Little bits and pieces Shannon wanted to keep to remember with.

They got boxed up, barely looked at, and shoved into the attic before the first time Hannah got to see his place.

So, the books Fornell and Molly are going through aren’t old. They’re in good shape, and they don’t have that well-loved read before naptime seventeen million naps in a row feel to them. But a lot of them are stories he knows by heart. The whole Madeline collection is in there, along with Goodnight Moon, a lot of Doctor Seuss, Harold and the Purple Crayon, and every one of the Boynton books he could find. For when they’re older, there are Berenstain Bears, and Little House on the Prairie.

Fornell’s smiling as he sees a book, his own memories of a little girl with bright red hair snuggling in for pre-nap stories vibrant in his mind, pointing it out to Molly. “You like this one?”

She nods, *Not the Hippopotamus* is just fine. She grabs *Moo, Baa, La La La*, too, taking them over to Jethro, who is just wrapping up diaper time with Kelly.

“Good picks.” He lays Kelly on the mattress on the floor that’s doing duty as a baby nap spot, and waits a few seconds for Ducky to get done with Anna. He does, settling her down to nap, too.

Molly scrambles into Gibbs’ lap, (she’s the only one who really cares about the pictures, Anna and Kelly are just listening to his voice) and opens up *Moo, Baa, La La La*.

![Moo Baa La La La](image)

“‘The cow says mooo…” he reads, exaggerating the Moo, feeling Fornell smiling and chuckling a little at this. “The sheep says baa…” Molly ‘baaas’ along with him. “Three singing pigs say…” he reads along, letting his voice trail off.

Molly shouts out, “La la la!”

“No, no, you say…” He keeps reading along, with Molly adding, “The pigs say OINK all day and night!”

They read *Moo, Baa, La La La* and *Not the Hippopotamus*, and then she scampers off to grab Madeline, so they read that one, too, and by then Kelly and Anna are basically asleep, so they both get soft kisses, as the men and Molly head out to let them snooze.

Fornell’s gently shaking his head as the walk down the hall. “I’d forgotten how much fun this age is.”

Gibbs smiles, nodding. “In small doses. Wouldn’t want to do it full time.”

Fornell shakes his head at that. “No! Done with that. But a few afternoons…”

“Don’t get jonesing for grandbabies too hard.”
Fornell holds up his hands, he doesn’t want to get within ten feet of that. Not with an eighteen-year-old daughter. “I’ll borrow yours if I need a fix.”

Ducky, who’s been watching this exchange, holding Molly’s hand as they go down the steps, say, “Excellent plan.”

Gibbs’ things slowly leach out of his home. Abbi’s things start flowing in. Some changes are noticeable almost immediately. New sofa. New TV. New dining table. Some are less so. He’s unpacking her plates, and putting them in his cupboards.

It hits him that if he’s actually eating dinner with someone else on a regular basis. He’ll end up using plates again. Not that he never did before, but… Some weeks it took the whole week to get enough dishes into his dishwasher to make it worth turning on.

It also hits him that he’ll probably be actually eating a whole lot more. He’s way better about it than he used to be. He’s drinking a hell of a lot fewer meals these days. (Which is not the same thing as saying he eats three meals a day seven days a week.) But, he can easily see himself actually being the guy who makes (or at least buys) food, pretty much every night, and then sits down and eats it with someone.

It’s been a long time since he’s had any sort of little domestic fantasies ready to act on, but right this second he’s thinking he needs to wheedle Fornell’s Nona’s recipe for pasta puttenesca out of him, so he can make it for Abbi.

“Penny!” Fornell calls out as she heads in as the day’s wearing late.

“Wow!” She looks around with wide eyes, staring at the new lay out. “If I was just dropping something off, I’d think I was in the wrong place.” She moves around the living and dining rooms, whistling quietly.

Gibbs isn’t a TV guy. He’ll watch games, but usually if he’s watching TV it’s because it’s keeping him company while he eats, or something to listen to while ironing. All his TV needed to do was hook into a (speaking of things that didn’t go to Goodwill) VHS so he could play the Westerns he liked, and provide him with news and Wizards and Redskins games.

He’s only got two channels he watches, ZNN and ESPN.

So, because he’s not a TV guy, his living room centered on his sofa and coffee table and fireplace. It still does, sort of.

Except now it’s Abbi’s sofa, which has soft, almost plush, light blue fabric with big, overstuffed cushions and lots of room for them and six or seven buddies. Tony and Fornell (mostly, with a slight assist from Tim and Ducky) wrestled it and the equally oversized chair (“That’s not a chair; that’s a loveseat with identity issues,” Tony said as they dragged it in.) into the living room, and set them so the back was to the entry way.
It’s set so the chair is in front of the bookcase closest to the dining room (now home to Abbi’s TV and some books), and the sofa is facing the fireplace.

So, now, there’s plenty of room for snuggling down to watch something on TV, or just zone out in front of the fire. (Mona’s already appropriated half of the chair. She’s curled into a ball with her head on Molly’s leg, as Molly and both babies watch Little Bear.)

Penny heads into the dining room, which seats just as many people as it did before, but the table and chairs look like they were made sometime in the last ten years. And, unlike the previous occupants of this space these chairs are wood. Penny doesn’t know what sort, but they’re light blonde seats with white legs and backs. The table matches those colors, light blonde top, white legs.

There’s even, and she’s wondering if this is from Abbi’s place, or if Gibbs is showing off his nesting skills, a small vase on the table. Penny stares at it a moment longer, it’s almost perfectly spherical, clear glass, with a collection of little glass beads in green and gold and blue on the bottom. Must be Abbi’s.

“Where are the rest of them?” she asks Fornell.

“Last I saw, they were upstairs. The last load had Abbi’s clothes and shower stuff and… I’m not messing with that.”

Penny looks around and sees that Fornell’s apparently splitting his attention between watching little girls and getting the table set for dinner. (Maybe he’s the one who decided to put the vase there.)

“Looks like you’re ready for me?”

“Depends, you’ve got the food, right?”

“In the car. Give me a hand?”

“Certainly.” He stops pulling glasses out of a cabinet and says to Mona, “We’ll be in and out. Keep an eye on the girls.” Mona flashes him her You’re kidding, right? I haven’t let them out of my sight all day look. Fornell nods at her and pats her head.

“You ever feel like that dog talks to you?” he asks as they go to her car.

Penny nods as she opens the door to her car. “She does seem to be an unusually intelligent dog.”

“Yeah. Ohhh… That smells good!”

“Yes! We’ve got a very good curry shop near campus.” She hands him the first box which has six quart containers in it. “I got all their greatest hits and enough naan to shingle the house.”

“Which we need. DiNozzo alone’s going put away at least half of it, and Palmer’ll get a third and maybe the rest of us can get the rest.”

Penny laughs at that. “So you’re saying you’ve been working hard today?”

“You don’t even want to guess.”

She smiles.

“So, how’d you get out of this?” he asks, lifting the first of the boxes filled with lots of dinner.

“Fundraising. I spent today working on setting up a fundraising campaign for a woman who’s
working on setting up a series of women’s shelters in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

Fornell perks up at that. “Really? That’s… interesting.”

Penny eyes him calmly. Gibbs has already told her and Ducky that in a year or so Fornell’s likely to be their next conspirator.

“Yes, it is. If she gets the funding she needs, she’ll be ready to start building in a year.”

“Huh. When we get inside, talk to me about where to send some money.”

Penny smiles at that, too.

It’s about half an hour later when Tony and Tim get back with the last load of stuff.

And while it’s true that Jimmy instructed Tony to make sure Tim got into Ducky’s hands, when they got in Ducky was busy working on hanging a seascape painting that Abbi had had hanging in her living room. So he decides that leaving Tim to the tender mercies of his (as soon as she noticed him limping) glaring Grandma would work just as well for putting the fear of the older generation into him.

“Timothy!”

“I’m fine, Penny,” he limps over to the sofa, deciding that Jimmy’s instructions about getting horizontal as soon as possible make a lot of sense.

“Yeah, you look it. I left the Saaru out in the car, how about you trot out and grab it.”

He hits the sofa with a groan and shakes his head.

“Yeah, you’re fine. You’ve been out of that cast less than two days.”

“It’s not my wrist that’s bugging me.”

“That, he’s properly babied,” Tony says, coming in with a box.

“Speaking of babies…” He begs Penny with his eyes for a moment and she fetches Kelly for him, plopping her in his lap. “Hi!”

“Daddy!”

She gets a big hug, snuggling into him, and he kisses the top of her head, which is lying on his chest right under his chin. “You have a good day?”

Emphatic nodding answers that as she pushes up, laying on his chest, staring him in the eyes, elbows on his sternum. “Nuggets!”

“Pop made you chicken nuggets for lunch?”

“Yes!”

“Were they yummy?”
“Yes!” Her eyes are wide as she says that. Right now she’s on a massive chicken nugget kick and would happily eat nothing but chicken nuggets if allowed.

He’s watching her, feeling her on his chest, toes just at the top of his jeans, face to face with him, noticing how her eyes are starting to slip from blue to green, and how right now she’s putting him in mind of happy Abby very much. He smiles at her, giving her another kiss.

That’s about when Molly notices that he’s come in. (Little Bear is like heroin for Molly. When it’s on, she’s oblivious to the rest of the world.) She scampers off of the chair, rushing over to him, climbing up onto the sofa and plopping herself onto his lap with an audible, “Ughf!” from Tim as her knee hits him in a less than pleasant spot.

“Uncle Tim!”

He gets his breath back and says, “Hi.”

She crawls up for hugs and kisses, too. “Uncle Jetro’s gonna get me fish!”

Tim smirks at that, thinking that maybe Jethro doesn’t need to be babysitting when he’s on painkillers, and that part of there being three adults around was to prevent the grandpa squad from making silly promises to little girls, but… obviously Fornell and Ducky didn’t step in and stop this, so…

“How many fish?”

“Many!”

By that point both Gibbs and Ducky are down again. “Two,” Gibbs says. “And they’re going to live with me.”

That makes a lot more sense to Tim. “What kind of fish?”

Molly looks confused by that idea. She’s under the impression that goldfish are the only sorts of fish around.

“Goldfish,” Gibbs adds.

Tim nods and says to Molly, “You need to ask Uncle Tony about goldfish. He’s got a few, and he takes really good care of them.”

Molly thinks about that, and then bounds off the sofa to go find Tony.

For the most part, dinner is a fairly quiet affair. Everyone (besides the babies and Penny) is tired. It’s been a long day of lugging things all over the place, and even Gibbs, who didn’t lift much of anything, was moving around a lot more than he’s been recently.

Add in very good food, and for a few moments the only sounds are chewing and “Can you pass the…” comments as everyone refuels.

Eventually though, blood sugar levels start to creep back up, and sitting down for a bit starts to take the edge off of tired, and real conversation starts to flow.
“So, ready to build?” Fornell asks Penny.

She nods a bit. “One of the biggest issues is getting spaces set up that are safe. If she can get enough money, she’s looking to set up women’s shelters with several schools, take advantage of one already fortified area, up the security, upgrade the physical plant of the schools, and add shelters to them.”

“Most bang for the security buck,” Tony adds.

“Yes. And if it works well in Afghanistan and Pakistan, she’s hoping to expand into Africa.”

“Provide shelter from Boko Haram?” Tim asks.

“That’s the basic idea. Afghanistan is hostile. Nigeria is deadly. If they can swing it in Afghanistan, get the fortifications well enough set, they’ll try to expand.”

“Sounds awesome,” Breena says between bites of Korma. “And you’re…?”

“Working on setting up a fundraising campaign. Money makes the world go around, and I know folks who know folks, plus, I’ve been filling out and helping to fill out grants since the ‘50s, if anyone knows how to spew out effective bureaucrat speak, it’s me.”

“Hours of going through potential donor organizations,” Ducky leads.

“Yes, and more hours of finding other organizations to partner with. Clean water people for example. Great if you have a school and shelter, not so great if they all drop over from dysentery. Sustainable, local, micro agriculture. You’ve got to feed everyone in the shelter and the school, and every acre of cropland, assuming the ground is even good enough to grow anything on, is another acre you have to defend. So, I’m working on getting Samira a collection of friendly groups who do things like squeeze every drop of useful food and water out of an area, and then work on how to waste as little as possible.”

“Sounds like a massive undertaking,” Jimmy says.

“It will be. But… It’s not a short scale project, but… five, ten years, with any luck they’ll have gotten a few of these up and running and ready to go.”

“Amen to that,” Abby says. “So, beyond writing checks, how do we help?”

“Right now, it’s all about writing checks.” Penny looks at Ziva. “That is, unless you know some Farsi and Pashtun fluent people who are familiar with the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan who are connected to local NGOs and looking to make a difference…”

Ziva shakes her head. “Not connected to local NGOs, and the people I know are… working along different paths to make a difference.”

Penny nods. “I bet they are.”

Ziva nods, too. They see her glance at Abbi, who nods quickly. “You’ve been wondering about what is going on at CGIS?”

The rest of them nod. Brushing it off last night didn’t go unnoticed. Gibbs and Tony know what’s up, but the rest of them don’t.

“We’re getting anonymous notes telling us to keep looking. That this is just the tip of the iceberg,” Abbi says.
There’s a moment of silence while the table considers the idea of system wide corruption for an entire federal agency as the “tip of the iceberg.”

“Can you trace them?” Fornell asks.

“And already working on it,” Abbi replies. “We’re on whose sent them, but they’re actual letters, sent through the USPS. We know what zip code they’re sent from. But, unless we luck out and there’s something distinctive about this, there’s just no way to tell who sent it.”

“No prints, no DNA, and 20020 is the most densely populated zip code in DC,” Ziva adds.

“And we don’t know if this is some conspiracy theory crank who’s taking advantage of the situation, or a credible source who won’t go on record trying to get more attention to this.”

“Anything besides ‘tip of the iceberg?’” Fornell asks.

“Told us to keep eyes on the budgets, and a list of four bank accounts,” Abbi replies.

“Which you need a warrant to get into, which isn’t going to happen based on an anonymous letter that just appeared from the ethers,” Penny adds.

“Exactly. Right now they’ll let me go through basically anything that CGIS runs or owns, so we’re running those account numbers against our own, but if ‘tip of the iceberg’ means anything, it likely means those numbers won’t match any of ours.”

“Might be someone you’ve done business with. Are you guys set to run that down?” Tim asks.

Abbi shakes her head. “That would have been tricky before Brandis fried my computer system. Now…”

“You’ve got the backups, right?” Jimmy says.

“Yeah, but every computer I’ve been able to scrounge up is working on something else right now. I don’t have enough tools, or people I trust, to run this,” Abbi turns to Fornell. But you do, is clear on her face.

He nods. “Did you guys know that unlike the rest of us, the IRS runs on a guilty until proven innocent standard of justice, and that it’s entirely legal for them to audit any account, at any time, for any reason?” Fornell smiles. “You know, Jethro, since you’re retired and have all this free time, maybe you should be the go between for the three of us. Make sure we’re all in the loop.”

Gibbs glares at Fornell. It’s worse than he was thinking, instead of the yearly all three of them together, it’ll be all FOUR. Then another horrifying thought hits him, Abbi and Diane like no-nonsense, take charge, grab a problem and take it on headfirst people.

He grimaces. It’s entirely possible his soon-to-be fiancée and ex-wife might end up friends by doing this.

The rest of the table seems to be aware of this, too. He can feel the unvoiced giggles and sniggers. He feels a hand pat his shoulder, Penny’s, along with the words. “You have been complaining about being bored.”

Abbi smiles at him, looking amused by how stricken he seems at this idea, then she looks to Fornell. “The letter’s in evidence, but I’ve got the account numbers in my bag. They’re all yours.”
“Great. Emily’s got her first lacrosse game of the season tomorrow. I’ll talk to Diane then. Jethro can get us all set up to go over it soon.”

Gibbs’ forehead hits his palm as he slowly shakes his head.

It’s not late. At all. In fact, it’s only a little past eight.

But it feels late. Jethro’s tired, and given how little he actually did today, annoyed to be tired. So, he’s resting (and annoyed to be resting) on the oversized chair, Mona’s head on his lap, reading (not really) while Abbi efficiently rearranges everything in his… their kitchen.

He’d like to be helping her, but when he tried to do that, she glared at the O2 tube he’s using, and then looked at the chair in the living room, so he went and sat down and began to amuse himself.

It’s really comfortable. And, unlike his sofa, the back is high enough that he can rest his head against it while he reads, and next thing he knows he’s a bit less tired, and it is genuinely late because apparently he’s drifted off for a three hour nap.

He blinks, sleepily, and sees Abbi, sitting in front of the fire, staring at it. She’s in quarter profile, most of her face towards the flames. She’s lit from behind, glowing from the fire.

She’d probably scoff if he said she looked angelic, gold and red and lit up with a halo.

“Beautiful.” He stretches a little, and hears another rumble of thunder, probably what woke him up in the first place.

She looks away from the fire to him, sees he’s really awake, and stands up to sit with him. Mona’s not thrilled about being shoved out of the way, but Gibbs is still too sore to have anyone pressed to his right side.

She snuggles in, and he rests his lips on her shoulder. “Feeling like home, yet?”

She shrugs. Everything is upside down and backwards, and she’s still not sure where a good three quarters of her stuff is, so, no it’s not home, not yet. “It will.”

He smirks at that. He’s not sure where most of his stuff is anymore, either, and he was here while they rearranged everything. Ducky and Fornell are champion unpackers.

“You?” she asks.

He kisses her, feeling her against him, smelling her skin, watching the flames flicker over her skin and eyes. “Yeah. It’s home.”

She smiles, and then gently kisses him. “Good.”
Tim lands on his stomach, in Jimmy’s bed, with a groan. “What is going on? There is no possible way I hurt myself this bad helping out moving.” Even his nose, which until today he’d forgotten had broken, is hurting. He moans again, sounding very pitiful. He’s hurt bad enough to feel comfortable whining about it, but not so bad that he feels like he needs more narcotics than the one he stole from Jethro after dinner.

Jimmy pets his shoulder while kicking off his shoes, and both of the girls give him quick kisses. Abby sits next to him, gently stroking his hair. “While you were driving all over the place did you catch the weather?”

“Thunderstorms late tonight and all day tomorrow, yeah, so?”

Abby gives him a sympathetic smile while gently petting his hair again. “First hurricane of the season is supposed to go crashing into South Carolina tomorrow. We’re getting thunder and rain up here. You’re hurting all over because the front that goes with that storm is coming into town.”

A supremely undignified whine goes with that news. That storm front is supposed to be in play for the next two days.

Abby kisses him again. “You want to trade weeks with me, get your massage this week, and I’ll take a later one?”

Tim winces. Right now he’s hurting badly enough he doesn’t really want to be touched. Maybe held, but any kind of real pressure or friction sounds bad to him. “Think I’ll just lie here and watch them pet you.”

Abby nods at that and then helps him sit up. “Come on, let’s get you undressed.”

Tim’s thinking the literal definition of heaven may be having a space where people will baby you when you’re feeling bad.

He’s hurting badly enough that he’s not feeling sexy at all. He is feeling very pampered and cosseted when the girls help him undress and Jimmy tosses a light blanket over him while they go about their own getting ready for bed routine.

And he’s loving watching Jimmy and Breena take care of Abby, who is also feeling a bit on the sore and achy side. Sean’s not huge, not yet, but he’s more than big enough to make any sort of long day feel even longer, and today was a long day.

It’s a very content moment. He’s watching Jimmy and Breena work on Abby. Jimmy’s got her head in his lap and is gently rubbing circles on her scalp, Breena’s got one of her feet, pressing her knuckles into her heel, and Abby’s purring, eyes closed, blissed-out, holding Tim’s hand.
He’s feeling very happy right now, sore, God, sore, but so well loved. (He wonders vaguely how much of this is real, and how much of it is the pain meds, but, honestly, after a few tenths of a second’s thought, he decides he doesn’t care. This is good, he doesn’t need to examine it too closely.)

His index finger slips over Abby’s hand, her skin soft and warm under his touch, and after another inch of motion he touches her wedding ring.

“When we were making our promises, what were you thinking, Jimmy?”

Jimmy isn’t paying attention to Tim. He’s feeling Abby’s hair in his lap, her scalp under his fingers, and he’s watching the way she’s making tiny little purrs each time he presses the tips of his fingers into the base of her skull, and he’s watching the way Breena’s kneeling at her feet and gently rubbing them, fingers long and smooth stroking up and down on Abby’s feet and ankles. (Tim’s current lack of interest in sex is not, in any way, shape, or form, contagious. Jimmy’s VERY interested in sex tonight. So, he’s paying as little attention as he possibly can to the guy just lying next to them.)

But, finally, the fact that Tim’s talking to him filters through the beautiful women in front of him, so he says, “Huh? What’s got you thinking of that?”

“Tony was asking about us.”

“Warming up to us, asking?” Breena asks.

Tim nods. “Maybe. We started off with him reminding me that Ziva’s off limits, and fortunately it got better from there.”

Abby turns her head to look at him, realize that all that does is give her a great view of Jimmy’s knee and thigh, so she returns her head to neutral and says, “He really said that?”

“Yes, he did. Mostly he was asking about us, but that was part of it, too.”

The girls laugh at that. “Marking his territory?” Breena asks.

“Yes,” Tim says dryly.

“And that got you wondering about me?” Jimmy asks, looking at Tim, lightly stroking Abby’s face. He’s very clearly trying to figure out how on earth Tim could have gotten from ‘Hands off Ziva’ to ‘What was Jimmy thinking?’

“Not the Ziva bit. We were in the car for like, four hours, so lots of talking, but he asked what we vowed each other, and... What were you thinking?”

Jimmy shrugs a little at that, and then kisses Abby. He crooks his finger at Breena, who leans up, palms on either side of Abby’s ribs, planking over her, and kisses him. She smiles at him, and kisses Abby before settling back onto her heels. “Just feeling it.”

Tim thinks for a good second about propping himself up on his elbow, so he can see everyone’s faces better, and then comes to the conclusion that that would require moving, and moving would involve pain, and that would be monumentally stupid, so he just asks, “No words? I... But... Okay...” He’s not sure how to get into this, but knows he wants to, finally he gets his thoughts organized. “I know we ragged on you a lot about your vows to Breena and... And if you didn’t say anything because of that, I’m sorry about it. Don’t want you feeling like you can’t be silly or goofy or sappy or whatever with us...” Of course, he’s never seen either of the girls give him any trouble
with that, so he amends it to, “with me.”

Jimmy reaches over and gently pets Tim’s face. Then he shakes his head. “Big. I said that. It feels big, and words are tiny, little things, and…” Jimmy’s looking at Breena, and she already knows this, maybe not spelled out, but she gets it, can’t not get it, not after all these years. “And the first time, I stuck every word I could think of together to try and come up with something big enough to go with how it felt. Didn’t do the job, wouldn’t have, even if Ducky hadn’t gotten me to pare it down from the original forty-five minutes.” He shrugs at that, too. “Call it older and wiser. Not embarrassed, just more aware.” He touches Tim and Abby, fingers lightly stroking over skin. Then he lifts his eyes to Breena. “There aren’t words for this, for what we have, what binds us to each other and our children. They’re all too small, too shallow, so… no words. Just a kiss, and the rest of my life living up to the joy this brings me.”

Tim blinks hard at that, feeling his eyes tear, (damn painkillers, and if it’s not because of them, he’s not touching that with a ten foot pole) he swallows hard, and squeezes Jimmy’s knee. Jimmy’s hand closes over his, and squeezes back.

Rainy day.

They wake up to the feel of Molly burrowing under the covers with them and the sound of absolutely pouring down rain.

Tim groans a bit at the idea of getting up. He didn’t sleep well. Too sore to get into deep sleep, and too much thunder made sure he’d jerk awake and have a hard time drifting off again. He thinks he got about six or seven half hour long naps interspersed with wakeful periods spent snuggling with Abby or Breena. (Abby’s in front of him; Breena’s at his back.)

He’s less sore now, and he’s not sure if that means the weather front has passed on enough to give all of his injuries a break, or if he’s had enough rest time since working yesterday, or what, but less sore is not the same thing as feeling good.

Molly’s chattering with Breena, (he thinks, could be Jimmy, probably not him) urging them up and out of bed. Tim feels lips on his forehead, and hears Breena say, “Okay, pregnant and achy, you two sleep in, we’ve got the girls.”

Jimmy doesn’t sound thrilled about that, but Tim doesn’t mind at all. He snuggles in a bit closer to Abby (who, from the feel of it, didn’t wake up at all) and drifts back to sleep.

Rain, rain, rain. It’s pattering against the roof, hard, pouring down from the sound of it. Tim doesn’t care, he’s feeling a lot less sleepy, not very achy, and very happily cocooned with a soft, snuggly woman under nubby, warm blankets.

His hand wanders to her belly, resting there, feeling her skin warm and stretched over their son. No movement, not yet. Little guy’s only seventeen weeks along, so he’s probably moving around all over the place in there, just not big enough to feel yet, but soon. By the end of the month they should be able to feel him.
Tim smiles, imagining Kelly and Molly with their hands pressed to Abby’s belly feeling Sean kicking and squirming about in there. He thinks Molly’s old enough to really get it, not sure about Kelly, and Anna absolutely won’t care at all.

“Feels like signs of life.”

He’s not sure if Abby’s talking about him or Sean. “Did I wake you?”

She sighs, stretching a bit, rubbing against him. “Nah, been up for a few minutes. Wasn’t sure if this was sleep snuggling or if you were up.”

“Do I do this in my sleep?”

“Snuggle close, cuddle me, pet Sean or Kelly?”

He nods, kissing her neck.

“Yeah, you do. You usually sleep with your hand between my breasts, when I’m pregnant, it’ll keep drifting down to my belly when you’re sleeping,” she rolls over as she says that, and he kisses her lips, then sits up and kisses her belly, lingering for a moment with his lips just below her navel.

She gently strokes his ear, neck, and shoulder and then says, “We should probably go down and help baby wrangle.”

He nods. “Yep. Get up, brush teeth, and then give them some off time.”

“Yeah.” Abby glances at the clock, and at Tim, who’s naked under those blankets, and is sitting next to her, cross-legged, blanket draped over him closely enough she can see that the part of him that checked out for last night’s festivities has woken up and would likely want some attention. She grins at him. “But they probably wouldn’t mind if we lingered up here for ten more minutes.”

Tim grins back as she’s getting up to hit the head. A minute later, she’s back in bed, under the covers with him. A second after that, she’s straddling his hips and kissing him. He scoots up a little, back against the headboard, his hands finding their usual spots.

Sweet kisses, soft motions, fast, soft gasps. It’s just ten good minutes, with each other. There’s something of a kick at doing this in Jimmy and Breena’s bed, while everyone else is awake, but mostly it’s a quick way to celebrate a morning where they both got to sleep in, with each other.

When they’re done, softly petting and snuggling in the afterglow, Tim says, “Think we’re going to breakfast this morning?”

Abby looks over her shoulder, finding the clock. “Would have left already. I think we’re just having a quiet rainy day at home.”

He kisses her, soft and wet, holding her face between his hands. “I like that.”

“Me, too.”

And that’s what it is. A quiet, rainy day at home. They don’t go out to breakfast, and they don’t go to church, or supper with the Slaters after.
When Kelly and Anna go down for morning nap, Jimmy and Breena catch a nap, too. They play with Molly, quiet, rainy day games of reading stories and watching some TV.

Tim sits on the sofa with Molly in his lap, both of them watching the Muppets, giggling at the vast wodge of silliness and singing along with Elton John to Crocodile Rock while Abby lays on the sofa with her head on Tim’s thigh, dozing.

Babies wake up, Jimmy and Breena keep snoozing. Tim and Abby and Molly go get them, and take Kelly and Anna downstairs for more rainy day playing.

It’s warm rain, so at one point when Molly and Kelly are getting a bit rammy, Abby grabs them and they go outside to splash in the puddles. Tim’s not thinking any of him wants to go play in the rain, but he gets video of Molly jumping in puddles while Abby holds Kelly’s hands and they bounce in them, too. Anna helps him get the video (which is how he ends up with shots of the blinds, and the curtains, and a tiny little hand, and his own nose, before he got his phone away from her) and they went back to playing with blocks.

Lunch isn’t fancy. Tim’s thinking it’s a good day for comfort food, and since Breena and Jimmy have bacon, cheddar, and bread, he makes bacon grilled cheese sandwiches while Abby gets tomato soup ready.

She cuts the crispy golden sandwiches into little triangles for the girls (Molly and Kelly decide they approve, scarfing them down) as the smell of food gets Jimmy and Breena moving.

“Good dreams?” Tim asks as they come and sit down. Abby sets soup in front of Jimmy, and one of the sandwiches in front of Breena.

Jimmy’s yawning, wide, and says, “Yeah.” He rubs his eyes. “Been way too long since we’ve done that.”

Breena pets his hand gently. “Weekend after next. All four of us can sleep in together for three mornings in a row.”

Abby sighs. “God, that sounds like heaven.”

Breena takes a bite of the sandwich. “This is good. Yours?” she asks Abby.

She shakes her head. “Tim’s.”

He inclines his head a bit. “Gran used to make these. Spent a few summers up at her place, and she’d make them on rainy summer days when we’d be stuck inside.” He takes a bite of his, smiling. “Not sure if she’d ever heard the term ‘low fat’ but every now and again…”

Jimmy looks at them, and then steals one of the little bites of sandwich from Kelly who shrieks at that, until she gets another piece back from Tim.

“I can make you one if you want one, just, didn’t think you would,” Tim says. Jimmy’s generally on an as few carbs as possible diet, and Tim doesn’t remember the last time he saw him eat an actual sandwich. Even when they do burgers, Jimmy eats his with a fork and knife and no bun.
Jimmy shakes his head, chewing thoughtfully. “No. Not a whole one. Just wanted a taste. Not quite the same. We’d be home for the summer, and mom would make us grilled cheese. Big glass of milk or Cherry Kool Aid, apple slices, Chips-a-hoy,” Tim smiles, remembering those, “bolt it down, and then out to play at the park.”

“You and Clark and your buddies?” Abby asks, taking a bite of hers.

Jimmy shakes his head. “Not Clark, even then we didn’t spend a lot of time together. Small apartment, shared a room, when we had a chance, we were on our own. I had my group of friends and he had his.”

Breena’s looking at the sandwich in front of her, dipping one corner in the soup, and eating it like that. “White bread, butter the sides, Velveeta in the middle, fry it up crispy. We did this, too.”

“I think everyone who grew up in the US did this. I bet Penny has stories of this,” Abby adds.

Tim shrugs. He doesn’t know that. Obviously at some time, Penny was a little kid, and home base for them was Boston, so… “No idea. Good question for next Shabbos. I know she was born in the ‘30s. So, she was a kid right before and during World War II. I can remember Gran and Pop talking about the past, but Penny was always more about the present and future.”

Breena smiles at that. “We really should ask her. I’m trying to image her, a little girl during the depression, all those older brothers and sisters… I bet she got told a lot about what she could and couldn’t do, and she just told them all to go to hell and did what she wanted to.”

Tim smiles back. “I’m sure there was some of that, but she also grew up Navy, and… I didn’t know my great grandfather, but I know Navy households, and no matter what Dad is in the actual Navy, he’s the Captain of his house. Her dad was an active combat battleship Captain, so I’m sure his house was run tight.”

“So, no lip from the eight-year-old who thinks having to wear skirts is stupid?” Jimmy asks.

“Can’t imagine it happened more than once. There weren’t a lot of rules at her place when I was little, but you didn’t set a toe out of line past them under penalty of a fate worse than death.”

“What would happen?” Abby asks, looking very curious.

“I have no idea. Too damn scared by just the idea to ever find out.”

“What kind of rules?” Jimmy asks.

Tim shrugs. “Normal stuff. You could make a mess, but you had to clean it up when you were done. They didn’t live in a house that had to be treated like a museum. No talking back. Any adult made a decision and that was that. If you wanted to run around, go outside. Pretty much the same sort of stuff we’ve got going on.” Tim thinks about it more. “Actually, I have no idea what she would have done if I’d broken the rules, I remember The Admiral telling me that I was going to behave, no matter what, so… I behaved.” Tim finishes up his sandwich and stands up, stretching out his shoulder and leg. “Anyone want another?”

“Me!” Molly says, sounding very certain about this.

Tim eyes Breena and she nods, quickly saying, “Half.”

So, Tim makes another grilled cheese and bacon sandwich.
Lunch wraps up, with an hour left until naptime, so there’s more playing with babies. Tim’s thinking about working on his hand rehab, while eyeing Jimmy’s X-box.

“Would you mind if I uploaded a game?”

Jimmy shrugs, he’s standing next to his sofa, Molly in front of him, holding his hands, working on climbing him and doing a flip. So far she’s doing okay on the climbing but hasn’t managed the flip.

So, Tim gets poking around and uploads Minecraft. For real rehabbing purposes he should probably be playing something that needs faster controls, but this requires the use of both left and right hands, it’s simple and bright enough that little girls might like it, and even if they don’t, he doesn’t have to worry about them hearing/seeing something they shouldn’t, which would be likely true if he got Jimmy playing Call of Duty with him.

“Minecraft?” Abby asks, plopping Kelly in his lap.

“How many controls do you have?” Tim asks.

“Just the two, why?” Jimmy says, drifting closer to the TV.

“You can get up to four people playing.”

“Are the graphics supposed to look like that?” Breena asks looking at the very square world of Minecraft.

“Yep,” Tim says, switching it into creative and picking a bunch of ores/woods/rocks in every color for his inventory. Then he carefully holds the controls in front of Kelly, putting her hand on the directional control, saying, “You pick where they go, and I’ll put the blocks down.”

Kelly didn’t seem to get that, until Tim started laying down lines of lapis, and then Kelly got the idea that she could basically scribble and draw and build with this, sort of. About half the time the screen was whipping around wildly, and half the time she was very carefully moving the control around to a new place for her daddy to stick blocks.

(And after a few minutes, Tim took her left hand in his and ‘helped’ her find places to put the blocks.)

Molly and Jimmy get in on that, too. So, while Anna works on her tummy time, the four grown-ups, and two very small girls, build a somewhat lopsided house, an extremely non-standard tower (six sides on the bottom, four in the middle, three on the top), and (once Tim showed it to her, Molly decided she really liked the TNT blocks) blew up three quarters of the map.

Tim would tell you that was a lot more fun than most of his other PT assignments.

It’s still raining come nap time. Tapering off some. Just a long, steady background drone to go with the very quiet vibe of a house full of sleeping babies.

Sleeping babies means playtime for adults, and they take advantage of it.
Something about a rainy day makes everyone feel sleepy and lazy, so playtime is sleepy and lazy, too. Soft, gentle touches as rain patters down. Slow caresses and cuddling bodies in the dull gray light of storm-filtered sun.

They’re quiet, dozing and petting in the afterglow, when Jimmy says, “My mom would call a day like this a ‘beautiful rainy day.’”

Breena, whose head is on his thigh, her legs across Tim and Abby’s hips, giggles a little at that idea. “Don’t think this is what she was envisioning.”

Jimmy’s hand strokes her hair. “God, I hope not. Still…”

Abby might be asleep. Her eyes are closed, and she’s breathing easily. Tim’s behind her. He props himself up on his elbow (tentatively, but it doesn’t yell at him, so he stays there), then he kisses Abby’s ear, and squeezes Breena’s knee. “It’s a beautiful rainy day, at home, with our family.”

Eventually, Molly comes in and finds them in bed, Abby asleep, the other three resting and petting and cuddling, talking quietly to each other about not much of anything. Molly’s a little confused by that. She’s looking intently at them, wondering why the grown-ups are in bed this time of day.

“She’s a beautiful rainy day, at home, with our family. And he’s a beautiful rainy day, too.”

“Sometime when we get grumpy, it’s because we haven’t had our naps,” Breena says to Molly, who has heard, “Nap time Little Miss Grumpy,” aimed at her more than a few times.

Breena and Tim are also pulling themselves out, Tim more carefully than Breena because his arm had been on pillow duty for Abby. “Aunt Abby’s still napping.”

Abby yawns and makes a content sound. “I’m awake.” She pulls Molly into a hug, and then puts her hands on her belly. “Your little cousin Sean’s in here, and he’s getting a nap.”

Molly’s eyes narrow. Abby knows that look, it’s the one she gets when she doesn’t necessarily believe something but doesn’t know how to express that.

“He’s a tiny, tiny little baby right now, and he sleeps almost all the time in there.”

Molly pokes Abby’s tummy. “Wake up!”

Abby nods. “A few more months and he’ll be awake and kicking, and you’ll get to feel him moving around in there. Maybe you’ll get to see it.”

“See it?”

“Yeah. When babies are on the inside, they move around, and sometimes you can see them moving around. Did you know your Mommy has video of you and Anna moving around when you were
still inside her tummy?"

Molly’s very intrigued by that, and home movie watching eats up the time between nap and dinner.

But even beautiful rainy days end.

It’s been a long time since Tim’s regretted leaving somewhere. It happens, but it’s rare.

But right now, as they’re finally venturing out, putting Kelly in her car seat and getting ready to go home, he doesn’t want to leave Jimmy and Breena.

He wants to put girls to bed and lay around with Jimmy and Breena and Abby. They probably wouldn’t have sex again, at least he’s not feeling any urge in that direction, but maybe they’d watch a movie or play Call of Duty, or just sit around and be in the same room and do their own somethings.

They’d be home, that’s what they’d be.

And right now, as he’s kissing Breena and the girls goodbye, he’s intensely feeling the bittersweet of this arrangement, how their home is split in two, and how much he’s looking forward to the day when it won’t be split any longer.

Until then, he’ll cherish his beautiful rainy days.
Tim sets his earphone/microphone headset in place. “You here?” he asks his sister as he settles in front of his computer.

“Just about,” Sarah’s voice comes back. “Two more minutes.”

“Not a problem.”

He waits, sips the iced-tea he poured before heading into his office, and adjusts and readjusts his keyboard. Not like there’s any place he can put it that’ll be easier on his hand, but… He’s waiting and stuff like this tends to go with waiting.

She’d asked, a while ago, what, if anything, she could do to help with him getting healed back up, and here it is: Halo. He’s not nearly nimble enough with his right hand to play with anyone who wants to win, but, she’s willing to play with him, and Jimmy’s prescribed gaming time, so…

“And back,” he hears through his headset. She’s at her place, at her gaming computer, getting ready to go.

“Great.”

“Just had a few details to nail down before hitting send on that email.”

Tim nods. “Know all about that.”

“Yeah, I bet you do. So…”

He sees her pop up on his screen. “I’ve got you. On your six. Okay, let’s go.” And off they go.

What he really wants to do is cheat. He can customize his keyboard so that just about everything is set for his left hand. That’s how he starts with every game. He gets it, resets it for the fact he’s a lefty, and goes from there.

But, as annoying getting killed (and worse, Sarah getting killed because he’s not fast enough to cover her properly) is, he’s not rekeying the game. His right hand has to keep working, or he’s never going to get it fully back.

“You’re getting better,” Sarah says as he’s able to get in there at the last second and blast a ton of aliens off of her.

“Not as good as I was.”

“Nope.” He can hear the smile in her voice. “But you’ll get there, and in the meantime, I’ll save your ass.”

“Yeah, thanks. Nothing I love more than being the damsel…” He sees the explosion on the far side of his screen. She’s fragged something that had him in sight. “Thanks. Case in point.”

“No problem. So, down the hall, then to the left?”

“Yeah.” He likes that plan. “I’m moving up, you cover me?”

“Got you.”
He can only go for half an hour before his hand really starts to ache. They get to a save point and he says, “Okay, and that’s it for me. I’ve got to bow out.”

“Better than last time. Jimmy’s really helping with this, isn’t he?”

“Yeah. A lot.” Tim knows that Abby asked Sarah to watch Kelly for a long weekend and that she agreed, but he also knows that she didn’t tell Sarah what they were doing on that long weekend or what’s going on with the four of them. He glances at the clock, it’s a bit before 8:30.

“So, what’s he doing? Some sort of PT magic? Glenn ripped up his shoulder two years ago, and he didn’t bounce back nearly this fast.”

There’s an opening. “You want to get a drink or dessert and talk face to face?”

He can feel her expression, kind of puzzled, PT isn’t a face to face conversation. “Do I? I’m already in my jammies.”

“You live in your jammies.”

He can imagine the look on her face as she says, “Like you wouldn’t if you were a full-time writer?”

Tim looks at himself, in the flannel drawstring pants and t-shirt he changed into as soon as they got home. “Good point. How about I’ll bring the drinks to you.”

“Tim…” He can feel her wariness.

“Nothing bad. Just want to chat face to face, not over the line.”

“Okay…”

“You going out?” Abby asks as Tim emerges from his office.

“Yeah. Going to have a talk with Sarah.”

Abby nods, smiling at that. She’s sitting on the sofa, reading, keeping up to date on the latest in mass spectrometer calibrations. “Not a phone conversation?”

“Apparently not. I started to try and… Nope, gotta do it face to face.” He heads upstairs, and is down a few minutes later. “You have any sterile swabs?”

The look Abby flashes him could best be described as, of course. “Sounds like you’ve got some things to ask her, too.”

Tim nods at that, too.

“I keep a few in my purse.”

“Great.” He heads into the kitchen, finds Abby’s purse, digs around for a moment, and finds her zip lock baggy that has gloves, scissors, swabs, two evidence bags, a tiny little black light, and an ounce squirt bottle of luminol. “You really are prepared for everything, aren’t you?”
“Like you don’t have all of that in the glove compartment.”

Tim shrugs. She’s right about that. And, though he’s changed most of what’s in his go bag these
days, he does have basic tools in there.

“So, you going to ask for DNA?” Abby asks.

“Maybe. Want to be ready if I do. I am curious. And… she took all the same basic science classes I
did, so she’s got to have noticed the brown eyes, too. Maybe she’d like to know.”

“Maybe.” Abby shrugs. Given the McGee brains and propensity for secrets, Abby thinks it’s
possible that Sarah already does know. “Of course, for all you know, she’s already checked it out.
Or talked to your mom or The Admiral about it.”

Tim inclines his head. That strikes him as a solid possibility. “Maybe. Lots to cover.” He leans down
and kisses Abby. “Don’t wait up.”

“I won’t.” She smiles up at him. “Wake me up nice tomorrow morning?”

He kisses her again, softer, slower, promising a good morning. “You know it.”

It’s been a while since he did this. Best he can recall, the last time he dropped by Sarah’s place,
bearing milkshakes, it was her senior year, and she was having a hard time with her senior project
(write a novel) so he showed up with piles of sugary caffeine for both of them, and then they read
through and beat her final draft into shape.

That final draft was good enough that she was able to sell it. She’s been writing since, and, though
he’s read many a draft of hers (and vice versa) this sort of head over to pow wow’s been pretty rare.

She moved to New York after graduation, which made confabbing in person more difficult, and it’s
not exactly like he’s had the sort of schedule where he was just rolling in piles of free time.

But, he’s thinking, they should do stuff like this more often. And, at least when it’s at his place, she
should have a standing invite to Shabbos. Penny’s already there, might as well have her and Glenn
come, too.

At least, assuming this conversation goes the way he hopes it does.

It has to. Okay, maybe not the stuff about the Admiral, but about him and Abby and Jimmy and
Breena, that’s got to go right.

He hopes.

“You know, it’s really hard to trust in the idea that this is just a happy little get together when you
show up with shakes,” Sarah says as she opens the door, looking at him holding the cups.

Tim stretches out the cup containing a chocolate strawberry malt with whipped cream on top. “Really, nothing bad, just want to talk.”

She raises an eyebrow at him, but takes the drink, leading them into the apartment she shares with Glenn. “You’re in your jammies, too.” She eyes his t-shirt and flannel pants.

“Don’t see much reason to stay in my work clothing when I get home. Especially with a one-year-old, who is not the tidiest person on earth, in the mix.” Tim eyes a suspicious stain on his pants, which he hopes is part of Kelly’s dinner.

Sarah sees him do it, smiles, and takes a sip of her shake, as he gets himself settled on the sofa next to her, with his. (Strawberry banana smoothie. Scale’s creeping up again, and he’s still not set to really exercise… so… sigh, last of anything like this for a while.)

“So… what’s up?”

He smiles at her. “Lot of things.” He holds up his right hand. “No more cast.”

She nods, looking at his hand, taking it, gently, in hers and checking it over. Too small, too thin, more scars than he’d like, but at least it’s not in a cast any longer. “Somehow I’m doubting you’re here to tell me that.” She doesn’t squeeze his hand but does stroke the back of it.

“Yeah. I’m not. Okay….”

She’s watching him carefully, and says, bit of sarcasm in her voice, “Yeah, this feels like good news.”

“It is… just…” Like with telling Vance or Tony, this feels really odd to just whip out. “hard to get into cold. Okay, you and Glenn have Kelly weekend after next.”

“Yes. Abby said she wanted to make sure you two got some together time before Sean joins the party.”

“And that’s true, but… not just Abby and I. You remember Jimmy and Breena?”

Sarah nods. They’ve met a few times. She likes them. Tim’s talked about them, and how Jimmy’s been working on his hand and shoulder. She knows they’re dear friends. She was there to see Jimmy and Breena stand up with Abby at their wedding, and watched them stand up with them again at Kelly’s baptism.

“We’re way more than just friends. It’s our, the four of us, honeymoon.”

Sarah stares at him, takes a sip of her drink, looks him over top to bottom, and then nods. Then she laughs. This doesn’t feel like Leon laughing. He doesn’t get any sense of laugh or curse, more this is just funny.

His eyebrow raises up.

“You ask me to babysit for your honeymoon, and I don’t get invited to the wedding?” she says, mock appalled.

He licks his lip and then says, “It was private.”

“Oh, I’ll bet.” She giggles and elbows him, letting him know she’s got an awfully good idea of how
that wedding went.

He rolls his eyes a bit and then laughs, too.

“So, you’re what, bi?” she asks, very curious, once she stops giggling. “I mean, I knew about Abby, I’ve seen her check girls our, but… I’ve never seen you check a guy out.”

“Because I don’t.”

“Oh, swapping?” she says, still curious, but no condemnation at all.

“No. It’s… I love them. They love us. But Jimmy and I don’t want to have sex with each other.”

Sarah takes that calm as can be. “But you love him?”

“Yeah.” This doesn’t feel like talking with Tony, at all. She’s curious and reboxing, too, but the there’s no sense of disgust or discomfort, just… relabeling.

She’s leaning in toward him, intensely watching him as she asks, “Really love him, not he’s just a very dear friend who loves your wife and you love his?”

He can feel she’s going somewhere with this, but he’s not sure where. “Yeah. I love him. I love Breena, too. I love Abby, and all of our kids.”

“I know that… Okay, assume that… That part is easy to put together. Jimmy’s the fuzzy bit.”

Tim nods, sees how she’s working on resetting things.

“Yeah. I love him. I’ve got two wives and a husband. It’s all of us together emotionally and not quite as much physically.”

Sarah nods at that and says, “Heterosexual biromantic.”

Tim squints. “I don’t know what that means.” Yes, he can sort of figure it out based on context, but he wants more than just his idea of what she might be trying to convey.

She smiles at him. “Sexual preference and romantic preference don’t always match up. They usually do, but not always. You want to have sex with women, you fall in love with anyone.” She pauses for a second and adds, “Okay, maybe not anyone, technically that’s panromantic, and bi just means any two genders.”

Tim blinks. “Okay, I know you and Penny and Abby are up on this, but I’m still from the land of ‘there only are two genders.’”

Sarah’s about to get into that, the shakes her head, now doesn’t strike her as an apt time for an intense conversation about sexuality, preference, and gender.

“You watch BBC Sherlock, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Watson loves Sherlock, they live together, work together, enjoy each other, would die for each other, but he doesn’t want to have sex with him.”

Tim nods, that matches his view of the character.
“He loves Mary, too and wants to have sex with her.”

Tim’s still nodding.

“Heterosexual biromantic. Just like House and Wilson, or Kirk and Spock…”

“Frodo and Sam?” he says.

“Sure. Though I think they played up the romantic bit for those two in the movie more than in the books. Hell, for all I, or anyone else knows, Frodo might be gay, but we know Sam at the very least had a wife and kids.”

“Dean and Castiel?”

Sarah shakes her head. “Eh… Not buying that one until the last episode is out and nothing happens. Dean’s a little too flirty with his eyes for me to be completely comfortable putting him in the straight camp. But, you get the idea. Harry and Ron.”

“Harry and Ron?”

“It wasn’t Ginny who got taken during the TriWizard Tournament. It wasn’t Ginny who went on the Horcrux hunt.”

Tim holds up his hands. “I’ll suggest you’ve read more fan fic than I have, without arguing that you’re wrong.”

She laughs at that.

Tim leans over and kisses Sarah’s cheek. “Thanks.”

“Feeling happier with a tidy, little label?”

He sighs, rolling his eyes a little at that. “Yeah. It’s stupid, but…”

“No, it’s not. Even people who claim to not like labels go out of their way to find them. Besides, how can you know something if you can’t find words to describe it, and how can you share it with anyone else if you can’t explain it to yourself?”

And this is why Tim loves having a writer for a sister.

“So who knows?” Sarah’s watching him with a lot of interest, wondering how much drama this is causing. “Penny and Ducky, of course. Gibbs? Is he on the warpath? Did Penny have to smack him again?”

Tim wasn’t aware that Sarah knew about that less-than-shining moment in their personal history.

“Penny tell you about that?”

“Yeah, that you and he were just about to smother Abby you were so scared.”

“Ah…” Well, that’s actually a pretty accurate description of what was happening, so it’s not like he can quibble about it. “And no, Gibbs did not require smacking. We started talking about it a long time ago, and he’s been supportive.”

Sarah looks significantly more shocked by that than the idea that her brother’s part of a foursome.

“Wow! I would have thought he’d be all ‘Mess around on my girl and I’ll cut your balls off’ with a
side of Marine induce homophobia.”

“He’s not like that, at all. And if I was messing around on his girl, he would cut my balls off. That’s part of the deal. We hold each other accountable. But, that’s not what’s going on.”

“Sure. I know that.” And this is why Tim loves having a sister who writes and edits what he thinks are oddball paranormal romances is worth its weight in gold. After all those popular love triangles where the fans fight tooth and nail over who really loves whom, her brand just let all three of them get together with each other. That seems to make fans happy. “I didn’t think he’d be able to parse it.”

“Tony’s having a tough time with it, but I think he’s going to come around. The rest of the crew’s seen the four of us together enough to know we’re okay.”

“Good. And, you are okay, right?”

“Yeah, we are. We… It’s good, Sarah.”

“You’re not…” she’s thinking, getting ready to pick her words carefully.

“What?”

“Sending Dad a big FUCK YOU, with this.”

That stops Tim cold for a second. It’s a thought that’s been nowhere near his mind. Finally he says, “It’s not that I don’t want to do that. I do. And there are a lot of different ways I’d like to do that. But I’m not so pissed at him as to kill my marriage, and my family, and my relationship with my best friends for a symbolic gesture he’ll never see.”

She nods. “So, congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

“What happens now?”

So he starts filling her in on the details. That’s about ten minutes of back and forth, covering everything, and then she says, “So… Okay, you don’t want to tell Mom, I get that, but… Look, you want a wedding invite with a plus three, that’s no problem for me. Wedding’s going to be huge, two more isn’t a problem. A lot of my writers are coming, and you guys wouldn’t be the only poly family there.”

He supposes this shouldn’t be in any way shocking to him. He’s seen the stuff she writes and publishes, so… okay, his mysteries were all based on his real life, so… other writers have to do that, too, right? Still, the idea of not being the only ones seems… almost odd. Kind of reassuring, but, still, odd. Then another thought hits.

“Isn’t Glenn’s family full of really traditional people?”

“Yeah.” Sarah’s eyes roll. “It’ll be interesting. They’re already starting to get fussy about you giving me away instead of Dad, and they’ve been moping about the lack of a church since they found out, but… Not their wedding. They can come or not as they see fit, and if they’re going to make a scene, they can leave.”

Tim sighs at that. “How can you possibly be this calm?”

Sarah smiles. “Maybe I am, maybe I’m not, but I’ll be damned if they ever see anything but that
calm.”

“Ah.” Tim nods. *The Admiral’s Daughter.* He looks at her eyes. *Or not.* “A plus three would be great, but… between Mom being there, and Sean’ll still be very little. We’re going to be tired and tense, and I don’t need more drama on top of that.”

Sarah smiles. “I get that. I’m inviting them anyway. Because you’re going to be tired, and it’s going to be tense, and having people who love and support you nearby, even if they’re not being physically demonstrative, is a good thing. Just because they’re there, doesn’t mean you’ve got to be tongue kissing Jimmy after the toast.”

“We really don’t do that!”

“Uh huh.” Just like Penny, she’s giving Tim the *give it time* look.

“Penny shot me that same look. I’m not bi!”

“And, I don’t think you are. I don’t think you’re ever going to be. At least, I don’t think it’s a switch that turns on and off. I think, at least this is how the people I know who are involved in this work, is that you’ll probably never prefer him sexually to the girls, but you can’t spend that much time and that much intimacy with someone else and not have it expand past strict heterosexual lines. Something happy happens, you kiss the girls, you’re not going to suddenly pull back and just pat him. Especially not after years of this. Seriously, how much time can you spend naked in bed with someone else and *never* touch them? It’s just not going to happen like that.”

That also makes a ton of sense to Tim and seems to be matching more of what happens with the two of them with the cuddling stuff. “Okay. Yeah. I get that. Still not happening at your wedding.”

“And it doesn’t need to. But feeling like you’ve got a support team in place is a good thing, right?”

Tim nods.

“And, you know, your family is always welcome with mine. We’ve got enough crap in our collective family closet, we don’t make more of it for each other, right?”

“Yeah, it is. No matter what, we’re family, and so are those we love.”

Sarah nods along with that.

“You really mean that?”

“Yes, I really mean it.”

“Might end up with a niece or nephew you’ve got no DNA in common with.”

Sarah shrugs, supremely unconcerned by that, but also looking very slightly confused. “If you’re good with it, and Abby’s good with it, and Jimmy and Breena are, too, I don’t see any reason why I’d fuss. Any child you slap a McGee on is my niece or nephew.”

Tim nods at her. “Yeah.” He squeezes her hand. That feels *very* good. “We were talking about it, and how maybe some of my McGees might have hazel eyes or curly brown hair…” He stares at her, willing her to bring it up, but she just waits. “You’ve got brown eyes.”

Sarah nods, slightly confused moving to moderately confused. “Yep. All my life.”

“None of the rest of us do.”
“I’ve got a cleft chin, too.” She gently touches the slight dimple in question while staring at Tim, still confused. “Dad says I look a lot like my mother.”


Now Sarah’s looking completely confused. “You didn’t know that? You were there, right? When I was born?”

“Yeah, I was there. Mom was pregnant. Then she went to the hospital, Gran stayed with me for two days, and then you and Mom and Pop came home.”

Now Sarah’s looking less confused. “No one ever told you…”

“Told me what? I was figuring Mom had a…” he pauses and looks at her, “friend… What version do you have?”

Sarah snorts at that. “Please, if Mom had had a friend that resulted in a kid who looked like me, he’d have divorced her before I could walk!” Tim nods, that’s part of why this is confusing to him. Sarah continues on with, “Mom miscarried a lot.”

“Penny told me that, but I was too young to remember it.”

“They really wanted another baby. Dad had a junior officer who found herself pregnant, and rather than her resigning her commission, she took a six month long ‘top secret assignment,’ and I ended up with you guys.”

Tim’s staring at his sister with eyes wide and mouth open. Finally, he gets thinking again. “Do you know her?”

Sarah shakes her head. “No. I don’t know her name or anything. I kind of feel like it’d almost be a slap to Mom to find out, you know?”

“Uh… shit… yeah. Good God… Gran and Pop went along with this…”

Sarah shrugs. “No idea.”

“They must have. Pop brought you two ‘home from the hospital.’ Penny doesn’t know.”

“Dad said they told as few people as possible. My birth certificate has Mom’s name on it, if I had to guess she delivered using Mom’s name and… Next thing you know Mom’s got me, and she’s got another baby, and you’ve got a sister and…”

“And that’s insane. Mom was pregnant!”

“You ever see her tummy?”

“Okay. No… And she didn’t nurse you… And I didn’t get to go to the hospital to see you and her there, but…” Tim sits there looking shocked. Finally he says, “So, what, you just asked him one day?”

“Yeah. Five years ago? Something like that. I asked if I was adopted. He blustered some, and finally gave me the story.”

Tim’s blinking, slowly. “Wow. Uh…” He swallows hard, lots of feeling swirling around him right now, but uppermost of them is even more rage aimed at The Admiral. “Not that… shit… I love you, and you’re my sister, and… but fuck, I want to go slap him even more now for putting Mom through
that.”

Now Sarah’s looking confused. “Putting Mom through…”

“He’s your Dad, right? He wouldn’t do that out of the goodness of his heart.”

“Uh… not according to the story I got. He was her commanding officer. She was Catholic. An abortion wasn’t an option. He was on a research ship then, she was very good at her job, something with computers, and he didn’t want to lose her. Not like they let single moms ship out in the mid-’80s. They worked something out where everyone was happy. You don’t think… I mean… Would Mom have gone along with that? Or Gran or Pop?”

“I’m sure they got the same story you did, but… Would they have believed it? Do you believe it?”

Sarah shrugs again. She’s fairly sure their father is gay, and that their mom is the only woman he’s ever had sex with, but that’s not the conclusion Tim’s coming to, and whether John is or is not gay, is probably not anything they need to get into.

Tim reaches into his pocket and pulls out the swab. “I was thinking… wrong apparently… that we had the same Mom, and… you know, if you wanted to do a DNA test.”

Sarah shrugs at that.

“I can find her. Assuming The Admiral wasn’t lying about her being in the Navy. As long as she was still there after ’91 when they started building the service database. I’ve got access, wouldn’t take more than a few minutes.”

Sarah shakes her head. “I know you’re not loving her right now, but… Mom’s my mom. And we’re both not loving him now, but he’s our dad.”

“Great.” Tim tucks the swab back, thinking. “How many other half-brothers and sisters do you think we’ve got?”

Sarah raises an eyebrow at him. “Do you really want to know?”

“Eh… In a kind of sick fascination sort of way. Not like I want to go find them and start inviting them to Sunday dinner.”

Sarah shrugs. “I don’t think we need to know. Honestly, I don’t want to. Part of not doing the 23 & Me thing. I mean… Before you, all the guys in our family are sailors. They were all on active duty and away from home for years at a time. How many half-siblings, half-aunts-and-uncles, second cousins, and on and on do we really want to find out about?”

Tim winces. “You think Nelson…”

Sarah shakes her head vehemently. “Not touching that. But, he and Penny didn’t get married until after World War II, who knows what he got up to when he was out there? Pop had the same basic story. Single guy on the other side of the world for years on end. I don’t know, and I don’t need to.”

Tim sighs. “Good point.”

They sit there silently for a few minutes and then Sarah grins at him. “So, got anything fun planned for your second honeymoon?”

Tim arches an eyebrow at her and says, very dryly, “Yes.”
“Gonna tell me about it?” she says with a grin, then sips her shake.

“No. Just like I’m not asking about what you and Glenn have planned for yours.”

She laughs at that. “How about where?”

Tim shrugs. “The girls are surprising us. We’ve got to stay close enough so if something goes wrong we can get back to work in a few hours, but… That’s anywhere from Philly to Norfolk.”

“Cool.”

“How about you guys? How’s wedding planning going? Mom and…” he flails around for Glenn’s mom’s name, he knows she’s mentioned it, but he’s not bringing it up, “Glenn’s mom, driving you buggy?”

Sarah looks at him, kind of tentatively. “Do you really want to know? I mean, about Mom?”

He opens and closes his mouth and licks his lips. “Uh… Yeah.” He rubs his fingers over his right hand, feeling the scars and the spots where the bones protrude under too thin skin. “One thing Ducky said to me, a long time ago, was no matter what happens with me and Mom, that getting to the point where I can be useful and supportive of your relationship with your Mom is a good thing. So… sure, how’s it going?”

“Really well. Uh… she’s wishing we’d do it later, so there’s no shot of snow or ice.”

“Your wedding’s in late March. I know she’s been in Texas for a while, but…”

“She’s got this weird idea that there’ll be some sort of freak blizzard or something, and if we wait until April or May…”

Tim nods. “Visions of spring flowers in her mind as well?”

“Probably. She approves of you giving me away.”

He smiles at that.

“And she’s glad Dad won’t be there. She’s…” Tim starts shaking his head, that’s too much him and Mom, and he doesn’t have the distance he needs for that. Sarah changes tracks. “She’s trying to get me to go for a ‘normal’ wedding dress.”

“Abby says the one you’ve picked is beautiful.”

“Yeah. I think so, too. But she wants something more ‘formal,’ less ‘hippie.’”

Tim inclines his head at that. He hasn’t seen the dress. But he knows this is not going to be a tux and tails event. “Yeah, well, not her wedding. She got to pick her dress both times, you get to pick yours. She giving you any flack about not doing it in a church?”

“Nah. She’s okay with doing it all at the hotel. Dorthy’s,” Glenn’s mom, “flipping out about the lack of church, and they’re both not thrilled about the Quaker ceremony; they wish we had a Justice of the Peace or something.”

Tim rolls his eyes a little. “Someone to say some magic words?”

“Something like that,” she says dryly.
He wraps his arm around her and gives her a little squeeze. “The only words that matter are in you and him. The rest of it’s just ceremony for the sake of ceremony.”

“I know! They’re both worried it’s not really real if it doesn’t get overseen by someone else.”

Tim rolls his eyes a bit. “Mom give Penny any crap on that?”

Sarah shrugs, and then laughs at the idea of what would happen to anyone who tries to give Penny crap about anything. “If she did, I haven’t heard about it. No officiant, that’s how Duck and Penny did it, right?”

“Just swooped in, he asked, she said yes, ‘look, rings!,’ and off to wherever their honeymoon was they went. Ten minutes, beginning to end, and all the rest of us stood there like dorks while our wives looked at us and more or less made sure we all knew we were never, ever going to be that cool.”

Sarah laughs at that, too. “It’s good to have goals.”

Tim nods. “Yep. Give me another forty years, and I’ll be the little old guy with the fedora and tattoos rocking my ladies’ worlds.”

“One on each arm, right?”

Tim likes that image. “You know it.”

She shoves him gently and takes another sip of her milkshake. “So, you really want to hear more about wedding planning?”

He wiggles his hand a bit, indicating, sort of. He’s not interested in flower arranging or napkin colors. “This, I don’t get, if there’s no Minister or Justice of the Peace, who am I giving you away to? How’s that work?”

“Okay, so, here’s how we’re going to do this…”

Brother and Sister
Penny and Ducky are driving home from more ‘fundraising’ when Ducky sees… whoever it is. Someone. Big someone. Standing on their front step. It's full dark, and their porch light is above and behind the man, so all he can see is the shadow of someone tall, leaning against their front door.

Someone they are not expecting. Someone who has not called first.

Whoever it is, sends all of Ducky's red alert sensors into overdrive. "You know, my dear, I was just thinking that we could use a treat."

Penny's not really paying attention to that. She's looking at her phone, sending a text to Madeline Lefrendu, a French NGO expert who’s been working on keeping a school going outside of Kuchlak for the last two years. She says something like, "Mmmm…" while Ducky whips them through their parking lot, looking for a car that's out of place, but not seeing one.

There's a small café a few blocks from their home, which is where they usually go if they're hunting for a "treat." They make excellent coffee, wonderful pastries, an absolutely to die for chai latte, and they’re open ‘til midnight. They probably have a late night snack there at least twice a week.

Which is why he's driving right past it, into the parking lot of the "garish" and "vulgar" TGIMcFunsters two streets over, where they have not only never eaten, but Ducky wouldn't ever voluntarily enter unless it was to pick up a body.

Penny notices that they are in the wrong place when they've stopped, and Ducky is dialing, very quickly, on his cell phone.

She's looking at him with a lot of curiosity in her eyes.

"I saw a man standing on our front step who I didn't recognize. I've had too many ghosts pop up to just walk into a situation like that."

Penny nods at that. "Why didn't you say anything?"

The real reason was that Ducky didn't want any shot of Penny deciding she needed to charge on in and take care of matters herself. The answer he comes up with is, "If they had a directional microphone on our car, I didn't want there to be any chance of them deciding to follow us, or to have whoever it is run away."

She doesn't look like she completely believes that, but it's not completely implausible, so she doesn't argue.

"Anthony!" Ducky's eyes light up as Tony picks up the phone. "We have something of a situation at our home…” Ducky rapidly fills Tony in on what's going on.

“T've got it Ducky," Tony says, rapidly swinging through a fast u-turn as soon as he can. “You and
Penny sit tight, and I’ll check it out. If you don’t hear from me in twenty minutes, give Zi… Gi… Borin a call and send in the cavalry, okay?” He stutters over his choices, but, if it’s going to be a fight he doesn’t want Ziva in it, not any more. Jethro shouldn’t be in it. Tim’s not on the lineup any more, and even if he was, he’s still too hurt, and he doesn’t have the kind of relationship with Draga or Bishop where he calls them up after hours to do favors for his family.

“Certainly, Anthony.”

“I’ll let you know what I find.”

Ten minutes later, he’s less than a mile from Penny and Ducky's place. Their home is a condo, in a block of condos. Ten total, in a rectangle five long, two wide. Parking lots on the east and west sides, roads to more parking and other blocks north and south. Their home is in the middle of their block. Ducky would have preferred a corner lot, but none of them were open, and he did like the amenities and neighborhood, so he was willing to accept neighbors on three sides. After all, it wasn't (when he bought) like he was home much.

Tony eyes it and comes up with a plan. He circles around once, and sees whoever it is that’s made Ducky nervous. There is certainly a big guy standing around in his doorway, lounging about, reading something on his phone from the looks of it. Light from his phone reflected on his face shows Tony he’s older, and even lounging his posture looks military. Tony’s not getting any sort of danger vibe, but he’s also just driving by.

He circles the block of condos, and then parks just out of sight before he starts trekking toward the guy.

It doesn't take long to close in on the mystery man on Penny's door. He seems mildly surprised to see someone he doesn’t know coming up on him, staring at him intently. Once he realizes that Tony’s not just walking by, he’s straightening up, reaching for the gun that he likely normally wears, but isn't today.

Tony sees that, and the posture, and says, "Special Agent Tony DiNozzo," showing his badge. "What are you doing lurking here?"

The man realizes he's not wearing his usual piece, and that he must have looked suspicious to someone. He makes sure his hands are visible and that he's projecting nothing threatening. He's probably in his mid-fifties, posture's too straight and still for a civilian, hair's too long for a Marine. He's wearing jeans, a Hawaiian shirt, and sandals. He's rumpled and has a go bag at his feet. He's been traveling.

He smiles at Tony, tilts his head, looking slightly irked as one eyebrow raises and he sighs a bit, pulling his ID out, shaking his head slightly. The resemblance is... not uncanny, but it’s very strong. Tony knows, roughly, who this has to be. He's one of two guys, but he don't know which one.

"Captain Michael McGee." He says with an Australian accent as he shows them his ID. "I was hoping to pay a visit to my mom. Now, why is Special Agent Tony DiNozzo about to shoot me for trying to do that?" Mike stares at him for a moment, and then who Tony is clicks. "You're Ducky's family, right?"

"Yeah." Tony says as he grabs his phone to text Ducky. "He saw you loitering, drove on, and called me to check you out."

Mike nods, approving.
"Wanna tell me why you didn't call first? Duck's old, but his instincts are still sharp, and there's no way he's ever bringing Penny home if there's someone he doesn't recognize sitting on the front stoop."

Michael sighs again, licking his lip. "Long story short," he holds up his phone, "this damn thing is only good for games right now. I'm not really supposed to be here, was supposed to go straight to Norfolk, but we stopped at Andrews. I'm here for the night, thought I'd stop by. Just got in about an hour ago. No one was home, so I settled in to wait."

They hear the purr of Ducky's Morgan, and a minute later Penny's hugging Mike.

Ducky nods to Tony. "Thank you for checking it out for me."

"No problem, Duck," Tony says. "A lot of our cases wouldn't be cases if more people had the good sense not to walk into strangers waiting around for them."

Ducky nods, and sees his wife and her son, hugging each other, and then gently gets them heading inside.

Michael McGee, once in the light, looks exhausted. And he's got the story to go with it. "So, I'm in charge of an evac exercise," he says once Penny has him sitting on their sofa, asking why he's here.

Ducky's busying himself making tea, mostly staying out of the way, once he's got water on and tea in cups, he'll come out and sit next to Penny, but for right this second he's looking through the doorway that separates their kitchen/dining area from the living room.

"She's told you I run security for the US Consulate in Canberra?" Mike asks Ducky.

Ducky nods. He's never met Michael or Thomas, Penny's two younger boys. He's talked to them on the phone and exchanged emails, but no face to face time. He is, however, feeling a bit silly that he didn't recognize Michael from the pictures he's seen.

"So, I'm in charge of the evac, and all's going great, which should be a hint that the shit's about to hit the fan. I've got my guys and our full diplomatic team moving, into the heilos, and the Ambassador is way less than thrilled about this, because I'm making him skip all of his appointments, running it like an actual evac."

Penny nods along. Technically she's not cleared for any of this, but all of the McGee boys grew up in a house where Dad wasn't afraid to talk to Mom about anything. And if The Admiral kept Mom in the loop, they've got no problems with it, too.

"We're in the air, full delegation and all of my security guys, when I find out the carrier we're supposed to be landing on isn't there. I'm the asshole in the air with fifty guys and three helicopters and nowhere to land, the Ambassador's on my ass like a wet Speedo because he's missing a meeting with the Prime Minister, and there's nothing but the deep blue below us.

"I finally get it sorted, get us down, back at the Embassy, and it turns out some maniac thought this would be a just spiffy cyber security attack, and now I'm here, because I've got to go all the way to Norfolk to talk to the asshole in charge of this fiasco."

Penny's not sure if she should laugh or cry. Part of this is just genuinely funny. Part of it is that she can't think about Tim's test without thinking about how the first one went.
“Or, you just could have called me.”

“Mom?”

Ducky looks at Michael as he's pouring water into his tea pot to let the tea steep. He listens to Penny describe Tim’s test, though his focus is on Michael.

Ducky's well aware of the fact that it is extremely unlikely that he will be alive to see what Timothy looks like in his fifties. It's not impossible, but given he will be ninety-five the year Timothy turns fifty, he’s doesn’t expect to see it. However, he's guessing that Michael McGee is a pretty good preview of things to come.

Not a carbon copy, of course, but they share the same long face. Michael has Penny's eyes, blue, and Timothy has his mother's green eyes, but the shape is similar, apparently the slight droop to his right eye will become more pronounced as time goes by, as will the smile lines around his eyes and lips. Michael's hair is mostly gray now, but it was probably the same sort of brown that goes dark blond with the addition of time in the sun. He definitely has the same hair shape, the high forehead and retracted hairline at the temples, though these days Timothy wears his hair longer than Michael is, but when he was wearing it shorter, it was almost identical to the look Michael has.

All in all, assuming he takes after his Uncle, the years will settle lightly on Timothy McGee.

The tea has steeped, and it's time to head out there.

Ducky hands over cups of tea, and gets settled next to Penny, holding her hand. Right now is fairly easy and pleasant, but he knows the storm is coming. He can feel the edge Penny’s on, and he’s not sure how far into it she’s going to let Michael go.

“So, Timmy won a Distinguished Civilian Service Award for that test?” Mike finally asks as Penny gets done with the details of the test.

“Yes. It was in the latest Stars and Stripes.”

“God. John’s got to be over-the-moon. Last we talked about Tim, got to be… five years ago now, he was bitching about Tim writing novels and pissing his talents away. You heard they made him retire, right? He’s gonna be bloody next time I see him.”

“Are you intending to see him soon?” Ducky enquires politely. Mike hasn’t yet noticed how quiet Penny’s gone.

“I’m supposed to head back through Pearl, last I heard he was there, thought I’d look him up.”

“Ah.”

By that point Mike is noticing that something is up. Both Penny and Ducky are acting like they’re afraid of what to say next. “Mom? Something wrong with John? I saw that he was ‘retiring for his health’ but… That’s bull, right? That’s drones are getting bad press so they’re putting him away quietly, right?”

Ducky looks at Penny, she nods, asking him to tell the tale, and he’s willing. Easier out of his mouth than hers, and starts at the beginning. “This is classified. Our family knows, but… It's a long story.” Michael nods, he knows all about classified ops that don't go quite the way you expect, and he's not at all surprised that Penny got the real dirt. He should have called her first, Penny’s always got the real dirt.
Ducky sighs, taking a sip of his tea. He's not sure how deep into this Penny wants to go, how much she wants her boys knowing about each other, so, if she wants to, he'll let her fill in details, but he'll give the basics. "In early May, The Third Carrier group was selected for a Cybertest. Like yours, it was completely blind, and very real. A 'cyber attack' crippled its communications and make it look like it was attacking itself. It didn't actually happen, but anyone who couldn't see the outside of the ship thought the fleet was firing on itself."

Michael's nodding at that. He can imagine how insane that would be. "Tim’s first attack, right?"

"Exactly. The Third Carrier Group as a whole, and the Stennis in specific failed the test."

Michael winces. It happens. Just happened to him in a massive way. He shakes his head. "John always was a son-of-a-bitch when things didn't go his way. What'd he do? Stroke out screaming at the guy who didn't realize it was a test? They’d bench him for that."

Ducky and Penny look at each other, and then Penny closes her eyes, slowly, opens them, and bites her lip in a move that looks so much like Timothy it makes Ducky's heart ache.

"No, Michael, he didn't. Penny, do you want me to tell all of it?"

She hasn't said the words, not to him, not to herself, but saying it is part of accepting it's real, and sitting in front of her is one of the few people who has a high enough clearance to even hear the real story.

Penny shakes her head, and Mike can see she's tortured by this. "Mom, you don't… I can read the report."

"It isn't in the report. It's not in any of the reports." She swallows hard. "I'll tell it. Tim ran the first test, hands on, on the Stennis. It was an undercover op, and John didn’t know he was even on board until the test was going."

She doesn’t say anything for a few seconds, so Mike tries to fill in some of the blanks. "So, Tim runs the test, John fails it, goes into one of his screaming fits and has a heart attack? They give him a send off for that? Half he failed, half he’s not well enough to handle the stress of the job?" That's plausible to him, but doesn't feel quite right. That doesn't match the level of pain radiating off of his Mom.

Penny licks her lips, rolling them against each other, steeling herself to tell the story. And Michael can see that whatever is happening here, it's a million times worse than anything he's imagining.

"Tim ran the test. It was a great test. He was very proud of it because it did exactly what it was supposed to do."

"And he got to tweak his old man's nose?" Mike understands that. He certainly enjoyed the few times he got to poke Nelson with a good idea the old man didn't love. Nothing feels better than winning a little competition with the old man.

Penny nods at that, tears in her eyes. "Yeah. That was part of it." She wipes her eyes and takes a quick drink of her tea. Then she stands up, heads into the kitchen, both Michael and Ducky watching. She comes back with a bottle of whiskey and three tumblers. "This isn't a tea story."

Michael goes pale. Ten million times worse. It's not that Penny can't put it away with the best of them; it's that she prefers to drink for celebrations and happy things. If she's drinking to numb herself, then whatever she's about to say is worse than anything he's seen since… actually no, she wasn't drinking when Nelson died. Last time he saw her get news and have to drink to take the edge off, they'd just heard that James had already been buried at sea, and they didn't get any say in it or get to
say goodbye.

She pours for all three of them, and socks hers back, fast. Ducky and Michael take decent swallows, but don’t try to down an entire two shots worth in one go.

"The Stennis failed, badly." Penny says as soon as the burn in her throat clears. "It didn't almost pass or get close or anything along those lines. Tim tipped the whole group into complete chaos. If it had been a real attack the entire group would have been crippled and destroyed itself."

She takes another sip. "It was a classified OP."

She’s already said that, but Mike knows that if his Mom’s repeating this it’s really important.

“The only people on board who knew what was going on were Tim, SecNav, his secretary, John and his secretary. Tim had skyped home, talking to us, happy, really pleased with how the test was going.”

"Sounds like he should have been." Michael says. "SecNav was happy? Obviously, you don’t get a Distinguished Civilian Service award for okay work."

Penny and Ducky nod. "The test did everything it was supposed to. They've identified a collection of weaknesses that need to be strengthened. They know about holes they didn't use to. They're getting new communications protocols in effect. It was a goldmine of good information, and because it didn't look like a Navy run test, John's men didn't act like it was a Navy run test, so they got a much better idea of how the Group would have responded to a real attack. And the plan for how to run it was good enough, they’re using it on other branches, other ships, to assess them, too."

"Great." And if there wasn’t this horrible foreboding that’s getting worse and worse with each word where Penny’s not telling him why his brother has retired, Mike would be genuinely pleased. Sounds like whatever it is Tim's been up to, he’s got some real computer skills under his belt. "So…"

"So, Tim's in his stateroom… And it's a classified OP.” Third time she’s said that, Mike’s getting chills. “The only two people on board who knows why he's on the ship and that he had anything to do with the attack is John and Lt. Mane,” she looks at Mike, who nods, he’s met Mane, knows who he was. “Everyone else thinks he’s a Captain with the Irish Navy on a fact finding trip, and then…” Penny takes a deep breath and finishes the sentence in a fast whisper, "then they arrest him for espionage, for planning the attack, and while he was in the brig four men who thought the attack was real and that their loved ones were missing after the Borealis was blown up, almost beat him to death.’"

"What?" Mike's stunned by that. That's just… He can’t believe he heard that.

Penny’s nodding. "John sent men in to kill Tim because of the test." She's full on crying now. Words that tore her heart to pieces finally said for the first time.

Ducky’s holding her and gently rubbing her back. He takes over the story from there. Filling in details, trying to answer the million questions he can see, as of yet unvoiced, on Mike’s face.

"Timothy was able to hold his own against four sailors until Secretary Jarvis got the fight stopped. He was severely injured, and likely would have died if that fight had gone on much longer. He was supposed to die. As a computer specialist, they didn’t expect that he’d have much in the way of self-defense skills. They figured that four on one they’d easily overpower and beat him to death. Though it couldn’t be proven, we are certain John ordered it."

Michael feels sick to his stomach at that. He can't believe that. He knew John didn't get along with
Tim, but annoyed and disappointed and order a murder are not even in the same hemisphere.

"Come on… you can't… No! Okay, sure, he didn't like Tim. That's not a secret. He thought he was wasting his life, but… killing him? No."

Ducky nods solemnly, and Penny's skin is the color of ash as she cries.

"No one but John could have put that plan into play. His secretary handled all of the details, took responsibility it, and then killed himself before he could be questioned about it," says Ducky.

Michael winces. "Oh, shit."

Ducky nods again. "Exactly. I take it you'd met Lt. Mane?"

Mike wants to be sick. "Yes. He wouldn't hit the head without express permission, let alone try to kill someone. Is Tim…" Michael doesn't know what the polite question is here. Tim could be anywhere from mending and pretty much better to comatose.

"He's healing. He will eventually regain all of his facilities. He just got out of the last cast last week, but the most optimistic version of when his right hand will be fully working again is Christmastime."

"God." Michael looks like he's smelling something fetid, and he takes a deep drink.

"While Timothy was in the hospital, the investigation into what had happened began. Shortly after it began, all the arrows were pointing to John."

"Then Mane offs himself and the trail ends?"

"Yes."

Penny nods again. "The investigation had to end there. Mane admitted it. Everyone else involved took their orders from Mane. There were no direct links between John and Mane, and no physical evidence."

Mike sighs. That's an awful story, but with no proof, that's also not enough to take an Admiral down. "So… how'd he end up retiring?"

"Tim got home, beaten… God, Mike, you've never… They're telling people he got t-boned by a truck and no one's doubted that for a second. Sarah looked at him, made a decision, called John and told him that if he didn't resign that second, she'd go public with child abuse allegations."

Mike's staring at her like he's just seen someone get hit with a truck.

"Oh, God, Mom." Michael switches seats, so he's on Penny's other side. He's hugging her, and she's crying.

Ducky's hand is also on her back, and after a second he takes Michael's in his and gives it a quick squeeze. "It has been a hard few months here, and no one is talking about this for… obvious reasons."

Michael nods at that, and is giving Ducky the we're going to have a longer talk about this later when my mom's not here, right? look.

Ducky nods at that, too.
It's fairly early when Ducky wakes. Nothing new about that. He never needed a whole lot of sleep, and ever since he hit fifty not a whole lot has meant about four and a half hours a night.

Michael McGee, who camped out in their library, appears to also be an early riser, or his body is acclimated to a different time zone and this is just when he's up. Either way, when Ducky heads into the kitchen to get himself a glass of juice and start the morning tea, he sees Michael standing in front of their fireplace, looking at the photos.

"Morning," Michael says.

"Good morning. I was going to make some tea, would you like that, or coffee or…"

"Whatever is fine."

Ducky nods at that, getting the water going. "We usually have breakfast out."

Michael, nods, staring at the family crest that's over the fireplace, along with the pictures. "Feel like telling me who's who?"

Ducky comes over. "I assume you know about half of these?"

Michael nods. He knows, roughly, who most of the characters, at least their parents, are on one side the mantle. Namely the pictures of Penny, her brothers and sisters, her children, their wives and kids, and grandkids. Sans one, there's no shot of John on the mantle. Ducky's side has shots of places he loves and old friends, and one of his mother.

In the middle is the Gibbs clan, candid shots, wedding shots.

The group shot from Tony and Ziva's wedding is out of date, but it's the most recent one with all of them in it, so Ducky picks that one up and explains who is who.

Michael shakes his head when he Ducky gets to pointing out Tim and Abby. "Even after last night… Still have the image of a fourteen-year-old in my head."

"Is that the last time you saw Timothy?"

"Something like that. I don't know how old he actually was. Old enough that he was tall and gangly with bad skin, young enough he wasn't shaving yet. I only saw Tim… God, five times? My home base is Perth, or was until we moved to Canberra. My wife's family is back in Perth, and John and Tori and Tim were stationed there for six months when Tim was a baby, so I saw them then. But all he was doing at that point was drooling and chewing on things. I was still single, and hanging out with my brother, his wife, and a baby wasn't exactly my idea of fun."

Ducky nods along with that. Michael would have been in his early twenties when Timothy was a baby. He knows that when he was a young man, family obligations involving infants wasn't his idea of fun, either.

"Can you tell me about John? I, obviously, know your mother quite well, and I've known Timothy for most of his adult life. We started working together when he was twenty-four. I've seen John once, but never truly met him."

"You want to know more about John?" Michael's surprised by that. "I'd imagine you'd have him firmly categorized as a monster and not want to touch it beyond that."

"Indeed. John has deeply damaged two people I care very much for, and those wounds have sent
ripples across all the other people I love and will continue to do so for a very long time." Michael sees a flash of anger and steel in Ducky's eyes. "However, I spent more than thirty years as a medical examiner. In addition to my MD, I have a degree in forensic psychology. Perhaps it is perverse, but I have and always had an interest in monsters and their acts. And though I spent half of my career among the dead, half was among the living, offering what healing I could. These days Jimmy handles the care of our physical bodies, but I would seek to aid in the healing of minds and hearts, so, any insights you can offer into John can help me with the trauma he's wrought on my loves."

Michael nods at that. They hear the tea kettle whistle, and Ducky leads them to the kitchen. A small, tidy space of light greens and rich browns. He gestures to the table, and Michael sits and Ducky gets the tea ready.

Once seated, Michael says, "I don't want to be that guy who says, 'Bob was never the same after 'Nam,' but, John went, and he really was never the same after 'Nam. He wasn't in James' unit. Hell, he wasn't within a hundred miles of him, but when James died something about John cracked. After, he could be fun, but there was a very sharp, very brittle, very… reserved aspect to him.” Mike licks his lips, and Ducky wonders briefly if this is a learned stress response or something coded into the Langston DNA. He doesn't know which, but he's now seen three generations of the same family do it, and wonders if he'll ever see it from Kelly. "He was a high achiever before, but after, everything always had to be perfect or better than perfect. I was a Plebe when it happened, so it's not like I was on the grapevine or got any scuttlebutt, but John was there, and years later John hinted that James fucked up, and it got him, and everyone else on his boat, killed. I don't know if that's true or not, but when John went he was smart and bright but, you know, human. People were allowed to make mistakes around him. He could forgive that. And when he got back, that was gone.

"We'd see each other every year or two, swap letters now and again. But we didn't spend a lot of time with each other, and even less time with each other's kids." Michael looks Ducky over, tea cup between his hands, trying to peel away fifty years with his eyes. "You served, right? Not a soldier, but…"

"I was a soldier in Korea, Medical Corpsman, then back to Scotland for University. Royal Medical Corps after that, tours in Vietnam, Africa, Afghanistan, and my last active duty assignment as a combat surgeon was in the Falklands. So, yes, I have served, and I am well aware of men who went to Vietnam and were, indeed, never the same." Ducky smiles gently and takes a sip of his tea. "None of us were, not really. Though some of us stayed closer to the original version, and some of us did a better job of reattaching ourselves to life outside the jungles when we got home."

Michael nods at that. "Okay. You know how the basics work. You don't have much downtime, and the downtime you have your buddies get first dibs on. Then your wife and kids, unless they're actually around, then that switches. After that comes everyone else. John was part of everyone else. Couple letters a year and a standing date for a drink anytime we were both in the South Pacific and had some free time.

"We'd get that drink, bullshit about the job and what we were doing, talk about our families some. With Tim, I was hearing about how he was so smart and talented and good at math, then I was hearing about Tim giving him trouble, not really applying himself, then he was wrapping up high school and getting ready for Annapolis, and then I didn't hear anything else about him for… I don't know, six years, and he's suddenly a cop. For a few years, I'd ask, but John would just glare. So I stopped asking. Things blew up with Tori, and I knew not to ask about that. Eventually the only talking about family was me telling him about mine and updates on Sarah."

"And you and Penny didn't talk about John's family?"
"Not much. You know Mom, she's never in the same place for more than ten minutes at a time. Hard to get on the phone, especially before cells were common. So, if I was talking to her, I wanted to talk about her. I'd get her up to date on my kids, and we'd talk about her latest adventures and what she was up to. I'd ask about John sometimes, but… I mean, his kids were people I didn't know and honestly couldn't have picked out of a lineup. That's the same kind of relationship he has with my kids." Michael shakes his head.

Michael's tapping his finger on the rim of his tea cup. He swallows, and looks up at Ducky. "John and Tim not getting along isn't new, is it?"

Ducky shakes his head. "No. It's not. And hiding what was going on isn't new, either."

Mike snorts quietly and shakes his head. "John does lots of hiding."

Ducky looks at him curiously.

Mike shrugs. "That's part of what you're asking about, right? He made it to Admiral, so obviously Timmy wasn't walking around with black eyes as a kid. He had to have a public persona, right? And that persona was perfect in every way."

Ducky nods at him. "Exactly. For a long time all any of us, besides Timothy and his mother, knew was that he and his father didn't get along."

Michael swallows a gulp of tea. "I never got the sense that you ever saw who was really there. Not after 'Nam, at least. He was guarded before, always careful, hiding something, but the walls went up and the image of 'John' was all you could get after."

"What do you think he was hiding?"

Mike shakes his head. "Lot of things. How he really felt about people. That’s pretty common, for everyone really, but especially when he was younger and lower ranks or a plebe, he never let it out. Can't be letting the higher ups know you think they're assholes." Mike gives Ducky a meaningful look. "And, you know, how he felt about people."

"Male people?"

Mike shrugs. "As a kid he always had a girlfriend or two. He got married, and still had a girlfriend or two. Divorced, didn’t seem to change anything. Last we talked, he had one in Tokyo and another in San Fran. And has two kids."

Ducky's look keeps asking if John is gay or bisexual.

Mike shrugs. "I didn't even know it was a thing until after I'd been at Annapolis for a while. But, you go out drinking with a guy enough times, and you pick up who he's looking at, and for John it usually isn't the pretty girls. Of course, you basically have to get a pitcher of beer into him before he starts looking at anyone, and especially as he got older, it got harder and harder to get a pitcher of beer into him. Haven’t seen him have more than two scotches in forever, and we haven’t gone to the kind of bar where you look at pretty girls, or boys, since the ‘80s. So, I don't know if he ever got past looking."

"Careful, precise, meticulous."

"Yeah. Always. Ramped up a million notches after the war. When Dad hit Admiral, John decided he had to, too. And he had to do it younger than Dad did. And he did, by close to six months. Which, since Dad went up during a hot war, and John went up in a luke-warm one should tell you
"Everything you need to know about him."

"Did John and your father get along?"

"Well enough. Dad was strict, but he was fun. He always had great stories to tell about whatever he'd been up to." Michael smiles at that memory. "Not around enough, and we all wanted lots of attention when he'd get on land. Whoever had the most interesting, highest awards, stuff like that, got the most petting from Dad. And John made sure to get a lot of petting. Kids and parents fight, that's just how it is, but I only remember one or two real fights between them. Most of the time they got on fine. But there was always a *I'm going to prove I'm better* vibe from John."

"And he was?"

"Ye…” Ducky can see Michael slotting the new information he has about John into his picture of him, so he doesn't finish saying 'yes.' "Dad never tried to kill any of us. Better's not the right word. John’s probably smarter. He’s definitely more dedicated to the Navy." Michael thinks about that. "Mom and Dad are/were brilliant. I think John’s more like Mom. You know how hard she had to work to get where she did. You know it wasn't enough to be a genius, she had to be three times as good as everyone around, and everyone around was already Mensa-level smart. Mom doesn't take shit from anyone on anything, and John’s just like that.

"I remember one time we met up, and there were a few other guys from his command, and they were ragging on him for what he put the sailors through, and he slugged back his drink and said, 'If I can do it, they can, too.' And that was the thing with John, he never asked you to do anything he couldn't, but he never ran into anything, on a ship, he couldn't do. And if he could do it, and you couldn't, obviously you were a blithering incompetent."

"Do you like him?" Ducky's curious as to how people who aren't Timothy or Sarah or Penny see John.

"Yeah. Or… I mean, I don't want to spend every minute of the day with him, but spend a night every year or so, down some beer and BS, sure? He’s smart and funny. Oh man, *wicked* sense of humor, and he can really dance, so especially when we were younger, before I was married, he was a ton of fun to go out with." Mike shrugs at that. "Bad husband material. Good for a drinking buddy or wingman."

"He gets stuff done when it needs to be done, no matter what. He's the guy who'll roll up his sleeves and get into the engine of the ship when it isn't working and no one knows what’s wrong, even after he had his stripes, and his stars. And you couldn't pick a better guy to have at your back if you were in a sticky situation. We were in Manila and got into a fight with six jarheads. All of 'em were the size of tanks and just as stupid and John just put them *down.*" Michael slices his hand across the air like a blade scything through grass. "They didn't know what the fuck they'd run into.” Mike smiles a little at the memories. “He’s my big brother.” Then Mike’s looking far away, distressed. “And apparently he’s not a good man.

Ducky nods, solemnly. "No. He is not a good man. He is an appalling father."

Mike almost shrugs, but realizes that could be read as quibbling with Ducky’s conclusion, as opposed to indicating he wasn’t there and didn’t know. "When Tim was a kid, John used to talk about him, so excited about how smart he was and all the great things he was going to do. Then he was a teenager and turned into a little snot, but a little snot on track for Annapolis, so I'd hear about that. John was worried, but I talked to Tori occasionally, and the kid had straight As, so John was just on one of his everything has to be better than perfect kicks. I poked him once about how Tom and I managed to make it into Annapolis without perfect 4.0s and Tim would do it, too, but that
didn't help much. And then he stopped talking about them. Tim, Torri, those were things John couldn't do, so he wouldn't say much about them. Just glare and change the subject if you asked.

"I saw Tim at Dad's funeral, and he was just this quiet little guy. I didn't pay a lot of attention to him, because..." Michael doesn't need to finish that sentence. Ducky understands how a ten-year-old you haven't seen in a decade would be a very minor aspect of your father's funeral.

"Saw him again at fourteenish. We were up for Christmas with Mom and so were Tori and Tim and Sarah, and he was a little snot! I know little snots, helped raise three of them. They're supposed to be snots at fourteen. That's how you know you've got a fourteen-year-old, they go from cute and fun into little snots. Beth, my oldest daughter, has her own fourteen-year-old and we've been talking about how they all turn into snots. Beth's convinced she was never a little snot, and Darla and I laughed so hard at that we almost broke something." Mike can see this isn't a diversion Ducky needs. He waves it away.

"Back to Tim. John was telling me about trying to get Tim straightened out, might not get into Annapolis, and what a waste that'd be, but... He didn't look like he needed much straightening out to me. Sure, he was a sarcastic little bastard, never quite over the line, but there was always that edge. You could tell he was smarter than you were and laughing at you behind his polite exterior. We were only together for three days, but he'd say things, and you'd nod along thinking it was okay, and then an hour later you'd really think about what he said and kick yourself in the ass for going along with it. He was just a sarcastic little snot with an innocent delivery that let him say a lot of things that he couldn't have gotten away with if he hadn't been so cute."

Ducky nods; he can well imagine fourteen-year-old Tim being a handful, especially if he was feeling safe, which with his father away and in his grandmother's home he likely was. Ducky thinks for a moment about what Michael just said. "You never actually saw John and Timothy together, did you?"

"Not after Tim was walking. How bad did it get?"

"He tried to murder Timothy." But Ducky knows that isn't what Michael is asking. "As long as it didn't leave marks or happen in public, anything was fair game."

"Fuck." Michael's looking down at his tea. "Still can't believe it. I mean... He can be cruel, and has a reputation for being an absolute bastard. If you can't do the job perfect, you did not want to be under his command because he'd tear you down, but... murder?"

"You think he wasn't capable of killing?"

"No. I know he can kill. Just, he's always so controlled. He'll be screaming his head off, chewing some sailor to dust, but you can see it in his eyes, the fire never gets that high. Part of not seeing the real John. The screaming... I always thought it was an act. Done because it made an impression and if you were on the receiving side of it, you never wanted to be there again."

"Timothy’s said something like that, too. However, at least some of the screaming aimed at him, was, in fact, real. And, as you said, real or not, you never wanted to be there again, and Timothy was there, quite a lot."

"John always said he was so smart."

Ducky understands that to mean if Tim was the only thing John valued, why was John yelling? "He is. Best-selling novelist. Running the NCIS Cybercrime Division, meaning he's the number four man at a federal agency, before forty. He's a wizard with a computer. The one thing he isn't, is a sailor."
Michael sighs.

"He got into Annapolis and turned them down."

Michael sucks in a quick breath at that. John never mentioned it, and that would piss him off enough he'd want to kill. He assumed Tim, somehow, even with a great-grandfather, grandfather, father, and three uncles who were all grads, fucked up his application so badly that Annapolis wouldn't take him. Having seen Tim at fourteen, Tom figured that most likely he'd failed the physical. "That's when John stopped talking about him, beyond the one quick, he's a cop now, update I managed to get out of him, years later."

"I'd imagine so."

They hear Penny heading in at that point. She grabs herself a glass of orange juice, before heading over to the table that Michael and Ducky are sitting at. She ruffles Michael's hair as she sits down.

“So, what happens now? He’s in Pearl and…” Mike asks.

“Nothing.” Ducky says, looking at Penny, making the decision to keep Mike out of whatever the rest of the family may do.

“Sarah played the last card of the game,” Penny says. She’s looking better from last night, not less distressed, but more in charge of herself.

“So… He was he doing it to Sarah, too?” Mike’s shaking his head at that, not able to believe it. “He kept talking about her and how proud he was and… Long after he’d only stare you down if you brought up Tim or Tori, he’d go on and on about Sarah.

“No. From everything we know, John and Sarah always were fine with each other,” Ducky says.

"John and Sarah were… okay?" How did that work? is clear on Michael's face.

"As okay as you can be with the man who tries to kill your brother," Penny says, looking grim.

Ducky adds, "In the last few weeks I've been reading up more on this, and apparently a very common pattern with domestic abuse is that the abuser has one target. He's not random and doesn't spread his abuse all over the place. Part of that is that whoever the target is satisfies a need other people do not. Part of it is that it's significantly easier to continue to abuse if no one knows you are doing it. Only one victim allows for that."

“And when he went full bore on Tim, Sarah lied to take him out of the game?”

Penny nods.

Mike sighs, and sips his tea. “God.”

“What are you going to do?” Penny asks her son.

He shrugs uselessly. “I’m supposed to be in Norfolk for lunch, finally get briefed on this test I’m not supposed to know about. From there… I was going to hop the fastest transport to Pearl, visit him a bit, and home, but…”

“It’s Friday,” Penny says. “If you come back up here after, we have a weekly family Shabbos—“

“You’re Jewish now?” Mike asks dryly. Too many things on top of each other, so this hits him and he starts to laugh.
Ducky smiles, understanding that laugh is mostly a matter of burning off too many feelings. “Part of the clan is, and a weekly dinner suits all of us. If you want to come back here after your meeting, you’re welcome to join in. Timothy and Abigail have claimed dinner at their house this week. Rumor has it Sarah and Glenn will be coming, too.”

“Tim would likely want to hear how his test is doing now that it’s being released into the wider world.”

Mike sighs, nodding. “I’d imagine. Let me see how the transportation works, and if I can, I’ll swing by for supper.”

“Good,” Ducky says.

Mike rubs his face and eyes the clock. “I’ve got to get moving if I’m going to make Norfolk in time.”

“Top of the stairs, on the left, there’s a bathroom with a shower,” Penny tells him as he’s standing to get ready to go.

Once he’s upstairs, Ducky lays his hand on hers, “How are you doing?”

She shrugs. “I really don’t know.”

Ducky reaches over and kisses her. “I’d fix it if I could.”

She nods. “I know.”
Devil's Hexagon

“So, how long were you two married?” Abbi asks as she and Gibbs get dressed and ready for the ‘friendly breakfast’ Diane, actually Draga, called them for last night.

Gibbs shrugs. He doesn’t know off the top of his head and has to think. “Two and a half years, first meeting to signing the divorce papers.”

“Fast.”

He shrugs at that, too.

“And you and Fornell?”

He looks up from shoving things out of the way in the closet. He’s used to having it all to himself, and suddenly there’s all this other stuff in there. They’re both still working out the kinks of sharing a home. “You asking how long Fornell and I were married?”

She smirks. “After we struck out with the perfect woman, DiNozzo was joking about how no one could compete with Fornell.”

He glares a bit at his mental image of Tony, and goes back to flipping through hangers looking for his green golf shirt. “Met Fornell in ’93. First joint case I worked with the FBI. Franks had worked with him before, liked him. Thought he was too by-the-book, but if he could loosen up and trust himself, he’d be a great agent.”

“Why do I have the feeling that’s not the way Mike Franks said it?”

Gibbs smiles at that, finds his shirt, grabs the first pair of pants he sees, and retreats from the closet. He sees Abbi’s well ahead of him on dressing, just wrapping up on buttoning her shirt.

“’Keep an eye on that one, Probie. He ever gets that stick out his ass and stop second-guessin’ himself, he’ll be good.’”

Diane smiles at that approximation of Mike Franks, and says, “And you said something like, ‘Don’t waste good.’”

“Something like that. Probably just thought it.” Back then he really was a functional mute. He pretty much only talked when he absolutely had to.

“What do you think she has?” Abbi asks, getting back to the reason for this meeting. Because the reason on the email, Diane and Draga just wanted to have a fun little breakfast with him and Abbi, and Fornell and Wendy sure as hell isn’t it.

“Something that’s got her flags up enough that we’re not doing this at work. Something that has her concerned enough that she had Draga email us about it from his work account.”

He sees the look Abbi’s flashing him.

“No, she’s solid. Diane doesn’t scare easy. If her danger sense is flashing, something’s up.”

Abbi zips up her boot, and looks at Gibbs, who is tucking his belt into the loops. “I’m ready. Just waiting on you, old man.”
He glares at her. No heat in it, this is just banter, and it’s part of his expected response. Taking two steps over, kissing her soundly, and then saying, “Your old man,” catchers her by surprise.

She nods, kisses him back, and says, “And don’t you forget it.”

He gives her a quick salute before saying, “Yes, Ma’am.”

She laughs at that, stepping away. “Get moving.”

Occasionally, Gibbs wonders what it was he did to piss God off so badly.

It’s not a real wonder. Not like the screaming at the universe when his girls died. This is more a matter of complaining about things that irk or annoy him. Occasionally, get him full on mad.

He guesses this qualifies as irked. He’s not angry, but he’s not, by any stretch, planning on enjoying this. It’d be one thing if it was just him, Fornell, and Diane. That’d be irksome, too, but private irksome, all their own baggage away from everyone else.

This is public irksome with all of their current significant others. Though he has the sense that Draga’s more a friend with benefits than a partner. Or Fornell, okay Wendy, has that sense and passed said sense along.

He and Abbi get to the diner second, after Fornell and Wendy, and after plates of scrambled eggs, oatmeal, and bacon (his) and a whole wheat bagel, fruit cup, and sausage (hers) were on the table, waiting for them. As they’re saying ‘Hi,’ Gibbs wonders how much of this is Diane showing off that of the three of them, she’s got the youngest, hottest SO. Probably not much, but he’s sure she’s enjoying that as she and Draga head in. (He’s mildly irked at the idea that Diane has an even younger redhead than he does, but that’s not the sort of thought that’s ever getting out of the deep recesses of his mind. He’s also somewhat irked at the idea that Diane has shifted from his ex-wife to one of the people he considers an equal he’s competing with to prove who’s the better man.)

Diane takes one look at Gibbs (who is using his O2 tube right now. He’d rather not, but he’s been feeling out of breath for the last few days. Tim said something about ‘welcome to ragweed season.’ When he mentioned it, his doctor took one look at the puffy eyes, listened to his chest, and agreed. Healing up from all of this has apparently knocked his immune system for enough of a loop that this year, he’s got allergies.) and says, “Oh, my God! Tobias! You said he was ‘injured,’ not! Good Lord, Jethro, what happened!” Diane’s horrified to see the O2 tube. “Are you…”

“I’ll live,” he says, drily, also giving Fornell a look, because he could have headed this fussing off by just telling her what happened. Fornell shrugs. He’d rather Gibbs get fussed at than get fussed at himself.

Diane very carefully leans in and kisses his cheek, before scooting in and sitting down next to Wendy. Wendy gets a one-armed hug, and Diane and Abbi nod at each other. “You all know Eric?” Diane asks.

Wendy and Fornell do, because he’s around enough that he’s part of their life, too. At least tangentially, in the sense that he’s the guy sporadically dating Fornell’s daughter’s mother. But Abbi and Eric haven’t met. They’ve heard of each other, but no face to face time. “Abbi Borin,” she says offering her hand.
“Eric Draga, you’re the one who stole my partner.”

“Thought Bishop was yours.”

“She’s more like my math-geek little sister.”

“Ah.” That matches some of what Abbi’s heard about Bishop from the rest of the crew. “Well, I needed her more than you guys did.”

“Yeah, I know.” Draga sighs. Both he and Tony are missing having Ziva around. They might both prefer their pregnant partner not be in the field, but no insult to Bishop, she’s as Probie as it gets and the only fix for that is time. Still, it’s really nice to go into an unknown and know the person at your back battle tested and rock solid. “This whole thing’s got us scattered all over the place. Say hi when you see her?”

“No problem. After this, I’m back to my office. DiNozzo’s working her way through my accounting department.”

“How’s that going?” Diane asks.

Abbi glares.

“That good?” Wendy asks.

“That’s the polite version of how it’s going. In addition to screwing everyone in every direction they could, we also weren’t paying our suppliers regularly. We ran all of our accounts at ninety-days past due, didn’t keep any records for a third of them, and now, if we want nifty things like electricity in the Great Lakes office, let alone freaking paperclips or the damn papers to clip together, I’ve got to find money to pay for them, yesterday, because they’re getting cut off tomorrow.”

The rest of the table winces at that. Gibbs gently strokes Abbi’s back. Diane sees it and smiles a little.

“So, what happened?” Diane asks Gibbs, “Tobias said you had some excitement on your end, not… you got hit by a truck.”

“I don’t look that bad!”

Fornell and Diane eye him. They’ve both seen him looking a hell of a lot better than he does now.

“You try getting shot in the lung! See how you look after that,” he fires off to Fornell.

Wrong thing to say. “You got shot???” Diane hits him with. (He catches Draga whisper to Wendy, “Are these three always so much fun?” Wendy nods.)

“It happens. I’m alive. They had to cut a chunk of my lung out, and rebuild a few ribs.” Abbi catches Diane’s eye, along with Wendy’s and all three of the women are well aware of the fact that this is Gibbs downplaying the hell out of this.

Diane flashes a look back to Abbi, letting her know she’s well aware of what Jethro’s doing. She’s heard this song (or versions of it) more than once before. “What did you get shot with, a harpoon?”

Gibbs nods, and Fornell says, “Bullet wasn’t much smaller than one.”

“And,” she gestures to the tube.
“With any luck I won’t need it much longer. Got a follow up appointment with the lung doc next Friday.”

Diane makes an annoyed sound, looks to Abbi, making sure that’s true, and Abbi nods as Elaine heads over with an egg white omelet and fruit cup for her, as well as turkey sausage and scrambled eggs for Draga. “Thanks, Elaine.”

“No problem, Hun. Diet Coke or full strength today?” she asks as she puts a Red Bull in front of Draga.

“Full strength, I’m going to need the sugar.”

Elaine raises an eyebrow.

“This one,” she looks at Abbi, “and her co-conspirators” another glance at Jethro and Tobias, “are keeping me up at night.”

“You keep talkin,’ I’ll keep the food coming.”

That gets thanks from everyone at the table.

Diane nods at that. “Your pen pal is the real deal. Anything you get from him, move on. He’s insanely connected, has at least some conscience, but doesn’t want to burn his own career/put himself in danger.”

“Hence all the cloak and dagger?” Wendy asks. This is the first time she’s been invited to a briefing like this, and she knows that she’s here because this isn’t supposed to be about work. She also knows that the reason they got here first is that Tobias made sure to scout the diner, make sure no one could lay a directional mic on them (he taped a small ‘massager’ to the window when they got here and scanned for bugs, all clean.)

“Yeah. Let me start where you guys leave off. You,” she looks to Abbi, “give Tobias your pen pal’s account numbers. He shuffles them over to me. I’m mid-case, so two days go by before I can do anything with them. That’s yesterday. I’ve been getting the second-hand version of what’s up, along with the ZNN updates, so I know this is going to be hot. Before I get into it, I memorize the numbers. Which was good, because less than five minutes into the second one, I’ve got John Koskinen in my office asking where the hell I got those numbers, confiscating the paper they’re on, and taking me off the case.”

Not everyone looks properly impressed.

“John’s the head of the IRS.”

Now they do.

“So, you… what?” Wendy asks.

“I look cute, give him my account numbers, ask, nicely, what I’ve gotten into. He doesn’t say anything, just tries to look intimidating while glaring at me.”

“Ew.” Wendy says.

“Pfft. Honey, there’s not a sixty-year-old guy with white hair and a bad attitude who can glare me into submission on Earth. I trained with the best,” Jethro looks pleased at that, “and Koskinen doesn’t have half of Leroy’s attitude when he’s in a good mood.” Jethro puts down his coffee (decaf) and
looks appalled at that. “And the day I take stupid orders from some old guy who thinks he can pull the wool over my eyes,” she looks to Fornell, who squirms, embarrassed, “is the day you need to bury me, because I’ve died.”

Abbi’s smiling along at this, looking very pleased with Diane right now.

“So, I look cute, and play ball, all ‘yes, sir,’ ‘no, sir,’ ‘no problem, sir,’ ‘anonymous tip, sir.’ And he heads off thinking he’s blown me off the path. Now, because I actually know how to use a computer, and because I’ve got a few friends in IT, I get a heads up an hour later that my computer’s being watched. Fortunately, we,” she strokes Draga’s hand, “already had a lunch date on the books, so I get him to get all of you together for our breakfast of ghosts of ex-lovers past.”

Draga adds in, “We’re at lunch, and Diane asks me if the guy following her really is a tail. I check, and keep checking, and he is. So, I get back to work, and get DiNozzo into this. He calls in Vance and McGee, and we’re back into this case that won’t die, right now, just as support and security.”

Fornell’s looking worried. “Emily?”

Draga nods. He and Fornell are never going to be BFFs, but they both get, in their bones and guts, the feeling of wondering if your child is in danger. In fact, the way Draga treats Emily, a lot like an over-protective big brother, is the only reason Fornell can stand having him around. “When she’s not with you, or with her mom and me, Bishop’s keeping an eye on her. We haven’t seen anyone watching her, and we are watching.”

Fornell relaxes at that. He’s not happy, but all of Emily’s life there’s been the shadow of his job, so he doesn’t feel like he can complain about it if Diane’s throws some shade.

“So, does this mean you’re out of this now?” Abbi asks.

Diane scoffs. “No. Just means I have to be sneakier about it. I can’t work the case when I’m at work, but McGee’s set me up with a secure account through the NCIS system and is keeping an eye on my home system, keeping it secure. Hence the,” she takes a sip of her soda, “full strength soda. No rest for the wicked. Here’s what I’ve got so far. The first account, it’s showed up in several other high-stakes corruption cases. It’s a small but very well-funded bank out of… actually I’m not sure. I don’t think it’s on land.”

All of them are staring at her.

“These days there’s no need for a physical bank, not if all you’re doing is moving numbers around from point A to B.”

They’re still staring at her.

“Okay. Cash isn’t real. The paper has no value in and of itself. People with big money have no use for cash, it’s just bulky and annoying, that’s part of making people we don’t like out of the electronic system, cash just weighs them down.” Diane can see she’s losing them. She refocuses to the idea at hand. “Cash is an IOU that represents a claim on some future service or good. Once you get that down, all a bank is is a way to keep track of who owes whom what. And that’s all this is, a huge collection of very well-endowed IOUs shifting debts around. Best I can tell, this one is floating around on someone’s yacht. I don’t know who runs it. I do know that some very highly-placed and well-off people have had dealings with it. That account number popped up in five very ‘sensitive’ audits. The sort where the people involved are very connected, twenty-five tax lawyers are involved, and in the end everyone agrees nothing illegal happened, but the person being audited ends up paying a huge ‘penalty’ usually for ‘late filing’ without having to admit any
wrongdoing.”

Abbi’s lip curls. That sounds a whole lot like the mess she’s in. “You think Koskinen’s in on this?”

“I think I’m bouncing those account numbers back to Tobias along with the idea that it’s time to look at my higher ups as well as yours,” Diane says to Abbi. Then to Tobias, “Leon’s agreed that if you take any flack from your higher ups, NCIS will take point on this, though they don’t have the accounting manpower for it, so they might have to borrow some people. Apparently they’re small enough, or play straight enough, that they aren’t involved with any of this.”

“What about the other accounts?” Gibbs asks.

“As for the other three… One’s linked to ISIS. The other two, we do know who’s running them, but unlike the floating account, they’re buried behind banking secrecy laws, located in non-extradition countries, and pretty much, unless Jethro’s willing to take command of a unit of Marines to kidnap the board of directors for both banks, we’re not getting any information out of them. We’ve tried. The entire board of the one is on the no-fly list and if they set foot in the US, we’re grabbing them, but so far, they haven’t left Seychelles.” Diane looks at Fornell. “Have your forensic accountants been able to get those missing quarters for CGIS back?”

“I’ll ask.”

“As soon as they do, shoot them to me.”

Fornell looks at her curiously.

“In a roundabout sort of way. Say, thumb drive to Jethro when you get together to do whatever it is you two do, then he drops by NCIS for a chat with Leon or something, and it ends up in Draga’s hand, from there I can get it. I know my work computer is being watched, so assume anything you don’t hear face to face from me or Draga is being watched, too.”

“McGee says our phones are clean, and his guys messed with them—“

“But I’m not trusting that,” Diane adds.

Abbi shakes her head. “Trust McGee on that. The only reason we’re here right now is because when his guys fix up a phone, it’s fixed. Also, he’s not kidding about don’t turn them off.”

Wendy hasn’t heard this part, and for that matter Fornell hasn’t either. They’re both looking expectantly at Abbi and Gibbs.

“He wires them with a tiny bomb. Kill the power and three seconds later they blow. That’s how we got out of the basement,” Gibbs says.

“MacGuyvered them into small shape charges and blew the hinges on the door,” Abbi adds, filling in the details.

Fornell’s looking impressed, like he’s going to have a chat with McGee soon. “That’s how you got out?”

“Yeah. What’d you think?” Gibbs says.

“Electronic lock. I assumed it died with everything else when the EMP went,” Fornell says. Then he looks at Diane. “This bit them. I don’t know if you’ve got it yet, but, over the last two years and next five, every Federal office is setting up a security system that will completely lock the building down
and kill all of the electronics in it. The idea is if someone breaks in and hacks the joint, they can’t get anything out. But if you’re inside when it happens, you’re sitting around in the dark, no way out, waiting for my guys to show up and save the day.”

“Not doing anything with this at work. Not doing it at home unless I’ve got someone,” she looks at Draga, “watching my back.”

“Good,” Fornell says. “So, step two, official step two, is back in my court?”

Diane nods at Fornell. “You guys handle the public corruption cases.”

“Sounds like it’s time to set up a new ‘Untouchables,’” Wendy adds, looking very pleased at the idea of her own personal G-man running the thing.

Fornell’s arm is around her shoulders. “Too much attention if I do that, but that’s the play. I can’t run this on my own.”

“I have it straight from Director Vance, for both of you,” Draga says, looking to Fornell and Abbi, “That whatever backup you need, you’ve got from us. DiNozzo and I are points of contact.”

“I’ve got a favor to ask, you, Jethro, but… Can you drive?”

He nods. “As of yesterday. Why?”

“Feel like tailing my tail?”

Gibbs nods. “You run the plates?”

Draga looks mildly annoyed at that. “Even Bishop knows to do that. It’s an IRS motor pool car.”

“I don’t know who’s in the car. But I want to find out.”

“You want pictures and prints?” Gibbs asks.

Diane nods. “He can’t be in there twenty-four seven.”

Gibbs, Fornell, and Draga all shoot each other a look.

“Oh, gross!” Diane says.

“Guys can spend a lot of time in a car,” Draga says.

Fornell’s nodding. “You get to know your partner real well after a long surveillance job.”

“DiNozzo had McGee and I watching this one building for twenty-six hours,” Draga adds.

“Pikers,” Abbi says.

Fornell and Draga are looking surprised at that. So’s Diane and Wendy for that matter.

“Please, you don’t need a dick to go on long surveillance missions. Just a water bottle, a knife, and a partner you trust to look the other way.”

Gibbs nods at that. “Sounds like you might want to teach Bishop that trick.”

“I’m sure Ziva did.”
Gibbs inclines his head. That’s a good point.

Diane gets them back on track. “Okay, before we got on that way too much information tangent, I had a point. He’s got to get out of the car sooner or later, if for nothing else than for someone to give him a break. I need to know who he is. Once I do, I can find out who he’s talking to.”

“Probably Koskinen,” Draga adds.

“Probably, but I want to know for sure. And once we know who he is, you guys do your magic and bug his phone and read his emails, right?”

Gibbs, Fornell, and Abbi nod, that’s a good play. “What’s he driving?” Gibbs asks.

“Blue Nissan Leaf. How’s your distance vision?”

Jethro’s look makes it clear that it’s more than good enough. Then he remembers he’s wearing glasses all the time now.

Diane says, “When we’re heading off, look down Kendal,” the street they’re on, “three blocks down, parked on the left side.”

“I’m on him.” Then he remembers he drove them here. “Abbi.”

“Feel like giving me a ride?” she says to Diane. Gibbs feels his teeth gritting at the idea of the two of them and Draga together for an hour, unsupervised.

“Not a problem.” Diane’s grinning, loving the idea of plenty of time with Abbi on her own, possibly just because it’s bugging Gibbs. “My offices aren’t very far from yours.”

Gibbs pops his last bit of bacon into his mouth, and then kisses Abbi. “Give me five minutes head start.”

Abbi nods at that. “Be careful.”

He smiles. “You, too.”

She nods, squeezes his hand, and he lays money for both of their breakfasts on the table, and heads out.

“Why’s he going now?” Diane asks. She’s got good instincts, but she’s not a field agent.

“If your tail is good, he’s got the idea that one of us might decide to follow. If he sees us break apart in the parking lot, us pulling out, and him waiting around, he’ll keep looking back to see what Jethro does. This way, he’s already in position when we go. Maybe your tail notices him, but I’m sure that when he stops somewhere, Jethro will make sure to swap out cars. If we’re really lucky, your tail will go investigate Jethro’s car while he’s moving to another one, and whoever brings the other one, McGee or DiNozzo, will get your prints and pictures.”

“And if he doesn’t notice?”

“Gibbs’ll take care of it. He knows what he’s doing. Your guy might get picked up for a busted tail light or something. We’ll know who’s in that car by the end of the day,” Fornell says. He’s also got an empty plate in front of him. “So, guess it’s time to head off and get a team up and ready for this.”

“People you know personally,” Draga adds.
Fornell nods. “Been with the Bureau since ’80. I know everyone.”

“People you trust, then.”

Fornell smiles. “That’s the trick, right?”

Which leaves Diane, Draga, and Abbi, to wrap up and head off. They give Gibbs the full five minutes and then to the car they go.

It’s Draga’s car, so he’s driving.

It’s not a terribly uncomfortable silence as Draga, Diane, and Abbi head toward CGIS HQ. But it’s not easy, either. The weight of a lot of questions that aren’t getting asked fill the car.

Finally, Draga says, looking from Diane to Abbi, “So, he’s got a type, huh?”

This results in Abbi and Diane looking at each other and breaking out laughing.

Draga’s very glad to see that went over the way he hoped it would. “Can’t say I blame him, I’m fond of a sassy redhead with a badge who doesn’t take any crap, either.”

“Five tall, slender redheads with long hair and tomboy tendencies. Yeah, he’s got a type,” Diane adds.

“Five?” Draga says.

“I’m number three, she’s five.”

Abbi thinks about that for a moment. The perfect woman hunt had revealed a lot about Gibbs. Ziva and Tony had gotten into a pretty intense “discussion” of whether or not said “perfect” woman had to have red hair. Ziva didn’t think so, pointing out Mann, and Tony did, pointing out how Gibbs was dating Mann and still couldn’t take his eyes of Director Shepard. Which then got them taking about what they thought but didn’t know happened with Shepard. “I think I’m six. But I also think there’s almost twenty years between me and five.”

Diane’s curious. “Who’s five?”

Abbi’s curious, too. “Did you know Jenny Shepard?”

Now Diane’s looking annoyed. “That son of a bitch! Oh…” There’s a lot of fire in Diane’s eyes right now. “I never saw her. He mentioned he had a new Probie when Mike left. ‘Shepard.’ No first name. I didn’t know she was a her until two minutes ago.”

Abbi winces. Gibbs is in trouble next time those two run into each other.

“So, they were…” Diane asks.

“Tony and Ziva thought so. Something about Paris. But… that’s way after you, right?”

Diane nods, looking a little easier at that. Gibbs never got to Paris during their time together. At least, not that she knew of. Not like he told her much about what he was doing.
“I thought DiNozzo was kidding when he said Gibbs falls for any redhead in his path,” Draga says dryly, shaking his head.

Abbi’s tiny, little warning voice, the one that remembers that Gibbs has been divorced three times, and more importantly remembers that Gibbs got three other women thinking things were going so well they agreed to marry him, perks back up at this. And hell, she’s got one of the previous redheads in her custody for the next hour, so…

“He’s different now, right?”

Diane nods and snorts a bit. “Yeah. Tobias and I have talked about it. He’s happy now, and that makes a huge difference. All that you’ve got to be happy in yourself BS. It’s not. A marriage is like a picnic basket you pack for yourself, you can’t get anything out of it you don’t bring. You can compliment each other, or rip each other down, but if you don’t have that love or joy or whatever it is you need inside yourself, someone else can’t give it to you. When we were married, neither of us was happy, so we couldn’t make each other happy.”

“Instead you made each other miserable?”

Diane half smiles. “We had a talent for it. We were good at anything hot. Fighting, teasing…”

“Sex,” Abbi fills in, not entirely sure she wants to know this about Gibbs’ ex, but more information is good. Draga also doesn’t look like he’s sure he wants to know this.

“Yeah. Both of us burned hot all the time back then, and we burned each other out. Someone has to know when to pull back, and neither of us did. Great when it was going good, horrible when it was bad, and we didn’t have any in-betweens. There’s a difference, too, he’s got middle gears now, speeds between full out and collapse.”

“You, too?”

“I always had a few, more now, but back then we’d just keep egging each other on. Not a lot of gentleness or affection between us. This morning, you’re talking about work, you’re frustrated, he listens and pets you affectionately. You want to guess how many affectionate pets I got in the six months we were married and on the same continent?”

“Single digits?”

Diane shakes her head. “That would have been an improvement.”

“And Fornell?” Draga’s the one who asks, but Abbi’s interested, too.

“We weren’t married yet. Weren’t engaged yet. Leroy’d cancelled four dates in a row on me, ‘big case,’ he finally makes one and brings this guy with him. ‘Working dinner.’” She rolls her eyes. “Mr. Romance in action.”

“Which one?” Draga asks her.

Given how it worked out, Abbi thinks that’s a good question, too.

Diane flashes him a look, and then says, “That’s fair. Really, both of them. Honorable guy code, Tobias can’t make a play on Leroy’s girl. Especially not when he’s sitting there. But we liked each other. And Leroy can’t let Tobias be better at he is than anything, so when Tobias is around, Leroy actually is Mr. Romance. I’ve got two amazing guys paying a lot of attention to me. That was great. Like I said, when it was good it was really good. One working dinner turns into several more. They
got me interested in going from straight accounting to law enforcement, encouraged it, even. Then working dinners turned into just spending time together for kicks.”

Abbi’s nodding at that, she can imagine it. Jethro and Tobias play off each other well, and both of them one-upping each other as possible suitors would be a lot of fun.

Until it ended.

“How’d it fall apart?”

Diane shrugs. “We got married. Leroy lost interest. Getting me was a lot more interesting than having me. Tobias didn’t have me, but he went undercover for four months. So, just me and Leroy. He’s buried in his work, ignoring me. Tobias is gone, no word, no idea if he’s alive or dead. By the time Tobias got back, Leroy and I were barely talking. Turns out he’d already accepted Agent Afloat, but hadn’t told me, yet. And since Tobias was ‘Leroy’s friend’ he couldn’t just drop by without Jethro around, and Jethro was barely ever around anymore. His last night in town, we had a massive fight, ended up burning hot in a lot of different directions. I thought I got through to him, actually found Leroy under all the walls of Gibbs. He heads off. A week goes by, nothing, no call, no letters, nothing. Two weeks. Still nothing.

“Week three, I’m nervous, lonely, getting nothing but silence from Jethro, so I call up Tobias, and we have dinner and it was nice. Lunch a few days later, still nice. He’s telling me not to worry, that it’s hard to communicate on a ship, probably get a letter the next day, stuff like that. We have dinner again, and again it’s good, and… And two weeks later the rabbit dies and we’re all beyond screwed.

“I tell Jethro first. Send him a letter. Then I find out he can make calls off a battleship, he just wasn’t calling me. The first person he calls is Tobias, because, and he didn’t mention this to me, because, you know, I was only his wife, so why would he mention it to me?” it’s clear that Diane is still pissed about this. “He’d had a vasectomy back in the ‘80s and wanted to talk to a ‘friend’ about what had happened. Tobias is on the phone with me about ten seconds after he gets off with Jethro in a blind panic, because he’s not only horrified at what he’s done to Jethro by sleeping with me, but he’s about to throw up because his ‘this is a terrible mistake’ ‘we can’t ever do this again’ ‘pretend it didn’t happen’ speech I got the morning after just flew out the window.

“Two weeks later, I’ve got divorce papers in my mailbox. Week after that I was Diane Fornell and was living with Tobias. Emily showed up eight months later, and when she was a year old, I filed for divorce again. It took ten years, but we eventually got to the point where we’re all pretty much okay with each other.”

Draga whistles low and slow while shaking his head. “Sounds like a train wreck.”

“It was. Find that informative?” Diane asks Abbi.

Abbi nods. “Oh yeah.” She’s got at least half a dozen points where she and Gibbs aren’t following the same patterns, so his comment about making all new mistakes with her seems to be honest.

“So, why do you call him Leroy?” Abbi asks. No one calls him Leroy.

Diane laughs. “First time we met. He sees me at the bar, buys a drink, sidles up, all big blue eyes and silent charm. I told him to back off, that I didn’t like cops.” Draga laughs. “I didn’t like cops then. He just smiles at me. ‘Drink’s free. Might as well enjoy it.’ So I did, and didn’t say anything. He doesn’t, either, just sitting close, drinking his own bourbon, looking at me in the mirror behind the bar. Finally, I asked his name. ‘Leroy Jethro Gibbs, you can call me Jethro,’ and he smiled again, offering his hand. So I shook it and said, ‘Hello, Leroy.’ Been doing it ever since. Us in a nutshell. Always
stepping over each other’s lines just to see the other one push back.”

Diane’s looking at her, and has an expression that could be best called uncertain. Abbi finds that interesting, because she doesn’t get the sense that Diane’s ever really uncertain. Then she sees Diane blink, and it goes away. “You know about Shannon and Kelly, right?”

Abbi nods. “Yes. I’ve seen pictures of them, too. Knew about the vasectomy, and why, also.”

Diane looks a bit surprised at that. She still doesn’t know why. She supposes she doesn’t need to know, either. “Good. I found out about them by going through his stuff. I never heard him speak their names.” She thinks about that. “Actually, I don’t think I ever have. Talked to him a little about it years later, he went mute, just staring at me. When we were married, he had a picture of her in his wallet, their wedding picture. The ring was in his sock drawer with his medals. He was never married to me.”

Abbi nods at that, too. She’s not sure about the picture, if it’s not in his wallet, she’s sure he’s got a version of it on his phone, but that doesn’t bother her. There are pictures of her and the rest of the family in there, too. She knows the ring is with Shannon and Kelly.

Diane’s looking her over. “Question is, is he ever going to be married to you?”

Abbi nods again. “Yeah.”

Diane smiles at that.
Gibbs is waiting, four blocks behind the Blue Nissan Leaf, wondering where this is going to go next.

“Keep digging until you can’t dig anymore.” That’s Tim’s rule 70, or something like that. He takes his phone out. You guys have bugs right? He sends off to Tim and Tony.

Of course. Shows up from Tony a minute later. Need one?

Wouldn’t mind. You in the office all on your own today?

I am right now. Draga’s supposed to show up sooner or later. Bishop’s pretending to be a transfer student at Emily’s school. Something to be said for her looking fifteen.

Gibbs smiles at that. Change her fashion a bit, and Bishop probably could pass for a high school senior. Later. He’s giving Abbi a lift to CGIS HQ, then he’s got Diane.

What are you up to? Shouldn’t you be home? Pops up from Tim.

I’m tailing Diane’s tail. Even I’m healthy enough to drive.

Okay. He can feel the ‘don’t exert yourself too hard’ that’s coming from Tim.

I’m fine.

Uh huh. From Tony. What do you want a bug for?

Easier to tail someone if he can’t make me.

Good point. He’s going to CGIS HQ? Tony asks.

He should be.

Then make sure he catches you. I’ll get his car.

They don’t have an ID on him. Hoping for prints and photos.

Just get him out of the car. I’ve got the rest. Tony sends.

How are you going to get him out? Tim asks.

He’s tailing my girlfriend. I’ll go be a jerk about it.

With your oxygen tank? Tim adds. Maybe right now isn’t the best moment to play up the Alpha Male routine. No bodies in autopsy, right?


He’s free, he’s not walking wounded like Gibbs and I, he’s not the guy who had to t-bone a perp with a car to handle himself any more, and unlike the rest of us, he doesn’t exactly look like a cop.

What am I going to do? Pops up from Jimmy a second later.

He’s moving. Gibbs adds, shifting his car into drive, waiting a few more breaths, and pulling into traffic. A second later he’s got a three way Skype call up. Jimmy and Tony are on one screen. Tim’s
on another, and he’s on the third.

“What have you two volunteered me for?” Jimmy asks.

“Trying to ID the driver of the IRS motor pool car who’s tailing Diane,” Tim fills in.

Jimmy sighs, looking from the image of Tim to Gibbs. “Don’t you guys have like, photo recognition software or something to do that? I get you’re both a little bored with life in the office, but that doesn’t mean you need to send me out to get killed.”

Tony’s looking irked, and Tim and Gibbs are both mildly chagrinned. Tony nods. “Keep a subtle eye on him. I’ll get to HQ and grab pics.” He pokes Jimmy. “He should be in the IRS employee database. Tim?”

“Yeah, I’ll make sure Abby’s got access to it to check.”

It’s boring. Whoever’s driving doesn’t expect Diane to have noticed him, and he’s not being subtle at all. He’s just trailing along. Plain as day, really visible, might as well have a sign above his head saying, “LOOK I’M FOLLOWING YOU!”

That gets Gibbs eyes open. After all, there are two ways to follow someone, so they never see you, or so they see nothing but you.

He knows Tony’s moving into place to get shots of the driver. He calls again. “He’s way too obvious about this.”

“Think there’s another tail somewhere?” Tony asks, immediately getting where Gibbs is going with this.

“Keep an eye out for one.”

“Got it. Give Tim a call. He can get the street cameras and see if anyone else is keeping track of you guys.”

Gibbs nods, a moment later he’s got Tim on the phone, explaining what he and Tony are thinking.

“I’m on it. If I find someone, want me to mess with them?”

“Just shoot it over to Fornell.”

“On it, Boss.”

Gibbs smiles a little, feels good to hear that again.

Completely uneventful drive. Mr. Leaf, as Gibbs has taken to thinking of him, does a very standard no messing around job of tailing Diane. Straight to CGIS HQ. Diane and Draga linger for a moment
after dropping Abbi off.

Gibbs takes that moment to look around, but he can’t see Tony anywhere. No hint of him.

But, a few seconds after he pulls away from CGIS HQ, following Mr. Leaf, who is following Diane and Draga, Tony calls. “Got him. Abby’s got the photo, as well as Fornell, now it’s just who pulls it up faster.”

“Thanks, Tony.”

“No problem. I’m heading back. Once Draga’s in, we’ll give his car another one over. Make sure no one’s keeping an eye on him.”

“He’s on Diane, right?”

“As much as he can be without giving away that he’s not just being her boyfriend. Fornell tells me he’s getting someone into her place and his, checking throughout, seeing if anyone’s got eyes on them.”

Gibbs shakes his head at that. He wouldn’t want to be going through their homes. He supposes there are some perks to being retired. “McGee’s checking the traffic camera footage.”

“I’ll go see what he’s got. You go home and rest.”

“I get enough of that from him and Jimmy, don’t need it from you, too.”

Tony laughs. “Your redhead is safe at work. Diane’s got her own redhead watching her back. Fornell’s has Bishop watching her. They’re all good. Unless you want to go wrangle more warrants, there’s nothing to do.”

Gibbs thinks about that. “I can get warrants.”

“You want to get warrants?” Tony can count the number of times Gibbs didn’t flog that off onto one of the three of them on one hand.

“What else am I going to do? Go shoot the breeze with Bleach for a bit, get you paper to cover those accounts.”

“Have fun.”

“Bet you didn’t think retirement was going to be this exciting,” Bleach says as Gibbs heads into his chambers.

“I was thinking more boat-building and less getting shot.”

Bleach smiles at that. “Was glad to hear you were going to pull through. We’re too damn old to be getting shot at anymore.”

Gibbs inclines his head. “Not going to argue about that.”
“So, what’s got you over here? Not my pretty face.”

“Some of your pretty paperwork. You saw how deep Abbi’s fun went?”

“Yeah. Been catching it on ZNN.”

“Tip of the iceberg. Abbi got an anonymous tip…” Gibbs gets Bleach up to date.

“Something corrupt at the IRS, color me shocked,” Bleach says in complete deadpan. “I can write you warrants for those account numbers, for Diane’s Boss, too, if you want. How about you guys don’t get locked into a building and shot at this time?”

Gibbs rolls his eyes. “Part of the job, you know?”

Bleach looks at where his legs used to be. “Yeah, I know. Here’s something else I know, the CGIS mess is getting a lot of attention, and the higher ups don’t want that, not right now. Not with the convention over and everyone gearing up for the election.”

Gibbs grits his teeth, he heard all about that shit with John McGee. He doesn’t want Bleach singing him another verse of it.

“They really don’t want more crap with the IRS, not with all the shit that came out about them not following the rules about keeping track of stuff, and really not with what came out once they found the stuff they weren’t keeping track of. They were able to palm that off as a few bad apples. So, I am going to make a suggestion to you. Take these,” he touches the warrants he’s filling out, “go in quiet, find your information, and then have your director have a chat with the other higher ups. My guess is you’ll get a hell of a lot more cooperation and people quietly falling on swords if you offer to handle this off the books.”

“You think anything’ll get better if it’s handled quietly?”

Bleach shrugs. “I think an offer of handling things quietly is going to go a long way towards making sure you guys stay alive.”

Gibbs eyes narrow at that. He knows it’s not a threat, this is someone who’s played the game a long time giving him a rational assessment of what’s at stake. Then another thought hits him. “Did you send those numbers?”

Bleach shakes his head. “I’ve seen two of them pop up on other cases. Drug trafficking and terrorism, but I’m not your letter writer.”

That settles on Gibbs’ gut just fine. Bleach isn’t BSing him.

“One other bit of advice, if you’re going up against the IRS, get your money out of the banks before you move. As soon as they notice you’re trouble, your assets freeze, and no bank is going to fight them, because if they do, their assets freeze. I’ve seen them go so far as to get CPS to take people’s kids.”

Money… That’s not too scary for Gibbs. Kids…

“Grandkids?”

“Never seen it, but… They’ve rigged the game so basically everyone is breaking at least one of their laws, and unlike you and I, they get to accuse first and make the case second. First thing that happens is you’re in trouble, and they grab every bit of leverage against you they can, then they go through
your taxes with a fine tooth comb, then they find something…”

“Get ready to hole up and hide while this one’s going down.”

Bleach nods. “Or offer to do it quiet-like.”

Gibb has never been a huge fan of quiet-like. “You gonna back us if we don’t go quiet?”

Bleach smiles. “I didn’t leave half of me in the desert so people back here could build up their own untouchable, unaccountable fiefdoms. Go find your windmills, and I’ll help you tilt at them.”

Gibbs smiles back at him. “Gonna be a hell of a ride.”

“That’s why we’re here, right? We loved the ride.”

Gibbs nods.

“Let’s get you some warrants.”

Gibbs has an idea as he’s heading toward his bank. Actually, he has several, but one trumps all the others.

If Diane is right about cash not really mattering, and if the IRS works the way his guys do, then… Then they don’t have someone show up at your bank and pull the cash out of your account. They send some sort of electronic document to someone, and that someone clicks a button, and suddenly you’ve got no money.

But…

If he knew someone who was handy with a computer, and say, someone who knew how the IRS sent those notices out. Then… maybe it would be possible to set it up so the IRS just thought they’d frozen the accounts without actually freezing them.

So, instead of pulling out all of his money, he cashes a check for a grand, makes a crack about losing a bet to the teller, and then drives like an idiot, stopping at green lights, turning from the wrong lane, swerving around, (proving that if anyone is tailing him, they’re very good at it) before heading to NCIS.

He heads over to Leon’s office, and instead of just barging in, waits patiently for him to have a few minutes free. (His secretary is staring at him in wonder. To the best of her knowledge the only time Gibbs had ever waited to go in was when Leon locked the door from the inside. Granted part of it is trying to look like he’s just stopping by to visit, part of it is the driving all over the place actually is more tiring than he expected and having a few minutes to just sit and rest are good.)

“Jethro?” Leon looks a bit surprised to see him sitting there as he’s seeing someone (Older, important looking man, not military, Gibbs doesn’t know him) out.

“Got a minute?”
“Was going to get a cup of coffee. I wouldn’t mind company.”

Gibbs nods at that, stands up, pulls on the O2 tube, and then Leon says, “Or maybe,“ he looks to his secretary, and she smiles, nodding at his office, “coffee could come to us?”

Gibbs inclines his head, not wanting to be thankful for that, but he is.

Leon ushers him into his office, toward the sofa. “Sit down before I end up with both McGees and Palmer in here barking at me for letting you over exert-yourself.”

Leon looks him over more carefully. Gibbs is looking a little gray, and not just his hair. His lips are not nearly pink enough and his skin is looking grayish. Gibbs sees it. “I’m fine.”

“Your color doesn’t get better in two minutes and Dr. Palmer will be up here.”

He turns on the O2. “Let me get my breath. Done more today than in the last two weeks.”

“And it’s not even noon,” Leon says.

“Boring two weeks.”

“They’re supposed to be boring when you’re healing. So, what sort of mischief are you up to?”

Gibbs hands over a thumb drive. “Figured you’d be in a good place to get these to the people who need them. Warrants.”

“Good.”

“The judge who gave them to me gave me a heads up. Go against the IRS at your own risk.”

Leon nods, he understands the warning.

“I’m going to sit here a bit, catch my breath, and then go visit Tim. Might be that risk can be minimized.”

“I don’t want to know what you’re going to ask him to do, do I?”

“I’d really doubt it.”

Leon laughs at that.

Jethro takes Leon’s warning about not looking good seriously. Because he knows if he does go wandering down looking like he’s anything other than in the prime of health (or as close as he can get) a McGee or Palmer (depending on who is the least busy right now) will nag him until he allows one of them to drive him home, and then leave him stranded there because they’ll take their own car.

So, he spends more than a few minutes in Leon’s office, waiting until he is feeling as good as he gets right now, and then begins a much slower than he’d like mosey toward the elevator.

Feels good to be in that elevator again. He flicks it off, just to flick it off, smirks at that, and then heads all the way down to Tim’s basement.
“Hey!” Tim says, hopping (and that actually looked pretty close to a real hop) up when he noticed Gibbs standing in his doorway. “Abby call you in?”

“Not yet. I’m giving her a bit longer to work the facial recognition.”

“Okay. So…” He’s closing the door behind Gibbs, and sitting in the chair next to the one Gibbs is in.

“I got warrants for everything.”

“Bleach came through?”

“Exactly. He had a concern. The IRS plays dirty. Freeze your assets if you go up against them.”

Tim thinks about that. “Not just them. We’ve done it, too.”

“How?”

One of Tim’s jobs on Gibbs’ team was to handle any and all of the financial matters. That isn’t exactly what he trained for, but it is close, and mostly just required the ability to deal with numbers and computers. He’s not a wizard with a financial statement, but he is better with one than he is with, say, a major mass spectrometer.

“You get a court order, and then send it to the bank. If everything’s in order, they freeze the assets and let you know know if anyone tries to access them.”

“Yeah. How?”

Tim squints at Gibbs.

“Fax a form? Email? Is there a screen on their website? Do you call someone?”

Gibbs has never shown the least interest in how Tim actually does this stuff, so he’s quite surprised to be asked this. “Why?”

“Because if we’re going up against the IRS we either need to pull enough cash out of our funds to hold out for as long as our money might be gone, or, I need to know if you can make sure the IRS can’t do it to us.”

Tim starts to think. “When I was doing it, it was usually a call followed by faxing over the court order. Then they’d double check, make sure the order was legit, and then the bank freezes stuff.”

“So you can’t magic that away with your computer?”

Tim shakes his head. “I can have Leon try a pre-emptive strike on our banks. Letting them know that they need to be on the lookout for an IRS strike, and that they have to pretend to comply, but not actually do it. I can guarantee you that’s not going to work well. No bank manager anywhere is going to take our word over the IRS. I can move our money, get it wired somewhere the IRS can’t touch. I’m sure Senior can loan us an account number or two, and I can bury how the money got there, but our banks will be required to report that we’re moving money around if we suddenly start major transfers.”

“Think Diane can run a pre-emptive strike? Say she’s with IRS IA, something like that…”

Tim thinks about that. “Worth a shot. Not sure if she’ll have any more luck than Leon will. Without a court order… Bleach could do one…” Tim glances at the clock. “Looks like you’ve got a lunch date
to make.”

Gibbs nods. “It does.” He stands up.

Tim does, too, reaching for his wallet. “Does your card have a limit?”

Gibbs nods.

Tim thinks for a second, and pulls his main credit card. “Buy prepaid credit cards with it. Three thousand for me, two for you—“

“I don’t—“

“Just buy them. Abby and I’ll sleep better knowing you’ve got liquid money and it’s not just a huge wad of cash. Get Jimmy and Tony’s cards, too. If Diane can’t pull it off, let me know, I’ll start shuffling money around.”

“Okay.”

“Wha’d’ya got for me Abbs?”

“Oh my God! Gibbs!” She’s about to bound into him for a hug when she sees how tired he’s looking, and tones it down to an enthusiastic but gentle hug. “I’d forgotten how much I missed that.”

He smiles at that. “No Caf-Pow.”

“Couldn’t drink it even if you brought it.” Her fingers rest on Sean for a moment. “I think he’s napping.”

“Starting to feel him move?” his hand finds her belly, too.

“Nah, just getting a snooze-y vibe.”

Gibbs smiles at that, and then looks up at the screen as the techs around them watch on in amazement. “So…”

Abby shakes her head. “You know how it goes. I thinned the field as much as I could, but the IRS has like a gazillion employees. What I can tell you is the first thinning I did was limiting it down to just the DC offices. No dice. This guy is not one of their regulars. Beyond that…”

Gibbs sighs. “Waiting.”

“Waiting.”

“Get lunch with me?” Gibbs says to Diane as he leans against her door, looking her up and down,
eyes hot on her. He intentionally did not bring his O2 with him for this and has been nice and smiley to everyone he’s walked (slowly) past.

She looks up, stunned to see him in her office. “Leroy?”

He does that little charming smile of his. “Lunch?” he asks, voice low, mostly so he doesn’t need a lot of air for it, but two of the ladies in the hall see/hear it and he knows from how they’re looking at him that they’re reading it as sexy.

They look jealous of Diane. He’s glad to know he’s still got it.

“Um… Sure.” Diane doesn’t look like she can believe he’s doing this. She rolls her eyes a bit as she gets up out of her chair.

He heads in to her office, takes her jacket off the hook, and holds it open for her. “Looking pretty today.”

“Are you flirting?”

He smiles again, hand gently on her low back, leading her out. She notices how many people are strolling around the hall, and understands exactly what he’s doing. Then he leans in and says, voice low, “You’re liking it, right?”

Diane smiles back at him, and kisses his cheek. “Lovely.”

He takes her hand as they head out of the office.

“That was cute, Leroy,” Diane says as soon as she’s in his car.

He slumps into his seat and hooks up the O2. Even walking slowly, he’s feeling it. He hates this, but once he’s done with lunch with her and Fornell, he’s got to go get a nap or something. For a few seconds he just breathes, and then says, “Figured you’ve got a pretty steady stream of ‘friends’ who like to take you to lunch.”

She smirks. “More than a few, not sure it counts as a ‘steady stream.’ Got something interesting for me?”

He nods. Then takes another minute to just breathe.

“Should I be driving?”

“I’m fine.”

“Oh yeah, you look it.”

“First day working since I got hurt. It’s slow.”

She just stares at him.

“I’m slow. I’ll get us there. Fornell’s waiting.”
“All three of us?”

Gibbs nods, saving his air as he puts the car into drive. He can sense there’s something Diane wants to pick at, but she’s not getting into it.

“What?”

She shakes her head. “When you can breathe and talk at the same time.”

“Not about this mess?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“Abbi?”

Now Diane looks exasperated. “Do you actually want to talk to me?”

“Can feel you gnawing on something. Worried.”

“Fine. How’d that probie of yours, Shepard, turn out?”

That takes Gibbs back. Now he’s wondering what the hell they got into on that car ride that’s got her thinking about Jen. But, obviously, it’s not about Abbi, so… “Dead. Eight years now.”

“Oh.” That takes a lot of wind out of Diane’s sails. “Sorry. Must have been hard.”

He nods. “Been a long time.”

“Were you there?”

He shakes his head. “Was my Boss by then, told me not to go, told Tony and Ziva to back off, ended up in a Mexican standoff. Duck tells me that was faster and cleaner than what would have happened if whatever was wrong ran it’s course, but…” He shakes his head again. “Haven’t thought about that in a while.”

That string of pronoun free sentences puts the wind back in Diane’s sails. “So, are you so used to lying to me you physically can’t tell me the truth about her, or are you looking to stay out of trouble?”

Now he’s looking confused. “Not lying.” Everything he said had been true.

“No pronouns! Ever. You can imagine how surprised I was to find out your little Probie was another tall, thin redhead!”

He opens and closes his mouth. He knows it was intentional back when they were married. He didn’t noticed he’d done it again. “Everything with her happened after we were divorced.”

“You were thinking about it from day one!” Diane says, pointedly. “That’s why she was only Probie or Shepard. You knew I’d jump on you if you mentioned another woman you were interested in.”

He shrugs. That’s true. “What’s got you on Jen?”

“Oh, she’s got a first name.”

Now he flashes her his we haven’t been married for almost twenty years look.
“And there’s good reason for that!”

He rolls his eyes. Should have kept quiet.

“You don’t pull that shit on Abbi!”

*Oh, come on!* is clear on his face.

“Don’t give me that look. That woman is way better than you deserve, so don’t you fuck around with her. None of your keeping secrets crap.”

“I’m not keeping secrets with her.”

“Good.”

He supposes he should say he’s sorry for all the lies he told her, but that seems like way too little way too damn late. “Should have told you Jen’s name.” That’s a bit more relevant.

Diane nods.

“Breakfast and lunch?” Tobias says when Gibbs and Diane meet him.

“Don’t get too used to it,” Gibbs says. “Got a few things. We clear?”

Fornell nods. He picked the place, all communications on it going from him to Gibbs. Only way someone watching Diane could have caught it was to follow them, and Gibbs didn’t see any tails. (And once again, he drove like a flaming idiot. Diane was getting ready to light into him about her needing to be driving when he finally *explained* something he was doing. Then she nodded and shut up about it.) “On my end. Yours?”

Gibbs nods. “Unless they’re invisible.”

“No one’s that good,” Fornell says.

“We haven’t found out who’s following you, yet,” Gibbs says. Though, on the way here, her tail wasn’t there.

Fornell shakes his head. “Zip for us. Abby’s telling you the same thing, I’d bet, the computers only go so fast and there are lots of IRS employees.”

Gibbs nods. He shows Diane the pictures Tony got. “Know him?”

She shakes her head.

“Abby says the first run through they limited it to DC IRS employees, he’s not one of them.”


“Stolen plates?” Diane asks.
“Not reported. My guys got into your motor pool requisitions, and the car that plate is supposed to be attached to never moved. Haven’t been able to get in to check the actual car, yet. Supposedly we’ll be able to do that this evening. So… Sending a message?”

“We’re watching you, but we won’t get caught?” Diane asks.

“Maybe,” Fornell says. He takes a sip of his drink while Diane and Gibbs order, quickly. A moment later, they’ve got drinks, too. Once the waitress has left, Fornell asks, “So, what do you have?”

“Talked to Bleach… Pet judge.” Gibbs can see both of them have no idea who or what Bleach is. “He reminded me that IRS doesn’t play fair, and that if we want to stay flush, we need to protect our money. Talked to Tim, he was hoping that if you got a court order, you could make sure our bank accounts stay safe.”

Diane thinks about it. “Probably. Can you get me a court order?”

“I can get a don’t mess with these accounts, no matter what, type of order. Can you make sure they follow it?”

“Depends on the bank. Tell me you guys are mostly with the Federal Credit Union, and we’re golden. Devon Chander, the President, and I go way back,” Diane says.

“We’ve all got at least a checking account there. McGee can get our money moved. Tobias?”

Fornel nods. “I can shift it around.”

Gibbs has his phone out and is writing a text to Bleach, letting Diane read off of his screen as he does it. “You and Murray’ll get it sorted out.” Diane takes Gibbs phone out of his hands and starts to text on her own. Faster and easier if she talks directly to the man who’ll be giving her what she needs to get this done.

“Tim suggested buying some prepaid credit cards, too.”

Fornell understands that. Almost as good as cash, and if you don’t want to tip your bank off, better.

They eat quietly, and quickly, business pretty much done, but as they’re wrapping up, Gibbs’ phone buzzes. It’s a text from Abby. No match. Don’t know who your trail is, but he doesn’t work for the IRS. Running wider search. If he’s in a database, we’ll find him.

Gibbs is beyond frustrated when he gets home. First off he’s exhausted. It’s been six hours since he got up and he literally cannot go any more. Once upon a time, literally cannot go any more meant it was day three or four of a case, not six fucking hours.

Second of all, they screwed the pooch. Tony only got pictures of the tail because they all assumed he worked for the IRS. No prints. No DNA. And nothing is slower than unfiltered facial recognition software. The only good thing is that it’s a clear shot of the driver’s face. No glasses, beard, hat, nothing in the way.

Third of all, he crashes onto the sofa, but it’s Abbi’s sofa, so it doesn’t feel right, and pain goes
shooting through his ribs and chest and arm because none of those parts of him want him crashing into anything, even a sofa.

Mona’s pleased to see him. She pads over, nose on his shoulder, nuzzling him gently.

And even with all of that, he’s asleep in less than two minutes.

“This can’t be right.”

“Diane?” Eric asks. It’s after hours, later than she wants to be working, but the job calls, so she’s doing it. At NCIS HQ. At Ziva’s desk, using the secure system McGee set up for her.

“There’s nothing here.”

He pulls up his chair and sits next to her. “Did you type the number in right?”

She glares at him, and types again. Nothing. Not a trace. There’s not a single case attached to that account number. Yesterday it was raising red flags all over, today it’s gone.

She tries the second, third, and fourth numbers, same thing.

They’re all gone.

She searches for any scrap of information of any case related to those numbers. They’re gone, too. Completely. Nothing at all.

Vance is hovering behind her shoulder before she’s even finished with the last of the account numbers.

She looks up at him. “They’re gone. Everything… The routing number for the bank that goes with the two of them, gone.”

Vance doesn’t immediately get that.

“Director, if the routing number doesn’t attach to anything anymore, that means in less than twenty-four hours two banks we’ve spent years trying to take down just vanished.”

Now Vance gets it.

Diane rubs her head, and finds a pad of paper, and writes down three names. The only members of that one Board that were all on the no-fly list she can remember. “They used to be on the no fly list, IRS most wanted, FBI was hunting for them on money laundering, the DEA wanted them for that, too.”

Vance slides over to Draga’s desk as he begins typing in names. None of them come up. There are no matching files, no flags on them, there’s no proof any of them ever existed. No birth records, no tax records, no passports or credit cards or anything.

By now Leon’s pulling out his phone. He’s calling in his own favors.

It takes three days for DiNozzo, Draga, Bishop, and Fornell to go through everything Vance pulled,
all the communication logs of the top ten people at the IRS. Their work lines, personal lines, those email accounts no one is supposed to know about. He thinks he got them all, and there wasn’t a single bit of communication to anyone out of the usual about anything untoward.

Four days in, there’s no match on the driver, and given how thoroughly everything else vanished, they aren’t holding out any hope for finding him.

Somehow, in less than thirty hours, everything on those accounts vanished.

So did Diane’s tail. It was almost like, as soon as he got made, and the people working with her were focused on finding him, his job was done, so he buggered off. When they checked, the license plate was exactly where it was supposed to be, on an IRS motor pool car.

Everyone involved with the case got the message loud and clear. *You will never prove anything about this.*

But that didn’t mean any of them liked it.
Heading back up to DC from his meeting with Admiral Finnegan, the guy in charge of these tests, has Mike impressed.

And distressed.

Impressed: apparently Tim McGee is the real deal. Finnegan refers to him as ‘Tim’ and lit up talking about what ‘Tim’s’ been doing. Though he’s not hands-on with the test any longer, he is getting bi-weekly updates as to what they’re doing, and is continuing to send off good suggestions for shaking the tests up further. (And yes, it was specifically one of his suggestions that ended up with Mike in a car driving north from Norfolk, thinking about all of this. Though it’s true that Tim had no idea he’d end up scooping Mike into his net.)

Distressed: apparently the only reason he got this level of access to talk to someone about what was going on was to prevent him from grousing about it with his brother and getting that version of the story.

Had he been Captain Anyone Else, getting on the horn and yelling about what the fuck had just happened would have resulted in a cold shoulder and some comments about how in the future it’d be a good idea to make sure that orders that appear in his email, no matter who they appear to be from, get double checked.

(It was somewhat satisfying to find out that he was not, exactly, the target of the test. Commandant Jenner, Mike’s Boss, who is in charge of security for consulates all over the world, had his system hacked. Tim’s addition to the test was to not just break into Jenner’s system, but to make in abundantly clear what could happen if said system was hacked. Thus, US Embassies all over the world ended up running “evacuation exercises.”)

But he’s not Captain Anyone Else. He’s Captain Michael McGee. His brother screwed a whole rescue shelter full of pooches on the first test, and, apparently, everyone with a high enough clearance knows about it. Add in his nephew designed the test he got caught in, and he gets a bit more hand-holding than Captain Anyone Else would have.

Finnegan referred to what happened with the first test as “unfortunate,” and that said, “misfortune” had required that all following tests would have to be done from remote locations. Though that level of “misfortune” would be unlikely to happen again, a witch hunt snapping up the person who is supposed to be monitoring the fallout from the test wouldn’t be impossible.

Finnegan was extremely diplomatic about the whole thing, making it sound like some sort of bizarre accident occurred in which no one was responsible, but Mike grew up swimming in Navy-politics-speak water. It’s his second language. He knows the codes, and he knows that anyone who gets to his level, let alone Finnegan’s, knows that if it happens on your command, it’s your fault.

So, in a very polite sort of way, he gets that no one who knows what actually happened buys the idea that Mane just snapped. They know what happened; they know who ordered it; they just can’t prove it.
He supposes, on the ride home, that it’s comforting to think that his Mom didn’t just go bonkers on this. That she isn’t overreacting.

It’s distressing as hell to think that he never caught wind of it. Okay, sure, he and John didn’t exactly live in each other’s pockets, but still… Not a single clue. If his own brother was pulling shit like this, what has Mike missed about the people around him?

He’s grabbing a bite in Richmond, and decides to see if he can get Tom, his younger brother, on the phone. It’s a beyond long shot, and he’s not even sure what he’d say to him, but… He wants to talk to someone else who knows John.

He hits Tom’s contact number, which doesn’t actually get Tom.

The thing about Tom McGee is this, he’s either right in front of you, in which case you know where he is, or he’s not, and you don’t, and you don’t try to find out, either.

It’s possible he’s at home, in Kyoto, with his wife and kids. It’s not likely.

Commander Tom McGee runs a Navy Seal team. (Probably. He became a SEAL in the ’83. They have no reason to think he stopped being a SEAL.) Mike’s not even sure of what exactly Tom’s rank is, let alone what precisely he does. He thinks, given that Tom’s home is in Japan, that whatever it is he does, he does it somewhere in North East Asia, but that’s an educated guess. Even John doesn’t know what Tom does. “Compartmentalized,” was all John would say about that when they get talking about Tom. (Hell, even Mom, who knows everything, doesn’t know where Tom goes when he does whatever it is he does.)

No luck. The voice on the other end of the phone says, “Commander McGee is in the field now. Would you like to leave a message?”

“Sure. Tell him Mike called, give me a call back when he’s got a minute. Any idea when that minute might be?”

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t say,” the voice says, patient and polite.

Mike nods. “Of course. Thanks.”

“No problem, sir.”

Mike heads back to the car he’s borrowing from the Navy motor pool. He’s been debating showing up for Shabbos and meeting the rest of the family, or heading straight home, or heading home with a stop in Pearl to see John.

Right now he half wants to find John, grab him by the throat, and make him explain how this could have happened. Half of him wants to head on home and see his family. He checks in with Andrews. That makes up his mind for him, no transport going anywhere remotely near home until midnight.

Time to meet the rest of the family, then.

After the week they’ve had, getting to Shabbos feels immensely good.
The weather’s cooperating, beautiful early September, skies blue, air warm, frogs and crickets singing away as the sun slips down. Tim had invited Sarah and Glenn along for Shabbos, so it’s at their place this week.

He’s got Kelly on his hip while he lights the torches on their porch. She’s trying to reach for the flames. “Pretty!”

“They are pretty.” Tim tucks his lighter into his kilt pocket, holds her very securely against his chest, and carefully holds her hand out so it’s near, but not touching, the flame. “Hot! No touching!”

Kelly’s looking startled by how hot the fire is. She’s nodding her head, and he steps back so her palm’s not getting toasted.

“Some pretty things we don’t touch.”

“No touch!”

“Good girl.” He smiles at her, takes a few steps over, pulls his lighter out, begins to light the next torch, and she immediately leans into it, trying to grab the flames. Once more he steps back. “No touching.”

She’s still leaning toward the flame as she says to him, “No touch.”

He sighs, putting her on the porch, kissing the top of her head. “You are your mother’s daughter.”

Kelly looks up at him, not getting that at all, and then stands up on wobbly little feet, and begins to toddle over toward the table to see what mischief she can get into there.

“So, there’s just nothing?” Breena’s asking Abby as they’re laying plates on the table and Abby picks up Kelly (who’s trying to yank the tablecloth off the table).

“No grabbing,” Abby says to Kelly, then to Breena, “Nothing. Single most frustrating case we’ve ever run.”

Breena looks at Tim who’s lighting the grill. “Nothing?”

Tim glares in her direction. “Nothing. I’ve been through their data up and down, nothing. I can’t even see where they messed with their stuff to get to nothing. Abbi’s guys were morons. These guys aren’t.”

Jimmy heads out of the kitchen, platter with salmon fillets on it in his hands. “Even Leon’s pissed. Apparently whoever wrote that note expected Abbi and Gibbs to go in guns blazing again, grab everything before anyone knew they were on the trail, and it didn’t happen. So, now the trail is gone. We get another note, it’s going straight through CGIS or NCIS, no one else lays hands on it.”

Tim’s nodding. “Once again, unlike Abbi’s idiots, everything on this was electronic. From what we can tell there aren’t any paper files to even look for, let alone find.”

“What about those numbers with CGIS? That’s why Abbi got the note, right? There’s still something with that…” Breena leads.
“Her forensic accountant’s best guess is that killing entire quarters of data was to make sure that whatever happened with those accounts vanished. They’re slowly recovering some of the data, but what do you want to bet that there’ll be nothing about those numbers in it?” Tim says.

Breena nods. “How’s Gibbs doing with this?”

They hear a car pull up, and another. “Might find out in a second,” Abby says.

“Hello!” Penny’s voice calling out.

“We’re in the back,” Breena replies.

A second later, they see Penny and Ducky, who they expect, along with a tall, somewhat older fellow, who’s triggering some faint memories for Tim, and looks uncannily familiar to Abby and Breena, who keep staring between him and Tim with wide eyes, but none of them know who he is.

Tim’s still eyeing him, knowing he’s got to know this guy… and then… “Uncle Mike?”

Mike McGee grins at him. “Mom said you’d have room for an extra.”

They do the usual hugs and hellos with Penny and Ducky. Tim and Jimmy shake his Uncle’s hand, while Breena and Abby go for hugs, and then introduce each of the girls, who get appropriate petting and all three of them are declared to be the most darling little girls in the history of little girls. Molly beams at that. It doesn’t mean anything to Kelly or Anna.

Tim’s still staring at him. “Aren’t you in… Japan?”

“That’s Tom’s base. I’m out of Australia.”

“You’re a far flung group, aren’t you?” Jimmy says.

“Dad used to say McGees were like sunshine on the ocean, scattered all over the waves, but leading to one central point.”

“What’s the central point?” Abby asks.

Mike looks around. “Here, I guess. The US. We scattered in the service of this country, so…” he shrugs a bit. Australia is home for him, and has been for a long time. But serving the US is how he got there.

“What brings you here?” Tim asks. He thinks he saw his Uncle… has to be more than twenty years ago.

“Believe it or not, you do. Indirectly, at least.”

Now Tim’s looking at him curiously.

“Penny says it’s okay to talk shop here.”

Tim shrugs at that. “Sarah and Glenn will be here.” He’s indirectly asking his grandmother, who appears to know this story, if it’s okay for them to hear it.

Penny nods. “Should be fine. Sarah knows the rules, and I think Glenn understands, too.”

“Then if you don’t mind, I’ll save the story for dinner.” Mike says with a smile, “I’ve been told it’s a good one.”
If Mike McGee was at all flustered to see his nephew in a kilt sporting a wide array of body art in addition to nail polish, he didn’t show it. Likewise, Abby’s tattoos didn’t seem to bug him. Of course, unlike John, who, as best as Tim could remember, didn’t own clothing that wasn’t a uniform, Mike, off duty, is in a pair of beat-up khakis, flip flops, and a Hawaiian shirt that all but made Tony drool.

They spent several happy minutes reminiscing about Magnum PI. (Apparently, also unlike The Admiral, Mike has interests outside of the Navy, and once upon a time Magnum was one of them.) Mike asking if Tony had ever gotten out to Honolulu, Tony talking about how he’d only been there twice and for less than a day each time. (Tim sees Ziva’s eyes light at that, and wonders if they’re going to try and grab a few days off at Christmas or something. Go see the big island before traveling any real distance is off the menu.)

Mike had spent all of ’88 and ’92 out of Pearl and loves Hawaii. He loves Australia more, because that’s where home is, his wife and kids, and these days, grandkids are there, but when he gets down time, he and Darla make a bee line for Hawaii.

Mike surfs, something else Tim would have never guessed. For all that they’re a Navy family, he’s never seen much proof of his family playing in the ocean. It’s all business, or at least it was in his branch. Tony body surfs, never had the time or lived in a good place to get on a board, so as Jimmy’s flipping salmon fillets on the grill, and Gibbs and Ducky put little girls down to sleep, Mike’s telling him about how Nelson first got to Hawaii in June of ’41. He learned to surf there, and taught his boys how to, too.

“Granted, the Atlantic’s not great surfing territory, but if all you’ve got is a long weekend and one board, it’s a good place to teach some little boys the basics.”

Penny smiles at that memory. “I remember that. You were… seven maybe. I think that board was twice the size of you. He got you and Tom out past the breakers, was holding the board, and you two were both standing on it. I’ve still got a picture of that. Then he let go and you zigged and Tom zagged, and the board took the wave in and both of you got a bath,” she says, chuckling, shaking her head. “That was a good weekend. Couldn’t get you boys out of the water. All si… we all came home with salt and sun blond hair and burned pink.”

“Yeah, Mom. You let us each have bottles of Coke. I remember that.” Mike looks at Tim and Abby who are listening carefully. “That was a big deal. We weren’t allowed to have it very often because it’d wreck our teeth.”

“I wasn’t wrong about that, was I?”

Mike opens and closes his mouth, holding out his hands. “Yes, Mom.” He rolls his eyes a bit, and she gently whacks his shoulder. “You had this big cooler, filled with ice, and Buds for you and Dad, and Cokes for us.”

“That’s right. You and Tom were asleep on your feet by the time we got you back to the motel. Little place, about half a mile from the beach. Didn’t think that we’d need to carry Tom, on top of everything else, back at the end of the day.”

“I remember Dad carrying Tom, and John had that cooler, looking like he was the king of useful
Penny wonders if the mention of John will make everything go tense, but it doesn’t. Mike doesn’t seem to recognize that John’s persona non-gratia here, probably because he hasn’t fully shifted his own idea of who John is.

And a second after that, it doesn’t matter. “God, sorry we’re late!” Sarah calls out as she and Glenn head around the corner of the house to the porch. “The beltway was completely… Uncle Mike? What are you doing here?”

Tim’s stunned that Sarah recognizes Mike. Best he remembers they last saw each other when she was six years old. She kisses and hugs him, then introduces him to Glenn.

“That’s a long story,” Mike says. “I’ll get into it soon. So… can I tell my girls you’ll be around again soon?”

Sarah shrugs. “Don’t have a publishing company paying my advances anymore. Right now, every dollar that’s not paying the rent is going back into the business.” The rest of them are staring at her. She knows Tim gets it, but isn’t sure about the rest of them. “Your advance is supposed to pay for any publicity you want to do. So, every book I’d set aside ten thousand dollars and go on tour somewhere. If someone’s willing to help you with travel expenses,” that’s a somewhat indirect way of saying that if she asked nicely, the Admiral didn’t have any problem with hooking her up with a Navy transport, assuming, of course, there was room. He wouldn’t boot a sailor for her, but if someone was heading that way and had an extra seat… (He never thought about the fact that there was always a free seat on any transport Admiral McGee asked for.) “It’s not too hard to get to Australia and New Zealand, and since most authors won’t go there, because it’s way out of the way and really expensive, you get a lot of happy fans and good will by going. Last three books I made sure to swing down. Aunt Darla, Susan, and Heather,” Mike’s wife, second daughter, and oldest niece, “are all fans, so I crashed with them when I was down there.”

“Oh.” Tim says.

“You write, too, right?” Mike asks.

Tim nods. “But I don’t tour. My day job’s demanding.”

Jimmy pulls the last of the salmon fillets off the grill. “Food’s ready. Show’s all yours, Penny.”

Traditionally, the oldest woman of the house runs Shabbos. So, at the DiNozzo house, that’s Ziva. Likewise, when they’ve done Shabbos at Gibbs’ house, she’s run things, too. Though, possibly Abbi will be taking that job over. At the Palmer house, Breena’s in charge.

And here, at the McGee house, it bounces between Abby and Penny.

So, tonight, Mike is having the rather surreal experience of watching his Catholic Mom light the candles and sing the prayers.

Actually, this whole thing has been surreal.

Yes, last night and this morning, he saw pictures of this whole group together. And in those pictures
they were all dressed up for a wedding. So, he has a collection of images, one of which is labeled ‘Tim.’

He has a much more concrete image of a young teen, pudgy, bad skin, floppy blond hair, cute baby smile, innocent eyes, and twice his body weight in quiet sarcasm bursting out at every opportunity. That’s the real image of ‘Tim’ in his mind.

So, though he had seen a picture, he had built a mental image much more akin to a younger version of John than the guy standing in front of him. For that matter, the first second he was looking at the McGee family on the porch, he honestly wasn’t certain which of the two guys was Tim. Okay, it was unlikely he’d developed dark curly hair and glasses, but the idea that John’s son would have tattoos, black nail polish, or a kilt was something that he couldn’t fathom. Jimmy, physical disparities aside, in jeans and a t-shirt, and manning the grill (who does that at someone else’s house?) more readily fit his image of ‘Tim.’

But, Mom’s long face, Dad’s lips and sandy hair, he can see both of his parents in Tim, (and he can see both girls and Jimmy staring between the two of them, so Ducky’s comment about the two of them looking similar must be true, but Mike really doesn’t see it. He knows what he looked like at 35, and he’s fairly sure the guy in the kilt isn’t it.) so he reworks his idea of who Tim’s supposed to be, and rolls with it.

The prayers have been said, the bread broken, the wine sipped, it’s dinner time. It’s probably last week that they’ll do this after the girls go to bed until summer, so if there was going to be a dinner that didn’t have constant interruptions of the conversation to it, this was a good one.

“Okay, we’re all here and sitting down, what’s got you on this side of the world?” Sarah asks her uncle.

He smiles a little, and shakes his head a bit, then licks his lips, looking chagrined, and says, “Your brother’s really good at his job, that’s what.”

Tim looks pleased. “Glad to hear, but… I still don’t know how I summoned you here.”

“You will.” Mike rubs his eyes and takes a sip of his wine. “Monday morning, just like every other morning, I head in, I check my email. There’s a note from Commandant Jenner in my inbox. Orders for an on the fly evac test,” Tim covers his mouth and starts to laugh quietly. Mike looks at him and nods. He knows why Mike is here now, and the punchline of the story, “and that as of 08:30, i.e. twenty-six minutes from when I’d sat down, I’ve got to have the entire diplomatic corps in the air. It went on from there, where I was supposed to drop everyone off, stuff like that, but I’m not really reading because I’ve got to get everyone moving.

“A standard Evac takes three hours. And that’s supposed to be moving fast. I’m not even sure I can get the heilos fueled up and ready in twenty-six minutes. So, that’s call one. Gotta get 47 people in the air. Twenty-four minutes left. I’ve got my guys running all over the place, grabbing people and things, because if we’re evac-ing, we’re supposed to grab all of the sensitive materials, too.” Mike glares at Tim, no heat in it, but there’s a definite, you did not make my day vibe to it. Tim shrugs.

“The Ambassador, he’s got a meeting with the Prime Minister. He’s not at the consulate, so I’ve got to, personally, when I’m supposed to be running all the rest of this, get my ass over to the residence, grab him, and drag him out of a meeting they’d had on the books for weeks. While booting the Prime Minister out and into the hands of his security people. But, it’s an evac, so, really, I should be
grabbing him and his guys, but they don’t want to budge. You can guess how well that went over, right?”

The rest of the table is grimacing in commiseration.

“Finally I hit the ‘I’m done’ point, and tell Abbott’s guys that they can come with us or get the hell out, but if they weren’t out of the Embassy in five minutes, I’d have them booted out. They decide to go.

“So, now I’ve got two minutes to go, I’m in the air, along with the Ambassador, and two of the other three helios have lifted off, but number four is on the ground because no one can find Tinkerbelle, the Ambassador’s wife’s daughter’s pet Chihuahua.” Now Mike is glaring at the universe in general, because that yappy, beige-colored rat almost killed him on this.

“I’m on the radio with a wailing six-year-old begging for her pet, her mom demanding loudly that they are not going anywhere without said pet, when I lucked out and Lt. Sandi had the brains to lie and say that Tinkerbelle was on her chopper, and that got the little girl and mom calmed down enough that we got them in the air.”

Nods all around, that doesn’t sound fun, but he did manage to pull off the impossible.

“The aircraft carrier that I’m supposed to be plopping everyone on is supposed to be about an hour and a half off, so once we’re in the air, I settle down and start taking stock. We got everyone, besides Tinkerbelle, out. We got almost all of the sensitive information out, too, and had the mock up version of the detonators in place. If that was a real evac, we’re supposed to blow up anything we can’t carry.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a good team,” Gibbs says.

Mike nods. “The best. Since Benghazi, I’ve run a lot of drills. Not like Canberra’s a hotbed of danger, but that’s why we need to be on alert. We’re the perfect ‘soft’ target.”

The rest of the table nods at that, too. They’ve know all about that sort of issue.

“I’m taking stock, getting status reports, making sure we got out clean, and as that’s happening, I’m watching the horizon. Eventually, I can see the ocean. Almost done, get us down, more fuel, then back we go, and I and my team get gold stars for going above and beyond. I go back to what I’m doing, but after a few more minutes I’m noticing my pilots aren’t sounding happy. Another minute and one of them is yelling at me,” The actual yell was, “Where the fuck is the goddamned fucking aircraft carrier?” but Mike’s thinking this is likely a polite group, so that gets edited, “because there are no aircraft carriers in view, and no one is responding to the radio calls.”

Tim’s still silently laughing, his shoulders shaking at this story as everyone else is still staring around, not quiet seeing the connection, yet.

“They’re trying to get anyone on the radio, and I’m calling Jenner, because that email said where the meet up was supposed to be. This would be, thousands of feet in the air, over the Pacific ocean, when I find out that Jenner has absolutely no idea what I’m talking about, that he did not, in fact, order any sort of evac and that I was clearly insane for having done so.”

Mike looks at Tim, who is doing his best to not break into full out laughing, as everyone else is still staring around, not quiet seeing the connection, yet.

“It turns out, because over the course of that day, as early morning hit in time zone after time zone, that Jenner got a lot of those calls, because someone hacked his system, and made it send out fake orders. And when I got here, to talk to Admiral Finnegan about said hack, it turns out that his team
had picked Jenner’s command for the hack, and had figured out how to get into it, and that a certain person who was cced on that test, thought that was a great target and a great attack, and then suggested a tweak that’d be really funny.”

At this point they’re all looking at Tim, who is full out laughing at this. Tim finally pulls it together and says, “I had no idea I’d catch you on this. And it wasn’t just for laughs. Especially on the older guys, a…” he thinks for a moment, “tangible lesson in why this matters is important. Jenner was already known for being pretty lax in his security. This showed him where the holes were, and how badly they could be exploited. The fact that you and fourteen other embassies were scrambling about was just icing on the cake.”

“You made fourteen embassies evacuate?” Breena asks Tim.

He shrugs a bit. “That was the idea. I haven’t gotten the official report back, but from what I can tell, only six of them pulled it off. That joke turned out to be really informative, too. Two called to make sure the orders were real, but they were some of the last ones tested. We’re not sure, but they might have gotten a heads up from embassies in earlier time zones. One didn’t notice the email, period. Their guy in charge just never opened it. Six of you guys got in the air in less than an hour. The other five were still on the ground when they ran out of time. Not fun, but we learned a lot.”

Mike inclines his head at that. Just because it wasn’t a good time, doesn’t mean it wasn’t a good test.

“Does the Ambassador still want your head on a stick?” Tony asks.

“Not mine. Not anymore.” Mike looks at Tim. “Yours on the other hand…”

Tim nods. “Eh… Wouldn’t be the first time I pissed someone off. Guys ranked higher than he is like what I’m doing.”

“Yes. Admiral Finnegan says ‘Hello.’”

Tim nods at that.

“You’ve got another Uncle, right?” Jimmy asks.

Tim nods at that.

“Going to go three for three? Catch all of them?” Jimmy’s got a wicked little glint in his eye at that idea, and several of the others smirk at that.

Mike shakes his head. “No. Don’t mess with Tom. Someone messes with his command, and people die. Mess with me, and I’m annoyed. But Tom doesn’t go out unless someone’s life is on the line.”

“Yeah, we’re not doing that. The idea of these tests is to show where the holes are, not get people killed. Trying to save lives, not end them. Uncle Tom’s… he’s a SEAL right?” Tim replies.

“Best we know,” Penny answers. “He’s not allowed to talk about what he does.”

“Even Lynn doesn’t know,” Mike says.

“His wife,” Penny fills in.

“That’s got to be hard,” Sarah says. The rest of the table looks around at each other. They’ve certainly all had missions and jobs they weren’t supposed to talk about. And in most cases they’ve pulled that off, but… They can usually talk to each other.
“It is hard,” Penny says.

“Part of the job,” Breena adds.

Sarah looks at Glenn and he looks back at her. It’s really clear both of them prefer a life where they can tell the other one what they do.

Tim looks around the table and thinks about the last time one of them had a job they wouldn’t talk about. Off the top of his head, he can’t remember it. Sure, they’ll shut up if someone “outside” this trusted crew shows up, but inside, everything is a safe topic.

“What have you guys been up to this week?” Glenn asks.

He sees heads shaking all along the table. “Speaking of things we can’t talk about,” Abbi fills in.

“Seriously, though, if you feel like someone has eyes on you, get somewhere public and give one of us a call,” Tony adds. He’s mostly talking to Breena, but he wouldn’t put it past whoever ran this thing to get eyes on Tim’s extended family.

Breena nods, she already knows the drill.

This has Glenn and Sarah looking alarmed, though, they aren’t used to this sort of thing.

Ziva says, “It’s a long shot’s long shot, but… This last one was creepy, in a way we do not normally see. No bodies strung up, not gory, but…” she looks at Tony, “‘The willies,’ yes?”

“Major willies,” Tony says, shaking his head. Sarah and Glenn are not looking relieved. “‘X-File-style major conspiracy willies’, not ‘we had to go find someone’s liver in the bathtub willies.’”

That’s when Mike’s eyes go wide. Penny and Ducky had given him a primer on who everyone around him was, but that was a lot of names, a lot of details, and he doesn’t have any of them very firmly connected to any sort of backstory. However, ‘Abbi Borin, current head of CGIS’ finally connects into what he’s been seeing on the news along with conspiracy and he says, “Wait… That blow up with the Coast Guard… was that you guys?”

More nodding.

“And I’m in charge of cleaning up the mess,” Abbi says.

“And it’s a real mess?” Mike asks.

The look she gives him makes it clear that this is a bigger mess than any mess he’s ever imagined seeing.

“That bad?”

“Worse.”

Mike winces. “Sorry.”

Abby shrugs. “We’re cleaning it up. But one domino tips over and knocks over six more, and… we’re keeping our eyes open over here.”

“Sounds like it.”
It’s not too late, but Shabbos is winding down. (Gibbs and Abbi have already headed off, and Glenn and Sarah are moving in that direction, too.) Mike checks his phone (still works as a clock) and sees that he’s got to get moving soon if he’s going to get to Andrews in time.

He says his goodbyes to everyone, and… Jimmy, the one who was cooking at the grill, making him wonder who’s house he was at, says, “I’ll walk you out.”

It’s, at most, one hundred feet to his car, but Mike gets that Jimmy wants to say something to him, so… “Okay.”

So they walk. Ninety-six feet. Almost twenty-five steps. Mike waits for whatever it is Jimmy’s going to say to him. It feels odd. Out of place for a guy who wants to chat with his buddy’s uncle. (Actually that whole scenario feels odd to him.) The last time he felt like this Darla’s Dad wanted to have a chat with him, but this isn’t quite that. There’s almost a protective lover feel to this, which Mike just doesn’t know what to do with.

Once they get to his car, Jimmy quietly says, “On your way home, you’re going to see John, right?”

“I was… but… I don’t know.”

Jimmy nods. “He’s your brother, and you’ve got family memories, and good times, and I’m sure Ducky and Penny told you what happened, but it doesn’t feel real, does it. Doesn’t get you in the guts?”

Mike nods.

Jimmy pulls out his phone. There’s exactly one picture (at least that any of them have, he’s sure the medical files and the police report have a lot more) of Tim beaten to a pulp. Ziva and Tony had pulled together extremely low key 1st birthday party for Kelly a bit after they got back. Probably a month after the attack, maybe three weeks. Jimmy doesn’t remember exactly anymore.

Close enough in time that Tim couldn’t hold Kelly without help, far enough away that most of the bruises were fading.

“This is weeks later.”

Tim’s sitting on the sofa, leg stretched on a pillow, in its cast, arm in the sling, nose still swollen from the break, yellow-green bruises ring his eyes, the scar through his eyebrow scarlet. Abby’s next to him, holding Kelly, helping her open a stuffed black cow.

Mike stares at it in a sort of horrified fascination. He’s understanding what Penny meant by ‘telling people he was in a car accident.’ Mike’s never seen someone that badly beaten up. “He’s healed up well,” Mike finally says.

Jimmy nods at that. Tim has healed up amazingly well. But he’s not done, yet.

“He’s still on pain medication. Nothing prescription, unless a storm is coming in, but first thing every morning, it’s so routine I’m not even sure if he knows he’s doing it, he grabs his pills and swallows them.” It doesn’t occur to Jimmy until much, much later that it might seem odd to Mike that Jimmy knows what Tim does first thing in the morning.
One of the easiest ways to tell if Tim and Abby have an easy morning is if Tim’s got the scar through his eyebrow covered. About three quarters of the time, he does. Little brown eyeliner, a few seconds of smudging it in, and it blends in… okay. The bit that goes above and below his eyebrow needs to fade more before it’ll be invisible.

Today was not an easy morning, so the scar’s visible, shiny and pink. Tim rolled up his sleeves when he got home, like he usually does, so the scars on his hand and wrist are visible today, too. He’s home and chilling out, wearing his kilt, that means bare feet, and though he can, mostly, walk around fine without a crutch now, but his left foot still bears the marks of being crushed under someone’s boot.

Jimmy’s voice is very low as he says, “Every time I look at my… Tim, I see scars. Scars that weren’t there when he left. Scars he shouldn’t have. If you go see John, tell him Jimmy Palmer says ‘Hi.’”

“Will that mean anything to him?”

“Eventually.” Jimmy’s eyes are diamond cold and diamond hard.

Mike nods slowly, realizes that’s a promise, and feels a shiver that’s completely unrelated to the ambient temperature slip down his spine. He’s got no idea what the hell Jimmy and Tim are to each other. That’s not true; he’s got a very good idea, but he’s convinced he’s wrong about that because both of them look perfectly happy with their wives, too. And the girls are happy with each other, so, he’s got to be reading the vibe he’s getting off of Jimmy wrong, but, whatever it is that’s going on, Mike’s certain that John pissed off the wrong group of people.

Big time.

Jimmy gives him a quick wave as he pulls out, and Mike’s last view of Tim’s home involves a man with the coldest smile he’s ever seen looking like he’s imagining a particularly satisfying murder.

Driving to Andrews, Mike decides he doesn’t need to see John.

He does send him a note. Quick email. He feels sick to his stomach when he imagines what happened to Tim and how it worked out, but that doesn’t mean he wants his brother murdered.

*John,*

*Got back east. Saw Mom and Tim. Don’t ever go back. Stay as far away as you can and watch your back.*

*Mike*

He doesn’t expect to get a response from that, and true to form, John doesn’t send one.
Teething

Soooo tired! It’s a text from Breena on his, and Abby’s and Jimmy’s phone.

I hear that. Kelly’s teething. Tim texts back.

Anna, too. Pops up from Jimmy a second later. Woke up every forty-five minutes last night.

His phone buzzes an instant later from Abby Wince. Kelly wasn’t that bad. Every two hours.

Yuck! From Breena.

Tim’s staring at this, and something’s occurring in his sleep deprived mind. Everyone post a number from one to ten.

Tim? Jimmy writes back.

It’ll make sense in a minute.

Four From Breena.

Seven from Abby.

To ten, or can I pick ten? Jimmy asks.

Doesn’t matter at all. Tim replies.


Okay. Breena, you’ve got the short straw. How about you and Molly have a nice, quiet night at your house, and the other three of us will go to mine with the screaming babies and take care of them. Tomorrow, the three of us will draw straws or pick numbers or whatever it is you pick, and whoever wins that gets Molly and a quiet night, and the other three take care of babies, and we’ll do that until teething is over.

Tim’s cracked cases and put away killers to less applause than this idea, which guarantees at least one night of uninterrupted sleep for each adult for the duration of screaming, unhappy babies.

There’s a line from the Godfather, at least, it’s in the book. Tim’s not sure if it’s in the movie. He’s seen the movie, but likes the book a lot better. Ziva agrees with him on that. Tony, of course, thinks the movie is a matter of sheer genius and was directly downloaded by God into Coppola’s head and from there onto the screen.

Needless to say, many pleasant hours have been spent with the three of them amiably arguing about this.

The reason he’s thinking about this, as he cuddles and rocks a very fussy little girl who’s trying to chew through her frozen teething ring, is that there’s a line (in the book at least) about how life is so hard that a man needs two fathers to look out for him. Hence, the Godfather.
He’s thinking, as said fussy little girl whines and complains about her very sore gums, that parenting is so hard you also need co-parents, which is also part of the Godfather concept. Right now, his child’s godfather is walking his own daughter (who is also in an intensely bad mood with her own sore little gums) around the nursery and quietly singing to all four of them.

“Ohhh… Teething, huh?” Heather says when she comes in the next morning and finds a house full of adult zombies and unhappy babies. Then, after a very quick count, showing there are several more people in said house than normal, she says, “Teething sleep over?” looking very confused.

Abby nods, tiredly. “Three kids between the four of us… Wait, have you met Jimmy?”

“Not really.” She’s seen pictures of Jimmy, and has heard mention of him, but hasn’t met him, yet. “I’m Heather.” She extends her hand, and Jimmy shakes.

“Hi. Jimmy Palmer. This is Anna. They decided to double team us with the teething. So, one of us, last night it was Breena, gets to sleep all the way through the night with my oldest daughter, and the other three of us round-robin waking up with crabby babies.”

Tim’s petting a hot mug of decaf, not really drinking it, because it’s not going to do much, so he’s mostly just smelling it and pretending it has caffeine in it. “Tonight Breena’s on teething baby watch, and one of the rest of us gets to go to his house and sleep all night long.”

Heather nods at that. “Sounds like a really good plan.” She picks up Kelly, who is drooling intensely and giving everyone the I’m killing all of you in your sleep look. “Yes, this is an unhappy baby. Orajel not doing the job?”

The three adults laugh hollowly. “It’s good for about ten minutes,” Abby says.

“Ah.” Heather looks at the clock. She knows what time the McGees usually leave for work, and it’s a few minutes after that. They look… fairly ready to go, dressed and whatnot, but they’re moving slowly.

Jimmy catches her looking at the clock. “Yeah, we’ve got to get moving. Okay. Come on, little girl,” he picks up Anna, who is also giving everyone her Once Kelly’s done killing you all, I’m going to set fire to the corpses look, “time for daycare for you.” He’s tired enough that he just walks over and kisses both Abby and Tim (on the lips), and then heads off.

Tim and Abby are tired enough that they don’t notice anything odd about that, either.

Heather, who is not remotely tired, watches that with high eyebrows, but doesn’t say anything.

It’s a little past nine when Tim (and Abby and Jimmy) get a text from Breena. It’s a link with one comment attached, Post your results.

Tim clicks the link, a random number generator. It’s already set for 1 to 250. He clicks the button and
gets 247.

So he posts it, along with, *Good night?*

*Yeah, but I know you guys didn’t have one, so I don’t want to boast.*

Tim nods at that. Right now he’d rather not hear about how Molly went to sleep after one story and Breena tucked herself in and got to sleep for twelve straight hours or whatever it is that happened.

A minute later 198 comes from Abby.

And a few minutes after that, 11 comes from Jimmy along with *Let me guess, high number wins?*

*Sorry, love, yeah. Tim, you’ve got Molly tonight.*

Tim looks up at the ceiling and says, “Thank you!”

Okay, Molly’s a little confused with the rotating parents thing. She expects certain things to happen every night, among them at least one of her parents show up, they eat dinner, and then she, along with her sister, get tubbies and go to bed.

And, yes, she does love the one on one time with an adult, and one on one time with Uncle Tim is cool, too. And, especially given how grumpy her sister is right now, tubby time on her own is fine, but she’s still finding this new arrangement unsettling.

So, in proper toddler fashion she’s ricocheting between over-the-moon-pleased and everything-in-the-world-is-about-to-fall-apart crying.

Tim, who’s not setting any records for patient endurance handles this in the tried and tested method of any parent who’s an inch from ripping his hair out by more or less giving Molly whatever she wants to keep her calm.

Thus, they’re in Jimmy and Breena’s living room, watching the Muppets, eating chicken nuggets and apple juice (he didn’t bother with making anything else for him), followed by a very fast tubby time, an extra-long story time, and when she wandered out of bed fifteen minutes after he put her in there, complaining about her room being scary, he used the last of his second wind to find one of Jimmy’s water pistols, fill it with water, say some magic words, explaining how this special water killed monsters on contact and made any space completely safe. Then he put her back in bed, sprayed down her room, and put the (now empty, he didn’t put much water in it) gun on her night stand.

“Anything scary comes out, you shoot it.”

Molly nods at that, eyes wide. Tim tucks her back in, sings one more lullaby (or tries, he’s a quarter of the way through ‘Goodnight Sweetheart’ when she tells him to stop. Apparently when Daddy and Ducky and Uncle Tony really can sing, Uncle Tim with his less-than-dulcet tones isn’t welcome to the party,) and then finally, she settles down, and he gets to go crash.

If he had been less sleepy, being all alone in Jimmy and Breena’s bed might have felt weird, but all he really has time to do is think *mmmm… soft, comfortable, no crying babies* and he’s asleep.
“I take it the teething party is still going strong?” Heather asks as she heads in on Wednesday. This time only two of the three members of the party look dead on their feet. “You must be Breena,” Heather says to the blonde who is just tired as opposed to exhausted.

Breena nods. “Hi. Yeah.”

“Those little toothies are being stubborn, aren’t they?” Heather says to Kelly, picking her up out of Jimmy’s hands.

There’s a hollow laugh that comes out of all three of the adults as Kelly continues gnawing on a particularly well-chewed teething ring.

“On the upside, this one,” Breena bounces Anna a little, who is also in a pretty bad mood, “has one through, but there are two more little white lines under her gums.”

“Ohhh…” Heather, gently pets Anna’s shoulder. “Poor little girl.”

Abby, dark circles under her eyes, kisses Anna and Kelly, saying, “‘Bout time for us to head off.”

“Yeah. Okay,” Jimmy says, standing up from the kitchen table. That’s the first thing she’s heard out of Jimmy this morning, and as he’s about to kiss Abby goodbye, Heather notices that Breena, who she thinks is Jimmy’s wife, they’ve got matching wedding rings, lays her hand on Jimmy’s arm, stopping him. He blinks, looks at Heather, and says, “Oh. Okay. I’ll help you get the girls in the car,” he says to Breena, followed by, “Then work?” to Abby.

Abby nods back, noticing what Breena just did. She hugs Breena and Anna together, and pats Jimmy’s shoulder. “Not that I don’t love you two, but I’m really hoping not to see you tonight.”

Breena gets that. Abby and Jimmy both have black circles under their eyes, because they’re both on night three of no sleep. “Tim and I can probably take the girls and let both of you guys crash tonight.”

“Please,” Jimmy says.

“I’m seconding that,” Abby adds.

“Okay. We can do that,” Breena says. “You’ll let him know?”


“Molly get off to daycare, okay?” Jimmy asks Tim about an hour later, when he’s in Tim’s office.

Tim, who’s looking a hell of a lot more human this morning, says, “Yeah. Amanda…” he’s not sure if that’s the lady who runs the place’s name, and Jimmy nods, letting him know he’s got it right, “seemed to think that grabbing some buddies and swapping kids if you’ve got a bunch of miserable babies is a great idea.”
Jimmy half-smiles and rubs his eyes, he’s on his second (diet) Caf-Pow of the day, and if he’s whipping out the Caf-Pow, he’s dead on his feet.

“She’s got… two little girls. Think they’re three and seven now. One of them’s with her, the other is in school.”

“She had the look of someone who’d been there and done it.” Tim says, staring at Jimmy who’s way past been there and done that.

Jimmy seems to be thinking along the same guidelines. “Breena volunteered you and her for teething duty, and we’re sleeping tonight.”

Tim nods at that. “Fine by me.” Two parents is the minimum for two cranky babies. With three they were round-robining wake up cries so each one only had to get two out of three cries. One out of three? He’s honestly not sure, which is all anyone needs to know about how tired he is, and that Jimmy and Abby are a step past that.

The more Tim thinks about it, the more he’s thinking two on two makes more sense, everyone is probably better off with one full night off and one night on, than two nights on and one night off.

Jimmy rubs his eyes. “I think I screwed up yesterday.”

Tim shoots him the curious look.

“Did I kiss both of you yesterday morning? In front of Heather? I almost did this morning, but Breena was with it and touched my arm, so…”

Tim winces a little, thinking back. “Yeah, I think you did.”

Both Tim and Jimmy know the rest. If Jimmy had done it both mornings, then he’s just an unusually close friend who’s very affectionate. But with Breena stopping him the one morning, that draws attention to the idea that this is something the outside world isn’t supposed to see.

“She say anything about it?” Jimmy asks.

Tim doesn’t reply with ‘when would she have?’ because he knows Jimmy’s tired enough that he’s not putting together the fact that Tim hasn’t been back to his home since the first kiss happened, so there was no time for him to talk with Heather. He just says, “Not to me.”

“Great.”

“We’ll set fire to that when we come to it. Tonight, you and Abby go to your place, sing Molly a lullaby she likes. Apparently, I don’t measure up; she told me to stop singing.”

Jimmy chuckles a little at that.

“And then both of you get a good long sleep.”

Jimmy gulps down more Caf-Pow. “That sound so good.”

“Yeah, and this sounds better, Friday morning we hand the kids over and head to wherever the girls are taking us and for the whole weekend we can do whatever we want.”

Jimmy sighs, sounding exceedingly happy at that idea. He takes one more sip of the Caf-Pow and tosses the empty cup next to Tim’s wastebasket, as he’s picking it back up and putting it in the trash can he says, “How does Abby do this? I don’t feel less tired. I’m comatose and jittery.”
“I think you need the sugar, too. There’s nothing in the diet version your body can turn into energy.”

Jimmy nods, and heads back toward Autopsy.

On the way home, Tim tries to think through the tactics of this. Heather’s seen a somewhat unusual display of affection. And then she saw another display that got cut short.

Soo… what makes what Jimmy did stand out more… Doing it regularly or having it be a one-time, exhausted, hidden thing…

Another thought hits him, if, after watching Jimmy smooch both of them, Heather had been curious, she could have headed upstairs and noticed that their guest room is in pristine shape. And while it’s true that Abby does make the bed every morning, it’s also true that the guest room looks like it’s a museum piece, their bedroom looks like a place where people actually sleep.

Likewise, there’s literally nothing in the second upstairs bathroom to indicate anyone over the age of 3 has used it in months. But, if he’s remembering right, there are four toothbrushes and three sorts of toothpaste in his bathroom right now, along with two men’s razors, two different men’s shaving creams, and four (though two of them are small) different sets of soap and shampoo/conditioner in the shower.

Of course, even if she hadn’t been curious, she cleans their house, including the bathrooms, so it’s entirely possible that she’s noticed a slight influx of stuff that accompanied Jimmy and Breena sleeping over more often. (Just like if anyone poked around in Jimmy and Breena’s place they’d notice Tim and Abby are keeping things there now, too.)

And, if he’d been thinking about it, it would have hit him that he’s found a two pairs of Jimmy’s underwear in his underwear drawer, and that Heather’s the one who washed them, so… Okay, actually, he and Jimmy are close enough in size that she probably thinks he’s expanding away from just boxers. Maybe… Or maybe, having seen said kiss, and Jimmy, she’s realized that he didn’t suddenly add two pairs of knit boxer briefs to his wardrobe.

Or not.

And, of course, no matter what subtle hints she may or may not have noticed, when the larger bed they ordered shows up in four weeks, she is going to notice that.

God… He just doesn’t know what she’s really seen or figured out.

He sighs. No shame. Act like something out of the ordinary happened, and people take note. Be bold as brass and this is how it is, and they ask a lot fewer questions.

At least, he hopes that’s how this’ll work.

When Tim gets home, he finds that Breena and Anna beat him there. So, they, along with Kelly and Heather, are in the kitchen, chatting.
“Hey.” He’s tired enough that he doesn’t want to cook, and he doubts Breena does, either, so he’s got a bag of Chipotle in hand as he heads in. He takes Kelly from Heather, and for the first time in days, Kelly’s smiling at him.

“Daddy!” He gives her a big, wet kiss on the cheek.

“Hey, baby.” And another kiss. “Tooth finally through?” he asks Heather, while hugging his daughter and heading over to Breena to give her a quick (and much less big or wet) kiss. She looks a little started to see him do that in front of Heather, but she trusts that he’s awake enough that he knows what he’s doing, so she doesn’t try to stop him as he leans in. Anna gets a big, wet, smacking kiss, too, normally that’ll make her giggle, but she’s just glaring at everything right now.

Heather watches that, and he catches her eye with a never seen a guy kiss his friend sort of look. She shrugs a little and replies with, “Not sure if it’s through, she didn’t want me poking around and checking, but she went down at two for her afternoon nap and slept straight through, so it might just be that she’s less tired, either way, she’s been in a way better mood this afternoon.”

“Good girl.”

“’Potle?” Kelly asks, looking at the bag on the table.

“Yes. I’ve got you rice and carnitas,” Tim grins at his daughter.

“’NITAS!” (She likes them almost as much as chicken nuggets.)

He smiles at Heather, cuddling his daughter. “Looks like my sunshine is back.”

Heather smiles back, stroking Kelly’s head. “Yes she is. Regular time tomorrow?”

“That’s the plan. We’ve told you my sister is going to be picking her up Friday night, right?”

Heather nods. “Yeah. Abby said you two were out of town for the weekend?”

“Yep.”

“Just make sure to email me a picture or something ahead of time.”

That makes Tim happy. “No problem.”

Heather waves at them, and she gives Anna a little pet, “Hope you’re feeling better soon.” Anna’s not looking too positive on that. “Breena,” she nods to Breena, warm and friendly, and heads off.

Breena looks at Tim and as soon as she hears Heather’s car pulling out on the driveway, she walks over to Tim and gives him a proper hello kiss. Then she mimics the quick lip to lip kiss he gave her. “So what was that about? Thought we weren’t going to be ‘out.’”

“The first morning, when it was Jimmy, Abby, and I, we’re all exhausted, and Jimmy kissed both of us goodbye before heading out. Apparently you stopped him this morning, and he thinks Heather noticed it, so…”

Breena nods. “Damage control.”

“Yeah.” She’s sitting at the table, Anna in her lap, and he’s laying out dinner for the three of them.
“I’m so used to her, the fact that there’s this outside person who is in my house ten hours a day five
days a week, who cleans and washes our laundry didn’t occur to me. I’ve got no idea what she’s
picked up on.”

Breena pulls the diaper bag toward her, rooting around for Anna’s bottle. “So… should I be sleeping
in the guest room tonight?”

Tim shakes his head. “No. I’m thinking we just act like this is our normal life, nothing we’re
ashamed of, and…”

“Hope for the best?”

“Yeah. There’s a non-disclosure clause in her contract, and I don’t think I’m famous enough for the
scoop to be worth breaking that contract.”

Breena smirks at that. “No one’s paying top dollar for Thom Gemcity’s dirty little secrets?”

Tim hasn’t seen a shot of himself in his kilt, eyeliner, or nail polish, let alone beaten to a pulp in any
of the gossip mags, both of which he assumes would pay something for that kind of shot. “Doesn’t
look like it.”

Tim’s tired, but not completely wiped out by the time they’ve got dinner done and little girls put to
bed. Breena’s looking a step beyond that, but not exhausted.

“So, you want down time, or just go straight to bed?” he asks.

“Normally, I’d want some more downtime, but the last two nights her longest sleeping stretch has
been this first one, so I’m going to bed.”

“Fine by me.”

“You going to stay up?”

“I’m checking my email, making sure nothing’s blown up in the last two hours, and then sleeping
sounds good to me.” Just because he’s tired doesn’t mean work stopped, and especially with a
vacation coming up, he’s trying to stay on top of everything.

Nothing did blow up, so it’s a few minutes before eight as he’s tossing his clothing in the hampers,
watching Breena get settled for the night. He slips into bed next to her, and realizes this is the first
time the two of them are attempting to sleep together, settle in for the night and sleep.

They’re sort of scooting around, looking for something that works. Tim sleeps on his side normally,
and usually he’s very happy to have a woman in front of him to snuggle into. Breena usually sleeps
on her stomach, her chin on Jimmy’s shoulder, her arm across his chest.

So, Tim’s looking for his spooning partner, and Breena’s looking for the body she uses as a pillow.

“How’d you do this last night?” he asks.

“Jimmy was in the middle, I was in my usual spot, and Abby was on her side, back against his side,
on the other. What did you three do?”

“He was on his back, Abby on her side, leg over his, arm across his shoulders, and I was spooning
Breena sits up, and begins rearranging pillows. She sticks one next to her, and one on Tim’s far side. “This one’s Jimmy. That one’s Abby, and you and I back to side.”

Tim nods, spoons the “Abby” pillow, feels Breena warm at his back, decides that this will work, and thankfully, falls asleep quickly.

Which is good, because Anna’s longest sleep is three hours.

He’s eyeing the non-decaf coffee the next morning, feeling like death warmed over. Breena’s not exactly looking perky, either. Last night was better. Kelly slept through, and Anna only woke up three times.

“I feel like I used to be able to do this longer and bounce back faster,” Tim says, not making himself a cup of coffee.

Breena nods. “You know, I can remember, back in college doing four back to back all-nighters, not getting more than two hours of sleep a day, and then crashing.”

Tim shuffles over to the fridge. “Eggs?”

“Sure.”

“Eggs!” At least one of them is feeling good. Even with a fussy, unhappy, wailing nursery-mate, Kelly slept through the night.

He gets cooking while Breena wrangles breakfast for Anna. As he’s doing it a horrifying thought comes to mind. “Are we going to be able to go if she’s this uncomfortable?”

Breena’s eyes go wide, and she also looks wrecked. Part of what’s keeping them all going is the idea that come tomorrow morning they’re heading off for alone time, with lots of sleep and no small, crying babies. But, it’s not exactly fair, or kind, to plop said crying baby in Ducky and Penny’s laps and skip off into the sunset. Beyond kind and fair to the adult babysitters, they also aren’t the kind of people who can leave an unhappy baby without Mom and Dad around.

“Oh…” Breena looks crushed, because the right answer is no, they aren’t going to give Anna in this bad of a mood to Ducky and Penny.

“Let’s hope that last wake up, 2:00 to 3:15, “was that tooth popping its way through.” Anna had been VERY unhappy through that last one, and finally, after lots of gnawing and crying and being walked around, where Tim or Breena walked her until one of them was ready to drop, and then handed her off to the other, until finally, she didn’t wake up screeching when Tim put her in the crib. From there, all three of them dropped, and no one moved until Kelly started chirping at her usual wake up time. “Maybe you two’ll get the first night on your own…”

Tim’s shaking his head at that. An idea hits, he still doesn’t know where they’re going, but… “Can we take her with us? Penny and Ducky can take Molly, Sarah’ll take Kelly, and we’ll keep Anna…”

“We could…” Breena’s looking at Anna, who’s not very happy right now, but doesn’t seem to be in as bloody of a mood as she had been. With any luck she’s just tired and not in pain. “Kind of defeats the purpose…”
“Us just going on our own does, too.”

Breena nods, tired. “Don’t have to decide until tomorrow morning.” The plan is, instead of heading off tonight and grabbing every possible second together, that they’d wrap up work, go home, with their girls, have a usual night, then tomorrow, Kelly would have a normal day with Heather, Anna and Molly would do their usual daycare routines, and at the end of the day, they’d head off to their respective babysitters. Abby, Tim, Jimmy, and Breena would head off to wherever it is after the girls get settled in with their normal daytime routines, and then home again Monday a bit after noon.

Not exactly a lavish amount of time on their own, but realistically, that’s as much as they can possibly grab. It’s not fair to little girls to run off any longer if they don’t absolutely have to.

“Tell me you’ve got good news,” Abby says as Tim heads into the lab an hour later.

He kisses her. “You’re looking perkier.”

“I love sleep. I don’t know how I did so many years without it.” He’s feeling the same way.

“The good news is that Kelly slept through the night,” he’s aware of the other techs in the lab, so he doesn’t give her an update on Anna, because he doesn’t know if they know the four of them have been playing musical babies. Then he realizes that’s stupid, because he’s already telling her about something she would know if she’d been home.

“And Anna?” she asks, taking the issue out of his hands.

“Only three times, but the last one was a killer, she was yelling for a full hour.”

“Oh, poor baby.” Tim’s about to go off on poor Tim and poor Breena, but the part of his brain that isn’t exhausted reminds him that while they’re annoyed, they aren’t the ones in physical pain and that Anna and Kelly aren’t screaming at them for kicks.

“Are you guys sure she doesn’t have an ear infection or something?” Corwin asks. “When my girls were little they’d start teething and like clockwork, they’d get an ear infection, the tooth would poke through, no problems, but they’d still be yelling about the ears.”

Tim sighs. “I think Jimmy’s checked, but we’ll mention it to him.”

Corwin nods. “This swapping thing is cool. My sister’s kids are less than a month younger than both of mine, and I wish we’d had the brains to do that. Instead of just two of us dead on our feet, we had what felt like months of all four of us dragging along.”

“Hopefully we’re near the end. Anna crashed after that last one and doesn’t seem like she’s in such a bad mood.”

“One more night of sleepover?” Corwin asks them.

Tim thinks it’s really weird to have him checking into this but… “Haven’t made our plans, yet.”

Corwin nods, watches them for a second, and then heads into the auxiliary room to mess around with something.

Tim quietly says, “If Anna’s not really better that might put a wrench in the weekend.”
Abby nods looking resigned. “Breena’s already texted me. Right now the tentative plan is you and Jimmy with Anna, and Breena and I’ll take Kelly and Molly.”

Tim’s a bit confused on that set up, and it shows on his face.

Abby answers the unspoken question. “If we can go, it’d be nice for the people who know where we’re going to be awake enough to drive safely, right?”

Tim nods at that, it makes sense.

“Likewise, you want the people who are packing alert enough to remember everything, right?”

Tim nods at that.

“Molly and Kelly’ll be at our place, and you and Jimmy and Anna’ll be at theirs.”

“Okay.”

“So,” Tim asks as he heads into Jimmy’s house.

Jimmy’s already changed out of his work clothing and is sitting on the living room floor with Anna, who is knocking over the blocks he’s piled up, and is smiling at him.

Tim sighs, sitting next to them, setting the bag of food on the floor, kissing Anna’s head. “You’re looking happier.”

“If you pry her mouth open you can see three brand new teeth.”

Tim stacks up three blocks. “I’ll take your Daddy’s word for it. You don’t want me messing around with your mouth, right?”

Anna looks at him, somewhat perplexed and then giggles as she whacks the blocks to the other side of the room. Jimmy and Tim look at them, not really interested in getting up and walking all the way (nine feet) to the far side of the room to fetch them. Unlike a certain little girl, they did not get multiple naps today.

Dinner and bedtime go smoothly. Anna’s pooped, too, so with a very quiet, very low key night she drifts off nice and easy.

Which means it’s 7:30, and Tim and Jimmy are on their own.

They’re tired. Yes, Jimmy’s in better shape than Tim because he got to sleep last night, but one night of sleep out of four doesn’t make for a well-rested person. Tim’s in the same boat, but a bit further back because he didn’t get a full night last night.

“Crash or do you want some down time?” Jimmy asks.

Tim’s standing in the middle of the hall outside of Anna’s room staring into space. He blinks, brain slowly moving again, and says, “Uh…”
Jimmy wraps an arm around his shoulder and points him toward bed. “Brush your teeth and crash. I need a bit more downtime before I can sleep.”

Tim nods slowly and heads to bed.

He wakes up a little when Jimmy comes to bed (maybe two hours later, he’s turning in early, too) just enough to scoot over a bit from the middle of the bed, and roll a little so he’s spooning Jimmy’s side.

It’s possible Jimmy muttered something about, “You’ll snuggle anything with a pulse, won’t you?” But Tim isn’t awake enough to notice. Likewise, he doesn’t much notice getting his forehead kissed.

He does notice (hours later when his bladder, but not, thank you God, Anna, wakes him up) that it feels okay to stumble three quarters asleep back to bed, flop into it, scoot forward and rest his chin on Jimmy’s shoulder, arm across his chest.

He’s not Abby, or Breena, but… it’s still good.
EPIC

Chapter Notes

Winchester, VA is real. I've never been there, but it looks like an awesome little vacation spot. The restaurant they're at is 50/50 Taphouse, and the ice cream comes from Red Fox Creamery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Friday morning. Texts sent between the Palmer and McGee homes show that all little girls have slept through the night and appear to be in good order.

So, with a sense that at any minute they may be rushing back to DC, they head off on their honeymoon.

Breena’s driving. Jimmy’s in the front seat, next to her, and Tim and Abby are both dozing in the back seat.

“How long until we get there?” Jimmy asks, wondering what the girls could have possibly come up with. The whole back of his van is filled with stuff.

They’ve been on the road for almost an hour. Breena glances at her phone’s GPS. “Probably another hour.”

“We’re not going camping, are we?” He and Tim didn’t pack, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t notice two inflatable mattresses in the back.

Breena smiles.

“There aren’t any tents back there.” He’d also noticed that when he was filling up the gas tank.

“Then I guess we aren’t camping,” Breena says. “Besides, do you really think either Abby or I would set up a romantic weekend somewhere with no showers or bathrooms?”

In that no showers or bathrooms is basically Abby’s idea of hell, and that she has not, ever, to his knowledge, voluntarily camped anywhere, that makes a lot of sense.

“Get a nap,” she says to Jimmy. “We’ll be there soon enough.”

So he settles back to snooze.

He wakes up when he feels the car stop and the engine turn off. Opening his eyes, feeling pretty out of it, Jimmy’s wondering where the hell they are. He’s not seeing anything that looks like a place they may be staying.

In fact, they appear to be on the main street of some little town in… He’s not sure, given they were
heading west and the clock tells him an hour’s gone by, they’ve got to be in Virginia or Maryland, but…

He’s looking around, stretching a bit. Behind him Abby and Tim are doing basically the same thing.

“Everyone feeling all nice and refreshed?” Breena asks her groggy passengers.

Jimmy hears some yawning from the backseat, along with Tim saying, “I don’t see a hotel.”

“Because there isn’t one.”

Though Jimmy does notice there’s a small shop next to them with pictures of cabins in the windows and a sign that says LakeFront Rentals.

“Okay, out you two go,” Breena says to Jimmy and Tim. “We’re going to grab the keys, and get everything set. You’ve got a grocery list on your phone, and there’s supposed to be a store two blocks over. We’ll pick you up in an hour or so.”

“All right…” Jimmy says, getting out of the car, Tim following.

“Uh, two blocks in which direction?” Tim’s staring around. “This is basically Stillwater.” He checks his watch. “There’s no way we’re in Pennsylvania, but…”

Jimmy nods, looking around more, this does look a lot like Gibbs’ hometown. Slow traffic, small shops, brick sidewalks with trees every twenty feet.

Breena checks her phone, and then points to a cross road. “Take a left. Two blocks down.”

So Jimmy and Tim head off in search of groceries, wondering where the hell the girls have taken them.

---

Tim cheats. As soon as they turn the corner, he takes his phone out and uses it to find out where they are. “Winchester, Virginia.”

Jimmy’s looking around. It really is a rather pretty little town. And they appear to be in the middle of some sort of historic district. A brick street lined with stores right off a sidewalk, and more small trees. It’s got a very Normal Rockwell feel to it.

Further down there are old churches, more “modern” looking streets, but the stores with non-chain names continue to line those streets.

They do, finally, locate a grocery store. Tim shakes his head a bit as they head in. “This place would give Gibbs déjà vu.”

“Jack’s store?” Jimmy asks, looking around at the tiny local grocery.

“Looked a lot like this. So, what’s on the list?”

Jimmy’s looking through his phone and finds the note Breena left him. “Three days of staples. Some goodies. Looks like wherever they got has a kitchen.”
“Wherever they got” is a cabin. It’s way the hell off the beaten path, one small street after another, and another, and then a dirt track, leading to a small square of logs with a porch on the back and side. There’s no shot of them making too much noise and disturbing any neighbors. That’s intentional, something they were looking for when they decided on going somewhere together. It’s one thing if you’re a loud couple in a hotel. A loud foursome seemed liked it might be asking for trouble they don’t want.

Abby gets out of the van and stretches a bit, then heads to the back porch. Breena follows her, both of them standing, leaning against the railing, looking out. “Exactly like the website said,” Abby says, happily, looking at a small pond nestled between a copse of trees.

Breena looks to their left, seeing the back of the cabin, and the reason they got this particular cabin, the solarium.

It’s a fairly small room, ten by ten, tops, with glass walls and ceiling, just a pleasant space off the living room to look out over the lake and see the stars. Right now, as they’re heading in, it’s got some chairs and a sofa in there.

It won’t for long.

The inflatable mattresses are for that room. Sleep with a view of the moon and stars, but not have to deal with mosquitos? Sounded perfect to both of them.

Before they start moving furniture around, Abby and Breena poke around a bit. It’s exactly what the website said it would be. Small. Can’t be more than 800 square feet. One bedroom, one bathroom, kitchen, living room/solarium. And rustic, wood walls, wood floors, mostly wood furniture, only conspicuously modern thing in sight is the entertainment center. (The kitchen’s newish… Not more than ten years, and has all of the basics.)

The bedroom is at least half of the cabin, with a nicely large and springy mattress on the bed. They’ll probably put that to good use, too. Bathroom has all the amenities. The other half of the cabin is one large space, kitchen gear on one end, a breakfast bar separating it from the living space, and the solarium on the far end. A porch wraps around half of the cabin, stairs leading down to a small path that heads to the lake. There’s a grill, comfy-looking porch furniture, and a hot tub on the porch.

There’s a TV, Wi-Fi, a dock for a smart phone so you can play music, a stone fireplace in the wall between the bedroom and living room, so you can see the fire from both sides, and enough cooking gear to make a decent meal.

All in all, everything they could need.

Okay, not *everything* but Abby and Breena packed carefully to take care of *that*. All that’s left is bringing all of it in. So they do.

Breena eyes the solarium, it’s one step down from the main living room, so while she can Abby can
grab the furniture and move it out of there, she knows Tim will want to Gibbs smack her if she has four months pregnant Abby lifting half of a sofa. So she starts shoving the sofa to the far edge of the solarium, and Abby grabs the first of the inflatable mattresses.

“What are we starting with?” Abby asks. They’ve been talking about what’s on the menu for this weekend for the whole time they’ve been planning it.

Breena gets the sofa flush against the glass wall, and grabs the first of the chairs while thinking. “Fantasy play or rainbow party… Mmmm…”

“Sheets’ll be a mess after the rainbow party.”

Breena shrugs. They brought two sets of extra sheets, for a damn good reason. The one thing this place doesn’t have is a washer or dryer.

“Will it be a problem if the sheets get stained?”

Abby rolls out an inflatable mattress, shaking her head no. “I got some black ones, specifically for this. Won’t matter if the lip tar sits on them for a while.” She plugs in the pump and flicks it on. A whirring sound fills the cabin as she gives Breena a hand shoving the other chair out of the way.

Breena’s looking around, there’s only one small floor lamp in here. She supposes that makes sense, too much light in here and all you can see is reflections of who’s in the room. But, one light means it’s not great for getting pictures or seeing what you’re doing at night, so…

“Rainbow party first. Take advantage of the light.”

Abby smiles up at her, turning off the pump. “Test it out, see if it’s firm enough?”

Breena flops onto the mattress and sighs. “It’s good. You get the other one set, and I’ll go find the sheets.”

They find the guys wandering around the old town, carrying several bags. Apparently the grocery store was very basic, (Milk, eggs, butter, sure, they had that, steaks, wine, not so much.) so they’d had to hunt down a butcher and wine shop, to get the “meat” and “drinks” that Breena had put on their list.

Breena’s peeking into the bag from the butcher shop, seeing white paper wrapped packages, as Tim opens the door to the trunk, and asks, “So what kind of meat did you get me?”

Jimmy looks tickled by that question, quickly glances around, shifts one step over so his back is to the rest of the parking lot, and then he puts Breena’s hand on his crotch and says, “I brought all the meat you need with me.”

This resulted in a massive giggle attack from the girls, and Tim dryly saying, “Yep, everything in that bag is for me,” as soon as they calmed down, which set them giggling again.

Finally, they managed to get everything into the car, and Tim asks, “So, now what?”
“Lunch!” Abby says, emphatic. She’s hit the part of her pregnancy where she’ll eat anything that isn’t nailed down, and it’s been a while since breakfast.

So, in search of lunch they go.

They aren’t hurting for options. And, if they don’t feel like cooking, this neighborhood will be happy to take care of them for breakfast, lunch, dinner, dessert and snacks.

They pass a creamery, and Abby’s looking at it longingly… “Mmmm... Dessert.”

“Real food first,” Jimmy adds. He’s getting hungry, and it’s unlikely a place that just does ice cream has much for him.

“Sushi?” Tim asks as they pass a sushi bar.

Breena shakes her head, and it occurs to him they brought a cooler along. A cooler that now has their groceries in it, but was empty when they opened it up. Which means there was likely something in it when they headed this way, something no longer in it. Something that is probably sitting in a refrigerator, perhaps waiting for them for later today.

And, given that little head shake, it might be something of a sushi nature.

He approves.

They walk another fifty feet, just easing along, looking at stores and restaurants, enjoying the brilliant September blue sky, when the scent of delectable grilled beef wafts toward them.

“Burgers!” Abby says. “Oh yes. That! We are having that.” She turns so she’s facing the other three, and takes Tim and Breena by the hands, and begins pulling them toward that scent. “Come on, Jimmy!”

Fifty burgers on the menu and fifty beers on tap. Tim’s not much of a beer guy, but he’s perfectly happy with this situation.

Plus, Pear Cider, oh yes, that’s just lovely. (Breena’s Orange Ginger Beer is excellent, too. He’s going to be investigating what’s involved with laying hands on these for future grilling dates at his place.)

They settle in, get drinks, and get to talking and relaxing.

They get a text from Heather during lunch. For a second, they all tense, wondering if this is the ‘come on back’ note, but it’s not. It’s a thirty second clip of video of Kelly blissfully gnawing away on a kosher dill pickle while sitting in the baby seat on the grocery cart.

*New teeth in action.* Tim chuckles at that, showing it to the other three, and then texts back.

*You got her a pickle?*
We were getting groceries, and she saw it and wanted it. Didn’t think she’d go for it, but she’s loving it.

Breena eyes Jimmy’s pickle spear on Tim’s plate. Tim didn’t precisely steal it. Jimmy thinks they’re gross, so he wasn’t heartbroken to give it away.

Tim has already eaten his with great enjoyment, and had been telling them about Abby feeding him the deep fat fried ones while starting in on Jimmy’s. (Cue Jimmy wincing.)

“Your daughter.” Breena says, watching the clip with a smile.

Tim smiles. “Let’s see if she gets my love of games.”

“And words,” Abby adds. “I’d love to see another poet in the family.”

“She’ll write the songs, and Molly will sing them,” Breena says.

“Punk rock goth and the princess in concert,” Jimmy says with a laugh. It’s too early for Kelly to have clothing preferences, but Molly does, and Molly loves all that is pink, fluffy, and sparkly.

“I think Kelly’s going to be into fluffy and pink, too. Look at the way she watches Molly,” Breena says.

“Is that because she likes the outfits, or because she likes Molly?” Tim asks.

“Both, I think. Anna’s going to be the wildcard,” Abby says.

“How can you tell?” Jimmy asks.

“I just can. Call it Goth-dar. Give her fourteen years and she’ll have purple hair and a taste for plaid skirts.”

“Lord have mercy,” Jimmy says with a sigh.

Abby looks affronted. “No Goth kids for you?”

“No. I’m fine with that. It’s all the punk-ass, death fetish, mopey Goth boys I’m going to have to look out for. I was a teen boy, I remember them, and the Goth ones… Jimmy rolls his eyes. “Be nice to have a kid who smiles at least on occasion in my house.”

Abby inclines her head. The death fetish guys certainly covered a lot of the other Goths she knew in high school and college. “Some goths like geeks,” Abby says, smiling at Tim.

“Yeah, well, if a fifteen-year-old version of me shows up to date your daughter, you should still keep an eye on him.”

“Really?” Breena raises an eyebrow. “I would have thought any girl with you was perfectly safe.”

“I wasn’t going to do anything she didn’t want to do. Never did. Anything her father didn’t want me to do is likely to have been a different story,” Tim says with a smile. “Same for you, right?”

Jimmy nods. “Never pissed a girl off by going too far, or even trying. Would have pissed off several dads if we’d gotten caught.”

Tim looks a little sheepish. “And, um…” he licks his lips, “especially back then, part of the allure of Goth girls was the idea that they might have… broad views of what they’d like to do.”
Abby slaps him on the shoulder. “Are you saying Goth girls are easy?”

“I did not, in fact, say that.” He smiles at her, eyes sparkling and trailing over her. She’s not particularly Goth today. She’s got on a cute blue sundress, though the tats, boots, and wrist cuff do edge it that way. He gives her a quick kiss, and takes a sip of his drink, feeling just happy and fun and mellow all over. “I said that Goth girls have a reputation for being kinky.”

Now she’s just staring a mixture of amused and appalled on her face. “Is that… Were you thinking that when we went on our first date?”

Tim’s silently laughing and shaking his head. “No comment.” He licks his lips, smiling, and then says, “But given how our second date went, if I had been thinking something like that, I wouldn’t have been wrong.”

Abby opens and closes her mouth, mock appalled at him. She’s playing with him, both of them enjoying this. “I can’t believe you went there.”

“Only way I got there was you saying, ‘yes.’” He’s looking downright cocky as he says that. “Actually, if I’m remembering right, you were the one asking, and I was the one saying ‘yes.’” He’s full on grinning at that, and kisses her again, then steals one of her fries, popping it in his mouth. “These are good!” (He intentionally did not order fries, a burger with apple bacon compote and cheddar cheese is more than enough food for lunch.)

“And what were you saying ‘yes’ to on your second date?” Breena asks, nibbling her own burger, a combo of burger, sautéed onions, mushrooms, and peppers, plus provolone cheese.

Tim looks around the restaurant, it’s fairly busy, and no one appears to be paying attention to them. They’re in the back, corner booth, so it’s not like a lot of people can see them, but he keeps his voice low, and scoots a bit closer to Breena as he says, “She was in my lap, legs around my waist, and we were kissing,” his eyes flick to Abby, and she nods, that’s how she remembers it, too, “and I was wearing a button down, jeans, belt, jacket. Standard, casual second date in cool weather wear. I’d driven up, and she was showing me around DC. We did the Smithsonian, right?”

Abby nods. “Air and Space museum. You got talking about jet packs and went on for like an hour.”

“It wasn’t that long.”

Abby raises an eyebrow at him and then winks. “You’re just lucky that I like jet packs, too.”

“Anyway, bumming around DC went well. We’re back at her place. Jacket came off when we got there. She was playing with the top button on my shirt, and asked if I was okay with this.”

“And you said, ‘Yes.’” Abby adds.

“Because I really really was. You undid the button, kissed my clavicle, and then your hands slid down my chest to my belt, and you tugged on the tongue a bit, and said, ‘How about this?’”

Abby’s nodding. She hadn’t been sure how much experience Tim had, and had underestimated how old he was by a few years, too. (He was really excited about the jet packs, and that let her see the kid that wasn’t too far under the surface. It also made her think he was twenty-one or two instead of a month shy of twenty-five.) She wanted to make extra sure that if she was jumping a virgin on his second date that he knew what he was agreeing to. “And you pulled me even closer, kissed me harder, and said something like, ‘God, please, yes!’”

Tim nods. “That sounds right.”
Jimmy’s voice has dropped too, as he says, “ Doesn’t sound kinky, yet.”

“It wasn’t, then,” Abby says, happily chewing a bite of her burger (Swiss and remoulade). She swallows and then says, “I got his shirt off, and he was looking adorable, but nervous and tense, so I asked about the tattoo on his arm.”

“And we spent like twenty minutes talking about the code on it.”

“Ummm… That’s your definition of kinky?” Jimmy adds, bite of his burger (pineapple, sriracha, grilled red peppers) on his fork, en route to his lips.

Tim glares at him a bit, and Abby says, “You don’t talk code in bed?”

Jimmy glances around the restaurant. No one’s watching, so he leans across Breena and Tim, pulls Abby close to meet him, and kisses her soundly. “As you well know, no I don’t.”

Tim watches them kissing pretty much in his lap, his hand on Abby’s shoulder, and then says, when they break apart, “I wasn’t, either. We were in your living room on the floor. My back was against the sofa. You didn’t even have a bed then.”

“I had a bed!”

“Yeah, your ‘box sofa bed.’ Putting a custom mattress into a coffin doesn’t make it a bed.”

Abby giggles at that.

“So, that’s the kink? First time you two did it was in a coffin?” Breena asks.

Tim thinks about that for a second, realizing that, yes, that probably counts as kinky, too. “That, too.”

Abby’s grinning widely. “I can still remember the look on your face when Gibbs asked if you slept in the coffin.”

“Gibbs asked?” Jimmy says.

Tim shakes his head. “Long story. And for the record, I knew it was a coffin. Not when we were getting into it, because you had the room pitch black, but I woke up in it the next morning, so the secret was kind of out. If you wanted to call it a box sofa bed, fine by me. No way in hell I was going to argue about that. I was giving you that look because apparently you told everyone else it was a coffin.”

“Uh huh.” Abby does not appear to be buying that. “You looked really stunned at the idea that it was a coffin.”

“I was looking stunned at the idea that Gibbs knew you slept in one.”

“Okay, this is cute and all, but I’d like to know what you meant by, ‘too,’” Breena cuts in, shutting down squabbling over whether or not Tim knew it was a coffin ahead of time.

“Too…” Tim says with a quick glance at Abby, and a little smile lighting his face. “Okay. She gets me out of my shirt, and we get talking about the tattoo, and some of hers, as well, and I start to relax.”

Abby squeezes his hand. “We were making out again. I was showing off my back tattoos, and I asked him what he wanted to do. Which pretty much stopped you dead.”
Tim looks mildly irked as he takes a sip of his cider. It had stopped him because her question had confused the hell out of him. “I was kneeling behind you in my shorts tracing your cross with my tongue, I thought it was pretty obvious what I wanted to do. Threw me for a loop getting asked, not like I was going to say, ‘Let’s knit.’”

Breena and Jimmy laugh at that.

“Uh huh.” That’s not precisely how Abby remembers it. “So, I manage to get across that yes, I know what he wants to do, and I’m asking about how. And he starts blushing scarlet. It was so cute.”

Tim and Jimmy share a look about how that’s very much not a situation when a man wants to be thought of as cute, but neither of the girls mind.

“I didn’t think he’d answer. Figured that with as hard as he was blushing, he’d just look away and then kiss me or something. And I was half right, you did look away—“

“Was checking to see if there was anything handy that’d fit the bill. Nope.”

“And then you stuttered your way through asking if I had any rope or cord.”

Tim doesn’t remember himself stuttering, but he probably did. Just saying it was a thousand times more bold than he’d ever imagined being, managing to do it smoothly was probably way too much to ask of Pre-Probie McGee.

“And you told me you had some ribbons you used for tying your hair, and asked if they’d work. And I said yes, so off you went to get them—“

Abby smiles at that memory. “And I found out that all those years as a Boy Scout paid off big time.”

“You tied her up the first time you got together?” Jimmy hadn’t heard that bit before.

Tim nods. Abby does, too. “Tied me up, helped me stand, showed me he could do more with those pouty little lips than talk, and then coffin-time.”

Tim smiles, those are good memories. He kisses her again. “Fourteen years ago in… November?”

Abby nods. “Yep.” Then she looks to Jimmy and Breena. “Haven’t heard about your first time.”

Jimmy and Breena look at each other, smiling, and then look at the almost empty lunch dishes.

“Over ice cream?” Breena asks.

“Oh yeah. Ice cream, stroll around a bit, then back to…” Abby doesn’t fill in where they’re going, but both girls share a pleased look.

“You’re really good at that.” Breena says as Tim licks his cone. They found the creamery again easily, and spent several pleasant minutes debating what to get. (Tim had spent a few minutes debating if he should get anything period. Lunch was probably enough food. Abby saw him staring at the strawberry ice cream and quietly said to him, ‘Trust me, you’ll work it off before dinner.’ So he ordered it.)

“Good at what?” he asks, still licking, running his tongue around the base of the scoop of ice cream, making sure to get any possible drips, as they stroll down the pedestrian mall.
“That,” she says, pointedly watching him eat his ice cream.

Tim rolls his eyes, but Jimmy wraps an arm around his neck and says, “We were going to wait until later to tell you.”

Tim gets the joke, and ups the ante, elbowing him. “Shhh…”

“No, we should tell them,” Jimmy’s looking mock serious and takes a quick lick of Tim’s cone. (Jimmy didn’t get anything. They didn’t have any sugar free options and he didn’t want to mess with his blood sugar today.)

The girls know he’s fooling with them, but they’re enjoying it. “You saying you two got some practice in last night?” Abby asks.

“Well, it’s been a while, you know?” Tim says. “The only action I’d seen since Sunday was my right hand.” Maybe the girls got some loving in without them, but he knows that every night since Sunday he’s been hitting the pillow to sleep.

“Aren’t you a lefty?” Jimmy says, eyeing Tim holding the cone in his left hand.

“Yeah. I was tired and multitasking. Shower, soaping up, right hand PT, blow off a little steam, all at once.”

Both Abby and Breena think that’s hilarious.

Breena watches Tim take another lick of his cone. “So…”

“It was so hot! Tim’s a natural.” Jimmy says. “I got video.”

They still know he has to be kidding, but both girls would really like to see that video.

“I told him that’d you’d be pissed if you didn’t see it. Told him we should wait, but, he’s whiny when he’s horny.” Tim kisses Breena. Abby notices that this time he doesn’t check the crowd before doing it. A big part of why they came way the hell out here was that no one here knows them. “I don’t know how you put up with him.”

Breena giggles at that.

“Whiny?” Jimmy sounds horrified by that. They’re just two anonymous couples walking down a street, goofing off, messing around. So far no one’s looking at them, and Jimmy would like to keep it that way, so his voice drops a few decibels as he says, “I’ll have you know that I’m a freaking saint when it comes to putting up with blue balls.”

“It was worth it,” Breena says, kissing him.

“Not saying it wasn’t, but, Lord Tim, you have no idea.”

Tim kisses Abby, and she lightly licks some of the ice cream off his lip, then offers him a spoonful of her double chocolate cherry. When he pulls back he says, “You know, I’m not heartbroken about that, either. Of the things I don’t have an idea of, I’m fine with that one.”

Jimmy pokes him this time. “Asshole.”

Tim smiles brightly at him, and then at Abby. “Thank you.”

Abby shrugs. “I don’t think I could go two years of just petting.”
Breena looks slightly irked by that. “It’s not like I made him hand carve the great pyramid out of granite for me. I mean, people used to not have sex before they got married all the time.”

The other three all glance at each other, and Jimmy says, “Ducky would challenge that assertion. Apparently, for everywhere they’ve kept records in the western world, before birth control was easy to get, something like fifty percent of all babies were born six to nine months after the wedding. Ducky says there’s a reason why Cupid is a baby.” Breena rolls her eyes, and Jimmy kisses her again. “And I will say, for as frustrating as it was, and for as many nights as I went home rock hard or jerked off in my car so I could focus well enough on the road so I could drive—“

Breena’s eyes are wide. She hadn’t known about that. “You did that?”

Breena smiles at that, looking a little sheepish, and says, “Oh. Yeah. I remember. First time a guy got me off, and I… kind of freaked out because I didn’t intend to let it go that far, but it felt so good, and I knew what I was about to do, because you were so pretty, and so hard, and making such wonderful sounds, and I wanted it, and I didn’t really want to do it, so… I sort of sprinted out of the car.”

“Yeah.” It’s pretty clear by the look on his face, and the gentle kiss Jimmy lays on her lips, that while he really would have preferred she stay, he doesn’t begrudge her leaving. “And even with all of that, I will tell you that it was worth it, and that I wouldn’t change a day of it.”

Breena arches her eyebrow. “I’d change a few days of it.”

Jimmy knows what she’s talking about. “Okay, yeah, I’d change the hell out of the Harper Deering shit. But, not one minute of the part that was in your hands or mine.” He strokes her hair and shoulder gently. “And I’ll admit, you made an amazing pitcher of lemonade out of what we got dealt.”

She smiles again. “Wanted to make good on my promise.”

“And you did.”

“Promise?” Tim asks.

“I told him when we got engaged that I was going to blow his mind…”

Jimmy smiles. “My wedding present, and she did. Just about killed me, but… God…” He looks to Breena, making sure she’s good with him sharing this story, and she nods.

“It was about six weeks before we got married. Breena got a copy of The Joy of Sex, and decided we should read it together. Speaking of nights I didn’t make it all the way home…”

“I wanted to know what you liked.”

“So, we went through it, every page.” Jimmy runs his hand through his hair.

“And had a very frank conversation, about everything sex.”

“Because you were serious about waiting. No Clinton-esque definitions of sex here. Clothing stayed on, hands stayed on top of it. Part of why beach day was so intense. That was the first time I’d ever
seen you in anything smaller than shorts and a t-shirt. First time I got to touch a lot of your skin.”

“So, we talked about everything. What I thought I was going to like. What he knew he liked. All of it.”

“Even the shoes, which I was really hoping wasn’t going to send you running away.”

Breena shrugs at that. “Might have if you’d lied about it, but, you didn’t. So… we talked, and after I did a lot of reading. I was getting ready for our honeymoon, had lingerie and toys and lubes and everything picked out. I was already on birth control, so no need for condoms. Everything was set.”

Jimmy sighs. “And then it wasn’t. The original plan was to shift the ceremony to the morning, and we’d at least have the day and the night. That was the idea.”

“We got a few pictures on the beach. Fast. Ducky wandered off as we got some with our parents, and…”

“And he got the call…” Jimmy’s teeth grit. “And our honeymoon was off and…”

“Yeah, anyway. Happy day, not thinking about that.”

Jimmy nods, pulling himself away from those memories. “So, we’re home. I’m working flat out. Shortest shift I pulled that week was fourteen hours. You guys did your ‘Oh, we got him, yay!’ dance, filled out the paperwork, and were done in two days.”

“Or so we thought.” Abby says.

“True.” It hadn’t been quite that cut and dried for them. It really wasn’t cut and dried for Jimmy. “I had 287 partial remains that had to be identified, put with the right person, and then sent home. On my own. Each piece had to be catalogued, and had its own paperwork to fill out. While getting the morgue functional again. Not too much bomb damage, but a lot of stuff got covered in dust and dirt and needed to be cleaned.” He shakes his head. “Lot of work.”

“So, the first week of married life was me in our apartment, mostly alone, with this guy who’d occasionally show up, flop into bed, crash, and then leave before I woke up.”

“I don’t think we saw each other, awake and in person, for more than ten minutes at a time for that first week,” Jimmy says. “Finally, I’ve got my stuff wrapped up, and send off the last report, and then Leon pokes his head down to the morgue and tells me that I’ve got five days of my honeymoon left, and I should go take them. So, I send a text home telling Breena that once the day is done, because I still had some paperwork to cover, that I’d be home and home for more than ten minutes.”

Jimmy smiles at the next memory.

“Which was something I’d been waiting for.”

“And a minute later I get this quadruple x rated email with a list on it that was so hot my computer melted into a puddle and then melted through my desk. All the things she most wants to do, along with the question, ‘How many do you think we can do in five days?’” Jimmy smiles at that memory, too. That was a great list. He still has it. “And it killed me. Literally. Dead on the floor. Everything you’ve ever wanted, at home, waiting for you, and you’re too damn tired to do anything about it.”

“Since we weren’t actually seeing each other, and because I really wanted to get honeymooning, I didn’t really get how tired he was.” Breena notices a bench, and nods at it. So they drift over, sitting down. She’s in Jimmy’s lap, head on his shoulder. Tim and Abby next to them, Tim’s arm around Abby’s shoulder. “He got home, looked at me, ’cause I’m dressed up and ready to go, and started
Jimmy looked a little sheepish. “I knew I couldn’t do it. It’s our first real night together, and all I’ve got energy for is sleeping. I figured that if I even tried, I’d be done in ten seconds, and I didn’t want that to be her first time, or our first time with each other. I mean… I wanted it to be perfect.” He’s watching Breena with intense tenderness in his eyes. “And perfect already got blown to shit, so amazing’s a good second place, and that wasn’t going to happen that night. I would have been lucky to pull off disappointing that night. I couldn’t stand the idea of that, but you were so eager and… So, yeah, finally get to our honeymoon, and I’m exhausted and crying, and she’s horrified because I’m breaking down and she thinks it’s her fault.”

“You weren’t kidding about traumatic, were you?” Tim asks. He remembers Jimmy describing their first few weeks together as traumatic.

“No,” Jimmy says, voice flat. “We finally get enough talking to get across the idea that I’m just completely fried, and that in a day or two I’d be all over her and everything on that list, but right at that moment I barely had enough energy to breathe, so sex was out.”

“And then he dropped and slept for thirty hours, only getting up to eat and pee and back to sleep again. I was pretty worried at first, but Ducky told me it was okay as long as he kept eating.”

“I finally wake up not feeling like a train wreck, get a shower and a shave and notice that I’m home alone, so I send off a text and find out that she’s working, but if I was up for it, she’s be interested in trying this whole married thing out once she got home.

“So, I had a few hours to go over that list, get the apartment cleaned up, make dinner, and when she got home, I was ready to play and she was, too.”

Breena smiles at him, gently kissing him, holding his hand in hers. “And it was perfect. Not what we were expecting, but…”

Jimmy nods, remembering that night and the morning that followed. “Yeah. It was. Worth every second of the wait and a hundred years more on top.” He looks away from Breena for a second, to Tim and Abby, and then back to Breena, “What’s the line? ‘No one writes songs about the ones that come easy?’”

Abby smiles at that, knowing what he’s referencing. “‘Spanning years and continents. Lives ruined, bloodshed. EPIC.’”

“If the quote fits…” Jimmy says.

Breena looks at the three of them. “So, are we EPIC?”

Abby squeezes her knee, kisses Jimmy, and then kisses Tim. “You know it, baby.”

Chapter End Notes

Jimmy and Abby are apparently fans of Veronica Mars, they're quoting Logan.
Rainbow Party

“You sure we’re not camping?” Jimmy says, as they turn off the tiny, but paved, road onto an even tinier dirt one.

“Is this place even on the GPS?” Tim asks.

“It’s on the GPS, and we’ve got functional WiFi. Anyone needs us, they can get us. We’re secluded, not vanished,” Abby replies.

They bump, slowly, down the dirt road for another minute, and finally come to a small clearing in the woods. And in the clearing there’s a small cabin.

Jimmy and Tim look at it. “Oh.” Tim says, nodding.

Jimmy smiles. “Looks good. Kind of wondering if there’s a witch or if Little Red Riding Hood’s going to show up.”

“Axe murders and harbingers,” Tim adds.

“We’re not that far into the woods,” Breena says, turning off the car. “Grab the cooler, and let’s get in.”

The guys get a few minutes to look around while Breena and Abby unpack the cooler.

Tim approves of the little nest they built in the solarium, and he spies the bag the lip tars live in on top of four plates sitting on the sofa, so he’s got a hint as to what Abby and Breena have planned for this afternoon.

He looks over to Abby, who’s in the kitchen with Breena, and says, “So, did you just bring everything with you?”

Abby looks up and smiles at him. “Not everything."

Breena adds, “But more than enough for three and a half days.”

Abby nods. “More than enough for a week.”

Jimmy returns from the bedroom, carrying the mirror. It had been over the dresser in the bedroom, not any more. He plops it onto the sofa.

“You’re really getting into being able to watch, aren’t you?” Tim asks him as Jimmy points him toward the mattresses. Tim gets to where he assumes they’ll mostly be, and checks the view. “Left about three inches.”

Jimmy nods and scoots the mirror over a little. “We all like it, and… Wait…” Jimmy seems to be noticing that if they can all see out, then that means anyone else can see in. “We’re far enough away
from everyone else that no one’s going to just wander by, right?” After all, there’s a reason why they do stuff like this behind closed doors. And sure, maybe getting caught is a kick, but… He’s not sure if that’s a kick when it’s all four of them at once.

Actually, no. It’s not. That’s the difference between naughty and actual danger. Get walked in on in a club with his wife, no big deal. Maybe get smacked on the wrist and look a little sheepish. Get walked in on mid-orgy, and that might have repercussions. (It also occurs to him that he’s apparently getting old, because the version of him that had sex on every horizontal and most of the vertical surfaces at the Navy Yard wouldn’t have blinked at this. Or, another thought hits him, he supposes it’s possible that he’s learned something from his experiences with Lee.)

Breena strolls from the kitchen to the mattresses, slipping off her shoes, and snuggling in next to Tim. “According to Google Earth, the closest house to us is six miles away. There’s a hunting camp three miles east, but nothing is in season for another month and a half. People do camp out here, but we’re on marked private property. It’s not impossible, just like it’s not impossible that one of our neighbors at home might decide to come over at a bad moment, but it’s as unlikely as it’s possible to be.”

“This is as far away from the rest of the world as we could get, and still have all the necessities,” Abby says, sitting on the step down to the solarium. Tim kisses Breena and then scoots over to help her with her boots. She can still get them herself, but, like before, he likes her legs and she’s pregnant enough it’s starting to get awkward, so why not help? “But if this is uncomfortable, there’s a perfectly functional bedroom over there, with solid walls, and shades on the windows. Moving’s not a problem.”

Jimmy looks at the mattresses all laid out, then looks out at a lake and miles and miles and miles of trees, he thinks about what went into this, and decides that he’s being silly.

“We’re good here.” He looks down at the little makeup bag, the pack of baby wipes, and the plates on the sofa next to the mirror. “What’s that?” He knows the girls brought toys, and he’s had more than enough sex to have a clue what the baby wipes might be for, but the plates are throwing him for a loop. He’s sure they’ve got snacks, but they’ve just eaten, so… he’s not immediately seeing what might be in that bag or going on the plates.

Abby grins up at him, flexing her toes in Tim’s hands as he gently kisses her knees. “You remember when we were talking about rings ‘or something?’”

Jimmy nods, the idea that they’d get each other something to mark this, and that Abby had something besides a piece of jewelry she was interested in. He crawls into the center of the mattress, kissing both girls.

Abby lifts her leg and strokes her foot over Tim’s leg, and then scoots down to join the rest of them on the mattresses. Right now, they’re all mostly dressed, and lounging about, sitting or lying, just resting and being comfortable.

“When we were on our honeymoon,” she touches Tim’s lips on her throat, “we traded permanent kisses. I was hoping to add two more kisses, if you’d be game for that.”

Breena’s smiling at that. She’s never seen lipstick on Jimmy, and isn’t sure if he’ll be game for this, but hopes he’ll go for it. “How do you see this working?” she asks, knowing she’s setting up the show and tell part of the afternoon.

Abby crawls over to the sofa, over Tim and Jimmy, stopping for kisses on the way, and then dumps a huge collection of tiny tubes out of the bag. “I brought all of our lip tars. We’ve got every color you can imagine, and they’re liquid, so it’s really easy to mix colors or paint them on however you like.”
She grabs one of the pink ones, and squirts a tiny bit on the plate, showing off that each one of them will have their own plate for color mixing. “I was hoping to collect a whole lot of kisses, and give a bunch of them, too.” She air kisses at them. “The two best prints, I’ll get pictures of them, and after Sean’s on the outside, I’ll get them tattooed on.”

Jimmy’s looking intrigued by that, eyeing the colors, and heads closer to Abby. “So, you’re going to mix up some color for me, and I can kiss you, here—” He’s touching Abby’s throat, just below her ear, on the spider web side.

Tim butts in, “No.”

Jimmy looks away from Abby, staring at Tim, confused. “No? What, is her neck yours and yours only?”

Abby’s looking really amused at the idea that Tim might have dibs on certain parts of her. She and Jimmy settle back down on the mattresses, facing the other two.

“No!” Tim rolls his eyes a bit. Abby is his, but not like that. “It’s her neck. The reason you’re not going to put a kiss there is the exact same reason why my lip print isn’t already there. It’ll look like a snack the spider’s got sitting on the web waiting for her next meal.”

Jimmy’s eyes go a little wider at that, and as he looks at the web, and thinks about what his lip print likely looks like, and how from a few feet away, especially if it’s a bright color, it would likely look kind of caterpillarish, he says, “Oh.”

Breena laughs. “So, besides not on your spider web, or any of the other tattoos?” Abby nods. “Everywhere else is open?”

“No! Not everywhere else. It takes about a month for one to heal all the way up. So, there are some places I’d prefer weren’t out of commission for a month. And, since neither of you have lips that look anything like Tim’s, it can’t be visible when I’m dressed for work or church. Any skin you can’t see now is fair game.” She’s still got her sundress on, along with a collar, one wrist cuff, and socks that go to her knees. Both Jimmy and Breena are looking all over Abby. “And, of course, for just lipstick, you can put them anywhere you like.”

Breena shifts her gaze to Tim. “We adding some to you, too? Is that your ‘or something,’ also?”

Tim smiles. “Wasn’t what I was thinking. Not permanently, at least. With the lip tars, oh yeah, I want a full rainbow from you and Abby.”

Abby smiles. “And we both know where you want it.”

He half-smiles in response; Abby’s not wrong about where he wants it. “I’m easy to please on that. Do you want to add a kiss to me permanently?”

“Maybe…” Breena’s kind of liking the idea of marking Tim. “What were you thinking?” Breena asks him.

He stands up and shucks off his jeans and socks, then stretches his leg out, over Jimmy’s, foot resting on Breena’s hip. They’ve all got a good view of the dragon and Kelly’s band. He touches the bit of skin next to the dragon’s top most wing. “Molly’s band goes here.” He touches Kelly’s. “Kelly.” His fingers move two inches below where Molly’s would be. “One here, for Jon.” His fingers slip down, to just above Kelly’s, “Anna’s goes here.” Back to the top. “Sean’s. That leaves a few inches for any other children we have. Maybe Donny Palmer goes down here.” He taps above where Anna’s knot will go. “When we’re done with babies, two four strand knots, one at the top and one at the bottom,
wrapping all the way around my leg, for the four of us.”

Jimmy whistles low at that, what Tim’s talking about will cover most of his calf.

Breena’s nodding. “Our family.”

Tim nods back to her. “Yeah. All of us, worn on my skin.” He’s got on a t-shirt, so he raises the sleeve a bit to show the band he and Abby share. “I was telling her that when hands that love you touch you, it should leave a mark. It should change you. That’s the change I want to make. Is that… You guys good with all the kids on me?” They haven’t specifically talked about the kids they already have, but Tim knows he’s thinking of all of them as ‘theirs’ and sure some of them are his and some are Jimmy’s for the sake of the outside world, but in his head at least, they’re theirs.

“Yeah,” Breena says softly, her fingers drift to the tiny diamond solitaire she wears around her throat. “Thanks for remembering….”

Tim nods, and looks to Jimmy who nods back at him. Jimmy looks away for a second, blinks hard, and then makes himself smile, pulls his shirt off, and says, “So… rainbow party?”

The thing Tim didn’t think of when he suggested a rainbow party to Abby is that he, still, thinks he looks like a massive dork when he’s wearing lipstick.

And sure, for playing, he likes the result of all those pretty kisses on Abby’s skin. (And hers on his.) But he doesn’t like how he looks with it on. (Actually, he doesn’t like how he thinks he looks with it on. He still hasn’t looked at himself when he’s doing this.)

But, and this is the part that’s biting him in the ass, as both Jimmy and Breena are enthusiastically getting into this, it’s that Jimmy and Breena are, by default, also going to see him with lipstick on.

On the upside, if he looks as stupid as he thinks he does, Breena probably won’t mention it, and Jimmy doesn’t have anyone to pull into teasing him about it. He’s wearing it, too, and Tony’ll completely flip out at the idea that this is the sort of thing they get up to when they’re on their own.

Still, he’s warily eyeing the colors as Abby’s putting tiny dabs of them on the plate.

“You weren’t kidding about every color, were you?” Breena’s asking, playing with one of the tubes.

“Nope. All of them. We might have gone a little crazy on them when we decided we liked this.”

Breena laughs. “Come here, babe,” she’s patting the spot on the mattress right in front of her, and Jimmy’s scooting over. She laughs at that, too, giving Jimmy a quick kiss. “Other babe.”

“Oh, me?” Tim starts to head over. “You need different nicknames for us.”

Breena inclines her head in agreement, but right this second she’s not feeling much need to wrack her brain for new terms of endearment. “Close your eyes.”

Jimmy’s looking amused, as Abby’s getting him settled and gently brushing the primer on his lips.

“Why?” Tim asks, feeling a little nervous, wondering what the hell she’s going to put on him that he can’t see while she does it.

“Because watching makes you uncomfortable.”
“Oh.” She’s not wrong. So his eyes shut, and he can hear her messing around and humming a bit, followed by the slightly wet, ticklish sensation of having his lips painted. “Open up.”

Tim does, letting her mess around with him.

“Ohhh… Good pick,” Abby says.

“Can I pick my color?” Jimmy asks, “Or are we just the toys you’re playing with today?”

Abby lets off a diabolical laugh. “Mental note, toy night is going on the list.”

Tim can feel Breena nodding at that. He can imagine her smile.

“Yes.” Abby says to Jimmy. “Though I was thinking of mixing a few together for you.”

“Mixing them how?”

“Let me do it, kiss it on me, and if you don’t like how it looks, we’ll do any colors you like.”

Tim hears Jimmy say, “Okay.” He’s trying not to squirm as Breena’s gently putting on… It feels like a lot.

“Lighter hand, love.” Abby says to her.

“We want a bunch of prints, right? Enough for both of us, not just you.”

“Oh!”

More dabbing at his lips. It didn’t take nearly this long when Abby did it. He’d like to ask, but she’s putting more stuff on his lips so…

“How much are these?” Breena asks.

“Eighteen dollars. They’ll last pretty much forever. For just casual wear, you only need a tiny bit.”

“That’s what I’m thinking. Better texture than what I use at work. Might have to invest in some of these.”

Tim finds that a little off-putting, he’d rather not be thinking about Breena’s clients right now, but, he’s still not saying anything because she’s lightly flicking the brush over his lips and humming again. He’s got the sense that if his eyes were open, he’d see her critically looking at what she’s done.

He’s about to open his eyes, but then the brush flicks out and there are a few more light flicks.

“Okay, all done. You want to see?”

He’s done, so he opens his eyes. And, okay, yes, he looks. He’s right.
He looks dumb as hell with lipstick. Eyeliner is fine. Tattoos are good. The kilt rocks. This looks stupid. Fortunately, he gets something he likes out of this.

It’s dark, metallic blue. Shiny cobalt. Not a bad color on him, if it was a shirt or something, hell, eyeliner even. DUMB on his lips. But the girls seem to approve.

He’s about to rub his lips together, because seeing that’s made him very aware of them, and Breena immediately whacks him lightly on the shoulder. “No you don’t!”

He’s not sure if he can talk without messing it up, but he tries anyway. “Okay. Shall I do you?”

Breena lights up at that. “Do me how. My lips?” She lightly touches her bottom lip. “Or are you going to decorate me?” She gestures to all of her naked skin.

Tim-whistles a low breath, remembering, vividly why he likes this. So many good options with that. He knows that eventually these will dry, and once they dry they don’t budge, so…

“Decorations first, then you’re going to sit in my lap, and I’ll paint your lips, and you’ll decorate Jimmy and I.”

She grins at that.

His eyes slip all over her, and he laughs a little. She arches an eyebrow, as Abby says to Jimmy, “All done.”

Tim answers Breena’s look. “Virgin territory. Miles and miles of untouched skin.” Then, as he’s checking out what Abby did to Jimmy, he carefully lays a kiss on Breena’s shoulder. The kiss on her skin is blue, bold and vibrant. He glances over and sees the kiss Jimmy’s putting on Abby’s inner knee in dark green and oaky brown, looks like she decided to match his eyes.

He doesn’t think lipstick looks as dumb on Jimmy as it does on him, but it’s not something he’d ever suggest Jimmy should do for a going out look.

Tim does like the look of Jimmy’s lips on Abby’s skin though. And as he lays another kiss on Breena’s throat, matching the one on Abby, he really likes how his lips look on her. Yep, Abby, Breena, either and both of them, this hits that little possessive kink just perfect. He’s idly wondering if Breena might be game for a tattoo, as he decides where Abby needs another kiss.

Tim slips over a bit, laying his next kiss on Abby’s breast. Lifting it gently and leaving a blue mark on the underside along with a deep, gently biting kiss. Then back to Breena. Enough of the tar came off on the first three kisses that this one should leave a really nice print.

“Where?”

Jimmy’s also over with her, so for the moment she’s a bit distracted as he’s marking her inner thigh. Right where her thigh and pelvis meet. She gently taps the other thigh, and Tim smiles. He waits for
Jimmy to pull back, and then lifts her leg, gently nuzzling from her knee to her pelvis, and finishes with a wet kiss to match Jimmy’s.

As he’s doing that, he feels lips on the small of his back, and he’s not sure if they’re Abby’s or Jimmy’s, and right now, he doesn’t care.

Tim scoots up an inch, and over an inch, gently nosing Breena’s pubic hair. “Next time you shave, my lip print goes here.”

“Sunday. All four of us slick and smooth and bare.”

That sounds awesome to Tim.

Jimmy groans at that idea, and Tim looks over to see his kiss print on Abby’s mound, one slightly higher and to the right on her hip, another one next to his on her breast. Breena pulls away from Tim for a second, and kisses Jimmy, deep, on the lips, and then says to him, “Wanna see it? Me riding you, your dick slipping in and out of me, with Tim’s lips right on my pussy.” Jimmy groans at that, too, and gently pushes her back onto the bed, trailing fainter and fainter kisses from her throat to her pussy.

Abby’s not wearing any lip tar yet, so she glances to Tim, and then snuggles into his lap.

“One sec.” He’s got something he wants to do before his lips dry. He gently lowers her onto her back and lays a kiss right above her belly button. Good one, clear edges, and then grabs a brush gets a bit more tar on it, and writes his name right under it. He gets a picture, too. Her tummy, gently swollen with Sean, his lips and name just above her belly button.

Abby’s staring at that, looking amused, and he kisses her lips, leaving faint traces of blue, while saying, “Just signing my work.”

Abby giggles at that, and Breena does, too. (Jimmy’s busy, and guessing by the sound Breena makes, he does something to make sure she’s paying attention to him.) Jimmy’s maybe missing something of the spirit of this, in that he’s kissing Breena over and over in the same place, but she’s having a very good time with it, so… Maybe he’s got the idea just right.

Tim grabs a baby wipe and wipes the blue lip tar off the brush. Then he starts up on Abby’s lips. He’s not as good with the brushes or the colors, but he thinks he does a passable job of mixing and then painting her lips blow job red. (He’s a tad distracted by her in his lap, all warm and soft and gently rocking against him.)

But, after a bit, her lips are done, and Abby’s ready to get kissing.

Abby kisses Tim. First print on his collarbone. Then, after one last warm, rocking moment on his lap, she kisses his cheek, and pats him gently so he kneels up, and closes her lips around the tip of his dick. He’s not full hard, yet, they’re just getting started, but that’s certainly helping things in that direction. “That’s where you want them, right?”

He smiles. “I like them all over, but…” he looks down at the first of the rings of color on his penis, “Yeah, you know it!”

Abby winks and then flips around and gently kisses Breena’s breast, leaving her lips in scarlet on Breena’s nipple.

Next one’s on her ribs, and Tim’s not sure if he wants to just watch, or if he should jump in. He settles for at least another second of watching as Abby gently licks Breena’s lips, and then shifts over
to leave a bright red print on the nape of Jimmy’s neck, then one just below it between his shoulder blades.

He takes Breena’s hand in his, and kisses her wrist, one last, light somewhat smeary blue kiss, as she’s arching against Jimmy, hand clenched in his hair. (And yes, she’s tugging on his hair, and Jimmy’s moaning, maybe at that, maybe at what he’s doing to Breena. Tim’s not sure which, but either way, they’re both having a good time.)

He pulls back, knowing he’s got to put more of the lipstick on if he’s going to leave more kiss prints. Abby’s looking busy, trailing kisses down Jimmy’s back, and he thinks she needs some kisses on her back, too, so he grabs a brush and the plate with all the colors and heads to the mirror.

Not difficult to pick his second color. He might think black’s the only acceptable color on him (at least in the sense of not looking like a total twit) but for the sake of how it’ll look on Abby and Breena, he snags the brush, and mixes the silver along with a little green, thinking that looks good, and is different enough from the green Jimmy’s wearing right now, to make it easy to see whose lips are whose.

A minute of taking off the remains of the blue, another minute of putting the new silvery-green on, and he’s ready to go.

He looks at Breena and Abby. God, so many good options. Miles and miles of beautiful skin, all begging for a little color.

Breena looks done for the moment. She’s relaxing, purring, Jimmy’s head resting on her thigh, as she gently pets his hair. Abby’s kissing her way down Jimmy’s back. Tim finds the red lip print on his right ass cheek especially amusing. Then his eyes slip away from Jimmy’s ass (kind of boring to him) to Abby’s (much more fun) which is nicely high in the air as she’s kissing the back of Jimmy’s knee.

Yep, that definitely needs some kiss marks.

Tim’s lying on his back, left arm extended over his head, Abby kissing up his leg while Breena’s got his arm.

He thinks he’s purring.

He’s not a cat guy, (lifelong cat allergies means he sees them as fuzzy annoyances at best) but right now he’s feeling awfully feline, all stretched-out, naked, spotted with glorious color, beautiful women petting him.

Breena gets to his wrist, looking at the one kiss mark that won’t wash off when they’re done.

“What if I want to put a kiss on you that won’t wash off?”

Tim tilts his head toward her. (His wrist is above his head, so he’s looking up and backwards.) “I told Abby a long time ago that I’d proudly wear any mark she wanted to put on me.” Breena leans down and kisses him, planting a candy pink kiss on his lips. “Same goes for you.”

Breena’s eyeing his wrist. “And you don’t have your heart set on another ring or something like that?”
“I’m fine with the cuff, or a ring, or… It just has to be something from the three of you that I wear on my skin. Beyond that, it doesn’t matter.”

“What are you thinking?” Abby’s asking, looking up from the trail of kisses she’s painting up Tim’s thigh.

Breena scoots over, next to Jimmy, who’s adding another color to his lips. She spends a few seconds looking at the already mixed colors, and then takes the periwinkle blue that matches her eyes and paints her lips with it.

“The cuff covers from here to here?” She touches just below Tim’s palm to two and a half inches lower.

“Yep.”

“Okay.” Breena takes his wrist in her hand, and lays a kiss on his wrist. Between hers and Abby’s it look almost like he’s got a 7 on his wrist. He’s a little puzzled at the placement, until he gets where she’s going with this.

Jimmy gets it about the same time Tim does, and he looks at Tim, raising an eyebrow.

“Go kiss that off on the girls.” Jimmy’s got a dark red on right now, and it’s too close to Abby’s blow job red to work on his wrist.

“You want my kiss?” Jimmy asks.

Tim almost shrugs at that. Jimmy’s lips tattooed to his skin was never on his list of dearest hopes, but he likes the symbolism, likes the closed triangle. He’s looking at two thirds of his loves, and… it’s just not done without Jimmy.

“Not done without you. Unless it makes you feel weird.”

“Nah.” Abby’s closer to him right now than Breena is, so he pulls her close and kisses her ear lobe. Then puts another one on her shoulder, giving her angel a kiss halo. One more right above the cuff tattoo on her arm, and then over to Breena. He lays a dark red kiss on her ankle, another on her shin, and one on her knee cap before the tar has mostly wiped off.

Back to the colors he goes, spending a moment thinking, and another moment mixing. Like Breena, he decides to match his eye color. So, deep greeny-brown. Tim would call it ‘cool moss’ which is probably just him being poetic, but if there’s ever a time to be poetic, describing your lovers’ kiss colors is probably it.

Tim sits up and holds out his wrist to Jimmy, who takes it in his hand and gently presses his kiss to close the triangle.

Tim takes a moment to look at it, all three sets of lips on his wrist, and nods. He likes it. It feels… right, and done, and he likes the idea of it hiding under his cuff. Likes the idea of carrying their love on his skin everywhere he goes.

He looks at his dragon, and touches it gently. “This is who I want to be.” More than that, it’s his love for them, worn on his skin. He looks at but doesn’t touch the lip prints. Jimmy’s is still wet and he doesn’t want them to smear. This is their love for him. “And this is what lets me be him.”
Rainbow party is, forgiving the pun, a brilliant idea. Everyone’s covered with pretty splotches of color. Tim’s got reds and pinks and coral and blues and greens and purples all over him. Kisses on hands and feet and everything in between. Both he and Jimmy are sporting rainbow covered erections, and the four of them have taken about three million pictures to go with this.

Breena’s still looking Abby over. She’s covered in kiss marks, his lips, Jimmy’s, and Breena’s but so far, Breena hasn’t found a place she wants to leave her forever kiss.

And then she does. Tim sees the way she lights up with it, and then springs over to the plate with all the colors on it. She’s carefully mixing as she says, “Tim’s is black; I want my lips to be lip colored.” After a few seconds, she’s got her color mixed up, and applied onto her lips, then she kneels on the bed behind Abby, gathering her hair in her hand, and gently, carefully, kisses the nape of Abby’s neck. “Right there. Between your hair and the collars you like, no one will see it unless you want them to. But it’s still close and sensual and romantic.”

Tim grabs his phone and takes several pictures. Making sure to get the color as true to life as possible, as well as good, close-up detail of the kiss.

Abby takes the camera from him. “Yeah. I like that.” She turns and kisses Breena. Not trading marks, this is just lips on lips and happiness slipping from one body to another.

“How about it, Jimmy, which one of yours is going to be forever?” Abby’s looking over the kisses, some green and brown, some blues, some purples, a few in black, and a few more in dark red, that are all from Jimmy.

Jimmy’s also looking, thinking. He looks up at Tim, and then back to Abby, “When you’re touched by hands that love you, it should leave a mark, huh?”

Tim nods. “That’s what I was thinking.”

“He’ll cover our lips with his wrist cuff. You wear one most of the time, how about always?”

Abby nods. “I can do that. You thinking about my wrist?”

“Forearm, really, but you’ve already got tatts all over them.” Jimmy lays his palm along the inside of her forearm, the bottom of his palm just about at the bottom of hers. “This is the first place we touched.”

She smiles at that. “When you glued your hands to my arms.”

“Who knew what that’d turn into?” Jimmy reaches over and grabs a baby wipe. He wipes off Abby’s arm, removing several kisses, and after her skin is dry, he lifts her wrist to his lips, kissing along the faint blue shadow of her radial artery. “There.”

Abby smiles at it, and then kisses him, holding her arm carefully to let that print dry properly. Tim
gets a shot of it, nodding, liking the placement and symbolism.

Jimmy’s looking over his skin, and then stands up to check his back in the mirror. He’s looking at the kisses, gently touching the now dry blow job red kiss between his shoulder blades, while thinking about the idea of forever. “So, how bad does getting one of these hurt?”

“How bad does getting one of these hurt?”

“Not the end of the world or anything, but it stings,” Abby says. “Why?”

“How bad does getting one of these hurt?”

“No.” Abby’s shaking her head. “There’s no reason for you to do that.”

Jimmy’s looking irked at that. They’ve got them all over their skin, why not him? “How about liking the idea? Sounds like reason to me.”

“Jimmy, you react badly to henna,” Abby says.

“And Sharpies…” Breena adds.

“You tried that?” Tim asks.

Breena’s nodding, pulling Jimmy back to bed. “I did a little design on his calf, and the next day the whole thing was swollen and red for days. You and ink don’t get along. So, let’s not inject it into your skin and see what sorts of new, fun allergies you’ve got.”

“Fine.” Jimmy’s not looking thrilled, but he doesn’t want to argue. Not right now. Not with pretty and naked people all around him. (Though Tim’s making a mental note that Jimmy’s got first dibs on the shower when they’re done.)

It looks like a Crayola factory exploded. Or… that holiday in India, with the dye, Ducky would know what it’s called, it looks like that.

There’s four sweaty, smeary, spent people on what were once black sheets that are now very much not black sheets.

Apparently, if you get sweaty, and apply some silicon based lube that gets smeared to other places, along with natural lube, and saliva, you come up with a cocktail lip tars cannot withstand. Most of those nice, defined, brilliant kisses have bled into the most conspicuous camouflage pattern in existence.

And Tim wouldn’t have it any other way.

He’s spooned up behind Abby, her body still soft and wet on his. He lightly kisses the smear that was once Breena’s lips on the nape of her neck. She purrs a little, shifting, and he slips wetly from her, coaxing one last, soft twitch from her body.

He can feel an arm slipping against his back. Jimmy’s, he’s guessing by the hair. He’s not rubbing Tim’s back, not as his main focus, (probably). Tim’s not quite feeling energetic enough to look up, but he thinks Breena’s on top of Jimmy (she was before he and Abby rolled to their side to finish up
with a slow and lazy spoon), and he’s gently stroking her back, and just rubbing Tim’s as a side bonus.

Tim drags his arm down Abby’s side, resting his hand on her tummy, holding her close as he scoots back an inch to get closer to Jimmy and Breena.

Breena kisses his shoulder, and he feels her hair on his back and shoulder, so he guesses she’s snuggled her head in against Jimmy’s shoulder, back of her head to his back.

For a few more heartbeats they rest there, tired and happy. Then his phone buzzes. He doesn’t want to get up, but… But it could be… God, what time is it? Sun’s low, so it’s got to be past six. So, Sarah maybe, or work or… He sits up slow, kissing both girls, and tries to remember where the hell his pants ended up.

Eventually he sees them in the corner of the solarium, and reaches for them with pink/purple/green/blue hands, digging his phone out of his pocket.

It’s a text from his sister. We’re doing just fine. Under that is a shot of Kelly sitting on one side of a nicely set table with Sarah on the other. Looks like dinner’s in full swing, for them.

He flops back to the center of the bed, showing off the shot. “Looks like they’re getting on okay without us.”

Abby looks at the picture, and takes the phone from Tim. Abby here. Awww!

You guys having a good time? ;)

Yes!

Then I’ll let you get back to it.

Thanks.

Jimmy’s still laying on his back, but Breena’s starting to get up, too. She gently pokes him. “Come on, shower time.” Tim glances at her, and yes, both of them are thinking that getting the pigments off of Jimmy is a good plan. Yes, they’re designed for skin wear, but… just in case.

“Then feeding the pregnant lady!” Abby adds.

“Shower big enough for the four of us?” Tim asks. Now that he’s not all post-orgasmic glow-y, he’s starting to feel a bit sticky and gross.

“Nope.” Breena’s pulling Jimmy up, and he’s making less than happy noises about that. He looks
like he wants to sleep, but finally he lurches up. “Fifteen minutes, then it’s your turn.”

Tim nods, and Abby looks around. “Come on, phase two. Won’t take us more than a minute.”

Breena grins at them, herding Jimmy toward the bathroom.

Tim glances at her, covered in her own rainbow of smeary splotches, hair spiky and sweaty, eyes glowing at him. “You’ve got a phase two?”

“Oh yeah.” She’s smiling brilliantly. “And you’re going to love it.”

“Really?” If phase two involves anything beyond a shower and sleep, he’s not sure how useful he’ll be for it.

“Yep. Come on, let’s get the sheets off and clean sheets on.”

That sounds like a step toward sleeping. “Okay.”

Half an hour later they’re on phase two, and Abby is right, he loves it. They’re all showered and dried off, naked and comfortable. (All four of them hitting more of a second wind once they got up and moving around again.)

They put clean sheets on the mattresses, as well as blankets and pillows. There’s sushi and lettuce rolls, cold dumplings, sake and tea. There’s feeding each other, bits of dinner nibbled from each other’s fingers, as they lay around.

And then, from there, there’s falling asleep watching the stars come out above and the last of the summer fireflies flitting among the trees.
One of the things that happens when you sleep with three other people is getting woken up. Just how it is. Only two of you can be on the outside, so if one of you on the inside wants to get out of bed, you’ve kind of got to scoot over at least one other person.

Tim thinks that if/when they get to the point where they all sleep together most nights, it’ll be the sort of thing that he’ll get used to. And, in his bed or Jimmy’s he’s almost to the point where he just sort of notices it and falls back to sleep a minute later.

Just like how, back when they were first together, Abby getting into and out of bed would wake him up a bit, but now he’s so used to it that it doesn’t touch his sleep.

New bed, different room, and bedmates he’s not entirely used to, so, when bright and god awful early Jimmy hops out of bed, Tim’s eyes pop open, too.

“Go back to sleep,” Jimmy says quietly as he tucks Tim back in. (He’s a little fuzzy on how he ended up on the edge of the bed with Jimmy next to him… bathroom run, he remembers, he put himself next to Jimmy when he got back rather than try to wriggle into the spot he left.)

Tim scoots into the warm patch Jimmy had been in, cuddling Breena from one side while Abby’s got her on the other, and tries to fall back to sleep.

Tries being the operative word. It’s really bright in here. All glass walls sounds really cool, and looks really cool, until it’s 6:30 in the morning and the sun’s shining right in your face.

He gets up, and heads into the rest of the house, thinking a little coffee, maybe snooze some on the sofa (in the living room where, thank God, it’s kind of dark) sounds like a good plan. Maybe find Jimmy, or read or something.

He’s actually a lot less tired than he expects to be. Probably because they slept a lot yesterday, and technically didn’t stay up all that late, either.

Jimmy’s not in the living room or kitchen. Probably outside. Sunrise on the porch. That sounds good to Tim.

He’s feeling a little chilly. Naked, a few minutes post dawn, just left a nice, warm bed… He grabs the blanket off the back of the sofa, wraps it around himself and heads into the kitchen.

He can smell coffee, so Jimmy must have been through here not too long ago. Once his cup is full, he heads out to the back porch.

Still no Jimmy. Bedroom? He might have decided it was too bright and wanted better sleep. Tim decides he’s happy where he is. It’s cool enough he can see the steam rising off his coffee. He takes a deep swallow, enjoying the warmth on his hands and lips, the bitter/milky/sweet on his tongue, and clean pine-y air around him.
Maybe they’ll get a shot to do this next year, too.

He likes the idea of them having this time, a weekend a year, that’s just theirs.

Contemplating that, he heads to the porch railing, placing his coffee cup on it, and leaning his forearms against it. For a second, he notices that doesn’t hurt, at all, so he tentatively leans more of his weight into his arms, the sort of casual positioning he never would have given a first, let alone, second thought to this time last year. It works. His arm and shoulder don’t yell at him for doing that. So he settles in, leaning against the rail, watching the forest around them and lake below.

It’s when his eyes meander to the lake that he finds Jimmy.

Tim is intellectually aware of the idea that Jimmy does yoga. Really does it. Seriously practices and is good at it. But, at least lately, he hasn’t seen Jimmy do much out of the usual. Like he and Abby used to, (Tim’s not doing much of anything more challenging than standing on one foot and some twists these days, and Abby’s grabbing every extra minute of sleep she can, so right now there’s no morning yoga at the McGee house.) Jimmy’s got a morning routine, and while it’s certainly challenging in the sense of involves poses Tim’s not sure he could get into even when he was working at it, Jimmy never really looks like he’s pushing himself at it.

He’s pushing himself this morning.

On several levels. First off: he’s on sand: soft, cool, shifting under his weight, sand. Not a nice firm floor. Second of all: no mirrors, so he can’t really see himself. (Tim needs to keep checking the mirrors, otherwise he’ll get lost/end up sore when he pushes his joints too far.) Third: he’s going for intense poses. Tim’s hit the edges of some of what Jimmy’s doing, so he’s got an idea of how much strength and flexibility it takes to get into bird in a basket, (more than he has now) let alone balance (more than he ever did, he’s toppled over every time he’s tried it.) But right now, Jimmy’s starting with something that looks like bird in a basket, planting both palms in the sand, crouching down, knees on his elbows, raising onto his toes, and then shifting all of his weight onto his hands, lifting his feet off the sand. (This is where, without fail, Tim lands on the floor, sometimes head first.) But, he’s not stopping there.

Tim’s watching it, and he’s still not sure what the hell Jimmy’s doing, but somehow he’s… God, it looks like planking, body braced on his arms, torso and legs straight out, but… and this is the part that’s amazing to Tim, his feet aren’t touching the ground. Or his knees. Just hands.

He does something, pulls his legs around a bit, and now he’s got one thigh on his elbow, and the other leg extending straight out behind him. Tim thinks that one’s called side firefly or something like that. It’s the sort of thing he’s seen pictures of and immediately assumed that the use of wires or some sort of XF team was involved.

But Jimmy’s actually doing it, hovering into gravity, and more importantly balance, defying poses, and holding them for several long slow breaths before unfolding himself back into down facing dog and from there back into mountain.
For a moment, Tim’s watching and just thinking about how beautiful it is.

Jimmy’s slipped into warrior, bathed in orangy-pink sunrise, and it’s beautiful.

For another moment, he’s calm, watching, enjoying, feeling the satisfaction that comes with seeing someone do something they’re insanely good at.

And that’s good.

And then it starts to fade away, anger creeping in. Tim should be able to do that, too. Okay, not that. He wouldn’t be that good, or strong, or flexible, but if that fucker and his minions hadn’t stolen his body from him for months, he’d be able to be there, on that little bit of beach, with Jimmy, doing his own morning workout.

He spent years working on this, okay, not a lifetime, not yet, but he’s pretty much back to step one, and he resents the hell out of that. The most complicated thing he’s doing now is standing on his tip toes, on both feet, slowly building up his ankle/arch strength. He can’t even stay in tree for more than a few breaths on his left foot, not yet. (His balance is still off, and that pisses him off, too.) And he hasn’t been brave enough to try anything involving his arms. Even the idea of attempting to extend his right arm enough for something as basic as down facing dog, let alone putting that much weight on it, makes him want to wince.

He’ll get it back. Everyone says that. Do the work and get it back.

Great, he doesn’t want to get ‘back’ he wants to be forward.

He sees Jimmy standing, relaxed, dusting the sand off his skin, then putting on some shorts and his glasses, which is when it hits Tim that Jimmy’s naked. He guesses it didn’t stand out before because that was just how that was supposed to be. Out and about in the sunrise with no one else around, of course you’d be naked, right?

Or maybe he’s just used to Jimmy naked, so it’s not remarkable to him, not anymore.

He doesn’t know. He does know he’s trying to shove anger out of the way. Well, trying to be aware of it, and why he’s feeling it, accepting that it’s real, and letting it go. That’s what Wolf’s suggested he try to do with it, though Tim’s a bit fuzzy on the difference between letting it go and pushing it out of his mind.

Either way, he’s fairly calm by the time Jimmy’s up with him.

“Enjoy the show?” Jimmy says once he’s on the porch.

“Will you take it wrong if I say yes?”

“What’s the wrong way?” Jimmy looks interested in that idea.

“I don’t know.” Probably something along the lines of enjoying it the way Breena or Abby would, which, he didn’t, but he’s not sure if making that distinction is really necessary, or, given why they’re here, warranted.

Jimmy runs his fingers through his hair. Close up, Tim can see he’s flushed pink and sweaty. He takes a drink of his coffee and flops bonelessly onto one of the chaises. “That felt good.”

“Looked like it.”
“Been… at least a year since I had the chance to do that. It’d freak the neighbors out if I headed out at sunrise to do a proper sun salutation. Bob’d be over less than ten minutes later, bitching about how he’s got three teenage daughters and what the hell did I think I was doing!”

Tim nods. He’s met Bob. Kind of uptight and stuffy, but also the kind of guy who will lend you a trimmer if you need to borrow one. Tim tries to think back to what Jimmy might have done a year ago that gave him a shot at this, but he doesn’t remember. Kelly was brand new a year ago, and he’s a bit fuzzy about what was happening outside the tight circle of his own home/job then.

Jimmy sees him thinking, trying to place it, and adds, “Moonrise last time, but that’s good, too.”

“Where?”

“Last… late summer, early fall, not sure, we got down to Ed and Jeannie’s. The girls were asleep. Just me and the sand. Dark enough no one else was going to fuss.” Jimmy closes his eyes and is quiet for a few seconds. “Probably as close as I ever get to how church is supposed to feel.”

“Reverence?”

“Something like that. Peaceful and connected, definitely.” He opens his eyes and looks more carefully at Tim, catching something, he’s not sure what, exactly, in his voice. “You okay?”

Tim shrugs. “Would have liked to have joined you.”

Jimmy looks a little surprised at that. Not that he’d want to join in, but that he wouldn’t join in if he wanted to. “You want a formal invite or something?”

Tim looks at his right arm, and Jimmy says, “Oh.”

Tim nods. He raises his right arm, a hell of a lot higher than he could have this time last month, but he can’t get it straight up, arm along his ear, yet. “Not quite there, yet. Pissed about not being there. Pissed at having to go back to square one.”

Jimmy nods. “Yeah.” They’re quiet for a moment, looking at the lake. Tim leaning against the rail. Jimmy resting on the chaise. Then Jimmy says, “It doesn’t have to be about your body. There are entire disciplines devoted to thought or breath. Last I checked, your lungs work fine.”

Tim turns to Jimmy, back against the rail. “Not my brain?”

Jimmy smirks. “That’s always been the question, right?”

Tim smiles at him.

“Go play. Get some sand between your toes. Splash around some. I’ve seen you sleep, so I know for a fact you can pull off corpse pose, kiss that blanket goodbye and feel the ground on your back.”

“You gonna watch?”

“You going to take it wrong if I do?”

“No.” Tim drapes the blanket over the railing, feeling the slight chill at the air, and a vague naughty thrill at walking around balls out naked in the sunshine. He’s never been naked outside in daylight, and it does make him feel good, the same way peeking at his presents used to.

The ground is prickly on his feet, and he’s realizing that Jimmy walked down with flip flops, in addition to shorts. So, two steps onto his journey, he’s turning around, heading back up to the porch,
and stealing Jimmy’s flip flops, not like he needs them for laying on the porch. They’re a bit small, Jimmy wears a ten and a half, he wears an eleven, but do what they need to do.

Once he gets down to the lake, he kicks off the flip flops, turns, sees Jimmy watching, and waves, and then feels kind of… Stuck and silly.

The sand’s cool and pleasant between his toes. It feels good. But, he’s not exactly feeling any desire to lay down on it. He stares at gently swaying leaves above his head, and then water rippling against the sand below his toes. That’s more appealing to him.

Tim takes a few steps, finds that the air may be cool, fall is starting to take a hold of it, but the water isn’t. Summer still flows through the lake, days and nights of sun and heat soaking in and warming the water.

This feels a lot better than sand.

He wades out and then jumps for it. He’s been swimming at least three times a week since he got hurt. It’s not precisely the sort of weight bearing exercise he needs to get himself fully back to functional, but it is a way for him to really move and build up strength so he can get to the kind of exercise he needs to get himself back.

He’s not elegant in the water. Can’t be, not without full range of motion in his right arm or left leg. But it does feel good. He swims half way out, looks around, decides that if he wants to get back on his own, now’s a good time to turn back, so he does.

It’s a longer run than he does in the pool, cooler and deeper, too. So when his feet touch sand and stone, he’s feeling pretty tired. He kicks his feet up, leveling out on his back, and lets the water support him.

Tim’s not sure how long he rests there, floating on his back, feeling small waves lapping at his skin. He doesn’t think, beyond the fact that he gets out before he sunburns that it matters.

And maybe it’s not church, or reverence, or any connection to much beside his body, but it does feel good, in a quiet, settled sort of way. So there’s that.

Eventually, he hears Abby calling his name. He lifts his head out of the water, and sees her waving him in. “Breakfast!”

He’s in favor of that.

When he gets in, he can smell more coffee, along with the turkey sausage they got, eggs, and he can see Abby and Breena have small bowls of berries and cream on the table for them.

All of that looks really good.

Abby looks at him, steps closer, about to wrap her arms around him, then she squints a bit, and says… “Ummm… shower?”

He’s still wet all over, so he’s not feeling much need to get wetter. He’s not getting why he’s untouchable or why he needs to wash off right away.
Jimmy glances over at him (now wearing his glasses) and chokes off a quick laugh.

“What?”

“You’ve got algae in your hair. And…”

Breena’s looking at his shoulders. He twists a bit and notices that, yes, he’s got a faint greenish stain all along his back.

“Ahh. There better be some berries left for me when I get back.”

“We won’t start without you. But shower fast!” Abby replies.

“So, do we have plans for today?” Jimmy asks as he chews the last bite of his sausage.

The girls grin at him. Yes, it’s very clear from the looks on their faces that there are indeed plans for today.

Breena hops up. There’s a pen and a small pad of paper next to the phone in the kitchen. She rips a page off the pad, writes something on it quickly, and rips it in four.

“I know we’ve all been thinking about this for years, so…” She hands each of them a piece of paper.

“Favorite, hottest fantasy time. Everything you want is on the table. Tell us what you’ve been dreaming of. Then we get to play in order of the numbers.”

Everyone looks pretty enthusiastic about this game. Tim glances at his and sees the one on it. He grins. There is something he’s been thinking of for a while now. “Who’s got two? I’ve got one, but I’m not sure we’re equipped for what I want to do. Let me check, and while I do, we’ll listen to two,” he says getting off his stool at the breakfast bar.

“Me,” Breena says.

Tim grins. He wants to hear what Breena’s been dreaming of, too. “Or maybe I’ll check, tell you guys, and then settle down and listen. Don’t want to miss any of yours. Are we just talking first?”

“Yeah,” Breena says.

“Okay, back in a bit.”

They watch him wander from the breakfast bar to the bedroom, and can hear him puttering around in there. A minute later they hear, “Abby, where’s the toy bag?”

“Left night stand. What are you looking for?”

“I’ll tell you in a second.” They hear him rummaging around. “Good, you brought everything.”

“So, what’s with all the build up?” Jimmy asks when he rejoins them.

“It takes props, and if we didn’t have them…”
“And do we have them?” Abby asks. She knows what they brought, and sure, not all of the toys came along, but enough of them did that if they aren’t equipped for this, it means Tim’s about to go off on one of his pretty far off the reservations kinks.

“Sort of. We’ve got the props, but there’s nothing really good to tie me to.”

Abby smiles, wide and dirty; she knows where this is going.

Breena looks really intrigued. “Come on... Details!”

“Okay. Jimmy, you’re not really in this.”

“You’re not in mine, either.”

The look they give each other perfectly understands that they both want time with the girls on their own, and that, for those purposes, the other guy is superfluous to the mix.

Abby and Breena just look from one to the other, not exactly rolling their eyes, but they aren’t in any way surprised by this, and both of the guys can tell that they think this is sort of silly.

Tim’s about to just get into it, but… he thinks a bit more, and decides that it’s always a good idea to give everyone an out. “Breena, if you don’t want to go along with this, I will completely understand. It takes a really long time, like, at least an hour, and…”

“Are you blushing?” she asks Tim.

“Probably…” He feels silly about that, but she’s already mentioned not being wildly enthusiastic about part of this, so, yeah, he’s blushing, and really hoping she’s game for it. “If we do this, I’ll be leaking the whole time, and I’ll cum like a geyser, and have no control over where it ends up.” Now even Jimmy looks intrigued. He’s generally in favor of things that result in cumming like a geyser. “I’d love it if you’d tie me up. Abby behind me, doing me with the strap-on, while you suck me, both of you keeping me right at the edge of getting off until I can’t take it anymore. The problem is, I’m not seeing anything that’ll work well for the tying. The doorway between the bathroom and bedroom is tall enough and wide enough for me to grab easily, but I’ll still have to hold my own weight.”

“Is it just so you’ve got something to collapse into, or do you need the restraints?” Jimmy asks, moving into problem solving mode.

“Both. I can hold myself still for a good long time, but I want them to take me past that point.” He shifts focus from Jimmy to the girls. “I want you two to go until I hit the point where if my hands are free I will jerk myself off, and take me past that. I want you two to keep me on edge until I can’t talk, think, hell, until I’ve hit the point where I’m having trouble coordinating well enough to breathe. Abby knows she can get me off so hard, I’ll black out, and I want you two to do that to me.

“At home we’ve got that hook sunk into a joist.” He sees Jimmy and Breena think for a moment, wondering where the hook is. They haven’t played with it, yet. “Most of the time there’s a hanging plant that lives on it.” He sees the lights go on for them. They’ve noticed the fern, which is the only plant the McGees have in their home. “We’ve got wrist cuffs with small metal rings on them, and we can tie them into that hook. But there’s nothing here like that. The bed is fine for tying me down,” The headboard and foot board both have slats, but they’re also both low. “but not fine for tied with access to both my front and back, and I know I can’t hold my leg up long enough to work this on my side.”

Jimmy looks at him and at both of the girls. “Hold up for a minute.” He also heads off, poking
around for a moment, probably going over the same spaces Tim was, and finding that both the closet and shower have options, the clothing bar and shower head will work as something to tie a man to, but neither of them are strong enough to hold Tim in place. The porch railing, assuming Tim’s on the ground below the porch, is strong enough but there wouldn’t be any room behind him for Abby. Trees all over the place, but… This doesn’t look like a scene where you’d want to be wrong about how strong a branch is.

Jimmy heads back in, sees the other three watching him, curious.

“If you want to lean into one of the door jams, once you’re not in control anymore, I can hold you in place, keep you from collapsing at the end.”

Tim’s looking at him, eyes wide. Pleased but surprised by the offer.

“I mean, not if it’s weird. Just, that’ll solve the tied problem.”

Tim’s nodding slowly. “Ummm… yeah, it would.”

Breena stands up, taking Tim and Jimmy’s hands.

“I thought we were just talking,” Tim says.

“Changed my mind. This we have to do, right now!”

Jimmy kisses her, a knowing smile on his face. “You just want to see me get my hands on Tim.”

She kisses him back, while her hands trail down Tim’s chest. “Of course.”

Tim smiles at all three of them, liking this idea quite a bit. “Okay, I’m fine with now, but give me like ten minutes to get ready.”

Jimmy raises an eyebrow. Tim shrugs while heading toward the bathroom. If there’s one thing being the parents of small children does, it makes you very matter of fact about what your body does with the food after it’s done with it. So Tim says, “Gotta clean up, inside and out, otherwise this is way too damn messy and nothing I want to do with a pregnant woman.”

Jimmy and Breena nod at that, seeming to think it makes sense, and also getting a pretty good idea of what all Tim might have meant by props.

“Jimmy, pants on. Don’t want you rubbing off on Abby,” Breena says a few minutes later when they’re all in the bedroom.

Jimmy looks askance at that. “I wouldn’t…”

The look Breena gives him has him putting on his jeans. He’s zipping up when he says, “You do know, that of the three of you, Tim is the one I’m least interested in watching get fucked?”

“Love you, too, Jimmy,” Tim says over his shoulder as he’s fastening the strap on dildo on Abby.

Jimmy sees that Abby has platform black boots on, which he loves, and the strap on, which he didn’t think would be particularly appealing, but when he sees her turn toward him, smiling, smallish fake
dick jutting from her pelvis, he feels his mouth go dry and decides that Breena is right, pants are a good idea.

“I’m thinking the door between the bedroom and the living room,” Abby says, taking charge.
“Breena, you go on the living room side. Definitely get a pillow and maybe a chair, so you can sit or kneel comfortably. Tim isn’t kidding about this taking a long time.”

“How about bedroom into bathroom?” Tim asks. “If Jimmy’s holding me, he’ll be behind me, and if he wants to be able to see what Breena’s doing, the mirrors in the bathroom will give him a better view.”

“Good point,” Jimmy adds, because yes, he does want to see her do Tim. He wants to see as much of this as he can. Just because Tim’s the one he’s least interested in, doesn’t mean he doesn’t intend to enjoy every second of this, especially watching his favorite women all happy and naked and playing with his man.

Abby kisses Tim’s neck. “You want your collar for this?”

He thinks about it. “Yeah.” He’s keeping his cuff on, too. He wants all of his marks of ownership on him as he does this.

“Why the collar?” Jimmy asks.

“Helps get me in the right headspace for this. Easier to just let everything go and be in the moment and my body when I’m wearing it.”

“Okay,” Abby says. “Breena, grab whatever you like, and let’s get going.”

Breena grabs two pillows, and then sits comfortably on the bathroom floor. Tim stands in front of her, and gently pets her face, and then crouches down to kiss her sweetly.

“Thank you. I won’t be with it enough to say it after, so thank you.”

Then he stands. The doorway is wide enough so it’s easy for him to rest his left forearm flush against the door jam, a bit above the level of his shoulders, hand easily curled around it. He does something similar with his right, but with his arm down, hip level. He spreads his legs, sides of his feet snug against the door jam as well. He rolls his neck and shoulders, seeming to settle in and get comfortable.

Abby wraps her arm around his waist, and he turns to kiss her over his shoulder. Then he bows his head, and she secures his collar around his neck.

“All yours, Abby.”

“What’s your safeword?”

“Abigail. Same thing it’s always been.”

“Yeah, just reminding them. He says my name, everything stops. Stop, step away, and find out what’s wrong. He says no, stop, anything along those lines, keep going. But Abigail stops the game dead. Got it?”

Breena nods, eyes wide. They’ve been over this before, but the idea that Tim might be saying ‘no’ or ‘stop’ is a little unsettling.
Jimmy’s feeling a little nervous at that, too. “Abby, what are you going to do to him?”

“Make him come so hard he blackouts. Sometimes there’s some begging to get off sooner involved, or some ‘please don’t push me this far.’ It’s okay. It’s part of the game. He says my name, and I’ll finish him in less than ten seconds. If he sounds like he’s past that, forgotten his safeword, I’ll stop and check, make sure we’re still playing.”

Tim’s nodding along at that, and adds, “Part of the game is being able to just lay back, let it happen, and put myself entirely in her, and this time, Breena’s, hands. Let them take care of me. And yeah, I might babble. I know I talk when I’m having a good time, but especially for a game like this, I’m usually not really aware of what I’m saying.” Tim smiles at all three of them. “Ready to go?”

Abby pets him gently and says, “Yes. Breena, while I’m getting him ready, you can do whatever you like to him, but once we’ve gotten him wound up, you can’t touch his dick.”

“Okay.” She kisses Tim’s hip, her hands on his thighs, looking up at him. “You said you wanted me to suck you. What do you want sucked?”

That’s a good question, lots of happy ideas go with that. That, and the visual of her kneeling at his feet flushes through him, making Tim feel especially fine and sexy. “Balls, tongue on my perineum, and while Abby might be calling the shots, I’d really like your mouth on my dick.”

Breena smiles, standing up. “Oh, it’ll get there.”

It’s not until Abby’s standing behind Tim that Jimmy realizes the boots are there for a practical reason, not just to make every drop of blood in his body go rushing to his erection.

In the boots, Abby’s exactly tall enough to fuck Tim easily.

Anal sex just isn’t something he and Breena do much of. They tried once, it wasn’t particularly fun for Breena, and since Molly was born, even the idea makes her cringe. So, he’s aware of how the general premise works, but the details are a bit fuzzy. He knows Tim and Abby were doing it at the beach, but he didn’t have much of a view of what was going on. Tim was talking. Abby was doing something with her fingers, but the rest of her body was in the way, and he was so into the story he was having a very difficult time pulling out what was really happening and what he was listening to.

This time, with the mirrors, and the fact that he’s sitting on the edge of the dresser, behind and to the right of Tim and Abby, he’s got a great view of what they’re doing.

It’s not a huge dildo. Smaller than both of the guys. But that makes sense, if it’s just about prostate stimulation it doesn’t need to be particularly long or thick.

He’s expecting her to lube it up, and then while Tim and Breena are making out, to just slide into him.

But she doesn’t.

There’s a lot of petting, kissing, stroking all over Tim’s back, hips, and butt. A lot of gentle kneading. A lot of massage. Jimmy can certainly see how that would feel good, and be quite relaxing. Add that to what Breena’s doing to the front of him, (more kissing, and petting, and
stroking) and Jimmy’s not having any difficulty figuring out why Tim likes this.

Eventually Abby decides Tim’s ready for more, and Jimmy’s not sure what she’s picking up on, but whatever it is, she starts with her fingers, and while he’s in a pretty good position to watch, that part isn’t particularly interesting to him, beyond a general awareness of the fact that she’s not going nearly as fast as he had expected. Tim’s comments about slow and lots of lube are becoming more concrete for Jimmy. (He’s also realizing that Abby’s boots are high enough for her to tuck the lube bottle into the top, thus keeping it handy, and warm. It’s clear they’ve done this before.)

He tucks what he’s seeing away on the list of things to make it more comfortable if he and Breena ever try again, and goes back to watching the rest of the action. Breena’s got Tim’s dick in her mouth, and that’s pulling his attention away from what Abby’s doing. She’s teasing him, just sucking the tip, and then stands up to kiss him sloppy and deep.

But the way Tim groans, and sort of shudders all over, not the way a man reacts to a kiss, even a really good one, draws his eyes back to what Abby’s doing.

One finger, slow, rotating motion, Tim’s kissing Breena hard as she pulls his dick, and Jimmy’s thinking that he’s never seen Tim look like this before. He’s seen Tim get off, seen him fuck both their wives, but this is… different.

Some of it is the submission aspect. He seems deeper in than he was before. Some of it has to be what Abby’s doing to him, because he’ll be kissing along, looking like he’s having a good time, and then she’ll shift a bit and he’ll sort of shiver all over and groan again.

The next time he does it, Jimmy watches a bit more carefully, and sees the tiny drop of precum slip out of Tim’s dick when he shudders. Yep, definitely prostate play.

Put it all together, and Tim’s gone. He’s just a ball of pleasure with some skin on it.

And they haven’t even gotten to the main event, yet.

Though, judging by the way Abby’s rubbing the dildo between Tim’s butt cheeks, they’re getting close.

“Abby, stop thrusting.” Abby looks over Tim’s shoulder at Breena, curious, but she stills her hips.

Tim groans. He doesn’t want Abby to stop. He’s really enjoying what she’s doing. He thrusts back a bit, and Breena says, “Don’t move, Tim,” as she takes a hold of his hips, and then very carefully, without letting her tongue actually touch his skin, licks the drop of pre-cum off of him.

Tim’s teeth grit and a whimper slips from between them as he watches her do it, heat and moist breath washing over the hypersensitive head of his cock, the bead of pre-cum stretching between his dick and the tip of her tongue. He’s been dripping for a few minutes, at least. Abby’s been setting a slow, steady pace, rocking into him, petting his chest and nipples, kissing his neck and shoulders and lips, while Breena’s been lapping at and sucking his balls, driving him insane.

Then Breena leans back on her feet, stands up, kisses Abby over Tim’s shoulder, letting him watch
Abby suck the pre-cum off her tongue, and then kneels back down and licks a long, wide stripe up Tim’s leg. “Okay. I’ll let you know when to pause again.” She goes back to gently sucking on his balls.

Jimmy bites his lip and closes his eyes, that is the single hottest thing he has ever seen. And that’s when it hits him that watching this and not getting off is going to kill him.

Jimmy notices that Abby adds more lube every five or six minutes.

“How does it dry out fast?”

“No. But I don’t want to hurt him, so keeping everything really slick is a good idea.”

“Used to do this to myself,” Tim says, “and it hurt. Took a while to figure out that adding more lube before it dries out is a really good plan.”

Marathon sex isn’t one of Jimmy’s specialties. Lots of quick rounds is more his thing, but still he’s got pretty good control. Damn good control. At least, he thought he did. But he has never seen anything like this. They’ve been at it for at least forty minutes, and they haven’t broken Tim yet. He’s still holding himself up, still following Abby’s directions, and enjoying it.

“God, Tim, how are you doing this?”

Tim says something like, “Nrmh.”

Abby pets his hair, kissing his neck, rocking easily against him.

“It’s called subspace, Jimmy. Tim doesn’t do this a lot, but when he does, he gets into it. He knows that if he lets me take charge, I’ll make it so worth his while. Right, baby?” she says, shifting her rhythm a little, adding a slight grind that makes Tim gasp and his fingers clench on the door frame.

A bit later, when Tim’s left hand pulls away from the door jam, Jimmy grabs him and starts to hold him in place. It’s an odd position, because he’s right behind Abby, feeling her thrusting into Tim, and he’s got to reach around her to hold his arms.

And Tim is strong. Even with his right arm not up to full strength he’s making Jimmy work as he’s pulling hard against Jimmy’s grasp.

Abby sees it, and whispers to him gently, “Just relax baby, just relax. You can do this, you know
you can, and it’ll be so good when get you off. So, so good.” She gently pets his hair and neck, stroking her hands down his chest.

Breena pulls back from licking between his legs and kisses lightly over his hips and stomach. Then stands up and kisses his lips. “Still good?”

Tim nods, curtly. He’s good, wants to be better, but he’s good here.

“Tim?” Abby’s voice.

The frantic rocking of his hips stutters to a stop. He slowly turns his head toward her. His pupils are blown wide, he’s pink all over, and he looks like he’s in a trance. Jimmy’s seen Tim pretty far gone, but this is… really impressive.

She kisses his cheek. “You need some help, baby?”

He nods, whimpering slightly.

“Can you hold your own weight for a moment?”

He nods again. He’s been pretty quiet for the last few minutes. According to Abby that means he’s in his head and body, entirely inside how what they’re doing feels. Not babbling is the step beyond babbling. She’s not sure if he knows he gets here when she’s really playing him.

“Jimmy, let him go for a bit. There’s a cockring in our toy bag, go get it.”

He’s back thirty seconds later and hands it to Breena.

“You know what to do with that?” Abby asks.

“Goes around his balls and cock.”

“Yes.”

Tim feels Jimmy’s hands return to his wrist and elbow, and it’s almost grounding. It certainly gets him through the desire to come as Breena slips the soft silicon ring around him.

“Better?” Abby asks, slowly stroking into him.

He doesn’t answer with words, but his head drops forward, mouth open, and a long groan spills from his lips.

Jimmy had never thought watching another guy get fucked would turn him on. At all. He was wrong about that. (And rather pleased to see he was wrong.) Watching another guy come on his wife. He’d been sure that was on the list of things to drive him insane and want to kill list. He was wrong about that, too. Tim’s inching towards his climax and it’s making him so hard he’s afraid he’s going to pass
Breena was right, pants were a good idea, because otherwise he would have lost it, rubbing up against Abby’s ass, a long time ago.

And they were a terrible idea because they’re way too tight and wet and uncomfortable, and right now he really wants to be naked and rubbing off on Abby’s ass. (Or better yet, he doesn’t think that harness blocks access to her vagina. He could be fucking her into Tim… No… Stop thinking about that.)

He honestly cannot believe Tim has taken this for so long. Jimmy’s not the one getting fucked. He’s not even getting touched, and he’s about to explode.

Tim’s struggling against him now, weakly, he’s so far gone that he can’t put up too much of a fight, but he’s tugging at Jimmy’s hands, trying to touch himself, trying to get off, and Abby sees it.

She’s cooing softly at him, “Just a little more, baby. You know you can take it. Gonna make you come so hard… Just a little more.”

Just a little more and Jimmy’s going to come in his pants.

Somehow she gets the idea to Breena to take the cock ring off. He’s not sure how, because she didn’t say anything, but he almost feels it when Breena does. He certainly hears the way Tim yells when she does it.

Breena’s got him deep in her mouth, hands and lips working Tim in tandem, and Abby switches from long strokes to a short, fast thrusts, getting his prostate over and over, if Jimmy had to guess.

He feels it when Tim comes. Feels the way his arms try to pull in tight, the way his knees go out under him. And it’s a good thing he’s expecting it, because Tim really does collapse. He and Abby hold him up as his whole body shakes and spasms.

Jimmy watches, over Tim’s shoulder, as Breena swallows, and swallows again, and still more dribbles from between her lips, and she swallows again. Her eyes meet his, and she grins at him, at least, as much of a grin as she can with Tim’s cock, still pulsing, in her mouth. Jimmy closes his eyes, and starts frantically thinking about Gibbs naked because he can feel the tingles about to start and he is not going to cum in his pants like a teenager.

Tim is still shaking when they get him into bed two minutes later. Still dribbling a little. And Jimmy’s watching, fascinated. He’s never seen, heard, or dreamed about a male orgasm lasting that long. Tim’s cock has gone limp, all of him is limp, Abby wasn’t exaggerating about the come so hard you black out thing, if Tim’s even remotely conscious right now, Jimmy’d be amazed, but every few seconds another tiny drop of cum slips out of him.

Abby’s curled around Tim, whispering something, petting his hair and arms and chest.

Jimmy looks at Breena, daintly wiping off her lips and chin, and he pulls her close, kissing her hard, and he can taste Tim on her, and he has to get those pants off right now.

She’s on the same page, stripping them off of him. Well, pushing them down, neither of them have the patience to try and get them over his feet. Then she’s got him on his back on the floor, riding him, hard and fast and deep and neither of them lasts for more than a minute, because that was just too
fucking hot not to get off to.

Tim comes back to himself slowly and easily. Not entirely sure if this is waking up or just getting all of his brain functioning again.

Didn’t matter. This is great. Everything around him is just softly glowing shades of marvelous.

There’s a warm girl pressed into both of his sides, and that’s whatever comes beyond marvelous.

“I love you.” He means both of them as he says it, and then kisses the shoulder closest to his lips, Abby probably. Then rolls a little and kisses the girl on the other side, yep, Breena.

He hears Jimmy say, (and this is when it occurred to him that he hadn’t actually opened his eyes, yet) “Hey, I helped, too!”

“Jimmy, I’ve got enough oxytocin coursing through me that if you get in reach, I’ll kiss you, too.”

“I’m fine over here.” He thinks ‘over here’ is the far side of Breena, but he’s not curious enough to open his eyes.

“Thought so.”

“How are you feeling?” Abby asks.

“Amazing.” His eyes finally laze open, and he gives all of them an extremely satisfied, if somewhat dopy, grin. “How long did we go?”

“One hour and eight minutes.”

He sighs, very pleased. “Thank you, all three of you.”

About an hour later, when Tim is moving again, Jimmy says to him, “You win. Standing next to you, I look vanilla.”

Tim smiles. “Breena, you had two, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do I do anything in your fantasy?”

Breena looks him up and down. “Yes.”

“Who had three?”

Abby holds up her hand.

Tim looks down at his extremely limp dick. “Jimmy, you’re up next; I’m totally fucked out.”
Abby shakes her head. “Uh uh. Nope. Pregnant lady here, must be fed regularly. Showers and lunch and maybe naptime is next. Then Jimmy.”

When they get to the restaurant, Jimmy notices that Tim sits very carefully, very gently. He quietly says to him. “When we get back, ice yourself down. It'll help with the pain and any swelling or bruising.”

Tim nods. “Probably a good idea. It doesn’t hurt while I’m doing it, but after the endorphins wear off…”

“Yeah. But you’re okay, right?”

“Just sore. Abby knows what she’s doing. But this is part of why you don’t want to do this with someone who doesn’t know what they’re doing. More than sore is a real possibility.” Tim looks a little chagrinned and says in an even quieter voice, “Honestly, right now, my shoulder hurts worse than my ass. Abby’s,” the girls are in the restroom confabbing about something right now, “smart enough to make sure she doesn’t hurt me. I’m not smart enough to not suggest bondage games when I’ve got a shoulder that still doesn’t have full strength or range of motion.”

“Wrist?” Jimmy asks. He’d been intentionally holding Tim’s right arm at the elbow.

“Achy. More Aleve. Ice. Rest some. I’ll be okay.” He shrugs a little, and winces a little, he shoulder didn’t enjoy that. “Probably a good thing I can’t get it up six times a day anymore. Enforced rest time means I won’t do something stupid for the next six hours or so.”

Jimmy smirks. “Joys of getting older.”

“Yay!” Tim says sarcastically. “God, we’re gonna be fun in ten years.”

Jimmy raises an eyebrow and then dryly says, “They make pills for that.”

Tim chuckles, little, wry smile in his eyes. “And lucky for us we know someone who can write prescriptions.”

“Exactly,” Jimmy says, as he takes a sip of his water.

“Speaking of that…”

“Prescriptions?” Jimmy’s not sure where Tim’s going. Well, he might. He supposes a script for Viagra or Cialis or something could be arranged as a party drug for them, but… He’s not really feeling like they need it. It’s normal to not be hot, hard, or ready for a few hours after a really good orgasm, especially if you happen to be a middle-aged guy. Jimmy’s thinking he’ll be ready for action again by the time lunch is done. Yes, that was a nice orgasm this morning, but most of the build up for that was in his head. Tim’s a different story, if he’s not ready until tomorrow, as a medical practitioner, Jimmy wouldn’t consider it anything to worry about.

“More, you being a doctor, and supposed to know better, what’s with you jonesing for a tattoo? That’s supposed to be bad for you, right?”
Jimmy shrugs, looking annoyed. Yeah, it’s not a great plan. His body has a harder time fighting off infections than Joe No Diabetes, so it’s a bad plan for him to sign up for a wound he doesn’t need. But… if he got a tattoo he’d be really careful about taking care of it properly, and likely wouldn’t get an infection in the first place. He rolls his eyes. “Wasn’t talking about getting a whole leg done.” His knee brushes Tim’s as he says that.

“I know. Still…”

Jimmy shrugs again. He knows he’s been overruled on this. “Wanted to do something big, something important.”

Tim smiles at that; he fully understands that desire. “I get that. But we’re never going to be cool with something that might hurt you, though.”

“Yeah.” Jimmy sighs. “I know. Just wish it was different.”

“Yep.”

It’s a lovely September day. The sun is shining. And, the Farmer’s Market is full swing, so, post-lunch they decide today is a fine day to mosey around the pedestrian mall and get to know Winchester, VA.

They’re browsing along the stalls when Breena sees it. White gold, broad, same shape as the wedding rings Abby and Tim share and one of the same metals, the exact same metal as the ones she and Jimmy share.

She tugs Tim along with her, picks it off of the black velvet tray it’s on, and slips it onto Tim’s ring finger while waving Abby over.

It looks pretty good there. “For me?” Tim’s asking, looking at it. It’s a bit loose, but that could be fixed. Looks nice on him.

Breena shakes her head, nodding toward Jimmy’s who’s messing around with the blown-glass orbs two stalls down. “Checking the size on you. If it fits you, it’ll likely fit him.”

“Little loose on me,” Tim says.

Breena’s looking at it on Tim. “Then it should fit him just right. His fingers are a little wider than yours.”

He’ll trust her on that, he’s never measured and isn’t feeling any need to.

Abby says, “We doing a wedding band for him?”

Tim likes the idea of that. “It’s not like it is with you girls, no one really cares how many rings we’ve got on our ring fingers.” And, in his experience, no one looks nearly as closely at his hand or Jimmy’s, either. At least, if anyone’s checking to see if they’re married, he hasn’t noticed.
Breena jerks a little when she feels Jimmy’s hands circling her wrists and his chin on her shoulder. He’s standing right behind her and looks at the ring on Tim’s hand for a moment. “I like it.”

The guy who sells the rings is looking at the four of them with interest, but not commenting. Tim takes it off his hand, and is about to give it to Jimmy, lay it in his palm, and then stops half-way through that, and takes Jimmy’s hand from Breena’s wrist, slipping the ring onto his finger. “Feel good?”

Jimmy rubs it with his thumb and shifts it between his pinky and middle fingers. “Yeah.” He kisses Breena, and gives Tim and Abby a you’re getting kissed soon look. “Feels like it belongs there.”

Abby beams up at him, her fingers trailing over his hand. “Good.” She turns to the guy selling them. “I don’t think we need a box,” she says as she hands him her credit card.

They’ve almost finished the circuit back to the car when Abby spies something interesting. She nudes Tim’s shoulder, nodding at the café they’re walking past.

He sees the sign she did. “Poetry Slam. 5-7 Sunday.”

“Any interest?” Abby asks him.

He shakes his head. “I haven’t done that in a decade.”

Breena perks up at this. “Haven’t done what?”

“A poetry slam.” He looks to Abby. “Besides, even if I did feel like it, I don’t have anything ready to go.”

She gives him a you’re going to try that one on me? look. “I’ve got at least five of your poems on my phone.”
“Wait,” Jimmy says. “Can we back up? I’m still working on the idea of Tim at a poetry slam. You used to get up on stage and read poems?”

Tim looks at Jimmy and rolls his eyes a bit, taking minor offense at the hit to his professionalism. “No. Read.” He makes a sound like *ha*. “I did get up on stage and perform them, but no, not read. That’s like… lip synching instead of singing.”

Jimmy’s not sure he buys that, but he doesn’t argue.

“How’d you stop?” Breena asks.

“Just did. Wasn’t writing much poetry. Got busy with other things. Decided I liked kicking back at a jazz club more.” He shrugs. “Decided I was a much better novelist than poet and spent more time on that. Lots of reasons.”

“You’re a great poet!” Abby says.

“Only if you’re you. There’s a tiny audience of people who love my work, and you’re it.”

“I’d love it, too!” Breena says, certain, though she hasn’t actually read any of his poetry. Abby’s kept that for herself.

“And one day, I’ll write some for you, and yes, you’ll love it, because it’s for you. But… I know great poetry, and what I do isn’t it.” He feels a little silly about this, but decides that it’s true. “I write great love letters, and most of them are blank verse. But rhythm, meter, imagery, nah. I get moments of good, but as poetry, most of it’s just okay.”

“We could go listen,” Abby says.

He does like that, but he’s fairly sure the rest of this group, none of whom he’s never seen reading a poem, or having any interest in listening to them, would find it boring. So, he glances back at the café, they’re well past it now, and says, “There has got to be something all of us want to do with tomorrow evening. Gotta be a place around here to dance, right? And if not, we’ve got music back at the cabin.”

“You’re voting for dancing tomorrow?” Breena asks.

“Unless you and Abby have other plans. What was that you said about toy night?” he asks with a little wicked grin.

Abby wraps her arm around his neck. “Dancing could be warm up for that.”

“Sounds like you’re starting to perk up again,” Breena adds. “Maybe my turn next?”

Tim thinks about it, does a mental check for how sore he is, and where, and shakes his head a bit. “Probably Jimmy. Unless you’re looking for me to be a hell of a lot less active than I expect.” Then he looks to Jimmy. “I mean…”

Jimmy nods. “If Abby’s serious about a post lunch nap, yes, I’ll be up for serious playing this afternoon.”

Abby grins, and Breena does, too, looking Jimmy up and down, eyes promising good things to come.

Abby licks her lips. “Then let’s get home and napping.”
“So Jimmy, what’s yours?” Abby asks.

Tim thinks Abby’s the only one who actually slept. He’s not entirely sure about that. There was a bit of time where he was dreaming or imagining intensely, but he’s not sure which. He was aware of the bed and Jimmy and Breena and Abby, so probably not asleep, but he was seeing some vivid images of flying behind his eyelids.

But now, an hour after getting back to the cabin, and tossing off clothing, and snuggling into the bed in the bedroom (after all, they might as well use it at least once, right?) everyone’s awake and sitting on the mattress, getting ready for round two of the fantasy game.

Jimmy smiles a little. He didn’t sleep. He did spend his rest hour between Abby and Breena thinking about exactly what he wants to do.

“Before Tim went, it was a combination of both of you running me, and watching you girls sixty-nine, and then slipping into Breena from behind while you went down on her, and helping her lick you off, while Tim watched. But now…”

Abby and Breena are both grinning widely at Jimmy.

“I mean, I know I can’t do that, not that long. I just can’t.” But holy shit, watching that almost blew his load, having it done to him… Oh yeah.

“I couldn’t at first, either,” Tim adds. He thinks about it… “What…Twenty minutes the first time you decided you were going to edge me?” he asks Abby. He’d done himself longer than that, but keeping yourself on edge is a very different game from letting someone else keep you on edge.

Abby nods. “Something like that.” (Correct answer, eleven minutes. But Abby knows that if they treat Jimmy right, he’ll lose track of time, too.)

“Anyway…” Jimmy cuts in. “I’ve never come that hard, and it looked really intense, and I’d like to see how close to that I can get.”

“Then Breena should be in charge because she knows your body better.”

Breena nods at that. She’s never tried to see how long she could keep Jimmy at just about to get off, but she certainly does know how to keep him from getting off if she wants him going longer. She also knows that half of how they kept Tim a hair away from climaxing is something she and Jimmy have never done.

“So, how much of what we did to Tim do you want us to do to you?” Breena asks.

Abby knows what she’s asking Jimmy. “It’s all about keeping you just about to get off, anal doesn’t have to be part of it if that’s not your thing.”

“Not the strap on.” He’s not sure if that’ll ever be anything he wants. He does know today’s not the day he finds out.

Abby shakes her head. “Not for your first time anyway. Fingers?”
Jimmy looks intrigued. “Yes?”

“You don’t sound sure about that,” Breena says.

“I’m not.” He glances away from Breena and Abby to Tim. “Yeah, it looked like you had a really good time, but…” Tim knows how to read the look on Jimmy’s face, there’s a lot of conditioning, for lack of a better word, that a guy has to break through before thinking, ‘Okay, this might be fun,’ let alone do anything about that thought, and he’s not broken through it, yet. Jimmy looks back to Abby. “Look, it’s not off limits, just don’t surprise me with it, either.”

Breena kisses him while Abby says, “Not a problem.” Then she gets up, finds their toy box, and tosses Jimmy a Fleet enema. “You know what to do with one of those?”

He’s not thrilled about that, but yeah, he knows what to do. “Errr… yes. Medical residency. Nothing the nurses like better than a new crop of residents to do the dirty work.”

Abby grins at him. “Good, then get to it. You might be iffy on fingers, but trust me, you’ll like tongue.”

Jimmy’s eyes go very wide at that. That was very much not something they did to Tim.

“So, off you go.” Abby wiggles her fingers at the bathroom. “Get cleaned up. Get really cleaned up. It’ll be worth your while.”

---

Jimmy’s having a really good time. He’s in the middle of the bed with both of the girls playing with him, as Tim lounges in an armchair, watching.

Tim knew he was going to like watching this, because, what’s not to like? It’s Jimmy and Breena and Abby all doing things he loves, with each other.

He didn’t realize how intense it would be to watch this. It’s not just Jimmy having a good time. It’s Jimmy having this good time, for the first time, and as intense as it is for Jimmy, for Tim there’s a lot of memories and experiences and just heaps of awesome attached to this, plus, watching Abby and Breena literally melt Jimmy’s brain.

Tim can see how much Jimmy likes this in his closed eyes, and the tension in his face. He can hear it in the way he’s gasping with every breath. Jimmy’s hands are telling the good time story; they’re clenched on the headboard, knuckles white. His head’s thrown back, his toes are curled, and his thighs are trembling they’re so tight. Everything about Jimmy right now is all but singing about how much enjoyment he’s getting out of this.

And sure, Tim can’t see Jimmy’s dick. It’s deep in Abby’s mouth. (And Jimmy seems really pleased to have it there.) But he can see Jimmy’s balls, or at least sort of, Breena’s mouth and hands are blocking some of the view, but from what he can see they’re pulled up tight against Jimmy, which is usually a very good sign of an about to be very happy guy.

Of course, being a guy in bed with two women blowing you at once is also, usually, a sign of a very happy guy.
In fact, Tim’s actually getting a little concerned, because part of the idea is to spin Jimmy out, and Jimmy looks really close to getting off. He’s thrusting harder as his head comes off the pillow, and Tim knows that if he’s doing that, it’s because he’s a hair away from getting off.

Then both girls stop, and Jimmy groans with frustration, teeth gritting, head slamming back into the pillow as his hips hit the bed. They retreat and start petting his arms and legs, Breena straddling Jimmy’s mouth, letting him know that it’s time for him to do something besides just lie there and enjoy.

Tim should have known they wouldn’t push him over accidentally.

Oh, God, yes! YESYESYESYESYES!

Jimmy likes tongue. He might not have been sure about that in the first place but by all means this is bloody fucking amazing and fucking yes they are doing this again, they are doing this a whole lot, and as soon as he gets the chance to he’s doing it to Breena because he can’t wait…

Oh God! Okay, God, yes, FUCK!, he can wait, he can definitely wait because as long as Abby’s still lapping at him he’s not going anywhere, but once this is done and he stops twitching he’s laying Breena out and Abby’s showing him exactly what she’s doing and they are going to do it to Breena.

And, OH GOD, he arches up into that touch, pushing his hips up, looking for more pressure, more pleasure, and God, he might be babbling the way Tim was, he’s got no idea, he just wants more of this, wants it all over, wants it to never end and...

Shit! What!?

Okay, that’s a finger, did he agree to that? Shit… Babbling has consequences apparently. He’s not sure if he likes that, but, GOD, licking!, again, and HOLY FUCK!, Breena’s got his ball in her mouth and Abby’s doing something with her tongue and her finger and his brain’s about two strokes away from completely melting and then, HOLY FUCK, how many hands do they have? He doesn’t know what’s rubbing the head of his cock, but right now he doesn’t care, at all, it could be Tim sucking him, hell, it could be Gibbs sucking him, and he’d be cool with it as long as it didn’t stop.

Then, oh God, no, no, no, no, no, don’t stop that, please! He really liked that, go back to doing that, please, and OH FUCK, nothing is touching his dick anymore, and he thinks Abby did something with her finger, and he thinks he’s lost it, thinks he’s come, because he feels the pulse, but… Okay… just one so, apparently not, but okay, SHIT, whatever the fuck that is, prostate? Gotta be… YES… feels almost exactly like the pulsing part of cumming and if, OH GOD, yes, she can do that as much as she likes, and pussy, oh yes, pussy on his face again, okay focus on that, it’s Breena, he knows by the smell and the taste, and soft, tickly wisps of pubic hair, GOD, pussy, he loves pussy, and FUCK, another pulse, and… and…. wait, no, no, no go back to doing that, don’t take the fingers away, no…. The finger is awesome, bring the finger back!

Tongue again. Oh God! He’s got no idea of how Breena’s getting the idea to Abby, but what he’s doing to her, Abby’s doing back to him. Sort of. Wait. Two tongues. One’s on the tip of his dick, lightly licking, the others on his ass, and…. He slips two fingers into Breena and strokes her g-spot… Oh, yes, please! fingers come back for him, and he feels that pulse again.

Breena’s matching his tongue, licking the tip of his dick like a clit, and Abby’s using her fingers the way he’s using his on Breena, and God, they’re fucking him the way he’s fucking her and oh oh oh
oh he’s not going to make it through this, every single nerve in his body is going to sizzle and burst into an epic climax and

NOOOOOOOO don’t stop! NONONONONONONO! Get back there and do it! NOOOOOOOOOOO!

Breena’s cuddling him, kissing him gently and right now he does not want to be kissed. Abby’s petting his thighs, and the last place he wants to be petted right now is his thighs.

“Jimmy, you still know your safeword?” He’s not sure which of them asks.

That slowly wanders through the crying with tension and disappointed haze of don’t fucking stop, nooooooo, and he flails around for a moment, thinking, not sure if he does and even more not sure if he wants this to stop and have them get him off now or spin him out further.

Finally he gets it together enough to say, “No, but don’t stop. God, don’t stop!”

“Don’t stop: get you off right now, or don’t stop: spin me harder and longer?” Abby asks.

“Harder, longer!” He gasps. “Don’t fucking stop fucking me!”

He sees them both grin at them and then, oh god yes, more tongues, Abby’s licking up and Breena’s licking down and holy shit, oh god, one of them has his balls again and the other is slowly slipping a finger into him again and God nothing has ever, ever felt like this.

Tim’s dick is awake again. Hard as he got off this morning he didn’t think it’d be showing any life until dinner, and possibly later than that.

But this show… Hell, this would wake the dead. (Guys all over western VA are getting hard ons just from the psychic punch of this much sex. That idea makes Tim grin. He doesn’t think any of the other three want to hear his little mental joke, though.)

Even with mirrors, even with the fact that he likes to watch, Tim’s still never really seen what it looks like when he’s this deep into sex. Because when it’s happening, he’s into it. He’s watching Abby or Breena or watching his dick slip into her, he’s not watching himself.

But he’s watching Jimmy, and the girls, but mostly Jimmy, because Jimmy’s teetering on the best orgasm of his life. He’s a hair’s breadth from coming and cumming all over, every muscle tight, every nerve begging for release, as two women he adores fuck him out of his mind.

Jimmy’s gone. Eyes closed, head back, gasping with each breath, whole body flushed, whimpering softly each time Breena slowly eases down him, and judging by the way Abby’s arm is moving she’s pulling her finger almost all the way out and slipping all the way back in the same speed Breena is. Guessing by how Jimmy jerks each time Breena gets all the way down, Abby’s probably giving his prostate a little rub, then they both slowly move off of him. Breena slowly eases all the way up, almost off of him, and then all the way back down, and God, if Tim watches another second of this he’s going to get off from just watching.

(Okay, not just watching. Apparently his hand’s wandered into his lap without any conscious though on his part. He lets go of himself, feeling like getting himself off to this would be missing the point.)

Abby’s kneeling between Jimmy’s legs. She gasps softly when she feels him behind her. Must have
forgotten he was there, which is fine, with what they’re doing, they should be paying attention to Jimmy.

But he can’t not touch. Can’t just sit there and watch anymore, so he slips his legs between hers, kneeling behind her, and pulls her back a bit, slipping into her, hissing as he’s surrounded by glorious, hot, wet, dripping wet, sopping wet, pussy.

He grits his teeth at the sensation, so, so good, and says, quietly to her, “When you slide into him, you rock forward, when you pull out, you rock back. Do both of us at the same time, same speed.”

She looks over her shoulder, grins at him, and keeps the pace, and when she slips all the way forward, into Jimmy, she pulses her pussy around his tip, and when she slips all the way back onto him, she does something else to Jimmy, but Tim doesn’t know what. He does hear the added, breathy, ripped out of him “Fuck!” from Jimmy every time she does it.

Tim’s not going to last long, can’t take too much of this, even though it is slow and so wet and slick. Jimmy’s cursing now, full out stream of half-spoken, half-cried, all-pleasure profanity filling the air between gasps and moans. They’re tipping him over, into a long, slow full-body orgasm, the kind that feels like it eats you alive, and Jimmy’s crying, begging, words gone, keening with pleasure as Breena keeps up the slow steady pace, and Abby sinks into him, easing his way out of his mind and into sparkling neurons and flaming synapses. Tim sees the rolling twitch begin in Jimmy’s hips and thighs. He feels the way Jimmy’s legs jerk around them, and all three of them hear him shout out FUCK!, ripping the sheets from the bed as the first spasm hits him hard as a car going ninety before he jerks, hard, again, and again, and once more, groaning each time, then falls limp and silent and twitching, and seeing that, hearing it, feeling Abby on him and Jimmy’s legs twitching next to him sets Tim off, too.

A few minutes later, when he’s fully back in his head again, it occurs to Tim that he’s not feeling any soft twitching from Abby, and for that matter, he sure as hell didn’t do anything that might have resulted in an orgasm for anyone other than him when he was the focus, either.

He’s kneeling, butt on feet, Abby in his lap, leaning against him.

Jimmy’s still crashed out on the bed, somewhere between asleep and unconscious. Breena’s got him, cuddling and petting him gently.

Tim kisses Abby’s throat, and she turns her face to his with a smile. He knows that look, she’s not done. Close, he can feel that, but not done.

His fingers slip down her sides, caressing over breasts and hips, before settling between her legs.

She sighs, very happy at that, and happier still as he starts a quick, circling stroke.

Maybe it takes a minute, probably less, before she’s tight and panting, before he feels her muscles clench on his softening dick and hears her moaning.

He holds her close as she comes down, and for as good as a slow, edged orgasm can be, there’s something to be said for fast one when you’ve been turned on for hours.
He nibbles her ear. “So, what are we doing for you tomorrow?”

She smiles at him. “We’ll see what I’ve got a taste for then.”

He kisses her gently. “And let me guess, right now, you’ve got a taste for dinner.”

She holds his hand over her belly. “Little boy wants to eat!”

One more kiss. “Go run a shower. I’ll join you in a minute.”

Abby gets up, kissing Breena and Jimmy as she heads out of bed. Tim looks at Breena, “You good?”

She smiles at him, nods, still gently petting Jimmy’s chest. “Took care of myself.”

He kisses her. “Okay.” And then strokes Jimmy’s face, smiling at him, remembering how good everything feels after waking up from that sort of orgasm, and then heads to the shower with Abby.

Jimmy wakes up feeling amazing. Everything is good. He’s one big, glowy, mushy, ball of euphoric love right now. Breena’s in his arms, he can smell steaks cooking on charcoal, and everything is perfect.

“You and Abby are the most amazing women on the planet,” he says quietly to Breena.

“Hey!” She rolls onto her stomach, resting on her elbows, facing him. “You’re up.”

He smiles, feeling goofy. “I’m awake. Not sure if up is happening anytime soon.” He giggles at his own joke, and Breena smiles.

“Well, how about moving, shower, and eating?”

He nods. “I’m in favor of all of those things.” He sits up, stomach rumbling. “Yeah, really in favor.” He kisses her again, hands finding her skin. He wants to get up and get moving, but he doesn’t want to stop touching, either.

She takes his hands, and pulls them to the bathroom for a shower.

Steaks on the porch with lots of salad, and very cold cider, charcoal fire slowly winding down, sun easing it’s way behind the trees is perfect.

Dragging one of the mattresses into the living room, popping up lots of popcorn, salty and buttery and crisp, while all snuggled together, munching away, watching Star Wars: The Force Awakens, is amazing.
And once again, sleeping tangled together, stars slowly vanishing from the sky, covered by rain clouds, and fat drops of soft rain pattering on the glass, is just the proverbial icing on the cake.
They wake up to the sound of rain on glass. Steady pattering. Soft, gray light leaving everything blue and cool.

Tim thinks it’s later than when he woke yesterday, but there’s no clock in the solarium, and the sun isn’t obliging him by being visible. It’s late enough he feels good. Early enough that he’s sure it’s still morning. Beyond that, it doesn’t matter.

Slow, easy breakfast starts the day. Nothing big or complicated. Fruit, eggs, the left over steak from last night. Easy does it.

Next up, checking in to see how the girls are.

Correct answer: just fine, or as Penny put it, “Compared to four boys under the age of six, this is a breeze. Don’t worry and have fun!”

Sarah’s looking a bit more frazzled, but wasn’t requesting immediate back up. She did ask if Tim thought Gibbs would be up for playing with little girls. Tim told her that until they put Gibbs in the ground, he’d be in favor of playing with little girls.

Then he calls Gibbs, tells him Sarah and Kelly might be over today, and to give them a ring if Sarah’s in over her head and needs them to come home early.

He can’t see Gibbs, but Tim can feel the look he’s getting over the phone, the hell will freeze over before we cut your honeymoon short look. But, true to form Gibbs says, “If there’s a problem, I’ll call.”

“But there won’t be any problems, will there?” Tim says, calling Gibbs’ lie.

“Nope. Not so beat up I can’t help watch a fifteen-month-old.”

“She’s with Sarah because we didn’t want you stressing yourself.”

“Oh huh.” Gibbs hadn’t been thrilled about that, too. “Sarah and Abbi can do the lifting, and I can still read stories and make goofy faces.”

“Okay. How’s everything else going?”

“Fine. Penny and Duck are coming over this afternoon. Gonna have little girls running around anyway, might as well have the whole set.”

“Then give Sarah a call. I’m sure she’d like the invite.”

Checking in with the family gives way to checking in with the rest of the world, but, fortunately, as of now, nothing at NCIS has blown up. All of Tim’s cases are happily simmering along with their various Minions. Abby takes a few minutes to check over the lab’s cases, but they seem to be swimming along without her. Slower than normal, but still faster than before the paperwork software
got tossed into the mix. Jimmy finds that Dr. Allan is still enjoying his weekend, and has not been called in for a dead body. Breena doesn’t call in. She knows her father would have absolutely no issues at all with giving her a call if something out of the ordinary showed up that needed her help. The fact that he hasn’t indicates that everything is bopping along exactly the way it is usually does. Right now, the funeral home is closed for Sunday, her family’s at church, and getting ready for supper.

All fed, and the world at large taken care of, it’s time to play.

“So, Breena what’s yours?” Abby asks.

Breena eyes both of the guys, remembering what she’d said during the rainbow party, and how Tim’s a bit fuzzier than she generally prefers. (Really should have gotten him trimmed down long before yesterday.)

Her hands steeple together, fingers flicking pad to pad, and she does her best evil villain grin at both of them, then says, “You two are both in need of a shave.”

Tim rubs his chin a bit, and yes, he’s a little raspy. He knows that’s not precisely what she’s talking about, though. “And where, exactly, do you want us shaved?”

Jimmy adds in. “I think we need to let her do it. That way she’ll get exactly what she wants.”

Breena grins. “You trust me?”

Tim and Jimmy nod, though Tim adds, “Just remember, it itches like crazy when it comes back in, so, plan for tomorrow accordingly.”

“Oh, I have!” Part of what she packed is the lotion that makes hair grow in softer and slower. It’s not a miracle potion, but it should push itchy and squirming off until tomorrow afternoon. When they’re back at their respective homes. “And I’m thinking, that we’re going to get you all trimmed up, and then shaved bare, and then you’ll get to watch Abby do me.”

Both guys whimper at that, and Abby’s looking exceptionally happy with that idea. Breena has a much easier time playing with Abby than the guys do with each other, but that doesn’t change the fact that she’s straight and prefers playing with the boys. It’s also true that she knows Abby genuinely likes playing with her, the same way Tim and Jimmy do, so she tries to work that in, too.

Abby’s sitting closest to Breena right now, and she kisses Breena’s shoulder. She grins, very wide, very sexy, and very pleased. She glances outside, overcast, but the rain has stopped. This is six or seven kinks she’s in favor of all wrapped up together, and she’s going to have a blast with it. “You know, the shower in here isn’t very big, and there isn’t a bath tub, so I’m thinking we start in the bathroom, do all the trimming and rinsing off in there, and then, if the hot tub looks clean enough (they haven’t taken the cover off of it to see) wrap up in there. That way I can sit you on the edge, spread your legs wide, gently take every hair off your body, and then kiss my work to make sure it’s perfectly soft and smooth.”

Given the potential for that show, the guys are now willing to scrub out the hot tub with their toothbrushes. It does not matter what has to be done, that hot tub is going to be clean enough for surgery, let alone fooling around.

Jimmy’s springing up, heading toward the porch, and Tim’s only a few inches behind him.
Abby looks at Breena, and both of them start to giggle.

The hot tub is empty. Both of the guys are surprised by that. They figured it’d be the kind of thing you kept water in all the time, and just dumped more chlorine in if it looked murky. It’s not. It’s a lot more like a large bathtub. Which suits them both just fine.

It’s clean, dry, a few spiders, but the guys get them cleaned out before there’s any shot of Breena seeing them and freaking out, or Abby seeing them and deciding that the hot tub is the spiders’ natural habitat and that they cannot be disturbed.

Nothing is getting in the way of this morning’s plans.

They get the water going, figuring that it’s going to be a while before the tub’s even close to full, and head back in again.

If there’s anything about this cabin they don’t love, it’s the bathroom. It’s a perfectly functional space. Kind of small, but if you intend to use it for what it’s designed for, washing up, getting rid of used food, it’s just fine.

It’s got a stall shower that’s comfortable for two people, tight for three, and four’s just not happening. There’s one sink, and sharing one sink with one other person is something they’re all used to. (Tim and Abby’s bathroom only has one sink, and the apartment Jimmy and Breena had before they got the house only had one, too.) But, one sink for four people means that at any given time, two people are not brushing their teeth.

There’s one electric plug, right next to the sink. On the opposite side of the bathroom from the shower stall.

So, it’s functional. Assuming you didn’t have any particularly kinky plans in mind. Like, say, using electric trimmers in the shower stall.

Brreena’s eyeing the cord, which is stretched all the way across the bathroom, and leaving her a foot shy of the shower. She and Abby had debated the one with the cord (hers) or the battery one (Abby’s) and decided that since they’d likely be doing all of them at once, the battery trimmers would end up pooping out well before the job was done.

Which is true. But right now Breena’s wishing they’d picked Abby’s trimmers and just brought a few more batteries. (After all, it’s not like they didn’t bring anything else that ran on batteries, or for that matter, a bunch of extra batteries.)

Nothing to be done for it now. Lucky for her, this party is inventive, and in that they’re miles from anyone else, not particularly inhibited.

“There’s a plug on the porch. Spread one of the black sheets out, stand out there, buzz, buzz, buzz, and then back in here to rinse off,” Jimmy says.

“Or spread it out in here,” Tim adds.

“Don’t want to go out?” Jimmy asks.
“I’ve got mental images of little clouds of hair blowing all over the place. In here, it’s not going anywhere but straight down.”

Jimmy inclines his head. That sounds like a legitimate critique of his plan.

Abby heads out, finds the laundry bag, and grabs one of the black (ish) sheets. She hands it over to Tim, who spreads it out all over the floor, and then, standing in front of the sink, says, “Lady’s choice. Who goes first?”

Breena grins. “I’m thinking you are. I’ve already seen him completely naked.”

Tim smiles back at her. “How do you want me?”

“Ohhh… Good question.” Given the layout and everyone wanting to watch, she takes Tim by the hips and scoots him a few inches over so his butt’s against the edge of the sink.

He spreads his legs a bit further apart. “Good?”

“So far.” She clicks on the trimmers, and gently scoots his dick to the side. “Try not to wiggle.”

“Honey, you’ve got trimmers in one hand and my dick in another, trust me, I’m not going anywhere.”

The other three laugh at that, and Breena gets to trimming.

It’s pleasant. The trimmers have quite a bit more oomph than the battery powered ones he and Abby have, and they’re vibrating gently. Add that to her hand on his dick, and he’s enjoying this quiet a bit.

In fact, he’s actually a little pouty when she gets done a lot faster than he expected. She’s just trimmed down his pubes, and just the front of him. He was thinking bare when she mentioned shaving.

“That’s it?”

Breena’s not looking very sure about what else she might trim. “Uh, yeah. What else?”

Tim gestures to the rest of himself.

Breena shakes her head. “Other than your face, nope.” She looks at Abby. “If I want to make love to someone who feels like a woman, I’ll make love to a woman.” Then she stands up and wraps an arm around Abby, dragging her smooth leg along Abby’s, and kissing her. “Oh, look, a woman! I like soft and slick and smooth, but I still want you two to feel like men.” She steps over, and drags her toes up Tim’s leg, which isn’t as fuzzy as Jimmy’s but is by no means hairless. Then she traces her fingers over his chest hairs. “So, into the shower with you. Rinse off, get your face, and by the time you’re done, I’ll have Jimmy buzzed down and you can swap.”

So into the shower he goes.

He’s almost done with his face when Jimmy slips in behind him, gently nudging him to budge over and share the water.

“Going kind of slow?”
Tim shrugs, finishing up. He’s hoping to have his face buried deep into at least one pussy today, (and
two’s better) so he’s making sure that he’s smooth as he gets.

When he steps out, he takes a moment to notice that Abby or Breena have cleaned up the drop cloth
between trims. (Which he appreciates. He doesn’t much like the idea of lots of little bits of hair all
over his wet feet.) He takes another moment to appreciate the fact that Abby’s buzzing all of the hair
off of Breena. And, as much as he’s liking what he’s seeing, Abby grins at him, and then says,
“Maybe checking on the hot tub? Don’t want to flood the porch.”

Tim nods, heads out, sees that the water is six inches from the top, so he turns it off, and goes back
in.

When he gets back in, Abby’s got Breena facing the sink, one knee on the edge, and is kneeling
beneath her, and very carefully trimming everything, front to back.

Tim just stands there and watches. Breena’s curls are very light brown, and she keeps them fairly
short to begin with, but now they’re almost gone, and he’s got a great view of luscious, moist, pink
pussy on display.

His dick would applaud if it could, but it can’t, so it salutes by standing at attention.

He’d like to hop on over and offer to help, but first of all this is very much a one person job, and
secondly, he doesn’t want to encroach on Abby’s good time. He knows what turned on Abby looks
like, and if she had a dick, it would also be happily saluting away, too.

Jimmy steps out of the shower, all wet, his face smooth, takes one look at the two of them, sees two
pinkish blurs in what is likely a very suggestive position, and says, “Damn it, where the hell are my
glasses?” before heading into the bedroom to find them, because he certainly wants to watch this,
too.

Unfortunately, that worked just about as well as not getting his glasses because as soon as he stepped
back into the nice, hot, steamy bathroom with his cool, room temperature glasses, they fogged right
up.

Abby was done long before he could see through the glass.

“Let me get a quick rinse off. Abby, can I put you in charge of getting everyone out and shaving
cream?”

Abby smiles. “With pleasure.” She takes Tim by the hand and pulls him close. “Hmm… I remember
reading about how to do this well…” She looks around finds two towels, handing one to each guy,
and grabs their shaving creams.

“Okay, out we go!”

“Hot towel shave?” Jimmy asks with a smirk, following her to the hot tub.

“Only the best for my loves. Hey, razors… wanna grab them, and new blades?”

Jimmy nods, heading back into the bathroom.

Tim and Abby head out to the hot tub. He climbs in, testing the water, it’s good and warm but not
too hot (can’t put a pregnant woman in too hot of water), and then holds her hands as she climbs in.
Abby smiles at him as he does it. She’s fairly sure that right now, especially on a wet surface, he
couldn’t catch her if she slipped, but he’s not about to give up on trying.
Abby eyes the towels and decides they don’t need them, at least not now. “I’m thinking, for right now, in the water is fine.”

“Not much point of a hot towel if there’s a hundred gallons of hot water.”

She nods at that, and Tim sits down. A second later, he pulls her into his lap, and kisses her. “Hey, beautiful.”

She smiles at that, and kisses him back. “Back at ya, baby.”

And for a moment they sit there, close, holding one another, enjoying weightlessness and warm water. Then Jimmy and Breena (along with three razors) come to join them.

Another few moments of relaxing and splashing around, along with the idea that maybe more of this later tonight or tomorrow would be a good plan goes by, followed by working out the mechanics of how best to do this.

Finally, Tim’s sitting on the edge of the tub, legs wide, feet on the little bench that circles the tub. Breena’s kneeling in the tub, water about shoulder high on her, exactly the right height to take every hair of Tim’s privates.

“You use this blade on your face?” she asks as she lifts the razor.

Tim nods.

“You want to put a new blade on Tim’s razor?”

The blades are next to Jimmy, so he nods, flicking off the old one, and slotting a new one in, while Abby squirts a decent sized dollop of Tim’s shaving cream between her hands and rubs it around.

“It doesn’t foam,” Tim says to her. There’s not much reason to rub it around.

“I know. Just feels good and smells good.”

Tim inclines his head at that, and Abby gently rubs the shaving cream all over him. That feels excellent. By the time she’s done, and he’s completely covered, Breena’s got a pretty good handle on his razor, how it feels and works, and is ready to go.

And like when he did it with Abby, it’s just so sensual and dangerous. The shaving cream does smell good, and it’s nicely slick. The blade skimming over his skin is smooth and cool (especially compared to how warm the water was). Breena’s holding his dick to the side, slowly scraping the blade in toward the base of his penis, and that feels great.

Add in the danger kick on top of that.

This is amazing.

And it gets better as she moves to his balls, gently holding them, slipping the blade over them, so soft and slick and so dangerous and it’s this amazing chemical cocktail of endorphins from pleasure and all of his fight or flight reflexes firing and it feels really good.

He doesn’t grow much hair on his dick, just a few at the base, so taking them off is only a few second more, and then he’s done. And again, like last time, it’s so soft, and so smooth, and so sensitive. His own fingers feel amazing, and Breena laying a gentle kiss on him, nuzzling him with nose and lips to ‘make sure she got everything’ is even better.
When she’s done, Breena hands him over to Abby, who ‘checks her work,’ and ‘makes sure she paid attention to detail’ which he doesn’t mind at all, while watching her shave Jimmy, which looks better than anything involving a naked man has any right to look to him.

Jimmy’s having a great time with that, too, and he takes longer than Tim because he’s both hairier and said hair is coarser, however, he doesn’t seem to mind in the least that Breena’s spending extra time playing with his balls and dick.

But, eventually, they’re both done, soft and smooth and hairless. And hard. Very hard. And very interested in doing something with all the new, soft, smooth hairless skin.

Abby’s looking at all three of them, eyes sparkling, then says to Breena, “Ready for your turn?”

“Oh yeah!”

“Tim, sit on her left, Jimmy on her right.” They’re not sure exactly what the plan is yet, but sit next to Breena is an instruction they’re happy to obey.

Breena hops up to the edge of the hot tub, and the guys scoot a little closer to her.

Abby’s in the water, in front of Breena, but she scoots over a bit, kisses the tip of each of their dicks, then looks up at the guys. “No getting off you two. This is for Breena.”

She goes back to kneeling in front of Breena, weightless in the water, and then gently puts each palm on the inside of Breena’s knees and slowly parts her legs, draping one leg over Tim’s thigh and the other over Jimmy’s.

Abby kisses up the inside of her thigh, leaving a light, teasing kiss on what’s left of her muff before looking up at Breena and saying, “Such a pretty little pussy. Can’t wait to make it sing.”

Tim bites his lip, and Jimmy moans.

Breena smiles, wide, happy, and sexy at her.

Abby grabs Breena’s shaving cream, and adds a little to her hands. Like Tim’s, it doesn’t foam. It’s unscented and feels very slick between her fingers. She takes her time massaging it all over Breena’s pussy, rubbing it in with lots of little circles.

Then she rinses her hands, and grabs Breena’s razor.

The first swipe of the blade is slow, gentle, straight down the middle of her mons. Sliding down and inward, slipping off a fine layer of shaving cream and tiny hairs. It’s followed by another, and another, all in line with the grain of the hair.

Abby rinses off the blade between each swipe, and once all the shaving cream, and from the looks of it, all the hairs, are off of Breena’s mons, she grabs the towel, wets it, and gently wipes Breena off. Then she takes another squirt of the shaving cream, applies another layer, begins again. This time against the grain.

Breena’s biting her lip as Abby does it, and trying very hard not to move, but this feels awesome, and her hips want to rock in response to it.

Abby’s grinning up at her as she finishes the last swipe against the grain. “Jimmy, how about you give her a little pet, make sure I’ve done a good job?”
Jimmy swallows hard, and then lightly traces his fingers over Breena’s mons, they both moan softly at that. “Good job!” Jimmy says. Then he kisses Breena, his fingers still gently petting her, and Breena groans at that.

After a few more seconds, Jimmy feels a light whack on his fingers.

“Oh, right. Not done yet,” he says pulling them back.

“Not even close. Still have to get your lips.” Abby grabs the shaving cream again. “And I think that’s probably going to take a lot of careful attention.”

And she’s right. It’s careful precision work. But Abby’s more than up to the task. And by the time she’s done, Breena’s completely bare from top to bottom, every hair carefully whisked away.

And all four of them are extremely turned on.

Abby cups the water in her hands, letting it gently trickle over Breena’s pussy, a soft wet stream of fat, slow drips up and down her lips. It takes her a good two minutes to get all of the last bits of shaving cream rinsed off, one drop at a time, Breena squirming with each drop and both of the guys watching, eyes riveted to Breena, dicks rock hard.

“Now to see if I missed anything,” Abby says as soon as she’s done. Her lips land, softly, so softly, on Breena’s mound, and then ghostly gently down. Abby makes an, mmmm sound while doing it, and Tim’s not sure if she’s moaning at how yummy Breena is, or adding a little vibration to what she’s doing. Either way, watching this is so hot, he’s afraid he’s going to pass out.

Another pass, from top to where her lips meet, and one more, getting the whole delta with soft stroking kisses. Then up, against the grain. When Abby finishes that, she looks up at Breena, who’s starting to flush, and says, “Perfect, just like silk.” She looks up at the guys, as she says, “You can’t wait to rub your dicks against it, can you?”

“No!” Tim and Jimmy manage to say in just about perfect chorus.

“Good. But right now,” and again she kisses Breena’s mons, “she’s all mine.” She kisses Breena’s belly, and noses her way down, gently taking her left labia majora between her own lips, and sucking it. Plump little sucks all the way down. Her face is too deep for Jimmy and Tim to really see what she does next, but they hear Breena inhale suddenly and jerk, and then Abby looks up at her, grinning wickedly, “Jimmy said he wanted us to do that to you. You like it?”

Breena pulls Abby up for a lip to lip kiss, deep and sloppy, wet with lots of tongue and lips sliding pink and plump all over each other before letting her go and saying, “Yes.”

“Good. I’ll teach him all my tricks on you.” Another wet, lip to lip, kiss, broken when Jimmy pulls Breena away from Abby to kiss her, followed by a kiss for Abby. Tim got a hand on each of the girls’ breasts, and is kissing Breena’s shoulder when Abby pulls back, looks at both of the guys, and says, “This is for Breena. Right now, unless one of us asks for something, you two are just watching and furniture.”

They return their hands to themselves, and settle back down to watch.

Abby kneels down again, too. She’s not in any hurry. One tiny lick, another, and another. Just fine little flicks of her tongue all along Breena’s lips. Little tastes to just say hi. Then longer ones, all the way up and all the way down. She brings her teeth into play, grazing them over newly bare skin, and Breena moans and shivers. 
That makes Abby smile, in her mind at least, her lips are busy laying fine little sucking kisses all over the pussy in front of her.

More kisses, and more licking. Breena’s hands have found Abby’s hair, and she’s trying to get Abby quit teasing. She’s still focusing on the outer lips, not having closed in to the more sensitive inner ones.

Abby knows what that sort of tugging means when Breena does it to Jimmy, so she shifts a little, running the tip of her tongue from the bottom of one lip to the hood of Breena’s clit.

Breena whimpers, so close to where she wants it, not quite there, yet.

Abby’s licking gently over the hood, keeping her tongue focused on the sides, not quite landing on Breena’s clit. She pulls very lightly with her teeth, and Breena gasps, no one’s ever tried that on her and it feels really intense, but in a good way, then more licking, still gentle, almost too gentle. Small, frustrated, panting noises are slipping from her throat.

“Tim?” Abby asks between licks.

“Yes!” He’s ready willing and able to do anything, at all, Abby might want right now.

“Finger, right here.” She uses the pad of his index finger to slip the hood of Breena’s clit back.

Breena whimpers again, and Jimmy does, too.

“You’re so pretty, like this Breena, all pink and open.” Abby sucks two of her fingers, and starts to slip them between Breena’s lips, just nudging her vagina, in for a second, just a hint of stretch, a heartbeat of friction, and then gone.

Breena’s hips are thrashing in response, she wants more friction and a lot less teasing.

“Should I do this?” Abby thrusts in two fingers fast while closing her lips over Breena’s clit and sucking. Breena practically bucks off the side of the hot tub. Jimmy and Tim have her, so she can’t fall off.

Abby backs off one last time. “I think you liked that.” And again, she’s right on Breena’s clit, lots of up and down licks, as her fingers slip inside one, two, three, stroking and curling up, pressing her gspot, as she licks hard and fast, making Breena keen in pleasure. Breena grabs Abby’s hair, grinding into her mouth, coming hard, shaking from head to toe.

Abby looks a little sheepish when she pulls back a few moments later. “Hmmm… that might have been part of my fantasy.”

Breena gives her a lazy kiss. “You know, I’m fine with sharing fantasy time with you.” Then she looks at her two hard, leaking, flushed boys, and says, “Give me a few minutes, and we’ll get to you.”

And with herculean control, and the fact that there’s not all that much else to do right now, they decide to hop into the hot tub, and spend about ten minutes soaking.

Neither of them is inches from getting off by the time Breena looks ready for round two, but they’re both primed to be ready in an instant.

Breena looks both of the guys over, and then says, “Both of you at once.”
Tim’s eyebrows jerk up at that. *That* sounds more like a fantasy that he or Jimmy would (do) have, but if she’s asking for it, then he’s completely game. Jimmy looks like he’s really into that idea, too, and Tim’s guessing they’re both wondering who gets the blow job and who gets vaginal sex, or if they’ll swap, or if after watching/doing him and Jimmy she’s thinking trying anal sounds fun. (Tim licks his lips at *that* idea. They haven’t done that with Abby, yet, either, and he’s been looking forward to it.)

Jimmy’s apparently also got a head full of ideas as to what ‘both at once means’ and he’s also looking very enthusiastic about this idea when Breena says, “I’ve given birth three times, and I’m in good shape, do my kegels every day, kept everything as tight as possible, but I’d still like to feel some *stretch*.”

And the light goes on for the guys. That’s not what either of them had been thinking by both at once.

“Oh.” Jimmy says, eyes wide, looking really uncomfortable.

“Yeah,” Breena says back to him, nodding.

“Both at once.” Tim’s nodding, too, a very similar expression to the one Jimmy’s wearing on his face.

“Yeah.”

“Am I doing anything?” Abby asks.

“I’d really like you to get pictures.” Breena and Abby look really happy about the idea of pictures of this.

Tim and Jimmy are both trying to squirm without being too obvious about it. Having sex with Breena is cool. Both of them having sex with Breena at the same time is cool. Both of them having vaginal sex with Breena at the same time more or less requires them to have sex with each other, as well… and that’s… not cool. Tim’s thinking the emotional sensation going through him right now may be terror. It’s not quite seeing a big black dog staring him down, but it’s on that spectrum.

Breena notices that neither guy is looking nearly as enthusiastic as he was two minutes ago. She glances at Abby, who shrugs. They’d talked about this, not sure if they could get the guys to do it. Though both of them came to the conclusion that if they could get the guys to try it, they’d probably like it.

Still, respect means allowing them to back out, so Breena say, “Look if it’s too gay, if it crosses your lines, it’s not a problem. Abby can sub in with the strap on for one or both of you if you’d rather take turns… but… I’d like to be wrapped up in both of you and feel both of you inside me at the same time. I want my two best guys together.”

Tim and Jimmy look at each other again. Neither sure what exactly the other means by his look, both of them kind of floundering around with the fact that this is really uncomfortable and way too sexy and Breena’s looking really expectantly at them, and she did each of their fantasies with no problems, and they’d still have their dicks rubbing up against each other and that’s squirmy in a bad way, and both of their wives masturbating to pictures of them doing it is squirmy in a very good way and this is just…

Finally Jimmy says, licking his lips, looking like he’s not sure if he can make himself do this, but if he has more information he might be able to. “How do you see this working?”

Breena smiles. Good. If she can get one of them through his panic, the other will follow, and this’ll
be awesome. “I’m thinking Tim sitting on the sofa, legs wide. I’d straddle him. You in front. Neither of you moving much. I want to be able to control the speed and angle.”

“Okay,” Tim says. That makes a lot of sense to him; this would probably be pretty ouchy if you did it wrong. Jimmy doesn’t look sold on the idea, and he’s not, either, but… He can’t not try. But he also doesn’t think it’s fair to act like this is completely cool if it’s not. (In this Tim is grossly underestimating how little of a poker face he or Jimmy is wearing right now.) “Look, honestly, I don’t know if I can keep an erection if I’ve got Jimmy’s dick and balls rubbing against mine. I just don’t know. But I’ll try.” Because no matter how scary this is, he’d rather shoot himself in the head than flat out turn Breena down. “And maybe… Maybe we could sort of ease into it. You on me, him doing oral, see if that turns us off, and go from there.”

Jimmy thinks about that for a second. He can do that… Probably… Not like he hasn’t seen Tim’s dick before. Though seeing it and practically licking it aren’t exactly the same thing. “Seems fair. ‘Cause honestly, I don’t know, either. But if having your dick an inch from my nose doesn’t kill my hard on, I can probably keep it up.”

They’re both looking at each other with a somewhat tentative peace. Then something hits Tim. Something about how in the fantasy version where it’s him, and Abby, and Breena doing this, and what happens with the tongue of whichever girl is on oral.

“Just, don’t lick me, okay.”

Jimmy blushes. “Wasn’t planning on it.”

“You do realize I will be moving around, right?” Breena says dryly. (This had sounded like such a better plan when she and Abby were talking it through. Now she’s wondering if backing out is a good plan, half thinking she’s pushing them too far, half thinking they’ll feel guilty as hell if she does back out. She glances quickly at Abby, who gives her a quick, keep going nod.)

“Um… yeah. Okay, I will not intentionally lick you.”

“Err…”

Both guys are watching each other, warily, looking ready to bolt to opposite sides of the state, so they don’t see the look Abby flashes Breena, the one where both of them are completely aware of Jimmy kissing her seconds after Tim came in her mouth, where they’re both aware of the fact that if they slip out of the middle of the bed at night (which they’ve intentionally done both nights just to see how it’d work) that they’ll just snuggle into each other like it’s no big deal, or how watching the other guy get off turns both of them on so hard they practically cum in their pants, and that this level of being uncomfortable strikes both of them as ridiculously silly.

Abby steps in, taking charge of the situation. “Tim, just get on the sofa.”

Having someone else tell him what to do helps, so, after a bit of cleaning up and drying off, Tim does.

Once he’s on the sofa, Abby leaves the living room and comes back with a pillowcase. She ties it around his eyes. “Jimmy and I’ll go down on Breena at the same time. And if you end up with a tongue rubbing against you, you won’t know whose it is. Better?”

He feels pretty silly about this, but, well, “Actually, yes.”

“Jimmy, I’d offer you a blindfold as well, but I think you need to see what you’re doing so we don’t keep bonking heads.”
“Yeah.”

“So, we good on this?”

Tim nods.

Jimmy says, “For the moment.”

Abby looks at both of the guys, then catches Breena’s eye. “Neither of you two are ready to go.” Those dicks that looked ready to climax with the faintest touch twenty minutes ago are awfully limp right now. “So, how about a game? Tim you’re already blindfolded, so it’ll be your job to figure out who is touching you. Jimmy, your job is to sit back, relax, and watch.”

“I don’t get touched?” That doesn’t sound like much of a game to Jimmy.

“Whichever of us isn’t touching Tim’ll be in your lap, getting you ready.”

“I like this game.” Tim smiles a little, it’s not as bright as the rest of the smiles this weekend, but he’s trying.

Jimmy does, too, and like Tim’s he’s not precisely gung ho about this, but he’s trying, too. “Me too.”

Tim does like that game. Granted, it’d be a hell of a lot more difficult if he didn’t know every inch of Abby’s body, how she smells, the way her footfalls sound when she walks, so, she hasn’t even touched him yet and he knows it’s her, but it’s still fun.

He knows when the girls swap out, too. One second he’s kissing Abby, and the next it’s Breena, but that’s good too.

Breena in his lap is good. Her breasts under his hands is good. The feel of her so so soft skin under his fingers and wrapped around his dick is awesome. And the mental image he has of holding her lips apart, deep inside her, with Abby licking her pussy is doing some very good things for him.

The rather warm, broad, and muscly shoulder under his thigh, which is very much NOT ABBY (because he can feel Abby’s narrower, softer shoulder against his other thigh) is somewhat distracting, and not necessarily in a way he wants to (or is proud of) being distracted.

Similarly, he can feel Abby’s long, silky hair against his right thigh (which is awesome, almost feels like sex and a blow job at once), and Jimmy’s much shorter, rougher, and springier hair on his left (which is just… weird).

And yes, they both shaved, but Tim’s really sure that the chin that just bumped his testicles isn’t Abby’s. Even smooth shaved, Jimmy’s face doesn’t feel like Abby’s.

So… he’s not sure if he likes this. It feels good, but… it’s…

He’s not sure.

Breena’s breathing fast and hard, then shuddering and moaning as she climaxes. That’s excellent. He’s always going to be good with that. And apparently having all three of them doing everything they can to turn her on works a treat for her, so that’s good, too.

And a little quiet time, letting her relax as the rest of them hold and pet her, that’s nice. Tim likes that.
Then he feels Abby back off, and his body starts to tense a bit, knowing what’s coming next. Jimmy’s shifting up, and…

It takes a bit of scooting around, getting set, but they get it figured out and…

The feel of Jimmy slipping into Breena next to him is just… honestly… weird. Okay, yeah, it feels good. It’s extra stimulation on a part of him that is always in favor of more stimulation. And yes, Breena isn’t as tight as Abby, but this takes care of that and then some. Everything is extremely snug in a very good way right now.

Objectively, it’s an exceptionally pleasant sensation. The part of his brain that’s just feeling it really likes it. Of course the part of his brain that just feels things has no objections to rubbing his dick against or in anything that might feel good. That’s the part of his brain that watched American Pie when he was nineteen and thought, you know, that would probably feel pretty good… And that’s precisely why that part of his brain is not in charge of deciding who and what he has sex with.

That part of his brain is stupid, so it’s not allowed to give orders.

Soft, hot, wet and snug are always good. Friction from two directions at once is just amazing and nothing he’s ever experienced before. Pressure, stroking over that little spot just below the head of his penis, while something soft and hot and wet and snug is wrapped around it is beyond amazing. And something soft and smooth gently rubbing against his balls is awesome, too.

And if he could just get over the fact that a good half of what he’s feeling is Jimmy, this would be some of the best sex of his life.

But it is Jimmy. So he’s a mile from coming and fucking with his eyes closed, which he hasn’t done since before Abby, hell, probably hasn’t done in the last decade, because he loves to watch.

And it’s just silly. So damn silly. It’s just skin. Skin that feels awfully good. But it's Jimmy’s skin, and for some reason that matters.

He’s sure that part of the reason Jimmy’s moving is that if he stays still, he’ll go soft. The plan was they’d stay pretty still and Breena would move. And if it was just this-feels-so-awesome-I-can’t-not-move, then Jimmy wouldn’t be silent. He’s not quiet when he’s enjoying himself, and he’s dead silent now.

And Breena did both of them, went in on their kinkiest fantasies, spent more than an hour on her knees driving him insane, and that can’t have been comfortable to do it for that long, and the idea of disappointing her feels awful, feels cold and sick and nasty in his stomach and chest, and he’s pretty sure Jimmy’s feeling something like that, too.

It’s not like she asked him to blow Jimmy. Not like they’re fucking each other. They’re fucking her, together, and if it feels good, so what? It should feel good. They’re making her happy (or they would be if they could get their heads out of their asses), and that should feel good. It should feel excellent.

It’s just skin.

Jimmy’s skin.

Jimmy’s dick, Jimmy’s balls, Jimmy rubbing against him. And it feels great. Which is actually a really squirmy thought.

It feels great, it’s smooth and wet and exactly the right sort of friction, and…
And they’re fucking each other. That’s just what this is, and pretending it’s not isn’t doing anyone any favors. He’s going soft. A huge pile of panic at that idea is cresting over him, along with a lot of shame, and...

He’s makes himself pull out of that spiral. Makes his mind back away from the fear. You are not going to disappoint her. You are better than this.

Long, slow, calming breath. It’s just skin! Get the fuck over yourself, open your eyes, and do right by the beautiful woman on your cock. Take the lead on this, and Jimmy will follow you. This shouldn’t be scary. It’s just sex. You’ve mastered everything you’ve ever put your mind to, and this… This feels good. It’s supposed to feel good!

It feels fucking excellent, so enjoy it. Man up, get over the fact that it’s Jimmy, and do what you need to do! It’s just skin.

Tim takes his blindfold off, and sits up straight, so his chest is against Breena’s back. Jimmy’s kissing Breena, his eyes closed, and a significantly less-than-blissed-out expression on his face.

Tim slides his hands off Breena’s hips, lightly strokes them over her neck and shoulder, lifting her hair out of the way, and kissing her throat and ear. “It’s about to get better.”

Breena makes a very pleased sound when he says that, and relaxes into his chest.

He hooks his feet around the back of Jimmy’s thighs, pulling him in close, and then wraps his arms around both of them. Jimmy squeaks with surprise when he does it, breaks the kiss and chokes out, “Tim?”

He curls his hand around the back of Jimmy’s neck, making sure Jimmy’s looking him in the eye. If he has to Dom Jimmy to make this work, then that’s what he’ll do. They can sort that out between them when Breena’s not, literally, between them. Though, he’s hoping just talking and pointing the way’ll get the job done. “This is some god-awful lame fucking from both of us. It’s just sex, and we’re good at sex. This,” and he thrust as much as he can, rubbing up against Breena and Jimmy, “feels awesome, and it’s supposed to. The only reason both of us aren’t inches from coming is in our heads, not our dicks. I’m better than this,” he gently squeezes the back of Jimmy’s neck, “and you are too, so let’s get over ourselves, enjoy it, and make your wife come so hard she sees stars.”

Breena laughs, delighted, turns, and kisses him. “I’m in favor of that.”

He doesn’t know if it’s his pep talk, like maybe once it’s okay to admit this feels good, something shifts, or Breena’s laugh, which makes everything better, or the way Abby’s smiling at them, like she’s never been more proud, or just plain, basic male competition, Jimmy’s not about to be out-fucked by Tim, but whichever it is (or all together) seems to snap Jimmy out of his headspace into something sexier, because he smiles and kisses Breena. For a moment, they share her. Jimmy kissing, then Tim, then Jimmy again, passing her lips back and forth as Tim pets her hair and Jimmy strokes her arms and shoulders.

“Good.” Tim rolls his hips against hers, and yeah, that feels all sorts of good. “You like that?”

“Yeah.”

“Both of us deep inside you, spreading you wide open?” he murmurs against her throat.

“Yeah.” She almost breathes the word, then moans as his fingers find her nipples.

“Tell us how it feels.”
“Full… Oh…” Jimmy lowers his head to lick, his tongue on the tip of her nipple while Tim’s fingers circle appears to be something Breena is in favor of. “Tight, really tight.” She rises higher on them and slides, slowly, back down, hissing. “Intense. Sort of like the first time. It almost hurts, but it doesn’t hurt, and the stretch is fantastic.”

Those words make Jimmy moan, he grabs her by the back of her neck and kisses her deeply. Tim gets in on it, nibbling gently down her neck, leaving small, pink suck marks along her shoulder. Breena’s moaning at that, one hand tight in Jimmy’s hair, the other twined with Tim’s.

She breaks the kiss, slides all the way up, almost slipping off of them, and strokes down again. “It’s like this full, hot rush, silk on electric steel. And I want to go fast.” She thrusts quickly on them. “Feels so good it makes it hard to see. And I want to go slow.” She eases up and down again. “Draw it out, feel each ridge and vein, pull the pleasure out of each nerve slipping along hot skin.”

Tim’s head falls against her shoulder. “Fuck baby, you’re good with words.”

He spreads his legs a little wider, forcing Breena to spread a little wider too, and then leans back a few degrees, pulling her with him. “Good angle?”

“God, yeah. Jimmy’s getting me exactly right.” He feels Jimmy thrust a little faster and, yeah, Jimmy’s getting him just right, too. “Tell me how it feels to you.”

Tim pitches his voice lower, lips brushing Breena’s ear as he says, “Amazing. Your perfect pussy’s wrapped all tight around me, rubbing soft and wet on me. And he’s smooth and hard, and each stroke gets me in just the right spot. That little sensitive bit just below the tip. And you’re moving different speeds, and fuck… that’s… no words for that. It’s so good.”

“Good.” She pulls Jimmy in for a kiss and asks against his lips. “You like hearing this? Like how good this feels for me and Tim.”

Jimmy kisses her harder and squeezes Tim’s knee.

Tim glances away, sees Abby getting shots of them. He’s not sure if it’s video or stills. He gently nudges Breena’s face toward Abby, and Jimmy strokes his fingers through her hair as she looks. “Want her to get some really dirty ones?”

“Yes. Both of you deep inside me.”

Jimmy groans at that, thrusting hard and grinding against Breena, pelvis to pelvis, getting her clit with his body, and rubbing his balls against Tim’s. That makes Tim groan, too.

Tim sees Abby come closer, then kneel behind Jimmy, between his legs. He feels her kiss his knee, and knows exactly what she’s photographing. He gasps when she cups his balls and Jimmy’s, rubbing them against each other and tugging on them a little. Jimmy bites his lip and grunts.

“Abby,” Tim’s voice is a little choked, trying to keep control of himself, “I don’t think Breena wants me getting off, yet.”

“Not yet.” Breena adds. He feels Abby let go.

She sits next to them, stroking Tim and Jimmy’s shoulders. “Then you don’t want me to kiss her? You look so pretty right now, Breena.” Abby’s dead right about that. She’s flushed pink, and a little sweaty, and glowing with love and pleasure. “I really want to kiss you.”

She leans in and just gently slips her lips over Breena’s. A few seconds of soft, wet, smooching
before she pulls back.

Jimmy groans at that. Tim closes his eyes, inhaling fast enough he whistles.

Abby grins and moves away, returning to just filming them.

Tim’s fingers find Breena’s clit and begin to stroke.

Breena grabs his wrist. “Not like that, Tim. Just a little more, little longer, and just you two in me’ll do it. And I want you two to come with me. Want to feel both of you hold me tight, thrust in hard, cocks pulsing. Want to hear you groan and moan as my body goes tight on you.” Jimmy’s kissing her throat, while Tim’s fingers move back to her nipples. “God, that’s good. Just a bit longer.”

Jimmy’s thrusting faster. Tim can feel him sliding against his cock and balls, along with Breena’s rise and fall at a slightly different speed, and since he’s the one on the sofa he can’t manage too much movement, but he can cant his hips a little, add some extra pressure and a little up and down. It’s really not going to take much more of this to get him off.

Breena squeezes a little tighter, moves faster. Tim can feel himself getting ready to crest, and hopes they are, too. “God, Jimmy, tell me you’re close.”

Tim decides that Jimmy’s answering grunt is a yes.

Breena arches against them, kissing Jimmy, moving even faster. Jimmy’s groaning, and Tim’s babbling, a long string of “Fuck baby, so damn good, oh God, just like that, fuck!” and other variations on that theme. Then the world narrows down to glorious hot, wet, pulsing tingles and their bodies against his, Breena keening with pleasure, and Jimmy groaning.

And eventually there’s the feel of his arms around them, and Jimmy’s arms around him, Breena’s shoulder under his lips, her back on his chest, her hair against his face, and soft, very wet, gently twitching orgasmic aftershocks.

He hears Breena say, “You get all that?”

“Oh yeah. I’m sending you the video now,” Abby answers. Then soft weight next to him on the sofa, and the sounds of kissing. Abby must have been kissing Jimmy and Breena, and eventually she gets to him and whispers, “That was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen you do. Almost got off just watching. All I had to do was squeeze my legs together.”

He grins at that.

“My turn!” Abby says, happily when Tim and Breena and Jimmy are all starting to show signs of life again.

All three of them give her a are you kidding? look. They’re still on the sofa. Though Tim’s scooted back from the edge. He’s got his arm around Jimmy, who’s sitting next to him, with Breena in his lap, legs over Tim’s, both of them still cuddling her, and completely fucked out.

Abby smiles at them. She knows that her best shot at getting to see this is striking while the proverbial iron is hot, or at least so blissed out it’s really open to suggestion. “If Breena hadn’t gone first, I wouldn’t have even thought of this, but… I was watching, and there was one thing, and if you” it’s clear from the way she’s looking at Tim and Jimmy that they’re ‘you,’ “had done it I would
have gotten off just from watching, not even touching myself, just seeing it would have done it, and I’m not that revved up now, but I still really want it… And it’s probably too far, but if you’ll do it, as soon as you’re all rested up, I’ll do anything both of you want, anything.” And it’s clear from how she’s saying anything that everything they were thinking for ‘both at once’ just jumped right back on the menu.

Jimmy and Tim both look at each other and sort of sigh. Not that they don’t like the idea of what’s on offer, but… They’re wary of what this request might be. Then they look from Abby, who is very excited, to Breena, who has figured out what Abby’s likely to want, because it’s the same thing she was hoping to see, too and is also glowing with anticipation on this, and sigh again.

“What is it?” Tim asks, sounding a little nervous, wondering what she could possibly want now.

“I want to see you and Jimmy kiss, really kiss. And then I want you to tell me how it feels.”

So, he just leans over and does it. Before his brain can get involved and decide it’s weird or squirmy. As he’s doing it, he realizes this is the first time he’s really kissing Jimmy. Beside the wedding vow kiss, this is the only time he’s initiated a kiss for them, and for both of them, this is the first kiss that’s not just a quick, affectionate rub of lips on lips. It hits him that Jimmy has an easier time with kissing, and that he seems to have an easier time with hugs and cuddles.

But, no matter how it works for them, they’re kissing. Really kissing. Lips soft and wet and sliding gently over each other. Little licks and nips and sucks to add to it. Like with the sex, it’s objectively pleasant. Jimmy’s a really good kisser. He gets why the girls go all soft and melty when he does that. His technique is different, slower, shallower, more lips, less tongue. He takes his time getting to know the lay of the land, so to speak, and then seems to repeat whatever gets the best reaction. It’s not the way Tim usually kisses, but, yeah, it’s nice.

Tim guesses they do it for about a minute, maybe two. At least, it feels long enough to qualify as a real kiss, not just a quick peck, but not quite long enough to get to full on making out. Long enough that both girls are making extremely excited and happy sounds, so apparently it’s working just fine for getting them both off.

When he pulls back, they both wipe their mouths off. Tim nods a little at Jimmy. “You are a good kisser.”

Jimmy smirks.

Abby’s beaming at them, and he very quickly finds her in his lap as Breena scoots over a bit, to be more fully in Jimmy’s. “Well…”

Tim kind of shrugs. “It’s nice… Soft, wet, kind of rough.” Jimmy looks surprised by that, so Tim clarifies, rubbing his chin, “Not forceful.” He touches Jimmy’s chin, feels smooth to his fingers, not as smooth to his lips. “He’s got good technique, really pays attention, and tastes nice. I see why both of you really love it.”

Breena and Abby are loving that, then Abby understands Tim’s last sentence. “But you don’t?” Abby asks, looking confused.

He looks at Jimmy in a sort of no offense way and sees Jimmy gets it and isn’t offended at all. “No.”

“But it feels good, right?” Breena questions, also looking confused by Tim’s answer.

Tim kisses Abby, soft and slow and wet, actually trying to mimic some of Jimmy’s technique, and yeah, being on the doing side of that is awfully nice, too. “Yeah, it feels good! Lips and tongue
rubbing against mine, of course it feels good! But doing that with you or Breena feels fantastic. It’s like—"

"Tofu when you want steak." Jimmy adds.

Tim looks at him and lights up. "Perfect! You want steak. You crave steak. You dream about steak. At any given time when you aren’t thinking about something else, you’re fantasizing about sinking your teeth into a piece of steak. Large portions of your life have been spent hunting for steak, and now that you’ve got regular steak in your diet, you’re an extremely happy carnivore. Steak is delicious, makes your mouth water, and there are two beautiful, perfectly cooked, savory, succulent steaks in front of you," Tim says all of that with great enthusiasm, and then quickly shifts to the kind of tone one would use to describe drying paint to say, "and a plate of tofu." He pats Jimmy on the cheek, then the enthusiasm in his voice slips back up a few notches but not to the level he used to describe steak as he says, "And look, it’s not like tofu is poison or gross or anything. And this particular tofu is great tofu. It’s tasty tofu. It’s the only tofu you’d ever consent to have on your plate, let alone eat. But it’s still tofu, and you still want steak."

Jimmy's nodding along and adds, "And there’s nothing bad or wrong about tofu. It’s perfectly fine. Lots of people love tofu and more power to them. And like Tim said, it’s tasty. It’s great tofu."

"Never." Tim shakes his head. "No matter how good the tofu looks, in fact, even if the tofu is wearing a steak costume and steak perfume, neither of us has ever thought, ‘Mmmm, I want some of that.’ No matter how hungry we get, and trust me, I’ve been awfully damn hungry in the past, I’ve been literally starving in the past, I’ve never thought ‘Mmmm… tofu!’ Best we ever get is, ‘Yes, that’s some nice looking tofu. God, I want a steak!’"

Jimmy's still nodding along with this, agreeing completely. "So, yes, the tofu is tasty. Yes, we’ll eat it if asked—"

"Though both of us would really prefer you didn’t ask us to…” Tim eyes both of the girls as he says this, "eat the tofu. I mean, yeah,” and Tim sighs, realizing what he’s about to say, and sounding a bit whiny as he continues, "I’ll do it if you ask, but, especially compared to you two, I’ll be bad at it, and I don’t think Jimmy’d enjoy it,” Jimmy’s about to give himself whiplash he’s shaking his head so vigorously at the idea of this is something he wants no part of, “and I know I wouldn’t enjoy it, either.”

By this point, both Abby and Breena are laughing so hard their skin’s flushed pink and they both have tears streaming down their cheeks.

“Okay, it’s great that you two find this so entertaining," Jimmy says dryly when they calm down. “Just… Look, we’re guys. We’re straight guys. And we love you insanely so if you want it, we’ll put on a show for you, and it’s not… painful or anything, certainly more pleasant than say, shoveling the driveway—"

"’Bout on par with watching a chick flick?" Tim asks.

Jimmy thinks about that and nods. “Depends on the flick, but probably a little better than that. This isn’t boring.”

“True. And like the chick flick, sure parts of this are fun—“

Breena grins. “Did you just admit that you like parts of the chick flicks?”
“No,” Jimmy says quickly. “But I think he did. Anyway, it’s not anything either of us is ever going to want. At no point am I ever going to wake up and think, ‘Gosh, I’m here with two beautiful women, nah, I want to fuck Tim.’”

“Yeah, that’s just not going to happen. Want to fuck you.” And he kisses Abby. “Want to fuck you.” He leans over and kisses Breena. “Don’t want to fuck you.” He pats Jimmy on the cheek. “So yeah, his dick rubbing against mine felt great. Yes, he’s a good kisser. Yes, watching you two do him is insanely hot. And yeah, hearing you two moaning over us kissing is really hot, too. But even with all of that, if it’s just the two of us, at no point are we ever going to say, ‘Let’s fuck.’”

“We’d have to be on the deserted island, just the two of us, for months, before either of us might think of fucking the other one.”

Tim’s thinking it’d have to be an awfully long time on that island, but, okay, maybe not impossible. He’d probably get bored enough with just his hands that eventually Jimmy’d start to look good. Granted, he thinks the most likely result is they’d take care of themselves for sex, and help each other with cuddles and sensual touch. “And at this point the only reason it would cross either of our minds after months on this hypothetical island alone is because we’ve already done it. Me and Tony on a desert island and the world will end before we decide to have sex with each other.”

“You are such guys,” Breena says, shaking her head.

“Yeah, we are.” Tim replies.

“Rumor has it, that’s part of why you like us.” Jimmy adds.

Tim takes over. “So… anyway… Look, nothing’s off limits. We love you, and we’ll do what we can to make you happy, but be nice to us. Okay?”

“Nothing?” Abby asks, a diabolically wicked look on her face.

Since Tim said it the first time, she has to be asking Jimmy, he sighs and nods. “Nothing. You want to see something special sometime, and yeah, we’ll do it, just be nice about it.”

“Like when you Domme. You know where the lines are. You know you can push them a little. And you know that if you do it too often or without the proper set up--and for anything along the lines of eating the tofu proper set up probably involves lots of alcohol and both of us so turned on we can’t see straight…” Jimmy’s giving him the there’s not enough alcohol in the world look. “It makes subbing stop being fun.”

Jimmy adds, “And just remember, steak and tofu is always going to be a whole lot more fun for both of us than straight tofu.”

Tim grins and kisses Breena. “Tofu wrapped in steak was really good. Anytime you want that, I’ll do that again, happily.”

“Yeah. Steak with a little tofu sauce wasn’t bad either.”

“I knew that was your tongue!”

Jimmy smirks. “Yes, it was, but that’s tofu with steak juice. Which also wasn’t bad, but wasn’t what I was talking about. Right after your turn, when you were out of it, I was with Breena and could taste you on her, and that, after watching that hour of them fucking you, was really intense.”

“Oh. Gotcha. That was good?”
“Uh, yeah… You gonna tell me you didn’t nail Abby to the wall the second she and Breena were done with me?”

“No. I was actually fucking her before you were done.”

“You kiss her?”

“Yeah.”

“Well…”

“You really were gone, weren’t you? Breena was riding you, and Abby was rubbing.”

“Oh.” Jimmy looks at the girls and they smile. “You switched?”

“Yep,” Abby says with a grin. “Half way through, my jaw was getting tired.”

Breena nods. “And after that marathon with Tim, mine wasn’t up to much, either.”

“Oh.”

“So, no, I haven’t tasted your cum on her.”

“Yet.” Abby adds. “And for the record, anytime you two kiss each other, that’s melt my panties, tingles through my nipples and clit, pussy dripping down my thigh, masturbate to it for the next month hot.”

Breena grins and strokes her fingers down Jimmy’s throat. “Yeah, you two might look at each other like tofu, but both of you with each other is that perfect medium rare steak with the loaded baked potato, crisp green asparagus spears, with the hollandaise, and chocolate mousse for dessert.”

“With the cherry on top,” Abby adds.

“And whipped cream.”

“And a little salted caramel.”

“Oh…” Breena’s looking very happy at that idea. “We should really have some of that tonight.”

“Yeah, we should.” Abby’s also completely on board with this idea.

“Are we still talking about sex?” Jimmy asks.

“No, I think we’ve moved onto lunch,” Abby answers. “We haven’t eaten in four hours; I’m hungry!”
Book V: Timothy McGee

Tim’s in a really good mood as he’s googling away. He’d gotten the first shower, so he’s the one in charge of locating someplace that has both chocolate mousse and steaks. (And if such a place does not exist, he’s in charge of the shopping expedition to get steaks, caramel sauce, chocolate, and cream.)

He’s feeling light, almost bubbly, which doesn’t hit him as particularly weird, he’s usually in a really good mood after really good sex.

He’s humming quietly as he’s flicking thought local restaurant menus, searching for the illusive dessert, then as he’s looking, it hits him that Abby’s found the song he’s singing in his head, putting it up on her phone, and is standing behind him with her hands resting on his shoulder, before kissing him gently on the back of the neck. (She hasn’t gotten a shower, yet, so she’s not rubbing up against him, too much.)

He squeezes her hand and shows her a menu. “This fit the bill?”

She takes his phone and starts flicking through. He turns his face a little to nuzzle her belly. “Hey, little boy.”

She pets his hair while looking, nodding. “Oh yeah! That looks perfect.”

He smiles up at her and gets a little kiss. “Can we keep you to one dessert?”

“Probably not!” She grins back at him. “Little boy likes sugar.”

“Can’t imagine where he gets that from.” Breena and Jimmy step out of the bathroom. “Breena!” Abby hops over with the phone. “How about this?”

Breena also looks over the menu, Abby flipping the screen while she towels off her hair. “Perfect!” Abby kisses Breena’s shoulder, and pets Jimmy as she heads into the bathroom. “Ten minutes, and I’ll be ready to go.”


He catches Breena and Abby giving each other a little look, and a little smile, but doesn’t think much about it. Probably because he’s in a really good mood.

The van’s parked, and they’re strolling toward the restaurant. He’s a step behind Jimmy and Breena, arm around Abby, just being really happy with himself and the universe.
Abby gives him a little extra squeeze, and kisses him. “Happy?”

“Yeah, really.”

She smiles at him. “Good. Happy’s the plan.”

He kisses her. They take a few more steps, coming abreast of Jimmy and Breena. Jimmy’s on his right, Abby on his left, and a few steps into this, the idea of happy being something Abby was working on really hits.

Because he is really happy right now. Really. Like, stupidly happy. All is right with the world, everything is excellent, no cares, no black clouds, the universe is perfect, happy.

Which gets him thinking, because there’s his usual I-got-excellently-laid good mood, which is wonderful, and there’s this, which is deeper. Hell, this might be past happy and into… peace?

Okay, obviously his brain is trying to send him a message… Happy, calm, peaceful, loved, cherished, all those good feelings are there to make him try to do or get something good for him. Positive reinforcement for doing the right thing.

Sex is good for me. Sex with people I loves is good for me. Sex with lots of people I love appears to be good for me, too. Okay, yep, been over that… He wasn’t feeling this good yesterday. (Which is not to say yesterday wasn’t awesome, too, but…)

What’s different?

They get into the restaurant, and he’s still pondering.

“You okay?” Breena asks, noticing that a quarter of the party isn’t all there.

“Yeah. I’m good, just thinking.”

Lots of people is closer to whatever this is… He lets those thoughts drop away while the hostess gets them seated. It’s a steakhouse, and apparently lunch isn’t their real busy time, or they’re late enough to have missed the rush. Not deserted, but they’re four of the maybe fifteen people in there.

He doesn’t usually have alcohol with lunch, but he also doesn’t usually have steak for lunch, either. Looks like this is going to be their main meal for the day, and the girls seem to be set on ordering half the dessert cart, so, might as well go wild. Not like he’s driving them back.

He orders a scotch neat to go with his medium rare New York strip steak. Talk of asparagus reminded him that he really likes it and hasn’t had any for a while, so some of that’s going to end up on his plate, too.

As the rest of them order, the idea of feeling really good pops back up. Doing things you love makes you feel good. Okay, yep, I got that, brain. Known that for a while. Maybe a little more specific on the epiphany front?

His eyes travel from Breena (sitting across from him) to Jimmy (diagonally across) to Abby (next to him) and then back to Jimmy.

Sex with people you love makes you feel great. Yep, got that, too. More specific?

The little more specific epiphany almost makes him feel dizzy when it hits. His eyes jerk back to Jimmy. Sex with a man you love makes you feel great. Tim swallows hard, not noticing the other
three all glancing at each other, wondering if he’s okay.

He can’t believe it took this long for that to hit. *Sex with a guy. The ultimate evil, nasty, awful, disgusting put you beyond the pale, thing you cannot ever do. The thing that makes you stop being a person and start being a fag. THE forbidden act.*

Years of conditioning, years of insults, of degradation, of fear and all of that shit the Admiral heaped on him. Years he thought he’d broken through. Ideas he’d tried to disregard and not let touch him anymore. But they were always still there, under and behind everything else, still stewing away in there.

He can feel it. Right now, inside himself, they’ve let go. They’re finally, really, broken. He’s not just ignoring them, or rebelling against them, or pushing them aside and trying not to let them effect who he is and what he does.

They’re dead.

“Tim?” Abby’s gently stroking his face.

He can tell by the tone of her voice that she’s concerned. He smiles at her, and Jimmy and Breena. “I’m good,” he smiles again, deep and genuine, “really good, just processing something.”

“Okay. Gonna let us in on it?”

“Eventually.” He looks around. It’s pretty quiet in the restaurant, but they’re still sitting at a four top in the middle of it. “Later, back at the cabin.”

He had sex with a man, and the world didn’t end. It didn’t change. He didn’t become dirty or unworthy or awful because of it. He isn’t stained or bad or… or anything because of it. His loves didn’t stop loving him. He didn’t stop loving himself.

He thinks about how careful he’s been to make sure that everyone he’s talked about with this knew that he wasn’t fucking Jimmy. Even with Tony, and his ‘it’s all sex’ thing, he made it clear that he didn’t desire Jimmy in any sort of way. Part of that’s just a matter of factual truth, he’s not bi, Jimmy is not sexually desirable to him. But that wasn’t all of it. Not by a mile.

Part of it was making sure everyone around him knew he isn’t *like that.* He’s not one of *them.* He’s not a fag. Daddy’s evil, little mind worm was still in there, still nibbling around his brain, still shaping the map of his understanding of himself and his world, spreading its poison.

And now that little fucker is dead.

And Tim feels excellent!

He stands up. *Screw later back at the cabin.* He loves these people, and he’s not afraid. He kisses Abby, deep and wet, hot and happy, and again for Breena, and once more for Jimmy, who’s looking really surprised but doesn’t wave him off, so Tim goes for it, and when he sits back down, he doesn’t bother to look around and see if everyone else is staring at them.

“I take it we’re celebrating?” Breena says, looking amused.

“Fuck, YES! He’s dead, his hold on me, the poison in my head…” Tim’s in the middle of the conversation from his own mind and none of the rest of them are on the same page. They’re not entirely sure who he is, though they’ve all got a fairly accurate guess. What they don’t know is why Tim’s thinking that.
Tim backs up to get them up to speed. “Gay was the worst thing you could be,” Tim says quietly. “The worst. Evil and unwholesome, sick, corrupted, awful. Every kind of awful there is, all wrapped up in one idea. He’d hit me with it all the time. Calling me…” they are in a restaurant, so he edits his words… “bad things, but that was always what the bad thing boiled down to. And, I didn’t want to be him, or live those hates. But that idea, it was still there. Still under the edges in the back. Gay is bad. It’s evil.” His voice drops another few decibels. “It’s why I was unloveable. Why I could never be good enough. ‘Stop being such a little fag.’” He just mouths the last word in deference to the other people here.

“You all know I can shove things aside and ignore them. I’m the world record holder for ignoring things I don’t want to deal with. I shoved it aside, and stuffed it away, and never acted on it, intentionally refused to let that be how I treated other people, but it was always there.” Tim smiles at them, brilliant. “And now it’s not. That last little voice of his in my head is dead.” He stares at them again, tempted to get up and kiss everyone again, but… they are in a restaurant, and just because he’s feeling balls out all over the place right now doesn’t mean everyone else is. “Thank you.”

Abby’s got her arm around him, and her lips on his shoulder. He can feel two feet rubbing his leg under the table.

It’s a really good lunch.

When the main courses come, Jimmy looks at four plates of steaks, lifts his glass, and says, wicked grin on his lips, “Here’s to a long life filled with all the steak we can eat.”

The other three clinked their glasses with his while giggling madly.

The desserts are better.

The restaurant did have chocolate mousse. They did have salted caramel sauce. They didn’t have them together, so a little rearranging is done, and the white chocolate, salted-caramel blondie donates its sauce to the chocolate mousse, and…

MMMMMMMM…

Yeah, happy people.

Tim’s licking the last little bit of the salted caramel sauce off of his spoon when the girls decide it’s bathroom time. He’s not sure why they go together, but… it doesn’t matter. They want chatting time without him and Jimmy, well, he wants to talk to Jimmy on his own, too.

So, once they’re out of earshot, he switches around, taking Breena’s seat, and quietly says to Jimmy. “Thanks. I know that wasn’t your favorite thing ever, so, thanks. It… helped. I mean, I never… A million years would go by before I’d think that up, but… I bet Abby knew or guessed, and I’m sure she talked it through with Breena, and…”

Jimmy nods, gently touching Tim’s hand. “No problem.”

“Really? You looked pretty freaked out.”

Jimmy raises an eyebrow at that. Okay, yeah, that wasn’t the smoothest moment of his life, but he’s
not thinking he was ‘freaked out.’

“Uh… I was concerned for you. And worried that Breena and Abby had backed us into something they couldn’t get out of with everyone’s honor and dignity intact, but…”

“Uh huh.” Tim’s not entirely buying that. It’s… as well as he can tell, mostly true, but that’s not the whole story.

Jimmy sees he knows what’s up. “Okay, really, about thirty percent the sex, and the other seventy was you looking like you were going to swallow your tongue and pass out. You know, we say, ‘Yeah, it’s fine, just not my thing.’ But then it’s right there in your face,” Jimmy’s eyes drop to Tim’s crotch, then back to his eyes, “literally. That’s a pretty intense put up or shut up moment.”

Tim nods at that.

“But, really, it was fine, just not my thing. Come on, you think that five second pep talk would have done it if I was freaking out over the sex?”

Tim’s eyes narrow slightly. He had thought that was a good pep talk. Though, he thinks for a second how well it would have worked on him without all the stuff that went before it… Jimmy may have a point.

“You quietly flipping out was not my thing. When…” Jimmy’s volume is so low he’s all but thinking the words to Tim, “she was riding you, and me going down on her, everyone looked like they were having fun, so that was okay.”

Tim nods. “I liked that. Feeling you there was weird, but all in all, it was fine.”

“Yeah. That’s about as stressed out as I got about the sex the whole time. I didn’t know, going into it, that that’s how it’d work out. I think I was more worried about freaking out than actually being freaked out, but… yeah, tofu instead of steak, nothing to sweat.” Jimmy shakes his head a bit. “And for the first little bit, when we were… he tries to think about how to describe it, ‘getting all set?’”

Tim nods, he knows which bit Jimmy’s talking about. That moment of just feeling it. “It seemed like you were fine, but then you weren’t fine, and we could feel you not being fine, and your eyes were covered, so you missed the three of us trying to figure out how to get out of that without you feeling like you’d let us down. We had just long enough to all glance at each other, what now all over our faces, and then Breena and I can feel you… perk up, she pulls me close, we’re kissing, and you’re okay. But… maybe for five seconds, that was kind of tense and worrisome.”

“Five seconds?”

Jimmy shrugs. “Three maybe? Did it feel that long to you?”

“Longer.”

“Oh. Real time, less than half a minute went by between getting set and you taking the blindfold off.”

“Huh.”

Jimmy’s looking him over carefully, then puts his arm around Tim, everyone else looking at them (because some of the other diners have been curious about what’s going on at their table) be damned. “You’re happy where you are now. You okay with how you got there?”

Tim nods. “Yeah. Scared the hell out of me, you know, but… But that’s the fear he beat into me.
God, it’s like my arm or shoulder or leg… All that damn scar tissue, from him, and having you guys break it down hurt, really hurt, but I needed it. And… you know, I don’t think I ever would have said, ‘Hey, go spend a few hours torturing me, I’m sure it’ll be good,’ on my own, but you knew it was part of getting better, and I trusted you to do right by me, so… Yeah. We’re good. I’ll be curious to see how much of this Breena and Abby had planned ahead of time, but… We’re good.”

Jimmy kisses him. Fast, gentle, just a little peck. “You’re really ready to heal now, aren’t you?”

Tim smiles at him, so much love in his heart, he looks over and sees both of the girls heading back to them. A moment later, Abby’s sitting on his other side, arm around him, too, and Breena’s across from them, holding his hand.

Tim nods. “Yeah, I am.”

To the surprise of absolutely no one, they had no problem getting their check in about nine seconds. Apparently the wait staff, who were in no way rude, had no problem seeing them out of the restaurant quickly.

Still, it’s a pretty day, and none of them mind a circuitous meander back toward the van, poking about and seeing if anything interesting is nearby.

The official reason for poking around is looking for some place to go dancing, but apparently Sunday night isn’t a big clubbing night in small town western-Virginia.

They found one joint, but it’s a Country Western place, and though Gibbs might have done okay, and Abby is ready to jump in, the other three veto the idea in favor of dancing at the cabin, where they’ll be in charge of the music, and the dress code can be as relaxed as they like.

“Dress code?” Tim asks as they head into the van. They’ve been more or less naked the whole time they’ve been at the cabin.

“Was thinking I might want to take some clothing off of you guys. Possibly while dancing,” Abby says.

“Don’t get greedy,” Breena says. “You had your turn. They’re up, remember?”

“Oh, right! That kiss was so hot, it’s worth at least a few whatever-you-two-wants,” Abby says with a smile, buckling in.

Tim and Jimmy glance at each other. They do not yet have a plan for ‘whatever they want.’ Then Tim says, “I like having my clothing taken off, possibly while dancing. We’d get to return the favor, right?”

Abby and Breena nod. “Whatever you want,” Abby says. She looks them up and down while Breena shifts the van into reverse. “What do you want?”

Tim looks at Jimmy, eyebrow high. Jimmy appears to be thinking. Abby smiles, “Whatever it is, it won’t be right when we get home. I’m thinking of a nap, and maybe some splashing around in the lake. But dinner and after… Is that enough time for you two to figure it out?”
Jimmy glances at Tim, and they nod.

“Great.”

Naptime and splashing around time is fun. They drag the chaises down next to the lake. Abby snoozes in the shade, and the other three get in some swimming, or at least just floating around. And after an hour or so, Tim’s arm and leg are feeling tired, so he heads over to join Abby on the chaise.

He dries off a bit, and then spoons up behind her. She snuggles in close with him, and his hand falls to her belly. He’s about three quarters asleep himself when he feels the light fluttering under his palm. Very fast, almost the sensation of a finger very lightly striking his palm once or twice. Then it’s gone. He lifts up a little to look at Abby’s face, see if she noticed.

She’s smiling, but asleep. Maybe having happy dreams of a certain little boy.

He kisses her ear, and throat, and settles back down. A second later that little flutter is back. “Hi, Sean,” he whispers.

He’s not sure how long he dozes. Can’t be too long, because he’s feeling pretty good when he wakes up, and naps longer than an hour usually leave him feeling unplugged.

Abby’s gently trying to extricate herself from him when he wakes up. “Stay a minute?” His eyes are still closed.

“Sure. Was trying not to wake you up.”

“It’s okay.” He holds her close for a moment, smelling her hair and skin, feeling her belly warm (and right now, still) under his fingers. “How much of this morning did you and Breena plan out?”

“We’d talked about it. When we were planning the weekend we talked about what we wanted to do, so we could pack well, and rainbow party was my thing, and she mentioned anything on the table fantasy play, which sounded good to me.”

“Did you know us together was hers?”

Abby nods. “Yeah. We talked about that, too. If she should even ask. We knew it’d be kind of squirm for you… I figured she should be able to ask. You and Jimmy can both say no. I mean, that’s… how we play right? We’re not afraid to say what we want or need. And we trust each other to say no to the things that are deal breakers.”

“I’d hope so. Was it just about her feeling comfortable enough to ask?”

“Some.” Abby’s starting to get an idea of what he’s really asking. “You want to know how I’d thought it’d go?”

“Something like that. I mean, beyond hot.”

“Yeah.” She lifts his hand to her mouth and kisses his palm. “Way hotter than I thought it was going to be, though. But, beyond hot, I thought… Okay, remember fried pickles? And you’re staring at me like I’m completely insane, and how on earth would anyone be stupid enough to fry a pickle?”

Tim kisses the back of her neck again. “I remember being unenthusiastic about the idea of fried pickles. And then even less interested after fried okra, which you told me was awesome, too.”
She nods, and then rolls over to face him, draping her leg over his hip. She smiles at him and giggles, the water looks fairly clear, but there’s a few algae patches, and once again he’s got some interesting green smears on him. Then she delicately plucks a bit of dried algae out of his eyebrow. “Yeah, but you liked fried things and you like pickles so… I thought if you put them together, you’d like them. And, if I hadn’t poked you about it, you wouldn’t have eaten them, they’ve have sat in the basket on the table, and I would have eaten them, but you wouldn’t have. So, I poked, and you did, and you really liked them… So… It was kind of like that. You like sex with Breena. You like watching Jimmy and Breena have sex. I thought if we put sex with Breena along with watching Jimmy and Breena have sex, you’d have a good time with that.” She kisses him. “Was feeling pretty stupid in the restaurant, because that’s when it hit me why that was something you wouldn’t have asked for. Why you weren’t putting that together on your own. I probably would have told Breena not to ask if I’d realized what was going on there.”

“Then I’m glad you didn’t.”

Abby shrugs. “Should have, though.”

Tim shrugs, too. “If I’m just getting it now, then I don’t think you need to get it before I do.”

She kisses him. “So, I don’t actually know you better than you know yourself?”

“Good to keep some mystery, right?”

She kisses him again. “But you are good?”

“Yeah.” There’s a lot of peace in his eyes as he’s holding her. “Good in a way I couldn’t have gotten to on my own.”

Abby’s eyes light up. “You feel that?” Her belly is pressed to his.

He smiles back at her. “Yeah. He was doing it earlier, too, when you were sleeping.”

“Breena, Jimmy, come here!” Abby calls out.

And a moment later, Jimmy and Breena join them. Abby’s got Tim in front of her, and Breena spooned up behind, which is all the people you can possibly get on that lounge. Jimmy’s kneeling behind Breena. Both of them have their hands resting on Abby’s tummy, and all four of them feel Sean kicking around.

A minute later, he settles back down, and all four of them are smiling like crazy at it.
More swimming (and in Tim’s case floating) rounds out the afternoon. Abby joins them, remembering why time immersed in water, especially cool water, feels awesome when pregnant. Hips and back, knees and feet are all happy with some weightless time, and cool makes everything feel better.

All of them with a bit of green algae in their hair and on their skin is somewhat less than fun, but it’s not hurting anything.

“How about you two get first dibs on the shower?” Breena says to Tim and Jimmy when they get out. “You’ve got stuff to talk about, right?”

And in that they haven’t yet talked about ‘whatever you want’ is, that sounds like a decent plan.

“Just don’t use up all the hot water!” Abby calls out, laughing.

Tim doesn’t get the joke until he’s on the porch, remembers that they filled the hot tub while getting showers, and comes to the conclusion that there’s an industrial-sized water heater tucked under this cabin somewhere.

“So, what do we want?” Jimmy asks while leaning into the shower, turning it on.

“Got a few ideas. Dancing and clothing on, that part’s pretty set. Is there anything you really want?” Tim’s surprised to see Jimmy actually looking a little shy. “What?”

“Does Abby actually really like anal, or is it just something you like and she’s cool with?”

Tim smiles a little, stepping in, letting the water stream down him, rinsing off some of the algae, then he steps back so Jimmy’s got water access.

“Yeah, she really likes it. I mean, you can’t just hop on her and shove it in, but… Pretend it’s your ass, treat it accordingly, and yes, she likes it.”

“It hurt Breena when we tried.”

Tim nods. “Everyone’s built different, and I was terrified of hurting her the first time, too. But, she really likes it, and…” Tim’s thinking through the contents of the toy bag, and yes, they did bring them. “If you want to stretch her out really slow and gentle, they brought the glass dilators.”

“The what?” Jimmy knows what both of those words mean, but he’s a little fuzzy on the idea of what exactly that is in terms of the toy box.

“Anal plugs. In different sizes. If you use fingers you’ve got a three step ramp up.” Tim makes a fist, and sticks one finger in.
“I’ve got a medical degree, I don’t need hand puppets to grasp the concept,” Jimmy says dryly.

“Okay, with them, it’s six steps. Starts smaller than your pinky and works up to about dick sized.” Tim thinks some more. “They’re comfortable—“

“You know that firsthand?” Jimmy asks, reaching for his shampoo.

“Yes. The only toys I haven’t used myself are the butterfly and the strap on, and I haven’t used them because I’m not built for the one and the other is redundant. The only ones she hasn’t used are the fleshlight and the cockrings, for the same reason.”

Jimmy thinks about that, rubbing the shampoo into his hair, and then gets Tim back on the track he was on. “Okay. So… they’re comfortable…”

“Yeah.” Tim notices that Jimmy doesn’t really need the water right this second, so he puts his hands on Jimmy’s shoulders and scoots them around so he’s in the water. “One or two dances per size… that’s at least half an hour of stretching out and teasing. Slow and easy. Shouldn’t hurt at all. Hasn’t when I’ve done it.”

That’s reassuring. He’s thinking about how it felt when the girls were doing him. “Were they only using one finger on me?”

“Looked like that to me, but I wasn’t in a great position to watch the end.”

“Felt… weird… it didn’t hurt, but… weird, almost… intrusive… at first.”

Tim nods, he knows the sensation. “Takes your body a bit to decide it likes it.”

Jimmy nods again at that as Tim rubs his fingers through his hair. He’s been getting more soap on his hair and skin than it really likes this weekend (for good reason) but he’s hoping he can just rise the algae off.

“You did like it, right? You looked like you liked it.”

Jimmy’s eyes go wide as he nods hard. “God, yes. Once they got into it. YES. Just, trying to think through doing it to someone else. Abby’s not exactly built for a lot of what I liked about it.”

Tim nods. “That’s why she did it to me months before I did it to her. Why she had to put it on the table. ‘Cause I wasn’t going to suggest it.”

Now Jimmy’s looking a little confused. “You like it, too right?”

“Oh yeah, but. I hadn’t ever done it with anyone else before her, and like you said, kind of intrusive, and since she doesn’t have a prostate… She had to ask, because I didn’t like the in-out part of it enough to suggest being on the doing side.”

Jimmy squints at him a bit, and moves Tim out of the water so he can rise the shampoo out of his hair. One of these days he’ll get the whole story on that, because, okay, yes the in out bit wasn’t his favorite part, but he wouldn’t say no to that, either. “So, you think she’d be happy with anal.”

Tim looks at Jimmy dryly. “Well, it’s true that I just met her, and we’ve never had sex before, so I’m guessing here, but I’d say she’d be okay with it.”

Jimmy whacks Tim in the chest with the back of his hand. “Smartass. Use some soap, all you’re doing is moving the algae around.”
“Great.” Tim reaches for his shampoo. “Hair’s going to feel like straw after this.”

“You pay attention to how your hair feels?”

“Not really, but Abby does. Sometimes she’ll be petting my hair and then say, ‘Conditioner next time.’ I can feel that’s coming up soon.”

Jimmy inclines his head at that. “So, we know what I want to do…”

“Think Breena wants to watch or play?”

“Probably both. Watch then play?”

“Hmmmm…”

“Hmmmm…?”

Tim’s got the start of a plan in place. “They both like it when we take charge. I’m thinking we run the show. Into the shower they go, and we lay out the clothing, and we take them to dinner, order for them, and we tease and play with them, and home we go for dancing and more teasing, and eventually, I’m on my back, and Abby slips onto me, you take out the last of the plugs and slip into her, and Breena rides my face and we all have a very good time.”

Jimmy smiles at that. He had a blast when he was on his back with Breena and Abby riding him, and that as a foursome sounds even better. And then he’s got another idea to add to it. “I run Abby and you run Breena?”

Tim nods, wide grin on his face. “Yeah, I like that.”

“And I’m thinking part of dancing and teasing should involve them playing with each other.”

That grin gets even wider. “I think you’re onto something there. I know we brought our butterfly, I’m thinking that might make dinner more interesting for Breena.” Tim finishes rinsing his hair. “Clean enough?”

“You’ll do.”

“Good.”

They step out, and Jimmy has one other idea. He taps the ring they got for him. “How loose was this on you? Any danger of falling off?”

“No. Maybe half a size too big. Why?”

Jimmy takes them off, and puts the one he just got back on. “If we’re going to play with them while we’re out, might not hurt to look like we’re each with the right girl. Assuming I’ll be able to get yours off when we’re done, that is.”

That’s a good point, and also a nice way to go about showing each of the ladies who’s in charge of them tonight. “Let’s get out of the shower and cooled off. My fingers always plump up when I’m warm, yours probably do, too, so I’m not sure you could get it on right now, but if you can before we go…”

“Okay.”

They quickly dry off, and head out, finding the girls on the porch, leaning against the side of the hot
tub, looking at Abby’s phone.

Abby stretches her hand out. “Look what Penny sent us!”

Tim takes the phone and holds it so Jimmy can see, too. It’s a picture of Gibbs and Ducky crashed out on the sofa, heads back on the back rest, eyes closed, dead asleep. Anna’s snuggled onto Ducky’s chest, his hand on her back (even asleep, he’s got a good hold on her). Kelly is on her side, head pillowed on Gibbs’ leg, and Molly is right next to her, pointed the other direction, head on Ducky’s leg. The girls are all asleep, too.

He reads the text: *Naptime! We went to the park and did some running (walking) around, followed by out for lunch, ice cream, and home. Abbi turned on Little Bear so the girls could have some quiet time before taking them upstairs to nap. Next thing we knew, there’s snoring coming from the living room.*

*As you can see, everything is fine, and we’re holding down the fort with ease! See you tomorrow afternoon.*

Both of the guys, in a manly, restrained sort of way, cooed at that. And Abby and Breena enjoyed it.

Then Tim and Jimmy burst out into full on raucous laughter at the picture that followed it, which is Sarah crouching behind Gibbs, making bunny ears, and flashing a goofy smile at the camera. *Thought you’d like this. —S.*

*We do.* Tim texts back.

Once Tim sends back a quick ‘thanks for the pictures, glad to see everything is okay’ text to everyone, he looks at both ladies, who are also sporting some nifty algae stains and says, “We do have a plan for tonight. It’s for both of you. First off, shower time. Both of you get cleaned up. Abby, get really cleaned up. Take at least twenty minutes. When you get out we’ll have laid out clothing and toys for you.”

Tim doesn’t have a “Dom voice” though he does say that quietly and with a slightly deeper intonation than usual. He does have “Dom posture” where he straightens up a bit more, keeps eye contact a bit longer and more intense, and stands with his legs a bit wider apart. Granted, he doesn’t have Tony’s wide shoulders, but he’s not a tiny guy, and when he’s in charge, he plays that up.

He lets himself take up more space when he’s in charge, and both of the girls feel the shift and respond favorably to it. They go scampering into the shower, and Jimmy looks at him, raises an eyebrow and says, “So, is that your best Gibbs impression?”

Tim glares at him silently until Jimmy leans back a little, unconsciously putting more space between him and Tim. Then he says, “That’s my best Gibbs impression.”

Jimmy laughs. “Come on, let’s get things laid out.”

---

The girls might have packed more stuff than the settlers took to start new lives on new continents, but they did not, by any stretch, bring along their entire wardrobe.

In fact, if anything, they skimped on clothing (which they rightly assumed wouldn’t be that big of a
deal this weekend) in favor of room for extra sheets, towels, and toys. (All of which have been used happily by this crew.)

So, it’s not so much a matter of putting together outfits designed to appeal to every kink they have, so much as making sure that both girls are appropriately covered for going out.

“Breena okay with going out without a bra?” Tim’s never seen her do it, so he’s asking.

Jimmy’s looking through the suitcase, checking to see what Abby’s brought. He shakes his head at Tim. “Not comfortable. Too jiggly. Abby won’t go without one now, right?” Because about half of the time when she’s off duty, and not pregnant or nursing, she doesn’t wear one.

“Yeah. Same thing.” At two cup sizes bigger than normal, Abby’s not a fan anything that involves a lot of walking around without a bra. When she’s nursing, which got her to three cup sizes bigger than usual, she was even sleeping in one.

Tim hunts around and finds one of Breena’s bras. He holds it under the dress he’s eyeing, and at least in the light of the bedroom, it’s not visible through the fabric. It’s a light pink sundress, made of several layers of soft, floaty pink stuff that are fairly transparent on their own, but with all the layers, it’s opaque. The bra is medium green. It’ll work… well enough.

He glances over, and sees that Jimmy has Abby’s boots sitting on the bed, next to a black, square-necked dress with little red cherries all over it. Tim approves. He likes that dress, a lot, and likes it even more now. That one’s all soft cotton and kind of stretchy. This is probably the last week she can wear it and still be ‘dressed,’ she’s just about spilling out of the top, and an extra curvy tummy and bottom mean it’s a bit shorter than usual.

He’s got the pink sundress for Breena, her tan sandals, bra, and the butterfly. He figures that should count as properly dressed for going out.

“The plugs you were talking about, can you sit wearing one of them?” Jimmy asks, holding a pair of Abby’s panties, apparently debating if she’s wearing them or not.

Tim nods.

“Okay, hand ‘em over.”

Tim smiles, and goes to find them, handing them over. For a moment, Jimmy’s just looking at them, touching, getting a feel. Then he lays the smallest one on Abby’s dress. He’s got a small bottle of lube and the two next sizes up in his palm, and then seems to realize he can’t tuck them into a pocket if he’s not wearing pants.

Tim’s also noting the clock, and that they need to get dressed if they’re going to be ready when the girls come out.

Jeans, easy enough. Tim’s thinking about his kilt but decides that since he doesn’t wear any sort of underwear with it, and if part of tonight’s game is taking his clothing off, that it’d be a good plan to wear enough clothing to make taking it off fun. So, jeans, boxers, he pokes around some more, and finds that he does have a button down. Abby brought his dark red one. He puts that on, rolling up his sleeves, not buttoning the top two buttons. He doesn’t have a belt… So untucked. Shoes… Mmmm… Okay, they only brought the boots he wears with his kilt and his flip flops. So, flip flops it is. He takes a quick glance at himself, and decides he’s done.

Jimmy’s got jeans, too. Of course, from the looks of it, all they packed him was a pair of jeans. He had cargo shorts on when they drove out, and… yeah, two bottoms for a four day trip, makes sense.
Jimmy grabs a t-shirt, and spends a few seconds eyeing the flannel shirt that Breena brought for him on the off chance it got a little cool. They are going out, there will be air conditioning… He puts it on.

Jimmy’s slipping his toys into the inside his pocket when Tim says, “Careful, don’t want lube spilling in there.”

“I know how to close the bottle.”

“Great. Go grab a ziplock baggie, too.”

Jimmy looks curious, not immediately seeing why he’d need a baggie.

“If you’re going to put a new one in, you’ve got to take the old one out.”

Jimmy nods, realizing he probably should have thought of that, and heads to the kitchen.

A minute later he’s back, and they hear the water stop in the bathroom. Tim glances around one more time, and then grabs the collars. “Both of them?”

Jimmy takes one from him. “Yeah.” They can hear the girls talking to each other. “Rings?”

Tim nods, slipping his off, handing it over, watching to see if it’ll fit Jimmy. Jimmy tries it on tentatively, but it doesn’t give him any problems. It’s snug, not cutting off circulation, and goes over the largest part of his ring finger readily enough. Tim slips Jimmy’s ring on, and it’s a little loose, but not terrible. It’s not going to go skittering off, never to be seen again, if he moves his hand too fast.

And, just as he has it on his hand, the girls come out.

Jimmy’s looking them both over, they’re wrapped in towels and looking pretty happy with each other and the world in general. They also appear to approve of what Tim and Jimmy are wearing. Jimmy says to them, “At least for the first bit of tonight, each of us has one of you. Can you figure out who goes with whom?”

The girls look them over, sure there has to be a clue.

Abby decides that Jimmy’s got her, but not for the right reason. She’s just running the odds based on what they like and who’s likely to be fantasizing about what.

Breena’s grabs her a second before she starts to move, still sure there has to be a visible clue, but nothing about what the guys are obviously wearing is saying who goes with whom to her. She takes another minute, looking more closely, catches the black glint on Jimmy’s ring finger, and then nods to Abby, who sees it, then gives both of the boys a very clever look before heading over to Jimmy.

Tim crooks his index finger at Breena, and she all but springs toward him. She’s about a foot in front of him, and it’s really hitting him how tiny she is. She’s got so much personality that she seems larger, but right now, standing right in front of him, staring up at him, he’s very aware of the fact that the top of her head just comes up to his chin.

He’s looking down at her, eye contact first, and then looking all over her body. He tugs gently on the towel and it falls to the floor, then his fingers ghost gently over her shoulders and arms.

“You like it when I take charge, right?”

“Yes!”
“Good. Wear my collar tonight? Put yourself in my hands for our mutual pleasure. Let me make all the decisions and tell you what to do and drive you out of your mind with wanting before getting you off so hard your knees buckle and lights dance behind your eyes.”

“Yes!” She’s glowing at the idea, eyes and skin bright with it.

“Good. Safewords are ‘no’ and ‘stop?’”

She nods again.

“Anything you don’t like, anything too far, you don’t want to do it, any questions or comments or… whatever… just say the word, and we break play. Or call me Timothy, and I’ll stop dead. Otherwise, game on, and I’m calling the shots.”

She smiles up at him. “Excellent.”

Tim steps over to the bed, where her clothing is laid out, and takes the collar that’s resting on the mattress next to Breena’s outfit in hand. He kneels at her feet, one foot and one knee on the floor, and then pats his thigh. “Foot here.”

Breena complies, looking at him curiously. “It won’t look right with the rest of your outfit if it’s around your neck, so…” he wraps the black leather around her thigh, and buckles it tight. Like his ring on Jimmy, it’s a little snug, but he’s not cutting off circulation to her foot, and it’s extremely unlikely to fall off.

“Good? Not too tight?”

Breena puts her leg down and takes a few steps. It’s a little lower on her thigh than she’d normally wear a garter, but it feels secure, and her dress comes to just above her knee, so it’ll be covered. “It works. Feels a little odd, but I’ve worn garters before.”

“Little less ruffly than the ones you usually go for?”

“Yes. All the other ones are lace.”

Tim likes that idea, too. One of these days, he’s going to see her in a frilly lace garter, a smile, and nothing else. “Not today. I want you to get dressed, except for the butterfly. I’ll put that on, and keep hold of the remote. You can wear any makeup you like on your eyes, but no foundation, no lipstick unless it’s one of the lip tars. Don’t want to taste or feel makeup when I’m kissing you. Brush out your hair, but don’t dry it, don’t straighten it. I like the way it looks when you just let it air dry.”

“Frizzy?” Breena’s not entirely sure that Tim has a clue as to what her hair does if she doesn’t straighten it.

“Soft and wavy. If you put stuff in it to make it softer, that’s fine, too. I pick your perfume.” Tim sits down on the armchair in the bedroom. “Bring me the perfumes and get ready where I can watch.”
of this he’s done before is tying Breena up and playing with her, which is a lot of fun, but not this sort of “in charge.”

Abby’s standing still, watching him, patiently waiting to see where he’ll take her. He gets the sense that she knows he’s not entirely sure what he’s doing, but she’s happy to let him feel it out and play around with it.

Tim’s behind him, having staked out the armchair for his territory, so Jimmy can hear what he’s doing, but not see it, so… Okay… Yeah… Huh… Being completely in charge is actually kind of daunting. Now what…

He pulls Abby closer to him, touching is good and kissing is good, and he’ll figure it out from there. That sounds like a decent first step.

Abby melts against him, so she’s on board for kissing and touching, too.

Breena feels very naked. She’s been sans clothing pretty much twenty hours a day this weekend, but right now, doing the sorts of things she usually does on her own, in private, with Tim’s eyes glued to her, she’s not just nude, she’s naked.

It’s not bad. Very different. Intimacy of a flavor she’s not familiar with. Yes, Jimmy’s seen her get ready for a night out, but… he’s never watched to get off on it. He’s never told her how to do her hair or what makeup to put on.

So, she’s brushing out her hair, feeling like she’s been laid bare, excited by it, and almost nervous, a tinge of being unsure if she can do this right.

Tim’s not smiling. He’s sitting in that chair, all spread out, thumb lightly stroking over his dick through his jeans, watching her like he’s going to eat her alive and enjoy every taste.

Abby had mentioned that sometimes she can get an almost dangerous edge out of Tim, and Breena hadn’t really believed it was possible, she can see and feel it from him right now, and it’s delicious.

Jimmy breaks his kiss with Abby and sits on the side of the bed, legs stretched out in front of him, her straddling them. He pulls her towel off, wanting to look as well as feel.

Eighteen weeks along, this is definitely his favorite part of pregnancy. She’s all soft and round and curvy, but not so far along she can’t have a good time. His fingers trace over full, lush breasts. They’re more sensitive than normal, and Abby purrs at that touch. Jimmy’s looking up at her, smiling, as he rubs his thumbs over her nipples.

“Good?”

“Oh, yeah.”

He slips his hands down, petting over her belly, and then places his hands on her hips. He folds his legs in, so they’re close to the bed, no longer between hers, and then turns her around. For a few seconds he just looks at her, eyes tracing her back and butt, devouring black ink and supple pregnant curves, and then he lays a kiss on each cheek.
“Want to play with this tonight.”

Abby looks over her shoulder, brilliant, gleaming smile aimed at him. “I like that idea.”

“Haven’t done a whole lot of this in the past.”

Her smile goes soft, kind. “You start going left when you need to go right, I’ll let you know.”

He understands that as a general, *I’ll let you know if it isn’t working* comment as opposed to a specific sort of instruction.

“Good. For all of this, right?” He means running things as well as playing with anal.

Abby quickly turns around and kisses him. “Always.” Then she turns back around, wiggling in a ‘come and get it’ sort of manner.

And that’s all the invitation Jimmy needs.

----------

Breena had brought two perfumes. One, Tim hasn’t smelled before. It’s okay, but he doesn’t know what it’s like on her skin. So, he puts the lid back on and rests it on the bedside table. The other is the one with the cute, innocent name, *(Butterflies, Flowers and Jewels Attending)* but he thinks of it as “Freshly Debauched Virgin.” Granted, that’s on Breena’s skin. In the bottle it’s pink and innocent and does make him think of butterflies, flowers, and spring time.

She’s got her hair brushed through, makeup done, bra and collar on. Tim nods at her to come closer, and she does, standing in front of him as he sits on the chair, legs spread out in front of him, taking up the whole space. For a moment he just looks her up and down, eyes lingering, slowly caressing each inch of her skin, and then he points to the floor between his feet. “Kneel.”

He sees her shiver a little at that, and a faint flush touches her cheeks. Tim smiles, enjoying it.

She’s staring up at him from the floor, on her knees, wondering what he’s going to ask for next.

Tim lifts the perfume bottle, placing his finger over the opening, and flips it, letting the cool liquid touch his fingertip. Then flips it again, transferring the bottle to his other hand, as he lightly strokes his wet finger along Breena’s collarbone and down to between her breasts.

He flips the bottle against his finger again. “Wrist.” She holds out her arm and he strokes the scent up her arm.

“Stand.” So she does, and he traces a fine line of perfume up her thigh.

He smiles up at her, then says, “Pick out a lip tar for me, then put it on.”

“Any color?”

“Any color you like. I know you said you didn’t like anything hard enough to mark, no bites or hickies, but how about wearing my kiss tonight?”

Breena smiles at him. She’s fine with that.

A minute later, she’s back with a dark red color that matches Tim’s shirt fairly well. Assuming this kiss is anywhere anyone else can see it, they’ll have no trouble putting two and two together and
coming up with four.

“In my lap, and put it on me. Lightly, just enough for one kiss this time.”

She nods and gets to it. “Where are you going to put it?”

Tim doesn’t answer. She’s painting his lips so he can’t really talk. The amused glint in his eyes seem to say, That’s the question now, isn’t it?

When she gets done, he lifts her breast, nuzzling over the soft, lacy material of her bra, coaxing her nipple to harden, carefully making sure his lips don’t touch her bra. He lifts his eyes to hers, grins at her, and then lays the kiss right on the top of the swell of her breast. It’s not even remotely subtle, and will be visible to everyone even when she’s got her dress on.

“Let it dry, and then into the dress.”

Breena nods, waiting to see if he’s going to tell her to do anything else. “Up you get. Relax, enjoy what they’re up to. I’m going to wash this off before it sets.”

What “they’re up to” is Jimmy kissing slow and easy down Abby’s spine. He’s got one hand on her breast, the other gently stroking her pussy, as his lips ease their way down to her butt.

He’s enjoying that, and Abby really is. She’s making some extremely happy noises.

He’s thinking he’s going to stay with this for a while, then spend at least a little while exploring her ass, which he hasn’t done much of. Then… getting dressed… no… not entirely dressed, not yet. He’s got a mental image of her in her boots, leaning over the bed, butt in the air, while he’s sitting between her legs, licking her pussy as he slides the first of the plugs in.

Oh, yeah, they are definitely doing that.

When Tim’s out of the bathroom, he watches Breena watch Jimmy and Abby. She’s still naked save for her collar and bra, his kiss not fully dried, yet.

She looks like she’s enjoying the show.

Abby and Jimmy do, too, though he can see Jimmy’s not entirely sure what he’s doing. But Abby’s being gentle with him, and they’re both having fun.

Tim heads back to the armchair, taking Breena by the hand on the way there, and sits down with her in his lap. “This is cozy.”

She snuggles in closer. “Yep. Gonna keep me naked on your lap all night?”

Tim strokes her cheek. “Petting you all night, hand feeding you little nibbles of food. Have you ride my cock slow and easy while I’m saying, hot, dirty, sexy things to you, and we watch them fuck? Would you like that?”
Breena’s eyes shut for a second at that idea and a little shiver races through her. “Wouldn’t mind.”

“What if I have something more ambitious in mind?” His eyes are warm at that.

She smiles back. “I like ambitious. Are you going to tell me about it, or is it a surprise?”

He kisses her, wet and slow, all his own technique, wanting her to know, feel, even with her eyes closed that it’s him, not Jimmy. His hand curls in her hair, holding her head snug as he stares into her eyes, and then he quietly says against her lips, “Eventually, we’ll get you dressed, and they’ll get dressed, and we’re going out. You’ll be walking around in that pretty little dress with my kiss on your chest, my collar on your thigh, and the butterfly between your legs, never knowing when it’s going to buzz. It’ll just look like we’re two couples out for a fun date night, and maybe I’m just whispering something sweet in your ear, but I promise it’ll be red hot smut. I’ll be standing next to you, lips a breath from your ear, whispering the hottest fucking words you’ve ever heard while making your pussy throb. Then I’ll smile and point out what’s on the dessert menu. And we’re going to do stuff like that, all night long. We’ll come back here and dance, and you’ll peel me out of my clothing. You’ll wrap your hands and breasts and pussy around my dick before the dance is done. And you and Abby’ll get to dance and play with each other. I know at least one of those dances will be just for Jimmy and I to watch, just to see how hard you can make us by dancing with each other. And when we’re both so hard we’re about to pass out from watching, we’re going to end tonight with my face buried between your legs, while you kiss Abby, pet her breasts, and Jimmy and I do her together. How’s that for ambition?”

Breena’s eyes ease shut, and then open slowly as she inhales and exhales, deep. “I like it when you’re ambitious.”

Tim smiles. “Good.” His hand slips between her legs, touching her gently, coming back slick. He licks that finger off. “Delicious.” Then he does it again, this time rubbing her scent on his throat and wrists. “Turned on you, all the cologne I need.” He smiles at her. “Maybe that’ll get your other husband kissing me, and maybe, if you’re really, really good, and you do everything right, I’ll let you and Abby watch him lick your cum off my skin.”

Breena’s staring at him like she can’t believe he’s doing this. She’s heard about this. She remembers him running the story but… Holy Shit! Abby wasn’t kidding at all about how you get a very different Tim when he slips into Dom mode.

He’s watching her, looking amused, and then lightly taps her chest just below the kiss mark.

“All dry?”

Breena nods, gently stroking her finger over the kiss mark. It doesn’t smudge.

“Good.”

She starts to get up to put on her dress, but Tim tightens his hold on her. “Changed my mind, no dress, yet,” he whispers in her ear. “Go get the butterfly.”

He lets her go, and she crosses the room, grabbing it. She’s never used one of these before. Vibrators, sure. They’ve got a few of them. Brought them along, too. She tends to like a bit more force and a little less focus when it comes to vibrators. These little guys are okay, they vibrate nicely. But, like she told Tim when he was going down on her, she likes some stretch to go with her clit work, and butterflies, bullets, those thin little wand type things don’t do that.
Somehow though, given that this is designed to keep the butterfly right on her clt, and allows for complete access to her pussy, she’s thinking that stretch is something she’s going to have some of, too.

Of course, given how Tim’s looking at her, she’s wondering if that’s going to be part of the tease, keep her on edge and practically begging for a dick or fingers or something while he keeps nudging a little vibration here or there on her clt while driving her crazy with those words.

That’s the other thing that’s getting to her. God, those words. Hell, they practically feel better than the touch. She’s seriously wondering if he can just talk her off. She can half imagine that. Naked, hands tied above her head, all stretched out, him teasing her with just the tip of one finger, slipping it up and down, over and over, on her clt while he sits there and talks her off.

Abby really likes this. Jimmy’s kneading and licking her butt, which feels amazing, Tim’s got red hot smut pouring out of his mouth, which is going straight to her pussy. She catches sight of Breena in that cute little bra, with the collar on her thigh and Tim’s lips in blood red on her chest, as she comes over to grab the butterfly, and this is almost too much of a good thing.

She’s not sure if there’s a special part of heaven reserved for bisexuals, but she figures that if there is, it’s a whole lot like this.

Jimmy’s fingers stop kneading and move to the front of her, finding her clt and taking her higher than the proverbial kite.

God! This is so good! And while for Jimmy and Tim that would be more of an expression of sincere appreciation, for Abby, that’s a prayer of thanksgiving.

Apparently Abby likes rimming just as much as he did. She’s hot and wet and squirming and making some extremely happy noises while Jimmy licks her.

He’s rippling his fingers on her butt, kneading the muscles, and thinking about where to take this.

When they were playing with him, the idea was to keep him at almost getting off, but not get him over the line until he was past begging for it. Which makes a certain amount of sense because he can only get off so many times.

But Abby’s not a guy. Really not a guy.

Jimmy lets go of her butt, slips his left index and middle finger into her pussy, looking for her g-spot while his right finds her clt.

Tonight, Abby’s getting off, a lot. Tim might specialize in marathon sex; Jimmy’s thing is lots and lots of orgasms, his specialty is speed, and he’s going to show her exactly how he plays that game.

He hears Abby moaning, loud, as her body starts to go tight around his hand. Perfect. He’d grin but his mouth is busy.
Breena brings the butterfly over to Tim, placing it in the hand he’s holding out for it.

“Have you ever worn one of these before?”

Breena shakes her head.

“Okay. You step into it, sort of like panties.” It does have straps that are sort of like the leg holes for panties, though he’s certain the thing they most closely resemble, a jock strap, is something that Breena’s never worn. He holds them open, and low to the floor, so she can step into them. Once they’re around her feet, he tugs them up her leg, carefully over the collar, and then makes sure the butterfly is right on her clit, before he fastens the second set of straps, the ones that go around her waist.

“Comfy?”

It feels a little odd, but it’s not uncomfortable. “Different. But it’s not pinching or anything.”

Tim nods. The straps are vinyl, means they won’t stain, and they’re easy to clean, but they probably aren’t the softest material either.

He looks around, they’ve got tissues. “Want me to wrap the straps?”

Breena shakes her head. “I think this’ll be fine.”

“Okay, if it gets annoying, let me know. I’m going to frustrate the hell out of you, but I don’t want you ending up with blisters on your hips.”

She smiles at that. “One sort of annoyed is fine another isn’t?”

“Exactly.” He pulls her closer, kissing her lips. “I want you quivering with anticipation, begging me to get you off. Not thinking about how the straps are rubbing you wrong.”

“I’ll let you know.”

“Good. That goes for anything else tonight, too. Too cool, got a stone in your sandal, hungry, thirsty, whatever. Don’t want anything distracting you away from this.”

Breena chuckles. “I will tell you if anything is distracting me from being a quivering bundle of need for you.”

Tim smiles at that, enjoying that she’s keeping some of her humor in place. “Perfect.” He cups his dick through his jeans. “That’s all you need to be focused on tonight.”

She rolls her eyes at him a little before saying, “Yes, sir.”

They hear Abby moaning behind her, and Breena sees Tim’s eyes slip over to see what’s going on on the other side of the room.

“Can I be focused on that, too?” Breena asks him.

“Yes,” he says, not taking his eyes away from Abby getting off as Jimmy licks her. “Now get the remote and give it to me.”

Breena takes a minute to get it, watching Abby coming down, breathing hard and fast as Jimmy cuddles her in his lap. Then she returns to Tim, who shifts focus away from Abby and Jimmy to her.
He looks Breena over, and takes the butterfly remote from her.

He’s already remembering why jeans are not the ideal choice for this sort of game. His dick is feeling sorely confined right now, and it would rather like a bit more space, and something warm and wet wrapped around it.

He flicks the butterfly into its lowest setting, and sees Breena jerk a little at that. “Feel good?”

“Yeah. Just a surprise.”

Tim grins, wicked. Then he stands up. “Take me out of my pants.”

“Enjoy the show?” Breena asks Tim as she does it. Unbuttoning and zipping him, then carefully shoving his pants and boxers down.

“I really did.”

Jimmy’s still holding Abby, petting her in his lap, but he does flash a thumbs up to Tim without turning away from Abby. Tim smiles at that, too.

Tim turns Breena so she’s facing the chair, back to him, and begins slowly kissing her ear lobe, then her neck, and then her shoulder.

“I enjoyed that a lot. Sweetest music on earth is the sound of a woman coming.” His fingers trail up the inside of her thigh, gently nudging her to spread her legs.

Once she’s in the position he wants, he knots his hand in her hair, pulling her back to his chest, thrusting into her hard and sure. “And you’re gonna sing for me tonight, gonna coax every note you know out of those sweet lips of yours, but not yet. Don’t come.”

Tim kisses her, deep and hard, lots of tongue matching his slow deep thrusts, and then he suddenly lets go of her hair, pulls most of the way out, and placing his hand on her back, between her shoulder blades, he gently pushes he down, so her hands are on the back of the arm chair.

“Leg up.” His fingers slip over the inside of her thigh, guiding it to the arm of the chair.

She’s wide open, just the tip of his dick inside her, butterfly nestled between her lips. Tim grabs his phone from his pocket and takes a quick picture of that, and then starts thrusting again, fast, deep, working himself up, and soon, off.

______________________________

Jimmy’s watching Tim, who has Breena in front of the chair, palms on the back of it, one leg up on the arm, other holding her up, as he’s slipping into her from behind again and again, from the sound of it, ramping up the vibrator fairly quickly.

He glances at Abby, who’s enjoying the show quite a bit, and he gets that, it’s hot to watch, but…

Okay… so, they’re supposed to be at this all night, and, at the rate Tim’s going, they aren’t going to make it to dinner, so…

Abby looks back to Jimmy and can see that he’s not sure what Tim’s doing. Well, he knows what Tim’s doing. He’s not blind or stupid. He doesn’t get why.
“James.” She breaks play with her safeword.

That make Jimmy feel alarmed. They’re snuggling on the bed. He can’t imagine he’s doing anything that bugs her.

But, he’s not doing anything to annoy her. Abby smiles. “Quick break to explain,” she says quietly. “You look confused, so…”

Jimmy nods. Right now Tim’s at, ‘Captain, I’m giving her all I’ve got’ speed fucking, which looks really counterintuitive to Jimmy. It’d be one thing if Tim could get off six times a night, or if they had a bottle of little blue pills for back up, but Jimmy knows for a fact that he can’t and they don’t, so…

“He’s planning on running her hard tonight. Which is a lot of fun. But, if you’re not careful, or if you don’t know someone inside and out, it’s really easy to push things just a little too far, and ruin a really good orgasm.”

“Uh…” This is still not helping Jimmy figure out what’s going on.

“Ever play with yourself, stringing yourself out, and then just touch again a little too soon, and boom! Soft, lame, not worth the build-up orgasm?”

Jimmy nods. No, he hasn’t done that to himself, but Breena has, back when they were still learning each other and she, trying to get him to last longer, slowed down at the exact wrong time to slow down, and then sped up too quick and… He knows. Tiny tingle, three little squirts, and done. Disappointing.

“Okay. He really gets off on running things. Hits him hard.”

Jimmy can see that. He looks like he’s having a really good time right now, and Breena appears to be enjoying it, too.

“But, the more turned on you are, the more difficult it is to pay really close attention to your partner, read what her body is telling you, and act on it appropriately. Also, the more turned on you are, the easier it is to just give into it and get off before you’ve gotten where you’re hoping to go.”

And the light goes on for Jimmy. “Refractory period.”

“Exactly. He’ll have way more control for playing her if he gets off now. She’s not going to get off. He is. He’ll keep her keyed up as long as she can stand, but given what all we’ve done today, and what we’re going to do, this should buy him a few hours of good focus.” She kisses Jimmy. “Anytime you want to break play and ask a question, feel free. We know you haven’t really done this before, not like this, at least.”

Jimmy nods, watching Abby, thinking some more.

God, this feels good. Tim’s moving, fast and deep, pulling her hips back to him with each stroke, feeling Breena all wet and silky and buzzing against his skin.

This is awesome! He couldn’t move all that much when they were on the sofa, and really being able to move feels amazing. His whole body can get into it.
She’s starting to tighten against him, so he’s got to get done soon, because he’s intentionally trying to not get her off. Tim moves a little faster, a bit deeper, feeling his thighs go tight, as his fingers clench against Breena’s hips, and he pulls her tight on him as he thrusts deep, pumping into her.

She whimpers and says, “Fuck!” quietly, but sincerely, when he stops.

“No coming, baby. Not yet,” he says, still breathing fast, clicking off the vibrator, leaving her hanging.

He can feel her clenching on him, trying to get just a hint more friction, so he gives her a gentle swat on the butt, and says, “None of that. If you want, and if Jimmy lets her, Abby can tell you what happens to bad girls who try to cheat and get off too soon, and I guarantee you, you won’t like it.”

Tim pulls back, intentionally not reaching for a tissue as he does it, watching his cum slip down the inside of her leg. “So pretty. Turn around, kneel, lick me clean, and tuck me back in.”

Breena does turn around, staring at Tim like she can’t believe he just said that to her. He sees the look. “No or stop ends the game, otherwise…”

Her hand slips to wipe some of his cum off her leg, but he shakes his head. “Don’t remember telling you to do that.”

Once again, her eyes go wide, but she kneels, and takes his dick in her hand, gently licking him off, and tucking him back into his pants, and then waits. He smiles at that. “You can zip me up, too.”

She just zips the zipper.

“Button’s good, too.”

So she buttons the button.

Tim smiles at her. “Stand up, please.” He glances over, and Jimmy and Abby look like they’re relaxing right now.

“Can I borrow Abby for a moment?” he asks Jimmy.

“Depends. I’m pretty comfy with her right here right now. What do you want her to do?”

“Lick my cum off of Breena’s leg.”

Tim can see that Abby likes that idea, and Jimmy’s looking like he’ll enjoy watching that, too. Jimmy lets go of Abby. “Off you go. Have fun with it.”

Abby’s grinning. “Oh, I will.” A second later, standing in front of Breena, Abby asks, “What can I lick?”

Tim stands behind Breena. “Spread your legs, love.” Breena does, and he drags his index finger along the crease between pelvis and leg. “Any cum below here, lick it off, above, leave it.”

Abby kneels in front of Breena, eyes up on Tim, grinning at him, and then she looks down to Breena, grinning at her, before saying, “Yes, sir.”

Tim’s eyes slip shut at that. He still loves hearing it.

And then he’s loving watching it. Abby’s soft, wet lips on Breena’s pretty, pretty leg. That’s so good.
Jimmy would have to admit that Tim had a hell of a good idea with that. Abby licking up Breena’s leg is insanely hot.

He’s watching his two favorite women, mostly naked, Breena’s in her bra, Abby’s still naked, playing with each other, feeling how hard that’s making him, how much he wants to just grab both of them and fuck until he’s cumming his brains out, and it’s occurring to him that Tim had another good idea, too.

What he’s not sure of is if he gets off now, if he’ll be up for much of anything later. Yeah, eventually, he’ll be up for something, but he’s not sure when eventually will be. One hour, two? Four? He’s already gotten off once today, and it’s been a long time since he’s gone for three in one day.

But if he doesn’t get off now, he’s also not sure if he’ll hit the ‘this hurts’ point before they’re really into the fun part of tonight. He knows all about blue balls from his two years of dating Breena, and they aren’t exactly his idea of fun.

Another thought wipes all of that out of his mind for a moment. Abby’s on all fours, licking the inside of Breena’s ankle, butt high in the air, and he’s got a raging hard on and the smallest of the plugs on the bed next to him.

The image of slipping his dick into her, and then settling the lubed plug in place… Oh god… His brain and body really like that idea, and he’s halfway across the room before he’s even aware of the fact that he’s moved.

Okay, technically, Abby doesn’t need to start at Breena’s ankle. Tim, especially when he doesn’t spend an hour getting worked up, isn’t Peter North. He doesn’t exactly cum gallons. (Abby would say, if you asked her to estimate, that 5 to 10 ml is his usual range, and that if she really goes to town on him, like yesterday, they can get that up to 20 ish. That’s impressive but not setting any records.)

And, on a second shot, that’ll be even lighter, so, it’s not like there’s enough to actually get all the way from Breena’s pussy to her foot. From what she can see, the lowest drip’s gotten to the inside of Breena’s knee.

But, this is permission to lick Breena, who will probably enjoy it, and she knows both of the guys will like the show, and it’s Breena’s skin in her mouth and on her tongue, so… it’s all good.

And, nope, neither of the guys complain at all about the fact that there is not, in fact, any cum on that part of Breena’s leg as her lips land on the inside of Breena’s ankle. And, looking up, eyes on Breena’s as she’s lightly sucking that little sensitive spot right above her ankle bone, Breena whimpers, so yeah, sounds like she’s enjoying this, too.

Abby’s eyes drop, and she focuses on the soft skin in front of her, drinking in the scent of turned on Breena, and perfume, and Tim’s cum. She’s making her own little moaning sounds at this, and then, a second later, her own little whimper, too. She hadn’t been paying attention to Jimmy, but right now
she’s all full of him, gloriously full, as he’s rocking in and out of her… mmmm… yeah, he’s hitting everything just right. She had just enough time to cool down after the last orgasm that she knows she’ll get off easy this time, assuming he’s going to let her.

Apparently he decided Tim was on the right track with getting off early in the game. This doesn’t feel like he’s messing around or drawing her out with this.

She kisses a little higher and hears a quick buzz. Tim’s taking care of Breena, probably playing with her breasts, too.

Abby’s lips find the first trace of Tim’s cum, and she starts to lap it off Breena. Sounds like that’s doing good things for Jimmy, she hears him gasp behind her, and Tim’s telling Breena to watch. Something about her pretty little tongue on Breena’s silky legs. And how much better it’s going to look on her pussy later tonight.

Abby hears that and catches Tim’s eyes, he nods a little at her, knowing she wants that, too.

Then she’s the one gasping. Cool lube and cold glass slipping slowly into her while Jimmy’s stroking in and out.

“Fuck!” slips out of her mouth. “God, Jimmy! Fuck! Just like that.”

He gets the plug set. She thinks it’s the smallest one. There’s just a little stretch, but a little stretch is all she needs, especially right now with Breena’s leg in her mouth, Tim’s cum on her tongue, Jimmy’s dick in her pussy, and his fingers on her clit. She feels like she’s starting to tingle all over as she works her way up Breena’s leg, and as her nose is brushing Breena’s pussy (she’s following Tim’s orders exactly, her tongue isn’t going above the line her drew, that doesn’t mean her nose isn’t gently nudging Breena) Jimmy thrusts just a bit harder, breathing harshly behind her, and both of them drop over the edge into glorious, happy tingles.

With Jimmy sitting on the floor, Abby in his lap, both of them coming down, Tim flicks off the butterfly, and Breena moans, still frustrated.

Tim smiles at her. “Remember yesterday, all those times Abby told me that when I got off it’d be so amazing?”

Breena nods, curtly. She wants to be fucking, not thinking about fucking.

He kisses her ear. “It’s going to be even better for you.” Then he steps away, finds a towel and gently blots off her leg.

“Comfy?”

For a second he can see Breena’s not sure if she should answer honestly. She’s really wet. Turned on, Tim’s cum. She’s not sure if she can sit down without leaving a wet spot.

“Always an honest answer. Can’t do this well without good feedback.”

“Kind of squelchy.”

He very gently blots her pussy, too. Careful to make sure she’s still damp, but not sopping.
“Better?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Gonna keep you wet all night, and all night you’ll be feeling all slick and slippery, knowing that’s you and me all mixed together.” Suddenly, all the perfume she’s wearing makes a whole lot more sense to Breena. Tim smells like sex, her sex, but not from more than a few inches away. But it’s got to be noticeable on her from more than a few feet away, or would be if she didn’t have all that perfume on.

“You really think these things through, don’t you?”

Tim smiles at her. “I certainly try to.” He thinks again about what they’re going to do, and what color her dress is, and how, unlike Abby’s mostly black wardrobe, a wet spot will be very obvious on her light pink dress. “Go pick out some panties, too.”

She sees him get what she was concerned about. “Do they go over or under the butterfly?”

“Over. Pick any pair you like out, and put your dress on. Once those two are moving again. We’re going out.”

There are a few things Tim’s thinking as Jimmy’s driving the four of them into town.

First off, at least according to Abby, when girls talk about wanting sex so bad they ache, it’s more a metaphorical, mental frustration based ache. (Though when a person doesn’t know what he/she’s doing it’s possible that ache is a matter of being rubbed raw/too much pressure/etc…) But, for the most part, women are not equipped to get blue balls.

Because, of course, if he says he’s so hard he aches, he means he’s in literal pain. There can be a god-awful mental frustration aspect, too. But if he’s talking about aching, it means he’s been hard for so long, and everything is so swollen, that it really does feel like the day or two after getting a kick to the nuts.

Getting off usually takes care of said ache, but it’s entirely possible to be sore for a day or so after.

It’s his understanding that most women do not understand that if you get to the point where you’re rock hard and leaking, that not getting off really does ache and not strictly in the ‘I’m so turned on I can’t see straight’ sort of way.

Which is why they often find the concept of blue balls amusing instead of appalling.

And, that’s why the ones who really know what they’re doing, understand that ache can be used, like any pain, to kick the endorphins up even higher and produce a better orgasm.

He’s thinking this because there’s something else he knows, and that’s only an absolute bastard edges someone for too long the first time.

And there may be a lot of things that are true about Tim McGee, but that’s not one of them. He’s perfectly happy to have Breena thinking he’s going to spin her out all night. But he’s not going to do it. Mental ache, physical ache, pain is pain, and he wants to find the exact right line for Breena where she really is so turned on she can’t see straight, where she’s aching to get off, and he wants to use that to take her to the stars.
Where to eat? Jimmy’s thinking that as he’s driving around. It’s not so much a matter of what food, though something sensual and tasty would certainly be nice, it’s more that he knows for a fact that they are not going to be in any way, shape, or form appropriate for a casual family dining sort of place.

Jimmy The Dad can pretty easily imagine not being thrilled if the people in the booth next to him were getting their wives off between the courses. Jimmy The Dad can really imagine not being thrilled if he was out with say his ten and eight year old kids and the couples in the next booth are making sexy noises and whatnot.

So, Jimmy The Lover has already crossed off anywhere Jimmy The Dad might take his family for a nice Sunday dinner.

That leaves the really high end places and dives. They’re in the wrong part of town for a dive. He assumes there have to be some around here somewhere, but he’s not precisely sure how to google that. Least nice restaurant in Winchester? Place where no one will blink if you get your wife off between the courses? And, for that matter, he’s not sure he wants to eat there. He does want a decent dinner out of this. (Which is a good hint that getting off did a fine job of allowing him to think about things besides getting off. Jimmy The Lover with a hard-on is way less concerned about those sorts of things.)

Finally, he sees a parking spot and just pulls in. They’ll wander around until some place jumps out as appropriate.

As they’re walking toward the pedestrian mall, Tim, whose arm is firmly around Breena, says to him, “I’m thinking somewhere small enough to have single occupant bathrooms.”

“Got a taste for anything in specific?” Jimmy asks.

Tim grins, does something, though Jimmy’s not sure what, he can see both of Tim’s hands and the vibrator’s remote isn’t in them, but Breena jerks a little, and blushes. “Probably,” he replies.

A few more steps, Breena’s still looking pretty flushed, and Tim says, “Seafood? Might be a good night to get messy eating clams.”

Abby giggles at that. Jimmy pokes him, appalled that he’d come up with a joke that bad.

Tim generally prefers his pants on the looser end of the spectrum. He does own and has worn skinny jeans, but they really aren’t his thing.

Still, even loose jeans get fairly snug around the thigh, and if you happen to flex your leg a certain way, while walking, that can cause said jeans to get quite snug, especially over the bottom of the pocket area.

Which he found out when he flexed his thigh while stepping forward and accidentally turned the butterfly on. He wasn’t intending to do it, but having realized he could…

The control on the butterfly works two ways. Click it on, click it off, and twist it to increase or lower the force. He’s got it on the lowest setting, just a nice little hum, and every few steps he’s turning it
This is torture. Breena knows they’re walking around, she knows they’re in search of some sort of food, but she doesn’t care. She feels like she’s walking around in a daze, her pussy commanding all of her focus, as everything else falls away.

She’s wet. So wet and so slick and so turned on.

She feels full, and ripe, and open, and begging, pleading, begging for something, fingers, dick, dildo, anything, to fill her up.

Her whole body is aching to get off. At any moment, she’ll feel a little buzz, just enough to get her close again, just enough so that she can just see the start of her release, and then Tim stops.

“You’re looking a little flushed, love. I think you got some sun while we were swimming. Abby, do you have some sunblock?” Tim says, grinning, stopping them in the middle of the pedestrian area.

And of course Abby does.

So she’s standing there, as Tim’s gently rubbing sunblock into her arms and shoulders, his fingers making deep circles into her muscles that feel delicious, and lighter, set her skin dancing touches to her hands and neck.

“Okay, good, think I got it all.” He kisses below her ear and quietly adds, “Back at the house, we’ve got massage oil. When we get home I’ll lay you down, open the bottle, slowly drip it a drop at a time all up your legs, then over your mound, and onto your clit. Drop,” he hits her with a quick buzz, and then off, “by drop,” another fast buzz, “by drop.” He stops the butterfly. “I’ll rub it all up and down your legs, and over your mound, between your lips,” he hits the butterfly again, “until you’re glistening all over, smooth and slippery as oiled silk and you’re begging me to fuck you.”

“Oh, please.” It comes out of her as a whimper.

Tim smiles, then turns off the butterfly.

Tim’s thinking they’re getting close to the edge between turned on and wanting, and cruel for no damn reason. He wants to dance Breena on that line, not cross it.

“How about the sushi place we were looking at the first time we were here?” Tim says. To him that’s sounding like a good plan, it’s about a quarter mile away, enough of a walk to give him one more shot at teasing Breena, plus it looked small enough to have the sort of bathroom where he’ll be able to get some alone time with her and get her off.

Then decent dinner, more teasing, back home dancing…

Sounds good to him.

They’re ambling along in that direction, happy with the decision, and Tim notices the benches in the middle of the mall. He edges them in that direction. He’s been keeping his arm around Breena, keeping her right next to him, controlling her walking speed and where she’s going, partly just to
show her he can, and partly because she’s not, by any stretch, really aware of what’s around her right now.

He gets her seated on the bench, and then puts his foot on the seat, bending over, “tying his shoe.” (Would look a lot more convincing if he wasn’t wearing a flip flop. Jimmy and Abby are very amused by this.) It’s really just an excuse to have his mouth next to Breena’s ear.

“What would you do if I told you to head to the back of this bench, stand behind it, bend over, put your palms on the seat, and raise your dress?”

She shudders at that idea, eyes glazed. She even shifts a little at those words, like she might do it.

“We’re just talking.” He touches her face, gentle stroke of fingers along her cheek, and a little kiss, and then turns on the vibrator. “I’m not getting us arrested. But I’m thinking about it. I’m thinking about peeling those soaking wet panties off of you. I’m thinking about your ass and pussy high in the air, all wet and gleaming, smelling like sex and that perfume and my cum. Thinking about standing behind you, and fucking you right here, in the daylight, where everyone can see you flush red and scream my name as you get off on my cock.”

Tim stands up, clicking off the vibrator, and takes Breena’s hands, pulling her up, keeping her close as they continue their walk down to the restaurant.

Sunday night, a bit after seven, the sushi place is busy but not packed. Fifteen minute wait for a four top, not too bad. They head to the bar to wait.

Sometimes, there are benefits to being a lefty. Tim leans, left side against the bar, and makes sure Breen’s right in front of him, chest to his back. His right arm is around her waist. His lips are on her shoulder, and he nudges her left leg, letting her know to rest it on the bar rail.

So, from any distance away, they’re just two very cuddly people on a date. And, even up close, the drape of her skirt, and the position of their bodies is hiding the fact that he’s stroking his fingers up and down the back of her thigh.

“You driving home, or am I?” he asks Jimmy.

“I’ll have a taste of whatever you get, but I’m good with driving,” Jimmy answers.

“Good.” They’ve got an impressive looking sake collection, and better yet, a tasting selection. He orders the tasting selection, knowing it’ll be there in a few seconds, and given the way this group drinks, that six shot-glass-sized cups of sake should do them all just fine.

His fingers have reached Breena panties when the sake is placed in front of them. Little tray, tiny glasses. He uses his right hand, reaching around her, to snag one and take a sip. “Yummy.” He holds it for Breena, offering her a sip, too, as he slips her panties to the side and thrusts three fingers into her.

He times it right, and it looks like she’s blissfully enjoying the sake at her lips.

“Good, baby?”

“Yes,” she sighs, rocking a little against him.
He can feel the restless motion of her hips, the way she’s trying to get more from him. He’s fairly sure that if he turns on the butterfly, she’ll come right here, at the bar, on his fingers, but… Nope. Not yet, not like this.

He gives her another sip, and thrust, and then places the drink back on the tray while removing his fingers and rubbing most of her cum off on her thigh. He kisses her ear. “Mens room. Take the panties and butterfly off. Wait for me. Don’t get off.”

Jimmy and Abby watch Breena almost stumble off. They both look at Tim, who’s looking very cocky and extremely pleased with himself right now.

He takes a little drop of one of the sakes with his left index finger, and hold it out for Abby. “Taste?”

Abby smiles at him, and licks the drop off his finger. You’re evil. She signs to him.

Think Jimmy’ll lick it off my finger, too?

Not here.

Want to see him do it later?

Abby smiles at him.

“Do I get to get in on that?” Jimmy asks.

Abby turns to him, and kisses his lips. “Eventually.”

Tim takes one of the small cups, rubs his index and middle finger around the rim, and then passes it to Jimmy. “Think you’ll like this one.”

Jimmy’s eyes go wide as he lifts the cup to his lips and the scent hits his nose. He hadn’t realized Tim had gotten that far already.

Tim grins, shoots back what’s left of the first cup. “Back in a bit.”

——-

No one in the hall to the bathrooms. Excellent. He figures he’s got at most two minutes. He also figures he won’t need that long. Not with the way Breena was gripping his fingers.

He’s almost wishing he hadn’t gotten off back at the cabin, because he would have really liked to have had an erection right now, hard and fast up against the wall sounds quite appealing, but he’s not sure how well he would have focused if both he and Breena were that turned on while getting here. Not sure if he could have handled the bar as smoothly.

He raps gently on the door and hears Breena’s voice say, “Occupied.”

Tim slips in. “We’ve got two minutes,” he says, locking the door.

It’s a really nice bathroom, small, but clean and smells nice. He takes hold of her and kisses her hard and deep, feeling Breena clinging to him, and grinding against his leg. He pulls back, hands on her hips and backs her to the sink, butt against it.

“Where are your panties?”
She nods at her purse. He grabs it, finds them on the top, and hands them back to her. “No noise. If you can’t muffle yourself, bite on them.”

He sinks to his knees, flips her skirt up, spends a few seconds slipping his fingers up and down over her soaked pussy before thrusting them in, fast and sure, stretching her and curling into her g-spot. Then he glances up at her. “Get off as hard as you can.” He lowers his mouth to her pussy and begins to feast.

She almost does as soon as he says it. Just permission is almost enough. But not quite.

Tim’s kneeling between her legs, face buried in her pussy, licking and sucking like his life depends on it, like if he doesn’t get her off in the next minute the world will literally end.

His fingers are moving hard and fast and thick and delicious, all spread wide and twisting to get her right on the inside and his tongue and lips and more tongue on the outside and fuck! It’s all too much, she can feel the orgasm barreling down on her, and she’s not in control, can’t make herself keep quiet, she wants to scream at how hard this is coming, at how her whole body is bowstring tight, begging, not really believing he won’t pull back again and leave her hanging, and it’s just more and more and more, wet, slick lips and tongue up and down and in and out and deep and thrust and she is biting her panties, trying to keep the sounds that want to spill out inside.

His fingers keep coaxing her, getting her closer and his tongue is relentless, and then everything pulls a hair tighter as her whole body tingles all over, fingernails, hair, toes, ears, eyes, pussy, everything is singing, sparkling, flaring as tingles turn into a wave of clenching muscles from toes to ears and her whole body shakes with the spasms as she gets off almost crying at how good it feels.

A minute later (maybe) she’s feeling like Jello, completely relaxed, totally calm, and sitting on the floor of the bathroom in Tim’s lap as he gently holds her and kisses her shoulder.

She spits out the panties. “Bleck.”

He laughs at that. “Good?”

“Oh, fuck! Yeah, I’m good.”

He cuddles her closer, stroking her shoulder and arms. “Normally, I’d be all in favor of giving you all the cool down time you like, but…” He gently pats her thigh. “Let’s get you up and cleaned off.”

He’s careful with that, too. Quick. He gives her a fast wash off with damp paper towels, before getting his own face, neck, and hands. But thorough. “Okay, back to the others I’ll follow in a bit.”

She gives him a quick kiss. “See you in a few minutes.”

“We can seat you more quickly if you’d like one of the Japanese-style tables,” the hostess says a moment later as Abby and Jimmy wait at the bar.

“You mean, on the floor and sitting on pillows?” Abby says.
The hostess nods brightly, then glances at Abby, not sure if offering that to a pregnant woman is a good idea, but Abby’s all over it. She’s not so far along getting up and down is difficult, not yet.

Jimmy nods at the hostess. “That’d be great.” A minute after that, he catches the bartender’s eye and taps one of the tasting glasses. “We’re going to want two bottles of this.” The sake in the cup is cold. “One cold for now. We’ll take the other home.” Jimmy likes what’s in that cup, even without Breena’s special seasoning, so some of it is going home with them so he can drink it, too.

He’s thinking of painting it on Abby and licking it off. Yeah, that’s got lots of good feelings attached to it.

Another thought hits him as they continue to wait. “Can you sit comfortably cross-legged?”

Abby smiles. “Probably end up more side-saddle, but I’ll be fine. I like feeling it.”

“All comfy?”

“Yeah, just keeping my attention nicely focused.”

Jimmy thinks about that, and about how long they’ll likely be here. He grabs the next bigger one, the baggie, and the little bottle of lube and discretely palms them into Abby’s purse.

She sees him do it, and smiles. “I think I’m going to check on Breena. Make sure she didn’t fall in. She was looking a little distracted, didn’t you think?”

Jimmy snorts a quick laugh and shakes his head. “Don’t make me wait all on my own for too long.”

Abby kisses him, wet and soft. “No problem, love.”

When Breena heads back to the bar, Jimmy’s the only one there. He watches her come up to him, smiling, and then kisses her cheek. “You’re looking like you had a good time.”

She’s feeling all soft and floaty and happy, and is really quite close to just snuggling into him until he taps “his” wedding ring against the bar, and she remembers they’re out in public and who she’s with tonight.

So, she smiles at him, and decides now would be a great time to take a taste of each of the sakes.

“Abby’ll be back soon.” There’s only one place Abby could be, and if Breena was just there, then…

“Yep. Hostess says our table should be ready shortly.”

“Wonderful.”

“It’s one of the low ones, sitting on pillows on the floor.”

Breena smiles, all sorts of ideas at that. “Even better.”

Tim wanders back a moment later, also looking like he had a very good time, though he’s a few steps shy of his full on just-got-laid-cocky.
Eventually the Hostess returns, and eventually they head over to a low table on the floor, pillows all
around.

Maybe it’s just happy circumstance, or perhaps the hostess can look at them and have a clue that
tucking them away from the rest of the crowd is a good plan, but these on the floor tables are all
tucked into little, almost private, nooks located several steps above the main dining floor. Japanese
style paper walls block them from the rest of the guests on three sides.

Jimmy eyes the set up. The pillows are arranged so each couple is facing the other, sides to the open
restaurant.

He’s nodding, looking it over, assuring the hostess that this is fine, and before Abby can get seated,
he kneels down and rearranges the pillows.

Doesn’t take Tim more than a glance to figure out what Jimmy’s doing and why. Only question is,
who’s going to be facing the crowd?

Once they’re done, it’s still both couples next to each other, but instead of side on to the open
restaurant, it’s Jimmy and Abby back to it, and Tim and Breena facing it.

Or, put more specifically, the only thing anyone from the rest of the crowd can see of the four of
them, unless standing right next to them, is Jimmy and Abby’s backs, and Tim and Breena’s faces.

Whatever they may be doing with their hands, or any other parts of their bodies, is shielded by the
paper walls and Abby and Jimmy’s backs.

Jimmy lets Abby get seated, and then sits next to her, mostly facing her, one leg behind her, foot on
the floor, knee bent, so she can use his leg as something of a backrest, other leg mostly tucked in
against him. Tim and Breena settle in on the other side, for right now, just cross legged, hip to hip.

Tim’s hand is on Breena’s back, gently stroking up and down as they look over the menu.

This is delicious.

Breena’s buzzed. She’s got all of her happy orgasm chemicals flooding through her, just enough
alcohol to feel good, Tim’s hand feeding her little bites of yummy fish while gently petting her and
saying ridiculously hot things.

Across the table, Abby’s cheeks are flushed (looks a little like she’s got an alcohol flush, but Breena
knows the cup of sake in front of Abby is untouched) and Breena knows what Jimmy’s doing to her
each time his hand drops under the table.

In fact, there have been a few times where Jimmy’s been so indiscreet as to let both Breena and Tim
see a flash of what he’s doing with Abby. Granted said flashes only happen when there’s no one else
nearby, and no chance of anyone else stepping by so maybe indiscreet isn’t the right word, but it’s
certainly a hot tease.
Breena knows exactly how it feels to be sitting snuggled in close with Jimmy, his hand between her legs, both of them trying to look like nothing’s going on, as he rubs her off in public.

Of course, they usually do that when clubbing, but…

The restaurant is fairly loud. As long as they speak quietly, they won’t attract attention.

Tim’s fingers are tracing down the back of her neck, as he offers her a little bit of seared tuna with bitter orange wasabi sauce.

She chews, thinking. Abby’s leaning in closer against Jimmy, and given how they’re sitting, she can see his hand busy under her skirt. Tim liked it when she got talking. Jimmy likes it when she reads/tells him stories.

“Would you like to hear a story?” she asks after she swallows

Tim nuzzles along her neck and ear. “I’d love to hear you tell a story.” His eyes flick to the far side of the room, and back to Jimmy with a tiny nod. Jimmy quickly stops what he’s doing to Abby. She pouts at that. That’s their game, he’s playing with her, and Tim’s keeping eyes on the room, letting him know when someone comes too close.

Anytime someone gets within ten feet of the table, they’re acting with proper (if very affectionate) decorum.

Tim nods to Jimmy again, the patron heading to the bathroom is out of sight, and they see his hand vanish below the line of sight of the table, followed by a quickly moving lump under Abby’s skirt.

“Watching you blush got me thinking about the first time we did that,” Breena says.

Tim picks another bit of fish for her, offering it to her on his chopsticks. “This sounds like it’ll be a good story.”

“It is.” Breena’s smiling, and Jimmy is, too. “We’re on our honeymoon, so… That’s almost six months after we got married. And like this honeymoon, we didn’t get out of the hotel room all that much.”

“Less than this one.”

“True. We had room service. We took advantage of it. But we did make it out one day. Like with tonight, I wanted to go dancing, and there was a nice little club a few blocks down. So, we put some clothing on and head out. Pretty night, and the club was loud, boisterous, lots of drunk partiers, and even louder live music.”

Jimmy’s smiling at that memory.

“Loud, crowded, no air conditioning, lots and lots of people all dancing hard. Not as well lit as this place is.” Though the lights here aren’t daytime bright, they aren’t sitting in the dark, either.

Abby’s trying to grind into Jimmy’s fingers, but he’s slowing down a little to match Breena’s story. Then Tim gives him another little nod, and Jimmy stops dead again. Abby all but growls. Jimmy lightly tugs the sleeve of her dress down, kisses her shoulder, and puts it back into place. Then he looks at the food in front of them. “Maybe we could listen and eat?”

Abby’s eyes narrow, but she takes a bite of her dinner.
Jimmy picks up one of his rolls with his fingers, eats it, licking his fingers clean, and grins at them. “Yummy.” Then he looks at Breena. “So, we’re in the club.”

“And it’s hot, and we’ve been dancing hard.”

“Is dancing or hard the operative word?” Abby asks, squirming a bit on her pillow as she takes another bite of her clam roll. Yeah, it was a bad joke on Tim’s part, but, it really did sound good to her.

“By that point, hard is the operative word. We were getting a drink. Third or fourth mojito of the night for me, and it’s so crowded at the bar that he’s pressed right up behind me.”

“That bar could have been deserted and I would have been right up behind you.”

“But it wasn’t. It was packed. I feel his arm move, and I’m thinking he’s going to order another drink for himself, but he doesn’t. Instead of waving at the bartender, I feel his fingers on the inside of my thigh. Sort of what you were doing, Tim, but not quite. I wasn’t wearing panties, or anything else under that skirt, so he’s getting right to it.” She smiles at Jimmy, and reaches across the table to lightly stroke the backs of his fingers. “Those long fingers of yours put to good use.”

Jimmy grins at that. “Should I be using them again?”

“I think Abby would like that.”

“Yes, Abby would like that!” Abby says.

Jimmy grins at her, looks to Tim, who nods, no one’s paying them any attention, so his hand finds her pussy again and Abby whimpers quietly with pleasure.

“We’d never done anything like that before. He’d mentioned liking doing it in public, but… Hadn’t happened, yet. So, I was surprised, but he’s right behind me, and so hard against my low back, and his fingers are dancing on my skin, slipping between my lips, rubbing all over me. Up and down,” she’s got direct eye contact with Jimmy right now, and she can’t see what exactly he’s doing to Abby, but she’s sure he’s matching his movements to her words. “And it was just so naughty. Standing there with strangers all around us, none of them paying attention, and none of them know he’s got his fingers inside of me while his thumb is driving me crazy.

“I’m sipping my drink, trying not to look like I’m about to come as he’s slipping over me faster and faster. I’m bopping along to the music a little, trying to look like I’m dancing, not fucking my husband in front of a hundred other people.

“He nudges me forward, which doesn’t make any sense, I’m already belly to the bar, then I get what he’s trying to get me to do, stand on the bar rail. That didn’t make much sense to me, either, but he’s got my pussy in his hand, and he’s kissing my neck, I’m doing whatever he wants.

“Bar rail is a few inches up. Once I figure that out, I know where he’s taking us.”

Abby straightens up a little, body getting tighter, chopsticks clenched between her fingers, eyes almost closed.

“He puts his glass down next to my elbow, and for a second all I can feel is his fingers still sliding over and over and over on me.” She’s sliding over those words, almost caressing them with her voice. “Then there’s a bit of a jostling sensation.” Breena takes a sip of her sake, lips stroking the edge of her cup, tongue gently licking the rim. “And then there’s this hot, hard, smooth, thrust.”
Breena bites her lip at that memory, and Abby’s breathing faster, harder. Jimmy’s alternating between watching the woman he’s getting off and the one telling the story. Tim’s listening, eyeing the room, keeping watch, though his left hand finds Breena’s knee and starts to make lazy circles on it.

“All that wet, slippery, stretch. The music is pounding, and so’s Jimmy, rocking back and forth, keeping time with the beat, keeping me spread open around him as he’s sliding in and out again and again and faster and faster,” she’s using her voice to match the rhythm of Jimmy’s hand, and the shared memory of a song neither of them know the name of. “They hit a drum solo, and the music’s just throbbing and so am I, pussy, nipples, clit, everything pulsing with my heart and the music.”

Breena’s eyeing Abby, who looks so close. Her eyes are completely shut, and she’s panting quietly.

“Then he steps just a bit closer, shifts the angle just a little bit, and hits right there.” Jimmy does something, and Abby yips a little, shuddering all over, and he holds her closer, letting her ride the wave.

A minute later, Abby takes a deep breath, opens her eyes, and grins at everyone. Breena grins, too. Then she finishes the story with, “Yep, that did it for me, too.”

Tim checks the crowd again, takes a sip of his sake, kisses Breena, and slides his hand up the inside of her leg. He gets to her pussy, and lightly strokes his fingers over her.

“Telling that story got you all wet again.”

Breena nods, wondering where he’ll take this.

His hand returns to her knee, and he gently squeezes it. “Get up, grab your purse, back to the restroom, and put the butterfly back on. Stay in there for three minutes. While you’re in there, I want you fingering yourself, thinking about dancing between Jimmy and I tonight while we take turns with you. Don’t come.”

“We’re taking turns?” Jimmy asks when Breena heads off.

Tim shrugs, sipping his drink. “We could.”

Abby’s cuddling Jimmy, still relaxing. “I’d like watching that.”

Jimmy kisses her, stroking her hair. “I’m not shocked. Is there anything you don’t want to see?”

Abby giggles. “Nothing’s springing to mind.”

Tim smiles at her. “You good with it?” he asks Jimmy.

Jimmy nods. “Yeah.”

Tim’s got another thought as they wait for Breena to get back. They’re probably out of the game right now, just planning, but he wants to make sure. “James…”

Jimmy’s eyebrows shoot up, once again he’s wondering what he could possibly be doing wrong. He’s eating dinner for God’s sake. Then he remembers again that they also use this as a general way to just break play and check in. “I’ll get used to this eventually. What?”
“You don’t want me running you, I got that, how about asking her to do stuff to you?”

Jimmy thinks about that… That’s far enough removed that it should be okay. “I think that’s okay. I’ll stop you if it gets weird.”

“Okay.”

“What are you thinking?” Abby asks.

Tim looks to Jimmy. “Does she get to find out?”

Jimmy strokes Abby’s back. “Yes, she’s been making me happy tonight.”

Tim smiles at both of them. “I like to watch. You like to be watched. Not sure exactly what, probably won’t know until it happens, but I think that could be fun.”

Jimmy inclines his head. He can, and happily will, go with that.

When Breena gets back, she’s looking very pink and excited. Tim smiles at her, kisses her as she sits down, and then says, “You told a very nice story, would you like to hear one in return?”

Everyone else at the table looks pleased with that, leaning in, getting ready to listen to something juicy. He gives all of them a wicked grin, then says, “The Dragon Knights date back to the days before the calendars were kept.”

Jimmy reaches across the table and gives him a gentle whack to the arm as he says, “You son of a bitch.”

Tim grins at him. “No adventures of Daegan, Gabe, Katie, and Breeanne?”

“Breeanne?” Breena says, staring at Tim. She knew he was bad with names. She’s read all of the Tibbs books, but… Breeanne?

“You don’t like that?”

Breena just looks at him.

“I’ll keep looking.”

“Good plan.”

Turns out the Dragon Knight story is sexy. Jimmy’s not sure where Tim even keeps all this smut inside him, but he does know that if he had that many dirty stories in his head nothing would ever get done around the morgue.

Okay, one thing would get done around the morgue, but that’s not what they pay him for.

On the upside (hehehe, he likes thinking about it like that) apparently a third round is not going to be a problem tonight. He’s actually springing into action readily enough that he’s starting to think that he possibly could pull off four.
And though the taste of the sake he had earlier was really yummy, he’s sure that if he drinks, four isn’t going to be an option for him, at all, but… Maybe…

God, it’d suck to be wrong on that.

But if he’s not wrong… He and Abby could get a quick one off in the mens room, and then…

Dancing, naked, Tim wants to watch… He likes to get watched…

That’d probably be enough.

Tim’s getting to the “climax” of the story, and they’re awfully close to the end of dinner, too. Breena’s cheeks are pink again, and even through her bra, he can see her nipples are hard. She’s liking this just fine. Abby’s right next to him, practically in his lap, rubbing up against him like an especially affectionate cat.

And he’s got an erection, lube, another dilator, and a willing partner.

The idea of grabbing Abby’s hand and heading off to the mens room is hitting him really hard right now. He can see her, back against the wall, leg over his hip, butt in his hands as they go at it fast.

But… He doesn’t know how fast Tim’s looking to take things tonight. How much dancing? How much teasing? And he also doesn’t know how fast Tim can take things tonight.

He’s had… ten, twelve (?) of those little cups of sake, (he and Breena have put a good dent into that bottle of sake) but that’s… about two and a half glasses of wine. Tim’s loose and flirty and sexy. Not that he’s particularly inhibited with the three of them, but whatever inhibitions he’s got left are likely gone. He definitely shouldn’t drive, but he’s not about to pass out.

Still doesn’t tell Jimmy if he’ll be ready to nail the girls the second they’re in the cabin, or if he’ll need more time to get up and ready again.

There are probably several different ways Jimmy could go about finding this out. He could break into the story and just ask. He could ask Breena to do a little “research” for him and report back.

Or he could do what he actually does, which is carefully make sure that Abby’s on her pillow and won’t topple over if he moves, and then slips over to sit next to Tim (thus getting a somewhat curious look from Tim) before giving him a discrete little grope (extremely curious and shocked look from Tim, very amused/aroused looks from the girls) and then heading back over to Abby.

“Jimmy?” Tim asks when he’s back on his side of the table.

“Go on, finish the story,” Jimmy says with a bright little smile. Tim’s not nailing anyone to anything anytime soon. Alcohol, multiple previous orgasms, and middle age do not appear to be hastening Tim’s round three.

Tim spends a second just looking at him, obviously he knows what Jimmy was trying to find out, he’s just not sure why he would want to know, but then he shakes his head and then goes back to the story.

___________________________________________________________

And then he does. Tim finishes the story, and he’s got three very turned on people all around him. Breena’s squirming on her pillow. Abby’s got her please, please, please fuck me now look on her
face, and as Jimmy’s hopping up and giving Abby a hand, Tim’s got a very good idea of why Jimmy’s hand was on his dick two minutes ago.

Jimmy and Abby are heading off to the restroom, and it’s occurring to Tim that maybe tonight wasn’t the best night ever to have... He looks at the empty tasting cups, and the less than half full bottle, that much wine.

Now he’s wondering if Jimmy decided that nothing’s happening with him when they get home, so might as well get off now, or if he thinks he can get to four.

“Can he get off four times in one day?” Tim asks Breena.

Breena shrugs. She knows that once upon a time, he could. She doesn’t know about now. “We haven’t since before Molly was born, but... First anniversary weekend, we did it eleven times in two days.”

“That beats our record.”

Breena smiles at that. “I don’t think it’s a competition.”

Tim kisses Breena. “Guys and dicks, baby, it’s always a competition, even when it isn’t.”

Breena smiles at him, stroking his face, and then her hand slips down his cheek, throat, and chest, ending where Jimmy’s had been. “Well then, think you can do it four times in one day?”

Tim knows the answer to that, at least for right now. “Not today. But next Friday into Saturday, assuming we’re not building a house and little girls nap well, we can find out.”

Breena laughs at that.

---

Jimmy and Abby come swaggering back about thirty seconds later.

Tim stares at them, shakes his head. That really couldn’t have been more than two minutes, including getting to the restroom and back time, then he says to Jimmy, “I don’t know if I should be impressed or pity you.”

“You’ve said that before.”

Tim watches Jimmy give Abby a hand sitting down before sitting down himself. “I’m thinking it again. Might just start calling you, Zippy.” Then he looks to Breena. “Is that one a good name?”

She gives Tim a little shove. “Only if I get to call you Glacial.”

Tim leans over, kisses her deep and wet and hits the control on the butterfly. “Glaciers always get where they’re going, sooner or later.”

Jimmy takes the teasing with a smile, and Abby says, huge grin on her face, “Impressed.”

Tim’s eyebrows raise a bit. “You think I should have him show me what he did that got you off that fast?”

Abby nods, arm around Jimmy. “Anytime you want to show off your tricks, I’ll be happy to be demonstrated on.”
Jimmy’s driving them home. “How about you set the playlist?” he says to Tim as they’re pulling out.

“I was planning on slipping three fingers into Breena and running the butterfly, but, I can do the playlist.”

“Like fuck you are.” Tim wasn’t kidding about frustrated. She’s almost ready to just take matters into her own hands and get herself off. Why Tim needed someone holding his hands yesterday is making much more sense to her now.

Tim smiles at her. “Eager? I didn’t say you’d get off.” He flicks on the butterfly. “But, I suppose… Abby can you do the playlist?” He hands his phone over to Abby, and she gets to looking for music. “Stuff all four of us want to dance to, please?”

Then he turns, as much as he can belted in, toward Breena. His fingers curl around the inside of her knee, a gentle tug, spreading her legs apart.

“I can smell it, you know.” His fingers trace up the inside of her thigh as he flips up the skirt of her dress with his other hand. “How turned on you are.” Abby flips down the passenger mirror so she can watch what they’re up to without having to try to twist around. “That scent hits me so hard.” The tips of his fingers trace over her lips. “Hits me right in the balls.” He thrusts into her, hard. “Makes me want to strip you naked and watch you ride my cock.” His fingers start to slip in and out. “Makes me want to watch you come.” He’d have to unbuckle to kiss her, so he can’t do that (though he’s three quarters of the way out of the seat before he notices that.) “Makes me want to lick my name onto your skin, while my dick’s deep inside of you and you’re clenching and moaning on me.”

Breena moans, rocking against him.

“There you go baby. Makes me want to make you feel so good…” He’s still talking, telling Breena about how beautiful she is, and how much he loves hearing her, but he’s also thinking about what comes next, about getting home and what they’re still hoping to do. Thinking about how difficult it is to enjoy anything besides sex when you’re so keyed up you’re almost insane with it.

Thinking about how, if they’re going to slow down, dance, tease, play, they should all be starting out at about the same level.

He glances up, they’re near an intersection. “Jimmy, drive slow, catch the yellow and red.”

He turns up the vibrator, but unhooks the straps from Breena’s hips.

As soon as he feels Jimmy slowing the van down, he unbucks and all but jumps over to Breena, unbuckling her, pulling her hips to the edge of the seat, tossing the butterfly to the side, and going at her, hard, with lips and tongue and fingers.

“Come for me, baby. Let me hear you sing.”

And Breena does.
Jimmy waits for them to get buckled in again, which does involve the guy behind him laying on his horn when the light changes to green.

He glances back, sees Breena slumped in her seat, eyes closed, breathing slowing down, fine sheen of sweat glistening on her skin. Tim’s back in his seat, too, holding her hand, looking very pleased with himself.

“And you want to call me, Zippy?” Jimmy says back.

Tim glances at him. “I’m not the one who got off in less than forty-five seconds.”

The rest of the drive is quiet. They’re mostly relaxing and listening to music. And finally, they get back to the cabin.

Jimmy worms off Tim’s ring, and they swap back. “Changing up the game?” Abby asks.

Tim nods. “Yeah, I think we’re all playing, equal, now.” Tim kisses his first wife, and his second. “You two said something about dancing and naked…”

Abby steps next to Tim, pulling his phone out of his pocket, and heads over to the sound system, hips swaying with each step, already a little dance sort of rhythm in her step. She gets his phone set up with the speakers and her playlist starts.

Once it’s on, she holds her hand out to Tim. “Come here, baby.”

“Always.”

Abby picked a good selection of music. Not too slow, not too fast. This is good warm up stuff.

Tim loves the fact that out here, in private, they really can dance, all four of them, as close and hot, or fast and light as they want.

Here, now, it’s standing up making love to music. It’s a slow seduction of easy touches, light caresses, and clothing falling away one piece at a time.

Jimmy’s lost the flannel shirt and jeans. He’s down to his t-shirt and boxer-briefs. Tim’s shirt is completely open, but still on his arms and shoulders.

The girls still have their dresses on, though the collars are gone, and so is Breena’s bra.

Deep beat, enough bass and drums to keep everyone moving, not so fast as to be exhausting. Tim’s got his hands on Abby’s hips, his lips on her shoulder and neck, and she’s dancing back to his front. Jimmy’s in front of her, arms around her and Tim, kissing Abby’s lips. She’s got one arm wrapped
around Tim’s neck, her other one is on Jimmy’s shoulder.

Faster beat, lighter sound, higher notes. All four of them this time, just light, teasing touches as the music slips through them. Breena tugs gently on Tim’s sleeve, kissing along his collar bone, and he’s down to just his jeans and boxers.

Soft, romantic music. Woman’s voice. Not really a dance beat, more a sway with someone you love beat. Breena’s in Abby’s arms, head on her shoulder as Abby holds her close, fingers stroking down her back. She flicks open the hook and eye on Breena’s dress, dragging the zipper down.

There’s an idea Jimmy’s intrigued with. He’s been thinking about it for a bit now. Since the girls started dancing with each other.

He and Tim aren’t really dancing. They’re more just standing around, watching. He glances over and sees that, yes, this has gotten Tim’s dick awake again, and a bit more of it, and his own dick will wake up, too.

They’re kissing now. Slow and wet, and Abby’s gently slipping the straps of Breena’s dress down, so all Breena has to do is step back, the dress will fall to the floor, and she’ll be naked save for her cute little sandals.

Jimmy knows how watching this feels to him. He knows that Breena likes playing with Abby well enough, but a huge part of the kick is the way he and Tim are watching her right now.

And he knows he likes to be watched. Another minute and it’ll be a new song.

He quietly says to Tim, “We really like this, right?”

Tim’s nodding vigorously at that.

“Turn about fair play?”

Tim looks away from the girls to Jimmy, but he’s still staring at them. Breena’s got her hand on Abby’s butt, under Abby’s dress, so Tim’s eyes go jumping back to that.

It takes him a second to get back to thinking about what Jimmy just asked. He doesn’t see why it wouldn’t be, but... Maybe later he and Jimmy need to have a chat with each other about what kind of lines they have with each other’s bodies, but that’s for later, right now Tim just wants to get back to playing. “Right now? Later?”

“Next song. Let’s get them ready to jump us.”

Tim would have to admit that sounded good to him. And, a moment later, the song does shift, and Breena steps back from Abby, her dress falling to the ground. She takes a step toward the guys,
wondering who (or both) she’s dancing with next.

“Since you’ve both been so good this evening, you get a special treat,” Tim says.

“Very special.” Jimmy hooks his index finger in Tim’s belt loop and pulls him closer. He looks Tim up and down, eyes hot, fingers of his other hand resting on Tim’s chest.

It feels odd to Tim, because it’s erotic, but… almost erotic at a distance. What Jimmy is doing to him feels fine, but isn’t turning him on. It’s a show, and that’s interesting. He knows he likes the kick that goes with performing, open Mic night and his Tim the MIT Beaver days certainly fed into that. So, this feels a lot more like the excitement that goes with that, than anything he’s got in his mind as sex.

He glances at the girls, who are not moving at all, staring at them, barely breathing, as if any sudden move might spook them, and both of them have that, I can’t believe I’m getting to see this, please, please, please let it be true look on their faces.

And that feels amazing. He knows he likes making an audience happy, and this is his favorite sort of happy from his favorite audience. That’s really good.

“No touching yourselves. That includes your little leg trick, Abby.”

And Jimmy leans over and kisses Tim. Really kisses him, holds onto him, wraps one arm around his waist, cups his face in his hand, and goes to town on him, while Tim wraps a leg around Jimmy’s, twines his hand in Jimmy’s hair, and kisses back for all his worth.

The girls are whimpering. He can hear little moans, too. That’s erotic. That’s making him feel like sex on legs. He can feel the vibe of so turned on I don’t know what to do with myself pulsing off of them, and that’s hitting him, hard.

He sucks Jimmy’s lip, wet and plump between his own, and grinds into him a little. The unmistakable sound of Abby getting off ends that kiss rather abruptly, as both guys pull apart in stupefied shock.

“Did you just come?” Jimmy asks, staring at a pink and flushed Abby in amazement.

Abby nods. “You don’t even want to know how long I’ve been wanting to see that.”

Tim arches an eyebrow.

“Since Jimmy’s first day at NCIS.”

“Wow!” Jimmy says, pleased and then, thinking back, “Really?” He remembers what both of them looked like back then, and, more importantly who they were… yeah… not exactly the poster boys for smoking-hot, kinky sex. Hell, he thinks back more carefully, he’s not sure if they qualified as the poster boys for tame, missionary position, lights-off sex.

She steps closer and runs her hand over Tim’s shoulder. “We were dating then, and you showed up, and for that whole first day I was fantasizing about both of you together with me.”

Breena joins them and points his head away from Abby, back to Tim and says, “Get back to that for a few more minutes and I’ll get off, too.”

“Wait.” Tim holds his hands up because Jimmy’s about to dive right in. “Were you touching yourself?”
Abby grins. “You know we’re both better than that. You said no touching ourselves, so no touching ourselves.” Tim has the sense that there might be some sort of loophole he missed in there, but he’s not able to find it.

Still, this is too easy. “Really, first base with him, and you’re climaxing? This isn’t… I don’t know, you’re not trying to sell us on it? We get you like it, but… This isn’t some sort of positive reinforcement thing? This is real?”

Abby looks from Tim to Jimmy, and then scoots her hand into Tim’s jeans, giving him a nice, warm squeeze, and he rocks into her hand, enjoying it. “What’ll happen to you if Breena and I make out slow and deep and you don’t try to keep yourself in check? Come on, you’ve gotten off twice already and had a ton of wine.” Another gentle squeeze. “You think we don’t know what’s getting you up right now?”

Okay, yeah, that’s a good point. Watching them’s not going to get him off, because watching can’t get him off, but… It’ll drive him crazy.

Jimmy’s less interested in analyzing why this works, and much more interested in working it. He hooks his arm around Tim’s neck and drags him back into the kiss, and yes, about five minutes later Breena’s sounding awfully happy, too.

There’s more dancing, and more kissing, and hands and fingers and tongues and lips and arms and legs all touching and stroking each other. There’s clothing slipping off, one piece at a time.

There are moments Tim remembers very clearly, exquisite images that burn into his mind, like Abby and Breena kissing each other around his dick. He will never, ever forget that. Soft hair in each of his hands and beautiful women with wet soft tongues lapping all over him, and each other. He remembers Breena riding him, and Abby licking her off, Jimmy behind her, all of them moving slow and easy, and because with the lights on and the sun down, the solarium turns into a huge mirror, he could see everything from every angle.

Dancing with Breena and Jimmy while Abby filmed it. Slow, lazy music. She’d face him for a few beats, both of them rocking together, her breasts in his hands as the beat set their tempo. Then she slipped off him, turning, facing Jimmy, kissing him as they take a few slow beats with a few slow thrusts, and turning back again.

He can remember the music getting a little faster, and kissing Jimmy over her shoulder as the three of them grind together. And how, toward the end of that song, he honestly wasn’t sure which one of them was fucking her, just that it was wet and slippery and she was coming between them, all pink and beautiful.

He remembers watching Jimmy slip the last of the dilators into Abby, her gorgeous body all spread open, getting ready for them.

And better than that, he remembers the feel of her lips on his, her hands in his hair, his hands on her breasts as Breena knelt and explored her pussy with fingers and tongue.

There’s a sound, Abby’s voice crying out as Breena’s soft little tongue licked her pussy. He’s never going to forget that, though he’ll probably try to limit remembering it to places where it’s appropriate to have a hard on.
He’s on his back, kissing… God, by that point he wasn’t entirely sure, probably Breena because he can remember Abby saying she was ready, and then straddling him, slipping down his dick. He knows he groaned at that, feeling her all smooth and wet and hot and perfect on him.

The kiss breaks, and he opens his eyes. Yep, Breena. Abby leans forward against him, and he remembers what she’s getting ready for. He’s kissing her, eager to get to what happens next, happy to stay in this moment of almost there.

The first time he fantasized about being the guy at the bottom of the pile, Jimmy wasn’t in the fantasy, beyond the fact that thinking about it with Jimmy as the guy at the bottom of the pile is what set the idea in his mind.

The second time was really fuzzy. He was hurting, and on a lot of meds, and not feeling very sexy, so Jimmy was the guy on the bottom of the pile, and he was mostly just watching, getting off (mentally at least) on how much fun everyone looked like they were having.

This time, he’s on the bottom of the pile, having an absolute blast.

He’s kissing Abby, and she’s kneeling over him, leaning as far forward as she can, wiggling a little in an invitation to Jimmy. Tim glances to the side, catching the sight in the mirror glass of the solarium, and Jimmy is behind Abby, right now just looking at her and petting her butt.

He can see Breena’s kneeling next to him, slicking him up, making sure he’s all ready, too. Probably making sure she’s got a good view of this, too.

And this time, the feel of Jimmy slipping in, because once again, he can feel it, is amazing. It’s not as intense, because it’s not skin on skin, but there’s still a very distinct sensation of motion and pressure, and that’s still all sorts of awesome.

Once he’s set, and Abby’s comfortable, she raises up, and Breena straddles his face. And, God, this is just… No words for how good this is. They’re all falling short.

This is full body, full brain, full heart sex.

This is transcendent sex. He’s hit it a few times before with Abby. And he’s here again now, where bodies are so suffused with pleasure they almost fall away, and there’s just glorious pulsing love and bliss.

It’s that moment when sex shifts, and it’s not about getting off. Though that happens. Possibly twice, he knows he got off once, but didn’t feel like stopping when that happened, so he didn’t, and later there was this… moment… (he's got no idea how long it actually lasted) of… joy, (that's probably the best word he'll find for it,) all over joy, and by then orgasms almost seemed beside the point, by then it was all about communion of bodies and minds and souls, and it’s all wrapped up in exquisite sensations that never seem to end.

Though, of course, they do. Because everything does.

But for a few heartbeats they, and this feeling, and all of the love and history and joy that binds them, is eternal.

And that's all the heaven Tim will ever need.
It’s still dark when pain pulls Tim out of his sleep.

He doesn’t want to move. He likes where he is. He’s very, very happy with Abby in front of him and… Warm bodies behind. He can feel smooth legs against his back, breathing against his calf, soft hair on his foot, and stubble on his heel.

Breena and Jimmy are cuddling each other, and apparently his lower half.

So, he doesn’t want to move, at all. He wants to be right here, in the middle, warm and snug, and… not comfortable, at all. He can feel all of the leftover shit from his fight, each break, all of the dislocated joints, he’s just aching all over.

So he drags himself out of bed, hoping he’s not waking everyone up, and goes in search of the little bottle of Aleve that’s his bestest buddy these days.

It lasts for twelve hours. Last thing he does before brushing his teeth is take two of them. Then he makes sure the bottle’s on his bedside table and he’s got fresh water in the glass. First thing he does waking up is take two more.

Down from last week’s three and three. But he’s not pain meds free, not even close.

He’s staggering toward the bathroom. (His left foot is sending him irate messages about not wanting to support his weight.) They didn’t brush teeth last night. So, no meds, since yesterday morning, probably getting onto 20 hours now, and he’s hurting.

Sometimes he forgets how hurt he was. Sometimes he feels normal. There are even, on occasion, moments where he thinks he’s better, healed, all he needs to do is keep regaining strength. He grabs the bottle and shakes out three of the pills. His right hand shrieks at that, because he’s asking it to hold something.

He’s not all healed. It’s not just a matter of more working on it.

He swallows the pills.

Still got miles to go.

He hits the bed, and snuggles in close to Abby’s back. Miles to go, and miles already covered, he reminds himself. He kisses her shoulder and wraps around her. His last thought before drifting off again is that he’s got the right team for getting to the end of this journey.

There’s light slanting in on them the second time he wakes up.

He’s sore this time, too, but this is good sore. This is rode hard and put away wet sore. This is completely fucked out on every level you can be fucked out, sore. And, he supposes, on a universal scale, pain is pain is pain, but he feels like he earned this, in a very enjoyable way, and he’s happy to have it.

He’s on the outside now. Abby’s in his arms, and he’s got one hand flat on Breena’s hip. Jimmy’s on
her other side, out of reach.

He sighs a little, burrowing in closer to Abby, enjoying her skin against his.

He closes his eyes and dozes, not really awake or asleep, just floating in bed with his loves.

The third time he wakes up, it really is morning. Everyone else is moving around a bit, too. He can hear birds, and the light’s no longer slanting in, it’s beating down on them, full on daylight bright.

It’s Monday morning. They’ve got to get the keys back to the rental place by noon. And they’ve got to clean everything up, get packed. Eating would be good.

He’s not sure what time it is, but he doesn’t care. They’re all starting to shift around, moving toward today, and the end of this weekend.

“Let’s just stay, just… another minute or two.”

He feels Breena’s hand find his and give him a little squeeze, and Jimmy pats his hip.

From where he is, his visual world has narrowed down to the curve of Abby’s shoulder, her neck, the edge of the spider web tattoo, her hair, and sunlight bright on all of it.

There’s a small bruise on her shoulder, love bite, and he gently lays his lips on it. Given where it is, he’s thinking that it’s from Jimmy.

His right arm is under her neck, and from what he can feel, Breena’s calf is in his palm. He strokes his thumb over her shin bone, and extending his fingers slightly rubs the back of them against some bit of Jimmy’s leg. He can’t see what part of his leg, and only knows it’s Jimmy’s leg by the feel of the hair.

A smooth, and small, foot, gently rubs his knuckles.

His left hand rests on Abby’s belly for a few seconds, then he reaches forward, stroking Breena’s side. He tries to touch Jimmy, but he’s out of range. And then he’s not, both of them scoot a little closer, and Tim’s able to wrap his hand around Jimmy’s side.

He feels a kiss to his calf, stubbly, must be Jimmy, and then a warm hand on the back of his knee.

And for a moment, they lay there, holding each other, putting off the real world a few seconds longer.

But, the real world doesn’t go away.

As the least talented cook of the crew, Tim’s on cleaning up. First job, open windows and doors. The cabin has a very distinct aroma right now, and it’s probably not something the people who rent it out want greeting the next guests.

Packing things up to go home is likely easier than packing to head off. He’s got two piles: McGee
Laundry and Palmer Laundry. Each one of them will get a bag of things to immediately toss into the washing machine upon getting home.

Jimmy takes over on getting the mattresses rolled up after he’s got the air out of them. From there it’s just packing everything they don’t need for shower time/getting dressed and stuffing it into the van.

Like most of the rest of the weekend, they aren’t dressed for breakfast. Tim approves of that, and of the various nips and bruises they’re all wearing.

If the idea is that when hands that love you touch you, they should leave a mark, they’re all marked.

Abby’s got a few bites on her neck and shoulder, little, dark pink finger marks that’ll be gone by tonight on her hip. Tim knows the finger marks are his, and that Breena’s got matching ones on her other hip. He’d had his left hand on Breena and his right on Abby, and he’d clenched his fingers hard when he got off.

He hasn’t looked at himself too carefully, but he can feel the scrapes on his back and thigh (Breena’s nails, probably), and he can see the hickey on his chest (Abby, definitely).

Jimmy’s got a dozen bites all up and down his thighs and a few on his chest. Sometime last night Abby and Breena remembered he likes that. Tim can see the image of one of them biting while the other rode him, and switching, and Jimmy with his head back, eyes closed, whimpering and cursing at how good that felt to him.

And they all have pinker, slightly swollen lips, from many, many, many kisses, hard and soft and every pressure in between.

Quiet ride home. They aren’t tired, not the way they were on the ride out, this is more… content.

It’s the space between leaving something adored, and going back to something treasured. They want their girls and their jobs and friends and lives, and they want that break from the rest of life, where they could just play with each other.

“Uh…” Tim says as they turn into his neighborhood.

“Uh?” Jimmy asks. He’s driving, wondering what they could have left behind.

“Not like that. Just… if the last week wasn’t a hint, all four of us coming home, and that pile of laundry is sure as hell going to spell everything out for Heather.”

“Yeah.” Abby nods, so…”Trust and hope for the best?”

“Or I can pull a quick u-turn, take us back to our place, and you can grab your car and transfer
“everything into it,” Jimmy adds. “You’ve got to get your car sooner or later, so…”

“Was hoping you’d drive it to work tomorrow and I’d give you a lift home,” Tim says.

Jimmy nods at that. “Decide quick, your street is next.”

“Trust,” Abby says it. “We give this woman our child every day.”

Tim nods. “Okay.”

Heather looks up from her book when Tim, Abby, Jimmy, and Breena, all lugging stuff, head in.

“Hey! Good vacation?” She sounds genuine on that.

“Yeah! It really was. She’s napping, isn’t she?” Tim asks.

“Just went down, like fifteen minutes ago. You want a hand?”

Jimmy shakes his head, dropping one of the bags right in front of the washing machine. “That’s all of their stuff.”

They stand around for a moment, because there’s not much reason for Jimmy and Breena to still be there, but Heather’s also there, and this was a lot easier when they were all sort of exhausted and fried and not really thinking. Then Abby steps to Breena and hugs and kisses her, and then Jimmy. “See you tomorrow!”

Jimmy nods, “Yeah.” He hugs and kisses Tim, and Breena does likewise.

They walk Jimmy and Breena to their car, no hugs or kisses out here on the street, though Abby squeezes Jimmy’s hand where it’s resting on the open window of his van.

“Back to the grind tomorrow,” she says.

Jimmy and Breena nod. She glances back at the house. “Think there’ll be any problems?”

Abby shakes her head. “Nah.”

They spend another moment, just standing/sitting there, because once Jimmy and Breena pull out of the driveway the weekend is really over, and none of them want that. But, just standing there is silly, so Jimmy sets his key in the ignition, and off they go.

When they get in Heather, who does their laundry as part of her job, is poking at the laundry pile, starting to sort things.

“Oh, God, no! Don’t worry about… We’ve got that,” Tim’s saying fast.
Heather straightens up. “Look, I’m not going to turn down you guys doing the wash, but… you pay me to do this.” She looks from Tim to Abby, and then says, “And, I’m not so sheltered that I don’t have a pretty good idea what you four were up to, so…”

Abby’s shooing her away from the laundry, as Tim’s chucking it into the machine. “There’s knowing and then there’s knowing.”

“And you don’t need quite that much detail,” Abby finishes.

Heather shrugs. “However you like. But… You’re the people who asked me to strip your bed and wash your sheets every Monday and Thursday, in addition to the rest of your laundry… So…”

“You’re looking for a gentle way to tell us we’re being silly?” Tim asks, as he joins them in the kitchen.

She nods a bit. “Not saying I don’t mind skipping the messy stuff, but you guys don’t have a lot of secrets from me. Only difference between now and last week is that I’ve got faces to go with the new toiletries in the bathroom, and a sinking suspicion that those jockey shorts aren’t actually yours,” she says to Tim, who nods.

Tim and Abby glance at each other. “Yeah, well, you know, that’s fine, but the outside world that’s a secret,” Tim says.

Heather looks non-plussed and grabs the cup of coffee she’d been working on. She glances around the McGee’s kitchen with want me to get you something? on her face. She sees them both shake their heads and says, “Everything about you guys is a secret for me. Not that anyone’s asking, but I wouldn’t talk about what sort of coffee you like, let alone anything else. The only thing we ever talk about, and only to the Agency, is if it’s a safe job or not.”

Tim and Abby are both looking at her curiously.

“Safe how?” Tim asks.

“Any sort. Everything from Dad thinks that sleeping with him is part of the job to there’s a Meth lab in the basement. Shady business stuff. Crime stuff. Even Mafia people need nannies.”

“So, we’re what? No big deal?” Tim asks.

Heather shrugs again. “Compared to some of my previous jobs…” She laughs a little. "This is a great job. I love Kelly. Neither of you are annoying to me, and you’re not angry with each other and using me or Kelly as a pawn to hurt one another. And you both know where the line between my job and not my job is.” She looks at Tim. “My first job, I was on my own, no agency, and I got to deal with the fun of ‘Is my self-respect worth more than being able to pay my rent this month.’ Followed by the joy of ‘get fired by Dad for telling Mom he’s cheating on her,’ or ‘get fired by Mom for not telling her Dad’s cheating on her.’

“So, look, I think people belong in pairs instead of quads, but you four want to play musical spouses, more power to you. Not like swinging’s uncommon around here. And compared to some of my past jobs, this isn’t even a blip on the radar.”

Well, that was a whole lot Tim and Abby didn’t know about the life of the professional nanny. Or, apparently, this area. Now they’re wondering about their neighbors.

“You didn’t know that?” Now Heather’s looking curious.
“Uh… No.” Tim says.

“It’s not like owning a Prius or shopping at Whole Foods, but, this kind of area, at least one family per neighborhood’s doing it. You know what key parties are?”

Tim and Abby both nod, glancing at each other, and then back to Heather.

Heather just looks at them.

Tim and Abby nod at each other again. It’s fairly clear neither of them really wants to know more about what sort of antics the neighbors might be getting up to.

“Okay, then,” Abby says. “We’re both home for the rest of the day, so, if you want to take off early…”

Heather thinks about that. “Actually, yeah. I’ve got some errands of my own I wouldn’t mind getting done.”

When Heather heads off, Tim turns on the washing machine, and then both he and Abby creep up to Kelly’s nursery.

She’s sleeping. Thumb in her mouth, laying on her tummy, eyes closed.

“Missed you.” Tim mouths to her. Abby very gently lays her hand on Kelly’s back as Tim kisses her hair. Then they creep back out. When she wakes up will be soon enough for hugs and kisses and playing.

Laundry is washing. Tim grabs the mattresses and tucks them back into the basement. Abby puts the sex toys back. Okay, unpacking’s done.

Monday afternoon. Probably two hours until Kelly wakes up. They’re standing around their bedroom. Abby’s eyeing the bed, debating a nap. She’s not really tired, but she’s also not feeling much desire to do anything else right now.

Tim’s also stuck in a sort of… ‘Now what?’ kind of place.

Abby lays down, so he does, too, wrapping around her, kissing her gently.

“Feels a little empty, doesn’t it?” Abby says.

“Yeah.” He thinks about that for a second. “Not that here with you isn’t—“

“Tim…“

“Yeah?”

“I get it. I love being here with you. And I love being with them. And best of all, I love being with you and them.”
He nods at that. Abby’s holding his hand in hers, rubbing her finger over his cuff. That makes an idea hit. “Two hours until she’s up?”

“Probably.”

“Monday afternoon. I bet Sam’s got an open slot. If he can take me, you mind if I get the kiss marks done?”

Abby shakes her head. “Kind of want to go with you.”

“Get your own kiss marks?”

“Yeah.”

“Then all the more reason for me to go on my own. No need to tempt you. Not with Sean along for the ride.”

Abby nods. “Yeah. I know they say it’s safe…”

“Yeah. I know. Let’s not test it.” He kisses her again. “So…”

“Yeah, give Sam a call. Come back with some pretty new kisses.”

“So, what are we doing today?” Sam asks.

“Today,” Tim fishes out his phone and shows Sam the shots of the kisses on his wrist.

Sam nods. He doesn’t talk a whole lot, just looks at the pictures and nods some more. Tim appreciates not having to explain who those kisses belong to or how they ended up on his wrist. Though, as he thinks about that, he kind of wants to, too.

But all Sam says is, “These the colors you want?”

“Yeah. Also want to talk to you some about adding more bands to my leg cuff.” Sam knows that the finished version of that dragon will cover his whole calf.

“How many?”

“Four. Not today. Not all at once. And I’d like to have room for more of them when they’re done. But, I want four more knots, like Kelly’s but different colors and different patterns.”

Sam nods at that, too. He knows what the Dragon means, and he’s not blind, so he can see Tim’s got several new scars from the last time he saw him. He knows the history behind Tim’s tattoos, and knows he doesn’t get them just for kicks.

He knows something has changed, something major, but Sam doesn’t ask, because Sam’s not the guy who asks.

He’s the guy who finds a sheet of paper and starts working on the transfer for the kisses. He sketches for a few seconds and then says, “The two new ones cover a lot of the old one. Want me to overlap them so each one covers one corner of the other?” He shows Tim the sketch, and how Jimmy’s kiss
goes over the right corner of Abby’s and under the right corner of Breena’s, and how Breena’s left is under Abby’s left.

They loop together, each one supporting the others.

Tim nods. “Yeah, I like that.”

An hour later, Tim’s driving home, his wrist very sore. Instead of his usual cuff, he’s got a cuff of soft cotton gauze and surgical tape.

At a red light he’s stopped. His wrist is throbbing away with his pulse, letting him know that it really doesn’t like this whole tattooing thing much.

He tells it to shut up. He does.

Both hands on the wheel. His left is wearing the gauze cuff. On his right, he can see the scars from the fight, both in the shape of his hand which isn’t quite what it used to be, and also the literal scars on his wrist and hand from where they had to cut him open to put his carpals back in place.

His body is marked.

The scars… the marks of lives he didn’t want touching his. Those are pain and anger and rage beaten into his flesh. The cost of being the man he wanted to be.

He glances at himself in the rearview mirror. The white hairs, not a lot of them, but they’re there, and the wrinkles starting around his eyes and forehead, that’s time. That’s days passed and his life lived, and… he may not love them, but he’s earned them.

But the tattoos, they’re his. They’re his choices. The people he’s collected and brought into his life. They’re the marks of his loves, and the marks of the man he wanted to become. Every important change in his life has been marked with ink.

And if those marks sting… becoming the man he wants to be isn’t easy, either.

What’d Breena say? “They don’t write songs about the ones that come easy?”

He flips his wrist over. Not just the symbol of his loves, but of being the man who could have those loves. It didn’t come easy, but it’s been worth it.

When he gets home, Abby’s dozing, and Kelly still is, too. But she won’t be for long. So he heads to her room, sits down on the rocking chair, gently easing back and forth, and waits for her to wake up.
She does a few minutes later, and he picks her up, snuggling her close. She’s still drowsy, happy to cuddle and rest on him.

He holds her close, hogging the baby snuggles, rocking her back and forth, feeling fine wisps of baby silk hair on his chin, and the warmth of a sleepy person on his chest and in his arms.

Eventually, she wakes up some more, and he gets her cleaned up, and off to go snuggle with Abby they go.

“Look who’s up!”

Abby’s stretches a little, blinking, looking almost surprised. He’s guessing she slept a lot deeper than she expected. “Kelly!”

“MAMA!” Kelly’s reaching out for Abby’s so he puts her on the bed and wraps around both of them, getting lots of hugs and kisses in.

“You get it done?” Abby asks as she’s holding Kelly, lips pressed to the top of her head, hugging her close.

Tim takes off the bandage, showing it to her.


Kelly looks, but really doesn’t care, she just wants Mama and Daddy cuddles, and Mama and Daddy are happy to provide them.
All jobs have rhythms and flows, things that happen every day. “The Routine” for lack of a better term.

Breena’s ready for today to not be “The Routine.” Mostly because she was out Friday and Monday, both of which she normally works, which means there might be more than a bit of overtime waiting for her.

Her customers don’t much care one way or another when she manages to get to them. Their next of kin do, quite a bit.

She knows they’ve got a viewing at ten, another at noon, one at twelve thirty, and then two at three. And then the Mrs. Meyer’s, the 10:00, has a second viewing at 5:00, and one other person at 6:00. That’s a packed day for them. Usually she’s got her part of it done by 1:00, but she’s fairly sure she’s going to be getting people dressed and made up all day today.

She’s running the day in her mind as she pulls into her usual spot. Her mom’s car is next to hers; it’s unusual but not unheard of for Jeannie to get in before she does. Big day today, so she’s probably making sure everything is ready to run smooth.

Door’s unlocked, so she just heads on in and gets to work. Mrs. Meyers is waiting; time to get her ready to go.

Both of her parents head down. “Good weekend?” Jeannie asks.

Breena’s nodding as she rolls Mrs. Meyers to the table. “Yeah, it really was. Dad, you gonna give me a hand?”

“Sure, honey.”

She expects a certain level of “What did you do?” “Where did you go?” etc… etc… But her parents aren’t really talking, and she’s paying attention to Mrs. Meyers. She and Ed going through the motions, a well-oiled machine at work. They do this probably a thousand times a year; they’ve got it down.

Eventually, as she’s getting her makeup palette out, she notices that her Mom is still down with them, and her parents keep glancing at each other, like they’re expecting something.

Breena starts to feel a little cold, unsure of what’s going on. There’s just no shot at all that they know what was up this weekend. They just don’t. She’s supposes it’s possible that someone saw them, recognized them, caught what they were up to in the Sushi place, then immediately called her parents to tell on them, but… No. That’s a plot to a soap opera, not real life.

She looks up at her mom and dad. “Okay, what’s going on? You’re both staring, and this isn’t so interesting as to have you down here, Mom.”

Jeannie shakes her head. “She didn’t see it.”

“So much for the great surprise.” Ed’s looking a little put out.

“You can only see it for a second if you come in the back,” Jeannie says.
“Which I do every morning. What’s up?”

“Go look at the front of the building,” Jeannie says.

Breena’s tempted to say, “Right now?” Today’s a busy day, and gawking at the building doesn’t strike her as a good use of time, but both of her parents are doing a bad job of not smiling, so there’s something out there they want her to see.

“Okay.” The front of Slater’s is at ground level, so is the back. However, the back entrance goes into the basement, where she works, and the front, which is one floor up, (her grandfather intentionally bought land that had a hill on it) goes into the foyer, and branches off into two viewing rooms, a show room, and Jeannie’s office.

So, up the steps, through the building, and to the front she goes. She can’t see it from the inside so, whatever it is is on the front of the building. Out the door, and onto the small grassy courtyard with the weeping willows and stone benches. (Always a good plan to have a place where people can stand or sit comfortably outside.) From there she can see the front easily, and seeing it, her jaw drops.

She’s blinking hard when her parents join her.

“Do you like it?” Jeannie asks.

“I… I didn’t… Yes! God, yes! But… Dad?” It’s rare that something, especially a kind something, completely floors Breena, but right now, she’s completely floored.

He smiles and shrugs a bit. “It’s more than half yours now, so your name should be on the front.”

Breena blinks again, staring up at the sign. When she left on Thursday it had said Slaters’ Funeral Home. Today it reads, Palmer & Slater’s Funeral Home.

She hugs both of them. “You planned this for when I was away?”

Her mom smiles. “That was just luck. New ad copy, stationary, all of it’s been ordered. We’ll use up the old stuff.” Breena nods at that, never waste anything you’ve already paid for. “But, in the next year, everything will have your name on it.”

Ed kisses her. “And in five years or so, when you’ve finished buying us out, it’ll just be Palmer’s.”

“Good morning Dr. Palmer,” Allan says as he steps into the Morgue.

“Morning, Dr. Allan,” Jimmy replies, sitting at the desk, looking over the work of the long weekend.

“You look like you’re in a sunshiny mood. Must have been a very good vacation.”

Jimmy nods, and then glances at the work in front of him. “Yes, it was. However, I’m ‘sunshiny,’ as you put it, because everything is up to date and in perfect order, and I’m extremely pleased to see I could go on vacation for a long weekend and come back to find you’ve held down the fort admirably.”
“Thank you.” Allan nods, taking that as his due. Then he inclines his head slightly, pointing out the mitigating factor. “Granted, without any guests, it’s not that difficult of a job.”

Jimmy inclines his head, looking at his very clear desk. There are only three folders on it right now. Once upon a time, there would have been at least fifty, and a ream of loose paper, too. The paperwork alone used to fill each no-guest day, but, that’s not part of the load now, so Dr. Allan is likely correct about it not being a terribly difficult job.

“I noticed that Director and Mrs. McGee were also out on vacation. Was that just happenstance, or did you go together?” Allan asks, hanging up his jacket and unpacking the coffees he’s brought for both of them.

Jimmy nod. “Thank you,” taking the coffee, using drinking some as an excuse not to answer. He’s feeling a little wary with this line of questioning, because he knows Allan sees a lot more than he’d like him to. (He’s already noticed the new ring, but hasn’t mentioned it, though Jimmy’s guessing a ‘yet’ should go at the end of that sentence.) Still, no shame. And keep your answers short and don’t blather! “We did go together. Abby and Breena wanted to do something nice for us, before Sean’s on the outside and lounging around at the lake time vanishes.”

“Ah.” Allan sits down, sipping his own coffee. “But Agents DiNozzo didn’t go?”

“No, they didn’t.”

Allan looks perplexed by that. “I thought the six of you tended to stick together.”

*Shit. Okay, why didn’t Tony and Ziva go?* “We do. But CGIS is keeping Ziva busy and close to home. Gibbs and Agent Borin didn’t go with us, either, though they usually come along, too.”

“And Doctors Mallard and Langston…”

“Someone had to stay home and take care of babies. If you ever have children, you’ll rapidly learn that you love time with them, and that you adore time *without* them.”

Allan nods at that. “My parents used to basically skip out of the house the one weekend a season my grandparents would watch us.”

“Exactly.”

Allan’s eyeing the ring, and looks like he’s about to ask, but is cut short when Jimmy’s phone rings. He grabs it. “Uh huh… Okay… Yes, we’ll be there in an hour.”

“A guest?”

Jimmy’s pulling up Google maps, finding out where they’re going. “Unfortunately.”

“Then I’ll get the van ready to go.”

“Thank you, Dr. Allan.”
“New ring, Dr. Palmer?” Allan asks a few seconds into the drive.

“Yes.” His thumb slips over it. “Belated wedding present.”

Allan nods, thinking. “So, a romantic weekend?”

Jimmy snorts a bit at that. “As much as possible with four people.” He’s actually quite pleased with that answer.

Allan nods, and Jimmy sees that Allan does not appear to be at all mislead by that answer.

“How’s it look, Jimmy?” Tony asks a minute after he and Allan see the bodies.

Jimmy sighs, surveilling the scene. They’re right in front of the door to a small apartment. He’s not even sure if he can set foot into the apartment. Right now, he, Allan, and Tony are all hovering in the hallway, leading to that door, looking in, while Bishop and Draga are inside, hugging the walls.

“Like a bloody mess.”

Allan nods, quiet, debating the best path to even try and get to the bodies without disturbing the scene. “Dr. Allan, we’re going to need…” Jimmy’s not sure, he sees three heads… “Let’s say all four of the body bags. We’ll sort them out later.” He looks at Tony, questions all over his face.

“Neighbors called this morning. Heard a fight,” Tony’s delivery is beyond dry and verging on Saharan.

“A fight?” Jimmy stares at the butchery in front of him. “There are three heads in there,” he does a quick count, “And I can see seven hands from here.” And he can only see the foyer and living room. God knows what’s in the rest of this mess. “There are apartments on all sides, and they heard ‘a fight?’”

Tony nods. “Yeah.” That ‘yeah’ covers a whole lot of territory.

“Boss?”

“Yeah, Draga?”

Draga’s about three feet along the wall to the left. Just past the door, taking pictures and blood spatter samples. “This isn’t blood. I think it’s,” He’s got a red smear on his glove fingertip. He takes a tentative sniff, and then licks, wincing while he does it, “This is corn syrup.”

Jimmy looks at his feet, and then crouches down. He touches the pool of blood six inches in front of his booties. “This is not corn syrup. Given coagulation and oxidation levels, this has been sitting here for at least six hours. When did you get the call?”

“LEO’s were here two hours ago. They opened the door, saw the mess, noticed the apartment was leased to the Navy, and called us,” Tony replies, checking his notes.

“Leased to the Navy?” Bishop asks. She’s four feet in, also getting pictures of the scene and spatter
samples. She doesn’t look willing to take a lick or sniff to see if her spatters are real blood.

“Yeah.” Tony nods. “Once we’re done processing, that’s your first job. Find out who is supposed to be in here.”

“Okay, I’ve got the bags.” Allan says, three more bags tucked under his arm.

“Wonderful.” Jimmy takes the bags, stacking them on the gurney. “I also want you to grab the blood testing kits. I want to make sure this is human.”

Allan looks confused. Draga points to the bit of wall next to him. “Spatter here is corn syrup.”

Allan glances at the floor. “But that’s definitely blood. And…” he inhales, they all know that scent, blood and feces and urine, “there’s at least one dead person—“

“One dead thing,” Jimmy corrects. “None of us have gotten close enough to make sure those really are bodies.”

“Smells like recent death.”

“You are correct Dr. Allan, but all mammals loose their bowels when they die. We don’t know how staged this is, yet.”

Allan nods at him, understanding that, since some of this is staged, Jimmy’s hoping this mess isn’t all made of people. “As you say, Doctor. I’ll get the test kits.”

Tony and Jimmy look at each other. Tony’s not allowed to mess with the bodies, including any pieces of the bodies, until Jimmy’s done with them. Jimmy’s got to get to the bodies without messing up Tony’s crime scene. As of this point, no one’s been able to get more than four feet into the foyer.

“Block it into a grid, take test samples of everything for Abby, collect all the… parts as we go along, and when we’ve got the apartment done, back we all go?” Tony says.

Jimmy nods. “I think that’s how this’ll go. Let’s get to it.”

“You heard the Doc,” Tony says to Bishop and Draga.

____________________________________

Emails, emails, emails… One thing never ends, every day there are more emails. Tim’s hacking his way through them when his phone buzzes.

“McGee.”

“Got a few minutes to spare?”

“Sure, Leon. Right now or in a bit?”

“The sooner the better. I have Lester Hue in my office, and he’d like to talk to you.”

Tim nods, no ideas at all as to whom Lester Hue might be. “Okay… Um…”

“The man in charge of making sure all Navy Veterans get their pension benefits.”
Tim doesn’t know what’s up, but if this guy’s asking for him, it’s got to be big. “I’ll be up in five.”

Lester’s a civilian. Tim gets that in a flash. He’s a small, precise, tidy, middle-aged black man in a good, but not particularly fashionable, suit. Call central casting and ask for an accountant, and Lester’ll show up and rock the part.

And, as Tim’s figuring that out about Lester, Lester is eyeing him, deciding if Tim looks like the computer guy he needs. Tim’s not sure how much he looks the part, but he’s not getting any sense from Lester that he disapproves, so they get down to it.

“Lester is here to report something that might be a crime,” Leon starts the ball rolling.

“Might be?” Tim asks.

“Might be,” Lester says with a sigh. “You have to understand, we handle millions of payments every month. Every retired sailor or their surviving spouses get money from us every two weeks.”

Tim nods, he grasps the scale of this.

“Normally, this sort of thing doesn’t get up to my level. Normally we just fix it at the individual level and that’s that.”

Okay, that’s great and all, but… “Let’s start with what ‘it’ is,” Tim says.

“Little fees. But, we’re not pulling them out. The banks swear they aren’t doing it. Every round of payments, we’re seeing about a hundred thousand tiny little fees charged to our Vets. They’re all less than two bucks. The only reason we even know about it is that they keep getting the wrong guys. A lot of these older retirees still go through their finances with a fine tooth comb, and if a buck fifty three is missing, they call us up and fuss about it.

“So, every month, we get a few thousand calls from different Vets fussing about the missing money. We put it back, and that’s that.

“We’ve been ‘putting back’ enough money over the last year that it’s starting to make some of the accounts skew, which is how some of my guys decided to see how many people were getting hit with these ‘fees’ and when the number got into the hundreds of thousands, this got up to me, and now I’m here with you.”

Tim nods, and glances to Leon. “Okay. So… why are you not sure if this is a crime?”

Hue shrugs. “It’s possible it’s just some sort of screw up. They happen. Something wrong in the code or something.” He stares directly at Tim. Tim knows there’s a message there, but not entirely sure what. “It’s all automated. But, it doesn’t happen to the same Vets over and over. One bunch of guys will get hit one pay period, then a new bunch next one. We know it’s been going on for at least a year. So, probably, someone’s skimming.”

Tim nods at that, too. That’s a headache, still… figure out where those fees are going and that should be the end of the headache and the answer to what sort of problem this is. “So… You might want the Forensic Accountants in on this. Don’t get me wrong, I can hack this, but they’re the guys who are better at tracking where the money’s going.”
Leon and Hue glance at each other. There’s a lot of weight in that glance.

“Our own accountants tell me that they need help, computer help, getting the guy who’s taking it.” Hue looks at Leon, and then to Tim. “And Leon tells me that you’re the guy for that.”

Tim thinks for a second, knowing there’s a few extra layers of conversation going on that he’s not part of. Then he thinks for another second, it’s September. A few thousand guys call, they get a few bucks put back each, call it ten thousand a month, nine months… That’s not even a rounding error. No one noticed this because the accounts weren’t balancing, not for something as big as the Navy Pension fund.

“You handle, what, hundreds of millions of dollars a month?” Tim asks.

“More,” Hue replies, staring him dead in the eyes.

“And you’re thinking…”

“From what we can tell, we’re losing about a million a month on this.”

This is getting brought up now, to him, for a reason. And Tim can think of one reason why this might be in his lap. He glances at Leon. Leon doesn’t nod, but his look is loud and clear.

“I’m the guy for this job.”

When Hue leaves, Tim says to Leon, “We’re keeping this in house this time, right?”

Leon nods. “You, me, give Borin a heads up and check her accounts for it, too. There’s got to be at least twenty or thirty thousand retired Coast Guard out there. Talk to her in person, when you see her next. Don’t go out of your way to see her. Voice to voice, in private, and only in the course of regular events. Nothing gets written down, texted, tweeted, or whatever on this.”

Tim nods. “You think this is part of CGIS’s mystery accounts?”

Leon nods back. “When those accounts vanished, both Director Borin and Ms. Anderson.” It takes Tim a second to remember that’s the name Diane is using now, “asked me to put out some discrete feelers. I set out some extremely discrete feelers. Less than two weeks later, this ends up in our lap. It’s part of the puzzle, or it’ll lead us in that direction.”

“Okay. Leon… Million a month, that’s big money for us, but…”

Leon knows how big his operating budget is, and he knows exactly how little a million a month buys. “I know. Whatever this is, it’s intentionally small to keep people from noticing it.”

Tim’s phone buzzes and he checks it. Text from Breena with a picture. That’ll hold for later.

“You need to get that?” Leon asks.

“Not now, family stuff. Do you know Hue personally?”

“No.” Leon’s eyeing Tim’s wrist cuff, or, more specifically, the little bit of visible bandage below it, but he doesn’t ask, so Tim doesn’t volunteer.
“Can I ask who you put those feelers out to?”

“Yes,” Leon’s eyes flick away from the cuff to Tim’s eyes, “but I’m not answering.”

“All right. Let me get on it.”

“McGee, given how small this is, it strikes me as entirely possible that this isn’t the target, but that this will have hints of what the real target is.”

Tim sighs. “Plans within plans within plans.”

“Exactly.”

“You picked an excellent day not to be on vacation!” Corwin says to Abby as Bishop and Allan wheel in the first two carts of evidence.

Abby and the other techs stare at it. “Is that all of it?”

Bishop laughs dryly. “Tony, Draga, and Dr. Palmer are still back there collecting more of it.”

Allan nods. “We ran out of room in the van. That’s why we’re back. I’ve got to get the first three body bags taken care of, and bring more bags back.”

Abby winces. “How bad is it?”

Bishop shrugs, trying to look cool. Not only has she never seen anything this bad, she’s never imagined it. Her words are somewhat upbeat, her voice isn’t. “The only upside is that, at least some of it is fake.”

“Two of the hands and one of the heads were mock ups,” Allan adds. “Unfortunately, one of the heads and three hands weren’t.”

“One of the heads?” Corwin asks.

Allan nods. “We’re not sure about the third one, yet.”

“How can you not be sure?” Corwin asks.

“We know it’s a head. It’s… older than the others. Not a lot of muscle or skin still on it, so it may not be human. It’s hard to tell. We’re not sure what’s going on with it.”

“Some days I hate people,” Abby says.

Bishop nods. “It gets worse. Draga found that some of the ‘blood’ is corn syrup.”

“And I found that some of it isn’t human.”

“But some of it is?” Abby asks.

“Yes,” Allan replies.
“Okay,” she’s staring at the sealed evidence bags, snapping on her gloves. “Let’s get to it.”

“So, how’d the weekend go?” Tony asks Jimmy as they’re moving their way through the bedroom.

Jimmy knows part of this is trying to think about anything beyond what they’re doing right now. Part of it is probably curiosity. Part of it is trying to be a good friend and finding out how the weekend went.

Tony’s doing okay at all three of them, but he’s not giving off a wildly enthusiastic vibe on how the weekend went.

Jimmy puts a lump of… he thinks it’s a spleen, but, given the size, not a human spleen (Please not a human spleen! If this is a human spleen it came out of a baby, and this case is already more fucked than anything he’s worked on since the meat puzzle, and he doesn’t want it to go there.) into a small bag, while Draga makes sure that he’s got pictures of where everything was.

“Really good. We had a blast.”

Tony inclines his head. “That’s… great.”

“Yeah, it was. Winchester’s a cool little town.” Jimmy’s very aware of Draga listening to them. “Neat little shops, good restaurants.”

“Laid around, ate everything that didn’t move, shopped?” Tony asked.

“Add in floating around in the lake and sleeping late, and yeah, that’s our weekend.” Jimmy’s not sure if Draga knows who went on the trip, so he’s being careful with what he mentions. “How about you guys? Abbi still running Ziva ragged?”

“They added three new people to the ‘to be indicted’ list.”

“Splendid.” Jimmy’s happy to hear about that. Faster they get this cleaned up, the happier they’ll be.

“Oh yeah. We were all at Gibbs’ place Sunday afternoon—“

“Penny sent some pictures,” Jimmy adds.

“Gibbs and Ducky unconscious on the sofa?”

“Yep.”

“Why were they unconscious on the sofa?” Draga asks, pausing in his picture taking.

“Got run ragged by three baby girls.” Jimmy starts to move for his phone and then thinks twice on that. He’s got to take his gloves off to get to his phone and now’s not the time. “When we break for lunch, I’ll show you the shot.”

“Okay.”

“That was about ten minutes before we got there. I caught the tail end of Sarah goofing on Gibbs and Penny getting pictures of it. Those McGee women are troublemakers.”
“And you would know, right?” Jimmy says dryly.

“I would know.” Tony’s eyes light up. “I wrote the book on troublemaking. We’re going to have to keep an eye on Kelly; she’s going to be a handful when she grows up.”

Jimmy laughs. “I certainly hope so. So,” he turns to Tony’s who’s measuring another blood pool as Draga shoots it, “you’re at Gibbs place?”

“Yeah… Shit… Jimmy, hold open the bag. That’s a finger, right?”

Jimmy nods. “Looks like a distal phalange.” Draga and Tony aren’t sure what that is. “Little joint of your finger. Every one of those assholes who pulled this on Ducky the first time are still in jail, right?”

Tony shakes his head. “They’re supposed to be. Anyway, at Gibbs’ place. The Bossman’s getting his forty winks in with the girls, so Abbi, Ziva, and I get some chatting time, and the good news is they made some real headway, and the better news is their union’s backing down on requiring them to keep everyone on staff until after they’ve been convicted. Abbi’s finally getting to fire some people, which means she’s able to start hiring new people, so some of those holes in her line are going to get filled in the not too distant future.”

“Which means you get your wife back, right?” Jimmy asks.

“God, I hope so! Every minute she’s not working, she’s asleep. I think we’ve spent less than an hour awake and together since Sunday night.”

Draga laughs at that. “Welcome to life with a pregnant woman.”

Jimmy nods along. “At least she’s not throwing up on everything all the time.”

“There is that.”

Draga looks between the two men. He’s got a should I ask look on his face. But after a second, he plunges ahead. “Speaking of Ziva, and Ziva working… um… Are we going to get another team member soon?”

Tony sighs. They almost don’t need a fourth member. With as little paperwork as they’re doing, three people gets the job done. Almost. Three people just isn’t a good team size, which they all learned when it was just him, Kate, and Gibbs. The problem is, you want someone at your back. He hates sending anyone, including himself, out completely on their own. Which means they get half as much out in the field time as when they had four members, or they get just as much, but he’s got someone on solo.

Tony notices something in the upper right corner of the square he’s working on. “Got a shell casing.” That’s not an answer, but that’s all he’s got, now.

When it comes down to it, if he hires someone else, it’s done. Ziva can’t come back.

“We don’t have anyone who looks shot,” Jimmy adds.

Draga nods. “Blade wounds all over the place. No bullets.”

“Well, I’ve got a shell casing; .45 from the looks of it.” He tucks it into another bag, and Draga shoots where it was. “When we wrap this one, I’ll send word to HR, see who’s in the potential talent pool.”
Draga nods. “Good.”

Tim gets the text from Abby a little after five.

*I’ve got to work late.*

He sees that and thinks *shit.* He writes back quick, *Me, too. My office?*

As soon as Abby shuts the door she says, “I’ve got at least one murder victim and parts of two dead guys.”

Tim tries to parse that, sighs, and then says, “This is another one of those cases where you and Jimmy and Tony will tell me the details, and I’ll start googling places to live in New Zealand?” Especially since Kelly’s been born, when they get really bad cases Tim’s been thinking that maybe they don’t need to live in such a crazy world.

Abby sits down in his lap, resting her head against his. “This is the case that’d make you start thinking of volunteering to colonize Mars.”

“Shit.”

“What do you have?” Abby asks.

“On it’s surface, accounting.”

She doesn’t look impressed, but she knows that he’s telling her that what he’s doing isn’t what it seems. “Deep down?”

“It’s probably linked to *the* case.”

Abby’s eyes light up at that. “And you’re the only one working it, aren’t you?”

Tim nods. “Yeah. Just me and,” he pats his computer.

“Can you take it home?” Abby asks.

Tim nods, thinking through that. “Might be better off that I do. One of us needs to get Jimmy home.”

“Probably me. I don’t think he and Allan have gotten all the pieces back, yet.”

“Yuglhk.” Tim winces. He knows they got called out this morning, and it’s almost normal quitting time.

Abby nods. “I’ll send him a text. We’ll see if he’s going home on time with you, or late with me.”
“From what Abby was saying, I was sure you’d be working late,” Tim says as he heads into Autopsy.

Jimmy shakes his head as Allan tucks the last bag into a drawer. “They’re still going to be processing the scene tomorrow, so it’s not like they’ll need anything I can give them for at least another day. Plus, and I know this from unfortunate experience, meat puzzles work a hell of a lot better if you’re rested.”

“What did you guys walk into?” Tim asks.

Jimmy shakes his head. “I don’t know. I don’t want to know.”

Allan strips off his coveralls and tosses them into the hamper where soiled scrubs and coveralls go. “But we are going to know.”

Jimmy nods. He’s also out of his coveralls and eyeing his shirt. He’s not sure what that stain is, but something seeped through the coveralls, and he doesn’t want to bring that home. He’s unbuttoning. Not like this would be the first night he’s come home in scrubs.

Allan adds, “It looks like in an effort to hide the real crime, they staged at least two others and maybe committed three more,” he glances at himself, but all of his clothing looks tidy enough he doesn’t want to toss it in with the rest of the potential biohazard laundry. “So, bright and early tomorrow, Dr. Palmer?”

Jimmy nods at Allan, heading to where the scrubs live to grab a shirt. “Get a good night’s sleep. We’re going to need our A game.”

“Then I shall bring it. Good night!” Allan nods to both Tim and Jimmy.

“Night, Sam,” Tim says.

Jimmy waves, and Allan heads out.

“Tell me you had a better day than I did,” Jimmy says as he pulls on a top and heads over to where Tim’s lounging against the side of his desk.

“I won the coin toss for who got to go home tonight?”

Jimmy’s going home, too, so… “That doesn’t sound much better.”

“There’s no mysterious goo on my clothing.”

“That does. So…” Jimmy sits down and starts exiting out of his programs.

“Navy retirees getting screwed out of their pensions a buck or two at a time.”

Jimmy stares at him, confused. “Uh…”

“Hundreds of thousands of them each pay period.”
The light goes on. “Oh!”

“This one was sent directly to me, by Leon,” Tim looks at Jimmy long and hard, “because I’m the right guy for the job.”

This time Jimmy’s “Oh!” covers a lot more angles. Tim sees all the programs have shut down, so reaches over to flick off the computer monitor. Jimmy eyes his wrist. “You…” That’s the start of a question, because Jimmy recognizes a bandage when he sees one, and then he remembers why Tim would have a bandage there. “Oh. Gonna show it off?”

Tim pulls up his sleeve. “I was going to. Believe it or not, I forgot about it. Lots of accounting crap in my head right now.” He unsnaps the wrist cuff.

“Trust me, compared to what’s behind my eyelids when I close them…”

“How bad was it?”

Jimmy shakes his head. “God, Tim, it was a fucking horror show.” Jimmy rubs his eyes. “I think, maybe, one victim, two dead people from God knows where, and maybe two chimpanzees.”

Tim rubs Jimmy’s shoulders for a moment, nothing to say to that. Then because Jimmy asked to see, and he really looks like he needs to get his head out of the case, Tim unwraps the white cotton gauze from his wrist. “Ta da!”

“Oh… That looks really good.” Jimmy’s holding Tim’s hand, eyeing the new ink, looking at it like it’s fascinating. Maybe he’s genuinely this interested, or maybe he’s forcing it to blot out some of the day. “I like the way they all sort of interconnect.”

Tim nods at that, too. “Yeah, Sam, the tattoo artist, pointed out that the way it was covered too much of Abby’s lips so—“

They hear the door slide open again, and Allan heads back in. “Ah…” He smiles at them, sees Jimmy sitting in his chair, Tim half sitting on his desk with his hand in Jimmy’s, gauze bandage open, and immediately changes direction. “Are you okay, Director McGee?”

Jimmy’s rapidly rewrapping Tim’s wrist. He doesn’t think that Allan got to see what was on it. But he’s sure that if he does see, he will be able to figure out whose lips are on Tim’s wrist.

“Fine, Sam. And you really can call me Tim or McGee. Just a stupid accident. Hot pad wasn’t as long as I thought it was, and I kissed my wrist with the oven rack.”

“Oh. That hurts.”

Tim nods at him. Jimmy finishes re-taping the bandage, and Tim carefully puts the wrist cuff back on.

Allan’s looking thoughtful. “It might heal up faster without the cuff. Better air circulation.”

“Yeah, he’s mentioned that.” Tim nods to Jimmy, because that’s the sort of thing Jimmy likely would say. And then he stands up. “But it’s like my wedding ring, I never take it off.”

Allan hears that, looks from Tim to Jimmy, nods slowly, still looking at both men, and then says, “I forgot my lunchbox.” He heads into the back office, and soon as he’s out, Tim’s kicking himself, because if he never takes the damn cuff off, he wouldn’t have a fucking burn on his wrist.
Jimmy’s silently giving him a *you should have shut up while you were ahead* look.

Tim nods at him.

Allan comes back a moment later with his lunch box. “Wouldn’t want to forget this.”

Tim and Jimmy shake their heads.

“Good night, this time I mean it.”

“Good night, Dr. Allan.”

As the door slides shut, Jimmy glances at Tim. “He knows something is up. Likely wants to find out what.”

“What sort of something?”

Jimmy shrugs. “Expecting to find us making out? I don’t really know. I don’t think he does, either. But he’s never forgotten that lunch box before, and he was eyeing the ring, and asking about how the weekend went.”

“Sounds normal to me. Half of my guys asked about the new cuff when they noticed it.”

Jimmy flicks off the lights, as they head to the door. “Didn’t feel like casual interest. He’s trying to figure us, or at least me, out.”

The elevator door opens, they step in, and then shuts. “Yeah, well, he’s going to be sorely disappointed if he’s hoping to find us in a compromising position…” Tim thinks about that. “With each other…” He thinks for another second. “Here…”

Jimmy laughs as Tim adds more conditions to that statement. Tim smiles; he was hoping that would help pull Jimmy out of the dark of today’s case.

“Uh…” Tim says when Jimmy finishes laughing, “Kind of on that topic, like with the girls, you don’t… have to ask. You want to play with me, that’s fine.”

Jimmy laughs a little at that. “Want to *play with you?*”

Tim flashes Jimmy his *get over yourself* look.

Jimmy laughs again. “No, I get it. And back at you. If we’re serious about this whole marriage thing, then, that’s how it works, right? We give each other free access to our bodies, but everyone has the chance to back out of anything whenever they want for whatever reason?”

“Yeah.”

The elevator doors open, and Tim and Jimmy head toward Tim’s car. Jimmy hands over his key. “This’ll help.”

“Thanks.”

Once they’re both in, Jimmy asks, “Any issues with Heather?”

Tim shakes his head. “Apparently, since we don’t have a meth lab in the basement, we’re not in her top ten weird couples.”
Jimmy’s eyes go wide.

“That’s kind of how Abby and I responded to that, too. And, we learned that apparently key parties are popular in our area, too.”

Jimmy thinks for a moment. “What’s a key party?”

“All the guys put their keys in a bowl, the ladies fish them out, that’s who you’re with that night.”

“Uh…” Jimmy looks disturbed. “Either you’ve got to have a lot of friends or very low standards.”

Tim shrugs. “Both? Maybe you’ve got lots of really interesting, attractive friends?”

Jimmy thinks about it. “I have the feeling that’s the sort of thing that sounds better than it actually is, or you’ve got to be under twenty-five to enjoy.”

Tim glances left and right, making sure he’s not about to get splatted by oncoming traffic, and pulls out of the Navy Yard. “I think under twenty-five and low standards are synonyms. I’m fairly sure they were for me.”

Jimmy smiles at that. “Weren’t you twenty-four the first time you and Abby dated?”

Tim whacks him gently in the shoulder. “Hush, you.”

“Hey, did you see Breena’s text?” He changes the subject, moving them both into happier things.

“Yes! Who thought Ed could be considerate?”

“I know, right. Bet it was all Jeannie…”
Humpty-Dumpty

Tim’s still up, still messing with his computer, when Abby gets home.

“In here,” he says quietly, letting her know he’s in his office, on the off shot the jazz and sound of him clicking away on his keyboard didn’t tip her off.

“One minute,” she says, and he hears her kicking off her shoes, the sound of her feet moving through the house… bathroom stop and more to eat if he has to guess, and after a few minutes, he doesn’t have to guess because she’s in front of him, kissing him gently, holding an apple with two bites taken out of it.

He pushes back from his desk and pats his lap, a second later she’s sitting with him, head resting back on his shoulder, munching the apple as he nuzzles her neck and shoulder.

“Solve the case?” he asks her.

Abby laughs, bitterly. “Only thing I know is that this is a hell of a mess. We’ve got, at last count, six human DNA profiles, and three chimpanzees.”

“God.” That’s an epic mess. “You’re checking it against research labs and hospitals, right?”

“Yeah. That many parts of different bodies… We’re running it against the missing person databases as well as every lab that works with human and or chimpanzee tissue.”

“And let me guess, that only narrows it down to two hundred labs in the tri state area?”

“Expanded a bit larger than that, after all North Carolina has the research triangle, and we’ve got New York and Boston close enough to be possibilities, too. How about you?”

Tim looks at his computer. “Two options. One, the money went somewhere, but I can’t figure out where. Or two: the money isn’t going anywhere and this is an easy way for the Navy to save a few million a year.”

“Isn’t going anywhere?”

“I can’t see where the ‘fees’ go. You pull money out, and it’s got to go somewhere, right? But there’s no obvious transferring of money from one account to another. Like… Okay, they’ve got an account they pay everyone from, and from that account some money goes to the people who are getting paid, and some gets transferred to the account they pay the taxes out of, and some of it goes to pay for benefits, and some gets transferred for 401ks and so on. The money moves around and goes to different places. But, these fees, I can’t see where they’re going. It looks like an accounting trick that lets the money stay with the Navy.”

“Didn’t you say the Navy guy was swearing it wasn’t them?” Abby asks, chewing.

Tim thinks back, but he’s not certain. “I think that’s what he said to me. I know he said the banks were saying they weren’t doing it, and from everything I can see, that’s true. The amount hitting the banks is already missing the ‘fee.’”

“So, does that mean you’ve got to get even deeper into the Navy’s system and see what they’re buying with that money that they shouldn’t be?”
“Maybe. He said they needed computer help, not a forensic accountant, but… To me, this looks like call Diane up and ask her to come play with my computer.”

“Lovely,” Abby says dryly, looking at her computer.

“Yeah. I have a feeling Leon and I are going to spend some time bouncing around some strategy on this one tomorrow.”

“Meanwhile, Jimmy and Allan and I are going to spend the day using DNA and a 3-d scanner to put the puzzle back together.”

“And Tony and Draga and Bishop will start running down leads.”

“Yeah. Busy day for all of us.” She takes another bite of her apple. “You able to come to bed soon?”

“A few minutes. There’s one other hunch I want to play, see if I can weed anything out with a bit of code and luck.”

“Good luck then.”

“Thanks.”

“So, what’s the hunch?” Abby asks a few minutes later, leaning against the sink, rubbing cocoa butter into her belly, hoping it’ll help with the tight, itchy feeling, while Tim brushes his teeth.

“Hue, the guy in charge of the pension fund mentioned that it might be a glitch. He said it was all automated, so, if I’m right about the money not going anywhere, maybe, somewhere, buried in the code, is something to make sure that these little glitches happen.”

Abby thinks about that, nodding, as Tim spits and rinses off his brush. “How much money are we talking about?”

“Ten, maybe twenty million a year on the pension. If it’s written into active duty pay, too, that’d be more.” He gently pets her belly.

“Might want to check our pay, too.”

Tim knows she means them personally and NCIS in general.

It occurs to Tim that he hasn’t looked at his pay closely since… 2008? Whenever it was his mutual fund crashed and he had a lot of expensive bills coming due and only one paycheck in his bank account. That wasn’t fun at all. Back then a penny out of place would have gotten him yelling, but, ever since… Not really. His pay goes into his bank account automatically, and as long as it’s somewhere in the neighborhood of where it’s supposed to be, he’s not paying any attention.

Hell would freeze over before he’d notice an errant dollar and a half fee. “Yeah. If I can find how this is happening, I’ll start looking for it elsewhere.”
They’re in bed, snuggling in, petting. He very much doubts that there’s going to be any sex tonight. It’s late, Abby’s looking ready to drift off, and given how this weekend went, he’s not exactly climbing the walls horny right now.

One last thought hits him. “You and Palmer and Allan tomorrow?”

“Yeah. I’m best with the 3-d scanner.” Meaning she’s the only one who’s used it before. She sighs a little, scooting back against him, curling into his body.

He kisses the back of her neck. “Allan’s suspicious of us.”

“Mmmm?”

Tim kisses her again. She’s too sleepy for this. “Tomorrow.”

“Mmmm.” That mmm goes with a slow nod and even breathing.

A few minutes later, Tim’s asleep, too.

Morning is busy. It always is. That’s just how they go. But, for a minute, between getting Kelly dressed and putting his own clothing on, Tim heads into the bathroom (where Abby’s in the shower) and says to her, “Allan’s getting curious about us.”

“Curious how?” he hears from behind their black and green striped shower curtain.

“Jimmy’s not sure. He knows something is up, but not what. If he asks, I burned my wrist on the oven.”

Abby pulls back the shower curtain, sees Tim brushing his hair with one hand, holding Kelly with the other. “You did what?”

Tim catches her eye in the mirror. “He caught the tail end of me showing Jimmy the new tattoo. Jimmy got it wrapped again before Allan saw what it was, and I told him I didn’t have a long enough hot pad and burned it on the oven rack.”

Abby looks like that makes sense to her, and ducks back into the water, closing the curtain.

“Then I got kind of stupid and doubled down. He mentioned that it’d probably heal better if I took the cuff off, better air circulation, and I told him that Jimmy’d already said that, but the cuff was like a wedding ring, and I pretty much never took it off.”

Abby groans, immediately seeing the problem with that.

“Yeah. My foot was so deep in my mouth I was kicking myself in the ass. I know. He just stared at us, and then headed off.”

“Wonderful.”
“Yeah. Nothing to do for it now.” He puts Kelly on the floor (she’s decided she wants some crawling time) and grabs his toothbrush. “So, what are you doing with the 3-d scanner?”

“Last time they did this, they had to put everyone together based on how the puzzle pieces looked. This time we’re going to match them into puzzles by DNA, and then use the scanner to put them together virtually. Won’t have to lay everyone out to see where the missing bits are.”

“Cool.”

“Yep. So, while the rest of the team is running samples to get all of the bits grouped, Jimmy, Allan, and I are going to get Humpty-Dumpty, and all the king’s horses and men, virtually back together again.” Abby turns the water off.

“And let me guess, you’re forecasting overtime again tonight?”

“Unless the magic Cause of Death Fairy shows up to give us a hand, or I’m about to walk into the lab and be greeted with IDs for everyone, I’m thinking more overtime.” She steps out of the shower, grabs her towel and kisses Tim.

Tim nods. “Maybe I’ll see if Gibbs and Borin feel like keeping me company tonight.”

Abby gets what he’s telling her. “I think they’d like that, a whole lot.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you know,” Jimmy asks, looking at the collection of body parts in front of them, spread out over four tables. (And that’s not all of them. There are still three orange bags filled with smaller bags, filled with unidentified parts, in the freezer.) “That it does not actually say, anywhere in the original rhyme, that Humpty Dumpty was an egg? He was illustrated that way, and the idea stuck.”

“Fascinating, Doctor.” Allan says, as he’s collecting small samples and labeling each piece they come from.

Abby looks up at Jimmy, and then back at Allan, trying not to laugh. She can’t wait to tell Ducky how closely his protégée and his new hire are clinging to the past. Jimmy sees it, smiles at her, and rolls his eyes a little. The old patterns are familiar and comfortable to him, so he tends to slide into them without thinking about it.

“So, how does this work?” He’s eyeballing the scanner she rolled in five minutes ago.

“I’ve never used it for body parts before, but the manual claims you can do it. When I’ve done it with other broken things,” she grabs a small plastic stand, “you affix the broken thing to the top of the stand,” she adds a little blob of the putty that holds whatever the broken thing is to the stand, grabs a chunk of bone, and smushes it gently to the tiny blob, “then you put this here,” she sets it on the scanner. “Flick the switch,” which she does, and a moment later there’s a little beep, “take it off, stick it on the table for DNA profile 2, and onto the next one.”

Jimmy picks up a small piece of some sort of very red tissue. It’s about the size of his last two joints on his index finger. It’s a muscle. What muscle? No way to tell.

“And what do we do with these?” he asks, holding it over the tip of his finger, where it’s just hanging. “This can’t be a good way to scan this.”
“Supposedly, and I’ve never used this feature before, so we’ll see if it really works, we take the little stand, stick it on,” and she does. “Then it goes into this cylinder.” Abby places a smooth, very clear, glass cylinder onto the scanner, and then affixes the stand to the bottom of it. “Jimmy, I need a gallon of water.”

He goes to the sink and fills up a jug.

“Pour it in, gently.”

He does, and in a moment the piece of muscle is floating at the top of the stand, suspended by the water, in the shape it’s supposed to be.

“No…” she flicks the button, “the glass and water are supposed to have the same refractive value, and the computer is supposed to remove that frequency, giving us the shape in the glass, but…” They hear the machine beep, and as best as they can tell a 3D version of the muscle bit is up on the screen, looking exactly like the one in the cylinder.

“It works!” Jimmy’s nodding, impressed.

“Looks like it.” Abby grins. “Let’s get scanning.”

Once in his office, Tim checks the hunch he had the night before. There’s only a few ways to do what he thinks might be going on. Only a few phrases that will create those fees, without actually moving the money anywhere.

The tricky point isn’t finding them, a simple search function and enough time will do it. The problem is that bit of code could be anywhere. For all he knows, it might be hiding in the Navy’s intra-office secure communications system, or it could be with accounts payable, or maybe with the launch codes. Write it up properly, and you can stick a bit of code like that anywhere.

So, the trick isn’t finding it, sooner or later, he’ll find it. The trick is searching it out without letting everyone on earth know he’s doing it. And, assuming whoever did this is anywhere in the range of as good at this as he is, that little bit of code will be booby trapped to scream as soon as someone finds it.

Get in clean, find it, and then out clean. That’s the trick.

Last night, he’d had the idea, set the worm to search, had his finger hovering over the enter key, ready to execute, and then decided that maybe, just possibly, running the damn thing through the Navy’s code would be too much of a red flag.

At least, if he was running something like this, he’d have his systems set to raise red flags as soon as it detected something like the search he wants to run.

So, he can’t just hop onto the Navy system and go looking around for it.

But, if this is wider spread than just the Navy, if it’s connected to the case, then maybe he can go search it out in his own code, first, without letting everyone on earth know what’s up.

First step of that, though, is making sure their code really is secure. He thinks it’s secure. He’s done everything he can to make sure it is, but he’s a pro, and he knows he’s not infallible. There are literally hundreds of millions of bits of code floating around NCIS, and some nasty little worm could
be hiding in any of it.

So, first thing on the docket, grabbing everyone who is not currently on an active case, and getting them checking into NCIS’s own code.

He sets an all hands on deck alarm, and within a few minutes has forty Minions, worldwide, plugged into his skype feed.

“First off, nothing’s on fire. If you’re on another hot case, feel free to log out. But if you’re free, I want you on this.” He hears some murmuring and loses 25 Minions.

“Okay, for the rest of you, as you know, CGIS has been having some fun lately. As you likely also know, I’ve been working with Director Borin on that case, helping her clean up her own house. Doing so has made it abundantly clear to me how easy it would be for anyone to piggy back onto our system and take advantage of it.

“So, today and tomorrow, we’re going on a snipe hunt. Hopefully, like the mythical snipe, what we’re looking for doesn’t exist, but it might, and if it does, we’re going to find it. I want us to go through all the code we can, in as many different ways as we can think of, looking for backdoors, spies, any bit of code that leaks our information or gives someone access that shouldn’t be there.

“Now, I know for a fact that there is at least one backdoor, because I put it there. Which means all of you should find at least one. Let’s see if there’s more. I don’t care how you do it, any technique that doesn’t break the system is fine with me. But let’s get searching.”

Tim checks his monitor, and he’s got fifteen excited looking Minions ready and willing to do battle.

Manner, his only Minion in DC not working on something else right now, is leaning against his door, looking disgruntled. Once Tim’s turned off his Skype chat, Manner says, “You put a backdoor into our own system?”

“Yes, of course.” To Tim it’s blatantly obvious that there might be a day he needs to get into their system without anyone noticing. And, as soon as they all find his backdoor, he’ll shut it down and stick a new one in there. Manner does not appear to agree with his tactics on this.

“Someone else could find and exploit it.”

“You’re right, but it hasn’t happened.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“Go find it, and you’ll see. Or better yet, go find someone else’s backdoor that we don’t know about. If the NSA is watching our work, I want to know.”

Manner nods, slowly and wanders back to his seat.

Tim picks up his phone. A few rings later he hears, “Vance.”

Tim appreciates having Leon’s direct number. This is so much easier than going through his secretary. “I was wondering if you’d like to have lunch with me so we can go over some staffing issues. If my projections are right, the paperwork software means you’ll soon have more people than you need.”

Tim can feel Vance nodding, understanding that staffing levels is the absolute last thing Tim wants to talk about, but that’s a good topic for one Department Director to his Boss.
“I have a lunch date already, but maybe you could swing by my office around two?”

“That’ll work.”

They’ve practically got an assembly line going. Allan is going through all of the pieces. He takes small samples of them, making sure they’re all labeled and prepped for DNA testing. When he’s got fifty of them (as many as the scanner can run at once) he heads back to the lab, offering them new samples, and collecting as much information as they’ve gathered.

Meanwhile Jimmy’s sorting parts that have been identified, putting them with the body they belong to, and making sure Abby’s got a steady collection of bits to scan. (He’s keeping her in bones for right now. Might as well get the easy, and less messy, parts out of the way.)

Abby’s scanning, returning each piece as she’s done with them.

And the computers are building bodies, one piece at a time.

They’re chatting, mostly Jimmy and Abby, just everyday things, how the girls are doing, this weekend’s plans (if they’re going to get a weekend). Jimmy suggests that if Tim and Kelly are going to be on their own tonight, maybe they’d like to keep Breena, Molly, and Anna company, and Abby thinks he’d go for that. (And when she texts Tim about it, she suggest that maybe they’d invite Gibbs and Borin to Breena’s for dinner. Tim jumps on that.)

Allan’s fairly quiet. He’s doing his work, listening, adding an occasional word.

But, as they hit a lull in the conversation, he decides to jump in. “Mrs. McGee, may I ask you about tattoos?”

“Sure, Sam. And, please, call me Abby. Even Ducky used my first name down here.”

Allan’s eyes flick over to Jimmy, and he nods. “Abby’s the exception to every rule.”

“So, what do you want to know? Thinking about getting some ink of your own? I know a great artist not too far from here. He’s expensive, but if you’re going to wear it on your skin every day for the rest of your life, you want it done right.”

“That makes a lot of sense. I was wondering how long they take to heal up.”

“About a month all told. Some people heal up faster, some slower. Basically, you get it done, wear your bandage for a few hours, then give everything a gentle wash. First few days it’ll seep plasma and ink, so that’s kind of gross. You’ll want to keep something clean, soft, and absorbent on it. Wash it gently at least twice a day until it’s healed up. After a few days it’ll peel like a sunburn. Worst part of that is you can’t pick at it, if you do it messes with the detail. Keep washing it. Pretty much, it’s like having an open wound, for a few weeks, so, treat it like you would a bad abrasion.”

Allan nods.

“So, thinking of something for you?”

“Possibly.” Though Jimmy would categorize the look on his face as meaning, no. “Not sure I want ‘seeping plasma and ink’ to describe anything I’ve ever gone through, though.”

Abby nods. “That’s why a lot of people get them before they know that.”
“Kind of like having a baby,” Jimmy adds. “There are a lot of details Breena would have rather known before she got into it.”

“Yes. Little things people who have done it forget to mention or don’t want to because it’s off-putting.” Abby’s eyes narrow. That didn’t happen to her because she and Breena had a no-BS-here’s-what-happens conversation ahead of time. Breena, unfortunately got blindsided on some of the icky stuff though. She gets back on track. “However, if there’s something that means something to you. Something you want to mark you for life… This is it. It’ll never wash off. It may fade, but it won’t vanish. Supposedly you can ‘get them removed’ but only black and dark blue really vanish. The other colors just fade.” She intentionally does not glance at Jimmy as she says that.

Jimmy’s thinking about what she’s saying, and coming up with something he’s never wondered before. “Why the spider web?”

Abby smiles. “I got the job here. To celebrate, I got that one. I’m the spider, and all of those guys out there, the ones who do stuff like…” she looks at the body parts around them, “are the flies, and I’m going to catch them.”

Jimmy grins at her, he likes that a lot. Allan appears pleased by that, too.

“Allan nods, thinking about that. He’s heard that Tim has tattoos, but he hasn’t seen any of them. “Does Director McGee have your lips on him?”

Abby grins. “Somewhere. And if you want to see something really beautiful, have him show you the design on his arm or leg. That’s going to be stunning when it’s done. Or go find Eric and ask to see his back. He’s got an awesome tribal design across his shoulders.”

Allan thinks about that, too. “But you don’t have one, do you Dr. Palmer?”

“My skin is ink free, Dr. Allan.”

Abby’s still grinning, and he can see she’s thinking about the henna debacle, so Jimmy gives her a quick, no telling look. She flashes him a little mope, but doesn’t say anything. Allan just looks between them, knowing he’s being kept out of something, but not what.

“I’m not sure if it’s just this group, or something about the rays of orange light emanating from the bullpen, but while the American population at large only has a twenty-five percent tattoo rate, for this group the number is much higher.”

“The rays of orange light?” Abby scoffs. “Please, they see how cool they are on me, and suddenly everyone wants one.” She winks at Jimmy while putting another bit of bone on the scanner.

“Or it could be that.” He smiles back, setting another piece of bone on the tray next to her.

“Got any news?” Tony asks Jimmy when he comes down.
“Actually,” Jimmy turns to Tony, while stripping off his gloves and grabbing the clicker for the big screen. “We do.”

“Still no I.D.s,” Abby says.

“True, so we’re calling them by letter.” Jimmy clicks up the first image. It’s about ten pieces of bone, three of which have been fitted together to form a rib. “This is Mr. A.”

“You know he’s a Mister?” Tony asks, taking notes.

“According to the DNA, he’s XY. What he may have looked like, or considered himself to be is anyone’s guess. But he’s genetically male. On the upside, none of the blood we found at the scene—”

“That we’ve checked,” Abby adds.

“That we’ve checked, is his. They’re running the scanner full tilt on this case. Likewise, all of the tissue samples indicate they were cut post-mortem. Whatever happened to A, he was disassembled after he died.”

“There’s some comfort for Mr. A,” Tony says, looking up from his notes.

Jimmy clicks to the next shot, and then pulls up another one. Both are collections of bones that as of yet, do not go together. “Miss B and Mr. C are in the same boat. Whatever happened to them, happened after they stopped breathing, and none of the blood is theirs.”

“B and C have heads,” Tony notes.

“Yes, and we’re working on C’s facial reconstruction.” Abby tells him. Back in the lab they’ve scanned in his skull and the computer is trying to figure out what C looked liked. B’s face is intact. “We’ve got B running in facial recognition databases.”

“Good.”

Jimmy clicks again. This time they’ve got a torso, a hand, three fingers, a selection of bones, and with one more click, Jimmy brings up the blood spatter map. “This is Mr. D. No cause of death yet, but I can tell you that D likely died in that room.”

“And his wounds?”

“The ones I’ve found are post-mortem. Someone took him apart in there, hence the large pool of blood in front of the door and through the living room, and there’s spatter on the walls, so at some point his heart was pumping while he was injured.”

“And guessing by the spatter, and the lack of neck, we’re think he had his throat slit, though given how high the spatter is, it’s not impossible that the wound was to his brachial or femoral artery,” Abby adds.

“There’s still a lot of spatter on that map,” Tony says.

“Yes. About half of it is colored corn syrup. Another third is from D. The rest, which account for an additional two DNA profiles, has traces of anti-coagulation chemicals in it, so—“ Abby says.

“I’m looking for someone who robbed a blood bank,” Tony says.

“At the very least. Corwin tells me we’re still checking with every lab we can find for one that’s had a robbery,” Abby replies.
“And the chimps?” Tony asks.

“Checking zoos, too.” Abby’s eyes narrow, looking furious, but then she makes herself calm down. No one, not the dead people in front of her, or the chimps they’ve got in the freezers, or any of the live people surrounding her, are better off if she goes on a raging tear. “On the upside, if you want to call it that, it does look like the chimps were dead before they were taken apart, too.”

“The real upside is that this would have taken a lot of time, a lot of effort, and more importantly a lot of space, to set up,” Jimmy says. “They had to get all of this stuff up there, and if I remember the hallway right, they had to go through it carrying all of this, to do it.”

Tony smiles. “Already ahead of you on that. Apparently that apartment had a new fridge and stove delivered to it two days ago. Bishop and Draga are tracking down the delivery company.”

Tim heads into Leon’s office. Leon sees him, and stands up. “So, you wanted to talk about how your paperwork software’s effecting staffing levels?”

Tim nods. “Yeah. Been thinking about that some.”

“Me too.” Leon looks around his office. “Been in here all day. Don’t remember the last time I felt sunshine on my skin.” It’s cool and overcast outside. But they both know Leon’s saying the words for the sake of giving them an out. “Let’s get some coffee and talk outside.”

“Sounds great.”

Once they have their coffees, and are outside, sitting on a bench well away from everyone else, Leon says, “Staffing levels?”

“We’ll have to deal with it sooner or later,” Tim says with a shrug.

“I’ll have to deal with it. Now, tell me what’s really going on.”

So, Tim does, explaining what he’s seeing, and where he’s going to start looking. He wraps up with, “The thing is, assume I do find that the Navy, or… whoever is using this as a way to pad their budget or something. What can we do with it?”

Leon looks at him curiously.

“If it’s in there, I’ll find it. But… given what happened with those accounts, I can guarantee you that I will not be able to find who put that code into there. And, without a full audit, I’m absolutely sure we’ll never know where that money went.”

Leon nods, grimly. “Clever plan, the budget and books show a certain amount of money paid out. And all of that money leaves the bank, but not all of it goes where the budget says it does. With millions of accounts receiving money, how do you find the one—“

“Likely more, a lot more,”

Once he hears that, Leon knows how he would do it. “Fake sailors or dead ones. Skim a few bucks off millions of accounts, bunch those payments back into pension or wage sized payouts, send them out to hundreds of accounts that belong to dead men, collect the money. It’d take time—“
Tim sees the scam, too. Elegant, easy, just take a computer, some access, and balls. “Not any more. Automate it. It’d take seconds. Thousands of accounts get money dropped in them every month, then they all transfer that money into a new account. Unless you know the new account, you’ll never catch it. You can’t catch it. We’d need…” Tim rubs his eyes. “We’d need authorization to check every account we’re paying out to, and then see what they’re doing with their money, and then if we find an account or two a lot of people are paying into, more authorization to make sure that final account is a problem. No judge anywhere, ever, is going to give us a warrant for this.”

“And if anyone ever notices, it’ll be like those IRS refunds that go to people who don’t actually exist. Blame it on third party scammers…”

“You still talking to Diane?” Tim asks.

“Officially I don’t have any reason to. However, if the updates I’m getting on Agent DiNozzo’s case are correct, the FBI might be called in.”

Tim nods. That’d be a way to get a heads up to Diane without raising too many flags. Then he thinks about the case. “Um… Why the FBI?”

“They’re in charge of cases involving exotic and possibly trafficked animals.”

Tim laughs. “Well, thank heavens for chimpanzees, then.”

He and Leon both look at each other again, briefly wondering exactly how staged the whole case is. Tim shakes his head. No way they’re getting their strings pulled from that far away. He hopes.

“I think I’m going to check in with Tony. See how he’s doing, maybe suggest a call to Fornell.”

“Sounds like a plan. You’ll let me know what your snipe hunt finds.”

“And of course. We’ll give it to the end of business tomorrow. If they haven’t found anything by then, we’re clean or we’re not going to find whatever it is.”

“I hope you don’t find anything?” Leon’s not sure if that’s the right thing to hope for here.

Tim nods; he knows. “I hope we’re clean.”

“‘What do you mean ‘I don’t need to know who was supposed to be in that apartment?’ We’ve got parts of six people and two chimps in there. Jesus himself could have booked it, and I get to know. No… NO! Don’t hang up on me!” Tony slaps down his phone and mutters, “Asshole.”

Tim leans against what used to be his desk and is now Draga’s. “I take it this is going well.”

Tony makes an angry snorting noise while rolling his eyes. “Bishop and Draga should be back soon, hopefully with the guy who delivered the boxes of body parts.”

Tim nods. “That’ll be fun.”

“You know it. So, what’s got you here? Don’t tell me you’re in on this one, too.”

“Best I know, no, I’m not. But, I was just talking to Vance, and he remembered that the FBI handles cases involving possibly trafficked exotic animals.”
Tony raises an eyebrow. “What would get you talking about that?”

“Directors gossip. We were talking staffing levels.” Tony knows Tim more than well enough to know Tim’s answering for the benefit of everyone around them. The real story probably involves his own case.

“Uh huh. Well, I’ll take that under advisement.”

“Please do. Who knows, maybe whoever you’re chewing out,” Tim moves closer to look at Tony’s computer, hand on the back of Tony’s chair, other hand discretely tucking a note that says, Diane, on the outside, and gets her up to date on the inside, under his mouse, “will give the FBI a bit more cooperation.”

Tony sees the note and knows what he’s being asked to do. “Can’t give ‘em less. I’ve got to go talk to Vance, see if he can shake free some information for me. If he can’t, I’ll see what Fornell can do.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Agent DiNozzo,” Leon says, standing behind the partition wall next to Tony’s desk. “Have a minute?”

“If you’ve got a hold of who was supposed to be in that apartment,” Tony says, standing up, “I’ve got all day.”

“All day will not be necessary. Draga, Bishop, you’ve got the rest of the day off.”

It’s not quite 4:00, a bit more than an hour before usual quitting time. They both look startled, but they know they’re being dismissed so Vance can talk with Tony alone.

As soon as they’re out of the way, Tony looks at Vance. “How bad is this?”

Vance shakes his head. “Bad.”

Tony sees who they’re meeting as he and Vance walk into a bar less than half an hour from work. Only one man in the room is wearing a naval uniform. Hell, besides the bartender, he’s the only person, period, in the bar.

Tony doesn’t recognize the man behind the uniform, and the uniform appears to be intentionally bereft of identifying markers.

He’s not supposed to recognize him. He glances at Vance, but can’t read his expression. “Know him?”

“Not him specifically. I know why he’s here.”

“Calling us off.”

“Yes.”

They sit down across from Nameless Sailor, who does not introduce himself. He does wave for the
bartender, who comes over with two drinks, scotch by the smell, deposits them in front of Vance and Tony and then heads to the back. Leaving them completely alone in an empty bar.

Tony’s carrying. He always is, and under the table he flicks off the small leather strap that makes sure his gun can’t just be grabbed out of his holster, and unlatches his safety. This sort of set up is making his danger sense scream. He shifts a bit in his seat so he can see the back room in front of him, and the front door in the mirrors behind the bar. He’s ready for anything.

At least, he thought he was. “As of five today, you’ll hand this case over to Metro PD,” Nameless Sailor says in lieu of hello.

Tony stares at him, and then says, “Nope. Not just on your say so.”

A moment later he’s got a folder and three thumb drives sliding across the table to him. “You’ll find the victim, Dr. Daniel Quinten, was a virologist, a civilian. You’ll find that all of the other bodies found with him were from his lab. Apparently his testing procedures annoyed the wrong people. And you will find that the Navy has no jurisdiction in this case, so you will hand it over.”

Nameless Sailor taps the top folder. Vance opens it, eyes scanning the order from Jarvis to let this case go to Metro.

Tony’s not going with it. This order burns. “And the location? Who was supposed to be in that apartment?”

“That is still classified, Agent DiNozzo.”

“Metro will ask.”

“And they will get the same answer you have.” Nameless Sailor nods, takes a sip of his drink, and leaves.

Tony and Vance look at each other. The order from Jarvis looks legit. Under it is several pages of information about this case. The short version of everything Metro will need to arrest a collection of animal right’s activists for the murder. Tony guesses that the thumb drives have the long version, as well as all of the evidence.

According to what they’ve got here, Quinten was murdered because his area of specialty involved infecting chimpanzees with HIV and then testing new antiviral medications on them.

“This stinks,” Leon says.

Tony nods. “So, we handing it over?”

“Yes.” When given this level of direct order by his boss, Vance will obey. But that doesn’t mean he’ll let it drop. “But we keep copies of everything. And I want to know who Daniel Quinten really is. Animal rights activists don’t murder people trying to cure HIV.”

Tony nods. “I’ll call Sacz.”

“Your pal at Metro?”

“Pal might be a stretch, but we’ve worked together in the past. He knows his head from a hole in the ground. He might not solve it, but it won’t be because he’s not competent to do it.”

Leon nods again. “Okay. Let McGee know you can’t get to Diane.”
“I will.”

Vance picks up his drink and shoots it back. “I hate days like this.”

Tony, who really would have liked to have joined him in that drink, but is driving them back to work, agrees. “Me, too.”

Given that everyone at NCIS is able to head home at their usual time, the quiet little dinner where Tim gets a shot to talk to Borin doesn’t happen.

The larger, pissed off, teeth gritting, ‘I hate politics’ dinner involving the whole clan, bitching loudly about this case, does.

Tony’s expounding about how deep in the shit he thinks handing this off is, when Penny says to him, “Daniel Quinten?”

The way she says it immediately gets Tony’s attention. “Yes.”

“Tall fellow, dark hair, blue eyes?”

Jimmy shrugs. “We don’t have enough parts of him to tell. The parts we do have matched the DNA profile they gave us. Why?”

“I know him through John’s Hopkins. We’re not close or anything, but he’s a psychiatrist, not a virologist. He studies the effects of anti-anxiety meds on people with PTSD.”

Jimmy thinks for a moment, and he can see Abby’s getting there, too. “Blue eyes?” she asks.

“Yeah, really blue. Like Jethro’s. They’re very pretty,” Penny replies.

“So… is he… brown skinned? We assumed he was Black or Hispanic,” Jimmy says, tentatively.

Penny’s not buying that, at all. “Quinten? If he’s black anything, he’s Black Irish.” Besides Ducky, no one else in the group knows what that means. “Most Irish people have light brown, blonde, or red hair and light eyes. Some have black hair and blue eyes. Hence, Black Irish.”

Tony does not like hearing that, at all. His danger sense is yelling again. “Penny, do you have his number?”

“Sure. You want to check on him?”

“What better way to hide a body than to spoon feed us a falsified ID?” Tony takes Penny’s phone from her and hits the contact button.

“Hello? Doctor Langston?”

“No, not today. Though she gave me your number. Is this Daniel Quinten?”

“Yes. Who is this?” The voice on the other line sounds nervous.

“Special Agent Tony DiNozzo. Naval Criminal Investigative Service. Are you at the hospital?”

“Yes, why?” Nervous has slipped to horrified.
“Ditch everything but your cash. Including your phone. Walk, run, or take a cab, but don’t drive to the nearest Baltimore PD precinct house. Get there, ask for Jeffry Renold. He’s a Captain, and he will be there by the time you get there. Do not give anyone your name. Ask him for a password. He’ll say Penny, and he will keep you safe until we can get you into protective custody. Move, fast. I’ll explain as soon as I can. It’ll take two hours to get to you, so get to the nearest PD precinct, and get safe.”

“But…” Horrified is on the verge of panic.

“Move, now. Fast. I know this is scary, but you have to pull it together and get yourself to the closest PD precinct house. We’ll talk when I’ve got you somewhere safe. I am leaving to get to you now. Move, toss out your phone and move.”

While he’s talking, Tim’s already texting Bishop and Draga, letting them know they’ve got to get moving. As soon as Tony hears dial tone, he tosses Penny’s phone back to her, and grabs his own. “Jeff, yeah, you’ve got to get your ass to the PD precinct house closest to John Hopkins hospital, and you’ve got to do it right away.”

“Tony DiNozzo?” They haven’t talked in two years.

“Yes. Please, Jeff. I’ve got a ‘murder victim’ that’s still walking around, and my guess is he won’t be for long because the people who fed me that ID don’t want me to find out who’s really in my morgue.”

That gets Jeff moving. Tony can feel the shift across the miles and hear it in his voice. “Okay, Tony.”

They go over the set up Tony told Quinten as Tony’s pulling on his jacket, kissing Ziva, and heading out. Tim and Ziva start to follow, and Tony shakes his head, covering the phone with his hand. “Sit down. You’re not in the transport people business anymore. But if you” he looks to Tim, “want to help, you can find out who fixed that DNA profile for me.”

“I can do that.”

Tony nods, and he’s out of there.

Dinner hits the skids after that. Mostly fast eating and faster clean up. They all want to know what’s going on with Tony’s mystery.

To the point that Tim had almost forgotten why he wanted to talk to Borin in the first place.

He’s handing her a rinsed dish, and she’s putting it in the dishwasher, when he says to her, “Got a lead of my own. Navy pension big wig just noticed that there are tons of little ‘fees’ getting pulled from the pension pay outs. Fees that shouldn’t be there. Fees that the banks aren’t pulling. My guys and I are going to check this all over my side of it, then we’re going to check it Navy-wide, but…”

Abbi’s looking at him, dish in hand forgotten. “I get it.”
“You have someone you trust to run your numbers?”

Abbi smiles. “Let me guess, you’ve got someone in mind?”

“Someone I don’t have a good excuse to go see, but…”

“You’re thinking that I need some girl-time with Diane?”

“Wouldn’t hurt.”

Abbi slots the dish into the dishwasher. “You know, one of the positions I was able to rehire for is my pension administrator. Maybe we need to have a chat.”

“Yeah, and Leon’s thinking that it might be a good idea to make sure that everyone collecting a Coast Guard pension is still breathing.”

Abbi smiles, she’s… well, her new pension guy, is going to be on top of that.
“We’re driving to Baltimore at 8:30 on a Wednesday night because…” Draga asks as Bishop pulls the armored van out of the NCIS lot.

“The smartass answer is that we’re cops, and we don’t have off time.” But, in that Tony knows he hasn’t given them the real reason, he keeps talking, “The real reason is that the ‘ID’ the Navy gave us was a pile of prime bullshit, and that the real guy with the name, address, work address, and the rest of it, is still sitting his ass in Baltimore, and we are going to get him before anyone else does.”

“Sounds like a plan. So, who did we have in our morgue?” Bishop asks.

“No idea.” That reminds Tony. He grabs his phone and calls Sacz. “Hey Ron, you still at your desk?”

Sacz scoffs. “You just dumped a murder with body parts or blood from six guys in my lap, of course I’m still at my desk.”

“Get to your morgue and make sure those bodies are all accounted for, specifically the one we’ve got IDed as Quinten.”

“Sure.” Sacz voice says that he thinks Tony’s on overkill, but he’ll do it because both times they’ve worked together Tony’s far out hunches have been right. “Are you expecting it to get up and walk away?”

“Let’s put it this way, I’m en route to Baltimore, where Daniel Quinten is, as of thirty minutes ago, alive and talking to me.”

That gets Sacz’s attention. “I’m on it. I’ll give you a call.”

“Thanks.”

Tony sees the name on his caller ID and answers it on speaker. “Are you psychic or something?” Sacz asks as soon as he hears the line pick up.

“Oh God. What happened?”

“According to the drivers, they delivered seven bags from your morgue. Four bags of body parts sorted according to DNA. The unidentified pieces were in two other bags. The chimps were in another bag. According to my ME, they’ve got seven bags of random, unlabeled, unsorted body parts. The drivers say those aren’t the bags they delivered. My chain of evidence shows my drivers signing in the bags at 17:45. Since we’ve got a four month long backlog, no one even looked at those bags until I asked.”

Tony’s ready to spit he’s so mad. “And let me guess, you’ve got no footage of anyone messing with those bags.”
“Right.” Sacz isn’t sounding happy, either. “I’ve got no footage period. We don’t keep cameras on the morgue or deep freeze.”

“And your deep freeze doesn’t have a key code lock or anything like that on it, either?”

“No. Upgrading our security has been on hold for the last three years. You know, budget cuts.” There’s a lot of bitterness in Sacz’s voice as he says that. “Once you get into the morgue, you can do pretty much whatever you want. I’ve got my guys checking to see who might have gotten in, and what they may have done. My ME didn’t see anyone out of the ordinary, but it’s night shift, so the cleaning crew is in now, taking care of the bays they use during the day. And they all have access to the deep freeze.”

“Fuck!” Tony rubs his eyes. “Okay. You talk to your guys. I’m on the way to Baltimore, gotta grab Quinten. Be at least another hour there, transfer time, two hours back, then talking with him. You find out what happened and get me samples of those parts. We’ll meet up again for breakfast. We kept copies of our findings, so we’ll find out if you’ve even got any of the body parts we gave you.”

“Okay. I’ll bring the extra strength coffee and bear claws.”

“And I’ll bring the ‘dead scientist.’”

Bishop and Draga have been quietly listening to that conversation. As soon as Tony hangs up they both glance at him.

“Bad enough having one case just vanish. Be worse to lose two in a row,” Draga says.

“I know. And we’re not losing it. I don’t care what SecNav wants on this, we’re not just letting it vanish.” Tony rubs his eyes again. “Okay, I’m catching a nap. It’s gonna be a long night. You get one, too, Draga. On the ride back, you get sleep time, Bishop.”

The feel of the van eating the miles has Tony just about asleep when a thought hits, jerking him out of his near cat nap. He sits up, rubs his eyes, stretches bit, and then grabs his phone.

“Vance,” he hears after two rings.

“Director Vance, I’m on my way to Baltimore to pick up Daniel Quinten.”

There’s a moment of silence, and Tony can imagine the look on Vance’s face.

“The Daniel Quinten?”

“Same name, birth date, address, and place of employment, different job, different race.” Tony can feel Leon nodding, slotting information into place.

“I have a call to make.”

Tony’s turn to nod. “I’d imagine you do. Keep me in the loop?”

“You, too.”
Pretty blue eyes isn’t the only thing Daniel Quinten has in common with Gibbs. Hair that’s more white than black is also part of the package.

Tony’s thinking that Penny hasn’t actually seen Quinten in a while.

Beyond that, the resemblance ends. Quinten is rail thin, nervous (though given the call he just got, Tony would be concerned if he wasn’t nervous), twitchy, and likely only in his mid-forties.

Tony’s not sure if he’s the kind of man who jumps at shadows, or the kind of man, having been told the shadows are out to get him, is jumpy.

Tony doesn’t say much as he pulls Quinten out of the 32nd Precinct building, wearing a vest, and into their van. He’s not wasting any time, and not relaxing until he’s got Quinten at the Navy Yard.

Quinten’s frustrated. He’s terrified and no one, including these grim looking people in NCIS gear, are answering any of his questions. But finally, as Draga pulls the van out, and Bishop tries to catch a nap in the front seat, and he and Tony are in the back, behind armored walls, Tony feels safe enough to get talking.

Quinten’s been trying many versions of what’s going on, why am I here, tell me what’s happening, with no luck, so as he sees Tony relaxing a hair, he asks, “How do you know Penny?”

Tony smiles a little. That’s not a bad way to try and get some information about Quinten and maybe calm him down some.

“Family matriarch.”

Quinten looks puzzled by that answer. Like he’s checking a mental list and can’t figure out where Tony goes on it. “You aren’t one of her sons?”

Tony's slightly miffed at the idea that Quinten thinks he looks old enough to be one of Penny's sons, but, bad light, nervous person... He’s trying not to take it personally. “No. Her grandson is my best friend, and she’s married to my adopted grandfather.”

“Penny married?” Quinten looks pleased by that, and a little surprised. “Must be a hell of a man.”

“Ducky is that. You two haven’t spoken or seen each other recently, have you?”

“We speak every few years. When she has a student who needs the kind of help I provide, she refers him or her to me.”

“What kind of help do you provide?”

“I work with adolescents and young adults who have been traumatized in some way and are dealing with anxiety as a result.”

Nothing about that is screaming reason for bloody murder to Tony. “Isn’t that the sort of thing any shrink can do?”

“On one level, yes. Anyone who’s properly trained can handle the talking part of the issue. I work more with the pharmaceutical level. Anyone who’s had serious mental health issues can tell you that the right meds are a lifesaver and the wrong meds make you feel worse than dead. The people she sends me are looking for the right meds.”
“Okay. Still… Isn’t that mostly trial and error?”

“Mostly. For the average doctor, yes. I’ve been working on creating profiles based on the subject’s chemical baseline, so that we can do a better job of figuring out, the first time, what kind of medication, and how much, and how often, the subject needs. It’s intense, it takes a lot of testing, but, my hope is, that by the time I’ve got a working base test, we’ll be able to use the technology that diabetics use to constantly monitor their blood sugar along with those pods that add insulin as needed, to keep my subjects chemically where they’re supposed to be. And once we’ve got those chemical levels right, talk therapy does worlds of wonder.”

Tony files that away. It sounds wonderful, but he’s not, on any level, seeing why that would get this man killed, why they’d pretend he was a virologist, or why he’d be doing anything at a Navy apartment.

“Do you test on animals?” Might as well touch on the 'official reason' why he's supposed to be dead.

“Humans. All of the drugs I’m using are already FDA approved. When we get to the point where we start working with new delivery methods, we may work with animals, but that’s years off.”

“Do you have a lab?”

“A small one. We run numerous blood tests every day.”

“But not the kind of set up where you’d have pint sized bags of blood?”

Quinten’s looking disturbed by this. “No. Why?”

“Do you do anything with HIV or viruses?”

“HIV, no. In order to get a good baseline, everyone I work with needs six weeks without any medication at all. Most of my patients start with a three month, if not longer, weaning off period, then six weeks cold turkey, before I get to start working with them. I can’t do that for an HIV+ patient. Besides mental issues, everyone I work with has to be healthy.”

“Great.”

“Agent DiNozzo, please, what is going on? I’ve been beyond accommodating to you.”

“You have. Have you ever been to apartment 44A in the Ronscon Building in DC?”

Quinten’s face shuts down. Tony’s spent a lifetime dealing with good liars, and Quinten isn’t one. His eyes visibly go blank and all the life in his face drains away.

“I can’t say.”

“Were you supposed to be there on Monday or Tuesday?”

“I can’t say.”

Tony sighs. “This would be much easier if you would. See, as of this afternoon, I’ve been told that…” Tony grabs his phone and gets the main shot of the crime scene up, then he zooms in so that one of the torsos is visible. He hands it to Quinten. “This is you.”

Quinten blanches, looking at the mess. “Oh God.” Tony knows that look and scrambles fast, finding a plastic baggie. Quinten grabs it and throws up. When he’s done, he manages to gasp out, “I was supposed to be there.”
“Who were you supposed to be meeting?”

“Captain Trevor Boylt. He’s Navy Psy Ops.”

“Can you describe Captain Boylt?” Tony asks.

Quinten’s still staring at the mess, zooming out, flicking through the pictures. He tears his eyes away. “Um… Yeah, sure. Six feet, maybe. Taller than I am, but not too much. Black and gray hair. Brown eyes. African American and Asian. Said his mom and dad met in Vietnam.” Tony doesn’t need to look up front. He knows that Draga’s making sure Bishop texts the lab, telling them to check the DNA profiles, hoping they catch a break and that everything about Captain Boylt hasn’t yet vanished.

“And what were you meeting about?”

“I can’t.” Quinten opens and closes his eyes. “I’ve signed a million forms from the Navy saying that on pain of treason, I can’t say. If I tell anyone, they’ll execute me.”

Tony’s eyes jerk up. That’s a new one on him. Sixteen years working Navy cases and no one’s ever tried that on him.

“I’ve got the paperwork. I made copies. I can show you. But, I can’t say what I was doing. Who did this to Trevor?”

“If we knew what you were doing and why you were there, we’d have a much better idea of that,” Tony says gently.

“I can’t.” Quinten is about to cry. “I’ve seen those crime shows and the whole, ‘it’s worth my life,’ and I’m sure you’ve heard it all before, but… It is. I can’t say.”

“Can you give me a hint?”

Tears are seeping down Quinten’s face. “Captain Trevor Boylt. Naval Psy Ops. Can I make a call?”

“Who?”

“I can’t say. But if I get permission, I will.”

Tony hands over his phone. It takes Quinten three tries to get the number in right, but eventually he does, and Tony hears half of a conversation where Quinten explains what’s going on. Another minute, where Quinten is listening, followed by him handing Tony the phone.

“Agent DiNozzo?”

The voice doesn’t identify itself, but Tony recognizes it. Just about everyone knows the voice of the President.

“Yes, sir.”

“In a moment, I will be texting you an address. You are to take Dr. Quinten to it. The Secret Service will be waiting. They will pick him up and provide for his safety. You are to forget this case ever crossed your path, destroy any evidence that you have that goes with it, and never touch it again. Are we clear?”

Tony’s biting his lip so hard it’s about to bleed. “Crystal, sir. May I get those orders in writing?”
The phone hangs up, and a moment later there’s an address on his screen.

Tony taps Draga, who pulls the van over. He tells Quinten what his orders are. “If we take you there, you’ll never be seen again. The Secret Service will make sure you vanish.” He glances at Draga and Bishop, they both know there are more than one way to make someone vanish. “Is what you’re doing for them worth keeping you alive? Because if it isn’t…”

Quinten takes a deep breath, looks at the address, and says, “Take me.”

At 00:43, in the middle of nowhere Maryland, in front of cow pasture, an armored van meets an armored car. The people in the van hand a man over to the suit-clad, sunglasses-at-night-wearing, unidentifiable men in the armored car.

At 00:44 Bishop runs the car’s plates. They don’t exist.

At 00:48 she runs the phone number Quinten called. It’s no longer in service.

At 00:50, Tony says that they’re getting home, going to bed, resting, and then, in the morning, after he has followed the President’s instructions, they are dropping this case. The look on his face makes it clear absolutely nothing of the sort is going to happen.

Bishop and Draga nod. They’re beyond tired of this shit, and they are going to solve this case.
A Series of Meals

Retirement sucks. Retired and injured sucks worse. Not only is Gibbs stuck on the sidelines while everyone else is scattering to do something useful for this case (and he’s sure these cases are in fact “this case.” He’s sure a lot of these things are connected. It’s like walking through a spider web. He can’t see the web, but he can feel it’s there, brushing all over his skin, and knows they’re in it.) he can’t even help from the sidelines.

All the gut on earth isn’t useful when you’ve got nothing beyond this doesn’t feel right, and you’ve got nothing you can use to try and figure out why it’s wrong. Not like he can go along and help Tony chat with this Quinten guy.

So, as they’re heading home, from dinner, he’s all but gritting his teeth at not being able to help.

“Jethro,” Abbi says.

“I know. I’m trying.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think you do. I’m feeling it coming off of you, I’m feeling it, too, there’s a big picture here, a really big picture. So damn big that we have no idea what we’re into.”

“Yeah.” He glares out the window. “And I’m useless on this.”

“Not necessarily. If Tim’s sure his system is safe, you can use it to get into mine, and Diane’s. Tony would give you his key to the NSA and CIA. You’ve got hours and hours of free time and access to almost everyone’s information. Fornell would let you in. That’s all of us that matter. Add in an internet connection and… Find us the big picture. We can’t take down the monster if we don’t know what it is.”

Gibbs finds that idea simultaneously horrifying and exciting. He hates computer work. Yes, he’s better than he used to be, but hours in front of a computer is only preferable to his next appointment with the pulmonologist, who will tell him that lungs take a long time to heal and that he needs to rest.

But, God, it’s casework. Real casework. Casework everyone he loves is tied to.

“I think you’re going to get called into an emergency meeting tomorrow, and I’ll have Tim give me a lift to Dr. Kent.”

Abbi smiles at him. “You know, I think that’s a very good idea.”

When Tony gets home, what he wants to do is storm around the apartment in a funk, and maybe break things. Then once he’s done that, what he wants to do is get into this. Get deep into this. But, if this case is as sensitive as he thinks it is, and if he wants to be able to keep working on it, he and his team are going to have to play a role, and that’s the role of good little boys and girl who do what they’re told.

He slumps into his favorite arm chair, and stares at the ceiling for a while.

He’s been called off the case by the President. He’s been told to destroy evidence, which is illegal, by the President. He was a kid when Watergate happened, but he loves movies and there are more
than enough of them out there that *that* bit of history is firmly entrenched in his mind.

And the narrative always works the same, the guy who asks for the cover-up is the bad guy. The guy who shines light on what’s going on is the good guy.

That’s how it always works on his cases, too. No one who’s meant any good has ever asked them to drop a case. Give it to someone else, sure. He’s played that roll of the die, and he’ll do it again. Put it on ice because there’s a bigger case going down, and eventually they’ll add in their bits, sure. He’s run that play, too.

But they’ve never just dropped one. Not without being read into something. Not without a damn good reason and a promise that, eventually, they’ll get their guy.

They don’t just let a case walk.

He stares at the ceiling. When it comes down to it, it’s a matter of trust. If Leon asked, without any explanation, to kill a case, he would. He’d hate it, but he’d do it. Leon’s earned that. He’d do it for Tim or Jimmy, too. Jarvis doesn’t have that sort of trust. Obama, a man he’s never met, never spoken to before today, can’t.

Rule… He doesn’t know. Call it 99. Never trust someone who asks for what he hasn’t earned.

It’s very late when it hits Tony that once again, he’s got a call to make.

This time the phone goes to voicemail. “Call me back. It’s not good.”

Five minutes later Tony gets a call from Vance, whose voice is groggy with sleep.

“How ‘not good,’ Agent DiNozzo?”

“We had him. He claimed that on pain of treason he couldn’t tell us what he was doing. He made a call. He explained what was going on. Then he handed me the phone and the President told me to forget the case existed and to burn all the evidence. He told me to hand Quinten over to the Secret Service. I asked if I could get those orders in writing, and he hung up. Then I got the address, asked Quinten if he really wanted to go, if he was sure they wouldn’t kill him, and he told us to give him up.”

There’s a long silence on the other side of the phone.

“And are you going to ‘forget about the case and destroy the evidence?’” Vance asks, voice tight.

Tony can hear several levels of question there. “How about we have breakfast tomorrow? We can coordinate the disposal plan?”

He can feel Vance’s nod, and knows that Vance understands what he’s saying.

“Been a while since I’ve had banana pancakes,” Vance says, naming their meet without having to spell it out. Precious little protection in the age of electronics, but better than nothing.

“I’m going to need some of them tomorrow, too. Nine? Gotta start up bright and early tomorrow.”
Tim would have to admit, that of all the things he could be doing this morning, chauffer service isn’t really on the top of his list. He’d also have to admit, that until he knows his system is clean, he’s not going to be running anything particularly interesting, so, he might as well be on chauffer service, and let the people doing the interesting things do interesting things.

He pulls up at Gibbs’ place and sees Jethro sitting on his porch, waiting for him.

Been a while since he’s seen Gibbs that eager for anything, so obviously the text he got about needing a ride isn’t the whole story.

Tim leans over, opening the passenger door, seeing the look on Gibbs face. He knows that look. That’s Gibbs on the hunt for a hot case. Yeah, he’s not doing this because Gibbs needs a ride.

“You’ve found something?” Tim asks as Gibbs gets in.

“Nope, but I’m gonna.” Then Gibbs starts explaining what Abbi thought of.

Tim sighs. That’s... One more sigh, and Gibbs is watching him. “Well, it’s an idea.” He’s thinking Abbi and Gibbs might be underestimating exactly how difficult it is to use the computer to look for things like this, but... “Let me make sure the system is safe. Tomorrow at the earliest, maybe Friday, might be next week depending on what I find. But, if I can get you on so everyone can’t see what you’re doing, I’ll get you hooked in and you can chase leads down rabbit holes until you know where they all go.”

Gibbs nods. If he was still the Boss, Tim would know that look means Do it yesterday. But he’s not the Boss anymore, so he says, “Good.”

“You know what you can do between now and then?”

Gibbs gives him a curious look.

“Get online and learn everything you can about how to use Python to create database searches.”

“Tim?” Gibbs is starting to look worried.

“Our systems aren’t Google, Jethro, you don’t just type in a word and have it pop up in a million places.”

Gibbs looks grim. “Great.”

Tim tries to figure out a way to make him feel better about this. “How long did it take you to learn Japanese?”

“Never got great, but could talk in six weeks.”

“Trust me, this one will still be here in six weeks, and probably ten weeks, and likely next year. Even if we ‘solve’ these, they won’t really be put to bed. You’ve got time, so add a new language to your portfolio.”
Gibbs sighs, but looks resigned. “I ever tell you about the case where I went in as a computer tech?”

Tim’s eyebrow shoots up. “Really?” he laughs a little. “Uh…” He licks his lips thinking of how desperate they had to be for a tech to send Gibbs in. “Did you…”

“I made it work! Only had three weeks of prep time for that. Spent all three of them buried in books in and in front of my computer, Mike mocking me every step of the way. Is the C++ I learned going to come in handy for this?”

Tim doesn’t wince. He swallows and says, “Only in the sense that you’re not getting into this completely cold.” Tim thinks some more. “Probably like going into sniping when you’re entire background is in martial arts. You’ll use the same discipline and mindsets, but new tools.”

Gibbs nods. That’s a concrete example he understands. “Am I going to need to learn how to program?”

Tim shrugs. “You’ll do better at this if you do. But, if you learn how to download search templates online, you’ll be able to at least get some answers.”

“Okay. Reading up.”

“Yep, reading up. Lots of reading up. While we’re waiting for Kent, I’ll make up a reading list for you.”

“You know, when I said I hoped I’d see you again…” Dr. Kent says as he walks into his exam room, this time finding Tim sitting on the visitor’s chair and Gibbs on the exam table. “This isn’t what I meant.”

Tim shrugs. Gibbs shakes his head. “How fast and what can I do to make it faster?”

Kent throws up Gibbs’ x-rays on the plasma sitting on Kent’s desk. “If the hurt arm and missing ribs were on opposite sides, you could start working your arm today. It’s just a chipped humerus. And from the looks of things it’s healing up fine.”

A quick gesture vanishes the shot of Gibbs’ arm. And his ribs fill up the screen. “Here’s the problem. These bright white sections here are still a mesh of plastic with a bit of soft bone knitting throughout. I know you don’t want to hear it, but until November 1st, I want you babying that arm, and your chest, and your shoulder.

“By then the bones should have calcified enough for you to start putting more weight on it.”

Gibbs glares. “You’re right, I didn’t want to hear that.”

Kent sighs at him. “I know. If you can get a hold of that extra bone vibrating disk that Tim didn’t think I knew about…” Tim jerks his attention away from the ribs to Dr. Kent, who smiles smugly, “Thought so.”

Tim shakes his head at him and goes back to checking out the mesh in Gibbs’ ribs. He’d worked on the idea of something like that when he was at John’s Hopkins, and how they ended up actually
doing it is interesting to him.

“Anyway, if you can get one, you can try it on your ribs, and it might speed things up. Or, you might end up with bones that are too stiff and thick and that will make it harder to breathe.”

“Duck sent it back,” Gibbs says. He probably would be willing to try, but the damn thing is in Japan again.

“Then November 1st. Don’t want you carrying anything heavier than five pounds on that side until November. And that does not mean go get a four and a half pound dumbbell and start doing straight arm lifts, either.”

“Any exercises, at all?”

“Until October, none at all. From there, we’ll re-x-ray, send your results to Dr. Palmer, and he can figure something out for you. I don’t know what he does, but he got Tim up and moving a lot faster than I expected. With any luck he’ll use his magic on you.”

Gibbs glances at Tim, not saying anything. Then he licks his lips and says, “Jimmy’s magic works better on Tim.”

Tim does a really good job of not giggling at that.

Tony feels groggy and drugged. He figures he got about an hour of sleep. Between getting in late and turning everything over in his head, he didn’t sleep well.

There’s a note from Ziva on the table. Lunch?

He takes his phone out, and sends her a text. Lunch sounds great. Miss seeing you every day.

Me, too. You get the guy?

Ziva knows what that means. Carlo’s? 1:00.

See you there.

“Did you put him through the ringer, or did he put you through one?” Ron Sacz asks as Tony sits down across from him at a Beltway Donuts halfway between their respective offices.

Tony takes the coffee he pushes to him, drinking deep and long. “We’re off it.

“What?”

“Check your morgue. It’s all gone. Mine is, too. All of our data is wiped. Quinten is gone.”

“How do you lose? Wait…” Sacz is calling up his Morgue. “Yeah. Hey Bob, what do you have on
“We can’t tie him to any crime. Couldn’t charge him. Couldn’t hold him. Just because he has the same name as an ID we’d been given wasn’t enough. He wouldn’t talk, so he walked and vanished.”

“You had eyes on him?”

“Of course we—“

Sacz holds up his hand. “No. What do you mean there’s no case? I was working it until three in the morning. I told Myrton to make sure there was a guard on those bags. No, I don’t have the number wrong. Seven bags of evidence. From NCIS. Body parts. Signed in last night. They’ve already been fucked with once, and I made sure someone was watching them. Yeah, go check again.” Sacz looks back to Tony, pissed.

“We had eyes on him. Good eyes. We gave him cab fare to get home. Had a guy in a ‘cab’ ready to ‘pick him up.’ He decides to take the train. Heads off to the restroom just as they pull out of DC. Never comes back to his seat. Searched the whole train. Not on it. We’ve got people looking along the line.”

“He jumped off?” Sacz can’t believe that.

“Or was thrown.”

Sacz shifts attention to the voice on the other end of his phone. “Uh huh? No. NO! That is the wrong fucking answer! You do not tell me it’s all gone! You do not fucking tell me all of my evidence just vanished. I do not want to hear any shit about a fire alarm at five in the morning. I will be there in half an hour and whoever’s in charge is going to be handing in his resignation in thirty-five minutes.” Sacz hits the off button on his phone, hard. “You’re right. It’s gone.”

“That’s why they sent it to you in the first place. I’m sure they had someone on the inside who was supposed to make this go away. If we find anything, I’ll keep you in the loop.”

Sacz nods. “Back at you. I’ve got to go chew someone a new asshole.”

Tony waves him off. Part one of playing the role of the good little agent is done. He checks his watch, he’s got to get across town in an hour for his next meeting.

__________

Tim heads in feeling pretty good. Assuming they really get their system safe, he can get Gibbs working. Yeah, it’ll take forever, but it’s still something for Gibbs to do, and once he gets the hang of it, he probably will be good at it.

He’s gotten a text from Abbi telling him that her new Pension Officer is completely behind her plan of going through and making sure that everyone getting a check is indeed breathing. He’s, as Abbi said, enthusiastic about this job.

He sits down, flicks on his computer, and sees Manner lurking.

“News?”
“Yeah, Boss.” Manner’s got his laptop out, and sets it on Tim’s desk. Tim’s wondering how bad it’s got to be that Manner’s calling him Boss.

Manner drags a chair over and sits next to him. “Three so far. Brand and Ngyn found two last night. Sallena out of the Tel Aviv office found the third.”

Tim doesn’t have to tell Manner to pull them up, he already is. Tim’s eyes flick over the screen. Two of them are elegant, subtle, and infuriating. One’s in their intranet, hijacking their mail server, providing access to everyone’s communications. The other’s lurking in Vance’s calendar software. Nasty little bastards hiding in the code. Number three is pissing him off for an entirely different reason. “Who was using Kazaa?”

Manner shakes his head. “Accounts payable processor, left seven years ago. From what we can tell, that one’s been in our system for the last nine years.” He points to the top two. “Didn’t find why you think you’d know if someone found your backdoor.”

“Because neither of them is mine.” Tim smiles a little at that. Manner almost rolls his eyes. *Save me from cocksure geniuses* is clear on his face. Tim smiles at that, too. “The Kazaa one isn’t, either. Did you shut them down?”

“No, the girls are backtracking them. They’ve got Brand on it, too. They went home at usual quitting time for them, and I sent Brand home when her hands started to shake from all the caffeine in her system and told her she couldn’t come back for ten hours. I expect she’ll be here at exactly 6:00 and ready to go.”

“Good. Anything we find, we backtrack before shutting it down. Once we know who’s spying, then we decide what to do about it.”

“Okay. So… um… Where’s yours?”

Tim shakes his head. His is hiding in the firewall he built, but he wants to see if they can find it.

“Keep hunting.” Tim’s eyeing the one that’s been lurking in their intranet. He hasn’t met that code before, but he’s got an idea what kind of person wrote it. In fact, he’s got a clue as to specifically what man wrote it. “I’m going after this.”

“Enjoy, Boss.”

Tim nods. “You, too.”

---

Tony’s next meet up is at the diner. Apparently he’s going to be eating, a lot, today.

Draga and Vance are already waiting for him. Draga looks uncomfortable. Vance looks angry.

“Bishop?” Tony asks as he sits down, sucking down more coffee.

“Any minute now,” Draga replies.

“Now you three look like you’re getting ready for a hanging or a funeral,” Ellen says as she comes over, more coffee for everyone.
“Little of both, Ellen,” Tony says.

“Then I won’t ask. Ya’ll just talking, or you want real food, too?”


Vance nods. “Haven’t had breakfast, yet. French toast and bacon if you’ve got it?”

“If I’ve got it?” Ellen smiles at him. “Hon, you name it; I got it. Tony?”

“Just coffee. My first breakfast date fed me.”

Bishop makes it in a few seconds later, also looking grim. She sees Leon and her eyes go wide. “Sir!” she says as she sits down, next to him.

“Relax Ellie,” her first name trips over Leon’s lips, but his smile is warm. “You, too, Eric. We’re just four co-workers having a nice breakfast this morning, right?”

“Uh, yes, S—Leon.” Ellie says, her voice tripping over his name, too.

He smiles again. “Excellent.” For a moment, they all sit there, not sure what to say, because they couldn’t be less four co-workers just having a nice breakfast on a Thursday morning if they tried.

Finally Tony says, lightly, after taking a sip of his coffee, “Ron, you know Ron, Leon, he works for Metro,”

Leon nods.

“He tells me that Metro is following orders perfectly.”

“Really?” Leon asks, voice cold.

“To the letter. They’ve been able to get rid of everything. Got a bit of help they didn’t expect on that. Ron was… very pleased by these developments.”

Bishop’s eyes narrow, and Draga clutches his cup as Vance says, “I see.”

“And once I get into the office, I’ll have a chat with Jimmy and Abby about making sure that anything we might have accidently kept is destroyed as well.”

“Good, glad to hear that. I’m supposed to have lunch with Clayt, and I’m sure he’ll be happy to hear what we’re doing.”

“I’m sure,” Tony says dryly. Then he looks at each of them, carefully, giving them his full attention for a few seconds. “I think it’s been too long since we’ve worked a real murder. Maybe it’s time we give terror plots a break. Not too long. Maybe a month or two. No later than picking it back up again for the New Year. Just long enough to clear our heads, long enough to find a replacement for Ziva. Once we’ve got him, we’ll swing back into action on the terror cases. After all, wouldn’t want to bring someone new in the middle of something sensitive.”

“You sure it’ll be a him?” Ellie doesn’t sound comfortable asking, but if they are just four co-workers having a chat… And if she wants to make sure it sounds like she’s not getting the message…

“Seven out of ten applicants are, Ms… Ellie,” Vance replies.
“Closer to fifty fifty at FLETC. At least, when I was there…”

“FLETC trains a lot of people for a lot of things,” Vance replies. And, for whatever reason, y chromosomes tend to go along with taking that FLETC certification and applying to NCIS.

Ellen comes by, plates piled high. Ellie’s eyes go wide as she sets hers in front of her. Ellen’s eyes go wide as she sees Ellie. “Now, I didn’t expect you to be such a tiny little thing when I put this together. I won’t be insulted if you don’t eat it all.”

Draga grins, looking at a plate filled with eggs over easy, bacon, chicken fried steak, home fries and biscuits on it. “She just looks little. There’s a lumberjack’s stomach in there.”

Ellie stares at the plate, then looks up to Ellen. “Did they tell you I love chicken fried steak?”

“Nah.” Ellen brushes that off. She gets to the counter and calls out the order to her husband, and that’s just what came out of her mouth. “Just had a feelin’. You all good on drinks?”

They nod, and Ellen heads off. For a moment, there’s just the sound of eating, (Ellie’s purring a little. She hasn’t had chicken fried steak this good outside of Oklahoma City.) then Tony says, “You know, in all the rush last night, I don’t think I remembered to tell you how we found out that Daniel was alive and kicking. I don’t think you’ve met her yet,” he says to Ellie, “but do you,” he means Draga and Leon, “know Penny?”

Both Draga and Vance nod, they remember Tim’s grandmother.

“McGee’s grandmother. Apparently she used to work with Quinten.” Tony says to Ellie. “One thought I had last night, is that she’s an incredible woman. Done everything, for everyone, and probably knows everything…”

The light is going on for Vance. He’s remembering the case Penny was involved in. Draga and Bishop weren’t there for it, so they don’t get this, and are looking lost.

Tony sees him light up, sees him get it.

“Yes, fascinating woman, Tony.” Vance looks to Bishop and Draga, “She’s a…”

“Bio-medical Engineering Professor, now,” Tony supplies. “But she’s done it all. During Vietnam she worked on several projects for the military.”


“In many ways,’ Tony says. “She mentors a lot of young women these days. Maybe you and her should have a chat? She’s a numbers wonk, too, and I bet she’d love the sort of stuff you were doing for the NSA.”

Bishop doesn’t have the whole picture, but she’s got the basic idea down: Penny knows Quinten, Penny used to do top secret stuff for the military, find out if Penny knows what sort of top secret stuff Quinten might have done.

“If you’d arrange an introduction, I’d love to have a chat.”
Prisoner transfers take time, but apparently when you’ve got the word “Director” next to your name, they take a lot less time than when you’ve got “Agent.”

Tim’s sitting in interrogation across from Ajay Khan a lot faster than he expected to.

Khan doesn’t appear to recognize him, but, of course, they never saw each other, just talked over the line, and he hasn’t opened his mouth, yet.

Tim pushes his tablet across the table to Khan. “This one is yours right?”

Khan’s fingers stroke over the device with the same level of adoration Tim uses when he touches Abby. Then he glances at the screen, then to Tim, bored. “My lawyer’s on the way, and there’s no way I’m saying anything to anyone without him here.”

Tim stands up, grabs the tablet, sees Khan flinch when it leaves his grasp, and walks out.

The breakfast party gets back to NCIS at the same time. They take the same elevator, and a second into the ride Leon hits the emergency stop.

“Okay, quick and clear. At lunch I’m meeting with Jarvis, if he doesn’t have good answers for me, we are solving this case. If he does, we’ll let it go. And it’s entirely likely that if the answers are secret enough, I will not tell you what they are and you’ll have to trust me. If he doesn’t have answers, Ms. Bishop you will find out exactly how Penny knows Quinten, as back up reading I want you to look at The Annex Project and the Tellas Research Institute. Draga, if I cannot get answers, your son is going to have some sort of issue and you will request leave. You will take that leave and go visit Quinten’s apartment. You will snoop, and you will not get caught, understand?”

“Find that paperwork he talked about,” Tony adds.

“Paperwork?” Vance asks.

“According to him he kept copies of the stuff that said it was treason for him to talk.”

Vance nods. “DiNozzo, you are going to make sure that evidence ‘vanishes’ somewhere we can retrieve it again.”

Tony nods back at that. “Quinten threw up in the van. Sounds awful, but I’ve still got it. I’m thinking Abby’s going to tell me if it matches the ‘profile’ we were given.”

“Good.”

“And as soon as McGee tells me that I can do it safely, I’m running everything I can find on Trevor Boylt out of Psy Ops.”

“Sounds good, too. Get up, do your work, and by one I’ll know what we’re doing.”
When Vance gets into his office, he follows his usual routine of getting coffee, sitting down, and then opening his email. His eyes scan over the names in his inbox, and he sees one from McGee.

Short little thing.

*Anytime you’ve got free, have coffee with me.*

Leon looks at the mug in his hand. Then he grabs his phone, wondering how the hell all of this is coming together now.

“McGee,” he hears after two rings.

“I’m free.”

“Lucky day then. My date won’t chat without her chaperon. Want some more sun?”

“Sure.”

And thus, fewer than twenty-four hours later, Tim and Vance are once again on the bench, having yet another coffee.

“Found three,” Tim says as Vance sits down.

“Three?”

“Three, and there are at least four, but they haven’t found mine, yet. One looks like BS, little worm left over from some twit downloading a game or music nine years ago. The second one is sitting in your calendar software, happily telling someone everything you write down.

Vance winces, and a second later fire flows through him. His kids keep their schedules on that calendar, too. So does Lara. That’s how they manage to get to see each other and get everything done. If they ever find who did this, he’s boiling that son of a bitch alive.

“We’re finding out, and as soon as we know who’s doing it, we’ll let you know, and you can decide to kill it or feed it crap. In the meantime,” Tim shuffles around a bit in the bag he had hiding under the bench, and then hands Vance a paper day planner. “Utterly unhackable.”

“And the third?”

Tim smiles grimly. “My date who’s still waiting for her chaperon.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Oh, I think you’ll find this very interesting. It’s new. Been in our system for about two years.”

Vance isn’t seeing how that’s interesting.
“And I’ll bet ten grand that Ajay Khan wrote it.”

Vance has to think for a moment, but only a moment, before he sees why this would be so interesting. “Uh huh.”

“Yeah. So how does a man in a federal prison, who as part of the conditions of his imprisonment has no access to a computer, stick a worm into our intranet?”

Leon purses his lips and then takes a sip of his coffee. He has an idea, and he’ll be interested to see what McGee comes up with on this. “That is interesting. Copy cat?” He doesn’t think it is, but, get the obvious out of the way, first.

“Could be, but I’m not feeling it. Why borrow the style of someone who can very easily prove he didn’t do it?” Tim pauses for a second, sees Vance about to ask, and answers his question, “No. He didn’t write it before he went in. It’s his style, his handwriting for lack of a better comparison, but he’s using some new phrases. They may not let him have a computer, but I’d bet he’s still keeping as up to date as he can with journals and magazines.”

Vance nods. “And what does this mean for us getting a secure computer system in place?”

“Not today. Not tomorrow. If we don’t find anything else, and we’re fast and lucky on the tracing back, Monday.” Tim sips his coffee. He’s not sure how much of talking to Vance Tony’s handling, or even how it worked out, but, “Have you talked to Tony?”

Vance nods. “Secure computers, McGee, as fast as you can get them.”

“I can have all of us set with new burner phones in an hour. How much more processing do you want?”

“Start with the phones. Secure communications is a good start.” Left unspoken is the idea that this is only a start.

“Since my ‘security sweep’ has found bugs in our code, now is probably a really good time to have the security guys sweep the whole building for listening devices.”

“I have a feeling that’ll be happening soon.”

“You’ve got that program where retirees can come in and work on cold cases, right?”

Vance nods.

“Good. Gibbs and I were talking about that. He’s going to take some time to brush up on his paperwork skills and then he’ll start coming in. He’s going a little stir crazy at home, nothing to do but heal up. So, I’ll probably end up tucking him in one of my cubicles and letting him work from there.”

Leon nods at that, too, smiling. “I’ll have to head down to see that.”

“I’m sure the pictures will get spread across the office pretty quick.” Tim checks his watch. “Khan’s lawyer is here by now. Time to see if I can get him to dance.”

“Let me know how it goes.”

Tim stands up, shoots of a lazy salute, and says, “On it, Boss.”
“Hey Abby,” Tony says as he heads into the lab. “Can we talk?”

Abby knows this is getting into risky territory. Between handing “everything” over to Metro yesterday and Tony skittering off after dinner for Quinten, and the dark cloud hovering over Tony’s head right now, she knows something very not good is up.

Actually the last time she felt this level of not good, she was running the bullet they pulled out of Hernandez and coming to a rather unwelcome conclusion about why he wasn’t breathing any longer.

So, serious look on her face, and characteristic spring in her step missing, she takes Tony into the ballistics lab for a “conference.” “How bad is it?” she asks when the door shuts.

Tony rolls his eyes, sighs, and rests, back against the door. “I need you to do two things.”

Abby nods.

“First off, make sure those samples that didn’t make it to Metro are safe. I know we’ve got them labeled with a different case, but… Now would be a really good time for them to go into the cold case deep freeze and get lost.”

Abby nods. “Retrievable lost?”

“Yeah, same with all of the result copies you’ve got. Find a home for them, and tell me about it Friday night.”

“Okay. I can do that. I have a feeling I’ll stay in for lunch when Zelaz heads off.”

“Good plan.”

“What’s number two?”

“Can you get DNA out of vomit?”

“Maybe. Depends on how fresh it is and how it’s been kept? The acid does a number on the DNA. Why, got some puke for me?”

Tony nods. “From about midnight. It’s in my freezer at home. Quinten lost it when I showed him the pictures. I want to know if his DNA matches the profile that matched the Dead Quinten.”

Abby likes that. “Ooh. Good question. Better question, I’ve still got Dead Quinten on a thumb drive, let’s see if he matches up with Live Quinten.”

“He shouldn’t.”

“You’re right, he shouldn’t, but if he does, that means something’s gone very hinkey. Oh, speaking of hinkey, last night, you had Ellie call Corwin, he’s been looking into Captain Trevor Boylt, trying to run him against out Dead Quinten. No dice. Boylt doesn’t exist.”

Tony shakes his head. “Yeah, thought that was a long shot. That’s probably the first thing they scrapped as soon as they knew this was in trouble.”
Abby smiles again. “Yeah. I thought of that as soon as I got in. So I did a different search. Did you know there are only six Naval Officers with a background in psychology or psychiatry who are a combination of African American and Vietnamese?”

“No.”

“And did you know only three of them had a father who was stationed in Vietnam?”

“Nope.”

Abby’s smiling. “And that one of them, Lt. Commander William Frakes, lived in Manassas, and died four days ago in a ‘car accident?’”

Tony lurches forward and kisses Abby. “I love you. And if you ever get tired of that hus— those three twits, I’m all yours!”

Abby laughs at that, giving Tony a gentle shove. “Find a way to get me your puke sample, and I’ll see what else I can find.”

“We still on for lunch?” Tony asks Ziva, making the first call of the day he’s looking forward to.

“Yes! Please! I’m starving and miss seeing you.”

“Me too. Can you swing by the apartment and grab something for me? It’s a little bag in the freezer. Uh… Don’t look inside. Just pack it in ice and bring it along?”

“I do not want to know what’s in the bag, do I?”

“Depends, Little D giving you any tummy issues today?”

“I am hungry, tired, and queezy.”

“Don’t look in the bag.”

“I will not look in the bag.” They’re quiet for a moment, not really wanting to hang up yet, not having much reason to stay on, either. “Okay. I’m going. See you in half an hour?”

“Yes!”

Tim heads back into interrogation.

Khan’s lawyer starts up before Tim’s even sitting down. “As per the terms of his conviction my client has not done any computer work in four years.”

Tim glances from Khan to his lawyer and back again. Then he laughs. “Okay. So, here’s the line. Either he’s suborning perjury for you, or you’re lying to him. Want me to leave for a few minutes so
you can figure out which one you want me to add to the charges?"

The lawyer looks shocked, and Khan looks impressed. He knows who Tim is, now. “You’re the one I talked to over the phone last time.”

Tim smiles.

“Still working for Silent Sam and MovieBoy?”

“I’m all on my own now. So, what do you have to say about that bit of code?”

Khan shrugs. “You know I’m a mercenary. Make it worth my while, and I’ll sing you every song you ever wanted to hear.”

Tim checks his notes. “You’re in for ten years, right?”

Khan nods.

“Up for parole if you behave. Condition of your parole and release is monitoring to make sure you never use a computer again?”

Khan nods at that, too.

“I can get that shifted.”

Khan’s eyes light up, and he leans forward. “Better currency than cash.”

Tim inclines his head, agreeing. “We’ll be monitoring you, provide you with the computer.”

Khan smiles, and Tim knows that expression means, You’ll try.

Tim smiles back. I’ll succeed.

Khan shakes his head, almost like he’s looking forward to it. “A year from now, when I’m up for parole, we’ve got a date. They feed me problems. I solve them. They’ve got me doing it on paper, so I don’t get to see where my work goes, and there’s no shot of me… exploring on my own, but, for a month off my sentence and two grand per job, I solve whatever problems they give me.”

“And this one?” Tim lays his tablet down and flicks the screen saver off, showing Khan the same bit of code. And once again Khan lovingly… no… lustfully strokes the tablet.

“Three years ago.” Khan smiles. “I liked that one. It’s elegant.”

Tim nods. “It is. So elegant that I knew at a glance who wrote it.”

Khan inclines his head, taking the compliment. Then his eyebrows furrow slightly. If Tim’s this good at this, he’s got to know him. “Why don’t I know who you are?”

Tim smiles. “You do, or did. You’d recognize my work if you saw it.” Tim’s not famous among law enforcement for his… less visible work… but there are people who know about hacking Mossad and the CIA. He knows Khan is one of them. “Just don’t know my face.”

“Interesting.” Khan’s watching him, wondering, trying to put the face and voice to code.

“You have the same handler each time?” Tim asks. He’s going to be paying a visit to whoever runs this, soon.
“All four years. Should see Harvey again in December. He shows up once a season. He’s always got interesting problems for me.”

Tim smiles, dryly. “Wonderful. Let me guess, Harvey isn’t his real name, and you’ve got no idea which branch of the government he works for.”

Khan smiles back. “It could be his real name, and he might actually work for the CIA, but… If he did, he’s misbehaving.”

Tim nods. “What are you working on now?”

Khan leans back in his seat. “Come visit me, and I’ll show you my notes.”

Tim shakes his head, curt and fast. It’s probably been a long time since Khan got to play like this, and he’s enjoying it. “You have nothing but time. I don’t. How about you tell me what you’re working on, and save my some of mine?”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Because I want you to imagine something. You’re out on parole. You’re in whatever little shack they let you live in. You’ve got some dead-end, minimum wage job, making subs at a sandwich shop or something, best you can find with that big, red FELON on your applications. But at the end of the day, you go home to that shack there’s you, and there’s the computer system I let you have. It’s beautiful. You’ve got a fifty inch plasma screen monitor, an Oculus, VIOS Quantum T4,” Khan’s eyes go wide at that, and he licks his lips, “and inside your sexy black computer case, sitting there, where the sixteen cores should be, is a Radio Shack 8088 processor older than you are.”

Khan looks pained at the idea of Tim pulling that sort of shit on him. He whimpers softly before saying, “You are Satan.”

Tim smiles. “The nicer you are to me, and the better the inside of that computer’s going to look.”

Khan glares. “I’ve got the code for Norton Anti-virus. I’ve got the code for Norton. You know, the company, how to get into their development system. I very much doubt Norton approves or knows what I’m doing. Harvey’s got me hacking into them, got to get into and out of them, clean, and then add a worm to the finished product. Anyone who buys a system with it already on it, or downloads it will end up with spyware on their system. Most people, most of the time, it just sits there doing nothing. Get on the wrong chat room, order the wrong product, work with the wrong people, get paid the wrong way, and it lights up, letting Harvey & Co. know what’s up.”

“Okay… That’s…” Tim’s staring at Khan. “Pros don’t use Norton, or a system that’d have it already installed.”

“Yep.” Khan smiles. “Won’t get you or me. Won’t catch any of the boogie men out there. It will catch disgruntled morons with a hard on for crypto-currency and conspiracy theories.”

“So, you’re going after…” Tim thinks through who that’d be. “That wouldn’t even be domestic cyber terrorism. That’s…”

Khan supplies, “The useful idiots. It gets them before they get paranoid. By the time they’re serious about going off the grid, they’re already on the radar.”

Tim sighs, rubbing his forehead. He nods his head. And, like Khan, he knows that “Harvey” isn’t CIA. Not by a long shot. But he knows who is looking to keep an eye on disgruntled Americans. “Harvey gives you all the jobs?”
“Yes.”

“That bit of code.” Tim taps the tablet. “Did he tell you where it was supposed to be used?”

Khan smiles. “Nope. But you all use the same intranet. You all upgrade at the same time. I didn’t even have to add a hack to get it in. Just had to write the code and they just plopped it right on it with the next upgrade. From what Harvey tells me, and from the fact you’re the only one who’s asked to visit, you’re the only one’s who’s found it.”

Tim nods. “Thank you.”

“What’s the inside of that computer look like now?” Khan asks eagerly.

“It’s got at least two cores. Might have four if Harvey’s who you’re suggesting he is.”

“Solid state drive?”

Tim laughs and stands up. “See you in a year.”

Tony slides into the booth, next to, as opposed to across from, Ziva. His arm wraps around her and they kiss. For a moment, they just hold on, reveling in quiet, gentle, awake touch.

Then Tony breaks the kiss. “Hi.” His fingers head to her belly. “Hello to you. You being nice to Mommy?”

Ziva rests her head on Tony’s shoulder. “He is being a little booger today. I want to eat everything I see and throw up, at the same time.”

“How does that even work?”

She rolls her eyes and takes a nibble of the saltines that started going everywhere with her on Friday. “Tell me what’s going on on your end.”

So he does, quietly, sitting in a restaurant, arm wrapped over her shoulder. He’s quick about it. Carlo’s is busy right now, and loud, so he’s not too worried, but sooner done, the less chance of being overheard.

“Leon’s got a lunch date with Jarvis, hopefully get us something good. How about you?”

“Abbi told me that she’s got Gibbs thinking about doing some computer work.”

Tony almost spit his drink out at that. “What?”

“He can’t pound pavement, or interrogate witnesses, but just like the rest of us he knows this is big. Once McGee gets the system secure…”

“Does Abbi have any idea how bad Gibbs is with a computer?”

Ziva holds up her hands in a no idea gesture as their waitress brings the food. Tony sees a huge, gorgeous grilled-chicken sandwich, crispy fries, and some very healthy looking salad. He then sees the waitress put the salad in front of him. His eyebrow rises as Ziva takes an ecstatic bite of the
sandwich.

“I’m supposed to have lots of fat and calories. Your cholesterol is high.”

His eyes narrow, but he grabs a fork and takes a bite.

“So, other than making us laugh so hard we wet our pants when Gibbs takes out his gun and murders the computer about ten minutes into this, what is Gibbs on a computer supposed to accomplish?”

“Among other things, Abbi knows that a lot of people outside CGIS had to look the other way. I think the first thing she’s going have him do is figure out who got paid off outside of CGIS.”

“And I know we all want to know what happened with those accounts.”

“Yes. I suppose this could be coincidence…”

“But we don’t believe in coincidence.”

Ziva nods. “Too much all at once. Abbi thinks… well, wonders. You know,” her voice drops lower, “how Jarvis basically said that whatever McGee wanted, he could have, as long as he shut up until the election was over.”

Tony nods.

“She wonders if all of this sort of stuff coming to a head now is about making sure some sort of ugly news pops up before November. Wonders if everyone is getting little trails along these lines, hoping something will stick.”

Tony sighs. “The infamous October Surprise.”

“Yes. She thinks that there is likely someone or someones high enough placed to pull the strings to try and get this sort of news out now. She figures that something nasty is going to come out about Bush soon, and this…”

“Is supposed to come to a head in a few weeks and blow up so spectacularly that whatever it is that pops up about Bush looks minor by comparison,” Tony says.

“Or shoots Bush and Clinton both so badly that whoever is running Green or Libertarian stands a chance. Or, gives Warren or Paul a decent shot at winning a write in campaign,” Ziva adds.

“Abbi’s thinking that?” That sounds… a lot more politically aware than anyone in their family tends to be.

“Penny’s thinking that, but she got talking to Abbi about it.”

“Ahhh… That’s…” A whole lot bigger than anything they normally run into. “Do you think this crap was going on in ’12 and we were just too low on the totem pole to find out?”

Ziva shrugs. “That’s a question for Penny.” She chews another bite of her grilled chicken. “Or Leon. He’d know. Penny is speculating.”
For Leon, lunch is at Jarvis’ house.

He’s not in a good mood going into this. That little sheet of paper with the call off your dogs crap yesterday was a slap. And not a Gibbs slap, but a slap in the face.

Jarvis is a politician, he covers his own ass first, but he generally tries to not burn bridges until he’s sure he can no longer use them.

Which means this is either coming from way above Jarvis, and if DiNozzo’s right about who’s voice he heard, that would fit. Or it’s coming from below him, and someone’s about to have his ass handed to him.

Jarvis is waiting for Leon, sitting at the table on his patio, overlooking a lush backyard. Drinks, plates laden with BLTs, a bowl filled with chips, another with strawberries waits for them.

Jarvis stands up, pulling out Leon’s chair, gesturing for him to sit. “Leon.”

Leon shakes his head, sitting down. “You thought that bullshit order would work? Come on, Clayt, we’ve known each other too long and well for that.”

Clayton Jarvis smiles and shakes his head. “I told them it wouldn’t work. Told them you needed to be read in. They told me to make you go away.” Jarvis smiles very briefly. And Vance knows that Jarvis intentionally “handled it” so that Vance would be here, demanding answers, and then he’d be “forced” to give them.

How Jarvis got as high as he did isn’t a mystery.

“So…”

“I can’t give you the details. Everything needs to vanish on this.”

“Clayt…” Leon won’t take that. Not on this one. If he’s going to let his people risk their jobs, lives, and families by doing something illegal, he wants chapter and verse on why they’re doing it.

He also knows that he and Jarvis are dancing. He’s ‘wearing down’ Jarvis for someone, but he doesn’t know who they’re dancing for.

“Look, I’ve got orders on this.”

Leon nods. He thinks for a second. They’re here, at Jarvis’ house, they should be alone, but who knows if anyone is ever really alone these days. “We were soldiers once.”

Clayt nods, looking approving. He’ll say the things he has to say, but his face is showing that Leon’s saying the right things, too.

“You know what happens when soldiers start blindly following orders. Our parents put a lot of people in jail for ‘just following orders.’”

Jarvis nods. “My father was one of them. Still…”

“You know what we’ve been asked to do, destroy evidence. Make everything vanish. That’s not good, Clayt.”

“I know. I still have my orders and they come from the President.”
“We didn’t take an Oath to protect or serve him.”

Clayton nods again, again smiling at Leon. Who’s watching, who’s listening? Now he’s starting to wonder if this is some sort of bigger trap. If, after the mess at CGIS, they’re running shit like this at different agencies to see who actually obeys the law and who doesn’t.

“You’ve taken the President’s orders before,” Jarvis says.

Leon glances around. He knows exactly which orders Jarvis is talking about. Deering. A US Citizen, on US soil, executed without trial, on the order of the President. An order so illegal they have never spoken about it and all of the official paperwork shows that Gibbs killed him in self-defense.

“Clayt, I don’t think you understand how I, or NCIS, works. We don’t do ‘orders,’ not the way you’re talking about. You gave me an order, and I listened to it, and smiled, and so did Gibbs, both of us giving you our best looking respectfully at the Lieutenant expression, then, when you were gone, we sent Gibbs in to capture Deering. He was so sure he’d be able to do it, by talking alone, he didn’t even bring his gun.” Jarvis knows this is complete bullshit, but whoever may be listening wouldn’t. “He overestimated the sympathy he thought Deering held for him, and had to fight him off with his knife. No matter how it worked out, I can tell you that there was no shot at all of us following that order. Obama himself could have come in and given that order, and we would not have followed it.”

Jarvis nods again, still smiling. Leon’s sure that whatever is watching or listening to them is behind Jarvis. He looks around, eyes skirting over the backyard. There’s an acre of grass, a playset that’s a bit too young for Jarvis’s now tween-aged kids, and beyond that bushes and trees. Leon doesn’t see anything in the woods, but if it had been done properly, he wouldn’t.

“So you are saying, that without additional information, you cannot possibly acquiesce to what you’ve been asked to do?” Jarvis says.

Vance shakes his head. “Last time a President requested evidence be destroyed, that didn’t work out well for anyone.”

“So, read you in?”

“I can’t help you until I know this is legal.”

“And let me guess,” Jarvis says, dryly amused, more of what Leon thinks of as ‘real Jarvis’ as opposed to ‘politician Jarvis’ coming out, “if you aren’t satisfied, we’ve got trouble because you won’t let this go?”

Leon smiles. “Make sure I’m satisfied.”

Jarvis leans back in his chair and sips his iced-tea. “We know who did it. We have them in custody. We know why. We know who the intended targets are and were. This case is completely closed.”

Leon blinks. “And instead of telling us this…”

Jarvis inclines his head. “Benghazi was embarrassing enough. What they left at the scene would have been worse. It was ‘sanitized’ twenty hours before you got in contact with me to find out who was supposed to be in that room. And, until you talked to me about it, I didn’t know what was going on. As soon as you called me, and I started making noise, I got read in.”

“And who, precisely, would this have been embarrassing to?” Though Leon knows who Benghazi was embarrassing to, so he’s got a good idea.
Jarvis shakes his head.

“Who is Daniel Quinten?”

Another head shake.

“Is he still alive?”

Jarvis looks curious about that. “Why wouldn’t he be?”

“The Secret Service has him.”

Now Jarvis looks nervous. “Shit,” he says softly. “When did that happen?”

Leon gets Jarvis up to date, and Jarvis looks more and more upset as he hears about what’s happened with Quinten. When he gets done telling about the Secret Service Men in Black, Leon once again he asks, “Who is Daniel Quinten?”

Jarvis mouths a few extremely rude phrases. “A psychiatrist. He works with people who suffer from PTSD. He does a lot of research into the chemical imbalances of a PTSD mind, especially in young adults and adolescents.”

Leon’s nodding.

“In his day job, he works at coming up with better ways to manage the issue. His biggest breakthrough in how to manage these issues is in understanding the exact, base chemical imbalances for each person with PTSD. From there, he’s working on finding ways to cure it.”

“Which is very important for our soldiers returning from traumatic adventures abroad.”

“Yes. With the help of the Army and the VA, we are bankrolling a lot of his official research exactly for that purpose. But, his baseline tests have another purpose. Brain chemistry is delicate. Mess with it in certain ways and you can cripple a man.”

Leon’s eyes go wide. “Was he… weaponizing PTSD?”

“Not… weaponized. You know there are still ‘assets’ all over the world, and some of them are less than perfectly willing to talk. Torture doesn’t do much. They just say whatever they can to get us to stop. And, it makes us look bad.

“Depression, fear, that’s a different story… They treat them well, give them good food, keep them comfy, and mess with their neurochemistry, and then they talk. The more the asset talks, the more they back off on the chemicals, the better the asset feels.”

Leon blinks slowly. That’s… He swallows. “Just talk to me, tell me how you’re feeling, it’ll help. Everything is confidential. You’re safe… blah, blah, blah…”

Jarvis half shrugs. “It works. It’s cleaner than anything else we’ve tried. No one’s complaining about loud music, messing with their sleep, or waterboarding. Outsiders can come in and ‘investigate’, they can show them everything, and other than the fact that the assets are depressed and anxious, which is perfectly normal for men in their condition, there’s nothing wrong with them, and they make sure the assets are getting top shelf care. It’s a PR win and an information gathering win.”

“Quinten was the real target?”

Jarvis nods. “From what we can tell, they think they got him. Chatter indicates they believe he’s
dead."

“And this act of war, murder the scientist and…”

“And if the scene had been found by anyone else first, they would have found a lot of evidence of us using extremely illegal interrogation techniques, in addition to a formal declaration of war between us and... It doesn’t matter. They can’t fight a real war, not here, but it would have been an impressive PR win for them, nightmare for us.”

Leon’s eyes close again and he takes a deep drink of his previously untouched iced tea. They never got all of the Benghazi guys, and if he’s reading Jarvis’ unsaid words correctly, the same group is claiming credit all over again. Which, six weeks from the election, would be the end of Hillary.

“Why are you worried about the Secret Service having him?”

Jarvis inclines his head a bit. “They protect their own. The President... The Ex-Presidents… and his family. Some of them are still very close to the Clintons. If a man will take a bullet for you, he’ll likely put one in someone for you, too.”

“And the men who killed Trevor Boylt? Is there actually a Tervor Boylt?”

“Not by that name. Quinten never knew precisely who he was dealing with.”

That triggers a question for Leon. He thinks for a second and realizes Jarvis stopped saying ‘we’ and started saying ‘they’ when he began talking about the interrogation side of Quinten’s work. “Was he dealing with us?” They Navy does interrogation. They soften up assets. They fund research. They are not, by any extent, one of the major players on that game.

“He was for his official research. He thought he was for his ‘unofficial’ research.”

“That’s why you weren’t brought in until I called you.”

Jarvis smiles slightly. “And why I have ‘orders’ to follow, too.”

“Do I get to know who he was working for?”

“If I knew, I’d tell you. But we can both guess, can’t we?”

“Not a huge list.”

Jarvis shakes his head. “Just two.” He takes another drink. “What can I tell the President?”

“About what I’m going to do?”

“Yes.”

Leon steeples his fingers in front of his face, thinking of how to phrase this. “I only met President Reagan once. He gave a short talk at Annapolis while I was there. I didn’t love a lot of his politics, but there was one thing he said that I’ve always thought made a lot of sense. ‘Trust, but verify.’ When I’m sure the dead man in a Naval apartment has been given as much justice as he can get, I’ll back off.”

Jarvis nods, takes out his phone, sends a text. “I told them that, too. DiNozzo’s going to get a folder soon. We don’t know who was in that room. Don’t know who ‘Captain Trevor Boylt’ really was. But, one thing we do know is who’s on the camera going in and out when the actual murder occurred. And we know the men who killed him are… detained.”
Footage gets Leon’s attention. “We have footage of--”

“Like I said, ‘sanitized.’ You don’t have this footage. But DiNozzo will by this afternoon. Call me when you’ve gone through it.”

Leon nods in agreement. He’s tempted to mention the rest of what’s going on, but if there is someone listening, now isn’t the time, so he reaches for his sandwich and takes a bite. After a few chews he says, “This is good.”

“Thanks,” Leon eats a chip. "It's all in the mayonnaise..." and gets talking about his wife’s mayonnaise-making technique.
“You want to tell me about the deal Khan and ‘Harvey’ have?” Tim asks Khan’s lawyer as he sees him out.

The Lawyer shakes his head. “I don’t know about it.”

“You expect me to believe that Mr. Mercenary in there ran a deal like that without going through you?”

“I’ve been Mr. Khan’s counsel for the last six months. This deal pre-dates me, and I am unaware of its details.”

Tim shakes his head. “Lovely. Why are you new?”

“My predecessor had a heart attack and retired.”

That sounds like a perfectly good reason to get a new lawyer to Tim. “I’ll have our legal department write up the details for his parole. He will get a computer. It will work, and we will monitor everything he does on it. If he behaves, he’ll keep it. If he more than behaves, he’ll get upgrades.”

“Sounds like you might want to cultivate a working relationship?” The Lawyer looks interested in that angle.

“Rule Number Five.” The Lawyer just stares. Tim shakes his head, brushing the comment off. “Let’s see how this works out. But, I’m aware of how difficult it is for people with specialized skills to find work using those skills after time in prison. Might be better to keep the dog on a leash and toss it treats than have it get free and start chewing on the neighbors.”

The Lawyer raises an eyebrow at that. “You have a way with words, Mr. McGee.”

“Thank you. Do you think you have a copy of that deal?”

“I should. I’ll check my files, and if you get a subpoena or if Mr. Khan allows you to see it…”

Tim nods, he knows the routine. “If I need the subpoena, let me know, I’ll get it.”

“Girl talk, huh?” Diane says as she sits down across from Abbi at Elaine’s. That’s the official reason for this chat.

Abbi smirks a little. “We can gossip and braid each other’s hair if you like.”

They both hold an almost serious face for a second and then start laughing, the image of a girly sleepover party hitting them hard with its ridiculous silliness.

“Lord, something big must be up. Is it time to start investing in shotguns and canned goods?” Elaine asks, bringing Diane a Coke and Abbi a black coffee.

“Not quite, yet. I need to talk to an accountant, and look, an accountant,” Abbi says.
Diane tips her head. “For the time being.”

Abbi raises an eyebrow and Elaine’s listening, too. “I’ve been given a promotion. My own auditing department. Got the whole upper-mid west under my command. All I have to do is be willing to relocate to Bismarck, North Dakota.”

“Now that’s just flat out wrong!” Elaine says. “You sit tight, I’ll be back in a sec. We’re taking care of you.”

Diane nods. “Yes. And if I’m not willing to relocate… Times are tough, budgets are tight, we’re overstaffed here in DC. You know the spiel.”

Abbi smiles grimly. She knows the spiel. “Got anything in your office you love?”

Diane shrugs. “Not too much. Nothing I couldn’t send someone in to get for me.”

“Good. Grab your phone and tell your boss what he can stick and where he can stick it. We’ve been wondering how to get you working on this and hiding it. Screw that. I need every good auditor I can get for my legit jobs, and we need someone to run the money for the bigger case on the sly. As of now, you’re working for CGIS.”

Diane starts to laugh at that. She’s still laughing when Elaine’s back with two slices of double chocolate mocha cake with espresso sauce and a scoop of coffee ice cream.

Abbi looks at the desserts and nods. “That’s perfect, Elaine, thanks.”

Diane’s laughter trails off to soft chuckles as she takes a bite of the cake. “It is perfect. This is exactly what I need right now.”

“And what’s got you so happy all of a sudden?” Elaine asks.

“I’m imagining the look on Leroy’s face when she tells him she’s hired me.”

Abbi and Elaine laugh at that, too.

“Trust but verify, huh?” Tony says to Vance.

“That’s the idea.”

They’re sitting in Vance’s office. Tony looks at the manila folder in Vance’s desk. It’s thin, really thin, and has two thumb drives taped to the outside. “Then we’ll do some verifying. You think he was giving you good intel?”

“I think I was being tested, and I think he was telling me what he’s been told. Or what he’s been told to tell me.”

Tony inclines his head. “I’ve got two new, interesting thoughts for you. First of all, Abby found Captain William Frakes, who died a few days ago, he fit the basic description of the infamous ‘Boylt.’”

Leon nods. “Probably not the guy. But dig deeper into him, too. See if there’s a body to even run a
match with.” He thinks for a moment as Tony makes a note. “I’d be really interested in seeing how many operatives Homeland Security and CIA have who match that basic description.”

“I’ll get her on it. Also, Penny’s got an idea floating around. Namely, this is the different sides trying to make sure that crap comes out now, right before the election, and skews the results.”

Leon finds himself reaching for the toothpicks he no longer keeps in his desk. Right now he wants to literally and figuratively chew on that idea.

“Did this kind of stuff happen in ’12?” Tony asks.

Leon shakes his head. “But it wouldn’t have. That one wasn’t even close. We knew how it was going to come down by September.” He thinks some more. “And no matter who wins this one, the current power structure is going to change. Bush won’t keep many of Obama’s crew, and Hillary won’t keep most of them. They’ve got their own teams. They’ll only hold onto people who pull out all the stops for getting them elected, or who know where so many bodies are buried that they can screw them to hard if they get fired.” Leon thinks about that some more. Now he wants one of the cigarettes he replaced with toothpicks. “That would explain a lot of what I’m seeing from Jarvis.”

“He doesn’t want to retire, does he?”

“Can’t imagine he does. One of these days, I should sit down and talk to Penny. I have a feeling that would be a fascinating conversation.” He thinks some more. “In 2008 no one knew enough about me to make trying any play like this with NCIS a good plan.” Then he starts to wonder about Shepard’s death. May of 2008, just as primary season was heating up. He wonders if that was part of a plan to make her and Aviles and by extension, Bush, look bad. From everything he’s seen of her record, The Frog stuff would embarrass the hell out of NCIS if it came to light. But she got into a shootout, and a possibly embarrassing leader hand-picked by the then SecNav to be one of the few women heading a Federal Military Agency, thus polishing the rather lackluster Republican feminist credentials, vanished, and her record with her. “Eight years later they know who I, and my people, are. I think we’re getting played.”

Tony inclines his head. “Thirty-six. Question is, was all the stuff with CGIS part of the game? Were they moving so far behind the scenes that they sprang that audit on Abbi to put something like this in motion, or are they taking advantage of a crisis?”

Leon blows out a frustrated breath. “I don’t know. I’m not even sure who’d be that far back and well-connected to do things like this.”

“I bet Jarvis does.”

Leon nods, slowly. “I bet Jarvis is one.”

“Harvey Wallbanger!” Tim mutters to himself, staring at the visitor’s log FCI Cumberland sent over for Khan. Bad enough the visits are unsupervised and unrecorded, but this fucker didn’t even bother to come up with a believable cover name.

No wonder Khan’s so amused by him.

He gets the warden on the line, fast. “You let ‘Harvey Wallbanger’ come and visit, unsupervised,
one of the most dangerous cyber felons you have?"

“Excuse me?” The Warden isn’t so much not on the same page as Tim, as not in the same book. In fact, given how stupefied he sounds at this question, it’s entirely possible he was watching TV.

“Get the visitor’s log your people just sent me up on your computer. Ajay Khan. Apparently your crew has allowed ‘Harvey Wallbanger’ to visit him for five hours at a go, once every season.”

There’s an embarrassed silence on the other line along with the sound of clicking, followed by quiet cursing.

“I want everything you have on Harvey, starting with how he set foot into your building and got this sort of access and ending with the fingerprints and photos you’re supposed to take of all visitors.”

“I have to che—“

“And if you so much as hint that I can’t have this information, tomorrow, on the front page of The Drudge Report will be an in depth story, with documentation, about how your prison allows convicted cybercriminals to hack into US Government operating systems and plant worms in them.”

“Ten minutes.”

“That’s exactly what I want to hear. Thank you.” Tim hangs up.

“Good lunch, Tony?” Abby asks as he heads down to her lab.

“Yeah. Nice to actually see Ziva when she’s awake.”

Abby smiles. “I know how that works.”

Tony glances around, not seeing anyone else. “I’ve got a present for you.”

“Good.” Abby holds out her hand, taking the baggie, and heading over to grab a pipette and a vial. She’s handling the puke while she says, “I put my devious conspiracy hat on, and another thought hit me, so I decided to try something.”

“What?” Tony’s wincing. The contents of that bag weren’t exactly nice to begin with, and freezing and thawing didn’t improve things.

“Okay. So, they gave us this profile, and I ran it, and it matched Dead Quint.”

“Okay.” He’s following along so far.

“But we couldn’t find Dead Quint on any other database.”

Tony nods. “Still with you.”

Abby grins, enjoying where her devious hat took her, and that it paid off. “What I got wondering is, what if the profile they sent us was a dummy?”

Tony squints at her.
“What if you set up a profile that was designed to automatically match whatever sample you set it against? It'll all digital data. They sent us an electronic copy of ‘Quinten’s’ DNA, not a sample that I could independently run. They know how our systems work, put the data in, and run it, and if it matches, woo hoo party time, and if it doesn’t, go find more samples. But, no one looks at the base data. It’s not like we’re running gels off of it. What they sent us was just numbers of code on a thumb drive, and there’s a lot of different things you can put on a thumb drive.”

Tony’s still squinting at her, but he’s starting to think he gets this. “So… you’re thinking they sent you…”

Abby pulls him to the plasma, and throws up four screen grabs. They’re each the little chart that pops up when there’s a DNA match. “A profile that would match anyone. I ran it against me. Match. I ran it against Tim. Match. I ran it against Zelaz. Match. There in the bottom corner, that’s ‘Dead Quint.’ They’ve run this play before.”

Tony nods. And sighs. “Let me get you up to date on what’s going on with Vance, and what Jarvis says happened.” So Tony does.

Abby listens, not asking too many questions, just absorbing right now. Then she nods her head. “Well, we’ve verified this part of it was complete BS. I’m going to get onto “Boylt” who is apparently not Captain Frakes…”

“But I’ll see if I can get a sample of some sort just to make sure.”

Abby nods at that. “Thorough, good. Speaking of thorough, I didn’t have time to try anyone who was outside of the military, but… Two groups… He’s thinking Homeland and CIA?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m going to check every employee they’ve got on the list. See if I can get a collection of possibilities.”

Tony’s not feeling like that’ll do much. “Probably won’t hit anything. This guy’s likely been wiped out of the system completely.”

Abby nods along with that. “Probably, but not certainly. I’m also going to widen my DNA search to look for parents, siblings, and kids. They think they can hide him, but not from me! McGee and I found Ari, and we will find ‘Boylt!’”

Tony nods at that. “Good.”

“Who’s still in your accounting department?” Diane asks Abbi as they dig into the cake.

“No one above the rank of payment processor, and I’d have gotten rid of all of them but I need someone to pay the bills.”

“All of them?”

“If they worked in my accounting department it means they were either in on it, or so bad at their job
they didn’t notice us hemorrhaging money right and left. I mean… how do you not notice every single bill you’re paying is past due?”

Diane shakes he head. “That’s Federal standard. None of us pay our bills on time. Medicare and Medicaid are so bad, they got a legal exemption so all they have to do is tell you they got the bill within ninety days.”

“Please tell me you’re kidding me,” Abbi says.

“Nope. So, what do you want me doing?”

Abbi thinks. “I haven’t hired anyone on the accounting side because I’ve got the GAO— “

Diane laughs.

“What?”

“You know how combat troops respond to National Guard troops?”

“Yeah…” Diane’s slowly nodding. “Weekend warriors playing at being soldiers.” Though she’s known some fine National Guardsmen, she also knows that it’s a really bad idea for them to get talking about how tough their job is if they’re in a room of Iraq or Afghanistan vets.

“That’s how the IRS sees the GAO, and the CBO is even worse. They’re told ahead of time what result they’re going to get.”

Diane looks at her curiously.

“It’s complicated. Just leave it at this, if you tailor the questions correctly and then specify exactly what information you can use to get your answer, you will always get the answer you set out to find. That’s how the GAO works.”

“That’s not how you work?”

Diane wiggles her fingers. She knows from the outside that it might look that way. “As an institution, we… they work on the premise of ‘You are guilty of something, and we will catch you at it.’ We know we’re the Grand Inquisitors of the modern age, and we’re not shy about it. But we don’t set out with a plan for why you’re guilty, and, we do, on occasion, actually run into people who aren’t guilty, so we let them go.”

“So, the GAO showed up either to make sure everyone knew we were screwing the pooch, or to cover up the rumors of it?”

“And they were going to make sure to only look at whatever would prove whatever position they took. No matter what you had sent it, they would have come up with the correct answer.”

Abbi squints a bit, wondering what answer they were supposed to get. Doesn’t matter now. “And if I set you free on my books and all of the higher ups in my accounting department…”

Diane looks smugly pleased and confident. She takes a satisfied sip of her cola. “They’ll hate me. They’ll fear me. The ones that you’ve got in jail won’t leave. The ones who aren’t in jail better run, because by the time I’m done, you’ll have what you need to indict them. And if, by some miracle or grand accident someone in there was just too damn stupid to be in on it, I’ll let him go.”

“Excellent. And in your free time.” Both Diane and Abbi smile at the idea of ‘free time’ “I’ll give
you a badge, access to a secure system, and free range to find out who’s screwing the pooch in the IRS.”

Diane looks very pleased with that. Then another though hits her. “I’ll be curious to see the jurisdictional issues on that.”

“If Leon and I can’t cover that, we’ll square it with Fornell, who does have jurisdiction, and if he can’t get it, I’m sure I know someone who can get this all over the internet, and do it clean.”

Diane smiles. “Anything else you want before I start rampaging around your system?”

“Here’s an idea McGee and I have bounced around. Apparently the Navy’s noticed that it’s got money, little fees, getting sucked out of payments to retired vets. They just, as best as he can tell, vanish. He and Leon are thinking that instead of the money leaving those pay outs, it never went into it, and instead it’s getting skimmed off, maybe into fraudulent payments to vets who don’t exist or aren’t breathing anymore. If they’re playing it at the Navy, they may be doing it at the Coast Guard, too. So, I’ve got my new pension guy checking to see that all of our payments are going to people who are breathing and qualify for them.

“If he finds ones that aren’t, I want to know where that money goes. Don’t freeze it or stop it, not until we’ve got the whole scope. But we’re thinking that, if you were skimming money off, you’d bounce it into account A, and there are thousands of account As so they’re pretty much untraceable, and then from there, you reconsolidate into account B.”

Diane smiles. “Oh, yeah. I know that scam. Sophisticated people actually bop it into account Q or R.” She sips her coke, finger tapping the edge of the glass… “I haven’t run this at the IRS, not personally, but we’ve done versions of this. None of us have ever thought to see if the scam comes from the inside. But, I do know, every year we get a few ‘Forty-million in refund checks sent to one post office box’ stories. And we still haven’t caught the guys who do it.” She takes another sip. “That’s where we’ll start, checks. Let’s see how many of the damn things you’re sending to the same place, or are being deposited into the same accounts. You sure you don’t want me to put a stop to them as soon as I see them? Killing those checks has saved the IRS a lot of money over the years.”

“Not yet. We’re not going to move on this until we’re ready to take the whole thing out. You know what a hydra is?”

Diane smiles slowly. “I have a teenage daughter who’s into all things geek.” She’s a little irked by that, but it’s what Emily likes, so she tries to be supportive of it. And, granted, some bits of it, like going to watch Captain American movies, are easier to support than others. “Yes, I know what a hydra is. And if you lean over and whisper Hail Hydra to me, I’m sprinting out of here.”

Now Abbi looks confused and Diane waves it off. “Obviously Chucky doesn’t have you over for family movie night.”

Confused slips to irked, from context she knows who Chucky has to be, but she’s not sure why. “Chucky?”

“McGee.”

Abbi’s still looking confused.

“Sterling was missing, I called in Leroy and Tobias, I snapped at Leroy, called him ‘Woodchuck’ and a few minutes later was calling McGee, ‘Chucky,’ you know, the little woodchuck, and that one stuck. Back to your allusion.”
Abbi shakes her head with a small laugh, little woodchuck, okay, yeah, she kind of likes that. Then she takes a sip of her coffee, looks Diane straight in the eye, and says, “With this case, I’m done cutting off heads. We’re not going to strike until we can stab the fucker in the heart and kill it.”

Diane grins, wide, happy, open smile. “Oh, I’m going to like working for you.”

Tony, Draga, Vance, and Bishop are in MTAC, watching the un-edited footage of the hallway outside of the apartment they found “Boylt” in. It’s hard to tell exactly who is who, the footage isn’t great and the angle could be better, but they’re all pretty sure that the guy they’re watching walk down the hall, in a Navy uniform, is “Boylt.”

He heads to the apartment, unlocks it and heads in.

In the original version of this footage, the version they saw the first time, when they were trying to figure out who went in and out, the man who walked in was not wearing a uniform, or, for that matter, African American. But, a man, white, middle aged, did walk in, and in this version, he’s nowhere to be seen.

They fast forward, an hour of nothing on the screen. Then two more men walk down the hall, and then stop at the door. One knocks. There’s a pause. Then Boylt starts to open the door, but from the look of it, realizes this isn’t who’s supposed to be there. He tries to shut the door. The first man, who knocked, shoves the door back, hard, catching Boylt in the head with it, while the second one… Tony thinks it’s a Taser in his hand, zaps Boylt, who drops like a sack of wet oatmeal.

They shove the door open, grab Boylt, drag him in, and shut the door. A few seconds later, they see a neighbor look out, but not seeing anything, he goes back into his place.

Another two hours of nothing. And then, both men walk out of the apartment and stroll out of the building.

None of that was on the version they’d seen before.

There’s nothing else involving that apartment for ten more hours. It’s the next morning when a new man goes to the apartment, puts the key in the lock, and heads in. Also, not on the official version. He doesn’t leave, but an hour after that, a man goes in. He picks the lock, and enters.

That part they had seen before. Apparently he was the first wave of “sanitizing” the situation.

The visitor with the key leaves. Also edited out of the official copy.

The lock picker waits, and waits. Eight more hours go by, and then the delivery people come in. They lug in three huge boxes. When this is happening the door is wide open, and though they can’t see much of the apartment at that time, the little bit they can see looks fine.

“They really were delivery guys,” Bishop adds. “No idea anything was up.”

Draga’s nodding. “And,” he points to the man on the screen, the lock picker, who signed his delivery so badly they have no idea what his name may have been, “He matches the description they gave of who they were delivering to.”

They see the delivery guys lugging out the old fridge, dishwasher, and stove, and then the door closes and stays closed.
Hours later they see the lock picker, in a new outfit, very carefully step out of the apartment. Once again the angle isn’t great, but they can see the blood puddle on the floor and the door smearing through it as it opens and closes.

He leaves, and three hours later Tony and Jimmy are staring into the apartment trying to figure out what to do next.

“What’s on the next one?” Leon asks. They’ve got two video clips.

The second one is… Grim. Tony thinks that the guy they’re looking at is the one with the Taser. It’s hard to tell for sure. But he’s got a similar build, and he’s singing like a blue jay about killing ‘Quinten.’

“That explains why Jarvis thought they thought they got Quinten. That’s not chatter, that’s a confession,” Vance says.

“Uhhh…” Bishop says, thinking.

Draga licks his lips. “This feel wrong to anyone else?”

All three heads nod. This feels like watching a cop show on TV. Real confessions have a feel to them. Actors playing a confession feel different. This feels faked.

“Let’s start with who takes out a hit on a man without knowing something as basic as what he looks like,” Tony says.

“Abby’s got to get eyes on the two digital files, see which one is altered,” Draga says.

Bishop nods. “Yeah. Also, um… where did the body parts go? The delivery guys. The ones we were certain were delivery guys… They picked up the old stuff. We’re still missing a lot of ‘Boylt’ so… It had to go out with the stuff they removed right?”

Everyone’s nodding at that, too.

“So, umm… what kind of delivery company doesn’t start yelling when they notice a pair of arms and legs in the fridge?” Bishop says.

“The kind that immediately junks the old stuff?” Draga asks.

Tony’s shaking his head. “No, it was fairly new, and there’s no way they wouldn’t scavenge out the useful parts. At least, if they were a real company, that’s what they’d do. If we were getting played by another layer of the ‘sanitation crew’ they’d have just tossed the stuff.”

“We printed the door, didn’t get any matches, and I’m not seeing anything on the feed where it got wiped off. Not on the outside,” Draga says. “Sir, could you… um… request that we get to take our own fingerprints from,” he gestures to the man on the screen.

Vance stares at the screen, where everything is just too perfect. “I can make that request. What do you want to bet that we’ve already traded these two for ‘higher value assets’ so we ‘no longer have access to them.’”
Tim’s staring at the document in front of him. It’s Khan’s copy of the deal he’s got. According to this, “Harvey Wallbanger” of the “CIA” had entered into an agreement with Ajay Khan for freelance work in exchange for money and a reduction in sentence.

According to the follow-up paperwork, Kenneth Jalbray, the judge who sentenced Khan, agreed to this set up, gave it his seal of approval, and sent the prison the okay to bend his ‘no computer work of any kind’ ruling.

And according to what the prison sent him, it just went along, all hunkey-dorey on the idea that this unknown, unnamed, unaffiliated dude from… God alone knew where, could just walk on in and do business with Khan.

He’s sitting slumped over, with his forehead pressed to the top of his desk, not sure if he wants to scream or cry, when a quiet knock gets his attention. It’s Manner.

“Bad news?”

Tim straightens up and rubs his eyes. “I’ve had worse. What do you have?”

“We’ve found two more.” He closes the door behind him, and sits on the corner of Tim’s desk, laying his tablet in between them. “That one,” he points to the bit of code on the top, “is yours.”

Tim nods. It is.

“And you’re right, it anyone uses it, it’ll let you know.”

Tim smiles at that, too. “What’s this one?”

“Don’t know yet.” Manner’s fingers hover over the code. It’s… diamond in the rough material. The work of someone with really great ideas but no discipline. Tim wouldn’t have had the idea for this on his own, but seeing it, he can refine it down, make it into something beautiful. “Teeny bopper out of who knows where.”

Tim nods at that. “It does look young.”

“Let me guess, if I can find who wrote it, you want to give him a job offer?”

Tim raises an eyebrow. “Let’s see who it is first, but…” he looks back down… “Tell me you don’t want to know who came up with that.”

Manner rolls his eyes. “He’s sixteen, hasn’t left his bedroom in two weeks, probably smells like it, too, and thinks dick jokes are the funniest thing ever. No, I don’t want to meet him. In ten years, when he’s potty trained and knows how to wash properly, then I’ll want to meet him.”

Tim laughs at that. “We all started somewhere.”

“One baby is enough. Don’t need a department full of them.”

Tim glances at his screen. “Our baby did a good job. She’s the one who found the intranet worm.”

Manner nods, grudgingly. “Yeah, she did.”

“Wanna guess who she just outed? I know you know him.”
Manner looks like he’s in pain at this idea. “Who?”

“Ajay Khan.”

Manner is pale. He started off having lost the melanin lottery and works underground all day. Tim didn’t think it would even be possible for Manner to go paler, but he does at the mention of that name. “He’s in prison! He’s…” Manner’s eyelid is twitching. Tim’s seen him pissed but, he’s so angry he’s about to stroke out. “That’s the fucker that got Jim killed. What… How… I… No. NO! He is not writing code again. He is…”

“Working for the CIA supposedly. I’ve got it.”

Manner’s breathing hard and fast.

“Steve, calm down. I know how it feels when the knife in your back twists. I’ve got this. Go work or go home, but calm yourself down.”

Manner nods, stiffly, and turns and exits, fast.

Tim sighs; he’d forgotten that Khan wasn’t just an annoyance with a computer. He rubs his temples. He’s already made the one deal, but any chance of working with him on any other level is shot to shit. ‘Don’t waste good…’ He’s good. Really good. And it’s better to keep the mercenary in your pocket than at your throat, but… No one who was here in ’12 would ever work with him, or trust Tim, if he hired Khan for anything.

He sighs again, and then looks back at the agreement in his hand. Given what Khan’s current project is supposed to do, he’s got an idea of who’s running it, and it sure as hell isn’t he CIA. He pulls his phone out of his pocket. “Hey, Bishop. Can you talk?”

“McGee wants to talk.” Bishop says to Tony, covering her phone.

“No problem. Go talk, and while you’re at it, get him to take you to see Penny.”

“Sure? I could be…”

“Go, do. Talk to her. Talk to McGee. Draga and I are going to go through this with a fine tooth comb and see if we can find any independent confirmation of anything we’ve been given.”

Bishop puts her phone back to her ear. “I’ve got time to talk. And a request from Tony that you take me to meet your grandmother.”

Tim’s eyebrows shoot up on his end of the phone. He shakes his head for a second and then says, “Go get a car. I’ll give her a call.”

It occurs to Tim as he’s heading to the motor pool and texting his grandmother, that he should probably get his butt upstairs and find out what’s going on a tad more often than he’s been doing
lately.

Then he remembers they went after Quinten last night, not six days ago, and that maybe it’s excusable that he hasn’t gotten the details, yet.

Bishop’s leaning against the side of the black Mercury, waiting for him.

She tosses him the keys, which because she’s tossing them a bit high to his right side, he misses, and has to crouch down to grab after they clink against the concrete.

“Oh, God, sorry McGee. I forgot.”

“That that side isn’t working so hot, or that I’m a lefty,” he says from the ground.

She’s wincing as he straightens up with the keys. “I didn’t know the one and forgot the other.”

Tim nods, keys in hand, and she quickly opens the driver’s side door for him. “I can get my own doors. I’m, mostly, all healed up. Just regaining speed and strength now.”

“Oh, God, sorry McGee. I forgot.”

“Okay.” She gets in on her side and there’s a quiet moment as they pull out.

“So… What did you want to talk about?” Bishop asks. She’s seen Tim around, talked to him a few times, and he’s pulled her down to work on a few cases, but they’ve never really worked together, let alone spent any time alone with each other.

“All the stuff you’re not supposed to say about your old job.”

Bishop looks uncomfortable. “Uh… Most of it’s classified.”

“Get ready to declassify. I’m not asking as a co-worker, I’m asking as the Director of Cybercrime for NCIS pursuing an active investigation into an attack on our system, and if you like, I will get a court order to cover you.”

She nods. “Just make sure you get it before you act on anything I tell you. I’d prefer not to go to prison.”

He hands Bishop his cell phone. “Hit Gibbs’ number and put it on speaker.”

Bishop does, and a moment later they hear, “You got something to add to my reading list?”

Tim smiles at that. “Nah. Need a favor.”

Gibbs sounds interested as he says, “What’s up?”

“Can you get Bleach to write a subpoena to cover everything Eleanor Bishop might tell me about her time at the NSA.”

Tim can feel Gibbs nodding, and starting to wonder what happened in the five hours since he’s seen Tim.

“I’ll ask.”

“Thanks, Jethro. Gonna need it dated yesterday.”

“I’d bet. I’ll see him as soon as I can.”
“Yes. Thanks. If you need a ride, I can drive…” Tim thinks about when it is, and how long this conversation with Penny should go, “round about dinnertime. You, me, Kelly, maybe Abby if she’s free, we could get supper with Bleach and Mrs. Bleach.”

“Nah. I think Duck’s free, maybe we’ll be old, retired guys together.”

“Sounds like a plan. Let me know when you’ve got it.”

“Will do.” And then they’ve got a dial tone.

“Can he do that?” Bishop asks. “I mean, Bleach is a judge, right?”

Tim nods. “Old Marine buddy of Jethro and Abbi’s.”

“Abby was in the Marines?” Bishop looks stunned by that idea.

Tim laughs for a second realizing which Abby Bishop’s thinking of. “No. Jethro’s Abbi, Director Borin…” Bishop knows who that is. “Bleach was one of her instructors and he came up with Jethro.”

“Oh.” Bishop looks like the world makes sense again. “So, I mean… he can give me a piece of paper to let me talk.”

Tim shakes his head. “If what I think is happening is happening, by the time we’re done with this, no one will care if you talked.”

Bishop’s looking disturbed by that. “Okay. What do you think is happening?”

“As part of letting you guys really do your jobs, I’m making sure our systems are clean.” He turns left when the GPS sends him on a traffic avoiding detour. “We’re not clean. Not by a long shot. One of the worms hiding in our code was written by someone I knew.”

“Who?”

Tim shakes his head, annoyed at this whole thing. “Ajay Khan. He’s got a distinct style, and should be out of the business because he’s a convicted cyber-felon.”

“He hacked us? I thought… How’d he get through the firewall?”

“Good questions.” Tim smiles, not a happy gesture. “Here’s a better one, how’d he do it from his cell? Without any computer access? Neat trick, right?”

That is a neat trick, but that’s not immediately making Bishop understand why Tim wants to talk to her about the NSA. “Wait, why are you talking to me about this?”

“Because I talked to him. And he’s got a buddy. This buddy’s showed up during visiting hours, and offered him money and time off his sentence if he did computer work, on paper, for him. This buddy got a judge to sign off on Khan’s work. This buddy is calling himself Harvey Wallbanger and claims to work for the CIA. And from what Khan tells me, this buddy is the guy who had access to all of the Federal Intranet Servers’ code, and he just plopped Khan’s code into it, and when we all updated, he got through my firewall because we intentionally downloaded the software that he’d just slotted that worm into, and now someone, who claims to be the CIA has access to all of our electronic communications.”

Bishop thinks about that for a moment. “Okay. I mean… Yeah, I wouldn’t put that past the CIA,
“But you’d assume they wouldn’t just swagger in with that bad of a fake name and say it’s them?”

“Yeah. They’re spooks for a reason. They don’t exist. That’d be hidden behind six shell corporations and coming from outside the US.”

Tim nods, satisfied with Bishops analysis of the situation. “Now, let me tell you about Harvey’s current job for Khan. He’s building a way in and out of Norton Anti-Virus, so he can put a little spy bot in there that’ll go after people who are interested in things like cryptocurrency, and government conspiracy theories.”

Now Bishop looks concerned. “Yeah. Not the CIA. Not exclusively. I suppose it’s possible Harvey works for whoever gives him a job. He might be an off-the-books talent broker. They do exist, and agencies use them to get things/skills they’re not supposed to have. But… That plan… Yeah, that was one of NSAs.”

She’s looking embarrassed. “Stuff like that is part of why Jake and I left. It was a working paper when I was there. The thing about working papers is, we’re allowed to come up with any ideas we like. They don’t have to be legal, because a paper is just that, a paper. It’s just an idea. It’s all about seeing what might be good or what might work. Jake saw it, and shot it down, sent it back with the ‘yeah, we’d get good info, but this is illegal’ note. So, it wasn’t supposed to ever, you know, exist.”

“What was the paper about?”

“An idea for a joint job with the IRS. Take something almost everyone has, an operating system say, in the paper the idea was to get it shoved into Windows, and stick a little tracker in there. It would look for hints as to who was trying to avoid paying taxes, hide money. It would also look for anyone who might be a home grown security issue. The idea was that if they found the right combination of interests the NSA would flag the person for the IRS, and then they’d show up as a ‘random audit’ and from there… Freeze assets, keep eyes on them, take their kids, stick them in jail, whatever.”

“Get a list of people who might cause problems and keep eyes on them without a warrant and without them having broken any laws. Then jump the second they break a law.”

Bishop nods, looking even more disturbed. “That’s the first level. What happens when a bunch of delicately-balanced, paranoid-types find out they’re being spied on?”

Tim winces, realizing where this goes next. “Oh, that’s gonna get nasty.”

“A bunch of good scapegoats, ugly cases of whack-jobs acting out… Lot of media attention. Lots of ‘we’ve got to do something,’ makes sure that different laws the people who wrote this were in favor of get passed. We… NSA gets more power and funding so it can do a better job ‘cracking down on extremists with guns.’”

Tim purses his lips in annoyance. “This sounds like every one of those ‘false flag’ stories you see those morons put out when there’s a mass shooting.”

“I know.” Bishop shakes her head. She hates sounding like the conspiracy nuts. “Like I said, working paper. Look at the world around you, figure out how to take advantage of it. Best of my knowledge, right now, false flags are few, far between, and usually the brain child of some twit with more ambition than sense, and we put down as soon as someone notices them. But a lot of people already believe in them, and if you can push them in the right direction… NSA’s working papers explore everything, but between Snowden, and it looking like they were getting ready to do more
than explore, Jake and I left. NSA was getting too close to too many edges.”

“So, the few bad apples made you jump out of the basket?”

Bishop shakes her head, tapping her finger against the armrest. “It’s not… It’s not just a few bad apples… I mean… Okay. Let me back up. I’m not saying everyone, or even one in ten is actively causing trouble. It’s just… Say one percent really are bad apples. At the NSA, that translates to about 500 people. So, that’s 500 people who are willing to do whatever they can to gain power; doesn’t matter as long as they come up on top. Almost another twenty percent are true believers. It’s not that they want bad things to happen, but they just don’t care about means because they’re all about the ends. That 10,000 people who are willing to do anything to make sure there’s never another 9/11. And then there ones who want to make sure the apples all look nice and shiny no matter how rotten they may be because they’d rather chew tinfoil rather than let anyone see there are bad apples. Let’s call that another 500 actively covering, hiding, and rearranging the apples to make sure the bad ones never see the light of day. Then there’s the people who are just apathetic and clocking in until they get their thirty years in. We both know that’s way more than ten percent.

“Next thing you know your basket stinks and is filled with worms trying to eat you alive. If you’re smart you get out before the worms get you. So, we had a long chat, about who we were and what we could do, and what we wanted to do. Why we got into it in the first place. Jake joined a group that specializes in watchdogging the Feds. He files FOIA requests all day on behalf of people who feel like they’re being kept in the dark. I’m here. The worms are busy chewing on the people we used to work for.”

“That’s grim,” Tim says.

“That’s the real world.”

He sighs. “Do you remember who wrote the paper?”

“No, but Jake might. Only reason I remember it was he got home that night and just about rolled his eyes out of his head he was so frustrated that that paper even got to him. According to him it should have been blatantly obvious to anyone reading it that it wasn’t legal. But he’s not going to tell you, or me, who wrote it without a properly written subpoena. He takes the agreements we signed a lot more seriously than I do.”

“Then ask him if he remembers, and if he does, have him draft up a version of whatever it is that would salve his conscious about telling, and I’ll see if I can get Bleach to stick his name on it.”

Bishop nods and begins texting. Tim stares at the traffic ahead and check the GPS on his phone. He sighs at that, too. “I think we could get out and walk to American faster than I’ll drive it.”

Bishop looks up. “How far?”

“Three miles there, three back.”

“Find a park-- Wait, can you do that?”

Tim shakes his head. “I’m not up for a six mile walk yet. If we’re still inching along when we’re within a mile, I’ll find somewhere to park and we’ll walk the rest.”
When Bishop gets done texting Jake, she looks up at Tim and says, “He does remember, and the subpoena he wants will hit your inbox by morning.”

“Tell him thanks.”

More rapid texting, then she looks back up from the phone. “He says, ‘no problem.’”

Once she’s tucked her phone back into her jacket pocket, Tim asks, “So, not that I mind visiting Penny, but… What are you thinking with this? You’re not planning on interrogating her, are you? ‘Cause, that’s not a good plan.”

Bishop shakes her head. “What do you know about what we’re doing?”

“Last night we’re having dinner, Penny mentions that she knows a Daniel Quinten, and that he doesn’t look anything like the guy you’ve got in the morgue, or work the same job, and Tony jumps up and gets moving. You’ve got him in protective custody, right?”

Bishop’s head thuds back against the headrest. “It’s a good thing we’ve got lots of traffic.” She then gets Tim up to date on their case.

By the time she’s done, Tim’s biting his lip and nodding. “And you want to talk to Penny to try and get confirmation on anything, maybe see if she knows anything about what Quinten was doing ‘off the books’?”

Bishop’s shaking her head, watching the street roll by, they’re getting closer to the American University campus, and anywhere Tim can stick the car, they’re parking. “Right now, I’d settle for was Quinten the kind of guy who’d even take that sort of off the books work.”

Tim nods. “Okay.” That seems like a decent starting point. “Um… don’t be coy with the details. We treat Penny like she’s read in on anything we touch. She was married to an Admiral, all her sons went high in the Navy, and none of them were ever shy about telling her what was up. We haven’t shifted that trend. Everything that happens, she, Ducky, and Gibbs are in on.”

“Older and wiser minds looking at the issues?”

Tim shrugs a bit. “That’s part of it. Also, it’s hard to have family dinners and not talk shop.”

“Family dinners at your place must be a hoot,” Bishop says dryly.

Tim smiles, a little wryly. “We love them.”

“Family dinners at my parent’s place is heavy on the football and light on the intrigue.”

Tim laughs a little. “Baseball. Tony follows the Yankees and they’re doing well. Jethro’s Pirates have a shot, so he’s poking Tony with that. And a month ago they were both ribbing Jimmy about the Nationals. And come February, it’s all basketball all the time. Google DiNozzo, Ohio State, Basketball. He doesn’t crow about it so much now, but back in the day he was a pretty hot college ball star.”

“Tony?” Bishop doesn’t look like she believes the idea that Tony could have been good at basketball.

Tim nods. “I’ve watched March Madness, he’s played in it.”

Bishop’s eyebrows jump high. “Huh.”
Tim spies a spot and pulls in, a good three quarters of a mile from Penny’s building. “Okay, let’s go see Penny.”

“Why ‘Penny?’” Bishop asks as the climb the stairs to her office on the fourth floor.

Tim’s breathing hard, and remembering why his foot does not want to be doing too much of this, yet. “It’s her name.”

“Okay.” Bishop stops at the top of the steps, letting Tim rest. “Should you still have crutches?”

“No. I’m fine.”

Yeah, you look it is very clear on her face.

“Won’t get better if I don’t do stuff like this.” He appreciates getting to stop and stand still, though. “My whole life she’s been Penny. None of us call her ‘Grandma’ or anything like that. Molly and Kelly call her Penny, too, and so will all the other babies.”

“Do they call Gibbs… Jethro?”

“Nope. He’s Pop. At least, for my kids. He’s Uncle Jethro to Jimmy’s. He’ll be Pop or whatever Ziva likes to Tony’s.” Tim tentatively rests a bit of weight onto his right foot. It’s holding up okay. Bishop sees it and starts to head down the hall. He follows and then, because he’s the one who knows where they’re going, takes the lead.

He knocks on the dark wood door with the frosted glass window that says LANGSTON on it. No answer.

“She said she might run late and to just head in.” Tim opens the door and gestures for Ellie to head in.

He happily sits down in one of Penny’s visitor chairs, and Bishop hovers around, looking at what Penny’s filled her workspace with.

It’s a small office, a good half of which is filled with her desk and visitor’s chairs. The wall in front of the desk is covered in bookshelves filled with journals and small souvenirs from her trips. The wall behind her computer has pictures of places she’s been, and their family. The wall to the left has the window, and a collection of different awards and diplomas Penny’s gathered over the years. The wall to the right has the door.

Bishop drifts over to look at the pictures. “God, she’s been everywhere and knows everyone, doesn’t she?”

Tim nods.

“Is that President Kennedy?”

“Probably. They were family friends. He served under my grandfather for a few months during World War II, and they were all part of the same Irish-immigrants-who-did-well-for-themselves-out-of-Boston community.”
“Wow. That’s Nelson Mandela!”

Tim nods again. “Yep. Jane Fonda and John Lennon are probably on that wall somewhere, or if they aren’t, it’s because those pictures are in storage.” Bishop steps over a bit. “Oh my God, is this your wedding?”

Tim can’t see the picture because Bishop’s directly in front of it. “Am I wearing a mourning suit in that shot?”

Bishop giggles a little. “Yeah. It’s you and her and Abby, all in Victorian clothing.”

“Yep, that’s my wedding. Look around some, you’ll find Tony and Ziva’s, too. I think Jimmy managed to grab a fast shot of Ducky proposing, too.”

“Oh, I see it.” Bishop smiles, looking at the shot of Ducky slipping a ring onto Penny’s finger. “She’s got shots of all you guys here, doesn’t she?”

“Only one I’m missing is Sean’s ultrasound,” Penny says, sweeping in, kissing Tim’s cheek, and gesturing for him not to get up.

He squeezes her hand. “Twenty week visit is next month. We’ll have good ones, soon.”

“Wonderful.” Penny extends her hand, “And you’re Ellie?”

Bishop takes it. “I am Ellie.”

Penny stands next to her. “A long life summed up in a few images.” She picks up one that’s framed. “This is my favorite one so far. This is Jethro’s house, and it’s last year’s Christmas party.” Tim hasn’t seen the photo in question, but he knows what has to be in it. Their whole family, or as close as they could have gotten in December. Penny passes the shot over to him when Bishop’s done with it. She must have taken it from the dining room. Near the mantle, Ducky, Gibbs, and Senior are talking. Molly’s riding Gibb’s shoulders. He, Abby, Jimmy, and Breena are all on the sofa. He’s got Kelly in his arms, and Breena’s nursing Anna, leaning against Jimmy, looking pooped. (Actually they both look exhausted, but that’s not exactly uncommon for parents of a two week old baby.) Ziva’s leaning over, behind the sofa, stroking Anna’s cheek. Tony’s got his hand gently resting on Ziva’s back, but he’s looking at Senior, saying something to the group at the fireplace.

“Only one we’re missing is Abbi,” he says, handing it back to Penny.

Penny nods. “Next Christmas. At the house. All of us.”

Tim smiles. “Next Christmas.” He hands the shot back.

“So, I assume you’re here on business, rather than Tim’s taking you down memory lane and tattling on Tony,” Penny says as she gestures to the other visitor’s chair for Bishop.

Bishop nods. “Yeah. Though I can’t wait to tell Draga about the pictures. Just, to be accurate, are you wearing a kilt in that shot?” she asks Tim.

“It’s been known to happen. He’s already seen me in one.”

Bishop looks surprised. Though, Tim doesn’t know if she’s surprised about the kilt or the fact that Draga knows and hasn’t told her, yet.

“We didn’t have our usual Fourth of July party this year. Next year, I’m sure we will, and Christmas
for that matter, and you and Jake will be invited.”

“I can’t wait to see that.”

“It’ll be fun. But, back to business. Bishop would like to know more about Daniel Quinten.”

Penny’s eyes get that look. Tim knows what she’s asking him without saying, and he nods slightly, letting her know that he would appreciate it if she would skip the BS and just start talking. Penny actually looks a bit surprised by that, like she didn’t expect Tim to want to know. Which makes him wonder what the hell he just walked into.

And then, as soon as Bishop asks, “So, how do, did you know Quinten? Were you close?” he finds out why.

Penny smiles. “We were close, a long time ago, and remained friendly after.”

“How close?” Bishop blushes a little. “I’m not being prurient, I need to know if you knew him well enough to have an idea of what sort of man he was.”

“In the late-nineties I was a professor at St. John’s College. My specialty is bio-medical-engineering, but I thought it would be fun to do a few years with the Great Books program, so I was teaching Biology as understood by Mendel and others of his ilk. In the late-nineties Daniel was a medical student at John’s Hopkins…” Tim’s eyes start to go wide, “we’d met at a talk I was giving, hit it off, and would see each other a few times a month.”

Now his eyes are very wide. “We used to see each other a few times a month during the late-nineties when I was an undergrad at John Hopkins.”

Penny shrugs a bit. “Lunch with you, dinner with him.”

Tim winces. “God, tell me he was in his forties…”

Penny raises an eyebrow at him, daring him to be insulted.

“Thirties?” Tim says, still slightly wincing.

Penny shakes her head. “Hush up, you. You’ve never blinked at Gibbs and Abbi.”

“Abbi’s older than I am, not even twenty years younger than Gibbs. She’s a real adult. He was young enough to be your grandson.”

“But he wasn’t my grandson.”

“Oh God.”

“Timothy,” Penny gives him a long look, “just remember what they say about people in glass houses.”

Tim’s eyes go wide again, but from a completely different direction, as he gets the reaction he’s having to this information is exactly the kind of thing he doesn’t want aimed at him for what he’s doing with Jimmy and Breena. He shuts up, fast, nodding.

Bishop in the meantime has been watching this conversation with great interest and is now intensely wondering if Tim had his own Mrs. Robinson or something in his past.

“To answer your question and horrify my grandson, yes, I knew Daniel, quite well. And we
remained friends, and then colleagues as things cooled down between us. I’d seen him last around 2005, and we’d talk every year or so, since.”

“Good. We’re… having some troubles getting Dr. Quinten nailed down. Let me tell you what we know…” And with that Bishop starts to fill Penny in.

It doesn’t take long to get to the point where Penny’s shaking her head. As soon as Bishop starts explain using what his baseline tests had down about how to nudge brain chemistry to induce anxiety and depression, Penny says, “No, no, no, NO! That’s not Daniel. He’d help anyone who needed it with PTSD. He’d beg, borrow, or steal to get the funding he needed to make sure the people he saw got treated. That’s why I’d send my students to him. He’d treat first and worry about payment later. And he published everything he came up with. He was a firm believer in the idea that if the government paid for you work, everyone got to benefit from it, but there’s no possible way he’d turn it around.”

“No even to get intel to save lives and stop attacks? End up with fewer people with PTSD?” Bishop asks.

“No. Never! His father came back from Desert Storm broken from it. And in ’93 he killed himself. There is no way he’d use that as a weapon or interrogation technique. It just wouldn’t happen. Ever. At all.”

Bishop and Tim look at each other, and then to Penny. “I think you need to find out who your mystery man is,” Penny says.

Bishop nods. “Yeah. I’m thinking that there might be a really obvious reason why they were so painfully far off about who they ended up killing.”

Tim nods. “Quinten was never really the target.”

“We never found out why he didn’t make that meet.” Bishop grabs her phone and shows Penny a picture. “I don’t suppose you recognize him?”

It’s a bad picture, from a bad angle. But it’s the only shot they’ve got of “Trevor Boylt” until they get the facial reconstruction done.

Penny takes Bishop’s phone and shakes her head. “No. But the kind of man who can do what you’re talking about, that’s an awfully small club. I’d start looking at Daniel’s co-authors on different papers, and then start asking them. It’s certain that one of them at least went to school with this man.” Penny hands the phone back. “Where’s Quinten now? Not with you obviously, or you’d be talking to him.”

“He said he couldn’t say what he was doing on pain of treason, and when the President ordered it, he surrendered himself to the Secret Service. When we last saw him, a bit before 1:00 this morning, he was vanishing into an armored car.”

Penny shuts her eyes and licks her lips, taking a deep breath. “I assume you wouldn’t appreciate it if I made a call about him.”

“If you make a call, someone will know we’re not following orders to forget this case ever existed,” Bishop says. “It’ll happen sooner or later, but the longer we can work in secret the better.”

Penny nods and swallows, hard. “And by now, whatever is going to happen to Daniel has happened to him.”
Bishop smiles weakly. “Probably. Tony asked him if he was sure they’d keep him alive. He thought they would.”

“I hope he’s right.” Penny swallows again. “Let me know when I can make that call. I’ve got a friend who will let me know if he’s okay.”

Tim stands up, and kisses Penny’s cheek. “As soon as this one’s out in the open or put to bed, I’ll let you know.”

Penny nods, then glances at her clock. She sighs. “Class in ten. Got to get across campus.” She stands up too, offering Bishop her hand. “Ellie, lovely meeting you. Friday, Tim?”

“I think so. We’ll see if work cooperates.”

Penny nods, hugs him, and the three of them leave.
Who Has Access

Leads… Almost too many leads. Bishop’s putting ideas and thoughts together as Tim drives them back from meeting Penny. She’s also, with the help of her phone, tracking down Quinten’s background.

“Looks like Penny’s right about Quinten’s dad. Air Force pilot. Shot down and captured, held prisoner for three months, came home with severe PTSD, spent the next two years in and out of VA hospitals and institutions. Two involuntary holds before he killed himself.”

Tim winces at that.

Bishop nods. “Undergrad at University of Pennsylvania, MD at Johns Hopkins, post doc work at Harvard and the Sorbonne, and then back to Johns Hopkins. He’s got a list of publications on PTSD, depression, and anxiety in adolescents and young adults the length of my arm. He hasn’t published anything new in the last three years, though.”

“His new job keeping him busy?”

That’s a possibility, but Bishop sees something that strikes her as more likely. “He also got tenure and may have decided to relax some.”

Tim nods at that, too.

Bishop’s tapping the arm rest, and then grabs her go bag and starts to rifle through it. “I need to think, and to think I need food.” She pulls out a bag of honey roasted peanuts. “You want one?”

Tim shakes his head. “I’m fine.”

“Maybe you could put me on speed dial?” Bleach says as he rolls back into his quarters. Gibbs and Ducky were waiting for him outside of his court room when his session adjourned.

“Might save time,” Gibbs replies. “Murray Harland, this is Donald Mallard, another of my old friends.”

Bleach, nods at Ducky, offering his hand. “And let me guess, Don, you’re up to your eyebrows in this case?”

Ducky smiles and nods. “Feel free to call me Ducky, everyone does, and I retired a few months ago, so I’m only into this up to my elbows. Though today, I’ve been called upon to render assistance as a chauffeur.”

Bleach looks amused by all of this. “Ducky Mallard?”

Ducky nods. “Yes.”

Bleach shakes his head. That’s a hell of a nickname. He looks to Gibbs. “And they still don’t want
you driving yet?”

Gibbs shakes his head. “Still on pain meds.”

“Don’t see the O2 canister, this time.”

“Getting better in leaps and bounds,” Gibbs says dryly. It’s sitting in the car. Only reason it’s not with him is he doesn’t have a badge anymore and neither he nor Ducky wanted to deal with the hassle that would be have been involved in getting oxygen into a court house.

Bleach smiles wryly. “Oh, I’m sure. He ever tell you about the time he pulled a four mile hike on a broken foot?”

Ducky glances at Gibbs. “No. Though, and I’m sure this will amaze you, I am in no way surprised to hear it.”

“Wasn’t like I had a lot of options. When you land wrong on your foot four miles from camp, you’ve still got to get back.”

“Of course.” Ducky says. “And let me guess, not only do you have to get back, but you have to do it without any sort of crutch, or leaning on anyone else?”

Bleach chuckles at that, then shakes his head, realizing what he’s just learned about Grave versus Gibbs. “You turned into a real hard ass, didn’t you?”

Gibbs shrugs a little.

“He let the medic tape and splint his foot, and yes, he was willing to lean on several of us, but he didn’t slow his pace down.”

Ducky shakes his head gently at that story. And if Bleach is realizing more about where Gibbs ended up, Ducky is getting a better idea of where he started.

“So, besides old times, what brings you in?” Bleach asks.

“Need more help.”

“Of course. And what do you need help with this time?”

“Tim’s pumping an ex-NSA data-wonk for classified information.”

Bleach sighs. “Don’t suppose you can give me anything more specific about what your boy’s up to?”

Gibbs shrugs again. “He’s talking to Ellie Bishop, asking about the stuff she used to do, and she’s gonna need some cover for telling him about it.”

“Do you even know what the case is about?”

Gibbs shakes his head. “I know it’s involved with the rest of this crap. I know she was at the NSA. I know Tim runs cybercrime, so if he’s asking it’s got something to do with computers.”

“And you know he’s trying to make sure that the NCIS computer systems are clean,” Ducky adds.

“Thanks, Duck. And I know he’s working on making sure that no one’s hacked a door into a system that shouldn’t have a door in it.”
“I think they call them, ‘back doors,’ Grave.”

Ducky raises an eyebrow at the nickname. Bleach sees it. “Back in the day, he was Grave. What are they calling you now?”

“Mostly Gibbs or Jethro.”

“Occasionally Pop or Uncle Jethro.”

Bleach nods at that. “I met the sweetie calling him, Pop.” Bleach thinks for a moment, staring at his keyboard. “Call your boy, I’m going to need something more specific to go on. I can’t give him a spill your guts about everything subpoena.”

Gibbs nods and grabs his phone.

“I need something more specific than everything Bishop knows about everything from her days at NSA,” Gibbs says when Ellie hits the call button on Tim’s phone.

“Okay.” Tim looks at Ellie. “How about everything Eleanor Bishop knows about… What was it called?” Tim asks Ellie.

“NSA/IRS joint spyware operation, working paper.”

“What she said,” Tim adds. “Or, if you want to wait until morning Jake’s going to send me a very legal looking version of the subpoena he wants, and if it covers both of them, all the better.”

They hear a bit of conversation in the background followed by Gibbs saying, “Who’s Jake?”

“Mr. Bishop,” Tim replies.

“Mr. Malloy,” Bishop says.

“Oh, sorry,” Tim tells her. “Anyway, he ran point on legal for that paper, and remembers who wrote it, but won’t tell me without jumping through the right hoops.”

“He’s a lawyer, so he knows what those hoops are,” Ellie adds.

They hear a bit of shuffling, then Bleach’s voice. “How about, instead of all of this going through third parties, you have him send me exactly what he needs, and I write it up and send it back to him. Then you guys can all have breakfast and get it sorted out?”

Tim nods. He can feel Gibbs doing it, too.

“Will do… Mr…”

“Harland.” Tim offers. “Your Honor works, too.”

“Murray’s fine,” Bleach adds.

“Thank you, Murray. Tim has your address?” Tim nods. “I’ll make sure it gets to you as soon as
possible,” Bishop says.

“Wonderful. Go get them!” And then they’ve got dead air.

When Tim sits down at his desk he’s got a lot of emails waiting for him. He’s about to start opening them and reading when he remembers Khan’s worm.

So he takes his phone, which is not on the NCIS intranet, and starts pulling up his emails like that. Not a great protection, but he needs to read what’s he’s got, and he’s legally not allowed to use a different system for his communications.

He thinks about that for a moment and then writes a quick note to himself to find out who was behind that law.

Then he opens up the one he’s most interested in. It’s from Warden Harrison and has the header, “Harvey.”

Pictures, contact information, finger prints, when he visited, who he’s visited (not just Khan), how often. Everything we’ve got on Harvey is in here.

Tim fires off a quick Thank You! and then, grabbing his phone, stands up and decides now would be a great time to visit the Lab.

No matter what’s in there, he knows he wants to make sure those fingerprints get run against their own data. See where else they may have shown up.

So, phone in his pocket, he heads toward Abby, and gets stopped two feet from his door.

“You’re back!” Brand is looking really excited.

“I’m back, Brand. What do you need?”

She’s grinning from ear to ear and grabs his hand, pulling him over to the corner of the room where she, Ngyn, and Howard tend to camp out and work things together.

“We found who put the worm in Director Vance’s calendar, and you will never, ever believe it!”

She’s all but bouncing up and down with this. Ngyn’s looking pretty embarrassed to have him hovering around, and Howard just smiles at him.

“Aren’t you supposed to still be home for another two hours?”

“Can’t, couldn’t, too many ideas!”

“Good ones,” Howard chimes in with.

Well, Tim’s not about to call off anyone who’s still coming up with good ideas and bouncy and happy on the job. Not like he didn’t marry an older, Goth version of this level of enthusiasm. “Well, what do you have?” (He almost says, “Wha’d’ya got?” but stops before it comes out because that’s just too Gibbs.)
“Mossad,” Ngyn says quietly, blushing.

“We checked six times!” Howard says. “Couldn’t believe where our tracks kept coming back to. And, not just Mossad, but…”

“It’s their Director’s private computer!” Brand cuts in with a very excited stage whisper.

Tim tries to keep his face straight. “How long has it been there?”

“Oh, God, like a really long time. Years,” Brand says.

“Why, does that mean something to you?” Howard asks.

Tim nods, and smiles. “Yeah. What’s good for the goose is good for the gander. Just kill it. Don’t tell anyone else about it. I’ll let Leon know you found it.”

“Boss?” Howard asks.

Tim shrugs a little. “Sometimes you end up with tit for tat. Just kill it and then write up how they got into the system, and kill that if it’s still possible.”

“On it, Boss!” Howard says.

“Great! I’m off to the Lab, let me know if something else jumps up.”

They wave as he heads off.

He’s texting Leon as he heads to the Lab, making sure he knows what’s up with the worm in his calendar. Tim’s pleased to see who put that there, because of all the people who could have hacked Leon’s calendar, Eli David, and apparently Orli… no she’s been out for a while, he’s not sure who’s in charge of Mossad, now, having that access is annoying but not horrific.

And it’s not like he didn’t do it to them, first.

But, because he’s been texting with Leon, he doesn’t get to open that folder on his email until he’s actually in the lab, standing next to Abby.

“Tim?”

“I know. Believe it or not, I’ve actually got work for you.”

“Really?” She’s giving him her, I don’t believe it look.

“Really.” He gets her up to date on “Harvey Wallbanger” (that involves sniggering from Zelaz and Corwin, both of whom think that’s the worst cover name they’ve ever heard.) “Anyway, I’m supposed to have a picture of him, and fingerprints in here, and I was hoping you could run them for me.”

Abby’s grinning, and both Zelaz and Corwin look interested, too.

Tim hooks his phone into the plasma, and opens his email, and then he and Abby just stare at the picture of “Harvey.”

“Holy, Hell!” she says in a whisper.

Tim’s feeling flabbergasted. He knows it’s got to be a coincidence, but… “Shit!” He blinks.
Zelaz and Corwin aren’t in on it, so they don’t have a clue. “You guys know him?” Corwin asks.

“No… No. Um… Okay, remember when I said Bishop thought he might be some sort of deal maker or talent broker?” Tim says. “You know, the guy who sets up the deals behind the scenes that no one’s supposed to know about?"

“Yeah,” Zelaz replies.

“Okay, this is stupid, but… He looks exactly like the guy who plays the demon who makes all the deals on Supernatural,” Abby says.

“There’s no way… I mean…” Tim’s looking at Abby. He knows it can’t be anything other than a coincidence, Crowley is fictional, but… For a second, he’s almost starting to wonder about all the fourth wall breaking that show does. “It’s just startling, that’s all. That’s my mental image of making a deal with the Devil up on that screen. Okay, let’s run some prints and find out who this guy is and what he’s done before I get him in interrogation and start chatting with him.”

Abby glances at the clock. They’ve got an hour until regular quitting time, and that’s not going to get her much. It’s enough time to get her data into the system and set up the search.

“Regular quitting time for you tonight?” Abby asks him.

“I can’t talk to him sooner than tomorrow anyway, so… Good by me. Tony keeping you late?”

“We’ve got stuff started with that, and Benedict’s going to finish later tonight,” Corwin replies.

“Only so fast the computers can go.”

“Then I’ll wrap up tonight, too, and we’ll hit it fresh tomorrow.” Tim kisses Abby, and heads back to his office. One worm killed. One worm identified. He’s got to check in on the Kazaa one (hopefully dead) and see how they’re doing on backtracking the one probably written by the kid.

“So, tell me you guys got interesting stuff while McGee and I talked to his grandma.”

Tony shakes his head. “Penny hooking up with a med student when she was in her sixties trumps anything we’ve gotten.”

Vance is glaring at his phone. “No response to my request to find out where our ‘murderers’ are.”

Draga shrugs. “We do have prints from the door, as of yet, they have not connected to anything. And the ‘delivery company’ we visited, I called them back, they are open, they do exist, but the day before yesterday they got a call from the gas company and were shut down. They just opened again this morning.”

“So, I guess the only question is, are we printing everything tonight, or tomorrow?” Bishop asks.

“Neither. You are printing one thing, the business card you were handed when you went over to chat with the delivery guys yesterday. After that, I want both of you heading to your computers, and hunting down everyone Quinten’s ever authored a paper with, and then I want everyone they’ve ever authored a paper with. I want pictures of all of the men who are even remotely similar looking to ‘Boylt,’ and by the time you’ve got that, the facial reconstruction should be done, so we’ll do a
comparison search. Penny’s idea about who ended up dead in that apartment is a good one. There can’t be a lot of people who can do this sort of work, so we’re going to find him.” As soon as Tony’s done saying that, Bishop and Draga get up, and head off.

Tony looks at Vance. “Now what?”

Vance shakes his head slowly. “Feels like a good night to go for a drive.”

As he’s heading back into his Dungeon, Tim takes a detour to the back corner. His… not girls... but Minions doesn’t exactly specify who he’s thinking about. Brand, Howard, and Ngyn are working together, not really talking, but fingers are moving fast and they’re in the zone.

He sort of hates to break into it, but if he is going to pull the King of Hell… Or whoever “Harvey Wallbanger” really is in to chat tomorrow, he wants to know who he works for.

“Ladies…”

“Yes, Charlie?” Howard says with a smile. Brand doesn’t get the joke, and Ngyn looks appalled that she’d make it.

“I’m not calling you Angels,” Tim says, getting the reference, and after looking at them for a second, and noticing that Brand’s changed her hair to red, so he does have a blonde, redhead, and Asian brunette in front of him, decides it’s not a bad comparison. He looks for another second and then shakes his head. He’s not that fun of a Boss. Back on topic. “The intranet one. I’m hoping to chat with the guy who ordered it tomorrow, so I want to know where it’s sending intel.”

“Shouldn’t you know that if you know who ordered it?” Brand asks.

He supposes that makes sense. “Ordered it in the sense of walked into a store and asked for a copy. I don’t know for sure who dreamed it up and decided they wanted it, and I don’t know who he gave the copy to after he got it.”

All three of the ladies are looking at him now, very curious.

“If I ever can, I’ll explain, until then, I need to know where the intel is going.”

“Then we’ll find it,” Howard says.

“Good. Let me know as soon as you do.”

“No problem, Boss,” Brand says.

“Thought you might be here,” Leon says to Jarvis as he steps closer to a bench near the Vietnam memorial. In the early nineties they worked together for the first time, and this was their meeting place.
Jarvis shrugs at him. “Same. So, I take it you’re verifying full tilt?”

Leon looks around, then glances to Jarvis, who smiles, nods, and pats the spot on the bench next to him.

“Who were we dancing for before?”

“I’m legitimately not sure. But when I was heading home, I noticed the work van in my neighbors’ driveway, and since they’re out of town for the next ten days, I knew someone was watching.” Jarvis smiles his deadly viper smile, and Vance knows that Jarvis will find out who they were dancing for, and it won’t go well for him.

“And here?”

“Here, I’m off the grid. Unless they tailed my car, and then followed me for a two mile walk,” without me noticing is left unspoken, “or trailed you, we’re in the clear.”

“No tails on me, and I’ve had my clothing scanned today. Plus, my phone is in my car.”

“Good.”

Vance leans in a bit closer to Jarvis. He pulls a toothpick out of his pocket and starts to chew on it. He’d like to say this is just about how chewing on something like a toothpick makes it harder to read lips and guess what he’s saying from far away. And that is legitimately part of it, but part of it is also bad cases do make him want to chew on something, so he’s chewing. “So, now, really, tell me what this bullshit is.”

“Honestly, I don’t know.” Jarvis’ voice is mild, but Vance knows he’s furious. “Every detail I’ve gotten is crap. Weaponized PTSD? Come on. That’s science fiction. That’s bad science fiction. That’s bad science fiction written by a guy who thinks I don’t have access to the unredacted Navy budgets, or that I’d be too damn lazy to check them.”

“Quinten did work with PTSD.”

Jarvis nods. “And he did something with the Navy, probably involving PTSD research, we were paying for that. A lot. And I can’t find where he wrote up a grant for it. And I can’t find any results for whatever he was doing. But we were paying him. He was working with someone he thought was named Trevor Boylt, but there is no Trevor Boylt anywhere in our records. I’m sure of those two things. Beyond that…”

“We know his father served in the Air Force during Desert Storm. We know he was shot down, captured, rescued, suffered from severe PTSD, and killed himself within two years of returning. Now, how about you tell me what you know? Like, who’s feeding you science fiction about weaponized PTSD?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“You think I like any of this?”

Jarvis nods. “I’m getting it from President. Who has told me in no uncertain terms to back the fuck off on this one because it’s beyond handled.”

“According to DiNozzo, Quinten had a direct line to the President. Middle of the night the Secret Service shows up, grabs him, and Barak tells DiNozzo to back the fuck off and destroy everything on this.”
“He’s way off the reservation on this one. Even he can’t pull this sort of thing. Not… Not without someone watching his back. It ever gets out…” The Jarvis stops. He thinks about something for a minute. “Quinten works with people with severe anxiety and depression?”

“Yeah. Adolescents, young adults, soldiers back from…” Leon lets that trail off because he can see that Jarvis already has a conclusion in mind. “What?”

“There’s no proof he worked with soldiers. We paid him to, but… No case files. No studies. No records of him at any VA Hospital…” Jarvis is still thinking. “Your kids’ pediatrician, she’s got a direct line to you, right? Probably one of the only people who can give you a call without going through your secretary.”

And the mystery unravels for Vance, too. Obama’s girls. It was in their information on Quinten, and Bishop reported Penny talking about it, Quinten works with adolescents and young adults. Specialized care for young people with depression or anxiety. “They’re in the public, people watching all the time, if one of them was really depressed or…”

Jarvis nods again. “They can’t be seen going to visit a psychiatrist. They can’t be ‘on medication;’ it’d look bad. They can’t go through regular channels because that’ll end up in the medical database, and sooner or later someone will break it. They’ve got to be perfect, happy, little princesses for the press. If one of them needed help… There would have to be someone who handled the meetings and making sure they all got set right, but out of sight.”

“Like at an apartment owned by the Navy. And he’d get them the best care possible. The guy who hand tailors the medications to match the patient. So, if Boylt was their handler…”

Jarvis shakes his head. “Pediatrician. He’d be their primary care doctor. The guy who makes sure all of this works together. Makes sure there aren’t any bad side effects. Makes sure it’s working.”

Vance chews his toothpick a bit more. “Does that mean the girls… girl was supposed to be there? Do you think one of them was the target, and they just took who they could get?”

“I don’t know. But that’d explain why the Secret Service is involved, and why I can’t get any good chain of evidence on the people they grabbed. I can’t even find out who they grabbed, let alone where they are. Whatever the blackest black site you can think of, they’re in the one under it, probably dying slow and hard.”

Vance is reaching for the phone that isn’t in his pocket. “Would he tell you? If you flat out asked him, would he tell you?”

“I don’t know. A lot of people act like being on anti-depressants is one step away from the looney-bin.”

Vance shakes his head as he pats his jacket pocket. “Give me your phone.” Jarvis does, unlocking it, and Vance stares at it, realizing he doesn’t know Palmer’s number. He does know DiNozzo’s.

“Sir?” Tony sounds very wary when he answers.

“It’s me, DiNozzo.”

“Good. You’re with him, so what’s going on?”

“A hunch. Go down to Dr. Palmer, and have him get into the Federal Medical Database. I want to know who Malia and Sasha Obama’s physician is, and if he’s gone missing.”
“Okay. Uh… That’s a hell of a hunch if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“It is, but as Clayt pointed out, your pediatrician is one of the few people who have direct access to you, no matter how powerful you are. And he is one of the few people you will take a call from in the middle of the night. And as everyone has told us, Quinten works with adolescents and young adults. But he wouldn’t be working on his own, the girls’ regular doctor would have to be involved, too.”

And with that piece in place Tony absolutely knows how this works. “I’m on it.”

“Thank you.”

---

“Hey Jimmy,” Tony says as he heads in.

Jimmy looks up from his computer and Dr. Allan glances up from the journal he’s reading. Right now, with no clients, they’re having a very quiet day.

“Tony? Uh…”

“I know, you don’t have anything for me. Ever since Metro stole everything. I need to ask you for a favor.”

“Sure.”

“Can you find out who the Obama daughters’ pediatrician is?”

Jimmy’s back is to Allan, so he can’t see him roll his eyes and glance, pointedly, in Allan’s direction before saying, “Yes, it’s physically possible, anyone with access to the Federal Medical Database can do it, but it’s completely illegal for a doctor to access information on someone who isn’t his patient. And,” he stands up, opens a drawer, looks at the nothing there, “look, no patients.”

Tony gets the message Jimmy is sending, namely ask me when I’m alone. “Ah. Of course. I’ll just… check missing persons.”

Jimmy nods at Tony. “Good plan. Let me know if you find who you’re looking for.”

---

A few seconds after Tony heads out, Allan says to Jimmy, “You’re going to check, aren’t you?”

“That would be completely illegal and a violation of privacy.”

“Uh huh.” Allan’s not buying it. “Just keep in mind, if they are in the system, their account will be flagged in a way that any physician who touches it will set off an alarm and the Secret Service or the like will be at your door in about ten minutes.”
“Uh…”

“No, I don’t know that for certain or anything, but you know just as well as I do that all you have to do is put your ID in and everyone’s information is in there. Security nightmare. So, either they aren’t in there, or you will get prosecuted for it. That’s the only way to keep people like them safe.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Dr. Allan.”

“No problem.” Sam smiles quickly. “I might want to run my department one day, but not tomorrow.”

---

“Hey Abbs!” Tony says as he heads into the Lab.

“Tony! You’re early. We don’t quite have anything for you, yet.”

“What’s quite?”

“We’ve found Boylt’s sister.”

Tony grins.

“Don’t know who he is, yet, but,” Abby gestures and Zelaz throws an image up on the plasma. “Meet Major Selena Young. She’s a Navy Chaplain. According to her CV she has three brothers.”

“Is one of them a doctor?”

“Actually, yes.” Abby and Zelaz stare at Tony. “Okay, you’re freaking me out, how are you pulling a Gibbs on this one?”

“Leon had a hunch. And, you finding this now means I don’t need Palmer to commit a felony for me. Get me everything on Dr. Young.”

---

“Jimmy?” Tony says into his cell as he’s heading up to the bullpen. Ready to call Bishop and Draga off of their hunt.

“Yeah.”

“Missing persons was a great idea. No need to mess with the computer.”

“Good. Dr. Allan suggested that if you want something like that in the future, you need to get Tim and I together for it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”
Tony then hits the contact button for Jarvis’ phone. After a few rings he hears Jarvis’ voice. “It’s Tony DiNozzo, sir, I’d like to speak to Director Vance.”

After another second, he hears, “DiNozzo?”

“No luck on the database, but another search panned out. Navy Chaplain Selena Young is our mystery man’s sister. She has a brother who is a Doctor. Abby’s gathering up the intel and if you’d like we’ll hold show and tell for you.”

“Put the condensed version on my desk. Clayt and I are still talking.”

“Will do,” and with that Tony hangs up.

“So, he’ll run down our possible missing doctor,” Jarvis says when Vance hands his phone back.

“That’s the idea. Someone has to oversee the girls’ care, keep track of everything.”

Jarvis nods at that. For a moment, he and Vance just look at the polished black expanse of names gleaming in front of them.

“What do you know about what’s going on with the Coast Guard?” Leon asks.

“Not my problem, not my mess, and I’m happy to keep it that way.”

Leon nods.

“We’ve been tipped off, a few times now, in ways that suggest it’s not just the Coast Guard.”

Jarvis nods at that, too. “Someone sees rot in the foundation, and they tend to want to get people looking at the other supports, too.”

“That’s a very politic way of putting it.”

Jarvis inclines his head. “I’m a politician.”

“Uh huh. I’ve got convicted cyber felons sticking worms in my intranet.”

“That’s unfortunate. You may have to work on your security.”

“That’s all you’ve got to say.”

Clayt smiles, just a little. “It’s all I can say.”

“Thought we were done dancing.”

“You’re the one whistling the new tune, Leon.”

“Ah…” Leon licks his lips and thinks. “What are your plans for next year?”

Jarvis smiles at that. That’s a good way to tack around this. “I serve at the President’s pleasure. The
President who is pleased with me leaves at the end of January. I’ll stick around a bit longer than that, I have things scheduled into March, and it’s my job to make sure the handover is nice and smooth, point my replacement in the direction of the coffee machine and make sure he doesn’t trip over the skeletons hidden in the closet, and then I get to rest on my laurels and enjoy my ‘well deserved’ retirement.”

“So, by…”

“April, I’ll be out. By May, I’ll be on a half dozen boards, collecting money for looking pretty and making contacts. Then in two years, enough time will have gone by, and I’ll begin my lobbying career. In 2020, when Michelle starts getting serious about running, I’ll be ready to help her get moving. I’ll take those contacts and the people I’ve lobbied for and start building PACs. And in 2024, when she wins, she’ll have a spot for me.”

“You sound awfully sure of that.”

Jarvis smiles a little. “We live in a world of political dynasties. This is the one I’m tied to. I may be off by four, maybe even eight years, but it’ll happen.”

“Nothing new under the sun.”

“Not at all, Leon, not at all. The mess with CGIS, and your intranet, and what I’m sure you’ll find if you dig deep enough…” Jarvis licks his lips. “Power is eternal. It doesn’t go away. It doesn’t get less concentrated. It just moves around, from one set of hands to the next. And it does whatever it needs to do to keep itself safe. In that sense, it’s almost alive.

“But the thing about power, is that in order to stay alive it has to give enough people, enough ‘freedom’ for lack of a better word, to make sure that they don’t go about trying to topple it. The Romans did it with bread and circuses, and we’ve got our own forms. And as long as enough people get good enough service, power gets to keep doing what it wants to do.

“Every now and again, different gadflies think things would be better if power were to really change hands. They’re wrong. That’s where chaos comes in. But they know the first step in getting there is making sure that the people who normally don’t think about power, who just do their own thing in their own way and never notice the top of the pyramid, start thinking about it.”

“And that’s what you think is happening with CGIS?”

Jarvis shrugs a bit. “Ever see the Wizard of Oz?”

Leon nods.

“Some people think it’s a good idea to pull back the curtain and let you see what’s behind the pretty buildings and troops in nifty uniforms. Some people think we’d all be better off if we knew Oz was just a conman living off the image of his own mystique.”

“You disagree?”

Jarvis smiles again, icy cold. “I’m a realist. I know the sort of people who tend to think they’d do better with power than those who already have it. They fit into two camps, the ones who make Stalin look like puppies and kittens playing in the sun, and the ones who mean well but would have the Chinese Army rolling through California in about twenty minutes. I’m fond of neither or those scenarios.

“We do what we need to to keep most of us not having to think about the wider world, and we are
“Uh huh.” Leon doesn’t look sold on that, but he’s saved having to comment one way or another by Jarvis’ phone ringing. He hears a second of conversation, and then Jarvis hands the phone over.

Vance listens, to Tony, and then looks at Jarvis after he hangs up. “They did a familial match and found his sister. Our dead man is Dr. Young.”

“And what are you going to do with a missing doctor?” Jarvis asks, intense.

“If he’s not Navy, there’s, officially, nothing I can do. Depending on what ‘officially’ happened to him, it’s likely there’ll be nothing I can do.”

Jarvis smiles a bit. “You know what I’m asking.”

“I’m not pulling back the curtain. Not today, and not on this one.”

Jarvis inclines his head. “After November, I may have some comments for you about who’s watching your computer systems.”

“I’m not shocked.”

“And I may know something about what’s happening with CGIS, and the IRS, too.”

Vance raises an eyebrow, he hasn’t mentioned the IRS or the missing account numbers.

Jarvis nods, curtly, and then stands up.

When Tony gets up to the bullpen, Abby’s already waiting for him, with the clicker.

“Say Hello to Dr. Derek Young.” Abby’s got a very good, full face, looking right at the camera and smiling shot of Dr. Young, from, apparently, his obituary, up on the plasma. “He was killed in a car accident late Tuesday night. He’s a celebrated pediatrician. Works with the families of senators and congressmen.”

Both Bishop and Draga are reading up, fast, looking for interesting information.

“Ohhh… I’ve got something. Six years ago he made a lot of waves when he stopped taking any sort of insurance at all. He made a lot of noise about not loving the ACA or insurance paperwork, and how it was a doctor’s duty to make sure that he saw patients at all income levels, and that they could all afford his care. Then he rebranded himself, set himself up as a boutique clinic, and for every paying client, promised that he’d see three patients who couldn’t pay.”

“He live up to that?” Tony asks.

“Uhhh…” Draga’s holding up a finger… “Checking his financials…. Umm…. Yeah. Looks like it. If you could pay the… God… six thousand a year, per kid, you got unlimited access for your kid, and three other kids from below poverty line families got unlimited access, too. Tests, basic prescriptions, he made house calls, all of it covered. He wasn’t starving, but he was making less than all better off that way.”
I am. Everything else was going back into his practice to treat kids who couldn’t pay. From what I’m seeing, it looks like he was closer to five kids who couldn’t pay for every one that could.”

Bishop adds. “Metro report says they found him thirty hours after the accident, car off the road, decapitation, head not found, burned. They think he lost control of the car, or was sideswiped, but the car was too destroyed to tell, and it rained between when he would have gone off the road and when they found him.”

“Oh huh.” Tony says. “And let me guess, they’ve got some big tire tracks?”

Draga knows where that’s going. “Nope, but what do you want to bet that if I get the feed from every video camera near where he was found, there’ll be a Dilegen’s Delivery truck passing by.”

“Not much. When’s the funeral?”

“This morning. No viewing. There will be an ash scattering ceremony tomorrow at noon.” Abby reads off the obit.

“Of course they cremated him,” Tony says. He looks over at the clock. It’s five minutes to normal quitting time. “Go home. I’m going to write this up for Vance, and then we’ll see what, if anything, we can do about this tomorrow.”

Because he’s not a lawyer, and because of coming up in Gibbs’ team, which treats lawyers like something to be banished with garlic and holy water, Tim doesn’t generally spend a whole lot of time on matters of law.

And, as he’s reading through a heaping mound of legal BS, he’s remembering why he doesn’t do this.

As best he can tell, and he’s fairly sure that he’s not supposed to be able to tell, after all, as a reasonably intelligent guy who WRITES for pay, he feels like he should be able to READ anything he sets his eyes on, but this looks like gobbledygook to him… but, as best as he can tell, a bunch of important people (ie, the guys who made this damn law in the first place) got caught using communications outside the proper channels (which was already against an older law) and then destroying those communications when they were inconvenient (against yet another law), so Congress decided that a spiffy new law, making sure that all electronic communications would not only be kept until the sun exploded and melted the storage sites, but that anyone who worked for any sort of Federal agency HAD to use the system they gave them for said communications under penalty of… blah, blah, blah, would fix the problem.

He assumes this means that the people who wrote this law just started doing a better job of hiding their non-fed email accounts.

However, and he thinks the may have found an interesting bit hiding in the depths of this damn thing, there is an authorization for the Feds to “monitor” said communications whenever they feel like it.

He cannot see who is supposed to do said monitoring, nor can he see who paid for it. But that does match the timeline of when Khan got called in to create said system, and it dovetails nicely with that little bit code popping up in their system.
He’s sitting back, staring at his screen, rubbing his eyes, and wondering if it’s possible that, besides him, the only person who read that section is the guy who wrote it. He’s also thinking, as he prints out a screen shot, that if Jake Bi—Malloy works as a watchdog, maybe this will be interesting to him. (And maybe tomorrow’s breakfast meet will be useful for more than just him.)

As he’s sitting back, eyes closed, hearing his printer spitting out info for Jake, he gets the sense of someone in there with him. He’s not sure if he’s catching her scent, or just knows it’s her, but he can feel Abby nearby.

“Hey.”

“Almost done?” Abby asks, heading in, closing the door, and sitting against his desk.

He sits up, eyes opening, staring at her. “Yeah. I’m done for today. You?”

“We found out who ‘Boylt’ is. So for right now, we’re done.”

He gently squeezes her knee as he stands up and kisses her. “Good. Want to say hi to Jimmy and then home?”

“Yeah.”
For not the first time since Ziva ended up at the Coast Guard, Tony’s the first one home. He’s only half paying attention as he sorts through their mail, thinking about what they might like to have for dinner.

He tosses the non-junk mail onto the kitchen counter and looks into their fridge. Whole lot of nothing he wants to make for dinner in there.

He pokes into the freezer, and there’s even more nothing he wants to eat.

He pulls out his phone. *Anything you want for dinner?* He leans against the counter, and picks up the non-junk mail. Two bills, he can deal with them later, and… oh… the final copies of their settlement with the bank. Closing is week after next.

He rips that open, and starts looking through. Page one, everything looks good. Page two, yep, there’s the right interest rate, and there right address, and the right amount of money to be borrowed. Looking good. He can’t believe this is *real.*

It still feels way too good to be true, but he’s holding it in his hands, so… Maybe it’s real. Maybe… He starts to relax into the idea that he might actually get this house.

His phone buzzes. *Already got it. Home in twenty.*

*Awesome! See you then.*

Page three, the bottom of the settlement. Monthly payment. He stares at it for a moment. $7,237.94. That can’t be right. There’s no possible way that’s right. The decimal point is in the wrong place. That’s… seven thousand dollars a month, not seven hundred.

There’s a quick chill of fear, but he stuffs it down. This has *got* to be a typo.

*Don’t panic. Be an adult and check the numbers.*

He goes to one of those ‘calculate your mortgage payment’ sites and punches his numbers in, $758. Exactly what he’s expecting to have to pay.

So, obviously, this is just a typo. He grabs a pen and crosses it out and puts the right number in.

He keeps flipping through. A typo on every damn page of the document.

*Shit! Not a fucking typo.*

He rubs his eyes and goes through the itemized list on page five, and finds the little line that says *Escrow.* That’s got a number north of six thousand dollars on it. *Escrow?* That’s sending a faint, niggling memory through him. There’s a little go see page 42 for more explanation mark on it, so off he goes to page 42 and that little chill of fear he felt earlier turns into outright panic.

*Escrow.* That’s his monthly payment to make sure that when the property taxes and homeowners insurance is due, that it’s sitting there in the bank waiting to be paid. And, while it’s true that he is getting the house for 300,000, it’s also true that its assessed value is 7.2 million dollars and between his insurance and taxes, he will have to escrow 72,000 dollars a year to cover that.

Or, about ten percent more than his yearly take home pay.
All of the air in his body goes pouring out in one long, strangled gasp. *He knew it.* Too damn good to be true. It’s always too damn good to be true with Dad. God. He’s got to get this called off, and they’ve lost months on finding a real place, and SHIT!

He must have yelled in frustration because Ziva pounces into their kitchen, gun drawn, ready to kill whatever’s making him make that noise. It takes her a second to pull out of battle response, and it takes him a minute to explain what’s going on.

He’s staring at her, and at the paper he apparently dropped on the floor, and back to her. She’s been planning this place, getting ideas ready, and… Nothing. He can’t get it for her. He just… can’t.

“You forgot?” Tony’s all but yelling at his dad on the phone. “How could you forget property taxes?”

He can feel the look on Senior’s face as he says, “Well, Junior, I… you see… When you’ve got a complicated intersection of business and personal expenses you use your personal property tax to offset income from another area. The property tax rate is always lower than the income tax, so, since you’ve got to pay on it one way or another, this shelters some of your inco—”

“All of my income, and then some. It’s more in taxes then I make in a year! How’s that supposed to work, Dad?”

Senior sighs. “It doesn’t. I’m sorry.”

“God, now we’ve got to call the bank, call the whole thing off. Ziva’s pissed. We’ve lost months of house hunting and… Dad! Why is it always like this with you?”

“What do you mean call it off?” Senior sounds stupefied.

“Call it off. I can’t pay for it. We can’t live there.”

“Whoa. Hold up on that. I’ll be there in half an hour. Don’t back out of it until we talk.”

“I don’t want to talk. I want to kick myself for even beginning to think this could have been real!”

“It is real, just… Not like that. This is the deal of your life, Junior, don’t throw it away. I’ll be there in half an hour.”

Tony’s glaring at the world at large and Ziva’s cleaning her guns when they hear the knock on their door.

“I can just leave him sitting out there,” Tony says to her.

Ziva’s not usually nearly as hard on Senior as Tony is. There are several reasons for this, but they boil down to the fact that she grew up with Eli David, and compared to him, Senior’s just a harmless screw up.
So, she’s pissed at him, but she’s pissed the way she assumes she will be when Little D breaks something. The kind of annoyance one gets at a misbehaving toddler.

Tony’s pissed at him the way he’s always pissed at him. A lifetime of hope and disappointment and more hope and more disappointment. He feels like he should know by now not to ever place any hope in that man.

But the kid inside Tony still wants to believe his Daddy is a good man.

“Open it,” Ziva finally says. “He will say his say and then we will send him on his way.”

So Tony gets up, stomps to the door, flings it open and does a double take.

“Ed?”

Of all the people who could possibly be standing in front of his door, Ed Slater was not on the list.

“Your dad called, said you’d want to talk to someone who knows something about real estate, and that he wasn’t the guy you wanted to listen to.”

Ziva’s standing next to Tony, also stunned by this. “Ed?” She’s pulling Tony out of the doorway, so Ed can come in.

Ed does come in, and Ziva leads him to their living room. She and Tony sharing what the hell glances with each other as they do so.

“You got the closing paperwork?” Ed asks.

“Uh… Yeah.” Tony goes to get it.

While he’s in the kitchen, Ziva sits down with Ed. “Senior called you?”

“Yeah. He explained what had happened, and he thought you wouldn’t take anything he had to say about this seriously, but you might listen to me. I think he would have called Breena, but he didn’t have her number. So, I’m here. What’s going on with the deal? He said it was a mess.”

Tony laughs grimly. “A mess.” Another dry, bitter laugh. “He sets us up with a dream house. A dream house we can pay for. A dream house that I’ve been saying for months is too good to be true, that he keeps saying, it’s real, it’s real, don’t worry, it’s real. I finally start to relax a little, start to hope that maybe it’s real, and we get the closing paperwork today, and yeah, it’s too damn good to be true. We can’t make the escrow.”

Ed glances at the papers in Tony’s hand. “May I?”

Tony shakes his head listlessly. “Sure. Don’t know what you can do about it.”

Ed takes his glasses out and starts to read through. He nods a few times. Chews his lip for a second as he looks something over. At one point he flips around a bit, checking the paperwork over, and then says, “If you won’t buy this, I will. And if I buy it, I’ll clear six million on it. You’ve got a shorter time frame than I would, so for you, let’s say four to five million is reasonable, and six is possible. The question is, do you want to put four million dollars in your bank account, or do you want to throw this away because your Dad isn’t the guy you want him to be?”

Tony and Ziva stare at each other, and Tony’s shoulder slump as he says, “Okay, I don’t think I was being clear here. We cannot make the payments and eat.”
Ed waves that off. “Yes, you can. First off, escrow isn’t mandatory. You are not required by law to prepay your taxes and home owner’s insurance. They may not want to loan you the money if you don’t do it, but I don’t think they’ll back out. The collateral is too good on this one.”

“We still have to pay it sooner or later,” Ziva adds. “Even if we do not pay now, those taxes come due in January.”

“Nope. You aren’t. The next owner is. You’re going to opt out of the escrow, you’re going to hire people to fix the windows and floors as fast as possible, and then slap some paint on the place. You are closing on October 1st according to this, and November 1st this house is going on the market at 5.5 million dollars. Taxes are due January 1st. That gives you two months to sell this. Any price above 300,000 makes you money, but given where it is and the fact that you’re going to make it livable, don’t take anything below 4.5 million. All decked out, it’s worth at least 7 million so you should have no problem selling the place, and with any luck you’ll get a bidding war going and clear six million.”

Tony and Ziva stare at Ed as he rattles those numbers off.

“That easy?” Tony says.

Ed shrugs. “Yes. I mean, look, if you don’t trust me, talk to Breena, and hell, if she can’t convince you to take the deal, I’ll buy back some of her shares so that she’s got the liquid cash to buy this place from you. Then she can flip it, and use that money to finish buying up Slater’s. This is a pile of cash just waiting for you to pick it up. You’d be insane not to.”

“And what happens if we can’t pay the property taxes in January?” Ziva asks.

Ed looks at her like that’s a silly question. “Nothing. They write you an irate letter and your credit takes a hit. You’ve got to skip something along the lines of two years of tax payments before anyone does anything, and if you can’t sell this place in two years, for more than you’re paying for it, you don’t need to worry about the taxes because that means the economy of the whole eastern seaboard has crashed. Really, this is money on the ground just waiting for you to pick it up.” Ed shifts the closing documents a bit, flipping through them, finding the pictures of the place in the end and looking at them. “Okay, I can look at this and see what Senior’s doing. It’s clever. It’s a good way to make sure you two don’t get hit with a huge tax bill, and it lets him pass on a lot of wealth without anyone really noticing.”

“What do you mean ‘don’t get hit with a huge tax bill?’ Six thousand a month is a huge tax bill!” Tony says.

Ed looks around. “Can I get a drink?”

“Yes.” Ziva gets up. “Water, coffee…”

“Water’s fine.”

Tony gets the sense he’s stalling, deciding if he should say what he’s thinking.

“Just say it.”

Ziva’s back with the water, and Ed drinks it down. “Your dad is in his eighties, right?”

Tony nods. “Yeah.”

“Estate planning. If you’ve got a big enough estate to make planning worthwhile, you know the
estate tax is more than 50%. By the time the state and Feds get their hands on your money, there’s not a whole lot of it left. It’s the highest tax bracket in the US, and any possible way to shift your money out of your estate saves it.

“So, he buys this place, full price, and his buddies run the value down, and pass ownership around, because you don’t want to get hit with gift taxes. If he sells it directly to you, that causes trouble. So he doesn’t sell directly to you. You’ll pay capital gains when you sell, but that’s better than estate taxes. He’s probably losing a quarter of the value, trying to get this money to you, but that’s better than the half he’d lose if he did it through his will.”

Tony and Ziva are staring at each other, and at Ed.

“So, you think this is… his will?” Ziva asks.

“There’s a reason why we make sure all the branches of Slater’s have been sold to our kids before we die. Estate taxes kill small fortunes. Those taxes are based on wealth not income. So, you tally up what you’re worth, and you send half of it to the government. If your wealth is in land or a business, when you die, you’re screwed. You’ve got to liquidate to pay the taxes. If you want your kids to get it, you’ve got to get creative. He’s getting creative.”

Tony looks at Ziva, and looks at Ed, and then at the closing documents. “Thanks, Ed.”

“You going to take it?”

“I think we need to talk more,” Ziva says.

Ed nods at that. “If you don’t, I’m serious, I will take this deal, or I’ll make sure Breena’s in position to do it. God knows her husband’s never bringing home that kind of money on his own.”

Tony and Ziva wince; this visit had been going well. “Well, neither am I.” Tony says. “Daddy’s got to bail me out to get that kind of money to us.”

And that pretty much kills the conversation dead. They look around for a moment, very uncomfortable, and then Ed stands up. “Anyway. Let me know.”

Tony sees him to the door. “We will.”

Money from your parents is tricky when your relationship with them is tricky.

When Eli died, Ziva closed out his estate, and though she was his only beneficiary, she didn’t keep his money. Between the lies he told, the way he died, the fact that Jackie died with him, the fact that if he hadn’t died she would have had to arrest him for murder… Because of all it, she closed everything out, sold it all, and then gave it away.

It wouldn’t have felt right to keep it, or anything else, besides memories and photos, of his.

Of course, it occurs to her, giving it all away was probably made easier by the fact that it wasn’t a ton of money. When all was said and done, it was about two years of her salary, which would have been nice, but that’s all. She had a job she loved, no one depending on her, and no plans that required that kind of money. She didn’t need it, and it wasn’t enough to make a major change in her life with.
It didn’t take more than a second to write two checks. One to an Israeli peace organization, and one (anonymous) to a Palestinian one. And then she, and Eli, were done.

She looks at Tony as he comes back to the sofa, sitting next to her, wrapping his arm around her. Then both of them look to the paper in front of them.

That’s not just nice money. That’s not a few nice vacations or a down-payment on a house.

And they’re not single and carefree.

Little D’s growing in leaps and bounds. Today she pulled on a pair of slacks and then took them off again when they didn’t button over her tummy. Come April, s/he’ll be on the outside with a lot of needs. And right in front of them is all the money they could possibly want to do basically anything they want for the rest of their (and D’s) life.

She knows Tony’s thinking hard. He’s not talking, at all, and that’s usually a good sign of thinking Tony.

After another minute, he says, “I told Kate once that I missed being rich all the time.”

She nods.

He laughs a little. “And there it is. Not rich, like my family was rich, but that’s you at home, and a decent home to be in, and good schools, and college. That’s money for three or four kids, not just one or two.”

“That’s not having to get another job after you retire.”

He nods. “And a vacation or two a year. That’s you going back to school, if you want. And the really good cameras you keep eyeballing. Invest it… hell, even at one percent, even at the low end, that’s forty grand a year to live on.”

“Take the deal, sell the house, buy a different one outright. Put the rest in savings…” She looks around at their apartment. The apartment they love. It’s small for full family gatherings but they’ve got the house for that, and it is big enough for a nursery. “We wouldn’t have to move right away. We could stay here, turn the den into a nursery. You’d be closer to work, less time commuting.”

“And… if that money just sat in the bank, that’d be like having your income.”

She nods. If they cleared four million on the house and then parked it in a mutual fund or something (She makes a mental note to have a chat with Breena about this. She’s never really had the sort of money where anything beyond 401K and a checking account was necessary.) that would be like having her income, without her working.

“And if we had my income, we could stay here. Maybe move a few floors up to one of the bigger apartments if we have more than one child.”

He nods a little at that. The three bedroom apartments two floors up are awesome. And it would be easier, and more convenient, and… and it wouldn’t matter that this isn’t the greatest school district on earth, because they’d have the money for private schools. That sounds really good. Except, of course, it requires him to take this deal.

“Do you want it?” he asks.

“I want what it could buy, but not badly enough to make it worth it if it makes you feel dirty.”
He shrugs. “Ed’s right. This isn’t the kind of money I’ll ever be able to bring home on my own. Not at NCIS. Not at my level. It’d take Leon 12 years to make that sort of money, and I’m nowhere in the running to take Leon’s job.”

She nods. That’s true.

“I want you to have the things or… if not things, then the life, you want. But… I wanted to get it for you myself.”

Ziva shrugs at that. “Do you think life with Senior isn’t earning this? And do you think he’d do this if you’d turned into one of your cousins, a pretty grafter?”

“Petty grifter,” he says without thinking about it.

She shakes her head. “Pretty.” She strokes his cheek, and he smiles a little.

“I don’t want to end up raising my cousins.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Money makes things weird.”

“If it stays in the bank, we’ll have the sort of money we would have had it I’d kept working. Maybe a bit more. Probably not more than if both of us were leading a team. That isn’t the sort of money that sent you and your cousins to Europe for spring break.”

He nods at that. “We take this, we don’t… we don’t become rich. This is a home, school, medical bills if that’s ever an issue.”

She nods at that. “I’m fine with that. This is… us buying time to be a family, to focus on each other, our home, and our children.”

“Okay.” He takes a deep breath. “Let’s see if they’ll let us not do the escrow.”

Her eyes light up. “Okay!”
Thursday Night: Gibbs & Vance

The last time Gibbs was this relieved to see the clock hit 5:00, it was a paperwork day and he had a date he was really looking forward to.

He gave himself until 5:00. That’s when he gets to shift from working on learning how to use the computer to doing something he’s not completely hopeless at. (Cooking.)

So, at 4:53, 4:56, 4:58, 4:59, 4:59:15, 4:59:46, and 4:59:59, Gibbs’ eyes kept darting away from the computer to the clock, and finally he’s able to get up, close the computer, and say goodbye to it for the night.

He’s, as he gets up and stretches some, feeling his ribs and shoulder ache as he does that, coming to the conclusion that he needs whatever level of how-to-do-this-computer-crap that comes before the Programming for Half-Wits (or whatever it’s called) that Tim hooked him up with. The stuff he’s reading means nothing to him, at all.

He’s thinking that if Ducky’s got the time, tomorrow they’re going to the bookstore and he’s pretending that he needs a how to program book for his six-year-old grandchild, because Tim’s idea of 101 is still too damn far ahead of him.

“Enough of that.” Mona looks at him curiously, wondering what she’s supposed to stop doing. He pats her. “Not you. What do you think? Chicken on the grill, take a quick walk while it heats up?”

She looks really pleased at that idea.

Gibbs eyes the fireplace and sighs a little as he takes one log, and starts to get the fire set. One log at a time is slow, but better than no logs. So, a log at a time, he sets his fire up, gets it burning, and then to the kitchen where he grabs the chicken, sprinkles on one of those seasoning blends that Abbi likes, and then gets some potatoes and onions chopped up along with frozen veggies and another of those blends all mixed up with a little butter and tossed in a foil packet, and dinner’s ready for the coals.

“Let’s go.” Mona hops up and follows him out of his place.

It takes an hour for the fire to really get going properly, so he’s thinking that a fifty minute walk will get him back in time to get everything cooking properly. His goal is that by the time there’s snow on the ground that he’ll be able to at least jog to the end of the block. Right now, he’s walking. Right now, an hour will get him all the way around his block twice.

There was a time, and he’s not thinking of when he was on active duty, when an hour meant he could easily do a six mile run. “Next year,” he says to Mona. This time, next year, he will be running again.

He wonders if this time, next year, he’ll be married again. Engagement ring should be ready in another two weeks. After that… He’s thinking that Abbi’s birthday is in November. At least right now he feels like he can wait to surprise her with an excellent birthday treat. He lifts his right arm, feeling the ache and burn in his back, noting how, less than two hundred feet from his porch his breath is starting to speed up, and he thinks that buying himself some more healing time before attempting a romantic treat is probably a good idea, too.
Leon hears what he usually hears when he gets home these days. Not much of anything. On one level, he misses coming home to loud. He misses the constant hum of a house with kids (his and their buddies) in it. But, his kids are almost grown-ups. Three more years and there will be no more children in his house. They’ll be off at college. And the silence he’s feeling all through his house, it won’t be a case of kids are off doing after school stuff. (Kayla’s got… gymnastics right now, and Jared’s on… yearbook, he thinks.) It’ll be the silence of an almost empty house.

Just him and Lara. He sighs a little at that idea, not ready to really deal with it.

On the other hand… Right now quiet appeals to him a whole lot. It’s been a long day, and he’s still got to decide what, if anything, he can or should do about Dr. Young.

Legally, the case is Metro’s. They handed it over. Legally, he is not required to share anything he learns about any case that’s not actually his. He is not required to let Metro know what he’s found out.

Legally, he doesn’t have to do anything on this.

Morally… Dr. Young is still very dead. His family likely doesn’t have any real answers… Or maybe they do. He’s got no idea of what level of in the loop they are. Hell, for all he knows the Secret Service may have personally delivered Young’s family the heads of his killers. Talk about revenge.

He’s thinking about that when his phone rings. He checks, sees the number is blocked, and almost puts it back in his pocket and then… No. He shakes his head, given everything going on, he answers, “Hello?”

“Director Vance?”

“Yes…” He feels a chill down his spine. He knows the voice. He’s even met the man a few times. Not often, but, at least once a year, he sees the President for something. “Sir.”

“I understand your agent did not do a particularly good job of forgetting the case or destroying evidence.”

He takes a deep breath, getting ready to stand his ground. “We don’t do that, sir. Not even for you.”

“How about for my daughter?”

Leon exhales, slowly. “Is the case closed? Do you… have the guys?”

“We do. It’s done.”

“Send me the fingerprints. Let me see that the men you’ve got are the ones who took out Dr. Young.”

“And what will you do with those prints.”

“Make sure you’ve got the right guys. My duty is to Dr. Young. If you’ve got his killers, then… Yes, we’ll bury it. If you don’t… I can’t just let it drop.”

“Check your mail in the morning.” And then the line goes dead.
“I hired Diane today.” Abbi says as Gibbs takes a bite out of his chicken leg. They’re sitting in front of the fire, munching on dinner, enjoying a quiet moment.

For a second, Gibbs stops everything. He’s not chewing and possibly not breathing. There’s a heartbeat of everything going blank and then he blinks slowly.

Abbi smirks a little, and nibbles her chicken wing.

“What?” he asks when his brain starts moving again.

“She said she couldn’t wait to see the face you’d make at that news. She wasn’t wrong. That was a doozy. Hiring her a problem?”

Gibbs assumes that sensation going through him is a full body wince. He puts his chicken leg down. “Uhhhh…”

“The IRS gave her an option, relocate to Bismarck, North Dakota, or enjoy her unemployment benefits.”

He sighs. Hell, in that situation, he’d hire Diane. “Five.”

“I don’t have them all memorized, Jethro.”

“Don’t waste good.”

Abbi nods at that. “And I’m not. She’s going to scare the shit out of my accounting department.”

Gibbs smiles a little at that. “Oh, she’ll do that, all right.”

“And I won’t have to sneak her in anymore.”

“Nope.”

“So, what’s that look?”

He shakes his head. He’s not sure he could put it into words if he tried.

Abbi’s got a pretty good idea that poking any further on this is a bad plan, so she says, “How’s getting you in front of a computer going?”

Now Gibbs is glaring, but not at her. He’s eyeing the computer that’s sitting on the coffee table. “I have to learn how to program.”

“You have to learn how to program?” She heard him; she’s just not believing it.

“Tim tells me it’s not Google. I can’t just type in a search.”

“Oh. Sorry. I didn’t mean to get your hopes up.” Gibbs is still glaring at the computer and Abbi realizes what that look is. “You’re going to learn how to do it.”

Gibbs stops looking at the computer. “We’re not breaking this today or tomorrow, are we?”

Abbi shakes her head. “We may put this little bit to bed right now, but the big thing? No. This case
will take years to get all the ins and outs. Just the CGIS corruption charges will take years to get all the way through.”

“Tim pretty much said that, too. That I’d have more than enough time to get the hang of it. So, before going to visit Bleach, I learned what Python is.”

“What is it?”

He glares at the computer again. “A shit ton of work.”

Abbi grins at that. “Well, we wouldn’t want you to get bored, right.”

He rolls his eyes a bit at that and then takes a bite of his chicken. “If I shoot that thing, it’s not my fault.”

She laughs at that.

“I know that look,” Lara says to Leon as they’re cleaning up the table. That used to be one of the Jared’s job, but with the mountains of homework he has, household chores have taken a back seat.

Leon sighs a bit, and nods. He knows that look, too.

“Gonna tell me about it?”

He shakes his head, and Lara doesn’t fuss. There are times, a lot of them, when he’d like to tell Lara about his job. There are times when he’d like to bring co-workers home. There are times when everything would go a lot more smoothly if he didn’t have a twenty-foot-high concrete wall between his work life and home life.

And none of that matters worth a shit, because Jackie died for his work, so these days his work doesn’t come home. Lara’s never met most of the men he works with. She doesn’t know Jarvis or Morrow or anyone else along those lines. She’s been to the Navy Yard fewer than half a dozen times in the last four years, and two of them were about her getting hired in the first place. With the exception of Gibbs family activities (which he has in his own mind as “safe”) she’s never been allowed near his work life.

He knows it bugs her. And he knows that she knows that it’s the step too far, that he can’t take that wall down.

So he shrugs a bit. “It’ll pass.”

She raises an eyebrow and hands him a rinsed dish. “So you keep saying. Doesn’t seem to be passing.”

He sighs again. “I know.”
Abbi’s on the sofa, her computer in lap, reading through a series of reports. Gibbs is also on the sofa, next to her, his computer on his lap. He’s not reading right now, he’s thinking.

The last time he learned something completely from scratch it was Japanese. And at least with that he had a pretty good idea of what he was trying to learn. He knew the things he wanted to say, because they were in his head, in English, just waiting to flip into Japanese.

He thinks that Python is giving him so much trouble because he doesn’t know what he’s trying to do. He can’t say, to the computer, ‘show me the big picture,’ if he doesn’t even know what that picture might be or how he’d go about finding it.

So, he’s thinking. What am I looking for?

Answers aren’t stampeding into place as he’s sitting there. He’s gently stroking Abbi’s knee as he thinks, and then, as answers aren’t miraculously forming, his phone rings.

He lunges forward with a minimum of grace, and grabs the phone off the coffee table.

Abbi glances at him. “Fornell,” he says, answering her unasked question.

“Tobias?” he asks as he picks up.

“World’s not about to end,” Fornell could hear the levels of question in his voice when he asked.

“So… just checking in?”

“Sort of. We’ve got to give the caterer the final count tomorrow, and I was wondering if you knew if McGee and Abby are coming?”

It takes Gibbs a minute to realize Tobias is asking about his wedding, and, apparently Tim and Abby are invited.

“They haven’t said anything about it.” He thinks. “They’d say. Abby would have asked about what presents to get. He’d be teasing me non-stop about the best man speech if he thought he was going to see it. I don’t think they got an invitation.”

“Speaking of that…”

“Yeah, I know. Still got two weeks.”

Fornell laughs a bit. “Uh huh. You got more than the first word?”

Gibbs glares. That’s not terribly effective over the phone. “It’ll be ready. You just be ready to go out on the 30th after the rehearsal dinner.” He’s had a much easier time figuring out what to do for a bachelor party than what to do for his best man’s speech.

“You’ve got nothing, do you?”

Another glare.

Fornell is still laughing. “I’ll call McGee. Have fun writing.”

“Thanks,” Gibbs says dryly.
Abbi looks at him as he sets the phone down, and stares at his computer. She raises an eyebrow at him.

“I might have found the only thing on earth that’ll make learning Python look fun.”

She smiles and kisses him.

Bedtime. Leon lays in the dark, next to Lara, thinking about a lot of things.

The Young case, and the bigger case, and the men behind the curtains Jarvis talks about. Leon was a sailor first, and a cop second, and then, finally a politician. He’s better at it than he ever thought he’d be, but he never liked it.

And he knows that’s why he’s never going to go any higher than where he is now. Morrow moved from NCIS to Homeland. Jarvis left active service after Leon did and climbed a hell of a lot faster. Because they liked playing in the mud.

Leon rolls to his side and rests his hand on Lara’s hip.

When he became the Assistant Director of NCIS he got clearance to see all the ops. He remembers the case Gibbs quit on, the Cape Fear, and how it “officially” had some sort of tragic gas leak and blew up, killing all on board and most of a freighter full of Marines who were refueling/restocking.

He wasn’t sheltered or naïve. He knew the higher ups played fast and loose with the truth. But, he didn’t think it was that bad.

And he had spent several nights, like this one, thinking, debating if he should stick around, keep working this job, or if an honorable man leave when asked to support lies.

He stayed. He figured that he might not love, or like, what’s above him, but the people below him, the victims, need someone who will do the job and do it well. Someone to protect them. (Though those poor bastards on the Cape Fear and that freighter didn’t have anyone looking out for them. He tries not to think about that too hard.)

He thinks about the finger prints that are coming his way. If they match up, if they are the hands that touched that door, then he’ll let it go.

He thinks about “Harvey” and about the bits and pieces coming out of McGee’s department. He thinks about CGIS, and the vanishing account numbers.

He knows, if he was getting a call from the top of the heap about a murder, what is going to happen if he gets too deep into the rest of this. Because the bigger case, that’s way bigger, way more… troublesome, for those in charge than a few dead bodies.

He feels the breath catch in his chest for a moment. A good man with a good team can change the world. He’s got the good team. He’s got the best damn team he could possibly want for this kind of a job. If anyone can break this, it’s him and his team. All he needs to do is be the good man.

He exhales, long and deep. Tomorrow morning he and Lara have to have a very long talk.
Good men can change the world. And good men die trying.

And Leon’s going to be a good man.
Thursday Night: McGee & Palmer

The door to Autopsy slides open and Tim and Abby head in. Jimmy’s at his desk, finishing up the last of the day’s notes. “Almost done,” he says without looking up. Tim leans against Jimmy’s desk, as Abby looks around.

“Allan still here?” Abby asks.

“Left ten minutes ago,” Jimmy says not looking up from his monitor.

A second later, as he’s still typing, Abby’s kissing the back of his neck. Jimmy’s fingers stop moving over the keyboard, and he drops his head a bit so she can get to more of the back of his neck. He sighs as she nibbles his ear lobe. Then he quietly says, “I love that, but unlike Tim, I’m not used to working distracted, so give me a minute and let me get done, and then you can have my full attention.”

Abby kisses the back of his neck one more time, and then pulls back, heading over to snuggle with Tim. And, after a moment, where Jimmy’s typing fast, he stops, looks up, stands up, steps over to Abby, pulling her close for a proper hug and kiss.

She’s between him and Tim. She’s leaning against Tim, butt against his lap, and his hands are on her hips. As she’s kissing Jimmy, his hands find Tim’s and gives him a gentle squeeze.

After, she looks up at him, grinning. “Hi.” One more kiss, wet and soft. “That one’s for Breena, along with the message that Friday can’t get here soon enough.”

“Amen on that.” Jimmy kisses her again, holding her close for another second before rubbing his hands up Tim’s arms, his right arm closing around the back of Tim’s neck. He shifts over a bit, pulling Tim a little closer, and after a quick, closed-mouth, affectionate but not sexy kiss, he says, “How’s your day doing?”

Tim squeezes both of them and says, “Long. Lots going on, lots more tomorrow. Think Breena wants to just meet up at our place or yours and we can…” He sighs a bit. He wanted to come in and say hi, and now, having said hi, he doesn’t want to just turn around and say goodbye. “…just be married people at the end of a long day?”

Jimmy nods, and Abby’s smiling, all three of them liking that idea. “She’s already home with my girls. How about you give me a lift to your place, and she can meet us there. If we bring the food, I bet she’d be okay with that.”

Tim hugs both of them, pulling out his phone, ready to order food. “Find out if she’s up for it, and I’m on food. You driving, Abby?”

Abby nods. “I’m driving.”
alcohol and pretending Brand is three years older than she actually is. It’s amazing how well an NCIS ID works for getting into a bar. After all, who’s ever heard of an under 21 Federal Agent?) are working hard.

They’ve found they like that. Synch their schedules together, and tackle whatever comes up. They don’t always work the same projects, but they do bounce ideas off each other when they get stuck. And when they can, when they luck out and find something their own specialties all mesh well together on, they pounce on it like a cat on a mouse.

They are, as Brand puts it, kicking ass and taking names all over the Cyberworld. One case at a time.

And this job, the intranet worm. This one is working for all of them.

They know who wrote it. Not personally. None of them have met him, of course. And Ngyn didn’t know Jim, she was actually hired to replace him, but she knows she’s in a dead man’s seat, and that Khan’s the one who blew his cover, so she’s not fond of Khan by any extent. But they also all respect the code they’re seeing, and to greater and lesser extents the man who wrote it. (Brand is, after having seen Khan for a few seconds as he was leaving, vehemently not admitting to having something of a bad boy computer genius crush on the man. She will also, vehemently not admit that a different crush on a different bad boy computer genius had something to do with taking down Anonymous. Her vehement non-admissions cause Howard and Ngyn, who have both been there, to look at each other and smile.)

The code is beautiful. It’s not so much that he hacked a door providing full access into any system that door was in. Any hole can be a door, and any blunt instrument can punch one into a wall. A gaping hole left by a wrecking ball isn’t elegant. It isn’t subtle. And anyone looking at the wall can see the hole and go about fixing it. Khan’s code is more along the lines of a teleporter. Anyone with the coordinates could patch them in, hop in, grab what they wanted, and hop back out, with only a moment of shimmer to let anyone know what had happened.

Brand keeps poking it, going at different angles, but… “I don’t think we can backtrack this.”

Ngyn, who is, indeed, quite shy, but who has also warmed up quite a bit to her two teammates who not only get what she wants to do, but never look at her like she’s some sort of freak for coming up with off-the-wall ideas, and no matter how off-the-wall the code she’s showing off is, have never just shut her down, says, “I know. We’ve got to catch someone using it.”

Howard grins. “How about…” And she starts writing the code on the whiteboard they commandeered for their own use.

“Oooh…” Brand’s grinning, too. “Oh yeah. And, let’s tweak this here.” She adds a few key phrases.

“How do we want them to be able to come back at us again?” Ngyn asks.

“What are you thinking?” Howard says.

“I’m thinking that we can add a few lines, so that when anyone uses this port to get in, we tag them, and then infect them with a worm of our own.”

“How nasty should it be?” Brand’s eyes light up. “I’ve got some really nasty tricks I’ve been dying to pull.”

Ngyn, as the mama hen/resident adult (she’s 32, Howard is 24, Brand 18) shakes her head. “Let’s just tag and monitor. We’ll run it by McGee before we add teeth.”
And with that, they get coding.

Tim, Abby, and Jimmy beat Breena and the girls back to their place. Not by much though. Heather’s still getting them up to date when Breena gets in.

They say their hellos and goodbyes and settle in for a quiet night.

Like any night involving feeding and bathing small children, step one is get out of work clothing. At work they’ve got coveralls and jackets, lab coats and scrubs. Here… Tim tosses the white button down he had on into the hamper… here they’ve got spills and stains and little people who make big messes. Followed by a lot of wet and sudsy when it’s time to get the mess off those little people.

Breena’s the only one of them who gets to work in clothing that won’t be any worse for the wear if it’s covered in baby goo. She’s sitting on the bed, in her mom uniform of jeans and a t-shirt, cuddling Anna, while Kelly and Molly play on the floor, watching the other three change. “So, how about, instead of go bags,” because even Jimmy has a bag with extra clothing in it, “we just keep some stuff at each other’s places.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Abby says. “Couple changes of laying around clothing, and at least one ‘work’ outfit.” She flops onto the bed next to Breena, sighing. “I don’t want to put anything on.”

“Stay naked. Who’s gonna see?” Breena says.

“Delivery guy is coming sooner or later,” Tim adds, pulling a t-shirt over his head. “But it’s not like you’ve got to get the door.”

“I’m fine with naked dinner once food shows up,” Jimmy says with a smile. He’s digging in the bag Breena brought and smiles when he sees his fleece jammy pants. They’re old, soft, worn, and feel like a warm, fuzzy hug. He loves them, and they’re one of the reasons he looks forward to cool weather every year. “Thank you!”

“Thought it was just cool enough that you’d want them instead of shorts.”

He grins at her, pulling them on.

Abby sits up slowly. “After the delivery guy shows up.” Tim tosses her a pair of her own pajama pants and a loose t-shirt. “Might want to wait outside for a bit. Suck up some early evening air.”

“It is nice out there,” Breena says. “How about we take little girls out for some quality time on the grass, and you two get their dinner ready?”

Abby stands up, pulling on her clothing, and grabs Kelly.

“We can do that,” Jimmy says.
“Gotcha!” Brand says.

“That’s lighting up like a Christmas tree!” Howard adds.

“What are they after?” Ngyn asks.

“Right now, Vance’s email,” Brand replies.

“Come on honey, take our worm home and tell us who you are,” Howard coaxes as their hacker picks his way through Vance’s email.

Brand points at the screen. “You see this?”

They nod. Whoever it is, is going through their collection of fingerprints, taking everything downloaded from the last four days.

“Oh, we’ve got to get this bastard!” Howard and Brand stare at Ngyn, even at her wildest (which isn’t very wild) they’ve never heard language like that come out of her, before.

---

“Molly!” Breena’s using her “firm” voice as Molly tries to get away with picking up the peas and dropping them on the floor instead of eating them, while complaining about the fact that Anna doesn’t have to eat peas.

“Maaaaaammmmmmmaaaaaa, I don’t like peeeeeeaaaaas!”

“Rule seventeen!” Jimmy adds.

“I don’t like rule seventeen!”

“Do you need to go straight to bed?” Breena adds.

Molly, moping, puts a pea in her mouth and chews, looking like she’s heading off to face the firing squad.

“What’s rule seventeen?” Tim asks.

“Same as all the other ones,” Breena says. “No fussing. The numbers don’t mean anything to her, so, the running joke for us is that we’ve got twenty-five rules at our house and twenty-four of them are ‘No fussing.’”

“What’s the other one?” Abby asks.

“Molly?” Breena asks her daughter. “What’s rule number one?”

“No biting.”

“Good girl.” Breena takes two of the ten peas off the plate. “Now eat the rest.”

They hear the bell ring, and Tim gets up, heading off to get their food. A minute later, he’s back with it. He turns the oven on warm and puts the food in.

Abby eyes the clock. “One more hour, then dinner for us?”
“That’s…” Brand says, quickly checking the address. Their little worm has done its job. It went home with the information their hacker took, and now it’s letting them know where home is.

“A private house. At least, it’s supposed to be,” Howard finishes.

“We’ve got to tell him,” Ngyn says, reaching for her phone.

Howard grabs her arm. “Not like that. Who knows if our phones are safe?”

“I know where he lives,” Brand says. “Come on.”

Ngyn shakes her head. Yes, working with Brand and Howard is helping get her out of her shell, but she’s still not relishing the idea of going to McGee’s house. “I’ll keep eyes on this, and see if I can find out more about this house. You go tell him.”

Brand and Howard pop up, ready to head to McGee’s house.

“You decent?” Abby calls up.

“What?” The girls are making a lot of noise and he and Jimmy are trying to talk. Mostly he heard her voice.

“Got company. You decent?” comes up a bit louder this time. And this time he’s on the landing near the bathroom door, so he can hear a little better.

Without really thinking, Tim says, “Enough.” Like he always does for tubby time, his shirt is off, and he’s down to just his kilt. He’s got Kelly in his arms, trying to get her dried off, while heading toward the nursery to get pjs for all three girls. Molly and Kelly did a good job of making sure that both he and Jimmy need to get dried off, too, so his hair is wet, and some of it’s in his eyes. (Jimmy had made, as he was heading out to get said pjs, a comment about Tim looking like a kilt-wearing-drowned-rat. Tim responded with a rude gesture and was about to add to it when Abby called up.)

Molly’s working on getting herself dried off (with some lackluster results, the only dry parts are the parts she can see, her back is still soaked), and Jimmy’s leaning over the side of the tub, dribbling water over Anna, getting her rinsed off.

Basically, it’s tubby-time 101. Wet, soapy, and not very dressed. And when he yelled down his answer, he was assuming that the person downstairs and coming up was a person who’d already seen him in a bathing suit (and possibly less.)

Really, as he thinks about it, and grabs the PJs, he’s expecting Vance to come up. Because if it was part of the family, Abby wouldn’t have asked. If it was, say, Gibbs, she’d know he’s welcome up, so she would have just sent him up. And if it was a stranger, she’d have called him down, giving him time to get fully dressed and the girls out of sight.
But Vance is family adjacent, and Tim’s pretty sure that Vance has been here before, and since he knows about what’s up with the McPalmer (or whatever they are) family he wouldn’t be shocked by him and Jimmy on tubby-time.

He’s not expecting Howard and Brand to pop up his steps, and they certainly aren’t expecting him in a kilt and nothing else with a small, wet person on his chest and three onesies in his hand.

Tim’s a few steps outside of the bathroom, so he yanks the door shut, fast. Jimmy’s just as dressed as he is, in his PJ pants and nothing else, and Molly and Anna are completely naked.

“Uh. Hi,” he says, dropping the onesies and making sure the towel covers Kelly.

Howard’s grinning at him. “Bet you’re wishing you hadn’t said to let you know as soon as we found something.”

Brand’s just staring at him, eyes wide and skittering over his skin from one tattoo to the next.

He raises an eyebrow at Howard, while stepping into Kelly’s room. “Hot enough you didn’t want to use a phone?”

She nods. Now he’s interested and much less concerned about not being very dressed. “Kelly, this is Catherine and Kristin. Do you remember Kristin?” Kelly ducks her head into the crook of his neck. “She’s feeling shy,” he says to Howard and Brand. “They’ve got some good information for me. You okay with Mommy and Uncle Jimmy taking care of bedtime?” he says to Kelly.

Kelly’s not thrilled at that, but she’s sleepy enough it’ll fly. Besides, tubby is the fun part, and she’s already gotten lots of splashing in with Dad, so she’ll let him go. Tim grabs a diaper.

Abby’s already standing in the doorway, holding the onesies he dropped. “Want me to get that?”

“Yeah. Molly and Anna need jammies, too.”

She kisses him while taking Kelly from him. “I’ve got it.”

“Okay.” Kelly gets a gentle kiss on the top of her head. “Goodnight, baby.”

“Night Daddy.” He turns to Howard and Brand. “Office is at the bottom of the stairs, on the left. Get in there. Turn on the computers. I’ll be down in a minute.”

They nod and head down.

“Was that Dr. Palmer?” Brand says under her breath to Howard as soon as they’re in Tim’s office.

Howard is nodding and trying not to giggle. “Palmer’s ripped.” She’s being quiet, but not silent.

“Shhh… his wife.” Brand’s gesturing toward the door.

“So’s McGee.”

“Oh my god! Did you see…” Brand just mouths it. And Howard is nodding. It’s not the first time they’ve speculated about what’s under McGee’s traditional button down and jeans. The little flashes
they’ve seen of something a lot less buttoned up, the cuff and nail polish, the kilt when he was hurt, hint in interesting directions the Angels have been happy to muse about (once again, like the name, Angels, said speculation has also involved alcohol). Brand doesn’t add any voice as she says, “So many tattoos.” She’d heard that he had some, but not that many. “Were those lips on his wrist?”

Howard’s nodding. “Yeah. Three of them!”

“Wouldn’t mind getting my lips on him, too.”

Howard giggles for a second and says, “Shhh… His wife,” and points to the floor above them. “Cool dragon.” That seems like a safer topic.

Brand nods, too. “Kilt?”

“Yeah. One time, before you were here, before I was here, he came in wearing that, black nail polish, and eyeliner.”

Brand takes a moment to appreciate that image. “Came into work, like that!”

“I know! That’s what Ngyn says. Way I heard it, it was right after he started, physical plant was dicking around with us, and he showed up all Gothed out and stared Dave from Physical Plant down!”

“Hehehehe.” Brand likes that idea. “Why do you think he and Dr. Palmer are washing babies?”

“Because babies get awfully smelly if you don’t wash them?” Howard spent years of her life as a babysitter, and is very much not getting what Brand is asking.

“No, not why are they washing them. Like… why are they washing them?”

“Men wash babies, too.”

Brand looks frustrated and decides that she’s not getting this idea across, especially not at the almost zero volume she and Catherine have been having this conversation at. But, as Howard said, there are three lips on McGee’s wrist, and he’s home, washing babies with one of three other people. She’ll see about getting into it later when they can really talk.

Howard’s got both computers on, and Brand drifts over to the typewriter. “What’s this?”

“Typewriter.”

“I know what it is, why do you think he’s got one?”

Tim’s dried off, pulled on a t-shirt, put his wrist cuff back on, and is almost all the way down the steps when he hears somewhat frantic whispering coming from his office.

He sees Breena, who’s leaning against the wall in the hallway, looking really amused, and he pauses, listening.

He supposes this is karma coming back for all the hours of gossiping about Gibbs. That said, it does feel odd to have them gossiping about him. Breena steps up to him, giving him a quick kiss and a pat
on the tush before saying, very quietly, “Sounds like there’s a bit of crushing on teacher going on in there.”

“Oh, God.” He rolls his eyes a little. “Serious?”

She shakes her head and pats him again, this time under the kilt. “They’ve noticed you’re pretty under your clothing.”

He glances down the stairs. They’re both in the office, so he gives Breena a quick kiss, and then heads in. On the bottom step he catches Brand’s voice, “Why do you think he’s got one?”

“Same reason anyone else has one. I type with it.”

Howard and Brand jerk like they’ve been electrocuted when he says that. Tim smirks a bit as he sees them glancing at each other guilty embarrassment all over their faces.

“So, what’s so hot you can’t call about it?”

“We started going after that worm,” Howard begins.

“And about a minute into it found out that we couldn’t backtrack it,” Brand adds.

“Not the way it works. You’ve got to get it while it’s working, because when it’s done, it’s done,” Howard says.

Tim nods. If he was going to build something like that, that’s how he’d do it.

“So we got it,” Brand says.

“Going through Vance’s emails, and our finger print database. It grabbed a copy of every print we’ve put into the machine in the last four days,” Howard says.

“Ngyn modified it. She had us add a little twist, so when someone used it to access our system, they’d get the information they took, along with a little present from us,” Brand explains.

“And now you can backtrack,” Tim says with a smile. “So, is that the hot part?”

“That’s the warm part. It’s going back to a private home. Given who made that worm, Ngyn was thinking that looked really suspicious,” Howard says.

Tim’s nodding slowly. “Yeah, that’s hinkey as hell. Any shot they found the worm you added?”

Brand and Howard both shake their heads. “It’s not impossible,” Brand adds, “but you’ve got to know it’s coming and look for it.”

“And Ngyn hasn’t called to let us know that the alarm on it buzzed.”

“Perfect. Got the address?”

“Yes!” Brand hands a piece of paper over. “Do you want us to kill the door, or leave it in play?”

“Leave it open, and keep your return worm in play. Just because we’ve got one address doesn’t
mean this is the only person using that entrance.”

Howard smiles, too. “According to Brand she’s got some very nasty surprises still in her toolbox. Want us to add one of them?”

Tim looks at Brand. “How nasty?”

“Anything from turn every electronic item you own that’s ever come in contact with your computer into a brick, to outing every detail of your life on the internet.”

“Your brick option. Can it be backtracked to us?” Tim’s got some ideas for that.

“Nope.” She smiles. Shutting everything down is annoying, but the nasty bit is in what she says next. “Brick. Solid and dead. If you get it running again, everything is gone.”

Tim thinks about that for a second. He’s seeing some really fun options for that. If the worm they’ve got works the way he hopes it does… “How much of their system can you pull?”

Brand knows where he’s going. “If you want it, I can have their entire system cloned onto ours, with identifying information, then turn everything into a brick, and they’ll never know what hit them.”

Tim grins, very, very happy. “Do it. Give me their entire system and then wipe it clean. Tomorrow I’m going to have a chat with a lawyer and then a judge, and I’ll get a warrant for the physical place and all the records on that place, who owns it, everything.”

Howard and Brand look very pleased by this. “On it, Boss,” Brand says. Howard nods with a grin, and they head off to NCIS to wreak havoc on the computers at 458 West Samber St.

“You have to leave?” Abby asks as Brand and Howard head out.

Tim sees that they’ve got the food laid out on a sheet on the living room floor. Several pillows around the sheet, a few low lights, all of the blinds drawn. Co-ed naked dinner time is up soon.

“Thank all that’s good and holy, NO.” He waits a few beats, makes sure he hears the car pull out, and then pulls his t-shirt and kilt off before sitting down cross-legged and starting to open cartons of food that smells yummy.

“So other than peeking at you and Jimmy and doing a bad job of not gawping, what was all that about?” Breena asks as she strips out of her t-shirt and jeans.

“Gawping?” Jimmy’s already naked and sitting down, adding food to plates.

“Yeah, the blonde…”

“Howard.” Tim adds.

“Was very impressed by you.” Breena says with a smile, petting Jimmy’s hair as she sits next to him.

Abby finishes stripping off and lies down on her side, propping her head on Tim’s thigh. “And Brand?”
“Seems to prefer Tim. They got really quiet after the first few words. But I could hear the giggles and I’ve giggled that giggle often enough to know what it means.”

Tim looks up down at Abby, stroking her neck and shoulder. “And that’s why we’re not adopting any baby hackers. I do not need to be encouraging the teenager with the crush on me.”

“So, other than eye candy, which I don’t imagine they came all the way out here for,” Jimmy says as he hands Breena the first plate, “what’s up?”

Tim sighs a bit, and takes a deep drink of the ice tea in front of him. “How much of… Nothing. You know nothing because this all happened today. I swear, today’s been at least three weeks long. Okay. To the beginning. Today started with me working on getting a secure computer system up and running so we can do our work without whoever it is figuring out we’re doing it.”

“Oh, and we know that you’ve found some traps hiding in there,” Abby adds, taking a plate from Jimmy, and grabbing chopsticks for her and Tim.

“Yeah, several worms hiding in the apple. Anyway, one of the worms looks like something I’ve seen before. So, I look into it, and yes, Ajay Khan…” and he tells the story of his adventures for the day. Abby’s heard some of it, because she’s helping to hunt down “Harvey.” Breena never heard the first Khan story, so they had to backtrack and cover who Khan was and why Tim knows him.

“Okay, so you’ve got Khan hacking systems for Satan from inside his jail cell?” Breena says, wrapping it up nicely.

Abby laughs at that, she’s perking up with food and rest. “Not exactly Satan, the King of Hell.”

“Big difference,” Breena says dryly.

“It is on the show,” Tim adds. “Anyway, tomorrow we find out who ‘Harvey’ is.”

“So at least find out that we can’t find out,” Abby adds. “With the way things are going, what do you want to bet I can’t find him in the system.

Tim sighs. “You better be able to. He’s got to be approved to have access to prisoners. But if you can’t get him, I’ve got the name of the judge who okayed this, so… Either way, we’re digging.”

“Back up, you said you were reading something about the guys who made the law that basically said you had to use the system with the worm in it?” Jimmy asks as he eats the last bite of his beef and veggie stir-fry.

“Yeah. I found something in there that said they could monitor us, but not who they are.”

“And you think this worm might be ‘they’?” Breena says.

“Yeah. Plans within plans within plans. Tomorrow, at dinner, I’m passing off what I’ve found to Abbi. And Diane when I see her next. And I’ve got to see Bleach, get warrants from him to ransack that house. Actually get out in the field.”

That has the other three all staring at him, not happy.

Tim puts his chopsticks down and holds out his hands in a defensive gesture. “I won’t go on my own and won’t be breaking down any doors. I’m sure Tony, Draga, and Bishop will be willing to do that. But me and mine need to go in and pull all the tech out.”
“Long day,” Abby says, rubbing his thigh, kissing him.

“Yeah. I know I’ll make it to Shabbos, if for no other reason than to talk to Abbi, but might be burning the midnight, midday, and midweekend oil.”

“I’ll keep your place on the bed warm,” Jimmy says with a cocky smile.

Tim laughs a little at that, and then grabs the last bite of his dinner (lemon chicken with broccoli.)

“Speaking of beds,” Abby says, “just got word that the bigger one should be here next week Wednesday, and we’ll all have enough room to spread out, here.”

There’s general rejoicing at that, which gets cut short when Tim’s phone rings.

“At least they called first.” He gets up, thinking that he’s going to have to go in, but sees Fornell on the caller ID. “Fornell? You guys catch something interesting?”

“Not exactly. Wendy’s getting the guest count for the wedding ready, and we haven’t gotten an RSVP from you.”

Tim spends a moment just staring into space, wondering how on earth he and Abby got invited to Fornell’s wedding, and then says, “Uh… I’m sorry, we didn’t get an invitation.”

“Jethro thought that was the story. I’ve emailed you the details. It’s the first. Starts at four. Here in town.”

“Oh, uh… let me talk to Abby.”

He feels Fornell smile. Then he puts his hand over the microphone. “That’s Fornell. We’re invited to his wedding, which is two weeks from Saturday. You want to go?”

Abby glances at Breena, who nods. “We’ve got her.”

“One condition on the babysitting, I want video of Jethro’s best man speech,” Jimmy adds.

Abby nods. “I’m up for a wedding. Up for seeing Gibbs give his speech even more.”

Tim had forgotten that and he starts to laugh a little. Then he grabs the phone. “Abby and I will be there, happily.” Then another thought hits Tim. “You busy tomorrow night?”

“I don’t know, why?”

“Shabbos is at Jimmy’s house. Starts at sunset. You and Wendy should really come.”

“Celebrate the Sabbath with you?” You got something you need to get to me? Is clear subtext to Fornell’s question.

“Yeah. You really should.” Yeah, get your ass there, it’ll be worth your while.

“Okay. I’ll check with Wendy, but I think we’ll be there.”

“Good. You know the way?”

“Jethro will help if I can’t find it.”

“Good. Okay, see you tomorrow.” Tim hears Fornell hang up, and then puts his phone down and
Brand cracks her knuckles, smiles, a deeply satisfied and mean little smirk, and starts to type. Ngyn’s completely downloaded everything that was on the computer monitoring them. She and Howard are going through it right now, looking to see if anything suggests who’s watching and what they’re doing.

Brand’s on destruction. Happily on destruction. She’s grinning and humming a little bit as she sets her trap.

As anyone who works with a computer knows, magnets kill them. That’s the only way to truly kill the information on a computer. However, as anyone who’s got a wicked imagination, an off the charts understanding of how a computer works, and how to program, and more than a bit of electrical engineering knows, if you fuck with a computer badly enough, you can tell it to make it’s own tiny EMP, and that’ll fry the little bastard so dead all you can do with it is melt it down to reclaim the minerals used in making it.

And Brand’s doing that. With a grin. While bopping along to Taylor Swift. She’s humming Bad Blood as her fingers fly over her keyboard.

This is so perfect. She can’t believe she gets paid to do this. Her friends are just getting into the college groove, complaining about books and dorm food and she’s killing someone spying on a branch of Federal Law Enforcement. And when they get done, maybe they’ll hit a bar and go dancing.

Life is awesome!

---

Co-ed naked dinner time turned into co-ed naked TV time. Which is warm and close and snuggly. Not particularly sexy or erotic, they’re really watching TV, but it is close and sensual.

TV time leads to bedtime, and bedtime to sex time. There are a lot of flavors of sex. And right now, Tim’s looking for physical closeness. He’s not horny, not in the gotta-get-laid-and-off sense. (Jerkng-off wouldn’t take care of what he’s looking for right now, and it usually works just fine for plain-vanilla-horny.) He does want to be wrapped in the people he loves. He wants touch and soft words and affection. And sex is his favorite way of getting that.

So, there’s nothing particularly fast or frantic about the sex. Slow, lots of kissing and petting. He’s mostly with Abby, and Jimmy’s mostly with Breena, though they’re all kissing each other.

Holding Breena’s hand while he makes love with Abby, able to feel Jimmy’s hip against the backs of his fingers, slow and easy and quiet, that’s meeting every need he has right now, and a few he wasn’t aware of.

He’s smiling at that, enjoying the breath and heat of these people he holds dear.
Tomorrow there’ll be mysteries and conspiracies and crime, but right now, life is sweet.
Getting Deeper

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tim’s a bit sore and stiff (and not in the good way) when he wakes up. A bed big enough for all four of them can’t come soon enough. Sleeping on the floor so they can all stay together is for the birds.

He rubs his eyes, feels around on the floor until he finds where he put his pain meds, and swallows them down.

A quick glance at the clock shows him that they’ve got about ten minutes until little girls start to chirp.

He closes his eyes, snuggles in against Abby, and scoots both of them back a little which puts his back against Jimmy’s side, and closes his eyes to drift for a bit.

He’s very surprised to wake up again. Tim didn’t think he’d fall back to sleep, but he did, and jerks awake when he feels Abby getting up. It’s his morning for stretching out, PT, shower and the like, while she gets Kelly. So he rubs his eyes again, and starts working the kinks out.

Apparently Breena’s giving her hand on baby wrangling this morning, because Jimmy’s taking an extra moment to just lay around and rest. But after a minute, he opens his eyes and sits up. “Morning.”

Tim nods at him, working on stretching his arm and shoulder.

He watches as Jimmy gets up, rolls up the blankets and pillows, putting them back on their bed, and get started on his usual morning yoga routine.

And for as much as Tim was thinking he’d like to join in at the lake, but his arm wouldn’t let him, it’s occurring to him that right now, as Jimmy’s doing his normal routine, that he doesn’t need his arms for a lot of this. And if he were to ask, Jimmy could probably find alternatives for him.

So, as Jimmy starts his day in tree pose, Tim joins in.

Jimmy flashes him a quick smile and says, “Remember, you just do what you can as well as you can. You’re not competing with me, just with what you did yesterday.”

“Which was nothing.”

“Congrats, you’ve already won. Don’t hurt yourself.”

Tim nods. Before he got hurt he could get into tree with his foot up against his thigh. He tries to do that, he wobbles, a lot, and comes to the conclusion that falling down is going to hurt a lot more than he’d like, so it’s back down to just above his ankle. He sighs. That’s where he started when he and Abby began this, almost two years ago.

“Back to square one.”
Jimmy opens his eyes and glances at what Tim’s doing. “That’s because you’re on the foot they broke. Your right will be better.”

Tim sighs at that, too. “We’ll see.”

And they did. He’s slower and a lot more wobbly, and nowhere near as strong, even on his left arm and right foot (because he hasn’t done much with them since June) but he’s not completely back to square one on the uninjured limbs. He was pleased to see he could do at least a version of down dog, and most of the warrior sequence still works because he can extend his arms all the way in front of him, and because he started working on his twists to help with the broken ribs, he’s got almost his full range on that.

It certainly wasn’t elegant or controlled or flexible or strong, but it was better than nothing, and as much as he missed where he had been, he is happy to be moving again.

“So, if they were giggling over you and Tim washing the girls, what do you think they’d do with this?” Breena asks when they come down for breakfast.

Apparently she got a shot of him and Jimmy, both in down dog, (he’s doing it one-handed, his right he’s got extended as far as it will go, about six inches away from his ear. It looks awkward as hell, jutting out toward the side) from behind.

Jimmy snorts a quick laugh. “God… Yeah, burn that shot.”

Tim glances over his shoulder, sees it, and winces. He doesn’t usually look at himself when he’s exercising. It’s one thing to check your form in the mirrors, it’s another thing all together to see your naked self, fresh from waking up, stubbly, hair all over the place, balls swinging in the breeze, flushed from working harder than you have in months, doing a yoga pose, badly, with another guy who’s just as rumpled as you are, but is at least doing it right.

Tim shakes his head. “Please, burn that.”

“It’s cute!” Abby adds.

He shakes his head again. “You want it for your own viewing, fine, but that’s not an angle I want to see myself or him from.”

The ladies laugh at that, and then hand over little girls. Food has been made, but not yet fed to small people, so he and Jimmy are on feeding babies. As Tim’s getting the eggs cut into tiny pieces for all three girls, and Breena and Abby are heading upstairs, Jimmy’s not doing much besides looking thoughtful.

Tim tosses the bottle toward him, with a “Heads up,” and he does manage to catch it without letting it hit the floor, but it’s clear he’s not thinking about feeding babies.

“What?” Tim asks.

“Real pictures. Tomorrow, have Abby get real shots of where you are. We’ll get them every Saturday morning. I think that’ll be good. You’ll be able to see what you’re doing instead of just going based on a vague idea.”
“Charting my progress?”

“Something like that. You won’t feel so stalled out if you can see yourself getting deeper and easier into the poses.”

Tim nods, that makes a certain amount of sense.

“And, you know, if you want to come back to bootcamp, assuming that we get a rainy weekend soon, Ziva’s not fighting anymore. I’m sure you two could find things to do. Get you back to working out on some level.”

Tim inclines his head. He has been missing that, though he’s wary about going back to the gym and watching Jimmy and Tony and Collin pound on each other.

“Or don’t. If it’s too soon, it’s too soon.” Jimmy seems to get why he’s not leaping at that opportunity.

He inclines his head at that, too. “I don’t know. We’ll see how it goes. And even if it does rain, most of the inside of the house is ripped out, so the next few together days, rain or shine, may be planning out where the walls go and working more on sketching that out.”

“Yes.” Jimmy notices that Tim’s put food for the girls in front of them, and appears to be making something for him, but isn’t cooking for himself. “You not eating?”

“Got a breakfast date with Bishop and her husband. Then I’ll be seeing if I can get some time with Bleach. Then work.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah. You’re riding in with Abby this morning.”

Jimmy smiles. “At least it’s not Gibbs or Ziva!”

Tim chuckles a bit at that while blending up Jimmy’s morning green smoothie.

Leon’s not sure how to start the conversation. If they’d had a normal courtship. If he’d met Lara after a divorce… Or if he hadn’t been her Boss… (Technically, he still is. That’s… complicated. He pays the nanny service, and they pay her, but since they aren’t married, he’s not going to suggest she look after his kids for free.) If any host of things had been different, this would be different. But it’s not.

Once the kids are on the bus and off to school, she’s eyeing him. He’s usually the first one out, and today he’s just sitting in the kitchen, looking tense.

“You got some bad news?” Lara asks.

He opens his mouth, thinks for a second, shuts it, thinks for a second more, and then says, “I don’t know. I don’t tell you about work… I know it’s not fair, or right, but…”

“But it cost you too much in the past. I know.”

“I’m glad you do. I don’t want you thinking that’s about you.” He’s seen guys who got involved
with someone “below” them and got embarrassed about that. Didn’t want to admit they’d fallen for
the nanny or housekeeper or whomever… That’s not the case here, and he wants her to know that.

She smiles gently at him. “I know it’s not. But, something big is going on, isn’t it?”

He shrugs a bit. “Probably.” He takes a deep breath, and then starts to fill her in. He starts with
CGIS, then moves to the missing IRS account numbers, touches on the worm in his systems, and
wraps with Dr. Young.

She whistles softly at that. “That’s a lot to have on one plate.”

He nods. “Yeah. And, it’s probably going to get worse. I’ve got people in almost every agency that
matters. I can see bits and pieces of this. The cop in me knows this is big, and it’s bad, and I can let it
lie. I can brush it under the rug and pretend it’s not real. But it is real, and I don’t think this is one
bunch of bad apples and another mystery, and that it’s not all connected to something bigger behind
the scenes.”

“And you’re afraid that if you dig into this, something bad is going to happen?” Lara asks, looking
concerned.

“Yeah.” He takes a deep breath at that. He is afraid. He’s been afraid since Jackie died, very
protective of his home and family, but this is a different flavor of fear, one he hasn’t felt in a while.
He’s afraid that he might be the target, and he’s not properly prepared to make that as easy as
possible for the people he leaves behind. “I’m afraid they might try to take me out of the picture, or
go after you or the kids to keep me quiet. It’s easy to be a white knight when you’ve got nothing to
lose.” He looks at her quietly, and his eyes flick to the pictures of the kids on his mantle. “And I’m
afraid this isn’t fair to you or them. They’ve already…”

She puts her hand on Leon’s. “If you got drafted, you’d go fight, right?”

“If I get drafted, now, the US Navy’s in awfully sad shape,” he says dryly.

She flashes him a, you get my point look.

“If they dug my old Navy number up, I’d go. Oldest damn Lieutenant Commander ever, but I’d go.”

“And Kayla’s headed for Annapolis.”

He nods.

She squeezes his hand. “This isn’t any different. You signed up to be the White Knight, so go be the
White Knight.”

He nods again. Then he takes a breath. “Marry me.”

She arches an eyebrow at him and sits back in her chair. “Well, that was the least romantic proposal
ever.”

He looks a little sheepish. “I’ll knock your socks off later.” He smiles a little. She knows he can do
romantic when he puts his mind to it. “But right now, if you’ll go to the courthouse with me this
morning, I’d like to have this done as soon as possible. You’d have my pension and the house, my
money, next of kin. The kids will go to you. And if they try to destroy me rather than kill me, you
won’t have to testify against me, and—“

“Leon.” He stops talking. “No one’s killing you today, right?”
He can’t tell if she thinks he’s being overly cautious or if she’s trying to figure out if he’s giving her the sugar-coated version. “Probably not, but… I’ve got people running things, and I don’t know what those things are going to find.”

“You really think they’ll… Who’s they?”

“I don’t know, yet. But I do know ‘they’ prefer it that way and won’t look kindly on me trying to find out.”

“You think ‘they’ll’ kill you?” She’s staring to sound nervous.

“Jethro’s got a five inch hole in his back. The man Borin replaced ‘died in a car accident.’ When my ME got a hold of him, he found the bullets. Might just be the Coast Guard. I hope it’s just the Coast Guard. But… it feels bad. Feels tense and nervous.”

“Okay.”

He’s starting to see fear in her eyes. She’s finally starting to feel what’s been keeping him tense and nervous.

“Maybe I’m being too sensitive on this, but I want you and the kids to have all the protection you can get, so, if this isn’t anything you want, not long term, you can divorce me when we’re in the clear—“

“Hush, you.” She squares her shoulders and squeezes his hand. “Let me go get changed. I’m not getting married in jeans and a t-shirt.”

When Tim gets to the Elaine’s, Jake and Bishop are sitting there, waiting for him.

Tim can see, perfectly well, that Jake is wearing jeans, sneakers, and a sweater, but somehow, seeing it, Tim’s mental image of Jake is wearing a suit. A very stiff, very formal, pristine, good suit.

Maybe it’s the glasses, or the posture, or the well-kept light brown hair, (or possibly the pancake in front of him cut into very precise little squares) but Jake Bish—Malloy, is a suit kind of guy. Actually, as he’s offering his hand and Bishop’s introducing them, he gets the sense that Jake Malloy is the kind of guy who looks like he belongs in a suit even when he’s sleeping.

He also, as Tim sits down, slides a thumb drive over to him. “Judge Harland sent me a subpoena that covered everything. I think what you’re looking for will be on that.”

“Thanks.” Tim takes a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. “I saw this while I was reading up, and… I thought it might be interesting to you. Bishop’s mentioned that you do government watchdog stuff, and… I’d never heard of this.” He passes over the copy of the law allowing someone to watch everything he does at work.

Jake looks at the page Tim printed out for him. He nods. “Ah, that.” It’s clear by the look on his face and tone of voice that, yes, he does know about this already.

“Is that… legal?” Tim asks.

Jake looks dryly amused by that. “Of course it’s legal. That’s a law you are handing me.”
Tim rolls his eyes a bit. “Not exactly what I meant.”

“I’m sure, but it touches on what I mean. You are a government employee, working for the government, on a government computer, you have no right to, nor expectation of, privacy in that circumstance. That aspect of this law cannot be challenged. On the bigger scale of what I mean, *everything* you are about to get into will be legal. I’m sure that if what you’ve got your hands on is a version of the working paper I turned down, that between then and now, implementing that paper became legal.”

“I’m not following…” Tim’s fairly sure the whole warrant thing is pretty much ironclad.

“Any law Congress passes is legal until a court torpedoes it. Congress isn’t *supposed* to pass laws that are blatantly unconstitutional, but that doesn’t mean it *can’t*. And if it does, those laws must be followed until someone with standing fights said law and wins. If the State really wants that law, they will keep fighting it up the chain of courts. A bad law isn’t really dead until the Supreme Court says so. Should the law in question be buried in say, an appropriations bill that no one has read all the way through, and should the implementation of said law be done quietly, without people noticing it, and should the Supreme Court decline to take the case when it comes up, then said law will remain legal, even though it may be blatantly un-constitutional.”

Tim’s not sure if Jake is the most jaded person he’s ever met, or the most realistic. Either way, he’s starting to get a bad feeling about everything they’re getting into. He’s an officer of the law, and if this is legal, he’s not sure, what, if anything, he can do about it.

As Tim thinks about what Jake said, he notices the word, *aspect* which means this isn’t ironclad. “My people tell me that information is being collected from my systems and sent to a private home, and I can’t find anywhere in that law that says who is watching.”

Jake smiles a little at that. “That’s the part of the law that we are… exploring. So far our FOIA requests have all been returned with, ‘We don’t know anything about this. Not our job.’ No government agencies are admitting that they’re the ones in charge of supervising everyone. Which means our requests are useless. We’ve wanted to move on taking a case on this, but as of this point we don’t have standing.”

Tim squints at him.

“I can’t sue unless I can do it in the name of someone who’s being effected by the law. And, as I’m sure you’ve noticed that code is buried deep, and I don’t think anyone else has even noticed it, yet. On my side of it, in addition to not knowing who was monitoring, we had no idea how they were doing the monitoring.”

“I thought you just said this is legal. What standing would we have?”

“It is. You can’t sue for breach of privacy. I think we can make a case based on neither of us knowing who is watching. Since the law doesn’t specify who is watching, when someone gets upset about you not complying with the law, we’ll counter sue saying they don’t have any authorization to take the information they’re taking.”

That sounds like a mess to Tim. He rubs his eyes and glances at Bishop. She’s not looking to happy about this either. He wonders what they were like before they got this disillusioned. Then he sighs and says, “According to Khan, the version of this they’re using on private citizens has to be hacked into Norton. They don’t have permission to put it there.”

Jake aims the driest smile Tim’s ever seen at him, and takes a very measured, precise sip of his coffee.
before saying, “Again, trust me, if this is happening, and if the person Khan is working for actually works for some branch of the US Government, what he is doing will be legal. But, if Norton catches them at it, then they will have standing for quite a bit more than breach of privacy, and letting the world know they were hacked by the US Government would be frightfully embarrassing, legal or not.”

Tim thinks about that. In that Khan’s behind both of these, it’s one case. In that only one of them is hitting him, it’s two. Treat it like two cases. Right now the thing with Norton isn’t in his ballpark, other than he knows about it, and he should probably see about giving them a heads up. He doesn’t think he knows anyone with them, but he’s got to know someone who knows someone.

Onto the stuff that he’s actually investigating. “So, Murray writes me up the warrant I need to ransack the house my data went to. Within a few hours some Man In Black type shows up and tells me to hand everything over. I tell him to pound sand because there’s nothing that says he can take that information back.”

“And then he and his crew arrest you for breaking whatever law,” Tim winces, that didn’t work out so well for him last time. Though, given his position, and the legal beagles that NCIS has at hand, he figures that worst comes to worst they’ll make him take a leave of absence and sit around at home. Where, if push comes to shove, he and Jethro will keep on investigating this. “And then we know where to aim the case. Then I know where to aim the FIOA requests, and if they don’t comply, I can sue. And once they put you in jail, I can sue in your name because the law doesn’t specify who is supposed to be doing the watching, and with any luck we can get it to the Supreme Court and make them require future laws to specify who does what.”

Tim sighs. Lawyers. “So, you’re saying the best you can do is make sure they have to tell us who is watching?”

Jake nods, looking angry and tired. Tim’s got a sense that he likely was one of Bishop’s true believers and these days, he’s lost what he believed in.

“Okay. Here’s the next question. Since I do not actually know who dumped this monitoring software into my system, can I just delete it?”

Jake thinks about that. “To the best of your knowledge a cyberhacker was hired to put this worm into your system. You don’t know who hired him, or how it got there…”

“The guy who hired him used a false name, bad one, and claims to be from an agency I’m sure he’s not from, but if he is, he’s got no jurisdiction on us. This looks hinkey as hell.”

Jake inclines his head. “You do not, in fact, know that this worm is the result of the law you just handed me, because the law does not specify how it will work, so I’d say, yes, as Director of Cybercrime for NCIS it’s well within the scope of your job to kill any breaches of security you see, and to then aggressively go after them.”

Tim smiles at that. He can and will do that, and when the Men in Black show up… Well, he’s kind of looking forward to that. He imagines Vance will enjoy it, too.

Elaine comes over, with a western omelet for him, along with a decaf coffee. “Thanks, Elaine.”

“No problem. You two good?”

Jake and Bishop nod.

She pats Tim’s hand. “Gibbs’ redheads were here yesterday. They got talkin’ shop, too. Abbi hired
the accountant.”

Tim’s eyes go wide, and he laughs. “Oh God!” He sniggers a bit more. “Oh, I can’t wait to talk to him about that.” Another quick laugh as Bishop and Jake stare at him. He gestures to them in an I’ll explain in a second sort of way. “I got an invite to Fornell’s wedding. Video of Jethro giving the best man speech will be in your mailbox within a day or two after.”

Elaine giggles a bit at that, too. He gets another pat along with, “Good boy. Can’t wait to see that.”

“Don’t I know it!” Tim’s eyes light with pleasure at that idea. He can’t even begin to imagine what Jethro’s going to do with this.

Elaine heads off, and Tim turns his attention back to Bishop and Jake. “Sorry for the gossip. Jethro’s current… they aren’t engaged yet, but I’d put better than even odds on it happening before the year ends. Anyway, Abbi, Jethro’s love, just hired Diane, his ex-wife, to work for her at CGIS, cleaning up the mess she inherited.”

Bishop giggles a bit at that. “They get along?”

“I haven’t really seen them together, but they’ve both have that got-to-work-the-case-until-it’s-done, bulldog-with-a-bone, tenacity. Diane’s pickier and more abrasive. Abbi’s a lot more like Gibbs, quiet until it’s time to not be quiet, and then she quietly kills you. They’re really intense women.”

As Tim’s saying that, he notices that Bishop’s enjoying the idea of Gibbs, who she kind of knows, in a round-about seen-him-a-few-times sort of way, with the tangled loves, but Jake’s thinking about something else.

“You know CGIS Director Borin?” Jake asks.

Tim inclines his head in a yes sort of way. “She’s pretty much my step-mom.”

Jake nods at that. Bishop nudges him, giving him, the go ahead and say it, look. “Ellie’s mentioned some of what’s going on over there. The little bits and pieces she gets from Agent DiNozzo. Do you know if she wants legal help?”

Tim shrugs. “She had to fire just about everyone she had on staff. I don’t know exactly who or what she needs, but I’ve got her phone and email, and I know that right now, anyone who looks like they know what they’re doing and don’t have any ties to CGIS are welcome to come help her clean up the place. FOIA requests getting boring?”

Jake inclines his head a bit. “We file them. They shuffle us around. Many never get any sort of useful answer. The ones that do, we write up a press release, and within a week no one remembers what we’ve found. Add in the fact that so much of what we’re digging up is legal and so much of it we do not have standing to do anything about, and, yes, it’s frustrating.”

“Jake would like to see his work actually put bad guys away.”

Jake nods. He thought, when he signed up the NSA, that he’d be prosecuting terrorists. He ended up being put in charge of coming up with ways the NSA could do whatever it wanted, no matter what the law actually said. He signed up with the Open Government Project in the hopes that his work would help bring light to what was going on, and make things change. He’s seen frightfully little of that in the last two years. He’s applied for Internal Affairs at several different government branches and half a dozen police forces, but hasn’t gotten any nibbles. Helping with a major corruption case sounds like something he can do, and he hopes that CGIS might want him.
“Abbi’s certainly in the putting-bad-guys-away field.” Tim takes the paper with the law on it back from Jake, and then writes Abbi’s contact information on it. “Not that I’ve ever worked for NSA or Homeland or any of the rest of the alphabet soup, but one reason I think we do a good job, and why CGIS is going to do a good job, is that they’re run by people who were cops and remember what the job really is.”

Jake smiles a little. “Good.”

Bishop looks like she’s just about done her breakfast. “Tony expecting you in first thing?” Tim asks her.

“Soon.”

“Okay. You guys on an active case right now?”

She looks at him like where have you been? “Dr. Young?”

“Oh, right. Sorry. You guys won’t be up to serving a warrant will you?”

“Unless the case is magically solved when I get in.”

Tim nods and holds his hand up. “Got it. I’ll see who’s up.” He looks to Jake and Bishop. “I’ve got the address where all the information is going. By now my guys should have the information out of those computers and it’s about time for us to get moving on laying hands on them.”

---

“We’re going to need a witness, right?” Lara asks as she comes down the stairs.

Leon nods, and smiles at her. It is a white dress. Cute little sundress. “I was going to ask you. I was going to do it right. Didn’t want to do it like this, but…”

She gives him that cut the bull look.

“I was. Just, didn’t want to rush anything.”

“Uh huh.”

“Kind of hoping to hit a quiet stretch at work, and find a time to take enough time off to do it really special. You were talking about how you’d never been to St. Croix, and how you wanted to go, and I was thinking that we’d go, and I’d ask on the beach.”

That gets a smile out of Lara. “Then, how about, when this is done, and you’ve slain your dragon, you take me to St. Croix, and we have a real wedding, on that beach.”

He pulls her close, into a deep kiss. “I will happily do that.”
“You know,” Bleach says, as he wheels himself into chambers, “it’s not that I mind seeing all of you all the time, but if anyone ever decides to challenge any of this, you’ll have a better time fighting it off if every warrant you have isn’t from one judge.”

Tim sighs. “Probably a good point. This one’s really straightforward, though.”

Bleach laughs at that, pushing his glasses onto his face, and reading Tim’s paperwork. He’s nodding as he looks over everything. Then he looks up at Tim. “You’re right, this does look straightforward. Why are you here?”

“Because the advantage of one judge I trust for everything is that I’m not worried about my moves being broadcast to people I don’t want to know them.”

Bleach looks over the page again, reaching for his warrant papers. “I can see that.”

Tim taps his warrant request. “It gets worse. We didn’t just notice that worm. I talked to the guy who wrote it, and they dumped it into the federal operating system. It’s probably watching your computers, too.”

That gets Bleach’s interest.

“Unless someone else has noticed it and quietly disposed of it, it’s watching everyone’s systems.”

Bleach’s eyes narrow slightly.

“The lawyer I asked you to send that subpoena to says that it’s probably legal.”

Bleach has the look of someone ready to storm the ramparts. “We’ll see about that. Might have to have a chat with Mr. Malloy.”

“What are you thinking?”

Bleach shakes his head and starts filling in the blanks on the warrant. Once he’s done, he says, “Any more of these you’re going to need?”

“Maybe. Depends if the next link is willing to talk to me or not. I’ll find a different judge for that one.”

Bleach nods. “Conspiracies work best when you don’t look like you’re doing anything outside of your normal routine.”

Tim inclines his head. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Lara and Vance are in the car, when she says, “What are we telling the kids?”

“I was hoping to not say anything about it, yet. There was a conversation I was planning on having with them before heading to St. Croix, and I’d still like to have that conversation with them.”

“I think they’ll be okay with it.”
“I do, too. Not like we’re hiding what we’re doing.”

She nods at that. They’d already had one conversation, all four of them, about the shift in relationship from nanny to girlfriend. Another one is probably in order though.

“So, witness?” she says.

“Only one guy I can think of who’s up right now, not at work, and can take a secret to the grave.”

“Gibbs?”

Leon nods. “Is that okay?”

“Not my dream wedding, but it’ll do.”

“This is just taking care of paperwork… or buying insurance. Dream wedding’s still coming up.”

She smiles at that. “That’s a good way to think about it.”

---

Tim’s got the warrant in hand, a thumb drive to read through, and plans in his head as he’s walking into the Dungeon. As he gets closer to the lounge area, he hears music. It’s not very loud, but, it’s really raunchy.

He then sees the cause of the music. Brand, laying on the sofa, eyes closed, but not sleeping. She’s resting and bopping (gently) along with said music.

“What are you listening to?” Tim asks Brand.

“Outkast.” She opens her eyes and is looking up at him like he’s a million years old, and right now he’s feeling that old, too. The idea that he might have to have a conversation with one of the Minions on appropriate work music had never occurred to him.

“Earbuds. I don’t care how smutty your music is, but if anyone else can hear it, you can get hit with a sexual harassment suit, so, earbuds.”

Brand’s eyes go wide. “Wait, you… understood that?” She’s starting to blush hard and scrambling to turn the music off.

“I’m not deaf. No profanity or sexually explicit anything played out loud.”

“Oh God… I didn’t…”

Tim tries not to roll his eyes too far. He supposes if your ears aren’t sharp you might not be able to understand, as in figure out the words, but they lyrics aren’t in code and they aren’t subtle. Not like that line about ‘left her throat warm in the dorm room’ is about knitting scarves. “Brand, no one in this office is so inexperienced or sheltered as to not get what that song was about.”

She nods, looking mortified.

“So, I don’t see Howard or Ngyn…”
“We’re done. I stuck around to hand you this.” She gives him three thumb drives. “Everything on their system. By now it’s a brick. No one trailed our attack back to us.”

“Great. When was the last time you slept?”

“Caught a nap at 4:00 when we wrapped.”

“Go home, go to sleep.”

“Yes, Boss.” She stands up and slings her bag over her shoulder. “Um, Boss…”

“Yeah.”

“Whose lips are on your wrist?”

Tim licks his lips for a second, thinking of how to deal with that, and then he decides that channeling Gibbs’ look of doom would do the job. After all, it always got him and Tony to shut up.

It works on Brand, too. She quails a bit, and then nods, and heads off.

There are some things Vance never expected to see. Gibbs, on his sofa, in sweatpants and a t-shirt, big black dog next to him, working on a computer is one of them.

“What’s going on?” Vance asks as Gibbs looks up at him, and then Lara, and back to Vance.

“Am I interrupting?” Vance asks as Gibbs looks up at him, and then Lara, and back to Vance.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

Lara smiles at him, a bit wry, a bit happy, and a bit looking forward to seeing him react to this. “As long as I don’t have to give a speech, I’m fine with it. Let me get dressed, and we’ll go.”

And with that, Lara and Leon had the witness for their wedding.

There’s one thing Tim didn’t mention about Brand’s music choice, and that’s most of the guys he knows can’t listen to a song about oral sex without thinking about it. (Okay, he can’t, and he’s sure Jimmy can’t, and he’s not sure about anyone else, but for this purpose he and Jimmy constitute everyone.) And today is not a day to be thinking about sex. He’s got more than enough to do without images of “Lick you like a lizard,” “I do suck lips until hips jerk,” let alone anything along the lines of ‘throat warming’ (yeah, he’s not cool or anything, but he’s fairly sure what all of that means) dancing through his mind.
 Didn’t do that last night.

Should have done that last night.

Definitely will do that tonight.

He heads into his office, not really paying attention to his work. Tonight’s a long time off. And he does have to head into the lab to get Abby’s report on “Harvey.” If he times it right, say aims for lunch, he could be there when no one else is. Just him and Abby, and there could certainly be some ‘throat warming’ and ‘lip sucking’ involved.

He enjoys the fantasy of that for a few seconds when it hits him that these days the Lab is never empty. One LabRat or another is always wandering in… So, lab’s out.

He puts Jake’s thumb drive into his computer, still not thinking about work.

Autopsy’s quiet right now. No dead body. Slip in there, use the back room, Jimmy could keep watch, make sure no one walked in.

Ohhh… better. Jimmy could play, too. Wait for Allan to head off. All three of them… Mmmm… Yeah, he’s really liking that idea.

The information on Jake’s thumb drive isn’t coming up. Because he hasn’t actually turned the computer on. Focus. He’s been focusing. On work. Tim rubs his eyes and hits the power button on his computer.

His computer doesn’t boot up fast. So he goes back to thinking about the three of them in the morgue. It’d have to be fast. What’s a three way quickie? He’s got more than enough experience with two, but three… Oh… The image of Jimmy doing Abby from behind while he goes down on her and strokes himself off fills his mind. Yeah, that’d do it. Better, record it and send it to Breena!

He can imagine her opening that shot up, seeing what’s on it, and having hours to wait until they get to her place for Shabbos tonight. The part of him that remembers Valentine’s Day is thinking that’s a splendid plan. An evil little grin spreads across his face.

His computer beeps, pulling him out of lusty revenge. Probably a good thing. He’s half hard and doesn’t need to be sporting wood if any of the Minions come walking in.

Another though hits and sex starts to fade from his mind and work begins to fill it. He’s got this warrant he needs someone to run for him. Time to call down to dispatch and see who’s up for warrant serving.

He lifts his phone to his ear, clicking on the icon for Jake’s thumb drive. He’s not really paying attention to the phone as his eyes scan the page. Just a few lines. Apparently it was a joint paper between three of the NSA CyberAnalysts. Jason Rey, Yasmin Amin, and Darcy Lovvy came up with this gem.

He’s about to start googling them when Dispatch picks up. He explains what he needs, and they tell him to get the warrant to Dornie. He remembers that Dornie does have his own team now, not a MCRT, just a run-of-the-mill lesser crime team, and yes, they tend to handle warrants for non-field teams.

He looks around the office. Manner and Connon are in. He grabs them. “Want to go on a field trip?”

Manner doesn’t look enthusiastic, but Connon is interested. Tim shows them the warrant. “Agent
Dornaget has to get this, and then serve it, and I want you two hanging back and removing everything once his people have secured the scene. Can you do that?"

Now Connon’s looking unsure and Manner’s excited. But they both nod.

“Good. Bring me all sorts of goodies back.”

Once they’re in the car, Gibbs is willing to get deeper into what’s going on. He’s got two theories for what’s going on, and either the rabbit died (not very likely) or things are heating up again (very likely) and Vance is making sure Rule 44 comes into play.

“I take it this isn’t just a swept off your feet moment.”

“No,” Vance says, getting Gibbs up to date.

Gibbs listens and nods. “Rule 44?”

“Rule 44?” Lara asks. “How many rules do you have?”

“Whole bunch. That one’s about making sure you protect your family. And just so you know, anything ever feels off, you ever don’t feel safe at home, my place is…” he was about to say always open, but he does lock the door sometimes, now, and likely should do so more often than he does. “You and the kids are always welcome at my home. I’m usually around.” He looks at his right arm, which he can’t do much with because of his shoulder and ribs. “I can shoot straight left or right, and Mona’ll go after anyone I tell her to.”

Lara’s starting to look really worried. “How bad do you think this will be?”

Jethro shrugs and then smiles a little, thinking that Lara probably doesn’t know his history, but he knows she knows Leon’s. “Hope doesn’t stop bullets. No matter what, we protect our own.”

Tim flashes Abby a quick text. *Anything on Harvey, yet?*

*Not yet. You check the contact information he had on his form?*

That’s a good idea. He hadn’t bothered to because it was such a fake name, but due diligence. He should check with the CIA to see if Harvey Wallbanger worked there.

*On it. Thanks. Lunch date?*

*I hope so.*

“Do you Leon Vance, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, from
this day forward, ‘til death do you part?”

“I do.”

It feels very different this time. He’s not jittery or nervous or so besotted with love and lust. He’s not looking at a woman and seeing only a future filled with joy and hope.

And he’s really hoping this isn’t a huge mistake. He hopes, prays that this is him being scared of the dark, and that this isn’t necessary. On that level, he hopes he’s making a mistake.

At the same time, he hopes that he’s not wrecking this for Lara. She’s never married, and though they haven’t talked about it, he knows she’s got an idea of what her wedding would be like, and this is much more utilitarian than she would have liked.

Hell, he doesn’t even have a ring.

But she says her vows, and that feels good. She says I do and it hits him in his heart. He feels this and her, and this might not be the start he wanted for a life with her, but it’s what they have, and he’s going to do everything he can to make sure this isn’t a mistake.

And this afternoon, he’s getting her a ring.

Tim’s feeling devious. If he were going to give someone that bad of credentials, credentials that are all but screaming I’m fake! he’d also make sure that anyone who checked those credentials would raise a red flag.

In fact, the more he thinks about it, the more he’s thinking that searching for Harvey is likely a way to tip his hand, let whoever’s screwing with him know he knows they’re onto him.

He grabs his phone. Kill the search for Harvey’s prints.

??? Comes back from Abby.

I’d betting those prints are flagged. You look for them, and someone gets a heads up.

So what are you thinking?

Giving Diane a call. Khan gets paid. Let’s track the money and find him like that. And while she’s on it, I’m getting into whatever these guys stole from us.

:) Go get ‘em!
No rice tossed over the bride, no honeymoon. Gibbs treats them to a nice breakfast out. The coffee is good, the French toast is better, and they do split a cupcake.

And then it’s back to work. This is supposed to be secret. It’s not supposed to tip anyone off. So, a regular day at the office, just in a bit late.

“Director Vance, a courier dropped this off for you,” his secretary says as she hands him a box.

He’s expecting a package, but he didn’t think it would be this big. It’s almost shoebox sized, which is too big for a thumb drive or a collection of prints.

He takes it from his secretary. It’s way too heavy for fingerprints, too. “You sign for it?”

She shakes her head. “Got here before I did. Front desk signed for it.”

“Okay.” He steps into his office, and with a feeling of foreboding opens the box. He blinks and bites his lip, an exhaled “Fuck” slipping over his lips as he sees what’s inside. Then he rubs his face and stops worrying that his danger sense may have been on overdrive and he’s acting too fast in marrying Lara.

He picks up his phone, still staring at the two hands sitting in a box on his desk, and makes a call. “Dr. Palmer, I need you up here.”

Jimmy gets up a few minutes later, and as soon as he steps into the office, he can smell what’s up. Human meat that’s not kept on ice has a particular smell, and he knows it well.

He is, however, worried about why he’s smelling it up here. “Director?”

“I was told that I’d get confirmation that the man who killed Dr. Young had been ‘taken care of.’” Leon gestures to the box on his desk and Jimmy looks in, nodding at it.

“And that’s your confirmation.”

“I’d imagine so. Or it’s a very unsubtle message to stop asking, and possibly both. I need you to get prints and for Mrs. McGee to run them, quietly.”

Jimmy gently takes the box. “I can do that. Should I ask who told you they’d be sending confirmation?”

Leon looks away from the hands to Jimmy. “I think you’re significantly better off if you don’t know that.”

Jimmy nods again, looking at the hands. At a glance he can see they were taken off with a scalpel and bone saw. Whoever did this knew what they were doing. It’s a surgical amputation quality job. “I’ll take care of Mr. Doe’s hands.”

“Thank you. Also, if you could tell me if Mr. Doe was alive when he lost his hands…”

“I’ll double check with histology slides, but I’m not seeing any signs of swelling or trauma at a glance. I’d wager he was dead.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

Jimmy picks up the box with the hands in it, tucking the flap closed. “No problem.”
Tim sends Diane the information from his personal account (not on the NCIS servers) to hers. It’s possible someone could be going after it, but he’s hoping not. Between his own hyper-vigilance on his own system, and Draga keeping an eye on Diane’s, if someone’s watching, they’re really good at their job.

Then he kills the worm in his own system. It’s nasty. It’s in there, and in there good. Specially set so that if you just cut it out, you’ll crash the whole system. He’s nodding at Khan, giving him props for that. Someone might notice the first level and kill it, and then kill the whole system, and have to have the thing “reloaded,” with, likely, another worm just like this one hiding somewhere else.

But, eventually, he’s got their system as clean as he can get it. (Assuming his guys, who are still looking, don’t bring him any other new worms.)

By the time he’s done, he sees Manner and Connon rolling several computers and stacks of evidence toward him.

He pulls out his earbuds (his own music is much less raunchy, and thus more conductive to him actually getting some work done) and says, “I take it your trip was a success.”

Manner nods, looking pleased. Connon’s looking really excited, and Tim thinks he’s never been in the field before.

“Any people?”

Connon shakes his head. “Place is a foreclosure…”

Dornie heads into Tim’s office, wheeling in another handcart with three more computers on it, and glances around. “Nice.”


Dornie had heard the first part, so he adds his own confirmation with a bit of extra information he got on his background search. “Sounds like Connon’s got it right. Foreclosed house. Only had electricity because the bank’s still trying to sell it. No water. No internet,” Dornaget adds. It took him forever to get a team, and now that he’s got one, he’s making sure everything they send him on gets done perfectly. It might take ten more years, but eventually he will build an MCRT for himself.

“Satellite service,” Connon adds, filling in how the computers were working.

“Didn’t look like anyone spent any time in there,” Dornie says.

“How so?” Tim asks.

“Whole place covered in dust. Even the computers.”

“Only things we knew had been touched was a pack of thumbdrives, and the slot where the thumbdrive goes.” Manner adds. “Looks like this was a dead end. Information goes to the computer there. They periodically pull the info off. No way to know what happens with it after that.”

Tim nods. Manner’s got it right. He can’t track information that gets downloaded and physically carried from place to place. Only hope now is that the legal beagles show up to fight over what he’s
“Prints?” Tim asks.

Dornie shakes his head. “Everything was clean. No fibers. No hairs. The next door neighbors never saw anything. Whole neighborhood is blind, deaf, and dumb. You’d think there’d be a nosy neighbor keeping watch somewhere, but everyone we talked to saw nothing.”

“Back yard is wooded, and from the looks of it, you could walk in from there at night and the neighbors wouldn’t see you,” Connon says.

“Didn’t notice a car sitting around?” Tim asks.

Dornie shakes his head. “Strip mall half a mile away. Park there, walk through the woods, no one would see or suspect. I’m getting the security tapes from the mall, but figuring out the difference between a shopper and our guys’ll be tricky.”

“Lovely. Well, let’s see what the computers tell us. Connon, can you put a job up on the system? I want whoever our best hardware guy is, here, by tomorrow at the latest.”

“I’ll send up the batsignal.”

“Thanks.”

Connon and Manner turn, but Tim eyes Manner, who decides to stay, as Tim says, “Thanks, Dornie.”

“No problem. Let me know if you need our team for follow up.”

“I will.”

Dornie heads off.

“Manner, you looked like you liked the idea of a field trip.”

“I like the idea of getting who hired Khan to put this worm in place.”

“Good. C’mere.” Tim scoots over a bit and shows Manner what he’s been doing. “You up to that?”

Manner’s eyes skim over Tim’s screen. “Yeah. I can disable that.”

“Wonderful. I’m writing you up a note, calling Director Borin, and sending you over to CGIS. You’re going to clean up their system.”

Manner smiles. “With pleasure. Let me get my stuff.”

Tim nods at that, and as Manner’s almost out of the door, he says, “Steve. Director Borin needs all the help she can get. If you feel like you and her are a good fit, and if she does, it won’t bug me if you want to be there. Right now she needs guys who play by the rules, and she needs them to root out the guys who didn’t. And I can’t think of a better person than you to suggest to her for that. So, pay attention when you’re there, and if you like it…”

“You offloading me you can grab another sixteen-year-old wunderkind with lousy taste in music?”

Tim gives him a wry look. Apparently Manner had been close enough to hear Brand’s serenade. “Only if you think you’ll do better there. I’m not booting you out. I am offering you something that
might be a better match with what you want to do.”

Manner nods at that. “I’ll pay attention and think about it.”

“That’s fine.”

Jimmy heads into the lab, the box, now without its contents, in his gloved hands.

Corwin sees it, and looks up at him. “Want me to take that, Dr. Palmer?”

Jimmy shakes his head. “Not this time. I’ve got instructions to give this to Abby.”

Corwin rolls his eyes a little, annoyed that it’s been more than a year and he and Zelaz and Benedict still haven’t broken into the little club of Team Gibbs. As Corwin’s doing that, it hits Jimmy that lines like that worked a hell of a lot better when he didn’t run his own department.

He’s about to apologize, but decides not to, he’s not sorry to not risk Corwin getting into some information he really shouldn’t have, and heads into the computer annex to find Abby.

“Hey.”

Abby looks up and sees the box in his hands. “Oooo… presents?”

“The best kind.” He kicks the door shut behind him, possibly the first time the door between where the computers are and the main lab’s been shut (Zelaz, hearing it shut, hadn’t even noticed there was a door there.) “It’s from Leon. He got this, with two hands in it, this morning. Supposedly they’re proof that Dr. Young’s killer has been dealt with.”

“Great.” Abby is not sounding enthusiastic about that.

“Allan’s getting prints, and he’ll bring them down soon. As for this, pull out all the stops on it.”

Abby nods, taking the box carefully. “No evidence bag.”

Jimmy nods. “He didn’t say anything about if we were doing this on the books or not. I’ve got the hands logged as John Doe.”

“Male?”

“Or a very large, hairy, woman. I can get you a blood sample and you can find out for sure.”

Abby nods. Not impossible, but most likely male. Proof’ll be in the testing.

“He was pretty clear about how we’re not supposed to know who dropped this off.”

Abby raises an eyebrow. “So why are we finding out?”

“So the thing we don’t know can’t bite us.”

She nods at that. “Okay.”
Tim stares at his computer. He’s got Diane hunting down where the money that paid for Khan came from. He’s got Manner taking the worm out of CGIS. He still hasn’t started looking into the people who invented the monitoring system for the NSA… He’s got three thumb drives of information he’s not supposed to have that might get stolen from him any moment.

Copies. Make copies of the thumb drives. All right. Over to his fishbowl of blanks thumb drives he goes.

When he was a field agent he bought batteries in bulk and carried them around so everything would always work. Now he buys thumb drives in bulk and keeps them in his office the way other people keep candy bowls. At any given time, he’s got one Minion or another wandering in to grab one when their own personal stashes come up short.

It’s actually a good way to keep track of who’s on what. They come in, he chats with them while they grab a new one, and he gets to touch base with them in a way that doesn’t seem overbearing.

He gets up and grabs nine of them. Lots of copies. He gets to it, popping thumb drives in. Then he waits.

He’s looking at all the computer equipment in front of him, and the thumb drives in his hand then back to the computers in front of him. He does a quick count, there’s six computers stuffed into his office right now. That’s a ton of computers for just three thumb drives of evidence. He’s got the sense that when his hardware guys get in here, they’re going to find a lot of stuff.

First step, first set of copies is done. He pulls them out, and then spends several minutes messing with his computer, erasing every trace of the fact that he made those copies.

Then he pockets them and sets the computer to start on the second set.

It is just about lunch time, so he heads over to the lab. He sees Zelaz working on scanning pieces of something into the computer. Obviously whatever it was is necessary for a case, but at a glance Tim can’t tell what it was.

“She’s with the computers.” Zelaz says, nodding at… a door?

When they’d get a door there? Tim blinks and says thanks to Zelaz before knocking and hearing, “Come in.”

“When’d you get a door?”

“The day they opened the computer annex.”

“It’s been there the whole time?”

Abby nods.

“Huh.” Granted they got the computer annex right before Kelly was born, so he had been a tad distracted. “So, what’s so secret?”

“How about I tell you over lunch?”
“Sounds great.” Tim eyes the computers and the tables, and the fact that Abby appears to be dusting for prints, taking samples of ink, and from the looks of it running the box for touch DNA, in the computer lab. “You’re in deep, aren’t you?”

“Not so deep I can’t eat.” She pets her belly. “Little boy’s been asking for lunch for a while now.”

“Then let’s get him and you fed.” Tim notices that they’d moved some of Abby’s art to the far wall. He’d actually noticed that the first time he was in here. Right now what he’s really noticing is a decent hiding place for thumb drives. “You have any tape?”

Abby gives him an of course I have tape, we’re in my lab look.

“Silly question. Where is the tape?”

She points to a shelf as she’s packing up her evidence, and he does see a tape dispenser next to a stapler.

“You didn’t see me do this, right?”

She turns to face the door. “I’m blind. You going to tell me what I’m not seeing?”

“Right after you tell me what you’re working on,” he replies as he tapes the thumb drives to the back of her broken spine picture. “All right.” He sets the tape back onto the shelf. “Want to see if Jimmy’s up for lunch, too.” Tim remembers, for a moment, his earlier hopes for lunch, but right now he’s too far into work mode to suggest it.

“Sure, I think he can add some to what I’m working on.”

Tim steps next to Abby and kisses her. “Hi.”

She kisses back and smiles. “Hi, back.” Then she gently pokes him out of the computer annex, and locks the door behind her.

“What if I need something in there?” Zelaz asks.

“You don’t. Not for the next hour,” Abby replies.

“I don’t like mysteries.”

“Zelaz,” Tim says, “When we all shut up like this, it means it’s need-to-know, and you don’t. Not trying to bug you, but that’s how this works.”

“Come on, when you were working in Norfolk you had cases that just you worked. Nothing different here,” Abby adds.

“Other than when I worked in Norfolk, they weren’t keeping me out of anything.”

“And when I go on maternity leave again, you will have access to whatever you like. Don’t pick the lock. I’ll know if you do.”

Zelaz nods, not looking pleased with all of this mystery he’s not part of.
They head up to Autopsy, and see Jimmy standing back, in his scrubs, watching Dr. Allan work on fingerprints.

“Just because they do it perfect in one shot on TV doesn’t mean you don’t have to practice,” Jimmy says.

Allan looks up at Tim and Abby. “I’d just rather they were attached to arms, and those arms attached to a person. Feels really odd and… floppy, to hold just a hand.”

Jimmy nods at that, looking away from Allan’s attempts to get good prints from John Doe’s hands. “You two hoping for lunch?”

“If you’re free,” Tim says. “Looks like you might not be.”

Allan shakes his head. “In med school I was in the ER when a man came in with his hand cut off. He had it in a cooler of ice. I took care of getting it ready for reattachment. I’ll get this down. Just make sure I’ve got a lot of blanks.”

Abby steps over and sees several smeary print cards. “I find it easier to press the card to the hand. Flip it over so it’s on its back, and then press the card to the finger. Only thing you’ve got to hold is the print card.”

Allan looks like a light just went on over his head. “I will try that. Have a good lunch.”

“When have you ever printed a hand on its own?” Jimmy asks Abby as they’re in the elevator, and then gives her and Tim hello kisses before she gets a chance to answer.

“Hello, to you, too,” she says with a smile. “We better hope they don’t ever get cameras in here.”

That gets nods from both of the guys. “As for the prints. Never. Not like that. But I do know how floppy a body part that’s out of rigor can be, so the less it has to move, the better, right?”

Tim looks at both of them, and then licks his lips. “Uh… why do you have a pair of hands just sitting in the morgue?”

Jimmy shakes his head. “You know that case they’re working upstairs, Dr. Young?”

“Yeah,” Tim says, not liking this direction at all.

“We’re checking to make sure that’s the guy who killed him,” Jimmy says. “Vance called me up…” the elevator opens and they head to Jimmy’s car, not finishing that sentence until they’re all in and buckled up, “he told me that he’d gotten word that he’d get confirmation that the guy who killed Young was taken care of, and then he got a box with two hands in it on his desk this morning.”

“Shit! Who gave him confirmation?” Tim says.

“Won’t say. But we know who we think the real target was, right?” Jimmy’s feeling cagy, like he doesn’t want to say out loud who he suspects could get a guy’s hands cut off for killing his pediatrician and threatening his daughter.

Tim exhales, loud. “Hell, compared to that, my day’s been boring as hell.” He’s in the backseat, so
he leans forward and strokes the back of Abby’s neck. “What you’re doing… Is that the box the hands came in?”

Abby nods. “Yeah. No blood trace inside the box.”

Jimmy’s nodding at that, too. “From what I can tell the guy was dead when they were taken off. I’ll get the histology report back soon, but, it looks like it.”

“Prints on the outside?” Tim asks.

“Yeah, but I’m going to bet they won’t match anyone, or if they do, it’ll be a courier or something.” Abby leans her head back, turning her cheek into Tim’s touch. “So, tell us about boring as hell…”

And Tim does.

Ten minutes. That’s how much lunch they get before Tim’s phone buzzes. He’s literally lifting his glass to his lips, iced-coffee, cold, sweet, and beckoning him, when he feels his pocket start to vibrate.

Diane’s number on his screen. “Chucky?”

If she’s going to call him Chucky… “Wha’d’ya’got?”

She laughs a little. “You channeling Leroy on purpose?”

“Not the answer I’m looking for, love.” He’d called her that the last time she called him Chucky. He sees Jimmy and Abby staring at him, and signs D-I-A-N-E to Abby.

“Fine. Timothy. I’ve got a news you don’t want to hear.”

“Wonderful.” He sighs. “How bad?”

“Money orders, bought ten or twenty at a time, for smallish amounts of money, never more than five hundred dollars, paid for with cash, and as far as I can tell not only never purchased at the same place twice, but never within twenty miles of each other.”

Tim groans. “You’re right, I didn’t want to hear that. That’s completely untraceable.”

“Given the times they’re bought, it’s also not the same person doing the buying.”

“Huh?”

“Buy one set in California, buy the next set in Florida two hours later.”

“Fuck!” he says it very quietly.

“Timothy, I didn’t know you knew that word.” He can feel her smiling at him.

“I know lots of them. I’m a writer. Any bright side, at all?”
“Not on this one. It looks like whoever it is buys a bunch of wire transfers, and then mails one of them, with a stamp and envelope, to Khan’s bank. They deposit it.”

“I suppose I could try to get the envelope…”

“You can try, last payment was more than a month ago, and they mail deposits to different branches.”

Tim groans again. “This is literally painful. You say they buy them in bunches?”

“Yes. Usually ten to twenty, though one time they got three and one time fifty. So, Khan’s not the only one getting paid. I’ve already sent you the account numbers where the money is going. Whoever does this does not want to be found, but doesn’t care if we know who’s getting paid.”

Tim’s rubbing his forehead. “Thanks.”

“No problem. That was more interesting than anything I’d done with the IRS in years.”

“Glad to hear it. How’s CGIS going?”

“You heard?”

“Small world.”

“I’m having a good time. Got my desk set up, and got your request. This afternoon I’m getting into the books.”

“Have fun!”

“I will.” There’s the savage joy of a hunter let loose on a reserve teaming with game in Diane’s voice.

Tim hangs up his phone. “Money trail is dead.” He explains what Jimmy and Abby got to listen to half of.

“Sounds like you two have a project for this afternoon,” Jimmy says.

Tim inclines his head a bit, not quite agreeing. Abby gets what he’s thinking and says, “Wallbanger’s a trap. We can go looking through AFIS again, see if we can find a flag.”

Tim nods a bit. Last time they did that, they at least had a clue as to who might have set a flag, and used that to locate the flags. This time. He’s not even sure where he’d start. He supposes they could go through every flag… No… That would be useless because he’d still have to have someone or something sight match the prints that have flags on them to the prints he’s got for Wallbanger. By hand that’d take decades. “That’ll be the last ditch effort. I’ve got one more indirect route. A judge signed off on that order. Go get him, see what he’s got to say about it.”

Back in his office. Tim’s now got original thumb drives. He’s got copy thumb drives. He’s got confirmation that his two best hardware Minions are coming in, one from Okinawa, and one from Alameda. Assuming he’s still got custody of the computers from the house, they’ll be able to get into it early on Sunday.

He debates grabbing more thumb drives and quickly turning everything on and stripping everything
out of them, but he knows if he was the one who set this system up, it’d have some sort of whammy attached to anyone who didn’t have the right codes to get into it.

So, for right now, he’ll punt that to his hardware guys.

He’s got three NSA analysts he still hasn’t looked at. Then something hits him. He grabs his phone and hits one button. “Tony, you guys still on Dr. Young?”

Tony sounds annoyed. “Not exactly. I got a heads up from Vance that it’s probably dead.”

“Great. I need help.”

“What kind of help can I do for you?”

“I need everything you can find out on three NSA analysts. Starting with anything Bishop remembers about them, and then everything they’re working on now, all of it. And then I need you to condense it down, into a maybe five minute presentation.”

“You’re on super double overtime, aren’t you?”

“Just about. Why did I think running a department was a good idea?”

Tony laughs at him. “And now you see the wisdom of the team leader route. I’ll send Draga down to grab what you’ve got.”

“Thanks.”

---

Okay, so thumb drives… or the Judge… Thumb drives. Pretend you don’t have back ups of back ups and act like this is somewhat urgent.

Tim pops the first of the thumb drives into his computer and starts to get into it.

Abby heads up to Vance’s office. “They match. Those hands left the prints on the door at Dr. Young’s crime scene. Obviously, we don’t know who did what when the doors closed, but those prints were on the door, and on Dr. Young.”

Leon nods. “Okay. The hands?”

“Jimmy says they were taken off post mortem, so…”

Leon nods at that, too. “No way to bring this man to any form of justice. Not now.”

Abby shakes her head. “No, not now. I’m running the DNA. We’ll see if we can get a name to go with the prints.”

“Keep me in the loop.”
“I’ve got another loop you might want to be in, too.”

Leon leans forward, and realizes that with the extended McGee-Palmer clan, and them all working together, he does have multiple ways to get information around his office without necessarily looking like he’s meeting with the wrong person. It occurs to him that he should be thinking about how to take advantage of that.

“Tell me about the other loop.”

Abby lets him know what is going on with Wallbanger, with Tim’s conversation with Jake Malloy, her eyes narrow as she goes over the arresting Tim part, and Leon’s eyes narrow on that one, too. He breaks in as she’s talking about Tim getting busted, “You know we’ll keep custody of him. No matter what.”

“Yeah, well, his last adventure was supposed to be ‘safe,’ too, so I’m not feeling very trusting.”

Leon nods, given what he did this morning, he understands. “I wouldn’t, either.”

Abby shakes her head. “Apparently the whole idea on this is to get him in trouble and then you guys battle it out with the lawyers.”

Leon shakes his head. “That’s how a lawyer would deal with this. At this level, the head of whatever it is calls me, and then we have a pissing match, pulling in our biggest guns. If his biggest gun trumps Sec Def, then he gets to have his information back. If he doesn’t, then I get to keep it. No one’ll be tossing Tim anywhere. And there won’t be any case, because these things are designed to not produce cases.”

Abby’s eyes narrow again. “I’m not sure if that’s reassuring or not. It is for Tim, because I don’t want him going anywhere, especially not a jail cell, but that’s a really awful way to do things.”

“I know. But for things like this, that’s how it works.”

“Then get Sec Def on your speed dial.”

Tim’s been on the thumb drive for five minutes when Draga heads down. And it’s just then, as Draga’s in his office, waiting for the names of the NSA analysts, that another thought hits Tim. It’s hit before, but sometimes it takes a while to really get these things.

He does not, personally, have to investigate all of this stuff. And Bleach’s bit about spreading things out a little comes back to mind, too.

“Got one more thing,” Tim says, twisting to the side and digging through his active case filing drawer. (Usually it’s empty or pretty close, he doesn’t do a lot with actual paper now.) But there it is, the agreement that Khan got. “I also need to know why this Judge agreed to this, and who he thinks he signed Khan up to work with.”

Draga looks over the document. It’s pretty straightforward. It covers that Khan will be allowed to do computer work, it covers how much he gets paid, it covers the time off his sentence. It doesn’t cover
who he’s working for.

“Okay. We’re on it.”

“Thanks.”

“What do you have?”

“Everything they stole out of the NCIS system, and possibly, another job for you guys on Tuesday.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Looks like whoever was using this picked up their information on Tuesdays at about 9:45. Dornie’s checking the security feeds from nearby, so I’ll get him on looking for someone around that time, too.”

“And you want us waiting to grab him?”

“That’s the idea. Information goes into one of those computers, but it all went off on thumb drives. Someone’s got to be there to get it.”

When he gets to five o’clock, Tim’s almost surprised. He’s had custody of the computers and the information on them for a full work day, and so far, nothing has happened.

He killed the worm this morning, and the Men in Black didn’t show up.

He’s been through, at a glance, because that’s all he’s had time for, what sorts of things they were taking out of his system, and… none of it’s really interesting. They’re just keeping an eye on things. As of right now, he can’t see the pattern. Okay, Jethro, get working on your Python and tell me what I’m missing. He pockets one of the sets of thumb drives. They’re going to Gibbs.

He stands up and stretches. Right now he’s delegated everything away. He’s… done for today.

He grabs his phone, as he locks his office, with the computer equipment in it, and heads toward the Lab. “Hey Tony, how’s the pile of crap I dumped on you going?”

“Just spiffy. I’ve got Bishop running through everything, and Draga’s hunting down your judge.”

“Hunting how?”

“He’s retired now.”

“How long has he been retired?”

He hears Tony ask Draga. Then says, “Three years”

Tim licks his lips. “Don’t bother. Everyone’s done for tonight.”

“McGee?”

“That deal is two-and-a-half years old.” He can imagine the look on Tony’s face. “Shabbos at Breena’s. I need fresh eyes and a place to lay everything out.”
“Campfire time.”

“In the living room, after we eat. I already got word to Fornell, and told Breena he and Wendy were coming, but… let’s get everyone there. Vance, Diane, everyone.”

“Yeah. Okay. We’ll be there.”

Chapter End Notes

The song Brand is listening to is Outkast's So Fresh So Clean. Sean Murray is an Outkast fan and posted a quote from said song a few weeks ago on twitter, and I just couldn't resist. ; )
As Tim’s standing in front of the elevator, a thought hits him. He turns around, heads to the back of
the Dungeon, and finds the whiteboards and markers he bought when he first got control of the
department, back before he had the plasmas.

There’s so much going on here, especially when they add in Fornell and Abbi’s cases, there’s no
way to keep them straight without writing everything down.

He does one last thing before getting into the elevator up to Abby. He fires off a text to Manner. You
find the worm in CGIS’s system?

A minute later he gets back. Oh yeah, and about six others. I’ll have reports for you and Borin soon.

Good.

Breena sighs a little. The usual party of ten adults and three kids just became sixteen adults (assuming
she’s counting right) and three kids.

Right now she doesn’t have room for a sit down meal, and she’s got almost twice as many people as
she’s got food for. Well, time to get the lead out and make this work.

It’s nice out, hot right now, it’ll cool down as the sun sets, so dinner outside. Food on the table…
sheets on the ground, picnic style, everyone can sit down, babies can roam around, she’s grabbing
plates and silverware, getting things set up for a buffet style, because that’s the thing she can handle
right now.

(Little girls are both sleeping, and she is not dragging them out of bed to get more food.)

She’s getting the plates stacked when she gets the first call. “Hey,” she says, phone tucked between
her ear and shoulder as she’s laying plates on the patio table.

“We’re bringing grilled chicken and salad,” Ziva says.

“Thank you! I was trying to figure out how to feed nineteen people with ten people’s worth of food.”

“We sent half the invitations out, and told everyone to bring something. You do not need to get the
girls up and out to the grocery store.”

“Again, thanks. So, how bad is this?” She’s been getting very vague updates, because no one wants
to put anything into a text. So, no details, but she knows something’s brewing, has to be, if everyone
is coming to her place tonight.

“Bad enough we’ve got everyone coming.”

That’s not terribly helpful, but if Ziva doesn’t want to talk specifics over the phone, Breena’s not
pressing. “Okay. I’ll be ready to host the war room.”
“Hopefully we will not need that,” but Ziva doesn’t feel hopeful, for all the people she’s investigated to clear, or not clear, she’s getting the sense that a lot of people had to look the other way for CGIS to get as bad as it did. The guy who wrote that note with the account numbers was likely right, CGIS is the tip of the iceberg.

“Better to plan than hope.”

Breena can feel Ziva smile in agreement with that. “Exactly. We will be there in about an hour and half.”

“Okay.”

It’s stupid. At least, that’s how Vance feels about this as he and Lara head toward Jimmy’s place, but he’s scared.

It’s not the same. Not the same place. Not the same people. Nowhere near the same threat level. But he’s scared.

He hasn’t attended a Sabbath dinner since Jackie died, and hasn’t felt any need to change that pattern.

But the meet up is at a Shabbos. And as a way to get everyone together goes, it makes sense. Just Friday dinner at a friend’s house. All the family invited. (Though he didn’t think twice about not bringing his kids. They’re not going anywhere near any of this.)

Lara glances over at him as he’s driving with his teeth gritted and a fine sheen of sweat on his brow. She gently strokes the back of his hand. “We can show up late.”

His eyes narrow and he’s giving the road a death glare. “No. I’ll be okay. It’s not the same.”

“No, it’s not, but it feels like it, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Tim, Abby, and Kelly are the first ones to Breena’s. (Besides Jimmy, but he headed directly home.) They’ve got their girl, clothing to stash at the Palmers’, and more food. They find Jimmy and Breena on the back porch, getting things set up. Molly’s playing in the grass, and Kelly’s sitting on her blanket in the shade, watching them.

Abby’s hugging Breena, and Tim puts Kelly down to go toddle around with her cousins in the grass before kissing Breena and hugging Jimmy, and gesturing with his bag of stuff that he’s going to tuck upstairs before anyone else shows up and wonders why they’ve got several days of clothing with them.

He gets back down just in time to hear Abby say to Breena, “Ziva told me she was bringing more ‘dinner stuff’ so we went a little crazy on the sweets.”

Tim kisses both of his ladies again, just happy to do it while he can. They’ll be on best behavior
tonight, with so many of people who are outside their quadruple around.

Jimmy pulls several boxes from the bakery that did their wedding cupcakes out of the bag they were in. “What did you get?”

“Pretty much every cookie that wasn’t on hold for someone else, and they had little berry tarts the baker said were Parve, so we kind of got all of them, too,” Abby replies with a smile. “Given what we’re doing tonight, I figure everyone’ll be going light on the alcohol, so we might as well have lots of sugar.”

“And coffee,” Gibbs says as he and Abbi join them on the back porch.

More hugs and kisses follow, as they unpack bags of good, strong, coffee, and plates of fruits, veggies, nuts, and olives that Abbi thought to bring.

“Campfire goes better with snacks,” Abbi says, heading inside to stuff some of the nibbles they brought into the fridge.

“Think we’re going to really have Shabbos?” Tony asks Ziva as they head toward Breena’s backyard, (driveway’s already full, so they’re parked on the street) carrying grocery bags full of grilled chicken, extra challahs, and salad goodies.

“We are. If there was ever a time we’d want the Lord’s blessing, now seems like a good one.” And Ziva knows that the men in their crew may be less than terribly faithful, ranging from Tony and Gibbs’ sort of vague, hands-off relationships with a God they believe in but don’t engage with in any sort of formal way to Tim and Jimmy’s agnosticism bordering on atheism, the women, or at least her, Breena, and Abby, do believe.

Shabbos is as much about real living humans, and the comfort of family, friends, and the faith in the Lord, as it is about honoring that Lord. And Ziva’s going to make sure they pull as much comfort and faith out of this as they can.

For her, this is as much about mentally gearing up for a big investigation, as it is about sitting down to plan everything out.

Yesterday, Bishop was investigating a very hinkey murder. Today, her husband’s involved in this case, and they’re both heading to Dr. Palmer’s house for, nominally, a Sabbath dinner, and actually a planning meeting for whatever it is Tony and the rest of the crew have been whispering about for... weeks really.

She’s nervous and intrigued. She can tell Jake is, too. Because, for him, yesterday he was filing FOIA requests, and today he’s talked to Judge Harland twice, Director Borin once, and from the looks of it, he’s busy for the foreseeable future.

She’s redone her hair three times, not sure how one goes about doing this sort of thing. Part of her,
the part that’s becoming a cop, thinks that the Shabbos part of this is just a cover, and that it only needs to be paid lip service. Part of her, the part that’s an analyst, has noticed that Shabbos is a big deal to Ziva and Tony, and that they go out of their way to make sure they get to it.

Jake’s already in his suit, and looking quite happy about it. The Open Government Project is ‘casual’ and he’s never really happy about going to work in jeans and a button down, and even that is pushing the dress code several degrees past the rest of his colleagues.

“Sauvignon Blanc or Merlot?” he asks, holding out two bottles of wine as she brushes out her hair again.

“No idea. Tony said bring food and drinks. I think there’ll be close to twenty of us.”

“Twenty? How big is this?” Given how many people he’s talked to today, and the conversations they’ve had, he knows this is big, but he hadn’t thought they had this many people in on it.

“I’ve got just as much information about the big picture as you do.”

“Wonderful.” He heads back to their kitchen and grabs all four bottles of wine they own. He calls out, “What kind of food did you want to bring?”

Bishop gives up on her hair. It looks nice down, and then she pulls on a light beige sun dress and grabs a sweater. It’ll get a little cool later tonight. “Ummm… I don’t know. What’s kosher?”

Jake shrugs. Oklahoma, where they both grew up and went to school isn’t exactly filled with Jewish people. He doesn’t know any Jewish people well enough to have ever been invited to a Shabbos before, and Ellie’s only slightly more in the know from watching Tony. “Veggies always are, I think.”

“Couple kinds of hummus and lots of veggies to dip in it?”

Jake nods. “That should work. Maybe some pasta salad or three bean salad?”

“I think we’re hitting Whole Foods and just grabbing what looks good.”

He nods. They do that for dinner, a lot. Perk of living within walking distance of a Whole Foods.

“Do you really have to bring a gun?” Diane asks Draga. “It’s dinner. A religious dinner.”

Diane likes cops. She likes men who can take charge and who have an air of controlled danger. She doesn’t like guns. She’s never really liked guns. To her, guns have an air of uncontrolled danger, and she doesn’t like that. To say this has proven irksome in the past (and present) is something of an understatement.

Draga looks up from his shoulder holster and ankle holster. He’s been debating it which one to wear. “A religious dinner where as soon as the dishes are cleared away we’ll be planning something big. Besides, I’m not going to be the only one armed.” He puts the shoulder holster down. He doesn’t really want to wear a jacket tonight. Just the ankle one will do. It’s not a huge gun. Just a little piece on an ankle holster under a pair of light cotton trousers. He knows for a fact that Ziva’s basically always wearing something similar.
Diane rolls her eyes while she buckles a sandal. “Leroy makes love with a gun on. Tobias isn’t willing to be more than five steps away from one. Doesn’t mean you need to be them.”

Draga’s eyebrows shoot up, he’s not entirely sure if she’s kidding or not.

She waves it off. She is kidding, but not by much. And she sighs, he’s got a point. She thinks every adult male in this group, with the possible exception of Ducky and Jimmy, will be armed.

Eric pulls on a light blue button down and begins to roll up the sleeves. “If scuttlebutt is right, the last time there was a Shabbos planning dinner, two people died.”

Now Diane is staring at Draga in horror. She hasn’t heard that story.

“Vance’s house. He and Ziva’s dad, who was head of Mossad, they’re talking about something important, rogue Mossad agent who thought Eli David had been around too long sprayed down the house with bullets. Vance’s wife and Eli died. Everyone who can legally carry one will have a gun at this thing.”

“What the hell are we getting into?”

He looks at her and shakes his head. “We got a box with two hands in it today, delivered to us, probably from the President. I don’t know what we’re onto. I don’t know if it all connects, but whatever it is, it’s nasty, and we’re not taking chances.”

“A box with hands in it?”

“Yeah.” Draga nods and begins to button his shirt. “Just hands. No body. Just hands.”

Diane shudders a bit. Numbers are so much tidier.

Hey, baby,” Fornell says as Wendy picks him up. “Thanks for putting up with the last minute dinner change.”

She gives him the side eye while allowing her cheek to be kissed. “It took weeks to get those reservations…”

“I know.” And he does. He was the one who spent weeks on the phone trying to get them. “And I will get them again.”

“You better.”

“I will.” He looks in the back seat and sees a box that smells awesome. “Penne and sausage?”

She nods. “Turkey sausage, grilled peppers and onions. No cheese. The text from Tony said it was a meat night.”

“You’re beautiful.”

“Yes, I am.” She pulls up to the edge of the FBI parking lot, and pauses, waiting for the light to shift. “This is big, isn’t it?”
Fornell nods. “Yeah, I think so. Wouldn’t have broken the date otherwise.”

She nods at that, too. This is how at least one of three of their dates go. And this is why they’re both looking forward to May, when Fornell hits retirement. She looks at him again. “I don’t care if the world is literally ending, you are showing up next week.”

Fornell smiles at her, and kisses her hand. He knows Jimmy’s story, and he knows who he is and the mistakes he made in his first marriage. No matter what, he’s not missing his wedding. “If I’m not there on Saturday, it means I’m in the ground.”

“You damn well better not be.”

He smiles at her again.

“Tobias…”

He shakes his head. “Jethro’d be on my ass 24-7 if he was feeling it, and he’s not. I’ll be okay.”

Wendy sighs, and pulls into traffic as the light shifts. “You’ve got a very odd understanding of the best man’s job.”

“It’s his job to make sure I get there. He’ll make sure I get there.” Tobias is trying to keep this light, because he doesn’t want Wendy worried, but at the same time, he’s also not feeling any firing of his danger sense. This is big, but… He’s not feeling threatened. He knows Jethro isn’t, either. If he was, Jethro would be on his ass, but he’s not, so…

They’re going to get out of this fine. Everyone else, who knows, but right now, Fornell is sure he’s good.

Wendy’s much less convinced. “Yeah, well don’t be sticking him back in the hospital, either.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Penny leads the Sabbath this week. Ziva finds it somewhat amusing that Tim’s eighty-four-year-old, Catholic grandmother took to this celebration, but she hopped right in like a duck to water. (Or, for that matter, like Duck to Penny.)

When Ziva asked her about it, she had said, “There are very few things I take on faith, but one of them is that God listens to us, no matter which set of traditions we use to address Her.” Then she gave Ziva a brief smile, cocky little thing, put her mind of a very satisfied Tim, “Besides, when would I ever turn down a ritual where the oldest broad in the group gets to run things?”

Ziva had laughed at that.

And in addition to the traditional prayers and blessings, Penny asks Hashem to offer them patience, wisdom, and clarity of purpose.

All of which Ziva finds very appropriate.
Dinner is dinner. Just a bunch of coworkers and friends out on the grass, laying about, eating (Jake looking pretty flustered at this not being a suit and tie kind of night), and for the most part, enjoying themselves. There’s some talking about what’s going on at work, but that’s fairly casual, and just getting everyone up to date. Tony keeps them amused with his latest adventures in home buying. (And also gets a list of decent, fast contractors who’ll get the place salable in a month.) Ducky provides tales of his week working on their house and the glorious joy that is researching electrical codes and figuring out what they’re going to have to do to get the place up to code. (Correct answer, rewire the whole damn thing from the ground up. He’s looking at Tim as he says this, and Tim knows that he’s the one nominally in charge of this endeavor.) Penny tells them about the group she’s working with that’s building shelters in Afghanistan and how they’re getting closer to being ready to break ground on the first one.

All of the adults help herd Molly and Kelly, who consider this an adventure in food. They’re wandering around, looking at everyone’s meals, and, pretty much, grazing from plate to plate as adults give them little bits and pieces of what they’ve got. Anna’s sitting either on Breena’s or Abby’s lap doing a very good job of sitting up straight and perfect, and watching all these new people around her.

The “outside” crew starts off a little stiff, but they start adding bits and pieces of conversation here and there. It takes half an hour or so, but when Jake starts to loosen up (about the time they get him out of his jacket and wingtips) they get a really good story out of him about the summer he worked construction in college, and how the building inspector changed his take on the electrical code three times over the course of the place they were working on.

Should anyone look into Jimmy’s backyard, they’d see a relaxed picnic, lit by flickering torches and fairy lights (never let it be said that Breena can’t put together an excellent party for too many people on not nearly enough notice) filled with people getting up and down to get themselves more food.

A very alert person might notice that this group is imbibing mostly iced-tea, iced-coffee, soda, and water. That very alert person might notice that no one’s had more than two glasses of wine. That person might notice that everyone looks relaxed but that no one actually is relaxed. And said person might notice that conversation topics appear to have a lot of unspoken context, bits and pieces of stories that appear to be left out (like how Jake’s building contractor was waiting for a bribe to show up), but are understood by everyone sitting or reclining on the grass with their supper.

Eventually babies get washed off and go to bed. Eventually plates are piled up. Eventually they move inside to the living room, which is tight quarters for everyone, but there’s no fear of anyone overhearing.

Eventually more snacks, and non-iced coffee are laid out. Eventually Tim gets both whiteboards up, and everyone gathers around.

Planning time.

Tim’s not sure how he ended up running this thing. Probably because he’s the one with the dry erase markers, standing in front of the whiteboards. “I’m thinking we start with laying out everything we know. I know I’m so deep in the woods I can’t see anything but individual trees, and I can’t imagine
you guys are any better off right now. So, let’s pull back.”

He starts writing. “Here’s what I’ve got…”

Leon gets visit from Hue about improper Navy Pension fees.

I try to figure out what’s causing those fees.

Decide to make sure NCIS computers are clean before going after those fees.

End up hip deep in shit.

Thus begins operation Kill the Hydra. (He comes up with that off the cuff, but likes it.) Diane and Abbi share a quick look at each other with that one, but he misses it as he’s writing on the board.

Found four worms in the NCIS system. Two aren’t a big deal. One is probably not an issue. One is courtesy of Ajay Khan. That worm is also in the CGIS system, and likely every other system because it’s sitting in the Federal intranet server.

“Who’s Khan?” Fornell asks.

“Cybercriminal. Been in prison since we took him down in ’12,” Tony says, patting Ziva’s knee.

That triggers Fornell’s memory. “He was on the most wanted list for three years, right?”

Tim nods as he writes, The deal that lets Khan do this sort of work was set by ‘Harvey Wallbanger,’ (Several giggles shoot through the room at that. Tim’s pleased to see he’s not the only one who thought that was a god-awful cover name.) supposedly of the CIA. ‘Harvey’ is asking Khan to do some really illegal sounding things.

Deal was okayed by the judge who put Khan away, six months after he retired. Draga hops up, taking the marker from McGee and adds, Judge is off the grid, too. Pension stuff is being sent to a mailbox in Cacaos. He hands the marker back to McGee, hoping that’s not the only useful thing he’s got to add to this tonight.

Following the worm found a foreclosed house, with a bunch of computers in it, at least one of which was pulling information out of NCIS. That one’s dead. Don’t know what’s on the others, yet. My hardware specialists get in on Sunday, and we’ll break into them, then.

“Assuming you still have them,” Jake adds.

Tim nods. “No men in black, yet.”

Jakes eyes narrow slightly. “Interesting.”

Tim nods at that, too. Not sure what the lack of Men in Black means, but they can get to that later, he stares at the whiteboard and Bishop asks, “You going to mention the NSA stuff?”

He taps the marker against the whiteboard. His list is in a straight column, all nice and tidy. He draws an arrow away from Khan and then writes. Possible NSA connection. One of Khan’s jobs is hacking a worm in Norton computer security to keep track of what Norton users are doing.

“I have Norton on my computer at home,” Wendy says.

“You and almost everyone else. Even people who don’t use it usually have it preloaded onto their computers,” Tim replies.
“One of his jobs?” Breena asks.

“Yeah, we never got into what else he’s been up to.”

“Might be worth finding out,” Jake says.

Tim writes down McGee—What’s Khan been doing? Then he hands the marker over to Bishop.

“Okay, add your stuff.”

She hands it over to Jake, who gets up and begins his own list. 2012, it comes out that several gov. agencies had asked different software programs to give them back doors into their data.

Rey, Amin, and Darcy wrote up a working paper suggesting that ‘asking’ was a waste of time, and it made the gov. look bad to some people, so it would be a much more effective use of resources to get hackers to put the doors in without permission. Idea is to do this along with the IRS and use the data they get to find tax and security targets.

“That looks better?” Gibbs asks.

“It does if you don’t get caught,” Penny replies.

Jake writes. The paper hit my desk, and I sent back a politely-worded version of NO WAY IN HELL.

Supposedly that killed that project. Ellie stands up, taking the marker from him, as he gently touches her shoulder, she begins to add her own information.

Rey and Amin are still analysts at the NSA. What they’re working on is currently classified, and neither of them have published anything since 2011. They are being paid way more than their official status says they should.

Lovvy is currently at the IRS, working in their Tax Fraud division as an Analyst.

“Nope. Not unless there’s been a name change,” Diane adds, standing up, crossing out Tax Fraud division as an Analyst.

“You sure?” Tobias asks, “There have to be—“

Diane’s glare shuts him up. “There are a lot of people who investigate tax fraud, and I don’t know all of them. The Analysts… not a lot of them. The title is quiet, so as not to attract attention, but those are the guys who spend time trying to think of ways people can screw over the IRS big time. They’re sophisticated tax criminals working for the IRS so the IRS knows what to look for. There’s ten of them; Lovvy’s not one of them.”

“Like actually convicted, tax criminals?” Tim asks, thinking this might tie into Khan. Might be the sort of job Wallbanger brokers for guys who are done “paying their debt to society.” He gets up and adds Who is Wallbanger? To the second whiteboard.

“Don’t think so, but that’s not the sort of thing you’d ask,” Diane replies, looking at what Tim’s writing, but not wanting to get distracted from where she is, she ignores it.

“Might be the wrong title,” Ziva says.

That gets some nodding, so Bishop puts a question mark next to Lovvy’s name. And, with a nod from Tim draws a dotted line to Khan with another question mark. Then she looks to Diane, “So, how do we find out what she actually does, without letting everyone know we’re looking into her?”
Tim quietly heads back to the sofa. He’d been sitting on the floor, in front of Abby, but getting up and down off the floor isn’t working well for him. Jimmy, who was between Abby and Breena, quickly gets up and takes his place on the floor, nodding at the sofa. Tim gently squeezes his shoulder when he sits down.

“My codes stopped working before I hung up on my Boss with the news I was done. Chucky, the computer slicing and dicing is your job, right?”

Tim thinks about that for a second, while a third of the group tries to figure out why she called him Chucky. “Yes, Peaches.” She smirks at the nickname coming back at her, and the same people who were wondering about Chucky, are wondering about him calling her ‘Peaches.’ “Easy way is for you to head back to the office, go play sweethearts with someone in HR, and get a hold of one of their computers for a few minutes, and from there I can talk you through it.”

Diane smiles. “I’ve got buddies in HR, and I still have to hand in my badge and whatnot. You busy tomorrow around lunch time?”

Tim looks to Abby, Jimmy, and Breena, they nod. “Unless we move on this tomorrow…” He glances around to the rest of the group, and none of them look certain. “I did get some advice earlier today, and that’s if you don’t want to tip people off that you’re working on something big, you keep as close to your usual routine as possible.” That gets nodding from the rest of the group. He looks back to Diane, “I’m probably sketching out wiring plans, so, sure. Question is, would you be there on the weekend?”

“Probably, you up and quit without giving notice, and you probably don’t go back during regular hours,” Diane says. “Plus my friend works on the weekends.”

Investigate Lovvy—Diane goes on the board in Ellie’s handwriting. Ellie spends another minute looking at the board. That’s pretty much all she’s got, on this, for now. She hands the marker over to Diane.

Diane draws another line off of Khan and ends that line with an arrow pointing toward Wallbanger. Under it she writes, Paid in untraceable money orders. Money orders being bought from all over the US. Not the only one being paid.

“I think you’re also on finding out who’s getting paid,” Leon says, feeling a little odd to not be just ordering people around, but for this operation, he’s not the General. At least, not until he’s got the information all his spies are bringing in.

Diane nods a bit. “Already started.”

Abbi’s looking curiously at her. “Really?”

Diane nods. “I asked for two computers for a reason. I had your books on the one, and was running accounts on the other. I’ve got some names, but I don’t know who they are. That’s Tobias and DiNozzo’s job, right? Hunt them down?”

Both of them nod.

“I’ll keep shooting them to you as I get them,” Diane says. Then she writes on the board. Investigate account holders Tobias and Tony.

“What do you have on my books?” Abbi asks.

Diane steps over to the second whiteboard. “We’re gonna need more room, I think.”
“I’ll take pictures and erase as needed,” Wendy replies, not feeling very useful for this group. She feels like she’s just being a lump on the sofa right now. Breena smiles at her a little, and gives her hand a squeeze. Lara catches her eye, the same sort of look on her face. All part of being the spouse of the cop.

Under Wallbanger Diane writes CGIS. She stops for a second, not sure how strong the language should get, but she’s pretty sure she won’t insult anyone too horribly with this.

*Finances are FUBAR.*

Abbi chuckles a little at that, approving of the language. “I take it you rubbed off at least a little,” she says to Gibbs, who just shrugs.

“I knew that one before I met him.”

“What’s FUBAR?” Lara asks.

“Fuc—“ Leon starts.

She elbows him gently. “No. I know what it means, literally. What’s it mean financially?” She’s also feeling very outside of this, but if she’s going to be sitting here for this, she’s going to listen, and learn, and look, and *try* to be useful.

“It means if I had an entire team of auditors we’d still be digging up crap three years from now. More concretely, if there was a way for CGIS to get screwed, it got screwed.” Diane taps the marker against the board a few times. “Here’s what I found on just the first day, CGIS was officially audited in 2013 as well, and that time, everything came up roses.”

“That’s when I got booted up because my Boss left in a hurry.” Jimmy stands up, takes the marker and adds in *Swissin, murdered, listed COD, blunt force trauma. Real COD... Shot in neck? Smoke inhalation? Actual blunt force trauma?*

Everyone’s staring at Jimmy, as he sits back down on the floor in front of Breena. “He left. And then, a year later, he ‘got into a car accident.’ His ‘pals’ at CGIS investigated it, and told his widow he died in a car accident. According to the police report he drove his car off a bridge into a small ravine, the car caught fire, and he died. The bullet in his spine may have had something to do with why he drove the car off the bridge. Or not. It’s entirely possible he was dead before the car got near the ravine. No skid marks on the road. And no body for me to investigate more closely.”

“No body, then...” Jake starts to ask.

“How do I know? Their ME was so sure no one would ever look, he put the real x-rays, with the visible bullets, into Swissin’s file.”

“I talked to the widow,” Fornell adds. Clean up on Swissin is part of what the FBI’s been handling on the CGIS corruption case. “After Swissin died, Brandis, who had been his Boss, and supposed friend, came and took everything he had that had anything to do with CGIS, including his computer. We have no idea what he might have been looking at or found between him quitting and dying.”

“Okay... This is really disturbing, but... how does this tie into that?” Lara asks, pointing to the first board with Tim’s stuff.

“It might not,” Abbi replies. “But at the very least, finding the CGIS stuff out leads to us getting the next bit.”
“It might connect in, too,” Diane says. “There’s no shot that the books were in any better shape in 2013 than they are now.”

Abbi stands up. **CGIS books, entire quarters of data were missing.**

Tim gets up again, (this time much easier than from the floor. He flashes Jimmy a thank you smile) taking the marker from Abbi. He erases missing and puts in deleted. Last missing quarter was Q1 ’16 first was Q2 ’11. Then he hands the marker back to Abbi.

“You weren’t able to find out when they were deleted?” Diane asks.

He shakes his head. “We’re still not entirely sure exactly which one did it, but he got the metadata in addition to the records.” Tim gestures for the marker. **Fornell, who deleted the quarters.**

“Already working on that, McGee. None of them claim to have a clue about that.”

Abbi shakes her head, taking the marker back from Tim as he sits back down. “And that’s only the five years I was supposed to come up with. I have no idea what was going on before ’11.”

“Okay. That’s…” Diane’s got a hot look in her eye. A lot of people are going down on this one, and she’s enjoying the idea of taking them out. “The biggest reason we know this isn’t just a fluke, or some sort of inside job is that CGIS passed the first audit.” GAO passed us first time Abbi writes. “And, we know someone, somewhere, put them up for audit again. Most groups won’t see an audit more than once every twenty years. Some, small ones, like CGIS or NCIS won’t ever see one. Two GAO audits in less than five years is unheard of.” Diane looks at Vance. “I think you’re the one with the clout to find out who and what and why on this.”

Vance nods. “I don’t know anyone there, but I certainly know the people who will get them talking if they balk.”

**Vance—Who passed CGIS first time, who set them up to be audited the second?**

After that, Abbi writes, **CGIS, my computer had both the Federal Worm, and a keystroke logger.**

“Your higher ups weren’t getting their intel from the worm,” Gibbs says.

“Probably not. But… This has been niggling at me for a while. How did Severs know to put the firebomb in the archives? There was nothing about what I was doing on my system. But he had to know…” Abbi’s looking at Tim and Leon.

Leon nods. “Yeah, whoever uses the worm could have gotten it from us.”

“Info from the worm is a dead drop. Every weeks, same day, same time. 9:45 on Monday,” Tim says.

“They wouldn’t have had enough information to get the whole idea, but they would have known we were getting close,” Abbi replies.

“Yeah,” Tim says. “And they would have known we planned to go in on Tuesday night.”

Fornell adds, “According to Severs, he was called in by Brandis for a test of their security systems. Yes, the bomb had real explosives, so the dogs could find it, but it wasn’t supposed to have a functional detonator.”

Abbi and Jethro are both giving Fornell the he really tried that line of bullshit look.
“He’s claiming he just tucked it in there, and someone else must have wired it. When we showed him the video of the door to the records, and no one else going in or out, he shut up and lawyered up.”

Abbi writes down, Fornell—Break Severs. Then she writes, Borin—Track all of Brandis’ communications. Find out how he knew to call in Severs.

She tosses the marker to Fornell. “What do you have?”

Fornell shakes his head a bit, as he stands up. “Right now, they’ve all gone silent. When we first started grabbing them, they were fingerling you. Saying it was your conspiracy and they were just in on it. We shut that down fast. We know they were using CGIS as their own personal slush fund. Contracts were given to friends and family. People who got paid off correctly looked the other way for a lot of things. We’re fighting a jurisdiction war with the DEA over several of your men. We’re calling it on public corruption charges, they’re calling it on pay offs from the Colombians charges. Evidence went missing, and a lot of it was being sold out of the country.”

“Being sold, like, how…” Lara asks.

“Coast Guard grabs a smuggling ship. It keeps it in evidence until the case is done. Once the case is done the drugs are supposed to be destroyed, the guns were supposed to be destroyed, and the ship was supposed to be auctioned off. They’d auction off the guns and drugs, and then one of the higher ups or his buddies would decide he liked the boat and it’d head off to his place.”

Fornell’s twiddling the marker. “The thing I’m not seeing right now, not in my investigations, is anything outside of the Coast Guard. If it passed the first audit, it might have done it just by paying off the auditor. Getting set up again might have been an auditor looking for another pay out.” He writes Greedy? Next to the GAO audit line.

“Whether it connects directly or not, it did lead to the next bit,” Abbi says, taking the marker back from Fornell.

Missing Account Numbers. “I get sent a nice little note, on paper, untraceable, with a few account numbers on it. The note said CGIS was the tip of the iceberg, but I can’t investigate those numbers without a warrant, and I’m not getting one based on ‘I got a note that said I should look at them.’”

Fornell adds, “So I remind her that the IRS doesn’t need probable cause, it’s allowed to go snooping into anyone’s accounts for any reason, and their standard is guilty until proven innocent.”

Diane takes over from there, “Which is when I get the accounts, and everything gets creepy. Within minutes of looking those up, I’ve got my Boss, not my supervisor, but the head of the IRS in my office telling me to leave those numbers alone.”

Abbi writes Fornell—Investigate Koskinen.

“Already was. Very quietly. Right after the accounts vanished, Leon pulled…”

“Everything we could get out of the IRS,” Leon adds. “Private emails, public records, everything.”

“And we spent three days on it,” Bishop says. “And nothing. They never talked to each other about those accounts, no one ordered them to vanish, but vanish they did.”

Fornell takes it again. “He’s the kind of guy who if he’s doing something wrong, my guys aren’t likely to find it. He’s careful, meticulous, organized. If he’s crooked, he a crooked accountant.”
Diane nods, “He came up from the forensic accounting department. He knows ways to hide money none of us have ever dreamed of.”

“Wonderful,” Fornell says dryly.

“We got the account numbers, and within a day, everything vanished on that. Every case, every mention, all the guys attached to those cases, EVERYTHING, vanished,” Diane says.

“What about the guy tailing you?” Fornell asks.

“Someone was tailing you?” Lara asks Diane.

Diane nods. “Yeah. They got a picture of him, but…”

“We’re still running the facial recognition. And facial recognition is slow. I used Tim’s technique to figure out a range of when he was born, so we could narrow down the field some, but without any other way to limit it, this will take a long time,” Abby says.

“Cross reference with blue Leafs?” Draga asks. He was there; he remembers what the tail was driving.

Abby opens and closes her mouth. She hadn’t tried that. They’d all assumed the driver wouldn’t be crazy enough to steal a license plate off and IRS car, and then stick it on his own car.

Draga sees that and says, “I know it’s a long shot, but I’m on it. See if any Leafs were stolen on that date range… might be able to pull a print or something…”

Diane still has the marker, she writes down Eric—investigate Leaf.

Tony stands up, and takes the marker from Diane. “That gets us to our latest case, Dr. Young. We think this one is…’ he looks to Leon, “done?”

Leon nods. “Probably. And besides timing, it probably doesn’t hook into the rest of these.”

“Do you have news of Quinten?” Penny asks.

“He’s missing. He’s likely going to stay that way. He was treating one of the President’s daughters, someone got wind of that, and tried to attack him, her, and her pediatrician. Our dead man was her pediatrician.” Everyone winces at that. They’re all, more or less, used to terrible things, but the idea that someone would really go up against the President’s daughter and her doctors makes them all feel awful.

“That sounds vague,” Penny says, because Leon’s answer doesn’t do anything to help her feel like her friend is okay.

Tony nods. “It is. From what we can piece together, as long as he’s needed to treat whichever girl, he’s going to be deep underground.”

“We have, gruesome, confirmation that the person who attacked Dr. Young, the pediatrician, is dead,” Jimmy says.

“And beyond that, I think it’s safe to say the Secret Service is handling it,” Leon says. “Though I will follow up on that.”

“If the worm is on the Federal intranet, could that be how whoever it was found out when and where to go to go after one of the girls?” Ducky asks.
Everyone looks around. There’s a connection. Tim shrugs. “Could be. I don’t think any of us know if the President uses the same system we do.”

“Though, even if he doesn’t, if this sort of worm could be placed into our system, it could be placed into his,” Ducky adds.

That’s a disturbing thought.

Ducky nods and then says, “So, it would seem to me, that like any other crime where we have too many variables and not enough facts, the question we must first answer, that will allow everything else to fall into place, is…” Ducky stands up, glances at Wendy, who nods, she’s got the board photographed, and then he stands up, takes the marker from Tony, erases and puts in, Who benefits?

“Obviously this isn’t just for kicks and giggles. So, who gets what out of this?” Penny says, and then begins to answer her own question. “The money has to come from somewhere. Someone is paying for this, trying to keep this secret and off the books. Your vanishing account numbers,” she says to Diane, “what sort of confirmation did you have as to who they actually belonged to?”

Diane shrugs a bit. “We had them flagged. We knew which country the money was in in a few cases. The floating one…” The light goes on for Diane. “The floating one got linked to a lot of big money tax evasion cases.”

“The floating one worked with Bitcoin and the like, too, right?” Jake asks. “The NSA was very interested in that account, too, because we weren’t fans of ways to get money moving around the official channels.”

Diane nods.

“I didn’t say this, and none of you heard it, either,” Jake says. “Another of our working papers, and to the best of my knowledge this one didn’t get shot down as immediately illegal, involved the US stealing Bitcoins and then using them for off-the-books operations.”

That’s triggering a memory for Tim. “Didn’t a ton of them get stolen a while back?”

“Twice. And they still don’t know who did it,” Abby says.

“And that didn’t get shot down immediately because…” Jimmy asks. Theft sounds awfully illegal to him. Actually, all of this sounds awfully illegal to him.

“US law holds the Feds can take any form of counterfeit currency and ‘destroy’ it,” Jake says.

“Bitcoin isn’t claiming to be US dollars,” Abby says.

“I know. But using that counterfeit law, and bending it until it screamed, the Feds took $60,000 in silver ‘dollars’ from a man in South Carolina, even though he was minting it himself and wasn’t claiming it was any sort of US currency. The Federal Government does not take kindly to competing currencies it cannot control or tax. Bitcoin, being electronic, and often run entirely outside the US banking system, is a nightmare for them.”

Ducky’s nodding. “By stealing them, the government makes them look less safe. Fewer people find them attractive, less competition with the dollar. But, some people will still want an invisible currency, no matter how unsafe. Having a large quantity of said currency allows them to do business with those people.”

Tim adds in, “And those cases are still unsolved, so… Abby?” he’s not as up to how Bitcoins work
as he could be.

“Yeah, I think... You drop them onto someone else, you can frame them for the theft... or make it look like the person who stole them is hiring whoever... I’m not entirely sure, but yeah, I think you can do that with them.”

“Or, more pedestrianly, you can just use them to hire people,” Penny adds. “And if you have a floating bank that moves money from currency to currency...”

“Do you still remember those account numbers?” Draga asks Diane.

“Of course.” She’s a little irked at the idea that she might have forgotten. “Don’t see how it’ll help, they don’t connect to anything, anymore.”

“That’s wrong.” Tobias says, and Diane starts to bristle. “Not, you’re wrong. Entire banks vanishing that fast. Every case attached to them. All the people who were involved. That’s wrong. That just doesn’t happen.”

“It did. I didn’t type in the numbers wrong. Not five times in a row, and not for each account.”

Gibbs might not know anything about computers, but he does know something about a conspiracy, and he knows controlling information is key. “Type them in, where?”

“Ziva’s desk. I got onto the computer at NCIS, used its shielded service to get into the Federal Banking Data—“

They all feel it as soon as she says that.

“Federal Banking?” Lara asks.

Diane’s shaking her head as she begins to add more details. “Federal Banking Database. It’d be almost impossible to track finances without it. It’s voluntary for the banks. If you’ve got names, social security numbers, account numbers, routing numbers... You punch them in, and they tell you if someone has an account with any given bank. You can’t see anything from there, other than the existence of an account, and there are a ton of banks that either aren’t on there at all, or like my mystery numbers are on there only as targets for criminal investigations. But, for most cases if you have a name, address, SS number blah, blah, blah, and you need to know where he banked, who he had credit cards with, and so on and so forth, that’s how you’d do it,” Diane says. “And let me guess, it’s got another worm in it, and so did the IRS, and as soon as I got into it, they pulled those numbers off of the database.”

Tim nods at them, that’s something that would take hours, unlike killing a whole bank, which would take months.

“You used your login, right?” he asks Diane.

“Yeah.”

“So, it’s possible they just blocked you,” Leon says.

Diane nods at that, too.

Leon stands up, and takes the marker from Ducky. Recheck missing account numbers, secure computer. He then underlines Who benefits? “I’ve been getting some hints that this is about making sure things blow open before the election. I know nothing like this happened in ’12, at least, not
anywhere I could see. Diane?"

She shakes her head. “Too low on the food chain to get anything along those lines.”

“Fornell?”

He thinks for a moment. “Yeah, we did see an uptick on corruption cases summer and fall of ’12. Happens before every election. And yes, we do have instructions to make sure things get handled ‘quietly.’ Nothing this big, though. At least, not that went through me.”

“Borin?”

“Still in the field. My cases were all routine.”

Penny’s looking at the whiteboard, and then looking at her phone, scanning the pictures, and shaking her head. “No. Not… not like this.”

“Dr. Langston?” Leon asks.

“Elections means new people every four or eight years. This is… this is a longer term game. We’ve…” she looks to Ducky, “talked about how little difference there really is between the main parties now. That most of the ‘differences’ are about posturing and making sure their bases show up and vote. And yes, some power shifts, individuals move up or down, but the system stays the same.”

“There’s always the question of is there something behind the system,” Ducky says.

“Like a shadow government?” Leon asks. He’s thinking of floating that idea past Jarvis at some point.

“Possible, but not what we were talking about.” Ducky says, “More along the lines of how so much is run behind the scenes. Take that law Jake has talked about. In all likelihood, some congressional aid thought it would be a good idea, he got it tucked in there, and he and several other unknown, unnamed bureaucrats, are using it to do their own thing. They’re unelected, low enough positions they will not be tossed out no matter who wins, assuming that whoever wins isn’t in favor of radically shifting what our government thinks is worth governing. Say, our Nameless Bureaucrat decides that being able to see everyone’s computer is a wonderful idea, so he does it. If he’s in the right place, he can sweep off money, shift funds around, and as the person who writes the regulations that implement laws, he gets to decide how things will actually be done.”

Leon thinks about that, nodding. “We get cash. We get a lot of cash. Drug busts, murders, thefts. When it’s released, we turn most of it over to the Feds, but who knows what they do with it. One guy in that program… That’s someone who could do a lot.”

“If that’s what’s going on, that would be a great thing,” Diane says.

Everyone looks at her, curious.

“Cash. If they’re working with cash, it’d be great for us. It’s big, heavy, takes up lots of space, and you’ve got to do something with it. There’ll be literal, physical evidence to deal with if they are using cash. The best thing that could possibly happen with this is them raking off cash.”

_Bishop, Draga where does the actual money go?_ Leon writes.

Once he finishes that, Breena says, “So, we’re either looking for a massive conspiracy involving tons of high-ranking people, or we’re looking for Herb, the Junior Assistant Secretary of Who Knows
What, who has plans for saving the US from his idea of perdition?"

Tim’s also flipping through the pictures of the boards. “Both… or… I think they’re one and the same. We’re not looking for high ranking in the sense of the President, but… Like Koskinen. For the sake of this discussion guys like Koskinen count as ‘Herb.’”

Ducky and Penny nod. “Koskinen would be a fine example of a ‘Herb,’” Ducky says. “Someone with power who is unlikely to be effected by who wins elections. Someone who can plan and run a long game.”

“That’s exactly who Brandis was. High enough to have power, low enough that it didn’t matter who was in charge, he’d still be around and able to bite us.”

“Then let’s bite back and bite harder,” Fornell says with a smile.

“I’m all in favor of biting back, and biting harder,” Tony says, “but, how about we don’t automatically decide this is internal.” He glances to Bishop and Draga. “Especially if that worm is how the hit on the Obama girls was set… Everything you’re describing here would be a foreign government or terror group’s wet dream. And, especially since we can’t, at least now, prove that Khan actually is working for the US Government…”

“And even if he is, we can’t prove that the guy who’s running this isn’t in the pay of someone else,” Ducky adds. He circles Who Benefits? “Jethro, Penny, Breena, Wendy, Lara, how would you feel about doing a lot more reading? Back in the day, most of a spy’s job was paying attention to the news. Seeing who was doing what. If we can see signs of the information that’s being accessed being used…”

Tim’s eyes light up. “Last year, remember they were talking about China hacking our system, compromising 18 million Federal Employees.”

“Exactly. Who is doing things like that?” Ducky says, while writing China on the board. Tim stands up and gestures for the marker, and then adds. McGee, investigate China hack. How did they get in?

“So, we’re saying our suspect list has been narrowed down to basically everyone on Earth?” Jimmy says dryly.

Tim’s looking over the boards, seeing what’s in his head, and adds, “I think we can cross off anyone who doesn’t have a computer.”

“Spiffy, three billion off the list, three billion left to clear,” Tony says.

Vance shakes his head. “I was talking to Jarvis about this. He was saying power was immortal. It moves and shifts. We can’t kill the Hydra because what we’re fighting isn’t just one thing. There’s no body, only heads and more heads. Say the CGIS thing was entirely internal. Say Khan is one program running amok. Say Herb is the guy who doesn’t want Diane to get those account numbers because they’re his private playground. This doesn’t have to be a conspiracy. Like McGee just said, there are more than eighteen million government employees. This could just be sheer, perverse human cussedness.”

“But, it could be I can’t get those account numbers because they have nothing to do with any sort of ‘international money laundering’ and they’re the slush fund for a massive conspiracy that makes sure that guys like Khan get paid,” Diane says.

Penny speaks up, “I don’t think that’s an either/or condition. Both of those ideas can simultaneously be true. Just because part of this may be individual actors doesn’t mean the rest of it isn’t a
conspiracy, or several conspiracies, and Jarvis is right, power, and the quest for it, will not go away, nor will it roll over and play dead just because we’d like it to.” She shakes her head. “The hydra cannot be killed because people abusing power is as old as people and power. All we can do it take off different heads. We clean up the mess we can see, and we trail that back to the next mess. That’s all we can do, and shooting for more than that is the road to heartache.

She looks at the boards in front of them. “We do what we can with what we have. And we have a lot. But at the end of the day, evil will still be there. Corruption will still hide in the dark corners. That’s never going to change. Our job it to shine as much light as we can over as much of the area around us as is possible. And if that means taking this down one man at a time, then we take it down one man at a time.

“Right now, we’ve got a few men, and it is time to grill them until they break. The rest of the supposition can wait for next week, when we can get back together and cover what we’ve learned. Let’s get this broken down as basic as we can, and we’ll go from there.”

“Not next week,” Fornell says. “We’re, he points to him, Wendy, Gibbs, Abbi, Tim and Abby, busy.”

“You hope,” Jimmy says, quietly. Wendy look startled at that, and Fornell glares at him.

“I can take care of that.” Tim says. “Next few days, we’ll all have new, clean cell phones. Use them just to talk to each other. That’ll keep us in the loop, without looking like we’re doing anything outside of our normal routines. Few weeks, we can have a… ‘Halloween party’ and talk in person again.”

“Halloween party’s at your house?” Jimmy asks Tim.

Abby nods, grinning. “Oh yeah. Halloween’s at our house. Wear costumes. It’ll be fun.”

That gets some quiet nodding. And then Tim grabs a pad of paper, a pen, and his phone, and starts to write down who is on what.

Diane: Who’s getting paid?
Fornell: Break Severn. Who was Borin’s boss talking to?
Abbi: CGIS worms. Who’s watching?
Gibbs: General intel. Get those python skills up.
Tim: Khan, what has he done? What’s on those other computers? Who is Wallbanger? As he writes that down, a thought hits. “Diane, do you know this guy?” He pulls up the picture of Wallbanger on his phone and hands it over.

“Sure,” she gives the phone back, wondering why he’d think this was useful. “He’s on that show Emily likes, the one with the brothers and the angel and demon. He’s the demon right?”

Tim blinks slowly and then looks at the picture again, shaking his head. “This can’t literally be Mark Sheppard, right?”

“Uh…” Diane’s looking at him.
“That’s supposed to be ‘Harvey’ the guy who sets up the deals and is paying Khan.”

She shakes her head. “That’s a British actor. Where’d you get the picture?”

“Everyone who visits an inmate at a Federal prison has to have his ID scanned and fingerprints entered into the database. That’s the picture of Wallbanger on file.”

Several of the others are looking over Tim’s shoulder. Fornell’s shaking his head, too. “Nope, that’s the guy on the show. Emily loves him.”

“Has a poster of him and the angel in her room,” Wendy adds.

“Okay, great.” Tim adds another job for himself. Find out who the hell okayed ‘Wallbanger.’

Draga’s looking over his shoulder. “You hack. We can do that.” Tim deletes and continues on with the list.

*Abby: General Intel*

*Jimmy: General Intel*

*Breena: General intel*

*Ducky: General intel*

*Penny: General intel*

*Draga: Who okayed Wallbanger. Trap for the house. Follow the money.*

“I’m laying a trap?”

“Sorry. This is what I meant about forgetting things. The information goes to that house. It gets put onto thumb drives and picked up every Monday night at 9:45.” Tim looks at Tony. “I was hoping to steal your team and have you grab whoever picks up the drives.”

Tony nods. “We can do that. And we can get your prison guys who okayed Wallbanger.”

*Bishop: Trap for the house. Wallbanger. Follow the money.*

*Jake: Liaise with Harland. Find out about the judge who okayed the Khan deal. Track down who really wrote that law. Be on speed dial and ready to defend us if we get arrested.* Jake smiles when he sees Tim write that.


*Ziva: CGIS investigation. Help Borin/Fornell break people.*

*Vance GAO. Follow the audits. Who benefits?*

Tim looks up from his list, at the people standing around him. “That cover it?”

A lot of heads bob up and down.

“And we’re going in slow and casual. Under the radar. We all keep doing our real jobs, too,” Fornell adds.
“No one moves until we’ve got solid cases. We might not get the whole thing in one sweep, but when we bring a case, no one is getting away,” Abbi adds. “Maybe we can’t kill the Hydra, but we can make sure that we seal off the neck when we cut the head off.”

“Amen,” Penny says.
It’s late, really late, and finally it’s just Tim, Abby, Jimmy, and Breena, together, naked, in bed, ready to drift off. They all would have liked something more energetic than just snuggling, but it’s late enough, and little girls get up early enough, and there’s more than enough on their collective plates, that any loving beyond going-to-sleep-snuggles is getting rescheduled for tomorrow. (Which they are looking forward to.)

They’re arranging themselves in the bed, Tim with Abby curled up in front of him and Breena at his back, when he hears Jimmy say, “So, what happened with Hue and the Navy Pension stuff?”

Tim sighs a little. “I still haven’t secured my own system enough to even look for it.” He thinks about that for a second. “I’ll run the search tomorrow. We’ve got every worm we could find out of my system now, might as well run it before they get a new worm into play.”

“Probably should give everyone more of a heads up on that than you got to tonight,” Abby says, quietly, starting to sound sleepy.

“I’ll make sure it’s the first text I send on the new phones.”

He feels Breena shift a bit, kiss the back of his neck, and say, “Sleeping time now. Lots to do tomorrow.”

He reaches behind himself, pats her butt, and closes his eyes.

And much, much too soon later, he wakes to the feel of achy bones and a little girl trying to squirm between him and her mom.

Morning goes like mornings usually do, eating, getting girls up and dressed, and, for Tim, there’s an extra job.

He shanghaies Jimmy into it, and they take the girls, too. Might as well get them out of the house. That’s a good way to eat up the time between breakfast and morning nap and give Abby and Breena a bit of a break.

Since what Tim does to cell phones has spread around NCIS, Cybercrime has been getting a pretty steady stream of requests for ‘modified’ phones. In fact, for the agents who are afloat or abroad, the single most popular thing to do if they get to the DC main branch is head down and have whichever Minion is handy with a soldering iron go to work.

These days, it happens often enough that Tim just keeps a batch of the modified ones lurking around waiting for whoever wants one next. (There’s a row of cellphones, plugged in, sitting on the back of the work bench with a huge DO NOT UNPLUG/DO NOT TURN OFF sign next to them.)

So, with Molly walking next to Jimmy, holding his hand, and Anna in the snuggli on his chest, and with Kelly in her stroller, the five of them head down to Cybercrime to grab some cell phones.
Tim doesn’t go for the already fixed up ones. Someone will have to replace them if he goes for them. He doesn’t go for the ten shiny new smart phones waiting to get fixed up. They’ll get noticed if they go missing, too. He does start stuffing flip phones into the little storage shelf under Kelly’s stroller while telling the girls that this is where he works.

Jimmy’s eyeing them, shocked to see Tim grabbing *them*. “The best 2008 had to offer?”

“2006. They call, text, and take pictures. That’s all I need them to do.”

Jimmy nods a bit at that, but still isn’t getting picking *those* phones.

“If I take twenty smartphones, I’ll clean us out and have to order ten new ones as well. Someone will notice that. These little burner phones, we go through them like thumb drives. I’ve got a standing order for 300 new ones a quarter.”

Jimmy looks appalled by that. “What the hell do you do with them that fast?”

“Me, not much. We just spiff them up, increase the battery power and the range of the GPS. Field agents… They do a lot with them. They’re pretty much standard undercover gear.”

“Oh.”

“I always had two or three in my go bag, and I’m sure you’d find at least four of them on Tony’s team at any time. Say you need to track someone and don’t have bug handy, just drop it in the backseat of a car or into a purse or…”

Jimmy starts to nod. “I get you.”

Jimmy snags one for himself, tucking it into his pocket. Tim looks at him curiously and decides that Jimmy’s going to put it somewhere into his gear. If they go missing again, having an extra GPS on them is a good plan.

“Yeah. They’re just easy and handy to have around,” Tim says, approving of the idea of a cell buried in Jimmy’s bag or something like that.

“Taking the girls out?” Manner asks, appearing from behind Jimmy, eyeing the stack of phones.

“Hi, Steve. Yeah.” Tim pets Kelly’s hair. “You know mine. Baby girl here,” he gently strokes Anna’s cheek, “Is Anna Palmer, and big girl over there,” Molly’s trying to get away from Jimmy to go explore on her own, “is Molly Palmer. Jimmy, have you met Steve?”

“Seen you around,” Jimmy says.

“The same here.”

“Okay, Jimmy Palmer, Stephen Manner. Steve’s helping Abbi out at CGIS.” Tim hands Manner one of the phones.

Manner looks at it, licks his lips, and nods. “I was afraid that one was a new hire.” He gestures at Molly.

“Give her ten years, and she might be,” Tim says with a smile, scooping Molly up. “What do you think, you wanna work here with me, Daddy, and Aunt Abby when you grow up?”

She grins at him, and lifted up, can see the TVs and sofas. “TV!”
“Yes, but not now. Maybe when your sister and cousin go down for their morning nap,” Tim says. Then he shift out of Dad-mode and into Boss-mode. “I take it you’re not here just because you were missing the joint?”

Manner shakes his head. “Kind of hoping you’d be here. Wasn’t sure how to get you directly otherwise.” He glances at Jimmy and Tim nods, then he holds up the phone. “Apparently, now I know.”

“Yeah, I’ll be setting up a secure system. Anyone on it is someone you can talk to face to face as well. What did you find?”

“Several things. First off, that worm doesn’t send information just to one place. At least the one in the CGIS system doesn’t. Unlike the girls, I left my back trace open, and I’ve followed it back to drops, probably like the one you got,” he points to the computers sitting in Tim’s office, “there. Five of them, so far. All over the world. There’s one as far away as Argentina.” Manner shakes his head. “McGee, it’s a perfect redundant system. Pulls the same info over and over and deposits it all over the place.”

Tim groans. That’s why no one is running in to grab the computers he’s got. The same information is sitting on other computers all over the world. “Fucking Hydra,” he mouths, not attracting Molly’s attention away from studying the Caf-Pow machine.

Manner looks confused. “Like Captain America? What?”

“No…” Though Tim’s starting to wonder if maybe yes, not in a real sort of way, but… *Enough of that.* “Just, every time we cut off one head, we find more.”

“Oh, yes.” That makes sense to Manner. “Here’s what I was thinking, and I’ll run it by Director Borin when I see her, right now, we’ve got the mirror system in place here. If I can pull it off, and if I can borrow a few hands, we’re going to build a mirror system for CGIS, and then we’ll shift the worm to the mirror system, leave it running, and back trace what happens.”

A wide smile spreads over Tim’s face. “That’s beautiful, Steve. Who were you planning on grabbing?”

He looks annoyed, and grudgingly says, “I want Brand. Baby issues aside, she doesn’t seem to need sleep, and she codes clean and fast. I need Connon and Soth, too. I’d take Howard, but I know you like to keep her around.”

Tim nods. He does like having Howard around, she runs things well, and he knows if he’s off on something she’ll keep them going the way he wants them going. “Send out the call, I’m good with it.”

“Howard?”

“You can have her as a set of second eyes when you give Brand back.”

Manner nods at that. It’s not ideal, but it works. “Shouldn’t I ask Director Borin?”

“Don’t worry about it. She’s coming over to my place this afternoon, I’ll square it with her. Just get it up and working.”

“On it, Boss.”

“Good.”
As Manner walks back to his desk, Jimmy says to him, “Baby issues?”

“He’s uncomfortable with the fact that Brand is eighteen. He prefers his hackers with multiple advanced degrees and at least thirty years behind them.”

“Ah, and the mirror system?”

“One of the defenses we have up here. If you try to hack us from the outside, you’ll end up in a mirrored version of our system. The case numbers are all the same, but what’s in them is gibberish. Randomly generated numbers and letters that we then encrypted.”

Jimmy laughs a little at that, watching Manner do something on his computer, likely sending out the call for help, he says quietly, “That’s the one who wanted to run the place?”

“Yeah. He’s still got a bit too much bureaucrat, but he’s slowly getting back to being a cop.” Tim sounds proud as he, also quietly, says that.

“All your doing?”

“I really don’t think so. I’m just giving him enough boot to the head to remind him how to do it for himself.”

“Ahhh… And you’re foisting him off on Abbi?”

Tim makes sure Manner has his ear buds in. He does, but Tim keeps his voice barely above a breath as he says, “He’s not my choice for a second-in-command. But he’d be damn good at getting her cyber-systems in order, and likely better than they ever were.”

“If last night was anything to go by, that’s not exactly going to take a genius to do.”

Tim nods a bit at that. Jimmy’s got a point.

Jimmy eyes the mound of cell phone boxes under Kelly’s stroller. “That all we need? You going after Hue?”

“I’ll do that from home, so I can keep an eye on it while we work on the floor plan. Still want to hit the lab.”

“Okay, then.”

And thus, they shuffle out.

They’re heading to the lab because of something Tim remembered while they ate breakfast. Faces that look identical to the human eye are not identical to a computer.

So, he gets the shot of “Wallbanger” up and fed into the facial recognition software, and then he takes the same shot, feeds it into Google, and pulls the most similar picture of Mark Sheppard from the internet and loads that in.
Zelaz is watching him do it, while chatting with Jimmy and Molly.

After a minute, the computer finishes up measuring everything. It beeps and tells him that not only do those faces match, they’re a 100% match. Which is, unless you are looking at two copies of the same picture, impossible.

Tim’s very annoyed at that. Some asshole at FCI Cumberland decided that it’d be a spiffy idea to scan in a fake driver’s license which had a picture of an actor stolen off the internet and photoshopped onto a Virginia driver’s license background.

Only question is, was that asshole stupid, or well-paid, or both?

Jimmy can see Tim glaring at the computer, so can Zelaz.

“That’s a match, why is that a bad thing?” Zelaz asks.

“That’s an actor. There’s absolutely no shot this guy is the person we’re looking for. That means someone okayed a guy holding this ID. So that someone is stupid or in on it.” He turns toward Jimmy. “You want to get the girls into the car? I’ve got one more job to do.”

“Take long?”

“Nah. I’m going to call the prison and make sure Khan’s sitting in interrogation the minute I get in on Monday morning. And I’m also going to make sure I get all the visitor logs for when Wallbanger’s showed up. I want to know who’s been letting him in.”

“Sure.”

And five minutes later, when Jimmy’s got the girls in their seats, Tim rejoins him, slipping into the passenger seat. “All set. Khan and his lawyer will be waiting on Monday morning. I have a feeling we’re going to have a lot to talk about.”

Jimmy nods at that, pulling the car out. “Yeah, sounds like it.”

“With any luck I can get a sketch artist to get a real mock-up of Wallbanger.”

“There’s a step. So, you don’t want to hunt by his job or prints, how are you going to find him?”

Tim’s leaning his head against the headrest, eyes closed, seeing how best to do this. “Job, I guess. Have to figure out a way to get into the CIA and go at it sideways.”

“Great.”

“Yeah. My guess is, not only will I not find Wallbanger there, but that there’ll be something in the system set to go off if anyone looks for him.”

“And that’s your sideways?”

Tim lifts his head and opens his eyes. “I hope so. Since I know what the flags are attached to, at least, I hope that it’s flagged, I’ll look for the flags and see if I can follow them to something interesting.”
“And if it’s not flagged?”

Tim shrugs. “If those redundant computers are anything to go by, it’s entirely likely they’ll have a cover ID that goes nowhere.” Tim’s glaring at his mental image of the computers.

“You don’t look happy at all.”

“We’ve got two shots to find out who those computers belong to. Either someone shows up and fusses over us having them, or we catch whoever’s been going to get the data out of them.”

“And so far no one is fussing, and you’re thinking no one is going to show up.”

Tim nods a little at that. “Not so much as to not have Tony and Bishop and Draga waiting, but... I’m not feeling it. Why risk it? The one thing we know is these guys do not want to be found out. If we’re lucky, they don’t know we were there, they show up for their information, and Tony grabs them. If we’re not, and I’m betting we’re not, given how carefully the rest of this has been set, they’ve got eyes on the building that we didn’t see, and they do know we grabbed their computers, so they don’t show up. Right now, while we’re working on finding them, they’re probably grabbing an abandoned house with good cover somewhere, and setting up more computers to drop intel onto.”

Jimmy inclines his head at that. It sounds reasonable. “You’ve cut their access to NCIS, and soon they’ll only get junk from CGIS. I can’t imagine Fornell’s guys are going to leave that in place at the FBI.”

“And if I’m lucky, that’ll force them to show their hand, make another play to re-establish contact, let me see who they are.”

“And if you’re not?”

“They’ll just vanish.” Tim sighs at that. “So many of the cases we close, we close them because whoever it was just couldn’t stop while they were ahead. If these guys are smart enough to just vanish, I don’t know if I’ll ever find them.”

“You’ll find them.”

Tim smiles weakly at that. “You mind me just spitballing at you?”

“Go for it.” Jimmy lightly touches the back of Tim’s hand. “Not like I’m the one who’s going to find the little bit of intel that breaks this open, might as well be a good sounding board.”

“You don’t know that.”

Jimmy looks over at Tim, glancing away from traffic. “I’m awfully sure this one isn’t going to hinge on some bit of evidence in how they kill someone. So, spitball away.”

“Okay. What if Wallbanger, or whoever, is selling information? Say he finds people who are in prison for doing... whatever. They’re good at what they did. He somehow convinces the prison to let him in, and then he gets these guys doing their thing. For all we know those other guys who are getting paid are also all computer criminals. So, they do their thing, like Khan provides a window into every Federal operating system, and then he sells access to whomever, and they set up their own collection points.”

Jimmy goes with that. “So, the guys in Argentina may be buying CGIS stuff, because they’re smuggling things into the country, and they may just have one data stream, CGIS, or they may also have, like, what FAA, DEA, or whatever?”
“Sure. If I was going to smuggle things I’d want something like that. And the house we found with our computer in it, that might be a spot for someone who’s watching local LEOs, or they may have a bunch of military stuff in there, or… whatever.”

“How about the code, I mean… can you use the door to find out where the information is going?”

Tim shakes his head. “Doesn’t work that way. Khan built a door, and he built a key, and he built a trap that’ll kill your system if you try to take the door out. Wallbanger or whoever sells the key, and that’s the system you have to track to get to where the information is going.” Tim’s eyes go wide. “He built a TRAP!”

“Tim?”

Tim’s looking very excited as he says, “The system will crash if you try to take his worm out! When the system crashes, your IT guys re-load it! Probably with another version of the worm on it. The IT guy isn’t going to stick a version with the exact same worm in it…” No that doesn’t feel right to Tim. The IT guy would have to be in on it, that’s too many people in on this… “No. He does, and it keeps crashing, because you keep taking the worm out, so he calls in the developer, and he fixes it. He’s the guy that’ll shove a version with a new worm in it into our system.”

Jimmy smiles at him, see you’ll figure it out on his face. “You’re going to visit the developer?”

Tim’s looking pretty happy. “Yeah. Someone in IT has to know where we get our system from. Right after I have a chat with Khan. I need to know what Wallbanger looks like, because someone gets that code into the system, and it’s not Mark Sheppard. And once I have a sketch of Wallbanger, I can go find out where we get our system from and see if he works there.”

Jimmy smiles a bit. “That’d be a perfect example of a ‘Herb-type’ guy. Say he’s a programmer at wherever makes the system. It’s not Microsoft, is it?”

Tim shakes his head. “Not now, at least. Might have been back in the day. Now we’ve got someone who just makes a system for us.”

“So, either Wallbanger’s got his own plans for how he wants things to go, or he’s found a way to make a ton of money. So, he dummies up court orders, or convinces a judge or two to work with him, he gets his back door built, and then he starts selling keys to whoever wants one.”

“Oh… That’d…” Tim shakes his head a bit. That’d be an almost perfect crime.

“Maybe he got really good with the first few jobs he tried, so he’s keeping up with it. He meets new people who want new things, like the Norton job. Say he didn’t know how to quit when he was ahead.”

“Probably didn’t see any reason to. Especially if he’s selling to people like the NSA.” Tim’s nodding; he can see that. “Bishop… I think it was Bishop… was talking about how there are talent brokers. They work with the government or cops or whoever, and find them people to do the jobs they don’t want their regular staff to handle.”

“So, he’s doing that. Might explain the variety of jobs he’s working. Maybe he’s selling info and talent to anyone with the money to pay him?”

“No great conspiracy then. Just another guy in a good place with his own little kingdom of gold.”

Jimmy nods at that, passing a slow moving Beetle in front of them. “Question is, how much of what this ‘talent broker’ is doing is legal?”
“Yeah.” Tim sighs. “If he’s got some judges on payroll, it’s possible he’s connected enough to get that language into a law, make sure he’s got cover for what he does tucked away somewhere. If he’s selling to the government, he may be relying on the idea that someone will give him a get out of jail free card. If he’s just forging everything, he may be hoping that no one really checks the papers he hands them.”

“Or some combination thereof.” Jimmy thinks for a few seconds, eyes scanning the road as he exits off of I-495. “You want an even scarier thought on that?”

“Sure.”

“Yes, there’s a paper copy of the law lurking about somewhere, but best I can remember, there’s only one, and as soon as they’re passed, they’re stored and handled electronically. What’s to say he even bothered shoving those clauses in before the law got passed? For all we know, part of what he’s selling is not just information, but a quick hack job into whatever law it is, adding a few lines to make whatever it is he’s doing legal.”

Tim slowly closes his eyes and then opens them. “You’re right, that’s scary. Remind me to make sure I have Jake check to see if that’s even possible.”

“So, text one. Hue. Text two, ask Jake if laws can be hacked.”

“Yep.” They’re still three miles from Tim’s place. “All while we’re working on figuring out how to wire the house. Gonna be a busy afternoon.”

When they get home, it’s time to put Anna and Kelly down for naptime. That means quiet play time for Molly, which means some quality time with the Muppets and Little Bear.

She’s happy with that. Jimmy, Abby, and Breena are at the dining room table, getting the stack of phones all set to talk to each other, programing in phone numbers and names and all the rest of it, boring, simple work that has to be done.

Tim gets his computer up and running, and goes to find the search he crafted to hunt down Hue’s missing fees. He had thought of a few ways to go about automating something like that. A system to randomly deduct a small amount from someone’s paycheck from time to time can be built several ways.

He tells his computer to execute the search. Then he settles down and begins to think about how, if Khan were hired to do it, how he’d write the code. It takes him another hour, but Tim comes up with what he considers a fairly good approximation of what Khan would do, and adds that to his search, too.

And now all he’s got left on that is waiting. Eventually he’ll know if NCIS is donating funds to where ever. And if it is, he’ll track that, and if it’s not, he’ll have a chat with Jarvis, Admiral Finnegan, and whoever does the Navy’s finances about ransacking the Navy’s computers to see if it’s coded in there.

When he heads back into the dining room, where there’s a stack of cell phones, all identical except
for the names that Abby’s put on them in glitter paint, (Tim smirks at the idea of Gibbs and Borin
with black flip phones with their names in sparkly pink paint and Abby’s distinctive handwriting on
the backs.) Tim says, “So, I’ve hit the point where I’m not sure if I’d consider finding a program in
NCIS’s system that’s stealing our money to be a good thing or not.”

Abby looks up at him, from where she’s sitting on the sofa with Molly. Jimmy and Breena, who are
looking for the house plans that Ducky gave all of them last night, look over to him, too.

“Good thing because you’d be able to track it in house?” Abby says.

“Yeah. I got access to the Navy’s communication systems for the test. They didn’t give me free reign
of every computer system they’ve got. So, I’ve got to hack it or ask for permission, and both of those
techniques will likely tip off someone I’d rather not tip off.”

“You don’t think you can get in clean?” Breena asks as Tim sits next to Abby and Molly scoots into
his lap for cuddles.

“When I ran the test, I got talking with Admiral Finnegan, and we agreed to snipe each other’s teams
for practice. He didn’t get into mine, so he asked if his people could get the code so they could build
their own version of it. Now he’s got what me and my best people came up with to defend my
system, and he’s worked it over to make it even better. Hacking the Navy would be a nightmare right
now.”

“What about Hue? Think he can just let you use his system?” Breena asks.

Tim nods, and then shakes his head. “I’ve got way too many things going on right now. That should
have been obvious.”

Abby pets him gently. “That’s why we work in teams.”

Tim rubs his eyes. “Yeah. Okay. So, what else is up?”

“Jimmy said something about sending a text to Jake,” Abby says.

Tim nods at that, remembering, and pulls his phone out of his trousers. A minute later, he’d finished
his text and sent it off.

While Tim’s been texting, Jimmy found what he was looking for. He heads into the dining room,
pushes the phones all to the far side of the table and unrolls the house plans that Ducky made sure
they all went home with last night. “I carefully hid it in your office to keep it safe, and forgot where it
was.”

Tim nods. He’s done that more than a few times before.

He kisses Molly, and sets her on the sofa as he and Abby head over to the table. They all spend a
moment looking at the plans for their part of the house.

The thing about a wiring job is that if you don’t know where the walls are going to be, you can’t do
a very good job of wiring your home. So, supposedly, what they are doing this afternoon, in addition
to dealing with Hydra (which is how Tim’s thinking of the Case From Hell) they’re sitting down,
planning out where all the walls go, and then it’s his job to figure out how to make sure every room
has power and cable and wifi and all of those good things.

He thinks that while he’s doing that, Gibbs is on HVAC and plumbing.
So, walls. Right now their section is to the right of the kitchen. It’s a hallway with two bedrooms on each side, and at the end another bedroom with the hexagonal-shaped glassed in room off of it.

At one end of their space, they’ve got a glassed in sitting room. On the other end, the kitchen backs up against one of the bedrooms. The outside walls and windows aren’t changing either. Between the two bedrooms on each side of the hallway there are bathrooms, and there’s a powder room right off of the bedroom next to the glass sitting room.

They effectively have a forty foot long, thirty foot wide rectangle with a twelve foot, glass addition on the far end.

Right now, in front of them is three layers of design. One, has the full lay out for the house as they bought it. One has the current lay out as it is now. They’d taken down all the drywall, and all of the non-weight bearing walls. It’s down to studs and plywood, and that’s what’s on that sketch. The third is, with the exception of the outside walls and windows, blank. It’s just an empty space.

Supposedly everyone is coming over after lunch, with their own sections sketched in. Walls set, bathrooms in place, and all the rest of that, and then, this afternoon, they’re going to put them all together into one big blue print with all of the plumbing and electric and whatnot all in place.

The goal is that tomorrow, as Tim’s got his computer guys breaking into the computers he’s got custody of, that Ducky and Penny will be able to take the finished plans to an architect friend who will look them over and make sure the building will stand and won’t burn down.

That’s the goal, at least.

Which means, for the four of them, they’ve pushed deciding if they’re going to have one room or two as far back as they possibly can.

Jimmy’s got the sketch with the supporting walls and the one that’s blank unrolled on the table.

Apparently the long hallway down the middle wasn’t just an aesthetic choice. At least one (and better off, both) of those two walls needs to stay in place to keep the two floors above them up.

Breena traces her fingers over the walls that need to stay in place. “One bedroom or two?”

Abby leaves for a moment and comes back with a stack of printer paper. She draws a quick and dirty version of the space they’ve got. Tim thinks that’s a good idea, whatever they come up with will be easier to see if they draw it out.

But they can’t draw anything until they answer Breena’s question.

“One,” Jimmy says. “Two would be just to look good, and… for two to work as cover, we’d have to actually sleep in both of them. Little girls get up, they come in to cuddle, they find all of us in one bed. That blows two bedrooms right out of the water, unless we’re willing to split up at night.” No one likes that. Maybe if it were just about sex, that’d be a workable answer, but sex is the icing on the cake at the end of the meal. And they want the whole meal.

“Unless we’re willing to keep them out of our room…s. This is our space, you don’t get to come in. If we did that, and had two rooms, there’d be no shot of ending up with a six-year-old telling her grandparents how Mom and Uncle Tim had slept in together last weekend,” Abby says. But she’s not looking happy at that, and no one else is, either.

Abby shakes her head, killing her own idea. “Okay, that plan is out. We’re not cutting off morning cuddle time.”
“I think that if we get a talkative six-year-old, we’re good with telling the outside world that yes, we share a room at our weekend vacation place by the river, after all, there are ten adults in the group and a bunch of kids. That’ll imply it’s just about tight quarters,” Tim says.

“And as long as said little girl doesn’t mention the naked part of sleeping in…” Breena shrugs some. “I suppose we could start wearing pajamas…” The four of them all look at each other, that’s a more workable compromise than saying goodbye to cuddle time or not sleeping together after sex.

“Act like you think this is totally normal and completely innocent, and that takes the wind out of a lot of gossip…” Abby’s feeling her way through that, testing to see if those words feel right. They do.

“As Gibbs told us, No shame!” Jimmy adds.

Tim thinks that works, but he’s not sold on one room, not yet. He likes the idea of it, but he’s still worried about how it’ll look. Why… Something’s niggleing in the back of his head, and he really needs it to come to the front now. So he starts talking, hoping it’ll hop out eventually, “If we have two rooms, even if we don’t split up to sleep…” He’s staring at the blueprints, shaking his head.

“Eventually they’ll get old enough they’ll want to bring friends along. If we don’t want them constantly bitching about being away from home every weekend, they’re going to be bringing buddies…” Yep, that’s definitely part of it. The kids will want the outside world to come join them here. “Hell, sooner than that, we’re talking about having the yearly Christmas party out there, so people will see that the place is big enough we’re not hurting for space. Plus, we’re the ones with the rooms on the ground floor. If there’s a party, people’ll be putting coats and stuff in our space. If we have two rooms… that goes a long way toward looking right. And once the kids get older, they aren’t going to be running in for morning cuddles. By the time we’ve got four tweens, they won’t be bursting in, they likely won’t remember cuddle time all that well, I mean, I don’t remember cuddle time with my parents,” no one stops Tim to mention that he may not remember it because it probably didn’t happen, “but they and their buddies will gossip if we’ve just got one room.”

That seems to make a certain amount of sense to the rest of this group.

He grabs the first piece of paper. On the left side of the hallway he fills in two thirds of the rectangle with one space. In the middle of that space he marks out a smaller rectangle and writes bathroom on it. “Bathroom in between. No access to the bath from the outside, but both of our rooms open onto it. We can decorate each room to our own tastes,” Tim would have to admit that trying to find a halfway space between the bright, cool, airy style that Breena prefers, with its pastel colors and tons of light, and Abby’s dark, vivid, gothic style, heavy on the drapes, jewel tones, black, and curlicues seemed like a Sisyphean task. Getting a compromise between Abby’s style, and his utilitarian chic was enough of an issue, melding it into Breena’s… “And, we can set each room for different styles of play.”
That gets an intrigued look from the other three. They like the idea of building different places for different sorts of playing.

“Say, our room is kind of dark, with lots of candles and mirrors and soft textures, big, low bed, drapes around it, lots of pillows, a cross between gothic colors and harem styling…” He can see the other three getting into this, and he’s coming up with something both he and Abby will be happy with. “All those pillows you got for that Valentine’s dinner at the Lab that are sitting in our attic now. That room could be their home.” Abby’s nodding along with that, getting some concrete ideas for designing around vivid scarlet and royal purple satin pillows. Tim looks over to Breena and Jimmy. “And your room is bright and airy, with say, a few plants on hooks, and some carefully chosen furniture at a few different heights…”

He can see them nodding. Then he draws two dots along the same line as the wall for the other third of the left side of the hallway. “Those are columns. TV, sofas, family entertainment section goes here. For when we want to do movie night with each other and our kids. There’s a few windows on the wall that’d make TV watching annoying… So he draws one more line, blocking off the wall with the windows, and says, “Powder room and laundry over here?”

That works for them. With as many little kids as they’ve got, and with what they hope to do in those rooms, they do end up with a lot of laundry to wash.

He draws two more dots in front of the hexagonal room. “More column supports. This gets some comfy chairs and more pillows.”

“Stargazing and reading?” Breena asks with a smile.

“Sounds good to me. Bedtime story pit for little guys?” Jimmy says.

“Come on, bedtime stories are going to happen in Gibbs’ section of the house,” Abby says. “You know he’s going to have some sort of nook in there just for reading to and snuggling with grandkids.”

Tim would have to admit that he can see that. “With a fireplace, and probably a really big rocking chair.”

He goes back to the edge of the rectangle that’s closest to the kitchen, and sketches another rectangle parallel to their rooms. He dashes another line down the middle of that, turning that space into two long rectangles, and adds two doors facing their rooms. “Nursery and bigger kids rooms.”

“How about bathroom?” Abby says.

Tim nods, erases a few walls, makes the rooms smaller and adds one more rectangle along the far wall.

They’re left with the far side of their area being wide and open, lots of space for grown-ups to lounge around and little guys to run and yell and make messes and play.

“Do we like this?” Tim asks, especially Jimmy because he was in favor of one room. He nods. This will work. Though he’s thinking, that in twenty years, when they aren’t swimming in babies, they might do some rearranging.

As they’re starting to add things like closets and doors to the sketch, Tim gets a text back from Jake. He doesn’t know Jake well enough to imagine the expression on his face, but he’s sure that Jake’s pissed off. *It’s not supposed to be possible, but the tax code alone is 70,000 pages long. One physical copy gets printed out and sent to the National Archives. A searchable, electronic text is then*
sent put online and added to the databases we all work off of. People can request physical copies, but they’re all printed off the same electronic document the one copy in the Archives was printed from. Get into that electronic copy, and God alone knows what you could do.

Tim sighs at that. *How would you get into it?*

Anyone who’s ever worked for a Congressman or Senator has open access to the program they write laws on.

*So, what... A few thousand people?*

Ten thousand-ish. And, depending on how security conscious the Congressman is, any of his previous staff. And anyone who can come up with the right password.

Tim looks up at his ceiling and quietly says, “Fuck!” Then he starts typing. *You and your buddies at the Open Government Project have a list of things you were sure should have been illegal, but weren’t?*

A few.

*Make a list. Go looking for everything you can find. Hopefully in this case the metadata isn’t missing.*

*McGee?*

*If we’re lucky, we get into the electronic copies, and we can see when certain bits were added. If we’re really lucky we’ll know who added them.*

*How about we have breakfast Friday morning? I’ll have a list for you.*

*Thanks.*

The afternoon feels really surreal to Tim. He’s bouncing between conversations along the lines of convincing Gibbs that it doesn’t matter if he never intends to watch TV in his and Abbi’s section of the house, it’s still got to be wired for cable because that’s where the third router has to go if the third floor is going to have any sort of decent wifi.

Followed up by Gibbs explaining to them that, yes, that set up they designed for their space is lovely, but if they were to rearrange the kids’ rooms a bit they could actually take advantage of where the current water hook ups are as opposed to having to move them all over by twenty inches.

And, the less that’s said about attempting to get wiring in place for ceiling fans and recessed lighting for Tony and Ziva, the better. They’ve got the room that backs up against the roof on the second floor. And while it’s true that they ripped out the drywall for the walls, they hadn’t taken down the ceilings and floors, so getting that wired requires ripping out the ceiling, too. Granted, when it’s done, it’s going to look awesome. So awesome that Tim and Abby are going to do it in their room, along with color changing LED lights, as well.

Which of course led to the conversation about *LEDs cost what?* and *Don’t worry about it, you’ll be dead before we have to get a replacement.*

But that led to the decision that all of the common rooms would have recessed lighting along the
ceiling line, because after all, those shots Ziva’s showing them do look really cool, and none of them want to be messing around with lightbulbs, and Tim and Abby looking forward to getting the smart bulb system up and set so that when you walk into the room it just lights up on its own. (And Gibbs is getting ready to install switches because he does not even begin to believe that’s going to work, and he refuses to be stumbling around in the dark in his own home because his lunatic kids are surgically attached to their smartphones.)

And through all of this, there are bits and pieces of conversation along the lines of, “Yeah, I’ve got my computer searching through the NCIS systems looking for a program designed to steal little bits of money out of our paychecks.”

“I have never noticed any errant fees on my check,” Ducky adds.

“And you look carefully enough you’d notice a dollar fifty ‘transfer fee?” Jimmy asks.

“Always, Dr. Palmer.”

Ducky’s looking at Jimmy like he can’t imagine how someone wouldn’t notice that, and Jimmy’s looking at Ducky like he can’t believe someone has so much free time that they would go over every pay check in detail to see exactly how much money went where.

Penny smiles and breaks in with, “Ducky still balances a check book every month. My finances have never been in better shape.”

This causes the younger generation to look at him in awe, because none of them even have a check register to balance, let alone would even think of doing so.

“You’re all doing a splendid job of attempting to make me feel ancient. None the less, I can say with absolute certainty, in over twenty years, there have been no mystery fees from my pay. My guess is none of you can do that.”

And that’s true, they can’t because they don’t.

So, Abbi tweaks Gibbs a bit about wanting a bath with a separate shower, and he gently snarks back at her about how much is she going to want that when they’re laying pipe for the tenth consecutive day, followed by a somewhat scandalous comment about Gibbs being too damn old to be “laying pipe” for ten hours in a row, let alone days, and minutes might be more his speed from Tony, which results in some giggles and Gibbs almost head slapping Tony.

Tim’s not commenting much about that. He’s listening, and enjoying that Abbi’s fully part of the planning for their section. (And Tim is very firmly convinced that that part of the house is their section, but it still makes him happy to see that Abbi’s on board with this, too.)

That part is good, and warm, and fun and friendly, even if trying to get everything wired up is making Tim’s eyes want to fall out of his head. He rubs them, and is coming to the conclusion that in his copious spare time he probably does have to visit the eye doctor again and hunt down a pair of glasses.

“Where are we putting the generator?” Gibbs asks. “Don’t want us getting caught that far out if the power goes.”

Tim nods, that’s a good point. The rest of the crew is scattered around his downstairs sketching away on their own bits of the house, so he’s got room at the dining room table to roll out the blueprints for the basement. He spends a moment looking at it, squinting, and rubbing his eyes more. He mutters something about the font on this being eight point, before tapping the spot under what’ll be his and
Abby’s room (the part farthest from the hot water heaters, and least likely to get wet if there’s a problem with them) “We’ll put the batteries here.”

“Batteries?” Gibbs doesn’t look even remotely convinced by that.

“Yeah. I’m not sticking a gas generator in my house. Too expensive, too loud, too… everything. Hell, I don’t want gas fumes in the place. Tesla batteries. You stick them somewhere out of the way, they charge off the house current, and if you lose power, they take over. Plop as many as you want onto your grid and you’re good to go.”

“And when you’re on day three of no power?” Gibbs asks, very much planning on buying a gas generator that will be in the boat house, ready to save the day when needed.

“When will we ever be out there for three days of no power?” Tim asks back.

Gibbs eyes narrow a little, that’s not a bad point. They aren’t going to live there full time.

“If you’re worried, we can stick some solar panels on the roof and put a few of the batteries on that. No matter what, the fridge and heat’ll keep running. Speaking of which, what is this?” Tim taps something that Gibbs has labeled as ‘furnace’ is the basement.

“Heat.”

“I can see that. What are we burning?”

Gibbs is giving Tim the isn’t it obvious look.

Tim shakes his head.

“We’ve got six acres of trees. Wood.”

Tim shakes his head. That’s what he was afraid of when he saw “furnace” on the plan. “Not if you want me out there for more than a few hours at a time. Fire in the fireplace, fine. Heat the whole house with it, and I’m going to need a ventilator.”

That perks up Breena. “Natural gas. We want that. It’s dirt cheap and makes for really nice cooking. And… You’re okay with that, right?”

Tim nods. “Yeah. We’ve got gas, and you do, too. It’s fine. Wood smoke isn’t my friend in large quantities. And maybe they’re better now, but the year we lived in a house with oil heat was the worst year for my lungs.”

Penny’s just about to add that that year was also frightfully cold, and that wasn’t doing him any favors, either, when Tim’s computer makes a chirping noise, and that derails his part of this conversation. “Gotta check on that.” He puts his pencil down and goes into his office. Abbi and Tony follow along with him.

“What is it?”

He’s reading, fast… “Not what I was expecting…” He’d told the computer to go looking for certain programs, and he told it to give him anything similar to the terms he put in. This is… “It’s a random number generator.”

“Is that good or bad?” Tony asks.

Tim shrugs, looking perplexed. “I don’t know. Hue thought the accounts were being chosen at
random, so one of the things I sent the computer to look for was…” He glances at Tony and Abbi and edits himself; they don’t care and aren’t interested in what, precisely, he went looking for, “I told it to look for anything that would pick things at random. One way to do that is to randomly generate numbers and then go after anything that matches those numbers.”

“Is that what’s going on?” Abbi asks.

“Not sure. This is just a generator. I can’t see what it’s generating for or why it’s there.”

“Where is it?” Abbi asks.

Tim smiles up at him. “Where do you think?”

“Federal intranet?” Tony says.

Tim nods. “Yeah. But, now I know it’s there, so I can now hunt for anything that references it.”

“Why didn’t your guys’ worm hunt find this?” Tony asks.

“It’s not a worm.” Tim’s already starting to type, but he pulls back for a second, realizing that’s a smartass answer, and that he’s not being asked that because Tony’s trying to waste his time. He’s asking because he doesn’t know the difference. “Worms are programs that get into your software and then allow other people to get in, or take information out. There are tens of millions of lines of code in here, so we didn’t just read through, looking for it. We searched out any terms we could think of that would allow someone to get in or take information out, and that’s how we found them. We didn’t find this, because this is a random number generator and it’s not even remotely like any sort of worm.”


“Now I find out what this does. And then I go back and try to convince that man of yours that more than one electrical plug in a room isn’t an extravagance.” Tim sighs at that. If this house had been entirely up to Gibbs, it’d be one room, with a fireplace, dirt floor, maybe a lantern, and possibly a cistern somewhere to hold rainwater for the occasional shower and drinking. Tim can just see it, camping with a roof and some walls to keep the rain off.

Abbi smiles dryly. “How about I convince, and you find the next piece of the puzzle.”

Tim nods and gets coding.

It’s a random number generator. That much he can see. And its job is to generate a number that is three digits, a space, two digits, a space, and then four digits. He stares at it for a second and then knows what he’s looking at. Social security numbers. And it’s just sitting there, lurking about, in the section of code that lets them change the layout on their desktops.

He looks at it for another moment, and gets moving. Two plans of attack. First off he knows it’s there, so he sets up a search for anything that references it. Second of all he modifies his search for how the fees get chosen. He begins looking for something that takes social security numbers and
then accesses accounts based on those numbers.

It occurs to him, as he’s looking at that, that all told there are 18 million federal employees, and more retirees, and if this thing is hooked into Social Security payouts… It probably is easier to generate social security numbers and see if they match someone than it is to try and pick them out at random.

He thinks about that more… There’s no central database of bank account numbers they pay into. He could go to HR, and get bank account numbers, but he’d have to get them by searching people. He couldn’t do it by account number. But every single federal employee and all the retirees and of course everyone getting a Social Security payout, is identified by their social security number.

He nods at that. It’s a good way to do it. Quiet, stealthy… The only question is, is that how they’re picking people?

An hour later, when he rejoins the group, Tim asks, “Ducky, do you have a social security number?”

Ducky looks up from the final sketch of the third floor, where Tony is drafting in the walls. “Since 1994, why do you ask?”

“Just curious about it. I think they’re using social security numbers to find something. Maybe that’s how they pick out which accounts to go after. If you didn’t have one, that would be a reason for never seeing a mysterious fee.”

“I have had legal dual citizenship in the United Kingdom and the United States since 1994.”

“Okay.”

“And how’s the search going?” Abby asks, laying a hand on his shoulder as he looks down at the house plans, which are coming along.

He rubs his eyes. “Slow. But I know there’s a number generator in there, and given what it’s coming up with, it’s creating random social security numbers. Hopefully soon, we’ll find out if that’s how it’s picking accounts.”

“And you’re hoping to teach him how to do this?” Tony asks, looking at Gibbs.

Both Gibbs and Tim shake their heads.

“You’ve got to know how to really code to come up with search terms for something like this,” Tim says, taking a sip of Abby’s lemonade. “Thanks.” He gives her a quick kiss. “But, once you’ve got those codes to search, you’re just telling the computer to go through the code and find them. The searching is the easy part. That’s not what you’re going to do,” he says to Gibbs, “if you’ve got the CGIS crime database—“

“We still don’t have one,” Abbi adds, looking annoyed. “Manner just about wet his pants when he saw how bad of shape we were in.”

“Oh, right. He’s fixing that. I told him that you’d be cool with it.”

“Do I want to know how or why?”
Tim shakes his head and gets back to what he was saying about what Gibbs is going to be learning to do. “Okay, say you’ve got the IRS database and you want to know…” He looks at Gibbs.

Gibbs licks his lips. He wants to be looking for the bigger picture, but he’s not even sure where that starts. Might as well take a stab at it. “The bitcoin thing you guys were talking about last night. Say I wanted everything that had something to do with that, and say… tax evasion, and… any case that hinted someone like Brandis was involved in something along those lines, and then the cases he didn’t solve but should have…”

Tim shakes his head, that’s a hell of a complicated search. “Yeah, not a keyword search. If I wanted to do that, I’d have to pull all of the cases that matched the basic points, bitcoin, tax evasion, the people you’re looking for, cases they ran, cases they didn’t solve, stuff like that. So that’s at least five databases. Then I’d build a program to cross reference them. Then that program would find as many points of commonality as you like. And that’s when you start looking for leads.”

Gibbs sighs… That’s… “Yeah. That’s the goal, but…”

“But it’s a lot of quiet, picky work that no one notices, and they just expect you to pop out answers in an hour even though you’ve barely got one database set?” Tim says with a mean, little smile.

Gibbs nods a bit.

“Karma’s a bitch, Gibbs,” Jimmy says, patting him on the back, smiling widely at him.

Gibbs blows out an exasperated breath.

“He’ll get it. Just takes time and effort,” Tim adds. “Hell, I suppose we could get you, and Breena, and Lara, and Wendy working on it, too. The internet is basically one big database. Teach all of you how to use it to really search…”

“You mean in my spare time, when I’m not watching kids, making up dead people, running my business, building a house, and occasionally eating and sleeping?” Breena says.

“Or not,” Tim replies.

“I think I’m on coming up with ideas to search. Making up dead people does give you time to think. Gibbs, you’ll be searching them.”

He smiles a little at that. “What do you want to search?”

“If you can get into it, I want to know how often GAO audits fail. I want to know, what, exactly they audit. Like, every quarter at Slaters we get all of the branches together and we go over our books. Not just a quick P/L statement, we go through everything. Keeps each other honest and our profit margins looking good. So, who’s looking, what are they looking at, are they really even looking? Abbi, were you supposed to just fill out some forms and everyone pats each other’s backs, or do they really look at your numbers?”

Abbi shrugs. “Brandis was pretty clear about I was supposed to just let it go. Stall. Kick it down the road and it’d go away. My auditor was sure I was supposed to give her everything.”

“You had a brand new go-getter, right?” Tim says, remembering something about Abbi talking about this audit making her career.

“Yeah, maybe two years since she got her CPA.”
Breena inclines her head at that, quickly snagging Molly, who’s trying to pull the plans off the table. “Your plans are on the floor, baby. Go draw me your playroom, okay?” Molly grabs a few markers and heads back to the big pieces of paper on the kitchen floor. “So, neither of you knew the rules of the game you were playing. I’d think if you could look into the audit numbers, see who has audits that pass and fail, who always passes people, that that might be a hint as to where you’ve got troubles.”

Gibbs nods at that, that would be a good thing to get into.

“Speaking of play rooms…” Jimmy says, and the conversation turns back to the house.

Tim shakes his head a little, surreal.

---

Soon doesn’t happen. His computer isn’t finding what that number generator attaches to. Which means it’s buried deep (millions of lines of code and one PC searching, that’s a search that isn’t going to be fast) or he hasn’t come up with the right terms (in which case there’s nothing for his PC to find).

He’s not terribly worried. Tomorrow he’s going in, and he’ll put his computers at work on it. That will speed things up. And he’ll get his coders on it, too, and that will widen the search net.

They’ll find why that generator is there, and what it’s doing.

They spend the rest of the afternoon getting plans into place. Tim puts in where plugs are going to go, figures out how to make sure that every room has light and cable and internet. He makes sure ceiling fans can be set and run, and that walls where they think TVs will go will have cable outlets.

It’s a good afternoon, and by the time it’s done, the plans are done, too.

Next week is Fornell’s wedding, and Tony and Ziva’s closing, so they won’t be doing any building then, but the week after, October 8th and 9th, they’ll all get together and start making their house into a functional home. The hope is that by the end of the month, all of the hardware will be installed, the walls will be up, and all they’ll have left to do is decorate.

Done in time for Christmas will be tight, but it’s possible.
Dinner is fun. Granted, dinner is often fun when it’s the seven of them. But with the sketches of their section of the house lying around, and talking about what sorts of things they’re hoping to have there (Abby and Breena get talking about the shower, how it’ll be glass, four feet wide, seven feet long, with multiple showerheads hanging down from above, and maybe some sort of bench sort of thing built in along the wall side… for example.) is even more fun.

Toward the end of the getting the sketches done, Ducky had given them all their budgets for fixing up their sections of the house, so to say they’ll get to have a lot of fun is an understatement. (In fact, Tim’s wishing he had mentioned that earlier, because he would have made sure they had more bathroom space. They will be getting a beyond awesome shower, but, if he’d known his budget, a beyond awesome tub would have been nice, too.)

So, they’re having fun, laughing, joking, dreaming about which bits of the house will look like what, as they feed little girls, and get them all washed up and ready for bed.

“Does it feel weird to either of you?” Abby asks Tim and Jimmy as the four of them put the inflatable mattresses on the floor, getting a sleeping and play place ready for tonight.

“Which part?” Breena asks, because today didn’t feel weird at all, to her.

“Well, you know, this is probably the biggest case any of us have ever worked…” Abby finishes tucking in her corner of the sheets, gets up off the floor, and starts grabbing the pillows from their bed, tossing them onto the mattresses as Jimmy and Breena tuck in the rest of the sheets, and Tim rubs his hand. “And today, instead of Gibbs storming around NCIS barking at us, we were here, working on the case and our home. Felt trippy.”

Tim nods at her, working on the sore muscles of his right hand. He hasn’t done anything with a pencil or pen in a long time, and sketching involved keeping the paper he was working on still, with his right hand, all spread out, or even less comfortable, sketching along a straight edge, which he also had to keep steady and still with his right hand. And right now, it’s not happy with him for that. He can really feel he stretched everything out a lot further than it wanted to go.

“Family first,” Jimmy says. He looks down, they’ve got all the sheets on, so he sits down in the middle of the mattress, and pulls Tim with him. “Here, let me.” He takes Tim’s right hand in his and starts working on his forearm. Tim winces a bit. He hadn’t realized it was even really involved with what he was doing today, but now that Jimmy’s working it, he can really feel what he did. Jimmy nods briefly at him, and lightens his touch some. “Gibbs said that to me, once. I think we’re finally living it.”

“Today felt surreal to me. Showerheads to conspiracies to Python to playrooms,” Tim says, relaxing, sitting back against the wall, consciously trying to make his right arm go soft and supple as Jimmy works it.

Jimmy’s eyeing his forearm, looking like that’s not exactly what the problem is.
“Scoot.”

Tim pouts at him a bit, he was comfy, but he scoots forward. “Where do you want me?”

“Depends…” He places his hand on Tim between his spine and right shoulder blade, and presses in a bit, when Tim jerks and whimpers, Jimmy nods toward the middle of the mattress. “Face down. You were leaning into that arm to keep everything steady while you were drawing.”

Tim pulls off his t-shirt, and decides he’s got no need for pants, either. His boxers follow a few seconds later, and he stretches out, naked, in the middle of the mattress. “You couldn’t have mentioned that to me while I was doing it?”

Jimmy straddles his hips. “Since you were doing it, I figured it didn’t hurt.”

Tim glances up at Jimmy, looking slightly irked. “Well, it didn’t. Not while I was doing it.”

He puts his head back down, and Breena gently pets his hair. He closes his eyes and purrs a bit. He hears footfalls, and knows they’re Abby’s, and the click of plastic, probably the bottle of massage oil, and then warm, firm hands (Jimmy’s) slick and sliding slowly, with good deep pressure, up and down his back.

Tim sighs. “I love you.”

He feels the mattress shift a bit, Abby settling in next to him, and she asks, “You singular or plural?”

“Always plural, but right that second I was thinking Jimmy.”

He gets a quick hair tousle from Jimmy, and then another long, stretching stroke from the base of his spine to where it meets up with his skull. “You love anyone rubbing on you.”

Tim smiles at Jimmy. “Guilty.” Then he looks to Abby. “You know what feels really weird to me?”

She cocks her head a bit.

“Gibbs taking the backseat. I mean, I know we’ve seen him do it. ‘Your case, your lead’ and all. But… I almost expect him to be hopping up and asking for updates. ‘M’Gee?’” He does a fairly decent version of how Gibbs says Tim’s name when they’re working. “It felt a little odd when my computer let me know about the number generator, and Abbi and Tony went in with me, but he didn’t.”

“Think he’s okay?” Breena asks.

They all think about that for a few seconds. Gibbs didn’t seem particularly off or in a bad mood or anything, so… “Yeah, he was okay,” Abby says. “I think, for right now, he’s shifting priorities. Like, he knows he can’t help you,” she strokes Tim’s cheek, “right now, so he’s working on learning something useful for that. He’s wounded and healing, so he can’t go out investigating with Tony, so he offered to get the contractors and make sure they do a good job on their place, make sure it’s ready to flip as soon as possible, which frees up Tony and Ziva to do more investigating. Same thing with Abbi, he’s not in a place to go out and help her in the field, so he’s making sure that she can focus on her work.”

Breena smiles wryly. “He’s being a wife, taking care of the home front.”

“He probably thinks of it as being a REMF,” Tim says.
Breena and Jimmy look confused on that one. Abby smirks and nods; that probably is how Gibbs thinks of it.

Tim reads their confusion to mean they haven’t run into that term before. “Rear-echelon motherfucker. That’s what the Marines call them. The guys who do everything from making sure that everyone eats, to having enough bullets, to planning out strategy, to building the things you shoot the bullets out of.”

“Okay.” Jimmy nods slowly, pressing his thumb into the muscles right along Tim’s shoulder blade. Tim sighs at that, it’s tender, but good tender, and Jimmy’s getting close to, but not on whatever the problem is. “How do you know that one and I don’t?”

“Because I’ve been cussed out by grieving Marines who didn’t appreciate being ‘palmed off’ on the REMF. Especially when I was heavier, they’d see me, see the computer, and assume I was back of the line and get annoyed. They wanted Gibbs or Tony or Ziva. Someone who looked like a front line person. Meanwhile, the ones you see don’t talk.”

Jimmy inclines his head, that’s fair enough. And the ones he sees that do talk usually have nothing to say about his job.

“Either way,” Breena says, “he’s shifting focus. And things like today, where he can do something useful, for the home front and get to listen in on and add occasional bits of advice on the current case is probably a really good thing for him.”

“More of that tomorrow, right?” Tim asks. “Not for me.” Tomorrow his hardware guys get in and he’ll be working with them. And he’d gotten a call from Diane today saying that she’d be heading in tomorrow, so that’s when they’d go looking for Lovvy in the IRS computers. “But you all are going to the lumber yard to start ordering two by fours and stuff like that, right?”

“Ordering, lugging, and maybe starting to do some framing. Depends on how fast Penny’s architect friend gets done with looking over the plans,” Breena says. “I think he’s planning on going along on that visit, see about hiring the guy for Tony and Ziva’s place. He wants someone who knows what he’s doing to get everything sketched out fast and clean.”

That sounds like a good day to Tim. He sighs and then twitches a bit. Jimmy’s got his thumb digging into something really tender under his shoulder blade, and that’s shooting pain through his whole arm and chest. He’s definitely on the problem now, not just near it.

“Once you’ve broken into those computers, I’ll be in to start going through them. If there’s even a hint of some sort of physical evidence in any of them…” Abby’s sounding gleeful at the chance to go head to head against someone who thinks they’re the best and brightest. “I will search it out, find it, and identify it. By the time I’m done with this, we’ll know who put those motherboards together.”

Tim smiles at her and squeezes her ankle, which is resting near his left hand.

“I assume we’ve got Kelly?” Breena asks Abby.

“Kind of hoping that, but I can wait for Gibbs or Ducky or Penny to be free.”

“We’ve got her, just nailing down the details.”

“And assuming we’re home in time to eat, we’re bringing dinner,” Tim says.

“Think you will be?” Breena asks.
Tim would shrug but he’s got Jimmy leaning into his shoulders, so he says, “No idea. It’d be nice.” His phone starts ringing and for a second all four of them tense up, wondering what’s going on now.

Jimmy gets off of Tim, and he scrambles up, grabbing it, and saying to them. “Patil, my hardware specialist from Okinawa.” Arya, his hardware specialist in Alameda got in late this afternoon.

Tim picks up and they hear, “McGee… Okay, good… Nah… You’ve been on a plane for twenty-eight hours. Sleep, eat, try to get onto East Coast time. I want your A game tomorrow. Eight o’clock at the Navy Yard… Sounds good… Yeah… They still make them… I’ll bring the donuts.”

Breena, Abby, and Jimmy watch Tim hang up his phone, tossing it back onto his bedside table, then turning back to them, sitting down between Abby and Breena, facing Jimmy. “And now they’re both here. Patil’s just landed and wanted to know if I needed him at the Navy Yard right this second.”

Breena slides her leg up Tim’s. “And amazingly enough you don’t think he needs to get there right this second.”

Tim leans toward her and kisses Breena, his hand drifting down her back. “Yeah, for some reason I want him to be well-rested before getting started on this.”

“Him well-rested, or you?” Abby asks.

Tim smiles a little. *Talk about changes. If I was running this à la Gibbs, I’d be at the Navy Yard with Arya, working our asses off, and expect Patil to get there as fast as possible and hit the ground running.* But he’s not Gibbs, and he doesn’t want to be Gibbs. Not like that, for several reasons. “Even if I didn’t have anything more interesting than that search running in the background and Call of Duty, I’d want us all going after this awake and alert. I don’t know what we’re going to find, but I don’t want him or Arya messing it up because of jetlag.” He pets Abby, and kisses Breena again, smiling widely at them. “But I do have something… someone… ones more interesting to do than Call of Duty, so…” He grins up at them, feel pleased with himself.

“Wanna do some ‘pipe laying’ of your own?” Jimmy asks with a smirk.

“Oh, my God, I can’t believe Tony actually said that!” Abby adds with a giggle. “That was the worst dirty joke I’d ever heard.”

“Yeah. I think that’s the dirtiest thing I’ve ever heard Tony say,” Breena says.

Tim shakes his head. “He made a crack to Abbi about swinging both ways when she mentioned batting lefty in softball.”

Abby’s eyes light up, “And he also mentioned the thing about her and Gibbs trading head slaps and how, in the right circumstances, that could be romantic.”

“When did he say that?” Breena’s somewhere between titillated and horrified.

“He told Ziva that when we were all looking for the perfect woman for Gibbs,” Tim says. Ziva told him, he told Abby, and on and on it went. Gossip is fun.

“What are the right circumstances?” Jimmy asks.

The other three stare at him, and he blushed a bit. “Okay, right, yeah, I should have realized that. Sounds like a way to get bitten, though.”

“Okay, you’re taking that too literally.” Breena scoots over to Jimmy’s lap and kisses him. He kisses
back, soft, wet, happy, and then gently nips her lower lip. “Of course, sometimes biting can be fun.”

After a moment of that, Breena breaks the kiss with Jimmy and then kisses Tim. When she breaks the kiss with him, she pets both of the guys and says, “So… there’s something I’ve been thinking about for a few days now,” that gets all sets of ears perked up and all sets of eyes watching Breena, “and I’m pretty sure Abby won’t be up for it much longer, and it’s my fertile week, so this would be fun, and neither of you’d need a condom,” now all attention is riveted to her, “but I’ve never done it before, so I might be kind of clumsy at it, and…” All three of them are hanging on every word, waiting to see what she’s been thinking about. “And I was thinking, imagining…”

“God, woman, just tell us,” Jimmy knows she’s spinning out her description to work them up.

Breena grins at him, complete wicked saucy joy on her face. “Am I taking too long?”

He gently kisses her and then nips her bottom lip again, giving her a pat on the ass. “Yes. Spill it.”

“Oh, okay. Maybe I’d like to ‘lay some pipe.’” That gets Tim and Abby staring at Breena, very interested, and Jimmy’s looking curious, but a bit less enthusiastic, because he’s not sure who’s going to be the pipe. “Tim and Abby in the middle. You and him are doing her, same time, and I do him with the strap on. You get the control on the vibrator on me.”

Jimmy’s eyes are sparkling at pleasure with that, and he’s got a very wide smile on his face. Tim’s eyes slide shut and he groans with pleasure. Abby’s beaming with joy at that idea. “Oh, yes! We are so doing that.”

Breena leans over, and kisses Abby, tongues and lips caressing over each other, wet and pink. When she pulls back she says, “Go get ready.”

Abby bounces up to the bathroom, shedding clothing as she goes.

“Okay, where is this going to work best?” Breena asks.

Tim eyes their room, and then says, “You okay with not moving much?” to Jimmy.

“So in the position you were in when we did Breena?” Jimmy asks.

“Eh!” Breena shakes her head while smiling at them. “I was doing you. You two mostly just sat there.”

“That’s not how I remember it,” Jimmy says with a smirk. “So, you thinking the armchair?”

Tim nods. “Bed would be better for my knees,” better for Abby, too, he can get that little up thrust thing with his legs in addition to the motion of his hips, “but I’m not sure how well I’d do holding her legs right now.” He, or Jimmy, would need to hold her legs, otherwise that position’s a great ab workout for Abby, which is not all that great for getting off when you aren’t pregnant, and just downright painful when you are. And yes, he’s healing, and getting stronger, but given what Breena intends to do to him, he’s not sure how stable he’ll be.

“Yeah, don’t need to strain yourself on this.” Jimmy says, pretty well able to imagine how on the side of the bed would work. “Pillows for your knees should do it.”

Tim feels Breena’s hand slip over his butt. “You’re almost a foot taller than I am, on your knees will work better for me than standing, but all of us lying on our sides was how I imagined it. Slow, easy, shallow, just feeling it.”
Tim glances at Jimmy, and he looks back to Breena. That sounds a hell of a lot easier than what he was thinking. “I like on our sides.”

“So, how does this work?” Breena asks when Tim gets out of the bathroom. She’s kneeling in the middle of the bed, strap-on in front of her, while Abby’s getting the lube. “I mean… Do I just wear it the whole time, or have it next to the bed and put it on later or…”

Tim shrugs. He’s got no idea how it feels when it’s on. He’s, for fairly obvious reasons, never worn it. And, usually, when Abby’s wearing it, she’s got him tied up and so wound up that he’s not really too aware of what’s going on.

He glances at Abby, who says, “I think it tends to flow better if you’re already wearing it. Start with the straps looser, and tighten them when you get going,” Abby says. “If you keep it a little loose, then just like a real dick, it’ll press up or to the side.” Abby sits next to her, putting the lube in the middle of the bed. “Once you’re ready to use it, make sure it’s tight. You’ll have more control and it’ll feel better for both of you if it’s snug to your pelvis when you’re fucking.”

So, Breena shimmies into it, and Abby helps her get it set, loosely.

From there they slip into their usual (if they can be said to have a usual) four-way making out. Kisses slipping from one to the other, hands and lips, arms and legs stroking and petting. Tim’s focusing more on Breena, and Jimmy’s more with Abby tonight, but it’s not exclusive. All four of them play with each other.

A few minutes into it, Jimmy remembers that he’s got a bottle of massage oil right next to the mattresses, and he’s not seeing any reason why all of them slick and slippery would be a bad thing, and Tim would have to admit that he thinks that’s a splendid idea, too. Women he loves, naked and gleaming in low-golden light, their silk smooth skin gliding against his is something he’s always going to be in favor of.

Eventually they settle into place, Abby in front of him, belly to belly, his arm under her neck, holding her close, kissing her deep and slow. He slips in, both of them sighing at the feel of it, stretch and slick and tight and wet. They settle into a very slow stroke, barely moving, mostly enjoying the feel of stretch and squeeze. He’s petting Abby, lazy circles on her nipples as Jimmy’s behind her, kissing her back and neck, rubbing her butt, gently working a finger into her. And Breena’s behind him, all soft and warm, and kissing his neck and shoulders as her fingers ghost over his ass, teasing him, slipping closer and closer to where he wants them, but not quite there, yet. He tries pushing his butt at her a few times, but that doesn’t speed her up.

He turns to her, kissing her lips, sucking her tongue, and quietly says, “This feels good, but you can go faster if you want. I’m pretty relaxed, very turned on, and have done this before.”

Breena gives him a little nip on the shoulder. “What if I don’t want to go faster?”

Tim licks her lip, and Abby gives him a lovely squeeze. “Ungh…” he sighs at that, and turns back to kiss Abby before turning back to Breena. “I may get done before you’ve gotten to see how you like being on the laying side of the equation. Abby’s wrapped around my dick. Jimmy’s knuckles keep brushing my balls. And you and her are kissing me.”
Abby grins at both of them. “So, you’re saying this is testing your control?” And she gives him a quick thrust.

Breena slips a finger into him just as Abby says testing and Tim shivers all over, a soft little gasp slipping out of his mouth.

He doesn’t answer for a moment because he can’t. His brain just melted. Finally he finds it again, and groans. Then he nips Abby’s lip. “Next time I’m in charge, you aren’t getting off for an hour.”

“Oh NO!” she says, grinning. “Can we schedule that for next weekend?”

Ideas for Fornell’s wedding go flowing through him, along with all the physical sensations and he moans again. “Oh yeah!”

Breena starts slipping her finger in and out of Tim, and lays a sucking kiss where his ear and neck meet. “Gosh, I wouldn’t know anything about being teased out of my mind for hours, would I?”

Tim smiles at her, and Abby. “You saying this is…” a soft pant slips from between his teeth as she moves onto her second finger, “revenge?”

“Revenge is sweet, no?”

“I’m…” Abby groans, loud and low, as Jimmy slips into her, and Tim does, too. Abby’s body is slick and wet and tight and feels amazing, and he can feel Jimmy moving through her, which is a whole other sort of amazing. Like a soft wave of pressure sliding all along the underside of his dick. And right now, as Jimmy’s slipping Abby’s leg off of Tim’s hip and over his, the feeling wrapped around his dick is perfect. So tight and snug and wet and and rippling and hot and his dick literally cannot be happier than it is right now.

He can feel Breena jostling around a bit behind him, pulling the straps on the strap-on tight, getting it set. He hears the cap on the lube bottle clicking open, and feels her moving a bit, then the clicking sound again and…

“Oh God,” slips out of Tim once Breena slips into him. He swallows, hard, rocking back into Breena, which means he’s moving in Abby, too, and that feels exquisite.

Breena’s not quite in the right spot, so right now all he’s feeling is his body sliding between two points, deeper into Abby, less penetration from Breena, back towards Breena, less Abby. It’s all slick and slippery and he’s got the feeling of sliding into and being slid into all at once and that’s physically amazing, and mentally… trippy.

Usually with anal he’s giving or receiving, not both at the same time, and right now he’s very aware of the feeling of sex from both sides, at once. He’s almost outside of himself, trying to figure out how this feels.

“Good?” Breena asks him.

“Uhnf… Yeah… Uh….” It’s good, but she’s still not quite getting it. “It’s good. Aim toward my balls, that’ll be better.”

Breena shifts her stroke a bit, more forward, less up. Slow, tentative, she doesn’t want to just jab on in and pound him, which Tim appreciates. Linguistic choices aside, prostates, at least his, do not appreciate getting nailed in any sort of literal sense. Stroked, rubbed, and pressed are all good, pounded, not so much. (At least, not unless he’s right about to cum, and yes, this is amazing, but he’s not there, yet.) So, she eases in with more of a forward thrust than an up thrust, and that time she gets
She gives his prostate a little sliding nudge as Abby’s all wrapped around him in front, both of them sliding onto him at once. “Oh, fuck, God…” he’s already starting to pant his words.

“You like it?” Jimmy asks. Like usual, he’s not talking much, but he’s been happily working on turning Abby into a molten puddle of erotic goo, and making sure to watch everything, too.

Tim whimpers a little. Like? This is a million times past like. “Mhrnmn…” comes out of his mouth.

Prostate and oral was great. That was his all-out fantasy. He loves it with oral sex. It’s every sort of awesome ever with oral sex.

And it’s even better like this. Tim loves oral. It’s wonderful. It feels amazing. But pussy is better. No, he can’t tell you why, it just is.

And this, this slow easy glide, which is the only reason he didn’t get off in the first ten seconds, pussy gripping soft and wet and silky on the one side and full sparking cumming pulse on the other, and the feeling of fucking and getting fucked, and warm women and soft breasts and hair and skin all around him, and this is just… “Fuck, fuck, fuckfuckfuckfuck!”

Abby’s grinning at him between kisses, soft wet lips on his and then on Jimmy’s and, God, he can feel Jimmy moving through Abby, too. So soft, wet, friction, pressure and Breena behind him, every time she slips over his prostate he gets that little jolt-pulse and just… “Ohhhh…” shudders out of him in a soft, deep sigh.

He’s just feeling it, riding the wave of building pleasure, not moving very much, letting them move through him.

Feels huge. He knows the wave that’s building is a tsunami. Every bit of him that can feel physical pleasure is feeling it, and Breena’s stroking his hair, whispering in his ear how sexy he is and how much she likes doing this, how beautiful he is right now, falling apart as she’s stroking him into Abby. And Abby and Jimmy are necking, so he can see that. And all around him he’s hearing, smelling, feeling sex.

Everything that possibly can turn him on, is turning him on. But he’s still in control, still keeping pace with the other three when Jimmy hits the remote on the vibrator Breena’s wearing, and all of a sudden, the strap-on is buzzing, too.

Not a ton. But the vibrator is just under the harness on the strap-on, so he’s getting just a faint little buzz to go with everything else, and that, a gentle but firm, buzzing nudge to his prostate while Abby’s sucking his lip, and Jimmy’s fucking her fast and smooth, which means he’s also feeling Jimmy rubbing his dick fast and smooth through Abby… It makes Tim shudder all over. He just… can’t… too much all over at once, every single erogenous zone he has is in play, its favorite sort of play, and he groans, hard, as he starts to shake and twitch with the force of a tsunami-sized orgasm crashing through him.

Fortunately Abby knows what to do with this, because he’s well past giving out useful advice as he’s coming down.

“Pull out, Breena. Prostates get really sensitive post climax.”

When he gets his head back together, he’s feeling pretty sheepish. That was a hell of a lot faster than he would have liked. Felt awesome, but that was the sexual equivalent of a freight train. It wasn’t going to stop or slow down and all he could do was ride it.

Which was great for him. He’s all tingly and glowy and feeling awesome. But everyone else is not
He’s (probably) a better lover after he gets off.

It’s easier to focus on the girls. He’s paying very close attention to what his lips and right hand are doing to Breena, and what his left hand is doing for Abby. He’s aware of all of the little grunts and gasps and purrs as he tries to melt both of their minds with immense pleasure.

And, while, on a pure technical level, he thinks he’s doing a better job than when he’s on the other side of his orgasm, he’s also thinking that, unless it’s a domination game, it’s a hell of a lot more fun to get there with them.

Though there is something to be said for being with it enough to get two women off at the same time. *Twice.* If he had a brag book, that’d go in it.

And if he was looking a bit cocky as he walked into work Sunday morning, donuts and lots of coffee in hand, he figures he earned it. (Though Jimmy would claim that Tim wasn’t exactly there all by himself, so he shouldn’t be taking all the credit, and just possibly ‘Zippy’ might not have covered himself in glory, and… They had a good time snarking about their respective ‘skills’ while getting the babies up and ready and letting their wives sleep in a bit.)
Bright and early, with donuts and coffee in his hands, Tim heads into the Dungeon. He’s in a damn good mood and ready to crack this case! Or at least get a lot more in the way of puzzle pieces.

He’s never met Patil or Arya in person, though they’ve talked via skype before.

What he does know is that they’re the two who are his best hardware people.

He’s good. He’s inventive and talented and good. They’re better. If Khan’s laptop had ended up with either of them, they would have gotten into it without killing it.

Which means Tim’s very happy to see them standing in front of the big screen TV, looking around at how much he’s changed things, ready to get to work.

Handshakes, greetings, passing out the donuts, and then rolling the computers out of his office and plopping them onto the conference table start the morning. (Patil’s only been in Okinawa for a year. Before that he was out of Boston, and wanted to know if they still made maple glazed bacon donuts. Apparently that’s something you can’t get in Japan. Tim was happy to grab a bunch of them, as well as several less exotic flavors. Snacks often seem to make this sort of work go better.)

Tim’s hand is resting on the top of the last computer he put up on the table. “We’ve got to get into them, find out what they were doing, what information they were pulling, and do it without damaging any possible physical evidence, because if there’s a way we can find out who was using these machines, we need to do it.”

“All right,” Patil’s munching away, looking pleased by the donut, and dubious as to why Tim would have called him in for that.

“One of them is completely dead,” Tim adds. Since they were all off when they were brought in, he’s not sure which one Brand killed.

“One?” Arya asks. (He’s looking less dubious than Patil, and also less jet lagged. Granted, he only had ten hours of travel, most of which were spent waiting in one airport or another. The run from Alameda to DC isn’t nearly as punishing as the trip from Japan.)

“Maybe more.” Tim explains Brand’s mini-EMP. Both of his Minons look impressed by that. “But they were off when I got them, so I don’t know which one got fried.”

“Lovely,” Arya says dryly, eyeing the computers. “You know anything about them?”

“I know I’ve got a mirrored version of the one Brand fried.”

“Any nasty little tricks on there?” Patil asks, pulling the case closest to him nearer.

Tim shakes his head. “I was too busy finding out what was on it. That’s what I’m going to be getting into while you guys make sure they don’t explode when we try to open them.”
Patil looks up from the case, now understanding why he’s here instead of back at home. “So, you think they may be literally booby-trapped?”

Tim nods. “I wouldn’t be shocked. I wouldn’t be shocked if they’re just sterile. I can see from the cases that they were built, not bought pre-assembled, so I want all of the data on them, and then I want my forensics people to go through every single wire and make sure that there’s not a drop of blood or a partial print, or anything in there that’ll tell us who built these.”

Patil and Arya stare at different cases, and then start to collect their tools. First job for something like this is scoping, carefully, the insides and seeing if there’s something lurking around in there that shouldn’t be.

Once they’re working, Tim gets onto his first job. As of this morning, his computer had yet to find anything to do with that random number generator.

Tim’s sure it’s not just there for kicks. Okay, it could be there for kicks. Could be a test of concept or something that’s been lurking in the code for eons. But… He’s not feeling it.

And now that he’s not home, now that he’s got the power of all of Cybercrime behind him, he’s going to break this. He gets his search running again. Something works with that bit of code, and he is going to find it.

Arya and Patil are scoping away, checking things out as Howard and Ngyn show up. He hands each one a set of thumb drives and gestures to the donuts and coffee. “Brunch is on me. If there’s something else you want, order it, and I’ll reimburse you.”

The ladies nod, and he spends a moment introducing them to Patil and Arya. Ngyn goes quiet and tries to hide in plain sight, and Howard gets chatting with them asking which branches they’re from and their CVs.

Once they’re all acting friendly(ish) Tim drags the ladies off and says, “So, we know, basically what’s on these. I’ve got intel suggesting that the other computers have information from places other than NCIS. Right now, we still don’t have how they’re accessing the door that’s built into the Federal Intranet, so I want that, and I want to find any little traps hiding in there that’ll kill us if we try to get into the other computers cold.”

Ngyn nods and Howard says, “So pull everything from the log in screen to their encryption keys to…”

Tim nods. “Yeah. Better to not trip the trap in the first place. Get me all of the access documentation you can find. I’ll go looking for traps.”

And with that, they’ve all got their jobs, and get to work.
On the upside, literally booby-trapped isn’t in the cards.

And, after two hours he’s got four coded traps marked. Ngyn’s got the key isolated. And Howard’s got the three levels of authentication necessary to get into the computer cracked.

So, it’s slightly before noon when they start trying to power up and get into the data on those computers.

That goes… fairly smoothly. On computer one and two, they get in and start downloading, smooth as silk. On three they trip something… and that something tries to blow the computer, but Arya and Patil and Ngyn are able to put a stop to that before the entire system’s trash.

Which means several more hours of combing through the data they have to try and see what they may have tripped.

His eyes hurt. His head hurts. And Tim knows that a big chunk of the problem is that he’s been coding all morning and is now staring at the micro-processors in the third computer, as Patil and Arya explain the tiny, little acid switch that is lurking in there and how, yeah, most of the computer is safe and will work, but whatever was on that little bit of silicon there is fucked.

Tim nods at them, and tells them to keep at it, and then pulls his phone and sends to Jimmy, Who’s your obstetrician?

Tim? Jimmy sends back. Tim knows who their OB is. He’s met her.

Tim stares at his phone for a moment, wondering what Jimmy’s unclear on. Then he sees it. Shit, autocorrect. Optician. Eyes are going buggy and my head hurts.

Get up, walk around, and do something other than stare at a screen for hours at a time. I’ll make an appointment for you.

Thanks.

He gets up, and decides now would be a fine time to go for a quick walk. Maybe get everyone some more snacks, and... sure, he’d just be listening in, won’t need his eyes for Diane’s job. He hits the contact button and waits.

“Anderson,” she’s sounding a little distracted as she answers.

“Hey, Peaches.”

“Chucky. You’re early. I’m just pulling into the parking garage.”

“Just making sure we’re on.”

“Why wouldn’t we be?”

He shrugs at that. “Give me a call when you’re in.”

“Not a problem.”
“Hey,” a thought hits Tim as he’s putting his phone down.

“What?”

“If you can, grab a computer that belongs to someone who’s in the office today.”

He’s not sure if she immediately sees where he’s going with that, but he doesn’t hear any question in her voice when she says, “If I can.”

His phone buzzes again as he’s heading toward Chen’s. Everyone thought some Chinese food would be good for grazing and refueling brains. “McGee.”

“Hey, Chucky. I’m in. Couldn’t get a computer that had someone at it, but I did get one.”

“Great. So, what are you seeing?” He sees a spot and starts pulling in.

“A ridiculously easy system. No hacking needed. Log in, put in a name, and hit search.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t sound like something you need my help for.” He waits for a second.

“Got it.”

“You do?” That’s almost anticlimactic it was so easy. Doesn’t sound like they’re hiding Lovvy particularly well if you can just look her up with an HR search.

“Like I said, easy.”

“So…”

“Lovvy’s officially on the list as a Strategic Analyst, level A-8.”

“Okay, what does that mean?”

“Means she’s doing something… what’s Abby’s word, hinkey?”

“Yeah. Why?” A-8 doesn’t mean anything to him. It’s not a job level at NCIS, but just because they don’t have it doesn’t mean no one else does.

Diane’s sounding testy. “No such thing as an A-8 ranking. Whatever A-8 is, that’s a clue.”

“Can you find the other A-8s?”

“Uh… Yeah… Here…” His phone buzzes in his hand. “I just sent you a screen shot of all of them. Okay, I’ve got to get out of here. This was just supposed to be me checking the terms of my contract in regards to separating without notice.”

“Thanks. We’ll see what we can find on the A-8s.”

“No problem.”

Tim glances at the shot after he turns off his car, nods briefly, only ten names. Whatever it is A-8s do, there aren’t a lot of them, and then he sends the shot over to Tony. Got more names for you to
Tim’s eyeing the box of boxes of Chinese food in front of him, wondering if he can actually carry this (He went a bit overboard on getting snacks, but he feels like if he’s going to drag people in on their off day, let alone their off day two or four thousand miles away from home, that he’s going to make them feel well taken care of.) when his phone buzzes again.

*Doesn’t exist how? I mean, we’re looking at a shot of them from IRS HR.*

According to Diane A-8 isn’t an official IRS job level.

There’s another minute, while Tim gets the box balanced on his left forearm, with his right keeping it steady, and begins to head out to his car before his phone buzzes again. Once he’s in the car, food settled on the seat next to him, he pulls his phone out.

*Are the other guys Diane’s criminals for the greater good?*

Didn’t think to ask. But she didn’t say. Might have to talk directly to her.

*Think she’s any good with a claw hammer?* For a second that doesn’t make any sense to Tim, then he remembers what Jimmy had said about getting to the house and maybe doing some framing today.

*You guys framing already?*

Getting the drywall off the ceiling so we can get the wiring up right.

Okay, yeah, I remember. Uh... she was just at the IRS, probably not dressed to get messy, but sure, see if you can trade drywall removal for intel.

Gibbs is glaring at me. Apparently Diane and manual labor do not mix.

Tim’s staring at the phone, right now Gibbs and manual labor aren’t supposed to mix. *Do you have him working? With drywall? What the hell made Jimmy think that was okay?*

He’s not working, we’re still at the lumber yard, where Gibbs is inspecting each and every single piece of wood we’re going to put into the house, Tim can feel that Tony’s thinking Gibbs is on overkill right now, but he supposes that a piece of wood is a piece of wood to him and Tony, that they aren’t all the same to Gibbs, *drywall removal is what we’re doing when we get done with this, and he’s going to be going with Penny and Ducky to see the architect then.*

Now he’s glaring at his mental image of you being the mama hen.

*His lungs’ll thank me. But, if he’s feeling like doing something useful while you get into those guys’ private lives, he can google them and see what their public personas are like. See if they know each other, if they know anyone else interesting. Might be a good time for him to get to know all about the fun that is social media.*

Now he looks horrified. Tim can feel Tony giggling at that. *How are things on your end?*

*Chugging along. Gotta get back at it.*
Abby comes in a bit after two, with snacks for them, and kisses for him. (Which Tim appreciates. He’s been enjoying today. He likes doing this sort of work with people who are good at it, but he’s been missing doing it with her.)

“How’s it going?” she asks, looking at a long conference table littered with bits of snacks, and more bits of computers, with two guys, at the far end, both wearing versions of Tim’s magnifying glasses, poking around in another computer.

He wiggles his hand to indicate so-so.

“Any goodies for me?”

That gets a smile out of him. He knows she’s itching to get these into the lab and find that flake of skin or tiny smudge of a print or weird speck of pollen that’ll tell them where these computers came from and who put them together.

Tim looks over to Patil, who nods, and then he touches the computer at the end of the table. “This one’s completely dead. Brand’s pulse killed it beyond resurrection, which means there’s nothing in here for us. You can take it apart on the atomic level if you want to.”

Abby grins, lifting the computer, getting ready to take it back to the lab only to have Tim take it right back out of her arms.

She’s giving him her Tim? look.

His eyes drop to her belly.

She looks back at his arm and foot, just as pointedly, and then takes the computer back. “It weighs less than Molly, and I haven’t seen you pulling her out of my grasp.”

He rolls his eyes a bit. “Fine.”

She smiles brightly at him. “But, if you’d like to feel like the big, strong husband, you can open some doors for me. And there’s a spider in the lab that Zelaz doesn’t like you can rehome outside.”

He can feel Howard and Ngyn smirking behind his back.

He kisses Abby again, smiles wryly at her, pats her on the tush, and says, “Message received loud and clear. Let me know what you find?”

She smiles at him again. “As soon as I know, you’ll know.”

“Thank you.” As Abby steps away, with the computer, and before he turns around, Tim says, “Less smirking and more working,” to Ngyn and Howard.

“Yes, Boss,” Howard responds.

“Boss…” Ngyn says.

He steps over to where she’s sitting, at her own desk, looking over her shoulder.
“I know who this is, now.”

He nods at that, part of the problem of trying to figure out whose information they’ve got is that a lot of the internal data assumes that you know who you’re dealing with. He knows none of their internal forms have anything that says NCIS on them. After all, if you’re an NCIS employee, working for NCIS, with NCIS computers, in an NCIS office, you generally do not need to be told that you’re working with NCIS. Which means they’ve been looking for emails, because all of them have the same basic format, name@organization.gov. Then they’ve been trying to figure out which emails were being sent out, and which ones were being sent in.

“Who do you have?”

Ngyn touches the computer she’s combing through. “This one is Homeland.”

Tim nods at that. “Okay, who wants access to NCIS and Homeland Security…”

“Anyone interested in terrorism?” Arya says, looking up from attempting to disconnect the version of the trap they tripped on computer three from computer four.

“Maybe. Let’s see who else they’ve got.” He feels like there’s something there. Some sort of little niggly NCIS Homeland Security thing, and then it occurs to him.

He pulls out his phone and texts Leon. What’s Tom Morrow up to now?

He’s checking on the random number generator search when his phone buzzes. Nothing. Died last month. Why?

One of the computers we got had our intel on it. Next one we’ve cracked is Homeland’s. You know anyone you trust over there?

Not anymore.

Suspicious death?

No one thought so. He lived for the job, and then didn’t have the job anymore. Eighteen months later, he’s got a bad headache one day, takes a few aspirin, goes to lie down, and never gets back up again. Supposedly a stroke. Want me to see if I can get his medical records to Palmer?

If you can do it without freaking out his widow, yeah.

I’ll see what I can do.

Another thought hits him. You still at CGIS? Tim fires off to Manner.

Yeah, why?

Any of the computers pulling CGIS data local?

Not close enough.

What are you thinking? Surveillance?
That was the idea.

Borin’s beat you to it. She’s got her team heading up to keep a discreet eye on the place. From what I can tell they grab their info every morning at 9:05.

That makes Tim happy. Great. Answers.

That’s the hope.

Find any more?

Up to eleven now.

Tim sighs. Wonderful. Keep at it.

On it, Boss.

When it rains it pours. His computer is beeping at him, letting him know he’s got something that’s finally connected to the random number generator. Howard’s also chirping at him, and Patil’s trying to get eye contact.

The computer can wait. He gets up from his desk and heads into the main room.

“Howard?”

“This one’s NSA.”

Shit. He thinks but doesn’t say it. Okay, he can cross them off the potential suspect list for who’s running this. They wouldn’t be pulling their own data. “Good work. Patil?”

“This one’s safe to power on.”

“Great!” Tim’s really curious to see what might be hiding on that little bit of processor they fried on computer three. He glances at the clock, a bit after four. “Five o’clock, I want to know what was so important it had its very own kill switch.”

“On it, Boss,” Howard says, as Patil and Arya open the case to computer five.

He heads back to his own computer, kills the alarm, sends out a text to the entire group, letting them know that NSA is one of the groups being watched, and then gets into his search. He’s nodding as he reads. Social security numbers. He’s found a bit of code hiding in the HR scheduling system that checks those numbers against employee ID numbers. And, like every other Federal office, the employee ID is the person’s social security number. Nothing in there about what it does if the number matches, but now he knows what the next piece of code is. He feeds it in, and tells his computer to go looking for it.

Then he moves into a less direct, but hopefully more illuminating, search.

Time to break into the meta-data. “Ngyn?”

“Boss?”
“I’m gonna need more eyes for this, come on over.” She does, and he pulls another desk chair over to his computer. “We’re going to compile the metadata by date.”

She nods. “You’ll end up with a list of what changes happened when.”

“Yeah. Likely going to be a lot of patching and updates, but hiding in there’ll be what we want.”

Ngyn nods. “Let’s do it.”

At 5:00, Howard pokes her head in.

He looks up at her, hoping for more good news, and she shakes her head. “Haven’t been able to isolate it, yet. But I can tell you that’s the computer keeping eyes on the FBI.”

“Okay.” He glances at the clock. “One more hour, then we all break. Ten hours on is long enough.”

Ngyn looks up from the metadata in front of them, curious.

“No one’s dying over this, not today, so we take the time to do it right. I’d rather we all have fresh eyes and be able to see what we’re doing than spend six hours staring at the answer, unable to see it because we’re fried.”

He stands up and heads out to where Patil and Arya are still working on computer five. “How’s it going?”

Arya nods at him. “No acid traps. We’re almost ready to turn this one on.”

“Great. Get it up and running, help out with finding out whose data it is, and then you’re off. If you want military transport, you can kick around DC until I can get it for you, or if you want civilian transport, set it up, and we’ll reimburse you.”

Patil and Arya glance at each other, and then to Tim. “We’ll set it up on our own.”

Tim smiles at them, hoping they’d take that option. “Good. Thank you!”

“No problem, Boss,” Patil says.

At six o’clock, Howard, Patil, and Arya come in. They’re looking… off. Like they’ve found something, but it’s making the mess bigger rather than smaller.

“Last computer is Baltimore PD,” Howard says.

And now Tim and Ngyn have the same looks on their faces.

“Baltimore?” Tim asks.

“Yeah,” Patil nods his head.
He rubs his eyes. Wallbanger’s selling more than just a door into the Federal servers.

“And the extra-protected chip?”

“Still no idea. Nothing I’m doing is using it. I’ll keep looking.”

“Tomorrow… Or earlier, but I want you off for at least six before you get into it.” Tim looks at Ngyn. They’ve both been staring at metadata, looking for any interesting patterns. So far all they’ve learned is that the guys who made the Federal System are B or C level programmers. They’re constantly patching. If the Federal Intranet Servers were a road, they’d be that high traffic road that moseys along at ten miles an hour because it’s so rutted and full of potholes and construction that no one can even see the original road anymore.

Of course, depending on how many worms are lurking in it, that may have something to do with things constantly needing to be patched. Or, because it’s shit programming to begin with, and being patched every ten damn minutes, that’s all the cover Wallbanger or whoever needs to drop whatever worms he likes into it.

That makes sense to Tim, and fits with what Khan said to him about not needing to hack his door into the code.

But at this point, they’re only three months back in time, and haven’t found anything that isn’t a legitimate patch. Tim rubs his eyes again, wondering when Jimmy’s got him seeing the eye doc, and realizing that unless Jimmy’s optician is very customer service oriented, he doesn’t have Sunday hours, so there’s no appointment for him, yet.

“Come one, we’re done for now. Pack it up. Get rest. Look at something that isn’t a computer screen. It’ll still be waiting for us tomorrow.”

He saves his own work, on his machine and onto two thumb drives. One he hands to Ngyn, one he keeps for himself. “I’ve got interrogation first thing tomorrow, and with any luck it’ll take a while, but when I finally get down here, I’ll want reports.”

“Got it,” Howard says. Ngyn nods.

“Patil, Arya, it was great working with you.” He remembers how much that mattered to him when Gibbs told him he’d been a useful part of the team back when he was brand new. “And, don’t take this the wrong way, but I hope I don’t have to drag you across the country or globe anytime soon.”

Patil smiles at that and Arya chuckles.

“No offense back, but I’d prefer not to spend two days on a plane for one day of work anytime soon, either,” Patil says.

“None taken. Thanks.”

Tim can feel the annoyance pouring out of the lab before he even sets foot into it. The music is loud, angry, and he assumes that Abby’s on her own in there. She doesn’t play her music like that now that she’s got lab mates.
“Hey,” he says tentatively, hoping this is case annoyed as opposed to pregnant annoyed. Case annoyed he may be able to help with. Hormonal surges, he’s not so useful with.

“McGee!” Case annoyed, she never calls him that unless they’re talking work anymore.

He comes closer, and pulls her into a close hug. She allows herself to be hugged for a moment, but there’s a lot of jittery energy pouring off of her right now, and she doesn’t want to be still for too long.

“How bad is it?” he asks, pulling back as she turns, fast, back to the table where she’s been working.

“It’s…” She’s glaring at a million pieces of computer scattered all over the long metal table they work on. “It’s inhuman, McGee!”

He raises an eyebrow.

“It’s custom made. All of the parts are things you can get off of Tiger Direct or similar sources. But it’s clean. Clean room clean. There’re no prints. No hairs. No fibers. No blood. There’s barely any dust.”

“Dornie said there was dust all over the place the computers were in. That’s part of how they knew they’d been there for a long time.”

Abby looks at the case. “You see any dust on that?”

Tim sees a black case coated with pink print powder. “Uh… no.”

“There’s a filter on the intake fan. I’ve got Major Mass Spec on it, looking for anything to give us an idea of where this might have come from.”

“Or at least let us know how long the filter’s been in place.” He thinks for a second. “Filter’s not standard on any computer.”

“They knew they were going to be running it somewhere dusty. Didn’t want that getting on the inside.” She glares at the table again, and then turns to Tim and hugs him long and hard. “I’m sorry.”

He pets her back. “Why would you be sorry?”

“I didn’t find anything. I’m supposed to find something, and this, this is nothing! There’s not even a bit of snagged latex from a glove.”

He kisses her forehead.

“Five hours. Five hours with a set up like this and I should be able to tell you where the guy who built it lives, his blood type, how high his cholesterol is, and what he had for lunch yesterday.”

Major Mass Spec beeps then. Abby sighs slightly. “Let’s see how much more nothing we’ve got.” They both head to her computer, and Tim pulls over her stool. Her back’s not generally happy with too much standing right now. She gets settled, and he stands behind her, hands on her low back, holding her gently, as both of them stare at the report.

And then the smile starts to spread over her face.

“What?” He’s still trying to figure out what the hell he’s looking at. Pollens. He can see that, but they don’t mean anything to him.
“That computer went for trip. Look, pine, so it was hear in early spring, ragweed, so it’s here now, but no oak. None. It wasn’t here in April.”

Tim kisses her. He’s got no idea, at all, what that might mean, but it’s something.

“Is that useful?” she asks.

“Sooner or later it will be. Come on, let’s get some food and get home before Jimmy and Breena assume we’re here all night.”

Kelly’s already down when they get home, so they both creep upstairs to where she’s snoozing with her cousins, and all three little girls get gentle kisses and petting, before they head down again.

Tim shakes his head a bit once he’s in the kitchen with Jimmy and Breena, “I hate doing that.”

Jimmy nods at him, getting it. “Don’t like not seeing her all day.”

“Yeah.”

Abby pets his shoulder. “You got time with her in the morning.”

He shrugs a bit. “Better than nothing, but…”

Breena gives him a quick kiss, before herding him and Abby toward the table where she’s got the dinner they brought home waiting. “But you want to do the job, and you want to be home, and it doesn’t balance nicely, does it?”

He shakes his head a little. “Nope.” Then he looks at Jimmy and Abby as he sits down. “But at least our long days won’t match quite so much, now. At least one of us, usually, will get home.”

“Which is nice,” Breena says, and Tim wonders how many nights she’s done on her own. More than she probably would have liked. Not as many a Shannon Gibbs did.

He’s telling them about the job, about what he’s found, and Abby’s adding her own bits to it, but he’s not really paying too much attention to that. He’s thinking about how he’s here, at Jimmy and Breena’s place, eating dinner, talking with them about the case. And that’s not new, or odd, or anything. That’s his pattern, how he deals with cases.

But he’s remembering talking with Diane all those years ago, and how she was complaining about how neither Jethro nor Tobias would tell her about active cases. They were fine with talking about old ones, bragging on saving the day and solving the case, but the current ones, they’d go silent.

He can’t imagine that. He knows he’s had cases where he wasn’t supposed to say anything, but his whole life was wrapped in people who were in on those cases. He sees how Breena’s listening in, keeping track of details, seeing things they aren’t, thinking, and he knows that this isn’t new for her. Jimmy’s been talking about his job the whole way through.

Because so much of who they are is this job, and there’s just no shot of making it work if they keep that part silent. They can’t shove it away and not let it touch their home. It’d be like chopping off three quarters of his body before walking in the door.

Breena keeps watching them as Abby’s talking about the filter and the pollen, and then she says, “Did you find any pollens that aren’t from here?”
Abby thinks about that, and Tim tries to remember, but he can’t. No oak, he remembers that, but… And, for that matter, he’s not in tune enough with the local plants to know what’s local and what isn’t.

But Abby is. “No…” she’s starting to see what Breena’s already got. “No, everything was local to where they found the computer.” She starts to smile and looks at Tim. “How far back does your data go?”

He thinks for a second. “June. That’s as far back as we got off that computer.”

“June’s too late for pine,” Breena says. “We’re always cleaning the pollen off the benches outside the funeral home in the spring, but by May that’s done. I don’t think your computer moved. I think it turned off.”

“What were we doing this spring, and again later in the summer, but not in the mid-spring?” Jimmy asks.

“I don’t know. But I bet Tony’s going to find out.”

“Did we transfer someone to Baltimore…” Abby says.

“Maybe.” Tim smiles. “Or worked a case with them. Or… something. Once, I’ve got the data collected on all of those computers, I’m going to show Jethro what it is I actually do with datasets.”

“And once I’ve got all of those filters, we’ll know when those computers were spinning, and build a time frame,” Abby’s grinning.

Tim takes a sip of his cider. He can’t imagine keeping them out of this. They’re better, he’s better, with them.
Playing Catch Up

Tim gets in bright and early on Monday, ready to start kicking ass and taking names.

He strolls in, checks with Chuck, who’s at the front desk, wondering if Khan’s lawyer is here yet, but no, he’s not. Tim figures that makes sense, he’s not due, technically, for another twenty minutes.

Still, if he was early, Tim would have liked to grab some coffee with the man, get all the details on Khan’s deal with Wallbanger now that Mr. Chase has had the chance to really go through it.

Oh well.

To his office. Twenty minutes is enough time to get a quick sit rep from How… nope, she’s with Manner today. From Ngyn, and see if she’s gotten Brand into the hunt, and then check on his computer and see how the search for what happens to those social security numbers is going.

Then he’ll find Chase, they’ll meet up with Khan in interrogation, the two of them will dance, he’ll promise more goodies for the set up Khan will get, and then he’ll get all the goods on Wallbanger.

Tim’s smiling as he heads down to the basement.

He’s a bit surprised to see Howard, Ngyn, and Arya still down there, all hunched around one of the computers, talking quietly.

So, he heads over for the update. “I’m betting this is good.”

Howard and Arya are grinning. Ngyn’s expression is cryptic, she’s pleased with something, but like with the Baltimore part, it’s a bigger mess than it solves.

“Oh, it’s good all right,” Arya says. “I kept thinking about the switch, feeling like I was missing something. So, I’m in Dulles, getting ready to get on the plane and decide that I’ve got to check again. It’s two in the morning, and both of them are still working, so I grab the computer and get looking more carefully. See, the thing we knew is that this was directly attached into the power feed in a really odd sort of way.”

“Odd how?” Tim asks.

“The computers have a back-up power supply. The power goes down, they keep working, but this thing isn’t attached to that. It’s just all by its lonesome on the main power supply. And that got me thinking, why would it be on the main power supply, but not the back-up?”

Howard takes over. “So he asks us if we can think of anything that would be attached into the main power supply, but not the back-up, and we think, bounce ideas around, and finally as we’re crashing into the brick wall, Ngyn has the eureka moment…” She pauses, sees if Ngyn will speak for herself, but she just sits there quietly, so Howard finishes, ‘she decided it had to be some sort of monitoring piece, something to keep track of how the system turns on and off, so we get looking, and we find it…”

This time Ngyn speaks. “If you put the correct sequence in before shutting down, that little switch does nothing. If you don’t, the next time you turn the computer on, it sends a little SOS and then erases the code and kills the sender. That’s why it’s acid, if you didn’t have the case open, you’d never know it had sent or that it was equipped to do it.”
“And once it’s done, it just looks like a little bit of slag in the computer, a blob of solder or something,” Arya says.

Now all three of them are smiling. And Tim, seeing those smiles, is smiling, too. “That’s slick code hunting. You know where the SOS went, don’t you?”

“Back tracing it now, but we should know in…” Howard says as the searching computer beeps.

All four of them are waiting with baited breath, looking eagerly at where the little dot ended up, and then Tim says, quietly, “Damn it.”

There’s got to be something hiding in there that’s screwing the response. It back traced to them. Ngyn and Howard are already on it, searching for more hints in the code.

“Okay, that was good work, and I’m glad you know what that switch does.” They’re all looking pretty sad about the lack of payout on the eureka. “And even if we don’t find where it goes now, we know something else, three of these computers were important enough to the people using them to have those little switches, and two of them weren’t. So… what’s so important about Homeland, Baltimore, and NSA, but less important about NCIS and FBI?”

They’re nodding, and getting to it. Tim heads into his office and sits down. He turns on his computer, no joy on the search front, not yet. He rolls his eyes, but, without a mega system, like Amazon’s cloud in his hands, he can’t make this go any faster.

He checks his email, doing his usual morning scanning of subjects, seeing what’s on fire and what can be punted to later in the day. He’s quickly labeling them with now and later and delete when he sees something in the delete pile.

It’s a notice that the system will be down for an hour from 2:00AM to 3:00AM for an update. *Shit!* In less than twenty-four hours, everything they’ve found is going to vanish in a new version of the Federal Intranet Server.

He steps out of his office, “Ngyn,” he gestures to his office. She comes in. “Remember when I told you that one of these days you were going to have to lead a team?”

She’s not looking thrilled at this, but she nods.

“Today’s the day.” He points her to the email, and she sighs, understanding what it means. “I’ve got to talk to Khan, can’t push that off any later, grab whoever you want, whoever you need, as many of them as you like. Unless taking them off the case means someone’ll die, they’re yours. You’re going to lead the attack on the old system. By 2:00, I want everything off of it. All of its secrets need to be out in the open, and more importantly, I need to know how they knew it was time to push an update and take us back to square one.”

“On it, Boss. Manner’s team?”

“Pull ‘em off. Make sure they’re not facing an update, too, but pull them off. Anyone you want, get them on this.”

“Okay.”

Tim notices the rings around her eyes and remembers Arya’s comment about them working on it at 2:00. “How much sleep are you working on, right now?”
“Three hours.”

“This is why I tell you guys to take breaks. You get them together, you get them working, and then you and Howard get naps.”

Ngyn’s not happy about that, but she also knows she’s starting to feel fried. “At least four hours off.”

His phone buzzes; Khan’s lawyer is here. “Good. I’ve got to talk to Khan.”

“Go get him, Boss.”

He flashes off a quick salute and heads up to interrogation.

Tim’s sitting there, waiting, with Khan’s lawyer, Seth Chase. And waiting. And waiting. They’re pretty much just staring at each other. He’s told Tim everything he knows about Wallbanger (nothing), Khan’s deal with him, which appears to be legal, though Chase is worried about the fact that it was signed by a judge who wasn’t on the bench any longer. He’s not sure how that’ll effect things, but he did know that Khan’s parole hearing had been set for 2019 and now it was set for 2017, so it looked like the agreement was holding up.

Finally, when they’re at half an hour late, Tim calls the prison. After some ‘round about he gets the person who handles prison transfers.

“I’m Tim McGee, Director of Cybercrime for NCIS, and I’m waiting for Ajay Khan, he’s supposed to be here.”

“I’ll check the dispatch, sir.”

“Thank you.” He spends a moment listening to muzak, tapping his fingers, as the lawyer looks nervous. Tim’s eyes narrow slightly at that. What are you hiding? “Mr. Chase?”

“Ever feel like someone just walked over your grave?”

Tim shakes his head. “But I know a few people who have.”

“Something’s wrong about this.”

“Director McGee?” Tim already knows this is trouble, that’s not the same voice he was talking to before.

“Yes, this is Tim McGee. Who is this?”

“Adam Prynne, I run all transfers into and out of FCI Cumberland.”

Not only is it a different voice, it’s a nervous voice. “And you’re about to tell me something I don’t want to hear.”

“Yes, sir. According to our logs, Khan was transferred into your custody yesterday. I’m assuming you do not, in fact, have him.”

Tim’s whole face clenches in anger. “No, I do not have him.”

“Ah.” That’s the sound of a man who’s pissed, and scared, and hoping a minimum of the shit will
stick to him. “I’m looking at a piece of paper with your name on it, accepting personal custody of Khan, yesterday.”

Tim nods, teeth gritted. “And were you on shift yesterday?”

“Yes, but not when Khan was transferred. We have the transfer documents. They’re…” His voice trips on that, Tim knows that something’s wrong, but not what, about what’s coming next. “All in order. Someone, claiming to be you, showed up and took custody of Khan.”

Tim nods again, and Chase is staring at him, alarmed. “I want everything, including the video of who picked Khan up.”

“Uh… I’d be okay with giving that to you, but… the last guy claiming to be you had ID and everything. Can you prove that you’re you?”

Tim’s about to crack a tooth he’s clenching his jaw so hard. “I will be in front of you, in person, with my ID in less than an hour. At which point, you will hand over everything that goes with Khan being transferred, and whoever processed him better be sitting in a chair waiting for me to chat with him.” His voice has gone very quiet as he says that, and he must be looking pretty scary because Chase, who none of this is directed at, is moving away from him. He shuts off his phone, explains, quickly, as he’s walking (fast) to his car.

Chase nods a few times, and says, “It’s a kidnapping, not a prison break. Khan had nothing to do with this.”

Tim rolls his eyes, of course Chase has Khan’s back on this. But, push come to shove, he thinks it’s likely that Chase is right about this. Tim nods. “We’ll see where and how we find him, but, yes, from everything we’ve run on this case, I very much doubt that Khan planned this.”

“Good. He’s been cooperative the whole time…”

“Cut it, Chase, I’m part of the team that caught him in the first place. I know exactly what we had to do to get him to cooperate. We’ll find him. We’ll find out what’s happened. If we’re lucky, he’s still alive.”

“Director McGee?”

“He was my only link to Wallbanger. If we’re lucky, Wallbanger got him out of jail and paid him to vanish. If not, he’s going to vanish in a much more permanent way. Now, I need you to get out of my way so I can go find him.”

Chase swallows hard and nods. “Let me know…”

“As soon as we find him, I will.” Tim punches the button for the elevator. Time to get in the car.

He gets Tony on his phone as he’s pulling out of the parking lot. “Khan’s in the wind. I need you to get a BOLO for him.”

“McGee?”

“Someone, using my name and credentials, got him out of prison yesterday.”

“I’m on it.”

“Thanks.”
He’s been on the road for half an hour when he gets a call from Tony. “I’ve got the BOLO out.”
“Good.”
“And I’ve got more crap you don’t want to hear.”
Tim’s eyes narrow. “Lay it on me.”
“You know how Diane gave Fornell and I each half of the accounts that went with who was getting paid?”
“Yeah, tracking them down is one of your jobs.”
“On Sunday, I had Draga and Bishop running the accounts. So far, three quarters of them are prisoners, and the other quarter look like they’re family or friends of prisoners. I haven’t checked in with Fornell, but I doubt he’s finding out anything else.”
“Great.” Tim’s not surprised at that, at all. As big as this looks, Wallbanger would have needed a lot of talent, and where better to find it, dirt cheap, than sitting in prison.
“It gets better. When you called, I played the hunch, grabbed five of the prisoners at random, and got them checking. Everyone we’ve looked into has been transferred in the last three days.”
“SHIT! He’s cleaning them up. Anyone who can identify him is gone.”
“Looks like it. Where are you?”
“Heading to FCI Cumberland. Going to have a chat with Mr. Prynne, the guy who runs the transfer department.”
“Keep me in the loop. We’re gonna run the rest of them down, and I’m going to get Fornell up to date, and then we’re also going to talk with several prisons. This stinks.”
There’s a quiet moment while they both just glare at the universe in general and Wallbanger in particular.
“How’s he ahead of us on this?” Tony finally asks. “How did he know to clean up his organization right now?”
Tim thinks about it, and then he sees it. “Diane. We didn’t tell her about the worm until after she got those account numbers. I bet she used the Federal Bank Account Database to get Khan’s information, and his account is flagged, and they’re cleaning up anyone who got paid in a batch with him.”
“Probably. God…” Tony sounds so frustrated, and Tim’s feeling it. “How do we do this when every tool we use is bugged? I mean… Shit! We put out a BOLO! What do you bet that’s flagged and tagged, too?”
Tim winces again. “I’m working on it. When I get back, IT and I are going to have a chat about updating our servers and how it’s not going to happen.”
Everything about FCI Cumberland is slow. Federal Prisons aren’t generally speedy places, but right now everything is being checked and double checked and triple checked. Tim’s not sure if he’s getting to jump through extra hoops to make it look like they’re really on the ball and it’s just some quirk of fate they lost a prisoner, or, with the cow lost, they’re making sure the barn is locked up tight.

Either way, it’s not impressing him favorably.

But finally, he’s inside, and sitting in front of Adam Prynne. He’s tall, fidgety, maybe because he’s neck deep in shit right now, or maybe he’s a nervous kind of guy in general. Either way, he keeps flicking the corner of Khan’s paperwork with his index finger over and over.

Tim gets the paperwork away from him, and gives it a quick one over. Part of it looks fine. The court order putting Khan into NCIS protective custody is letter perfect. The forms that get filled out at the prison, are, to put it mildly, not. There are a lot of empty blanks, and the scanned image of the ID in question is terrible. Grainy, smeared, black and white. He can’t make out the picture, let alone read the name on the image of the ID.

And there’s one other glaring omission from this situation. “I do not see the man who gave Khan up,” Tim says, very quietly, putting the paperwork back down.

“Uh, no, Sir.” Prynne is looking at Tim, who isn’t exactly a ball of cute cuddly kindness right now, and everything about him is responding to Tim with borderline pants-wetting terror. “Justin’s not on today, and he’s not answering his phone.”

“Uh huh.” Tim grabs his phone and gets Howard on the line. “I need you to ping a phone number for me, and I need you to get Draga and Bishop to that location and grabbing the person holding that phone.”

“No problem, Boss. Give me the number.”

Tim looks up at Prynne. “Justin Matt, two t’s,” then he rattles off the digits. Tim repeats them.

“Okay, I’ve got them… Uh… No luck. Phone’s off.”

“Of course it is. Ping it every hour and have Bishop get a… No. Have Bishop go out and check Justin Matt’s home.”

“Got it.”

Tim hangs up, and watches Prynne, eyes hard and cold, saying nothing for a long minute, silence stretching between them painfully. Finally Tim says, “Tell me about Matt.”

Prynne tries to smile but he just bares his teeth. “I… I don’t really know him. We’ve never worked the same shift. I wave hi to him when I’m coming on and he’s going off.”

Tim eyes Prynne, wondering if he’s in on this. Prynne reads it off his gaze and flinches. He starts babbling about how he’s been here for twenty years and he’s never lost a prisoner. Tim keeps watching him, eyes very cold, not hushing him, offering no comfort, letting all the scared pour out of him.
By the end of it, he’s fairly sure that Prynne really is horrified to have lost someone from his watch. Tim nods slightly and then says, “Video.”

A few things are very clear from watching said video. The man who picked Khan, and apparently two others, up is not him. In that he’s short and round, he bears no resemblance to Tim at all. It’s also clear that he knows where the cameras are. There’s not a single clear or even half shot of his face. The best they get is a second of quarter profile.

One other thing is very clear, Khan knows this man isn’t Tim, and he’s not comfortable about going with him. Khan sees him, pulls up short, the man nods at him, gesturing toward the door, and the two other men with them, and then Khan turns to face the camera, mouths… something… the video quality isn’t good enough for Tim to make it out, but he’s sure Abby will clean it up for him, and then Khan follows Not McGee and the two others out.

“Who are they?” Tim asks Prynne, who’s looking sick. He gets the sense that Prynne hasn’t seen this yet, and is just realizing that he’s got two more missing prisoners.

“Heath Lenter and Sam Jentyl. And before you ask, yes, I’ll get their paperwork.”

“Why are they here?” Sam sounds vaguely familiar to Tim, but he knows he’s not anyone he’s met through NCIS.

“Heath is a money launderer, and Sam’s here for the same reason Khan is. Good with a computer.”

“Not good enough,” Tim replies. “Let me see the paperwork.”

Prynne’s back with it five minutes later, handing it over. Tim does a good job at rolling his eyes. Wallbanger walked in here, provided paperwork for three men, with three different IDs, and Justin Matt just rolled with it. He calls Bishop before he’s done looking over the paper work.

“Bishop.”


“Charges?” Bishop asks.

“We’ll start with kidnapping and sort it out after you’ve got him.”

“I’m on it.”

“Good. You on your own?”

“Tony’s with me.”

“Eyes open. I don’t know what you’re going to walk into when you get to this guy’s place.”

“Got it. I’ll call when we have him.”

“Okay.”
Tim sends Abby the video from the prison, along with instructions to find out whoever the hell that is, along with the fact that right now he doesn’t care if that image is flagged and he sets off every red flag that’s ever waved.

They are getting a name, and an address, and all the rest of it on this guy.

“Any other video?” Tim asks.

“Just this,” Prynne says. It’s video of them leaving, and like with the video from the inside, there’s no clear shots.

“When I drove up, I had to scan my driver’s license.”

“Yes, and the station took a snapshot of your license plate.” Tim stares at Prynne, who hops up, saying, nervously, “Getting it.”

He sends that over to Draga, adding to the pile of crap he’s got to deal with, before really looking at the picture on the fake driver’s license. It’s not Mark Sheppard, but beyond that, he can’t really tell. It looks like someone took a picture, printed it out on an old black and white inkjet printer, smeared it, and then stuffed it into a driver’s license.

No human being seeing this would be okay with it.

But the scanner at the gate just snaps a picture and reads the chip, making sure it’s a legal driver’s license.

Tim sighs, there’s something. If it’s a fake, it’s a good fake. More likely, it’s a real license, but modified. He supposes it’s possible the picture on it really was melted and smeared. He pulls out his own license. Standard VA Driver’s License, all plastic, picture printed opaque on one side and translucent on the other. He checks his next to the image, and decides that, yeah, if you were to heat up a license hot enough, you probably could mess with the plastic enough to get that effect.

He sends the license information to Abby, too, asking her to run them.

He gets a text back from her as he’s sitting down in his car, ready to head back. *Looks like you’ve had a busy morning.*

*Wallbanger’s cleaning up shop. Khan and two others just walked out of prison yesterday.*

*Ohhh… That sucks. I do have something to help perk you up though.*

*Please. I need all the perking I can get.*

: ) *Borrow a quiet corner of the Morgue and get some “perking” in with lunch?*

He smiles a bit at that. : ) *I REALLY wish. Working through lunch, and probably dinner.*
Okay, I’ll quit flirting and give you the goods. Khan turns to the camera and says, ‘Watch the code.’

Tim feels two pieces slipping together, and looks up at the roof of his car, offering thanks to whatever’s watching.

That means something to you?

Yeah. Means that Khan’s afraid. He knows he’s alive as long as he’s valuable, and he’s only valuable when he’s coding. He’s going to lead me to Wallbanger, and save his own life doing it.

How?

Intranet Server Update tomorrow morning.

He can feel Abby get it.

Okay. I’m on the license.

Thanks. Back in an hour or so. Need to go talk to IT and figure out how they knew it was update time.

“McGee!” Kevin looks really pleased to see Tim. Tim’s happy to see him, too. Good to work with someone he’s on good terms with for this. Though, he’ll admit, he’d forgotten that Kevin got booted up to head of IT two years ago. “What are you doing up here? Don’t you have a thirty part conspiracy or something to chase down?”

“Believe it or not, this is part of it.”

“Okay,” Kevin’s got a lot of not on his face right now. “What can I do?”

“The update. I need it, but I need you to keep us on the old system.”

Kevin’s staring at him like he’s asked for the impossible. “Out of my hands, Tim, it does it automatically. I can’t keep us on the old one. As for getting the new one, you and everyone else’ll have it come 3:00 AM.”

“Fuck.”

“Tim?” Kevin looks appalled. That’s much rougher language than the situation, according to him, warrants.

“It’s part of that thirty part conspiracy.”

“The intranet?” Now Kevin look astounded, like he can’t possibly believe that could be part of it.

Tim nods. “Long story. How do updates happen? Are we on a schedule or…”

Kevin shrugs a bit. “They happen when they happen. I get the heads up from the developer, and then I shoot you guys the ‘system will be down’ email.”
“And, let me guess, the only way to stop it is to take us entirely off line.”

“Yeah.” Kevin nods, sadly. “Kill our communications, destroy our ability to figure out what’s going on, and as soon as we’re online again, it’ll go through.”

“And we can’t revert back to the previous version, can we?”

He shrugs at that, too. “It might be possible, but I don’t have the power to do it. I know they’ve rolled back broken updates in the past before, but they do that at the developer, not here. It’s not Microsoft; you can’t go into the system and uninstall updates. Part of why it takes an hour is every time we get a new system, they wipe the old one.”

Tim sighs, and nods. “Who’s the developer?”

“Dynamic Infrastructure Services. I’ve got contact information for our case worker. You want it?”

“I want everything you’ve got on them.”

Kevin’s beaming up at him, looking really happy to be useful. “No problem, McGee. It’ll be in your inbox before you get back to your desk.”

When Ngyn takes care of a problem, she takes care of it. There are 100 techs worldwide working on dissecting the Federal Intranet Server now. Which is great, except for the fact that come 3:00 he’s going to want them all combing through the new version, finding Khan.

But if he pulls them off the old version, he’ll never find out all the secrets buried in there.

Ngyn’s sacked out on a sofa. Howard’s napping on one of the bean bag chairs. Good, they’re getting some rest.

He checks his watch 12:02. He’s got a bit under fifteen hours…

Tim sits down at his computer and sends out the modified call. Anyone on Ngyn’s team within four hours of quitting time (about half of them) are off, resting for the next ten hours. The other half are going to be off in four hours. Whatever they can’t find in the next four hours is lost.

What comes next matters more. At 03:00 he’s going to have 100 sets of fresh eyes, ready to burn through the code, find Khan, and with any luck, Wallbanger and his whole operation, too.

He glances at the contact information Kevin gave him. Something’s… niggling at him. Some little off detail.

After a second it hits, the alarm bounced back to NCSI. What if that’s real, not just another layer of defense in the system?

He hops up and heads into the work area.

“Back to NCIS… The trail led back to NCIS. You guys got anything on that, at all?”

Five heads have turned toward him, and Brand is very clearly giving him an and exactly how many things do you want us doing at once? look.
He nods and backs off, heading to his own computer and examining the lead back to NCIS. *What if it’s not a mirror in the code…*

He gets his phone and calls Fornell. “Hey. What did your guys do with the worm in the intranet?”

“McGee?” Fornell sounds testy, but that’s how he pretty much always sounds on the job. Unless he’s being dryly amused, but best Tim can tell, only Gibbs and Vance get to see dryly amused at work.

“Yes. I’m running here and need a quick sit rep.”

“I’ll check. Hold on.”

Tim holds, and a minute later Fornell is back. “They used the information you gave them and killed it. Took out the alarm, too, so it wouldn’t kill the system.”

“All right. What am I looking for that’s so important you’re pulling me away from three dead prisoners?”

That stops Tim short. “Wait, dead?”

“Dead, McGee. Three of the ones on my list have been ‘transferred’ into nowhere and three are dead. All of ‘cardiac arrest’ all in the last two days.”

“Shit, he’s cleaning up. He’s really cleaning up. Who’s dead?”

“All prison officials who had ended up on the inside for taking bribes.”

“Same prison?”

“Nope. We’re working it.”

“And the missing ones?”

“Two drug traffickers and one money launderer.”

“I don’t suppose the rest of your group is accounted for?”

Fornell barks a fast, humorless laugh.

Tim gets him up with his side of it. “He’s pulled Khan, another launderer and another tech guy out, too. According to Tony, he’s gotten more, as well. They’re not all local, are they?”

“No, from the time stamps, he’s started in California on Thursday afternoon and has been moving east. He’s got his own plane, only way he can be doing it that fast. We’re hunting for it.”

Tim nods at that. “Better than the timestamps telling us it’s ten or twenty guys pulling them out.”

“Email’s up, what do you want me to check?”

“Are you guys getting a system update tomorrow morning?”

Fornell pauses, and Tim can feel the wave of pissed off aimed at him. “McGee, what the HELL? A *system update*? I’ve got dead men, missing prisoners, dangerous people walking free and you want
to know about a system update? You are wasting my TIME!"

“No, I’m not. He’s watching everything we do through our electronic systems. Once that update goes through, all the worms come back. If you’re getting an update, your ability to use your own system without tipping him off has a clock running down on it. And if you aren’t getting an update, my team, all 100 plus of them worldwide, are heading to your offices to work on your computers.”

That mollifies Fornell. “Okay. Ummm… No. I didn’t get an update message.”

“Thanks. Tony realized he may be watching the BOLO lists. And, right now, I know exactly one judge who will issue a warrant without putting it in the electronic system. You want his name?”

“I’ve got my own who’ll do that.”

“Good, use him. Assume that if you’ve got to use a computer for it, he’s watching. We’re thinking he knew it was time to clean up his operation because he was watching the Federal Bank Account Database, and as soon as someone investigated one of his pets, Khan in this case, he knew it was time to run.”

“Shit.” Fornell says it softly. “Diane tipped him when she went looking for who was paying Khan.”

“Yeah. So he’s had three and a half almost four full days to work ahead of us.”

“Lovely.” Tim can feel Fornell about to start growling. “You got any good news?”

“Last I heard, Abbi had people in place to grab one of the computer dens, hopefully with the users, up in Boston.”

“I’ll take that.”

“Did your guys do any back tracing on the worm?” Tim asks.

“Would you like to talk to them?” Fornell doesn’t actually know what they’ve done, and he wants to be on his job, not playing pass the message around between McGee and Tech.

“Yes, but not right now. One of the computers we grabbed was for your system. I doubt it was the only one.”

“Wonderful. Send it to us?”

“As soon as we’re done with it, I’ll get you it, and all the reports on it.”

“Good? Anything else?”

“Not right now.” And Tim hears a dial tone.

His next call is to Abbi. Since all of his team is back in his office right now, he can’t just ask Manner what’s going on.

“Hey, Abbi.”
“McGee, you’re not sounding happy.”

“No. I’m not. Got a quick question, did you get an email saying there was going to be an update to your server tomorrow morning?”

“I’ll check.” And like with Fornell a minute goes by without any words. “No.”

“Good.”

“Should I ask?”

“Not sure I’ve got the time to burn to explain it all. I hope this is a major clue.”

“All right.”

“Good luck in Boston.”

“Thanks, Omagi’s got this. I’ll give you a call as soon as we’ve got them.”

“Great!” Thank God that someone has a lead on this.

Fornell says FBI’s killed the worm. CGIS kept it running to trace it. Neither of them have gotten the update email. The tracker led back to NCIS…

One more piece of data.

He’s on his phone again. “Hey, Kev.”

“Yeah, Tim…”

“Updates, are they across the whole Federal system, or just one agency at a time?”

He can feel Kevin shrugging at that. “Supposed to be the whole system. Why?”

“We’re the only one getting an update.”

“Huh? I checked with my friend at Dynamics, and supposedly they’re pushing a new security update. Everyone should be getting it.”

Tim feels cold. “You have a friend at Dynamics?”

“Yeah, we talk all the time, why?”

“What do you talk about, Kevin?” Tim’s voice drops, and he’s standing up, heading toward IT.

Kevin’s sounding worried. “I don’t know. All sorts of stuff, work stuff, baseball, improv. We just talk.”

“I’ll be at your desk in two minutes. Don’t move!”
Kevin’s not pale by nature. His complexion is fairly dark in most circumstances, but as Tim is leaning over his desk, waves of threat radiating off of him, he’s gone awfully white. He’s almost as pale as Tim is.

“McGee, you’re scaring me.”

Tim’s eyes are hard as he’s looking directly at Kevin. “Good.”

“What is going on?”

“I want you to tell me everything about what is going on with Dynamics.”

Kevin’s looking at Tim like he’s insane, and behind that Tim can see Kevin’s nervous. “They make our server. The guy who handles our account is friendly. Clem. I gave you his contact information. When I became head of IT he came to introduce himself, we hit it off, and…”

“And…” Tim know’s Kevin’s hiding something. He leans in even further, his face inches from Kevin’s. “And what, Kevin?”

Kevin licks his lips. “He offered me a deal. You know the code. They’re low bid contractors and they… well, they suck at their jobs. The damn code breaks all the time. So,” Kevin sighs, “a lot of agencies modify it some. Make it work better. And…” he licks his lips looking really uncomfortable, “he offered me a few thousand dollars to show him every patch we make. So, I wrote some code, anytime someone here modifies the code, it passes on to him, and a day later there’s another three grand in my bank account.”

Tim, and he’s proud of this, does not pick Kevin up by his throat, nor does he growl at Kevin. Kevin, apparently, understands the look on Tim’s face, because he shrinks back even further in his chair. He’s looking like he’d like to be behind the chair, with it between him and Tim right now.

Tim swallows, hard. Then he says, voice quiet, gentle, coaxing, “And, just possibly, did you get a little note about some monitoring software in our code not working, say yesterday, and then pass that message onto him?”

Kevin winces. “Uh… not our software. But, yeah.”

Tim nods. “Not our software… Uh huh, and who’s software suddenly stopped working?”

“I don’t know. It’s part of the Federal System, I know that, but… Look, his guys don’t know what they’re doing, a lot of tech guys don’t. They do their Microsoft training, get certified, and show up on time often enough to get promoted. So, when he finds an IT head who knows what he’s doing, he’s hires them. He’s got IT managers at a few different offices helping him out.”

“Uh huh.” Tim can feel his heart racing. “Who else?”

“I… I… don’t know all of them. But, me. Ted Cox over at NASA, Jeffery Robinson at IAEA, Kaitlyn Rose at ICE. We’re the ones out of DC. We all get together for lunch every other month or so, talk about what’s working in the system, what’s not, what could be better. We’re… we’re field testers for Dynamics.” Kevin tries to smile a little, but it comes off scared and sick. “But you’re going to tell me we aren’t, aren’t you?”

Tim’s eyes are a bit wild as he says, “Oh, you’re field testers all right. And spies. And leaks. And….” He’s visibly not cursing Kevin out. “As of right now, you are on suspension. Get up, get
away from that computer, and come with me.”

“Wait, can you even…”

“Director McGee. I can fire you if I want to, and I probably will. Your contract is just like mine; you are not allowed to be moonlighting with other firms. Not without express permission from Vance. Do you have express permission to be ‘field testing?’”

“Uh…” Kevin looks ready to cry. “No. I… He wouldn’t go for it. I knew. If I got permission, I’d have to do it for free, and… My uncle is sick. I’m paying his medical bills, and…”

“And I don’t want to hear it.” Tim grabs Kevin by the hand, and yanks him up from his desk, taking him up to Abby’s lab are. “Plasma,” he barks out.

“Kevin?” Abby asks.

“Guess who’s been ‘field testing’ and ‘consulting’ for Dynamics?”

“Oh, Kevin,” Abby looks disappointed and Kevin cringes. She pulls the quarter profile shot of ‘Harvey Wallbanger’ up. “Is this your contact?”

“Uh, yeah. That’s Clem Rogers. I have all of his contact information.”

Tim turns to Kevin. “You talked to him today.”

“Uh, yeah. Just a bit ago.”

He points to Abby, who is getting ready to start pinging, as Kevin gives her the number. She looks up and shakes her head. “Gone.”

“Of course it’s gone. Because he’s busy breaking criminals out of prison and killing people. And he’s doing that because you’re the guy who let him know that we figured out how he was watching us.”

“Watching us?” Kevin sits down, hard, on the stool Abby usually uses.

“Did you actually bother to check any of the code you sent him?” Tim asks.

“Uh. No. I automated it. It’d just give me a heads up that it happened, and then I’d get paid.”

“One of the changes I made that you sent him, was rooting out a door that opened up the entire Federal Intranet Server to anyone who had a key. That little note about someone’s software not working… That was a heads up that we’d shut some of the computers that were pulling information out of the servers of Homeland, the NSA, the FBI, us and Baltimore PD down. You’re the one who told him how we were tracking him, and I can promise you that new version of the Intranet has everything we pulled off of it, right back in there, hiding somewhere new.”

Kevin looks sick.

Tim shoves a pad of paper into his hands. “I want everything you know about Clem. Everywhere you’ve ever been with him. And I want everything on all of your other ‘field testers.’ And I want it YESTERDAY.”

Then he takes Abby by the hand and pulls her into the computer annex. Once he’s in there, he starts quietly cursing up a storm. She takes a moment to gently rub his back, and then sets up the facial ID scanner again, this time popping the quarter image up against the Dynamic Infrastructure Systems
employee database.

By the time he’s winding down, she’s done the search.

She doesn’t need to shake her head. He doesn’t hear the telltale beep of success.

“He’s not on staff,” she says.

“At least, he’s not in the database.”

“God.” Tim’s rubbing his eyes. “He’s got to be associated with them somehow.”

Abby thinks about it, rubbing his back again. “Umm… If they’re like us, cafeteria and janitorial are hired out.”

He nods. “Okay, right. Or he’s hacked the damn thing from the outside.”

“Start with Janitorial. Easier to check up on.”

“Yeah. Okay. What the hell do I do with him?” he nods toward Kevin.

“He’s fired, that’s for sure. Arrested?”

“I’m not sure if what he did was illegal. Companies ask for feedback from users all the time. I’ve got to get him somewhere safe.”

“Tim?”

His mouth opens, and then he remembers that he hasn’t given Abby the full update on what Wallbanger’s been doing with his crew. “According to Fornell, three of Wallbanger’s crew just mysteriously died of ‘cardiac arrest.’ It looks like he’s kidnapped a bunch more. I’ve got to get word out to the rest of the field testers, too. Get them scooped up into protective custody.” He grabs his phone again. “Dorney, you on a murder?”

“No.”

“Kidnapping?”

“Car theft.”

“Great, it can wait. Here’s what I need you to do.”

A minute later, Dorney’s in the lab, taking Kevin in hand. As he’s about to leave, Tim says, “Dorney, no reports on this. Nothing goes on our system, nothing gets written down. You do everything in person, and if you don’t know who the person is, you don’t say anything. On this one, you’re reporting to Tony, Vance, or me, and no one else, got it?”

Dorney nods. “Got it. We’ll round them up, get them secure, and then get them writing everything down.”

“Good. On paper. I’ll give you a phone you can get pictures with, and that’s the way you’ll get information to me.”

“Okay.”

“If someone shows up with a court order, even if it’s signed by the Supreme Court, don’t follow it.
Unless it’s me, Vance, or Tony, you keep custody of these guys.”

“Okay, got it.” Both Dorney and Kevin are looking disturbed by this.

Tim heads back down to his office. “Sit rep.”

His Minions, who are tech guys and not cops or ex-military, all stare at him, wondering what he wants.

“Situation report.” The light flashes on and they skitter forward. Brand setting up the plasma so the worldwide team can report in, too.

Sit rep takes close to an hour. On the upside, he now knows exactly how the random number generator works and what it was doing. And he also has the satisfaction of knowing that the account it was paying into is frozen colder than Antarctica in July.

He knows about the worm, the trap, the other worm, the backup worm, the backup trap, and the employee data breach that was collecting all of their personal information and giving it to God alone knew who. (It’s occurring to him that China probably just bought access to the hack, and didn’t bother to hack their own way in.)

The downside is he’s halfway through that when he gets the call from Tony. “We’re back.”

“Excellent! Is Matt in interrogation?”

“Jimmy’s got him.”

“FUCK!”

Tim wonders what it says about him that he finds the smell of autopsy calming.

Probably that he’s been in this business too damn long.

Of course, he also finds the smell of the lab calming, so it probably means that the mix of disinfectant, dead people, and too much air conditioning, has been linked in his mind to Jimmy, and he finds Jimmy calming.

He hopes that’s what it is. But he heads in there, and sees Jimmy and Tony standing next to a table with a body on it, and he’s feeling himself get angry. That little burst of calm from the first whiff of the place doesn’t last long.

Matt’s laying there, dead, very, very dead. A perfect circle of a small caliber bullet hole in the middle of his forehead. Tim’s glad he can’t see the back of his head.

“I take it you’ve got cause of death?” Tim asks.
Jimmy nods. “I suppose there could be a surprise hiding in there, and Dr. Allan and I will check, but…”

Tony takes over. “When we got there the Local LEOs were already on the scene. Neighbors saw a delivery van pull up. Few minutes later it pulls away. A bit after that, maybe a half hour or so, they notice the front door is still open and head over, thinking Matt forgot to shut it. They find him lying in the doorway.”

“Anything?” Tim asks.

“According to the neighbor, ‘It looked like a Fed Ex van, but it wasn’t,’” Tony says.

“So, you’re looking for a… white van with a blue and red logo?” Tim asks.

“Yeah. I pulled Ziva back from Abbi. She’s still running traffic cameras looking for the van.”

“Have you talked to Fornell?”

“Not since this morning, why?”

“He’s been hunting down his half of the account numbers, and three of them are dead.”

Tony’s looking pissed, now, too. “My next step is going up to visit Draga and see what he’s up to with that.”

“Fornell says that Clem—“

“Clem?”

Tim smiles an angry smile, backs up, and gets them up to date on the fun they’re having with Kevin.

“So, wait, Kevin, IT Kevin, harmless little improv meister, Kevin, is the leak?”

“Yeah, Tony. I’ve got him in protective custody now with Dorney, and when he’s done, I’m going to get to fire him. I’ve got to talk to legal and see if I need to arrest him, too. Only upside of this is that I’ve got a name. And maybe, a lead on who that name belongs to. Gotta find out who does Dynamics janitorial and cafeteria services.”

“That’s just asking questions, right?” Jimmy asks, checking his watch. It’s a bit before 17:00.

“Just taking a photo and asking around,” Tim answers.

“And at 03:00 you’re whole team is going full bore on the new code?”

“That’s the plan,” Tim says.

“Then take the advice you gave to Howard and Ngyn, go home, sleep, and come back at 02:00. If Ziva’s over here, I’m sure she can go ask a few questions,” Jimmy says while looking at Tony.

Tony nods. “Or Draga. He’s got to be close to getting to the end of the guys on our half of the list. Go, rest, get your tech game ready to go. Tomorrow’s going to be a big deal.”

Tim doesn’t exactly like that, but… Neither Jimmy nor Tony is wrong. He rubs his eyes. “You’ll give Abby a lift home?”

“No problem. Get some sleep. Oh, I got the appointment made for you, Wednesday morning, 8:00,
“Thanks. Okay. Sleeping. Then more code. You still going to be here when I get back?” Tim asks Tony.

“Draga and I have a date at your computer den. Seeing if the buyer shows up.”

Tim shakes his head. “Nope. Part of what Kevin leaked was the heads up that that system isn’t in play any longer.”

“Great. In that case, I really hope not to be here when you get back, but if you find Khan you’ll want feet on the ground to grab him, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I’ll keep Ziva and Bishop running intel, and Draga and I’ll head home, too. Catch our own 40 winks before being ready to run.” Tony turns to Jimmy, “Full report on my desk when I’m back?”

“Have I ever let you down?”

Tony smiles and nods, heading out. Tim spends an awkward moment wanting to hug Jimmy goodbye, but doesn’t, and he too turns and leaves. As he’s heading down to grab his stuff, he remembers who hasn’t gotten an update yet.

He sends off a text to Vance. We’re breaking early. 02:00 everything heats up.

This have something to do with the Intranet Service Update that begins at 02:00?

Yes.

And would this also have something to do with you pulling Mr. Hussein out of his desk and spiriting him away into protective custody?

Yes.

And are you going to give me a full report than that?

Depends, how tired do you want me to be at 02:00?

I’ll wait.

I’m sure there’ll be a full campfire at 02:00, you’re more than welcome to be there.

I will.

Good.
Sleeping from six to one is technically Tim’s usual seven (ish) hours of sleep. But, in that they didn’t happen at his usual time, Tim’s feeling awfully out of it when his alarm starts chirping, getting him out of bed.

A quick, and fairly cool, shower pulls his eyes the rest of the way open.

Kisses for Abby (sleeping) and Kelly (also sleeping) see him out the door.

Time to earn his pay.

He heads into the bullpen, a collection of snacks and drinks ready for everyone. He’s not surprised to see Abbi, Gibbs, Fornell, and Vance here, in addition to Ziva, Bishop, and Draga.

“Someone forget to tell Diane the party was on?”

Fornell shakes his head. “Wendy’s bachelorette party tonight, so she’s out.” He glances to Draga and Gibbs. “Diane drew the short straw for who has Emily tonight.”

“Ah.” Tim supposes that’s how his family would handle it if someone needed to watch the kids during a hot case and Breena was busy.

“What’s that?” Tony asks, looking at the box of goodies in Tim’s hands.

“The one on the far right is yours. Three espresso shots in milk, five tablespoons of sugar.”

Tony smiles, grabbing it. “Liquid sleep. I trained you well, didn’t I?”

Tim raises an eyebrow at that, and once everyone else has grabbed some sort of midnight breakfast, they start talking.

Tony pulls up a now full face shot of the man who’s been vexing them. “Meet Roger Clemens. He used to be a night janitor at Hellerson’s Maintenance.”

“Used to be?” Tim asks.

“Quit the day Khan’s bank account was accessed,” Draga replies.

“More importantly, janitor?” Fornell asks.

“According to his CV he was a very talented hacker at CalTech, top of all of his classes, full scholarship case. He got caught with an ounce of pot on him when he was a freshman, wouldn’t roll over on who sold it to him, so instead of a slap on the wrist he did three years for possession with intent to distribute,” Draga replies.

“And with a drug conviction he’s pretty much shut out of any legitimate tech job.” Tim knows how that works.
“It gets better.” Tony says, in a voice that makes it completely clear that by better he means worse.
“Five years ago, the cop who busted him went down for corruption. Looks like he was making his cases against the big guys by planting drugs on kids. He’d get them to ‘roll’ on ‘their dealer,’ whoever was on the top of his hit list, and then he’d go make the bust. Clemens didn’t follow the script. Even after being told over and over, ‘I know you got the drugs from Emilio Juarenez’ he didn’t roll, because he didn’t get any drugs from anyone.”

Everyone’s wincing at that.

“He get his record cleaned up?” Fornell asks.

“Not that we can see,” Ziva replies. “He’s had no interactions of any sort, beyond checking in with his parole officer while he was on parole, since he’s been out. Not even a traffic ticket.”

“And the cop?” Tim asks, feeling cold.

Tony nods. “Had a convenient heart attack Thursday evening, in his jail cell.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then Ziva gets them back onto how Clemens got into everything. “Hellerson’s has contracts with Dynamic Infrastructure Services, and the Capitol building, and a few dozen Federal Office buildings, and every major bank in the greater DC area.”

Tim’s already feeling his head start to ache, and he’s only been looking at the screen for two minutes. “So, you’re saying he had unsupervised access to pretty much every single building where anyone who mattered worked?” And, what Tim really means, is that he had unsupervised access to the computers of anyone who mattered.

“Yes, McGee, and it gets better from there. Using a dozen aliases, he’s gotten himself onto the verified visitor list for every Federal Office building in DC and four dozen others across the country.”

“It’s almost like I can just walk into anywhere I want to.” Everyone turns to face the voice and sees Roger Clemens, short, round, a bit slubby, something of a Michael Moore vibe about him, grinning like he’s in the middle of the best joke in the world. “I assume you’d like to arrest me.”

Tim and Vance win interrogation rights. Tim’s at the table, across from Clemens. Leon’s lurking in the corner, watching carefully.

Tim can feel the rest of them, watching from behind the mirror.

“You look very amused, Mr. Clemens.” Seems like a good opening gambit. The man’s been grinning like the Joker on ecstasy the whole time he’s been in here. “Want to let me in on the joke?”

He’s grinning at Tim, still, in a brilliantly good mood. “Oh, I am. I’m curious, what exactly do you intend to charge me with?”

“I’m starting with murder and kidnapping, and figured the rest could come up as needed.”

Clemens is still smiling, wide and bold. “You can’t prosecute me for anything. But, by all means, waste my time, I make two thousand dollars a minute, just sitting here, breathing.”
Tim’s feeling hip deep in bullshit right now, and he really wants to wipe that smile off of Clemens’ face. “Do you want to tell me why I can’t prosecute you for murder? Are you innocent or something?”

“Hell no!” More smiling. This is getting really annoying. “I shot Matt, and had Florence, Sammie, Johnson, and Elspeth poisoned, and there’s eleven more prison guards sitting in morgues that you and FBI guy haven’t found yet.” He sounds almost orgasmic at that. He calms down a little, still smiling. “Though I think springing my associates from prison is really stretching the definition of kidnapping. Not like I held a gun to their heads.” He punctuates that with a small giggle.

“Uh huh.” Tim’s nodding slowly, wondering what sort of insane this guys is, and then he remembers talking with Jimmy and the appointment he’s got with Jake on Friday, and a trickle of cold drips down his back.

Clemens sees it and smiles, then says to Vance, “Oh, he gets it, now. This one is clever. You don’t look nearly scared enough, so I don’t think you do.” He turns back to Tim. “You found at least some of it, didn’t you?”

Tim’s cagy. “Found the authorization for you to stick that worm in the Federal Intranet.”

Clemens giggles again.

Tim’s starting to feel sick. “You worked in the Capitol building for ten years.”

Clemens nods, still grinning. *God, does he have any other expressions?* “Yes, I did. Did you know that no one reads laws all the way through before they’re passed? They literally can’t. Not on the long ones, even at ten seconds a page they’re way too long to read before they go up to a vote. And the little ones, the only people who read them are the ones who write them. Once you’ve read a few of them, you know where the filler is, where the bits no one checks are, and then, add a line or paragraph or three after the first draft is done and before it goes to a vote and no one will ever notice.”

Tim winces, that was Jimmy’s worst case scenario on this.

Clemens keeps talking. “Yeah, I was really expecting someone to notice something. I mean, I wrote into a bill that covered regulations for *soap manufacture* of all stupid things, that my home was a sovereign country, and granted myself and everyone who’s ever set foot in it, diplomatic status, and no one noticed. That worm,” he laughs, “guess what, not only is it legal, not only can I sell everything I get out of it, but because no one reads the damn laws before they pass them, Congress passed, the Senate passed, and the President signed off on the fact that anyone who bought my information can never be prosecuted. And, oh man, I’ve got some excellent clients.” Clemens stands up, still grinning, and starts to wave at Tim. “Bye, bye.”

Tim’s up a second later, hand on Clemens’ shoulder, shoving him back down. He beat Leon to it by maybe a tenth of a second.

“Sit down! I can hold God Himself for twenty-four hours, and you aren’t moving a second before that’s done.”

Clemens shrugs. “2:48 Wednesday morning, I’m out of here.”

As soon as he and Vance are out of there, Tim says, “I’ve still got to find where he’s got everyone holed up. Can you get Jake Malloy and Murray Harland here and reading? If what he’s saying is true…”
Vance nods, looking like he could chew through a steel toothpick right now. “Go. Find them. I’m on it.”

At 03:00 the systems go back up, and Tim is in the Dungeon, ready to roll.

He’s got 112, bright-eyed (okay, maybe not bright-eyed, but at least not exhausted) techs all over the world linked in and ready to break this wide open.

“I know Ajay Khan is on no one’s favorite person list, but somewhere, hiding in this update is a message from him to us. We’ve got to find that, because if we do, we get to grab 50 felons, put them back in jail, and nail the guy who set this whole thing up. So, have at it.”

He sees them nodding and getting into to.

“All idea what the message will look like?” One tech, Tim doesn’t recognize him by sight, asks over Skype.

Tim shrugs. “He likes music, so… notes? Song lyrics? Something that Roger Clemens, the guy who’s got him and the others, who isn’t a bad hacker himself, wouldn’t notice. We’re going to have to take the whole thing apart to find this.”

And they get to it.

Tim’s got the code open on one screen, and his search function on the other. It’s time to break this motherfucker.

He starts with easy searches, *McGee, NCIS, Wallbanger* and as he expects, they don’t turn up anything. The next set is more complicated. He doesn’t know where they might be, but he knows that longitude and latitude coordinates have a certain format, so he sets a search for anything that matches that format. That one will take a while, too many variables for that to be a fast search. GPS coordinates have a different format, so he puts that in, too. Street, drive, circle, any road name he can think of goes in there, as well as all state names and abbreviations.

That’s the easy stuff. From there he starts getting into the hard stuff.

Two hours into it, Tim’s got to take a break. He’s got as many searches running as he can think of, and right now he’s just spinning his wheels, coming up with the same things over and over again.

Might as well let his searches do their thing. The coordinate searches aren’t done, so, let them work.

He heads upstairs to see how the rest of the case is going.

Tim’s never seen such distressed looking people in his life. Okay, no he has. He’s never seen such disillusioned people in his life. They’ve taken the conference room, and everyone, even Vance, is sitting in front of a computer or a pile of books, looking through everything.
He sits down next to Bleach, who’s got his laptop open. Jake’s buried under a pile of massive books. Both of them look like they’ve been sucker punched right after watching a horrific traffic accident.

“We can’t get him, can we?” Tim asks.

Jake shakes his head. “Not anytime soon. He declared himself, legally, a diplomat, thus granting himself immunity from everything, including the equal protection under the law statutes.”

Bishop nods, slowly. “He owns five floors of an apartment building DC that became its own country in 2010. He got it through both houses of Congress and the President signed it. That’s likely where all of his felons are holed up, in a sovereign territory that we can’t go into without his permission.”

Okay, that’s not a problem for Tim. “They’ll have to come out sooner or later. We stick people around it—”

Bleach is shaking his head. “The Senate ratified the treaty giving them full trade rights with the US. We can’t block the borders.”

Tim can’t believe that got through without anyone noticing. “How did… I mean… Where?”

“Part of it’s in the ACA, part’s in the tax code, a lot of it is in different appropriation bills. The defense budget’s got a bunch of it. Those bills were so big, so long…” Jake’s staring off into the distance looking wrecked by this, like his last hope just died. “The only way anyone found anything in it was to do a word search. No one read straight through, and he wrote his bits in German, so they wouldn’t pop up on any word searches, at all.”

“And some of it is tucked into little bills that could have been read through, but no one did because the only people who cared were the ones writing it. Did you know Federal law mandates the way gas canisters are built?” Harland asks.

Tim shakes his head; he didn’t know that.

“You and everyone else. But they do. And apparently between Congressman Smithers writing that bill, and it hitting the floor, Clemens added a line about how all of his clients will also be granted total immunity for anything they ever do.” Bleach sounds ready to go and personally storm Clemensland or whatever the hell it is, and destroy every inch of it, and then tie Clemens, still alive, to the rubble and set fire to the whole thing. He might be edging sixty and in a wheelchair, but right now Bleach is a Marine ready to go and show the world that you do not mess with a Marine. (And he’s got two other Marines, also mirroring that expression.)

“So, even if I do storm…” Tim can feel Jimmy, and Breena, and Abby glaring at him on that idea. He’s not a field agent anymore, for a reason. “What is it called?”

“Clementine.” Vance’s voice is steeped in scorn.

“So, even if Tony and Fornell and Abbi storm Clementine, grab everyone in it, we can’t do anything to or with them?”

Fornell and Tony and Ziva and Bishop and Draga and Abbi all look extremely ready to strap on the body armor and take out Clementine. And, even with the mental images of his loves glaring at him, Tim’s more than ready to join in. Gibbs looks ready to, too, so he glares at Gibbs a bit. Gibbs, knowing what Tim’s thinking, gives him the stink eye back. Tony and Ziva are doing their own version of that same non-verbal exchange.

“Exactly. Upon setting foot in Clementine, you become a citizen, and all citizens are granted full
diplomatic immunity in perpetuity,” Bleach adds. Then he says with a grim smile. “Kind of makes me want to visit, just to… take care of this, you know?”

And with that Tim knows Bleach has already decided how this is going to end. He can see the look on Vance’s face, and that same look on Abbi’s. Clemens fate is decided, now they’re just working out the details.

“Is there… I mean, there’s got to be some way to reverse this, right?” Tim asks.

“We can go to war with Clementine, which would mean storming a building filled with civilians below, and the apartments visiting foreign high muckety-mucks stay in, in the middle of downtown DC, and having to admit what happened,” Bleach says. “You got anything, Jake?”

He shakes his head. And then he pulls his armor of sarcasm back into place, and says, “A newfound respect for those people who want to make a law that no law can be longer than 50 pages, and that any congressman or senator who votes on a law he hasn’t personally read needs to be impeached.”

Bleach’s eyes narrow. He’s thinking about something. “Besides us, who know about this?”

Tim shrugs. “Clemens, that’s obvious. Probably everyone in those five floors. Maybe their lawyers. Maybe his lawyer? Does he have a lawyer?”

“Didn’t see payments to one in his records,” Draga says.

“He is probably not fond of them, not after what happened to him,” Ziva adds.

“What? Did his defense attorney screw him, too?” Tim asks.

“Public defender, met with him twice, told him to plea out, and then pretty much capitulated as quickly as possible during the trial. Testimony was done in one day, and an hour later, Clemens was convicted,” Tony replies.

Bleach nods. He’s seen a lot of versions of that over the years. Public defenders who have too many clients, and don’t want to go to court because it takes time. He spends another moment thinking some more. “Leon, Abbi, we’re gonna have a chat, everyone else say goodbye.”

Leon’s nodding, he’s fine with this. Abbi is, too. Everyone else is fine with what they think is about to happen, too, but they’re less fine with leaving. No one has moved.

“Off you go. Anyone asks we spent the night working on… the mystery bank accounts.”

“Talking about what my team’s got,” Abbi adds, standing up. She gently touches Bleach’s shoulder, “You really set for this?”

He winks at her. Jethro’s not moving, either. “Leon’s got my six, I’ve got his, we’ve both got Abbi’s and she’s got ours. Now, the rest of you are going to protect your own by getting out of here.”

They start to shuffle out, and Bleach thinks of something. “McGee, you’re the one who’s never met a system you couldn’t get into and out of clean, right?”

Tim nods, hearing the door shut behind him.

“He made sure every law he wrote to shield himself or his associates mentioned him by name. That’s the word search you’re going to use. Jake’s going to show you what needs to be edited.”

Tim can do that. “Okay. I can erase everything, but I’ll bet you good money the lawyers have hard
copies of everything.”

Bleach says, “Don’t worry about it. As soon as the twenty-four is done, I want you to escort Clemens out of the building. Back exit. Near the handicap spaces.”

Tim’s feeling cold. The look on Bleach’s face is very dangerous. Reckless dangerous. The kind of dangerous that might result in collateral damage.

“Uh… I have a wife and kid and a baby on the way.”

Bleach smiles. The kind of smile that looks like a blade drawn across a neck. “No harm is going to come to you. Just don’t stand behind him.”

“And, we’re not going to arrest him after I shift the laws because…”

Harland shakes his head. “Because I can guarantee you we didn’t find every law he buried in there. He’s got another get out of jail card in there, probably more than one, and if he pulls it in open court, especially in a way where everyone gets to see him do it, tomorrow everyone else will be hacking every law on the books.”

“God… Okay.” Tim stands up, and then sits back down, swallowing hard, looking at the door Jethro just walked out of. “You’re not calling Jethro, are you?”

“Need to know, Tim, and you don’t,” Vance says.

“Okay.”

“And, try to look surprised,” Bleach adds.

“If someone is shooting at me, I look surprised.”

“Good.”

As soon as he’s out, he sees that Tony, Bishop, Draga, and Fornell are getting geared up and ready to go. “Storming Clementine?” Tim asks.

“Yeah.”

“How about you wait a few minutes on that. Jake’s going to show me which databases need to be edited, and if you guys hold on long enough, you’ll be recapturing a bunch of felons, not invading a sovereign territory.”

Jake shakes his head a bit. “This will take more than a few minutes.”

“And require more than five people,” Abbi adds, rejoining them. Apparently that bit of conference didn’t take long.

“I’ve got two teams getting ready to meet us,” Fornell adds.

“I’ve got two more in the area I can pull in,” Abbi says.
“Do you think you’ll need that much firepower?” Jake asks. The husband in him is perfectly happy with Bishop in the middle of as many armed guys as possible. The lawyer, the civilian, is worried about this turning into a massive bloodbath if they bring that many people in.

“If we’re lucky, they’ll happily come with us, all of them flashing their ‘Citizen of Clementine’ badges or whatever, ready to see us wet ourselves when they tell us they’ve got immunity. If not, we’re going to want at least a one to one ratio of men to fugitives,” Tony replies.

Tim can see Jake’s worried. “Come on, we can do this in MTAC, and from there you can keep eyes on everyone. Ziva can show you how it all works.”

Jake nods nervously, squeezes Bishop’s hand, and Tim leads him up. He looks over his shoulder and sees Gibbs saying goodbye to Abbi, a much less restrained show of affection as he kisses her, holding her face in his hands, staring at her, willing her to come home. Ziva and Tony are saying something quietly to each other, further aside, and he doesn’t have a good enough view of their faces to tell what. And then he and Jake are up the stairs.

Time to get working.

“So, what are you going to do?” Jake asks as he sets Tim up with the law library all the other electronic searches come from.

“Pray that you’re right that this is the base document they print all of the laws off of. We’re going to get screwed pretty fast if they just grab an older book that’s already got the laws in them.”

Jake shakes his head. “No one does it that way anymore. Back in the old days, part of how you showed off how good your practice was, was all of those law books, but now?” Jake shrugs. “No one prints them out anymore. Ink and paper is expensive and you’d need a warehouse just to keep up to date with one field of law.”


Jake logs him in, and then says, “Okay, here’s what I’d do with it.” He goes to the search feature, which, Tim would admit is nicely designed. You can widen or narrow your search however you like, break it down by state, by type of law, by year passed. You can keyword search, phrase search, or search by bill name or number. Jake types in “Roger T. Clemens”, and 72 responses pop up.

“Now, what do you do with it?”

Tim says, “Watch.”

Ziva heads in, and she gets Jake set with a headset so he can hear. No microphone for him, she doesn’t want him distracting anyone by trying to talk to Bishop. “We’ll have visual from Tony, Bishop, and Draga, and audio from Tony.”

Jake’s lips go tight. “How long before they get there?”
Another hour, at least. Probably an hour after that before they’re ready to go in.”

Gibbs and Vance head in, also settling in to wait.

It’s not complicated work. There are basically no defenses on this system, because apparently they didn’t think anyone would ever try anything with it.

Tim sighs. This can’t get out. It’d be like those horror movies… He doesn’t remember which ones. The ones where everything is suddenly legal, so everyone goes out and steals and kills everyone, all came true.

But, he also knows that this has to go somewhere. Someone’s got to secure this. Secure it a hell of a lot better than it is now. The proverbial barn door is wide open, someone’s already stolen the cows, and now they’re putting the cows back, but it’d be a damn good idea to get a lock for the fucking barn before the next guy decides he wants some free milk and burgers.

Tim finishes deleting, and then he pushes the changes he’s made through. Next step metadata. None of these changes ever happened. If someone does actually have a copy of the law printed off earlier, and they decide to check, the data will show that those phrases never existed.

When he’s done, he lets Tony know. “And you’re no longer starting a war.”

“Wonderful.”

“When are you going in?”

“Another hour? We’re still waiting for one of Fornell’s teams to get here and get in place. Then we’re quietly evacuating the first four floors and the ten floors on top. If there’s something nasty in there, we’re not going to get a hell of a lot of civilians killed.”

“Anyone make you?” Vance asks.

“We’re staging a mile away. No one’s seen us yet. The evac will be interesting, though.”

“Yeah. Good luck,” Tim says.

“Thanks.”

While Tim’s been working, Vance has been texting. Less than a minute after Tim’s done talking with Tony, Jarvis walks in.

The two of them talk quietly in the corner, very quietly. Tim can’t make it out, and the half of the conversation he can lip read is making it very clear that he’s going to be in much better shape if he doesn’t know what’s going on.

He turns his eyes back to the big screen, where they’re just starting to get eyes up.

When Vance and Jarvis sit down, Tim moves over to join them, and quietly says, “Who do we need
to talk to to make sure this doesn’t happen again?”

“I’ve got it, Tim,” Jarvis replies.

“Got it how? I don’t want to be doing this again.”

Jarvis nods. “Both houses of Congress will be meeting in two hours. The bill will be on the President’s desk by lunchtime. By dinner, we’ll have coders in place, working on securing these systems.”

“Good.”

And after that, all that’s left is waiting.

The evacuation is messy. No one wants to leave, and the most effective way to do it is a fire alarm, but that’ll tip off the floors they don’t want leaving. So, they spend two hours watching agents knock on doors, tell people they need to get out of the building, fast.

And of course, there’s grumbling, but generally when guys in full body armor with automatic weapons tell you to get out of a building, you go.

Watching a raid is very different from being in one.

Watching is tense and nervous and you can’t really tell what’s going on because everything is loud and confusing and a jumble of images as people move their heads and bodies around.

Being in a raid is nervous and tense, too, but it’s focused. It’s hyper awareness of only what’s immediately in front of you, your job, and your team.

Tim would rather be in the raid than watch the raid. But this isn’t the first one he’s watched, and it won’t be the last. He falls into his usual position, on the com, keeping everyone together pointing out who is seeing what.

As raids go, it’s quick and easy.

And ten minutes later, he’s got Tony talking to them again, watching men and women holding up their hands, clutching folders of paperwork.

“You got it?” Tim asks.

“Yeah, we do.” Tony reports. “They’re all explaining how they’re sovereign citizens of Clementine and we can’t touch them, but they’re also all going quietly. My guess is they’re expecting to lawyer up, whip out their new legal status, and walk right out.”

“If you can grab them all easily with that, do it. We can wait until after they’re out to disabuse them of that notion,” Leon says.

“So... we going with the conman story line?” Tony asks.
“That’s what I’d go with. Heavy on the, ‘Do you really think someone could just hack into the legal code?’ He’s got a few dozen good hackers in there, and it’d be nice if they didn’t all, immediately after getting out, start trying it themselves,” Tim says. As much for Jarvis’ benefit as Tony’s.

Jarvis gets the message and nods.

Tony scoffs. “Even if you build brick walls around the laws, they’re gonna try. Once they’ve got the idea…”

Tim sighs. Jarvis nods again, and get up, without saying anything, and leaves. For another hour, Tim watches them grab guys, cuff them, put them in vans, and say over, and over, and over, that as soon as they were processed, they could call their lawyers, or a lawyer would be found for them.

Then he notices something. Or rather, the lack of someone. “Did you guys grab Ajay Khan?”

Tony replies. “I didn’t see him. But lots of guys. Let me check the list.” They see Tony’s view scoot through people and search out Borin. She hands over her list, and he and Tim read it at the same time. No Khan. Over to Fornell, same thing.

“We didn’t process him, FBI didn’t, and CGIS didn’t either.”

“You guys got everyone, right?”

“We thought we did.” Tony raises his voice, “Bishop, Draga, grab ten more guys and do a full search. We’re missing Khan.”

They see Bishop and Draga head off, and with one eye on their feed, as they clear room after room, floor after floor, he and Tony talk.

“You ever find his message in the code?” Tony asks.

“Not yet. They’re still looking.”

“Why, we’ve got them?”

Tim sighs. “Yeah, good point.”

Bishop comes up to them, shaking her head. “Not here.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll go get a BOLO on the lookout for him. He’s in the wind again.” Tim puts his earphones down, and nods to the rest of them. Gibbs stands up, heading out with him.

“I can get the BOLO, go deal with your guys.”

Tim nods. “Thanks. We still don’t know who was buying his information. Tomorrow or later today, sometime soon, we’re going to sit down with those five computers, and I’ll show you how I find leads. Then you’re going to do it.”

Gibbs mouth opens and closes. Everything he’s tried so far on his attempts at programming has died horribly.

“It’s easier to learn hands on. Abby’ll help, too. You’ll do better with the problem in front of you.” Tim hits the elevator button, and in they go.
When he’s back in the dungeon, he sees that his crew hasn’t found it yet. They’re looking, hard. But no joy yet.

The ones in the office see the look on his face, and he nods, then heads to his office and gets his computer up and ready.

“We’ve got him.” Tim’s about to say, how they got him, but it occurs to him that right now, something very bad is about to happen to Clemens, and it would be a good thing to not have 112 people know he just walked right in and gave himself up.

Plus, he really doesn’t want to tempt any of his white knights to go dark side. They don’t need to know how easy it was to do this.

More than a hundred versions of what the hell? hit Tim all at once.

“The guys upstairs found a block of apartments he was renting. All of the prisoners were in there.”

“Clemens?” Howard asks.

“Not sure yet. Got some guys we’ve got to ID.”

“Khan?” Manner asks.

“In the wind, just set the BOLO for him. All of you, thanks. If you want to keep looking, you can, but I think we’ve found what we’re looking for. As of now, any of you who want off are welcome to take it. Once you’re back on, we’re dissecting this version of the code and taking all of the little nasty bits out of it.”

There’s some grumbling about the guys upstairs hogging all of the glory, but eventually most of his guys head off, some shift their searches to what other surprises are hiding in their intranet, and some of them go back to their regular cases.

Within an hour NCIS DC Cybercrime looks the way it usually does at 07:00, except of course, Tim’s not usually sitting in there at that hour.

Tim stares at his computer and tries one last thing. When they were talking before, Khan didn’t know who he was, he didn’t recognize him from his earlier adventure with NCIS, but eventually that fell into place. But he and Khan go further back than that. Khan hacked MIT when he was a student there, a senior if Tim remembers correctly. Tim was in the first year of his master’s program. The hack had happened first semester, but no one had been able to track it. He and a few other students got together to go after that hack as an extra credit seminar second semester.

He led that team. Khan was expelled less than four weeks away from graduation.

It’s beyond a long shot, that Khan knows that now, but… If he’d wanted to find out… He could have.

Beaver. That was a very long shot. Didn’t do it. Okay, not whimsical…

He runs one last search MIT
And a minute later, it pops up. MIT 030809000408070700106040 TIM. It’s in there 5000 times.
The numbers are… Tim stares, and sees it. GPS coordinates, with a zero between each real number.
No spaces, no periods, no directions, but they were in there.

*Watch the code.* Yep. That was definitely a message just for him.

*Where did you go?* he asks his mental image of Khan.
When Abby and Jimmy get in at eight, Tim’s already been on six of his usual nine hours.

He heads to the Lab first, wanting to see Abby, just to see her, and also to get the update on what she did yesterday.

“Hey.”

“Hello you.” She smiles at him, linking her arm in his, and pulling him into the computer annex where Gibbs is sitting next to the long table, with all five of the captured computers. Tim gets a quick and bright kiss, and then she pats the chair at her desk, where he obligingly sits down and she plops herself in his lap. “Okay, this is good, didn’t get enough of it yesterday.”

His head rests on her shoulder for a moment, and he just holds on. “Nope, not enough. Waiting for Abbi?” he asks Gibbs.

Yes, he is, but he’s trying to not get weird about it, she’s back at her office, processing people, not in danger anymore, so he’s down here. “You said we’d…” he looks at the computers.

Tim nods. “Yeah. I’ll admit I was intending for both of us to get some sleep between now and then, but, sure.”

“He tells me you’ve volunteered me to help, too.”

“You mind?” Tim asks his wife.

“No!” She looks at him like he’s being a twit. “Why would I mind?” Then she grins at Gibbs. “This’ll be fun!”

Gibbs shakes his head.

She waves that off. “Eh… You’ll love it.”

“So, can we get started?” Gibbs asks. He’s looking doubtful about love, but he knows Abbi’s not going home anytime soon, so he’s got hours to kill, and it’s work on computers or work on his best man speech, so, bring on the computers.

“Yes. All yesterday I’ve been dissecting and resecting and reassembling these puppies. They’re still clean. Clean room clean. Mr. Clean, clean.” Gibbs looks like he’s about to chime in with a ‘get to the point Abs,’ but he doesn’t, and Tim, who’s enjoying her sitting in his lap, talking, doesn’t speed her up. “But all of the filters show slightly different spans of time in use. See, local pollens only happen at certain times. So, with a little google work, and a quick drive around the neighborhood you got these in, I was able to get a timeline that’s accurate to… call it plus or minus three days of when each computer was running.”

Tim kisses her, and Gibbs adds the “Great work, Abbs.”

She waves Gibbs to join them on the side of the desk where he can see the monitor on her computer. “Here’s what we know. The NSA and Homeland computers have been on since the last week of October last year. The NCIS computer was on in late March and April, off the end of April through July, and then on again from July to now. The FBI computer’s tricky. It’s been on the last three weeks, and… I think, but can’t be sure, because it’s not pollen, but it’s in the NSA and Homeland
computers, too… There are traces of wood smoke, and the house next door has a fireplace. Now, it’s not in the NCIS’s computer’s filter, so the smoke stopped smoking by March, so that’d go with using it for heat. So, I’m giving you an educated guess that the FBI computer was on in the winter, but not the fall or spring, because it’s got no pollen from those times.”

“And Baltimore?” Tim asks.

“Turned on in April, and has been on since.”

Gibbs sighs. There’s a reason why he hired Tim, and that was to have someone else to go through all of this stuff and tell him how they all fit together.

At least he’s not sitting in front of thousands of paper files, having to look through them by hand and write notes. That’s how he and Mike Franks did this the last time he personally had to deal with this sort of a situation.

“You got thumb drives?” Tim asks Abby.

“Of course.”

He gently pats her on the hip, and she gets up, pointing out where they live in the annex. He grabs five of them, and begins powering on the computers. He gestures to Gibbs, and he joins him. Tim hold ups the thumb drive.

“You know how to get everything from here,” he pats the Baltimore computer, “onto this?”

Gibbs rolls his eyes a bit, but nods. He can use a thumb drive.

Tim smiles at him. “That’s step one. Pull it all off, and then we’re going to build a matrix. Once we’ve got five matrices, we’ll start cross referencing.”

“How long will this take?” Gibbs asks.

Tim shrugs. “I’ll show you how to build the first one, and then I’m off to see Jimmy, and then home again. I’ve got at least one more upside down day.”

“I thought you got them?” Abby says.

Tim sighs and shakes his head, glancing at the open door. Corwin’s in there, running samples in Major Mass Spec. Abby and Gibbs nod. “Yeah, we did. But my Japan team is on something hot, and they need me tonight,” Tim says, and then he starts signing, explaining what he’ll really be doing tonight.

“So, when I set something like this up, I start with the smallest group first,” Tim says, grabbing the FBI thumb drive. “These only had information from the most recent turn on to now, right?” he asks Abby.

“Yeah.” She and Gibbs see what he’s doing, running the tutorial, so that Corwin’s got something to listen to, while he keeps signing.

*Jarvis showed up while we were in MTAC. Couldn’t see all of it, but he’s going to ‘handle’ things. You get a better view?* He signs to Gibbs.

Gibbs shakes his head.

*Abbi will get you up to date when she’s home.* Abby adds.
“So what we want to do is go through this one, and find out what sort of information’s on it. Then, we’ll build the matrices for the other computers and see what all five have in common,” Tim says.

“And if they don’t have something in common?” Gibbs asks.

“If they don’t, I’ll handle the search myself, because that’s going to be coding that took me years to learn.”

What’s your part? Abby asks.

Gotta walk Clemens out. When his 24 is done.

Cover story? Gibbs asks.

Probably going to make him feel like he won. He’ll gloat. I’ll glare. Then out he goes.

“First step, get your computer on.” Tim flicks on one of the auxiliary computers. “Next step, get comfy. Mess with the chair and the screen, make sure you’re feeling okay. Last thing we need is you getting a bad back or neck from this.”

Gibbs doesn’t look impressed by that, but he does go and start adjusting.

So, early night, early morning again for you? Abby asks Tim.

Yeah, probably head home in an hour or so. Sleep all day. Back here again by midnight. Still have to go through the entire new intranet. And then there’s handling Dynamics. And Hellersons. And I’ve got to get Kevin and Co. handled.

When Gibbs is sitting on the chair, Tim pops the thumb drive in. “Okay. Date search.” He starts typing, showing Gibbs how he’s telling the computer to pull anything with a date code and compile it, by date into a neat little file. “This is your first matrix, we’ll cross reference dates on all five servers, and use that to build a timeline.”

And, like Abby said, everything on the computer right now comes from this summer. In that data are casefiles, emails, forensic reports, and a decent spattering of paperwork.

“What next?” Tim asks Gibbs.

Gibbs spends a minute staring at the list in front of him, as Tim’s busy saving it into matrix one. “Email addresses?”

“Good. Okay, go find them, just like I did dates, but put in something unique to an email.”

Gibbs has to think for a minute on that, and then starts typing, he puts @ in instead of a date stamp, sees Tim approve, and hits enter. A minute later he’s got a huge list of email addresses.

“Okay, let’s sort them alphabetical, and then save this. Next?”

“Case numbers.” Gibbs is starting to sound a lot more sure of himself, and a bit happier about this.

“Got him, Abby?” Tim asks. He’s thinking he’s going to go visit Jimmy, get something to eat, and then go talk with Leon about Kevin, Dynamics, and Hellersons.

Abby smiles, and kisses both of them. “Yeah.” She’s got her hands on Gibbs’ shoulders as he slowly typing his search in. “If you’d been born twenty-five years later, you’d be a natural at this.”
“So, I hear you managed to get all but one of them, without a single bullet being fired,” Jimmy says as Tim heads in.

Tim glances around, he doesn’t see Allan.

“Allan?”

“No active cases right now. We’ve got Mr. Matt handled for the time being. So, he’s on call today.”

“Tonight. You’re going to be on call tonight.”

“Tim?”

Tim explains to Jimmy what’s going to happen to Clemens, and how sometime around 03:00 he’s going to be getting the ‘come back to work’ call.

“So, might be a good plan to grab a nap down here?” Jimmy asks, looking at the cold steel table, and thinking about how it was a lot more tempting when he was five years younger.

“If you can swing it without anyone noticing. If you go home…”

“I got it.” Jimmy nods. “You okay?”

Tim raises an eyebrow; he’s been not thinking much about this, intentionally. “I really hope whoever does it is a good shot. Don’t want to die for this, and I’ve spent more than enough time in a hospital bed for three lifetimes, I don’t want to go back.”

Jimmy sighs at that. He hadn’t been thinking in that direction, but that’s very real, too. “And let me guess, you can’t wear a vest because you can’t know about what’s going to happen.”

Tim nods. “Yeah.”

“Shit.”

“Uh huh. Bleach is promising I’ll be okay.”

Another sigh from Jimmy, who’s feeling a lot less settled than he was five minutes ago. “Does Abby know?”

“That Clemens is about to die? Yes. That I’m walking him out? Yes. That not ever sniper is Gibbs, and they don’t all have perfect hit scores… That didn’t seem to hit her, and I didn’t feel like sharing my concerns about that with the pregnant lady. Gibbs was with her when we were talking about it, and he was looking comfortable, so… either his gut’s not firing, or he’s the one shooting. I don’t know. He says he doesn’t know what’s going to happen…”

“But he’d flat out lie about that if he needed to, even to us.”

Tim nods.
“What about… killing Clemens? You okay with that? Can’t we just dump him in Gitmo or something?”

“I caught a few seconds of Jarvis and Vance talking while we were in MTAC. Jarvis is going to ‘handle’ the wet works. If they’re pulling him in on this, Gitmo’s already been taken off the list, by the President.”

“That’s what happened to Deering, right?” Jimmy says, eyes narrowed.

“Best I’ve been able to find out, yeah. Jarvis showed up with authorization from the President, and Gibbs took care of it. This time Jarvis is handling it again, so for all I know he had a chat with Gibbs once I got back to my office. Or maybe he’s bringing in someone else.”

“Think he’s going to do it himself?”

Tim raises a hand indicating he’s got no clue. “Or he could be doing it himself. However it works out, I’ve got to walk this guy into a sniper’s crosshairs and pray he’s a decent shot.”

Jimmy squeezes his shoulder and gives him a hug. “You’re going to be okay.”

Tim snorts a bit. “Don’t put it past Jarvis to hurt someone to sell a story.”

“I don’t, but by now, he’s got to know how dead he’d be if something happens to you on this case.”

Tim inclines his head at that. Jarvis being ultra-extra-dead if he gets hurt doesn’t help him.

“Where are you taking him?”

“Out the back, to the handicapped entrance.”

Jimmy thinks about that. “Who suggested that? Jethro?”

“Bleach.”

Jimmy’s nodding, seeing it in his head. (Of all of them, he probably spends the most time in the back lot, because that’s where the loading bay for Autopsy is.) “That’s a good spot. Decent vantages from three different rooftops. Minimal wind because the buildings provide shielding. If you were fast, you’d be able to get down the south building and out the rear exit before anyone could get the property shut down. Bleach knows what he’s doing.”

Tim’s got one eyebrow very high. “Bleach knows?”

Jimmy shrugs. “Since he got hurt, we haven’t been doing any hands on shooting, but every few days he’ll send me an address, and I scout it on my way to work. Show him where I should be, how to get in and out, and what sort of rifle and bullets to use.”

Tim nods at that. “Oh.”

Jimmy inclines his head a bit. “Guess we’ll get to see if Jarvis can deliver on his promise.”

“Yeah.”
Tim heads up to Leon next.

“McGee,” he says, as Tim’s heading in, waiting for what comes next.

“Housekeeping. Beyond firing Kevin, and explaining to NASA, IAEA, and wherever the other one was from what they were up to, what do you want me to do with our leaks?”

“According to legal, they didn’t, technically, do anything illegal.” Leon looks annoyed by that. “If they had been reporting back to ‘Rogers’ about anything other than the software he was ‘selling them’ they’d have broken the law, but…”

“Clemens knew what he was doing inside and out. Hell, for all we know, he might be the guy who wrote that exception into the law.”

Leon sighs, his eyes narrowing. “If they’d done it for free, we wouldn’t have been able to fire them, either.”

Tim shakes his head. “So, greed has one upside?”

Leon nods. “I’m getting regs written that specify that without express permission of at least two directors, that all employees cannot talk to any outside vendors about how we use their equipment.”

“Thanks.” Tim thinks for a moment. “And we’re both granting each other permission to talk to outside vendors about equipment we might need or want in the future.”

Leon flashes Tim a tight smile. “Go get Dorney back to work.”

Tim nods. “Hellersons? Dynamics?”

Leon shakes his head. “As of right now, Roger Clemens is an outside informant, voluntarily helping us with an investigation. No charges have been brought against him, nor had he done, or is even suspected of doing, anything illegal.”

“Ah.” Tim has to admire the level of verbal hair splitting that’s going on in that sentence. Every bit of it is factually true, and completely misleading. “And, later?”

“I have a feeling he’ll be done helping us around 10:30 tonight.”

“Earlier than I expected.”

“Suspects can be held for 24 hours without charges. People who come in and voluntarily help us leave when they’ve given us all they can give.”

“Ah.” Tim nods, feeling his lips tighten. “And, I’ll just, walk him out…”

Leon nods. “Yep. I wouldn’t walk him all the way to his car, if I were you.”

He nods again, wondering what, exactly he’s being told here. Something about the location of where it’s going to go down, probably. Tim sighs, loudly, not really liking this. “No problem. Just to the back door, and then he’s on his own.”

“Exactly.”

“And, I suppose quietly going through every other employee at Hellerson’s would be a good plan, make sure none of the other janitors own their own little micro-countries?”
Leon nods again.

“Okay. I’m on it. I’ll give Dorney a call, and then be back around nine.”

“Good plan.”

Dorney’s got them in a safe house that’s actually on the way to Tim’s house, so he tells Dorney to let the others go, but to sit tight with Kevin and wait for him.

Once he’s there, he sends Dorney out to wait on the porch, and sits down at the kitchen table with Kevin. Small kitchen, hasn’t been decorated since the 80s. The Formica is starting to fray and warp, but safe houses don’t have to be posh, they just have to hold people somewhere away from the people hunting them.

Kevin looks scared. “What happens now? Are you going to arrest me?”

Tim shakes his head. “It’s not illegal to be a victim of fraud.” How fucking dumb could you possibly be! Tim wants to yell. He takes a deep breath. “Your employment with NCIS is over. You will not be allowed back into the building to get your things. I’ll make sure they get mailed to you. You will not be getting a severance package. You will not be getting hired by any other Federal office, ever. Right now, if I were you, I’d be thinking of setting up a consulting firm, or something where no one will check with us for references.”

Kevin’s nodding, looking very sad, but also like he expected this.

“I need your ID and your key card.”

Kevin nods again, and hands them over. “My car’s in the parking lot.”

“Dorney will drive you to it, and escort you from the premises.”

“Okay.” Kevin sighs again. “Anything else?”

“Yeah.” Tim shuffles around in his go bag and finds what he printed up. “Non-disclosure agreement. All of this is part of an ongoing investigation. If you talk about ‘Clem’ and your deal with him or ‘Dynamics,’ we will come and arrest you. Anyone asks, you were fired for taking kickbacks.”

Kevin winces, but that’s true enough. He reads through the agreement, signs one copy for Tim, and keeps another for himself.

Tim nods and stands up.

“I’m sorry.”

Tim shakes his head. “I am too, but it doesn’t matter. Be smarter next time, Kev.”

Kevin nods as Tim heads out.
Being home in the middle of a work day feels weird to Tim, but, in that it’s time with his daughter, who is actually awake, he’ll take it. They both spend an hour in the backyard, her working on her walking, him working on his stooping and grabbing a wobbly toddler.

By the end of the hour, she’s ready for her nap, and he’s thinking he might as well try to sleep again. Got to be back around 9… that means leave 8:30, might be nice to eat before getting there, probably should get a shower and shave…

Yep, bedtime soon.

He’s hoping his body will go along with that.

It takes him a while to get settled. There’s something to be said for not needing to know. In fact, right now, he’d much rather not know about any of this. It’d be easier to sleep if he was just going to walk into work, do his thing, and then be told that they’re releasing Clemens. He’d be pissed about it, but he wouldn’t know what’s going to happen next.

Doesn’t matter. In a bit less than eleven hours, he’s got a show to put on. Gotta get ready to do it.

Being home when Abby gets in feels weird, so does getting a shower before dinner, and heading off after.

More weird, and less fun, is knowing he’s up all night, Abby’s sleeping, and he’s got no quality snuggle time until tomorrow night. (Though Abby reminded him the new bed is coming sometime tomorrow, so snuggle time will be all four of them. He is looking forward to that.)

He feels off, and probably because he hasn’t been touched enough lately.

It occurs to him as he sits down at his desk and starts checking the financials of the Hellerson employees, that four years ago, he could go months without more than a hug from Abby or a headslap from Gibbs. Entire weeks would go by and literally no one would touch him.

He’s fairly sure he’d start to go bonkers after a few days if no one was touching him, now.

“You again?” Clemens asks. He’s not looking so smiley now. In fact, his skin is a bit gray, and he’s looking a little sweaty.

At the time, Tim doesn’t think anything of that. He sees it, but doesn’t really notice it.

“Me again.” Tim sighs. “You are free to go.”

That gets a grin. “Told you!” Clemens says in a sing song voice.

Tim rolls his eyes. “Yes, you did.” He unlocks Clemens cell door. “Come on.”
They head over to booking, where Tim stands next to Clemens as he examines everything he came in with. His cell phone, his apple watch, his shoes, everything are in fine shape. Then Ruth hands over three empty pill bottles.

“Where are my meds?”

She answers in a precise voice, void of animus, “All medications are destroyed. We don’t know what’s in them, so we don’t vouch for them.”

Clemens looks alarmed. He’s been taking ‘his’ medication all day. “What have you been giving me?”

With the same dispassionate voice, Ruth replies, “We have a medical doctor on staff. I’m sure he wrote you a prescription for whatever it is you had in those bottles.”

Tim realizes what’s going on, and for a second he feels relieved. No change of him getting hurt by this. He’s finally really noticing what he’s seeing with Clemens grayish skin and sweaty brow.

Ruth nods and hands over an envelope. “This’ll get you through the night.”

Tim checks the envelope. Jimmy isn’t the prescribing physician. No one on staff at NCIS is. Tim doesn’t know what the pills are, but Clemens, even in a good mood, isn’t a perfect specimen of vibrant health.

Clemens glares at Ruth, but grabs the envelope, rips it open, shakes two pills out, and looks around for a drink. “Can I get some water?”

Tim takes the envelope, tucking it into his pocket, and says, “I’ll walk you to the fountain.”

Clemens is getting bitchy about this. “I’m going to sue you guys for the cost of those pills.”

Tim scoffs, pointing out the water fountain in the hallway. “Cry me a river, fuckhead, you make two thousand dollars a minute robbing me and putting my family in danger.”

That gets Clemens attention, and not in a good way. “And how is your family?” he asks, smile, cruel smile, back in place.

“Lovely,” Tim says, eyes narrowed. Clemens looked way too happy to ask that question, and that makes Tim feel cold. Clemens knows something, and he doesn’t, but it’s his job to act like he knows whatever it is.

Clemens smiles and then finishes taking his pills. “Now where?”

“Out, and after that, you can go to hell for all I care.”

“Oh, you’ll care.” Yeah, that sounds creepier than Tim’s comfortable with.

They walk a few more steps, and Clemens is sounding a little out of breath. Tim slows down slightly. “ Might want to work on your cardio some.”

Clemens doesn’t respond.

The rest of the walk down the hall is silent. When they get to the door, Tim holds it open, and Clemens looks at him like he’s been kicked. “My car’s in the front lot.”

“Sucks to be you.” Tim points to the far end of the back lot, and now he knows why he’s still taking
Clemens out the back way, and it’s not for the roof top vantages. The Navy Yard is not level. The back lot is about twenty five feet lower than the front lot. That’s intentional. Morgue, evidence, and the garage all have road access from the back, but visitors to the front can park and walk in on one level. “Down the lot, up the two flights of stairs, turn left, follow the sidewalk around the building, and there you are. Just three or four thousand feet out of your way.”

Clemens glares at him, but heads out the door, and starts puffing his way down the lot.

Tim lets the door shut behind him. He doesn’t watch to see if Clemens makes it to his car. He doesn’t linger at all. He immediately heads back toward his office. There’s a lot of work that still needs to be done clearing other Hellerson’s employees, and it’s time to do it.

An hour and a half later, he along with everyone else, hears the alarm that calls for anyone in the building with CPR training to get to the back lot.

He’s got CPR training, along with Brand. So, they head to the back lot, and at the top of the steps, lying in his own mess, is Clemens.

Tim’s not allowed to call time of death, but he more than knows when CPR is futile. He takes charge of the scene, points out how when they loose their bowels, they’re past saving, and then he calls Jimmy.

“How?” Jimmy asks. “I was just getting ready to go to bed.”

“Sorry to drag you out. Looks like Clemens had a heart attack trying to walk up the back stairs.”

Jimmy sounds pleased as he says, “Oh. I’ll be there shortly.”

“I’ll secure the scene.”

“See you soon.”

Jimmy and Allan stand at the top of the stairs, gurney beside them, looking down at Mr. Clemens.

“And now I understand why you told me to get to know the weight room,” Allan says.

Jimmy nods. “Tim, we’re going to need help. He’s got to be at least 350.”

Tim’s not looking happy about that. Among other things, he’s not wearing gloves or coveralls. “Let me…”

Jimmy nods, and Tim heads into Autopsy, grabbing one of the sets of coveralls, and gloves. He’s back a few minutes later.

Jimmy’s standing near Clemens head, and then steps to his middle. “Okay, Tim, you get the shoulders. Allan, feet. I’ve got his hips. Lifting with legs, not backs.” They all get into position, and Tim gets a firm grip on his shoulders. “One, two, three, up!”
Tim’s glad he didn’t drop the top third of Clemens. As it is, his arm and back are yelling at him for trying this, and his foot isn’t very happy, either.

It’s after he’s on the gurney, that Jimmy notices Tim wincing and holding his right arm. “Shit. I forgot.” Jimmy steps over, stripping off his gloves, and gesturing for Tim to get out of his coveralls.

Tim does, rolling his eyes a bit, as Jimmy checks his arm, hand, and wrist.

“Say something next time.”

Tim shrugs at that, and winces a bit, his shoulder isn’t happy with that.

“Are you hurt or just sore?” Jimmy asks as his fingers gently palpate Tim’s shoulder.

Tim almost shrugs, but stops in time. “I’ll find out soon.”

“Get back to your office and sit down. I’ll be there with ice packs soon.”

“I can get my own ice.”

“Yes, I know, but I want you on your ass, not walking around. Rest, Ice, Compression, Elevation. We miss the first one if you’re off looking for your own ice.”

“Yes, mom.”

Jimmy glares a bit at Tim, and Tim smirks at him.

Allan watches.

Jarvis is sitting in his office when Tim limps in. Tim shuts his door, deciding that anything Jarvis wants to say to him doesn’t need to be overheard by Connon or Brand.

He’s looking calm, and cool. Relaxed, his tie is loose and the top button of his shirt is undone. It’s possible he’s just stopping by after a casual dinner, or something like that.

Tim doesn’t think that’s likely though.

“Clayton?”

“Tim. I take it everything is handled on this end?”

Sit rep. Sure, he can do that. “Just about. Ajay Khan is still in the wind. We’re not sure what we’re going to do with Dynamic Infrastructure—“

“Already handled. We will not be renewing their contract to provide us with computer services.”

“Ah.” Tim wonders if the next guys will be any better.

“We’ll keep them in play for the next eight months, so each agency can back trace the various worms and find out who is using them.”

Tim nods, that makes a certain level of sense.
Jarvis stands up.

“Any chance anyone will notice that Jimmy didn’t prescribe those pills?”

Jarvis shakes his head. “Hearts are tricky little things. Sometimes a rhythm just goes a little wonky. Try to do something too strenuous when it’s already having a hard time, and that’s the end of you. Dr. Palmer will find all the signs of a fatal ventricle arrhythmia. A fairly common end for middle aged men who are that overweight.”

Tim nods at that, too. Jarvis looks at him, smiles briefly, letting Tim know there’s another man who’s likely going to have a very similar end soon, and then turns toward the door before saying, “Anything else, McGee?”

“The bill you say passed, how good are those defenses?”

“Good enough.”

Tim scoffs. He’s seen who Clemens recruited from prison. “According to Abbi and Fornell, a good third of those guys we just put back in prison are hackers. They’ve all got the idea now. At least some of them will try. I’d rest easier if something had gone through about making sure laws actually got read.”

Jarvis smiles his viper smile. “70,000 page long bills are a feature, not a bug, Tim. They are intentionally designed to be unreadable. That way, when certain issues arise, they can be quietly amended without the messy work of repealing bills or taking laws all the way through the Supreme Court.”

Tim winces.

Jarvis inclines his head. “Clemens isn’t the first man to notice that design feature. He is the first one who wasn’t somehow attached to Congress or the Senate. It’s a job perk, McGee. Benefit you and yours, and make a deal flow more smoothly. There’s a reason why the line item veto has died every time it’s been brought up. Every President knows that this is how the game is played; he’d like the ability to kill the other side’s perks. They will not give him the power to strike their teams perks. And he won’t go public with it and give up the power for his side to write their own perks in.”

Tim shakes his head, feeling… like he wants to be disgusted and shocked, but isn’t. After the last few months, he’s got no faith in the idea that anyone he doesn’t personally know isn’t screwing everyone else right left and all over the place. But, there’s still more than 500 people and all of their staffs. Someone should have said something, right? “I’d figure someone would have made a fuss over that.”

Jarvis turns back to him, looking a bit exasperated at how innocent Tim’s being. “It’s not in the ‘Welcome to Congress’ handbook. The only people let in on this are either around long enough to be trusted, or test the theory out on their own and find it works. Either way, they don’t talk.”

“So, you’re saying that if anyone tries the exact same ploy that Clemens used, literally walk into the building and log in as a congressman, and they’ll be able to do the same thing.”

Jarvis smiles a bit. “They’re going to have a much more difficult time walking in, and a much more difficult time getting in from the outside.”

Tim sighs. “That’s something, I suppose.”

“The vetting process for anyone who works in a Federal office building just got a lot more
“So, only the politically well connected will be able to screw the system with impunity?”

Jarvis nods, smiles, and heads out.

Tim wonders why Jarvis tells him things like that. He’s not sure if Jarvis is hoping he’s the man who might do something about it, or if he’s trying to turn him into a politician, the kind of man who looks the other way when it happens.

“Was that Jarvis I saw heading out?” Jimmy asks a minute later, standing there with a collection of ice packs.

“Yeah. He was checking in to see if everything was done.”

Jimmy points to Tim’s chair, and gets his arm propped up at his desk, putting ice packs on his wrist, arm, and shoulder. “Better?”

“Probably.”

Tim nods at the door, and Jimmy heads over to shut it. When he comes back, Tim says quietly, “Do you think it hurt?”

“Tim?”

“Supposedly you’ll find out he had ventricle fibrillations that killed him. Does that hurt?”

Jimmy shrugs. “Not sure. Some people report it feel like a worm jumping around in their chest. Some say it feels like a sledge hammer to the chest. Or a bad cramp to the chest and arm.”

Tim nods. He wonders how it’ll feel to the Admiral. Jimmy’s not quite following for a second, and then he is.

Tim’s got the blinds on his windows closed. Jimmy steps closer, kneeling in front of Tim, his hand on Tim’s left, finger gently tracing over his palm. “Do bullets hurt?”

“Only if you don’t do the job right. Kate didn’t hurt. She was gone before she hit the ground.” He squeezes Jimmy’s hand in his. “If it’s up to you, aim for the head.”

“You want him to go fast?”

“I don’t want there to be any shot of him getting back up again.”

Jimmy nods. Tim squeezes his hand, and gives him a quick kiss. Jimmy nods and stands up. “Better get back, before Allan starts wondering if I got lost.”

Tim smirks at that.

“You sticking around?”

“Yeah. It should look like I was here for more than seeing Clemens off. So, I’ll go through my stuff,
head home early.”

“Don’t forget the eye doc.”

“Thanks. Maybe next time you see me, I’ll have glasses.”

Jimmy smiles at that, shaking his head, unlike Tim he knows that the magic glasses fairy does not produce them in minutes, and heads off.

It’s not been an exhaustive search. Thorough enough to know that as of right now, everyone at Hellerson’s looks okay. No one’s paying for a mortgage that costs more than his entire paycheck, for example.

Tim stretches and gets up, foot and hand twinging as he shifts. Yeah, moving literal dead weight wasn’t a great plan.

He’s been trying to be careful about not going straight through, hours on end, staring at his computer. Try to ease the eye strain a little. So, time to get up, move around some, and decide if he’s going to just power on through, or try to get home, grab a nap, and then head to the eye doc.

He ambles over to the snack station, looking at the cookies, thinking about them for a moment and then shaking his head and getting himself another decaf coffee.

It’s almost two, so he decides to go check in with Jimmy, see if he’s got Clemens wrapped up.

Another slow mosey, and he’s in Autopsy. “Director McGee?” Allan asks as he heads in. Tim notices that he and Jimmy are wearing extra protective garb, and Tim decides to stay back.

“Just wanted to check in and see how it’s going. Everything okay?”

“About like usual, just heavier,” Jimmy replies. “Got a question for you, did anyone attempt CPR on Clemens?”

Tim shakes his head. “He’d already wet himself when we got there. Skin was cool. Wasn’t breathing. I said he was dead and began securing the space.”

“Good,” Allan replies.

“Good why?” Tim asks.

“I got the list of medications he was on. Assuming he was taking it properly, it shouldn’t have been a problem, but Clemens was HIV positive,” Jimmy adds.

Tim winces, and wonders if that’s why a sniper didn’t get called in. Then he wonders how Jarvis could have known something like that. He decides he doesn’t need to know. Probably another ‘perk of the job.’

“Once the lab runs his blood, we’ll know if he was managing his condition well,” Allan says.
“And if you guys have to keep up the hazmat routine?” Tim asks.

“Exactly.” Jimmy says. “The anti-retroviral treatments are good enough that, if he was using them properly, he shouldn’t have any of the virus in his bloodstream.”

“Cause of death?”

“Same as with the viral load, waiting on the lab to run his blood, and right now, no one is on,” Jimmy reports.

“Really? I thought Abby made sure someone was always on.”

“Zelaz called out sick. So, bright and early, I’ve got goodies waiting for Abby.”

“She’ll be thrilled. Want me to take them up?”

“Uh… Don’t you have work to do?” Jimmy asks.

Tim smiles a little. He’s not feeling smiley right now, but it’s not a deadpan line, either. “My doctor told me I should let my eyes rest and not spend hours and hours staring at the screen. I’m taking his advice and getting a break.”

Jimmy nods to Allan, who grabs the test tubes, places them in the evidence bag, and signs them over to Tim.

From there, Tim heads to the lab, and as promised, it’s silent. Technically, he’s not supposed to have a key to it, but he does. He unlocks and lets himself in. Quiet, dim, the glow of many indicator lights and the fridge and freezer make sure the lab isn’t completely dark.

And even if it was, he’s spent more than enough time in here to navigate by feel alone.

He deposits the blood, signs off on them, and gets ready to head back to his office. Somehow he doesn’t start moving immediately. He stands there, in the cool, dim light, thinking of a lot of good, and some bad, memories down here.

Then he takes two steps over to what used to be ‘his’ lab computer. The black hearts are gone from the keyboard, and the mouse is on the wrong side. (Everyone up here is a righty, now.) His fingers ghost over the keyboard, but it’s not the same. Not on his own. Not in this space that’s larger and filled with physical reminders (he’s looking at a shot of Corwin’s kids) that this isn’t “their” space anymore.

Tim sighs. He flicks on the computer, and checks Khan’s BOLO. Nothing. That’s his next big job. Once the intranet is secure, it’s time to hunt him down again. Only took him four months the first time, three years the second, and God alone knows this time.

He turns off, logs out, and locks up.
Tim heads back to his office, sipping his coffee, walking past the sofa… That’s an option, set level two of his background checking of the Hellerson’s employees into action, go crash on the sofa, nap until he’s got to get up for the appointment, and hope that he’s awake enough to actually see what that new bed can do tonight.

That’s sounding like a decent plan. He’s feeling rather pleased with it as he turns into the doorway of his office and hears, “This is a nice setup.”

Tim jerks and rubs his eyes again. Of all the places they could find Khan, sitting behind his desk, at his computer, at 03:30 in the morning, wasn’t on the list. (He makes a mental note to extend BOLOS to the security staff at Federal buildings.)

Tim sits down in the visitor’s chair of his own office, and says, “They’ll let just anyone in here, won’t they?”

Khan shrugs. “I’m not afraid to admit that when I see a good trick, I use it. And Harvey had some great tricks.” He keeps looking at Tim, and Tim’s fairly sure he’s been studying his office to get to know him better, too. “You were right; I do know you.”

Tim nods. “Yeah. Saw that in your message. How’d you find out?”

“Harvey told me how much of the system you’d killed, and told me to make it work again.” Khan smiles a bit. “I did, and a little googling besides. It’s on your CV that you’re a Beaver, class of ’01.”

“You would have been 2000, right?”

Khan nods. “Until a group of assholes in the Forensic Computing department found me. It’s also in your CV that you’ve got a degree in Forensic Computing. And a commendation from MIT for leading the team that caught me.”

Tim smiles.

“So, we’ve been dancing our whole careers?”

Tim smiles a little more at that.

“Guess what, Tim, dance stops here.”

Tim’s amused. “Think so, Ajay?”

Khan smiles, leans forward, and slides a thumb drive toward Tim. “Yeah, I do.”

Tim stares at it for a second, and then Khan stands up to let him access his computer. He grabs Deep Six, and heads over to the chair Tim just vacated. He pulls the other one across from it, and slouches down, feet up in front of him, and gets ready to start reading.

“Comfy?”

“Yeah. So, you’re a bestselling novelist, too? Think I’ll like this?” He holds up the book.

Tim inclines his head. “A lot of people do.” He touches the thumb drive with his index finger. “I take it you think this’ll take a while?”

“It’s three gigs of data. The highlights alone should take an hour. Though, once you get to the first one, you’ll be busy for a bit. No problem. I can wait.”
Tim plugs it in, glances up at Khan, who of course, encrypted whatever this is. He smiles briefly at Tim and then gets reading, and Tim goes to breaking into the thumb drive.

Only takes ten minutes. Khan’s annoying him, not trying to keep him out, and once he’s in, and reading the first bit, he feels his breath catch. “Shit.” Now he knows, at least, he thinks he knows what Clemens was really asking when he asked how Tim’s family was.

Khan looks up, his voice sounding mock disappointed. “Exactly. It’s distressingly true that there really is no honor among thieves. So, bomb squad, is that your first call?”

Tim’s nodding as he pulls his phone. Fornell’s got the best guys for that, so he gets the ring. “All five floors were wired to blow.”

“McGee?” Fornell sounds mired in sleep, and Tim doesn’t blame him, but he need Fornell awake, fast.

“I’m staring at the blueprints for Clemens’ building, and he’s got all of the main ventilation shafts stuffed with shape charges.”

That does the trick. Fornell’s awake now. “Shit! I’m on it.”

“Good. Is everyone still evacced out?”

“No, we let them in again this morning. SHIT! I’m supposed to be off today!”

Tim can sympathize. It’s Wednesday. The wedding is Saturday. Tobias probably does have a ton of stuff completely unrelated to crime and nastiness that he’s supposed to be doing right now. “Yeah, I know. Talk to Jimmy about it; he’ll commiserate. We’ll do everything we can to get you to your wedding.”

That gets Khan’s attention. “Who’s getting married, not Silent Sam? Movieboy? Him and the Hot Israeli, right?”

Tim glares at Khan.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Wendy’s a saint for putting up with me,” Fornell gripes.

“Yes, she is. But you know how fate works, it wants to see Jethro give a speech more than screwing your wedding.”

Fornell laughs a bit, but it’s grim sounding. “I’ll let you know what we find.” Then there’s just a dial tone in Tim’s ear.

Tim looks over to Khan. “I take it that was supposed to go off while the building was full of cops?”

Khan smiles at him. “What, no thank you for saving your life?”

Tim shakes his head. “Not in the field any longer. I watched the raid from here. But thank you very much for saving your own life.”

Khan smiles at that, too. “Saving your buddies, then. The moment he left, I left, too. The rest of those twits were happily buying the BS about being bulletproof. Not me. Someone looks at me like that, and I know there’s trouble. And I found it. And I took care of it.”

“Then why didn’t you stay?” Tim asks. “Didn’t want to show off your brand new Citizen of Clementine badge?”
Khan shakes his head. “You’re not letting anyone walk. The lawyers will wet their pants laughing at those laws. That’s why I got out before you guys got in. As for the bomb, sure, I thought I had it disabled, but I wasn’t going to bet my own skin on the idea that I didn’t miss anything.” Left unsaid is how, if the bombs had gone off, Khan would have never turned up again. He’d have just vanished, and they would assume he was dead. He’s here now, because he was good enough to kill the trigger. He’s here now, because he wants something.

“The only thing Harvey hated more than cops was other criminals. Prison fucked him up, big time,” Khan adds.

“Tends to happen when you go down for something you didn’t do.”

“That’s not the half of it.”

Tim looks disturbed. “Khan?”

“Just keep reading.” This time the smile on Khan’s face is hard. He doesn’t enjoy that bit of the story.

This thing, if it ever got out, is a nightmare. It details everything. The whole plan, how Clemens did it, step by step instructions for anyone else who wanted to it, along with a good dozen other things they didn’t catch him at. (Like, for example, how when he got the message from Kevin that Tim had pulled the worm out of the NCIS code, he’d just strolled on in in his Janitor’s uniform, with his spiffy ID, swept some floors, cleaned everything up, and plopped a bug… Tim gets up, slips his finger under his door, and there it is, tiny little bug, grabbing everything that happened in his office and the Dungeon. And there’s supposedly three more lurking around the office.)

It’s the perfect recipe for how to break down the system. It’s Fight Club, but done by someone who actually knew how a computer and the legal system works.

And then it got worse. Maybe not worse. Worse from a PR standard.

Clemens funded his work through money laundering, selling data, and smuggling. He even listed all of his accounts and clients which, given they’d erased his immunity laws, made things easier to deal with. Tim’ll be forwarding that on, and a very large group of people are going to be spending a decent chunk of time in prison, very soon.

But the hundreds of millions of dollars stolen from the government, all of that he’d given to charities. A lot of HIV/AIDS stuff, but also post-prison rehab charities, sentencing reform crusades, cancer centers, four separate scholarships for doctor and nurse training, hospitals all over the world. Tim rubs his eyes at that. There’s a fifteen page long list of names of people on Indiegogo and the like who’s medical bills he paid for. He sighs, there are thousands of people who owed their life to the money Clemens stole.

And then it gets worse. There’s the twenty page rant, with back up documentation, of how he was wrongfully arrested, how he was abused in prison, by the guards and other prisoners, (why the guards died in prison or were shot isn’t a mystery to Tim, not anymore) how he went in a nineteen-year-old virgin and left HIV positive.

“Awful story,” Khan says when Tim’s looking away from the screen, staring at his wall. “Anyway, as I mentioned before about honor and thieves, those bombs, and his manifesto were supposed to go off at the same time. If you keep reading, you’ll see the bits where he’s talking about how ‘they’ll kill
me to keep me quiet.’ I’ll admit, I thought he was crazy with that. But, boom, down he goes on the back stairs. I waited an hour to see if anyone would come before calling the front desk and telling them there was a body on the back steps. He had you dead to rights.”

Tim keeps his face blank, though he wonders where Khan was that he saw Clemens go down.

“I did some digging in a few online law libraries today. Looks like some bits of the law that were there yesterday have all vanished. Like those laws never existed. I bet the rest of the guys sitting in his apartments were really surprised to see that.” Khan smirks. “Aren’t you one of the white hats? Aren’t you supposed to obey the law, not rewrite the damn thing to suit yourself, let alone kill inconvenient people? How are you going to sleep tonight, Tim?” Khan’s enjoying this way too much.

“Naked, in a huge bed, with two beautiful women wrapped around me,” Tim says, deadpan.

Khan laughs, and then smirks, sure it’s a joke. “Well, good for you. Beautiful women will cure most of what ails you, and right now, you’re looking a little mopy. I hope to find a few myself, soon.”

Tim’s tired of this. “What do you want?”

“A lot of things, but from you, I’ll settle for one. NCIS, in its raid on whatever it is you’re claiming those apartments were, found Ajay Khan dead. I certainly would have been if I hadn’t decided to do a bit of snooping on Wallbanger’s computer.”

“Speaking of honor and thieves.”

Khan shakes his head. “Mercenary, not a thief. I deliver what I’m paid for.”

“So what got you snooping?”

“Like I said, mercenary. Mercenaries, when they get too expensive, are expendable. So, when Wallbanger shows up claiming to be you, slinging his BS about having changed the law, I know I’ve gone from the useful side of the equation to the too expensive side. Which means, I shut up, do what I’m told, gratefully, and look for how to save my own ass.”

Tim smirks at that. Khan certainly read that situation correctly. “And you want a deal with me?”

“No” Khan shakes his head. “That would indicate we’re negotiating. I’m telling you what you’re going to give me.”

Tim’s eyes narrow. “You think after what happened to Jim Hunt I’ll give you anything?”

Khan taps the book in his hand. “Interesting things, words. You’re not a bad writer, especially for a tech guy. Most of us can’t build a sentence to save our lives, you know?”

Tim’s not amused.

“What happened to Jim Hunt.’ Passive construction. Not, what I did to Jim Hunt, because you know I didn’t do anything, personally, to him.”

“You killed MTAC when he was in the field.”

Khan waves that off. “And they killed him, I know. I also know that I was in prison for a lot of things, but murder, attempted murder, accessory to murder, manslaughter, and all of those variations aren’t on the list. And you know why. I can see it in how you’re watching me. Your man got sent
where he didn’t belong, without the backup he needed. He wasn’t trained for that job, he didn’t know how to do it properly, and a power surge, an EMP, hell, if the guys he was working with had thought to bring a jammer, he was screwed. I just happened to hack you guys at the wrong time for him. And the only reason I could hack you guys was that your C-team had written your defenses. His death isn’t on me.”

There’s enough truth to that statement that it burns. Jenner didn’t make sure his guys were ready for field ops, and Hunt didn’t have the backup he needed to get in and out clean. He didn’t have the personality to lie his way out, either. And as for the C-team crack. Well, Hunt wasn’t even in the ground before Tim started rewriting the security wall around NCIS.

“Still not seeing why I give you anything. You just watched what happened to Clemens, so you know I’m not quite the sweet-innocent white-hat you thought I was. I can stick you in a hole, and we’ll keep ‘looking for you’ forever.” And right now, that’s sounding really appealing to Tim.

Khan smiles at that, too. “And I’m not stupid. Like I said, I’m a mercenary, I know exactly how much I’m worth. I’m worth the information on that drive. If I don’t access that information every six hours, and tell it to go to sleep for another six, every single news organization with an email account will get it. And right now, with Wallbanger barely cold in your morgue, that’ll be a hell of a story.”

Tim eyes close and he inhales deep. He knows when someone’s got him by the balls, and Khan’s got him. He’s been here, with Tim, for three hours, and god knows how long before that. He’s got to go soon, or this gets out.

“If I let you go, what happens?”

Khan smiles. “I’m gone. Like I said, we’re done. No more dancing for us. I’m getting the hell out of anywhere you’ve got jurisdiction.”

“I’ve got jurisdiction worldwide.”

“Uh huh.” Khan’s not impressed. “Yeah, there’s a huge US Navy presence in Paraguay. But, maybe I’ll aim for somewhere a bit more upscale. Switzerland is nice. Bit cold, but I’ll live. Not hard to find landlocked countries.”

“Navy and Marines.”

Khan rolls his eyes. “You worry about getting me out of here in time. I’ll worry about finding a place for myself.”

“I’ll figure out how you’re doing it, block your ability to get that information out,” Tim says.

“Oh yeah, I know. You can do it. Hell, if he’d been paying attention and not cackling about destroying the system, Wallbanger could have done it. But not in time.” Now Khan’s smiling, and if Clemens had had a glint of madness in his eyes, Khan is cold and sure of himself. He knows he’s got Tim, too. “See, unlike last time, even if you do hold a gun to my head on this one, I’m not going to tell. You can’t hurt me enough to get it out of me, not in time, and if you kill me, it goes live. You are well and truly fucked, Tim.”

Tim glares at him. That matches his own assessment of the situation much too closely for comfort. “I let you walk out of here, how do I know you’ll be the honorable thief and not go back on your word?”

“Mercenary, not thief. And not stupid either. I’ve been caught twice. You were behind both of them. I know retirement time when I see it. And lucky for me, Wallbanger wasn’t nearly careful enough in
protecting his own computer systems, so my nest egg just got a hell of a lot bigger.” Khan looks happy about that. “I head out of here, and for six weeks I’ll keep running my six hour clock. And then after six weeks, all of this information ends up nice and safe in your lap.”

“Why six weeks?”

“In six weeks, I’ll be so far beyond gone, no one will ever find me again.”

“Yeah, and a year from now, all of this will come spilling out.”

“You don’t get it. A year from now, it won’t matter. Today this comes out, and it’ll ruin you, your buddies, and break the entire system. Wallbanger’s just as dead as he said he would be. He’s got proof of what he did and how he did it out there, and your defenses aren’t ready. Every news organization in the US will be out there, and you’ll be testifying in front of Congress before you can blink, while every hacker on earth worth his salt will come up against you. And you and I both know you can’t build your defenses fast enough to win the battle.

“A month from now, it’ll be an unnerving footnote to a creepy case, but almost no one will notice.

“A year from now it’s a conspiracy theorist’s wet dream, but that’s all it is. Clock’s ticking down, Tim, am I walking out, or not?”

Tim shakes his head. “I’ll walk you out.”

Khan shakes his head, too. “The last guy you walked out is in your morgue. I only want to end up there on a report.”

Tim inclines his head, and lets Khan go.

So much for getting a nap before going to the eye doctor’s. Tim’s awake now. He scrolls up to the beginning of the list of Clemens clients, and starts taking notes. He’s not sure who’s getting this report. Leon, Jarvis… Fornell and Abbi… head of the CIA should know… er… He’s not certain, but he thinks the fourth name down is the Assistant Director of the CIA.

He recognizes some of the clients. Fornell’s going to be having a great time with this. He’s been hunting out Mafia moles for decades, and finding out that they gave up having men on the inside and have opted for software will make his job easier. Every drug cartel is on the list. More governments than he’d like to admit, friendly and hostile alike. Abbi’s ex-boss is on the list. Well, that also explains more of how their data got out.

He flashes a text to Diane, not expecting a response anytime soon. He knows she’s mentioned the name of her boss at the IRS, and he thinks he’s looking at his name, but he’s not sure about that.

He’s ten minutes into that when he has to stop.

He wonders if he’s got that look that Jake had. That punched in the guts seeing how bad it really is look. He’s not a child, and he’s not innocent, but he can’t feel like this was any sort of a win. Maybe tomorrow he will. Maybe some sleep and distance will help. But, as he thinks about this, thinks about Tony’s case with the pediatrician, thinks about what Abbi got into, why Bishop left NSA…
There are no rules. The law is, apparently, designed not to apply to certain people. He’s got a gray, disillusioned feeling, fairly sure that anyone on this list on the “right” side of the law is going to walk. Going to claim they were running a sting, or pull out a warrant showing they had a right to use this information to keep tabs on each other, or something.

He’s not sure what’s worse, that they’re on the list, or that Jarvis just told him that they’re supposed to be able to get on lists like this and get away clean. Hell, Jarvis probably has fifty guys right now busily re-writing laws right and left, making sure that all the right guys have the right protections in place.

He closes his eyes and rubs his temples.

He’s never been a huge ‘Law’ guy. Can’t work with Gibbs and be a stickler for “The Law.” You’ll burn out the first week where he’s cutting corners and skipping the protections that the accused get.

But he had believed in justice, and trying to be the man who works for that. Is anything they did today, yesterday justice?

He’s not sure. The prison guards that Clemens killed, they were all crooked. All on the take. Three of them had personally assaulted him. Tim knows all about wanting to kill the man who hurts you. Knows all about being powerless for no good reason, left to the mercy of people who didn’t want any good for you.

The cop Clemens killed framed him and put him away to make a bust. He didn’t care about law either. His gut said that someone was guilty, and he didn’t care who he had to crush to get his conviction.

It’s not comfortable looking too long into the dark mirror. Seeing versions of yourself, your co-workers, unconstrained by… he’s not sure. Inherent goodness? He laughs at that a little. Maybe. Maybe not. Gibbs didn’t used to care if he went home or not at the end of the day. That’s probably why he never framed anyone, he’s just kill them, and if it came back on him, it came back on him, and that was that.

Thin thread to base a moral code on.

Tim knows there’s more than that, but he wonders what he would have done if Gibbs hadn’t had that code. Tony had to leave Baltimore, because he had the guts to turn in his co-workers who were crooked. Tim’s not sure how he would have behaved if Gibbs had been truly ruthless.

No, he does know. Twenty-four-year-old desperate for approval McGee, he knows. He still knows. “Isn’t that illegal?” “Technically I’m not doing this and you aren’t seeing me do it.” How many variations of that has he said over the years?

How far would he have gone?

And now… Khan may not have killed Jim personally, but he’s not just a bundle of sunshine and puppies. He’s a dangerous man with dangerous skills. Dangerous man who saved his friend, his stepmom, and he supposes, in this family he’s collected, Fornell’s that crotchety uncle who shows up at family gatherings from time to time.

At least, he’s claiming to have saved… Tim glances at the thumb drive and grabs his phone.

“Fornell?”

“Kind of busy here, McGee.”
“So it really is wired to blow?”

“Wait, you didn’t make sure it was a real threat before dragging me out of bed?”

Tim rubs his eyes again. “Reliable source, just overthinking it.”

“Go to sleep, McGee.”

“Yeah, I should.”

Maybe he’s not a white hat. More than enough gray’s rubbed off on him over the years, but he’s not completely ruthless, either.

He thinks about how Jarvis would have handled Khan’s threat. And he thinks about how he will. Jarvis would have eyes on Khan, find where he’s gone, figure out when and how he’s telling that information not to get out, and then have him quietly killed.

Tim minimizes the window with Clemens’ manifesto on it, and gets to work.

He’s still feeling pretty gray as he makes one last stop before heading off to get his eyes checked. Up the stairs, and another flight of stairs, and one more, and then the elevator. He’s not back to all stairs all the time, but three flights is better than he was four months ago.

Leon’s just getting in as he’s getting ready to go. Tim hands the flash drive over to Leon. “Destroy it after you read it.”

Leon raises an eyebrow at him.

“Clemens wasn’t just a criminal. He had a whole manifesto right here.”

“What’s in it?” Leon asks.

“Among other things, him saying that ‘they’ll kill him’ because a man like him is ‘too dangerous to exist.’” Leon winces at that, well aware of where Clemens is and how he got there. Tim nods and continues, “It’s got the whole scheme, along with proof, of everything he’d done, and how anyone else with a computer and balls could do it, and two dozen other things, as well.”

“Shit.”

Tim nods. “We… I guess ‘lucked out’ is the best way to put it. I had to make a deal with a small devil to make sure this didn’t hit every media outlet with an internet connection.”

“That small devil, Ajay Khan?”

“Yeah. Jimmy’s doctoring the paperwork as we speak. I’ve got his prints, face, and DNA flagged. He gets on anyone’s radar and they go searching for him, they’ll come up blank, and we’ll grab him.”

“Think he’ll stay quiet?”

Tim shrugs. The ruthless man assumes the answer is no, and destroys the target. That’s not who Tim
wants to be. “I think in six weeks, I should start to quietly go hunting for him.”

“What happens in six weeks?”

“We get the original data file with all of that on it.”

“Does he know you’re going to hunt him?” Leon asks.

“I imagine he hopes I won’t, but expects I will.”

“Are you going to find him?” Leon’s understanding there’s more to this than he knows.

“Yes.”

“And then what?”

Tim shrugs again. “That building was wired to blow, and he was out of it when it would have gone up. He could have just let it go, let the manifesto go live, too. Burn us all. Kill Tony and Fornell and Abbi. If the manifesto went live while Clemens was in custody, we’d have had to go to trial, had to find something to try him with, had to deal with the whole mess in public…” Tim sighs. “Is that worth a pass?”

Leon shrugs. “I won’t order you to recapture him.”

“Thanks, Leon.”
Time Keeps Moving

Chapter Notes

And we're backtracking to Gibbs starting to use the computer for Tim.

The computer thing isn’t as bad as it could be.

Yes, it’s slow. Gibbs rolls his eyes and continues carefully typing. He’s slow. Fact of the matter is, he’s a bad typist. He just never really learned how to type, not the way Tim or Abby or Jimmy does with nine fingers and looking at something other than the keyboard.

He needs to see the keys, and he uses about four fingers, and he’s slow.

He’s got really nice penmanship. When he was coming up, all paperwork got filled out by hand, and it had to be legible or it was useless. So, unlike his kids who can type a million words a minute, he has neat, legible, functional cursive and printing skills. His signature is made up of actual legible letters, not just a wiggly sprawl.

And none of that matters anymore because nothing is done with a pen.

Hell, these days even Tony can type.

That said, it is really, absurdly, satisfying to see the little lists all pop up after he asks for them. And it’s nicely challenging to think up new queries. (At least, it’s better than staring at his pad of paper at home, staring at his pen, trying to think of his best man’s speech.) Tomorrow, or whenever, they’ll start putting the searches together. Today he’s looking through and finding the data from each computer.

“Tomorrow, say I’ve got all the dates done, then what?” he asks Abby, who’s writing up her own report. Gibbs would have to admit, he kind of misses the music. With the other techs working down here, now, there’s no more ear blasting music. Abby’s got earbuds in, and he can catch a faint hint of what she’s listening to, but it’s not the chest pounding thud that makes him feel at home down here.

“We put them in order, which’ll give us a timeline, and we’ll start to see overlap, which will be good. It should also give us some hints as to what we don’t have. Once you’ve got what’s going on in the winter on the NSA and Homeland computers, that should be a hint as to what we’re missing on the FBI computer.”

Gibbs nods at that. “I’m pulling names off of the case files right now. When I move onto the NSA and Homeland computers, I’ll add them in, see what comes up?”

“Yep. Detectives, suspects, and on and on…” Abby shrugs a bit. “For all we know this might be about one informant or something.”

Gibbs looks at the computer. Problem with a computer is that it doesn’t know what’s hiding in there, so it can’t show him by trying to hide it. His “gut,” all those years of honing a razor sharp BS detector, is useless for this. Still, he’s leaning toward ‘or something’ rather than ‘informant.’

“You might want to do the email search before looking for names. Find cases where they’re talking
to each other, and then go looking through casefiles for names,” Abby suggest.

Gibbs writes that down, it’s not a bad suggestion.

Then he turns on the next computer, grabs a new thumb drive, and begins building a new matrix.

Fornell’s done. He’s known it for a while. (That’s when he filed the paperwork for his retirement.) But he’s really feeling it today.

Today, he should be having a great day. He, DiNozzo, and Borin just led a raid that re-captured fifty felons without even having to break a sweat. No one died. No one got hurt. Right now, while they all think everything they’ve done is legal, they’re happily singing away about what they were doing for, “Collins,” “Wallbanger,” “Beam,” “Daniels,” “Walker,” apparently Clemens went to the local ABC store and just grabbed the name of any alcohol that was even vaguely appropriate, and made up some IDs for himself.

Fornell’s sitting back, just keeping an eye on… Hell, he’s not even sure who’s doing this interview. Anyone even remotely competent is up here right now, happily working on their interrogation techniques as these sad sacks with their Clementine Citizehships (and in some cases their lawyers) are patting themselves on the back with how incredibly clever they all are.

The only reason Fornell’s hanging around is that every single time they’ve handed over a computer with a link to the internet and told them to go find the laws in question, it’s been really, really fun to see the guys’ faces go bone white and their eyes bug out of their heads as they realize they’re going back to prison.

This one’s a money launderer. The technical aspects of what he’s explaining are beyond Fornell. (Though he supposes Diane would appreciate this.) He’s been offered a lawyer, but hasn’t taken one, sure he’s bulletproof. But, in that he’s offering a very detailed account of moving money between the man he called “Johnny Walker,” who “worked for the CIA,” and two Colombian drug cartels, and he’s got account numbers, off-shore shell corporations, tax havens in three countries, Fornell’s feeling like this is time well spent.

Or he would be. He should be. But he’s not, not really. He wants to be home, with his soon to be wife, spending time with her, getting ready for their wedding, and then (he smiles at the thought) their honeymoon.

And that’s true because he’s done. He’s paid all the dues he or anyone should have to pay. He’s earned his right to sleep soundly at night, knowing he’s made the world a better place, and now, he’s done.

When this interrogation wraps up, with… he checks the file, Jeff Heller, requesting a few hundred lawyers while sputtering about how he checked and those laws were right there yesterday, Fornell heads out.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket. “Hey.”

“Hi!” Wendy’s voice is gentle and warm on the other line, a little surprised to hear him right now in
the middle of the day.

“I can’t wait to get home.”

“Good, because I’d like to see you soon. Don’t like waking up to an empty bed.”

“I know. Didn’t want to leave, either.”

“Home for dinner?”

“Earlier. It’s almost noon, I’ve been on thirteen hours. None of these guys need me hovering over their shoulders. They’re not even breaking the suspects, just poking them gently and everything comes spewing out.”

Wendy laughs at that. “I haven’t had lunch yet. Meet me at Red’s?”

“That sounds great.”

Fornell hangs up, packs up his stuff, and heads to his car. There was a time when he never left a case until it was done. He’s sleep and eat at his desk, grab a fast shower in the gym, and back he’d go. Now, he’s perking up, moving faster, spring going back into his step as he gets closer to home and further from work.

His official retirement day is May 1st. That’s a hair over seven months. He’s got close to three months of vacation time, too. He’d been thinking about holding them until after he retires and cashing them out, but…

He’s got money, not tons but enough. He wants time at home, with his wife. Tomorrow, he and HR are going to have a little chat about rearranging things some.

He’s been up since… Gibbs checks the clock, yeah, he’s been on for the last 30 hours straight. Gibbs is tired. His typing speed has gone from slow to glacial and error filled. The third time he sets a search and nothing happens, because he didn’t actually hit the enter key, he’s done.

Abby must have noticed him growling at the computer (and his fingers) because he feels her hands on his shoulders.

“Come on, let’s get you home.”

He growls at that, too. She’s not going to let him drive himself home, not this tired and with pain meds in his system, so someone else has to stop working to get him from point A to point B.

He narrows his eyes and shakes his head a bit.

“Don’t worry, I’m not quitting because you are. Leon’s been on since 1:00. He’s heading home to crash before tonight, too. I sent him a text asking if he’d give you a lift.”

Gibbs sighs and nods at that. “Okay.” He saves his work. Twice. (Just making sure he got it right the first time. Plus he wouldn’t put it past that infernal machine to eat his work for kicks.) And then gets up, gets hugged by Abby, and heads off in search of Leon.
He keeps eyeing Leon as they drive back to his place. Whatever it is that’s going to happen to Clemens, he’s not in on. Just like Tim, he saw Jarvis show up, but last time that happened, Vance picked him as the guy to take care of the problem.

And he’s not that guy anymore.

Too old, too tired, too wounded. He doesn’t even want to think too hard about how much it would hurt to try and lie on his stomach propped up on his elbows right now. His back screams at just the idea of it. He’d do it if he had to, but he doesn’t.

Leon’s used to all of Jethro’s flavors of quiet, and this one doesn’t feel good.

“You okay?”

Gibbs shrugs. “Tim gonna be okay?” He caught Tim mentioning he was going to walk Clemens out, and wondered about that, but Tim seemed okay, and he didn’t want to upset Abby… He’s not feeling anything on it, but checking is always good.

Leon nods. “Yeah. Jarvis has this. He’s doing a bit of research, and then he’ll take care of it. It won’t splash back on us, and McGee’ll be fine. I’m not risking the guy who broke this open just to take out one bad guy.”

“You sure?”

Leon nods.

Gibbs nods back.

They drive a few more miles. “Makes you feel old, doesn’t it?” Leon asks. “Makes me feel old. Hijacked the law.” Leon shakes his head. “He got them passed. Nothing he did was illegal.”

“Gives you a headache just thinking about it.”

Leon nods. “Murder rate’s down. Theft, assault, all of the old usals, besides rape, are all down. Now it’s terrorism and computers. I keep saying I’m staying on for another ten years, but I’m not sure how useful I’m even going to be for another five.”

Gibbs nods at that. They’ll always need someone like him for dealing with the old crimes, but… you can’t intimidate a computer. You can’t trick it. You can’t ask it a leading question. You have to speak its language and know how to read what it’s telling you and then ask exactly the right question, or you get nothing.

“Given what we’re getting into, I’m not even sure if I want to be here for another five.” Leon shakes his head. “No. Pretend I didn’t say that. That’s tired talking. The fight’s not done, and we keep going until it is.”

“Fight’s never going to be done.”

Leon smiles a bit at that.

When Gibbs gets home, he sees a box waiting for him on the front porch. He smiles at that. He’s
been waiting for it. The world might change, and his place in it may shift, but some things hold true.

Wood is wood is wood. The feel of it under his hands, shaping to his will, that’s real.

It’s his mini-lathe.

He picks it up, heads inside, pats Mona on the head, takes the lathe down to the basement, and rips into it while Mona watches from her doggie bed in the corner.

It doesn’t take long to set it up, takes even less time for him to grab a small piece of scrap, set it in place, and turn it onto the lowest setting, just to get a feel for it.

He sighs with pleasure, this is sweet. It’s got a nice steady motion, and he just kisses the wood with the tip of his chisel, and the wood begins to spiral off in beautiful swirls.

He took a pottery class with Kelly once. Some sort of kids’ art thing. Both of them sitting at the wheel, working together to make a vase for Shannon. It was pretty droopy and lopsided, but they had fun with it. Doing it, he could see how that was something he could have gotten into. Steady motions, hands touching gently, shaping something real out of the ideas in your head. He liked it a lot. He didn’t like how expensive it was to set up a proper studio, and when it came down to it, he’s more a wood man than a clay man.

But this is almost like the best of both of those arts.

He’s not a lathe master, or even close, yet. But when he turns it off, he’s got a nicely swoopy chunk of wood. Might make a decent… He’s not sure. It’s too wide and short for a fork handle. Maybe a drawer pull? Eh… It’s not supposed to be functional in and of itself. It was just a test of concept.

He’s feeling a bit more centered as he heads up to bed. Tired. Very tired. But he knows that the side of the bed that he’s not sleeping on, the one with the pillow he’s snuggling into, has a lot to do with being able to get himself settled so quickly.

He smiles a bit at that, and hopes she’ll want to have dinner tonight. But maybe she’ll just crash. Either way, few more hours, he’ll wrap around her, and sooner or later, he’ll get to hear how her half of this job’s gone.

He slept through dinner. Abbi got home at some point, but he didn’t wake up for it. He really doesn’t bounce back from all day on, no rest time the way he used to.

He grousing about that as they get a shower, and she smiles, (looking tired herself) and pokes him gently, and then says, “No coffee. You haven’t had any caffeine in a month.”

That makes him feel a little better about not being able to run the way he used to.

Then it makes him feel really good about how long he did go. Last time he did thirty hours on without help… He’s never done thirty hours on without help. Even in the Marines they had little ‘pick me up’ pills (he prefers not to think about what might have been in them) to keep them going when they absolutely had to.

“You going in again today?” Abbi asks while they’re dressing.
“Hope so. Go beat on the computers some more.”

She smiling at that.

“What?” He thinks he knows what that smile is, but he wants to hear her say it.

“Even on a computer, you look really happy to be working a case.”

He nods. “Yeah, it feels good.”

“You get done with those, how about you come into work with me and start looking through everything my conspirators were working on. God knows how many cases we need to reopen.”

Gibbs nods at that. “How did the raid on the computers in Boston go?”

“Good.” She tucks her blouse in. “You want breakfast here or at the diner?”

“Diner.”

Gibbs waits, not sure if she’s keeping what she found close, or just switching gears to start working on her hair.

“They had eyes on us, the TSA, the FAA, and Amtrak.”

“What were they smuggling?”

“Both of them claim not to know. They just ‘pull thumb drives out, put new ones in, and then leave them in a locker at the local bus station.”

Gibbs isn’t buying that, at all. “TSA and Amtrak… that sounds like people.”

She nods. “People who can travel openly, but aren’t supposed to. Might be drug mules, but that’s really sophisticated. And Boston’s not a hub for that.”

“Boston harbor to… rail and sky?”

“Some combination of that. I’ve got Manner breaking into the computers.”

“Didn’t Tim pull in his own A-team for that?”

“Manner is my A-team.” They both look a bit unsettled by that. “In his spare time, I’ve got him eyeing the rest of my techs, seeing who’s actually up for the job. From the looks of it, I don’t have anyone who is competent and uncorrupted on staff. Meanwhile Omagi’s sitting on the bus stop, waiting for someone to grab some thumb drives, and then he’s going to follow him back to wherever the thumb drives go next.”

“I’ve got asking one more computer to spew out lists, and then gotta get McGee back, or ask Abby, what I do next with all the lists.”

“Compare them, right?”

“Yeah, but I need to know how to make them do that. Once I’ve got the phrase, I can keep punching it in over and over with different questions.”

Abbi nods.
“First up, email addresses. Let’s see who’s talking to who about what.”

Abbi smiles, that sounds like a good search to her.

By that point they’re both dressed and ready, so diner, breakfast, and off to work.

Tim’s heading out as Jethro’s heading in. And, even from the far side of the parking lot, he can see the black cloud hovering over Tim, so he detours and meets him a few feet from his car.

“You okay?”

Tim shakes his head a bit. “Not great.” He rubs his eyes. He’s been doing that a lot recently, and he looks really tired. “And I’m about to be late for my eye doctor’s appointment. Leon can get you up to date. He knows what’s going on, or if you feel like waiting around, I’ll be back when I can.”

“Want me to give you a lift?”

Tim thinks about that for a second and says, “Sure.” Tim’s being very quiet as he sets up the GPS, and Gibbs starts driving him toward the eye doc.

“Glasses?”

Tim nods. “Jimmy’s guy. Eyes keep going buggy and my head hurts a lot.”

Gibbs remembers those days. Probably about when he got to this age that his close up vision started to go.

Another mile of driving, Tim being quiet.

“How bad is it?” Gibbs asks.

He sighs. “On the surface, it’s everything we could possibly want. It’s fucking Christmas, all wrapped up in a nice and tidy bow.”

Gibbs waits. Tim’s still quiet.

If Tim’s this quiet, he’s got to get it right in his head before he can talk about it, so Gibbs tracks toward problems he can help with. “You eat anything?”

Tim shakes his head. Gibbs nods. “After the doc, we’ll get you fed. Maybe you’ll want to talk then.”

Tim shrugs. Maybe. Maybe by then he’ll have a better idea of why this is hitting him so hard.

Or maybe, after a very quiet appointment, and a more quiet breakfast, Tim’ll still be sitting there, looking gloomy, not really talking. Gibbs gets the actual facts out of him. He learns about Khan’s midnight visit, and how this really is Christmas. Once Tim’s got that information spread to the people
who need it, it’s all down to the sweep up. Like what Abbi’s doing.

All over the place.

At every major agency, and with people from all over the world.

Gibbs feels a momentary pang of annoyance when Tim tells him what was on that drive. Not just because Clemens case was handled so badly, but also because it means there’s no reason for him to go back to NCIS and keep going through the computers.

Then Tim suggests that he help with going through the data that Khan dropped on them and that perks Gibbs up. He can do that. One pile of bad guys or another, he can deal. And maybe, if he’s got the base document, he can get a better feel for what he’ll find in Abbi’s mess.

The first hour back in the Lab, Gibbs spends just playing with Khan’s data set. He starts by looking for guys who bought information and laws, and makes a list of them to go over carefully. There’s not a lot of overlap on that, and the ones he does tend to find are people who seem to be keeping an eye on regulatory issues. (Everyone who bought information on the EPA was also buying laws, for example.)

He recognizes some of the names (there is a Scott Benoit on the list, and he’s really hoping that’s not Jeanne’s brother.) but most of the law buyers are ‘legitimate’ business/lobbyist/politicians. He’s guessing that the ones looking for modifications of import regulations are likely importing more than just legal goods, but… Okay, sure, it’s possible that Xavier Jimenez got the amount of Spanish Iberico Jamon de Bellota (Gibbs has to look up what the hell that is, ham apparently) that could be imported into the US doubled so he could sneak something else in, but from what he can tell Iberico Jamon is actually more expensive per ounce than cocaine, so maybe he just wanted to bring in more ham.

There’s a distressing number of… to Gibbs’ mind… godawful stupid crap in this. He shakes his head, (he’s spending almost as much time googling the law exemptions people were buying as he is pulling information out of the data) apparently if he tried to sell any of the little wood toys he makes for the girls, he’d have to get some sort of massive anti-lead testing done, it’d likely run him several hundreds of thousands of dollars, and he’d have to do it every few years. Apparently buying Clemens’ services was a hell of a lot less expensive than that, because four little toy makers banded together and got themselves an exemption.

He sighs and decides to get out of checking out who bought what laws. He keeps reading this, and he’s going to start thinking Clemens might have been the good guy.

Lucky for him, that’s just about the time Tim heads in, still not looking too happy. He spends a few minutes cuddling with Abby, head on her shoulder, petting Sean, and then hands Gibbs a piece of paper with twenty names on it. He signs to Gibbs, Government employees buying the FBI feed. Look into it?

Gibbs smiles. This is good work.

He’s feeling pretty good when he wraps up for the night. He’s tempted to stay on all night, but Abby pokes him out of the lab as she heads off, reminding him that he’s got some stuff he’s got to do at home, and maybe he should get on it.
And she’s right. It’s Wednesday, he’s put it off almost as long as he possibly can.

So, he drives home and gets to work on his best man toast.

The fact of the matter is that Gibbs has been dreading Fornell’s wedding. And no, not because it’ll be the ghost of exes past from hell, with him, Fornell and Diane all in the same room with dates (bride in Fornell’s case.) The case from hell means they’re already doing that on a somewhat more regular basis than he’d like.

And not because he doesn’t wish Fornell well and want all the happiness of a good marriage for him.

It’s that public speaking is only slightly lower on his fun things to do list than get shot. (He rubs his shoulder gently and sighs. Maybe on par with getting shot. Depends where the shot is and how he ended up with it.)

At least, when you get shot, no one expects you to get up and talk about it.

And they especially don’t expect you to be glib and charming about it, let alone funny.

He’s not having nightmares about this, but he’s also still got three nights to go.

Three nights… two technically. He’s taking Fornell, his brothers, and Wendy’s sons out for a bachelor party on Friday night. That’s not nearly as much time as he’d like. Especially if this is going to be good.

He’s thinking about that as he heads into the house. Abbi’s car isn’t in the driveway. With any luck she’ll be home… He gets a text from Abbi, Omagi’s got the next link on her case, so she’s flying up to Boston tonight. So much for home soon. He’s on his own for the evening.

He’s on the back porch, tossing the tennis ball for Mona with his right hand (working on building up his strength and range of motion) with a blank pad of paper on his lap, and a completely blank brain in his head. He’s got nothing to say about this.

What do you say at the second wedding of the guy who’s first wedding was to your pregnant barely ex-wife?

You say nothing about that, because even Tony doesn’t have the delivery to make that into a wedding appropriate joke.

This should be easy. On one level it is, he remembers Abby, Tim, and Tony’s speeches. It’d be easy enough to cobble something out of that: remember first time Fornell and Wendy met, talk about him being soppy about it, another comment about falling in love, wish them well, done.

There is a boilerplate version of this, and he can do that. He’s actually somewhat afraid that that is what he’s going to end up doing.

Hell, just standing up and talking for three minutes or so, about anything, will put him well past everyone’s expectations for this. But, even with expectations so low they’re in danger of melting from the heat of the earth’s core, he’d still like to do something genuinely good.
After two hours of playing fetch with Mona, and not writing a speech, he jots down the boilerplate version. He looks at it, sighs, and folds it up, tucking it into his wallet. If nothing else comes up, he’s got something.

A boring something.

Mona lays her head on his lap, and he pets her ears.

Maybe food and lathe time will help.

It does. Some. Wood under his fingers always helps. Getting to play with the different speeds, seeing how pressure, blade shape, wood type all work helps. Realizing that at this speed, with a lathe, sandpaper becomes a cutting tool is fun.

By the time he’s done with that he’s feeling like he’s got a plan in place. He hopes it works. Worst comes to worst Fornell’s disappointed and doesn’t pick him for his best man for his next wedding. Gibbs smirks at that. Unless Fornell and Wendy renew their vows at some point, there’s not going to be a ‘next wedding.’

The thing he didn’t notice is that the lathe is loud. Okay, he noticed it. Hard not to notice it. He’s right next to it and it more growls than purrs. He didn’t get why that might matter. When he finishes up, there’s a message on his phone. It’s the jeweler. Abbi’s ring is done and ready to be picked up.

“You’re looking better today.” Stephen says to Gibbs as he heads in.

Gibbs nods. He’s not feeling very chatty, but Stephen likes to talk, so he mentions that he’s healing up slow and sure. And he is. He can’t wait to start really moving around again, but he can drive himself around now, so that’s a start. And he doesn’t need the O2 tank unless he tries to go too far or too fast.

“So, you want to see it?”

No, I’m here twenty miles out of my way just to blather on first thing in the morning.

Stephen nods, smiles, and gets the drift of Gibbs’ facial expression.

A moment later Gibbs is holding a small, black velvet box. He flicks open the lid and his breath catches. There’s a slithery warmth that slips through him as he sees it sitting there, pearl almost
glowing against the velvet, the mother of pearl simultaneously looking like water and smoke. He touches the stone, almost expecting it to be warm, but of course, it’s not. He feels himself smiling, and looks up at Stephen and says, “That’s beautiful.”

Stephen inclines his head. “That’s what I do.”

Gibbs nods and grabs his credit card.

When he gets out, he realizes he’s got a significantly more interesting speech to plan than Fornell’s Best Man’s toast.
Occasionally I have a ‘soundtrack’ to what I'm writing. If any of you are interested in hearing the music that goes along with this bit, go find "Hot Gates" by Mumford and Sons. It's especially relevant for the bit that begins with, "I told Jarvis..."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tim’s tired and fried and just… not in a good place, when he leaves Leon. This one’s hitting him on several levels, and he just doesn’t like it, at all.

He doesn’t like Khan out there. Given how many of his friends and loves would have died if Khan hadn’t killed those bombs, he doesn’t like Khan in jail. He doesn’t like Khan, and all the shit Khan’s got him thinking about, period.

He doesn’t like Clemens. Nothing about that case is good.

He doesn’t like Jarvis coming in and… and he’s not even sure entirely what that was. Is he being dared to do something about this? Is he... being tested? They know he’ll shut up and take one for the team if a case can’t be made and the price is right. Is he pushing further, harder, seeing what Tim’ll do? Seeing how far Tim’ll go for the team?

Bigger question, besides Jarvis, who the hell is even on “this team?” More important question than who, does Tim even want to be on a team that does shit like this?

All of that’s whirling around his head as he leaves the Navy Yard, and, walks right into Gibbs, who he hadn’t noticed was lurking around.

So, between that, and the bad mood, and how tired he is, he does let Gibbs drive him to the eye doctor’s.

On the upside, he’s mostly just got eyestrain. His vision really isn’t that bad. His distance vision is still fine. His midrange vision is still okay. But up close… Yep, it’s glasses time.

Apparently if you start spending ten to fourteen hours a day looking at a screen, especially, say, after fourteen years of a job that frequently involved hours and hours and hours of not looking at a screen, your eyes cope for a while, and then they start yelling at you.

The eye doc suggests that not reading or working on a computer for a few days might be a good idea. Instead of cursing, Tim laughs bitterly.

“Not an option?” Dr. Reynolds asks.

He laughs again. “I’m the Director of Cybercrime for a Federal Agency.”

Reynolds nods a bit. “So, you’ll want rush delivery on the glasses.”
Tim nods.

“Look, they’ll help, but just like any other strain, if you don’t rest, you’re not going to heal up.”

Tim sighs, feeling like he’s been hearing that a lot.

It’s while he’s looking through the frames that it occurs to him that Jimmy’s got Harry Potter glasses. (Okay, technically, he and Abby noticed that a while ago, and they have a quiet running joke about how Harry James Potter decided he was done with Britain, done with being famous, hopped the pond, and found a quiet life out of the limelight after the war was over. He’s personally counting the days for Molly to get interested in Harry Potter so he can tell her that her Daddy is actually Harry Potter. Then he’ll point out the glasses and the pickled frog green eyes, and tell her he’s got the wand hidden at work, and that’s how he gets the bodies to tell him what happened.) And, (and this is a new thought) Gibbs has the Dumbledore half-moon specs, as well.

He’s smirking about that, glancing over at Gibbs, who is wearing his glasses right now as he reads on his phone, his sparkly blue eyes and silver hair putting Tim in mind of possible Halloween costumes, and he wonders exactly how many tranquilizers he’ll have to slip Gibbs for him to get an especially awesome Halloween for the kids in about eight years.

Tim rubs his eyes again. He’s hit the point where he’s tired enough he’s getting silly. Though silly is preferable to feeling in a funk, so he’ll take it.

And he manages to hold it as he tries on different frames, feeling… They don’t look bad or anything, but… He’s not a glasses guy. That was the only line between him and the complete and utter nerds when he was a kid. At least he didn’t have glasses.

He’s got them… getting them, now.

For a moment, he thinks of the scene in Major League where Wild Thing (or whatever the character’s name was) gets the ones with the really big black frames and the little skull in the middle. He smirks at that, too. Abby’d be pleased by something like that.

Yeah, really too damn silly if he’s thinking along those lines.

Okay. Getting serious. Not thin round frames because he’s not getting the same damn glasses Jimmy has. (Plus, he thinks they look stupid on him.)
So he pokes around some more, trying different options. Finally he settles on two of them, both are somewhat square shaped. He gets one for home, thicker, black plastic frames, so if one of the various small people in his life grab a hold of them they won’t be instantly destroyed. (This is part of the reason why Jimmy wears contacts at home. Molly mangled two pairs before he decided that popping his contacts in as soon as he got home was a good plan.) For work, he’s got lighter ones. Thin frames, light silvery-blue, but round cornered squared off lenses.

*Rhomboïd.* That’s the word for the shape he’s looking at. He shakes his head again, gonna be a long day. He probably should get a nap, but he’s got to get back onto the sleeping at night schedule. Maybe he’ll get an hour off this afternoon.

The clerk eyes the frames when he brings them up, tells him they’re good choices, gets him measured for them, asks if he wants the lenses to go dark if he’s outside, and he decides why not on that. He reads outside sometimes. And then she tells him that they’ll be ready for pick up in three to six week, and that little bit of decent mood he was able to grab a hold of vanishes because another month of rubbing his eyes and feeling like they’re going to fall out of his head isn’t making him happy.

“Three to six weeks? Dr. Reynolds said something about express—“

“Yes, sir. That is the express service.”

Tim blinks slowly. “There’s got to be a faster way to do this.”

She shrugs at him. “They’re custom made lenses. Designed for the frames you’ve picked out, and your personal eyes, and with the anti-glare coating, the scratch resistant coating, and the light sensitive glass.” Then she points to the far wall. “Traditional reading glasses, feel free to try some and see if a pair works for you.”

Tim stalks over, quietly grumbling about this being a massive racket and that there has to be a faster way to do this, and didn’t they used to have places in malls that did glasses in twenty four hours, and how the hell does Jimmy put up with this crap, when a hand lands on his shoulder and he gets the sense he may be grumbling a bit louder than he intends to as Gibbs gives him a gentle squeeze.

Tim grabs the first pair that has a tag that matched his prescription, not caring what they look like, and heads back. A minute later, he’s signing a credit card receipt, and hoping that his eyes are going
“Gonna tell me about it?” Gibbs asks as they’re sitting in the diner, Tim getting some breakfast, Gibbs having coffee. (Apparently this is his second time here today.)

Tim’s already been over the basics. What happened. How. Why. So he shakes his head. This one’s gnawing at him, but he can’t touch what exactly is getting to him. Maybe it’s just having his schedule upside down and not enough snuggle time. So, instead of trying to talk about it more, he shakes his head.

Elaine sees he’s in a funk, too, and she’s extra gentle with him. He smiles a bit at her, enjoying the pampering (and the scrambled eggs, turkey sausage, and strawberries.)

“What happened. How. Why.” Gibbs having coffee. (Apparently this is his second time here today.)

Tim’s already been over the basics. What happened. How. Why. So he shakes his head. This one’s gnawing at him, but he can’t touch what exactly is getting to him. Maybe it’s just having his schedule upside down and not enough snuggle time. So, instead of trying to talk about it more, he shakes his head.

Elaine sees he’s in a funk, too, and she’s extra gentle with him. He smiles a bit at her, enjoying the pampering (and the scrambled eggs, turkey sausage, and strawberries.)

“Home or NCIS?” Gibbs asks as they go back to his car.

“NCIS.”

“Sure?” Gibbs is giving him the, you need a nap look.

“Need to be able to sleep tonight, too. And I’ve got… God… Probably two full gigs of people buying Clemens services. You remember the name of Diane’s old Boss?”

Gibbs shakes his head. “Head of the IRS.”

“I’ll google it. I think his name was on there.”

Gibbs winces at that, but it matches the rest of the news out of the IRS in the last few years, so he’s not surprised. “Gonna talk to her?”

“I texted early this morning. Haven’t heard back yet. I’ll try again when I’m back in there.”

Gibbs nods. Then another idea hits. “That’s just like the other stuff you had me doing, right?”

“Yeah. Put the data in a computer, ask it questions. So, you can sort by name, or by office, or date…”

Gibbs looks at him. Tim nods. “Yeah, I can give you a copy of who was buying what. What do you want to do with it?”

“Start finding the conspiracies. They wanted that information for a reason, why?”

“He’s also got a list of different laws he modified for people. That should help, too.”

Gibbs nods. He’s got some ideas going. Then something else hits him. “Any for us?”

Tim rubs his eyes again. “Uh… Not that I saw, but I’ve only been able to give it a quick glance.”

He’s fairly sure that Gibbs doesn’t have any idea how big a gig is. “Who are you thinking?”

“Jen, Grenouille…”

“Out of the picture now.” And Tim’s hoping they were both dead long before Clemens got this fully up and going, but he’s not sure yet how far back this list goes.
“I know, but…”

Tim nods. “Might explain how Trent Kort… Actually, the CIA had people on his list. I bet NSA does, too. They’re probably legally.” Tim’s got his sarcasm amped on legally, but drops it and reins himself in, “using it to keep an eye on the rest of us.”

Gibbs nods a bit. He can see at least three legitimate reasons why you’d do something like that. (All involving cover IDs and or selling the appearance of being a double agent. Sometimes you work with the bad guys to catch other bad guys or to make yourself look like one.) And he can think of more than a few illegitimate reasons for it, too.

Tim nods at that, and finishes up his breakfast.

---

Exceptionalism forgives everything. Tim’s thinking that as he’s sitting at his desk, looking at the raw data in front of him. Right now he’s sorting people into groups by who will have jurisdiction over them. So, for example, his first search, people buying information on the FBI, turned up close to 300 names.

From what he can tell about 280 of them are out and out criminals. At least, 280 of them are not in the Federal Employee Database.

The other 20…

It’s possible the other 20 think the FBI is up to something hinky and they’re keeping an eye on it, without going through official channels, because official channels make things messy, start turf wars, and alert whoever you’re looking into that you’re looking into it. It’s possible they’re just good guys doing their jobs and hoping to catch the bad apples and…

Tim’s not feeling able to swallow that bullshit.

Not today.

But… hell, he’s done this. Literally. He has personally sat his ass down, hacked friendly government agencies that he thought had information they needed and wouldn’t share or someone at that agency wasn’t playing for Team Good Guys anymore.

He sighs at that. What would Gibbs have done if he couldn’t have done this for him? Found someone else. He never would have gotten here if he couldn’t have done this sort of work. Some other guy who could have done this would have spent years getting teased by Tony and told to do the impossible by Gibbs.

It feels deeply surreal and unsettling to suddenly understand where Manner and his love of The Law comes from.

He stands up and stretches, easing the aches in his shoulder and arm, blinking a little, noticing his eyes and head don’t hurt (as much). These might not be custom glasses, but they appear to be helping.

He forwards 280 of the names directly to Fornell. The other 20 he adds to a different list. This one written with pen, on paper. This is the list that’ll be handed directly to different people and checked into quietly.
Tim makes a copy of that list and goes over to the Lab, where Gibbs is working on the computers, and Abby’s running trace. A quick hug and some petting perks him up a little, and handing over that list to Gibbs, seeing him smile as he’s got a mystery to get into. That feels good.

But it doesn’t shake the deeply unsettled feeling as he goes back to his desk to see who’s buying information on the CIA.

“Someone didn’t get his nap today,” Jimmy says when Tim’s glaring at everything and snaps at Abby as they’re laying out dinner.

That gets the glaring aimed at Jimmy, for a second, then it reminds Tim to quit being an asshole. It’s not any of their faults that he’s bummed out. “Sorry.” He shakes his head, steps closer to Abby, sees if he’s forgiven, her eyes narrow a bit but she nods, and he kisses her. “Really long day.”

“Jimmy had one, too.” Abby says, pointedly. Tim’s not the only one who was at NCIS all night.

“Jimmy got his nap,” Jimmy adds, sweeping in to defend Tim.

Breena hops on Abby’s side. “Shouldn’t you be all celebratory today? Bad guy’s been picked up. Yay! Not grumpy bear with a thorn in his paw.” (Abby nods along. She knows he’s off, has felt it from the few times he’s hopped into the lab, but there’s off, and then there’s making snide comments about why the hell the fork has to go on the left side of his plate, he’s a goddamn lefty for God’s sake, and it’s annoying as hell to reach across his food to put the knife in the hand that cuts.) The idea of arguing with two unhappy wives, who are both ganging up against you (especially when you’re being an ass), hits Tim as a potential downside of their foursome.

“Jimmy didn’t have quite the long day I did. But, yes, I’m sorry.” Complete capitulation looks like the wisest course if this isn’t going to blow up. (He picks up the fork and moves it to the right side of the plate himself. He’d really just been grumping along for the sake of being grumpy. Not like the fork hasn’t been on the left side for every single other meal he’s ever eaten that involved sitting down at a table with set places.) “That was snide and snippy and uncalled for.”

Abby nods, liking that better than the kiss. “So, what was your long day? You’ve been off since this morning, but…” But he hasn’t said what’s up, because he didn’t want to talk, or even sign, about it at work. She knows at least some of what Gibbs was doing, because she was helping him work on compiling searches, but, other than seeing the little gray cloud hovering over Tim all day, she hasn’t been able to get into it deeper.

But now they’re home, and getting ready to have dinner, and, now’s the time. So, as they eat, he tells them all about Clemens, and about the deal with Khan, and all of Jarvis’ crap, and… And by the time he’s done, none of them are looking very chirpy, either.

“I’m not stupid. I know it’s not all good guys and bad guys and that one team’s on the right side and another’s on the wrong one and all, but…”

Abby’s stroking his shoulder, and Breena says, “You feel like you just pulled back the curtain and got to see the face of the Great and Powerful Oz?”

Tim shrugs a bit, that’s part of it. That’s definitely it with Jarvis. But he also pretty much already knew that part, so…

His mouth starts moving and words start coming out before his brain is fully engaged. Kind of like
free writing. Free talking. “Or, like the scene in Empire Strikes Back where Luke sees his own face in Vader’s mask…” The other three are looking at Tim, really startled by that idea. “What Clemens did… That’s the Dark side version of Gibbs, or… me…” He looks at Jimmy. “Us. What we’re talking about doing with the Admiral…” That’s the connection his brain was fighting hard against making, and when he says it out loud, he starts to feel a little better. But, having made the connection, he’s got to deal with it now.

“He didn’t just go against the people who screwed him over,” Breena says. None of the rest of them are comfortable with the connection Tim’s drawing, either.

“That’s why it’s Dark side. Everyone who might be responsible, and anyone like them… He went to take out the whole system that hurt him. But, even if he had just gone after the people who hurt him. Say he killed the men who raped him. They gave him HIV. Back when he got that news it was a death sentence.”

Tim glances at Abby and Jimmy, each one having a part of this puzzle. Jimmy nods, stroking Abby’s hand. “Abby got the blood work back to us. He took his med properly and had his viral load controlled. No discernable levels of HIV in his blood, now.”

“Good.” No shot of anyone coming in contact with a stray virus and running into trouble. Not a likely issue, but still, good to know. “But in ’98 or whenever it was, they basically told him he’d been raped and slowly murdered for a crime he didn’t commit. Not that it’d be better if he had been selling drugs, but…” Maybe a little less free talking, he’s going off on tangents. “If anyone had the right to revenge, he did, but if he did take them out, we’d still hunt him down and put him in prison, again. Why do we get a pass for that, and not him?”

“We don’t, Tim,” Breena says. “And it is different, for Gibbs, for us… You know what the Admiral did. If you could arrest him, try him, toss him in jail, it’d be enough, wouldn’t it?”

Tim nods. But he notices that Jimmy doesn’t, vehemently doesn’t, and Abby’s not looking cool with that either.

“And Hernandez.” Abby may not be sold on just trying the Admiral, but she’s very invested in not being Clemens, and, more importantly, Gibbs not being Clemens. “I went over that whole case when I matched the bullet. His family was paying off everyone. Mexico was never going to extradite him. As long as he stayed on the far side of the border, he would never see justice for what he did. Bodnar…” The revenge they all helped with. “You think he took out Eli without the backing of powerful people in Israel? Hell, Orli might have been behind it. If we hadn’t grabbed him, he would have just vanished, never to be seen again. We’re different because we take this step when the system fails.” Abby says it before she realizes that Clemens is basically the poster child for the system failing, but she does see it as soon as she says it, so she starts adding onto that idea. “He didn’t try to get his record cleared. He didn’t sue the state for wrongful imprisonment. He didn’t lay charges against the men who abused him. He got out and decided to tear everyone and everything down, and that is not the Dark side version of you or us!”

That helps some. He scoots closer to Abby, lets her hold onto him, and pet him. That helps more. But he’s not convinced.

“And Jarvis? Why are we working so hard to protect something like that?” Tim asks, still feeling gray. Lighter gray, but still gray.

That’s something they don’t have much of an answer to. After a moment Breena says, “That’s a good question. I mean… If justice matters… If it’s not just about who’s on what team and making sure power stays in the “right” hands, should we be just sitting here, knowing what we do?”
“No.” Jimmy replies. “But, we’re low on options for fixing it.” He eyes Tim. “You kind of killed the proof of that, and if you resurrect it, those guys you grabbed get eternal get out of jail free cards. The stuff Jarvis was talking about, those laws got passed, they’re completely legal. Not like we can arrest senators for sticking some sort of get out of jail free passes for themselves and their buddies into different legislation that passed. And if you start deleting right and left… you don’t know what got sneaked in and what got put in intentionally… so, if you and Jake get into the database and start cutting chunks out, you have gone to the… okay not the Dark side, but that’s probably further on the vigilante path than any of us are comfortable with. So, what do we do? The press would want more than just your story…”

That starts to perk Tim up. “Maybe I can find proof.” He stands up and goes to his phone.

After a minute Jake, who’s also sounding pretty gray, answers, “Malloy.”

“Jake, we’re still on for Friday.”

“McGee?”

“Breakfast, you and me on Friday, we’ve still got stuff to talk about. Any little bits of laws that don’t look like they belong, keep looking for them.”

“Why? You’ve got the guy.”

“Jake, I’ve got a guy. Apparently, it’s not a one man show. 7:00 at the Diner?”

“Fine.”

He explains what he’s thinking with Jake, why they’re going to get together Friday morning, but the image of Luke’s (or maybe his own) face in Vader’s mask won’t leave him.

So, he’s not exactly a bubbling cauldron of fun that evening. And it’s okay. He and Jimmy are tired. So they’re mostly just having a quiet night. Dinner, clean up, trying out the new bed.

That’s nice. It’s huge. There’s room for all of them. As they’re putting sheets and pillows on, Tim grumbles a bit about how they got a new custom made bed almost as fast as he’s going to get new glasses and Jimmy chuckles a bit about welcome to the tribe. Tim snarks about he was fairly sure that once upon a time they had those places with the 24 hour service, and Jimmy nods, tells him they still exist, and as long as he doesn’t mind glasses that are, kind of, in the neighborhood of your actual prescription, going to one of those places is great, but when Jimmy made the appointment, he assumed that Tim wanted glasses that would actually match the eyes in his personal head.

Tim rolls his eyes a bit, and then flops onto the bed once they’ve got it made. Nicely firm and springy, room for everyone to spread out, yes, this was a good investment. “You sound like Tony talking about suits.”

He feels Abby settling in next to him, as Jimmy says, “Unlike glasses, you don’t get headaches and eyestrain from a suit that doesn’t quite fit you right.”

“Oooo…” Breena’s on Tim’s other side now, also laying out. “When we get a new mattress…”

Tim feels Jimmy joining them on the bed, and also hears a long sigh. “Yep. And we’ll make sure they make both of the beds for the house.”
Quite nights often involve reading or watching TV. Since they’re all taking advantage of the new bed that means reading. Tim and Abby intentionally do not have a TV in their bedroom, and hope to keep it that way. (Plus, it’s not like they don’t have a wide array of computer options if they want to watch something in bed.)

Tim could be reading. Not like he doesn’t have literally millions more bites of information to go through. Or a stack of reports (because it’s not like all the rest of the crime they deal with vanished when they got working on this job.) He even, technically, has some fiction he might get into. Latest Game of Thrones is out, and rumor has it John Snow isn’t quite as dead as he seemed. He could be writing some. There are some faint stirrings of story ideas for Gabe and Skye in the back of his head.

What he actually does is lie down, make a few pleased noises, close his eyes (might as well attempt to follow the doctor’s instructions), and ends up dozing. He’s not quite full on asleep. He’s aware of the people around him, hearing them talk a bit, low music, the sound of Breena’s fingernail clicking against her phone as she’s reading, the feel of Abby’s hand resting on his shoulder. Just the various soft sounds and sensations people quietly spending a night in.

He keeps seeing Luke’s face in Vader’s mask, and he stops skittering away from it. He makes himself deal with that image. His dreams are vivid and intense, sad but not scary.

Clemens bent his whole life into a mission of revenge. No friends, no family, no life outside of destroying what made him hurt. Tim can feel that. Can feel the seduction of it, how… rich and golden and satisfying it would be. But he’s already made the decision that’s not him.

As he’s dreaming, he can see the marks on his body, on his mind, all the ways his father tried to shape him, the mold he tried to push Tim into (symbolized by struggling with a Naval Uniform that doesn’t fit), and as he dreams he can see that what he’s asking Jarvis for… what Jimmy’s training for… That’s The Admiral still shaping, still controlling his life. (He doesn’t need a uniform that fits, he needs to get out of it all together.)

If he’s going to be free of the man, he can’t still be shaping their future.

It’s very dark when Tim wakes up, images of the knife he always carries slitting the uniform off of him still fresh in his mind.

Clock says it’s a bit before five.

He gets up slow and easy, not wanting to wake his bedmates. They all get kisses as he pulls on jeans and a t-shirt, and then, leaving a note on the dresser, he heads out. With any luck, he’ll be back in time for breakfast.

As Tim’s driving, he knows there’s two sides of this. One of them is going to be a hell of a lot easier to get into that the other, so that’s where he’s going to start. He finds himself standing on the front steps of a very nice house in an extremely expensive neighborhood in Arlington.

He’s not surprised to see in the pre-dawn murk that the lights are on downstairs.

He knocks, and after a moment, Jarvis comes to the door. “What changed, Clayt?”
If Jarvis is surprised to see Tim on his front step at 5:30 in the morning, he doesn’t show it. He’s also, unlike Tim, dressed for work. Tim’s starting to suspect that Jarvis might be some sort of machine. He’s cold enough for it, and, from what Tim can see, he functions on about two hours of sleep a day.

“Come in, Tim.” He steps out of the doorway, and ushers Tim into his home. “You remember Lt. James?”

Tim nods as James hops up from the sofa to greet him, about to shake his hand and then pulling back at the last second, remembering how bad his right hand was the last time he saw it and not sure if Tim’s up for that. Tim nods and offers his hand, getting an enthusiastic shake. “Oh, man, you’re looking so much better than you were the last time I saw you.”

Jarvis walks over to his coffee table and begins flipping over pieces of paper. Intel Tim’s not allowed to see.

“Amazing what four months, great surgeons, a better ortho, cutting-edge medical technology, and an amazingly good physical therapist can do.”

James is looking him over, blocking his view of whatever Jarvis hasn’t flipped over yet, saying, “Yeah. I’ll say.” He glances back, sees that Jarvis has everything covered, and says to Jarvis, “We’ll be meeting Mr. Biden at seven. How about I go on ahead and make sure everything’s set?”

Tim knows that he’s being told, subtly that his time with Jarvis is limited, but that he’s got enough respect to get to see him alone. Tim nods to James, letting him know he’s got the message, and then James scoops all of the papers up, tucks them into a large folder, and heads off. Once he leaves, Jarvis says, “What are you referring to?”

Start with the easy stuff, the politics. “When the Admiral attacked me, you made it very clear that no one wanted any light shed on that. That for political purposes it had to stay quiet. This time… I got the sense you were basically daring me to do something about this.”

“Are you going to?” Jarvis is looking interested, and, Tim’s not sure, but he thinks there’s pleasure in that look, too.

“Good question. What changed?”

Jarvis shrugs a bit. “You want some coffee?” he asks as he stands up, picking up his own cup, and leading Tim deeper into his home to the kitchen.

“Only if you have decaf.”

Jarvis shakes his head. “Not much purpose for that.”

“Yeah, I hear that a lot.”

“Then why drink it?”

Tim’s not interested in small talk right now. “Are you going to tell me, or are you going to flog polite generalizations off on me? I’ll just head off and stop wasting your time and mine if you’re not interested in talking.”

Jarvis smiles at that. “Politics shifts with the times. When you were hurt, Hillary was ahead, but not certain to win the nomination. Sanders still had a mathematical possibility of winning, and the states he was polling better in were still up to vote. Bill made your father an Admiral. He’s been a Clinton
partisan for more than twenty years now. Sanders already had the entire hardcore anti-war base, and
an edge with the social liberals. If Clinton were made to look bad by being associated with a child
abuser, that could have put Sanders over the top.”

“You were defending your man… woman?” Jarvis stops at the counter in a very tidy, very modern
looking kitchen. He pours himself another cup of coffee, and settles in, back against the counter, to
chat.

Jarvis nods. But Tim gets the sense that’s not the whole situation. He has a vague memory of
something along the lines of the Obamas and Clintons not loving each other, and Jarvis is, if
anything, Obama’s man… so… He’s still missing something here.

“She won the nomination. She hasn’t been in the Senate for a while, but she would have voted on at
least some of Clemens’ ‘laws.’”

Again, that cold, dangerous smile. “And she’s connected enough that she knows, and has used, the
perks of her office. It would be terribly damaging to her if some of the things she’s written into
several obscure laws were to come out.”

“And again, I’m getting the sense that you’re daring me to do something about it.”

“Will you?” Jarvis’ finger taps the edge of his coffee cup as he asks.

“You’re willing to sweep me almost getting killed under the rug to protect her. Now you want to
yank the rug out from under her, what’s changed?”

Jarvis inclines his head. “Nothing, not really. A miscalculation on my part of what each party values,
and how the game is played.”

Tim just looks at him, the idea that Jarvis doesn’t necessarily know what’s going on, is shocking to
him. Jarvis looks back, expecting Tim to put together on his own.

After a moment of not putting it together, Tim says, “Yeah, well, I don’t play this game, and I’m not
doing anything until I know who the hell I’m helping. Why are you shifting around?”

Jarvis sips his coffee. “Hillary wants to provide the world with an image of diversity. She does not
want her cabinet to look like an old boys club. I am, unfortunately, the definition of an ‘Old Boy.’
Jeb wants to provide the world with an image of going across the aisle and building coalitions for the
good of the country.”

“If she wins, you’re out of a job, and if he does, you aren’t?”

Jarvis lifts a hand, indicating that this wasn’t something he had expected. “That does appear to be the
way this has worked out. She’s ahead in the polls. She will most likely win if something big doesn’t
pop up.”

And now Tim’s fairly sure why the Naval Pension System noticed this and asked for Leon and by
extension, him, specifically.

“And Bush was a Governor, so he won’t be touched by this, at all.”

Jarvis nods, curtly. “Not this at least. I’m sure if someone were to go through the Florida legal system
with the same level of scrutiny, they’d find just as much creative lawmaking as you’ve found in the
Federal system.”
Tim snorts at that. It’s not comforting, at all. “So, if I do anything about this, I secure your job?”

Jarvis smiles a bit.

“Are you even remotely interested in the good of the country?”

“At this point in time, I’m lucky to be in a situation where the good of the country and my personal interests align. That’s not always the case. And before you ask for more clarification, I’m in it for the good of the Navy. That’s my job, and I’m good at it.”

Tim nods. He knows the next question is a longshot, but he’s still not quite ready to get to the personal reason he’s here. “Those account numbers Abbi got?” Unspoken context, did you send them?

“I know what they are and where they lead, but I didn’t send them.”

“Who did?”

Jarvis shakes his head. Tim can see he genuinely doesn’t know, but he probably has suspicions. “The man who wants to see everything burn.”

“What are they?”

Jarvis shakes his head at that, too. “Do I look like the man who wants to see everything burn?”

“No.”

Jarvis inclines his head. “Whoever in your little cabal is in charge of them better watch his back.”

“We don’t have them anymore. Once we couldn’t get into them, we lost them.”

Tim doesn’t think he flubbed the lie, but Jarvis doesn’t look like he believes that at all. “Is that all?”

Tim shakes his head. Now or never. “No.” He takes a deep breath, not entirely happy to let it go, but he doesn’t want to be Clemens, doesn’t want to be any more like him than he already is. “Don’t go visit the Admiral.”

That surprises Jarvis. “Are you sure?”

Tim sighs, no he’s not. But at the same time, he doesn’t like where revenge can lead. He might not be a pristinely sparkling Paladin clad in white armor and holy goodness, but… “Yeah. I’m alive, and that’s all I need.”

“And the rest of the deal?”

“That stands. I want the increase and I don’t want to see any budget cuts for NCIS.”

Again Jarvis flashes that smile. “Then you better think twice or three times about doing anything with what you know about how the law works, because that’s how organizations are exempted from across the board budget cuts. And that’s how they get their budgets increased without extra scrutiny.”

Tim shakes his head at that. “And is that how guys like me become Director, making the right decision on a job like this?”

“One of them. The Director of any Federal Agency has one job, no matter what, protect and serve
that agency. Have you thought about that more?"

“Yes.”

“And…”

“Let’s see if you’re in position to even do anything in ten years, when it’ll matter.”

“As long as I’m on this side of the grass, I’ll be in position to help.”

Tim does get home before everyone else heads to work. He gets home before they’re even all up. Abby’s getting a lay in this morning, so she’s still asleep, Jimmy’s in the shower, and Breena’s corralling little girls.

“You okay?” she asks him.

Tim nods at her. “Better than last night.”

“You look it. Going to tell us what’s up?”

“Yes. You guys set to sleep over again tonight?”

“Oh yeah, no problems on that.”

“Good.” He kisses Breena and looks around. She’s getting cereal and breakfast into little girls, so he starts making breakfast for the four of them. “Last night, you mentioned trying the Admiral…”

She nods, scooping cereal into Anna’s mouth. “Yeah. You said something about that, right? That more than anything else you need him humiliated, and how everything he’s done coming out would do that better than anything else.”

He inclines his head, not remembering it, but that certainly sounds like him. That’s what would make him happy about this, if happy’s an option. “I’m not sure that’s what Jimmy or Abby need.”

Breena nods. “You’ve got him dead to rights on that. I’m less sure on Abby. She’s cooling down as time goes by.”

“And he’s doing a better job of keeping it under the surface.”

“Yeah. Why?” She nods to Molly, and Tim heads over, pouring her more milk and Cheerios.

“I asked Jarvis not to visit the Admiral.”

“Tim!” Breena’s looking really proud of him right now.

He rolls his eyes a little as he goes back to the stove and cracks eggs. “I…” he shakes his head. “Tonight. I can get into that more tonight. But…”

“But you’re afraid how they’re going to take it?”
“Yeah. It was really clear when I was driving to Jarvis…” But she doesn’t know what’s clear to him. “I’m alive, you know? He didn’t end me. And, one thing Gibbs said is you don’t do this if you can still look at yourself in the mirror, and we can. It’s not him or us, but on the way home…” He shrugs again, pouring the eggs into the pan, and swirling them around a bit. “It’s not just me. And what I need isn’t all of this.”

They hear the water in the pipes above stop. Jimmy’s out of the shower, and he’ll be down soon. Breena looks up. “When he went off on Tony, you guys were talking about getting him into counseling this fall.”

Tim nods. “It’s fall.”

“Yeah. He’s coping. And he’s putting one foot in front of the other, but that anger is still there. John’s given him something to focus it on, but his focus is on learning how and then destroying John. I’m not sure what would happen if Jarvis did it. I’m not sure he knows, either.”

“Okay.”

“I’ve talked to Gibbs some about this.” Tim hadn’t known that. “I don’t think he thinks Jimmy’ll ever take the shot. Pretty much he’s giving Jimmy something to do to eat up time, help him feel useful and get him further and further away from it, hook him more into the world now and let the anger have less of a hold on him.”

“You got that out of Gibbs?”

Breena smiles a bit. “I’m filling in a lot of the blanks he left in the conversation.”

“Ah. So, he’s working on getting Jimmy to a place where he can deal with this without killing something?”

“Maybe,” she shrugs a bit. “If John has to die to deal with it, he’ll have been fine with that, too. But he’s not sure that killing John is a good thing for Jimmy.”

That sounds like Gibbs to Tim. They hear footfalls on the steps, and a few seconds later, Jimmy’s sitting at the table, dressed, ready for work, hair and skin still damp, and looking fairly content. “That’s an awesome mattress.”

Tim’s nodding at that. “Even as many hours of sleep short as I am right now, that felt great.”

They talk about the new bed, and about Breena and Jimmy joining them in it again tonight, and eventually Abby’s down, too, and the morning really starts.

What changed...

Tim’s got that hopping around in his head as he continues digging through the information they’ve got. He’s filling up casefiles to send to, literally, everyone in the alphabet soup. (He’s had to google some of the agencies he’s sending reports to, because he didn’t know who the hell they were by their initials.)

He’s seriously wondering if Clemens had a website or something. Pesky government problems? Call R. Clemens and watch them vanish!
He shakes his head and focuses back on the work.

What changed…

Nothing. It’s all been there, lurking behind the edges of his mind, swirling around.

Hell, he even said it to Gibbs and Abby after he had that talk with his mom. *No one’s the villain in their own story.* Everyone’s got a reason. Everyone ‘does the right thing’ as long as they’re the ones telling the story.

He doesn’t believe in *black and white, this is moral, this isn’t, we never, ever cross this line.* (Okay, he does, but not when it comes to killing people.) He believes context matters, that almost nothing is always evil.

He doesn’t begrudge Gibbs Hernandez’s death. Same situation, he’d hope he’d be the kind of man to do the same thing.

But it’s not the same situation. He’s still alive. He’s better than he ever was. Every rule the Admiral tried to beat into him, he’s broken, and he’s *thrived* by doing it. The hold John had over him, the nasty, little, second-guessing, is-this-good-enough, should-I-do-this, can-I-do-this, voices are all dead.

He doesn’t need to kill the Admiral to destroy him. Just by going through his day, being himself, he already has.

Though, he’ll admit, if the shot to ever take him down by showing the rest of the world what a heaping pile of shit The Admiral is ever comes his way, he’s going to jump on it with both feet.

“I told Jarvis not to visit The Admiral.” Tim says when they’re all settled into bed again. This feels like a bed conversation, a naked, at home, everyone close and touching, all walls down sort of conversation to him, so he held onto it until bedtime. (Though he did suggest early bedtime.)

Breena’s smiling at him, and she’s sitting next to Jimmy, already petting his back, because he is *not* taking this well, at all. He’s looking like he just got sucker punched.

Abby’s less than thrilled, too, but not that badly off. Tim glances between the two of them, not sure who to start with, and Breena gives him an *I’ve got Jimmy, you get Abby, then we’ll swap* sort of look, and he wants to kiss her.

Tim takes a second touching both of them, his hands on Jimmy’s and Abby’s, petting gently, his eyes on Abby. “I don’t need it. I’m here and alive and in one piece and…” He kisses her, deep and sweet while squeezing Jimmy’s hand. “He didn’t break me. He didn’t make me into him… He spent my whole life trying to beat me into a shape, a person, he wanted me to be, and he couldn’t do it. And every second spent on him now… that’s time wasted. That’s life, our lives, wasted, on *him,* and he doesn’t get another second of my life.”
That doesn’t exactly sell Abby on the idea, but she’s not as invested in literal revenge as Jimmy is. She’s willing to keep listening. “When I got home, you were reclaiming me, remember that? Touching me, holding me, making me yours again.”

Abby nods at that.

“I am. And more than that, I’m my own. He’s got no more hold on me. Not anymore.” He lets go of Jimmy and touches her belly. “I’m done with the past. Really done with it. Everything I need in this world is in this house, and this is where I want to be, where I want to live. Here, now, with you,” he gives both Jimmy and Breena a quick glance to make sure that they know that you is plural, “and our kids. Not… nervously watching the news, wondering if today’s the day he ends. Not feeling like I’m holding my breath, waiting for him to fall.” He shakes his head at her. “No. Not for me. Not anymore. Can you be okay with that?”

Abby’s eyes close. “Yes.” She can be okay with that because she knows that’s where they need to go. That’s… where freedom and love lie, but at the same time… “But I want him to hurt. I want every second of pain he gave you back on him.”

Tim smiles a little at that, nods a little, feeling her anger and his own. “God, baby. So do I.” He squeezes Jimmy’s hand, too, making sure he knows this is for both of them, “and if he ends up in our laps somehow, all bets are off. If Burley ever makes a case against him for anything, we’ll prosecute it to the ends of the earth, but… unless he’s actually here, he doesn’t get another second of my life, and I don’t want him to have any more seconds of yours. I don’t want to be, and I don’t want you, or you,” another quick pet to Jimmy, “to end up being any version of Clemens.”

Abby nods, slowly, at that, but that’s part of who Abby is, she burns white hot for a while, but eventually cools. And she is cooling. And she wants that future more than the past. And above and beyond all of this, she can feel the shift in Tim right now, and he really is ready to let the whole thing go. So as much as she’d like to spend months coming up with inventive ways to kill John, and then trying all of them out on him, she wants that peace for Tim, more.

That’s not who or where Jimmy is. Jimmy glows along, subtle, looking cool to the touch, and then you pick him up and see that black, cool exterior is just a molecule thin layer over a molten core. And while Abby’s ready to be swayed on this, Jimmy’s not.

He’s angry, hot and dangerous. Jimmy never got to hit back at the fate that hurt him worse than anything else, and Tim’s seeing, right now, how much of that he shifted onto the idea of destroying John, how taking out the man who never loved his son became a proxy for getting to hit the fate that robbed him of his son. “He deserves it!”

“I know.” Tim shifts over a bit, so he’s got all his focus on Jimmy, holding both of his hands. “And if… if somehow he ends up in front of me or you, we’ll do something, but… We’re the good guys. We don’t do crap like this. Not… now. Not like this. I’m alive.” He puts Jimmy’s hand on his chest, making sure he’s feeling his heart beating. “I’m whole and unbroken, and…” he kisses Jimmy this time, real kiss, deep with an edge of frantic, trying to push what he’s feeling into his touch “and I can do that,” he says as he pulls back, “and it’s okay. We’re okay. I’m alive, Jimmy. I’m me. Not the little clone of him he wanted. He couldn’t turn me into the man he wanted me to be, and he couldn’t kill me when I refused to be that guy. I won, Jimmy. And he’s got to live with that.”

Jimmy’s finger traces over the scar across Tim’s eyebrow. “Tell me how unbroken you are when I see that every time I look at you.”

“Tell me how broken I’m going to be if this goes wrong and something happens to us? Jarvis killing him isn’t going to be enough, right? I see the way you look when we’ve talked about Jarvis keeping
his promise. Jarvis doesn’t scratch the itch. It has to be you, and… I’ll be okay if he lives to be 130 and drops over dead of a heart attack wandering around on the beach in Hawaii. But I won’t be okay if you take him out and get caught. And I won’t be okay if you take him out and it goes off without a hitch, and you still aren’t fine, after.”

“Will I be okay if I don’t do it?” Jimmy’s voice makes it clear that he’s thinking the answer is no.

Breena’s got her arm wrapped around him, stroking his back. “Yeah, you will. You’ve got too damn much to lose to not be okay.”

Jimmy’s not looking convinced by that. Tim’s still kneeling in front of him. “We talked after you went off on Tony, about talking to someone, Wolf maybe, or… she’s probably already aware of most of our family secrets since she was seeing Jethro, Rachel. It’s probably time.”

Breena gently adds, “You know most of this isn’t about John or Tim.”

He glares at her, but she gives him her *not putting up with any bullshit* look.

“Enough of it is.”

Breena shakes her head a bit. She shifts, so she’s in front of Jimmy, and Tim’s on the side, petting him gently, while Abby’s got him on the other side.

Some of this is John, absolutely. But she saw how he went off on Tony and got a very good idea of how that knot of sick anger inside of Jimmy isn’t under control the way it should be. It’s like a furnace that has a few ways of letting off pressure, and so far it’s managing, but any little thing might make it explode.

She knows what he did with Tony, the combination of how Tony used Jeanne the same way Lee had used him, and how Tony may have missed his son’s whole life mixing together and pouring rocket fuel on the fire in Jimmy’s heart. He blew up, let off enough steam to keep going, and then Tim right on the heels of Tony meant that Jimmy didn’t have to deal with what’s actually making him so angry.

She knows that what’s going on with the Admiral is an extension of that. Jimmy didn’t get to have his son. He never saw his boy smile or laugh, never felt little fingers clench around his, didn’t hold him for more than a few minutes, never heard a coo or giggle or felt his breath on his neck, and John had all of that, and pissed it away, and then tried to kill it on top of that.

Breena’s stroking Jimmy’s face. When they lost Jon, he was the strong one. She collapsed under it, and he kept her going. Carried her when she couldn’t walk. He cried, and mourned, and didn’t do the stoic thing, but… He didn’t deal with it either. Not his anger. He got control of his fear, but the anger, that’s been there the whole time. Even fighting it out just lets him manage it, it didn’t help him accept or put it into any sort of context.

She kisses Jimmy. “The Admiral’s dead. You’ve splattered him, broke him into a million tiny pieces. Then what? It doesn’t take Tim’s scars away. It won’t make him any happier or better than he is now. It won’t bring Jon back. It won’t let you be the dad you wanted to be for him, and you’ll still be angry. You’ll keep it tucked deep, simmering away, looking pretty damn normal, and then go bugfuck insane on Tony again or Allan or whoever hits one of your buttons by accident.” Breena smiles at him, but it’s a sad smile. “I remember who you were before we lost Jon. No one else may know you well enough to still see the difference, but I do.”

Jimmy’s biting his lip, trying to keep anger and sadness in check. “Of course I’m different, you
can’t… You are, too!”

“I know. But I remember the man who wasn’t so angry he had to leave bruises on his best friends as a ‘weekly workout.’ When we got married, the idea that you’d have to spend hours a week working on how to kill someone to keep the nasty bits in your own head in check would have horrified you. When we took out Bodnar, and we saw the body… It did horrify you, and me, too.” That’s something they’ve never spoken about in front of anyone else. But, when it was done, Tim brought them a van filled with a body, clothing, upholstery, and a few weapons, all of which ended up burned.

“You said you approved!” He means of the fighting, and the planning.

“I do! Because it helps. Because it does keep the nasty bits toned down, and whatever you need to work it out, I approve of, but... but you’re still angry. You keep it so tucked down it’s hard to see, and then you explode. You stalled out on angry, not moving forward anymore. I know doctors make lousy patients, but it’s time.”

Jimmy’s got tears in his eyes. He’s staring at her, trying to get away from this, but he knows she can see what he doesn’t want to face, and she knows it, too. “I don’t want to get past it! Not being angry is like saying he didn’t matter.”

Breena kisses Jimmy again.

“I know it’s stupid, but…”

“I know, baby, I know.” She’s petting his face and hair, and he’s crying.

“Sometimes a day or two will pass and I don’t think about him at all.”

Breena nods. It happens to her, too, and she feels awful and relieved and more awful for being relieved. “I know. At the grocery store, someone asked how many children I had, and I said two. I know.”

Jimmy’s shaking slightly, tears still streaming down his face. “I can’t get him back, and I can’t change it,” he glances at Tim, wiping his eyes, “but I can do something about John. I can’t make my own pain go away, and I can’t kill yours,” he strokes Breena’s face, “but I can hurt the guy who hurt you.” He squeezes Tim’s hand. “I don’t have to be useless and powerless and just take it. Not with John.”

Tim blinks slowly at that. He doesn’t know what to do with that, but Abby does. “None of us are powerless.” She glances at Tim, getting, she thinks, where he wants to go with this. Getting where she wants them, too. “Yeah, we can’t bend the world to our will, and fate’s still going to kick our asses, that’s out of our control. How we react isn’t. It’s not about pain, not anymore, not for him, and not for me, and hopefully, not for you, soon. We’re out of the pain business. We’re building joy, and love, and our home.”

Those words help, and now Tim knows what to say, “I don’t need you to hurt him. You hurting him doesn’t make me better. I need you to be here with me, and our girls. I need your joy and your peace and your love. That makes me better, makes all of us better.”

Jimmy’s not quite buying that. “You still want him to hurt.”

And Tim nods. “Yeah, I do. I probably always will. But I don’t need it. Do you need it? If it’s just the Admiral, and if you need this, then I’m game. If we’ve got to kill someone to get you right in your head, I can’t think of a better candidate, but after, are you still going to need this? Are you
going to have to find something else to hurt?”

Jimmy swallows, hard. His head drops to Breena’s shoulder. Tim’s gently rubbing his shoulder, and Abby’s hugging him from the side.

“You still have Rachel’s number?” comes out of Jimmy after a long time of quietly crying.

“Yeah. You want me to make the call?”

Jimmy nods.

“I thought the idea was that we’d kill the Hydra, not breed some new ones,” Jake says as he sits across from Tim at the diner.

Tim shrugs a bit. “I have some thoughts on that.”

“Hopefully something less disturbing than we’re going to” Jake’s voice drops, “murder” and back up to normal again, “an inconvenient man.”

“He was somewhat more than inconvenient.”

Jake shrugs at that, too. “We’re not supposed to kill US Citizens without trial.”

“Nothing on the books about Clementinians, or whatever he was.”

Elaine hustles over, placing a decaf pumpkin spice coffee in front of Tim. “Now, this is a party that looks like it needs some cheering up. I know what Tim wants. What’s your pleasure, Mr. Malloy?”

Jake looks like he’s unlikely to be happy about much again. He sighs. “Uh… Carrot cake? Do you have that?”

Elaine smiles at him. “You want it as a muffin or waffles?”

“Does the muffin have frosting?”

“Of course!”

“Muffin.”

“Okay, Hun, I’ve got ya.”

They sit quietly, as Tim sips his drink, surprised to see it’s not his usual decaf with two sugars, but this is pretty tasty, too. First decently cool day this year, maybe Eliane’s feeling fallish.

“So, what’s your idea?” Jake asks.

“I’ve gotten confirmation that those laws are intentionally that long. For the express purpose of hiding things in them. Mostly it’s about taking care of things the rest of us aren’t supposed to know about it, or hiding a deal to get a vote on something else. But it’s also a perk of the job, fit little treats in for you and yours, keep the donations flowing, that sort of thing. Not something Joe Citizen can
do for himself.”

Jake slumps a little further into his seat.

“And the only reason they can keep doing that is because no one is willing to talk about it. According to my source, not even everyone in Congress and the Senate knows about this. If you look like the kind of person who’ll spill this information, you don’t get it.”

“And I’m supposed to do what with this, go to the press? They’ll…” Tim sees Jake’s eyes start to light up. This isn’t some piddly little FOIA violation. Depending on what he can find, this is the October Surprise of Doom. If he can find enough of it, this is every incumbent on the board voting for something the public doesn’t want.

Tim nods. “Three weeks. That’s how long I figure we’ve got. That puts us at a week before the election. You find the bits that stink. Some of them have been added after the laws were passed to keep them working smoothly. You find the stinkers, and I’ll get the metadata to prove they’re hinky and who added them.”

Jake’s looking really pleased by this idea. “Who do you know to make sure this gets out?”

Tim smiles a bit. “Pull out your phone and google Dr. Penny Langston.”

“Your grandmother?”

“Knows EVERYONE. Including Tom Brokaw and Diane Sawyer, they may not be big names in media now, but they’ll know where to go with this. Hell, I think she might know Matt Drudge, too. Literally, everyone.” Tim smiles a bit, harder, more devious. “If it was one of my stories, the young, handsome hot shot attorney, with his beautiful, blonde, cop wife, who got this information out would then see about getting into politics. How old are you?”

Jake starts to slowly perk up, seeing the angles. “Thirty-four.”

Tim nods. “Yeah, he’d write up, and get some co-sponsors for a bill limiting the length of laws, and talking about killing special privilege and things like that.”

“And while doing that, he’d find a neighborhood where the incumbent is dirty as hell, and then he’d run for Congress.”

Tim nods. “Yeah. And he’d keep his eyes open and make sure that when something hinky’s happening, that it gets spread far and wide.”

By the time Elaine’s back with breakfast, Jake is smiling, and Tim’s feeling quite a bit better about his place in the world, and the state of the world in general.

“Thanks for seeing me on short notice,” Jimmy says to Rachel on Friday morning.

She smiles at him. “No problem. Call it the Gibbs Friends and Family Plan. So what brings you to my sofa, Dr. Palmer…”
“It’s a really long story.”

Rachel smiles again. “I’ve got time.”

“I know what I need to do, but doing it…” He lets that trail off.

“If doing what you need to do was simple, everyone would do it, and I’d be an accountant. Come on, if you know where to go, you know where it begins, so tell me the story.”

Jimmy swallows hard, and then says, “Okay… um… On the 8th it’ll be a year and ten months since my son was stillborn…”

Chapter End Notes

I know the last few chapters I’ve been taking a lot of shots at the Democrats. It’s not anything personal to them, they happen to be in charge. In my personal convictions I fully believe that all politicians are assholes, but I recognize the last few chapters have likely sounded fairly partisan in a way I’d prefer not to be.

As soon as some Republicans get themselves elected, I’ll paint them as bad guys, too.
“Don’t your boys know anyone else at the FBI?” Fornell asks Gibbs, exasperated, as Tim sends him yet another pile of names.

“Just because they send it to you, doesn’t mean you have to respond.”

Fornell rolls his eyes. “I know. I was supposed to be off all week and now…”

“You’ve worked straight through the week, got out an hour early today, ended up late at your own wedding rehearsal, and are seriously debating skipping the bachelor party?”

Fornell nods.

Gibbs nods back, been there, done that on his face. (Yes, he was an hour late to his wedding with Stephanie, which was an impressive feat of almost-husbandly-not-giving-a-shit, seeing as they eloped.) “Don’t.”

“I won’t.” Fornell nods. He might be done, but when he’s staring at a list of people hacking the IAEA from inside the US (they told Tim to send that to the FBI, they don’t have their own investigators for that sort of thing) he feels like he should be doing something about it. “I’m off. I’m off until the week after next.” He forwards the list to Ron Sacks, his one-time partner, along with McGee’s contact information.

“And when you get in, introduce Tim and Tony to whoever’s any good at his job. Time they got some of their own contacts.”

The minister pokes his head into the room where Gibbs, Tobias, Wendy’s sons, Trevor and Dave, and Tobias’ brother Alton are all standing around, going through the motions of getting ready for tomorrow. “This is the part where you’d all come out.”

So they shuffle out and head down to the chapel to go through the getting married dress rehearsal.

As wedding duty goes, Gibbs is thinking he preferred how Ducky and Leon’s weddings went. Stand there, say nothing, sign the paper, take bride and groom out to lunch/brunch, and done. Then came giving away the brides. All he had to do for those weddings was stand there, look pretty, walk a bit, in Abby’s wedding say, ‘Her brothers and I do,” and he was done.

He’s got a bit more on this plate this time. Best-manning requires a person to actually do things. Though some of the job is fairly easy. For example, he’s certain that Tobias isn’t going to run off. He’s not going to have to talk him down off a metaphorical ledge. Which he did have to do the first time he was a best man, and the groom had a major case of cold feet, but by that point the rabbit was dead, and in 1978, you married your pregnant girlfriend or her Drill Sergeant Daddy literally killed you, even if you were completely unsuited for each other and ended up divorced by ’83.

Not an issue this time.
Nope, this time, he’s got rehearsal duty (done), bachelor party duty (starting when the limo shows up, none of them are driving anywhere tonight), providing the groom with a place to sleep (in about five hours), getting him to the church on time (t-minus 20 hours from now), and then, during dinner, standing up and looking like he knows what the hell he’s doing as he gives a speech in front of (sigh) more than a hundred people.

He’s glaring at Fornell, who’s kissing Wendy goodnight, getting ready for the bachelor party part of the night.

“Something wrong?” Dave, Wendy’s youngest son, asks him.

Gibbs shakes his head. The limo pulls up, and he nods to it, getting this crew on the road for part two of the festivities.

Gibbs hasn’t hosted a bachelor party since he was in his twenties. Not that he’s got anything against them, but his buddies when he was young got married young, and once he lost Shannon and Kelly, he tended to avoid the kind of guy who was likely to get married.

Out of the guys he was close to in his thirties, Fornell’s the only one who got married, and for obvious reasons Gibbs was not at that bachelor party. (Actually, Gibbs does not know if Fornell had a bachelor party when he married Diane. He’s never asked, and doesn’t expect he ever will. Some things he just doesn’t need to know.)

But, back when he did host a few of them, they had a pretty standard format. Hit the bar, get really drunk, go watch some strippers, get drunker, roll on home, groom in tow, in the early hours of the morning.

Namely, back when he was young and stupid, he hosted the kind of bachelor party other young and stupid guys liked. He remembers they were fun, but is somewhat fuzzy on what exactly happened at most of them.

The thing about hitting the point where young and stupid are long past, and in fact, middle aged (unless you intend to live to be 114-120, which neither he nor Fornell expect to do) is also in the rearview mirror, is that certain options are out for a bachelor party.

Like, for example, even if half of your wedding party wasn’t the Bride’s sons, going out to a strip club looking to get drunk and ogle the girls just looks flat out creepy to everyone around once you hit a certain age. (That age being one that Fornell and Gibbs passed about ten years ago.)

And, granted, if they had had Pryde in the mix, or Franks, because neither of them have/had ever met a party they didn’t like, and they are/were both good at dragging Gibbs and Fornell along for the ride, they may have gone out dancing or something, but… They aren’t there, and Gibbs isn’t about to even try given how his lung is doing.

So, quiet bachelor party.

And lucky for him, Fornell loves pool. He’s good at it, too. Really good at it. Thus, Tobias, Alton, Gibbs, Trevor, and Dave are going out to shoot some pool, drink some very good drinks, and have a (tame) good time, with each other.
And, Gibbs would have to admit, that he and Fornell are intending to really enjoy hustling several groups of puffed up college guys who are vastly too young and stupid to know they’re getting played. First time it happened, they were both undercover. Spent close to three months working slowly into a group that was kidnapping girls and using connections with the Navy to get them out of the country. They played a lot of pool in several dingy bars, slowly building up a reputation as guys who were good in a tight situation.

Highlight of that case (besides the end, busting the guys and rescuing fourteen girls not much older than Emily is now) was hustling a lot of stupid kids out slumming on daddy’s money.

Gibbs is okay at pool. Not bad, but not great. And worse now that he’s missing a good chunk of his latissimus dorsi, which apparently is one of the muscles you use to pull your arm back when getting ready to shoot. Still good enough to run the con.

So, he plays the ‘expert.’ He quietly runs the table, quietly killing the ‘drunk’ Fornell, who flails around with his cue, missing easy shots, drinking a lot (three quarters of the time he’s not really swallowing) and after a few games, Gibbs “gives up” because “it’s no fun taking money from a drunk” and heads back to the bar to get himself another drink.

Trevor, Dave, and Alton are at the bar, watching this, wondering what happens next. Gibbs settles in next to them, smirk on his face, as Fornell asks if anyone else will play him, after all he’s got money and he wants to play, and with the sight of a few twenties flapping around two idiot twenty-two year olds hop up, eager to take the old man’s cash.

Fornell doesn’t suddenly sober up. That’d be too easy. He loses the first game, and Alton’s starting to get worried, but Gibbs puts his hand on Alton’s shoulder, stopping him from interfering.

“He’s just setting them up. If they don’t get greedy, they’ll get out of this fine.”

“They’re going to clobber him.”

Gibbs shakes his head. “Not that sort of place.” They did this, several times in the sort of place where a sore loser would beat the shit out of you. Giving as good as they got was part of how they made a reputation for ‘being useful in a tight situation.’ ‘I’ve got my badge, and he’s got his. They aren’t stupid or drunk enough to take a swing at two cops.”

“You better be right. Mom’ll be pissed if he’s got a black eye or split lip in the wedding pictures.”

Gibbs smiles at Trevor. He supposes that, yes, getting the Groom home, in one piece, not bleeding, is also part of his job as Best Man. So far, he’s managed it for every wedding he’s done this for, and doesn’t expect that streak to end tonight.

Fornell offers to buy all of them a drink. He’s getting married tomorrow, looking happy and flush and drunk, and the college students go for it. They’re toasting him and wishing him good luck. One of the students suggests another game, and Fornell takes them up, losing that one, too.

“This is a game, right?” Alton asks Gibbs, starting to worry that Tobias isn’t playing.

Gibbs nods. “Look at his drink.” Fornell’s been sipping on it all night, but the level’s the same.

Fornell “knocks over” his glass with the weighted end of his cue, and calls for another round, taking a new full glass and having a sip of that, too. When he pays for that round, the college students see that he’s got a few hundreds in his wallet to go with the twenties.

They huddle together for a moment, and then one of them says, “How about we play for some real
money. You win, you buy that bride of yours something really nice.”

Fornell thinks about it, smiles, bleary, and says, “How nice?”

“We’ve got a grand between us.”

Tobias smiles wide, and says, “Let me check with the bank,” and gestures to Alton, who’s looking alarmed. The college students all grin, as Tobias walks over. “What do you have on you?”

“I’m not giving you money to gamble away!”

Gibbs smiles then, stepping in. “Here, they need it more than I do.” Handing the money he “won” from Fornell back to him, and saluting the college students with his drink. They grin back at him.

Fornell heads back, dopey smile on his face. Gibbs is in tow, leaning against one of the unused tables. “Can’t wait to see this,” he says.

Fornell nods, sloppily racks the balls. Then he laughs. “Almost forgot.” He hands his money, and Gibbs’, back to Gibbs. “Hold onto it for us?”

Gibbs nods.

The college kids hand over their grand, too. Third party makes sure no one can back out. They think that they’re making sure they get paid, and that Fornell can’t just refuse to hand it over. Gibbs smiles at them, too.

Once Gibbs has the cash, Fornell looks up at them, his smiles sharp and dangerous, and then he steps away, allowing the designated college student, Gibbs thinks his name is Thad (he looks like a Thad), to break. It’s a good break. Thad’s not a bad player. He’s better than Gibbs is. They’re playing eight ball, and Thad broke and ran his first four balls before he misses a shot.

Fornell’s better. He smiles at Thad, lines up, and proceeds to run every striped ball on the table, then, after a few seconds of checking the angles, he calls the eight ball, and pockets it in one perfect, solid thock of the ivory cue against black eight.

He takes the money from Gibbs, still smiling, and says, “Thanks, boys. Wendy will like your wedding present.”

They just stare at him, completely stunned. Fornell, Gibbs, Alton, and the boys are walking out, looking for the next bar, before the college students have even moved from their spots.

“This is what you do for fun?” Dave whispers to Fornell as they’re walking back.

Tobias grins, a thousand stories of many, many good times in mind. “Lately.”

“That sounds like a story,” Trevor adds.

Tobias nods. Then he gestures to Gibbs. “And like I told his boys, maybe, one day, a long time from now, you’ll both be old enough to hear them.”

Jeremy shakes his head, and Trevor gives him a gentle shove as they head off in search of the next group of rubes.
Last stop is Gibbs’ place. Alton, Trevor, and Dave have been returned to their respective homes/hotel rooms, and now it’s just the two of them in the back.

Fornell hands the bottle over to Jethro, who takes it and puts it back in the little bar. (He didn’t expect the limo to do more than drive them around, but apparently limos have gotten a hell of a lot more upscale than the last time he was in one. Or maybe muttering the magic words bachelor party conjured a car with a full bar. He’s not sure. It’s good bourbon, though. He wishes he could have had more than one of them.)

“You’re done?” Neither of them are looking to be hung over tomorrow, so they haven’t been pounding the drinks back, but best Fornell can tell Gibbs has only had three (one was wine with dinner, two was a collection of sips of different drinks at different bars, and three was just now, on the way home).

“Still on pain meds.”

Fornell nods. “Oh.”

For a few miles they ride comfortably together, quiet. “When are we doing this for you?”

Gibbs shrugs. “Got the ring on Thursday.”

Fornell smiles. “Know what you’re going to do with it, yet?”

Gibbs shakes his head. “Thinking.”

“Not tomorrow.”

Gibbs flashes him his I’m not an idiot look.

“Got some ideas?”

Gibbs nods at that. He does have some ideas. Depending on how Sunday goes, if, for example they get together for breakfast and then supper at the Slaters, Gibbs may corral Breena, Ziva, and Abby and ask for some suggestions to round out the somewhat nebulous plan that’s starting to form in his head.

“She gonna be home when we get there?”

Gibbs sighs. “Hope so. Hope I’m not going stag tomorrow, but…”

Fornell nods at that, too. Abbi’s even busier than he is. Fornell’s got a, not unlimited, but close enough that it doesn’t make too much difference, pool of people to delegate the stuff McGee’s sending him. Abbi’s got… her team, maybe ten other guys she trusts, and a crop of newbies. She’s hiring as fast as she can, but right now her new guys are either fresh-out-of-FLETC-green, or flooding in from other agencies and not used to CGIS ways, yet. Either way, she doesn’t know them, not yet. They don’t know each other, not yet. She’s doing a lot of the work herself.

“McGee sending her little presents, too?”

Gibbs nods. “Forty-eight names. Probably smuggling. She got back from Boston and grabbing two of them this morning, then right back to work.”

Fornell nods at that. “You couldn’t pay me enough to take her job.”
Abbi is home when they get in. She’s on the armchair, reading something, probably work-related, on her laptop while Mona sits next to her, head resting on her thigh.

“Hey.” Gibbs heads in, leans over the back of the chair to kiss her, as he pats Mona’s head. Abbi’s hand reaches up, wrapping around the back of his neck, gently stroking the short hairs at the back of his neck.

“Neither of you two look like you’ve been to a bachelor party. Shouldn’t you smell like cheap booze and cheaper perfume?”

Gibbs smiles at her. “You want us to go out and get drunk and laid?”

She smiles back, laughs quietly, and pats his cheek. “I’m good with this.”

He nods.

Fornell smiles, watching his friend, finally, really at home.
Date Night

Chapter Notes

First one of two wedding chapters. Everything that's going on would have been too much stuff for one chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Aww… Look at you two all pretty!” Breena says to Tim and Abby. They’re at Jimmy and Breena’s, slept over Friday night, and now, as little girls are all settled down for afternoon naps, they’re getting dressed and ready to go to Fornell’s wedding.

“You’ve seen it before,” Abby replies, smiling though, she enjoys the compliment. They’re basically wearing exactly the same outfits they wore to Tony and Ziva’s wedding. Apparently Wendy wanted a black and white wedding. Tony and Ziva got awfully close on that, too. So, Tim’s in his black tux again, and her bridesmaid’s dress is ivory, but that’s close enough to white, and, just like with Ziva’s wedding, she’s about twenty weeks pregnant, so it fits over Sean’s bump nicely.

Really, the only difference is that Abby’s hair is blond now (and up in a pretty French twist) and Tim doesn’t have a boutonniere pinned to his jacket.

“So, how did you get invited to this thing?” Jimmy asks. He’s not feeling any particular loss at not going to Fornell and Wendy’s wedding.

“They came to ours, and I think Emily pouted a little at them,” Abby says, making sure her stockings are straight. (They’re white lace, with a seam up the back. Tim approves, so does Jimmy.)

“Just make sure you get video of Jethro’s speech. I can’t wait to hear this,” Breena says with a grin.

“I think all of us can’t wait to hear this. It’ll hit your inbox as soon as he’s done,” Tim says, pulling on his jacket.

“You’re good with Kelly all night?” Abby asks.

Come on! is a pretty good approximation of Breena’s look. “Go. Have fun. Enjoy that hotel room you’ve got. Soon enough romantic evening out followed by sleeping through the night isn’t going to be an option, so take advantage of it.”

Abby nods at that, fingers stroking over Sean. He’s getting bigger in leaps and bounds, and comfortable sleeping is probably limited to the next month.

Tim’s got her wrap, black satin with little white skulls, maybe not completely wedding appropriate, but it’s very Abby, and black and white. He drapes it over her shoulders. “You two want to do this next week? Go out, do something fun, just you two, and we’ll have the girls?”

Jimmy nods at that, plans already starting to form in his head. “Yeah. Been a while since we’ve had date night with just us.”

“Got some ideas?” Breena asks, smiling at him. Also aware that it’s been… Got to be getting onto six months now, since the last time they went out on their own.
He kisses her, arm around her shoulders, and then pulls Abby close for a kiss, too. “Have fun.”

“I intend to.” Jimmy and Breena both get goodbye kisses from her, and then Tim, and then it’s time to head off, for another wedding.

“Did he actually talk to Rachel?” Abby asks Tim as they head toward Gibbs and Abbi’s place. They’re picking her up (Gibbs has been part of the getting ready for the wedding stuff since this morning) and taking her to the wedding. She’ll go home with Gibbs.

“I think so,” Tim replies. “He seems okay.”

“He’s good at seeming okay.” Abby’s got a good point on that.

“I think, most of the time, he is okay.”

Abby nods at that. Most of the time, Jimmy probably is okay. Kind of like how Tim did a decade of ‘okay’ because nothing rubbed up against any of his hot buttons. But once something did, he was very much *not okay*, and didn’t have any good tools for dealing with *not okay* on his own.

And given how Jimmy’s dealing with his own *not okay*, getting some real coping mechanisms in place is a good plan. Whether this will result in that is yet to be seen. He went, that’s enough for now.

“How about you? Still think this is a good decision?” Abby asks.

Tim shrugs a bit as he glances left, turning into Gibbs’ subdivision. “I don’t know.” He shakes his head a bit. It seemed like a good idea at the time. He’s starting to have some second thoughts now. More and more he is feeling like he’s letting the Admiral off the hook. Then he feels like it’s the right thing to do. Then he wants revenge in many glorious shades of bleeding pain. He hopes he did the right thing. “Water under the bridge now. I don’t think I can go back on it.”

Abby strokes the back of his hand, fingers lingering on the thin, straight scars from where they had to cut his hand open so they could screw the bones back together. They’re dark pink now, better than the bloody red they were before, but still years to go before they fully fade to match his skin tone. She supposes that’s one good thing about being as pale as Tim, eventually, the scars really will blend in, only visible as a slightly different texture of skin. (At least, that’s what Jethro’s bites did, she assumes these won’t do anything different.)

She shakes her head, making herself stop thinking about that, and get back to what they’re talking about. “No. I don’t think you can, either. But we could probably arrange for something he likes to eat or drink to get laced with something nasty. Not kill him or anything, that’d be too obvious, but… explosive diarrhea for a few months is an option.”

Tim smiles, and then shakes his head again. He loves that idea. It’s a terrible idea. He groans quietly. Why does being a good man suck so much?

“How do you think Gibbs’ll do with it?” Abby asks.
Tim shrugs at that, too. He’s not sure how to start that conversation with Gibbs, but supposedly tomorrow afternoon they’re heading over to Tony’s place to check everything out and see what exactly they want the contractor to do, so he figures he’ll get some one on one time then.

“You okay?” he asks Abby. Speaking of one on one time, he’s got hours of it with her now, so might as well take advantage.

Abby takes a deep breath, and thinks for a few more seconds. “It’s frustrating and freeing. I want to be done with him, too, and this helps with that. More importantly, I want you to be done with him, really done, not just pushing it into the background, ignoring it, and hoping it doesn’t jump up and bite you again, and this is probably the right way to do that.” She smiles, half sad, half angry. “And I want him to pay for everything he’s done for you, and… It feels like he’s getting away with it, and that’s frustrating.”

“Yeah.” Tim nods, that sums it up nicely.

They pull into Abbi’s driveway, and Tim changes the subject. “How long do you think it’ll take before I start thinking of this as Abbi’s place?”

“Hopefully not long.” Abby unbuckles her seatbelt. “Let’s go get her.”

---

Tim knocks. Abbi and Gibbs still have the open door policy, but Tim still (like always) knocks. He hears a bark, scrambling claws on hardwood floors, and the sound of Abbi calling down, “Come in.”

“Hey, Mona,” Abby pats her, but stays back. Like most big dogs, Mona sheds like crazy, and right now, in an ivory dress, she doesn’t need a bunch of black hair all over her outfit.

Mona’s a bit confused at not getting her usual love fest from Abbi. Normally she kneels down for some nuzzling and patting and cuddles, but Tim kneels down and pets her more, which he doesn’t usually do. Save for his shirt, he’s in all black, so he’s putting himself between Mona and Abbi’s dress, earning some good husband points. He and Mona have a wary (on his side) relationship, but she appears to be enjoying the attention, and he’s doing his best not to get licked.

A minute later, he hears footsteps on the stairs, and Abby lets out a perfect wolf whistle. He looks up and, damn… “I’ll second that,” he says to Abbi.

It’s a formal black and white wedding, and right now, Abbi’s in white. It’s a strapless sheath dress. Her hair is softly waving down her back in a 1940s ish sort of curl, and she’s got a string of black pearls around her throat and wrist, and two dangling from her earlobes.

Abbi smiles at that and rolls her eyes a bit. Tim gets a little shove when she’s down to the foyer floor. “You two clean up good, too.”

“Tim inclines his head, and Abby smiles.

Abbi pats Mona, once she’s got her coat on. “Don’t wait up. We’re not coming home until late.”

“You’re not staying?” Tim asks.
Abbi shakes her head. “Neither of us realized how far away it was until after all the rooms had booked.” (It wasn’t until this morning, as she was heading out to wrap up some more work, and Gibbs was checking the GPS to see where the hell the reception actually was, that they realized it’s way the hell out in the middle of Virginia. Two minutes on the phone found that every room at the house where they’re holding the reception is now booked.)

“Share with us?” Abby offers.

Abbi’s shaking her head at that before Abby’s done with it. “Not barging in on your romantic night. We’ll be fine. Two hour drive isn’t the end of the world.”

“Might feel like it after a long wedding,” Tim says. No, he doesn’t want to share a room with one bed with Gibbs and Abbi, but he’s also pretty sure about what you do when your family realizes they’re way away from home and don’t have a place to stay.

“We’ll be fine, McGee.”

“Okay. But you can change your mind.”

Abbi shakes her head, and they walk to Abby’s car.

It feels a little bizarre to get to the church and find Gibbs in his own, very black, tux, waiting to escort everyone in. Tim’s not sure why. It wasn’t weird at Senior’s wedding when Tony was ushering, but for some reason this strikes him as odd.

Maybe it’s proof that Gibbs has a life outside of them? That doesn’t feel right.

Maybe it’s the image of Gibbs as the groom? Probably closer. Of course, that’s also probably closer to happening for real, too.

Whatever it is, they head into the church, congratulate Fornell, say hi to Gibbs, and he walks them to a pew on the ‘Groom’s Side.’

Once the girls are seated, Tim, under his breath, says, “White dress, black tux, Minister’s over in the corner… You getting some ideas?” He gives Gibbs a gentle nudge and a shit-eating grin.

For a second, Gibbs looks tempted to glare, but he doesn’t. He smiles and says, just as quietly, “Maybe.”

Tim’s about to give him a good, congratulatory slap on the back, but he pulls it the second before he makes contact. Two reasons, A: his shoulder isn’t up for it, and B: neither is Gibbs’ back.

“Does that mean the ring’s done?”

Gibbs nods again, looking pleased with himself. He’s probably got something to show off tomorrow at Tony’s, too.

Tim’s grinning from ear to ear. “Bet she’d look awfully pretty with a pearl ring to go with the necklace and dress.”
“Not here. Not taking anything away from them.” Gibbs nods back toward Fornell. Tim gets the idea that Gibbs has cast enough of a shadow on Fornell’s previous wedding, no need to do it at this one. “Plenty of time coming up.”

Tim nods and sits down next to his wife, as Gibbs heads back to escort more guests.

“Do you, Tobias Carmine Fornell take Wendy Beth Eccles to be your lawfully wedded wife…”

Tim’s holding Abby’s hand as they watch the exchange. It occurs to him, as he’s sitting there, that, with the exception of Glenn and Sarah, and Gibbs and Abbi, this is it for them and weddings. Probably, within a year, definitely two, everyone they know well enough to get invited to a wedding for, will be married.

It’s a strange realization; this part of their lives is almost over.

He’ll give Sarah away, and they’ll stand up with Gibbs, and then… that’s it. Next up is the kids (hopefully in not less than twenty years).

He strokes her wrist, and she glances away from the vows to him. He kisses her. Only three weddings left to celebrate properly… Nope, this one, and Gibbs’. Sean’ll be maybe two months old at Sarah’s wedding, so that’s not going to be a good wedding for sneaking off for a quickie. Got to get two weddings worth of celebrating into this one.

Abby’s wondering why he’s watching her as closely as he is. He smiles, kisses her once more, and very quietly whispers, “Not a quickie this time,” into her ear.

Really? she signs back.

He grins at her, fingers moving, not perfect yet, but better than the last few times he’s singed something to her. You game for cutting out early?

Abby kisses him back, grins, and settles so her head is on his shoulder. His arm wraps around her as they listen to the rest of the vows.

“I understand the point of destination weddings, but I don’t get this,” Abby says as they’re getting back into the car.

Pregnant bladder means somewhat more frequent than normal pit stops when traveling, and with the reception two hours away from the wedding, a pit stop is needed.

“Driving everyone to the middle of nowhere doesn’t strike you as a good wedding plan?” Abbi says as she buckles back in. She’s also riding with them for this part. Gibbs has been snagged, along with the rest of the wedding party, for at least an hour of photos at the church. Sooner or later they’ll get down here for the reception. Everyone else is driving down, enjoying a cocktail hour, and then, when the wedding party gets to the house, it’ll be dinner and dancing time.
Tim’s mildly amused at the idea of Fornell dancing. He can’t remember if he did at their wedding. Granted, he also wasn’t paying much attention to anything other than Abby that day. Fornell would have needed to be pirouetting around the dance floor in a neon pink tutu before Tim would have really noticed him. He smiles at that mental image.

“No just for a reception. It’d be one thing if we spent the day or weekend out here, but just for one party?” Abby says, still thinking about their conversation, and drawing his attention back to it.

Tim remembers something Diane had mentioned, how Fornell prefers not to be parted from his cash. “Might be a way to keep costs down. Everyone can come to the church, but only people who are really dedicated to this come all the way out here?” he asks as he pulls the car out the gas station parking lot.

The girls think about that.

“Pretty sneaky if it is,” is Abby’s conclusion.

“How did you two get this dedicated to Fornell’s wedding?” Abbi asks.

“Jimmy and Breena offered to take Kelly and pretty much told us to go,” Tim replies.

“And we haven’t met a wedding we didn’t want to celebrate,” Abby adds.

Abbi smirks at that, rolling her eyes a bit. “So I’ve heard.”

Abby grins brightly, and Tim says, “That’s the kind of thing you and Gibbs gossip about?”

Abbi glances at him like he’s being silly. “I was at Senior’s wedding, remember?”

“Right. If memory serves, you got some celebrating in, too,” Abby says with a grin.

Abbi smiles at that.
An hour later, they pull to the end of a long, tree-lined driveway into a parking area in front of an…
Okay, Tim’s not sure what the hell this is. It looks like a medieval British manor house. It’s all stone walls and arches and leaded glass windows. (There’s even a few gargoyles.) It doesn’t look new, at all. But… no one who lived in the US when this would have been built was building things like this. So, to say he’s mildly confused to see this stone behemoth sitting in front of them is an accurate assessment of his views on the subject.

Abby, however, is not confused. She takes one look at the house, inhales sharply, and says to Tim, “I want one!”

He chuckles and shakes his head a bit. “Then you better hope the next book sells a lot better than the last five did.”

Both Abbies laugh at that. They get out of the car, and Abby links her arm in his. He looks to the other Abbi, and offers her his arm, too. She gracefully takes it.

Tim would have to admit, as they’re walking in, that it is something of a kick to be escorting two beautiful women to an event like this. Everyone’s all dressed up and swanky, there’s the buzz of voices around them, pleasant soft jazz in the background, and several waiters are walking around with yummy looking food and drinks. It almost feels like a scene from a movie. Stick an Evil Russian in the corner, hand Tim a martini, and they’re ready to play James Bond.

Tony would really like this. Senior would be even happier.

He kisses his Abby as they get to the cocktail reception and then leaves the girls to head back to the car, grab their bag, and get them checked in for the night.

While he’s waiting at the front desk for the clerk to get his key, he gets the story on this place. It is a medieval British manor. Apparently, back in the 1920’s someone with way too much money and not nearly enough hobbies bought the place, and had it shipped back, block by block, and then reassembled it here.

Unfortunately, he didn’t have long to enjoy it. Construction finished in May of 1929, and the market crashed in October.

He killed himself in November when he couldn’t cover the margin call.

Supposedly, the house is haunted. Though Tim’s not noticing any sense of creepiness. Granted, the places that have triggered his creepy sensors generally involved people who were still alive and interested in doing terrible things.

Tim’s heading up to their room, debating mentioning this to Abby. Might make for an entertaining ghost story. Might make for a night of ‘cleansing’ the place, and him looking for a store that sells sage way the hell out here.

He’ll play that by ear.

He opens the door to their room and smiles. Abby’s going to love this part. The door is wood with
cast iron hinges. The key is iron, old fashioned, longer than his finger, slides in and turns with an audible thunk.

It’s a small room. Dark brown hard wood floors. Half timbered walls. Stone fireplace. (That’s been retrofitted for gas. Tim flicks a discretely located switch and flames jump up on the artistically arranged ceramic logs.) LED candles are in sconces on the walls. The furniture, a four posted canopy bed, a dresser, and a wardrobe (there’s no closet) are also dark wood. Gibbs would probably know what it is, but all Tim can say about it is that it’s dark brown.

He tosses their bag onto the bed, and sits down on it. Feels good. Nicely springy, and the maroon comforter feels like it’ll be warm enough.

No bedside tables, that’s annoying, but they’ll cope. Tim opens his bag, fishes around for a moment, finds the massage oil (never let it be said that if sex was on the menu, Timothy McGee didn’t have a plan) and tucks it under the pillows. It’ll be ready for when they get back here.

He checks the bathroom. Tiny, functional. Nothing special or interesting. One side of the door is as close to the 1400s as anyone wants to get, and the other side is every bathroom in every motel they’ve ever stayed in on a job. He puts their toothbrushes and toothpastes by the sink, tucks the shampoo and soaps into the shower, and nods.

It’s clean, the towels are soft, and there are enough of them. That’s all he needs.

His bag goes into the wardrobe. Nothing they’re intending to wear tomorrow needs to be hung up, and he’s not quite so tidy as to unpack the one outfit each that they’ve got in there.

He tucks the key into his pocket, and heads down to find the ladies.

The cocktail hour is pleasant enough. They’re in a “small” ballroom, being serenaded by some sort of low-key cocktail lounge music. Everyone and thing looks marvelously elegant. People sipping drinks and nibbling on… Tim eyes someone eating what he thinks is some sort of little toast with smoked salmon, crème fraiche, and a little dab of caviar on top. He’s got to find whoever’s handing them out.

He does, snagging three of them on a little cocktail plate, (as well as a few shrimp and some sort of pastry thing) and then sees the girls over by the fireplace.

For a moment, he enjoys the view. His Abby in ivory, all sort and curvy, pregnantly-glowy, sipping
what is likely a cherry cola (that’s her go-to ‘normal’ non-alcoholic drink), talking to Gibbs’ Abby,
tall and slender and poised in black and white. She’s sipping something cloudy and white in a martini
glass, and looks so posh she really should be in a 1940’s film noir classic. (He discretely snaps a
photo of them, and then Abbi by herself, and sends it to Tony with *Femme fatale* as the tag line.)

Once he gets there, Abby hands him… he’s not sure. It’s not his normal out and about cocktail
scotch. This is brown, but too dark. Smells like booze, coffee, and a bit sweet. He takes a sip. Coffee
flavored, bit creamy, sweet, it’s nice. She happily takes the nibbles he’s brought over.

Tim holds up his drink, with a question in his eye.

“Black Russian. Figured you’d like it.”

Tim nods at that. It is yummy.

“Part of the black/white wedding theme,” Abbi adds. She glances at her drink. “This thing’s a White
Cloud.”

He’s never had one of them before, either. “Any good?”

Abbi offers him her glass. “Take a sip and tell me.”

That one’s good, too. Chocolate, cream, and… pineapple? Not a combo he’d have come up with on
his own, but it’s not bad at all. He’s feeling pretty pleased with himself about not needing to drive
anywhere tonight.

Abby starts excitedly telling him the ghost story that goes with the building. Apparently, there are
placards in each room explaining their historical significance, as well as different bits about the
various owners. (She doesn’t think the place is haunted. Or if it was, it’s not anymore.)

The three of them stick together. They know that Diane and Eric are supposed to be here
somewhere, but he doesn’t see them.

“What making her work late?” Tim teases Abbi.

She shrugs, sipping her drink. “I took off for this, didn’t think I could keep her away.”

“What even to save Gibbs and Fornell?” Abby asks with a smile.

Abbi rolls her eyes. “I don’t get why you’re so terrified of her. Yeah, she’s intense, but…” compared
to, pretty much the entire Marine Corp, Diane’s not all that impressive.

“She made Tim cry the—“
“No, she did not!” Tim looks alarmed.

“That’s not how Tony tells it,” Abby’s voice is light and teasing as she sips her cola.

“Yeah, well, you know what Tony’s full of. I just said I didn’t ever want to be alone with her after that first time, and Gibbs, in his gentle and encouraging sort of way dropped her at my house and made me babysit her all night.”

Abbi laughs at that. “She ended up at your place?”

“Fornell and Gibbs were fussing about who she should stay with, coming up with worse and worse reasons for it not being them.”

“Fornell claimed he had toxic black mold,” Tim adds, remembering him and Gibbs scrambling around for anything that might get them out of this.

“And then Tim opened his mouth, reminded them they were in the room with one other guy with a gun, who they could boss around. Both of them smiled like they were seeing the sun for the first time. She ended up sleeping on his sofa, spooned up against him,” Abby chimes in with a grin.

Abbi’s eyes go wide, and she looks at Tim. “You slept with Diane!”

“While she was married!” Abby’s having way too much fun with this.

Abbi looks like she’s planning to enjoy it, too. “Okay, back to the beginning! I haven’t heard this story.”

Tim slumps a little and glares at both of them.

Eventually, the wedding party shows up, and everyone is escorted to a large tent off the back of the house. Inside, around a dance floor, there are tables covered in black table cloths. White china, napkins, and flowers accent the tables. At one end of the dance floor, there’s a long table for the wedding party, and all the rest of them are at small, round tables, seating six or eight.
To the right of the head table, is a smaller table with a huge white cake that looks like it’s draped in black lace, surrounded by white roses.

Tim glances at it, nudges Abby, and says, “If we hadn’t gone for cupcakes?”

She nods, and they drift over to look at it more closely. If they had had a cake, it probably would have looked a lot like that. “Red flowers?”

He nods. Add some more roses to that, and that would have done perfectly for them.

On both the left and the right, the tent opens to the gardens beyond. The timing of dinner begins to make more sense. The sun’s finally down, and outside there are shadowy shapes of trees and hedges, all covered in millions of sparkling fairy lights.

Tim kisses Abby, happy to be here with her, surrounded by so many beautiful things.

Abbi’s searching the tables, looking for theirs, and she finds it, waving them over. Tim sees two more redheads at the table, and he smiles. Of course…

“Is this Fornell’s idea of a joke, or Wendy’s?” Tim asks as he kisses Diane’s cheek and greets Eric as they all settle in for dinner.

“I think they decided we were better off all tucked into one corner on our own,” Abbi replies.

“Not entirely on our own,” Eric says, looking at the name tags on their table. “Who’s Ron Sacks?”

“I am,” Ron says, showing up as Eric says his name. He offers his hand. “Is this the law enforcement table?”


“Ron Sacks.” His voice is wary as he says that. He knows who Diane is, and can’t believe she’s here tonight. He’s fairly sure she doesn’t know who he is. And there’s no reason why she should. She and Fornell were divorced when they partnered up. “I was Tobias’ partner for a few years. I know…” he’s squinting at Tim, like he kind of knows who he’s talking to, but isn’t entirely sure. “You’re NCIS, right?”

Tim nods. “Tim McGee. You tried to put my partner in prison about ten years ago. I’m the one sending you and Fornell lists of names of people who need to be investigated.”

Ron nods. “You’re the one keeping me in overtime.”

“Me, too.” Draga adds. “NCIS, also. I’m on DiNozzo’s team, and we’re also running down guys on that list. You know everyone else?”

Ron glances at Abby, looking carefully. “You had black hair the last time I saw you.”

“Yes, I did. And a different name. Abby McGee now. And just to make things interesting, she’s Abbi, too.”

“Abbi Borin,” Borin offers her hand. “CGIS.”

Ron’s eyes light up. He’s finally able to place Abbi, who looks familiar to him. “I knew I knew you. I’ve been seeing you on the news. You’re the one who broke the mess there.”

“I had some help,” she says dryly, looking at the people around her, and then glancing at Gibbs.
“Wait, are you here with Gibbs?”

She nods at that, too.

Ron looks over to Gibbs, who is up at the head table with the rest of the wedding party. “Wow. Okay. He’s retired now, right?”

“Why are you thinking that?” Abby asks.

“DiNozzo’s got his own team. And all of his emails say Director of Cybercrime on them. Don’t see half of his team wandering off if he’s still there.”

Ron’s not wrong about that. “He retired in January,” Abbi says.

“And they needed crowbars to pry him out of his desk?” Ron asks.

Tim nods. “Just about.”

Since they’re all working, more or less, the same job, conversation flows fairly well.

Eric, Diane, and Abbi think the story of FBI V. NCIS is funny. They have a good time talking about Chip, and Abby doesn’t mind a story where she’s the one who saves the day at the end.

They’ve also all got bits of the same massive case, and listening to Draga and Sacks getting into grabbing these guys and pumping them for information is interesting.

Tim and Abbi both glance at each other as they’re talking, a shared sense of feeling out of place by not being in the field any longer. Not all that long ago, those interrogation stories would have involved them, too.

Dinner is good. Fairly standard wedding fare, prime rib or chicken, or the vegetarian lasagna. Tim’s a bit surprised that there isn’t more of an Italian pasta-oriented meal, since that seems to be something Fornell really likes, but as Diane points out, trying to eat something with red sauce when you’re in a white dress is a disaster waiting to happen.

Abbi laughs at that, and nods, and goes into a story about how something always happens when she’s in a nice dress. Only time she’s gotten dressed up, really dressed up in the last five years that didn’t involve getting bled on/dirty was DiNozzo Sr.’s wedding.

Ron’s got a few stories of good evenings out that didn’t happen. (Tim wonders if that’s part of him being single.) Abby trumps all of them with Jimmy and Breena’s wedding story, and the table agrees that they win the most distressing work-screwing-your-personal-life award.

Dinner wraps with the first dance. Fornell does dance, well, for that matter, and he’s holding his bride and grinning like everything in the universe is perfect. Abby coos a bit at that, and Tim holds her closer, remembering how that felt.
The second dance opens the floor, and Tim and Abby head out eagerly.

The music is pretty tame. Mostly instrumentals that Tim doesn’t recognize. There’s enough beat to dance to, and it’s not so loud you can’t talk. Really, that’s all he needs from wedding music.

He’s got his hands on the small of her back, and she’s got her arms around his shoulders as they sway to a soft, gentle beat.

“Another month, and it’ll be two years for us.”

He nods at that. “Three weeks and it’ll be four years.”

She kisses him gently. “Good four years.”

“Oh yeah.” His hand drifts to her belly. “Nothing I could have ever guessed, but everything I ever wanted.”

She’s looking into his eyes as she says softly, “Exactly.”

Dancing breaks for cake cutting and dessert.

Fornell and Wendy go through the traditional motions, turning a big dessert into a smaller one, and feeding each other little bites of what appears to be chocolate cake.

Once they’re done, everyone sits down, ready for (at least for Tim and Abby) the main event. Tim’s got his phone out, Gibbs in focus, and is recording away.

They watch as the wedding coordinator heads over to Gibbs, hands him a microphone (which Gibbs immediately puts down) and then starts clinking a spoon on a glass, getting everyone’s attention.

Gibbs closes his eyes, takes what looks like a deep breath, lets it out slow, and then stands up. (Microphone still on the table, forgotten.) He looks over to their table, his eyes finding Abbi, Tim, and Abby, and all three of them are thinking you’ve got this! thoughts at him.

He takes one more breath, squares his shoulders, and then kisses Wendy on the cheek. It’s hard to hear what he’s saying, but Tim thinks he says, “For making my friend happier than he’s ever been.” Then Gibbs steps over, gives Fornell a firm whack up the back of the head, and says, “For waiting two years to ask her out.” The whole room is silent for a heartbeat, shocked, and then Emily starts laughing like that’s the funniest thing in the history of funny things, which gets Fornell laughing, followed by everyone else.

When everyone quiets down, he hugs both of them, and lifts his glass. “For both of you, a long life filled with the love of each other and the joy that love brings you.” Then he kisses Wendy again, hugs Fornell, and sits back down.

The video Tim sends out ends with Gibbs looking fairly pleased with himself, surrounded by the sound of him and Abbi giggling while Abby says, “Oh, my god! That’s a perfect Gibbs best man’s speech!”
Dinner might have been pretty much standard wedding food. Okay, not spectacular. Everything was more or less cooked the way it was supposed to be and put in front of the right person. (They watched the waiter break out into a sweat at Diane’s extremely specific order, but he got it right, earning many thanks.)

Dessert is spectacular. Tim’s not sure what he’d call this cake. Black velvet? It’s chocolate, really, really intense chocolate, and probably had some sort of extra food coloring added because it’s midnight in a cave black. The filling is black cherries and probably brandy. (Tim knows it’s got alcohol in it, and that said alcohol isn’t scotch or tequila, beyond that… Eventually a waiter identifies it as spiced rum.) It’s dark and sweet and a little spicy, a little sour, and all wrapped in this rich cloud of white chocolate buttercream.

He valiantly offers to eat Abby’s cherries. It’s probably not enough alcohol to worry about, but she’s not interested in taking any risks, and he knows she loves cherries, so if they sit there on her plate, gently calling to her, she might eat one. (At least, that’s the way he attempts to convince her to let him eat her cherries. She raises an eyebrow at him, spears one on her fork, lets him eat it, and goes back to finishing her dessert. Draga makes a crack about getting shot down. Tim chews his cherry, smirks, and points out he got one more than Eric did.)

More dancing. It’s really not late. Not even nine, yet. But he can feel Abby’s slowing down.

“She tired?” he asks as she’s leaning a bit more heavily against him than normal.

She shakes her head. “Just pregnant. My feet are done.”

He grins at her. “Then let’s get out of here. We’ve got a room, massage oil, and hours and hours of free time. Let me see if I can make those feet happy.”

She grins back. “Sounds like heaven!”

They say goodnight to everyone, resulting in some smirking from Gibbs and Abbi, and a collection of sympathetic looks from the people who think they’re cutting out early just because of pregnant tiredness.

Tim leans against the doorway as Abby gives the room a one over. He was right; she loves it. She flops onto the bed with a sigh, and he kicks off his shoes, slips off his jacket, and then turns on the fireplace and the candles while turning off the overhead lights.

The room goes dim, lit with flickering golds and warm oranges.
She’s lying on her side, then props herself up on one arm, watching him as he slowly unbuttons his vest.

“Show time?” she asks.

“You want a show?” he smiles a bit, loosening his tie, very deliberately. His long fingers coaxing fabric through the knot.

“Always,” she grins up at him.

“Mmmm…” his eyes spark with wicked pleasure as he pulls his tie from his collar and drapes the black silk over the foot of the bed. “Might want that, later.”

Her eyes are equally alight as she says, “Oooohhh! Yeah, we might.”

He steps closer to the bed, trails his finger down her left leg, and then cups his hand gently around her ankle, slipping her shoe off. She shifts from reclining on her hip to her butt, her weight on one hand to both of them, and lifts her right foot, up, and he repeats the gesture, then lifting her leg to kiss her ankle before gently putting her leg back on the bed.

He’s leaning over her once he’s got her foot back on the bed, so she tugs on his vest, and he slips that off, too. Taking a few steps back to the dresser, he lays it on his jacket. (He quickly shucks off his socks, too. There’s no good way to get them off for this sort of game.) Then he turns back to Abby, who’s now sitting on the bed.

“White button down, black dress slacks…” She’s looking him up and down as he heads back to the bed. Tim pops the first button on his shirt, standing in front of her, keeping up eye contact.

Abby licks her lips and follows the view of his hands as they unbutton each successive button on his shirt. Her eyes trace over his skin, reveling in the dichotomy of pale gold light and gray shadow.

He offers her his wrist, and she undoes the button, and again, on the right side.

“On or off?” he knows she likes him a little undressed, and is fine with either option.

“Off.”

He leans in a little closer, and she pushes the shirt off his shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. Her hands trace across his shoulders and down his arms. This time four years ago, they were, save for the code tattoo and Jethro’s bites, unmarked.

Four years has changed him, inside and out, and it shows on his skin, and the wrinkles around his eyes when he smiles, and the few gray hairs threading through the dark brown.

Abby kisses the cuff tattoo, and the scar on the inside of his bicep. She kisses the scars on his wrist and hand, and carefully takes the cuff off his left wrist, and kisses the tattoos there. She lifts his left hand to her lips, and kisses his wedding band, and the scars from sparring with Jimmy on his knuckles, before looking up and smiling at him. “You’re so beautiful.”

He smiles back at her, voice dry as he says, “Even all marked up?”

“Yeah.” She pulls back as he kneels in front of the bed, and the kisses the scar through his eyebrow, and gently strokes her fingers through his hair, looking into his eyes, smiling a little, and says, “Mine.” She kisses him again, fingertips on his chest, feeling smooth skin and silk fine hairs under the pads of her fingers. “And yours, always yours.”
“This breath to my last.” The vow that’s shaped his life these last four years. It’s grown, changed, but that bedrock is still there. He leans forward and kisses her, one hand on her neck, the other resting gently over their son.

The fingers on her neck trace down to the top of her dress, finding the hook and eye, and slipping it open. A few seconds after that, he’s got the zipper between his fingers and is pulling it down.

Abby shifts a bit, so he can pull the dress over her head easily, and he does, and like with his jacket and vest, he carefully lays it on the dresser. Part of it is about taking care of nice clothing, part of it is enjoying walking around and letting her really look at him.

And she is watching. The flex of his shoulders as he carefully smooths the silk of her dress against the dresser, the press of his butt and thighs against his slacks as he steps, the slight jut of his dick against his fly, as watching her, feeling this moment, starts to wake it up.

He’s watching, too. Abby’s halfway between sitting and kneeling on the bed. Most of her weight on one hip, with her legs curled close to her. Her arms are raised as she’s taking the pins out of her hair, letting it loose.

He smiles, and gets a shot of that. Her arms up, breasts high, cupped by white lace, belly round and smooth, legs also caressed by white lace. “I should blow that up. Hang it in my office. Motivational pin-up poster.”

Abby giggles. “And, would you find that motivating to actually work?”

“Only if my job responsibilities radically change. I’d find it motivating to get home.”

She smiles at that. “You and Jimmy need a man cave. You can put it up there.”

He laughs at that, and then sits behind her on the bed. “Want some help?”

“Sure.”

Her hair is long enough now that it does things like twists okay, but okay means she still needs a decent number of pins to keep it in place. He’s kissing her neck and shoulder as he finds the bobby pins and slips them out.

When he tries to run his fingers through her hair, they snag.

“I think you missed a few.”

“May have been distracted.” He pulls the last two out, and then runs his fingers, successfully, through her hair. It’s a bit poof-y and wild, but he likes that look. He loves the way her hair feels, soft and silky between his fingers. And he really loves the pleased moan that eases out of her as he begins to gently rub her scalp. “So, what’s sore from lugging Sean around?”

She smiles, wry look on her face. “What isn’t?”

He kisses her, then says with a grin, “Then I guess I’ll just have to rub you all over to make it all better.”

“I think you will.”

He sighs, teasing her with, “What a way to spend a night.”

She gently nips his bottom lip. “You know you love it.”
He kisses her shoulder, and looks up at her. “You know it, baby. Feet to head, head to feet?”

“Feet are pretty sore.”

“Feet then.” He moves away from her, grabbing the massage oil from under the pillow, and then piling them all at the head of the bed. “Sit back and relax.”

Normally, she’d just lie on her back for something like this, but on her back isn’t comfortable for more than a few minutes right now. Lounging reclined works, too, and gives him more room at the foot of the bed.

He settles himself at her feet, between her legs, and then traces his fingers up her calf, light whispers of a touch, before shifting a bit to kiss her belly, hip, and thigh. Just little kisses. Hello kisses. Then his fingers find the edge of her stocking, slip under, and slowly peel it off her leg.

Abby makes a pleased, “Mmmmm” sound at that. Tim echoes it, enjoying unwrapping his wife, noticing that Breena must have done her toes, because she’s got a pedicure: white base with silver French tips.

He tosses the stocking behind him when he’s got it off, and uncaps the oil, drizzling a teaspoon or so in his hand, and he’s ready to go. He rubs it between his palms and fingers, warming it, before he firmly cups her heel and ankle in his hands. For a moment, he just holds, then he sweeps his hand down her foot, over her toes, before shifting direction, and sweeping all the way up to the back of her knee.

Several more long strokes has her whole lower leg slick and glistening in the soft gold light. He kneads down her leg, back to her foot, and begins in earnest.

He cups her ankle in his right hand, and takes her big toe in his left. Soft little motions, holding and squeezing, gently circling each toe, milking them. She’s purring before he gets to her pinkie toe. He worms his fingers between them, flexing them back and forth, working all the little kinks out.

Each toe gets a soft, little kiss on the tip, and then he moves onto her foot. Warming strokes, both of his whole hands rubbing up and down the length of her foot, circling over her ankle, up and down, over and over. He worms his fingers between her toes again, getting a firm grip, and this time rotates her foot at the ankle, loosening it up, giving everything a little shake.

Then knuckles, pressing into the arch of her foot, rippling against the sore muscle, making small, focused circles, stripping up and back along the tendons, over and over until Abby’s gone from purring to full on moaning.

“I think the last time you made that sound, Jimmy and I were getting you off.”

“Then maybe you need to do this more often.”

He slips his finger tips to her ankle and begins to circle it with firm pressure, making little circles with the pads of his fingers, while his whole hands move in bigger circles around the bones.

She moans again, loud.

“Maybe I do.”

“If it gets me more foot rubs like this, I’ll moan you the whole Hallelujah Chorus.”

Tim tries moaning the first few bars, but they both end up giggling too hard to keep that up for more
than a moment.

She moans again. “It’s really good.”

“Yeah. I guessed.” He’s looking forward to the next time he gets a massage that isn’t designed to break down scar tissue or increase flexibility. One of these days, they’ll rub on him just to make him feel good. He’s intending to enjoy it.

He starts on the top of her foot, mostly just stroking up and down. Not a lot of muscle there, so he’s not trying anything firm or deep, just petting.

“And those shoes are cute, but pregnant feet do not like cute shoes. Pregnant feet like flip flops and slippers and boots that are a size too wide with lots of arch support.”

He kisses the top of her foot. “Then we’ll not ask pregnant feet to get into anything other than flip flops, and slippers, and too big boots.”

She smirks at that, and then moans again as his hands slip from her feet to her calf, getting a nice, tight grip and slowly sliding up to her knee.

“Pregnant calves really appreciate that, too.”

“How about this?” He starts circling both thumbs (though his right is less likely to make a circle and more likely to do a somewhat jerky back and forth) in her calf while the rest of his hand rests on the top of her leg, slipping down.

“Pregnant calves love that.”

“And this?” The top of his hands stay where they were, but instead of circling them, he tries twiddling his thumbs against her calf as he slides back up. (His right thumb cooperates better with that, too.)

Another very happy sigh.

They continue like that, warm strokes, quite conversation. Calf became thigh, and apparently pregnant thighs get sore, too. And pregnant thighs very much appreciate being carefully rubbed from knee to hip, hands stroking up and down, ripping against tight muscles.

From thigh, he slips off her panties, and bra, and has her scoot down a bit, lying her side. He’s snug up behind her (Still wearing his trousers, there’s going to be a hell of a dry cleaning bill for this, but he doesn’t care.) stroking her hip, digging his finger into the tense, sore muscles there, soothing them with smooth, slick pressure. Hip leads to buttock, can’t skip that. It’s round and smooth in his hands, and he’s making sure to keep his pressure deep and firm. Her leg ends up on his hip (better access… sure, that’s it.) He’s rubbing his thumbs across the fleshy bit of her buttock, then stroking from there down the back of her leg, and back up again, edging closer and closer to her pussy with each stroke.

Abby’s making very pleased sounds, and rubbing up against him in what he considers and exceptionally pleasant and distracting sort of way.

Eventually, he nips her ear and says. “If you want me to get to your left, tone that down.”

She thinks about it for a moment, wiggles against him once more, and then goes still. He thinks about it, too. If he keeps working on her butt, he’s not going to get to her left side anytime soon, so he goes to her belly. Very soft, very gentle. Much more petting than massage. He can feel Sean squirming around, so maybe he likes belly rubs. Abby certainly seems to. She’s making happy sounds, but has
kept herself fairly still while he’s doing it.

Eventually, belly becomes ribs and chest. He tries to stick to her ribs and pecs, but there’s a lovely white and pink breast right there, under his hand, and it’s also all soft and warm and slick, and he can’t not play with it. Abby’s enjoying it, too, arching into his touch, rubbing against him. When her hand slips between them to find his fly, that wakes Tim up enough that he notices that what he’s doing doesn’t qualify as a massage anymore. At least, not the sort that’s legal.

Her hand is squeezing him through his trousers, stroking, and he’s moaning, too.

“Finish the massage or go with this?” he asks, sounding a little breathless.

“Oh, god, this!”

He nods, kissing her neck and shoulder, helping her with his trousers, getting them shoved down a bit and his dick free. A little more shifting, and Abby scooting back a few more inches, one sweet thrust, and he’s groaning along with her, both of them reveling in that first, slick push.

His right arm is under her neck, and her right hand finds his, twining fingers with his, tightening them on him as they start a slow, lazy rhythm.

Her leg is draped over his hip, her left hand on his butt, giving him a squeeze as his left heads for her breast again, rubbing and gently circling her nipple as they rock together.

She twists as much as she can, so they can kiss as well as make love, and their lips find each other, tongues mirroring the slow, easy pace of their hips.

It’s kindling sex. Small sparks slowly joining together growing hotter and brighter. Embers glowing red and gold, sparking to flames with a shift of the hips or a quick squeeze/suck. Small flames licking along fingers and toes, growing wider, hotter, creeping up legs and arms, then racing, bonfire high as they course from nipples to thrusting, wet, ecstatic pulses.

Tim’s so content and satisfied when they’re done, he doesn’t want to pull back long enough to kick off his pants. But eventually Abby gets up to use the bathroom, so he does, not worrying about making sure they don’t get wrinkled.

A moment later she’s back, flicking off the candles, but leaving the fireplace on. She snuggles into him, and he burrows under the blankets with her, wrapping around her, kissing the back of her neck.

A minute later breathing slows, steadies, and they shift into dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Pornell Fangirl for Fornell's middle name! (She mostly writes Fornell/Jimmy and it's lovely!)
“Come on! Let’s GO!”

“Wedding’s not for three hours, Tobias. Sit back down.”

Fornell is not sitting down. He’s buzzing around Gibbs’ living room, enough nervous energy pouring off of him to make Mona jumpy.

Fornell paces across the floor again. The game they’re supposed to be watching is just a blur in the background, and if he doesn’t quit this soon, Mona is going to start chasing him, thinking this is a game of tag or something. Gibbs pulls himself up from the sofa, grabs Fornell by the hand, and takes him into the basement.

“I’m not sanding anything.”

“Wasn’t going to ask you to,” Gibbs replies. (And he wasn’t planning on sanding anything himself, either. Right now, he’s got to wear a face mask to sand anything, which he hates.) He heads over to his collection of jars filled with screws, grabs one, unscrews the lid, and then very gently pours out the screws. Also in there, is a small ring box. “Here. Take a look.”

“Is that…”

“Yeah.” He hands the box over to Fornell, who opens it and then looks at the ring approvingly.

“Nice job.”

“Thanks.” He tucks the ring back into the jar, and then carefully pours the screws back over it. He jiggles it a few times, making sure the screws are settled around the box, and puts it back.

Fornell watches. “What are you going to do if she decides she needs a screw?”

Gibbs laughs. “Give her one.”

Fornell gives him a gentle shove. Then he checks his watch. “Well, that ate up three minutes. Now what?”

“Best hotel in DC? Not the Adam’s House.”

That has Fornell interested. “Best how?”

Gibbs starts to explain his plan, and Fornell nods, offering advice. That takes more than three minutes.

Mona’s staring up at Abbi. Gibbs and Fornell left three hours ago and Abbi only just got back. She wants to snuggle and play.

Abbi shakes her head. “Nope.”
More doggy staring, big brown eyes shouting, *play with me.*

“If you come up, you’ll shed all over me.”

“Stay down here. Let me know when McGee and Abby get here, okay.”

Abbi nods and heads up the stairs to go get ready for Fornell’s wedding. On the way to the shower, she walks past her dress. Her *white* dress. She wonders if part of why Wendy picked a black and white wedding was to get everyone else thinking weddings, too. Either remembering their own, or pondering how they may go.

Abbi flicks on the shower, thinking about her dress. It’s not old, exactly, or very new, either. She bought it for an undercover op four years ago. They were supposed to be a wedding on a cruise. Good enough cover. It made sure the guys smuggling untaxed rum in from Haiti thought they had a reason to want several cases. (The rum-runners were small fish in a much bigger op. But domino one’s got to fall before domino two can.)

She was the only girl on the team, so she got to play the bride. (Her suggestion that Henry would look great in a white dress didn’t go over too well.) Several moments of looking at the lace and sparkle encrusted, poofy monstrosities that CGIS had on hand for her made her decide that she had to get her own dress.

The, *what the hell, not like I’m ever going to get to do this for real,* moment meant she got a real wedding dress, one she liked, one that looked amazing on her, and kept it. It’s a sheath dress, strapless, sweetheart neckline, fine white silk that flows like molten pearl down her skin.

Omagi saw her in it at the start of the op (he was playing the minister) and said quietly to her, “I really hope you get to wear this for real one day.”

She’s not sure if today counts as ‘for real’ and for that matter, she’s not sure if she’d wear this ‘for real.’ She’s certainly aware of the fact that she and Gibbs are moving towards a marriage, and likely a wedding, at some point, but she’s still very nebulous on the concept of what a Borin-Gibbs wedding would look like.

As she’s washing her hair, she’s thinking that part of not having any concrete ideas on the subject (since it’s not like being vague or nebulous about anything is part of her usual personality) is a way of making sure she’s not too disappointed if it doesn’t happen.
“The Camaro?” Diane says, sounding a little annoyed when Eric leads her to his car.

“We’re taking Emily home, and she loves it,” Eric replies.

Diane nods at that, and sighs a little. That’s a good reason for the car, and it’s not like there’s anything wrong with the Camaro. Sometimes, though, she wonders what the hell she’s doing with Eric. It’s not that he isn’t a great boyfriend, because he is. He’s gorgeous (and ripped), and sweet, and kind, and cooks, and as good of a dad as his ex will let him be, and Emily loves him (and Kevin), and it’s not that Diane doesn’t like him, because she does, but God, he’s just so damn young.

She’s looking at part of being so damn young. It’s a blood red, hand rebuilt, customized, modified, ’68 Camaro. Eric drag races with it. Off-road. He shouldn’t. He’s a cop after all, and it’s illegal as hell. But, he loves it, loves what he does with it, and according to him, there is nothing now that he’s not flying anymore, like getting six guys together on a long stretch of beach out in the middle of nowhere and opening his baby up.

And she is beautiful, in an almost menacing sort of way. She’s beautiful the way a sword or a gun can be beautiful. According to him, on pavement she’ll break 200 (and no, Diane does not want to know how he knows that) and on sand she’ll get to 120 (she really doesn’t want to know how he knows that).

He doesn’t usually drive her on pavement. Doesn’t usually drive her period. Most of the time she sits in his garage, and he pets her with his polishing cloths and tinkers under her hood. (Diane sighs at that. Jethro has his boats. Fornell’s got his car, too. Sterling loved model trains. What does it say about her that she’s not happy with a guy unless he’s got some sort of thing to spend hours tinkering with?)

Since her tires and suspension and torque are all specialized for driving on sand or gravel, she’s not as good on pavement as the kinds of cars the urban drifters go for. But, for a nice, sedate drive home from a wedding, the Camaro’ll do just dandy. For impressing a teen girl who idolizes him, it’s even better. Diane knows that Emily will light up seeing her. She loves the idea that Eric’s got this big, fast, dangerous car that he spends his downtime on. She’s even, on a few occasions, headed over to Eric’s to mess around with the Camaro, too. (In fact, if she wasn’t seriously grossed out by the idea that he dates her mom, Diane’s pretty sure Emily would have a crush on Eric. But the idea that he sleeps with Diane did a good job of killing any interest Emily might have had in him. So, now he’s the awesome big brother and Kevin’s the awesome little brother she always wanted and never had.)

And then Eric opens the door to the Camaro for her, handing her in, and Diane would have to admit that showing up at her ex-husband’s wedding in a goddamn sexy car, with a six foot two, two-hundred and twenty pounds of sculpted muscle Federal Agent, who’s more than twenty years younger than she is, and filling out his tux in all the right ways, is a kick.

Though she does wonder when she became the lady with the trophy boyfriend.

And she wonders if he’s really a trophy boyfriend. He’s not here just because he looks good. (Though that never hurts.) And especially after Sterling, a guy who can hold a decent conversation, isn’t hiding anything from her, puts away terrorists and killers for a living, and can do push-ups with her sitting on his back (and she really enjoyed how she knows that), plus doesn’t need heart meds or Viagra, is a treat.

She wonders what Eric gets out of this. He seems happy. But she knows he can do ‘better.’ At least, he can do younger, and prettier, and certainly kinder, definitely easier-going.

Diane sighs. They’ve probably got a conversation coming up.
The tuxes are *very* black. Boutonnieres are white calla lilies. Fornell’s pacing around the foyer to the chapel, with a determined and excited stride. Gibbs is sitting, watching him. Alton’s leaning against the doorway, looking pretty relaxed. Trevor and Dave are off with Team Bride, getting ready to give their mom away.

T-minus one hour. Probably at least half an hour before anyone’s even going to be showing up. Even the minister isn’t here, yet.

Fornell makes a fast turn, and goes back into the chapel. It’s all set. Pews are looking pew-like. White roses and calla lilies are all over the place. They’re all tied with black ribbons. At the front of the chapel, there’s a forest of white pillar candles, all of which are also tied with black satin ribbons at the base.

Gibbs grabs Fornell’s hand as he’s about to head in there and start fiddling with something. He looks up at Fornell and shakes his head. “You’ll just mess it up.”

“How can I mess up lighting candles?”

“By doing it an hour before they need to be lit,” Alton says. He’s two years younger than Fornell, looks like him, except for the fact that unlike Fornell, he’s still got a full head of hair, and unlike Fornell, he’s got a desk job running analytics for a health insurance company, so he’s a lot rounder than Tobias. He shakes his head. “Kind of wish we still smoked.”

Fornell sighs at that. “Then we’d all be in the back puffing away.”

“Remember your first wedding, you, me, the minister…” Alton shakes his head. “God, it was so cold. We were out there on the front stoop, puffing away. Diane caught the smoke on you and spent the first half of the reception bitching you out for smoking, baby on the way…” He looks over at Gibbs, who is listening quietly and intently. “You ever meet Diane?”

Gibbs gives Tobias a look, and quietly says, “Yeah, we’ve met.”

“Then you know how she can get when she’s pissed. ‘Smoking! Don’t you care anything about our baby! Don’t you want to be here when she’s a grown up!’ and on and on… She’s a piece of work! And pregnant on top of that. Yikes!” Alton shudders.

“She’s a bit calmer now,” Tobias adds.

“Be hard not to be. Can’t believe you invited her.”

“She invited me to hers,” Fornell adds.

“Yeah, but you didn’t go,” Alton replies.

“You were going to,” Gibbs says.

“Yeah, well, my wingman dropped out,” Fornell shoots back at him.

Alton looks at both of them, realizing that Gibbs was the wingman in question. “You were both
invited? How do you know Diane?” Alton asks Gibbs.

Gibbs glances between them. He’s not sure how much Alton knows about the situation with Diane.

Apparently, Alton knows enough. He looks from Gibbs to Fornell and back. “Oh. Wait. You’re… Oh, shit, I’m sorry.”

Gibbs shakes his head at that. “You’re not the one who got her pregnant.”

“How are you two even still speaking with each other? Let alone her…”

“Long story,” Fornell says.

Alton smiles. “We’ve got an hour. Have at it.”

Tobias elbows his brother, seeing what he’s doing, getting his mind off of the impending wedding and talking about something else. Instead of giving him the backstory he says, “She’s working for his fiancée now.”

Gibbs rolls his eyes at that one. “With. Diane doesn’t work ‘for’ anyone.”

“Is she really coming?” Tobias asks. “McGee’s got to be sending her piles of goodies, too.”

Gibbs nods at that. Since they don’t actually know anyone at the IRS anymore, and since the IRS looks shady as hell right now, Tim’s been sending all of his IRS stuff to Tobias (because FBI has jurisdiction over public corruption cases) and Diane (because she knows the ins and outs of everything IRS.)

“You know she’s coming. Someone’s got to take Emily home tonight,” Alton adds.

“I can hope, right?”

“Maybe she’ll back out last minute, like you did with her wedding,” Gibbs says.

Fornell shakes his head. “I was bringing you to her wedding. She’s bringing Flyboy. No shot in hell she’ll pass that up.”

“Who’s Flyboy?” Alton asks.

“You’ll see.” He nudges Gibbs. “Those two are running a competition for who’s got the hottest redhead, and she’s winning.”

Gibbs shakes his head. “I’m winning.”

Fornell laughs at that.

While it’s true that Gibbs is doing a better job of not looking nervous than Fornell is, it’s also true that he feels nervous.

Which he hates.

On several levels. First off, it feels bad. He’s not sure how Tim survived what looked like feeling like
this for years at a time. He’s sure that if he felt like this for more than a few hours a year, he’d be drunk non-stop to kill it.

Second of all, it’s stupid. He’s going to give a speech. A (very) short speech. Worst comes to worst, he looks like a moron doing it. Not like it’ll be the first time he’s looked stupid. Won’t be the last, either. And on top of that, almost everyone at this thing doesn’t know him. And really, when it comes down to it, if he completely bombs it, he knows Tim won’t send the video around. It’s one thing to poke fun at him, it’s another to humiliate him, and Tim won’t be part of the latter.

So… he’s not in the greatest mood ever as they finally get the go ahead from the Minister to start lighting the candles. He takes as deep a breath as he can, tries to make himself relax, and debates making Fornell be his best man, because he hates public speaking just as much as Gibbs does.

With a somewhat mean smile on his face, Gibbs pulls the lighter he always carries (Sub-rule 9A: Always carry a lighter. 9B: Coffee grounds. 9C: Water. 9D First aid kit. Rule Nine in all its variations has kept him alive and functional in a whole slew of situations.) out of his pocket and tries to imagine Fornell having to give his best man’s speech.

That helps calm the gnawing in his gut, but it doesn’t kill it by any stretch of the imagination.

Go time in ten minutes.

Diane and Eric come in, and Alton understands why Diane wouldn’t pass this up. Eric’s in a classic tux, but he’s swapped out the white shirt for a black one, and contrasted it with a white tie and vest. Alton might not spend much time considering male beauty, but he knows arm candy when he sees it, and Eric’s arm candy.

Diane’s in black, too. Halter top dress, with the neck and bodice covered in intricate sparkly black swirls, and a flood of matte black silk flowing down to her ankles. Her hair is up in a bun, and she smiles at both of her ex-husbands before kissing cheeks and offering congratulations.

“You ready for this?” she asks Jethro.

He rolls his eyes a little, feeling more nervous as she watches him.

She sees it, squeezes his hand. “Just like that case. Pretend someone’s holding a gun on me, and do the job.”

He smirks, but, that actually might help. Just another case. Mission: Get Fornell Married. He can cope with that.

“Emily with the bridal party?” she asks Tobias.

Fornell nods. “I bet she’d like it if you went in to say hello.”

“We will.” She squeezes Tobias’ hands again, and heads back to the room where Team Bride is hiding. As Gibbs watches her leave, he feels off. This is… like a new flavor of nervous, and he doesn’t like that, either.

Once they’re gone, Alton says quietly to Tobias, “Flyboy?” distracting Gibbs from whatever it is
he’s sensing.

“Experimental pilot for the Navy, now he’s an NCIS agent,” Fornell adds.

“So, he worked for you?” Alton asks Gibbs.

“Only for about five minutes.”

Five minutes later, the McGees and Abbi come in, and Alton does shake his head. Both of those two managed to pull redheads way out of their leagues. As Gibbs is escorting his lady and kids to their seats on the Groom’s side, he quietly says to Fornell, “No disrespect to Wendy, but where the hell did those two find them?”

Fornell shrugs. “As long as you don’t mind never seeing your love, you can find some really pretty federal agents.”

Alton thinks about that. “You’ve got the better deal.”

Fornell nods. “I agree.”

Gibbs would have to admit that he is feeling awfully proud to be escorting Abbi down the aisle in a white dress, while he’s wearing a black tux.

He remembered that Wendy had a certain glow in her eyes when she mentioned this thing was going to be a black and white wedding, and he’s thinking he’s feeling what she was glowing about.

He kisses her one more time before she sits down, and Tim lets Abby go in first, before whispering to him, “White dress, black tux, Minister’s in the corner… You getting some ideas?”

Yeah. He is. And thinking about them makes that nervous feeling go away, really go away, for the first time all day.

“To love, honor, and cherish…” the minister says, voice low and soothing.

Abbi hasn’t been to a lot of weddings lately. Actually, she hasn’t been to a lot of them, period. After Liam died, she skipped out on any weddings she was invited to for five years.

Her sister got married, and as the maid of honor she couldn’t get out of that one.

Omagi was her partner, right hand, number one man for so long, there was no way she could skip out on his wedding. (Especially since she sort of introduced him to his wife. Not like she set them up
or anything, but Lucy was one of her neighbors, and Omagi met her a few times heading to and from Abbi’s house, and after a few “chance” meetings, he asked if she was single, and the rest is history.)

Similar stories for the other two men on her team.

But once they were all married, she was fairly sure she was done with weddings. Sure enough to buy the dress for the op, and then, after, keep it. Because that was close enough. Because she didn’t get to do it when she should have. Because… a lot of because, but when the op ended, she had it cleaned, petted it a little, very carefully put it in a nice bag, and stuck it in the back of her closet.

Then he shows up.

She’s watching Gibbs, standing up there, looking happy and proud for his friend, and looking… pretty good. She can see the difference in how he’s standing since he got shot. She sees him cradling his right forearm in his left hand, taking some of the strain off his shoulder and back. She sees the fact that his color’s still a bit too pale. She’s not sure how many others would notice what he’s doing, but she does. It’s been less than two months, so the fact that he’s even standing up is a miracle, let alone without oxygen. Apparently that’s the core, indestructible Gibbsness, of Gibbs.

But he’s not quite looking like himself again. And she’s got the sense that she’s not going to fully relax until he does.

He catches her eye and smiles back to her. That’s him. The bit of him most of the rest of the world didn’t see for all those years. The Jethro that hid under angry, hurt, sad, stern, do the job and nothing else Gibbs for all those years.

‘Black tux, white dress…’ McGee isn’t nearly as quiet as he thinks he is. She is thinking about it. About standing up there, and holding his hands and saying the words.

For the first time in a lot of years, that’s sounding like something that may actually happen.

“I do,” Fornell says, and Abbi’s looking at Gibbs, who’s looking back at her, and smiling.

“From this day forward, until one of you lays the other to rest…”

Gibbs is watching Abbi.

He’s feel very settled right now. He has been since he took the bullet for her. This is where he’s supposed to be, who he’s supposed to be with, and this is what he should be doing.

This is the path, and the partner he wants for that path. From now until his last breath, he’ll travel it with her. He smiles at her, and she smiles back.

He almost is tempted to grab the minister and ask if they can make it a double. He mentally shakes his head. Not tonight. Not here. He can’t really imagine Abbi going all out on wedding planning, but if she wants to, she should have the chance. Not like he doesn’t have the money to splurge some if she wants to. (Actually, once she sells her house, if she wants to go hog wild on it, he’ll go along for the ride.)

“I do,” Fornell says. And Wendy starts her vows.
Gibbs thinks about vows. (Much more important to him than whatever party surrounds them.) He’s said these words too many times. Repeated them with no real love or joy, because he was trying to grab what he had the first time he said them, and that was gone.

He smiles at Abbi again, and knows these aren’t the vows he’ll do again. He already made that promise and lived it, and this time, he needs to start over, fresh, new words, new promises.

He glances over to Tim, who’s got his arm around Abby, lips on her temple as they both listen to Wendy repeat the words. He thinks about Ducky, and comes to the conclusion that he probably will need some help from a ghost writer or two to get it all out and down right, but one way or another, he will get it out, and right.

The downside of being the best man, is that there’s this beautiful person, in a fabulous dress, who he really, really wants to spend time with, and he doesn’t get to spend that time with her.

Gibbs gets to kiss Abbi again in the receiving line, and then there’s a few seconds where they and the McGee’s linger around during some of the photos. But that’s pretty much it until they get to the reception.

Gibbs sighs a bit as Abbi waves goodbye. She’s going with Tim and Abby to the reception cocktail hour, while Gibbs gets to stand around and have his picture taken sixty-million times.

Could be worse. Fornell could be having a bad time. But he’s not. He’s… whatever the old guy version of glowing is.

Hell, as he’s standing there, arm around Wendy, other arm around Emily, getting shots of the three of them (and later shots of him and Wendy and her boys, and then all six of them together with the daughter-in-laws, and grandkids) he’s grinning so wide it doesn’t look like all that smile can even fit on his face.

Gibbs settles back with Alton, trying to focus on Abbi and seeing her again, willing that nervous feeling to go away, waiting for the next shot they’ll be in.

“Wow!” Eric says as he and Diane pull out of the long, tree-lined drive to the parking lot in front of the reception location.

Diane nods. She’s been a bit annoyed about going this far out of their way, but… This is absolutely beautiful. Wendy had told her the place was worth the drive, and Diane had nodded a bit, not really believing it, but Wendy was right. The main house is a stone, high middle ages, English, manor house. It’s all stone arches, and gothic beauty. What it’s doing on the banks of the James River in the middle of Virginia, she’s got no idea, but…

Hell, put everyone in ‘30s style garb, kill off one of the guests, and this has all the makings of a BBC mystery. (Including a collection of detectives who just happen to be at the party, ready and willing to solve the mystery. She spends a moment wondering which one of them would end up top dogging, and comes to the conclusion that Chucky and Eric aren’t going to win. And that, on his wedding, Leroy would probably let Tobias take the lead.)
Once Eric parks, they head into the house. Everyone who is staying overnight will stay there. They aren’t staying the night, so they go on through the house, pausing to read the small write up on the history of the house, and how it doesn’t just look like a high middle ages manor, how it actually is one, and that back in the 1920s when the original owner was especially flush, he had the whole thing taken apart, shipped over from England, and rebuilt, stone by stone, in Virginia.

Diane looks up from that and says, “Because, who doesn’t need their very own Gothic English Manor?”

Eric nods. “I can’t actually imagine having so much money you’d do something like that.”

Diane smiles a bit. “Oh, I can imagine it, just, probably wouldn’t decide to move a mansion.”

Eric grins a bit. “And what would you do with a fortune?”

“You look fabulous.”

Diane nods, smiling, taking that compliment. Like with everything else in her life, she’s very particular about her clothing, and she’s got ninja level shopping skills to get the stuff she wants. She looks great in this dress, but she’d still like it better if it really was Chanel.

They head through the manor, down a long hallway, and find the ballroom. “It’s hard to believe that people actually lived like this.” Even if she did win the lotto and end up with ninety zillion dollars, Diane can’t see having her own, personal, ballroom.

Three steps from the door, Diane’s phone buzzes. She digs it out of her purse. “Anderson.”

“Hey, Diane, remember those account you wanted me watching?”

She rolls her eyes. She asked Jared to watch two accounts, the day before yesterday. Not like she’d forget. She mouths case to Eric, who nods at her, understanding how this works. He’s got his cell on, too, and really hopes DiNozzo doesn’t call, but he wouldn’t bet on it.

“Yes. What’s going on?”

“The one that ends with 01286, it just closed.”

Diane smiles. “Interesting. You keeping watch?”

“Of course! Money’s flowing all over the place, and we’re tracing all of it, tracking all the account numbers, banks, all of it.”

Diane grins wide and happy. “Shoot the details to my email, okay?”

“No problem.” Jared sounds very pleased with himself. “You need anything else?”

“No, Jared, I’m good. Thank you.” She hangs up.

“Jared?” Draga asks, he’s more than mildly interested in who Jared might be.

“Old friend. Got our CPAs together a million years ago. He’s with Bank of America now, in their fraud department.”

Eric nods at that. He knows that Diane has a lot of friends, and they all seem to be male. This one
sounds like he’s at arm’s length though. “And he’s doing you a favor?”

She nods. They’re out, in public, and now isn’t the time to get talking about what she’s been doing this week, on her official cases, and her unofficial ones.

“Favor work out well?”

She smiles at that. “Oh yeah. I’ll tell you about it on the way home.” Her phone beeps, letting her know she’s got the email. She quickly forwards it to Borin, DiNozzo and Fornell, and then backs it up to her cloud storage. “All set.”

He nods at that.

Once they’re all in the limo heading toward the reception, that nervous feeling spikes. Gibbs goes over the speech again in his head. It’s maybe fifty words. There’s no reason at all to feel like this.

But he does.

“You okay?” Fornell asks, starting to wonder if he really is asking Gibbs for too much. Okay, Gibbs not being big on speaking at all, let alone public speaking is a running joke, but there’s making someone a bit uncomfortable for your own enjoyment, and then there’s sadism, and Fornell’s starting to wonder if he’s crossed the line. “Alton can do the speech.”

Gibbs shakes his head. “I’ve got it.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

Though she wouldn’t say it out loud, the fact that Gibbs, Fornell, and McGee apparently, all find/found Diane terrifying is vastly amusing to Abbi. She catches a quick glimpse of her as she’s entering the ballroom, all in black with Eric on her arm, and gives her a nod, while smiling as Abby and Tim give somewhat different versions of the time Diane slept over at his place.

What she also finds amusing is that none of the three of them find/found her terrifying. She’s just as hard, just as tough, just as willing to bite the heads off of people who don’t do their job properly as Diane is, but, apparently if you wrap that iron core in a pretty blouse, a nice skirt, modest heels, discrete makeup, and floral perfume, they all get really disconcerted.

She supposes it’s possible that Diane has really mellowed over the years. But, she can’t imagine she mellowed that much, because even Gibbs on a self-destructive spiral wouldn’t marry an outright Harpy.

And it’s likely true that she and Diane have a very different relationship than anything Fornell or Gibbs had with her. They’re professionals. And, though Abbi may be in charge, she’s under no illusions about being Diane’s Boss. She’s lucky enough to be in a situation where she just points out the big problem and gives Diane a pat in that direction. Diane takes care of everything else (including deciding what bits of the problems go first, and pointing out new problems) on her own. As she’s thinking about that, she realizes that’s exactly what Vance did with Gibbs, and what Robinson does
with Fornell.

She shakes her head a bit. They’re terrified because Diane is a mirror. Same work style, same tenacity, and though it would horrify them, same pickiness. (She can imagine Gibbs having a very quiet fit about that, but she’s heard the stories of reports booted for not being just right, and god save the guy who tries to give Jethro a 3/16ths screw instead of a 1/8th screw, let alone if that screw is the wrong kind of metal. And, yes, she’s heard the complaining about getting Diane the wrong drink, but Gibbs isn’t exactly a monument to chill if someone gets his coffee wrong.) She’s just a younger and prettier and louder version of Gibbs and Fornell. No wonder they’re scared.

Three of a kind.

She’s mentally chuckling at that as they head over to the ballroom to go find their dinner table.

Gibbs looks over at the table he should be sitting at. Not that he minds being up here with the wedding party, but he can see his family sitting there, talking with Diane and Eric and Sacks. They look like they’re having a good time. A good time he wants to be part of. He’s far enough away, that even with his glasses, he can’t read lips well enough to see what they’re talking about, but everyone just laughed really hard, so it must have been funny.

He’s having an okay time. Emily’s on one side (he’s been her escort tonight) and Tobias is on the other. But Tobias is sort of pre-occupied (understandably), and Emily’s not exactly great for keeping up conversation he finds fascinating.

Plus, dinner means he’s getting closer and closer to his part of this. Once they finish eating, they’ve got the first few dances, then cake cutting, and then… He makes himself not think about that, and continue to eat his prime rib, while watching Abbi laugh about something Draga just said.

Dancing. Finally Gibbs is done lurking about with the wedding party and can spend some time with Abbi.

He’s a bit fuzzy on why the ballroom was used for cocktails, and the doors leading from it to the outside are opened up to a tent, with a dance floor in there, but he doesn’t mind.

It’s fairly warm inside the house, and the cool October air is pleasant for being out and dancing.

It takes him a few seconds to find Abbi, who’s standing on the side of the dancefloor, watching the rest of the crew take advantage of the music. “Hi.”

Abbi smiles back at him. “Hello.”

He glances at the dance floor.

“You really up for it?” She doesn’t want him out of breath for his speech, and she knows he didn’t bring his O2 with him.
The music is slow and easy; Fornell’s ninety-six-year-old father-in-law is dancing to this.

Gibbs holds out his hand, and she takes it, following him onto the floor. He pulls her closer, hand finding her low back, and he gives her a lingering kiss. “As long as I’m breathing, I’m up for dancing with you.”

She smiles at that. For a few dances, they sway slow and close, and he’s so happy to be holding her.

And then the MC announces the cutting of the cake, which means it’s almost go time for him.

Cake is cut, and served; the Champagne is sparkling in the flute glasses; it’s time for him to do his thing.

The wedding coordinator lets Gibbs know he’s up, handing him a microphone.

Gibbs takes as deep of a breath as he can, and then stands up, mustering every ounce of no shame he has. There’s got to be a hundred people watching him, and this is the sort of thing he usually runs screaming away from. (Okay, walks deliberately, silently, away from. If he’s running and screaming, he’s going toward whatever it is.)

Nothing to be done for it. There are three sets of eyes watching him, urging him on, hoping he’s going to do great. Two sets that are very amused, wondering what he’s going to do. And one, Diane’s, he can’t entirely read. She’s not hoping he flubs it, but she’s not exactly wishing him well, either.

Another quick breath.

Okay. Get up and do it!

He takes a quick step to the side, and gently kisses Wendy on the cheek. Then he says, “For making my friend happier than he’s ever been.” Then one more step to the side, and he gently slaps Fornell up the back of the head, and says, “For waiting two years to ask her out.” Everyone laughs at that. (Especially Emily, apparently that’s the funniest thing she’s seen all year.) When it quiets down, he raises his glass, says, “For both of you, a long life filled with the love of each other and the joy that love brings you,” takes a sip, waits for everyone else to drink to them, and then hugs Fornell, and then Wendy, and sits down again.

There’s a second when everyone wonders if he’s going to say anything more, but he shakes his head and smiles, and the dessert rolls on.

All in all, Gibbs is pretty proud of how he did.
Diane’s phone rings again, and she heads out of the tent, away from the noise of dancing people, to be able to hear the call properly.

“Got an update for you.”

“Great, Jared.”

“Money trail stopped in Barbados. From there it was turned into cash and picked up.”

“Fuck,” Diane says it softly. “They were already there, waiting for it, right?”

“Yeah. But it’s not all black cloud. I’ve got some silver lining for you. I know one of the guys at that bank, and was able to get a picture of who picked the cash up. No name, they don’t work that way, not there, but I’ve got the picture, and because they don’t use names or account numbers for IDs I’ve got fingerprints and a retinal scan.”

That is a hell of a silver lining. “Jared, I love you.”

“I’ve got better news, too.”

“What could be better?”

“The account that ends with 0948, it’s bleeding money, in small drips, to three hundred US accounts. I’ve got all of them.”

Diane smiles wide and happy. “You’re right, that’s better.”

“I’m sending you the information—“

“Not me.” She knows she’s not in position to do anything with this right now. She’d need a court order, and she’s not the person who gets them. “Her name is Ellie Bishop. I’ll send you her email. She’ll be able to get the warrants necessary to make sure those accounts can keep accepting money, but not send any out.”

“One way freeze, that’s sneaky.” Jared sounds impressed.

“Thanks. Do we know who owns those accounts?”

“What do you think?” Code for don’t ask stupid questions.

“Ghosts and shell corporations?”

“Ghosts of shell corporations. You’ll get them, I know you will.”

“Oh, yes I will!” Diane’s grinning as she says that.

———

“You okay?” Abbi asks. This is the second time she’s caught Jethro scanning the dance floor.

He shakes his head a bit. “I… feels off.” He should be done with nervous. The speech is over. He did his job. People laughed. He’s gotten texts from Ducky and Jimmy congratulating him for a good job, and even Tony sent him a back-handed compliment, along with a subtle dig about if Fornell’s
wedding present covered the Asshole Fee for the head slap.

But he’s not feeling better. That… feeling is still there, tugging at his gut. And the more he’s feeling it, the more it feels like danger, and the less it feels like nervous.

Something’s up, but he doesn’t know what.

And then he does. Diane comes in from the garden, smiling her predator smile, and he knows it’s something about her. She’s got something, and it’s about to bite her.

That gets Abbi’s attention. She’s notices Gibbs watching Diane. Very intensely watching Diane, and she can feel this isn’t my ex-looks amazing and I’m wondering if I made a mistake sort of looking. (Though Diane cleans up good. Draga’s been looking awfully pleased with himself tonight.)

“Your gut’s firing, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. God, all day. Was thinking it was the speech, but… Don’t know what or why, but it’s got to be her. Can’t shake it, and… It’s vague. Feels like something is coming, but…” He shakes his head.

“Let’s start with the perimeter.” She’s got no problem with giving everything a once over. She wraps his arm around hers, and they head out of the dance tent to take a stroll around the Manor.

They don’t see anyone out of place, and they’re looking. They keep an eye on Diane, seeing her take a few more calls, but, besides them (and Draga) no one’s watching her.

Gibbs is shaking his head, annoyed. He can feel something’s up. But it’s not up here.

“Do you want us to grab McGee, get another set of eyes on this?” Abbi asks.

There was a time, when, without a second thought, Gibbs would have easily grabbed Tim away from whatever he’s doing with Abby right now (and, no, Gibbs is not about to imagine it clearly enough to get an idea beyond ‘whatever’) but… “No. I don’t see it. You don’t see it. He’s sure as hell not going to see it if we grab him now.”

“Draga? Fornell?”

“Not Fornell. Like Tim, he’s… distracted.” And right now, as Fornell is drinking with Wendy in his lap, he’s looking very distracted.

“Eric then.”

That annoys Gibbs on principal. Not because Eric isn’t a good guy, but because, if he sees something that Gibbs doesn’t, that means that he really does need to go and get stronger glasses. But, he nods at Abbi, because she’s right, another set of eyes is a good plan, and the thing Eric doesn’t see is the thing that doesn’t exist. Eric sees, and remembers, everything.

He’ll notice if something’s out of place from earlier today.

Time to bite the bullet and talk to Eric and Diane.
“You’re working,” Gibbs says to Diane, ushering her off the dancefloor, into the inside hallway, away from any windows or clear line of sight.

She shrugs a bit. “I can multi-task. Why, you have a problem with doing some work during what should be personal time?”

He glares at her, remembering too many arguments about that in the past. He notices that Abbi’s pulled Eric aside and they’re rapidly striding off to check the perimeter. “Tell me what you’ve got.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now! Something’s up.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

It’s true he hasn’t taken any calls, and neither has Abbi. “I just—”

“Oh, right, the gut!” Diane flashes him a massive eye roll. “The infamous gut that kept you at work for three straight weeks where nothing, at all, happened. The gut that had you missing dinners and getting up early and leaving late and…” (It’s possible that Gibbs may have, occasionally, blamed cutting out on Diane on having a ‘gut feeling’ that something was up. He was right. Just, the something in that case was his desire to get away from her for a few hours.)

“Diane…”

“Leroy,” his teeth grit. She’s got the most patronizing voice ever to pronounce words when she wants to, and she’s using it on him, now. “Take a page out of Chucky’s book, relax, go find your sweetie, have a nice dance, and then have a drink or six. Calm down. I’ve already gotten DiNozzo and Bishop up to date with what I’ve got, and they’re running it down. Now, you,” she gestures off to the dance floor, “go be the best man. We’re at a wedding, for God’s sake, Leroy, nothing is going to happen.”

He glares at her again, painfully annoyed when she’s being all, right, and stuff. If she’s already got DiNozzo and Bishop on it, then he probably doesn’t need to do anything… Probably… He glares at her again, and begins to step away, before she adds, “And you do not say a word of this to Tobias! It’s his wedding, give him one night off!”

Now he’s giving her his stop being a twit look. Even he has the sense not to interrupt his friend’s wedding for anything short of a full scale invasion, and whatever this is, it’s not coming here, not now.

Diane nods, looks around, notices that Abbi and Eric are missing, and glares at Gibbs again.

“Double checking,” he says.

“Wonderful.” There’s a lot of sarcasm in her voice, and a lot of it is based on the idea that if they’ve told Eric they’re concerned he’s going to go all hyper-protective-alpha-male. “I’m not some damsel you have to run in and save.”

“I don’t—“

“Don’t give me that! You’re ready to run me off into protective custody right now.”
She’s not exactly wrong about that.

“Don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’m an accountant, Leroy. People don’t shoot at me.”

He rolls his eyes, thinking about Sterling, who wasn’t exactly on the top of the dangerous guy list, either.

“No, not like that! I’ve already got what I was looking for. Shooting me now is useless. Damage is done. It’s not… cost effective. If you want to stay hidden, you take someone like me out before I find what I’ve found.”

“Locking Abbi and I into a building and trying to kill us wasn’t cost effective, either.”

She snorts, an inelegant sound of supreme scorn. “You were dealing with twits. They wouldn’t have gotten caught in the first place if they’d known what they were doing. The guys who are running this money, they aren’t twits.”

“Then they’ll go after you and make sure they don’t get caught.”

“Leroy!”

Draga and Abbi come back, see both of them looking at each other, very tense, and do their best to hide.

Gibbs is looking at both of them, silently pleading for a lifeline.

Unfortunately, they don’t have one. Eric shakes his head. “If something’s up, I can’t see it.”

“You feel it?”

Eric shrugs. “Not before she mentioned anything, but now I’m feeling jumpy.”

Gibbs groans. A spooked agent isn’t particularly useful.

Diane’s not really looking pleased with Eric, either. “He’s not infallible. I know you work with people who think he can walk on water, but he really can’t.”

Now Gibbs looks insulted. Not on his own behalf. (He’s more than well aware of the fact that he’s not infallible. His gut didn’t yell nearly hard enough going into CGIS.) But that’s a slap to his team. He earned his rep with his team.

“Infallable or not, caution’s a good plan,” Abbi adds. Calming things down a bit. “We can follow you home, make sure you get there safe,” Abbi adds.

“I do not need you two babysitting me. We’re fine! I’ve already got my very own Federal Agent keeping watch over me.”

Gibbs stares at her for another second, and breaks through that wall of silence, his usual mode of dealing with annoyed Diane. “Emily’ll be in the car, too. Just… Let us follow you home, okay?”

“Fine!” She’s all but rolling her eyes at this. “What exactly do you think you’ll be able to do from the car behind us?”

That’s a better point than Gibbs or Abbi likes. Abbi says, sighing, “With any luck, if they’re
watching closely, they’ll see our tail and back off. You’ll get home safe and sound, and we’ll catch sight of them.”

“If there’s a them,” Diane says pointedly.

“If we’re wrong, we burn some extra gas. No harm, no foul,” Abbi adds.

“If you’re wrong, you’ve freaked out Emily for no good reason.” They all glance over at the girl, who is dancing with her newest step-brother, and blissfully unaware of the tense conversation in the corner.

“We’ll stay far enough behind she won’t notice,” Gibbs says.

“Fine. When she’s done, we’ll head off.”

Abbi nods. “We’ll say our goodbyes, and be waiting for you to pull out.”

Gibbs is glaring at the road. His gut is really firing, and Diane was absolutely right, they’re too far behind to be good for anything. Only upside is they’re a visible tail and at one in the morning, out here in the middle of nowhere, they’re a really obvious tail. Only a complete moron would attempt to do something right now.

He’s driving, and Abbi’s going through her email, reading the updates Diane and DiNozzo have been sending her.

“It’s good stuff,” Abbi says.

“How good?”

“Payoffs ending up in three Supreme Court Justices’ accounts good.” Gibbs winces at that. Not that, at this point, he thinks there really are good guys anymore, but he had kind of hoped. “DiNozzo’s got Corwin running the DNA profile, no links yet, but we’ll know who that one account goes to, soon.”

“If he’s in the system.”

“If not, we can flag him. He’s also checking all flight and boating plans. Guy who takes 500 million out of a bank isn’t travelling commercial, and he’s not going fast. Tony’s got a team in place, searching. We’re a few hours behind, but if he didn’t get off the island immediately, there’s a good shot of grabbing him.”

Gibbs nods at that. That much money, even in gold, is going to take up a lot of space.

“Cash or coin?”

“Combination of both, and gems, according to Diane’s friend.”

Gibbs sees the flashers up ahead, and tenses up. This connected also means that what looks like an accident might not be one. They drive up, and… Okay, no… that’s two completely wrecked cars, a fire truck putting an engine out, and an ambulance with lights flashing. It’s a real accident.
Like Draga and Diane, they make the u-turn. Apparently Draga’s got a GPS or something that’ll reroute him.

That makes Gibbs tense up, too. Probably nothing good coming that way, either. Abbi’s feeling it, too, she’s already on the phone with Diane.

The cop waves to Gibbs, stopping him. Gibbs doesn’t want to stop. He also doesn’t have a badge he can just press to his window and keep going anymore, either. He rolls to a stop, keeping eyes on Eric and Diane, seeing them getting further away. If he can’t see their car anymore, he’s going to get moving, no matter what. He figures the fastest way to deal with this is to have Abbi flash her badge, and get going again.

“Excuse me, sir, did you know--”

“Doesn’t matter.” He nods to Abbi.

She flashes her badge. “On protection duty. Let us go, now!”

“Yes, Ma’am,” the cop steps back, fast, and Gibbs gets going. They’re on the job again. About a half mile behind.

Draga doesn’t like this intersection. Four roads come together here, as well as a train track. He hates intersections like this, and is annoyed that his GPS sent them this way when a car accident took them off of 301. He likes this one even less because the flashers for the train are going and the guard rail is down. Who knows how long they’ll have to sit on their asses here, waiting for the train to pass?

Only good thing is that it’s late enough there aren’t many cars on the road. Makes it easy to see who’s around, where they’re coming from, and what they’re doing. Two tiny headlights way back are Gibbs and Abbi, catching up.

If he hadn’t gotten the warning from Gibbs and Abbi he wouldn’t have been watching for it. But he did, so he’s alert, and he sees it. The car that just turned onto their street, coming up behind him, is speeding up.

He’s got maybe a second to get ready for it, so he does. Fifteen feet between him and the rail, and probably another twenty feet between it and the tracks. It’ll be tight, but he can do it. Good thing he’s not in his sedan. Tonight all the work he’s put into the engine on this baby is going to pay off.

He doesn’t take his foot off the break, but he cranks the steering wheel hard right. Diane looks alarmed, but he doesn’t have the time, or focus, to deal with her right now.

He glances back, car is still coming up on him, too damn fast, it’s got some real power behind it to accelerate that fast, and now it’s not just warning flashers going in front of him, the train is screaming past, too.

One last glance back, car’s less than five feet away, and it still hasn’t slowed down. Draga stomps the gas the second the car kisses his bumper and his car jerks forward, turning hard right, slamming through the warning railing, and skidding, but compared to the fighters he used to fly this thing is a
piece of cake, he’s got control as his car goes leaping off the road, bouncing over the uneven ground next to the train track, without hitting the train.

He hears shrieking, and he’s not sure if it’s him, Diane, or Emily, probably all three.

The car behind him, which likely expected to hit his car and slow down while slamming on the breaks hits nothing and goes hurtling straight into the train, and from there into a million pieces and a huge fiery ball of flaming gasoline.

By the time Draga’s got his own car stopped, he’s shaking, Diane has gone white and silent, Emily is crying, and the only sound they can hear is the screeching halt of the train’s brakes.

He leaps out of the car, adrenaline still pumping, feeling the ground vibrating from the train slowing down, and screams at the bits of flaming wreckage that are still falling to the ground and tinkling off the slowing train, “FUCK YOU, MOTHERFUCKER! You picked the wrong damn flyboy to try that on, ASSHOLE. I flew experimental planes at six times the speed of sound and you thought you could get the jump on me? YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE, ROAST IN HELL YOU TURTLE FUCKING CUMRAG!”

They’re maybe a quarter mile behind Draga and Diane, when Gibbs sees it. “There.”

Abbi nods, that’s a car moving way too fast, and from the looks of it, going to ram Draga and Diane. They both know exactly how this is supposed to work, and there’s nothing they can do about it. Not really.

Gibbs is grabbing for the gun he’s not wearing. Diane’s got her phone to her mouth, already calling it in, ripping at the latch to the glove compartment. Her Sig’s in there.

By the time she’s got it, it’s too late, shooting out the tires won’t help; the car’s going to hit. Gibbs can see it in his head. He’s braced for it, and then he sees Draga jerk his car out of the way, speeding through the divider, keeping his car next to but not touching the train as the chase car barrels right into it.

Gibbs actually yells, a mixture of triumph, joy, and good for you, aimed at Draga, as he floors it to get to Draga’s car.

He screeches to a halt a few feet away from Draga, and she and Gibbs leap out of the car and are treated to a truly virtuoso performance of profane invective aimed at the man who tried to run them into the train.

“Turtle fucker?” Gibbs asks as he stands next to Draga, who is still raging at the wreckage, before going silent, sitting down, hard, knees going out. Gibbs puts his hand on Draga’s shoulder, kneeling next to him, and quietly saying, “You got ‘em out safe.”

Draga’s breathing hard, and nods his head, he knows he did the job, but he’s still got way too many fight or flight chemicals running through him. “Last time I felt like this I landed, got drunk, stayed drunk, and fucked anyone who’d let me for three days.”
Gibbs nods at him, still keeping physical contact. He knows how being that close to dying and then pulling life out of the jaws of death feels.

“Nothing that exciting up for you. Abbi’s going to secure the scene,” she’s on her phone again, barking orders at her guys, and he knows she’ll be calling in NCIS in a minute, “and I’m going to get the four of you back to NCIS. Debriefing, statements, and protective custody, that’s what’s coming up next.”

Draga grins at him, manic grin, and then says, “I like how we handled it in the Navy better.”

Gibbs nods, pulling him up. “I bet you did.” He gently squeezes Draga’s shoulders. “You did good.”

Draga nods. “I know. He picked the wrong guy to even try that trick on.” He’s looking at the wreckage and the now stopped train. “YOU HEAR THAT! I drag race for fun, ASSHOLE. This car has five hundred horses under the hood! You don’t get to ram me into a TRAIN. I run YOU into the TRAIN.”

“He’s dead, Eric,” Gibbs says quietly. “He knows. Come on, let’s get the girls.”

Diane’s holding onto Emily, who is still crying, and Diane’s still not saying anything. She sees Gibbs handle Eric and nods a bit at him, she’s got her hands full with Emily, and her own stuff, adding Draga to the mix is too much. He nods back to her, and then steps next to her and wraps his arms around her and Emily.

“Don’t say ‘I told you so,’” Diane says, eyes dry, voice brittle.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he says, lips near her ear. “You okay?” he asks Emily.

“He tried to drive us into a train!” her voice is shaking and panicked.

“Yeah,” Gibbs says quietly. “Eric saw him and did exactly the right thing.”

“He was trying to kill us.”

“Yes,” Gibbs says. “And that’s why we’re going to the Navy Yard, where a whole lot of guys with guns are going to make sure nothing happens to you.”

Abbi nods at him. “I’ve got my team coming. I called Palmer, and he’s on the way, with DiNozzo, too.”

“Are you going to call my dad?” Emily asks, eyes wide. “Don’t call Dad. Let him have his wedding night.”

“Shhh…” Diane says. “We’ll call him in the morning. There’s nothing here that the rest of us can’t handle.”
Tony wakes up feeling good. Several reasons for this, but the primary one is it’s been (by conservative estimate) fifty million years since he and Ziva got to sleep in, together.

It feels so good. She’s warm and soft in his arms, and they’ve got nothing to do (okay, there are lots of things they could be doing, but right now, they are off duty, until Monday) until 1:00 when they’re closing on the house.

Thinking about that makes him feel electric. The house. The big, expensive albatross he’s intentionally wrapping around his own neck in the hope that this means a better life for his... today he’s thinking that little person growing inside Ziva is a boy… son.

He exhales, feeling the nervous tension of this decision. He’s not committed to it until they sign the papers. He glances at his clock. Two and a half more hours of backing out time.

His fingers find Ziva’s belly, soft and round now. She can still wear her regular clothing, sort of. Nothing with a firm waistband. Maternity jeans (borrowed from Breena) are waiting for her. She’s a bit annoyed at needing them so soon. Abby made it to 14 weeks without changing her clothes. Breena made it to 17. He’s pointed out that Breena was constantly throwing up, and that might have had something to do with not gaining any weight, and that if she wanted to wear skirts all the time like Abby did, she could probably stretch the time of non-maternity clothing a few weeks further by moving her waistband up. Ziva growled at him, so he retreated, and returned with ice cream, which she’s been craving non-stop for the last two weeks. (This may have something to do with needing maternity jeans now. She simultaneously smiled and glowered at him for that.) He, on the other hand, is not annoyed. He’s looking forward to Little Mr. Bump getting big enough for everyone else to see, too.

On a visceral level, he’s understanding that proud, cocky, look at me and what I did, attitude that Palmer and McGee get when they’re out with their wives when they’re visibly pregnant. He’s looking forward to strutting around with Ziva when she’s in full on baby bump mode, too.

He gently pokes Ziva. If they’re going to get up, and eat, and get to the bank in time for the closing, they’ve got to get moving.

She grunts a bit, and burrows closer to him, further under the covers. Supposedly all sleep all the time will end soon, but… But nothing, they’re both working full out, and she’s growing their kid, to boot. She should be tired. He kisses her hair, stroking his hand down her back. “Come on, babe, time to get up.”

“Mmmm…” Her eyes don’t open.

“Yeah, I know.” He gives her a gentle jiggle. “Shower, food, signing papers until our fingers fall off.”

“Mmmm…” She stretches, wiggles, blinks a few times. “Compared to paperwork days, it cannot be that bad.”

“You’ve got a point there.”
She sits up, and he strokes her back again, eyes traveling across her body under the ultra comfy, worn and washed so often it’s getting sheer, white cotton nighty she’s got on. That hand meanders from her back to her front, slipping over her breast. She smiles at him. “I thought you said we had to get moving.”

He stretches up, and kisses her. “I’m intending to do some moving. Maybe in the shower… Multitask?”

She laughs, kisses him again, and kicks off the blankets. “Let me pee first.”

“As you wish.”

---

He’s stretching out his fingers as they walk out of the bank. “Mental note, don’t ever let our paperwork guys talk to their paperwork guys.”

She’s nodding, feeling shell shocked. She thought she knew all about paperwork. She’s a cop at a federal agency, until McGee got hold of the problem, her paperwork had paperwork. She was wrong. Between the two of them, in two and a half hours, they filled out and signed four vertical inches of paperwork; that’s a record for even them.

Beyond feeling like his butt is numb from sitting on that hard chair for so long, Tony’s not sure what’s going on. They just bought a house; that should feel like something, right?

“So, do we celebrate?” he asks her.

“Go see the house?” She’s got the keys in her pocket. They are now, officially, the owners of 1458 Bryce Street.

“We could do that.” But he’s not feeling very enthusiastic. Probably because it’s not really theirs. It’s a stop gap to getting to theirs. “Or, we could get some ice cream, and then go look at some houses we might actually live in one day.”

Ziva smiles, but it’s not aimed at him. Tony follows her gaze and catches the good suit and white hair. He nods, and Senior walks over to them.

“You did it?” he asks, sounding unsure of himself.

“We did it.” Ziva replies, giving him a hug. But he’s not watching her, he’s eyeing Tony, seeing how he’ll respond to his presence.

Tony nods a bit. “Yeah, Dad, we did it. Not sure what happens next, but we did it.”

Senior smiles at him. “Great things happen next. I heard something about ice cream, and I think my grandbaby needs some.” He holds out his hand, and Ziva nods, giving him permission. He pets her belly, and grins up at both of them. “I know you aren’t finding out, but that really feels like Third to me.”

Tony shakes his head, but wraps an arm around his dad. “Dave. If he’s a he, that’s Dave DiNozzo.”

Senior lights up. “I like that! Does Dave have a middle name?”
“Jethro. David,” Ziva pronounces it in the American fashion, long a, short i, “Jethro DiNozzo.”

Senior smiles at that. “And if he’s a she?”

“Miriam Tali DiNozzo.”

“Yes, and Tali was my sister. It’s a common Jewish tradition to name children for lost loves. I am named after my mother’s mother and my grandfather’s little sister.”

“What’s your middle name?” Senior asks, realizing he doesn’t know that.

“Danuta. My grandfather’s family was from Poland.”

Senior sighs. He’s old enough, and remembers well enough, to know what happened to Ziva’s grandfather’s family if they were Polish Jews. He can still remember being fifteen, in a movie theatre, and seeing the footage of the liberation of Auschwitz. Obviously her grandfather survived, but the likelihood of any of the rest of them surviving was minimal.

Ziva’s got a far away look in her eyes as she says, “Saba was one of the very few Jews who got out of Warsaw. His mother and sister were taken to a camp in the first sweep. He and his brothers tried to join the resistance outside of the city, but the Polish fighters they found didn’t want the help of Jews, and tried to trade them to the Nazis for their hostages. By the time he got to Cyprus, it was just him.” Ziva shakes her head at that, gently touching her child, knowing that the one thing her grandfather had wanted more than anything else was a world where his children would grow up at peace. She’s glad he didn’t live long enough to see how the David family ended. “When he got to Israel, he found several others who had survived Warsaw, and helped to form the Kibbutz my father was born on, Lohamei HaGeta’ot, The Ghetto Fighters.” No one really knows what to say about that. She smiles sadly. “I am sorry. I’ve been thinking about that a lot, lately. Ice cream sounds wonderful.”

Tony squeezes her hand, and the three of them head off in search of some double mint chip.

“So, besides the house, what are you working on right now?” Senior asks as they sit around a tiny table in a small ice cream shop.

“Can’t really say, Dad.” That’s Tony’s standard answer, but, as he thinks about it more, what they’re working on, and what they’re finding, and who’s sitting in front of him, it hits him that he might not be able to really say, but he might be able to get something useful out of his dad. So, he takes a bite of his ice cream (mocha chip) and asks, “Say there was a law you didn’t want to follow, what do you do?”

“Junior…” Senior’s looking alarmed. “Look, I’m sorry about the taxes on the house. I really didn’t ___“

“Not why I’m asking, not directly. What we’re working on is a huge mess, the heart of which is a guy who basically fixes laws for people. So…”
Senior lights up and smiles. “I know about them. Don’t usually work with them, too shady, too expensive, and no tax benefits.”

“No tax benefits?” Of all the reasons not to get involved with a guy like Clemens…

But Senior’s all over it, talking fast and happy. “Okay, say I represent some people who want to build a high rise on a particular piece of property. Say that property is zoned for buildings under ten stories. There are a few ways to do this. You can go to the zoning commission and ask them to revoke the zoning ordinance. That’s a dead end. They’ll take your money, let you file your permits, ask you to do studies of every possible impact imaginable, hold hearings, on and on. Six years later, you’re still not zoned properly, you’re paying taxes on the property and not earning any money on it. Then, when the commission finally finds, they find against you. Bad plan, unless, of course, you’re trying to lose money, which you may be. But, assuming you want to make money, that’s not the way to do it. If you want to make money, you’ve set up your corporation, and you find out who’s on the zoning commission, and then you donate to their pet charities—“

“Why are you donating to their charities?” Ziva asks. She followed along pretty well on the first bit, but that leap doesn’t make sense to her.

“Because they’ll be on the board of those charities, board members get paid a fee, and that fee will be a percentage of the donations they bring in. More money in, the more money out. Direct bribes are for amateurs, clumsy ones, at that. That charity makes everyone look good, and buys lots of good press for whatever it is you and they want to do. Plus, said charity will be a proper 501C, so those donations will be tax deductible for you. Once you’ve done that, the commission will find a loophole allowing you to do whatever it is you’re looking to do. That’s how I’d get around a law I didn’t like.”

“Is that legal?” Tony asks.

Senior smiles, takes a bite of his rum raisin, and says, “My lawyers and accountants will swear by it. The Commissioner’s lawyers and accountants will swear by it, too. So will the charity. Granted, that route is a bit risky. There isn’t always a loophole available, so don’t try that technique unless you know the loophole you want to use before you start slinging money around. If there’s no loophole to worm through, you move into illegal territory, and that’s the kind of stuff I try to avoid.”

“Why are you paying if the loophole is already there?” Tony asks.

“Because, usually, the loophole is so subtle that it’d take half a dozen lawyers and ten years of litigation to work it out, and since you don’t want to end up having to do that, you pay, and they don’t sic the regulators on you, and then you don’t have to prove you’ve got the loophole.”

Tony and Ziva aren’t thrilled by that, but it does match their understanding of how the world works.

“How would you get a loophole if there isn’t one?” Ziva asks.

Senior winces a little. “Usually, there’s a loophole.” He sees both of them watching him, waiting for more. “That’ll depend on how big of a mess you intend to make. If what you’re going to do is visible, but popular, you get a lobbyist. He’ll then go and spread money around, shift some votes, and get the law you want passed. If your lobbyist is good, he rounds up a lot of good PR for what you want, and by the time it’s up for a vote, your pet Congressmen look like heroes for saving the day. If it’s visible but not popular, then you’ll want a fixer, but that tends to be messy and very expensive. Say you want to skirt EPA regulations, build on a wetland or something, that’s fixer territory, and that’s so damn expensive I stay away from any deal that might need that. If what you’re looking for is little, like, say you want to save five hundred grand by building your hallways half an
inch smaller than code, that’s pretty much the same as what I mentioned before, go find the pet charities, it just costs more.

“Of course, there’s always the cheap route of paying off the building inspector. Good for a deal you’re not going to stick with. You build whatever it is, bribe the inspector, and then sell it. Next guy down the line is left sitting on the problem because as soon as the deal is done, the corporation that ran it liquidates and closes. I tend not to like those deals, either, because the guy who will take a bribe from you is the kind of guy who’ll come back looking for more, later.” Senior’s eyes light up. “Have you found a fixer?”

Tony glances at Ziva, and she nods. “Yeah. Do you know Roger Clemens?”

“Not the baseball player? I know him, but…” Senior’s looking horrified.

“Not the baseball player, Dad. He went by at least fifty different names. Short guy, round, kind of schlubby.”

Senior shakes his head. “I know guys who know guys who know fixers. And, I employ lawyers who take advantage of the laws that get fixed, because once the fix is in, anyone who finds it can use it. But I don’t know any fixers personally. Too much risk for my tastes.”

“How do your lawyers find them?” Ziva asks.

Senior shakes his head. “I don’t know. But every few months, they shift all of our money around, rearrange our holdings and which states we incorporate out of and all the rest of it. Keeping my taxable income in negative numbers is their job, and they’re very good at it.”

“Well, how did you find the lawyers?” Tony asks.

“Harvard. Stanford. Friends of friends. They hire each other and provide services for many guys in my situation.”

Tony sighs. “It would really screw things over for you and Delphine if I were to ask who your lawyers were and subpoenaed their records.”

Senior smiles. “Give me three days’ notice before doing it, and it won’t. You think they’re doing something illegal?”

“I think they may know how to find other people doing something illegal, beyond that…” Tony’s genuinely not sure. No, he is sure. If they’re hooked into whatever it is, their own asses are beyond covered. They’ve probably got whole books of laws letting them do whatever they’re up to, and then even more laws saying they don’t have to talk to it to guys like him.

Senior nods. “Hold off until Wednesday morning, and they’re all yours.”

Tony sighs at that, too, but, honestly given the number of people they’re running down right now, it’s not like he could go much faster than that. “I can do that. Send me their contact numbers on Tuesday so I can get the warrants.”

“Ohay!” And right that second, Senior’s looking so happy at finally finding something he can do that’s useful for his son.
They decide to go to the house on the way home. It’s theirs, they might as well go check it out.

Tony peels back the CAUTION tape, and Ziva heads in. “This isn’t how I was planning on taking you into our first house.” He tacks the tape back up, and closes the door.

“And what were you thinking?” she asks, looking away from scorched walls and the hole in the floor.

He takes two steps forward, and scoops her up in his arms. “I’d been thinking something like this. And, I’d been kind of hoping I wouldn’t have to worry about the floor collapsing under our feet.”

“Soon enough. Another year or two…”

“Yeah.”

“A back porch, Shabbos under the stars, you and Dave playing catch in the grass.”

“Maybe with his little sister, Miri?”

She smiles at that, and then her eyes start to tear up. She looks embarrassed that this is getting to her like that; she’s not supposed to cry about stupid stuff. He smiles a bit, kisses her, and snuggles her close as she starts to cry happy tears.

All in all, it’s been an almost perfect day. Sure, he would have preferred a bit less paperwork, and it really would have been nice to be buying a house to actually live in, but as they’re making dinner together, it’s been a good day. Which is usually the sign of something about to go sideways.

And there it is, in his email. A nice little note from Diane, who’s off with Draga, at a wedding, having fun on her off day, expecting him to track down leads on his off day.

He looks more carefully and sighs. Unlike Senior’s hint, this really is something they need to move on.

One of those accounts they were sitting on just emptied out, and all five hundred million dollars in there just went on walk about all over the world, ending up dead ending in Barbados where it’s about to vanish.

“One whole day, is that too much to ask?” he says to Ziva.

She sighs, looking at the email. “Apparently. When this is put to sleep, we are taking a vacation. You, me, somewhere warm and sunny, and our cellphones are staying in DC.”

“Amen!” He rubs his eyes. “Okay. Ummm… Who do we know in Barbados? I’ve got to get them on the ground. We’ve got a picture and retinal scan, so… Zelaz’s on…” he’s sending the email to his on duty Lab tech, hoping to get an ID asap, “and Barbados has to have a harbor master and flight controllers…”

He’s messing with his phone, grabbing intel and moving it around. She turns off the burner, tosses
the food in the fridge, and grabs the keys. This’ll go better at work, and she’s the one who’ll get them there, fast.

“What’d’ya got?”

Bishop snaps to attention, handing over a piece of paper. “Contact information of anyone in Barbados who may be of help, and our Puerto Rico team on a plane heading there as fast as can be.”

“Perfect.”

“And why am I sending them to Barbados as fast as possible?”

Ziva fills her in, and she asks, “So, do I need to call Eric in?”

Ziva shakes her head. “I am here, and can handle the research he would do.”

“He’s with Diane. Might as well make sure someone’s watching her back while she’s got all of this going on.”

Bishop nods at that. After all, right now, this is running numbers and planning the op. All execution is going to happen somewhere else, so it’s not like they need Eric right now. At least someone might as well get a weekend, right?

Tony’s got his phone to his ear, and is heading up toward MTAC. This’ll be easier to coordinate from the com center. He trusts the ladies to get him more leads, more numbers, more everything, and bring them to him while he’s getting his boots on the ground ready to start kicking ass and taking name.

“So, we’re going to Barbados with the instructions of try to catch the guy who took the money out of the bank, if he’s still there?” Joe Seth, NCIS San Juan, asks Tony, sounding very unimpressed by this order. (Tony’s got voice communication but not visual. Not surprising seeing he’s talking to him over his cell as he’s flying toward Barbados.)

“If Vance wants to read you in on why we’re grabbing this guy, that’s up to him. I’m telling you that fifty-seven minutes ago he took five hundred million dollars in cash, coin, and gems out of a bank account that we are extremely interested in.”

In the dim light of MTAC, Tony’s pacing around, feeling a buzz of almost nervous energy. He’s ready to be done with this, and hopefully today’s the day they hammer the last nail into this coffin. Warm beach, sunshine, rubbing coconut scented tanning oil on Ziva and (for him) drinking rum-based concoctions between naps in the sun are up if the can ever finish this damn case, so they are FINISHING this case.
“Wonderful. Guy got a name?”

“I’m sure he does. We don’t have it. His picture and retinal scan are in your inbox. Also, he’s the guy with, according to the bank footage, a blue Range Rover filled with boxes of money. No we don’t have plates. You’ll touch down in sixty-three minutes. Besides you, I’ve got the ports and airports shut down, but not for long.” And that was a stressful conversation. But he got it done. Amazing what charm and a bit of looking the other way can get done. “If we’re lucky, we can grab him before he’s unloaded and in the air.”

“Do we know anything about where he went?” Seth asks.

“Range Rover was pointed east, and didn’t show up again in any of the footage from the bank.” Getting footage from the bank wasn’t fun, either. After two dead ends with the bank, he called downstairs, found Tim’s cyberbaby, and asked her to hack it. Five minutes later, Brand had him into the bank’s security footage. “We’re running everything we can find on this money, where it went, who it belonged to, and if we can connect it to anyone in Barbados, we’ll give you the heads up. Photo recognition is running, once we’ve got an ID, this’ll be even easier.”

“And as long as this guy doesn’t have a private helicopter, small boat, or a good place to hide out until the ports open, we’re all set.”

Tony rolls his eyes. All of those are valid points. “Yeah, thanks for that. Look, we don’t care if we get the actual cash, the guy is the important thing. So, if you were to get locals to help, and suggest that as long as most of the cash ends up in evidence, you’ll look the other way if some of it goes missing. Have at it. Get everyone you run into interested in catching this guy, and make sure they know that we’ll make bringing him worth more than looking the other way.”

Joe smirks at that. “That how you get the ports closed?”

“Yeah. Five hundred million dollar scavenger hunt. Customs is suddenly very motivated to find this guy and his money. I told them he had about four hundred and fifty million on him. No one’s getting out of official channels until they’ve been well searched.”

“Uh huh.” Seth chuckles a bit. “You gonna look the other way if I get a little too fond of that cash, too.”

“Don’t let me catch you at it. Let me know when you’re on the ground, I’ll give you the update.”

“Okay.”

Tony calls down to the lab. The sooner he’s got an ID the better. “Zelaz?”

“Nothing interesting yet. Facial recognition is running. Retinal scan is running.” Tony can see the computer zipping away through faces in the background.

“Good, anything else?”

Zelaz shakes his head. “Not really. Not yet.”
“I’m fine with you narrowing the search to people born in the US, and if that comes up dry, expanding it. We think these guys are already in our system, somewhere. Federal Employee Database is a good place to try, too.”

“On it, Boss.”

“Boss!” Bishop’s voice pipes up as she rushes down to where he’s sitting in MTAC.

“Yeah, Bishop.”

“Just got another email from Jared Reener.”

“What else does Mr. Reener have for us?”

“One of the other accounts is emptying. It’s spilling cash into a lot of other accounts.”

“What’s a lot?” Tony’s feeling tense at this. Lot more work, split focus, but… this has to be something, no way two of their four accounts start moving all at once.

“As of right now, over 300. Diane wants us to get the court orders to freeze those accounts. Let them keep accepting money, but not let any of it out.”

Tony nods, thinking about it. “That’ll take forever.” They need a separate court order for each account, and without anything else… Putting money into an account, especially when you don’t know anything about the donor of said money, other than an anonymous source told you to check it out, means that you’ve got to have a very lax, and friendly, judge to get it done. He’s not sure that even Bleach would go that far for them. And it’s still going to take six hours because you need him to fill out the paperwork for each account.

“I know…. Um…” She’s looking very uncomfortable. “When I was with NSA, they used to have a program for vague intel that had to move fast. As long as you applied for a mass warrant before you started moving, you were okay. They’d offer you a provisional warrant, which was basically a key to get you whatever you wanted, as long as you promised not to use what you found if the warrant application didn’t go through. And… um… you could… pretty much grab people, listen to their stuff, and freeze their money with it.”

Tony nods. That’d be just perfect. “Explain it to Leon. If we can use it, do it. I don’t want that money shifting out of those accounts before we can track them down.”

Bishop nods. “Ziva’s already finding out who owns them.”

“Good.”

Tony hears knocking at the MTAC door. One of the techs goes and answers it, bringing Zelaz to
him. He’s looking awfully out of place up here, and it hits Tony that’s he’s likely never been up here before.

“You’ve got an ID?”

Zelas smiles, and hands him a print out, and then heads out of the room.

Tony unfolds the print out, his eyes skimming over the picture to the ID and information under it.

“Shit.” He mutters. He figures Leon is still talking to Bishop, so he starts going through his contact list, hoping he knows someone who’s got an in with the US Diplomatic Corps.

“And we’re on the ground.” Tony hears as soon as he clicks on his phone.

“Great. I’ve got an ID for you, but you’re not going to like it. At least, I don’t like it.”

“What?” Seth sounds tense. This job is already a needle in a haystack, and he doesn’t want to hear about worse.

“Fredrico Ellanza.”

“Should I know that name?” Seth sounds curious. Tony doesn’t blame him, either, if the ID hadn’t included a title he wouldn’t have known who it was.

“US Ambassador to Uruguay.”

Seth winces. Tony nods. “Find him, take custody of him. He doesn’t have immunity from us, but it’s awfully likely everyone else just got a lot less interested in helping us grab him.”

“Now we see how good money is at motivating people.”

“Yeah. I’m working on getting his status revoked. Once that happens, everyone can pile on.”

Tony’s finished his contact list. No one he knows is high enough up in the US Diplomatic Corps to be useful on this. Time to call Leon, who is, hopefully, off the phone with Bishop by now.

He hits Leon’s contact button, and a moment later hears, “So much for a quiet Saturday at home. I just got off the phone with Agent Bishop.”

“Good. Can we swing it?” Tony really hopes so, once those accounts freeze, they can take their time going through them. Right now, they’re racing against the owners of those accounts moving the money before they can find out where it goes next.
“Technically the NSA isn’t allowed to do that, either. Or, it shouldn’t be.” Leon thinks about what Clemens did. “At least, as best as anyone knows…”

“Yeah. One day I’ll brief you a bit on a chat I had with my dad about that. So…”

“I told Bishop to explain it to our lead counsel. If he can make it work, we’ll do it. What do you have for me?”

“A crooked Ambassador.”

“One of ours?”

“Yes, but not on US soil.”

Leon makes a disgusted noise. Crooked Ambassador somewhere other than the US has no rules. He can do whatever the hell he wants and he’s got full protection.

“Can you get his status revoked?”

Leon sounds a bit tired as he says, “Shoot me your intel. I’ll see what I can do.”

Jarvis sounds amused as he answers the phone. “I take it things are heating up?”

“When aren’t they?” Leon replies.

“What do you need?”

“Information about ambassadors. Our ambassadors. I’ve got a dirty one.”

“Are you sure about that, Leon?” Jarvis knows that ambassadors often get sent to handle “off the books” jobs. Said jobs either look dirty, or are dirty, but are dirty on the side of the angels, or at least the US Government, and having a bunch of NCIS agents busting in and messing things up would cause problems.

“Remember those account numbers we got sent by our anonymous letter writer?”

“Yeah.” Now Jarvis doesn’t sound amused. “Which one?”

Leon rattles off the number and ends with, “he just took 500 million out of it in cash, gems, and gold.”

That makes Jarvis nervous, because he knows that account number. “Leon, what are your people doing?”

“Right now finding him, then grabbing him, why?”

“Call your people off of him. Eyes on him is fine, but don’t grab him, and don’t get caught.”

“Clayton?”
“Pull your guys back! I’ll call you when I can.”

“Clayton!”

Then there’s just the sound of a dial tone.

“Pull them back?” Tony’s not happy with that.

Leon isn’t, either. He does not appreciate being flogged off without an explanation, though Jarvis has enough trust built up over the years that he’s fairly sure that Jarvis is checking something big. “That’s what Jarvis said! And that was not a request. You can keep eyes on him, but not engage. I’m coming in. What answer did Bishop get from Counsel?”

“According to her, Yientz’s eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas, he spent ten minutes looking things up, smiled all over, and told them to get moving.”

“There’s something at least.”

Tony nods. He’s not going to say what’s in the first email Ziva’s sent him about who owns those accounts. “Get here soon.”

“Half an hour out.”

“We’ve got eyes on him,” Seth says, reporting in.

“Hang back. You can keep watch, but not intercept.”

Tony can feel the frustration rolling off of Seth. That’s not the sort of order he’s ever wanted to hear, and, honestly, he doesn’t like giving it, either.

“Not gonna have eyes on him all the much longer if I hold back.”

“Yeah. I’m sure. Always works that way. Order’s from way above my pay grade. We can watch but not grab. What’s he doing?”

“Standing on a beach, with two other guys, and a blue Range Rover, loading heavy looking boxes onto an extra-long Saturn.”

Tony thinks about that, and remembers that Saturdays aren’t just cars, they’re inflatable boats with a motor on the back, too. “Customs on his tail?”

“Nope. Embassy has its own private beach and he’s taking advantage of it.”
A beach doesn’t sound like great cover to Tony. “How far away are you?”

“Far enough. He’s not worried. Just strolling around with two other guys casually loading things up.”

“A Saturn. How big is that?”

“Twenty feet long? Seven feet wide? The engine is small, not a huge gas tank. He’s heading for a different island, or there’s a boat or water plane out here he’s going to. This can’t have a range of more than fifty miles.”

“How can you get someone on the water?” Tony doesn’t want Ellanza sailing off into the sunset never to be seen again.

“I can try.” Seth doesn’t sound enthusiastic about it. Or maybe about being micromanaged like this.

“Do it.”

“I’ve got a three person team. I send one onto the water, and we get the go ahead to grab him now, it’s just gonna be me and Gonzales.”

Tony slumps a bit; that’s a good point. “Two guys with him?”

“Yeah. Big ones, with guns. Big guns for that matter.”

“Embassy guards?”

“Not wearing the uniform if they are. I’d say they’re mercenaries, the tats look right, but I’m not close enough to see for sure. Those could be gang or cartel markers, too.”

Tony’s not going to send them in a guy short on that. “Hold in place, keep eyes on him as best you can. They get onto the water, follow at a distance.”

Leon’s pulling into the Navy Yard parking lot when his phone rings again.

“Grab him.” Jarvis’s voice.

“Call you back in a sec.” And a second later he’s got Tony on his phone as he’s parking. “Make the call, grab him. I’ll be in there with you in less than five minutes, hopefully with more intel.”

“On it.”

Tony has voice communications, and now that he’s patched into the Embassy’s security cameras,
he’s got visual now, too.

“Grab him.”

“On it.” For the first time Seth is sounding pleased by one of Tony’s orders.

For a good two minutes, he’s got nothing to see. Just Ellanza, standing on the sand, watching as his guys load the boats. They’re going slow, taking their time, messing around, (no sound, but Tony’s guessing they’re bitching about the boxes being heavy).

All he can hear is heavy breathing as Seth moves his men into place.

One more minute passes, and he hears “Drop it!” and sees one of the guys drop a box. The Ambassador, looks up, startled, jerks, reaches for something, “Don’t even try it! United States Naval Criminal Investigative Services, you do not have immunity from us! Hands up where we can see them!” He stops and holds his hands up. Guy number two leaps for the Saturn, tries to get it shoved into the water, but stops when a bullet smacks into the inflatable edge of the boat, sending air streaming out of it.

A second after that, Tony sees the NCIS team coming into view. They’re cuffing, and talking about rights, and then grabbing other Embassy security to help them get the boxes out of the rapidly sinking Saturn.

“Good job,” Tony says. “Now, get them and the money on a plane to DC.”

“What was the hold up, Clayt?” Leon asks as he moves through the parking garage, heading toward his office.

“That account. It’s a black op slush fund. If that money was authorized to go out, you could have been blowing a hostage deal, or a payment to make sure that a friendly despot stays friendly, or made sure that different undercover agents stay undercover.”

NCIS has a slush fund, like that, too. It’s got fifty-thousand dollars in it. “Lot of money for a slush fund. Let alone an undercover op.”

“The whole thing isn’t supposed to move at once. Ten million here, twenty million there, that’ll sell you as an arms or drug dealer. That’ll buy the kid of an Ambassador back. Despots cost more, but rarely more than a hundred million.”

Leon nods at that. “But this wasn’t an authorized op?”

“No! And outside of the security services, no one is supposed to know that account even exists. It’ll be very interesting to see who told Mr. Diplomat about it.”

“Another one of the accounts heated up tonight, too.”

“Interesting. Which one?”

Leon’s heading through security as he says, “Let me get to my office, and I’ll tell you. Or maybe you
could just tell me what they are and save me the time of having to call back and ask later.”

He hears Jarvis sigh. “Two of them, I don’t know. They’re protected. I know that. That’s why no
one is ever able to catch them. Who runs them and why… I don’t know, and the President isn’t
telling. The fourth one is a campaign finance law dodge.”

“How does that work?”

“Both teams use it as a way to make sure that incumbents stay incumbents. Donors put money in.
Politicians take money out. No limits on the donations or the withdrawals. You’ve got to have been
in the system for at least ten years and made the right friends, or running for reelection as President to
even know about it, and you’ve got to have a challenger who might actually win to use it. But, if you
do, you get a card, and any spending you don’t want the world to see, you pay for with that card.”

“Attack ads?” Leon asks.

“Nothing that visible. Rumors, memes, positive news coverage, digging up dirt on your opponent,
inventing dirt when you can’t find any, stuff like that.”

“Wonderful,” Leon says dryly. “Why do you know about it?”

“Daddy was a Senator, remember? Though back in his day it was a checkbook.”

Jarvis’ father had died back in ’84. “How long has this account been around?”

“Since there have been politicians who wanted the benefits of dirty politics without visibly getting
their hands dirty, and since there have been men with money who wanted those politicians to do
dirty things for them.”

“Of course. Who runs it?”

“That is a question that’s intentionally never asked, and never answered. Pay your dues, vote the
way you’re supposed to vote, stay in long enough, the card shows up at your house one day.”

Leon can imagine that one day that checkbook had showed up at Jarvis’ house. “And let me guess,
how you donate to it is also kept secret?”

“I’d imagine so. The big bundlers probably know, same with the big Lobbyists, but… I don’t. Dad
didn’t. Card only works during election season, which is pretty much all the time now, but back in
the day it was only good from June to November. Use it for the wrong sort of thing, say buy a boat
or something, and you will lose your next election, and likely get indicted for something.”

“I’m in my office. Let me find out the status on our Ambassador and call you back.”

“Never mind. I’ll be there soon. No matter what the other account is, you’re going to want someone
high enough on the food chain to deal with it.”

“Yeah. And that would be…”

“If needs be, the President himself.”
Tony hates waiting.

Four hours before Ellanza’s in DC.

And with each additional name Bishop and Ziva dig out from behind shell corporations, charities, and PO boxes, Tony knows that they’re going to need something way beyond what they’ve got.

Leon’s watching him, wondering what he’s thinking. They’re in Leon’s office, because with names like these... Tony doesn’t want the wrong person to hear these names.

He shakes his head. You don’t accuse a Supreme Court Justice, let alone three of them, of anything without... honestly, you just don’t do it. You get your proof together, and they quietly look at it and resign. You never go to court with something like this.

Tony shakes his head. “Right now, this is a dead end.”

Leon raises an eyebrow.

“Payments. All we have are payments. To corporations and charities that claim to have important people on their boards. We don’t know who is paying or why or why now. We don’t know if they pay their board members, can’t know that until we can really get into their financials, and right now we’re still figuring out who the hell they are. We do anything with these right now, and once we get there, they’ll all immediately have a case of ‘accepting money isn’t illegal.’”

Leon nods.

“Worse, with a list like this… It’s possible this is some sort of sting. Something designed to embarrass people, make them look like they’re taking bribes.”

Leon inclines his head, that’s possible, too. “You think there’s any shot this is a coincidence?”

Tony shakes his head. “Rule 8.”

Leon nods.

“Something’s got them spooked. Whoever this is, is liquidating. Why?”

Leon shakes his head.

Tony jumps up, grabs his cell, and calls Diane’s friend, Jared, the guy who’s keeping eyes on all of this. His phone goes to voicemail. Tony sighs. It’s 9:30, 8:30 in Chicago, where Jared is, he’s probably left for the day, passed this off to whomever he’s got keeping an eye on it.

Tony’s pacing around. No one knows who’s behind these numbers. Not precisely. They know who’s getting the money. As of ten minutes ago, the six accounts that Ziva and Bishop had broken had 43 congressmen, senators, judges, and governors listed as directors or board members.

Add in a different account and one Ambassador...

The Ambassador makes sense. If you want to move money and have it go easily, slap a diplomatic tag on it, and off it goes to wherever. As long as you keep it out of the home country of whomever is moving it, you’re all set.

Tony stands up. “I’m going to get into Ellanza’s history. See who he was talking to.”

Leon nods. “Jarvis will be here soon. We’ll find out what this account is.”
Okay.

Ellanza’s email account is a mess. It’s disorganized, sloppy, public, private, everything all in one place, and to make matters worse, three quarters of it are in Spanish.

He looks up at Ziva, who’s working away on her computer, hunting down another mystery account, though this one is linked to something called “The Greater Delaware Valley Public-Private Drug Free Partnership” (He’d made a crack about their parties being awfully dull.) and seeing who’s actually involved in said “partnership.”

“Trade with me?” he asks Ziva. He can speak Spanish, but he’s not great at it. She’s better.

Ziva looks up. “What are you looking at?”

“At least six thousand emails, more than a hundred of them in the last twenty-four hours, and most of them are in Spanish.”

Ziva nods, stands up, stretches, and heads over to switch computers with him. He pets her belly a little as she sits down, and she kisses his hand as he pulls away to go work on hers.

On her screen, Tony sees that Ziva had been googling the partnership, seeing who’s involved, and given his Dad’s earlier comments about using things like this as a way to pay people off, he’s thinking double checking everyone on the list makes sense.

So, that’s what he does. Takes each name, googles it, and makes a note as to who they are. Bishop’s keeping a running total of who they’re finding, and with each new name there should be a pattern emerging, but other than the fact that they’re all powerful and connected, Tony’s not finding it, not yet.

His own search of the Partnership gives him twenty five names. One ex-Governor, three Pennsylvania State Senators, one current Governor, two ex-PA congressmen, one active PA congressman, three ex-PA senators, one current one, and several other businessmen who were the ‘private’ half of the partnership.

He shoots the names to Bishop, and keeps looking to see if he can find out what the “Partnership” actually does. It’s a charity. He can see that. The website talks about anti-drug outreach and protecting vulnerable children and all that stuff, but… He’s not seeing what they actually do.

There’s lots of information about how to donate.

And, if you donate enough money one of the big names on the board will come and speak to your group or school about why drugs are bad… But… they don’t appear to be running rehabs services, or midnight basketball games, or any of the other stuff that people who are trying to cut down on the amount of drug use actually do. (At least, in Tony’s experience of more than twenty years as a cop, old dudes in suits talking to elementary schools is a remarkably ineffective way to cut down on drug use.)

Tony looks up at Ziva and Bishop. “You’ve got names. What do these corporations and charities and clubs do?”
Ziva gives him an arch look. “Do you want to know who is getting paid, or do you want to know what they are doing with the money? We cannot get you both at the same time.”

He rolls his eyes a bit. With a list this big… “Okay. Bishop. Keep finding out who these accounts belong to. Both of you, shoot me the organizations you’ve found, I want to see what they do.”

“And find out who Ellanza was talking to on top of that,” Ziva adds.

“Yep. Get ready to interrogate him.” Tony checks his watch. “He should be on the ground in three hours.”

“Well Clayt?” Leon asks as Jarvis looks at the account number in question, and the money dribbling out of it.

Clayton shakes his head. He doesn’t know the one that’s bleeding money. And anyone he’s asked about, even people who have a lot to lose by pissing him off, haven’t been willing to say what it is. “It’s not the finance law skirting one. That’s…” he taps one of the other numbers on the list they had gotten from the anonymous pen pal.

Leon remembers what Diane said about that one. “That one’s in a bank out of Seychelles. Everyone involved with it is in a non-extradition country, and if they ever move, we’ll grab them.”

“But they all live in a tropical paradise and have enough money to bring anything they want in, so they aren’t going to move,” Clayton says, dryly.

Leon nods. “According to Diane Anderson, this one” Leon taps the floating account, “is an account on a computer on a boat somewhere.”

Clayton nods. “That’s my understanding, too. No cash. No hard assets. We’re not entirely sure there are even people. There’s no board of directors listed, for example. From everything we can tell, it’s just a computer keeping track of numbers and shifting them around.”

Leon taps the fourth number. “And this one’s the now empty slush fund. Who runs that fund?”

Jarvis shakes his head. “Like I said, black ops. No one ‘runs’ it.”

“You mean no one admits to running it. Then how do you get access to it?”

“Have a big enough problem and know someone high enough up to know about it. When I was in the Clandestine Services we had an undercover op start to go bad. I was able to make contact with my handler one last time, but the people I was supposed to be buying the weapons from were getting suspicious because I was awfully short on cash. Within a day, I had the account number, and the money to get out of the situation.”

“And that’s why you know it?” Leon hasn’t heard too many clandestine services stories, but the ones he has heard have made him very glad to have not been in them.

“That and the fact that my handler told me to forget it and write up the report to show that I’d used the money the Navy was supposed to give me, but didn’t, to do the job. For some reason, telling me to forget something or look the other way just burns it into my memory.” Jarvis gives him a tight,
little smile.

“Why didn’t they give you the money?”

Jarvis looks annoyed at the answer to this. “They gave me half of it as real bills and half counterfeit. Some dingbat thought it would be a good way to save money, and a better way to track where the money went.” His eyes narrow at the memory. “If I could tell they were bad, my buyer could, too. I was stuck, needed ten million more dollars than I had, but I lucked out that Chaffin knew someone who knew someone and got me out of bind, otherwise I would have been too damn dead to ever meet you.”

Leon nods. “Chaffin?”

“Been dead ten years.”

“Of course.” He would have had to been or Clayton would have never mentioned him by name. “Who did you call to find out if that was a legitimate job or not?”

Jarvis shakes his head. “Can’t say.”

“Clayton.” Leon’s giving him the no bullshit between us look.

Jarvis shakes his head again. “I can’t. It’s not a security clearance thing, or a you aren’t read in thing, either. It’s a I don’t want a good contact getting screwed thing.”

Leon nods at that, too. Understanding that said contact is not supposed to know what that account is doing, and any attention on him/her would bring trouble. “Ellanza’s coming in. We’ll find out how he found out, soon.”

“I’d like to watch that interrogation.”

“I’m fine with that.”

“Bishop,” Tony says.

“Yeah.”

“Am I going crazy or are all of these corporations/charities/shells, claiming to be some sort of anti-drug warriors?”

“You are crazy,” Ziva says, “but not about that.”

“Ziva?”

“I remember that about the ones I was going through. One drug treatment center, two charities, and three corporations that had something to do with drugs.”

“Everything I’m finding with a descriptive name leans in that direction,” Bishop says. “Like, okay. Jemson Inc. that’s not helpful, but Clermark Pharmaceuticals, Drug Free Tomorrow, Partnership for
Clean Kids, those are all really drug related.”

Tony rubs his eyes. “So, who pays a ton of money from an illicit account to… help keep drugs \textit{illegal}? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Maybe they aren’t trying to keep drugs illegal? Maybe it’s some sort of money laundering thing?” Bishop asks.

“Like your father was telling us,” Ziva adds.

“Maybe… Got to be easier ways to launder… How much is it by now, Bishop?”

“Three quarters of a billion dollars into four hundred and six accounts.”

Tony’s eyes narrow, and he gets into the next account. There’s a pattern here; he can feel it; he just can’t see it.

“Okay, thanks, Seth. See you in half an hour.” Tony hangs up his phone. “Seth, Ellanza, and his two ‘body guards’ are on the ground and en route to us. You ready to grill him?”

Ziva smiles. “I have some ideas. I haven’t found any direct references to the money, but I have found an invitation to a ‘party’ at ‘Cattlewash’ beach today at seven AM.”

“Probably where they set up the plan. Who sent that?” Tony asks.

“Still checking. I have an email address, but no concrete ID, yet. Though the computer the email was sent from is in Peru.”

Peru. That’s niggling in Tony’s head. Tingling his gut. “Bishop, what’s the biggest cocaine producer on Earth right now?”

“Colombia. Has been for the last two years.”

“Number two?”

“Bolivia,” Ziva answers.

“Not what I’m looking for.”

“Peru’s number three,” Bishop replies, rapidly googling.

“That is.” He’s staring at the list of corporations, charities, and people on his screen, all drug related in one way or another. The money is moving, fast. Pouring into those accounts in bit and drips, all random numbers, but all smaller than the amount that triggers the money laundering flags. More of it’s heading to an Ambassador…

Tony pulls up a map, and Uruguay is exactly where he thinks it is. The other side of South America from where the cocaine producers are. Hell, it’s just about as conveniently located to Peru as Texas is to him right now.

“Ellanza have any connections to Peru?”
“Not that I can see. He was born in Miami. His parents were Cuban refugees. He went to college, got a degree in…” Ziva’s eyes are scanning around on Ellanza’s CV, and she finds it and smiles. “He got his degree in pharmaceutical engineering.”

“What’s that?” Tony asks. He knows what biomedical engineering is because of McBrains and McGrandma, but this one is new on him.

“The guys who make the devices that get medicine into bodies. They design things like insulin pumps and the inserts that slowly release hormones, stuff like that,” Bishop adds.

“After college, he worked for a collection of drug manufacturers, did well, and then…” She’s still scanning the page. “Car accident in ’95. Lost a hand from the looks of it.”

“That would make mad scientist-ing difficult.”

Bishop nods in agreement with Tony.

Ziva continues, “Then he shifts from research to lobbying. He spent a lot of time testifying as an expert for the FDA… Consulted with Medicare on coverage options. Worked closely with the Administration on the ACA… Between consulting deals, he registered as a fundraiser. Started a pharmaceutical-based PAC. And was named the Ambassador to Uruguay in late ’15.”

“Hasn’t been there long,” Tony says.

“No. And then yesterday, he gets an email requesting his attendance at the ‘beach party.’ Only email from that address. He did not respond to it.”

Tony asks, “Would you travel a thousand miles for a ‘party’ if you got invited by someone you haven’t talked to before?”

Bishop shakes her head.

“Phone records?”

Ziva shakes her head. “No numbers from Peru. I am still tracking down people he was talking to. Though if I was running something like this, I’d have someone on the ground to make contact, get things set, and just send the final detail. That way the man on the ground can’t tell where the meet is, and the meet email gets lost amid all the other details in his inbox.”

“Say, like a bodyguard who’s not on detail with the Embassy?” Bishop asks.

Ziva nods. “Neither of the men with him are on staff at the Embassy.”

“Not as security,” Tony adds. He’s got his phone and is calling his agent, “Hey Seth.”

“Yeah…”

“Don’t let on what you’re telling me, just yeses and nos. Now that you’re close enough to see, are those cartel tattoos?”

“Yes.”

“Colombian?”

“No.”
“Bolivian?”

“Nope.”

“How about Peru?”

“Bingo.”

“Does our Ambassador look particularly nervous?”

“Yes.”

“About them?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, thanks. Twenty minutes?”

“Yes.”

Tony bounds up the stairs. He knows Jarvis is here, and that he’s talking to Leon, but he hasn’t gotten an update, yet. With Ellenza twenty minutes out, he’s also done waiting patiently. (Though he does knock before opening the door.)

“Almost show time,” Tony says, poking his head through the door.

Jarvis and Leon nod. “Are you handling the interrogation?” Leon asks.

“Ziva is.”

Jarvis smiles. “May I join her?”

Tony’s flatfooted by that, but he nods anyway. “I suppose I should get you updated.”

“That would be good, Agent DiNozzo,” Leon says with a small smile.

So, Tony starts talking, and as he talks, Jarvis smiles wider. He doesn’t like Jarvis much to begin with and that smile is part of it. That smile bodes ill for anyone caught in it. When he gets to the Peru connection, Jarvis nods, looking satisfied.

“That’s the piece.”

“Clayt?”

Jarvis inclines his head. “We lost a SEAL team in Peru six months ago. Official story is they were KIA in Pakistan.”

“But they were in Peru?” Tony asks, feeling a little stupid at that, but he wants to make sure he’s hearing this right.
“Exactly. It’s considered bad manners to send armed forces into friendly countries without their permission on orders to kill their citizens and burn their fields.”

Tony nods. “So they were in ‘Pakistan.’”

Jarvis nods. “Since they were completely off the grid, their commander would have had access to that account.”

“Which account?” Tony asks. Too many bank accounts floating around right now.

“The one Ellanza just cleaned out,” Jarvis says.

“So, is our SEAL alive and turning traitor, or gave it up before he died?” Leon asks.

“We know for a fact all six of them were KIA.”

“How good of a fact?” Tony asks.

“Their heads were delivered to the US Embassy in Lima. DNA confirmed who they were.”

Vance is looking angry. “And I didn’t know about this because?”

Jarvis aims a cold look at Leon. “Because you don’t get notified every time a Sailor gets killed in action. Officially they were beheaded by insurgents in Pakistan.”

Tony rubs his temples and sighs. “Okay. They got captured by the people they were trying to kill, and they returned the favor.”

“The Bathenada family. They’re running cocaine, heroin, and synthetic mushrooms out of Peru. It’s a smaller cartel, they tend to shy away from the big boys in Colombia and Bolivia, preferring to let them fight it out with each other.”

“Are you sure about that?” Tony asks.

“Why?” Jarvis responds.

“Our second account. It’s pouring money into anti-drug crusades. Could they be big enough, or well enough connected to be trying this as a way to cut down the competition?”

Jarvis looks unsettled by that. “Who’s getting paid off?”

“Directly, no one. Indirectly, senators, congressmen, judges, and on and on. Why?”

“All through anti-drug organizations?” Tony can see that Jarvis has something with this, too.

“Almost. Some of them are pharmaceutical companies.”

Leon’s watching Jarvis, who has something, big, clicking in his head. “What is it, Clayt?”

“Not sure, yet. Let me make a few calls. We’re not going to interrogation until I get done.” Then Jarvis leaves Vance’s office.

Tony shakes his head, and Vance nods a bit.
It feels like a very long time before Jarvis is back. But then he is, and he’s not looking happy.

“According to DEA, there’s always been a rumor that the Bathenada’s were up to more than it looked like. Nothing ever got pinned to them, because they kept a small profile. But, the theory was that they tended to pit the Colombians and Bolivians against each other, making sure to keep the chaos up, and limit the supply of drugs going into secondary and tertiary markets, keeping prices up.

“According to Commander Allison, who sent those SEALs in, the reason for going in against the Bathenada’s now, was that they were one of the primary buyers of poppy seeds. They’ve always run a smaller, higher tech operation, so the idea that they were using their contacts in Pakistan and Afghanistan to get good seeds and plants and then breed them with each other was plausible. The idea was to go in and destroy their greenhouses. Help to cut off the money going to the warlords in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

Tony and Vance nod at that, it makes a certain amount of sense. Waste of time and life if you ask Vance, but he’s certainly seen dumber operations over the years.

“For the South American producers, the US and the pipeline up Central America to the US is the primary market for cocaine and heroin. That’s where the big money is, so lots of drugs go flowing up. Europe is the secondary market. Harder to get to, longer travel time, less drugs get in, so they cost more per ounce. Australia, New Zealand, Canada, tertiary markets. Not enough of their own population involved in trafficking to have to fight for territory, not a lot of demand, but for people who want drugs, the prices are very high.”

Tony’s still nodding along. He gets this. “So, they what, monopolize the Australian market?”

Jarvis nods. “Something like that. And if they can produce a higher grade of heroin, they can move more ‘drug’ in less space, cutting costs further.”

“Makes sense, what does this have to do with the anti-drug groups?” Tony asks. “Are they the ones behind that account?”

“We don’t know for sure. Money, cash money, goes into that account. That’s part of never being able to get too deep into that account, because all of the money that goes into it is cash. No back trail. We do know that it’s going out and being very charitable, encouraging people to not soften their stance on drugs. And…” Jarvis looks slightly embarrassed. “We know that the harder we come down on drug trafficking the higher the profits are for the cartels.”

This is counter-intuitive to both Tony and Vance, who are just staring at Leon. “They make their money by providing a product you can’t just go to the grocery store and buy. Like every other business they don’t like competition. And right now, they’ve got competition that would completely decimate them, but they’re legally barred from getting into the market.”

Leon and Tony still aren’t quite getting it.

“All of the major pharmaceutical companies run on thinner margins than they’d like. All of them could add illegal drugs to their catalogues overnight. They’re all capable of doing it, and they’ve got distribution chains all set up, and the customers that spend big money on drugs would much rather go to their local drug store and buy cocaine, with a guaranteed purity and quality control, than the current model of hoping their connection won’t turn them in to the Feds. It’s just like Prohibition and the Mob. The Mob didn’t want alcohol legal, because it put them out of business. No one in their
right mind goes heading off to a dangerous part of town to buy something they hope is their drug of choice, when they can just go to the corner store and pick it up easy as you like.”

“So, you’re saying the cartels are pushing for anti-drug legislation?” Tony asks, feeling kicked in the guts. He spent years working vice, busting dealers and the like. The idea that he was making life better for the cartels hurts.

“We know that they do, through shells and dummies and friends in the US, donate to the hardliners on keeping drugs illegal. So far, from what we’ve been able to see, they don’t donate a lot, but they do it.”

“Why does a cartel that doesn’t deal much in the US lobby here?” Leon asks.

“If the money is coming from the Bathenadas, and we don’t know that it is, I’d think they’d do it because when our drug laws get stiffer, we lean on all of our buddies to stiffen theirs, too. Every industrialized nation on earth has a pharmaceutical industry. Recreational drugs are so easy to make that high school drop outs in West Virginia can do it. It would take most of those companies less than a month to switch production over.”

“Or it’s a move right out of the Godfather,” Tony says.

Jarvis raises an eyebrow.

“The ‘neutral party,’ in this case the small player, gets everyone together, lumps their money in one place, or maybe grabs a lot more of it and gets ready to start laying it all over the place, for the benefit of everyone…”

“That would work. They all benefit when the big pharmaceutical companies stay out of the market. A lot of legalize pot on the federal level people are up for election this year. Pot goes legal, the ceiling doesn’t fall in, that’ll move the push for other drugs. If they get in, the cartels are going to end up hurting because they won’t be able to shift their distribution model into the legal market fast or easy.”

Leon nods slowly. “And with all the laws on the books right now against importing legal drugs…”

“Right. Now, because there’s no legal route to get those drugs, bringing in illegal ones makes lots of money. Once you can buy them legally at the local CVS, importing them illegally is a lot of risk for very little reward. Like black market cigarettes, you can only make a profit on them in states where the taxes are too high,” Jarvis replies.

Tony rubs his eyes. “So, our theory is that the cartels are paying the drug warriors to keep drugs illegal. Maybe, if we’re seeing what we think we’re seeing, one of the cartels has grabbed our own money, maybe trying to get it into the account that’s paying everyone else off. Do we think that people who are on the boards of these organizations have any clue as to who is bankrolling them?”

“We can hope not, right?” Leon says.

Jarvis shrugs. “At least some of them don’t.”

“Last question,” Tony asks, ”why now?”

Before Leon or Jarvis get a chance to speculate on that, Tony gets a call, from Abbi, explaining what just happened to Diane and Draga.
Today is (eek!) the last day of summer camp for the kiddos. Two solid weeks of Little Dude and Littler Dude at home, and then school begins. Next chapter's a big one, too, so it might be a while before it pops up. (Or perhaps the writing muses will fly with me and the free-time fairy shall be kind. I can dream right?)
"Wait! Back up. What just happened to Diane and Draga?" Tony asks Abbi, his mind spinning.

Abbi explains, starting with Gibbs’ gut feeling and ending with Draga jerking his car out of the way and the chase car hurtling into the train and exploding.

Tony keeps nodding, relaying bits and pieces to Jarvis and Leon.

“Jethro’s bringing them to you. I’ve got my team securing the scene, though I’m calling Jimmy in for the body. Joint investigation?”

“Fine by me,” Tony says. “Wanna hear what I’ve got on my end of Diane’s mysterious account numbers?”

“Sure, bring it on. Nothing I like more in the middle of the night than a massive conspiracy.”

Tony smiles grimly. “It’s a good one.” Then he gets to telling his side of the tale.

“I think we have a change of plans,” Tony says as everyone shuffles into the conference room. Once Jarvis and Leon are seated, and Bishop’s got her computer open, ready to take notes, and Ziva is watching him, he starts up. First off, he explains all of the drama going on with Diane and Draga, then he goes into the possible cartel connection.

While he’s doing that, Seth calls in, saying he’s got the bodyguards in holding and Ellanza in interrogation. Tony tells him to come join them.

“Bishop, catch a ride with Dr. Palmer and go to the scene, work with Abbi’s guys. Ziva you and Jarvis are taking the first swing at Ellanza, after debriefing Seth, learning more about the trip up, and confirming who his bodyguards work for. I’m going to keep researching who is getting paid while digging into the major cartels, and once Diane and Draga get here, more debriefing followed by a long chat with Diane about what she’s getting into. Vance, if you could talk to anyone you know in Colombia or Bolivia, let alone Peru, and find out what they’ve got to say about this…”

Everyone is nodding, though Ziva is curious about the idea of working with Jarvis on interrogation.

As they’re driving to the Navy Yard, Diane is thinking one thing. (Actually, she’s got a lot of things buzzing around in her head, but she doesn’t like any of them, so she is focusing on one thing.)

People don’t take players like her out of the game after they’ve found what they’re looking for. As she said to Jethro, it’s not cost effective. Once she’s found whatever it is, the cat is out of the goddamned bag. Once that happens, it’s damage control time.
It’d be one thing if she was the only person who could do what she does, or use the information she has, but she’s not. Any decent accountant with a computer connection, like Jared, could do what they just did.

Plus, both her and Jared have saved everything they’ve found to the cloud. It can’t be deleted, can’t be destroyed. This data is out there, for everyone to see, forever. It’s not like she’s a witness with one piece of evidence no one else can access. So, moving now, that’s just stupid.

No. The guy she’s playing against, the mind on the other side of the blind chess game they’re playing, the guy who can plan a freaking train crash, he doesn’t move after the cat’s out of the bag. He goes before. He’s playing defense, not offense.

Two of four accounts are moving.

Two… aren’t/weren’t.

Something big is about to happen or is currently happening, she hasn’t found it, yet, and someone doesn’t want her seeing it. Someone, really doesn’t want her to see it.

Another thought hits her cold as ice down her back. She’s not the one directly looking, not right now. When she’s at work, she’s looking, but she kicked it over to Jared because she was going to be out for the weekend.

“Leroy,” he’s keeping a close eye on the road, watching all of the other traffic while Eric drives. After that display of car handling, Jethro didn’t think he could insist on driving.

“Mmm?” His eyes don’t leave the street.

“I’ve had a friend at Bank of America using his own connections to get me this information. Is he going to be okay?”

“Shit,” Gibbs says it softly, but Emily hears it, and her hand tightens in her mother’s grasp. Gibbs grabs his cell phone, and has Tony up in a minute. Then he tosses the phone back to Diane.

“Tony, have you tried to get a hold of Jared?” Diane asks.

“Few hours ago, he didn’t pick up his phone.”

“I had him running all the searches for me, and if they knew I was looking, they probably knew he was doing it for me.”

Tony’s not sounding happy as he says, “I’ll get someone on him.”

So much for running down cartel connections.

Tony goes through his contact list, looking for who they’ve got in the Great Lakes Office. A minute later, he’s got a name. A few rings after that, he says, “Hi, is this Zoe McClellan?”

“Yes… and this is?”

“Agent Tony DiNozzo. I’m at the DC branch, and I need someone to check in on a local where you
He hears some under the breath grumbling, probably because it’s 1:00 on a Sunday where she is.

“I know, not what you want to get out of bed for. It’s a big case, and we need to have him brought into protective custody, and shipped to us.”

“Okay. I’m up. Send me a name and address, and I’ll go get him for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Who is he and why do we want him?”

“An accountant, and we want him because someone just tried to kill the person he was doing research for.”

Now McClellan’s voice sounds awake. “Person okay?”

“Yeah. By a hair. I’ve called Jared, the accountant, twice in the last five hours. Didn’t get him the first time, figured he might have just been out. Second time, after the attack Diane, he’s still not answering his phone, and my gut’s not happy.”

“Gut?” She sounds amused by that. “I worked a job once with a guy who told me to trust my gut.”

Tony nods, wondering if she ever worked with Gibbs. “Yep. Me, too. You’ll go check?”

Zoe sounds more awake as she says, “I’m putting my boots on as we speak.”

“Thanks. Let me know what you find.”

“No problem.”

Ringing phone. That slowly filters through Tim’s mind. There’s not supposed to be a ringing phone this late at night. This is supposed to be romantic evening in the country date night. Tim grumbles, fumbles around, grabs the phone, sees Jimmy’s name on the contact, and jerks awake, hoping everyone is okay.

“Sorry to get you up, but we’ve got a case.”

Tim curses quietly, but at least this isn’t a baby girl is spiking a fever/spewing Technicolor fluids all over the place call. “Why are you calling me about a case in the middle of the night?” There was a time where Jimmy would have called Tim in in the middle of the night. Any case where Dispatch got Ducky before Gibbs involved Team Morgue getting Team Investigation out of bed. But, in that he’s not part of Team Investigation any longer…

“I’m not. I’m calling Abby; you picked up her phone.”

“Ulgh.” Tim rubs his eyes. “So, you don’t actually need me?”

“Get her up to DC and let her nap on the ride up so she’s ready to work. Home with Breena and babies after?”
He stretches a bit and pokes Abby gently. “We’re on our way. What sort of case?”

“I don’t have all the details, but the quick version is some idiot tried to ram Draga and Diane into a train. Draga saw it, jerked his car out of the way, and the idiot drove into a moving train at full speed.”

Tim winces. That’s going to be beyond nasty. “And suddenly I’m very glad to not to be in the field.”

“Thanks.”

“Sorry,” He winces for Jimmy. Yes, Jimmy’s used to every flavor of death ever, but that doesn’t mean he enjoys having to use a shovel to pick up all the pieces. “Probably three hours before she’s there.”

“Draga’s car’ll be getting there sooner, that’s the first bit of evidence to get in.”

“Okay.”

“Mmmm…” Abby finally moves a bit, possibly because Tim just turned the light on.

“That a sound of life from Abby?”

“Mmm?” Her eyes haven’t opened yet, but that’s definitely a why are the lights on kind of question.

“Yep.”

“Give her a kiss from me. See you at work… Who knows when? This’ll take hours to get all of the body parts collected.”

Jimmy hangs up the phone as Dr. Allan shuts the doors to the back of the van. A moment later, he’s sitting next to Jimmy, looking nervous. That’s somewhat new. Allan’s not a nervous by nature sort of fellow, and though he does look nervous when he’s about to do something he’s never tried before, Jimmy hasn’t seen him look like this about going to a crime scene for months.

“Dr. Palmer?”

“Yes, Dr. Allan?”

“How bad is this going to be?”

Jimmy sighs and nods, swallows hard. Train wreck, literally. That’s worth being nervous for. “I’ve done one train accident before. It was bad. This will be… not as bad, but only because this was one car with presumably one person versus a train, and the last time I did this it was a full troop transport versus a train.”

“Oh, God.” Allan’s looking nauseous at that.

“Yeah.” That one stayed with Jimmy for a long time after. “We had help from the Norfolk and Baltimore and New York MEs, and it still took us three days to get all of the pieces. This won’t be that bad.”
“But it’ll just be us.”

“True.” Jimmy puts his key into the ignition, and jerks a little when Bishop taps on the glass.

He rolls the window down.

“Room for one more?”

“Always,” Allan says, looking pleased to see someone else who hasn’t done this before. He scoots over while she goes around the van and gets in, next to them.

Abbi’s five ten. She is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a small woman. She’s still, though, on average, an inch smaller than Joe Average American Man.

Joe Railroader, who’s real name is something like Broder, is standing in front of her, looking deeply unimpressed by the idea of a cop in a fancy dress that he’s got to look down at, as he’s explaining how he’s got to move the damn train, crime scene or not, because it’s blocking both of the roads that cross at this intersection as well as the damn rail. And that, if she wants to process it for evidence, she can to that down at the Richmond train yard.

“You are not moving this train!” Abbi says, voice soft and low.

“I’ve got to, Ma’am. Got three trains behind me, and they all gotta get through.”

“Re-route them.” By the time three plus trains go through here, everything scattered around this scene will be lost or crushed.

“I can’t do that.”

“Then get on your radio, and get the person who can. If you move this train, I will arrest you!”

“No, you won’t. My union rep…”

Her look at him could freeze water, and he finally sees past the makeup and dress and sees her staring at him, cold and angry. “Will do absolutely nothing for you. This is a direct and legal order from a person with a gun. That train stays right here until every scrap of evidence has been collected from it.”

He slouches off, grabs his radio, and starts talking.

For right now, she’s on her own. At least two hours before the rest of the crew is here. The local LEO’s are still messing around with the other accident, but they tell her that she’ll have additional man power here, soon.

She starts setting up flares, gets the flashers that Gibbs has in his car going, and uses the two emergency signs he’s got to block two of the four roads off.

Then it’s just her, a flashlight, and a bored looking conductor.
“This your normal route?” she asks him.

“Not saying anything without my union rep.”

She wants to roll her eyes. This guy couldn’t be less helpful if he tried. “You’re not under arrest, you can’t refuse to answer questions or ask for counsel.”

Joe Railroader’s eyes narrow. “Not saying anything without him.”

“Do you want me to arrest you for obstructing justice?”

“If you arrest me, then I have the right to say nothing until my Union rep shows up.”

Abbi grits her teeth, shakes her head, and then goes to photograph the wreckage.

Ellanza’s not looking too worried as he sits in interrogation. Not looking too comfortable, either. If Ziva had to characterize that look, she’d call it the look of someone who’s in trouble, but knows exactly how bad it is, and doesn’t think it’s that bad. She puts him in mind of how she looks when she gets pulled over for speeding.

“What does this look right to you?” she asks Jarvis.

Jarvis is eyeing him up and down, and shakes his head slightly. “He’s sure his lie is going to hold. Which means it’s probably true, or at least confirmable…” Jarvis turns to Seth. “The men on the plane with him… tell me about the tattoos.”

“I can do you one better.” He pulls out his phone and shows Jarvis a picture.

Jarvis looks, nodding. It’s a black cross, each arm equally long, with curled ends. A crescent moon in yellow above. “That’s the Bathenada crest.”

“So, why him…” Ziva asks, looking at Ellanza.

“That’s going to be our first question. Agent Seth, once we get the answer out of him, you’re going to check it, carefully, and bring us more information.”

“Yes, sir.” Seth’s looking a little overwhelmed at getting orders directly from the Secretary of the Navy.

“And once we have the answer to that, I want you and your men to wring every drop of information you can out of Mr. Ellanza’s body guards.”

Seth smiles, looking like he intends to enjoy that.

Jarvis is smiling, too. “Ready, Agent DiNozzo?”

Ziva smiles back at them. This is so much more satisfying than running down numbers. “Lead the way.”
Before entering interrogation, Jarvis takes off his suit jacket. He musses his hair a little, loosens his tie, unbuttons his sleeves and rolls them up.

Ziva watches, getting in idea of what he’s doing. He’s making himself look tired and annoyed. Like he’s been drug out of bed late on Saturday night and wants nothing more than to get back there. She nods, holds up one finger, and heads over to the canteen to grab an extra-large cup of coffee.

When she hands it to him, he smiles, takes a deep swigs, winces a little (2:00 on Sunday, the coffee’s been sitting for a long time), and then he takes his glasses off, rubs his eyes, hard, making them look a little bloodshot, and puts them back on, very slightly askew.

Ziva nods, approving. This is going to be fun.

Leon’s in MTAC talking to NCIS Cartagena, the Colombian and Bolivian Ambassadors, and the DEA. (He called for the Peruvian Ambassador as well, but he’s ‘in a meeting’ and ‘cannot be interrupted.’ (Diplomatic speak for fuck off, we’ll get back to you when we feel like it.) He’s explaining what they’ve got over here, and is asking for intel.

And he’s getting it.

Namely, yes, they all know about the Bathenadas. But, they’re tiny players. (Not “tiny” the DEA points out, cash rich, but not major players by any stretch, they’ve got, at most, 5% of the market.)

Colombia and Bolivia’s Ambassadors are agreeing that things have been heating up between their own Cartels. Not across the borders, Peru’s between Colombia and Bolivia, after all, but each country has their own problems with cartels, and it does look like they’re simultaneously in situations where the different families are continuing to squabble for control.

“What does ‘squabbling for control’ mean?” Leon asks.

“The usual stuff,” Tomas Medin, Ambassador to Bolivia says. “Shoot up each other’s supply lines, burn things down, most of it happens far away from the cities, so we’re getting second and third hand accounts. More violence than normal, not enough to call it a war.”

“Only a war when it spills into the cities,” Sarah Olpin, Ambassador to Colombia says. “Doesn’t matter how many people get killed in the jungles, that’s just the cost of doing business. When it happens where people can see it, that’s when it’s a war.”

Daniel Traig, the DEA’s cartel specialist, nods. “We try not to get too involved when they’re just killing each other. When collateral damage gets too high, that’s when we start paying attention. Right now collateral damage is at a minimum.”

They all see a woman walk into the view of the NCIS Cartagena, whisper something to Ken Harris, who nods, and then opens his window, turning the camera on his computer. For a second, they all watch the camera spin dizzily, and when it focuses again, they can see black night lit by flames.

“Just got word that that’s the docks. Supposedly ones favored by the Allajanco Cartel for moving cocaine out by sea. I think things are about to blow up.”
For a moment, they watch the flames, and then the Bolivian Ambassador gets a discrete word whispered in his ear. His face goes tense, and he nods. “Gentlemen, lady, I’ve got to get moving. Our third biggest airport was just bombed.”

And with that, they begin scrambling. The DEA promises to keep Vance in the loop, but he’s feeling awfully sure that he’s going to be the low man on the totem pole when it comes updates.

---

Ziva walks in first. She’s sure she’s going to be the “reasonable” one. Jarvis is going to play the fried/annoyed/get it done as fast as possible cop.

“Are you comfortable, Mr. Ellanza?” she asks, handing him a bottle of water.

Jarvis snorts at that. “I was comfortable. This asshole doesn’t deserve comfortable. Your thirty room mansion not big enough for you? You need a gold plated Lamborghini or something?”

Ziva rolls her eyes. “If you wanted comfortable, you shouldn’t have been cop, Clayt,” Ziva fires at him. “Mr. Ellanza?”

“I’m fine, thank you.” His English does have a slight accent to it, one that puts her in mind of south Florida.

“Start at the beginning,” Jarvis snaps out.

“I was born in Miami in 1967.” Ellanza’s back is up. He’s answering Jarvis with the same attitude he’s getting from him.

“Don’t be a jerk.”

“Don’t be a jerk, yourself,” Ziva says to Jarvis, “Honey, remember?” She turns to Ellanza, “You know why we picked you up?”

He nods. “I have a clue. I’d like to speak to counsel.”

“As is fully your right.” Clayton looks annoyed, and mutters something about shooting all the lawyers. Ziva hands over her phone. “Call whomever you like.”

Ellanza does, and as the phone rings, and then connects, he shuts it off. The cool and collected façade falls, and he says, “We’re really in the US!”

“Where else would you be? You drove past the Washington Monument to get here.” Clayton sounds annoyed by this, but Ziva knows they’re about to get to the ‘cover lie’ the one that’ll hold up, and she’s eager.

Ellanza’s looking scared. “They test you! That’s how this works. They take your family, and then they tell you what to do, and if you don’t do it… They test you. Humphry never saw his wife again. He thought he was safe, he thought… But he wasn’t. It was a test.”

“Who tests you?” Ziva asks, gently.

“The Bathenadas. They have Claire! I got a call two days ago.”
“And Claire is…” Ziva leads.

“My wife! They have Claire!” Ellanza is extremely agitated now, face starting to flush.

Ziva doesn’t look behind her, but she’s sure that Seth is on it.

“So, start from the beginning, tell us what happened so we can find her,” Ziva’s voice is gentle.

“There’s no time for this. The beginning is two days ago, and it’ll take too long to explain. They have Claire! You need to get talking to the Peruvians! Someone’s got to go get her.” His eyes are tearing up, he’s looking truly distraught.

Jarvis isn’t impressed. “Cut the shit. If they ‘have Claire,’ she’s dead. You’re five hours behind schedule on delivering the cash, your ‘guards’ haven’t checked in, the boat you were loading the money onto had a less than fifty mile range, so whoever was supposed to get that money has let his higher ups know you didn’t do what you were supposed to do. If Claire is someone you actually care about, right now you better be hoping that you’re ‘they’ve got Claire’ is a cover story, because if they actually have Claire, the game’s over. So, start from the beginning,” Jarvis says, cold and sure.

Ellanza’s sobbing, and Ziva’s actually getting a bit worried that Jarvis may be taking his bad cop routine a bit too far.

“Clayt…”

“We’ve seen this before, Ziva. These assholes claim they’re acting under duress. So, we ignore what’s in front of us, go off on the wild goose chase looking for the poor lost wife or child, finally find them, half the time they’re dead, and the other half the asshole stashes them away to provide himself with a shield.” Jarvis nudges Ellanza, “So, either she’s already dead, in which case moving faster doesn’t matter, or you hid her away yourself, in which case it really doesn’t matter. So, start at the beginning. How did the Bathenadas make contact?”

Ellanza’s glaring at Jarvis through his tears, and if eyes could kill, Jarvis would be turning slowly on a spit over a low fire, cooking alive. Both Ziva and Clayt see it, Ellanza is mad, but part of that mad is that Jarvis just nailed exactly what happened to Claire.

“Clayt!” Ziva stands up, grabs Clayt by the arm, and jerks him out of the room. Once out she says, “I assume I am going back there alone?”

Clayton smiles. “With tissues or a handkerchief I’d imagine.”

Ziva nods. “Let’s see what Seth has.”

They go back into observation, where Seth is on the phone and frantically going through his computers.

“Claire Syth married Ellanza in ’98. According to both people I talked to, they have a happy marriage. According to Embassy security, she ‘went to visit her mother’ five days ago. She did tell people before she was last seen that that was the plan. That’s not just how her husband explained her disappearance. Her mother has been dead since 2014. She used the Embassy’s private Jet to go to Miami, got off the jet, a limo was waiting for her on the tarmac, she and her security entered the limo, and haven’t been seen since. The jet returned exactly when and how it was supposed to. No missing persons reports have been made. Her security guy has called in and is telling his contacts that everything is fine.

“So, a planned exit,” Ziva says.
Seth nods. “Her phone records are quiet. I don’t know what she’s doing there, but it’s not involving the use of her home phone or cell. And she didn’t answer when I called.”

Jarvis nods at that. “Have someone check their family home, see if she’s actually there or not.”

“I’ve done background on her security. No good information, yet. James Pasder. Been with the Embassy since ’06. He’s got good but not amazing reviews. He’s also got a wife in Ohio and mistress in Montevideo, so he might be the kind of guy who’d be blackmail-able to look the other way, or he might not. Haven’t found anything on his financials. We’re looking.”

“Good,” Jarvis says. “Five to one, she’s at home, laying low.”

Ziva nods in agreement.

“You ever feel like you’re looking at something so complicated, that you’ll never, ever figure it all out?” Tony say to Leon as he sits on the corner of his desk.

Leon nods slowly. “All the damn time. You want to go first?”

“Sure.” Tony rests his fingers on his keyboard. “Diane’s accountant friend isn’t answering his phone. He left his office a bit before eight last night, and hasn’t gotten home, yet. I’ve got Agent McClellan hunting him down. Between updates on that, I’ve been getting into the history of the cartels in Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru.”

“Is that the complicated part?” Leon asks.

Tony nods. “Five main players out of Colombia, four out of Bolivia, and one out of Peru.”

“The Peruvian one is the Bathenadas, right?”

“Yeah.” Tony sighs. “That’s the simple one. They got into the drug trade almost accidentally. Peru’s between Bolivia and Colombia, so, for a while, they provided security for shipments moving across the country. Then they decided that they could make a hell of a lot more money by taking those shipments and selling them themselves. Then they decided that stealing drug shipments was expensive and got a lot of people killed, so they stopped that, and began growing their own.”

“And the complicated part…”

“Colombia and Bolivia. Factions, more factions, side factions, families rising and falling. Things got really frisky in the early 2000’s when everything in Afghanistan and Pakistan heated up, messing with the heroin trade, add in local politics stirring things up with a side of the CIA and DEA poking their heads in to prop up different factions at different times, and you’ve got a HUGE mess. Things were fairly quiet for most of the last eighteen months, but have been heating up in the last six weeks.”

“I’ve got something on the present day of the cartels of Colombia and Bolivia.”

Tony nods, “Sure, give me present day.”

Vance checks his phone again. “As of two minutes ago, full-on drug war’s broken out in Bolivia and Colombia. Any way you can move drugs around, planes, boats, trains, trucks are on fire. Fields are
burning, too. We’re looking at concentrated, coordinated attacks, and from the intel that’s getting to me, everyone is getting hit.”

Tony nods. “Okay, so they’ve gone to war. That’s a massive supply disruption. The Bathenadas are in place to swoop in and take up the slack…”

Leon nods along with that. “Money’s moving around, too. The DEA says that the accounts we’re seeing moving aren’t the only ones. Drug money and suspected drug money is flying around the world, fast right now.”

“So, we’re…” Tony leads. This is well outside of their jurisdiction.

Leon nods. “Sitting on the sidelines as South America burns.”

“Are we going to be able to hold onto Ellanza?” Tony asks.

“Probably, but only because everyone else in the drug world is busy putting out fires somewhere else, and they know we won’t lose him,” Leon replies. “Sooner or later they’ll want to grill him, but probably not until they’ve got everything calmed back down.”

“And if we can connect him to the attack on Diane and Draga…” Tony says.

“Then we, or Ms. Borin, will be able to keep hold of him. Attempted murder still trumps drug smuggling. Do we have anything to link him to that attack?”

“Besides timing and our intense disbelief in coincidences?” Tony shakes his head. “Ziva and Jarvis have him, they’ll get it out.”

Ziva does head back into interrogation, this time by herself, with a box of tissues, and another bottle of water.

“I am sorry for my partner. He can be very rough,” she says, handing over the tissues.

Ellanza wipes his eyes. “Is he right?”

“If the Bathenadas are who you claim they are, then yes, he is. As soon as they knew that money was out of their hands, Claire would have been killed.”

Ellanza whimpers.

“I am so sorry.” She gently strokes the back of his hand. “Please, help us make the case against them. Tell me what happened.”

“But…” He’s looking up at her, tears in his eyes. “You’ve got to at least look, right? You’ve got to go find her! She might… I mean… This is a waste of time! You need to find her.”

Ziva catches it. She’s not even sure what it is, but it’s there. He’s stalling them.

She pats the back of his hand and nods. “Okay. I’ll talk to my boss, see if we can get another team on this, looking for your wife. You said we needed to talk to Peru?”
“That’s where they’re based.”

“And you know she’s in Peru?”

“The call said as soon as she got the money, they’d drop her off at the Lima Embassy.”

“All right. You stay calm. I’ll see what I can do, and then we’ll talk.” And once again, Ziva gets up and leaves Mr. Ellanza alone in interrogation.

Tony’s at his desk, talking with Vance, when she and Jarvis walk over to them. “He’s stalling. There’s something he’s waiting for,” she says.

“What sort of something?” Vance asks.

Ziva shakes her head.

Tony thinks about it for a moment, and then his eyes go wide. “No. They wouldn’t try that, not here…” He knows it happens. It happened once when he was in Philly and once again in Baltimore, but… you’d have to be insane to try it in a Federal building, let alone one where no one’s on the take. Though… given what just happened with Kevin, no one being on the take might be an optimistic assessment of the situation.

“Tony?”

“When I worked Vice… It happened a few times, and only with the really big players. Of course these guys are the really big players, or, at least they want to be…”

“DiNozzo…” Jarvis says.

“It was always plan B. You never know if Plan A’s going to go right, so Plan B. They’d keep trackers in the money or drugs or weapons or whatever it was. If a shipment didn’t go the way it was supposed to, they’d use the trackers, find them, and then grab whatever it was. Philly and Baltimore didn’t exactly have the kind of security we do, and there was usually a guy or two on the payroll anyway. So, occasionally things would go missing.”

“So, we need to be in evidence, right now?” Ziva says.

“We need to be in evidence, right now! And Vance, we need all hands on deck level security. He might be stalling because he’s expecting a rescue.”

And with that, they get moving.

Finally, Local LEOs. Finally, Abbi’s got flashing lights, and signs letting people know to go around. Finally, her crime scene isn’t in danger of some twit trying to drive through it.

“Well, this has certainly been an exciting night,” Sgt. Paul Lane of the Spotsylvania County PD says to her.
“Two accidents in one night a big deal for you guys?” That’s likely what she drives through going home from work.

“Two accidents like this is. First one was weird. Looks like the SUV swerved right into oncoming traffic. He hit the other driver head on.”

Abbi shakes her head at that. “Hence the ambulance?”

“Yeah.” Lane looks upset. “They don’t think the other driver’s going to make it. The SUV driver, apparently, swerves, crashes, gets out of his car. I don’t know how; the front of that SUV was totaled. But he texts 911, lets them know there’s been an accident, and then he runs off. That’s what took us so long to get to you. We spent two hours trying to find the driver before giving up until we’ve got daylight. He can’t have gone too far. He’s on foot, his phone is in the car, and… no blood, but there’s no way he’s not hurt. The windshield is crushed, something went into it, so he’s got to have a concussion or internal bleeding or something.”

“You run the plates yet?”

He nods. “Yeah. Delaware plates. Reported stolen a year ago. Got the phone in evidence, too. My tech’s looking into it, figuring out who it belongs to.”

Zelaz looks tired as he’s staring at six boxes filled with cash, one with gold bullion, and one small bag filled with gems. Three more sealed evidence bags, holding the personal possessions of the men they have in custody sit on top of the cash boxes.

“If we’re lucky,” he says after Tony explains what they’re looking for, “then it’s a continuous transmitter, and all I’ve got to do is sweep for bugs, and we’ll find it.” He sweeps, and nothing beeps. “Or it’s an intermittent transmitter, and we’ve just got to wait.” Zelaz flicks the switch at the top of his bug sweeper and sets it on top of the money.

“How many of those things do you have?” Tony asks Zelaz.

“Six.”

“RFID?” Tony asks Zelaz.

He nods. “If it sends messages, I can find it with this.”

Tony picks one of them up, thinking. “Just press the button and it lights up?”

“Yep.”

“Range?”

“About six feet.”

Tony looks at the bags of evidence. Ellanza is still in his street clothing. His ‘guards’ are in NCIS jumpsuits. He hands one of the bug sweepers to Ziva. “You keep talking to him, see if he’s got the tracker on him. We’ll keep watch on this and see if we’ve got to batten down the hatches.”

Seth runs up to them. “Mrs. Ellanza, she’s in Miami. She’s healing up from plastic surgery. She got
“You going to do a cavity search while you’re at it?” Diane says to the guards outside of the NCIS south gate as they do an extremely thorough search of Eric’s car and everyone in it.

“There’s been a threat,” he says, patting Jethro down.

“Yeah, I know, Jarhead, we’re the ones who were threatened,” her voice is sharp, and she does not want this cretin’s hands on her daughter.

Draga shakes his head at her, and for once, she actually takes some heed. She sighs and says, “I’m sorry, long night.”

Gibbs nods at the guard as he’s wrapping up his pat down. “What’s up, Bryce?”

“Can’t say. But you are not the target. What’s going on with you?”

“Getting us in to debrief, and the car into evidence,” Draga replies. Then he looks at Emily. “She’s seventeen, was almost killed tonight, you gotta do this?”

Bryce nods. “Quick and gentle. Nothing personal to you, Miss.”

Emily nods back. “I can handle it.”

Diane glares. “Hands don’t linger.”

Bryce rolls his eyes and does a very professional job. Once he’s done, and they’ve all passed the check, he says, “Sorry, Eric, can’t let you do that. Nothing’s going into or out of evidence. You can park it in front of the lock-up.”

Gibbs and Eric nod, if security is this tight, something big happened, and they aren’t part of it.

Yet.

“Does this feel like every worst nightmare you ever had in high school algebra?” Jimmy asks.

Allan blinks slowly at Jimmy as they’re walking down the road, toward the stopped train. Bishop’s already talking to Abbi, because she didn’t have to grab anything from the van. But Jimmy and Allan have the gurney, body bags, and assorted instruments of dealing with dead people.

“You know, a train moving east at forty-five miles an hour, a car moving south at fifty miles an hour,
where do they intersect…”

Allan thinks about it for a second. “Can’t solve the problem given that information.”

“Probably why I hated that class.”

Allan’s staring at the train, aware of the fact that Jimmy’s trying to make this a bit easier, trying to help him build the calluses he needs to be able to do this job, but all he can see are burn marks on the side of the train, and think about how it had to feel to go hurtling into it.

“We actually are going to have to do a version of that problem,” Jimmy says.

Allan looks away from the train toward Jimmy.

“Debris field. It’ll give us an idea of where, and how far down the road, we need to be looking. The tracks are rock and gravel, and without that, we’ll be picking up random bits of metal from passing trains and cars and everything else for weeks.”

Allan nods. Then he rubs his eyes. “Um… Let me get a pad of paper. I was good at physics in school.”

“Okay. I’ll see if I can find out what kind of car it was, how fast it was going, and how fast the train was going.”

Allan nods, and Jimmy continues toward Abbi, to grab information for him, while starting to get a sense of the scene.

“Abbi.”

“Jimmy.” They’re working, so they don’t give each other their usual greeting hug.

“So much for a romantic night out.”

She nods, and looks down at her pretty white dress. Her now ragged, ripped, and stained gray and singed dress. Clomping through flaming wreckage in a floor length dress is a bad plan, for the dress. “So much for my pretty white dress, too. You got a change for me?”

“Yeah. I stopped by your place and grabbed your go bag. Do we need to bag up the dress for evidence?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “Anything interesting is,” she points the train, where Bishop is photographing, as Omagi tags bits of the car, and the local LEOs tape the whole area off.

Jimmy glances at the train. “We’re going to need the make, model, and how fast it was going to get a good idea of where all the pieces will be.”

Abbi thinks. “Ummm… We kept pace for a few seconds at close to 85 miles an hour. It was… a Taurus or something like that.”
“Mid-sized sedan?”

“Yeah.”

“Train speed?”

“The engineer won’t say. I’d estimate 45 or 50.”

“Won’t say?”

“Won’t talk without his Union Rep, who is apparently walking down from Philadelphia or something, because he’s not here yet.”

“Okay. That’s a start.” He hands her the bag, and the keys to the van. “You can change in there.”

“Thanks.”

Tim’s pulling up to the south entrance to the Navy Yard. The one he uses, on average, 500 times a year. The last time he saw them being this attentive to security, he was coming in the morning after Deering blew the place up.

It’s five in the morning, and he’s behind at least six cars and a DEA van. Six cars and a van that aren’t moving.

He shakes his head. Abby’s napping next to him, so he pulls back before he gets boxed in, turns the car, and heads to the main entrance. He’s going to drop her off.

He gives her a gentle poke. “Hey, time to start waking up.”

Abby blinks a few times, not looking happy about that. “Rhgm.”

“Yeah. I know. There’ll be food and a case in there, all things you like.”

She nods, looking more alert. A good case is a thing of joy. She rubs her eyes and stretches a bit.

“Why are we over here?”

“Long line. Security’s on high.”

“Someone takes a swat at one of us; that tends to happen.”

Tim nods at that. “Give me a call when you get in.” He stops the car a good hundred feet from the front gate.

She kisses him, and he wraps his arm around her, kissing back. “You going to Breena’s?” she asks.

“Yeah. That’s the plan. If I’m lucky, I’ll grab an hour’s nap before the girls are up.”

“Good luck.” Abby opens the door and heads off.
To play stupid, or not to play stupid. That’s what Ziva’s debating as the heads back to Ellanza.

If she tells Ellanza what she knows, he’ll either clam up or start telling her what’s really going on. With the Bathenadas, at least. He probably won’t let on that he’s expecting something. If she doesn’t tell, if she plays along with the idea of hunting for Claire, he’ll probably tell her a pretty close to but not exactly true version of how he ended up with the Bathenadas trying to get him moving money around.

There’s a reason they picked him. And not just because he’s got diplomatic clearance. They’d use their own diplomats (who according to Leon still aren’t returning calls) who they’ve got better, closer, more personal leverage against if it was about diplomatic clearance.

She’s feeling like understanding why Ellanza was chosen will break the rest of this open.

Then another thought hits Ziva… Play stupid, act like she believes what he’s telling her, but hit him with something he doesn’t expect. She smiles gently to herself, touching her belly. It occurs to her that this is probably one of the last times she’ll interrogate someone face to face (most of what she’s doing at CGIS is with a computer), and she’s intending to enjoy it.

She steps into interrogation. “Mr. Ellanza.”

“Agent DiNozzo! My wife?” He’s so tense, on edge, looking worried. It’s acting. Good acting, but still, acting. Fear, nerves, tension, sadness, they all have, for want of a better word, a smell, and he may look scared and nervous, but he doesn’t smell of it.

Ziva nods, looking distraught. She sits next to Ellanza, patting his hand gently, and quietly says, “We were able to track her down.” She sees the flicker of doubt in his eyes. This is too fast, and that’s not the answer he expects. “I’m so sorry. Both her and her guard were found in your Miami home. The Miami PD thinks the time of death was about six hours ago.” His eyes go very wide at that, and he’s shaking his head, this time the distress is genuine. Now the scent of fear is pouring off of him.

“No! That wasn’t supposed to happen!”

“Tell me what was supposed to happen, Mr. Ellanza.”

“There’s a code. They don’t…” He’s stunned, wheels in his head spinning. “They… not the women or children.”

“Honor among thieves?”

She sees Ellanza’s face go hard, and suddenly she knows she’s got a very willing conversationalist on her hands. He swallows hard, takes a deep drink of his bottle of water, and then says, “In the next ten minutes, someone is going to take the money out of your evidence lock up. They’re going to request custody of me and my men. You’d best not let them have me.”

Ziva nods. “I can arrange that. Then we’ll talk?”

“Then we’ll talk.”

Ziva springs up and runs to MTAC. “Tony!” Tony’s with Vance, and right now, they’re watching the security feeds around the Navy Yard.

Tony turns to her. “You have details?”
“Yes. He’s expecting a rescue.”

Leon nods, and Jarvis does, too, pointing to the south gate. “And I know who’s going to do it. You haven’t gotten a call from the DEA, have you?” Leon asks dryly.

Tony and Jarvis shake their heads. “No one’s requested a prisoner or evidence transfer from me,” Tony says.

Vance nods. He’s got his phone and is calling down to the south gate. “Where are you parked?” he asks the three of them.

“South lot,” Tony says. He can see his car in the feed right now.

“East,” Jarvis replies.

Tony knows what Vance is thinking. “Mr. Secretary, I’m going to need your keys.”

Tony’s heading to his desk, wishing he had a few more hands around. And, because apparently today wishes are horses, the elevator bings, and in walks Draga, Gibbs, Emily and Diane.

Tony smiles. “Gibbs, Draga, with me.”

“What? Just like that?” Diane says.

“Been a big night, Peaches, we’ll get to you in a bit.” Tony digs through his desk, finds his backup gun, and hands it to Gibbs. He kisses Emily’s cheek. “Looking lovely, Ms. Fornell. Ziva, you got them?”

Ziva nods. She’d rather get the DEA van that likely isn’t legitimate, but that’s just asking for an argument.

Gibbs grins as he takes the gun. Eric’s looking pretty happy at the chance to blow off some of his own nervous tension by shooting at things, too.

Gibbs falls into step next to Draga, as Tony rapidly fills them in on the plan. “We’re grabbing Jarvis’ car, and making sure that van can’t just reverse out of there. Vance is getting other teams into place. When they roll up to security, if they don’t quietly file on out, we’re going to light them up.”

Out here, on the road, it’s almost dawn. The far eastern horizon is almost starting to pink up. Not that anyone here at the crime scene is admiring the dawn.

Or for that matter, looking at anything other than the ground or the train.

Allan and Palmer have been at this for ten solid minutes now, and… Even to Allan, who’s never done this before, this doesn’t seem right. “Dr. Palmer, are you noticing something?”
Jimmy nods. He’s sitting in a wreckage field of what is likely millions of pieces of debris. In fact, though he doesn’t know this for sure, but he’s betting there was a small bomb or something inside the car, because there should be larger pieces around, but so far, the biggest thing he’s seen are the tires. Even the engine, which is designed not to shatter when it’s rammed at high speed into something, is in chunks.

What he and Dr. Allan are not seeing is body parts.

None of them. No bone, no blood, no skin, nothing.

And while it’s true that everyone in Jimmy’s line of work has heard of situations where bodies are “blown to bits,” it’s also true that when that happens there are still bits. Yes, this is gross, but, even Cole, who was kneeling right over a bomb when it went off, left some remains. (Jimmy found six toes, charred bones, and blood ash, from where his blood burned against the metal of the car he was in.)

Sure, whatever it was likely wouldn’t be identifiable, not easily, but something around them should be wet, something should squish. Bodies, even bodies in explosions, just don’t vanish.

They’re both standing next to the train, where the car crashed into it, staring at dented metal covered in scorch marks. There’s a quarter mile long trail of glass and metal, and from what they’ve been seeing, not a single drop of blood.

“Dr. Palmer, I don’t think the car’s driver was in the car.”

Jimmy’s nodding. “Go look at the road.”

“What am I looking for?”

“Skid marks.” Jimmy walks with him, and after a few minutes they’re back to the road. Jimmy’s not a crime scene tech, nor is he a car guy, but because he’s the ME, and because he handles all deaths investigated by NCIS, he’s seen a lot of car accidents.

There’s one path of heavy rubber on the road, short but intense. The kind of mark a car makes when it goes from zero to fast in not nearly enough time. “Draga’s car.” Jimmy points out. There are no other paths. “The ramming car didn’t try to stop. If a person had been in it, they’d have tried to ram the first car into the train, and use their brakes and the force of hitting a stopped car to stop themselves.”

Allan’s nodding. “You’d have your foot already on the brake, ready to hit it the second you made impact. At least, if you were a person, that’s what you’d do. If you were a… remote control?” he doesn’t sound sure about that, but it fits what they’re seeing, “you’d run right through, because that would help to destroy the evidence of what you did, and make sure everyone in the car you rammed died.”

“I think you’re right, Dr. Allan.”

“What is going on here!” Diane demands of Ziva. “Someone tries to kill us, tries to ram us into a train, and you’re all off playing—“
“Diane,” Ziva has an arm around Diane, and one around Emily, and is shuffling them toward the conference room. “The accounts you were watching… They’re the opening salvo in a full-on drug war. Colombia and Boliva are on fire right now. Right now, we have the man who picked up the cash in custody, and we believe someone is about to come and try and rescue him and the money.” Ziva flicks on ZNN, and there is coverage of buildings that are literally burning in Bolivia.

“Holy mother of God,” Diane whispers.

Ziva nods at her. “Stay here. I’m going to grab you a computer. If you want to keep looking at those accounts, figure out what’s happening, that would be good. If you and Emily just want to crash, that’s okay, too. But right now, everyone who can shoot is making sure that money and the suspect don’t leave this building.”

Emily looks up, eyes alight. “I can shoot.”

Ziva smiles gently at her. “Get a badge to go with that, and you can join in. Say, in six years?”

Tony’s feeling electric as he’s grabbing Jarvis’ car. Doing stuff like this on no sleep is a bad plan, but for some reason the guys in that DEA van didn’t call ahead and offer to let them all get naps.

Gibbs is strapping on his vest, and checking Tony’s gun. It’s not one he’s used before, but it’s the same make and model as his usual piece.

Draga’s also strapping in. He’s got his own holster and own gun that he’s getting set with. “So, what’s the plan?”

“Out of view, Vance is making sure we’ve got the road blocked off. We’re going to drive out of the east lot, go around the Navy Yard, and we’re the only ones who’ll be let back in through the south. Then we pull up behind the van, make sure it can’t back out, and make sure if anyone tries to jump out of the back, they’ll get a surprise. Jackets on over the vests.”

“Easy enough plan,” Gibbs says, pulling his tux jacket back on.

“And if they try to run?” Draga says.

“You make sure they don’t.” He tosses Jethro the keys. “If more than two of them try to run, Palmer ‘em.”

Gibbs doesn’t look happy at that, but he’s in no condition to run down a suspect on foot. He slips into the front seat, and adjusts it into place. He puts his gun on his lap, holding it. No, he’s normally not in favor of driving with a loaded gun in his lap, but he may want to shoot it fast, and he’s not going more than two miles. (Especially with his right arm in sub-prime condition, he doesn’t want to be wrestling with pulling a gun out of a shoulder holster, sitting down, buckled in.)

Tony’s in the front seat next to him. Draga’s in the back. They pull out, and Jethro circles them around the Navy Yard, and then through the barricade. Right now, they’re idling behind the “DEA” van. One car in front of it, and them behind.

“Think it’s bulletproof?” Tony asks, looking at the van.
“If it’s real, it is. Is it real?”

Tony shrugs. “Ellanza, the guy we grabbed with the money, made one call. Cell phone number. Burner phone. No owner of record, but it’s a Kansas number.”

“How long ago?” Gibbs asks.

“Less than an hour.” Tony replies. “It’s probably real. Easier to have a crooked DEA agent or two on staff than it is make something like this up in an hour.”

That makes a distressing amount of sense to Tony. These guys might actually be legit DEA agents, acting on what they assume are legitimate orders. Or they may be cartel guys in a DEA van. Or some combination thereof. He sighs.

They see the car in front of the DEA van get waved in. Tony notices a few people going to their cars in a casual sort of way. He recognizes most of them. Pretty much every other agent or security guy who was in the building and wearing non-uniform clothing. He knows they’re going to wait for that car to get well away from the crosshairs before moving on the van.

It’s rolling along slowly, looking for a parking space. Up ahead… Up ahead he can’t see anything. The back of the van is in front of him. Gibbs can see Bryce talking to whoever’s in that van right now. He casually rolls his window down, so they can listen.

“I’m going to need you to step out of the van, sir.”

“Why?”

Bryce snorts. “Come on, you’ve been in this line long enough to see. Everyone’s getting searched. Some asshole tried to kill two agents. Out you get.”

“I’m here for a prisoner transfer.” The voice out of the van sounds annoyed.

“Great. Get out, let me search your van, and then you can take your paperwork in and get your prisoner.”

Tony sees the car finally park, and he notices that more of those “people” just wandering around the lot are moving closer. One of them is right next to the parked car, and from the looks of it, probably telling the people inside to get down and stay that way.

Bryce looks like he’s doing a good job of being a bored agent. The driver, and the man with him, step out, allowing him to frisk them.

“We good?” One of them, probably the driver, says.

“Gotta check the van.”

“Oh, come on! That’ll take forever.”

“You think I don’t know. I’m supposed to be going home now, not looking through your stuff. Come ‘round back, let’s see what’s in there.”

“Fine.” The first man leads Bryce to the back. Tony’s watching carefully, but trying to appear like he’s not. Just another bored guy in line.

Gibbs shifts his gun so it’s not visible from the outside of the car. Eric scoots over a bit, hand on the door handle, ready to leap if need be.
Tony tenses as he sees Mr. DEA gesture to the door, indicating Bryce should open it. “Open it up.”

He knows it’s going to happen a half-heartbeat before it does, just long enough to start wincing, and moving. The door flings open, catching Bryce in the forehead, and he staggers back. Gibbs and Tony already have guns drawn and pointed at the three guys in the back. That’s enough to stop two of them, but number three goes running.

Draga’s on him, tearing after him, gun… forgotten from the looks of it. It’s not drawn.

The guy from the van is fast. Eric, who’s had a hell of a night of way too much adrenaline is faster. DEA man doesn’t manage to get more than a hundred feet before Eric tackles him to the ground, then leaps up, foot in the small of the man’s back, gun pointed at his head.

Once the guys in the van are dealt with, (all of whom are protesting that they’re DEA agents, on a prison transfer, goddamit, what the hell is wrong with these NCIS assholes trying to grab them) Tony heads over to Draga.

“Very James Bond, Mr. Draga,” Tony says with bad Scottish accent.

Draga nods. He supposes there is something very James Bond about standing over a guy with your foot in the small of his back, holding a gun on him, while wearing a tux.

When Ziva gets the word that they’ve got the “DEA Agents,” (Half of them have checked out as actually working for the DEA, the other half haven’t.) she gets ready to visit with Ellanza again.

This time she brings a drink for her, too. She’s tired. She woke up tired, and, checking her watch, twenty straight hours on, with no caffeine, while pregnant, is killing her. As soon as she’s done, she’s curling up in a ball behind her desk and sleeping for at least ten hours.

She rubs her eyes, takes a quick gulp of her double chocolate smoothie (if she can’t have sleep, or caffeine, she’ll make up her energy deficit with sugar and fat) and heads into interrogation.

This time, Ellanza is genuinely upset. His eyes are red, his shoulders slumped, and waves of weary resignation are pouring off of him.

He looks, listlessly, at her as she comes in and sits across from him.

“I take it I’m staying here for a while?”

She nods. “Who did you call?”

“No idea. It’s my get out of jail free card. Dial the number, hang up, within two hours, you’re free. I’ve never had to use it before.”

“And the story about your wife?”

“Like your partner said. BS designed to keep you busy.” His eyes tear up. “At least, it was supposed to be. They’re businessmen. They’re supposed to be businessmen. They don’t… That’s why we picked them.”
“Who is we, Mr. Ellanza?”

Ellanza shakes his head, annoyed. “Pick a drug company, any drug company. That’s we.”

“You are working for… Pfizer?”

“Among others.”

Ziva wasn’t expecting that. She was expecting, given where the money was going, and what Tony and Vance and Jarvis were saying, him to be working against the drug companies. He sees her confusion.

“Marijuana will be completely legal in the US in probably five years. As soon as the states see how lucrative it is, decriminalization is going to follow hard on its heels for the rest of the drugs. Everyone wants every penny they can get.”

Ziva nods; she understands that.

“The people I work for want to get in on that. Pot is easy. High school dropouts can grow pot. The tobacco companies are already getting ready to move in that direction. They’ve got the land, the processing equipment, the distribution networks, the only reason they aren’t moving in on it yet is the fear the Feds will knock on their door and confiscate their entire companies. Once it’s completely legal, they’ll roll, and you’ll have pot cigarettes right next to the tobacco ones, and every flavor of pot vape you can think of, just waiting for buyers.

“We want to get into something like that, too.”

“But with harder drugs?” Ziva supplies.

“No such thing as ‘hard drugs’ not for us. We can set the dosage so that any given product can produce anything from a nice glow to inducing a coma. We’ve already got some feelers in the heroin trade. Have to to make opiates. We wanted to get in with the cocaine market, too. Margins are small enough right now, so we want something that takes no research, takes minimal production efforts, and we can roll out over-the-counter as a party drug.”

“But you need raw materials for that.”

He nods.

“So, you and the Bathenadas…”

“Form a partnership. For ten years, we work as hard as we can to keep drugs illegal, and use our influence to keep the US and its neighbors actively suppressing the drug trade in Bolivia, Colombia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.”

“But not Peru?”

He nods.

“You use the power of the government to suppress the Bathenadas competition?”

“Yes. As those years go by, the cartels in other countries will decide it’s too expensive to keep supplying drugs, they’ll sell out. The Bathenadas, they’ll buy up fields, recruit talent, and get ready for a production boom. Buy low, sell high, right? They’ve got their own labs and greenhouses working on new strains of coca and poppy plants. They’re coming up with new concoctions, looking
for higher highs without the lows, minimizing side effects. When it’s time to move, they’ll be sitting on millions of hectares of land in the exact right climate for production, with new seeds and plants ready to go.”

“Business will boom.”

“Exactly. And in ten years or so, when the US does decriminalize, we’ll buy them out for a king’s ransom, and then use our distribution network to get ready-to-go products to the market. Everyone, except Claire,” his voice catches, “wins.”

“And the money you were moving?”

“Eddie, one of my guards, told me that we needed to take a trip soon. I got the location in an email, and off we went. We do little jobs like that all the time.”

“Five hundred million dollars is a ‘little job?’” Ziva doesn’t believe that.

“That’s what it was?”

She does, however, believe that Ellanza doesn’t know what he was moving. She gets the sense that when they say move something, his only response is where. “Yes.”

He nods. “Big job, then. But not the biggest I’ve run. Federal elections are multi-billion dollar affairs. Fundraising at the level I did it… Usually a fifty-million dollar buy in.”

“There are laws against that.”

Ellanza smiles, but it’s a grim smile. “There are laws against a lot of things. Money buys power, and there’s no way that people who want power are going to agree not to use their money to get it. People who have power want money, it’s a perfect circle of mutual support.” He smiles again, bitter. “How do you think I got to become an Ambassador? Once you get to the top levels, everyone knows what’s going on, and they’re all fine with it.”

“Uh huh…” Ziva watches Ellanza staring at the wall behind her. “Where was the money supposed to go?”

He shakes his head. “No idea. I grab whatever it is, stick diplomatic tags on it, put it on a boat or a plane or whatever and off it goes. I don’t know what I move. I don’t know where it goes. I don’t know that I’m moving it more than a day or two in advance. Most of what I do is people. I make sure the right people meet at the right times to discuss the right things. And once those meetings take place, I help them make sure whatever they discussed gets taken care of.”

“You are a facilitator.”

He nods. “I don’t want or need the details.”

“What did you get out of it?”


“Tell me about your other jobs… Whens and where and what you think you were moving.”

And for the next hour Ellanza does. By the time he’s wrapping up, he and Ziva are exhausted. He’s emotionally broken, and she’s just to-the-bone tired.
She stands up. “All of this has been recorded. One of the other Agents will take you back to holding. I suggest, when you get to your cell, you ask for a phone and call your wife.”

Ellanza’s eyes go wide. “That’s a horrible joke.”

“She is at home, healing up from her eye job, and fine, Mr. Ellanza.”

“You lied!” He lunges at her. Fortunately, even tired, Ziva’s got moves, she twists a bit, keeping the table between them, and shoves it back, hard, catching him in the stomach with it. That knocks the wind out of him, and he falls back to the floor, gasping, trying to catch his breath.

“Yes. I did.” She stands up, heads out of observation, and finds Tony waiting for her, with another smoothie, and a warm kiss to the forehead.

Tony’s tired. Ziva’s on her side, curled into a little ball behind her desk, grabbing a snooze. Draga looks ready to crash as he’s gulping down his Red Bull-protein smoothie combo. Gibbs is leaning, heavily, against what used to be his desk.

Tony makes the executive decision. Nothing else is happening today.

“Quitting time. Jethro, we’ll give you a ride home. Draga, grab Diane and take her home. Tomorrow’s soon enough to deal with the rest of it.”

Draga pulls himself up, rubs his eyes, and nods.

When he walks into the conference room, he finds Emily, like Ziva, curled into a little ball, asleep on the floor. Diane is not sleepy, nor does she look calm or quiet. She’s got a pot of coffee next to her, a lap top open, and she’s working.

“Come on, let’s go home. Get some rest, get on it fresh tomorrow.”

She looks up from her computer and shakes her head. “Get DiNozzo in here.”

“Look, I don’t care what fire you’ve found that needs to be put out right now, we can’t do it. We’re all fried. You are, too. Rest, we need rest.”

She glares at him.

“Fine,” he snaps out and goes to get Tony. “She won’t leave without talking to you.”

Tony shakes his head. He’s done. He’s going home, burrowing under the covers with his wife, and not moving until Monday morning. Fussing with Diane is the last thing he wants to do. “Why?”

“I didn’t ask. I don’t want to know. Just, deal with it so I can get us out of here.”

Tony nods. He and Draga head into the conference room. “We’ve got it, Diane. Followed the money trail, figured it out, all the rest of it. We can go home and crash.”

Diane shakes her head. “No, you don’t. And you don’t have it figured out because I don’t have it
“figured out.”

“Come on. No such thing as a coincidence. We’ve got the guys in holding. Go home, rest, we’ll go over it with fresh eyes and find the connections.”

“It’s not a coincidence, Skippy. I’m the connection. I’ve got four accounts, and I’m moving on them all at the same time. Just because two them started acting up doesn’t mean no one noticed eyes on the other two.”

“So, you’re making this happen?” Tony rubs his eyes. He’s so tired.

“It’s them making sure I don’t find whatever it is. I know you’ve got safe houses. I know you offer protective custody. I want it, for me and Emily, until I find what’s going on.”

Tony nods. He’s tired. “Fine. We can do that. Just like you, none of us have slept all night. Let’s get you and Emily tucked somewhere safe. We’ll all get some rest, and then come at tomorrow morning.”

“Fine. I’m going to need a great computer.”

Tony flashes her a quick smile. “I know someone with a great computer, and a gun, and he got at least some sleep last night.”

Diane’s eyes go wide. “Chucky?”

“Not like you haven’t slept at his place before.”

She narrows his eyes. “They tried to kill me. They arranged for my car to be driven into a train. You don’t just pull that off on the fly. I haven’t found what they’re trying to protect, not yet. So, this isn’t going to be the last shot at me. I want somewhere safe, somewhere I haven’t been before, somewhere they can’t track just by looking at my associates, I want it for me, Emily, and Eric, with real, awake, armed guards. Not some half-exhausted tech guy with a gun, and certainly not one with a baby in his house. They had no problem with the idea of taking out Eric and Emily to get to me, they’ll have no problem with going after McGee’s family, too. Now, get me the protection I need!”

“Diane…” He’s sure she’s overreacting.

“Has Leroy told you he’s feeling calm? How about Abbi, is she here telling you she’s solved the case? Better yet, you want me to drag his ass in here and tell him you’re stonewalling me on protection? You want him volunteering to sleep on my doorstep?”

“No.” And Diane does have a point on that. She says she’s not feeling secure, and Jethro will sleep on her damn doorstep, and likely call Fornell, as well.

“Jared?”

Shit. He’s so tired he’s forgetting leads. He checks his phone and sees he’s missed two texts from McClellan. He reads the one that says Jared was found, dead, run off the side of the road by another car. “Still looking for him.” Tony lies. “Okay, I get it. Protective custody, real protective custody, full-on safe house with guards, for you and Emily and Eric.”

“Thank you.”
While Tony’s on hold, getting it set up, he asks Gibbs, “Anyone tell Fornell what happened?”

Gibbs shakes his head. “Not yet.”

“Keep it that way. Jared, her accountant friend, got run off the road last night. He’s dead. I haven’t told her that, yet. That'll wait for Monday. I’m getting her and Emily moved into protective custody. If anyone’s watching her that closely, they’re watching Fornell, too.”

Gibbs nods. If Tobias does what he’s supposed to be doing, going on his honeymoon, enjoying his new wife, they’ll just keep watching, seeing if he gets spooked. If he starts doing something unusual, like not going on his honeymoon, they’ll follow, and go right to Diane.

“What do you need me to do?”

“Right now. Same thing I need me to do, and Ziva to do, and all the rest of us. Sleep. Monday morning, you’re going after Ellanza’s statement with a fine tooth comb, as well as everything else we’ve got. We got those four accounts for a reason. We’re going to find it.”
Day of "Rest"

Jimmy and Allan spend another hour on the scene, checking, double checking, looking all around, but... They aren’t seeing anything that looks even remotely like a body/parts of a body.

Jimmy nods to Allan, who starts to pack their stuff up, and then he heads over to Abbi. “No body.”

She’s looking concerned at that. “I watched the crash. There’s no chance at all the driver got out.”

Jimmy nods. “We’re not thinking he did. Dr. Allan suggested that this is a driverless car.”

Abbi rubs her eyes and checks her watch. She’s been up for twenty-six straight hours now and this twist means this isn’t going to be any sort of open and shut case. Jimmy sees her do it. He nods to her team. “Omagi’s got the scene. I’m taking you and Bishop back to NCIS and from there, home. Something’s really wrong about this case, and we’re not going to find it, exhausted.”

Abbi nods at that, unhappy that he’s right, but he is right. Then she remembers something. “One minute.” She grabs her phone and gets Sergeant Lane. “You said you couldn’t find the driver of the car that crashed?”

“Yes. No trace of him. Not a drop of blood or anything.”

“How about extra electronics that look out of place?”

“I’ll ask my tech guy.” She waits for several minutes, watching Omagi handle the scene, collecting evidence, bagging it all up. Saunder (Omagi’s number two) is interrogating the train’s Engineer (with his Union Rep). Everything’s in hand. Finally, Lane’s back. “Yeah. My techs are telling me that there’s a bunch of stuff that doesn’t look like it belongs in a car.”

Abbi’s holding the phone and nodding. “I know this is your case, but I think that accident was a decoy, designed to make sure that my accident happened. Would you be willing to box everything up and ship it to NCIS care of Abby McGee?”

“Just hand the case over to you?” He doesn’t sound pleased by that.

“Yes, please.”

“I’ve got a grieving family that I’ve promised answers to.”

“Driver didn’t make it?”

“No. He didn’t.” Lane’s angry. Abbi doesn’t blame him.

“Damn it! Look, we’ve got amazing people, a beyond state of the art lab, and we’re sitting on why this happened. That accident in part of a much bigger case. I’ll share the case if you want, but it’d go faster and easier if we just take it.”

Lane doesn’t say anything, and Abbi’s got the sense he’s listening to someone.

“Tech guy says I should pass it on. Say’s McGee’s amazing, has some really impressive publications to her name.”

“She does.”
“Okay. I want updates as soon as you’ve got them. You can’t just start up on this and sweep it under the rug.”

“Two of the three people they tried to kill in my crash are Federal Agents. One of them is my agent. The third is a kid. Trust me, if there’s anything that doesn’t get swept under the rug, it’s the attempted murder of one of my people. Everything I get’ll have you CCed on it.”

“Thanks.”

When she’s done with the details, she nods to Jimmy. “Okay. Now I can go home.”

“Got some DNA for me?” Abby asks when she answers Jimmy’s call.

“Sorry Abby, no DNA for you. No body for me. We’re thinking remote control car. And given how it blew up, maybe some sort of explosive.”

Jimmy can feel Abby nodding, smiling. “That'll be fun. I’ve been playing with Eric’s car, not too much on this, but what I’ve got is interesting.”

“Good interesting?”

“I think so. You give Tony a call?”

“Already did. He’s cutting out to get some rest. I’m saving him a few minutes by giving you the heads up. Today, you’re reporting to Abbi’s Team Leader, Omagi. He’s got this part of it.”

“Good to know. You coming back here?”

“Only to drop off Bishop and make sure you’ve got all the cherry smoothie you can drink. Then home and babies until tomorrow.”

“All right. See you in a bit?”

“More like two hours.”

She makes a little kissing noise into the phone.

“Back at ya’,” he says, instead of returning the kiss. If Abby’s with Eric’s car, she’s likely on her own in the evidence lock up. He’s not. He’s in the van with Allan, Bishop, and Abbi, and all three of them know he’s not talking to Breena.

Tim gets back to Breena’s place just as the sun starts peeking over the tree line.

Probably an hour before the girls are up. He walks in, and briefly debates making some breakfast, so that it’s hot and ready for everyone as soon as they’re up, but grabbing an extra hour of sleep wins. He’s thinking he’s gotten maybe three hours.

Four’s better than three. And if he clocks some more sack time during morning nap, he’ll be just
about at his normal sleep level by lunchtime.

That sounds like a good plan to him, so he quietly toes off his shoes while slipping out of his clothing, and snuggles up next to Breena. She doesn’t wake up, but she does cuddle in closer to him. He wonders, for a few seconds, if she’s going to be surprised when she wakes up with him and not Jimmy, but only for a few seconds, and then he’s asleep.

“This is protective custody?” Diane asks archly as they get out of one of the NCIS sedans in front of a dilapidated-looking row house, complete with graffiti, iron bars on the doors and windows, and the first floor windows are boarded up, in a neighborhood that would consider a five points on the Richter scale earthquake urban renewal.

Draga nods at her. “It’ll be nicer inside.”

“It better be.” She’s got her arm around Emily as she says that, walking swiftly behind Agent Conner, who’s in charge of her protection detail.

Inside is nicer, but that’s not exactly nice. It’s clean. Not the spotless, surgical quality clean she keeps her own home, but on par with a decent hotel. The furniture is IKEA’s greatest hits, probably bought en masse, and on sale.

She doesn’t like it, but for a few days, or, please God, no, weeks, it’ll do.

She doesn’t want to let Emily out of her sight, but she’s dead on her feet, and it’s time to sleep. So, the first bedroom they come to, she gives to Emily, who heads in, and even though she’s seventeen, even though she’s a senior in high school, Diane tucks her under the covers and kisses her forehead before she falls asleep.

The next bedroom isn’t much bigger, but it’s got a bed with clean sheets on it, and that’s all she really needs right now. “Why a row house?” she asks Eric as she strips out of her dress.

“We own the houses on the left and right, too. Makes sure that you can only get in and out from the front. Back door is sealed shut. Row house cuts line of sight. They can only watch you from the front and back.” He touches the window. (This room has an actual window.) “Bulletproof glass. No line of sight at all downstairs, but we can see out from up here. Lousy neighborhood is intentional. Anyone comes in the wrong sort of car, or happens to be the wrong race, and they’ll stick out. Can’t run the ‘drive on up in a utility van’ ruse here, because the utilities don’t come here. Just like we don’t blend here, the people likely to come for you won’t blend in, either.”

Diane nods. “Okay. Sleeping.” She rubs her eyes, she’s tired, very tired, but she doesn’t think she’ll sleep.

Eric takes her hand. “Come on.” He gently pulls her onto the bed. “Resting. They’ll all still be out there tomorrow.”

She nods, her head falling back on the pillow, and eventually sleep comes.
Abby’s double checking Draga’s car when Jimmy finds her. “I think you and Dr. Allan are on to something.”

He hands over an extra-large cherry smoothie, (her current, preferred, not Caf-Pow drink. The flavor is… similar, and it’s got things like calcium, protein, and vitamins, all of which are lacking from Caf-Pow) and she walks him to the rear of Eric’s car.

Jimmy follows, watching the evidence lock up. It’s barely 07:00 on a Sunday, so he thinks they’re the only two in there, but he’s not sure, and he wouldn’t put it past someone to come wandering in. Abby smiles at him while sipping the smoothie, then she slowly licks the straw and her lips and winks at him.

He smiles back. He’s tired, but not dead, so he appreciates the little show she just gave him.

“Behold,” with a gloved hand she gently strokes her fingers over Eric’s bumper, getting them focused on the case and not sex. It’s dented and busted, but not as bad as it should be. “This tells us several things, among them that if you ever want someone to drive a getaway car for you, you want Eric.”

Jimmy nods at that. He’s fairly sure that in the same situation, he would have hit the brakes and gotten splattered into the oncoming train.

Abby taps the dents. “Whatever hit Eric’s car, was a car.”

“Abbi thought it was a Taurus or something like that.”

“That works. Anything else, and his trunk would be damaged. Now, usually, if there’s a person driving the vehicle that’s going to do something like this, they drive something as close to the size of a tank as possible. A big rig, an RV, at the very least it’ll be a truck or SUV, and then, instead of ramming,” she puts the drink down and slams her fist into her palm, “they use the heavier weight of their car to push the second car into the way of the train.” Then she touches her palm with her fist, and pushes it forward. “That way, they don’t risk running into the train themselves.”

“So, what kind of person does this with a car?” Jimmy asks, knowing where she’s going.

“The kind of person who not only isn’t in the car, but doesn’t want what they were driving to be found in one piece. There’s evidence in that car, and it’s going to be good.” She smiles at him, and gulps the smoothie.

For Tony, Sunday is spent between half-remembered dreams, and deep black sleep. At one point he gets up to pee, drink, and crash back into his bed. He knows there was a time when he could do two or even three straight days on, and he supposes he could do it again, if he had to.

But right now, as he’s remembering that he forgot about Jared, he’s wondering how many of those two or three day on cases would have been solved just as fast, if not faster, if they had taken breaks and gotten sleep every night.

It’s occurring to him, that a big chunk of working straight through every case was because Gibbs couldn’t stop not because it was a somehow better way of solving cases.
Breena would have to admit to being somewhat startled when Molly crawls into bed, waking her up, and finding that the body behind her is Tim and not Jimmy.

Obviously, something happened last night. Something she slept through. But that’s standard for them. Jimmy doesn’t wake her up if he’s got to go in the middle of the night. He did, when they were first married, but after Molly was born, sleep became so precious that even five minutes lost to, “Gotta go,” were a problem.

Tim’s blinking his eyes, hair sticking up in thirty directions, looking like he wants nothing more than to just go back to sleep, but he sits up, slowly, and grabs Molly into a big hug as she’s crawling over Breena to get between them for cuddles.

“Where’s Daddy?” she asks him, snuggling into his arms.

“Good question,” Breena says.

And Tim begins to explain, giving her as much as of the story as he has as, between the two of them, they get little girls up and fed and ready for the day.

Daddy gets home a bit after the girls have finished breakfast and Tim and Breena have cleaned up the kitchen.

“Shouldn’t you be wrist deep in a dead body?” Tim asks him.

Jimmy nods, going to the fridge and grabbing himself three eggs, a few mushrooms, an onion, a bit of ham, and the cheddar cheese. (Apparently, he’s making himself an omelet.) “I should, but the dead body didn’t deign to show up.”

Tim blinks at that, looking curiously from him to Breena, as Breena says, “How did you get called in for a case if there was no body? Isn’t a body the way they know you need to be called in?”

“Abbi and Gibbs watched the car go crashing into the train. They expected there to be someone driving the car.”

“No one was driving the car?” Breena asks, sounding very doubtful.

Jimmy grabs the egg pan, and puts it on the stove, then starts chopping onion. “Obviously, someone was making it go, but no one was in the car. So, no body. We drove for five hours, spent two searching, and… nothing.” Jimmy’s sounding crabby at that.

Breena pets his back. “I think you need food and sleep.”

He nods, looking tired. “You two have the girls?”

“We’re good,” Tim says. “Planning on heading out to play in the grass some. Maybe get to the farmer’s market if we’re feeling energetic. You think we’re seeing Abby anytime soon?”

Jimmy laughs, hollowly. “She’s planning on taking that car apart to the molecular level to find out who built and drove it.”
Abby and Omagi haven’t met in person before, but they’ve both heard about the other.

So, Abby’s ready to report in as close to a no nonsense way as she can, and he’s got a large Caf-Pow in hand. (Which Abby takes one look at, pets a little, and sips some to be polite, her eyes closing in reverence as the flavor of artificial cherry and gallons of sugary caffeine explodes on her tongue.)

“God, I’ve missed that!”

Which is when Omagi puts together pregnant and no caffeine. “Sorry. Borin’s told me that everyone brings you treats and that’s you’re preferred treat.”

“Don’t be sorry. I love Caf-Pow,” she pets the cup again, “just on hiatus right now.” She pats Sean. “Little boy here doesn’t do caffeinated well.”

Omagi nods. “So…”

“Right, to the point…” Borin’s laughed about her reputation for being no nonsense, and told them that compared to Omagi, she’s a take-the-scenic-route-and-wing-it kind of gal. Abby gets him up to date with what she’s found on Eric’s car, adding, “Abbi said she thought the car was a Taurus, and she was right. Not only does the paint match Ford’s catalog, but Jimmy gave me the license plate number, and…”

“And it’s a stolen car,” Omagi says, voice flat.

“Yes. Stolen six months ago. How did you know?”

“The evidence coming in right now is from our crash, and another one that happened an hour before, which resulted in everyone rerouting so they had to go across the train tracks.”

Abby smiles a bit. “Interesting. An hour before would be right around the time everyone left the wedding.”

Omagi nods. “You were at the wedding, too, right?”

“Oh yeah. We cut out early and were already asleep by the time they headed off, but I was there.”

“Borin really dances?”

Abby laughs. “Here.” She grabs her phone and shows Omagi video of Borin and Gibbs dancing with each other.

He smiles at that, very small, brief smile, nods, and then says, “Okay, case work. You’re going to get both wrecks. Each one featuring a stolen car that drove itself.”

“And you want to know who was really driving them.”

“Yeah.”

Abby smiles. “I do, too. And… If you’ve got anyone who feels like another four hours of driving time, you might want to check out Havilan Plantation, and see if you can find out how whoever drove the cars knew when Diane and Draga left.”

Omagi nods. “Half my team is still down there, pulling more bits and pieces out of the train tracks. We can send them down to check out the plantation.”
There are things Abby likes more than a big pile of evidence with a fabulous mystery to go with it, but not a whole lot of them. (And most of the things on that list involve naked people, and really aren’t appropriate for work, which doesn’t mean they haven’t happened at work… well, not all of it’s happened at work… but, it probably could… hmmm… that’s distracting… big old pile of evidence!)

So, first off, the target: presumably Diane, maybe Eric, but everyone seems to think it was Diane, and Gibbs gut said Diane, so that’s good enough for her.

Second of all, how to track the target? She’s got the write up saying that Gibbs, Abbi, and Draga checked and didn’t find any eyes on them. That’s not 100% certain, but it’s close enough that she’s not thinking someone in the building was pretending to be a waiter or something. Whatever it was that let whoever was driving know it was time to drive, wasn’t visible.

Omagi’s sending his guys down to scout the building, so that leaves her with Eric’s car. A bug on the car, something to send a signal… That’d be a great way to track something like this. Not only would it send a signal letting whoever was driving know they were on the move, but, it would also let them know where.

In fact, second only to getting into whoever’s phone was giving them GPS directions home, that’s the best way to know how they were going.

Abby takes a tiny sip of the Caf-Pow Omagi gave her, and then, sadly, dumps the rest down the sink in the back of the evidence lock up. Then she heads over to Diane and Eric’s cell phones. A few minutes of poking around shows that Eric’s phone was the one giving them directions home, and that those directions did reroute them to the train tracks when their original route was blocked with the car accident. It also shows her that Eric’s phone (this is his official phone, not the safe one Tim gave him) is unbugged, and unmodified in any way she can see.

A few more minutes of googling, messing around on her own phone and on Diane’s shows Abby that every major GPS would reroute a driver from the path Draga and Diane were on to the route that goes across the train track, assuming the original route was blocked off anywhere along a two mile path. Any nearer or further down the road, and the new route wouldn’t intersect with the train.

Abby’s staring at what she’s found, tapping her fingers on her work bench. “So, was the train a lucky coincidence, or planned?”

Eric’s car doesn’t answer her. She glares at it, and then pets it a little. “Sorry, Baby. I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

More map time. If the train hadn’t been crossing then and there… Abby smiles when she sees it. Five miles further up the road, there’s a bridge. By flipping onto Google Earth she can see it’s a small, one lane, rickety looking thing. It’s crossing a deepish, probably thirty feet, gorge.

If the train hadn’t been coming, then whoever was driving the crash car could have gotten ahead of Draga and Diane, and then caused a head on crash on that bridge, probably sending them into the gorge. But, the train was in the right place at the right time.

Probably. She makes a mental note to check the train schedule at some point, make sure the train was where it was supposed to be, when it was supposed to be, and all the rest of that.

“Still doesn’t tell me how they knew you were moving.” Abby pats Eric’s baby. “I promise this
won’t hurt, but I gotta look.”

Baby’s not pleased by that.

“I know. I don’t like having doctors poke at me, either, but sometimes it’s got to happen. I promise I’ll be gentle.” And from there Abby starts going over Baby with a fine tooth comb.

______________________________

It’s dinnertime when Eric, Emily, and Diane get up and start moving around again.

“We need clothes,” Diane says. Eric had a go bag, so he’s not in his tux anymore. He’s in his usual work jeans and button down. But Emily and Diane are wearing NCIS sweats.

“Okay. I’ll swing by your place and pick stuff up.”

“I want to go—“ Diane’s saying.

Eric’s shaking his head. “Nope. You wanted protective custody. This is it. Stay put. Order us some dinner, with the phone we gave you last night, don’t pay for it. I’ll pick it up and be back in two hours.”

“Two hours?”

“Gotta get Bishop. I’m not walking into what may be a trap on my own just to get you clean socks.”

Diane slumps a bit, the reality of being stuck in this tiny row house in a neighborhood where urban blight would be an improvement really hitting her. “My computer. I need that more than clean socks.”

“Use the one we got from the Navy Yard.”

“Mine has…”

“Not been checked out by McGee to make sure it’s not bugged. I’ll take it back to the Navy Yard, once it’s all checked out and clean, you get to play with it.”

______________________________

“And we’re on again,” Draga says to Bishop when she picks up her phone.

Bishop groans into her phone. “Really?”

“Yeah, I need back up. Should be quick. Get you home in time for a late dinner.”

Bishop’s not thrilled about that. Yes, things are hectic. Yes, the (as she calls it when talking to Jake) Case of DOOOM! is heating up. Yes, all of that’s true. She’d still like one twenty-four period per month (at least) off. “Is DiNozzo ever going to hire us a fourth agent?”

Draga shakes his head on his side of the conversation. He’d also appreciate a fourth man on the
team. Make everything easier for all of them, but he gets why Tony’s dragging his heels on it. “He says he is.”

“Okay. Meet up at the Navy Yard?”

“Yeah, check in, find out what’s happened since we left this morning.”

“You just want to pet your car.”

Draga shrugs a bit. She’s not wrong.

“I’ll be in in half an hour.”

“Thanks, Bishop.”

It takes closer to ten minutes for Eric to get into the Navy Yard. One of the perks of their safe house. It’s in a crummy neighborhood that’s close to the office. He heads in, figuring he’ll swing down, see Abby, get the update, maybe get Baby back, then collect Bishop and their vests, over to Diane’s, which, with any luck (though his gut is feeling cold, so he’s not expecting luck) will be a quick visit where he grabs clothing and toiletries and the rest of it, and then back to his place for his stuff, pick up dinner, and a quiet night of mostly sleeping before getting back to it in the morning.

He’s following that plan. In he goes, Bishop’s not there yet, so he grabs his vest, straps it on, and heads down to the evidence lock up, where, once the doors to the elevator open, he whimpers audibly.

“Oh God…” escapes his lips, half horror, half prayer that it’s not really as bad as it looks.

That tattoo-covered, insane, Goth-woman took Baby apart.

He can see legs on a dolly, wearing long socks with spider webs on them, sticking out from under his Precious. The back seat’s been removed. The bumper is sitting on the work bench. All four wheels are off. Baby’s hood is sitting next to Baby. It takes him three steps to get to Abby, grab her ankle, and yank her out from under Baby.

“WHAT!” comes out of him loud and vicious. Everything that’s sucked for the last three days all poured out of him in that not quite question.

Abby holds her hands up, looking up at him from the dolly. “I know, Eric, and I’m sorry. We’ll put her back together. But…” She holds out a hand to him. “Come on, give me a hand up. I’m like a turtle on my back right now.”

He does, eyes narrowed, hand shaking he’s so angry, and he yanks a bit too hard getting her up.

“What?” She’s rubbing her wrist as she leads him over to the work bench, where a collection of electronic bits are staring up at him. “Last I checked, none of this sort of gear is standard for the sort of work you’ve done on your car, or the sorts of things you do with it.”

Eric swallows hard. Still pissed, really pissed, but not at Abby anymore. Some asshole touched his Baby and added, “That’s a tracker, and that…”

“ Lets whoever’s watching tell your speed and direction. Fine tuning for the tracker. This one here,” she gently taps a half crushed square of gray metal the size of a playing card deck, “was hooked into your NO booster. Looks like you’ve got a guardian angel. You knocked it on something bouncing along the train track, killing its receiver. If that hadn’t happened, boom. Whoever got a hold of your
car went to a lot of time and effort to make sure you guys wouldn’t get home from that wedding.”

Abby touches another mangled bit of metal. “This was under your car, too, and from the looks of it
got killed by whatever took out the detonator on your NO booster. It’s a cell phone jammer. If,
somehow the crash, the train, or the explosion didn’t kill you all off, turn this puppy on and it would
make sure you or anyone who stopped near your car couldn’t call for help.”

“Shit. Mom always said I had an angel on my shoulder.”

Abby nods. “Yeah. I’d say your mom was right. So, first off, this is not easy work, and it would not
have been fast. Where does Baby live and how much time would someone have had to mess with
her unsupervised?”

Eric rubs his eyes. “My apartment complex has garage bays. She lives in the one I rent. Anyone who
can pick a padlock can get into it. You know my hours. I’m gone all day, every day but Saturday
and Sunday, and with the way we’ve been working lately…”

“Do you stay at Diane’s some nights?”

“A lot of them recently.”

“And you don’t check in on her every day, even when you are home?”

Eric nods at that.

“You’ve got another car…”

“Yes. My Cobalt.” It’s old, cheap, and Draga uses it for just getting from point A to point B. It’s
boring and not flashy at all. He doesn’t love it, or even like it that much, but it does what it needs to
do for the price he needs it to do it. “Baby gets out… two or three times a month.”

“So…” Abby leads.

“Yes, if someone timed it right, they could have had as many as five days’ straight to work on her
without me noticing.”

Abby nods. That’s more than enough time to do what she found. Then she gestures to the table.
“That’s probably everything. I haven’t found anything else in the last three hours, but…”

Eric nods. He’s not getting into Baby again until she’s been stripped down to her skeleton and put
back together again. “I understand. How about we put her to the side, track down what you’ve
found, and when we’re done with the rest of the evidence, we’ll, together, take her apart and make
sure you’ve found everything.”

“Okay. I’m really sorry. She doesn’t like me poking at her, but she understood once I found the
tracker.”

That’s a step further in the anthropomorphic personification than Eric usually goes with Baby, but he
takes the sentiment as it’s meant.

“Got anything else?”

“Not yet. I’m off in an hour. Zelaz is on tonight. Then tomorrow morning, Corwin and I are going to
get into it again.”

“Okay. Bishop should be here by now. We’re going to Diane’s.”
Abby sighs. “I bet you’ll find something interesting there.”

The cold feeling in Eric’s gut gets worse. “Yeah. I probably will.”

Gibbs wakes up as the sun’s sinking. Abbi’s next to him, which he appreciates. There’s a case, with stuff for him to work on, which is very good. Part of him wants to jump in immediately, part of him realizes that if he does that, lunges out of bed, grabs the first white t-shirt and golf shirt he sees, and heads over to the Navy Yard, he’s going to keep being upside down with everyone else.

Part of him realizes, that, unless something radically changed since this morning, there’s no one at the Navy Yard for him to intimidate into talking, and that’s pretty much the only part of the job he has to be there to do.

Part of him realizes (as he’s sitting up and moving around a bit) that he’s not feeling dead on his feet right now, but he’s not exactly feeling rested, too.

And part of him is thinking Tony told him Monday morning, and right now, Tony’s the Boss.

Monday morning is still twelve hours away.

So… Food. Food is good. Abbi’s still sleeping, but she probably needs/wants food, too. He pulls on some sweats, and heads down to his… their… kitchen. Make some dinner, and then get online. He can re-read everything Ellanza said, and spend some time doing the sort of thing they’ve asked him to do, putting together deep leads.

He’s puttering around in there, poking in his fridge, grabbing the pork chops, and thinking about drug cartels. It’s not something he ever did much with. Probably two reasons on that. First up, he’s been with the Navy his whole career as a cop, and the international drug trade doesn’t overlap with his jurisdiction all that much. Second of all, most people (okay Tom Morrow and Mike Franks) wouldn’t put a guy whose family was killed by a drug cartel in charge of investigating them.

Besides his tangles with the Reynosa cartel, it’s nothing he’s worked with.

He’s got some Mob experience. He supposes they’re a cartel of sorts. But some Mob experience isn’t a lot of Mob experience. Usually, if that’s where a case is going, he calls Fornell. The one guy he’s not calling for help, not now.

The briefing with Tony told him that the Bathenadas are a family out of Peru. They’re looking to take over the coke and heroin market, and then go into business with real drug companies when the US decriminalizes drug use.

He’s putting salt and pepper on the pork chops while thinking about that.

First off, these bad guys don’t think small.

Second of all, they’re paying everyone they can off to make sure that this works the way they want it to. So, small players right now, but deep pockets. Where’s that money coming from? Or are the pharmaceutical companies donating the cash. Of course, if that last account was anything to go by, they’re bleeding different governments for funds… Gibbs shakes his head, that sort of thing makes enemies in high places… Which usually results in dead bad guys. Unless of course the people in
high places are the ones getting the pay outs, in which case they may be the ones offering intel on those black accounts… After all, black account ends up empty, who’s gonna fuss?

Third of all… Gibbs heads over to his TV and turns on ZNN. Talk about good timing. There’s a map of South and Central America showing little flames where different fights are going on. The news anchor is droning on about coordinated attacks. His official line is that the Allajanco family, out of Colombia, and the Tacana family out of Bolivia are attacking each other’s supply lines.

Gibbs listens to that, and to the much more excited reporters who are on the ground/in helicopters, gesturing to the buildings and/or fields on fire around them.

He takes out his phone and jots a note for himself. Bathenadas playing ends against the middle? A few well-placed and well-funded plants in the right places can make a huge mess, and once that mess begins the Allajancos and Tacanas can take over fighting the war against each other.

The info graphic of where conflicts are happening pops back up. Little flames are studding the map from Northern Mexico to Southern Boliva, with several more flames in the Caribbean. No flames in Peru. No flames in the US, or within fifty miles of the border.

He starts up a fire in the fireplace while watching a round table with a Senator, a ‘Drug Trafficking Expert,’ some sort of Pro-Legalization Wonk, and a Border Patrol Agent. They’re “debating” what’s going on and what the US should do about it.

The Senator and the Drug Trafficking Expert are both going on about how the US needs to be tougher on drugs, and how it’s vitally important that troops and DEA agents get sent south to help lock down the violence. (Gibbs glares at that. The last thing he wants is Marines and SEALS going into the jungles to die in order to make sure drug companies get rich.) The Border Patrol Agent (whose job Gibbs does not envy, at all) is talking about how they need more funding and more men, otherwise this violence will spread into the US. (Gibbs would prefer seeing those Marines and SEALS on the border, making sure said violence didn’t get across, playing defense instead of offense.) And the Legalization Wonk is making the point that in the states where marijuana is legal the crime rate dropped more than ten percent and if the US would just legalize the drug trade, none of this would be happening in the first place.

Gibbs writes down their names, wondering if he’s going to find out that they’re being paid by the Bathenadas.

“She’s going to kill someone,” Draga says two steps into Diane’s home.

Bishop’s looking at the extremely tidy home in the suburbs of Arlington. “Uh… why?”

Draga shakes his head. It’s obvious to him. “Someone’s been here, been through everything, and didn’t do a good job of putting it back in place.”

Bishop eyes everything. Nothing looks out of place to her. “You sure?”

He gives her his best snotty older brother look. Of course he’s sure. He’s the one they ask about where things were if they don’t have a picture handy. He remembers what everything looks like.

“The books are out of order. That vase is two inches too far to the left. The lamp should be on the other end table. The pink pillows go on the love seat, not the sofa. The house has been tossed. And they didn’t take pictures ahead of time to figure out how to put it back properly.”
“Or they wanted you guys to know they could mess with you, come in, screw with everything. Make you feel scared.”


“Where’s the computer live?”

“Should be on the desk in the office.” Draga says, pointing toward the back of the house, as he heads up the stairs to go get clothing for Emily and Diane.

A minute later he hears, “Draga!” so back down the steps he goes.

“What?”

“They took the computer.”

He books down the steps and into Diane’s office. Her laptop, her desk top, her router, her scratch pads, her accounting textbooks, everything even remotely related to her job, is gone.

“Shit.” He pulls out his phone a minute later Abbi picks up. “You at your office?”

“I’m home right now. What’s going on?”

“Someone cleaned out Diane’s home office. Everything attached to her job is gone.”

“And you want me to see if her office at work’s been ransacked?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll give a call.”

“Thanks.”

Draga probably called at the right time. Too much more sleep, and she’d end up feeling like her joints are glued together and her brain muzzy.

Abbi’s rubbing her eyes, thinking about what she needs to do.

She can call Omagi, have him look in on Diane’s office, but he doesn’t know what’s supposed to be in there, and where. She could do the same thing herself, and run into exactly the same issue.

The fact is, the only person who knows exactly what’s supposed to be where in Diane’s office is Diane.

So, nothing, short of bringing Diane in that she can do about that. But, she can make one call and get a head start on the rest of it. As she’s dialing, Mona hops up on the bed and nuzzles her. Abbi pats her while the phone rings. After a moment she hears, “Manner.”

“Hi. Are you at the office?”

“Which one?”
Abbi supposes that’s a good question. Manner is in a sort of job limbo right now. “Mine.”

“No. I was home, actually.” There’s a hint of you know, they call them weekends for a reason, right? in his voice.

Abbi knows why Manner’s not Tim’s first choice for a computer tech leader or second-in-command. He’s good, but… this level of devotion to off time is unsettling to her. Still, right now, she’ll take any help she can get, and he’s better than who she’s got on tap.

“I need you in today or early tomorrow. Someone made an attempt on Diane Anderson’s life. We know her home’s been compromised, and I need to know her system at CGIS is safe.”

“Is she okay?” Manner sounds properly alarmed at that.

“Yeah. But we’re not taking any chances. She’s in protective custody, and…”

“Look, I know how this is going to sound, but this isn’t me ducking out of extra work. I’m not. Have her go to the Navy Yard. I’m one guy. I might miss something. McGee’s made sure we’ve all been through our system, top to bottom. It’s the safest system in the US right now. If she needs to work on a computer, that’s where she needs to be. I’ll get into her system and check everything out, but don’t have her work here.” Manner makes an annoyed sound. “Hell, we still don’t have all of your staff vetted, yet. For all we know, another ‘janitor’ is making trouble.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll let you know what I find. Maybe, we’ll luck out, and someone will leave a traceable calling card.”

“Yeah, if we’re lucky.” Her voice makes it clear that she’s not expecting anything along those lines.

“I know.” Manner says, and then hangs up.

Abbi pats Mona some more, and notices that she’s hungry, and she can smell something really yummy from downstairs. Food and then seeing what the awake part of the world did today sounds like a good plan to her.

Jimmy’s feeling human again when Molly pokes him in the back and says, “Mommy says ‘Dinner!’”

He rubs his eyes a little, picks up his daughter, giving her a long hug, and then looks around for his glasses. He does a quick double take when he sees two pairs sitting on his bedside table, and then comes to the conclusion that pair number two is Tim’s, and it’s on the table because he’s either forgotten to put them on, or not doing anything where he needs them.

“Okay.” He kisses Molly. “What are we having?”

Molly smiles. “Burgers!” They’re high up on her list of favorite foods. Jimmy smiles, too, he’s rather fond of them, as well. Especially if Breena’s making them. (Not any slight to Tim or Abby, but Breena’s the better cook.)

Jimmy stretches a bit, and slips on his fleece pj pants. He thinks for a second and decides it’s cool enough he wants a shirt too, so he grabs a long sleeve t-shirt and one of his fall sweaters. (Jeannie makes them. This one is gray with orange, maroon, and yellow leaves around the bottom. He may
not love the style, but they’re warm, and it makes her and Breena happy that he wears them.)
“Starting to get cool.”

Molly nods. (She’s also got her own little fall sweater. Hers is a cardigan, and it’s pink with pumpkins on the hem and little pumpkin buttons.) “Uncle Tim found us red leaves.”

“Uncle Tim was really looking, wasn’t he?” The trees in their backyard are mostly green, with a few orange and yellow leaves right now. They’re still a week or two away from all of the leaves turning color.

“Three!”

Jimmy nods at that and picks Molly up. She giggles a bit as he tickles her while carrying her down to dinner.

It is starting to get cool. Probably in the mid-sixties right now. Unless they luck out and get one last gasp of Indian Summer, this is the last weekend of eating out on the porch. Abby’s lighting the tiki torches, and Tim’s putting the plates on the table. Breena’s getting Kelly and Anna in their high chairs. The burgers are finishing up on the grill, and right now, everything is excellent.

Jimmy gives hugs and kisses to everyone, puts Molly in her chair, and heads into the kitchen to get the pitcher of spiced cider Breena made.

Ice cold cider, spicy with cinnamon and nutmeg, hot juicy burgers, salty roasted potatoes to go with them, and the light of a dying day staining the sky crimson and pink, that’s good for the soul.

“So, what have I missed today?” Jimmy asks between bites.

For Tim and Breena, the answer is mostly domestic, playing-with-kids-stuff. Trip to the farmer’s market, looking for leaves that had changed colors, naptime for Tim (which Jimmy slept straight through) when the girls went down, maybe apple picking next weekend. (Molly’s enthusiastic about that idea, if somewhat fuzzy on the concept of next weekend.)

For Abby, that question has a much more detailed answer. She explains what she found in Eric’s car, which causes the adults to get tense. That’s a level of planning that means they’re dealing with pros, careful, dangerous pros.

“We shelved the rest of his car until we get done with the other evidence.” Abby looks over at Jimmy, takes a sip of her drink, and says, “You, or Allan, whichever one figured it out, was right. The ramming car was wired to blow. I found bits of detonator and explosive residue. What I didn’t find, and I’m sure this is intentional, is how the car was being steered. My guess is that charge was in there for the purpose of destroying how the car was getting its directions.”

“Great,” Tim says. “Nothing left?”

“Not that I found. Zelaz has everything from our ramming car, and the second accident, and he’s looking, too. Tomorrow morning Corwin and I’ll take another whack at it. We know that we did find the mechanical device that turned the steering wheel. So, low enough tech that they built something to move the wheel instead of re-doing the entire steering system.”

“If you’ve got a functional system, you don’t strip it out. Not for something like this. Use the system that works rather than build a new on that might not,” Tim says.

Abby nods at that. “I’ve got robotic arms, and gears, and a motor for moving them, all broken to bits and flung all over the place. But the thing that was getting the-turn-left-now message, that’s gone.”
Breena thinks about that. “Which means you can’t find who was driving?”

Abby inclines her head. “Not directly. Not with what I’ve got now. We’re going to have to go the long way. We’re printing and touch DNA checking everything. We’re scanning every part, digitally rebuilding them, so we’ll find out who made them, and who sold them, and with any luck who bought them. We’re going to find out who was in those cars, and from there, we’ll get to who was driving them.”

“And if you can’t?” Breena asks.

Abby looks mildly affronted. “There is no can’t. Someone modified these cars, and there’s no possible way they did it without leaving a single trace.”

Breena smiles at her. “And you’re going to find that trace.”

Abby nods.

Tim’s chewing, and then says, “How functional is the stuff you pulled out of Eric’s car?”

“Broken to bits, but I know where you’re going. The tracker and the cell jammer looked like they had a very long range. Satellite uplink range. The explosive had a very short one, probably supposed to get a signal from the ramming car. But we haven’t found anything on the ramming car to broadcast any sort of signal.”

“Want my team to go over the trackers?”

Abby nods. “They’ve already got them.”

Draga’s been a cop for less than two years. He still doesn’t really have the hang of the giving out bad news part of his job. Likewise, he’s not necessarily good at the when to tell and when to keep things quiet bit.

So, he’s sitting in the NCIS sedan that he’s using, a bag of Chipotle next to him, debating what the hell he should tell Diane.

For example, he’s certain she’s going to be unhappy (to say the least) to hear that not only has her home been tossed, but that, right now, Omagi and his guys are in her home, photographing, dusting, and touching everything.

He’s also sure that if he goes into the safe house and says everything is beyond spiffy, that she will call him a liar to his face.

And he’s not entirely sure how much she wants Emily to know about what’s going on. That’s part of what’s killing him about this. From everything he can tell, nothing was taken out of the house except Diane’s computer gear, but whoever was in there had gone through Emily’s room, and made sure that the changes in there weren’t subtle.

*We can touch your daughter.* He got that message loud and clear.

He’s also thinking, given that that is one of the messages, that whatever happened to Diane’s place happened after they didn’t get killed last night.
He’s been thinking about that for the last hour. Why after the wedding? Once Abby showed him the detonator on his NO container… They could have blown him and Diane sky high at any time. Why plan it for after?

The best answer he’s got is because no one was expecting to see any of them from the end of the wedding to Monday morning. That’s the longest stretch of unaccounted for time that the three of them had.

Blow them up bad enough, nothing left to ID… no one starting to look for them until Monday morning… How many hours until someone would put together the mangled car accident and the three of them…

Draga shakes his head, trying to stop thinking about that.

Omagi’s guys are canvassing Diane’s neighborhood. Seeing who heard what, but as of his last check in (ten minutes ago) no one saw anything. Of course, whoever wanted them dead, probably knew by 02:30 that the attempt hadn’t worked, so for all they know, by 03:00 someone may have been at Diane’s.

He sighs. They were probably supposed to be there last night. Sometime after dark. They wanted the computer equipment, and they wanted to get it when no one else was looking. Going into Emily’s room and leaving the sheets off the bed, the drawers open, and her clothing strewn around was probably added for effect, after whoever it was got news they weren’t dead.

He’s got to say something. He’s got clothing for all three of them. Bought new. (Everything at Diane’s is evidence right now, and going to his place is up first thing in the morning, tomorrow, when he’ll have his own crew to start on his garage bay and the explore from there.)

He puts the key into his ignition and gets ready to go.

---

Gibbs isn’t sure if this counts as domestic bliss, but he’s liking it. He and Abbi are both on the sofa in front of the fire, computers on their laps, working their respective parts of the case. (Mona napping on the floor in front of them.)

He wishes he had a white board or plasma screen, something to put all the pieces on so he can see them, but he’s doing okay with the little notes he’s writing for himself.

“Plastic.”

Abbi looks up from her own research.

“The Bathenadas were a rubber family. Plastic replaces rubber, they start to lose money. Simon,” Gibbs uses the American pronunciation of that, “Bathenada decides to move the family into security. That’s good for a while, but not getting the bills paid the way he wants them paid. From there, they start sliding into drugs.”

Abbi nods. “Okay.”

“They kept up their rubber plantations, too. Still some market for it. Simon’s son, Emilio, goes up to the University of North Carolina and gets a degree in chemical engineering.”

“To make the rubber plantation richer?”
“That looked like the basic idea. They worked on that for five years. But more and more rubber’s in decline, and the things he’s doing with it aren’t selling. Tires are pretty much the only thing still made with it, and Firestone and the rest own their own plantations. Then the ‘80s coke boom hits, and the Bathenadas decide to get into it full swing. They cut down the rubber trees, and start planting coca plants.”

“And the rest is history…” Abbi says dryly.

“Almost. They decided to go for the high end market. Uncut, pure, and extremely well-refined cocaine. They were selling as much to the party market as to the medical market.”

“Who uses coke for medicine?”

Gibbs had had to google that, too. He knows that opium is used in medicine. He didn’t know that cocaine had any use besides a good time. “Asia and South America, apparently it’s a very good anesthetic, and the stuff they were selling was medical grade. Enter Simon Jr., the grandson, who gets a medical degree at the Sorbonne in France.”

“He’s in charge now?”

“Him and Daddy. They’re taking out the competition and moving into the opium trade.”

“Great.”

“In South America, it’s the start of spring. They’re striking right at planting time, making sure that the competition won’t have a crop next year.”

“And they’re paying off anyone who might cause trouble?”

Gibbs still needs to get deeper into the money trail, but from what he’s seeing with just the one account on his computer… “They’re paying people off to get them to cause trouble. Everyone I’ve seen on the news tonight talking about how we’ve got to go to South America and wipe out every last cartel member is on their payroll, directly or indirectly.”

“And they’re paying now because it’s election season and this is when money makes the most friends?”

“Probably. Or they’re making sure their friends are still in place come January.”

“Yeah.” Abbi sighs. “I’m happier with this side of it.”

“What do you have?”

“According to Omagi, everyone at the wedding was on staff, and had been so for months. No one called out sick, no last minute replacements. If anyone got themselves in on this from the staff, they’ve been planning on this since before Diane got her hands on this job.”

“So, not a person on staff.”

“Yeah. Abby found trackers on Draga’s car, and explosive detonators. That car was not supposed to get home.”

“Why ram it if you’ve got it wired to blow?”

“Good question? Belt and suspenders? Get rid of more evidence. Keep watch, make sure everyone’s dead, and if they aren’t add an extra boom to take care of them?”
Gibbs inclines his head, those are all plausible reasons. "Why didn’t they blow it after Draga didn’t crash into the train?"

"Abby said the way his car went bouncing over the rocks next to the train track damaged the detonator."

Gibbs sighs. That’s a lot closer than he likes his close calls. "Where would they be watching from?" He knows they looked all over the place after the crash. Only one place anyone could have been watching from… "Did anyone get on or off the train?"

"Just the engineer and his crew. And yes, Omagi’s giving all of them a microscopic inspection."

"Nothing yet?"

"Nothing, yet. Manifest says they were carrying flour." Abbi’s eyes light up as she gets a text. "Zelaz just reported that he’s found a lens, so he can confirm that the accident that rerouted us had a camera in the car."

"What was driving it?"

"Can’t tell yet. Like with the car that hit Draga and Diane, the transmitter is missing."

"How did the explosive under Draga’s car work?"

Abbi nods at that. That’s a good question. She sends it back to Zelaz.

Diane’s eyes narrow as she sees Eric walk in. He has the correct bag of food in his hand. He does not have the correct bags of clothing in his hands.

She’s on the verge of having classic, full on, complete melt-down, starting with the fact that those are Target bags (Good God, what on earth is wrong with him, getting clothing from Target? She’s an adult with a real job and a sense of style and…) and moving on to why the hell would he buy them new clothing when there’s piles of perfectly good clothing at home!

She can feel the steam about to start pouring out of her ears when her second question really gets to the front of her brain.

Why would Eric buy us clothing? And it’s definitely clothing, and it’s definitely ‘us.’ He just handed one of the bags to Emily, who is also looking less than thrilled by this, but she’s biting her lip, and looking like this is just one more turd in the septic tank their life became yesterday.

"Thanks, Eric."

“I know it’s not what you usually wear, but…”

“It’s okay.”

Her daughter is handling this with more grace than she is. That pulls Diane out of rage mode, and makes her take three deep breaths, and take the bag from Eric.

“I’m going to hate the story behind this, aren’t I?"
He nods sadly at her. “Come on. Let’s sit down, eat, and we can get into it.”

He gestures to the table in the kitchen, putting the food on the table, waiting for Diane and Emily to come sit with him, and then he slowly tells them about the first part of his trip, about Baby (Emily’s properly horrified on his behalf for what happened to her) and as he gets into what was in Baby, both of them stop eating.

“They were really going to kill us,” Emily says, voice tiny, sounding very scared.

Eric nods. “Yeah. Your mom was right, you both need this. After the Navy Yard, I went to your house…”

Diane loses the details to the wave of rage sweeping over her. They were in her house? They touched her daughter’s stuff? She’s not eating, she’s shaking her head, eyes flashing, teeth gritted.

“They bastards don’t know who they messed with! Two of the toughest men to ever wear a badge are terrified of me, and by the time I’m done every single person who ever even heard of what they did to us will be, too.” She stands up, fast. “Get me a computer!”

Eric knows a war cry when he hears one. He grabs her the computer NCIS gave her, and hands it over. She nods, slowly, opens up the lap top, and gets to work.

Emily looks at him. “What’s she going to do?”

“Hit them where it hurts. In the bank account!” Diane replies.
Lining the Dominoes Up

It’s a good computer. Diane’s worked on a lot worse. Of course, it does seem like Chucky knows what the hell he’s doing with a computer and likes to make sure everyone has good tools.

While she and Emily waited for Eric to get back with clothing and food, she’d spent two hours reading up on everything that was in the computer on their case.

Not all that much. Lots of physical evidence. Great. None of it seems to lead anywhere.

And there’s all the drug war stuff, which is interesting, but she’s sure that’s not her case. Though the question of why those particular four accounts ended up in her hands has been dancing around in her mind.

Somehow, beyond just the fact that she’s the one investigating, there’s a relation in these four accounts. There has to be. She’s also sure that someone didn’t wire Baby to blow, let alone tried to ram her into a train because of the drug war stuff. Okay, wire Baby or her car to blow up, sure, Tobias had told her about Mob cases where that’s what happened to witnesses. She can buy that. But, rammed into a train? With a driverless car? That’s not someone shutting up a witness or sending a message.

She guesses, if the accident had happened the way it was supposed to, it would have looked like there were enough drivers, and the local cops would have put it down to someone hitting the gas instead of the brake at the train. And that would be that.

The drained account… That’s got something going on… Something more than Black Ops money ending up in the hands of an Ambassador. And how whoever gave her that account knew this was going to happen… Of course, maybe the anonymous writer didn’t know. Maybe he just wanted to highlight what else that account did. She makes a note to see what that account did before yesterday.

There’s the third account, which is behind a wall she can’t scale or break into on her own. She’s thinking she’ll need Chucky’s help on that one. Which means that’s the one they’re trying to keep her out of.

The fourth account. It’s old. Really old. Started up in 1932, and she’s got the records going all the way back.

The first bit that’s weird about it is that money goes in all the time, but only goes out every two years, and when it went out, it went out all over the place, hundreds, if not thousands of transactions going out. Then, come November of every even numbered year, it’d just stop. Another two years of money going in, and boom, round about June money starts going out.

That pattern stays in place until 1992. Suddenly money starts to exit the account all the time. It goes in, it goes out. There’s usually something of a pause in November of even numbered years until May of the next year, and then money goes flowing out again.

She’s tempted to start checking all of those accounts feeding into and out of that one, but there’s literally hundreds of thousands of them, and given how old they are, she’s sure a lot of them are closed accounts from banks that don’t exist any longer. So, she keeps scrolling back up to now.

In 2004, the pattern shifts again. Money keeps going in the way it always was. But, instead of lots of little payouts, it shifts to one big payout, and lots of little ones. 2006, one bigger payout, fewer little ones. 2008, is way bigger than 2006. 2010, smaller than ‘08, bigger than ‘06. 2012 was another huge
year, but not as big as ‘08. By 2014, more than two thirds of the money going out is going to one payout, and that one payout is going to her mystery account. In 2004, the big payout was 83.6 million dollars, in 2014 the big payout was 1.6 billion. And, judging by what’s sloshing around in this account right now, next November’s payment will brush up against 4 billion. Whatever this is, it’s huge.

“What happens in November every two years?” Diane asks, the first sound out of her, besides the clicking of her fingers on her keyboard, in three hours.

Emily looks up from the card game she’s playing with Eric and says, “Odd or even years?”

“Even.”

“Mom… The elections, duh! First Tuesday of November every two years.”

Diane feels cold, and begins to nod. Drug cartels kill people right and left. Happens all the time. Two bullets to the back of the head, in, out, and done, fast. And when they do it, they usually want you to know they did it.

But this… This is a lot of money moving off the official books matching the election cycle. Of course there are spikes in ’08 and ’12, and, of course, ’16, with a Presidential election where no one’s running for reelection, will be even higher yet.

This is the kind of money you work very carefully, very methodically, to make sure that no one, ever, finds out about. This is the kind of case where you want to make sure that anyone who might have been investigating it looks like they died of an accident, like getting nailed by a car that doesn’t see the train’s flashers.

This is the kind of case where people, and things, computers, accountants, investigators, just vanish over.

She knows why a target went on her head as soon as she got those account numbers, and she knows why her Boss at the IRS basically sprinted down to get her off this case.

Time to find names to go with each of the accounts feeding off of this one. Who’s paying in, who’s paying out.

One other thought occurs to her as she starts going through them. The person who let her know about this had to know about it. Maybe s/he’s one of the names she’s going to find.

When Gibbs is making breakfast, he turns on the news again. ZNN is reporting about the drug war down south, and there are even more little fires on the map than there were yesterday.

He’s thinking that Simon Jr. is one hell of a strategist to have pulled this off. That, or the Allajancos and Tacanas are trigger-happy paranoid schizophrenics. Or some combination thereof.

“Everything still on fire?” Abbi asks as she comes into the kitchen.

“Looks like it.” He can’t see the TV in there, (he’s been listening as he cooks) so he pokes his head out of the kitchen and counts quickly, knowing he’ll get more detail when he heads into work.
“There’s seventy-six targets on there, over five thousand square miles, in two days.” He shakes his head.

She nods. “Give me a battalion of Marines and I can pull that off that fast, but not with any fewer men.”

“Yeah.” The flames on the infographic are color coded for fields, buildings, transportation. “You’d need a third of the SEALs to do that…” Gibbs gets an idea. Something he remembers about Tim’s Uncle Tom, the one who’s some sort of Black Ops kind of guy for the SEALs. He puts the eggs on plates for both of them and heads to his phone.

“What are you thinking?” Abbi asks.

“Tim’s Uncle Tom does that sort of stuff. He’s the kind of guy who would have had access to the Black Ops account, too.”

“Calling Penny?”

“Yeah.” He dials the numbers, wondering if he might be able to get some time with “Uncle Tom.”

A minute later he hears, “Good morning, Jethro. Up bright and early?”

“I’m always up now.”

“Ah. So, to what do I owe the honor?”

“Feel like getting some coffee or breakfast with me? My treat?”

“Interesting. Is this coffee or are you just hankering for my company?”

“I want to ask you about Tom.”

For a second, Penny doesn’t say anything, and then she does. Gibbs has the sense that she just put together why he’d want to know more about Tom. “Even more interesting. At the diner?”

“Yeah.”

“I can be there in half an hour.”

Monday morning. Tony’s up and ready to go. He’s got updates from Omagi about what he’s been working on; a full report from McCellan about Jared (yet another car accident. They’re still looking for the car that knocked him into oncoming traffic, resulting in a four car pile-up, and three dead people, including Jared.); on top of that, he’s got Draga and Diane, who have had their whole lives turned upside down; and down below it, a collection of “DEA Agents” (three of the five actually work for the DEA, the other two haven’t been IDed yet.) who’ve been sitting in holding all night, getting more and more annoyed by the minute.

The “DEA Agents” go first. Technically, he’s only allowed to hold them for 24 hours, and he’s had them for 27 at this point. He should be letting them go or charging them soon, but he’s also curious. Namely, no one’s called for them. He knows that if he was supposed to move a prisoner from the FBI to NCIS, and he went off the radar for more than 24 hours, the FBI would have several very
irate NCIS Agents banging down their door, looking for him.

As of yet, he’s gotten not so much as a politely worded email, let alone a large, impolite man looming over him demanding he return his agents. (Which is exactly what he’d expect Draga to go do if he went missing at the FBI.)

He’s also noticed that none of the “DEA Agents” sitting in his holding cell have been reported missing. Now, it’s possible that spouses have been calling the DEA and are getting the official, “Can’t tell you where they are” line, but, once again, if that’s the case, why doesn’t he have a pile of DEA Agents on his doorstep looking for these guys?

This has led him to one major conclusion. The “DEA Agents” were not expected to come back, not anytime soon, after grabbing Ellanza and the money.

That conclusion has led him to do a bit of extra digging. Extra digging is showing him that Gil Dunerson, Director of the DEA, is on the board of about twenty-five anti-drug charities. Nineteen of those charities just got big payouts from the Bathenadas.

Tony does not think this is a coincidence.

Draga starts his morning at his home. It’s the smallest, least expensive two bedroom apartment he could find in any sort of neighborhood where he didn’t have to worry about stray bullets from gang fights if Kevin’s playing outside.

He doesn’t keep it particularly tidy, though it’s not a pigsty, either. It’s clean, but, because he has almost perfect visual recall, he doesn’t have to be particularly careful about where he puts things when he’s done with them.

If his keys end up on the coffee table instead of the shelf next to the door when he gets in, it’s not like he’ll have a hard time finding them again in the morning. This is true for his tools, kitchen supplies, computer things, clothing, and all the rest of his stuff. So, maybe he’ll put his frying pan back on the stove when it’s clean, or maybe on the shelf, or, say if he’s watching TV while he dries his dishes, it might end up on the coffee table.

So, unlike Diane’s house, where Bishop was standing next to him, wondering how he could possibly tell anything was out of place, she’s standing next to him at his house, with Omagi and his team, looking at his place, and says, “They tossed it, didn’t they?”

Eric shakes his head. “If they did, they took pictures first and put everything back.”

Bishop walks over to his sofa, and eyes the stack of folded jockeys and paired socks. “You keep your clean undies here?”

He gives her a You, Queen of the every paper in every file spread over the entire bullpen, are going to make a comment about how tidy my space is? look. And if it was just the two of them, that look would have done it, but Omagi is also looking at the mild chaos of his apartment, so Draga explains, “I live alone most of the time, so it’s not like I’m bothering someone if my skivvies are out. And no, this isn’t where my underwear normally lives. This is where I sort and fold it after I wash it, and before I put it in my drawers.” He gently kicks the basket of unsorted, clean laundry sitting next to his sofa. “Didn’t get done before it was time to head over to Diane’s.”
Omagi’s just watching the two of them. “Can we get to work?”

“Yeah. But, let’s start with my garage. We know they were doing something in there. It’s possible no one’s been in here.”

“That’s fine. We’re still going to go through everything. Given how far they went with your car, we wouldn’t put it past them to have a plan B that involves something nasty in your food or drink or toothpaste or something.”

Eric rubs his forehead. “Fuck.”

Bishop rests her hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

He nods, sighing. “I know. Let’s go check out the garage.”

“Weren’t you in it Saturday?” Bishop asks as Eric’s about to grab the key to the padlock.

Omagi steps in. “Nope.” He holds out an evidence bag, and places the keys inside, using gloved hands.

Eric slumps a little more. He snaps on gloves to handle his own things, and Bishop does as well. “Yeah. Nothing looked out of place, but I wasn’t really looking.”

He shuts the door to his apartment, and takes them across the parking lot to the enclosed garages. His is on the far left end. He watches as Saunders, armed with pink powder, goes to work dusting the lock, and the door. Lots of prints, but Eric assumes most of them are his, and then he groans because he knows Kevin’s prints are on there, too, which means he’s going to have to have a conversation with Kevin’s mom about why he needs Kevin’s prints. With the way this case is going, he’s never going to get custody of his little boy. Hell, he’ll be lucky to get to visit him. He can just see her lawyer pointing out the attack on Baby and why he’s an unsafe parent.

Bishop squeezes his shoulder again as all the prints get taped and saved for later. Once that’s done, Omagi’s got the bolt cutters, cuts through the lock, and, taking it off the door says, “I see some small scratches on this. Might have been picked.”

Eric looks at it, and there are some tiny scratches along the channel the key goes into. “They’ve been there for a while, but I don’t remember when they got there. I just assumed I made them when I opened the lock. That’s not the sort of thing that would set off my danger sense.”

“Not feeling wary on Saturday?” Omagi says.

“Why would I have? I was getting my car, to show off for my girlfriend’s daughter, and then going to a wedding. The only thing I was worried about was making sure I got there on time.”

Saunders lifts open the door, and they go in. Eric takes a few minutes to look, really look, at his set up. Like his apartment, it’s clean, but not tidy. His tools are organized using the ‘the things I used most recently are nearest the car, the stuff I haven’t used recently has been shoved to the back’ system.

There are only two things out of place.

One is his spare N2O canister. Normally, it lives under his workbench, in one of the shelves, behind a closed door. Namely, it’s the sort of thing he’d only see if he was specifically looking for it. It’s missing. Of course, if you were the sort of guy who does anything with explosives, having a spare canister of one of the best oxidizers on earth, that you don’t have to pay for, that’ll trace back to a
COP if it’s found, is perfect.

The second is a drop of something on his floor. Omagi swabs it, but by color and scent, Draga knows that it’s not one of the fluids that would normally be in his car. By scent, he’s thinking it’s some sort of soda, and he’s really, really hoping it’s got DNA.

Everything else is exactly where it’s supposed to be. Unlike Diane’s place, whoever did this didn’t want him to notice something was wrong.

---

When Abby gets in, Zelaz is looking happy to see her.

“I know that smile,” she says to him.

He grins, nodding. “Oh yeah. Check this out.” He brings her over to the collection of non-standard hardware that they pulled out of both of the driverless cars. “Whoever did this built his own components, and he was picky and very well-funded.”

Abby looks at the wires Zelaz is showing her. “Those are high end stereo cables.”

He nods at her. “Yeah. Minimal resistance. Pure copper and silver, supposedly no oxidation. No lag, at all between telling the bomb to go boom and boom. Cost more than a grand a meter, and only three places make and sell them.”

Abby starts to do her happy dance. “Oh yeah! That’s the best news all morning.”

Zelaz is still smiling, and Corwin gets in, joining them. “We get a break?”

“Yeah.” He briefly tells Corwin the same thing he just told Abby. “Guess who was able to get all three manufacturers to donate a millimeter or two of cable so we can find out exactly who made this!”

Abby gives Zelaz a huge hug. As she’s stepping back, Corwin adds, “I was thinking, since these were wired to blow, we should be cross referencing these builds with our bomber database.”

“Excellent idea! You get on that, and I’m going to get into what’s left of the ramming car. Time to start looking for blood, sweat, tears, a hair, a fiber out of place, a little bit of snagged latex, something. There’s no way someone did this much work on a car without leaving a trace.”

Zelaz looks pleased by that. “I’ve got one last bit; that I’ve already sent to DiNozzo and Omagi. Both of these cars were stolen, within two months of each other, from the Philadelphia airport long-term storage garage.

Abby’s humming a happy little tune as she smiles to Zelaz, and begins to pull on her coveralls.

---

There are a lot of days where Abbi would much rather be in the field. Like right now. She really wants to be with Omagi, investigating an actual crime.
Instead, she’s in her office, still trying to get her own organization out from under-water.

Attempted murder of one of her team, doesn’t matter, she’s at her desk, doing her job, because investigating it isn’t her job anymore. Her job is sitting in this building trying to make sure her whole agency runs.

And then, at 10:00 she’s got another chance to go testify in front of Congress about the FUBAR CGIS was before she and Gibbs broke open the accounting scandal.

Once she sits down, Manner pokes his head into her office. “You got a minute?”

She nods.

“As best as I can tell, Diane’s computer here is clean. Doesn’t mean that it wasn’t, at some point, bugged, and it doesn’t mean that someone didn’t ransack her office and take one computer out and put a new one in its place.”

“Good.” She’s pleased to hear they have at least that minimal level of security.

“Eh…”

“Eh?” Shit, there’s some sort of cloud to go with that silver lining.

“I got looking upstream. There have been times when more than one person’s been accessing her computer at the same time. Someone else has her passwords. And if her home computer is gone, that’s probably where the keystroke logger was that let whoever it was know what her passwords were.”

Abbi’s eyes narrow. “Tell me you know where the second user was.”

Manner smiles. “Not yet, but I’ve got the trap laid. Today, I’m going to use her log ins, and do some… highly visible things, and it’s entirely likely that whoever is watching her will decide they need a closer look at what I’m doing. Once that happens, we’ll have who’s watching.”

Abbi looks very pleased by that. “Thank you. Have you given Omagi the heads up?”

“Yeah, he’s ready to stop processing in less than a minute and run if need be, to grab whoever it is, and I’ve got the no-knock warrant set, too.”

And, yes, Manner might not be Tim’s number one choice for a second-in-command, or Abbi’s for that matter, but right now, she’s very happy with him.

Tim finds Diane in his office, sitting at his desk, working on a laptop. She’s extremely focused right now, not noticing him at the doorway, so he takes a moment to just look.

Obviously, something happened that he’s not in the loop for. He’s never seen her in anything less than a perfectly put together professional outfit. Hell, he woke up next to her with both of her ex-husbands leaning over them, and she looked more put together than he does when he’s trying. Right now she’s in jeans, a t-shirt, and an NCIS sweatshirt. Her hair’s quite a bit frizzier than normal, most of it pulled back into a ponytail, and she’s not wearing any makeup.
“Stop staring. I know you’ve seen a woman without makeup before,” she says without looking up.

“I… uh… What are we working on?” He thinks that’s a safe answer.

“Making every single one of those assholes who tried to kill my daughter pay so long and so hard that they’ll wish their grandparents never met.”

Tim nods. That’s, in his book, a perfectly reasonable response to someone trying to hurt your child. “What do you need from me?”

“This one,” she says, pointing to an account number on a post it note, as he pulls out his chair and sits down.

He looks at it, remembering that that’s the account at the floating bank, the one no one can get into. The one that supposedly has ties to all sorts of nasty business.

“This is the account you know exists but were never able to get into,” Tim says to Diane.

She nods. “Leroy and I were arguing about it, and one thing I said to him is that the people we’re up against don’t take people like me out of the picture after we find whatever it is. I’d already gotten into the drug stuff before they went after me. They take me, and… shit… Jared, out before we get into it.” She got the heads up on Jared when she got in this morning and talked to DiNozzo. She’s intentionally not thinking about that. She can mourn for him after all of these people are behind bars and her daughter is safe. “They’re protecting something, not avenging it. I’m next to something, closing in, but until I can get into that one, I don’t know what.”

“You sure it’s not the drug war?”

She glares at him. “That’s a smoke screen or something. And that’s not the kind of guy who sends a drone controlled car after me. The cartels don’t do that. They show up when you’re sleeping and murder you.”

Tim would have to admit that he’s never seen a cartel go after someone with a drone controlled car, but he’s also a firm believer in a world where the bad guys adapt tactics to changing technology, so he wouldn’t put it past them. He also does not want to argue with the look in Diane’s eye right now, so he says, “All right. So…”

“So…” She flicks from one window on her computer to another. “This one. Tell me what you see.”

Tim’s eyes scan over the list of accounts. In and out, in and out… “November’s your drop dead date on whatever it is this is paying for.”

“Yeah.”

His eyes flick from the big payout to the mystery account. “Same number.”

“Uh huh. What happens every other November on even years, Chucky?”

His eyes start to go wide. “Shit. This is…”

“Something to do with the election.” She opens another window on her computer. This one is a list of account numbers with names and dates attached. “I’m starting to put names to who’s paying into this thing, and getting some names on who’s paying out.”

Tim’s eyes scan that list. After the Bathenadas’ payout list, he’s not in any way shocked to see who’s
on this list. “Big names.”

She nods. “Yeah.” She taps two of them. “These guys make drones for a living. They have some impressively large contracts with the US government, and one with Amazon.”

Tim nods at that, too. “The Admiral probably knows them.”

Diane gives him the side-eye, she has no idea who ‘The Admiral’ is. He shakes his head at her, and she points to the next column. “And see this column?” It’s a spread sheet, so he’s not having a difficult time seeing the third column. He nods to her. “These are guys who were getting pay outs from the Bathenadas.”

“So now you’ve connected three of four accounts. What about the one with the Ambassador?”

“Even I have to sleep sometime.”

“Okay. Uh… If you go talk to Bishop or Ziva, you can get those accounts that the Bathenadas were paying into unfrozen, and then trace where the money goes.”

“Yeah, I know. Already done it for ten of them.”

“Because that’ll be easier to trace?”

She nods. Ten is easier than more than four hundred. “And because those ten had the biggest names on their boards.”

“Good point. Go for the big fish first.”

“Exactly. Now, get me into the mystery account. Moby Dick’s hiding in there, and we’re going whale hunting.”

“Okay, Ahab.” Tim gets his computer up and running, and as he’s doing that he says, “For the mystery account, you’ve got a routing number and an account.”

“Yeah, Chucky, I know that. I’ve been doing this for a while.”

Tim rolls his eyes. “I haven’t. Why couldn’t you get in?”

Diane looks annoyed by this. “Even incoming deposits need a key to break their verification system. You can’t just go over to your bank and ask them to wire money to this account. Won’t work. There are, as best we can tell, only six banks in the world that can send money to this one. You’ve got to wire your money to one of them, they use the verification software, and that gets the money to this account.”

“Okay. Which banks do you have to originate from?” Tim asks, getting into his computer’s stealth mode. It’s a proxy server that bounces thought sixteen levels of false IP addresses as well as two encryption systems. It’s possible that someone he hacks can trace back to him, but it’s snowball-in-hell level unlikely.

“What are you going to do?” Diane asks as she starts getting that information together.

“Check them out, find the one with the most lax security, hack it, steal the verification key, and get from there into your floating bank.”

“Isn’t that illegal?”
“So,” Penny says, taking a sip of her coffee, “I take it you’re curious about Tom because of what’s going on down south.”

Gibbs inclines his head, also sipping his coffee.

“What made you think of him?”

“Abbi and I were talking about it. How big. How fast. She said she’d need a battalion of Marines to pull that off, and I was thinking at least a third of the SEALs.”

“Which made you think of Tom.”

“Mike said something about you guys thinking he was a SEAL.”

“We do. I don’t know if he could be any help. None of us know what he does. Once he hit the SEALs, his work went from vague to never spoken about. We’re not even sure of his rank. The voice who picks up when you call his work number refers to him as ‘Commander,’ and has for the last twenty-five years.”

Gibbs inclines his head at that, too. “Yeah, but you know not to ask, right?”

Penny nods. That’s true. Part of why she doesn’t know for sure is because she never goes further than saying, “Anything interesting happening at work…” And that lets Tom know she’s interested, but doesn’t require him to give any details, and he doesn’t. For a while, Nelson was able to get her updates, and after him, John, but since the ‘90s, even John hasn’t been able to find out what Tom does. “From everything I know of what he does, all the rumors I’ve been able to get, he’s the kind of guy who would, if the US Government wanted to do something like overthrow a drug cartel, be sent in to go about doing it. But I don’t actually know if that’s what he does. So, what do you want to ask him?”

Gibbs glances around, but no one’s paying any attention to the two old people in the back booth.
having breakfast together. Even Elaine knows not to come too close right now.

“We know one of the cartels out of Peru has a lot of high ranking US government people on the payroll. Like Supreme Court Justices, high-ranking.”

Penny winces. She knows three of them personally, and is on nodding terms with two more. She really hopes her friends aren’t hooked into this. “The kind of people who could order that sort of attack, if they were properly bribed.”

“Yeah. Or loan men to train others to pull it off. But, if it’s off the books, those guys wouldn’t have official orders, so…”

“So you want to talk to the kind of guy who’s also sent on off-the-books missions, and see if he knows what’s going on?”

“Yeah, I want to know if our soldiers are getting killed to make drug barons rich.”

Penny nods at that. She pulls out her phone, and texts Gibbs a number. “That’s what we use to reach him.”

“Thanks. When was the last time you talked to him?”

“Ummm…” She thinks for a few minutes. “Bit after CGIS blew up. You were still in the hospital.”

“Okay. You think he’ll talk to me?”

“He’s heard your name often enough that he’ll say hello, and if you explain what you know, he’ll listen. I don’t know if he’ll talk, but if your case is convincing enough, he might take matters into his own hands.”

“Should I be scared?”

“No. But if what you think is happening is happening, the guys selling out our troops should be. Tom’s just as driven as I am. He’s never met a cause he’s ever let go. And he lives in a very black and white world. There are good guys and bad guys and the bad guys better hope they don’t come before him, because he takes care of them. If you ever meet him, I imagine you’d like him quite a bit.”

Gibbs nods, smiles. “Sounds like my kind of man.”

“Director Vance, would you care to explain why NCIS thought it necessary to use civil asset forfeiture to seize the bank account of the Partnership For A Drug Free Tomorrow?”

The voice on the other end of Vance’s phone is annoyed. Not angry. He has a sense that voice doesn’t get “angry.” That voice, which has been polished by years of high office ranging from Secretary of the Interior to Senator to Governor, is known for being eternally cool and collected.

“We froze the account, not seized, and beyond that I have no comment. You are not read in on this operation, and until you are, I have nothing to say.”

“Read me in.” Now annoyed is edging toward angry. From the transactions that Vance has seen, this
voice gets close to $50,000 a month in “board fees” from various charities. The majority of those fees appear to come from the Partnership. And, if the information Diane’s been sending him is correct, the Partnership gets about half of its funding from the Bathenadas.

“I’m sorry, sir. This is need to know, and you do not.”

“Do you know who I am?” Still not angry, but icy cold and tense.

“Yes, sir. I do.” Joe Average might not know the name, but anyone hooked into DC political circles would. “Do you know who I am?”

“No. But I guarantee by lunchtime, I will, and then everyone else will know who you are, and we will make sure that by the end of dinnertime you will have been so thoroughly busted down that you’ll be begging the janitor for spare change.”

Vance smirks, that’s the most creative threat he’s gotten today.

“You are welcome to try.” And then there’s a dial tone. Vance rubs his eyes. Then he opens his desk drawer and breaks out the toothpicks. He needs something to gnaw on, and if he doesn’t get one, he’s going downstairs, finding someone who smokes, and bumming a cig off of them.

He buzzes his secretary. “Unless it’s someone who wants to talk to me about actual NCIS business, give them the polite brush off. Get their names, tell them I’m in conference with the Sec. Nav., and sound worried about it.”

“You want me to give them the impression that your superior is already handling their complaint?”

“Please.”

“No problem.”

“Thanks, Sharon.” He buzzes off and gets back to his computer. So far, he’s had nine calls along the lines of the one he just took, some high-ranked person calling on behalf of a charity that got its account frozen. He supposes it makes sense that he’s getting the calls now, it’s Monday, so business is open.

He writes down the name of this latest one, and gets back to what he’s trying to do, namely figuring out what Ellanza was going to do with that money. 500 million isn’t chump change, and with it not in the hands of whoever was supposed to get it, something should be grinding to a halt by now.

The question is, what?

Computer time. Not precisely Ziva’s favorite way to spend the day, but it’s useful, and it has to be done. Especially with Draga and Bishop out of the office, working on finding out what’s happening with the attack on him and Diane, someone’s got to do the grunt work, and that someone is her.

For example, right now she’s checking car thefts from the Philadelphia Airport Long Term Storage Garage. It’s boring as hell, but likely useful. For example, over the last three years, twenty-two cars, common, old makes and models have been stolen and never seen again.

Interesting cars that have been stolen, ones that are expensive or have valuable parts, aren’t of interest
to her. They’ve got good market value and it makes sense that people would steal them.

No, she’s looking for cars like the ones in the accidents from Saturday/Sunday. The one that blocked the road was an eight-year-old Dodge Durango, the one that tried to run Draga into the train was a ten-year-old Ford Taurus. Good, decent, old, working cars. The sort of thing that no one looks twice at.

None of those 22 cases are solved. Part of that, Ziva assumes, is that the Philly PD has bigger fish to catch (she can hear Tony correcting her idiom in her head). Part of it is that, given how everything else in this case is going, it’s entirely likely that these cases were intentionally not solved.

So, what she’s doing is sitting there, listing cars, and going through the airport security footage, putting together screen shots of the people who stole those cars, so they can put them through facial recognition.

The shots are black and white, grainy, and at bad angles, but, to her eye, it looks like the same three guys have boosted all of those cars.

And while the guys stealing the cars are hard to see, the license plates aren’t. So, that’s her second job, seeing what those cars have been up to.

Tim glances over at Diane. He’s been at this for over an hour, broken into three of the feeder banks, and hasn’t come in contact with anything that looks like a way into the floating bank.

“Are you sure about the authentication key?”

She looks up from her computer. “That’s how we thought it worked, why?”

“No key. I’ve been through three banks that have transferred money to this account, but there’s no authentication key.”

“The money has to get in there somehow, and we’ve tried to wire money into this account. You can’t do it.”

Tim thinks about that. “You want to try an experiment for me?”

“Sure.”

“Unlock another one of charity accounts, and deposit Bathenada money from them into the election account, and from there into the mystery account. Obviously money has moved from this account to the other one before.”

“I can do that, but why?”

“There are two ways to make sure a system is safe, take it so high tech that no one can break your tech, or take it so low tech they can’t use a machine to do it. What if it’s a matter of some guy has to physically hand a check over? What if the verification code is two guys who know each other’s face? That’s the kind of security you can’t break with a machine.”

Diane’s nodding, seeing how that would work. “Banker A knows Banker B, and they do everything in person… Yeah… Okay, let’s see what I can do. If that’s how they’re playing it, can you get into
“David R. Sammuels. Special Agent for the DEA for the last seven years. You’ve worked primarily in Peru for the last seven years, and only came back stateside six months ago,” Tony says.

Sammuels is sitting in interrogation, in front of Tony, looking annoyed. “You read my CV, great. Why am I still in here?”

“Because I’m not ready to let you leave.” Tony smiles.

Sammuels rolls his eyes. Asshole is written all over his face, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Tell me about your current job.”

“Call my boss.”

“I wanna hear about it from you.”

“Cut and dried, prisoner and evidence transfer. I was just about done for the day, then I get called in, and told to pick a guy and some stuff up from you guys.”

“Oh. So…”

“So…”

“There’s more to the story than that. Tell me all of it,” Tony leads.

Sammuels’ lips purse in annoyance. “So, I log out of my computer, lock up my desk, put my gun on, and head over to the motor pool to grab a van. Ed and Skyler were there, along with two other guys who I don’t know, but they had the right paperwork, so we tucked them into the back of the van and off we went.”

“Uh huh. What’s the right paperwork?”

“They’re with the US Consulate in Montevideo. Ellanza… the prisoner… he’s their Ambassador, and it’s their job to lug his ass back to Uruguay.”

Tony licks his lips. “Uh huh… And do you have any idea why we grabbed Ellanza?”
“No, and I don’t fucking care. Get him, get the evidence, give both of them to those two little shits, and then done with it. We’d be out of here if that one asshole hadn’t coldcocked your guy with the door and ran.”

While that’s not exactly true, Tony doesn’t mind if that’s why the DEA guys think they’re in holding. “And, do you routinely give prisoners and evidence away to US Consulates?”

Sammuels is giving Tony the *quit being a jerk* look. “I do whatever the hell my Boss tells me to do. And if some jerk shows up with the paperwork signed off by the Director of the Agency, I do what that paperwork tells me to do.”

Tony tries to not let his glee show when he hears the word ‘Director.’ “You still have that paperwork?”

“You guys should. The last time I saw it, Nash, the asshole who tried to run and got tackled, was tucking it into his suit jacket.”

“All right. Were you and your partners supposed to go to Montevideo, too?”

“No. Pick them up, take them to their plane, turn around, and done. I was supposed to be home in time for brunch.”

Yeah, something, to quote Abby, *hinkey*, is going on here. “Ah. Interesting. So, one last question, if you were expected back at the DEA within, what, three hours?” Sammuels nods. “Why do you think absolutely no one has called to enquire about what happened to you and your partners?”

That has Sammuels flatfooted. “No one?”

“No one,” Tony says with a nod. “Now here, if I go off and don’t come back, a pile of people come looking for me, but no one’s looking for you. Why?”

“My Boss hasn’t called?”

“No.”

“Frank Toner? He’s the fourth man on our team. He was out on Sunday. Nothing from him?”

“Literally, *no one* has checked in to see what’s happened to you.”

Sammuels’ eyes narrow. Tony can read that look. That’s Sammuels going from annoyed to scared. “Something just went very wrong.”

“I agree. Let’s start at the beginning, what did you used to do in Peru?”

“Easy day, today?” Dr. Allan asks Jimmy. Most of the time, when he comes in and they don’t have a case, or paperwork, or tests to run, Jimmy gives him a “provisional” day off. Namely, he’s free to leave, but he’s got to be able to get back in less than half an hour should a call come in. This helps to balance out the overtime he’d otherwise be accruing in large quantities when they have a long case. Because they didn’t have the paperwork software, he had fewer of them, but when Ducky had no customers and the work was done, Jimmy also had provisional days off.
“For right now. Dr. Allan, I know this isn’t part of our job description, but how would you feel about both of us heading upstairs to offer assistance?”

Allan thinks about it. “Slightly worried. What do you think I’d be able to do upstairs?”

“If what I’m hearing is correct, anything from getting coffee to making phone calls, to putting information into an excel spreadsheet. It’s not part of your job, so you certainly don’t have to, but they are swamped up there, and could use the extra sets of hands.”

Allan inclines his head. “I can type; I can make phone calls, and I’ve been known to get coffee on occasion. Sure. Let’s see what we can do.”

“The number you are trying to reach is not in service. Please hang up and dial again.”

That’s the second time Gibbs has gotten that recording by trying to call Tom McGee’s contact number. His gut is yelling. Something is going on, and Tom’s attached to it, somehow.

He doesn’t know how or why, not yet, but he’s feeling like he just unraveled the biggest damn knot of this case. Problem is, he’s got no idea what all the threads are trying to tell him.

Time to go talk to someone who’s got more of a view of the bigger picture than he does.

As he drives toward the Navy Yard, he turns his radio on, finding the all-news all-the-time channel. Since this morning, fighting has petered out in Bolivia, but is going strong in Colombia. He wonders if, perhaps, someone didn’t get the payment they were supposed to, and that’s why things are starting to calm down. Or possibly, that’s just the fog of war, and lag in reporting times.

Diane looks up from her computer. “Payment bounced. Wasn’t accepted by the mystery account.”

Tim nods. “Okay, so they’re playing it old school.”

“Or they know they’re only supposed to get one payment from that account, and it’s too soon, and not enough money.”

Tim inclines his head, Diane might be right about that. “Either way, means I can’t get in using a different bank. Time to go straight in.”

“How are you going to do that?”

Tim starts to get into it, sees her eyes begin to glaze and switches to, “Do you have a masters in forensic computing, fifteen years in the field, hacking, or a PhD in computer science?” His tone is a bit too smart ass for her liking, so she glares at him. Tim shakes his head. “It’ll be gibberish if I try to explain it. Just trust me, it’ll work, or it won’t, and if it doesn’t then I’ll move onto plans B, C, and D, but that account’s going to give up its secrets.”

Diane smiles at him.
As Chucky’s clicking away, and occasionally talking to his computer, Operation Hit Them Where It Hurts, has been churning along.

That little NSA trick of Bishop’s has allowed her to do some thoroughly nasty things to people who probably didn’t expect it. Add in civil asset forfeiture, where, unlike a person, she can just accuse the money of breaking the law, and then seize or freeze it, without having to come up with a warrant, and she’s tearing through people’s finances like Ghangis Khan on the plains of Asia in a bad mood.

For example, as of 10:34 eastern time, the Bathenadas are broke. Every account linked to them is frozen solid. Every account attempting to deposit money into the Bathenadas’ accounts have also frozen. Every account they’ve ever paid into is colder than Antarctica in July.

She’s begun the audit of her boss at the IRS, sure he’s part of this, and because he’s got the same tricks up his sleeve as she does, she didn’t freeze his money, she drained his accounts and put them into a blocked escrow account. Only two people have access to that account, her and Leon. Then she cancelled his and his wife’s credit cards, put him on the no-fly list, and stuck his name on the terror watch list for money laundering. No matter what else is true, he’s not going to be able to run away.

Then came the election account. It took her all of five minutes to find that her boss also, personally, vetoed audits of that account three times in the last ten years. A few more minutes’ work, found that two of the three IRS agents who requested audits of that account were no longer among the living, and number three was now the Director of the department that handles auditing other government agencies. (She empties his accounts and cancels his cards, too. Unless he’s got cash on hand, or generous friends, he’s not going anywhere.)

She drains the election account, too, but doesn’t freeze it. She wants people able to keep putting money into it, wants to see who’s paying in. But no one’s getting a payout.

Sooner or later, someone will notice that four billion dollars is missing, and they will come looking for it. That’s how she’s going to find who runs that account.

And from there, she begins systematically making a list of everyone getting payouts, and begins to freeze their accounts. In the next day or two, Leon’s going to start getting a lot of calls, and those people are going to have to answer some very sticky questions if they ever want to get their money back.

Stephen Manner is sitting in the office of the man who used to run Cybertech for CGIS.

He’s in jail now.

Stephen supposes he could redecorate, or do something to make this space more his own, but he’s worried that at any moment someone with a warrant might show up to take everything away. So, he’s sitting in this office, working on his laptop, taking up the smallest possible space he can.

He’s also feeling rather pleased with himself as he reaches for his phone. Right now, there are two different people using Diane Anderson’s ‘missing’ computer accounts to do things. One of them is him, and one of them is currently located in the IRS headquarters, being very, very naughty. (Diane
is on an NCIS computer, using log ins from their own forensic computing department.)

He picks up his phone. “Omagi, time to go.”

“Where am I going?”

“IRS. Main office. From the looks of it, room 216. Move fast.”

“We’re on our way. Keep whoever it is at his computer.”

Manner smiles. “Don’t worry. I’ve got it covered.”

Omagi looks away from carefully labeling and bagging everything in Draga’s life. “We’ve got to move.”

“Actual bad guy to catch?” Eric says, wanting to finish up with this. He hates having all these other people, let alone Bishop, this far into his personal life.

“Yes. Someone’s who isn’t Ms. Anderson is using her computer.”

“Good! Let’s GO!”

Bishop’s nodding eagerly. She doesn’t want to be this deep into Draga’s life, either. She doesn’t need to know what sort of toothpaste he uses, let alone his lube preference. But, because whoever tried to kill them did so thorough of a job of it, they are scooping up everything to test.

They grab up what they’ve got packed and get moving.

Saunders locks up and places the tape over Draga’s door. No one in or out, not anytime soon.

Omagi’s driving.

“Where are we going?” Bishop asks.

“IRS. Room 216, apparently.”

“Good!” Eric’s voice is low and dangerous. Diane’s been telling him for months about how everything involving her boss felt off, and from what he’s heard he’s the kind of bastard who’d be connected enough to pull the sort of shit that just happened to them.

Eric can’t wait to get his hands on him. He’s happily fantasizing about a situation where Koskinigen runs and has to be beaten into submission.

“So, what can we do?” Jimmy asks Ziva, handing her a smoothie.

She smiles at the smoothie, pleased to get a little more energy, and even more pleased to see some help.
“I am on hold with the Kansas City police, trying to get a car accident report.”

Jimmy wiggles his finger for her phone, as he leans against the corner of her desk. “Hand it over.”

She does, and he waits on hold as she says, “I have six more departments to call to get accident reports, and twelve more stolen cars to check and see what they’ve done since they’ve been stolen.”

“How do you do that?” Allan asks.

She points him to Draga’s desk, and then logs him in. “License plate/VIN database. Put the plate number in, and see what comes up. Not every car on my list has been involved in some sort of accident, but six of the ten I’ve checked so far, have been. While you’re doing that, Jimmy and I will make calls. Once you’re done, we’ll get you making calls, too.”

Tim’s rubbing his eyes. This time they aren’t hurting. His stopgap computer glasses are doing their job. No, he’s rubbing them because this is the most complicated hacking he’s ever had to do. He got into the CIA easier than this. Compared to this, cracking Mossad was telling the computer to count from one to ten in Basic.

The problem is that this computer is only online for one minute out of ten. And once it’s offline, he can do bugger all with it. So, he spends nine minutes planning and writing the next attack, and hopes like hell that he can push it through during the minute it’s online.

Part of the problem is the computer the bank is on is slow. VERY slow. It takes almost the full minute to even connect, let alone send a command.

If he can’t get it through in less than a minute, then he’s got to rewrite, faster, more streamlined, fewest lines of code possible.

He’s trying not to think about what he’s going to do when he gets into this damn thing. Sixty seconds, minus getting in time, to ransack and download. If he forces the computer to stay online, whoever’s on the other end will notice that. Which means he’s going to have to plant a program in there to gather everything up into easily moved packets, and automatically start sending them off as soon as the computer goes live.

And he’s got to get that program so small and streamlined that it’ll get in in under a minute.

And then he’s got to pray that no one notices he’s got the computer doing it, and shuts it down.

It’s the tenth set of tiny fragments of car parts that Abby’s set into the superglue chamber to check for prints.

She’s working on the Durango. The SUV that cause the accident that re-routed Diane and Draga. So far she’s gotten some prints, but they all appear to belong to people who would have had reason to touch this car. The mechanic at the place that sold it and its owner, for instance.

As she fills the chamber with superglue vapor, her computer begins to chirp at her. It’s found
something. She takes one look and smiles widely. It's time to head up and have a chat with Ziva.

“You going up?” Corwin asks as she’s walking through the lab.

“Yeah. I’ve got an ID on someone who steals cars for a living, or at least used to, and also touched this SUV.”

“Great. I’ve got some goodies to pass along, too.”

Abbi is in front of the combined Senate and Congress, answering annoying questions about how so many years could have gone by without anyone noticing what was wrong with CGIS.

She’s taking a sip of water while the Senator from… North Dakota, maybe, (Somewhere with a long and glorious tradition of Coast Guard service, she thinks, snidely.) goes on and on about how this is tragic and how obviously everyone was asleep at the switch and that Congress needs more oversight into what the different Federal Agencies are doing.

Abbi grimaces at that. The last thing she needs is more time in front of these bozos. And, if what she’s hearing from NCIS is right, more than half of them are on the Bathenadas’ payroll, and God alone knows who else’s. Giving them more inside information on what she’s doing so they can work even harder to cover up even more shit is not going to make things better.

The Honorable Blowhard keeps blathering on, and her phone rings.

She answers it. If Omagi’s calling her when she’s in court, it’s a big deal.

“What’s up?”

“Got something of a Mexican standoff here.”

Omagi didn’t think going into the IRS to grab who he suspected (rightly) was the top of the pyramid was going to be easy. He was fairly sure there would be a certain level of hassle serving this warrant.

So, when they went in, they did dispense with certain niceties, like say, telling people why they were in there. They go in, all of them in their official jackets, badges on display, walking like storm troopers about to take over the place, hoping to get to 216, and that computer, while the guy at the computer is still there.

They get to the second floor, and can see 216, when IRS security catches up to them.

Omagi can read the title on the door. John Koskinigen, Director IRS.

“You can’t go in there!” The guy in front of him is huge, and flanked by two other, huge, guys.

“I can and will go in there. I have a no-knock warrant for the arrest of whomever is in that office using that computer.” Manner made sure of that. They need to get in there, while the guy’s working, and before he takes a magnet or the like to his hard drive.
“Let me see that.”

Omagi hands over the warrant, still moving forward.

The security guard does not attempt to read the warrant. He does place his hand on Omagi’s chest, stopping him. “No one is going into that office until our legal department has had a chance to read that entire warrant.”

“They can read it once we’ve secured whoever’s in that office and his computer.” Omagis nods and Bishop and Drag flank the two back up guys.

“No sir. They will do it, now.” And as soon as he says that, the guns come out.

Before that “Now” is said, Bishop, Draga, and Saunders have their guns out. Omagi swallows, hopes Manners is good enough to have made sure whatever’s on that computer stays there, and holds up his hands. “I’m reaching for my phone.”

The guy in front of him nods, and Omagi dials. The other five of them still have guns trained on each other.

“I’m taking this,” the security guard in front of Omagi holds up the warrant, “to legal. Make sure they do not enter that office or remove anything from it.”

The two guards behind him nod, and take three steps, backs to the door.

Abbi picks up, and Omagi says, ‘I’ve got something of a Mexican standoff here.”

“Hold on.” He hears some rustling, along with, “You want more oversite? Listen in. This is my guys going after another part of this monster. Sit rep.”

He gives it. “It’s been four minutes since we got into the building, with a legal warrant, and we are currently being held at gun point by the IRS to prevent us from exercising the terms of this warrant. By this point there’s no possible way to know if the person who was in that office still is in that office, or if his computer is still in working order.” They hear a shattering crash from the background. “The odds of that computer still working just dropped considerably. We need to get in there,” they hear another crash, “now.”

He hears Abbi talking to someone else. Then she says to him, “Put it on speaker.”

Omagi does so. “All set.”

The voice on the other line says, “This is Joe Biden, Vice President of the United States, President of the Senate, and I am ordering an immediate bench warrant from Congress for the computer in room 216 of the IRS building, and for the person located in said room, using that computer.”

The two security agents at the door look confused. They slowly lower their guns. And then one of them opens the door.

“They’ve opened the door. Thank you, sir!” Omagi says. (Draga and Bishop are already heading in. “Step away from the computer!” “Get up! Hands behind your back!” Between them he can see that Koskinigen has been trying to beat his computer to death with his chair.)

“No problem. I’ll be interested to see what you find,” Biden says.

“Go get him,” Abbi adds.
“On it, Boss.”

Abby gets to Ziva’s desk just the same time that Gibbs is walking past it.

“Perfect timing, you’re almost all here.” She looks at Jimmy and Allan, both sitting around with phones up to their ears, waiting to get reports back from different police departments. “Shouldn’t you two be Tony and Eric?”

“We’re subbing in,” Jimmy replies.

“Wha’d’ya got, Abbs?” comes out of Gibbs before he can stop it. Yes, he’s here to talk to Leon, and see if he can hunt down Tom McGee, but Abby up in the bullpen means something’s going on, and for all he knows it’ll be the thing that puts the rest of this in perspective.

“I’ve got a print. And more than that, I’ve got an ID to go with the print.”

Ziva smiles at her, and Abby takes over on Tony’s computer, setting up her information on the plasma.

“Meet Michael Kenna—“

“I know him!” Ziva says, excited. “Here.” She hops up, takes two steps, and clicks up her own pictures. “We have to run the facial match to know for sure, but he looks like one of my car thieves.”

“He probably is,” Ziva hands the clicker back to Abby who gets Michael’s rap sheet up. “Joined the Army at 17 in 1988. Worked the motor pool for three years. Got out and spent the next decade in and out of jail for car theft. Completely dropped off the grid in 2003. No current address, no bank account, no nothing. A complete ghost.”

“A ghost who leaves finger prints?” Allan asks.

“A ghost who left a finger print on a car that managed to head-on crash into another car while its driver was Lord knows where.”

“Just one?” Gibbs asks.

“That I’ve found. I can only print twenty pieces at a time, Gibbs, and there are a lot of pieces. Here’s the other interesting bit, Corwin’s been checking the detonator pieces we’ve found against our bombers database and has found five other cars that have gone skyward with detonators that are very similar to the one we pulled out of the car that tried to ram Draga and Diane into the train, down to the same ridiculously expensive stereo cable, in the last three years.”

Ziva hands Gibbs her phone. “Stay on hold, get that case for me. I need to get looking at those bombings.”

“Okay,” Tony says, getting into Sammuels’ history. “So, the DEA sends you to Peru.”

“Yeah. First job as an Agent. I speak perfect Spanish, my mother grew up in Lima, my grandparents
are still there. Officially, I was a bored rich kid getting my PhD in art history at the University of Lima.”

“And in reality?”

“I was taking classes, partying, a lot, and trying to get into the Bathenada family.”

“That was your assignment?”

“Yeah. And I was doing well,” his voice trails off for a moment, remembering, “the first year. Go to enough parties, flash enough cash and coke around, and you attract attention. I mentioned to some of my new friends that I had my own plane.”

“Very rich kid.”

“Professional dilettante. Failed out of two previous PhD programs, took just enough classes to stay on campus, you know the type. Those buddies hooked me up, and I rose fairly fast. I’m not going to say I was having dinner with Simon or anything, but every time I went back to the states to ‘visit my family’ they had me transporting drugs. I worked up from transportation to running my own crew, and stalled out. Couldn’t get any higher. A full year went by, and just nothing. No big jobs, no more trust. I think they were suspicious, but couldn’t prove anything. I was too useful to let go, and too dangerous to move up. The DEA was okay with what I was doing, because I kept a steady stream of low value intel flowing to them. Two years ago, my partners get sent down to work with me. ‘My own people’ for my crew. They got the same sense I did, the Bathenadas were using me to move drugs, and that was all it was ever going to be. So, we made our busts, took out my crew, and came back to the US.”

“And that’s when you got Frank Toner on your team?”

“Yep. Four man team. Now, we’re not doing much of anything. Six months of paperwork. Then Dunerson calls, he’s got a transfer for us, supposedly because I ‘knew the area.’ You’d think the head of the DEA would be able to tell the difference between Peru and Uruguay, but apparently they’re all the same to him.”

“Ah. Did you know that Ambassador Ellanza is in the pay of the Bathenadas?”

“No… That’s…” The picture is suddenly getting clearer to Sammuels. “Money… You said we were trying to take him and money? Were we sending him and the cash payout he was picking up back to the Bathenadas?”

Tony nods. “Gil wasn’t the Director when you started your job, was he?”

“No. He wasn’t.”

“When did he take over?”

“Five years ago.”

“About when you stalled out?”

Sammuels nods.

“And he’s the guy who called you down, told you you had the transfer job?”

“Yes.” Sammuels is looking very suspicious. “You know something I don’t.”
“Very likely. Let’s get this all written up. I would like to keep you and your partners here. For the time being, it’s better off if your boss doesn’t know where you are, and you three are much better off safe and sound, in here.”

“What do you think is going on?”

“Gil’s been getting payouts, big payouts from a lot of charities the Bathenadas fund. He takes over, and suddenly you stop rising up the ladder. You get sick of it, make a bust with your two partners, and then six months later, you get sent on a one way trip with an Ambassador who’s also in the Bathenadas pockets.”

Sammuels winces. “I’d bring the drugs up. Hand them over. They’d go into evidence. A few hundred kilos a pop. My cover was rich kid student with his own plane. I did that for almost four years before we made a bust.”

“What happened to those drugs?”

“Destroyed.”

“Hmmm…” After what CGIS was doing with their ‘evidence’ Tony’s got a good idea of where those drugs probably went. “Got a buddy who isn’t on your team, someone who’s log in information you know?”

“Yeah. You want me to check, but not as me?”

“We’re all on the same server. You can log in from our computers here.”

“Okay. If those drugs weren’t destroyed, I want to be in on making the corruption bust.”

Tony nods at Sammuels. “I’m eye deep in conspiracies right now. All the extra hands I can get are welcome.”

“Good. Go get a warrant for Gil’s communications. If he set up a way to make sure that the money and the Ambassador got to back to the Bathenadas, and they didn’t, I’m sure someone’s said something to him about it.”

“Tim!”

“Mmmm…” He slowly pulls himself out of the code. Diane must have spoken to him several times to get to ‘Tim.’

She’s standing by the door. “I’m getting lunch, you want anything?”

“Are you leaving the building?”

“Not without a babysitter. No, I was planning on calling out and having it delivered.”

“Uh. Yeah. Food, sounds good.” He notices that his coffee mug is not only empty, but cold. Time for more decaf. “You know Carlo’s? Less than a mile away, makes a decent burger, delivers.”

“I’ll look it up. What do you want?”
Tim thinks. Like his usual coding binges he’s either completely unaware of the concept of food, or grazing through anything salty or sweet nearby. Today, he’s unaware. “Grilled chicken salad, extra chicken, diet Coke, and fries.”

“Sounds nutritious.”

“My doctor tells me that if I’m doing hard work, I need calories, and protein and fat are better for me than sugar.”

“Coding is hard work?” she doesn’t look like she believes that.

“It is for my brain,” and saying that, he dives back into the code. This time, he hopes, he’ll get in.

Diane’s phone buzzes half an hour later. “Anderson.”

“Ms. Anderson, it’s Burt at security. Your lunch is here.”

“I’ll be up to grab it in a minute.”

She heads up to the front desk, feeling a twinge of wanting to go outside, it’s bright and sunny and glorious fall on the other side of the bullet and bombproof glass. But until this is done, outside is the place she’s avoiding.

Burt hands over the bag, and she checks, everything looks right. She goes back down, puts the food next to Chucky, but he’s completely absorbed in what he’s doing, so he doesn’t notice it.

She supposes she could go back to her computer, find more people to bleed, but… Until Chucky gets into his account, all she’s doing is harassing the underlings, and yes, the first four hours of that were satisfying, but she wants bigger game. She wants the guys calling the shots, and she knows she doesn’t have them, yet.

So, she takes her lunch, and decides to head over to the bullpen, check in, see what’s going on, find out from Eric if they found anything at his place. Her place has been ‘processed’ but the evidence is still in the CGIS lab.

When she gets up there, lunch in hand, she sees Palmer, who she didn’t think did this sort of thing, another young man in a conservative gray suit with a flashy fuchsia tie, both of whom are holding telephones and looking at Tony as he’s talking with Leroy and Ziva.

She catches, “Gil Dunerson, looks like he’s in on it. Getting paid by the Bathenadas,” from Tony.

That name is ringing a bell for her. She strides over, puts her lunch on Tony’s desk, and then grabs her phone, checking what she’s done, today.

“Dunerson, as of 10:58 this morning, saw all of his bank accounts freeze. He’s been being paid by the Bathenadas for the last eight years, and he’s depositing money into an account that’s doing something with the elections.”

Tony and the rest of the crew are staring at her. Finally he says, “Um… maybe we could get an update as to what you’re doing? On my end we’re teaming up with some DEA agents to start taking down their top tier.”

So, Diane does. “I’ve got those four accounts, and started to get really into them. The Bathenadas’
account, we shut that down yesterday. No problems. Today, I got into one… It’s really old, and the payout patterns suggest that it does something with the elections. So, I started to cross reference, where was the Bathenadas’ money going. It goes to charities, those charities have board members and pay them ‘board fees,’ and some of those board members are putting big chunks of cash into the election account, and the election account, pays out, pays out BIG to the account at the floating bank.

“Anyway, so far Dunerson’s on a bunch of boards, getting paid well for all of them, and shuffling money into the election account. Same thing with my ex-Boss.” Which reminds her of something. “Oh, right… Been getting lost in the details. Thomas Grason and Yvette Hereuch, both of them worked for the IRS, both of them attempted to audit the election account, and they’re both dead now. Car accidents.”

“I’ve got Thomas Grason’s police report,” Jimmy says. “Got off the phone with the Atlanta PD ten minutes ago.” He starts shuffling through the reports that have been popping up on Draga’s computer.

“Why were you guys investigating him?” Diane asks.

“Not him, specifically. We’re tracking down cars stolen from the Philadelphia Airport, just like the ones that were used against you,” Ziva says.

“And it sounds like it’s time to pay your ex-Boss a visit,” Tony says.

“Don’t bother,” they hear Leon say from the staircase behind the bullpen. All of them looking up to see he’s been listening in. “I’ve just gotten a call from Director Borin. Her guys have him, and what’s left of his computer, in custody. They’re bringing him here. Ms. Anderson, I’d like to chat with you.”

“Certainly, Director.”

She sees Leon do a double take.

“Gibbs?”

Gibbs inclines his head a bit. “Wouldn’t mind a word with you.”

“Come on up. I’m sure you two can behave for a few moments together.”

Leon opens the door, and ushers in Diane and Jethro. He notices that Jethro’s only slightly out of breath after climbing the stairs, so he appears to be healing up from his gunshot wounds.

“You said you have a very old account that does something with the elections?” Leon asks after they’re all seated at his conference table.

“Yes. Why?” Diane replies.

“I have confirmation that that one’s an off-the-books account to make sure that the right people get elected. According to my source, if you’ve been in office long enough, and you look like you’ve got a challenging election coming up, a checkbook, or these days bank card, shows up, and you use it to pay for everything you don’t want anyone to see.”

Diane nods at that. “That would explain the little payouts.”
“Little payouts?” Leon asks.

“Yeah. Until 2004, none of the payouts came to more than 500 grand, and a lot of them were much smaller, 20k here, 40k there, some of them were even as low as five thousand dollars. Just lots of different payouts to all sorts of different people.”

“What sorts of people?” Leon asks.

Diane shrugs. “I’m getting names. Some I recognize, especially the bigger payouts, like… Say $330,000 to a famous economist who writes a weekly column and tends to be very vocal about tax policy, and I’ve seen several news network heads on there, but most of them are smaller payouts to random people or companies or charities that I haven’t gotten deeply enough into yet to know who they are.”

“My source would say those are the sorts of people who help to shift perception about candidates and make sure elections go the way they’re supposed to,” Leon replies.

“Could be. I’ve been spending more time on the money going in side of the equation than the money going out side.”

“And who is paying in?”

“You know how magazines like Forbes have the 100 most influential people lists?”

“Sure.” Leon and Gibbs nod.

“The top ninety of them. And the top ninety of pretty much every other list like that you can think of. A lot of non-profits. A few corporations. I know the Bathenadas are paying in because I know they’re bankrolling a lot of the charities. But I had to have three sets of accounts to figure that out. I’m getting into who’s paying who, and how deep the money trail is buried, but, there are a lot of dark secrets in there.”

“Secrets people will kill to keep secret,” Gibbs says.

“Yes.”

“Tell me about the big pay out,” Leon says.

“One every other November into the floating account. Last payout was over a billion dollars, and if what I’m seeing is right, the next one will be close to four billion dollars.”

Leon licks his lips, nodding slowly. Jethro blinks. “Four billion?”

“Just about.”

“Who owns these accounts?” Leon asks, which is an awfully good question.

“Chucky’s still breaking into the one. The other… The official name is the ‘Greater American Prosperity PAC.’ Before that it was ‘America for Better Tomorrow.’ Before that ‘Americans For America.’ And before that—“

“We get the picture, Ms. Anderson. Who are the people attached to the Greater American Prosperity PAC?”

“Not on record with the bank. And it might have PAC in its name, but it’s not legally listed as one with the IRS or the FEC. In fact, it hasn’t paid taxes, ever.”
“Like a shell corporation?” Jethro asks.

“Not exactly. Shells are designed to do things like pay taxes and look like they officially exist while covering something else. This one hides by people choosing not to see it. By IRS protocol, we’re supposed to audit any account with over a billion dollars in it every five years, at least. I know people who have tried to audit it have died, Grason and Hereuch trying to audit that account. But, today, I closed that account, pulled the money out, and tucked it away. Sooner or later someone is going to start screaming about it.”

“With any luck, we’ll hear the yells, soon. In the meantime, in less than an hour Director Koskinigen will be joining us. I will be giving you and Mrs. McGee what’s left of his computer to do with as you like. In twenty-four hour, I want a report of what he’s been doing ready for DiNozzo, because he’ll be going in to interrogate him.”

Diane’s eyes flash at that. “Can I be part of that? I’ve done interrogations before, and Tony doesn’t have the background to ask the questions right or see where the lies are.”

“You can observe. We don’t allow outsiders to join in on interrogations of people who likely tried to have them killed,” Leon says, sounding very calm.

Diane nods in agreement, not happy, but understanding. “When we all got together, there was a lawyer in the bunch. Pretty Blonde’s husband.”

“Jake Malloy?” Jethro adds.

“Yeah. Unless you’ve got counsel here you prefer, you’ll want a sharp lawyer on this interrogation. I can guarantee that Koskinigen won’t say anything with a slew of his own lawyers, and they will be very precise in their answers. You’ll want another lawyer to wade through the BS and catch the nuances.”

“That can be arranged. Set up a briefing for DiNozzo and Malloy. Get them ready to go in and shred Koskinigen and his lawyers.”

Diane smiles with genuine pleasure, stands up, nods to both of the men, and heads off to get started on doing just that.

Leon turns to Jethro, “I assume you didn’t come here because you’re missing my company?”

Jethro shakes his head. He gestures to the TV. “Get this thing on ZNN, or better yet, whatever briefing you’re getting on what’s happening in South America.”

It takes Leon a minute, but he does get the latest briefings out of the DEA (which, after DiNozzo’s information, they’re both viewing with skepticism) as well as the sit rep from NCIS Cartagena, Rio de Janeiro, and Valparaiso, and the ‘for public consumption’ briefing from the CIA.

ZNN didn’t have the full story, by a long shot. It did have the right general shape of things. Bombings and arson attacks all through Colombia and Bolivia, with outlying attacks as far north as Mexico and as far east as the Caribbean. The DEA report highlights that these attacks are focusing on logistical targets. How the drugs get moved from point A to point B. Those attacks are making sure the drugs stop moving.

The CIA notes skirmishes of up to two hundred men taking place on the farms and in the jungles. These attacks are taking out production, either where the drugs grow, or where they’re processed from raw materials into salable goods.
According to the CIA, these attacks are swift, focused, and well-coordinated. Teams are going in, fast and quiet, destroying everything they can get their hands on, and then fighting their way out. Maximum damage for minimum effort. Weaponry and tactics are, in the words of the CIA, unusual for cartel violence.

Unfortunately, they don’t expound on unusual.

“Find what you were looking for?” Leon asks.

“Some. We know the Bathenadas were shelling out big money. We know their competition is getting killed right now. Unusual tactics and weapons. Are we doing this? Are those our guys down there?”

Leon stares at the map. “Shit,” he says it quietly, and gets on the phone. As he’s talking, Jethro points to his computer, a question on his face. Leon nods, allowing Jethro access.

It takes him a few minutes to find the right screen, and another moment to type it in. McGee, Thomas.

A moment later a record pops up. Gibbs blinks. Even his rank is redacted. The only bits he can read are: Thomas McGee, Annapolis class of ’76. SEAL training class of ’82. Everything else, including Tom’s sex and birthday, is redacted. If he didn’t know Tom was an Annapolis grad and SEAL, and be able to guess his dates, he wouldn’t be able to tell if this was the right Tom McGee.

His eyebrows shoot up at that. Leon’s on hold, so he’s watching Gibbs, and he’ll admit, he’s never seen a file that thoroughly blacked out before, either. “Who’s that?”

“Tim’s Uncle. His family thinks he works for the Navy doing Black Ops type stuff.”

“And you’re looking into him…”

“Gut feeling.”

Leon looks at the miles of blacked out information. “Keep looking.”

“Now what?” Allan asks as he puts his phone down. They have successfully tracked down and requested accident reports on the 14 cars that were stolen from the Philadelphia and involved in a traffic accident. Eight others either haven’t been involved in accidents, or like the car that caused Jared’s accident, weren’t left at the scene.

Ziva replies, “Now, you start looking through them. You’re looking for accidents where there wasn’t a driver. Read the medical reports and make sure that the right people are assigned to each car. You’re looking for mechanical devices in the wreckage that shouldn’t be there. You’re looking for cars that exploded.”

“And what are you looking for?” Allan asks.

“A bomb maker who works with a team of car thieves.”

“And Jimmy?”

Jimmy glances to Ziva. “I’ve got background on everyone who got hurt. Finding out why they were
targeted.”

She nods.

“You can’t arrest me! I’m doing my job!” Koskinigen is extremely irate about this whole procedure. He’s been spouting off how he’s been running his own sting for the last three months and if they’d just talk to legal everything would make sense. “Everything on that computer is classified. I had to destroy it. You guys are trying to keep me from bringing this all to light!”

Draga is supremely unconcerned about Koskinigen’s comfort. “Doing your job? Killing people, that’s your job?” Draga leans in close to the handcuffed man, sitting in the back of the transport van with him. “Killing people is my job. I don’t even need a warrant for it. All I have to do is claim you got frisky, got your arms around my neck, and I had to shoot you in self-defense. And trust me, the only reason that hasn’t happened is because what’s in your head is worth more still in there and functioning than decorating the inside of this van.” That’s a lot hotter, and much more personal than the usual cop giving a suspect a hard time routine.

That gets through to Koskinigen. “Who the hell are you?”

Draga glares. “I’m the guy whose life you’ve ruined. I’m the guy who’s likely not going to see his kid anytime soon because I’m too damn big of a risk, because of you. I’m the guy who can’t go home because every scrap of my stuff has to be looked over for evidence.” Koskinigen’s eyes are blank, but they flicker with recognition when Draga says, “And I’m the guy who’s car is in ninety million pieces back in an evidence lock-up because you didn’t want Diane Anderson to talk.”

Koskinigen swallows hard. “I want a lawyer.”

Gibbs and Leon are having an interesting conversation. Right now, Leon can’t get confirmation of if there are any US forces on the ground dealing with anything that’s going on in South or Central America. He also can’t get confirmation that there aren’t.

In fact, he can’t get anything beyond shuffled around from one stuffed shirt to another. Though, each stuffed shirt he gets is higher on the food chain than the last one. But not much higher. He figures at this rate it’ll be the Tuesday after next before someone high enough on the food chain to give him an answer will talk to him.

After the third non-answer, Leon shakes his head and hangs up. This time he dials Jarvis. “Can you come in?”

“Kind of busy right now.”

“I bet,” Leon says dryly. “Do we have soldiers on the ground dealing with that mess?”

“That’s the million dollar question, isn’t it?” Jarvis sound frustrated as he says that.

“Do you mean you don’t know, or that you don’t want me to know?”
“Why do you want to know?”

“Because we know who the Bathenadas were paying off, and several of them are in a position to put soldiers or sailors on the ground, and the people I know who have run ops like this think this is looking awfully professional.”

Leon can feel Jarvis nod his head at that. “No one is willing to tell me. I used to run ops like that, and, yes, they do look awfully professional. Suddenly, I’m getting a lot of people who are deaf, dumb, and stupid.”

“They won’t tell you?”

“I know. I am… dealing with the situation.”

Leon comes, rapidly, to the conclusion that he’s very happy not to be “dealt” with. “I see. Okay. Here’s one for you, can you get me in contact with Commander Thomas McGee?”

Jarvis thinks for a second, placing Thomas McGee. “Your family tree has branches everywhere, doesn’t it?”

“Apparently.”

“What’s he do?”

“Rumor has it, he’s a SEAL Commander who does the sort of stuff that’s happening in South America right now. Without a permission slip from you, I can’t get any intel on him. He’s ‘above my pay-grade and clearance level.’”

“Interesting. Sure. I’ll have James write you up a permission slip. Think you’ll get something interesting out of him?”

“Maybe. And if not him, he may know who’s involved with something like this.”

Tony’s gotten his “hostage” DEA Agents together, and they’re happily tucked into the conference room, working on their computers, hunting down the finances of their boss, and where all the cocaine they were bringing in actually went.

Tony sighs, and then, finally gets a few seconds with his wife.

“I see you’ve got the Gremlin and the Mogwai working away,” he says very quietly, sitting on her desk.

She glances over. Allan’s pouring through his data, and Jimmy’s, from the looks of it, building some sort of visual web to show the connections between everyone. Tony’s being quiet enough that neither of them looked up when he said that to Ziva.

“With Bishop and Draga out, every set of eyes I can get is welcome.”

“I’d imagine.” He looks at the empty smoothie cup next to her. “They’ll be here soon. How about, between then and now, we get you and I something to eat?”

Which is when Ziva’s tummy reminds her it’s busying growing a small person and sends a massive wave of FEED ME to her.
“Yes! Fried chicken. I *need* fried chicken.”

Tony takes her hand. “We’ll talk bombs over biscuits.” Then he turns to the working MEs. “We’re on a food run, want anything?”

“Where are you going?” Jimmy asks.

“Elaine’s taking care of us,” Ziva says, knowing where the properly fried chicken and biscuits will be.

“Tell her I need food, and to make up whatever for me,” Jimmy says.

“You don’t have a specific order?” Allan asks.

“She knows what you need. You want to try a blind order, too?” Jimmy asks.

Allan shrugs. “Do I?”

Jimmy nods. “Yeah, we’re expanding your horizons today. Bring us food, and by the time you’re back, I’ll have this chart done.”

---

With Jarvis’ permission slip in hand, Jethro’s not having any problems getting into Thomas McGee’s file. And as military files go, it’s an impressive one. He, unsurprisingly, did well at Annapolis and SEAL training. He more or less leapt up the command rank, and lots of active duty helped with that. Pick a hot zone, and Thomas McGee was there.

What he’s having a problem with is when it ends. Namely, 1990. Twenty-six years ago. When Thomas retired at the rank of Commander.

He looks over to Leon, who’s getting in touch with everyone he knows in the logistical support services (because, if you want to know where something is happening, and no one will tell you, finding out where the food, uniforms, weapons, and machines go, and which ones went, can be enlightening) and nodding away as someone tells him something, and says, “He’s not in the Navy any longer.”

Leon raises an eyebrow, but turns his attention back to whatever it is he’s hearing.

Gibbs checks on one other hunch, going over to the CIA database. The SEALs and the CIA’s Special Activities Division work together sometimes, maybe Thomas transferred over. He gets another extremely redacted file, thought this one has enough legible details to know that Thomas stopped working for the CIA in 2003.

From there, he’s off the grid.

That feeling that he’s onto something *big* is hitting Gibbs even harder. He’s sure that on some level, Tom either is the key to this, or knows where to find it.

They don’t know anyone at the CIA who will give them un-redacted access to this file, and he knows that Tim’s beyond swamped right now. And Tim’s the only person he’d trust to try and take this file from the CIA.

He’s staring at the screen, looking at a lot of blacked out lines. Willing himself to free associate. *Why does this feel like the lynchpin?*
The updates Gibbs’s getting from downstairs have linked three of four accounts together. The one that doesn’t fit is the account that was emptied into Ellanza’s hands. It’s attached to the Bathenadas, now, but…

Gibbs checks the timeline on when those SEALS were captured. Before they got this account number. So, it’s possible they got this account number because whoever sent it knew it’d be going active soon. Or, they got it because there’s a message in there, somewhere. Could be whoever sent it didn’t like how those SEALS were treated and wanted attention on them…

Could be the account is a message, telling them who is sending this information.

Gibbs pulls it up. He hates running financials, but that doesn’t mean he can’t do it. So, he starts, slowly, having to double check each number, going back to the first entry on the account, finding where that money was going, and hoping that it’ll tell him who sent them this information.

An hour later, when Tony and Ziva are back with food, (and Jimmy’s happily tucking into a grilled tuna salad, and Allan’s looking pleasantly surprised to see chicken fried steak and mashed potatoes looking up at him) Tony herds everyone (but Tim, who was mid-hack and growled at him for distracting him, Tony backed, slowly, out of his office) into the conference room.

“Campfire, time! I want sit reps, status updates, and everything else, from all of you.” He tosses a dry erase marker to Draga. “You and Bishop, first.”

“We arrested John Koskinigen for lunch. He’s claiming everything he was doing was legal, and he’s got warrants for all of it. When I mentioned not appreciating his attempting to kill me… He didn’t say anything, but I could see it in his eyes, he knew what I was talking about, and it wasn’t a surprise. Then he immediately asked for a lawyer.”

Bishop chirps up. “He’s got a call into counsel, but we’re trying to put together a money laundering for a drug cartel link that we can somehow link to terrorism so he can’t get one.”

Diane shakes her head at that. “Let him have his lawyers, we’ll be ready for him, once Abby gets the data off of his computer.”

As they’re saying that, Draga writes IRS on the whiteboard, with Kos. under it and an arrow leading from Kos to Diane/Eric.

Diane bounces up, because that sounds like her shot. “I’ve got him, too.” She draws a triangle on the whiteboard. The top of it says, Floating account, the middle level says, Election account, the third level says money laundering charities, then she draws a circle off to the side Bathenadas, she draws an arrow from the circle to the money laundering charities level. “This is the basic way the money’s flowing. Here’s where John comes in.” She draws an arrow from money laundering charities to Kos. “Here’s where it’s going.” She draws from Kos to election account.

Then she adds: Thomas Grason and Yvette Hereuch and draws a line between them and Kos. “These are both IRS agents that attempted to audit,” she draws a line to the election account. “A third agent, Josh Rush, attempted to audit that account, too. He did not audit that account and is now in charge of IRS audits of other branches of the government.” She adds his name and another line to Kos.

“Here, let me butt in before we get lost,” Jimmy adds. He circles both of the dead IRS agents, and then adds lines from them to another circle, this one labeled, traffic accident. He adds another circle,
Philadelphia Airport Thefts. “Both of them were killed in car accidents.” He connects them to car accident. “Hereuch was a hit and run, so we don’t know for sure what caused that accident, other than it was a large car with white paint…”

“Anyone track down the paint?” Abby asks.

Jimmy shrugs. “Wasn’t in the accident report. By the time this is done, I’m sure you’ll have samples of it in the lab.” He stares at the whiteboard for a moment. “Okay. Grason was not in a hit and run. Grason was in a two car accident, the second car stolen from Philly.” he draws the line from Grason to traffic accident, to Philadelphia Airport Thefts, “The driver of the second car was never found.”

Allan looks up. “And the report says that they found a collection of gears and a camera that didn’t belong in the car.”

Jimmy nods, adds: self-driving car to the list, and links up the murder he’s talking about with it. And then, he quickly sketches in Diane’s case where it matches up with the other two IRS agents.

“You put a rush on getting that one back to me, right?” Abby asks.

“Oh yeah. Everyone who still has physical evidence has been told to get it to you as soon as possible,” Jimmy replies.

Abby stands up and takes the marker from him. “While you were at lunch, the photo recognition came back. Say hello to Michael Kenna,” she writes it on the board. “He’s in the videos that go with the thefts of,” she underlines Grason and Diane and adds Halson, the name of the victim of the accident that rerouted Diane and Draga. “And he’s in a bunch of other videos, too. Once, we do a full cross reference, I think we’re going to see that he’s the guy who lifted all of the cars we’ve caught up in this sting.

“Corwin’s been on the detonator side of this, and he’s found that the detonator in Draga’s car matched seven other ‘unsolved’ bombings.” She writes, Bomber??? “We’ve got samples of the wiring he used, and we’re nailing down who’s bought it recently, but don’t have that, yet. What we do have is the knowledge that each of the explosives he made were wickedly expensive, so he’s either insanely rich or the guy bankrolling him is.” Then she draws a dashed line between Bomber???. And the top of the triangle’s floating account. “They’d have that sort of money, right?”

“Four billion dollars went into that account, from just that one source, in the last twelve years, and they’re on track for another four billion to head in this year. Yeah, they’ve got the expense account of the gods. But… So do all of the lower levels,” Diane says. “Unless those detonators cost more than tactical nukes, you’re not talking about so expensive to put the lower down guys out of the running.”

“Not that much.” Abby erases her dashed line.

Ziva gets up, she’s been the one researching the bombings. “The bombings have, mostly, happened outside of the United States. Although, given the quality of the investigation into some of the car accidents—“

Allan adds in, “I’ve got at least two that don’t look like standard gas tank blew accidents that need to be double checked.”

Ziva nods at that, “It’s entirely likely that more have happened here that have been overlooked. The abroad ones have been ‘high value’ targets. They range from a British Finance Minister to a member of the UN Security Council. Interpol thinks that this bomber is talent for hire. The attacks fit into
larger patterns of crimes, but not with each other. The Finance Minister, for example, was executed by bomb in 1978, and was a high value target for the IRA. The theory is that his death was farmed out, because local talent would have had a difficult time getting to him.”


“Yes. The first one goes back to 1969.”

“Probably explains the use of hi-fi equipment. Back then high-end stereo equipment was likely the best components you could get for this sort of work.”

“That would make sense.” Leon, who used to have an awfully nice stereo back in the day, says.

“Plus, stereo equipment might be expensive, but it’s easy to get through customs, and be can openly sent through the mail.”

Ziva nods at that as she says, “Four of the overseas bombings happened before 1988. One happened in 2006. The rest are in the US and have been in the last two years.”

“Long time off,” Tony says.

“Check the MOs of bombers in jail?” Gibbs asks.

“Yes,” Ziva replies. “Until the 2006 bombing, it was assumed the bomber was Jakob Hemmelich. But he was still in jail in 2006.”

“Copycat?” Tony asks.

“Too exact. This is the same formula down to the trace elements that came off the equipment used,” Ziva says. “So exact, they let Jakob go free.”

“That’s exact,” Bishop says.

“As of right now, no one knows who this is, just that he had a long retirement, and came back out of hiding recently,” Ziva says.

“If the detonators all match, it looks like he’s done at least five jobs for whoever’s planning the car crashes,” Tony says. “Where are you on linking Koskinigen to them?” he asks Diane.

She shakes her head. “If he’s handling the money, it’ll be virtually untraceable. Just like we can’t concretely say the Bathenadas are paying any given person on our list directly. Well, compared to how John’ll have it structured, they’re playing sloppy. There will be no direct connection between any money he controls and whoever is running this.”

“Indirect connections?” Tony asks.

“I froze more than seven hundred accounts today. It’ll take me and a legion of accountants months to get through all of it. What I can say, is that every cent he’s directly touched in the last six months has been recorded, frozen, and made so only Leon and I can touch them. My legion will find the link, but first, I’m going to need a legion, and second of all, we’ll need the time to get into it.”

“Who else did you freeze?” Leon asks.

“It’s possible you and Abbi are the only directors of Federal Agencies that still have liquid cash.” She smiles a bit. “Okay, not the only ones. I’m sure there’s a bunch of little ones I’ve never heard of and couldn’t identify if I had to, they’re okay, too…” She thinks for a moment. “Director of the FBI
is in the clear. Jarvis is in the clear. Secretary of the Army checked out. The entire top tier of the DEA was getting pay outs from the Bathenadas, directly and through charities, and were paying into the election account. CIA’s up to its eyeballs in this thing. Everyone at the top is involved in this on every level I could find. Jeb and Hillary are both getting money from the election account, along with pretty much everyone who’s run in the last ten years. Both of them have connections to people putting money into that account, too.” Diane’s fidgeting a little as she says that, looking annoyed and uncertain. She swallows hard. “We’re going to have a real problem with this case shortly… judges.” She rubs her eyes. “Every federal judge on a bench was appointed by someone who got paid out of that election account. Some of them have paid into it. The three highest ranking Federal Prosecutors have been paid by the Bathenadas through the charities. We’re lucky enough that the FBI’s out of this, and they’re the guys who handle public corruption cases, but… This goes live, and we’re going to have a hell of a time finding people to prosecute it.”

Everyone else looks around the room. That’s not their usual job, and none of them quite know what to do with that.

“When’s Malloy coming in?” Vance asks.

“Soon,” Diane replies. “He wanted to grab everything he could find on tax law before he got here.” She looks uncomfortable, very uncomfortable. “Judge Harland is on the board of two of the charities the Bathenadas are paying. He’s only getting a few thousand dollars a year in board fees, but…”

Gibbs looks angry. “There’s no way he knows!”

“I hope not. But just like you didn’t give Sterling any slack on my say so…”

“Shit.” Gibbs nods. He wouldn’t take her word on it, and she was sleeping with the man, not a somewhat estranged Marine buddy. “Okay. I’ll go talk to him this afternoon. Who appointed him?”

Diane shakes her head. “He’s a state judge and the Virginia Senate elects their judges. No direct or indirect payments for him. From what I can see, no state offices lower than Governor got money out of the election account.”

“What does the ‘election account’ do?” Bishop asks.

“Money goes in, and then it goes out. I think it buys good press. There are a lot of payouts to bloggers and writers and reporters. But not all of them do that, and each year a really big payment goes to the top of the pyramid,” Diane says.

“And we don’t know what the top does,” Leon says.

“And McGee will bite your hand off if you attempt to distract him away from finding out,” Tony says, holding up an empty sleeve, his hand pulled back into the cuff.

“DEA?” Leon asks.

“Still hasn’t asked where their agents are, though by now they must have noticed that something’s gone wrong. At the very least whoever was expecting Ellanza and the cash to show up has, yet again, been disappointed. I’ve got their three agents on that. Last update, Sammuels has been investigating what exactly he was doing when he was a mole in the Bathenadas’ organization, and the other two are hacking into their boss’s communications, finding out how he got the message that they needed to go in and pick Ellanza up.”

“The guys with them?” Draga asks.
“Not in the system,” Abby replies. “At least, as of yet AFIS and Interpol haven’t matched their fingerprints, faces, or DNA to anything.”

Leon adds what he’s been able to find on the Bathenada situation, as well. “There’s a good possibility that the current fight in the South is not the Bathenadas alone. I can’t get anyone to comment on if we have men there, or who those men might be, but, talking to logistics was able to let me know that sat phones, APVs, demolitions equipment, munitions, and more than 100 helicopters have headed to South America in the last month. The missing 500 million was going to pay for something, and I’m not an accountant, but that sounds like about the right number for this sort of an incursion.”

“So, wait, they got the US to pay for a US incursion into a country it’s not supposed to be attacking?” Tony asks.

“Or they got one part of the US to pay another part of the US… The right hand and left hand may not know what each other are doing,” Leon says.

Gibbs thinks about mentioning Tom McGee, but… not yet, not when he’s got so little to go on.

Everything pauses for a second there, then Jimmy adds, “Everyone Allan and I looked up, everyone who was in a car accident with one of the stolen cars, was in a position to be a whistle blower. Couldn’t find what they might have brought to light, but they all had some sort of middle or higher level government job.”

Tony nods at that. “Get Draga and Bishop the list of them, and they’ll get on their bosses. They probably, like Diane, tripped a computer red flag when they checked into something, or they told their bosses they wanted to check into something.

“Diane, how hard is the accounting stuff you’re doing?”

“How hard?” she’s not sure what exactly Tony’s asking. It’s not physically difficult, and mentally it ranges from type number A into line B, to spending hours unraveling financial statements to find the devils hiding in the details.

“Yeah, is it like tracking down case numbers? Can I give you Jimmy and Allan and have them do something useful for you?”

Diane nods, number A into line B work. “Thousands of numbers that don’t have names, yet. And I still need to get into Koskinigen’s computer, and get you and Malloy briefed on what you need to be talking to him about.”

“We can add names to numbers,” Allan says.

“Okay. Bishop, Draga, find out about our dead almost whistleblowers. Ziva, you’re on our bomber. Abby, more and more evidence. I’m on IRS and DEA. Gibbs, you’ve got Murray. Leon, where’d the 500 million go? That cover everyone?” Tony says.

Everyone nods.

Gibbs heads out, hoping this won’t be too awful. He’s really, sincerely, deeply hoping that Bleach isn’t in on this, let alone for so little money. He might not like, but he can at least understand the guy who sells out for millions of dollars. The guy who does it for five grand a year… Gibbs doesn’t get
Bleach is in court when Gibbs gets there, but he notices when Gibbs ducks into his courtroom, and reads the look on his face right. He calls a recess less than five minutes after Gibbs gets in.

A minute after that, he’s sitting in Bleach’s chambers, and Bleach is rolling in behind him.

“You look grim.”

Gibbs nods. He closes the door behind Bleach.

“Partnership For a Drug Free Tomorrow, what do you do for them?”

Bleach blinks, thinking about it. “Donate money. Put something expensive up for their yearly silent auction fundraiser. Go to the fundraiser and bid on stuff. Attend a meeting twice a year. That’s pretty much it.”

Gibbs doesn’t feel his gut tighten at that. “Hill Valley Drug Treatment Center?”

“I’m on their board, too.” Bleach offers Gibbs a rueful smile. “Sam, my youngest son, he was in and out of rehab in his teens. Alcohol, pot, coke, you name it, he took it. They got him cleaned up when the previous three places couldn’t shift him. I owe them for his life, because before they got him, he was on track to be dead in a ditch one day. We give them lots of money. I’m on their board, but it’s an honorary position. I don’t have the time to be involved day to day, but that’s one of my post-retirement plans. Why are you so interested in my charitable work?”

“You paying attention to what’s going on down south?”

“The cartels? Sure. You’ve got to be under a rock not to see what’s going on.”

“They’re funneling money into a lot of anti-drug charities. Those charities pay money to important people. Some of those people are getting—“

Bleach looks furious. “You wanted to know if I was on the take!”

Gibbs nods, silently. “Don’t think you are.”

“I’m… God! How much money?”

“Hundreds of millions of dollars in the last week alone.”

“Oh God.”

“It gets worse.”

“How?”

“Those important people put that money into another account, and that money gets uses to circumvent the election finance laws.”

Bleach looks like he’d collapse if he wasn’t already sitting down. Then furious comes back up again. “Give me a minute. I’m closing session for the day. Then you get me up to date on this.”

Gibbs nods. “Sure.”
And from there, there’s hunting down leads. There’s sitting on computers and adding hint A to hint B to find coincidence C and attach that to suspect D.

It’s long, it’s painstaking, and for every lead that goes somewhere there’s more that don’t.

By the time dinner comes around, everyone is looking weary and fried.

Tony, thinking about his day of sleep, makes the executive decision. “Break time. Go home, sleep. At it fresh in the morning. Tomorrow, we’ve got interrogating the head of the IRS, busting the head of the DEA, hunting down a crew of car thieves and a bomber, as well as figuring out who’s paying them, and who runs all of our mystery accounts.”

Jimmy sighs at that, rolls his neck, very glad to get off the computer. Yes, what he’s doing is useful. Grunt work, but useful grunt work. He doesn’t know how Tim does this day after day after day. “See you all tomorrow,” he says before heading down to the lab, to spread the word that the day is done.

A few minutes later, he finds Abby surrounded by car parts, all of her computers flashing through different searches. “Quitting time upstairs. Boss is sending us home.”

Abby looks at the slew of tiny and not so tiny pieces of metal around her. She’s got Kenna nailed on the car thefts, and has connected him with physical evidence to four more cases. She nods to Corwin, who’s going through bomb reports that are close but don’t quite match the mix of their bomber, looking to see if he’s expanded his technique and or range. She’s found three other attacks that are close enough that she’s willing to say they were by the same person.

“Zelaz’ll be here any minute,” Abby says to Corwin. “You can head off.” Then she looks to Jimmy. “Give me a few minutes, and let me get my stuff set, and I’m ready to go. You want to swing by the Dungeon, grab Tim, and save my poor tired feet a few steps?”

He smiles dryly at her and winks. “I live to serve your poor, tired feet.”

Abby smirks at that. “Meet me back up here in 10?”

“No problem.”

A bit further down, Jimmy stops in his own domain, and makes sure everything is properly shut down. Since he didn’t actually do anything in the morgue today, that didn’t take long, and then down to Tim.

He pokes his head in and sees Tim staring intently at his computer screen. For a moment, he hovers in the doorway, and then realizes that whatever he’s doing (and Jimmy isn’t sure, because Tim’s fingers aren’t moving) it’s all engrossing. He takes one step into the office and sees Tim’s face go hard with anger as a line of profanity comes out of him.

Tim finally looks away from the computer and sees Jimmy standing there.

“Been here long?”

“Less than a minute.” Jimmy shuts the door behind him. “So, does that mean it’s quitting time for you?”

“No!” Tim looks like he’s about to hit the computer. “This…” he looks like he wants to say something but can’t think of a swear word bad enough to describe it, “bastard booted me out with
87% of the program through.”

“Tim?”

Tim stands up and starts pacing around, he starts to rub his eyes, touches his glasses, remembers they’re there, then lays them on the desk and gets to it. “It’s the security system from hell. It’s only online one out of every ten minutes. Which means if I don’t get my program though in less than a minute, I’ve got to start from the beginning again.” Tons of agitated energy is pouring off of Tim right now as he paces fast.

“Ugh,” Jimmy says, trying to be sympathetic.

“Yeah. Fucker! Eighty-seven percent uploaded. I’m still rewriting…” He swings by Jimmy on one pass of his pacing, and Jimmy catches his hand.

“You want to go at if fresh in the morning?”

Tim blinks, from the looks of it, calming down a bit. “No. I’m in the zone. Just… Order me some food or something. I’ll be here until I break this.”

“Okay. Might want to give Abby a quick call…”

“Yeah. Okay. She doesn’t want to take an extra step, does she?”

“Not right now.”

“I’ll go up with you and say good night. Can’t even try again for eight more minutes. Might as well get up for a bit.”

Tim’s tired. His eyes are bleary and he’s not sure what time it is since he’s been down in the artificial light of the Dungeon for so long. (He could look at his clock, but he’s also been coding for so long, there’s nothing left in the world outside of the screen in front of him.)

Finally, finally, as he’s sitting in front of that screen, willing his program to go faster, to work harder, to slip in under the deadline, as he’s watching the timer tick down and the percentage of his program get smaller and smaller, finally, finally, he sees it hit 0 before the timer hits :00 and he whoops with pleasure.

He’s jumping up, adrenaline pouring through him, ecstatic.

In ten minutes, the first packet will come back to him, and he’ll finally get to see who all that money is going to. He gets up, stretches out all of the various kinks, looks at his watch (remembers that he wears a small piece of technology on his person that tells time) and sees that it’s only a little after 10:00.

Not nearly as bad as the thought it would be.

He grabs his phone and calls Abby. “I just got in!”

“That mean you’ll be home soon?”

“Yeah. In ten minutes, I’ll get the first packets. Just want to stick around long enough to make sure it works, maybe take a quick look and see how many other big names are in on this shit, and then
“Excellent.” But she says it with a yawn.

“Don’t wait up.” He’s feeling very good right now, and he’d certainly like to blow off a lot of this adrenaline naked and with one of his favorite people. But he also knows said person is cooking their son right now, and likes lots of sleep. “Maybe, tomorrow morning, there’ll be a chance for some quick celebrating.”

He hears a little chuckle, and can feel her smile. “That sounds great. See you in my dreams.”

He makes a little kissing sound. “And in an hour or so, I’ll see you in our bed. Good night.”

“Night, baby.”

Tim heads over to the snack bar and gets himself a decaf coffee. He strolls (struts with a happy little bounce in his step) around the mostly quiet Dungeon. Just him and Connon and Ngyn right now. He says hi, tells them a little about what he’s been on, and asks about their projects, and then, watch beeping, heads back to his computer to see what’s popped up.

He stares at the screen. “This can’t be right. One packet?”

Okay, sure a minute isn’t long, but his program broke the data from that account into little bits that could just fly across the web. He shakes his head, wondering if something got caught or slowed down or what, and spends a minute writing up a diagnostic to see what might have happened, sets it to run, and then opens up the packet.

“Eight payees?”

The one packet mystery was explained. Every other year, since 2008, before that it was six accounts, eight accounts get one large, equal, payment. And though the numbers vary, every other year, somewhere between one and six people pay in.

This is the least active account he’s ever seen. His own, personal, savings account does more in a month than this does, and he’s never had billions of dollars in it.

With only eight accounts to check, he decides to run the financials. It’ll only take an additional ten minutes, so why not? Save Diane a few minutes, start the morning with a report for everyone, and they can roll from there.

So, he’s starts looking. After all the secrecy for this account, the protections to the accounts this paid out to are minimal. Probably because they thought this one was safe. You put the security system on the outside of the house, not on the closet.

He gets the names, feeling, almost let down. He’s got no idea who any of these people are. Given how big the names on the other accounts were, this is… anti-climactic.

*Who the hell are you guys?*

So, eight names, and again, it’ll take, ten minutes tops, so he googles. And when he googles, his blood starts to run cold. Jeffry Tanen, President of the Federal Elections Commission. William Burke, Vice President of the Federal Election Commission. Jaqueline Fordi, Chief Operations

The four men at the top of the Federal Election Commission, and the owners/operators of the companies that make 98% of the electronic voting machines used in the US are all getting massive payouts every November.

He says it out loud, almost silently, but he still says it, “They’re selling the elections.”
Rule 44

Tim’s been pants-wetting scared before. He’s felt fear hit so hard it’s paralyzed him. This is different. It’s colder, less gut fear and more mind fear.

*They’re selling the elections.*

His mind is reeling with it. Okay, yes, the first of the election accounts had hinted that something along those lines was going on. But not this. Sure, corruption, okay. He can deal with that. He more or less expects politicians to be at least a bit grungy, if not outright dirty, these days. Bending the rules, going outside the lines, nudging things right and left to their own benefit. Of course.

But this… This isn’t paying off your local news channel to skim over your bad points and praise your good ones. Hell, this isn’t even creating a scandal for your opponent to tank him the weekend before the election. This… This isn’t deceiving people to vote for you, this is taking their vote away from them all together.

They’ll kill to keep this quiet, and… Shit…

He thinks he’s in and out clean, but Diane drained the account that feeds into this one, and the people running that account have to know the people running this one.

And with multiple billions of dollars… They will find him. They found Diane.

The target just went on his head, too. He gets up, closes the door to his office, picks up his phone, puts it on speaker, and gets working on his computer as he calls home.

“Abby!”

“Tim?” she’s sounding sleepy.

“Grab Kelly, get our guns, get every scrap of cash we have and all of the credit cards I got when I thought we were going up against the IRS, and get out of the US.”

“Whoa!” She’s not sounding sleepy anymore. “Back up. What the hell just happened in the last half hour?”

“I found out what that account does. They’re selling the elections.”

“Tim? You’re… shit… no you’re not kidding. Okay, I can have everything set in… less than an hour. I’ll get you—“

“I’ve got to be here.”

“I’m not leaving you! If it’s too dangerous for me to be here, it’s too dangerous for you to be here.”

“Please! Look. I’ve got to stay here and hack like I’ve never hacked before to just bury what I’ve done. They’ve got the money to find me, and then find you, and… And that’s not going to happen. And someone’s got to… deal with this.”

“Then we’ll deal together. They’ve got safe houses and…”

He’s shaking his head while he tries to get into the log information for the banks he used to check who owned those accounts, hoping he’s not too late. “Jethro trusted a safe house and protective
custody and it didn’t work out that well for him! I want you with me, but… They may already know I’m the one who got in. Tomorrow we might be under martial law, and those movies where none of the laws apply anymore, that could be here tomorrow. Remember how bad things got after Katrina? That could be the whole country tomorrow. The FEC’s been selling them since 2004. That’s every law passed in the last 12 years, gone… Maybe. I don’t know what happens when this breaks. At the very least, the market probably tanks… and people get mean when their money vanishes, and I want you and Jimmy and Breena, and all of you, out of here, safe.”

“Tim. Don’t…”

“Please! Grab what you need, leave your phone and computer… I’m going to start buying train tickets you won’t use… Just, go. Don’t tell me where. Get out of the US. Take the clean phone, leave it off—“

“I know how to not get tracked. If you’ve got to deal with this—“

“Zelaz and Corwin know how to do their job, and they won’t be a target the way we are. The way we might already be. If nothing else, get out of the house, as fast as you can. It’s been twenty minutes since I looked up the first account. They probably couldn’t have broken my system that fast, but…”

“You think they’re looking for you?”

“If they aren’t already, they will be. Please, please, I’ll call Jimmy, and all six of you, get going.”

Abby knows well-enough not to say to Tim, let alone over the phone, that he might be overreacting, especially not after what happened with Diane, but she’s certainly hoping that he’s having a moment of panic. (Though, feeling the cold spreading through her as she thinks through the ramifications of what ‘selling the elections’ actually means, she’s feeling like he’s probably not overreacting.) “Okay. I’ll let you know when we’re on the move.”

“Thank you. I love you.” His voice shakes on that.

“Don’t say it like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you think we aren’t going to see each other again.”

He swallows hard. “I don’t know when we will. If this gets bad… I love you.”

“I love you, too. And soon. We’ll see each other soon.”

“Okay.”

He’s got the first account wiped, well, modified, by the time his phone is ringing again. He feels bad about doing this, but he switches his IP to Diane’s. Anyone checking who accessed that account will see that Diane did it. She’s already on the hit list, and in protective custody, so he’s likely not hurting her too bad by making the switch.

Jimmy’s phone is ringing, but no one’s picking up. “Come on, Jimmy.”
His fingers are flying over the keyboard, working his magic. But, and this makes him feel cold, if they dig deep, they’ll see that he changed the IP.

Still no answer. He hangs up when he hears the voice mail pick up, and calls again.

If they get to the next account before he’s got it switched, they’ll be able to see it was him. He thinks the stealth mode he set for his computer is good, and now’s the acid test of doom. More than a billion dollars each in the last twelve years, means any one of them has more than enough money to buy the talent that will find him.

Finally he hears a click and says, “Jimmy!”

And extremely crabby voice says, “Your timing is atrocious. This better be the most important call you’ve ever made.”

“It is. Abby and Kelly are heading to you. You and Breena need to grab the girls, get packed up, and get out of the US.”

For a second, there’s just shocked silence on the other side of the phone. “Okay, what did you get into?” Jimmy asks, sounding a hell of a lot less crabby at that.

Tim explains it, and Jimmy gives him less trouble than Abby about staying, which Tim appreciates greatly. He doesn’t want to have that conversation over and over.

“Don’t tell anyone—"

“Breena’s parents… My mom…” That reminds Tim that he needs to call his sister, and Penny.

“Shit, okay, yeah. If they’ll keep quiet.” He gets another account converted over. “Just… Don’t tell anyone, not even them, where you’re going. Or tell them, but lie. Just get out. Canada’s ten hours away. You can get there before Leon gets in, and I’ll sit on this until the morning. Give you a head start.”

“You think it’s going to be that bad?”

“I don’t know. But I’m not relying on hope, and even if they don’t track me down… What happens when every major position of power is filled by someone who bought their way in? What happens if the government actually, really shuts down? At the very least, we’ll see riots. And on this one I’d rather be overreacting than underreacting.”

“Okay. We can bug out for a while,” Jimmy’s sounding resigned, and he can hear sounds in the background that makes him think he and Breena are getting dressed and starting to pack.

“Thank you.”

“Stay safe, Tim.”

“I’m in a building filled with armed guys and Marines who know me. I don’t know who they’ll be taking orders from tomorrow, or if they’ll even stay at their post, but with any luck, some of them’ll think protecting us is worthwhile. You stay safe.”

“We will. Ditch the car along the way. Find a new ride, get new phones. We’ll get out.”

“Okay. I love you. Tell Breena, too.”

“Love you, too. Abby’s here.”
“Okay, get going.”

“Tim?” Sarah’s not sounding sleepy, or annoyed, just surprised to hear from him this late.

“You and Glenn need to get out of the country.”

“What?” She sounds literally stupefied by that.

“Just trust me on it. Something big and nasty that I can’t tell you about is going to go down soon, and you need to grab all the cash you can and get out of the US.”

Sarah laughs. “It’s not April fools.”

“Do I sound like I’m kidding?” Tim practically growls.

“No, but I can’t deal with this being real.”


“Can you tell me anything?”

“Keep your eyes on the news. You’ll know it when you see it.”

“That bad?”

“Tell mom and Ben to get out, too. She always said she wanted that Mexican vacation. Now’s the time to take it. Go!”

That. His request to get their mother to safety, convinces her more than anything that whatever is about to hit will be a complete disaster. “Okay. We’re gone.”

He’s got the last of the accounts buried as he dials Penny’s number. He’s not a praying man, but right now he’s intently hoping in the direction of any greater powers that could possibly be listening that his hack will hold, that whoever is behind this doesn’t find him until his loves are clear.

“I’ll do no such thing,” Penny calmly says when Tim tells her to get moving and explains why.

“Penny…”

“I’ve never run from my home before and I’m not about to now.”

Tim takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and opens them slowly. “Put Ducky on.”

“Are you going to try to go over my head, make him make me leave?” She sounds angry.

“No. You’re not leaving, fine. I’m not wasting time on trying to talk you into this when I might get him to leave.”
A minute later he gets Ducky on the phone followed by, “I have heard what you told your grandmother, and I am going nowhere. Among other things it sounds like NCIS is short a Medical Examiner and could use a second set of hands. And if you are right about how bad this is likely to get, everyone who can do basic first aid, let alone any level of higher medical care should stay.”

Tim rubs his eyes and groans. He hears the echo and realizes he’s on speaker. “Ducky, Penny, please… You live in the city. You’re less than two miles from the Capitol. God alone knows what’s going to go down when this goes live.”

“I didn’t run away during The Blitz, and I very much doubt the ruffian elements of DC can hold a candle to the Wehrmacht.”

“You were seven when that happened, and I bet your father would have preferred you and your mother had been home in Scotland rather than London.”

“Nevertheless. We do not run.”

“Goddamned stubborn octogenarians! I’m boycotting your funerals if this bites you in the ass!”

“As will be your prerogative, Timothy, along with the ability to tell my ghost, ‘I told you so.’ We’ll be at the Navy Yard, bright and early tomorrow.”

Tim hears the ‘we’ll’ and assumes that Ducky or Penny has the sense at least to stay together. He knows they can both shoot, he knows there’s at least one gun in their home, and he knows they both don’t have the kind of eyesight where he’d want them to have to bet their lives on their ability to hit a moving target. If he’s very lucky, he might get them to agree to stay at the Navy Yard, not as good as getting out, but better than an unprotected condo.

“Fine. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He makes one last family call. “Senior.”

“Is this Tim?”

“Yeah. It’s me.”

“Oh, God! Are they okay? Gibbs said someone would come in person…”

“Okay. Everyone is okay. I’m… I haven’t told your son about it, yet. I want things to look as normal as possible, but… It’s…” Tim’s not sure if he should be calling Tony about this, yet. Not sure which works best for buying his loves the most time possible to get them out before they look like something is up. “Shit. Just, look, right now, you and Delphine need to get out of the country. Don’t ask me any questions. Don’t call Tony. Just, grab your cash, pack a bag, and leave.”

“Tim?”

“This is real. It’s serious. I can’t tell you why. I can’t tell Tony, yet, either, but I promise you, if the shoe was on the other foot, he’d be getting my family out.”

“Tim, we’re in Berlin this week.”

“Perfect! Stay there. Pretend I didn’t call you.”
“What…”

“I know. I can’t say. If you’re already there, change as much cash as you can into Euros.”

Senior sounds deeply disturbed as he says, “All right. You sure about this? Dollar’s doing better than the Euro right now, any sort of big change…”

“I don’t care what it is, just get your money out of US currency. You might end up bankrolling the rest of us soon, so be ready.”

Senior sounds much happier with a job to do. “Then I’ll be ready. Good idea to sell off any assets I have?”

“If they’re in the US… I don’t know. I hope I’m wrong, but… I’m probably not.”

“All right.”

“Senior, you can’t tell anyone about this. It’s not a hot tip you can give to your buddies. This begins and ends with you, okay?”

“Certainly, Tim. Let me get moving.”

“Thanks.” Tim’s really hoping he didn’t just start a run on the markets, and that Senior can do what he’s told to.

---

_Call Tony, don’t call Tony…_

He’s been making the calls from one of the clean phones, and with the exception of the one to Senior, he’s been calling the clean phones, too.

It’s not impossible to trace these calls, but no one should know who has what phone.

Rule forty-four, first things first, hide the women and children.

The idea that Ziva might qualify as one of the women to hide had never occurred to Tim before, but right now, it is.

He doesn’t think she’ll leave, but he needs to give them the option.

“DiNozzo,” Tony’s voice is thick with sleep when he answers.

“Hey.”

“Tim, you’re supposed to be home, asleep. You finally break that account?”

“Yeah. Wake Ziva up, you two have something to talk about.”

A few minutes later, Tim’s done explaining, and Tony and Ziva do have something to talk about. Tim leaves them to it.

---

He should try to sleep. It’s midnight, and all sort of hell is going to break loose tomorrow, rest would
be good for helping to handle that. But he’s way, way too wired for it.

So, no sleeping. He’s gotten as much coverage as he can give himself for what he’s already done. **What next?** Next up, he picks up the laptop Diane’s been using, the one he just tried to pin all of his previous work on, and turns it on. Everything from here on out happens on this computer.

His “track covering” showed that Tim McGee logged out a bit after eight. Same time everyone else left for the night.

He’s got his tool, now what?

They don’t know who runs the election buying account. Diane drained it, so someone’s going to be checking into that soon, if not already.

There’s step one. They know who’s selling the elections, they don’t know who’s buying.

Ownership is hidden behind a dozen false names and a PAC that doesn’t exist. He doesn’t have the accounting chops to untangle that. So…

Tim groans. It’s stupidly easy.

He can’t get into the bank that handles that account’s records, and he doesn’t need to. Not it’s banking records, at least. He finds out who runs that bank, the board members are wanted for money laundering and illegal banking in most of the first world, but they’re openly living in a non-extradition country. Finding them, and the phone numbers attached to them, isn’t difficult.

Same with the bank. Using it is illegal as hell, and causes the IRS to drop on you (unless you’re these guys) like a ton of bricks. But it’s not secret. It’s not like you’ve got to know a guy who knows a guy to get into this. The phone number’s on the damn website. (And, yes, there is a website. It’s a very nice website, images of soothing beaches and promises of ‘security’ and ‘privacy’ for the discriminating customer. Minimum account balance, two hundred million dollars.)

Routine helps him feel more in control, more calm. He gets phone records. He’s done that thousands of times over the years.

Then he begins checking numbers. The first thing someone does when their bank account suddenly goes empty is call the bank. A bank account with more than four billion dollars in it going empty is going to produce some extremely irate calls.

It’s a bank, so when the list for the last day of incoming calls returns to him, it has more than a hundred entries. He gets the lists for the individual board members, too, and begins the first search, who called the bank and the board…

That narrows him down to four numbers.

Two of which called the bank five times a piece as well as the entire board. The country code for those two shows the calls originated from inside the US. He’s feeling awfully sure these are the numbers he wants.

Tim’s all but typing with crossed fingers as he punches those numbers in. He slaps his desk in celebration when he gets names to go with those numbers. No burner phones. Amen.

He doesn’t know who these people are, either, but some googling takes care of that.

Theresa Manedel, Chairman of the Republican National Convention and David York, Chairman of
the Democratic National Convention.

He pulls up their phone records next. In the last three days, they’ve called each other a lot. Sixteen times since Sunday morning. He checks the month before that, and they didn’t talk to each other once.

The first call happened at 03:38 on Sunday. Shortly after the accident didn’t take out Diane and Draga. Who was Theresa talking to before that? She got a call at 03:35.

That one goes… Tim sighs. The case is unraveling here in the phone records. That number looks familiar, and a bit of extra checking shows him why. That’s Koskinigen’s number.

Who was he talking to?

Tim can’t tell. The number that called Koskinigen at 03:30 was from a burner phone.

Tim runs the burner phone, but that one call is the only one it ever made. He tries to trace it, but it’s out of service now. That branch of the conspiracy knew what it was doing.

He checks the other two calls to the bank, he doesn’t recognize them, and googling isn’t informative. He flags the numbers, see if they pop up again, but there are several hundred accounts with this bank, and some of their owners likely called with their own business.

Now what?

Start at the beginning. Abbi hands the mystery letter over to Diane. Diane starts to look at those numbers. Next thing she knows Koskinigen is in her office. Time to trace every call he’s made since Diane got those numbers.

He’s been at it for two hours when Tony leaning against his door, holding a suitcase, one of Tim’s suitcases, and a bottle of scotch filters into Tim’s mind.

“Take it you and Ziva had a chat?”

Tony nods. He puts the suitcase in the corner of Tim’s office, pulls up one of the chairs, and pours both of them a few shots into the coffee mugs Tim has in his office.

“Yeah. I made a few more calls to. She’s getting Emily Fornell, Lara, and Vance’s kids out.”

Tim nods. He hadn’t thought to do that, and that’s a good plan. “And that gets her out, too.”

“Yeah.” Tony sips his drink. He doesn’t have to say that’s the only way he could get Ziva out of the country. And he’s not sure if she’ll try to come back after she gets them out, or if she’ll decide keeping her and their child out of whatever comes next is more important than getting back to him. He hopes, if it gets bad, that she stays away. He fears she won’t. “Swung by your place. Figured that if the shit hits the fan as bad as I think it will, neither of us is seeing home anytime soon.”

“Thanks. I’ve got the feeling none of us are going anywhere alone anytime soon.”

“I wouldn’t.” He sits back, drink cupped between his hands. “You wonder if this is what it felt like to be on the Titanic after it hit the iceberg?”

Tim raises an eyebrow at him, and takes a sip of his scotch.
Tony’s looking tired, and contemplative. Tim knows this is the way he looks when his walls are down. A version of Tony almost no one ever gets to see. “You, and I, and a handful of others know that everything’s about to sink. Nothing we can do about it. Can’t fix the hull. Just got to sit here, and wait, and hope we get a lifeboat.”

“We got our families on lifeboats. That’s the best we could do. Come on, I’m tracking down who’s doing what. Once Vance gets in—“

“Maybe half an hour behind me. Diane should be here, with Draga, soon, too.”

“Okay, let’s run this down.”

Tony nods, grabbing a computer, and starting to hunt down who did what. “It’s kind of ironic,” he says as his computer logs in.

“What?”

“You know how they say your vote matters and it’s so important to get out and vote and all that shit?”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t vote in the last… election before last. Couldn’t vote in the last one because I live in DC. The one before it. I was planning to. Swing by on the way home. Ended up running late. Didn’t make it in time. I actually felt slightly bad about that.”

Tim snorts at that, and then remembers… “I didn’t, either. The last one. I got to the one before that, but, I was on my honeymoon. Didn’t even remember about that, until now. Not sure I could have. Didn’t live at my old address, wasn’t registered at the new one.”

It’s a few minutes of quiet data surfing later when Tim says, “Penny might end up happy with this.”

Tony raises his eyebrows.

“Her Green buddies might actually get elected now.”

Tony scoffs. “You think there’ll be an election?”

“I like the idea of that better than the alternative.”

“How is anyone ever going to trust one, again?” Tony asks.

“I don’t know. Penny talked about this one guy she met who wanted to increase the number of seats in Congress to 5000, so there’d be way fewer people per Congressman, so each vote would matter more. That’d give more local control, too.”

“I suppose. Gonna have ten senators per state?”

“Something like that.”

“2004?” Tony asks.

“On this account. For all we know there’s an older one with the names of other guys attached to it.”

Tim drinks more of his scotch, trying to keep himself from thinking all the way through this, but he’s not willing to drink enough alcohol to shut down his brain, so the thoughts come. “At least the last two Presidents. And everyone they’ve appointed. That’s what… Four Supreme Court Judges?”

“You think the Military will stand for this? Think they’ll revolt? Put SecDef or some General in charge?”

Tony shrugs. “And if they did, would that be any less legitimate than what we have now?”

Tim doesn’t have an answer to that. He does have a list of people Koskinigen’s been talking to, so he spends more time on that.

Leon comes in a moment later, sees the bottle, grabs another coffee cup, and pours himself a large drink. From the way he drinks, he’s gulping down at least half of it. Then he sits down, shaking his head. “Jarvis will be in, soon.”

Tim shrugs, not sure what good Jarvis is going to be if the President’s out tomorrow.

Tony’s got the same look on his face.

“He knows where the bodies are buried,” Leon says.

Tony drinks again. “Dead rise tomorrow, Leon. Not gonna matter if some Senator took bribes or something. Not after this breaks.” Then Tony laughs. “Isn’t there a book or something where the head of the CIA becomes president?”

That’s ringing some faint bells for Tim, but not enough for him to put it together. “I know a show where the Secretary of Education ends up in charge when the President, VP, and the rest of the cabinet are killed.”

“This’ll take the whole cabinet out,” Leon says. “They’re all appointed by the President. Head of Congress?”

“That account works on off-year elections. ’14 was a big year. Lots of money,” Tim says.

Leon shakes his head and pours himself another. He looks at the alcohol in his cup. “It’s clarifying. Yesterday, we were on the biggest corruption case we’d ever worked. On the verge of taking down two more agencies. Today, who cares if the IRS was on the take? Doesn’t matter. Not really.”

“It matters,” they hear a second after the sound of the door opening. Jarvis heads in, with Lt. James. A second later James shuts the door, and settles himself, leaning against Tim’s desk as Jarvis takes the last of the chairs. “It matters because that’s our protection, and how we’re going to get out of this alive.” Jarvis takes the last cup, pours some for James, and then drinks his straight from the bottle. “So, what do we know?”

Tim proceeds to tell him.

Jarvis and the rest of them listen to Tim’s sit rep, nodding a bit, and then, when he’s done, Jarvis says, “Terri and Dave, huh? Well… That’s less shocking that I was expecting. Who else is buying?”

“Not into that, yet. Going through Koskinigen’s calls, seeing who he’s been talking to.”

“Okay. Any shot they know you’re onto them?” Jarvis asks Tim.
Tim shrugs. “I really hope not. But… That kind of money. They can hire the guy who’s better than I am. They probably already have. They can hire a bunch of him. They put their minds to it, and they will find me.”

“Okay… DiNozzo, you’re working the DEA angle, right?”

Tony’s not thrilled at Jarvis just waltzing in and taking over, but he answer nonetheless. “Yeah. Dunerson’s in the Bathenadas’ pockets.”

“Great. And you’ve got Koskinigen in custody?” Jarvis asks Leon.

“Yeah.”

He looks to Tim, “And you’ve got proof that what you say is happening is happening?”

“I’ve got the files. I suppose there could be some other reason why the head of the DNC and RNC are giving billions of dollars to the top four guys at the FEC and the top guys at the three companies that make 90% of the electronic voting machines in the US, but I’m damned if I can think of what it would be.”

Jarvis flashes them a very tight smile. “That’s good. Here’s the plan. We hunt down the buyers and sellers. SEAL teams. I’ve got ones I trust, are going to go in and grab them—“

“SEALs? Just grab them out of the blue?” Leon asks.

“Not like there’s a Federal Judge left to write a legitimate warrant,” Jarvis says.

“Shit. Diane mentioned that. That’d we have a hell of a time prosecuting any of this. The… avoid the campaign finance laws account. That touches almost everyone, and they appointed all of the judges and prosecutors,” Leon says.

“Yeah. I’ve got teams I trust. Men I’ve worked with. Men James has worked with, too. We’re going to distract the rest of the higher ups with a bit of buzz. I may have, on the way here, gotten a hold of Dunerson and told him that he’s about to be indicted for bribery, and several other higher ups have gotten that news, too. They’re in self-defense mode right now, burning evidence as we speak.”

“And this is going to help us, how?” Tim asks.

“Because you guys are going to get every member of the press you’ve ever met, and every single person who has a blog, and anyone who can get information out, and tell them that Leon’s got the juiciest story they’ve ever heard of. They’ll, if they’re any good, already have some feelers out that are noticing people are getting nervous, and they will show up to find out what we have to say.”

Tim starts nodding, and Leon and Tony are getting it, too.

“And then, when we’ve got every member of the press, inside NCIS, away from windows and direct line of sight…” Leon says.

“And checked top to bottom for explosives,” Tony adds, remembering Deering.

“You guys will drop the real story while my teams move in and take custody of everyone who’s buying and selling. We make sure all of us are on camera. All of us speak.”

“Snowden it,” Tim says. “Become so visible that if something ‘mysterious’ happens to any of us, it’ll be all over the news and the world’ll know why.”
“Yeah, it doesn’t guarantee they won’t try, men who lose everything are willing to do desperate things, but, with any luck, that’ll keep us alive,” Jarvis says. He puts the bottle down, takes off his jacket, and says, “All right, who are we grabbing out of their homes?”
Operation Get Out of Dodge does not start off smoothly.

It would have been nice if it did, but it didn’t.

Biggest Little Girl, who to date, has slept through every attempt to move her while sleeping since the day she was born, decided that tonight was the night for her eyes to go springing open as her daddy was carrying her into the car, and start wailing, inconsolably, about some sort of bad dream.

Jimmy, did, eventually get her shushed back into sleeping, but not before the three grown up members of the group were so stressed out that they’re practically vibrating with it. (Though, given the mood of this group, it didn’t take a whole lot of extra aggravation to get there.)

The second bit of not exactly going smooth as silk is that none of them have a map. That’s not true, they have smart phones, smart phones which have every possible map to have ever existed on them. Those phones, which Tim had said not to bring, are currently in the car with them, but they are turned off, and not being used as maps.

Breena’s not sure why the phones are with them. She doesn’t see any reason why they should be going along on this trip, none of their computers came along for the trip, but Abby keeps saying, ‘trust me’, she knows what she’s doing.

“And what are we doing?” Breena asks.

“Going to Walmart. You guys are going to buy a map, and new phones, and as many of those pre-paid credit cards as you can. I’m going to take care of our phones.”

“Take care of how?” Jimmy asks.

“You’ll see. Get me some duct tape while you’re in there, okay?”

So, Jimmy, with Abby and Breena’s credit cards goes in. And he buys a lot of prepaid cards. And then he understands why Abby said Walmart. Because, in the front of the store is a vending machine that sells pre-paid smart phones. Which means, as long as he uses cash, (which he does) he can get a phone, which has no connection to him, which has a map on it.

He buys three of them. And a bunch of little ones like the flip phone’s Tim uses for burners.

And then he remembers the one other thing he’d forgotten: insulin. He remembered his test strips and all the rest of that, but not the thing he needs if his sugar goes wonky.

Fortunately he didn’t forget his prescription pad. He writes himself a script for insulin and syringes, finds a good cooler, and stocks up. He probably won’t need it. He hasn’t had to inject himself in more than a week, but this is really the sort of thing he’d rather have and not need, than need and not have.
He gets the duct tape, and snacks, and more diapers and wipes, and heads out.

When he gets back into the car, he hands over the duct tape and says to Abby, “Now what?”

She takes the tape, cuts three long strips, and then tapes them to the back of their phones, their turned on and broadcasting their location, phones. “Now I go tape these to three semi-trucks. They’re big enough they don’t have to worry about someone trying to run them off the road or into a train, and anyone checking our phones will see us head off in three different directions.”

Breena looks up from trying to get the map working on the first of the new phones, and says, “That’s a really good idea.”

Abby grins at her, but it’s not as bright as it could be, too many people are back in DC for it to be her usual ‘everything is perfect and I’m getting petted for how brilliant I am’ smile, but it’s better than nothing.

“Back in a minute. Then off we go.”

By the time Diane and Draga get in and wander down, Tim’s fairly sure his, try-to-keep-this-as-quiet-as-possible plan has been shot to shit, so he calls Gibbs.

Gibbs sounds very awake when he answers, to the point where Tim wonders if he’s been working all night.

“Everything okay?”

Then Tim realizes that Gibbs must have seen his name on the ID, and thought something might be wrong at home, where he’s supposed to be.

“No. It’s not. Come to the Navy Yard, bring Abbi, and pack like you might not get home for a while.”

“You broke the case, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, and it’s rotten.”

“Okay. We’ll be in soon.”

As he’s doing that, Tony calls in Bishop and Jake. If they’re gonna war room it, they might as well have the whole crew in place.

By that point, it’s two in the morning. Leon, Tony, Diane, and Draga are hunting through the accounts, finding out which names go with which accounts and who needs to be, and can be, swooped up. Jarvis is calling in every commander he personally knows, and asking for troops on loan. James is calling in his SEAL buddies.

Tim looks around, thinks for a moment, decides that there’s nothing he can do right now that everyone else can’t just as well, and heads for the sofa. He lays down, closes his eyes, and forces his mind to clear. He can’t work if he’s fried, and if he doesn’t get at least a few hours of downtime, he’ll be fried.
When told to pack like he might not see home for a while, Jethro packs. And with Abbi next to him, also packing… It’s a very thorough job.

Not necessarily what Tim or Tony would bring, but… he’s the one who’s had to live off of just what he could catch or carry. Whatever it is, it looks like they’re going to make the Navy Yard their home base, so…

Blankets. He and Abbi clean out what they have and grab all the camping gear, too.

Matches, candles, lamps, lighters, everything in his house that burns is coming with them.

Abbi has a few days of MRE style rations; they’re coming too.

Water filters. (They don’t know what’s coming, but there’s never a situation where having an extra water filter or two is a bad thing.)

Batteries. Every battery in the house, even the ones currently in devices are coming with them. He’s eyeing his generator when Abbi says to him. “NCIS has a backup generator, and your motor pool has its own gas station. That little guy isn’t going to do much.”

Gibbs nods, unplugs it, starts to pick it up, and puts it down. Too heavy. “You feel like lugging that next door? The Reynolds don’t have one, and…”

“Sure. I’ll leave it on the back porch.”

He nods at that and gets onto other gear. The knives, the guns, the hand-cranked radio, they pack it all. If they have to bug out of the Navy Yard and head for the hills, they’re set.

They also, and this is more in line with what Tim was thinking when he said pack like you aren’t going to see home for a while, bring a few spare outfits, extra socks and undies, Mona, all of her food, her bowls, and their personal toiletries.

Tim’s asleep on the sofa, curled onto his side, looking very unpeaceful for someone who’s asleep, when Gibbs and Abbi get down to the basement.

They can see two very nervous looking techs, who don’t appear to know much more than they do about what’s going on. The shy one and the little girl, they’re sitting at one desk, and keep glancing over at the conference table. Tony’s taken over the conference table, and has his crew, along with Diane, Leon, and Jake working on something. The door to Tim’s office is closed, but the blinds aren’t drawn, so Gibbs can see Jarvis, his secretary, and a crew of men he knows are military by their posture, but can’t identify on sight, having a tense conversation.

He and Abbi stride over, Mona happily bounding along, really interested in this very new place with all these new smells and people.

Gibbs remembers the name of the one tech. “Brand, right?”

She nods.

“You like dogs?”

She’s flatfooted by that, but finally says, “Uh, yeah.”
“Good. C’mere, say ‘hi’ to Mona. You can come, too,” he says to the quiet one, who he’s seen before but doesn’t know.

Both of the ladies come over, and Mona does her best to be cute and charming. Brand pets her and says, “Aimee, this is Mr. Gibbs. McGee’s dad. Mr. Gibbs, this is Aimee Ngyn, she’s… awesome.”

Ngyn, who predates Brand by more than five years, smiles a little at that. She knows who ‘Mr. Gibbs’ is, by reputation if nothing more.

Gibbs offers his hand. “Hi, Ngyn. I know I’ve seen you around. I worked here before I retired, Brand.”

“Oh! Sorry.”

Gibbs waves it off. “They telling you anything about what’s going on?”

Both ladies shake their heads. “Top secret, and everyone’s nervous.”

“Let’s go find out. If they’re calling me back in, I’m sure you’re cleared for this, too.”

Abbi’s aware of the meet and greet going on behind her with Gibbs and the computer ladies, but she’s focused on what’s happening at the table.

Tony’s about a paragraph into the sit rep when Gibbs and both girls join in. But even with that one paragraph, she’s starting to feel sick. When Gibbs does come over, Tony begins again. He gets them up to date, and as he does so, more and more people keep coming in. None of them are in uniform, but they’re all military, and they all head straight for Jarvis.

Once he gets the sit rep done, Tony says to Abbi and Gibbs, “You two feel like running the feint?”

“How so?” Abbi asks. She’s still too shocked by the sit rep to really process. She’s run into her share of bad apples before but this…

“The ‘official’ reason we’re going to call the press conference is the corruption charges on DEA Boy and Mr. IRS.”

Abbi nods, slowly. “Gil. I’ve met him a few times. Hell, about… four weeks ago, he requested an hour to talk with me about what had tipped me off to problems in CGIS. I thought he wanted to make sure his organization was clean, not cover his own ass.”

Tony shrugs at that. “Yeah, well. Lot of ass-covering going on right now. Ours, as well. What I’d like, is for you and Gibbs to run a big, flashy, lots of men, my main team and yours, lots of press, lots of lights, both of you growling at the cameras, not really talking to anyone, being gruff as bears with sore paws, and grabbing Dunerson.

“Then I want you making the statement that the official press conference will be at the Navy Yard, tonight at 6:00, and that all members of the press are welcome and all questions will be answered.”

Abbi nods at that. “And that’s when the real news drops?”

“Yeah. Everything falls at once. We grab the buyers, the sellers, and as many of the big names on the election influencing account as we can get.”
Abbi glances over at Tim’s office. “That what Jarvis is doing?”

“Yeah. They’re calling in everyone who owes them a favor. We’re going to need men all over to do this.”

Abbi nods at that, too, standing up. “Jethro, you wanna plan grabbing Dunerson? I’ve got some friends to call.”

Gibbs looks up, his eyes blank, he’s still reeling from what he’s learned. How many lives… sent off to die by men who hadn’t earned the right to issue those commands? He lets out a slow breath, making himself not think about it. There’s a job to do. A real, concrete job. Think about that. “Sure. I’ll get the first sweep done while you call. Then you look it over, and I’ll call in my favors.”

Tony looks at the two Minions who have joined the conversation. They’re both looking shell-shocked.

“This isn’t supposed to happen,” Brand says, very quietly, very young-looking.

“I know.” Tony says gently, “Come on, grab an account number, and get a name to go with it. We won’t be able to get all of them, but it’s time to hunt down the biggest donors.”

Gibbs grabs Draga and Bishop, taking them up to the bullpen. If this is the public face of what they’re doing, it’ll be public.

“Okay, what do we know about Dunerson?” Gibbs asks, slipping back into Team Leader in a heartbeat.

“He’s been tipped off by Jarvis that he’s about to be indicted for bribery, and that we’re supposed to show up on his doorstep at 11:30, once we’ve got the warrant. He knows who the judge is, and we’ve seen several calls going between them. Probably a promise to let him know when the warrant is ready,” Bishop says.

“He’s called his lawyers, and from his phone records we know he’s still at home,” Draga adds.

“So, we’re getting our warrant from a different judge and showing up early?” Gibbs says.

“That’s our current game plan. And, we’re not indicting him on bribery, but on election finance violations and money laundering,” Bishop adds.

“He’s, from what we can tell, stuffed in his house with his lawyer, rapidly destroying anything that links him to any sort of bribe, and probably building up his this-is-a-witch-hunt defense,” Draga says.

“Okay. Let’s get a map of that house up, and see how to do this to provide the best possible show,” Gibbs feels really off saying that, but, that’s the job, and right now, it’s way easier to focus on the job than on anything else that goes with it.

Brand and Ngyn spend five minutes watching the account hunt. Then they spend a moment conferring with each other. After that, Brand asks Tony, “Are you really just going down the list and
typing numbers in?"

Tony looks up from his own typing, a bit annoyed. “Yes. This is how cops work.”

“It’s slow.”

“Yes, Little Ms. Obvious, it is slow.” He says, tense and annoyed at her.

“Would you like us to speed it up?” Brand asks.

“That’s why you’re here, typing away. Two more people speeds things up.”

Brand rolls her eyes, every ounce a teenaged hacker dealing with a dinosaur who doesn’t know how to use a computer radiating off of her. Ngyn pokes her, and says very quietly, “Behave.”

Brand reins it in, taking a deep breath. “I mean, really speed things up. This is just asking a database for information. Give us ten minutes and we’ll write the script that takes everything from dataset A and runs it through dataset B. That way we can also sort by bank, by who’s sending how much, compile all of the payments together, stuff like that.”

Diane is all over that. “Can you do that with this?” She points out how the account information doesn’t look like a standard database to her. (For example, if this information had come back to her in an Excel spreadsheet, Diane would have already done what the girls are talking about.)

Brand waves her concerns off. “It’s all just bits. Just gotta arrange them right. Give us some time, and you guys can get onto tracking these guys down.”

Twenty minutes later, as Tony’s looking at names with total amounts of money next to them popping up, organized by amount, he says, “Brand, as soon as you can legally drink, I’m buying you a bottle of whatever it is you drink.”

Brand laughs at that. Then she says, “The twenty-one thing is a federal law. That won’t matter soon, right? I like Stoli Vanil. Ohhh and the Godiva Chocolate liquor… And Rum Chata! Oh my god, that stuff is liquid oatmeal cookies!”

As Brand is extoling the virtues of alcohols that are basically candy, her twenty-one comment shuts down what had been a slightly lifting mood in the rest of the adults. They all glance at each other, getting what Brand doesn’t.

Diane, watching names pop up, says, “Can you do this with the payouts, too?”

“No problem.”

“Instead of by amount, I want them organized by zip code,” Diane adds.

Brand glances at Ngyn, who shrugs and nods. “I can do it, but… why?”

“We know who’s paying in, and we know who’s getting paid, but we don’t know who is actually hiring these guys to do things. This won’t be definitive, but it’ll start to narrow down who’s using this service.”

“You mean like which senators?” Brand asks.

“Yes.”

“Cool! Sure, we can do that.”
Diane really wishes she could be that innocent. Brand really doesn’t get what they’re up against.

Diane does.

The first thing she did when she got in was transfer all of her money to an offshore account in Emily’s name. She’s had that account since the divorce with Sterling. Most of the money in it is from that settlement, and has been kicking round, collecting interest, waiting to become Emily’s college money. Once she had all of her cash in there, she converted that money into Euros and lifted the restriction on it. Yesterday, that account could only be accessed by her and Emily, or Fornell and Emily.

Now Emily can get into it alone. She’s got the access numbers.

She doesn’t know where Ziva’s taking her. “Safe.” Somewhere safe. Yeah, right. Safe is her baby, in her sight, in her arms, right here.

Except, unlike Brand, she knows what’s coming, and right here might be “safe,” in the sense that she doesn’t think anyone would be stupid enough to try to mob the Navy Yard, but it’s not going to be Europe or Canada safe. It’s going to be burrowing down here under ground and hoping there’s still some city left when they come out.

More anger at having to deal with this, at having her life tossed upside down, of her home violated, and her child driven away surges through Diane.

With her computer, she makes sure that no one on the payout list can move. She kills their bank accounts, destroys their credit, and puts them on the no fly list. Those voting machine companies are all bankrupt now. Financially, in addition to the morally they were yesterday. The FEC top dogs can’t even buy a cup of coffee, now, unless they’ve got cash on hand.

The account she’s tucking all of their money into is getting bigger and bigger in leaps and bounds. She just hopes it going to be enough to pay to rebuild the destruction that’s coming.

“So, we understand what we’re doing?” Ziva says, and the four people with her nod. “Good.” She doesn’t love this plan, but she’s getting four civilians out of a country with hundreds of miles between her and the borders.

Confusion is her best ploy.

Confusion and big bank accounts.

She’s bought bus tickets for every major city in the US for Lara and the kids. And she’s bought them departing tickets from four different DC stations, as well as three of the neighboring suburbs. She’s gotten them train tickets, and plane tickets, all using the same technique. And she’s gotten them, from all of their destinations, connecting flights, trains, and busses. Anyone trying to track them will have to use a lot of people to see who goes where, and which tickets actual people are using.

They’re all starting off at different transport out, and not rejoining each other until they’re in Puerto Plata. It’s not exactly the way she’d like to do this, but the kids are old enough to travel alone, and unlike Emily Fornell, every summer of their lives, they’ve gone with their parents on Leon’s different
trips. They know how to do this. Lara’s spent less time out of the US, but since she’s been taking care of the kids, she too has been part of the summer trips.

Their passports are well-stamped, and the airport they’re going into isn’t as high tech as it could be. If anyone is looking for them, using a computer, it’ll be a while before they get the heads up.

From the Dominican Republic, they’re getting on a cruise ship. That’ll spend the next week cruising around, and then land in Europe. From there, it’s up to them where they go next. Hopefully, by then, they’ll be going home.

She’s not making them vanish, but given who they are, and their training, and the resources she has at hand, she can’t make them vanish. All she can do is make them hard to find.

She and Emily Fornell are going to vanish. She’s seen the pictures of what the people who are after Diane did to Emily’s room, and the message was clear.

Once she’s handed over all of the tickets to Lara, and dropped her off at one bus station, Jared at the train station, and Kayla at Dulles, she and Emily head to Andrews.

“Why aren’t the Vances coming with us on this?” Emily asks as they pull away from Dulles.

“Because one NCIS Agent and a witness going from NCIS DC to NCIS Rota is unremarkable. They’ll give us passage and that will be that. If I try to put the Vances on a Navy transport, there will be questions, first and foremost, why take the family of the Director of NCIS on a transport instead of the jet. And, why take them in the middle of the night? And why don’t they want their names on the docket? And why isn’t Director Vance going?”

“I get it. But you and a witness, moving fast, in the middle of the night, for a case…”

“Is unusual, but happens.”

“Okay.” Emily sighs, staring out the window as they drive towards Andrews. “I’ve never been on a C-130J before, that’ll be interesting.”

“Interesting is a good way to put it. Do you like rollercoasters?” Ziva asks.

“No. They make me sick.”

Ziva sighs, and makes a mental note to stop on the way, getting baggies, and some of the anti-motion sickness stuff McGee uses. “This isn’t going to be a fun flight.”

Emily shrugs. “I’m supposed to be writing college application essays right now. Going to Europe doesn’t sound too bad.”

Ziva nods at that, and squeezes Emily’s hand. Where in Europe, they don’t know yet. Military transport, unlisted on the passenger manifest into Frankfurt, and from there… Probably get a Euro-rail pass and be in a different country every day.

Do it all in cash, or as much as possible, and blend in. Just two tourists having a good time. She’ll notice someone watching long before they manage to pin down where they’ll go next.

“Ziva?”

“Yes.”

“When are we going to go home?” Emily sounds very young, and very scared as she says that.
“I do not know,” and Ziva’s voice is very sad as she replies. “Governments rise and they fall, and we will hope that the people in the United States do not wish to settle this with all out war.”

“But if they do? If it all falls apart and…”

Ziva gently squeezes Emily’s shoulder. She doesn’t have an answer for that. She knows what she would do if she were not pregnant, what she’d be tempted to take Emily along with, too. Ziva was Emily’s age when she started in the army. Not much older when she killed her first person. There’s nothing a soldier needs to do that a seventeen-eighteen year old girl can’t.

Shouldn’t possibly, but not can’t.

But she is pregnant. And she owes it to the life growing inside of her, and the ones she’s leaving behind, to find a place, a calm, quiet, peaceful place, a place where she can live to raise this child. Hopefully, in the not too distant future, that will be the United States.

As she pulls over into the parking lot of a drugstore, planning on getting motion-sickness remedies for Emily, she prays that both of them can come home, soon.

Abbi holds her phone and thinks. It’s been a long time since she’s been in touch with too many Marines. Her team, the people who she would have called for something like this in a heartbeat are dead. Her second and third runners up…

She just doesn’t know, not anymore. Not for something that needs to be kept this quiet.

She calls Omagi instead. He’s going to be part of the team going after Dunerson, and he’s got a wife and small child at home. Time to make sure her team is in play, and as safe as possible. They speak briefly, and at the end of that, she tells him to call in any CGIS field agent who’s even remotely competent. Doesn’t matter who’s “on” today, they’re all coming in.

She’s got a gut feeling of her own, and that’s that by this time tomorrow, DC is going to need every good person inside of it to hold the line.

Jarvis has called in every favor he can. That’s not true. He’s called in every favor he thinks he should.

He is, unfortunately, rapidly coming to the conclusion that even with his men, and James’ men, they do not have enough people to do this in one fell swoop. They can’t do a coordinated shock and awe campaign because between the two of them he’s got 114 men, and right now, more than 200 people who need to be picked up.

He knows he’ll get more warm bodies over the course of the day. He’s not sure he’ll get enough of them, let alone in the right places. Five bank accounts were involved with buying the last election, and the people behind all of those accounts will need to be grabbed before any of his people here can bring their families home.

Before he can see his own kids again.
Which means, instead of planning a single, multi-theatre attack for 18:00 tonight, he’s talking with a small squad of men about picking up the first two names on the list. Lucky for them, Manedel and York both live in DC, almost within walking distance of the Navy Yard.

With the girls speeding up the search for who’s getting paid, and who’s doing the paying, Leon doesn’t have much to do. He thinks for a moment, and then stands up.

Jarvis and James are in Tim’s office, and from the few words he catches before he goes in, planning the extraction of Theresa Manedel, who lives less than four miles from here. If they move fast, they can get to her before the sun rises.

Might be a good idea to have as many of them in custody as possible before they go live with this, rather than hit them all at once…

Jarvis appears to have already had that thought, because he nods to the men, and James, and they head off.

“Off to stock up my holding cells?”

“That’s the idea. Manedel and York both live in town. They’re going to grab them first. Quietly. In, out, and done, no witnesses, no sound. Then back here.”

“More guys coming in?”

“Yeah. I’ve got six of my own teams coming in, and two of James’ will be here before the sun rises. More across the country, moving into place for other targets. You’ve got holding cells in every NCIS building, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I think we’re going to be using a lot of them. We’re going to grab as many as we can, because when we go live with this, the ones we don’t have are going to get lynched.” Jarvis looks out at the cybercrime office, and Leon doesn’t think he’s speaking metaphorically.

“How much money do we have here, right now?” Jarvis asks Vance.

Vance shrugs. “I’ve got a thousand on me.” He’d grabbed that for him, and made sure the rest of his money went with Lara and the kids. The entire reason he didn’t get in the same time as Tony was he took a few minutes to get his money out of the country, and make sure they could access it. The grand in his pocket is his emergency stash.

“No. I mean in evidence. The banks will not open for at least a few days after this happens. And if the electricity goes, credit cards are worthless. Short term: is there cash on hand to keep your people afloat? If we have people sheltering here, for days, maybe longer, do we have the money to feed them? Longer term, who knows if Treasury is going to keep paying the bills.”

“Yeah. Not for too long, but…” He thinks they’ve got about two million dollars in cash on hand. Yesterday, when they didn’t need it, that was tons of money. Today, if he’s got to keep the thousand people who work here and their families fed for any real length of time, let alone make payroll with it, it’s not nearly enough.

“How about food and water?”
“I doubt anyone is going to lay siege to us, here, Clayton.”

“Grocery stores might not open tomorrow, either. Even if they do, it’s entirely possible we might end up under siege. The President probably will. How many pissed-off parents of men and women who have died in our service are going to respond well to hearing that the man who ordered them to Afghanistan or wherever, wasn’t really elected? And God help Bush, he’s way out in Texas with just him and a few Secret Servicemen.”

“You want to tip him off?” Leon doesn’t love Bush, but that doesn’t mean he wants to see the man, or more importantly his Secret Service detail, murdered.

“If we do it directly, he will let the others know we’re about to move on him.”

“One of the wonder kids can probably figure out how to pull an untraceable bomb threat. Maybe an hour before we go live? Hopefully that’ll get his security up enough they don’t manage to outright murder him.”

Clayton nods. “Good idea. It’s going to be open season on senators and congressmen. I honestly don’t know if the President will resign, or if he’ll gather everyone loyal to him and proclaim himself ruler of the US for life. Tomorrow we might be under martial law, we might be in the middle of a war zone, or everyone might yawn and decide to fight it out in court. I don’t know, but I’m giving long odds on fighting it out in court.”

Leon doesn’t think that’s likely, either. Not in the short term, at least. Longer term… Sure, nothing DC likes better than long and twisted legal cases. Though, now he’s wondering how many of those cases were for show, a way to make people think they had power, without having to actually give them power.

Another thought hits Leon, more related to making sure he’s got enough food for everyone. “Your teams, they’re not leaving here after, are they?”

“They can. I won’t say anything if they’ve got families they want to go to, but they aren’t reporting back to their units. They’re going home or staying with us. As many of them as I can get. The states all have a National Guard they can call out if the going gets rough. We’re in DC…”

“On our own.” They’re in the only spot in the US that is entirely under Federal control. There’s no State government here to offer redundancy, no National Guard or State Troopers to keep order, no state treasury to pay the bills if the Feds won’t. “Schools won’t open tomorrow, either.”

“First responders won’t be getting paid. No money going to the hospitals. It’s going to be a mess. So, yes, if they’ll take orders from me, I’m pulling them in. Hope to have at least 200 of them here by the time we go live. Thinking about how to give Metro a heads up, get SWAT ready, without tipping our hand. Your bomb threat idea might work. Get it called in as soon as our press conference goes lives.”

Leon nods at that, too. “Where’s your family, Clayt?”

“Not here.” He doesn’t know where they are, and that’s intentional. “Yours?”

“The same. I’m going to make some calls,” Leon says.

“Everyone you know who can shoot and will uphold some sort of law here if everyone riots?”

“Yeah.”
Jake Malloy has never, ever felt so useless. His wife is off getting ready to go storm the DEA and kidnap… arrest, right now, while they’re still doing warrants and the like, it’s an arrest, their Director. Everyone around him is studying something, looking something up, though with the girls (one of whom he suspects might not be old enough to even work a full-time job, and definitely should not have been waxing poetic on a cocktail of Stoli Vanil, Rum Chata, and whipped cream with cinnamon and a maraschino cherry on top) doing their computer magic, the thing he had been doing, that was useful, looking up names and accounts, has now been outsourced to a machine.

He’s basically staring at a computer screen, trying to look vaguely useful, and not doing much of anything.

DiNozzo seems to notice that. “You need a job.”

“Yeah, otherwise, I’m…” Jake shakes his head. He can’t… won’t think about what comes next. Because if he does, he’s going to grab Ellie, and run, all the way back to Oklahoma. Jake’s always been long on brains, pure, balls in charge, physical courage, not so much.

“I’ve got two of them. Take your pick. Tell me who takes over if the entire cabinet and all of congress gets knocked out of the running, or go wake up Koskinigen and make him tell you who he hired to kill Diane.”

Jake doesn’t have a legal answer to the first one, though he does have a realistic one. “Traditionally, when the elected government falls, the guy with the most guns takes over.” He’s feeling horrified and bitter as he says that, wondering who precisely that might be. One of the generals probably.

Of course, he also can’t think of a historical example where the guys taking down the “elected” government weren’t trying to step in and take over for themselves. He’s watching Jarvis, men coming in and out, and wonders. He looks like the kind of guy with guns at his disposal, maybe he’s the kind of guy who takes over when the “elected” officials fall.

Tony watches Jake’s gaze, sees who he’s looking at and says, “Not enough guns.”

Jake shrugs.

Tony nods. “Okay, Sunshine, get ready to question Koskinigen.”

They had spent a few hours prepping for that, last night. But Koskinigen’s computer had been badly damaged and they were playing catch up, getting bits and pieces of data as the techs downstairs got a drive here or there working.

“How?” Jake asks. His job was to listen to answers and give Tony points on where things were going wrong.

“They taught you how to ask questions in law school. Have at it.”

“Without his lawyer, it’ll…” He’s about to say, never stand up in court, but it hits him that Koskinigen may never get to a courtroom.

Tony nods. “Don’t go into any of the election stuff. We’ll keep that nice and clean and pristine, on the off chance we actually get to prosecute that at some point. Go after the attempted murder. Feel
free to do whatever you need to to get it out of him.”

Jake raises an eyebrow at Tony. “Whatever?”

“He’s sixty-eight and has a bad heart. Don’t leave any marks.” Jake looks very disturbed. “And make sure he’s still alive when you’re done. Otherwise, feel free to use every aggressive cross-examination technique you can muster on him. At NCIS, we don’t take kindly to the attempted murder of our agents, and on my team, we’re especially touchy about attempting to kill little girls.”

Jake nods, stands up, and realizes he has no idea where to go. Up, going up. Ellie’s up, and can probably spare him a minute to help him get this set.

The sun’s coming up as Gibbs and Abbi have wrapped the attack plan for Dunerson.

As they’re getting geared up, Gibbs’ is thinking about how much he’d really like a cup of coffee right now. A big, deep, black as sin one. Bacon, eggs, and home fries to go with that coffee would be heaven. And he knows who cooks in heaven, and who else has to get out of town, as soon as possible. He drifts off to make one more call.

“Callin’ early, Hon?” Elaine answers.

“Yeah. Big order for you, and… and a request.”

“You’re sounding tense. What sort of request makes you sound like that?”

“Bad one. Things are about to go really bad. Tonight… Can’t give you details, but tonight’s not going to be a good night to be in the city.”

“Some poor Black kid get shot by a cop when he wasn’t doing anything wrong?”

“Worse.”

Elaine can feel how close to the surface all of the scared Gibbs is trying to keep down is, and she’s feeling it now, too. “How much worse?”

Gibbs wracks his brain, and then he remembers. “Were you in DC in ’68?”

He can feel Elaine nod. Anyone who was a native of the city remembers the almost week of race riots after Dr. King was assassinated.

“Get out of the city. Make sure the premium on your business insurance is paid, and get out.”

He hears a hand muffling the mouthpiece, and can feel her talking to her husband.

A minute later she says, “Can’t do it, Jethro. Would like to, but… This building goes, and that’s everything we have.”

“Elaine!”

“Business insurance doesn’t cover riots! That’s what you’re talking about, right?”
“Yeah.”

“We’ve gotta stay and protect what’s ours. Our apartment, they can burn that to the ground and we’re covered, but not the diner. That goes up, and we’re sunk. Now what’s that order of yours?”

Gibbs knows when a woman is not going to change her mind, and he knows Elaine is there. He also knows that he can try to protect them as much as he can. “Okay. Big order. Everything you’ve got in the place you don’t want to hold on for yourselves, cook it up, and have your kids bring it to the Navy Yard. Stuff to eat now. Stuff to heat up and eat later. Raw ingredients if you don’t have time to cook them. We’re going to have a lot of people in and out of here, and they’re going to want to eat.”

Elaine understands what he’s saying to her. What he’s offering. “Sasha, Allie, and Kenzie, yeah, they can bring it in, serve it up?”

“Yeah, your sons, too, if you want, for as long as we’ve got all those people here.”

“James and Danny got to stay here with us. Danny’s got a girl he’s sweet on; she might decide to help with the order.”

“Okay.” That makes sense to Gibbs, her “boys” are big men, the younger of the two is twenty-two or three, something like that, the older is twenty-five and was a Ranger until he ripped up his knee in Afghanistan. Like their father, they’re big, strong, quiet men. “Send your sons along on the first delivery. We’ll have some things for them, help keep your business safe.” He knows Elaine’s husband has a shot gun in the kitchen, and there’s a pistol under the counter. By the time they boys have picked up what he’s going to pack for them, they won’t be in danger of being outgunned. “And when this is all done, we’ll send the girls home with payment.”

“Good.” Elaine sounds very serious as she says that. But she knows just as well as Gibbs does that leaving that money inside the building with the armed Marines is a good plan, and worst comes to worst, having a pile of cash to rebuild with after… She hopes it doesn’t come to that. “We’ll get cooking and have that over to you as soon as we can.”

“Anytime before six tonight is good. Can’t be after six. After six…”

“All right. We’ll get the first batch over soon, and keep going from there.”

“Okay. You guys change your mind and…”

“Jethro.”

“I know. Stay safe.”

“You, too. I wanna see those big blue eyes at my counter to get coffee again, soon.”

“Amen on that.” While he’s hanging up, Jethro decides to make one more call. It’s probably a step too far on the keep-things-quiet front, but the Todd family’s already seen too much sorrow. He didn’t save one of their daughters, maybe he can save the other.

“Jethro?” Rachel’s voice is sleepy and confused.

“Hi, Rachel. I’m going to tell you something, quickly, and I want you to pay attention.”

“Okay. You’re sounding very grim.”

“Yeah, with good reason. Get your husband and kids and get out of the city. Better yet, get out of the
country. But at the very least put a few hours between you and anywhere with a lot of people.”

He can feel the look Rachel is giving him, the one that knows he’s serious, but isn’t sure what to do with it nonetheless.

“Do I get to ask why?”

“We still have doctor patient confidentiality, right?”

“Sure. Anything you tell me doesn’t go anywhere else, unless you’re about to hurt yourself or someone else.”

“I’ve got intel that the last twelve years of Federal Elections were sold to the highest bidder. We’re going live with it today.”

“Shit.”

He’s never heard Rachel curse before, not like that, not to *curse,* and it’s shocking. He’s quiet for a second, stunned, and then says, “Yeah. Neck deep. We’re getting everyone who’s family out, and…”

“Thank you for thinking of me.”

“I’ve got to go start making some arrests. You want to get your extended family, your brothers out, fine, but you can’t tell them why.”

“I understand. You think DC will get… bad?”

“I hope not, but I’m not banking on hope.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Gibbs says, “Give me a call when it’s over, let me know you made it through okay.”

“I can do that. Or you call me.”

“No problem.”

“So, I guess the six billion dollar question is, who are these guys?” Tony asks, pointing to the accounts other than the one from the US, that were buying the elections.

“The guys we have to grab before our families can come home,” Diane replies.

Tony nods. “So…”

She’s tapping the lines on her laptop screen. “This account looks like it’s from China. This one is from a bank out of Saudi Arabia. This one’s in the Caymans, and that last one is out of Switzerland. As for who runs them…” Diane lets that trail off. Like the US account, these accounts represent a collection of people, not just one lone guy with too much money and an interest in US politics.

“You can take six weeks and run the numbers and shell corporations and what not, or try McGee’s
trick, empty them, and see who starts calling the banks?"

“I'll empty, you get the records?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

A minute later, Diane says, “If they’re outside the US, how are we going to grab them?”

“We’re going to hope that Jarvis really does know everyone.”

In the event of civil unrest, you and your families are welcome to take shelter in any NCIS office in the country. Should the Treasury stop paying our bills, make sure all money in evidence has been thoroughly recorded (photographed) and then use it. Petty cash survival expenditures get paid first. Wages next. Until we know for sure that Treasury will continue to pay us, only survival expenditures (food, shelter, utilities) and wages will be paid out. Vendors will have to wait. Make sure to record who gets what.

Leon stares at the letter he’s drafting for each of his outposts. He’s got teams located all over the world, and while he’s not too worried about the ones outside of the US, he needs to have some official policy in place for the ones inside the US.

He figures that around 16:30, he’s going to give word to everyone who works in the building about what’s about to happen. That way the ones who want to get out of DC can get out, and the ones who want to grab what they need from home and come here, will have time to do it.

He’d like to send that out wider, but he’s worried about being able to keep control of the message.

Of course, if he tells the people in his own building about it, they’ll tell their friends.

17:30. That’s time to get people out who want to leave, and a little time to get people in who want to come. The press conference will take time, and there’ll be some lag between him saying the words, and people starting to react. It’ll probably be close to 19:00 before everything starts to erupt.

He spits out the tiny nub of a toothpick, and grabs a new one. He hasn’t written up what he’s going to say at this news conference and he needs to do that. Hasn’t called the various news outlets, and he’s got to do that, too.

Abbi’s in the CGIS van. Gibbs is in the NCIS van. They each have a team. As they pull into a quiet, pre-dawn dark suburban neighborhood, there are scores of media vans.

Once Draga hits the brake on the van, parking, Gibbs nods to him. He and Bishop hop out, and begin setting up a perimeter. Gibbs gets out, and starts barking orders at the reporters, demanding they move back.

He makes sure they all get pictures of him looking tense and glaring at everyone, answering all questions with, “Press Conference, 6:00 pm, Navy Yard, everything gets explained then. Now move
your ass back!

A lot of the press seem to like Bishop. Which makes sense to him, she’s cute and young and blonde. Extremely photogenic. They keep yelling questions at her. “Weren’t you supposed to be here at 11:30?” “Can you tell us who was being bribed?” “Why is NCIS and CGIS working this case?”

One of the more aggressive ones yells out, “Can you comment on rumors about your boss sleeping with the head of CGIS? Is that why this is a joint investigation?”

Gibbs comes down on that one like a load of bricks, getting right into her face and verbally abusing her until she backs up behind the line. (He wouldn’t admit it, but he enjoyed that. It helped to blow off some of the tension that’s building inside him right now.)

Draga notices that Dunerson and his lawyer keep peeking out the curtains at the front of the house.

A minute later, once they’ve got the perimeter secured, Abbi and her van pull up. She and her team hop out. She’s walking tall, in the middle, holding a warrant, on both sides she’s flanked. The two men of her team on the right, Gibbs and his team on the left.

Abbi doesn’t have to pound on the door. The lawyer opens it. He nods at Abbi. “Do we really have to have the press circus?”

She smiles slightly, and then says, quietly, so the media can’t here, “Gil Dunerson, you are under arrest for money laundering and election tampering.” Both Gil and his lawyer look stunned by that. The lawyer’s eyes go wide as he demands the warrant, scanning it over, as Gibbs and Omagi turn Dunerson around, cuffing his hands behind his back.

She then produces a new warrant. “Mr. Verger?” The lawyer nods, slowly. “You are also under arrest for election tampering and money laundering, please place your hands behind your back.”

He starts to sputter that this can’t be true. Gibbs and Omagi turn him, a bit more roughly than necessary, but they get him turned, and Abbi cuffs him.

“Draga, Bishop, Saunders, you’re on evidence. Bring me everything.”

They nod, and head inside. Gibbs, Borin, and Omagi herd Dunerson and Verger into the CGIS van, through the crowd of extremely excited press, arresting the lawyer set them off into an absolute tizzy. Questions pelt them as they move, and Gibbs and Borin keep telling them about the press conference at NCIS tonight as they move through, and take off.

Tim wakes to the sound of rustling bean bag chairs. He blinks a few times, feeling groggy and upside down, and sees Diane pulling two of the chairs together.

He rubs his eyes, and slowly sits up. “You can have the sofa, if you want.”

She nods at that, sitting down on the segment he just moved off of.

“Feel like a snuggle?” she says, dry and a bit sarcastic. Her walls are in place to make her look less vulnerable, but the need for contact, someone real to hold onto as the storm gathers on the horizon, is
He snorts a bit, smiles a little, and wraps an arm around her, resting his head on her shoulder for a moment. He feels her relax under his arm, and feels himself relax a hair, too. She squeezes his hand, and nods at him. He lets go of her and stands up, then drapes the blanket over her.

“Pleasant dreams.”

She laughs at that, caustic.

“Yeah, I know.” He rubs his eyes again. His own dreams had been jumbled and unsettling. Searching for the thing that can’t be found, and not having the thing the people around him need.

He shrugs at that as he gets himself a cup of decaf. Not too far from his waking life.

He looks over at the conference table, and sees the girls are working with Tony on something. So he drifts over to find out what. What, it turns out, is what he would have done if he’d been a bit less concerned with the big question, and a tad more rested.

Still… He shakes his head. Time to get them out. “Brand,” she looks up at him.

“Yeah?”

“Your apartment’s in the city, right?”

She nods. “Yeah, three blocks from American.”

“Okay, right now, you have two options. Option one, I will buy you a ticket on the next plane out, for you to go home to your parents in New Mexico. Option two, you can go home, grab your gun and whatever you don’t want to live without, and come back here. Things are going fall apart soon, and I don’t want you by yourself in your apartment.”

She just stares at him.

He shifts attention to the tech next to her. “Ngyn, you live outside of the city, right?”

She nods, too.

“Far enough, right?”

“Hour and a half commute.”

“Good. Slightly modified options. You can go home, grab what you want, and stay here, or you can go home. If you want a gun or two from the armory, I’ll sign them out for you.” He looks at both of them. “I’ll add one other bit to this, if you look around, you will notice my wife is not in the building. She and our child is also not in the city, or near the city. It would make me rest easier if both of you decided to get out of DC and stay out of DC. There’s nothing coming up you can’t remote in to do.”

Brand looks around, and then says, “Can Ngyn and Howard come with me? She lives in the city, too, and…”

“Give her a call. You want to go with Brand, Ngyn?” She nods. “I’ll get you tickets.” To Brand he says, “If you have time, get your parents and get into Mexico. There’s an NCIS outpost in Mexico City, and another one in Baja. Either of them will host you if need be.”

Both girls nod. “Okay, go, get packed. Call Howard. I’ll text you with ticket details. I’ll get you
home before we go live. And, I’m sure I don’t have to stress this, but with the exception of Howard, you cannot tell anyone why you are going.”

“On it, Boss,” Ngyn says it, and Tim smiles at her. He gives both of them quick hugs, and watches them leave.

As they head out, another thought hits Tim, so he acts on it. Or tries to, Jarvis and a collection of very big guys who appear to be some sort of military, are located in his office, so he grabs one of the currently empty computers and gets to work.

Booking tickets takes a few minutes, sending Brand a text takes a minute more, and then he gets writing.

Half an hour later, he shows this to Leon:

Dear NCIS Staffers:

As of 07:15 this morning, NCIS has been informed that we are required to engage in a Metro DC Urban Chaos Emergency Readiness Drill.

What this entails is that all NCIS Staffers must write up, and then execute, a plan for what to do should a major riot/terror attack resulting in a week of ‘urban chaos’ occur in DC.

To help in this endeavor, should any member of staff feel more comfortable with a ‘shelter in place at the Navy Yard’ plan, you and your family should come to NCIS, with gear for a week, by six o’clock tonight. Everyone who is more comfortable within our walls is welcome. You are not required to come to NCIS, and if you have an emergency plan that involves getting out of the city, go ahead and do it.

Should your emergency readiness plan involve not sheltering at the Navy Yard, you must write up, and execute your plan for how to ride out an extended (at least one week) period of ‘urban chaos.’

By four o’clock all members of the DC NCIS staff will have to have on file, and be in the process of executing, their emergency plan.

Bear in mind, an effective readiness plan will involve all aspects of your life. It will make sure your finances are secure, you and your family have enough of whatever they need on a daily basis (food and medications, for example) to last through the week. Do not forget trivial things, like diapers or toothpaste. Imagine you are trapped in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina; what do you need to survive? If you need to buy things to make sure you have what you need to make it through a week of ‘urban chaos,’ keep the receipts, and you will be reimbursed.

In order to facilitate this, all DC staff members are excused from work immediately upon getting this email.

With any luck this exercise will go smoothly and be rapidly finished.

Thank you for your compliance,

Tim McGee Director of Cybercrime

Leon Vance Director of NCIS.
Vance nods at that. “One modification, can’t send it to the security teams.”

Tim nods at that. “Right. Can’t have them leaving their posts. Okay. I’ll modify it.”

“Then start making the rounds, I want you to talk to our security people. Everyone who’s in today, all of them who aren’t. By six o’clock, I want them, and if they want, their families, here. From 16:30 on, we’re going to double security.”

“I can do that.”

“Good.” Leon glances at the email and sends copies of it to Borin and Jarvis. That’s a solution for how to get their own people as safe as possible without a massive tip off. He glances up at McGee. “Can you make a version of this that looks official to send to the FBI, NSA, DC Metro, and the like?”

“If you want, I can invent, whole-cloth, a DC Urban Chaos Initiative, make up a website for it, and send out the most official looking letter you’ve ever seen to the heads of every agency in the greater DC area. I can’t do that and talk to all of our security people.”

Leon nods at that. “Do it. I’ll make the rounds. CGIS wasn’t the only Federal Building that was hardened to withstand an outside attack. The IRS might be dirty as hell, but that doesn’t mean we want those people’s families getting slaughtered in riots. Let’s get as many of them out of the city, or into a safe building, as we can get.”

“No problem.” Tim stands up, and heads into his office. Doesn’t matter if Jarvis is using it for his central command, Tim’s not about to do this sort of work on a borrowed laptop.

---

Cross examine the hostile witness. _No problem, you’ve done this… six times._ Jake, sighs, bitterly. Once upon a time, he thought he’d be a trial lawyer, and in law school he’d certainly enjoyed that aspect of it, but he hasn’t had to actually question anyone, about anything, in more than ten years.

For the last twenty minutes, he’s been standing in observation, staring at John Koskinigen. Koskinigen is not a happy camper. He’s fidgeting, looking nervous, and if the black circles under his eyes are anything to go by, he hasn’t slept well.

Well, that’s two of them. Jake was sleeping fine, excited about getting to be part of this investigation, dreaming righteous dreams, and then he got the 1:00 AM wake up call, and a bit later the news that the world was just about to fall apart, and now he’s in observation, all on his own, trying to figure out what the hell he’s supposed to be doing.

He knows what he’s doing. He’s got a very specific job. Who did Koskinigen hire to kill Diane? Find that out.

He just doesn’t know how.

Ellie had kissed him and said, “Don’t worry, it’s easy. Just get in there and start asking.” He rolls his eyes a bit at that memory. Ellie’s always been better at just winging things. She can hop on in and roll with the punches. He has to _plan_. In this, they occasionally get on each other’s nerves, but when
they’re working together they get to play to each other’s strengths, and can handle just about anything.

But they aren’t together.

Jake looks at the clock. Half an hour. Koskinigen is pacing now.

He fantasizes a bit about trying to go in there all rough and growly, try to scare him into talking, and that just doesn’t work. The people who find Jake intimidating are the people who fear lawsuits. The people who don’t want to spend years in minute litigation and tons of red tape.

And while it’s true that might bother Koskinigen, he doesn’t think the Director of the IRS is about to wet his pants at the idea of being nibbled to death by FOIA violations, let alone admit to planning a murder to avoid it.

Forty minutes. Get moving. This is information they need, so go get it for them. Jake straightens his shoulders, takes a deep breath, and walks into interrogation.

Koskinigen’s eyes snap to him as soon as he’s in there. “Thank God! What’d they do, walk over to Harriman’s and ask for you in person?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve been here since yesterday. I asked for counsel almost eighteen hours ago. What took you so long?”

This would be the moment when it occurs to Jake that he does not look like a cop. He’s in a suit. A nice suit, with good shoes. He’s wearing glasses. He has a very nice pen tucked into his breast pocket. He doesn’t have a badge or gun. His hands are soft and un-calloused, much more accustomed to the use of a computer than a gun. He looks exactly like what he is, a lawyer.

He says a quick mental thank you to God, and smiles wide and bright. “Mr. Koskinigen, I’m sorry it took me so long to get here. It’s been less than an hour since I was told to come speak with you. My name is Jake Malloy; let’s start at the beginning… What have they told you they’re holding you for?”

“Some bullshit about attempting to kill someone.” Koskinigen’s lip curls in derision at the idea that someone might think he’d be behind a murder.

Jake runs with that. “That seems… unbelievable. You’re the head of the IRS not a mafia family; why would you attempt to have someone killed? Who do they think you tried to murder?”

Koskinigen looks ready to spit. “Little bitch named Diane Anderson.”

“Is she a Marine or sailor?”

“No. An auditor for the IRS.”

Jake does a good job of looking puzzled. “Doesn’t the N stand for Navy? Why are you here?”

“More bullshit. Some asshole tried to run her, her daughter, and her boyfriend, who does work here, off the road, and they’re trying to pin it on me.”

“Sounds very shaky. Are they just trying to embarrass you? Why not the driver?”

“How should I know? Anderson probably told them I’m out to get her.”
Jake’s actually starting to enjoy this. “Why would she do that?”

Koskinigen’s eyes narrow. “You’d have to ask her. One day everything is normal, next day she’s quit, a few weeks later, I’m here.”

“Mr. Koskinigen, I am here for you,” Jake says in a soothing voice, “and I can’t do my job if I don’t get the whole story. What you’re telling me right now, seems…” he looks for a delicate way to put it, “edited. If you really know so little of her, then you wouldn’t know she’s part of the problem. A good interrogator would have jumped all over that and strangled you with it. So, as you know, all communications between a lawyer and his client are privileged, so please, start over, tell me what’s really going on, otherwise, I won’t know how to answer the questions they are going to ask you to keep them away from what you don’t want them to know.” Jake thinks that does a good job of staying on the side of absolutely true while being completely misleading.

Koskinigen eyes Jake. “How long you been at Harrison’s?”

Jake doesn’t blink, and hopes this is the right answer to what Koskinigen really wants. “The job of a defense lawyer is to defend. Guilt and innocence do not matter. The job is to provide anyone, no matter what they’ve done, the best possible defense. A defense lawyer can’t do that if he gets caught in a situation where the prosecution, or the police, have information he doesn’t. Now, sir, tell me what’s happening, because until I know the whole story, I can’t do my job.”

“And you can’t tell anyone else what I tell you?”

Jake smiles, answering with extremely precise language. “Any communications between a lawyer and his client about something that has happened in the past, are privileged. So, should you tell your lawyer that you are planning a murder, or ask him for help in doing something illegal, he would, as an officer of the court, have to do something about that. If you tell your lawyer you planned a murder, that’s between you and him, and he cannot say anything about it to anyone without your express permission.”

Koskinigen nods. “Okay. There’s a bank account. It… you don’t need to know.”

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t want to end up blindsided when they ask you something about why Ms. Anderson was the target. I can’t tell you how to answer their questions if I don’t know what you’re trying to hide.”

Koskinigen takes off his glasses and rubs his temples. “It’s a national security issue. The money that does the stuff the rest of the country isn’t supposed to know about. Protecting it is my job. Anyone at the IRS looks at it, and I get an immediate note about it.”

“And Ms. Anderson looked at it?”

“Yeah. I don’t know how she even knew it existed. She was a mid-level auditor looking into business tax fraud. And then suddenly, her computer’s sending off the alarm. She’s got four accounts she shouldn’t have. I get them from her and call Miressa.”

“Who is Miressa?”

Koskinigen shrugs. “I don’t know. She asked me to call her Miressa. First name? Last? Made up? I don’t know or care.”

“Have you met her in person?”

“Once. She’s about my age. East German accent. Back in the day she was probably Stasi, or
something like that. I don’t know what she does now.” He thinks about that. “She takes care of problems, now, that’s what she does.”

“All right. And what did you tell her?”

“That Anderson had the accounts and was looking into them. I gave her Anderson’s home address, phone number, and the rest of it.”

“Then what happens?”

“I don’t know. That’s where my involvement ends. There’s ten of those accounts, and my job is to make sure no one gets into them. If someone does, I call Miressa. That’s it.”

“All right. Who introduced you to Miressa?”

“Eli Jakobson. My predecessor. He’s the one who explained how there were certain accounts and we protect them, because they make sure things continue to work the way they’re supposed to.”

“Have you ever called Miressa before?”

“Six times.”

“And, do you know what happened the other six times?”

Koskinigen nods. “Four are dead, one vanished, and one I was told to promote.”

“All right. Did you hear from Miressa again?”

“No.” Jake sees the flicker in Koskinigen’s eyes, and he’s got the sense he’s lying.

“Does anyone else know about these accounts?”

“Depends on the account.”

“The one Ms. Anderson was looking at?”

“Yeah, a few people.”

“Who?”

“It’s not important.”

Jake remembers Tony telling him to stay off the election information, so he backs off on that.

“What phone did you use to call Miressa from?”

“Personal cell.”

“All right. Just one call that day out of many?”

“Yeah, probably made fifty calls that day.”

“Excellent. I’m going to go let them know that we’ve talked, and they can come in and ask questions now. I’ll be back.”

Koskinigen nods at him, looking nervous, but relieved.
Sam Allan couldn’t explain why he’s feeling nervous this morning. He just is. He woke up at 5:00 in a cold sweat and hasn’t been able to shake the feeling that something’s about to go wrong.

And it’s not getting any better when he notices that there many fewer cars in the parking lot than there should be.

It gets worse when he gets into the morgue, and he’s alone. Dr. Palmer doesn’t always beat him in, in fact about half of the time Allan gets in first, but today he would have appreciated coming in and finding the lights on and Palmer sitting in front of the computer getting ready for the day.

But, he’s not there.

So, Allan turns on the lights and the computer, and he’s just about logged into his email when he hears the doors sweep open.

“Good morning, Dr. Palmer,” he says as he sees an email that looks interesting. Something about an “Urban Chaos Preparedness Exercise.”

“Alas, Dr. Palmer is out for the next few mornings.” The soft Scottish brogue rolls across the Morgue, and Allan looks away from the computer to Ducky.

“Is he okay?” He wonders if something happened to Dr. Palmer. He’s found that he’ll often get nervous when bad things happen to people he’s close to, and while his relationship with Dr. Palmer isn’t exactly an intimate friendship, he does spend ten hours a day with the man.

“He should be fine. I see we have no clients today?” Ducky’s looking around, noting that none of the doors are open, and that Allan is logging into his email.

“Not today. Not yet. I was just about to read my email. Yesterday we were helping with the case upstairs, and I was thinking of offering my help again.”

Ducky nods at that. “I think that would be an excellent plan. What help did you offer last night?”

“Looking up car accidents. Has Dr. Palmer been telling you about this case? I know you two are close.”

“I’ve been keep in the loop, so to speak. Self-driving car, IRS conspiracies…”

“Drug cartels using anti-drug charities to launder money. I don’t know if that’s brilliant or insane.”

“Dr. Allan?” Ducky’s interested at the dichotomy Dr. Allan is seeing with this.

“Brilliant, because who would expect it, and if it comes out they’re working together, it’ll discredit the people trying to keep their products illegal. Insane because… How do you even start up that conversation? ‘Hello, Partnership for a Drug Free Tomorrow, I was wondering, could we use you to funnel piles of drug money into the US electorate!’”

Ducky nods at that, liking the way Allan is thinking. “I would imagine, that instead of a cold opening along those lines, that said charities were built for the purpose of laundering that money.”

“Oh,” Allan nods. “Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. Let me get through the emails, and then we can
go up and see what help we can offer today.”

“Excellent, Dr. Allan.” Ducky hangs up his coat. If Allan were paying attention, he’d notice that it’s a bit warmer than necessary for the weather. Likewise, if he was paying attention to Ducky, he’d notice that he’s got more than a standard ‘go bag’ with him. In fact, what he’s carrying is much closer to a suitcase, than a backpack with a change of clothing and overnight toiletries.

But he’s not. He’s checking his email. A minute later, after Allan’s done reading the ‘Urban Chaos Preparedness’ email, he says to Ducky, “Dr. Mallard, you didn’t say where Dr. Palmer is.”

“No. I did not.”

“Uh huh. And, would his not being here have something to do with this?”

Ducky comes over and reads the email. Even before he sees the name on it, he can feel Tim’s hands all over that document. “Ah.”

“Yes. What’s going on?”

Ducky’s pleased to see that Allan is able to put the dots on this case together and draw an appropriate conclusion. “The case you were helping with yesterday has now been broken open. Sometime today, Leon is going to tell the world what has been found. It is likely to cause more than a mild disturbance. We are getting ready for it.”

“And Jimmy?”

“Rule 44, Dr. Allan, hide the women and children first. That rule presupposes that there will be someone assisting with the hiding, and providing protection should said hiding place be found.”

“He and his family have left?”

“Yes, with Director McGee’s family, as well. Ziva has taken Director Vance’s family, as well as Ms. Anderson’s daughter.”

Allan nods at that, wondering, at first, what this case opened to reveal. Then another thought hits. “And, am I supposed to hide, or stay here?”

“If you want to hide, I will understand. Being in the middle of a riot is not a pleasant experience. If you have someone you want to get out of town with to protect, I will applaud that decision. But, if it is just you, and if you are willing to stay here, and offer to use that medical degree you have to help the people who will be hurt in the days to come, I’d appreciate the help.”

Allan looks Ducky over. He sees a small man, one who is deeply calm, and as he looks he sees the sorrow in his eyes, the tiredness at the idea of having to go through something like this. He sees resolve to do his job and do it well. And he sees an old man. He sees a man who is in very good shape for his age, but that age is old, and he knows why Dr. Mallard is no longer the ME. He doesn’t have the eyes for the fine detail work any longer.

He nods at Dr. Mallard. “Give me a few hours to pack up my own things and get them back here. While I’m gone, make up an inventory of what we have, and set up a shopping list. If we’re going to be running an infirmary, we should be stocked for it.”

Ducky smiles at him. “Good choice, Dr. Allan.”
Penny had kissed Ducky when he left the elevator for Autopsy, and pressed the button for the basement.

When she gets down there, she sees Diane napping on the sofa, Tony at the conference table, working on something. Leon is pacing around, phone in hand, talking to someone.

Jarvis, she sees through the glass of Tim’s office, he’s got a phone between his shoulder and ear, and appears to be having two conversations, one with the people in front of him, SEALs if she had to guess, they’ve got the posture of Marines, but look more dangerous, and one with whomever is on the other side of the phone.

Behind Jarvis, at his computer, earbuds in place, and paying no attention to what’s going on in front of him, Tim is working on something.

The last time she was somewhere that felt like this, it was the Officer’s Club in Pearl Harbor on April 28th 1975. They knew the evacuation of Saigon was about to begin. The men on the ground… didn’t. Not yet. Everyone in the club knew it was going to be a disaster. They had to do it too fast, without enough resources, and people were going to get left behind and die.

They were angry. Angry to be put into the position of having to do it. Angry that the promises they made weren’t going to get kept. Angry at lives wasted. Angry at having to pick and choose who would get out, and who would face the mob.

And they were scared.

And this basement, which is fairly empty right now, has that same feel.

And there’s nothing she can do but go through it.

She strides over to the table, looks at Leon and Tony, and says, “How can I help?”

Leon looks up. “Dr. Langston, I’ve been told that you know everyone.”

“Just about.”

“Everyone is who I want at the press conference tonight, where we go live with this.” He pushes over a cell phone. “Six o’clock tonight. Free food and drink. Media people like that, right?”

She nods. “Free booze does tend to attract reporters.”

“Invite them. As many as you can, from every news agency that will send a crew.”

Penny nods. “I can do that.”

Not enough men. Jarvis’s using four men teams to grab the people on the list, and so far, that’s moving smoothly, but if he wants to put a dent on this list, he needs more men out, moving faster.

But he doesn’t have more men. He needs to do this with two men teams.
And then, he needs somewhere to put these people.

Leon’s calling his off-duty security people. He’s not talking right now, so probably listening to a phone ringing.

“How many people do you have room for in holding?” Clayton asks, stepping out of McGee’s office.

“We’re built for fifteen, can hold twenty if we absolutely need to, and maybe twenty-five if it’s not for long,” As he’s answering that, Leon he can feel the problem. “How many on the list?”

“Two hundred and sixteen more to go. One hundred and three of which are in the DC area, and every hour, we’re getting more names than we’re checking off.”

Leon looks around, imaging what the Navy Yard is going to look like once he’s got families stuffed in here. Readiness plans are starting to come in in response to McGee’s email, and it looks like he’s going to have at least four hundred civilians in here, in addition to his own staff.

“How many have your guys brought in?” Leon asks.

“Nine, so far.”

Leon glances at the clock, it’s a bit before ten. “At this speed, I don’t have to worry too much about where to stuff them.”

“I’m going to speed that up, but we need somewhere to put them.”

“Give Borin a call, she’s got holding cells, too.”

“Not that many,” Jarvis says.

“Nope, but she’s also low on staff, so she’s not planning on turning her building into a refugee center.”

Tony’s been listening to this, as he continues to hunt down who else was paying into the election buying account. “You want to speed things up?”

Jarvis nods.

“Most of these guys are lobbyists or money men. They’re not ‘criminals.’ You probably don’t have to swoop in with the Special Forces guys. Get two of your guys, put them in NCIS armored vests, and give them badges, have one of them carry another vest, they go over to whoever it is, say, ‘Mr. Soulsucking Money Grubber, we’ve received word of a credible threat on your life, we need you to put this on, right now,’ hand over the vest, ‘and get you to safety. You need to come up with us.’ Most of them should happily sprint out of wherever they are to go with you.”

Jarvis looks at Leon, they both look at Tony, and nod. Next thing Tony knows, Jarvis is on the phone.

“Yeah, Clayt, we’ve got…” Abbi thinks. “Room for thirteen more in holding, and I’ve got a basement that used to be full of files and evidence, and right now, it’s completely empty. It’d even
work with DiNozzo’s security ruse, no windows, underground. It’s not particularly comfy, but…”

“Neither of us care,” Jarvis says. People who are going to upset his apple cart, pull him out of the job he had to claw his way into, and more importantly than that, send his family into hiding, can sit in a fucking dungeon, chained to a raw rock wall for all he cares.

“Yes. I’ve got ten people I can use for guard duty. You get them here, and I can hold them.”


“Like cake. His lawyer just about wet his pants when we arrested him, too. Whoever you tipped off did a great job with the media, there were at least twenty-five reporters there.”

“Perfect.” Jarvis looks over the list. “Wanna do another?”

“Sure, bring it on.”

“I’m going to give Marty Senuyn a call, let him know that Koskinigen just named him as part of a tax fraud scandal.”

Abbi’s nodding at that. “You want us to scoop up the Director of the CIA?”

“Him, and as many of his top brass as you can grab. That one’s going to be a complete media circus.”

“Have at it. Just tell me when we need to roll. And make sure it is a media circus so I’m not facing another armed stand-off like we got with Koskinigen. Enough bloodshed tomorrow, I don’t want any of my guys getting shot for this shit.”

Jarvis smiles. “I can arrange that. Say, 14:00?”

“We’ll be ready to roll.”

“Tony!” Jake is looking very excited as he walks, quickly, over to Tony.

“Is he still in one piece?”

That catches Jake flat footed, so he has to stop and think for a second before saying, “What? Oh. No, he’s fine. He thought I was his lawyer, and I very carefully didn’t say anything to disabuse him of that notion, while also not saying anything that confirmed that I was his lawyer. He’s got a list of ten accounts that he’s got a watch on, and Diane tripped four of them.”

“Did you get those accounts?”

“You told me to stay away from that stuff. I got the name and phone number of the person he called when Diane got into the wrong account. Anna Miressa. She was born in Schwedt back in 1958. Immigrated to the US in 1995. She worked for the Stasi from 1971 until 1989. I couldn’t find out what she did there, but she didn’t stop doing it until the Stasi was dissolved. I couldn’t find anything on her until ’95, when she immigrates here. Since then she’s run a high-tech security consulting company. She actually sells the fact that she used to be secret police, knows all the ins and outs of surveillance to prospective clients, promising them safety for their own secrets.”
Tony nods at that, pleased with what Jake’s come up with. “High enough tech to use a driverless car?”

“It’s not on their website, but… Maybe?”

Tony nods at that, too, remembering that the bomber they’d had in prison for a while was German, too. “Okay. I want you to go to the lab, ask if anyone at Miressa’s company has been buying expensive hi-fi cables, and if the answer is yes, then I want you to make an appointment to talk with Miressa. Get her out of her building, meet you somewhere, and we’ll snatch her up when she shows up.”

“You want me to arrange a kidnapping?”

“I’ll get a warrant. We’re thin on manpower as it is, and right now I don’t want to walk into a building filled with God alone knows what sorts of gizmos and explosives to attempt to arrest this woman. I also don’t want her hitting the panic button and having all of her employees go skittering away, burning evidence, before we can get who’s doing what for her out of her.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Jake nods. “I’ll… uh… see what I can do.”

“Good. Give me that number, okay?”

Jake hands it over. Tony stares at it, and sighs. According to Tim, the phone that made the tip off call after Diane’s attack had been a burner. This number is probably only attached to legitimate business. Still, it’d be good to know who else she’s doing business with.

Tony glances at the rest of the phone numbers he’s dealing with.

After. After he knows who’s buying the elections. Contract killers will still be there tomorrow. Probably. He’s got a hard deadline on this one.

Tim rolls his shoulders. Website done. The DC Urban Chaos Preparedness Initiative has a web presence, and collection of directors, official 501 c status, and even tax returns going back four years. It’s all complete bullshit. And if anyone were to spend more than a few minutes really looking at it, the BS won’t hold. But, for what they’re trying to do, it’ll pass muster.

And, of course, the only name on the list of Directors that’s “real” C. Jarvis, Secretary of the Navy, will be the voice answering the phone should anyone who’s getting this order give them an annoyed call.

Tim gets up and stretches, working the kinks out of his neck. He takes his glasses off, and notices that there are several other people in his office watching him.

He nods to Jarvis. “Got the ruse in place. Anyone calls about the DC Urban Chaos Initiative, you know what to do?”

“Yeah. I can BS that with the best of them.”

“Great.” Tim looks around. It’s only 10:00. “I’m going to get us something to eat. You all want
food?"

The… he thinks this batch are Marines, with Jarvis look enthusiastic about that. Jarvis nods, too. And Tim heads up. His timing is good, because as he’s leaving, he sees Elaine’s girls, with a van, trying to explain to Burt that they’ve been invited to bring food in, by Agent Gibbs.

“Burt…”

He turns to face Tim as Tim smiles at the girls. Young ladies, the youngest of the bunch is probably fifteen. “Director McGee.”

“They’re fine. If they’re saying Gibbs has invited them, he has. They’re family friends, and they’ve got good food.”

“Mom’s cooking. Been at it since early this morning. We’re supposed to bring food in all day. It’s our second trip in, but he,” Kenzie, the oldest, nods to Burt, “wasn’t here before.”

“And, then you’re going to stick around and make sure everyone gets fed?” Tim asks.

“That’s the plan,” Allie, the youngest girl, answers. Tim nods at that, understanding what Gibbs must have done.

“Wonderful. We need food. Once you get parked, let me help you get it in.”

As he waits for them, he’s noticing many fewer than normal cars in the parking lot. His email is already starting to thin them out.

“Thought there were supposed to be a lot of people here today,” Kenzie, says, as she walks up, pulling a pallet with boxes of food on it.

Tim grabs half of the handle, and together they pull.

“There will be. Right now, people are heading out, soon they’ll be coming back with their families, and they’ll need to eat.”

“What’s going on, Mr. McGee?”

He shakes his head a bit. “Stupid bit of bureaucracy. All the Federal Agencies have to pretend the city is about to riot, and show that we’ve got plans in place for dealing with it. Big pain in the ass, but we’ve got to do it.”

The girls nod at that, not really understanding, but they get the idea of feed people who are grumpy because their routine is off, so they’re doing it.

They follow Tim in, and start getting things set up.

---

Tim comes down with several plates in his hands. They’ve got eggs, French toast, bacon, sausage, and fruit on them, he lays them down in front of the group at his conference table. He rests a hand on his grandmother’s shoulder, glad to see she’s here, wishing he wasn’t seeing her at all, and then kisses her cheek before saying, “About a third of the staff have left already. And Elaine’s kids are here, bringing in food. More upstairs in the main conference room.”
“How much food?” Leon asks.

“Apparently, Gibbs called them. They’re closed today, and cooking just for us. Steady stream of food coming in until 18:00, and then the girls are going to stay with us to make sure everyone gets fed.”

Leon glances to Jarvis, Penny, and Tony. “He couldn’t convince them to leave, could he?”

“Nope. But we’re getting the girls, and I’d say, guessing by how much food they’ve already brought, we’re putting at least twenty grand aside to pay them.”

Leon nods. “We can do that.”

Tim sits down and takes a bite out of a piece of pineapple. “It’s got me thinking. We’ve got the café, which has some food, and the snack bar, which has a little more, and the vending machines, we’ve got what the girls are bringing in, but, those emails coming in, we’re going to have a lot of people in here. They’ve got to eat something.”

Leon’s nodding.

“I’d like to grab a few of the security guys, and a few vans, and make the biggest Costco run NCIS has ever seen.”

“Okay. When you get back, go to CGIS, and do it for Borin. Prisoners are going there, so she’s going to need food and supplies, too.”

Tim stands up, and is about to head off as Jarvis says, “Tim, toilet paper. Do one load of food for each agency, and then one of toilet paper. Trust me, we do not want to be stuck in a building with hundreds of people when the toilet paper runs out.”

Tim nods. He hadn’t thought of that. Diapers, he figured he’d make sure they got some of them, too, because he knows there’ll be little kids coming along, and because he’s a dad, and taking care of baby butts is part of his job, but taking care of adult butts hadn’t hit him.

“On it.”

“One last thing,” Jarvis says, handing over his BJs card, “different warehouse stores. Get lots of stuff, but not all at the same place. Make it look like we’re getting ready for a party or something, not stocking for the end of the world.”

He’s at the elevator when Leon catches up with him, handing him three hundred dollars. “Morley’s. The ones in the red and white packs. A lot of them. If this goes the way we think it’s going to, I’m going to need them, and so will everyone else who’s ever smoked.”

Tim looks really surprised at that, but he takes the money.

Leon says, “If you think a building filled with people and not enough toilet paper sounds bad, try being stuck in one with a whole bunch of nicotine addicts all going through withdrawal at once.”

Tim nods, and then says, “Coffee. At least one run of just coffee.”

Leon nods at that, too. “Yeah.”
Gibbs and Abbi stand in front of the broken door to what used to be the CGIS file room.

It’s empty now. Acres and acres of nothing but cement floors and cement walls, and ghostly white fluorescent lights.

“All the comforts of home,” Abbi says with a mean smile.

Gibbs nods slowly, enjoying this. “One way in, one way out. You want a new door on it?”

“Maybe. No matter what they did, I can’t just leave them locked in there. Someone’s got to be watching.” She makes note of the lack of water or toilets. “Probably have someone on full time bathroom runs.”

“There any bathrooms on this floor?” Gibbs asks.

“Down by the stair wells.”

“No access to the armory from in here, right?” Gibbs says. He knows what’s on the floor above him, but if memory serves, you can only get into it from the stairway. And, while he’s not too worried about the soon to be army of pencil pushers, lobbyists, and well-connected moneymen who will be in here, he does know that desperate people do stupid things, and filling a room with them next to a huge collection of guns isn’t a great plan.

“Yeah, just files down here, at least, there used to be, and bathrooms by the stairwells.”

“We’ll block off the stairwells, and give them run of down here. Put some tables and chairs and maybe some bottled water and snacks, a few blankets or something, and that’s that. They’re down here for their own good.”

Abbi smiles a bit. “That’ll work. What do you need to get the doors set?”

Gibbs is eyeing the doors to the stairwell. “Gonna need a drill, some two by sixes, a saw… Won’t take long to get these set so whoever is outside can hold them as long as they need. Once that’s done, we can go grab the next one.”

“Yep, over to CIA Headquarters.”

“And I’ve got a name to go with a number!” Tony says, marking off the third of the four buyers from the last set of elections.

Jarvis looks up from trying to locate the next name on his list, a question in his eyes.

“Hi Yun Cho. Mean anything to you?”

Jarvis nods, curtly, picks up his cell, and heads into Tim’s office.

Tony looks at Penny. “That name mean anything to you?”

She shakes her head. She might know “everyone” but that’s not part of the “everyone” she knows.
She takes a moment and gets googling. “Not online, either.”

They both watch Jarvis pace Tim’s office. “Whoever it is, from the looks of it, he’s not going to be out and about longer,” Penny says.

Tony nods at that. “One more to hunt down, and then…”

“You think sending Ziva, Abby, and Breena away was a bad call?”

Penny puts her phone down and shakes her head. “I’m never going to suggest keeping pregnant women in a place where medical care will be iffy at best is a good plan. I’ve lived that and have no desire to make anyone else do that. And I do not think babies make riots easier to deal with.”

“Then what’s that tone for?”

Penny’s eyes close for a moment, and Tony sees the anger and sorrow shine through her ‘get it done’ attitude. “I’ve buried two brothers, my father, my husband, and one son, all in the service of the ideal of government by and for the people. I’ve spent my whole life working to make sure this country was a good thing. It’s heartbreaking to see how far astray it’s gone. And it hurts in my soul to think that it may have always been that way, and all I did was provide a show to make people feel like they had some control.” She looks away for a second, licking her lips, and then meets Tony’s gaze, looking resigned and ready to do whatever it is that needs to be done, her feelings on the matter be damned.

He’s seen that look from Tim, a lot, over the years. “Being a cop is all I know. All I want to do. But… What the hell sort of law have I been upholding?”

Penny glances at the phone records he’s working on right now.

Tony looks at those numbers, too. “I’m making myself not think about it. Can’t, because if I do…”

She gently squeezes his hand. “I know.”

“I’ve saved lives, and I’ve put away killers. That’s a good thing. That’s important. That’s what I want to do, keep doing. Been working a lot of terror cases lately… You know those crackpots who say we make the terrorists, go into their countries and kill people and turn ‘em bad. Go in there to make money and line pockets or because we hate brown people, not because we need to be there.”

In that Penny’s been known to say all of those things, she’s familiar with the basic idea. She cocks an eyebrow at him.

“Yeah, well… If the guys who made those decisions weren’t playing by the books to get into office, why should I trust they played by the rules when they decided to go into Iraq or Afghanistan or Lebanon or wherever? And if some asshole came into my town and killed my family, I can tell you that it would take about five minutes for me to get a gun and start planning on ways to kill his family, even if he was thousands of miles away.”

“Crisis of faith.”

Tony nods. “Yeah. For both of us. So.” He plasters a big, fake smile on his face. “We’ve still got the Swiss account. Let’s find how owns the damn thing and shut these fuckers down.”
As the Secretary of the Navy, Jarvis has *connections*. As a man who used to work for the Clandestine Services, he has connections that are used to getting things done without anyone else knowing about them.

He’s been calling in a lot of favors today. For jobs inside the US, he’s begged, borrowed, threatened, or outright stole troops to pick people up. Right now, he’s slowly filling up NCIS holding cells all throughout the United States.

But the intel DiNozzo is getting him is for people outside the United States. People who *very much* should not be involved in swaying US elections. Three of those sorts of people already, and Jarvis knows who they work for.

He is not capturing them. He is not ordering any attempts to bring them in. He is sending a very clear message to the sorts of people who employ men like Hi Yun Cho.

For Hi Yun Cho, who is an intelligence officer in the Chinese Army, with a specialty in destabilizing foreign governments, and two others like him, he’s placing kill orders. When DiNozzo digs up the number four, he will make one last call of this sort, to a team with jet, ready to go, and they will take care of it, likely before their news conference tonight.

Things might be about to go insane, but the message will be clear, *Fuck with Uncle and die.*

---

2:35. Jimmy, Breena, and Abby and the girls are finally, finally pulling up to the Canadian side of the Rainbow Bridge at Niagara Falls.

They made, for people traveling with an infant, two toddlers, and a pregnant woman, pretty good time.

They could have done better, but Jimmy, and then Breena, and then Abby drove *exactly* the speed limit the entire trip, if not slightly under. All three of them were *extremely* cautious about every other car on the road.

This is the last hurdle for getting out. Jimmy pulls up, and a bored looking border agent asks for ID. Jimmy hands over his driver’s license, and then Abby’s and Breena’s, as well.

He checks them over, peeks into the car, looks at the girls, decides they must look enough like the three of them that he doesn’t ask for ID or if they’re their children, and then says, “Reason for your trip?”

“Sightseeing.” Jimmy’s trying to sound really calm. “Want to see the falls from the Canadian side, and then up to Toronto, and east to Maine.” Jimmy nods to Abby. “She’s never seen the North East in the fall, so, here we are.”

Abby nods, trying to look like she’s the sort of person who’s deeply interested in fall foliage.
“How long are you planning on staying?” The guard is still looking bored, and Abby catches sight of another one giving Jimmy’s van a once over. (Turns out you can only rent a car or van with a credit card these days, and not a pre-paid one, which meant, short of stealing a car, there was no way for them to get a new ride en route. So, they still have Jimmy and Breena’s van. Not ideal, but better than trying to get across the border in a stolen van, or having a car rental show up on one of their credit cards.)

“A week.”

The guard nods, handing back the IDs. He eyes them for a moment, and Abby starts to feel a little nervous, but then he smiles and says, “You’re going to want some warmer clothing. We’re supposed to get snow the day after tomorrow.”

Jimmy nods, smiling at that. “Thanks. Don’t get snow that early in DC.”

The guard waves him through, and they’re on the other side of the border.

Abby pulls out her newest phone and sends a quick text.

Tim’s standing in line, next to a pallet covered in shelf-stable foods. Basic, easy to store, will last forever, and almost everyone can eat them, foods. Dried fruits, canned fruits and veggies, peanut butter, oatmeal, rice, dried beans, powdered milk, jerky (He got fresh meat, eggs, and frozen fruit and veggies at the BJ’s Club using Jarvis’s ID. Right now he’s at Costco, using his own.) pasta, and what feels like tons of sugar, salt, oil, and flour. He’s not much of a cook, but he knows what pantry staples are, so he’s getting them.

Burt and Clem, the two security guards with him, are looking extremely tense. As well they probably should be. They’ve been muttering about why they’re on this shopping trip the whole time, and if their grumbling is anything to go by, anyone who’s stood for election in the last ten years better vanish before this is done, because their days are numbered.

Tim is intentionally not listening to them quietly planning the murder of a particular senator they both loathe. Having spent a lot of time with people who did kill other people, he knows letting off steam grumbling from really going to do it, and this is grumbling.

As the checkout lady asks him how Kelly is, (his usual co-pilot for Costco runs) his phone beeps.

He pulls it out, sees a number that’s brand new, and reads Made it. I love you.

He takes a deep breath, starting to feel less nervous. His loves are out. “She’s doing fine. She and Abby are getting a little girl time in, heading down to North Carolina for the weekend.”

“That sounds like a lot of fun. You going stag?”

“Beer and football all weekend long,” he says with a smiles.

She looks at the pile of stuff on the pallet. Not a beer in sight. (Though, as he thinks about it, why the hell not? Next stop. Beer, or cider, or something, and more coffee, and hell, three hundred dollars of cigarettes really isn’t a lot of them, more cigs, too.) “Yeah, this looks like one hell of a party.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t you know it.”
Once he’s out of Costco he texts one line back. Good, love you, too. Keep your eyes on the news. Stay safe. Comes back to him.

I am. Love you, all of you. Gotta go. He doesn’t want to stop texting, but even though he’s fairly sure this is a safe phone (it’s his burner phone) he doesn’t know that for certain.

Abby gets the return text. Smiles a little, swallows, and then turns off the phone, tossing it in the nearest garbage can. They’re sitting in a McDonald’s playground, letting the girls crawl and toddle around, sipping drinks of their own.

“Okay, let’s find a place to stay the night.”

“Shouldn’t be hard to do,” Breena says. “Every third building here looks like a hotel.” The Canada side of Niagara falls is filled with businesses catering to all sorts of tourists.

Jimmy wraps an arm around both of them. “Naptime, for all of us, and then we’re going to take the girls and see the falls, and do something fun.”

“Jimmy,” Abby says. She wants to get into a room, and turn on the TV and start watching every news channel, at once.

“Fun.” He says quietly, but very sure. “We spend the whole time in a hotel room scanning the news, we’ll be insane before tonight’s press conference. That’s not good for us, and it’s really not good for them.” He glances at the girls, who are, right now, getting a chance to move around. After all night and morning in the car, Molly and Kelly are bouncing around with abandon, and Anna’s doing everything she can to crawl all over the place. “We’ve got an hour until naptime, so we’ll find a nice hotel, and then we all get naps. None of us slept much, so we rest, and then we eat, and for a few hours we get out, do something stupid and silly, and then we watch the news.”

Breena’s holding his and her hands as he’s saying that, and Abby closes and then opens her eyes again, nodding. “Okay.”

They went in to get Dunerson early. For Senuyn, they’re going in late. And if Dunerson was a media circus, it was a small, local, piddly two tent deal.

For Senuyn, they’re pulling out all the stops. There are literally hundreds of reporters, camera men, and sound guys pushing up close around them, pressing in, shouting questions, trying to be heard over the roar of other questions.

Gibbs gets snatches of them, “Is this related to the arrest of Gil Dunerson earlier today?” “We’ve heard rumors of bribery charges, who’s being bribed?” “What charges are being brought against Senuyn?” “Why is the Navy investigating this along with the Coast Guard?”

Over and over. He listens closely, none of the questions are hinting they know what’s really up, not
yet. As he and Borin, Bishop and Draga, Omagi and Saunders push on through, they say, “Press conference tonight at 6:00, NCIS building at the Navy Yard, all questions answered.”

Senuyn is waiting for them, along with his counsel. His Assistant Director, two of the lawyers, and three department heads are surprised to be on the warrant, but they go peacefully enough.

They’re much less compliant when they get shoved into the basement at CGIS, instead of the cushy conference room they were expecting, but by that point, there’s no media watching, only scores of other surprised people who were expecting protective custody and got this instead.

Though from the grumbling Gibbs hears down there, they’re starting to realize what they all have in common, and why they’re all down there. And if the yells he’s hearing for cell phones and begging to call their families are anything to go by, they’ve got an idea of how bad things are going to get when this breaks.

“Wow,” Tim says, pulling a pallet on wheels behind him into Autopsy. The whole area’s been turned into a full trauma center.

“Wow, indeed. What do you have for us, Timothy?” Ducky asks. He and Allan have gotten everything set. Right now they can handle anything that does not require a blood transfusion. And the only reason they cannot handle that is that they could not get their hands on any blood or plasma.

“Meat, eggs, fruit, veggies. We’ve used all the cold storage in the café, and were hoping to take advantage of the shelves in here.”

“They are empty and you are welcome to them.”

Tim nods. “Thanks.” He slides the first of the drawers open, and begins to load food onto it.

Ducky heads over. “How is your arm handling this?”

Tim rolls his eyes a bit. “Not feeling it right now. Because I’m being careful and haven’t hurt it, or because I’m too focused on other things is up for debate.”

Ducky nods. “Be gentle with yourself, Timothy. Long days are coming. Dr. Allan, will you assist us?”

And with that, the three of them load the food that needs to be kept cold into the mortuary refrigerators.

NCIS has six floors. Cybercrime, in the subbasement, is the lowest of the bunch. Above ground, there’s the main floor, the second floor, where the bullpen is, and then the top floor, MTAC, Leon’s office, and a few conference rooms.

Once he’s got the groceries stowed, Tim takes a moment to wander around.

The building is filling up. Two hours until the press conference, and there are people setting up cameras and sound equipment in the main hall. He sees that, apparently, Jake’s taken over on that,
and Penny’s helping him. He nods at them, happy to see them doing something that appears to be playing to their strengths.

On the first, second, and third floors, there are families milling around, mostly staking out locations for their gear, or hovering around the table in the conference room where Elaine’s girls are keeping a steady supply of food.

He hears a lot of muttering about this insane Urban Chaos Readiness Drill, and people wondering when the hell they’ll get to go home.

He’s thinking, with two hours to go, that the building is busy, but not insanely crowded. Of course, as of right now, all of those SEALs and Marines and whatever else Jarvis and James and Leon and anyone else who’s got a buddy to pull in have been in and out, grabbing people. Right now, they’re all out, by the time the next two hours are done, they’ll all be in.

And so will the rest of the families.

Very soon, it’s going to go from busy to crowded. Add in all the press they’re expecting, and crowded will become packed.

He heads down, checking into the lab, where Zelaz and his family are, along with Corwin, who’s on her own.

“Hey, McGee, you know what’s up with this?” Corwin asks.

He shakes his head. “Some sort of bureaucratic BS. I got the notice and wrote up the email.”

“How’s Abby?” Zelaz asks.

“Having a very pregnant sort of day. Woke up this morning, and just felt like crap.”

Both Zelaz’s wife and Corwin nod at that. They know how hard being pregnant is, and with the hours they’ve been working lately, Abby needing a down day makes sense to them.

“Hope we’re going home soon,” Tim says to them.

“Yeah, any idea when this is going to be done?” Mrs. Zelaz asks.

“Whenever those guys say it is.” Tim shrugs and heads down to his own level. For the first time all day, his office is empty. Jarvis is off doing something outside of it. Tim glances around, and hopes this won’t be home for too long.

________________________________________________

Rule number one might be don’t let suspects stay together. However, that’s Gibbs’ rule number one, and right now, Gibbs is not running the game.

Jarvis is standing in interrogation in front of Theresa Manedel, David York, Jeffry Tanen, William Burke, Jaqueline Fordi, and Thomas Pein. The Chairmen of both major US political parties and the top four members of the Federal Election Commission are not happy to be here.

Jarvis isn’t either. He’d also prefer that there were four more people in this room right now, but that’s not in the cards.

And while he does, sort of, have custody of the men who run the companies that make the voting
machines, none of them are in DC. John Thomas Ralph and Lewis Gray, both of VoteTech, are in a holding cell in Alameda. James Ellroy, of Galveston Electronics, is in a cell at NCIS Texas City, and Rick Helmsorth, of Helmsort Voting Systems, is in another cell at NCIS Portland.

They’ve already been through a version of what their conspirators are about to taste, and he’s got copies of the confessions they wrote up. He would have liked to have been in on breaking them, but they were too far away.

Now it’s his turn though. For the last twenty hours he’s been cool, collected, in charge, and quietly killing their organization of vote buying and selling. He has been very professional. He’s been calm. He has been polite. And now, he’s done being professional and calm and polite. Now he has the people who have wrecked his life and what he’s been working for in front of him, and he intends to make them sweat.

He knows all of them, and is on a first name basis with the chairmen.

So, he leans in the corner as they sit around the table, looking nervous.

Finally he says, “In the next few days, Washington DC is going to burn. Hundreds, if not more people will die, and this will happen because you stupid fuckers got caught.” They all look appalled at that, and there’s a moment of fussing that’s shut down by Jarvis saying, “Now, you’ll see there are pads of paper in front of you. You are going to write on those pads exactly what you were doing, and how. You are going to tell me who was buying, who was selling, and who, exactly, knew what you were doing. You will spare no details and you will not stop writing until every single person involved with this is on paper.”

“What are you talking about? Why would DC burn?”

Jarvis sighs. He knew at least one of them would try to play stupid. “Terri, you are sitting in a room with David, Jeff, Bill, Jackie, and Tom, why do you think you are sitting here if I did not know exactly what you’ve been up to? It’s all coming out tonight. Every bit of it. We are going to go live with all of the account numbers, names, dates, locations, everything.”

David’s eyes narrow. “You’re fishing. You haven’t actually accused us of anything. You just want to see what we’ll write down.”

To an extent, that’s true. Jarvis does not know if the politicians know the elections were being bought off. This whole system had been carefully designed to make sure none of them were directly implicated, and he wants to see if they were useful stooges or part of the plan.

“Account number 0096846-3473-987.” Jarvis hands over his phone. He’s got a breaking headline up on it. Apparently the five top members of a venture capital fund out of Saudi Arabia all died when their private jet developed ‘mechanical trouble.’

Six sets of eyes all glance at the phone, and each other, and he can smell the fear starting to roll off of them.

He grabs his phone. “Account number 9797-0979634-8562.” Another headline, this one a nervous looking woman claiming her husband was just stolen off the street by masked men in black this morning.

“Do you want more? I have every account, and every name that goes with an account. I’ve got 148 of your conspirators in custody. 18:00 tonight, the whole story goes live. You’re all realists; you know how the world works. What, exactly, do you think will happen when I get up in front of every
news organization in the world and tell them that every election in recent memory has been sold to the highest bidder?

“What do you think will happen when every man with a grudge against the government, when every mother mourning a lost child in our service, when every man with a ruined life because of a Federal conviction, when every person who lost a business to the tax man, or had to surrender the use of his land to the EPA, or any of millions of other little slights, all find out that the system that put them into those positions was a scam?”

Cold sweat, fear, and hopelessness rolls off of the six people in front of him. The whole room reeks with it now.

“Now, you have a choice, you can write those confessions, and then, when things calm down again, and for the sake of everyone outside of this building you better hope that happens soon, you will be tried, and then convicted, and then executed for treason. Or, if you do not fill out these pages, telling me every single detail of how this scheme worked, I will, tomorrow or the next day, when the mobs are burning this city to the ground, hand you over to them.”

Jarvis looks them all down, eyes like ice, making it clear, by his voice that he’d really prefer they don’t fill out those pages, as he says, “Now, are you feeling like filling out some confessions, or will I hand you to men who will, if you are lucky, kill you before they set you on fire.”

Six people scramble for pens and start writing, very, very quickly.

Diane looks at Tony, who’s exhausted. “Come, on. Get your nap. I’m on it now.”

Tony nods, rubbing his eyes, and heads to the sofa. He doesn’t think he’ll be able to sleep, but he needs to. Conference time is soon, and he needs some rest to deal with it.

He can hear rumbling from above, the sound of more voices than this building usually holds are filtering through the floors and ventilation.

He lays down as Jarvis walks past him, a collection of pages of yellow legal paper in hand. Looks like he got his confessions.

Diane lucks out. The last call. The final buyer of the elections, decided to make his call on her watch. She sees the number pop up and traces it easily, and heads into Tim’s office, where Jarvis is sitting heavily in Tim’s chair, head back, looking exhausted.

“‘You okay?’ she asks.

He shakes his head.

“Is there another level?”

“Maybe. I’m debating something.”
Diane sits down. “Want to talk about it?”

He shakes his head. “No.” It’s in the confession. Some of the politicians knew. Some didn’t. Some knew before they were elected. Some found out after. Some had to be ‘taken care of.’ And ‘taken care of’ meant everything from threats against their kids to payoffs to murder and attempted murder.

His dad knew. At least, he knew about the version that was in place before this one. He got confirmation that there hadn’t been a clean election in the US since 1932.

Jarvis shakes his head. “What do you have?”

“The last phone number.”

He nods. “Okay. Hand it over.”

She does. “It’s out of Norway.”

“Yeah. I know. I know who it belongs to. They gave it up a few minutes ago. I’ve already made the call.”

“Oh. Um… So…”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Get ready for the show. Go talk to Leon, see how he’s doing with his press release.” He eyes her up and down. “Run out, get a real outfit and make up, and get ready to face the press as the Hell Bitch of the IRS who refused to roll over and die, and bit the head off this conspiracy.”

Diane smiles briefly and nods. “All right. What are you going to do?”

“Get a nap. Try not to look like death warmed over for the cameras.”

Last job of the night before settling down and waiting.

Jake’s in a café, having a coffee, looking slightly nervous. He’s trying not to. But, right now, he’s got an appointment with a woman who kills people for a living, and it’s his job to lure her out, and then let his wife and her partner arrest her.

Except this time, it’s not an arrest. It’s a kidnapping. There are no warrants, not anymore. Tony tried, but he couldn’t get one, not in time, and not without tipping off how they got this information.

He knows her the second he sees her. She’s tall, iron gray hair cut shot and slicked back, ice blue eyes watching everything around them, wearing a power suit right out of GQ.

And, she’s dangerous. He can feel it coming off of her, almost smell it like perfume.

He swallows, takes a deep breath, and then stands up, offering his hand. “Ms. Miressa?”

“Mr. Malloy, what can I do for the NSA?” she asks as she sits down.

He nods. He hadn’t mentioned he worked for the NSA, but she’s done her homework.
“Personal business, actually. I haven’t worked for the NSA in years.”

She laughs at that. “What personal business can a man who makes $46,000 a year, before taxes, have that requires my services?” She answers her own question. “None. An emissary from the NSA, one who is no longer part of official channels, he may have business.”

He smiles, and sips his coffee, thinking fast. “Then, let me put it this way, I have business the NSA would prefer was not related to them.”

She smiles at him, and takes a sip of the coffee that’s sitting across from Jake waiting for her.

“Tell me your business,” she says between sips.

So he does. BSing away, madly hoping the dope in the coffee works fast. It does. He’s less than two paragraphs into his ‘need for discretion spiel’ when he notices her eyes aren’t tracking well. And a minute after that, as she starts to slump to the side, Ellie pops up out of nowhere, and says, “Mom!” loudly.

“I’m so sorry sir, she does this sometimes. Come on, MOM!” she gets an arm around Miressa, helping her out of the booth. A second after that, Draga’s with her, and between them they help “Mom” out of the café and into a plain car.

A minute after that, Jake finishes his coffee, leaves a tip on the table, and then picks up Miressa’s cup, and carries it out of the café.

Three miles later, he tosses it out of the car.

From there, it’s time to head back to the Navy Yard and get ready for the storm.

“You got them?” Abbi asks Omagi.

“I’ve got them. I’ve got this. Everyone is inside. We’ve got supplies for weeks. Things get bad, and I’ll hit the emergency switch. If need be, there’ll be bombproof walls between us and the outside.”

“Okay.” Abbi gives him a quick hug. “See you on the news.”

“Kick their asses.”

“Yes, sir!” Abbi turns away from her number two, who’s just been put in charge of CGIS, because she’s not sure when, or if, she’ll be able to get back, and joins Gibbs, who’s already in the car, ready to get them to the Navy Yard.

There’s press waiting for them as they leave. They follow them, wondering if they’re about to pick someone else up, but they aren’t.

“You ever seen it this bad?” Abbi asks as they get three miles from the Navy Yard. Traffic is already starting to slow down. The streets are lined with news vans and TV crews.

Gibbs looks at his truck, thinking, and then pulls them over more than a mile from the Navy Yard. “Not gonna be able to park anywhere closer.”

“This might not be here when we get back.”
He shakes his head. “I don’t know if we can drive fast enough to get there before the news conference starts. I know we can walk it.” Unspoken is that he doesn’t want to be caught outside of the walls of the Navy Yard when the news breaks.

Abbi understands. She nods at him, and before they get out of the car, she gives him a kiss. He returns it, sweet and desperate. They’ve both been trying not to think about what comes next all day. But all day is rapidly running out. Less than an hour of ‘all day’ left to go, and then… Then there’ll be nothing left to do but think, and survive.

He leaves the key on the seat, and the door unlocked. Someone else might need a reliable way out of DC, might as well let them have it.

They work the crowd as they move closer to the Navy Yard. Gibbs mentions there’s free food and drinks inside, and that everyone’s questions will be answered. So does Abbi. Partially to make sure there’s as much coverage as possible on the press conference, partially because they don’t know how fast the unrest will start, and they want as many people inside as possible.

There’s a bottleneck at the main gates. Everyone and thing is being searched, thoroughly. That makes sense to Gibbs, and he’s fortunate that security is willing to wave him and Abbi in.

When they get in, NCIS is packed. It’s crawling with media people and families. The whole first floor has been turned into a news room, with people milling around. Gibbs knows he’s got nothing to say on this. He’s not going up and talking, and the number of people all pressed in right now is uncomfortable. He kisses Abbi one last time, and then she heads over to Leon, who’s standing up at a podium flanked tables, talking with Jarvis, Diane, and Tim.

Gibbs looks around, and then decides he knows where he wants to be.

He takes the elevator down to the basement.

Sitting on the sofas, in front of the big screen TV, which is tuned to ZNN and showing the scene upstairs, is Penny, Ducky, Tony, and Allan. They’re all looking tense and nervous, well aware of what’s going to begin in the next few minutes.

He watches Leon nod to the others. They all take their seats, and then Leon stands up at the podium and says…

Leon takes a deep breath, and then says, “I know you’ve all gathered here to hear about a massive corruption case involving the IRS, the DEA, and the CIA. I’m here to tell you that the IRS and the DEA and the CIA is the tip of the iceberg.” He glances over to Tim, who nods, and they hear a few beeps and chirps as phones tell people they have new mail in their inboxes, “Right now, in your inboxes is the unredacted, unedited proof that in the last twelve years, the Federal Elections Commission in collusion with the three largest makers of voting machines have been selling the Federal Elections.

“The Chairmen of the RNC and DNC have been conspiring with each other and others in both the US and outside the country, to buy winning positions in those elections. In your inboxes are copies of the bank records showing who has been paying Menedel and York, sending them the money that has been used to buy those elections. Among others the Directors of the IRS, DEA, and CIA have all been arrested for helping to fund this election buying scheme.
“In addition to this, in your inboxes, are the full financial records of a bank account that has existed since 1932. That account has been used by literally thousands of members of our government to buy their way into office. Two IRS agents who have attempted to audit this account have been murdered, and Ms. Anderson,” he looks to Diane, and she stands up, “her daughter, and her date, was almost murdered for this information. We have direct information connecting John Koskinigen to the murder and attempted murder of IRS agents who have tried to discover what that account does.” Diane is still standing. “Ms. Anderson…”

Leon sits down and Diane takes over.

“Several weeks ago, after Ms. Borin,” she nods to Abbi, who nods back, “took down the corruption at CGIS, she received a letter with four bank account numbers on it. I was the closest, and most discrete numbers person she knew, so she handed it over to me. Within ten minutes of beginning to look up those numbers, I had John Koskinigen in my office, demanding I cease investigating, and that I hand those numbers over. I handed them over, but did not stop investigating.

“I removed myself from the IRS and headed to NCIS, where I have connections, and a safe computer system, but upon getting there, I found that the Federal Bank Account Database no longer had the account numbers I had received on file. This led to bringing our computer expert into the investigation.”

Tim stands up, feeling a bit nervous, but knows this has to happen. “I began to work on the issue, first by attempting to secure our own servers, only to find that the Federal Intranet Server had been hacked, and access was being sold to the highest bidders, one of which was John Koskinigen, another of which was York, and the NSA, and many others. They used this access to see what we were doing, when and how.

“I was able to apprehend the hacker, and secure our own system. Upon doing so, Ms. Anderson got the idea that those bank accounts likely hadn’t vanished, just our ability to access them through our traditional routes. That proved to be correct.

“By going outside of the Federal servers, her friend, who was later killed, was able to get into those accounts and let us see what was happening with them. Once he did that, they were able to point me in the direction of the account no one could get into. I broke it open, and found what it was doing. All of that is in your inboxes, now.”

Tim sits down, and Diane gets back up again. “Once we got into those accounts the money trail was plain to see. We were given a black ops account, showing the US using money in jobs and operations all over the world that it was not supposed to be involved with. We received an account owned by the Bathenada Cartel, and watched it dump 500 million dollars in less than three days to hundreds of charities, and then we watched those charities pay their board members, and then those members turned and payed into the account that had existed since 1932 for swaying elections. That account showed a major payout every two years, in November, since 2004. That payout went into the hands of the FEC and the men who make the electronic voting machines.”

She sits down and nods to Leon, who returns to the podium. “You’ve all seen the news stories about machines that didn’t record votes correctly. You’ve seen the court challenges to the electronic machines. You watched, and some of you are old enough to have covered the 2000 election where everyone was so concerned about hanging chads and talked about how unreliable paper is.

“I do not know if that was a moment where the universe ended up in a grand place for evil men to take advantage, or if evil men decided to make a situation they could take advantage of. I do know, that as of right now, the last President elected without behind the scenes tampering, at least, tampering that I personally know of, is Herbert Hoover.
“We know of at least three people who are dead to keep this a secret. I’m standing next to another person who is only alive because her companion, one of my Agents, is an amazing driver. We know of fourteen other cases where it is extremely likely that those people were killed to keep this a secret. Because of the nature of this fraud, because of the extremely large amounts of money and power involved, because, previous to now, everyone who has attempted to investigate this is dead, all of our families are in hiding.

“I know one other thing, as of right now, 6:08 pm on October 5, 2016, NCIS is no longer taking orders from the Federal Government and will not do so until a properly elected regime is in place. Our mission is to serve and protect the men and women of the Navy and Marines, and their families, and we will continue to do so however we may.”

Leon sits down, and there’s a second of silence, and then suddenly reporters start to scramble, but are cut short a second later as Clayton Jarvis stands up. He also nods to McGee, who sends Jarvis’ last order live.

“My name is Clayton Jarvis, I am the Secretary of the Navy. As of 6:09, October 5, 2016, I am ordering all Naval and Marine personnel to stand down. Until such a time as there is a legitimately elected Commander-in-Chief again, all Naval and Marine units located inside the United States are to turn themselves over to the nearest local National Guard unit. My commanders outside of the United States have gotten their own, personalized orders, for what to do next.” Jarvis blinks, hard, and he has to stop to take a deep breath. “In that the President who nominated me and the Congress that confirmed me were not actually elected, as of 6:10, October 5, 2016, I am no longer Secretary of the Navy. Now, we are opening the floor to questions.”

There’s a second of silence, and then a roar of voices hits, hard.

Tim will later, much later, learn that the first shot was fired at 6:05. It was aimed at the IRS building, and no one’s sure who fired it, or if that shot was aimed at the IRS for the IRS’s specific actions in this endeavor, or just as a general anti-government movement. He will also learn, that by 6:35, the IRS building, which, like CGIS, had been hardened to withstand terror attacks from the outside, was in full defensive mode. It’s believed that’s the only reason it didn’t burn to the ground.

He will, after several days, learn that the neighborhood fires started at 7:46 on K Street. He learns in less than ten hours, when he goes out to help fight them, that Washington DC is a very flammable city. For the next three days he will go out each day, when he’s not on guard duty, to help fight those fires.

Either way, he won’t leave the Navy Yard without full body armor and armed with both a pistol and automatic rifle for almost a month.

He will, watching the news with one eye while answering questions during the press conference, see that a herd of TV reporters will more or less run from the Navy Yard to the White House, only to get there within minutes of a mob. Nine civilians and two reporters will be killed when the Secret Service, who have not yet gotten the message, open fires on a crowd that tries to scale the gates.

Within two hours, while the mob is still milling around, kept at bay by occasional shots. The Secret Service will learn of what happened. Three of them will be shot by other members of the Secret Service when they try to open the gates and let the mob in.
Within three hours, The President, his family, the Vice President, and any member of the Cabinet located in the White House will be evacuated by helicopter out of DC.

When they go, the mob breaks the gates, and burns the White House to the ground.

Congress, with much less protection, and many, many more visitors, is on fire before the White House perimeter is breached.

It will be two weeks before a full count of who survived that fire is available.

Tim learns, by reading, four days later, that it took less than an hour for the Army, two hours for the Airforce, to give formal notice to the White House that they were no longer taking orders from them, and until such a time as a properly elected Commander-in-Chief was to fill the seat, all offensive operations would cease, and each branch would, like the Marines, turn themselves over to the command of the local National Guard, or in the case of overseas forces, hold in place and only engage in defensive actions.

He’ll learn three days after the news breaks that the Virginia and Maryland National Guards have walled off the city, not allowing anyone who cannot prove they live outside of the city, out. This is to “curb the spread of riots.” They are also, and for this he is grateful, keeping anyone who cannot prove they live in the city from entering. It’s estimated that saves at least 50 lives. (Well, the lives of fifty people inside DC, a full scale battle on the southern border of DC takes place between a collection of ‘Anti-government Survivalists,’ and the Virginia National Guard, resulting in fourteen casualties.)

He’ll learn close to five months later that, upon hearing the news, Metro PD decided not to take calls from Congress or the White House, and to focus their efforts on protecting the citizenry of DC. Nineteen deaths are attributed to that decision, though no cases are brought. He learns from Jake, days after that, that it’s settled case law that the cops have no legal duty to protect any given person, and especially in a case like this one, as long as they were doing something like their job, they’re in the clear.

He won’t learn that his home comes through just fine for another ten days. He won’t think to even check for six. He won’t learn of the fate of Jimmy and Breena’s for fourteen days. It too, will come through fine. Likewise, Gibbs’ place in Virginia will be fine, too. Tony and Ziva’s apartment will be livable when this is done. There’s smoke damage, like everywhere else in the city, but nothing permanent. Ducky and Penny’s home will be broken into, every window smashed, everything of any value stolen, anything that can’t be moved will be destroyed, but, it will still be standing when this is done.

He’ll be with Tony when he learns of the fate of his house and Abbi’s as well.

He’ll hear the man who was called President say that he knew nothing about any of this as he resigns, a script that will be repeated over and over. He’ll watch a bit more than three hundred members of Congress and the Senate resign. They will all blame the heads of their two political committees, and claim they knew nothing of how this worked. Some of them will be telling the truth.

Eventually more than two hundred of them will be convicted of breaking Election Finance Law when it’s proven they were personally using the election swaying account to skirt the finance laws. Eventually, after hundreds of judges resign, and new (and many of the old) judges are appointed (or reappointed), there will be courts to convict them. The others will claim they knew nothing about their campaign managers/the local representatives of the RNC or DNC using those accounts. No one will believe them, but they won’t be able to make cases against them. (But, eventually, they will make cases again.)
In the end, fifteen Senators, and seventy-two Congressmen will be cleared of any election tampering. Thirteen of the fifteen Senators and sixty of the Congressmen were elected in ’14, and as non-incumbents, didn’t qualify to use the election tampering account. If their wins were part of what was paid for in 2014, it couldn’t be proven.

Angus King, as the only Independent member of the US Senate or Congress with no ties to the DNC or RNC will end up leading what’s left of Congress. Eventually, through different interrogations, it will come out that while the general elections were rigged, the nominations were not. Anyone who got on a ballot managed to do so through his own accord. The “Election Salesmen” as they would eventually be known in the news, decided that was as much say in the matter as the general population needed.

As a man with a gun and the training to use it, he will stand guard at the gates of the Navy Yard and make sure that the mob does not breach their perimeter and take any of the people selling the elections. He will stand at that gate, holding a loaded assault rifle and full body armor, and watch effigies burn while people carry signs demanding the conspirators be lynched. He will shoot into the crowd three times in four days, when they swell and rush the gates, and he will do everything he can to not think about those days. He will not talk about them.

He’ll think that’s the lowest point in his life, until the food runs out, and the mob is no longer calling for blood, but bread.

He’ll get dribs and drabs from the rest of the country, but as Jarvis suspected, within minutes they had the call out to their National Guards, and within a day (two in New York and Los Angeles), they had their rioting under control.

He will learn, because he’ll be in the building when it’s discovered, that York will commit suicide before charges are brought. Manedel will do so the night after. The remaining six will be tried, convicted, and executed for treason. There will be no fussing about the inhumanity of the death penalty in those six cases.

And he will learn, that, eventually, much sooner on a calendar than it feels living through it, that life will go back to “normal.” He will hold his loves again. He will kiss his children. He will go home. He’ll work cases, and he’ll retake his oath of office. Unless he knows the candidate, he won’t vote again, though.

But all of that is in the future, and right now, there’s sitting in the conference room, talking in depth with the reporters who have stayed here to talk about what they’ve found, and watching the ones who scurried to the White House get shot at on the big screen.

Right now, there’s still twenty-four days of martial law, to be run by a hybrid operation between the FBI and DC Metro, to live through. Right now, life is about to shrink down, bounded by walls and smoke, and the vision blocking lines of helmets and protective goggles, and stretch out, hours pulling like melting taffy into a sticky morass of unending time.
On the first day, not long enough after the news conference, Tim stares at the cherry glow of the sky around him, and says, “The man who wants to watch the world burn.” He’s not very loud, but he’s got a mic on to keep him in contact with Tony and Abbi.

“McGee?” Tony asks.

“Never mind.” Tim didn’t think that Jarvis meant it literally when he said it. It’s beautiful. That’s what the little part of his mind that liked fire a tad too much as a teenager thinks. It’s horrifying. The much larger part, that he’s trying to keep from screaming, is thinking. He, Tony, and Abbi, are all at the Reflecting Pool, with one of those ancient hand pumps, wetting down the grass. They’ve got a ‘great view,’ the whole Capitol is around them, lit flickering orange and smeared with breath-stealing black smoke. The sun should be rising, but right now, he’s got dawn on all sides.

Dry summer. Dry fall. Tim hadn’t noticed. Though, as he’s taking his turn working the pump he’s thinking the last rain he can remember was pattering on the glass room in Winchester. He can remember listening to it, wrapped around Abby and Breena, Jimmy nearby.

That was three weeks ago.

Right now, he’s surrounded by fire on all sides, and acres of withered, brown, dry grass. According to the last update they got from Metro FD, the fire’s five blocks east, and two south. Wind is coming out of the east. Pushing the fire toward them.

Supposedly, they’ll get them out before the fire gets to within a block. Supposedly, they won’t have to try to cross it to get back to the Navy Yard. Supposedly.

Enough of that. Pull the lever up. Push it down. Do it again. Tony’s got the other side. Abbi’s got the hose, wetting things down. They swap every five minutes.

If the fire gets here before they get done, the whole Mall will go up in a matter of seconds. Up. Down. Up. Down. Swap.

Tim can feel his lungs tightening. Smoke’s getting closer and thicker. They’re going to have to move soon.

There’s a wall in each man’s mind. It exists for a reason, to keep the societally acceptable, calm part functional when the emotional part wants to scream, rage, or break down into sobs.

It’s little things, not the big ones that tear that wall down. That wall is there to keep a man moving through the big things. It’s there as a survival tool.

The whole time they were out in the field, pumping water on anything that looked like it might burn, Tim’s wall stayed in place. He made it through ten hours of smoke and flames and hot. So hot. Burning hot air, getting hotter each minute they were there. Hot skin. Hot light pushing at them. Hot sweat.

Part of why they were out there was to give the Metro FD a hand. They literally did not have enough people to do the job.
Part of it was because when the FD tried to put out government buildings, the mob started shooting at them. For some reason, the crowd was less interested in shooting at guys in body armor who could shoot back.

But body armor was part of hot. So hot. No air on his skin. No room to breathe. Just hot skin, and hot sweat, tricking down his body between his skin and the Kevlar plates designed to keep his vital organs safe. Hot hair, matted down from the helmet, soaked through with sweat. Visor that, after a few hours, began to fog up from the heat and his sweat.

And he made it through that. Made it back to the Navy Yard. Even, and this is a testament to how much grit Abbi has, managed to respond to a few of the jokes she cracked as they headed back.

He made it through wanting to take the helmet off, only to have his hand on the strap, and then see one of the guys next to him crumple when he was winged by some idiot taking pot shots at anyone who got in range.

His wall made it through all of it.

He made it back to the Navy Yard, covered in soot, dripping with sweat and blackened water from the pumps. He made it through peeling off the armor, and giving it back to the guys in the armory. He doesn’t know what the hell they’re going to do with it. Dropping it in a vat of boiling bleach might get it clean enough for someone else to use, though Tim suspects that they’ll just try to find a place to let it dry, and then hand it over to the next reasonably tall guy who needs it.

He made it through waiting in line for a shower. Final count showed there were more than eight hundred people in the Navy Yard, and, including the emergency bio-chem attack showers, ten showers.

He didn’t bite the head off of the guy in the men’s locker room who told him no more than fifteen minutes. He can do the math, eighty people per shower per day.

Tim doesn’t make it through stepping in, and finding that there’s only a cold, limp, drizzle of water.

He’s in the shower, shivering after hours of overheating, watching the black soot slowly stream off his skin, crying.

The first day after the news conference, the Navy Yard runs out of hot water.

On the first day, when Jake gets back from chopping down trees with Ellie and Draga, (They’d been put on a different aspect of fire break building, clearing away things that burn. Pine trees, especially dry ones, are basically torches. They’d been chopping them down, as others loaded them onto trucks and drove them to the Potomac,) he starts writing.

As of right now, the Navy Yard has electricity and internet access. Parts of the city are starting to lose power. Fire burns electric lines, it burns the poles that hold those lines up. It burns trees and buildings that then crash into those lines.

He doesn’t know how long he’ll have access to the outside world. He doesn’t know what’s going to be happening with the government after this, but he does have a lot of ideas.

He remembers talking with McGee, when this was still a scandal about greedy legislators stuffing laws to benefit them and their friends into bills. He’d been thinking about the run for Senate after
that. Now he’s thinking wider and grander. The whole system just fell apart, and people are going to be looking for someone with an idea of what to do next.

He’s got ideas. And he’s getting them down.

On the first day after the news conference a blog goes live: New Federalist: Thoughts From Inside the Flames.

On the second day after the news conference, Fornell is in for a rude awakening.

“Mr. Fornell, you are an American, right?”

Fornell has been having an excellent week. He and Wendy got to Antigua Sunday afternoon. And since then they’ve been enjoying, in no particular order, the beach, the food, each other, and a large quantity of rum based drinks filled with fresh local fruits.

There’s a little café, right on the sand, where they cook the fish less than 100 feet from where they catch it, and every evening he and Wendy have been eating supper there.

So, after four nights, the cook has gotten to know them some: has their names, that they’re here on their honeymoon, and a few details like that.

Fornell nods. “Yeah. We’re from Virginia. Why?”

“Is that near Washington DC?”

“Yes. Our place is about ten minutes outside of DC,” Wendy says. Both of them are starting to feel cold. The cook doesn’t look like he’s just asking to ask.

The cook nods. He packs up their dinner for them, and then says, “I think you need to go back to your hotel, and turn on the TV.”

“What happened in DC?” Tobias asks.

The cook shakes his head. “It did not make much sense to me. Something about vote buying and riots.”

Tobias and Wendy run back to the hotel, leaving dinner behind.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DON’T KNOW WHERE THE FUCK EMILY IS!” roars through Diane’s phone.

“Tobias…”

“YOU DIDN’T CALL ME! YOU DIDN’T—” he hangs up.
A minute later, Gibbs hears, “WHAT? IS THIS FUCKING PAYBACK FOR FUCKING DIANE? YOU LET MY LITTLE GIRL GO, AND YOU DON’T EVEN TELL ME?!? WHAT THE FUCK IS FUCKING WRONG WITH YOU, GIBBS? I EXPECT THIS FROM HER, BUT YOU???”

Gibbs waits a few beats, making sure Tobias will let him talk, and then says, “We think they were watching you, too. Call you, you come running back, and they follow you right to Emily and Diane. You stay on your honeymoon, do what they expect you to do, you and Wendy stay safe, and so do Diane and Emily.”

Gibbs can feel that kick the wind out of Fornell’s sails. A second after that, he hears more cursing, and the sound of packing. “You coming back?”

“Next flight out.”

“To where?” They’ve got news, but right now it’s on ZNN, which is only reporting local coverage. Gibbs knows Reagan is closed, but the wider world, he’s not sure about.

“Atlanta is still taking flights,” Fornell says.

“Dulles isn’t?”

“Dulles, LaGuardia, Philadelphia, Richmond, Baltimore. Nowhere in the Mid-Atlantic is accepting planes right now. The FAA… I don’t know. How bad is it where you are?”

“The fire’s still a mile off from here, and so far none of the mobs have come for us. Either because they don’t know we’re here, or because we broke the story. I don’t know which.” He can feel Fornell nodding. “Tobias, don’t come.”

“Don’t come? You telling me that from your house on the Potomac, well out of danger, in Virginia?”

“No. But I don’t have a civilian wife, and I’m not on my honeymoon, either.”

Fornell snorts at that. The man on the other line was a goddamned Marine. He had the civilian wife and kid, and he left them behind to go into danger and save lives, and Fornell can’t do any less. “Wendy’s going to stay here. I’ll be there as soon as I can. And then I need to find out where Emily is.”

“Ziva’s with her. She’s safe. They were in France yesterday. And no one who’s looking is going to find her.”

“Thank God for small favors. Next time you’re about to blow up the fucking country, you call me first!”

On the second day, Fornell begins the trek to Washington DC.
On the third day, Gibbs feels useless.

It’s the most frustrating feeling of his life.

The whole world, well, DC, is on fire out there, the Metro FD is calling for help, his boys are going out, Abbi’s going out, the SEALs are going out, the Agents, even some of their wives, are going out. Jarvis and Leon are in full body armor, armed to the teeth, and going out.

And he’s not.

He’s here, inside the Navy Yard, with the women, and babies, and old men. Being useless.

He supposes it could be worse. He could be being a jerk in addition to useless. He knew well enough not to (sigh) beg the guys going out to help with the Fire Department. He knows he’s in no shape to be helping to pull down buildings and clear out trees, trying to build fire breaks. Let alone use the hand pumps. Enough of the city is on fire, and the summer and fall have been dry enough, that they’re pulling water from the river, and they’re using everything that will move water, even the hand pumps that have been sitting in storage since the 1950s. In some neighborhoods, they’re using buckets and garden hoses to try and get things damp enough that a loose spark won’t spread the flames.

He thought he could at least help Ducky and Allan. He knows basic first aid. And even if he didn’t he could have covered them. He can shoot. Ducky took one look at him, and then said, “Jethro, I have a finite store of Oxygen. If I take you, with your healing lung, out into the smoke, I’ll be using it on you instead of on people suffering from smoke inhalation.”

The worst part of that is that Ducky’s right. He hasn’t left the building, but he can smell the smoke, it’s creeping its way into the building, and he’s already starting to wheeze.

As he was leaving on the third morning, Leon said to him, “Keep everyone calm. It’s bad enough out there, we don’t need riots in here.”

He wants to smack Leon for that. ‘Keep everyone calm.’ He doesn’t know how to keep five hundred civilians calm. Right now, he’s lucky. The ones that are awake are glued to the TVs, watching the country fall apart, or on their phones talking to the outside world.

Some of them want to leave, and with the exception of Elaine’s girls, he’s letting them go. Idiots want to run into a mob setting fire to every government building they can reach, that’s on them.

The girls are a different story. They want to get home. They want their mom and dad, and they want to help defend the Diner. They aren’t happy when he won’t let them go. “We need to get home, Mr. Gibbs!” Kenzie is saying to him, looking him right in the eye.

“You think your mother and father didn’t know what was coming? You think you aren’t here on purpose?”

“But… They’re alone and the map…” He’s seen that map, too. The neighborhood the Diner’s in hasn’t burned, yet, but between the wind and the fact that it’s located in an area near where the big money lobbyists live (the second area, after Congress and the White House to burn) it’s in the path of
the flames. Right now, he and the girls are praying the interstate (right next to the Diner on the east) will be enough of a fire break to protect it.

“They’re building fire breaks. And your mom and dad know where to go when it’s time to bug out. I’m sure they’ll be here soon,” Gibbs hopes he’s not lying. “Come on, let’s get everyone who can cook together. People are going to start coming back, and they’ll want to eat.”

On the third day, Gibbs, along with many of the rest of the civilians, watch a news conference. They hear Metro PD declare a curfew. Anyone out after dark not wearing Metro FD or PD uniforms will be shot on sight. No exceptions.

They watch and hear how right now, Metro will be scooping up anyone who’s even remotely trained with a weapon to join those patrols.

How, as of sundown, they hope to have eight thousand men combing the city, walking the streets, and keeping the peace.

The room goes quiet after that. For a moment. And Gibbs can hear two opinions starting to come out, those who are in favor of this, hoping it calms things down, and those who learned the lesson of what happens when men have too much power and no accountability.

Gibbs knows how this will work. Old scores are about to be settled at sundown. Metro’s going to clean house. Anyone they’ve ever not been able to make a case against. Everyone who’s been on their watchlist… They’re all going to be found ‘out after dark.’

On the third day, just before sunset, Elaine, her husband, and her boys get to the Navy Yard. They’re exhausted, singed, and emotionally battered.

All Elaine’s husband would say, holding a shot gun, is, “Can’t shoot fire. Could handle the mob. Scared them off twice. But fire don’t scare.”

Gibbs looks at them, nods, and says, “You’re alive.” A minute later, their girls are in their arms. Elaine looks over them as she’s holding them tight, and she nods at him.

He nods back.

A few minutes later, as Kenzie’s dragging her parents to the café kitchen, which she’s turned into their territory, he hears her say, “Whoever stocked this thing had something against flavor. There’s no herbs, no spices, not even pepper, just salt and sugar.”

Gibbs decides he doesn’t need to mention that to Tim.

On the third day, at dinner, sitting between Tony and Tim, both of whom are bone deep weary,
neither of whom are talking, Gibbs starts to understand part of what he’s seeing.

Frayed nerves all around him. Tense people. Of course they’re tense. The city’s still on fire, they
don’t know if their homes are standing, and most of them are not trained or used to this kind of work.

With the exception of the SEALs and Marines, all of whom have clumped together, and are doing
their best to make sure everyone knows how much of a joke this is, and that anyone who’s having a
rough time with this has never seen a rough time, the rest of the people in this building are civilians.

They aren’t trained for this. They don’t know how to deal with it.

And Gibbs remembers. Remembers what got him, and a lot of the rest of his different teams through
Basic and then assignments around the world.

jokes. Little bits of the outside world. Those god-awful stupid movie nights and the USO guys.
Every place he’d been stationed that wasn’t an active front had had a morale officer.

On the third night, Gibbs finds a purpose. He heads over to Tony’s desk, rummages around for a bit,
finds a few DVDs and goes up to MTAC.

They’ve got popcorn and butter and movies. On the third night, he starts movie night. And as a few
hundred civilians and their families squeeze in to watch a show, he works on figuring out what else
they can do. He’s got to keep them in the right headspace, or else they won’t just have to worry
about the riots on the outside, they’ll have riots in here.

Just after 23:00 on day three, Jarvis gets confirmation that everyone who was directly involved in
buying the elections, from the outside of the US, is dead. Everyone directly involved in buying them
in the US, is in custody.

The immediate threat, that they or their families will be hunted down to keep the secret/revenge is
over.

The wider threat, the riots, the chaos, that’s going strong.

No one comes home when Jarvis sends out word that they’ve taken down all of the main
conspirators.

But, with that done, NCIS suddenly doesn’t have any jobs anymore. Not NCIS in the US anyway. If
there’s no Navy, and no Marines, because they’ve all been swallowed into their local National
Guards, there’s nothing for them to do.

In the off hours, between going out on humanitarian work, they’d all been trying to do their jobs.
Because it’s real. It’s something to do. It’s a way to stay attached to real life.

But right now, there are no new cases. Which means there’s a building full of people picking at old
cases. And that’s going to wear thin, fast.

By the fourth day, the fires are out. Mostly. No one’s setting new ones, at least.
And by the fourth day, Ducky and Allan have come to several conclusions.

First and foremost, they cannot go out alone. They tried. Ducky waved off Jethro’s offer, mostly because he didn’t want Jethro out in the smoke, but also because he was thinking that if he and Allan showed up armed, that might attract the wrong sort of attention.

So, they got the van, loaded it up, and worked under the idea that they’d head toward where the people were and would find wounded people.

This did not work spectacularly.

They were in what looked like a police van, and within minutes of getting out of the Navy Yard, they started taking fire.

“Why are they shooting at us?”

“Because they can, Dr. Allan. It’s an armored van, the glass is bulletproof. We should be fine.”

“As long as we stay inside of it.” Allan began thinking he should have gotten out of DC when he could. He was the one driving, and he was sorely tempted to get them out of the city, and let Dr. Mallard get himself back.

That lasted for three more blocks, when Dr. Mallard said, “Stop. Here.”

It just looked like a random crowd to Allan, but he stopped. “You sure?”

“We are doctors, we go where the wounded are.” Ducky tightened his helmet, which says NCIS on it, and got out of the van as spryly as he could. Allan followed, not about to be outdone by an eighty-four year old.

Ducky started shouting, the medical corpsman voice he developed in Korea, and the MASH doctor tone from Viet Nam, loud and clear.

“Who needs medical attention? We are doctors! Queue up.”

And people started to shuffle out of the crowd. Most of them were lining up, nicely. Some were pushing, shoving, half mad from fear and pain. Ducky and Allan were in front of the back doors to the van, and several other members of the crowd pushed in behind them, trying to grab supplies.

Three times they got people lined up again, got them back away from the van before everything went south. They were treating a little boy with a head wound. Getting it stitched up while he cried and his mother sobbed when someone stole the van.

Fortunately, they were less than a mile from the Navy Yard. More fortunately, sunset was hours away. They made the walk back, through milling crowds, burnt smoldering buildings and cars, in a bit less than an hour.

On the first day out, The NCIS infirmary lost a third of it’s antibiotic ointment, a quarter of its bandages, half of its store of lidocaine, and all of Dr. Allan’s belief in anything approaching the goodness of mankind.

“We will do better tomorrow, Dr. Allan,” Ducky said as they get back into the Navy Yard.

“Tomorrow, we treat people who come to us.”

“If you wish to stay here, and see to our own wounded, that is fine. I’ll gather some extra hands and
go out on my own.”

“We got lucky they didn’t kill us.”

“That is true every day, Dr. Allan. Tomorrow we shall prepare properly. Armed guards. Modify our outfits some. Full armor for us, not just helmets and vests. The van. I know we have white paint somewhere.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Paint it white and slap a big red cross on it. We have colored electrical tape somewhere. That will suffice to put red crosses on our armor.”

Allan was very shaken. “They’re going to kill us out there.”

Ducky looked up at Allan, and said, very seriously, “Dr. Allan, a good three quarters of the people who were hurt lined up. They needed our help and were grateful for it. They are not armed. They do not have an armed compound to go back to. They are out there, at the mercy of the savages around them.” His voice shifted deeper, and lower. “They are in danger, and because of how we handled this case, they did not have the time or warning to prepare. The very least we can do is go out there and help.”

“You feel responsible for this?”

Ducky shrugged. To a degree that was true. By then they were back in autopsy, so he went looking for the electrical tape while Allan took his helmet and vest off. “We had an idea of what was coming, and we prepared ourselves for it. I’m not saying I had a better idea for how to do this. Not given how dangerous this information was. And not given how little we truly know about who was in on it and how far they’d go to keep us quiet. But as we watch the news, and as we move outside and inside of these walls, I keep thinking there had to have been a better way to do this.”

Allan shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“I do not, either.” Ducky grabbed the tape. “Here, bring me your helmet.” Allan did, and Ducky neatly places a red cross on it. “Be pleased we have armor. The first time I did this, all that stood between my skin and bullets or shrapnel was army drab cloth, a heavy back pack, a flimsy helmet, and the hope that they wouldn’t aim directly at a the man with the red cross on his shoulders and helmet.”

It takes them a while to get another van set up, and set up properly. And, by set up properly, they mean handed over to the guys in the motor pool, who take the time to modify the top, so that, as long as they drive slowly, the three or so armed men on top with the assault rifles won’t get knocked off.

On the fourth day, Ducky and Allan go out, in head to toe body armor, in an armored van, with two SEALs and Tim on top, also armed to the teeth, and set up shop.

Three assault rifle wielding men covering the parking lot they set up in has a good effect. People queue up neatly. They do it quickly and quietly enough that Ducky gets the chance to triage, and Allan begins treating the worst cases right away.

By the end of the fourth day, Dr. Allan remembers what it feels like to save lives.
Over dinner, as he and Allan work on plans to streamline their system further, they hear everyone go quiet. Another news conference, this one with the Governors of Maryland and Virginia. They are refusing Metro’s request for National Guard troops to help keep the peace in DC.

They are placing those troops at the border between DC and their states.

Anyone who lives in DC won’t be let out. And the only people who don’t live in DC being let in will be those on ‘humanitarian’ missions.

The Mayor of DC, as well as the Metro PD Chief give a brief, and polite statement that boiled down to a ‘thanks for fucking nothing.’

It’s as they’re watching that conversation, that a thought occurs to Ducky, with limited supplies coming in, and no indication that anyone will be leaving, they are very soon going to have entirely new sets of riots on their hands.

After dinner, he and Penny head into the café, and take a look at the supplies on hand. He returns to Autopsy, and checks the refrigerator. Between the two of them, they do the math.

There are eight hundred and seven people in the Navy Yard right now, and at 2000 calories a day, they have three days of food for them.

He and Penny find Vance later that night, and says to him, “Director, I think it would be a very good idea to start sending out foraging parties.”

Penny adds, “And an even better idea to get everyone out of here who can leave.”

Vance, weary all over from a long day walking patrol around the Navy Yard, pulls in a deep breath on the cigarette that began to permanently live between his lips on the second day. “How bad is it?”

“We have three days of food left at this point,” Ducky says.

“That’s if everyone stays,” Penny adds. “They’re letting people who live outside of DC out. Right now, it’d be a very good idea to load up the vans with people who live outside, flank them with security guards, get them to the border, and then fill them up with every bite of food they can find on the way back.”

Vance nods, slowly. Then he asks the tougher question. “How do I get them out without setting up a panic over our own food situation? A lot of the families don’t want to go outside the walls, even to get home, because the trip out there isn’t a good one.”

Ducky looks to Penny, she looks back. Neither of them have a good answer for that.

On the fifth day, they start getting serious about hunkering down into survival mode.

It’s little things that’ll keep a man sane.

For Tim, those little things are texts/calls from Abby, Jimmy, and Breena.
For others, especially the ones who have their families with them, those little things are more concrete.

Tim would tell you he got tons of chocolate, cigarettes, alcohol, and coffee.

And, in an abstract sort of way, for abstract, ideas of people, he did.

He didn’t count on how many real people would end up inside the Navy Yard. He really didn’t count on the fact that by day five, they’d still all be in there, and that no one would be able to get out for more supplies.

On the fifth day, they made a lottery for what’s left of the beer, cigarettes, and chocolate bars. There weren’t enough of any of them for everyone to get one let alone more than one.

Within an hour of the lottery, as the goods are handed out, there’s massive trading going on inside the Navy Yard. A Hershey’s bar is going for $28 by the time day five is over. A bottle of beer is going for $46. The cigarettes aren’t trading for as much, because fewer people want them, but those that do, are hoarding them.

On day five, when Tim goes out with Ducky, he sees Leon coming in, cigarette between his lips, inhaling savagely, like that little hit of nicotine is the only thing keeping him sane. Tim strokes the screen of his phone. He’s read the texts on it a thousand times. They’re the only thing keeping him sane.

On day five, Jarvis claims that everyone with a family, who lives outside of Washington DC, has been offered safe passage to the border.

It takes all day, but they manage to get one hundred and seventeen people out of the Navy Yard. Though, given the fact that each and every single trip gets shot at on the way to the Virginia or Maryland National Guard, it doesn’t take long for the people in the vans to figure out that the ‘safe passage’ was a lie.

It still gets them out.

Which is good, because the scroungers aren’t coming back with much food.

After the first two sets of them return with nothing, Penny has an idea. “Vitamin pills, protein drinks, sports drinks, those weight loss shakes, anything with vitamins and calories.”

Ducky nods at that. Right now, they’re looking at malnutrition and calorie deficiency. If they can eliminate half of the problem…

It won’t be good, but it won’t be as bad as it could be.

The third set of scroungers come back with a van full of gummy multi-vitamins, and weight loss shakes. Not ideal, but better than the nothing they brought in the first two times.

“You need to go,” Abbi says to Gibbs.

He shakes his head.
“Jethro…”

“You can’t leave,” he says it with a wheeze. Tim’s lungs aren’t enjoying the smoke that won’t leave the air, that’s soaked into every molecule of NCIS. Gibbs’ are actively trying to crawl out of his body and go off, without him, in search of real oxygen.

He’s too pale. He starts to cough if he talks for too long. And if he tries to move around too fast, he gets tired and lightheaded.

And he’s still stubborn as a bull. “Not going without you. Not leaving you here.”

“I can handle myself.”

He nods. He knows that. He squeezes her hand, finger tracing over where he hopes to put a ring if they ever get out of here. “You and me, to the end of the road. I don’t walk the path without you,” he stops coughing, bad, “you don’t walk it without me.”

She shakes her head and glares, not happy with him about that, but sure she can’t get him to leave.

Tim is done with this shit. He’s sitting on one of the benches in the locker room, pulling off clothing that reeks of sweat and smoke. Everything reeks now. The whole building is foul. When this is done, he’s going to recommend they pull all of the windows out, because otherwise they’ll never get rid of the smell.

As of today’s dinner count, they’ve got six hundred and ninety people and two washing machines and two dryers. They run them twenty-four seven, but clean clothing is dwindling fast, and detergent is dwindling even faster. Tomorrow, all they’ll be able to do is rinse their clothing, in cold water.

Tim hadn’t had the chance to pack, so between his go bag and what Tony brought for him, he wore his last clean outfit yesterday.

And like almost everyone else who can, he’s been out, working hard and hot.

“McGee, gear up, night patrol.”

Tim glances up at the SEAL looming over him. He’s been back at the Navy Yard for maybe ten minutes. He’s been on medical patrol, all day. He’s tired, he’s achy, and he’s in what can charitably be called a ‘bad mood.’ (He’s thinking of it as ‘raging asshole’ mood personally, and has come to the conclusion that nothing sets up raging asshole mood like having to stare down people with a gun to keep them from mobbing fucking doctors for God’s sake.)

He’s also, intentionally, been avoiding night patrol.

“Shoot on sight after sundown order still in place?” he asks the SEAL.

“Yeah.”

The SEAL, who Tim doesn’t think has been out in daylight, looks like he’s enjoying that idea. “Then no, I’m not moving. I’m going to sit here, get a shower, and then call my wife.”

“Gear up. That’s an order.”

Tim glares up at him, sighs, then stands up. The problem with the SEALs and their big-swinging-
dick style of life is that very few of them think he, or anyone else who doesn’t consider this a vacation from the usual grind of full on warzones, has anything between his legs at all, and if he does, they’re tiny, shriveled-little-raisin-sized balls, thus making him incapable of standing up for himself.

And so far, he’s been dealing with it in a reserved sort of way, just quietly ignoring it as best he can. They can’t actually order him around, and until now, none of them have been dumb enough to try.

So much for that. He’s staring right into (and slightly up, the guy’s huge) the SEAL’s eyes. Time to put a motherfucker in his place.

“You seem to be mistaken about a few things, so let’s start with this: first off, you and your order can go to the armory, grab a flamethrower, and fuck yourself sideways with it until you bleed. I am not shooting some poor asshole for sticking his nose outside of his house, not tonight, not tomorrow night, not any night. As long as the nighttime orders are shoot on sight, my butt and my gun stay inside. Second of all,” his eyes flick to the uniform, “Petty Officer, I am not military, and, since you didn’t turn your ass over to the National Guard of wherever the hell you’re supposed to be, you’re not, either, so you cannot order me around. Third of all, I am the number four man at NCIS, and with number two and three out of the building, and with Jarvis having handed in his resignation, I’m the second highest ranked man in this building. It may be a civilian rank, but we’re both civilians now, and it’s a damn sight higher than yours. Now you will turn around and go find someone else to ‘keep the peace’ tonight, are we understood!”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?” He glares into the SEAL’s eyes, making it immensely clear that if he doesn’t immediately start getting the kind of respect he’s due, that he will flatten the man and enjoy doing it.

“Yes, sir!” The SEAL snaps into the correct attitude.

Tim nods. He doesn’t mind at all if these assholes call him sir. He waits for the SEAL to leave the locker room, and then collapses back into his chair, feeling shaky. Right now, everything gets to him. He has to take a while to calm down before he can call Abby, lucky for him the shower line is pretty long. He knows they’re worried, and right now, he’s doing everything he can to seem normal when he talks to them, including claiming skype video isn’t working.

He knows, if they see his eyes, or if he sees theirs, he’ll break, and not just for a bit of a cry in the shower.

“How’s the outside reacting?” Tim asks. It’s later. Nighttime, he thinks. Time is melting for him. Hours stretching on and on with no breaks in sight. He’s not on guard or walking a beat outside, so it’s probably night.

Abby answers, “I saw on the news today that Texas, Montana, Utah, California, and New Hampshire seceded. Well, said they weren’t sending another cent to the Feds, and their state assemblies are talking about it. Alaska and North Dakota formally requested to join Canada, and the local news says they’re seriously thinking about saying yes.”

Tim rubs his head. “Great.”

“New York is calling a new Constitutional Convention. What’s left of the Senate and Congress is there. They’ve got to stay under armed guard and move to a new location every day to keep them
safe. They claim that they’re working on getting new elections set.”

Tim scoffs at living under armed guards. He hasn’t been watching the TV news, it depresses him too much, but he’s fairly sure whatever the hell it is they’re doing in New York, it’s not life in DC.

“Are you okay? We’re only getting dribs and drabs out of DC,” Abby says.

“We’re fine.” That’s his stock answer. If he tries to really talk about it, he’ll either start crying and won’t be able to stop, or he’ll choke on the words. If he doesn’t say it, it can stay a nightmare that’s happening outside of him.

He knows she knows he’s not fine. He can hear it in her voice. “We heard that what’s left of Congress is supposed to have a press conference tomorrow.”

“Lovely. I’m so done with this.”

“I know.”

“Tell me about Canada.”

“Okay.”

On the fifth day, Abby and Breena and Jimmy are getting well-practiced at painting pictures with words. They know Tim’s ‘Skype’s not working’ line is bullshit. They’ve asked if he’s ‘okay’ and Abbi’s told them (over Skype) he’s as good as anyone is.

From that, they’ve put together that seeing them will break him, or seeing him will break them. Or both.

So, they’re just voices on the line.

He doesn’t talk much. Can’t. He tried the first few days, but meaningless chatter wouldn’t come to him, and he can’t make himself say what’s really happening. So, they talk to him. They tell him silly stories about the girls. They send him pictures of their ‘trip.’ They are, slowly, moving east, stopping in little cities all over eastern Canada. They tell him about the food, and parks, and snow.

And they don’t want to hang up. But every night, as they pass the phone around, telling different stories, they stop hearing anything from Tim but slow steady breaths, and eventually, after a few discrete, “Tim, you still there?” questions, they come to the conclusion that he’s asleep.

And if all they can do for him is talk him to sleep each night, than that’s what they’ll do.

Day Six, the fires are “officially” out.

“You ready?” Tim asks Tony.

Tony nods. They’re in full body armor, both of them carrying pistols and automatic rifles. The van is armored, but they’ll only be able to drive two thirds of the way. Abbi’s with them. So is Draga and Bishop. Five man team, a bit lower than optimal, but they know what they’re doing. And where they’re going.
Ducky’s told them, that, at least in the United States, riots rarely hit well-off neighborhoods. In the US, riots are usually a combination of a bad situation touching off people in bad places, where hope is a thing rarely seen, and where there’s very much nothing to lose.

That has not been the case here.

Probably because, while these started as average run-of-the-mill angry riots, they didn’t stay that way. While people who lived in DC flooded out in the first few days, people who didn’t live here, and who hated DC, the government, and everything that it stood for, flooded in.

And they weren’t interested in burning down slums. Destroying the nothing the poor had didn’t scratch the itch for revenge, or answer the call of rageful violence.

They marched, drove, ran to the rich neighborhoods. To where Congressmen, Senators, and the men and women who sold power or lived off of those sales, lived.

And they burned them. In some cases, they took entire neighborhoods, circled them, shot anyone who tried to get out, and then lit them on fire.

So, it’s the five of them, walking in a diamond formation, pistols on their hips, and assault rifles cradled in their arms, swapping out who’s in the middle each block, heading away from the Navy Yard, to the historic district, where Tony’s house…

The whole neighborhood is gone. Tim had been expecting that. Tony’s house was on a street famous for connected people and lobbyists. Somehow, when it became clear who was involved in raising the money that bought the elections, Metro PD didn’t feel like doing much to protect where “those people” lived. The single tallest pieces left are the brick dividing walls, some of which are still two stories high. Most of them are crumbled to fewer than ten feet tall. A few chimneys still rise skyward. Cement staircases, blackened from the fire, and decorated with slumped, melted, wrought iron rails, still jut up from ash-coated sidewalks. A few of the trees are still standing. The active fires are out, but the street is hot, and so is the air. Hot, dry, ashy.

Everything’s ashy right now.

Tony can’t even tell which one was his.

They form square around him, looking out, away from him, not to give him privacy while he grieves, but to keep an eye on the street, make sure no one is coming. Darkness and the teams of armed men who will kill anyone out has made the nights “safer.” Daytime holds no such promises of “safety.” Tim reaches behind himself, and Tony takes his hand. He feels a forehead on his shoulder, and hears Tony start to sob.

There is exactly one area where Tim’s been pulling rank on anyone, and that’s his office. It’s his. He’s hogging it up, and using it for just him. And he doesn’t care if everyone else is whispering and hating how he’s got a little space of his own. (Though, by ‘his own,’ what they mean is that he’s slept in it once. The rest of the time he lets Ducky and Penny, or Gibbs and Abbi, or Bishop and Jake, or Diane and Draga, or Tony use it.) But it’s his damn office, and he’s close enough to snapping as it is, and if he doesn’t get at least some alone time, he’s going to go completely bonkers.

When they get back, he walks Tony over to it, lets him go in, and shuts the door.

“You want me to stay?”
Tony shakes his head. He hasn’t said anything since they saw his house.

“Okay.” Tim sees Tony curl up into a little ball on one of the chairs as leaves.

Gibbs is getting the update from Abbi when Tim comes over to him, flopping down, exhausted, boneless. He’s tired all the time now, but at least when he’s out there, he can keep moving. As soon as he gets inside the walls, he just crashes. Abbi and Gibbs are at the conference table, and he’s sprawled into a slump in a chair next to them.

“I didn’t think he was that attached to the place,” Gibbs says.

Tim shrugs, this is more emotional than he expected Tony to be, too. Not like he ever lived in the place. “Maybe it was what that place represented? Not like he can sell it fast now.”

“Not like he needs to. His homeowners insurance should cover it,” Abbi says.

“That’s why you weren’t devastated,” Tim replies. Abbi’s neighborhood was just as gone as Tony’s. Her home is down to three feet of blackened brick.

“Not saying it doesn’t hurt to see it burnt, but… I’d already pulled everything I loved about that place out. I can rebuild it or sell it as is.”

Gibbs is looking in the direction of Tim’s office. Tony’s got the blinds drawn, so he can’t see how he’s doing, but he can imagine it. Then he remembers something… “Tony’s never owned a house before. And he bought this one fast, not planning on keeping it. I wonder if he bothered to see what his homeowner’s covers.”

“Go in there, cheer him up some,” Tim says.

Gibbs had diagnosed the problem correctly. Ever since looking at a street of nothing but burned out hulks, Tony’s been dying inside. He’s on the hook for a 300K mortgage, a God alone knows how high tax assessment, though he supposes it’s possible he can get it argued down to way less than seven million dollars, what with the fact that he’s now the proud co-owner of a smoldering pile of charred brick. He’s got no equity to pull off of, and while he had enough to make repairs, he doesn’t have enough to build from scratch, let alone up to the city’s historic landmark codes.

Assuming the damn thing still is a historic landmark when they get around to trying to rebuild.

He doesn’t have enough money to fix it, and right now, he can’t sell it for more than he paid for it. He’s not sure if he can sell it for what he paid for it. Location’s meaningless when the entire neighborhood is gone and no one knows when anyone will be able to move in again.

He doesn’t even want to imagine telling Ziva about this.

She calls him every day, and that’s the only thing keeping him going right now. She thinks Jarvis is right, that whoever was running this is gone deep underground or dead. She’s caught no one keeping watch on them. And that helps. The fact that she and Emily aren’t coming back anytime soon helps even more.

No matter how bad this gets, she’s not here, not in the thick of it, not trying to keep their baby healthy on rations that are getting plainer and plainer, and starting to get smaller with each meal.
But it’s not enough. Nothing will ever be enough until he’s out of the city, out of the Navy Yard, and back with her, somewhere nice and safe. Somewhere he can get clean. Somewhere that doesn’t smell like char and death.

Everything in their apartment is going to need to be deep cleaned to get the smoke out, and even if they do get it cleaned back up, his son won’t come home to a pleasant apartment on a decent street filled with nice restaurants and interesting businesses, because he has no idea when or if any of them are coming back. Only reason his apartment only has smoke damage is because it’s too high up to vandalize. Everything on the first and second floors had been broken, ripped apart, shit on, literally and figuratively, and spray painted in his neighborhood.

And maybe it’s not just the house. No one’s sleeping, him least of all. He feels like he hasn’t seen Ziva in years. He hasn’t been able to get through to his Dad, though Tim told him he was in Berlin. The food is shit. The air smells and tastes like the inside of a crematorium. And he drank all of his booze two days ago, so right now, he’s way more sober than he wants to be.

So, he’s in Tim’s office, in a chair, which is not ideal for his almost fifty year old body, curled into as much of a ball as he can get, rocking slightly, making small sounds that might be referred to as a whimper, when Gibbs walks in and he freezes.

Gibbs puts a gentle hand on his shoulder, sitting next to him, and says, “It’s okay. You don’t have to stop.”

Tony sits up and wipes his eyes. “I’m…” He can’t make himself say ‘Okay.’

“I know. You’ve got renter’s insurance on your current place, right?”

Tony nods. “Yeah. It’ll pay for the cleaning.” He sighs, that’s something at least. Save a grand or two when he’s on the verge of financial collapse.

“You’ve got homeowner’s insurance, too. Bank wouldn’t give you the mortgage if you didn’t.”

Tony nods a bit. “Great, so, what… the fat lot of nothing I had in there can be replaced?”

Gibbs squeezes his shoulder. That’s the difference between renters insurance and homeowners insurance. Renter’s insurance covers the stuff inside the building. “It’ll cover the house. Pay to build it up new for ya. Then you can sell it like you planned. Or build to your price range and live there. Not sure if you’ll want to. No idea what the rest of the place’ll look like after, or what the taxes might be. Might get zoned different or something, but… Check’s coming your way. You can pay off the bank, leave it the way it is, sell the land, and pocket the rest.”

Tony blinks, slowly, a smile starts to spread over his face, and then he begins to sob. It’s been too damn much, and he needs the release. Gibbs nods and pulls him close, petting his back.

On the seventh day, Jimmy, Abby, and Breena hold each other as they watch the news. They aren’t getting ‘drips’ and ‘drabs’ out of DC.

They’re getting horror shows.

They don’t know how much information anyone inside the Navy Yard is getting. Tony won’t talk to anyone other than Ziva. Gibbs will say hello, but they can hear the wheeze in his voice and don’t want to keep him talking a second longer than necessary. He needs to get out of the smoke and into
real air, but he won’t leave. Ducky hasn’t been in anytime they’ve called. He’s got Penny and Allan
with him, and they’re running a mobile infirmary.

And when they get back, there are the people who have come to the Navy Yard seeking help.

Tim tells them that if Ducky doesn’t sleep soon, he’s going to drop. But they can’t make him sleep.
Not when there are battered, bleeding people in need of help.

Tim will only tell them he’s fine.

Abbi’s only chatted for a few minutes. They get the same line from her. They’re fine. Everything is
fine. Try not to worry. They’ll be fine, and they’ll see them soon.

But they’re watching, and they’re scared. The IRS and CIA had already had the extra armor put in
place to harden it from outside attacks. They’re still standing.

The mob burned out the DEA and the FEC. They didn’t have enough protection. And, having
followed Tim’s Urban Chaos Protection plans, those buildings were stuffed with civilians trying to
shelter inside.

The DEA put up a fight. The first four times the mob charged them, they shot back. Then someone
in the mob came up with the idea of shooting out the windows, Molotov cocktails, and slingshots.

Which meant the people on the inside had the choice of run out into the mob, or burn inside.

They shot their way out, leaving a good two hundred casualties.

The FEC wasn’t so lucky. They weren’t armed to the teeth. The casualty count hadn’t come through
on that one, yet.

Best guess, close to six hundred people had been in there, mostly civilians, mostly families of people
who worked for the FEC. The mob surrounded the building, shot out the windows, and fired
incendiaries. When the people inside tried to run out of the burning building, they were shot.

On the seventh day, it comes out that David York, Theresa Manedel, Jeffry Tanen, William Burke,
Jaqueline Fordi, and Thomas Pein, are inside the Navy Yard. Leon wants to shoot the fucker in his
building who decided to let that bit of information fly. They’ve still got close to forty journalists of all
different stripes, and they are still reporting.

And one of them, who will, in a few minutes be given a gun and told to stand the line, thought it
would be a really great idea to publish a live interview with Manedel, explaining what she thought
they were doing, and why it was for the good of the country, and how evil the FEC/voting machine
companies were for making them have to pay to do it. How if they hadn’t been greedy, they could
have all agreed ahead of time, and no one would have ever found out.

On the seventh day, the mob, which had, until that point, been ignoring the Navy Yard, turned
against it. Leon starts getting reports when they’re still two miles out. They’re coming, and they want
blood. For a moment, Leon’s almost tempted to just give them who they want, and hope that’ll keep
the mob off of them.

But he’s seen the news. He can’t trust he can buy the lives of his people with six of the prisoners he’s
got.
Lucky for them mobs move slow. Like a swarm of locusts, they get wherever it is they’re going, and they leave nothing but destruction behind, but they don’t do it fast.

On the seventh day, Gibbs is not useless. He, McGee, fifteen of the SEALs, and every other agent who can hit an apple sized target at 1000 meters with a rifle, are on the roof, with rifles, looking for the men in the crowd with incendiary devices.

The mob is coming. The Navy Yard is not armored. And if anyone gets a good throw in with flaming gasoline, they will burn.

Tim hasn’t told Abby about what’s happened to three of their sister agencies. He doesn’t want them worrying if they don’t already know, but everyone at NCIS knows what happened to the men and women in the DEA, FEC, and EPA buildings.

And it’s not going to happen to them.

On the roof, there are the precision, distance shooters. Every car that had been in any of the parking lots have been driven out to create a two car deep ring around the Navy Yard on three sides (the Anacostia River is the fourth side). At 1000 meters out, that’s the far perimeter. That’s the line the sharp shooters are monitoring. At the walls, anyone who can use a pistol is standing, waiting. And on the river, Ducky and Penny are getting everyone ready. If the civilians have to try and float or swim for it, they will.

Tim is not surprised that Jarvis is on the roof with them, cigarette between his lips, rifle held light and steady in his hands, laying on his belly, keeping watch on the crowd.

“No one gets past the cars. Anyone steps over that line, one warning shot, and then take them out.”

Tim hates that order. He hates the fear streaming through him. He hates all of this.

But the crowd is coming, and he can see the effigies, already on fire. The city is running out of food, any water that doesn’t come from a bottle is gray with ash and turns your guts into solid knots, or loosens them so bad you spend the next three days shitting yourself bloody, but somehow everyone has gasoline to burn.

He takes a deep breath, coughs. He’s coughing all the time now. His lungs hate the smoke. Not as bad as Jethro’s, who they have to get out soon. His lips and fingernails are pale blue all the time now. But right now, right now they need him, here, on the roof, with them, sniper’s eyes sharp and ready.

Jethro’s (and the two other snipers) got his own orders. Any incendiary he spots, he shoots. Doesn’t matter if it’s past the car line or not.

Tim sights through his rifle, keeping watch. Up here his job is to shoot the people who are leading, take out the guys with the Molotov cocktails and the homemade mortars. Don’t let themselves get burned out.

They hear Vance’s voice through the loudspeaker, telling the crowd to disperse. Telling them that if they cross the line, the literal line of cars blocking the street, providing a steel buffer around the Navy Yard, that they will open fire.
For a moment, everyone stays in place. They’re restless, and Tim can feel the energy of the mob, feel the reckless, don’t-give-a-shit-about-life-or-death, everything’s-gone-so-there’s-nothing-left-to-lose power of it.

He doesn’t breathe, hoping they’ll break, hoping they’ll run.

They don’t.

The first person starts to scramble over a car, and Jarvis nails the hood less than six inches from his hand.

There’s another pause, a heartbeat where someone has the sense to not want to die, and then that sense flees, and then the mob surges, screaming for the blood of the men who put them here.

And Tim searches, finds his first target, and fires. And again. And again.

And with those shots, and Jethro’s and the SEALs, incendiaries burst, and gasoline, flaming, spreads through the crowd.

Soon it’s not just the lingering smoke in the air. It’s the greasy, sweet char of burned meat.

He’s been up on the roof for more than three hours. The mob’s shrunk back and regrouped twice. Tim’s not even sure where all these people are coming from. (He’ll later learn that they’re sneaking in from all over the country. Caravans of people have been streaking toward DC, out to hunt down their very own senator or congressman. As long as they’re coming in ones and twos, armed with what they can carry, the VA and MD National Guards aren’t doing much to stop them. They are stopping the guys trying to come through with trucks and vans full of weapons and people who want to burn and kill.)

On the third surge, Tim knows this is it. He’s down to his last magazine. The armory is low on bullets. The men guarding the perimeter can’t have much more ammo, either.

If they regroup for a fourth try, they’re done. Nothing left to do but throw the guns at them.

He watches the third wave break. Too close. Surge one they kept out of range of the wall guards. Two got to the far extents of it. Three breaks when the wall open fires, as well as the sniping from the roof.

Four bullets left.

So many men he can’t count them.

And fire everywhere. Licking through the crowd, on the street, the cars people parked outside the Navy Yard smolder.

If the wind turns east, they’re fucked. The fire on the ground will do what the mob came to do, whether they get to do it themselves or not.

If the mob tries one more run, they’re fucked. They’ll run out of bullets before they can break it.
Tim hears screaming, howling, the sound of beasts that lost their minds long ago, voices tearing through the air, demanding perfect justice paid out in blood and pain.

The mob is going to make a fourth run at them.

Four bullets.

*Don’t waste them.* It’s all a waste. Doesn’t matter if he shoots perfectly, or shoots into the ground. His four bullets won’t stop this.

Tim licks his lips and sights, looking for the flash of a flame. Once he’s out of bullets, he knows what he has to do, down to the perimeter. He’s got a pistol, and worst comes to worst, he’s got a knife.

More than three hundred civilians inside the building, and keeping them safe is where he’s going to live or die.

One shot. Glass busts and gasoline flames and slows a few people down as they try to move around it. He imagines he can hear the few that are pushed through it scream.

Two shots. That one snaps a head back, and the flask of fire falls to the ground, to be picked up by someone behind the first man.

Three shots. That time he hits the flask. And again, he imagines he hears the scream of the man holding the liquid fire as it bursts upon him.

Four shots. He doesn’t see what that one does. His target gets lost in the crowd. He closes his eyes for a second, grabs his helmet, and begins the run to the perimeter. More than two thousand feet, mostly stairs, to go.

His Sig carries fifteen bullets.

Not enough to stop the mob. Not enough to save his life of the lives of anyone in the building.

Just enough to make sure he’s got a good count on the men he takes to Hell with him. That’s all it’s down to now, the size of his honor guard when he gets there.

Panting, wheezing, coughing, standing next to Tony, who’s already firing into the crowd, his heart pounding, he figures this is how it’s going to end, trampled by a mob, defending strangers, hoping his loves won’t hold it against him that he didn’t leave.

He knows he holds it against himself, and if there’s ever another moment like this, he’s running the fuck away from it.

He hears Tony’s gun click, sees him reach for another magazine, and feels his own gun slamming back into his palm. Fourteen shots to go.

The sound changes. Maybe his ears are wrecked from the gunfire. Tony’s shooting next to him. He’s shooting. People are screaming all around, but he thinks he’s hearing clanking, followed by the ripping canvas sound of machine guns.

Lots of them.

And finally, finally the crowd runs.

As they scatter, still screaming, he sees what sent them off. Tanks.
Tim’s so relieved he starts to cry, and Tony does, too.

And then he starts to laugh, hysterical, insane, the whole world is about to go inside out laughing, because a hatch just opened up, and Fornell pops out. “Where’s Gibbs? I told that son of bitch I’d get here. Now, let’s get you re-armed and get those prisoners secured!”
Interlude: Night Seven

A minute after that, Fornell scrambles down, heads directly over to Vance, takes the cigarette from between his lips, and takes a deep drag, a look of pure, sublime pleasure on his face. “Thanks, Leon. Forgot how fucking good that feels.” He savors another long draw as the tanks circle the Navy Yard, setting turrets to face anyone who might come for them. “Haven’t done this since ‘Nam.”

Everyone on the NCIS side of this conversation is still staring at Fornell, still processing the idea that they aren’t all about to die in the next five minutes, and then finally, gasping for breath between laughs, Tony says, “Is Mike Franks about to come rappelling out of a fucking helicopter?”

Fornell shrugs. “Crazier things have happened. Like all of this shit. How the hell did you guys end up stuck in here without enough men to hold DC? I heard that Jarvis gave the Marines and Navy to the National Guards and didn’t think to keep the Goddamed SEALs in DC to keep the place from blowing up.”

In retrospect, that would have been a good plan. That’s also just about the point when Jarvis gets to Fornell.

He eyes the line of tanks bristling with huge guns and says, “What did you do?”

Fornell shrugs. “I borrowed some friends who didn’t leave the Army after ‘Nam, explained who was in DC, and who needed help. They decided sitting on their asses waiting for the National Guard to do something with them was boring, and helping here was a good plan.”

“You co-oped an Army regiment?” Jarvis says.

“Not quite that many of them, and it’s not like they were doing much. Once you get ten miles south of the border of DC, the National Guard’s pretty much done their work. There’s a bit of friction still going on in Richmond, and, I’m getting reports that Petersburg is a mess, but most of the state is quiet.” In 1966, twenty-year old Tobias Fornell was drafted to Viet Nam. His Army record shows he was a good soldier. His final rank, Sargeant, would have been a lot higher if he had been better at not telling officers what he thought about their orders. Jarvis, in his mind at least, is one of those officers, and he’s about to get an earful. “Why the hell didn’t you keep the SEALs, or hell, the Navy, under your command? Wouldn’t take more than five thousand guys who know what to do with the pointy end of the knife to keep this town under control.”

“Because I’m a bureaucrat, not a king,” Jarvis says sharply. That was his big decision. He knew he could have kept the Marines and Navy under his control, and probably could have rallied the Army, too, or at least worked out a good compromise with them, and ended up ruling. He also knew he wasn’t elected to anything, ever.

“Yeah, well, we’re gonna need a king, soon. Still no acting President, and things are getting hairy out there. You hear that the Governor of Texas got all of his senate and congress together, voted on it, and just declared them an independent country. Mexico recognized them this morning, and they’re already getting trade agreements set.”

Tim, finally, thinks of something to say. “Not the first time that’s happened.” Then he starts to laugh again.

Fornell looks at Tim like he’s insane, laughing at that, and then knows what he’s seeing, and his eyes go gentle. “Been a long week for you guys, hasn’t it?”
Vance nods. With each day it’s becoming clearer and clearer who’s a soldier or sailor, and who isn’t. And the civilians, even his police officers, are having a much harder time than the soldiers. “Come in. Let’s get moving, before someone else starts taking shots at us.”

Inside the walls, Fornell tugs off his helmet, and Tony and Tim stare at him. Tobias stares back for a second, and then rubs his hand over his newly bald head. “Did it this way in ‘Nam. Hate the way it’d get all sweaty and matted under the helmet, even when it’s short. As soon as I knew I was going to be in a tank, off it went.”

Tim and Tony don’t say anything to that. Too tired, too stunned.

A few seconds later, they see Jethro, slowly, rifle disassembled and in its case, walking toward them.

“God, Jethro, you look like shit,” Fornell says.

“Thanks,” Jethro says, with a wracking cough. “Love the new look.”

“Sound like shit, too.”

“Outside. It’ll get better when I go in.”

“You need to get out of the city. Go to McGee’s house. He’s far enough out that you’ll be able to breathe again.”

For the first time in days, Tim feels like vigorously agreeing with something. He nods. “Go. Abby told me last night she talked to Heather. The house is fine. Bit dinged up, and we’ve got a mess to clean up in the front yard, but no one broke in.”

“Can’t leave.”

“You can’t even say more than three words at a go,” Tony adds. “You’ve got a Virginia driver’s license. They’ll let you out.”

Gibbs glances at Abbi, who’s twenty feet ahead and talking with Leon and Jarvis about seeing if they can get more SEALs and Marines in here. “She doesn’t.”

“She’s a big girl, who’s doing just fine on her own,” Fornell says.

Gibbs shakes his head, coughing again. “Need every man who can shoot here.”

“They don’t need you dying here,” Fornell says.

“Too damn stubborn for it.”

Fornell snorts. “Yeah, we’ll see about that. What’s the FBI been doing? I’ve been getting nothing from them?”

They head into the building as he asks, and the air is a little better in there. But not much. What’s really better is that the O2 tank Gibbs co-opted for his own is at the door. He slides the cannula into his nostrils and inhales, deep. Then he can answer. “Dicking around with PD some. I think after the DEA building went up, they shut their own building down, sealed themselves in. Haven’t heard from them since.”
“Then I know what we’re doing next.” Fornell says, “We’re rearming you, taking the prisoners, and getting them into our custody, in a building that won’t burn and can’t be mobbed. And then I’m getting my guys and anyone else out there who’s sick of sitting on their asses, getting orders to twiddle their thumbs from the National Guards, and we’re going to stop dicking around. This is insane.”

“Not much leadership right now. Most of us are just keeping our own heads above water,” Gibbs says.

“Yeah, it’s not doing you much good.”

“I know. What took you so long, getting here?”

Fornell sighs, and rolls his eyes, and looks at Gibbs’ O2. “Go stand down wind. I want another cig and I don’t want to blow us up.”

Tim doesn’t stick around to listen.

Shower. That always comes first. That lets him put a little distance between what’s outside and his time with his family.

He’s in there, with his trickle of cold water, trying to get clean. Always trying. He doesn’t feel like he’s ever really free of the ash. Probably because it’s in the water. Probably because the smoke has seeped into his clothing and skin and hair and…

He runs his fingers through his hair. He’s been wearing it longer since their wedding. And Fornell’s right. It gets matted under his helmet, soaked and dripping down his back and neck, tangled in the padding. He’s overdue for a trim, so it’s starting to get in his eyes, too.

He grabs his razor. He’ll probably do a terrible job of it, the blade’s not sharp enough, but he’s not exactly thinking clearly right now. He just wants to get clean. He wants the stink and the sweat and the feel of death off of his skin. He wants the memory of the mob out of his head.

So he starts at the middle of his forehead and works his way back, shaving his hair off, focusing on the feel of clumps of hair between his fingers, and the sting of the razor when it bites into his scalp.

Whoever gets the shower after him will hate what he finds, but Tim doesn’t care. For the first time in days, when he gets out of the shower, he’s able to fully dry off. No damp hair clinging to his head or neck or ears. He rinses it all out after they get used, squeezed out, and hung to dry. The best he can do is blot himself off a bit with them.

There hasn’t been a dry towel in the locker room since the second day.

He’s standing there, naked, scalp bleeding from the six places he cut himself, staring at his clothing. It’s dirty. It smells like death. It’s crusty and rough. It’s damp. All the damn time. Just like the towels, he rinses it all out, squeezes it as dry as he can get it, and hangs what he’s not wearing to dry. It’ll spend hours, dripping and get to clammy and damp before he puts it back on.

The only dry, clean (The scroungers, when they couldn’t find food, came back with detergent and extra toilet paper. Both of which were welcome.) clothing he has is the same dry, clean clothing everyone else has, socks and boxers. That’s it. Washers and dryers running all day and all night...
keeps them all in one pair of clean socks and undies a day.

That was Ducky’s idea. They had been doing a pick what you want to wash routine, but he ended that. They’ll start getting trench foot if they don’t keep up the clean, dry socks, and the less that’s said about what happens when you wear the same undies day after day after day, working hard, especially if you’re female, the better.

It helps, some. But they’re wearing the same shoes or boots, day after day. Tim knows he’s sweating through his socks, soaking the boots, too. The boots that never really get dry. And they’re using the same showers. Tim’s feet already burn and itch all the time, the skin between his toes is starting to crack.

Tony, who had eaten his ration before shower time sees him, standing next to one of the benches, looking at clothing he’d just as soon burn as ever put on his skin again, hair gone, defeat rolling off of him.

Tony’s so beaten down he doesn’t even attempt a joke. He just nods and grabs a shower for himself.

“So, what did take so long?” Leon asks Fornell as they sit down at the conference table in the small conference room they usually talk to next to kin in. Gibbs, Abbi, Jarvis, and Leon have not nearly enough food in front of them, and water that’s got a grayish tinge. (One of the jobs the kids do is pouring boiled water through coffee filters. It doesn’t make the water good, but it makes it better. Leon hasn’t been able to get word on what’s happened to the water supply. Obviously, if he turns on the sink, water comes out, but it’s dingy gray all the time now, and if it doesn’t get boiled before it’s drunk, it’ll make a man sick.)

Fornell doesn’t eat. He’s not taking a mouthful of their food away from them. Not if he can help it. He was sure, given what the news was saying, that they’d be low on things like bullets. He didn’t realize how bad the food situation would be. He’s not sure if he’s going to be able to keep going across the lines, but if he can, he’s bringing in food next.

He does, however, take another long, loving suck off of a cigarette. Nicotine and combat always go together for him. Plus it kills his sense of smell, which, looking around the NCIS building, he’s grateful for.

“Air travel’s crazy. We were in Mexico. Got in the air, headed for Atlanta, and they stopped taking flights while we were in the air. FAA walked out.”

“They just left?” Jarvis asks.

“That’s the story I got. Who knows what really happened? Re-routed to Miami. Which wasn’t too bad. Most of that city heard the news and shrugged. I don’t know if they’re the most jaded people on earth, or that’s just business as usual in Miami, so it didn’t faze them. Either way, getting in and out there went fine. Got a car… That was crazy. Day after the news broke, so no one’s sure what the money’s worth—“

“What is it worth?” Jarvis asks. Inside NCIS money isn’t worthless, but it’s value is extremely elastic. A chocolate bar is going for 100 dollars right now. Any food beyond the basic rations costs an arm and a leg. But a high end cell phone costs exactly what it did before this started. (Jarvis knows this because he ‘relaxes’ by playing poker. A condom goes for about $50 right now, and a candy bar or a shot of alcohol is a bet that buys off the whole table. A cell phone or a watch is worth
exactly what it was before. At the end of the game, he always gives the watches and cell phones back. Not like he needs six of them a night. The alcohol he’s winning means he gets just enough to take the edge off for about ten minutes a night. And he’s got no use for the condoms, so he’s been discreetly handing them over to different people he knows are here with their spouses.)

“Depends on where you are,” Fornell says. “Right now, outside of the US, value is holding steady. Everyone else uses it to trade, so they’re just doing business as usual. Here… I’ve seen gas going for $58.89 a gallon outside of Atlanta, and for ninety-nine cents a gallon in rural North Carolina. Some stores are doing ‘We’re not paying any income taxes’ sales. Trying to rent a car to take out of state meant that they spent three hours debating if I had to pay in cash, or if they’d take credit, or… Right now, it looks like if you’ve got a credit card you’re fine. In ‘Visa we trust,’ or something like that. Some places will only take cash now, and some won’t take it at all.”

“You get a car in Miami,” Jethro says, trying to get him back on topic.

“Yeah, usually, that’s a fourteen hour drive, straight up 95. But that’s not the route you want to take right now. Miami took the news fine. Jacksonville, didn’t. Had to track wide around there. Then I had to get across the border. Give the National Guards a 500% increase in manpower, and they decide to man the state borders.

“Every state I went through wanted to check my ID, see where I was going and why. Took four hours to get across Florida to Georgia, another three across Georgia to South Carolina, and South Carolina… Nine hours, in line, trying to get to North Carolina. Those good old boys… They’re all loading up their pickups, and cruising north to shoot a senator.”

“Tell me the National Guards aren’t letting them through,” Abbi says.

“That’s the back up. Most of them are not happy about getting turned back, and a lot of the Guards didn’t trust that I was who I said I was.”

“But you got through,” Jarvis adds.

“Yeah. Took four days to get to Virginia. Another two to get the guys together. Then early this morning, we snuck out.”

“You snuck fifteen tanks ‘out’?” Leon says, dryly.

Fornell inclines his head a bit. “Some people may have turned a blind eye.”

Gibbs cracks a smile at that.

Then Fornell looks at Jarvis, seriously. “Call your men back. I know you’ve got commanders who are sick of sitting on their asses. Call ‘em in.”

Jarvis looks around, and quietly says, “If I can get them in, I can’t feed them. No supply lines, no way to get supply lines. I can only keep them as long as they can eat. What’s going on at the DC border, why aren’t we getting any food in?’

Fornell shakes his head. “Food’s there. Tons of it. Trucks are waiting in lines a hundred deep on every major road into DC.”

“Why aren’t we getting any?” Abbi demands.

“When they shut the border, they let were letting food, water, supplies in. The third truck had bottled water. Someone had messed with it. Twenty people died. Now they’re going through each truck.
Each package.”

“Each package?” Gibbs asks, astonished.

“They’re doing collections, food donations, clothing, blankets, everything, all over the country. Stuff is pouring in. But, some church has a food drive. Most of it’s fine. Most of it’s canned goods, pasta, stuff like that. But some asshole dumps ground glass into the protein shake mix. Or another one spikes the Gatorade with anti-freeze. It’ll be three canisters and two bottles out of a whole truck’s worth of food. And they are inspecting anything before it goes in.”

“How much is getting in?” Leon asks.

“Hundred trucks a day. They’ve got a refugee centers in the hospitals, and another in the stadium, that’s where those trucks are going.”

Jarvis groans. “There’s 600,000 people in this city.”

“Yeah. Clayt, if you can’t get your people back to patrol the streets, get them back to inspect trucks. The more people go through them, the more that get into the city every day.” Fornell takes another drag off of his cigarette, watching the ember glow and fail. End of that one. He exhales and says, more seriously. “Those yahoos in New York keep dickering around with their plans for a new government. In the meantime… News says China’s getting tetchy. Treasury isn’t paying out on the bonds. Which means a lot of the world right now is holding worthless US paper. Most of the country, from what I can see is pretty calm. Once you get outside of the cities, life is just churning along, and in a lot of the cities, things are calm now, too. But things are going to get bad, fast, if the rest of the world decides they want to see us pay our debts, now.”

“You’re telling me this,” Jarvis says.

“Yes, because I figure you’re the guy with the balls and the troops to get online, tell the Treasury to start paying the bills again, and they’ll listen.”

Jarvis nods. He didn’t want to be that guy, but if no one else is doing it…

He stands up and says, “Excuse me. Got some calls to make.”

---

Tim can’t take waiting another minute for the shot to talk to his family alone. Really talk to them. He’s about to tear into his office and boot whoever’s in there out, but, as he opens the door, he sees Ducky lying down, sleeping.

Ducky who hasn’t slept in days.

Ducky who they’ve been begging to sleep.

Penny’s laying next to him, gently stroking his chest. She looks up at Tim, eyes going wide for a second, and then she smiles gently, and he nods. He won’t rip them out of here, not tonight.

So he roams the building, desperate for a moment alone. For a space where he can shut everything but the voices of his loves out.

Finally, he settles into the morgue, in the back storage closet. There’s a door he can wedge shut, and the sacks of oatmeal he’s sitting on are softer than bare floor he’d have in his second runner up spot,
another closet off of MTAC.

His hands are shaking as he dials, and a minute later he hears Breena’s voice, sweet and gold and soft in his ears. “Tim!”

His voice shakes as he says, “Hi.”

“Honey! We didn’t expect to hear anything for a few more hours. Are you okay? Did something change?”

“I’m… No… Nothing’s changed. Can you just… talk to me?” Can you make it go away? Can you vanish the images in my mind of shooting into the crowd? Can you erase the fire in my mind?

“Oh, baby. Yeah. Sure. Jimmy and Abby are getting the girls washed up right now. Here.” He hears the sound of moving, a door opening, and then wet splashy sounds and little girls babbling and laughing. “Say hi to Daddy, Kelly!”

“Hi, Daddy!”

“Uncle Tim!” he hears Molly chirp. “We miss you!”

He can’t make himself respond, his voice won’t hold for it. He can hear Jimmy and Abby adding their hellos, and how in a few minutes when they’re dried off, they’ll be on to talk. He manages to make some sort of sound.

The sounds of tubby time fades a bit, and then Breena says to him, “Big tub here. All five of them are in there. Abby’s got Anna and Kelly floating with her, and Jimmy’s washing Molly’s hair.”

“Where’s here?” he asks with a sniff.

“Riviere-du-Loup. We’re about two hours north and east of Quebec. Around here it’s either small towns, farms, or woods. We found a cabin in the woods. Lucked out, the farmer who owns it was willing to give us a break on it because we’re ‘refugees.’ It’s pretty small. Two bedrooms, the little one’s the size of the closet at my parent’s place down in OBX, but the girls don’t mind. Bigger one’s half the size of our room at home.”

He can hear her walking around.

“It’s got wood logs for walls, and a big stone fireplace. Jethro would love it. And right now, it’s cold outside, and kind of chilly in here. There’s six inches of snow on the ground. Molly loves sledding. Kelly’s not so sure. She only likes doing it with Abby or Jimmy. And Anna’s under the impression that snow is some sort of torture.

“We sat her down on it, and she batted it with her hands twice, picked a bit of it up, touched it to her face, and then yelled until I brought her back in.” Breena waits a second, sees if he’ll say anything, but he doesn’t, he can’t, so she continues on, “It feels crazy to be walking through snow before Halloween. But, apparently Halloween’s not a big deal up here. No pumpkins out, nothing like that. The guy who’s renting us the place says it’s a bigger deal in the cities, but out here, where you’ve got to walk half a mile to the nearest neighbor, trick-or-treating isn’t a thing.”

Tim nods. He’s trying to imagine snow, and cold, and… “Pine trees?”

Breena sounds very relieved to hear him say something. “Yeah, Tim. Lots of them. Cold fresh air, clean pine, cider with cinnamon and maple syrup in it, and snow. You remember how snow smells?”
He doesn’t.

“Warm, crackling fire at night.”

He makes a pained sound at that, and Breena knows she’s hit something fresh, and hurting.

“Blankets. Lots and lots of blankets. Three thick, nubby, wool ones, and then a down comforter on top of that. Flannel sheets. They’re dark blue with white snowflakes on them. And when we take the girls out, they’re bundled up like little snowmen.”

She’s lulling him out of today, calling his mind to them, and a place where the air is clean and cold.

“Shower?”

“Oh, God, yes!” She jumps on that, knowing that he hates the current set up. “The bathroom is huge. Little bedrooms, but a big bathroom. There’s plenty of room in the shower, and the water feels like it’s hot forever. Close your eyes, baby, shut it all out, just listen to me.”

He nods.

“You’re here, with us, and it’s cold and the air is clean. You’re free. You made the drive and you’re finally here, out of the car, walking to the cabin. You can see yellow light pouring out of the windows and feel the snow gathering in your hair. You feel it Tim?”

He nods again, makes a little sound. On his scalp. No hair left to gather in. He doesn’t say that, though.

“You can see us through the widow, hear the muted sounds through the door, and then you’re here, in the warm and the light, and we’re all here with you, holding you close, wrapped around you. You feel that? Me and Abby and Jimmy, and we’re all holding onto you.”

He whimpers a little, but she thinks that’s a sound of relief.

“The girls are here, and we let go, just for a few seconds, so you can sit down, and they can all pile on. Big, wet baby kisses, and warm little bodies that fit in your arms. Soft baby giggles, and fine silk hair against your cheek. You got that in your mind?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. It’s all there, all real. The girls all around you, and Molly’s asking questions and Kelly’s holding onto you, and Anna’s doing that little hug thing where she goes completely limp on your shoulder, just draping over you. Feel that? Little, baby breaths on your neck. For as long as you need, you’re there, with the girls, all wrapped around you.”

He’s crying, silently, he needs that so much right now.

“Abby’s next to you, your arm is around her, and under your right hand, you can feel Sean squirming around. He’s kicking, good and strong, letting you know he’s there, and can’t wait to meet his daddy and sister and cousins. He’s getting so big, got to be the size of a guinea pig now.

“Abby’s got her arm around you, her head on your shoulder, and she’s holding onto you. Jimmy and I stay close, where you can see us. And when you’ve had enough baby snuggles, we’ll put them to bed, and come hold you, too. All three of us, wrapped around you, for as long as you need.”

“Forever?”
“As long as you need. Molly’ll squirm away, and she’ll bring you the pictures she’s been drawing, and the scribbles Kelly’s making for you.”

He nods. He’s seen pictures of them. Molly’s starting to make drawings that look, kind of, like things. In that she’s still not quite three, that’s a feat. Kelly mostly chews on the crayons and whacks them against the page.

“The girls get sleepy. You’re going to help us put them down. Standing up, holding onto them. Jimmy’s singing, you hear it.” She must have switched onto speaker, because he can hear Jimmy singing to the girls. “You lay them down. Kissing them goodnight, tucking them in.”

He listens, imaging it. His girls all nestled down between dark blue sheets with white snowmen, and thick nubby blankets.

He hears murmured good nights. And clearer, Breena’s voice, saying goodnight, the sound of kisses.

“Good night, Kelly. Good night, Molly. Good night, Anna.”

They make soft, sleepy sounds at him, and he hears Jimmy’s lullaby winding down.

For a moment, there’s just quiet, and for a moment, Tim’s with them, in their cabin in the woods, but he shifts a little, and feels the oatmeal sacks he’s sitting on, and is pulled away from them, back to a storage closet.

This time it’s Abby’s voice that breaks the quiet. “Hey, baby.”

“Mm.”

“Sleepy?”

Not really, but talking takes too much effort. “Long day,” he manages to say.

“Okay.”

“I’m trying to get him here with us,” Breena says. “He’s come home, helped to put the kids to bed.”

He can feel the nod Abby’s giving Breena as she says, “Come, on baby. Food or shower? Which do you want?”

“Shower.” If he hears too much about food right now, he’ll want to eat, but he’d have to get up and leave to do that, and he doesn’t want to move.

“All right. I’m holding one hand, and Breena’s got the other. We lead you through the bedroom to the bathroom.”

“Tiny bedrooms, Tim, but the bathroom and kitchen are big. The guy who’s renting the place to us says he wanted a hunting cabin. And if it was just up to him, it’d be an empty cabin with a fireplace and a sleeping bag on the ground, but he wants his wife to come, too, so it’s got to be comfy.”

“Yeah, and she likes real plumbing and a good place to cook. Jimmy turns the water on, and Breena and I start to undress you. I’m doing your buttons, and she’s got your shoes.”

Tim makes a distressed sound at that. “Not… just…”

“What’s wrong, Tim?” Abby asks.
“Got a shower ten minutes ago, and I already smell so bad I want to claw my skin off. My feet itch all the time, and… It’s just…”

“It’s okay,” she soothes. “We don’t care if you’re stinky and worse for the wear. We love you and we’re going to take care of you. You let us take care of you tonight, okay?”

Jimmy breaks in there. “One moment. Practical care. Pee on your feet, or whatever else might be itchy, when you’re in the shower. It’ll kill whatever’s growing on them and making them itch.”

“Oh. That’s…” Tim’s not sure what to do with that. Kind of gross, but he doesn’t think it’ll hurt to try.

“Yeah. I know. It’ll work.”

“Okay.”

“Where are you?” Abby says, taking the story over again.

“Storage closet.”

“All right, get as comfy as you can, okay?”

He rearranges the oat sacks a bit, turning them into a wedge he can recline against. “Okay.”

“We’ve got you here with us, now. Jimmy’s getting the bed ready. He’s got the massage oil and making sure everything is nice and warm. Breena and I have you in the bathroom.”

“Big shower, Tim, plenty of room for all three of us. It’s gray slate, and the shower head is one of those really wide ones that pour down from overhead. And right now, I’m turning the water on, making sure it’s nice and hot.”

“And I’m in front of you, stripping you off.” Abby says, “None of this clothing is ever going on you again. We’ll get you new stuff tomorrow or the next day, and until then you can wear some of Jimmy’s stuff.”

He makes a sound of ascent. The idea of clean, really clean clothing sounds like heaven, even if it might be a little too short.

“Right now, I’m just getting the job done. Buttons unbuttoned, pants unzipped, socks and shoes and boxer off. Once we get you all cleaned off, we can play.”

“Good.”

They’re both happy to hear him respond with a real word.

“Come on, Tim, water’s good. Get in here with me.”

“Okay.”

Abby can hear his voice settling into the kind of quite that goes with him subbing. “Good job, baby. In you go. Let Breena take care of you while I get undressed.”

“Come here. Even if you are smelly and grungy, you’re never going to be too nasty to kiss. I’m under the water, with you, holding you tight, and right now, we’re kissing.”

“Mmm.”
“Yeah, just like that. My body wet and soft against yours as hot water pours over both of us,” Breena says.

“And a minute later, I’m in there, too. Can’t press in quite as close, but I’m giving you all the hugs I can. You feel that, Tim? Both of us holding you?”

“Yeah.”

“Good, baby, good,” Abby murmurs. “Breena’s getting the shampoo.”

“Abby got it new, for you. It smells really nice, pine and—“

He makes another hurt sound and then says, “Hair’s gone.”

“Oh.” Abby says it, as she and Breena stare at each other. They see Jimmy get up, quietly, and grab a phone. He grabs his jacket and heads outside of the cabin, going to call Abbi or Gibbs and find out what the hell happened today.

“Okay,” Breena says with a swallow, rolling with it. “Soap then. Good stuff. Lots of foamy lather, and it’s really gentle.”

“We got it in Quebec. It’s made with goat’s milk and honey and it smells sweet and creamy. I’ve got one sponge, and she’s got the other, and we’re going to rub all over you. Top of your head down to your toes and everything in between.”

“You feel that, soft, fluffy lather, all over your body, and my hands and Abby’s rubbing the sponge over you?”

“Yeah,” his voice sounds small as he says it.

Abby and Breena glance at each other.

“I’ve got you, Tim,” Abby says. “Just holding onto you. You rest your head on my shoulder, okay? Breena’s washing you off, and I’m holding on, lips against your forehead, one hand on the back of your head, other arm around your torso, hand on your hip.”

“Mmm.”

“I’m in front of you. Hands on your chest, rubbing gently, making sure to get you all clean. One pass, just to get the worst of it off, and then again. I’ve got a slightly rough wash cloth. We’ll get that all soapy and scrub you all over. Abby’s got you, keeping you close, and I’m making your skin pink up. By the time we’re done, you’re pink all over and nice and clean and smell good. All toasty warm and clean all over.”

“Breena shuts off the water, and then we get out. I’m still holding you, but she’s got the towels.”

“So many towels, and they’re all soft and fresh out the dryer, fluffy and sweet smelling and warm.”

Tim groans at the idea of that, but it’s a happy sound, so they run with it.

“I let go and grab one, and we both rub you all over. Every single drop of water gets whisked off of you as we rub you up and down,” Abby says.

“And when we’re done, you’re all warm, and pink, and dry.”

“And tired, right?” Abby asks.
“So, tired,” he says, quiet.

“Come on, baby, let’s get you to bed. Jimmy’s in the bedroom, and we’ve been waiting for you.”

Jimmy is, in fact, just walking back in, and he’s caught a little off guard with that, because he’s been getting the update from Abbi about what happened today, and why it would be hitting Tim so hard. He’s sure he’s gotten the ‘edited’ version of what happened, and he’s about to wet his pants at it, so living through it had to be horrendous.

“I’m here,” he adds his voice, not sure what he’s supposed to be saying, but just those words are enough, because Breena takes back over again. Though both she and Abby are staring at him, trying to get by his look what happened. He looks back and mouths, really bad.

“Come on, Tim, just lie down, on your front.” Tim shifts around until he’s on his stomach, which isn’t really comfortable, but it helps him get deeper into the story.

“Jimmy’s got the sheets back, and right now the bed’s waiting for you, open, a few towels on top of the sheets. You just lie down, full out. It’s a good firm bed, and more than big enough for you to stretch out in the middle and not have your fingers or toes hanging off.”

“Hop on, Tim,” Jimmy adds, figuring out where this is going quickly, and if anyone needs some pampering right now, it’s Tim.

“You feel it, baby?” Abby says. “Nice soft towels under your skin, air’s warm, we’ve got some candles burning, so it smells like pumpkin pies in here. I’m going to lie down next to you, okay. I’m holding your hand, and kissing you, okay?”

“Mmm…” that sounds like a fairly happy mmm.

“Good.” Breena says. “I’m at your feet, and I’ve got some ointment that’ll make them not itch. It’s cool and slick, and I take your left foot, holding under your foot, lifting your leg so it bends at the knee, and set in in my lap. I’m rubbing all over your foot, getting the ointment all over it, so it doesn’t itch anymore, and then I do the right one.”

“mmm…”

They aren’t sure if he’s getting sleepy, or just, like he often is when he’s getting a massage, not very talky.

“I’m kneeling over your hips, Tim,” Jimmy adds. “Hands at the base of your spine, one on each side of your spine, all slick with the massage oil, and then I’m going to lean into them, and just let my weight push them into and up your back.”

Tim groans at that. Jimmy’s done that to him before, and yes, he loves it when the girls do it, but Jimmy’s bigger, so his hands cover more of his back, and his weight makes Tim’s spine pop in all the right ways.

“Yeah, I know. Your spine sound like bubble wrap right now, doesn’t it.”

“Mmm…”

“Yep. Let’s get that all worked out. Slow, steady pressure, all the way up, light and soft back down again, and slow and deep on the upstroke again.”

“mmm…”
“Feet are done,” Breena adds. She doesn’t want to give too much detail on them. If Tim’s itchy, she doesn’t want him focusing on it. “Let’s get those calves. You’re walking all the time, right?”

“M.” That one’s very short. Not even a full exhale of sound. They hope that means he’s drifting off.

“I stroke the oil up and down your calves, nice and slick. Then I start to kneed. Thumbs rubbing into those sore muscles, whole hand squeezing them, over and over. I find all of those little knots and ripple my knuckles into them.”

He moans, quietly, at that.

“Still kissing, right?” Abby asks.

He nods but she can’t hear that. “Yeah,” comes out when he figures that she needs to hear him.

“You know it. Soft and wet. I’m stroking your face, fingers slipping over your eyebrows and cheeks.”

“I love you.” All three of them look at each other, happy to hear a full sentence out of him.

“Love you, too, baby,” Abby says back.

“We all do,” Breena adds.

“Me, too,” Jimmy says. He’d rather just kiss Tim, but he knows they all would, right now.

“And we’re going to make you feel so good,” Abby says. “All over good. Gonna make your skin sing.”

He doesn’t respond to that.

“I’m moving up to work on your shoulders,” Jimmy says. “You’ve been working hard, and I bet they’re sore.”

Jimmy’s right, they are. His left one especially, because it’s taken a lot of recoil shots today.

“How about you flip over, on your back. I’ll sit cross-legged, and you rest your head on my lap, then I can get into them deep enough to do some good,” Jimmy suggests.

“Mmm…” They hear Tim shift around. He’s a little more comfortable on his back.

“You settled?” Jimmy doesn’t wait for a response. “I give you a quick kiss, and then squirm my fingers under your shoulders, and curl them up into your traps.”

Tim can imagine how that would feel, and he groans at it.

“Yeah, I bet their sore. Breena and Abby each have a hand, and they’re going to work their way up while I work down, okay?”

“Mmm…”

“Your left in my right,” Abby says. “Just gently making your wrist circle around, giving your hand a little shake…”

“I’ve got your index finger in my hand, squeezing my way up it, and then rubbing my thumb along the inside of your palm. Gonna do that with each finger.”
“Tim, you up for more than just a massage?” Abby asks. She’s fairly sure he’s not. He doesn’t crave sex when he’s sad, and she knows he’s sad, but on the off chance he might want a happy ending, she’ll happily talk him through one.

“No,” and he sounds so tired when he says that. He knows it’s been on offer every night when he talks to them, and he knows what everyone else has been doing with the privacy his office provides, he’s been doing it, too, when he’s had his office to himself. Night two, they had a really nice four part story. That got him out of his head, out of the fires, out of all of it for a while, but right now, he just… can’t.

“That’s okay. You just relax,” Jimmy says to him. “Just close your eyes, drift, and let us take care of you.”

“mmm…”

It’s maybe a minute after that that they hear Tim’s breathing slow down, and he stops responding to anything they say.

“We’re all unloaded,” an Army Lt. says to Fornell.

“Thanks, Tom. Time to go see what’s happening with my people.”

Gibbs nods to Fornell, offering to walk him out. He sees that they have Manedel and York, but not the FEC guys.

“Only taking half?”

“Split them up, take some of the heat off of you guys.” Then Fornell says more quietly. “You’re hurting for food, I can see that. But I can also see you planned for this. FBI didn’t, did they?”

Gibbs shakes his head.

“Okay. Look, we’re going to be trying to keep the peace. And no one’s stopping a tank to search it, so we’ll be bringing supplies in.” They both know how little gear you can shove into a tank. “Might be a while before we can get back to you.”

Gibbs nods at that, too. “Ducky’s saying we’re at three days of food. So far the scavengers have been bringing something to eat in. Might just be vitamins, but they haven’t come back completely empty, yet.”

Fornell nods. “Gibbs, get out. You can’t breathe. And every mouthful you eat is something someone else who can’t leave can’t eat.”

Gibbs shakes his head. “Can’t. Won’t leave her. Won’t leave my boys.” His look to Fornell says a whole lot. “They aren’t military. They never trained for anything like this, and it’s wearing on them.”

Fornell nods at that, too. “McGee’s holding on by his fingernails, and I’ve never heard DiNozzo make so few jokes.”

“Someone’s got to keep them going.”

“Yeah, well…”
Gibbs nods again. “I know. This can’t last too much longer.”

Fornell shoots him a dry laugh. Then he thinks of something, “Where’s Diane? She was here, right?”

“When Jarvis got word they’d taken out all of the conspirators, we got her out. She took Mona, too. Last I heard she was home, cleaning up, and trying to get Emily home, between talking to every journalist on Earth.”

“Good. She doesn’t belong in a place like this.”

Gibbs inclines his head. *None of us do* written plainly on his face.

“Trying to get Emily home?”

“Ziva got them out on a Navy transport flight.” They both know that right now, that’s not an option for coming home. “They’ve got money, but, like you found, flights into the country are iffy right now. They’re working on it. No airport person in their right mind wants to tell Diane he can’t get her child back to her.”

Fornell’s look makes it clear that he doesn’t envy the man who has to tell Diane that he can’t get the plane to go. Then he hugs Gibbs, giving him a good thump on the back, and its sheer luck he picks the side Gibbs didn’t get shot on. He pulls back, re-buckling his helmet. “Stay safe.”

“You, too.”

“What happened?” Abby says, sounding scared after they hang up the phone.

Jimmy shakes his head, letting his own, second-hand, fear finally free. He rubs his face and says, “I got Abbi… Someone let slip who they had in holding, and the mob tried to burn them out.”

“Oh, God!” Breena says it while Abby’s breath sucks in fast.

“But they’re okay,” Abby says.

“Yeah. I didn’t have time to get all the details. Abbi got called away, but… He was on the roof, sharpshooting. Too many people were coming up with incendiaries, and his job was to shoot them before they got in range.”

“Oh…” That’s a pained sound. Abby knows Tim’s not cool about killing people. Even when it’s literally they die or he does, he’s not calm or collected, let alone happy, after that.

“He ran out of bullets for his rifle, headed down to the outside walls, and was shooting with his pistol.” Jimmy feels like he shouldn’t say these things, but they scare him so bad, he can’t see not sharing them. He can see the horror on Abby and Breena’s faces, too. “And then, apparently, out of nowhere, Fornell shows up with a tank.”

“A tank?” Breena asks.

“Yeah. He had more ammo for them. She says they’re safe, now. And should be fine. He rearmed them and then took the prisoners out.”

“A tank?” Abby squeaks. “A tank? They needed a tank to break the mob?”
“More like eight of them.”

Both of the girls moan at that.

“He’s got to get out of there!” Abby says. “He has to get out of there, right now! He doesn’t belong anywhere they need tanks to protect.”

“I said that to Abbi.”

“And…” Breena replies.

“She’s going to try to get him and Jethro out. Almost everyone else with a Virginia or Maryland residence is out.”

“She better get him out!” Abby says, looking very angry.

Jimmy nods.

When Jethro heads back in from seeing Fornell off, Abbi’s waiting for him.

He can see her watching, eyes flitting over everything. She’s making sure their walls are safe. He approves.

“This was you in uniform, wasn’t it?”

She nods. “I didn’t think I would, but… I missed it.” He nods at that, too, wrapping his arm around her. “Feel so much more alive right now, necessary.”

He looks out at the perimeter. He’d spent the whole assault up on the roof. His job was to stay up there and keep sniping until he ran out of bullets or someone killed him. But she’d been down here, on one of the corners, with a machine gun, laying down fire to the mob’s left flank.

“Combat beats paper pushing?”

“Yeah.”

And he always agreed with that, too. He can see it in a lot of the other soldiers, feel it in himself, too. It’s why he can’t leave. It sucks, it’s horrible, he hates it, but he needs it, too. This is being alive. This is putting his physical body, his skills, his mind, his rifle between the mob and the people he loves. This is what he was born for.

She’s looking at him, hard, really searching his face.

He gives her a what? look.

“Jimmy called. Tim’s hurting.”

Gibbs thinks and realizes he hasn’t really seen Tim, who hasn’t exactly been enjoying himself, since this morning. He nods to indicate that he knows Tim’s not doing all that well.

“I told him what happened today, and he wants Tim out of here.”

Gibbs thinks about that. Tim’s not doing great. It is wearing on him. “We’re better off with him
Abby nods. “I agree. There are a lot of people I want out of here before Tim.” She gives Jethro a hard look. She understands why he won’t leave, she knows what’s going on in his head, but she hears the coughing when they try to sleep, she sees the blue in his lips and nails.

He shakes his head. If she’s in here, he’s not going anywhere.

“If Jimmy’s not just being overly concerned, will you leave to get him out?”

Jethro looks at the walls. Today they pulled through by the grace of God. If Fornell hadn’t shown up when he did, all they would have been doing was buying time for the civilians to see how well they could swim for it.

“We need every man who can shoot on that wall.”

She nods. And more than anyone who can handle a pistol, she needs sharpshooters. She needs the guys who can take out the Molotov cocktails before they’re airborne. That’s the only reason she hasn’t pitched a full on future ex-wife fit and demanded that Gibbs leave.

“You gonna ask him to get me out?”

She shrugs. “See what happens, see how both of you do. We get wild fires again, and I don’t care if you’re the last sniper in the building, you’re out of here. I’ll tie your ass up, tape your driver’s license to your forehead, and have Ducky drop you on the other side of the border.”

Gibbs smiles dryly at that.

Jarvis makes calls late into the night. He finds out several things.

First of all, Fornell only had part of the picture. The reason why so few trucks are going through isn’t a lack of manpower. It’s that a man, on his own, can’t tell the difference between a twenty-five pound bag of flour, and a twenty-five pound bag filled with twenty pounds of flour and five pounds of rat poison.

Unless the packaging is obviously tampered with, and so far, it hasn’t been, there’s no way, by sight alone, to tell what’s been messed with.

They’re checking each and every single package with a mass spec. Only way to know for sure what’s in the bag, box, or bottle going into the city.

Right now, the only things they’re letting in, un-checked, are canned goods.

He could call up ever SEAL on the planet, and unless they know how to use, and have, a mass spectrometer, they can’t speed this up.

He does, however, volunteer their mass spec, along with people to run it, if the Governor of VA will be willing to let two DC families out of DC.

That deal gets made in a matter of seconds. He hopes that Zelaz and Corwin and their families will be happy to get out, and more happy to use their skills to get people fed.

That done, he makes a few more calls. He doesn’t want to be the ruler, dictator, whatever… of the
United States. There are many reasons for this, but the most basic one is that he’s not sure if he’s the sort of guy who could give it up if he got it.

And he doesn’t want to find out.

He knows that the interest on the national debt runs at more than a billion dollars a day, so he can’t just use the money Diane tucked away to make this problem go away. The Treasury has to get back up and running again.

It’d be nice to say that reason and goodwill got the job done. That just explaining why that money had to get moving again would have gotten it moving, duly elected government support or no.

It didn’t.

Explaining, in extreme detail, how the same SEALs who took care of the people from outside the US who were buying off the elections would show up and hunt down the Treasury secretary, as well as all of his family and friends, did.

Jarvis glares at the phone as he puts it down. Never let it be said that violence doesn’t solve problems. Violence solves lots of problems, all sorts of problems. The Navy Yard is pretty quiet by the time he’s off the phone, but he’s too wired to sleep. He walks the walls, watching, seeing no one moving toward them, and then finds a poker game.

Maybe if he’s really lucky, he’ll win enough alcohol to put himself to sleep.
On the eighth day, Tim wakes up when the door he’s sleeping next to whacks him in the back. Fortunately, it’s a fairly gentle whack.

Tim sits up, groggy, and sees Elaine standing over him.

“Sorry, hon. Didn’t know anyone was in here.”

“I just…” He looks around, blinking in the sudden light of the morgue in his storage closet.

“I know.” And she does, right now, everyone is upside down all the time. Work’s still got to get done, though. “Feel like giving me a hand?”

“Uh… Sure.” He rubs his eyes and sees what she wants. The last twenty-five pound bags of oatmeal. Only four of them left. When he bought them, and twenty-six others, it seemed like more food than anyone could possibly eat.

He thinks about it, lifting two of the bags. When he bought them, this storage room was full. So was the kitchen. Now he can pick up half of what’s left in here.

“What’s left in the kitchen?”

She shakes her head. “Not enough.”

When he bought it, a pallet of oatmeal was enough food to handle everything. But right now, as he’s trailing behind Elaine, thinking it through, he realizes that 100 pounds of oatmeal, when cooked, is two hundred pounds of food. Two hundred pounds of food, split between almost seven hundred people…

“A cup a piece?”

“There abouts.” But he can hear in her voice that ‘abouts’ means less.

“Do we have anything else?”

“That’s it.”

That breakfast, Tim helps make the oatmeal, and, since this is his first time in the café, seeing exactly how little food is left, he makes a decision.

They’re all getting vitamins. Plenty of them. And the scroungers came back with more than a thousand protein bars, so they get one of them a day, too.

He keeps them for himself, and then he wanders through the first floor, where families are sitting around, waking up, getting ready for the day. Tim listens, his dad ears on, and when he hears the sort of whining that sounds like ‘hungry’ to him, he heads for it, and hands over his oatmeal.

Day eight is the day Tim starts sharing his food.
On the eighth day, the foraging parties come back empty. Not even protein bars.

On the eighth day, the Navy Yard goes on half rations for adults, three-quarter rations for children. At that rate, they’ve got enough food to last for two more days.

On the upside, malnutrition won’t be an issue. They’ve got tons of multi-vitamins. They’ve got vitamin enriched diet “meal replacement” shakes. Those two days of food includes two vitamin enriched protein bars per person.

What they don’t have is calories. At least, not enough of them.

Much to the surprise of no one, Tony DiNozzo is one hell of a scrounger. But even a hell of a scrounger has to have something to fucking scrounge. They’ve been coming up empty. Everything he can think of that might have food, they’ve been to, and been over, with a fine tooth comb. Supermarkets, restaurants, cafes, movie theatres, museums even. They’ve been going through office buildings to raid the vending machines and pull gum and snacks out of people’s desks.

Nothing. It’s all picked over. On day nine, he’s with Bishop, Jake, and Draga, all looking at a map of DC, trying to think of what might have food.

“What about hotels?” Jake asks.

“Picked clean,” Tony says.

“Not the restaurants or kitchens. The rooms. Those little mini-fridges.”

“Empty,” Tony says. Mini-fridges were day three.

“Keep listening,” Jake says. “They probably keep the snacks and mints and stuff in housekeeping, not with the rest of the food supplies, because the housekeepers restock them. Might just be a big bag of mints or something, but…”

Ellie looks around the ground floor, where kids are listless, whiny, and arguing, and adults are stressed to the breaking point, and rapidly comes to the conclusion that even one bag of mints would probably raise spirits. Even if there weren’t enough to pass out one for everyone, it’d be a new flavor of oatmeal or something.

Tony shrugs. That’s a better idea than anything he’s got for today.

They get a van, and head out.

The first three hotels are empty. At this point, pretty much everyone who can get out of DC, has. And that means most everyone who might be in a hotel, is in a hotel, somewhere else.

Draga’s walking next to Tony, rifle at the ready, as they check the second floor of the Hamilton, and says, “It’s like Fallout 3.”
Tony looks over at him, also with his rifle ready. “What?”

“It’s a game. Post-apocalyptic DC. In the game it’s after a nuclear war or something.”

“Tell McGee about it. I’m sure he’s played.”

Draga snorts a bit. “You spend the game scrounging around, looking for food and weapons.”

“But in the game, you find them, right?” Tony says, dryly.

“Yeah. In the game, you’ve only got to keep you fed.”

Tony nods. If all he had to do was keep himself, and the rest of their core group, fed, he could do it. And likely, he could keep doing it. One box of Twinkies divided by seven people can make a difference. By almost seven hundred… You might as have not found them in the first place.

If it was just him, his team, and his family… They’d be hungry, but not ready to eat the cold cases just to have something to chew on.

Bishop and Jake come running to them. “Tony!” her eyes are sparkling.

“You got something?”

“You got something?”

“Come on!” Jake says, also gleeful.

They wind through the hotel, fast, moving up and up the floors, until they find main house keeping on the sixth floor. Bishop stops at the door, and then flings it open, saying, “Voilà!”

Tony feels an awed breath go sliding out from between his lips. This is where they kept all the goodies they were stocking the mini-fridges with. Draga, Ellie, and Jake are already helping themselves to some of it. That’s part of his rule for scrounging, scroungers can have one of whatever they find for themselves. The rest has to go back.

He grabs his phone. “Leon, fast. Every van you can get, and security for them. Everyone with a gun. We’re at the Hamilton hotel.” Then he jumps into that closet, tearing into a bag of chips like it was a twelve course tasting menu at the French Laundry.

Unlike Fallout’s post-apocalyptic wastelands, most of DC, including where they are now, has power.
A lot of it still has internet, too.

Which means they’ve got to be ready to move fast. One van, that could be anyone scrounging around. And more often than not, that van is empty, save for the scroungers. But there are always people watching, and if it looks like a van has something in it, the mob will notice and they will tweet, and then they come.

Word gets out that someone’s found food, next thing you know, there’s a horde of people trying to get that food. Tony’s seen footage of it. Some scrounger finds food, and if he doesn’t have enough guys on his van, the mob comes, rocks it until it tips over, and then takes everything. Sometimes they don’t kill the driver.

He’s been too damn close to it, too. Twice he’s had to shoot over crowds to get his own van back to the Navy Yard. Usually, a few bursts with an automatic rifle over the crowd disperses it, and they go looking for easier prey, but as everything gets more picked over… Tony doesn’t think it’ll be long before he has to shoot into the crowd to break it.

They’re staging inside the hotel, getting things ready to load fast. They fill the carts that normally carry toiletries and cleaning supplies with bags of mints, chips, pretzels, granola bars, and peanuts. They load mini-bar bottles into laundry bags, and start humping them down to the ground floor.

Bishop stands watch. Close enough to the door to see when the NCIS vans come, far enough back that a casual onlooker from the street probably won’t see her. She keeps her finger on the trigger. Tony heads up again, looking for more housekeeping storage rooms. Jake and Draga keep bringing more stuff down.

The first van gets there in forty-minutes. Three guys on the top, armed to the teeth. One driving. Six of the SEALs come out, ready to move goods and move them fast.

They start grabbing food, getting it into the van fast. Less than a minute, they’re loaded up, and out of there. Bishop nods to them, she heads back up to scrounge more. Two SEALs keep watch, inside the lobby, fingers on their triggers, waiting for the next van. The rest of them go with her, looking to see what else might be hiding in these halls.

It’s not just a matter of loading up the vans and getting back to the Navy Yard safe. Though they do manage to get the first load in without any excitement.

Then it’s a matter of unloading. Inside the Navy Yard is as much of a challenge as outside. There are still more than 690 people in there, and making sure they don’t mob the van is an issue, too.

That’s part of where the Marines that Jarvis brought in are worth their weight in gold. With him and Abbi keeping them in order, discipline holds. They unload bag after bag of little chocolate covered peppermints, and then come the pretzels and peanuts. Crunchy, salty, sweet, junk food.

The civilians are getting restless, seeing that food starting to pile up.
“McGee.” Tim hears Vance’s voice. He’d been on the roof, keeping watch. He looks away from the street, toward Vance.

“Leon.”

“They’re bringing in food. I need another lotto.”

Tim nods. “Okay.” He stands up slowly, and hands his rifle to Jethro.

He drifts down to his computer. It’s an easy program, but it still takes him two tries to get it right. Somehow, he’s having a hard time making his fingers hit the right keys to create a random name generator.

He’s got the name of everyone in the camp. He just has to make his computer spit them out. Finally it’s up and running. Tim takes it up to the main floor, where people are milling around, eyeing the pile of snacks. His own stomach rumbles at the sight.

He hits the button and “Sylvi, Jamie” pops up. He calls it out, and five-year-old Jamie comes up and gets the first tiny handful of treats.

He’ll spend the next nine hours distributing mints, snacks, cookies, and any other food they find that way. The little bottles of alcohol he’ll modify the parameters on, adults only for that.

The rest of the goodies will be handed out one per family.

---

The second van doesn’t get filled with food. As Tony’s moving from room to room, he’s thinking about how much he wants to tell NCIS to fuck off, grab his family, and make their stand here. Soft beds, blankets, pillows, showers, God, showers. All the fucking showers with hot water and so much comfort.

Grab the top floor, keep guns on the stairwells, disable the elevator, and they can stay here, in comfort… until the mob burns you out.

So much for that fantasy. But he makes the decision to get as much of the hotel back to the Navy Yard as he can.


They stuff one van with just pillows, and send it back to the Navy Yard.

The next van, they load three industrial sized washing machines into it, and pad them with every towel they can stuff in there. They are going to start getting more clean clothing.

Another van of pillows and towels.

One more pillow run. Everyone’s getting a pillow. Everyone is getting a towel.

Toiletries. Everyone who brought a week worth of toiletries is washing themselves with the hand soap from the NCIS bathrooms, and that’s running out fast, too. One van full of soap, shampoo,
conditioner, detergent.

One last van, this one filled with more food. All of it tiny snacks from the vending machines and hotel mini-fridges. None of it’s nutritious. It’s all got too much salt, sugar, or fat, and absolutely no one cares.

It’s food. It’s *tasty* food. And when they bring it back to the Navy Yard, they’re treated like gods.

They manage to get one more run in before the sun sets. More pillows, more towels, and boxes and boxes filled with those single serve coffee packs.

On the ninth night, everyone parties.

---

Day Ten, Abbi get word from Omagi, what’s left of Congress has set a bench warrant for everyone he’s got in custody. They want them brought to New York to stand trial.

Leon gets a similar call. The New York National Guard is sending a two platoons of men to come and grab every conspirator they’ve got in custody. They’ll be brought up to New York and publically tried.

Leon’s fine with that. Twenty-eight fewer people he’s got to feed. People he no longer has to protect. He does have one condition. “I need two hundred pounds of food for every man you take.”

The Marine Captain he’s talking to is confused by that request. “Like, just, anything?”

“I don’t care what it is, but we’ve got to be able to eat it. They aren’t letting citizens of DC out, and they’re only letting a dribble of food in.”

“Okay. I’ve got MREs, you’ve got thirty prisoners, right?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Call it six thousand pounds of MREs?”

“Yes!” And for the first time in more than a week, Leon feels the knot of fear and pain and hopelessness in his stomach ease a little. And then, remembering what they’ve had to do to get food into the Navy Yard, it tightens back up and he says, “And you’ve got to make sure no one sees you bring it in.” If word gets out that they’ve got that much food, they’re going to have a mob at their door again.

“We can do that. It’ll take us three days to get there.”

“Three days!” He feels like he’s been punched in the guts.

“You aren’t the only people we’re picking prisoners up from. Your teams stuck conspirators all around the country, and we’ve got to get them all.”

Leon rubs his eyes, and inhales hard on his cigarette, the only thing keeping him from screaming. “Okay.”
He tells Jarvis about it later, and Jarvis raises an eyebrow, before letting Leon have a drag off of his cigarette.

“Your wife going to scream about this?” Leon asks.

“I think she’ll understand. Especially if I quit again after.” He doesn’t expect that’ll be too hard. It wasn’t the first time he did it, and unlike Leon, who seems to be craving them, the only reason he’s doing it is because nicotine is an appetite suppressant, and it’s keeping him from going bonkers on the food situation.

Leon scoffs. “Nicotine gum, two years, then toothpicks for another four… Lara’s going to hate this.”

Jarvis shrugs and hands Leon another pack. He’s been winning more than he can smoke himself at poker, and anything that keeps Leon from completely imploding is worth giving to him. Then he changes the subject. “A few platoons?”

Leon feels stupid that he didn’t see that earlier. “Yeah. He’s got no idea what he’s getting into.”

“No.” Jarvis rubs his head. “That food’s not getting here anytime soon. Where else can we look?”

“DiNozzo’s been through everywhere to go through. Your guys are fishing and I think they hunted the local pigeon and squirrel population down to nothing.”

Jarvis nods at that. Elaine’s kept ‘soup’ on the whole time she’s been here. Now, it’s mostly water, and they’re all better off not asking what the tiny scraps of meat in it are.

“Any news from Fornell?” Jarvis asks.

Vance shakes his head. “How about outside?”

“Treasury’s printing money again, so no one’s rumbling about not getting paid anymore. The group of Congressmen that got up to New York aren’t happy about that. Half of them seem to want to see if China really will attack if we default on the debt, and half of them want us to do it just to wipe the slate clean so they don’t have to figure out how to pay it off.”

Leon shakes his head. “Elections?”

“Nothing yet. King proclaimed himself head of an interim government until they can get an election plan in place.”

“You calling the tune they’re dancing to?”

Jarvis shakes his head. “Not the guy for that job.”

“You think you’d do a worse job than the ones we just got tossed out?”

Jarvis inclines his head at that. Leon’s got a point. “You’ve got a Virginia driver’s license. We can take you to the border, and you can head on up and take over.”

Leon holds up his hands. “Not for me.”
Jarvis nods. “Exactly.”

By day eleven, the treats are gone. And, even with several good ideas, the scroungers come home empty handed. Even the pet stores are empty. Tony thought, maybe, they should check out the zoo. But, in the end, none of them are willing to go into an enclosed space with massive, starving carnivores who are, in all likelihood, better hunters than they are.

On day eleven, Tony and the rest of his scroungers start scouting the DC/Virginia border, looking for a way to get over to bring food in and take people out.

He comes back distraught. Every road out of DC has Virginia or Maryland National Guardsmen on it.

On day eleven, Jake checks, and sees that his blog is up to 436K hits a day. He’s been writing about what they’re doing, how they’re living. He’s also been writing politics, and where he wants to see the country go, how to fix this mess.

In his writing, he was smart enough to not let on that he was in the same building with the FEC guys. Not that that helped. He was on the wall that day, firing blind, and he’s never going to forget how scared he was, how bad that hurt.

So, he channels that into his words, into his ideas for how to make things better. And by day eleven, he’s decided that he needs to know how they got here. Not like he’ll have all that much longer to find out. Rumor’s flying around that they’ll get to swap out the prisoners for food. (Though, personally, he thinks that rumor is wishful thinking, designed to keep people from going mad as they try to make due on 1000 calories a day.)

But, in case it’s not a rumor, and the prisoners really are going, he’s got to talk to them soon if he’s going to talk.

1932. That’s when this plan started. He knows that from looking at the finances of that one account. He knows, in general what was going on that year. He knows it was the Great Depression. He knows that’s when Roosevelt won. But… he doesn’t know why then. He also can’t figure how they decided to share power, or how they decided who would win what.

He asks Leon if he can go talk to the prisoners, and Leon just looks at him. “I’m not going to write about it. Not going to let anyone know they’re still here.”

Leon nods, slowly.

Jake heads down to holding. They’ve all been in the same cell for twelve days now. They’re all thin. If the people in the Navy Yard are getting short rations, the guys down here are getting less. According to Ducky, people can and have lived on significantly less food, with much less nutritional value than these four are getting.
According to the internet they can go somewhere around twenty-one days without food. Jake dearly hopes he won’t have to find that out first hand.

All eyes are on him, hopeful that he’s got something to eat. They see he doesn’t have food and slump back into inactive disappointment. When he says, “Tanen,” the one time President of the Federal Election Commission flinches away from him.

And Jake realizes why. He doesn’t look like a lawyer anymore. His beard is scraggly. (He didn’t think to bring a razor, and he’s not about to trade either of his tiny bottles of scotch, won in the lotto, or his last condom, won in a poker game, for one.) His suit is… not really a suit anymore. It’s a pair of slacks that might have been gray, or tan, possibly brown, but likely not black, and a similarly unnamable colored shirt, with ragged cuffs, and two missing buttons. His shoes… he’s not sure what happened to them. He’s been wearing armored boots since his first day out cutting down trees.

His hands aren’t soft anymore. Red, chapped, bleeding, with the start of some serious callouses, but not the smooth, soft skin he used to have.

“Now!”

And Tanen, looking afraid for his life, scuttles to the bars. “What?” he sounds timid.

“Talking. I’m working on fixing this mess, and I need to know how we got into it.”

Tanen shrugs a little at that. Jake sits down, back against the wall, and Tanen does, too, facing him through the bars.

“Why 1932?” Jake asks.

Tanen glances at the other three members of the FEC, they all look back, none of them happy with this. Tanen licks his lips and says, “You know much about the history of the late ‘20s early ’30s?”


“Yeah. That’s basically it. But, remember that didn’t just happen in the United States. The whole world economy crashed. And everywhere had different ideas for how to fix it. In the early ’30s the Democrats and Republicans tried a lot of different ideas, and they didn’t work all that well. At the same time the Socialists, USSR force everyone into collective farming Socialists, were getting popular. So were the Anarchists. Not the hippy-dippy peace and love anarchists, but the guys who throw bombs. Fascism… that was getting popular. Even a few monarchist-types were out there, all of them claiming they had the way to reform.

“So, the powers that were decided they were going to continue being the powers that be. Instead of allowing themselves to be nibbled to pieces by other ideologies, the Democrats and Republicans decided they were going to run things in perpetuity. They already agreed on most of how things were supposed to be done, and they could live with what the other side wanted to do, even if it wasn’t what they wanted.”

Pein, the one-time FEC Chief Technological Officer, pipes up, “It’s like ice cream. You go to the ice cream store, and you feel like you’ve got lots of choices. Fifty flavors. But they’re all ice cream. That’s how it was set up. You could pick any ice-cream you liked, as long as it was ice cream. No sorbet. No sherbert. Not a popsicle in sight. Certainly no cookies.”

Tanen inclines his head. “That’s the basic idea. We make sure you get to pick, but only from a certain range of ideas and opinions.” Tanen sighs, shakes his head. “You may hate this, but take a
look at Europe’s history, look at how *they* made out.” He laughs, bitter. “You ever see those, ‘what makes America special?’ questions. Self-congratulatory crap about how a Hitler could never happen here. Hitler or his ilk, doesn’t happen here, because we don’t *let* him. Those…” he waves to indicate the outside world, “will vote for any twit with a nice voice and some charisma. God, you saw how far Trump got, right?” Tanen looks disgusted, and Jake’s got the sense that Trump apparently didn’t pay the right guys off, or didn’t pay enough. “We weed them out, take the worst of the crew out, make sure that the real outliers never get on the stage. And that keeps us safe.”

“So, what, this is capitalist wonderland?” Jake asks. “Don’t let the Wobblies take over?”

Tanen laughs at that. “Don’t say that to an actual Capitalist. Though they’re awfully rare. Corporatism. That’s what we have here. That’s what keeps us all fat and happy and living the dream. The rich get rich. The poor are richer than the middle class in more than half of the world. No one starves. Elections run nice and smooth, and we never have to worry about anything ever really changing. People think they have a choice and that keeps them happy. Markets know, more or less, what’s coming, so they stay stable. Everyone wins.”

“Until now,” Jake says.

“Until now. How are you going to fix things?”

Jake shrugs at that. “The less power an individual can accrue the less temptation there is to misuse it.”

Tanen laughs again. “Good luck with that.”

“Washington seemed to do well with it.”

Tanen laughs on last time. “Washington’s dead. So’s everyone like him.”

On day twelve, Ducky, Penny, and Allan are given a very special gift. Since they’ve been out providing medical care, they’ve been lucky enough to have some very grateful people in their care. Grateful people share.

Most of those gifts have been little, a box of cereal, a bottle of wine, whatever someone who’s not much further away from starving than they are can spare. Most of the time, they eat it while they are out. Three reason for this, first of all, it’s never enough of whatever it is to share with the wider group. Second of all, because they are out, they aren’t eating their rations back at the Navy Yard. And third of all, hungry people make bad decisions and miss details. They already aren’t getting enough sleep, any extra calorie they can grab means someone less likely to get substandard care. (Or more substandard care, they’re already working at a lower level of technological sophistication than Ducky had when he was in the bush in Tanzania.)

So, they are, in general, a little better (at least on calorie count, they get paid in candy bars and chips, a lot) fed than the rest of the crew.

But today was special. The child in their care had two broken legs, which they were able to set. Her parents were extremely grateful. They were also, apparently, fairly good cooks who took the idea of going to the local farmer’s market and stocking up on fresh veggies seriously.

Ducky, Penny, Allan, and the four Marines on security each got one jar of homemade pickles. As
soon as they got back to the Navy Yard, they made a beeline for the conference room they use as their own canteen.

Tony is already with them. Abbi’s been told that she needs to get to the conference room, fast.

“Shut the door,” Ducky says, as Tim and Gibbs wander in. Gibbs does, quickly, seeing the treasure on the table, knowing that if the door stays open, the smell will get out, and they will have a lot of people looking to share. And Gibbs doesn’t want to share.

Tim speeds up a little as he finally recognizes what he’s seeing, little cucumbers sitting in a salty, garlicky, mustardy brine, pale green centers with frog green skins, just waiting for him.

Abbi gets in a second later, shuts the door behind her, and squeals with delight.

It only takes about a minute for them to gobble them down, they’re tiny little jars, maybe four ounces a piece. They even drink the brine, as Ducky tells them that this is what people used to do before the invention of Gatorade.

Tim nods, listless, the little spark of life at seeing the pickles vanishing with the weight of going back to work. “Back to the roof.”

Jethro nods as well, he coughs, hard, and then follows Tim, he needs to get back up there, too. Not enough sharp shooters left. In the last two days, half of the SEALs and Marines with non-DC IDs have left. Thirty-four fewer people to feed, which is… not enough to make much difference. Some. One or two more bites of food person who is left. Not so good from the perspective of they’ve lost three sharpshooters. Keeping people on the roof to watch from all sides means they’re on twelve hours shifts now.

When they leave, Ducky looks to Abbi. “Is that blood on his lips?”

Abbi nods. “Cough’s getting worse. We’re supposed to get real rain tonight, so that should help, but…”

“But he needs to be out of here,” Ducky says.

“He needed to be out of here a week ago,” Tony adds. “I’ve talked to him. Tim’s talked to him, only thing you can get Tim to talk about anymore. I know you have,” he says to Abbi. “But he won’t leave without you.”

She wiggles her hand a little, indicating that’s not all of it. “It’s part of it. He’s a Marine. This is what we live for.”

“This is what he’s going to die for if we don’t get him out,” Allan says. “If he’s coughing up blood now, he’s a massive infection about to happen.”

“And we’re down to seventeen antibiotics. Not types. Pills. By tomorrow’s second patient, we’re down to pre-World War II level medicine,” Penny says.

“Setting bones, stitching up holes, and cutting off limbs that can’t be saved,” Ducky’s not looking forward to that. He’s already had to take off four fingers, a hand, and one foot. And right now, all he’s got left for pain medication is NSAIDs and lidocaine. If he never has to do something like that again, it’ll be too soon.

“I’ll talk to him,” Abbi says.
On day thirteen, watching the sky that’s threatening rain, but not providing it, Ducky and Penny have a plan. They’ve been trying to get Jethro to leave. Asking hasn’t worked. Telling didn’t do it. Him standing there, wheezing all the time, lightheaded, gasping for air, didn’t get him out of the damn smoke that just refuses to leave. (Ducky and Penny have a running joke about which is more stubborn about staying, Jethro or the smoke.)

But them starving might.

It’s a two pronged plan.

They weed him out of the group, after the quarter cup of rice and beans with a protein bar that constitutes lunch, off to Tim’s office, and lay it out for him.

“Tomorrow, we run out of food. Fornell has not been able to get back with anything to eat. Our own foragers haven’t been able to scrounge up anything to eat. Leon hasn’t heard any confirmation that those men from New York will get here in time. It’s time for you to leave, Jethro,” Ducky says.

“Not leaving you guys here to starve.”

“Jethro, we’re not asking you to. First of all, if you leave, and take as many people as you can fit into a van, that’s fewer mouths for us to feed. Second of all, once you get enough time to catch your breath, you’ll start thinking clearly, and remember that you have a boat, and we are on a river.”

Jethro does start to see it when Ducky says that. And he rapidly comes to the conclusion that not enough food and too much stress is killing all of their brains for not coming up with that sooner. “We built her with smuggling in mind.”

“Exactly, Jethro,” Penny says. “Get out of here, take some of the others, anyone who’s got a Virginia ID, and can help steer a ship, and then fill it with food and get back here.”

Jethro likes that. A lot. It’s something he can do, beyond just keeping people sane. It’s saving lives. It’s risking the nightly shoot to kill order. It’s him and his boat and making sure his loves make it through. It’s the thing that matters. The thing only he can do.

“On it,” he chokes out, eye’s blazing, ready to go.

Ducky and Penny glance at each other. “Take Tim.” They haven’t seen a lot of him. He’s up on the roof and they’re usually out, but what they have seen doesn’t look good to them.

Jethro nods, but he’s not feeling steady in that. He goes, and that’s one sharpshooter down. Tim goes… That’s leaving Abbi, Tony, Penny, and Duck here, behind the walls, down two more precision shooters. No one’s mobbed a building in two days, but that doesn’t mean it’ll hold.

But he can see the look Penny’s giving him, so he says, “If he’ll go.”

He finds Tim on the roof, holding his rifle, watching the roads. There is a crowd, and neither of them like or trust it, but it’s still a good half mile off.
Gibbs explains the plan, watching Tim, the way his eyes are on that crowd, the way he’s sighting. He’s worried. If he goes, and takes Tim, they’re down to six sharpshooters. Not enough to keep someone up here twenty-four seven, properly alert, and watching each angle.

Though he sees the way Tim’s watching, sees the hollow look in his eyes, and isn’t sure if he’s really here, or if he should be.

“Tim.”

“Mmmm…” He doesn’t look away from the crowd.

“Quick test, take the rear view mirror off that car.” Gibbs points to a car at least two thousand meters away. The windshield is gone, so he doesn’t have to shoot through glass to do it. Just has to be able to find the car in question and aim.

Tim shifts slightly, sights, and, mechanically, blows that mirror off the car. Then he returns to his watch. “You go, Jethro.”

Jethro really doesn’t like the sound of Tim’s voice as he says that.

“Take Tony. Smuggle him out. He’s not doing all that hot.”

Tim’s not wrong about that. Two days of not finding anything is tearing up Tony. He hasn’t heard him say anything, let alone joke, in more than a day. And unlike Tim, with scrounging coming up with nothing, Tony doesn’t have a job.

“He can sail, too. You take me, and that’s one less guy you can use to get food back into us. You take him, he can co-pilot or whatever. Or you can take money out of evidence and buy another boat.” Then Tim stops talking. That crowd is moving closer. He’s watching, and uses a hand signal to get Jefferies, one of the Marines, over to his side, both of them watching.

The crowd moves slow, but they don’t turn down the road toward the Navy Yard. They go on past. Tim and Jefferies both relax a hair. Then Tim looks up at Jethro from where he’s lying on the roof.

“You go. I’ll be okay.”

“All right.”

Jethro would later regret that decision. Once he got out, got some food and sleep and air into himself, he was able to see what he was looking at, a man so depressed he couldn’t see the way out anymore. But he was so far in himself, he couldn’t see Tim was there.

Gibbs finds Tony walking the wall. Everything is so picked over, they aren’t even bothering to go out to scrounge. Don’t want to waste the gasoline and tempt the mobs.

So, instead of scrounging, Tony’s got his Sig, and his body armor, and he’s walking, up and down, along the length of the east wall. Between the sharpshooters and the perimeter guards, there’s not shot of anyone deciding to visit NCIS by surprise.

But it’s dull work. And unlike scrounging, which brought useful things back (until all the useful
things were gone) it’s meaningless.

It doesn’t matter if he walks the wall or not. The city is hungry and hungry people are not very energetic. In his private thoughts, (these days, they’re almost all private thoughts, because he’s not saying much) Tony thinks that that’s probably why they aren’t letting food into the city. Starving people can’t put up much of a fight.

He figures in a few more days all the riots will have died down because everyone will be too weak to riot. Then the Virginia and Maryland National Guards can come in, “save the day” and look like heroes.

Gibbs finds him, watching over the wall, putting one foot in front of the other, over and over and over. He explains Ducky’s idea, and Tony leaps at it. He feels a little bad, because he can’t really sail. Not the kind of sailing he’d need to do to be useful for something like this, but he doesn’t care, it’s a way out. It’s food and clean clothing and not having to face people who glare at you for not finding what they need to keep their children fed.

“How are you going to get me out?” He knows they’re checking everything that goes in to and out of DC at the border. Checking close, too close. If there was a way to get through the lines, Tony would have found it, and he’d be getting people out, not walking back and forth like a marionette.

“Leaving within the hour. First run in tomorrow night. Food goes in, you and some others go out.”

Tony nods.

“Day after tomorrow, you start finding us more boats,” Gibbs also knows Tony can’t really sail, not sailing at night with no lights, not that kind of sailing, but he also knows that if anyone is going to get them the best deals on boats, and not let slip why they suddenly need cheap sail boats, it’ll be Tony. Plus, if he can get a big enough one, and if the river’ll work for it, he can keep a boat still. They’ll load and unload from that boat, and get more than one run in per night.

Gibbs heads to Jarvis next. And in a few minutes he’s got three SEALs who can sail and have IDs that say they live outside of DC.

Tony and Draga, with several more SEALs on the top of the van, take them to the border. They drive Gibbs and his SEALs down I-95 until they get to the tanks.

Gibbs looks at Tony and Draga, nods at both of them, and shuffles out of the van.

Getting through is annoying, but not painful. National Guardsmen wait for them, check their ID, check them again, grill them on why they were in DC, but they don’t press too hard. Gibbs is fairly sure that the people sneaking in to spread mayhem don’t look quite so thin, or ragged, or smell so bad, when they’re coming out.

“Why’d you stay so long?” a bored looking PFC asks Gibbs.

“My wife’s in there. Haven’t been married long. My ID’s got our home address on it. Hers still has her DC address.” He starts to cough, bad. The oxygen that’s been keeping him going stayed in the Navy Yard. Finally, he gets breathing again. “Didn’t want to leave her.”

“Looks like she had the good sense to make you go. You got a ride or something?”
Gibbs blinks. He’s so used to having a car, the idea that he’d need a ride hadn’t hit him. He fumbles for his phone, and takes a long moment, trying to think, who’s still here? He finally remembers that Diane is still in the area, and on the outside of the border.

He hits her number.

“Jethro? Are you okay? Have you heard from Emily? Or Tobias?”

“I’m on the Virginia side of 95, can you pick me up?” He gets that out and starts coughing again.

He can feel she wants to pepper him with questions, and he also knows that she knows if he’s outside, he’s gotten so bad they kicked him out. So, instead of pounding him with questions, she says, “Yeah. Half an hour.”

So Gibbs slowly, along with three SEALs, ambles over to a divider, and settles in to wait.

Fornell was right. There are lines of trucks. There’s piles of food. There’s mountains of drinks. There are makeshift testing areas, where each box and bag is getting checked and then carried over to new trucks. And the only reason he and the SEALs haven’t fallen on it like ravenous beasts is that as soon as they settled in, a PFC handed them blankets, which are welcome, October is starting to get chilly, bottles of Gatorade, and an apple each, and then said, “Eat and drink slow. You keep that down, we’ve got more for you, but eat this first, and eat it slow. Too many people get to this side, eat too fast, and end up puking up their first meals. Don’t be them.”

It’s the best apple in the history of apples. It’s blush pink and yellow and crisp and juicy and a little sweet and a little tart and he eats the core. The only thing left when he’s done is the stem, and he’s seriously thinking about it when his stomach starts to complain.

He didn’t eat it slowly enough because immediately after eating it, he does feel nauseous. But he keeps it down, and he keeps sipping the Gatorade.

When they’ve finished, and ten minutes goes by, the Private comes back, this time with what looks like coffee cups and Gibbs can feel his heart lifting. The coffee packs Tony found at the hotel ran out yesterday, so he hasn’t had any in more than twenty-four hours.

He grabs the cup, feeling it warm between his fingers, and almost starts to curse when he inhales and realizes it’s chicken broth, but he’s too hungry to stay disappointed.

Salty, savory, it’s probably a bullion cube in a cup of hot water, but right now, like the apple, this is the best chicken broth, EVER.

He’s still, slowly, (he’s coughing between sips) drinking it when Diane pulls up. She stops, looks at him, bedraggled, too thin, lips and fingernails still bluish from lack of oxygen, and says, “You didn’t say you were bringing friends.”

He looks at her car, slowly standing up, and the SEALs follow, piling into the back seat that’s made for three small people, and if they hadn’t just spent the last two weeks on a crash diet they’d never fit, but today they do. He gets into the front seat, and says to her, “Get driving, I’ll fill you in while we go.”

“This better be a hell of a story,” Diane says, throwing the car into reverse.
“It is.” And Gibbs starts to tell it.

He doesn’t do a very good job of it. Virginia’s just… unreal. He keeps stopping to cough, or just stare at trees that have gone gold and scarlet in the fall. They drive past very normal things, like gas stations and grocery stores and they’re all doing business. Prices look odd (12.99 for a gallon of 93 octane gas) but there’s nothing burnt out or broken. (Not actually true, but compared to DC, a building per block with a little graffiti and one boarded over window isn’t hitting Gibbs’ radar. In most of Virginia, the only places that got burnt out were local Congressmen’s offices, campaign headquarters, IRS outposts, and the like.) And people are just walking and driving around. No one’s wearing any sort of armor. No one is armed.

It’s civilian life and it looks like a dream. Finally, he snaps out of it enough to tell the rest of why they’re out, and ask to be dropped off at his house.

“No.”

“No?” Gibbs asks, confused at the idea of why he can’t go home.

“Nothing else is happening until you get food, sleep, and a doctor. You’re all about to drop, which means none of you are ready to go to buy food, let alone smuggle it in. You’re coming back to my place. All four of you are having a real meal, and then you three are getting cleaned up and sleeping. Jethro, we’re going to the hospital. I am not telling my boss that I got you out of DC just to have you drop over of lung failure ten minutes later.”

He glares at her. He knows he’s not in that bad of shape. But he doesn’t argue either, which is probably a very good hint that he’s not in that good of shape, either.

More food, showers, real showers, clean clothing. Okay, it’s Draga’s so it’s way too long, and even if he hadn’t just lost a ton of weight, too big, and it’s nothing he’d ever buy for himself, but it’s clean and smells good and feels nice on his skin. His clean skin. His skin that he scrubbed pink under pouring hot water. He doesn’t even care that the only soap Diane had in the house smells like vanilla and roses. Right now, anything that doesn’t smell like ash, BO, and foot rot is welcome.

All Gibbs wants to do when he gets out of the shower is collapse on the… Bed is out, there’s a SEAL there, same with Emily’s bed, and there’s a SEAL on the sofa, but hell, right now the plush carpet on the floor looks like soft, fluffy heaven compared to the bits of mostly concrete floors that he and Abbi had been laying their sleeping bags on.

He’s all but swaying on his feet, when Diane grabs him, wraps an arm around him, and leads him to her car.

“Doctor’s. You can sleep in the car.”

He nods at that. Once he got some food in him, and started to get out of the smoke, he started to feel how bad his lungs are. He feels like they’re stuffed with cotton balls, and like he’s breathing through a wet, fluffy mesh.

He does sleep in the car. He sleeps in the waiting room. He doesn’t sleep in the Doc’s office. As they’re waiting he says, “You asked about Tobias. I haven’t gotten to talk to him. He’ll call when I’m out, or I call him when he’s out. Do you know what he’s been doing?”

She nods. “Yeah. I know. Chucky sent out his Urban Chaos Preparedness thing, right?”
“Yeah.”

“So, on the upside, a lot of FBI employees and their families didn’t get caught out in the riots or get burned in their homes.”

Gibbs nods, coughing.

“Downside, there’s 1042 people in the FBI building. And they thought this was just some sort of little exercise, so they weren’t prepared for it. By the time he got there, they were on day two of no food at all.”

“He’s bringing food in for them.”

“Non-stop. Can’t get a lot of supplies into a tank. They’re convoying in and out. Food in, people out.”

“No one’s stopping them?”

“Tanks. Even the National Guard is looking the other way, letting them in and out. I think he made it clear to them he’d open fire if they tried to stop him. Once I get you home, I’ve got to go meet him.”

“What are you doing?”

“Someone’s got to buy the food.”

Gibbs nods, that makes sense. Then a thought hits. “How are you paying for this?”

She laughs, dry and bitter. “When I was done confiscating the money that went along with all of those accounts, it came to 8.9 billion dollars.”

“That’ll do it.”

That’s when the doctor comes in. He pokes Gibbs, prods him, listens to his chest, tuts a bit, and writes a prescription for strong antibiotics. He suggests that Gibbs rest, drink plenty of fluids, and take it easy on his lungs by using his O2 as much as possible.

Gibbs makes all the right noises, looks contrite, grabs the prescriptions, and gets out of there.

When he and Diane are in the car, she asks him, “You going to do any of that?”

“Some of it.” His eyes are drooping as his head hits the headrest in the car. “Sleep. Would you get the meds?”

“I can do that.”

After what seems like a minute later, Gibbs wakes up to the car slamming into a stop, and Diane shrieking with joy.

She’s already bounded out as he’s rubbing his eyes, feeling muzzy, wanting nothing more than to curl back in on himself and sleep.

But another sound keeps pulling at him, a familiar barking. He’s fumbling for the car door when he sees what’s behind it, and what’s got Diane shrieking.
Emily, wrapped in her mother’s arms, and Ziva, who is holding onto Mona’s collar, keeping her from running over Gibbs.

She’s smiling until she sees him get out of the car, and then the smile falls as she looks him over, deep worry and concern replacing it. Gibbs doesn’t care, he’s so happy to see her. He doesn’t run, he’s too tired to run, but he walks the few steps quickly and envelops her in a massive hug. He holds onto her, face buried in her hair, just feeling her in his arms, solid, real, plump and clean and whole, baby bump, which is definitely bumping along, nudging him in the tummy.

When he pulls back a little, he says, “I know someone who can’t wait to see you.”

“And I cannot wait to see him.” She gently touches his face. “You need rest.”

“I need to get people fed.”

She’s still staring at him, and then nods. “You sleep, and eat. I’ll start getting things ready. We are going to the house, yes?”

“Yes. I need to know what sort of watch they’re keeping on the Anacostia. Right now, there’s a shoot on sight order for anyone out after dark in the city. And the National Guards aren’t letting any food in that hasn’t been inspected during the day.”

Ziva nods. “You rest. Eat. Tomorrow morning, you come to the house, and I’ll have the river defenses scouted out.”

Gibbs holds onto her, tight. She kisses his cheek, hugging him back just as hard. He’s not letting go. After a moment, when she decides she’s not going anywhere soon, she asks, “How is he?”

“About to be much better.”

“Thin, like you?”

Gibbs nods.

“Tired?”

He nods at that, too. “We’re all tired and hungry. Smelly. He’s not hurt. And when he sees you, he’ll get better.”

Ziva nods, sure there’s volumes of information Gibbs isn’t giving her, but she also knows the only reason he’s still on his feet is that he hasn’t let go of her. “Come inside, let’s get you down.”

Gibbs nods. She gets him set up on a pile of blankets and pillows on the floor, with Mona snuggled in next to him. He’s asleep again almost before she’s standing up.

It’s late on day thirteen when Ziva DiNozzo begins to scout the river. She’s not worried about the shoot on sight orders. And won’t be an hour later when the sun finally goes down. Right now, she’s got time to move around in the open, and once the sun sinks, no one will see her.

Their home is two hours from the Navy Yard by car. A lot of those two hours are eaten up by DC traffic.

By ship… She doesn’t know. She’s not sure how fast Semper can go.
By ship, they’re going up the Potomac, and from the Potomac to the Anacostia.

She spent her first hour looking at maps, carefully, getting the sense of the river, and where she would put men if she didn’t want anyone getting in by ship.

Then she goes in live, driving carefully, and finally, walking. A black shape barely disturbing the cloud covered dark.

No one notices, no one sees her. But she sees them. The Maryland National Guard is camped out on top of 495, at the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, making sure no one gets past. She sees flood lights, and men that aren’t really paying attention. The bridge is down, so big ships can’t get through, and the little ones don’t seem to concern them, too much.

Of course, she’s not seeing any little ships trying to go upriver, or get past the bridge. Most of them appear to be heading downriver, south and east.

She comes to a few conclusions, namely, getting out should be fairly easy. Getting in will be problematic. Gibbs is going to have to dodge the spotlights, and Hashem help them if the clouds break. The moon is full tonight, or so close as to not matter, and if they try to move without clouds, they’ll be the slow moving black blob on a river lit silver by the sky.

It’s early on day fourteen when she gets back to their house. It’s not ready for people. But it’s got walls. She unloads her own sleeping bag, and settles down, tired, lonely, aching for this to be done.

She sends Tony a text. It’s a picture of her at the house, and says, “Tonight, you see this live.”

---

Tony’s almost asleep when his phone buzzes. He doesn’t recognize the number, but these days no one’s texting unless it’s important. He opens it up and sees Ziva sitting on the patio at the house, along with her words.

He can’t speak, can’t even begin to write to her his heart’s so full of joy.

He’s getting out, and she’s home again.

He can’t think of how to even begin to express how happy this makes him, so he calls her, but she’s already asleep by that point, so he leaves the sound of a kiss on her machine.

---

Gibbs wakes up alert, bright eyed, bushy tailed, and brimming with purpose on the morning of day fourteen. (He’s also exhausted, aching from head to toe, still wheezing, and ravenous. These sensations all get pushed out of his mind, because he’s got a job to do.)

He shovels as much food as Diane will give him into himself, and all the (decaf) coffee, too. He’s been drinking caffeinated since that was the only sort they had, and the water tasted too bad to drink on its own, but now that he has the choice, he’s going to back to following his doctor’s orders.

He tells himself that’s why he’s so tired. No caffeine.

Diane drops him at his place, and he grabs Abbi’s Taurus. He then takes each of the SEALs to their own places, where they pick up cars, and fortunately, a truck.
From there, it’s convoy time. Up to the house.

As he’s driving, he realizes that there’s a reason why, beyond them just being stuck up assholes, that officers hog up the food when rations get low. There’s a reason why, if you’re on short rations, the guy in charge keeps eating.

And that’s, in retrospect, a pretty sane reason. Namely, it’s a really good idea if someone in the group, preferably the guy making the decisions, has enough food in his system so he can actually think.

And one other thing becomes very clear. No one at NCIS has had this particular insight yet, probably because they’re all so damn hungry, they can’t think straight.

He makes a mental note to make sure that he’s got a pack of food for just Leon, Jarvis, and Abbi. Between the three of them, they’re running the place, and it’s about time they get enough food that they can start thinking again.

Though, he wonders if they’ll actually eat them, or just pass them out to everyone.

The SEALs have been… somewhat less than perfectly impressed with the old guy ordering them around. First off, he’s a Jarhead, and what the fuck sort of Jarhead has ever had two damn brain cells to rub together, let alone run an op?

And this particular one. Okay, yeah, he can handle a rifle, they know that. They saw him on the roof. And sure, he’s got grit, sticking around wheezing like that, but that’s all a Jarhead is good for. That’s how they make Jarheads, they take the brains out of ‘em and pump ‘em full of balls and then tell them to go kill, and they do it.

You don’t put them in charge of a smuggling operation, let alone one on a boat. That’s their territory. That’s why they trained for. Literally. That’s SEAL school, how to get you and your men and your stuff in behind enemy lines, without getting caught, and then rip things up so then the Jarheads can come in and break even more shit before the Army wanders it’s ass in to hold the place.

So, to say they aren’t particularly impressed by Jethro is an understatement. And they’re less impressed with him acting like he’s God’s gift to the river.

So, Lt. Hanne, who should be running this, says, “What the hell does a fucking Jarhead know about boats?” as Jethro’s opening the door to the boathouse.

Jethro gets his answer, and looks really satisfied, as the Squid sucks in a fast breath, seeing how sleek and beautiful Semper is.

“How to fucking build them for one, and I can sail her, too. All I need from you Squids is manual labor. Let’s get her ready.”

Gibbs can fit ten cubic feet of food into Semper and still have enough room to pilot her. Nine if he wants a co-pilot.

So, he’s standing in Costco, with Yunz and Bardinio, trying to figure out what to grab. As best he
remembers, they have rice and beans. That and power bars are what they’re living on right now. (Though, and this is another sign of no one out there eating enough, he’s realizing all of his memories of the last two weeks are fuzzy.)

Shopping. Oatmeal, more beans, more rice. Not tasty, but it won’t go bad, and if he can’t get in tomorrow or the next day, it’ll last. That’s Ziva’s biggest concern, as long as the clouds hold, he can get in and out. As soon as they break, the moon will light them up, and he can’t get Semper under the bridge.

Can’t just do dry goods. Onions, cabbages, carrots. Good for you, lots of vitamins, good shelf life. Potatoes. As long as they stay cool and dry, they’ll last for weeks.

He’s down to two square feet at that point. He sees the country hams. They’re dried. They don’t need refrigeration. They’ll make everything taste better. They’ve got bones Elaine can add to the soup she’s been simmering this whole time. Three hams. That’s all he can get in there besides himself.

He hopes it’s a good start. Then he sends Elaine a text, telling her what he’s got, and asking what she wants for tomorrow’s run.

Once the SEALs have Semper loaded, they all look around, and then, Henne, who has decided based on how well built Semper is, that maybe this one Jarhead knows his ass from a hole in the ground, asks Gibbs if he minds if they head off.

“What are you thinking?” Gibbs asks. He and Ziva are getting ready to go over the map of the river she’s made.

“We’ll keep coming back to help you load, but we’ve got friends on the outside. When we trained to do stuff like this, it was with one or two men on an inflatable raft.”

“And you’re going to float down the river,” Gibbs says.

“Exactly. Acquire a few of those rafts, can’t put much on them, but we can get a person out on them. Start north of DC, float down the river to the Navy Yard, and then float someone else down to you.”

“That’ll take all night,” Ziva says.

Henne shrugs. “Maybe. Once we get past whatever they’ve got north of the city limits, we can probably use our engines, same for once we’re far enough south of 495 to be out of gun range.”

Gibbs and Ziva nod at that. “See you back here tomorrow night.”

Henne gives Gibbs a quick salute. “At least one of us will be here to load things up tomorrow morning.”

“I should go with you,” Ziva says to Gibbs as he unties Semper from her moorings.

“Ziver…”
She shakes her head. “Do not give me that look. We have a rifle with a suppressor. And you are going to have to tack right and left to get through the search lights. If the wind doesn’t behave, or if you can’t get her turned fast enough… You need a pair of eyes and a steady hand to kill the lights.”

He starts to open his mouth to say something about how he’s the sniper, but she says, faster, “You cannot pilot the boat and shoot at the same time. It’s a two person job.”

She’s right about that. He’s still not at all happy about the idea of her going along with this.

“Tony’ll head slap me.”

“No, he will not. He’ll be too happy to see me.”

He looks at her again, not sure what to do with this.

She looks back. “I was a good girl. I ran the way I was supposed to. I went into hiding and got Emily and Vance’s family out of the line of fire. And now it is time to make sure that you can get my husband out of there.”

Gibbs nods.

“Once we get past the 495, no one will be watching the river. From what I saw Metro does not care about people trying to get in and out by the river.”

Gibbs sighs. They wouldn’t care. They’re marching the streets trying to keep the peace. The only people using the river are trying to get into or out of the city.

“I want two vests on you.”

“I can swim, Gibbs.”

“I know. You’re still putting a life vest and a bulletproof vest on.”

“Fine.” She’s gone for a few minutes, and as she goes, it begins to rain again. Perfect weather for something like this.

“Gonna be cold and wet.” There’s room for him below deck, there isn’t for her.

She’s bundled up for the cold weather. Rain gear on top of her vests, rifle properly guarded from the wet, too. “I can take a little cold and wet. Get me to my love.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

The first two hours go very smoothly. The wind is holding steady. The sun is sinking into the horizon. Clouds are deep and full. Gibbs is navigating by radar. Once the sun sets, he’s got no visibility. But, his GPS is showing him the way, and Semper’s doing exactly what she was made for, sweeping smooth and gentle up the river.

For some reason, he’s thinking of a scene in a movie he watched with Kelly back in the day. “Just a fisherman, at night, going for a pleasure cruise, in eel infested water…” Yep, that’s him and Ziva, just two sailors, at night, in the rain, going for a little cruise, toward the rioting city. No big thing.

He hears Ziva knock on the deck, and sees what she’s seeing. The bridge. He stops them well out of
range of the lights, watching. Three spot lights, and they are playing them back and forth across the water.

The good thing about that is the watchers are so close to the light, they should be fairly blind to anything that isn’t lit up like a Christmas tree. The better thing is they’re probably only looking at the circle of river lit up by each search light.

All he has to do is not get caught in the lights.

This would be so much easier with a motor. He’d be able to go faster. Of course, with a motor, he’d also be making noise. Not much traffic right now, not around DC, they’d hear him and have those lights trained on him well before he could get through.

Ziva’s watching, too. “I can take the middle one.” Her rifle won’t make a noise, and she’s using small bullets. It should look like the light just popped. With the way the rain’s coming down. One drop of cold water on hot light... It would shatter.

Three lights, sweeping back and forth...

“Do it.” Gibbs begins to edge the *Semper* forward, he’ll tack left in a second, and start the zig zag that’ll hopefully get them under the bridge. He hears a tiny pop, and a second later there’s only two lights.

“I told you I’d be useful.”

“Yeah. You catch cold, he’ll kill me.”

“I doubt that.”

“Shhhhh...” He needs to concentrate. Stay out of the lights. Slow and gentle, just stay where they aren’t. A bit left here, a little right there, *please wind, don’t fail now*, a little more left, and a bit more beyond that. Just a few more degrees, and then hard right. A few more meters, just a little bit more, and then he exhales with relief. They’re under the bridge.

It’s another hour of slow sailing up from there. Mostly just staying out of range of the banks, keeping themselves far enough away that whoever’s looking doesn’t see them. But finally they see the lights on the Barry, waiting for them.

Jethro sails into the dock and finds many *eager* people waiting for them.

Unloading takes a few minutes. He personally hands three boxes to Leon. “Make sure you, Jarvis, and Abbi actually eat these.” He looks for Abbi, but she’s not there.

Leon answers his unspoken question. “She’s on the wall.”

“Excitement?”

Leon shrugs. “We don’t know yet. They’re still milling around at the corner. They haven’t turned towards us, but they might be thinking about it.”

“Shit. You need—“

“Don’t even think about it. I need someone to bring me food a hell of a lot more than I need a sniper.
I can pull a trigger myself. I can’t get these people out or bring food back in.”

Jethro nods. He knows where his duty lies, and he knows where Abbi’s is, too.

“Okay. Let’s get them loaded.” He looks at the ten people on the dock. They’re all exhausted and hungry. He makes a mental note for how he’s got to repack things tomorrow night. Right now, there is no food in *Semper* because he just unloaded it all. And they’re three hours from the house. Which also isn’t swimming in food. He sighs. “Leon, I need those boxes back.”

Leon sees the families staring at the food that just came off the boat, and the Marines and SEALs humping it inside. He nods, understanding what Gibbs forgot in his hurry to get as much food into the Navy Yard as he can.

“You need a logistics officer, don’t you?” Leon says.

“Yeah.”

“Penny’ll be on the boat tomorrow.”

Gibbs nods. She’ll be good at that. He wants to ask for Abbi, wants her out of there, too, but, he shakes his head. Anyone with a gun who can shoot needs to be on the walls.

“Come on. Get in and let’s get moving. We’ve got three hours before we’re back to our home berth, and some of the trip is going to be rough,” he says to the people on the dock. The number of turns he had to make to get through the lights wasn’t exactly an easy bit of sailing.

Tony’s standing on the dock, wrapped around Ziva, very quietly crying on her, so relieved to be going and happy to see her. Gibbs gives them one more minute, and then says, “DiNozzo, you can keep hugging her on the boat, but we’ve got to go, now.”

Slightly after midnight on day fifteen, Jethro takes the first load of people out of the Navy Yard. 656 people becomes 646. He brings in enough food for all the ones who are left to have 1500 calories, if they eat it all in one day.

Leon eyes the weather. Fifty percent chance of rain the next day. Supposedly, he should have three platoons of New York National Guardsmen taking twenty-eight people off his hands. Supposedly they were going to show up yesterday, but they didn’t, and they didn’t come today, either, and they are not returning his calls. Supposedly, those Guardsmen, will, if they show up tomorrow, bring him about 6000 MREs. Each one will run slightly over 1200 calories. Maybe, if he’s lucky, tomorrow, rain or shine, he’ll have three SEALs floating in with… Some amount of food. Maybe two hundred pounds per raft. Probably less.

He has, in his stores, enough food left for everyone to have 200 calories tomorrow. And then that’s it. They’re done.

He looks at the food the Marines are now guarding, and makes the decision. Rations will not be increasing until they’ve got enough of a buffer to last one full day.

For at least another twenty-four hours, unless those Guardsmen show up, they’re on 1000 calories a day.
His stomach rumbles as he looks at fresh carrots and cabbages. At least tomorrow, they’ll be something other than protein bars and rice and beans.
Hunger changes the mental landscape of the people experiencing it. By day 13, inside the Navy Yard, they're seeing what hunger does to people.

Cooking shows have replaced the news. No one’s watching the outside world anymore. There is no outside world anymore. There’s just images of glorious food, lovingly made by people who aren’t losing half a pound a day.

They talk about it, all the time. What they’re all going to eat as soon as this is done. What they used to eat before this. What they loved eating. What they loved cooking. What restaurants they want to eat at.

It’s all food, twenty-four seven, as they swallow down rice and beans and protein bars.

No one has any emotional resources anymore. Any little annoyance immediately explodes into argument. Fortunately everyone is too hungry to keep a fight going too long.

Long term planning is gone. Get through the day. That’s all that’s left.

The only reason theft isn’t rampant is the fact that there’s one SEAL, Marine, or Cop for every three civilians. But these days, Elaine is handing out rations, that are weighed to show that everyone is getting the exact same amount, in front of the people getting them, with four armed guards.

It’s the crying that’s killing Tim. The babies and little kids cry and whine all the time. He doesn’t blame them, he wants to curl up and whimper all the time, too.

But, blaming them or not, it’s wearying.

He gets his rations, eats his vitamins and protein bar, and then finds a crying kid and hands over the rest of his meal.

The parents will smile at him, and the kid will cry a little less. And he’s not, by a long stretch, the only parent, or person, doing it. Some people are only handing over a spoonful, some more, but most of them are trying to keep the kids from starving.

He’ll drift off, back to the roof, where he can’t hear the tears, or to the little nest of quiet he’s carved out for himself in the ballistics lab. In there he’s got the pillows Tony got for them, his “drying” clothing and towel hung off of the ballistics tank, and Abby’s music playing.

No one comes in there, not since Zelaz and Corwin left. So he’s alone, and he can talk to his family, or sleep. Mostly sleeping. He’s not hungry when he’s sleeping. Though, he’s starting to get to the
point where he’s not hungry when he’s awake, either. As long as he doesn’t see the food, he doesn’t think about it. Too much.

Abby, Jimmy, and Breena keep begging him to leave, and he can’t get it through to them that he can’t leave. That leaving is impossible. No one can leave.

Because there’s no outside world anymore. Not for him.

Inside the Navy Yard, on day fourteen, when they learn that Gibbs is coming in that night with food, there’s something between a party and a riot.

No one can wait for him to come. They watch the clock and make bets about what he’s going to bring.

The riot almost breaks out when nine people and Tony are picked to leave. With the exception of Tony, they were picked at random. Tim’s name generator came up with the first name, and Sarah Maitz, one of the HR staff, and her family got a one way ticket out of the Navy Yard. Rhonda in accounting and her three kids got the second spot. When Connon, who works in Cybercrime got the last spot, a lot of whispering about the name generator being fixed started to flow.

Of course he’s getting out. He’s Cybercrime. Probably fixed the machine.

The whispers got ugly, but when it was time to line people up on the dock, no one rushed the Semper.

Breakfast on day fifteen hears more angry rumbling. Yes, the quality of the food just got significantly better, but the amount hasn’t. They’re still looking at a tiny scoop of potatoes, cabbage, and carrots with a few slivers of ham, next to another tiny scoop of oatmeal.

The food Jethro brought in was high in nutrients and good for them. It’s not high in calories.

Elaine asks him for powdered milk, powdered eggs, and fat. Butter, Crisco, oil, bacon, sausages, ground beef, whole chickens. The power hasn’t gone, and even if it does, they still have the generators to keep food cool. Shelf life doesn’t matter, most calories per square inch, does. If he had a shorter run, or any sort of refrigerated storage, she’d tell him to pack ice cream. As it is, she doesn’t want him to waste space by packing coolers to keep ice cream, ice cream.

Ideally, she wants a lot of rice, which cooks up to twice it’s size, and then she wants meat and fat to cook into that rice. She wants eggs, which are fat and protein. Nuts, if he can get them, lots of nuts.

On day fifteen, Gibbs has a very different shopping list.

And on day fifteen, it doesn’t matter. The clouds break, scuttle away. It’s October 20th, the moon is two days past full, bright and brilliant, and unless the guys on the 495 are blind, there’s no way they won’t see him.
“Watch your ring,” Jarvis says to Tim, voice listless on day fifteen, as he scoops up the last drop of ham and bean soup from his bowl.

Tim looks at his hand, slowly. His wedding ring has worked it’s way down to the tip of his ring finger and is one gesture from ending up on the floor.

For the first time in days, Tim really looks at himself, sees his knuckles too thick and fingers too thin. He sees his wrist cuff barely hanging on to his hand when he puts his hand down.

“You’re getting too thin,” Jarvis says, really looking at Tim.

“We all are,” Tim says quietly. “You need extra hands on today’s food run?” Tony’s gone, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t still scrounging. Though they’re not trying to take food anymore. The city is empty. Now they’re going out in parties, trying to hunt. Yesterday, they brought back two pigeons, for more than six hundred people. Elaine put them in the soup. Abbi made a joke about homeopathic pigeon broth. No one else got it.

“No. We’re burning more calories than we’re bringing in.”

Tim shrugs. He supposes he should be disappointed or something, but he’s not feeling it, or much of anything else right now. “I’ll be on the roof.” He shuffles the ring around, and finds that it fits on his index finger.

Jarvis looks at the SEAL next to him. “Did he eat anything?”

“Just had a cup of that crap they’re calling coffee and the vitamin pills.”

The Navy Yard had oak trees. The oak trees had acorns. Half of them have been roasted, ground up, and are now pretending to be coffee. They don’t taste like coffee, not really. But it’s roasted and bitter and the water tastes foul on its own, so it’s an improvement.

The oak trees had had chipmunks and squirrels and birds, too.

They don’t anymore.

They aren’t eating the rats, yet, but that’s likely because no one’s seen one.

On day fifteen, Ducky gets called back to his original NCIS duty. People sleep, a lot, inside the Navy Yard right now, which is the best thing they can do. Burn the fewest possible calories.

But Edna Purcell, previously of the accounting department, doesn’t wake up from her nap.

Ducky thinks it’s complications from diabetes. They ran out of insulin yesterday, and they don’t have the kind of food supplies to handle a sugar crash.

One of the morgue freezers goes back to being used for what it was made for.
“What the fuck is he still doing there!” Jimmy yells at Abbi on day fifteen.

“Keeping us alive,” Abbi yells back. “You don’t get it Jimmy. You’re NOT HERE. All the time there are crowds of people around us, just waiting to break in and kill us. As long as he can shoot, I’m not making him go.”

“Abbi, there’s no chance he can still shoot! He’s barely talking anymore.” The last two phone calls Tim said maybe six words a piece. They’re begging him to leave, and all he’ll say is that he can’t go.

“He can still aim and still pull a trigger. Jethro’s offered to get him out, and he told Jethro to take Tony.”

“WHY THE FUCK WOULD HE DO THAT!” No one had mentioned that to Jimmy, yet.

“Because Tony can sail, some at least, so he can get us more food, and Tim can’t! The most important thing Tim can do for us right now is man the roof!”

Jimmy wants to scream. Everyone down there has gone mad. He knows because he, and Abby, and Breena have been asking, then begging, then screaming at them to get Tim out. He knows why, too. He knows how food deprivation works. He knows that lack of calories compromises the ability of people to think, and on top of that it makes them depressed and anxious. He gets that they can’t see beyond their own noses right now. They’ve stripped down all the needs and wants to enough food to see the next day. They’re in full on nothing but survival mode.

But that doesn’t make it any less frustrating and terrifying. He’s trying to reason with animals. In most cases, depressed, starving animals.

He hangs up. He looks over to Abby who has Gibbs on the phone. He looks at her with a question and she shakes her head.

“Abbs, I can’t get him on the boat if he won’t come!”

“That’s bullshit, Gibbs! Pick his ass up and dump him on the damn thing.”

“That’s not why. Everyone in there is desperate. If I try to force him on there, they will riot. So many people want to get out, that if I take someone who doesn’t…” Gibbs knows, he’s seen it. The crowd inside the walls already isn’t happy with line jumpers, and a line jumper who doesn’t want to go… “At any given time, Leon’s a heartbeat away from having to turn the guns in instead of out. They had to have armed Marines to get Tony out.”

“Why would you get Tony out!”

“Abby…”

Abby’s too burnt with worrying for Tim, and too damn pregnant to be rational about that. “He’s… Tony didn’t need it! Not the way Tim did! Tony was probably sitting there, cracking jokes and making smart comments, all cool and Tim’s… he’s hurting so bad… Why would you abandon him? You’re his dad, and you left him!”
If Gibbs could have shot himself to get out of that conversation, he would have. He should have
pulled them both out. He should have grabbed Tim by the hand and led him out. He should have…but he didn’t.

Abby’s verbally beating the hell out of him for not doing it, and he’s taking it, because he feels like
he deserves it.

When she slows down, he says, “I’ll get him out as soon as I can. As soon as he’ll let me, I’ll get him
out.”

“It’s not soon enough!” Abby spits back at him.

On day fifteen, Gibbs does not come. He can’t. The moon is too high, too bright.

Three SEALs do, and between them they have five hundred pounds of MREs. They get three people
out, young and strong ones. Floating down the river in a mostly submerged inflatable craft, hugging
the bank sounds fun, until you’ve got to do it in the middle of the night in cold water in October.

When they get to the house, they’ve got three civilians with hypothermia. Five hours in sixty degree
water was too long, too cold. The SEALs had the gear for it, the civilians didn’t.

Gibbs and Ziva spend the night getting them warmed back up again, and pray for rain.

The weather channel says it’s coming. They can see it on the radar. They pray it’ll move fast and
stay for a long time.

On day fifteen, NCIS is out of medical supplies. The mobile infirmary is done. Which means Penny,
Ducky, and Allan have a whole lot of nothing to do.

For the first time in weeks, they’ve got breathing time.

And that’s a bad thing. Hours and hours of work broken by eating fast and exhausted sleep makes
time melt into oblivion. It kept them busy and useful, and right now, busy and useful is the only thing
keeping people going.

People with jobs that matter aren’t having a good time, but they’re not lost to depression and hunger.
People who don’t have jobs that matter, they’re turning into ghosts, drifting around, more and more
tenuously tethered to life with each passing day.

For most of day fifteen, they sleep. And for much of day sixteen as well. But by nightfall, they are
up, and more or less functional. As good, if not slightly better, than everyone else.

Leon finds Penny at dinner. “Dr. Langston, Gibbs has confirmed that he’s in the water. You’re going
with him. And if you could get your grandson out of here, too, that would be a good thing.”


Leon shakes his head. “No.”

“I’ll find him.”
She tries to think back, and comes to the conclusion that she hasn’t seen Tim since the day with the pickles, whenever that was. They’ve been working flat out, outside of the walls. When they get back, they eat, fast, work with whoever needs help in the walls, and then sleep.

She checks her phone, which she hasn’t done in days, and sees a collection of messages from Abby, Jimmy, and Breena, all on the theme of *get our man out of there.*

She spends an hour looking, but doesn’t find him. Obviously, he’s hiding somewhere, but wherever it is, it’s outside of her ken. She sends Jimmy and Abby a text, asking where Tim would hide if he didn’t want to be found. She gets a flurry of excited texts with suggestions for places. Both of them are desperate to hear that she’s got Tim out of NCIS.

*Am looking. Will talk to him.*

She finds him where Abby suggested, curled up into a little ball back in the ballistics lab, sleeping.

She hasn’t actually seen him since they brought the pickles in. He wasn’t looking good then, and now… For a moment, she’s looking at him, and she understands what Jimmy and Abby and Breena have been begging him for. They need to get Tim out; he’s wasting away here. She lowers herself to the floor and gently shakes him. He comes awake very slowly, and even when his eyes are open, he doesn’t look all there.

“My name’s up. I’m out of here. Come with me.”

He shakes his head slowly. “Not enough sharpshooters if I leave.”

“Timothy…”

“Someone’s got to do it. I can. So I should.”

“Tim.”

He sounds so tired, and he doesn’t sit up, he’s still curled on his side, head turned toward her. “Take someone else. There’s got to be a kid or someone who needs out of here more than I do. The lady who died was diabetic. She can’t be the only one, go find someone who needs insulin or some medicine.”

“You eat more than a kid does. And right now, you need medical care, too.”

He laughs at that. Not these days, he doesn’t. “There’s got to be someone who needs it more than me, or someone who’s not doing something useful.”

“Timothy…”

He’s got that set look on his face. And between his hair gone, and his face gaunt from hunger, it looks atrocious. “Is Ducky going? How about Allan?”

And he’s got her, because they aren’t. Just because they’re out of supplies doesn’t mean they don’t need someone who can handle first aid in the compound.

“What I’m doing is just as important as what they’re doing. I’ll go when they don’t need me anymore.”

“Leon told me to get you.”

Tim snorts. “Because he’s sick of Abby and Jimmy and Breena begging him to send me home. He
didn’t tell me to go. Abbi hasn’t, either. He knows he still needs me.”

“Jethro wants you to go.”

Jethro’s been calling and asking, and then telling, and then ordering him to leave. It’s working just about as well as every other time Jethro’s ordered him away from something dangerous to save himself. “He’s not here. He left. And with him gone, we need sharpshooters even more. There’s only five of us now. Eighteen hours on, just to keep the perimeter under watch.” He closes his eyes. “I’m tired. Let me go back to sleep. I need to be up there again in three hours.”

She spends the next twenty minutes talking to him, but he doesn’t budge, or open his eyes.

When she texts Abby, Breena, and Jimmy, Breena calls her and spends the next hour, until she steps onto the boat, begging her to do anything she can, including having a few SEALs literally pick him up and put him on it, to get Tim onto it.

Abby and Jimmy call Tim. He turns his phone on, but he doesn’t talk. He drifts, their voices upset, but still them, just a lull as he dreams.

Jethro looks disappointed when Penny steps onto the boat and Tim’s not with her. She just shakes her head.

“Get more food in,” Penny says. “Maybe if you can get enough food into him, he’ll see some sense.”

In addition to being one hell of a scrounger, Tony DiNozzo can talk a con up, down, left and right if he needs to.

He might not be a great sailor, but he doesn’t need to be. Not for this.

On day seventeen, he and the SEALs head over to where CGIS keeps the boats they confiscate. And with loads of paperwork, an I don’t have time for this bullshit attitude, and Abbi Borin on speed dial, he gets his hands on four daysailers of different varieties.

They don’t hold a whole lot, but they’re small and fast and can be sailed by one person. They’ve got tiny engines that don’t make much noise. He figures he can get four people out per boat.

At last count, they were down to 635. The next day they get anything even remotely like a cloudy sky, instead of Jethro’s ten people out per trip, they’ll get that up to twenty-six, more if they do multiple trips.

Ziva’s working on the logistics of getting more than one run taken care of. And once Penny’s gotten some sleep and more to eat, she’s on top of that, too.

It’s not exactly safe. Getting it set up works best at night, so Penny’s not scouting it out, but she’s getting it planned. Doing the math.

The Woodrow Wilson Bridge links the Virginia side of 495 to the Maryland side. Right now, there
are three spotlights and a collection of Maryland National Guardsmen on top of the bridge. Those spotlights have a finite range. They can illuminate only so far out, and they cannot be turned too close to the bridge, either.

So, with Penny doing the math, and Ziva plotting how to get everything in place, they’re planning on setting up a spot to drop people off, under the bridge. *Semper* needs a deeper berth than they can get, but the new little boats can be pulled ashore under the bridge, people can get off, and then they can turn around and grab more of them.

As long as there is someone on the shore to lead those people off of the shore and to a… van or something… It’ll have to be far enough away from the bridge so the sentries don’t see it, but once they get there, Penny can pick them up and then drive them to a hotel or something.

---

On day eighteen, Leon is yelling, “Where the fuck are you guys?” The promise of food in ‘three days’ is now five days past. And right now, 6000 pounds of MREs would do his camp a world of good. Hell, right now, 300 pounds of MREs would make a real difference.

Gibbs brought in more food last night. The SEALS got more food in, too. And he’s been lucky enough to bring everyone's calorie count up to 1300. For today, and tomorrow. And then again, they’re out.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to get prisoners out of DC?” Captain Craig says back to him.

“No, I’m totally fucking clueless as to how bad DC is right now! I’ve only been sitting in the goddammned middle of it since day one!”

Craig snorts. “Yeah. I’m sure. Try taking the 200 most wanted men out of the city. We had to fight our way in, and then fight our way out, and that was just with the first twenty of them. Then we had to regroup outside of the city and wait for reinforcements. We still haven’t gotten CGIS cleaned out, yet. We needed more men, we just got them yesterday. We’ll get to you tomorrow.”

“You better. Do you have any idea how low we are on food?”

“Yes… um… well…”

Leon goes cold when he hears that.

“What?”

“We… That’s part of how we got out. Twenty prisoners, forty of us, a convoy of jeeps… Thousands of them. We had to toss the food. Throwing it aside kept most the crowd so busy we could get out.”

Leon blinks, and then snaps the pencil he was holding.

“We don’t have any extras. Not until we get out again.”

“What are you feeding your men? You’re feeding *them*, right?”

Craig snorts at that. “They came in with rations. They’ll get more when we get out, but right now, the only ones who have something are the ones who didn’t give their rations away.”

Leon slumps in defeat. He knows how it works. He was doing it, in the beginning, when they still had more than an extra day of food. He’d give little bits out. He’s sure the soldiers did it, too. They
know, at the end of the day, or in the morning at the latest, they’ll get something to eat. So, as they move, they’re tossing their MREs to hungry people.

“I promise. Tomorrow, we grab your guys, and we get them out. Then we’ll come back, with the food. Day after tomorrow, 6000 pounds of MREs, more if I can get it to you.”

Leon doesn’t respond. He hangs up and calls Gibbs. “Food’s not coming.”

“I’ve got better news.”

“Thank you!”

“Tony’s got four more boats. Light little things. I can get three of them in the water now, and if you give me one more sailor, I can get all four of them moving.”

“Next run, I’ll get you sailors.”

“Great.”

Leon hangs up, feeling… Awful, really. Because there’s one thing Gibbs and he didn’t say to each other. The sky is clear tonight. And it’s supposed to be clear tomorrow. No rain predicted until day twenty.

By day nineteen, it’s very clear who the military people are, and who the civilians are. The civilians are fried. They’re in varying levels of past what they can endure.

Leon’s getting them out by lottery. Gibbs can, safely, pack ten people on his boat. Twelve if enough of them are kids.

It’s slow. It’s not getting people out nearly fast enough. But it’s something.

Leon’s worried. It’s might not be enough. He’s got double guards on the food right now, and is passing it out with armed men.

Technically speaking, they aren’t starving, not the way the outside is. Right now, everyone in the compound is getting three tiny meals a day.

But he’s getting scared. He doesn’t know how long it’s going to be before he has riots inside the walls, to go with the ones outside.

On day nineteen the New York National Guard shows up and takes the prisoners. 618 people left to feed. Most of the camp lines up to jeer and throw things at them as they leave.

Once they’re out of the compound, Leon hears gunfire. Once again, the National Guard is having to fight to get these men out. All of DC blames them for what happened, and they do not want to see them stand trial. And by right now, he’s sure they’d rather just let the mob have them.

Either way, it’s not his problem anymore. Everyone gets an extra mouthful of food, and that’s a (tiny) victory, or sorts.
Day 20:

“What part of don’t let anyone see what you’re doing was unclear!” Leon screams at the Lieutenant in the New York National Guard who drove up in his APV, bold as brass, and visibly unloaded two pallets of food in front of the Navy Yard.

The Lt. flips him the bird, hops back into his APV, and drives out of there, fast. (An eventual inquiry will bring out the fact that said Lt.’s older brother was a Congressman until the day he died, two weeks earlier, when a mob lynched him. Said Lt blamed NCIS, because they’re the ones who broke the news.)

“Shit, shit, shit, shit!” Leon yells. It’s hundreds, not thousands of pounds of food, saran wrapped together, all in neat, tidy squares on wooden pallets, out in view of anyone who is watching, and he can feel them watching.

“Fast!” He’s got Marines running over, grabbing them, lifting loads that two weeks ago would have taken one, maybe two of them, and today takes four, manhandling what should be on a dolly (but there’s no time to grab a dolly) Leon can already see people starting to run toward them.

He hears warning shots from the roof, and that stops the people running toward them.

But they’re regrouping, and from the look of it, texting, probably tweeting.

When he’s behind the wall, he gets confirmation, twitter just blew up with #FeedDC #FoodattheNavyYard.

Right now, Leon Vance would happily give every penny he has in evidence (1.2 million dollars) and both arms to not make the decision he has to make.

In the Navy Yard, behind the wall, they are not starving. Technically. They’re hungry. But they are not starving, and tonight, if Gibbs gets through, they will get a little more food.

Inside the walls, they’ve seen the food, much, much less than was promised. It’s about five hundred pounds of MREs. Or less than one per person.

He knows, that if he tries to keep that food inside his walls, the mob will rush them, and it’s entirely likely they will break his defenses.

And he knows that if the tries to put that food outside the walls, his people in here will riot. He’s already got Marines keeping his own people off the food by gunpoint, and if he doesn’t let them eat soon, they may turn those guns on him.

“Vance, they’re coming!” He doesn’t know who yells it. He does know that last week, let alone last month, that yell would have been a hell of a lot louder.

Decision time.

He looks over the walls, and he can see them coming, dirty, hungry, slow, every nightmare of every Zombie movie ever. He made sure his people were safe, and he did fuck all to save them. Didn’t let them know to get out of DC, didn’t warn their families. They didn’t get to prepare.
And none of them expected to spend this long under martial law.

He closes his eyes, thinks for a moment longer, and then says, “Come on, get the pallets, we’re gonna feed people.”

Jarvis shakes his head, looking out at the mass of people pushing in toward the Navy Yard. In less than a minute, he’ll need to be on the roof again. “There’s at least five thousand people coming here right now. We give everything out, and less than one out of ten will get any food. The rest of them will rush us, or the ones with food.”

“Clayt…” Leon’s eyes are all but bleeding with the pain of this. “We’re going to have to shoot starving people.”

“Leon,” Clayt eyes the food in the middle of his lot, and the people inching toward it. “You try to take it out of here, and you’re going to have to shoot your own people.”

“Fuck!” Leon shouts. He turns to the Marines guarding it. “Hand it out. Fast. Everyone with a gun, on the walls. We’re gonna go, we might as well go fed!”

Jarvis whips his knife off his belt and cuts through the saranwrap. He grabs five meals, not bothering to look at what they are, and then runs for the roof.

Tim’s already watching the mob, and this time, it’s not about to turn away. This time… He can hope another tank will show up out of the blue, or that they can punch so much lead into the crowd that it breaks.

Supposedly mobs have been breaking faster lately, too tired and weak to really go bonkers.

But they’re also desperate, and hungry, and they know there’s food behind the wall.

Jarvis tosses an MRE at him before crashing next to him on the roof, setting his rifle into place. “Eat it. If we’re gonna kill for it, we might as well get to enjoy it.” He’s already ripping open his pack, and the smell hits Tim like a hammer.

It’s not enticing, he doesn’t want it, at least, his brain doesn’t. His stomach is screaming for food. He grabs his and eats, fast, shoveling something, he’s got no idea what, into his mouth as fast as he can, keeping his eyes on the crowd. They haven’t gotten to the cars yet, and Leon’s yelling on the bullhorn, telling them to disperse or they will open fire.

A minute later, he’s throwing up, and he’s not the only one. He hasn’t tried to put that much food into himself in weeks and his body won’t take it.

As soon as he’s done, he’s back at his rifle, and focused again. This is it, all that’s left of him, keeping the line intact.

There are no warning shots on this one. Leon’s been yelling warnings the whole time the mob’s been gathering. The first person past the cars drops, and Tim doesn’t know if he fired the shot that did it or not.

And worse, he doesn’t care.
Fornell might not have been able to get them food, but he did get them bullets.

Lots and lots of bullets.

Tim doesn’t have to run for the wall. He stays, safe (ish) above it all, firing round after round after round. On the fourth surge, when the mob once again falls back, they finally break. The back of the crowd begins to wander off. The front is littered with screaming people, and bodies that won’t ever move again.

When it’s done, and all that’s left is the sound of the wounded, Tim throws his rifle off the roof and leaves.

On day twenty, Tim shuts down. He killed people who wanted to eat. He did it. He knows he did it. He knows why.

And he doesn’t care anymore.

About anything.

They’re never getting out of this. This is it. The rest of his life is going to be stuck in this hell hole, chewing down tasteless gruel and staring, dead-eyed, at the people around him.

He’ll walk the perimeter, and he’ll kill starving people so that his people can starve at a slightly slower rate. And one day, he’ll vanish. Get thinner and thinner until there’s just nothing left.

Abby calls, and he doesn’t pick up the phone.

Jimmy tries a few minutes later, and he still doesn’t answer.

There’s no outside world anymore, and he’s not going to pretend there is.

“Turn on the news!” Breena says, sounding scared.

They try not to watch the news too much. Otherwise they’d be glued to a TV twenty-four seven, trying to see what’s happening. But, they are keeping watch, especially on Twitter, because that’s giving them live, up to the minute reports, and as soon as she saw #FoodattheNavyYard go live, Breena knew they had to watch.

So they did.

There’s some helicopter footage. Not much. They can see the roof Tim’s on, and five tiny people on it, lying down, presumably firing into the crowd, but they don’t know which one is him.

There’s more footage from people’s phones. Mostly bouncing up and down and people running. Some toward the Navy Yard, some away. They see people throwing Molotov cocktails. They hear screaming and gunshots and people moaning, begging for food. And it goes on and on and on.
The can see, from the helicopter footage that nothing gets near the roof, so they assume that Tim has
to be okay, but as soon as it’s done, as the crowd breaks, they begin calling.

Tim doesn’t pick up.

Abbi’s their next call. “Kind of busy right now.”

“Tim’s not answering.”

Abbi grits her teeth. Yes, she loves Tim. Yes, she wants him to be okay. But A: he is choosing to be
here. And B: she’s got more than six hundred other people she’s also trying to protect, most of whom
are not choosing to stay here. She does not have time to be coddling McGee, who is a perfectly good
soldier, who is doing his job as well as he can and if he doesn’t want to talk to these overprotective
lunatics who keep calling every ten minute from the outside, that’s on him. She says as much to
Jimmy, who hangs up in a snit.

(When she gets out of here, and gets to eat again, Abbi will be horrifically embarrassed by this.
Everyone had their own flavors of shutting down, and Abbi’s was to shift into hyper-competent
officer mode. If it wasn’t directly related to keeping their camp safe, she just didn’t see it.)

When she does, finally, get a few minutes, once she’s made sure the wall is secure, and that her
perimeter has been rebuilt, and that everyone still on the wall has their full compliment of ammo, and
all of her wounded have been tended to by Ducky and Allan… then she takes a few minutes to go
looking for McGee. (Because he is one of her soldiers, after all, and she looks out for her soldiers, so
she does check on him.)

Abbi finds him walking the wall a few minutes later. She pulls him down to sit, and sits next to him,
and wraps her arm around his shoulder.

Like the rest of them, she hasn’t really seen Tim in days. He’s on the roof. She’s on the wall. She
doesn’t think she’s actually seen him in two days, and shit, Jimmy and Abby and Breena might not
have been totally insane. He’s listlessly wandering around the wall in a t-shirt and slacks. Unarmed.
No armor, not even his helmet.

She knows combat fatigue when she sees it, and this is it. Shit, shit, shit, shit!

“You’re on the boat tonight.”

His eyes are dead as he says, “If I’m on the boat, a kid isn’t.”

Abbi shakes her head. “You’ve got four hours to grab your gear.”

“I can’t go.”

“Tim, if you’re not on the boat, you’re going to eat your gun or let someone shoot you.” The wall is,
right now, fairly safe. But everyone who walks it should have body armor and a helmet on. Tim’s
walking it in slacks and a t-shirt and it’s about fifty-five degrees out. “You’re out of here. Four hours.
If you won’t put yourself on it, in four hours I will have you carried onto it.”

She doesn’t mention, that as a person with a Virginia driver’s license, they can just walk him out of the city. She’s giving him to Gibbs, because she’s honestly not sure that if they get him out of the city on his own, that he won’t just end up wandering around, lost, out there.

She gets up. “I’ve got to watch.” With him not on the roof, she’s the next best sharpshooter. And she’s not good. But if he leaves, someone needs to replace him, just to watch, if not to shoot. And right now, she’s convinced Tim shouldn’t be holding a rifle.

Abbi makes one more stop on her way to the roof. “Ducky, I need you to get Tim, and make sure he’s on the boat.”

Ducky find him exactly where Abbi left him. Not moving, not really seeing anything, though his eyes are open. “It’s time to go, Timothy.”

He doesn’t respond to that. Then he slowly looks at Ducky. “Shouldn’t you be out there? With the wounded.”

That gets Ducky’s attention, in a bad way.

“Why do you say that?”

“They’re still crying out there.”

Ducky sits down, slowly, because that’s the only way he can get on the ground from standing these days, and he wraps his arm around Tim. “How long have you been sitting here, Timothy?”

Tim blinks and looks at the sky. It should be morning, but the sun is on the wrong side of the Navy Yard, barely hovering over the wall. He squints a bit. “Feels like ten minutes.”

Ducky holds him closer. “I’ve seen to the wounded. The dying have been sent off to rest, and the ones I could help have been helped. You’ve been out here seven hours, Timothy.”

“Oh. Where’s Penny?”

“She left with Jethro a few days ago.”

“Right.” He looks like he might be remembering that.

“It’s time for you to leave. You made it twenty days, and you did not have to be here for any of them. There’s no shame in going home.”

Tim’s eyes finally meet his. “You’re not.”

Duck shakes that off. There’s literally nothing he can do outside this building that’s more important than what he’s doing inside of it. “My vocation is here, and more than that, I didn’t have to man the sharpshooter’s perch. If I had, I’d be leaving, too. That’s a job that requires more training than just the ability to aim. I could not have done it. Let alone twice.”

“They were starving, Duck,” Tim says it flat, empty. He’s past crying now.

Ducky squeezes Tim to him. “I know, Timothy.”
“And they were going to mob us. I know it, but… They’re so hungry.”

Ducky nods, gently. “So are you, aren’t you?”

He nods, eyes empty.

Ducky can see how much weight Tim’s lost. They all have. But unlike some of them, he didn’t get into this situation with much fat to spare. “When was the last time you ate your full food allotment?”

Tim shakes his head. “I take the pills.”

“You need calories in addition to nutrients. The one without the other doesn’t get the job done. Come, now. Food. Shower. Sleep. Then you get on the boat.”

“I can’t go.”

Ducky’s gently rubbing his back. “Yes, you can. You are not a soldier and you never wanted to be one. You do not need to be one now. You can leave.”

“If I go…”


Ducky takes the time to watch Tim eat. And he makes the effort to tip some of his own food into Tim’s bowl. It’s not much food, but judging by how he’s eating it, it’s more than he’s had in days, maybe longer.

As he’s watching Tim slowly chew, it’s hitting Ducky how little he’s seen Tim lately. He’s thinking it’s possible the last time he saw him was when they were eating the pickles, and he has an unsettling thought, he has no idea how many days ago that was.

Looking at Tim, who’s chewing very carefully, making sure each bite gets ground into a pulp, that Ducky realizes how far he’s been in his own head, his own world. Anyone with eyes should have been able to see that Tim needed to get out of here days ago, if not more. But he didn’t see, because he wasn’t looking at anything beyond the next patient.

Ducky’s eye catches the glint of Tim’s wedding ring, on his thumb now.

Then an even colder thought hits Ducky, he holds up his own hand and notices that his wedding ring is gone. He’s lost enough weight that it must have fallen off at some point, without him noticing.

Ducky realizes he hasn’t looked at himself in a mirror in… He has no idea.

Tim’s not the only one who has to get out of here. They all do. Now.

But now isn’t going to happen. Not unless the outside world radically changes.

Tim drifts back to his office. Sleep. Time to sleep. Ducky’s gently steered him within a few feet of his office and told him to sleep. Then he went off to talk to Leon about something.
Eat, Ducky said, so he ate. His insides feel unsteady, unused to that much food at once, but as soon as his stomach shifted from incessant gnawing at him, his eyes started to droop, and he wants nothing more than to shut a door between himself and the rest of the world and sleep. He’s so tired, he’s even skipping his shower. He just needs to sleep.

Tim opens the door without thinking. It’s his office, he’s barely in the world right now, three quarters a ghost, so he just drifts in, and then stops.

It takes him a stupidly long time to figure out what Draga’s doing in there, with a woman, who’s name he doesn’t know. She’s one of the Marines Jarvis called in, and apparently she’s a natural blonde, and that’s all Tim needs or wants to know about that.

He shuts the door behind him, and walks out, all the way to the spot near the USS Barry, where Jethro’s been loading and unloading, and he lies down on the chill ground, to sleep until Jethro gets there.

He’s done.

It’s 23:48 on day twenty, when Jethro gets his boat to the Navy Yard. It’s 00:14 on day twenty-one when Tim gets on. He made it a full twenty days.

Jethro watches him as much as he can, while trying to sail by feel alone, with *Semper* in full black out condition for several more miles.

He hopes sleep and food and time with his family will pull Tim out of this. He’s afraid he left one of his men, one of his *boys* behind when he shouldn’t have, and he’s cursing himself the whole way back to their house.
Elysium

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Like everyone else who gets on Semper, Tim’s met with a warm blanket and a thermos full of hot chicken broth. He sips it, absently, feeling warm and dull. His eyes are heavy, and the soft rocking on the boat is hypnotic.

Like most of the people who get on Semper, he’s asleep in a few minutes.

He wakes up at some later point, still on Semper, still in the dark. He’s not sure what woke him up, but he’s hungry. So hungry. Ready to eat the other passengers hungry. He’s about to gulp down what’s left of his chicken broth, but he remembers what happened when he did that with the MRE, and right now he really doesn’t want to get sea sick.

So he keeps sipping.

And after a minute, notices he’s not feeling sick.

He’s not sure if he’s too fried to get sea sick, or the switch in his head finally flipped and boats don’t do it for him anymore.

Either way, he’s tired, and he drifts off again.

It’s still dark, and he’s still on the boat when he wakes up again. His phone is buzzing. That’s probably what woke him up the last time, too.

He blinks a few times at the wash of light his cellphone spreads below deck as he hits the contact button.

“Tell me Gibbs has you,” Jimmy sounds terrified.

“Yeah.” His voice sounds rough, weak, and very strange to his ears.

“We’ll be there as soon as possible.”

“Jimmy…” He’s so tired, even talking seems like too much work. He says the name but his voice trails off.

“Tim?”

He gathers up more energy and finally says, “I’ll come to you.”

“We can be there—“

“Abby’ll understand.” Explaining will take too much work. He’s so tired, all he wants is sleep and food. “Breena’s story. I want to see it. I’ll get there.” He yawns, loud.
“Okay. You rest. And… We’ll talk about the rest, later.”

“Mmmm.”

“He’s out.” Jimmy says, and watches both of the girls sag with relief. And then, in less than a heartbeat, Abby’s up, gathering their stuff, ready to get back to him.

“We can be there before lunch,” Breena adds, getting into it.

“He wants to come to us.” That stops both of them. Breena’s looking just as puzzled as Jimmy’s voice sounded when he said it. “He said you’d understand.” Now they’re both watching Abby.

She sighs, and sits down, hard. She wants to run to him. She’d fly if she could. She needs to see him and touch him and hear his voice and wrap herself in his arms and… She blinks hard, feeling the tears in her eyes.

He’s got to be in really deep if he wants that much alone time.

Jimmy and Breena move to her, petting gently. She sniffs a few times but gets it together. “You’ve seen it, too. When he’s had too much, he needs to pull back, get some alone time.”

“That defensive sleeping thing he does?” Jimmy asks.

She nods. “That’s part of it. Or, if you press him before he’s ready to talk, he just curls in on himself. Nothing comes out. The step past that is the need to be literally alone. Last time that happened was after things blew up with his Mom. He needed a few hours entirely on his own, in his head, to rest and reset.”

“You’re saying he needs time to… unfurl?” Breena says. “Is that what he said to you?” she asks Jimmy.

“He said Abby would understand, and that he wanted to see the story you told him.”

Abby nods, she can see that. “How’d he sound?”

“Dead on his feet. But he was talking. Some. And he sounded tired, not… detached. I told him we’d talk more later.” Jimmy looks at both of the ladies. “After this last adventure, I’m reserving our right to overrule him. We’ll talk to Gibbs and Penny, see how he really is, if he should even try to drive, and we’ll go from there.”

Gibbs can’t wait to get all of these people, most of whom are just nameless faces, off of Semper so he can get some time alone with Tim.

“Those people” are, like all the other people he’s gotten out, exhausted and starved. They are not setting any speed records for getting out of a boat. At least this time, all of them wake up when prodded. He’s had a few of them who wouldn’t, before. Apparently that’s a thing that happens where you have terrified, starved, exhausted people, and then you give them food, wrap them in warm blankets, and leave it dark and quiet for three hours.
That had been really spooky the first time it happened, but he’s getting used to it. Everyone’s woken back up sooner or later, but some of them ended up sleeping hard as soon as they were out of the Navy Yard.

Tim’s sleeping hard. He’s not even trying to get him up. Tim can spend as long in *Semper* as he needs to.

There are people on the dock. They started coming in about an hour after Gibbs was underway. When he was on the water, Leon set the lotto to go, and once he got names picked those people started making calls.

There’s a line of cars in the driveway, and strangers milling around, holding their friends and family.

They’re on the honor system right now. Gibbs didn’t have a person to spare. Tony, Ziva, and Penny are all running the landing under the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, and Gibbs had to trust that the notes he left at the house got the idea across.

It sounds like it did.

He sticks his head out for a few minutes, sees that everyone has someone waiting for them. He gets out, goes to fridge that they’ve got in the kitchen, grabs another thermos, this one full of cold milk, flavored with a little (decaf) coffee and a lot of sugar.

Each time he’s gone out, he’s made one up, waiting to give it to Tim.

By the time he’s back to *Semper* the dock is almost empty, Mona’s keeping watch, looking like she’s enjoying the rain on her fur, and cars are starting to pull away. Other than the dull patter of rain, it’s starting to get quiet.

Gibbs climbs back up, thermos in hand, and heads below deck, where Tim’s sprawled out, resting back against the hull.

Gibbs doesn’t add any light, between his night dark eyes and the faint glow of *Semper’s* navigation system he can see well enough. Gibbs sits down next to him, sharing the berth, and he gently nudges Tim until he’s lying on his side, head in Gibbs’ lap.

Tim doesn’t wake, though he burrows into the blanket more, and half nuzzles Gibbs’ leg.

Gibbs pets his head, feeling the barest blush of peach fuzz hair, and much too prominent skull bones under his head.

“I’m sorry,” he says it very softly. “Been doing a shitty job lookin’ out for you this last year. Gonna do better.”

Tim snores a bit.

The next time Tim wakes up, Gibbs is holding him, just the two of them in *Semper*, both rocking gently with the motion of the river.

Tim blinks a few times, not sure if he wants to get up, or just stay here. His bladder is suggesting that
up is a really good idea. The rest of him is thinking that laying here forever is an even better idea.

“I should have made you go,” Gibbs says when he realizes that Tim’s awake.

Tim swallows. He nods. “I should have listened.” He sits up, slowly, feeling dizzy and exhausted and so hungry. Gibbs helps him, keeps him steady as he goes from lying on his side to sitting up, and then he reaches for the thermos, and unscrews the top.

“Slowly.”

Tim nods, taking a sip, his tongue lighting up with pleasure. It takes all of his self-control to not gulp down the whole thermos. But after one sip, he puts it down and says, “I know. Last thing I ate fast didn’t stick around for long.” That brings back memories of the roof, and Tim starts crying.

Gibbs holds onto him for a long time, rubbing his back and head, eventually getting him to drink the coffee. Eventually, Tim sleeps again.

It’s gray inside the *Semper* the next time Tim wakes up. And this time the pattering of the rain is gone, Gibbs is snoring slightly next to him, and Mona’s curled up against Tim’s back.

This time, he’s really got to get up, or his bladder is going to explode. So, he slowly untangles himself and stands up, kind of, he has to grab for the top bunk to steady himself.

He feels like his knees are only loosely connected to the rest of his body, and his grip on the top bunk isn’t nearly as secure as he’d like, and he wonders if he was this unsteady in the Navy Yard, or if this is a response to finally getting some real rest and a little food into himself.

As soon as he has that thought, he’s ravenous again.

But first things first.

They have one functional bathroom at the house. Mostly because none of them wanted to rent a port-a-john. So, the powder room off the foyer didn’t get ripped out, and won’t be until they’ve got at least one other bathroom up and working.

The house is a good thousand feet from *Semper*, so Tim’s thinking the local tree population won’t mind if he takes advantage of them. He’s right, the maple he’s leaning against doesn’t complain. He can just about smell the trees, the rain soaked air, and the river, but mostly he smells himself. Fear, sweat, hunger, ash, death, mildew. His skin is crawling at it, and whatever is left of the coffee milk is violently churning in his stomach.

It’s cool out there, but he doesn’t care. He strips out of everything he was wearing except for this ring and wrist cuff, leaving it lying on the forest floor, and then wraps the blanket more tightly around himself. He’s not sure which he wants more, a hot shower or food.

Then he realizes it doesn’t matter, there isn’t a hot shower out here, but there is food.

It takes him a long time to get back to the house, but he does, and once he’s there, he sees that it’s still not finished, but apparently Gibbs maybe, or… Ziva or Penny (It looks more comfortable than he thinks Gibbs would set up on his own.) has set up a little campground in the living room.

There’s cut logs by the fireplace, but right now it’s cold. Inflatable mattresses with sleeping bags and
pillows and more blankets fill the floor. He can smell smoke, but clean smoke. The salty tang of wood smoke, and it’s not similar enough to burnt DC to flood his memory banks with images of the fires.

He’s moving faster, toward the kitchen. The floor is rough under his feet, and it would be because it’s bare plywood right now, but the fridge is plugged in and turned on. He stumbles over to it, and yanks it open, and finds himself crying again.

There’s so much in there. Fruit and milk and yogurt and thermoses filled with something, and cold cuts, and more drinks, and eggs, and there’s bacon, and there’s just so much.

He’s standing there, wrapped in the blanket, paralyzed by so much choice when Gibbs finds him.

Gibbs gently leads Tim back to the beds, and sits him down. Then he grabs a yogurt and a spoon, and gives them to Tim, before getting a fire going. It’ll be a little while before he’s ready to make toast, and a bit longer for decent eggs and bacon, but he’s got more than enough cold food to keep Tim fed.

But it’s a moot point, Tim finishes the yogurt, grabs pretty much every blanket in sight, piles them on himself, stretches out on sleeping bag, and is asleep again.

Mona pads over to him, and lays her head on his thigh.

Gibbs pats her head, and gets the fire ready for cooking. His boy is going to eat!

Gibbs is making eggs when his phone buzzes. Tony’s number. He texts back, because he doesn’t want to risk waking up Tim by talking, though, given how he’s looking right now, that’s unlikely to happen.

Count? Gibbs sends to Tony.

36. Had time for three runs. You got me another sailor, right?

Yeah. One of them is. Jarvis says some more should be joining you, with their own ships, soon.

Ships?

That’s what he said. Though Gibbs wonders about that. But Jarvis was looking well beyond fried when he talked to him, so he decided pressing the matter wasn’t a good plan.

Okay. Weather channel says rain all night. 70% chance tomorrow, too. We’re pushing off as soon as the sun sets. You?

Yeah. I’ve got to get more supplies, but I’ll be less than a mile from the bridge when the sun sets. What are you bringing in?

Henne brought me a truck-full of MREs. He and his buddies boosted them from the National Guard. He’s got it tucked under the bridge. If anyone looks under here, we’re busted, but right now, we’re ready to go. As many runs as we can get, people are going out and food’s going in.

Gibbs nods. He glances outside, rain is still spitting down. Everyone eats tonight.

God willing and the rain don’t stop! We’re going to crash at your place, and then back to it tonight.
You get McGee out?

Tim’s here.

He okay?

Don’t know yet.

Let me know if you need one of us to come.

You guys rest. Long night ahead. He’s sleeping now, and I’ve got him until Abby gets here. Can’t imagine it’ll be more than a few more hours.

---

I’ve got him isn’t precisely true.

It’s generally true.

But, when it comes down to it, no matter how much he wants to sit here and watch Tim sleep and then pour some more food into him, there are (as best as he can figure) 582 people still in the Navy Yard, including his wife and all of his best friends, and he’s got to get them fed.

So, with toast, eggs, and bacon made and sitting next to the fire, and a pot of coffee staying warm next to it, Gibbs writes a note: Costco run. Back soon. Eat. Sleep. Clean clothing in the bag on your left. Then we’ll get you home.

By the time he’s done writing, he can see Mona perk up her ears and hear the sound of trucks on gravel. His “manual labor,” the SEALs, are back and ready to help him move stuff.

He’s about to ruffle Tim’s hair, but there’s no hair to ruffle, so he settles for a gentle pet, and then Mona gets a firmer one, along with, “Keep him company.”

She gives him the look he reads as, What? You think I’m going to shirk my duty? Surely you’ve confused me with someone else. Gibbs pats her again, and heads out.

---

He’s in Costco, with his shopping list, when Abby calls. “How is he?”

Gibbs isn’t sure how to answer that. “Tired. Too thin. I… don’t know about the rest, yet. He’s been awake for less than an hour since I grabbed him.”

“Nothing a hot shower and a good meal won’t fix?” Abby sounds both hopeful, and like she knows that hope won’t pan out.

“I doubt it.”

“Nothing a hot shower, a month of good meals, another month of full nights of sleep, lots of quality time with his family, more quality time with Wolf, assuming we can find him again, and maybe a job where he never has to set food in the Navy Yard again, and possibly DC, won’t fix?”
“Probably closer.” Gibbs has seen people so broken they never bounce back, and he doesn’t think Tim’s there, at this point he doesn’t think Tim can get there. (If he could get that beaten down, the Stennis probably would have done it.) But he also knows this isn’t a light little kerfuffle that Tim’ll just brush off. “Might need some antibiotics, too.” Gibbs doesn’t like the way some of those cuts on Tim’s head looks.

“Gibbs?”

“Just some cuts. Nothing big.”

“What kind of cuts? He was on the roof, not fighting hand to hand!” Abby’s convinced the little blob in black at the North East corner of the NCIS building was Tim. And, though Jimmy pointed out that every single blob on the roof looked like every other blob, she has been unshakable in her opinion as to which one was her Tim.

“He shaved his head, Abbs. He’s got some cuts from that.”

Abby goes silent on the other end. The idea that things would go bad enough or that he’d be hurting bad enough to take his hair off is horrifying to her, in a much more concrete way than the previous bits they’ve been able to get about how Tim’s physical body is.

She pulls it together to say, “He wants to come to us.”

Jethro makes a confused look at that. “Uh…”

“Yeah. We wanna get a read from you and Penny on that before just ignoring it, ordering him to stay put, and coming home to him.”

“I don’t know. I’m pretty sure all he’s doing today is sleeping and eating. Maybe get a shower once I get him home. I can’t imagine him behind the wheel of a car is a good idea. Not today.”

“Nightmares?”

“Not that I’m seeing. But he’s sleeping hard.”

“How thin is ‘too thin?’” They’ve seen Tony and Penny, so they know the people getting out of the Navy Yard are thin, but they weren’t in there as long as Tim was. And, both of them went in with more of a body fat cushion to burn through. (If you didn’t know what happened to him, now that the haunted look from inside the Navy Yard is starting to fade away, Tony looks like he was on a really successful diet.) And, though Abby doesn’t know this, both of them, as people working outside of the walls, were getting more food than Tim was.

Gibbs isn’t great at eyeing that sort of thing. Jimmy could probably take one look and get Tim’s weight within three pounds. Gibbs can’t. “Remember back when he got really thin?”

“About five years ago?”

“Yeah. He’s probably another ten pounds down from there.”

Abby curses. Then she says, “You’re taking him to a doctor. And then I want to know what the Doc thinks about him trying to drive to Canada.”

Gibbs feels relieved by that, because that’s a very concrete order that he can and happily will take care of.
“When I get back, and he’s awake, that’ll be the stop after I get him a shower. Then I’ll give you a call.”

“Okay. Talk later.”

It’s early afternoon on day twenty-one when Tim wakes up and actually feels “awake.” It’s also the first time in probably two weeks that he feels clear. Like he’s really in the world and not just drifting through a nightmare.

He yawns, stretches, feels… hungry. Really hungry. Tired. Sore. And… home. He wants home, he wants it so bad he hurts, and that feels good to him. Not just because he’s, for the first time in more than a week wanting something, but that wanting it means he’s gotten back to the point where he thinks he can have it.

He sits up and sees that Penny’s grabbing a nap, too. He’s not sure when she got here, but judging from the fact she’s holding his hand, she may have shown up to see him. He gives her a little squeeze before thinking about how thin she is.

Apparently, his mental image of her didn’t update while they were in the Navy Yard.

Or he just didn’t really see anyone. That’s… distressingly likely. He’s also thinking his mental image of himself is likely to be proven wildly inaccurate should he get in front of a mirror. He already knows that if he closes his eyes, he thinks his skin should be pale, (which it is) but it should also be somewhere in the peach spectrum (and right now it’s gray.) His mental image of himself isn’t so slim he can push his wrist cuff almost all the way up to his elbow, and his mental image isn’t wearing his wedding ring on his thumb.

Nothing to do about that but eat. Which he wants to do.

He can hear things moving around outside, and is mildly curious about that, though he’s way more interested in eating.

He sits up, and the blanket slips off of him, and he’s cold. He thinks he should probably expect that. Even dressed, he’s going to be cold for a while. He knows (and he considers the fact that he, once again, knows stuff like this a good sign) that he’s going to be cold until he can regain some weight and somehow convince his metabolism to get moving again.

So, he tucks the blanket around him further, and goes in search of more food.

Jethro pops up out of somewhere, probably outside if his wet hair and clothing is anything to go by, when Tim’s sitting on the fireplace sipping coffee and eating some toast, (He made himself. His hands are a bit too shaky for cooking over a fire, so part of the toast is a bit singed.) with just a little butter on it.

He’d been really happy to see the toast, bacon, and eggs when he woke up last time, and, even though he ate them slowly, the first bite of bacon set his stomach rumbling in a way he didn’t like. Probably too much fat. Mona was happy to help him out with that, and the eggs went down fine.

And, once he was done eating, his eyes were drooping, so he pulled on the clean clothing, which
felt… pretty good. He’s sure he’ll appreciate clean clothing even more once he’s got clean skin to go with it, and right now, warm is worth it’s weight in gold, if not calories.

“How are you feeling?” Jethro asks, sitting next to him, keeping his voice low so as not to wake Penny.

Tim shrugs a bit at that. He’s honestly not sure. A bit like when he was getting over the flu, and given that getting over the flu also involved all the emotional stuff that went with getting his relationship with his parents re-figured out, that’s probably the best comparison he could come up with. But it’s not right.

Gibbs nods. He didn’t feel right for days after getting out, either. Though getting the goop out of his lungs probably helped a lot with feeling ‘right.’ Getting more food took him the rest of the way. And having a real job to do pushed everything else out of his mind.

“Abbi’s running the defenses.” He figures Gibbs would like to hear how she’s doing. “She’s… I don’t know how… but she’s still going.” Gibbs nods at that. He calls her in the morning. They both get a little quiet time then. There’s no such thing as an ex-Marine, and Abbi’s living up to that. She might not be enjoying this, but… like with Jethro, this is her vocation. It’s who she is and what she’s meant to be doing. She wasn’t made for paper-pushing. She was made to man barricades and protect the people behind them. “And Duck wouldn’t leave. He’s gonna see it out, I think.” That sets his mind in a direction it shouldn’t go. Tim starts to feel nervous, panicky, afraid that it’s never going to end, that he’ll never see Ducky or Abbi again because they’ll never get out of there.

Gibbs grabs his hand. “We’re getting them out. All of them. At least fifty a night, now. And we’re starting to get enough of them out that we can get the ones who are still in there fed.”

That makes Tim nervous, too. If there’s too much food in there, people will find out, and they’ll attack.

Jethro sees it, and squeezes his hand harder. “We go in at night, when it’s raining. No one’s out. No one sees.”

Tim takes a deep breath and tries to banish the fear. “Okay.” He takes another big bite of the toast. Crispy, warm, slightly salty with butter. That flavor on his tongue does a good job of putting him here, at the house, with Gibbs, not back in the Navy Yard.

“I’ve got to get back here by six, get ready for the next run. Between then and now, I’m taking you home, get you a shower, and then you’re going to see a doc.”

Tim nods a bit at that. “Okay.” He’s suddenly feeling very tired again.

Gibbs gives him a hand up, and leads him to Abbi’s car.

The ride back to his house is quiet. Gibbs has news on, but Tim can’t really follow it. He catches something about the Texas Rangers taking custody of the Bush family, but it’s blurry.

He mostly dozes, but he wakes up as they get to his neighborhood. He’s watching, amazed. Somehow autumn happened when he was out of the world. (That’s how he’s starting to think of it. There’s his life, and then there’s this chunk of time where he was out of his life, out of the world, but he’s back, now.) The houses have Halloween decorations. There are carved pumpkins out.
“What day is it?” Tim asks Gibbs.

“October 26th.”

“Fuck!”

Gibbs looks at Tim, worried.

“Missed our anniversary.” He sees Gibbs look confused at that. “Not wedding. I’m with it enough I still know that’s the first. The 23rd. That was our second first date.”

Gibbs nods, understanding. He sees Tim’s fairly awake and with it right now, so he says, “Abby said you wanted to go to them?”

Tim nods at that, too, licking his lips, looking tense. “I… It feels a lot like a bad dream, right now. And… I know I’m going to need some time alone in my head. And… And… The last thing I really, clearly remember is Breena and Abby telling me about where they are. They’d do that for me. Tell me stories so I could sleep. I want to see it.”

“They want to see you.”

Tim nods at that, too. “If I can’t leave tomorrow or the next day…”

“Okay. You need to give them a call.”

“I know. I am… will. Woke up this morning and wanted them. First thing I’ve wanted in a while.” And saying that, he wants them so bad his eyes are starting to tear. He could just stay here, curl up in his own bed, and by breakfast they’d all be there, piled around him.

That’s sounding really good.

Gibbs nods at that, too. “Hard to want when you’re not getting what you need.”

“Yeah.” Need. He wants them. He’s fairly sure he needs time to think. That if he’s going to be any sort of… anything, he needs the processing time.

They pull into Tim’s driveway. And there is a bit of a mess in his front yard. Looks like mischief night came early this year. But if all the rioting in this part of the world boiled down to toilet paper in the trees, he’s not worried.

His house feels empty. Obviously, it is empty, so it should feel that way. But he’s been in it by himself before, and it didn’t feel empty.

He wanders in, almost feeling like it should be different. He’s different, the house should be, too. But it’s not. It’s just empty.

He spends a moment just circling around it. (After a detour to the pantry to grab a granola bar to nibble on.) Everything’s where it should be. Just like he left it. He picks up a pacifier from the coffee table, it’s pink with a little unicorn on it. Images of Kelly and Abby in the living room, Abby lying on her side, hand resting on Sean, and Kelly toddling around, sucking on her pacci, flood through him, and with those images comes the fear of not seeing it again, the feeling of being stuck, hopeless on the roof. He has to sit down, he’s crying so hard at that.
Gibbs stands beside him, rubbing his back. “You want me to make the call? They’ll be here before you wake up in the morning.”

Tim shakes his head, not able to talk, or get across the idea that he needs time to find his balance again, at least a little.

He’s still firmly convinced that showers and hot water are the single greatest inventions in the history of mankind.

Mirrors, on the other hand, which he’s normally rather fond of, are not. He’s moving through his room, wishing he hadn’t done quite so good of a job of making sure that every angle of a person in that room would be visible.

Even after a long, hot shower, and lots of scrubbing his skin is still pale gray. (Not from any sort of ingrained dirt, just the pale, sick look of someone who hasn’t been well for a long time.) Dark gray rings his eyes. He’s thinking he could have done a better job of taking his hair off with a weed whacker than with the razor he used. He’s got cuts all over his scalp and his face. (He also can’t believe he kept shaving with a razor that dull. But there’s a lot of things he can’t believe about his time out of the world.) He can see his ribs, and hipbones, and, shit, he’s got thumb-sized dimples where his sacrum and hips meet, but… okay, not his spine. He’s not that thin.

He’s thin. He’s not emaciated.

He’s thinking, hoping, that an extra day or two of getting to Abby and Jimmy and Breena might help him look somewhat better. Maybe get some color back into his skin. He knows they’ve seen him beat to hell and gone, but if they don’t have to see this, maybe they shouldn’t.

His clothing is all too big. He digs around for some of the stuff he had when he was really thin, but the Magic Clothing Fairies, (Breena and Abby will both go through their clothing and get rid of anything that doesn’t fit/hasn’t been worn in a while, and send it off to Goodwill) apparently decided he didn’t need his skinny jeans anymore. That annoys him, and like all other emotional things right now, that’s on him in a hot flash, but the rational part of his mind points out that he hasn’t worn them in more than five years, and he wasn’t exactly planning on going on a crash starvation diet, so maybe he didn’t need to be keeping them.

He puts on his regular clothing, pulls his belt tight, and then realizes that he doesn’t have a loop that’s small enough to keep his jeans on his hips, and changes into his PJ pants. They’ve got a drawstring, so he can pull them tight enough.

He’s thinking that right now would be an excellent time to crash into his bed and get another nap when Jethro comes up, and begins herding him back to the car, saying something about a doctor’s appointment.

Tim let’s himself be herded, to a point. He knows he’s not coming back here. He grabs one of Abby’s perfume bottles, and that pacifier of Kelly’s, tucking them into his pocket, keeping them close.

By that point, Tim’s fairly out of it. He sleeps in the car, and like Jethro’s first day on the outside, dozes through the waiting room.
“One fifty-eight. What were you before?” the nurse asks him as she’s going through his intake.

Tim sighs. He’d gotten to 178 before the Stennis and that was, he considered, a very nice mix of muscle and body fat. (A much smaller, tighter, and in his mind, better looking 178, than the 175 he was at when they got married.) A week in the hospital on a mostly liquid diet dropped his weight to 168, and no sort of real exercise meant he lost muscle. He’d gotten back to 174, with not nearly as much muscle as he had been before. (His left arm is… he looks, was visibly larger than the right due to him not having gotten completely over the atrophy from not moving. Moot point now. Both arms are very slim.)

“One seventy-four.”

The nurse nods at that. “We’ll do a blood draw, see what you’re low in.”

“Thanks.”

“Might have to stick around for IVs. Most of the people we’ve been getting out of DC have needed to stay with us for a few days. Get their nutrients and electrolytes up.”

Tim looks at Gibbs, who shrugs. Their people may have been to visit this doctor, but he hasn’t been taking them in. Besides Tony and Penny, neither of whom needed IV treatments, he hasn’t been bringing people to the docs.

“Are you seeing a lot?” Tim asks.

“Not as many as I’d like to be. Can’t believe those…” she edits herself, “are leaving people trapped in there. They say they’re moving food and medicine in, but the people who are coming out don’t seem to be getting it. I’ve heard stories of getting out through the sewers and the Metro.”

Tim and Gibbs glance at each other, most of the Metro lines leave the city, though Tim didn’t think they were running. Then he remembers that some of them are underground.

“Don’t they have guards on the Metro lines?” Tim asks.

The nurse, who’s nametag says Drea (Tim isn’t sure if that’s a first or last name) snorts at that. “I don’t think the guards like those orders any more than anyone else does. As long as no one can see, which is true underground, they’re turning a blind eye.”

“Great.” Though Tim looks at Gibbs, and he can see Gibbs is tucking that information away.

She takes his blood, and checks his blood pressure (low), asks about his other issues, and is about to head off when he says, “I want to drive.”

The nurse laughs. “Let’s see how you’re doing.”

Tim starts to feel a desperate. “My family’s in Canada, and I have to get to them.”

“And you will. Might be a few days. Right now, resting and eating, that’s what you need to be doing.” She leaves, and Tim looks at Gibbs.

“Unless they need to put me on an IV, I’m on the road tomorrow morning.”

Gibbs just looks at him.
“Don’t give me that. You were sailing blind the next day, right? And I can see you’re not coughing now, so you were on what, a ton of antibiotics?”

Technically, Gibbs still is on a ton of antibiotics. “Didn’t lose that kind of weight.”

“No, you were just blue around the gills because you couldn’t breathe.”

“I’m not gonna stop you, but I want you thinking long and hard about who’s waiting for you up in Canada, and realize the only reason they aren’t racing down here right now is because they think you’ve got enough sense to make good decisions. You haven’t been doing a great job of making it easy for them to trust that. Don’t prove them wrong.”

“I won’t.”

About twenty minutes later, a doctor does come in, and he handles diagnosing. Apparently, in addition to being a hair above “underweight” for his height, Tim’s got a raging case of athlete’s foot, and three of the cuts on his scalp are badly infected.

Other than that, he’s in, surprisingly, good health. “Who did you say oversaw what you were eating at the Navy Yard?” he asks.

“His name is Ducky Mallard.”

The Doc looks at Tim, making sure he’s not kidding about that. But right now, Tim’s fading fast. He’s too tired to be kidding about anything. “Well. Whoever he is, he knows his stuff. Given what you’ve been through, you’re in great shape. You don’t need a vitamin booster. You need rest, you need food, all the fruits, veggies, and lean protein, and good fats you can get.”

“Whole grains and complex carbs and all the rest of that. My husband’s a doctor and a diabetic, I know the drill.” The Doc looks slightly surprised at that, too, in that Tim’s already mentioned having a wife, but he doesn’t say anything about it, and Tim’s too tired to realize he said it. “I just want to get back to them.”

“Well… You’re not going anywhere tonight. Turn in early, sleep long and deep, keep eating, lots of little meals, and if you want to, and if you’re the kind of person who can get in a car, drive for an hour or two, and then stop, get a snack and a nap, you can leave tomorrow. I don’t want you driving for more than an hour without a break. One hour on the road, one hour resting. Long term hunger clouds thinking. You’re on the rebound now, but you’re still not going to be as sharp as usual.”

“I know. I can feel it. Rest, food, home.”

“Yep.”

“Home?” Jethro asks after they get a small dinner.

“Jimmy’s. Car’s there,” Tim says, voice quiet. Doctor’s, pharmacy, dinner, he’s pooped. All he wants to do is crash into a real bed and sleep until he can’t sleep anymore.
Jethro drops him off. “Don’t be stupid tomorrow. Rest if you need it.”

Tim nods, tired. “Good sailing, tonight.”

Gibbs nods back at that. He’s going to have to drive fast to get back in time, but he will. Like he said to Tony, everyone eats tonight. And, if the rain holds, and they can get a run in tomorrow, he can get some medical supplies in, too. And maybe, if he’s lucky, he can get Ducky out.

Tim doesn’t linger or wander in Jimmy’s house. He knows exactly where he’s going. Bed. Once up there, he sees the sheets still pulled back, there’s lube on the nightstand, and while most of his time out of the world is fuzzy, he does remember, clearly, how annoyed Jimmy was when he called to get them to run, and now he knows why.

He snorts a quick laugh at that, while stripping out of everything but his socks. He knows he’s supposed to let his feet air out, but he doesn’t want to get whatever nasties are living on them on Breena’s bed. He can wear flip flops when he drives up.

He collapses onto the bed, stretching out, feeling how soft and comfortable it is. His eyes are drooping, and he’s pulling the sheets and blankets all around him. Then he grabs his phone. He sets it on Skype, one way video call, he wants to see them, so badly.

It rings twice, and then he’s got the image of Abby in front of him, and for a moment he’s so overwhelmed by it, he can’t talk.

“Tim!”

He manages to make a little noise, and then gets his voice back. “Hey, baby.”

“Oh, God,” her voice is weak, too. He can see the tears in her eyes, and the concern, and smile on her face. “Where are you?”

“Bed.” His voice cracks on it, and he sees Jimmy and Breena rushing into the frame, too. “Hi.”

“Tim!” Breena’s voice, and Jimmy smiles.

“You have picture on your end?” Jimmy asks.

“Probably. Just… Don’t feel like turning on the lights.” That’s true, but also not exactly a useful comment. It’s 5:04, the sun’s still out. It’s dim in Jimmy and Breena’s bedroom from the rain, but it’s not dark.

He sees them look at each other and visibly decide not to press it.

“Are you okay?” Breena asks.

“I’ve been better. Got checked out. I’m in ‘amazingly good health’ for what I’ve been through. As long as I keep eating and sleeping a lot, I’m cleared to drive. Tomorrow, I’m coming home.”

“Honey, you’re home. We’re the ones who need to get back to you,” Breena says.

Tim shakes his head. “Home’s where you guys are, and I need to get to you. It’s… um… probably gonna take a while. I can’t just head straight up. But, I’m coming. Can you show me the girls?”

“Oh, yeah!” Jimmy says fast, and the image jostles around. Kelly and Anna are lying on the floor. Molly’s on a small sofa. All three of them are staring at the TV. “It’s Little Bear time,” Jimmy says, as if that explains everything, and for Tim, it does. Little Bear is one of the few TV shows they’re
allowed to watch. It’s a nice, quiet bridge between afternoon nap and dinnertime.

“Kelly…” he says it, and she looks around, disturbed to hear her name but not know who’s speaking.

“It’s Daddy, on the phone,” Jimmy says, holding the phone toward her. “You wanna say ‘Hi.’”

Kelly doesn’t look like she buys it, so Tim says, “Hey, Kelly.”

Her eyes go wide, she knows that voice. “Daddy!”

“Hi. I’m coming to you.”

That doesn’t mean much to her.

“I’ll see you soon.”

“Daddy!” At not quite a year and a half old, she’s not exactly a conversationalist, yet.

He makes a kissing sound into the phone, and that she knows what to do with, she kisses back.

“Okay,” he says, voice breaking again. He wipes the tears off his face. “I’ve got to…” he sees the image swirl around the room again, and then he’s facing Jimmy, who’s walking back to Abby and Breena. “I’m tired.”

“Okay.” Breena says.

“You rest,” Abby adds.

“I will. I’ll let you know when I’m on the road.”

“Okay.” Jimmy says it, this time.

“Can you guys… just leave the phone on? I’m not gonna talk, and I’ll be asleep soon, but…”

“No problem,” Abby says it fast, she doesn’t want to hang up, either. Even if he’s not talking, just knowing he’s still there, still attached to them through the ethers. It’s not enough, but it helps.

And, before the sun sets on day twenty-one, Tim falls asleep to the sounds of his loves getting ready for dinner, a thousand miles away from him.

So, the whole point of this is time alone, in his head, processing.

Yeah. Okay. Sure.

Not much processing is happening. He gets dressed, pulling on Jimmy’s clothing, which doesn’t require quite so much pulling tight to get himself into. It’s a little short, but he prefers short to in danger of mooning everyone if he stands up too fast. (Not that, these days, he’s standing up, or doing anything else, fast.)

He takes his pills, washes himself head to toes, applies ointments to his cuts and feet, and is ready to go off in search of food, and home.

He’s in Abby’s car, putting his keys into the ignition, when the idea that maybe he should pack some
things pops into his head. (Besides food. He packed food. He’s got bottled water, and all the snacks that Breena had in the house sitting next to him in the passenger seat. The idea of being more than a few feet away from some sort of snack makes him very nervous.)

Back in, he grabs clothing, soap, pillows. After this long with no one sleeping on them, they don’t smell like his loves, but he’s still got the feel of those pillows under his body and the feel of his family around him pretty firmly attached to each other.

He remembers the bottle of perfume, and he puts a little of it on him. Not much. He just wants the feel of it, the memories. Kelly’s pacifier he ties to the rearview mirror. He’s going home.

The first time someone asks Tim if he can pay for his meal before putting the order in, he thinks it has something to do with the financial system being upside down. So, he just quietly asks, “You want cash or a credit card?”

“Either’s fine, just making sure,” the waitress says, eyeing him.

“I’ve got both.”

“Okay.” And then the waitress takes his order, and leaves him in peace to drink his coffee and eat a muffin.

For as hungry as he is, he can’t eat all that much in one sitting. He does have to stop every hour and refuel himself. But they’re little stops. A cup of soup at one stop. An apple at another. Coffee (decaf, with lots of milk and sugar) at every stop.

He hasn’t tried eating any meat since the bacon, and as of yet, he doesn’t want any, but as he’s pulling into yet another diner, he’s thinking that won’t last all that much longer. He’s starting to think a bit of grilled chicken would be good.

But not yet.

The second time he gets asked if he can pay, two hours later, it’s actually lunch time, there are people sitting on his left and right at the counter at the diner he’s sitting in. So, he notices that no one else gets asked if they can pay. That strikes him as odd, but not particularly weird. Everyone around him might be regulars. (By that point, six hours into his trip, he’d gotten into Delaware and is in a small café. The sort of place that likely did have regulars.)

The third time it happens, he’s really starting to wonder what’s going on. Okay, yes, he is wearing Jimmy’s clothing, so it is a bit short on him and it’s a little bit too big, too, but it’s good clothing. His wedding ring (still on his thumb) is expensive. His flip flops are cheap, but he’d intentionally bought ten of them, so he could wear each one for one day, and then toss them at the end of the day. (Plenty of air, clean flip flops, the anti-fungal ointment, he should have his feet feeling better soon.)
He should look like he’s got some money. And if he doesn’t look rich, he should at least look like he can pay for a cup of coffee and a bowl of clam chowder.

But he keeps getting the side eye, and wait staff keep trying to get him out fast.

He’s wondering if he still smells like the Navy Yard, but he can’t imagine he can. Nothing, besides his ring and cuff were there with him. (Though he does take a discreet sniff at his cuff after he leaves, but it just smells like leather to him.) And he’s washed himself as thoroughly as a person can be washed. Plus, he’s wearing perfume.

It’s when he’s grabbing a nap in a mall parking lot in New Jersey that he finds out what the problem is.

There’s a cop, knocking on his window with his baton. Tim blinks a few times, sits up, turns the car on, and rolls down his window.

“Problem?” Last he heard it was legal to sleep in your own car in a public space.

“You got a license and registration?” The Cop is giving him the kind of look he used to give suspects who were trying to BS him in interrogation.

“Yeah. It’s my car.”

The Cop just looks him over. Then he looks the car over. “Can I search your car?”

“No! Not without a warrant.”

The Cop laughs at that. “Yeah, well, they’re still sorting out how that works. Let’s put it this way. You are going to get out of the car. You are going to take off your jacket and let me see your arms. Depending on what I find, I’m searching your car.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Tim sees the hand on the baton tighten, and the other hand move closer to his gun, and he decides right now is an excellent time to walk small. “I’m sorry. I’m opening my door, stepping out, and then taking off my jacket. I’ve got long sleeves, so I’ll have to roll them up. Okay?”

The Cop stands back and nods, and Tim does exactly that. He’s cold in the October air, shivering, rolling up his sleeves, and the cop checks his arms, eyeing Tim up and down, poking his wrist cuff down and scoffing at the tattoo, but he doesn’t see what he’s looking for.

“Let me see your ID.”

“Fine. May I put my coat on?” He’s way too thin to be out in this kind of cool without a jacket.

The Cop nods, satisfied with Tim being ‘properly respectful,’ and then just about shits himself when he reads the ID.

“I know you!”

Tim shrugs.

“You’re the guy… You were on TV. The whole… thing. You’re one of the guys who broke it open. God, man, you look like shit.”

“Thanks.” Tim says dryly. “You try living on vitamins and two protein bars a day for almost two weeks and see how you look.”
“Oh, God… sorry. Just… Oh man, you were in DC, weren’t you? They didn’t get you guys out? Shit. I thought…” He gives Tim a look, and it takes Tim a minute to understand.

“You thought I was a junkie sleeping off a high.”

“Something like that.”

“That explains a lot,” Tim says quietly.

The Cop looks at him curiously, and Tim shakes his head.

“You got a place to go? I mean, for you, our precinct, we’ve got money. We can put you up somewhere if you need a place.” Having identified Tim, Mr. Cop, who Tim notices is named Trevins, is now obsequiously polite.

“I’ve got a place to go. Just needed a little rest. Bit tired these days.”

“Oh, God, yeah. How’d you get out? Last I heard the blockade’s holding strong.”

Tim sighs; he just wants to go back to sleep. “Got some good friends who have skills.”

“Lucky you. There’s something going on down there. We’re getting reports that there’s a few battleships heading toward DC. Something about the Marines in the Virginia and Maryland National Guard mutinied.”

Tim has an idea of what might be happening, and he’s glad to see that Jarvis is finally doing something about this.

Tim just stares at the cop, and then asks, “May I go?”

“Okay. Yeah, sorry. Didn’t mean to hold you. Just… Look, you need to sleep, find somewhere inside. Until you… look healthier… you’re gonna get hassled.”

“Wonderful,” Tim says, getting into his car.

That conversation meant that Tim couldn’t keep drifting in the quiet headspace that was pulling him home.

Time to actually deal with some of the stuff in his head.

Time to deal with what they did.

That comment about warrants was chilling. But that’s Federal law, one each state has… had to follow. Who knows what they have to do now?

He doesn’t remember when he stopped watching the news. Probably the day Fornell showed up. He remembers the thing about Texas, and he thinks there was some muttering about someone up in New York, but he’d been too checked out to follow it.

He’d also been just blindly driving north, following whatever directions Google gave him. He’s looking at his map more carefully, and noticing that instead of heading straight north, through Pennsylvania to New York, into Canada, Google is taking him through New Jersey, to New York City, to Connecticut, and then up through Vermont.
He can’t image that’s the fastest way to Riviere Du Loup. And, after another minute of googling, he sees it’s not. He also sees, that right now, Upstate New York just declared itself an independent state from New York City, and that things are tense along the Upstate New York borders, so Google’s sending him around that mess.

Tim decides, that if he’s going to take the time to see what the fallout of what they did was, that he might as well be doing it in a nice warm restaurant or hotel room, preferably with something to eat. He turns on his radio (he’s been listening to a mix of Abby’s, Breena’s, and Jimmy’s music as he’s been driving) and catches a “Breaking News” story.

On day twenty-two, as he’s driving north, Tim hears Congressman King unleash his new government plan. Six weeks of campaigning. No political parties. No party fundraising. No primaries. No incumbents can run in these new elections, when the new government reconvenes it will be made up of all new people. All paper ballots, counted by hand, by citizens picked at random. One congressman per fifty thousand people, congressmen to be assigned not by geography, but popular vote. That puzzles Tim until it’s explained further. If a state has a million people in it, the twenty people on the ballot with the most votes become their Congressmen, and they are to represent the whole state, not just their neighborhood. Two senators per state to be appointed by the states, the way they used to be.

Presidential elections go the same way. Six weeks. No parties. No primaries. Everyone throws their hats into the ring at once, anyone gets a majority, and they win. If no one has a majority, then they can match up with another candidate to make a “President/Vice President team,” if that team gets over the majority, then they win. If no two candidates are willing to work together to make up a majority vote, or if none of them have a high enough percentage of the vote, the bottom fifty percent of the ticket gets lopped off, and they run again until someone wins a majority.

No reelections. One term and done for everyone.

The first of the new elections are set for December 12th.

Best Tim can remember, that’s been entirely lifted from Jake’s blog. He sort of remembers something Jake was saying to Ellie, about how as soon as they get ready for elections, he’ll be running. But Tim isn’t sure how much of that actually happened, or if he’s creating a memory based on him and Jake talking about the “October Surprise” they were planning.

“So much for that,” Tim mutters.

He supposes he can get to a poll by the 12th to vote for Jake. But right now, he’s not sure if he’s coming back. Maybe they’ll just stay in Canada. He makes enough writing for them to live on until they can get other jobs. Canada has to need funeral homes. Breena could open one, and Jimmy knows what to do to help out. He can’t imagine there isn’t something he could do to be useful at one. They can find a quiet little place somewhere off the beaten path, and be there, all four of them, together, all the time.

That little fantasy keeps him going until he finds a hotel that looks like it’ll have room service. Before the desk clerk can give him the side eye, Tim says, “I just got out of Washington DC.”

Suddenly side-eyes vanished, and he’s got his room comped.
His plans of thinking, and seeing what’s happening in the outside world all vanish with the pull of laying full out and sleeping.

On day twenty-two Tim makes it 215 miles.

On day twenty-three, he manages to drive another six hours. He’s getting closer. Almost to the border. He wants to go further, but he knows he’s too tired. So, Windsor VT. It looks like a nice little town.

It looks like nothing’s happened. Everything is rolling along just fine. He hears people talking about if New Hampshire’s going to secede, but they don’t think they will. People joke about how sure, big states like Texas and California can pull that sort of move, but little ones, like them, they need the rest of the country. He hears speculation on if the new government is going to try and make Texas and California come back. Tim hopes that won’t happen. His taste of warlike conditions had been more than enough war for him. (And if the Feds do try to make Texas and California, which as of this morning’s news had seceded, and Alaska, North Dakota, and Maine, who had successfully petitioned to join Canada, come back, he’s sure his family isn’t going back to the US. If Canada won’t take them, they’ll find somewhere else.)

Tim’s got no idea if their chattering about New Hampshire is true or not. He hears them talking about how every big money man who didn’t ever manage to win a primary have all rushed back into the election. He hears them talking about how anyone can even make a decent vote if they’ve only got six weeks to get to know the guys running.

They don’t talk about DC, and he hasn’t turned on the news to see what’s going on down there. He’s half afraid that if he does, he’ll find out something horrifying. Right now, he’s sure that if it’s going to be bad news, he can wait for Jethro or Penny to call and tell him about it.

He doesn’t talk to anyone, just listens as he sits at the counter of yet another diner, munching down a piece of pumpkin pie.

In his hotel room, he eyes the bathtub, thinking a long, hot soak would be great. He’s also tired, and fairly sure that he’ll fall asleep in there if he tries it.

So, he doesn’t. And he doesn’t call home, either. Not tonight.

The world is different. Completely different. And, he’s not going to say it’s all his fault because he’s not accepting responsibility for what other assholes did. But bringing it to light, that’s on him.

*The man who wants to watch the world burn.* Did Jarvis know? Guess?

He did not sell the votes. He just the guy who uncovered their sale.

He didn’t burn DC. He’s just the guy who stood up and spoke the words that made others want to burn it.

He did not starve DC. He’s the guy who killed other people to protect his own food.

He was not part of the mob. He’s the guy who knocked down the dominoes that set the mob in
He did not kill the people in the EPA, IRS, or FEC building. He is the guy who put those families in there.

He did not save the FBI or DEA. He is the guy who got those families into those buildings, where they could ride out the fires and mobs without burning.

He lies on his bed, curled into a ball, wondering if he held his own life, and the lives of his family too dear. He wonders if they should have gone through proper channels, opened themselves up to the risk of assassination, and taken this down one arrest at a time.

And he wonders if it would have mattered. One arrest at a time, one case at a time, warrants and custody and building a proper case would have likely meant the status quo continued as they got picked off with car accidents and faulty wiring fires and food poisoning or whatever “accidents” would have befallen them. And, if, somehow they managed to break this open, legally, correctly, without having to just dump the news on the world, would everything still have burned?

He thinks it would have.

And, as exhaustion pulls him away from the waking world, he doesn’t know if busting open the status quo was worth one life, let alone all the lives that had been lost over the last six weeks.

The more he eats and sleeps the more he feels like he’s waking up from an excruciatingly long and bad dream. The further he drives, surrounded by fall leaves, and then snow, the more the memories of the Navy Yard feel fuzzy and indistinct.

He knows it really happened. His wedding ring is on his index finger because he doesn’t yet weigh enough for it to go home. He’s wearing a hat, even in the car, because otherwise his head gets too cold, and even driving, his mind starts to wander after a few hours if he doesn’t eat and rest. He’s got no stamina, and his feet still itch.

It happened.

But it’s getting blurry. A different sort of blurry. Before it was indistinct, but any little thing would bring the feel of it back. Now, he’s not falling back into it too easily.

He thinks that’s a mercy.

And when he wakes up on day twenty-four, he’s feeling pulled north. He’s starting to feel like his heart is back within his grasp, and he knows where it is. He just has to get himself there.

On day twenty-four, when he sits down in his car, he flicks on the news and hears a familiar voice. It’s Jarvis, declaring open travel between DC, Maryland, and Virginia, and an end to Martial Law.

He feels like he should probably get online and see what made that happen, but he just wants to drive. Home is calling.
Google is telling him he’s got 409 miles to go, and if he was his normal self, driving like he usually does, he could do that in about seven hours.

Which means, if he drives hard and straight through, he could be there by this afternoon.

Actually, if he drives hard and straight through, he should run himself off the road and end up in a ditch by lunchtime.

Abby, Jimmy, and Breena know where he is. He’s keeping his phone logged in, so they can actually check his location. (He’s doing that both to keep them updated, and also to curb his desire to drive further than he should in one sitting. If he’s on the road for more than two hours at a clip, he’ll get a text from one of them telling him to take a break.)

Still, tonight. He should be there by tonight.

Most of the nightmare is getting fuzzier by the moment, but the image of Breena’s story, of coming home to gold light spilling out over snow, to opening a door and being hit with a rush of warm air and warmer hugs, that’s carved into his mind like words on a granite slab.

He’s ready to be there.

Just has to go.

---

*Home by tonight.* He sends off as he puts the car into drive, flicking on a mix of Abby, Jimmy, and Breena’s music.

*Good.* From Jimmy.

*We’ll keep dinner warm.* From Breena.

*I love you.* From Abby.

---

Taking an hour break every two hours is frustrating. He knows he needs it. He can feel his attention wandering, but he doesn’t want to need it.

Still, he does it.

And his first breaking point is fairly convenient. He’s at the border, so getting a second small breakfast and, grabbing a short nap in his car (This time, not wanting to get hassled by the local LEOs, he asks the diner owner if he can sack out in her back lot. She says it’s fine.) makes a certain amount of sense.

He’s glad he decided to break before the border, rather than trying for after, because he needs all his patience to deal with getting hassled by the border guards, who, for some strange reason, are not interested in letting someone who looks like a recovering junkie/cancer patient into their country.

They search his car, by eye and with dogs. He gets cross-examined about the antibiotic ointment for
his cuts. (He’s been swearing up and down that he’s not strung out, he’s not sick, he’s just gotten out of DC, which does not sway them.) Then they find his gun, which he’d brought because he always has it in his car. That’s several tense minutes while he’s busy proving that he’s law enforcement before they relax about that. And, finally, after figuring out who he is, they relax some more, but he doesn’t get the hero treatment he did in New Jersey.

It takes close to two hours to get through, and he needs another break as soon as he’s in Canada, but they do, finally, let him in.

Traveling a distance of close to three hundred feet results in suddenly everything switching to French. He’s on the Boulevard Notre Dame, heading for a café, passing Rue this and Rue that.

Last time he was in Canada, he was in Toronto, which is very Anglo. Right now he’s rapidly running head first into the fact that his high school French is a million years old, and stored in a part of his brain that’s withered into oblivion.

He’s got the sinking suspicion that as he gets closer and closer to Quebec the less English people are going to speak.

Thank God for Google.

He’s also, as he heads further and further north, in a very rural part of the world. Not that Vermont is any sort of booming metropolis, but he’s driving through little farming villages and forests and more farms, and every third sign is for Sainte this or Sainte that.

It feels odd to run into culture shock less than a hundred miles from his own country.

He stops for another break before he gets to Quebec.

It takes him a long time to figure out why he’s feeling so nervous. Why he keeps checking the skyline and wanting to spring back to his car.

Once he figure it out, he wonders how long it’ll be before he’s comfortable near, let alone, in a city.

And after that, he wonders how long it’ll be before he can go back to DC, if ever, without breaking into a cold sweat.

So close. Another nine miles to go. The sun is down and it’s very lightly snowing as he drives north. He’s gotten through Riviere-du-Loup, which reminded him a lot of Winchester. A very pretty and small town surrounded by trees and farms. (Though, unlike Winchester, which was completely landlocked, the St. Lawrence River is right to the west of Riviere-Du-Loup.)

He’s surprised at how many farms there are. He’ll pass what looks like miles of flat, snow covered land, and then more miles of trees, and more farms. He’s got no idea what anyone would grow this
far north, but whatever it is, they grow a lot of it.

The GPS directs him off the interstate. (? He’s not sure what they call them up here.) He turns onto a smaller road, and then another one, and eventually, he’s crunching along on gravel under snow, under trees so old and big they meet above his head.

And, eventually, like Breena said, there’s a small cabin in the woods, with snow on the roof, and falling gently around him, golden light pouring out of the two windows facing him.

He turns off the engine and sits there for a second, watching. He can see into the living room area, but there’s no one in view. The other window has curtains over it, so he can’t see much beyond light. Probably the kitchen area, and he’s definitely getting there about the time little girls eat, so… They’re probably over there.

He steps out of the car and smells cold. It’s biting at his ears and nose and scalp. The air is fresh and sharp with pine and snow and right now, he knows what snow smells like. There’s wood smoke from the cabin, and it’s not chicken, but he can smell some sort of roasted bird.

Then the door bursts open and Abby runs out to him. She’s bigger than when he left, round and plump and her skin is warm and pinkish. Her hair is down, flying behind her as she rushes to him, and then stops, a hair’s breadth away, knowing that if she does her usual enthusiastic tackle-hug, they’ll both end up on the ground.

For a second, they just look at each other. He drinks her in, feels his hands shaking as he starts to reach for her.

She’s breathing hard, so many emotions flowing through her, so many visions of this moment, colliding into it really being here, and none of them matched this. Her hands hover over his shoulders, as her eyes skirt from his four days of peach fuzz hair and the hallow eyes and cheeks, and he nods a little, eyes tearing up, biting his lip, hard, holding on to not crying by his fingernails.

She touches him, fingers closing around his shoulders, and his eyes close, savoring the touch, that it’s real, and he can’t begin to put everything into words. He’s so sorry he didn’t come with them. He hates that he put them through this. He’s so happy to see her again. He’s fragile over what happened. He missed her so much. He aches to hold her again. All of that and a million other thoughts and emotions whirl through him. He opens his eyes, and what comes out is, “They burned your car,” and then he starts to sob.

“Oh, Tim…” Abby pulls him close, rubbing her hand over the fine short hairs on his scalp, rocking him gently as he just collapses into her.

For a moment, they hold each other. Just the two of them. He’s clinging to her like she’s a life preserver. Like she’s life itself, crying loud and hard, every ounce of all the shit of the last three weeks rocking through him like it’s never going to end.

And a moment after that, he feels Jimmy and Breena push in, too. All three of them hold him, keep him grounded in the here and now.

At some point, they get inside the house.

The girls don’t recognize him. It kills him that Kelly’s got no idea who he is until he speaks. Then she looks really confused. Whatever mental image she has of Daddy, this gaunt, teary, bald guy isn’t
But when she hears his voice, she snuggles into him. He wraps his arm around her and presses his lips to the silk fine hairs on the top of her head as she snuggles into his shoulder and neck.

And when he speaks, Molly says, “Uncle Tim?” like she’s not sure about him, but he holds out an arm, and Aunt Abby’s holding onto him, too, so, he’s probably the right guy, so she rushes into the hug, too.

“They’ve been asking when you were going to get here for weeks,” Jimmy says, keeping his hand on the back of Tim’s neck. It’s just a little touch, just making sure he’s really there.

“I should have been here,” Tim blinks hard, trying not to completely lose it in front of the girls, because if he starts wailing, they probably will, too. They’re already a bit nervous with the sky high emotions running around them; he doesn’t want to make it worse.

He doesn’t want to let anyone go. He wants to sit here, hugging everyone (which is physically impossible) forever.

But it is getting onto bedtime for the girls, and he has been awake for hours, so he’s getting tired, too.

The whole house smells delicious. Food for them is coming once the girls are down. Breena’s doing something with it so they can lay a blanket on the floor in front of the fireplace, and all snuggle and eat, but that’s contingent on him letting Kelly go long enough to get her in jammies and lay her down to bed.

Eventually, the lure of the big bathtub and lots of hot water, and another bath (he already got a shower in the morning) pulls him away from sitting in the middle of the living room, clutching onto the girls and Abby.

Abby hands Kelly over to Jimmy. The girls will join them in a bit, but she wants her first sight of Tim, all of him, to herself. He understands that, and appreciates it, too.

She holds his hands as she leads him into the bathroom. He stands there, feeling very emotional about everything right now, hoping he won’t start crying again, but thinking that getting to see her naked will probably do it.

Abby turns on the water, and a little space heater. The cabin is cooler than they keep their place in Virginia, but it’s also probably about as warm as they can get it.

“You tell me if you get too cold.”

He nods and swallows hard. She pulls his clothing off one piece at a time. Not particularly sensually. This right here is just getting the job done.

Once he’s naked in front of her, too thin, and a bit chilly, but the bathroom is warming up fast, her touch shifts from functional to loving. Her hand skim over his skin, trace bones that jut too far from under his skin. She remaps his body, relearning the curves and flats, and he lets her.

When she’s done, she stands back up, and kisses him, long and sweet and desperate, her hands cupping his face. And right now there aren’t any words. None he could think of, and even if he could, they wouldn’t do the job. When the kiss breaks, he’s shaking. Not from desire, at least not
sexual desire, but from so much love.

He carefully, with trembling hands, begins to get her out of her clothing. It’s very plain, for her. They didn’t bring proper winter wear, so they’re making due with clothing bought here. She’s in an oversized flannel shirt, and a sweater, and a t-shirt underneath. Below that there’s a skirt, and leggings, and thick woolly socks.

He takes each piece off carefully, reverently, and when she’s naked in front of him, he takes the time to re-learn her, as well, marveling at the feel of her under his fingers. And when he’s done, his hands settle on Sean’s bump. He can feel his boy squirming around a bit, doing whatever it is babies do three months before they’re due.

“He’s so big.”

She nods at him, her hands on his.

He kisses her again, fast, hard, desperate, pulling her close as hard as he can (not very hard). “I’m never leaving again. I don’t care if the fucking world is about to end, I’m ending it with you.”

“You damn well better. If you ever want to hang behind and--”

“I’m not; I won’t. I’m done. No more of… any of that.”

She steps back enough to really look into his eyes. “We protect each other by staying close, got it?”

“I do,” his voice breaks on that.

“Oh, god, Tim…” her voice is breaking, too. Too much worry, too much fear, heart in pieces seeing him so emotionally and physically battered. This time they pull each other close, and hang on for a few minutes, just feeling each other, knowing, mind and body, that the other one is here.

A fairly tentative sounding knock gets Tim to raise his head from Abby’s shoulder.

Jimmy pokes his head in, and it’s clear he doesn’t want to disturb them, and it’s also clear that little girls are getting dangerously close to overtired and if they don’t want to add overtired toddle tantrum to an already over-emotional night, that getting a move on on bedtime is a really good idea.

“Breena says food’ll be ready to go in twenty minutes. You two just want to hide out in here, and I’ll put the girls down, or are we doing tubby time?” Jimmy’s keeping his voice light, but his eyes are tracing over Tim, and his inner doctor is screaming at what he’s seeing.

“Tubby,” Abby says. She wants babies going down easy and sleeping through the night, and the most certain way to make sure that doesn’t happen is to mess up their routine.

“Okay.” Jimmy opens the door all the way, stepping into the bathroom. He’s got Kelly in his arms, and he hands her over to Abby, eyeing Tim, not sure if he should be trying to hold someone who’s twenty-four pounds and squirmy, if he’s standing up.

Tim sees it and shrugs. He’s not sure if he should be holding someone who’s twenty plus pounds and squirmy, too. His rifle had been (about) sixteen pounds (loaded), but most of the time he wasn’t carrying it. Most of the time, it was on a tripod, on the ground, while he was watching.

And it also, absolutely, did not squirm.

And that’s the heaviest thing he’s carried in weeks.
He does get into the bath, which is, like Breena said, huge. It’s a rounded triangle, the sort of shape that two adults could easily sit in, or four if they were lap sitting. The water feels great. He’s very nicely warm. Abby hands Kelly over, and in the tub, she might as well be a large, giggling pillow for all she weighs.

He spends another minute snuggling her, and then gets to work. Baby washing time.

His hands remember. Anna and Molly join them. Abby slides in, she’s got Anna, and between the two of them, they get all three girls washed off.

Anna half-swims, half-toddles over to Tim, and he scoops her up. “Looks like you’ve got a new trick. Is she standing up on her own now?”

Abby nods at him with a smile. She knows they told him about it when it happened, and she knows he was gone, just holding onto the sound of them, not able to process the words. “No walking. Not much crawling, either. But she is standing up.”

“Good for you, little girl.”

Anna stares up at him, and then shrieks, happy, her voice echoing off the tiles in the bathroom.

Tim inclines his head a little, remembering, wryly, that babies have two volumes, quiet and blow your ears off.

Breena and Jimmy take the girls from them. It’s usually easier for the dry people to stay outside of the tub with the towels and catch the small, squirmy, wet ones.

Tim’s knees feel weak when he gets out. He’s tired, too. Sleepy and weary.

But warm, dry, clean clothing is calling him, and putting it on feels excellent. Baby girl kisses as he leans over the bed they’re all sharing, and listening, in person, to Jimmy singing to them as Breena’s getting them tucked into jammies makes him feel good all over.

The food smells excellent, and his stomach rumbles, loudly, at it, causing the other adults to wave him into the living room area. “Go eat,” Breena says to him.

“I can wait. They’ll be down in five minutes.”

“I know you can, but you don’t have to. So, go nibble a carrot or something.”

So he does. Breena had a little picnic set up for them on the floor in front of the fireplace. There’s crisp green salad, and carrots cooked with ginger and cinnamon from the smell of them. (He does find a fork and take a nibble, and then sighs, loud, at how good they are.) A bird of some sort, maybe a duck, it’s definitely not a chicken, has been disassembled and is sitting on a tray in the middle of the picnic blanket, and there’s mugs of cider warming by the fire.

For a heartbeat, he wonders if he died in the Navy Yard. Maybe he didn’t make it through the fight when the mob wanted the FEC guys. Maybe the Catholics are right, and the last two weeks in the Navy Yard were a taste of hell, the trip here purgatory, and now he’s in heaven.

Jimmy comes out a second later, and sits next to him. “You okay? Dumb question. You more not okay than you’ve been?”
Tim closes and opens his eyes slowly, and then takes Jimmy’s hand in his. His fingers are warm, strong, smooth. He can feel both of Jimmy’s wedding rings, metal warmed by the heat of his body. Jimmy wraps his other hand around Tim’s neck, and gives him a quick kiss. “Where’s your head?”

Tim blinks, and shakes his head. “Just… It’s real, right? You’d tell me stories and I’d slip into them, dream them, at first at least. I stopped dreaming eventually, but…” He blinks a few times at that, too, pulling himself out of the feel of not being entirely sure if when he was awake or asleep. The lines between them began to blur toward the end. Jimmy squeezes his hand, hard, pulling him back. “I’d be here, with you, and then wake up… I’m not going to wake up back there?”

Jimmy strokes his face. “It’s real.” He hands Tim a mug of cider. “Drink. Dreams are built out of memories. You can’t remember this because you’ve never had it before.”

“I’ve had cider before.”

“Not like this. Breena came up with it a few days ago. Not a whole lot to do out here, so we’ve been cooking up a storm.”

Tim drinks, and Jimmy’s right, he’s never had this before. It’s mostly cider, with some orange peel and clove and vanilla steeped in it, sweetened with maple syrup, and there’s a kick of alcohol to it, but he doesn’t know what sort.

“What is this?”

“Cider, calvados, mulling spices, maple sugar. Local ingredients here are different.”

Tim nods at that, too. “How much calvados?”

“Yours and Abby’s, about a teaspoon. Just for flavor. Mine and Breena’s has a bit more kick to it.”

“Good. I’m going to crash soon, but I don’t want to literally pass out.”

Jimmy smiles at him, eyes tearing a bit, and then hugs him close. “Don’t scare me like that, ever again.”

Tim kisses his temple. “Not again. If I’m not willing to make you deal with it, I’m not doing it, either.”

“Good.”

A few seconds after that, Abby and Breena join them, and he realizes what they’re doing, making sure he gets at least a little time with each of them, alone.

They eat dinner, and he wishes he could eat more, everything is beyond delicious. (The bird in question is a goose, and it’s luscious.) But unless he wants to get sick, all he can do is nibble a few carrots, munch down some salad, and eat one slice (which he eyes nervously, the grilled chicken went down fine, but this is richer than that, though it does stay down just fine) of the goose.

There’s dessert. Chocolate puddings, but his is going to have to be a midnight snack. Actually, he’s thinking of making up a plate of everything, still small servings, for his midnight snack. Though making up a plate of anything would involve moving, and right now, lying on his back, head in Breena’s lap, he’s way too content and tired to move.
Jimmy and Abby are getting the dishes taken care of while she pets what’s left of his hair.

“You’re going to be asleep soon, right?”

He nods.

“Come on, let’s get you up. Carrying the girls to bed is one thing, none of us want to try to lug you around.”

He snorts at that, and dryly says, “Come on, you’d barely feel it.”

Breena glares at him, hard.

“Sorry, bad joke.” He lurches up to standing. She wraps an arm around him to steady him, and leads them into the bedroom. It’s a plain, functional space, but the bed is big and warm looking, which is all Tim needs.

“Sit down.”

He does, sitting on the edge of the bed, tugging off his shirt. Bed sounds really good right now. Once his head is out of his t-shirt, Breena cups his face and pulls his eyes toward hers.

“If I had wanted the kind of guy who hangs back to fight the impossible fight and die bravely, I could have had him. I didn’t want him, or that life. You don’t ever pull that shit again. If it’s so dangerous we’ve got to hide, you hide with us.”

Tim nods, looking very sleepy. “Behind the lines REMF-life for me, and maybe not even that.”

Breena sits next to him as he’s pulling off his pants, and then both of them get under the blankets. He’s not sure how long she’s staying, she didn’t get undressed, but for right now, she’s a beacon of warmth under cool sheets.

“What do you mean by ‘not even that?’”

“Can we stay here? Not just for a few days but…”

She kisses him, short and sweet, and then gets out of the bed. “That’s a conversation for when you can keep your eyes open.”

“Okay.” He takes a few deep breaths, starting to drift, and hears the sound of footsteps and rustling clothing, then Abby’s exactly where he needs her to be, in his arms, spooned up against him. He kisses the back of her neck, wrapped in her scent and the warmth of her body as they both quietly breathe against each other.

And that’s where day twenty-four ends for Tim, at the home he’s never lived in, wrapped around one love, and, though he’s asleep before they join him, he’ll soon be snuggled with the other two.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, we will be backtracking and following what's going on in DC in the next chapter.
Jarvis is done. He’s standing on a roof, holding a rifle, looking at a fleeing crowd and counting the bodies that either won’t ever get up again, or are too hurt to get up now. One hundred and six.

There’s a wall in his mind that’s been guiding his actions. A wall made of ideals like Rule of Law, and Representative Democracy, and Republic. And one hundred and six bodies shatter that wall like hot glass touched by a drop of ice cold water.

And while it’s true that at any given time his respect for any of these concepts has been… less than perfect, it’s also true that he has spent most of his adult life at least in the business of providing lip service, if not actual service to these ideas.

It is also true that Jarvis knows himself and what he’s capable of. He knows how he got to where he is, and what games he has played and will likely play again.

And he knows that while he’s not a White Knight, and that his past has more than its share of black and gray marks, that he’s never, intentionally let people fucking starve.

And after the roof, after shooting people to protect a fucking thousand calories for himself, he’s done.

It’s the sun is still high on day twenty, but he feels like it should be sinking. This kind of decision belongs in the night. But it’s not night.

The people he talks to say that they’re on it. They sound relieved. They’ve been waiting for someone to grow a set and end the problem, and apparently, Jarvis is the guy to do it.

He scoffs at that. They’ve been waiting for someone to take responsibility for what he’s set in motion. Any competent Captain could have planned it out. It’s not difficult. It just took someone willing to get shot for it, after it’s done, if that’s what’s going to happen. (And Jarvis is more than aware of the fact that it might. It’s entirely possible they’ll hang him for treason when this is done.)

Jarvis knows what he’s doing. He knows that if they need a dictator to get basic food and medicine into DC, then he’ll be the fucking Dictator.

And he doesn’t care anymore if he’ll be able to give it up when the emergency is done.

Or, as he says to Leon when he explains what’s about to happen, “And if we’ve got to fucking call it the fucking Republic of Jarvistan when we’re done, we’ll call it Jarvistan, so long as the goddamned food and supplies get here. Day after tomorrow, the food riots end!”

Leon looks relieved and then he says, “Long live the King.”

Jarvis rubs his eyes and groans, “God.”

“I believe that’s our call, Dr. Allan.”

Allan nods, tired, beyond tired, this is the sort of tired he didn’t think a person could survive. But he’s still putting one foot in front of the other each morning.

Because the people outside the walls have it worse.
Shots aren’t being fired, not anymore, which means it’s time for them to go.

Ducky’s told him this is how they did it in Korea, where he was a medical corpsman, and in Vietnam, where he was a doctor.

Go through the bodies.

The dead… They don’t have room for them. Not in the freezers. Once one of the two of them have declared someone dead, they slip a tag on that person’s ankle. Then one of the soldiers with them looks for ID. If there is ID, it gets put in a bag with a number that goes with the tag, and that person gets carried off to be buried in the far corner of the Navy Yard. Hopefully, one day, these people will be returned to whomever they belong to. The ones that don’t have ID have a lock of hair and fingerprints put into the bag.

Allan hates how many bags they’ve got sitting in the Morgue.

He hates what comes next, worse. According to Ducky, in Korea and in Vietnam, they had, usually, enough morphine to deal gently with the next group. But, they don’t. Maybe Gibbs will bring in some medical supplies soon, but right now, they’re down to surgical sutures, bleach, and alcohol.

Nothing to ease the situation for the next group.

The next group is too hurt to save. And that group gets larger every day, as they run lower and lower on supplies. The men who were left after Fornell’s tanks went through, they could help a lot of them.

Not now.

The man at Allan’s feet no longer has much of his head behind his eyes, but he’s still breathing. Two cuts, fast, sure, precise. It will take him less than ninety seconds to bleed out, and if his open eyes can see, Allan’s face is the image he’ll leave this world with.

Those aren’t so bad, even with a fully functional hospital at his disposal there was nothing Allan could have done for… No ID. He puts the tag around the man’s ankle and collects his hair and prints. The soldiers take him away.

The hard ones… Ducky’s been handling them. Cases where, if he’d had a fucking IV of antibiotics, they’d be able to save them.

The woman, teen really, that Ducky’s with has had her intestines chewed to confetti. In any sort of competent hospital, that’s a bad wound, but it’s not fatal. But for them, with no antibiotics and no way to feed her…

Ducky’s faster with his cuts. He holds her hand and whispers something soothing while seeing her off.

“I feel like the Angel of Death,” Allan says to Ducky as he straightens up, and they look for the next person they might help.

“The only thing we should fear is when the Angel of Death passes us by, for he may decide to visit our loves.” Ducky shakes his head. “I’m sorry. That is beyond grim. As doctors, we inhabit the liminal spaces, Dr. Allan. The line between life and death is where we do our work. As Medical Examiners, we offer our voices to the dead, and comfort to the living. I’ll admit to preferring bringing them in to seeing them out, but right now, this is the last mercy we can do these poor souls.”

“And, as Medical Examiners, mercy to the dead is our job.”
“Thus we offer it to the dying, too.”

Allan nods. Then he gestures. They see one of the last group. The group that gets smaller every day. Someone they can help.

“Take care of him, Dr. Allan.”

“Gladly.” He strides over and tells the man not to get up, not yet. Right now, this looks like a clear, through and through, calf shot. Rubbing alcohol, stitches, and one of the last sterile bandages. It’s not elegant, but it’s better than nothing. He just hopes the wound doesn’t go septic.

When he’s done, he looks up, and sees Ducky holding another hand.

The sun is almost down before they finish. But when they are, everyone who Jarvis had counted has been IDed and placed to rest, or patched up and sent off.

The door to the van Penny borrowed slams shut. It’s just before dawn on day twenty-one and she’s got the last load of refugees, six people. Getting these little boats in the water has been helping, a lot.

Thirty-six people tonight, ten more on Jethro’s end… They keep this up… And it’ll still be too damn long before she sees Ducky again.

He says he’s fine when she talks to him.

She knows he’s not. And she knows he’s not because she knows how much difference just a few days on the outside as made to her, and he’s still trapped in there.

She wants him out. She understands duty and honor. She’s lived it her whole life. She’s spent what’s felt like decades waiting for a man to get done doing his duty to come home.

And she’s tired of it. As she’s driving the ‘refugees,’ she’s thinking that when he gets out of the Navy Yard, they’re going to need to have a long talk.

Maybe it’s time they really retire.

Penny’s tired once she’s dropped off her charges. That’s not exactly new. She’s been tired since the beginning of October, and November is looming now.

She’s bouncing back “okay” from a little more than a week of not nearly enough food and too much work, and because Ducky knew how to minimize the long term problems, and Tony and his crew of scroungers managed to lay hands on lots of vitamins, her doctor thinks that with rest and more food, she and everyone else in there should be, physically, fine.

The doc was glad to see they’d been getting those vitamins. They’re thin, they’re tired, they’re emotionally balanced on a fine edge, they’re in need of lots of food, but they aren’t facing permanent heart, liver, kidney, and brain damage.

The same can’t be said for a lot of other people in DC right now.

Penny is also frustrated. Since she’s been out, she’s been spending every minute she’s been awake
and not working on getting people out of the Navy Yard, talking to anyone and everyone who matters in both Virginia and Maryland trying to get the National Guards off the borders.

After a day, they stopped taking her calls. All she can get is bullshit about moving the food through as fast as they can.

And she knows they aren’t because she’s seen trucks full of sealed canned goods, sitting in line, waiting, behind the trucks that are being searched one item at a time. She knows there are MREs, sealed and ready to go, but not moving into the city. She knows that her little group is not the only one working on smuggling people out and food in. She knows there are news people from all over the world, showing footage from inside DC, and the piles of food outside of it. She knows there are people decrying the ‘humanitarian crisis.’ She knows that as of this point in time, there are teams from all over the world checking that food, but checking takes time. The Red Cross and Salvation Army are the only two organizations allowed to bring food in without getting checked, but from the looks of it, they’re also getting hamstrung on how much they can bring in.

If she were to plan a system to keep a population just a hair above starvation, this is how she’d do it. There’s no way this isn’t intentional. But she can’t get why this quagmire is going on from anyone.

And since she can’t, and since, right now, in the mid-morning, after everyone they got out last night has been deposited with friends or family, she can stew on what’s wrong until she can sleep, or she can go to the house and see her grandson.

On the morning of day twenty-one, she’s in the car and heading toward the house as soon as she can.

---

He’s so thin. She knows that a person can lose up to 10% of their body weight without any “serious” consequences, and if she had to guess, Tim’s probably under that, but not by much. He’s curled under a blanket, pretty well covered, but his hand is visible, as well as his neck and head, and she doesn’t like seeing the jut of his wrist bones, or hollows at his temple and cheekbone, let alone the wrist cuff loose or his wedding ring on his thumb.

(Of course, the only reason her wedding ring is still on her ring finger is that edema of the extremities, swelling of the hands and feet, can be a side effect of losing too much weight too fast. Her fingers are just getting back to normal size.)

He doesn’t stir when she comes in. He’s dead to the world asleep, spooning Mona, who’s looking like she’s not going to put up with that all that much longer. (At least, she’s giving Penny a very intense, So, we can go out and play, and I can stop being a pillow, right? look.)

And, as soon as she steps into the living room, the smell hits her. It wasn’t so bad with the people who they were pulling off the boats. Probably because they’re little boats, open to the rain and sky, so everyone on one of them got an hour of rinsing off and airing out, but right now Tim’s in an enclosed space, and he still reeks of the Navy Yard.

She doesn’t think she’ll ever be able to smell that combination of sweat, fear, rot, and mildew without wanting to break into a cold sweat again. She knows, even though she is perfectly safe, in a nice house, with a fridge full of food, that she’s feeling panicky, and it takes active work to make her heart slow down and her breath go back to a normal pace.

She also opens the door and all the windows. Yes, it's chilly, but... she can’t take that smell for too long.
Then she goes to the fridge, grabs herself a yogurt, and sits next to the fireplace, where there’s a good fire going, along with a pot of coffee, and a bare plate.

She sees Jethro’s note, and assumes that the plate had food on it at some point. Food that is, with any luck, located inside of Tim and not Mona, though she’s usually pretty good about not stealing treats.

Sitting on the fireplace, she gets thinking. First and foremost, Ducky, and getting him out. But those thoughts don’t lead to good places, (especially with the smell of the Navy Yard dull but present, she can feel those thoughts are going to spiral into panic.) So, she pushes them aside.

Here, in this house, slowly nibbling a cup of vanilla yogurt that she doesn’t exactly need, but very much wants (She’s noticed this with Tony, too, even when they aren’t ‘hungry’ they’ll keep nibbling or sipping on something, just to prove to themselves that they can), she gets thinking about the bigger case, and the loose threads. The bits that got lost in the huge mess they’re finally starting to pull out of.

That spins around for a bit. Last she saw the Bathenadas were imploding. Things are calming down in South America, but not fully quiet. (Of course, that’s the sort of news someone has to actively search out, local news has been dominating cable and the internet lately.)

Supposedly, if Congressman King actually manages to do what he’s proposing, there will be trials of everyone involved in the sale of votes. Supposedly. After they figure out the new election system. Rumor has it he’ll be announcing that system soon. After they’ve got a new government in place… because the new congress or whatever will hold the trials…

Rumor had it that, having taken all of the various players into custody, that whoever’s running the investigation in New York (and as of yet, no one has been named for that job, probably because they can’t find a Prosecutor who’s good at his job and clean) will be taking the whole system apart.

She lived through the Nuremburg trials, which is probably the template they’re working off of now. But they had an outside force running things while a separate group rebuilt. She’s not sure if both can be, satisfactorily, done at once.

She never heard from Gibbs if he got what he was looking for out of Tom.

Penny hasn’t spoken to Tom, or even thought to call him, since before those account numbers showed up in Abbi’s hand. She was planning on doing it when Gibbs got asking about him, and then everything went crazy. So, she didn’t, and for that matter hadn’t thought of him since then.

And lack of calls is not unusual. They can, and often do, go months without speaking. She’ll often send him an email or something, and he’ll send something back.

Still, given what’s going on, she’s been getting a lot of ‘Are you okay?’ emails, and invitations to stay for as long as she and Ducky need to, from friends all over the world. She’s thinking they should take some of those offers up. Get out of here. If or when DC opens back up again, they can hire someone to clean up their condo and then get rid of it. She doesn’t think she’s going to want to live in DC again.

(She hasn’t been able to get good information, so she’s got no idea if, or when, American University will open again. At the very least, the building her classes were in is still standing, but that’s not true for the whole campus.)

She checks her phone. None of those offers are from Tom. There’s not even a ‘are you okay?’ email. The last email from him is more than a month old.
She dials his number, and instead of the pleasant young Ensign who’s been handling his calls for the last two years, she gets a new message. “We’re sorry, the number you have dialed is out of service.” Of course, he’s Navy, so… Who knows what’s going on with his position?

She calls Lynne, Tom’s wife, next. This time the recording is in Japanese, but she’s fairly sure the message is the same.

Penny licks her lips, and then sends an email to both of them, as well as their three kids.

Tom and Lynne’s emails bounce back to her, no such address.

She gets back three versions of, “Dad wanted to surprise Mom with an anniversary vacation. He took six weeks off, and they’re bumming around in Bali,” from the kids. Along with more versions of, ‘Are you okay? Do you need a place to crash?’

Penny swallows hard. She knows three things are true. One, there’s not shot, at all, that Tom or Lynne are in Bali. Tom, just like his father and older brother, has never voluntarily taken a day off work in his life. Two: they’re on the run. Three: if they are on the run, no one is going to find them unless they want to be found.

She remembers one other thing, the last time she talked with Tom, he called her, and he steered her to talking about the mess at CGIS, and talk she did, she covered the excitement Abbi and Gibbs had gotten into with CGIS, and he asked a lot of questions about them. Most of them, in retrospect, boiling down to: Are they honorable people? Will they do the job, even if the going gets hard and it costs a lot?

She knows one other thing. She told him, yes. That between them Gibbs and Abbi and the rest of their family, would go to the ends of the earth to solve the case and put the bad guys away.

As best she can remember, four days later, Abbi had an anonymous note in her hands.

__

Between the MREs and the food Jethro got in on day twenty, Vance has enough food to get everyone four, small, but real meals on day twenty-one.

He never thought there would be a point in his life where he would define success by the ability to get almost six hundred people a full eighteen hundred calories in one day. (He’s also thinking that all the shit they gave the quartermasters guys about not being real soldiers back when he was in the Navy was extremely unwarranted.)

He gets a call about an hour before the sun sets. “I’m on the water,” Jethro tells him.

“Thank God. More food?”

“Yeah. Lots of it. Tony tells me Lt. Henne boosted a truck of MREs, so more of them are coming toward you, too.”

“Thank God! Today was the first day in forever that everyone got almost enough to eat.”

“I know. I got an idea for you.”

“I’m all ears.”
“Was talking to the nurse who was checking Tim out.”

“He okay?”

“Enough. Better than the other people getting out.”

That gets Leon’s attention. He’s been so focused on keeping his people in one piece, fed, and on the peaceful side of rioting, that he’s paid no attention to the larger world. “Other people are getting out?”

“That’s what the nurse said. The National Guard isn’t happy about the blockade, where they can get away with not enforcing it, they’re not enforcing it, and they’re not watching the Metro stations too closely.”

And Leon knows what to do with that. There’s a Metro station less than a mile from the Navy Yard. (It’s actually called The Navy Yard Station.) It’s not running, but people can still walk. Hell, he’s got SEAL teams and Marines on hand. The system that they can’t jerry rig doesn’t exist. Assuming there’s a train somewhere, he bets they can figure out how to make the damn thing move. And… yeah… He’s thinking now would be a really good time to send a few of them out to do some scouting, see if that’s an even remotely tenable option. Because, if Jarvis can’t make his plan work, they’re going to need a plan B, badly.

“Leon?”

He realizes he hasn’t said anything to Gibbs. “Jarvis has something in the works. If he can’t pull it off, that’s plan B.”

“What’s in the works?”

Vance tells him, and Jethro lets out a low whistle. Finally he says, “Tell me where, and I’m in.”

Leon shakes his head. The last thing this plan needs is a fifty-seven year old Gunny missing half a lung. “Keep doing what you’re doing. We don’t know if it’ll work. And if it doesn’t, we’re going to need you bringing food in and getting people out.”

“You’re sidelining me.”

“Jethro, he’s got hundreds if not thousands of guys who can do what you can do as a Marine. We’re really low on blockade runners.”

Gibbs nods at that, not happy about it, but he’s not wrong. “Three hours. Have ’em ready for me.”

“Will do.”

All through night twenty-one and into the morning of day twenty-two, reports filter through to the Governors of Virginia and Maryland that the newly acquired members of their National Guards, the former Marines and Sailors, and for that matter, a decent number of the ones who had been there for a while, were leaving.

They were just vanishing. Not showing up for duty. No one knows where they are or where they went.

They know something is up. But not what, not yet.
At 02:00, as Gibbs is sailing down the Potomac, back towards his house with a load of ten more refugees, he passes six US Navy gunships. Fairly small ones, they’d have to be, because the river isn’t *that* deep, but he’s pleased to see them.

He’s got a pretty good sense of what’s going to happen.

The sun is going to rise and the men on the Woodrow Wilson Bridge are going to get a very clear message to get off that bridge and raise it.

And if they don’t…

He hopes they aren’t dumb enough to do that.

According to Leon, Jarvis is bluffing with a busted royal flush. He’s got everything he needs, except the willingness to actually fire. If they stand their ground…

This is going to be over really fast.

---

At 05:00 on day twenty-two, Jarvis gets a call. General Evans and Admiral Keller tell him everything is ready to go.

Getting that call, he makes another call, this one to the Governors of Virginia and Maryland. They are not pleased to take his call, because it is not, by any stretch, the first one, however, unlike Penny, the man who blew the lid off of this scandal, and still has a modicum of control over half of the US Armed forces cannot be politely brushed off.

Even if they don’t give him what he wants when he calls.

“Gentlemen—“

“Clayt, we’ve already told you, we’re moving the food through as—“

“Stuff it, Ralph,” he says to the (brand new) Governor of Virginia. (As of four weeks ago, Ralph was the Lt. Governor of Virginia. His rapid promotion had to do with his predecessor having been the former DNC Chairman. And as of now, the man that Clayt used to refer to as Terry, is sitting in an undisclosed jail cell to keep him from being lynched.) “I’m done talking. This is an ultimatum. You pull the National Guard off the borders, you get them escorting the food and medical supplies in, and you start evacuating the people in DC out, or the US Navy and the US Marine Corp will, for the first time since the 1860s, fire on our own people.

“By dawn my men will have encircled yours to ensure that all aid moves into the city smoothly.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then, “What the fuck, Clayt? How can you even do that?” Larry, Governor of Maryland, asks.

“If you don’t do exactly what I say, you’ll find out, Larry.”

“It’ll take more than ten hours to get everything moving,” Ralph adds.

Jarvis is not playing around. “They are soldiers, Ralph. They are National Guardsmen. They are
trained to go into dangerous places, keep the peace, and make sure people get fed. We’ve seen them do it during every major national crisis in the last fifty years, I’m sure they can do it, NOW!”

“Look, we know it’s rough—“

“No, Ralph, you fucking do not know that it’s rough here. No one on the outside knows. And do not give me any shit about how you’ve got to protect you own people, or how you’re protecting my people. My people are so hungry they’ll eat arsenic just to put something in their bellies. No one inside the city cares anymore if a bottle of Gatorade has anti-freeze in it, as long as most of them don’t.

“You pull them off the border. You get them out of the way. You get the food moving. And it happens, now.”

“We’ll talk—“ Larry starts.

“No. You’ll do. Dawn, gentlemen. As of right now, I am giving you formal notice that the District of Colombia has just declared itself and independent state, run by me, and while we may be short on resources right now, my military outnumbers and outguns yours. If your men are not off the border by dawn, if the food is not moving, I will consider your actions a declaration of war against us, and I will respond accordingly. Good night.”

And Jarvis hangs up the phone.

Gibbs is wired. He didn’t get much sleep last night. The few hours he grabbed with Tim was it. From there he ran the full day through. And, then, on top of that, he knows what Jarvis is putting in motion. He feels electric and jittery, having to watch it happen, without being part of it.

He’s back at his house. They all are. Not like Tony, Ziva, or Penny have anywhere else to go, right now.

He can’t turn the TV off. Penny’s sitting next to him, clutching his hand, almost vibrating with tension watching this.

Tony and Ziva are on the other sofa, also glued to the TV.

ZNN’s reporting that, right now, Richmond and Annapolis have been besieged, all of the interstates cut off by Marines, the cities ringed with tanks, with gunships on the James and the Chesapeake, while aircraft carriers wait just off shore in the Atlantic.

Jarvis has been on every major news outlet, looking gaunt and haggard, explaining how, if food doesn’t start coming into the city soon, that he will give the order to fire on the Governor’s mansions of both states, and starve their capitol.

But nothing is moving yet.

Neither Virginia nor Maryland’s Governors have responded, yet.

“You wouldn’t dare, Clayt!” Larry yells.
Jarvis turns the camera on his phone slightly. “You see that?”

Larry’s eyes go wide. He’s looking at the Governor’s mansion, which he is currently sitting in, on the big screen in MTAC.

“That’s my targeting software.” He makes a little gesture and the Governor’s mansion in Richmond pops up. “Yours burned once before, right, Ralph? I know you know your history. 1865 was a bad year for Richmond, let’s not see if we can make 2016 worse. Get that food moving.”

At 08:55, on day twenty-two, the blockade weakens. They open the interstates to the food trucks, National Guardsmen driving them in and trying to distribute them without riots breaking out.

They are, somewhat, successful at that.

Each truck has to go in at a walking pace, surrounded by armed guards. People are too hungry to queue up tidily, and the food in each truck is a crap shoot. One truck was filled with fifty pound bags of flour. Great for longer term issues, not anything you can hand out to starving people.

As soon as the interstates open, the Red Cross gets into it, as well. They do a better job, because this is their job. They’ve already got packs of food and clothing and tents ready to hand out.

The Salvation Army heads in as fast as they can, too.

By lunchtime, the line of trucks, vans, cars has expanded by a multiple of three. Different organizations, everything from Walmart to local churches, are lining up to bring help in.

“You aren’t taking people out, Ralph,” Jarvis says in a clipped voice.

“We can’t take hundreds of thousands of refugees!” Larry adds.

“We’re sending medicine and doctors in,” Ralph adds.

“Are you sending houses in, too? These people are homeless, their neighborhoods have burned.”

“Whose fault is that, Clayt? Not like you gave your cops a heads up,” Larry replies.

Jarvis blinks, slowly. “Larry, I am sitting here with my finger on a button that will literally kill you if I press it; do you really think right now is a good time to call my judgement into question to my face?” Jarvis laughs a little. “Let me make this even easier. I’m crazy and utterly ruthless right now, and I don’t care what I have to do to get this fixed, and if that means murdering you and everyone in the building with you, I’ll do it.”

Larry doesn’t look impressed by that, and Jarvis has played too many games of poker to see that look and let it pass. There’s a point, where the other players will suspect that you don’t have the cards you say you do, and that’s the point where, if you’re going to win on a bluff, you’ve got to raise.

“See, the thing is,” Jarvis says, “I got my family out. Even I don’t know where they are. That means, right now, I’m untouchable. But, Larry, I know where you are. I know you’re 127 feet under the ground in what’s supposed to be a bombproof bunker, and I want to you think about what the man, who has command of the entire Navy and Marines, might have pointed at you right now. And
maybe that’s not enough, maybe, because you think your family is safe, maybe because you’ve got cancer and your days are numbered anyway, you think, that like me, you’re untouchable.

“I know where your wife is. I know where her daughters are. I know where her granddaughter is, and I have snipers on all of them. And Ralph, don’t you relax, I know you got your family out of Richmond when the Federal Reserve building burned, but guess what, I know where they are, too. And if you think I’m too good of a man to kill your family because you wouldn’t do what I told you to, you do not understand the situation.

“Here’s the thing. There is no downside on this for me. I can guarantee you, that the guy I deal with after you, the man who replaces your corpse, he will look at your murdered families, and he will give me what I want!

“Now, what’s it going to be?”

At 14:14, the trucks pulling into DC start unloading food, and loading up sick, hurt, starved people and taking them out.

On day twenty-two the Navy begins airlifting food into DC.

On day twenty-two, everyone in the Navy Yard eats.

On the night of day twenty-two, Jethro, Tony, Ziva, and Penny do not go to the Navy Yard. There’s no point. Between the Red Cross, the Marines, and open roads, DC is being evacuated.

According to ZNN, Governors Hogan and Northam have come up with a plan to get everyone out, with refugee camps being rapidly put together all over Virginia and Maryland. To start with, every homeless shelter, church, campground, and hotel with an empty room has been pressed into service. By the end of the week, the only people left in the city will be Marines and Sailors, keeping watch.

And after that… According to ZNN Jarvis will be holding a press conference at noon the next day, explaining what is going to happen with DC, and how the rebuilding process will work.

They’ve gotten calls from Abbi and Ducky. Sometime, hopefully early, tomorrow morning, they’ll be coming home. (Along with Bishop, Jake, and Allan, all three of whom are currently homeless. Gibbs asks about Draga, but apparently he’s going to Diane’s.)

And while they’d be happy to run in and get them back, they know the logistics on that won’t work. Right now every way into the city is clogged with people coming in to help, and every way out is filled with people fleeing.

Even Semper isn’t a good plan. According to Ducky every pier at the Navy Yard has a ship at it now. Nowhere for Jethro to tie up.

So they wait.

And somehow, with a set end time, one more night stretches on and on and on, longer than the nights before them.
There’s an image in Gibbs’ mind. One he’s trying to flip, to see from the other side. Shannon and Kelly waited for him to come home, over and over. They picked him up, dusty, grimy, after too long on the road. They met him in perfect uniform, standing at attention, waiting to be released. They waited at home for him to be dropped off by buddies. They waited at the dock, so they could see him the second his feet touched US soil again.

He’s seen that, over and over, from his side of it. From straining to find them in the crowd, to sitting up, straighter, eager, tall, feeling pulled toward home while the car he was in got nearer.

Now he’s trying to see it from their side as excited butterflies flitter about in his stomach and every single car on his road has his head jerking up to watch the road.

Penny’s on the porch swing, waiting with him. He’s sitting on the front steps of the porch, with a slightly better view of the street. Tony and Ziva are inside, making sure there’s more food than anyone can possibly eat all cooked up and ready to go.

He might not have sniper’s eyes anymore, but he doesn’t have any trouble identifying the truck that eases down his street the second it turns the corner.

It’s his truck. He can’t believe it was even still there, let alone still runs. The paint job is wrecked. It’s covered in graffiti, and it’s got burn damage on the one side, but it’s heading toward him.

Ducky’s driving, slowly. Too slowly. Although right now Jethro would consider anything slower than the speed of light too slow. But, really, he’s driving, too slow, until, that is, Jethro notices that there are people in the cab, and in the bed.

A lot of people.

Abbi’s riding shotgun. Though in this case, the term should be automatic rifle. No one uses a shotgun in that position, not anymore.

It takes him a moment to recognize who’s in the back. Jake, Ellie, and Elaine’s boys, all of them are armed, too.

Looks like things haven’t exactly calmed down in DC, yet. Or maybe they just aren’t taking any chances. Either way, at 100 feet off, he can count five rifles, and he’s sure there are more in there that he can’t see. And either way, he approves. He’ll be damned if one of them gets hurt this late in the game.

An excruciatingly long ten seconds later, he and Penny are right at the driveway, waiting, they pull in.

Penny’s already circling to the driver’s side, and Gibbs is all but vibrating with eagerness as Abbi opens the door and steps out of the cab.

She smiles at him, looking thin, so thin, and cocky. Homebound conquering hero, Marine in all her glory. She should be in fatigues, but she’s still in the same white button down, jeans, and vest she’s been wearing for days. They’re battered, stained, smell like… Gibbs doesn’t want to think about that, but she’s wearing them like they’re armor blessed by Jesus and decorate with gold and jewels.

He pulls her close, holding onto her in a full body hug, and she’s clutching him back just as hard.
They don’t pull back for a long time. Just holding one another, both of them better with actions than words, so that hug, those moments of bodies touching, seeking each other out, cover a lot of ground, but eventually, they do break the hug, and she nods toward Elaine and her family. “Figured you wouldn’t mind putting up a few friends.”

He takes three steps over and hugs Elaine, too, so happy to see her, and all of her family, have made it through, too. He’s feeling so stupidly happy, he hugs her husband and family, too.

And then there’s Bishop, Jake, and Allan, all of whom get hugs and back slaps.

And then, Duck. He waits on that, because like him and Abbi, Ducky’s sucking up the joy of the first moment back in the arms of his love. He’s standing there, holding Penny, who has her head on his shoulder, crying quietly, and Ducky’s crying, too. But they look like happy tears.

They do, eventually, break their hug, and Gibbs sweeps in to hug Ducky, and he supposes there are things he could say, but he doesn’t want to. Words can’t do anything with these feelings, won’t express them right, they’ll just get in the way.

And then, as they’re standing in the driveway, Ziva opens the door, and says, “Enough out there, come in, we have food, clean clothing, and hot showers!”

And that, surrounded by loved ones, is heaven.

---

Food is chicken broth. It’s toast. There are sliced apples, and Ziva made rice pudding. It’s very simple, easy to digest. There’ll be time for a real feast later, but right now is just about getting food into some very delicately balanced tummies.

Now’s just about making sure they keep the food down.

Bishop and Jake, and Elaine and her husband get the first showers. Gibbs only has two of them, and it made sense to get the people who could share washed up first.

There isn’t a whole lot of talking. Even Abbi and Ducky, who seemed to be pulling through on nerves and balls alone, as soon as they got some food and clean clothing on them, fell asleep in minutes.

For Gibbs and Penny, day twenty-three will be spent mostly hovering near a sleeping loved one, petting them, touching, just to prove they can, and in between moments of that, playing host to this crew of people who are now calling his house home.

Toward nightfall, Gibbs has a brainstorm. He rummages around through his things and finds it. “Ziva,” he hands the keys to Tim’s house over. “I know they won’t mind. Take Elaine and her family to Tim’s.”

Ziva nods at that. Gibbs’ place is not made to hold sixteen people for more than a few hours at a time.

“Tony!” He looks up at her. “I have lock picks. I’ll take Bishop, Jake, and Allan to Palmers’. Meet me there?”

He nods at that. Seven people at McGee’s. Five at Palmer’s. Four at Gibbs’. That makes pretty good sense.
By nightfall on day twenty-three, he and Penny share a quiet moment, watching their loves sleep, with the TV turned off, not caring about the outside world and what’s going on out there. Not right now. Everything that matters is inside this house.

Shortly after midnight, on day twenty-three, the Navy Yard is almost empty.

There’s a crew of Marines keeping watch. That’s true in a lot of the city right now. But all (most) of the civilians have been evacuated.

Leon is still here, and so is Jarvis. The job isn’t quiet done, not yet.

Six Navy SEALs bring in two struggling prisoners. Neither of the men in front of Jarvis want to be in this room. They’re visibly sickened by the smell. They’re outraged that SEALs broke into their homes and smuggled them out. They’re sputtering with indignation.

And Jarvis doesn’t care at all. He’s sitting in front of a holding cell, which as of this morning was being camped out in by a family looking for a little privacy, and is now empty.

Jarvis nods and both men are shoved into the cell, and locked in.

Jarvis stares them down. “I didn’t want to do this. I didn’t want to run this city. I didn’t want to spend twenty-one days stuck in this festering building, starving, watching people rot, and having to kill to protect a few mouthfuls of food from people who were hungrier than I was.

“As the current sovereign of the District of Colombia, I am charging both of you with crimes against humanity. As soon as we receive recognition as a state in the United States, or barring that, as a separate country, you will stand trial. Here or at the Hague. I’m not picky. Any person, with even the smallest shred of compassion would have gotten food in and refugees out. Both of you failed in that endeavor.”

Jarvis pushes away from the wall he’s been leaning against. “Goodnight, Gentlemen.”

And the Governors of Virginia and Maryland don’t know what to say to that.

Jarvis makes one last call before he can leave. He has General Evans and Admiral Keller on the phone. They know what he’s going to do tomorrow. They know that if he’s going to do it, he’s going to need the right setting.

They know how to provide it.

And they both know a man on the edge of collapse when they see one.

So, their job, which they have done before, is to take care of everything that has to happen between now and 11:00 tomorrow. That’s when Clayton Jarvis will stand up in front of what’s left of the Capitol building (charred steps and blackened rubble) and give the world the sort of show it hasn’t seen since the end of World War II.

They tell him they’ve got it. All he has to do is get there on time.

Once he’s off the phone, Leon comes closer. “Where can I take you, Clayt?” Leon asks, not
realizing he doesn’t have a car to take Jarvis anywhere.

All of it finally hits Jarvis, he blinks hard, sagging, and then says, “I don’t know. My house is gone. My family is gone.” He shakes his head. “Your place. Take me to your place.”

Leon nods. “I can do that.”

A hot shower, a hot meal, a long, almost comatose sleep, all of those things help, but they can’t fix Jarvis. Though, to make as much impact as he can, he shouldn’t be “fixed.”

When he gets back to Leon’s house, James is waiting for him. Like everyone else who had been in DC, he’s thin, but like everyone else in the CGIS building, he got out when they took the prisoners out. Like everyone else in the CGIS building, he had to fight his way out, but he got his prisoners, and his SEALs out.

He’s happy enough to see Jarvis, that, even though they don’t have the sort of relationship that’s emotional or huggy, he does hug Clayton.

“I talked to General Evans. Everything here is ready. I’ve got food for you, new clothing for tomorrow.”

Jarvis shakes his head at that. He’d almost rather die than spend another day in the suit on his skin right now, but tomorrow, with all the cameras on him, he wants it clear to everyone in the world how bad things got.

Leon’s drifting through this. Both of them, suddenly relieved of command, able to relax, are all but asleep on their feet.

James sees it, nods, and gently gets them into the kitchen for the food he brought. From there, both of them crash out, and sleep, hard.

He pretty much needs a blowtorch to get Jarvis out of bed at 10:00 the next morning. That’s as late as he could push it and make sure that Jarvis got to the Capitol in time.

They let Leon sleep.

The last time he did this, he was surrounded by people. Now, it’s just him at the podium and that’s intentional. He doesn’t want anything blocking the view of what’s behind him. Charred, blackened, dirty, graffiti covered, rubble.

Crows and vultures are infesting the city. And he’s sure there are bodies in the wreckage behind him. He can smell them, and the birds wouldn’t be hovering around if there wasn’t anything to eat in there.

The first press conference had been packed.

This one is… and he realizes he’ll never use this phrase again lightly… mobbed.

He waits for General Evans to nod at him, letting him know it’s 12:00. He takes his breath, and then begins.
“Less than a month ago, this was a city, not a graveyard.” He smiles, ruefully. “Things change, fast. When I revealed the nature of the deceit the United States Government was engaged in, I did not expect what followed…”

“That people would be angry. That anger could spill into violence… I knew that was coming.

“That this would result in the Federal Government needing to rework itself. I knew that was coming, too.

“That the states that surround us would attempt to strangle us, and starve my people. That I did not expect. The country reached out to us, offered us food and medicine, and that food and medicine sat at the border, leaking into our city.

“I want you to look at me.” He slowly strips off his tattered and filthy jacket. He slowly unbuttons his shirt, too, and steps from behind the podium. Everyone can see a man who had been slim, in good shape, twenty-one days ago, and is now gaunt. “Thirty-seven pounds in twenty-four days, and I am one of the lucky ones. I got at least a mouthful of food a day. Look at me, and see what was done to the people of the District of Colombia.”

He pulls his shirt back on. “What’s behind me, that we did to ourselves, and we’ll clean it up, by ourselves. But this,” he gestures to himself, “and what is likely to be the deaths of thousands from the complications of starvation, that was imposed on us from the outside.

“I have, right now, in my custody, the Governors of Virginia and Maryland. I am holding them for trial for crimes against humanity.

“As for who will try them… I don’t know that, yet. Right now, the District of Colombia is declaring itself an independent state. We will, in the coming weeks, send representatives to New York to petition for full statehood in the United States. If we are granted full statehood, then I shall transfer custody of the Governors to the Assembly in New York, to stand trial with the rest of the criminals they are holding.

“Should that not be granted, we will seek to become our own country, and I will petition the Hague for the right to try them.

“Either way, the District of Colombia, as the unrepresented home of the United States Federal Government, is over. We are taking over our own future, now. We will, as part of our rebuilding process, develop a Congress and Senate of our own. For the time being, whoever is still alive in the DC City government will hold their positions, and we will begin to work on rebuilding the City into whatever future is coming for it.

“General Evans and Admiral Keller have agreed to provide protection and peacekeeping services for the interim. They have removed their forces from Richmond and Annapolis, but both Virginia and Maryland should keep in mind that we will consider any attempts to regulate the border between us an act of war.

“As of today, the District of Colombia is open to travel, though I would highly suggest that people who do not have to be here should not enter.” He gestures to what’s left of the Capitol building. “None of this is stable. There is no food. The water supply, where it is running, is not safe to drink. The Marines are here to keep human predators at bay. They will not be protecting people from unstable buildings, wreckage, down but live powerlines, and the like.

“If you have a home here, if you have friends here, I highly suggest now is not the time to decide to come in and see how things are doing. If you are in demolition, salvage, clean up, or construction,
we need you.

“For now, I am asking everyone in the nation, if you have a spare room, extra food, clothing you aren’t wearing… More than 600,000 people lived here, and almost all of them need a place to stay. Most of the people getting out of the city left starved and with nothing but the clothing on their backs.

“Please, if you can, help.

“And I would like to take a moment to say thank you. As soon as the blockade broke, the District was flooded with help. People all over the world have been trying to help us for weeks. We are not unappreciative of that. We know that the only reason things got as bad here as they did were the criminal decisions by the Governors of Virginia and Maryland, and we intend to hold them liable for it.

“I will not be answering questions today. As we begin rebuilding, we will offer updates, and there will be other opportunities for us to talk, but today isn’t it.”

And with that, Jarvis is done. He nods to everyone, finds James, and returns to Leon’s house. He’ll sleep the next twenty-four hours straight though, and when he wakes up there’ll be a text from his wife on his phone.

See you soon.
Solace

Chapter Notes

Sometimes I have very intense sound memories attached to different chapters. This is one of them. Abby and Jimmy's sections go with Mumford and Son's Ghosts That We Knew, and Breena's goes with Believe.

For a moment, Tim’s not sure where, or when, he is.

He knows he’s not in the Navy Yard. He doesn’t know the smell of where he is right now, but it’s not the smell of the Navy Yard.

He thinks he might be in another hotel, and that he dreamed last night, So much for your ‘you can’t dream it if you’ve never had it before’ theory, and he’s starting to get a little annoyed at himself for arguing with a version of Jimmy who’s just in his head, but then he hears a toilet flush, and he knows where he is.

His eyes peel open, and he’s at the cabin, and for a moment, by himself.

He wonders briefly about that. He’d been rather hoping to wake up with someone. But little girls need to eat and the rest of the world didn’t vanish because he came home. And, at least they’re letting him sleep in.

God, he’s tired. So, tired. Yes, every day, every sleep, he’s feeling better as he wakes up, but better and good aren’t the same thing, and right now they aren’t even on speaking terms.

If they’re going to let him sleep in, he might as well take advantage. His eyes drift shut again, and he stretches out some. The bed is soft and warm, and he’s feeling comfortable, lulled by nubby cotton and thick wool. It won’t take much to send him back to sleep.

He’s almost there when the little, awake part of his brain notices it just heard a door open, and footsteps, and he can smell… something, hot chocolate, something else, bready, but he doesn’t know what, and then there’s a wash of cold as Abby slips into bed next to him.

She settles in next to him, spooning into her usual sleep position, trying not to wake him up.

He kisses the back of her neck, and his mind drifts off.

The next time he wakes up, he is definitely not alone.

And he is extremely pleased by this.

More than just the emotional joy of waking up with Abby snuggled in his arms, is that part of him, which had been showing no signs of life for at least the last two weeks, is waking up and taking notice, too.
Tim’s quite glad to see his dick is up and working, he’s been mildly worried to see that it’s just been lying there as he’d been trying to get home. He didn’t expect anything/didn’t pay any attention to it in the Navy Yard, but by day three of driving, he was starting to get concerned. Jimmy will later tell him that lack of food kills libido and causes depression, which in turn kills whatever bit of your libido the lack of food didn’t get. Namely, a human body will do what it can to avoid making more humans if the food situation is bad enough that your metabolism starts to shut down. But that’s still a ways off, and right now…

A happy, little sigh eases out of him as he scoots closer to Abby, rubbing against her insanely soft, plump, warm skin. An answering, and just as pleased, little “Mmmm…” slips out of her.

She squirms against him in an encouraging way, and he sighs at that, too. “Good morning,” he says.

“Hi,” she says back.

When she’s spooned into his arms, her neck rests over his right arm, and his left arm curls around her, usually ending up with his hand cupped around her right breast. Sean’s putting something of bump in that plan, so right now his hand is on her tummy. He strokes lightly over her belly to breast, and then traces his fingertips down her arm to take her hand in his. Left hand in left hand. Their wedding rings don’t touch with the slight metallic kiss that he has associated with holding her hand, fingers entwined, but… soon enough, they will again.

There’s a pause of just holding each other, of being aware of heartbeat, breath, heat, and the small sounds of two bodies snuggled under thick blankets.

“You know,” she says, stroking her fingers between his, “you owe me.”

He kisses the nape of her neck, teeth ghosting along the edges of the spider web. “I know I do.”

He can hear the smile in her voice. “I didn’t mean like that. A while back, you made me a promise, that we’d wake up, together, on our anniversary, and all wrapped up together, we’d go at it soft and slow and sleepy, the way we used to before you got hurt.”

He smiles at that. That’s the sort of owing he’s happy to pay back. “It’s…” He realizes he doesn’t know what day it is.

“The 30th.”

“Okay… I’m seven days late. So, every day for the next week?” He rubs up against her bum, giving her a few gentle thrusts.

She giggles a little at that. “Breena might get jealous.”

“Then you’ll just have to tell Jimmy to step up his game.”

“I meant about me hogging all the time with you.”

He hadn’t thought that part through… “That’s what naptime’s for?”

That gets a giggle, and a soft squirm that rubs up against him in exactly the right way.

He’d like to say he missed this, but for most of the time he was gone, he was too damn fried to miss anything, so he kisses her neck, and squeezes her tighter to him.

She lifts his hand to her lips, and kisses each finger.
“Any shot of you flipping over?” he asks, “or should I circle around?” She’s a lot bigger than he remembered, and she’s probably starting to get to the point where rolling over isn’t much fun, or easy.

“I can still flip.” And she does, in one swift move. “He’s not quite that big, yet.”

Tim smiles at that, and smiles at her. “Hi.”

“Hello, to you, too.”

He sighs, and his fingers slip over her face, taking in each detail. Morning Abby, with her hair haphazard, and her eyebrows and lashes still light brown, her lips pale, and the freckles on her face visible. He likes her made up, but there’s a delicious intimacy that goes with this, and he’s steeping in it, letting it soak in and fill him back up again.

He’s smiling as he looks, as he feels her against him, and she’s smiling back. After a moment of it, after heartbeats filling with contentment, she says, “There you are.”

“Starting to come back to myself.”

“Yeah.” She kisses him, sweet and gentle, and he lets himself be kissed.

That wakes his body up further, starting the urgent ache of wanting more. Face to face is a bit awkward with Sean between them, but a bit more bending and shifting around manages it. He cups her face in his hand as his lips move over hers and gives voice to this thought, “Coming back to life.”

She flashes him a quick grin and grinds into him. He hisses at the pleasure of that. Then she says, “Life, is that what this is?”

He nods, rubbing against her, well aware that on a biological level, this, literally, is the mechanism of life, and on a metaphoric level, this is the return of intimate contact with everything in the world that matters to him. There’s a little wry look in his eyes as he says, “It’s close enough. My life, it’s here, with you, and…” he nods toward the rest of the family outside these walls.

“I know.” Another kiss, long and deep, her hands stroking over his arm and back, his fingers trailing down hers. He shifts her leg over his, and reaches under her leg, finding her slick and waiting. Tim knows that he’s not going to last. He can’t remember the last time he had a hard-on, and the last time he got off is a vague memory, so this is not the day for endurance sex.

But it is the day for kissing, for lips wet and slick rubbing against each other. It’s a day for tongues that know when and where to lick. It’s a day for gentle sucks, and soft nibbles.

And it’s certainly the day for his fingers to find her clit and start with soft, gentle circles. Her hips begin the soft, rolling thrust that he knows means she’s getting into it, the movement that means he’s doing her just right.

He drinks that in. Her arousal feeding his. Her tummy’s rubbing against his dick, and she’s moaning (quietly) into his kisses, making him feel electric from fingers to toes and everywhere in between.

Her breath hitches and her hips roll faster, his fingers follow her, speeding up, keeping pace, showing her that he still remembers the moves to this dance.

“I love you,” he breathes it to her, kisses it to her lips, and rubs it into her skin as she begins to shudder against him.
He presses into her, wet and slick and soft and snug and welcoming, so welcoming as she’s still twitching on his fingers. This angle, this position, he can only get the top inch or two into play, but it’s enough.

It’s sublime. It’s another day of them together. It’s real, tangible proof that he made it home. It’s her lips on his and his body in hers and all of the love between them distilled into sharp tingling pleasure drawn out by slow, shallow strokes.

“Love you, love you, love you,” she’s chanting it back to him, in time with each thrust.

He’s trying to pace himself, trying to draw it out, to spend as long in this moment of slow slide and building pleasure as he can, but it’s a losing battle.

It’s been too long, and he’s still too emotionally raw to do anything but clutch onto her, pulling her as close as he can, burying himself in her over and over as her heart speeds and his breath catches, muscles pulling tight as hot pleasure washes through him in pulsing flows of physical and emotional love.

He doesn’t have the reserves, physical or mental, to stay awake for long after that, but the few breaths where his brain is still in the waking world are filled with her smile and all-suffusing love.

Breena Palmer is pissed. Once that first rush of “OH THANK GOD YOU’RE HOME! I LOVE YOU SO MUCH! DON’T EVER LEAVE AGAIN! I MISSED YOU SO MUCH!” passed, twenty-one days of agonizing over Tim crashes into her, and she is PISSED.

(Which is why she is not in the bedroom with Abby, giving Tim a proper welcome home. The way they had been planning.)

She loves Tim. She’s exceptionally grateful that he’s home in one piece, and she is pissed at him for putting them through this.

That’s twice in six months that she’s had to sit there, wondering if he was dead or alive, begging God that if he was alive, he come out in one piece, and she’s so angry at him she wants to spit. (And slap him upside the head for being an imbecile and making her that scared, but right now, she’s sure if she tried something like that, she’d really hurt him.)

She told him the truth, if she had wanted the guy who hangs back, covering everyone else’s retreat, takes stupid risks, and dies bravely, she could have had him. That’s the boyfriend before Jimmy. Her dad liked him. He was big, and tough, and very gung-ho about everything, and he (three years after they broke up) did manage to get himself killed in Afghanistan. (And worse, his parents were friends with hers, so they took care of his burial. She helped put him in the ground, which did nothing to convince her that she might have been misguided in her desire to not be with a guy who throws his body into the line of fire.)

She didn’t want that life. She intentionally did not get it for herself. And having to live shadows of it twice in one year is not making her happy at all.

And at the same time, she’s knees weak with relief that he’s okay.

Which makes her more angry because she had to sit there, stewing in full body fear, listening to Tim drift away, begging him to just get out. And he wouldn’t. And Jimmy can say all he likes about depression and how not enough food fucks with your mind, but at the end of the day, Tim could
have come home, and HE DIDN’T.

And how he is home, and he’s apologizing all over the place, and he looks like a whipped puppy, a *starved* whipped puppy, and that just makes her more angry because he fucking did it *to himself.*

---

If he had to guess, Jimmy would say he’s somewhere between Breena’s wanting to take Tim’s head off for making them go through that three weeks of torture, and Abby’s immediate glom onto him as tightly as possible and never let him go.

Like Breena, he couldn’t be happier that Tim is back. And like Breena every time he looks at Tim he’s torn between wanting to cry at how broken down he is, rage at him for not coming with them, or not getting out when he could have, and wanting to make sure he’s got a hand on him at all times, so he can *feel* that he’s really, finally, home.

Like Abby, he knows that if Tim could have left, he would have. Something, lack of food, sense of responsibility, depression, *something* kept him walled in there, and Jimmy doesn’t entirely blame Tim for not getting out. (Even though he was chew through titanium frustrated and angry that they couldn’t get Tim out.)

He’s hoping, eventually Tim’ll “unfurl” enough that they’ll find out why he couldn’t leave. And he’s dreading that “unfurling” will likely involve having to hear how bad it really was, which will bring up complicated feelings of anger at the situation, and anger at Tim for putting himself through it, all with a thick layer of sorrow and grief for everything they’ve lost, and that Tim had to see it firsthand.

Watching it on the news was bad enough. Jimmy doesn’t want to imagine living it, but if he’s going to be useful, and if this really is a marriage, then hearing it, and helping Tim carry it, is part of the job.

And, rubbing the rings on his finger, he knows he’s going to do the job.

---

It’s a lot earlier than Tim expected it to be when he wakes up the third time. He feels like it should be after lunchtime, not barely 10:00.

But it is, so he’s got a good chunk of morning to play with little girls and be part of the rest of the world. Abby’s still napping, so he gently gets himself out of bed, gets dressed, fast, practically diving into his clothing because even inside it’s *cold.* (Actually, it’s 64, which is cool by Virginia standards, but isn’t exactly freezing. He’s just not in good condition to deal with it, yet.) And he’s busy cursing the inch of wrist that Jimmy’s clothing leaves bare, as he heads into the main part of the cabin.

Breena looks at him, her eyes narrow a little, and she quickly says, “Good, you’re up. You and Jimmy can go to town with the girls. Get us something for dinner.”

Tim knows he’s neck deep in the poo just by her voice, so he quickly nods and says, “Sounds great. Can’t wait to see this place.” A few seconds after that, he’s tucking a snack into his pocket, and helping Jimmy get the girls bundled up.
There’s a mall with an indoor playground, so they’re there. They’ve unbundled the girls, and let them free to toddle around. Anna’s on Jimmy’s lap, and Kelly is, right now, holding onto Tim’s knees, but she looks like she’s going to go after Molly (who’s running around with abandon) any second now.

Seems like a good time to talk. “So, Breena’s pissed.”

Jimmy nods at him.

“Do I wait for her to come to me with this, or do I go to her?”

Jimmy shrugs. “I don’t have a how to apologize for almost-getting-myself-killed-because-I-wasn’t-smart-enough-to-listen-to-the-people-around-me template. When horrific and meaningless death looms, I run the other way.” Jimmy wiggles his fingers while moving his hand away from himself, mimicking a man running away.

“You’re pissed, too.”

Jimmy gives him a no shit look.

Tim nods. He looks at Jimmy. They’re out, and rural, primarily Catholic Canada probably isn’t exactly the most hospitable place for gay rights, so he doesn’t take Jimmy’s hand, but he does say, with as much earnest, heartfelt eye contact as he can manage. “I’m sorry.”

Jimmy nods, and gives Tim’s hand a quick squeeze. “I know. You’re heads’s on straight again, and you can see the mess you got yourself, and all of us, into. I know. But we, all of us, still have a lot of healing up to do, and I have a feeling you’re on a damn short leash when it comes to making risky decisions for yourself for a long time to come.”

Tim sighs. “Given my current track record, that’s probably not a bad idea.”

“Okay. It’s just… Especially for Breena and I, neither of us ever wants to feel that fear again. We got more than six lifetimes of it with Jon, and… I think for her, especially, those days of fear mixed with not being able to do anything…”

Tim nods. Kelly decides now’s the time to launch off his knees, and she takes off with a swaying waddle after Molly.

Tim feel like he should say something, like, ‘You were right, I should have left earlier, I’m sorry…’ but those words won’t form, because he doesn’t feel like he should have left sooner. He’s not, in the dark of his mind, entirely sure he should be out now. But that’s the dark, and dwelling there probably won’t lead anywhere good.

“If she were just run-of-the-mill-mad at you, what would you normally do?”

“She’ll come to you when she’s ready. Try not to step on her toes too bad between now and then.”

Lunch is tense.

There’s a quote in his mind to cover this situation. He thinks Heinlein wrote it, but it’s not exactly an original statement, so a bunch of other guys likely did, too, but, as the quote said, “When you’re
getting along, even the tightest quarters are plenty of room, and when you aren’t, there isn’t enough space on Earth.”

Right now, Tim’s living that.

Angry Breena is quiet and sulky. And Angry Breena has impossible standards. He can’t do anything to make her happy right now. Just the way he’s breathing is setting her off.

No one’s talking much. Which, on one level, is good, because he’s sure when the storm breaks he’s going to need some answers, and this is giving him time to think about them.

As soon as lunch is done, he sprints outdoors with Jimmy. He’s relieved enough to be out of there that the cold isn’t bothering him, and the slight flurry of snow is soft and pretty.

They need logs for the fire. There are lots of them, but they aren’t split, yet. Tim knows he’s in no shape to split logs. (Unless he wants to chop his own leg, and add to the excitement by a trip to the emergency room.) But he can pick up logs (one at a time) and carry them over to Jimmy, who splits them and dumps them into the basket that they live in.

Jimmy looks at him between whacks of the hatchet. “You’re fucked.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ve never pissed her off that bad.”

“You’re pretty good at not almost getting yourself killed.”

Jimmy gives him a tense little nod. “Maybe it’s time to take a minute and learn something from me.”

“I’m learning.”

“Good.”

He watches Tim slowly pick a log up, and then put it on the chopping block for him. “You okay with that?”

“Enough.”

Jimmy raises and eyebrow and splits the log.

“Everything makes me tired, fast. The first day on the road I could go an hour, and then I needed to rest an hour. Last day, it was two to one. Fourteen hours of sleep last night, and if I don’t get a nap, I’ll end up turning in right after dinner.”

“And if you do get a nap, you’ll probably do it anyway?”

“Yeah.”

“161?”

“Maybe. By now. 158 at the Doc’s office. Before this, the lowest I’d ever gotten to was 165.”

“You were too thin then.”
“Well, I’m really too thin, now.”

“God…” Jimmy puts the axe down and pulls Tim into a long hug. “I missed you.”

Tim nods and kisses Jimmy’s cheek. “I missed you, sort of. I didn’t want you there. It was a relief that you weren’t. And… I was pretty far gone when it happened, but the only person we lost was diabetic. Ran out of insulin, and we couldn’t keep her fed well enough. I think I spent that night curled into a ball, rocking back and forth, whimpering. I almost asked you guys to join me. I was a hair away from it. They were killing people in cars, and you’d be driving if you left, and safe in the Navy Yard, with me, if you didn’t, but we knew there’d be riots, not… not that bad, and… they worked for the government, owned it, they might have been able to get in… but… I almost said it. I almost said to you, ‘Get the girls and come to the Navy Yard, and that would have killed you.’” His voice is trembling, and so is his body by the time he gets to the end of that story.

Jimmy sighs, holding onto Tim, stroking his stocking capped head and his neck under a scarf. The idea that Tim could have left isn’t in his head. That’s absolutely clear to Jimmy with the way he’s talking. He’s out, been out for days, and the idea that he could leave still isn’t there. “We would have left way before it got that bad, and we would have taken you with us.”

Tim whimpers a bit at that. “There was nowhere else to go, Jimmy.”

Jimmy kisses Tim’s forehead and squeezes him a little tighter. “There’s here, Tim. You’re out. We’re out.”

Tim takes a deep breath, and another one, and one more on top of that. Then he nods and pulls back a little. “I know. I do… It’s… easy to slip back.”

Jimmy nods back at him. “Yeah, I’m seeing that. How about you go in and get a quick snack? Help get your head here, not there.”

Tim looks at the basket, not a lot of wood in there. He inhales, deep. Cold, clean air filling him up. “I’m good. I can stay out here. For a while longer, at least.”

“You start to shiver, you go in. You don’t need to be burning calories on keeping warm.”

Tim nods, and places another log on the chopping block for Jimmy.

Breena does come to him, during naptime. Jimmy and Abby decide now would be a really good time to head into town, gas up the van, and kill some time so Tim and Breena can have some privacy.

They sit quietly for a moment. Actually, he sits. He’s on the sofa. Breena’s standing by the window, looking out, as Jimmy and Abby bundle up, and for one more minute as they hear the van crunching through the snow, and then Breena turns to him.

She’s not glaring at him, but her look is very intense, extremely focused, and suggesting that right now would be an excellent time to listen and not talk.

“You said ‘til your last breath.”’ She takes the two steps to be standing in front of him, looking down at him.

Tim nods; he did.
“That implies that you will not do something stupid to hasten that breath. It implies that you value those breaths, and that you’re interested in having a whole lot of them.”

He nods, warily, at that, too.

“And I thought, silly me, that you actually did value your life. That you held it as precious as those of us who love you hold it. I thought, because your life is sacred to me, that it would be sacred to you, too!”

He’s thinking now would be an excellent time not to mention the move to Cybercrime, and getting out of the field, and how he’s gone from risking getting shot every day of his life, to only every now and again.

“You got on the Stennis. Abby and Gibbs, both of whom have the best guts you have ever seen, told you not to. You promised not to go anywhere alone, and then you let James just walk on off. You let them put you in a cage, and then you let the guy watching your back leave. And I didn’t think much about that until now, because that’s the sort of thing that can happen, sort of. You’re a normal sort of person, so you think that the people around you are playing straight. Fine. That can happen.

“But this time. We all know no one is playing straight. Straight flew out the fucking window. So, you have good instincts, you get us out, but you don’t go with us? Why?”

She pauses long enough that he’s cued into the fact it’s his turn to talk. He realizes he didn’t talk to her. He talked to Abby and he talked to Jimmy, but he didn’t say anything to her. He called, and then they were gone.

“I wasn’t sure if I got in clean. I needed to erase everything, make sure they couldn’t track us. I did some other things, too, pulling attention away from you, making sure you’d have time to run. If they were going to go after anyone, it was going to be me, in a building filled with armed guards. That’s part of why I didn’t want you guys coming to the Navy Yard.” As he’s thinking more about it, that’s a big part of what tipped him from come to me to get out of town. The people they were going up against were well-financed, well-connected, and knew the government inside and out. It probably would have been easier to buy a guard than it would be to find one car driving to God alone knew where.

“Uh huh.” Breena’s not satisfied with that answer. “What did you do that on, Tim?”

He’s not sure what she’s asking. “Like… a computer?”

She nods. “Like a laptop? That could have been sitting in your lap, while you worked on it, while all seven of us, hell all of our family, got out of town? While you made it send little signals out so whoever might have been tracking it thought you were in the Navy Yard.”

Tim’s mouth falls open, and he blinks hard. He could have done that in a heartbeat. Take two cars, him and Jimmy in one, the girls in another, they’d go straight through to Canada. He and Jimmy would take a circuitous route. He’d do the hacking in pieces, upload them in packets, piggy back off the local wifi, bounce it all over hell and gone, land that at NCIS, bounce it around between NCIS and the computer he was attacking, too. By the time anyone could have gotten through one packet, they’d be well away, and by the time they got through all of them, his computer could have been sitting at the bottom of a dumpster somewhere, and he and Jimmy could have been heading toward the girls.

“Shit,” falls off his tongue when he’s done working that through.
“You panicked! And when you panic, Jimmy and Abby do, too! He’s telling me to pack, and I don’t find out for days that we’re running without you because you didn’t think the damn problem all the way through! This was a cascade of bad decisions. And then you got stuck in there! No bars. No one pointing a gun at you saying you couldn’t leave. You got stuck in your own head! Everyone you loved tried to get you to leave, but you wouldn’t go! That’s terrifying, Tim!” Her voice cracks on that, and he wants to get up and comfort her, but her eyes and the emotions coming off of her discourage that, so he keeps sitting there, quietly. “What’s going to happen next? Who are you going to Don Quixote on next time?”

She doesn’t let him answer before starting up again. “You panic, and then you started ordering everyone around, and we panic, and it’s all a mess because no one sat down and thought. And we’re not doing that again! Next time something spooky comes up, we talk! You don’t give orders, again. Not like that. You explain what’s going on, and you listen to what other people have to say to you. We might still go with your plan, but not until everyone’s had a say, and everyone knows what the fucking plan is.”

Tim nods.

She looks like she’d prefer he’d fight with her, defend what he did, but he’s not touching that. Her laptop comment took a lot of the wind out of his get-the-hell-out-of-town-without-me plan.

For another minute, she paces around, jittery, periodically glaring at him. “You scared me, so bad.”

“I know.”

Her voice is hard as she says, “You’re supposed to say you’re sorry.”

“How about I say I’m not leaving you guys again? Camp out with the kids and Gibbs, and that’s it. Tents in the woods while you’re in the house. That’s as far away as I ever want to get.”

She thinks about that, and then says, “If you actually live up to it, that’ll do. But how many times have you told Abby that that’s the last time you’re almost getting killed?”

He tilts his head to the side; she’s got him dead to rights there. “Too many.”

“Yeah.”

“All I can do is live it.”

“You better.”

He holds out his hand to her, and she gives him hers. He married her with Abby, so they don’t have a set of vows all their own. He kisses her palm, and then says to her, “I will protect my life with the same devotion, same love, with which I hold yours, Jimmy’s, Abby’s, and our children’s.”

That starts to crack her anger, and he can feel some of tension slip off.

He stares up at her and pats the seat next to him, offering her a snuggle. She’s burned enough of the angry off to allow it, and sits next to him. His arm wraps around her shoulders, and she relaxes a little, but she’s still tense, not cuddling into him the way she does when she’s happy.

They sit there for a few minutes. Tim knows they aren’t done talking, but he doesn’t have anything to add right now, and she’s not ready to talk, yet.

After a few minutes, she says what else has been sitting unquiet in her mind. “I’ve already got to deal
with the fact that Jimmy’s life expectancy is almost fifteen years shorter than mine, I don’t need you being stupid and killing yourself, too.”

Tim licks his lips, not sure what to do with that. The trouble he gets into is risk that can be avoided. Jimmy… that’s the fate that can’t.

“I’m not sure I want to go back.”

Breena raises her eyebrows, sees that he means it, and then nods. She gets that that’s as much avoiding a stupid accident as he can do. “What would you do?”

Tim’s not sure. Beyond his current gut-level aversion to the Navy Yard, he doesn’t know what comes next. “Write? Sarah does it fulltime. She likes it. She’s always looking for editors, too. I can proofread.”

Breena thinks about that. “You’d miss it. Miss what you do with computers.”

Tim shakes his head, looking out the window, not really seeing much beyond the mental image of his office before everything went sideways. “I might.” Then the image of it as he left it comes back, and he shivers. “But let’s see if I can walk into the building again without breaking into a cold sweat. Not sure I can do it. Not sure if there’ll be any sort of NCIS to go back to.”

“There’ll still be crimes to solve. Still threats to deal with.”

His face turns back to her, and his eyes focus on hers. “Thought you wanted me leaving them alone.”

She opens and closes her mouth. She doesn’t want people getting hurt or damaged because he’s too scared to work. She doesn’t want him in danger, either. “I want you dealing with them at a desk. Safe. I want you to have the job you love, but I don’t want you starving or dodging bullets or any of the rest of that…”

Tim exhales, a long breath to give him some time to think, and to get himself ready to say what’s in his head. “I can’t imagine I’m ever going to run into a bigger case than this last one. And if I do… Jarvis basically told me to leave it alone…” Tim shakes his head. “He didn’t actually say to leave it, but there were enough hints…” He licks his lips, very nervous, and holds onto her hand tighter. “Bad guys come, and we hunt them down. Doesn’t matter who they are or how dangerous or… whatever. We’re the good guys, we take down the bad guys. That’s the job. Except, what do you do when taking down the ‘bad guys’ hurts more people than leaving them in place?” He’s staring out the window again. “I should have left it alone. We all should have. I’m afraid to listen to the news, afraid I’ll get a new body count. We… NCIS… did okay, at least, while I was there. Only lost one person, but… if we’d just left it alone, just said, oops, no access to these accounts, let’s stop digging, she’d still be alive.

“The Capitol’s gone, Breena. I don’t know what you’ve seen, but… Like I said, I haven’t been watching the news, but… It’s gone. We couldn’t tell which one of the ruins was Tony’s place. Abbi’s is gone, too. Charred brick, melted glass, and black concrete stumps.

“They burned the people in the FEC building alive. Only reason they didn’t get us is Fornell showed up with eight tanks and open fired on the mob with them. I mean, what the fuck is worth that? Rich guys played their games, and no one died. I did the right thing and probably thousands are dead. Who’s the good guy?”

She rubs his back.
“I got stuck. And… I think I got stuck because I felt like I had to be there. I set the ball rolling. I opened the can of worms, and… as long as they kept crawling out, I had to see it through. I had to be there, take the beating, because it was my fault.”

“Hey,” she’s still stroking his back, “none of that. You weren’t the one fucking the system. And you weren’t the one setting fire to buildings.”

“I know. I do. I really do, and I keep telling myself that… But… We could have done more to prep the city. We went live with it on the news to protect our own lives. Keep quiet, build cases, and they’d kill us to keep it quiet, stop the case in its tracks. So, we sprang it on everyone, so no one could leak it and kill us before we got it out, but that meant Metro didn’t have time to protect anything.

“We knew there would be riots. We got our families out of town or into our buildings, and… And we didn’t do enough.

“We saved our lives, and our families lives, and how many people died because we didn’t give the rest of the world enough of a heads up? How many people did I kill, people who had nothing to do with this whole mess, who didn’t set it in action, didn’t even know about it until their world blew up, to keep you and Abby safe?

“And I’m in a building with starving kids, and I can’t leave because they’re in there with me because of me. They’re there because I literally wrote the words that put them in there. And I can’t leave the city because there are bodies everywhere, and some of them are there because I’m the one who pulled the trigger, and the rest of them are there because I’m the one who cracked the account and broke the case open. Tony and Ziva’s home is gone because of hacking I did. Everything Ducky and Penny own is broken or stolen. Elaine’s diner is gone. Abbi’s house is rubble. Bishop’s apartment building will be condemned if they ever get an inspector back to it. Draga’s place is standing, but it’s been looted.

“It’s all gone.” He swallows hard. “And… you know, past cases, other jobs, other kills,” he rubs his lips together, “I could say to myself it was worth it. I was saving my life, or my partner’s lives, or rescuing someone, or derailing a terror plot, or something… But this one? Billions of dollars of damage, thousands of people dead, the government upside down, for what?” Tim wipes his eyes.

Breena holds onto him.

He’s shaking, and has his head on her shoulder, crying silently. It takes a while for him to pull out of it, get himself together some. “That’s why I couldn’t get out. And… I’m never doing that again. I don’t know if I can go back to any sort of law enforcement, because I don’t know if law will ever matter to me again. Don’t know if I’ll ever trust it again.” He sniffs.

She kisses his head, stroking his neck and back, and exhales a long breath. That makes a lot more sense. That covers him not getting out, in a way she hadn’t understood, and doesn’t know how to fix. But it does kill a lot of her anger. At least, the anger directed at Tim.

When Abby and Jimmy come back, Breena’s sitting on the sofa, Tim’s head in her lap, as he snoozes.

“You two okay?” Abby mouths to her.

“Yeah,” she whispers back.
It’s after naptime, in the quiet bit of afternoon before dinner. Tim’s feeling a little groggy from his nap, but he’s also determined to get at least a few minutes of contact with the outside world, so he’s reading some news.

He’s half aware of Molly asking for a drink. It’s background as he’s reading about what Jarvis did to finally break the blockade of DC.

Molly’s a big girl, drinking out of her big girl cup, and she can even, as long as there’s a stool, get herself a glass of water.

So she does. She heads over to the sink, and Tim’s not really paying attention to that. He’s imagining the Governors of VA and MD in Holding, and thinking he might just be able to get over his revulsion of the Navy Yard to go visit them set fire to their genitals, and then he sees, out of the corner of his eye, one of his girls about to drink a glass of water that she just got from the sink.

He’s leapt up and swatted the cup out of her hands, sending water flying all over the kitchen, before his brain has the chance to check in and remind him that they’ve all been drinking the water here, just fine.

Molly’s extremely startled to see her cup on the floor and Uncle Tim looking scary and embarrassed. His mouth opens and closes because he doesn’t know what to say.

“I’m… sorry. I’ll clean that up and get you a new one,” comes out after a minute.

Jimmy’s picked up Molly by that point. She’s not too upset, though she does look extremely curious about this. (They will later see her decide it’s a game, and do it to Kelly and Anna, who have sippy cups. The, ‘Uncle Tim did it, why not me?’ argument will be the first instance of Jimmy whipping out, ‘Because I’m your Dad, and I said so!’)

Tim gives Jimmy a hangdog look, and says, “We had to boil the water. I wasn’t thinking, just saw her with the cup and…”

“What happened if you didn’t boil it?” Jimmy asks.

“If you were lucky, you didn’t sh… poop again for three days.” Molly giggles at that. She’s at the age where any mentions of poop are hilarious. “If not, you didn’t leave the head for three days. Some of the kids got really sick. Ducky still had stuff for them, then, and that’s before we ran out of Gatorade, so no one got dehydrated, but… not fun.”

Jimmy eyes Tim, seeing how thin he is. “You lucky?”

“Believe it or not, yeah.”

They’re not sure what they can, or cannot ask about. They see it, that the wrong association will drop Tim back into bad memories. But, unless they aren’t going to ask about anything, they aren’t sure what will trip him into the past, and what’s just talking.

It’s a few minutes past bedtime, and tonight he was on the dry side of putting little girls to bed, so he hasn’t yet gotten a shower. He’s tired, but he doesn’t want to sleep without one, so into the bathroom he goes.
He’s getting the sense that none of them want him on a slippery surface by himself, because a few minutes later, Jimmy’s in there with him.

Tim’s fine with that. He’s also fine with not being alone right now. He feels like he spent months alone in the Navy Yard and years alone on the road, so having someone at arm’s length feels good.

He’s in the shower with Jimmy, sudsing up, enjoying the new soap, when he feels Jimmy’s hand, tentative, on the back of his head.

“You can ask.” He knows they’ve been eyeing his now almost half-a-centimeter-long hair. Tim turns to face Jimmy.

“What made you decide to shave it all off? Lice?” (That was the only speculation that made sense to them, but now they’ve seen that Tim still has his armpit and pubic hair, it’s pretty clear that that’s not the right answer.)

“Thank God, no. Uh… Fornell shows up out of the blue in a fucking tank and saves the day.” He hasn’t told that story, though they know it happened. Just, not his version of it, not yet. “Once he got inside the walls, he took his helmet off, and no hair. He’d shaved it all off. He mentioned that he hates the way it feels under a helmet, hot, sweaty, gets tangled in the pads. He’s right. Feels… like shit, really. I’ve done it before. Afghanistan. And, for a day or two, or light work, it’s not bad, but if you’re pouring down sweat fighting fires… If you’re covered in dirt and ash and grit…” Tim shakes his head. “So, off it went. More comfortable, felt cleaner.”

“Dry?” Jimmy’s noticed that Tim scrupulously dried himself off after tubby time last night, and suspects he’ll be just as careful tonight.

“Yeah. You know how the locker room has clean towels in it?”

Jimmy nods. He’s used them before. His mental image is of three shelves with towels on them, maybe sixty of them live there.

“Imagine sharing them with 300 other guys, and you can’t wash them between uses, because the washing machines are running full tilt just to keep us in socks and underwear. And don’t even think about a dryer.”

Jimmy winces.

“It got a little better. Tony’s crew got more towels and washer. A few of the Marines were engineers. They built hookups for them out of nothing. But the towels were still damp all the time, mildew-y, but at least it was yours, and every few days you got a shot to wash it.”

Jimmy winces and glances through the fogged up glass door of the shower toward where there are multiple soft, fluffy towels waiting for them.

Tim shrugs a bit. “It’s stupid shit that gets to you. No clean towels. No pillows. Our people got told to bring what they’d need for a week. Only four of them brought an inflatable mattress, because none of them thought about it. Only reason I had more than one outfit was Tony had the good sense to pack for me.

“Toothpaste. Ran out of it about two weeks in. Still had a toothbrush so my teeth felt okay, but my mouth tasted like something died in it all the time.

“Just stupid little shit like that.
“And food. I bought a million pound of food. Felt like that, anyway. By day five we were getting low. And… garlic powder, hell, fucking black pepper. Elaine’s cooking for us and it’s all shit because I’m the idiot who didn’t buy any spices.”

“You’re also the guy who decided to make sure you had food in there. We saw the news reports. A lot of other people, even the ones who got your note about disaster preparation, didn’t think to bring food.”

“Yeah. I know. A lot of our people brought a box of granola bars or something. Almost no one brought an entire week’s worth of food.” He rubs his face. “I felt like I tried. Like… I could see the shape and the shadows of the problem, but I couldn’t see it, didn’t know how bad it was, and everything I set out to do with this wasn’t enough.”

“Better than nothing.”

Tim inclines his head. He doesn’t disagree. But the fact that he didn’t know, that it wasn’t his fault, that didn’t fill any bellies. “I feel like one of those weather forecasters who tells everyone that the hurricane is coming, but it’ll be small, and it’ll stay offshore, and so everyone buys a few gallons of milk and some chips, and they settle in for the storm. And then it’s a category five with a direct strike and they all fucking die in the flood. Doesn’t matter that he, or I, did the best we could, people still died.”

Jimmy snorts at that, and Tim looks at him, startled and amazed. He’d been expecting some petting on that and a bit of comfort.

Jimmy shakes his head. “That’s day one of your ER residency. And you hate it, and you feel like shit, but that’s the truth of being in the life-saving game. You will do everything you possibly can. You will check and double check. And you will still be wrong. And even when you aren’t, they will still die.”

Tim snorts back at him, eyes closing with a small roll. He’s not sure if that’s a comfort or not. But that’s also the first few months of being a cop, too. You can’t, won’t save them all. It’s not possible.

Jimmy holds his hands, give him a little tug to get him to look at him, and stares into his eyes, “We do the best we can, with what we have, and Gibbs and his gut aside, we’re not psychic, we can’t tell the future, and we have no control over the actions of others.”

Tim swallows, still looking into Jimmy’s eyes. “I know.”

“And you still feel like shit.”

“Yeah.”

“It’ll get better.”

Tim nods at that. “I know.”

They’re getting ready for bed, settling in, starting with light kisses and pets, just getting the feel for the four of them again, when Jimmy’s phone rings.

“Not again,” he mutters under his breath, and then picks up. He listens, face serious, makes a few non-committal noises, and then says. “I need to talk to my family, but, tentatively, yes, day after
tomorrow.” There’s another pause and then he says, “My wife is a mortician… Uh huh… Yeah, Breena Palmer… Okay.”

He turns off his phone and places it back on the nightstand.

“That was General Evans, apparently he’s running the first wave of rehabbing DC.” Jimmy sighs. “They need every medical examiner, mortician, doctor, EMT, anyone who’s got any training dealing with the dead. They started getting people in to clear out the rubble today, and less than an hour into it they started finding bodies. They’re calling me back.” He strokes Breena’s cheek. “Calling you in, too.” He looks at Abby. “Can’t imagine it’ll be more than a few days before they get to you. They’re going to need people to run DNA and prints. He says there are th—lots of people to ID.”

“Thousands,” Tim says, voice thick. “You can say the word.” His eyes are hollow as he says, “At least a few hundred of them were buried in the Navy Yard by the time I left. Probably more. So, we’re going home?”

Jimmy glances at Breena and Abby. “If you don’t want to, I’ll stay here, but… I feel like I should. This is what I do, and there’s no immediate risk anymore. Plus, if I’m not there to take his place, they’ll have to duct tape Ducky to a chair to get him to sit out, and Allan must need to rest, too.”

Tim nods. “He lost so much weight his wedding ring fell off. I don’t know if he found it again. I don’t… I know Allan was there, but I don’t remember how he was.”

They’ve skyped with Ducky, so they know he’s thin, but they didn’t realize it got that bad. Jimmy’s seen Allan, too, and he knows that Allan needs a month off, at least.

Breena nods at the other three of them. “Thirteen hour drive. We’ll head back in the morning, start the day after. We can leave the girls here, with you, and you two come back slowly or…”

“Together.” Abby says. “We stay together.”

“I think Gibbs and I’ll be okay watching the girls,” Tim says.

“Maybe… Ducky and Penny and Tony and Ziva are going to need a place to stay. The house is almost done… Maybe that’s what you guys need to be doing, let the girls go back to daycare and Heather, and work on building a place for them to live,” Breena says, thinking that some quiet time building things, creating and doing something uplifting and useful would definitely be good for Tim, and would likely be good for the rest of them.

Tim nods a little, looking tired, but thinking. “It was my turn to take point, anyway. Time to do the wiring. Probably don’t want to do drywall with Gibbs, but Tony and I could probably handle it. It’s light, right?”

“And you’d build up strength working on it,” Jimmy replies.

“Take the girls to daycare, head to the house, break for the day at three or so, pick ‘em up, and then get dinner ready, all three of you come home, and… Make a haven for you. And, for as long as you can stand it, or until it’s done, I’ll guard the home front, and you guys take care of DC.”

Abby nods at that, and she strokes Tim’s face, “And if we can’t stand it, or if it can’t be home anymore, then we’re start looking for somewhere else.”
Sex has flavors, and colors, feels, and sounds. It has emotions and currents. What had started as ‘getting reacquainted sex’ shifts after that conversation.

It flows into comfort sex, into reassurance made touch. Tim can feel his own fear building at the idea of going back, and with that fear, resentment, at himself, for being afraid. He doesn’t have to go into the city, he’s not going to be digging bodies out of the rubble, but at the end of the day, when they come home, they’ll smell like it, and that has him unsettled.

So, he pulls as much comfort as he can out of here and now, out of kisses and strokes, out of skin growing pink and warm, swollen and flush. He takes solace in soft moans, and quick breaths, little grunts, and the slicker-y sounds of wet skin sliding on wet skin.

He lets pleasure and love and the feel of these people all around him banish tomorrow and yesterday. He lets kisses and thrusts, and images: Breena’s head back, mouth open, gasping. Abby laughing as Jimmy licks one of her toes. His fingers twined with Jimmy’s over Breena’s breast, as Breena kisses Jimmy, riding Tim slow and steady. Abby and Breena kissing each other… so many images, all of his favorite sights… They wash the rest of the world away, and plant him in a small, dim room, filled with soft words, love, and exquisite pleasure.

And for a few minutes, tomorrow doesn’t exist.
Inch At A Time

Getting home doesn’t take nearly as long as leaving did.

First off, the tension between… They aren’t sure yet. New York City and New York State, except that New York City is also attempting to become a state and two New York States right next to each other is going to be an issue… Tim’s referring to them as Upstate and Gotham… has been relegated to the lawyers.

Which means they can drive straight south.

Plus, he doesn’t have to stop to rest every two hours. He and Abby are swapping out. He does need nap/snack time after two hours of driving, but his trip doesn’t have to stop to accommodate that. That’s working out well for Abby, too, who also appreciates the downtime. She’s not as sleepy as she was first trimester, but trimester three means she’s also getting tired more easily than in trimester two.

They’re making somewhat slower time than Jimmy and Breena (more bathroom breaks), but every meal/snack stop they plan out ahead of time and they wait for them. They’ll get home the same time.

Going south, there are two main ways to get to Tim and Abby’s place. (Closer to DC than Jimmy and Breena’s and where they intend to land tonight.) The shorter way, which is again open, is to take I-95 south, and then skirt the city by taking I-495 around it, and then exit off of I-495 toward their neighborhood. (The longer way involves going through the city, which is currently legal, but a beyond stupid plan.)

Tim and Abby have both done this run thousands of times.

For the most part, they can’t see much of DC from I-495. Most of the view is trees. Or office buildings. The occasional mall. But… as they head south, they get to the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, the link between the Maryland and Virginia sides of right outside of DC, and from there, if they look west, they can see most of the city, with the Washington Monument jutting into the sky.

It’s night. They got on the road a bit before 08:00, and it’s almost 22:00 now.

Tim’s intentionally not driving. He’s not sure how he’ll react to seeing the city, and he doesn’t want to attempt to control an SUV while dealing with whatever’s going to go through his head when he sees it.

They’ve seen this drive, this time of night… more times than either of them could count. They should be looking a million little lights. They should see the monument lit white, a gleaming pillar into the sky. There should be houses and buildings aglow.

There aren’t.

Tim’s not sure if seeing nothing, except the crescent moon on the river, is a mercy or not.

“Oh God,” whispers out of Abby, as she looks out and sees nothing but black.

He nods.
“Is the Washington Monument still there?”

He nods again. “Yeah.” He shakes his head as he realizes he doesn’t know that for sure, but… unless the wrong guy got a tank, which certainly wasn’t impossible, it should still be there. “I haven’t seen it since the fires were burning. I… I might be wrong. Last time I saw it, I was with Tony and Abbi on the Mall, pumping out the Reflecting Pond, trying to wet everything down so the fire wouldn’t spread. When the wind shifted, the smoke would thin, and it was hazy, glowing orange and red.” He laughs, it’s dry, bitter sound. “Actually, it was kind of pretty.”

Abby squeezes his hand.

The first hint that something is wrong hits Tim when they pull into his driveway and see lights on. There shouldn’t be lights on in his house. While he could fully believe that he was out of it enough to have left all the lights on at Jimmy’s place, he was only in his house for an hour, during the day… So… There should not be lights on in his house.

He’s stepped out of his car, wary, gun already in hand, and Jimmy pulls up behind him. He sees Tim eyeing the house, sees the gun, and gets out of his car. He puts his hand on Tim’s wrist, making sure the gun keeps pointing down, and quietly says, “Remember my comment about meaningless death? Let’s go to my place. We can sort this out during the day, with Tony and Abbi along for backup.”

Tim’s in the process of nodding when his door opens and Elaine steps out.

There are a few minutes of hellos and hugs and a somewhat awkward discussion of “Gibbs sent us here because his house can’t hold us all, but we can leave,” followed with Tim and Abby doing their part of “Absolutely not, you keep your butts right here, we’re not throwing you out, we can go to Jimmy’s,” which ends with Elaine mentioning that Tony, Ziva, Allan, Bishop and Jake are all at Jimmy’s place.

This is followed by a moment where the four of them all stare at each other, and then look at Elaine and her husband. (The kids have headed back inside, moving things around to make room for Tim and his family.)

“I guess we’ll just… head home, then.” Jimmy and Breena are sort of staring around at Elaine and her husband. They don’t want to go home. They just got all of them together. Apart, especially after a long day of driving, is the last thing they want right now, but…

There’s no real reason why they’d stay at the McGees’. And, okay, they don’t exactly want to be out to Elaine and her family, but if they get outed it’s not the end of the world. But the people at Jimmy’s place all work with them, and that could get the rumor mill running, fast.

Assuming, that is, that one of these days there’ll be a job and a place for the rumor mill to run.

So…

Elaine looks them over, and glances to her husband, he nods back at her. “If the only thing you think I’ve noticed about the four of you after all these years is your breakfast order, you aren’t paying attention. The kids don’t know, and I’d imagine you’d like to keep it that way, but with tight quarters it’d make sense to share a room.”
None of them were expecting that, and it’s clear by the way they’re looking at her, and each other.

“Uh… Sure,” Tim says, feeling very odd about being told how to bunk in his own house. His eyes flit to the cross around Elaine’s neck; the one she never takes off.

She sees him do it and knows what he’s thinking. “A good friend of mine once said, that he who was without sin could cast the first stone. Well, that ain’t me. And He said something about not judging unless you want to be judged, and I don’t think He meant, ‘judge all you want in your heart, just don’t talk about it.’ And He said one other thing, and that’s to love each other, which I aim to do.”

That gets another round of nods. “Come on, Brian, let’s get our stuff out of the master bedroom, they’re gonna need it.”

It’s not quite eleven when they’re all settled into Tim’s room. Today was a long day, and tomorrow’s going to be longer. They turn in, just to sleep.

“So, what happens next?” Jimmy asks Elaine, at breakfast.

“Vera and Hec, my sister and her husband, are coming up from North Carolina to get us. We can stay with them until…” she lets that drift off.

“Until you know what you’re doing?” Abby asks.

Elaine nods. “Not sure if we’re coming back. Your Boss made sure we had money to land on our feet. We don’t have to worry about making rent or paying for food, and our apartment building is still standing, but…” her voice catches, and she has to stop, resettle herself, before she can go on, “The diner’s gone. The Marines have this satellite service up right now, so you can look up your street, see how bad it is, without having to go into the city.”

They hear Brian speak, for maybe the second time ever. (Why Elaine likes Gibbs isn’t a mystery.) “Scorch marks, ash, melted lumps.” He shakes his head. “All that’s left.

“We have a little money in the bank, but that’s for the kids, for college. Not sure if the land is worth anything anymore, might not have any equity to take out of it. Might start over again in Raleigh.”

Tim doesn’t have to think about it. “If you want to rebuild here, and if you need help, we’ll help you get the financing.”

Elaine waves that off. “That’s sweet, but I’m not going to put you out, you’ve got your own babies to raise.”

“It’d be an investment, not a gift, but… Think about it, figure out what you want to do, and, if you want to rebuild, we’ll help,” Breena says. “Actually, once we’re done,” they’ve explained, briefly, why they were back so soon, “you and I should have a chat. I’m always looking to diversify my holdings, and this might be a good partnership.”
As Breena, Jimmy, and Abby drive out of Tim’s neighborhood, Jimmy says to her, “That sounds like putting more roots into DC.”

Breena shrugs a bit. “Wouldn’t be any sort of hands-on management. I could do that from anywhere.”

“But you’d like to stay here,” Abby adds.

Breena nods. “My family is here. My business is here. Our home, the house… Unless we can’t stay, I’d like to be here. Maybe… just getting a bit further out of DC will be enough. Move closer to the house or something.”

“Or something… West… Lots of air and space,” Abby says. “Get a big ranch out in Montana or something.”

Montana isn’t one of Jimmy’s dearest hopes, so he says, “Or something.” They haven’t done any extensive searching, yet, but the first brushes of research they’ve looked into have let them see that immigrating legally pretty much anywhere would be a massive undertaking, made even more complicated by Jimmy’s diabetes. Most of the developed world isn’t interested in having someone with expensive medical issues become a citizen, and since ‘marry a citizen’ isn’t an option for them… Complicated is the name of the game.

“It’s a big country, lots of—” Abby’s saying, having picked up on Jimmy’s lukewarm response to Montana.

And then they all go silent. They’ve gotten to the part of the trip where they can see DC.

Breena swallows hard, a low gravelly “Fuck,” slips out of Jimmy, and Abby closes her eyes and looks away.

Eventually, Breena thinks of something to say, “It should be in black and white. All the bombed out World War II pictures, the shots of Dresden after the fires, London during the Blitz, they’re all in black and white.”

Getting into the city isn’t difficult. Not physically. The roads aren’t torn up. There’s almost no traffic, just a few cars, like theirs, and a decent number of truck going in to pull rubble out. And a long line of heavy trucks, filled with… stuff, are coming out, taking wreckage away.

Rock Creek Park. That’s where they’re going.

Jimmy’s been there… God, hundreds of times. Before he and Breena moved out of the city, that was his morning run. He’s pulled more bodies than he wants to count out of Rock Creek Park. He knows every street, every trail. He knows the hills, and the overpasses…

He knew them.

It’s bare now. The grass burned, the trees burned, the brush burned… This bit of driving might as well be in black and white, because he’s not seeing, (besides the other cars) any color. The “Creek” part of Rock Creek Park is sludgy gray.

The granite: boulders, and the rocks used to build overpasses so joggers could move through without having to dodge cars on the roads, had been gray. Now it’s gray streaked with black.
Everywhere else, the trees are brown, with the last few, stubborn leaves hanging on, also brown. Here, they're black, charred, leaning haphazardly or already collapsed.

When they finally see something in color, it’s a collection of huge tents on a fairly level bit of ground, that had been a nice meadow for Frisbee or lying about and catching some sun, and is now the single largest morgue he’s ever seen.

Neither Jimmy nor Breena are strangers to the smells of death. Abby’s not, either. But none of them have ever smelled it at this level.

The air is so thick with putrescence, they could chew it.

It staggers them when they open the car doors. Staggers them with the force of the assault on their senses, with an almost palpable hit of death and rot. Worse, there’s the surprise of it. They’d been smelling it, in the car, for miles. They thought they knew what they were getting into.

They didn’t.

There’s a very military order about the place. Likely, because the Marines are handling it. There’s a check in table, where Breena and Jimmy are both given name tags, bags to hold their clothing and personal items, and clean coveralls.

“Abby McGee.”

“You aren’t on the list,” a young Marine says to her while Jimmy and Breena head off to get changed.

“I’m not here to handle bodies. I’m a forensic specialist. DNA matches, fingerprints run, bloodwork. You name it, I’m your lady.”

He looks confused. “I don’t… Hold on.” He gets up and a few minutes later, she’s got a higher up Marine in front of her.

He’s also rather confused looking. The plan is to process all the bodies here, and then send off the packets for identification. “Ms. McGee…”

“Abby. I know, you’re not processing, yet. But you’ve got to have stuff to process. I’m the lead Forensic Specialist at NCIS.” She hands over her creds. “You name it, and I’m set to do it.”

“We don’t have the tools for you.” They don’t. They’ve got eight tents set up to process bodies. Refrigerated shipping containers to hold them. Generators a plenty to make sure they’ve got the power to run it all. But there’s not a single computer set with a scanner for finger prints or facial recognition, let alone anything to handle blood or hair DNA.

“I’ve got my own. You give me a guy to go with me, and keep me in prints and blood samples, and I can start getting names on your John/Jane Does.”

The Marine checks and double checks her ID. Then he thinks for a minute. “How many people do you need?”
“Someone to get me there and back.” She pats her tummy. “Don’t want to be going through DC on my own right now, but there are supposed to be Marines at the Navy Yard, so once I’m there, it should be fine. Then all I need is someone to make sure I don’t run out of information to process.”

The Marine barks a short, sarcastic laugh. “No fear of that. I’ll call over to the Navy Yard, if they’re willing to spare someone to shuttle you and the ID packets around, I’m fine with starting to get names attached to the Does.”

Half an hour later, Abby finds Jimmy and Breena, gives them both a kiss on the cheek, and tells them where she’s going, as two young Marines grab boxes filled with bags.

---

They have it set up as an assembly line.

The first stage are the people working through the city. Clean up crews are going through, pulling out rubble, pulling down buildings that won’t stand on their own. Every time they find someone, they mark it off, and call in what will eventually be known as *The Morgue*.

They send out the first set of handlers. The people bringing the bodies in are mostly EMTs or Medical Corpsmen, though some are volunteers from all over the spectrum of humanity.

Those bodies will be carried to a refrigerated shipping container. Before being put in there, the body will be laid in a bag with an identifying number on it. Then the body will wait until a table opens up.

From there, each body will move to a table. On that table, will be another bag (also with the ID number on it) that the person’s belongs will go into.

On that table, they’re photographed, their clothing and pockets are searched. If there’s an ID on them, it will also be photographed and go in the plastic pouch where all personal belongings will go. If there is an ID, the last name of the person will go on the bag in addition to the number. All people, IDed or not, will have hair and blood samples taken. With so many unknowns, and so many children, they’re hoping to use DNA to build webs of family connections.

This is the station where the number gets put into the computer, with pictures, and an ID, or Jane/John Doe.

The next table is Breena’s. Taking clothing off, photographing, again, the body under the clothing, and then washing everyone off. Once clean, if she has a name, she write it on the bottom of the person’s left foot. In all cases she writes the number on the bottom of the right. It’s less “tidy” than a toe tag, but there’s no chance of the number getting lost. It’s not all that different from step one of her usual job. What comes next is different, but that’s not her job.

The next table has a portable x-ray hovering over it. Each body will be x-rayed. For some, that will be about helping to determine cause of death. For others, it will be used to help ID the person.

Jimmy’s got one of the next tables. The first part of the line is fairly quick. The second part, not so much. Tentative cause of death is his job. He gets the body and does as much as he can with what he has. Some of them are fairly straightforward: bullet, blunt force trauma, smoke inhalation, fire.

He digs a lot of bullets out of people. He removes plates and surgical pins to help ID victims. He takes histology samples, to narrow down cases where there are no clear causes of death. Unlike NCIS, here, it’s not his job to follow up. It’s not his job to come up with final conclusions. He’s just a table, on a line, getting bodies processed.
But for right now, he’s the last table.

From him (and the other MEs), bodies go into new refrigerated shipping containers. One for those with IDs, and one for the Does.

There is one more station, after Jimmy, though the table at this one doesn’t have space for a body on it. This one is a place for people to sit, and wait. Most of them won’t wait long. This is where the names of the people they’ve been able to ID go. At this table, there are computers, and men and women, most of them older, all of them calm, peaceful, sad.

This is where the Chaplains, Ministers, Priests, Rabbis, Imams and Social Workers are.

They will get a name, and begin their search, find an address, and phone numbers, and begin the hunt for next-of-kin. And once they find one, it’s their jobs to go and spread the news.

The first day Tim’s home, after Abby, Breena, and Jimmy have headed into the city, he doesn’t have much to do.

That’s not true. He’s got three little girls under the age of three on his hands. He should have piles of stuff to do, but Elaine (who should also be sitting on her butt, healing up, along with the rest of her family) feels like she’s freeloadign if she’s not helping out. So, he’s in a house with eight people, any one of whom is fully capable of looking after a baby, and three babies.

Baby time seems to be good for all of them.

And, outnumbering them more than two to one keeps all of the adults, who are still tired, weak, and healing, from getting too worn out.

He does nap when they go down for their morning nap.

After lunch, when he’s playing with Anna and Kelly, a thought hits him. If the day before yesterday was the 30th, that would mean yesterday was Halloween, and today is his anniversary with Abby.

“Do you guys mind keeping an eye on them?” he asks, spooning mushed peas and carrots into Anna.

“Not at all!” Kenzie says, enjoying this. Taking care of happy, well-fed, babies who are going to get a nap soon is actually fun, and a very nice change from running the NCIS kitchens, trying to stretch ever smaller amounts of food to feed a crowd of people who are perpetually disappointed to see what you’ve got.

“Goin’ out?” Elaine asks.

“Yeah.” Tim shakes his head a bit. “I just realized what day it is. My second anniversary. You want me to get anything for you?”

Elaine shakes her head. “Vera and Hec’ll be here by four. Just make sure you’re back by then.”

“No problem.”
In the two years since Tim and Abby moved into this neighborhood, they’ve gotten to know people. Which means something as basic as attempting to go to the grocery store to get ingredients for a nice dinner and flowers for his wife, is *exhausting*.

Two people in the grocery store gush on about if he’s okay and stare in horror at his mention of being stuck in DC. His usual barista at the coffee shop (They’re out of coffee, so he’s picking up a bag for himself, and another one, with caffeine for Jimmy and Breena.) wants to know about breaking open the case. The florist wants to bitch about those “animals” in DC and how they deserved it if they were going to burn their own town.

Pulling into his driveway, the neighbor three houses down jogs over to say ‘Hi’ and gawk at him.

*Everyone* he ran into out there stared. He can’t imagine he’s the only guy they’re seeing moving around who hasn’t been out of DC long enough to regain the weight, but he feels like a tie-dyed unicorn in a herd of horses.

He’s out for a little more than an hour, and by the time he gets back, he’s ready for another nap, and debating not going out in public until he’s put on at least five more pounds.

Besides the smell, and the litter… no trash pickup for three weeks plus 600 people means lots of litter… Abby thinks NCIS really isn’t all that different.

Okay, that’s not really true. The ring of burned cars around the perimeter and the fact that everywhere she looks around the walls there are shell casings, is all the different Abby ever needs to see.

Besides the litter and the smell, *inside* NCIS isn’t all that different. Abby feels like the walls should be screaming. But they don’t. It’s just a wickedly smelly building that looks like it housed the mother of all frat parties. Clean it out, air it out, fix a bit of damage, and… it’s fine. It shouldn’t be. It almost feels like a betrayal of Tim and everyone else who was in here, but… really, it’s fine.

Down here, in the lab, with her music on… besides the smell, it really could be any day before she got her own team.

The Marines who are keeping watch aren’t doing much. Besides her and two Governors, there’s no one else to *watch*, and the Govs are locked in, so it’s not like they’re going anywhere.

So, she has a team of polite, young, overly courteous people who are willing to lend her whatever hands she might need, and are treating her like she’s made of spun glass. She doesn’t have to lift anything heavier than a blood vial or print card, they’ll more or less sprint off to fetch her something should she desire it (and when a smoothie craving hit, one of them did go all the way out of the city to get her two of them), and, because this is the easy stuff, she’s got another two of them entering prints into AFIS. (She’s thinking she’s got one of them interested in a career in Forensics when her hitch is up.)

If she was doing *anything* else, (and if her sense of smell would vanish) this would be one of the most pleasant days of her career.

But she’s not.

And she’s also, because they will not leave her alone in here, unable to do the one thing she most wants to do, walk fifty feet to the ballistics lab, and see where Tim was hiding out. She knows he
wouldn’t want whatever is left of his nest viewed by these very pleasant strangers.

She wants to walk the whole building, feel it, see where he was, but… not with an audience. Abby’s fairly sure that the one thing she’s not going to get here is alone time, and to the extent that the whole city is upside down, not being alone makes sense, but to the extent that she’s in a mostly empty building that’s structurally sound, being alone here really isn’t much different from being alone at home.

Doesn’t matter. She can’t ask them to leave or let her alone without explaining why she wants the alone time, and she doesn’t want to do that, either.

So, she half perches on a stool, and feeds another picture into the facial recognition system.

Crunching gravel. That’s the sound that wakes Tim up. Someone’s pulling into his driveway. It’s a little after four, so he’s pretty sure who that someone one.

He pulls on pants and quietly heads down to say goodbye to his guests and hello to their kin.

Vera and Hec are, much like Elaine and Brian, middle class, middle-aged (though the exit from Middle-aged to Old is coming up fast for Vera and Hec.) and generally cheerful. There are a lot of long hugs as Elaine and her sister see each other for the first time since before everything fell apart. Tim gets a pretty enthusiastic hug for putting everyone up at his place.

He keeps a fake smile on his face, but his eyes are burning and his throat is thick as they drive off.

Another thing ending. Everything’s ending. Because he fucking killed the city.

His knees feel weak and loose, and he finds himself sitting on the stoop of his front porch, crying, wrapped in the sense that nothing will ever, ever be right again, because it can’t be right if there’s no Diner to get breakfast at on Sunday mornings. It can’t be right if they can’t all get together, have breakfast, go to church, do dinner at the Slaters, and then he and Jimmy and Gibbs head off, meet up with Tony and…

And it’s never going to be right again.

When one of the other neighbors ask if he’s okay, and if they need to call Abby, he pulls it together enough to say, “I’m… Just… She’s working. I’ll be okay,” and stumbles inside.

Once he’s in there, Tim starts looking for help. This time, he knows he’s in too deep over his head. His first idea, calling Wolf, doesn’t lead anywhere. And that makes him nervous, edgy. Things are already never going to be okay again because they can’t be because everything is changed, and that’s already spiraling out of his control, add the paralyzing fear that he got Wolf killed on top of that and he’s sitting in his office, shaking, holding his phone, willing Wolf to answer.

He has to bite his lip, hard, to get that under control. He’s the only adult in the house. He cannot fall apart.

He keeps telling himself that he’s got Wolf’s work number, which goes to an office in DC. Of course no one’s answering it.
But he thinks he’s seen Wolf only talk on a cell phone. And, hell, even Jethro doesn’t have a landline these days. If Wolf’s not picking up… Tim doesn’t know if he lives in DC or not. He could have been working late, he could have been in the city, gotten caught in the riots, his neighborhood might be ashes by now, or he could have been killed, or hurt, or still among the missing, or…

Fear’s washing over him, making him feel jittery in addition to hopeless.

That’s spiraling out of control, too, and he forces his mind out of it. He can make himself think about something else, but he can’t get his breathing to even out, or the prickly, cold nauseous fear to leave him.

So, he tries another number, and this one gets him an answer, “Agent McGee?”

“Hi.” He swallows hard, trying to get his voice under control, he sounds shaky because he is shaking.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m… No, Rachel, I’m not. Are you… Can you… see anyone right now?”

“I’m in Miami, Tim, so, not in person. What kind of not okay are you? Are you safe?”

“Oh,” he rubs his eyes. “Yeah. I’m home. I’m safe. I’m not going to hurt myself. Just having a really bad time right now.”

“Okay,” her voice is cool and calm. That helps him find some calm. “What sort of bad time?”

“Can’t shake the fear, and broke into a cold sweat when I couldn’t get to my usual therapist. I… I don’t know if he’s okay and…” He can’t finish that sentence.

“All right.” She sighs. “Why were you trying to get him?”

“Panic attacks… That’s probably the right word for it. I’ve been out of DC for a few days, but the wrong words, wrong thought sends me back. And… wrong thoughts send other ideas spiraling out of control, and pulling out is hard, so…”

“But you are pulling yourself out?”

“I have to. Can’t… Nothing good’s on the other side of those thoughts.”

“That’s good, Tim. Pulling out might be hard, but that’s probably the most important thing you can be doing right now. I’m going to be coming back up tomorrow. My neighbors say our street is in one piece. My husband used to work construction and would like to help with the cleanup. Would you like to talk in person tomorrow night?”

“Gotta be home for my family at night. They’re on cleanup, too. Jimmy and Breena, they’re processing the dead, and Abby’s IDing them. They’re gonna need help. They kept me going while I was in DC, least I can do for them is the same thing. But, the day after, morning?”

“We can do that. Do you have internet access?”

“Yeah. I’m at home.”

“Okay, good. Between now and then, I want you to get online and google cognitive behavioral therapy.”
“I can do that.” He can, and will. A concrete thing to do is helps him feel more settled.

“Good. There are even versions of it you can do online.”

A wry smile forms on his face, but he does feel a little calmer. “So, you’re saying it was made for me?”

“It might mesh with your style well.”

“Okay.”

There’s a quiet beat, and then, “Tim?”

“Yeah?”

“Is Jethro okay?”

“Oh, God, I should have… Yeah, he’s okay. We’re all in one piece. Worse for the wear, but nothing that time and food won’t fix.”

“Really?”

He says, “Yeah,” before he realizes what he’s telling her.

She sounds fairly satisfied as she says, “Good, Tim. Day after tomorrow, morning. How about I go to you if you don’t want to go to the city?”

“Thanks.” He hears some chirping from upstairs as he hangs up the phone. At least one little girl is awake, and that’s real and it’s now. He’s relieved to head up and start corralling babies.

Every time she finishes a box, Abby has one of the Marines go back and get her a new one.

She wishes that every time she finished a box, she could send a box filled with IDs back, but it doesn’t work that way.

By the end of the day, when she’s ready to go and get Jimmy and Breena, she’s got seventy-three people processed, and seventeen IDs. Better than nothing, but not as good as she hoped.

With any luck, there’ll be another thirty or so of them in the morning.

Her escort, Pfc Sierra Mann, is excited, really excited at seventeen IDs. Her escort is also, maybe nineteen, and like many young Marines, extremely enthusiastic about most everything. “We doing more of this tomorrow?”

“Yep. Until everyone’s got a name,” Abby answers.

“Good. Those…” she pauses, editing herself, “people at the National Guard, they stuck me in a squad keeping watch on the Lake Anna Nuclear Power plant. Three weeks of nothing. Didn’t do anything anyone would ever consider useful. This might not be what I trained for, but it’s the same kind of thing, helping people, you know?”

“Yeah, Sierra, I know.”
“I’ve got some friends who won’t be on duty tomorrow. Can I bring them?”

Abby nods. “Sure. We’ll hit the point where you just can’t stick any more information into the computers, but… Until then, bring ‘em. I can always use an extra set of hands to scan photos and put finger prints into the computer.”

Abby thinks about that more, if she can hand all of that off, she can work with just blood and bullets, the kind of work that Marines with less than an hour of training shouldn’t be doing.

“You guys’ll do photos and prints, I’ll work bullets and blood. We’ll get names for them.”

“Good, Abby.”

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is actually, if the little bit of Googling he’s doing is accurate, fairly similar to what he does when he pulls himself out of a mood or spiral.

Get into trouble. Identify the trouble. Force yourself to rationally assess what your brain is doing and why it’s a trap. Explain why the trap isn’t real. (Supposedly this allows you to, gradually, control what’s in your head.)

It also, according to the bits of research he’s done, works.

He can see why Rachel would consider this a good fit for him. He only gets a few minutes of reading between baby wrangling and getting dinner ready, but he sees one tip, and takes it. Tim rummages around in his office, looking for a rubber band, and eventually gives up because why would he have a rubber band? He can’t remember using one for anything since he was twelve, on his paper-route, rubber-banding the papers into cylinders. So, he goes up to their room, and locates one of Abby’s ponytail holders. He takes off his watch and slips it over his wrist. Part of the idea is that if he feels himself slipping into negative/not true thoughts, is that he can snap the band against his wrist, and help shock himself out of the panic. Give himself a physical “stop it” reminder.

He doesn’t think it’ll hurt, and it might help.

Jimmy and Breena have never worked together before. Not this kind of work, anyway.

And, by the end of the day, it’s safe to say that they will happily never work together again.

Not because of any mismatch of styles, or they get on each other’s nerves, or anything like that.

It’s just the job.

By the end of day one, primary killers appear to be complications of starvation and bullets. (This is likely because they haven’t started cleaning out any of the really burnt out parts of town, yet.) Which means they are seeing old people, sick people, young children, and what should otherwise be healthy, young men.

Jimmy would say about half of the people he’s seeing died because they couldn’t get enough food. It’s true that a healthy person can go twenty-one days without food. Many of the poor people who lived in DC were not healthy. Likewise, a child cannot go twenty-one days without food.
Another third have obvious signs of violence upon them. A lot of bullets. He thinks he’s removed more bullets today than he did in his entire last year at NCIS. He’s officially listing them all as murders right now, but from what Tim said about the nighttime shoot on sight orders, and the size of the bullets he’s removing, he’s willing to bet that the majority of these bullets will come back to Metro LEOs.

The rest are burn victims or unknowns.

It’s grinding work, and they deal with it the same way people always have. Black humor. Deepest crevices of the Marianas Trench at midnight *black* humor. Jimmy lets all of his inner dweeb out, all the inappropriate comments, because here it *helps*. Anything that gets the people around him not thinking about the fact that they’re carefully cataloguing all of the injuries on a six-year-old who’s died from massive organ failure because she couldn’t get a few hundred calories a day, helps.

Bad jokes. Black jokes. Idiot puns. Long, rambling stories with wicked, dirty punchlines. Any and all of it. Even the chaplains and pastors are adding in with some of their own. (Theirs tend to be PG-rated. There is one Priest, though, probably about Ducky’s age. From his posture, and the uniform, he was a Marine Corp Chaplain, and he’s got the dirtiest jokes they’ve ever heard. Apparently, they told some absolutely *filthy* stories in the Corp back in Korea and Viet Nam, and he’s happy to share.) They tell the jokes to each other. They tell them to their clients. Anything to keep them all from just collapsing under the sorrow of it and never getting up again.

When Abby joins them, she hears one of the EMTs wrap up with, “And then the dad says, ‘Pool? We don’t have a pool!’” She looks startled when the people around her laugh, hard, too hard. Even drunk people in a good mood don’t find *that* joke *that* funny.

Breena’s wiping tears out of her eyes at it, and so is Jimmy.

And then Abby doesn’t have to ask. It’s laugh or cry, and if they start crying, they aren’t going to stop.

---

Haven. That’s Tim’s goal. Provide a safe haven for them at the end of the day.

He’s made the best meal he can make them. Steaks are on the grill, searing away nicely, next to the asparagus. He’s got potatoes roasting along with onions and radishes in the oven. There’s salad in the fridge.

He’s got red and white roses on the table for Abby.

And he picked up chocolate cake for dessert. (He’d thought idly about attempting to bake one himself, and decided even a box mix was way too much work when he was at the market earlier today.)

The girls are just about ready to eat. He’s got them all in the living room, chilling to Little Bear. Anna and Kelly are on his lap, Molly’s sitting next to them. Right now, it’s just a matter of putting food on plates and plates in front of people.

It’s a matter of one other thing, too. He smells them as soon as the door opens, and it’s a kick to the gut. It’s instant, full-immersion, balls-deep, cold-sweat, wanting to throw up, run for cover, full-body terror prickling through his skin and screaming along his nerves from brain to toes and back again.

He snaps the band hard, and it helps, a little. The sting is something to focus on besides the smell and
fear. Repeating that he’s home, holding the girls, helps. Holding the girls, feeling small bodies against his, and focusing on the way that feels, helps. Going outside, where he can’t smell it, that’s even better.

Outside, steaks, asparagus, clean air, little girls… He snaps the band again, forces himself to count to three between breaths. He makes himself slow down.

At Jimmy and Breena’s place, they have a laundry room. It’s off the garage, and there’s a door between it and the rest of the house. They have a second washer, too. That one lives in the garage. This is intentional. That was the make or break feature of any house they looked at. With their jobs, they needed a door between the laundry room and the rest of the house, and they needed a place where the worst of it could be washed before it even got into the house.

At Tim and Abby’s house, the washing machine and dryer are off the hall in the middle of the downstairs.

Tim going white as a sheet and breaking into a visible, cold sweat as soon as they stepped in the house, before they even got to hello, let Abby, Jimmy, and Breena know the logistics of this aren’t going to work at Tim’s place.

Tomorrow they’re at Jimmy and Breena’s. Tony and Ziva and the rest of them can come here.

It doesn’t matter that they stripped out of their clothing and wore coveralls, or that those coveralls are back at the tents. The smell is in their hair and skin. It snuck into their clothing while they changed. It seeped into their shoes and socks. It’s in Jimmy’s van, soaking into the upholstery, lingering in the air filters.

And now, it’s in Tim and Abby’s house.

They don’t try to comfort Tim. Having correctly diagnosed the problem, they know getting closer to him is the last thing they need to do.

They do get undressed, showered, scrubbed and scrubbed again. Jimmy sneaks downstairs, naked, and sees Tim on the back porch with the girls. Tim sees him naked, in the kitchen getting trash bags and baking soda. He’s not sure what Jimmy’s doing, but he’s obviously had a shower, so Tim flashes him a less than perfectly enthusiastic thumbs up.

Upstairs he goes, and Breena tucks all of the clothing, and the shoes, into the trash bag, and sprinkles the whole box of baking soda on them. Then they tie it shut, and stick it in three more layers of trash bags.

From there, Jimmy opens the window, and tosses it outside.

They get all the windows and doors open, and after a few minutes, Tim pops his head back in, and the house just smells like outside.

He grabs Anna, bringing her in to her Mama, and then Kelly, and Molly follows them in. “Dinner’s ready to go,” he says, brittle smile on his face, pretending them getting home didn’t set off a massive panic attack.

They let him, kissing him hello, with long hugs, and tickles and giggles for the girls. None of those smiles, or giggles reach their eyes, but it’s better than crying.
“Pretty flowers,” Abby says, as she’s snuggling Kelly, with her other arm around Tim.

He kisses her, and if everything else about this meal has a thin veneer of cheer over it, the kiss, and all the confusion and fear and relief and love, that’s real. “Happy Anniversary.”

She smiles, also real, and kisses him back. She remembers them saying to each other, last year, that the next one would be even better. It wasn’t. She says a quick prayer, and then whispers to him. “Next year will be better.”

He nods and kisses her again. “Starting tomorrow, it gets better.”

“Amen.”

They don’t talk about their day during dinner. That’s different. Usually, no matter how bad or gore-y, they can talk, but none of them wants to spend another minute in today if they can avoid it.

So they eat, and Tim tells them about the girls, and Vera and Hec, and that Rachel made it through okay. (He doesn’t mention why he called her, but they’re relieved he did.) He talks about calling Heather, and that she’ll be here in the morning, and he’ll get Anna and Molly to daycare, and then give Gibbs a call and see if he’s up for messing around on the house some.

That sounds like a good plan to the rest of the group.

They put girls to bed, and then they’ve got a few hours to fill.

That starts what will be their pattern for the next few weeks. Tim picks first. He grabs the lightest, fluffiest, silliest comedy he can find. Breena makes them popcorn. They settle onto the sofa, all wrapped into each other, and they watch the first five episodes of the Muppets.

And, like with the jokes in the morgue, they laugh too long, and they laugh too hard, and sometimes they have to make themselves laugh, but they do.

Between now and when The Morgue shuts down, they’ll binge watch every light comedy they’ve even heard was good. They’ll check out goofy kids’ movies, or rewatch old favorites.

Princess Bride night goes over well. The Incredibles and it’s sequel, just fine. Tim realizes that apparently, while he wasn’t paying attention, Minions developed into some sort of small yellow things that don’t exactly speak Spanglish. He’s not sure if he can think of his underlings the same anymore. They giggle maniacally at John Cusack movies from the ‘80s. Abby and Breena get them watching the fluffy teen romances they grew up on, which he and Jimmy don’t exactly love, but they’re not awful. (And they do match them one for one with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Transformers movies.) Legally Blonde (and it’s sequels) is also surprisingly good, and they all really like, But, I’m a Cheerleader!

They buy themselves at least two hours of a night of goofiness, spent wrapped in each other, and that’s enough to get them grounded in the here and now to let them make love, and then sleep.
Next Steps

Chapter Notes

I tried to get this out Monday, alas, the universe conspired against me. Happy Late Birthday, Suzanna!

Eat, sleep, eat some more, sleep some more, make love, eat, sleep…

For Gibbs and Abbi, it’s been a very low-key collection of days.

It’s abundantly clear by the way he crashes as soon as Abbi’s home, that the only thing that had been keeping Gibbs moving forward was a need to get his people fed and out. Given how Abbi crashes, just as hard, it’s just as clear that duty and honor were the only things keeping her going forward, either.

Gibbs knows that Duck and Penny are in the house, too, though they don’t see much of them. He assumes (He knows he shouldn’t, but he’s too damn tired to investigate.) that they’re doing pretty much the same thing. A collection of plates he and Abbi didn’t get dirty, wash, or put back in the wrong place tells them that Duck and Penny get up at least on occasion and are eating, and that’s all they need to know.

This morning, Gibbs wakes up with the sun in his face, Abbi on his one side, the feel of her warm against his body, and her hair draped across his arm and chest. He sighs, rolls over, and snuggles in closer. She murmurs something unintelligible to him, patting the hand that’s wrapped around her chest, and they both drift off again.

Gibbs wakes up again, later, sun high enough it’s not streaming through the windows of the ‘girls’ room.’ (Ducky and Penny have the master bedroom. Gibbs’ knees might not be great, but he can get up and down off the mattress on the floor okay. He figures Ducky and Penny had more than enough of that in the Navy Yard, and since they don’t have to sleep on the floor, he’s not going to make them.) This time, the lady who’s attracting his attention is carefully biting on the shoulder of his t-shirt, and making a very plaintive, bored whine in his direction.

He blinks at Mona.

She whines back at him.

There is food in her bowl, water in the bowl next to it, and a doggy door leading to the outside. All of her basic needs are taken care of. He pats her a little, and tries to go back to sleep.

She keeps nudging his shoulder and whining at him.

Gibbs sits up, blinking, rubbing his eyes, listening. He doesn’t hear anything. He doesn’t smell anything. There’s nothing springing to mind for reasons why Mona would want him out of bed.

She gives him a big wet lick, and bounds off the mattress, (carefully jumping over Abbi, she’s allowed to keep sleeping in) to the door, and then stops, looking at him, signaling, follow me.

Gibbs rolls his eyes a bit, but he needs to ‘dehydrate,’ as he put it to Kate once, so he might as well
find out what Mona wants.

While he’s taking care of his business, she’s getting him ready for some of her own. When he steps out of the bathroom, she’s waiting for him, and so are his sneakers. Mona looks up at him, big, eager doggy eyes, practically quivering at him with let’s go all over her face.

This would be the point where it occurs to Gibbs that he hasn’t been out of the house in... He’s not sure. And yes, he’s been in need of lots of naps and more food, Mona has not. She’s been laying around the house, mostly amusing herself (Though he’s got a suspicion that Ziva’s been by. He thinks he heard her voice yesterday, and more food showed up, that he knows he didn’t buy, so she probably made sure Mona got out for a bit.) and now she’s BORED.

Gibbs thinks about it. Yesterday, this would have been a complete no-go. Today… He’s tired. But he doesn’t feel like he just got off ninety-six hours straight on.

He pats Mona’s head. “Okay. Let me get dressed.” No matter how out of it he may be, he’s not going jogging (optimistic, walking) in… November (?) in his boxers and t-shirt.

Ziva has been over to Gibbs’ place. And she’s been to Tim’s. And, of course, right now, she’s living at Jimmy’s, so she’s seeing to everyone there, too.

As the only member of the extended family who wasn’t in the Navy Yard, she’s the only one who’s not currently spending twenty hours a day eating or sleeping.

Like Mona, she’s bored.

Getting people out of DC and food into it, that was fun, and better yet, important. Scouting routes, smuggling people, making sure no one was watching at the right moment, that was excellent. Her daily run of buying groceries and making food for sleeping people, that’s important, but somewhat less interesting, and even if she goes all out on it, still doesn’t take more than three hours.

Tony’s starting to bounce back, but he still gets tired too quickly, and he’s not precisely enthusiastic about going into DC to help with the cleanup operation. She doesn’t blame him for that, but she does wish she had something… bigger… to be doing.

Once again, she’s in a house full of sleeping people. Everything she needs to do today is done. So… now what?

She spends several minutes thinking about who is up, active, and ready to do something. Last she heard, Vance and Jarvis were both resting as hard as they can. She doesn’t know the General who’s currently running the cleanup of DC, or anyone at the Salvation Army or Red Cross, and going in on her own would freak Tony out.

There are things she could be doing, practical things, like trying to get into contact with their insurance agent, but all of the information for that is sitting in their apartment. So, that’s on hold until they go into town, which she doesn’t imagine is going to happen anytime soon.

The news says that DC is calmed down, but it’s not ‘safe.’ (Mostly ‘not safe’ means structurally unsound, but there are still gangs roving around and looting.) If they’re going to go in, they’re going to want to make sure they’ve got extra guns watching their back. Which means that trip’s going wait
for at least Gibbs and Abbi up and moving around enough to keep eyes on them, or, better yet, for Jimmy to get back. (She’d really appreciate having someone else who’s actually healthy to keep eyes on them.)

So, that’s not an option, at least not in the next five minutes.

She’s poking at her computer, reading the news feed, feeling frustrated by the current situation, when an Op Ed about who is going to be paying for fixing everything up catches her eye.

Ziva grabs her phone and begin dialing.

Diane picks up on the second ring. “Anderson.”

“Do you need help?”

“God, yes! I need a full department.”

“What do you have?”

“A very keen seventeen-year-old, and Eric when he’s awake.”

Ziva winces. “What can I do?”

“I’ve got everything from a complete audit of the Federal Government, to an audit of DC, to trying to find cash to repair everything—”

“Aren’t you using the vote-buying money for that?”

Diane laughs, and it’s a dry, bitter sound, laced with frustration and malice. “Eight point nine billion dollars sounds like a lot of money until you’ve got a city almost bombed off the map. Just security, cleaning everything up, and say, rebuilding the hospitals and schools will burn all of it.”

Ziva’s mouth drops. “How is that even possible?”

“A state-of-the-art hospital can cost half a billion dollars all on its own. One’s a complete loss, and another is so trashed it might as well be. A good high school’ll run eighty to ninety, if not more, millions of dollars. Middle schools and elementary schools cost less, but we lost a bunch of them. If we follow the EPA guidelines for cleanup…” Diane groans. She has entire thumb drives filled with nothing but EPA cleanup-reg. (That’s what she’s got Emily doing, looking them all up and finding the one’s she’s got to deal with.) “It’s expensive. Between the old buildings that might have had lead in the paint or asbestos, the gas stations that burned, anywhere that did any sort of chemical work, anywhere that did any sort of radiology work… Your local chiropractor has an x-ray. His building burns. EPA says we can’t just cart the waste away, we’ve got to make sure it’s safe and properly handled and disposed of. You want to guess how many hundreds of x-rays were in DC? And that’s just the one thing… There are thousands of things… Everything from any sort of doctor’s office to paint stores… And they all have to be cleaned up properly. And, the longer things sit, the more mold we’re going to have, so there’s even more crap that needs hazmat containment. I know Jarvis is thinking of telling me to go blind and stupid just so we can get rebuilding before 2020, and I’m really tempted to do it.”

The idea that it might be four years before they can even begin rebuilding strikes Ziva as insane.

“Blind and stupid doesn’t sound bad to me, either.”

“Yeah, well, that’s until there’s no crab harvest two years from now because some unnamed crap leaks into the Chesapeake because I went blind and let them just cart the wreckage off.” Ziva can
feel frustration pouring off of Diane. “I don’t even want to think about the wrongful death suits. Metro’s going to get sued into oblivion because of the shoot-on-sight order. IRS, EPA, and the FEC… Whatever’s left of the Federal Government is going to get crucified because they didn’t have enough security.” Diane sighs.

“What can I do?”

“It’s boring, but… I need someone to okay payments to haul-away companies. Some of them are coming in and cleaning up on goodwill, assuming we’ll make it right in the end. Some of them are asking for funding, but they aren’t actually doing any work. And the specialists, the guys who deal with hazmat situations, they aren’t budging until there’s 50% in the bank. They’re not betting their companies on the idea that we’ll pay up when all is said and done.”

“I’ve got a computer. Send me what you have, and I’ll get on it.”

“Thank you!”

And, yes, reading up on different companies, asking for proof that they are actually cleaning something up, and then getting account numbers and money transferred isn’t exciting, but it’s useful, and that makes being stuck in a house filled with sleeping people easier to deal with.

If he could have, Jarvis would have slept the first three days straight through.

But he can’t.

One day. That’s as much rest as he gets. He’s sure he looks like death warmed over; he certainly feels like it. He’s at Leon’s still, and using his house as the Executive Office of Jarvistan (as he calls it when he’s talking to his family or Leon) doing as much as he can with what little he has.

The job calls, so he answers.

It sounds fairly easy, get everything cleaned-up, then fix stuff, and rebuild. But cleaned-up means pulling out all the wreckage, it means finding a places to put the wreckage, and finding that place means dealing with the fact that niggly bits of inter-governmental cooperation, like DC paying Virginia to take it’s trash, have all fallen apart.

Fix stuff… That’s beyond a headache. 90% of the city burned, rioted, or both. Assuming he can call every building inspector back, he’s got forty-seven guys who have to check 90% of the city to see if it’s still structurally sound.

Half of the city still has power. The other half… They’ve still got to get the wreckage out of the way before the electric people can safely go in to get the power under control. (At least, that’s what his power guys are saying. His cleanup guys are saying they need to get the power taken care of before they can get the wreckage out. He’s trying to get them to team up and work together.)

His water processing is in Maryland. They claim everything is fine at their end, but obviously, because the water isn’t potable when it’s coming out of the tap, something’s FUBAR somewhere in the system. They’re ‘getting to the bottom of it.’

Rebuild… Physical rebuilding… DC has reams of regulations on how and why and when and where things can be built. On top of that, entire neighborhoods are gone, but if they’re going to be rebuilt, assuming the laws are followed, they’ll have to be rebuilt to historical landmark standards.
Infrastructure rebuilding… His tax base is gone. Somehow he needs money to do this, and the people who would be paying those taxes have all left the city. The ones that come back… Not like a lot filled with charred brick and melted glass can be assessed at ninety-seven million dollars for tax purposes.

Right now, he’s rubbing his temples, sipping coffee, (Usually he takes his black, but right now it’s filled with cream and sugar.) chewing on a cinnamon toothpick, (His quitting smoking plan is not going as well as he had hoped. Last time he did it, he wasn’t moving from insanely high stress to just wickedly high stress.) and staring at DC building codes.

If he relaxes the building codes, he’ll get more people back into the city, faster. If he keeps them in place, rebuilding will cost more and take longer, but those buildings will assess for higher values, resulting in more tax revenue for him down the road.

Assuming that people stick around long enough to wait for slow… Bigger businesses and enterprises will likely run off if they don’t have functional locations… Of course, if the new Congress decides to stay in New York, or resettle somewhere else, a lot of those big businesses might not come back at all, buildings up fast or not.

He pushes that aside. He’s not an economist and never intended to be one. There’s got to be someone who can run the numbers on this for him. He snorts, sure Diane’ll shoot him if he drops another number question on her.


“Yes, anything.”

James checks his watch. “Jake Malloy will be here in five minutes.”

Jarvis nods. “That’ll be worth it.” He stands up. “You want anything?”

James shakes his head.

Jarvis wanders to the kitchen, feeling off because it’s not his kitchen. He still doesn’t quite know where everything is, and he’s trying his best to not mess everything up. When Vance and his family get back, he wants them to be able to find their stuff, again.

As soon as Lara and the kids got home, Leon loaded everyone up into the van, and off they went. Beyond a few texts to let him know they’re okay, Jarvis doesn’t know where they are, and he doesn’t blame them for getting away.

He’d do it himself, except he can’t. He’s got to be here. And ‘here’ would be even better if it was in DC. His wife is looking for a place for them, in the city, in move-in condition, that he can ‘run things from.’ Like any good political spouse, she’s a class A scrounger, and if there’s anywhere in the city that’ll meet their needs, she’ll find it, but he’s not sure it exists. Not anymore.

He sets his cup on the island in the middle of the kitchen, pours more milk into his cup, as well as a little coffee. The fact that he’s stuck here, running some sort of detail eighteen hours a day, barely seeing his wife and kids, having to oversee all of this is part of why he didn’t want this job. The Mayor of DC should be doing this, or the Chief of Police or… anyone else.

But they didn’t. And he did. He rubs his eyes again, they’re feeling achy; he probably needs new glasses. He takes a sip of his coffee, reaches for the sugar, but doesn’t grab it. Lots of small, healthy meals, that’s what the Doctor said to do, assuming he didn’t want to immediately put his lost weigh back on, and another fifty or a hundred pounds on top of it.
Apparently, one of the side effects of almost starving is once you start getting to eat again, your body decides that it is never, ever going to starve again, so every calorie you are not immediately burning (and it will do everything it can to not burn any of them) will be packed into fat. He’s got to keep eating, so that his body doesn’t decide it’s in any danger of starving, but do it in a low enough calorie way that he doesn’t turn into the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man.

And since he’s on TV all the goddamned time, he can’t get fat. Jarvis growls a little at that, right now he’d happily get fat if it meant he could have a real, full, sit-down meal instead of ten snacks a day, but he’s got to project his ‘image.’ He sits on one of the high stools around the island, and helps himself to an orange.

He hears the doorbell, and then James is answering it.

“I’m in here,” he calls out.

James leads Malloy and his wife into Vance’s kitchen. “Mr. Malloy, Agent Bishop, good morning.”

Jake nods. “Morning, sir,” Ellie says.

Jake eyes Jarvis, and James, and the house they’re in. Jarvis knows that, before the Navy Yard, the only time Jake had ever shot a gun was ‘guy time’ with Ellie’s dad and brothers in Oklahoma. And he knows the way Jake is watching the place now. He’s checking for exits, looking for threats, and, possibly, making sure there’s enough food.

Jarvis does it every time he goes into a new building, now, too.

“Can I get you anything?” Jarvis asks. He gestures to the kitchen around them, filled with food. “We’ve got… anything. When she got home and saw me, my wife decided I needed every kind of food possible within hand’s reach.”

(That’s almost exactly what Ziva did as soon as she got them to Palmers’. They all crashed. She cleaned the ruined food out of the fridge, and then bought anything that might have been even remotely appealing at the grocery store.)

“Coffee,” Jake says, starting to relax.

Jarvis nods to the other stools around the island, as he gets up to grab a cup for Jake.

Ellie winces a little, settling on one of the stools. “Doesn’t taste right to me anymore. Is that… Do things taste weird to you, too?”

Jarvis hands Jake a mug, and pours the coffee, leaving a good inch at the top for Jake to doctor it how he likes it. “Oatmeal,” he says to Ellie. “Never eating that again.”

She nods, too. Hot oatmeal on a cold morning, bit of maple syrup and butter, used to be her comfort breakfast, but she doesn’t think she can make herself swallow it, now. “Stew. That’s another one. I know Elaine did everything she could with that, but… mystery meat in broth… Never again.” Then she spies the fruit bowl, and helps herself to a pear. Though that’s not exactly what she means by tasting weird. A lot of foods just taste off to her.

Jarvis and Jake nod along with that. Henceforth, all meals with meat will involve meat from some form of specific, named, domestic animal that was raised for the purpose of being eaten. Pigeon, squirrel, chipmunk, crow, and whatever the hell sort of fish those things were are never going on the menu again.
“So, you wanted to chat?” Jake asks as he sips his coffee. (Which tastes just fine to him. More intense than he remembers it, but he went from six cups a day, to none, and is easing back up to about two.)

“Yes.” Jarvis flashes a small smile. “In December, the rest of what’s left of the country will be voting for representation in the new Congress. Obviously, we will not be in any shape to vote by December. However, each state has the power to appoint two senators.”

“DC isn’t a state,” Jake says.

“Which is why you’re here. I understand what’s left of Congress has been fans of your blog. We are going to try to get statehood before exploring becoming an independent country. I’d like to put you in charge of heading up a delegation to go to New York and get us that statehood. Once that’s been achieved, I’ll name you one of our first two Senators. We’ll get Congressmen by the next election cycle.”

“In two years?” Ellie’s voice is making it clear that she thinks that’s an overly optimistic timeframe.

“I hope so,” Jarvis replies. “Realistically, four. But, if we’re lucky, people will move back sooner rather than later.”

“What sort of delegation?” Jake asks.

Jarvis shakes his head. “The details are up to you. It’s not much, especially at New York prices, but you’ve got a four million dollar budget for the next year. That’s to get you and whoever up to New York. You set up an official embassy. Work Congress. Get us statehood. If you don’t have a vote set on it by the end of the year, we’ll go independent.”

Jake glances to Ellie; she looks back at him.

“You’re talking about relocating,” Jake says.

“Yes. And if they move out of New York, I expect you to follow.”

Jake can guess what Jarvis isn’t saying. “A year is about as much money as the city has, isn’t it?”

“Less. Creative financing, you don’t need to know about, will get us to ten or so months, and with any luck, by that point we’ll be part of the United States, and getting FEMA money.”

“The vote buying money?” Jake asks.

“That’s not the creative financing part of it,” Jarvis replies.

Ellie winces. “Creative.”

“Pulling the gold out of the teeth of the skeletons in the closet.”

Jake and Ellie decide that Jarvis is right, they don’t need to know.

Jarvis can see they both need to talk. “Have your chat. Think about it. Agent Bishop, you are welcome to be part of the delegation, or go as a spouse. I know NCIS will, assuming it still exists, have a place for you when you return, and if you stay here, near DC, I will find something for you to do until NCIS is up and running again.”
Jake and Ellie are back in Jimmy’s car, key in the ignition, not going anywhere as they stare at each other.

“Well…” Jake starts, tentative.

“It be a good move, for you.” He’s been at loose ends since they broke ties with the NSA, and this would very much be the end of that.

“Is it a good move, for you?” he asks.

Ellie shrugs. “Would I be there as a delegate or as Mrs. Malloy?”

Jake’s face grows tense as he thinks through it. “It would look like nepotism if you’re a delegate.”

“And it’d be boring if I went as a spouse.”

“If your suspicion for why everything tastes ‘off’ is right, ten months of boring might be just the ticket.” They don’t know, yet, not for sure, but there’s better than even odds that baby Bishop-Malloy is in the works. ‘Pack for a week.’ She had nine days left on her birth control pills, no problem, right? They ran out of scrounged condoms long before they ran out of the need for comfort and a few minutes of not being hungry or scared.

She glares at him. “Do I look like the kind of lady who lays back, gets fat, and knits doilies when she’s pregnant?”

“I think you crochet them.” It’s a joke. Not a great one, but that’s part of who he is. When he doesn’t know what the next move is, he makes jokes.

“All the more reason I’d be bad at it, then.”

“You could work on your political spouse smile.” He smiles, wide, bright, plastic, when he says it.

“Just shoot me now.”

“On the upside, it’s an appointed position, so it’s not like you’d have to campaign.”

A sound reminiscent of ‘yuck’ issues out of Bishop.

“What do you want to do, Ellie? Between what I did on this case, and all the fallout, I can be happily writing books and litigating until the end of time. Congressman King’s offer is on the table, too.”

“His offer involves the exact same issue, you go to New York, do useful important things and I… go with you and sit on my ass, or stay here and… wait for NCIS to start up again, sitting on my ass.”

“It’s a very pretty ass, and sitting on it doesn’t show it off much, so obviously, we must do what we can to avoid that outcome.”

That one finally gets a chuckle out of her. And an eye roll. “I don’t know what I want to do. Not be apart.”

He nods. “That’s a good baseline. Wherever the next step is, we go together.”

“Okay. If you take King’s offer, there’ll still be time for Senate seats and the rest of it, after.”
He nods. “I don’t think I’d be good at it, though. He wants me as a prosecutor for the vote-selling cases. I haven’t done any sort of criminal or trial law, ever.”

She agrees, but with a kind smile on her face. “He wants you there to make things look good.”

“Which is why Jarvis wants me up there asking, ‘Pretty please, can we be a state?’”

“As least with that one, you’ve already been working in that direction.” He’s written a lot over the last month, and statehood for DC, Puerto Rico, Guam, any other US Territories, and any Indian Reservations that want it, is part of what he’s written about.

“On that one, I’ve got bona fides and know my ass from my elbow.” He stares out the window at Vance’s house. “They’ve got ships in New York. The Navy has a presence. DiNozzo had you doing analyst stuff before. Come with me, and when that gets started up again, be his long-distance analyst, and he can go find someone else to kick in doors and get shot at.”

Ellie thinks about that, and then nods. “We’ll talk about it when we get back to Palmers’.”

“That looks interesting,” Tony says when he looks over Ziva’s shoulder at lines and lines of numbers. “You on a case? Wrapping up an old one?”

“I am on a case, sort of.” She pushes back from Breena’s dining room table and kisses Tony.

After a moment, he breaks the kiss and sits next to her. “Tell me about this case.”

She smiles at him, happy to see him looking interested in something. Like Jethro, as soon as the need to run people out of DC vanished, he hit a wall and hit hard. For a full day, the only reason he woke up was to eat or go to the bathroom.

“This one, right now, is the case of the junk hauling company that isn’t.”

He glances from the screen, to her, and back to the screen.

“They want to be paid 50% down, for a bill of $500,000, to haul away junk and dispose of it properly. They claim to have all the necessary certifications. They have a very nice website. They have good reviews. They do not have any financials. I can’t find any history on the company. None of the people reviewing them appear to actually exist. From what I can tell, this company has only been around for two days, and only exists online.”

“I take it you’re not sending them $250,000.”

“I do not intend to.”

“Do I want to know how you got your hands on this kind of work?”

“Diane.”

Tony nods at her. “Of course.” He stands back up and goes to the kitchen to get himself a muffin. A minute later, he sits down next to her again, nibbling on a blueberry-bran muffin. “I’ve been thinking.”

“Okay.”
“Today, maybe tomorrow, whenever Jethro and Abbi want to go, let’s get to our place, grab our insurance information, document everything, get everything sent in, and then get out of here. You, me, somewhere warm and pretty. We’ll figure out what to do next. Our insurance company will have time to do whatever it does, hopefully send us a great big check. Vance and the Feds’ll have some time to figure out if we even have jobs anymore. And by the time we get back, we’ll know what we’re doing.”

Part of her thinks that sounds great. Beach time, for both of them, would be a good thing. Time for just the two of them is going to be awfully scarce, soon. And healing up time, physically and mentally, would be a very good thing for him.

Part of her, the part that didn’t get burnt out inside of DC, feels like she’s freeloading if she’s not doing more to help.

“This warm place. It needs to have internet access so I can spend some time on this.”

“Not more than four hours a day?” Tony half-says, half-asks. Part of the idea of this is to be together. If she’s going to spend it glued to a computer saving the day back in DC, they can do that, here.

“While you rest or watch movies.”

That’s more than good enough for him. He can feel she’s edgy, not feeling like she’s doing enough, but he’s done all the enough he can right now.

He kisses her. “Any particular warm place you have a hankering for?”

“Southern Italy? On the coast? Beaches, warm…” She feels an ice cream craving start up. “Gelato? Maybe Sicily or Sardinia?”

He grins at that. “I will find us a warm place with plenty of gelato.”

Ziva kisses him as she gets up, heads into the kitchen, and rummages around in the freezer looking for the pistachio gelato.

---

For Sam Allan, staying at Dr. Palmer’s house feels very odd.

He almost feels like he’s snooping.

Part of trying to keep work life and home life separate is that he and Jimmy don’t talk, too much, about who they are outside of work. They do some, can’t talk at least some about it. But, for the most part, if they’re talking about something personal, they’re light topics. Like his explorations of DC, or Dr. Palmer’s somewhat weekly martial arts workout/house building adventures, or what sort of music they like.

Light topics like that.

But he’s actually living in the man’s home right now, which automatically means pushing in a lot deeper than he’d ever wanted to, or for that matter, than Dr. Palmer may have wanted, either.

It’s the pictures he can’t keep away from. He should. It’s really not any of his business. But, especially late at night, when everyone else is asleep, he feels pulled toward them.
He assumes Mrs. Palmer is the one who likes to put pictures all over the place, and keeps albums of them, because Dr. Palmer doesn’t have that many strewn around work. Of course, he also might not have that many up at work because people come to the morgue to identify bodies, and a large collection of cheery shots of home might be off-putting for mourners.

There are framed shots of the four of them, Dr. Palmer (who, with each hour in his home, looking at the photos is harder and harder not to think of as Jimmy), Mrs. Palmer, and their girls. There are shots of the girls alone, and a few of the baby who was stillborn. (Sam doesn’t know his name, and hasn’t thought to ask Ziva or Tony, who do.) Some are formal. Some are clearly candid shots, taken by the rest of the family. There are collections of shots of people he assumes are Mrs. Palmer’s family. A few of a woman, who, by the curly hair and glasses, Sam assumes is Dr. Palmer’s mother. There are a lot of the people he thinks of as the ‘Gibbs clan.’

And there are a lot of shots of the McGees, on their own, and with the Palmers.

He wonders about that. There are just as many pictures of Kelly on the fridge as there are of Molly or Anna. (Someone who hasn’t seen Jimmy and Breena, or doesn’t know much about DNA, would assume all three girls are Jimmy and Breena’s.) There are shots of Director and Mrs. McGee on the mantle, along with the rest of the ‘immediate’ family shots.

He’s sleeping in what he thinks is Mrs. Palmer’s office. At least, it feels more like her than him, and there is a lot of funeral home related information and business in there. She has pictures of her parents, sisters, and her kids in there. She got shots of Dr. Palmer, and her and Dr. Palmer. And a shot of Director McGee and Mrs. McGee. A shot of the four of them at a lake somewhere, all standing together, arms wrapped around each other has pride of place. It’s a selfie, taken by Director McGee, just to the left of her computer, where she’d look if she’s glancing away from the computer.

One other shot keeps catching his eye. It’s Dr. Palmer and Director McGee, on the back porch. It must be from earlier on in the summer, because McGee’s still in a cast. Dr. Palmer’s sitting across one of the lounges, and McGee’s in front of him, sitting on the porch, shirt mostly unbuttoned, collar pulled wide to leave his right trapezius exposed, and Jimmy’s hand is resting on his shoulder.

It’s… to a visitor who knows that Dr. Palmer adores his wife… an innocent shot. A doctor helping a hurt friend with some muscle work. (Sam knows about the continuing education that Dr. Palmer did in rehab this summer. He even helped with a little of it.) As a kid who grew up gay in very conservative Iowa, he sees a lot of layers to that shot.

It’s little things, like the position of Dr. Palmer’s finger on Director McGee’s collar bone. There’s a sense of tenderness he gets from that placement that doesn’t go with just helping a buddy out. Or the fact that Director McGee’s other shoulder just casually rests against the inside of Dr. Palmer’s thigh. That makes sense, given the position, but again, it’s much more relaxed than he’d expect.

Sure, Dr. Palmer’s a doctor and medical examiner, so he can’t be especially nervous or hung up about touching people, but that’s more intimacy than he’d expect from two married, straight guys.

He’s had a theory as to what’s going on with Dr. Palmer and Director McGee, spurred on by the “burn” that is most likely a tattoo, and if that shot had been tucked away in Jimmy’s phone or hidden in his bedside table, he’d consider that theory confirmed.

But, sitting here, in his wife’s office, right next to the shot of all four of them...

He doesn’t know what to think.

Other than, it’s probably time for him to see about getting a place of his own to stay.
He pokes his head out of Mrs. Palmer’s office when he hears feet thump down the steps and waits for a moment as Tony and Ziva chat with each other. It’s clear, from their conversation, that they want a place of their own, too.

Once he’s sure they’ve moved on from romantic get-awaying, he heads to the kitchen, making enough noise to let them know he’s up, too.

“Hey, Allan,” Tony calls out.

“Good morning” he says, sitting down at the dining room table, a muffin and coffee of his own in hand. “Did I hear you talking about going back into the city?”

Tony nods. “You want to check out your place?”

“I checked online. I know it’s still standing. Wouldn’t mind getting back, grabbing some more clothing, figuring out how long I’m going to be homeless.”

“We should take Jake and Bishop, too,” Ziva adds.

“Where are they? Getting some quality ‘alone time’ in?” Tony didn’t remember hearing them when he was upstairs, but that doesn’t mean much.

Ziva gives him a quick poke. “They left to see Jarvis about an hour ago.”

Tony exhales, loud, shaking his head. “That can’t be good.”

“Last night, Agent Bishop said he wanted to talk to them about an assignment for Jake,” Sam doesn’t have any problems calling the people he doesn’t work with by their first names, though he can see Tony’s irked by his referring to everyone else by title.

“Wheels within wheels.” Tony says, “Though that’s making me think I should give Vance a call, see how long it’ll be before we’re back up and running.”

“I’d think it would have to wait for the election. Right now we don’t have any legitimate authority to do what we’re doing,” Allan replies.

“People keep dying though, and it’s our job to find out why.”

“It is. Though… are we Jarvis’ personal investigative service now? Some of the Navy and Marines are reporting to him, and the rest stayed with the National Guard. Who are we even serving?” Ziva asks.

Tony nods, slowly. “Sunny beaches, warm breezes, and all the ice-cold gelato you can eat. I don’t even want to stick my toes into trying to answer your questions, and I do not want to be Jarvis’ personal investigator. I did that once, and that was more than enough.”

Allan glances between them, waiting to see if either of them will elaborate, but they don’t, so he says, “Maybe, once Agent Bishop and Jake get back, we can see about going into town?”

Tony nods at that. “I’ll give Gibbs a call, see if he and Abbi are game.”
“Jethro, if it is safe enough for you and Abbi to go in, to say nothing of Ziva, then it is safe enough for Penny and me to go, too.”

“Besides, there’s no reason why we should make multiple trips. In once, grab everyone’s stuff, and then out,” Penny adds.

Which is how Jethro ended up driving lead car (truck) in a small caravan, with Penny and Ducky behind him in the cab, heading into the city.

They’re still armed, and still keeping close watch, but the sense that someone will jump out, tip the truck, and try to make off with everything they have has abated quite a bit.

Google has done a very good job of keeping up with which roads are open, and which ones are blocked by rubble. It’s got updates for where cleanup crews are working. It’s also telling them that the six mile long circle that will take them from Allan’s apartment to Jake and Bishop’s place, to Penny’s to Tony and Ziva’s house, and then out by Tony and Ziva’s apartment will take them four hours to drive.

If they weren’t hoping to take stuff out, Jethro would suggest they walk it.

But they are hoping to grab things, as much as if left to grab.

The road to the apartment building Allan rented a one bedroom out of is blocked at both ends. On the west, a less sound building had already collapsed, resulting in a mound bricks and broken detritus taller than Ducky. To the east there’s a line of nine cars, parked into a wall formation, blocking the street.

Anyone who wanted to get in would have been an excellent target.

“You have military neighbors?” Jethro asks Allan as they slowly pick their way between the cars.

He shrugs. “Not that I knew of.” He points up. “Six floors in my building, and who knows who was across the street.”

Abbi nods at the across the street building. There’s two windows that have been knocked out of the top floor. “I think that’s your strategist.”

“Could have been. Hope they’re not feeling trigger happy today,” Allan says.

Gibbs shakes his head. “I’d feel it if someone was watching. We’re alone here.”

Tony takes up position on top of one of the cars, his rifle very visible, and ready. He wants Ziva in his sight, but she’s back with their convoy with Jake and Bishop, making sure no one tries anything with Penny and Ducky. “Yeah, well, just because your gut’s happy, doesn’t mean mine is. In and out, fast. I don’t like us in the open like this.”

Allan picks up his pace. The door to the building is broken, probably so people can get in and out, it’s an electric one that slides open when it senses someone in front of it, and he’s in a part of town with no power. “No elevator.”

“How far up are you?” Abbi asks.
“Forth floor.”

Abbi nods to Gibbs, and he takes up a watching position at the doors, and Allan leads her up to his place.

It’s bizarrely unreal to unlock his door, open it, and see everything looking almost exactly the way it did when he left almost a month ago.

It doesn’t smell the same. It reeks of smoke. The food in his fridge and pantry is fetid, growing a collection of unspeakable molds, and swarming with flies. But, once he airs out and cleans up, he’s back to where he was before. Allan cracks all of his windows open to help with the airing out part of this. He grabs more clothing, his personal information and computer, bags up the rotting food for disposal, douses his kitchen in bleach, and is ready to go. Maybe twenty minutes all told.

That leaves the hour and a half it will take to go three quarters of a mile to get to Bishop and Jake’s.

---

Forty seconds. That’s how long it takes them to decide that attempting to go into their building is stupid.

Their street burned. The trees are vertical stacks of charcoal, waiting for a strong wind to knock them over. The cars parked along both sides of the streets are charred wrecks. Between Ellie remembering where they parked, and wiping soot off of what was left of three license plates, they were able to get shots of what was left of their Prius. Several of the buildings went up, completely gone. Theirs is still standing. It’s an old building, brick walls and iron beams. Not very flammable. Looks like those beams got hot enough to slump, though, because while their building is standing, it’s also listing about ten degrees shy of vertical.

Ellie’s tempted to try and get in. She just wants a few things. Their wedding album, the OU shot glass this cocky young law student sat down in front of her, and said, “Every other guy in this room is trying to get you drunk and in bed. But I’ve noticed something, you don’t get drunk.” He flipped it, bottom up. “How about, instead of trying to get you drunk and into bed, we dance and talk until you like me enough to try it sober…”, her mom and grand mom’s recipe collection. Just, stupid little things that she loves.

Gibbs shakes his head. That building is probably stable enough to handle Ellie walking through it. But he really doesn’t want to be wrong about that.

Jake looks relieved when he says no.
Ducky and Penny’s next. If it wasn’t for the litter, broken windows, and missing doors, their neighborhood would look like it always does. No fire touched here. The trees are still brown. Their condos are still red brick. The flowers planted around the bases of the trees are still sunny yellow and dark purple.

The fact that they’re all wearing boots, because the ankle-deep drifts of broken glass along the curbs would cut their legs to shreds if given the shot, says all that needs to be said about the neighborhood not being the same anymore.

Ducky and Penny do have power. Not that that’s easy to tell. Most of the lights are broken. The first two switches they flip don’t turn anything on. It’s only the clock over the stove, still showing the correct time that lets them know they still have power.

It takes every ounce of control Ducky has to not start railing against the lack of humanity that did this. His records, her books, their things were destroyed. He could understand people stealing them. Taking them to enrich themselves, but… He’s standing over a framed shot of his parents. The glass is shattered and the frame stomped, mauling it from a circle to an oval. That frame is silver. It has value, independent of the emotional value he attaches to the picture of his parents’ wedding day inside of it.

And it was broken just for spite.

Penny’s standing in their bedroom, cursing, loudly, at whoever did this to them, as she gently shakes glass shards off of photos.

He takes two steps over to her, and kisses her shoulder. He tries a quick smile, but it comes off more angry than comforting. Then he looks at the shot in her hand.

“Oh. I’d glad we still have that one.” The smile at seeing that picture undamaged is real. “That’s one of my favorites of you.” It’s Penny, in the late seventies, smiling straight at the camera, wearing a
halter top, arms raised, resting against her head. A glamour shot of sorts, because she’s starkly
beautiful in that shot, though she’s not wearing much makeup, nor is her hair especially well done.

She smiles gently at that, and the shot. “Nelson’s, too.”

“He took it?”

“Yeah. When it came back, he looked at it and said, ‘This is what you look like, to me, all the time.’”

“That’s why you kept it?” She doesn’t have a whole lot of pictures of herself. Lots of family shots,
and books of places she visited and enjoyed, but not many of herself, let alone ones that she’s kept
framed and on display.

“Yes.”

“I’m glad. I love this shot, too.”

Tony drifts over to look, and his eyes widen at the photo. Ducky thinks that look is not pure delight,
and he’s sure he knows why, but Tony covers it well. “Oh, wow. That’s you?”

Penny shoots him a wry look. “Once upon a time, I was middle-aged.”

“Not in that photo, you aren’t!”

Then she laughs. “That’s the year Tim was born. I assure you, I’m past forty in that picture.”

“Oh huh, tell me another one!” Tony chides her, getting her laughing, making them think less about
what’s been lost.

They take longer than twenty minutes because they are not coming back here. Most of what they
rescue are photographs, a few books, several of Penny’s publications, and both of Ducky’s records
that weren’t crushed, one golf club, and as much clothing as survived.

An entire home reduced to three boxes of mostly photographs.

Three boxes is an improvement over Tony and Ziva’s house. With the help of the GPS, they’re able
to figure out which one of the charred ruins is their charred ruin, and they take pictures.
“DiNozzos! Oh, I am happy to see you!” Tony and Ziva get huge hugs from Mrs. Elthel, the lady who runs the deli on the first floor of their building. “I didn’t see you, and I was afraid. I knew you were in one of those buildings…” she continues to talk about what happened to several of the Federal Buildings while sweeping out her store.

“Did you stay?” Tony can’t believe she stayed. She’s round and plump as always.

“Ptthb… These…” she edits herself, shaking her head. “My parents would roll in their graves if they knew they had run me off. They made it through the battle of Stalingrad. This…” She shrugs, indicating the fall of DC was no big deal. She flashes Tony a smile. “Russian Jews… We always know where to hide when the going gets bad. The sub-basement. Food, power, running water. Had to boil the water, but still. You never know when you’ll need a panic room.”

Tony and Ziva just stare at her.

“Your apartment should be okay. I didn’t have a number for you, or I would have called. Hendersons and Guthries are already back. They’re talking about calling those… crime scene cleaners, right?”

Tony nods, slowly.

“They figure they’d be up for the smoke damage, and if all of you went in at once, you’d be able to get a better deal on it.” She waves to the door that leads to the first floor. “Have a chat.”

Everything’s the same. Except for the smoke damage. And all in all, it’s really not that bad. Tony’s fairly sure they don’t actually need more than a good cleaning and maybe some of that fabric deodorizer stuff.

It boggles his mind. Right now, in his apartment, nothing changed. All they’ve got to do is clean out the fridge, spray a boat load of Febreeze around the place, remember not to drink the water, and they’re… fine.

Their house is gone, but here… Nothing changed.

He starts to laugh, just at the sheet stupid fucking meaninglessness of it.

Gibbs clasps a hand over his shoulder, well aware that that’s not just mildly amused laughing.

Ziva’s going through their stuff, grabbing what they need for right now. She’s still thinking a week or two off somewhere warm, and then hopefully, by then, Tony’ll be healed up enough to do something other than rest.

She gives the Hendersons a spare key, and a check to cover their part of the cleaning.

It’s almost dinner by the time they get done, and, as they’re heading out of the city, Gibbs is thinking
they should be going to the Diner.

But there’s no Diner to go to. He got a call from Elaine yesterday, letting him know that her family is coming up today. For all he knows, by now, they’re gone, heading to North Carolina, maybe never coming back.

Gibbs doesn’t like thinking about that.

His family is here. Almost. Got to get the McPalmer branch back, but… If they need downtime, he understands. Tony and Ziva have talked about getting away for a bit, and he can see the appeal. Maybe he and Abbi’ll get away, too. Let Penny and Duck have some alone time of their own.

Get *Semper* aired out and cleaned up, and go out… Though November isn’t the best month ever to be sailing the Atlantic.

Abbi squeezes his hand, seeing he’s thinking, feeling hard right now.

He flashes her a half smile, and then catches sight of a place. He’s never eaten there before, but it’s open, and looks like the kind of place that’ll be able to seat nine.

“So, what are the plans?” Tony asks once they’ve all got their dinner. “Jarvis come up with something juicy for you?”

Ellie and Jake glance at each other, and she decides to speak. “Yeah. He did.” She nudges Jake. “Meet the DC Ambassador to the US Congress.”

“He offered to have me set up a group of people to head up and get us statehood,” Jake downplays that with his voice, but the more he thinks about it, the more he likes that idea, and the prouder it makes him. “Actually… Dr. Langston, since you travel in those sorts of circles, but aren’t actually part of any active political group, would you like to be part of the delegation?”

Penny’s very pleased by that offer, and that also answers an issue she and Ducky have been dealing with. They know they aren’t moving back to inside of DC. They’ve been planning on moving their full time residence to the house on the Potomac. But, a lot of building has to happen between now and then, and neither of them love the idea of living with Gibbs and Abbi for the intervening months.

She glances at Ducky, but he’s smiling, so she knows he’s okay with the idea.

“Yes. I would. It’ll be interesting to see how this all shakes out. When are we going?”

“As soon as you and I can find two other delegates to go. It’d be great if we can get it done before the election, but realistically, we’re looking at working the next Congress.”

“I take it you’re taking a leave of absence from NCIS, then?” Tony asks Bishop.

She shrugs. “I can do my analyst work from anywhere. All I need is a computer and access. And you and Draga can probably handle the in person stuff between now and hiring someone else.”

Tony inclines his head at that. It’d be one thing if they were still mostly dealing with murder investigations and the like, but most of what they do now are multi-year long terrorism cases where they pull threads out of the tapestry and follow where they lead.
“How about you, Sam?” Ducky asks.

“Rest. Regain weight. Probably take a week off, and then back at it. They’re going to need MEs for a long time to come. You got the call, too right?”

Ducky nods. “Yes. But in a case like this, where talent will be coming in from all over the world, I don’t think my old eyes will be needed.” Everyone at the table knows that’s code for Ducky too needs more time resting and healing up. Ducky’s been old for a long time, but now, he’s starting to look frail, too, and that worries Gibbs and Penny, both of them are in favor of him getting a good long chunk of time to rest and heal.

Sam continues on, “Once my part of town has power again, I’ll head back and then see what I can do. If NCIS gets going again, I’ll return to my day job, but until then, I can assist with dealing with the dead as well as anyone, and better than most. Agents DiNozzo?”

“Day after tomorrow, we’re on a plane. Day after that, beaches and gelato, here we come!” Tony replies. “I’ll hunt down Vance—“

“Jarvis is at his place, but he isn’t. He and his family got away,” Ellie says.

“Then he can hunt us down. As Allan pointed out, we don’t exactly have a Navy to serve right now, so this looks like vacation time to me.”

“Gibbs? Abbi?” Ziva asks.

They just glance at each other. Plans for the immediate future are as of yet, unclear. Abbi shrugs a bit. “I need to start getting my sandbox back in order. Check in with everyone. Just because the Navy and the Marines are upside down doesn’t mean the Coast Guard stopped working.”

“Back to the grind tomorrow?” Tony asks.

“Not sure about that, gotta see if my grinding equipment is even functional, but that’s the idea,” Abbi answers.

“Have any of you heard from Dr. Palmer? I talked to him three days ago, and Director McGee had made it back to them, but that’s the last I heard,” Allan says.

“Probably resting then,” Ducky says. “I can’t imagine they’ll stay away for much longer. Not with the call for Medical Examiners having gone out.”

“I’ll give them a call tomorrow morning,” Gibbs says. “Check in.”

“If the Palmers come back, we can go to the McGees’ house. You said Elaine and her family headed south today, right?” Gibbs nods at that. “We can let them have some time on their own; I’m sure they’d want that by now,” Bishop says.

Abbi, Ziva, Tony, Gibbs, Duck and Penny all glance at each other at that.

“I would imagine they’d come back together,” Ducky says.

“And would likely stay together as long you five still need a place to stay,” Penny adds.

Bishop looks like that’s crazy; she and Jake can’t wait to have a place of their own again, but since it doesn’t involve her having to find yet another new place to live, she’s fine with it.

Ducky doesn’t miss the way Allan listens to that, or the fact that he caught the look going between
the rest of them.

He also, from weeks of working with the man, has not missed the fact that Sam Allan is very smart, and very good at keeping his thoughts and suspicions to himself. Ducky makes a mental note to give Jimmy a call, and soon, because the likelihood of Dr. Allan not figuring out what’s going on with the four of them is minimal.
The plan, if it could be said that they have a plan, might be for Tim to do the heavy lifting on taking care of the three of them while they’re out and about, neck deep in desolation and death, it’s also true that Jimmy’s doing some taking care of Tim.

He’s shaving as Tim’s drying off, both of them done with the washing up part of the morning shower.

“Let’s get your weight,” Jimmy says.

Though they have a scale, Tim doesn’t use it all that much. Pants are comfy, he’s good. Pants are too tight, it’s time to cut down on the sugar. Pants are too lose, time to add a bit more sugar.

Granted, right now, he’s wearing Jimmy’s pants, and they’re still too loose, and getting back to the size he wants to be is likely going to be more complicated than adding an extra cookie (or three) for desert with each meal and having a drink with dinner.

Jimmy, on the other hand, does weigh himself every day. If he’s off by more than a pound a day, that’s a signal to keep closer watch on his sugar levels. He’s also, for the same reason, very good at keeping tight control of what he eats, how much he weighs, his body fat percentage and all the rest of it.

So, Tim stops drying himself and steps on. “163.4”

“Good. I want you doing that every day, and keeping a record.”

“One you can see?”

“That would be nice. Google Docs or something.”

“Okay. What’s my target?”

Jimmy puts his glasses on and looks at the scale, which also tells body fat percentage. “No more than three pounds a week, and I don’t want to see you at more than 15% body fat.”

“This really necessary?”

Jimmy just looks at him.

“Okay. You going to tell me what to eat?”

“Probably. You’re still making dinner for us, so I’ll give you portion size help on that. But right now, I’m thinking the target is five two hundred-ish calorie snacks between a real breakfast, and a bigger but still small dinner. You’re going to the house today, right?”

“That’s the idea.”

“I’ll pack food for you.”

Tim makes breakfast for them, and gets the girls fed while Abby and Breena get their showers, and
Jimmy packs everyone’s lunches.

His involves way more food than he was expecting, but all of it is healthy, a lot of veggies and nuts, some cheese, a bit of fruit, leftover grilled chicken, a hard-boiled egg, (no cookies, that gets some mental pouting) all of it packed up into five little baggies.

When Jimmy hands it over he says, “Every two hours, you eat one of those. You get hungry in between, I’ll up your calories more for tomorrow, but make sure you’re genuinely hungry, and not just eating to munch on something.”

Tim nods at that. He’s also got a lot of bottled water. “All the water I can drink?”

“Good plan. Herbal tea if you want, too. No caffeine. Take it easy today. Just being awake all day’ll be more work than you’ve done in a while.”

“I’ll get a nap if I need one.”

“Good. Don’t forget to eat. Don’t scarf down two of them at once and go four hours without food. Your metabolism is shot, and we’re going to get it working again.”

Tim nods slowly at that, and wipes mushed carrots off of Anna’s chin.

The early part of the morning, getting everyone showered, dressed, and fed, that’s pretty hectic. They’ve got a good system for it, Team A in charge of getting little girls cleaned up and dressed while Team B gets themselves cleaned up and dressed, and then swapping baby wrangling as they get washed up and dressed while B gets breakfast ready and lunches packed.

Who’s on Team A or Team B swaps around, so no one gets stuck on a job they don’t love.

It’s fairly efficient.

And, by the time Heather is there, everyone is ready to get moving. They kiss and hug goodbye, and Tim waves them off.

Which leaves him to his own devices. Heather keeps watching him, looking like she’s ready to spring into babying him action, too.

And, while it’s true that he wouldn’t mind some additional babying, he’s not the baby they hired her to take care of, and Kelly seems to be very pleased to see Heather again. She’s babbling and laughing, tugging on Heather, trying to get her to the stroller for their usual morning walk.

He spends a long minute snuggling Kelly, while she squirms and tries to get out of his grasp. In her world, it’s playtime, not be-glommed-onto-by-Daddy-time. “Okay.” He puts her down. “Have fun.”

She’s toddling as fast as she can to the stroller.

“You okay on your own?” Heather asks.

“Yeah. I’m going to go do some work on our family house.”

She looks appalled at the idea of him doing anything other than eating or sleeping.

He rolls his eyes a little. “My doctor says it’s fine. He even packed me a special lunch to keep me
“going.”

“Ah. Okay… Have fun.”

Tim packs a few extras for himself, too. Inflatable mattress, pillows, sleeping bag. He’s not sure how much he’ll get done today, or if Penny and Gibbs left the sleeping gear in the house, but if they didn’t, he wants somewhere comfy to stretch out should he get too tired.

(And, even if he doesn’t get too tired, he wants somewhere comfy to curl into a ball and hide if he needs that, too. He gives the ponytail holder on his wrist a firm snap at that. There’s nothing at the house he needs to be hiding from.)

He puts the key in the ignition, turns his car on, and then sets his phone to call Gibbs. As he’s pulling out, Gibbs picks up.

“You’re up early.” Gibbs sounds a little sleepy himself, and Tim wonders if he woke him up.

“Hi, Jethro. Been up for an hour.”

“Go back to sleep.”

“I’ll get a nap later. What are you doing today?”

“Only concrete thing on the list was calling you guys and finding out when you’re coming back.”

“Day before yesterday.”

“You’re home?” Gibbs doesn’t sound like he believes they got back without him knowing about it.

“Yeah. Jimmy got the call the day after I got up there. Spent one day, and then turned around. He and Breena are helping with the bodies. Abby’s working on IDing them. She tells me she’s got her own team of Marines helping her out.” Tim intentionally keeps his voice light on that, but the idea of Abby in the Navy Yard makes him nervous. He snaps his wrist at that, too. She’s surrounded by gung-ho men and women armed to the teeth. She is perfectly fine in there.

“Is she in the Navy Yard?” Gibbs sounds nervous, too. Tim finds that soothing.

“Yeah, but they don’t leave her alone there.”

“Okay.” That calms him down. “What are you doing?”

Tim sighs. “Right now, I’m driving to our house. Not sure how useful I’ll be, but the wiring has to go up, and it’s better than just sitting around and stewing in it, so… I’m off to go do something. You want to help? Maybe Tony and Ziva, too? Who’s up and moving around?”

“I’ll help. We’ve got some other people who might want something concrete to do today.”

“Okay. I’ve only got food for me, and I packed some sleeping gear, because I’m probably going to need a nap at some point, but…”

“Tim, there’s enough food in there for ten people. Penny and I stocked it.” He doesn’t have to say that no one who was in the Navy Yard will ever let their pantry get even close to bare again. “I’ll see you there.”
“Good.”

Tim’s standing inside the house, schematics rolled out on the floor, glasses perched on his nose, pencil tucked behind his ear, realizing that he’d over-estimated how far along they were. Namely, he can’t wire all that much when they haven’t finished framing the interior walls for each of the sections of the house.

They’re down to bare studs and insulation for the exterior walls, and just studs for load-bearing ones, but just like how his family had set up their section, all the other families had set up their sections as well, but beyond tear down, making sure they had a blank canvas to build in, they haven’t put anything up, yet.

He’s thinking he can start measuring and marking out where walls are supposed to go. That looks like fairly light work. (After all, lifting the pencil and a laser measure shouldn’t take that much effort.)

Even better than being light, it’s the sort of work that requires him to pay close attention to what he’s doing. Measure once, measure again, mark precisely, take a few more steps, and do it again. It might not be complicated, but it takes focus.

That’s what he’s doing when he hears Gibbs’ truck crunching over the gravel.

He’s somewhat surprised at who hops out. Mona and Gibbs and Tony he was expecting (and hoping for. He wants quiet time with them.) Ducky’s good, too. The idea of meandering stories in the background makes Tim feel more secure.

Bishop and Allan surprise him. No Penny or Ziva surprises him, too. He figures that if Abbi’s not here, she’s doing some sort of CGIS stuff, and though he’s ashamed to admit it, he kind of forgot about Jake, so his absence didn’t matter to Tim.

Though, all of that is secondary to pulling Gibbs, Tony, and Ducky into a long and tight hug.

There’s a long moment of the four of them just holding each other, and then Tony breaks it with, “Okay, McVila, what are we doing today?”

Tim pulls back, almost runs his fingers through his hair, but there’s no hair to do that with, so he grabs the pencil he’s been using and points out the marks he’s making. “I wasn’t sure what the next part would be, so, I just started marking out where the walls go.”

Gibbs steps back, but his hands don’t leave Tony or Tim’s shoulders, as he looks over to what Tim’s up to. He thinks about how much two by fours weigh, and the cutting and hammering that has to be done to get them framing.

He also thinks about the fact that Penny and Ducky want to move in here, so the sooner their part of the house is done, the better.

Still, with the six of them working, it shouldn’t take more than two days to measure everything, and two days means more rest, that’ll make getting things cut easier.
They measure. They share stories. Tim gets them up to date on his trip north and they tell him about what’s been going on down here. He asks if they mind swapping houses. He doesn’t want to explain too much about why they’re better off at Jimmy and Breena’s place, but, fortunately he doesn’t need to.

Everyone in this group has smelled DC, they understand the desire to not bring that smell into their home.

Tony tells them about how they’re going to start in Sardinia, and from there they’re going to Cyprus, and finishing up in Greece. He mentions how, according to what Ziva is saying, their insurance agent isn’t giving them any shit, and they should be getting the first payment by tomorrow.

Bishop gripes about how she wishes her insurance agent would do that. They need confirmation from whoever’s going to do building inspections that they can’t go in and get their stuff, before they’ll send money to replace anything but the car. (Which was obviously, visibly, totaled, just like Tony and Ziva’s place.)

Allan doesn’t say much, but he does ask about Jimmy, and what they’re doing. Tim can’t tell him much, because they haven’t seen any need to give him the gore-y details, nor does he want them. He does say that as soon as Allan wants to go in, they’ll be happy to pick him up and give him a ride.

Ducky talks about what Penny and Jake are doing, and how, by the end of the week, they hope to be heading to New York. Right now, they’re looking for a decent office building to turn into the Embassy of the District of Colombia, but once they’ve got that, they’re heading up.

Jake’s written about it on his blog, and they’re already getting offers for places to set up, and places to stay. Apparently, sheltering refugees who are trying to change the world, and were part of bringing down the old system, is extremely good press. Every hotel with an empty penthouse has sent them an offer of free or extremely reduced price lodgings. Right now Jake and Penny are going through the offers, looking for the one that saves them the most money while looking the least like being in the pocket of whomever is paying for their rent.

They start in the part of the house that will be Ducky and Penny’s. Standing in the house’s front door, looking forward, the house opens into a great room. That great room is huge, with the two story fireplace in the middle of it. To the left of the fireplace is the kitchen and what will be the dining area. To the right is what will be the main living area.

Flanking the far walls on the left and right sides of the great room are the stair cases leading to the second floor. Under those stair cases are two hallways, the one on the right leads to the McPalmer wing of the house, and the one on the left leads to what used to be a large study and a library, and will soon be the Mallard-Langston wing of the house.
Right now, the area that will be Ducky and Penny’s is an empty, lopsided, rectangle (ish.) The side that faces the front of the house is fifteen feet long, and twelve feet deep. That’s the bit that used to be a den. It has a stone fireplace along the far wall, and like the rest of the front of the house, big windows overlooking what will, eventually, assuming they ever mow it, be a long front yard and is currently a tangle of knee-high dead or dying grass, vines, and baby trees. There used to be a hallway against that room, and then there used to be a longer, twenty feet long, fifteen foot wide library on the other side of that hallway.

They’ve got the outside walls, a fireplace, and the studs for the weight bearing wall that used to be the right-hand side of the hallway. The rest of the space is empty.

Gibbs, who’s done more work along these lines than Tim’s ever dreamed of, watched what he was doing, and the got lights.

He sinks a few nails in different studs and hangs them up. Suddenly, it’s bright enough to really see what they’re doing. From there, they start drawing in where walls are going to go.

Penny and Ducky are keeping the basic shape and idea of the place. That one wall can’t really go anywhere, so that’s going to be the boundary between their bedroom, and their study.

The fireplace will eventually be in their bedroom. The extra length of the back side of the room will house closet space. Two doors will go in the weight bearing wall, one leading to that closet, another to a bathroom. The remaining space will become an office for them.

With other people measuring out where the walls are, Gibbs gives Tim a can of spray paint. He’s adding orange dots where electric plugs are going to go, and where any cables for “internet stuff” as Gibbs put it, needs to go.

Tony’s got the pink paint, he’s putting in lines where they’re going to running plumbing.

He gives Ducky the last color, blue, for where the HVAC needs to be.

It might not be the most elegant system for taking care of it, but after an hour, Duck and Penny’s rooms are color coordinated, and at a glance they know where everything is going to go.
Not too much measuring for the great room. The whole point of how the house is built, the two wings with different heights, no floors above this one, minimizing the weight bearing down here so they could have a two storey ceiling, huge windows to the outside, and no walls to block the light.

The walls here are all set. The plumbing is pretty well set, too. Ripping out the kitchen and rebuilding is likely the last job they’ll do.

Tim’s marking off where they’re going to want plugs and more ‘internet stuff.’ Bishop and Ducky are making sure the closets and powder rooms and whatnot are all properly laid out. Gibbs and Allan are talking floor options. (Apparently, Dr. Allan’s parents have recently redone their place, and he’s listened to about two years of dithering over hardwood floor options. The upshot of this is that he’s got a pro and con mental list of about fifty different hardwood floor brands in his head.)

Tim notices he’s not the only one who’s got a collection of snacks instead of meals. He’s not, by a long stretch, the only one who’ll be working, talking even, and just go blank for a few seconds, shudder a little, and then come back to the conversation.

And he’s not, by any stretch of the imagination, the only one focusing way too hard on this job, because it beats the hell out of letting the memories in his head run rampant.

Their section comes next. Tim’s doing pretty well with it, having an easy time imagining what will be coming next, but he does have a few moments where he snaps the ponytail holder to keep himself here and now.

The thing about doing that in a room full of investigators is that they won’t miss it.

Ducky knows why he’s doing it. Can’t get a degree in psychology and not recognize that.

But Gibbs and Tony don’t, and the second time it happens they both glance at each other, and back to Tim.

They’re in what will eventually be Jimmy and Breena’s room, and he’s marking off more places for plugs. Tony sidles over to him. “What’s with the rubber band?” he asks quietly.

Tim rolls his eyes a little. He’d been imaging what Jimmy and Breena are doing right now, and it was making him feel nervous. Nervous for him. That claustrophobic feeling that they’ll never get free of all the death and pain. Nervous for them, afraid that the mobs might come back, and that they’re in there with no way out...

Tim holds up his wrist. “Way to keep my mind right. Brain goes running off to places it shouldn’t. This helps me yank it back where it belongs. Supposedly, I keep doing this, reminding myself that the real world isn’t my nightmares, and I’ll stop having the nightmares.”

“Pinching yourself awake?” Tony asks.

“Something like that. I know…” he’s about to say they’re, but he notices that Allan and Bishop are listening, too, “she’s safe in there, but…”

“Too many bad memories,” Bishop adds. She and Allan come over and join them, all four deciding that right now is a decent time for a snack or drink. Tim can see Gibbs and Ducky working, but they’re listening, too. “Jake’s not keen on me ever going back into NCIS building.”
“Not exactly feeling any need for that, either,” Tony adds. “I know they’re relocating whoever survived the IRS, EPA, and FEC, think they’ll do that for us?”

Tim shakes his head. “Not with our budget. Not with everything else burned and broken. Cleaned up, new paint, maybe… otherwise, we’re stuck. The building’s in good enough shape that Abby’s working in it, so there’s no ‘reason’ for us not to go back.”

“Invest in rubber bands,” Tony says.

Tim shrugs a bit. He’s still not sure if he’s going back. “Work from home for a while, too. Nothing I’m doing that needs me in that building.”

“Yeah, well some of us have to actually deal with suspects,” Tim catches the sound in Tony’s voice as he says that. It’s not nervous, but there’s some… heat maybe… definitely a strong emotion, that Tony’s still working thought.

“You’re having second thoughts about going back, too?” Tim asks.

Tony’s eyes narrow a bit, and his face grows tight. “Not back. I might not love the building right now, but it’s not the problem. Look, no shade on Jake or Penny, but… You really think this’ll change anything? Who the hell are we going to be working for? I’m… right now… I’m thinking of looking for something else. We do terror cases now, but… so much of that’s those assholes we were dealing with pissing on each other, and people responding to it. And, since I don’t know that I work for the good guys, and since I don’t think I’m ever going to be comfortable with the idea that I’m working for the good guys again…” He spends a moment looking off into the distance, still thinking. “We get back, and I’m asking Vance to focus on actual crimes. Homicides, thefts, stuff like that. Things where our team makes a real, tangible difference in someone’s life. Something where I don’t have to worry that I’m on the wrong team.”

Bishop stares at him. That puts something of a kink in her analysis from New York plan. “What am I going to be doing then?”

“I can’t imagine we’ll stop working terror cases. NCIS that is. They’ll still need analysts. But, I’m done with that.”

Bishop sighs. “Been there, done that. Why I wasn’t with the NSA anymore. But the threats are still real, Tony. And even if the assholes run the circus, that doesn’t mean that innocent people don’t get hurt.”

“Yeah, I know.” He licks his lips. “But I don’t want to help prop up the ringmaster anymore. I’m a good cop. I can put assholes in jail for hurting people, and that’s what I want to do. If Vance doesn’t need me for that, I’ll find somewhere else.” He glances over to Allan’s who’s been listening, not saying anything, munching on an apple. “I kind of envy your job. You know who you’re working for and what you’re doing. There’s no doubt about who’s benefiting because of what you’re doing.”

Allan smiles a bit at that and then nods. “There is something to be said for the simplicity of my job. Be the dead man’s voice. Will Dr. Palmer be going back when NCIS is up and running again?”

Tim nods without thinking about it. “I don’t see why not.”

Later, he realizes what he’s said with that. He’s not just giving Allan some comfy BS. He might not be feeling any desire to go to the Navy Yard right now, but he’s tied to it. It’s still where his duty lies, and the only reason Jimmy might not have been going back lies in his hands.

But it’s not. Because he’ll go back. Sooner or later he’ll get the nightmares calmed down, and like
Tony, he might not be feeling very secure about the larger mission, but the small one, serve and protect the Marines, Navy, and their families’, given the time to heal up, he’ll be all over that, and he will go back, because that’s where they belong.
Tim breaks for the day earlier than the rest of the crew. He’s got picking up all three girls, getting to Jimmy and Breena’s, and making sure dinner’s ready for them when they get home.

Ducky decides he’s had enough for the day, too, and asks to ride with Tim.

Tim’s alert enough to know that Ducky is legitimately tired, (He is, too, and he’s annoyed that six hours of light work has him wiped out,) but that he also wants to talk to him one-on-one, so he doesn’t say anything about how heading back with Jethro makes more sense.

Once they’re in the car, Tim says, “So…”

“I approve of your wristband technique.”

“Thanks. No, I didn’t think of it on my own. I called Rachel yesterday when I couldn’t get a hold of Wolf. She suggested I google Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. I’ll be seeing her tomorrow morning.”

Ducky smiles gently at that, happy to see Tim being proactive about taking care of himself.

“Good, Timothy. How are you doing?”

Tim barks a short laugh. “It’s been a shit year, Duck. Without Abby, Jimmy, Breena and our girls, I don’t think I’d still be standing up.”

“But you are standing?”

“Apparently. Not saying I can handle… pretty much anything else right now… but I’m up.”

Ducky gently squeezes Tim’s right hand. “You are looking a lot better than you were when we sent you away from the Navy Yard.”

Tim shrugs. “I don’t really remember. I know we talked… but… kind of like memories of a dream. It’s really scattered.”

Ducky nods at that, too. Tim seems to be pretty good at keeping memories he’s not particularly interested in dwelling on away. They’re both quiet for a few minutes before Ducky says, “I don’t know if this qualifies as ‘anything else’ but, I’m getting the sense that Samuel is developing suspicions as to the nature of your relationship with Jimmy and Breena.”

Tim’s mouth opens and closes. He’s not feeling much of anything on that, though, so he says, “I don’t think it qualifies, either. He’s been staying at Jimmy’s…”

“In Breena’s office. He’s quite sharp and very observant. You and Abby returning home, when you didn’t have to, with Jimmy and Breena, caught his attention.”

Tim nods. “And now he’s coming to stay at my house.”

“If you wish to do some last minute tidying before he gets there, I can pick up the girls.”

Tim appreciates the offer, though he wonders slightly at what Ducky may think they’d have lying around the house. Yes, they do have pictures that would spell everything out, but they sure as hell aren’t on the mantelpiece. “We should be fine. Nothing… revealing is out. We already knew he was coming over to my place when we left in the morning.” Tim half shrugs, and glances away from the
road to Ducky, “He’s caught a few hints from Jimmy and I, so… we’re expecting him to figure it out sooner or later.”

“Will that be a problem?”

Tim shrugs, and then he says, “You know what? No. Even if he blabs all over the place about it. It’s not going to be a problem because we won’t let it be.”

Ducky looks very satisfied by that.

Swapping houses goes well. Jimmy, Breena, and Abby having a place to get changed before getting into the house is even better. To smooth it out even further, Tim sets dinner a bit later, so everyone has time to grab showers before sitting down to eat.

He’s thinking they’re going to be flipping the morning routine. He’ll still get a morning shower, but the other three will probably hold off until the end of the day for as long as the current job holds out.

Tim tells them about working on the house. He shows them pictures of spray paint marks and walls measured out.

They cuddle the babies, and put them to bed, and settle in for another night of light, fluffy, comedy.

As they’re heading to bed, he notices a text on his phone, from Rachel, asking where they should meet up. He sends her Jimmy’s address while brushing his teeth.

“This isn’t your house, is it?” Rachel asks as she looks at the pictures on the mantle. Tim, Abby, and Kelly are in more than a few of them, but the wedding picture is Jimmy and Breena, so are most of the other shots. There are newborn baby pictures of both of their girls along with a shot of Jon’s tiny little fingers curled around Breena’s index finger, and one triptych with all three (first trimester) ultrasound shots.

“No. We’re at Jimmy and Breena’s.”

She nods, taking that in, looking at the pictures. “Is your house okay?” she asks, turning to look at him.

Tim’s sitting on the sofa, watching her get the lay of the land. He probably should be standing up, too, but he doesn’t feel like it. He’ll get enough standing up when he goes to the house. “Yeah. Tony and Ziva’s isn’t. Jake and Bishop’s place is probably going to get torn down. Allan says he’s just waiting for power to get back to the part of the city he’s in. So, they’re staying at my place, and we’re here.”

Rachel thinks about that, too. Tim’s with it enough to realize that it probably seems odd for him to not be in his own house, and between him and the Palmers spread the guests around.

“Easier to keep all the babies in one place.”

Rachel shoots him a look, letting him know that she’s sure he’s right, and that she knows that’s not the whole story. “Have you heard from your regular therapist?”
“Yeah.” Earlier that morning. And that had been a massive relief. “Sheer dumb luck, he was visiting his family in London when it went down. He’s a crisis counselor for the Feds. He’s not sure when his job’ll be around again, but he knows there’s work to do. He tells me he’s coming back this weekend, and like a lot of people in DC, sleeping on friends and families’ couches for the foreseeable future.”

“I’m glad he’s okay. Do you mind if I ask what you were seeing a counselor for?”

Tim sighs. “How many hours do you have?”

She flashes him a curious look and sits down at the far end of the sofa. “I didn’t get the sense you were that complicated when we last talked.”

“I’m good at that.”

“Apparently.” She smiles at him, and it’s clear from her look that she knows what he’s doing, even if he may not. “You’re good at not talking about things, too.”

He nods, realizing that he’s filling the void with words that don’t enlighten. “The short version is a very bad relationship with The—” he’s about to say Admiral, but she doesn’t know who that is, and his voice catches, because he doesn’t want to say Dad, either. “my mom’s first husband, which resulted in him trying to have me killed at the beginning of the summer.”

He gets the sense that Rachel doesn’t often look shocked, but she is shocked now.

Tim gives her a curt nod. “Amazingly enough, in addition to spending the entire summer in casts and rehab,” he gestures to the scar through his eyebrow and the ones on his hand, and the shot on the mantle of the four of them from the OBX, “some fun new scars, enough metal in my arm to make sure I can never go through a metal detector without getting wanded, that left me with some issues to work out.”

Rachel blinks at that. “I’d say. Is that what you meant by it matches something you were already doing?”

“Yeah. As you can imagine the whole thing was traumatic, and involved an actual, physical, life of death, me versus four other guys, hand to hand, fight. Shockingly enough, that also left me with some issues.” He’s got his protective sarcasm well in place, and Rachel takes note of it. “Fear and anger mostly. What you had me researching is more formal than what I was doing. Normally, I’d do something like, This is irrational, stop it. Or just yank myself out of the thoughts and put myself back in the real world. I wouldn’t name why the thoughts were irrational.”

“Does it work for you?”

He half shrugs. “Better than nothing. I’m… I had been having fewer nightmares…” But he doesn’t know that for himself. “I don’t usually remember them. I was being told I have fewer nightmares. Right now I’m sleeping too hard to tell if nightmares will be an issue. Hit the pillow, close eyes, and I’m gone for the next ten hours, too tired to dream. I was feeling less angry. Got past the blood rage, got to the point where keeping my family safe mattered more than revenge, that’s moving forward, right?”

Rachel’s nodding. “You got that far in…”

“Five months?”

She smiles at him, a lot of kindness and some doubt in that look. “If it’s real, that’s what we in the
psych world would call record-setting, unmitigated success.”

He answers her unspoken question, “It’s real enough.”

“Okay. How about right now? You’ve mentioned fear. Angry?”

“Not yet. It’ll probably show up sooner or later. It usually does. How much of the news did you watch?” He glances at the TV as he says that.

“Enough to know that you lived through hell, and you probably feel responsible for a lot of it, too.”

“That’s pretty much it. There’s a lot of guilt in there, too. I set a lot of it in motion, that’s the big level. The case. I’m the guy who broke the last line and spilled the full story. Micro level, in the Navy Yard, I got so mired in it, in the guilt, I couldn’t get out of the Navy Yard, even though they would have let me go, so,” he holds up much too thin arms, near skeletal hands she can see the slight protrusions from the screws in his bones, “a lot of this is entirely on me. I put my family through hell, they were begging me to get out, and I wouldn’t leave.”

She doesn’t ask who he means by ‘his family,’ but she does glance at a shot of the four of them with their girls at the beach in the Outer Banks. For a second, she just looks, taking in the casts, and how much weight, and hair, Tim’s lost. “Because you felt like you couldn’t, because everyone else deserved to get out more than you did?” she asks as she looks back at him.

“I didn’t feel like I couldn’t. I didn’t feel… anything really those last few days. I literally couldn’t. I was talking to them, but, they, the outside world, wasn’t real anymore. There was nothing outside of the Navy Yard. Would have stayed to the end if Abbi and Ducky hadn’t made me go. And now… wrong words, wrong smell, it brings everything back, leaves me in a cold sweat with my heart galloping.”

“They’re called triggers. Part of the idea of what we’re hoping to do is identify yours, and… have you ever had allergy shots?”

Tim groans. Oh, he’s had allergy shots, all right. “Remember what I said about a ‘bad relationship?’”

“Yes.”

“This is the kind of shit I’d go through as a kid. Navy family, so we move every two years. I’m allergic to all sorts of stuff, allergy shots take about two years to be useful. We’d move to a new place. I’d spend the first year being allergic to whatever it was. But we’d have to wait a year, see what set me off, couldn’t just assume that I was allergic to pollen every damn place we went. Then, a year in, we’d start the shots, and they’d be specific to whatever it was I was allergic to there. So, it was never ‘mold’ or ‘pollen,’ it would be ‘pine tree pollen’ or ‘ragweed pollen’ or ‘leaf mold’ because that would have the best chance of working. Except, a year into it, we move. I’ve had the first half of allergy shots five different times and am still allergic to pollen and ragweed and mold and a bunch of other stuff, just not as bad as when I was a kid.”

Rachel winces. “That’s… awful.”

“So, yes, I’m familiar with how the idea works. You get exposed to a little bit of whatever it is, small controlled doses, and your body decides it’s not the end of the world, calls off your immune system, and gets used to it.”

“That’s what we’re going to look for here. Find your triggers, expose you to them, in small, controlled doses, reinforcing that just hearing about it isn’t causing you a problem, and allowing you to build up the emotional calluses you need.”
“Sounds like a plan. I’d… I don’t know, maybe not like… but it might be nice if I at least have a choice about going back to work, as opposed to it just being too much.”

“Not going back because of the work…”

He shakes his head. “Work’s fine, probably. I’m not sure if I can walk into the building, but I can likely handle remoting in and running the department from home. I don’t know if I can make myself care about the job, or like Tony said, trust it. I don’t know if the big picture stuff I’m doing is going to help or hurt people. Little stuff, catch killers and thieves by their computer, I’m fine on that. Hunt down massive multi-national conspiracies that affect the whole world and get thousands of innocent people killed… not sure I want to do that again.”

That seems to make sense to Rachel. She asks, “What is the problem with the building?”

“I put 600 people in there to keep them safe from the riots, and then didn’t buy them enough food. Adults spent weeks on a thousand calories a day. A lot of us ate less, keeping the kids a little better fed. You don’t ever want to smell a building with 600 people, three washers, and ten showers… We had mobs come. One tried to burn us out to get our prisoners. Some asshole let out that we had the FEC election-buying guys in our custody. The other…” Tim shakes his head.

“The other?” Rachel gently asks.

His mouth opens and closes.

“Okay. The other was bad.”

Tim nods.

“And you stayed there until the end?”

He shakes his head. “After… It broke me. Abbi, Jethro’s Abbi, not my Abby, my Abby and Jimmy and Breena and our girls were up in Canada. Abbi ran the defenses. She made me leave. I think she said that if I stayed, I’d let someone shoot me,” he thinks she also said that if she let him say, he’d eat his gun, but he’s not sure anymore if she said it or he was just thinking it. He’s fairly sure he didn’t have a gun on him, and he thinks that’s why he threw his rifle away.

“Were you part of the defenses, Tim?”

He nods. “Yeah. Sharpshooter. I’m good with a pistol, too. Better with a pistol than most people, but pistols are short range weapons, and if you’re going up against a mob at short range, it doesn’t matter if you’re a good aim or not. You just fire. Anyone who could handle the recall was on the wall, trained to shoot or not.” He sounds clinical as he says that.

“And the first mob, were you part of the defenses?”

Tim nods at that, too. “Ran out of bullets for my rifle on that one. Ended up on the wall with my pistol.”

“You seem less traumatized by that. What’s different about those two cases?”

Tim licks his lips. He knows the answer, and he’s got no problem saying part of it. “The first time, they were coming to take our prisoners. Maybe burn us out. No one said it, but we were all thinking it. Just tie the prisoners up and leave them outside the wall. Save us the cost of the trial and the appeals. Let the mob take care of their execution for treason. But, we’re still the good guys, so we don’t… Like I said, no one said it.
“They come, and they’ve got incendiaries. That’s what I was shooting, mostly, Molotov cocktails. We’ve got the river behind us, so anyone who can swim has an exit, but we’ve got little kids. One ship, can’t fit everyone, and it’s a display, though we had a crew of Naval Engineers doing everything they could to get it ready to move if it had to. Wasn’t ready when the mob came, so if they surround and burn us, a lot of us are going to die. They’d gotten the IRS and FEC building a few days earlier. We know what’s going to happen to us if we let it.

“I don’t like that, but give me a gun, and I know what to do. We weren’t going to be the IRS.”

Rachel makes a quick note on that. “You have a moral framework for that, and it fits into it?”

“Yeah.”

“The second one doesn’t fit your moral framework, does it?”

Tim shakes his head.

“What happened, Tim?” She keeps her voice soft, comforting.

“I… don’t know what day it was. Abby or Jimmy could tell you. A while. Food’s scarce. Real scarce. We finally get rid of our prisoners. The deal was the National Guard would take the prisoners out and bring food in.”

“Oh, that sound like a good deal.”

“Leon should have made them get us all out. CGIS did that. Got everyone out. They had to fight their way out, but they got out.”

She knows a sophisticated evasion when she hears one. That’s a good one, but talking about what didn’t happen isn’t where she wants this to go. “That probably would have been a good plan, but it didn’t happen. What did happen?”

Tim feels the fear creeping up on him, and he knows it’s going to drown him if he tries to answer that question. Rachel sees it, too. She moves a little closer to him, and takes his hands in hers. “You are in Jimmy and Breena’s home. You are safe. This is just the allergy shot. Pain now to dull your reaction later. You don’t always want to be reacting to your triggers this way, so tell me as much of it as you can.”

He blinks, slow, licks his lips, and begins to disassociate himself from it. He’s telling a story, something that happened to McGregor. Rachel sees the switch in him, and right now, if he can only tell it as an abstraction, that’s fine.

Tim keeps his eyes on the trees outside, watching brown and red leaves rattle a bit in a light breeze through the window. “They’re all hungry. Everyone in there is hungry. The fucker who brought the food didn’t bring enough. Supposed to bring thousands of pounds, and he brought hundreds. And he didn’t do it quiet or subtle. Asshole dropped it in front of the walls. EVERYONE is hungry. They’re roaming the city, eating anything they can catch, and there’s not much left to catch. They’re online. Power still works. No one’s got food, but they’ve got Twitter and Facebook.

“They post it online. ‘Food at the Navy Yard.’ And the mob is back. No food, but gasoline. Tons of that. Empty bottles filled with it galore. And no one’s short on matches. Guns… somehow they’ve got guns. The ones who don’t, they’ve got rocks and knives and… Shit, one of them had a truck with a snow plow blade on it. He was going to drive through the cars we’re using as an outer perimeter, clear a path for the mob, let them move faster.” Rachel notes that detail, and figures out why Tim remembers him so well. She doesn’t need to ask what happened to the man driving the
“Can’t let it go. It’s food. There’s no other food in the Navy Yard, and that sad little pile of it means the kids get a full belly and the grown-ups are a little less hungry.

“Can’t let it go. So, we didn’t.” His eyes are very wide as he says that, and he’s very intently not looking at her.

Tim looks like he’s trying to say something else, and Rachel waits for it, but the words don’t form. After a few more seconds, Rachel nods. That’s enough detail for right now. “Okay.” She’s holding his hand, so she can feel the sweat, and a little adjustment of her finger position means she can feel his pulse thrumming away too fast. “Where are you?”

“Here. Jimmy’s.” His voice is strained as he says that, and his body tense, ready to run.

“Okay,” she keeps her voice calm and soothing. “What are you doing?”

“Talking to you.”

“Yes, tell me all about it. We’re reinforcing that you’re home and safe, give me details.”

Tim looks away from the trees outside, his eyes really seeing again. He swallows, hard. “We’re in Jimmy and Breena’s living room, on the sofa. It’s beige and the pillows behind us are blue. The walls are light blue, the carpet and trim are dark brown.”

His heart is starting to slow down, the need to run lessening.

“Good. What else?”

“Umm…” He takes a deep breath, trying to get himself further under control. “You’re wearing perfume. It smells nice. I am, too. It’s actually Abby’s, but it’s got really good memories attached to it, so I wear a little of it sometimes, when I need a boost.” He licks his lips, thinking about where he is, what’s around him, what he’s feeling. “Ummm… I’ve got on jeans, a t-shirt, and a sweater. The jeans and t-shirt are Jimmy’s because mine are too big these days. My calves are a little cool where the jeans are too short. Actually, I’m a little cold all over, but that’s true most of the time I’m not holding onto someone else these days.”

“Okay, more details.”

“I can feel the softness of the carpet under my feet. Not the texture, because I’m wearing socks, but the floor is soft. Breena has a few of those ‘beach’ scented candles, and I can smell them. In a week or two, she’ll change to her fall scents, usually something spicy and warm. Outside the window most of the leaves have fallen, but I can see a few red ones still hanging on the maple tree.”

“Okay, how do you feel, emotionally?”

He licks his lips. “Not as scared as I was two minutes ago.”

“And that’s the plan. That’s how this gets beaten into submission. Adrenaline takes a while to work itself out of your system…”

“I know.” He’s nodding his head. He’s got more than enough experience with waiting for his body to calm down. “I’ll feel a bit shaky for half an hour or so.”

“Yes, but it will pass. It’s just the chemical remainder of what happened.”
“Great. Now what?”

“Now, we talking longer strategy. Are you going to want to keep seeing me when your regular counselor comes back?”

He hadn’t given that much thought. “Might see both of you. Maybe just you. I know he’s going to be swamped.”

“Just because other people need help doesn’t mean you have to forego it.”

“I get that. I’ve got the funds to pay you out of pocket, but right now he’s free to people who work for the government. Any hour I’m with him is an hour someone else who might not have a second option can’t have.”

She smiles at that. “Very rational.”

“Gotta be rational about something, right?” he says with a painfully dry smile.

“It’ll make this easier.” She lets go of his hands and stands up, looking at the photos on the mantle again. “How are you doing with your family?”

“Good. We’re good.”

“Can you talk to them about this?”

Tim thinks about that. “Yes, Jethro, definitely. He was there, he saw it. When I get done here… Did he tell you about our house?”

Rachel shakes her head. “Our house?”

“Ducky and Penny decided to get a place for our whole family. It’s on the river, big enough for all of us, and our kids, to fit. It was in terrible shape when we got it, and we’re still fixing it up. When we get done today, I’m heading there. I’ll be working on it with Jethro. I think Ducky’ll be there today, too. Maybe Penny and Jake, but they’re also working on some other stuff, so I’m not sure if they’ll be there. Bishop said she’d be there today. Probably Allan, he’s at loose ends right now. Tony and Ziva should be at the airport by now, so not them… Anyway, yeah, we’re working on it, and everyone who’s there was in the Navy Yard, and we all get it. Time doing something mentally intensive, where you can stop and grab a nap if you need to, and no one stares if you’re too damn thin… and everyone gets why you might just shudder for no reason… or why you get edgy if you can’t see where the snacks are… That’s good. And yeah, I know I’ll be talking to Jethro while we do that.”

“That’s good. How about your… more immediate family? Abby… Jimmy and Breena?”

Tim swallows. So far he hasn’t felt any need to drop many of the images or details of the Navy Yard on them. “I’m sure I could, but I’m not sure I want to. They’re in DC on clean up right now. Jimmy and Breena are in the morgue, dealing with bodies; Abby’s IDing the Does; they’ve got enough dark, and I don’t know if I want to dump mine on them, too. But, if I wanted to talk to them, I could.”

Rachel stops studying the pictures to look at him. “One of the things I’ve noticed, is that the more engaged you stay, with your friends, family, life around you, the better off you are likely to be. The more you fill your life with the things that light you up, the less room there is for the dark. Now isn’t the time to ‘protect them’ by not telling them what you went through, or what’s in your head. You do that, you’re building walls between them and you, and you’re denying yourself the opportunity to
deal with these issues in a place you feel safe. So, don’t do that.”

Tim nods.

“Did you feel comfortable telling them about what happened with… is your mother’s first husband your father?”

“I prefer not to acknowledge that. Gibbs is my father.”

Rachel mentally winces. Issues. “Could you talk to them about it?”

“Yeah. I could, and did, and do. Abby went with me to some of the sessions with Wolf.”

“Good. You want to do that here, too. And if Abby wants to join in for any of these sessions I’m fine with that.” She glances from Tim to the mantle, eyes on a shot of the four of them from Tony and Ziva’s wedding. “If Jimmy or Breena wants to come, too, that’s also fine.”

Which is when Tim remembers that before everything blew up, Jimmy had started seeing Rachel. They hadn’t talked about what Jimmy’s been saying to her. He thinks they got maybe one, maybe two appointments in, and then the case went insane and they were on the run.

Tim can’t think of a good way to ask, “So, how much of what’s going on between the four of us has Jimmy told you?” so he says, “We’ll see. They’re working during the day.”

Rachel knows evasion when she hears it. “I show up at night, too.”

“I’ll float the idea past them.”

“For right now, I want you to keep pulling out of it, stay engaged with your here and now, stay engaged with your family. And, right now, I’d think that getting all four of you together to talk about this, with me or without me, would be a good plan.”

Tim nods.

“Based on just an hour of chatting with you, I’m guessing what we’re looking at is a whole lot of guilt, and that’s what’s setting the panic attacks into play.”

That sounds like a distressingly accurate read to Tim. He’s fairly sure that fear as just fear would have been a lot easier to beat. “Great. So…”

“So, you’re going to have to work on accepting that you did the best you could, and it wasn’t enough. And you’re going to be working on making sure you know that you are safe, and your fear can and will be tamed down.”

“Okay. When do you want to get together again?”

Rachel checks her phone quickly. “Same time, day after tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

After dinner, after girls are in bed, as they settle onto the sofa, Tim says, “Rachel suggested that maybe all four of us talk together… with her… Uh…” he’s looking at Jimmy… “how much does she know about the four of us?”
It feels like it’s been a million years since Jimmy talked to Rachel, so he’s got to think about it for a
second, though he knows he didn’t specifically mention the particulars of their relationship. “We just
talked about Jon and how I was doing with losing him. And no, I hadn’t gotten around to the killing
the Admiral bit of it, just the MMA and blowing up on Tony part of it.”

“She ask about family support?” Tim asks. He’s sitting on the left side of the sofa, facing the right
side, one leg stretched out along the back of the sofa, the other facing forward, foot on the floor.
Abby’s between his legs, back to his chest, head on his arm, which is also stretched out along the
back of the sofa.

“Yeah…” and Jimmy remembers what he’d said… “And yeah, I did mention you and Abby…” he
hands the popcorn over to Abby, and sits down on the right side of the sofa, his hip against Tim’s
foot, while Breena snuggles across his lap, facing Tim and Abby. “Just that you two had been really
important to keeping me going.”

“And she met you here,” Breena says, looking around the living room, taking a few pieces of
popcorn from Abby. “She wonder why you weren’t at your house?”

“I think so. I know I mentioned you two being important, and when she asked about if I could talk to
my family about this, I replied for all three of you.”

Abby feeds him a bite of popcorn, and asks, “Did she seem bothered?”

“Not that I noticed. I don’t know if she’s thinking we’re very close friends or what.” That’s when he
remembers his chat with Ducky. “And Ducky’s mentioned that Sam’s on the verge of figuring things
out.”

Jimmy shakes his head at that. “Nah. At least, I don’t think so. He’s on the verge of deciding we’re,”
he gestures to him and Tim, “fooling around behind their,” he kisses Breena and gives Abby’s foot a
squeeze, “backs.”

“Do you need to talk to him?” Breena asks.

“I don’t think so. Not now, at least,” Jimmy replies.

“He’s been working at the house with us. He seems intrigued by our layout, but isn’t asking me
anything,” Tim says.

“And he won’t. He’s used to keeping his own secrets, and likely won’t poke into ours. I talked to
him today, and he’s planning on joining our team on Monday. I have a feeling after he watches us,”
he pets Breena’s hair, “work together for a few days, he’ll decide that he’s misread the situation and
we’re…” Tim gets his foot stroked, and he jerks a little because it’s ticklish. Jimmy winks at him.
“Just good friends.”

“I’m thinking that if he does find out… It’s not a big deal,” Tim says.

“I doubt it’d be an issue for him,” Jimmy replies, “but, we didn’t think it’d be an issue for Tony,
either, so, as long as he can stay in the dark, I’m fine with that.”

“Not exactly what I mean…” Tim licks his lips and rests his hands on Abby’s tummy. Sean’s still
right now, probably sleeping. They’ve got an OB appointment tomorrow. Get new ultrasounds. “I
know this sounds stupid coming from a guy who breaks into a cold sweat at the mention of his place
of employment, but… I just don’t care what he thinks, or what anyone else thinks, not about this, not
anymore. This isn’t on my list of fears anymore.”
“Not stupid at all,” Abby says, squeezing his hand. “After this last month…”

That brings a memory back. “I got out on Semper. And, I didn’t get seasick. After the Stennis, I figured I’d never set foot on a ship again without tossing my cookies, but it didn’t bug me at all. Might have been too far gone for it, but… And I’m not saying I want to hop on again anytime soon, and re-test it, but…”

“But it was better,” Jimmy says.

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to have all four of us talk with her?” Breena asks, pulling them back to why he mentioned this.

“I don’t know.” He presses his lips against Abby’s temple and hold her a little tighter. “I want to be functional. I want to be here, with you guys, not stuck back there. She’s happy with the idea of me talking to Jethro about it, but she’d also like me talking to you guys, and… I mean… I don’t really want to talk, but I probably need to, and I don’t want to dump this crap on you, because you’ve got more than enough of your own crap right now—“

“Tim, don’t ever shut up about something because you think we can’t/don’t want to take it,” Jimmy says.

“That’s the deal. We help each other carry the load.” Abby kisses him as she says that.

Breena strokes his leg. “Come on, pick something, we’ve got it, with you.”

Before he starts to think of something to say, he decides explaining more about the idea of ‘psychological allergy shots’ and why he’s making himself think of horrible things in a safe environment. They follow along with that pretty well, not like it’s a very complicated concept, but he’s getting into the details of it, and then the details of real allergy shots, and then Abby gently strokes his face and says, “You really don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. Not tonight.”

Tim winces slightly, his conscious brain catching up to what he was doing.

“I should. Uh… okay, no more evasion.” He licks his lips, thinking. “This one caught me at the house today. We’re up on the top floor, getting the kids’ play area measured out. I was thinking about our kids, older, up there messing around.

“There were kids there, too. A lot of them. And the first few days, it’s… I don’t know… vacation sort of. No school, not much work. The older ones did their schoolwork or were glued to their phones. Connon stuck around, and he got the computers wired up for a massive Minecraft party, and with the One and PlayStation they did tournament days. Vote on different games, and then anyone who wanted to play got 10 minutes to get the highest score possible. Winner got a candy bar or something.

“Because that’s when we still had candy bars, though they were starting to get scarce.

“Last tournament day was a week in, and that was it, last candy bar in the place. They played so hard for that damn thing…” Tim’s starting to get tense, thinking about it, and Abby’s gently stroking his hands.

“Pool parties. Did that the first week, too. We have a pool. Not like there was any reason to not use it. Day one or two even three, when everyone still had clean clothing… People went swimming. Trying to have fun and kill time. Cranked up the music. The kids liked it.
“But the water went bad, and you didn’t want to drink it. It was safe to wash in, but no one wanted to swim in it. Even with chlorine, we weren’t sure what would happen if you spent too much time in it.” Abby can feel his heart speeding up against her back, and Jimmy’s gently rubbing the bottom of Tim’s foot.

“You’re okay, Tim,” Breena says, voice soft.

“So, the first week… they’re bored, and tense, and whiny, some of them were sick from the water, they’re being kids stuck in a place they don’t want to be. But they’re still okay. They’re still, for the most part, round and plump, and they’re running around.

“And then we had to cut rations. Just the grownups at first. We went down to 3/4 rations first. Fifteen hundred calories. Most of the kids, especially the little ones, ate less than that anyway, so, they got to have all of their food.

“That didn’t last long. Whole city ran out of food at once. Ate its way through everything it had stored. Tony and his team was out scrounging, looking for food. Only reason more of us didn’t die was the first day they went out, they cleaned out a warehouse club of vitamins, protein bars, diet shakes, stuff like that. It’s not really food; it’s all ‘low calorie,’ but it’s got all the nutrients you need.” Tim has to stop there, take a few deep breaths to get himself back into the living room with Abby, Jimmy, and Breena. The taste of those bars, sweet, “chocolate” but not really chocolate, with a gritty, chalky tongue-coating under-taste floods through him. He gags for a few seconds and squeezes Abby’s hands, tight.

“You’re okay, baby.” She kisses him, making a mental note to find out what the hell he was eating in there and make sure it and anything like it stays off the menu until he puts it there himself.

“No new food is coming in, so we drop to half rations. 1000 calories a day. That’s… two protein bars and a cup of oatmeal or rice. Just to try and make something else, Elaine made rice pudding with the diet shakes, so… Maybe a half-cup of chocolate or strawberry rice pudding that… I don’t know, tasted like shit to me, but… It’s still food, and you eat whatever you can…” Shoveling too sweet, gummy, artificial-strawberry-flavored, which is something he can’t stand under the best of circumstances, gruel into his mouth, comes back. Comes back in a lukewarm wash of stomach curdling flavors. Tim buries his head into Abby’s neck, inhaling deep, smelling her skin and perfume, and then licks her, just to have another taste on his tongue.

He can feel firm pressure on his foot, Jimmy’s hands, and Breena slips around, behind the arm of the sofa, rubbing his shoulders.

“That’s when we started to cut the kids’ rations, too. And now they’re bored and nervous and hungry. They whine and cry and get into fights all the time. The few that were nursing did okay a bit longer than the toddlers, but… Mom’s not getting enough food, milk won’t be good, so…” He’s a dad. He’s the dad of a toddler, and the very involved Uncle of a baby. He’s spent hours listening to little people cry, and it’s the worst sound in the world. It’s a sound that has been, through millions of years of evolution, designed to make sure you, the caregiver, get your ass up and fix the problem.

And he couldn’t fix the problem.

“Six hundred people in there, and maybe two hundred and fifty of them are kids.” Tim swallows hard. “Maybe eighty of them are under seven. That’s a lot of crying.” His eyes are tearing up, too.

“I can shoot. That was the test to stand watch. Can you hit something the size of a softball at the edge of our perimeter? I can do that. I took watch over and over just to get out of the building. Just so I didn’t have to hear it. But, Abbi only lets you stand watch eight hours a day. At first, when we had
enough people. Got it up to fourteen later, but that’s still too many hours left in a building filled with miserable people.

“I stopped eating my oatmeal or rice or whatever the mystery broth was. I’d line up, just like everyone else, sign my name showing I’d gotten my food, and then hand it over to whichever one was crying the loudest. A lot of parents did that. Some non-parents, too. I don’t know if it was to get them to shut up, or if it was about keeping them healthy.

“Didn’t matter much. They started looking like little skeletons. And they stopped playing. Toward the end, most of them stopped crying.” Tim’s voice cracks on that. “They’d just sleep all day, wake up a little to eat, and then go back to sleep. A lot of us were doing that. Sleep every minute you could. Hibernate, I guess. Ducky said that’s the best thing you can do when food is scarce… But… Shit…” He’s crying now, having a hard time keeping the words going. They hold onto him, let him have his cry, making sure he stays here, with them.

Tim supposes it’s working, he’s very aware of being here, in the living room, talking about it, not slipping back into reliving it. He guesses that the step after being tossed back into it is grieving for it. He supposes this is progress.

His voice is rough and shaky as he says, “We’re upstairs, measuring out the play area, and I just cracked, thinking about how close we were to having our babies in there, and… It didn’t happen to them, but I couldn’t shake the image of them starved and sleeping all day… Couldn’t shake the fear of them not waking up.”

He exhales slowly at that. “It didn’t happen. I know it didn’t happen. And even if it did, we live in Virginia, we would have left. It didn’t happen.” He works on holding onto that, while they hold onto him. And he’s doing, okay, with that. But guilt hops up, just as he’s starting to calm down some, and it spikes his heart rate, and rushes through him in an electric wash of adrenaline.

*His* babies weren’t here. *His* loves got out. And even if they had been there, they could have gotten out, but that wasn’t true for everyone else. Starved toddlers, sleeping on the floor, their parents exhausted, hollow-eyed and cheeked, wrecked, because the number one, first, primary responsibility of being a parent is keeping your kids fed, and their babies weren’t eating.

They didn’t have anywhere else to go.

And they were in the Navy Yard because of him.

It takes a very long time for Tim to get himself calmed back down from that.
Quiet Time

It feels surreal to Tim to do normal things. Like go to the OB.

Abby’s almost twenty-five weeks along, so they’re late for the twenty-week ultrasound, but no one gives them any crap for it. They aren’t, by a long stretch, the only people who had their schedule turned upside down.

Instead of their normal ‘Hellos’ from Dr. Draz, they both get hugs, followed by, “I saw the news conference, and then you guys didn’t show for your appointment. God, you two scared me,” that gets another hug. “So glad to hear you’re okay.” Then she pulls a step back from Abby, eyeing Sean. “And it looks like you’re better than okay.” She glances at Tim… “Did you not eat for a month to make sure she got enough food?”

Tim shrugs a bit. “Not exactly.”

“I was in Canada. Plenty of food for us,” she pats Sean. “He stuck around, like you saw with the news coverage. Made sure other people got fed.” There’s some edge to her voice, but not enough for Tim to react to.

“Are you going to be okay?” Draz asks.

“So they tell me. I’ve already got a Doctor watching my every move,” he nods to Abby and Draz takes the hint.

“Okay. So, you know the drill. We’re a bit late for the 20 week work up, so we’re going to modify it some. Today we’ve got an ultrasound, check everything out, as well as the glucose test, make sure you’re still doing okay with your blood sugar. Then the next two appointments will be at four week intervals. That’ll get you to 33 weeks, and we’ll start checking in more regularly, and start getting ready for little boy here to join the outside world.”

Dim room, Abby’s hand in his, the woosh, woosh, woosh, sound of Sean’s heartbeat, followed by the image of it pumping away, and then sepia-toned view of their little boy, who appears to be sucking his thumb, and that moment, right there, with Abby, Tim’s entirely engaged.

As they wait for the second round of blood tests, Tim sends a text to Jimmy with the ultrasound footage. Check out your namesake.

A minute after that, he sends another one to the larger group. SJ McGee.

Abby watches him text. “Are you really going to call him SJ?” she teases.

He shrugs a bit. “I don’t know. Don’t want the James part to only be something we whip out when he’s in trouble.”

She smiles at that. “’SEAN JAMES, you get in here, right NOW!’ You mean like that?”

“Yeah.”
She shakes her head a bit. “God... We’re gonna have five of them under the age of four.”

Tim laughs at that, then he smiles, genuinely. “Trick or treating. Next year only Molly’ll really care much one way or another, but five years from now... Can you see it?”

“Oh yeah, Molly’ll be almost eight. Kelly’ll be six. Anna almost six. Sean four, Dave four, and if Breena manages to catch again soon, next baby Palmer might be four or almost four.”

Tim smiles, mental images of Princes Darth Vader or whatever fluffy, counter-culture, nerd-chic costume Kelly will come up with, dancing in his mind. “Five years, there’ll probably be at least one more DiNozzo in the mix.” Tim adds, thinking of the picture that Tony sent them this morning. It’s one of Ziva, in a pretty white dress, on a bench, somewhere warm and tropical looking, munching on ice cream, looking gloriously happy and pregnant.

“And if we’re lucky, one more McGee. Breena and Jimmy talk about wanting four, so another Palmer. That’s what... nine kids under the age of nine?”

“Yeah. Halloween and Christmas are going to be insane.”

Abby’s still smiling. “Going to be amazing. Can you see Gibbs in... I don’t know, pirate costume or something, herding this troop of kidlets around his neighborhood, taking them Trick-or-Treating?”

Yeah, he can. “Hook Mona up to a small wagon, let her pull the candy around when it gets too heavy for them.”

“God, she’d be all over that.”

Tim’s hand rests on Abby’s belly. “Christmas. Fire in the fireplace. Huge damn tree in the corner. You and Jimmy and Breena decorating the ever-living snot out of every inch of the house. Kids all over the place, wrapping paper up to our eyeballs, house smells like pine and spice and turkey and roast beef and cookies, people coming over all day.” He blinks hard a few times at that, feeling tears forming, but they’re happy ones.

Abby smiles at him, and kisses him.
“When I drop you off, I’m heading back to the house. We’re starting framing today.”

“Good.”

“It’ll be rough, and close, probably won’t have everything done, but… I think we’ll have Christmas at the house this year.”

“Even better.”

“You sure you want to do this?” Abby asks as they head back to the car.

Tim shrugs. “If it’s too much, we’ll change plans. You’ll drop me off, and I’ll catch a ride home with Jethro.”

Abby nods, and they begin the drive into DC.

It’s not as bad as Tim was fearing.

On several levels.

On the first one, the city isn’t in as bad of shape as he remembered. He’s not sure if his mind made the damage worse than it was, or if the cleanup crews have been working miracles. Probably some combination of the two of them with a side of they aren’t taking their usual route in, because they aren’t coming from home.

They’re driving through a busted up, but not burned part of the city, taking a fairly circuitous route, when it hits him that part of why it doesn’t look as bad as he expects is that they’re driving, not walking, so Google is taking them through the sections of town they can still drive through.

They’re skirting the burned out parts, and going around the rubble.

He is pleased to see, that, at least in the bits they can drive through, that people are coming back, cleaning up, and getting back to life. He’s not feeling particularly hungry, but when he sees an open coffee shop he stops and gets them both drinks and a cookie for Abby. He figures if someone’s going to try and actually run a business right now, least he can do is pump some money into it.

He even drinks his tea. The first sip is tentative, expecting the sludgy-gray-metalic yuck of the water in the Navy Yard, but he doesn’t taste it. Maybe they’ve got the water system fixed, or maybe they used bottled water, either way, decaf Harvest Chai is just pleasantly creamy and spicy.

It’s also not as emotionally bad as he thought it might be. Of course, they aren’t to the Navy Yard, yet.

He’s driving, and that’s intentional. If he can’t handle driving to the building, he won’t be emotionally stable enough to handle driving away from it. So, he’s driving, that way there’s no shot of Abby getting him further in than he can stand.

He can feel his nerves creeping up on him. His jaw is starting to go tight. Tim’s not sure if he’s afraid of being afraid, or afraid of what’s coming. Not sure if the anticipation is the problem, or if there’s an actual problem lurking.
“You still okay?” Abby asks, aware of the fact that he’s driving pretty slow, which isn’t much of a problem. There’s some traffic, but not a lot of it.

He nods, just a slight up down of his chin.

“Really?”

“Yeah.” His voice is tense as he says it. “Little hurt now, less hurt later.” He’s convincing himself.

“Okay. But if you look like you get any deeper in than you are now, I’m vetoing this trip.” Her hand rests on his leg, and helps ground him.

“Thanks.” He exhales long and slow, and jiggles his right wrist at her. She snaps the band for him.

“I’m okay. In the car. You’re next to me. We’re turning onto Ruthers, and then we’ll drive a quarter mile and turn again…” He narrates the whole trip in, but he does make it to the front gate of the Navy Yard, without a panic attack.

But he doesn’t look past the gate. He doesn’t check the buildings. And he doesn’t watch Abby go in. (Though he does demand that she send him a text the second she’s inside and let him no she’s safe.)

As soon as she’s out, he whips into a fast u-turn and gets out of there, again narrating the ride out, until he’s past 495 and heading to the house.

He feels shaky, and tired, but he made it in and out. He didn’t let the fear stop him. And it wasn’t comfortable, but it didn’t hurt him.

As he tells Rachel the next day, “I was fine.”

It’s not until later that day, in the house, hammering away with Gibbs, that it hits him that he was in DC, but he didn’t smell it. He wonders if that’s part of why it didn’t hit so hard.

Work on the house follows a pretty relaxed and slow schedule, often with breaks where someone grabs a quick nap.

Gibbs has his saw set up outside on the back porch. That’s the spot where they really can’t talk while work is going on. Too loud.

But that part of the work tends to happen for an hour or so. Ducky measures. Gibbs saws. Tim, Bishop, and Allan move lumber in, one two by four at a time. (And none of them are pleased to be only carrying one in.) Then they lay them out where they’re going to go.

After all of the measuring, sawing, and moving is done, it’s hammering time. For the first bit of wall, the whole crew builds the wall section the way they did when they were framing in Gibbs’ basement. One chunk at a time. Then they prop it up, shove it into place, and get out the drills.

Tim’s the only one in the crew who can comfortably reach the ceiling without having to get more than two steps up on the stepladder, so he’s in charge of the screws that anchor the wall section to the ceiling. He’s also slow at it. And has to take breaks. The stupid drill weights about five pounds, but he’s doing it up, over his head, and he gets tired very fast.
Gibbs and Bishop’ll take the lower screws. Between the two of them, they’ll get the wall studs secured to the floor in about a minute, and then rejoin Ducky and Allan, working on the building the next section. Tim keeps working away, three or four screws at a time, take a little break, four or five more, another break, and so on and so forth.

Ducky’s taking a break from framing, and Tim’s getting a rest from securing the wall to the ceiling.

“Any news from Penny and Jake?” Tim asks.

“Oh, yes. They’ve found a place for us. And two more ‘Ambassadors.’ On the 14th, the ‘official convoy’ of the District of Columbia Diplomatic Corps is heading north. We even have shiny, new, to us, at least, cars.” They’re very gently used Nissan Leafs. Low emissions, and low price because they don’t have the ‘status’ that goes with a Prius. The District of Columbia Diplomatic Corps is attempting to set a tone for thriftiness and environmental consciousness.

“You going, too?” Tim asks Bishop, who’s hammering with Gibbs and Allan.

“Yeah. Penny found a building in Harlem that was willing to give us a floor of furnished apartments at a steep discount.”

“I thought every hotel in the city was offering you penthouses?” Allan asks.

“They were. That was part of the hold up, figuring out who owned those hotels, and what they might want. The guys in Harlem know Penny from back in the day,” Bishop replies, remembering Penny talking about being a Naval wife in the early fifties leading the integration charge for base housing and the like. She ended up good friends with the wives of the men who, once upon a time were Navy enlisted, and now own several apartment buildings in Harlem.

“She was also cognizant of the fact that the Harlem connection would… help to provide a visual reminder that the population of the District of Columbia is not just well-heeled lobbyists and congressional aides,” Ducky adds.

“And help remind that part of the population that things are changing.” Bishop shrugs at that, not sure how much anyone actually in the city of DC cares about stuff like that right now.

“Is Jarvis pleased?” Tim asks.

“We haven’t spoken to him. I think he’s so busy right now, he doesn’t care what we do, as long as we take care of it and don’t bother him with the details.”

Gibbs smirks at that.

Bishop shoots him a questioning glance.

“How he ran the Navy, too.”

When they wrap up for the afternoon, Tim’s tired, his arms are sore, but the good sore that goes with
working out, and ready for a quiet night at home followed by a long sleep.

“Tomorrow night,” Gibbs says. “Shabbos at our place. Dinner starts at sunset.”

“I went back into the city, drove to the Navy Yard, and didn’t have a complete meltdown.” Tim tells Rachel the next morning.

“That’s good. And have you tried talking to your family?”

“Yeah… It’s harder than I thought it would be.”

“To make yourself talk?”

“No… I can talk to them about anything. It’s physically difficult. I feel wiped out when I’m done. Exhausted all over.”

“This is work, Tim. Healing is work.”

“Yeah, great…” Like he doesn’t have enough work in his life these days.

“At least you’ve got time to do this work, without having to try to balance it with all of your other jobs.”

He nods a little. “There is that.”

“So, why were you in the city?”

“Dropping Abby off…” Tim tells her about what they’ve been up to, and they talk more about what he did, why he did it, and how it worked out. Rachel doesn’t take him back to the last mob. She’s watched the news reports, which have it labeled as a food riot, though the level of detail is sketchy. She’s checked twitter, and saw the way it blew up when someone noticed there was food there. She’s seen pictures and footage from people in the crowd, and even watching it online is terrifying. She doesn’t want to imagine living it.

She’s thinking that getting Tim grounded on the rest of it is a good plan, get him on more solid footing, and then they can break into what’s going on with that last mob later, when he’s got a firmer foundation to stand on.

They meet at Gibbs’ place a bit before Sunset on Friday. Penny decided that if this was her last weekend at home for the immediately foreseeable future, she was hosting Shabbos, and that was that.

The whole clan is there. (Granted, this is accomplished by Tony and Ziva Skyping in, along with surprise Skype visitors Senior and Delphine. Their whole neighborhood is charcoal right now, so they don’t intend to head back to the US anytime in the immediate future.) As well as the extended clan.

Even Diane and Draga show up.

Dinner is loud, and boisterous, close to twenty people stuffed into one house, all celebrating that they’re alive, and whole, and there are pile and piles and piles of glorious food all laid out in front of
Tim’s surprised to see Draga look nervous when he sees him. He can’t for the life of him think of why Draga, who made it through everything else the last month had to throw at him would find him unnerving, until he starts to really think about it and realizes what he saw right before he left.

Draga does get a few minutes alone with him later in the night, and very quietly asks him, “Are you going to tell Diane?”

Tim shakes his head. “You were on the wall, right?”

Draga nods.

“Close enough to see their faces?”

“They were so hungry.” Draga bites his lip, voice anguished.

Tim nods back. That’s the thing he hasn’t been able to make himself say, not yet. Not to Rachel, or to his family, or even himself, not really. Though he knows he did it. He killed starving people, a lot of them. He didn’t deserve that food any more than they did, but he had it, and he killed to keep it. He snaps his wrist band, hard.

He couldn’t see their faces, not well, not close enough to watch them die. He’d hit one, or he’d hit an incendiary, and they/it would just vanish in the crowd. Mostly. He could almost pretend that… But he won’t. He remembers some of them, like the plow driver, and that’s enough. “Yeah. I… Only reason I walked in was they were sending me home. I… couldn’t take it anymore. It broke me…” he snaps the band again, starting to feel the cold air, hear the screams, and smell scorched death, and the sting helps to put him back in Gibbs’ house. “And I… wasn’t as close as you were. So… whatever you had to do to get through that night.” Tim shakes his head again. “I’m not judging.”

“Thanks.” And Draga does look relieved, for a second. “Just… couldn’t stand feeling that way, seeing them…”

Tim nods at that. “I get it.” He inclines his head and adds, “Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t tell her, though. Especially, if there’s a shot this might come back to bite you later.”

That kills his relief. “I…” Draga looks very nervous at that.

“Doesn’t mean you should, either. I don’t know the answer on this one. I really don’t know the answer for Diane, who’s got a shit load of history when it comes to fooling around. But that’s between you two, which is somewhere I don’t intend to go.”

Allan finds Shabbos interesting. He’s finding all of this, interesting. His own family dynamic is
straightforward, and somewhat tense.

He loves his parents. They love him. They’re “accepting of his lifestyle,” as well as they can be. (To the point where they cut ties with their church and his mother’s mother when he came out.) They don’t make stupid comments. They don’t make his boyfriends feel unwelcome.

They did the “good parent” thing. They are actively trying to be “good parents.” He loves them for it. He knows way too many people whose parents told them to, literally, go to Hell. He knows kids who were beaten and thrown out of the house. He knows how bad it could have been, and that he’s been blessed with people who love him and adore him.

And he absolutely knows they think him being gay is really gross. They think having a relationship with him is more important than their discomfort, so they work at it, but… They’re tense and nervous and spend every minute walking on eggshells because they’re afraid of saying or doing something that’ll annoy/embarrass/make him feel unwelcome.

So, when they’re together they talk a lot about neutral subjects, like them remodeling their house, or his job, or anything that isn’t about him or them, or him and them, or him and sex.

Right now, he’s in Gibbs’ house, at a formal religious dinner, that is, from what he can tell, a religion that no one physically located at this table is part of. (Though he’s not entirely sure about the McGees. Dr. Palmer has mentioned that the DiNozzos are Jewish, and he knows that Shabbos has been hosted at the McGee house, too, so he’s not sure.) He is sure they have a lot of practice at this, and practice brings ease, but… He can imagine his parents trying this. It would be perfect. All the details elegant and carefully designed, and it would be hollow and awkward.

But this isn’t. It’s warm and comfortable and the laughter is real.

This is also the first time he’s gotten to see all four McGees and Palmers interacting with each other in a relaxed atmosphere as a foursome.

He knows something is up. He doesn’t know what. They’re just too… easy with each other, in a way that people just aren’t. Not with their friends. Hell, not with their significant others, not usually.

He knows that everyone who is part of the intimate family knows what’s up, and though he can’t make himself wrap his mind around the idea that Gibbs or Ducky is wildly liberal when it comes to sex or the variations thereof, they seem genuinely comfortable with what’s going on.

In fact, the ease with which they treat the four of them, even when McGee cuts a piece of lamb for Breena and feeds it to her off of his fork, (which would have caused his mom to swallow her tongue) as she’s got her hands full of Anna, or when Breena’s rubbing Abby’s back as Tim’s off talking with Draga, or that one moment where McGee is having a hard time, and Dr. Palmer gently strokes the back of his hand, is making him think that whatever the hell it is he thinks he’s seeing, isn’t there.

“Leon, any news?” Tony asks over Skype. They’re in Sicilly right now, having a very late dinner, on an extremely early breakfast, in order to be up and with the rest of the crew.

“We’re officially off until after the election. Technically, right now, there is no United States Navy or Marines, so there’s no NCIS. Congressman King tells me that, technically, until there’s a clean election, there’s no United States so everything that possibly can be put on hold, like us, is on hold.” Leon chews a bite of his lamb. “He also tells me that as soon as the first election is done, before they’ve even got a count, we’re back. They don’t care who wins, it’s the election itself that conveys
legitimacy.”

Jake nods along with that. “And, from what I’m hearing, until DC becomes a state and/or I’ve got some sort of reciprocity deal set with the Congress, you won’t be able to use anything in the District as a headquarters.”

“That’ll go fast,” Penny says. “They’re way more interested in getting that deal inked than anything else we’ve got to offer. They don’t care if the District ends up being a separate country, as long as they don’t have to pay to relocate everyone who used to be in DC.”

“The election is the 12th. You’ll be authorized to go back to work by 12:01 on the 13th,” Jake says.

“And they’ll expect us to be up and running by 12:02 on the 13th, right?” Leon says dryly.

“Probably not much later than that. We’ve got to see how many of the states are willing to give their Marines and Naval personnel, equipment, and bases back. California and Texas aren’t interested in letting the US have any of the equipment, bases, or ships back. The troops, that’s settled, they won’t hold them if they want to return to US service, and we won’t demand they serve out their tours if they don’t want to. But all the fancy, expensive toys…” Jake lets that trail off.

“They’re trying to get leasing deals. Same with the parks and historical sites,” Penny says.

“And, can I expect you back on the 13th?” Leon asks Tony and Ziva.

They glance at each other. “Me, yes,” Tony says. “Don’t get too comfy sitting on your butt, Draga!”

Draga flashes him a ‘how could I?’ sort of look.

“For right now, I’m still helping Diane, and then… Abbi…?” Ziva asks.

“Unlike the Navy, we’re up and running. I don’t know when, or if, the corruption hearings are starting back up again, but, it also doesn’t matter much. I’m claiming the fall of the government killed all of the contracts we had, booting anyone even remotely suspicious who’s left, and starting clean. By the first, I’ll have an all new slate of people, we’re up and ready to go.”

“How are you enforcing border law if we don’t have any?” Allan asks.

Abbi smiles. “Not touching that. We’re going after old-fashioned crimes. Murders, kidnappings, piracy. The rest of it, I’m turning a blind eye. I don’t have hard numbers yet, but since we stopped going after drug smugglers, we’re seeing murder rates dropping in the areas they usually bring stuff in. Don’t know if there’s actually less violence, or if they’re shifting where they’re bringing product in, but there are a bunch of port towns having a much less bloody month than usual.”

Tim’s glad to see at least some good is coming out of this.

“Looking forward to getting your house back?” Allan asks him as they’re both homing in on another slice of chocolate cake.

Tim feels unsettled by that question, and it must show on his face.

“Just, with Agent Bishop and Jake leaving on Wednesday… I figured, since I’m going into work with them, that we’d swap again. You’d get your house back, and I’ll go stay with Dr. and Mrs.
Palmer.”

He frantically thinks of something to say. “Uh… Yeah… that does make sense,” is what comes out. He saves quickly with, “But… don’t rush out of my place. I’m sure you want some on your own time, too, and four grown-ups and three kids is a lot easier than one kid and two adults.”

Allan nods, and Tim knows that question was a trap, designed to see what he’d do with it.

“Allan?”

“Thank you. I would rather like some on my own time. The power company has on its website that my block should have electricity again by Friday. The street cleaning crews say they’ll have the cars towed out of the way by Monday.”

Tim sighs, mentally. “That’s just a few more days. Stay at my place until you can go home. We’re fine at Jimmy’s, and he’s not sick of us, yet. No need for you to move again.”

“If you say so, Director McGee…”

“You know that when we’re not at work, it really is okay to use my first name? Hell, when we’re at work, you can use my first name. I’m not your boss.”

Allan thinks about that for a moment. “Okay, Tim.”

“And, when we’re not at work, it’s okay to use his,” he glances over to Jimmy, who’s on the sofa, talking with both Abbies, “first name, too. It’s about the line between work and home, and right now, we’re home. Dragging the titles into it now just blurs the line in the opposite direction.”

Allan nods.

Tim thinks about Jimmy’s comment about Allan keeping secrets and being very discrete. Then he adds, “I mean, unless you aren’t comfortable with it. In that case, call us by title. That’s fine, too. Just, don’t want you feeling like you’ve got to keep the walls up all the time.”

Allan smiles a little at that and nods gently. “Thanks, Tim. I get it.”

______________________________________________________________________________

Tim listens to Leon talking about going to St. Croix with the family, and none of them miss the engagement ring Lara’s wearing. Leon gets some good-natured poking along the lines of ‘took you long enough,’ along with a lot of questions, for both of them, about what sort of wedding, and when they want to do it.

He hears about plans for the DC Consulate.

He talks some about their house.

He intentionally drifts away from Jimmy, Breena, and Allan talking about The Morgue. On Monday, Allan’ll be joining them there. He’s still too thin, and slow, but he’s ready to be back doing his job.

Leon pulls him aside, and mentions to him that if they’re going to be up and running by the 13th, he’s going to have all the Directors get together on the 1st. Tim even agrees to go to it without feeling too unsettled.
Allan’s back at the McGee’s house. Bishop and Jake have headed up to bed. They’ve got the master bedroom now, and though he could have the guest room if he wanted, the soundproofing in this house is awful, and he doesn’t need to know any more about the intimate life of Agent Bishop and her husband than he already does.

So, he’s staying in McGee’s office.

It’s a very tidy space. He gets the sense that both McGees get very uncomfortable if their personal spaces are messy. It’s also very clean. (That’s likely part of why McGee was having such a hard time in the Navy Yard, clean and tidy were two things the Navy Yard wasn’t.)

Like with Jimmy’s house, there are pictures of both families, but not as many of them. Allan’s sure that those shots are likely buried in computers and phones here. And, though he sleeps in a room with two computers, he’s not about to attempt to use either of them.

He’s sitting on the futon in McGee’s office, thinking. About the layout in the house they’re working on. Two bedrooms for the adults, but one bathroom… Could be about saving space, making sure they had extra space in those bedrooms. Though the section of the house they’ve claimed for their own isn’t small.

If they were trying to… what… pull one over on the “adults?” He kills that train of thoughts dead. It might be possible to come up with something that Ducky literally cannot see. His eyes aren’t great anymore, but he’s not stupid, and there’s nothing wrong, at all, with Penny’s eyes, and Gibbs knows everything, so…

So… what?

Allan looks around, and notices the typewriter on the desk. Then he remembers something that Dr… Jimmy had told him about McGee. McGee writes. He bases his characters off of the people around him. If you read those books, you know what Mc…Tim thinks about the people around him.

Allan checks the bookshelf. There are five Gemcity books. He grabs the first one and starts reading.

He’s halfway through when he remembers Dr. Palmer’s comment about how nothing in the first book ever happened. He wonders a bit, as he’s reading the necrophilia dream, what the hell Dr. Palmer could have possibly done to piss Tim off that much. He also understands Jimmy’s comment about being a saint for putting up with McGee.

Allan smirks a bit, and keeps reading.
For the most part, November is a quiet month. Which they all need.

Tim regains stamina and weight fairly quickly. Though he knows it’ll be a while before he’s back to where he was before the Navy Yard, let alone the *Stennis*. He can feel it in how quickly he gets tired, or how his arms shake when he tries to do something too heavy. (Unfortunately, *too heavy* often means something that this time six months ago would have barely hit his ‘this is an issue’ register.)

But every day, he hammers a bit longer, and can carry more wood, (though he doesn’t yet have the control to trust himself with sawing) and as the days pass, the walls go up.

That first week after Allan’s joined Jimmy and Breena at The Morgue, it’s him, Gibbs, Ducky, and Bishop.

Ducky knows that he needs time with just Gibbs, or, at least, without Bishop, so he and Bishop tend to take one room, and he and Gibbs will work on another. Framing works better with a two man crew, anyway. There’s less shot of getting in each other’s way if there’s just two per wall section.

Mostly, they’re quiet, though sometimes, Tim will talk. Sometimes he doesn’t snap the band quite so fast when a bad thought or memory comes up, sometimes he lets those thoughts form, and then lets them out.

Gibbs listens. He doesn’t say much. There isn’t much he could say, but having someone listen, and more often on the first days, and less on the later ones, grab his hand or shoulder and physically pull him out of it when he gets lost, *helps*.

The second week, it’s just him and Gibbs. Ducky, Penny, Bishop, and Jake have headed to New York, ready to start their new adventures. Tony and Ziva won’t be back until Saturday.

Tim won’t, ever, talk much about that week. And not because it’s bad, or wrong, or anything like that. But because it’s his and Gibbs’, and because it’s quiet time pulled out of his hyper-verbalized life.

It’s a good week. Building things is useful, like writing, but different. When he writes he organizes the bad things, he arranges them in a way that allows him to deal with them. He’s not there, yet. (Though he has a feeling that writing it out will be the step between where he is now, and finally being able to really deal with what happened there.)

Right now, he’s organizing himself, getting his mind to the point where he can start to break down what happened and put it into context.

And so, as the walls go up, as he stands next to Gibbs, both of them hammering away, measuring and placing and driving nails, he’s building in his head, too, arranging the scaffolding that this story, the final draft of how he’ll understand October, will stand upon.

---

Reclaiming bits of normal helps, too. The first Sunday they’re back, they do some of their normal routine.

No Diner to go to, so that part’s out.
But, they get dressed up, and they meet up with Gibbs and Abbi at a Denny’s. It’s not nearly as good as Elaine’s, but it’s food, and it’s them together, getting ready for church. Finding a place where they can all grab breakfast on a Sunday morning, where three babies and the noise that goes with them isn’t a problem, where six (and often ten) ten adults can fit, goes onto Tim and Gibbs’ to do list.

Church is, like usual, quiet thinking time for Tim. Though, at this particular moment, he’s thinking thoughts that he knows Breena or Abby wouldn’t much like: namely, why worship a God who allows things like this to happen? He’s not much of a believer in the idea of God to begin with, but assuming there is a God, He seems to be sleeping on the job.

Tim’s sitting on a pew, surrounded by well-off, plump people, who by sheer luck, or if this whole God thing is real, divine design, ended up on the right side of a line. Being on that side of the line meant their lives have been disrupted, in some cases, severely, but not ruined, not the way the people in DC had their lives ruined.

And while Tim might, possibly, accept the idea that there is some sort of Creator, and said Creator may have unlimited power and the ability to move mountains and set the world in motion, he’s also sure that he’ll be damned (and likely is, if the Pastor’s right about the whole faith thing) if he’ll ever offer up a word of praise to a creature that can easily prevent suffering, and chooses not to.

He remembers catechism class, and the idea that God allows man free will, allows him to mess things up and torment each other. He entertains the notion of free will versus an omnipotent God, and glances at the man on his right side.

Nothing free will about what happened to Jimmy and Breena. Can’t blame Jon on perverse human cussedness.

He watches Jimmy, and wonders about how it felt to come here, not believing in a merciful God, after his heart had been ripped out by losing Jon, and have people all around you sing praises to the kindness and mercy of an entity that, if it was real, allowed, or in Jon’s case, set in motion, the most painful experience you’d ever have.

He brushes Jimmy’s hand, very aware of how much love he has for Breena, how he put himself through that, because the idea of a loving creator who makes it all right in the end was the only thing that gave her the strength to get out of bed those days.

To Tim, that’s love what love looks like. That’s selfless, concrete, active love. Not the invisible cloud of forgiveness and mercy taken entirely on faith that the Pastor’s talking about right now.

Jimmy looks up from Tim’s fingers on the back of his hand, and shoots Tim a curious glance that Tim shakes off. Maybe one day they’ll talk about it, maybe not. It’s not really important. Everyone else is standing up to start singing again.

At the end, when the service is over, and everyone mills around, chatting, he ends up with a lot of people all wanting to know what really happened, looking for the inside story. Many of them were self-congratulatory about ‘not believing in any of those SOBs...’ and ‘always knowing they were up to something’ though he knows he’s seen a lot of political bumper stickers in the parking lot since he’s been going here. (And he noticed a lot of them ripped off or blacked out now.)

Like usual, Sunday supper is at the Slater house, and there are more than a few moments where Tim feels significantly weirded-out by the fact that Ed really approves of what they did. He’s actually got
kind words for Jimmy about dropping everything and leaving NCIS with the girls. He’s happy as a clam that Tim had the good sense to give them the tip off. Apparently running ‘his’ girls to Canada if there was any shot of danger struck him as a great plan. (Tim’s getting the sense that Ed’s counting Abby and Kelly among ‘his girls,’ which is also vaguely irksome.)

It’s months later when Tim realizes that Breena knew what was going to happen the day before it did. She made sure her family moved their assets around, got them out of the dollar, and sold all of their US and DC bonds. Of course, he’s a flipping hero to the Slaters, he’s the guy who made sure Breena had the information to keep them flush through all of it. In the long run, they ended up better off than they were before. Two of their competitors had to close, they were able to buy a new branch and set Breena’s sister Christine up with her own mortuary, and there was a bumper crop of people in need of their services. Put those together, along with every Chaplain in charge of doing family visits to inform next-of-kin knowing about Palmer and Slaters’ or Slaters’ and fall and winter of 2016 were very lucrative for the Slater clan.

Jeannie keeps trying to get him to eat more. Gibbs and Abbi, too. She’s actually handing them more food while they’re still eating the food they’ve got. If, at any point during the three hours they’re there, he doesn’t have a full plate in his hand, she rushes back and loads more food onto it.

Collin’s chatting with Tim and Jimmy, playing with Molly, and says, “I guess MMA’s out for a while, still?”

Jimmy nods at that. “Building won’t even be open again until after the election. But ‘round about New Year’s you want to go, and I’m game. Tony should be back by then, too.”

“You in, Tim?”

Tim shrugs. “We’ll see. I’ll probably come work out. I know Jimmy and Ziva have some plans for torturing me into ‘building up strength.’”

Jimmy smiles at him. “Exactly. Rehab on your arm and leg got derailed for a bit there, and that won’t do. Ziva and I have been talking about things for the two of you to do.”

“She’s not going to fight, right?” There’s an alarmed expression on Collin’s face at that idea.

“No. Even our Ninja doesn’t fight four… five… she’ll be almost six months pregnant by then,” Tim says. “They’re got weights and some sort of yoga stuff that she’ll be amazing at because she’s all pregnant and flexible, and I’ll look like a dried up piece of jerky trying to bend on.”

Collin smiles a bit at that idea. “Well, whenever you get back to it. I’m ready and willing. Even if it is ‘yoga stuff.’” He glances at Ed, and says softly, “Been missing the weekly Get-Out-of-Sunday-Supper-Early club meetings.”

Tim and Jimmy both laugh a bit at that.

Jimmy does have him doing more rehab work on his arm and ankle, neither of which are in
particularly great shape after a month of not enough food and not doing anything to keep working on them.

All of the ‘heavy lifting’ strength work is coming from working on the house, but flexibility, range of motion, stretching out muscles that clamped down hard while he was in the Navy Yard, that’s a half an hour or so of work every morning.

While Jimmy does his usual morning asanas, he’s got Tim going through poses designed to get his right arm and left leg doing what it needs to be doing.

When Tim and Gibbs work on the house, there are things he can say to Gibbs that he just can’t say to anyone else. Not to Jimmy or Abby or Breena, because it’d horrify them, and not to Rachel, because he just doesn’t think she’d get it.

“You ever,” he says, quietly, as they lift the skeleton of what will be the back wall of Tony and Ziva’s bathroom into place, “feel like you paid too much for your life?”

Gibbs gives him the keep talking look.

“Like, it was you or them, but… the math doesn’t work out. And there were too many them.”

“You feeling that way?”

Tim sniffs a bit. They’ve got the wall up, so he sits down on the floor. “I don’t want to be dead.” And he doesn’t. He just, deeply, dearly wishes he’d made some better decisions. “But…”

“Why you?”

Tim shakes his head. He knows the ‘why me’ feeling. “That was when you requested that weekend off and Cassidy’s team was on and we weren’t. Why do we get to live and they don’t? You try to be good after that. Give more to charity, work harder, be better, try to… I don’t know, earn the chance you got. If you’re here, you might as well be worth it, but… That’s not this…”

He wishes they were in the basement. He could really use some scotch to make these words flow easier.

“They were hungry, Jethro. The first group… they were rage, coming to kill… just to kill.” He shakes his head, and Jethro wraps an arm around him. He remembers that group, and Tim’s description does a fine job of summing them up. “But the second… They were hungry… just… They just wanted to eat, to live. I didn’t deserve that food. I didn’t earn it. I didn’t find it. I didn’t grow it, or pay for it, or anything. I didn’t have any special claim on it. It was just there, with me.”

Tim doesn’t make himself pull out of the memories. He’s aware of being with Jethro, of sitting on a plywood floor, surrounded by the skeleton of a house. He’s also on the roof, feeling his own hunger, the gnawing acid pain of having just thrown up, bile in his mouth. He can see the crowd in his mind, the snow plow driver, the flashes of fire he shot at, the people who were coming, desperate, hungry, starving people who just wanted enough food to keep themselves going.

“I didn’t run out of bullets. Not that time. Shot and shot and shot and kept doing it, over and over, to break the mob. All they wanted to do was eat.”

Gibbs rubs his back.
“There were kids in the crowd, teenagers. I didn’t aim for any of them, but…”

Jethro nods, and keeps rubbing his back.

“You got in a few hours later, brought more food. Why’d we have to hold onto it like that? We weren’t going to die if… Maybe, if we’d put it outside the walls… Maybe they wouldn’t have come toward us. Just taken it and gone. I mean… If we’d done that, and they still came at us, I’d be okay, you know?”

Gibbs nods. He gets that.

“But we didn’t. I didn’t refuse. I didn’t step down. I killed hungry people. I killed a lot of them. For what? A couple hundred calories?” His voice is wasted as he says that, withered, and he’s past crying, distraught.

Jethro keeps rubbing his back.

---

Good days generally outweigh and outnumber bad days.

And, no matter how the day looks like it’s shaping up, Tim tries to pull some good out of it.

Good can be simple, time spent snuggling with the girls and his loves. It can be rewatching a movie he liked as a kid, and giggling hysterically with the rest of them as they finally understand the ‘grown-up jokes’ that blew right past them as kids.

Sometimes good is complicated. It’s satisfaction at working with Gibbs, figuring out how to make a particular line of wall in the house work with where he’s got to put the electrical and HVAC.

A lot of the time, good is about pure, physical pleasure. Sex and/or food.

In that the people he prefers to have sex with are all working during the day, that leaves food for his daytime pleasure pursuits.

He’s still got Jimmy dictating portion size, keeping tight rein on how much and when he’s eating, but he’s got complete control over what he’s making.

And what he’s making is, at least twice a week, a concerted push to go from an okay cook to a really good one. He’s never going to be Elaine, but he’s working on it.

Most days, he spends at least an hour reading about food, researching recipes and menus, and then, twice a week, he Gibbs only work until the early afternoon. Those days Tim’ll hit the market, and really get into shopping. Into looking at the food, smelling it, getting a feel for it. He’s starting to learn how to eat with his eyes, fingers, and nose, learning how to tell what will taste good before it’s all put together.

It’s mid-November, so it’s the height of comfort food season. Soups, stews, braises, mounds of fluffy mashed potatoes, fresh breads and pies, lots of hearty, filling, spicy food.

Gibbs goes with him. He doesn’t mind eating well, and when Tim’s on his Mission: Make Super Dinner, he and Abbi are invited, too. He’s… amused is probably the best way to put it, to watch Tim carefully going through every bunch of cilantro looking for the freshest/most flavorful one of them.

He’ll watch, and think about how he’s dealt with his own demons, and come to the conclusion that
this is likely healthier than not sleeping, drinking like a fish, working until he’d drop, beating the shit out of any suspect who got out of line, fucking any woman who would let him, marrying a few of them, and building boats in his basement that he’d then set fire to.

Somethings you just have to live with, and if this helps ease that… It seems okay to Gibbs.

Tim usually goes for fairly simple dishes. He doesn’t yet have the knife skills to try his hand at anything that requires precision knife work, and he doesn’t have the patience yet to deal with something that has fifty ingredients all of which require some sort of different preparation and need to end up on a plate at the same time.

So, fairly simple, fairly basic, let the ingredients do the heavy-lifting style cooking. One night might be chili, for example. But he’ll have read seven articles and watched three videos about how to make excellent chili, and have gone through everything to get the highest quality meat, chiles, and spices. He’ll make the cornbread to go with it from scratch (and that will have involved nine more articles and two more videos), and he’ll spend two more hours looking for the perfect beer to go with what he’s made, and it will be served at the exact right temperature.

All in all, as ways to deal with anxiety and grief go, this is the one the family as a whole seems to like best.

(And, though Gibbs wouldn’t admit it, he’s rather liking all the Good Eats episodes he and Tim are watching, and is starting to make a list of the shows he wants to check out. Given Alton Brown’s attachment to cooking over live fire, let alone cooking at his hearth, Gibbs is thinking he might go so far as to actually buy some of this guy’s books. After the bacon episode, he’s also thinking he might be interested in making a smoke house for himself.)

Rachel thinks working on creating things is a good coping mechanism, too. And she tells Tim that his pumpkin spice muffins are delicious.

The next Sunday, as he sits quietly, barely listening to the Pastor, Tim thinks about forgiveness.

Supposedly, that’s why they’re all there. That’s the offer, endless, condition-less, all-encompassing forgiveness for everything.

All you have to do is sincerely ask and believe it will be given.

He looks at the scars on the back of his hand, the lines from his father’s crimes against him, and thinks of his own crimes against nameless strangers.

He doesn’t want to forgive, and he doesn’t want to be forgiven. This time he touches his own hand. This, all of it, the pain, the joy, the good bits, and the bad ones, it’s all him, and he owns every minute of it. Triumph and guilt are both his, both earned by his actions, they both define him and shape him.

He might not like carrying the weight of it, but it’s his, and he doesn’t want to hand any of it off.

Jimmy, Abby, and Breena don’t work every day. And there really is only so much comedy you can watch in any given month. And there’s only so much healing… working on healing you can do.
There’s time where they’re just being, together.

Gibbs and Abbi are still healing up, too. Still tired, but rebounding well. As they get to the middle of November, a month before Tim and Jimmy’s birthday, they offer to take the girls overnight. “Early birthday present,” Gibbs says, knowing exactly what the four of them like to do to and with each other, and that in another month Abby’ll be too pregnant to really enjoy much in the way of food or sex.

As birthday presents go, time on their own with their ladies is exactly what they want. They appreciate it, greatly.

Tim supposes they could go out dancing, but Abby’s hit the point where too much standing up means aching feet, and her left hip is unhappy all the time these days. And even with all of them together, he’s not feeling in a very clubbing sort of mood. (It doesn’t hit the front of his brain for months, though he does, finally, realize that all the clubs they like are in DC, and he didn’t want to know if they didn’t make it through.)

Home, in front of the fireplace, or in bed: that’s his idea of a celebration these days.

They go out for a nice dinner, and end their ‘early birthday’ celebration at home. In bed. The sex is good. He doesn’t know if this is a side effect of having been so close to dead, emotionally if not physically, or if he’s still riding the rush of having his loves back again, but the sex these days is really good.

Still, there’s only so much fucking four people can do, and that leaves a lot of time for other things. Like happy stories.

Tim turned the thermostat up so they could be comfy in just their skin, (even though it’s sleetimg outside) so they’re lying around, on top of the blankets, warm, flush, post-orgasmic but not sleepy. (Too early to be sleepy.) Nowhere to go and no one to tend to for hours and hours.

Tim’s on his side, Abby spooned against him, as he rubs her hip. Sean’s decided that he’d really like to get himself wedged into her pelvis in such a way that her left hip aches in almost any position. (She’s got a countdown on her phone, telling her exactly how long it is until Jan 28th, little boy joins the outside, and her hip stops aching.) Jimmy’s crashed out on his back, feet near Tim’s head. Abby’s holding his ankle. Breena’s on her side, back against Jimmy’s side, head on his shoulder, slowly stroking Abby’s foot.

Breena sighs, feeling warm and loose and happy. “First time stories. First time you kissed someone.”

Abby laughs a little at that. “Really kissed, or do you want the story about the nuns telling me not to smooch the other kids at church?”

“Really kissed, unless the little kid kiss stories are cute.”

Tim drags his fingers up Abby’s spine, and kisses the back of her neck. “There’s a picture of me, I don’t remember it firsthand, kissing one of the girls at my preschool graduation. I guess I’m four in that shot. I do remember telling my grandmother I was going to marry her.”

That gets a chuckle.

“The boys ran away from me when I tried to kiss them,” Abby says. “They thought girls were icky.”

“Did you catch one?” Jimmy asks.
“Yeah, but Sister MaryAnne made me let him go before I kissed him.” Abby mock pouts at that.

“I was… I don’t know, seven, eight? I had the biggest crush ever on David Ruch. I don’t think he had a crush on me, though, and he really didn’t want to get kissed. Cooties. He didn’t want any of my cooties,” Breena says.

“Appallingly bad taste on his part,” Jimmy adds.

“Yeah, well. We rode the bus together, and I’d always sit next to him, and he’d try to get away. I think I scared him. The windows would get foggy in the winter, and I’d draw our names in a heart, and he’d erase them.”

“Oh…” Abby pets Breena’s foot.

“Yeah, well, that’s as close as I got to kissing games as a kid.”

“How about you, Jimmy?” Tim asks.

He sighs, eyes warm. “In first grade, there was a little girl. Meagan Harahan. I was so in love with her. I’d write her notes… well, like Breena, draw her hearts, I wasn’t writing much then, and carefully fold them up, and stuff them in our mail slot… Took years to figure out why they never got to her. I don’t think she was really aware of me. We didn’t play together or ride the bus together or anything. But I’d sit on my side of the classroom and just watch her. I still have a really clear image of her hair. It was light blonde, almost white, shoulder length, perfectly straight and fine. It looked so soft. Pretty much the exact opposite of my hair. She’d wear these plastic headbands. Molded ones, little loops, like a chain, or butterflies, or flowers, and they were all soft girl colors, pink, yellow, purple, peach, like that. I can remember watching her, so in love, and wanting to pet her hair.”

“You get to kiss her?” Tim asks.

Jimmy shakes his head, “Nah, my first kiss was also my first real kiss.”

The other three watch him, expectantly.

“Uh… Seventh or eighth grade…” He thinks for a few more seconds. “Seventh. I was thirteen.”

“Eighth, we turned thirteen in eighth grade,” Tim says.

“Uh… no. I turned thirteen in seventh grade.” He might be a bit fuzzy about when that kiss happened, but he very clearly remembers his thirteenth birthday, which was something of a big deal because he was finally a teenager, and he knows that was seventh grade.

“You two have the exact same birthday, whose memory is off?” Abby asks.

“I had to live with Penny after getting out of high school because I couldn’t rent a place for myself because I was seventeen. I was thirteen in eighth and ninth grade,” Tim says. Like Jimmy’s he’s sure he’s got the age and grades right.

“Did you do two years of kindergarten or something?” Breena adds. They all know, college-wise, that Tim’s the class of ’99 and Jimmy’s the class of ’01, but until this point they’d all assumed that was because when his father died, Jimmy had to drop down to part time school and work to make enough to pay his tuition. They’ve never talked about what year they started college.

“I didn’t do two years of kindergarten, or two years of any other grade.” Though, as Jimmy’s thinking about it, he never was part of the Class of ’99. If he’d done the traditional four years, he
would have been the Class of 2000. Granted, if he’d thought about it, he would have just assumed
that Tim finished college in three years, rather than he started a year before Jimmy did. So… if Tim
started… that’d be fall of ’95… “Where were you when you started kindergarten?”

Tim’s not sure about that, Maryland or California, but he does know that he wasn’t in Delaware with
Jimmy. “Not Delaware.”

“Probably different birthday cut off dates. My elementary school best friend had a December
birthday, the year before mine, and was in the same grade. In my school district you had to turn five
before September 30th to start Kindergarten. In his, you had to turn five before Dec 31st.”

They digest that for a moment and decide it’s plausible.

“All right, we’ve determined that you two ended up in different grades, so, kiss story…” Breena
says, leading them back to the topic.

Jimmy smiles and stretches some. He grabs a pillow and props it under his head. “Shelly Curroughs.
So, in Wilmington, in eighth grade, roller skating or blading was a big deal. If you had an extra three
bucks, you could get into the rink, spend a few hours circling around, showing off if you were good
at it, and having your ear drums blasted into oblivion with Nirvana, U2, and Red Hot Chili Peppers.”

“Smells Like Teen Spirit, One, Under the Bridge…” Tim smiles. He remembers that, well.

“Exactly. A lot of pop I don’t remember, too. Whatever it was, it was loud. I didn’t live too far away
from the rink, I had my own skates, and I was good at it.”

“Skates or blades?” Abby asks.

“Blades. Skates weren’t retro, yet, they just meant you didn’t have the money to get blades. Took me
a long time to save up for them, but I had blades.”

“For ten minutes until you outgrew them?” Tim asks.

“Just about. Eight months was as long as I could shove my feet into them. And by that point I wasn’t
willing to spend another year saving up for a new pair. They looked really cool, and, though I had
dork oozing out of every pore of my body when I was thirteen, when I was on the rink, I really could
skate, and I had good skates.”

“And Shelly liked that?” Breena asks.

“She did.” Jimmy looks especially satisfied by that. “They had weekly races. She’d usually win the
girls’ races. I’d win the boys’ ones. So, we’d keep seeing each other. And, after a few weeks, I
worked up the guts to ask her if she’s like to skate with me during the couples’ skate.”

“I remember that!” Breena says with a grin. “That was the only reason to go skating!”

“For people who don’t like skating,” Jimmy adds, looking smug. He liked couples skates just fine,
but he liked racing better. “Though, for me, that was the icing on the cake. Several couples’ skates
turned into getting soda and snacks together, and then sitting there at one of the tables talking
about… I don’t really remember anymore, probably school stuff, holding hands, munching on fries
or nachos.”

“Shelly’s your first girlfriend, wasn’t she?” Abby asks.

“Yeah. I lived close enough to the rink that I’d skate there and back. Her parents had to pick her up.
So, I could stay until she had to go. A few weeks into it, we’d been sitting at the table, holding hands, and her Dad came in, gave me the evil eye, told her it was time to go. She got up, smiled at me, gave me a quick kiss, and then skated off to her locker while her Dad glared down at me like he was going to rip my head off, and I did everything I could to meld into the plastic seat and pretend I wasn’t there.”

That gets a bit of laughing from the girls, but Tim’s been there too, and didn’t think it was all that funny.

“Bad timing on her part,” Tim says, a memory or two of being stared down by dads who were less than thrilled with what he wanted to do with their daughters in his mind.

“Yeah, well that was who she was. She liked drama and tended to cause it.” Jimmy shakes his head a bit. Drama, and lack of new skates, is why they broke up about five months later. “I loved her, but… Anyway, later kisses, where… God, he probably wasn’t much bigger than Gibbs, but I was still like 5’4” and a hundred pounds… this bigger-than-life grown-man wasn’t staring me down, were a lot better.”

“Oh, that sounds like there are some good memories,” Abby says.

“Yeah. Let’s just say, I learned how to scout out dark corners of a building young.” That gets some laughing. “And you wouldn’t believe what I can do on a pair of rollerblades.” He flashes them a saucy wink. “So, that’s my first kiss, how about it, Abby?”

“Mmmm… Okay, first off, when I’m not pregnant anymore, we’re going skating.” Jimmy grins at that, he likes that idea. “Next up… kisses…By the time I was fourteen, the boys weren’t running away from getting kissed anymore, and we all had the good sense to do it where the Nuns weren’t watching. And, there were some boys I liked, but… none of them was my first. Okay… so…’ she gives them her naughty/innocent look. “I was fourteen and so was my best friend, Paulette, and we decided that New Orleans was only twenty miles away, and there was no reason at all for us not to go to Mardi Gras. On our own.”

“Oh! This is going to be a story, isn’t it?” Breena says.

“Yeah, probably the sort we don’t tell the girls, either.”

“Probably?” Jimmy says.

“Okay, definitely. Now, Mardi Gras has the advantage of being the sort of thing that you know when it’s going to happen well in advance of it happening. Which means we had planning time. Which we needed. First off, how to get there? Public transportation wasn’t a thing where I grew up. And, yes, we had bikes, but that’s a very long ride, and rolling up on a BMX isn’t going to do anything to disabuse people of the idea that we’re kids.

“Papa had the salvage yard, and some of those cars weren’t in awful shape. I’d been able to drive, at least on the yard, since I was tall enough to look out the windshield and work the pedals. Mostly a matter of moving the cars around, but, still, I knew the basics.

“So, my job is to get us a ride, and make sure it rides.”

“You stole one of your dad’s cars?” Breena asks, eyes wide.

“Tried. I worked that car every minute I could, but I still couldn’t get it running on time. We ended up having to hitch hike.”
“Oh my god,” Jimmy says, eyes wide, staring at Abby in amazement, with a healthy dose of amusement, too. “I did some dumbass shit as a teen, but this is going to blow it all out of the water isn’t it?”

Abby grins. “Oh yeah! You’ve got to remember, it was 1988, and Louisiana. Yeah, hitch hiking wasn’t a great idea, but it wasn’t nearly as stupid as it could have been.

“Paulette was in charge of making sure we blended even more. She… acquired… the 1988 Wet ‘n’ Wild cosmetic line, enough hairspray to make a Texas beauty queen envious, some bras that were not even remotely our size but would eventually be filled in, and the highest high heels we could possibly walk in.

“So, while I’m putting the car together, she’s practicing with the makeup and costumes, making sure that when we get there, we’ll fit in.

“Then came the coup-de-grâce. Permission slips. Paulette had a computer and a printer, so she made up permission slips for an overnight school trip. I forget what we were supposed to be doing, but she made them up, along with a twenty dollar fee, which was a lot of money back then.”

“You got your parents to pay for this trip?” Tim can’t even imagine having this level of brazen moxie.

“Yeah. And trust me, they took it out of both of our hides when we got caught.”

“You got caught!” Breena almost shrieks.

Abby holds up her wrist and shows off the P on her wrist. “Paulette has an A on hers. And… yeah… they noticed.”

“Wait, hold up, you got a tattoo artist to do you when you were fourteen?” Jimmy says.

“Jimmy, 1988, New Orleans, Mardi Gras. Huge party, everyone is drunk, including us, including him, and we probably didn’t look twenty-one, but I’m sure we were passing for eighteen or nineteen, which was old enough.”

“Oh Lord,” Breena sighs.

“Exactly. So, the day comes, we’ve got our backpacks packed, get on our bikes and head toward school. Next step, call in our sick days. No problem. I had extra change for the pay phone. My parents could talk, but they couldn’t hear so I’d been calling myself in for sick days for as long as I could talk. I faked Paulette’s mom’s voice well enough, and off we went!”

“Two hitches, less than an hour all told, and we’re there. We just walk around for a while. Finally found a place to stop, and spent the next hour in the bathroom getting dolled up. Do you guys remember what late ‘80s fashion looked like?”

“Oh God, yeah!” Breena says. “Every color on the planet as long as it wasn’t subtle, clothing in neon, leg warmers, hair teased and high…”

“Yep, we were both rocking our best Cyndi Lauper looks, and out we went. God, we did everything. It’s a street party, and if you’re a pretty girl, you don’t even really have to buy anything; people’ll give you beads and drinks and food and more drinks and… We had a BLAST. Best night ever! Well, up to that point.” She grins at the three people with her. “I’ve had some better nights, since.”
“I was dancing in the street, with Paulette, having the best time ever, and I kissed her. Really kissed her, and she kissed back. I’m never going to forget the taste of Hurricanes and Wet ‘N’ Wild lipstick. I really liked that. But… You know… Catholic. It’s the 80s… the idea that we were doing anything other than ‘practicing’ for when we had ‘a real boyfriend’ didn’t hit either of us. Okay, it’s possible, likely even that Paulette really was just practicing. I mean, I liked boys, and had grown up on the idea that love and attraction were all one thing, and I liked boys, so obviously, what I was feeling for Paulette was just… getting ready for the real thing, right?” Abby rolls her eyes a little. “I was in college before I ever heard the word bisexual. I just figured I liked kissing so much that it’d be awesome no matter who I did it with. Then we stumbled off to the tattoo parlor and got each other’s initials on our wrists.”

“And then you got home and your parents killed you?” Tim asks.

Abby nods. “Just about. We got our literal asses whipped. Hung over and getting your hide tanned is a special sort of Hell. And then we were grounded for the rest of the school year. And we had to pay back the money, times two, which for me meant working every spare minute in the salvage yard. We had to apologize to the school, Mr. Murton, who owned the store Paulette got the makeup, bras, and heels from, had to pay him back, times four, and apologize to each other’s parents. It was a mess.”

“But you still did it the next year,” Tim says, because he knows how those smiley faces on her finger got there, and the angels on her shoulders, too.

“Oh yeah. When they saw the smiley faces, that’s when our parents decided that short of locking us up, we were going, so we might as well have a ride that involved someone invested in making sure we got there and home in one piece. My mom went with us the next year. That’s… one of the last ‘special’ things we did together.” Abby smiles but it’s sad. “That’s the year we got the angels. She didn’t want a tattoo, but we convinced her to get a temporary one drawn on. So, for the rest of the party, we all had angels on our shoulders.”

“Your mom liked to party?” Jimmy asks.

“Both my parents loved a good party. Beneaux was mostly a shrimping town, cash poor, but poor communities that raise food generally eat well. We’d have shrimp boils… everyone over at someone’s house, big pile of shrimp and crawfish and corn and potatoes, jambalaya, collards, all sorts of good stuff, beer and moonshine, music, usually someone’s band… played loud so my parents could feel it. We did that a lot when I was growing up. Sunday dinner, too. That was every week. It’d put you in mind of Breena’s place, but the food would be Cajun, and people would be speaking English and Creole, and signing…” Abby smiles, softly. “Gators. Every year there would be a gator hunt. That was a big deal.”

“What did you do with them?” Jimmy’s somewhere between intrigued and horrified. Even though the alligator was his college mascot, he’s secretly afraid of them.

“Catch them, skin them, one of the old guys in town would tan the skin to make leather. Whoever got the kill shot got to keep the hide. Usually ended up being a pair of awesome boots and a belt. You eat the meat. Really, really good sausages. Mix them up with a lot of garlic and spices, a little pork for the fat. Gators tend to be too tough and gamy for anything else. Though some of the old guys liked to make gator jerky. And Maum Madeline,” she says that name with a deep Louisiana accent, “she was this ancient black lady who lived on the edges of town. Rumor had it she was a witch, and I’m fairly sure she was a voodoo priestess. She made the stew out of it that was blow your mind good.”

“Maum?” Jimmy asks, “First name?”
“Nah. Variation on Mamam. A long time ago she’d been a nanny for some of the better off families. And she had a crop of kids and grandkids and… And in the Deep South… This was more of a thing before I was born… Something the adults did when we were kids, and by the time most of the people my age grew up, you’d see less and less of it, but they didn’t call Black people Mr. or Mrs. ‘Uncle,’ ‘Maum,’ ‘Boy or Girl’ if they were young… She’d been ‘Maum Madeline’ as long as anyone could remember, and that’s what we called her.” Abby smiles at that, too, but it’s an uncomfortable smile. “Louisiana in the seventies and eighties really wasn’t like where any of you grew up.” She pauses for a moment as the other three nod.

“Anyway, gator hunting was always a big deal. The guys go out, and they come back with usually one or two. I mean, they’re really big, you don’t need a lot of them. And they’d skin them. Then the ladies clean them up, butcher them, make the sausages. Next week, best jambalaya ever!

“So, yeah. My parents liked parties, and when we were young there were a lot of them.” She sighs a bit. “Wasn’t the same after we moved in with Aunt Gert. She lived in a different town. And she lived in town. Totally different vibe.” That’s making her feel a bit sad, so she says, “Okay, enough of that… Tim, you’re up, tell us about Jessie Malone.”

“You remember that?” Tim’s surprised to hear that she remembers the name of a girl he’s mentioned once to her.

“Of course I do.” She explains to Jimmy and Breena, “When we went on our trip around the US, I got to see his grandparents’ house, where said first kiss happened. There’s still a spot on a tree where he carved their initials.”

“Awww…” Breena expression makes is clear she thinks that’s sweet.

Tim draws his leg up Abby’s, feeling her skin soft and smooth against his, and takes a moment to put himself back there. “Right before the start of ninth grade. So, I’m 13. We’d start school the Tuesday after Labor Day, so… That would have been the Sunday. Drive home on Monday, school Tuesday…

“My mom had us at my grandparents’ place that summer. The Admiral was God-knew-where, not with us, and she decided sitting around in base housing when we didn’t need to be there wasn’t worth it. So up to Redding we go.

“My grandfather was an amateur astronomer. He loved the stars, and they were far enough of from any of the major cities that you could see them pretty well from his place. He had a really nice telescope, and the two of us had spent a lot of time over the years charting and star gazing.

“That year, they had a new family a few houses down, the Mallones. Jesse and I were about the same age. We were both sarcastic little snots with too many brains and not enough to keep them busy over the summer. Pop took us under his wing and dealt with both of us being bitchy little twits.” Tim chuckles at the memory of them. “She liked star gazing, too. Or, at least, she liked getting out of her own house and coming to ours well enough. And he had enough of an idea as to what was going on that he’d keep a lenient eye on us. Close enough to make sure we weren’t ‘getting into trouble.’ That was the summer that involved the talk and an extremely uncomfortable two hours on what ‘getting into trouble’ meant, so, I mean, I wanted to get into trouble, and was more or less thinking about it non-stop. But the doing part of it wasn’t happening. We were pretty nervous and young and Catholic and sitting on his front porch, so he’d often ‘wander off’ or ‘turn in early’ or ‘go get some ice cream’ and let us have an hour or so to ourselves.”

“Anything interesting happen during those hours?” Breena asks.
“Complaining about our dads? Her dad was an executive with a drug company, and they moved them around every two years, too. Complaining about constantly being the new kid. Complaining about our little sisters.” Tim rolls his eyes. “And feeling put upon by being constantly forced to be free babysitting?” He winks. “Whiny little snots. But we were, that summer, in it together, which was nice. As for interesting, in the sense you mean, only happened once.

“Last night of summer, we’re sitting on the stairs of the front porch, looking up at the sky. Not a lot of stars that night. But, pretty much any night that didn’t involve rain actively falling from the sky we went ‘star gazing.’

“It’s the last night I’ll be up there, and we’ve talked about writing each other. She’s got my address and I’ve got hers and we’re both sitting there, not looking at each other, or the stars much, just feeling… I don’t know, sad… nervous… I’d been working up the courage to hold her hand, when her Mom yelled out that it was bedtime, and she had to come in.

“‘I’ve got to…’ she said, looking really sad.

“I nodded at her, and smiled a little, finally held her hand, squeezed it a bit, and she leaned over, kissed me, sweet and fast, and then stood up and ran off home.”

“You ever see her again?” Breena asks.

“Once. We went up for Christmas, and she was there. Didn’t get to see too much of her, because we were just up for the one day, and it was a ‘family’ day. But we got to spend an hour together. Next summer, we stayed on base. Summer after that, I was back at Gran’s, but her family had moved again.

“We wrote pretty regularly at first, but… Too much stuff… And I didn’t like writing about what was going on with the Admiral, so letters drifted off.” Tim shakes his head a bit, wishing he’d been a better pen pal. “Anyway, what’s your story, Breena?”

Breena smiles. “I snuck out. Sara Fischer was… ‘a bad influence’ and I wasn’t allowed at her house. But she was having a party and everyone was going to be there. Including my best friend, who was allowed to go. So, that night I had a convenient slumber party, and we spent the first four hours of the night at Sara’s.”

“What was a ‘bad influence?’” Abby asks.

“Nothing you’d raise an eyebrow at. Nothing I would, either. Her parents were divorced, so she was home alone a lot. That might have been part of it. She dressed more ‘adult’ than my dad liked. She’d cuss some, in front of adults, but hell or damn, not shit or fuck. So, maybe a bit loud and rough, but… for example, the party, her mom was there, and so were thirty or so other junior high kids, but there wasn’t any alcohol, no drugs, tons of sugar and caffeine, ear bleeding loud music, and… Truth or Dare!”

Jimmy smiles at that; he’s got a few good Truth or Dare memories, too. “You have a good wingman for that?”

She nods. “Of course. Truth or Dare isn’t any fun if there isn’t someone to dare you to do what you want to. Allie, my friend who I was sleeping over with, knew that I had a massive crush on Matt…” Breena pauses, thinking. “Shit… I don’t remember his last name anymore. On Matt… Something or Other, and finally, it gets to her turn, and in proper Truth or Dare fashion she calls me out, and I almost chickened out and asked for Truth, but he was sitting there, on the far side of the circle, floppy blond-brown hair, just long enough to brush his eyes, hazel eyes, ripped up jeans, flannel
shirt, glasses—“

“So you’re saying he looked like a cross between Jimmy and I?”

Breena shifts up a little and carefully looks at them, trying to see their fourteen-year-old selves…

“Actually… That’s… You might be onto something with that. His face wasn’t similar, but coloring, build… He was pretty tall and lanky.” She chuckles a bit at that.

“So, you say the magic word, ‘Dare,’” Abby says.

“Yep, and off to Matt I go. I remember feeling really nervous, until I noticed he was smiling, and then I was okay. I made him stand up, and he was a lot taller than I was, so that part was kind of awkward, but I edged up on my tip-toes, and he bent down a little…” Breena’s smiling softly at that memory. “And it was soft and wetter than I was expecting, he tasted like Coke and gum, and when I pulled back I was grinning like crazy.”

“Sexy?” Abby asks.

“Wet. That’s really my main memory of it, really, really wet.”

The other three giggle at that.

“So, you leaped right to tongue kissing?” Jimmy asks.

“I hadn’t intended to, but I think he did, and… yep, wet.”

“Did that kiss lead anywhere?” Tim asks.

Breena shakes her head. “Nah. I wasn’t allowed to do anything even remotely like dating until I was sixteen. So, I couldn’t go to his house. He couldn’t come to mine…”

“You weren’t allowed to have guy friends?” Abby asks.

“Not one on one. If I had a squad of buddies come over, some of them could be boys, but I wasn’t allowed to do anything one on one with a guy. Even at home, with my parents there, I couldn’t have a guy over on his own. I got paired with one for a school project, which would have required one on one library time or at home time, and my Dad marched into that class and made my English teacher reassign my partner and I.”

Tim cringes. “People like your parents are the bane of teen boys everywhere.”

Breena grins. “That was the point, if memory serves.”

Tim sits up, back against the headboard of their bed. “So… are we going to have rules like that?”

“Dating rules?” Breena asks as Abby scoots a bit to rest her head in his lap.

“Yeah. I mean, I didn’t. I had the no-sex-until-you-get-married talk with my grandfather and the produce-any-kids-before-you-can-take-care-of-them-and-I-will-beat-you-so-hard-you’ll-never-walk-again talk with The Admiral, but no one ever told me I couldn’t spend time with girls, alone even. Though my mom would get snippy and drop by to ‘check in on us’ every ten minutes if I had a girl over.”

The other three are rapidly coming to the conclusion that that talk with the Admiral likely wasn’t hyperbole, and Abby’s starting to understand why Tim never had sex with anyone without a condom before her.
“I think we can leave off the threats of bodily harm,” Jimmy suggest. “And… I’d really rather have the girls on some sort of birth control. Let them know that as soon as they may want it, or better yet, before they want it, it’s an option. If we’re lucky, by the time Sean might want or need it, they’ll have something more reliable than condoms on the market. Beyond that, I’m not thinking we’ve got to try and keep them in purdah or whatever the hell it was your parents thought they were doing.”

“Making sure I didn’t get into a situation I wasn’t emotionally mature enough to handle,” Breena says with an arched eyebrow.

“Uh huh…” Jimmy’s not buying it. He can imagine how it went. Ed wanted his girls kept in a convent from the age of 12 until they were 30, and Jeannie looked at him, laughed, and said ‘sixteen,’ and sixteen it was. “And the magic Ready-to-Deal Fairy showed up for you and your sisters the night of your sixteenth birthdays’, bestowing upon you the good sense and poise to handle boys?”

Breena rolls her eyes. “You don’t have any sisters. You want to see a hissy fit to end all hissy fits, attempt to tell sister A she’s mature enough to date at fourteen, but sister B has to wait until seventeen.”

Abby laughs at that. “I wasn’t allowed to go on car dates until I was sixteen, and the rule was I had to drive. That horrified some of the potential boyfriends. Wasn’t allowed to do one on one dates with boys until I was fourteen. And I think we’re going to have to get to know these little people a bit more before we make any hard and fast decisions.” She shakes her head a bit. “Some of the guys I dated… They shouldn’t have been allowed alone with anyone, no matter how old. Some of them were wolves. Some were lambs. The only hard and fast rule I want is that we’ve got to meet whomever it is they want to go out with, really get to know him or her, maybe toss ‘em in the basement with Gibbs for a few hours, and then make our decisions from there. Might be some of them are only allowed at our place. Maybe some can go off on car dates or off on their own.”

Tim nods. “And for some of them, Jimmy and I will show off the ‘Fear of Dad’ skills Gibbs has been training us in on and see if we can run them off.”

“Exactly.”

Tim makes sure to periodically check in with his guys. Right now, NCIS is officially shut down. Because the Navy and Marines are officially shut down. The men who are stationed abroad, or afloat, are still on those ships/bases, and NCIS is still providing police services for them, but that’s skeleton crew work.

And it’s also not much of anything Cybercrime is doing. Yes, at any given time one of them may run an email check or hack a personal computer or phone, but no one’s got a job that’ll take more than an hour at a go.

He makes sure that if something blows up big time on one of the ships, or bases, that his skeleton crew can swing into action.

He also lets them know that if any of them want to leave, he won’t hold them to their contracted one month notice. (Technically, he will, because he has to, but he’ll jigger the paperwork to show they gave noticed before everything broke apart.)

Unfortunately, he has to tell them that he doesn’t know when, or if, they’re getting paid again. He
doesn’t know if this down time is going to be treated as an unpaid furlough, or if, when they’re back, they’ll get paid just like usual.

He knows that Leon’s been burning through what’s left of their accounts to make sure that everyone gets at least something every pay period, but they aren’t getting any new money paid into their accounts. Treasury’s paying out as little as it possibly can, and NCIS not only isn’t on the top of the list of organizations getting paid, it’s not on the list at all. So that something is getting smaller and smaller each pay period.

He’s deeply touched when 96% of his team stays, and two of the ones who leave tell him that it’s just a matter of absolutely having to have a regular paycheck. He lets them know that once he knows what’s coming up, once he’s got stable jobs again, that they’re welcome to them.

---

Tony and Ziva get back the Saturday before Thanksgiving. They’re staying at the McGee house for the next few days, though they’ve been told that their bit of DC will be ready to go back to by Tuesday.

Ziva’s plump and round and lovely. Tony’s looking human again. Both of them are tan, hair lighter from time in the sun, and smiling more easily. They meet the rest of the family for Sunday breakfast and tell stories and show pictures of the Mediterranean.

It’s not the Diner. They’re on their third Diner alternative, and this one is looking like a possible, and hopefully temporary, replacement.

“Any word from Elaine?” Tony asks as he’s munching his eggs. (Scrambled, light, fluffy, a hair over-done. If he hadn’t had Elaine’s eggs, he’d think these were perfect. But he’s had perfect, so he knows these aren’t it.)

Breena shakes her head. “I hope she comes back. Even if she doesn’t take us up on our offer.”

Jimmy adds, “Her part of town is still a wasteland. I don’t think we’ll hear from her until it’s in better shape.”

“How’s cleaning up going?” Ziva asks. “I know way more about it than I ever wanted to from one side,” she’s still making sure people get paid, and that they’re doing the work they’re getting paid for, “And not enough from the other.” Making sure they do the work isn’t the same thing as seeing the finished product.

Abby’s eyes flick to Tim. They’ve been intentionally not telling him too much about what’s going on. And, it’s true that he’s driven her into work a few times, it’s also true that those routes have all involved the least damaged bits of the city. He also hasn’t been asking.

“Parts are looking fine,” Abby says. “Some neighborhoods came through pretty much unscathed. Some areas they’re bulldozing to the ground and starting over from scratch.”

“NCIS?” Tony asks.

“The Navy Yard is currently a Marine/Navy compound. Jarvis’ personal forces are making it home. Well, the ones who don’t have someplace else to stay. There are more in Norfolk and Baltimore, too. Anyway… They’ve done a lot of cleaning. I think Jarvis grabbed a bunch of drill sergeants and told them to make sure the whole compound sparkled by Thanksgiving. Everything’s been cleaned within an inch of its life. They’ve been repainting… The orange is gone. It’s a cheery light-green
now. New carpets. You’ve got an ID so you can go in and check if you want. They aren’t keeping NCIS employees out, but you might get shanghaied into cleaning if you don’t have something else to be doing while you’re in there.”

“Abby’s got a small crew of Marines working forensics with her,” Tim adds. That’s a detail he does have, and one that amuses him. “They won’t stop calling her Ma’am.”

Abby rolls her eyes at that. She hasn’t been able to break most of them of that. “About five of them, and they’re turning into fingerprint uploading experts. They’re also getting handy with a bullet scanner.”

“You seeing a lot of bullets?” Abbi asks.

Abby nods. “And something like one out of three of them is coming back to a weapon owned by Metro PD. They won’t let me see which guns go with which officers, but I can see they belong to cops.”

That gets an angry look out of Jimmy and a frustrated one from Breena.

Ziva raises an eyebrow at them.

Breena shakes her head. “Most of the people we’re getting now are fire victims. They’re pulling them out of the rubble. At first… That wasn’t true at first. We’ve got to log where everyone was found. So, we’ve got maps of who was found where. It looks like Metro called the shoot-on-sight orders and then headed out and shot anyone and everyone they’ve ever had a problem with. We’d get four bodies all found in the same building, all with Metro bullets in them… Sh… Stuff like that.” She changes her word choice as Molly’s watching her carefully.

“And I’m sure none of those people were angels,” Jimmy adds, bouncing Anna, who’s acting a bit fussy, “but unless someone took the time to pull the bodies inside after, a lot of those people ‘breaking curfew’ were shot inside their homes. With rifles.”

That gets a collective wince.

“You’ve got maps, is anyone checking the crime scenes?” Tony asks.

Jimmy barks a short laugh. “Martial law. Metro gets to do whatever they want in the name of ‘keeping the peace.’ We’re logging them all, I’m listing them as homicides, and I’m certain none of them are ever going to be investigated.”

“Diane mentioned wrongful death suits,” Ziva says, sipping her tea.

Breena nods. “Yeah. That’s probably what’s going to happen. Some lawyers will round up the next-of-kin, they’ll file a class action civil suit, the city will settle, the lawyers will get rich, and the next-of-kin will get a few hundred bucks a piece to cover part of the funeral costs.” Breena takes a sip of her coffee, and shakes her head. “I’m sorry, this’ll make you cynical if you let it.”

“It’s not cynicism when you’re right,” Tim says.

Breena shrugs. “We’ve been told that Metro is starting to investigate the shooting victims whose bullets don’t go back to law enforcement or a federal building.”

Tim snaps his wrist band at that, trying to stamp out the sudden swamping sensation of guilt. He knows he fired more than a few of the bullets that go back to a ‘Federal Building.’ Abby squeezes his hand, too. And it helps, a little.
He doesn’t know if the people he shot have crossed Jimmy’s table, yet. He assumes, because they’re
cleaning up the Navy Yard, and because the smell doesn’t hit him when he’s driven by, that
everyone in the mass grave had been handed over to Jimmy’s crew.

He wonders if they’re going to be hit with a wrongful death suit. He wonders if he’d rather they
settled or tried to fight it out.

He knows none of those thoughts will lead to a good place, so he says to Ziva, “So, when’s your
next OB appointment? Are we going to get a shot of D soon?”

Ziva smiles a bit. “First week of December we get our 20 week ultrasound.”

“Still sticking with not finding out if he’s got all the bits to go with the ‘he?’” Gibbs asks.

Ziva nods; then she glances at Tony. “I do not intend to find out.”

Tony rolls his eyes a bit. “She doesn’t think I can do it. She thinks as soon as I’ve got the shots, I’ll
be looking, trying to figure it out.”

“So, you mean she’s met you before?” Abbi says with a little smile.

On Monday, Tony joins Tim and Gibbs. Three sets of hands speeds things up. The fact that Tony’s
taking fewer breaks than Tim does helps with that, too. They’ve gotten to the point where they’re
stringing wires, and Tim’s hoping that by the time they break for the weekend, they’ll be ready to
drywall.

Like always, Tony chatters away, and right now, Tim’s glad for the chatter. He likes hearing about
Tony and Ziva looking for a house in move-in condition. (What she’s doing right now, between odd
jobs for Diane.) He likes hearing about Sicily and Sardinia. They sound warm and beautiful and
filled with yummy things. If it wasn’t for the fact that the only way to get there involves either a boat
or a plane, he’d like to go.

He likes seeing Tony looking engaged again, likes seeing him looking like he’s interested in
working, too. And he is. He’s working with them, which is good, but like Gibbs, and for that matter,
like Tim when he’s not got other things on his mind, he’s starting to get that bit of an edge that goes
with not having had a good case in a while.

Tim’s sure that whenever the first day back is, Tony’ll be there, if not sooner, and ready to start
catching killers.

And, though he probably shouldn’t be, he’s also amused to see Tony griping about how much
weight he’s gained. Two weeks of sleeping and eating everything that didn’t run away may be good
for the soul, but it wasn’t good for the waistline. (Apparently Jimmy was dead on right about how if
you don’t go back at it slow, with lots of little meals, your body decides it’s going to immediately
turn every single calorie you eat into fat.) Tony makes self-deprecating crack about looking more
pregnant than Ziva does, and Tim mentions to him that if he wants, Jimmy can help with that.

“We going back to working out?” Tony asks after Tim says that.

“Yeah. Probably. After the building’s really open again. Until then, you’ll have to make do with
this.” Right now, this, is getting the ventilation system in place so that everyone has heat and AC. The ventilation shafts are light, (they’re aluminum) but in that they’re doing the AC right now, it’s work that’s up, over their heads.

“You coming, too?” Tony asks Gibbs.

Gibbs tentatively punches his right hand into his left, and his shoulder smarts at it. (It’s not been happy with all of this over-his-head work, but Jimmy tells him that he needs to keep stretching and doing things like this if he wants his full range of motion back, so he’s doing it.) “I’ll keep you company and let Jimmy figure out what I should be doing. Not ready to fight, yet.”

Tony looks at Gibbs and Tim. They both look a lot better than they did when he left, especially since McQueball’s got a decent half inch of fuzz on his head again, but… “Neither of you are. Still be nice to have you around. Get back into the routine, you know?”

Gibbs and Tim both nod, emphatically. They know.

Part of the routine is Thanksgiving at Tim and Abby’s place. It’s not, usually, a big holiday for their family, not the way Christmas is.

But this year…

Between Tim’s hardcore cook-or-die philosophy, and having a large crew of somewhat displaced people all interested in sincerely giving thanks, the McGee family is pulling out all the Thanksgiving stops.

Including going back to their home for the first time in two weeks.

It doesn’t feel odd or anything like that to go back. It’s still home, and it’ll always be home, just for the time being, while Jimmy and Breena still need to strip off before getting into the house, it’s the home that’s less well-suited toward their current work circumstances.

However, it is also the home with the bigger kitchen and the dining room/living room floorplan that makes feeding the extended Gibbs clan easier. Thus, it’s the home more suited toward having everyone over for Thanksgiving dinner.

And thus, Tuesday morning, Tim heads to his house, instead of the house, along with Gibbs and Tony, to do some baby wrangling and food prep.

Between the three of them and Mona, they have a pretty good time starting to get things ready, and Heather certainly doesn’t mind a few extra days to get to her Thanksgiving Dinner, in Minnesota, with her parents.

“Turkey’s brining, pie crust dough is chilling, pie fillings are freezing.” He may have gone a bit overboard on that, but… anyway, apple-cranberry, pear-blueberry, chocolate silk, and pumpkin pies
are on the menu. “Sourdough starter is starting, cornbread is made and drying for stuffing, all of my two days out prep is done,” Tim says as Breena, Jimmy, and Abby sit down for dinner.

“Sounds like you’ve been busy today,” Breena says, putting some salad on her plate.

“Yeah. It’s been feeling good.” He looks to Abby. “Next time you talk to Luca, tell him I’ve been really enjoying the recipes he gave us as a wedding present.”

“Oh.” She pets his hand. “Or how about the next time I give him a call, I put you on for a few minutes and you talk to him yourself?”

“Hmmmm… actually interact with a person… Yeah, I could probably swing that.” He feels like he’s been having a good day, so he starts to push out of his comfort zone some. “So… how was today, for you guys?”

The other three glance at each other, a quick look of how much are we telling? Tim sees it, and knows what it means. “I’m okay. Unless you don’t want to talk about it. I’ll cut you off if it goes too far, but… I’m tired of being outside of your daily lives.”

They nod at that, and Abby starts. “Bullets, lot of them. That’s pretty much all we did today. Take them out of the little plastic containers, get samples of everything on them, clean them up, photograph them, put them on the scanner, scan them, and then load them into the database, put them back into the container, put the container into the folder and into the plastic mail box, ready to go wherever they’re storing all of the evidence. It’s not difficult work, but it takes time.

Tim’s helped out with that in the past, so he knows how it goes. “Careful, patient, nit-picky work.”

Abby nods. “Yep. Don’t get me wrong, I love it, but I don’t know…” She sounds uncertain, trying to find words for why this isn’t nearly as satisfying as it is when she’s working for her teams at NCIS. “It feels really odd to just collect data. I’m not really building cases. I don’t have suspects or leads or any of that. I’m… filling up packets. I get hits on bullets all the time. But, it’s not like Tony or Gibbs comes down and asks, ‘Wha-da-ya-got, Abs?’ I just update the file in the computer, and move onto the next one.”

“Are they going to investigate?” Tim asks.

“Sooner or later, but we won’t have jurisdiction on most of them. Unless I keep track of them and check back later, I’ll never find out what happens with most of them when I’ve got a name attached to those packets.”

“And with that, you’re still further ahead than we are,” Breena says. “Especially right now…” she sighs at that. “They cleaned up the easiest to cleanup parts of the city first. Now they’re moving into the burnt parts, so the people we’re getting… no IDs on them. No fingerprints. Seen a lot with no fingers.”

“DNA and dental records,” Jimmy says. “And at least three of the ones I saw today won’t work for either of those.”

“No teeth?” Abby says.

He’s shaking his head. “Heat gets too high, teeth crack and break, older fillings, gold ones, say, melt. If the heat’s that high, it’s also high enough to cook pretty much anything that could have had DNA. The buildings that burned, like in Tony’s neighborhood, they’re gone. They don’t even really know which house was where… Okay, that sounds stupid. They know which house was where, what they don’t know is how the houses collapsed, what direction it might have gone… So, they find John Doe
“Facial reconstruction?” Abby asks.

Jimmy nods. “At least some.”

“And in some cases it won’t help. With as hot as some of those fires got, not all of them are complete bodies. Even in a crematoria getting a whole body to burn to ash can be challenging. In a house… You get a little cool spot, or something falls on one part, or the wind blows in the wrong direction. Next thing you know you’ve got part of one leg.”

Jimmy glances at Breena, both of them aware that that’s a somewhat sanitized version of their partial bodies. They’ve gotten more than a few partial bodies because something, and judging by the marks, it was indeed something, as opposed to someone, took advantage of the protein. They’ve made a lot of bad jokes about crows and vultures and rats, but no one who works in The Morgue will ever see one of those animals again, let alone in DC, without at least a mental wince.

Abby winces some. “Okay. I’m vetoing this.” She looks over to Tim. “You and Gibbs watching more Alton Brown?”

Tim rolls his eyes and smiles a bit. “Only four episodes. Tony really likes them, too.”

“You had Tony watching them?” Jimmy asks.

“He didn’t feel like working on the house by himself, so he joined us for Thanksgiving dinner prep. He’s firmly convinced I’m working on making sure he’s the size of a blimp by Christmas.”

“Yeah, well,” Breena glances at their dinner: braised short ribs, mashed potatoes, and salad, “I can’t imagine how he got that idea.”

“Gotta keep you well-fed,” Tim flashes her a sexy smile. “You’re going to need a lot of energy tonight.”

That gets a few laughs, and then Tim starts telling them about watching every Thanksgiving Good Eats episode, but mostly he’s thinking about what Jimmy, Breena, and Abby were saying, and how he’s not feeling much of… anything… really about it. No sense of guilt hits him.

When he tells Rachel about that, they agree it’s a good thing. There’s enough on his plate that he’s literally, directly responsible for, people acting like maniacs because of what he revealed isn’t anything he needs to feel responsible for.

On Wednesday, Ducky and Penny come back for Thanksgiving.

They’re still playing merry-go-round housing, but with the main meal at the McGee’s tomorrow, they’re staying with Tim and Abby, along with the Palmers. It’s a full house, in a good way.

It also means they’re getting updates on what’s going on in New York.

Apparently, what’s going on in New York is a lot of political wrangling, horse trading, and desperately hoping the whole thing won’t come crashing down in a minute when enough of the population decides it won’t take orders from the Feds anymore.
“How big of a worry is that?” Tim asks while cutting up little pieces of chicken for the girls. They’re getting dinner ready, and right now that means everyone in the kitchen, putting food on plates, or getting little girl washed up, or setting the table. It’s loud and boisterous, with bits of the main conversation flowing through the ordered interjections that go with trying to get kids ready for supper.

Penny, who’s pouring juice into plastic Disney Princess cups, (with something of an eye roll, alas Molly LOVES Sleeping Beauty, and as of yet cannot be convinced that Belle and Tiana are vastly cooler and better role models) says, “Big. Status quo is holding a lot of what’s left of the country together, but as the different breakaway states are getting set on their own, or becoming Canadian, they’re worrying we’ll see more split off. Especially once the Feds attempt to do something whatever state doesn’t much like.”

“They planning on doing much of that?” Abby asks, reaching between Tim and Penny to grab the little spoons for Kelly and Molly.

“They’re doing everything they can to avoid ruffling any feathers right now.”

Once they’re all settled, Tim says, “Before you two head north again, you need to come visit the house, and figure out what you want in terms of paint, flooring, bathroom stuff. We’re at the point where all we have to do is slap up the drywall in your section, and we’ll be ready to get it livable.”

“That’s if you’re planning on coming back anytime soon,” Jimmy adds alluding to the fact that they might be doing their political magic for DC in New York for a while.

“We’ll make certain to get you a list of what we need, but I don’t see much reason to press any harder on our section than on any of the other ones. I have a feeling we’ll be primarily residing in The Capitol until the first of the DC elections can take place,” Ducky says.

“In ‘The Capitol,’ you think they aren’t sticking with New York?” Abby asks.

“They’re not staying in New York, not long term. They’re talking about having a moving Capitol. Presidents will have a six year term, and they’ll get to pick which state will host them and Congress. Only rule, can’t re-do a state until every state’s been done,” Penny says. “That’s part of trying to keep the remaining States happy. They all know, that, sooner or later, they’ll have the whole machine move to one of their cities, bringing in a lot of money and power.”

“Three hundred years until you cycle around again?” Abby says, not really thinking. “Gonna be a long wait for, say, Utah.”

“Bit more than three hundred years. With the territories, Indian Reservations… We’re in talks with any Reservation that might want to become a state or part of a state. Especially the casino rich ones are interested in the idea of hosting the Capitol at some point. A few states are splitting. New York’s name problems aside, it’s been true for a while that they’re better off as two states. We’re going to end up with a bit more than fifty of them,” Penny says. “And yes, I don’t see anyone rushing out to Utah. Hawaii, on the other hand… This isn’t common knowledge, but they’re putting feelers out to Australia and Japan about becoming a protectorate of those countries. Honolulu being the Capitol after the next election might go a long ways towards keeping them in the US.”

“They want to keep it, that badly?” Breena asks.
“I think it’s a combination of wanting a nice place to work, and not wanting to give it up.” Penny glances at Ducky. “I don’t think either of us would mind being able to skip New York, or Northern Virginia winters for the immediately foreseeable future.”

“And if Hawaii won’t accept you guys, or Canada’s not willing to give up Alaska, North Dakota, Maine and Vermont? What happens then?” Tim asks.

“We’re not going to force it. Each state has been offered the ability to rejoin if and when they want to. Eternal open door policy to anyone who’s ever been a US state. Honestly, since we’re getting deals set for profit sharing and leasing rights for any mineral wealth found on what used to be Federal lands in those states, they’re treating the loss of them as a blessing. As long as the oil/natural gas money comes in, not having to deal with the needs of the citizens is making the new Congress happy,” Penny says as she lifts a bite of flounder to her lips.

Ducky adds, “Any territory that will offer income without the need to support and provide for citizens is exactly what they want right now. Hawaii, on the other hand, brings in a lot of tourism dollars, and that cannot be flogged off or leased out. Add in year-round warm beaches, and there is certainly hope going around that that’s the capitol the next president will chose.”

“Any word on who that next president may be?” Since neither the Palmers nor the McGees have live television, they’ve been, happily, missing the flood of political advertising when they’re home. They haven’t missed the non-stop, wall-to-wall political ads on the radio, though.

“What’s left of Congress is hoping for the Stewart/Colbert platform, if for no other reason than they’re famous enough they might get enough votes in the first round that we won’t have to do run after run of voting,” Penny replies.

“It does not hurt that, given the vote buying fiasco, the current attitude is that no matter who wins, they cannot do a worse job than any predecessor in living memory. Just winning a legitimate election will put whoever it is ahead of everyone else in the last hundred years,” Ducky replies as he allows Molly to sit on his lap to eat. (She’s been exuberant that ‘Her Duck!’ is back, and between tugging him around to show him everything she’s done, made, looked at, or been even vaguely interested in the last three weeks, she’s also made sure that he’s been in touching/hugging range the whole time. Right now Ducky has an extremely cuddlesome and chatty barnacle on his left side.)

“Add in the idea of these two fairly famous guys running, who are generally considered smart, and moderate, ish, and that adds a level of legitimacy to the whole thing,” Penny wraps up with.

“You voting for them?” Breena asks.

“I’ve got my own pet candidates. People I know personally. They won’t win, but I’ll support them,” Penny says with a smile. “Though, at this point, I haven’t voted for a winning candidate since Kennedy, so voting for a loser isn’t precisely a new thing for me.”

Tim smiles. “More like a badge of pride.”

“Yes. Rather vote for the person who reflects my principals than hold my nose and vote for the lesser of two evils, and if that means writing someone in, or leaving a race blank, I’m comfortable with that. I do not intend to change that pattern this late in the game.”

“Or this early,” Jimmy says as he gives Anna a bite of his roasted Brussel sprouts. “I swear this is the only twelve month old on earth who eats Brussel sprouts.” She gobbles down a quarter of a sprout and fusses at him for more. Tim looks smug, learn how to cook the damn things and kids’ll eat them all over his expression. “I’m cutting as fast as I can…” Jimmy says to Anna. “Anyway, early in the
game. New game, right?"

Penny gives Jimmy a nod. “Or early in the game. Whatever else is going on, it’s certainly new.”

“What happens if no one wins 50% over and over,” Abby asks.

“They’ve already stated the ‘We’re going to do this until someone/some team wins a basic majority.’ So, that’s going to be true for the next election, no matter how many rounds of voting we end up having to do to get there. Right now, we’ve got eight thousand names in the running, and that was with a three week long sign up period. Next time, the sign up period will be longer, and if we have 20,000 names… It’ll be a mess. They’re thinking, depending on how the vote shakes out, that the next presidential election will work something along the lines of anyone with less than 5% of the vote in the first round gets booted, anyone with less than 10% in the second round, and if they still don’t have a majority by the third round, they’ll shift to a four person run off, and the top two will be President/VP.”

“Sounds like a mess, right now, Penny,” Abby says.

“I know.” Penny groans. “The printing alone for the ballots is insane. They’re books, thick books. Each booth gets one, you look your candidate up, and then write his name and number on your ballot. That’s their ‘cutting down on paper’ version of this.”

“I take it, since you haven’t mentioned it, that none of you have received a vote counting notification?”

The rest of the table shakes their heads at Ducky.

“This is what Eleanor and I have been working on. A way to mobilize voter rolls into a functional, nationwide, database, from which vote counters can be pulled.”

“What are you doing with that, Duck?” Tim asks. He can see what Bishop might be doing, but that doesn’t sound like Ducky’s sort of work.

“Mostly, I am sitting on the phone, politely requesting access to voter rolls from every state left in the country. There is no national database of this information, and to make it even more frustrating, each state is… lackadaisical in its voter role upkeep.”

Everyone groans at the idea of that job.

Ducky inclines his head, acknowledging it’s an obnoxious and frustrating job. “It is, however, useful. By the time this is done, there’ll be a master list that can be used to weed out voter fraud.”

Tim shakes his head.

The rest of the table looks curiously at him.

“Not worth it anymore. It’s a straight majority in a country with hundreds of millions of voters. Say the winner is one point ahead. That’s more than a million votes. On paper ballots, right now. Way too expensive. Add in the way Congressmen can’t run for reelection anymore… Not worth it. Hell, even electronically, even with the old system, those guys wrecking the elections didn’t bother with attempting voter fraud, not like that. They hacked the computers to show the results they wanted. They didn’t attempt to get dead guys to vote or send in absentee ballots for people who didn’t actually exist. The numbers were too big to make that worth doing.”

Everyone else looks at him like Tim’s either brilliant or insane or dangerously cynical, and he shrugs.
“Social Security and Medicare/Medicaid, whatever’s left of them when this is done, *that’s* a system where taking the dead/non-existant people out would make a difference.”

The official start time for Thanksgiving Dinner is 3:00.

But the family starts showing up early. Gibbs is there at the crack of 5:00 to get the turkey started.

In their quest for the perfect turkey, Gibbs and Tim might have gone a bit testosterone heavy. (With Tony’s eager help.) After all, if they’re going to make this damn thing, they’re going to cook like *men*.

And *men* cook with *fire* and *smoke* and with manly tools like a huge damn grill and real wood and beer. (Okay, cider. Tim’s had half of the wood they’re smoking with soaking in hard cider for the last two days. It’ll add steam and flavor.)

Abby and Penny are staring out the sliding glass door, looking at the smoker/grill combo thing that Tim and Gibbs have put together, and Gibbs loading the wood into the smoker as Tim wrestles the biggest turkey she’s ever seen onto the grate.

“They’re having a lot of fun with that, aren’t they?”

Abby nods.

“They need it, don’t they?”

Abby looks away from her guys turkey wrangling to Penny. “Yeah. He’s doing better, but…”

“But better isn’t healed.”

“Nope.”

Penny wraps an arm around her and gives her a gentle squeeze.

The DiNozzo branch of the family, complete with Senior and Delphine, show up a bit before noon.

“I didn’t know you’d be stateside!” Penny says, giving Senior and Delphine welcoming hugs. They all know that what used to be the Senior DiNozzo residence is currently a blackened block the cleanup crews haven’t even begun to go through, yet.

“Spur of the moment decision. Fortunately we’re able to bunk with Junior for a few days.”

“And what is spurring you to the US?” Ducky asks, as he takes Delphine’s coat.

Senior’s eyes sparkle. “Plans within plans that finally worked out. Thought you’d like to hear about them in person.”
There’s a moment of dread, because Senior and plans can be fraught territory, but those words do draw everyone to the living room to find out what on earth Senior might have been up to. He glances around, sees the whole crew, at least that he wants to share this with, is here.

“I figured you’d know what to do with this. And I figured you’d need it. When McGee gave me the call about the… recent unpleasantness, he told me that I couldn’t tell anyone.” Senior looks at Tim and gives him a little half smile. “Sorry, Tim, I couldn’t do that, but…”

Tim feels his shoulders slumping, afraid of what he’s going to hear next. He didn’t watch the market too closely after things got moving, but he knows it tanked. And he’s familiar with the fact that people like Breena’s family, who sold short, or moved their holdings around before it tanked ended up doing very well.

“Buck up, this isn’t bad. Because I did a good job of spreading the news, to the right people, and those people did extremely well with that information, we’re in a position to… offer some not insubstantial financial aid to the rebuilding of DC.” Senior grins. Huge grin. Blindingly white teeth and an edge of almost manic glee sparkling in his eyes. “I don’t want to talk specific numbers, but… I figured if anyone would know someone who could use a donation of cash and resources in the neighborhood of fifty billion dollars, you guys would.”

Northern Virginia does not have live crickets in late November. They’re all dead or hibernating by then. However, in the silence that follows Senior's comment, those ghost crickets, rubbing their spectral legs together, could be heard.

Two seconds later, Senior has Jarvis’ number. Five minutes after that, Clayton Jarvis was having a very good Thanksgiving.

By 3:00 everyone, the entire extended Gibbs clan, including Fornells, Andersons, Vances, and Slaters have gathered at the McGee house.

Like any of the extended family gatherings, its loud, people are in a generally good mood, and they’ve all brought food to go with the feast Tim and Gibbs have been working on. (Jeannie alone seems to have brought at least two courses.)

There’s a somewhat self-selected group of people hovering around the Eagles-Lions game playing in Tim’s office. Several more are on the back porch approving of the Turkey smoking contraption that Gibbs and Tim put together. Emily Fornell and the Vance kids blocked off a chunk of the stairs where they could text their buddies and hang out with each other. Kevin Draga and Molly are playing with each other in the kitchen, doing their best to be underfoot as often as possible, with Kelly toddling along behind, doing her best to keep up.

It's a family holiday, with a big extended family.

“Bishop and Jake off in Oklahoma with their families?” Jimmy asks between sips of spiced tea. (Kind of like chai, but no milk.)
Ducky nods, a smile on his face, and glances at Penny, she smiles, too.

“Okay, you two are beaming. What’s going on?”

Penny’s smile doesn’t falter. “It’s likely this is going to be an especially good Thanksgiving for the Malloy clan. Did you know Jake’s the oldest of three boys, and he has no nieces or nephews?”

Jimmy catches the glee in her eyes. “And you think that is unlikely to be a true statement for his brothers for all that much longer?”

“I’d say that will be a true statement for maybe another eight months, and then…” Ducky grins, too. “I’ve been spending quite a bit of time with Eleanor lately, and it has not escaped my notice that she has something of a tendency to skip caffeinated beverages and, if we are not actively working on a project, fall asleep in her chair.”

“But they aren’t saying anything, yet?” Jimmy makes sure he doesn’t stick his foot ankle deep into his mouth by repeating unconfirmed gossip to the wrong person.

“Not yet,” Penny replies.

____________________

Ed gazes at the smoker, a wide smile on his lips as he nods slowly. “That’s a piece of work!”

Gibbs is feeling pretty good about it. The smokers they found at the hardware store weren’t quite as big as they wanted for a turkey big enough to feed this crew, so, an oil drum, some time with Jack’s metalworking tools, a bit of welding, and boom! turkey smoker!

Cooking is a lot more interesting if you gear up for it at the hardware store.

____________________

“You guys made fifty billion dollars on those deals?” Tony asks his dad, when he gets a minute alone with him.

Senior laughs, a deep, rich, and somewhat condescending sound. “No Junior. We made closer to five hundred billion dollars, but I made everyone who got the news pledge 10% of their earnings to a rebuilding fund as a cost for the tip.”

“How many guys did you call, Dad?”

He waves that off. The correct answer is he knows he called fifteen people. He doesn’t know who they called, not precisely, but he has been spending the last month tracking down as many of them as he could and collecting on the finder’s fee. “Ten percent is a common finder’s fee. Instead of it going to me, or Tim, I guess, it’s going to DC. Least we could do.”

Tony’s not sure if he should be pleased or horrified. “How much did you make?”

Senior smiles. “Your Uncle Clive, he always thought I was small time. He wouldn’t anymore.”

Tony likes that idea. “You mean I can finally wipe that smirk off of Crispian’s face?”

Senior shakes his head. “Crispian was one of my first calls. That man knows money in and out. He made out very well. He ponied up his ten percent, and matched it with another ten percent to the DC
Fire Department. However, given that tip, he now considers that IOU of yours settled.” Senior shakes his head. Crispian had enjoyed telling him about what Junior ‘owed’ him, and still hadn’t paid off. “What have I told you about signing contracts?”

“He brought that up? It’s been thirty years!”

“Junior, you signed a contract for $10,000 at 14% compound interest, thirty years ago. What were you thinking?”

“Dadd…”

“Hello, Stranger!” Abbi gives Ziva a hug when she finds her in the mob.

“Hello!” Abbi gets a kiss on her cheeks. “It has been a while. Did you just get here?”

Abbi rolls her eyes. “Yes, but for a good reason. A real case today, with an actual victim.”

“Ow.”

Abbi nods. “Suicide. Open and shut for us. But, I was the one on call until noon today, so I’m the one who got to drive to Norfolk and back this morning.”

Ziva sighs. “I have done that run, many time.”

“Oh yeah, and I’m sure I’ll be doing it again.” She takes a step away from Ziva and grabs herself a mug of spiced cider. It’s warm and sweet and spicy and exactly what she wants after a long drive. “You’re back, and Jethro’s been telling me about your recent adventures, so sounds like you’re all rested up, you ready to come back and help me get my staff in shape?”

Diane swoops in on that one, and wraps a protective arm around Ziva’s shoulders. “No poaching! I’ve got more than enough to keep every hour she wants to spend and beyond frantically busy.”

Ziva gives Diane a quick hug. “I take it you don’t have enough staff?”

“I’ve been able to get my own team and department, and I still have more work than any group of people can do. Plus, trained investigators, good ones, are hard to come by right now. Everyone in any of the Federal branches has a cloud hanging over them. The Batthenada stuff, the election fraud… that got a lot of other people starting to really look at their own departments and what they’ve really been up to.”

Abbi nods along at that. “Yeah. I’ve been hearing about that. It’s making it hard for me to find people, too.” She looks at Ziva, who right now is an extremely valuable example of ‘people.’ “And unlike you, I need real investigators, someone who can find me other real investigators. You need, what, accountants?”

That gets some stink eye from Diane, but Abbi isn’t wrong. “I need accountants. I need investigators. I need lawyers. I need EPA experts and chemists and… I need… hell, I need people to just handle invoices. Some of them are sending me paper bills and want to be paid with checks.”

And while it’s true that Ziva has felt what she’s been doing for Diane is valuable, it’s also something anyone with a computer could do. What she can do for Abbi, finding real investigative talent, isn’t
something anyone can do.

“I’m sorry, Diane, but I think I will be returning to Abbi. However, if you have investigators you want me to interview, add them to the pile. I’ll be happy to go through whomever you want.”

That’s a functional compromise.

Ziva sips her cider, and says, “Bright and early on Monday?”

Abbi nods. “The building is open and cleaned up. You’re going to have to take a round-about route to get in, but as soon as you do, I’ve got people for you to interview.”

“You’re all cleaned up?” Diane sounds envious of that. She’s working out of the Navy Yard right now, with most of Jarvis’ staff.

“Pretty much. But we didn’t have too many people in there,” Abbi replies. “Any news on…”

Diane shakes her head, and for a moment she looks distressed, then she forces a hard smile on her face. “Um… I haven’t found anyone I was close to who wasn’t in the building. And… since I no longer for work the IRS, they aren’t keeping me in the loop on where they’re relocating everyone.”

“I am sorry, Diane.” Ziva says, and Abbi nods, laying a hand on her arm.

“As the person who’s running the cleanup operation, I can say that the block the IRS building use to be on is scheduled to be started on next week.”

“Where’s the Autopsy Mogwi?” Tony asks Jimmy as he and Tim and Gibbs all spend a moment outside with the turkey, eyeing it, checking the temperature to see if it’s really done.

“Sam’s home with his family.”

“What’s the deal with them? He didn’t go home when everything else went crazy…” Tim asks, well aware of the fact that people who don’t go home when they can and should is probably a flag of some sort.

“Not sure. He seems to get on well with them, but… He’s home now. He wasn’t home before.” Jimmy shakes his head a bit. “I don’t know all that much about them.”

“He’s okay with them, though?” Tim asks, watching the thermometer edging up toward 160 degrees.

“Seems so. I didn’t get any sense that he’s dreading going home. Might just be that ‘home’ is Iowa, so it’s not exactly nearby.”

They think about that, and then the thermometer beeps. “And she’s ready to come in!” Tim says, looking very pleased with himself, and the glorious, smoky, savory, mahogany skinned beast in front of him.

Jimmy brushes Tim out of the way. “I got her. No need for you to be trying to wrestle a hot thirty-five pound monster.”

“Thanks.”
Tim’s beginning to understand why Gibbs is the one who cooks the main dish for Christmas. Being the guy who made the food that everyone else is complimenting and treating like it’s the Platonic Ideal of food feels really good.

They don’t have room for everyone to sit at a table, so it’s buffet-style Thanksgiving. Tim’s thinking that, as much as he’s enjoying everyone here for this, next year he’s looking forward to just the close family. He’s only getting a few minutes with everyone, which isn’t exactly breaking his heart when it comes to, say, Ed, but he’d kind of like to spend more than six minutes with Abby and Breena.

Everyone will leave sooner or later, and then he’ll get real time with them.

And right now, spending five minutes chatting with Lara Vance about sweet potatoes is pretty nice.

Politics. Lots of conversations are revolving around it. Between their jobs and where they live, that makes sense. And, given the last month, politics is probably the main topic of conversation in pretty much every house in the nation today.

Jared’s in the living room, and because his Civics class is doing a lot of work with government in general and what’s going in right now in specific, he decides that, with Penny and Ducky right here, he might as well ask some questions.

He politely waits for a pause in the conversation. His mother’s ghost will whack him upside the back of the head if he just barges right into a conversation. Ducky, Penny, Ed Slater, and Draga are chatting right now, about politics, but not exactly about what he’s curious about.

“Don’t they need to… I don’t know… have a Constitutional Convention or something?” Jared asks when they pause.

That gets some huge smiles from Ducky and Penny. “The short answer to that is, yes, Jared. The longer answer is they are doing everything in their power to avoid one, because they fear the entire process will be short circuited by gun control and abortion.”

“The legal loop-holing they’re doing is calling these changes ‘Constitutional Amendments’ that will be set to be ratified as soon as they’ve got new Congressmen in place,” Penny adds.

Jared looks skeptical. Both Penny and Ducky are pleased to see it.

“In the longer run, at some ‘later point,’” he gestures elegantly to indicate that ‘later point’ is code for basically never, “they’re talking about a formal convention for a rewrite of the original document, though from what I can see, they intend to make that as long of a long run as possible,” Ducky adds.

“By the time they get a Congress of 6119 people, getting anything ratified, let alone on a two-thirds vote, will be a quagmire. So, they’ll move along as well as they can without patching the original
documents. The Supreme Court will likely attempt to stop this, and…” Penny shakes her head.

“As Andrew Jackson said, in one of the more shameful moments of American history, ‘the court has made its decision, now let us see them enforce it,’” Ducky replies.

Penny inclines her head. “It looks like the Supreme Court may be a casualty of this. Between all of them having been nominated by people on the take, and half of them having connections to the Batthenada cartel… It’s a mess. All of the Federal Judgeships are.”

Jared thinks about that. “So… what happens?”

“It’s entirely likely that we’ll end up much like Europe, a common market, common currency, common defense, free travel, and leave the rest to the individual states,” Penny replies.

An hour later, Tim overhears Penny saying, “Texas won’t extradite the Bush family until the death penalty is taken off the table for George Senior, Barbara, and Laura. The only reason they haven’t tried to bring in Chelsea Clinton is she hasn’t run for anything. They won’t release where the Obama girls are being held, but we know it’s outside of the country.”

“Carter lucked out, then?” Abbi asks.

“Yes, dying in May is likely the best stroke of luck he could have had.”

He knows the death penalty is on the books for treason, and if anyone’s committed it, the people involved in the election fixing and vote selling have certainly committed it, but right now, he’s feeling like too damn many people have died. He doesn’t want to see anyone else have to.

He doesn’t think he’s going to get his wish on that, though.

“How are you not the size of a house?” Tony asks Tim, staring at the mounds of luscious food on his own plate. He’s on buffet return trip number three. The whole house smells like a dream of Thanksgiving, and everything is just sitting there, begging to be scarfed down. Tony’s happy to oblige it.

Tim glances at his own plate. It’s almost empty now. He had a few bites of everything, and that’s it. “Because this plate represents my whole dinner.”

Jimmy adds in, “You wanna splurge, go ahead, but you’ll probably feel cruddy after.”

Tim rolls his eyes. He, unfortunately, knows that first hand. Right now he really can’t eat too much at one setting or his stomach rebels. “Six or seven little meals a day, and this is probably two of them. More than that and Jimmy’s right, I’ll feel like crap.”

“ Keeps your body from thinking it’s starving,” Jimmy says.

“Yep.” Tim rolls his eyes a little. “It’d be nice if my brain could just get the message across and I could go back to real meals.”
“Give it time, you’ll get there.” Jimmy, who normally does three small meals and two snacks a day (part of keeping his blood sugar stable) has quite a bit more of… almost everything that isn’t a dessert… on his plate. He’d skipped out on the cranberries and sweet potatoes, and only has a taste of the stuffing. And, if it wasn’t for the fact that too much food will make him feel cruddy, too, he’d be all over that table, because Tony’s right, what’s sitting there is solid pleasure, just waiting to be consumed.

“Have you been back?” and variations is the most popular question of the night. Who’s been to DC? Who’s seen what? Tim’s fine with skipping those discussions.

But Leon notices him skittering away from that topic of conversation, and does grab him as the night is winding down.

“Nine AM, December 1st, the Directors are meeting, are you going to be there?”

Tim sighs, but he doesn’t feel the need to snap the rubber band on his wrist as he says, “Yeah. I’ll be there.”

“Have you been back?” Leon looks curious. He hasn’t. He knows he should, but he hasn’t had any desire to go in.

“Just to the front gate. I drop Abby off a few mornings a week. Helps to build up a thicker skin, or something.” Once he’d told Rachel about it, she’d suggested he keep it up. “You?”

Leon shakes his head. “Half the time I want to ask Jarvis to get us out of that building.”

Tim wholeheartedly agrees with that.

“But… The building’s fine. Whatever government we report to is going to be scrapped for cash. Can’t see asking for a new home when we don’t need one.”

“And other agencies do.”

They both look over to Diane. She’s talking with Draga, and they look okay. Tim doesn’t know if Draga just buried what happened in the Navy Yard, or if she was okay with it, and he’s not about to find out.

Tim makes himself think work thoughts, “So, what are we meeting about?”

“Getting back up and running. Seeing what shape we’re in. Figuring out who we report to and who we serve. Everything.” Vance nods to Tim’s grandmother. “I’m starting to hear rumors that whatever’s left of Federal Law Enforcement after this is going to be extremely reorganized. I’m supposed to get more about that next week.”

“And then you’re passing it onto us.”

“Yeah.”

“December 1st, 09:00. I’ll be there. Even wear a suit if you’d like.”
Leon shakes his head. “Don’t have to go that far, McGee. Just show up, ready to work, and ready to think outside the box. Who knows what we’re going to have to do to keep NCIS, NCIS.”

“It never ends, does it?”

“Nope. And here’s the other rumor, we’re going to be fighting off the reorganization, while you and I and most of this team, ends up being called up to New York to testify.” The first thing the new congress is going to do is begin the trial of everyone involved in the vote buying scandal.

Tim snorts. “Fuck that. They can talk to me by Skype.”

Vance inclines his head. That doesn’t sound like a bad idea to him. Especially as he thinks of what he’s got in his coffers and what lodging in New York costs.

“It’ll be something we’ll talk about on the First.”

“I’ll be ready.”

---

“Is it midnight?” Tim asks, flopping bonelessly onto the sofa next to Abby after the last of the guests leave.

She glances at the clock. “In the middle of the Atlantic. It’s 8:06.”

“It feels like midnight.”

Abby pets his hair.

Penny’s sitting by the fire, and laughs. “You realize that was Sunday supper, every week, cooked on a coal burning oven and stove, when I was a kid.”

Tim makes an exhausted sound. “I don’t even want to think too hard about that.”

Penny grins at them.

“Are you and Ducky staying long?” Abby asks, half listening to Penny, half keeping an ear on Breena, Jimmy, and Ducky putting little girls to bed. Kelly’s been fussing hard, and if she needs to go up, she wants as much advanced warning as possible.

“We’re going to drive back up again Saturday.”

Tim nods. “Wish you’d stay longer. Traffic will be insane until Monday.”

“We’ve got work to do.”

“I bet. Leon was telling me he’s hearing rumors of reorganizing Federal Law Enforcement?”

Penny nods. “That’s waiting for after the election to really come out, but yes, it’s on the docket. Too much overlap, too many cracks to fall through, not enough good communication. There’s some talk about focusing on types of crime. All the murders go to one agency, all the rapes to another, all the terrorism to someone else, yet another group gets cyber matters, with a master database that all of the groups can work with. Something sort of like your job software. People get a case, they put the
particulars in, and it starts sorting things, moving it around as need be to the right people.”

Tim blinks at that thought. Done right, it’d be amazing. Done the way every other government project he’s ever seen… It’d be a cluster fucking. And given the current state of the art in AI, and machine learning… because something like this would have to have a very sophisticated AI, and it would have to learn, just to figure out how to categorize things and get the right people in on it…

“That project is still, at least, ten years off.”

“You couldn’t do it?” Penny asks.

“Yeah, I can do it. Get my team up and running, and we can build something that’ll do it. In ten years, when we can get our hands on a computer big enough to run the damn thing, and the cops in question all know how to use keywords, and they can all type, and…” He thinks about the errors his system had, has had, and continues to have. Ninety-nine percent of them are located between the keyboard and the chair.

“It’s a user interface nightmare, Penny. Computer can only use the data you give it. So, something like, AFIS, sure, that’s great. It’d be really awesome if it was bigger and faster and every single case had prints and DNA and bullets and facial recognition all uploaded and run.

“But that database would be so damn big… And it would still depend on Local LEOs to actually put their information into it, and do it right.

“And that’s just physical crimes, terrorism… cyber stuff…” Tim whistles low. “It’s possible, but I wouldn’t hold out any hope for the government, any government, building one that works.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Penny says.

“Hey!” Jimmy’s voice from upstairs. “Got some little girls looking for goodnight kisses.”

“We’re coming,” Abby calls up as Tim stands and helps her up.

On the morning of November 30th, before a day that will be spent at the house with Tony and Gibbs, working on getting the last of the drywall up, and if they go very quickly, starting on painting, Rachel asks Tim, “Going back tomorrow?”

“Yeah.” He nods as he says it.

“You feel ready?”

“I don’t know. I’m doing it anyway.”

She smiles at that. “Good answer.”

“Really? Kind of hoping this would be easier.”

“It will be, eventually, but not the way it was before.”

“Yeah.”
“Nine tomorrow?”

He nods again.

“I don’t have a client, and my phone will be on me. You call if you need to, okay.”

“Okay…” He thinks about it. “But… I don’t think I’m going to need to.”

“Good.”
08:50, December 1st.

For the first time in a month, Tim is driving through the gate at the Navy Yard.

He’s almost more apprehensive about doing it than experiencing any sort of negative feeling from doing it.

Of course, going through the gate isn’t something he did during his time on the inside. He went through it in October, and spent most of the next month on the other side of it. Even when he was on the wall that one day, he was on the east entrance, and right now he’s driving in through the south.

Beyond a million mornings of driving in, having a collection Marines check his car and ID, he has no memories, good or bad, of this.

He doesn’t recognize the Marine who checks the car and waves him in. But that’s not uncommon, either. Guard duty at the Navy Yard was (maybe still is? maybe will be again?) considered a prime non-combat posting, and people moved in and out on a regular basis.

Abby’s watching him as he’s doing this, keeping a hand on his right wrist. He flashes her a little smile as they pull through the gate. “It’s not bad.”

“Okay.”

He finds a parking place. Not too hard, there are maybe ten cars in a lot made for 200. “If we’re both going to be working regularly again, might be a good idea to get a new car.”

Abby nods at that. They received notification that several pieces of scrap with a VIN that matched Abby’s roadster had been recovered.

“Would you want to build another one?” he asks, turning the car off.

She shakes her head. “Take too long, and I’m not in any shape for it these days. When the kids get older, we can see about working on building a new one.”

Tim likes that idea. “Family tradition, pick out your first junker and rebuild it with Pop and Mom/Aunt Abby.”

She smiles, also liking that idea. The mental image of their girls, older, twelve-thirteen, hair pulled back, swaddled in coveralls, hands black with grease, putting a car together makes her really happy. (Little brother in the background, getting into everything, stealing tools, and getting yelled at intensifies that smile.) “Yeah. Might not be junkers.”

He gives her a look while they unbuckle. He supposes they could get a car in just rough shape and go from there, but that seems like a lot of effort for not much payout.

Abby gets what he’s thinking. “Okay, yeah, they’ll be junk, but we’re not going to be taking the time and energy to rebuild a Ford Escort or something like that. They’ll be cool cars.”
Tim nods back at her, liking that idea, a lot. “And for now?”

Abby shrugs. “Nothing I really want. We could get another of these,” she pats their Highlander, “and I’d be fine with that.”

“Want me to start doing some research when I get home?”

“You’re going to the house after here, right?”

“That’s the plan. Five rooms painted, way too damn many more to go. With any luck Gibbs and Tony are tearing through it without me this morning.”

She flashes him a look making it clear she’s not understanding. “I thought you liked painting. You’re good at it.”

“It’s okay.” And it is. Of the things they’ve done, he definitely prefers it to putting up drywall, let alone installing the HVAC system. But what he likes best about painting, namely get the rollers out and slap the paint on, is the part he’s not doing. “And I am good at it. Which is why they’ve got me doing all the precision work, the trim and edges, and my hands keep getting tired.”

“Ah.”

“Plumbing when we get done with that. That’ll be interesting.” They’ve got the pipes in. So, while the carpet guy shows up on Monday (None of them are interested in messing around with carpet glue or stretching anything out, and with the number of rooms they have, they got a good volume discount.) they’ll see about getting sinks, toilets, and as many shower/baths in as they can.

“I bet.”

As Abby says that, they’ve gotten to the front doors of the NCIS building. The outside looks the same as ever. But it would. Scrub off the soot stains, which the Marines and Sailors did, and it’s good as new.

The doors are just the same. They don’t loom with menace. There’s nothing sinister about them. Just two, large, smoked glass doors with metal handles, leading in.

He feels a brief frisson of... something, maybe fear, maybe nothing quite that strong, but it’s only a second, and then Abby takes his hand in hers, gives him a gentle squeeze, and lets go.

You okay? she signs as they step through.

He appreciates her not asking out loud. Sure, there aren’t a lot of people around, but enough. Probably. He flashes back to her.

The main entrance is beige now. It was off white edging toward light gray when he left, and now it’s not. A soft, sandy, soothing beige: sand on the beach in vacation photos beige. The floors are gleaming. He’s never seen them that shiny. He didn’t realize they were made of a material that could shine.

Even the metal detector’s been buffed to a shine.

Burt isn’t in his usual place. Inside security is civilian, and they’ve had the same ten or so guys for the last six years, at least.

Tim thinks about it. He knows Burt was in the building at the beginning. He brought his family in,
and Tim remembers chatting with them before the press conference. Burt had been joking about how
if he had to find ‘shelter from urban chaos’ nowhere was safer than a compound filled with armed
Marines. Tim knows he can’t remember seeing Burt, or any of his family, after the first week. He
thinks he remembers chatting with him about where home was, and that it was in Maryland. But he’s
not sure about that.

Either way, he doesn’t know the Marine at the metal detector, and the Marine doesn’t know him.

The usual routine is to put everything in his pockets on a tray, put the tray through the x-ray, his go
bag follows the tray through the x-ray machine, and then he goes through the metal detector. After…
Tim thinks it’s been nine years since Burt started there, so, after nine years Burt came to the
conclusion that Tim really does work at NCIS, and has the good sense to not get in trouble. Which
means, once he ended up with a small appliance’s worth of metal in his body, Burt let him just walk
around the metal detector, rather than hold up the line by making him go through, set the damn thing
off, and then wanding him.

This new guy isn’t doing that.

So, it’s the usual routine made slower by having to get wanded because he can no longer go through
a metal detector without setting one off.

“It’s really okay for him to be here, Henry,” Abby says. (She gets to walk around the metal detector,
with a quick frisk. Yes, they both know the radiation on one of those things is minimal, but she’s not
interested in dosing Sean with a hit of it every day. She did the same thing, except, once again, Burt
let her just walk around without the frisking, with Kelly.)

“Not taking any chances, Ma’am.”

“You know… Henry?” Tim asks Abby, as the wand Henry’s waving over him shrieks at his arm,
shoulder, hand and ankle.

“He’s been checking me in for the last two weeks.”

“And I’ve got orders to check everyone, else, too.” Henry stands up, a look of respect in his eyes. If
Tim’s got that much metal in him, and he’s up and walking, he’s recovered from some serious shit,
and that’s the sort of thing Henry respects. “Even if their ID badge does have Director of Cybercrime
on it.”

“Is that so?” Leon asks, coming up behind Tim and Abby. “How about if it says Director of NCIS?”

Henry straightens up, very tall, very grim looking, eyes narrowed. That look of respect falls, fast. He
nods Tim through the check point. “I figure that means I check you extra careful. It was a lot of
‘Directors’ and ‘Generals’ and ‘Congressmen’ muckin’ things up.”

Leon grins at him. “Good to hear.” He hands over his ID. “Leon Vance, Director of NCIS.”

Henry doesn’t blanch at all. He just nods, checks the photo on the ID, and leads Vance through the
metal detector. If anything, Henry looks disappointed that Vance checks out.

Abby takes the down elevator. They share a quick kiss before she steps in to continue evidence
processing for “The Morgue.”

Tim and Leon wait for the up elevator. Both of them are tense, and dealing with it quietly.

As the doors open, Leon says, “Lara tells me I’m supposed to get your turkey brine recipe.”

Tim nods. “I’ll send it off to her.” He looks down as they step in. “I thought the floor in here was black.” It’s gray now.

“Jarvis got them really cleaning.” Leon looks almost afraid to touch the sides of the elevator, they’re as shiny as matte stainless steel can get. He looks at the floor. “I think they replaced the carpet, though.”

Tim thinks about that and decides that’s a good conclusion.

“Any more rumors?” Tim asks.

“And some confirmations. I’ll get into it, soon. Craig’s had his ear to the ground, and he’s been ferreting things out, too.”

“And Severin?” Tim asks about their Director of Operations.

“Got in from San Diego last night.”

The doors slide open, and they’re met with… “It’s like sunshine!” Tim says, wanting to wince away from the flood of bright light hitting him square in the face.

Leon stares at the almost blinding field of perky light yellow staring at them. “People are going to need sunglasses in here.”

“At least in the morning.”

They step out gingerly, looking around at the ‘new’ bullpen. The walls are now a daffodil yellow. With the morning sun streaming in through the windows, that yellow is reflecting light all over the place, resulting in an extremely bright room.

The carpets are a cheery leaf green.

When it became clear that people were going to be staying in here for an extended time, desks got moved around, dividers were used to close off small spaces for families, the floor plans were completely rearranged.

They aren’t back to where they were, yet. But Tim and Vance can see stacks of dividers, repainted in a creamy darker yellow, waiting to be collected by the teams that use them.

“Did the Navy have a store of yellow paint or something?” Tim asks.

Vance shrugs. He could very easily see something like that. Someone accidentally ordered fifty thousand gallons of yellow paint, and now everything’s daffodil colored.

“It’s cheery.” His voice sounds flat as he says it.

Tim shrugs, too. “It feels different. No smell.” That’s not precisely true. It smells like new carpet and paint. It doesn’t smell like six hundred people shoved into a building not meant to hold them. “No memories. Doesn’t look like my nightmares.”
Vance sighs at that. “Yeah. Let’s see what they did to my office.”

“T’ll have to get down to mine later today, see if I can still recognize it.”

They head up the stairs.

Craig is waiting for them in Vance’s Secretary’s office, with four cups of coffee and a bag full of pastries.

“Leon!” Leon looks slightly uncomfortable as Craig hugs him, but he responds with the appropriate back slap. Tim gets a hand shake. “McGee! Last time I saw you, you were still working downstairs. How are you liking the top tier?”

Tim smiles a bit. “It’s been interesting. The private jet was nice.”

Craig laughs at that. “Don’t get too used to it. That’s mine.”

“So I found out. We got some top flight talent out of that trip.”

“Glad to hear it. And really, yes, I’ll share if you need it, but I need more than a day’s heads up.”

“No problem.”

“When’s Bob getting in?” Craig asks.

A fourth voice, Bob Severin, Director of Operations, chimes in with, “I’m here. My body still thinks it’s six in the morning, but I’m here.”

Craig gives him a handshake, too. “Hey, Bob. Have you met McGee?”

“Not yet. Though I’ve been hearing a lot about what you do.” Severin offers his hand, and Tim shakes.

Tim flashes him a curious look. “Hearing what?”

“All of HR reports to me. This is the first year since I’ve been here that comp time is running under 20%, and we’re… we were, on track for hitting close to 73% of our staff actually taking their allotted vacation time. That paperwork software… We’re in way better shape than a lot of other agencies because of it.”

Leon leads them into his office, which is, with the exception of the walls and the carpet, exactly the way he left it. He sniffs tentatively, and Tim does pretty much the same thing, wondering if the smell had soaked irreversibly into the upholstery of his sofa, chair, and curtains, or into the pages of his books.

Apparently not. Or if it did, the smell of new carpet has beaten it into submission and made it cry uncle. All they can smell is carpet and the coffee Craig is carrying.

They sit around the conference table, the heavy, dark furniture looking out of place in Vance’s newly bright office, and Craig hands out the coffee. “Nothing too exotic today. Figured we could all use some normal.”

“That and the shop you used to get your Peruvian, Fair Trade, Organic, slow roasted over pine embers, and brewed in the tears of virgin unicorns blend, or whatever the hell it was you kept bringing in, is gone now.” Bob shakes his head. “Part of why I’m unconscious this morning. The closest place I could find a hotel room was in Richmond. Nowhere in the city to stay, and outside of
it is packed."

Craig, a consummate politician, looks distressed at Bob putting it that blatantly.

“You can always find a berth on one of the ships if you’d like less travel time,” Leon adds.

“I’m tired enough; I’ll take you up on that for tonight.” Severin gulps down his coffee. “Okay, starting to feel human again.”

“What constitutes better shape?” Craig asks, putting a tray of muffins and Danish on the table between them.

“As of the next pay period, we’re broke instead of in debt. Fewer comp hours means we weren’t paying out nearly as much as we usually do, which meant we had more money to keep running on when Treasury stopped wiring us funds.”

“Jarvis tells me we’ll be getting enough to cover payroll, and our back obligations in the next few days,” Leon says.

“Wonderful,” Severin says with a weary sarcasm. “We getting any money to keep us going after that?”

“We should be able to make pay long enough to keep going until we know if there’s still going to be an NCIS,” Leon tells them. “One hundred million will hit our accounts soon.”

Severin’s shaking his head. “That’s not much of a budget.”

“It’ll do for the time being, and get everyone up to date.” Leon would have liked to have seen more, too, that’s barely eleven weeks of cash for them, but he knows that Jarvis is watching that money to the penny.

“Get back to, ‘if there’s still going to be an NCIS,’” Tim says. He’s figuring that’s a bigger deal than if they can meet payroll. After all, it doesn’t matter if there’s money, or not, if there’s no agency.

“That’s the question, on several levels. On the biggest level, is there still going to be Marines and a Navy after this? Is there going to be a US military force?” Leon says. The rumors he’s been getting have involved some ideas he’s not fond of.

“Yes.” Craig responds. “At least, there will be a military force. Reorganization is still up for debate, but even if ‘The United States’ becomes code for ‘The European Union of the Western Hemisphere’ some form of common defense will happen.”

“What sort of reorganization?” Severin asks.

Craig grimaces. “That’s for after the election. But, keeping track of the guys trying to get elected is part of why I get the jet. A lot of them are thinking that we don’t need four competing, overlapping branches of the military, and if everything came under one umbrella it’d be easier to scale down.” Craig sips his coffee. “And they want to do a lot of scaling down. Take planes for example, the theory is there’s no need for an Airforce, Army Flight Service, Naval Aviators, and Marine Pilots, plus a drone program, all overlapping and doing mostly the same stuff.”

“So, what… Everything that flies goes to an Airforce, if it floats it’ll be Navy, and if it marches/rides on the ground, it’s Army?” Severin says.

“Pretty much.” Craig hasn’t much liked hearing that, but he’s fairly sure a lot of potential voters
have. “There’s no doubt we’ll still have a Navy, but Marines… Any sort of ground troop, they’re
talking about mashing them all into one force. There’ll still be specialists, like the SEALs, but the
people talking about this don’t see all that much difference between Soldiers and Marines.”

Though he doesn’t say it, attitude aside, Tim doesn’t see a whole lot of difference between Soldiers
and Marines, either. Though he supposes that Marines tend to go in on boats, soften things up, and
then the Army follows behind them and holds onto things. (Granted, that’s a very Marine way of
understanding who does what. The Army probably has different ideas on that subject.)

“And thus, we end up with level one on will there still be an NCIS?” Craig says. “Literally, will
there be a separate Naval system of justice for us to even work with? It’s possible we, ACID, and
AFOSI might all end up wrapped into one service.”

“Coast Guard?” Tim asks, thinking of Abbi.

“Broken into land and sea defenses and mashed into the corresponding units. All of the land based
border defenses may end up as part of the Army, sea ends up Navy,” Craig replies. He catches the
look between Leon and Tim. “Oh, that’s right, you’re friendly with their current head. Trust me,
none of you guys who were big on breaking this ever have to worry about job security again. Bob
and I,” that gets an arch look from Craig aimed at Leon, “who were left to pick up the damn pieces
after, without any advanced warning, we might be out with our asses hanging in the breeze, but
whatever the hell it is they come up with next, they’ll be begging you guys to run it.”

There’s a moment of quiet that follows that. Tim watches to see if Leon’s going to apologize for not
telling his two other top guys about what was going on, but he doesn’t. He gives them the need to
know only, and you didn’t look.

Craig flashes him something that Tim reads as Don’t keep your damn cards so close to the vest. Do
you have any idea what the fuck I had to do over the last month?

Leon raises an eyebrow slightly, and Craig notices how much weight he’s lost. Craig nods, and Leon
does, too.

Tim decides to shift the topic of conversation a bit. “You said that’s one level of will there still be an
NCIS, what’s the other one?”

“More than one,” Craig replies. “Terrorism. Just like with the military, the people who are running
for Congress and President don’t see much need for a CIA, NSA, DHS, Border Patrol, FBI, and
every other branch of Federal Investigation all running their own terror organizations.”

“Terror is more than a quarter of what we do. They going to expect us to hand it off?” Leon asks.

“Maybe? Like with everything else, we’ll have to see who wins, but… All of them are running on
anti-corruption platforms, and the less overlap, the fewer organizations, the less chance of there being
corruption.”

“My grandmother’s telling us—“ Tim sees the way Craig and Severin look at him, the Who’s your
grandma to know? “Penny Langston—“

“Oh, I met her last week!” Craig knows what’s going on now. He smiles at the memory. “She’s a
firecracker.” Severin still doesn’t know who she is. “One of the DC Ambassadors to the Congress.
What’s she saying?”

“Streamlining all of the Federal Law Enforcement into one system. Some of them are talking about
automating a lot of it, getting a computer system up and running. Someone finds a body, someone
gets kidnapped, terror threat, whatever, they put all the relevant facts in, and the computer calls up whoever specializes in that sort of case.”

“Like your job software?” Leon asks.

“Yeah, but much bigger, and it’d handle any sort of crime, and have everyone in it, and… Okay, look, I can do that for NCIS Cybercrime, because there’s fewer than 200 of us, and we only handle certain things. Try to make it much bigger and you’ve got a mess. Just getting information put into it correctly, every time… Most of the time when my system isn’t working, it’s because whoever keyed in the problem didn’t know what the problem was or keyed it in wrong. Now try to imagine that for every sort of Federal crime imaginable.”

There is only one thing, besides a y chromosome, that all four of the men at this table have in common, they were all, once upon a time, field agents. They know how field agents deal with technology. They know how it takes a good five years of regular use for even basic tools to be used properly, most of the time, by most users. And they can all imagine exactly how well some Local LEO back in God-knows-where-Arkansas or the like, trying to handle a sophisticated piece of electronic software to get the right guy to show up to handle his one murder a decade, will do. All of them wince at that idea.

“Yeah,” Tim says. “So, while I don’t mind that idea of, say, instead of nine different agencies all handling different terror aspects, having one that takes care of the whole thing, if we’re talking crime… You know how it works, starts as a robbery, turns into a kidnapping, ends up a murder. No one wants three agencies working on that, or a computer yanking the crime out of one set of hands to another each time it shifts parameters.”

“But we also know that what starts as a robbery, turns into a murder, and is in fact terrorism cleaning up loose ends,” Leon adds.

“Yeah, we do.” Severin says.

“Question is, are we just going to end up being one group, some sort of massive Federal Law Enforcement, or will we still specialize based on victims or location or something?” Craig asks. “I don’t know,” he answers them.

“None of us do. They don’t know, either,” Leon adds.

“I do know this,” Craig says. “While the new Congress is milling around, figuring things out, we’re going to be doing that, too.” He pulls out his phone and sends quick emails to everyone at the table. “Those are invites to different conferences all throughout January and February. We’ll be meeting with anyone and everyone next month, building our own alliances, figuring out how we think we’ll work best. By the time Congress is ready to start talking about reorganizing, we’ll have reports up and ready to go, written by all of us, about what we think will work best.”

Tim opens his email and sees that from January 9th to the 13th, he’s expected to be joining in on an Anti-Terrorism Tech and Cyber Resources Commission. From January 16th to the 20th, he’s on the Federal Cybercrime Initiative Commission. From the 23rd to the 27th, he’s supposed to be warming a seat with the Technological Innovations Streamlining Services Commission. And the list goes on and on through February. The only upside he can see is that they apparently intend to do this in DC. Each commission has a DC location.

“Unless my son shows up early, I’m on paternity leave from the end of January to the middle of February.”
“Congratulations on the baby, and make sure you’re second-in-command is ready to go. And, I
know, legally, I can’t try to push you out of your family leave time, but try and pop in for at least a
day or two,” Craig says. Get your ass to those meetings is clear on his face.

Tim raises an eyebrow at him. Maybe he’ll go, maybe not. But he does need a real second-in-
command either way. Time to get his crew back.

Leon looks up from his own email. “Supposedly they’ll also be calling us in to testify before
Congress soon, when are we supposed to fit that into this?”

“It’ll be February before the new Congress is sworn in. Then they’ll have to organize themselves,
and assuming we end up with a President to go with the Congress, figure out where they’ll be
meeting. If testimony begins before 2018, I’ll be stunned,” Craig says. “In the meantime, we’ve got
meetings to get ready for.”

“Once the election takes place, what happens with our current armed forces?” Leon asks Craig.

“Ah… Yes. The nuts and bolts. I have been told that as soon as the election takes place our current
armed forces go back into active duty. So, December 13, we’re open for business again. For how
long? No one knows. Until the new Congress and President is sworn in, the Navy and Marines
won’t be doing much, but we’ll be back working for them again, and everyone who transferred to a
National Guard troop will be returning, as well as all of the cases they’ve been handling between
now and then.”

“So, prepared to be slammed on the 13th,” Severin says.

Tim and Leon nod at that. “Everyone back on the 12th,” Leon says.

“I’ll have my guys up and ready to go,” Tim replies.

They chat for a bit longer after that. Mostly bits and pieces that don’t directly affect Tim, beyond the
fact that his current set up better still be functional, because it’s not like he, or anyone else at NCIS, is
getting any new equipment anytime soon.

Severin, Craig, and Vance talk about the Agents Afloat, all of whom have had no downtime since
October, and making sure they get reassigned as needed.

They cover the Agents who have been stationed abroad, and they have a very long chat about what
to do with the San Diego, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Texas offices. California and Texas are
more than willing to let their people leave, as well as their personal equipment, they’re still dealing
with issues of what’s going to happen to the land, buildings, and ’large equipment.’”

“You’re saying Texas wants to keep our arms?” Leon asks Craig.

“Basically. Personal weapons, fine. Those can go with our people. They want our APVs, gunships,
and anything bigger than a .45 side arm to stay with them.”

Leon shakes his head. “Really?”

“Really.” Craig’s nodding his head. Yet another reason for the jet, he’s been in every state that’s left
the Union in the last month, trying to make deals to keep hold of NCIS’s stuff. “They’ve suddenly
got to take care of their own defense, and are under the impression that the National Guard and
Rangers aren’t quite as well armed as they’d like. So, they’re grabbing everything they can lay hands on.”

“And if we try to just take it out?” Leon asks.

“You really want to try to run 1500 miles with the Texas Rangers chasing your men in an effort to keep custody of nine APVs?” Craig asks.

“Shit, no.” Leon immediately gets the logistics of what’s involved in trying to get his stuff out of Texas. Even if the Navy offers air support, that’s still a long time to be in ‘enemy’ territory for not a whole lot of benefit. “What’s California trying to do?”

Severin takes that one. He’s based out of San Diego, for the time being, and that time’s getting smaller and smaller each day. “We can have our men. Everything else they’re trying to confiscate. When Jarvis handed the Navy over to the National Guard, they decided that meant they got everything. Those offices are, personnel aside, a complete loss. We’ve got to be out by the 12th, when they officially become an independent country.”

“What are we doing with them?” Tim asks. “My guys can work from anywhere, but…”

“Good question. Depends on how many resignations we’ve gotten over the last month. Some of them are coming here. Some are going to Seattle and Portland. I know the New Orleans office is going to be expanding, as well as Mobile, and Yuma.” Severin looks at Vance. “All the more reason why 100 million dollars isn’t going to last long. We’ve got reimbursing relocation expenses in their contracts for anytime we move one of them more than 15 miles. And we’re going to have to re-outfit most of the ones who move.”

Tim winces at that, remembering all the cool toys in Los Angeles. “OSP in LA?”

“We’ve been pulling out what we can, which isn’t much. We’re allowed all of our secure data, but none of the equipment. We’re allowed to wipe everything clean. The National Guard has surrounded and been keeping watch on all of our offices. Same for the all of the military bases. We’re losing one of our premier tech centers. It’ll hurt. Wait until you see what Jarvis is going to have to do to try and get the aircraft carriers that decided to land in California when everything went haywire.”

Vance shakes his head, not sure what exactly he can do with that. He knows he had close to 150 people in California and Texas, and a handful of others in the states that decided to join Canada. “We’ll do as much as we can with what we have.”

More nits to pick, more details. Tim stays engaged, and pays attention, but most of it isn’t really in his wheelhouse. Finally, after three hours, they’ve got rough plans in place, and know what happens next.

Which means they break off, and can go to do their own things.

Which for Tim is a trip to the subbasement.

He’s not sure what to expect as he heads down. Unlike the rest of NCIS, his set up stayed fairly close to how it had been. They’d locked down all of the special features on the computers, and left them open as communication hubs, so everyone could talk to the outside world. The cubicles came in handy for allowing everyone a little privacy.
The doors to the elevator slide open, and... nothing. No memories. No palpable hit of agony and memory as he steps out. It's more bright, perky yellow and soothing green. This couldn't be less of a dungeon if it tried.

It's been cleaned to gleaming. The white LEDs cool down the yellow some, so it's not as warm as it is upstairs. And of course, as the subbasement, they've got no natural light down here. The floor underfoot, once gray concrete, has been repainted to match the carpets upstairs. It's... pretty. Could be the data center for a cosmetics company or something equally innocuous.

The gaming station is turned off, but functional. All the games are in a tidy pile on the shelf under the TV. His snack station is stocked. The Caf-Pow dispenser is whirling away, ready to give them frozen, churned caffeine in a heartbeat.

It's too quiet. The computers are off. Tim makes a note. Each computer had hundreds of people doing god knows what on it. His guys are coming back on the 10th, or earlier, otherwise they won't be ready to hit the ground running on the 13th.

He heads into his own office. The door is the same. Reddish, fake wood. It clashes with the yellow walls. His name is still on the black tag. Inside that door... He opens it with a sense of trepidation.

They cleaned but didn’t change anything. He guesses he had enough stuff up on his walls that they didn’t want to mess around with repainting.

He looks at the ceiling for a moment, feeling his breath starting to speed as memories of sleeping in here, or the feel of his keyboard under his fingers as he broke the last barrier to finding out what that account did. He inhales slow and deep, and lets it out just as easy. It’s just a room. His room. He’s spent a lot of time in it, and most of it’s been good.

He sits down, behind his desk, and flips his computer on. The chair's too high. He readjusts, trying to remember if other people were using his computer as a communications hub. Those memories are fairly vague. Laying on the floor, head pillowed on his go bag, trying to grab some sleep, before he found his little nook in the Lab, that memory isn’t vague.

Penny and Ducky, finally crashing in here. Jake and Bishop catching a quiet, alone, night in here. Gibbs and Abbi claiming this room for their own. He remembers that. And he knows, as he goes through those memories, that they’re all from the first week.

He shakes his head, fingers stroking his mouse. He spent so little time in here after the first week, it doesn’t hit, not the way he expects it will.

Tim know where to go if he wants the memories to beat the shit out of him. He knows where the psychic punch is. He’s not ready for it, and for that matter, he’s not sure there’s any reason why he’d ever subject himself to it.

Not like there’s any reason for him to go back up on the roof.

So, he gets his computer up and running, and begins the traditional anti-virus scans. God alone knows what everyone else might have done to his baby, time to get her working again.

You okay? It’s a text from Abby.

Yeah. Getting my computer up, dosing her with cyber penicillin. A lot of it.
“So… where is lunch these days?” Tim asks as he steps into the Lab. It feels really normal to do that. He’s even feeling well enough to skip the elevator, which had been his usual mode of up and down post-Stennis but had been something he’d been trying to avoid in order to stay in better shape before the Stennis.

Walking in and seeing Abby in her lab coat, all on her own, music blaring, that feels like home to him.

“We can meet Jimmy and Breena at the canteen they’ve got at The Morgue. We could venture out and see what’s open. We can head to the canteen here. Or we can eat what Jimmy packed for us. What’s your pleasure?”

Tim grabs her coat. “If you feel like walking, let’s go out.”

She pats her hip, then her hand trails over her belly. “Sean’s behaving today, so I feel like walking. Let’s go.”

“Where’s your troop of baby Marines?” he asks as they head off.

“Their ‘real job’ is collecting evidence from The Morgue and then taking my findings back to them. They’re on their three times a day information exchange.”

“Ah…” He wraps his arm around her as he says that, enjoying the feel of her solid against him.

“What’s open?”

“We’ll see. More stuff every day.”

“Carlo’s?”

“Not yesterday. Maybe today. Tell me about what happened upstairs…”

So he does.
Marines out to fetch her food, and, if it’s behaving, going out herself, to get into the city and spend money.

It’s hard enough to run a business. Worse when most of the people in your area are gone. And she knows, because she saw how it worked in her hometown, that the more businesses that fail, the fewer people will stick around, and the next thing you know you’ve got a ghost town.

So, sure, her fifteen or so dollars a day for lunch isn’t going to make or break a business, but it helps. And right now, that’s all she can do.

Carlo’s isn’t open. They walk by it, and that makes Tim feel nervous, because it, like many of the buildings nearby, are boarded up.

He thinks though, that he’s nervous because he’s primed to read a city like this, boarded up windows, no cars, very few people, as dangerous. Every video game ever has this scene, and, if it were a game, in the next minute someone would start sniping at them.

Abby, who’s been doing this for weeks now, isn’t tense.

She leads them to a building with boarded over windows, though this one has We’re Open spray painted, along with their hours, on the plywood.

“Diane mentioned that every window guy within five hundred miles is here, but it’ll be weeks before most buildings have glass.”

Tim can understand that. He opens the door (plywood nailed over what used to be a glass door) for Abby, and there are people inside.

It’s dim. The place wasn’t built with enough electric lights, because it’s supposed to have huge front windows. But the mood is… maybe not cheerful, but it’s not scared, and the construction workers in the back appear to be having a great month.

There’s not a lot on the menu. Apparently, in addition to glass, it’s also tricky to get the same range of ingredients as before. But his cup of ham and pea soup is good, and Abby enjoys her turkey club sandwich.

“You two save room for dessert?” their waitress asks as they’ve wrapped up lunch.

Abby glances at him, and he shoots back a I’ll have a bite of anything you want to order look. Abby smiles up at her. “What do you have?”

A minute later, they’ve got an order for a slice of apple spice cake headed their way.

Tim sips his decaf coffee, and says, “So, on a completely unrelated topic to anything else we’ve been talking about,” Mostly DC and work, “I’ve been thinking, we still don’t have a marriage present for Breena.”

“Jimmy and I have been talking about that, too. Wanted to get you in on it before we settled on something.”

“Good. What have you been thinking?”
“A pendant of some sort. She always wears Jon’s diamond on a necklace, and if we could find something to go with that, or around it…”

Tim tries to see that idea. “How do you mean ‘around?’”

“It’s a small diamond solitaire,” Tim knows that, “so… around… like, you’d thread the necklace through whatever it is, and the diamond would end up in the middle of it.”

“So, whatever it is has to be open enough to get the clasp through, and big enough to fit Jon’s diamond.”

“Yeah. And pretty and refined enough that she could wear it and still look professional.”

“And that’s where you hit a snag?”

Abby smiles some at that. Tim knows her tastes in and out, and he’s sure she could find dozens of absolutely awesome wrought gold/silver/steel wire work that Jon’s diamond could rest inside easily, however, finding something along those lines that would look appropriate resting against the chest of a mortician… not so much so.

“What’s Jimmy thinking?” Tim asks.

Abby looks up to their waitress, who drops off the cake as he’s asking that. “Thank you.” And then hands Tim the second fork on the plate.

“He’s thinking maybe some sort of heart-type thing.”

Tim should have guessed that. “You’re too Goth and he’s too cute.”

Abby shrugs a bit at that. Tim isn’t wrong. Though, given the choice between Jimmy’s heart, and her thought of some sort of cross, set so Jon’s diamond would rest where the bars connect, the heart idea is probably closer to something Breena would wear because she’d like it, as opposed to wear because they gave it to her.

Tim fiddles with his ring, thinking more about the idea of a pendant, because he likes that a lot.

Abby takes a bite of the cake, and nudges his hand. He has a bite, too. It’s pretty good. Sweet, spicy, the frosting has a little savory sourness to it to balance the sweetness nicely. It could use a bit more nutmeg, but all in all he’s pleased with it. (Becoming a better cook has made him a much more judgmental eater.)

“Three metals…” Tim says. “One for each of us.”

“Three of whatever the pendant is… Like circles. Three circles, all around Jon’s diamond…”

Tim pulls a pen out and begins sketching on his napkin. He comes up with something reminiscent of the Olympic rings.

Abby shakes her head and takes the napkin from him. She’s a better artist, so it takes her a little longer, but her sketch looks a lot more like jewelry. She’s got three, thin, circles, through the loops the chain goes through on Jon’s diamond’s setting, circling the diamond.

Tim likes it better than his sketch, but it still looks crowded and a little clunky. He can see his wedding ring, and the swirls of metals through it. He starts to take the napkin back from Abby, but he doesn’t have the sketching skills to pull this off.
“Okay, how about one circle, made out of three different metals, each one an elongated tear drop shape…” Abby’s not following him yet. “It’s round, and the same thickness all around, but each metal starts out thick, with just a little of the metal next to it, and then sort of bleeds off into the next color…”

“Like a three part yin-yang…”

“Are you thinking a solid circle, because I’m thinking a ring shape?” (And Tim also can’t wrap his head around the idea of a three part yin yang.)

“Not solid, but thick on one side, thin on the other, and like you said bleeding into each other.” Abby starts to sketch it out. Hers isn’t teardrop shaped, they’re a solid band that slips from more of one color to more of the next.

Tim likes that sketch. He thinks Jimmy might, too. Abby starts to shade the different colors in, and one of them is very dark. “It’s for Breena, you can’t have black.”

She almost pouts at that, then says, “I know. But… Okay, Jon’s diamond is on a white gold setting and a white gold chain, so… we want to be able to see the different colors, can’t do white gold, platinum, and silver, they’ll all bend into each other…”

“Different finishes of the same metal?” Tim asks.

“You and Jimmy pick one metal, one of you do shiny, the other matte…”

Tim’s thinking through that. He likes that idea. “What are you doing?”

“Rose gold. If I can’t be black, I can be pink. And Breena likes pink.”

Tim smiles at that idea. “We run it by him tonight, and tomorrow I can add a trip to the jeweler to my to-do list?”

“Yeah.”

They walk back to the Navy Yard, holding hands. It’s not the most direct route, but Tim’s willing to trust that Abby knows more about how and where they’re going. He trusts that if there’s something he might not want to see between him and the Navy Yard, that she’ll scoot them around it.

Even with the route they are taking, there’s a lot of boarded up buildings. There are very few cars. Very few people. Tim can tell the exact line of how close the fire got to them, because they cross it. They follow along three blocks where the buildings look scorched and there are no living plants.

As they go back, Abby says to him, “It’s like chemo.”

He gives her a curious look, not having made any leap along those lines in his own head.

“Okay…” tell me more, is clear in his tone.

“There’s something bad, something that, if you just leave it, it’ll kill you.” He follows that. Cancer, don’t treat it, you die, okay, he’s on the same page. He’s not entirely sure why she’s thinking that, but he gets the base concept. “So, you take this stuff, and it’s bad, too. It has nasty side effects, and it kills or damages a lot of the good things, but you keep taking it because you’ve got to kill the bad stuff.”
He glances around, they’ve turned the corner and are now on the same street as the Navy Yard. No more fire damage, but the marks of the last few months are clear on this street, too. “Is that how you see… this?”

They haven’t talked about what he did. Or why. Not on this sort of level. He’s kept his conversations about if this was worth it confined to Rachel and Jethro for right now.

She nods at him. “Yeah. You cut the tumor out. And it hurt, bad. And a lot of good tissue was lost, too. But you do it because if the tumor stays there, it’s going to kill the whole thing.”

He feels a wave of tired cynicism overtake him. “You really think this will help? Five years from now, is anything actually going to be better?”

She squeezes his hand. “I believe it will be. I have to. You do, too, even if you can’t find it right now. Because if we didn’t, we wouldn’t be here. There’s no point in doing this, any of it, if it doesn’t help. Maybe… long term… Maybe it won’t help. Maybe the cancer wins in the end. That’s true, and it’s real, and it happens. But we fight it. Because that’s who we are. Maybe we only win one tumor, one cell, at a time. Maybe one tumor is all the win we get. It’s enough. It has to be.”

He sighs, seeing the walls and the gate, knowing he’s going to be going back to it, soon. “And we fight the good fight, because it’s who we are.”

She stops, and he does, too. Abby turns to him, wrapping one arm around his waist, and the other around his neck, and kisses him. It’s not a romantic or erotic kiss. He can feel layers in her touch, kindness, sympathy, understanding. His bedrock, certainty in the storm, touching his cheek, and voicing a word, gently, “Exactly.”

Chapter End Notes

N/A: Some of you have mentioned an interest in eventually laying hands on a printed, bound, version of STAW.

I happen to have the skills to make such a thing possible. (Go to Amazon, check out Keryl Raist, and you can see the three previous novels I’ve designed. Layout is pro-quality.) But, given the length of STAW, and the time involved in doing this, this would not be an inexpensive proposition. At the very least, STAW will end up being 5 HUGE books (and maybe 6). Just printing and shipping alone will probably run $100 or more (for paperbacks).

So, if any of you are still interested in this idea, drop me a note with your email, and I’ll cost the project out, based on however many of you are interested, and we can see if this is do-able.
Getting Back Into the Old/New Groove

When Tim gets to the house, he finds Tony and Gibbs in the hallway to what will be his wing of the house. Which means that, as of now, Penny and Ducky’s rooms are painted, the great room is painted, the kitchen and dining area are done, and, if they really push, tomorrow by lunch they’ll have his section done.

Then onto the second floor.

“How’d it go?” Tony asks as he and Gibbs roll primer all over the walls.

Tim takes off his jacket and the nice button down he’s got on over a t-shirt. He’s got a ratty, old, too big MIT sweatshirt that’s been living here and getting covered in paint drips. That goes on, along with the ancient sneakers and jeans that serve as painting clothing for him, and, a moment later, he grabs another roller. He’s thinking that maybe they should just grab some coveralls for this. Though he’s not sure where the NCIS coveralls may be these days, or if they want to get them covered in paint.

“Pretty well,” Tim fills them in on what happened today. When he wraps up he says to Tony, “You should probably head in before the 12th, too. Make sure your work station is set up, if nothing else.”

Tony nods at that. “Gotta get some people to put in it, too. I can’t hire right now, can I?”

Tim shrugs. “I’m not. But, you can try to headhunt out of the offices that are closing and reorganizing. And I know we’ve got people here in DC who aren’t coming back. Probably have some orphan Agents here, too.”

“Great.”

“What’s happening with Bishop?” Gibbs asks as he pours more of the primer into the paint tray.

Tony shrugs. “Tech support? Analysis? I’m not going to fire her, but she’s up in New York for God alone knows how long.”

“Jimmy says that Ducky thinks she’ll be on maternity leave before ‘17 is done,” Tim adds.

“Yeah, I got that rumor over turkey day, too. So, for the foreseeable future it’s me and Draga.”

Gibbs nods. “Did a two man team for a long time. It’s not a bad thing.”

“I know. We did it, too, for… what was that? Six months?”

“Something like that.” Gibbs doesn’t remember precisely when Vivian left, but he does remember exactly when Kate joined them.

“Still, it’s a pain in the ass when you’re used to four.”

Tim starts rolling primer onto the walls. “You’re not entirely on your own. You’ve got all your computer work farmed out. Who knows when or if we’re picking up a terror case again, so the year-long cases aren’t coming up. Your paperwork’s been cut to the bone. Two with one out of the office… That might work.”

“Might. Probably will. And at least right now, when we’re just working crimes… Yeah. It’ll do.”
Tony’s not really seeing the wall in front of him. He’s thinking through his job.

“At least until you’ve got the time to go through the displaced Agents’ files,” Tim adds.

Tony nods at that, stroking primer up the wall. “Can’t wait to see what the cases we are going to get are going to look like. Can you imagine all the stuff the Local LEOs are going to be handing over to us?”

Tim and Gibbs groan at that.

“Red?” Tony asks as he’s prying up the lid on the first of the cans of paint for Tim and Abby’s room.

Tim glances down at the paint. It’s not supposed to be red. Dark, sultry burgundy. It’s got a name like Garnet Sunset or something equally poetic.

But in the can, it’s fire engine red.

He shrugs a bit. Every other color they’ve worked with has gotten darker as it dried. Though he’s really hoping that this is the right color. Everyone had figured out their square footage, come up with a list of paint colors and how much they needed of it, and then, over the previous weekend they’d gone through the house writing color numbers on post it notes and sticking them to every wall.

Jimmy and Tony had taken the list to the hardware store and gotten all the colors, so, if somewhere along the lines a number got flipped or something, this might be a can of RED!

Tim checks the lid, though he’s not sure what that would do. He doesn’t remember what the correct number is, and hell, he never knew. Abby and Breena were in charge of that part.

“So, what, Palmer and Breena have the real bedroom and this is your ‘red room’?” Tony asks with a smirk, as he starts to stir the paint.

Tim rolls his eyes and shakes his head a bit. “Didn’t I tell you not to read that book?”

Gibbs glances between them, unsure what a ‘red room’ might have to do with an unnamed book.


“I told you that.”

“You told me it was an awful book. I figured the movie would be better. Probably was.”

“How could the movie have been better?”

“Naked people and it was less than two hours long.”

Tim nods. Tony’s got a good point on that.

Gibbs watches them and decides he’s not going to ask. He does stir the red paint with a somewhat amused look on his face.

Tim catches it and says, “It’ll look cool.”
“Uh huh. Is this why you’ve got two bedrooms? Couldn’t agree on what it’d look like?” Tony asks.

Tim doesn’t roll his eyes. He does take a smaller container of the RED, a small brush, and heads to the ladder in the corner of the room. Just like with the rest of the rooms, he’s cutting in the edges.

“That just ended up being a perk. This is home, and it’s private, but it’s not… that private. The kids’ll probably have buddies over here. And we’ll have parties here. So… people might end up in here, and they might begin to wonder if there’s only one adult bedroom. So, two rooms. And that works out nicely because Jimmy and Breena can have their light and airy beach room, and we can have our dark and sultry harem.”

“Harem?” Tony hops onto that. “This really is a red room?”

Tim half grins and half rolls his eyes. “Like I said, it’s going to look cool. Ceiling’s going to be dark purple. Trim’s chocolate. Floor is wood, also dark, and there’ll be a lot of soft, sensual textures, pillows and rugs, and a lot of those little LED lights… It’ll be cool.”

Gibbs raises an eyebrow, trying to wrap his mind around what this room is going to look like.

This conversation gets Tim thinking.

On the first floor, there’s Penny and Ducky’s space, which will, when they’re done with being DC Ambassadors, be their fulltime home. Their space is a combination of close, warm rooms in autumn colors, and an open, white, cream and gold colored bedroom.

There’s the main living space, which has been done in cool light colors, grays so light they border on white, faint washes of blue, exposed wood, and gray rock. It’s not rough, but there is a rustic cabin sort of feel to the main space.

They’ve gotten the first coat of Jimmy and Breena’s room done, which really is a beachy sort of room. There’s a chair rail at waist high along the walls. Below it is a light sandy color. The rail is in a mid-toned blue-green that edges gray, and the top, including the ceiling is a light sky blue.

Tim knows that eventually there will be a sand colored carpet in there, and a white ceiling fan. There are plans for some large, leafy hanging plants, and light flowy white curtains. The bed they have picked out is similarly white, with flowy curtains hanging off the posts. The room is supposed to look, and feel, like an island retreat. He imagines they’ll spend more time there in the summer when it’s warm.

His and Abby’s room: that’ll be dark, close, intimate and sensual.

What he doesn’t know, though, and what has him thinking, is what everyone else’s rooms will look like.

“Aren’t you guys doing something like this? I mean… we’re… the four of us… setting this up as a comfortable play space. This is where we come when we’re relaxing and having a good time, so our rooms are functional, but they’re fun, in a way home isn’t, you know?” He’s fairly certain that a room this close and dark and red all the time would drive him buggy, but for a few days at a time? That’s just awesome.

Gibbs and Tony think about that. Gibbs nods. His room, like the main room, has a lot of exposed wood, and will, when it’s done, feel a whole lot like a little cabin off in the woods. Cozy, warm, in touch with the earth and the wood he loves.

Tony shrugs a bit. “Our bathroom is. I think Ziva went a little bonkers on that.”
That gets a nod out of Gibbs. He and Jimmy spent close to an hour lugging in boxes of tiles for that bathroom over the weekend. He doesn’t know what Ziva’s imagining, but whatever it is, it’s going to involve a lot of tile.

“Why the bathroom?” Tim asks.

Tony raises an eyebrow at him, and says, “Not everyone plays in their bedroom.”

Tim and Gibbs chuckle at that.

“Minds out of the gutter. She likes to read when she gets a bath.”

“Ahhh…” Tim says with a smirk.

They’re cleaning up for the day, when Tim says, “So, Jimmy told me that he noticed a piece of equipment going into the boat house.”

Gibbs looks up from can of paint he’s hammering the lid back onto.

Tim gives him the start talking look.

Gibbs shrugs a bit. “Project I’m working on.”

“Project you’re working on here? This whole thing is a project,” Tony says. “What’s this equipment?”

“Mini lathe,” Tim says. Jimmy’s mentioned it to the three of them the night before, and since Tim’s the one who was going to see Gibbs next, he was deputized to investigate.

“What do you do with one of them?” Tony asks. He’s never heard of a mini lathe before.

“Make pens?” Tim adds.

“Not makin’ pens.”

Now they’re both staring at him, waiting for an explanation. Gibbs isn’t forthcoming.

“What are you making you don’t want to do in your basement?” Tim begins. “Can’t be for the house. Too small for spindles on the banister or stuff like that.”

“Abbi. It’s got to be for Abbi. Right?” Tony adds, getting it. “She lives in your house now, can’t have whatever it is working away in the basement. But she’s only here on Saturdays…”

“Both of us. I hope.”

This has Tim and Tony very interested.

“Christmas is coming up. Got the engagement ring bought. Want to get the wedding rings done, too. Show her all of three of them at once. See if she likes ‘em.”

Grins spread wide over Tim and Tony’s faces. “You’re going to ask her on Christmas?”
Gibbs shrugs a little. “Thinking Christmas Eve, when it’s just us, instead of the whole mob on Christmas.”

“Wait!” Tony holds up a hand. “That implies that you’re thinking of doing this when everyone is around?”

Gibbs smiles some. “Yeah. Thinkin’ about it.”

Tim laughs, just so happy. “Oh man, you’re going to make the girls’ day! What’s the plan?”

Gibbs shakes his head. “You’ll see it when you see it.”

On Saturday, everyone, minus the Mallard-Langston branch of the clan, is at the house, and painting away.

Mona’s not happy about the smell, and the babies aren’t exactly thrilled, either.

Molly, though, has a blast, because her mama and daddy decide that she’s big enough to help get primer up. She’s even more pleased when she sees the little roller Uncle Tim got her. (Actually, it’s one of the tools he’s been using for cutting in. It’s a four inch long, one inch diameter, foam roller that’s good for getting tight spaces. And it’s exactly the right size for an almost three-year-old.) And, yes, there are some erratic stripes of primer on the walls, but nothing that a little smoothing out from Mama can’t fix.

Toward the end of that day, as every room in the house has at least the first coat paint up, and most of them are done, Tim’s thinking that he’s feeling… pretty good. He’s tired, but he’s not aching or sore or anything along those lines.

“I’m thinking, you need to get back into the office at some point,” he says to Tony, “and Collin can’t wait for us to start cutting out on Sunday dinner again, so… You guys want to hit the gym Sunday?”

“Is it open?” Tony asks.

Tim shrugs. He didn’t check it out when he was there. But it’s not like they’ve ever cared about ‘open’ before. They use it whenever they feel like it.

Abby nods, though. “Yeah, the Marines have been using it some. It’s probably the color of a daisy, but it’s open.”

Tony hears that and nods. He does need to get back in, start getting ready to work, and it has been a long time since he’s hit the gym. “You in, Jethro?”

Gibbs nods. He does not, at all, mind the idea of cutting out early from Sunday supper. Yes, he’s happy to see the various Slater branches are getting along well enough for everyone to attend Sunday supper, but mostly, that’s him being pleased that Breena’s family isn’t driving her buggy.

“Ziver?” he asks.
“I would not miss it. Abbi?”

A gleam lights up in Abbi’s eyes. She’s been doing too much paperwork and not nearly enough body work of late. “Oh, yeah!” She glances over to Jimmy. “You’re short fighters right now, right?”

Jimmy nods. “Me, Collin, and Tony. You want in?”

A slow, dangerous smile spreads across Abbi’s face, and a similar one lights Gibbs’. “Yeah.”

On Saturday night, Gibbs is sitting on the sofa, reading away, half-aware of Abbi puttering around the house, talking to someone on her cell.

She’s quiet for a bit, and then is standing next to him. He looks up from his book.

“You busy?”

“Nope.”

“Good.” She flops down next to him, holding up her phone so both of them are in the tiny window in the corner, and staring straight at him are two curious looking people who aren’t nearly as much older than he is as he would have liked.

“Hi,” he says, smiling, trying to look somewhat less like what he is, namely a much closer to sixty than fifty-year-old guy who’s got to wear glasses to read a book, and more like good husband material for their daughter.

“You must be Jethro,” her mom, Becky, says.

He nods. “Becky and Jeff, right?”

“Yes,” Jeff replies, a bit stiff, and for a second Jethro’s wondering if going straight for first names was a good plan. But really, he just can’t imagine calling them Mr. and Mrs. Borin. They’re at most, ten years older than he is, and likely closer to five.

He puts his arm around Abbi, trying to look less like a deer caught in the headlights, while frantically trying to think of what to say. Weather, weather always works. “Abbi was saying you guys are already snowed in.”

Jeff laughs at that. “No such thing as snowed in, not when you’ve got dog teams.”

Jethro nods at that.

Mona, hearing the word ‘dog’ appears to consider that a request and hops up on the sofa with them. That gets several minutes of easy conversation about what a pretty and good dog Mona is, which wraps up with, “Even without them, we don’t get too badly snowed in, ever.” Becky says, “They know how to handle snow out here, and we’ve got a plow blade for the truck. Gotta keep the drive open for the customers. Abbi’s told you this is our busy season?”

“Yes, she has. Mentioned you’ve got skiers, and dog sleds, and snow mobiles.”

“Five of the six cabins are already filled. Looks like this is going to be a busy winter.”
Abbi smiles. “That’s great, Dad.” Busy winter means enough money to live the rest of the year on, whether the price of beef is good or not.

“So, what do you do, Jethro? Abbi says you used to be an NCIS agent?” Becky asks.

“Used to. I’m mostly retired now. Back up for her or the kids if they need it.”

“And when you’re not back up?” Jeff asks.

“Construction. We’re building a house, so I do a lot with that. Been painting all last week. Sailing. I’m an active Granddad, so playing with babies.” He shrugs. “A lot of family stuff.”

They both nod at that. “How many grandchildren do you have?”

“Three on the outside, four’s due out end of January. Five’s due end of April.”

“Two in one year, that’s going to be a busy year!” Becky says, knowingly.

Gibbs jumps on that, grandparent to grandparent. “Oh yeah. And all five of them under the age of four. Abbi tells me your grandkids aren’t quite so on top of each other.”

Becky nods. “Have you met Miranda, yet?’

Gibbs shakes his head. He’s seen pictures of Abbi’s sister, brother-in-law, and niece and nephew, but hasn’t met them, yet.

“She and Drew haven’t gotten east lately,” Abbi tells her mom.

Gibbs feels like this is immensely surreal. He’s sitting on his sofa, meeting Abbi’s parents over the phone. Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined this scenario last year.

“You mentioned helping out the kids, are they all cops, too?” Jeff asks.

“Not exactly. We, all met through NCIS, but only Tony’s a field agent any longer. The rest have moved on.”

“So, Tony’s the only one you’d be helping?” Becky asks.

Gibbs wiggles his hand. “Sort of. Tim’s on computers, and I’m not setting any records for working on that, but I’ve found some good stuff now and again. Abby’s in the lab, and that’s not my thing. Jimmy’s in the morgue, and again, not my speciality. Ziva’s—“

“Working with Abbi, we’ve been hearing about her,” Becky seems to approve of whatever she’s been hearing.

“She’s easing out of in the field work into stay-at-home motherhood. Though I’ll keep her in my office until she’s ready to go,” Abbi says.

“Investigators as good as Ziva are few and far between. Even behind a desk, she’s gold,” Gibbs says, sounding proud.

“So we hear,” Jeff says.

There’s a moment of quiet, and then Becky nudges Jeff. “I know you have a hectic schedule, and Abbi’s told us about the Christmas plans you’ve got this year, but, would you like to spend New Year’s with us?”
Gibbs knows that Jeff is making sure to invite him into his home, and he appreciates that, greatly.

“Yes. Unless our newest grandson decides to show up that week, I’d be happy to join you.”

Becky and Jeff don’t miss the ‘our’ Gibbs used to describe Sean. He and Abbi see them catch it, but he’s not entirely sure what that look on Jeff and Becky’s faces means. After a quick breath, Jeff says, “Okay. The 28th to the 2nd?”

“I’m free,” Gibbs says with a shrug, and glances to Abbi.

“As long as I don’t get shanghaied into another one of those ‘Commissions’ they’ve got going all January, I’m free. Hell, even if I do, I can skip a day or two. The first few days of those things are mostly meet and greets, anyway.”

Becky smiles. “Excellent. It’s been too long since you got home.”

“I know, Mom.”

Collin’s all but quivering with relief at getting out of the Slaters’ supper.

And Tim and Jimmy know why.

“Ed’s leaning on you pretty hard,” Jimmy says as Tim’s wrapping his hands.

“Yeah, Christmas is coming, and he wants a ring for Amy in the stocking,” Collin replies.

“So does Amy,” Gibbs adds. Tim and Jimmy know Gibbs well enough to know his tone means *so get your ass up and buy a damn ring or break up with her and let her go*, but Collin doesn’t seem to get all the nuances of those three words.

“Yeah, I know. She’s not being subtle about it, either.”

Now all three of the other guys are staring at him with an expression best described as, *Well…*

“Why should it matter? What we’ve got is great. I mean… I could use less in-laws hassles, but… I love her. We get on fine…”

“Then why does it matter?” Jimmy asks, stepping into his pseudo-big brother role for Amy. “She did her put up or shut up moment for you. Told Ed about what was going on, risked a lot with that. And we backed you and her. So, you love her and what you’ve got with her, so why does it matter?”

“Things’ll change.”

“That’ll happen no matter what,” Tony adds as he and Ziva walk up to them. “Abbi still in the locker room?”

Gibbs nods. It takes them less time to get out of church clothing than it does Abbi. Probably because they don’t wear makeup that needs to come off before a hard workout.

Ziva gives everyone a quick kiss. “I’ll say hello to her, and then you two,” she gestures to Tim and Gibbs, “are joining me.”
Tim and Gibbs share a moment of *oh God what is she going to do to us* and then refocus on Collin because Tony’s still talking to him.

“Look, there’s nothing going on right now with her that’s going to last forever. You’ll both change. Your lives will change, and that’s going to happen if you get married or if you don’t. So, you decide to ride it out together, or you head off. It’s been what, two years now?”

Collin nods.

“Yeah. You know her and her family and yourself well enough by this point to know if you want to be in for the long haul. And if you don’t, you don’t. That’s fine. You’re allowed to decide this doesn’t work or you can do better. But if it’s not working, then sticking around is a real dick move.”

Tim finishes up taping Jimmy’s hand as Tony’s saying that, and gestures for Collin’s hand. Collin gives it over, thinking, and Tony nods at him, hopping off the edge of the ring. “Gonna get warmed up. You and Palmer up first?”

Collin and Jimmy nod.

Tim finishes with Collin’s hands, and glances around, Abbi and Gibbs are chatting with each other, ready to watch this. Ziva’s not out, yet, so he stays leaning against the ropes, as Jimmy and Collin duck under to start their bout.

Jimmy nods to Tony, who turns on the music and gets a loud, heavy beat throbbing through the gym. The four Marines who are on the weights seem to approve, and one of them drifts over to see Jimmy and Collin go at it, too.

For a moment or two, both of them are just getting a feel for doing this again. Neither attacks. They bounce around a little, warm up, some, watch each other, and then it’s go time.

One swing. It’s not even a hit because Collin doesn’t even manage to land it on Jimmy before he’s flat on his back with Tim kneeling on his chest, hand clenched on his throat.

Jimmy’s yanking him off, fast and hard. “Woah, Tim! It’s okay. *I’m okay.***”

And Tim more or less bounds up as soon as he realizes what he’s done, but… he did it. He doesn’t even have a clear memory of it. He was standing next to the ropes, watching, and then he was kneeling on Collin, bouncing back up as fast as he could. He knows what has to go between those points, but he doesn’t remember it.

Collin’s lying there, looking stunned, but he takes a hand up from Tim. “Damn, you’re fast when you want to be.”

Tim gives him a half smile, and says… “Uh… Sorry…” Tim shakes his head and swallows. “Probably came back too soon.” Which is a lie. He’s not back too soon. Back too soon indicates this is a side effect of the trauma he’s been through recently. It’s not, because that’s the exact same reaction he would have had ten months ago if someone had taken a swing at Abby. It doesn’t matter that it’s exercise, no one hits one of his loves in front of him.

Jimmy’s watching him, carefully, and Tim knows there’s a conversation coming up.

Ziva gently takes his hand. “Come with me. You need more strength training before you’re ready to get back to this.”

He nods. “Yeah.”
Collin shakes his head. “You just knocked me off my feet. Lack of strength isn’t the problem.”

Tim looks embarrassed. “Only because I bull rushed you, and you weren’t expecting it. I’d do more damage to myself than to you if I’d tried a punch. Okay, Ziva, what are we doing?”

What they’re doing is, first of all, finding out how far behind they are. Ziva remembers what they could do before getting hurt, and she’s seeing how close to that they are.

Compared to where he was in June, Tim’s moving forward in leaps and bounds. Compared to May, he’s a million miles behind. Finding out he can’t do a pull up anymore is somewhat disheartening, and the less said about weights, squats, and bench presses, the better.

And Gibbs… Apparently Gibbs has a place beyond silent angry. Tim didn’t know it was there, because he’s never seen beyond silent angry. But, as Ziva puts them through their paces, seeing where they are, Gibbs goes from silently glaring at the weights to outright cursing at them.

Really cursing. And not just in English.

Ziva’s impressed. Unlike Tim she can follow most of them. (The only language Gibbs speaks that she doesn’t is Japanese.) She even blushes a tad at one point. Which makes Gibbs growl a little and shut up.

She gives them a little pep talk at the end, talking about how they’re both better with flexibility and balance than they were when they started this, and because of that they’ll get it back faster this time.

Which is better than starting at square one, but it’s not exactly anything either of them want to hear.

Toward the end of the afternoon, after Gibbs and Tim and Ziva have wrapped up their exercises, they stop to watch the one on one on one on one brawl going on in the ring.

Abbi’s holding her own, and well. She’s smaller than the guys, but a bit quicker, and unlike the other three, she’s a trained Marine.

She’s also, from the looks of it, set up a loose alliance with Jimmy, working with him to make sure each other’s backs are covered while keeping Tony and Collin off balance.

And even with that, she does take several hits, some of them hard, just like everyone else in the ring.

Tim glances to his left and right. Ziva and Gibbs aren’t leaping in there to ‘rescue’ their loves.

“How are you watching this?” he asks quietly, because he has to keep himself from flinching when Jimmy takes a hit.

Ziva shrugs. She’s been doing this, seeing Tony fight, since long before they were a couple. She knows he can take care of himself. She thinks about it a little more. “It’d almost be an insult to hop in there for something like this. He’s got it. He doesn’t need my help.”

“It’s not real,” Gibbs says, voice soft. “If it was…” Gibbs doesn’t need to add that if this was a real fight, he’d be in there and working on killing anyone near Abbi.
Tim nods and sighs, licking his lips. “It’s not real.” He watches, sees the way Jimmy’s moving, the speed and strength, the way he slips out of the hold Collin’s got him in, and how, in slipping out, he sets Collin up to get tripped by Abbi, which takes him out of the match.

Tim swallows again, still watching. *He can take care of himself.*

“What was that?” Jimmy asks when he and Tim are alone in Tim’s car, heading home for the night. He doesn’t need to specify what *that* he’s asking about.

Tim rolls his eyes, turning on the ignition. “Stupid over-protective crap.” He sighs. “No one hits my man.”

Jimmy chuckles a bit. “Is this something that we need to work on?”

Tim shrugs. “*We?* When you decide to deck Tony or Gibbs because they take a swing at me in the ring, then *we* can work on it. Until then, it’s something *I’m* going to work on. If Gibbs can watch Abbi spar, and Tony and Ziva can handle it, I can learn to, too.”

“Uh huh. You sure?”

“Unless you want to stop?”

Jimmy shrugs a bit.

Tim isn’t expecting that. “Do you want to stop?”

Jimmy shoots him the half-confused, half-feeling defensive look. “I…”

Tim waits, watching him as well as he can while still driving.

“Before everything went bonkers, you remember, we were talking, all four of us, and Breena was pointing out how there was a time when I didn’t need this. Once upon a time, I wouldn’t have found this fun. Once upon a time, I never got this sort of angry, so…”

“So… Do you need this, or is this fun?”

“I don’t know. If we’re not killing the Admiral,” Jimmy flashes him a *any change of mind on that?* look, and Tim shakes his head. He’s had more than enough death in the last two months; he’s not signing them up for more of it. “I don’t know. Right now, I don’t feel like I have to do it. Today was just a good work out with a bit of an edge. But, sometimes I can feel the dark squirmy thoughts in the back of my head, and I need this, so… I don’t know. Keep talking to Rachel, see if that helps keep the dark and squirmy thoughts at bay. Maybe that’s enough of this. Not like getting pounded on regularly is necessarily a good plan for me.”

“Better than being angry and not having a way to get it out.”

Jimmy nods. “Yep. But if you don’t want to see this… Got to be other ways to do it. I used to run. Tony likes basketball.”

“I think I can learn to deal. From what Ziva’s saying we’re still probably at least three months out before I’m back in the ring. That should be more than enough time to get used to the idea that you’re really okay out there.”
Jimmy nods a bit. “I was, you know?”

“Yeah, the part of the brain that thinks knows that just fine. My balls and guts were a bit fuzzy on that concept.”

Jimmy gently strokes the back of his hand. He can imagine what he might do if someone took a swing at Breana or Abby. “Yeah. I’ll admit, though, it was pretty impressive. One second I’m warming up. Collin tenses, shifts weight, starts to move forward, and then you’d flattened him to the mat. Boom! Down he went.”

Tim sighs. “Yeah, thanks. That’s how I almost shot Mona, too.”

Jimmy chuckles at that.
Bright and early on Monday morning, Tony and Ziva have their 20 week ultrasound. Technically it’s 18 weeks, but that’s close enough.

Part of going in a little early is that the hospital their OB had been based out of is now half ash, and half torn down wreckage. So, they called Breena’s OB, and are now patients there. It’s a bit out of the way, but not too bad.

So, just like when they went in the first time, they’ve got all the paperwork to fill out, and all of the getting to know a new patient checking up. They talk about any concerns they may have. (Not too many, though Tony’s a little worried about what he’s been reading about links between autism and older fathers, but as Dr. Jun points out, that’s nothing they can test for, and even if they could, given how wide the Autistic Spectrum Disorder is, she wouldn’t recommend it.)

Then there’s waiting for the ultrasound and blood work.

They’re in a little room, covered in pictures of newborns. Tony’s eyeing them, sure that none of them will be anywhere near as pretty as David DiNozzo. Ziva’s eyeing them, too, with somewhat similar thoughts lurking in the back of her head, though her surface thoughts are different.

“How do you think Molly and Anna are on this wall?”

“Oh, God…” Tony looks at hundreds of small, pink heads, squinty-eyes, and wet, shiny lips. All of these little guys are brand new and swaddled from head to toes. He can exclude a bunch of them, because they aren’t Caucasian, but other than that… “Almost all of them are wearing caps. The only way I’d be able to even guess if one of Palmer’s kids were on this wall would be by the curly hair.”

Ziva’s staring at them all, too, and is also a bit amazed to see exactly how much one newborn looks like every other newborn.

They’re still looking, and Ziva’s thinking that maybe, one of those faces could be Anna, but she’s not entirely sure, when the ultrasound tech comes in.

“Checking out our wall of fame?” They both nod, as the Tech pats the table for Ziva. “Up you get.”

She smiles at the wall. “That’s just 2015. Every New Year we take down the old pictures and put up the newish ones. First day of 2018, you’re little one will be up there.”

That flushes through Tony. This is real. This little person will eventually make his way out of his wife and join the real world. He whistles low at that, and the Tech shoots him an amused glance. He’s not, by a long stretch, the first Dad to have that response.

“I understand you’re not finding out the sex of the baby?”

Ziva flashes Tony an amused look. “I am not finding out. We’ll see how he does.”

“She doesn’t think I can do it.”

“Okay. I’ll keep it to myself.” She arranges Ziva’s gown, and then says, “This’ll be cold,” before squirting the gel on her belly.

Ziva tenses for a second, but it’s not that cold. And a few seconds after that, she’s feeling the smooth, round head of the ultrasound wand rubbing over her belly.
“Okay…” They’re doing the 2-d version of the ultrasound right now. “Let’s see, bone structures look good. That’s a spine, and you can see ribs and arms…” The tech keeps talking them through it, but they know what they’re looking at, a baby.

Nothing about David looks like the grainy black and white salad shrimp he was the last time they did this.

“And those are fingers… Heart looks good, you can see the blood pumping through it, nice action on that… All right, let’s flip to the 3-D view…”

It sucks the air out of Tony’s lungs. He’s standing there, holding Ziva’s hand, looking at his… son… He’s sure it’s a boy. He can see eyes and nose and ears and little fingers and toes and… hmmm…. He’s not supposed to be checking that out… and look little legs and…

“God…” Tony’s not sure if that’s an exclamation or a prayer, but whatever it is, it’s intensely felt.

Ziva squeezes his hand back, blinking away the tears.

They’re in a ridiculously good mood as they head out of the Doc’s office with a clean bill of health, and a dozen ultrasound shots on their phones.

“Now what?” Tony asks.

“I was planning on heading back into work.”

“More investigators to go through?”

“I’ve got almost all of Abbi’s done. Diane has more for me.”

Tony thinks about that, holding her hand as he gets the car door for her. “How is Abbi hiring right now?”

Ziva shrugs. It has not occurred to her to ask how Abbi’s got the budget for it. Maybe because she just fired ¾ of her employees.

He shuts the door, heading around to the driver’s side. “I’m wondering if I need to be hiring, too. You’re gone. Bishop’s probably gone. Not sure how long just Draga and I’ll work.”

“Good question. Are you going to go in?” They’d talked about him heading back into the office today.

“Yeah. I think I will. Drag the desks back into place and put the dividers up, if nothing else.”

She smiles at him. “You just want a place to tack all of those pictures.”

He leans over and kisses her. “You know it!”

Tony does head into NCIS. And he successfully grabs a few Marines to help him get his work
station back in place. It’s always easier to move furniture if you’ve got three eighteen-year-old hard-bodies around to do the heavy lifting.

(He makes a quick mental note to see if they can locate some eighteen-year-old hard-bodies for the house, because sooner or later they’re going to want to move some furniture into it, and given how much all of them were hurting after moving Abbi in, he’s thinking doing that on their own is a stupid idea.)

Tony takes an hour, gets the desks, two of them, set up, along with the big screen and their filing cabinets. It feels really odd to have gone from five guys less than two years ago, to just him and Draga now, but… That’s what it is.

He snaps pictures of their new set up, pretty much the area that had been his and McGee’s for so long, and sends it off to Draga with 12/12/16.

He gets Ready when you are. back from Draga minute later.

Tony sits back at his desk. Same old desk, same old chair, very different room and dividers. It’s… a very odd feeling. His heart knows it’s old, but his brain thinks it’s new, and he can’t figure out who’s right.

Or something like that.

He turns his chair to gaze at the pictures of his child on his wall. He stares lovingly at that tiny face, and imagine those bitty little fingers clasped around his, and looks at the full body shot… and then yanks his eyes back to Little Guy’s face.

The Tech said he’s, from butt to head, about the size of a green pepper, and weighs about that much, too. He’d fit right into Tony’s palm, now, but by the time he’s ready to come out, he’ll be six to eight pounds and twenty inches long.

Tony shakes his head at that. Five months and he’ll… she’ll… he’ll be out.

His eyes wander back to the full body shot. Why does he have this if he’s trying to not figure out if Dave really is Dave? God, it’s like a test, or a tease. Ziva took some pictures for herself and handed these over to him, and he’s sure she’s just counting the hours, giggling, about how long he can go without looking.

He almost takes the shot down. But he can’t do that. That’s his baby on the divider. He can’t take it down.

And… shit, he can’t not look. So, he does, and a wide, happy grin spreads across his face, because not only does that look like a penis, but… Holy shit, that kid is hung.

“Mothers hide your daughters, Dave DiNozzo’s in town,” he says under his breath with a grin. He keeps looking and starts to get a little nervous, because there’s taking after the old man in the well-endowed department, and then there’s… that actually looks like it’s tucked under Dave’s thigh, and that’s…

That’s too long.

Now he’s not sure if he’s looking at a too damn long penis or an umbilical cord. Little Person’s hand is in the wrong place to see where the structure in question starts.

“Shit.” He talks himself into just letting it go and no knowing for an entire five minutes. He gets up
from his desk, packs up his gear, and decides it’s time to head back to the house, get at least a few hours in on painting today.

He’s fully intending to do all of that, and yet, once he’s in his car, he’s driving to The Morgue, where Jimmy, and his MD, are.

Cleanup has gotten far enough along that, as of this point, it’s been two days since a new body’s been brought in to The Morgue. They’re still going through the backlog, but this job will be done soon.

They’ve lost half of the staff. Different helpers and MEs going back to their other work. Breena went back to Slater’s today, for example. Jimmy and Allan will, if they haven’t gotten everyone done before the election, head back to NCIS when they reopen on the 12\textsuperscript{th}.

Two of the four tents they were working out of are packed up now. More than half of the refrigerated containers have been emptied out, their cargo sent home to different loved ones for burial.

What had seemed like an unending job will, eventually, end.

They’ve been told that after the election the DC ME’s office will officially reopen, and whomever is left will be transferred back to them.

But the election is still a week and a day away. And until then, Jimmy, and Allan, and seven other MEs are still at The Morgue, still cracking black jokes, and still doing what they can for their charges.

Tony’s able to get in fairly easily. Between his badge and ID, none of the Marines keeping watch are interested in stopping him.

He’s not sure he wants to go in, though. The Morgue still reeks of death, and he’s fairly certain this bit of Rock Creek Park will smell of it forever.

But, smell be damned, he’s got a baby to identify. And Jimmy’s told all of them that right now, he can use all the happy news he can get. So, in he goes.

There are more tables than Tony was expecting, but not as many as he feared. And right now, Jimmy and Allan are working together at one of the ones furthest from him. For a moment he has a hard time identifying them, because everyone in here is in scrubs and protective gear, but he catches the tail end of the dirtiest joke he’s ever imagined hearing, and the laughs following it.

He knows that laugh, and that helps him see the guy under the visor, who’s drilling something blackened and charred that likely was a person once upon a time.

He heads over, and Jimmy looks up, confused to see him here. “Tony?”

“You got a few minutes?”
Jimmy eyes the body on his table. They’ve gotten all the samples they can from her. (They know she’s a her from the hips.) The next step is to try and do a facial reconstruction, which isn’t part of what he or Allan does. “Yeah, we can take a break once we get Ms. Doe packed up.”

“Great. Can I get you a coffee or something?”

Jimmy nods. “Yeah. Head east. Middle tent. You’re buying. We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Allan smiles at that. The canteen and all the food and drinks at it are free to anyone in there. They aren’t getting paid for this, so the least DC can do for them is provide free food.

Tony catches the ‘we’ll’ and asks Allan, “What do you want?”

“It doesn’t matter. Everything here tastes the same.” Tony looks a little alarmed at that, so Allan decides to make an actual order. “Coffee, black, three sugars.”

Tony nods, and then says, “Tastes the same?”

“You smell it, you taste it,” Jimmy replies.

Tony’s not looking forward to grabbing a coffee so much, as he heads off to the canteen.

“So, what’s got you here in the middle of the day?” Jimmy asks as he sits at one of the tables, across from Tony.

Tony slides the picture to Jimmy as Allan takes a sip of his coffee. “Is that” and he points to the protuberance in question, “what I think it is?”

Jimmy looks at the ultrasound and chuckles. Then he says, “I thought you and Ziva weren’t going to find out.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “She was right. I can’t not find out. Not when I’ve got the picture right here.”

Jimmy smiles again. “What do you think it is?”

Tony glares at him.

Allan’s looking pretty amused by this, too.

Jimmy nods and says, “Okay, no that’s not what you hope it is. That’s not the pride of the DiNozzos. That’s an umbilical cord.” Jimmy points slightly lower and a bit to the left. “That, on the other hand, looks like a testicle to me, so I’m going to say that’s a boy.”

Tony takes a quick, shuddering breath. “That’s my son!”

“Before you go out and get every piece of sports equipment on the planet, just remember, six week rotation on OB ten years ago. I’m not an expert on this, and there’s a decent possibility that’s just her thigh or something. But, yes, I think that looks like a boy.”

Allan gestures for the picture. “May I?”

Jimmy hands the photo over. “Certainly.”
“For more than a year, I donated at least a shift a week to Planned Parenthood. I’ve seen tons of these.” He’s looking at the shot. “Not a great angle, but that looks like a testicle to me, too. Congratulations, Tony!”

Jimmy grins at the waves of joy sloshing over and off of Tony right now. “So, how are you planning on covering why you’re strutting around all over the place, have no interest in girls’ names, and are suddenly ordering Ohio State Future Buckeye onesies?”

Tony laughs. “I’ve already ordered the onesies. My daughter can be an All-Star-Center Buckeye, too.”

It becomes abundantly clear, about an hour into Monday’s work, that Tim and Gibbs’ lungs cannot take the dual assault of paint fumes and carpet glue.

Okay, actually, it becomes abundantly clear to Tim, who is working on coat of paint number two in Tony and Ziva’s room, (warm cream walls, darker beige accents, and Ziva tells him there will be jeweled toned pillows as well as some soft cherry blossom pink bits, too. He thinks it’ll look cool. Right now it just looks very sophisticated and male.) that his lungs are not loving this, but he’s doing okay. Then it becomes clearer, as he notices the soft wheezing coming from Gibbs, along with the look of grim determination as he’s painting away, that the four fifths of his lungs that he has left are not cool with this situation.

So, Tim starts to cough. Not a lot. Enough. Gibbs jumps on it, and suggests they get out of there, which is fine with Tim, who experiences a miraculous recovery as soon as they’re out of the house.

They’re standing around outside, where it’s cold, but easier to breathe, watching the carpet guys going in with long rolls of gray, brown, sand, one patterned one of forest green and gold (Ducky and Penny’s office), cream, dove, and a multi-colored mix for one of the kid rooms that Breena called “Confetti” and Jimmy and Tim are referring to “Clown Vomit.”

“How long does it take for that stuff to outgas?” Tim asks one of the carpet guys.

He shrugs. “Can’t smell it anymore myself. Maybe a few days?”

Tim sighs at that. “Thanks.” The guy picks up another roll of carpet and heads into the house. Tim looks to Gibbs. “Well, we’re not going back in there today. So, show me your other ‘project.’”

Gibbs shrugs a bit, and turns away from the house to tromp on back to the boat house.

The light in there isn’t great, which is why he doesn’t love working in there. He’s thinking that when they get the main house done, he’s setting up a shop for himself, and with any luck, there’ll be some younger people who want to give him a hand with this sort of thing over the years.

Plus, he’s got little fantasies in mind of different sorts of furniture he wants to make for the place, and it’ll be easier to do if he’s got a shop on site.

But right now, he’s got a table with a tiny lathe set up on it, a collection of chisels, a few small saws, some padded clamps, a collection of glues and sandpapers, another work bench, and three work lights shining down on it, all of which are cramped into the far end of the boat house.
Tim follows him, and picks up one of the wood blanks. He doesn’t know what sort of wood it is, but even as a 1.5 by 1.5 by 6 inch rectangle he can see that it’s reddish and will have an amazing grain once it’s all buffed up.

“Are you making wood wedding rings?” For a second Tim’s amazed by that idea, but the more he thinks about it, the more he likes it.

Gibbs opens up the drawer in the table and pulls out the sketches.

Tim holds the wood in his hands. “What is it?”

“Rosewood burl.”

That doesn’t mean much to Tim, but he does have a mental image of dark whorls of reddish brown and lighter whorls of scarlet.

It’s mesmerizing to watch. The wood spins, fast, and tendrils of it fly off, curling into spirals as Gibbs gently touches the chisel to wood. Tim’s not doing anything, but he’s still finding this immensely satisfying.

“You ever let me play with this?”

Gibbs shuts off the lathe and looks over to Tim, pleased and a little surprised. “You’d want to?” he asks, pulling his ear protection off.

Tim shrugs a little. “Looks cool. Might be a lot like pottery. Looks amazing and easy, and then you try to do it and it’s a mess.”

Gibbs eyes the part of the ring he’s been working on, and nods at Tim. “This is try number eight. Hold it a second, half a second too long, and the ring doesn’t fit anymore, or it’s too thin to hold the inlay. Press just a little too hard and you’ve got a gouge in it you don’t want… But, you want to play, sure.”

“I’ll keep watching. So how do you get the mother of pearl in it?”

Gibbs eyes the ring, grabs his calipers, and gives it a quick measure. Then he flips it around, reattaches it to the chuck, and gets ready to smooth out the other side.

“Two possible ways. I’m hoping to try way number one, first, but I’m not sure if it’ll look right.”

“What’s number one?”

“Get this roughed out, cut it in half, then take the mother of pearl, cut it into a circle, sandwich all three together, and finish it up.”

Tim nods along with that. “Okay. Why don’t you think it might work?”

“Not sure how the cut edge of the mother of pearl will look. If it doesn’t buff up nice, then I need to start over, make a new ring, cut a groove into it, crush up the mother of pearl, and drop it in.”

“Won’t that be all rough and jaggy.”

“And finish it smooth.”
Tim picks up Abby’s ring, which for the time being, lives in here, where it’ll can help with inspiration. The mother of pearl inlay on the sides is curved. "You think it bends, or is this cut?"

“If it bends, I don’t know how to make it do that. I think it’s cut. That’s an option, too, I guess. Cut little squares, lay them in the groove, and run them on the lathe, keep grinding them down."

“Start off a hell of a lot bigger than you need and work it down?”

“And hope I don’t burn the mother or pearl or wreck the wood. It’s not very hard, but it’s harder than rosewood.”

Tim can understand that. Gibbs waits a few seconds to see if Tim’s got anything else to say, but he doesn’t, so Gibbs goes back to working on the ring. And Tim’s content to sit there and watch.

Tony joins them a bit after lunch.

“Why are you hiding out here?” he asks. He’d driven up, seen the cars, seen the carpet truck, and gone through the whole house looking for them before deciding to try out here.

“Lungs don’t like the fumes,” Tim says.

“And they like sawdust better?” Tony asks, sitting on the workbench next to Tim, remembering him just about dying in that one place with all the sawdust.

“It’s better.” And it is. Gibbs could turn the entire blank into a pile of sawdust, and that still wouldn’t be enough to really set Tim’s lungs off.

Tony glances at the ring turning on the lathe, and it’s possible that if he had something less interesting tucked into his pocket he might to know more about what Gibbs is doing, but he’s got Dave’s ultrasound in his pocket, so he’s not terribly interested in spinning wood.

He whips the picture out. “LOOK! David DiNozzo, in the flesh.”

“Oh, God, Tony! How are we supposed to not let on to Ziva what he is if you’re telling us he’s a boy?” Tim asks, while taking the picture and looking as his nephew with a smile.

Tony opens and closes his mouth. That’s a good point.

The lathe comes to a stop and Gibbs steps over, huge grin on his face as he takes the shot from Tim.

“You sure?” Tim asks as he’s looking at the shot with Gibbs. “I mean, I’m pretty sure that’s an umbilical cord.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I’m sure. More importantly Palmer and Allan are sure, too.” Tony points to a different spot on the picture. “They tell me that’s a testicle.”

That gets a laugh out of Gibbs and Tim, and Tim would have to admit that he does recall a similar shot, with a similar structure on it, for Sean, so… “Hello, Dave.” He grins at Tony.

Tony grins back. “So, what was that crack of yours about turning out some grandsons?” he shoots to Gibbs.

Gibbs is grinning too, staring at the shot. “Gonna be a few days before we can work in the house.
You want to get that room painted blue?”

“That okay with Abbi?” Tim asks.

Gibbs stops for a second. They aren’t using that room for anything right now, but he really should
run it by her. “I’ll ask.”

“Good.” Tony’s smiling all over, looking at the shot. “God. Little boy. My son!”

Tim shakes his head gently, still smiling. “You’re over the moon.”

“Yeah. I mean… look, little girl, would have loved her, too, but…” his eyes are all lit up with ideas
and fantasies of life with Dave, all the dad-son things he never got, Dave’s getting all of them
and then some. “My BOY.”

Gibbs and Tim chuckle at that.

“Doesn’t feel real. Feels so good and… I’m afraid I’m going to wake up and…”

Tim gives him a quick pinch.

“Ow!”

“Looks like you’re awake.” Tim grins at him, too. He’s got much less in the way of boy-specific
parenting fantasies, but he’ll admit, here, that he is rather tickled by the idea of his little guy, too.
“Sean and Dave… Can you see that?”

All three of them are smiling at that image. “Oh yeah!” Tony says. “Thirteen, fourteen years from
now, football games, first dates…”

“Abby’s talking about wanting to work on building cars with them.” Granted Tim means all the kids,
but he can see that being a ‘guy’ thing for Tony.

“Kelly and I did that.” Gibbs adds.

Tim hadn’t known that, but he does know this, “We were planning on you being part of the building
committee.”

“Get Duck in on that, too. That Morgan was scrap when he got it.”

“You going to be a scout leader again, by then?” Tony asks. “Both of ‘em in the little uniform, while
you’re teaching them how to track dead bodies by the buzzards?”

Tim smiles at that memory. “Maybe.” He nudges Gibbs. “Might be I’ll be too swamped for that, but
maybe this guy’ll step up and lead some scouts.”

Gibbs is warming up to that, while Tony’s spinning more “guy” fantasies, like all of them out
camping together, when Tim starts to feel a little off. He’s not sure why, unlike Tony he actually
likes camping, and this is in no way related to anything that should make him feel sad. But, it does.

He tries to make sad go away while Tony’s talking about the idea cheering on their boys as they’re
playing football when it finally hits: Jon. There’s supposed to be a third, older, boy in this group, and
he’s not here.

He’s not sure how to enjoy the idea of Dad/Son stuff without making it all the more real that Jimmy’s
not getting to do it.
Tony’s still happily talking away about Dad/Son stuff, like the talk and passing on the combined wisdom of the generations of DiNozzos, when Gibbs notices that Tim’s not entirely there.

He’s got a concerned expression on his face as he says, “You okay?”

Tim nods. “Yeah, I am. Just… For the three of this, this is fine, but… might want to lay off the joys of Daddy/Son bonding with Jimmy around.”

That drops everyone’s mood, which Tim hadn’t wanted to do, but… “Don’t get me wrong, he’ll be happy for you, but…”

Tony’s nodding. “Yeah. I get it. Until the future Donny Palmer is safe and sound on the outside, keep it to stuff we want to do with our kids.”

Tim nods back at him. “Yeah.”

Tony thinks for a moment. “Didn’t you tell me they were thinking of starting trying again when Anna hit a year old?”

Tim had mentioned something, sort of, along those lines. Though they is not precisely the correct pronoun. Still, he’s good with saying, “That’s the plan.” Then Tim grins, because he’s lost a bit of time over the last few months, but he’s coming to the conclusion that Anna’s birthday is the day after tomorrow.

Tony flashes them a wide grin. “Could be three of them in one year. That’d be amazing.”

Tim has to chuckle at the idea of three little guys, all within a year of each other.

And Gibbs just grins at it, wide and happy.
“So, I was thinking…” Tim says, voice low, conspiratorially, as Breena’s starting up the stairs for tubby time. She knows there’s something the other three are working on without her, because Tim wasn’t precisely subtle when he grabbed Jimmy and Abby as she headed up the stairs and said, “Be up in a minute.”

Jimmy and Abby are looking at him, waiting for him to finish that sentence.

“Does Breena’s marriage present have to be metal?”

They’d heard him talking about what Jethro was doing with the lathe during dinner, so they kind of know where he’s going with this.

“You want to make it?” Jimmy asks.

“I’ve got some time, and if it’s a disaster, then we can get a metal one, but… I mean… It didn’t look that hard, and I bet she’d think something we designed and made for her would be really cool.”

Jimmy nods; Breena would like that.

“How would it go together?” Abby asks. “Like, I get the basic idea, say glue your wood together and shape it into a circle, but, I mean, can you get the different woods to support each other, or would this just be a circle with three parts?”

Tim thinks about that. “Not sure. But the house won’t be done outgassing tomorrow, so we won’t be working in there. I can show the sketch to Jethro and see what he thinks. See if it’s doable.”

That seems like a plan.

“Work on some sort of mock up, with scrap woods, see if you can make it happen,” Abby says.

“Yeah, and then, if it works, we can each pick a wood, all different whorls and grains, and then make the ring.”

Jimmy hears that and says, “Should it just be a ring? I mean, part of the issue with this the whole way through’s been how to get it onto her necklace.” Because they have thought of that, and haven’t come up with a way to get it onto the necklace without marring the circle. (Not quite true, they could just put the ring on the necklace, but it’d just be dangling there, over Jon’s diamond, which wasn’t exactly how any of them were envisioning it. Unfortunately, the only way they can think of to get it onto the necklace, around Jon’s stone, is to put holes in the ring for the chain to go through, which, having noticed how big the clasp on the chain is, none of them is particularly thrilled with.)

“It’d be easier if it was a ring,” Tim says. He likes the symbolism of the unbroken circle made of three elements. “What size is her right ring finger?”

“I can find that out,” Abby says. “You want to try and get a mock up made for us, and I’ll do some recon on getting her size.”

“And with any luck we’ll have something special to give her for Christmas,” Jimmy adds, beginning to head up the stairs. It’s time for all three of them to catch up to Breena on the bedtime for little girls’ routine.
“Conspiring?” Breena asks as they get up there.

“Yep,” Jimmy replies, taking Anna from her mother, and working the zipper on her winter-themed snuggly open.

“Do I get to know what about?” Breena asks as she turns on the water and starts running the bath.

“Eventually,” Tim replies a moment later. He and Abby didn’t get up the stairs as quickly. She’s not moving all that fast these days, and he’s happy to move slow, keep a hand on her back, and make sure she’s steady on the stairs.

Tim decides to shift the topic a little. “So, while we were working, Tony reminded me that little girl’s,” he kisses the back of Anna’s head, “first birthday is the day after tomorrow.”

“Party!” Molly adds. She’s not following a whole lot of this conversation, but she knows birthdays mean parties, and she’s well aware of what you need to do at a party. Namely, eat cake!

“On Friday. When we all get together for dinner,” Breena tells her oldest daughter. Fortunately, that’s just fine with Molly, who doesn’t know when Friday is. It certainly could be the day after tomorrow, however, in that she’s not quite three, any day besides today and tomorrow are really sketchy concepts for Molly. In her world, things happen today, or they happen tomorrow, and that covers all the possible bases for her.

“Cake!”

“There will be cake,” Jimmy says to Molly, and Kelly rapidly catches up to this concept, too.

“Cake!” Kelly adds, equally excited by the prospect, as Tim’s tugging off her leggings.

“Cake on Friday, for both of you, and Anna, if you eat your supper,” Abby says, in her best ‘Mom-voice,’ returning from the linen closet with clean towels for little girls.

Both Molly and Kelly are giving them wary looks, and then Kelly bursts into tears. “NOW! CAKE NOW!”

And that pretty much shuts down any level of conversation not devoted to calming down the tired toddler.

An hour later, little girls are washed, dried, dressed, calmed down, read to, and in their beds, snoozing.

The adults are somewhat less calm, two of them are changing out of wet clothing, and all four of them are happily contemplating heading downstairs and just flopping onto the sofa to watching something funny and stupid.

They have flopped, with maximum boneless floppiness, and are eyeing the snag in the current plan, namely the remote is on the far side of the living room and none of them want to get up and grab it, when Breena says to Tim, “So, why were you bringing up Anna’s birthday?”
Tim rolls his eyes, right now he about as uneager to add another kid to the mix as it’s possible for him to be. “Uh… It sounded better in my head an hour ago.”

Breena raises an eyebrow.

“You were talking about trying for another baby after Anna hit a year old.”

She gently pokes him. “Horny bastard. Can’t wait to knock me up.”

He chuckles a bit and shakes his head. “Right this second, I can wait. Somehow getting soaked during tubby time, and then pooped on as soon as I got Anna out of the water, and the crying about cake killed a lot of that, but…”

Abby and Jimmy are laughing dryly at that, too. None of them are in anything like a sexy mood right now.

“But you want to know when the condoms are going back into retirement?” Breena finishes the sentence, dry humor in her voice. Like the rest of the crew she’s not feeling particularly, Yay! Kids! right now.

Tim nods. “In an entirely intellectual sort of way, now.” His expression makes it clear that in the not too distant future he’ll have a much more visceral desire to know.

“Wouldn’t mind knowing,” Jimmy adds. Like Tim, he’s not a fan of them. Doesn’t hate them or anything, and they’re certainly better than no sex at all, (He thinks Tim’s a little crazy on the preferring oral to condoms, not to say he doesn’t like oral, but… he really likes pussy.) but he’s also well aware of the fact that absolutely nothing else feels like having a crazy horny woman in your lap, and intentionally making a baby with her, even if, right this second, he’d happily skip off to baby-free land and spend at least the next six months there. (He’s the one who got the dripping wet kid more or less shoved into his hands when she decided to take a dump on Tim, as Breena pulled the other two out of the tub, fast, Tim worked on poop containment, and Abby waddled off to the linen closet to go find the bleach so the bath could get properly cleaned up.)

Abby’s been giggling at this, her hand on Sean’s bump. “Just think, little under seven more weeks, and we’ll be juggling four of them.”

The image of the work involved with four children under the age of three makes them all groan.

“You’re not helping the cause,” Jimmy replies, pointing at Abby. He kisses Breena. “Whenever you’re ready, I am. You want to wait longer; I can wait. Want to get pregnant now…” he thinks about that for a moment, he’s really not feeling like doing anything but snuggling, now. “An hour from now, and I’m in.”

He winks at her, and she kisses his smirk.

Breena’s been charting for years, so she knows where she is in her cycle. And, yes, right now, she’s not feeling any urge to make a new baby, but she knows that this morning as Anna was crawling around, pulling herself up on the coffee table and trying to stand on her own and Molly was dressing herself, that she wants to snuggle a newborn again, wants big, murky blue eyes looking up at her as little lips suckle at her breast and tiny fingers clasp around hers. “My period should start day after tomorrow, and that should mean next fertile period’ll be a little before Christmas. So, might be a very Merry Christmas,” she says with a big grin.
The house is starting to look like a place people might actually live at some point. All the walls are in place, they’re all painted (though several still need a second coat), the carpeted floors have their carpets. All that’s left is the non-carpet floors, and getting the plumbing fixtures in place.

Well, and furniture. That’d help, too.

Lights would be good. They’ve got the built in fixtures in place, but haven’t put in the bulbs, yet. (Still waiting for most of them to show up. LEDs aren’t cheap, and Tim went a little bonkers on finding the lowest cost, highest rated bulbs he could. The shipping tracking says they’ll be in by Tuesday.)

And maybe some appliances would be nice, also.

Possibly some art.

Maybe a few plants…

But really, they’re on the home stretch.

It’s December 6th, that leaves them nineteen days until Christmas, eighteen days until they want this place in shape for everyone to be over for their first Christmas and Chanukah celebration in their home.

Tony, who doesn’t love the smell of outgassing carpet, but also doesn’t have any problems with working in it, is in the house, getting those last coats of paint up.

Jethro’s on the back porch, cutting. All of those non-carpeted floors have either hardwood or tile on them, which means those pieces have to be cut to size to make this work out.

Tim’s the guy with the floorplans, the boxes of tiles and wood flooring, a pencil, a huge stack of graph paper, and the job of figuring out which piece of wood or tile goes where, and how big it should be.

So, Tim charts the floors out. He figures out square footage, and what goes where, and how to arrange the pieces to minimize the number of cuts. And then he takes each piece, writes the dimensions it’s supposed to be on the back, along with a number.

Jethro cuts them to shape and puts them back into a box. When the box is full, Tim tapes his graph paper chart onto the side.

The plan is, once Tony’s got his painting done, he can take a box, lug it to whatever room it goes to and just put the floors together like a jigsaw puzzle.

With any luck, by the time they’ve got everything cut, the fumes in the house will have died down enough to make it bareable for Jethro and Tim to get in there, too.

And, if Jimmy’s projection about them wrapping up at The Morgue by Thursday night are right, on Friday they’ll have another set of hands, and maybe, just possibly, they’ll have all the floors in by the weekend.

All hands on deck for the weekend, and maybe, if the housebuilding gods are kind, they’ll have everything in place by the time they all go back to work on Tuesday.
When they break for lunch, with all of the wood floor boards cut, half of the first of the wood floors in place, and schematics for the first of the tile sets roughed out, Tim explains what he’s thinking about for Breena’s ring, to Jethro and Tony.

To say that Jethro’s enthusiastic about this project is an understatement. He’s been studying mother of pearl and how to work with it during his off time, and getting back to pure, unadulterated wood is making his eyes gleam.

Plus, roughing something like this out, just with scrap, shouldn’t take more than a few minutes.

That sounds shockingly fast to Tim. “Minutes?”

“For the first bit. Cut the wood, glue it up. That’ll be pretty quick. Put it on the lathe tomorrow after it’s had some time to cure. Make a big one the first time. Just test the idea, see if it looks right.”

Jethro’s got his own pencil, and one of Tim’s pieces of graph paper, and is happily sketching away.

“Three pieces, slanted triangles, glue ‘em up, drill the center. Cut the outside with a jigsaw. Then shape it… Probably wouldn’t even use a chisel on it. Least, not for more than a few seconds. Do most of it with sandpaper.”

Tim and Tony share amused looks as Gibbs happily talks his way through the project, sketching away, mind buzzing with ideas.

On Thursday, Tim gets to the house early, and finds he’s the first one there. He doesn’t mind that. He pokes his head in, and the fumes are… his nose wrinkles at them. Still pretty stinky. They’ve got every window in the place open, so it’s not nearly as bad as it was earlier in the week, but he’s pretty sure taking Gibbs’ lungs into the house right now isn’t a good plan.

Tim inhales deeply, and doesn’t feel his own lungs grow tight. He’s fairly sure he can work in there if he needs to, though, as he thinks about how many tiles they’ve got to cut today, and the math he needs to do to get it mapped out… Probably another full day of cutting.

He turns to the right and heads down the hallway to his section of the house.

It’s really looking like a place people might live. They’ve got the hall and the main living area in light sky blue, off white, and dove gray carpets.

He checks into Breena and Jimmy’s room, and save for the furniture, it’s done.

The girls’ room is the next one down the hall, on the left, and it’s also done. Since Molly’s the only one with opinions about colors right now, they more or less bowed to her tastes on the matter. The walls are a soft dusty coral, the trim is rose pink, and the floor is more of the dove gray carpet.

The boys’ room or nursery or… he’s not sure how they’ll arrange the kids if Sean’s the only boy in the crew, (Though he is sure, that ten years from now, if Sean has a room to himself and the girls have to share, there will be squabbling.) is the next one down the hall on the right. Dove gray carpets, slightly lighter gray walls, cool green trim. It’s a very gender neutral sort of space.
The kids’ bathroom is also on the right, and it’s still a mostly empty space. The walls are painted cream, the trim is dark blue, but the tile, bath/shower, sink and toilet are still in boxes in the main living area.

He remembers what he’s doing and quickly goes through, snapping photos of everything and sending them to his loves. Then he heads into his and Abby’s room. Still no floor. Most of the first floor entry area, the great room, the dining area, both sets of stairs to the upstairs, Ducky and Penny’s hallway, bedroom, and study are hardwood. Tony got all of that done, by himself, yesterday.

Tim didn’t expect him to get his room done, too.

But the walls are dried, and he is looking at dark sultry burgundy, not fire engine red. His trim has been stained mahogany, like the floor that will go in today. Abby’s got some arabesque stencils she wants to put around the ceiling line in black and burnished silver that’ll look awesome once they’re up.

Tim smiles. It’s coming together. He can imagine the bed, a low mattress covered in pillows and sumptuous linens, the gauzy fabric and fairy lights that Abby intends to have cascade from the ceiling down around the bed. He shoots more pictures, and sends a note to the other three. *Christmas Eve, here, all snuggled together for a long winter’s nap.*

---

On Friday, the house still reeks, but, on Friday, they’ve also cut everything they can cut. The only jobs left are inside the house.

So, Gibbs heads to his workshop to start playing with wood, working on how to make the ideas he, Tim, Abby, and Jimmy have been bouncing around into reality, while the three younger male members of Clan Gibbs head inside to continue attaching flooring to the floors.

“So, he’s working Breena’s ring,” Tony says, as they lay down the tiles in what will eventually be his bathroom.

Jimmy nods, slapping grout onto the floor.

“Shouldn’t he be working on Abbi’s? He wants to give them to her on Christmas.”

Tim knows the answer to this one. “He’s trying to make the wood ring clasp onto the metal one. Become one ring for the wedding, and every version he’s tried so far has split.”

“That’s why he was spitting mad yesterday?” Tony asks.

“Yeah.” The less said about Gibbs on Thursday, the better. There were several moments where both Tim and Tony were convinced they were back at NCIS with a stalled out case and a rising body count. He’d be cutting tiles, thinking about the project, silent, annoyed, and then after an hour or so, he’d take a break, try something new, and then come back in an even worse mood.

Tim and Jimmy got in early today, found Jethro had crashed on *Semper* when he got too tired to keep working, and got him to talk about what was annoying him so much over coffee and eggs.

“So, he’s working on ours?” Jimmy says, gesturing with his trowel at the other two, who are doing a good job of chatting, but not lying much tile.
Tim nods, slopping a bit of grout onto his corner of the floor, and scraping it flat, flashing Jimmy a see, I’m working look, and then tamping the first of his tiles down. “The complicated part on ours is figuring how to cut the three woods so they look right once they’re scraped down.”

“So, he’s messing with that, and we’re in here, working on all fifty million tiles you’ve got in here.” Jimmy looks down at the tiny little one and a half by one and a half mosaic pieces Ziva wants in her bathroom.

“It’s just the border,” Tony adds. And it is. Small blue and green glass, some translucent, some sea glass opaque, and greeny-gold accent tiles sweep around the edge of the floor in a six inch border, surrounding ten by ten squares of what looks like, but isn’t, white marble with soft blue veins.

“And another line of it up in the shower, too.” Tim adds. This tile pattern is going up on the shower wall, and up the wall around the bath tub, too.

“Don’t ever slip in here, you’ll break something.” Jimmy adds. This whole bathroom is very hard.

Tony rolls his eyes. He slapped up two bathrooms worth of tile yesterday, and it was just as hard as what they’re doing right now. “It’s pretty.”

The other two veteran husbands nod. It is pretty. And it’s not like their bathroom is all that much less complicated on the tile front, but, they’re sharing one, so on a per bathroom user scale, it’s half as much work.

When they break for lunch, Gibbs hands over a small ring. It lays on Jimmy’s palm, buffed to a satin sheen. All the woods are pretty much the same color, they’re just bits of scrap Jethro had lying around, but he set them so the grains weren’t moving in the same direction.

It does exactly what Tim and Jimmy want it to. Each section slanting into the next one, all three woods supporting each other.

Gibbs looks proud of the work. He’s got a satisfied grin on his face. (Though that’s more than three quarters from figuring out his own problem. He’s got the answer to how to make the wood wedding band clasp onto Abby’s ring, namely he’s going to make the smallest pegs anyone’s ever seen, cut both halves so they cup around her engagement ring, and then make sure the bottom section, the bit that’ll go under her finger, is a bit thicker, and then he’ll peg it there. Sure, he’ll have to do some assembly post wedding, but he’s fine with that. This little thing here, which really did take him less than ten minutes of active working time, is just icing on the cake.)

“It’s beautiful,” Tim says, looking at the ring in Jimmy’s hand.

Gibbs nods at them. “What kind of wood do you want? I can hit the woodworking shop today. This is small enough I can use pen blanks for it, and they’ll have anything you can imagine.”

“Abby’s ebony,” Tim says. They’ve known that since the idea this might be wood sprang to mind.

“But I don’t think we’ve got any concrete ideas,” Jimmy adds.

Gibbs nods, expecting that. “I’ll take pictures.
There are some places Gibbs loves, and his woodworking shop is one of them. For a very long time, this was his favorite place on earth.

It’s a fairly small shop. Big for a woodworking place, but it’d be swallowed by a Target or Walmart.

It smells like heaven: fresh wood, kiln-dried wood, aged wood, tools, the oil used to keep tools in good shape, grinding stones for sharpening tools. And he likes the kind of guys who tend to hang out in there. They all get him, and most of them aren’t really chatty, unless you get them talking tools or projects.

If they sold drinks, he’d have been tempted to live here back in the day.

When he started working on Abbi’s ring, he had six other guys, all of them in his age range, with the same sort of hands, work calluses, but sensitive enough to tell the difference between wood sanded to two hundred grit finish or a four hundred grit finish. They all had opinions about what sort of lathe he should pick, which kind of wood would do the job, and how best to work mother-of-pearl. They talked him through different chucks, which sorts of glues to use, who made the best chisels and scrapers for what he wanted to do, and where to get good mother of pearl.

A decent number of the guys here like turning pens. It’s fast, easy(ish), a good way to use up little odds and ends of wood, and looks awesome.

And for those who don’t want to use scrap, or like something more expensive or exotic, they have a lot of pen blanks.

Gibbs takes about an hour of chatting with the other guys, explaining that one of his sons wants to make a present for his wife, and asking which sorts of woods (because, really, they’ve got pen blanks made of everything) would do that best.

Turns out that just about everything that will make a decent pen will make a decent ring.

That doesn’t narrow his options much. In ebony alone, they’ve got more than fifteen choices. He gets shots of all of them, ranging from tightly grained black on black, that when polished to a shine will look like jet, to the zebra striped Macassar Ebony, with its lines of yellow-white and black. He sends them to Abby, and begins snapping shots of the other options.

And there are a lot of them. Wood, natural wood comes in colors ranging from bone white to black, with shades of cream, yellow, orange, brown, and red to go with it. But this place doesn’t stop with natural colored woods, they have a huge stock of dyed woods, in every color anyone could possibly imagine.

(Gibbs is hoping he’s not going to get a note back saying this ring is going to end up being black, screaming green, and violent purple.)

He gets Abby’s text back first. She wants an ebony blank that is mostly black with a few whorls of white.

Jimmy chooses a maple burl. It’s cream with golden swirls and whorls. Gibbs picks the piece with the tightest grain and the most whorls to go with the streaks. After all, the ring is going to be small, so he’s got to get some really good grain in a very tiny package.

Tim send him a request for an East Indian Rosewood. It’s a dark red wood with almost black streaks,
and though there are six blanks on display Gibbs knows which one Tim wants. One of the blanks has a streak of cream colored wood through it.

Gibbs takes the three pen blanks, and then fires off a quick text to Jimmy and Tim, *Back to work.*

On Friday, after work at the house wraps up early, there is cake. Cupcakes actually, because they’re just the right size for little girls, and because that way everyone gets their favorite flavor.

They’re missing Duck and Penny, who Skype in for a few minutes, but they’re spending the evening meeting with Congressman King, so their time online is short, but this is starting to feel like getting back to normal again.

Gibbs’ house, Shabbos dinner, little girls able to stay up late enough to join in for lighting the candles and the fun that goes with trying to eat with little people and a dog who’s very interested in having a bite of everything on the menu.

It feels good.

Add in cupcakes, one candle blazing as everyone sings happy birthday, and Anna grabbing her cupcake in both hands and smushing the hell out of before trying to eat it double fisted, and it’s a good night.

“Leon got you going to any of those Commission meetings?” Abbi asks Tim as they’re clearing the table.

“All of January. I don’t know if I’m going to set foot into the building that whole month.” He sets the dishes in a stack on the counter, for Tony, who’s scraping them into the trash can. “At least they’re nearby. Some of them are even in DC. Last thing I want to do is travel for this.”

Abbi nods, she knows that feeling. “Good. Can I call you my rep for the ones you’re at?”

“Low on people?”

She grits her teeth and nods. “Abysmally. I’m starting to get enough warm bodies to do the job and keep things running, but everyone’s new. Hell, I’ve got Manner going to three of them for me.”

Tim hasn’t gotten formal notice, yet, but he’s fairly sure Manner’s going to defect over to CGIS. Which works out fine, because he seems happy to be there, and Tim wanted another open desk. He’s got the desk now, but doesn’t know when, or if, he’ll get to fill it. “Sure, I’ll stick CGIS on my ID badge under the NCIS. I’ll send Manner an email, make sure we’re not going to the same ones. Actually, I might have him stand in for NCIS for some of them. He knows, probably better than I do, the ins and outs of the bureaucratic bits of the job.”

Abby nods in agreement. Manner jumped into her computer systems and got them up to code, and then some. Hell, he found codes she didn’t know existed and got them up to them, too. “He’s good at that. The rest of my organization is limping along, but my computer systems are up to code and fully re-staffed.”
“Excellent.”

“I’m thinking we need to do a Winter Birthday party,” Breena says as they’re driving home from Anna’s bash.

Tim raises an eyebrow at her, which isn’t very effective communication-wise because he’s in the back seat, and she’s driving.

“What are you thinking?” Abby asks, which does the job a lot better.

“Abbi’s the 30th of November, Anna’s the 7th, Tim and Jimmy are the 17th, Jethro’s got January 9th, Molly’s on the 14th of Feb, and somewhere in there we’re gonna have Sean, too.”

“Penny’s December 31st,” Tim adds.

Abby says as she caresses over Sean, “I’m perfectly cool with you showing up on the earlier end of that spectrum than the later end.”

“Okay, so, by my count that’s more than half of us have birthdays in one season,” Breena says. “I’m thinking one big party, get everyone’s birthday all at once, maybe do one more in late spring for Tony, Abby, Me, Kelly, Dave, and Ducky—“

“And Ziva with the oddball fall birthday gets a party all on her own?” Jimmy adds.

“Sure.”

Tim thinks about that for a moment and cracks a smile. “Okay, so apparently with this crew’s parents Valentine’s Day is pretty popular, given how many of us are Nov/December.”

Jimmy smirks at that. “Speak for yourself, I was supposed to show up in early January.”

Tim inclines his head at that. He can remember his mom talking about how he was due at the beginning of December but just wouldn’t get his butt moving.

Saturday morning. All hands on deck. And, in an effort to make a really concerted push to get everything done this weekend, Tim and Abby asked Heather if she’d be willing to do some extra babysitting this weekend.

And she was.

So, the full crew, minus Penny and Ducky, a house with in need of almost a thousand square feet of flooring, ten toilets, eight showers, five bathtubs, eleven sinks, two ovens/ranges, one extra-large fridge, two freezers, an extra-large dishwasher, kitchen cabinets and counter tops, three sets of washer/driers, a slew of bookshelves, and the proverbial partridge in the pear tree.

It’s going to be a busy two days.
This is, without a doubt, Abby’s least favorite part of being pregnant. She feels *useless*.

The floor is too low. She can get down on it, and work on tiles right around her, but the getting back up and moving somewhere else messes up the tiles she just got down.

The level of getting down on the floor necessary to help with getting sinks installed just isn’t going to happen.

Bathtubs and showers are too heavy to work with. She can’t fit close enough to the wall to get the washers hooked into the water supply or driers vented.

She gets the doors screwed onto the cabinets in the kitchen (Which gets a little bit of glaring from Tim and Jimmy because it requires her to be on a step-ladder, but they both back off on it when they see her about to melt down, and Gibbs decides to stick around in the kitchen working on counter tops and appliances with her.) but that only takes an hour and a half.

And, eventually, as bathrooms get closer to done, she’s able to screw in more doors on cabinets, but that’s almost more trouble than it’s worth, because in addition to not being able to move around too well, she also takes up a lot more space than she wants to these days.

If she’s in one of the powder rooms, screwing in the door on the cabinet below the sink, it means no one else can really fit in there and work.

And it still takes her two hours (okay, closer to a minute, it *feels* like two hours) to get back up off the floor once the door is screwed in.

The only upside is she’s got Ziva to commiserate with. Because, if Abby, round and waddling is having a hard time with this, Ziva, who’s not nearly as far along, but who keeps getting dizzy from the fumes, *and* can’t get on the floor easily, *and* has never had to deal with not being able to move the way she wants to is ready to rip her hair out and swearing under her breath in Hebrew about how this child is going to be an only child.

Breena, who has “Been there, done that” emblazoned upon her soul as she watches Abby and Ziva help as much as they can, and get increasingly frustrated with their pregnant bodies being willing to do less and less that’s useful for this endeavor, snaps off her grout encrusted gloves (she’s got a really fine hand for scraping down the grout off of the tiles, so she’s been on grout cleanup), grabs both of them as they’re griping at their future offspring, and leads them into the kitchen/dining area.

“You two want a job you can do, one that has to happen, the sooner the better?”

To say the looks that Ziva and Abby are flashing her are doubtful that she’ll be able to find said job is something of an understatement. They both look like they’d rather be sulking and griping with each other about how much being pregnant sucks.

But, they do nod, because yes, it would be nice to be useful, and they can gripe and do whatever it is
Breena’s thinking needs to be done.

“See that…” she points to the oven/stovetop that Jimmy and Tony are gently pushing into place.

Again nodding. The dining area is open to the kitchen, so it’d be difficult to miss the guys.

“We have thirteen days until we want everyone able to spend the night here. So, between now and then, we’re going to need cook wear, because it’d be really nice to have some things to put between the food and the stove, like frying pans, and sauce pans, and maybe some pots. I know Gibbs and Tim are talking roasted lamb and turkey for Christmas, so it’d be really nice if we had some roasting pans, and it’d be even better if we had some knives so we’re not gnawing the meat off the bones, and maybe cutting boards, possibly a platter or two to stick the food on, and some plates and silverware and cups and glasses—“

Abby holds up her hands. “You want us to outfit the kitchen?”

“Might be a good plan, unless you want to see exactly how rustic Gibbs’ campfire cooking can get. I mean, even he uses plates, right?”

“Only when I’m feeling fancy,” shoots out of the kitchen, where Gibbs is puttying the drain into the sink.

Ziva smirks at that. Abby and Breena laugh gently.

“Unless they’re marshmallows over the fire, here, you use plates!” Breena shoots back to him.

“Yes, Ma’am,” comes back to them.

Ziva nods, and she and Abby creep over to the computer that’s sitting on three long two by fours suspended between step ladders. Time to shop.

Several moments later, the squabbling has shifted from complaining about babies in utero to, “We are not getting black goblets with blood red stems!” “But they look awesome!” “You can get them for your house, the rest of us don’t want to live in the Adam’s Family.” “When did you see the Adam’s Family?” and so on and so forth.

Breena feels like her job is done, so she heads back to their bathroom, where she and Tim are finishing up the tile that will eventually make up their shower.

By the end of Saturday, all the floors are done. All of the kitchen appliances, counters, and cabinets are in place. Stuff to put into that kitchen, as well as a dining table, chairs, sofas and loveseats for the main living area have all been purchased.

Sunday is plumbing day. One day to get all of the bathrooms done.

Gibbs and Abbi decide to stay at the house. Semper’s got a decent berth for two, (which is intentional) and there’s no reason, like three small people waiting to see Mama and Daddy, or sore pregnant bodies that do not want to camp out, for them to head home.
“Think we’ll get it done?” Abbi asks as she snuggles into Gibbs. It’s been a long day, and they’re turning in early. Well, going to bed early, probably be an hour or so before they “turn in.”

He nods at her, kissing her gently. She’s wrapped in his arms, and they’re rocking gently with the motion of the water. Their family home is almost ready to move into, and he’s feeling so content he doesn’t know what to do with himself.

“I love you, so much.”

Abbi smiles at him and gives him a kiss.

“Tomorrow. Yeah, we’ll finish. This weekend, you want to ‘break in’ our new room,” he’s grinning as he says that, “and it’ll be ready.”

Abby nibbles his lip. “Oh yeah. Must christen the new room.” She laughs. It’s the sound of a Marine with a really dirty joke in her head. “This is going to be one well-christened house.”

Gibbs groans, still laughing. “Oh God. Those hornballs are going to do it in every damn room, aren’t they?”

“Might be a good plan to not be stealthy over Christmas. Make a lot of noise before going into any room.” They’re both laughing at that idea.

Gibbs shakes his head for a moment, and then a gleam flashes in his eyes. “We gonna cover more territory than they do?”

Abbi grins back at him, huge smile on her face. “Eventually.”

On Sunday, shortly after three in the afternoon, the last sink (bathroom upstairs next to the kids’ area) is put into place.

December 11th, 2016, The House, their house, is done.

Tony was ready for it, and he has two bottles of Champaign and one of sparkling cider tucked into the fridge. So, as everyone else is standing around, looking tired, feeling amazed that it’s really done, that eight months of labor has made what used to be a painfully ugly, deserted shell into a home for them, he skitters down the stairs, and is back a few minutes later with three bottles.

And no glasses.

Because the glasses (not black goblets with blood red stems, but a well-stocked collection of round, clear glass tumblers, wine glasses, a few shot glasses, and for Ducky, several brandy snifters) won’t be showing up for another three days.

Still, he opens the bottles, with dramatic popping of corks, cider first, allowing the pregnant ladies the first “taste” of victory, and they share them, looking at what they’ve built, while Tim sends pictures to Penny and Ducky, along with the text: Just waiting for you to get back and make it complete!

He gets a quick response from Penny: Soon!
New and Old

Tim stares at the book in front of him. Okay, it’s probably only a hundred pages long, still it’s the biggest slate of candidates he’s ever seen.

He’s standing in his voting booth, doing his ‘civic duty’, feeling… he’s not sure. Not much of anything, really. Maybe a little relief that he and Abby are through the forest of campaign posters, past the ‘have you heard about Blah?’ electioneers, and finally done waiting in line. Certainly not hope, or a sense of doing something important. It’s Election Day; he’s voting, probably because he always does.

He understands the idea that Jake and Co. were going for in cutting down the power of the political parties. He approves of that, even, but this…

There are eight thousand candidates for president. Anyone with two hundred dollars for the filing fee and the free time to fill out the form got to run, so they all did. With the exception of the actors and the guys who managed to lose, over and over, politically, no one’s ever heard of any of these people before.

For this slate, he’s got two votes. One for Pres, and one, theoretically, for Vice Pres. Though he can give both votes to one person, and hope to nudge his favorite that much further up the list.

He copies the number and name that go with the guy he dislikes the least onto his ballot, noting the instructions that say to check and double check because if the name and ID number don’t match up, his vote won’t be counted, and then puts both votes with the one name.

Tim can’t imagine they won’t be doing this again in a month, with only 4000 candidates, because he can’t imagine any two of these guys will come up with 50.00001% of the vote. Then, again in February, with 1000, and probably at least once more with 500, and hell, probably a time after that to get it down to 250, and with any luck after that enough of these twits will have dropped out to get the numbers down low enough to actually elect a flipping president.

He glares at the ballot in front of him.

The next slate is smaller. Only 3000 people to pick from for Virginia representatives. 1 rep per 50,000 people. He’s got 128 votes. He gives all of them to Bleach, who decided that he couldn’t, in good conscience, be a judge, what with not really knowing if any of the laws he was supposed to be enforcing were legitimate, but he could, at the least, go about becoming one of the guys going over, making, and remaking those laws.

At least that race is done. No majority required. The top 128 become the next crew of Virginia Congressmen, and the rest go home, wait four years, and try again.

He wishes he could feel some sort of satisfaction at that, but it doesn’t come.

Vote recording is different, too. Before he’d take his ballot, stick it into the electronic reader, and accept the I Voted sticker, and off he went. Today, he handed his ballot over. The recorder is a person. She checks with him, makes sure his candidate and number is correct, and then, with him watching, finds the index cards that go with his candidates, and, using a calculator for both numbers, tallies the new vote number on each card.

It takes a long time.
“What happens when the polls close?” he asks.

“You remember Scantron sheets?”

He nods. He does remember the sheets with the little blank circles that got filled in with a number two pencil. He remembers being young, and very carefully filling in each any every circle, petrified that he might go over the line or not get enough pencil lead into the circle for the machine to read it.

“We take the ballots, and the cards, then fill in a Scantron sheet. The Scantron sheets get done twice. I’ll tally my numbers, and make my sheet. Then Bob,” she nods to the guy next to her, who’s handling Abby’s ballot, “and I will switch, going over each other’s numbers, creating a second sheet. We’ll,” she gestures to all the other poll watchers, “do that for every vote, so we’ve got two counts. Then we put them through the machine. And we’re going to do that until we get two matching counts. When we get matching counts, the numbers go to the state, along with the raw ballots, the cards, and the Scantrons. Then they all get scanned and put online, so anyone who wants to challenge the numbers can go through and see all the raw data.”

Tim sighs. “You’ve got a late night, don’t you?”

She laughs, bitterly. “They told us to bring sleeping bags. Just like jury duty, any registered voter might end up here. I’m a math teacher. Having to use a calculator to add two to a number is killing me.” Her voice drops, and she nods at one of the vote counters on the far side of the room, “He didn’t know how to use the calculator, and I’m not sure he can count to ten without taking off his shoes. We’re going to be here forever.”

Tim winces. He’d like to commiserate longer, but the line behind him is huge, and it’s not getting any smaller by him sitting there chatting. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” she says, voice dry.

He waits a few moments for Abby, who’s not too far behind him. She and her vote counter had to double check to make sure the number on her candidate was right.

Finally, she’s done, too. Abby inclines her head at him as they head toward their new car. It’s another Highlander. They’ve got a red one and a black one now.

“You okay?” she asks once they’re settled.

Tim shrugs. ‘I’m not bad.”

She gives him a half-hearted smile. “That’s enough.”

The next matter for Tim is something he finds satisfying. Tomorrow, no matter what, NCIS is open again, which means he’s heading back in today, making sure that his crew are ready to hit the ground running.

Tonight they are going to get a metric shit ton of cases handed back over to them, so they’ve can’t be getting back online when the cases come in.

Fortunately, for him, his crew is all around the world, on 24/7, so making sure he’s got hands on deck and ready to work whenever the cases start coming in.
Abby doesn’t have that luxury. As soon as NCIS goes live, evidence is going to start coming in, and someone’s got to be there to grab it. Plus, some of her equipment is just getting back from its period out and about, and they’ve got to get it hooked back up, and ready to work again.

But at least Abby’s got a team. She might not want to leave tonight, but she does have people she can delegate the overnight work to.

Jimmy, on the other hand, will have to be in Autopsy, because they’re fairly sure he’s going to be expected to start taking possession of bodies as soon as NCIS officially goes online again. He and Allan have already been getting calls to let them know that morgues and PDs all over the Mid-Atlantic, have clients ready to go.

If no new cases pop up, they’ll be taking custody of twenty-two Sailors and Marines, which will be something of a challenge, because they’ve only got drawers for nine of them.

Fortunately, they’re both on good terms with some people who have more than a bit of refrigerated storage on hand. Jimmy and Allan’s job at The Morgue may be done, but there are still John Does, Jane Does, a collection of people with no apparent next-of-kin, and people they haven’t been able to contact any next-of-kin for. The Chaplains are still working full days there, and they still need the storage.

Since they are tight on space, they’re going to have to triage cases. The faster a case looks to solve, the higher the priority. Normally, that’s not how Jimmy would do this, but the quicker the case is done, the sooner the body can be released, the less time their bodies will spend at The Morgue.

Tim heads down to The Dungeon, which is no longer very dungeonish. Maybe it needs a name change. Daffodil Land? Sunrise Valley? Tim rolls his eyes.

He greets Techs left and right. Everyone, no matter what their normal shift is, is here right now, making sure their systems are ready to work. Tim sees a few I Voted stickers. (Those are still the same.) He hears a lot of clicking, some not so muffled cursing as people see what happened to their systems, and a decent amount of chattering about who did what over the last two months.

Ngyn, Brand, and Howard are back, setting up their own stations, complaining about how yellow it is down here now.

“Ladies…”

“McGee!” he gets an affectionate puppy-ish hug from Brand, but only for a second because Howard yanks her back with a look that Tim takes to mean, no molesting the Boss.

He nods at Howard, thankful for that. She nods back.

“What happened to your hair?” Brand asks.

Tim sighs. This is part of what happens when you hire teenagers. The filter between brain and mouth is not fully formed yet.

He gives her a grim smile. “It got shorter.” At six weeks out of the Navy Yard, his hair is slightly less than an inch long, and right now, he and everyone else can’t wait for it to grow back. Yes, both
Abby and Breena had been amused at how soft and fluffy it was in the true peach fuzz stage, and he
didn’t exactly mind them petting his head, but… He hadn’t been thinking about how silly he looks
with a buzz cut when he took it off. Probably because he hadn’t been thinking of anything then.

Now that it is the future, and it’s cold outside, he’s stuck with stupid hair, and a need to wear warm
caps when he’s outside. (Tony’s already gotten him a collection of blazingly ugly knit caps in awful
colors with huge pompoms on the top. Bringing a new one each day he was outside working with
Gibbs on cutting things seemed to make Tony’s day. Tim’s settled on a fleece lined, knit, NCIS cap,
in navy blue, sans pompom.)

Brand’s eyes are wide, but he can see that Howard and Ngyn are looking intently, too. That’s not
enough of an answer for them.

He runs his fingers through what’s left of his hair. “It was easier to keep clean if I shaved it off.”

That makes all three of them blanch. They’d heard rumors about how bad it was in here, but none of
them knew for sure. But that one line is an extremely concrete concept. Ngyn touches her almost
waist-long, black hair. They glance at each other, and Brand says, “Thanks for getting us out.”

“No problem. I told your parents I’d look out for you.”

Brand rolls her eyes at that, too. “They almost didn’t let me come back.”

Howard nudges her. “Like they could keep you away.”

Brand smiles up at him. “Not a shot.”

“Are you ready to go?” Tim asks them.

He gets nodding from Ngyn, and a long, complicated, two part story from Howard and Brand about
what they’ve done to not just get their systems up and running, but to rev them up and get them
working even better than they used to be.

Unlike when he gets going on one of his tech spiels, the girls don’t get cut short. Tim’s listening
intently, enjoying what they’re thinking of doing. They’ve got good ideas, and if they work the way
they, and he, hopes they will, they’ll pull more power out of their current systems.

When they get done, Tim’s smiling, feeling awfully good about getting back to work.

Manner’s request for a formal transfer to CGIS is in his inbox. Tim’s got no problem granting it. He
wishes Manner well, and asks him if he minds doing some double duty on the Commission work.

Then he goes through the rest of his inbox.

He’s been keeping up with it, checking in at least once a day, so it’s not like he’s slammed, but he
does have one new email that’s going to require some attention.

It’s the CVs of all of his staff who used to be in Texas and California.

Tim glances up. He’s got an empty desk, and seven techs in need of new assignments. Time to start
getting in contact with people and seeing where he can shuffle them around.
Tim’s wrapping up for the day when Jimmy heads in.

“You look productive,” Jimmy says, shutting the door to Tim’s office behind him.

“I’m trying. You about to be productive?”

Jimmy nods. “They’ve been transferring files to me all day. Bodies’ll start coming in in an hour or so. We’ve got to get ready for it. Allan should be here any minute.”

“Then what?”

“Work until I fall down.”

“Try not to do that.”

Jimmy nods. “Bring me breakfast?”

“No problem.”

Jimmy gives him a lascivious grin. “Kiss the babies good night and give our girls a good tucking in for me.”

It takes Tim a moment to get what Jimmy means by ‘tucking in’ and that the girls in question in that case are not their daughters.

Tim chuckles back at him, and licks his lips. “It’ll be a challenge, but I’m sure I can rise to the occasion.”

Jimmy gently slaps his shoulder and heads for Autopsy.

The thing about being an NCIS medical examiner is that ‘regular hours’ isn’t part of the job description. For that matter, it’s not even a concept that anyone involved in this job is even vaguely familiar with.

Granted, if there was more than just him and Allan, it might work a bit differently. If there were two full MEs and two assistants, they’d have shifts, but in that they don’t have enough dead people to make that a feasible expenditure, he and Allan are pretty much on all the time.

Though Jimmy’s thinking, if he can get Allan to stick around long enough, that in two or so years, bumping Allan up to a full ME, and then sharing an assistant between them might make for a much more manageable work load for everyone involved.

But that’s a few years from now, and he’ll have to see what his budget is doing, then.

Right now, he’s heading in, finding Allan already sitting at the desk, staring at the four boxes of case work that’s already showed up.

“Ready for some light reading, Dr. Palmer?”
Jimmy hangs his coat and scarf up, pushes his glasses up on his nose a little, and pulls a chair over. He gestures to the files in front of them. “Where should I start?”

They’re an hour into the reading when the first call comes. Jimmy checks the clock, it’s nineteen hundred hours, seven o’clock to the outside world, and while no one knows who’s running it yet, the United States once again has a legitimately elected (they hope) government. Or, at least, the polls have closed in the Eastern Time Zone.

“Dr. Palmer,” Jimmy says, identifying himself to whomever is waiting.

“Dr. Palmer, this is Major Herbert Sloane, I’m the ME for the Virginia National Guard. I’ve got three of your Marines and four Sailors.”

“We’re open all night, Dr. Sloane, send them over and I’ll be here to sign for them.”

“All right. They’re heading up to you from Richmond, so about two hours from now…”

“We’ll be ready.”

“I should be at the office,” Abby says after they get the girls to bed.

Tim and Breena shake their heads, though he leaves it to Breena, who’s done this, to say, “You are eight months pregnant. The last thing you need to be doing is pulling all-nighters.”

“You were there all day, all your equipment is up and ready to go, the full handover back from the National Guard won’t be over until tomorrow morning, so all that’s going on right now is accepting and cataloging old evidence. Corwin and Zelaz are ready, willing, and able to do that. Tomorrow you and Benedict head in, take over, and start beating those cases into shape.”

Abby glares at Tim a bit. “Says the man with his phone strapped to his hip, his laptop up and ready to run.”

That is true. Tim’s home, and hoping he’s going to get a full night’s sleep. He’s not betting on it, though. 7:01, as soon as the polls closed in the east coast, cases started transferring over from every National Guard in the Eastern Time Zone. “I’m here, with you, not at the office. They need me they can call. Same as what they can do for you.”

“Uh huh…” Abby’s still looking suspicious. “Why do I think you sent an email to my guys telling them that if it’s after eight o’clock to leave me be?”

Tim looks slightly guilty. He did not, in fact, do that, though he did think about it. He did not, in fact, do it, because he did not have to. Everyone in Abby’s lab has either gestated a baby of her own or was the male half of the baby-making equation, so unless the lab is literally on fire, they are not calling the eight-months-pregnant woman in after hours.

Abby catches the look and shoots off to Breena, “You see that look?”

“I did not tell them not to contact you.”

“Then what’s that look?” Breena asks.
Tim rolls his eyes. “I may have thought about it, but I didn’t do it.”

“Fine.” Abby glares at both of them, and the sighs. “I’m sorry. I just feel…”

“Prickly?” Tim supplies.

Breena nods along with him. Abby’s definitely in porcupine-mode today. “Six more weeks. Little boy’s almost cooked, and then you get to be yourself again.”

“I cannot wait.” She pats Sean. “You hear that, get your butt moving.”

“In two more weeks,” Breena adds. Officially, Sean’s not fully cooked for another two weeks.

Like Jimmy, Tony’s day is starting at night. The National Guards and local LEOs are all sending in their cases as the polls close.

So, with ZNN blathering along in the background, keeping up running speculation as they wait for returns to come in, (They don’t expect to get any, except for the tiniest of counties, until well after midnight.) he and Draga are sitting in their new, two person setup, reading, as more and more casefiles start popping up on their systems.

Over the next twelve hours, fifteen of Jimmy’s twenty-two murders will end up on their desks, along with thirty-four thefts of greater than $500,000 value, twenty-two fraud cases, sailors are well known for working any angle they can, and it looks like several of them were taking advantage of the chaos to enrich themselves, and three terrorism cases that Tony’s not sure what to do with.

He fobs them off to Bishop, along with the third of the thefts that are money laundering cases, and a quick note that says, Vacation time’s over.

He gets a snapshot of her at her computer with the words, On it, Boss.

It’s a good thing that the Navy Yard is still hosting a slew of Marines and Sailors. Jimmy’s got them schlepping paperwork around, and bodies. Tony’s got them moving around more paperwork. Abby’s crew has them lugging evidence.

Just because NCIS stopped working, the Sailors and Marines did not suddenly become law abiding angels, and right now they’ve got more than two months of down time to investigate.

If Abby was prickly last night, she’s downright spiny now.

“How! How does this happen, Tom?”

Benedict shrugs. He’s just as spiny right now, too. They are both being reminded, as they sort through the evidence, that Local LEOs are a crap shoot. Some of them really know what they’re doing and they do a good job. Some of them… (And here Abby and Benedict are gritting their teeth)
pretty much decided that their job is to look pretty and get elected and they gave fuck all attention to cases that ‘weren’t their jurisdiction.’

Abby’s looking at one case from Craword County, in western Virginia, where once the LEOs had identified the victim was a Marine, they just stopped investigating. It’s been eight weeks, the body sat in their Morgue, the crime scene was roped off, and everything they collected in those first few hours was packaged up, but then they just quit.

“Tony’s going to rip that LEO’s head clean off his body when he sees this one.”

“See’s which one?” Tony asks. He’s tired, been at it all night, going through case after case, getting a sense of who’s going to go first, how to prioritize what he’s got.

“Lance Corporal Jason Sedman,” Benedict says.

“You’re upping your Gibbs game,” Abby smiles at Tony, and really smiles at the green smoothie he’s got for her.

“I felt a tingle and knew you’d have something for me. Who am I killing?”

“The Craword County PD.” Abby clicks her remote and crime scene photos pop up on her screen. “They found Lance Corporal Jason Sedman dead out in the woods. They figured out he was a Marine,” she’s flicking though the shots of the body, where he was found, “packed him up, secured the scene, packed up their gear, and did nothing until handing him over to us.”

Tony thinks. It takes him a minute, but he remembers this case. Nothing in it had jumped out as high urgency, but if it’s an outside murder that’s been open to the elements for more than two months with only minimal evidence collection…

“Shit.”

Abby nods at him. “Exactly.”

Tony’s stalking out, phone open, “Draga, grab your go bag and a ton of Red Bull, we’re heading to Deliverance country…”

---

Tim heads for Autopsy with his bag over his shoulder, and another bag, this one filled with a thermos of sugar free chai, Jimmy’s preferred omelet (eggs, spinach, Swiss cheese, and ham), two containers of sugar-free yogurt, and several muffins and cookies for Allan.

(He’s not sure entirely certain what Allan likes for breakfast, but he’s not about to bring breakfast for Jimmy and ignore Allan.)

There are bodies on all three tables. Jimmy’s at the one closest to the door, signing quietly to himself. One of his keeping himself awake techniques. Tim smiles; he’s going through a medley of Christmas Carols that Molly’s daycare preschool have been teaching the kids.

Allan’s at the middle table, not singing.

Both of them appear to be checking the bodies in front of them and the reports that go with them, and both of them look ready to drop. At least, both of them are tired enough they don’t respond to Tim just walking in.
“Hey!” That gets both of them looking in his direction. “I come bearing food!” Tim holds up the bag.

And both Jimmy and Allan look happy to see that, too. They pause their work, stripping out of gloves and coveralls, quickly washing up, and heading toward where Tim’s laying out breakfast on the desk.

“Thank you,” Sam sounds extremely grateful. He grabs the vanilla yogurt and the multi-grain breakfast cookie, dipping the cookie into the yogurt and bolting it down.

He gets a quick smile from Jimmy, who also tears into his omelet.

Tim pours the chai for Jimmy, glances at Allan, who also nods, and pours for him, too. They don’t say much, mostly Tim’s just hearing chewing.

“You going to get home soon?” he asks Jimmy, when he pauses between bites to breathe.

Jimmy shrugs. “Might crash in your office for a few hours and get back to it. Dr. Allan, if you want to go, or kip out on the sofa in Cybercrime…”

Allan nods at that. “We’ve got three more to do. Once we’re done with them…”

Tim’s eyebrows narrow. He’s not sure why Jimmy’d be sticking around if they’ve only got three more to do.

Jimmy sees it, pauses chewing and says, “Checking them in. Right now, this is just the quick inventory: is the client who he appears to be, is the paperwork filled out, have we got full chain of custody. Once we’ve got that, we’re going to grab the three cases that look fastest to solve, and start trying to get these men and women home.”

Tim understands that.

“How about you, Director McGee?”

Tim shakes his head. “Long day coming up. Probably won’t see home until late, or early. Just checking off on cases is going to take hours.”

Jimmy and Sam nod at that. All they’ve been doing all night is just checking off on cases.

Having made sure that Jimmy got breakfast, and sending off a text to Breena to let her know he’d gotten it (She often gets concerned when Jimmy’s got to work as long as he is now. He can forget to eat, and that’s not good for him.) Tim heads to his own office.

He clearly remembers pouring himself a cup of coffee. He remembers seeing most of his usual daytime crew. He remembers walking into his office, setting the coffee down, logging into the job triage system, clicking on the first one that he could knock off on his own easily, and then…

And then he checks the clock, feelingly mildly hungry, and sees four hours have passed.

He grabs himself another cup of coffee, sees several techs, and Allan, all snoozing in his gaming zone, and, though it doesn’t occur to him until hours later, he doesn’t feel the need to snap his wrist band at that sight. He just grabs a bag of nuts to go with the coffee, tucks it into his pocket, pull out his phone, and sends a text to Abby, Jimmy, and Tony, checking to see who’s still in the office, and if they want him to get them some lunch.
He gets back, *Yes! 10 min. Little boy wants pastrami on rye.* from Abby. From Tony he gets: *I’d love lunch, but I’m in west-middle-of-nowhere Virginia. I don’t think they’ve even heard of pastrami out here. Stick a sandwich on my desk, Draga’s, too. We’ll want them when we’re back.* Jimmy sends him: *I was sleeping. At home.*

Tim hits him back with *Good. Eat something and go back to sleep.*

*You getting home tonight?* Jimmy sends him.

*Hahahahahaha. Bring me breakfast.*

*Got ya.*

And that, for all practical purposes is the next nine days for the NCIS-working members of Clan Gibbs. They’re playing catch up, hard.

But Tim would tell you, assuming you could drag him away from his computer long enough to get it out of him, that it was good. Tiring. God, so tired. But good. Working hard to solve concrete crimes with real victims and actual perpetrators feels *good.*

Tim would also tell you, that when he, and the rest of his crew, got the note from Leon that ten days straight was enough, and that they were all being mandated to take off Dec 23, 24, and 25, that he left the office with a very tired spring in his step and a grin on his lips, as he wraps his arms around Abby and Jimmy, pleased to be going home with both of them, at the same time, to have a real, sitting down, with all four of them and the girls dinner, and then collapse into a coma until sometime late on the 23rd.
These days, Breena’s never sure who will be home, when. Even Abby, who they are trying to keep to some sort of regular schedule, and who has double, super, pinkie promised to rest at least ten hours out of every twenty-four, has been catching at least one out of three of her rests on the Cybercrime sofa.

Some nights, Breena is on her own, with the babies.

Some mornings, she wakes up on her own, again with the babies.

But that’s fairly rare. She’s not sure if they’re trying to make sure there’s at least one of them with her when there’s kid watching to do, but it does seem like they’re doing an okay job of making sure someone is around.

This is not, by a long stretch the first bit of her life where she’s not been sure who would be home when, but since day one of: Attempt to Make Baby Number Four, and NCIS reopening happened to be the same day, it matters to her in a way that it doesn’t normally.

There is a fantasy Breena has, about how to go about making baby number four. It involves her and Jimmy and Tim, all of them on their sides, together, Tim behind her, Jimmy in front, lazy slow kisses, soft, sexy words whispered by Tim right into her ear, deep touches, both guys slowly rocking in and out of her.

The fantasy shifts as the movements get faster. Them on the side of the bed. She’s in Jimmy’s lap, him behind her, Tim standing in front of them, kissing, so much kissing. Both of them kissing her, and each other. There’s the sound of fast, deep sex, panting, grunts and moans, and filthy, dirty, sexy, blistering hot words as sweat and lube slick skin slides against more skin.

She can imagine the feel of them, both of them, deep, hard, moving fast, her moving fast too, chasing blazing orgasms that sweep over them in wracking pulses and deep-voiced shouts, and all of that hot, sticky, limb jelling pleasure making a new little person.

But, as she gets more details in the form of texts as to what’s going on at NCIS, she’s got the sense that that fantasy isn’t happening anytime soon.

Reality is a bit different than fantasy.

Take Thursday, for example. When she got home, Jimmy was already in bed, crashed out, sleeping the exhausted sleep of a Medical Examiner who’s had too damn many people to examine in not nearly enough time.

She poked him a bit at dinner time, which he didn’t much appreciate, but he can’t afford to sleep through meals, and then she let him crash again as soon as she had gotten some food in him.
It was a bit before eleven, normal bedtime for her, when she heard footfalls on the steps, and a damp, tousled, shower fresh, sleepy-looking, naked Jimmy headed into their living room and sat on the sofa next to her.

“Hey. You’re alive.”

He flashed her a dopy grin. “Apparently.” Then he snuggled in close to her. “You going up soon?”

“That’s the plan. You gonna stick around and sleep with me.”

He kissed her neck. “That’s my plan. Allan and I are off until tomorrow. Everyone’s catalogued, double checked, and stored somewhere.”

“Good.” She turned her face toward him, and kissed him gently. “You up for anything other than sleeping?”

He grinned again, much less dopy this time. “Kind of hoping.” Her hand skittered down his damp skin. He’d been working more than twenty-four hours straight, generally that means he’ll come home a little smelly, but not intolerable. If he was just looking to sleep, he’d have held off on the shower until the morning.

She grinned back at him, standing up, offering him a hand, and he took it, kissing her fingers and wrist. “Probably won’t be too energetic.”

“I can deal. First day of my fertile period, maybe if we have some slow, laid back, lazy sex, we’ll end up with a quiet, low key kid.”

Jimmy laughed at that.

And it was sweet, and slow, and gentle, with soft words and soft kisses. And Breena appreciated the extra build, the supple, slick glide that goes along with fertile period sex, where her body’s working on making a new body.

And after, they drowsed off, tucked under the blankets, in their normal sleeping position.

When she woke up on Friday, Tim and Abby were sacked out next to her, and Jimmy was already up and moving around, getting ready for an early start.

She doesn’t remember which afternoon it was that she got home, put her girls down for their naps, (Kelly was at Tim and Abby’s with Heather.) and settled in to go over the books.

She does know she jumped almost a foot off the chair when she heard her door open, at a time she wasn’t expecting anyone, but a second later she heard, “Hey,” from Tim, and calmed back down.

“You gave me a start,” she said as he came into the kitchen, looking pooped.

“Sorry. Wrapped one case, nothing on deck that’s specifically mine, thought I’d head home and crash for a bit.” He didn’t look like he was about to crash. He was roaming around the kitchen, jittering, and Breena was wondering how much caffeine was in his system.

At the same time, he looked exhausted. “You look like you could use it.”

Tim nodded. His eyes, ringed with dark circles darted around the room, and the fingers on his left
hand keep twitching, working on an invisible keyboard.

Breena had heard about this level of caffeinated/exhausted Tim, but she hadn’t seen it before. “Uh… can you actually crash right now, or if you hop into bed, are you just going to vibrate and stare at the ceiling?”

A sheepish, and overly-caffeinated look crosses Tim’s face. “Uh… I didn’t think you’d be home for a few hours.”

“I get home every day at one. Then I work here while the girls nap.” She thought Tim knew that.

“It’s after one?”

She nodded, seeing the problem. “Yeah. What was your plan?”

He gave her a half-hearted grin. “Shower, take care of myself, and sleep. That’ll usually do it for me when I’ve been awake too long.”

“Ah…” Breena nods at that. She knows Jimmy’ll do something like that when he’s been on so long he’s having a hard time turning off, too.

And, while it was true that she didn’t remember precisely which afternoon she and Tim had that conversation, she does remember what she did next, which was think through how long of a fertile window she had left, and what the likelihood of getting any sex from Tim in the next few days was. “You going straight back after you wake up?”

“Eat, kiss the girls, and back, yeah. My inbox will be full again by then.”

Breena nodded. She stood up, grabbed Tim by the hand. His eyebrow raised at that, and she said, “I’d like to have sex with you at least once this fertile period, and I thought you wanted that, too.”

The light dawned on Tim, and he nodded, still looking jittery and sheepish. “God, yes. Just…”

“Yeah. I know. Five minutes if I’m lucky.”

He looked a bit more chagrined. “Maybe three.”

“You can make it up to me later.”

Tim kissed her, fast, and deep, tasting of coffee and fried nerves. “I will do that.”

And yes, both Breena and Tim had had significantly better times on their own, and together, but it got the job done. At least, it put Tim to sleep. No way to know if any other jobs got done for a while, yet.

The fact of the matter is that an egg is not viable for all that long. It pops out, meanders down the tubes, and if it doesn’t hook up with a sperm at some point during that meander, or, even if it does, but it doesn’t find a nice place to land and set up housekeeping in the womb, that’ll mean no baby that month.

So, it’s true that Ms. Egg is only on the stage for twenty-four hours.

However, sperm are a bit more… goal oriented, so they stick around longer, if given the chance.
Most women will produce a rather nice mix of fluids to help Mr. Sperm find Ms. Egg, and they start doing that anywhere up to a week before Ms. Egg makes her grand debut.

So, while it is possible that when the temperature drops and it’s ovulation day, that the sex that goes with ovulation day may produce the sperm that gets to the egg, it’s also possible that the quickie two days earlier got the job done, or four days earlier, the relaxed shag in bed before falling asleep did the job.

The point of this is, that a fairly sexually active woman who is not using a barrier form of birth control will, assuming she has sex at least once a week and her partner produces healthy sperm, have enough sperm wandering about her system to find Ms. Egg, whether she has sex on ovulation day or not.

Breena, with two husbands and a very pregnant co-wife certainly qualifies a ‘fairly sexually active.’ (If not a good bit beyond that.)

Which is a good thing because the only one of her spouses on the scene of her actual ovulation day was the one who cannot, physically, get her pregnant.

So, as her body does what it does, and releases an egg, that may or may not have hooked up with the sperm in her system, and may or may not have found a nice place to land in her uterus, Breena enters what Jimmy refers to as the Schrodinger’s Pregnancy period.

Ten more days before she can take a pregnancy test and find out.

January 1st might make for ringing in a very Happy New Year.

It’s also true, as Breena’s in the Schrodinger’s Pregnancy period, that she’s kind of hoping it’s Tim’s sperm that gets there.

And not because she wants his kid more than Jimmy’s, she’s indifferent on that matter. Either of them, doesn’t matter, she loves the idea.

No, it’s a much more practical reason. One Abby shared with her. Namely morning sickness is a combination of the lady in question’s body chemistry, and the guy’s DNA trying to make sure that it gets the best possible chance at producing a live baby.

The point of morning sickness is to make sure Mama doesn’t eat anything that might damage baby. If Mama’s healthy, she can coast on her own body weight until the most delicate period for baby is over, and baby will be just fine. So, the guy’s DNA part of the mix can get very aggressive (biochemically) about making sure that his baby doesn’t run into anything nasty while it’s gestating away in there.

And it does this by making sure that anything that could poison little dude gets thrown up long before it could be a problem.

Three times now Breena’s puked and puked and puked and lost weight and had no energy and felt like shit for months because Jimmy’s DNA is extremely aggressive about making sure his offspring don’t get poisoned, and she’s really hoping, seeing how little morning sickness Abby had, that Tim’s
DNA is a bit more laid-back on the _don’t poison me_ front, and will allow her to experience a pregnancy where she’s not constantly keeping barf bags on her person.

Abby did mention that, of course, her own chemistry is a big part of this, too, and it might just be that her body really doesn’t like pregnancy hormones, but… with a new sperm donor, being pregnant might suck a hell of a lot less for her.

She can hope, at least.

“So… what’s your gut saying?” Abby says to Breena as they eat dinner together, without the guys, on the night of the 21st.

Breena just shrugs. “It’s at most one day. No way to know.”

“I’m not asking _know_; I’m asking _feel_!” For the first time in a while, Abby’s looking really happy. Probably because they’ve been ordered to quit work tomorrow evening, and stay quit until the 26th. So, not only will they finally get some real rest, it’s also almost time to get into Merry Christmas Mode!

Plus, Sean dropped yesterday, which means she can _breathe_ again, and that’s making her a lot happier about life in general.

Add in possible new baby on top of that, and she’s in a really good mood.

Breena inclines her head, in a somewhat less good mood. Yes, this weekend is going to be awesome, but they had an awful case today, a burial for a toddler, and those cases always kill her. “I’m not feeling it.”

“Really?”

Breena shrugs again. “Never got pregnant first try out before. Why would this time be any different?”

Abby gives her a naughty grin. “I got pregnant first time. Maybe…”

“Yeah. Maybe. We’ll see. I didn’t think I was pregnant with Anna, not really, until I started puking.”

Abby gets that, and gets what Breena doesn’t say. How Anna was something of a special case, and not really believing it was part of a defense mechanism. So, she shift the topic a little. “The killer part is how every little thing makes you wonder. Is that gas or is my body changing? Wait, am I tired because I had a long day, or is Baby starting to suck the life out of me?”

Breena chuckles at that. “Did I eat something my system doesn’t like or is this morning sickness day one?” Breena nods at that. “Yeah. And yeah, feeling it or not, I’m going to be doing that until my period shows up again, or doesn’t.”

Abby squeezes her hand.

They eat for a moment, and then Breena says, “So… what’s your gut saying?”

“That I can have one more bite of dinner, bringing my total up to six bites before I’m full.”
Breena gives her the *quit playing* look.

Abby shakes her head. “I’m not feeling it, either. Was kind of hoping you’d be feeling it and…”

Breena nods. “Yeah. I get it.”

“Just means more fun next time.”

“Assuming we aren’t all completely exhausted because little boy here decided to show up for next cycle’s fertile week.”

Abby pokes Sean. “You make sure to let your little brother get in the works. Hear that?”

She looks awfully surprised to get a series of quick kicks back. Breena sees her look shocked, and then watches as her stomach bulges under her goth-Christmas-t-shirt. (Skeleton reindeer pulling a bone sleigh with Santa Death sitting in it.)

“I guess we take that as a yes?”

Abby makes an amused face and says, “That’s how I’m reading it.”

Breena takes another bite of her dinner. “Little brother?”

Abby nods, smile on her lips. “Might not be feeling him in the works, yet, but I know he’s a he.”

Breena touches Sean’s bump. “Yeah. I think you’ll be getting a little brother, too.”

On the 22\(^{\text{nd}}\), all three of her spouses are home, at once, and all three of them are tired enough that after dinner, they all crash.

Breena’s not exhausted, so, after doing her nightly rounds, (every night she makes sure the girls are all properly tucked in and sleeping) she heads downstairs, turns on one of her playlists, and settles in with her account books.

Time to make sure that Palmer and Slater’s has everything on order that it’s going to need from March to June.

And, she’d have to admit, feeling it or not, boring work or not, she does wonder, and feel a little spur of joy, when half an hour into it, her eyes are drooping.

So, she heads up, goes through her own bedtime routine, and slips into bed, finally hearing all the sleepy time sounds that mean *home* to her.
The Night Before The Night Before

Tim supposes that they should be up bright and early on the 23rd, get the girls all packed up, and the presents, and then off to the House to make merry and get ready for their first Christmas in their family home.

And, he’ll admit, that about 6:55, he did open one eye, look around Jimmy and Breena’s bedroom, aware of the sound of Abby in the bathroom, and the feel of Jimmy’s arm against his back, and for a good second he thought about getting up and getting a start on the day, but then the toilet flushed, and Abby came back to bed, soft and sleepy in his arms, and he thought fuck it, and went back to sleep for four more hours.

There was something Tim had been hoping for when he drifted back to sleep at about 6:58 in the morning. Namely, it’s been a long time since he’s gotten any real loving in, and Abby was all warm and soft in front of him, and Jimmy was behind him, and he was certainly starting to feel almost frisky (in a rather passive, sleepy, how-about-I-roll-onto-my-back-and-you-take-care-of-me sort of way) as sleep stole over him again, filling his mind with some rather lovely dreams.

Unfortunately, for the sake of making those dreams come true, when he woke up again at almost eleven, the only other person in the bed was Jimmy, and while it’s true Jimmy was in his dreams, in the dreams he wasn’t the one Tim was fucking.

Tim rolls away from Jimmy with a groan, and a very hard erection. The noise and the sudden lack of a warm body pressed to his side wakes Jimmy up. He blinks a few times, feeling out of sorts. He’s slept too long, his dreams, the somewhat confused images that tend to fill his mind when he’s overly tired, and it’s about time for him to get another snack, so his blood sugar is starting to slip, are all combining to make him feel off.

So, he’s not being overly attentive to Tim. He’s paying attention to the mug of chai (mostly spiced, warm milk, not too much tea) and the handful of almonds that Breena has sitting on his nightstand for him.

Tim, meanwhile, isn’t entirely sure what to do with himself. He knows exactly what he’d be doing if he was alone, or if one of the girls had been in the bed. But, even though Jimmy’s… Jimmy, he’s not entirely comfortable jerking off while Jimmy munches down his mid-morning snack two feet away.

Finally, after a few bites of food, and several gulps of his chai make Jimmy start to feel human again, he notices that Tim’s just sort of lying next to him, staring at the ceiling, looking really pensive, with his hands very carefully on top of the blankets, crossed over his chest.

“You okay?”

That jerks Tim out of whatever’s going on in his head. (Namely, what the hell is the protocol for getting off when you’re alone with the spouse you don’t find sexually desirable?)

“Uh.” Tim swallows. “Yeah.” He shakes his head a bit as an idea finally hits. “Shower.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes. He knows what Tim’s looking to do. Hard not to. Not with the way the sheet was tenting, and the erection that’s leading the way to the shower as Tim heads in that direction isn’t
subtle. It’s very much not normal, gotta pee, morning wood.

“Leave it alone,” Jimmy says as Tim’s getting out of bed. “The girls have plans for you tonight.”

Tim stops, two feet away from the bed. Several thoughts hit him at once, and they all sort of flow out together. “Tonight? That’s hours from now?” (he sounds a little whiny on that bit) “What plans? Why just for me? And you know, why?”

Jimmy smiles at him. He’s been in on this Christmas plan (originally Birthday plan, but that didn’t happen) for a while, now. “Just remember. If you shake it more than twice, you’re playing with yourself.”

Tim rolls his eyes, muttering about how he’s going to end up squirting the damn ceiling if he even tries to pee like this, hoping that the shower will help him deflate, because Jimmy’s comment is reminding him that he does have to pee in addition to being horny, and wondering if there’s going to be anything even remotely distracting enough today to keep him from being a horny jackass.

Fortunately, getting to the house, there are indeed distractions. Lots of them.

Jethro’s been making sure that furniture gets delivered, put in the right rooms, and working his way through some assembly.

As of yesterday, when Penny and Ducky got home, he’s had two extra sets of hands for that, too.

And, a good bit of the furniture in question came already assembled, and just had to be deposited on top of the Post-It Notes tagging where it goes. Or part of the price of having it delivered involved getting it assembled, and then deposited onto said Post-It Note, so it’s not like they’re walking into a house full of unpacked Ikea boxes, but… there’s still a lot of assembling left to do. (Attaching drawer pulls, putting books onto shelves, getting cushions in place, and in a few cases, actually putting furniture together. Ziva and Tony have a rocking chair in their room that had ‘some assembly required’ on the write up, that apparently was code for ‘you’re getting a box of wood and screws.’)

There’s getting the place ready to live in. Making sure all the beds have sheets, there are towels and soap in the bathrooms, glasses and plates put away in the kitchen, all of those little details that go into making a house functional.

There’s the Christmas grocery run, which needs to be planned and executed. And not just the food for the feast, which they’ve been collecting for a while, but little things like cream for the coffee, (Hell, coffee for the coffee. Yes, Gibbs has the kitchen stocked with the blend he and Abbi drinks, but in that the rest of this crew won’t touch that unless it’s at least ½ milk, it’d be a good plan to get some coffee they drink, and tea, real tea, not ‘tea dust’ for Ducky,) or butter to go on toast, and a toaster to make the toast in. They’re lacking the kind of staples that people generally don’t think much about until it’s too late. Say, 7:30 in the morning, and little girls are looking for their Cheerios, which is when the memory of a total lack of yellow Cheerio boxes in the grocery cart hits.

Babies looking for Cheerios isn’t happening on Pop’s watch. So, grocery planning is happening with Marine thoroughness and precision.

On top of that, there’s decorating. In the basic sense of put up pictures and add knick-knacks to make the place look lived in and in the less basic sense of decking the halls with boughs of holly.

It’s going to be a busy day.
The McPalmer branch gets home a bit after lunch.

So, first up on the list of “distractions” is getting little girls into a mindset where they might possibly be willing to sleep in this new place.

This means exploration time for them. Toddlers cannot be dropped into a new place and expected to sleep until they are comfortable in that new place. They get into the house, say their hellos to everyone, and, though it’s not the first time the girls have been here, it is the first time they’ve been here since it’s looked like an actual house on the inside.

Tim and Jimmy put baby gates up on the stairs, and then... “Okay, you can run around. Go check everything out,” Jimmy says.

Molly and Kelly are just standing in the main room, staring at this huge space. It’s loud, and bustling with people all moving around doing stuff. It’s almost too much new. Little pink lips are almost on the verge of quivering at this onslaught of new. Fortunately, there are some well-beloved old things, too, and Ducky takes Molly by the hand, lifting Anna in his other arm, as Penny picks up Kelly, and walks them around the house. (Mona trailing happily behind. She’s also enjoying finally being invited in to explore, too.)

Cuddled in Ducky and Penny’s arms, with Duck’s soft burr and Penny’s higher notes explaining where they are, and what’s around them, and who’s rooms are where, the girls start to relax and settle in.

Giving the girls some time to explore buys their parents a few minutes to check on their nursery. Abby and Jimmy sigh with relief when they get in there. Both cribs are put together and pretty much in the right spots. And Molly’s bed is tucked into the corner, looking ready to go. (Of all the furniture in the house, these are the pieces Gibbs paid the most attention to. Yes, he’d prefer the kids were all in beds he made, but, at the rate this is going, with a crib for Sean needing to get done fast, and more than a few other projects with looming due dates, he admitted that buying cribs made sense. He did hover, annoying the workmen, making sure they put them together right.)

All they have to do now is get sheets, pillows, blankets, and much loved stuffed animals onto those beds, and little girls will have their napping place set to go.

Tim and Breena come in, suitcases in hand, and that was all they needed.

It takes about ten minutes to get the room all set up. Molly’s got her bed in the corner furthest from the door, her little stuffed corgi, loved into matted, grayish, vaguely-dog-shaped lump, on her pink pillow. Kelly and Anna’s cribs are both on the opposite wall. Kelly has the cream colored crib, and her pet stuffed skull is ready to be snuggled up with. Anna has the coral crib, and as of this point, she doesn’t much care for stuffed animals. She does have a favorite blanket, which Jeannie made for her, and that’s in her crib.

On the far wall, between Molly’s bed and Kelly’s crib are three boxes for storing toys, and a low bookshelf, currently pretty empty, but there is a copy of the Night Before Christmas and Goodnight Moon on it. In the middle of the room is a large rocking chair, with room for a grown up and a few
little girls. There’s a dresser with three large drawers next to the door, one for each girl. No changing
table, because all three girls are at the point where it’s easier to change diapers with them lying on the
floor or standing up.

And all of it is in shades of cream, pink, and coral.

Ducky leads the girls down the hall, toward their room, telling them that they’re about to see their
room, and how everyone has a room here.

“Mona?” Kelly asks, twisting in Penny’s arms to see the dog walking along side of them.

“Mona shares Pop’s room,” Penny replies.

“Mona can sleep with us,” Molly adds.

“Yes!” Kelly says, very definite.

Anna gurgles in what appears to be an appreciative manner.

Mona’s not paying too much attention to this conversation, as she’s sniffing every inch of the
hallway.

When they get into the room, and Penny and Ducky put the girls down, letting them explore the
much smaller, and easier to deal with space, on their own. Mona apparently approves of the idea of
this being a sleeping place for her. She hops up into the rocking chair, looks a little startled when it
shifts under her weight, tentatively turns around a few times on the cushion, and flops down for a
nap of her own.

It does take about twenty minutes longer than usual to get the girls down, but eventually they
determine that all of their stuffies are where they’re supposed to be, and the soothing sound of
Mona’s tiny snore helps them settle in.

(After all, as Tim points out after reading Goodnight Moon for the third time, if Mona can sleep in
here, they can, too.)

Tim’s the last one out, quietly closing the door behind him, and then heads across the room to Jimmy
and Breena’s space. No one else is in there, but he still stops for a moment to look around.

It’s done.

Soft, cool beachy colors. The off white furniture goes along with the colors in the room to make the
whole place feel tropical. (Though the snowflakes he can see flurrying down through the windows
are doing their best to negate the tropical feel.)

He flops onto the bed for a moment, just to get the feel of it. Firm, springy, a sinfully soft and fluffy
microfiber plush blanket under his hands. Yeah, he approves.

“Feeling lazy?” Jimmy asks, heading in, carrying an extra two pillows, placing them at the head of
the bed.

“Just testing it out. Gonna do it in my room in a minute.” Tim sits up and smooths out the blanket.
Jimmy smiles at that. “First thing I did, too.”

Tim nods, heading toward his room, getting ready to be useful.

If Jimmy and Breena’s room is the tropical get away overlooking the beach, his room is the dark, sultry harem, a gem of forbidden pleasures hidden away behind walled gardens.

It might not be done, not yet, but it feels right. It even smells right. (Though he notices that Abby’s got a cone of incense burning, which is likely why it smells right.)

Breena’s tucking the sheets, rich, satiny, amethyst, around the extra-large, low to the floor mattress. Abby’s unboxing and fluffing the scores of jewel-toned pillows. He looks around, seeing that the gauzy curtains that will flow around the bed from the ceiling haven’t been put up yet, and he goes off in search of the box holding them, and a step ladder.

Breena’s noticed, as she’s been working on getting the house set up. First their rooms, and then more of the house in general, that Gibbs keeps popping up and snagging her spouses. But not her.

She doesn’t know what those three are up to, but she’s sure it’s for her.

She smiles at that, happily humming, *It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas*, as she and Penny get the Gibbs Clan crest up on the chimney.

Gibbs has been stealing Breena’s loves.

He may have been heavily involved in designing and figuring out how to put her ring together, but those three are going to make the real one.

So, one by one, he’s grabbed them, taken them to the boat house, and showed them the different stages of the prototypes he’s built.

First step is cutting the blank. Each blank is six inches long by 3/4ths of an inch square. The first set of cuts is to split it down the middle lengthwise.

Gibbs loves hand tools. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t have any electric ones. Sometimes, a power tool is the right tool for the job, and if the job is trying to get a ring done in less than a day, power tools come in handy.

So, he’s got his jig saw set, along with a guide. It’s a very easy first cut. Put the blank in the guide, turn on the saw, grab the pusher, and gently push the blank until it’s split.

Next cut, and again he’s got guides for this. He’s sure that all three of them have steady hands and can likely do this without a guide, but this close to wanting it done, and with this little room for error, he’s not taking any chances. Next cut, both the cut sides get stacked on top of each other, and the blank gets cut into six two inch by 3/8ths sections.

Then comes the tricky cuts. Miter box time. Angling the cuts so that all three pieces will slant into
each other and form a triangle took Gibbs a bunch of tries to work out. He knew how to do it for a square, could see that pretty easy, but a triangle took some trial and error. Eventually, he got it, and he stands there in the boathouse, with each of them, showing how to slot each tiny bit of wood into the miter box, and this time, they use a small hand saw.

Gibbs finds it interesting to watch the three of them working at this. Tim, for example, didn’t need to be talked through how to set the angels. He, apparently, could see the damn things in his head (which would have been handy when Gibbs was working through the prototype. Alas, Tim doesn’t know that everyone else can’t, automatically, see how to slant the cuts to make them do what he wants them to.) But, he’s shaky on the cutting side of it, taking probably twice as long to get a good straight cut than either of his spouses.

Jimmy, on the other hand, needs help getting the wood into the miter box right. He can’t see the angles in his head. He knows what they need to do, but how to make them happen… Not part of what he can do. He can, on the other hand, whip through the cutting with ease. Once he’s got his bits of wood set, he just zips through cutting them. Apparently, years of going through bone means he’s pretty handy with a saw.

Abby’s the easy one. She can see how the angles work and does enough physical work with her hands that getting straight even cuts only takes one practice shot for her.

By the time the girls are awake, there are two, glued and clamped, triangles. After dinner, they’ll drill them, cut the circle, and hopefully, get it on the lathe.

Gibbs and Abby are heading back in from the boat house when Abby says to him, “So, I’m hearing rumors that Abbi might be in for a very Merry Christmas.”

Gibbs grins and nods, satisfied pride radiating off of him. “Got it done day before yesterday.”

Abby beams at him, and both of them watch as the last car pulls into their driveway.

“Speak of the devil… I mean, not that Abbi’s the devil… Uh…”

“We’re good Abbs. Go in, warm up.”

“You gonna go warm her up?”

Gibbs smiles again, waves, and heads off through the fine snowfall to Abbi’s car.

He’s standing by the side of the driveway when she parks, looking happy to see her.

“Hi,” Abbi says, stepping out, wrapping him in a hug and warm kiss.

“Hi, back. How was the drive?”

She nudges her snow tires. “Nothing I’m not used to. Little slippery, and some of the Virginia drivers are doing the annual dance of the snow morons,” He sighs at that. There’s something about Virginia drivers, they forget, every single year, how to drive in snow, even though, every single year, it snows
in Virginia. “but, all in all, not too bad.”

“You’ve seen worse.”

“I grew up in Montana. They don’t even know what winter is out here.”

He nods at that, too. “So, you really off?”

She grabs her cell out of her pocket, and with gloved fingers, turns it off. “Omagi’s got the house number if anything blows up. Short of that, I’m really off until 08:00 Monday.”

Gibbs flashes her a big grin, grabs her go bag, and leads her into the house.

The warmth and light of the house after the cold dark of the driveway is almost blinding. It’s so bright. Apparently when Tim when through with the lighting schematic, he decided the house should be visible from Mars. Or maybe, as Abbi takes off her coat and looks around some, it’s just possible that some of merry makers in this crew decided that the house needed Christmas lights on the mantle, and on the banisters leading up to the second floor.

Add in the fire in the fireplace, and the regular lights, and it’s bright.

And loud! Little girls are running around, getting the lay of the land as Mona chases them, barking. Adults look evenly split between putting up pictures on the mantle and getting dinner ready. She can hear, dimly, symphonic Christmas music, so she’s guessing that’s Ducky’s addition to the noise.

Gibbs takes her coat, hanging it up in a packed full closet. (Hmmm… maybe they need a coat hanger or a rack or something, because thirteen sets of winter gear don’t fit well in a standard coat closet.) She kicks off her boots, placing them on the rug next to the door with the long line of boots ranging in size from Anna’s tiny, little mostly decorative knit, pink footie boots, to Tony’s size 12 work boots.

“Hey!” Breena sweeps over and hugs her. “Good! You made it. Lasagna’s just out of the oven. Dinner in ten, okay?”

Gibbs nods at Breena, taking Abbi’s hand, looking at her, eager to show off. “C’mon.” He tugs her gently toward the stairs.

He’s been sending pictures as he’s been getting their section done, but she hasn’t seen the grand reveal, yet, and Gibbs is eager to show it off.

Their section is on the third floor. Intentionally. His knees may not love all the stairs, but he does love quiet, and when he was looking at spots where their room could be, they had a choice between a section above the McPalmer wing, with lots of space, or take the top floor with the good windows, looking at the woods and, now in the winter, when the leaves are gone, the river. Given the option of listening into what’s likely to be loud, kinky sex (Though he did make sure there was extra sound-proofing in both the McPalmer wing, and his own area. Gibbs doesn’t want to hear his kids teasing him about being loud.) with lots of space, and a smaller space with a great view over the library section of the house, Gibbs told his knees to shut up and deal, and picked the smaller section on the top.

And now, as he’s taking Abbi up to finally see the space they designed together, his knees aren’t complaining at all. (He is a little short of breath, but it’s worth it.)
One thing he and Abbi agreed on, or had in common, is the fantasy of the little cabin in the woods, far off the beaten path to be out of the way, but close enough to the water to have a boat. (Ultimately, if it was just the two of them, some rocky, tree filled bit of the coast of Maine would be perfect, but there’s a lot to be said for being 1500 miles closer to your family.)

So, that’s what they built for themselves.

They ripped out the bit of attic above them, making their space high rather than wide. The whole inside has been done to look like exposed logs. Cool browns and blue-gray old wood. The floor is rustic, smoothed down wood, covered with a rag rug in front of the bed, and a fluffy, white sheepskin rugs on each side of the bed. Gibbs put in a gas fireplace for them, not quite what they were hoping for, but much easier than ripping a hole in the roof they just built to put a chimney in, across from their bed.

It doesn’t smell or sound right, but it’s warm and provides the right sort of light.

That bed is, this time of year, snuggly piled with thick blankets and quilts in blues and grays. White sheets and pillow cases peek out from behind those blankets.

Their bed is tucked under a loft, behind the ladder that leads up to it. Up there, there’s the slanted ceiling just below the roof, more exposed wood, two cushy, over-stuffed chairs, and an ottoman for foot resting.

Gibbs doesn’t love the furniture, not yet. It’s all decent, solid, inexpensive wood. It looks nice, and as long as the kids aren’t rough-housing up here, it’ll hold up okay. But his plan is to replace each piece (except the chairs and ottoman) with something made by his own hands.

Right now, with the lights on and the sun long down, the windows are just mirrors. But in the morning, they’ll have the view of the woods crusted in snow and a thin gleam of river flowing behind them.

Gibbs is standing in the doorway, watching Abbi looking around, huge smile on his face.

She finishes looking around and grins at him. “It’s home.”

He nods back, still smiling, “Yeah!”
Dinner for thirteen, at a table big enough for all of them, one booster seat, and two high chairs.

It’s the first meal they can remember where everyone has enough room that there’s no danger of sticking an elbow into someone else’s food or face.

Tony and Ziva ended up in charge of the meal, so it’s vegetarian lasagna, several loaves of savory garlic bread, huge piles of green salad, and strictly speaking, a bit more red wine than anyone needed.

And, it is the red wine, or specifically, who is drinking it, and who isn’t, that gets the speculation about possible Baby Palmer number four in the works. Because, of course, Breena does not know if she’s pregnant or not, and yes, it’s likely true that a glass of wine with dinner is unlikely to cause any harm if she is pregnant, but given her history, she’s not taking any chances. Any cycle she’s trying to get pregnant means no alcohol, no rare/raw meat or eggs, certain cheeses go off the list as well as certain sorts of fish, and granted, no one in this crew smokes, but if they did, they’d be exiled to the outer reaches of the house until her period started or she got to the second trimester.

Granted, with Molly at the table, and Breena and Jimmy’s history, that speculation is going to be happening behind closed doors, but Breena opting for a glass of cider instead of wine makes smiles that much brighter.

After dinner, Gibbs cuts out with Tim, Jimmy, and Abby, on some ‘last minute Christmas stuff’ which by this point everyone knows is code for ‘present for Breena, likely involving wood, probably a lathe…’

Both of his little triangle mock ups are nicely solid. Which means it’s drilling, cutting, and then lathe time.

Drilling goes fine. Abby’s got Breena’s ring size, and a little bit of googling lets them know what sized drill bit will go along with that. Gibbs grabs one just a tiny bit smaller, so they’ve got some wood they can finish off and not have the ring end up too big.

They fit the triangle into the drill, Abby presses it down, and in a minute the first cut that makes this look like something almost ringish is made.

Tim’s got the jigsaw for the circular cut, which makes Gibbs a little nervous. They’ve only got two of these, and if they both get muffed, there’s going to be a very long trek to get to the nearest mall for some last minute presenting.

But, he gets through the circular cut just fine. It’s a tad lopsided, but a few seconds on the lathe will take care of that.

And, though Tim wanted the lathe, Jimmy pointed out that using extreme delicacy with razor sharp tools is pretty much his day job, so maybe he’s the guy who should get the job where if you press too
hard for a second with the blade you wreck the whole project.

Tim would have to admit that Jimmy has a point with that, and hands the chisel over as Gibbs shows them how to set up the lathe.

It is fun. The lathe is spinning. Jimmy barely touches the ring with his chisel and tiny tendrils of wood start spinning off. After what feels like less than a second, Gibbs stops him, and the lathe, and they look at it.

It’s a ring. Not finished yet. The wood is still a little rough, but it’s really a ring. Their ring. For Breena. Almost done.

They take turns on the sandpaper, each one doing a different grit, until the paper they’re working with feels almost smooth.

Abby looks up when they get to the second to last step. “Superglue?”

“I really works,” Gibbs replies, showing them how to use the superglue to finish the wood.

Jimmy drips a bit of it onto a cloth, and gets the lathe going again, rubbing it into the wood. This time when the lathe stops, the woods, flowing into each other, gleam.

One more sanding, one more layer of finish, and one last sand, and the outside is done.

The flip the ring, putting it into the chuck, and do it again for the inside.

Half an hour all told, and all that needs to happen is a bit more time to cure. Breena’s ring is done.

Tomorrow morning, one of them will smuggle it in, and at some point, tomorrow night, it’ll find a place in Breena’s Christmas stocking.

All four of them head back into the house, feeling giddy. *This* is the fantasy of Christmas they’ve all wanted.

They turn in pretty early.

Gibbs and Abbi have a certain look, and everyone in this group knows how to read that look. (A certain amount of smirking goes into wishing them a *good* night.) Ziva’s got the pregnant-and-in-need-of-sleep, look on her face. She’s fading fast, and Tony’s eager to break in smallish entertainment room they’ve got upstairs. Time to see if McTechy knew what he was talking about when he picked out the TV and sound system. He dangles his copy of *The Man From UNCLE* in front of Ducky and Penny, “Come on, you know you want to see it!”

Penny smiles at that, linking arms with Ducky and Tony. “You know, a long time ago I did have something of a crush on Illya. He was so mysterious,” she’s eyeing Ducky as she says it, thinking about some of the pictures of him they’ve put up on the mantle.

Ducky rolls his eyes at that, he’s been hearing about how much he looks like Illya Kuryakin for years now. “I never have seen the resemblance.”

Penny gives him a gentle shove.

Tim, Jimmy, Abby, and Breena, listen to them heading up, then they all look at each other, grinning,
and head to their own section of the house.

Tim was sure they were going to spend the first night in their room, but, he’s sitting on Jimmy and Breena’s bed, as Abby fetches something out of the top dresser drawer.

It’s a box. A nice box. Maybe four inches on a side, white, with a black ribbon tied in a neat bow on top. Abby places it in his hands. Tim glances up from the box in his hands to the wide, wide grin on Abby’s face.

“Uh?” She’s still grinning. Jimmy and Breena, who have hopped onto the bed, are also grinning, too. “Abby?”

“Open it!”

“Okay… Um…” He’s tugging on the ribbon. “Not that I’m ever going to complain about presents, but… It’s December 23. What are we celebrating?”

“Your birthday, late.”

“Didn’t we do this last month?” They’d done their birthday celebration a month ago, when Gibbs and Abbi took the girls for the night.

She’s still grinning, and Breena and Jimmy have awfully happy looks, too.

“You weren’t up for this last month,” she says as he pulls out a length of black silk rope.

“Oh!” The grin spreads across his face as he remembers. It feels like fifty years ago, but it has only been a few months. The girls tied Jimmy up and played with him, and Tim wanted that, but he was too hurt for it. Abby promised him that on his birthday, he’d get to be the one tied up. And, of course, on his actual birthday, he worked until one, slept in the office, got home just long enough to grab a shower and change, and then back again.

Now he knows why they’re in Jimmy and Breena’s room. His and Abby’s bed is low mattress on the ground. There’s nothing to tie someone to in there. Jimmy and Breena’s bed is some sort of white coated metal. It has a beautiful headboard of vine-y twists and turns that offer almost endlessly customizable options for tying someone down.

He’s finally feeling rested again, he’s got a brand new bed with tons of tying options, black silk ropes in his lap, and a huge grin on his face.

“Baby!” Tim’s night just got a hell of a lot better. “What do you want me to do?”

Abby glances at the clock. “I want you in bed, in forty-five minutes, completely shaved bare, and ready to play.”

Tim licks his lips, feeling his dick starting to harden. “How ready?”

“All cleaned up, shaved bare…” Abby looks him up and down… “Collar and eyeliner.”

Tim thinks that through. He’s pretty fuzzy, well, for him, and he doesn’t think he can get it all done that fast. “Uh… Fifty minutes? Not sure I can get everything shaved and my eyes done.”
“Fifty minutes. Wrist cuff, too. You keep that on.”

“All right. Anything else? Scent?”

“I’ll lay it out for you,” Breena says.

It’s with a huge grin and a major spring in his step that Tim heads to the bathroom to get ready.

The Slater’s bathroom in North Carolina provided a lot of inspiration for their own bathroom.

It’s not quite a temple to all things water related, but it’s close. Most of the bath is in dark gray slate or brushed stainless steel. It’s very cool, very modern looking.

They set it up with two toilets, one on each side of the shower, tucked into their own little rooms for extra privacy. Across from the toilets and shower is a bank of three sinks with mirrors over them. The doors are on each side of the room, between the toilets and sinks, and all of it centers around the best part: the shower.

They had a lot of fun designing how they wanted it to work.

On the one end, opening into the bathroom, is a glass door. On the other end there’s frosted glass blocks to let in light from the outside window, a shelf for holding everything, and more dark gray slate. The sides are slate walls that have two shower heads each, and a bench for easy sitting, lounging, or storage.

In the middle of the ceiling are three more shower heads, pouring water straight down.

Tim managed to fit waterproof LEDs into a strip around the top, so it’s not dark in there.

When they were setting it up, Jimmy joked about that shower being bigger than his college dorm room. And, yes, it was a joke, but not by a whole lot. That shower is six by eight, plenty of room for all of them, and the dorm room in question was eight by ten.

And now, Tim gets to turn as many of those faucets on as he likes, and have at it.

He’s gotten the first step of “cleaning up” done, as well as running the trimmers over all of the hair below his eyelashes, and is in the shower, rinsing off, splashing away with glee at this much hot water just pouring over him from all directions in all sorts of different patterns (yes, they got the showerheads that offer different water settings), getting ready to shave everything, when Jimmy knocks and steps into the bathroom.

“Hey.”

“They send you to clean up, too?” Tim asks from his spot on the bench in their shower.

“Nope. I’m… researching.”

Tim has to think about that. He’s not sure if he heard that right. He turns off all but one of the
faucets, which makes it a lot easier to hear in there, and then Tim turns around, so he’s facing Jimmy, wondering what the hell Jimmy needs to research.

Jimmy’s a dull shape through the fogged glass of the door, but with most of the faucets off, he’s significantly more audible. “Keep shaving, you didn’t get a time extension.”

Tim props his foot back up on the bench and gets working on taking the hair off his toes and feet. “What are you researching?”

“Okay, remember when they tied me up, it was just the girls playing with me. You were mostly watching.”

“Yeah.” Tim does remember that, fondly. He had a good time that night. Jimmy had a better one, but… Well, he’s got the good time coming for him tonight.

“And… okay. I know I’ve asked you not to Dom me.”

He remembers that, too, as he rinses off the razor, and starts on his right leg.

“Okay…”

“Can I help with running you? If it’s not cool, I’ll just watch, and get myself off, but…”

Tim’s eyebrows shoot up. “Are you asking if you can Dom me?”

“More like can I help them do it, and maybe… offer suggestions.”

His lips purse as he thinks about that. “What kind of suggestions are you thinking?”

Jimmy’s silent for a second and Tim inserts him shrugging into his mental image of Jimmy leaning back against the sinks, looking in his general direction. (He can’t really see more than a bluish outline through the fog.) “I don’t know. But… I mean… They’re both really good at this, but… I’ve got a more… concrete… idea of what dicks like than they do.”

Tim thinks about that. “True…”

“Not saying they don’t know how to play you, but… They were suggesting that if there was something that I thought you might really like… something they didn’t come up with…”

“Oh. Uh… Yeah, sure, chime in.” Tim licks his lips, feeling a quick flush of gratitude that he can’t see Jimmy all that well right this second. He’s thinking about the bigger question there, and he’s not sure how that’s making him feel. So, for right now, as he’s feeling a bit confused, the fog between them is nice. “Would you want to Dom me?”

He’s not sure what Jimmy’s doing out there, but his voice sounds a little startled as he says, “What?”

“Like… I mean… Uh… Shit.” Tim doesn’t know what he means, not really. He stops shaving for a moment to collect his thoughts. “Okay… I still don’t want to have sex with you.” He knows that part, though he’d be hard pressed, right now, to define where the line between sex and not sex is for him and Jimmy. Probably, like not really wanting to jerk off with him two feet away, the line has something to do with sex where the girls aren’t around. “But… It’s about trust, and release, and putting yourself in someone else’s hands, knowing they’ll do you right. So… Yeah. You want to Dom me, sure. I call you James, the game stops, but… Yeah. Just like Breena and Abby, you can play with me.”
Jimmy’s touched by the trust implicit in that statement, but he’s also wondering what Tim means by it. From what he’s seen of this with Abby, this aspect of the relationship might be based in trust and respect, but it’s also entirely sexual. Jimmy licks his lips, thinking hard. “If I were to Dom you, what would I do with you?”

That’s the crux of the question for Tim, too. “I don’t know. Anything you want. Live action porn? Or like you were saying, if you’ve got something the girls aren’t seeing, sure, have at it.”

“Okay…” That helps some, but it’s not precisely clearing up the issue for Jimmy. “Am… I having at it, or getting them to have at it?”

Tim shrugs, but Jimmy can’t really see that. “Would you want to have at it?”

“Uh… probably not,” there aren’t a ton of situations Jimmy can think of off the top of his head where he’d rather do, whatever it is, than have the girls do it. But he can think of some, especially if part of what he’s doing is turning the girls on, too. “But it’s not impossible.”

“If you’re running the game, delegating, or not, that’s up to you.”

“Yeah, I know, but…”

That but hangs there for a moment as both of them try to figure this out. Finally Tim says, “If you want to do it yourself. Like… doing it yourself would be sexy, make you or me feel good, or you think the girls really want to see it, or… I don’t know, you don’t want to try to explain it to them or… just… whatever. Sure, have at it yourself. I mean…” Tim opens the door, looking Jimmy in the face, gesturing with his fingers to come in. “Get in here. I’m not having this conversation without looking at you.”

Jimmy strips off fast, while Tim keeps shaving, and is in the shower a moment later, sitting on the opposite bench, turning another one of the faucets on. After all if they have multiple jets he might as well get some hot water, too.

“You do your armpits?” he asks once he’s got his water to the temperature he likes, seeing Tim going after his underarms.

“She said bare, not just pubes. I’ve done this before.”

“Wow, okay…” Jimmy’s eying Tim’s body, which is getting more naked by the second, as he shaves his right armpit. “God, that’s got to itch like hell.”

Tim half shrugs. “Not too bad, at least, I’ve never done them on their own, and compared to my balls growing back in, I just can’t feel ‘em. And… it’s kind of stupid, deodorant goes on better without the hair.”

Jimmy nods like that makes sense to him. “So… you mean…” Jimmy’s getting them back on topic. The clock’s ticking down, so…

“So… I don’t have to ask Abby’s permission to touch her, you know? Or Breena’s. I just do, and if they don’t like whatever it is, they tell me, and we do something else. That’s how they play with me, too, and you, right?”

Jimmy nods along. “Yeah.” They’ve talked about this some, before. For the sake of this relationship, bodies are community property, everyone gets to play, but the person in the body gets final say on what’s going on.
“Okay, so you’re part of that deal. Something looks good, sure, try it. You know my hard lines, don’t step over them, at least, not without asking first. I’ve got no problem telling you ‘no’ if I don’t like something.”

Jimmy nods at that. “That’s… We’ve talked about that, so that’s part of it, kind of but… It’s the being in charge part of it. If you want to, if you see something, sure, you can play with me, that’s not the issue. I’m not comfortable with you running me. Maybe, I will be eventually, but right now, that’s too…” Jimmy lets it trail off, trying to think of a way to describe it.

“Femme?”

“Yeah. No… I don’t know. Maybe?”

Tim sniggers at that as he finishes up with his right armpit. “He says to the guy shaving all of his hair off.”

“Okay, yeah, irony. Anyway. That’s more what I’m asking about than…” he trails his hand up Tim’s hip as Tim stands up and starts going after his pubes.

Tim inclines his head, understanding, rinsing off his razor. “Uh… Look, I don’t have a problem taking orders. I worked for Gibbs for how long? And, especially a scene like this, being told what to do, or having control taken away, that’s the selling point.”

“I get that part of it. I like it just fine when the girls are doing it. But… I’ve had every other guy around me give me orders, but you. You don’t give me orders. I kind of like keeping it that way.”

“Oh.” Tim stops shaving for a second and nods at Jimmy. “I can get that. But… that’s just not part of what’s in my head. So, sure, you want to run things, go for it. I’m good.”

“Really?” Jimmy’s not sure about this being lopsided between them.

“Yeah. If it’s weird, I’ll tell you to cut it out, and go back to the girls running the show, but I don’t think it’ll be weird.”

Jimmy hangs out with Tim as he finishes up shaving. He even gives him a hand by putting the collar on him while he does his eyes, thus saving a few seconds. Which was a good thing, because Tim hit the bed at 49:42, which was cutting it a lot closer than he likes for this sort of mission.

When he hops onto the bed, Breena’s lighting candles around the room, and wearing nothing but a string of pearls and a smile.

Tim smiles, too. He remembers what she did to Jimmy with those pearls, and what he’d like her to do to him with them. Abby’s in the corner, naked, getting some music going. It’s soft and syncopated. No voice, but at least two saxophones. Tim approves.

He sees the bottle of Satyr on his nightstand, and asks, “Shall I put it on?”

“Yes, little bit, just on your wrists and neck,” Breena answers.

“It’s pretty whiffy right out of the bottle.”

“That’s okay. Put a little on Jimmy, too.”
Jimmy steps over to him. “How whiffy?”

Tim drips a tiny bit on Jimmy’s wrist, and he winces. “This better be the world record holder for ‘smells different on skin than it does in the bottle.’”

Tim nods. “On me, at least, it really is.” Tim finishes rubbing it from wrist to neck, though he’s wondering if he really wants this scent stuck to his collar.

He doesn’t have long to think. Abby turns to him, and curls a finger at him, drawing him to Jimmy’s dresser.

“Take a look. I want you to pick one out.” She has three toys laid out. His prostate massager, a string of anal beads, and the strap-on.

Tim swallows hard, his dick beginning to lengthen just at the idea of what’s going to happen tonight. “Oh. Good choices.”

Abby kisses the back of his neck, sniffing appreciatively, the scent’s already shifting, adding to the mood, as her hands settle on his hips. “Yes. What are you in the mood for, my pretty boy?”

Tim picks up the beads. It’s been a long time since they’ve played with them, and Jimmy and Breena have never seen them in action. “I was thinking that’s what Breena was planning on doing with the pearls.”

“No.” Abby kisses him, stroking his face, looking into black-rimmed, bright green eyes. “Wrong sort of fiber on the string. Not risking the cord snapping. We’re not ending tonight in the ER.”

“Thanks.”

“They just look pretty,” Breena adds. She’s leaning against her dresser, Jimmy in front of her, petting her hands down his back and sides, both of them watching Tim choose.

“And might feel good on my dick.”

“They will,” Jimmy says. At least, they had on his. They aren’t real pearls, but they’re good quality fakes, and they feel awfully nice lubed up and sliding over sensitive skin in a good firm grasp.

Abby takes the beads from Tim, twirling them around her fingers. They’re hard red plastic on a soft plastic cord, each one about the size of a nickel. The far end has a ring to make it easy to keep a hold of them, even with lubed fingers, plus it’s large enough to make sure the beads don’t get “sucked in.”

Tim grins at her playing with them, very, very pleased at where this is going to go tonight.

“On the bed?”

“Yep. On your back. Hands and legs spread.”

He lays down, assuming the position. “Talking?” he asks, as Abby trails the black rope up his hairless leg, raising goosebumps on his skin.

“If you like.”

“You know I like.”

“Yes, I do.” She knots the first rope to Jimmy and Breena’s headboard, and begins looping it around Tim’s hand and wrist. Right now, she’s on his left, the side that didn’t get hurt, so she uses familiar
knots, weaving rope between his fingers, around his wrist, making sure to get a good firm knot over his wrist, and then wraps the rope down his arm. “Lift up a bit,” and he does, so she can get the rope under his back, and started on his right. She takes more care with his right arm, making sure to keep the ropes off his shoulder and wrist. He’s got the knot at his elbow on his right side, with the rope just gently looped around his wrist.

They both know how to play the game well enough that he can clench his hand on the rope, or struggle as he likes, without putting too much stress on the parts of him that are still healing.

Abby then tucks a pillow under his head so he can have a better view of what’s about to come. Breena shifts the closet door a bit, so the mirror on it also gives him a great view of the bed. Abby trails the second rope down his chest, letting it barely touch his skin, just waking up his nerves, letting him know something good is about to come.

Tim purrs at that, arching into the caress.

His right foot is the one that didn’t get hurt, so she starts there, knotting the rope to the footboard, and then wrapping it into a cuff for Tim’s ankle. From there she loops it up his leg, wrapping it nice and snug. Mostly this is for how it looks, the part on his ankle’s what holding him. This bit up his leg just looks cool.

And feels nice. Silk on his skin, Tim likes that.

“She pats his hips and he does. Abby snugs the rope under his butt, and then wraps it over his hips, tying it back to the footboard. Not only can he not move his right leg, he also can’t scoot to the left.

He grins at that, too. She’s making sure he’s tied down, good.

She does a similar knot on his left, though this one is tied on his calf and knee. It probably won’t stay on as well as the ankle knot on his right will, but, like with his right arm, some concessions have to be made to still-healing joints.

Abby’s humming to herself, along with the music as she looks her work over. Breena’s getting pictures of it, Tim all stretched out and covered in knots, Jimmy’s pulled the armchair over, settling in to watch, and Tim’s feeling excellent.

“Ready to play?” Abby asks.

“Oh yeah!” he answers, eyes gleaming. Abby’s got him tied down, good, and his body loves it. He’s secure, can’t really move, black silk striping his skin. Tim wriggles a bit, seeing how much play he’s got, just enough. He can really struggle, but he won’t go anywhere.

Then Abby puts the whipped cream on top of the icing on the cake.

She turns away from him, heading to Breena’s dresser and picks up, a soft, thin red ribbon.

It’s new. He knows that, and he licks his lips because he can guess what’s about to get tied. And he’s right.

“Ah…” he pants as she carefully takes his dick in hand.

Abby grins at him, feeling him stiffen further as she gives him a few quick strokes. “Oh yeah. Gonna tie you up real pretty.”
“Yes. Please.”

She kisses the tip of his dick. Soft, wet, little smooch with just enough of a suck to make his hips thrust.

“So pretty, my love, all spread out like this for me.” She’s still grinning as she loops the silk behind his balls, and carefully twines it around them, and then up, twisting over his dick. It’s tight enough he can really feel it, but doesn’t hurt. She ties it with a tidy bow, and he’s fairly sure that when that bow gets untied and gently tugged, that lovely strip of silk will just slither over his skin.

Until then, it’s scarlet silk on skin that’s still white, but pinking up a bit more with each second. Skin that will probably be flushed red by the time that ribbon comes off.

Breena leans in, and with just the tip of her tongue traces the diamond pattern of skin visible on the side of his dick, and Tim groans.

He tries to come up, to touch her, but he can’t.

Breena looks slightly alarmed, and Abby says, “Timothy, explain the game to them, or we’re not playing.”

Tim bites his lip, hard, pulling himself out of play mode. He and Abby have played this game several times, but… especially if you haven’t seen it before, it could be disturbing.

“I’m going to groan, and struggle, and pull on the ropes, and try to get you to go faster, get me off sooner. I’m going to try to control this, but you aren’t going to let me. You’re going to take me over and play me however you like.”

“Go deeper, Timothy.” Abby says, making him explain further.

“By doing what you like, you’re doing what I want, too. I want to feel out of control. I want to feel my body, strong and primed and powerful, but out of my control. I want to fight it, and I want to lose this fight. At some point, I’ll surrender, give into it, but… I’m always giving into it. I want this. All of it.”

Jimmy and Breena glance at each other, and Abby, and she nods at them. “It’s still a game.”

“Best game ever,” Tim adds. “When you fight, it revs you up, and I like the way that feels. I like the way it feels to pull against the ropes.”

Jimmy takes note of what Tim’s saying there, and starts to come up with some ideas to kick that into hyper-overdrive territory. His job for tonight is mostly just watching, taking some pictures, too. He’s already talked to the girls about that, how, since this is Tim’s birthday present, he’s not exactly superfluous to the mix, but he doesn’t exactly need to be on the bed doing anything. Just being there, watching, adding his voice and pleasure to the mix is enough.

Still, if he does see something to add… And if it really is about kicking Tim’s biochemistry into overdrive…

Jimmy knows a little something about that. He settles in to watch, appreciate, and ponder.
Tim’s in heaven. He’s tied down good, and both girls are carefully dribbling warmed massage oil over his skin. One drop at a time, making sure he feels each hit on his skin.

He twitches at each one, pulling on the ropes, trying to move into the heat. But he can’t.

Then there’s hands. Warm, supple hands rubbing that oil into his arms and legs. Up his feet, around the ropes, slippery hands stroking deep into his muscles, circling light over his joints, fingernails trailing over his own, silk smooth skin.

God, and kissing. Abby’s kissing him. Soft wet lips on his, as four slick hands slip back and forth on his chest and stomach.

Abby’s mostly staying to his arms, hands, and lips. That makes sense to him, she’s really not very mobile right now, so getting the game in motion, and then handling the top third of him is a good game plan.

Breena’s got the rest of him, staying away from his dick as that pretty red ribbon gets tighter and tighter, and that tightness takes him a notch higher. Every heartbeat makes his dick feel more full, shifts his focus to it.

Tension and pull. Right now, hair gone, freshly shaved, Tim’s already sensitive skin is supercharged sensitive. He’s ultra-aware of every inch of silk pulling on his skin. He can feel the thread of the ropes across his arms and legs, snug on his hips, cradling under his completely bare balls and caressing up his dick.

The girls are kissing his now, slick, wet lips running over his flesh, flashing pleasure through his central nervous system, and he keeps trying to move into them, trying to up the pressure, which ups the tension in his body, ups the pull of his muscles against the ropes.

He’s holding that moment, the tight, hovering feeling of waiting for the gun to go off, as he keeps trying to buck his way off the bed and into their mouths.

Lips, wet, hot lips around his dick. Tim does buck up at that, and the ropes keep him down, keep him on the bed.

He’s watching Breena suck him into her mouth, groaning at how good it looks and feels, as Abby trails her fingers down his chest, and then shifts off the bed, getting the beads.

“Look at me, Tim.”

He does, pulling his eyes away from Breena’s mouth on his dick.

She pours a large dollop of lube into her hand and begins to work the beads through it. Tim groans again. He knows what’s coming next, and he starts to make himself relax. It’s not going to happen if he keeps straining the way he is right now.

Breena’s blowing him, fast and wet and lovely, and Abby’s rubbing slick hands over his hips, and inner thighs, it’s a maddening mix of building arousal, climbing tension, and lulling relaxation. His body enjoys the counter points as he tries to keep letting himself relax.
Hard to do when there’s a gorgeous woman with her dick in your mouth, and another one handing her a string of anal beads.

Breena lets his dick go, and Tim pouts, lifting his hips, trying to get her attention back on it, but she’s got other things to do.

“Hips down, baby,” Abby says, laying a slick palm on his hip.

Tim closes his eyes for a second, and complies. This part won’t work so hot if he doesn’t go along with it.

Abby moves his balls out of the way, gently stroking them, which is not helping him relax, but he’s sure as hell not going to ask her to stop, as Breena gently starts to push the first bead into him.

“Slow, gentle pressure, Breena, just hold steady, and his body’ll swallow it up.”

Abby’s right about that. Tim was a little startled the first time that happened. He was used to fighting his way through the getting anything into him part of this, but… Enough lube, gentle pressure, and, pop! in they go.

“You get the first two in, and he’ll take care of the rest.”

That’s true, too, and was also a surprise. The first one, once it’s in, doesn’t feel like much. It’s past the muscle, so there’s no real sense of fullness or stretch, but it’s not high enough up to get to his prostate, so there’s no pressure or pulse. Number two, that starts to get a little pressure on his prostate, which is really nice, and from there, his body will pull the rest of the string in on its own. (That’s why it’s got to have a wide ring at the end, otherwise, this is a disaster waiting to happen.)

That’s the game, he’ll pull them in, and then she pulls them out, as fast or slow as she likes. Each one going in provides a bit more pressure on his prostate, and pulling them out causes them to bump over it, each one feeling like a little orgasmic pulse.

It’s not cumming, no tingle, no more than a few drops of ejaculate, but it feels amazing.

“Feel good?” Abby asks as Breena gets the second one set.

“Oh, God!”

Abby kisses him, smiling, and heads back up to his face. “How about you put that tongue to good use?”

“God, yes!”

Pussy on his tongue, his dick and ass played with at the same time, this is all the happy birthday Tim could ever want.

He’s floating on it, feeling so good, all over.

When Abby starts to moan above him, Breena tugs the string, causing the beads to speed out of him, sending a quick succession of little jolts of pleasure through him, as she sucks his dick.
Jimmy’s wondering if the night just ended earlier than anticipated. The way Tim sounded when Abby got off is making him think Breena tipped him over accidentally, but she pulls back from his dick, and it’s not twitching, so…

Apparently not.

Jimmy’s been watching this, alternating between playing with himself and taking pictures, and deciding that he’s definitely got to try the anal beads at some point. He’d teased Tim when he’d stuck some in Tony’s honeymoon bag, but… now… seeing them in action. Might be fun.

Jimmy gets up to pet Abby some. She’s coming down, looking pretty happy, but Tim’s (obviously) not in any position to take care of her right now.

Abby’s feeling awesome.

That was an especially nice orgasm. It’s been way too damn long since the four of them have had the opportunity to play.

Once she’s calmed back down, as Jimmy’s petting her and playing with her hair, she gets her head back together on how to get Tim even more turned on.

She goes back to kissing him, both for her own pleasure, and because he likes it, too. And as she’s kissing him, a thought hits.

Tim’s nipples aren’t terribly sensitive. At least, not on a sexual level. (They can get somewhat irritated when his skin gets too dry, but that’s not any sort of good sensitive. That’s annoying sensitive.) By themselves they’re just two small, pink spots on his chest that, if he hadn’t just shaved, would be ringed with about ten fine dark blond hairs a piece.

Abby’s played with them in a lot of different circumstances, and so has Breena, and for the most part, not all the much happens. Unlike with the girls, his nipples aren’t really hardwired into his sexual response cycle. (He’s got four main erogenous zones: lips, genitals, ass, and thighs, and while playing with the rest of him feels nice, it doesn’t really turn him on.)

However, a lot of circumstances are not all circumstances. And there is one situation that Abby remembers from shortly after Tony and Ziva’s wedding, where she found that if she had an insanely turned on Tim, and went after his dick and his nipples at the same time, that got a good response.

Abby knows something else, given the chance to have someone touch his lips, or touch his nipples, Tim prefers his lips. They are hardwired to his dick. Any sort of sex is better for Tim if it involves kissing.

Which is why, if she’s got the option of kissing his lips or his nipples while they make love, she goes for his lips.

But there’s an extra set of lips, that aren’t doing all that much right now, and perhaps they could be volunteered to help out…

“Jimmy…” He glances away from Breena sucking Tim, and looks at her. Abby kisses him, then quietly explains her plan, and then asks if he’s cool with joining in, and Jimmy decides that yes, he’s cool with this. He grins back at her, and then heads to Tim’s other side.
Tim’s gone. There are no higher level brain functions left. There’s just exquisite wet slide on his dick, and the deep pulse of pressure on his prostate. There’s the feel of rope on his arms and legs, and the strain in his muscles.

Then, as Breena sucks the tip of his dick, keeping it well in his mouth with wet, little pulses around him, he feels another mouth, Abby, on his nipple.

Hard suck. Beena lets off, and Abby starts up.

He groans, hard, loud, trying to move, arms, legs, body straining against the ropes, and that shifts the beads, changes the feel of the pressure, shifts Abby and Breena’s rhythm, makes him moan again, makes the full, tingly, ripe, ready to burst sensation intensify, and then he’s kissing, too.

“Oh, God, Jimmy.” He’d forgotten Jimmy was there, but not anymore.

All three of them are sucking on him. Jimmy’s got his bottom lip between his lips, and Abby’s got his nipple, and Breena his dick, and he’s glowing with pleasure.

He’s gasping, and trying to move, trying to grab them all and fuck and fuck and fuck. He wants to drive his dick and his ass and his whole body into anything hot and wet, over and over building up to getting off.

His teeth are clenching, but Jimmy’s still got his lip, still sucking on it, rubbing his tongue over it, driving him insane.

His fingers have clenched, hands and feet tight, his back barely on the bed as he tries to force himself up, deeper into Abby and Breena’s mouths, but Breena keeps to the shallow sucking on just his tip, and his nipple’s already as deep into Abby’s mouth as it can get.

Breena tugs on the beads again, starting a long, slow, pulsing pull of them out of him.

He’s rocking into that, too. Each one nudges his prostate as they slip out, and she sucks hard with each pulse. It’s like cumming. No tingles, but each one matches the pulse part of climax.

Drier, sort of. He knows, can feel by how swollen his balls and prostate are, that he’s going to climax like a geyser, and he’s sure he’s leaking with each pulse, but they’re a drop at a time, no relief. Just continually feeling like he’s just fallen off the edge of an orgasm, without hitting the bottom.

Jimmy has a pretty good idea of how to take this up another notch. At least, he knows what would blow his mind (and load.) And he’s got explicit permission from Tim to do stuff like this to him.

But… he’s not sure.

Pain for the sake of pain isn’t part of Tim’s playbook. That’s one of his hard lines.

But, as he laps gently at Tim’s lower lip, alternating between sucks, what he’s thinking isn’t exactly pain for the sake of pain. It’s pain for the sake of endorphins. He’s fighting the ropes because that jerks up the endorphin level. He’s struggling because that increases the tension in his body. All of this is about maximizing the chemical cocktail his body can produce and riding the high.
And Jimmy knows how to add to the mix.

He’s seen Tim with hickies and love bites before. He doesn’t think Abby or Breena has ever put one on him intentionally before, though. And he knows he hasn’t seen one of them play with one before.

Tim didn’t mind watching Jimmy get bit. Though Jimmy was too far gone to remember if Tim enjoyed watching it, or was just dealing with it.

Jimmy sucks harder on Tim’s lip, and Tim moans into it. Long, ragged sound, past all rational thought and dwelling just in sensation.

He sucks a bit harder and adds a little tooth. Just a nip, but that gets another long moan, as well as feverish kissing back.

Jimmy decides that’s his answer. Right now, Tim’s liking this, a lot.

Jimmy pulls back and Tim tries to thrash against the rope. His eyes jerk open and look at Jimmy, mad. “Get back to it!”

Jimmy smiles at him, thinking that he’s never been ordered to kiss anyone before. “Abby, swap with me.”

This has both Abby and Tim looking interested. Though Tim’s interested because right now he’s so turned on he doesn’t care who does what to him as long as it gets done, and Abby’s interested because she and Breena, cannot wait to see him sucking on Tim’s chest.

Abby’s raising an eyebrow at him as she kisses Tim, who makes a muffled groan of pleasure to have the kissing back. Jimmy winks at her and smiles back. Then he drops his lips to Tim’s chest.

Both girls, and Tim moan at that.

Jimmy’s thinking he wants to get Tim revved back up to where he was before he broke play. Get him panting and cursing and groaning again.

So, for a moment, he’s exploring the fact that Tim’s got really tiny nipples. Not like he’s never seen them before, but there’s seeing and there’s touching, and he’s never had a guy’s nipple in his mouth before. And, not only is it a hell of a lot smaller than Abby’s or Breena’s, it also doesn’t have a breast underneath it. And, because the damn things are so small, and because there’s no give on the skin/tissue under it, and because Tim’s trying to flail his way off the bed, it’s rather difficult to keep it in his mouth.

Namely, if he’s got Breena’s nipple in his mouth, and she jerks, her breast will sort of flow or stretch, and the nipple says in his mouth just fine. If Tim jerks, his chest goes with him, and Jimmy ends up with his nose bonking into Tim’s sternum.

Jimmy places both of his hands on Tim’s shoulders, and leans into him, and Tim groans at that, too. More weight, more restraint, more being taken over. He’s liking that a whole lot.

And Jimmy decides, that with the way Tim is jerking and flailing, and the long steady stream of kiss dampened words spilling out of Tim, that he’s back to revved up and ready for more.

As Tim’s inhaling, and Breena and Abby have coordinated the way they’re sucking on Tim, Jimmy gives his nipple a hard, steady bite.

The only reason Tim doesn’t buck off the bed is that he’s tied down and Jimmy’s holding him down
The sound that rips out of him at that bite does not sound like pain. Jimmy knows how Tim sounds when he’s in pain, and that sound is not hurting Tim.

Jimmy flattens his tongue and go over Tim’s nipple in a firm, wet stripe, and that gets another groan, as well as an attempt to arch his back, get more pressure.

Jimmy lifts up for a second. “More?”

“FUCK YES!”

Abby pulls back from Tim’s lips, and kisses him one last time sweetly.

“Show me what you did,” she says to Jimmy.

He just glances to the bite mark on Tim’s chest.

She grins back at him, and gets to it. And like Jimmy did, before, they both wait a few moments, let Tim get burning ember hot, before trying again.

This time, Jimmy just sucks hard on Tim’s nipple, while holding his shoulders down. Abby bites, and again, Tim all but comes off the bed.

Breena’s got his dick in her hand. He’s thrashing around too much for oral to be enjoyable for her, and it’s bright red, skin stretched drumhead tight, swollen as far as it goes, every vein pulsing with his hammering heart.

Jimmy knows dicks, and he knows how that sort of erection feels.

“Fuck him, Breena! Get on top of our man and ride him.”

Tim groans at that, Abby does, too. Breena grins, tugging the wet ribbon, so it slithers off Tim’s dick with a loud groan from him, and then she slides down Tim hard and fast as he yells at the feel of it and Abby and Jimmy go back to his chest.

Pleasure and pain and pulse and breath and tense, so tense, and more pleasure and more tense and full, so full, his body’s like a squeezed water balloon, full to bursting with more tension, and every inch of him is ready to go off.

Tim’s not seeing. He thinks his eyes are open, but he’s not processing anything that might be happening.

Hearing, beyond the rasp of his breath and the thunder of his heart, kicked out a while ago, too.

Feeling… He’s all feeling. All over. Everything is feeling. Too much feeling. Every hair, every nerve, every… everything is feeling, all over. He thinks he can count the taste buds on Jimmy’s tongue as he laps at his left nipple, and feel each individual tooth with Abby on his right, and Breena… God above, Breena, rising and falling and slamming down on him in liquid heat. Rippling liquid heat racing toward the most epic climax ever.

He can feel the edge coming, feel himself teetering on it, ready to fall over, almost there, and then there’s four things all hitting at once, two sets of teeth, the beads rushing out, his body pumping in
response as Breena slams down onto him over and over, fast and deep, and he’s thrusting hard, hips off the bed as it all hits at once, pulsing over him in hot rushes through his whole body, toes to scalp.

When Tim gets back to himself, he’s feeling amazing. He’s so high right now, he’s glowing with it. He’s twitching, and wet, and calm, and euphoric.

Abby eventually sits up, and starts to untie him, which, after that much fighting the ropes feels excellent. He’s still got Breena lying across his chest and stomach, and Jimmy’s on his side, and he’s kissing both of them.

Eventually, his hands and legs are free, and Breena and Jimmy move back so he can move a little, too.

Tim curls into a ball, letting his body move into the position it couldn’t get into and notices his side and stomach is wet, and so it part of the bed. He doesn’t think, there’s no filter between his brain and mouth right now. “Why’s my side wet?”

Jimmy raises an eyebrow at him. Abby got off riding Tim’s face. Breena was rubbing herself while riding Tim. Jimmy, on the other hand, had, well, his hand. Fortunately he was able to get across to Abby what he needed to do, so she took over holding down one of Tim’s shoulders, giving him a free hand. Jerking himself off while he was biting on someone’s chest was new, but it worked out okay. But, when he was doing it, he was way too turned on to think about who or what he’d end up spraying.

Tim sees that eyebrow, and says, “Oh… Ah!”

Jimmy flashes him a dopey grin.

Tim smiles back at him. “You’re right, my body can’t tell the difference, either.”

Jimmy smirks, remembering telling Tim his body couldn’t tell the difference between pain and pleasure endorphins. Then another thought hits Jimmy, specifically about what endorphins do, and he gets up, looking for his bathrobe.

“What are you going?” Tim asks, as he cuddles Breena in closer. He can hear Abby in the bathroom, getting them washcloths from the sound of it.

“Kitchen.”

“Hungry?” Breena asks.

Jimmy shakes his head. “No. You want me to get you something?”

“I’m good.” Her eyes are starting to get a little droopy. “Sleepy.”

Jimmy yawns. He’s pretty ready to crash, too. “Me, too. Back in a sec.”

Abby’s back after that, draping towels on the wet spots, and handing over damp washcloths to Tim and Breena. Tim purrs at her. Warm washcloths feel pretty damn good right now, too. She kisses him back. “Happy birthday, late.”

“So worth the wait.”
As Breena heads to the bathroom, Jimmy comes back, holding three ice packs, a glass of water, and a bottle of Aleve. He hands the water and pills to Tim, putting the ice packs on the bed, and gratefully takes a washcloth from Abby. He’s not too crusty, but a bit of clean up feels good.

Tim looks from the pills to the teeth marks around his nipples. “Doesn’t hurt that bad.”

“I know. The ice is for your shoulder, arm, and ankle, and so’s the pain meds. Trust me, you will feel this in the morning.”

Tim smiles, still really blissed out on the endorphins. “Good. I want to.”

Jimmy nudges the hand holding the Aleve, and puts the ice on Tim’s shoulder. “No. You don’t. You want to be a little sore tomorrow. You’re gonna be past that if you don’t do something now.”

Tim pouts, but takes the pills, and gets himself on his side, curled around Abby, with ice packs strewn around his body.

A moment later, Abby says, “You’re cold.”

“Thank Dr. Palmer for that.” Jimmy’s getting himself into his usual sleeping position and pats him on the back. “This okay?”

“I can deal. Not like I’m not running too hot these days.” Actually, she’s thinking, giving that Sean’s keeping her nice and toasty these days, that an ice pack or two in the bed might be a good way to deal with that.

A minute later, Breena’s out of the bathroom, too, and they all settle in for a long winter’s nap.
"Twas The Night Before

Gibbs would admit to having certain fairly specific and tame Christmas-oriented fantasies (He’s got some not tame ones, too. Abbi’s helping him out with them,) that have been bubbling up in his head since he’s had a good feel for how this house would work out.

For example, the last time he did the Christmas-tree-with-the-family thing, it just wasn’t right. It wasn’t bad or anything, and in that it’s his last Christmas with Shannon and Kelly, he treasures those memories, but as someone who grew up in the North East, Christmas in California is just… wrong.

First off, it was warm. Okay, yeah, it was cool for Pendleton, but still, highs in the mid-seventies are not what Gibbs thinks of when he thinks of cold. Christmas is supposed to be cold. Breath is supposed to freeze on the air. There should be large quantities of bulky clothing involved. Boots and wooly socks and scarves and hats and gloves are a must. One sweatshirt over a t-shirt while wearing cut-off jeans and sneakers is not going out to get the tree clothing.

Second off, they bought the tree. He gets it. He’s bought trees before, and especially in the desert, it’s not like pine trees, well… grow on trees. They’ve got to bring the damn things in. Okay, fine. Still, a Christmas tree is something you are supposed to go out into the wood, preferably with the other male members of your family, cut down, and bring home, through the cold.

Third of all, the house. It was a hacienda-style rancher. Totally appropriate for where they were living, but nothing that said “Christmas” to Gibbs.

Fourth of all, getting home, to the house, through the warm, spring-like weather, means there’s just no rush of home as you burst into the warm and light and have people all around happy to see the tree, helping you peel out of winter clothing and giving you hot coffee or cocoa. Nope, there’s just walking from one temperate zone to another temperate zone.

Christmas in California just isn’t right.

So, this year, when he’s got his family near, six acres of ground, and it’s snowing outside, he’s getting his, old fashioned, North Eastern, White Christmas, Christmas tree fantasy!

The land around the house is rough. The grass has not yet seen a mower, and it’s rapidly working on turning back into the woods it so wants to be. They do have plans for taming at least some of it back down, but that’s not starting until spring.

The woods, which are part of Gibbs’ fantasy Christmas plans, are mostly deciduous trees, with a good spattering of pine and spruce.

In the boat house, he has part of this fantasy plan set and ready to go. Namely, he’s got his chain saw, and he’s got a few ropes, and he’s got a sled with a rope pull. All he needs now are his boys, Molly and Kelly, and it’s time to go find their Christmas tree.

Christmas in DC can be pretty iffy on the snow front. January and February are the real snow months. And, though it was a pain in the ass for getting to the house and away from work, the four
inches of snow on the ground right now are pretty sweet. Just deep enough for the sled to pull over easily. Not so deep as to make walking in it difficult.

Right now, Gibbs has the chainsaw in hand. Tim’s got the ropes slung over his shoulder, while Jimmy and Tony pull the sled with the girls in it.

Molly’s all over this. She knows what a Christmas tree is and is extremely eager to pick one out. Kelly’s just enjoying time in the sled, and pointing out every tree they pass.

“That one!” Molly’s pointing at an at least seventy foot tall pine tree in the deep woods. They can’t even see the trunk, but Gibbs knows pines in deep woods, and one that tall likely only has branches on the top fifteen feet.

“How about one closer?”

“And smaller,” Tim adds. “We can’t fit that in the house.”

Kelly points to a tiny one a few feet from them. It only comes up to Tony’s knee, and would be perfectly set to star in a live action remake of Peanut’s Christmas Special.

Tim shakes his head. “Mama and Uncle Jimmy don’t think that’s enough tree.”

Jimmy gives Tim a gentle shove. “If I’ve got to cut it down myself and lug it a quarter mile though a forest and scrub to get it into the house, that’s plenty of tree.”

“No! We’re grabbing a real tree,” Gibbs says, eyeing the forest. He hands the saw to Tim, picks Molly up, holding her on his hip, and points out a fifteen-foot-tall pine. They’ve got two stories of open space in the living area, time to take advantage of them. “How about that one, Molly? Want to put the star on the top?”

Molly’s eyes go wide. “YES!”

Gibbs looks at his boys. “Let’s move it.”

Though, as they’re heading off, Kelly starts to fuss about not getting her tree, so Tim heads back, takes the nine seconds necessary to cut it down, and then puts it on the sled with her. Her eyes light up, too, and she keeps petting it, then making faces because it’s prickly.

“What are we going to do with that?” Jimmy asks him.

Tim shrugs. “Stick it on the coffee table in our living area? Between you and Abby and Gibbs,
we’ve got enough decorations to cover the whole house. Not like we don’t have a string of lights for it.”

Jimmy inclines his head, that’s true.

“We’re going to need a ladder to get the star on top of this,” Tony says as he loops one of the ropes around the bottom of the trunk.

Jimmy’s nodding along, looping the other rope. He hates to even think about admitting this, but he’s a little wary about them being able to move this thing. It’s huge, and heavy. If Gibbs and Tim were up to full strength that’d be one thing, but…

Doesn’t matter, they’ve got to get it in, and he’ll be damned before they go back to the house, empty-handed to grab Abbi and Ducky for extra muscle.

He tosses one of the ropes to Tim, and the three of them lean into it, getting their muscle working, and after a few grunts and some muttering about being slave labor the tree finally gives up, and starts sliding along behind them.

Gibbs follows along, grinning, pulling the sled with the girls while Mona frisks around them in the snow.

They’re about thirty feet in front of Gibbs when Tony quietly says, “Just for the record, you guys should keep it a bit quieter. I had to turn the volume way the hell up on the movie when Penny asked what that sound was.”

It’s hard to tell, because it is cold out, and they are working hard, and there are hats and scarves in play, but it’s possible that both Tim and Jimmy blush, and it’s definite they give each other a half-panicked side-eye glances, which is exactly what Tony was hoping would happen.

He chuckles. “You two are so damn easy! Didn’t hear anything. Old man did a great job with the sound-proofing. But, I take it you had a good time breaking in one of the bedrooms.”

Two smirking smiles bloom on Tim and Jimmy, followed with Jimmy saying, “Yep, and I take it you and Ziva had a pleasant morning, sleeping in.” Neither Tony nor Ziva were seen anywhere near the downstairs until well after 9:00.

Tony smiles wide. “What’d you say last year? Great outpourings of holiday cheer?”

Tim laughs. “Something like that.”

“Good Lord!” Breena says, looking at the massive tree the guys are trying to get wedged through the sliding glass door from the patio into the dining area. “It’s huge!”

Jimmy flashes her a saucy grin. “Love it when you say that to me.”

“Okay, you’ve already had too much eggnog.” Tony adds. “Come on, get pulling.” With another
hard tug, and a bit of shoving from Tim and Gibbs on the other side, they manage to get the tree through the door, and sprawled onto the floor in the dining area.

“How are we going to get this upright?” Ziva adds, looking at how much space the tree is taking up, wondering how much of the furniture they’re going to have to rearrange.

“It’ll fit. We’d just have to shove things around,” Gibbs says, stepping in, lifting Kelly over the doorway and into the house. Tim follows, Molly holding one hand, the baby tree in the other.

“Tim! It’s so cute and tiny!” Abby says, seeing the little tree in his hand.

Tim can see the jokes flashing through Jimmy and Tony’s minds, ready to come spewing out, as both of them start wearing identical smirks. “Bite your tongues, both of you, or I’ll leave you to lifting the monster by yourselves.”

Jimmy, Tony, and Gibbs are sniggering away at that, as Tim says, “Our daughter wanted this one. Do we have an extra Christmas tree stand?”

“We’ve got at least three,” Breena adds.

“Great, point me to the smallest of them, and Kelly and I will go get this one set up.”

So, while the various members of Clan Gibbs push and shove sofas and chairs around to clear a space for the tree, Tim, Abby, and Kelly head into their living space.

In addition to their rooms, they have an open play area that terminates in the glassed-in octagonal room. That part isn’t done yet. It’s supposed to have soft cushions all over the floor, for looking at the stars at night.

It doesn’t yet, which is working out fine. Tim drags the coffee table into that room, finds Breena’s smallest tree stand, and sets it up on the table.

Then he sets the tree into the stand, while Abby holds Kelly on her lap. “Lights, baby girl?” Abby asks her daughter.

“Lights!”

Tim nods and gets a string of white lights. He wraps them around the tree, twice. It’s a small tree and a long string of lights. When he plugs them in, the tree explodes into a thousand points of light, and Kelly smiles.

Tim flashes a quick shot of that, his girls, all lit up by the lights on the tree.

Part of getting the house into a home is decorating. Between the dining area and the living area is a freestanding fireplace. It’s a huge expanse of gray stone, heading straight up to the ceiling, twenty feet above, with a mantle that wraps around all four sides.

Penny and Breena have already hung the family crest high on it, above the mantle, and yesterday
they started to put the family pictures up. They’d asked the rest of the crew to bring family shots, too, and pictures of themselves when they were younger.

So, as the guys work on wrestling the tree into a vertical position, the rest of the clan is either cooking, or putting pictures up.

There are shots of their family. Their core group together. There are shots of each member at different ages, with their own parents (Save for Tim. He’s intentionally not putting any shots of himself up with his parents. Though he did find one of him and Sarah, ages sixteen and seven.)

Some of the shots feel… strange to look at. Tim doesn’t begrudge Penny wanting a shot of her with her husband and boys. It’s a picture from the early fifties, Christmas, and he’s honestly not sure which one of the four buzz cut boys in blue flannel PJs opening presents is his dad. And he doesn’t begrudge Ziva’s picture of her, Tali, and Ari sitting around a table, Eli smiling at them, as Ziva’s mother lights the Chanukah candles.

He doesn’t feel like they should have to edit their pasts, or shield the rest of the family from their memories of home.

But it does feel weird to look at them. To try and sort out happy memories from the pain. He wonders if there will be a point when he can look at shots of himself with his parents, and be okay with them.

Some of the pictures Tim finds fascinating.

Ducky as a young man. Intellectually he knows that Ducky wasn’t born in his sixties. He’s heard the stories. He met Mrs. Mallard. So he knows that once upon a time, Ducky was a young man, and then a middle-aged man. Once upon a time Ducky was his age.

Still, it floors him to see shots of a young man, barely a year out of boyhood, thin and sharp, hair buzzed short, wearing rumpled fatigues, an old, stained t-shirt, dog tags on his chest, massive cocky grin on his face. Or a somewhat less young man, a medical student, longer hair, pensive, frozen in black and white, looking into the distance. Finally a color shot, four men, Ducky in the front, all four of them in formal uniforms, smiling at a camera. There’s another shot, at least ten years later, Ducky’s in fatigues, still wearing his dog tags, slumped, looking tired, on a rickety chair in front of a tent, jungle behind him. He’s got long hair, a bushy moustache, and more than a few days of stubble on his cheeks. Tim guesses that Ducky has to be his age in that shot, and if Ducky’s his age, and he’s in a jungle, that’s his service in Vietnam.

And like with Ducky, Tim knows Penny was not always old. He gets it. It’s still a shock to see her in a proper 1950’s party dress, wearing heels and gloves, with perfect make up, a cigarette in a long holder elegantly held in one hand, martini glass in another. His grandfather, in his Captain’s uniform, hand on her back, grinning. He knows, by the clothing, that she can’t be more than twenty-five in the picture, and if she’s twenty-five, he’s just a bit younger than Tim is now.

He knows that there was a time before she became the liberal, revolutionary she is now. He gets it. But… He looks at pictures of her later, at different rallies, hair long and free, face devoid of makeup, setting fire to a bra, and he knows who that women is. The lady in the 1950s’ feels like someone else.

His eyes move two inches to the left. He’s seen shots of Shannon and Kelly, and he met Jackson, but he’s never seen this picture of Gibbs with his parents. It’s likely the mid-sixties, because Gibbs can’t be ten years old yet, but it’s a color picture, so he can see how much Gibbs favored his dad, with those big blue eyes and dark hair. But he knows the grin on his mother’s face, he’s seen it on Gibbs over the years.
“What was her name?” he asks Gibbs, as he straightens the shot out, tucking it between the shot of him and Shannon and Kelly, and another shot of him with Abbi.

“Ann.” Gibbs looks at the picture, smiling. “Dad had gotten the camera earlier that year. It had a timer. So, you could set it, and then hop into the frame. So we sat there, smiling at the thing, as he kept setting it and running back to us. He took a whole role of shots, and this was the only one where everyone had their eyes open, was looking at the camera, and smiling.

“Mom had copies made. This one;” it’s a big, eight by ten shot, “went up on the mantle, and all the little ones got put in the Christmas cards. That was a big deal back then. She had a folding card table, and from the day after Thanksgiving until the week before Christmas, she’d have it out in the living room, with a huge stack of Christmas cards on it. Writing out each one, and sending it off. Most of the town, all of Dad’s suppliers, every buddy they ever had… She’d send out hundreds of them.” Gibbs winces a little. “All of December, I never got the taste of glue out of my mouth.”

“You were the official stamp licker?” Tony says, putting his favorite shot of his mom up on the mantle, the one he took of her in New York when they were going to a movie, along with one where he’s a tiny little boy, maybe three, sitting on his Mom’s lap, with Senior’s arms around both of them.

Gibbs nods. “And envelop licker. What’s that?” Gibbs asks, looking at the shot Tony hasn’t put up yet.

Tony sighs a bit. “I asked Senior for shots, and he didn’t have a whole lot of them left, because…” Tony doesn’t need to fill in that the only pictures Senior still has are the ones he had backed up digitally and kept online, or kept physically on his person. Just like a lot of people in the very well-off sections of DC, Senior’s home was destroyed. “Anyway. This is one he keeps on him. He made a copy for me.”

It’s a small picture, wallet sized, and Tony’s got it in a little silver frame. It’s him and Senior, both of them in Civil War re-enactment costumes (Yankees). Senior’s in his Calvary Captain uniform, and Tony’s in his drummer boy outfit, complete with drum.

Tony can’t be more than eight, and no matter how much he protested having to be involved with this when he’s talked about it, he’s light-up-the-room proud in that photo.

“You look like you’re having a good time,” Tim says, waving Abby away from overseeing Jimmy, Abbi, and Ducky getting the now upright tree into exactly the right spot.

“Ohhh! Look at you!” Abby’s grinning, wrapping her arm around Tony.

Tony rolls his eyes. “Yeah. I liked the drum, and it’s in my boot, so you can’t see it in the shot, but that was the year I got the little derringer, too.”

“Senior got you a gun to go with the costume?” Abby asks.

“Little thing.” Tony points his index fingers and holds them a few inches apart. “A ‘girl’s’ weapon really, but I was a little guy, and it fit my hands. Single shot, derringer. And he made sure I knew how to load and shoot it. We never used bullets, just blanks, so it made a great bang and a huge cloud of smoke. I was still too little for a rifle of my own, and most drummer boys went into battle just on their own, no weapons at all, but I’d been begging for a gun, and that year he decided I was old enough for one.” Tony’s smiling at that memory.

“What about the ‘poo boy’ stuff?” Tim asks.

Tony sighs and rolls his eyes. “Way to put a damper on the good memories, McBuzzkill.”
“Sorry, just…”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I know… An encampment has latrines. The lowest ranked guys, prisoners, or any Contrabands…” the rest of that crew doesn’t know what that term means in relation to this, “captured slaves. Confederate Armies used slave-labor. If we captured them, or they ran away to us, we didn’t just set them free.” Tim finds it amusing to see Tony referring to an Army that disbanded a hundred years before he was born as ‘we,’ and disturbing to realize he had no idea what happened to captured slaves during the Civil War. “They’d be used for hard labor, and digging latrines was part of that. Obviously, no one wants to play captured slaves, so, no Contrabands in the reenactment camps. And for the most part we’d have port-a-potties for longer reenactments. But not always, and Senior liked a certain level of ‘realism.’ Officers, and see those stripes, Senior’s playing a Captain, didn’t have to deal with smelly latrines if they didn’t want to. They got a chamber pot, and whoever was their valet, was in charge of dealing with it. It was part of my job.”

“So, you’re saying it was a literal shit job?” Jimmy adds, looking at the picture. “You ever think about doing this with our kids?”

Tony shakes his head. “A: yes, it was. And B: no! This is part of why I hate camping and being outdoors for more than a few hours at a time. We’re lucky enough not to live in the 1860s, and trust me, we don’t want to go back!” Tony looks over at the tree, and glances at Jimmy and Abbi, both of whom have pine needles and bits of sap glued to their skin, hair, and clothing.

“Looks like we’re ready to decorate!”

Jimmy tries to run a hand through his hair, and it gets stuck in a wodge of liquid pine. “Yeah, just give me a few minutes to change and grab a shower. I don’t want all the tinsel stuck to me.”

Abbi nods along, thinking that’s a good plan.

Abby eyes the tree, standing tall and proud in their living room. “How about we get lunch ready, you guys clean up, we’ll eat, do some decorating, and then put little girls down.”

Everyone thinks that sounds like a good plan.

For Breena, part of Christmas Eve is making sugar cookies and having them carefully decorated and ready to be put on the plate for Santa.
It’s just… not really Christmas without that. That’s one of her earliest Christmas memories, standing there with her Mom, who was pregnant with her youngest sister at the time, carefully squeezing frosting onto the cookies, so that Santa would have pretty cookies to eat. They did it every year, long past the point of knowing who Santa was. Long past the point of putting them on the plate, next to the fireplace, grabbing cups of eggnog, and nibbling the cookies while watching The Peanuts Christmas special before filling the stockings, putting the presents under the tree, and heading to bed.

But, living with a diabetic who tries to avoid carbs means the last few years, making a pile of cookies for Christmas Eve just hasn’t been part of the celebration. She might like doing it, but she doesn’t want to eat the whole plate herself.

But this year… This year she’s got Santas all over the place, and most of them are quite in favor of cookies.

Ziva and Gibbs are getting lunch gear ready. Mostly a lot of cold cuts, breads, sandwich and salad stuff, all laid out on the table, and everyone can make up their own meal. Meanwhile, she and Tim are putting the Kitchen Aid through its paces. He’s got his own contribution to the cookie making.

So, as she’s creaming butter and sugar, he’s a few feet away, chopping up Andes mints, both of them getting ready to make sure the whole house smells like cookies all day.

Ziva heads back into the kitchen. “Are you a good stopping point?”

“Let me get the flour mix in. Then I can get my half in the fridge to chill, and he can get the mints stirred into his half.”

Tim runs his knife through the mints one more time. He’s got nicely sized little chunks. “I’m all set, just need some dough.”

A minute later, Breena shuts off the mixer. She scoops half of the dough out, onto a piece of parchment paper, and pats it into a disk. “This just needs to chill.”

Tim nods, pouring his mints into his half of the dough. “Never done this without a spoon.” He gingerly turns the mixer on, and it grinds away for a few seconds, paddle turning though the dough. “This is faster.” He turns it off, removes the bowl from the mixer, puts a piece of plastic wrap on top of the bowl, slides it into the fridge, and then sets the oven to pre-heat.

“Hey, Ziva,” he says, as he heads into the dining area. “Did you see the cookie cutters Breena got you?”

Ziva flashes Breena a curious look. Breena smiles at her. “I’ve got my traditional Christmas tree, and the gingerbread man, and reindeer, but since today’s the first night of Chanukah, I got some candles, and a menorah.”

Ziva laughs at that. “We are celebrating Chanukah with Christmas cookies?”

“Yes.” Breena smiles at her. “We’re a proper interfaith family.”

Yule, which, as Ducky is happily telling them, is a traditional celebration of the sun returning. Thus, lights, and, of course, the biggest living thing anyone could find in the dark of winter, an evergreen,
are vital to the celebration.

Chanukah, as Ziva adds, is also a festival of lights. The miracle of how The Lord allowed the oil in the lamps to burn on and on for eight full days, re-sanctifying the temple.

Thus, on December 24th, this blended crew of winter merry-makers, deck their home in lights.

The tree, all fifteen feet of it, is *covered* in them. Ducky’s talking about how when he was a boy the tree was covered in actual candles. Ziva really likes the idea of that. (Tim’s just glad that Ducky and Ziva haven’t made the leap to getting real candles for next year. Yes, it would have looked awesome, but he can’t image how long it would take to light, and more, he doesn’t want to imagine how dangerous it’d be.) More lights are hung by the mantle. They’re wound up and down the banisters on the stairways up to the second floor.
And in the middle of the table sits one of the few things Ziva removed from her father’s home when he died. It’s her family’s Menorah.

She sets the first candle in the middle of the old silver holder, and one more all the way to the left.

“My mother’s family left Russia with one bag between the four of them. Clothing, money, forged papers, and this.”

Tim’s sitting at the table, untangling another string of lights, as Ziva’s getting her menorah set properly. “I just realized, I have no idea where you’re from. Israel, but… Like, my family’s Irish originally… So, your mom’s family was Russian?”

“Refuseniks.”

Tim’s sure that means something. He knows he’s heard it before, but… he’s drawing a blank. Penny and Ducky both come over, very interested to hear Ziva talk about her family.

Ziva can see that Tim doesn’t know what that term means.

“Russia doesn’t love its Jews. And while many stayed, many more have tried to get out. My grandparents had been trying to get out for a while. They started trying to get to Eastern Europe, hoping to eventually get to the west, and that got them labeled as Refuseniks. In the sixties, they decided to try for Israel. The USSR wouldn’t let them leave, but, because they were Refuseniks, they lost their jobs. Dedu was a machinist. Bebbu was a dancer. They knew that charges of ‘social parasitism…”’

Tim’s looking at her blankly.

“It meant that you didn’t contribute enough to the USSR. You weren’t doing enough of whatever it was you were supposed to be doing. Of course, they couldn’t ‘contribute’ because they’d been fired from the jobs. If you were found guilty of ‘social parasitism’ they’d send you to a gulag.”

“That’s horrible!”

Ziva nods. Her Dedu had had some choice words about the USSR. “They knew trouble was coming. So they got everything they could together, sold everything they could, quietly, and used the
money they had to buy forged travel papers. And then they got on a train, and started south. When it got too dangerous to go by train, they walked. My mother was thirteen, her brother eleven. Dedu had a friend from his Navy days who worked as a sailor, shipping out of Novorossiysk. They had to get to the Black Sea to get out of the USSR, and they did, finding Dedu’s friend.”

“Shipping?” Ducky asks.

“Officially. Smuggling unofficially. According to Dedu, he was taking caviar and vodka out of the USSR, and getting it into Turkey. No matter what he was taking, he did manage to get my mother’s family to Trabzon. And from there, they hitchhiked and walked to Israel.

“It took them a full year to get there. All four of them taking odd jobs here and there. They’d make enough money to eat and get a place to sleep, and then walk to the next town.” She gently touches the silver menorah. “They weren’t supposed to have this. No one in the USSR was supposed to have a religion. There were no legal synagogues there. They could have gone to jail just for having this. When Ima died, I packed this up and put it in my room at Abba’s house.” Tim can’t remember the last time he’s heard Ziva talk about her parents calling them the Hebrew equivalent of Mama and Daddy. “It’s been a long time since it’s been properly lit.” Ziva smiles at them, a few tears threatening to leak out of her eyes.

Tim’s looking a little disturbed by that. The idea of Ziva so happy she’s crying is unsettling to him. But her husband does well with it, placing his hands on her shoulders, and kissing her neck, quietly saying something, Tim doesn’t know what because it’s not English, to her.

Whatever it is, it makes her smile, and she wipes her eyes.

There are literal boughs of holly. After lunch, Abby and Breena headed outside, strode (waddled, in Abby’s case) toward the woods, found a holly tree, and cut branches off of it.

They wove dark green, prickly leaves with bright red berries between the pictures on the mantle. They circled them around the Menorah on the dining room table. It’s wrapped around the mailbox at the end of the driveway, and more of it circles the posts on the front porch.

“Falalalala la lalala,” Tim says, as they come back in, smelling like evergreens and cold.

Abby smiles at that, giggling a little.

He grins back at her, taking her coat, and the big, floppy, neon green with orange pompom hat that Tony had gotten him, that she decided she liked.

There’s a picture, being taken, right this moment, that will, in years to come, live on Gibbs’ mantle piece. It’s him, on the ladder, holding Molly by the waist, as she reaches up on her very tippie toes, and puts the star on the top of the tree.
Little girls DO NOT want to go down for a nap. So far, for them, today has been an absolute blast. There’s been playing, and decorating, and Aunt Ziva’s getting ready for a special treat tonight, and Mom/Aunt Breena’s been baking cookies all day, and they got to stick ornaments all over the trees, and it’s just been AWESOME, and they are VERY TIRED and FRAZZLED, and DO NOT WANT THE PARTY TO END.

This unfortunately means they are crabby, bursting into tears at the drop of a hat, and LOUDLY DEMANDING NO NAPS.

They are eventually cajoled by their daddies into their room, where they lie down (with much whining), and listen to their stories (with more sleepy whining), and then Jimmy starts softly singing to them (quieter, less verbal whining), and Tim adds his own voice in, both of them pulling off an okay version of Silent Night (though neither of them know anything past the first verse, and Tim can’t hit the high notes to save his life), and after only three versions of the first verse, and then two more softly hummed verses, they’re able to creep out, leaving Mona snoozing away with them.

Once the door is closed, Tim’s thinking he could probably use a nap, too, and Jimmy’s also looking a little frazzled. (There’s nothing like a chorus of screaming kids to shoot your nerves to hell and gone.)

“Well, that was fun,” Tim says dryly.

Jimmy nods. “Maybe a little more low-key next year.”

Tim nods vehemently in agreement. They’re heading down the hall, Tim rubbing his shoulder, as he says, “Two more of them next year.”

“Maybe three.” Jimmy’s thinking of the little person who might be calling his wife home right now.

Tim smiles. “I meant two of ours. Dave’ll be up in his own nursery, right?”

“Oh.” Jimmy smiles back. “Are we crazy to pack them in so close?”

Tim nods. “Yep. But think of it this way, nineteen years from now, we’ll have the house back. Spread them out more, and we’d have kids in our place until we’re Gibbs’ age.”

“You are fried, aren’t you? We’ll be Gibbs’ age in nineteen years.”

Tim laughs a bit at that. “Okay, yeah, we’re crazy.

Jimmy inclines his head, that’s a good point. “How’s your shoulder doing?”

“Sore. But I’m okay.” Tim winks at Jimmy. “My doctor takes good care of me.”

Jimmy wraps an arm around him as they head back to the living room. “Damn straight.”

With little girls down, most of the rest of the crew decides that now would make a splendid crashing time, too.

The afternoon is quiet. People napping, or resting, getting ready for the evening’s festivities.
It’s almost dark out when the girls wake up.

And night is when the Chanukah candles are lit.

So, once they’re up, and cleaned up, and ready to be sociable again, it’s time for the first night of Chanukah.

Tony turns off all the lights, save for the Christmas ones, washing the main living area in a golden glow. Ziva starts the blessing, and then lights the first candle. She says the next two blessings, and carefully hands that first candle to Molly, who’s in her mama’s arms, and together, both of them light the first candle of the Menorah.

Ducky tells the Chanukah story. The adults listen, most of them kind of, sort of, know how the story goes, but they don’t know the details. And, of course, Ducky’s got details.

He’s sitting on the sofa, Anna in his arms, talking about Maccabees, as Ziva, Tony, Abbi, and Gibbs work on getting dinner ready.

There’s a joke about Chanukah food. That it’s designed to make sure the kids eat.

It’s not just a festival of light, but of oil. The sacred oil that burned and burned and welcomed The Lord back to His home in the Temple.

And, to celebrate that blessed oil, comes fried foods.

Latkes are just the tip of the iceberg. There’s sufganiyot, which are strawberry jam filled donuts. There are apple fritters. Deep fried, golden brown, crispy goodness is all over the place tonight.

They made “real food,” too, so dinner wouldn’t just be potato pancakes and dessert. Beef brisket, challah, apple sauce, and roasted beets fill out the meal.

The dreidel is a big hit for maybe five minutes. Molly can sort of use it, but she’s got not-quite-three-year-old hands, and the motion necessary to make it really spin is beyond her.

Kelly swats hers across the room, never to be seen again. She really enjoys the way it goes flying, though. Anna approves, too, giggling as it flies.

Until the second one went skittering away, (Tim looked a little sheepish at that, but his right hand doesn’t have the dexterity to spin the top properly, either.) with Mona chasing it, the adults were having an okay time with them. Ziva got hers to spin for a full minute.

Chanukah Gelt is a huge hit for little girls. Those go over very well with everyone in the crew. Even Anna gets a little bite of it, and her eyes light up as the chocolate touches her tongue.

The candles are kept lit until they burn themselves out, and these candles are designed to last about two hours. So, as dinner and playtime wind down, they sputter out. For little girls, Christmas Eve is almost done.
Only one thing left, putting up the stockings.

There’s a layer of excited tension flowing through everyone in the group. They keep eyeing Gibbs, wondering when he’s going to make his move. And, as it gets later and later, they keep eyeing him more and more.

There’s no way Abbi’s missed the way they keep looking at him, or the approximately fifteen times he’s been nudged by the various guys, and his answering smile and nod. (Especially when Tony and Ziva exchanged Chanukah presents, that got a lot of, *come on!* looks aimed at Gibbs.)

Something’s coming, and she’s pretty sure what it is.

It’s had her smiling all day, too.

The plan for the night was: Menorah, play time, dinner, put the stockings up, little girls go to bed, and then their annual *It’s A Wonderful Life* screening.

So, as they get moving in the direction of stocking time, Molly heads out from the kitchen with her plate of cookies for “Santa.” The decorations on those cookies range from the near-professional looking job that Breena’s done, to Kelly’s splats of frosting on top. It’s all good, and they’ll all be tasty.

Santa, both of them, are eyeing those cookies eagerly. Maybe not literally licking their chops, but there does appear to be some figurative chop licking going on. Elf Leader makes a crack to Mrs. Claus about how Santa I might like some eggnog, heavy on the nog, with his cookies. Mrs. Claus thinks that’s a good idea and gets one for her and Santa I to share. Santa II mentions that he prefers brandy, his Mrs. Claus shoots him a *I’m perfectly comfy here on the sofa, go get your own* look, so he heads off to grab one for himself.

But once cookies are in place, the various family members head off to their bits of the house to grab the stockings, and Gibbs offers Abbi his glass, saying, “I’ll get ‘em.”

For a few minutes, there’s the fuss and confusion that goes with putting up thirteen stockings. And there’s a moment of quiet as they get several shots of it. And then Gibbs says to Abbi as he feels the toe of her stocking, “Yours isn’t empty.”

She’s sitting in the armchair, near the tree, cup of eggnog between her hands, smiling at him, and raises an eyebrow. “You saying I’ve got an early Christmas present?”

He smiles back at her, sitting on the base of the fireplace, as she gets up, putting her cup down, going to her stocking, reaching in and taking out the small black velvet box. The rest of the family is watching, eagerly, not making a sound, bursting with happy, seeing this. Even little girls, who don’t know what’s about to happen, can feel the excitement, and go along with it.

The smile on Abbi’s face is wide, open, lighting up her eyes and beaming off her skin. Gibbs, sitting on the base of the fireplace, back against the stone wall, tugs her hand, and she lands in his lap, still not having opened the box. He kisses her and says, “Didn’t want you thinking this one was from
Santa.”

She kisses him back, gently, eyes alight, voice teasing. “Who’s it from?”

He strokes the back of her neck, eyes tender and on hers. “My hands to yours.”

She flicks open the box and, for a second, she makes no sound, just looking at the collection of rings sitting in there. She blinks, hard. “Jethro!”

He kisses her again. He’d spent a lot of time thinking about this, not sure what to say, not really liking anything he came up with. Mostly, he was hoping and praying that he could get himself into this situation, and just know what to say once he got there.

“The rest of our days, let’s spend them together. Be my last thought at night, and my first thought in the morning, and my happiest thoughts in between. Let me support you, and you support me, and both of us grow stronger and better for it. I love you so much.” He kisses her again, and then asks, “Marry me?”

Abbi blinks hard again, and nods, not trusting her voice. She kisses Gibbs, hard, his face between her hands, and for a long moment the only sound is the crackling fire and Molly whispering, “Why is Abbi crying?” along with Breena’s “Shush. You can ask her in a minute.”

When Abbi pulls back, she’s got control of her voice again, and she’s smiling, with teared eyes, as she says, “Yes.”

Gibbs’s face can’t hold the grin. His skin is too small to contain the joy. It beams off of him, from his eyes and skin and the smile writ large on his face. He takes her engagement ring out of the box, slips it free from the wooden wedding ring, and gently slides it onto her finger.

Abbi looks at it for a second, the pearl seeming to absorb the golden-rose glow of the firelight, shimmering it back at them. She kisses him again, and again, and Gibbs is happy to kiss back. And this time, when they break the kiss, the rest of the family slips in to offer hugs and congratulations, and just bask in the joy, adding their own to it.

(And eventually, Molly does get her answer, from Ducky. Sometimes, people can get so happy, that just laughing and smiling can’t let it out, and those times happiness turns to liquid, and it leaks out in tears.)

Tim’s feeling gloriously content.

They’re in the media room, all around the TV, watching It’s A Wonderful Life. He’s on the sofa, Abby’s lying on her side, head in his lap. He’s got his hand on her low back, gently rubbing as those little, annoying, just-getting-ready contractions punctuate the movie. Breena and Jimmy are sitting on the floor, in front of him. Breena’s next to his legs, hand wrapped around his ankle, shoulder against his knee. Her head is on Jimmy’s shoulder, and Jimmy’s got his temple pressed against Abby’s tummy. Like with Tim, he’s petting gently as her belly stiffens and relaxes.

There’s the soft glow of the movie flickering over the room. All around him are the people he loves. If Abby’s contractions play nice, they’ll go to bed, snuggled in warm and close, and have a restful evening.

And if they don’t, maybe they’ll have a Christmas baby.
He kisses her temple as he rubs her back a bit more firmly. That’s three this hour. Maybe…

Nope. That’s the last one. Abby falls asleep during the movie and given how rare solid sleep is for her these days, he just stays there on the sofa as everyone else heads to bed. He waves Jimmy and Breena off, too. They linger, but the floor’s not as comfy as the bed and little girls will be up soon enough.

Plus, these days, Abby never gets more than two hours of rest without having to get up to pee, so it’s not like he’ll be here all that much longer.

He rests on the sofa, drifting himself, stroking her hair, aware of the going to bed sounds filtering through the house. (Tony and Ziva are across the hall from him, so he can hear footfalls and creaking. Someone turns on the water, he hears the rush through the pipes. Little sounds like that.)

Then, after a bit, it’s just him and Abby, alone in the quiet, dull light from the hallway filtering though the mostly closed door to the media room.

That’s a good end to Christmas Eve.
Pictures On The Mantle

Chapter Notes

Pictures on the mantle and little bits of conversation that go with them. No real narrative flow for this.

 Pictures from The Gibbs Clan Mantle

Birthday Dinner with Senior and Delphine
"Is that South Africa?" Penny asks Ziva. It's one of the few places she hasn't been.

Ziva nods. "We had one day with nothing planned. Just laid around in the shade and read."
"I took this one, right?" Breena asks, looking at the shot of Ziva starting to relax after they'd moved her into Tony's place.

"That is how I remember it."

"God, look at you two as kids," Breena says, staring at the shots of Tim and Jimmy next to each other.

"Didn't I tell you, Wonder Twins! You all thought I was just BSing it, but I knew."
"When did you stop being blond?" Ziva asks.

"I was still blond when you met me," Tim replies.

Ziva shakes her head and looks at Tim like he's insane. "You weren't that kind of blond when I met you. Jimmy?"

He shrugs. "Seven, eight. I don't know. Here..." He shows her a shot of him from high school.
"Death of a Salesman. You can see it's dark by then."

"That's you and Grandpa, right?" Tim asks Penny. He doesn't have much in the way of memories of his grandfather, just a few vague images and the scent of bay rum aftershave. He certainly doesn't remember him being that whiskery.

"Yes." She smiles, softly. "This was the day before he left for his last float. Tom took that picture.” Penny stares at it, thinking of the missing husband and the son she can't locate. She says a quick prayer to see Tom again, at least find out what happened to him.
"What are you, twelve in that shot?" Tony asks, joking, with Abbi.

"Nineteen. One of my girlfriends took it. We were stationed in Germany then, had a bit of leave, and decided to go visit Switzerland. That was a good time." Abbi looks at one of Tony's shots. "Speaking of twelve..."
"Yeah, I'm nineteen, too. See, I did at least one thing besides sports in school."

"Selfie with the Mrs.?"

"Yep," Jimmy replies, putting up the shot of him and Breena.

"Gotta get this one up, too," Breena adds. "This is what... the day after Molly was born?"

Jimmy looks over her shoulder, looking at the picture in her hand. "Something like that."
"Same day, I think. That's my jacket in the background," Tony adds.

Tim nods. "Yeah, I think I took that one." He picks up Molly. "Look, that's the day you were born."

Molly looks at the bundle in the picture and says, "No! Anna!"

Tim decides not to get into an argument with the tired toddler about which little person is in her daddy's arms.

"Is this what I think it is?" Tony asks, glee lighting his face.

Jimmy nods. "Yes. I brought it just for you. Halloween. I'm eight-years-old, and yes, that's a Mogwai."

Tony grins.

"Merry Christmas, Tony."

He's chuckling, looking at the shot. "This is the best thing you could have possibly gotten me, Palmer."
Jimmy nods.

"Oh... you really... Wow!" Breena says, looking at one of Abby's shots.

"First year of college I shaved it all off."

"Is that Luca?" Tim asks, seeing the resemblance, but not sure. The only version of Luca he's met was more than twenty years older.

"That's Luca."

"Whoa! What's this one from?" Jimmy asks.
"That's the last year I went to Mardi Gras with my mom and Paulette. Here... this is us about twelve years earlier."

"Talk about winning at puberty. You're what, seventeen in that all dressed up shot?" Tim asks.

"Yeah."

"This is me at seventeen."
"You look fine!" Breena insists.

"I look like a teenager. She looks like a twenty-five year old model."

"Paulette was really good at makeup."

"Speaking of seventeen..." Penny brings a picture of Ducky over. "This is your last year at Eaton, right?"

Ducky looks at the picture. "I am eighteen in that picture, and that's the party my mother held to say goodbye to all of my friends and family before joining the army. Two days later, all that hair would be on a barber's floor, and I'd be wishing for something as warm and comfortable as that sweater as the nights grew colder and our drill sergeant had us out marching around."

"Why did you enlist, Duck?" Gibbs asks. In all the hours, all the stories, Gibbs realizes he doesn't know that about Ducky, and looking at the picture, he can't see why Ducky might have wanted to get free of that. Granted, looking at pictures of him and his Dad, it's not obvious that Gibbs wanted to get away, either.

"There have been Mallards in the King's Own Scottish Borderers since there's been a King's Own Scottish Borderers. My father and grandfather died in their service. It was expected that I would put
my years in. Everyone was... disappointed when I ended up in the Medical Corps, but that turn of events opened me to a life outside of a military Commission.

Ducky picks up another picture. "Medical school. This has to be from my second year, because my hair has grown back."

Tony shifts over, looking at Ducky's pictures. "Diving?"

"Yes, though that's a good twenty-five years later."

"You still like it?" Jimmy asks.

"It has been quite a long time, but I imagine I would."

Jimmy nods at that. "Next time we get to the ocean, we'll have to see if we can get some diving time in." Breena grins in agreement at that. "Haven't done it since our honeymoon. That was a lot of fun."

Tim raises his hand. "I'm volunteering to watch kids here and now."

"You don't like it?" Breena asks.
He shakes his head. "Nooo... It's stupid, but I get freaked out at the idea of all the air I can get to is strapped to my back. I don't like being deeper down than I can up in a few seconds."

"Then we'll give you the kids and have a good time," Tony says. "Ziva's got a shot of me in my wet suit around here, somewhere..."

"I left it at home."

"Or not."

"How'd you get that one?" Tim asks Abby, knowing no one else was in the lab when they were doing that.

"I hacked the security feed and got a screen grab. That's why it's kind of grainy."

He smiles at her, and gives her a quick kiss, sticking a shot of them dancing in the lab up on the mantle.

"Is there a story behind this one? You look like you've got a bit of naughty smirk on your face," Breena says to Tim.

"Nah. Senior was in for something, don't remember what. Ziva got the shot of us together." Tim looks at the shot more closely. Then he waves Abby over. "This is from right after we started dating, isn't it?"

Abby nods. "Yeah. That smirk is him perky over the secret romance thing." Then Abby's eyes go wide. "Wait! Senior did come by, and he and Tony and Gibbs were doing something, so you snuck down to the lab..."

Tim's eyes light up. "You're right!" He chuckles. "Yeah, that is a naughty smirk on my face."
"Drinking on the job?" Abbi asks.

"Impromptu engagement party," Gibbs replies.

Abby looks at the shot. "Tony and Ziva's, you can see them in the background talking to..."

Ziva looks at the shot, "Dornaget was offering his congratulations."

"At the hospital after Anna's birth?" Ducky asks.

Abby shakes her head. "My hair's black. Has to be Molly."
"What's this one from?" Abbi asks looking at a picture of Gibbs lounging around.

"It's Breena and Jimmy's place. I know that from the furniture."

Breena hears her name and checks the picture. "Just a random Shabbos."
Jethro carefully places the shot on the mantle. That's his favorite shot of Shannon. No one asks, but they all know who this is, and why she's on one side of Gibbs lounging. Then he places another shot next to the first one.

His favorite pictures of his two favorite people.

"Oh, Good..." Tim strokes Abby's back as he sees the picture. He was hoping they'd get at least one with Kate.

Then he looks with surprise at the next shot. "What is that from?"

Abby smiles. "You know. I don't really remember. Ducky, what's this from?"

Ducky heads over and glances at the shot of him holding Abby and Kate. "Some sort of office party, I'd say Christmas, but none of us are dressed for it."
Gibbs looks over at it. "Fourth of July '03. Morrow wanted us to have some sort of 'team building' office party."

"You don't look like you believe that," Penny says.

"I think he had some extra money in the budget and decided to do something fun."

Penny's looking at the picture. "It looks like it was."

Ducky smiles. "I believe it was."

"Oh, that's a good one!" Penny says.

"Little blurry, but it's okay," Abby replies, looking at a shot of the two of them all dressed up for Tim and Abby's rehearsal dinner.
Pictures without stories:
There’s one image of Christmas that just didn’t happen in the Gibbs house. The tree standing there with mounds of presents under it, waiting for Christmas morning. It certainly would have been easier to put all the presents out once the tree was up, but they have two toddlers and a baby, and all three of them live in eternal now. The concept of later is, at best, for Molly, sketchy, and non-existent to Kelly and Anna.

Thus, making them spend hours looking at presents, but unable to open them, just isn’t going to be part of the Gibbs Clan Christmas. Not for a while, yet. When the youngest one is four, if they want to put all the presents out before Christmas morning, fine, but right now, that sounds like a recipe for whining and crying, and just not fun at all.

So, as he and Abby head to bed, Tim’s got one last job before they can sleep.

Time to do some Santa-ing himself. Abby heads into the bathroom, and Tim turns toward Jimmy and Breena’s closet, flicking on the light. (Jimmy and Breena are, likely, happily sleeping away in Tim and Abby’s room, in the dark.)

Presents… Grab them… or… Hmmm… Shit…

He’s standing in a very empty closet. Just him, a few pieces of clothing, and an extra blanket.

Well, he would be Santa-ing if he could find the damn things. They’re supposed to be in Jimmy and Breena’s closet, with the idea being that whoever went to bed last would put them under the tree.

But he is not seeing any presents. At all. He listlessly scoots Breena’s coat a few feet down the hangar rack, as if all the present might be magically hovering in the air behind the coat.

Tim decides he’s way too tired when it takes him a full two minutes to come up with the conclusion that if the presents are not where they’re supposed to be, they are likely already under the tree, and that Jimmy and/or Breena decided to buy him and Abby a few more minutes of sleep.

He heads into the hall and checks.

Little Girl presents are under the baby tree, waiting for whatever o’dark-thirty hour the girls decide to wake up. He heads into the living room, and the presents for the rest of the crew are tucked under the tree or into stockings.

And with that, Tim heads back into his own room, ready to settle in with his loves, for, hopefully, a full six hours of sleep before little girls decide it’s Christmas time.

These days Ducky doesn’t need a whole lot of sleep. Five and a half hours a night, and he’s in good shape. In some ways, this is good. He’s got a few extra hours a night to read and study. In other ways… He’s got a few extra hours a night to be bored and restless if he’s of that mindset.

Tonight is not a restless night, though.

Normally, he’ll sleep from eleven to two, and another sleep from four to six.
And tonight, as they each play Father Christmas, he takes advantage of his somewhat unconventional sleep habits to deposit presents.

He heads out, packages stacked in his arms, and finds Tony sitting on the sofa, glass in hand, looking at fireplace.

“Anthony, are you up late or early?”

Tony half smiles. “Both?”

Ducky nods, and begins to place presents under the tree and into stockings. “Are you of an unquiet mind tonight?” he asks, feeling that there’s something pensive about Tony right now.

“I am of an unquiet room right now. Ziva snores. Pregnancy makes snoring worse. If I fall asleep before she does, it’s okay, I sleep fine, but…” He gives Ducky a look, one that indicates a certain level of understanding as to why Ducky’s up this time of night. “You know. Can’t get all the way through the night without a pit stop anymore, and getting back to sleep… Sounds like a lumberjack convention’s showing off their chainsaws up there.”

Ducky inclines his head. He may not know about the snoring half of it, but he does know that it’s his bladder’s unwillingness to go more than four hours without relief that wakes him up every night.

“All part of the joys of getting old.”

“Apparently.” Tony quietly sips his drink, listening to the quiet sounds of Ducky depositing presents.

When he finishes that, Ducky spends a few minutes looking at the pictures on the mantle. There’s probably close to a hundred of them up there. Big ones, little ones, every size in between. He’s not sure which picture is the oldest. There’s one of his mother as a girl, and one of Penny’s parents’ wedding. Both would have to be from sometime in the late teens, early twenties, but he’s not sure which.

“Gotta be at least a hundred years up there, right?” Tony asks, standing up, joining Ducky next to the mantle.

“I was thinking that. Mother was born in 1912.” Ducky smiles at that. “Did I ever tell you how I found out about that? We had thought she was older… I thought she was older. She was a pianist. Quite accomplished. There was a musical conservatory in London she had wanted to attend, but they wouldn’t take any student under the age of fifteen. So, with the help of her parents, one night she went from twelve to sixteen. And, then that fall, she began her studies.”

“How did you find that out?”

“After she passed, I read her journals. Mother kept quite extensive journals. She, when she still had her faculties, willed them, and a considerable bit of memorabilia, to the Smithsonian. Historical documents about life and times in the twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties. Since she was interested in making them public, I figured she wouldn’t mind me reading them.” He smiles at one memory. “Apparently my father was quite irked that her family wouldn’t let anyone court her until she was ‘twenty-one.’”

Tony laughs at that, looking at a picture of Mrs. Mallard from the mantle. There’s also a shot of Ducky with his father, but no pictures of the three of them, or of his parents together. “No pictures of them together?”

“Not anymore. We lived in London during the first part of the Blitz. The house next to ours took the
direct hit. We had time to get to the Tube, and shelter there, but anything we didn’t bring with us was gone. That included all but the one book of photographs mother made sure was in her bag, ready to go at any moment. She saved their wedding picture, and I had that, but it did not survive the damage to our home.” Ducky flashes hot for a moment, at the memory of his parents’ wedding picture, destroyed by some hooligan who rampaged through his home.

Ducky forces the anger down, and looks at the picture of Penny’s family. “Captain Langston,” Tony realizes that Ducky has to be talking about Penny’s father, “looks to be a Lieutenant in that wedding picture. He was probably born in the early 1900s or late 1800s.”

“More than a century, then.”

Ducky looks at one of the pictures of him and Penny. “And with any luck, a century hence, our great-great grandchildren will stand here, and look at pictures of us.”

Tony sighs. His kids’ kids. It’s an intense and heady idea. “They’ll wonder why the pictures are two dimensional and don’t move.”

Ducky smiles at that. “Probably.” Ducky gently, minutely readjusts his favorite shot of Penny.

Tony watches him do it, looking at that picture, trying not to feel weird about it. “That’s really your favorite picture of Penny?”

Ducky nods, but he knows what’s hitting Tony’s buttons about that shot. He heard Tim and Ziva gossiping about Tony all but turning white and swallowing his tongue when he noticed the park ranger he was hitting on didn’t shave. “Anthony, you need to remember that my erotic identity was born neither in the modern day, nor the United States.”

“Come on, Duck, you’re not that old. Women have been shaving their pits for a long time.”

“It is true that women shaving their under arms predates me by about twenty years. In the US. In Scotland, after the war, where the climate was cool and fuel expensive, women dressed from head to toe. At the height of summer, a woman might decide to slip into a lightweight blouse and forego her sweater. Underarm shaving wasn’t unheard of, but it still only happened if the lady in question expected to be wearing something that might show her underarms off. And that just didn’t happen in the part of the world I lived in when I was an adolescent. When I was still deciding what qualified as
sexy, which was right after the war, while we were still in the midst of the rationing years, the swell of a bosom pressing against a blouse or a pair of actual nylons instead of woolen stockings was the height of sexual excess.”

Ducky smiles a bit at a memory, looking at the picture of his farewell party. “When I was eighteen, I went to Korea. In Korea, the ladies naturally didn’t grow much in the way of body hair, but what they did grow, they certainly didn’t shave off. Maybe the ladies who tended to the Americans had different grooming standards, but the ones I got to know were as nature made them.

“So, to wrap up a long-winded bit of blather, no, underarm hair has never bothered me. In that the first lady who allowed me the intimate pleasures of her body had never used a razor on herself, it’s associated with some extremely sweet memories of being a young man.”

That Tony understands. “Aqua Net hair spray. My first real girlfriend used to tease her hair up with it. That smell…”

Ducky nods. He’s got a few scents along those lines, too. “Chanel Number Five and formaldehyde.”

That draws Tony up short. “That’s a really weird combo, Duck.”

“There was a woman I was quite fond of when I was in medical school. She wore Chanel. Medical Anatomy class meant I always had a whiff of formaldehyde on me. After the first week of class, it’s pervasive, soaking into everything about you. It was so deeply ingrained into my life at that point that I didn’t realize I was smelling it. Until I smelled Chanel years later, on its own, I didn’t know that part of what I had associated with that scent was formaldehyde. I know now. Put those scents together, and I’m twenty-three again, lolling on the grass, studying with her.”

“What happened to her? I mean…”

“How did I end up here, not married with a medical practice in Scotland?”

“Yeah.”

Ducky shrugs. “She was in love with my best friend.” He taps the man across from him in the farewell party picture. “I asked her to come away with me. She stayed with him. The last I had heard of them, they were married, had a few children.” Ducky shakes his head a bit, contemplating the life that was and the life that could have been.

Tony catches the look. “I know that one. Had that look on my face a lot when Wendy invited me to Christmas at her place to ‘catch up.’”

“Alas, Maggie never looked me up again. I have, and do, wish both of them well. Though, I’ll admit, I sometimes wonder how it would have turned out if she had come with me.” Ducky half smiles. “I imagine I would not have ended up here, and that would have been a loss.”

“Yeah. It would have,” Tony yawns. “Okay. Come on, both of us, let’s get back to sleep. Rugrats’ll be up soon.”

The “Rugrats” are indeed up soon, but the rest of the family gets a bit more sack time.

The McPalmers had decided that, instead of trying to keep baby girls in bed, and instead of getting all the rest of the adults out of bed early, to stagger present opening.
So, at six thirty, which is actually about normal wakeup time for baby girls, Molly gets out of her bed, and goes off in search of her parents.

She is distracted from this mission by the sight of the little baby Christmas tree, all lit up, with PRESENTS under it.

At about six thirty-five, Tim wakes to the sound of shrieking giggles and ripping paper. He rubs his eyes, sitting up, poking his wives, and saying, “I think she got started without us.”

Jimmy nods. “I’m on it. Make sure she hasn’t gotten them all open.”

Breena blinks a few times. “Baby gate across the hall next year.”

“Probably a good idea.” Abby heaves herself up and heads toward the bathroom.

Molly does not appreciate having to wait for her sister and cousin. It takes Uncle Tim and Mama FOREVER to get them out of their cribs and cleaned up. But finally, they come out, and join her, Daddy, and Aunt Abby with the presents, and have at it.

Kelly’s a little grabby on the presents. She wants ALL of them. Molly does, too. Anna’s content to chew on one of the boxes.

Tim gets Kelly to one side of the tree. Jimmy’s got Molly on the other. And thus, the two of them, with their daddies, open presents like toddlers. There’s lots of ripping, loud shrieking, and they aren’t setting any speed records. Each present must be opened, and then opened, explored, messed around with, (chewed on in Anna’s case), and played with.

It’s loud. Loud in the sense of loud little girls, and loud in the sense that a bunch of the toys make noise.

Then, of course, Molly has to check out what everyone else got, and make sure that it passes muster. Anna doesn’t want to share her stacking rings, (Re-gifted from Molly who stopped playing with them a year ago, and forgot she had them. They recycle toys and clothing between the two families. So, each girl did get one new, small present, and several toys that one or the other of them had stopped playing with and forgotten about.) and there’s a minor melt down between the two of them over that.

Abby averts further distress by the judicious application of Cheerios.

By the time Cheerios are eaten, and little girls are again cleaned up, and their parents have gotten into some semblance of appropriate for the outside world wear, (brushed teeth and put pjs on) the rest of the family is starting to make sounds of moving around.

It’s time to move onto Christmas morning with the family at large.
Tim would have to admit, as he’s sitting on the floor, in his PJs, with a little girl in his lap, mounds of wrapping paper strewn around them, people laughing and talking and thanking each other, while a large black dog frisks around in said mounds of paper, tossing them in the air and trying to catch them, much to the delight of the little girls, that he’s becoming a Christmas-sort of guy.

He’s got the sense that next year, Abby and Breena probably will be able to get him into some sort of Christmas sweater. (Abby’s been wearing a collection of them for at least a week now, and Jimmy’s a few feet away, helping Anna open one of her presents, sporting a navy blue sweater with reindeer and pine trees on it, to go with his red and black plaid flannel pj pants. Tim’s got an NCIS sweatshirt to go with his gray fleece pj pants.)

He supposes it makes sense. If you don’t have the good stuff that goes with Christmas, like a family to celebrate it with, and people around you whose enjoyment you can partake in, it’s a rather flat holiday.

But now…

The magic isn’t in the lights or food or presents. Well, he supposes they’re part of it. They’re the spell components. But without the people around, you can’t cast the spell.

And opening his Christmas presents, by himself, in his undecorated bachelor’s apartment, he didn’t have what he needed to make the spell fire.

And now he does.

Abby and Jimmy catch his eye as the chaos of present opening starts to die down. There’s one present that isn’t under the tree or in a stocking. It’s not wrapped, nor does it have a box or bag. It’s sitting, in Tim’s pocket, keeping close to him, and holding the warmth of his skin.

Breena’s a few feet from Jimmy, wadding up some of the wrapping paper, getting ready to toss it so Mona can go fetch it for them.

Tim nods back to them, and Jimmy reaches his hand out, gently pulling Breena closer to him.

She sends him an amused look, tossing the paper, and Mona happily bounds off to chase it. “Yes?”

He tugs her down into his lap, and Tim and Abby join them.

“One last present,” Jimmy says, holding her close, kissing her.

“Am I going to like it?” Breena asks when she pulls back.

“Yes,” Abby says, with a kiss of her own.

Tim takes it out of his pocket, and slips it onto her right ring finger, and then kisses the pad of her finger. “We made it for you.”

“Gibbs helped,” Abby adds. “Showed us how to do it.” (Gibbs is quietly watching this in the background, appreciating the look on Breena’s face as she sees the ring. She looks up at him, and flashes him a wide smile. He smiles back at her with a nod.)

Jimmy’s quiet, watching Breena twist it around her finger, feeling the satin smooth wood, watching the different whorls and burls flow into each other.
She looks up at all three of them, and kisses each in turn before saying, “It’s beautiful.”

Jimmy kisses her again. “Just a reflection of what inspired it.”

Two main meals today. Brunch, (second breakfast for Little Girls and Jimmy. The rest of the adults are fine with brunch,) and then party food, which will be, like always, smorgasbord style. Everyone grabs a plate and eats what they like.

While Abbi, Tony, and Ziva handle getting breakfast ready, and while Abby puts Anna down for her morning nap, the rest of the adults clean up shredded wrapping paper or play with little girls.

Brunch is French toast (using up last night’s left over Challah), turkey sausage, eggs, and fruit. It’s not complicated cooking, or particularly intense, which is a good thing, because Gibbs and Tim are already in the kitchen getting a start on dinner.

Turkey has to hit the oven by 10:00 to be ready by two, and the lamb should come up to room temperature before it hits the oven, assuming Tim wants a nice crust on it as well as a medium center.

And he does. He’s been researching how to do a proper standing rack of lamb for weeks now. He’s frenched the bones, dry aged the meat, prepared the herb rub, and gotten the perfect stuffing researched. Assuming he pulls this off, it’s going to look awesome and taste amazing. Four crowns of lamb chops, sitting up, mounds of stuffing inside.

(He’s also giggling a bit, mad scientist-style, as he’s getting his mise-en-place prepped. Gibbs gives him a very gentle head slap as he passes by Tim.)

Breakfast is almost ready when they hear knocking at the door. The party starts at three, but Fornell and Wendy usually show up early to help with the cooking, so Gibbs doesn’t think anything about it as he yells out, “It’s open.”

The door does open, and a voice, very much not Fornell’s calls out, “Any room for a stranger at this Inn?”

For a second, Tim feels his heart stop. He literally drops the onion he’s laying out for his stuffing as that voice stops his world. He takes three steps, clearing the kitchen wall, looks over, sees the face, the size and shape, it’s so much like his father, fear floods through him, but his grandmother dropping the pear she’s slicing for breakfast and flinging herself into his arms, saying, “Tom! Tom! What are you doing here?” pulls him out of the panic spiral.

Tom McGee, youngest of the McGee boys. The mystery uncle with the job no one talks about. The man who vanished months ago. And right now, he and his wife are standing in their foyer, hugging Penny, and saying, “Last week we got to a place with Wi-Fi, read the news, and found out it was safe to come home. Everyone who could have put together who set this in motion is taken care of now, so…” He smiles at his mom, kissing her forehead. “We’re home. Can we come in?”

“Oh, God, yes.” Penny retreats from the doorway, pulling them into the house. “God, you’re here!” Her hands rest on Tom’s shoulder, and caresses his wife, Lynn’s, cheek. She hugs both of them.
When she pulls back she says, “How’d you even know…”

Tom shakes his head. “Don’t ask. I know. I can always find the kids, you, John, or Mike. Visited the kids on the way here, made sure they knew we were okay, and decided to drop by here, let you see we were alive, and say thanks.” His eyes skitter around the room, looking at a collection of shocked people all staring at them. Then he lets go of his mom, and heads over to Abbi. “You’re Abbigail Borin, Director of CGIS.”

She stands up and offers her hand. That comment about ‘everyone who could have put together who set this in motion’ got her attention. She knows who’s standing in front of her, even if she’s never met him before. “You’re my anonymous letter writer.”

Tom nods. “You don’t want to know how long I had to sit on that before I found someone who might actually act on it.”

“I can imagine.” Abbi smiles dryly. “How about we get introduced, then pull up a seat, and a glass of eggnog, and tell us all about it?”

“We can do you one better than that,” Breena says. “Breakfast’ll be ready in about twenty minutes. Jimmy, go put their stuff in our room, and let’s get you set.”

Tom nods, glancing around. He can use some introductions. Obviously, the guy who just stood up to grab his and Lynn’s bags must be Jimmy, but, the rest of them? “Yeah. I’ve seen… Uh…” he glances between the younger guys and successfully points out Tim, “your picture from at least fifteen years ago,” and he nods to Ducky, “and we’ve talked online,” he looks at Gibbs, “White hair, so I know who you’ve got to be, but I’m sorry, for the rest of you, I don’t know who goes with what names.”

“We’ll get you settled in, and you can find out,” Jimmy says, offering his hand. “Jimmy Palmer. The one with the good idea of getting you a place to land is my wife, Breena. Come on, we’ll dump you in the deep end in a minute.”

Tom and his wife follow Jimmy down the hall. “We’re not putting you out of your room, are we?” Lynn asks.

Jimmy shakes his head. “Not a problem. We’ve bunked with Tim and Abby before, and I know we’ll do it again. The girls are so close in age that they share a nursery, and we get on well enough our part of the house is shared space.” Jimmy opens the door to his room. “Bathroom’s that door. Take a minute, get settled in, and get ready to eat. More food than you can imagine is about to hit the table, and it’s going to be that way all day.”

When Jimmy gets back, Penny’s in the middle of a quick backstory of Tom and Lynn McGee. He finds out that Tom is, or at least was, maybe, a SEAL, that both Penny and Gibbs began to wonder about him some when everything went bonkers back in September and October, but neither of them managed to get anything definitive before he went underground.

Penny had been suspicious that he was involved in what happened, because she could remember him asking about Gibbs and Abbi after the Coast Guard blew up, but beyond wondering, she didn’t have anything solid to go on.

“Looks like we’ve got solid, now,” Jimmy says, sitting at the table.
Tom and Lynn come out a moment later, and Penny stands up to join them, to just lay hands on her son again, feel that he’s really here.

He kisses her cheek. “Hi, Mom.”

She smiles at that. “Hi. Where did you go?”

Lynn shakes her head. “Which day? We didn’t spend more than three days in any given place.”

“Not quite true, we were on that ship for two weeks.”

Lynn gives her husband the side-eye at that. “Okay, yes, we were on one ship for more than two weeks. And what did that ship do?”

“Started in Jakarta and ended in Port Moresby.”

Lynn nods. “We’ve been all over. Mostly the Pacific and Indian Oceans.”

“Easier to stay below the radar if you keep moving,” Tom replies.

Penny leads them to the table, where food is starting to pile up, getting ready for the meal.

Abby heads in from their wing, Anna successfully put down for her morning nap, saying, “Did I hear…” she sees two more people at the table. “I guess I did.” She stares at them, and like Tim, for a second she has a visceral reaction at seeing Tom, thinking he might be John, but she notices the tall woman with white hair next to him, and Penny watching him with love in her eyes, and says, “You’re… Uncle Tom and Aunt Lynn, right?”

“Yes. Okay. Introductions,” Penny gets on top of this and makes sure that everyone in the crew knows who everyone else is as they all sit down for brunch.

Once they’ve all got names and an idea of who is who, Tim asks, “How long has it been since you were Stateside?” Best Tim can remember, he’s never met his Uncle Tom in person.

“Mainland, more than twenty-five years. Hawaii, ten years, and only to visit John or Mike. My job… They didn’t want me to be on US soil. Kinda illegal.”

That gets some glancing around the table.

“Aren’t you supposed to be a SEAL?” Tony asks.

Tom nods. “I was a SEAL. I was a SEAL for more than ten years. Being a SEAL meant I was involved in some interesting assignments. Those assignments got me working with other organizations, like the CIA. The SEALs and the CIA work together on certain delicate operations that need more muscle than the CIA can easily bring to the table.”

“Destabilizing foreign governments,” Penny adds. “Your Dad talked about that, some. Especially during the Vietnam era.” She doesn’t mention that Nelson didn’t think that was honorable. He saw his job as out fighting the other guy, weapons against weapons, skill against skill, and who was the better sailor or soldier, not spies and stealth and killing countries slowly one person at a time.

Tom knows what his Dad thought about stuff like that. His own take on it had always been that Dad had noble (read: old fashioned) ideas, and in a world of nuclear weapons, anything that kept the
body count down and the armies sitting on their collective asses was a good thing. He and Penny share a look, they tended to be in agreement on that. “After several, *delicate* missions, the CIA recruited me to work for them, full time. They moved us to Japan, gave me a team, and every month I got a collection of new missions. My operational perimeters involved everything from full-detail-planning, to move this envelope from point A to point B.”

“And then one day you opened the envelope?” Abbi asks, passing the French toast.

“In a manner of speaking. More like the envelope was opened for me. One day the guy grabbing the envelope assumed I knew what was in it. I’d been delivering it for nine years at that point. Same place, same time, always the two of us. We were friendly. He asked how I’d gotten into that sort of business. I rolled with it, and then started doing so research. I didn’t like what was in those envelopes. Took me two years to figure out what to do with that information.” Tom takes a sip of his orange juice.

“Saw what happened to Snowden. He leaked everything, and what… Nothing happened. No one lost their job, nothing changed, not really. *He* ended up on the run, not the guys spying on their own system. I knew if I just went live with it… I’d end up dead, my team would be screwed, and the guys we blew the whistle on would get away clean. Nothing would change. Maybe there would be hearings, but… They’d just shuffle it around, hide behind their lawyers, and bury it with panic-of-the-day stories of mass shootings and terror plots.” Tim hears that and begins to wonder how much of the media cycle guys like his Uncle had been responsible for. That’s a cold feeling in his gut. Tom keeps talking, “I had half of the puzzle. I knew what was wrong, but I didn’t have anyone to give it to who could make a difference.” He smiles at Abbi.

“And then you’re on ZNN and the Coast Guard is upside down. And if you had the balls to take on your own department, and do it right, none of this whistle-blowing, wait around for Congress to take care of it, and let it get buried shit. Mom had mentioned you before everything went up, and was talking about you and Gibbs right after, so I had some details that made me happy, and if Mom liked you, and knew you’d do the job... It was time to move on it. Lynn and I cut out of town—“

“You make that sound so simple!” Lynn gently whacks Tom with the back of her hand on his shoulder. “Oh, by the way Dear, remember how I’ve been telling you that I work for the Navy as an administrator... Yeah, that’s not quite true. Guess what? We’ve got to drop everything and run, NOW.” Lynn is still looking a tad miffed at this. Tom gives her a chagrinned smile.

“Anyway, a friend of a friend sent an envelope, and now…”

“A lot of guys are in jail,” Tony says.

“Or dead,” Tom says quietly. Suddenly they get the sense that they may not have grabbed everyone with their net, for example, they never found out who was accepting those envelopes, but it wasn’t a problem, not anymore. They also get a sense that Tom may have done a few jobs while he was ‘on the run.’

“So, how did you do it? We’d only get little bits and pieces when we were somewhere we could get online without anyone asking any questions. For a long time it looked like nothing was happening, and then the President’s in jail, the Capitol’s in New York, and we’ve got an election a month late with 8000 candidates,” Lynn asks.

“Last I heard we were down to 3,867,” Tony adds, in his best cute/bratty voice, followed up with a look of withering scorn.

Abbi sighs, of the people at this table, she’s the most involved in how it broke down. “You got a few
hours?”

“No plans to be anywhere anytime soon,” Tom replies.

“Good, because it’s a long story,” and from there Abbi starts to tell it, with everyone else adding their bits and pieces.

Gibbs loves seeing the ring on Abbi’s hand. It’s probably stupid, but he’s just feeling so satisfied to see it there, warm pearl and cool mother of pearl, glistening against her skin.

She’s talking to Tom, and between the two of them, they’re putting together the pieces of how everything fell apart, and how many more layers of crap may still be out there, and he’s sitting back, smiling, occasionally petting the back of her neck, feeling her silk fine hair against his fingers, just so content to watch her, hear her, and know, deep in his heart that she’s his.

That of the 3.5 billion guys on the planet, he’s the one she picked.

He’s feeling giddy, if it could be said that Gibbs, when not under the influence of powerful narcotics, can be giddy.

It’s closer to noon when Fornell and Wendy show up, with presents and ingredients for sausage and penne.

“No Emily?” Gibbs ask as they head in.

Wendy shakes his head. “Not yet. She and her mom decided they’ve been working hard and deserved some downtime and a treat. They decided to take Friday off, and headed down to Williamsburg for a spa weekend. They’ll be back up here, later, for the party.”

“Sounds like fun,” Breena replies, looking at Abby, Abbi, and Ziva, and thinking that they’ve got some girl time coming up soon. “What do you think Abbi, we leave the kids with the boys and do a girl’s weekend for your bachelorette party?”

Abbi grins and nods. “I can handle that.”

Fornell and Wendy both look from Abbi to Gibbs and back to Abbi, seeing the ring. Fornell gives Gibbs a hard, congratulatory whack on the back, and kisses Abbi’s cheek. Wendy swoops over to see the ring closer. “Oh… Very nice! Good work, Jethro.”

Gibbs smiles.

“So… plans?” Wendy asks.

Gibbs and Abbi look at each other. They’re aware of the idea that that ring indicates that at some point there will likely be a wedding. Gibbs shrugs. He doesn’t much care one way or another what or how. It’s enough that it happens, and he’d like the kids there, but beyond that, whatever makes Abbi happy is good with him.
Abbi flashes him a look that indicates she doesn’t have any firm plans in mind, either. “Not Alaska in December.”

Gibbs laughs at that, while the people around him look surprised.

“My sister thought it would be fun to have a wedding that both sunrise and sunset happened during, so she dragged us all up to Alaska in December. Then it snowed so hard we didn’t get to see either. I’m thinking it’ll probably be around here,” Abbi says. “Most of the family lives around here. My parents were willing to go to Alaska for my sister’s wedding, I’m sure they’ll travel here for mine.”

“Does your family have a hard time travelling?” Wendy asks.

“Not exactly. They travel just fine. It’s finding people to take care of the stock and the property that’s tricky.”

“Stock?” Wendy asks. Tom and Lynn also looking interested in this.

“Cattle. My parents have a ranch in Montana.”

“Oh,” says Lynn. She knows all about that sort of operation.

“Yeah. Finding someone to show up for a week to take care of 500 head of cattle can put a kink in travel plans.”

“I’d say. My brothers and I grew up on a farm in Kansas. Wheat. We didn’t have much stock. Mostly chickens and a few cows, just for food, for us. But you can’t just take a weekend off when you’ve got animals,” Lynn commiserates. “Is your sister part of the farm?”

“No… That’s my parent’s pet business, and they are having a hard time figuring out who’s going to run it when they get too old for it.”

“That’s why my parents didn’t want my brother joining the Navy. He came back to run the farm eventually, and brought one of his good buddies home a few times to visit, too,” she winks at Tom, “so it worked out, but it’s hard to find people who want to do that sort of work.”

Abbi nods, and she and Lynn chat about growing up on a farm, and about parents who are getting older, and need help running said farm.

“So, this is the new place?” Fornell says to Gibbs, looking around approvingly as he piles his ingredients onto the kitchen counter.

“Got it done with a minute or two to spare,” Gibbs is looking fairly proud of that, too.

“Looks like you did this up right.” Fornell glances around the kitchen, seeing lots of room to work.

“We knew a lot of the meals that got made here would be for at least fifteen people,” Tony adds, heading in to grab himself another cup of coffee. “You want some?”

“Yes, please. Fifteen? There’s really that many of you?” Fornell’s doing a quick mental headcount.

“Once Sean and Dave are on the outside, yes,” Tim says from his spot at the counter, where he’s
mincing garlic.

Tony hands over the coffee.

“DiNozzo, have you…” Fornell looks like he doesn’t much want to ask, but he also wants to know. “Do you know what’s going on with Diane and Draga? She’s not talking about it, and Emily’s sad. She really likes him, and he hasn’t been around for a few weeks. She’s hoping he’ll be at the party tonight.”

Tony sighs. He does know, and he knows Draga won’t be here today. “Spent fifty hours in a car with him over the last ten days, yeah, I know.”

“Do I want to know?”

Tony shakes his head. “Probably not. When he was in the Navy Yard, you know, when it was bad, he got stupid, and then got stupider by telling Diane how he was stupid, and now they’re ‘taking some time to think about things.’ On top of that, his Ex is trying to make sure that Kevin can’t come up here to visit. She’s suing for full custody and no visitation rights because Eric’s ‘too dangerous.’”

“Shit.” Fornell sounds like he just got a mouthful of something vile. From everything he’s seen, Eric’s a good dad, and getting screwed out of his kid because he’s a cop ties a knot in Fornell’s stomach.

“Yeah, he’s getting burned big time. Right now he’s in North Carolina trying to convince a judge that having a hit called on him doesn’t make him an unfit parent. Last I heard, he wasn’t doing too well with that argument. I’ll hear more about it tomorrow. If you want to tell Emily that he’s being run ragged at work and fighting to get to see his son, he’d probably be cool with that.”

Fornell nods in agreement. He’s fairly sure what ‘got stupid’ means, and well, Emily exists because of people ‘getting stupid,’ so that’s not an issue where he’s going to throw any stones, but he’d prefer not to get too deep into that story.

The idea that it would be something as simple, or, well, maybe not simple, Tim’s not cooking simple for tonight, but as… mundane, as a rack of lamb that gets Fornell to finally, really, warm up to him, stagers Tim.

But, it is.

He’s tying off his crowns, after having seared them nicely, sharing the range with Fornell who’s browning up the hot sausage for his sausage, peppers, and penne, when Fornell says, “Thought you were the cookie guy.”

“I am the cookie guy. Well, one of them. Breena made the pretty ones. I made the mint ones. You ate three of them, right?”

Fornell nudges his food, making sure it browns but doesn’t scorch. “They’re good.”

Tim nods, taking that as his due.

“Don’t remember you ever doing any real cooking before. Cookies are easy.” Fornell says as his spatula flips hot sausage.
Tim inclines his head at that, too. Cookies are easy. That’s why they’ve been his go to dish for years. “Abby and I split cooking. Been doing it for a while now. Someone’s got to cook if we want to eat, but nothing fancy. Got serious about it after…”

Fornell nods. Tim doesn’t have to finish that sentence. He’s seen more than enough people who got out of DC get “serious” about food after. Hell, Fornell got serious about food too, even though he got out of the city every night, because you can’t watch people starve, first hand, and come away from it unchanged. (Well, he supposes you could, but that’s not the sort of person he wants to be.)

“You’re looking better than you did the last time I saw you.”

Tim’s sure that’s true, too. He doesn’t remember much about how Fornell looked, other than like salvation and breath and another chance at life. He kind of thinks his mind added the halo around him when he burst out of that tank, but maybe he really was right in front of the sun when he popped out.

“You were in and out, right?”

Fornell nods. “Yeah, even the National Guard wasn’t willing to try and take on a force of tanks. They let us bring food in and people out. Mostly taking out kids and sick people.”

“Where’d you learn how to do that?”

“Back in 1971 I spent some time at Fort Benning. Got good at it in Vietnam. First tank I was able to ‘borrow’ was a museum piece, but I could still drive it.”

“Oh. Do I want to know how you ‘borrowed’ a tank?”

Fornell smiles, eyes bright. “It’s a good story. I always liked undercover work. Put on a role, be someone else. So, I got my team together, explained what we were going to do. They made a backstory for me, and I headed over to the Virginia National Guard training grounds with the transfer orders for an M60. Claimed the West Point wanted one for training purposes. They were going to have the cadets take it apart and rebuild it.

“They called to check the orders, got Sacks, he claimed to be General Sacks, told them it was a legit order, and they got one out of mothballs for me.”

“And let me guess, once you’ve got a tank, it’s a hell of a lot easier to get more tanks.”

Fornell nods, still grinning. “It really is. Show up in a tank with orders and the right uniform, and people just start doing what you tell them to.”

Tony’s been sipping his coffee listening to that, and adds, “Okay, let me make sure I’ve got this story right. You find a uniform, have Sacks, Mr. Law and Order, pretend to be a General, and then you steal a tank, so you can steal other tanks, to get food in and people out of DC?”

Fornell keeps smiling, and nods. “I gave them back.”

Tim and Tony laugh at that.

“How on earth did you sell Sacks on that?” Tony asks. “His knees go weak at the idea of breaking the rules.”

“You never did know him well. He was fine with breaking the rules, for himself. He just didn’t like you doing it. But, when people are starving and the ‘rules’ are keeping them hungry, Sacks had no
problems with breaking the rules. His only regret was the he didn’t know how to drive one himself.

“Once we’d been at it a few days, other tank guys started deserting from the National Guard crews and joining us. After that… Ended up with twenty-five tanks under my command by the time Jarvis got the borders open.” Fornell looks both Tim and Tony over. DiNozzo looks like DiNozzo, bit fatter than he remembers, but so is pretty much everyone in this crew. McGee’s looking better, too, but he knows that Gibbs was worried about him.

“You really okay, McGee? Almost swallowed my tongue when I saw you step out with no hair.” Which is code for the fact that Tim was so far gone even Fornell could see it and was starting to get worried.

“I’m… okay… enough. Doing better than I was. You were right, it’s more comfortable.”

Fornell’s eyes skitter over to Wendy, who’s talking with Abbi and Penny and Gibbs. “Until you get home and your wife thinks you look like a dork bald.”

Tim smirks at that. “Yeah. I’m not allowed to get my hair cut again anytime soon.”

Fornell nods in agreement. “Yep.”

They put little girls down a bit early. Can’t get them down too early, or their little body clocks will let them know it’s not time, yet. But, half an hour… that’ll work.

Tim’s on naptime for this afternoon. He’s thinking he might get one himself, too. He reads stories, and cuddles girls, and spends a few minutes slowly rocking in the nursery, listening to their getting settled sounds. All of that is lulling, and he’s feeling awfully drowsy by the time he gets out of the nursery.

When he heads to his bedroom, he sees Abby and Breena also getting a siesta. The more he thinks about it, the more a nap feels like a really good plan. Lie down, curl up between the girls, catch a few zzzs. Yes, that sounds excellent, and he’s in the process of slipping out of his pants and going to do just that when the little, cautious voice in the back of his head pipes up and says, “There are a bunch of outsiders in this house, now’s not the time to be caught napping naked with both girls.”

So, with a sigh, he puts his pants back on, and heads to the sofa in their living area.

Which turns out to be a very good thing, because in an hour, Fornell is looking for him, letting him know it’s time to put the lamb in the oven, and if he’d been shocked when he walked in on Tim with Diane, Tim’s fairly sure that heading in and finding him spooned between Abby and Breena, all three of them half-naked or more would have given the man a coronary.

By the time Tim’s got the lamb into the oven, the house is starting to fill up with people. Sarah and Glenn are over, also talking with Tom and Lynn, getting caught up. Tim heads to the sofa, kisses his sister, and sits next to her and her fiancée. He’s not really talking. A word here or there where needed to keep the conversation going, but he is listening, and enjoying.

He’s at home, with his family, sitting around with them, and it’s been so damn long since he’s done something like this.
He loves his adopted family. They’re his life. But, sitting here, next to two other people who remember his past, who were there and part of it, he’s feeling less adrift.

He’s got history here, as well as present and future.

It’s a good feeling.

“Our building is open,” Ziva says to Sarah a few minutes later.

“Email me your landlord’s contact information. We’re hoping to stay in the city, but our place is gone,” Sarah replies.

“You’re staying?” Lynn asks. “Why? I’m sorry, that sounds bad. You can work anywhere, so…”

“She can do her work anywhere,” Glenn adds. “I’m a fire inspector. This weekend is the first downtime I’ve had since they started the cleanup, and, besides our wedding day, I don’t think I’m getting another day off until June.”

“And I don’t want him burning time on his commute,” Sarah adds. “So, right now, if it’s in DC and in fairly decent shape, we’re interested.”

“Our building is both of those things. And it’s got a lot of empty apartments. Many people are not coming back,” Ziva says.

“A lot of the people in our building worked for the government. They’re either in New York right now, or don’t have jobs period.” Tony and Ziva glance at each other. They don’t mention the apartments that are empty because the people who lived in them are dead now.

Senior and Delphine make it over just about the time little girls get up from their naps. And for all of Senior’s foibles and follies, he’s an awesome doting-Grand-Santa.

He’s got little girls crawling all over him while he’s handing out too many presents, grinning from ear to ear, collecting sloppy kisses and full body hugs.

Ziva’s watching him, on the floor, in front of the fireplace, covered in babies, laughing deep and rich while little laughs echo his. Tony comes up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist, fingers stroking over Dave’s bump, and kisses her neck.

She wraps her hand around his neck, giving him a gentle squeeze. “Next year is going to be insane, isn’t it?”

“The pile of presents will be taller than Dave.”

“Taller than Miri.”

He smirks. “If you say so.”

She rolls her eyes. “How long before you had Jimmy tell you?”

“He already told you I asked, didn’t he?”
“Breena did.”

“I’ll have you know that I made it almost two full hours.”

Ziva nods. “That’s an hour and a half longer than I thought you would.”

The Vances make it just as the sun is starting to set.

“So, this is what happens when you don’t have a case to work on?” Vance says, looking around the house, and then back to Jethro.

“I had some help,” Jethro says dryly.

Ed and Jeannie, along with Amy and Collin get in just as Jethro’s saying that. Ed looks around at the place and nods approvingly. “Good work.”

“Thanks.”

Then Ed starts telling Leon about how the house was a shell when he was here last.

Gibbs takes a discrete look, and notices that Amy still doesn’t have an engagement ring. He glances to Collin, who’s looking around at everything while Breena hugs her family, and gives him a look. The returning look hopefully means something along the lines of ‘ask later,’ but might just be Collin fobbing him off.

Gibbs isn’t sure and whenever they get around to another Bootcamp at the gym will be soon enough.

With the setting sun, Ziva heads to the centerpiece of their dining table, her menorah. Tonight, Molly and Kelly each get to light a candle, which makes both of them very happy, and their collective parents nervous, but it goes without a hitch.

Jeannie looks at the ham she and Ed brought without thinking about, beyond travels-well and feeds-lots-of-people, and says, “Should we have not brought this?”

Ziva shakes her head. “Most of the food on this table is unkosher, or if eaten with other food on the table, will be unkosher. As long as you aren’t bothered by me not eating it, I have no problems with you bringing anything you like to the feast.”

Tony’s gazing at it, succulent pink flesh rubbed with honey and spices, studded with cloves, sitting next to spicy cranberry relish. “Though not tempting me past what I can endure is a kindness. That looks amazing Jeannie.”

“Uh… Thanks and sorry?”

Tony nods with a soft whimper and makes himself look away.

“No LJ?” Vance asks, looking around. He enjoys his yearly visit with Gibbs’ “uncle.”
“Not this year. He’s got a ‘lady friend’ and they’re off with her family.”

“Good for him.”

Gibbs nods. “It seems like he really likes Lorraine.”

Amy’s standing next to Breena, with Abby and Ziva and Abbi. She’s gotten the details on Abbi’s engagement ring, and has attempted to get some sort of girly talk going about wedding planning, but Abbi’s got nothing for that.

(Though, and she wouldn’t admit it, yet, but she is starting to think that a New Year’s wedding, next New Year’s, not the one next week, would be good. There’s a vague image of a long sleeved dress, and snow, and cold, and lots of white and silver starting to form in the back of her mind.)

So, after an unsuccessful foray into wedding talk, Amy does get them onto babies. “You look done,” she says to Abby.

Abby nods. “I am. He’s welcome to get moving anytime he likes.”

“And this little one?” she asks Ziva.

“Late April. Tony’s birthday is the twenty-second, so maybe he’ll share a birthday with his daddy.”

“Oh, God,” Abby says, “Can you just imagine that? He’s already going to be over the moon when Miri shows up, can you imagine if they’ve got the same birthday?”

Breena and Abbi snigger a little at that, and Ziva smiles with them.

Amy looks over her sister and Abbi. “Any other babies in the works…”

Abbi shakes her head. “No. Not going to happen. I’m good with being…” she looks at the ladies… “Uh… I’m younger than you,” she says to Abby, shaking her head, “not gonna be Grandma to your kids.”

Abby nods along with that. It would feel weird to have her kids calling someone two years younger than she is and only one year older than her husbands Grandma. “Then, like with Penny and Ducky, you can be their Abbi,” Ziva says.

“Pop and Abbi,” Abbi says it, feeling it. Not like it’s new, that’s what the girls that are talking call them anyway, but it means something new now.

She glances across the room, and sees Penny talking with Tim and Sarah. She can’t hear what they’re saying, but can watch the three interact. Thirty years from now, she’ll be seventy, and the little girls playing with Kayla on the floor will be adults. She tries to fast forward time, get a feel for Molly, Kelly, and Anna as adults, but even having seen pictures of all their parents as children, she can’t come up with an image of them as adults.

But, even without the image, she knows, that (with any luck) thirty years from now, she’ll be in this house, spending Christmas with them, and maybe the people they’ll add to the family, too. They’ll be just as much her girls as Sarah is Penny’s.

Abbi tunes in again, hearing Breena say, “Who knows? I’m not throwing up, so obviously I’m not pregnant now.”
“That sounds like you’re thinking about it,” Amy says, smiling at her sister, imaging another niece.

“Have them close together, and we get the house back sooner,” Breena adds.

Jeannie comes over, hearing that. “Good plan. It took nine years to get you all out of the house. Do them all at once, get each stage done in one sweep. None of this get done with potty-training one of them and then turn around and start all over again stuff.” Jeannie watches the girls for a moment. “Although there is something to be said for not having two in diapers at once.”

“That’s going to be us in a month,” Abby says. “Year and a half and newborn.” She groans, melodramatically. “What the hell were we thinking?”

Breena smiles at her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “Lucky for you, you’ve got some good friends to help out.”

Abby kisses her cheek. “Trust me, I know it.”

Tim’s eyeing the eggnog. Not like he’s got to drive anywhere tonight, and another one of them would be really nice.

Senior distracts him from his mental debate about another drink with, “McGee, your sister is here, your grandmother is here, and your aunt and uncle. Where are your parents?” Senior asks, finally realizing that he’s never met McGee’s parents.

Tim cringes a bit, mentally, but makes himself answer Senior blandly, “I understand my father is in Hawaii, and my mother and her husband live in Texas.”

“You understand… Oh, right. He’s Navy. Is that code for he’s on some sort of top-secret, you-don’t-get-to-talk-about—“

“Dad!” Tony grabs Senior’s arm, sweeping in. “Tim doesn’t know. Here, how about you ask Tom, if anyone knows, he probably does.”

Senior smiles blandly at Tim, sure that he’s just stepped onto some Navy thing.

Tim nods at Tony as he pulls his Dad away. The wider family doesn’t know about the drama with his parents, and he’s happy to keep it that way.

“So, do we have a President, yet?” Ed asks Leon.

“Last I heard twenty more guys got booted from the race. They still haven’t gotten the count done in New York, Illinois, or Pennsylvania,” Leon had been listening to NPR on the way out here, and they were, like every other news outfit, covering the never-ending election.

“Gonna be a long race. What happens with you guys?”

“We’re back up and running. Officially, we, the whole Navy, is under new management, though we don’t know who, yet. Jarvis handed in his resignation. He’s officially the Governor of DC right now.
I’ve heard that there’s a woman named Sarah something-or-other. She’s not Navy, but the company she runs makes things we use. Rumor has it she might get the nod.”

“You okay taking orders from a civilian?” Ed appears to have picked ‘civilian’ carefully, and Leon wonders if he means woman.

Leon shrugs. “Not like it’s the first time it’s happened. If they’re good orders, I’ll take them from anyone. If they’re bad orders, I don’t care how many ribbons are on your chest. If this last few months show anything, it’s that we’re done ‘just following orders.’”

“How’s paying for the cleanup going?” Senior asks Diane shortly after she and Emily get in.

She groans and slumps. Hours of spa time had helped to unkink some of what she’s thinking are going to be permanent stress knots from what she’s been doing lately. Just talking about it is starting to bring them back. “The cash you brought in is a very good thing, but it’s still… I mean, we’re not in danger of bankruptcy, but…”

“It’s long and hard and everyone promises everything and very few of them deliver.”

Diane nods. “In a nutshell. And a bunch of the ones who are delivering are trying to rewrite the deal while it’s happening.”

Senior nods, too. He’s been there and done that, many times.

“On the upside, trash collection is back in full swing. We’ve finally got four full-time EPA inspectors checking the removal crews to make sure they’re taking things out in a way that’s up to code. I’ve got twenty building inspectors on the job now, so I’m starting to get full neighborhoods approved for tear down or renovation. It’s starting to get moving, but it’s slow.”

“At least a year before it’s done?”

Diane is sure that Senior’s looking for an angle on this, but she doesn’t care. If he’s willing to cut them in for a finder’s fee of whatever he makes on her tips, she’ll take it. She and Jarvis have talked long and deep about how he’s got no tax base right now, and if he wants people to come back, he can’t be jerking up his tax rates to make up for the deficit. So, she’s comfortable answering, “If not more. Probably eighteen months. Hospitals and schools are going to get the green light a lot faster than that, though. The real question is who’s going to come back when it’s all done.”

“There is that.” Senior waves Penny over. “Junior tells me you’re up in New York, working to get DC turned into a state.”

Penny smiles at Senior and Diane. “That’s the idea. We think it’s going to pass, too, but we’ve got to see who actually shows up for the next Congress before we know for sure.”

“Any idea where the next Capitol is going to be?” Senior asks. Both Penny and Diane can see he’s definitely angling for a tip with this one. Anyone who knows where the next Capitol is going to be before it’s picked, can make a lot of money on real estate.

“Not yet. I know some of the Congressmen would like Hawaii. I’d miss the kiddos, but I know Ducky and I wouldn’t mind getting out of New York in winter and going somewhere nice and warm. New York, Philadelphia, Saint Louis, Las Vegas, and Chicago are bending over backward to try and get chosen. I do know that given the way they’re lobbying, and the comments we’re getting
from other states, that this President will get to pick where his Capitol will be, and where the next
one will be, that way any State after this one will have six years to get ready. Take Wyoming, there’s
nowhere in the state to house the at least 40,000 new people who will move in with the new
government. Several of the smaller states have that same problem. They don’t have the housing
capacity ready to deal with the influx of people. Don’t have the schools, don’t have the medical
infrastructure, don’t have any of it ready to go.

“The idea is that six years will be enough time to get ready for the influx of people. And with a little
luck, since none of them will be eligible for re-election, some of them will chose to stay in their new
town, instead of just up and leaving a ghost town when the capitol moves on.”

“That sounds like a mess,” Diane says.

“We’ll see. It’s supposed to help shake things up and prevent too much power in one place at once
time,” Penny replies, but she’s also well aware that for a lot of the more rural states, it likely will be a
mess.

“Sounds like it’ll do that,” Senior says. “At least on the surface.”

Penny nods at him. “That’s how it always is.”

“Sounds like overkill,” Tom says, drifting over, handing his mother the coffee she’d asked for. “We
did it this way, we fu—screwed it up. Sorry, sailor talk, I try to edit, but sometimes it doesn’t work so
hot. Anyway, we screwed it up, now we’ll try screwing it up in a new and interesting way.”

Penny inclines her head at that. “Probably be good for helping the people in charge see that the rest
of the US isn’t just a blank bit of map between New York and Los Angeles.”

“Maybe. My guess is that by the time they’re done with urban states that have big cities with
civilized amenities’ to descend on, they’ll change the rules. South Dakota isn’t ever going to house
the Capitol, let alone Idaho,” Tom says.

“Fortunately, that’s not a problem your mother or I will ever have to deal with. More than enough
big population states to last out what’s left of our lives,” Senior says.

“What about us, I mean, what about the Navy? Have you heard any rumors on that?” Tom asks.

“The deal is set to lease all Federal buildings and landmarks back to the US. Just got to get the new
congress into session to vote on it.” Penny shakes her head. “Half of the guys who we were dealing
with wanted to start everything from scratch. Anything that the Federal government had ever touched
was taboo to them. Another two-thirds think that most of what the Government did it didn’t need to
be doing. It took a lot of talking to get them to decide that not starting over from scratch just because
you’re miffed at people who aren’t in charge anymore is a good plan.” Penny sighs. She’s spent hour
and hours and days and days going over numbers, pointing out how silly it would be to move
anything that didn’t need to be moved. Money is tight, and there’s no reason to pay for anything that
doesn’t need to be paid for.

“So, they’ll stay at the Navy Yard?” Senior asks.

“That’s the plan.”
“You pulled the trigger?” Diane says to Gibbs when they get a quiet moment.

He nods, looking pleased with himself.

“Good. You do right by her.”

“I intend to.”

Diane shakes her head a bit. “We all intend to.”

“I will.”

That gets a small smile.

“How about your boy, falling short of his intentions?”

Diane raises and eyebrow at him and sips her eggnog. “Are you asking about my love life?”

“I’m… giving you a chance to talk if you want to.”

“Yeah, you would. I take it you’ve got the story?”

“Bits and pieces. Overheard him talking to Tim a while back. He’s not here now. Might be doing the math and coming up with five for two plus two, but I think I’m close enough.”

“You probably are.” Diane licks her lips and shakes her head a bit. “Look, I don’t hold it against him. Not… I saw him when he got out… I mean, I know. I know the crap people do when they’re miserable, just to keep themselves going. I get it. I don’t love karma coming back and biting me in the ass, but I get it.”

“Him not being here isn’t about that?”

“It is, and it isn’t. He really does need to be in North Carolina right now. That’s why he’s not here. Him not being with me is about the long conversation we had after he told me about what happened in the Navy Yard.” She looks away from Jethro, scanning the room, seeing couples and families making merry. “My boy.” She copies Gibbs’ lead. “I’m almost fifty, Jethro. He’s twenty-nine. Yeah, he’s cute and fun and sexy but… God, he’s so young. What the hell does he need me for? And, more importantly, do I want him?”

“Do you?”

“Yes. No. I don’t… I like him. He’s nice. He’s pretty. He doesn’t want me to be someone else. Emily loves him. I’ve certainly done worse. But I don’t see growing old with him because when I’m old he’ll still be middle-aged. Hell, I’m not sure about anything long term with him because he’s still growing up.”

“You thinking I’ve got some insight into that?”

“Add ten years to the numbers and that’s you and Abbi, right?”

“Yeah. It is.” He rubs his face. “I don’t know. We’ve got now, right? Tomorrow isn’t a given, and yesterday was too damn empty and lonely for words, so we might as well enjoy now, right?”

Diane smiles a little at that.
Fornell’s on the back porch, smoking, with Senior, who’s got a cigar of his own, and Leon. Plans for Post-Apocalypse smoking quitting haven’t exactly been working as well as hoped.

“You’re almost done, aren’t you?” Senior asks Fornell between puffs.

“This fall was my last hurrah.” Fornell shakes his head. “Not going to top that, not ever again. I’m doing paperwork on it until the end of time, but officially the 2nd is my last day. Something of an anti-climax because I’ll be back again on the 3rd to write more reports, but I hand my badge in next week.”

Senior takes a deep puff of his cigar. “You’ll like it. More time with your family, time to do the things you always wanted to…”

Leon’s nodding on that. He likes the idea of more free time, but he wonders, if, like Morrow, within a few minutes of retirement, if he’ll be looking for a new agency to start up with.

Fornell shrugs. “Says the eight-eight-year-old who’s still working.”

“I like expensive toys. Gotta pay for them somehow.” Senior holds up his cigar. It’s not legal in the US, and very expensive.

“I thought you were quitting,” Gibbs says to Fornell as he heads outside to join them.

“I am,” Fornell says, inhaling.

“Yeah, looks like it.”

“Down from five to two a day now. It’s slow, but it’s happening.”

Gibbs eyes Fornell, Bullshit in his gaze.

“Quiet, you. Wendy, Emily, and Diane are already on me about it. Don’t need a third ex-wife ganging up on me.”

Leon and Senior laugh at that idea. “Don’t ever remember seeing either of you out here before.”

Senior say, part of his nightly routine is one cigar. He’s been out on Gibbs’ porch for them previous Christmasses.

“Quit the first time around when Emily was born.”

“Got done back in ’08,” Leon adds. “Probably the same reason you did. My wife didn’t want the kids getting lungfulls of it, and it’d be easier to keep them from doing it if I wasn’t.”

Fornell nods at that. “Exactly.”

“Then they decided to start up again,” Gibbs adds.

“Yeah, sit there looking at me all high and mighty, Sniper-boy,” Fornell says. “You spent the whole time outside in the fresh air. If you had ever smelled the inside of an M60, you’d know this is self-defense.”

Senior laughs at that. “Tank smell… Ooh… That stays with you.” He makes a disgusted face. “Haven’t been near once since Korea, and that smell…”

Fornell nods to Gibbs. “See, he gets it. Four guys, hot as hell, our ventilation wasn’t quite right, and
we didn’t have the time to fix it, so we were getting gas and a bit of exhaust in there, too. It stinks. You don’t want a sense of smell in there.”

Leon laughs, long and hard. “Listen to the little kitten complain. Four guys? Who got to go home every night and get a shower? Oh, boo hoo! Six hundred.” Leon inhales deeply, remembering how nasty that was, even with his cigarette-dulled sense of smell.

Fornell bows to him. “Fine. You had it worse. We’re both coping the same way.”

Leon nods. “And our wives are both unhappy about it.”

“Dad!” Kayla Vance steps out, disapproval all over her face.

“And our girls.” He stubs out his cigarette. Kayla looks up at him, rolls her eyes, and hands him a pack of cinnamon toothpicks.

Gibbs smiles at it, seeing her mother shining through Kayla’s body language and eyes.

---

“It’s midnight, right?” Tim says to Jimmy as he hands Kelly over for her last goodnight kiss.

“At least,” Abby replies.

“Goodnight little girl,” Jimmy says as he lays her down.

Kelly murmurs something soft, could be ‘Uncle Jimmy’ might just be a few sounds. Anna and Molly are already down, also making their settling in sounds.

The adults creep out of the girl’s room, and head to their own. The party is still going, though some members have headed off. It’s actually only seven thirty, and they will rejoin it in a bit, but for right now, some quiet with each other is nice.

“So, your Aunt and Uncle in the next room,” Breena says, flopping onto the bed.

“Yeah, if there’s ever a night where we need to be quiet and restrained…” Jimmy adds, curling around her.

“He’s not quiet when he’s restrained,” Abby says with a giggle, patting Tim on the bum and sitting down on the bed heavily. She lays on her side, and he sits at her feet, pulling off her shoes and starting to rub them.

“Ah…” Her eyes close. “Feels so good.”

“Should we be… I don’t know… making something that looks like a bed on the floor?” Breena asks.

Tim shakes his head. “We don’t have anything to make something that looks like a bed with. Every blanket and sheet we have, we’re using.”

Abby’s eyes go wide. “Did the sheets in your room get washed?” They made the bed after the first night here, but Abby doesn’t know if the sheets got washed, and… yikes… Not the sort of thing you
want your Aunt and Uncle sleeping on.

“Already got them,” Breena says.

“Good. That’d be way more information than they need,” Abby says.

“As opposed to the four of us sharing a bed… platonically?” Breena asks.

Tim shrugs. “I don’t think they’d just walk in, but we’ve got a lock on the door between us and the bathroom, so…”

“Besides, even if they did walk in, who are they going to tell? Your grandmother?” Jimmy says.

“Your dad,” Abby says.

Tim lets go of Abby’s foot to extend his middle finger. “Fuck him. Hell, if there’s anyone I’d like to be out to… Just to see that little vein in his forehead explode.” He flicks his fingers in an exploding gesture. “It’d twitch when he’d get pissed, and this… He’d stroke out.” Tim smiles at that mental image.

Abby wiggles her foot, a get back to that gesture, and Tim goes back to rubbing.

“I was going to grab a nap with you two, but thought better of it. Worked out pretty well, Fornell came looking for me, and speaking of guys who’d stroke out if he walked in…”

“He just walked in?” Abby doesn’t remember that.

“Tony thought you and I were gaming,” he glances at Jimmy, letting them know who you and I is, “And told him to just head on it. He found me on the sofa. I assume he would have knocked if I hadn’t been on the sofa, but… He didn’t before. And if he thought you,” he glances to Abby, “might have been sleeping, he might have gone in without knocking so as not to wake you up.”

“And you don’t need to hear him going off on the three of us?”

“Yeah, I imagine it’d be more impressive than ‘Holy Fourth of July Weenie Roast!’ Probably something along the lines of screaming for Gibbs and you,” he pets Jimmy.

“Then he likely would have been disappointed by the lack of sudden domestic turmoil,” Jimmy says with a yawn. “Why does it feel so late? We work longer hours than this all the time.”

Tim stretches a bit. “I don’t know, but it does feel late. Maybe it’s because we know we’ve got to get up early.”

None of them are happy about that. They’ll get up. Jimmy’ll ride into work with Tim and Abby. Breena will take the girls, dropping Kelly off with Heather, and then her girls to daycare, before her day starts. The only downside of the house is the hour and twenty minutes between it and their homes.

“We could just pack them up and go home,” Breena says, and her three spouses decline that offer, none of them want to do any of that, now.

She sits up, and offers her hand to Jimmy, “Come on, let’s do some more merry making.”

He smiles up at her, and takes her hand. “You two coming?”

Abby nods. “In a few. This feels too good to stop.”
Tom and Lynn had been in the south Pacific when they got the news that it was safe to go State side again. Their first leg of that trip had been to head to Australia, where good communications is a given, catching a plane to the US wasn’t much of a challenge, and Mike and Darla could put them up for a few days.

Having ended up on Mike’s door, and having explained their plan to head east, Mike had given them a heads up on the John situation, which Tom hadn’t been aware of.

He hadn’t even known John was out of the Navy. He really hadn’t known about the John/Tim dynamic. He knew John had kids, but he’d never seen them in person. But, apparently Mike had put some feelers out, and gotten his hands on the real reports of what happened on the *Stennis* (as opposed to the ‘official reports’ which have a somewhat different story). When Tom asked how bad it was, Mike just shook his head.

But he did know, after a late and somewhat boozy conversation, that Mike was concerned about the east coast branch of the family, enough to have sent John a note about them, one which John hadn’t responded to.

John hadn’t responded to anything sent his way. He didn’t write Mike back either, when he sent off a ‘So, now that it’s all coming out, I haven’t been in the Navy for a few decades, how are you doing?’ letter.

Tom’s concerned. Enough that on the trip back to Japan they are going to stop in Hawaii and check in on him. John’s not his favorite brother, that was always Mike, but he’s still Tom’s brother. And, once Tom got his half of the picture together with Mike’s half of the picture, a conversation with John about his future went on Tom’s to do list.

Tom’s half of the information was this: there are eleven Admirals of the US Navy. Eight of them were involved in the election buying scheme. Mike’s half added this to the mix: The US Navy is under new management and scrambling for talent. And both of them know that the people who knew what really happened with the *Stennis*, are, for the most part, out of the Navy now. The ‘official’ report shows that John’s battle group failed the test, and that he resigned in shame after. Anyone who casually knew John and his demands of constant perfection would believe it.

The party’s rolling to a close, people heading off because there’s work tomorrow. Tom is looking at the pictures on the mantle, thinking about his family, thinking about John. He knows there aren’t a lot of his family, partially because a lot of his mom’s pictures didn’t survive her home being ransacked. But he also knows that a lot of the pictures are missing because they contained John.

He can only find one shot with John in it. There are pictures of him, James, and Mike. He smiles, seeing the picture of James’ Annapolis graduation. John hadn’t been able to get leave to get home for it, but the whole rest of the family is there, standing next to James. Tom thinks that’s probably the last picture taken of James. He knows it’s the last picture they have.

They don’t have the shot of John’s graduation up on the mantle. He has that picture. It’s the last shot of their whole family together. The last time they were all in one place.

Penny sees him checking the mantle. She lays her hand on his shoulder, and he wraps his arm around her. “You okay?” he asks her.

Penny knows what he’s asking about. “I’m moving forward. But, yeah, I have bad days. It’s… I
thought James was the worst thing you’d ever feel as a parent.” She swallows hard. “Turns out that’s not true.”

Tom keeps his voice low, there are people around, though none of them are paying attention to him and his mom. “Mike thinks Jimmy’s dangerous.”

Penny shakes her head. “He’s not the only one.”

Tom’s not sure it that means Mike isn’t the only one who thinks that or if Jimmy isn’t the only one who’s dangerous. He sighs, both interpretations are likely true.

“How dangerous?” Mike watches Jimmy. He’s on the far side of the kitchen, talking with Ziva, his arm around his wife, looking about as troublesome as a cotton ball.

Penny, who knows there’s steel under the fluff, says, “I don’t know. I hope never to find out. Why?”

“In a few weeks the new Congress will convene. They’ll appoint a new Secretary of the Navy. She’ll start appointing and promoting new talent. John and Admiral Siddons are on the short list to be brought back. They’ve got almost perfect track records, they’re both under seventy, and they weren’t involved in the recent mess. I don’t know who you’re talking to in New York, but…”

Penny swallows and nods. “Yeah. Okay. I…” She hates this. Swimming in Navy politics was her job for a long time, but part of her deal with Nelson was that once he hit flag rank, she wouldn’t have to do it anymore. Going back to it, and to torpedo her son… Hates this. “I can spread the word that John can’t come back.”

Mike keeps looking over the pictures. The lack of John should say everything that has to be said, but he still has to ask, has to hear it for it to be real. “Did he…”

Penny nods. “Yeah. He did.” She looks like she’s tasting something awful. “It wasn’t just a misunderstanding or something got out of hand or…” She nods to Tim, who’s by the tree, with Abby and Ducky. “Sheer luck he’s still with us.”

“Grace of God?”

“If you’re inclined that way.”

Tom kisses his Mom’s cheek. “Okay. Sorry to get you thinking about this now. Supposed to be a happy night.”

She hugs him back. “You get to my age, and all your happy moments have a shadow on them. Lost too many people for that not to be true. If you’re lucky, those shadows make the light a little brighter, and they keep you from being blinded by the dazzle.”

Unlike Tim and Jimmy’s late, it is legitimately late as Abbi and Gibbs are putting away the last of the dishes.

Tomorrow, she’ll head into work, and he’ll go home, get everything packed and ready for visiting her parents’ place. Then, on Tuesday, Mona heads over to… whichever house the McPalmers are at, and off they go to Montana.
“How about New Years’ 2018,” Abby says, tucking a wine glass into the cupboard.

“Mmm?”

“They’ll want to know when we’re getting married. Next New Years’, you like that?”

Gibbs thinks about it for a second. “Sure. Any day you want, I’m good with.”

She smiles at him. “You want a real wedding, or just roll over to the courthouse, pick up the papers, and dinner here after?”

He shrugs. “I think you get to pick on that.”

“I know I get to pick. I’m asking for your preferences.”

“Wouldn’t mind doing it here. We already know everyone we’d want to invite fits here.” He thinks about it a bit more. “Kind of want a real wedding. Doesn’t have to be a lot of people, but...” he’s not sure how to even begin explaining the desire to show her, and them, and what they’re doing off. He does know that he wants everyone he loves to be part of this, and see that the two of them are doing something important, something that matters. He rubs his lips together, thinking. “It’s not just a party. It matters, and... I’d like everyone to see that. But... I want to celebrate, too. It’s happy, you know?”

Abbi smiles at him again, and kisses him. “So... you might like something fancy?”

“I’ve been told I clean up nice. And I know a guy who knows a guy who makes a great tux.” He winks at her, remembering them playing with him dressed up, and the very good time they had at Senior’s wedding.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Do you want something fancy?”

“Maybe. You’ve got your pension, and I’m getting my director’s salary. Not like we’re saving up to buy a house or fill up college funds. We could do something fancy.”

“We could.” Talking about that makes Gibbs think of something. “Are your parents going to try and pay for this?”

Abbi shrugs. “Don’t know. I think they paid for my sister’s wedding, at least part of it, but she was twenty-four when she got married. They gave me ten grand to put down on my house when I bought it, so that might have been them keeping the score even between us.”

“I’d feel... odd... if they wanted to pay for it. We’re not kids.”

Abbi nods at that. “Yeah. I think they might feel odd if we needed them to pay for it. We’ll talk. They’re pretty good about being open about things like this. I don’t think they’ll get annoyed if we say we’re paying for it. And if they were planning on paying, we’ll probably end up with a big wedding present.”

“Tony said Senior tried to do something like that.”

“I take it he wasn’t very receptive to that.”

“Not so much.” Gibbs sets the last plate onto its shelf. “What would fancy look like? Senior and Delphine’s wedding?”
“Minus four hundred people?”

“I don’t think, between the two of us, we even know enough people to get that many people in attendance. But, yeah, assuming our family and some friends, what would you like?”

Abbi sighs… “It’s silly.”

He takes her hand and they head up the stairs to their room. “I’m good with silly.”

“Do you remember when Grace Kelly got married?”

“I’m not quite that old,” Gibbs says dryly.

She blows a raspberry at him.

“I know it happened, but I don’t have an image of it in my head.”

“Okay. I do. When my sister was doing her wedding stuff, she had piles and piles of pictures of dresses and stuff. It was my job to help her sort it out. She had a picture of Grace Kelly’s dress, and… when we get back to our room, I’ll google it for you… Anyway, I liked that image. I could see doing something like that.”

“Are you asking me to check out the dress?”

“Only so you have an idea of what I’m thinking of as fancy.”

“Okay.”

In their room, she turns her phone back on, and is pleased to see that none of the 153 emails are urgent, and then she googles Grace Kelly wedding. She shows Gibbs the dress, and says, “Not lacy, but some sort of satin, maybe white with silver brocade… The kind of wedding you’d wear a dress like that to.”

Gibbs looks at it, imagining Abbi, sleek and elegant and beautiful in white satin, his bride. He feels a rush of pleasure and pride at that image. “I can do that.”
There are things Gibbs thought he was done with. Many things. Most of which, he really is.

One of which, he apparently isn’t.

Namely, as he pats Mona one last time, and kisses Breena’s cheek for agreeing to take care of her, he’s getting ready to pick up Abbi, drive the circuitous route of still open roads to Reagan, and head off to Montana to meet his finance’s parents.

He really never expected to do this again. He’d gotten to an age where, well, most of the women he expected to be dating weren’t likely to have parents anymore.

But it didn’t work out that way. Borin’s forty, and her back-to-the-land homesteading parents are… Sigh…Sixty-one and sixty-three. So… he’s closer in age to her mom and dad than he is to her. By a lot.

It’s been a damn long time since Gibbs has flown commercial as a civilian. (Speaking of things he thought he was done with…) He’s sure he’s had to have done it at some point, but the more he thinks about it, the likelier it is that it was before 9/11.

“Don’t suppose you could just whip out the badge and get us through this mess,” he says quietly to Abbi as they shuffle, in stockinged feet, closer to the security checkpoint.

“Sure, I can do that. For me.” She flashes him a cocky grin.

He rolls his eyes a little, taking another slow step forward. “We’ve got a jet. Don’t you guys?”

Abbi laughs at that. “CGIS does have a jet. Using it is supposed to be a perk of my job. And when you’ve got the $300,000 I need to get it in the air, we can take my jet. Until then, it’s in storage.”

Gibbs laughs grimly at that. He knows that the Treasury is starting to send out cash again, and that given her particular situation she’s not having any trouble at all getting promises of cash for CGIS. Actual cash is a somewhat different situation.

Like everyone else with a Federal Agency right now, she’s scrambling to make payroll and keep the lights on.

“You’re kidding me,” Gibbs says, voice flat, as he gets pulled aside for “enhanced screening.”

He even remembered his knife, which is in his checked baggage. (Not having it in arm’s reach is making him feel buggy.)
“I’m sorry, sir.” The TSA Agent, who probably hears variations on that, and often less polite, a thousand times a day stares blandly at Gibbs.

“Do I look like a terrorist? I’m traveling with the head of the Coast Guard’s Investigative Service.”

The TSA agent smiles weakly and begins to pat Gibbs down.

He’s staring at Abbi, who glided on through, with no problems, his teeth gritted, as he gets felt up by some twit who he would have fired from his team on the basis of this lackluster pat down. He could have a knife on his back, a gun under his arm, another one at his groin, and this twit would never have noticed.

“Why me?”

“Sir…”

“Come on. I’ve been law enforcement for decades. Why me?”

The TSA agent sighs and comes up with a half decent lie on the fly. “The canister in your baggage.”

“My oxygen? I got shot in the lung a few months ago. In the line of duty.”

“I’m sorry sir, anyone traveling with something like that gets checked.”

“Uh huh.” Gibbs whips out his don’t BS the Boss look, and the Agent pales. “Gotta keep the skies safe from people with emphysema.”

“Something like that, sir.” The TSA Agent gets done and says, “You’re clean. Thank you.”

Gibbs nods and heads off, looking for his shoes.

They got to the airport more than early enough that even with Gibbs’ extra-special attention, they’ve got two hours to kill before the flight leaves.

It’s true that Abbi wasn’t comfortable burning $300K for one flight. It’s also true that she didn’t mind spending a few hundred on CGIS’s dime to bump them up to business class, and get a direct flight to Denver. (She figures the fifteen hours of travel time they’ll save by going direct more than makes up for the cost.)

So, with a few hours to kill, they’re in the business lounge, having a drink, relaxing (Gibbs) or checking emails (Abbi.)

Gibbs checks their tickets. This first part of the trip looks pretty plush. Get on the plane, kick back and relax in the cushy seats, and a bit more than four hours later, they’re in Denver. From there, it’s puddle jumper territory.

Denver to Billings, that’s not too long, about an hour and a half. Then a three hour drive to the north east. Her parents live way off the beaten path, outside of Fallon.

Or, as she told Gibbs when he asked, “Fallon’s the kind of place that’ll make Stillwater look like New York City. Last census it was down to 150 people.”
“Blink and you’ll miss it?”

“Not quite that small, but only because it used to be bigger. Lots of empty space and buildings. It’s
dying slowly.”

He hears the concern in her voice. “Another reason why you’re worried about your parents?”

“They’re half an hour out from something that’s barely a town. Fallon goes, and they’ll end up
almost an hour away from the next town, Glendive, which at least really is a town, but… It’d be nice
if they didn’t have to drive an hour for groceries.”

Gibbs can understand that. He got nervous with his Dad all on his lonesome, and all on his lonesome
meant neighbors all of fifty feet away. Still, it’s not like her parents are ancient. Her dad is five years
older than he is… Of course, he’s also not suggesting they go head off and live way the hell out in
the middle of nowhere. He can imagine what Abby and Breena would say to him if he were to
suggest getting a place an hour from the nearest grocery store.

“What’s ‘really a town’ mean?”

“About five thousand people.”

Gibbs shakes his head. He likes being away from the rest of the world, but there’s away and then
there’s hermit-hood.

“People really go out there for vacations?”

Abbi nods at that, little smile on her face, and sips her whiskey. “Mom and Dad have six cabins full
of them. If your lungs can take the cold, I’ll get a sled set up, and we’ll go out. Trust me, there’s
nothing at all like it. A million miles of sky, wind whipping in your face… It’s pretty flat where we
are, and you feel like you can see forever, feel like you can run forever.

“We don’t let the tourists go out at night, but you and I should. You’ve never seen stars like Montana
stars.”

Gibbs doesn’t get a lot of time out with Abbi. These days she’s either working or she’s home. He’d
certainly like to spend time out with her, and he’s looking forward to a time where she’s not working
twelve hour days most of the time, and with any luck, if Christmas weekend off and this trip go well,
she’ll start easing back, letting her second and thirds in command take over more of the duty.

But that hasn’t happened, yet.

So, it’s entirely likely, as they’re in the lounge at the Denver airport, that this is the first time he’s
really been out in public with her since the fall of CGIS.

He’s used to being no one. Gibbs doesn’t want the limelight, and he’s happiest far away from it.
Tony might be bothered when another agency gets credit for whatever it is NCIS does, but Gibbs
doesn’t mind. The less attention paid to him, the better.

Still, there’s not in the limelight, which he prefers, and there’s invisible, which is getting irksome.

Denver, by some perverse trick of God, is located on a mountain, and there’s no air there. As soon as
they got on the ground and out of the carefully controlled atmosphere of the plane, Gibbs needed his O2. He doesn’t want to need it, but he can’t, with 4/5ths of his lungs, pull enough air to keep from feeling dizzy without it.

So, he supposes that, as the old guy on oxygen, sitting next to the super-hot redhead who’s been on TV right and left lately, who’s something of a national hero for her part in the recent upheaval, it’s fairly normal for people to overlook him, but as the third guy in an hour tries to hit on his fiancée in front of him he’s getting sick of being ‘low profile.’

They don’t even see him there. Two of them notice him halfway through getting their hopes of getting laid crushed into dust by Abbi and look startled, and the third didn’t notice him even after Abbi blew him off.

It makes a few uncomfortable thoughts about their age difference go flying through his head. And it makes a very possessive streak of him do something he usually doesn’t. Neither he nor Abbi are very touchy-feely in public, but if the ring on her finger isn’t keeping the guys off, it’s time to pull out the bigger guns. He scoots his chair over a bit, and wraps his arm around her waist.

“Getting snuggly on me?”

“It’s that or I start slapping these twits.”

Abbi chuckles at that. “I thought I was handling them fine.”

“You are. Doesn’t mean I don’t want to growl at them.”

She strokes his face and kisses him. “Thanks for letting me handle it.”

“No problem.”

They do stop hitting on her, but he does see a few of them give him a look, then look at her, and then back to him, and he can see them wondering if he’s extremely wealthy or what.

Gibbs smiles, cold and smug, at the one who’s openly staring at him with how the hell did you get her? on his face. He slowly strokes his hand up and down her back, feeling very possessive and a bit unsettled because he’s never going to look any younger than he does now.

He wonders, ten years from now, when he’s closing in on seventy, and she’s barely fifty, how many looks they’ll get. Too many. One would be too many.

He makes a mental note to have a good long chat with Jimmy when he gets home. And then another one with Ducky. He can’t get any younger than he is now, but if he’s going to promise to be with this woman for the rest of his life, the least he can do is try to live in such a way that he’ll be here for a good long time.

It’s cold. Montana in December, cold, really? The snarky little voice in the corner of his brain says. Or it would be saying, except it’s so fucking cold he can’t breathe.
It’s like ice in his lungs, and they won’t expand to let another molecule of this cold death into them.

Abbi, who’s also stopped dead the second they step out of the airport car rental in search of their truck, takes one look at him, and pulls him back into the airport.

“I always think my memory exaggerates how bad it is, and then I get back here.”

Gibbs nods, wheezing. He’s thinking of grabbing his O2, but he doesn’t think it’ll help. It’s not that there isn’t enough oxygen (which was the issue in Denver, and blessedly doesn’t appear to be a problem here) it’s that his body is refusing to inhale that gaseous ice masquerading as air out there.

He’s starting to get scared that this is going to be the shortest visit in the history of visits when Abbi rifles through their bags and finds the scarf that Breena tucked in there for him. Gibbs, who had been giving it the side eye because it had cute little red-nosed reindeer on it is now looking at it like it’s a lifeline.

He happily wraps it around his face a few times, eager for something to help warm that slow death by frigid suffocation out there, and wonders idly if Ducky had ever seen someone who asphyxiated on cold air.

Abbi holds up her hands. “You stay here. I’ll get the car warmed up.”

Normally, Gibbs would hate that, and a sliver of his pride is riled by it, but compared to heading out there into that cold again, into a cold car, and then waiting out there for the ten or so minutes before the car’s got enough heat to be bearable…

He’ll take it.

When he does get into the car, which is, technically speaking, a truck (With where they’re going, Abbi doesn’t want some sort of small, compact thing without a lot of clearance.) the thermometer says it’s -8.

Abbi shrugs at it. “About average for this time of year out here.”

“I grew up in Stillwater.” Gibbs is shaking his head. “It was cold there, but…”

“But this was that one really bad week in the winter, right?”

“The one where no one went out if they could avoid it, yeah.”

“You get used to it.”

“Hope so, if we’re going to do anything besides sit by your parent’s fire.”

Gibbs has been all over the world. He’s served on four continents and several islands. Jobs have taken him from Canada to Colombia. He’s been to most of Europe and the Western USSR and then Former Soviet States. He did tours in Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi. Afghanistan, been there and done that.
And Montana is different from all of them.

Part of it is that it’s winter, and winter in this part of Montana means snow. Though, as Abbi tells him, it’s not like a ton of it falls, this is an arid area, but once it falls, it doesn’t melt until May. And right now, with the sun still an hour above the horizon, it’s sparkling bright. Gibbs is very glad he’s got sunglasses, because snow blindness is a real possibility here.

The only parts of the world where he’s done any winter work were in Europe or Russia. Which was cold and very snowy, but not like Montana.

In Europe and Moscow, there are people. There are buildings. There’s stuff.

Out here, Billings behind them, there’s sky and snow, and a million miles of rolling space. There’s some scrubby pine trees sticking up from the snow, and tufts of grass and sage, but mostly it’s snow and dirt and rolling hills that stretch on FOREVER.

“People run cattle out here?” Gibbs asks, seeing a few cold-looking cows nosing dried, withered tufts of grass. He can’t imagine anything the size of a cow getting enough grass out of this dry land to stay on his hooves, let alone plump enough for anyone else to eat him.

“Yeah. Though they usually try to stay close to the buildings this time of year.” Abbi nods to the two of them they’re passing. “Those two got free and are probably regretting it. Normally, this time of year, they stay where the wind can’t get them, and keep close to each other for warmth.” She shakes her head at them. “They’re pretty stupid animals.”

“Good thing they taste good, then.”

Abbi smiles at that. “Oh yeah. And trust me, for a carnivore like you, a cattle ranch is a treat.”

He raises an eyebrow.

“We keep the best of the best for ourselves. Trust me, you haven’t yet met a real steak, but you will.”

Gibbs is pleased by that idea.
Abbi wasn’t exaggerating. Fallon, MT makes Stillwater look like New York City. Or maybe Tokyo.

There are two paved streets, the rest of them are... he assumes dirt. Right now, they’re packed snow. Feed store, grocery store, gas station, post office... Not much else. Not even a diner.

“Is there a school?”

“Up in Glendive. That’s where the cops, fire department, and doctor is, too.”

“Don’t get in an accident out here.”

Abbi nods.

There are a few tiny houses, the kind of construction that reminds him of the post-World-War-II building boom back east. He sees several more trailers. “What do people do here?”

“Farming, some. Welfare. Social security. A lot of people who are still here are old, the town is vanishing around them, though Mom says it might be perking up a bit. Got a few families looking for a cheap place to land while Dad works oil and natural gas in South Dakota.”

“You grew up here?”

Abbi smiles. “Not really. I got feed for the animals here, did some grocery shopping, and picked up mail. Most of life was on the ranch or in Glendive.”

She turns the truck, and now they’re on something Gibbs had barely noticed was a road. It’s a depression in the snow with a few tire tracks on it.

“Just gets wilder from here out.”

“Lead on.”

She isn’t kidding, at all.

Back east, any land that isn’t kept clear reverts back to forest. Leave it alone, don’t mow for a few years, and next thing you know, you’ve got a bumper crop of baby trees trying to become grownup trees. That’s happening to the lawn at their place on the Potomac.

That isn’t how land works here.

Here the land goes on forever, rolling away from them in soft hills and depressions, there are some scrubby little trees, all of them some sort of pine. At the edge of his vision, there’s a small river or large creek, and there are more trees (cottonwoods according to Abbi) by its banks, but between him and them there’s got to be at least fifteen miles of snow covered scrub.

Abbi points out the dark branched edge of the river. “Another twenty miles, across the creek, and that’s the corner of Mom and Dad’s place.”

They’re bumping slowly over the packed snow road. It’s so cold, that to Gibbs, this feels like driving on sand, it’s shifting below them, but the liquid slip of melting slush isn’t part of the road feel here.
Shortly after Abby mentions where they’re headed, the sun sinks below the horizon. Sunset is different here, too. Back east, with the trees and the hills and the buildings, you can lose sight of the sun long before it slips below the edge of the planet. That doesn’t happen here. There’s nothing tall to block the sun from them before the Earth turns away from it. One minute, the sky is pink, the snow is rose gold, and the hollows of the hills are shadowed, and then the next, it’s dark.

One second, he can see where they’re heading, and the next, it’s gone.

They’re enveloped in dark, two small circles of light in front of them from headlights, and black all around.

Gibbs is sincerely grateful that Abbi knows where they’re going, because even with his history as a Marine, and his much better than average map skills, this would be disconcerting territory to move through.

After a few minutes, his eyes adjust, and Abbi’s do, too. She stops the car, not like there’s any traffic here, and turns the lights off.

Gibbs knows what she’s doing, and his gloved hand finds hers as they look up at the billion stars above.

And she’s absolutely right, he hasn’t seen sky like this. He’s gotten close, the sky over the desert in Iraq was similar, but when he was there they were burning the oil fields, so there was always the flicker of those lights, and a fine sheen of smoke.

But here, it’s just them, the stars, and the moon above.

Out here, in the winter night, he can see the Milky Way, and he can see why it would be called that. There’s a stripe of stars across the sky, lighting a glowing path.

“The Lakota call it the Trail of Spirits. It’s the path we all take when our fates have been met.”

“I can believe that. How did you ever leave this?”

She smirks a bit. “Even stars get old. Especially to a seventeen-year-old. Though, wait a few hours, and we might get Northern Lights, too.”

“Never seen them before.”

“Really?” Abbi turns the car back on.

“Suppose I could have in Moscow, but I wasn’t spending my nights star gazing.”

“They can be a bit temperamental, but with any luck we’ll get some while you’re here.”

They’re bumping down the road, going about fifteen miles an hour, when Abbi turns again, and for
the life of him, Gibbs couldn’t have told you that this particular bit of snow was any different than any other bit of snow, but apparently this is the ‘drive’ that Jeff and Becky have a plow to keep clear.

He’s curious as to what constitutes ‘clear’ in this part of the world, because he’s guessing there’s six to eight inches of snow under them.

When they’ve been going for a few minutes, he sees what Abbi must have, the break in the trees up ahead. It’s a small bridge over a shallow run of water, about thirty feet wide.

On the far side of the bridge, there’s lights and buildings.

“Your dad and mom built this?”

“Most of it. It was a few trailers when I was little. They got the barn and kennel done first. Then the cabins. House has only been done for five years, but it’s exactly the way they want it now.”

They pull up in front of the ‘house’. It’s a two story square of stone. There’s a wide porch that wraps around it, and Gibbs assumes that in the warmer weather there are rocking chairs on it, but right now it’s bare. The windows are small and there aren’t a lot of them, but he assumes that has something to do with how cold it is. Each one is glowing gold with inside light, though.

“Wood’s expensive out here,” Abbi says as she parks. “Anything long and strong enough to build with has to be shipped from the west. Those stones… They’ve been digging them out of the ground for years. Each one of the ‘cabins’ is another acre or two of garden for Mom.”

“Your mom has acres of garden?” he unbuckles.

“Vegetable farm? Peas, potatoes, cabbage, lettuce, greens, carrots, radishes, rutabagas, blueberries and strawberries. Anything that’s low to the ground, happy with cool weather and lots of sunshine does pretty well out here. It’s too dry and windy for bigger plants, but,” Abbi gestures to the left, “she’s got acres of veggies using the creek for irrigation. If they could get better prices for the cattle, they wouldn’t bother with tourists. They want to be farmers, and this is what lets them do it.”

Gibbs winds the scarf around his face. He’s only looking at a twenty foot walk from the warmth of the car to the warmth of the house, but he’d rather not walk into her parents’ home wheezing away looking like he’s a million years old and sick on top of it.

Abbi’s tucking her hair under a hat and zipping up her coat. She smiles at him again. “Ready?”

He nods. “Yeah.”

Meeting people online is not meeting them in person.

For example, when you meet someone online, you don’t have to figure out what to do with your physical body, or their bodies, either.

Jeff and Becky Borin in person are a bit reserved. He’s not getting enveloped in massive hugs as soon as he walks in. Abbi is, and he gets polite handshakes. They aren’t hostile to him, but he can see, Jeff especially, is reserving judgement.

Jeff’s a cowboy. At least, that’s how Gibbs has this look and attitude cemented into his head. He’s
wearing jeans and flannel and a vest. He’s tall and thin, skin weathered from sun and wind, with sharp green eyes that his daughter inherited, and maybe, once upon a time, he had the same red hair. It’s white now.

Becky’s a cowgirl. Same basic outfit. She’s missing the vest, but like her husband she’s wearing jeans and flannel and there are wide-brimmed Stetsons on a shelf near the door, along with two pairs of well-worn boots.

She’s a bit younger than her husband. Her eyes are soft brown, and her hair might have been blonde once. It’s a dishwater gray now, kept back from her face in a long braid down her back.

He knows from Abbi that her parents were from Seattle originally, a little too young to be proper flower children, though their older brothers and sisters were. They met when her mom was a senior in high school, fell in love, “married” young, (Abbi isn’t certain if they actually bothered with the ceremony and paperwork. All her life they’ve had the same last name, but they don’t wear rings, and she knows there wasn’t a wedding,) and then decided to drop out of the larger society to come out here, get ‘back to the land’ and build a farm.

Gibbs has an image of that kind of person, and it’s a hell of a lot more like Penny Langston than Jeff and Becky Borin. Penny does the flowy clothing and has the relaxed, touchy, organic sort of personality that Gibbs associates with people who do things like homestead.

“Well, come on it. Let’s get you unbundled. You must be frozen, Jethro,” Becky says as she lets go of her daughter. “Everyone who comes here from back east and isn’t used to it thinks Montana in winter is Dante’s ice Hell.”

Gibbs isn’t entirely certain about ‘Dante’s ice Hell,’ Ducky would know about that, but he nods. “It’s colder than I’m used to, that’s true. I grew up in the North, but it’s been a while since I spent a winter there,” he says as he’s unbundling, happy to have the heat of the room sinking into his skin.

A thought hits him as Abbi’s pulling off her gloves. They haven’t told her parents about the engagement, yet, thinking that would be a good thing to say in person, and as soon as that glove is all the way off, they’re going to notice, so his window for paying proper respect to her dad is narrowing.

“Was hoping to have a serious chat with you at some point,” comes out of Gibbs.

Jeff nods. “Figured you would,” and Abbi finishes pulling off her gloves, and his eyes flick down to her hand. “Moved a bit faster than I expected,” Jeff says, dryly, not offering congratulations.

“Dad!”

“You pregnant?”

He’s asking Abbi, but his eyes are on Gibbs.

“NO!”

He nods again and kisses his daughter. “Good. Don’t want you feeling forced into anything. Go on up, get settled, dinner’s whenever you come down.”

Gibbs grabs both of their bags, and waits for Abbi to lead the way. He’s sure there are several things he could say to her dad right now, but he’s watching to see how she handles it, and taking his lead from her.
She gives Jeff the stink-eye, and then nods to Gibbs, and up they go.

The downstairs of the house is as open as they could build it. Twenty-five feet on a side, square, with a huge fireplace in the center of the house, and several pillars to keep the floor above them up.

“Helps keep things warm, and cuts down on the fuel needed to light the place,” Abbi says, as they head up the stairs that rise along the back wall.

“They’re that interested in low energy?” He’s thinking along the lines of Penny’s green crusades, but Abbi shakes her head.

“They’re off the grid out here. All the power they use, they have to make. There’s windmills, and each structure has a generator. Once a season they get a shipment of fuel oil and gasoline to run everything. The less power they can use, the better. That’s why the walls are white and cream, it reflects the light better. Everything is insulated within an inch of its life, so they use less heat.” The top floor is four rooms, two on a side, along a long hallway. Abbi opens the first door on the left. “Guest room.”

“This wasn’t yours as a kid?”

“We were still in a double wide trailer when I left. Dad had started digging the foundation, but this sort of work happens when everything else is done. He’d get maybe a day or so a week to work on it, grabbed an hour here or there.”

Gibbs eyes the space. He knows the outside wall is rock, but inside is drywall. The ceiling and floor are wood. The furniture is nice, not handmade, but good quality, none the less. The bed’s piled with quilts, which he thinks are handmade, and if so, Becky’s a serious quilter. It’s not warm in there, but it isn’t cold, either. There’s a small oil heater, and he touches it, realizing it’s cold, and that Abbi’s dad and mom did such a good job building this place that just on the radiant heat of the rest of the house, it’s only cool in here.

“You’d have done fine with the classes.”

“I know. I like reading. I don’t, especially back then, like just sitting around. When Shannon was in school, I’d quiz her on her stuff, and she’d help me with mine.”

He places their bags on the bed, and starts to unpack. He’s glad to see that in addition to his jeans and cargo pants, that he’s got long johns (Abbi packed them, assuring him he’d want them). He looks at them as he tucks them into a drawer. “Feel like a kid. Long underwear and short days.”

Abbi’d put her long johns on before they left. “I know that feeling. Sometimes on a case I’ll wear them, but mostly slipping into them makes me think of being seven or eight, sharing a bed with
Miranda, and when we’d go to sleep, we’d make sure that our long johns were under the sheets with us, so we could get into them without having to get out of bed.”

Gibbs nods along. “Our house had a furnace in the basement, and there was a heat vent in the hall outside my room. I’d put my long johns on the vent, jump out of bed, run over, strip out of my pjs as fast as possible and into my long johns as fast as I could.”

He’s got his clothing unpacked, and grabs his toiletries. Abbi gestures to the door by their bed. It leads to a small bathroom. Toilet, sink, tiny shower. No co-ed showers here.

Compared to the Corps, it’s the lap of luxury. Hell, compared to his parent’s home, which had one bathroom for three bedrooms, this is an extravagance. Compared to the bathroom they designed for themselves at the house, it’s Spartan. The sink has enough room for him to tuck his toothbrush into the toothbrush holder, and there’s room on a small rack in the shower for his shampoo, soap, shaving cream and razor.

Of course, as Gibbs is eyeing it, as both a guest and a man who just helped to build a ton of bathrooms, if he had to personally truck all of his equipment in from… Miles City probably, maybe this Glendive place, he’d be buying small things that he could fit as many as possible into a truck load, too.

Abbi’s waiting in the doorway for him to get out of the bathroom, so she can go in and unpack her stuff. Once she’s done she says to him, “So, ready to head down?”

“Yes.”

Since they didn’t know for sure when they’d get in, dinner was something that could sit on the stove and stay warm. It’s beef stew and biscuits, and Gibbs is in love.

“This is amazing!”

Becky smiles, happy to hear that. “Except for the salt, pepper, coffee, flour, and wine, everything you’re eating we grew here.”

“Everything?” Gibbs is drinking coffee, and he doesn’t see any wine at the table, and then it hits him that it’s in the stew.

Becky nods. “That was always our plan. Get out here and be self-sustaining. We got there about fifteen years ago.”

“Once we got the windmills up, that made a huge difference,” Jeff says. “The food… That’s just been a matter of figuring out how to preserve things. Meat is easy, keep it on the hoof, and it’s fine. First few years, before we had the cold cellars dug, those were touch and go.”

“You built all of this,” Gibbs opens, hoping they’ll be happy to talk about adventures in homesteading.

And they are, at least, Becky is. “Until 1976 anyone who wanted to farm out here could get land through a homesteading grant. Jeff did the research found the bits of land that were still available, and then we drove out here and began looking around. Lots that had water access were few and far between, but we found this one, staked our claim, and began to work it.”
“If you run cattle, for five years, they’ll give you 640 acres,” Jeff says.

“So we did. By the time we got this plot, the homesteading act was over. We’re some of the last homesteaders. Probably the last ones to get a deed in Montana. But this first bit of ground was ours free and clear, so we were able to turn it into loans for more land, and a bit at a time we got adjoining properties. 640 acres in 1975 is 38,000 acres, now.”

“Are you going to keep expanding?” Gibbs asks.

Becky shakes her head. “We’ve got anything worth having by now. Gotta have a certain amount of water per acre. Expand any further, and it’s just more scrub.”

“Land’s cheap out here. You need a ton of it to do much of anything.”

“Putting snowmobilers on it sounds like a creative use,” Gibbs says.

“That’s pretty recent. Last…” Jeff chews, thinking.

“Seven years,” Becky says.

“Dogsleds before that. Everyone who’s into dogs knows everyone else. Made for easy advertising. Three years in a row we had a top five Iditarod team training out here. That got other people interested, too. Didn’t get into snow mobiles until we got internet access,” Jeff sounds proud of that.

“You built all of this?” Gibbs asks, and gets an affirmative from Jeff and Becky, from there he asks them a fairly complicated building question about how they’d gotten the rock walls together, and that results in a pleasant half hour of conversation, in which stone, mortar, structural supports, and insulation are all discussed.

By the end of it, Jeff even cracks a smile at Gibbs.

“Take a walk with me?” Jeff asks Jethro once dessert (pound cake with blueberry preserves) is cleared away.

“Sure.”

There’s a few minutes of getting bundled up, and Gibbs really hopes he’ll be okay out there. He wonders if he’s being taken out as some sort of a test. See how tough he really is. Most of the time, he’s sure he can pass any ‘let’s see what sort of balls you’ve got’ exam, but this isn’t about will power, not right now, it’s about making his lungs inhale.

Fortunately, he does keep breathing. Maybe it’s a tiny bit warmer. Maybe the scarf makes enough of a difference.

They’re out for more than a few seconds this time, so Gibbs can hear that this is different from anywhere he’s ever been before, smell it, too. Five hundred cows are loud and smelly, lowing away somewhere out in the dark. He can hear barking, too. The sled dogs have to be around here, somewhere, though he hasn’t seen their home, yet.

Jeff’s out in a long coat, and thick gloves, knit cap under his Stetson, but he doesn’t have a scarf, and his breath plumes with each exhale.
They amble, mosey, meander, something, it’s not fast, which Gibbs appreciates, over to the split rail fence along the edge of the driveway about a hundred feet from the house. Jeff leans against it.

“Smoke?” he asks Gibbs as he pulls out papers and his… Gibbs’ nose wrinkles… very much not tobacco pouch.

Gibbs shakes his head. “Not for years, not down a fifth of my lungs, and not what you’re rolling.” He takes a few steps to the side, making sure he’s upwind of Jeff. Gibbs doesn’t have a whole lot of experience with pot, but he’s pretty sure he doesn’t want to be inhaling a lot of it second hand.

“It’s legal here,” Jeff tips dried leaves into the paper, licking the edge. His motions are practiced and steady. Gibbs is impressed that he can roll a joint in gloves that thick.

“It’s not back home, and even if it was, it’s not for anyone with a Federal Job.”

“Which is why we’re freezing our butts off out here and not doing this in the house, with her.” He finishes rolling the joint, and lights it, inhaling. “It’s about a third tobacco. Don’t really like the way pot feels, too… loopy. Becky’d kid me that I was a bad hippie because of that.” He shrugs. “Tobacco helps keep my head on.”

Gibbs has met plenty of people who like the way pot feels. He knows people who really liked it and just don’t use it anymore because of the job. (Fornell had some interesting times in Viet Nam. Though Gibbs has been sworn to never, ever mentioning them to Emily.) He’s fairly sure that all of the kids have tried it, though he never has. What he hasn’t run into before is someone who smokes it but doesn’t like it. “Why smoke if you don’t like the way it feels?”

“It’s a good anti-inflammatory. Helps with diabetes. Helps with the eye problems I’ve been having because of the diabetes. Rather take it in a pill, but my insurance won’t cover it, so…” he inhales. Gibbs wonders if they grow it here, then he really notices what Jeff said.

“Helps with diabetes how?” That’s got Gibbs’ attention. He knows Jimmy takes good care of himself, but he also knows that takes good care of himself won’t be enough forever, and if it’s a matter of keeping his job, or keeping his body working, he’ll pick taking care of himself.

“You diabetic?” Jeff is eyeing Gibbs like that would just be the icing on the cake, old, a bum lung, and diabetic.

“Nah, one of my boys is. He takes good care of himself, but… Always good to keep an eye out, right?”

“I’ve got some articles; I’ll make copies for you.” He inhales again. “Getting diagnosed was half of getting internet access. Too long of a trip to the Doc’s and we needed to stay on top of things.”

Gibbs nods at that. “Had one at work for years, got my first connection at home last year. Hate to admit it, but I like it.”

Jeff smiles briefly at that, and then looks him up and down. That look lets Gibbs know that he means business. “You’re too old for her.”

Gibbs nods. “I agree. Look, I know what you see when you look at me. I’ve got no illusions about what stares back at me in the mirror. I’ve got girls, and they’re married to great men, but if they weren’t, I would not have wanted to see one of them bring me home, so I get it.”

Jeff’s why the fuck are you here then? look is eloquent and to the point.
“But I get her, too. I get why she’s doing the job and how she has to do the job. I get the job. I’ve been there and done that and I get it. She’s not going to have to deal with me bitching at her about how much time it takes or giving her a hard time because she can’t tell me what she’s doing. I get the hours. I get the danger. I get the stress. I’m happy to go shooting or spar with her on bad days when she needs to beat it out, and I’m good with laying on the sofa reading together on good days when there’s calm in her heart.

“With me there’s never going to be a me or it moment. I’m never going to make her choose. I’m never going to give her crap about it being dangerous, and she’ll always know there’s an extra pair of experienced eyes to watch her back if she wants them.” Gibbs taps his chest. “I will, and have, put my body in the line of fire for her, and I’ll do it again in a heartbeat.”

He sees that Jeff knows that part of the story by the respect in his eyes for that moment.

“And if she ever gets to the point where she doesn’t need to do the job like that. If she can get to the point where she can rest without running after the bad guys, I’ll still be here.”

“You still gonna be here twenty years from now?”

“Hope so.” Gibbs shrugs. “Don’t have a crystal ball or anything, but I’m doing everything I can to be here a good long time.”

Bill shakes his head. “Look, you seem like a good, solid guy, and if she was fifty, forty-five even, we wouldn’t be having this talk, but she’s not. She stays with you, she’s never going to have kids. She’s never really going to have a family, ‘cause twenty years is pretty much your expiration date. You go and that’s it, she’s sixty and alone.”

Jeff is right and wrong about that, and Gibbs takes a moment to get it right in his head before he starts talking. “We’ve spoken about kids, and you’re right, we stay together, she won’t have children. I’m out of the kids business. Mine are grown. And yes, one of them is older than Abbi. Though only by a few years. But I’ve got some beautiful grandbabies. Three of the sweetest little girls you’ve ever wanted to meet, and we’ve got one little boy due any day and another due late April.

“So, if she decides she wants to stay with me, she won’t get pregnant, she won’t be nursing her own babies, but she will be a hands-on grandparent. She’ll get the fun part of kids, and it’s early enough days none of them will remember a time she wasn’t part of their life. She’ll help raise a family, even if it’s not day in and day out babies.

“And yeah, maybe I’ve got twenty years, maybe more, maybe not. My dad lived to 88 on a worse diet and less exercise. But no matter what happens, if she decides to stay with me, she will have a family. That’s what we are. Me, my kids, their kids, Ducky and Penny, we’re family. She signs on, and she will always have this web of people, who are all cops or people who love them, who all get the job because they’ve all been there in one way or another.

“I’ve been building a home for a long time, and it’s almost done, only part that’s missing is her. If she stays with me, she’ll have that home. And there will always be people in and out, and there will be children and dogs underfoot. And, in twenty years, if I’m not here anymore, she won’t mourn alone.”

“Spoken like a family man.”

“I hope to be, sir.”

Jeff looks appalled by that. “God, don’t call me, sir. I’m barely five years older than you are.”
Gibbs smiles wryly at that. “Haven’t done this in a while.”

“What’s a while?”

“1979.”

“She was three.”

“I was twenty.”

“What happened to your first wife? You divorced?”

That’s sticky. He wonders if Abbi hasn’t told that story, or if she has and Jeff wants to see how he deals with it. “She and our daughter were murdered in 1991. Yes, I am divorced, too, three times. I haven’t been married since 2001. Decided to take a lot of time and get right with myself before trying to do this for real again. Like I said, I know what’s looking back at me in the mirror. You want to send me packing, I’ll understand. I’m not going to leave your daughter unless she sends me packing, but I’ll understand you wanting to see the back of me.”

Gibbs would characterize the look on Jeff’s face as, fair enough. “You never talked to your other three wives’ dads?”

“Two of them didn’t have living fathers to talk to, the third’s father had started a new family and was pretending she didn’t exist.”

Jeff sighs, inhales on his joint, and shakes his head.

“My youngest son,” Though Gibbs doesn’t actually know which of the two of them was born first (Tim, by four hours), so he’s going by the one he adopted last. “He and his father-in-law don’t get on. It’s not the end of the world or anything, but it hurts Breena, his wife, and annoys him. And all of it’s about Ed, his father-in-law, being determined to be an ass to him. I don’t want that. Not for me, especially not for Abbi. So, we gonna make each other and her miserable, or we gonna get along and make our girl happy?”

Jeff thinks about it. That’s a good point, but he’s not quite ready to concede it yet. “You’re twenty first time you get married, she’s three, you’ve got one kid older than her… How’d that work?”

Knock up your high school girlfriend and have to wait a few years for her to get old enough for it to be legal?

“Not like you’re thinking. They’re all adopted. I was twenty and a Corporal the first time I got married. We were together twelve years. When we were twenty-four we had our little girl. Eight years later, they’d both been killed.”

“What’d you do about that?”

Gibbs doesn’t like talking about that, but he figures Jeff’s got a good reason to want to know. “Got drunk. Stayed drunk. The man running their case kept tabs on me. Made sure I didn’t follow them. He found the guy who did it. He was in Mexico. Wouldn’t extradite him. I took care of it. When I got back he told me to try FLETC. I put the bottle down, studied hard, graduated with honors, and started working with him. I was with NCIS until January when they made me retire.”

“Your kids? You just adopt strays?”

“Orphan Federal Agents. Started out as my team. And over the years ended up my family.” Gibbs gets out his phone. Last shot of everyone together is from Tony and Ziva’s wedding. “This is us.”
Jeff looks over the shot, sees Gibbs in the tux, and his eyebrows rise. “You gave away the bride?”

“Not kidding about them being my kids.” He flips through a bit. There’s a shot of almost all of them together that’s a lot more recent. He’s not in it, because he took it, but he figures it’ll be a good one. “Christmas morning, at our home.” He shows Jeff the shot of all of them (minus him) in their jammies, opening/watching opening presents. It’s early and everyone’s pretty rumpled (Tony’d die if he knew Gibbs was showing off a shot of him with his hair that disheveled) but there’s a lot of smiles and happy faces, and wads of wrapping paper all over the place.

Jeff nods and takes the phone from him. Gibbs flips through and finds one with him playing with the girls. “Molly, Kelly, and Anna. Sean’s still on the inside, but not for long. Ziva, the bride, is five months pregnant, now. She doesn’t want to know if it’s a girl or a boy, but Tony, her husband, he can’t take a mystery without finding out, so he got Jimmy, he’s the doctor, to check the scans, and he showed up bragging on his little boy an hour later.”

Jeff stares at the shot, and flips through more. He sees another one from Christmas, Abbi with Kelly riding her hip, looking very happy as Gibbs kisses her under the mistletoe. He swallows and closes his eyes for a few seconds. “We’re gonna get along.”

“Good.” Gibbs takes the phone back, and then says, “I know livestock means it’s hard to get away, but that house is huge for a reason. You want to be in those pictures next year, or anytime, come visit. You, your wife, Abbi’s sister and her family, you’re always welcome anywhere I call home.”

Jeff nods at that, too.

Farm work starts early. Really early.

For Becky, every morning begins with baking the muffins that they deliver to the guests, fresh. They only have four milk cows, and Jeff takes care of them. Then there’s taking care of the dogs, and making sure the rest of the cattle get fed.

They have hands that help with that, but it’s still hard work that starts early.

And Gibbs, when he wakes to the sound of a mixer buzzing away on the floor below him, and sees that it’s 4:30, is really grateful that his job doesn’t involve having to be up and working every single day at 4:00 AM.

Abbi says something sleepy, along the lines of, “Go back to sleep.”

So he does. Though he wonders if he should get up and offer to help.

Abbi feels his indecision, and pats him. “Sleep. There’ll be plenty of chores three hours from now.”

She’s not wrong about that.

With daylight, Gibbs can see the rest of the operation. There are cabins tucked into bits of woods around the creek, each one with a small parking place for a few cars. Inside the cabins, there’s views
of trees, meandering water, and bits of grassland.

Behind them, on the far side of the water, is the more industrial aspect of this business. It’s kept ‘out of view’ because it’s a collection of large, corrugated iron, ugly, buildings. They do what they need to, but they aren’t picturesque.

There’s a garage that houses the sleds and snow mobiles, along with the larger farming equipment, and the lesser used vehicles.

There’s storage sheds that hold feed, fertilizer, and fuel.

There are windmills, to help supplement the farm’s power. There’s tons of wind out there, and as Abbi says, “Might as well take advantage of it.”

Becky shows them off, explaining how they just upgraded to those tesla batteries Tim added to their house. “That’s the last piece of being really self-sufficient. Once someone makes a battery that can hold a real charge for a good long time, we can say goodbye to these.” She pats the fuel oil tank.

Closer to the house, there’s the kennel. A dogsled team is six dogs. They’ve got twenty four of them. All of them big, affectionate, good-with-people huskies. And all of them start barking up a storm when Gibbs shows up. “We don’t usually let strangers back here. If you were out by one of the cabins, they’d be fine with you, but they don’t know you…”

Gibbs nods at that. “Mona’ll go a little crazy if she’s not properly introduced to someone trying to get into our home.”

Becky introduces Gibbs, and his quiet calm wins the doggies over pretty quickly. The fact that they’re extremely well-trained and used to people helps a lot with that, too. He give out petting, rubs ears, tells them all that they are very good dogs, and helps with making sure they get fed.

He thought that huge bag of dog food Mona goes through every other week was a lot of food. He’s realizing they go through two of those bags a day here, and that kibble is mixed with raw meat and fat. “They need a lot of food to be running around in this cold, pulling people along,” Becky says as she’s mixing bits of beef and fat and kibble together, as Gibbs is handing it out.

There’s a barn and a huge fenced-in lot for the cattle. “This time of year, we round them up, keep them close together so they don’t freeze. Once it warms up, they get the run of the land, but that’s a few months off,” Becky says as she and Abbi and Gibbs are wandering around.

Gibbs tries not to wrinkle his nose, but even in the winter, 500 head of cattle are pretty stinky. And loud. They keep talking to each other in longing-sounding moos. He sympathizes, he’d rather be out roaming around than packed into the winter pen, too.

There are four ‘less pretty’ cabins that are closer to the kennel and barn. “The hands live there.” Like the rest of the buildings here, they look like a combination of rock and structural steel. Seeing how many buildings they’ve put up in stone, Gibbs is wondering why they ever tried to grow anything here.

Behind the cattle lot is Becky’s newest project. “Greenhouse?” Abbi asks. She’s heard they were thinking about it, but hadn’t heard that it was finished.

“Got it done right before the snow started.” Becky looks pleased. “We put pipes through the manure composting piles and run the water through them, that warms it up, and then it flows into the greenhouse. Irrigates the plants, and keeps the temperature in there a few degrees warmer.”
"What do you have growing in there?" Gibbs asks, wondering idly if the answer is pot, and really hoping he’s not going to turn on the news and find the DEA raiding the place one of these days, assuming the DEA ever gets back up and running again.

"Mostly greens right now. It’s warmer in there, between just above freezing at night and fifty-five-ish during the day, so everything in there has to like cool. Year round salad. When it gets a little warmer, we’ll put in some plants that don’t enjoy frost. Might get cucumbers this year."

"Mom’s been trying to make cucumbers grow out here for decades. It’s too cold for them three quarters of the year, and too dry the other quarter."

Gibbs is about to ask why they don’t just buy them when it hits him that anything that gets eaten here has to be brought in from miles away. They don’t go shopping every day, or every other day here. So, even if Becky got herself a pile of cucumbers every time she went to the market, she still wouldn’t be able to have them every day.

"Can I help?" Gibbs asks Becky as she’s making them lunch.

"Sure." She hands over two loaves of bread and a knife. "Slices for the four of us and the eight hands."

"Everyone eats in here?"

"That’s usually how it works. They’re on their own for breakfast and dinner, but a good lunch every day and food staples are part of their pay."

"They here year round?" he asks as he slices.

"Four of them are. Bob, Sarah, Chris, and Kelso are here year-round. Sarah runs the dogs during the off season, and is in charge of them in the winter. The other three are cowboys. They keep the cattle healthy and on our land. Jack, Arlo, Fred, and Lizzie are just here for the season. They run dog teams, teach snowmobiling, provide snow shoeing and cross country skiing tours, and help take care of the stock and equipment."

Becky looks up from the roast beef she’s slicing. She watches Gibbs as he’s cutting the bread, making sure to keep the slices even and straight.

"You going to try to make her quit?"

Gibbs shakes his head. "Nope. She wouldn’t want me around if I was that guy."

"So, what, you’re good with alone? She works all the time."

He looks up from the bread. "I’m good with the job. I know it’s got to happen. I know why and how and all the rest of it. Certainly wouldn’t mind her having more downtime, but I’m not going to give her a hard time about it. Been on the other side of that, and I didn’t like it."

"That how you ended up with three ex-wives?"

"Part of it. I was hurting too bad to be good for anyone else those years. Work all the time, and you don’t have to feel the hurt. You get to focus it, do something useful with it." He shrugs a bit. "Past
that now.”

“Is she?”

Gibbs nods. “Part of why we get on. We’ve both been there. When my son was hurt, she dropped
the job and came out to California to be with me. That was back in May. Can’t tell you what that
meant to me. I think we were both ready to move on, just needed to find someone to do it with.”

“And when her job called, and she needed backup, you dropped everything for her.”

Gibbs nods.

Becky watches him for a few moments, and then nods, getting back to getting lunch ready. A minute
later, not looking up from her slicing, she says, “Why a pearl?”

Gibbs isn’t expecting that, and he’s not sure he wants to verbalize something that private to this
woman he barely knows. But, barely knows or not, she’s also his soon to be mother-in-law, and she
probably doesn’t want him to be a stranger to her.

She wants inside of his mind, just like he’s getting inside hers by seeing her home.

“Lot of reasons. Didn’t want to remind her of Liam.” Becky nods at that. She doesn’t know if
Jethro’s seen Abbi’s first engagement ring, but she did, and it was a pretty little diamond in a yellow
gold setting, and this new ring is as little like it as a ring could be. “Because I’ve given out too many
diamonds over the years...”

Gibbs thinks a bit more. That’s why not-a-diamond, so ‘why a pearl?’... how to verbalize
that...“Water. We’re Marines. We met because of a case on the water. NCIS, CGIS, we’re tied to
the sea. Penny’s husband...” Becky’s heard of Penny, but she’s not understanding why Gibbs didn’t
say Ducky, and it’s clear on her face. “Her first husband, Nelson, Tim’s grandfather, passed a while
back, but he’d say we’re water given breath, and set to walk the earth for a while. It’s a good symbol
of that. Because pearls come from something alive. The wedding ring is wood, because that’s alive,
too. It’s not just cold, hard rock, it’s something that grew and changed... Something my hands
shaped for her.”

Becky looks happy with that answer. Abbi and her Dad head in, Jeff saying, “Five minutes. Gotta
get the food ready.”

Gibbs slices faster.

Early mornings mean early nights. Jeff and Becky go to bed a bit after nine, leaving Gibbs and Abbi
on their own, downstairs, sitting in front of the fire. For a while they read, talk, enjoy being together.

Gibbs finishes his book, and is watching the flames leap, hearing them crackle, and petting Abbi’s
shoulder. She’s on her phone, looking something up.

When she’s done, she tucks her phone into her pocket and looks at him. “You’re looking really
content.”

“I’m feeling really content. I like this.”
“Somehow, I thought you would.”

“Not sure I’d want to live it, full time, but… It feels good.”

“If they’d started here, done, everything up and running, I probably wouldn’t have left. It’s a lot less satisfying when you’re ripping a living out of bare earth, sharing a room and bed with your sister, and watching tourists wrinkle their noses at you because you always smell like cow shit.”

Gibbs inclines his head. “I can see that.”

She settles into him closer, resting her head on his shoulder. “But it’s still a nice fantasy, isn’t it? Little place out in the middle of nowhere, make everything you need.”

“Yeah.”

Abbi turns a bit, kissing him, and then stands up, offering him a hand. “Come on, more fantasy time.”

Gibbs raises an eyebrow at her, and she smiles.

He feels like he can barely move. He’s bundled to his eyeballs, and a bit beyond. (Abbi found goggles for both of them, to help keep the skin around their eyes a little warmer.) There’s not a single inch of either of them open to the air.

It’s cold. But that’s the sort of thing that happens when you go out at 12:00 AM in December in Montana.

And it’s worth it.

It’s not the cold stealing his breath away. It’s the sky. He’s laying back in the snow, staring up at ribbons of green, yellow, pink wavering over every star in the universe.

She’s got her phone out, videotaping it, so the kids can see.

Between the moon, stars, and the Northern lights, it’s so bright it might as well be an overcast day. The snow around them is glittering with shimmering colors, and the sky above them looks like nothing he thought could exist in the real world.

This is a fantasy sky. This is a fifty-million dollar CGI budget on the big screen sky.

But it’s real, and he’s under it, holding his love close, feeling the weight of her body against his as they stare at the most glorious light show on the planet.

He wishes they could make love under this sky. Not so much in a hard-dick sexual want sort of way (though that’s also starting to kick around in the back of his mind as he thinks about it) but in a something this beautiful deserves some beauty in response.

Half an hour later, which is as long as he can possibly take out there, they do. Nestled in the warm
cave under the quilts in her parents’ guest room, she makes the lights flare behind his eyes, too.

It’s way too early in the morning when Gibbs’ phone buzzes. He jerks up, flailing at the nightstand, electric sensation of anticipation, because there’s only one reason someone would be texting him at 4:47 AM and that’s to show off new baby pics.

He grabs the phone, swipes fast, and then growls at it.

Or, it could be that the people back east are not quite sure about what time zone he’s in, and while it’s true that he’d normally love an ultra-cute shot of Molly riding Mona, right now, after less than three hours of sleep, he’s not exactly bubbling with joy at it.

Abbi wakes a little more slowly, but she’s on the same page he was. “Sean?”

“No. People who aren’t paying attention to the time zones.”

“Oh.” She tugs his arm, pulling him back to her side, snuggling under thick comforters, drowsing in the warmth of her skin and breath.

He closes his eyes and slows his own breath, tucking himself against her back, and drifts back off to sleep.

“You have wedding plans yet?” Becky asks Abbi at dinner the next day.

“Starting to get some. You guys think you can make it east for New Years’ 2018?”

Neither of her parents look ecstatic about that, but Becky doesn’t hesitate to say, “Sure. A year’s more than enough time to get people in to take care of the place.”

“Good.”

“Big wedding?” Jeff asks.

“Probably not. Don’t know where yet, but just family and friends.” She glances at Gibbs, and he does a head count of his part of this.

“Twenty-five or so for me.”

“And about the same for me.”

Becky’s eyes light up a bit. “Dancing?” She always liked it, and it’s been a long time since she’s had the opportunity.

“Of course.” Abbi pats Gibbs. “He dances.”

Gibbs nods. “Even a few rumors that I’m good at it.”

Abbi gently swats him. “Always knew that. Surprised to see Tim could, but you…”
“Gotta do something to keep up with my pretty lady.” He grins at her with a quick wink and she nudges him a bit.

Becky laughs a bit, happy to see them enjoying each other.

It’s not all that much later when she says to Jeff, as they’re getting ready for bed, “Been a long time since we’ve seen that smile on her face.”

Jeff nods, brushing his teeth. “I know.” He rinses and spits. “Be nicer if the guy inspiring it wasn’t our age.”

“I know. But that didn’t happen, and this did.”

“I know. I’m not going to be a jackass about it.” He puts his toothbrush down, and pulls his wife close by the hips. “Gonna order you some new dancing shoes?”

She smiles at him and offers him a quick kiss. “Ready to give the bride away?”

“Yes.”

It’s dark when they get up to start the trip back.

But like every other day they’ve been here, Becky and Jeff are up well before them. So, in the cool dark of the house, the fire is burning bright, and the coffee is steaming hot, ready for the long drive back to Billings.

Abbi gets hugs from both of her parents, and this time, leaving, Gibbs gets a hug from her mother, and a handshake from her dad. “Want to see you both back in the summer. Show him this place when it’s blooming.”

“If we can, Mom.”

“Yeah, I know, you’re busy. Come anyway.”

“We’ll try.”

In the car, a few minutes later, Gibbs says, “I know it’ll depend on the work, but, I would like to be out here in the summer.”

Abbi nods. “If I’m not locked into testifying every hour of the day in New York, while running CGIS during my downtime, we’ll come.”

He squeezes her hand. “Good.”

Chapter End Notes
So, next chapter is a Christmas present of sorts. I'm wondering, since I know a lot of you have family things going on, when would it be best for a must-read Christmas present of a chapter to land, 23rd, 24th, or 25th?
Thursday morning, Tim gets into his office and finds an email from Leon, asking him up when he’s got a moment.

That moment doesn’t materialize for a while. There aren’t any hot cases of the sort that he was dealing with over the summer, but that doesn’t mean he’s just twiddling his thumbs. But, eventually, between jobs, he does get a break, and heads on up.

After a short wait, while Leon’s busy with whatever it is he’s doing, Tim heads in for his visit.

Leon looks up at him and grins. Tim gets the sense that grin is never a good thing. Like, there’s the I’m happy for you grin which has a certain sort of feel, and this is much more of an I’m happy for me grin and that’s got a very different look.

Then there’s this look, which is probably best described as I’m happy for me, because some of the shit I’ve got to deal with, I can dump on you.

“Leon...” Tim’s voice is wary.

“McGee.” That grin is still there. “Just got the roster of events for the first slate of Commissions.”

“Great.” Getting ready for being out of the office most of next week is part of why Tim’s working hard today. “What horrible thing are you going to make me do?”

Leon’s still grinning, and now the grin shifts a bit, indicating he’s enjoying the prospect of seeing, or Tim supposes, hearing about something. “Tech in Anti-terror is starting off with a formal cocktail hour and dinner. Meet and greet. Schmooze. Get your good kilt out of mothballs and slap your best plastic smile on your face.”

Tim rolls his eyes a bit and then grins at Leon.

“Perfect. The next four days are seminars, talks, coalition building exercises, and legislation crafting. Where the real work happens.”

Tim sighs. “This is what you pay me the big bucks for.”

Leon inclines his head, and smiles again. This time it’s a pure, happy for me smile. “That and getting to hear stuffed-shirts who haven’t had a new idea since GW Bush was in office gossip about my wonder-kid with the ink.”

Tim laughs slightly at that. Only way to know he’s got ink when he’s dressed for work is for him to be wearing the kilt. “So, you’re not kidding about the kilt?”

Leon grins again, nodding. “Craig got you set with all of the vaguely tech related ones. Time to
shake them up a bit. We got a really good reputation for going outside the normal lines and thinking creatively recently, and I want you to protect that image. Abby’s welcome, too, for the reception. The ticket for that has a plus one. Though, unlike your situation, I have sympathy for hers, so if she’d rather not get dressed up and make small talk nine months pregnant, I completely understand.”

“I’ll let her know. And let me guess, short of Sean deciding to join the party or an all-out terror hunt, I can’t get out of this?”

Leon flashes him one last grin, and then hands over the tickets and information pack for the Tech In Anti-Terror Commission.

Quiet family Shabbos, this time at Jimmy and Breena’s. Ducky and Penny are back in New York. Gibbs and Abbi are still in Montana, so it’s just the six of them.

It’s been a while since the six of them have done anything on their own, at least, as much on their own as they get with three kids now, and it’s kind of nice.

Tony’s got Molly on his shoulders, bouncing her around the living room as the girls get dinner ready. Tim and Jimmy are riding herd on Anna and Kelly.

“So… five-years-old, six? How old do they need to be before we can do laser tag with them?” Tony asks, thinking a bit about what the six of them used to do together.

Tim thinks about it as he stacks rings for Anna to knock down. “Sounds about right. So, 2022-2023?”

“We going to do that with them?” Jimmy asks. He’s got Kelly, getting her changed and ready for dinner. He blows a raspberry on her belly before asking, “Does that sound like fun? You want to run around and shoot Uncle Tony?” He points his finger at Tony and says, “Pew, pew, pew.”

Tony shifts his hold on Molly, making sure she’s secure, and then grabs his chest, “Ah! You got me!” and crumples to the floor. Kelly toddles over, making more shooting noises as Tony continues to die dramatically.

“Anything interesting this week?” Breena asks. Four of the six of them work in the same building, but this last week their jobs haven’t intersected much.

Tony, Jimmy, and Abby are still playing catch up, wading through the huge backlog from their downtime. Tim’s playing ahead, trying to get his inbox cleared before 16:00 on Monday, when he’s got to leave to get home and dressed up for this shindig.

They tell different stories. Abby starting off with her case of twisting and intersecting suspects, DNA all a-tangle. Ziva gets them up to date on how CGIS is humming along without Abbi. (Okay,
enough. It’d probably be a good idea for Abbi to not take any long vacations soon.) Jimmy’s been
hip deep in bodies, and so is Breena, but for him, he’s got cases, and for her, it’s about making sure
they get to their final rest.

Tony’s been pretty quiet, which is unusual for him. “Bad case?” Breena eventually asks him.

He shakes his head. “No. Staffing stuff. Bishop’s fine doing what she’s doing right now. She runs
prints, and backgrounds, financials and communications, BOLOs and all the rest of that. She’s our
intelligence hub, and she doesn’t need to be nearby to do it. But we need another person. Every lead
gets taken care of with both of us, which means no one’s back in the office putting things together.
We need a third guy. Really, we need four, but I’m not getting Bishop back in the office anytime
soon, so…” Tony looks frustrated.

“Don’t want to hire?” Abby asks, taking a bite of her chicken.

Tony fiddles with his wine glass. “Not sure what I’m looking for, other than language skills. The
only one I’ve got who can speak any middle-eastern language is in New York. Great if I need intel
translated, not so hot if we need to drop anything and get to Afghanistan.”

Then Tony takes a sip of his wine. “That’s part of it. Other part is, if Draga can’t secure visitation
rights for Kevin, he’ll quit. He’s already told me that. The judge is dropping hints that if he had a
‘safe’ job that the custody hearing will go better for him. His lawyer’s fighting that tooth and claw…
Hell, he tells me Fornell went down to talk to the judge and be a character witness.”

Everyone winces at that. Breena says, “When will he know?”

“By the fifteenth. Not soon enough.”

Jimmy licks his lips, not sure if he should ask this or not, but they’re home, the kids are too small to
repeat this, so… “Did he do something to piss his Ex off that badly, or is she just one hell of a piece
of work?”

“Both. Big time. They were a few day long stand when he took some R&R in North Carolina. Two
months later, he gets the letter. She didn’t like him asking for a paternity test, really didn’t like him
offering to pay for the abortion once it was clear Kevin was his, didn’t speak to him for something
like the next six months, but Kevin showed up, Eric fell in love with him, they tried to make it as a
couple for six months, and then he got stationed in the Pacific. He wouldn’t leave the Navy. She
didn’t want him off six months a year. They broke up and have been squabbling about custody of
him ever since.”

Tim winces. “I can’t imagine how, ‘Hey, I’ll write the check to end this little guy’ didn’t immediately
inspire confidence in his parenting abilities.”

Tony nods at that. Nothing says, ‘I’ll make a great dad,’ like offering to destroy the child in question.
“According to him he was twenty-three, terrified, and particularly stupid. He’s been trying to make it
up ever since, but the only thing his Ex wanted was a guy who’d actually be there to help her raise
this kid, and he doesn’t like her or her family enough for that.” Tony stops talking for a second,
thinking… “He… Look, I’m not judging, but Kevin’s got a few half-siblings, with different dads…
From what he can tell, he’s the only one paying child support, which is part of Kevin’s mom fighting
tooth and nail for Kevin, because that money helps keep the other four of them afloat. Eric doesn’t
think that’s a good environment for Kevin to be growing up in. So, he’s been trying to get custody
ever since.”

“Lovely,” Breena says. “Looks like growing up is helping him, quite a bit.”
“How’s mom affording this?” Jimmy asks, that sort of story doesn’t usually go along with the funds for a multi-year long custody battle.

“She’s a paralegal. Works for a family law firm.”

“And they’ll fight it until the end of time for her,” Breena says.

“Yeah. And are on good terms with most of the local judges. Anyway, it’s possible that I’ll be getting Eric’s two weeks’ notice soon.”

“That sucks,” Abby says. “No matter who he was, I like who he is.”

“Yeah.” Tony winks at Ziva. “He’s not my favorite Probie,” then he gives Tim a little nudge, “or my second favorite, but I was getting a good working grove going with him. Adding one new person to that was already going to be interesting, starting from scratch…” He shakes his head. “Anyway, between playing catch up, and our new stuff, we’ve got the personnel files open, looking for a new guy.” Tony takes a bite of his chicken. “So, what’s up in Cyberland?”

“Well… It’s not exactly Cyberland…” And Tim explains about what his next week will be full of.

On the way home, Tony’s thinking.

“That was really normal.”

Ziva looks at him curiously. “What were you expecting?”

He opens and closes his mouth. “Just… That’s the first time it’s been just the six of us since the McPalmers started McPalming and… it was just really normal.”

Ziva thinks about that, and realizes that was the first time it was just the six of them in months, and then something else hits, it was normal for Tony. It wasn’t normal in the sense of being exactly like it was when they used to get together. Tim kissed and touched both of the girls through the course of the night, so did Jimmy, and when Tim and Breena were putting the girls down together, Jimmy was rubbing Abby’s back and hips to help with her sore pregnant back.

Nothing out of the ordinary. Just the sort of little, every day physical affections and intimacies you expect to see in a healthy couple, at home, with their family.

And it was normal, for Tony.

She smiles brightly at him, and takes his hand in hers.

As weekends go, it’s a quiet one. It’s cool enough that they spend most of it inside, though, after seeing video of Abbi and Jethro with the dogsleds, they do jury-rig a harness up to the wagon, attach
Mona to it, and see if she likes pulling little girls around.

She does. So do little girls.

It’s only after Breena hits send on the video of the girls shrieking with giggles as Mona pulls them around their cul-de-sac that she realizes that it’s like 4:30 where Gibbs and Abbi are.

She winces at that, hoping they sleep through it.

Saturday night. New Years’ Eve 2016. There are fireworks, but they all happen in Jimmy and Breena’s bedroom, well before midnight.

Sunday morning, when little girls are eating breakfast, Breena excuses herself. She comes back a few minutes later with a pregnancy test, and the four of them wait, not exactly on tenterhooks or with baited breath.

Breena’s not feeling it, so this is mostly a formality. Still, there’s a bit of excited nervous tensions flowing through them as they watch the first of the pink lines appear.

But the second one doesn’t.

They give it another moment, look at it from a bunch of different angles in several different light levels, but that second line is not there, at all.

She tosses the test into the trash and says to her husbands, “So, in about two weeks, you two know what you’ve got to do, right?”

Jimmy grins, and Tim whips off a fast salute, “Yes, Ma’am!”

By three thirty on Monday, Tim’s got his inbox mostly cleared out. He’s going to have his computer with him for all of this, so he’ll be able to keep an eye on things, but he’d rather be in the office, working, than out of it schmoozing.

He sends off his ‘Out of the office. Text me or talk to Howard if you need something’ email, and heads to the lab to collect Abby for their night of wining and dining.
So, for all his looking at Leon in horror, the fact of the matter is Tim’s never actually been a guest at one of these things. He’s worked security at them. He’s been on the edges, watching, but actually one of the people meeting and greeting…

That’s new.

“You get bored or tired…” Tim says as he opens the door to their car for her and offers her a hand up. He’s already told Abby about six times that screw what Vance says, if she wants to go, he’s out of there. He does not see, by any stretch of the imagination, how his presence at this part of the meeting improves anything in any way.

She’s nodding her head. “We’re good. Can’t imagine we’ve got too many more grown-up dinners for two in the near future, might as well enjoy it.”

That is true. Little Boy is getting bigger and bigger. No contractions today, which Abby appreciates, but any day now...

They’re at the Omni, which (obviously) survived the recent upheaval. He’s never been here before, so he checks the invite and points the way, through an ultra-luxurious lobby toward an equally lux dining area.

There’s security all over the place. Tim knows all those bored looking men at the entrances and exits in nice suits with earwigs aren’t party goers. (Though he assumes there are a few blending into the crowd as well.) They’ve got to go through a metal detector, which involves the usual fun of explaining he’s got a compact car’s worth hardware in his arm.

They make their way to a table at the doors to the dining room.

There’s a line of people in suits and nice dresses in front of three women sitting at the table, tablets in front of them, checking names off of lists. When they get to a free one, she doesn’t look up as she says, “Name?”

“McGee.”

She still doesn’t look up as she scrolls through her tablet and then says, “Admiral John or Director of Cybercrime Timothy.”

He feels something akin to an electric current spread through his body at that, and Abby’s clutching his hand. Apparently he’s quiet for too long, because the woman actually looks up at him, sees the man in the black suit jacket/kilt and says, “Ah, Director McGee, NCIS. And your plus one?”

Tim swallows and pulls himself together enough to say, “My wife, Abby McGee.”

She smiles up at them, types Abby’s name into the tablet, taps it a few times, and a second later two name tags print out. “You’re at table 126, along with the DOD Cyber-Cryptology team. Have a lovely evening.”

“Uh, thanks,” Tim says on automatic, taking the name tags from the woman.

As soon as he has them, Abby’s pulling him away, looking for a quiet nook where they can talk, and they find one, along with the gaze of one of the security guys, who’s noticed two very nervous looking people in his midst.
“Leon will give you a pass for this if you want to go.”

Tim doesn’t respond, feeling blank.

Abby’s scanning the crowd, anger in her eyes, looking for him. “Want me to head back to the lab? I can mix up a cocktail, and we can spike his drink, and he’ll spend the next month shitting his bowels out?” She looks like she’s really enjoying that idea.

Part of Tim wants to sprint out of this. Just leave, pretend it didn’t happen, and run. Part of him has… It’s not a plan, not yet, but he’s noticing how much security is here and… “Just… Let me think… Tony didn’t say he’d been on the move. Stan’s supposed to still be keeping an eye on him… Let’s find out if he’s even on the East Coast before doing anything. Just because he got an invite doesn’t mean he’s attending.”

Tim grabs his cell and taps Tony’s contact. “Hey.”

“McGee? Aren’t you supposed to be rubbing shoulders with the high muckety-mucks?”

“Yeah, I am. Muckety-mucks to the left and right. Wanna guess which other high muckety-muck with my last name and a history of innovative drone technology work got invited to this thing?”

There’s a second where Tony doesn’t respond and then, “Shit. FUCK! Really?”

“Yeah. I know you had an eye on his travels, is he still in Hawaii?”

“He should be. I’ll double check. We’ve got him on the no-fly lists, and I’ve got his credit cards monitored. Unless he decides to swim, I should know if he moves.”

“Okay. Just, double check for me?”

“No problem. I’ll call Burley and get him to check, too.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, Tony.”

Abby looks a little relieved, little disappointed… she heard enough of that conversation to fill in the blanks. “None of their watches went off?”

“Yeah. Nothing’s been flagged, and he’s on the no-fly list, so…”

“So he should be in Hawaii, and we can have a good night of rubber chicken, mingling,” she looks into the dining room, and notices they do have a band and a dance floor, “and tame dancing.”

Tim smiles at her. “Like any dance with you is tame.” He takes her hand in his, and wraps his arm in hers. “Let’s go.”

She nods.
They’re having a pretty good time. The DOD team is also fairly young, usually stationed out of Dubai, but stateside this month for both R and R, and to work on interviewing some new members. Their leader is a young woman named Delilah Fielding, who gives Tim a sense of… not exactly Deja Vu, he doesn’t think he’s seen her before, but… something. She keeps looking at him the same way, and at this point they’ve both been over their entire CVs, trying to figure out if there’s some possible way they could know each other, but neither of them is finding anything.

So, it gets chalked up to some sort of passing resemblance or something, and their whole table is happily talking about being little fish in big ponds enjoying seriously screwing over the bigger fish who think they know so much about what they’re doing, but they’re so damn big they can’t maneuver or see behind themselves.

It’s kind of fun to bitch about the big guys. (FBI has three tables. Former NSA has five. The guys who used to be Homeland have three. What’s left of the CIA are filling four.)

They’re half an hour into the mingling time when he gets a text back from Tony: No tickets purchased, no charges made in the last three days, no cell signal we’re picking up. Stan’s going to his place to see, in person, if he’s there. But, from everything we can see, he hasn’t left Maui.

He shows that to Abby, who visibly relaxes. Probably better for everyone and everything if John’s nowhere nearby. Tim texts back Tha- he’s mid-word when he feels Abby tense again, fingers digging into his arm. Tim looks over to where she’s looking and sees the Navy delegation coming in. He closes his eyes, swallows hard, and shakes his head.

For a second, he can’t do anything, at all. Everything just stops. The room, his thoughts, everything screeches to a halt, only to get rolling again when, “Are you okay? Bad news?” breaks into his head. Delilah’s asking.

“Yes,” he says, curtly. Tell Stan to go home. I’m staring at him.

His phone rings two seconds later. “What?!” Tony’s never sounded more shocked.

“He’s in the room with me.” Tim and Abby are watching as John greets people with firm handshakes and a wide smile.

“How?” Tony asks

“I don’t know! He’s with the Navy delegation. Did you check to see if he got a Navy flight?”

“No. Shit!”

He can feel Tony kicking himself on that. “Apparently, drones are part of their anti-terror-tech,” Tim says, watching the Admiral meet and greet a few former CIA members like they’re long lost friends.

The rest of his table is now staring at the Navy delegation, trying to see what’s going on, but nothing about it looks off. Just a bunch of men and women with enough ribbon salad on their uniforms to start their own organic grocery store and their posh-looking dates. Everyone is smiling, they’re grabbing drinks, and moving around. John’s chatting with the first NSA table right now.

“Shit! What are you going to do?” Tony asks.

“I…”

“Leave,” Abby says. “Now.” (Though Abby means get out of this room to somewhere no one else can hear them talking, not get out of the party.)
“I’m voting with Abby on that. Get out of there.” (Tony’s in favor of literally getting out of the party.)

“Just, wait, both of you.”

Now the whole table is really staring at them. He’s got DOD types trying to figure out the puzzle in front of them. Tim looks at them. “It’s ugly and classified.”

They all nod and start pretending they can’t see him. He and Abby get up and head out of the ballroom, once again looking for a quiet place.

“Tony, you still there?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, I’ll call you back when I know what’s going on.”

“Fine. I’m letting Leon know he showed up.”

“Sure, fine, just… Not Gibbs,” who should have landed at Reagan an hour earlier, “really not Jimmy. Don’t want him showing up with a rifle.”

“Okay. Call me back!”

Tim turns to Abby, hangs up the phone, and tucks it into his jacket pocket, all the while looking at her, seeing the rage and fear on her face, trying to sort out how he is. He doesn’t know exactly what he’s feeling, it’s hot and cold and scared and reckless and… Dangerous. He’s feeling really, completely, knife edge, gonna kill tonight, dangerous.

“How married are we?”

She’s… he’s not sure. Supportive. Excited. Worried. He knows she can read the emotions coming off of him right now, and he can feel her own knife’s edge coming into play, too. “What do you mean?”

He licks his lips. “Will you back my play if I’m about to do something that’s probably very stupid, that Breena really won’t like if it doesn’t work, but, God, baby, if it works…” It’s all over his face, if it works… It’ll be everything he ever wanted and needed from the Admiral

She’s looking worried, gently stroking his forehead, fingers skirting the scar through his eyebrow. “Oh, Tim, what are you thinking?”

“Something I want more, and like better, than spiking his drink. Something less likely to get us in any sort of long term trouble than Jimmy up on the roof with Gibbs’ rifle. If it doesn’t go right, only skin in the game’ll be mine.”

Her eyebrow raises, silently asking.

“There’s at least fifty guys working security here tonight.”

She nods, looking at a few of them. Then looks back to him. “Last time, there was a whole damn ship of guys working security out there.” Don’t make a plan that relies on trusting anyone else.

“Yeah, but this time, they don’t work for him.” Tim keeps thinking, fast, planning it out, seeing the angles. “It’s a meet and greet, everyone’s relaxed; they’ll be drinking. He will, too. He always has two at parties. Never enough to get drunk, but it’ll loosen his control. He won’t be able to leave me
alone, not once he sees me, especially in the kilt. He’ll come over, put me down a few times, try to pick a fight, and this time…”

“You’re going to get into a fight with him?” Abby looks like that’s every sort of bad plan she’s ever heard of. She wants *John* to hurt, not Tim.

“Not exactly. No. Tony’s letting Leon know what’s going on. He’s going to make sure security knows that NCIS is running an op, and that they need to keep eyes on me, but not engage. That I’m bait for an unnamed sting, and we need to capture the target after he moves. Gibbs once told me, if you can’t control your temper, control him, make him throw the first punch, and then you ‘can be the bigger man’ and decide not to press charges.”

He can see two sides of Abby warring on this, the *I do not ever want to see you in pain or another bruise on you* side fighting with the *I get your plan and I can’t wait to see him throw a punch, then watch you level him as every security guy in the room piles on side.*

She can see it on his face. Everything he thought he lost about being able to finally win something against his The Admiral on the *Stennis* just came rolling back in. He needs this.

“Okay, one condition, you’re going to press charges!”

There’s a gleam in Tim’s eye as he grins, “Fuck, yes, I am!”

It doesn’t take long to explain the plan to Leon, and though Tim cannot see the NCIS Director through his phone, he can guess there’s a grin on his face.

“Twenty minutes, our own security will be there, too.”

“Thanks, Leon. I’d recommend Agent DiNozzo’s team for the job…”

“Yes, I think that’ll work.”

Tim and Abby are both looking a lot more comfortable and relaxed when they head back to their table. “Everything better?” Simon Burlwicz, Delilah’s date, asks.

Tim nods, and smiles. “Yes. Everything is still classified, but somewhat less messy.”

Delilah smiles at that. “Know all about that.”

Thirty minutes later, Tony and Draga, in formal wear, looking like guests, enter the party. They linger and mingle, smiling, chatting, blending much more effectively than the rest of the security. From there, it’s a dinner. Buffet food. People talking. Dancing eventually. Tim and Abby settle in, waiting.
At one point, when Tim and Abby are in line getting their food, Tony’s behind them, and he quietly says, “Two o’clock. He’s just noticed you, eyeing the kilt, and Abby.”

“Okay,” Tim says back. “He’s got to swing at me. Can’t press charges for assault if he doesn’t. But once he does, I don’t care if you guys shoot him for resisting arrest.”

Tony nods.

“I care. Shoot him for resisting arrest!” Abby says, quietly, but very intensely.

Tony smiles slightly at that. “Gonna be hard to pull that off if we do it in here. If you can pull him away from everyone else…”

Tim nods. “We’ll see how it goes. I think I’d rather him embarrass himself by taking a swing at his son in front of three hundred people during a formal dinner reception. That hit to the pride’ll hurt him worse than a bullet.” There’s a very cold smile on Tim’s face at that. Then he says to Tony, a little more quietly, “If he even looks like he’s thinking of saying something to Abby, take him down, hard.”

Tony nods, snags a few bits of food, and heads back to the table he’s sitting at with Draga.

His job, tonight, is to mingle, make small talk, get an idea of who in their world is doing what, why, and how. He and Abby are supposed to be warm and charming and make NCIS look good, while getting a feel for how the world after the new Congress meets and starts rearranging things will work.

So, for the first hour, that’s what he does. Circles around with Abby, talks about NCIS and, in general, what they do. He listens, a lot. A big part of why he’s here is to see what the other organizations are hoping to accomplish. NCIS will, eventually, come up with its own plans for how crime and terrorism should be dealt with, but right now, it’s listening.

Some of the Navy personnel know of him from what he did with the Stennis group, so they come over and chat with him about it. He gets the sense they’re poking to see if they can get any hints about when or how their own commands are going to get hit, but, he can honestly tell them he just designed how the test should work, he’s completely outside of what happens next.

None of them know, or hint they know, about what happened after the test.

And if any of them are aware that he shares more than just a last name with the Retired Admiral in their midst, they aren’t letting on.

And almost everyone, once they see the name badge, recognize who he is in relation to why they’re even at this meeting. He’s one of the guys who took down the old government. That gets him a lot of
attention. A lot of people want to come over and chat.

So chat he does.

He’s surprised to see how easily he can BS the small talk and keep an eye on both The Admiral and his team. He knows, at all times, where every security person on the floor is.

Mostly though, he’s watching, waiting, planning how this will go. He’s laying his trap, using himself as bait, and with each swallow of what he assumes is bourbon (It’s hitting him for the first time that that’s probably why he doesn’t like bourbon.) The Admiral spends more and more time looking at him.

He sidles over as Tim is getting more food for him and Abby. For a second, he watches Tim handle the tongs and plate. “Looks like your hand healed up.”

“Just about.” He can’t type quite as fast as he used to or as accurately, and Sarah can no longer count on him for pinpoint back up when they game. Tim’s quiet after that, falling into his traditional pattern of just answering direct questions, hoping the repeat will encourage his father to do what he always did, double down on him.

And he does, he eyes Tim’s kilt. “We’re not Scottish.”

“Before we went to Ireland in the 1300s, the MacGhees were Scottish. This is the correct tartan for our family. Your step-dad did the research for it.”

John’s eyes narrow, and Tim realizes he’s hit a nerve. Interesting. “He is not my step-dad.”

“Oh, come on, Grandpa’s been dead for thirty years, she’s allowed to get remarried.”

“Yes, she is. But they didn’t actually get married, so he’s not my step-father. Ben wasn’t your step-dad when he was just shacking up with Tori.” They’re both keeping their voices normal, so no one is paying any real attention to what they say. The fact that John keeps making eye contact with other people and smiling at them is helping with that, too.

“Please, they’re more married than you and mom ever were. Among other things, they’re located in the same hemisphere every day, and he actually loves her. As I said, he’s the guy who did the research to find that this is the tartan for our clan. If you like, he can tell you about it.” Tim thinks about that for a half second. “Actually, no, he won’t tell you about it, because you’re the asshole who’s made his wife miserable, tried to kill his grandson, wound his granddaughter, and attempted to deprive his great-grandchildren of their father and uncle. Anyway, if you do the research yourself, it’s a good story. But even if it wasn’t, if it was just a random collection of threads, I like it, so that’s what matters!”

For a second, that off foots John, he’s not used to Tim talking back. His eyes dart from Tim’s lingering for a second on the scar through his eyebrow, and the dart back to the kilt. “Of course you’d like skirts.”

Tim smiles, cold. He can see Tony hovering about twenty feet away, from the looks of it keeping one eye on Tim and another on his phone, where Abby’s probably texting him, verbatim, everything
he and John are saying to each other. “Yeah, I do. They show off my pretty legs.”

His father nods, coolly, eyeballing the dragon tattoo. “Didn’t know you had any ink.”

“I have several of them now. Been collecting them since I was twenty-four”

His dad stares at the dragon for another second. “Overcompensating.”

“Goodbye.” Tim turns and leaves, knowing that will egg John on, make him feel like he’s won a small victory of some sort or another. He’ll come back for another round. Probably one after that, too. But soon…

Round two is when Tim’s getting a refill on his drink. He’s got sparkling mineral water with a twist of lime. It looks like a gin and tonic, which is intentional, he wants to look like he’s drinking, loosening his own control. John’s never seen Tim drink, has no idea what, if any, alcohol tolerance he has, but Tim’s fairly sure that since John is certain that Tim has no skill at any of the ‘manly arts’ which include putting away booze, that he’ll see Tim as an even easier target if he’s got a drink in his hand.

While Tim waits for his drink, he spends a few minutes chatting with an Army Colonel who works with big data and satellite images to track the movements of armed forces. That’s a good conversation, but eventually the Colonel gets his drink, and the Admiral drifts over to him.

“You’re thinner than you were last time,” he says to Tim as he orders another double scotch.

Tim isn’t sure if that’s the Admiral’s idea of a compliment or a put down. He also takes note of the fact that he’s ordering doubles. That’s new.

He nods at his father. “Hard to keep working out when you’re healing up. Lost some weight on that. Should have it back in a few months.”

“Chipped a clavicle back in ’89. Didn’t miss a day of training.”

Tim snorts and rolls his eyes. “Yeah. I bet you didn’t. Tell me about the time you spent a week in the hospital strapped to the bed in traction with more than twenty broken bones and didn’t miss a day of training.”

John looks him up and down, really looking, eyes lingering on the scars on his hand.

Tim sees him doing it and says, “Yeah. They had to cut me open to screw my hand back together. You should see the scars on my arm, shoulder, and foot. But, sure, chipped clavicle, beaten near to death, that’s pretty much the same thing.” Then he snorts and turns away, going back to Abby.

Close to an hour later, Tim’s in the head. Draga’s actually in one of the stalls, which is a bit more
security than he’d like, but Tony’s not leaving anything to chance, and, when John walks in as he’s washing his hands, he’s glad to have another pair of ears lingering out of sight.

“Your wife is beautiful.”

Tim looks up from washing his hands and sees the Admiral standing behind him in the mirror. “I agree.”

“She’s a bit too plump, but her eyes are gorgeous.”

Tim glares at him. Of course he’d take a shot at Abby’s weight. “She’s exactly the weight a woman her height is supposed to be at nine months pregnant.”

“Your mother only gained ten pounds with you.”

Tim closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly. His mom was always slim, and always on a diet, always watching every bite, and suddenly that makes a hell of a lot more sense.

On top of that, he was a seven pound baby. Add in placenta weight, water weight, breast size increase… His mom, the parts of her that weren’t a baby factory, lost weight when she was pregnant with him. He shuts the water off.

He’s watching his dad in the mirror. “Pregnant women are supposed to be plump. If she’s plump, it means her husband is doing his job and making sure she’s got enough nutritious food easily available, and she’s getting enough rest that her body doesn’t have to burn through its whole fat reserve to keep his child safe and healthy. It means, that when that baby joins the rest of the world, he’ll be able to get all the nutritious food he needs, too. It also means she’s secure enough in his affections that she doesn’t feel like she has to starve herself to keep him from wandering off.” He turns to face his father. “So don’t try to sell me the idea that the physical manifestation of you abandoning my mother and I was some sort of fashion statement. If you had done your job and been the husband, father, and provider you were supposed to be, by six-weeks pregnant Mom would have been plump, and she would have stayed that way for as long as she was nursing me. Her gaining less weight than was necessary to bring me into the world means you failed!”

Tim grabs a paper towel and begins to rapidly dry his hands. He’s intentionally not looking at the Admiral as he does that, hoping he’d take it as a sign of weakness.

Looks like he does. Tim can hear (or imagine) that Draga’s keeping in constant text contact with Tony and Abby.

“She’s not what I was expecting. She’s why you’ve got the tattoos right? The neck one makes her look cheap. But, I guess you take what you can get.”

Tim tosses the paper towel away. He takes a second, debating engaging on him about Abby, but decides that’s a recipe for him throwing the first punch, and John ending up pressing charges, which is not how he wants this to go. *Stay on target. Don’t let him control this.* Time to commit to the whole plan, and then he does, knowing that if he’s going to really set the trap, he needs to use his best bait. “Well, judging by the fact you called me a fag three hundred times a year, I’d figure you’d have expected my spouse to be male.”

“I knew you liked girls, just didn’t want you be one of them,” John says staring at the kilt, disgust on his face.

“Lovely. You ever have a good heart to heart with Sarah about how you feel about women? Oh, right, she’s not talking to you anymore. How about Mom? I guess not, or is that why she left?” John
looks stunned to see that come out of Tim, and Tim barrels on, keeping talking, “If you’re that freaked out by women, it’s no wonder you’re no longer married. Probably explains why you couldn’t stand to be in the same hemisphere with her. Take a hint, Admiral, straight guys usually like seeing their wives.” Tim leaves the men’s room, upping the tension by knocking his father’s shoulder with his own.

Tim stops, grabs his drink from the table he left it on, and settles in next to the dance floor, about ten feet in front of the doors to the room, where his father will have to walk past him to get in. He watches couples bob around, scanning for Abby and Tony. He’s just found them and catches Abby’s eye when The Admiral comes back, standing a step too close to him.

Tony’s slipping through the crowd, heading for Tim’s left side. Abby’s watching him, and he sees Draga heading toward her.

“You told your grandmother I abused you.” John says, voice very low, taking a sip from his bourbon.

Tim raises an eyebrow at him. “Really?” And then he clarifies in his best snotty, precise tone, “No. I did not tell her that. I have never told her or anyone else that. I did tell her what you said to me, and she called it abuse. In fact, everyone who hears what you’ve said to me calls it abuse.”

That’s not what John expects to hear. “I never touched you.”

Tim nods, curtly. “And I have never told anyone that you did. I have gone out of my way to make it clear that you have never raised a hand against me. I have told several people that you threatened to have me gang raped and mutilated, twice. And you know what? You hitting me would have gotten a less horrified reaction. Every man I know has had a moment where he’s just wanted to beat the shit out of someone, even, occasionally, his own kids. None of them have ever felt the need to say the words,” Tim’s voice drops even lower and he moves a quarter step closer to his father, “‘You wanna be a girl so bad? I will order my men to drag you into the hold, stake you down, fuck a cunt into you, and then cut your pansy ass little faggot dick right off of you and shove it into that bleeding maw of a cunt.’”

John snorts. He actually looks proud of that turn of phrase, and Tim can see that Draga just stopped dead for a second, too shocked at what he’s just heard to move. It’s only a second though. Draga’s easing right, getting into place.

“Just trying to scare you straight.”

Tim shakes his head, staring at John with malevolent disdain. “You know, for someone who claims to have known I liked girls, you seem terrified that I’d be gay.”

“It’s a figure of speech.”

Tim takes a big swallow of his drink, looking like he’s pulling up some liquid courage. His father smiles at that, takes a small sip of his.

Then he glares as Tim says, “It’s a Freudian Slip. When it came to following the rules I was so straight you could have used me for a level, so it wasn’t about that. So, what, you actually like
guys?” The Admiral flinches, it’s very slight, and the only reason Tim catches it is because he’s looking for it. “Oh…” Tim smiles, cold and brilliant. “That your dark secret? That why you never remarried? It’s legal now, you know. Wouldn’t even keep you out of the Navy… Or is that why you put Mane up to taking me out, couldn’t stand to make an honest man out of him, so why not get rid of him and me in one move?”

John flushes, red, fast. It streaks up his face as, “Watch your mouth!” hisses from between his lips. They’re in public, so he keeps his voice low, but it’s hot and very angry, and he’s inched closer to Tim. Tony’s moving closer, too. And Tim’s noticed a few of the outside security are also moving in. They know they can’t do anything until John makes a physical move, but they’re ready and watching.

“Or what? You’ll have a fit? Cuss me out proper? Teach me some respect? Deal with me yourself? In public? There’s only two gods you’ve ever worshipped and that’s the Navy and proper behavior. You’ve already lost one of them, so I’m guessing you’ll cling like glue to the only one you’ve got left. Besides, when were you ever the man who got his own hands dirty where people could see him? Four men have asked me about the Stennis test, today alone. They all know what you did, that you cheated. How’s that feel, them laughing at you behind your back because you were outsmarted by your kid?”

John glares at him. His lips open, but he kills whatever was about to come out of them before it does.

“Only reason you’re even here is because I just fucking decimated the upper brass back in October, and the ones who were left weren’t well-enough connected to know what you did after I outsmarted you. You think you’d be here if they knew what you had them do to me after I won?”

John shifts his weight, about to step away, and Tim knows that can’t happen. If he leaves, Tim won’t get him back, won’t get him to lose his temper.

“You should go back to ignoring me. Go back to the other side of the room, sip your drink, chat with other drone guys about how killing people from the other side of the world gives you all hard-ons or whatever. And then turn your ass around and run back to Hawaii before this gets unpleasant. I do not want to see you here for another second of this Commission or any of the other ones, either.”

His dad doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t walk away, either. Tim knows he can’t. Not now. By challenging him to walk away, he’s just cemented his father’s feet to this spot on the floor.

“Walk away, Admiral. Just walk away from me. I’ll go home and spend the rest of the night with my beautiful wife and beautiful child who you’ll never get to see. You can go back to being the retired, old blowhard who’s just here clinging to his old glory days. Just let it go and walk away from me. Do it now.” John still doesn’t move. Tim stares at him for a second, daring him with his eyes to back down. He doesn’t, and Tim smiles at him. “Good. ‘Cause I don’t really want you to go, either. I gave you one pass and didn’t raise a fuss because SecNav personally asked me not to, because we couldn’t prove you asked Mane to have me killed, but right now I’m the fucking golden boy of the Navy, and I’ve got all the ‘get out of jail free’ cards in the deck, so walk away before I forget myself and this gets messy.”

The Admiral still doesn’t walk away. He can’t. He doesn’t respond either. For once, his acid tongue is still, and Tim isn’t sure why, but he doesn’t care. He takes another deep breath and commits to it, hopes, for a second, that it doesn’t hurt, too much. “I’ve always wondered why you were so hung up on it. It was always the first thing you jumped to. Tim’s doing something I don’t like or understand, must be a fag. I mean, who makes that leap? Not like you found me reading gay porn or making out with another boy.”
The Admiral’s eye twitches at the mention of gay porn, and Tim wonders what’s going on in there, who might have caught him, but not enough to stop this.

“Had to get to know a forensic psychologist before I got the answer to that.” Tim flashes The Admiral a mean little smile. “You know what they say about people who fixate on things, right?”

“What?” John’s eyes are narrow, jaw clenched, and people are starting to move away from them. It’s not enough of a fight that anyone who isn’t security or Abby is really paying attention, but there’s a get-away-from-this vibe coming from both of them, so that even people with their backs turned to them are edging out of the way.

“That it’s what they are or want to be. But you’ve always known that about yourself, right? So, who caught you with the pictures of the naked guys?”

The Admiral grits his teeth. He’s noticed there are people around, people who would probably notice if he let fly with his usual loud, profane routine. Tim realizes that’s probably why this is a one way-conversation. That iron control is still keeping the Admiral’s tongue in check.

“But I should probably thank you.”

“You should.” His voice is cold at that. “But that’d be too much to expect from a self-centered, ungrateful…” He sees John drop the last word before he says it. “Three meals a day, roof over your head, best education money could buy. I did everything I could to make you into a man.”

“Oh yeah.” His voice caresses over the yeah, adding an obscene pleasure to the sound. “You always knew it, right? Knew I was a twisted, bent little fuck. Knew I needed to be straightened out.” Tim knows, exactly, how this is going to go, can see it all play out. He catches Abby’s eye, nods very
slightly at her, she reads lips well enough that he knows she’s been following the conversation, and he wants her to know this is when to look away if she doesn’t want to see him get hit. She does.

“Walk away, Admiral. Walk away right now.” But he doesn’t step back, he doesn’t walk away, and Tim knows he can’t, and Tim smiles. “That’s your worst nightmare isn’t it, Dad? Me liking guys?” He smiles, eyes hard and cold. “Me sucking cock, spreading my legs like a girl, taking it up the ass, moaning like a bitch in heat when some guy drills my ass, hitting that sweet spot. Just like you, right? Guess what? It feels great! Makes me come so hard I pass out. That’s the real reason for the kilt, so he can bend me over and nail my ass whenever he likes and—”

He doesn’t get to finish that sentence before his father punches him, hard, in the face and shouts, “You God-damned faggot, I should have made them fuck it out of you! Should have cut that disease out of you when I had the chance! You are a disgrace to our name, and the Navy, an—”

He tries to follow it up with a second hit, an uppercut, but he’s not nearly fast enough, and for as sure as Tim is that he’s going to be in a world of hurt when the adrenaline crashes, he’s not there yet, so he grabs that hand, pulling his father’s index finger out of joint, quickly snapping it, while twisting his hand into a wrist lock that would have made Ziva (who taught it to him) proud, and jolting his legs out from under him with a fast leg sweep.

In a second, his father is pinned, on the floor, throbbing pain in his hand holding him immobile.

Tim kneels on him, knee digging into his shoulder blade as he holds his arm on the verge of dislocation. “I’m one man,” he’s not being loud, but the whole room is silent, so anyone nearby can hear what he’s saying as he twists his father’s wrist a bit further, “and I’ve broken one of your fingers. You are on the floor and completely at my mercy. You locked me in a cell and set four men on me, and in that cell, they broke my foot, dislocated my ankle, broke my nose, broke my teeth, ripped my wrist to shreds, kicked me in the balls, broke my arm and hand in ten places before one of them ripped my arm out of my socket and that’s what finally put me down. I may be a fag, but if I am, I’m the fag who dropped you without even landing one punch.”

Then he straightens up and says, loudly, “Admiral John McGee, you’ve just assaulted a Federal Officer, that’s a felony. You just assaulted me for coming out to you, that’s a hate crime.”

Tony comes over, pulling cuffs out of his pocket. He’s eyeing Tim, and Tim nods at him, letting him know to take care of John.

“Admiral John McGee, you are under arrest for assault on Timothy McGee, you have the right to remain silent…”

Abby rushes over to him, so angry at John and proud of Tim, she’s overcome with emotion, she’s shaking, but he smiles at her, feeling giddy, gleeful. “It’s okay. That felt way better than it should have. Way, way better! I can’t even feel my eye right now I’m so high on the endorphins.”

She very gently touches his eye, and he winces. “We’re going to the hospital. You’re going to feel that in a few minutes.”

“I don’t care! It was worth it.” He’s grinning from ear to ear, as his eye purples and swells. “Do you think someone at the bar could make me an ice pack for my eye?”
It'll Have To Be Enough

Chapter Notes

And even more Merry Christmasses to you all!

Draga watches Abby help Tim out of the conference, feeling shocked, and finally, when his brain starts working again, he says to Tony, “Holy fuck!”

Every eye in the room is on the two of them, a lot of them are shocked or pitying, and the susurrus of gossip is starting to swell.

Draga’s voice is part of it. “God, poor Abby…” He thinks for a few seconds about what he heard. “Shit, Breena, too.” He looks like he’s got a bad taste in his mouth.

“Draga, shut it. We will talk, later. Let’s get the Admiral handled.” Tony nudges the man in handcuffs kneeling in front of him.

“Fine. Just…”

Tony can see all of Draga’s respect for Tim and Jimmy crumbling into a heap of ashes. “It’s more complicated than you know.”

Draga snorts, gently helping McGee get standing. “It always it. That’s what I said to Diane, too. It’s complicated. Come on, you know that’s—“

“Eric! Later.” Tony glares at McGee between them.

“Fine.”

In the car, with McGee, behind them, Draga gives Tony the can we talk now? look.

Tony shakes his head. “Later. Uh… remember Tim’s car accident?”

Draga nods.

“Yeah… When we get in, I’m bringing him up to Vance. Get into my computer and read all of the emails between me and Agent Burley. Tim’s the Doe in that case.” Tony nods back to McGee. “He’s The Admiral in question.”

Draga starts to look really disturbed as he remembers how badly hurt Tim was. “There wasn’t a car accident, was there?”

Tony shakes his head. Then he shifts the rearview mirror to look at McGee, huddled into a little ball, skin gray with pain. “Eric, this was almost forty years in the making, and what you heard tonight…”
That’s the tip of an iceberg that’s only tangentially related to this.”

Eric exhales low and slow, and then nods. “Okay. It’s complicated. But when you’re done with this asshole, we talk?”

“You read; we talk.”

Leon sits at one end of the conference table in his office. John, shaky, gray, sweating, clearly in bad pain, slouches at the other.

Tony is leaning, back against the wall, watching this.

Leon is not smiling, not on the outside. On the inside, he’s got sunshine pouring out, and his only regret is that he didn’t get to watch it and get a kick of his own in. (He’d actually debated going in as part of the ‘security,’ but he’s too well-known for that. These days, at any sort of crowd like this, he doesn’t blend.)

But now is not the time to reveal that. “As Director of NCIS I don’t often get involved in individual criminal cases. That’s just not part of my day to day job.” Leon smiles, cold and brittle. “But for you, Admiral, I will make an exception.” Leon steeplest his fingers in front of him. “You see, I have a vision of the Navy, one where there’s no black or white or brown, where we aren’t gay or bi or straight, where male or female only matters in the sense of making sure the uniforms fit properly. In my Navy, the one I’ve been working to make, one case at a time, one priority at a time, there’s only Navy Blue, and every, single person on one of our ships, planes, carriers, bases, is just that, a person in blue.

“So, it should not be a surprise to you that people like you, who want to divide everyone into groups of your pets, and not your pets, are on my hit list.” Leon smiles again. “Add in the fact that you’re the dumb fucker who messed with my Cybercrime Director, the man who is my first choice for my successor,” Tony looks impressed by that, “and I’m enjoying this a whole lot.

“Now, this is going to go one of two ways. First way, you will plead guilty to assault and a hate crime. Agent DiNozzo will handle the paperwork, and then, by morning, you will be on your way to Leavenworth. Or, I will, as per your rights, call whichever lawyer you want, and allow you to take this to court. What is not on the list is the option of any sort of plea bargain whereby you agree to some lesser charge, and this goes away.

“So, either I get to enjoy seeing you sign the guilty papers, which I’ll admit, will be sweet, or I will watch you, in court, attempt to explain away what ‘You Goddamned faggot, I should have made them fuck it out of you,’ meant. And while my best lawyers are raking through your personal life, your professional life, why, before DADT your command had the highest rate of discharges for ‘conduct unbecoming,’ followed up by during DADT of having the highest rate of officers and enlisted being ‘outed’ and then booted, and then finally, once it was legal to be openly gay in the Navy, how it is that in two years with literally tens of thousands of troops under your command not a single openly homosexual sailor was promoted, and then Sam Burley will get up there and go over how suspected gay officers and sailors under your command had an unusually high rate of accidents, then they’ll grill you about Tim and the Stennis, and I’ll have them call your daughter and mother up to talk about how you are a child abuser with a nasty anti-gay sexual slant, while they do all of that in the
court room, I’ll be having press conferences along with SecNav about how at the Navy we takes these issues deadly serious, and no one, not even a retired Admiral is outside the scope of the law. Either way, it’ll be sweet for me.”

Leon grins again. “So, shall Agent DiNozzo draw up the paperwork to process you? Or shall we call you a lawyer?”

McGee blinks, hard and slow, and chokes out, “Give me the papers.”

Tim is used to being next to the limelight. NCIS does the work, someone else gets credit. He helps break the US Government, but he’s one of the guys off to the side talking about one very specific part of the job. His book hits the best seller list, and his agent fobs off a few canned comments from Thom E. Gemcity, stuff like that.

And it’s intentional.

It’s not that he minds having people know what he’s done, but, really he’d rather just be doing it than talking about it.

So, he’s not exactly sure what to do when, while in an emergency room in Virginia, waiting for an open bed (though if he’s here for another hour, he’s going to ask Abby to just take him home to Jimmy, or if she really wants an x-ray, to NCIS, where they have an x-ray and a doctor), his phone starts ringing off the hook from numbers he doesn’t recognize.

Finally, about forty minutes into the wait, as his eye is throbbing along with each heartbeat and he’s feeling woozy and sick, a number he does recognize pops up. Penny’s.

He nods to Abby, who answers the phone. He doesn’t much want to talk.

“Is the scuttlebutt true?” she asks Abby.

“Depends on what they’re saying.”

“I just got calls from four high-ranked Navy wives saying that John hit Tim after Tim came out to him. They’re asking what’s going on.” Penny is, too. That’s clear from her tone.

“Yes, that did happen. John got one good shot in, and then Tim leveled him. Yes, he did ‘come out’ to that man, but… well, you know the real story on that. Then Tony arrested him for assaulting a Federal Officer and a hate crime. And, if you want to start spreading around the idea that this was a hate crime sting, we’d both appreciate it. It’s even, more or less, true. Once we found out he was invited, too, we got that sting set up with Leon on the fly.”

“Is Tim okay?”

“We’re finding out. I don’t like the way his eye looks. Too swollen for just a black eye.”

“How about you?”

Tim might have been floating around on clouds nine, ten, and eleven as they were heading out, but Abby could feel the ‘Oh, my god, that poor woman, she’s so pregnant and her husband is sleeping
with other men’ looks from all over the room as they left. And though she certainly doesn’t mind sharing Tim with Jimmy and Breena, she’d prefer not to be seen as some sort of sad, stand-by-your-man victim in this case.

Abby knows that’s what Penny’s asking her about.

“I’ll live. Not like people haven’t stared or whispered at me before. We were out of there in less than two minutes. But both of our phones have been ringing nonstop.”

Tim looks surprised at that, he hadn’t noticed her phone going. Abby nods at him.

It’s a bit later, after he’s had a chance to think some, after the x-ray tech has gotten him in to get his eye zapped with plentiful rads, that he says to Abby, “I put you in a bad spot, didn’t I?”

She shrugs a bit. “For better or worse, right?”

“Yeah, but…” he feels sheepish as he thinks about it. People are going to talk, even if Leon does get up and explain the whole thing is a sting, the rumors will flow around.

“I don’t care. You took him down. You got him, and that’s worth more than any whispers… And I am willing to stand tall and proud next to you, and let the world know that whatever it is you are or want to be or do, that I’m in for the ride.”

He starts to smile, but moving his cheek muscles hurts.

“I love you.”

“Me, too.” She kisses him, soft, gentle, very carefully avoiding his eye. “And the rest of them can fuck off.”

“Yeah, well, we can hope, right?”

She nods, about to say something else, when the doctor comes in with x-rays in hand. “Mr. and Mrs. McGee, hello. I’m Dr. Ryl. We’ve got your x-rays back, and you do have a hairline fracture of your orbital bone.”

“And that means…” Abby leads with.

“In terms of what you do next, not all that much. It’s not anything we can cast. Pain medication, keep it protected, don’t let anyone else hit you in the face—“

“I know the drill. Got my nose broken a few months ago.”

Dr. Ryl looks really disturbed by that. “Mr. McGee… Uh…” he’s not sure how to proceed. Usually if a couple comes, and one of them has facial injuries like this… and then more of them recently…

Tim’s not with it enough to know why the Doc is looking concerned. Abby’s watching him eyeing the bruises on Tim’s face and trying to see if her hand is big enough to have made them. Abby shakes her head. She holds up her hands. “No bruises. He was in a car accident a few months ago. Got hit by a truck, broke his nose, hand, foot, ribs… We know the drill.” She points out the scars on
Tim’s hand.

“Oh.” Ryl starts to look relieved. “I’m sorry. Yes, you would know, then, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Percocet…” Abby rattles off the pain meds that Tim had been on that worked fairly well for him, and wrapped with, “not sure about that dosage though, he’s ten pounds lighter now than he was then.”

“We’ll get to it. Probably another hour before we’ve got the release papers ready. Then you can go home. Rest. No work tomorrow, maybe the next day. The pain meds will make you loopy. You can’t drive on them…”

“We know. Really.” Tim’s feeling out of it, but he knows enough to say that.

“You need to sign, there, and there.” Tony says, pointing to all the spots on John McGee’s confession.

John looks at the pen in front of him. He reaches for it, tries to pick it up, but his fingers (black and blue and his index finger is pointing in a non-standard direction) won’t curl around the pen.

“I can’t sign.”

“Sucks to be you.” Tony’s giving him the I’ve got all the time in the world look. And for the sake of nailing Tim’s father, he does. “We’re just going to sit here until you do.”

John glares at him. “Maybe if I could get some medical attention?”

“You want a doctor? What, did you damage your hand breaking my friend’s face? Oh, you poor, poor thing. Does it hurt?”

John grits his teeth, and Tony can see him willing himself to ignore any insults offered to him. How this man got to Admiral is not a mystery. “Yes, I would like a doctor.”

“Then we’ll make sure you get one, Mr—”

“Admir—“

“Mr.” Tony draws it out, enjoying emphasizing the lost rank. “McGee. After all, we wouldn’t want you to complain about substandard treatment, or have any reason to believe that you aren’t being treated with proper professionalism. My Boss runs a tight ship, so we don’t have accidents in holding.”

And they don’t, and won’t. But Tony doesn’t mind if John gets an extra layer of shit dumped on him between now and Leavenworth. Tony gets out his phone and calls Jimmy. He figures by now that Jimmy has to know what’s going on.

Apparently Jimmy does, and he’s sounding awfully enthusiastic about heading off when he’d normally be getting ready for bed to offer Mr. McGee a little hands-on attention.

When Tony wraps the call he looks at Mr. McGee again and says, “You know, you should probably
take that jacket off, otherwise someone might add a charge of impersonating an officer to your sheet.”

That makes John bristle. “I earned this jacket.”

“Oh, that’s right, you’re retired. Tell me about how that went, Mr. McGee.” Tony says with a cold smile.

John doesn’t reply.

“Wait… What?” Breena says, waving Jimmy closer, and putting the phone on speaker.

“He took John down. Flattened that fucker, kneeling on his back, broke his hand… It was beautiful!” Abby says. Tim’s lounging on the hospital bed, waiting. He’s already starting to get the loopy-gazed look he gets on Percocet. She wanted to know how bad it was before she called Jimmy and Breena. “Let me start at the beginning. We’re just getting a free second right now.”

So, Abby tells the tale, and Jimmy and Breena, knowing how it ended before how it got to that ending, cheer at the good parts, enjoying every verbal hit Tim was able to lay on the Admiral, and they growl at the bad parts, where John’s being an asshole.

She’s just about to the good part, reporting the third-hand version of the men’s room, when Jimmy’s phone buzzes.

“Tony just called.”

“Yeah, he probably would. He’s got John. I bet Tony’s looking for a doctor for John.”

Jimmy puts Tony on speaker, too. “Hey. Abby’s just getting us up to date. Tim creamed him?”

“Oh, yeah. God, Jimmy… I got it on tape. You’ll… You’ll see. The Admiral is complaining about his hand, needs medical attention. You feel up to offering him some?”

Jimmy’s smiling brilliant, hard, knife’s edge of rage in his eyes. “Oh, yes! I can do that. Give me half an hour.” Jimmy hangs up with Tony.

“Abby…” he says.

“I heard.”

“Give Tim a kiss for me, and tell him I’m about to give the Admiral our regards.”

He can feel Abby’s excitement at whatever he’s going to do next pouring through the phone.

“Will do. Doc’s coming back, got to go.”

Then it’s just him and Breena. She looks at him for a long time, weighing her love for Jimmy, and the desire for revenge, and Tim’s pain.

“Don’t get caught,” she says to him.
He kisses her, hard, that knife’s edge look still in his eyes. “Trust me baby; I’m not going to.”

She nods, slowly, and kisses him, too. “Remember, if needs be, we have a crematorium.”

Jimmy looks eager at that, and crushes it himself. “No. Not now. He’ll do jail time for this. And we know Tim wants that.” Jimmy smiles at that idea. “Bad things happen to men like him in prison.”

“And he deserves every second of it.”

“Yes, he does!”

Jimmy gets in about twenty minutes later. (Getting to the office at 10:00 is a whole lot faster than at rush hour.) He heads inside, texting Tony, finding out where he is.

He stops in Autopsy, grabs his medical bag, spends a moment messing around with a prescription bottle, and then goes to Interrogation.

“You called?” Jimmy asks as he steps in.

Tony’s in his usual seat, on the far side of the table, leaning back, looking lazy and complacent. “He’s complaining about his hand.” He gestures to the swelling and bruised hand in question.

Jimmy walks around John, to the side of the table closest to the camera, and then scoots up a bit, getting one butt cheek on the table, leaning against it, using his back to block the camera’s view of what he’s doing to John, and gently takes John’s hand in his. “Ew… That’s nasty. How’d you do this?”

“Punched a guy,” John says, voice sharp with pain, but there’s some relief at seeing a doctor, too.

Jimmy smiles at John, face kind, eyes obsidian hard, carefully cradling his hand, letting that moment of feeling safe build, and then he quickly flips his hand over, and John gasps a startled yelp of pain. “A guy, huh? Kind of impersonal. You must have really hit him to do this sort of damage to yourself, or you just suck at fighting? What’d this guy do to make you punch him? Wiggle your fingers.” He asks the questions in a fast line, so if John tries to complain, he’ll be talking over him.

John’s wincing but he tries to wiggle his fingers. All but his index finger wiggle.

Jimmy tsks. “Looks like you’ve got a few broken fingers.” He pulls out a small prescription bottle from his pocket, and grabs a pill. John’s watching it eagerly, leaning toward the pill that’ll make the pain start to go away. “Get some water for us, Tony.” He turns his attention, and his smile, back to John. “Well?”

John doesn’t answer. He does take the pro-offered pill and the bottle of water Tony hands over eagerly. “That’ll help with the pain and swelling,” Jimmy says.

Once he puts the water back down, Jimmy’s gently palpates John’s wrist. He shifts a little, moving so his upper body is closer to John’s face, making sure the camera won’t catch his expression. “Your wrist is broken. We’ll brace it up and get a film later just to make sure. Your thumb and index fingers are broken, too. You don’t really know how to throw a punch, do you?”
John’s starting to look alarmed. He’s fairly sure his wrist is dislocated and that his thumb isn’t broken.

“My wrist—“

Tony cuts him off, fast. He’s got a clue where this is going. But only a clue. “He used to be an Admiral,” Tony says dryly, talking over John.

“Oh, so you’re used to having someone else do your dirty work.” Jimmy also talks over John, who’s looking more alarmed by the second. “Looks like he’s got some sort of amnesia, Tony. What’d this ‘guy’ do to get punched so hard?”

Jimmy carefully palpates along each finger, and then calmly, without tensing or doing anything to telegraph he’s about to do it, he firmly grasps John’s hand and wrist, twists in opposite directions, hard, shattering at least three bones and pulling the joint apart.

John shrieks, all but jumping out of the chair, but a little added pressure from Jimmy’s thumb on newly broken bones takes John’s knees out from under him and he falls back into the chair.

“There, there, setting a broken joint really hurts, doesn’t it?“ Jimmy’s smile is wide and bright and razor sharp. “Usually I’d wait for the pain meds to kick in, but restoring proper blood flow to your hand is paramount. Once more,” Jimmy twists again, opposite direction this time putting the joint back in place, and John screams as he does it, trying to yank his hand back, but again, Jimmy just nudges the bones, and John goes limp, whimpering. “Getting your broken fingers correctly aligned is going to hurt even worse.” Jimmy knows his back is to the camera, blocking what he’s doing to John, so he smiles at John again, staring him right in the eyes, and grabs his thumb and wrenches it, hard, pulling it out of joint and breaking it.

John whimpers and starts to cry. The thing about holding a man by a broken bone is that you’ve got complete control over him. John’s not going anywhere Jimmy doesn’t want him to go.

Jimmy’s back is to the camera. Tony’s isn’t. Which means, even though he’s horrified at the sheer volume of hate and violence pouring off of Jimmy right now, he’s got to stay still and keep rolling with it, or he’ll give away the fact that Jimmy’s not just fixing up the Admiral’s hand. Tony thought that Jimmy might go hard on John, might… Hell, he didn’t know… might be mean to him. He sure as hell didn’t expect this. And now that he’s got this he doesn’t know how to get them out of it without letting the world know what Jimmy’s doing to John.

“The ‘guy’ is his son, and he came out to Daddy over there tonight, and Daddy punched the shit out of him for liking boys,” Tony finally manages to say, getting his role back in place.

Jimmy quickly wrenches John’s thumb back into correct alignment. John bites his lip, whimpering, skin gray, looking on the verge of passing out.

“Good thing for you that I’m sworn by the Hippocratic Oath, or I might have slipped on that. Got a guy I’m rather fond of, too. Let’s get your thumb and your wrist braced.”

John’s staring at him through his tears and finally says, “You’re the doctor.”

That makes Jimmy pause and stare at Tony, puzzled. Tony gives him the it’ll make sense when you read the report look.

“Peter Capaldi’s The Doctor. I’m a doctor.”

“You’re his doctor.” If John was gray before, he’s white now. Eyes hollow, horror pouring off of
him. “Keep your hands off of me.”

Jimmy’s with it enough that he knows he’s being taped so he lets go.

“Tim’s doctor?” he asks, obviously by this point John knows Jimmy isn’t just some random medical professional. “Yeah, I’m Tim’s doctor.”

John nods, disgust replacing the horror on his face. “Get away from me you cock-sucking faggot,” spittle flies from his lips and hits Jimmy on the glasses, “and keep your goddammed fucking hands to yourself. Don’t you touch me! Don’t you ever touch me again!”

Jimmy steps back, holding his hands high. “As you wish. NCIS would never force medical care on someone. But I can absolutely promise you that I am the only doctor you’ll have any option of seeing until you get to prison. In fact, I might just make it my duty to head off to Leavenworth and make sure I’m the only medial professional you’ll ever have the option of seeing. My mentor, your step-dad, Dr. Mallard was a specialist in hands. He spent years doing remarkably delicate surgery to make sure that wounded service men regained the use of their hands. We’ve spent many, many hours talking about that, so take it as fact that if you wait the three days until you get to prison for someone to properly see to your hand, these breaks will have become so infected and badly healed that you’ll have lost any shot of regaining full function with that hand, and that’ll be if you’re lucky. If you’re not, they’ll have to cut it off to keep the blood poisoning from killing you.” Jimmy smiles at him, cold and mean, back still to the camera. “And trust me, you’ll want the use of both of your hands once you get there.” He leans in a bit closer to John and drops his voice, “because if you can’t fight, someone might actually do what you threatened Tim with. So, if you ever want to use this hand again, you will submit to my treatment and take it like a man.”

John blanches, whimpers, and then holds out his (shaking) hand.

“Good choice.” Jimmy pulls out some of his flexible splits, bandages, and tape out of his bag. “Of course, even if you can fight, it’ll probably happen. I understand there’s not a lot of tolerance there for guys who beat up their kids where you’re going. Sure, Tim’s 39, but no one there will know that. You’ll be the guy who clocked his son for coming out to you. Maybe that’ll get you some cred, but I’m sure there are enough guys there who got beat up by their dads that you’ll have to watch your back.” Jimmy fits the splint. He knows there’ll be a medical review when John gets wherever he goes next, so this part of it has to be perfect. “Hm… bend that a bit more.” He shapes the metal to match the curve he wants John’s wrist and thumb to have. “Better?” He doesn’t wait for John to answer. He starts tightly taping everything into place. “Of course, maybe you won’t want to watch your back.” Jimmy eyeballs John’s wrist and thumb. They look right. He gently palpates again. They feel right. Then he takes John’s index finger in hand. The only finger that was broken before Jimmy got a hold of it. “Yep, this one’s broken too, going to have to snap it back into place. This’ll sting.” He savagely shatters John’s index finger with a hard twisting jerk. John’s eyes tear, and he jerks back, staggering to the waste basket to throw up. Jimmy stands by, passively watching, waits for John to finish, and then points to the chair. “Sit down.” He leans in close to John, whispering in his ear, “Take it like a man, McGee. Only fags and little girls cry when they get hurt, right? And you wouldn’t want anyone to mistake you for either of those things, right?” John’s cradling his arm against his chest, and Jimmy stands up, starts gathering up his gear. “I don’t think he wants me to treat him, Tony. Have fun trying to defend yourself with a 101 fever while your arm’s about to fall off.”

John’s all but bit through his lip, Jimmy can see blood dripping down his chin, but he holds his hand out, again.

“Good boy.” Jimmy pats John’s head, and he flinches. “Let’s get this all taken care of, and then
you’ll be all done and ready to go off to prison.” Jimmy starts to set John’s index finger with a splint. “Scary place, prison. You know, a lot of those guys are there because some officer kept telling them to do shit they didn’t want to do. I bet they’re going to have a lot of fun with an Admiral. I bet you’re going to be really popular.

“Maybe you’ll just close your eyes and pretend it’s not happening. Maybe you’ll just go passive and lay there and hope for it to end as soon as it can.” Jimmy begins to wrap the bandages around John’s finger, making sure everything is firm and still. “Sort of like you’re doing right now. Realizing that you’re small, and powerless, and all you can do is just take it, and if you’re lucky, survive. Okay, that one’s done.”

Jimmy pats the back of John’s hand, and again, he winces. “None of that, Admiral. Just take what’s coming to you. Maybe they’ll pass your ass around, fuck a cunt into you, break you open, and leave you bleeding, shit smeared, diseased, and covered in cum.”

Tony’s eyes practically fall out of his head at that. He knows Jimmy’s got a dark side. Hell, he’s felt Jimmy’s dark side come out and bite him, but… He sure as hell was not expecting this.

Jimmy gently places the splint under John’s palm, making sure everything is properly lined up again. “And you, weak little cunt, you’ll just lie there and take it, because that’s all you’ve ever been able to do. All talk and no fight.

“Tony, can you hold this here?” Jimmy’s finished wrapping the bandages into place, time to tape them. Tony gently holds the end of the soft cotton bandage in place while Jimmy gets the tape. Jimmy gently applies the tape, and then he pats the back of John’s hand again, getting another wince. “Karma’s a fucking bitch, John. What you sow, you reap, and it’s about to all come back to you! Have fun in prison, asshole.”

And Jimmy gets up and leaves.

He heads into observation and sees Vance staring into the space where he had been, eyes wide, mouth open. Vance turns to him and stares, stunned.

Jimmy blinks, he hadn’t realized that Vance was watching. He doesn’t regret what he said to John, and he’s sure that Vance couldn’t see what he did while he was “fixing” John, but he’s not sure Tim wanted Vance to know that much about his/their lives.

He shakes his head at Vance. “None of that leaves this room, right?”

Vance nods.

Tony bursts in a minute later. “Jimmy! You better ho…”

Vance is watching them closely, and Tony only just seems to notice he’s there.

“Director!”

Vance looks coolly at Jimmy and Tony. “And what should Dr. Palmer be hoping, Agent DiNozzo?”
“Uhhhh…” Tony’s backpedaling fast, not sure what exactly Vance saw.

“I’m sure Tony’s about to express an interest in the contents of our infirmary’s pharmaceuticals. And you’re right Tony, we don’t normally have the kind of pain killers a man like Admiral McGee would need to deal with the level of pain he’s in. Fortunately, I had the forethought to fill a scrip for him on the way over. I imagine he’d rather like some more pain medication, now.”

Vance and Tony are both staring at Jimmy as he produces a proper prescription bottle. “Instructions are on the bottle.” There are ten pills in there. “Should be enough to get him through to wherever he’s going next.” Jimmy stares through the glass at the Admiral; he’s curled in on himself, skin gray, sweating, shaking, moaning in pain. “He’s slipping into shock. It’d be a good idea to wrap him in a blanket, keep him warm, get him lying down, feet over his heart.” He hands Tony the pills. “These’ll help.” He looks at Vance. “He’s actually going to end up in some high-end, minimum security prison for guys who skip out on their taxes, isn’t he?”

Vance nods, staring at Jimmy, realizing he’s never seen the man inside the man before, never guessed at what might have been in there. “Probably. He’s an Admiral, or was, we can’t put him in general population; they’ll kill him just for kicks.”

“Great.” Jimmy shrugs. “He won’t know that for a while, so he might as well sleep bad for a few days.”

Tony’s still staring at Jimmy, who’s just watching John, looking coolly detached from the whole thing. He can feel the pill bottle in his hand, and really wants to talk to Jimmy without Leon around.

“Could I have a minute with Jimmy, Director?”

Jimmy turns to Leon and adds, “Probably a good time to go find a blanket for Admiral McGee.” Then he takes the pills from Tony and hands them to Leon. “Make sure he gets one of these.”

Tony yanks the bottle back, very worried about what might actually be in there. Then more worried because whatever it is, John’s already had one, but he threw it up, so… “I’ll handle that.”

Leon looks between them, nods, and heads off for the blanket.

As soon as the door is closed, Tony turns to Jimmy. “What the fuck is in this?”

“Nothing to worry about.” Jimmy’s still watching John, the monster that haunts Tim’s dreams, the man who almost stole him from them. Now he’s just something small and broken, scared, hurting, crying to himself in an interrogation cell. Jimmy smiles. This time there’s no razor’s edge, it’s just pure pleasure. Tony’s not sure which smile scares him more.

“Nothing to worry about? I’m worried about you right now. You just…”

Jimmy turns to Tony, staring at him, cold, eyes distant. “I broke his thumb, index finger, and wrist. And then I fixed it. His medical files will show he came in with all of those breaks, and they have all been properly cared for given the limitations of the first aid available here in the Navy Yard. The pills are placebos. The first one I gave him was real, but he threw it up. I’ll make sure he gets another real one. The rest are compressed baking soda. That combination, along with Leon treating him for shock means he won’t die. He’ll be stabilized by the time the real pain kicks in. As long as he’s taking these, they won’t give him any extra pain medication. It’s possible that just thinking it’s real medicine will take the edge off, but it won’t do any heavy lifting on his pain. Right now, his biggest risk is shock. Improperly treated shock may kill him, which is why I’ve mentioned it to you, why I’ll make sure he gets another real Percocet, and why Leon’s getting him a blanket.”
“Shock may kill him…” Right now Tony isn’t all that worried about “shock.” “What about you?”

“We decided” and the way he says we makes it clear to Tony that ‘we’ means Tim, “that he gets to live out the rest of his natural life.”

Tony nods, wondering if Jimmy means that he won’t do anything more than this, or that he’ll make sure Tim doesn’t know if he does anything more than this. They see Vance head in, wrap McGee in a blanket, get him lying down, prop his feet up.

“Take it like a man?” Tony asks.

Jimmy shakes his head. His eyes close and his teeth clench. “Comes out of Tim when he’s sleeping sometimes. You can tell from the nightmares that’s something John used to say to him.”

“Oh. Is he…” Tony knows they aren’t just fooling around, but it still strikes him as weird when he comes up against things like the fact that Jimmy really sleeps with Tim.

“Still having nightmares?” Jimmy finishes the question for Tony, and then answers it. “Yeah. Not as many, but yeah. Maybe once or twice a month now.”

“Oh. I didn’t know he talks in his sleep.”

Jimmy shrugs. He assumes that Tony’s roomed with Tim enough to know something like that. Of course, Tony sleeps like a log, so he might have just slept through it. “Enough. He’s pretty easy to get settled back down again, now.” Tony realizes that means he wasn’t back when they started sleeping together. “Still hurts, though, you know?”

That Tony knows all about. Rips his heart out when Ziva wakes up screaming. Doesn’t happen all that often anymore, but it does happen sometimes, especially with pregnancy dreams it’s been happening more often the last few months. She gets lost in a dream, starts yelling, never in English. It jolts him awake, and he cuddles her close, murmuring soft things to her, petting her gently, until she wakes up or settles back down.

“You help settle him down?”

Jimmy shrugs. “Whoever’s next to him does. It’s usually Abby, and about half the time, me.”

Tony’s just staring at Jimmy on that.

“What?”

“I just… I didn’t know it was like that.”

“What, you thought it was just all sex? That we fuck and then sleep apart?”

“No… Not that.” Tony looks uncomfortable, especially given what Tim said to The Admiral. “Just… Didn’t think you’d be next to him.”

Jimmy shrugs a bit at that. “Sometimes I am, sometimes I’m not. Not like we have to keep the girls between us or our dicks’l drop off and we have to hand in our man cards. If he’s having bad dreams and he’s next to me, I’ll rub his back or cuddle him, while Abby holds onto him, we’ll both talk him back to dreamless sleep, and then he’s good.”

“That’s…” Jimmy waits for Tony to figure out what to say. “Really domestic.”

Jimmy shrugs. “Yeah, well, sleeping at home, in bed, with your family tends to be kind of
domestic.” He’s looking at John, whose color is getting better as Leon makes sure he’s in the right sort of position. “I want to go in there and kick him to death.”

“I know.”

Jimmy shakes his head. “No. I don’t think you do. Because until today, I didn’t know. I thought I did. I’ve spent months training with Gibbs to do it, kept practicing on my own when he couldn’t, so, I thought I knew, and I’ve been fantasizing about it, but… Nope. He’s here, and breaking his hand wasn’t nearly enough.”

Tony puts his hands on Jimmy’s shoulders. “I know, Jimmy. I really know.” And for the first time Jimmy really gets, in his guts and balls, what Tony was doing in Somalia, and how Tony and Tim and Gibbs had to let a lot of those guys go to get Ziva out. More than that, he gets how Gibbs and Tony didn’t expect Ziva to be there, so they weren’t going in for a rescue mission so much as a kill-everyone-who-gets-in-range mission. “He’s in our custody, and unlike his ship, we can’t just have some sort of accident in the jail cell.”

Jimmy nods. “And I don’t want him to. Not right now. Only reason I could stop from going further is because fear is more satisfying than death, and right now, he’s scared. Really scared.” Jimmy smiles. “But I really wouldn’t mind if he ‘accidently’ spent a few months in the general population at Leavenworth.”

Tony thinks about that. “You know, we can probably arrange for something like that to happen.”

Jimmy shakes his head. “No. We can’t. I mean, yes, it’s possible, but no… Like you said, he can’t have an ‘accident’ here. Everything’s got to be above board.” Jimmy takes a step toward the door. “I’ll get the report written up. We’ve got Percocet down in Autopsy, I’ll get some of that for John, too.”

“Take your time,” Tony says.

Jimmy smiles again.

Once Jimmy’s out of Observation, Tony sits down, heavily.

He’s not precisely sure how to process what he just saw, what happened tonight.

He feels like he just got dropped back into the deep end. Like, okay, yeah Ducky had mentioned that John had pulled any sort of shit he could on Tim, but somehow he hadn’t realized, until he was sitting there, listening, watching, exactly how deep the damn shit went.

That’s stupid. He knew. A guy doesn’t try to have you killed because he’s irked at you. And, he knows Ducky mentioned there was a sexual edge to it, but… He didn’t know. Didn’t imagine. Not until he saw the look on John’s face as he was shouting about ‘making them fuck it out of you.”

He didn’t realize how black those words thrown at Tim must have gotten, because obviously, this was not the first time Tim heard anything along those lines.

Threaten your own kid with rape. Tony’s seen a lot of sick fuckers in his day, and John McGee’s in
the top ten.

And, God… Tim got up there and proclaimed himself a… Tony doesn’t even like to think that word. Not anymore. Especially not with Jimmy and Tim in his family.

And Tim didn’t just name it, he described it. To John. God, he owned it and served it up on a platter and took the hit and… And… And just leveled the fucker. Grabbed his hand and took him down! That was awesome.

Tim described it. That was more than he needed to know about what happens when the McPalmers are McPalming, let alone Tim’s role in the relationships.

And then Jimmy. Shit… Jimmy! He knows Jimmy’s got a dark side. He knows Jimmy can get vicious, and… Right now, he can’t for the life of him decide if he set Jimmy on McGee because he knew, deep down what Jimmy would do, and he wanted it to happen, or he blindly refused to know who Jimmy is deep down.

Too much shifting around for one night. Too many thoughts he really doesn’t like.

He likes neat and tidy and everything in safe and secure little boxes. And the whole McPalmer thing broke all of his boxes. His boxes for where the people in his life go, his boxes for how relationships work, his boxes for what’s acceptable behavior, hell, his ‘this is what love looks like’ box got shattered.

But they’re his friends, so he rebuilt, and he cobbled together broken boxes and he made some bigger boxes and he tried not to think too hard about the bits that strike him as icky and…

And now the damn things are broken again.

Jimmy’s in love with Tim. Beginning, end, middle: that’s what’s going on. That’s not what he thought was going on, but that’s it. Tony loves Tim, he could easily kill or arrange the murder of John McGee with nary a second thought, tucking himself into bed that night and sleeping the untroubled sleep of the morally just.

Jimmy looked John in the eyes while torturing him and smiled.

And Tony knows that he couldn’t do that. If he got his hands on the men who captured and raped Ziva, oh yeah, he could spend hours on wringing every drop of pain they could possibly feel out of them, but… no, not for anyone else, not Tim, not Gibbs, no one else would elicit that level of rage out of him.

When he reboxed everyone, with both Tim and Jimmy assuring him over and over that they were both straight, which was either true at the time, or a huge lie designed to… what, keep him calm? After he blew up about them as a foursome with the guys straight, he could see them deciding he didn’t need to know they were fucking each other on top of that… Except… Tony remembers telling Tim that he’d actually be more comfortable with it if they were fucking each other. Easier to buy that it was stable if that was true. So, it probably wasn’t true when he last talked to Tim or Jimmy about it.

Apparently, it’s true now. Given Tim’s history with this, with what John was threatening, Tony isn’t sure if he should cheer or feel vaguely nauseous.

Anyway, he arranged it in his head as a set of two threesomes, Abby, Tim, Breena, and Jimmy, Abby, Breena, where the sexual attraction and romantic feelings all moved along heterosexual lines for the guys, and he didn’t bother to try and define the girls because he knows trying to define Abby
is useless and he’s got no idea what Breena gets out of this.

So, it took a while, but he reboxed everyone, and, sure no orgies happen in front of his eyes, but from everything he could see his new boxes worked. Tim and Jimmy don’t neck in public. They act like they always did, two guys who are very close friends. The only new stuff involved how they relate to the girls and how the girls relate to each other.

But those boxes don’t work, because this isn’t two threesomes, no matter what the hell those two were saying about being straight, this is a foursome.

“Never thought I’d say I’d be happy to see you with a black eye,” Breena says when Tim comes in.

Tim hugs her, sagging against her, and says, with a huge grin on his face. “Never thought I’d be happy to have one. But, oh man, I SO am!”

Breena pulls back a little, and Tim follows her, not steady on his feet. “Okay, come on, let’s get you to bed.”

He smiles along with that as Abby and Breena help his elated and drugged self up the stairs.

“Where’s Jimmy?” Tim asks, having forgotten most of what’s happened in the last hour as he keeps replaying standing over The Admiral, calling him out in his mind again and again.

“He’s with Tony.” Tim misses the look Breena and Abby share.

“Oh, cool. I bet he’s having a good time. You want to go, too?” he asks Breena.

She holds up a hand as they get to the top of the stairs. “I’m good here.”

“Okay…” Tim doesn’t say anything as they get him into bed. But, once he’s lying down, he says, “Did anyone call Gibbs?”

“Not yet. You want me to?” Abby asks.

“Yeah. I really want to see him.”

“Okay.”

Eleven o’clock phone call from Abby. Gibbs knows what this is.

And again, he’s wrong.

He listens as she gives him the story, electric something, pride maybe, joy, a little disappointment, because this means he’s never going to get his own shot in against John, all flowing through him as
he gets the story.

He remembers, as he’s grabbing his coat, that Tim had said something to him, when he sat him down and showed him the rifle, that Tim wanted this on his terms, using his tools, his weapons. Gibbs remembers Tim saying that it needed to be his words that did it.

Gibbs smiles, shutting the car door behind him, hitting Abbi’s contact number to get her up to date. (She’s already back at CGIS)

His boy did it!

“You gonna be able to see out of that eye again?” Gibbs asks as he walks into Jimmy and Breena’s bedroom, seeing Tim in the middle of the bed, eyes closed, looking extremely satisfied and tunelessly humming something to himself. Abby’s next to him, holding his hand. He starts on her side and kisses her cheek.

Tim’s right eye opens and focuses on Gibbs. The left is too swollen to open. “Probably. Might have double vision when I look up and down. Good thing I’m not a field agent anymore, that would have ended it.”

Gibbs is shaking his head, and half-sits, half-leans on the bed next to Tim. “How you feeling?”

Tim isn’t looking at Gibbs. He’s watching… Gibbs isn’t sure, something… above and to the right of Abby. “Pretty loopy. I’m on a ton of pain meds, and they’re actually doing the job. It’s actually pretty nice, kind of floaty, and I’m in a really great mood. Abby’s right, morphine’s a treat. When we retire, Abby and I are going to do a lot of drugs. Gonna try everything.”

Gibbs isn’t sure how to respond to that, so he tries a tight smile and says, “Glad to hear it.”

“Bet Breena and Jimmy’ll like ‘em, too.”

“That’s great, Tim,” he says, patting Tim’s knee.

“And Jimmy can write scripts for a lot of them. He really liked Special K back in college, can’t wait to see how that feels. March or April, when Abby’s all healed up from Sean, Jimmy’s gonna write us a prescription for morphine and we’re gonna try sex like this.”

“Uh huh.” Abby’s shaking her head at Gibbs; she’s not nursing stoned. “You wanna get some sleep?”

“That might be a good idea. I’m not sleepy, but I’m sort of not really here, either.”

“No, you aren’t, Tim.” Gibbs is shaking his head. He squeezes Tim’s knee through the blanket on his bed. “Was it worth it?”

Tim seems to go clearer for a moment, and that grin spreads over his face as his eye lights up. “Oh yeah!”

“You sure?”
“Oh yeah!” That grin on his face is amped to eleven as he says, “I didn’t break him, Dad. I made him break himself. It was perfect. Told him I liked it up the ass and he freaked, shouting about me being a fag and how he should have made them fuck it out of me. All the shit he put me through, all that crap just boomeranged back onto him and took him right out of the game. Everything he ever loved is gone, and he did it to himself. ‘Admiral attacks own son in hate crime.’” Tim giggles. “He’ll do jail time. Can’t sweep this under the rug, not like what happened on the Stennis. Two hundred witnesses and the past means this is an airtight case. Even without the morphine I’d be feeling pretty damn good right now.” Tim thinks about it, remembering how he felt after the endorphin crash, and ended up throwing up in the waiting room because he hurt so badly. “Okay, maybe not good, this would really hurt. But very satisfied.”

“Okay.” Gibbs kisses the top of Tim’s head. “Okay.”

Tim reaches up and hugs him, spending a good long minute clinging to Gibbs, and he holds him back, gently petting his hair. “It was good, Dad. It was so good!”

Gibbs kisses him again and ruffles his hair. “You get some sleep.”

“Okay.”

Gibbs sits next to Abby, not saying anything, but she rests her head on his shoulder, knowing how much that moment mattered to Gibbs.

No one’s called him Dad, not like that, since 1991. Sure, Tony and Ziva and Jimmy’ll do it as an affectionate joke, but for real? It’s been too damn long since someone called him Dad for real.

And even if it was high as a kite on pain killers, it matters to him. He’s missed that so much, didn’t know how just hearing that word aimed at him would fill him up. Pop is good, and he loves when Kelly calls him it, but… Dad’s better, fills a different hole, one that’s been empty too damn long.

Eventually, Tim’s fully asleep, but she keeps her voice low as she says, “He probably won’t remember he did it, but if you tell him what it meant to you, he’ll do it when he’s sober.”

Gibbs shrugs. “I can wait until he can do it on his own.”

Abby shrugs at that, too. “Might be too much baggage with that for him to come up with it on his own when he’s sober.”

Gibbs nods. “That’s why I can wait.”

Breena comes back in a moment later. “Penny called again. It’s already starting to get some press. Just the fight, so far. No names, yet. Leon’s promised a press conference about it tomorrow afternoon.”
Once John is bundled up, and no matter what Jimmy wants on this, Tony’s not helping to torture the
guy a second longer than he’s already been, so he quietly tells Leon the pain meds are a placebo so
they can get him some real pain medication.

Leon’s looking at the bottle, then looks at Tony. It’s clear on his face that he knows what Jimmy did.
It’s just as clear that he doesn’t entirely know what to do with it, either. “I didn’t expect that.”

Tony swallows. He’s the guy who called Jimmy in. “If I’d known he was going to go that far, I
wouldn’t have called him.”

Leon nods. He’s fine with John taking some of his medicine. That’s part of why, even knowing what
sort of relationship Tim and Jimmy have, and having read what Tim said to John… Hell, because of
the relationship Tim and Jimmy have, that having Jimmy walk in there and tend to him would be
fine. Some insults, maybe slightly less than gentle treatment, John knowing that he owed his health to
Tim’s “Doctor,” all of that was fine with Vance.

He slipped into Observation, looking forward to seeing Palmer hurt McGee verbally, and maybe, just
a little, physically. Rough him up a bit. Like that first move, where he flipped John’s hand too fast.
Leon cheered at that. That was exactly the sort of thing he was hoping to see.

The idea that Jimmy would go in there and torture John did not occur to him. Watching it happen,
from Jimmy of all people, was exceptionally disturbing, and now he’s on major ass covering mode.
“The files will match up?”

“Jimmy says so.”

“Okay. I could see it from where I was standing, but it’s not on the feed. He’s sitting in the exact
right place so you can’t tell what he’s doing. I screwed the sound a bit, too. Once he got in there, the
volume drops. Crank it up, and you can make most of it out, but not all of it.” He’d also been
expecting some less than kind words. He was fine with covering for that. What he got and what he
thought he’d get… Leon exhales long and hard, shaking his head.

“You didn’t stop him?” Tony half asks, half says. He wonders what Vance is thinking about this.

“Same reason you didn’t. It’d screw the tape. If McGee complains, he complains, and we all take the
black mark for letting someone too close to Tim handle this. There’s no proof he didn’t come in with
those injuries. Most they can get him, or us, on is that Jimmy says some really unkind things to him.”
Leon glances at the pills. “You think he’s telling the truth about these?”

Tony opens it and pops one. “He’s off the reservation, but he wouldn’t lie to me about them being
poison.”

“You hope. Palmer doesn’t see McGee again.”

“On it, Boss.”

Tony knows it’ll take a bit for Jimmy to get that report done, so time to handle his other loose end.
Draga.
He heads back to their desks, and sees Draga hunched in front of his computer, looking sick. 

He glances up at Tony and then back to the screen and back to Tony. “Is he in holding?”

“Yeah, now.”

“You mind going out for some coffee and turning a blind eye while I go in there and use his kidneys for target practice?” Draga glances around his desk. He picks up his stapler. “With this?”

Tony purses his lips and swallows hard. He’s tempted to say, “Jimmy already got there,” but decides that’s a bad plan. “No, I don’t mind, but no, you’re not going to do it.”

Draga almost pouts. Then he glances back at his screen, shaking his head. “That… I don’t have words. Nothing in my head is bad enough for this.”

Tony sits down, across from him. “I know.” He looks at the image of Dave, and on Draga’s desk where Kevin’s picture is. “I don’t… I’ve got a shitty dad. Took him seventy-five years to get in the neighborhood of decent parenting, but…” Tony shakes his head again. “Nothing, at all, like that.”

Eric nods along. “Yeah, I know I’m not getting Daddy of the Year anytime soon, either, but… Shit!”

Tony nods at that, too. He knows Eric’s got a big question left.

And he does. He gestures to the computer, “So… this, and the shit that came before and… Is McGee gay? Is that why The Admiral…”

Tony’s shaking his head. “No matter what may or may not be true about Tim, why The Admiral pulled any of this shit is entirely in his own twisted, fucked rats-nest of a head. It’s not on Tim.”

“Fine… You know what I’m asking.”

“What’s your gut say?”

Draga gives Tony the stink eye. “If I trusted it, I wouldn’t be asking you.”

“You’re an investigator, think your way through it.”

“Fine.” And Draga does think. “No. He’s not gay. I’ve seen him with Abby. Hell, I’ve seen him sneak off at a Christmas Party with Abby and wander back ten minutes later with his hair all fluffy and a shit-eating grin on his face. No one is that good of an actor or that deep in the closet.”

Tony nods.

“And I watched him level The Admiral and talk about… I mean… That was really fucking explicit!”

Tony nods at that, too. He knows and agrees on that.

“That’s not the sort of thing a straight guy says. It’s not the kind of thing a straight guy thinks. You ask me to play gay, and I’ll swish, but you’d never, ever hear… that come out of me.”

Tony keeps nodding. Ask him to play gay, and he’s sure he could pull it off, but what Tim said to actually get the Admiral to strike isn’t anything he’d ever say, let alone think. “So…”

“He’s bi?”

Tony shrugs. “Could be. He and Jimmy both tell me they aren’t, but that was a while ago… What
else did he say?"

“Wife, husband, other wife… So… Abby and Breena know, don’t they? That’s why Abby didn’t freak out?”

Tony nods. “And are part of it. And approve. The family knows. You know. I’m sure Allan will know soon, because he’s my next call. Now shut the fuck up about it! This was a sting. We know gay things set The Admiral off; gay sailors have a hard time under his command, and this was designed to get him out of the Navy once and for all.”

“All right. I can… If anyone asks about the stuff that came before? About the Stennis?”

“You know nothing and are not authorized to talk about ongoing investigations. They want questions answered, they can talk to Leon.”

“I can do that.”

Tony hunts down Jimmy and finds him in Autopsy filling out John’s medical report. For a moment, he just watches Jimmy typing, reading over his shoulder, and so far everything looks up and up.

“Aren’t they going to wonder why you didn’t x-ray him upon initial examination?” Tony says to start up the conversation.

“He was in interrogation. Lots of places only offer first aid until they’re done working with a criminal. I’ll x-ray him in an hour or so.”

Tony shakes his head, very scared of what will happen when Jimmy x-rays John. “Nope. I shouldn’t have called you in. I… didn’t think you’d do that.” Though the more he thinks about it, the more he’s coming to the conclusion that some little part of him kind of hoped Jimmy would go batshit on John, and he’d get to watch. “I’ve already called Allan in, he’ll x-ray and do any secondary care that John needs.”

Jimmy blinks slowly, turns away from his computer and stands up to face Tony. He thinks for a moment, and Tony’s not sure what that look on his face means, but it scares him. Finally he says, “If I had shot him, you’d have been fine with it, right?”

Tony nods.

“And you’d shoot him yourself?”

“Yes.”

“So, what you’re saying is that murder is a lesser sin than pain?”

Tony puts a hand on each of Jimmy’s shoulders. “I am saying that I have a direct order from our Boss, who could see what you did to the man in our custody, and who did not stop you from doing it, to take you off this case and make sure you never see John again.”

Jimmy’s not happy about that, but he gets it, and gets the massive ‘Get Out of Jail Free’ card Leon just handed him. “Fine,” he says, voice flat.
“Finish up the report, go home, or go to Tim, I know…” that trails off. Tony’s just looking at Jimmy, trying to see him as a man who would rip another man’s hand apart to avenge his lover. His male lover.

“What do you know?” Jimmy says, looking at Tony curiously, aware something’s shifting in Tony’s head.

“I know you want to be with him.”

Jimmy does. He hasn’t seen Tim, yet, and he’d like to. But… right now there’s something (a copy of an x-ray of John’s hand) that he’d like to give Tim when he sees him, and it looks like that’s not going to happen. “Like to be able to tell him about several rounds with the Admiral. Better than flowers or balloons or some other stupid get-well present.”

“One round will have to be enough. He can complain, you know? Eventually he will get to Leavenworth and…”

Jimmy nods his head, turning back to his computer. He spends another minute typing, and then hits the enter button. “Notes are done. He came in here with all of those breaks. When Allan x-rays him, everything will look exactly the way it should. You guys got him in so fast, that short of McGee offering bone samples for a histology report, you can’t tell all of those breaks didn’t happen at the same time.”

“Fine. Go. Tomorrow morning, when you get in, after he’s been transferred out of here, I’ll head over to visit, with a copy of the x-ray.”

“Okay.”

Jimmy gets home to the sight of several cars in his driveway. The other one that belong to him, okay, that’s normal. Abby’s, makes perfect sense. Gibbs’… He supposes he should have expected that.

No lights on in the house. So… Gibbs is sleeping over? All right.

He heads in quietly, but sees that Gibbs isn’t sleeping. He’s in the living room, one light on, low, waiting up for him.

“How’d it go?”

Jimmy shrugs, heading into the living room. He’d like to just get to bed, but… Apparently thinking, in addition to doing, is in order.

“He still alive?”

Jimmy nods as he sits down on the sofa next to Gibbs. “Yeah. World of hurt… maybe… I think Tony pulled an end run on me on that. Vance might have… But I got a few licks in.”

“He gonna press charges?”

Jimmy shrugs. Calmer now, he’s more with it, and more able to see that John might be able to make a hell of a fuss. “He can. I don’t think he’d win the case if it went to court. Tony and Vance’ll lie
about what they saw, the camera didn’t get anything, and any medical review won’t be able to tell what I did. Sometimes you’ve got to break bones to set them properly… And now, they’re set properly.”

Gibbs sighs. “Did it help?”

That’s what Jimmy’s been working on not thinking too much about. “I liked doing it.”

Gibbs lays a hand on Jimmy’s shoulder. “I’ll bet. But it’s not better, is it?”

“No. God, it felt… good.” And Jimmy’s not sure he likes how much he enjoyed that. “But… kind of like sex with someone you don’t much like, you don’t feel good, after. Doesn’t last.”


“Tony’s got him. Called in Allan to finish up his medical care. On Vance’s orders, I’m not allowed back into the building until John’s out of it. He plead guilty rather than face trial. Apparently, they got him on tape admitting he threatened Tim with rape, and they got video of him going batshit insane when Tim came out to him, so he doesn’t want any of that coming out in open court. He’s off to Leavenworth while a judge rubberstamps this and gets it swept away as fast as possible.”

“Now what for you?”

Another shrug. “Go upstairs, snuggle in with my loves, try to get some sleep between now and back to work. Longer term, be a husband and a dad. Keep talking to Rachel. Hope this doesn’t blow up too bad, apparently Tim didn’t just out himself, but mentioned enough details about his lover that anyone who knows both of us can figure it’s me… Got a conversation with Allan coming up. He’ll wonder why I started the treatment and he finished it.” Jimmy shakes his head. That’s immediate what he’s doing, not who he’s trying to be. “Love my family, raise my kids, be a better man tomorrow than I was today. That’s what’s up for me.”

Gibbs squeezes him a little tighter. “Good.” He stands up and gives Jimmy a hand up. “I’m heading home, snuggle my own love, she should be home by now. You need it, you call.”

Jimmy nods. “Goodnight, Jethro.”

“Night.”

After Gibbs leaves, Jimmy spends a moment or two downstairs, lights off, letting his eyes adjust. Then he heads up. He checks the girls. All three of them are snoozing away, little, round lumps under blankets, cuddling their stuffies, and in Kelly and Anna’s case, contentedly sucking away on pacifiers.

Then to his room. Tim likes to sleep on his right side. Jimmy can understand that, it leaves his dominant hand free for whatever he wants to do with it. He likes to sleep with his lips against the shoulder of whomever is in front of him, all curled around them the way Kelly curls around her Skully.

Tonight, he’s on his back. And, even in this light, Jimmy can tell why, his eye’s got to hurt like a
bitch.

He feels a little more satisfied with what he did to John.

He takes care of his nightly routine, as quietly as he can, but he still wakes up Abby.

She drifts over to the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. “Hey.”

“Go back to sleep.”

“In a minute.” She glances at the toilet, and he knows what she wants to do. He brushes his teeth faster. “How was it?” He can see that gleam in her eye, and he knows she would have just as happily been in there with him, cracking bones, and likely adding a massive laxative dose to the placebos.

Jimmy smiles for a moment. “Doing it was great. Broke his fingers and wrist, felt the bones crunch and the joint rip under my hands.”

Abby’s eyes close and she savors it. “Good.”

He nods. “But it didn’t fix anything. Tim’s still hurt.”

Abby shakes her head. “No. I mean, yes, his orbital’s cracked, but… You’ll see when he’s up. He’s not hurt, not anymore. He got what he needed out of it.”

Jimmy smiles at that, a real smile. “Good.” He gives Abby a quick kiss. “Can I…” He’s not entirely sure what he’s asking here, but he wants to be close to Tim, but that’s her place on his left.

Abby does. “Yeah, go snuggle with him. If he was awake, he’d like that.”

Jimmy nods, and leaves Abby the bathroom. He strips off quietly, and pads across the room to their bed. He’s on Tim’s left, the side John hit, so he doesn’t try to kiss his face or touch it, but he settles in next to Tim, on his back, the same way he usually sleeps, scooting in close, so his flank is pressed to Tim’s, then he takes Tim’s hand in his and gives him a gentle squeeze.

Tim stirs a little, squeezes him back, and goes quiet.

A moment later Abby’s back, curled against Jimmy’s other side. Jimmy doesn’t fall asleep quickly, but he’s not wracked with guilt or pain or much of anything. Mostly, he’s very aware of the sounds of breathing, the soft shifting movements around him, and how much he loves this collection of people around him.

He wonders if tomorrow, they’ll be fully out. Probably not. Given how embarrassing that whole thing was, the Navy is going to do everything it can to keep it quiet. And he’s thinking that, were it not for the fact that Breena works with her parents, he doesn’t care. He’s ready to be open about this, wider world be damned.

He’s thinking as the night sounds of his home swirl around him, that they need to spend a few hours really going over their family finances, as a twosome and foursome, and figure a few things out. From everything he can see, their main vulnerable point is that Breena and her parents co-own Palmer and Slaters’. If, between the four of them, they’ve got the money to buy her parents out…

Then they’re free. No one, not Breena’s family, not NCIS, would have any leverage on them any longer.

He drifts off, thinking about that.
“Hey, Sam.”

“Tony?” Sam sounds fairly muzzy as he says that. This is not, by a long shot, the first middle of the night call he’s gotten from work. It is the first one where Dr. Palmer’s voice wasn’t on the other side of the line.

“Yeah. We’ve got a perp in need of medical attention. Could you come in?”

Sam rubs his eyes. He wants to say, “Why didn’t you call Dr. Palmer?” but he figures that’s kind of whiny.


“Great. Thanks. Swing by my desk, and I’ll take you to Holding, okay?”

“Sure.”

Sam’s not quite as well put together as he’d like to be for work, but he figures that if you want medical attention, fast and in a sweatshirt and jeans is better than slow and clean shaven with nicely styled hair and a suit.

He looks like what he is, a guy who got called in the middle of the night, did the absolute minimum level of grooming to be socially acceptable, and then got in his car and drove like a son of a bitch to get to work, fast.

He gets to the bullpen and finds both Tony and Draga at their computers, working away. Tony looks up to him and says, “Thanks. I know midnight calls aren’t fun.”

Sam inclines his head in agreement as Tony gets up.

“Who am I looking at?”

Ever since he called, Tony’s been wondering how to answer that question. He sighs as he leads Allan down, wondering how much to share.

“Admiral John McGee.”

Sam knows that name. His eyes go wide as he hears it. He’s not supposed to know all about The Admiral, but sometimes Dr. Palmer and Abby get talking when they think he’s not there. He knows exactly how unpopular Admiral McGee is among this group.

“Okay… And…”

“He decked Tim at one of the Commission meetings. Tim took him down, and he just pled guilty to assault.”

“Ew…” Allan winces. He knows the McGees have a messy relationship. Well, he assumes. He hasn’t been able to overhear what the issue is with the McGees, but he can’t imagine that Dr. Palmer or Abby could hate anyone that much unless he was at the absolute pinnacle of Tim’s shit list.
It’s also true that he didn’t think it was so messed up that The Admiral would take a swing at Tim. Though… Allan begins to feel a bit cold as he gets the idea that, just possibly, Jimmy and Abby weren’t just being mean and blowing off steam with some of those suggestions, and that they might have meant them.

Tony’s talking again. “Jimmy started with him. Took care of the first aid. But he was called away, and John still needs an x-ray, get the checkup finished.”

Allan looks at Tony curiously. Dr. Palmer has never, for any reason he’s ever seen, been ‘called away’ from anything. He supposed that maybe if Sean decided now was the time to show up, that he might leave in the middle of an exam of the person he likes least on earth for that, but Allan wouldn’t bet on it.

“All right.” It’s clear in his voice that he’s reserving judgement, waiting to get more information. “Is Tim okay?”

“Abby says he’s got a cracked orbital.”

Allan winces again. That was a hard hit. “So, John has a broken hand?”

“Something like that.” Tony opens the door to Holding. “Jimmy got him some pain meds, and set the breaks.”

Allan raises an eyebrow at Tony. If Jimmy had already set the breaks, then he’s already done the long part of this job. The x-rays would have taken, at most, another five minutes. “But he didn’t have time to do an x-ray?”

“Uh… No.” Allan finds Tony’s tone interesting. There’s a lot he’s not saying. “He was just getting John patched up enough so he could sign his confession and his guilty plea.”

“Huh.” Allan looks at Tony again, thinking about how very fast this is going. Best he knows, no one gets a plea taken care of the same day they get booked. This is getting shoved into a corner out of the light as quickly as possible, apparently. He’s sure that taking a swing at your kid would be embarrassing, and he is an Admiral, but… Something else is going on here. “And you want me to see him, finish up the full medical review before he’s transferred out of here?”

“Yes. We’ve got him booked on a flight to Leavenworth at seven.”

Allan nods, slowly, and looks through the bars of the different holding cells. He also glances to the left of the cells, seeing the portable x-ray and laptop, waiting for him.

“That was considerate.”

“Yeah, well… Jimmy said you’d need them, so here they are.”

Allan and Tony step closer to the cell, which Tony unlocks.

There’s only one man in it. He’s not what Allan was expecting, not from hearing Abby and Jimmy talk about him.

It’s just a guy, probably sixty-five-ish, sleeping, wrapped in a blue, wool NCIS blanket. He’s in fairly good shape for someone his age, tall, hair that’s the yellowish gray that makes Allan think it used to be blond or the sandy brown color Tim has. He doesn’t have Tim’s long face, but the eyes, lips, and hairline are similar. He does not appear, at least not lying on a cot, to be Satan incarnate, which, given what Jimmy and Abby want to do to this man, is what he was expecting.
“Admiral McGee?” Allan says quietly, hoping to wake him gently.

His eyes spring open, and he thrashes himself backward against the bars of the cell, cradling his arm against his chest, trying to get away from the voice calling him. *So much for that plan.*

“I’m Doctor Sam Allan. I’m here to finish your medical review.”

McGee’s eyes aren’t tracking well. It takes him a second to get eye contact with Allan, and then he jerks his eyes away, looking at Tony, looking around the room for someone, and then back to Allan and back to Tony.

“This one a fag, too?” he asks Tony.

“Oh, God!” Tony says. He looks horrifically embarrassed. “Jimmy gave him a pretty strong dose of Percocet.”

Allan, whose mouth had opened, but no sounds had come out upon hearing that, swallows, and then turns to Tony, and says with maximum sarcasm, “Yeah, homophobia’s a well-known side effect of Percocet.”

Allan, whose mouth had opened, but no sounds had come out upon hearing that, swallows, and then turns to Tony, and says with maximum sarcasm, “Yeah, homophobia’s a well-known side effect of Percocet.”

Tony winces again, and Allan can see he’s just now remembering that he’s gay.

Then Allan squares his shoulders, turns back to John, and takes two steps forward, crouching down so he’s eye to eye with the man on the cot. “I don’t know about ‘too,’” but yes, I am. And if fag’s the best you’ve got to throw at me, you need to go back to kindergarten and brush up on your technique. Sissy, nancy boy, cock sucker, shirt lifter, tea bagger, pansy… I’ve heard them all, and they were all old ten years ago. Though, if you’d ever seen me in a pair of heels and eyeliner, you’d know I’d the Fucking Queen. Now, if you want to talk about my sexuality, I prefer queer. If you want your hand taken care of, you’ll stop slinging insults, and let me at it.”

“Queen, huh?” John’s swaying slightly as he tries to keep sitting up. “La ti fucking da, your Majesty. You fucking my son, too?”

“Only on Wednesdays. Your hand.”

John snorts, mutters something Allan’s glad he didn’t understand, closes his eyes, unwilling to look at Allan, and holds his hand out. Allan carefully, and quickly, checks visually, and gently palpates to see if everything looks and feels okay. So far, so good. Jimmy did a good job. Allan carefully unwraps John’s hand, and removes the metal brace. “I’m going to put your hand on the x-ray, make sure all the breaks are properly lined up.”

“Yeah, sure. You going to snap a few of my fingers while you’re at it?”

“That’s doubtful, but not impossible. Sometimes you have to break bones to properly set them.” He places John’s hand on the x-ray. “Hold still.” He gets two shots. “I’ll check these, and then if you need your hand reset, we’ll see about getting you the proper care,” Allan says as he replaces the metal splint and re-wraps the hand.

Allan stands up, and nods to Tony, who follows him out, pushing the x-ray and computer.

Once they’re clear of Holding, Tony says, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t…”

“Tony… It’s not the first time that’s happened. It won’t be the last. Compared to some of the shit I’ve dealt with, that’s nothing.” He smiles grimly. “Besides, it always freaks them out when I don’t just roll over and cry when they call me nasty names.”
“Still, I’m sorry.”

Allan nods. “Let me get this back to Autopsy. I’ll check everything out, and let you know if he needs anything else.”

“Thanks, Sam.”

There are things that are true about Dr. Sam Allan. He is young. He is not terribly experienced in the ins and outs of murder (though he’s learning every day.) He’s almost a year into a new job that he’s enjoying, in a new city, which is a good change of pace from where he was before.

He’s lonely. He still misses the man whose murder put him on this path. He’s broken, but put back together, and if not healed, he can at least see where healed is. And, he’s found, in the course of the last year, that he’s stronger and more adaptable than he ever imagined being.

He is not stupid, nor is he blind. He is not bad at reading social situations, though he may not be good at it, either. But he’s been at NCIS for almost a year, so he’s getting the lay of the land of the relationships around him.

And he knows that something has gone very wrong.

He knows this because he’s reading John McGee’s x-rays and medical report, and can see that Dr. Palmer was called in to provide medical attention, which from the looks of everything he did a fine job of.

He also knows, by looking at those x-rays, that somehow John McGee appears to have gotten several torsion breaks from punching Director McGee. Granted, that’s an unlikely combination but, Allan supposes, given the fact that Director McGee, before he got hurt, used to be part of Dr. Palmer’s sparring party, it’s possible that Director McGee has some interesting tricks up his sleeve.

Though, given that comment about snapping fingers, Allan is doubtful as to the likelihood of that. What he said was true, sometimes you do have to break bones to set them, after they’ve healed into the wrong position. Which takes, at the very least hours into days, not… as he’s seeing in the medical files, 94 minutes.

What’s impossible is that John McGee was brought into this building, handed to Dr. Palmer, and then given appropriate medical care. And not because Dr. Palmer isn’t competent to handle first aid for those injuries. He’s seen the files, he did the X-rays, he knows Dr. Palmer did a splendid job of patching John McGee back up. (Actually, seeing the x-rays, Allan’s quite impressed, Dr. Palmer has some hard core palpation skills. He knows his sense of touch isn’t good enough to get that many breaks put back together, properly, by feel alone. Then another cold though hits Allan, setting breaks by feel alone is the most painful way to do it.)

No, the reason why it’s impossible that Dr. Palmer did what he was supposed to do the way he was supposed to do it is twofold: One, he’s in love with Director McGee, and two: he’s here doing the wrap-up for this job.

If Dr. Palmer had done the job he was supposed to do, he’d also be standing here, finishing that job.

There is one other thing Dr. Sam Allan is unsure of, and that’s what, if anything, he needs to do
He heads back up to Tony’s desk, with copies of the x-ray to put into his files.

Tony glances up at him as he heads in. “All good?”

“Yeah, the breaks are all properly set. I don’t think I could have done that by feel alone, but Dr. Palmer set them right.”

“Great.”

Allan looks at Tony, who appears tired, and then to Draga, who’s carefully not meeting his eyes. “So, have you heard from Dr. Palmer? Has whatever called him away been taken care of?”

Tony swallows, and Allan can see he knows he’s caught in the lie.

“Yeah. I think he’s okay, now.”

Allan looks at both men, who are glancing to one another, and then nods.

He’s watching the elevator doors shut when he hears Draga say, “So, you gonna tell me why Jimmy didn’t hand you those x-rays?”

“No.”

He could head home, grab a few more hours of sleep. That’d be the smart plan.

But Allan’s not getting ready to do that. He’s heading back to the Morgue, and to his computer.

Over the last year, Sam’s been trying to figure out how Dr. Palmer, Tim, Abby, and Breena fit together.

With the wedding rings, he’s sure how two of the relationships work. Given what McGee said, he’s feeling like he’s got confirmation on at least one more of the relationships. “Are you fucking my son, too?”

He’s damn sure that too didn’t refer to Tony.

At first, when he started working here, he thought Dr. Palmer and McGee were just good friends. That thought was bolstered by the fact that McGee and Abby appear to be the poster couple for ‘in love and married.’ Add in the fact that Dr. Palmer and Abby genuinely like each other, really get along well, and are just flat out fun to be around, and he was sure he knew what was going on.

Sam’s met some rock-ribbed bastards in the course of his life, and he’s sure Jimmy isn’t one, which is why, as things kept shifting with McGee and Dr. Palmer, he couldn’t believe they were together. Dr. Palmer’s not the guy who fucks the husband on the down low while keeping up a deep, warm, intimate friendship with the wife.
That’s just not who he is.

Summer wore on and the relationship shifted further. Tim got hurt, and that got Abby and Jimmy talking together about some really nasty things they wanted to do to The Admiral. And, by the end of the summer, Allan was willing to believe that Jimmy might have been involved with both McGees.

Nothing concrete. Just… looks. Or… Occasionally Dr. Palmer would hug Abby just a bit too long or close. Or, the way he pets Sean’s baby bump. And he and McGee stand a bit too close sometimes. Or… that ‘burn’ on McGee’s wrist. Whatever the hell that is, tattoo probably, it sure as hell isn’t a burn, and it means something to Jimmy and Tim, but…

But he doesn’t know. As best as he can tell, both Tim and Jimmy are straight. They might be very comfortable with each other, and a lot more touchy-feely than he expects two straight guys to be, but he’s never seen either of them check a guy out, not each other, not any other guys. He’s seen both of them check women out, but guys… Nope.

If it wasn’t for that, he’d have been sure the guys are in love with each other. They act like it. But…

“Are you fucking my son, too?”

That clears that up, doesn’t it?

Except it doesn’t. Because even if Jimmy and Tim are lovers, that doesn’t help him figure out the girls. He might have been able to buy that Jimmy was involved with both McGees. Since he rarely sees Breena, (though he hears about her, often) he could, sort of, believe maybe things weren’t all that hot… but… But he lived in Dr. Palmer’s home for weeks. He’s seen the pictures. There’s just… Too much. Too much love, too much affection, too much ease and joy between Jimmy and Breena for them to be in the sort of rough patch where he’d be seeking comfort from the McGees.

And he stayed at Jimmy’s while Jimmy and Breena were sleeping at the McGees’… While Tim trusted Jimmy with his wife and daughter, to get them to safety while everything fell apart. And he can’t imagine a situation where Jimmy would have the balls and the emotional calluses to make his wife go on the run with his mistress.

He supposes it’s possible that they share the girls. He knows swingers exist. He’s never met any, at least, not like this, not long-term relationships, but it happens, right?

And again, he’s not sure what the hell to do about that.

There is a practice, common among MEs, but something Dr. Palmer, and before him Dr. Mallard, frowns upon, namely reading the crime reports. Both of them think that getting too close to the investigating officer’s idea of what’s going on/reading what the suspects say happened can prejudice their investigation, and deafen them to what the body is trying to say.

So, even though, as the Assistant ME, Dr. Allan has full access to any case file, he’s never bothered to do more than upload his information into one.

Today though, he’s doing some reading.

Or, he would be, if he could find that case. He already knows it’s got to be sensitive as hell because
Timothy McGee doesn’t turn up anything other than a really sketchy traffic accident report from last year that Allan knows is BS.

Fortunately, he remembers the numbers on the x-rays he took, and searches by them.

That gets him in a John Doe assault case.

His eyebrows lift as he sees the second charge on the sheet, *hate crime*. “Bingo.”

He reads Tony’s version of the assault first. It’s pretty accurate, covering when Admiral McGee interacted with Director McGee, what sorts of comments were made, where said comments were made, how both of them reacted, and on and on, until they get to the last bit, where all Tony has written is, “Words were said, and then John McGee pulled back, punched Tim McGee in the face. Upon being hit, Tim McGee immobilized John McGee with a finger lock, twisted his hand until he dropped, and we proceeded to arrest him.”

Allan’s eyebrows furrow at that. “Words were said.” Every other conversation, from the dragon tattoo to the Abby’s pregnancy weight were recorded, but not what set Admiral McGee off.

Allan sighs and flips to the next report, Draga’s version of the story. It’s awfully similar to DiNozzo’s, though he’s got a more in-depth account of what was said in the men’s room. Apparently Tony wasn’t in there, but was reporting what he was being texted.

Then comes the fight. McGees are drinking, talking, and… “Holy shit!”

Draga did not mince words. By the time he’s reading the bit about why McGee likes kilts, Allan’s blushing from his toes to his scalp, and he’s not sure he’s ever going to be able to look his Boss in the eye again.

As a medical doctor, Sam Allan is aware of the fact that bisexuality exists. As a doctor who’s done a lot of reading on this, he knows men and women do not, generally, work the same way when it comes to sex.

He’s aware of, and has met, several women who he’d classify as genuinely bisexual. His first, and only, girlfriend is bisexual.

In the course of his life, he’s known a decent number of “male bisexuals,” and as of this point, every single one of them deserved those quotation marks around the title. He’s come to the conclusion that genuine male bisexuals are like unicorns. Everyone’s heard of one, they all know what one looks like, but no one knows a real one.

In his experience, every “unicorn” he’s met has been a horse or a zebra, pretending, or easing from one identity to another.

Thus, this moment, sitting in front of his computer, reading Draga’s report, is the first moment where he’s considering the idea that Jimmy and Tim might actually be unicorns.

The idea that there are two of them, together, here, right where he works, is staggering to him.

But, perhaps that’s the answer. They’re married to women they love, but the girls, because they are
girls, can’t scratch that itch. So… They’re good friends, they love each other, and… take care of each other when they need to…

He supposes that could be it. It’s not how he’d run a marriage but… If it keeps everyone happy… He supposes the girls have to know what’s going on… Maybe they’re part of it… Maybe they just look the other way every now and again…

Allan’s not sure if he likes that, but… But it doesn’t matter if he likes it or not.

He checks the clock. It’s getting onto three, and if he wants to catch any sleep between now and the start of the day, he’s got to get settled now.

He shuts off his computer and heads to Cybercrime, hoping the sofa will be available. He’s seen Jimmy and Tony nap on the steel tables in Autopsy, but they hurt his back, so if he doesn’t have to sleep on one of them, he won’t.

Jimmy wakes up to the gentle sounds of the girls getting up and moving around, and the not even remotely gentle sound of Tim cussing up a storm because his eye hurts like betrayal.

He hears Abby saying, “Take the Percocet,” and Tim saying, “I can’t work on that stuff.”

Abby adds, “That’s the point. You’re supposed to be home today.”

Jimmy opens his eyes and sees a very blurry Tim shake his head. “Gotta be there today.”

He decides that’s his cue. “No, you don’t.”

Tim turns toward him, and even without his glasses Jimmy can see his eye’s a freak show. “Yeah, I do.” Jimmy can’t see it, because she’s behind him, but he can feel Breena giving Tim her stop being so damn stupid look.

Tim sighs, dramatically. “If I don’t go in there, today, then I’m hiding out from what happened. The rumors’ll fly even faster, and it’ll get messy. If I do go in today, then I’m a cop who was working a sting, and it was just a job. Nothing that I’d even dream of being anything like ashamed of.”

That causes the other three of them to stop and think. Riding high on Tim’s victory felt great. Today though…

“How bad is it?” Jimmy asks, putting his glasses on so he can see what he’s thinking of offering medical advice on.

“It’s a broken bone,” Tim says, annoyed. “It hurts. What they’ll start saying if I don’t show up’ll hurt more. So…”

“What do you have to do at this thing?” Jimmy asks. “Not any programming, right?”

“I have to sit on my ass, make small talk, and listen.”

Jimmy nods. “Okay. I’m on the bench until they get the Admiral out of the building. Put some clothing on, and we’ll head to Target. I’ll write a script for Tylenol Three. If you can stand riding around with me, then you can probably handle going to the Commission.”
“Won’t let you back into the building?” Breena asks, and Tim and Abby are watching him, looking very interested.

Jimmy flashes them a small smile. “I’ll bring the x-ray home tonight and tell you all about it.” He kisses both of the girls, and continues to smile at Tim, “I had a good time last night. Not as good as I could have, but…” He steps over to Tim and very gently strokes the right side of his face, “You okay?”

Tim nods, something other than the pain in his eye filling his mind. “Yeah.” A smile lights his face up. “I really am!”

Jimmy gives him a very light, gentle kiss. “Good.” He hears the first of the fussing from the girls’ room. “I’ll get the girls.”

“When do you have to be at this thing?” Jimmy asks as he’s taking Tim to Target.

“They start at ten and go ‘til four. Easy days for me. Just got to get there, plop my ass down, and listen in.”

Jimmy’s looking at Tim, skin white, eye swollen shut, lips tight with pain. He knows he’ll look less pinched and unhappy once he gets some functional pain meds into his system, but…

“You really sure you want to do this?”

Tim turns to Jimmy. “No shame, right? Head high, back straight, deaf to the whispers, take it on. Abby did that for me last night, grabbed me up and walked me out of there while everyone around us was whispering. Gotta do the same for her. Got to talk to Leon, too, about getting it out there that this was a sting.”

Though, as he thinks about what he did after he dropped John, that ‘sting’ bit might not go very far.

Still… No shame. It won’t fly at all if he hides and doesn’t go back.

They’re waiting for the meds when Jimmy gets the call from Tony.

“He’s in the air. Feel free to come in and do your normal day.”

Jimmy nods on his side of the phone while grabbing coffees for him and Tim.

“See you soon.”

“Not me. Draga and I are off for the day. We worked all day, we worked all night; we’re done.”

“Oh…”

Tony knows what Jimmy’s sounding disappointed at. “Check your inbox.”
That makes Jimmy happier. He’d been expecting a physical copy of the x-ray, but an image of it would work just as well.

“Thanks.” Jimmy hangs up and sits next to Tim, who’s slouching in the back of the Target Starbucks, eyes closed, looking hurt. “Here.” He opens his email, and pulls up the letter from Tony, and there it is, in all its black and white glory.

Jimmy blows it up as much as he can on the tiny screen of his phone.

Tim’s looking pretty interested as he sees the scan. “His hand?”

“Yeah.” Jimmy traces breaks on the index finger. “These are yours. His index finger was broken and dislocated, along with his wrist, when I got him.” He touches several more breaks on his thumb, index finger, and wrist. “These are mine.”

He sees the grin spread over Tim’s face, as he rests his hand on Tim’s back.

“Wanted to give you more, but… Tony and Vance decided that was enough.”

“Decided?”

“Tony was in the room with me, and Vance was in Observation. I didn’t know he was watching.”

Tim starts to look concerned. “Is this going to bite you?”

Jimmy shrugs. “It shouldn’t. The tape is clean. I don’t think Tony or Vance would talk. I could see it in how they were looking, they expected me to hurt him, wanted me to, just… not as much as I did. If they talk, they’d have to admit they didn’t stop me. Have to admit they called me in, on purpose, hoping I’d harass him, when Allan was just as available and not involved with the victim.”

Tim inclines his head, looking away from Jimmy to the x-ray. He touches the breaks, tracing his fingers over them. Then he looks back to Jimmy, who’s sipping his coffee. “You okay?”

“I should ask you that.”

“Get some pain meds in me, and I’ll be okay. I got what I needed. God, Jimmy… It was…” That grin spreads over his face. “I think Abby taped it. I hope she did. I want you to see it. I want to see it, again!”

“I don’t know about Abby, but Draga taped it. It’ll go in the file.”

“Okay. You watch it at some point.” Tim’s smiling. “It’s beautiful, Jimmy. I told Gibbs…” Tim says that and starts to remember what he told Gibbs last night, and though he was loopy with pain meds, he remembers what he said, and the look on Gibbs face when he did it.

Jimmy sees Tim’s mind go wandering off mid-sentence, and he waits a moment, nothing else comes out of Tim so he says, “You told Gibbs…”

Tim shakes his head and gets back to the conversation. “I told him about it. I didn’t do it to him, Jimmy, I made him do it to himself!” There’s a wondering quality to his smile, like Tim can’t believe it ever happened. “He showed the whole world who he really is, and I got to drop him for it.” Tim doesn’t touch his eye, he stops his finger a few millimeters from puffy purple/black skin. “That moment was worth at least ten of these.”

Jimmy eyes Tim’s bruises. “Yeah, well, I’m glad it’s only one.”
Tim nods. “So… I’m good. I’m really good. Now, you?”

Jimmy shrugs. “I liked doing it. That was… really good in a very bad sort of way, you know?”

Tim doesn’t but he can imagine.

“In a I-can’t-ever-do-something-like-that-again sort of way. Like… Okay, you know how I told you I tried everything I could get my hands on in college?”

Tim nods.

“Cocaine, once. And that was enough. It felt…” There’s a dreamy/dismayed look on Jimmy’s face, and he’s sure that’s the kind of thing you just can’t explain to someone who’s never tried it. “Yeah. Anyway, I knew I could never, ever do that again, or it would own me. I’d spend the rest of my life chasing it. It was like that. Felt amazing, but it didn’t solve anything, it didn’t make anything better, but it felt really good for a bit, and I really liked showing you that x-ray.”

Tim brushes his hand against Jimmy’s. “I like seeing it. Probably in a I-shouldn’t-ever-get-a-present-like-that-again sort of way.”

“Yeah. That little, dark, bad, slimy thing in the back of your head sees it and cheers, and you know that you can’t feed that thing, or it’ll get out of the cage you keep it in.”

Tim’s not quite that far along on this, but he’s happy to support Jimmy with that. “Uh huh.”

Jimmy phone buzzes. It’s the text saying the meds are ready. Tim sees it and says, “Thank God.”

Jimmy gets up. “You stay put. I’ll be back with the meds in a minute.”

After several versions of, “Really, I’m okay, I need to do this,” Jimmy takes Tim to work.

They get a few curious looks as they walk in together, and that’s when it hits both of them that if there was ever going to be a day where Tim needed to go into work with Abby and not him, today is it.

Tim mutters a bit about it, and makes sure to look anyone who glances at him right in the eye. It’s a bit tricky to do with only one functional eye, but he pulls it off, and once they hit the elevator, together, because that’s what Tim and Jimmy always do, Tim says, “Looks like scuttlebutt’s been running rampant.”

“Didn’t expect it to get that far that fast. No shame, huh?”

“Back straight, look ‘em in the eyes, and dare them to bitch about it. This is what we do. What we’d do if it was just a sting, and we’re just buddies, because this is the sort of thing we do.”

Jimmy nods. They’re at his floor, so off he goes.

Tim’s got an hour before he needs to leave to get to the Commission meeting. That’s enough time to check in with Abby, then to his office to give his email list a quick run through.

Abby first.
He knows everything he needs to know about his “sting” from how Zelaz looks at him when he walks into the lab. There’s not quite open hostility in his look, but it’s not the warmish greeting he usually gets.

“She’s in ballistics,” Zelaz says, without asking how he is.

Tim nods, straightens his back a bit more, and heads into ballistics to see his wife.

She’s shooting when he goes in, so he waits in the doorway for her to stop. When she does, he says, playfully, “You keep that up, they’ll add that you’re aiming at Jimmy and I in your head to the rumors.”

Abby turns to him and rolls her eyes a bit. “Only because you’re too damn stubborn to stay home and rest, and he’s helping you get out of the house.”

“How bad is it?”

That gets another massive eye roll. “You remember how we got anonymous baby presents when people thought I was pregnant with Kelly but hadn’t mentioned it, yet?”

He nods.

“Yeah, three anonymous notes with the phone numbers of divorce lawyers on them in my inbox today.”

He winces at that. “Oh, God, Abby. I…”

She steps into him. “Hush.” She meets his lips with hers, and after a soft kiss pulls back and says, “Other than you getting hit, I wouldn’t have changed a moment of that.”

He shoots her a half-smile. “Still… I didn’t think that through, at all.”

“I didn’t, either. But, even knowing what you’d do, and what he’d do, and how it would spread like wildfire, I wouldn’t change it.”

“So, what did spread?”

“The nuances seem to have been stripped out of it, but you’re fucking Jimmy.” She shrugs. “The Admiral cold-cocked you when you told him about it. Then you kicked his ass for it. He got dragged back here, where he was processed faster than anyone’s ever been processed before. It doesn’t look like anyone noticed Jimmy coming in, but they have seen Sam snoozing down in Cybercrime, so they’re pretty sure you must have hurt him when you dropped him, and no one, at all, is buying that this was some sort of sting.”

“Great.” Tim’s voice is flat. He supposes it could be worse, they could have noticed Jimmy coming in, but that’s not much saving grace for the rumor mill.

“Everyone is suddenly remembering that vacation we took together, and a lot of them are speculating about Jimmy, Breena, and I not being here when DC shut down. A few of them actually have the right idea. Most of them have different versions of the wrong one. And more than half think Tony and Ziva might be part of our play group, too.”

“Sometimes reading lips isn’t all that hot, is it?”

Abby shrugs. “Better than them talking and not knowing about it. Breena sent me a text a while ago.
There’s a blurb in the local paper about a scuffle at the Tech In Anti-Terror Commission. No names, no details, just that it occurred and resulted in an arrest of a ‘high ranking Naval Officer.’"

“Well, that’s not wrong.” He holds her close, resting his chin on her shoulder. “Think Breena’s parents’ll find out?”

Abby shrugs. “That’s the only thing I’m worried about. I can take” she gestures to the outside world, “them nattering away. Not sure what’ll happen if Ed and Jeannie get wind of this.”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

Tim’s phone buzzes. He checks it. “Leon just found out I’m in the building. He wants to see me in my office.”

“Then off you go.” She kisses him again. Normally, if she was in the middle of a ballistics test, she wouldn’t stop to walk him out. Today, she secures the gun in question, and walks him out, holding his hand, and giving him a quick kiss as he leaves.

When she turns around, Zelaz looks at her and shakes his head. “You don’t have to pretend for me.”

“I’m not pretending anything.”

“Uh huh… Look. A guy may tell you it’s a one-time thing. He may say he’ll stay on the straight and narrow, but it’s bullshit. If he’s cheating, especially with another guy, your marriage is dead. Time to break it off and move on.”

Abby turns fully to Zelaz, “Roger,” she shakes her head, “when I want marriage advice, I’ll ask for it. In the meantime, that is my husband, whom I adore, who is back at work less than twenty-four hours after having his orbital bone broken for standing up for himself. You want to whisper and look at me with pity, fine, but there is absolutely nothing about that man I don’t know, nothing I don’t approve of, and when he dropped the Admiral, I cheered, and if you knew even a quarter of the story, you would have, too.”

Zelaz isn’t buying it, but Abby’s his boss, so he’s not arguing.

Sooo… how to start this… Allan thinks. Dr. Palmer is at work, looking, for all the world, like it’s just another Tuesday. He got in a bit late, apparently with Tim, who is wearing the black eye of all black eyes. But, other than a quick discussion about getting in late because they were getting Tim some lower grade pain meds so he could work, he hasn’t said anything to indicate that anything happened yesterday.

Right now, Dr. Palmer’s listening to the call from Dispatch, getting the details, as they’re getting ready to go take custody of a body, in Appomattox VA. That means a long drive is coming up.

“Who are we working with, this morning?” Allan asks.

“Agent Dornaget is on his first solo murder.”

“I like him.”

“He is a pleasant sort of fellow.” Then Jimmy looks over at Allan, realizing that ‘I like him’ may be
more than just an expression of Dornaget’s a nice guy.

Allan shakes his head, if ever he’s got an opening… “Just meaning that he’s fun to talk to for a few minutes. We both like first person shooters and rpgs.”

“Ah.”

He and Dr. Palmer have talked gaming before, so he knows that Jimmy plays, but not to the level he does.

“He’s not my type, anyway.” Office romances may be discouraged, but that didn’t stop Allan from finding out who the pool of potential companionship was when he got here. There aren’t a lot of gay guys at NCIS, let alone single ones, and he and Ned did go out twice, which was often enough to see that they’re okay as casual work buddies, and not much more than that.

They head over to the van, and Jimmy slides into the driver’s seat. Allan knows his job; he punches the address into the GPS, and then quickly double checks their supplies.

“All set, Dr. Palmer.”

“Good.” He puts the key in the ignition, and off they go.

---

Once they’re on the road, Allan says, “So… ummm… I did the follow-up care on John McGee’s hand.”

Jimmy nods, not looking away from the road to Allan. He’s not specifically telling Allan to shut up, but Allan can certainly feel a deep unwillingness to talk about this.

So, almost a minute goes by before Allan says, “And… um… those x-rays looked a lot like… torsion breaks… Like… um… maybe someone grabbed his hand and wrist and kind of… twisted in opposite directions… And… Draga’s report… It doesn’t sound like Director McGee did that…”

Jimmy nods again, still not saying anything or looking away from the road.

Allan barrels on, feeling like he can’t just have this sitting in his head, untouched. “And… you know… there didn’t seem to be any reason why you didn’t finish the exam. Not… on paper, that is.”

Allan’s quite surprised to see Jimmy’s lips purse. He drives for a minute in total silence, pulls the van over in the nearest Starbucks lot, gets out, walks into the coffee shop, and gets them coffee. Each minute while Allan waits in the van, watching Jimmy, of all things, buying two cups of coffee, makes him feel a hell of a lot more nervous. Then he comes back, hands Allan a cup of his preferred drink, all without saying a word, takes a sip of his own drink, and then says to him, very carefully, his voice even and measured, “This is private, but not secret. Some people do know about this, our family, Leon, and that’s fine, but all of us would prefer this didn’t get spread wide around work. There’s more than enough gossip coming our way, and we’d prefer not to see more of it spread around. The official story, the story I’d appreciate you spreading about, is that this was part of a sting operation to catch Admiral McGee and other anti-gay figures. Tim was chosen as bait because he and his father have a difficult relationship, and Tim would be able to excellently push his buttons and get him to attack.”
As for the real story, Admiral McGee got about a tenth of what he was owed. You remember when Tim got hurt back in May?

Allan nods.

The Admiral ordered it. We couldn’t prove it, so nothing happened, but when a chance to bait him into trouble came, we jumped on it.”

Allan’s really surprised about that. Of all the possible reasons for this…

“So, this was revenge?”

“Justice, or at least, a taste of it.”

Allan blinks. “So… umm… The stuff Director McGee said about him and you…”

Jimmy mutters something about needing to read the damn report. Then says to Allan, “From what I understand he said, some of it is true and some of it isn’t. Tim, Abby, Breena, and I are together. Married. It’s all four of us together, and has been this entire time. It is not just Tim and I.”

“Oh. Uh…” Well, that answers that question. It certainly matches what he was seeing, and the bit that he read about two wives and a husband, but it wasn’t anything Allan expected. He knows it exists, sort of like how he knows mantis shrimp exist, he just didn’t ever expect to see one, didn’t think it was real. “That’s… Hmm…”

“Is that a problem?” Jimmy asks, eyebrow high, sipping his coffee, looking very calm, very placid, and very capable of killing Allan and losing his body between here and their crime scene.

“Uh…” It’s not that it’s a problem, it’s that Allan’s rapidly resorting everything he knows.

“I do not seek or require your approval for this, Dr. Allan, so if it is a problem, and you cannot work with me because of it, I will accept your resignation, and write your recommendation based on your work from yesterday and before, and nothing else. If it is a problem, but you can put it aside, and be professional, that’s fine, and I will be happy to continue working with you. If it’s a problem, and you cannot be professional, and you will not resign, I will have no trouble at all letting you go—“

“Whoa.” Sam’s hands go flying up in a stop gesture. “Just thinking. No, it’s not a problem. Just… so, you’re all what, bi? Didn’t know there were enough of you to form a decent twosome, let alone a foursome.”

Now it’s Jimmy’s turn to look confused. He wasn’t aware that bisexuals might be rare… Well, any rarer than any other variety of not straight person. “Uh…”

“Okay, look, I know this is over the line, but both? You like both? For real? I know women who really are bisexual, and I’ve heard of guys, like Allan Cummings, but all the ones I know in real life are ‘bisexual’ meaning they think girls like it, and that’ll get them laid, but when someone with an actual dick makes a pass at them they freak out, or they’re gay and just peeking out of the closet.”

Jimmy blinks. That’s a lot of information about the parts of the dating world he missed. But, somewhere in there, there’s a personal question, too, so he focuses on that. “Uh… Girls. I like girls.”

“You like Tim!” Allan’s nodding at him. “You love Tim. I’m not Sherlock Holmes, but I don’t have to be to see that.”
Jimmy takes another sip of his coffee and slowly blinks. “I do love Tim. And Abby. And Breena, and all of our kids.” He touches his second ring. “Our wedding ring. Yeah, I could see the questions you weren’t asking as I was very carefully answering the one you did. All four of us, together, until the end of our lives. That said, Tim’s just not terribly sexually interesting to me.”

Now Allan’s looking confused again. There’s helping a buddy out, and he’s heard about straight guys who’ll do that when they’re horny enough, and then there’s what Tim said was happening, which he’s never heard about any straight guy doing, ever, but… Okay, it’s not impossible. He’s never met a straight guy willing to do that, but… If he loves Tim, and Tim likes guys… “So, swinging?”

Jimmy shrugs. “That’s probably a word for it, but that conjures up images of bad ‘70s porn, sex clubs, and key parties, and that’s not us.”

“Tim said to his dad… that you and him… and…” Allan’s staring at the cars zipping down the road, feeling a blush starting. “He said he’s the bottom and the reason for the kilt was so you could bend him over and give it to him.”

Jimmy blinks, hard, licks his lips, puts his coffee down so he won’t spill it, and then burst out laughing. “Serves that fucker right! I bet that made his head explode.”

Allan looks really perplexed by that. “That doesn’t bug you?”

“Allan?”

“No… What Tim said…”

Jimmy shrugs. “The idea that I have sex with people I love doesn’t bug me. I try to do it as often as I can.” He adds a dry smile to that line. “You remember what Tim actually said?”

“Yes.” That blush starts to creep up Allan’s face. “And no, I can’t say it to you.” Allan’s shaking his head. He can’t think of any circumstance where he could make those words come out of his mouth. “It’s in the report.”

Jimmy laughs at that, too. “Yeah, he’s got a dirty mouth when he puts his mind to it. Besides my in-laws, and in their case it’s only because of how they’ll treat Breena, I don’t care who knows and what they think. Just, as a matter of fact, I’m not into guys. But, if thinking that makes us easier to classify or something… Fine. And if it makes John’s head explode, all the better. Hell, if I’d have been there, I would have felt Tim up just to see his eye twitch.”

Allan’s eyebrows shoot up at that, and then he laughs, too. “God. He’s…” He shakes his head. “First thing he said to me was, ‘You a fag, too?’”

Jimmy winces. “Oh, God, I’m sorry, Sam.”

“They won’t all be good guys.”

“Yeah, but that’s… He’s an Admiral for God’s sake! He’s supposed to be one of the good guys. I know his mom and daughter, and I love his son, and they’re all good guys.”

“But he’s not.”

“No, and he’s been fixated on Tim, and turning him into… Probably the guy he wanted to be, since he was a kid.”
“The guy Tim didn’t want to be. And let me guess, Tim liking boys didn’t go with his plan?”

Jimmy winces a little again. It feels… he’s not sure, weird to have this conversation with Allan. Like he’s protesting too much or something. But, he’s just now realizing that he’s managed to let Allan know that he’s not into guys, without specifying that for Tim, too. “Tim was… overstating the case, at least with the physical stuff. He’s straight… like me… sort of… his sister came up with the term heterosexual biromantic, and given how she explained it, it seems to work, but when it comes to sex, he’s into girls, too.”

Now Allan looks annoyed, and Jimmy feels even more off when he says, “Gay baiting.” Allan can see Jimmy’s just looking at him, not sure where he is or what’s going on. “Happens on TV shows all the time. You get these really intense, devoted, almost romantic relationships between guys, so gay watchers will root for them, but there’s never any payoff because they’re ’straight’.”

Jimmy shrugs. “Sorry. But… That’s who we are.”

“So, you two really don’t have sex with each other?”

“We fool around some, but, haven’t gotten past second base.” Jimmy figures that’s the most concrete way to put it without having to get into too many details. “The girls really like watching. But it doesn’t do all that much for us.”

Allan thinks about that for a moment. He’s got some of his own past experiences that match with that, so he doesn’t press any further. “And John McGee’s hand?”

Jimmy looks at him blandly and sips his coffee. Allan shivers a bit. That look is freaking terrifying. Finally Jimmy says, “It’s a bad idea to mess with Tim McGee. When Tim was hurt, John had him locked into a cell with four men, all of them younger and bigger than Tim, and all of them believing that Tim was responsible for an attack that had killed their loved ones.” Why Tim looked like he was run over by a truck is suddenly very concrete to Allan. “If John had paid attention to the reports on the four other men in that cell with Tim, he would have known attacking him is a bad plan.” Allan is sure that that is both absolutely true, but in no way answers his question about what happened to John’s hand. He’s also bright enough to know that’s the only answer he’s ever going to get on that subject.

They sit in the van for a moment, both sipping their drinks. Then Jimmy says, sounding a lot more like the laid back, somewhat goofy man he normally works with, “Sam, may I ask you a completely out of line, non-professional, way too personal, but not prurient question?”

Allan smiles at that, given the conversation they’ve been having, it seems in line. “Sure, Jimmy.”

Jimmy nods, and he looks like he’s feeling stupid asking, but he does it anyway because he doesn’t know anyone else well enough to ask this question. “Have you ever had sex with a woman?”

Allan chuckles a bit. Straight, my ass! “Yes. I had a girlfriend in high school, back before I had it figured out. I loved her very much, and she loved me, and… We’re actually still really good friends. Still love each other. She’s coming to visit in March. If we get a case, you may get to meet her.”

Jimmy smiles at that. “I hope to. Okay, now for the not-prurient, but way too damn far over the line, feel free not to answer, I’m trying not to be a creep, but—“

“It’s okay.”

“How’d it feel?”
Allan smiles at that, too, then he shrugs slightly. “It was nice. We dated until we went to college so we did it, not a lot, but often enough. It’s just… You know how guys talk about sex?” Jimmy nods; he knows. Been there, done that, and all the rest of it. “It wasn’t that. I’d had better times with myself, so that was a good hint something wasn’t quite right. And, I could take it or leave it. My girlfriend went away for a month one summer, and I missed her, but I didn’t miss the sex. But most of the guys around me were basically walking erections, joking about how we’d be in bed all week when she got back. So, that was different, too. But, it didn’t hurt. It wasn’t creepy. If I hadn’t been fifteen to eighteen, it probably would have taken a while to get started, but…” He gives Jimmy a look, and Jimmy nods, understanding, a breeze in the wrong place got him hard at fifteen, any sort of sexual stimulation would have done it, too. “It just wasn’t fireworks and the earth standing still and walking around like you’ve seen the sun for the first time. I liked the cuddling together watching the movie before-hand part better than the during bit. She did, too. We snuggled, a lot. We were quite affectionate, and we both felt like we were supposed to be having sex, so every now and again, we would. Actually, given all the affection, and the fact we were together for three years, it came as quite a shock to all four of our parents when we came out.”

Jimmy nods. “Okay, thanks. That’s… really familiar sounding. So… how’d you decide…”

“That I liked guys?”

“Yeah…”

Allan shrugs a bit. “Technically speaking, I’m somewhere on the asexual scale. I don’t feel sexual attraction until I really like someone on an emotional level. Which is why it took me so long to figure it out. I don’t remember ever feeling particularly attracted to anyone in middle or high school. All of my close friends were girls, then. I didn’t have pinups in my room. Pictures of pretty boys or tough guys or anyone really, never did anything for me. Anyway, I got to college, there was this guy in my dorm, and he rocked my world. We liked a lot of the same things, had a few classes together, and one night after a movie he kissed me, and then I understood the whole seen the sun for the first time thing.” Allan smiles at that.

Jimmy tries to imagine not feeling attracted to anyone for years at a time. He can’t. “Ah. So, what happened with you and your friend?”

“Sasha? We went to different colleges. I found Stephen. She met Maria, and then Stephanie, we’d kid each other about that, joking about double dates from Hell, and Hannah, and then Stephanie again, and Jennifer, and then Sally, and a bunch of others I’m forgetting. She had a really good time at Sarah Lawrence.”

Jimmy nods. “Sounds like it. So, you’re in this little town in the middle of Idaho dating a lesbian?”

“Sasha prefers queer. I do, too, for that matter. She’s gender fluid, usually more on the male end of things, but not so far over that she wants to drop she and her and move to he and him. She prefers girls. But she likes guys, too, especially pretty, little, femme ones.” Allan shrugs a bit at that. At 5’8” he is fairly short for a guy, and now he’s got ear length blond hair, but back in high school it came to his shoulders. Then, from the back, he could pass for a girl. And from the front, well, he’s never grown much of a beard, and he does have a rather pretty face. In heels and makeup, he really is the fucking Queen. One of his first hints that just possibly he wasn’t straight, was that he had no problem at all letting his girlfriend do his makeup. He even liked the results. And, one of her first hints that she might not have been entirely straight was that she really liked the results, too, and once she got him in her undies, she was even happier. “She really likes trans girls, too. That’s the icing on her cake. And she was the most butch girl I’d ever met, which was probably why I liked her as much as I did.”
“Okay.” Jimmy’s not sure what to do with that, but he is looking forward to meeting Sasha at some point.

“But when it comes down to it, she’s not a guy, nor does she want to be, and I’m not a girl, nor do I want to be, so we’re… how’d you put it? Not very sexually interesting to each other. But, unless we’ve got a boy/girlfriend with us, when we visit, we sleep together, the cuddling is still good, and if it’s been a long time for one or both of us, we’ll help each other out. We still know each other’s tricks, and laying back and having someone else do you is nice.”

“So, you’re gay, but you periodically have sex with a les—queer woman?”

“One of the reasons I prefer queer, too. It’s pretty rare now. Last time was after Ryan’s funeral.” Jimmy’s never heard Allan mention his murdered partner’s name before, and he hopes that’s a sign of him healing some. “It’s never been anyone other than her, and with us, now that we’re out of high school, it’s about affection and comfort, and sometimes, affection and comfort involves orgasms, but usually it doesn’t.”

Jimmy nods, that’s actually really reassuring.

Tim beats Vance to his office by about two minutes.

Once he gets in there, Vance just looks at him, carefully cataloguing his eye, while Tim looks back, waiting to see what Vance wants to talk about.

Finally, he offers Vance a seat, and Vance shuts the door, sits down, and keeps staring.

“Okay. You’ve got to tell me why you’re down here, because I’m not getting it by just having you stare at me.”

“How are you feeling?”

Tim shrugs. “I’m hurting. But, I’ve been a hell of a lot worse. I can still work.” He shakes his head. “I can attend meetings. I shouldn’t try to program like this.”

“Your eye gonna be okay?”

“Probably. I might have double vision issues, and maybe some sinus problems, but I should be okay.” At least, he thinks the Doctor said that as they were heading out, but he’s awfully fuzzy on that. Abby’ll know.

Vance nods.

“You down here to ask about my eye?”

“Not precisely.”

Tim looks at him in a Well, then? sort of way, or at least as well as he can with one eye swollen shut.

“I’ve read the full report, including the transcript of what you said to your dad before and after he hit you.”
Tim nods, waiting.

But Leon doesn’t say anything. He sits there, looking at Tim, trying to imagine him with Jimmy, but he’s having a hard time making the image form. Finally, he adds, “I was also sitting in Observation while Dr. Palmer and Agent DiNozzo dealt with your father.”

“Oh, okay,” Tim still waits, and then finally asks, “Is there a problem?”

Vance looks up at the ceiling, very uncomfortable with this. “Not really… Not to me, at all, and certainly not now. But… We’ve been over some of this, and I know what Jarvis offered you to shut you up after the Stennis. Beyond that though, I think you’ll be good at the job. I’m hoping that when I leave, you’ll take my seat. That’s part of why you’re going to Commissions, and as time goes on, I’ll send you to holiday parties, and meetings, and conferences. I’m getting ready to make you one of the faces of NCIS. When I retire, your name will be on the list of potential Directors of NCIS, with my personal recommendation. Because you’ve impressed Jarvis, your name will also have a personal recommendation from a former SecNav. Given you’re a big part of why she’s getting the job, you’ll likely have the recommendation of the next SecNav, too.

“Which means, in ten years’ time, assuming there still is an NCIS, your name will be on the top of the list for the next Director of NCIS. But you know that. Here’s the part you may not know. When your name goes on that list, the hiring committee looks through your life with a microscope. Anything that NCIS might find embarrassing gets you booted off that list. No one ever blabs about what they find, because that would look bad for NCIS, but… if there are details of your life you don’t want the hiring committee to know about…”

Tim nods, getting it. “So, you’re saying that if I might find having my personal life gone through with a fine tooth comb problematic, I could mention it to you, and then somehow my name would never make its way onto that list.”

“Yes.”

Tim nods again, understanding why they’re having this conversation, but not why they’re having it now instead of say, back in September. “Okay, here’s what I’m not getting. You knew all about my ‘personal life’ last week, too. Why bring this up now?”

Leon swallows, hard, looking a little chagrinned. “I did, but I didn’t. Whatever it is that’s between you and Dr. Palmer, I genuinely do not care. You’re good men, and you’re good at your jobs, and as long as that stays true,” that’s as close to an outright warning that things better not blow up between Cybercrime, Autopsy, and the Lab that Leon will get, “then I will never care what you get up to in your off time. However, I’m not the world at large. On the upside, the landscape of sexual politics has changed faster than I think anyone ever thought it would, but, this is the Navy, and there are still a lot of guys like your dad around. We’ll weed as many of them as we can out, but we won’t get them all.” Leon sighs again, very uncomfortable. “There’s another side of this. There’s not a straight man alive who hasn’t, at least once, been interested in more than one woman. As long as you stay discrete, that’s the sort of thing that doesn’t even make it into the file. The hiring committee will pass it around verbally, smirk a bit, probably tell a few rude jokes, pat you on the back a bit for having two girls, and that’ll be that. No one will mention it beyond that. A lot of the higher ranks, especially the ones who are away from home a lot, have a wife and mistress. And many of the single ones have several girlfriends in different cities at any given time. That won’t torpedo a career. A wife, mistress, and boyfriend—“

“Husband. Wife, wife, and husband. We’d make it legal if we could.”

“Husband then, that may be sticky. If you’re straight, you’re allowed to play around. If you’re
anything other than straight, you better be the poster child for long-term, monogamous bliss. And who knows, in ten years, whatever it is you do may be entirely beside the point. But it might not just be about sex. As Director you’d be Dr. Palmer’s Boss. No matter what the sexual politics of the time are, being especially close a Department Head you are not legally married to may be an issue. And it’ll likely be even more of an issue if you happen to be legally married to a different Department Head.”

Tim nods at that, as well. Hard to avoid the appearance of favoritism when two of your employees are also literally two of your favorite people.

“And, if you are especially close to some people, and you’d rather not have the rest of the world know about that, it opens you to blackmail, which is one of the reasons potential NCIS Directors have their lives gone through with a fine tooth comb.”

“Never gonna happen.”

“McGee?”

“You’re being very delicate in this, and I appreciate that. But here’s the thing, and this is part of what happened with the Admiral, I’m done with bullies. And that’s all blackmail is, just another version of what I’ve spent the last five years ridding myself of. Jimmy, Breena, Abby, and I are a foursome, quadruple, whatever you want to call it. It works all four ways, which apparently we weren’t clear enough about before, and really that’s probably more detail than you want or need, and if that gets me booted out of the running for head of NCIS, I don’t care. What we have is worth more than the job at the top of the pyramid. But none of us will ever consent to blackmail. We’re discrete about our affairs because it’s easier and life runs more smoothly. I want the Minions working, not gossiping about how the four of us work.” Tim looks out at his team, right now, only one of them is craning his neck trying to see what he and Leon are talking about, but he quickly ducks back to his work when he catches Tim’s eye. “Granted, that may be more than I can hope for, today. However, if that’s ever not true, if the cost of discretion rises too high, then we’ll fully out ourselves and take the consequences. Easy enough to do. Especially given how yesterday went, and honestly, given some of the crap they’re laying on Abby right now, it might be easier to be out as a foursome. With any luck, she’ll stop getting the phone numbers of divorce lawyers in her inbox soon.”

Leon winces, shaking his head. “Sorry to hear that.”

Tim shrugs. “I didn’t have to spill that much information to get him to hit me. This one’s on me.”

Leon sighs. “Sometimes doing the right thing will smack you, hard. You and Dr. Palmer taking any crap?”

“So far, just dirty looks. But, I’ve only been here long enough to say hello to Abby and talk to you, and then I’m out to the Commission, where I can deal with more looks.”

Leon inclines his head.

Tim shrugs. “Yeah. So, here’s a question for you, given the nature of the politics of NCIS and the Navy, and the fact that rumors never, ever die, in ten years, assuming I want to keep my job, and Abby wants to keep hers, and Jimmy wants to keep his, are we better off with me as Director, and thus shielding us, or are we better off just quietly doing our jobs, letting whoever is your second best pick run things?”

Leon smiles at that. It’s a much more astute question than he had expected Tim to ask. “I don’t know. But, how about, in, say 2024, you and I have another chat about this, we’ll see who those
potential second picks are, as well as have a better idea of how the sexual discrimination laws will work. For all we know, your situation may be protected by then, in which case the only thing that will matter is if you think you’d like to be Director of NCIS…” It’s not exactly a question, but it’s not a statement, either.

Tim shrugs again. “I don’t know. Right now, I’d rather stay in the basement and run computers. I love what I do, but… I want time with my family. I want little league games and gymnastics and home for dinner. I want to see my family every single day. I don’t ever want another month like October, and frankly, with the amount of travel you do, that looks like a lot of mini-Octobers.”

Leon nods. He had to cut back some after Jackie died, but he probably doesn’t get home a hundred nights a year.

“In ten years, my babies’ll be eleven and almost ten and maybe there’ll be one more of them, and Jimmy’s babies’ll be almost thirteen and eleven and maybe one or two more for him, too, and I don’t want to miss it. If it’s what I need to do to keep my family safely employed, then it’s what I’ll do. If I can pass on it, I’ll probably pass. Either way, I will take you up on that conversation.”

“A good plan.”

Since they’re talking about it… “If you could go back, would you do it again?”

Leon shakes his head. “No. I love Lara, but… No. This job cost me Jackie, cost my kids their mom, and… if I could go back to the day I got the call about Shepard… I’d turn it down.” He sees the way Tim’s looking at him. “But that’s not what you’re asking.”

Tim’s feeling pretty stupid about asking that question. Of course he didn’t want Jackie killed. Of course he’d take the route that would have protected her. “If I’d been thinking, I wouldn’t have asked. I meant about the home/work/life balance.”

Leon nods. “I think I’ve made the world a better place for my children to grow up in. I made it better for everyone else’s children, too. That matters. And I did it in a way I couldn’t have if I’d stayed a cryptologist. There’s a lot of power that goes with this job, a lot a potential to do good.” Leon looks at Tim’s computers. “Of course, you’re doing a lot of good down here. A lot more than I think anyone expected anyone in your shoes could do.”

“That’s just running with the ball after I caught it.”

Leon nods at that, too, acknowledging that part of what Tim’s done with this is a matter of being the right guy in the right place at the right time. “It’s possible, that down here, especially since your current scope of practice is much wider than anyone would have originally considered, you’re doing as much, if not more than you could in my seat. My job includes a lot more politics than yours does, and some days, a lot of them, that feels as useful as herding cats. But, some days, it’s not, and those politics don’t just shape NCIS, but all of the agencies we rub up against.”

Tim’s turn to nod.

“Doesn’t mean I don’t wish I’d been there for more basketball games and ballet recitals. My kids don’t hold it against me. They don’t feel like I ignored them. And, unlike a lot of other kids, they’ve had some amazing experiences that wouldn’t have been open to them if I’d stayed with the code breakers, or stayed with the Navy. All of the conferences and travel during the summer, they’ve come along for.”

Tim thinks about that, nods to himself, and says, “I’ll keep thinking, and, assuming you think me
with my dashing black eye to go with the kilt cuts an acceptable figure, I’ll also continue to schmooze my way around, so if I do end up in your chair, I can do a decent job of it.”

“Good. In the meantime, we have a press conference tomorrow morning. I’ll be doing my ‘We’re cleaning up the way the Navy does business routine,’ and you get the stand there, nod, and explain how important it is that everyone, no matter what, feels safe in the Navy. If you feel like mentioning that we’ve got this huge computer system that could be looking for serial gay, race, or gender bashers…”

Tim nods at that. “We don’t have that yet, but I’ve certainly got the data and people to make something like that.”

“Good. You sit there, talk about that. They will ask why your father, and… any answer you like, that doesn’t touch on the Stennis, is fine by me.”

“Wonderful,” by which Tim means he’d rather curl into a ball and hide under his desk.

“That’s part of filling the big chair, too.”

“I guess.”

“We’ll be talking to the Post, AP, and the Times, and I’ve also got Out Magazine coming. I don’t want you getting caught flat-footed; I’m sure at least one of them will ask about your sexuality. I don’t care how you answer that, either, other than making sure we’re both parroting the party line, that this was the first arrest in an anti-hate crime sting.”

“I’ll parrot along with the best of them.”

Leon smiles at that, nods, and heads out of Tim’s office.

It looks like a pretty straightforward murder. There’s a guy, Petty Officer Jason Draq, in a room, with a knife sticking out of his chest.

Jimmy can feel nervous energy pouring off of Dornaget. He’s very carefully going over everything, pleased as all get out to have his own team, doing their first murder.

“Would you say that’s the cause of death, Jimmy?”

“Not without a further examination, Ned, but I’m sure it didn’t help.”

Dornaget looks Jimmy over, making eye contact a second longer than is comfortable, and smiles at him, laughing a little too hard at Jimmy’s joke.

“I’ll bet. Do you need any help?”

“Dr. Allan and I have this. Just make sure there’s a clear path between us and the van.”

Dornie heads off, making sure that every scrap of anything that might be considered evidence gets cleared out of the way, as Allan’s unloading the gurney.
Once he joins Jimmy, who’s getting the liver temp, Jimmy says, “Well, Dr. Allan, how do we proceed?”

“Get our own photos. Then… I’m thinking we take the knife out before we try to move him.”

“Good. What’s missing?”

Allan looks around, scanning the room, and then sees it. “About, what, two liters of blood?”

Jimmy nods. There’s a small pool, maybe a cup’s worth, of blood on the victim’s chest and floor. “What’s that tell us?”

“Possibly several things. It’s likely that stab is the only stab. Either one shot took out the man’s heart, or he bled out internally, or both.”

Dornaget is back, watching them talk. “The neighbors didn’t hear anything. One stab and done would go with that.”

“What else, Dr. Allan?”

“Mmm…” Allan keeps looking and thinking. “Stab’s not post mortem, too much blood for that, and the wrong position, but it could be very close to time of death. If something was already killing him, and this just finished the job faster…”

“Good thinking.” Jimmy nods, then shifts attention to the temperature that’s coming up on his thermometer. “26.4. Dr. Allan?”

“Time of death is, likely, five to six hours ago.” He gently nudges the body’s wrist, and the whole body moves. “Full rigor. Might as well leave the knife in, then.”

Jimmy nods. Getting a knife out of a body in full rigor is just as likely to slice up the tissue more than leaving it in place. “Let’s get him moved, Dr. Allan. Ned, we’ll be back to the Morgue a few hours, and I’ll start the prelim when we get back. Autopsy’ll be tomorrow morning, after he’s out of rigor.”

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow morning,” Ned says with another big smile. “What kind of coffee do you like?”

Jimmy smiles back at him, feeling a bit confused. “Plain coffee, no sugar, two creams. But, you don’t need to bring me coffee, doing autopsies is my job.” Ned’s a friendly guy and all, but this is a lot of smiling, and no one ever brings him coffee for doing his job.

“No problem. Just want you bright eyed and bushy tailed.”

It’s not until, as he’s helping Allan push the gurney back into the van, and he feels eyes on him, that Jimmy puts together what might be happening.

Once he’s in the van, with Allan at the wheel, he asks for confirmation. “Sam, was Ned flirting with me?”

Sam laughs. “Yeah. And watching your butt every moment your eyes were turned.”

“Uh…”

“I’ll let him know that you are extremely married.”

“Thank you.”
To the best of his knowledge, Tim has never walked into a crowded room and ended up with every eye on him.

So, stepping into the main conference room for the Tech In Anti-Terror Commission, whereupon every voice went silent and they all stared, is a new and unsettling experience.

No shame. He smiles brightly at people, as well as he can with a very swollen black eye, finds his seat, next to Ms. Fielding, who looks at him for a sec and says, “God, that’s got to hurt.”

“It really does!”

“You okay?”

“Broken orbital. I’ll live.”

“So… that your classified and messy case?”

“Yeah. The Admiral… He’s the kind of guy who’s smart enough not to get caught, and twisted enough to make real trouble. They were able to shuffle him out with early retirement before, but the guys who got rid of him, they’re mostly gone from the Navy, now. My boss and I… we know who he is and what he’s capable of, and that he had to go.”

“And now he’s gone.”

“Yeah. Should be in processing at Leavenworth by now.”

She looks away from him, seeing everyone still staring at them. She looks back to him, and then taps her wheelchair. “You get used to it, you know? Everyone staring at you, half of them curious, the other half pitying. Every day for the first six months after I got back to work, they stared. But, if you keep showing up and doing the job, they get used to you, and you blend back in again.”

He smiles a little at that. “Good. I’d rather not be the center of attention. Though, press conference tomorrow, so at least for a few more days.”

She chuckles a little. “I read up on you once I got home last night. You broke the code to find out what happened, where the money was going, right?”

He nods.

“And this is what you’re going to end up famous for?”

He rolls his eyes. “I’d rather it was the other way around.”

“I can imagine. Is your wife, okay?” Delilah certainly heard what Tim said to The Admiral, but she also got to see him being in love with his wife. She, for one, and possibly the only one, is willing to believe this was a sting.

“She is. She knew, as soon as we saw his name on the roster, that something like that was going to happen. You plan a trap, you need to use the right bait, and that was the right bait.”

“I’ll say.” They see the main speaker for the morning head up to the podium. “Come lunch time, let
me tell you about trolling the internet for terrorists. Had a lot of fun being bait for that. Time to get into this.”

Tim nods.

---

By four o’clock, Tim is done. All he wants to do is grab an Uber, get back to the Navy Yard, curl up in his office with about nine Percocet, and wait for Abby or Jimmy to get done with their day and take him home.

He was right about what he needed to do today, sit on his butt and listen.

He was wrong about how hard that would be.

Tylenol 3 might not be Percocet, but it does make him sleepy, and today’s meetings… God, they’re boring. Yes, he should be paying attention. Yes, he needs to be aware of what these guys are looking to do. But, by half an hour into it, his eyelids were drooping, and he spent the rest of the day fighting hard to stay awake.

Okay, not the whole day, most of it. There was a lunch break, that involved moving around and talking to people, so that woke him up some, but once he’d eaten his salad and drank his coffee, with caffeine, just to try and help keep him up, he felt sleep clawing at him again.

The only upside is that he doesn’t think he missed all that much. The first set of guys talking were going over why it’d be a really spiffy idea to consolidate all anti-terrorism forces into one unit, and that they should be the unit that specializes in the tech side of it.

As he was trying, desperately, not to drift off, he found himself thinking that the idiot on the podium had never, ever set a foot into the field.

He’s got exactly one note from the first day. “Jamison Kalb is full of shit.”

Delilah, who is taking real notes, looks over, sees it, and laughs.

Tim jerks a little at the sound of her mirth, and she says, very quietly, “Well, you aren’t wrong.”

He chuckles, and then says, “If I snore, poke me, okay.”

She nods and pats his arm.

---

Trying to get out of there takes more effort than getting in. People want to talk to him. He grits his teeth, slaps a smile on his face, and works the crowd.

It gets easier after the first two or three. No one directly asks him about the night before. They hint at it, and offer some open silences to allow him to comment should he see fit to. He does, somewhat, talking about how, since the fall of the government, that NCIS has doubled down on not allowing the well-connected to get away with anything.
That his organization is done with looking the other way.

He’s with it enough to see that that makes a few of the other Navy folks look nervous. He tries to memorize those names, let Leon know that his ‘sting’ needs to go wider.

He’s finished with the last of the ‘interested’ attendees, and is walking through the lobby, looking for the Uber he’s called, when another man walks up to him. Tim’s fairly sure they don’t know each other, but his stride is direct, smile warm, and he looks like he knows Tim. He eyes Tim’s bruises, before offering his hand. Tim takes it, just wanting to get out of there, but he smiles, too.

“Matthew David.”

“Hi. I guess you know who I am?”

“Kind of hard not to, not after last night.” That’s the first direct comment about the night before, besides Delilah’s, that he’s gotten.

Tim smiles again. “All part of the job.”

Matthew gives him a knowing look. “Of course it is.” He hands Tim his card. Apparently, he’s with the Airforce’s satellite crew. “I’ve been where you are. And… It’s hard and it’s confusing and… Worse when you’re married with a kid. You ever want to talk to someone, give me a call.”

Tim’s not sure what to do with that. So he tucks the card into his pocket and says, “Thanks.”

Matthew puts his hand on Tim’s shoulder and leans into him, not too far, but very much in his personal space. Tim steps back a bit. As Matthew smiles again and steps a bit closer. “No problem. Really, give me a call.”

Tim’s one eye goes wide and the other cracks open a slit as he backs up again. “Uh…”

This would be the point where Matthew realizes that this is the least successful pick up attempt he’s ever tried, and he backs off. “Oh. Uh… Shit. Sorry.” He stares at Tim for a long minute, eyes curious, looking him over again. “Wait. Was that really a sting?”

Tim nods. “Yeah. It really was.”

“You’re one hell of an actor, then. Shit, sorry man. Uh…”

Tim holds up his hands. “You go undercover, you do what you need to to sell the role. Glad it looked good enough to fool people watching.”

“Yeah, I’ll say.” Now Matthew looks annoyed. “So, what, no real gay guys to go after him? You guys all straight over at NCIS?”

“No. There just isn’t a gay guy at NCIS that he’s so pissed off at he’d take a swing at one of them. He’s been very carefully not getting caught for forty years, it was time to end that, so… I was up.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, thanks for the offer, but… I’m good. The only hard part about this is making sure my in-laws don’t flip out.”

Matthew nods again, and leaves, shaking his head.

Tim does likewise.
It’s getting onto normal closing time when Jimmy texts Abby *You want to get them all talking more?*

_Sure_ comes back to him a moment later.

_Then let’s, together, get our boy and take him home._

A big smiley face shows up on Jimmy’s phone.

He heads down to the Lab first, where Benedict, who from the way he’s watching Jimmy, has also heard the story, and not a flattering version of it, stares at both of them as Jimmy heads in, kisses her cheek, and says, “So, ready to wrap up today?”

“How about done.” Abby waddles into her office to hang up her lab coat, as Benedict flat out glares at Jimmy, and Jimmy can tell he’s about to say something to him, but Abby’s too quick, she’s back in the lab before he gets the first word out of his mouth. “See you tomorrow, Tom.”

“’Night, Abby.” He doesn’t speak to Jimmy.

When they’re in the elevator, Jimmy says, “Well, that went over great.”

“Zelaz told me my marriage was dead.”

Jimmy shakes his head, and then kisses Abby, soft and gentle. “Sorry about how deep in the shit you are.”

She shrugs. “How about you? Anyone being weird?”

“Dornie’s flirting with me.”

Abby laughs at that. “Yeah.”

“God, Allan did the exact same thing!”

“Well… You’re cute, and presumably a top, and apparently not averse to fucking around on your wife. But you’re also married, so you likely don’t want anything long term. You just got a hell of a lot more popular in certain circles.”

Jimmy sighs. “I don’t want to be more popular with gay guys looking for a quick hook up.”

She pats his cheek. “It’s good for the soul. See what it’s like to get hit on a lot. Lets you walk a few miles in the shoes of the average pretty girl for a while.”

Jimmy shakes his head a bit, and then looks up at her, eyes twinkling, and says, “As you well know, I’m fine with walking in a pretty girl’s shoes.”

“God,” she gives him a playful shove while laughing, and that’s what the doors open up on as they get to Cybercrime.

There are only four Minions on the floor right now, and two of them are watching them, closely. The others appear to be working. Abby wraps her arm around Jimmy’s waist, and they head out of elevator to grab Tim.
He’s sitting in his office, slouched back, head against his chair, ice pack on his eye, looking wrecked. Abby takes one look at him, letting go of Jimmy, and shakes her head. “Oh, yeah, this was a brilliant plan. You look fine.”

He sits up slowly, and pulls her close for a quick kiss. “Hello to you, too.”

“Hi.”

He looks over to Jimmy. “You got a comment, too?”

Jimmy shakes his head. “Nope. But I’ve got a bottle of Percocet with your name on it waiting at home, a set of keys, and the ability to get you to said bottle of pills.”

The door to Tim’s office is shut, so he’s got no problem saying, “I love you,” as he slowly gets up with the help of Abby and Jimmy.

Four sets of eyes follow the three of them out of Cybercrime. More of them track them out of the building. Jimmy walks Tim and Abby to their car, and lets go of Tim once they get there. He quietly says, “I’ll pick up dinner. You pick up Kelly, then quiet night at my place.”

They nod. That sounds good.

The application of painkillers, and food, and being out of the wondering gaze of everyone around them, does perk Tim up quite a bit.

Listening to the blow by blow, along with what he said, report of Jimmy’s run in with the Admiral has everyone in a good mood.

Listening to what happened at the Commission, at the crime scene, and the lab droops that mood a bit.

“How about on your end?” Abby asks Breena.

“Nothing so far, though I’ll admit to being a bit nervous when my dad was reading his blogs.”

Tim shifts the icepack off of his eye, and Kelly picks it up, starting to gnaw on it. He looks at her first, “You got a new tooth coming in, or are you just so used to the idea of chewing on cold things, that that’s just what you do?”

She flashes him a drool-y smile and says, “Yes.”

He kisses the top of her head.

“It’s going to hit the news, with my name on it, soon. Don’t know how much detail will go into it, but tomorrow morning, Leon’s got me sitting in on a press conference.”
Breena exhales slowly. “Great.”

“Official story, this is a sting, and that’s the line we’ll both be singing.”

“Is that going to fly?” Breena asks.

Tim shrugs. “I’ll sell it the best I can. I’ve got to spend some time between now and then working on some BS about using our databases to determine who might be violating anti-discrimination regs.”

“Probably a good plan to get an answer for why you went after a retired Admiral,” Breena adds.

“That one I’ve got the answer to. He was given the ‘early retirement’ option before, I’m sure Jarvis will back that, and unfortunately, after the recent upheaval, most of the people who know why he was given ‘early retirement’ weren’t on board anymore, and anyone not involved in the vote buying scandal was getting grabbed back up to fill in the command holes.”

“And you and Leon knew what was up and made sure he didn’t get grabbed back up,” Abby says.

“That’s the plan.” Tim looks to Breena. “I don’t know how close of a quote they’ll have of what I said to him when I dropped him. Hopefully, not all that close. But… at least some version of it’s floating around, because everyone who knows the story going around NCIS knows Jimmy’s my guy.”

“They wouldn’t need any information besides the idea that you have a guy,” Breena says. “Not like they’ll go leaping to the conclusion that you’re hooking up with Tony.”

“Good point. Anyway, will the idea that I BSed that… will that fly with your parents?”

She shrugs. “I’m sure my dad would believe anything about Jimmy.” She flashes him a sad smile. “I’m not sure, especially since they’ve seen you with Abby, that they’d buy that about you. Who all is coming to this thing?”

“Leon told me, but the only one I remember in any detail is the Post.”

“Eh… Dad think’s they’re a rag since Bezoz bought them.”

“So… maybe he won’t get it?” Abby says.

“We can hope,” Breena replies.

Jimmy takes a bite of his fish. “I was thinking about that some. Not… not that specifically, but… playing defense. Your parents still own, what, 48% of Palmer and Slaters’?”

“42%. Amy’s starting to buy some of their shares, too.”

Jimmy thinks about that for a moment, and decides that can go on the back burner. “So, that’s a million in stock, right?”

“1.2, yeah. Why?”

“The faster we buy them out, the safer we are, right? If they find out, and don’t react well, they can make things unpleasant if they own that much of the company. If you own more of it…”

“You’re kind of right. Because of the fact that this is a closely held LLC, they’re able to add a poison pill to the sale of shares. I own 51% of this one branch. That branch belongs to the larger Slaters’ company. If the majority of shareholders in the larger company decide they don’t want one of us in
the business anymore, they can force us to sell. It’ll be at full market value, and coming up with that much cash fast could be an issue, but even if I own my full branch, I’ll still be a minority shareholder in the larger company.

“We’d need… 8.7 million in shares before I’m the majority shareholder in the full company, and I know we don’t have that sort of money.”

She’s right. They don’t. Shifting around the kind of money necessary to buy out her folks, that they could probably do in a year or two, especially, as Abby’s thinking it through, if they were willing to use the money that’s earmarked for college.

“Fourteen years,” Tim says before Abby’s done thinking about it. “Find a new agent, turn out another Tibbs novel a year, between that and our jobs… We can get there, but not fast.”

“And that would require my Uncles to sell to me. They won’t. They’re selling to their own kids. What’s coming will come. The big thing is making sure we keep the girls safe. And I’m thinking plausible deniability, which is what Leon’s giving us, will do that.”

Later that night, after the pain meds really kick in, and they watch the video of Tim taking down the Admiral, as well as see the x-ray, Tim’s in an awfully good mood.

Lounging on the sofa between the girls, Jimmy’s thinking he’s never seen Tim in a better mood, and he’s seen Tim in some awfully damn good moods. But, between the painkillers and taking out his dad, he’s a big, bubbly pile of happy right now.

And he probably will crash soon, because he’s sleepy in addition to in a really good mood. Jimmy and the girls might play some, later, but right now, Tim’s drowsy, and snuggly, and really happy, and cuddly. Jimmy watches how Tim’s snuggling the girls. Maybe not that drowsy. His hands are wandering about, happily copping feels, right and left.

He’s acting a lot like a big, affectionate, sleepy, horny puppy.

Jimmy’s watching him touch the girls, and the way they’re playing with him, enjoying that a whole hell of a lot.

He’s on Breena’s far side, kissing the back of her neck, as Tim’s necking with Abby, one hand in her lap, the other on Breena’s breast. Tim switches which girl he’s necking with. Abby’s got her legs over Tim and Breena’s laps, she’s on Tim’s left, nibbling his ear, staying well away from his eye, with one hand on his chest, and the other in his hair. Breena’s on his right, kissing him, wet and deep, stroking his chest and Abby’s hand.

Jimmy’s next to Breena, half turned in toward her, his lips on her neck, and his hand on Abby’s ankle. He pulls back a little, watching, stroking Breena’s back and Abby’s leg. He likes this, a whole lot.

They’re just making out. All dressed, all on the sofa, warm skin and soft smooching sounds, and he still really like it.

He finds himself wondering why watching this is hot, but playing with Tim isn’t. Why is watching this man making love with the girls fun, but touching him directly less so? After everything that’s
happened today, and what’s likely to happen tomorrow, he’s wondering if there’s just some sort of mental thing going on that means this isn’t just piles and piles of sky high erotic goodness between the two of them.

It’s just skin and endorphins. Breena’s hand on his thigh as her eyes trace down his body turns him on, Tim’s should, too, right?

He was biting the guy’s chest last week, sucking his nipples, and licking them. One third of the team making him come so hard he practically levitated off the bed. If he’d done something like that to Abby or Breena, he would have gotten off on it, possibly literally, but definitely metaphorically. Doing it to Tim felt emotionally good, but not particularly erotic. If he could figure out how get off on that physically in addition to the mental satisfaction of making his love feel so good…

So, if he could just break through whatever’s blocking this…

He pulls Breena onto his lap, and scoots next to Tim, gently turns his face to him, and (again, gently! He’s staying well away from Tim’s eye) very thoroughly kisses Tim. And just like the other times they’ve kissed, it’s nice. It feels good. He’s had significantly worse kisses from women. But it’s not kissing the girls. His body likes the sensation of lips on lips, and Tim knows what he’s doing with his tongue (in fact, drugged out of his head, with enough pain meds coursing through him that he’s not hurting, Tim’s an extremely enthusiastic kisser and this is the best kiss he’s ever gotten off of him) but nice is all it is.

The girls are having a great time watching this. He can hear them appreciating the scene. Breena’s rocking in his lap in an exceptionally pleasant sort of way. And, yeah, he’s getting so laid tonight, and if they can keep Tim conscious for another ten minutes or so, he is, too.

But… Yep. Dick’s not getting hard. It’s just laying there in his shorts. (Though given what Breena’s doing and the sounds the girls are making, it’s not going to stay that way long. It’s a very big fan of moaning women, and an even bigger fan of a woman rocking back and forth in his lap running her fingers though his hair.) He’s not looking or groping, but he’s fairly sure Tim’s not getting hard from this, either.

All in. Try. See how it feels. He kisses deeper, tongue stroking against Tim’s, and lets his hand wander down Tim’s body, stroking over his chest and hips, sliding up the inside of his leg, and… actually, Tim is pretty hard. He’s also had both girls playing with him before Jimmy got into it. But, maybe he’s liking what Jimmy’s doing, too.

Maybe… Shut down the part of his mind that’s all about what he’s supposed to be, and just the physical enjoyment takes over…

Jimmy knows, if he’s groping the girls, and he feels damp panties, that gets to him, hard. If he’s not already sporting wood, feeling wet undies’ll do it for him.

He figures that’s the girl equivalent of a hard dick through trousers.

And again, like with the kissing, hard Tim in his hand isn’t doing it for him. Both girls sounding like they’re about to get off from watching this, that’s getting to him. That’s doing some awfully good things for him. And, yeah, his thigh is a bit damp from where Breena’s grinding on him. She’s really enjoying watching this, and he likes that a whole lot, and the way that her hand is rubbing under his shirt, pulling gently on his nipples is just upping the ante.

If anything, though, Tim’s dick in his hand feels a little awkward. Like, he knows how a dick in his hand is supposed to feel, and this isn’t that. It’s not quite the right shape, and it’s in the wrong place.
He’s pretty damn sure he shouldn’t have to reach across himself to end up with a dick in his hand. It should be right there, in front of him, not over to the left.

But, Tim’s kissing him like his lips are every favorite meal Tim’s ever had, and he’s starting to rock into Jimmy’s hand, and that’s making Jimmy think that possibly this is a situation where the big head is way too much in charge, and letting the little head take over would shift issues and produce some excellent results.

And he certainly knows how to make the big head fuck off… It’s been twenty years since he’s had sex any sort of stoned, but it’s not like that’d be difficult to arrange. Maybe this weekend… See if Tim’s up for some experimenting.

He can’t see what Abby’s doing. His eyes are closed, and he’s kissing Tim, so even if they were open, he’d be looking at Tim’s face, but he hears the zipper, and feels her hand brush his, and he knows she’s about to slip his hand into Tim’s shorts, but Jimmy’s thinking, former permissions or no, that this isn’t a step he’s taking with Tim drugged out of his skull.

He pulls back a little, keeping his arm around Tim’s neck, and strokes his fingers through his hair, looking at him. Tim’s giving him something of a goofy smile, his one, visible eye not focusing or tracking well. Tim’s definitely turned on. He’s got sex oozing from his pores right now, and probably about a gallon of pheromones, too.

“I love you.” Jimmy knows that’s not the first time he’s said it to Tim, really said it, but he knows saying it feels good. Whatever else may be going on, that’s true.

The girls aren’t making any noise at all, but he can feel the happy pouring off of them.

Tim kisses the tip of his nose and flashes him a sloppy grin.

Jimmy kisses him (on the lips) again, and then gives him a quick hug, and moves back. “All yours, ladies.”

He watches the girls with Tim, once they get him upstairs and naked, and all three of them are having a very good time. He’s having a very good time watching, too. Kissing Tim doesn’t hit his erotic buttons, but this, all three of them petting, naked, and moaning, this hits him like a truck moving at full speed.

But Tim, on his own… nope.

He thinks of what Sam said, about it being about love and affection.

Maybe… That closeness, he wants that. He loves that. Afterglow with Tim is really good. And unlike the sex side of it, that’s something he actively craves with Tim.

It’s sensual, but not sexual, that’s probably the best way to describe it. It’s funny, because he’d thought he really got the difference before, but even when he was trying to keep them separate, they were always tangled together. He can’t give Breena a sensual massage without the SEX part of his brain being aware of the options. He can give a good sensual massage, without stepping over the line, without even giving a hint of wanting to step over the line, but he knows what’s on the other side of the line, and if there’s a woman involved, he wants what’s on the other side of the line.
With Tim, he knows what’s on the other side of the line, and it’s okay, but he doesn’t crave it. Big yummy pile of tofu. Great if you’re a vegetarian, like Breena or Sam, or an omnivore, like Abby, but it’s nothing he’s dreaming of. He doesn’t have to remind himself to stay on the sensual side of the line with Tim.

Abby’s riding Tim, slow, shallow, and gentle. It’s her third round with Tim tonight. Jimmy’s assumption that he’d conk out soon appears to be dead wrong. He’s going and going and going. Slow and steady and blissed out, but from the looks of it, not stopping anytime soon.

Breena’s kissing him as Jimmy fingers her. Tim’s making very pleased noises as the girls play with him. He’s pink all over, and gasping, moaning, babbling.

Jimmy’s lying on his side, watching the three of them, holding Tim’s hand and stroking Breena, getting her off again, making her moan.

Tim’s still going, and Jimmy’s coming to the conclusion that he’s on a boat load of Percocet, because he’s not usually this slow. Usually, if he goes this long, he’s showing signs of actively trying to not get off, and he’s not doing that tonight.

Jimmy lets go of Tim’s hand and kneels behind Breena, slipping into her, and she shudders a bit at the glide, straightening up and turning to kiss him.

Jimmy groans into her mouth, reveling on the feel of her lips on his and her body around him, and how much he loves this wet, slick slide. Unlike Tim, Jimmy’s not going to take an hour to get off. He’s been watching and playing too long to last for hours, and right now, he’s sure Breena isn’t looking for a marathon, either.

He plays off of what Tim was doing, providing a counter point to the long, slow screw he was providing, going fast and focused, snapping his hips against her as his fingers press firm on her clit, and she groans at that, kissing harder, sucking his tongue.

He pulls Breena back into his lap, a deeper position, and both of them can watch Tim and Abby, and be watched by them.

Abby’s watching them, grinning, and scoots over a bit to kiss Breena’s breast. Jimmy watches that, loving it, too.

So good, so good all over, beautiful women all wrapped around him and touching each other and touching his love and… God, feels so good. His eyes fall shut as he grinds deep into Breena, feeling the tingles building, grunting as they explode through him.

He’s coming down, relaxing with Breena on his lap, as Tim’s getting close, eye almost closed, body tight, gripping Jimmy’s knee, babbling about how much he loves all of them, as he arches, shudders, jerks, and moans.

Jimmy scoots a bit further back from Tim, taking his hand again, as Breena settles between them, and Abby curls into his other side. Tim’s lying between them, purring, kissing each girl gently, and if he got in range, Jimmy’d get a kiss, too, but he’s content with where he is. He does get his hand squeezed.

With Tim, the steak is these moments, the quiet, the closeness, getting to see someone you love wrapped in bliss, getting to enjoy it with them.

And maybe that’s enough.
Though, watching Tim, eyes closed, breathing slower, skin flushed, Jimmy’s thinking that he’s at least got to try to see if he get to the point where all of it is steak.
One Does Not Look The Other Way

Jimmy and Tim have shower time together this morning. So, once in there, with the water on, Jimmy asks him, “Did you like last night?”

Tim’s staring at Jimmy like he’s being exceptionally stupid as he grabs his soap. “Of course! That was awesome, felt like I went forever.”

“You’re on Percocet. You did. I was sure you were going to conk out like ten minutes into it, but you just kept going, really slow and easy for like, an hour.”

“Felt amazing. Really slow build, but it was good. Is that what you’re asking about?” It’s clear on Tim’s face that he’s not sure what Jimmy might have been curious about in regards to liking last night.

“No.” Jimmy’s eyeing Tim, who’s just staring back at him, soaking wet, rubbing soap absently over his chest and under his arm. He’s getting a pretty clear sense that Tim’s memory of last night might not be quite as well fleshed out as it usually would be. “How much of last night do you remember?”

Tim blinks, thinking, hard, and turns into the water to rinse off. After a moment he says, “Uh… Images… Feelings. Sensations mostly. Really loose and liquid and sleepy. Dream sex.”

“Remind me to check the dose they gave you. That sounds like too much.”

Tim feels alarmed at that. He turns back to Jimmy. So far he’s been really liking this round of pills; when he takes them, he genuinely doesn’t hurt. This is a novel experience after the summer, and one he’s not interested in giving up. “I don’t care! It felt great! Believe it or not, I don’t really like hurting, and this is the first time they’ve given me enough pain medication that I don’t hurt, at all.”

Jimmy shakes his head. “Yeah, you’re on too high of a dose.”

“Don’t you dare mess with it!”

“Tim.”

“Shit.” He looks crestfallen. “Bad enough I hurt all day… Nice to be able to not hurt at night.”

“I’ll see if I can split the difference. You get too high a dose, and it’ll mess with your system. One time thing, sure, great. Day after day… Not so hot.”

“Fine. Why are you asking how well I remember last night?”

Jimmy almost blushes, and even with one functional eye, Tim can see something is up. “What?”

“You ever wonder why we’re straight?”

“I can honestly say no. If, I’ve wondered about that, but not why.”

“Why not?”

“For as long as I’ve known it was a thing, I’ve also heard people telling me why it happens. I don’t think they were all right, well, I really hope most of them weren’t, but it was never a mystery in my world. Pop… first time I asked what a fag was, he told me they were bad people doing bad things, same sort of thing like why there are murders and thieves. A year later, Penny’s telling me it’s a
social construct, and my grad school girlfriend agreed with that. That was the line in college, we’re all naturally bi, but we get pushed one way or another. It never felt that way to me, but especially then, I wasn’t going to argue with them. I’ve heard Ducky and Penny talking about it, and no disrespect to her, but his argument about genetic determinism made a hell of a lot more sense to me.”

Tim shrugs, stepping away from the water, letting Jimmy have it. “I told Abby, if there had been any conditioning aspect to it, I probably would have been sleeping with guys in college, just to piss the Admiral off. It never happened, even when I was going crazy I was so horny, so… Yeah, I’ve given it just about as much thought as to why I have green eyes. That’s just how the DNA got together. Why? You thinking about it?”

“Yeah. Some. Last night, we were kissing, and it looked like you really liked it.”

Tim doesn’t have a particularly distinct memory of that, but he does know he liked last night. “I really liked everything last night.”

“You looked really turned on.”

“Stoned and fucking all three of my loves.” Tim nods. “That’s a situation where I’ll be turned on.”

Jimmy’s feeling like he’s possibly not being specific enough about the idea he’s trying to convey. “It looked like playing with me was getting you hot, felt like it, too.”

Tim shrugs, he doesn’t remember last night well enough to know if anything Jimmy specifically was doing was getting to him.

“And if it was…” Jimmy continues, “I mean… Doesn’t that kind of hint at a conditioning thing? Pump enough drugs into you, and the wall between straight and bi falls?”

“What the hell were you doing to me?” Tim’s starting to wonder about what he’s not remembering from last night.

“Had my tongue down your throat and felt you up.”

Tim looks alarmed, and for a moment Jimmy’s worried he crossed the line, but then Tim speaks, and he’s not alarmed about what Jimmy was doing. “Shit! Okay, yeah, I’m on too much Percocet.” Tim rubs his good eye. “I just remember you being close and feeling really good. Feeling me up, how?”

“We were still dressed, but I had my hand on your dick, and you seemed to like it. Rubbing into me, you know?” Tim nods. He knows. Might not remember it, though he’s starting to get some images along those lines together in his head, but he knows how his hips react to a warm, firm hand on his dick while he’s kissing. “Plus, you’re a good kisser sober, but you’re a better one stoned. Or, at least with me, you are.”

Tim’s eyebrows rise at that. “Huh. Uh… Did you like it?”

Jimmy steps away from the water, grabbing his shampoo. Just because they’re talking doesn’t mean he can take too long in here. The girls’ll want backup on breakfast and baby wrangling, soon. “I wanted to. I mean… Abby gets to get off on all three of us, Breena too, to a lesser degree, but, you and me, we’re kind of stuck. And I’m not saying what we’ve got is bad, but… It could be better, you know? Practically getting the girls off just by fooling around with you is great, but I’d like to get off on it, too.”

Tim’s eye narrows as he thinks about that. “So… what… you want to experiment?”

“Yeah. Some. I mean, if you’re cool with it. People drink because it lets them do things they
normally wouldn’t do. You on Percocet seem to enjoy me more… Maybe it is conditioning. That’s the point of conditioning, right? It doesn’t just go away because you don’t want it anymore. It’s supposed to stay there and keep you behaving a certain way. So… I want to see what happens if I can shut that down for a night.”

“Shut it down, how?” Tim’s somewhere between curious and concerned. The science guy is interested in this as an experiment. The friend/lover is concerned about what Jimmy’s thinking he might like to try.

“If it wasn’t illegal, I’d suggest E. That shuts down your social conditioning, floods your brain with serotonin, and makes *everything* feel awesome. As it is, I’ve got to do some research. There’s got to be something I can write a prescription for that’ll do it.”

“If it makes everything feel good, how would you know that it’s not just the E doing it?”

Jimmy rolls his eyes a little, and also smiles at Tim, because he’s very glad that he’s cool with this and actually helping with good suggestions on experiment design. “Good point. The experiment should be about enjoying the sex, not the drug. But it’s moot because I’m not going to go grab a tab of E from the evidence lock up…”

Tim nods. “Yeah, I know. Sure, I’ll experiment with you. Just nothing that won’t be out of your system by morning, right?”

“I’m looking to get laid, not put myself into a coma. Once upon a time, I used to be really good at this. And that’s before I had an MD. Lots of chemicals out there I’ve got access to now, that I didn’t back then. I think I can figure out how to do it.”

Tim’s looking a little wary, beyond mentioning that he’d tried pretty much everything he could get his hands on, Jimmy’s never talked all that much about what he used to do drug-wise. “What does ‘really good’ mean?”

Jimmy finishes rinsing his hair and grabs his shaving cream, starting to lather his face. “I never wanted to get wasted, just nicely buzzed, and I didn’t exactly have piles of cash laying around. So, I wanted the longest, moderately intense high for the buck. I just wanted to glow for a while, take the edge off.” Tim looks like he’s following, but Jimmy takes the idea a little further. “Three beers, the way that feels, nicely loose and happy, for hours, without getting any further along.” Tim nods. That’s very concrete and he can easily imagine it. “I got really good at researching, and figuring out exactly what I needed to keep myself nicely toasted, without wasting any. Say you’ve got one tab of E. You take it, you feel weird for 40 minutes, you feel excellent for about six hours, and then you feel like shit for the next day. I’d figure out how much E was in the tab, dissolve it in water, give myself enough to get over the weird bit, and then keep re-dosing every two hours to stretch the high, after eight hours, half dose, then two quarter doses, to minimize the crash. You’ve got to drink a lot, but not too much, water with E, so I’d have a collection of water bottles, each with a dose in it, numbered, and my watch set to buzz every two hours. I just wanted to nudge the serotonin level, not spike it.”

Tim cannot imagine having had enough time to even begin to get that into anything that complicated in college, other than school work. “What did you do in college?”

“First of all, unlike you, I went to a second-tier school. A good one, but not Johns Hopkins. For the first two years, I did just enough school work to keep a 3.0. My scholarship would lapse if I ever dropped below a 3. Theater, chorus, PB&Js, I worked in a Vet’s office as an Administrative Assistant, so a lot of typing and filing, making sure everything they needed was ordered and in stock, and after hours, messing around in their lab.” Jimmy reaches for his razor, and adds, “I was still a
music major back then. I had biology as my minor, and I had to take a few chemistry classes for that. I wasn’t exactly aimless, but besides the next good time, or the next concert, I wasn’t very focused, either. I got sick and my Dad died within a year, and that changed a lot of things.”

“Wake up call of doom.”

Jimmy nods. “Something like that. Had to work full time after that to keep myself in health insurance and enough cash to stay in school. That meant no more job with the Vet. Meant being the class of ’02 instead of ’00. But… my ‘tragic backstory’ got me into Georgetown’s medical school as a ‘non-traditional student’ when on grades alone I shouldn’t have been able to make it. Being a student there got Ducky to put my resume into the maybe pile, and here I am.”

Tim nods, touching Jimmy’s shoulder. “For which I am glad.”

While Tim’s toweling off, Breena’s leaning against her makeup table, tools out, and says, “How battered do you want to look for the press conference?”

Tim sends her a curious look as he hangs up the towel and steps toward her. “Uhhh?”

“I cover all sorts of issues all the time. Your eye is still really swollen, but it’s opening a little now, and if you want, I can cover the bruises.”

The idea of someone patting makeup on him makes Tim want to wince. But, he figures Breena has to know that, so he’s got to be missing something. “You have to touch it to do that, right?”

She touches something, a small plastic square that’s tucked onto the back of the table. Previously to this point, that’s something Tim’s never given any thought, and looking at it now he’s got it characterized as a ‘do-hickey.’ “Not if you don’t want me to.”

“How?”

“It’s an airbrush. When we go out and my makeup’s amazing, or, like in the videos we made you, this is what I use.”

“Oh… Uh…” He takes a moment to really look at himself. His eye is open, a smidge. He tries to imagine how he’d look with an eye almost swollen shut, but with it exactly the same color as the skin around it. Tim shakes his head. “When the swelling’s down… Like, Monday, I’ve not a new Commission to show up at, and by then it’ll just be covering the color, sure, that sounds great, but right now… I think it’d look weird.”

Jimmy adds, pulling on his boxer briefs, “Plus, you’re making the case that this guy needed to go to jail. Might be a good idea to look beaten up.”

Breena smiles at that. “I’ve got blues, purples, greens and browns. You want that bruise to look worse, I can do that, too.”

“Wait, is this paint?” Tim asks.

“No,” She flashes him a do you really think I’d offer to put paint on you look? Tim shrugs. “It’s makeup, but if you want to match someone’s skin tone, you need a lot of colors to mix with. I’ve got
a full color palette. You wouldn’t believe how useful a drop of orange or purple can be in the right circumstance.”

“Is this from work?” Tim asks.

“The color palette is, the machine is mine. I mean, I only buy the colors I need for me, for my own use. And you and I don’t have the same skin tone. But no one minds if I borrow a few drops of my other shades for personal use a few days a year. What, am I going to yell at myself for grabbing fifteen cents worth of makeup?” Breena laughs at that.

“Monday. Unless I’m so healed up you can’t see it, I’ll take you up on it, then.”

Abby’s riding herd on the girls when they get downstairs. All four of them are at the kitchen table. She’s got a cup of tea for herself, and the girls have bowls of Cheerios, sippy cups of milk, sliced bananas, and small squares of cheddar cheese.

And that’s exactly as much cooking as Abby’s willing to do these days.

She glances at Tim and says, “No makeup, huh?” when he heads into the kitchen.

“Not today. Why, you want to glam me up?”

“Always,” she gives him a pat on the tush when he bends down to kiss her. “Can you get my black boots?”

“No problem.” He heads off to the door between the garage and laundry room, and grabs Abby’s boots. Though she probably can put them on herself these days, it’s easier and faster if he does it for her.

She pats Sean when he’s back, holding one leg out, and Tim slips the boot up over her foot, zipping it along her calf.

“Little boy having a quiet day?”

“Yeah. Second in a row with no contractions.” She pokes her tummy. “Don’t get too comfy in there. You’re getting evicted on the 28th if you don’t move out on your own.”

“You decided on when maternity leave begins?” Breena asks, sitting next to her at the kitchen table, taking over on making sure little girls eat the breakfasts in front of them.

Jimmy moves onto his usual place, breakfast cook, while Tim gets coffee ready for everyone.

“Maybe the 13th, maybe the 20th. I felt like I was going stir-crazy last time. Nothing to do but rest and wait.”

“You’ve got someone else who might want some quality Mommy and Me time before you vanish to the hospital for a few days and then this new person comes home with you.” Breena gives Kelly a little stroke down the back of the head.

Kelly looks confused, waiting to see if the adults want anything from her, and then shoves another bite of banana into her mouth.
Abby nods. “That might be a plan.” She’s about to say to Kelly, “Do you want some girl time?” but decides since they aren’t doing it today, that asking now would just be teasing her. “We need to get Sean’s nursery ready.”

Tim nods at that, taking cups of coffee, handing one to Jimmy, one to Breena, and sipping from his. “Does this mean we’re moving back to our place for a while?”

“Most of why we were here, the smell, is gone now,” Jimmy says, whipping eggs. “Your place is closer to your hospital… Should probably stay there for the time being.”

“Tonight at our place, then. We can get the new furniture set up,” Abby says. “And, quick reminder, Friday morning, we’ve got an OB appointment.”

Tim nods. “It’s on my calendar.”

“When does the press conference start?” Breena asks.

“Nine. I’ve got just enough time to get in, check my email, and then up to Vance’s office. If I’m lucky, it’s short and I get to show up at the Commission on time, and then spend the next six hours trying to stay awake, and if not, I get to show up late and have everyone stare at me again.”

Abby pats his hand.

Dornaget’s been waiting for a morning when he’s in the office, and Tim is, too. He got the word of what had happened two seconds after he got in on Tuesday, and if he hadn’t gotten a murder call about a minute after that, he would have been waiting in Tim’s office for him then.

He knows Tim is going to be in today, because they’ve got that press conference thing, and he’s supposed to go see Jimmy today, too, so he’s in, too.

Perfect.

He does feel a little disappointed as he’s taking the elevator down.

Tim… They aren’t very close buddies or anything, but especially after he came out to Tim, he felt like… Like Tim might be the kind of guy who’d trust him with something like that, too.

All in all, he’s a little hurt that Tim didn’t tell him, but, he knows how hard it is to say those words, and the fear that keeps a man silent.

He’s also a little pissed that Tim would do that to Abby. Dating a woman… hell, marrying a woman, when you like men, that’s a shit move. His next stop, after Tim, is to head to the lab and offer Abby a shoulder to cry on, too.

Still… They’re friends, and right now Tim’s got to be feeling really unsettled, really scared and vulnerable and confused, so the least he can do is offer an ear to listen and a sofa to crash on.

Tim’s at his computer, giving a quick check to everything else going on, as Dornie heads into his office, closing the door behind him.

“Hi.” Tim smiles up at him, wondering what on Earth Dornie needs. He knows how to use the triaging software as well as anyone, and he’s more than good enough with a computer to do a lot of his own workload.
Dornie winces a bit, looking at Tim. That eye is a mess. Then he moves to sit on the corner of Tim’s desk. “Hey, McGee. I… um… I know everyone’s gossiping and all that, but, I just wanted to say ‘good for you!’ I wish I had had the balls to deck my dad when I came out to him. He had some…” Dornie shakes his head. “Anyway. I’m glad you did it; I bet it felt really good.”

This one is new to Tim, and he’s not quite sure how to respond. “Thanks.” Seems safe enough. And, “Yeah, it did,” also seems safe.

Dornie keeps sitting on the edge of Tim’s desk. That’s not exactly the response he was looking for, but he also knows that Tim’s not exactly ebullient when it comes to sharing feelings. Finally he says, “Look, I know we’re not really close or anything, but… You could have told me. I wouldn’t have made fun or anything. I certainly wouldn’t have blabbed about it. I know how much is at stake when you come out. And… you know, been there, done that, it’s good to have support when you come out.”

Tim’s really not sure how to respond to that. He nervously licks his lips while absolutely no response at all to what Ned just said pops into his mind. And Ned is wondering why Tim’s staring at him like he’s speaking Klingon… scratch that, Tim would understand Klingon, like he’s speaking German.

Ned tries a slightly different track. “So, are you okay? NCIS has always been really good about anti-discrimination stuff, but there are a few guys here who can be pretty tricky. Stibbons in HR can be a real pain in the ass. He goes out of his way to make life difficult, though you outrank him by a mile, so he might not be a jerk to you.”

Okay, that Tim’s got a response for. “I’m okay, Dornie.”

“Good. I mean, it can be hard, and it’s really emotional, and not always in a—“

Tim isn’t sure how to handle this, but he does know that Dornie’s sympathizing with something he’s not actually experiencing, so it’s probably a good idea to try and set things straight.

“Dornie…”

Dornaget perks up, that sounds like something sincere is about to come out of Tim. “Yeah, Tim?”

“I’m not actually gay.”

Ned hears the words, and, God, like he hasn’t heard this fifty times before. He tries to keep it down, but he feels his lips quivering and then the laughing hits.

Of all the responses Dornie could have had, bursting out into laughter isn’t one Tim’s expecting. When Ned finishes, he shakes his head, smiles kindly, puts a hand on Tim’s shoulder, and says, gently shaking his head, “God, I was so there twelve years ago. You jump out, and then you realize what a big deal it is, and sometimes you want to jump right back into the closet. I get that. It’s a lot safer, especially for guys like you with a wife and kids, in there. But, it’s not the Hokey-Pokey Tim, once you’re out to a group, you’re out. You don’t get to go back into the closet. It’s kind of like being born; it’s a one way trip. Sure, you’ve got to keep making the damn trip every time you end up in a new group of people, but…”

Tim sighs. He knows that for the rest of his NCIS career, people here are going to think he’s at least bi and probably so far back in the closet he’s behind the skeletons. He’s fine with that. But, he’s trying to have a real conversation about this with Dornie, and Dornie looking smug and amused isn’t helping.
“I’m really not gay.”

Dornie laughs again. “Uh huh. Yeah. There’s a word for guys who have sex with other guys, and that word is gay.”

“I’m married.”

Dornie’s smiling. “So are lots of gay guys.”

“With two kids.”

“Yes,” Dornie nods, encouragingly. “It happens a lot.”

“I had sex with my wife last night.”

“That’s generally how gay guys end up with kids.”

“Five times this week.”

Dornie laughs again, giving him another gentle squeeze to the shoulder. “Uh huh. Come on, that’s Tony’s line.” He smiles kindly. “Look, I know it’s scary. Coming out is downright terrifying! With the way people are talking about you, that’s got to be a lot to handle, and I’m sure Abby wants a lot of reassurance that you and Jimmy aren’t getting ready to run off together. But, look, come on… Denial is not good for you. This is what I mean by support, you’re going to need help getting through this, you are going to need people around who are fine with you being who you are, and I just wanted you to know, I’m here.”

Tim would bury his face in his hands, but that would hurt too damn much. The kicker is, Dornie is being really nice to him. Everyone else is whispering away, and this is the first genuine offer of friendship he’s gotten… well… except for… that guy… yesterday, who he thinks was more hitting on him than being nice. He gets how big of a deal this is, and he appreciates it, but… he just doesn’t need it. He looks up at Dornie and sighs loudly. “Dornie, first off… I get what you’re offering me, and I appreciate it, I really do. You’re the first person to be really kind to me about this, but I’m not gay. I do not find men sexually attractive, and that’s kind of the definition of being gay, right?”

Ned sits back a bit. “It doesn’t have to be men, plural, Tim, just Jimmy is enough. Though…” Dornie gets a dreamy look on his face. “Hello, Jimmy! Oh my God! I’ve seen him in the locker room… Those abs! And the way he slings that towel low on his hips when he heads off to the shower. God, someone carved him out of a slab of marble. He is so ripped! Between you and me, and don’t get jealous, but sometimes, if I see him come in, I’ll slow down, so I’m still there while he walks to the shower, just to peek a bit, you know?”

Tim sighs at the look on Dornie’s face as he’s imaging Jimmy in a towel heading to the shower. “Actually, no Dornie, I don’t know, because I don’t look at Jimmy like that, because I’m not gay, or bi, or straight and making an exception for Jimmy. Don’t get me wrong, I love Jimmy to the ends of the world, but he’s not sexually attractive to me.”

Are you blind? Those ABS! Those big hazel eyes, and that smile! Okay, sure, he’s easy to overlook dressed, but once you’ve seen him, you keep looking! Unwrapping him for the first time must have been one hell of a treat!”

Tim’s rubbing his forehead, very carefully skirting the sore eye. “Breena certainly thought so, and Abby really didn’t complain when he offered to be one of her Rolfing Guinea Pigs. She and Breena agree with you that I’m blind, but… He’s not what I’m into. I like,” Tim gestures with his hands to illustrate the concept, “nice, soft, round butts, and boobs, and smooth skin, and pregnant tummies, all
of which are features Jimmy doesn’t come equipped with. He’ll be glad to know you think he’s hot. But, I don’t. And he doesn’t think I’m hot. Because we aren’t gay.”

Dornie’s eyes flick away from Tim for a second. That sounds distressingly sincere, and then another thought hits. Everyone assumes it’s Jimmy. Tim, at least in the version he heard, didn’t actually say who the guy was. Another figure hops into Dornaget’s mind and his face lights up. “It’s not Jimmy, is it?” Then his mouth drops open. “Oh, God, don’t tell me it’s Gibbs! Oh my god, I’d be too terrified to even look him in the eye let alone—“

“It’s not Gibbs! It’s not any guy! ‘She’s every man’s type!’ Remember me saying that? Is that something that a guy who’s even remotely aware that every other guy isn’t necessarily straight says? Is that something a gay guy says?”

That gets to Dornie, and he stares at Tim more, watching him carefully, thinking for a bit, and then finally says, “You going to tell me you’re not sleeping with any guy? You got up in front of three hundred people, told your Dad you are gay, got hit in the face for it, and you’re not?” Dornie’s halfway between disbelieving and horrified.

Tim blinks again, thinking of how to explain this. “I love Jimmy, dearly. He loves me. We both love each other and our wives. When it comes to sexual desire, we want the girls, not each other.”

Tim’s staring up at him with those big, sincere green eyes, and finally, Ned starts to think that he’s not just BSing this. “But… You and your dad?”

“He’s a fucking monster, Ned, and I used the best bait I had to get him to strike. He’s been… It’s a long and complicated story, but no one who knows about him wanted him getting back into any position of power in the Navy, so… I took him down. And honestly, even though I don’t have sex with Jimmy, the fact that I’m willing to say I love him paints me as gay in The Admiral’s book. Talking about sex just freaked him out enough that he’d hit me.”

Dornie’s looking really confused by this. Coming out was not fun. Dealing with the stigma of being gay is not a picnic. He can’t imagine anyone voluntarily signing up for that if they didn’t have to. “Why would you…”

Tim looks tired. “If I could have gotten him with something else, I would have used it. I could feel it, when I was baiting him. I was pissing him off, but he wasn’t going to hit me with what I was using, and if he didn’t hit me, he was going to walk out of there and back into his ‘glorious Naval career.’” Ned’s taken aback by how much scorn is pouring off of Tim as he says this.

“He’s an Admiral. He’s really good at covering his tracks. He almost killed me and didn’t leave a trace. Stan Burley’s been looking into him ever since, and he’s got a really nasty history with gay and believed to be gay sailors under his command, but there was never enough proof to make anything stick. I got the proof. Call it an undercover mission if you like. Just a shame he’s only going away for a few years, he’s got a lot more blood on his hands than mine.”

“So… You’re really not gay?”

Tim shrugs. “I’m fine if people want to call me that because they can’t figure out or believe the sort of relationship Jimmy and I have, but, I like girls. And… I listen to you talk about Jimmy, and I know that’s how our wives see him, but… he’s just Jimmy to me. I’ve seen him naked, and I know, objectively that he’s attractive, but I don’t feel it the way you do.”

Ned’s aware that some guys aren’t into guys, at all, but… Jimmy. “Not at all?”
Tim shakes his head. “Got a shower with him this morning. Nothing. I like watching him fool around with the girls. That’s…” Tim smiles. “I like that a lot. Him on his own is a hell of a lot less interesting.”

Ned squints at Tim, then his eyes go wide when he realizes what Tim just said. Tim bites his lip and curses his pain meds, he’s not being as careful as he should be. He really hopes this press conference isn’t a minefield. Tim shifts the topic a bit, hoping that what he said is not about to go flying around the office, too. “What happened with your dad? You guys ever make it up?”

Dornie shakes his head. “He and mom divorced when I was a kid. I’ve been out to her since… since before I knew I was gay. She’s… She’s super spy woman, or she was, she resigned from the CIA in October. Anyway, she’s like Gibbs, she knows everything, she told me not to tell my dad, that he’d be a jerk about it.” He shrugs again. “She was right. I told him. He booted me out of his house, literally, I had to wait on the sidewalk for Mom to come and get me, and we haven’t talked in twelve years.”

Tim winces. “I’m sorry, Ned.”

Ned shrugs a bit. “Yeah, well, it happens. But… I wanted to run back into the closet and hide in there after I told him. My own Dad… So… What you said. It looked familiar, really familiar.”

“I’m sure it did.”

Ned’s thinking, looking a little behind and past Tim. “Being in the closet is safe, and… comfortable, sort of. Well, for me. I know people who feel like it’s killing them, but that wasn’t how it worked for me. It was like a piece of clothing that’s not quite right, but you wear it so often, you get used to it? Shoes that are stretched out… And, nothing really bad happens there. But, nothing good happens there, either.”

“That safe, comfy rut.”

“Yeah.”

“I know all about that. My life now,” Tim gestures to his office, and the pictures of his family, “None of this would have happened if I had stayed in my rut. Getting out of it was scary. I planned that for a few months before I made the first move, and if I had known how far getting out of that rut would have taken me, I probably would have dithered for a few more months. It’s not exactly what you’re talking about, but it’s the difference between getting along okay and joy, for me, at least.”

“Yeah, Tim, it is.”

Tim waits a few beats, checks the time, he’s got a minute, and then says, “So… Look, no one’s talking directly to me about this. All I get is looks and conversations that die as soon as I get within earshot. What the hell is the rumor going around?”

“First night of the Tech In Anti-Terror Commission. Your Dad shows up, and he’s bugging you all night. You keep brushing him off, and he keeps coming back, saying snide things. Draga let slip that he made a nasty crack about Abby’s weight, and then he almost decked him, wrecking the whole thing—”

“I almost hit him then, too. If your wife is skinny and nine months pregnant, something is wrong. And if you’re the asshole who thinks his wife is supposed to be skinny nine months pregnant you can go fu—” Tim sees the way Dornie is looking at him and says, “Sorry, I’m getting you off track.”

“No, I agree with that. Okay, sure, women aren’t my thing even in the best of circumstances, but I’ve
seen the ones who are really pregnant and thin and it just looks wrong. Anyway, the rumor says he
was looking to pick a fight, but he was trying to get you to hit him. But you don’t do it. Finally, you
tell him you’re gay, he takes a swing at you, and you drop him and Tony arrests him for assault and a
hate crime.”

“That’s it?”

“In one version you’re both drunk. In another you… well… It involves one of my least favorite
words ever, but the way you used it made me hate it a little less.”

Tim inclines his head a bit at that. He hadn’t really been thinking about it when he said it, beyond the
fact that that was the Admiral’s trigger word. “It was his favorite slur. Anything he didn’t like, he
slapped that label onto. Like milk and sugar in your coffee, must be a fag. Allergy attack, fag. Didn’t
complete the pass on the football field, fag.”

Ned’s wincing at all of that, and becoming a lot happier that Admiral McGee is never getting
anywhere near a command rank again.

“I wanted to burn it into his head as a badge of pride, for me! I wanted him to know who took him
down!”

Ned shakes his head. Speaking of things straight guys don’t say.

Tim adds, “So everyone knows Tony and Draga were there the full time, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think they would have been there the whole time if it wasn’t a sting?”

Dornaget gives him a tight smile. “Tim, everyone knows it’s a sting. Of course Tony and Draga
didn’t just happen to be there. They also think you were telling the truth about being gay.”

“Oh.” That was a combination that hadn’t occurred to Tim.

Dornie smiles and nods. Then he checks the clock. “And I’ve got to go visit Jimmy. He’s also,
really, not gay?”

Tim nods. “Really. More importantly, he’s more married than you could possibly imagine.”

Dornie sighs as he stands up. “They always are. And Abby’s cool?”

“Yeah. But she’d love a visit from someone who isn’t offering her the phone number of different
divorce lawyers.”

“I can do that.”

The last time Tim did a press conference he had a somewhat distracted collection of tech writer who
were all very sympathetic to what he had just done sitting around him, listening less and less to what
he had to say as the events at the White House unraveled on the TV behind them. Granted, he had
less and less to say as those events unraveled, too.
By the end of it, they were all just watching the TV, seeing the Secret Service fire into the crowd.

And by then, no one much cared about how he got into the bank account that was selling the elections.

As of that point in time, that was the sum total of his experience with the press one on one in any sort of situation where he was expected to actually talk to them. Sure, as a writer, he’s done publicity, but as a writer, his publicist gives him interview questions, he answers them, lets them sit, edits them, rereads them, edits again, and then off they go along with his head shot, to be published by whomever wants them.

He’s never done any live publicity as Thom E. Gemcity.

So, this experience, in Leon’s office with four reporters and one photographer, is not what Tim’s used to. First off, they want pictures. Of him. Now. With no makeup (he is wearing some in his author head shot) and a full face shot. With his real name. He feels squirmy just thinking about it, but he manages to stick a smile on his face, and is then told by the photographer that it’s not that kind of picture. And that he should, “Just act natural.”

“I’d be in my office, working on my code, solving crimes if I was acting natural.”

Leon smiles at that, and so does one… he thinks it’s the one from the AP… of the reporters.

Once everyone’s got some coffee, Leon gestures for everyone to sit down at his conference table. “In the last two days, I’ve gotten requests for comments from all of your news services. I’d like to thank you for waiting to talk to us before reporting too much about this.”

That gets a bit of nodding.

“Come on, Leon, spill. You know what we want,” The Reuters reporter says.

Leon nods. “I do, Frank. First of all, introductions, Frank Murtaugh from Reuters, John Clamton from Out, Seelia Lingh from the AP, Jillian Wau from the Post. I’m Leon Vance, Director of NCIS, and this is Timothy McGee, our Director of Cybercrime.”

“Why is Cybercrime involved in a hate crime sting?” Clamton hops right into this.

“Because data is your friend when you’re looking for far reaching patterns, and part of my job is being the data guy,” Tim says, glad he’s been thinking about why Cybercrime would be involved in this sort of thing. “Leon?”

“Let me start at the beginning. As you all know, NCIS was integral with the recent governmental upset. I had a lot of time to think while we were on the shelf, about who we are, and what we do, and the world around us.

“It’s no secret that power provides a sort of ‘get out of jail free card.’ Part of why so much that went wrong with the US Government could go wrong was people looking the other way. We set a benchmark when we brought that story out, and we’re going to live up to. If there’s any legacy I want for myself, it’s that I cleaned up the messes I saw. And now, I’m making sure to look for the messes, and not just step over them.”

“Why start with hate crimes?” Lingh asks. “Wouldn’t corruption be a more logical target?”

Leon glances to Tim, and Tim nods. “Data. We have all the files in our databases, and we can use that data. Admiral McGee had already run into other issues, and had been being investigated, and
while no one could find any proof, there was an unusually high number of issues under his command. Because he was being specifically investigated about LGTB hate crimes, we were able to get a good sense for that issue directly under his command. And the issues under him ranged from denied promotions, to, before DADT the highest rate of ‘Conduct Unbecoming’ discharges, to a frighteningly high number of men and women under his command being outed under DADT, to outright harassment, violence, and two missing sailors. I do need to stress, that until he hit me, we never were able to get any proof against Admiral McGee, and we do not, for a fact, know that he was personally involved in any of those crimes, but the numbers don’t lie, his command was not a safe place for an LGTB Sailor. We know, at the very least, he did a lot of looking the other way.”

“And, in the Navy, the buck stops at the top of the pyramid. It was his job, as an Admiral, and a Captain before that, to provide for the safety of his troops,” Leon adds. “He became an Admiral shortly after the institution of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, it was his job to make sure his men weren’t asking, and given the number of sailors outed under his command, he was not doing his job.”

Tim takes over from there. “Having seen the patterns Agent Burley was finding on Admiral McGee, I realized we could do similar searches. My team is building the programs that will find out which commanders allow hate crimes to slide under their commands.”

“How will that work, especially with gay sailors?” Wau asks.

“We won’t just be focusing on LGTB personnel. Any form of discrimination charge or hate crime complaint will be looked at as part of this. I’ve got my database, which has every complaint in there. I know, from that database, what the average number of complaints per squad, platoon, up to battle division is. I can calculate standard deviations. From there I can start searching by command. If a command has more than a standard deviation of hate crime issues, I know we need to get into it and start looking, closely.”

Leon hops in. “I am hopeful, that as the Navy sees we’re serious about this, and as we work to make sure whistleblowers are not targeted for backlash, that we’ll get more information, and that Sailors and Marines will be comfortable letting us know where the problems are.”

“Once you’ve targeted someone with your program, then what?” Wau asks.

“Then it’s just like any other crime. Investigate. And if that means undercover work, it means undercover work.” Tim replies.

“Aren’t you afraid of charges of entrapment?” Lingh asks, eyeing Tim’s black eye.

Leon grins at that. “Entrapment is when you encourage someone to commit a crime. There is no universe where saying ‘I’m gay’ should encourage anyone to do anything illegal. Now, let me go further, if the words, ‘I’m gay’ makes someone want to commit a crime, I do not want that person in my Navy. That type of person is clearly not well-enough balanced to be entrusted with weapons and life or death decisions. And, if that person wants do something violent to one of his brothers and sisters in blue because they’re gay, that’s someone who is unworthy of wearing the uniform.

“We depend on each other. Social cohesion keeps us alive out there, and we cannot afford to have people in uniform who aren’t willing to die for every other man or woman on his team. So, we’re not. Anyone who can’t look at his fellow Sailor or Marine and feel respect, isn’t welcome here, not anymore.

“Black, white, gay, straight, male, female, we are all Navy and we’re going to act like it. No more looking away and winking at bad behavior. That ends, now.
“What happened with Admiral McGee is a signal. We intentionally began with someone very visible. No one is too highly ranked. No one is beyond reproach.”

Once Leon says that, he gets a few seconds of silence while the reporters digest that and think of new questions.

“Director McGee… I know it’s a common last name, is there anything more to that?” Murtaugh asks.

Tim nods. “It is a common last name, and yes, there’s more to it than that. Admiral McGee is my father, though we have not spoken, other than in the line of duty, since 2014. We do not get on.”

“So, you two have a certain level of personal animosity?” Clamton asks.

“Since I was a child. It got worse when I refused to join the Navy. I get crippling sea sickness, and didn’t think a career involving boats was a good plan. He disagreed.”

“And that’s the root of the problem?” Wau asks.

“No problem has only one root. However, if I’d gone to Annapolis, and was now Captain McGee instead of Director, I imagine all the other problems could have been smoothed over.”

“Is one of the other problems the fact that you’re gay?” comes out of Clamton, fast, sharp.

“I, and who I am, is not now, nor has it ever been, a problem. It didn’t matter who or what I was, his problems are his, and who I am is incidental to them.”

“You’re married aren’t you?” Lingh says.

Tim taps his wedding ring. “A bit over two years now, and our second baby is due any day.”

“And, you don’t routinely do undercover work. Not as the Director of Cybercrime,” Wau asks.

“Not routinely, not now or at any point in my career here at NCIS. But a good undercover op uses people who are well-suited for the operation. In this case, I was the perfect person for the job. When Leon got word about Admiral McGee, he knew who to call to make sure he didn’t get away again. And I was perfectly fine with helping out.”

It’s the reporter from the Post who finally flat out asks. Tim’d been thinking of answers all day, and talking to Dornie finally cemented what he wanted to say. “So, are you gay? Or was this just an act?”

Tim gives her his best smile. “A lot of people are asking me that. And a lot more are speculating about it. Here’s what I’ve found out, there is no answer to that question that doesn’t get me called a liar. If I say I am gay, people point out that I’m married with kids and have never dated a man. The ones who know my wife and I mention that we are deeply in love, and quite affectionate, and are on our second child in two years. If I say I’m straight, they point out that plenty of gay guys, especially in the military and military services, are married with kids and have never dated a man. The ones who know me and my best friend think that we’re too close to be ‘straight.’ If I say I’m bi, they tell me bi guys don’t actually exist and I should pick a side. So, I’ll say this instead…”

“I am married. I love being married. I will be married for all the remaining days of my life. Over the years, I’ve racked up a lot of titles, Agent, Author, Director, the two that matter most to me are Husband and Father. That’s who I am.

“I have a family I love beyond all reason, and that love is my bedrock. That’s what gives me the
strength to be who I am, and the courage to become the man I want to be.

“My family knows all there is to know about me, and they’re the only ones who need to. Not to be too blunt, but you and your readers do not need to know everything there is to know about me.

“That said, if you’d like to ask more about our current policy shift, making sure that everyone who wants to serve in the Navy will be afforded respect and given the protection necessary to do their jobs, I’d be happy to talk more. If you just want to know about who I have sex with, I’d prefer to end this conversation.”

The reporters look remarkably unimpressed with that.

“Come on,” Clamton, the Out reporter says, “quit evading. Are you gay?”

Tim glances to Leon, asking silent permission to be a smartass. Leon grants it with a quick nod. “My sex life is an exceptionally exclusive party with a miniscule guest list. And if you aren’t on the guest list, you don’t get to find out who else is. And none of you are ever getting on the list. So, big data questions? Tracking algorithms? Active recruitment of the best talent we can find?”

“Guest list indicates more than one person,” Lingh says.

Tim stands up. “Bye.” He turns and heads out.

The reporters all stare at Leon after Tim leaves. He shakes his head. “I’m not even going to speculate. As well as I know, everything he’s told you is true.

“Now, as Director McGee said, policy chances, big data questions, recruiting outreach… What would you like to know more about?”

“Are you going to be seeking criminal charges against commanders that look the other way?”

Clamton asks.

“As of right now, looking the other way isn’t illegal. So, our first line of attack is to make sure we get the people who are committing the crimes. Second line is to see what sorts of patterns we have with command ranks. There’s a big difference between a squad commander looking the other way, and a Captain looking the other way. It’s possible the Captain might genuinely not know. He should know, but it’s possible he doesn’t. A squad commander, he knows. That’s where McGee’s standard deviation information will come in handy.

“Third of all, I will be working to make sure that looking the other way becomes the sort of thing a commander can be removed for. That will require a shift in our Code of Justice, but it’s one I’m going to be pushing for. In the meantime, if we have to ‘entrap’ people to get them to break currently existing laws, then we’ll do it that way. If you think violence is an appropriate response to someone coming out to you, I’m perfectly happy to put you in jail.

“Looking the other way, that’s ending, now. And I’ll kill it any way I can.” Leon smiles and begins to talk more about his ideal Navy.

There are indeed moments where Leon Vance has felt like he’s been on the side of the angels in his career. Moments where he’s made a real difference. But, until the point close to six weeks later,
when he makes a separate trip to Barnes and Noble to pick up a magazine on his way home, he’s never felt like his actions on Team Angel have intersected with his home life well.

Today, though, it did.

That press conference had been long, and he talked about a lot of things. The work after it was longer, and it made him deeply happy to do. His new Sec Nav was rather happy with the direction he wanted to go, and offered her full support.

Today, he’s bringing home a gift for his daughter. It’s the article that ended up in Out magazine after his press conference. It covers how he’s hell bent determined to make sure that the Navy gets the top talent it can find, straight, gay, male, female, in between, any race, the only thing that matter is if the person can do the job and do it well. And then, once it has those people, it’s going to go out of its way to keep them.

And he is very pleased to be able to hand that interview to his daughter.

He wraps his arm around her, and kisses the top of her head, which he can only reach because she’s sitting down. She’s too tall for him to do it now, when she’s standing, and he wonders how the hell that happened.

She’s looking up at him, very curious as to why he’d hand her a copy of Out magazine, which isn’t part of her, or his, regular reading.

Leon smiles. “Annapolis is going to be hard. The Navy is going to be hard. But I hope, and I’m working, to make sure that by the time you get there, it’ll be the right kind of hard.”

His daughter grins at him, a huge smile, and he feels so proud he wants to burst.
It annoys Jimmy to no end that the drugs he actually liked in college are all illegal. Alcohol, which messes with his blood sugar and leaves him feeling like shit the next morning if he has too much of it, can be bought in pretty much every grocery store in Virginia. Cigarettes, which taste like crap, make his lungs hurt, and are so massively unpleasant he’s never actually smoked one, are cheap and easy to get.

They are also, for the sake of the experiment he’d like to try, the wrong tools for the job. Yes, traditionally, alcohol is the drug of choice for soothing social anxiety and weakening the bonds of ‘proper behavior,’ but he had as much alcohol as he ever should the night they went clubbing, and he was not noticing any desire, at all, that night, to jump Tim.

So, obviously, at the dose he’s willing to take, it’s fighting outside its weight class trying to drop that inhibition.

He’s not willing to push it any further than that. Like he told Tim, he wants to have a good time, get laid, enjoy it, and not end up in a coma.

He’d also prefer to be somewhat functional the next day. He’s sure they’ll give him a pass if he needs one, spend Saturday sleeping whatever it is off, but he doesn’t want to do that.

And, also, it’d be kind of nice if he remembered the experience, too. He figures if he can connect erotic sensation and Tim in his mind once, doing it again will be easier. If it doesn’t make any lasting impression, that’ll be defeating the point.

Thus, as he gets into the Morgue, and begins turning on the computers, lights, and equipment, he’s feeling rather miffed the tools he would like to use are not available for use.

E, Special K, and pot, what he really liked, which made him feel good, and (at the doses he was taking) didn’t (usually) leave him feeling like shit the next morning, are, of course, illegal as hell.

He’s sure that if he felt like taking a walk to the evidence lock up, he could easily get his hands on any pharmacological substance he’d like to play with.

He thinks about that for a moment.

Ketamine would be a bad tool for this particular experiment. The goal is to be in his body, not off floating around in a good mood.

Pot has similar problems. Yes, it’s very relaxing, and that might be good for shutting down the part of him that thinks guys (or at least, Tim) aren’t supposed to be sexually interesting to him, but he doesn’t remember ever wanting sex on pot. Granted, back in those days, having someone to have sex with when he was on pot tended to be an iffy proposition, but even when he did have a girlfriend, mostly he just wanted to lie around, watch movies, and eat everything in the room. Jimmy shudders, trying to imagine dealing with the munchies, now.

If he’s hoping to have sex, really good sex, without his brain getting involved in the picture and sending messages he doesn’t want to his dick, E is what he’d like to have on hand. He hasn’t done that since 1996, since before he was diagnosed with diabetes, but he really liked it. E just makes everything more dreamy and intense and just all around lovely, and it’s really good with sex. Touch, any sort of touch feels amazing, and best he can remember he never got off on E, but he didn’t need
to. He and his girlfriend made out/made love for (what felt like) six hours, he’s not even sure if he got an erection, but he knows he didn’t come, and he still can’t remember that night without smiling. He imagines it’d be even better with sex with people you truly love.

More importantly than it makes everything feel good, is the fact that it makes you care fuck all about anything anyone else has ever said, done, or thought. If Penny’s right, and not being into Tim is cultural shaping, E will shut that bit of his brain down and let him play without it kicking in.

And it’s not going to happen. Yes, he’s got access, and yes, he’s got a lab where he can make sure the stuff in the pills really is MDMA, and, he’s sure that between his pharmacology background, and Abby’s Master’s degree in chemistry, they could come up with one hell of a finely tuned chemical cocktail made just for him, but between the illegal side, and the crash the next day, even with his system for minimizing the crash, he’s still achy and crabby the next day, he’s not going to do it.

He’s got all the lights and equipment on, and heads to his computer, getting it up and running, stopping his mental list of potential drugs, to get back to work. He pulls up the preliminary results on their victim’s blood work, as well as the trace evidence they removed from him. He gets that printed out for Agent Dornaget, and tidily tucked into a file.

That done, he’s in the morgue, by himself… He usually waits for Allan to come in to begin an Autopsy, and he’s due in soon, anyway, sooo…

Back to setting up his experiment.

Can’t grab something out of evidence. That means he’s got to stick with something he’s got on hand (Percocet, the bottle of Absinthe in his liquor cabinet), or something he can prescribe for himself.

So, he sits down, and starts reading up on Percocet. Just because it does good things for Tim, doesn’t mean it would for him, and these days, Jimmy’s extremely careful about anything he puts into his body that he doesn’t need to.

Just because Tim has a good time on it doesn’t mean he will.

And after a few minutes, he rapidly comes to the conclusion that it might work nicely with Tim’s biochemistry, but for Joe Average (or more likely, Jimmy Palmer) it’s a recipe for a sunny disposition, a limp dick, and a good nap.

He wants euphoria and relaxation, preferably without an anesthetic effect.

More reading. More researching for drugs he can legally get a hold of. He’s wondering if he just shot onto every government watch list by the research he’s doing. Then he starts wondering if there still are government watch lists. Probably. They cut the head off of a snake, they didn’t pull a St. Patrick and lead all the damn things out of the country. (That thought triggers Ducky’s voice in his mind, talking about how St. Patrick wasn’t Irish, and how snakes, being cold blooded, didn’t actually live in Ireland to begin with.)

More reading. He’s half paying attention to what he’s looking up, and half listening for the elevator. There are a lot of things he doesn’t mind Dr. Allan walking in on, him on a website searching drugs by the king of high they provide isn’t one of those things.

GHB… He missed that as a party drug. By the time it was getting any attention, he was already in law enforcement, so it’s not anything he seriously thought about.

Though… if one of its slang names is Liquid Ecstasy, it might be worth reading up on. So he does.
Ooohhh... This might be what the Doctor ordered. It doesn’t work the way E does, but it’s got a lot of the same sensations attached to it.

But, of course, it’s also, illegal as fuck. He’s muttering about what the hell it is the US government has against people having a good time when he hears the elevator bong, and turns off that search.

Jimmy’s morning flows along smoothly. He’s able to give Dornie his preliminary report without any flirting, though Dornie does ask if they’d like to get lunch with him and Abby, which sounds fine to Jimmy and Allan, so they agree, and then he and Allan get to the autopsy.

They work well together, each one knowing which part of the operation is his job. Jimmy thinks, that had it not been for the month in The Morgue, that Allan would not be this sharp at the job. In a usual week, Jimmy and Allan will see one murder victim, and two accidental deaths. Granted they will do a more thorough job than they were doing at The Morgue, and they will do quite a bit more reporting, but it would have taken Allan years to get the experience he got in that one month by just working at NCIS.

The lack of blood was explained, at least in part, by the preliminary report. The victim had a .4 BAC. He was in the process of dying of alcohol poisoning when he was stabbed.

He did not however, smell like alcohol, and when Jimmy and Allan got to his stomach, they did not find large quantities of anything, let alone alcohol, in there. They did find what appears to be a puncture wound in his femoral artery.

And thus, the mystery deepens!

After September, and worse, November, Jimmy finds it very settling to have a basic, straightforward, murder mystery to deal with.

Lunch feels bizarre on a few levels. It’s him and Abby getting lunch together. Happens at least twice a week usually. That part feels normal and easy. Like he’s been doing since they got back to work, she waits at the table in the cafeteria, and he (Tim usually, but if he’s not there Jimmy does it) gets lunch for both of them.

Craig, the guy at the register, gives him a long look as he rings up both lunches. As Jimmy steps away, he mutters under his breath, “Better do damn well better than a crappy lunch if you’re fucking her husband.”

For a second, Jimmy tenses, about to say something along the lines of, “What was that?” But he sees Abby waiting, sees a lot of people looking at him, and decides that now is a good time to go selectively deaf.

Allan’s behind him, and also hears the not nearly under the breath enough words out of Craig. He tenses, too, and then “accidentally” spills his drink on Craig.
Craig glares, hard, at Allan, while Allan batters him in apologetic bullshit. Craig’s just starting to relax, thinking that it might be an accident, when Allan quietly says, “So, so sorry. Got distracted by a jerk making a comment about something he knows nothing about.”

“You defending him?”

“I don’t need to. What he does is on him. I’m calling you out for being a jerk about it.”

Before Craig can say more, Allan follows Jimmy to the table.

“I take it you’re looking forward to more restaurants around here opening again?” Allan says as he sits down. He can well imagine they’d like to eat somewhere they could be anonymous.

Jimmy’s already told Abby what Craig said. “Wouldn’t mind it,” she says. “This is a pretty sad lunch.”

It’s a grilled chicken salad, probably made yesterday. The lettuce is limp and the croutons are soggy.

“Want me to get something else?”

Abby shakes her head at Jimmy. “Nothing else here is going to be much better.” Actually, nothing there was any better period. He grabbed the best looking thing he saw, for her. “It’s food, and I’ve only got room for three bites anyway, so…” she stabs a bite of the chicken with her fork and gets to it.

Dornie joins them a bit later. He’s looking awfully happy.

“Do I sense a break in the case?” Abby asks him as he sits down.

Dornie grins. “A good one. I’ve got the wife buying large quantities of 181 proof rum and syringes.”

Abby hadn’t heard that part. “She shot him up with rum?”

Allan nods. “Don’t know about she, not yet, but he’s got a small puncture wound in his thigh, leading to the femoral artery.”

“We can excise the tissue and see if there are any traces of alcohol in it,” Jimmy adds.

“Ewww... That’s cool, I guess. How’d she think she’d get away with it though? I mean, that sounds like a lot of premeditation for a really easy crime to track down,” Abby says.

Dornie nods at that, and then says, “And how’d she get him to just lie there and take it? Hey Honey, could you just lie here for a few minutes while I kill you?”

“That would be a hard sell,” Allan says, dryly, chewing his hamburger.

They sit there, the four of them, having a really normal, for work, conversation. Sure, most people probably don’t talk murder over salad and fries, but, they’re NCIS, it’s their job.

Jimmy can feel people watching them, and he wonders what they might think about this. If the rumors are true, he and Abby should be on the outs, not having lunch together, and they’re sitting
there with the two most visibly out men in the building.

Every now and again, as they talk, he glances around, scanning the room, the sort of thing he’d rarely do before. Every time he catches eyes on him, most of them darting away as he looks in their direction.

Abby gently touches his hand and minutely shakes her head. “Don’t do it, Jimmy. If they know you care, they double down on it.”

He returns his gaze to her, Ned, and Allan, realizing that, on different levels, all three of them have gone through a version of this. He’s so used to Abby being Abby, that he forgets that every new place they go, her tattoos and clothing get looks. And Allan and Ned must have had something like this happen when they came out.

He shrugs a bit. “Feels weird to be out of a closet I was never in. How long does this part last?”

“Depends on how out you go,” Ned says. “You come out over and over and over. Every new group of people you interact with enough for it to make sense for them to know, you have to tell. In my experience, it takes about two weeks for the looks and whispers to stop.”

Allan wiggles his hand. “Depends a lot on where you are and who you’re with. The CDC was cool, but there were parts of Atlanta that my partner and I were always going to get looks, no matter how long we lived there. One difference, don’t ever move into a neighborhood blind if you’re gay. That was beyond stupid on our part.”


“I got a job with the CDC. Between the two of us we didn’t have a ton of money, but we found what looked like an okay apartment not too far away. I went to visit it, and it had what we needed. Run down neighborhood, but it didn’t feel dangerous. I mean, we lived in Chicago before, we knew dangerous neighborhoods. This one was just old and shabby. I signed the lease, and we moved in.”

“And you went on your own, no one noticed you were gay because you were alone, and when you showed up with a boyfriend…” Ned fills in the blanks in his mind.

“Yeah. We lived there for a year. The old lady who lived in the basement apartment stared every single time we went out. I’m still not sure which pissed her off more, that we were gay, or that Ryan was Chinese. That pissed off a lot of the neighbors, too. Here, though, yeah, two weeks. Of course, they’re all waiting for some massive, public explosion between you two and Tim. That’ll keep them watching longer.”

“At least until Tim’s back in the office and you two start really hanging out again. That’ll get a lot more attention. But… March, April… Can’t imagine it’ll go longer than that,” Dornie says. He looks at Jimmy, and Abby, and decides to ask anyway, “Really, they aren’t gay?”

Abby shakes her head. “Really not. Trust me, if either of them had been, I would have known, and if they’d been out, I would have mentioned it to you.”

Dornie sighs.

“You were telling him who was gay?” Jimmy asks.

“Yeah, when I moved here,” Dornie says. “You’ve got to find out some way, and contrary to public opinion we don’t actually have ‘gaydar.’ At least, I don’t. Sure, a guy pats your fanny at a club, you’ve got a clue, but just working, at work… I can’t really tell. There’s no gay way to file a report.
Abby looked like the kind of person who would know.”

“He was new, looked interesting, and liked my tattoos. I liked the look of him. Dinner, a bottle of wine, a lot of giggling, and a good time was had by all.”

Ned smiles at that memory. “And then Tim wanted to slap me the next day.” Abby giggles a bit at that, too. “You two weren’t dating then, right?”

She shakes her head. “Nah. But on again off again jealousy was part of our game.”

Dornie glances between Abby and Jimmy, remembering what Tim said, and wondering what exactly he meant by that. “But it’s not, now?”

“That’s the difference between real love and just fondness. Love doesn’t get jealous. It knows it has no bounds and that it’s not diminished by being shared.” Abby pats Sean, and then winces. “Ack… Yes, I love you, too, no need to kick me like that!”

Jimmy rests his hand on her belly, and feels little boy squirming around. He doesn’t look around, but he can imagine that made another ten minds explode. *Two weeks. Or maybe twelve. You can do this.*

---

As Dr. Allan finishes up with their body, Jimmy returns to his search. GHB… They made it to take care of specific medical issues. It’s not just something someone cooked up in his garage one day. There has to be a prescription version of it somewhere.

Finally, he finds something.

Xyrem. There is exactly one legal version he can write a script for. He’s grinning and happily looking this stuff up, reading more, obviously, since it’s a drug used to treat narcolepsy, he’s got to be careful about how to use it, but the damn stuff is basically pure GHB, so…

Oh, God, even better, it makes you horny! Causes euphoria, makes touch feel better, lowers social inhibitions… And then you sleep the damn stuff off. This is exactly what the doctor ordered. In the right doses, this might be a hell of a lot of fun on their next long weekend.

He gets his pad out and is writing away, extremely naughty fantasies running about in his head, when he runs into a snag in his plan. He keeps reading. A big fucking snag in his plan.

Xyrem, because it is GHB, is basically impossible to get. He’s got to register with the drug company that makes it, and get certified as the kind of guy who should be prescribing this stuff, which he can’t do because he’s not a sleep specialist, and then, whomever he prescribes it for, also has to register, with a full medical background showing sleep problems, and the only pharmacy south of Philadelphia and north of Atlanta they could get it from burned down in October.

Jimmy grits his teeth, muttering about how he’s going to register as a Libertarian before Dr. Allan reminds him there are no political parties anymore, and they were barely a party to begin with anyway, and thinks longingly of how easy it would be to head into the evidence lock up and just grab a pill from the to-be-destroyed pile. He’s even got his own tablet maker, so he could swap pill A for one of his own, that way the count wouldn’t be off.

He sits back, staring at the ceiling, thinking about the fact that in college he knew how to get this
stuff. Of course, in college he wasn’t nearly as worried about getting arrested. Didn’t have nearly as much to lose.

And, while he does want to play with this, he doesn’t want to risk the life he’s got for it.

Back to what he’s got on hand.

Allan slides their victim back into his drawer and heads over to Dr. Palmer. He’s been researching something, and muttering about it, for the last ten minutes. None of those mutters sounded happy.

“What had you thinking about Libertarians, Dr. Palmer?” The computer is back to the victim information form, so whatever he was doing is done now.

Dr. Palmer shakes his head. “Drug regulations.”

Allan looks surprised by that. Jimmy’s never said anything to indicate anything along those lines before. Then he thinks for another moment. Jimmy’s diabetic. He’s seen him give himself shots every now and again, and occasionally check his sugar. Part of their ambulance kit is testing strips and a can of Coke. He also knows that there’s a lot of promising research coming out about the effects of THC on diabetes. “I’m sure the new Congress will legalize medical pot. And if they don’t, I can’t imagine DC won’t when it becomes a state. You’ll be able to get it soon enough.”

“I still live in Virginia.”

“Right. But at least you won’t end up losing your job for it. Saw another report linking THC to positive outcomes in diabetics.”

Jimmy nods. “Yeah. I’d like to see some thorough testing on that.”

“Hard to do when it’s illegal.”

“I know.”

Allan taps the small plastic container in his hand. “I should take this to Abby. She can check for traces of alcohol.”

“Thanks, Dr. Allan.”

In the morgue by himself, Jimmy supposes giving up on the drug hunt is also part of not feeding the dark, slimy thing in the back of his head. That he can’t, shouldn’t, in good conscious help put people away for doing the sort of thing he’s hoping to do for fun.

Part of disliking most politicians is seeing those smug bastards talk about how they used every drug under the sun, and then sat there and put tons of people in jail for the same damn thing.

He supposes he does that, too, though given the power, he’d pardon everyone in jail on a drug
charge who didn’t engage in anything violent, and the only people he personally helps to put in jail are murders.

He’s not sure that’s good enough though.

He snorts at that, remembering something Ducky once said, “There is only one human condition, Mr. Palmer, and that’s hypocrisy. Everyone, if they live long enough, will get there sooner or later. The task is to try to keep it to the past tense. I used to do this, I learned from it, and that is why I do not think you should do it. If you do it in the present tense, it makes you an ass.”

He figured he was in his mid-twenties when Ducky said that, and it makes a hell of a lot more sense now than it did then.

More importantly, after he’s done musing in that direction, is that, if he can’t do it sober, he probably shouldn’t be doing it at all.

Though, he’s not trying to force himself to touch Tim. He’s sure he can do that. Hell, he has done that. He’s trying to see if there’s a circumstance where he can like it.

He knows one circumstance where he likes it just fine. Wrap Breena around both of them, and he’ll happily fuck Tim, too.

Once he got into that, it felt wicked good. That was a whole lot of excellent things all happening at once and it felt amazing.

So… maybe if he’s just turned on and horny enough… Add, maybe, a glass or two of wine, or one of absinthe… just to bump him over the… jitters? Maybe… whatever it is.

Well, that shouldn’t be too damn hard to arrange, and no one’s going to even suggest putting him in jail for a marathon sex session with his loves.

“Director of Cybercrime Tim McGee, who would neither confirm nor deny being gay…” Abby puts her tablet down. It’s after dinner. Babies are in bed. They’re back at the McGee house. The three more agile members of her family team are on baby furniture assemblage. She’s reading to them, letting them know what’s hit the wire. “I suppose that’s one way to put it.”

Tim looks at his wife as he and Jimmy sit on the floor screwing together a dresser. “I told you that Ned outright laughed at me when I said I was straight, right?”

“Oh, yeah, and he told me about it later,” Abby adds.

“He had lunch with the two of us and Allan,” Jimmy adds. “Want to talk about a lot of whispers. We sat down in the canteen and every eye in the place was staring.”

“How much of that was Ned being there, and how much of that was you with Abby?” Breena asks. “I need another octagonal screw.” Tim hands one over. Right now, she’s putting together the toddler
bed that Kelly will soon be using as they get ready to move her into her own bed, and Sean gets the crib.

“All of it was Abby and I,” Jimmy says.

Abby nods. “My lab guys keep their eyes glued to us whenever Jimmy or Tim is in the lab.”

“Waiting for the blow up?” Breena asks.

“Probably,” Jimmy says. “They seem almost disappointed that we’re so damn normal together. Same with when I’m with Tim. That gets a lot of stares and whispers, too.”

“Anything else?” Breena asks.

“Really snide comment at lunch today,” Jimmy replies.

“But not much beyond that. I mean…” Abby shrugs a bit. “We’re each the Boss of our own department. All they can do is whisper. Not like we depend on these people for a good annual review.”

“Be a hell of a different story if we were lower in the ranks,” Jimmy adds.

“I can see a lot of them think I’m a prime, grade-A asshole now,” Tim adds, and nods at Jimmy, too.

“Him, too. One thing to have a boyfriend. Another thing to be having an affair with a guy while your wife is pregnant. A few of the Minions are changing their hours all of a sudden. I’m assuming that’s so they don’t have to worry about possibly working with me in person.”

“How is that going?” Abby asks.

He shrugs a bit. “I’m really just supervising. I haven’t worked a real project since Monday morning, and I won’t get on another one until March at the earliest. Mostly, the ones who are in when I’m in, keep watching me when I’m in the office, especially if I’m talking to anyone, but it feels mostly curious. Brand, Howard, and Ngyn keep looking at me, looking away, and giggling. That’s… disconcerting.”

Abby giggles a bit at that, too. “That’s Brand having a crush on you, and not knowing what to do with it.”

Breena snorts a little, too. “Remember when she and… Howard, right?”

Tim nods.

“When they came here, they were whispering about you and Jimmy being hot. My guess is the idea of you two together just melted their collective brains, and giggling is the only way to deal with it.”

Tim sighs. “So, you’re saying this is a natural side effect of hiring an eighteen and twenty-three year old, and letting them work together with minimal adult supervision.”

The ladies nod.

“I thought Howard was the one keeping your office going while you’re out?” Jimmy says.

“I don’t care if she’s giggly as long as she can do the job. And she’s good. Ngyn’s the better programmer, more grown up, but she hates dealing with people. So between the two of them, I’ve got a second-in-command. Brand’s tagging along, being the genius wonder kid. It works. At the very least, they seem to know when to text me for help, and when not to.”
“Have they?” Breena asks.

“Nope.” Tim smiles. “So, beyond the fact that I won’t say if I’m gay or not, what does the Post have to say?”

Abby picks the tablet up again. Her eyes skim over the paragraphs. “Most of it is about NCIS’s new commitment to anti-hate crime policing. You’re going to start using data mining to look for problems?”

“If I ever get back into the office long enough to actually program something, again. Yeah. It won’t be too hard. I’ve got all the information. I just have to use it.”

“Why not put it on your job queue?” Breena asks, fitting another slat into the bottom of Kelly’s little girl sized bed.

Tim thinks about that. He’s got more than half a dozen guys who could do this, probably knock the programming out in less than two days, and once it’s done, he’ll need someone to monitor it, and use what it finds… Organize who to go after, how, and when.

And thinking through it, he knows why.

“I don’t have a big job anymore. I manage. But… there’s no huge case, not like there was.”

“And you want one?” Abby asks him, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah. If I was in the office fulltime right now, I’d be feeling like I’m drifting.” He shrugs at that.

“Feel like I’m drifting at the Commission, too.”

“Another stupidly boring day?” Jimmy asks.

Tim rolls his eyes. “Okay. I don’t hate the idea of all the anti-terror tech guys in one bundle, but… It’s a logistical nightmare. Say… I don’t know, you’re LA PD, scratch that, say you’re the New York City cops. You’ve got a case. It looks like it might be involved in some sort of terror thing. So, you head on over to your Terror Tech system, punch your information in, and see what pops up. That part I’m fine with. But then, once you’ve punched it in, you’ve got to keep using it to get more tech. So, you’ve got to go outside of your own organization for wiretaps, chatter, whatever. Meanwhile, our tech guys, they don’t ever set foot in the field. The closest any of us would get to laying eyes on the guys we’re trying to catch is a drone hovering overhead.” Tim rubs his eye. “It’s half clusterfuck and half better streamlining.”

“So, what would you like to see?” Jimmy asks, leaning across Tim to grab another drawer front.

“I like the idea of a fast, strong, good database that everyone can use. If I’ve got half the case in NCIS, and you’ve got another quarter in the FBI, and Bob’s got a clue in the Metro PD… even if we all want to talk to each other,” Abby snerks at that, “Yeah, I know. We’ll pretend right now that we’re not having any territorial pissing matches. Even if we all want to talk to each other, we might not know we need to.

“So, sure, something where everyone puts in prints, DNA, weapons, MOs, locations, all of it. And we do it for every crime. And they all update in as near of real time as possible. That would be great.”

“Every crime, you’re not just thinking terror, are you?” Breena asks.

“No. One thing I’m seeing that I’m liking is the idea of shelving the idea of geographical
jurisdictions. Hopping from town to town or state to state shouldn’t be a way to avoid detection.”

“Same things aren’t illegal everywhere,” Jimmy adds.

“Then we can keep it to things that are illegal everywhere. There’s no state where murder’s legal, let alone kidnapping, rape, or theft. Just… Okay. I could see that. This huge database that you put everything in, and it spits everything back out again. Serial killers, if they’re smart enough to move from state to state, we almost never find them. Just stuff like that. And with terror cases… same basic idea. FBI’s got one set of wiretaps. CIA’s got another. Homeland’s got video surveillance. None of them know the other is on the job, and they never talk to each other. We can fix that, and I’d be happy to be part of fixing that.

“But sequestering us off from everyone else? That looks like a whole new way for us to get annoyed at each other and squabble over who gets what information.”

“So, what are you thinking?” Abby asks.

Tim licks his lips. “I don’t know if we’ve got the talent or will to even try to pull it off, but… One group. Crime, terror, anything illegal. It all goes into the system. Teams go into the system like they do with my triage system, by specialty. Every case a team takes, that updates their specialty list.

“Crime comes in. Whoever’s on the ground grabs it. They do whatever it is they can, fit the case for all the preliminary data. The best, closest, unoccupied team for the job gets it. They take over, and keep adding data to the case. If it moves out of their wheelhouse, they pass it on to the next best, unoccupied team. If it stays in their area, they finish it, and then off to court it goes.”

“Anyone else like that idea?” Breena asks.

“I haven’t floated it around, yet. Right now I’m listening and watching. Add in the kind of database work I’m talking about for NCIS, and we’ve have a great system to weed out incompetence and bias. Hell, we could put a time stamp on it, too. If evidence gets entered, like a rape kit or something, but the results don’t show up in the system by a certain time, we could flag that. Move the evidence to a less-slammed lab if there’s just too many cases in place A, or find the kind of people who just let evidence sit because they don’t want to deal with certain crimes, if not.”

Abby smiles softly at Tim. “You would have made a hell of an engineer, you know that, right?”

He glances up at her curiously, looking at the dresser that Jimmy’s doing most of the putting together on.

“No. You build systems, Tim. Here’s a problem. Here’s a huge, complicated, elegant system for fixing the problem.”

“Oh…” That makes a lot of sense, but he hasn’t thought about it that way. “Yeah, well, right now, this system’s just an idea. Building it would be… Anyway, anything else, in the Post?”

“They talk about Leon’s ‘If I have to entrap them, I will…’ bit, and then explain about the Admiral’s history…” Abby goes quiet. “Fucker,” slides out of her quiet and violent.

“More?” Breena asks.

“Twenty-two questionable cases under him that Burley found. Two sailors who went missing. Twenty more with hinky, unsolved, assaults. Some of them go back to when he was a Commander. Most of them passed the statute of limitations. Only things they have in common, him, believed to be or gay sailors, ‘everyone looked the other way,’ and no conclusive proof was ever found.”
Looks of disgust fill the room.

Abby starts skimming again. “Okay, after the background, they get into what Tim did, pretty non-detailed version, just that Leon had decided that Admiral McGee would be the perfect figurehead for what he’s trying to do, so he calls Tim in because he and The Admiral have ‘long term issues going back to Director McGee’s childhood’, they meet up at the Terror-In-Anti-Tech Commission, and after Tim ‘who would neither confirm nor deny being gay’ came out to him, he hit Tim. It wraps with John pleading guilty, and that he’s currently in Leavenworth, awaiting formal sentencing, though the maximum time he can do for assault and a hate crime is five years.”

“That’s it?” Jimmy asks.

“Yep. Maybe a thousand words, and if this was a literal paper, it’d probably be three or four pages in, below the fold. Next round of voting starts Tuesday, and that’s got all the top stories.”

“Good,” Tim says.

Later that night, as they’re laying out the towels on the bed (period sex with Breena means a bit of extra prep work) Jimmy explains his experiment plans, and then pulls out the big gun.

He’s not getting off. Not tonight, or tomorrow, and on Friday, assuming Tony and Ziva are free, they’re handing in one of their babysitting night coupons they got for Christmas, and going to town.

“I figure if I spend days fooling around with you guys, without getting off, come Friday I’ll be horny enough to kill any sort of social conditioning that might be damping down eroticism.”

Jimmy doesn’t miss the look Abby and Breena flash each other. He’s been married more than long enough to recognize husband is being silly. “Comments from the peanut gallery,” he says, dryly.

Breena looks at him, and then kisses him slow and soft. “You really gonna do this, make out for days, and not get off, at all?”

“That’s the plan.”

She shakes her head a bit. “Okay. Tim?”

“I’m game. I know I liked the last thing he was doing to me that I clearly remember, and apparently I liked last night, too. So, sure… Experiment, play, see how it goes. It doesn’t work, it doesn’t work. Other than him being frustrated, we haven’t lost anything by trying. If it does work, might try it myself.”

Abby’s been looking like she’s thinking of something. “Friday night is Shabbos. If we want Tony and Ziva to take the kids, we’re going to have to push this to Saturday. So, you want to fully play tonight, or be that more worked up when we get to date night?”

Jimmy groans. The whole time they’ve been talking, he’s had a naked Breena in his arms, rubbing against him in a very pleasant sort of way, and suddenly getting an extension is really appealing.

He bites his tongue. “They’re all yours, Tim. Tonight, I’m just fingers and tongue.”
Dad

On Thursday, Tim sits in his place at the Commission feeling fairly awake. He’s coming to the conclusion that there’s a very large difference between one cracked bone and twenty broken ones. He’s not feeling any desire to work out, but he’s aware of the fact that if he had to, he could. And that was not even remotely true for more than a month after getting home from the Stennis.

One cracked bone is not, really, that big of a deal. Especially if that crack is located in a bone that’s not designed to move.

His eyelid opens the whole way now, which is nice, and he’s down to Aleve for the pain.

All in all, he’s feeling pretty good.

And bored.

Today’s been the counter arguments for why one big Terror Tech unit is a bad plan. He’s made most of those arguments, though they’re whipping out some he considers bad ones, like the need to keep the CIA off of US soil and the FBI on it, and the like. He scoffs at that. Old thinking following old laws that might not even be legal.

Then there are the good ones. It’d be expensive as hell. He agrees. Doing this right would not mean nickel and diming it while the lowest bid contractor turns out the Obamacare website 2.0. This cannot spend years being “fixed,” and then still not work all that well when it’s “functional.” For this to have any shot of working, it needs to be built, from the ground up, with decent equipment, and designed by someone who really knows how to work a database. His people, by which he doesn’t mean his personal team, but real, hardcore data guys, who live and die by their ability to search out patterns, need to design this thing. And then it needs to be tested into the ground by Gibbs-type guys, people who hate computers and can kill them with a well-timed look.

When it can work with both groups, it’ll be done.

Given a real budget, he’d headhunt Google, and get them to design it. If it worked exactly like the Web, with each case being a “web page” and then had a google-esque search system… Even Gibbs can use the internet these days, and anyone who can’t, can’t be more than five years away from retirement. Gone by the time this thing would be really up and running.

But, the more he thinks about a system for this, for all crimes, the more he likes it. Run it like the web. Set it so that every bit is built together, at once, integrated. They already have AFIS, and bullet databases, and knives, and tires, and all the rest of it, but they were all designed hodge-podge with various levels of functionality.

AFIS… Abby’s a wizard with it, and it takes her an hour to get each set of prints in. He understands that on average, it takes two hours per set of prints. There’s got to be a way to speed it up, and…

Again, it takes Google less than a second to come up with 50,000 matches for an image search. It takes AFIS hours or days and sometimes weeks to come up with something. (Yes, he’s fully aware of how useful a Google image search would be for something like a fingerprint, so he gets that this is the basic template for an idea, not the final concept.)

That said, there’s got to be a way to speed this stuff up.

He’s writing out notes, ideas, and bits of code as he’s thinking of it. Delilah looks over at his notes,
since today’s the first day he’s really writing them, and then she says, “That’s not what he’s talking about.”

“Nope.”

She reads over his shoulder. “I like that.”

“Me, too.”

“My group would kill for that kind of information all in one place. It’d make trend analysis so much easier.”

He nods. “Got an ex-NSA analyst on my team. She’d love something like this, too.”

“Yeah. You going to present it?”

“Nope. I’ll keep working on the idea. Need cost figures and a lot of other bits before setting this in front of someone else.”

Her eyes continue to scan his notes, and he turns his computer toward her so she can scroll up and down to keep reading. “You want help with that, holler. My team would like to be part of something like that.”

“I’ll keep working on it. I’ve got the Federal Cybercrime Initiative Commission next week. If it’s anything like this, I’ll have a week to just work on this.”

“I’m not going to be at that one. Back to Dubai on Monday, but keep me in the loop.”

“No problem.” Tim thinks for another moment. “You want to co-design? I’ll be on paternity leave for at least some of the next few months, and effectively useless at anything that involves heavy thinking.”

Delilah smiles. “Yeah. Get your stuff as done as you can, and kick it over to me. I’ll kick it back to you when I get a version done, and we’ll volley it around until it’s ready to see the wider world. Bounce it to some of the other minds we know.”

Tim nods at her with a smile, too. “Good.”

Jeannie Slater doesn’t usually spend too much time in the “working” part of Palmer and Slaters’. She’s the front of the house manager. During funerals, she holds hands, pats backs, makes sure tissues are readily available. She takes care of people, and makes sure everything goes smoothly. When there aren’t funerals going on, she’s in charge of the showroom and sales.

But, given the call she got last night from her brother-in-law, she’s heading down to the basement, where Ed and Breena do their work.

Breena is down there, carefully washing off Mr. Keller. (Ed’s off with the van, picking up a new client.)

“Hey, hon.”
“Mom! Hey.” Breena looks up at her, expression annoyed. “Did we get another delay on the Millennium X caskets? I’m tempted to just cut them off and look for a new supplier. Someone else has to make a decent gunmetal gray mid-range casket.”

“Nothing with them.” She’s not sure how to start this conversation. Breena looks very normal. She’s in her working scrubs and apron, hair tied back, gloves on, hosing down their client. Jeannie’s sure that if something bad was happening with Tim and Abby, Breena wouldn’t look this calm or composed. “Ummm…”

“Yeah?”

“Are Abby and Tim okay?”

“Sure, Mom… Oh, you read the Post, didn’t you?”

“Your Uncle Wes did, and he called, wanted to know the story.”

Breena shrugs a bit. “First off, yes, Abby and Tim are fine. Abby was there when it happened, knew it was going to happen, helped to plan it, and approved of it.”

That was really not anything Jeannie expected. She was hoping that Wes misread and it was another Tim McGee. “So… she knows that Tim’s… gay?”

Breena snorts, looking extremely amused at that idea. “Please! No, he’s not! You’ve met him, seen him with Abby. Does a gay guy act like that? Come on!” She shuts off the water, and gently pats the shoulder of their client. “That’s it for now, Mr. Keller. We’ll get you dressed in a minute.” Then she looks back to her Mom, face and voice more serious. “Do you remember in the late spring when Tim went off on that secret mission and got hit by a truck coming home?”

Jeannie nods. She’s not expecting that kind of response from Breena, and she’s starting to feel cold, because she does remember how badly hurt Tim was. “He didn’t get hit by a truck?”

“No. He got hit by The Admiral’s men, four of them. They locked him in a cell with them, and… You saw the results. John ordered it. We all knew that. Everyone knew it. But, no proof. He’s an Admiral, so it had to be ironclad, so they couldn’t make the case. The Admiral shows up again, and Tim made sure to get the proof, and neither he nor Abby cared much what he’d have to say to get the Admiral to swing at him. John’s the most homophobic man on the planet, so that’s what Tim used. It worked. John hit him. And he’s in jail now, and we’re all tickled pink about it.”

Jeannie blinks, shocked, and for a moment says nothing before, “Oh… I didn’t… I knew they didn’t get on, but…” comes out. She remembers Kelly’s christening, and feels even worse about asking Tim if he wanted his parents there.

Breena smiles a bit at her mom, having a good sense about what Jeannie’s thinking. “That’s all Tim wants or needs people to know. We get to be a bit less circumspect about what happened in June, now, but he’s pretty private; he’d prefer not to have that spread around.”

Jeannie nods. “I understand.” There’s still one question in her mind, a question that she feels a bit off about, but… She’s seen how well Tim and Jimmy get along, and between that and the article, she’s starting to wonder if they’re just friends. “Why wouldn’t he say, though?”

“Say what?”

“He refused to say he was straight.”
Breena rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “He tried, twice. People outright laughed at him and told him to get out of the closet.”

“Oh.”

Breena shrugs again. “You know the story, but if you didn’t, and you saw that headline, and then read the article, and then saw, ‘Director McGee, who is married with two children, and claims to be straight…’ you wouldn’t believe it either, right?”

Jeannie sighs. “No. That’s not… usually… the kind of thing someone would say unless they were.”

“Yes. Still, he and Abby thought a little scandal was worth getting the Admiral into prison, and Jimmy and I and the rest of the family are happy to support them in it.”

Jeannie smiles at her daughter. “Then we will, too.”

Now Breena looks serious. “Will Dad? I’d rather he wasn’t making snide comments about Tim being gay.”

“He’s your Dad. You know words come out before he can stop them, but, not like he cares much one way or another about gay or straight, and on top of that, it’s Tim. Be one thing if it was Jimmy, but Tim? He’s not nearly so concerned that Abby might have a gay husband than you might.”

“Neither of us have gay husbands.”

“Well… good.”

Breena smiles at her, and then turns to the shelf where the towels live. “Time to get Mr. Keller dried off. Got to get him ready for the evening showing.”


“Dressed, made-up, and waiting. Just got to get her rolled out for the 11:00 viewing.”

“Good.”

——

Tony gets a similar, if less delicately parsed call, later that afternoon. He’s been waiting for it since he saw the news conference with Tim and Leon. And… as he’s filling in one of his reports, his phone rings.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Tim’s gay? I thought I could always tell, but…”

“I see you picked up a newspaper.”

“Pah! Who does that? Irwin Northmanon, he runs the Omni, was telling me about the dust up. He recognized you, told me you busted the guy, an Admiral who took a shot at his kid when he came out to him. At a tech conference. That’s Tim and his father, right?”

“Yeah Dad.”

Tony can feel his dad shaking his head. “How did I miss that?”
“You didn’t. He’s not gay.”

“Junior…” There’s oodles of patronizing schmooze in those two syllables. “You don’t have to do that. I don’t judge. That’s part of the DiNozzo code. The more of them there are, the better for us.”

“He’s married, Dad.”

“Of course, most of them are.”

Two thoughts go springing into Tony’s head, the first one is that his father’s logic on ‘the more ladies for us’ and ‘most of them are married’ doesn’t match up, and ‘most’ is making him really wonder about his father’s friends.

“Is Abby okay? I know a really good divorce lawyer.”

Tony sighs again. “Abby’s fine. They aren’t getting divorced.”

“Now that’s just plain wrong! It’s one thing if you do that sort of thing on the sly, but once you’re out, you’re just wasting that woman’s time by staying married to her. Do I need to come over there and have a chat with Tim?”

The idea of Senior having a heart to heart with Tim about marriage pointers makes Tony shudder. “Dad, if Tim were fooling around with anyone, let alone a man, behind Abby’s back, do you really think Gibbs wouldn’t have already killed him so dead that all of his individual organs would no longer be in the same zip codes?”

Senior thinks about that for a moment. “You’ve got a point. So, he’s really not?”

Tony’s nodding against his phone. “Really not. Undercover op. He was the bait; Draga and I were waiting for John to move. Tim got him to strike, dropped him, and then we moved in for the arrest.”

“And he played the gay guy…” Tony can feel Senior’s smirk. “Better him than you. Let me guess, he had the skirt on, right?”

“And was working it.”

“Well, good for him, then!” There’s a long quiet, where Tony can feel Senior’s mood shift, where what actually happened hits him, and then Senior says, “There’s a reason why I’ve never met Admiral McGee, isn’t there?”

“Yeah, Dad. You’ve never seen him at a Christmas party or a wedding for a reason, and that reason’s not that he’s far away. Same with Tim’s mom.”

“Oh.” That ‘Oh’ says a lot.

“Yeah.”

There’s another quiet moment.

“Dad…”

“Junior?”

“I love you.”

Tony can feel his dad beaming on the other side of the phone. “Me, too. Junior. Me, too.”
“You coming to Shabbos tomorrow?”

“You coming to Shabbos tomorrow?"

“Can’t, we’re in Vegas. Got a lead that the Congress after the next one will be here, and I’m looking at real estate.”

“Happy hunting, Dad.”

“Thank, son.”

While it’s true that Fornell is “technically” retired, so far that hasn’t resulted in any real change, beyond what he wears to the office, in his daily schedule.

But as he folds up his copy of the Post, it occurs to him that he doesn’t actually have to go in at any given time, and if he feels like it, he can so see his friend, who is probably on the verge of doing something really stupid, and prevent said stupid thing from happening. (Or help with it in such a way as to make sure it doesn’t bite his friend in the butt.)

So, he kisses Wendy, and says, “Gonna see Jethro for a bit. Lunch together, then the office?”

She nods up at him. “Sounds good to me.”

It’s a bit past half an hour later, when he, gingerly, opens the door to Jethro’s place, hoping that Mona won’t tackle him, but she just trots up the stairs from the basement and gives him a quick hello bark followed by some nuzzling and petting.

“He’s down there?”

Mona doesn’t nod, but she does turn to lead him down.

He hears Gibbs doing something with a saw, and before he’s halfway down the stairs says, “So, you need some help hiding the body?”

Gibbs puts down his saw (he’s getting slats cuts for Dave’s crib) takes off his safety glasses and looks up at Fornell. He’s looking frustrated.

Fornell looks back. “Okay, yeah, I know.” He finishes the walk down the steps and rests a hand on Jethro’s shoulder. “I know how much you love both of them. He’s your boy, and she’s your girl. Can’t imagine how much this sucks. Between the two of us, we’ve got to know a few good divorce lawyers. Try to get them split amicably.”

Gibbs shakes his head. He knows that Fornell isn’t on the list of guys who gets to know the full McPalmer story, but he figures Tim’ll forgive him spreading around why the Admiral was on his shit list.

Jethro’s only got one cup of coffee down with him right now, so he leads Fornell back up, to get him a cup, too.

“How bad is this?” Fornell’s asking. Jethro has a lot of flavors of quiet, but this one feels weird. Like he’s debating something.

Gibbs pours a cup for Tobias. “No one’s getting divorced. Just like the paper said, it was a sting.
They’re wrong about why it was a sting, but… Tim and Abby are fine.”

Tobias knows Jethro way too well to say, “You sure?” so instead he says, “What’s the sting?”

And over two cups of coffee, Jethro tells him.

Fornell listens, nods, listens some more, nods a few more times, and when Jethro’s done, says, “How was he even alive to get to this thing?”

Jethro’s eyes makes is clear that if it had just been up to him, John wouldn’t have made it to the Stennis test, let alone the Commission. “Tim said no. And Penny isn’t happy with John, but that doesn’t mean she wants him dead. Too many people to answer to.”

“You think Jarvis is still on it?”

Jethro taps his fingers against his cup. “Last I heard, Tim had told Jarvis not to go after him.”

Fornell shakes his head. “Look. I worked the Mafia for more than twenty-years. You want a guy who even I couldn’t catch; I know how to set it up.”

That startles Gibbs. “If you know how to set it up, why couldn’t you catch him?”

“Because I could never go from the set up to the guy doing the job. Set it up. That part I’ve got tracked fine. Person dies. Even in protective custody, the person dies. Got that. How? Usually could get that pinned down, too. Who did it? Twenty years, never got him. I’ve got open warrants for a John Doe with a certain set of finger prints and DNA, and that’s it.”

Jethro shrugs. He’s got unsolved cases like that, too. Some guys just are too damn good at this stuff.

“So, now what?” Tobias asks.

“Jail. Haven’t heard the sentence yet, but at least a few years.”

“Something bad going to happen to him there?” Fornell asks.

Jethro’s sure it could be arranged, but he hasn’t done anything about it. Mostly because he agrees with Jimmy’s assessment of exactly how much fun John would have in prison. “Why, you know a guy?”

“Not in Leavenworth, I don’t, but you do, right?”

Gibbs thinks for a second. “Three or four, probably. Not going to happen.”

“Sounds like a waste of opportunity.”

Jethro shrugs at that, too. “I never gave a second’s thought to Hernandez’s family. That he might even have one. Don’t have that luxury here. I eat dinner with his Mom every week, Tobias, and she’s a strong woman, but… Even in this case, she doesn’t want to bury another son. I don’t blame her.”

Fornell sighs. “It’s easier to just see them as scumbags, not people with lives and families and all the rest of it.”

Jethro nods. Then he puts down his coffee cup and says, “Shouldn’t you be at work?”

Fornell shrugs this time. “What are they going to do, fire me?”
It’s after Fornell heads off to work that a thought hits Jethro. He has a wedding to… okay, maybe not plan per se, but participate in, and if they’re doing this somewhat “fancy” wedding thing, he’ll be expected to develop a “Best Man” for this thing.

And five potential guys to pick from.

Okay, two really. He knows that none of the ‘boys’ will be bothered if they don’t get picked. He assumes none of them expect to do anything other than show up, or maybe groomsman duty.

Fornell or Ducky…

There’s a headache. He doesn’t think either of them would hold it against him if he picks the other one, but…

But they’re different aspects of his life, different sides to be honored. The older, cooler, wiser head that’s been able to provide council and solace, or the buddy in the trenches, the man who’s been there, done that, lifted the same weights and lived the same (mostly) pains.

Five years ago, this would be easy. And not just because it wouldn’t be an issue because there was no shot of him getting married. Just, five years ago, Ducky, hands down. But, like with the rest of his loves, he and Fornell have drawn closer, too.

He supposes Ducky would do a better job, and feel more comfortable with the Best Man’s speech. Fornell would probably do a better job with the bachelor party.

Then he smiles a bit, imagining what Mike Franks would have done with both.

*Don’t need to imagine, Probie, you’ve seen me run that play.*

Gibbs smiles. Like always, the voice comes to him from behind. But he turns, looks, and sees Mike. “Yeah, Mike, I did. But I don’t remember half of it.”

*Sign of a good bachelor party.* He can see Mike looking around his new living room, signs of Abbi all over. He appears to approve of the room, and then plops himself onto one of the chairs, looks at Gibbs and shakes his head. *Probably a good thing I’m not here for this. Not sure what the hell I’d do with you and your troop of Boy Scouts. You’d all want to be home by ten, no hangover, and no naked women.*

“Hazard of actually being in love.”

Mike laughs at that, fading away.

Friday is less productive than Tim would have liked. He was hoping to sit next to Delilah, open up his laptop, and between the two of them, quietly sketch out what CrimeWeb should look like.

Turns out the Commission had other ideas. They’re, once again, set loose on each other to mingle,
chat, and develop ideas.

It’s six hours of small talk.

Tech small talk, so it’s not nearly as painful as it could be, and some of these guys have decent ideas, but by the end of it, he’s more than ready to go home.

He’s had enough of plastic smiles, of guys who shift away from a group when he joins them, of people who change the topic when he gets nearby. He knows some of that is because of the Admiral, and for the Admiral part of it, about half is uncomfortable at the gay aspect, and half of it is that he’s the kind of guy who’d take his own father down in a sting. Add in he’s NCIS, and the guy who broke the election buying ring, so presumably he’s some sort of hyper-vigilant white-knight on the lookout for tom-foolery, or something, and that makes people nervous.

Some of it’s just plain old, our team’s gonna do our thing and we don’t want anyone poaching.

Hell, he’s doing a version of that. It’s not that he’s unwilling to share his ideas, it’s that he’d like to have them rounded out before he sets them loose. He doesn’t (usually) let people read his stories while they’re in the rough draft stage for that reason, too.

But, enough of the people at this thing are playing their cards close to the vest, that he’s getting annoyed.

Thus, it is with a spring in his step, and glee in his heart, that he’s able to shake the dust of the Tech-In-Anti-Terror Commission free of his shoes, and head out of the Omni, back to his home, pick up everyone’s stuff, as well as Kelly, swing by Molly and Anna’s daycare, grab them, and then back to NCIS to get Jimmy and Abby.

It’s Friday night, and they’re going home, for Shabbos.

“You ready?” Jimmy asks Abby, as their day comes to a close.

She’s looking pretty tired. “Yes! Got one last set of test shots. You want to wait, or head up.”

Jimmy settles in to lean against her desk. “You’re talking about, what, fifteen minutes?”

“Ten. I’ve got the paperwork done, just got to fire, fish out the bullets, and scan ‘em.”

Jimmy grabs his phone. “Got an article on islet cell transplants I’ve been waiting to read, I’m good.”

Abby nods, and waddles off to ballistics. Jimmy sits back and opens the article. He’s about two minutes into it when Zelaz rolls a collection of new evidence into the lab and sees him at Abby’s desk, looking fairly relaxed, eyes skimming over his phone.

Zelaz also doesn’t see Abby.

He steps away from the evidence, stalks over to Jimmy, and demands, “What the hell are you doing?”

Jimmy jerks when he hears the voice and then sees Zelaz looming over him, trying to look… intimidating or something. It’s not doing anything for Jimmy, other than annoying him.
“Reading up on islet cell transplantation and thinking about if that’s something I need to talk to my endocrinologist about.”

They both hear the bullet fire.

“That’s not… What are you doing down here? What are you doing with Abby? That’s one of the sweetest human beings on earth and you’re… you’re… What the hell are you DOING?”

“I’m waiting for her to get done with her shift. Then I’m going to grab her purse so she doesn’t have to carry it. I’m going to walk with her to Tim’s car. Then, all three of us, and our kids will drive to the home our family shares and celebrate the Sabbath together. My wife, the DiNozzos, Dr. Mallard and his wife, Gibbs and Abbi will meet us there. That’s my plan for the next hour or so, after that, there’ll be praying, singing, eating, talking about the week. Then we’ll put the babies to bed. We got a new video game for Christmas, so Tim, Tony, and I may spend an hour or two playing it together. In other words, I’m getting ready for a quiet Friday at home with my family. What are you doing?”

Zelaz shakes his head, metaphorical steam coming out of his ears at the way Jimmy’s dealing with this.

“Roger, have you ever heard Abby try to tell a lie?”

Zelaz flashes Jimmy a very annoyed look. “Yeah, she’s terrible at it.”

Jimmy nods. “You think she’d be any better at it if it was non-verbal? Or you think, like with everything else, she’d wear it on her face and sleeve?”

“Yeah.”

“So, she’s cool with me, isn’t she?”

Zelaz looks really annoyed by that, too. “She shouldn’t be! You’re… you and Tim…” He can’t finish the sentence and just glares.

“Are having an affair? That’s the rumor, right?”

Zelaz nods, still glaring, hand fisting.

Jimmy pulls up the calm he tries to hold when he’s practicing yoga. This is going to get messier if he gives into wanting to slap this twit. “You really think a forensic scientist of Abby’s caliber would miss an affair right under her nose? I mean, yeah, Tim and I are bright, but… we’re humans. Sex is messy. It leaves trace evidence. You think she wouldn’t notice a stray hair, or smell something off, find semen in a place it doesn’t belong, something along those lines? Or are the two of us such incredible sexual masterminds that we manage to all work in the same building, spend our weekends together, go on vacation together, all of it with Abby nearby, and never, ever leave a single trace of the torrid affair we’re having?”

Abby steps out of ballistics. Jimmy can see her, but Zelaz’s back is to her.

“Come on, think it through. Stop being pissed and think. You’re a guy. You’ve had sex. You know how it works. So, when, in our copious spare time, do Tim and I have the time, and place, to go and do this without her knowing? Before I got married, I had an affair at work, and everyone found out. You can’t do stuff like that without leaving at least some marks.

“So, how do you think it works? We do it in her bed, and she doesn’t notice? Seedy hotels? I get out of the office a lot, so yeah, I could be ‘getting a body’ and… wait… What’d I do with Dr. Allan? I
stop off at a no-tell motel and tell him to wait in the van? And, wait, I’m off getting that body, and Tim’s in his office all the time… Hmmm… Nope. Oh, wait, Tim’s got an office, maybe we go in there and close the blinds and… oh right, we’re guys, semen has a scent, sex has a scent…

“Maybe we wait until it’s after hours. Tim’s office still doesn’t work; he’s got guys down there twenty-four seven. Maybe they don’t notice him wandering off for a quickie. Morgue is empty then. Just the two of us and corpses. Nothing hotter than dead bodies all over the place. Come on! THINK, Zelaz. Stop being pissed and think. If she’s still cool with us, it’s because, unlike you, she lives with us, sees us all the time, and knows the real story. So, you don’t trust me, fine, but trust her. She is not stupid, not blind, and neither Tim, nor I are good enough liars to manage to run an affair behind the back of a woman we spend 85% of our waking time in the same building with.”

Zelaz stops glaring. Then he turns and sees Abby watching them. “They’re really okay?”

“Like I said before, yes. We’re all fine. Settling in and getting ready for little boy to join the show.”

“I’ve seen his hair on Tim’s shirt before.” Like Abby, Zelaz is one hell of a forensic scientist, and he knows he’s seen things between Jimmy and Tim that do not match them just being good buddies.

“We’re friends! We hug. God, you’ve seen Abby’s hair on my clothing for the same reason. Hell, you’ve had Abby’s hair on your clothing for the same reason!” Jimmy’s not having an easy time holding his cool, not anymore.

Zelaz is pretty much ignoring Jimmy at this point. Abby looks at Jimmy. “He’s right, Roger. I’ve never seen a hair or the wrong sort of hair, in a place I didn’t expect it. I don’t find Jimmy’s cologne on Tim’s clothing when it shouldn’t be there, or vice versa. The only place they could be doing it and leaving no trace at all is in the shower, and like with most people, Tim showers in our home, where I tend to be. You think Jimmy can get into the shower with Tim and I wouldn’t notice?”

Given the look on Zelaz’s face, that’s exactly what he thinks. “You don’t go to their fight club thing.”

Abby’s giving him the Oh, come on, now, look.

“His wife doesn’t, either.”

Jimmy’s eyes are about to roll out of his head as Zelaz says that. “Fucking in the locker room… Is the rumor that Tony and Gibbs are in on it, too? How about my maybe brother-in-law Collin? He fights with us, too. Ziva and Abbi? Or just us guys because we use the same locker room? This some sort of twisted family initiation ceremony? We get all hot and sweaty in the ring and then, what… help each other work out the kinks after? Rub out all those sore muscles. God, man, get a subscription to Porn Hub and do your stuff there, stop jerking it to my sex life.”

Zelaz goes white and then storms out.

“Elegantly handled,” Abby says dryly.

Jimmy grits his teeth. He stands up and steps closer. She hugs him, head resting on his shoulder. “That experiment of yours is putting an edge on you, isn’t it?”

Jimmy nods, and kisses her forehead. He’s still playing with them hard at night, but hasn’t gotten off in a few days, and everything that annoys him really annoys him today. “Come on, let’s get out of here before I bite someone’s head off.”

Abby nods, lets go of him, and they head off in search of her coat, and purse, which Jimmy does
They can see Tim’s car. It’s maybe twenty-five feet away. And then, Jimmy’s phone buzzes. “Shit!” He’s got a set buzz for Dispatch. He’s got a body.

Abby takes her purse from him, kisses him on the cheek, and hands him the keys to her car. (The ride they took in this morning.) “Get home when you can.”

He nods. “Give ’em my apologies.”

She squeezes his hands one last time, and turns to waddle toward the car on her own. Behind her, Jimmy answers his phone, “Palmer…"

Tim sees that Jimmy’s not coming along, so he hops out to open the door for Abby, and to give Jimmy a quick hug. Jimmy flashes him a fast smile, and then turns to head back into the building. Tim goes back to Abby, closing the door behind her, and slipping into the driver’s seat.

“We ready to go?”

She nods.

The first part of the drive is just talking about their days. Easy enough. His was less vexatious than the last ten minutes of hers, and she’s not exactly looking pleased with him when he’s grinning widely at what Jimmy said to Zelaz, but she understands that not smacking a bunch of twits is a bit more wearisome on Tim and Jimmy than it is on her.

After that, he says, “When Gibbs came after I took down the Admiral, I called him Dad a few times, right?”

“Yes. He really liked it.”

“It was cool? Not stepping on Kelly’s memory, or anything like that?”

She shakes her head. “No. You lit him up like a Christmas tree with that. It was linked to good memories, not bad ones.”

Tim thinks about that.

Abby adds, “I told him that if he told you how much it mattered to him, you’d probably be willing to do it sober.”

Tim doesn’t remember that. “What’d he say?”

“That he could wait for you to come up with it on your own, sober. You thinking about going in that direction?”

“Yeah. I kind of remember feeling… just feeling really warm and happy with it, and feeling like he was, too.”

“Oh, he was.”
Tim nods. “Been a long time since I had a Dad.”

“Baby, I don’t know if you ever did.”

Tim inclines his head at that.

They aren’t the first ones in, or the last ones, either.

Ducky and Penny’s new Tesla is sitting close to the house, plugged in, charging. Tim’s thinking they’re awfully brave to take the trip from DC to NY with that, because that’s got to be as far as it can possibly go on one charge. But he’s looking forward to the conversation on how they ended up with it. Ducky’s Morgan didn’t make it through the riots, and Penny’s Beetle, which they had driven to the Navy Yard, was used as part of the perimeter defenses, and didn’t make it through that.

Listening to the two of them argue about what sort of car to get to replace their previous vehicles, something that fit with both senses of style, history, labor practices, and environmental standards, had been awfully amusing.

He’s pleased to see they’ve found a compromise vehicle, and wonders if they’ll let him test drive it.

Ziva’s Mini is also in the driveway. He knows she cut out from CGIS early to get the cooking started, and depending on how today went, she may have picked Tony up and brought him along, or he might be making his way home from the Navy Yard on his own.

They park, and he gets the door for Abby, before they both go about getting little girls unhooked from various seats. Molly hops out of the car, and runs to the door, but between mittens and the fact that it’s too tall, she can’t open it on her own. “Knock, honey!” Abby yells to her as she’s unhooking Kelly.

Molly whacks the door a few times, but again, between mittens and being less than three years old, she’s not making much noise.

Tim’s got Anna and one of the bags, so his hands are full, but when he kicks the door a few times, “Like this, loud!” Ziva hears him and gets the door.

“Hello!” Molly gets picked up and given a big hug and kiss. Anna and Tim get kisses, too, as they head in.

“Can I give them to you?” He’s already looking back, watching Abby carrying Kelly, looking a bit nervous at the not nearly as well salted or sanded path between the car and the door as he’d like it to be for his pregnant wife and baby girl.

“I’ve got them.”

Tim hands over Anna and hurries back to Abby, and in what he considers a sign of extreme pregnancy, she’s not bugged by him taking Kelly and hovering nearby as she waddles across the snowy drive and path to the front door. Actually, lately she hasn’t been bugged at all by him and Jimmy staying close, and if there’s any sign of being ready to pop, he thinks tolerance of overprotective hovering daddies is it.
They get settled in, putting the baby gates on the stairs and letting little girls wander around, getting the lay of the land again. They seem slightly confused because the Christmas tree and decorations are gone.

Abby finds a comfortable bit of sofa and lands on it, talking with Ducky, while they keep eyes on the girls.

Tim heads to their room, to get the bags stowed, and Penny follows him.

They said hello and hugged when he came in, but he can feel the tension on her, and hugs her again. “Hey.”

She nods, looking sad, and very gently touches the fading green-purple bruises around his eye. “Hey, back. You okay?”

He nods, feeling how thin she is in his arms. “Yeah. I am. I really am. I… needed that. You?”

She sighs. “I’ve been better. I’m glad you… plural, all of you, didn’t kill him. That was a kindness, but…” Her fingers hover over the bruise again. “Don’t like seeing that. Don’t like…” she shakes her head and rubs her lips together, not voicing the ideas. He hugs her a bit tighter.

“I know… Well, I don’t, not really, but… It doesn’t have to be said.”

She presses her face against his shoulder.

He can feel her shaking, and he kisses the top of her head.

“I spend so much time wondering why.”

He nods.

“We didn’t raise him to be like that. He didn’t grow up in a broken home full of hate. Even after we lost James… He was already on his own then, but… What could we have done differently?”

“It’s been fifteen years since I got into this, and… Some people just are that way. That’s the best I’ve got. Anything else, it’ll just torture you. He is who he is. He’s got blue eyes and a nasty temper and a rat’s nest of a mind and that’s just it. It’s not your fault, not Grandpa’s, or Uncle James or any of it. It’s just who he is.”

Penny’s eyes are so tired as she says, “I don’t know if I can accept that. If that’s true, then some people are hopeless or helpless.”

Tim shrugs. “Some are. I don’t like that, but… That’s how it works out. Some people just aren’t right. And, I’d rather that be true than spend a second thinking this is on you or Grandpa or the Navy or any of it. Four sons, all raised in the same house with the same parents, all four went to the same schools and then university, all four picked the same career, and only one of them turned into… him.” Tim shakes his head. “It’s not you. It’s him.”

She hugs him a little tighter back.

“I don’t blame you for any of this.”
She sighs again.

“Penny…”

“Yeah?”

“Would it bug you if I started calling Gibbs, Dad?”

She hugs him a little tighter again and then pulls back to look him in the eye. Again she barely touches the bruises, and he realizes, a second later, she’s laying a finger gently on the scar that goes through his eyebrow. “Oh, honey, not at all. You call him whatever you want, and,” she’s looking at the bruises, “you don’t ever have to be kind or respectful or… anything… about anyone who does something like that to you. Not for me.”

Tim smiles at her, and nods.

Penny moves back, and leans against the dresser as Tim heads to the closet to grab clean sheets for the bed. “So, tell me about this week. How’s ‘coming out’ been treating you?”

Tim sighs long and loud. “Dornie flat out laughed at me when I told him I was straight. Okay, maybe I’m not the poster boy for butch, but between the wife and kids, I didn’t think I was that swishy,” he says it with a little smile, and Penny does manage a quick laugh.

Once he’s got the bedroom set up for them (clothing put away, sheets on the bed, cribs set up), and Penny up to date, as well as hearing about her week, (DC is on the fast track for statehood, all of the new Senate and Congress is due in next week), they both head out and find that Tony’s joined the crew.

They share hellos, and Tim heads over to see what he can do to be useful to them as they work on getting dinner set.

“Good day?” he asks as Ziva points him toward a knife and salad veggies.

“Slow. I interviewed eleven people this week as potential agents.”

“Any good ones?”

She smiles. “Tony has already asked me that. He’s got to start looking for a third partner at some point.”

“Third? Does that mean we know Draga’s staying?” Tim asks Tony.

Tony smiles. “He got word yesterday. Same deal he had before. Two weekends a month, and two full weeks a year. Kevin’s in school now, so Draga’s got one week of Christmas break and one in the summer break.”

Tim sighs. “Good. I know he’d like more, but…”

Ziva nods. “Yes, he would, but realistically, this is what he can do right now. He’s not home often and reliably enough to be a single parent of a small child.”
“So, a third?” Tim asks Tony as Tony stirs the spaghetti sauce. (Easy Shabbos this week, pasta, garlic bread, lots of salad, cheesecake and cannoli for dessert. Someone stopped by his favorite Italian bakery on the way out here and made sure they were swimming in Milchig desserts, which meant a vegetarian dinner. Fortunately, someone else, who’d had a long day interviewing people, was very happy with the idea of put pasta in water and mix up an easy tomato sauce as a dinner option.)

Tony nods, ripping up lettuce. “Got the pile of resumes. Think you can spend a week moonlighting at your old job, weed through them while Draga and I go out and bust guys?”

“I think Abbi will be okay with that.”

“Jimmy got a call out right while we were leaving. You know anything about that?” Tim asks.

“I’m on call. Dornie’s got an active murder… So… They didn’t call Draga and I, which means it is part of Dornie’s case.”

Abby hears that from her place on the sofa. “Oh… I wonder if they found the wife.”

“The wife?” Ducky asks.

“It’s a pretty twisted case so far,” Abby says, and gets them up to date on Dornie’s case.

Breena makes it in just as Abby’s saying, “So, Jimmy got us the excised tissue, and we tested it, looking for trace alcohol…”

She hangs up her coat, shaking her head, walking to the sofa to kiss her wife before saying, “Home sweet home, good food, happy people, and grizzly murder details!”

“Mama!” Molly notices that her mama has just joined the party, and runs over for hugs, which she gets. Anna starts to crawl over, too. Kelly looks up from the blocks and decides that Aunt Breena’s not that big of a deal, not when she’s suddenly got Ducky all to herself, and stays put.

“Okay, that’s one, two, and three,” Breena says after getting a kiss and a long, snuggly, whole body draped over her shoulder hug from Anna, “where are four, five, and six?”

Tim steps out of the kitchen, Tony and Ziva behind him, and picks up Kelly on the way. He kisses Breena, and Kelly gives her a hug. “I guess we’re four and five.”

“One!” Kelly’s not real up to date on a lot of things, but she knows she’s one-year-old.

“Okay, we’re one and five.” She’s also fussing to be let down to go back to playing with Ducky, so Tim does, and back she goes. No one makes a better giraffe noise than Ducky.

“And number six?”

“Six got called back just as we were leaving the building,” Abby says, and Tim kisses her again.

“From Jimmy, along with his regrets.”

Breena sighs, looking a bit annoyed. Tim nods at her, and Abby does, too. “How long ago?” she
asks.

“Almost two hours. He should be on the road, maybe at the scene by now. We should get the call soon.”

When Jimmy gets called off during what should be their family time, he gives them an update as to when he’ll be able to join them. “Good.” Breena eyes the sky, and their clock. “Sunset soon. We just waiting on Gibbs and Abbi?”

“Yes,” Ziva says. “The water is boiling, all we need to do is pop the spaghetti in, and we’re ready to go.”

The candle lighting is supposed to start right at sunset. That’s when Shabbos begins.

And Gibbs and Abbi and Mona make it by about a minute under the deadline.

“Traffic got crazy on 395,” Abbi says as they step into the warmth of the house, while everyone else is gathering around the table.

They don’t even get their coats off, just head straight for the table and the beginning of the night. Tim pats the chairs next to him, and Gibbs and Abbi draw close. He hugs both of them, and says, “Hi, Dad,” as Ziva lights the first match.

He smiles as he sees Gibbs light up at that, and hug him a bit tighter in return. “Hey,” he gets a quick kiss on the forehead, and then they turn back toward the table, where Ziva touches the match to the first of the candles, beginning the blessing, and the start of their holy time, together, as a family.

Traditionally, at least in the home Ziva grew up in, adult parents did not bless adult children during the blessing of the children. She knows some families do it, but hers didn’t.

And, over the years they’ve been doing this, they’ve been playing from Ziva’s Shabbos playbook, because she’s the one who “knows” how it’s supposed to work.

It’s true that Senior doesn’t bless Tony when he’s been there for Shabbos, but it’s not his tradition. Not in any meaningful way. It’s something he does, when he’s in town, that makes his son happy.

It’s also true, that with the exception of Tony and Senior, they have no direct parent-child links with adult children.

But that doesn’t even register as they get to the part where Tim, Abby, and Breena all offer blessings for their children, and then Gibbs, jumping up as Tim sits down, stuttering a bit over some of the words, places his hands on Tim’s head and does it for Tim. He never thought he’d be in a position to say the words, so he’s working off of a half-remembered litany of syllables in a language he doesn’t speak, but he doesn’t care, because this feels good.

Feels right. He’s almost stupidly happy as he gets to do this. Tim’s looking up at him, surprise fading to so very pleased. Halfway through, he gently squeezes Gibbs wrist, and nods at him, huge smile on
his face.

Ziva smiles a bit as he does it, and Tony giggles a little. Gibbs is about to offer some headslaps, but he sees it’s not about him doing it, or about him killing the Hebrew, it’s about something else. When he’s done he glares a little at them, and then says, “What?”

Tony smiles brightly at him. He’s happy for them, but amused, too. No real edges to this, but it is funny in his mind. “There’s a blessing for girls and another one for boys. You just told Tim that you wish the Lord would make him like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.”

That does get a bit of amused laughing.

Tim shrugs at that when he’s done chuckling. “I’m good with it. They were cool ladies. What’s the one for boys? We’re going to need it soon.”

It’s been a very long time since Ziva’s heard the one for boys, but she still remembers her Abba’s hands on Ari’s head. “Y’simcha Elohim k’Efrayim v’che-Menasheh. May God make you like Ephraim and Menasheh. The rest is the same.”

“Who were they?” Tim asks.

Ziva’s even rustier on that story, but between her and Ducky, they know.

She who cooks, does not clean up. That’s rule number… 24… That’s one that doesn’t have a rule as best as Ziva can remember.

So, she is not on cleanup duty. She’s on sitting on her tush, sipping a cup of tea, relaxing while everyone else cleans up or puts babies to bed.

Which suits her just fine. She wants a bit of thinking time.

She saw the way Gibbs and Tim clicked on the Dad thing. She watched Gibbs glow as he blessed Tim, saw Tim bask in a moment of unconditional parental love. And she feels a pull to that, too. Her relationship with her father is more complicated than Tim with his, but the want is still there.

She has an Abba, with all the complicated baggage that goes with that. Unlike Tim, she’s not looking to erase that, or minimize, or even replace it, she just wants something to compliment it. Wants a new relationship to go with the new life.

Her new life, the new life of her baby.

She wants a Dad, wants a ‘Pop’ for the child growing inside of her. Maybe she doesn’t need it, not the way Tim does, but she wants it, and she’s pretty sure that Gibbs does, too.

She levers herself out of the chair, and steps into the kitchen, where Abbi’s rinsing dishes and Gibbs is sticking them into the dishwasher.

“Dad?” she tries it, and it feels… odd, very American, a short, curt sound, tripping off her tongue, but very good, very right, too. After all, Gibbs is all of those things, short, curt, and very American.

Gibbs glances to her, sees she’s being real about it. Not the occasional half-joke way Tony or Jimmy
use it when they say it, and again, he lights up at it.

Both of his lost kids… *his* kids.

He grins, eyes warm and bright, and maybe a little more watery than usually, though she wouldn’t say he’s crying. He steps closer to her, wrapping arms around him, and kisses her. “Next week, I’ll get you, too. And, I’ll get ‘em right.”

Ziva nods, holding tight onto him. “Just doing it’s enough.”
12:42. Jimmy opens the door to their room quietly, and exactly like he expects, no one moves.

Three sleepy, warm lumps under the blankets. Two of them are spooned together on the left of the bed, one’s in the middle, waiting for him.

He’s tired and annoyed, he’s got to go back in the morning. His whole evening was driving out again, getting the body, securing it, and driving back again. It was almost midnight when they got back, and he called time.

Autopsy tomorrow morning.

As he quietly walks past the sleeping people to their bathroom, he’s hoping date night doesn’t have to be rescheduled.

And if it does… He’s not proud of this, but he’s keyed up enough that if it looks like he’s not getting laid tomorrow night, he’s taking care of himself in the men’s room, and that’ll be that.

Sleep, well, bedtime, is gentle torture.

There are these beautiful people in his bed. Soft, warm, sexy people. Naked, soft, warm, sexy people. And he’s crawling the walls horny.

Yes, that was intentional on his part, and he thinks that if he does get to go out on tomorrow’s date night, it’ll work splendidly for his plan of enjoying sex with Tim, but right now…

He’s gritting his teeth as he eases into bed, and Breena, who even in her sleep looks for him, immediately scoots over to snuggle him.

She feels so good. Like always, he’s on his back, and she’s on her side, lips against his shoulder, arm across his chest, leg draped over his hip and leg.

He kisses her forehead and scoots a little closer into her. She sighs a bit and rubs against him. He’s extremely aware of her breasts against his arm, and her leg less than an inch from his dick. He can feel the heat, the subtle brush of her leg against the hairs on his testicle making him harden, and if he just rocked a bit, he could be rubbing against her.

Jimmy mentally groans, and makes himself stop thinking about that. He’s got to get up and go back to work again tomorrow, so he has to sleep.

If there’s anything a medical residency is good for, it’s making sure you learn to fall asleep fast and hard. If you can’t master the art of sleeping 55 minutes of the one hour long nap you get on a thirty hour shift, you’ll die.

It took him a few weeks, but Jimmy got it down.
And that’s the only reason he falls sleep that night.

Morning is worse. At least at night, he was tired.

Now he’s fairly rested, with a warm girl on both sides, and his dick basically couldn’t get any harder if it tried.

Okay, it could. Someone could be touching it, and that would do very good things for him. But they aren’t.

He could roll onto his side, and… Breena’s not in position for it, but Abby’s back is along his side, so if he were to roll over he could be rubbing up against her. Soft, full bottom right against his dick… Maybe, if she just shifted a little bit he could...

He feels Tim poke him gently. “Get up before you lose your resolve.”

Jimmy rubs his eyes and sees Tim leaning over him and the girls. “Come on. I’ve got the babies up. Dealing with them’ll put a damper on it.”

Jimmy eases his way out of bed, leaving the two sleeping women, and pulls on some soft jogging pants, a sweater, and his glasses. He’s about to step out of their wing and head for the kitchen to get some breakfast when he realizes that he’s not at home, and if he goes walking around here with his dick leading the way, he’ll horrify half of this crowd and cause the rest to break into hysterical giggles.

Tim knows what the problem is and nods. “Keep eyes on them, I’ll get us food and Cheerios for them. You working today?”

Jimmy glares at that. “Yeah. How early is it?”

“A minute after seven.”

“Just enough time to eat, dress, and then back on the road.”

“Sorry.”

Jimmy’s eyes roll again, and he starts to take a step toward the girls. Tim takes his hand just as he’s stepping away, and pulls him close for a good morning kiss. And it’s a pretty good morning kiss. Firm, nice glide, just wet enough, little prickly, neither of them have shaved since yesterday morning. This is working pretty well for Jimmy, and he’s leaning into Tim, kissing back, and starting to rub against him when Tim steps back.

Tim doesn’t normally kiss him good morning, let alone kiss him, so Jimmy gives him a curious (and slightly disappointed, he wanted to keep kissing) look when he pulls back, and Tim shrugs. “Getting into the spirit of it, right?”

Jimmy nods. “Sure. Hell, at this point, I’m so horny, you can do whatever you want, as long as I get to get off!”

Tim laughs. “Not for a while, yet. Our wives would pout if they missed it, and I’m not about to wake either of them up early on their day to sleep in.”
That has more than enough truth to it, so Jimmy heads off to the babies, who are on the floor, playing with their toys.

Two cups of coffee, a small handful of almonds, eggs, three bowls of Cheerios. Not too hard to make. Even before he got into cooking, this was the sort of meal Tim could handle.

Biggest issue is remembering which cup has the decaf with milk and one sugar and which one has full strength with cream and one Splenda. They both taste awfully similar and look freaking identical.

Tim’s thinking, idly, about how the first of the: we’re actually living here, we’ve got to switch things up modifications the house needs is coffee mugs that aren’t all the same. At any given time there’s at least two cups of coffee lurking around somewhere in this house, and it’d be nice to be able to tell who it belongs to without tasting it.

He and Breena are on grocery shopping tomorrow, might as well grab some extra mugs to bring over here, because he’s just poured Jimmy’s coffee, turned his back on both cups to put the milk and cream into the fridge, and is now clueless as to which one is his and which is Jimmy’s.

Tim rubs his good eye while contemplating the eternal problem, needing your morning coffee to be with it enough to actually make your morning coffee.

He figures the one on the left is likely his, takes a sip and… Yeah… That’s probably right. He moves it way to the side, and starts on eggs.

While he’s whipping them up, he thinks about kissing Jimmy. Not like today was the first time it happened, by a long shot. It is the first time Jimmy stepped into him and started rubbing on him.

That was… interesting… maybe.

Tim knows he’s the one who started it. And he knows Jimmy has a dick. He’s seen it in pretty much every form of action a dick can possibly have. Part of poking Jimmy out of bed was that when he woke up to the sounds of little girls he noticed that Jimmy was pitching a tent capable of sheltering a den of Boy Scouts, and Tim knows what he likes to do when he wakes up like that, and Jimmy’s trying to not do that.

And it’s not like that dick has never rubbed up against him before. Hell, it’s not like that dick’s never come on him before, but…

But…

It still felt kind of weird to feel it, to have Jimmy all over him, pulling him close, rubbing on him, without the girls being part of the picture. Felt a little odd to have Jimmy kissing him the way Jimmy kisses the girls. With… desire and intent, and a long, hard dick, rubbing against his tummy.

Tim’s starting to wonder how good of an idea this experiment is. And that’s making him think it’s probably a good one. Because, if this feels weird, that’s an emotional response, so that would be conditioning, right? If he was just indifferent to it, that would be biology… Maybe…

There’s supposed to be a genetic component to how emotional responses work, too…

He’s putting the eggs on a plate, and wondering what Rachel would say if he asks her about this the next time they see each other. Then he wonders about how he’d answer as to why he’s even
interested in this sort of thing.

Jimmy’s laying on his back on the floor, holding Anna over his head, lifting her up and down. It’s a good way to start the day, he gets some light weight training, and she gets to “fly.” He’s already done sets with Molly and Kelly, too. All four of them like their morning fly time.

When Tim gets near, he puts Anna down and sits up, cross-legged on the floor.

“You ever talk to Rachel about us?” Tim asks as he hands over the coffee and eggs. “Hold on.” Back out to the kitchen to grab the Cheerios. A moment later he’s handing bowls of dry Cheerios to little girls. “Try not to get them absolutely everywhere, okay?”

All three of the girls have an expression best described as *Who me? Obviously, you have me mistaken with someone else.*

“Yeah, I know, you’re all angels. When you get a little older, you’ll be blaming everything on Mona. Eat up. Aunt Ziva’s got left over challah so there’ll be French toast later,” Tim says as he sits on the floor next to Jimmy. “We need a breakfast table or something in here.”

Jimmy nods. Molly and Kelly perk up at the mention of French toast. They really like Aunt Ziva’s French toast.

By the time Tim’s got that done, Jimmy’s halfway through his eggs. He sees that Tim’s ready to listen, so he says, “Not directly. I know she knows we aren’t just friends, but I’ve never confirmed anything, and I don’t know what flavor of not just friends she thinks we might be.”

Tim nods. “Same here.”

“What’s got you thinking about that?”

“Just wondering what she’d think about this experiment. Unlike either of us, this is her job, she’s got a degree in this sort of thing… Just… Thinking.”

“Feel free to think out loud, to her, if you like. She’s probably already read about the dust up in the Post, so she’s likely got a better idea of what flavor of not friends we actually are, and if she doesn’t, I doubt she’d be freaked out by it.”

Tim cracks a smile between bites of egg. “Or, at least, if it does freak her out, she’s way too damn good at her job to let anyone know.”

Jimmy nods at that, too. He pops an almond into his mouth.

“You talk to her about…” Tim pantomimes snapping a finger.

Jimmy shakes his head. “ Haven’t seen her since before it happened. Same with you, right?”

“Yeah. Next session is Monday morning.”

“Thursday afternoon.” Talking about that gets Jimmy noticing something. “You took the rubber band off.”
Tim nods. “Yeah. After getting done with him… Hadn’t used it in more than a week, and just, didn’t feel like I needed it anymore.”

“Good.”

Tim sips the cup of coffee closest to him. “This one is yours, right?”

Jimmy nods and moves the cup to his other side.

He’d like to sit there, linger with Tim and the girls, but… work calls. So, as soon as Jimmy’s got his breakfast done, it’s back to the grind.

At least it’s an autopsy day. Unless some other poor bastard ends up dead, he’s in the office all day, and in scrubs.

He’s hoping it’ll run that way because he doesn’t feel like heading back to his house to put on “professional” clothing. (Though he does make a mental note to make sure he’s always got a suit, button down, and tie at the house, should he ever get called away from here.)

Ten hours to go, and assuming all goes well, date night tonight!

As he’s leaving, he sees Tim on the floor, being “smothered” by little girls. He sits up enough to wave Jimmy off, and then… worktime.

While Jimmy’s off dealing with dead bodies, the rest of the family starts to settle into what will be their weekend routine for the foreseeable future.

Family members wander out of their own sections, grabbing whatever early morning snacks they like, and moving onto whatever the morning holds.

For Tim, who’s on baby duty this morning, that’s laying around, stacking up blocks, and listening to Molly babble about her dolls. Not exactly mentally taxing, but he’s enjoying it, for the first ten minutes. Bit boring after that.

He’s fairly pleased when he hears footsteps from above (Tony or Ziva) and the pitter of claws on hardwood, Mona. Thus, other members of the family are stirring. So, he gets his troop up and into the main section of the house, where little girls can play with Mona, and he can have coffee with Gibbs and whichever other adult is stirring.

Real breakfast (aka breakfast food for lunch. Some of the members of this crew will not set a toe out of bed before noon if they have their way. In this, he’s thinking of Abbi. Though Penny can really sleep in when she puts her mind to it, and Tony’s been known to linger in bed as long as he can, too.) will be a joint effort between him and Ziva, but that’s still a ways off.

Right now, it’s just him, Ziva, and Gibbs. All three of them are in the kitchen, hovering near the coffee maker. Tim’s already got his second cup of coffee of the day in his hand.

When Ziva’s cup is done, she says, “Sugar, please, Dad.”
Gibbs, who is closer to the sugar, reaches over and passes it to her, while she pops her K-cup out and puts his into place.

Tim smiles at her, seeing Gibbs react just as well to her calling him Dad as he did to Tim doing it.

“You, too?” he asks.

Ziva nods. “Feels right.”

Gibbs wraps an arm around each of them, just holding on for a moment, before he lets go to grab his own cup of coffee.

Tim nods back at her. “Yeah. It does.” Then Tim flashes his smartass smile at both of them, and says, “You think Grampa’ll let us borrow his car?”

Ziva’s eyes light up at that. She’s also been interested in seeing what a Tesla can do, though she’s fairly certain that Ducky won’t let her drive it until she’s got a few less points on her license.

Gibbs rolls his eyes at both of them and shakes his head.

---

“Are you okay, Dr. Palmer?” Sam asks as he lays out the autopsy equipment.

Sam’s noticed that Jimmy’s in something of a bad mood today. He’s also been a bit… irritable as well, the last few days. A side effect of preparation for tonight’s experiment that has left him somewhat less pleasant than usual to be around.

He’s trying to not be a jerk about it. Because he knows this experiment will be considered a fail if he ends up so unpleasant to be around that none of his loves will voluntarily fuck him of their own free will.

He’s rather hoping not to get to the point where they exile him to the bathroom with his phone and tell him not to come out until he’s gotten off and is suitable for human companionship again. (He can see where that is, and he’s a lot closer to it than is comfortable.)

He managed two years of making out with Breena without getting off with her, but… he took care of himself regularly during those two years. This full cold-turkey thing is rather unpleasant, and is nothing he’s looking forward to trying again.

Allan’s looking at him expectantly, and Jimmy’s thinking he’s likely coming to the wrong conclusion, that all the gossip around work is wearing on him.

“I’m fine, Dr. Allan, just… I want to be home.”

Allan nods at that. “I understand. I didn’t have any especially interesting plans for today, but I still would rather be doing them.”

“I did have plans, and with any luck, we will wrap up with Ms. Seera soon enough to get to them.”

“May I ask what?” Allan asks, as he hands Jimmy the scalpel for the y incision.

“Date night. Good dinner out. Tony and Ziva have the girls for the night. Probably the last one we’ll
get in before Sean joins the party.”

Allan thinks about that for a moment, decides that Jimmy must mean all four of them, and then says, “That sounds like fun.”

“I really hope so! How about you? What are you supposed to be doing right now?”

“Nothing too exciting, just a hot date with Halo 4, but…”

“I understand that, too.” Jimmy catches a look at the clock, sees that it’s just about morning naptime, and then begins the incision. “If they we weren’t playing with Penny and Ducky’s new car, morning naptime was supposed to be Tim, Tony, and I along with Fallout 5.”

“Ohhh…” Allan looks impressed. “That one’s supposed to be good. You guys want a fourth?”

Jimmy thinks about it for a second, and about the wall he tries to keep between work and home, and what Allan already knows about them… “Yes. As long as the idea that the three of us occasionally act like… Blistering assholes Jimmy thinks but doesn’t say. (Not saying it is part of how he’s different at work from at home.) They’re not necessarily the nicest people on the planet when they game. Not cruel. No griefing. But the language can get a bit salty. There’s a reason, beyond not just dropping the girls on their wives, that they only game when little girls are sleeping. He swallows and says, “less than professional,” Allan flashes him a mock appalled look, “doesn’t bug you. Grab a copy, and I’ll let you know the next time we get a game up. Tim’s sister, Sarah, plays with us, too, sometimes.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Good way to pass a quiet naptime.”

And from there, as Allan peels back the skin, and Jimmy grabs the bone saw, they talk gaming and autopsies.

---

Tim’s not a car guy. Not the way Abby or Ducky are car guys. He doesn’t build them from scrap. He can’t tell you how they’re put together. He’s, at best, shaky as to what the different trims mean. That said, he likes nice cars, mostly as speedy art that makes him feel good. Not as something he knows everything about and works with intensively.

And, as speedy art that makes him feel good the Tesla is perfect. “I promise to return with her in one piece. Please!”
He’s giving Ducky his best puppy eye look. Penny’s giggling at it, because she’s seen this since he was a baby, and those big green eyes, looking… down in this case, he’s more than half a foot taller than Ducky, begging away amuses her to no end.

“Like you promised to return my golf clubs…” Ducky says dryly. He knows he’s going to let Tim and Tony take her out, and Abby when she’s not quite so pregnant. Maybe not Ziva, she’s been one point away from losing he license for the last two years, though she hasn’t asked to take her on a test drive, yet.

He’s actually enjoying showing off his new toy. But this teasing is fun, too.

Tim opens and closes his mouth. “I got you replacements, eventually.” It took him a damn long time to hunt them down for under $1200, but he did. He thinks Tony still has the left-handed ones.

Ducky smiles at them, and tosses the key fob to Tony. “Both of you. Be careful with her. We need to get back to New York tomorrow.”

Tim and Tony all but bounce off, huge smiles on their faces, snarking over who gets to drive first.

“Why do you get to drive first?” Tim asks.

“Because I caught the key.”

Tim rolls his eyes and heads for the passenger seat.

Tony slips into the driver’s seat and sighs with pleasure. Tim makes a fairly similar noise. It’s a sweet car.

“You just decided what you’re doing with the insurance money from the house, didn’t you?” Tim asks as he buckles up.

Tony sighs. “I wish.” He checks the light, which says he has turned the car on, but there’s no engine noise so… “You think it’s on?”
“The little light says it is.”

Tony stares at that light. “This is weird. Cars are supposed to make noise. You’re supposed to feel them when they turn on.”

“Well, get your foot off the break and let’s see what happens when it moves.”

What happens is elegant and smooth and in Tim’s book, very nice. He’s not a fan of road feel or noise, so for him, this perfectly engineered cocoon of music and conversation that responds the second you tell it to do something is perfect. For Tony, who wants to feel the road, and the car, and the drive, it’s like sex with a condom, sure it’s nice, but it doesn’t feel anywhere near as good as it could.

“So, what are you thinking?” Tim asks as they find a bit of fairly empty road that doesn’t look like it’s covered in speed traps to really take the car through its paces.

“With the insurance money?” Tony’s been focusing on driving, so he lost the train of the conversation for a second there.

“Yeah. You moving or…”

Tony shrugs. “I don’t know. We could buy the apartment next to ours and remodel them into one unit. The landlady is fine with that. Get something else? Move out of DC all together.” He shakes his head. “The schools we’re attached to right now are terrible, but… Five years from now? Elementary school burned down, so they’ll have to rebuild. Who knows who’s going to come back? The whole neighborhood is going to change. But, even if it doesn’t… We’ve got the money for a private school now.”

And with that, Tim understands why the money can’t go to a fancy car, not now, not if it’s got to pay for a decent school for twelve years, possibly for more than one child. “Ed and Wes have been talking about property values in all of the DC suburbs tanking. If you want a place in the burbs, now’s probably the time. Schools in all of those districts are good. Or…” They’re good now. He’s not sure what they’ll be in five years when the neighborhoods resettle.

“The vultures are all moving to follow the Congress.”

Tim nods. “And they aren’t meeting in DC anytime soon.”

“Dad says they’re talking Las Vegas for the one after this.”

Tim can imagine what Senior’s doing with that information. “Good luck, then?”

“Yeah, let’s see how much useless desert he ends up buying.”

Tim sniggers a bit at that.

Tony glances over at him from the road. “He asked about you.”

“Your dad?”

“Yeah. He knows the guy who runs the Omni and heard the gossip.”

Tim nods. “Ah. How’d that go?”

“Before I got him straightened out, he suggested having a chat with you about how it’s just ‘plain wrong’ to stay married to a woman if you’re gay and out. Married and gay and in the closet is
apparently just fine.”

Tim laughs a little. “Marriage advice from Senior… Uh…”

“Yeah! Though…” Tony smirks at Tim. “I probably should have let him get started on it, just to see the look on your face.”

Tim laughs at that, too. “I’m sure it’d be my absolute prize bitch face.”

Tony nods. “Oh, yeah.” He mimics his father, “Timothy, come out back and have a little chat with me… You see, son, there are certain things a man just doesn’t do. There’s a code, son, and…”

Tim’s laughing and shaking his head as he says, “Okay, just stop! I don’t need to imagine it that clearly.”

They both go quiet for a moment as the road gets twisty and Tony takes the speed up a bit just to see how she handles the curves.

Tony sees Tim enjoying the flow of the car. “Let me guess, this is your next book advance?”

“Who knows when I’m getting another one? Still got to write the damn book. But… probably not.”

“Sounds like you might have plans for that cash…”

“Might. Not sure how useful it’d be. The sooner Breena owns her branch of Palmer and Slaters’, the sooner Ed and Jeannie retire off to North Carolina… That might make things easier. We could be a lot more open, and a lot less worried about getting bit in the ass by this.”

Tony’s not sure about that, but he nods anyway. He realizes two things, this is the easiest time he and Tim have had together in a while, and that he hasn’t spent any time with Tim since they took the Admiral down.

“You okay?”

Tim’s watching the road. Just them, the car, a twisting strip of blacktop, and snow-covered trees and land zipping by. “You mean about everything, right? Not just this morning?”

“Yeah. You’re… lighter.”

Tim inclines his head in response. “I feel it. That was… everything I needed. Well, everything I needed out of a confrontation with him.”

Tony nods at that, too. “I… I didn’t know it was that bad.” He shakes his head. “I didn’t know it was that kind of bad.”

Tim shrugs. “It was what it was.”

“I’m sorry about all the crap I gave you about being gay when you were new.”

Tim snorts at that. “Just… Don’t. Long time ago. More than two years, and we forgive it, right?”

“Yeah. That’s the rule.”

“So, water under all the bridges.”

“Okay. Just… I mean…” Tony glances at Tim, and then back to the road. “I get why you didn’t
want to talk about you and Jimmy. I’m sorry I was pushing so hard on that, too.”

Tim shakes his head a little. “Maybe. I didn’t get why I wanted to keep that walled-off. Why I had to make sure everyone was clear the two of us weren’t having sex. I do now, getting that figured out helped, a lot.” Tim’s quiet for a moment. “I probably had to get there before I could have taken him down. Had to own all of it, and then I could use it to beat him with.”

Tony nods at that. “So, it’s… all four of you? Like really, all four, now?”

Tim rubs his eyebrows a bit, and winces because it’s still pretty sore. “It’s always been all four of us.”

“But… you know… physically…”

Tim sighs, that’s the question now, isn’t it? “It’s… Evolving.”

Tony’s giving him his quit the BS look. “I heard what you said. How much more evolved can it get?”

Tim licks his lips. He didn’t realize Tony didn’t know he was lying. “Uh… all of what I said to my Dad… except the good kisser bit, none of it’s happened…”

That takes Tony back. “Oh.” He thinks for a moment, while Tim does, too. “So, evolving… Um… Does that mean…”

“I don’t know. We’re… experimenting.”

He thinks about everything Tim’s said to him about this and how he feels about Jimmy, and sex with Jimmy. “Do you want to… experiment?”

Tim shrugs a bit at that, too. “Jimmy’s got a theory, and if he’s right, then… That’d be great.”

Tony knows how Tim speaks more than well enough to know what Tim’s not saying. “But you don’t think he’s right?”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t, if he’s right.” Tim thinks about that, too. “Of course, if he’s wrong, I likely wouldn’t agree, either, so…”

Tony’s eyes narrow, and he whips them through a few more fast turns, once he’s on a straightaway he says, “God, this thing has great action! Okay… Can you be a little less vague about this? Because I’m not sure what the hell you’re talking about anymore.”

Tim supposes that’s a decent request. “Okay. We like girls. Great. We’re not terribly interested in each other. Fine. What if we could get interested in each other? He’s thinking Penny might be right, and it’s just conditioning, and if it is, that’s something that can be broken. I’m thinking Ducky’s right, and it’s genetic, and all the conditioning or lack of conditioning on earth won’t help.”

Tony licks his own lips, closes his eyes for a second, and then jerks them open again. “Is sex always this complicated for geeks?”

Tony rolls his eyes at that.

“And let me guess the Lab Mistress and Autopsy Gremlin are all happy about the idea of running it as an experiment, too, because you three all get to enjoy your science hard-ons.” Tony rolls his eyes. “I don’t know how Breena puts up with you three.” He shakes his head at that, but Tim knows it’s a joke. The next bit isn’t, though, “Just do it. If you like it, great. If you don’t, don’t do it again.” Tony
glances over at him. “There’s that prize bitch face again.”

“Yeah. I know how just do it’ll work out. The question is can we shift that?”

“How do you know how it’ll work out if you haven’t done it, yet?”

If anything, prize bitch face just intensified. “The same way I know I don’t like tuna fish and salami sandwiches. I can imagine it.”

Tony thinks about that. “It’s been a million years, and I probably failed that class, but I think back in school the idea was do the experiment first, and then come up with the conclusion.”

“No, I want you to get out of your head and just enjoy it. Jimmy…” Tony glances over to Tim again, and holds his eye for a second before looking back at the road. “He looked John in the eye, ripped his hand to pieces, tore him to shreds verbally, and smiled the whole time. I sat there and watched him do it, and absolutely knew that if he had had permission, he would have ripped the rest of The Admiral apart, and that smile would have never wavered. Jimmy is fucking terrifying when he wants to be. And he was fucking terrifying for you.”

Tim nods. That’s something he already knew about Jimmy.

“And you know how that story usually ends? The hero goes in and kicks the shit out of the bad guy. Then he swoops his gi—partner up, and there’s sex galore.”

Now Tim’s giving Tony a disbelieving look. “Are you writing my story?”

Tony inclines his head. “Not like you didn’t do it to me, first. Sparkling, white beaches of her homeland, right? And, hey… I saved her in that story, too, right?”

Tim rolls his eyes again. “You saved each other.”

“Seriously, though. I watched him do it. And… Okay, part of not being cool with you four was that it looked a hell of a lot like horny and bored, but… I know how horny and bored acts, and I know how love acts, and horny and bored doesn’t do that. That man loves you.”

“I know, Tony. I love him, too. We’ve been telling you that for a while.”

“Damn right, you do! So, you love him, you go into it with an open mind, and actually experiment, right?”

Tim can’t believe he’s hearing this from Tony, but, Tony’s not wrong, so he says, “Sure.”

They drive for a few more moments before Tony says, “Well, that was the most surreal conversation I’ve ever had.”

Tim nods. “GPS says there’s a bakery up the road. We stop there, get you guys food for dinner, and then I get to drive home.”

“Sounds good.”
“Oh, God, that’s a sexy little thing!” Tim says as he hops out of the car when they get home, grinning at his girls, who are out playing in the snow with Mona and Gibbs.

“You want one, don’t you?” Abby asks, giggling, as he kneels on the ground, kissing her, and scooping Kelly into his arms.

“In every color,” he winks at her and Breena. “And no, it costs too much, gas is too cheap right now, we can only stick two grown-ups and three kids in it, and there’s nowhere to charge it at the Navy Yard, but… Oh, it’s so pretty, and feels so nice!”

“Feels nice?” Tony’s shaking his head, grabbing a handful of snow and getting a snowball ready. Gibbs sees him doing it and starts to shift to the left. “There’s no road feel at all. It’s like being in a bubble hovering over the street.”

Abby shakes her head at that. “You’ve got to feel the road!”

“It’s silent, too. No engine noise!” Tony’s shaking his head, appalled that someone designed a car like that.

Now, Abby pouts a little, agreeing with him that that’s just flat out wrong. She also notices the snowball that’s forming, and the one that Gibbs is getting set with. She begins to ball up her own little mound of snow, while Breena and Tim stake out the position that a perfectly smooth, silent car ride is awesome.

Gibbs actually lets fly with the first ball. It gets Tony square in the arm. He whips around, firing back at Gibbs, who ducks fast, but not enough. He ends up taking the snowball in the cheek instead of the chest. Another one goes whipping, fast, out of nowhere, which is when Tim realizes that Abbi’s joined the fight, and he’s got to get armed… Abby hands him the one she’s working on, and he tosses it off, one-handed, throwing wide, missing everyone… Ten minutes later, there’re snowballs everywhere, a collection of red-faced, giggling adults, and some confused looking toddlers.

By the time Jimmy’s tucking their client back into her drawer, he’s fairly sure he’d be willing to fuck a reasonably compliant barracuda, so, Tim, who has the benefit of being both a bipedal mammal and someone he rather likes, should be no problem at all.

By the time he’s tucking their client back into her drawer, he’s still got about two hours of reporting left to do. Yes, the paperwork software means he’s only got to put what they’ve found into the computer once, but it’s still got to go in.

And, “What have you found?” as Agent Dornaget is asking Dr. Allan.

What appears to be another intravenous alcohol overdose. Allan and Ned are going to take the blood samples and excised tissue to the lab to confirm what they’ve found. (Jimmy’s thinking that with as moody as he is right now, he doesn’t need to be spending any time with Zelaz or Benedict, because he knows he’ll snap at them. He also thinks he should probably go apologize at some point, that jerking off comment was probably out of line, but that point certainly isn’t today.)

“So much for the wife did it, theory,” Ned says to Allan as they head out with the samples.
Jimmy sighs at that, feeling brushed by the reality that yesterday, this was a real, living person. One who had a life and loves and hobbies. He shakes his head at that, putting the wall back into place. He’s got a job to do, and then out of here, back to his own life and loves.

Six hours. It’s not a record for them. Neither fast nor slow. Just, another day, another somewhat complex case.

Jimmy puts the last bit of information into the computer, hits enter, and leans back. As long as everyone else in his jurisdiction manages to stay alive for a few more hours, he’s free for the night.

Done. He texts to his loves.

A moment later he gets a collection of happy responses.

Heading home. Meet at the restaurant?

Three more versions of yes fill his phone.

Great, see you then.

He shuts down autopsy, pulls on his coat, and is off before someone else can call him back in.

By going home instead of to the house, Jimmy’s got a bit of extra time to kill. Which is basically the last thing he needs right now.

He’s very tempted to just get off. He’s got a phone and free time and… God, he wants to get laid!

He gives his dick some firm orders about what’s happening in the next hour (getting a shower, washing off the scent of autopsy, and then into clean, nice, going out clothing) and what isn’t (a long, hot shower involving lots of soapy lather, his hand tight and firm around his dick, his favorite fantasies, and vigorous thrusting.)

He’s in the shower, washing off, carefully, and his hand is heading toward his dick, and just, maybe he could take the edge off a bit... “Stop that,” he tells himself. “You are an adult, and fully capable of controlling yourself.”

His dick doesn’t appear to agree with that. It’s sending him some rather urgent messages, and if it could pout about being denied, it would. He gently slaps the head. “Stop it. You’ll get yours later.”

The sting gets it down again, and he begins to run into the next issue, as he’s shaving. He’s got no idea about how to be sexy, on a date, for Tim.

For the girls, yeah, he’s all over that. He knows which shirts, (Breena’s favorite is a plum button down, and Abby prefers a black one with an emerald pinstripe. They both like his collection of vests.), what jeans, (They agree on which pair shows him off the best. It’s a slightly faded powder-washed finish in dark blue, and it tends to run a bit snug on his thighs and butt.), and what cologne (They have three favorites that he rotates through.), and how to do his hair, (Little bit of gel, and then run his fingers through it. Just enough for a little messy curl.) and if he should wear his glasses or
contacts (contacts). He knows exactly how to package himself to for them.

For Tim? No clue. He supposes he could go hunting around and see if he still has that pair of pumps, and… Jimmy shakes his head. The plan for tonight isn’t to see if he can pull off half-decent drag. It’s to be who he is, and let Tim be who he is, and see if he can make himself feel attracted to him.

See if he can be attractive, too.

The goal is to see if he can like the tofu, not dress it up in a steak costume, smother it in steak sauce, and pretend it’s a steak.

Jimmy licks his lips and fights the urge to call Allan and ask for pointers.

Not like this is a blind date. He knows this guy, literally, inside and out.

Jimmy laughs out loud at that. It might not be a blind date, but it also is. This is blindly moving into territory he’s never been to and doesn’t know how to navigate.

He finishes shaving, and then carefully double checks. It might not be much, but he’s feeling like it’s safe to say that Tim won’t be looking for a big, rough, stubbly kiss. He likes smooth lips. Jimmy does, too. So… there’s something. Thinking about lips gets one more idea out of Jimmy. He hunts down the tube of uncolored lip balm Breena uses, and puts some of that on. He likes smooth, soft lips. He knows Tim does, too. So, might as well try to get as close to that as he can.

As he’s standing naked in front of his closet, Jimmy’s thinking more about what he’d consider a success for tonight. He wasn’t kidding earlier about being horny enough that if Tim got within range, he’d let him do whatever he wanted, as long as Jimmy got to get off. But, he’s also thinking that maybe he’s looking for more than up, in, and off. Not maybe. Definitely.

Right now, he could jerk it with anything even vaguely soft and warm, so… Jimmy sighs. He’s thinking he missed the sweet spot on this. He’s past I don’t care about social conditioning and onto just fuck me, please! (whimper, beg, beg, whimper,) please! The goal of this is to enjoy it, not just get off.

Not enjoy it. To enjoy Tim. He knows he’ll enjoy it. He’s enjoyed all the sex he’s had with Tim.

Time to enjoy Tim sexually.

He thinks about that a little further. So far, every time he and Tim have made love to Breena or Abby or both of them, he’s liked that. Making love to them with Tim is good. Tonight… tonight he’s making love to Tim.

He reaches for a forest green shirt. Tim’s favorite color is green. Probably. Jimmy realizes he doesn’t actually know that, and feels stupid for not knowing, but… He doesn’t get Tim pretty little treats in the colors he likes, because Tim isn’t a girl, and doesn’t have anything he’d consider a pretty, little treat, so, he’s never actually asked what Tim’s favorite color is.

His dragon is green, so… that’s probably close enough.

“You’ve got them, and you’re all good?” Abby’s asking Tony and Ziva as they get ready to leave.
“All set,” Tony says. He’s got Anna in his arms while Kelly and Molly play with Mona behind him and Ziva.

“We will be fine,” Ziva replies. “Go, have fun. Tomorrow morning we will bring them to your house, right?”

“Their house. Skipping church, but probably go to dinner with my parents,” Breena adds.

“Then we will have them home in time for that,” Ziva says as Tim hands over his car keys.

“All the baby seats are in there,” he adds.

“Good, go, have fun!” Tony says.

“Please!” adds Gibbs, shooing them out of the house. At the doorway, he very quietly says, “We’ve got eyes on them, too. Don’t worry.”

Tim shoots Gibbs an understanding look. It’s not that Tony and Ziva babysitting on their own is a problem. It’s that this is their first time doing it, and they’ve got all three girls at once. Three under three, all night, at once is a handful. Knowing Tony and Ziva have some backup is a comfort.

It occurs to Jimmy, as he waits outside the restaurant and watches the three of them walking to him, that there may be a tiny snag in his plan.

It’s cold out. January in Northern Virginia is, generally speaking, coat weather, and today is no exception to that. So, it’s not like either of the girls is showing any skin, besides their faces, at all.

But he can see faces, rosy with the chill, done up nicely, with soft, luscious lips, and waves of warm silky hair and he feels himself start to stiffen in anticipation.

And… Oh, right, and there’s a guy there, too.

A guy who is supposed to be the focus of his attention tonight.

Yes, he might find a barracuda, or Tim, interesting, if there weren’t two beautiful women there. But there are. They get closer and he can see more details, smell them on the cold breeze, and they’re beautiful, and warm, and smell perfect, and… he’s unaware of anything else on earth.

Once they’re within touch range, he kisses both of them, and not just friendly little pecks on the cheek. He pulls both girls close for deep, wet, horny, trying to convince them to skip dinner and just go home and fuck style kisses, and Jimmy is thinking very intense thoughts of maybe grabbing some sushi takeout and nibbling it off of the girls, when a set of very amused, smug green eyes, and a huge smile break through his horny, girl-clouded haze.

He pulls back from Abby, and looks around for a second. Hell, it’s a date, no one else is lingering out here on the sidewalk in the cold. They’re, intentionally, way outside of their normal stomping grounds, so he grabs Tim and kisses the hell out of him, too. Tim’s stiff in his arms for the first second of it, but he relaxes, and then kisses back.

This time, Jimmy’s the one who ends the kiss; he pulls away when he starts breathing fast and hard and his pants are too tight. Did it feel better than normal? He’s not sure. Kissing the girls did, but…
But he knew that would be true. Anything with the girls feels better than normal after time apart.

Tim might not have a lot of positive things to say about his parents, but they did train him in proper, polite male behavior. Jimmy does have a lot of good things to say about his parents, and they likewise trained him in proper polite male behavior.

Thus, when they’re out together, whichever one of them is closest gets the door. The girls do not get the doors. They will actively go out of their way to make sure that one of them is located in door getting position.

If, like tonight, they’re going to a good restaurant, they pull out chairs for the ladies, too. They hand menus over, and always get the check, too.

It’s just part of them on a date.

And Jimmy is on a date. This results in him practically hip checking Tim so he can open the door, for him.

And that results in another of those very amused smiles from Tim.

As soon as they get in, Abby starts looking for a bathroom. Between the cold and the nine month baby pressing on her bladder, she’s got to go, NOW. Breena goes with her.

Which means Jimmy and Tim standing around, waiting to be seated. None of them have ever been here before, but it’s quiet, dimly lit, and supposedly does good things with French-inspired small plates. It’s nice enough to have a coat check, and Tim’s handing over their coats.

Jimmy got the sense that normally, if the person next to him were his date, he’d be doing something other than just standing here so he says to Tim, “You look nice,” once he returns without their coats.

Because Jimmy is on a date.

Tim thinks about that for a moment; he’s just him in nice dinner clothes. Black leather jacket, crimson button down, no tie, nice (black) jeans. He looks a lot like he does at work, though his hair is a bit less tamed down. Then he remembers that Breena did his eye. So, instead of a blotted mess of yellow green and muddy purple, he looks, especially in light this dim, like himself. Hell, himself back in May. She covered the scar, too.

So he nods, and says, “Yeah, Breena did a good job.”

This would be when it hits Jimmy that Tim isn’t precisely on the same page with him here. So, as they stand there, waiting for their table, he steps a little closer, brushes his hand against the back of Tim’s, just a light little touch, enough to wake goosebumps on his skin, and says voice low, “You smell nice, too.”

That’s where the light turns on for Tim, and he… and he’s not precisely proud of this, but Jimmy’s flirting with him, so he giggles, half nervous, half… it’s just… funny.

This doesn’t exactly encourage Jimmy. He’s had dates where his date thought him attempting to flirt was amusing, and they generally didn’t go well. He’s not glaring at Tim, but he’s not really happy
with him right now, either.

The hostess turns back to them. “Your table is ready, follow me.”

So they do.

It’s a four top off in a quiet corner, probably not a “great” table, but it’s fairly close to the restrooms, and with a very pregnant woman in the group, Tim’s extremely fine with that.

And then he’s a bit off-footed again, when Jimmy pulls out the chair for him, and then attempts to help push him into the table.

Tim doesn’t roll his eyes. He does, once Jimmy sits down, next to him, on his left, brush the back of his hand with his fingers, smile, and quietly says, “It’s okay. I’m a sure thing. You’re gonna get laid tonight.”

That’s not the reaction Jimmy’s going for here. He grits his teeth a bit and flashes him a You’re not helping look.

Tim hits him with a Really? You’re doing this? look. “Sorry, keep seducing me.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes. “Now, you’re really not helping.”

“I’m also not a girl. You don’t need to pull the chair out for me or tell me I look nice.”

Jimmy stares at him, feeling frustrated; he doesn’t know how to do this with a guy. “You like it when the girls tell you you look or smell nice.”

Tim squints a little, flatfooted. He does like that. “It’s different.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know! It just is. Just, treat me like you usually do.”

Now, Jimmy’s looking frustrated to go with feeling frustrated. “That’s the point of this, not treating you like I usually do. I’m trying to see you differently!”

“Well, can you see me differently and still as a guy?”

“You didn’t grow boobs while I was at work. I know you’re a guy! Just… the point of this isn’t just to get laid. I know I’m getting laid, trust me, I’m looking forward to it, I’m trying to… see you as someone desirable. So, I’m doing the things I do when I’m with someone I desire.”

Tim shrugs. That’s a fair point, but… “It feels weird to be on a date with you.”

“That’s definitely social conditioning.”

Abby and Breena catch that as they head back. “Experiment in the weeds already?” Abby asks. Jimmy leaps up to get the chairs for them, too.

“Revealing some interesting bits about Jimmy on a date,” Tim says.

“You, too.” Jimmy shoots back, tucking Breena into the table. “Someone’s not rolling with his side of this as well as hoped.”

Tim rolls his eyes a bit. “Okay, I’m fine with trying to shift things, but I’m not a girl. And if you have
to treat me like one for this to work on your end, it’s not going to work on mine.”

Breena glances at Jimmy. “What did you do?” *You were only alone for six minutes* is a very clear subtext for that question.

“The same stuff he does for you,” Tim answers.

Now Abby and Breena are looking at Tim, *This is a problem?* clear in both of their eyes.

Tim’s not sure how he ended up on the defensive here, but he is. “It’s just… weird.” All three of them are sharing a *social conditioning* look. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Next week, you get to be the girl, see how you like it.”

Breena and Abby do not look particularly impressed by that.

“I’m just digging myself in deeper, aren’t I?”

Three sets of nods. Two of them are quite vigorous.

---

Tim would have to admit that he was not aware he was signing up for this level of experimentation. He’d been, skeptical, to start with, on the idea that this might work, and he’d just been thinking about it as a sex game. The idea of being Jimmy’s… and yes, he feels a bit squirmy thinking about it this way, *girlfriend,* also feels weird.

But, unlike the gay or straight thing, *this* absolutely is social condition. He was trained to know what his role in this play is, and this is him stepping outside of that role, so…

He knows it, and he did agree to this, and…

And it’s weird. And it’s not entirely comfortable to be the object of desire of another guy.

Apparently this sex thing is a never-ending onion of layers.

Maybe it’d be easier if Jimmy were genuinely into him, instead of trying to make himself get into him, but the more Tim thinks about that, the more he decides that’s not it.

It’s just another level.

It’s desire. Being desired, desiring back, knowing that there’s anticipation of something sexual happening.

It’s not enough to fool around as a side show, or an appetizer. He’s gotten into those layers. Things we do because the girls like seeing them… check. Things we do because they feel good… half check. They’ve messed around with that a little. Things that make us feel good because we love each other… no check in that box.

The girls are talking with each other, giving both Tim and Jimmy processing time. Tim licks his lips, his somewhat uncomfortable version at first, then gives his lip a little bite, and commits to it. He signed up to experiment with this, so he’s going to damn well experiment.

He wiggles his toes out of his shoe and gently traces them up Jimmy’s calf. He flashes him a little
grin as Jimmy sends a startled look back to him, and says, “Okay, experimenting, really experimenting, not me sitting here looking smug while you try.”

“That’s all I’m asking.”

“So, you actually like this cologne, or were you just being nice?”

Jimmy rolls his eyes a little. “It’s not bad, but mostly being nice. I think all of them smell better on the girls.”

Tim nods. “That’s because what’s under them smells better to you when it’s one of them. How’s it match up compared to bare skin?”

Jimmy leans a little closer to Tim, inhales, and thinks. “Indifferent. Makes me think of expensive shaving soap, and that’s nowhere in my erotic library.”

Breena shakes her head. “How about when he wears one of Abby’s?”

Jimmy looks at him. “Have I smelled you wearing one of hers or Breena’s… I mean, intentionally, not when you’ve been rubbing all over them?” Jimmy’s perfectly fine with Tim smelling like Abby or Breena because he’s been rubbing all over them. That mix, their skin on his mixed with sex and desire, yeah, he likes that just fine. If they could bottle that and slap it on Tim, that’d work a treat.

But, Tim in just one of Abby’s perfumes… He knows Tim does that sometimes, but he can’t remember the scent of it.

Tim shrugs; he doesn’t know. “Abby?”

“Don’t remember. But the one you’ve got on right now is really male. Bay rum, lime, and sandalwood doesn’t exactly scream femme. Great for Breena and I, because it telegraphs what we respond to, maybe not so hot for Jimmy.”

Jimmy’s nodding at that. Granted, he’s got one of his own usual date scents on, too, which is a bit less “traditional male” but certainly not femme on any level.

“I’ll try something softer next time,” Tim says.

“Next time?” Breena asks.

“Successful experiments need to be repeatable. Just because you can get cold fusion once doesn’t make it science. Gotta do it again,” Tim replies.

Abby giggles at that. “You might be pushing the experiment part of this a bit too far.”

“Not if I’m going to tell Penny about it,” Tim says with a wicked little smile. “Can’t you see it? Shabbos, maybe a year from now. Got the report all written up. Sexual Response Cycle in Males: Conditioning V. Genetic Pre-Disposition, a Brief Hands-On Study.”

That gets some laughing.

Then Jimmy ups it a bit, “Can you see Tony’s face if you actually do whip that puppy out at her? Between the subject, and an actual, written report, with statistics and charts and all the rest of it?” That gets the laughter several notches higher.

“Pictures,” Breena adds, sexy grin lighting her face. “Can’t do it without pictures. Which techniques worked best, stuff like that.”
“And then Penny and Ducky’ll be flipping through it, totally un-phased, criticizing my math, sample size, and lack of single, let alone double, blind.” Tim adds.

Abby laughs even harder at that, and gasps out a second later, “God, I just peed on myself a little, stop it!”

And, of course, that’s the moment the waitress shows up to see what they might like to drink.

Dinner moves a bit easier after that.

The application of wine helps, too. Jimmy’d gotten to the restaurant by Uber, so it’s not like he’s got a car he’s got to get back to Tim and Abby’s place. And for the sake up upping the odds of successful experimentation, Breena is more than willing to be the designated driver for the night.

So, wine, a collection of beautifully plated small meals, none more than a few bites each, and talking about the Tesla, the latest case, and what Tim’s hoping to get out of the next round of Commissions goes smoothly.

This, they know how to do. Life is, for most people, in most places, at most times, a series of scripts. Shifting those scripts can be uncomfortable, but… Probably worth it.

So, Tim goes with it when Jimmy offers him a bite of duck confit with sour cherry compote off of his own fork. They both do that for the girls without thinking about it. If he runs into something he likes, it takes precisely no thought at all to spear some of it up and offer it to Abby or Breena, but that’s not anything he does for Jimmy.

And he does try to remember to pet Jimmy over the course of dinner. He’s happily touching Abby, and with his foot, under the table (because she’s sitting across from him) Breena, but he doesn’t usually touch Jimmy, just to touch him, when they’re on a date.

So he does. Little brushes against his hand, or when he’s the focus of the conversation, occasionally leaning into him, stroking the back of his neck.

And Jimmy does, too.

At one point, during dessert, Tim’s licking a bit of crème brûlée off of his spoon. (And, yes, he is showing off for the girls as he does it. The crème brûlée does not need anywhere near that much tongue work to get it off a spoon.) Jimmy decides to take that up a notch, he catches Tim’s eyes, looks hot, eyes tracing his tongue and lips, licks his own lips, and rests his hand on Tim’s thigh.

And Tim’s sure this experiment isn’t going to work, because he absolutely knows that if Abby or Breena did that, gave him that look, and then started sliding her hand up his inner thigh, his dick would respond. It would feel all hot and shivery all over, and he’d have a lot of good sense memories attached to it, as well as the anticipation of getting home and naked and…

Jimmy just did it, and he knows how he should feel, and…

It’s a nice sensation. Jimmy hand is warm and large and cupping him in a very nice sort of way. And, actually, on a pure physical sensation level, having someone who has his own set of testicles and is somewhat more intimately acquainted with how they like to be touched doing this is rather
pleasant, but… It’s not doing all that much for him.

He’s wondering a bit if this is what women mean when they say sex is a mind game. Like, it feels okay, it’s pleasant, but it’s not turning him on. It’s not making him want. Maybe that’s how the mind game part of it works? The kisses and touching still feels okay, but if the sex part of the brain doesn’t engage, nothing’s happening.

But that’s also the point. See if the sex part is just walled off. Try to get it out from behind that wall. So… maybe the experiment’s not failing… Shit, how complicated does this have to be?

Tim glances at Abby and Breena, and they both appear to be enjoying watching this a hell of a lot, and that gets the sex part of his brain online.

Ride home time. He and Jimmy aren’t usually in the back with each other, even if both of them do drink at dinner, by this point in a date night, they’d like to be near one (or both) of the girls.

But, tonight, they’re in the backseat with each other.

Jimmy’s feeling pretty good, well-fed, buzzed, horny… God, so horny! And there is a warm, friendly body right next to his, kissing… pretty good. But he keeps looking at the girls in the front seat, and thinking about making out with them.

Breena’s driving, so she can’t pay too much attention to what’s going on back there, though she does shift the rearview mirror every time they hit a stop light.

Abby’s watching, eyes glued to them.

And Jimmy’ll kiss Tim, and the kissing is good. Tim’s going at it a bit rougher than the girls usually do, and Jimmy’s liking that. He’s thinking there might actually be something to having sex with someone larger (or the same size) as you are and letting body weight and strength get into it.

He’s starting to, maybe, have an inkling of why some people might find wrestling erotic.

Mostly though, he’s getting off on being watched.

He’s always liked that. And right now, he’s putting on a show. He’s twisted in towards Tim in the backseat, one hand in his hair, other hand on his thigh, and kissing Tim back just as hard as he’s getting kissed.

Even in a moving car, he can hear the way Abby’s breathing, feel her eyes on them, and he knows she’s all but quivering at the sight of this, and that’s taking Jimmy awfully high.

“So, how do you see this working?” Tim asks as they’re heading to bed.

Jimmy has to stop kissing Breena to answer that. “God. Uh… Just naked in bed, and it’ll take care of itself.”
Abby laughs at that. “So, all we need to do is put you two on short sex rations and that solves the issue?”

Tim raises an eyebrow. “We’re not the same person, just because it works on him doesn’t mean it’ll work on me.”

She playfully swats his butt. “Yeah, right.” Then she wraps an arm around Jimmy’s neck and kisses him. Her belly’s too big for her to grind her hips against his groin, but she can still drag her leg up the inside of his, and he moans against her lips at that. “Come to bed boys, we’ve got plans for you.”

“And we’re also enjoying the idea of seeing what you’re going to do to each other,” Breena adds with a gleam in her eye. “Quick reminder though, it’s baby-making week, so I get you off, right?”

Neither of the guys have any problems with that, at all.

Once they’re in the bedroom, Tim’s first thought is to see about getting the girls naked. He’s happily got his hands on the clasp of Abby’s skirt, looking to peel her out of that high-waisted, clingy pencil skirt, and lay his eyes and hands on the butt he’s been fantasizing about all day.

He’s kneeling behind her, working her skirt over Sean, and saying, “Gonna get you on all fours and just lick that luscious ass of yours until you’re screaming, and I’m so hard I’m ready to pass out from it. Then get my fingers into you, three of them, curl ‘em nice and sweet, get that spot over and over while my tongue dances on your skin. You want that, right? Want to be clinging to the edge of coming all over again and again…” Abby’s breath is coming fast and she’s moaning gently at those words, feeling his teeth on her panties as she kicks her skirt off.

Jimmy’s pushing Breena’s jacket off of her shoulders, kissing along her neck as his fingers look for the hook and eye at the top of her dress. It’s on there somewhere, but he’s way too distracted by the feel of her skin against his lips, her scent, and those soft, needy little sounds she’s making to find it easily. He’s more or less tugging at her dress, and she reaches behind herself to get the clasp, then he’s got the zipper, ripping it down, fast, hands finding their way to her skin, and he groans, loud and long, crushing her body to his as the feel of her back, soft and smooth and naked under his fingers short circuits any higher levels of thought.

There’s just skin, and pressure and soft, sweet, sex rubbing up against him, undoing his belt, and all he wants right now is to get out of these pants and into his wife, and thrust and thrust and her hot and slick and rippling on his cock. He’s tugging on the dress, trying to get it down, over her skin, but that’s not going to happen, the neck is too small, and even if it wasn’t, he’s grinding against her with his leg between hers.

Breena steps back, and he groans, not a happy sound this time, but it shifts into a happy sound, a hot, ecstatic sound as she pulls her dress over her head and is standing in front of him in his favorite lace push-up bra, panties, little black pumps, and thigh high stockings.

They’re two minutes into this, and he’s already starting to leak, pressing the heal of his hand against the head of his dick, rubbing over the slick spot on his own belly feels amazing and plunging into Breena’s going to be even better. Breena circles behind him, stroking his back and shoulders, pressing up tight against him, and turns him toward Tim, who is also not at all interested in or paying any attention to the other guy in the room.

Abby, likewise, is really enjoying what Tim’s doing with her (biting gently on her left butt cheek),
but she’s also wanting to enjoy him playing with Jimmy, so she turns, gets Tim by the hands, and pulls him up to her. For a moment, they’re just kissing. His hands find her hair and hip, tangling, holding her as close as they can get, as his lips make love to hers.

She’s got her hands on his shirt, unbuttoning, pulling it free from his jeans.

Breena’s on a similar mission, though starting with Jimmy’s pants. She brushes his hand away from his dick and slowly unzips him, making sure to trail her fingers over his dick as she does it. He groans at that, too, loud enough to get Tim’s attention away from Abby to see what Jimmy and Breena might be doing that feels so good to Jimmy.

He watches Breena finish unzipping Jimmy, pushing his pants down, as she rubs her hand over his boxer briefs and dick, light, teasing pressure, but her hand stroking over his dick, his hard, wet dick, desperately trying to get out of it’s cotton confines, that’s getting to Tim. His eyes follow her hand up and down on Jimmy and he feels himself go harder at it.

He’s watching that, breath coming faster, and Abby sees it, smiles, and gives him a gentle little nudge. “Go, play,” she says quietly. “I bet he’d like a kiss, right now.”

So, Tim does. He steps closer, cupping Jimmy’s face in his one hand, and holding Abby’s hand with the other, and kisses Jimmy.

Abby’s right. Jimmy desperately wants to be kissed right now. He’s rocking into Breena’s much too gentle touch, feeling her glued to his back, and wanting more pressure on his dick and lips and… everything.

And then he’s got it. Lips, hot, soft, plump lips all over his, and tongue. Tim’s more of a tongue kisser than Jimmy is, and right now he’s perfectly fine with that, because all that soft, wet tongue is slipping between his lips over and over and over, and Jimmy’s got that sort of sensation hardwired into his idea of sex, and he’s rocking between Breena’s hand and Tim’s belly.

“Skin,” he manages to choke out, and the girls are on that in a heartbeat. He’s not sure which one of them got his vest and shirt off, let alone his undies, but it’s not more than a minute before he’s feeling Tim’s skin against his own and probably, at most, another minute after that before they’re on the bed kissing and rubbing all over each other.

Kissing someone who’s basically as tall as he is is pretty nice. Jimmy’s well aware of the fact that Tim’s a little taller than he is, but that really only comes into play when they’re standing up. (Tim’s got an extra inch of leg.) Like this, lying down, his lips are at lip level, and his hips are at hip level. And that’s a new, and welcome sensation. Unlike with Breena, (and to a lesser extent, Abby) his neck isn’t getting scrunched and when he rubs against Tim and kisses.

And dick on dick is nice, too. It’s smooth and hard and feels… different. It’s not anything Jimmy’s ever done before and the sensation is good. As long as he keeps Tim in exactly the right spot, this is pretty sweet.

But… They’re not good at keeping in the right spot. Neither of them automatically wraps a leg around the other one, because they’re not, usually, the one who does that when it comes to sex. So, about half of the time, he’s happily rubbing against Tim’s dick, which is soft and smooth and nice, and half the time he’s rubbing against Tim’s pubes, which… It’s kind of prickly and really isn’t all that hot.
There are other distracting bits, too. Tim’s hard all over. Softer than Jimmy is. But he’s a lot harder than anyone else Jimmy’s ever rolled around naked with. He’s all long angles and plains. There’s a little swell at his belly, and lying on their sides, facing each other, his pecs are a bit soft, but Jimmy knows that if Tim was on top, those muscles would flex, and they’d be hard, too.

Jimmy’s hands are roaming around, but there’s no butt, no hips, no breasts, no curves. Nothing soft, or jiggly, or plump and fleshy for his fingers to dig into. Nothing fills the curve of his hand and makes his breath come fast as he cups and squeezes.

And yes, he’s horny enough that rubbing up against Tim feels good. There’s nice friction with this, and his dick is awfully smooth against Jimmy’s, which is nice, but… it doesn’t feel right. He’s too hard and not smooth enough and he’s thin enough his hipbone is poking Jimmy in the stomach, and…

And he’s really not a girl.

Jimmy’s losing steam on this, and he can feel Tim is, too.

The fact that he’s more or less just letting Jimmy do this, isn’t exactly helping. It’s awfully clear this isn’t on any of his top ten fantasy lists.

Jimmy pulls back. “A little more enthusiasm, please.”

Tim tilts Jimmy’s lips to his and kisses him, hard and deep.

Okay, that’s good. Apparently mentioning that he was a better kisser stoned has made Tim think about upping his kissing game, because he’s tonguing the hell out of Jimmy right now, which Jimmy’s appreciating.

The chorus of extremely excited women is really helping things, and if they’d quit just watching and actually get in on this, Jimmy’s sure he and Tim would both be having a much better time, but… Of course, they already know they like playing as a foursome. He knows that Tim plus the girls is a winning combination, it’s trying to get off on Tim alone, so… he supposes the girls should be hanging back.

He’s sure this would feel better if they were actively playing though.

Jimmy’s a hell of a lot hairier than he looks. That’s primarily what Tim’s thinking as the haze of SEX goes leaching out of his mind. Everything was good, and the sex was building, and there were girls and boy and Breena behind Jimmy and Abby nearby and they were taking off clothing and all of that was really good, but somewhere along the line the girls backed off and now there’s just Jimmy and…

He’s so… fuzzy… all over. His legs are hairy, his arms are, too, and chest and stomach and… his back isn’t, but… He’s just fuzzy.

And it’s really distracting to Tim.

The kissing is nice. He likes that. Jimmy’s sucking on his tongue like it’s candy and that feels great, but the rest of it is just… weird.

Jimmy’s knees are bony, and they keep bumping knees because neither of them know where their
legs go when they’re together.

Tim finally figures what to do with his hand when he’s again being rubbed into Jimmy’s pubes, which are a hell of a lot rougher than anything he wants to be grinding naked into. He gets his hand around both of their dicks, keeping them rubbing in the right spot, and that helps.

That’s pretty nice. But, the feel of Jimmy’s dick rubbing against his, and both of them in his fist, is just reminding him about how much better he liked that when they were doing it with Breena. If they were doing this with Breena between them, everything would be wet and slick, and both dicks would have something hot wrapped all the way from tip to base around them, and thinking about that’s actually helping to get Tim more interested in what’s going on, so he thrusts a bit harder, imaging Breena between them, feeling her hair against his chest, and her kissing Jimmy, and then him, and… God… yeah, soft, full breasts in his hand, and wet, slick pussy gliding over them…

That’s working just fine for Tim.

Tim’s taking things up a few notches, and Jimmy doesn’t mind that, at all. This is easier if his partner’s acting like he’s actually having a good time.

They’re both on their sides, and Tim’s speeding his hand up, doing a good job with the friction and pressure. (Which, Jimmy idly thinks, makes a certain amount of sense. After all, he’s been giving himself hand jobs for more than twenty-five years, of course he’s good at it.) Jimmy knows if he lets Tim keep doing this, it’s going to be done way too soon, before Breena’s even in the picture, so he rolls Tim onto his back and starts kissing down his chest. That’s… still a bit weird. He misses breasts. And Tim hasn’t shaved his chest since the last time Jimmy did this, so this time he’s got hair on his chest and around his nipples, and sure, there isn’t a lot of it, Jimmy’s got more, but it’s just making him miss breasts even more.

Still, he’s done this before, and it was hot as all manner of fuck when Tim was moaning under him while he and Abby were biting on him and Breena playing with the beads. That was blistering hot. Jimmy’s keeping those thoughts and images in his head as he creeps down Tim’s body, kissing and licking, hearing Tim… be a hell of a lot quieter than usual.

Well, he knows how to fix that.

Hopefully.

He hurries, kissing faster, moving down Tim’s body, and nudges his legs apart. That feel weird, too. Jimmy doesn’t have to remind either of the girls where he goes if he’s going to do this. They know that legs get spread for this to work.

Tim doesn’t. But after getting his knee between Tim’s he gets with the program and spreads his legs.

Jimmy gets himself settled between Tim’s legs and just looks.

It’s a dick. It’s very much a dick. A nicely hard, well-shaped, not too long and not too short, pink-tipped, dick. Soft, lightly-haired balls are hanging loose below it. If there were such a thing as the aesthetics of male genitals, these would be a very pleasing ones.

But it’s still a dick.
Not like he’s never seen this dick before, or touched it for that matter, (his fingers are splayed on Tim’s hips right now) but… It’s… looking him right in the eye… and really… yeah… It’s a dick.

He looks up at Tim, hoping for… he doesn’t know, but Tim’s eyes are closed, and that… That’s not encouraging. The only time Tim closes his eyes during sex is when he’s kissing. Eyes closed, balls loose, that’s very much not how he’d be reacting to either of the girls in this position.

Try.

Jimmy shifts forward a bit. The body mechanics are wrong, too. The spot Jimmy’d normally be aiming for is about eight inches lower than where he actually needs his mouth to be, and… Okay, he’s seen both girls do this. He knows, good God he knows, it works, but he’s stupidly thinking about the fact that Tim’s dick is pointing in the wrong direction for it to go into his mouth easily.

Jimmy licks his lips, shifts even further forward, and very lightly, tentatively, licks Tim.

Tim jerks a little at the touch, and he doesn’t seem to have minded it, but he’s not making any noise. Both girls moan. He thinks that might be Abby’s just got off cry. They’re certainly doing everything they can to encourage the hell out of them in this.

He licks his lips again and tries a little suck. He slips just the head of Tim’s dick into his mouth. It feels… bigger than he expected. He didn’t think he’d have to open his mouth that wide, which is kind of awkward. When it comes to sex, he’s never sucked on anything bigger than a finger or nipple before, and… yeah… This is just weird. It’s not bad, but he’s suddenly very aware of the fact that he’s the one who penetrates, not gets penetrated, in a way he wasn’t when the girls were playing with him at the cabin.

Still, it’s weird, not bad. It’s smooth and feels nice against his lips and tongue. In some ways, it puts him in mind of kissing, wet lips have that same sort of smooth slide to them, too. It’s got pleasant, slick glide to it. He hears Tim sigh, feels him gently petting his hair, and this time he absolutely knows that’s Abby’s getting off cry (so at least someone’s really enjoying this) but…

But… It’s not a pussy. In this position, doing this to Abby or Breena, he’d be getting off on the smell and taste. He’d be tracing all over it with his eyes, probably stroking himself, savoring the flavor and wet on his lips.

He’d be holding himself back from diving in, not psyching himself up to do it.

And, it certainly doesn’t smell bad or taste icky; Tim’s good with hygiene, and right now he just smells like skin and turned on guy... which is also actually kind of nice… and he doesn’t taste of much of anything. But it’s not making Jimmy’s mouth water or his dick get harder. He doesn’t want to dive in, suck it deep, and see how it feels slipping in and out of his mouth.

Not the way he’d want it if Breena were splayed out in front of him like this.

Mostly what he’s thinking as he kind of half-heartedly runs his tongue over the head of Tim’s dick is that he doesn’t know what the hell he’s doing, and though it’s true he didn’t know what the hell he was doing the first time he gave head to a woman, he really wanted to learn back then, and right now, he’s just sort of… stuck. He doesn’t want to give up, but doing this isn’t turning him on, and he can’t imagine he’s even getting in the neighborhood of rocking Tim’s world.
Tim doesn’t think he’s ever received a less enthusiastic blow job, and he’s including the one and only one he got from his grad school girlfriend who didn’t like doing it and thought even wanting one was a horrifically anti-feminist statement of male dominance. (She asked what his fantasy was, and he was stupid enough to truthfully answer, and… yeah… she did it, but it was pretty clear she’d been hoping he had different fantasies.)

He gently pulls on Jimmy’s hair, drawing Jimmy’s lips away from his dick and says, “You’re really fucking straight.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes and nods. Tim pulls him up, sitting up himself, and kisses him.

They’re sitting next to each other at the head of the bed. Tim has his arm around Jimmy, and both girls are still at the foot of the bed, but moving up to them.

Jimmy shakes his head. “Yeah. Great. The point was to choke on it literally, not metaphorically.”

Tim’s eyes go wide at that. “God, I’m rubbing off on you in all the wrong ways, aren’t I? I can’t believe you said that.”

“You’re not rubbing off on me at all right now. Which is part of the problem.”

Tim smiles at him and gives him another kiss. “If you want to…” He gestures back at his dick. “I mean, for someone who’s never done it before, that was pretty good.”

Jimmy shakes his head and rolls his eyes. “You’re not going to magically turn into a girl. I’m straight, and you’re a guy, and this isn’t really working all that hot.”

Tim’s nodding along with that.

“You might be the first person in the history of men to be disappointed by that,” Abby says, kissing the back of Tim’s neck.

Jimmy gives Breena a gentle tug, pulling her into his lap. “You don’t flip out about stuff like this.”

Breena shrugs. If pressed, she would admit that she thought this experiment idea was kind of silly. She’s all in favor of the boys playing with each other, and any set up they had to come up with to get them moving in that direction seemed fine to her, but… She didn’t think this was how they’d go about it. She was envisioning them more just playing with each other some, and more active all four of them making love to each other sort of thing.

She hadn’t expected them to try and just run headlong into having sex with each other in one fell swoop.

Jimmy’s still staring at her, and she kisses him. And then Tim, and Abby just to round things out.

She’s never thought she might be bi, she still doesn’t, but she does know what she just saw, and how the guys basically ran out of gas when it was just the two of them, and that’s not the way she reacts to Abby’s body. When they were just messing around, the two of them, taking the Valentine’s photos, she had a great time and was so ready to pounce on Jimmy the second he got the girls into their beds.
Of course, she also knows she didn’t try to force herself to do it. She just went with the flow, and the flow started with kisses and eventually got to playing deeper.

“Jimmy, you aren’t flipping out. You’re in bed, naked with him, making out. That’s about as not flipping out as possible.” Tim nods as Breena says that. He knows flipping out, this isn’t even on the same continent.

“Plus, she’s a girl, Jimmy. Different brain wiring and chemistry,” Abby adds. “Literally, she’s got more connections between the sides of her brains, and study after study shows women react differently to sexual stimuli than men do.”

Breena kisses Jimmy, slow and sweet. “I also didn’t decide that making love with Abby was a wall I needed to barrel though all at once.” She smacks her fist into her hand. “Try to go through the wall at full speed, you crash into it. Got to go at it soft and gentle and worm your way through the cracks.” She kisses Jimmy, and then leans over and kisses Abby, and one more kiss for Tim. “Chip it down, one kiss at a time. C’mon, play time. Less thinking, more fucking. Just touch as feels good. That’s what I did with Abby.” She kisses Abby.

Tim feels his pulse shoot up as they kiss soft, wet, slow, open mouths and soft pink lips rubbing on each other.

“One kiss felt good.” Breena kisses Abby again, and it does feel good. She’s all soft, and smooth, and she does this little thing with her tongue where it just flutters over the tip of Breena’s and that feels amazing. “And then another,” she breathes to Abby as they shift into another kiss. Her hand finds Abby’s breast, long fingers stroking over full, plump, pink flesh. Abby’s just so soft all over, and all of that soft just feels amazing.

Jimmy’s feeling all the turned on from the last week come galloping back into play.

“And then a little touch.”

Tim moans at Breena stroking her fingers over Abby’s throat and breast. Breena turns and grins at both of the guys, who are ramping back up again, fast. She feels the added rush of that. Both of the guys looking at her like she and Abby are literal sex goddesses, ever flowing founts of beauty and desire. “And then insanely turned on guys, make me feel all flushed and ultra-sexy.” She traces her eyes over both of the guys, whose bodies are responding extremely well to this show. They’d both gone a bit soft when they stopped making out, but “a bit soft” does not in any way describe them any longer.

Abby kisses her again, running her fingers through Breena’s hair. She pulls just hard enough to get Breena’s attention, and then there’s that soft, soft mouth and her wicked tongue…

“And another kiss, and…” Breena gasps out.

Abby strokes her hand over Breena’s breast.

“Oh… Yeah…” she sighs long and low. Abby pulls just hard enough, with just enough friction and twist on the nipple, and a very light brush over the breast. Breena goes goosebumpy all over from that touch.

Tim kisses her shoulder, his hand stroking over her breast, and Abby’s fingers, as he grinds against her side.

Breena’s starting to pink up, breath getting faster. “Oh, God, more happy guys, and happy girl, and…”
Abby’s fingers slip down her belly, just lightly skirting over her pubic hair.

“Mmmm…” slips out of Breena. That’s really good. Such a light touch, mostly just friction over the hairs. Just enough to wake up her body, remind it that it’s getting played with tonight, too. Breena pulls Jimmy’s lips to hers, kissing him long and hard as Abby and Tim stroke all over her. “Just play with it, baby. If it’s a wall, break it down a kiss at a time. Don’t try to force it.”

She kisses Jimmy again, rocking against him, and that, her body on his, rubbing sweet and slick, has him moaning against her.

“Oh God,” Jimmy groans. Yeah, sex, real sex, the kind of sex he’s wired for, that feels amazing.

Jimmy keeps enough of his hope to play with what he likes in mind to try different sorts of playing with Tim, as well as Abby and Breena.

Like, kissing Tim while Breena’s riding him. Okay, that’s really good. The little rasp of Tim’s stubble is interesting, and a warm, and large, hand on the back of his neck, keeping his head in one place is really nice. He’s starting to possibly rethink letting Tim in on the domination games, because someone big enough to really hold him down might be interesting.

He’s completely understanding why Tim really liked getting kissed while he was the one tied down and being played, and… the idea rushes through him, hot and slithery and jolting to his groin. “Bite me!”

Abby’s on it, jolting him that much higher, as Tim sucks hard on his lip and Breena rocks back and forth on him.

Oh… that sting’s just perfect. Breena on her hands and knees, him behind her, Abby spanking him into her. His teeth grit at that fantasy. Next time Tim has late night, and they are so doing that.

Or, the feel of Tim’s hair between his fingers, and the sensation of leg hair against his leg, that’s pretty nice, too. Tactilely pleasant, in a way that’s different from the girls.

Breena lowers herself onto Jimmy’s chest. Tim moves away, and she takes over on the kissing, and Tim heads behind her, stroking her back and butt, taking a few minutes to kiss each cheek, and draw his fingers down her spine.

Jimmy can hear Abby moaning as she’s watching this. “I got some free fingers.”

She scoots over a bit, and his hand finds her pussy, all wet and hot, and just that sensation on his fingers, and Breena sliding on his cock. “Oh Lord, yes!”

Tim… Oh, God… he knows what Tim’s doing, shocked he’s doing it, but… “FUCK!” He thinks Tim might have just smirked at him, and then he slips into Breena, too, and, yeah better.

That’s really good, floating around on how turned on he is and sex, so much sex, all around and all over his body.

He’s building up slow because with Tim and Breena on top of him, he can’t move all that much, and both Breena and Tim are going, slow. Probably because they know he’s on a hair trigger tonight.
Tim’s a butt guy. He’s always been one. He intends to always be one, and right now, kneeling behind Breena and Jimmy watching them fuck, Breena’s ass high in the air, just begging to be kissed… “God…” He’s palming both cheeks. “So beautiful!”

Breena wiggles a bit at him, inviting him to taste, and he does, happily licking, adding the occasional little bite and kiss.

*This* hits so hard. So round and full and plump between his fingers, and he can hear and smell and if he shifts his head just a bit, see, the sex from an inch away.

It’s the smell… That’s killing him. That’s filling him up and making him ache and drip. He slips a little further down, licking Breena’s pussy, and of course, Jimmy’s dick, too. Can’t get the one without the other, and right now, out of his skull turned on, it’s all good.

Breena’s so wet, and pink, glistening as Jimmy’s slipping in and out of her, and Tim licks, again and again, getting all of that, savoring the flavor of her body and Jimmy’s together.

Then he moves a bit lower. Jimmy’s balls are slick with Breena’s cum, and he starts licking again. He feels dizzy with how hard that hits, and like Breena said, he’s just going with it. He opens his mouth a bit wider and slips Jimmy’s ball between his lips, sucking gently, laving every drop of Breena off Jimmy’s skin.

Jimmy and Breena have been moaning and gasping as they’ve been playing, but he hears that pause for a second as Jimmy shouts, “FUCK!”

Tim pulls back for a second, mouth wet, and smirks at him, and then winks to Abby who looks ecstatic at him with that.

Breena scoots a bit forward, so she’s just touching the tip of Jimmy’s dick, and Tim knows what she’s looking for. He shifts up to kneeling, and lays his dick on Jimmy’s getting a firm hold of both of them, and again, Jimmy groans, and another one, as Tim adds more lube, rubbing it over both of them, and rubbing against Jimmy a bit, too, enjoying the slick glide through his hand. Then, carefully, holding both of them together, he rubs the tips of both of their dicks against Breena, letting her know to move back, and she does.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK!” So hot and tight and slick and wet and AMAZING.

She rocks back onto them, and a long, slow forward. All three of them groan at that, so tight and hot and so so so… no words for that… “Uhg…” slips out of Tim in a long breath.

He straights out, so he’s above both of them, and licks Breena’s shoulder, biting gently, and says, “You taste fucking amazing on him, and feel even better on me.”

She smiles at him, turning to kiss Tim, and together they start a slow, easy rhythm.

It’s the little smile that gets to Abby. More than the rest of this… And God, *this* is everything she ever wanted to watch, and she cannot wait for Sean to be on the outside so she can fully play with
them… ideas about what’s happening when she can wear the strap-on again are dancing through her
head… But, more than that, more than ripe, hot, Technicolor, surround-sound, XXXX fucking, it’s
that smile, and what it means, getting to her.

She doesn’t even know if Tim knows he does it, but sometimes, when he’s kissing deep and present,
he’ll pull back for a stroke or two and just smile. Lots of deep eye contact, and that little smile that
lights up his whole face.

He’s kissing Breena, right now, each stroke taking his lips past hers. He’ll kiss, drag his lips over
hers, both of them mouths open, breathing each other in, and back, lips brushing again. He’s still
moving, just easing in and out, but he pulls back an inch and just smiles at her, and at Jimmy.

Breena arches up, pressing into Tim, and Jimmy’s hand slips up, tracing over Tim’s cheek. Tim turns
his lips to Jimmy’s palm, and kisses again.

Tim’s arm and shoulder call time after a few minutes in this position. He’s getting stronger, but
there’s only so long he can basically plank these days, and he’s there.

He slips back, and Breena makes a less than blissed-out sound, and Jimmy’s not exactly on board
with that plan, either.

“She up, side of the bed. My arm’s about to fall off.”

That gets some rearranging, with Jimmy on the side of the bed, Breena in his lap, and Tim’s able to
stand in front of them, slipping in again.

“Yeah…” hisses out of Breena. “God, baby, just keep that up.”

“No problem.” He snaps his hips, and gets his knees into it, pressing in deep, deeper than he could
go before. “Uhn…” slips out of him as the pleasure of it washes over him.

Jimmy groans, too. This is all sorts of good. Extra friction, and the brush of Tim’s balls against his,
that’s great. Breena’s back is to his chest, and he’s kissing her neck and shoulder, her breasts in his
hands.

This combination is perfect. Right now, he’s got everything he likes about girls and boys. Soft
curves, smooth skin, silky hair, wet pussy, and hard thrusting dick, all together. *This* is great!

Tim’s enjoying this, too, and figuring that after the last few days, Jimmy’s not looking for any sort of
marathon. As soon as Breena gets off, they’re getting off, too.

And Tim knows, remembers, how to speed that up. He strokes his fingers down Jimmy’s face,
fingers pausing under his chin, and then lifts his face from Breena’s shoulder. He leans in, kissing
Breena first, plastering his body to Breena’s so with every thrust he’s rubbing over her entire front,
then a few inches further, he wraps his arms around Breena and as much of Jimmy as he can get, and
he kisses Jimmy, right over Breena’s shoulder.

Jimmy’s eyes slide shut. A long, happy sound eases out of him.

Another long groan, and Tim’s not sure if it’s his, Jimmy’s or both. He does know the higher pitched
yip of excitement is Abby, as well as the hand that twines with his on Jimmy’s back, encouraging
him. He can feel the rumbling moan of Breena’s voice, hear it too.
He keeps up a long, slow glide, making sure he’s grinding into Breena at the top of each stroke. “Come on, baby, sing for us,” he says, breaking his kiss with Jimmy and kissing down her throat.

She’s almost there, panting, soft, high pitched moans finishing off each exhale. Her eyes close, head falls back on Jimmy’s shoulder as his hands slip down her body, stroking breasts and then clit. “There you go,” Jimmy’s voice adds.

She’s biting her lip, starting to grind harder and faster, and Tim speeds up, too, hoping he won’t flip Jimmy off the edge too soon. Jimmy flashes him a quick nod, he’s good, for a few more seconds, at least.

And he’s good because he’s focused on Breena right now, he’s feeling her heartbeat thundering under his hand, watching the flush creep down her chest, and the gentle sway of her breast with each thrust. He’s feeling her hair, damp and wild against his chest and cheek as he’s kissing her deep and fast.

Tim’s biting his lip, hard, trying to keep himself from slipping over. That’s the hottest kiss he’s ever seen between Jimmy and Breena and he’s right on top of them, part of it, too. He can feel Breena’s pussy starting to twitch, not quite over the line, yet, but getting there. Her hands are grabbing at his butt, pulling him deeper and faster and harder, and he’s going with it, smooth glide replaced with staccato thrusts, hips and heart pounding together, chasing pleasure.

Breena shifts, kissing Tim, tongue so wet and soft, slipping between his lips, matching the pace of his dick, and he can feel Jimmy speeding up his fingers on her clit, working her faster as she grows tighter on both of the guys.

So close, just… Pounding hearts and fast slippery sounds and that bright glow growing between them, almost… just… there.

Breena goes first, with a loud groan and rippling pussy and jerking hips.

That’s almost all Tim and Jimmy need. Tim speeds up just a hair, letting himself really feel what he’s doing, feel Breena’s body all slick and wet and clenching and Jimmy’s cock hard and smooth against him, and he pulls his lips back from Breena, grabbing at Jimmy to kiss him, hard and fast, sucking his tongue, making love to him, finishing Jimmy off, too. He feels Jimmy’s arms go tight around them, and then another loud grunt, Jimmy’s dick pulsing, and there, against his dick, there’s the swell and twitch and more rhythmic pressure against Tim as he rocks, clinging to both of them, snapping his hips, faster, heart beating faster and… then… almost… there.

He comes with a shout, clutching both of them tight, and spends a long minute standing, quiet, heart thundering, legs shaky, slowly coming down from the high.

It’s probably a good five minutes before they move. Just quiet time, resting, kissing soft and gentle, light, easy petting.

Abby scoots in to join the afterglow, wrapped around them as well as she can get.

Gradually, hearts slow, and skin cools, and eyelids grow heavy. Tim knows he should step back, but he doesn’t want to. He’s wrapped in his loves, and that’s a very good place to be. But, eventually, he does move away, and they untangle and start to get cleaned up.
He feels limp and lose all over when he crashes back into their bed, and a minute later Jimmy lands next to him. He idly debates rolling all the way over to kiss him, and decides it’s worth the effort. Like everything else right now, it’s slow and lazy, sated and sleepy.

“So, when we write it up, was that a success?” Jimmy asks, tired humor in his voice.

Tim chuckles a bit. “I have no idea. I liked it.”

Breena gets back to the bed at that point. She snuggles in next to Jimmy. “I think that’s all the success you need.”

Jimmy turns his face toward her, and kisses her soft and slow. She lies down on her side, wrapping around him.

His fingers find her belly. “So… Think that did it?”

“Still got a few days on that,” she says with a yawn.

Abby doesn’t go to their bed, in fact, instead of turning off the one light that let them see their games, she’s turning on another light, which isn’t exactly making the day of anyone else in bed, but in a second, when she says, “You better hope it does, because my water just broke,” no one minds.

Chapter End Notes

I know some of you like to know. Tim is wearing Black Phoenix Alchemy Lab’s Alan McMichael, and Jimmy is wearing Dee. Google them for scent notes. Dee is one of my personal favorites.
Sorry about the long quiet time. I live in the direct path of last week's Snowmageddon, and for kicks and giggles, my county decided that closing school on Friday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and two hour delays on Thursday and Friday were an appropriate response.

Thus, I've been off wrangling my human babies, instead of this literary one. Hopefully more soon.

So sleepy. Happy and warm and sated and ready to sleep. That’s what Abby’s feeling as Breena heads out of the bathroom and she gets to the toilet.

Just a bit of clean up, pee, and then curl up next to——

There’s a sound. It’s a small sound. She’s not even sure she heard it so much as felt it, but, if she were to describe it, she say it was reminiscent of “pop” and, sound or not, the fact that she’s pretty sure she stopped peeing a few seconds ago but fluid is still coming out of her is a good hint that something important has changed and that she is not going back to bed to sleep.

She feels a small contraction, as well as another gush and… Okay, yeah, this is definitely not pee, and that means it’s baby time.

She pets Sean and says to him. “Thanks for waiting. Ten minutes ago would have been really bad timing.”

Then she… doesn’t know what to do next. She’s leaking, and… actually, this is pretty gross. Right now, on the toilet, this isn’t a problem, but the very tidy part of her is thinking about how she’s got to get off the toilet and… God… pads… Does she have pads? She’s got to have pads, but…

“Shit!” she says it very quietly and then tries to reach for a towel, that of course, she can’t reach because she’s got this huge belly in the way.

She tries not to think too hard about dripping all over the floor, and then stands up and grabs the towel.

Somehow in all the stories of how Molly and Anna came to be, Breena left out the part about waddling to the hospital with a bath towel stuffed between her legs hoping not to dribble all over the place.

And for as ready as Tim was to drift off into peaceful sleep ten seconds ago, right now he’s AWAKE, and out of the bed and…

“You cannot go to the hospital like that!” Breena says as he’s rapidly attempting to put on both Jimmy’s pants and his shirt at the same time. “Sean’s not coming out right this second,” she glances
at Abby, making sure that’s true, and Abby nods. “Go get a shower. Both of you. We’ll get the car turned on, warmed up, and call to let your OB know you’re on the way, okay?”

In their bathroom, with the light on, Tim’s coming to the conclusion that Breena is right about not going to the hospital like this. They’re both covered in smeared lipstick, dried sweat, cum, and a few hickies. “Cleaning up” meant doing the absolute minimum amount of hygiene necessary to make sure they weren’t glued to each other or the sheets when they woke up.

Tim’s awake now, on the second wind of all second winds, and Abby is, too. Both of them feeling pretty giggly as they get into the shower and start washing off.

“Contractions?” he asks, shampooing her hair. He doesn’t remember her mentioning them all day, but…

“Just little ones.” And her belly obligingly stiffens as she says that.

Tim kisses her shoulder and lips. “Hell of a night!”

She nods. “Yeah, so… when we tell this story… We were just going to bed when my water broke?”

“Yeah, I have a feeling that’s the way to tell it,” he says with a smile. His hands drift to her belly. “Can’t wait to meet you, little boy.”

Abby’s hands close over his, and she adds her own voice, “Just a few more hours and you’ll be out and we’ll be holding you and kissing you.”

And when they do get out, they can see Breena’s on top of this. She’s got clean clothing laid out for both of them. Abby’s got panties that have a pad already in them, and then a towel, and then sweats.

“Yeah, I figured this out with Anna. Pad, then undies, then towel, the sweats. That way you won’t feel like you’re sloshing all over the place, and I put another towel on your seat in the car.”

“Thank you,” Abby says, getting dressed.

“No problem.” Breena’s got a huge grin on her face.

“Go bag?” Tim asks.

“Already in the car.” Jimmy replies, hanging up his phone. “Dr. Draz isn’t on tonight. You’ve got Dr. Siddons, and he says to take your time. The OR won’t be open until 4:30, so before then, unless something goes wrong, you’re just filling out paperwork and getting a room.”

“OR won’t be open?” Tim’s confused by that, and then he remembers. All of the hospitals around DC are slammed all the time right now, because there isn’t a functional one in DC.

Jimmy nods. “He said, if you want, and if you’re pre-registered, it’s okay to stay here and rest until 3:30.” He glances at the clock, it’s 11:34. “How are you feeling? Do you want to stay here or head in?” Jimmy asks Abby.

“Uh…” Not immediately running for the hospital hadn’t occurred to her or Tim. “You going to flip
out if we don’t have an OR ten feet away?”

Tim’s not sure. But… the adrenalin is starting to crash, and all the tired is starting to come back, and if he can grab a few hours of sleep in his own bed…

“There aren’t going to be private rooms, are there?”

Jimmy shakes his head. “Can’t imagine they still have them set up like that. Too many people, not enough rooms. Easiest fix is to just stick extra beds in the rooms they’ve got.”

That settles it for Abby. She’s got the choice of being here with her lovers or in a hospital waiting room with strangers. Here wins.

So, for all the excitement of the last half-hour, Jimmy heads back out and turns off the car, and then they all go back to bed.

Tim curls around Abby’s back. Breena is facing her front, holding her hands, and Jimmy’s next to Tim, hand resting on his hip.

Tim and Jimmy do fall asleep. In Tim’s case it’s not any sort of deep sleep. He’s dreaming about driving to the hospital and seeing his son for the first time.

Abby’s not dealing with much in the way of contractions. One here, another there. They aren’t very strong or painful, but they, and the excitement of what’s coming next, are keeping her awake.

Breena’s not sleeping either. She’s holding Abby’s hand, and occasionally, they’ll talk to each other. Just little words here and there. At one point Abby says, “So, magic bullet, get your husband to have sex with another guy, that starts labor.”

Breena giggles at that. “We’ll keep that in mind for when I’m ready to pop.”

Abby nods solemnly. “Oh yeah. You coming with me?”

“You want me to?”

Abby thinks about it and sighs. “They’ll only let Tim in the OR, and just sitting around waiting outside isn’t much fun. You guys stay here, rest up. Got babies coming home tomorrow. Be a good thing if someone isn’t exhausted.”

Breena nods at that. “And this time, you’re not nursing twenty-four seven. One of the other three of us gets the 3:00 AM feed. You get to sleep through that.”

Abby kisses her wife. “Thank you!”

“No problem. Lots of healing up to do, so you need to sleep, not just rest. Making sure you get at least one five hour stretch a night matters.”

“Probably the difference between surviving and living.”

Breena nods at that, too. “I know the feeling.”
Abby’s eyes close, and she winces. Breena squeezes her hand. “You okay?”

After a moment Abby says, “Probably. Strongest one I’ve ever had, so… probably an almost medium one.”

Breena shakes her head. “Only lasted fourteen seconds. You’re still in easy territory.”

“So, drugs, huh?”

Breena nods yet again. “Yep. Drugs are your friends. I highly recommend drugs.”

“Moot point, no one’s suggesting I try heavy breathing to deal with a c-section.”

That gets them both quietly laughing, too. Breena flashes a wicked smile. “I know that mom. She’s the one with the perfect Pintrest, organic, free range, kale smoothies who drops her daughters off at daycare the same time we drop of Molly and Anna. She’d be the one with the ‘all natural’ c-section, talking about using meditation and acupuncture to manage the pain.”

Abby smirks, and then sighs. They both go quiet, resting, waiting.

---

3:00 shows up way too fast for Tim, and way too slow for Abby.

They’re in the car, heading toward the hospital, when Tim says, “January 8th, 2017… That’s a good birthday.”

“The 8th?” Abby asks.

“Yeah. That’s the date, right?” Tim figures he might be off, but… He thinks that’s today’s date.

She looks at Tim, and then he gets it. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

At 4:06 AM, two years ago today, Jonathon Palmer was born.

“Do you think…” Tim asks. He doesn’t know if Jimmy and Breena did an amazing job of holding it together for them, or if they just weren’t really aware of the day.

“They’ll realize what day it is sooner or later.”

---

They did get a private room. That’s a pleasant surprise. Granted, given the size, lack of windows, and (more importantly) lack of bathroom, Tim’s fairly suspicious that as of October, this “room” was likely a storage closet.

The nurse gives him scrubs, gives Abby a gown, and tells him to stow all of their stuff in one of the lockers in the hallway and not to lose the key. They’re only going to be in this room until the OR opens up. They won’t be coming back here.
“Have you eaten anything in the last twelve hours?” the nurse asks Abby.

“Yeah, dinner… about… nine hours ago.”

“Okay, we’re going to give you some anti-nausea medication. Once you’re all gowned up, and hooked up with your IV, we’re going to have the ultrasound tech come and check everything out. Your doctor should be in soon, and then, as soon as we’ve got an OR open, in you go.”

Tim and Abby are both nodding at that, feeling excitement cresting. Soon…

Tim carefully folds up their clothing, and he tucks it into his go bag, then he slips Abby’s wedding ring and engagement ring onto his pinky finger. “Got ‘em, safe and sound.”

“All right…” The Ultrasound tech says to Abby, Tim, and their doctor for the night, whom they’ve only met once. “Everything looks good. Little boy is head down, lungs look good, cord’s nowhere near his neck… Judging by what I’m seeing, I’m thinking he’s going to be about six pounds. I think you’re ready to have a baby!” He grins at the three of them, and then Dr. Siddons does his part, checking around.

When he’s done he checks Abby’s chart. “You’re at thirty-five weeks and five days which is a little earlier than we like to do this, but three centimeters dilated. Fully effaced. Water’s broken. So, doesn’t matter what we like on the subject, Sean’s ready to go.” He smiles at them, too, then his phone buzzes. He checks it and nods. “We’ve got an open OR. Mrs. McGee, you’re coming with me. Mr. McGee, you get to wait here for a few minutes, and then a nurse will bring you down to the OR. Time to get this show on the road!”

Abby smiles at Tim, and he smiles back, bending down for a quick kiss, and then they’re wheeling her out of the room, and he’s all by himself in a tiny closet, hoping that the nurse in question won’t forget about him in there.

Tim’s thinking that when they did this with Kelly, they waited around, a lot. This time, he’s feeling like he’s in the middle of a contest to see how fast they can get things done.
There’s a lot of hurrying going on. The nurse hurries him to just outside of the OR. She hurries off. She hurries back. She hurries through getting the little tag around his wrist, and through the directions for what he’s supposed to be doing. (Mostly just standing there.) He can see people rushing around all over the place, constantly checking and updating.

He wonders how many other people are trying to get into that OR tonight. Wonders about what has to be happening that when they called at almost midnight, there were four solid hours of surgeries booked. He wonders about the fact that they’re not in the maternity OR. Wonders if they’ll have a room in the maternity ward when this is done, or if they’re just shoving people wherever they can fit them.

And, for that matter, he wonders how tired all of these people around him are, because he knows he’s not, by a long shot, the only guy here with dark circles under his eyes from not enough sleep.

“Mr. McGee?”

He jerks a little at a new nurse calling his name. He knows she’s got to be the pediatric nurse, because her scrubs are pink and covered in small teddy bears.

“Yeah!”

“Okay, we’re ready for you, come on in.”

So, he follows her in.

This part is really familiar. Though, instead of a picture of butterflies above them, this one is a sandy beach.

There are people buzzing around them, talking quietly, doing… Whatever it is they do before they cut your wife open to get your kid out.

He’s on the same sort of little rolling stool, sitting next to Abby’s head, his own face bowed so he’s cheek to cheek with her.

Just like last time, he hates seeing her with tubes in her nose and more tubes in her arm, and strapped down to a table, but… It’ll be quick, and they’re getting their son out of this, so… He still hates seeing her like this, and he hates the idea of her getting cut open and…

“Okay, we’re starting now. Mrs. McGee, you’re going to feel some pressure, and maybe some jostling.”

“We’re good. Done this before.” She’s not laughing or giggling or talking non-stop. Tim’s guess is, by the way her eyes are closed and the soft, slow breathing, that the morphine’s pretty much knocked her out. It’s almost 5:00, pump a ton of drugs into his system this early in the morning, after the night they just had, and he’d be asleep, too.

So, he doesn’t say anything. He sits there, cheek to cheek, listening to surgical sounds, holding her hand, and waiting.

Abby squeezing his hand. She’s not asleep, just quiet, waiting. He kisses her cheek.

Right now, nothing seems to be in a rush, at all.
“Time of birth, 4:57.” Then Dr. Siddons holds Sean up, pink skin, eyes screwed up tight, mouth open, covered in yellowish-gray goo. He’s still too shocked to be out to be making any noise, but a second later he lets out a massive, annoyed wail, demanding to be put back in. “Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!” Siddons says, smiling and handing Sean to one of the nurses.

Both he and Abby are staring at their son, and yes, objectively he looks like a flailing, slime-covered, pink raisin, but he’s the most beautiful slime-covered, pink raisin ever.

One of the nurses grabs Tim, so he kisses Abby, and then follows the nurse over to the little baby station watching his son get wiped off, weighed, measured, poked a bit, tested, APGARed and all the rest of it, before he’s able to touch him.

Tiny little fingers grab his index finger, and Tim’s watching him through tear clouded eyes.

“Hello, SJ.”

Sean stares in his general direction for a few breaths, and then wails, flailing his arms and legs around.

“Think he’s looking for a swaddle.”

The nurse looks amused. She’s already done this seven times tonight. “We’ll get him all bundled up in a minute.”

And a minute later, he’s got a tiny little bundle of much calmer baby boy in his arms, and is taking him over to Abby.

“Ohhh… Oh, God, Tim, he’s so beautiful!” She’s crying and smiling. “Hello, Sean… Oh… Love you so much, baby, so much!”

He holds Sean so she can nuzzle and kiss him. He’s got his eyes open now, murky dark blue looking at everything, but he seems to settle on his Mom. She kisses his forehead as her son stares at her.

Tim kisses both of them. “He is.”

Tim’s again, nicely surprised to see they’ve got the room to themselves. For how long? He’s got no idea. That bed on the other side of the room from Abby’s looks ready for someone else. But, at least, for right now, he’s got time with Abby and Sean, just the three of them.

Abby’s holding Sean, has him in her arms and on a pillow, seeing if he wants to nurse. Mostly he looks like he wants to sleep. He’s got his eyes closed, his mouth closed, and is just lying there next to her breast.

And both of his parents are just hovering over him, holding on, and so awash in love they can’t stand it. Just being there, watching him sleep is perfect.

Tim can’t really get on the bed with Abby, so he’s half leaning on it, one arm around her, his head on her shoulder, and his other hand gently stroking Sean’s cheek.
“He’s got perfect eyelashes.”

He nods as Abby says that. He does. Perfect little blonde eyelashes, on tiny closed eyelids, and a little button nose.

“He’s got your lips,” Abby says, trying to get him to open his mouth by rubbing her nipple against them.

“My eyes, too.” The shape at least. Probably a pretty similar color, eventually, but right now they’re blue. “But apparently not my enthusiasm for your breasts,” Tim says with a giggle and a kiss to Abby as Sean keeps sleeping, not at all interested in eating.

Abby’s eyes are drooping, too. They both want to sit there and cuddle their son, but they know how this works and how little sleep there’ll be soon, so Tim says, “Come on. I’ll put him down, and you can both sleep.”

She nods a bit. She doesn’t want to let him go, but she’s so tired right now, and she’ll sleep easier if she’s not holding him.

Tim picks Sean up again. He’s so little. Yesterday, Anna was little. Today… Most babies put on two or three pounds in the last month in the womb, which of course, he didn’t get. So, he’s seventeen inches long and 5 pounds 14 ounces. He’s tiny. Tim’s got a bag of coffee at home that weighs more than his son.

An entire human being who fits in both of his hands.

Tim can feel the tears in his eyes as he holds his boy close, lips pressed to the top of his cap covered head, and then puts him down in his bassinet.

The last thing he does before getting a nap himself is to snap a few pictures and send out the text.

Sean James McGee. 5lbs 14 oz. 4:57 AM. Mama and Baby are doing great. We’re in room 163. Visitors welcome!
This time, when his and Abbi’s phones buzz at a minute before 6:00, Gibbs knows what’s up, and more importantly, this time, he’s right.

There on his screen, in all his bright pink, bundled up, swaddled and capped glory, is Sean.

Abbi rolls over, opens one eye, sees Gibbs staring at the phone with a look of abject love on his face, and knows she didn’t just get called out. She sits up, and Gibbs heads next to her on the bed, sitting down and sharing the picture.

“Hospital visit this morning,” she says.

Gibbs nods, still staring at his grandson.

She reads the text, and though it’s true she doesn’t know a whole lot about babies, she knows her niece and nephew both weighed in at more than eight pounds. “He’s a tiny little guy, isn’t he?”

Gibbs nods. “Kelly was little, too.”

She’s not sure if he means Kelly McGee or Kelly Gibbs, but it doesn’t matter. She rubs his back and looks at the picture. She kisses Gibbs’ shoulder. “He looks so much like Tim.”

Gibbs nods. He’s gently touching the photo.

“Are we going now?”

He glances back to Abbi, thinking she might not be overjoyed at the idea of getting up at 6:00 on a Sunday, but he also doesn’t want to wait. “That okay?”

Abbi nods. “Yeah. I’m up. Let’s go see our grandson.”

By the time they’re dressed and downstairs, Penny’s up, too, and ready to go. Ducky’s getting coffee for all of them, but still in his pajamas and robe. “I was thinking that Ziva and Tony might like a bit of extra help getting the girls ready this morning.”

The other three seem to think that’s a good idea.

And thus, off they go, ready to meet the newest member of the family.

Ducky has one other reason for not immediately heading over, but he doesn’t want to mention it and bring down the mood of the three very happy people in front of him. They may not know what day it is, but he does.

And he’s sure that if they don’t yet know what day it is, Jimmy and Breena soon will.

So, his plan for the morning is to help get Ziva and Tony set, and then go to the Palmer house and see how they’re doing this morning.

He sips his coffee, wondering how he’s doing.
Decades as a doctor, more as a Medical Examiner, and he and Death are old friends. At least, as well as anyone can be the friend of Death. But he knows that none of them have touched him the way Jon did. He was there when Jon was born, held his tiny body cupped in his hands, and later held Jimmy’s much larger, sobbing one, in his arms.

And for all the perverse cruelty of life, and the horror humans wreck upon each other, tragedies like Jon, where there is no agency to blame, nothing to rail against beyond fate or God, they hit the hardest.

And now, two years later, they celebrate a new life, a new little boy, and for once, Ducky has no words.

Maternity wards don’t really have day and night. They’re fairly active all the time. So, even though it’s barely ten minutes past eight in the morning on a Sunday, the place is buzzing away.

Gibbs, Abbi, and Penny find their way through the long hall, past open and closed doors, hearing small cries and the louder shouts of women working on getting babies out into the world. Couples, with very heavily pregnant women, walk the hall, trying to get labor moving faster. There are exhausted and elated looking dads walking new babies around, trying to get them to fuss a little more quietly, so that the mom half of the crew can get some rest, and all over the place, there are rushing doctors and nurses.

Gibbs doesn’t remember it being quite so hectic when Anna was born, but… New year, new circumstances.

Some things are the same, though. He doesn’t knock on Tim and Abby’s door, and when Abbi’s about to, he takes her hand in his and gently eases the door open, glancing in, quickly.

He opens the door a bit wider, finger pressed to his lips.

All three of them are sleeping. Abby’s on the bed, pale, tubes attached to her arm, wearing a light blue gown, but, even in her sleep, smiling. Tim, folded out the small sofa, and thus is actually lying down, curled onto his side, small blanket wrapped around him.

And the star of the show is also sleeping. He’s on his back, eyes closed, swaddled and capped, only his face visible.

“He’s so tiny,” Abbi whispers it. She’s never seen a brand new baby in person before. She didn’t get to visit her niece and nephew until they were a few months old.

Gibbs and Penny are both smiling, and nodding. They don’t touch him. They don’t want to risk waking him up, but they do stand there for several minutes just watching him sleep.

Tim rolls over, mutters something, and for a second everyone freezes, but he settles back down to sleep, again.

Gibbs glances at the door. “They’re going to want breakfast soon. I’ll go get some,” he whispers.

“I’ll stay here,” Penny mouths back to them.

Abbi decides she’ll go with Gibbs on the breakfast run, and hopefully, by the time they get back, there’ll be an awake baby looking for some cuddles.
Baby boys are not, in any way shape or form, baby girls.

That there would be an appreciable difference between newborn baby boys and baby girls was not something Tim was anticipating.

No, as the veteran Dad of a year-and-a-half-old girl, and well-practiced Uncle of two more baby girls, he felt like he had this whole newborn baby maintenance thing down.

So, as Abby’s sleeping, and Sean’s crying that tiny cat meow squeak of the newborn, he lumbers (well, in his own mind he sprang, but really, he’s pretty tired, too, so at best it was a lurch, but really wasn’t springing) to the bassinet, picks his son up, and rapidly assesses that the issue is awake baby looking for food.

For a moment, he’s just standing there, watching Sean cry. Because he’s still punch-drunk with baby-love, his son crying at him, tiny little eyes closed, mouth wide open, itty-bitty little squawks of indignant sound is amazing to him.

But, after a moment of that, he swings into action.

Step one in the awake baby plan is change diaper, because stinky babies aren’t very pleasant to cuddle.

So, off with the swaddling. And this time he’s not feeling any nerves at all about this, he knows how to get him reswaddled as soon as Sean’s all nice and dry. Snag clean diaper and wipes. “So, this is how we do this around here…” Tim starts narrating the operation, just talking to Sean, voice low, as if him speaking quietly while Sean’s complaining as loudly as he can will help Abby catch another moment of sleep.

Tim’s leaning over Sean, carefully opening the diaper, making sure he’s keeping the edge well clear of the umbilical cord stump, pulls it back, and Holy fuck! What the hell was that?

Baby pee on his shoulder and neck was not anything he’d been anticipating.

Penny, who must have appeared from somewhere, because he doesn’t remember her being in the room, laughing hysterically, really doesn’t help.

But, still laughing, she comes over and says, “Here, let me get this. Do you have a clean shirt?”

“Yeah.” He takes a moment to find his go bag, grab a clean shirt, wash up, and change. When he’s put back together, Penny has Sean cleaned up and redressed and reswaddled. She smiles at Tim, while gently nudging Abby, “Time to wake up. Little boy looking for breakfast here.”

Abby begins to come to, moans in a less than perfectly happy sort of way, she really wants to be sleeping, and takes Sean from Penny.

Penny kisses Abby’s forehead and then gives Tim a hello hug. “You know, I hadn’t thought about how little boys like to keep you on your toes in a very long time.” She grins at Tim and chuckles. “Probably about thirty-nine years.”

“Wonderful,” Tim says dryly.
“I think it’s a pressure thing. Undo the straps, let off the pressure of the diaper, but don’t lift it off for a few seconds, it’ll minimize your chances of needing to duck.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. When’d you get here?”

“Not long. Twenty minutes. We peeked in, saw everyone was sleeping. I camped out on the bed.” Tim notices the other bed is a bit rumpled, and apparently that must have been where Penny was hiding. “And Abbi and Jethro went to get you guys breakfast. They’ll be here soon.”

She steps away from Tim and back to Abby’s side to watch her feed Sean. She’s stroking Sean’s cheek, and now, with a breast in his mouth, his eyes are open and he’s looking around.

“How’s he doing?” she asks Abby.

“Confused, I think.” She’s also petting Sean. He’s not sucking at all, and seems to be wondering why this thing is in his mouth. Abby’s squeezing her breast trying to get a bit of milk out. “There we go.” A bit must have hit his tongue, because suddenly he seems much more interested in this whole operation. He starts to suck and Abby winces. “Ow! Yeah…” She slips her finger into his mouth and shifts him around a bit. He looks irked and is about to cry when she gets her nipple back into his mouth. “Let’s try this again.” He’s sucking again, and this time it seems to be working better. “Okay. He’s not trying to give my areola a hickey now.”

“He looks so much like Tim,” Penny says.

Abby’s nodding. “Never seen a baby pic of him, but…”

Penny strokes her great-grandson. “You don’t need them. This is it.”

Abby laughs a little at that.

Tim watches the three of them, and then remembers he’s got a camera on his phone and gets a few pictures of his son, nursing with his wife, and his grandmother staring at both of them with adoration.

After a moment, Penny looks up and says, “Kind of surprised not to see Jimmy and Breena here.”

Tim and Abby glance at each other. “Wanted at least some of us to have enough sleep to deal with the girls,” Abby says.

And then Tim adds, “And, we didn’t remember until we were on the way here, but… It’s the 8th.” He can see that doesn’t immediately mean anything to Penny, but it wouldn’t, she wasn’t quite part of the inner family then. “Two years ago, today, they lost Jon, and… If they want some alone time… I mean… I’ll go home at some point… But…” Tim shrugs. “I don’t know.”

And Penny suddenly knows why Ducky isn’t here with them right now.

Once Tony and Ziva wave him off, assuring Ducky that they’re just fine with the girls, and that they’ll keep being fine, especially if they need to hold onto them a bit longer than planned to give Jimmy and Breena some on their own time, he heads off.

He half wants to call ahead, but if they’re sleeping he doesn’t want to wake them. The problem with
This plan becomes apparent, when, halfway to DC when he realizes that he doesn’t know where they are. They might already be at the hospital with Tim and Abby. They may have been there for Sean’s birth.

He pulls into a McDonald’s parking lot and calls Penny.

“No. They aren’t here.” He hears her asking Tim where the other half of their quad is. “They’re at Tim and Abby’s. Hopefully sleeping in.”

Ducky hears a newborn chirp and smiles. “And are you getting a lot of baby cuddles?”

“I had to arm-wrestle Jethro for them…” He chuckles a bit. “Actually, no. All three of them were asleep when we got here. Jethro and Abbi went off to get breakfast for everyone, and haven’t gotten back, yet. Little boy woke up ten minutes ago, and he’s having breakfast, now. I’ve gotten a few quick snuggles, and intend to get all the snuggles when it’s burp time.”

That makes Ducky smile, too. “I’ll come visit with Jimmy and Breena.”

“Okay, we’ll look forward to seeing you.”

This time, Penny’s the one walking the halls with Sean, and Jethro’s the one walking up to her. She and Sean decided to go for a bit of a walk when the nurse came in to get Abby all cleaned up.

“He’s awake!” Jethro says, plopping breakfast on the floor to grab his grandson.

“Yeah, he is.”

He’s cradling Sean in his arm, staring down at tiny blue eyes looking around. Abbi’s stroking his cheek and watching Gibbs just melt into a pile of blissed-out Grandaddy-goo.

Jethro looks up at Penny. “Tim. This one looks like Tim.”

She’s nodding. “Very much.”

Gibbs holds Sean, smiling down at him. “Hello beautiful boy. So many things you and I are going to do!”

“Any news about when the girls’ll get to meet him?” Abbi asks Penny.

“Tomorrow probably. Current rule of thumb is no visits from the under four set until after Mom’s unhooked from the tubes.”

“Probably a good plan.”

Gibbs is still holding Sean, pretty much unaware of the rest of the world, but he does notice Abbi’s voice, and turns toward her. “You want to hold him?”

“Uh…” There’s a flash of nerves because he is very tiny and floppy and fragile looking, but only a flash. “Yeah.”

He very gently hands Sean over to Abbi, and helps to get him settled into her arms. He’s a tiny, soft weight in the crook of her arm, and he shifts his gaze from Jethro to her. He doesn’t smile, because newborns don’t smile, but Abbi feels a thrill of connection as he’s looking up at her.
“Hey, there.”

He chirps back at her. For a second, it almost feels like he’s saying hello back, but that chirp turns into a whine, and from there…

“Ten minutes, maybe fifteen. That’s all the awake and not eating time you get at this stage. Time to get him back to his bassinette.” Penny says, taking her great-grandson back. “Let’s see about getting the rest of us fed.”

And thus, they head back toward Abby’s room, and find Abby, eyes closed, shivering, hard, teeth chattering, mostly asleep, as Tim sits on the side of the bed, gently stroking her forehead and cheek.

The shivering alarms Abbi, who hasn’t seen this before, either.

Gibbs feels her tense. “Side effect of the C-section and pain meds,” he whispers.

Tim stands up and gets wrapped in congratulatory hugs as Penny puts Sean back in his bassinette. He continues to fuss for a moment, but eventually his eyes close, and the pacifier in his mouth works its magic, and he drifts off.

Asleep? Gibbs signs to Tim, looking at Abby.

Tim nods. Probably. Food?

Gibbs nods this time, and begins to unpack. Abby’s not allowed to have solid food for 24 hours, so he’d found a pho place that was willing to sell them just broth: beef, chicken, and seafood. His girl had a hard day, and she is going to eat. None of this bullion cube dissolved in water stuff for her!

For the rest of them, there are muffins, donuts, breakfast burritos. There’s also four cups of rich, dark coffee. One of them, especially for Tim, is decaf with lots of milk and sugar.

Tim takes it and drinks deep, like it’s a lifeline. Gibbs signs to him Gonna tell the story?

Sure. And then in a very quiet voice, Tim says, “Abby was just getting ready for bed…”

Nine o’clock is pretty much as late as Jimmy can sleep without risking blood sugar problems. So, like any other day where he’s “sleeping in” he’s up a little before nine, heading down to go get something to eat.

Breena’s still resting. He’s pretty sure she didn’t fall asleep until after they got the text saying Sean was okay, and he hopes she’ll be able to really sleep in, and that he’ll get a few more hours, too.

His eyes are feeling pretty droopy as he’s padding naked through Tim’s house.

Down to the fridge, grab a glass of milk, and then back up to crash again, good hot shower, (he feels a bit crusty and knows he absolutely reeks of sex right now), maybe if Tony and Ziva keep the girls long enough he and Breena can get a quickie in, change the sheets, and then off to see their boy!

To say that Jimmy practically has a heart attack when he hears Ducky’s voice as he’s reaching for the milk isn’t much of an understatement.
Ducky let himself quietly into Tim and Abby’s house. If they’re sleeping, he doesn’t want to wake them up, and if they’re up, well, a little shock never hurt anyone.

But, they’re asleep. He hears absolutely nothing coming from upstairs, so he settles himself in the living room, takes his phone out, and begins reading.

About an hour later he wakes up to the sound of footsteps in the kitchen. Someone’s up and moving. So, he heads toward the kitchen. The fridge door is open, blocking most of whomever is awake from his view, but he knows the fingers closed around the edge of the door, and says, gently, “Good morning, Jimmy.”

Several thoughts go flooding through Jimmy’s mind as he slams the door shut, none of them are the fact that he’s naked and covered in pink and red lipstick smears, bite marks, a few hickies, and has the scent of four very turned on people fucking like crazy all over him.

No, what’s streaming through his mind is that if Ducky is here, voice that gentle, and waited for them to wake up, that something very, very bad just happened. “Sean? Abby?” tears out of his mouth as terror jolts through him.

Ducky meanwhile, has come to the conclusion that Jimmy’s on the other end of an extremely good night, and likely couldn’t identify what month it is, let alone day, and that he’s the one who’s going to dump the gallon of ice cold water on him.

“They’re fine, Jimmy. Everyone is fine.” He takes Jimmy’s hand in his and smiles a little, which he can see is just freaking Jimmy out even more, because if they’re fine then... “Just... It’s the eighth, Jimmy.”

And the gallon of water drops. Jimmy blinks, very slowly. And... he doesn’t know... a shit ton of... something... goes crashing into him. He blinks again, not sure if it’s shock or his eyes tearing up causing that response, and he swallows a few times, too. Mechanically, he grabs a glass and fills it with the milk that’s still in his hand, and then drinks it down in a few quick gulps.

He’s past the ability to verbalize what’s going on in his head. And Ducky just stands there, being quiet, waiting.

“Not even two years,” finally comes out of Jimmy. He’d told Jethro that January 8th would never sneak up on him again, and less than two years later...

Ducky smiles at him. “It’s okay.”

Jimmy shoots him the saddest smile he’s ever seen. “I know it’s normal. But, no Ducky, it’s not okay. I forgot him.” He shakes his head. “It’s a Sunday. If Sean hadn’t been born today, I never would have seen the date and it’d be tomorrow by the time I got back to work, flipped on my computer, and noticed.”

Ducky nods. “I know.”

“That’s why Tim just put the time on Sean’s birth text.” All the rest of them, Kelly, Molly, and Anna, had had the full birthday.
“Probably.” Normally, when faced with a naked man who is blissfully unaware of that fact, Ducky would never bring it to his attention. Especially if, like right now, he happens to be dressed. (This has happened a surprisingly high number of times over the course of a long military career.) That’s just the height of rude. But now is not normally. He lets his eyes trail down Jimmy’s body, highlighting the condition he’s in, while lightly touching a bite mark, Tim’s judging by the size, on his shoulder. Jimmy’s not wearing his glasses, but he’s close enough to see what Ducky just did, and he certainly felt the touch. For a second, he does feel a bit embarrassed to be not just nude but naked.

“It’s okay, Jimmy. It really is. You and Breena are allowed to let the joy of your loves ease your pain. You’re allowed to be in the present and not the past. You are allowed to let the past be the past, and remember it when it suits you, not on some preordained schedule. You didn’t love Anna and Molly any less last night, even though you and Breena weren’t taking care of them and weren’t thinking of them. You’re allowed to have nights where being a parent goes on the back burner.”

“You think that helps?” Jimmy’s voice is harsh as he asks that.

“Not at all, but it’s true, and I think it’s important for you to know that absolutely no one thinks it’s your job to mourn forever.”

Jimmy slumps a bit at that, because Ducky’s right, and he certainly wasn’t thinking of his other two children last night, either. He fiddles with his glass and decides he’s not going back to sleep, so he starts to set up a pot of coffee. Again, he’s mostly blank right now, a lot of feelings but no way to express them, and Ducky doesn’t press him.

After the coffee’s made, and in mugs, one of them set in front of Ducky, Jimmy says, “It’s a good birthday, and I’m glad he shares it with his older brother. Nice to have something to be happy about today.”

Ducky nods at that. “Yes, it is.”

Diapering baby boy try number two seems to go a whole lot better. Tim follows Penny’s directions: lets the pressure off first, waits a few seconds, and lifts the diaper off with a certain sense of wariness while standing well to Sean’s side. There’s no fountain effect this time, so he’s not leaping away or slamming the diaper back down to catch it, so that’s a good thing.

Gibbs and Abbi both look very amused to watch him do this with the level of reserve he usually holds for dealing with live bombs. Then they get the story of why he’s acting like Sean’s diaper is a live bomb, and Abby wakes to the sound of Gibbs full-on belly laughing.

Alas, Tim does not quite have all the nuances of baby boy diaper management down, yet.

An hour later, when Sean’s done eating, and Tim’s putting him back in the bassinette, he feels a warm, wet sensation on his chest, where Sean was pressed up against him.

For a second, he figures it’s spit up, (but usually there’s a sound that goes with that) but no, Sean’s chin is dry, and there’s a wide wet spot along the Sean’s tummy area, soaked through the swaddling and his onesie, and Tim’s clean shirt.

Tim’s a bit embarrassed to say how long it took him to figure out what the issue was, but apparently, in addition to being ready to duck and giving it a few seconds before taking the diaper off, it’s a good plan to make sure that once your son is all cleaned up, that all of his equipment is pointing down, otherwise the diaper, no matter how absorbent, is fighting outside of its weight class.
He sighs, hands his now, correctly, diapered son to his grandfather, and heads to his go bag to find his last clean shirt.

Jimmy heads back upstairs and wraps around Breena. He’s still pretty blank when it comes to what to think or feel, but holding her close and feeling her breathe helps.

But doing this… He also can’t help but slip in time, feel her in his arms this time two years ago.

Their Doctor let them hold Jon as long as they wanted…

Not exactly, he said they could hold him for as long as they wanted. And probably, if it had just been up to them, they would have held him… Jimmy doesn’t know… Forever.

But not really. But at the time…

But, eventually… They were both so tired, and the nurses kept suggesting that they needed to rest, and Ed and Jeannie, neither of whom were calm, collected, or untouched by this, also kept suggesting that it was time for them to take him.

Jimmy doesn’t know when they let go of him, but he does know it was light, so, probably, around now.

He and Breena were holding him. He was so small he fit in their entwined hands. And finally, they gave him to Ed, who was also crying, and they let him go, and they never saw him again.

Breena wakes up to the feel of Jimmy curled around her and crying, and, just like he did, she’s frozen in terror for a moment, but he feels her wake up and says, “It’s the 8th.”

For her, it’s a low punch to the gut. “Oh,” slips out of her, exactly like it would if a fist had just hit her, forcing the air in her lungs out of her body.

After a moment, she’s able to roll to her side and face him, saying, “We forgot.”

He nods at her.

That feels sick and awful and just… wrong, so horribly, horribly wrong.

He tries a little, crying smile at her, and she tries one back, but they fall flat. And beyond that, there’s nothing to do. She holds him tight, and he holds her, and eventually, they’ll kiss and make love, because that may not fix anything, but at least the world doesn’t suck quite so bad when they’re doing that.

And by the time they’re up, showered, and moving around, there are messages on their phones from both sets of their parents, calling to check in, and see how they’re doing.

And, honestly, neither of them know.

Nurses come in. Nurses head out. They have lots of questions. How often has Sean eaten? How
many diapers have you changed? (They’ve even got a chart they expect Tim to fill out every time
Sean eats, pees, and poops.) They prod Abby all the time, checking her pain level, how she’s feeling,
if she’s hungry, and all the rest of it. (Abby wants to sleep. That’s all she wants, sleep. She was up all
night, and currently has a boatload of painkillers in her system, thus she’s not in the happiest of
moods when, yet again, they’re asking what she wants.)

And, though Tim didn’t expect this, they’ve got one other question they keep asking. “And you
won’t be circumcising?”

Every nurse who’s checked on Sean has asked them that. “No. For the third time, no.”

She’s a bit annoyed by his curt answer. “Just making sure.”

And, more awake, Tim might pull his annoyed in on this, but every nurse they’ve seen has asked,
and he feels like it’s very judgmental asking. “You’ve asked us about that more often than if we’re
breast feeding and who Sean’s pediatrician is.”

“Really, just making sure.”

“I don’t think we’re suddenly going to change our minds. He was born with a foreskin for a reason.
We’d like to see it stay attached to him.”

“Fine.” She’s moving over to Sean to pick him up. “We need to do a few more tests…”

“Okay.” And Tim doesn’t exactly want to let her take Sean away, but he knows this is part of having
a baby in a hospital. Someone’ll keep trying to take said baby off to make sure he’s every sort of
possible okay he can be.

Gibbs and Abbi had been sitting on the unused bed, just hanging out as he had that conversation. He
turns and flashes them a tight smile.

“Didn’t think it was that radical of a position.”

Gibbs shrugs. That wasn’t something he’d ever thought about. When they didn’t know if Kelly was
a boy or girl, that was something you just automatically did.

“You want to crash again?”

Tim shrugs. He’s pretty awake right now, and… “Not yet. Soon. Gonna give Breena and Jimmy a
call.” He glances at the pull out sofa/bed. “You guys got up early. Want a nap of your own?”

Gibbs is good. He didn’t get up that much earlier than normal, but Abbi’s about six hours shy of her
usual Sunday. She’s happy to take him up on that.

“Yeah, Mom, we’re… I don’t know. Better than last year?” Jimmy say to his Mom. She’s good
about long-distance support. As long as it doesn’t involve leaving Wilmington, she’s ready, willing,
and able to help. She calls fairly regularly, and they write every week. If he’d been more with it, he would have known that she’d call today.

“Oh… Jimmy.”

“Yeah. One bit of good news, our friends, Tim and Abby, they had their little boy today.”

“Oh…” That’s a fairly unsure oh. “Is it?”

Jimmy sniffs a little. “Yeah. It’s got to be.”

“You’re allowed to be sad about this…”

“I know. But, I don’t want to be. And it’s not like Sean… Sean James… they named him after me. Not like he’s doing it out of spite. This is just when he happened to show up.”

“Okay. Have you seen him?”

“Not yet. We had a date night last night, and got a slow start this morning, but we’ll get over there soon. I’ve got a picture. Looks like he’s a tiny, little guy.” Jimmy’s phone chirps to let him know he’s got an incoming call. He checks. “That’s Tim on the other line.”

“You go talk to your friend. Send me pictures of you and your namesake.”

“Sure, Mom.”

“Love you, baby.”

“I know. Love you, too. Bye.” He kills the one call and picks up the next one. “Hey.”

Tim sounds a bit tentative on the other line. “Hi… How are you?”

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

“Beyond no sleep, I’m having a good day.”

Jimmy smiles a little, feeling the hurt, and joy for his love. “Yeah. You are. Here, let me get Breena on, too.”


“Enough,” Breena says. “He’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, he is. So tiny. I forgot how little they are. So far he’s a good eater and sleeper, but… You know… He’s only seven hours old.”

Breena smiles a bit. “We do. And our girl?”

“Sleeping. Shivering. Itchy when she’s awake. The pain medication’s doing its job. She made it through fine, but…”

“Yes, we know. Major surgery is not fun or easy,” Ducky adds.
“How about you guys? You want to come visit, or just… I don’t know. What makes this easier? I need to get home and grab some clean shirts.”

“You didn’t pack shirts?” Breena sounds like she can’t believe he’d leave them out of his go bag.

“I packed two shirts, plus the one I had on. Guess what, baby boys are exciting and messy in a way baby girls aren’t.”

There’s a second of quiet as Breena, Jimmy, and Ducky think about that, and then Breena remembers one of her mom buddies talking about her little boy, and she starts to giggle. “He sprayed you?”

“He sprayed me, and if you don’t make sure his dick is pointing down when you put the diaper on him, he ends up spraying himself, and you get your second clean shirt of the day wet when you’ve got him cuddled on your chest.”

That gets a bit of a laugh. “Oh, Tim,” Breena says, shaking her head a bit. “We’ll be over later today, and we’ll bring shirts. Got to call Tony and Ziva and coordinate with babies. It might be… God, I don’t know. It’s a hell of a day, but we still want to meet our boy.”

“And we can’t wait for you to meet him, too.”

“You guys need anything else?” Jimmy asks.

“If we do, I don’t know about it. Penny, Jethro, and Abbi are here, so they’ve been grabbing anything we might want or need. I think we’re okay, besides shirts for me, right now.”

“Okay. We’ll send a text when we head off.” Jimmy says.

“Good. See you soon. Love you guys.”

Breena makes a little kissing noise. “Bye.” Jimmy hangs up the phone, and for a moment they look at each other.

“We ready for this?”

Breena swallows and nods. “Yeah, we are. He’s still our boy, we still love him, we love his parents, and it’s time to get Tony and Ziva on the phone and get with the show.”

It’s a weak smile on Jimmy’s face, but he pulls it off. “Okay.” He dials Tony’s number, and they get with it.

Abby’s sleeping when their pediatrician carries Sean back in. Tim’s dozing, sharing the sofa bed with Abbi, but he hears her say hello to Gibbs, and starts getting up.

He’s expecting the usual We checked everything out and it’s all splendid, or another round of Are you sure you want to keep his foreskin attached to him questions.

So, between his expectations and the tiredness, he doesn’t immediately notice the look on the pediatrician’s face. But Gibbs, who hasn’t been napping, does. Tim feels a hand on his back as he takes Sean from the doctor.
For a second, he’s staring at Sean, who’s peacefully sleeping in his arms. Then Tim looks more carefully at their pediatrician, and sees the tension. Then it hits him, this is their pediatrician, Dr. Illn, who does not actually have an office in this hospital and though she does make routine visits here for her brand new patients, she’s not on call here.

“What?” He’s feeling cold, and Gibbs is gently poking Abby.

She’s slowly coming awake, and Dr. Illn appears to be waiting for her to come to before speaking.

Tim’s getting really worried. Sean looks fine. He’s little. But that was a textbook pregnancy followed by a textbook c-section. All his bits are accounted for. All of the scans were normal. He can’t think of why Dr. Illn is here, let alone looking so tense.

Abby’s blinking, trying to pull herself out of the pain killer, muzzy sleep. “I’m up. What is it?”

Abbi also, from her sleep, notices that something is going on, and wakes up, too. Sitting up, moving closer to the collection of people centered on Abby’s bed.

Once they’re all in place, Dr. Illn says, “It’s standard procedure to check every baby’s hearing shortly after birth. We always start with the Otoacoustic Emission test. We put a little microphone in Sean’s ears, played a sound, and in babies with normal hearing an echo comes back. For Sean, there was no echo in either ear. There are two tests, and that’s just one of them. And sometimes the first test just doesn’t work on everyone, so we always run both if a baby fails the first one. The second test is the Auditory Brainstem Response test. It’s a lot like the first one, but instead of looking for an echo, we put a little sensor on Sean’s head, then played the sound, and then measure for a nervous system response.” She gently touches Sean’s face, but he’s asleep and doesn’t stir. Then she looks back up at Tim and Abby. “I’m sorry. He’s failed both tests in both ears. Now, that happens. Sometimes newborns don’t pass the tests and their hearing is just fine, but…”

Tim’s staring at the sleeping baby in his hands. Abby sniffs, hard, and then signs, to Tim and Gibbs, It could be worse before bursting into tears.

Dr. Illn looks at the three of them. She’s been seeing Tim and Abby since Kelly was born, and had no idea they had any exposure to Deaf culture. “You already sign?”

Tim’s trying to cuddle with Abby and Sean, an exercise made more difficult by Abby currently not really being able to move and the huge incision he doesn’t want to jostle, but he’s nodding. “Abby’s parents were deaf,” Tim says, chin on her shoulder, arm around her, as they both hold Sean.

“This is likely a genetic—“

“I’m adopted,” Abby says, yanking the rug out of Dr. Illn. Though, adopted or not, almost all forms of deafness are genetics, so…

“Oh. Look, we don’t know for sure if he can hear or not. When he comes in for his week old checkup, we’ll test again. He might have vernix in his ears or…”

“Did you check?” Gibbs asks, voice rough, letting Dr. Illn know this is really not the time for feel good BS.

She responds to it. “Yes. And no, we didn’t see any. But… we still like to wait a week and retest. Even with both tests, we can get false positives. So, we always give it a little while and retest. But, if, in a week, he is still failing the tests, we’ll be able to do more testing to see how severe any hearing damage he might have is. If he does have hearing loss, it might be mild.”
“Why don’t you do that, now?” Gibbs asks. “Get a new machine or whatever and test again.”

Illn has a look on his face that Tim thinks of as intentionally being patient. “Because sometimes it takes a little while for these little guys to get fully online. Much before a week, and we get a decent number of false positives for hearing loss. Sean may be one of them. But… I want to make sure you schedule that first week checkup, because if he does have hearing loss, getting moving on it quickly is important. If he does have hearing loss, the sooner he’s fitted for hearing aids or cochlear implants, the easier time he’ll have with speech. That said, the only reason for even mentioning it right now, is so that, when we retest, you don’t get blindsided.”

Tim’s shaking his head. That’s… Just useless right now. “What…”

Dr. Illn smiles gently. “Right now, there’s not much to do. Right now, there’s no functional difference between him and any other newborn baby.”

“He won’t hear the lullabies,” Abby says, voice shaky, still staring at their boy.

Again Dr. Illn smiles gently. “Maybe. We don’t know that for sure, yet. But, even if he can’t hear you sing the lullabies, he’ll feel them.” Sean’s against Abby’s chest right now, sleeping, face against her breast. “He feels you breathe, and your heartbeat, and everything you say. Keep his head against your chest or throat, and whether he can hear it or not, he’ll feel everything you sing to him.”

“So, we just… wait?” Abbi says.

“I know, no one wants to hear that, but, yes, that’s the answer.” Illn glances at Abbi, who she hasn’t met before, and Gibbs, who has come to a few of Kelly’s check-ups, and says, “What you can do right now, you two, not the exhausted, sleep-deprived, brand-new parents with a toddler at home, but you two, can take the time to research cochlear implants. There are some really strong feelings about them, and if Sean’s a candidate for them, I don’t want you going into that, blind, either. Tim, Abby, what you need to be doing is the normal, new baby stuff. Get him on an eating/sleeping schedule, get as much rest as you can for yourselves. Abby, take it easy and heal up. Other than that, we wait.”

That’s not the answer anyone wants.

When Penny left to get lunch, all was good in the McGee nursery. When she comes back, she can feel the tension wafting off everyone in the room, see it in the posture, tense shoulders and faces. Something just went wrong. Her first thought is that they talked to Jimmy and Breena and it went badly.

Then she realizes that Gibbs and Abbi are sitting on the pull out bed, both frantically reading on their phones, as Tim and Abby hold Sean, looking at him. Abby’s crying a little, and Tim looks really resigned.

That’s not Jimmy and Breena having a hard time dealing with the timing on Sean’s birth.

Penny puts the bag with the food in it down, and says, “What happened?”

Tim sighs, long drawn out sound. “Our pediatrician just said that Sean’s failed his hearing tests. They ‘don’t know for sure’ but… he’s probably some level of hearing impaired.”

Tim’s phone buzzes. He checks and sees the text from Jimmy. En route. Half an hour away. Need anything?
Everything you remember about infant hearing testing.

**TIM??????????????**

*He failed his hearing tests.*

*Okay, there soon.*

“Our pediatrician told Gibbs and Abbi to get researching. Told us to rest up and take care of Sean. And now, we wait. They’ll retest in a week, and maybe he’ll be fine, maybe not,” Tim says.

“He’s fine!” Abby says it, voice intense and utterly certain. “Whether he can hear or not, he’s fine! He’s not damaged, or broken, or wrong, or… He’s fine. Just a bit different.” She wipes at the tears that are still easing down her face. “He’s fine. Deaf didn’t stop his grandparents from doing anything they wanted to do, and it won’t stop him, either.”

Tim nods at her, kissing her. “No. It won’t.” He looks back to Penny. “The pediatrician said something about people having a lot of intense feelings about cochlear implants. You know anything about that?”

Penny nods, sitting at the foot of Abby’s bed. “Yeah, I do. There’s deaf, and there’s Deaf, one’s a condition, one’s an identity. A lot of Deaf,” and they can hear the capital in her voice, “people aren’t fans of them. The idea being that they damage Deaf culture and identity. Many people who get them don’t learn how to be Deaf. They’re often the children of hearing parents. They never learn to sign. Can’t live in Deaf spaces. Things like that.” Penny shrugs a bit. “What would your parents have thought?” she asks Abby.

Abby just shrugs. “They met at a school for the Deaf. If they could have gone to a regular high school, they’d have never crossed paths. So… for the sake of the family I grew up in, all of that rests on being deaf, but… I think if I could have said to them, here’s this thing that will let you hear—“

“Doesn’t quite work like that,” Abbi says. Gibbs is on hearing aids, and she’s on cochlear implants. “The microphone picks up sound, it turns them into electrical impulses, and then sends them directly into the cochlear nerve. People who could hear, and then get one of these, have to re-learn what the information they’re getting means. So… it’s not the way we do it, but… because it goes right to the brain, if the bits of the ear that do the hearing aren’t working, it still allows the brain to respond to sound.” She pauses, eyes flicking over her screen. “And it’s not a magic bullet, either. What I’m seeing here is that yes, people with them hear sound, but we’re not talking pin drop level sensitivity, and they’re still only looking at 70-80% sentence recognition. Better than hearing aids, but not what you and I do.”

Abby the scientist is somewhat interested in that. Abby the exhausted, hurting, hormonally imbalanced new mom just lets it flow over her. “I think they would have wanted to try. But, there wasn’t Deaf, where I grew up. At least, not the way I think you’re talking about it. It was just something about them, not who they were.” Abby shrugs. “I don’t think it’s anything they ever wanted to be. Other people saw them as Deaf, and they just wanted to be Gloria and Tom.” She kisses Sean, who’s still asleep. “And you’re Sean, and if this is part of being Sean, then this is part of being Sean.”

There’s a lot of quiet studying going on as Tim eats his lunch. He’s got Sean laying on his chest, one
hand on his back, as he’s holding chopsticks in the other, eating the chicken and broccoli that Penny brought for him.

He’s not sure what he should be feeling about this. Not sure what he is feeling either.

Abby’s *It could be worse* seems to sum it up pretty well. Assuming everything else works… it’s, and he’s not sure if he’s supposed to think of it this way, but… assuming Sean’s brain works just fine, it’s not a big deal. They can start teaching the girls how to sign when they get home, and…

They’ll cope. They’ve got money and family to throw at any problems that might come up. If he needs hearing aids or cochlear implants or speech therapy or… whatever… they’re set to do it.

So… more of a problem than being colorblind, less of a problem than being blind… He’s not sure if that’s how he’s supposed to understand this.

He puts the chopsticks down, and steps closer to Abby, who’s sleeping again) and kisses her. This is just who Sean is, and if they’ve got to outsource his hearing to a machine or something… then they do.

And that feeling lasts for a good… maybe three minutes. But, what if deaf, if he is deaf, is just the tip of the iceberg?

No way to know if there’s anything else going on. Not right now. Probably.

“Do they do newborn vision tests?”

Penny looks up from her phone, where she’s reading up on different types of deafness. “No idea, why?”

“Just wondering… They can test this, but… what else might be—“

“Stop that,” Gibbs says. “Nothing good on the end of that sentence.”

Penny nods. “From…” she checks her phone again… “ten minutes of research, it looks like in most cases, deafness is the only issue. And from what I can tell, when it’s part of something else, it’s usually bad enough you can see something is wrong.” Penny glances at Abby. “It’s usually genetic, and… my uncle Samuel was deaf, the family story was that he caught measles as a baby, and when he got better, he couldn’t hear anymore, but, he was a little baby when he got sick, and back then there really wasn’t a way to tell if he could hear before he got sick. He got sick when he was three months old, and everyone was amazed he survived. Gramma called him her miracle. They didn’t know he was deaf until he was a year old. So… it’s probably something lurking in our genes. Probably Abby’s, too.”

Tim doesn’t remember hearing about Penny’s Uncle Sam. “What happened to him?”

Penny shakes her head. “The Navy wouldn’t let him enlist, so he did what a lot of other big strong guys in Boston did to make a living, fishing. That lasted a year or two. He decided fishing out of Boston was boring, and went west. Ended up a prospector in Alaska in the ’20s. He didn’t have to hear to pan for gold. I don’t think he did very well. The boom had been over for a while by then. At least, I’m sure Gramma would have mentioned it if he’s struck it rich, but he stayed out there, and…
I don’t know. Gramma died a year after I moved south with Nelson, and after that I didn’t get any updates on the family that wasn’t in Boston. Mama probably stayed in touch, but…”

Tim sighs. “Bitten by a recessive. Great.”

“You want all the answer now,” Penny says.

“You don’t?”

“Yeah. I do, but… Wanting isn’t having. And having…” she doesn’t finish that sentence. He’s literally standing next to his wife and little boy, holding his breathing child in his arms. He’s got all the have he needs.

Tim nods.

Jimmy, Breena, and Ducky get in a few minutes later.

Tim’s walking Sean around. He’s fussing, and like new parents everywhere, Tim doesn’t know why. He’s fed, diapered, and burped. All of his basic needs at this point should be met, so maybe he’s complaining just to let the world know that he’s not appreciating his lack of womb.

Whatever it is, he’s fussing, and Tim’s humming, patting his back, pacing around as the rest of their family reads (or in Abby’s case, sleeps.)

He gets hugged by all three of them, and then Breena’s giving off the most intense I need to hold the new baby look, so she gets first dibs on Sean. Jimmy and Ducky hover close, watching their tiny boy cry, petting his back, and adding to the general shushing sounds that Breena’s providing.

Jimmy backs off a moment later, hugging Tim again, and very gently leaning over to kiss Abby. She murmurs a bit in her sleep, and settles back down.

“What do you want to know?” Jimmy asks, arm around Tim, as they watch Breena walking Sean around.

“Rate of false positives. Our doctor said sometimes they fail the test but they can really hear.”

Jimmy thinks about that. “They just do one test, or both?”

“Both.”

“One ear, or both?”

“Both.”

Jimmy sighs and shakes his head. “It’s not impossible, but… Unless all the other kids they’re testing today are coming up hearing impaired, it’s not likely.”

Tim exhales long and slow. “You ever…”

“Only two babies failed while I was on OB, and… I don’t know what happened with them. When I was on Pedes, I only did three retests, and none of them were false positives.”
Tim nods. “Okay.”

“That’s an exceptionally small sample size, Tim,” Penny says.

“I know.”

Breena’s bouncing Sean, and Ducky’s crooning something soft to him. He’s not fussing anymore, looks like he’s about to drift off, so Breena gently puts him down again.

Ducky looks up at Jethro, and says, quietly. “This afternoon, I start learning to sign. Sean’s not missing out on any of the stories.”

Gibbs nods at him, and sends back, No problem, you’ll pick it up fast.

“I don’t suppose there’s any signing equivalent of a Scottish accent?” there’s a little smile on his face as he says that.

“We’ll figure one out,” Gibbs replies.

______________________________

They’re getting settled in, talking quietly, just sitting, looking at Sean as he sleeps, holding Tim and Abby, when a new nurse comes in.

“We’re getting a new family in here soon. So, that means two visitors at a time, and being quiet.”

Nods all around, and by unspoken consensus, that means Jimmy and Breena, who haven’t gotten to see Abby awake, get to stay.

______________________________

The absolute last thing Tim wants to do right now is make small talk with strangers. He wants to stay wrapped in this cocoon of family.

Fortunately, the nurses seem to understand that, because the curtain that splits the one side of the room from the other, that Tim had not noticed, is drawn across. So, while they can hear bits of conversation, and from the sound of it, an extremely irate tiny person, he and his family are, at least, invisible.

Sean’s napping. Abby’s napping.

He probably should be, too, but he’s not. He’s sitting on the sofa, with Jimmy and Breena holding onto him. Breena kisses him. “You okay?”

He shrugs. “You?”

She shrugs back at him.

Jimmy gets up, and gently gets Sean out of his bassinette. “I’ll take getting him to sleep on his own duty.” They’ve all done this often enough to know that babies really like sleeping on people, and they tend to get annoyed if you let them sleep on you and then put them in a crib. But, if they start in a crib, it’s a lot easier to get them to keep sleeping in one.

Tim and Breena nod at him. He hasn’t gotten a chance to really hold their boy, yet.
Jimmy walks him around gently, feeling tiny, soft breaths against his collarbone. He gently slips off Sean’s cap, and places his lips on their boy’s head and begins to murmur, “Hello, Sean James. We’ve been waiting for you. So, you’re a little on the small side, so we’re gonna work on that, okay? Little guys like you tend to want to eat every two hours, and that’s a lot of lost sleep for your mama, so we got to get you big and strong and sleeping for three hours at a stretch…” He keeps walking around, just sort of babbling at Sean, telling him how much he’s loved and how much he’s part of the family. Towards the end, as the words are working their way out, he says, “You and your older brother have the same birthday. I wish you could have known him, grown up with him, but that didn’t happen. You’ve got some awesome sisters, you’ll get to see them tomorrow, and a cousin due soon, and you’re going to grow up with such amazing people.

“And, uh… sometimes, if your Aunt Breena and I are a little sad on your birthday, it’s not about you. We love you more than you can imagine, and we’re so happy you’re here. But sometimes life gets hard, and two years ago it got really hard, but your sisters, and your parents, and you… you’re making it easier, helping us get better.” He kisses Sean’s head again, and Sean sleeps on.

He looks up from Sean toward Tim and Breena, both of whom are watching him. They gesture for him to join them on the sofa, and he does, sitting between them, all three of them cuddling their boy.

Tim drifts off into a light doze, but he keeps holding Jimmy, Breena, and Sean.

And for Jimmy and Breena there’s a quiet time of holding this tiny little boy in their arms. He isn’t theirs, not the way Jon was, but he is theirs, too. They have and will be there for every day of his life, help raise him, hold him, comfort him, dry tears, and wipe up diapers, get up in the middle of the night with ear aches, and sing the lullabies, even if they do have to hold him a little differently so he can feel them.

Jimmy can feel Tim pressed into his side, drooling lightly on his shoulder, and he can look over and see Abby sleeping. Being a parent isn’t about providing some DNA. Tim’s did that, and Jimmy absolutely refuses to refer to either of them as “parents.” Abby’s provided none of her DNA, and he’s proud to know their daughter, and wishes he could have known them.

It’s the day in day out care. It’s the time and effort and love. And Jimmy knows he’ll be there for that.

Breena’s mostly holding Sean now, and Jimmy caresses his face. He gives Tim a quick kiss, and Breena. “Our boy.”

She nods and kisses Jimmy. “One of them.”

His return smile is a bit teary as he says, “Yes.”

She laces her fingers with his, and moves them to her tummy. He nods again. Not yet, but soon, maybe… Maybe three boys.
“He can’t hear?” Tony’s asking, phone sandwiched between his ear and shoulder, as he’s got Molly under one arm, and a plate of chicken nuggets in the other hand.

He sets the nuggets in front of Ziva, and returns Molly to the booster seat she’d somehow escaped from when the phone started ringing and he and Ziva were getting excited about baby updates.

Ziva’s chopping up the nuggets for Kelly and Anna, and giving Molly the *you behave* glare, while simultaneously staring at Tony with alarm at his words.

Tony sits down next to her, and puts the phone on speaker.

“They don’t know ‘for certain,'” Ducky replies. “But… If I were to guess, and Jimmy seems to agree, by ‘for certain’ they mean, ‘It’s possible but extremely unlikely that the test is wrong; however, we don’t want to hit you with too much distressing news on the day your son is born, so we’ll toss you a slim ray of hope while giving you time to get used to the idea.’”

Tony doesn’t think he’s ever heard Ducky be that sarcastically disdainful before.

“You are not thinking those tests are wrong?” Ziva says.

“I would put the odds of failing two different tests, that work in different ways, in both ears, while having intact hearing at exceptionally low. Like their pediatrician said, it’s *not impossible* but I would consider it so unlikely as to be unworthy of mention. Or, if it were likely, I’d consider those ‘tests’ to be no better than a crap shoot.”

“Ah.” That ‘ah’ out of Ziva covers a lot of ground.

“What…” Tony doesn’t even know what question to ask, so his ‘what’ just trails limply off.

“Exactly,” Ducky says, telling Tony and Ziva all they need to know about what’s going on at the hospital end of the equation. “Right now, we do not know. Right now, there’s nothing to do. Penny’s texting her colleagues at Johns Hopkins to see who might know what about deafness in infants, and I’m searching my list of contacts for anyone who might know someone. Beyond that… We wait.”

“How are Tim and Abby taking it?” Ziva asks.

“Admirably, I’d say, and shocked. They have rallied behind the position that if Sean is deaf, then deaf is exactly the way he’s supposed to be.”

Tony lets out a long sigh. He supposes that that’s the only healthy way to look at it, but… He knows he’s feeling disappointed, and he knows if it was Dave, he’d be sad for lost opportunities. Of course, he supposes Tim doesn’t have any fantasies of teaching his son to play the piano or guitar, no images of late night jam sessions and going to concerts together, and not having them, he can’t lose them.

“How about Jimmy and Breena?” Ziva asks.

“Stuck in the awful position of being elated and wrecked. I’d say they’re doing as well as they can. Happy for Sean, sad for Jon, a bit of guilt for being happy for anything today…”

“All the fun of long-term mourning,” Tony says, remembering how he felt when he enjoyed
something with the first of the stepmoms.

“Exactly.”

“Do they want us to keep the girls until the morning?” Ziva asks.

“I do not know. They don’t have a private room, and the rest of us have been sent off. The medical staff may send Jimmy and Breena off at some point, or not. There’s a two visitor limit in effect, now.”

“We’ll call and find out,” Tony says.

Part of the idea of being in the hospital is to rest.

How they think this is possible to do when you’re a brand new parent, with a brand new baby, and thus on ultra-high-alert, and there’s another brand new baby, who makes an almost identical noise, on the far side of a curtain, Breena cannot fathom.

What she does know is that, with the exception of Abby, who is so thoroughly drugged that unless someone touches her, she’s not waking up, none of the three of them can sleep through any of the little sounds echoing out of Sean, or (they caught his name when they heard his Daddy walking him around) Danny, on the other side of the room.

Both of them have that little, cat meow cry, and they’ve got their schedules nicely set so that when one is just settling down, the other starts to fuss.

But this time, the meow is coming from Sean, who’s waking up on Jimmy’s chest. Jimmy gets up to get Sean cleaned up while Breena gently wakes Abby.

“Hi.”

Abby blinks a few times, and then holds out her arms for hugs. Breena kisses her. “He’s beautiful.”

“Yeah,” and a huge smile spreads across Abby’s face. She looks around, sees Jimmy getting him unsnapped from his onesie. “Tim warn you?”

Jimmy nods. “Yep.” He carefully takes the diaper off, and, again, there is no fountaining. “And now you get to keep all of your shirts,” he says in Tim’s direction, but Tim, having ascertained that Jimmy and Breena were on it, just went right back to sleep.

Holding Abby, seeing Tim snoozing away, realizing that he’s able to shut down because he knows that someone is on baby duty, gives Breena a plan.

“Okay. I’m on Sean fetching duty tonight. Jimmy, you’ve got tomorrow. Day after that you get home, right?”

“Maybe?” Abby’s not entirely sure what time or day it is, but that sounds right.

“We’ll say yes for now, and then Tim gets that night. We’ll all rest better if we know someone’s on top of it.”
“We’ll rest better knowing jumping up to get him isn’t our job,” Jimmy adds.

Breena nods, petting Abby’s hair. “What do you need?”

Abby blinks a few times again. “Uh… Maybe some food. Not really hungry, but…”

Without opening his eyes, Tim says, “Bowls of pho broth on the table. Gibbs made sure she’d have good stuff. Seafood and chicken is left.”

“Seafood or chicken?” Breena asks.

Jimmy’s got Sean all cleaned up, and is carrying him over to Abby. “Nurse now, eat when I’m done. Can’t do both at once right now.”

Jimmy hands their little boy off to Breena before getting a big hug from Abby. Sean, who is displeased with not being the star for the moment fusses even louder.

“Hush, you,” Breena says to him. “Food’s coming soon. Your mama gets to have some hugs and cuddles, too.”

Sean is not mollified by that.

Jimmy lets go after a moment, and Sean takes his place, looking annoyed at having to wait an entire minute to eat.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, you want it and you want it now.” Abby says while getting her breast out. “Here you go, just… wait…” he might be tiny, but even tiny she doesn’t want any weight on her incision. “Okay, there you go. All the milk you want.”

Sean gets latched on and goes to town.

Breena and Jimmy hover close, watching, petting Abby and Sean. “Really good eater,” Breena says, quietly, hoping she’s not disturbing the people on the other side of the room, too badly.

“Yes.” Abby makes little sucking sounds at her son. “Good boy, eat up.”

“He really eating every two hours?”

Abby just looks at Breena blankly. It’s entirely possible that Sean is eating every two hours, but her time sense is completely fried.

She glances to Tim, but nothing comes out of him, so, this time, he’s probably, really asleep. “I’ll ask Tim when he’s awake.”

“What are you thinking?” Jimmy asks.

“That if he really is eating that often, you’re right, that’s not enough rest for Abby. Would you be okay with me getting two, not in a row, feeds tonight? Let you get enough sleep to actually dream?”

Abby nods at that. “Yeah. I’m… not feeling *the world will fall apart if I don’t breastfeed every single meal* the way I was with Kelly.”

“Good. You’ve got a lot of healing up to do, and that’ll work a lot better if you get to sleep.”

“How are you feeling?” Jimmy asks.
“Right now, I’m pretty good. Not as high as I was last time. I think I’m on different meds. Sore all over. My incision aches, and my shoulder is worse, but not terrible.”

“Want us to get you more pain meds?” Jimmy asks.

Abby looks over at the little button that summons the nurse, and it is on the wrong side for her to easily grab, so she nods.

“Shoulder aches?” That’s a new one on Breena.

“Docs say that air gets stuck inside the incision, and it makes your shoulder hurt.”

“Okay…”

“It happened last time, too.”

Jimmy lays his hand on her right shoulder and she nods, so he starts to gently rub it.

“Don’t get me wrong, that feels nice, but it doesn’t help.”

“Want me to stop?” he asks.

“Didn’t say that.” She sits there for a moment, just feeling taken care of. Then she spends another moment gazing at her son, so completely in love with him. Her finger gently traces over Sean’s perfect, little ear. On the outside, at least, it is perfect. Just like his sister, this is the Platonic Ideal for what an ear is supposed to be. Other than, apparently, for him, it’s only decorative. “Did they tell you…”

Jimmy nods. “Yeah, we know.”

Breena gives her a soft look. “How are you doing?”

Abby shakes her head. “I… He’s fine. His ears work; they don’t, either way, he’s fine. That’s just what he is and anything else…”

“It doesn’t have to be…” Breena starts.

Abby shakes her head again. “Nope. We’re not going there.”

“Okay.”

Abby looks up from her son to her spouses. “I wish you’d met my parents.” Her eyes are tearing at the memory, everything’s making her cry today, but that’s pretty normal. “They were amazing people. Papa was deaf as a post, no hearing at all. Mama could hear a little. Blast the fire alarm right next to her ear and she could just about make it out, that sort of ‘a little.’ They built a business, and a home, and raised two great kids, and…

“And if we’ve got to turn the music up so loud it vibrates the walls for Sean to feel it, well, that’s how I grew up, and it didn’t hurt me any, and it won’t hurt us.

“He’ll dance if he wants to. My parents did. I’ve got a movie of it, from their wedding,” she’s wiping her eyes as she says it. “They liked good, old southern rock and roll, Credence, stuff like that, probably because you could go to any concert or bar and they’d play it so loud they could feel it. It gets in your chest and makes your heart throb, and you get to be the music for a while. I’ve got a little spool of film from their wedding, the band is just whalin’ away on Sweet Home Alabama, and they’re right in front of them, dancing.”
She pets Sean, who’s nursing away, looking awfully content. “You’ll dance, or sing, or… whatever it is, if you want to.”

Abbi wasn’t around for Jon Palmer. He’s before her time with the family.

But, right now, she’s very aware of his shadow all over everything. And not just because of the date, though she assumes that’s part of why she’s feeling him so intensely.

The other part is, as Ducky put it, *perspective*.

She heard them say that the tests were indicating Sean can’t hear, and it felt like punch. That perfect little boy, not so perfect. He’s broken, and she just felt so disappointed and sad and sorry. Thinking of all the things he won’t/can’t do, and…

And none of the three other people around her are reacting that way at all.

She, Gibbs, Ducky, and Penny have found a coffee shop, and they’re researching, sending out feelers, learning, but… none of them are acting like this is anything more than a logistical problem in need of solving.

(Actually, watching Gibbs, who is going at this *exactly* the way a Marine trained in logistics is supposed to go at a problem, they could have been told by the pediatrician that 400 people would be showing up at Tim and Abby’s place a week from now and it’s their job to make sure they’re all fed, given a place to stay, and have enough clean clothing and showers.)

This is just… something to be researched, and handled and then… dealt with.

Maybe the other three are sad or disappointed or something, but… she’s not feeling it. All she’s feeling is intense learn everything/problem solving mode. What can happen? What should happen? Who should be doing it?

They’re on top of all of that.

And none of them are mourning, because this time two years ago, they were *mourning*.

She supposes, that if she had been here two years ago, and had buried one of their babies, she’d be able to look at this as just a hiccough. But she wasn’t, so she doesn’t.

Their boy can’t hear, and that makes her sad.

Ducky’s online, hunting down ASL software/videos. He intends to have everything he might want or need to learn this, by the end of the day.

He was only half joking about the ‘Scottish accent’ bit.

Sean can’t hear an accent, of course. But… It’s while he’s reading through and watching little bits of videos, that it’s hitting him that words won’t be sounds for Sean, they’ll be movements. He won’t live in a world of long vowels or short vowels, of sounds slipping past lips. A whisper will be a feeling, breath on a cheek, as opposed to a susurrated voice. Shouts will be emphatic gestures and the force of skin hitting skin.
He supposes that’s worst case scenario. If Sean has no hearing at all, and cannot use a cochlear implant.

If he can do hearing aids or implants, then… Sound will be something, but Ducky doesn’t know what.

Penny nudges him gently, and glances to the clock overlooking their table in the coffee shop. He nods back. “We have to get moving if we’re going to make New York before it gets too late.”

“You have a full charge?” Abbi asks. She remembers the guys talking about the range on their car.

“That’s why we came here,” Penny replies. “We’ve been charging the whole time.” The four of them stand up and share hugs. “Give us a call if anything comes up, okay?”

Gibbs nods. “We’ll call even if it doesn’t. I’ll be back again tomorrow, get more pictures.”

“Good.” Penny hugs him again. “I want all of them.”

“Penny’s in conferences all day tomorrow. I however, have free time. Skype me when you get a chance, and we’ll work on signing,” Ducky says to Jethro.

“Sure.”

With Penny and Ducky on the road, there’s not much reason for Gibbs and Abbi to hang around, either.

“You mind if we go back to the house. Back up for Tony and Ziva?”

“Not at all. I’ll send a text, and see what they want us to bring home for dinner.”

They’re on the road, Abbi’s driving, meaning they’re alone, in private. She asks Gibbs, “How can you be this calm?”

Gibbs knows she doesn’t mean how are you functioning on this level? They both spent years being trained to function like this under stress, and then spent more years honing those skills and teaching them to others. He shoots her a look of mute appeal. Don’t make me talk about this.

So, Abbi backs off, staring at the road, getting them closer to Tony, Ziva, and little girls. It’s about ten minutes later when Gibbs gets it together enough in his head to say, “Lot of reasons. If this is a tragedy, what does that say about our boy? That we’re not happy for him? That his birth wasn’t a joy because he’s not ‘right?’ Not going there. We have enough good reasons to be sad today, don’t need to add a bad one to the list.

“And… I never met Gloria or Thomas, but… how upset about this can I get and not insult Abby? If this is they sky falling in, then I’m saying her boy’ll do worse than her parents did. And do it with more technology, more money, and more extended family support than they did. Not going there, either.”

And both of those things are true, but they’re not the heart of it. And Abbi can feel that, so she listens, and by the tilt of her head and the crook of her eyebrow, lets him know to keep talking.
Gibbs sighs a bit, watching the road zipping by. “When Abby was pregnant with Kelly, we got a little scare, and… it was right after what was going on with Tim and John came out, and… I was talking with Penny, yelling at her some, but… Her point was that Tim wasn’t what The Admiral wanted, he wasn’t hard or tough enough or… whatever bullshit he wanted. We… I didn’t know if they’d ever have another baby. But I remember thinking about that, about Tim being a quiet, sensitive boy, who probably cried when he was upset, and wanted to read and play make-believe games instead of rough-house or play sports, and I was wondering how I would have done with that son.”

Abbi looks a little alarmed by that. Gibbs holds up a hand. “Not like John. I know that. But… Kelly, both of them, could or can be as fluffy and girly as they like. That never has or will bug me. All the pink lace and sparkles and tutus and… I’m fine. I’ve done tea parties in full dress uniform, and who knows, maybe I will again? Molly’d probably like that, and it’d tickle Breena pink.” Gibbs suddenly has a very intense sense memory of doing that with Kelly and Maddie, along with the idea of Molly, Kelly, and Anna, all a few years older, doing their own tea parties. He’s actually looking forward to it.

“You still have you dress blues?”

“Somewhere. Not sure I could get into them… anyway… I’d been thinking about Tim as a kid, and… How would I have done with a gentle little boy? And then, I didn’t know if I’d ever get the shot to find out, but I knew that no matter what, if that little boy ever came to be, he’d have a tough, old Marine Gunny who loved him no matter who he was.

“So, this is, maybe, who he is… Part of it, at least.”

That makes sense to Abbi, but doesn’t feel like all of it. “You can love someone unconditionally, and still be sad for what they don’t have.”

Gibbs shrugs. “I’m sure you can, but… Don’t want to think about it as he’s lost something.”

“But he has. What if he wants to be a big, tough Marine Gunny like his Pop?”

Gibbs sighs. Then he shrugs. “Lot of time between now and then. They’re letting amputees back into the service. If he’s thinking military, by the time he could enlist, who knows what they’ll have? Who knows what the Marines’ll be then? Might all be computer game controllers and drones. And if he can’t do whatever it is… Fuck that. He’ll do it! We will get him to where he needs to be to do the stuff he wants to do. Twenty-years from now, if he wants it, we’ll stand there at Annapolis and celebrate the… sixth?”

“Seventh?”

Gibbs shrugs at that, too. “McGee to graduate from there.”

Abbi smiles gently at him. “Hoorah!”

Gibbs nods and adds a prayer of his own. “Amen.”

Sarah peeks her head into the room a bit after dinner time. Glenn’s not with her, so only Jimmy ducks out so she can get some time with her brother and nephew.
Once Abby’s done nursing, and settles back into her sleep, Sarah’s snuggling the little boy, petting him, staring into big murky blue eyes that gaze up into hers, Tim’s not sure what to say.

It feels stupid. She’s been asking about when he was born and how the surgery went and how everyone’s doing, and he’s having this conversation, just like with Kelly, all the details and whatnot, and… There’s this huge thing that he doesn’t know how to say.

And, it’s not like other things he hasn’t known how to or wanted to say, it’s… He’s got no idea of how to put it into the conversation. He supposes he could have worked it in to the part where she’s asked, “And he’s okay, right?” would have done, but… He said yes, because Sean is okay. He’s the right size and weight and breathing fine and all of his bits are attached and…

And he’s deaf, (Tim’s already jumped to that conclusion. Maybe he’ll be pleasantly surprised in a week, but… that’s a week from now.) and for most people that is not fine.

He can feel Breena watching this, because of course, she knows, but she doesn’t know how Tim wants to handle this.

Finally, after another moment of watching his sister coo at her nephew, he sighs and comes up with, “How do you feel about learning to sign?”

Sarah, who had been carefully inspecting all of Sean’s fingers, each one of them clasped around one of her index fingers, looks up at Tim, shocked. “Tim?”

“That may be his main form of communication, and if it is, I’m wondering if you and, to a lesser extent, Glenn, will be willing to learn, so you can talk to him yourself.”

She licks her lips, looking back down at the little guy on her lap. Then she looks back up to Tim. “He’s deaf?”

“Probably. Retest again in a week, but…”

“Oh…” It slips out of her as her shoulders hunch in, and she looks back down at Sean. “Oh, baby.” Pity is oozing out of her voice.

“Eh! None of that,” Tim says, leaping into Protective Papa mode.

Now she’s looking at him, confusion on her face. “You just said he’s probably deaf!” They hear the people on the other side of the curtain just stop talking, and Sarah realizes that was probably too loud.

“I know,” Tim replies, quiet. “But I also know this is a no-pity zone.”

“It’s not pity, it’s just… He’s deaf! Everything is going to be so much harder, and he’ll never hear a ——”

“No! Not in front of me or him. Have that conversation with Glenn if you want to, but not here.”

“He can’t hear me say it!”

“But I can, Breena can, and if she wakes up, Abby will, so stop it! Only thing I need to know is if he needs you to go the extra mile so you can talk to him, will you do it?”

“Of course.” She gives her brother a bit of a shove. “Just because I’m not all happy about this doesn’t mean I won’t do what I need to.”
That’s a wall of frustration for Tim. “Sarah, there’s no line between this and him. You can’t be, ‘I hate you’re deaf but love you.’ This isn’t a bad habit he’s picked up, or something he can control. This is part of who he is.”

Sarah, who has a very clear distinction between Sean and Deaf, is not on the same page as Tim, but she’s willing to humor him. “Can I hate the fact that he’s going to have a harder time in life than his sister will?”

Tim sighs. He’s too tired and fried for this. “Just… whatever. I’m glad you’re willing to learn to sign.”

“But I might not have to?”

Tim shrugs. “A week before we’ll know. Maybe with hearing aids he’ll be able to hear well enough the rest of you won’t need to learn. Maybe. It’ll probably be a long time before we know that, so you might as well start getting it down. It’s not a cinch, but I thought it was easier than French.”

“Okay. He’s going to learn to sign the way everyone else learns to talk, one word here, another there… probably start doing it at what… eight months, a year?”

Tim nods; he assumes that’s right.

“I’m sure I can keep pace with an eight-month-old.” She flashes Tim a little smile, and he smiles back, not too warmly, but he appreciates that she’s trying to keep this from turning into a huge emotional scene.

Breena adds, “With any luck, he’ll also learn to speak that way, at the same time. Even before hearing aids and cochlear implants they were able to teach deaf people to speak, so… We’ll figure it out.”

That makes sense to Sarah. “So, he’d need to see the signing before he can do it, right? Babies understand before they can talk, and if no one’s signing at him, he won’t have anything to understand?”

That makes sense to Tim. “I think so. I have a feeling that as soon as his eyes are sharp enough to pick it up, every conversation at our home will be signed and spoken.”

“That why you’re not doing it now?” Obviously, Tim’s right here, and for the moment, Sean’s awake and with them.

“He can only see eight inches to a foot away. It’d just be a blur. Two, three months, and we’ll start. Get his sisters signing, too.”

Breena realizes something with that. “That would probably be good for Anna. She’s not talking yet, and we can see her get frustrated when she wants something and can’t tell us what.”

Sarah nods. “I’ve read about that, teaching babies how to sign because it’s easier than speaking.”

“Yep,” Breena says.

“Show me, ‘Hello, Sean’.”

So Tim does, and slowly, with some stumbling on his name, Sarah signs it to her nephew. By that point, his eyes are getting droopy, and it’s time to find his bassinet.
Sarah’s the last of the first day visitors. Tony and Ziva and the girls will be by in the morning. Tim, Breena, and Jimmy settle in, and get ready for their first night of hands-on parenting of Sean James McGee.

Time might not matter much in a maternity ward, but things do slow down a bit at night, especially once everything is stable.

Breena gets Sean’s 10 o’clock feed. She’s got him snuggled into the crook of her arm, the tiny two ounce bottle of formula in her hand.

For a moment he’s nuzzling her breast, looking for a latch, and seeming fairly confused by the concept of the shirt between them. But, eventually he consents to suck on the squishy thing she’s slipped between his lips, and… she laughs a bit, the look on his face at the formula is pretty funny.

“Not what you were expecting, huh?”

He gives another almost tentative suck, but apparently decides this is okay and gets down to it.

She hums quietly as he nurses. Unlike Jimmy, she doesn’t say anything to him, not because he can’t hear, but because she doesn’t have words. For a moment, there’s just content. Tomorrow there’ll be things to read and learn and work to do and the rest of life, but right now, she gets to hold a tiny little boy, inhale his new baby scent, feel his suede soft skin and feel the glow of this tiny, perfect life in her arms.

And right now, that’s more than enough.
Day Two

For Abby, the first day of Sean’s life is a fuzzy, achy, tired blur with tiny bits of very, hyper-real moments. She’s not sure if that’s a good thing or not.

What she does know is that there’s nothing wrong with her little boy. If he can’t hear, he can’t hear, and that’s that.

Day two, that’s when things start coming back into focus.

Unfortunately, day two starts way too damn early (4:00) and involves the dreaded get out of bed.

Breena got Sean’s ten and two feeds, which means Abby’s only really out of it as opposed to a literal zombie. But, out of it or not, as she’s wrapping up the 4:00 feed, and handing Sean back to Breena, a nurse shows up.

“It’s been twenty-four hours, time to get you unhooked.”

And, yes, Abby’s looking forward to not being tethered to a catheter or an IV, but the bit that happens after that, where she says, “Okay, now, up you get.” And then the nurse stands there, arms out, expecting her to somehow twist her poor, sad, cut apart body that’s only being held together by scabs and will power, to the side of the bed, and then stand up, and then walk around some…

Just like with Kelly, she does it, but… It hurts. She’s got this horrible feeling that everything’s about to come spilling out, and…

It’s just not good all over.

Breena’s watching Abby get up and hobble around some, and coming to a very rapid conclusion. A gazillion gallons of hormones have crashed into her girl, who appears to be in pain and emotional distress, and they’re about to cause some very bad crying.

“Come on,” she gets and arm around Abby, because like with every other brand new mom, the lure of the shower is held out like some sort of miracle bath that makes everything better, and she’s shuffling herself toward the bathroom.

They get in there, and Breena starts to strip off, too, planning on getting in with Abby and helping her get washed off. As she’s about to pull her shirt over her head, Breena pauses, and kisses Abby. She holds her hands on Abby’s shoulders, and makes sure she’s looking her in the eye. “You’ve got this!”

Abby nods, and then pulls off the gown, and looks at herself in the mirror.

This time she doesn’t immediately burst into tears.

It doesn’t hit that hard this time.

Abby looks, and she’s not thrilled by what she sees, more stretch marks, and bruises, and swollen,
puffy legs, and a Frankenstein’s monster scar, but, she’s not wrecked this time.

She doesn’t feel ruined.

Maybe it’s just that having Breena around is good for the soul, or maybe it’s that having someone who’s got the stretch marks and the saggy boobs and butt, who’s stood exactly where she is, with the blood smeared thighs and the smell of antiseptic and amniotic fluid all over her, staring in the mirror, seeing the train wreck, and survived it, maybe that helps.

Of course, maybe it’s the fact that the woman looking in the mirror who’s done all of that, this time, is her.

Whatever it is, she doesn’t feel nearly as wrecked this time around.

By the time she’s gotten her shower, and dried off, and into soft, comfy clothing, by the time Breena’s brushed out her hair, which felt insanely good, and helped her get back to the bed, Sean’s just about ready to eat again.

“This every two hours thing can’t last.”

Breena nods. “He’s got to get bigger. Fast.”

“They look comfy,” Abby says quietly about Tim and Jimmy, who are in their usual have-the-bed-to-themselves positions, Jimmy on his back and Tim spooning them. For a second, Abby wonders what will happen if one of the people on the other side of the curtain were to come back here, but… The nurse already did, and she didn’t even glance at them. (At least, as well as Abby can remember.) “I’m up, and I can get him, you want to wiggle in between them and get a bit more sleep before Tony, Ziva, and the girls get here?”

Just the mention of that sets Breena yawning. She may have enjoyed her flickering blue hours with Sean, but she also wants to sleep. “Yes.”

Breena gets herself on Jimmy’s other side, and in a moment there’s the soft, almost snore of her breathing. Abby shuffles over to Sean, and he’s on his back, eyes closed, sleeping like a baby.

She wonders if he dreams, and if he does, what he may dream of. Warm, wet, the thudding of her heart and gurgle of her digesting food? Maybe.

His eyes don’t flicker, so maybe he’s in light sleep.

She very, very gently gets her hands under his butt and head, and lifts him to her chest. He doesn’t wake up, but he does snuggle in against her, tiny warm patch of skin, his face, against her neck. When she gets home, where she’s in charge of the thermostat, she’ll get to hold him skin to skin, but she knows she thinks it’s too nippy in here to not be covered in clothing, so she can’t imagine Sean would enjoy extended skin time, either. But when they’re home and warm…

Abby smiles, she’s looking forward to that.

She’s also looking forward to something else, in a few hours, Tony, Ziva, and the girls will be here,
and they’ll get to see their little brother for the first time.

Abby hears them before they get into the room. Loud, happy signing, is echoing down the hallway as well as Ziva’s voice saying, “Molly, people are trying to sleep. Hush, baby.”

“I CAN’T! We’re gonna see Sean!”

“Molly Keira!” She’s never heard Tony attempt Dad-voice before, but it suits him. The singing quiets down, a little bit.

Abby chuckles at that, and stops fast, any sort of laughing hurts, but she holds the amusement, knowing what that sort of excited feels like, and not at all minding the fact that she’s only got to visit it today, instead of try to manage it on her own. The sound of the kiddos closing on their room, gets her three companions up. So, they’re all sitting up, looking various levels of disheveled and muzzy, as Tony, Ziva, and the girls round the corner.

Ziva’s got a good grasp on Molly, and Tony’s got Anna in his arm but they let Kelly go forward, and she’s picked up, rapidly, by her Daddy, who greets her with a huge, warm hug, and kisses, and then carries her to her mom.

“Oh, you’ve got to be really, really, really gentle. Mama’s very sore, and Sean’s really tiny, okay?”

Kelly smiles at him for a second, she’s pleased to see him, but he’s not the star attraction. She’s staring at her mom.

“Mama!”

Abby knows who her baby wants, and it’s not the new little interloper on her chest. “Hey, baby. C’mere.” She and Tim trade so that Kelly gets the hugs and Sean gets shown off to the girls who are somewhat more interested in him and less interested in Abby. (Well, Molly’s very interested in Sean, Anna’s pretty indifferent to this whole thing, beyond the fact that she’s in a new place and checking everything out.)

“Not home,” Kelly says, voice accusing.

Abby kisses her daughter again. “I know. Tomorrow. I’ll be home tomorrow. My tummy’s sore and I’ve got to stay here a little while longer for it to get better.”

“All better?”

Abby shakes her head. “Nope. But enough better. You want to meet your little brother?”

Kelly snuggles in closer to her mama. She doesn’t say no, but they’re all getting a clear ‘no’ sort of vibe off of her. She wants mama-time. But, wanting to meet him or not, he’s part of the family now, so…

Tim pries him away from Molly, who has decided that Sean is the greatest thing in the history of great things, and brings him over, half sitting on the bed with the two of them. He doesn’t attempt to give Sean to Abby, it’s very clear that right this second Kelly’s feeling very territorial about her mom.
He does angle Sean a bit so Kelly can see him easily, and says, “This is Sean. Your little brother. He’s going to come home with us. Just like Molly and Anna do.”

They’ve been over it before, but how much a one-and-a-half-year-old understands about these things is always kind of nebulous.

Kelly gives him the side eye; she’s not sure she wants a brother.

Molly, who is all in favor of a little brother, is trying to scramble up onto the bed as well, with limited success, because her Daddy is also on the job, and doing what he can to make sure that Abby and Sean don’t get swamped.

Jimmy quietly says, “How about I take Sean, and let Kelly soak up some Mommy and Daddy time.”

Tim nods, that seems to be the order for the day.

Ziva snags Sean from Jimmy about two tenths of a second after he got him. And, with baby girls occupied and the two visitor limit in effect, Jimmy and Breena go off in search of food, with Anna, who’s not terribly interested in anything besides Mama-time of her own.

Ziva sits down on the fold out bed with Sean, Tony on one side, Molly curling up against her on the other, and the three of them do the somewhat normal ‘brand new baby’ routine of looking at him, petting him, checking out finger and toes and all the rest of it.

Molly’s holding her hand against Sean’s, his palm just a fraction of hers, marveling in a (somewhat, for a toddler) quiet voice about how little he is.

Sean goes with the flow for a few minutes before bursting into tears, which has very little to do with the attention, and a whole lot to do with it’s time for him to go to sleep again.

Tony’s looking a bit panicky at the little crying person in his arms, but he does hum to him enough to get him calmed down, and then put into his bassinette, where, after a bit more fussing (and Tim saying, “It’s okay, just let him lie, he’ll settle down,” as Tony’s about to snatch him right back up again when he doesn’t immediately fall asleep) he decides to go back to sleep.

Ziva watched him do it, huge smile on her face. He was walking gently, little bounce in his step, humming, lips pressed to the top of Sean’s head, hand rubbing up and down Sean’s back, and for all that he doesn’t think he’s a natural at this, he’s doing an awfully good job of it.

Once Sean’s down, Ziva stands up, next to Tony, and both of them watch him settle down, eyes starting to droop, pacifier sucking slowing down.

“He looks so much like Tim,” Ziva says. She saw the pictures, and everyone else said that, too, but looking at it face to face…

Tony nods and kisses her cheek. Then he heads over and gives Abby and Tim hugs, as well. Now that Sean’s sleeping, they get attention.
With two girls in the room, there’s really not much in the way of time for adult conversation. A lot of the visit is managing the somewhat older babies, and making sure they don’t break anything.

So, while there are things Tony and Ziva might like to say to Tim and Abby, most of it gets wrapped up in, “Molly, stop that!” “Kelly, No! Mama’s sore there!” “Molly!”

After about half an hour, Jimmy and Breena are back with food, and Tony and Ziva decide to let them eat, and, for the first time since Friday night, get some time to relax on their own.

As they drive away, Tony turns to Ziva and says, “We are never having three kids.”

She throws her head back and laughs.

With Ziva and Tony gone, that means the McPalmer branch is busy handling their own little dudes, which A: they have more practice at and B: said little dude are somewhat aware (okay, Molly and Kelly are) that Aunt Ziva and Uncle Tony are sort of softies when it comes to them, but the various and sundry Mommies and Daddies are not, so it’s time to behave a bit better.)

It also means, that, assuming said Mommies and Daddies who did not suddenly go on new parent leave want to get to work, they’ve got to get moving.

Which is when the reality that Kelly does not, on any level, want to be separated from her Mama sets in. She’s in the midst of an absolute screaming fit at the idea of having to leave. So, plan A, which had been Jimmy and Breena take the girls home, Kelly stays with Heather, Palmer girls go to daycare, and then they go to work, switches up a bit.

For the time being, Breena’ll stay with Abby. Tim, who isn’t Mama, but is the most tolerable alternative, is going home with Kelly (and as they think about it some more, Jimmy remembers that Tim’s got his appointment with Rachel today, and given what’s happened this last weekend that he should probably go) and hopefully getting Kelly settled back into her normal routine with Heather, will help her calm down.

Jimmy’s got his girls and getting them off to daycare, and when Gibbs shows up (they’re a bit surprised he’s not here already, but they assume he’ll be in soon) Breena will head in to work.

All sorted out, the day, officially, begins.

“Are you on administrative leave, Tim?” Rachel asks as he heads into her office six minutes late. Tim’s never late. He’s either five minutes early, or she gets a text saying he won’t be coming because of some sort of work thing.

No text and late was actually making her worry some, and him in jeans, an old MIT sweatshirt, and sneakers, a faint bruise on his eye, plus what happened two weeks ago, she comes to the conclusion that he’s not visiting her from work today, and why. She is correct about half of her assessment.

For a second, he doesn’t know what she’s talking about, looking utterly startled, and then notices he’s in jeans, a t-shirt, sweater, and sneakers.

“Uh. No. As of 4:00 on Sunday, I’m on paternity leave.” He smiles as he says that, fishes his phone
out of his pocket and shows her the pictures.

Rachel smiles with relief and takes the phone from him. And, flipping through, she’s got a dozen pictures of a tiny baby being held by everyone in the extended McGee clan. “Congratulations!” She looks at one of the close ups of Sean. “Oh, Lord, he’s your Mini Me!”

Tim inclines his head. “So they say. I won’t say I don’t see it,” he’s looking at Sean over her shoulder, and those eyes are really obvious, “but… I don’t see it as much as everyone else does.”

“No one ever does.” She hands the phone back. “Not that I’m not glad to see you, but… shouldn’t you be home, with your baby and wife?”

He inclines his head at that, too. “The brains of the operation suggested that, since my wife is sleeping, and Gibbs is with her, and my baby is a day old, and couldn’t care less if I’m in the room or not, that I should spend some time with my daughter, who cares very much if I’m around, and then come see you.” He takes his phone back and sits down.

“You’re not the brains?”

“Not today. Jimmy’s got that title for the moment. Let someone who’s getting some sleep make the decisions seems like a good idea.”

“At least, not a bad one.” She nods at him. “So… What did Jimmy think was important enough for you to come chat with me instead of rescheduling?”

She really isn’t expecting Tim to start laughing, but he does. “Uh… Well, on Saturday, it would have been about… Uh… Did you see the news about the admiral arrested at the Tech in Anti-Terror Conference?”

She nods. “Beyond that, I noticed which admiral was arrested, and who did the arresting, and the rather interesting press conference that followed it hosted by NCIS’s Director and Director of Cybercrime.”

“Yeah, well, on Saturday, that was the big thing.” He swallows. “On Sunday, we had Sean, and got the news that he’s probably deaf, and… you know, that kind of blew all the shit with The Admiral out of the water. Um… So… You’re the Pro. Where do we start?”

Rachel sighs. Tim’s right, that’s… “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He holds up both wrists, realizes he’s got a sweatshirt on, so all she’s looking at is the cuffs of his sweatshirt, pulls them down, and shows off his wrists. “No rubber band. Haven’t had a panic attack in weeks. And… It seems like people who aren’t part of the close family are more upset about Sean than I am. My sister had a more… intense… reaction than I did.”

“Intense how? Or better yet, tell me how you’re doing, and if you need to contrast it with her to do it, that’s fine.”

“I’m okay. Um… I mean… I get this is a big deal, but…” Tim winces, aware of how this might sound, “but it’s also not.” He sighs at that. “God, that sounds like world class denial, right?”

“Probably” says Rachel’s look. “Depends on why you think it’s not a big deal,” comes from her lips.

“From the reading we’re doing, it looks like he has some form of non-syndromic deafness. Meaning he’s just deaf. It doesn’t go along with anything else. So, all other systems should be normal. Just like his big sister he should be wicked smart, and curious, and interested in everything, and… Okay, you
know? And, it’s not like being blind. Almost anything he might want to do, he’ll be able to do. He might have a hard time as a linguist because speech will likely be a problem on some level, but… it wouldn’t stop him from learning other languages and writing and reading and… I mean, if he wanted it… He’d probably have to work a lot harder for it, depends on how deaf he is, but… It’s not like he might want to be a blind test pilot. There’s pretty much nothing that being deaf makes you completely unsuited for. He could… be a piano tuner by feel if he wanted to.

“Unless he’s completely deaf, unable to use hearing aids or cochlear implants, he’ll be able to go to school normally, he’ll be able to ‘hear,’ he’ll learn to talk… So… It’s not a big deal… but it is… but…” Tim shrugs.

“And if he can’t hear at all?”

“Jethro, Abby, and I already sign, and the rest of us will, too. We’ve got the money to make sure he can go to a great school for deaf kids, or for an interpreter to translate speech into sign if the best school for whatever he wants to do isn’t set up for deaf kids. We’ve got Gibbs, who’s retired now, and is more than willing to kick extra time into this if he needs extra shuttling around to speech therapists or whatever. We’re invested in making sure he does okay, and we have the resources to do it. So… I mean… Is that denial?”

She flashes him her patient look. “It sounds like a very healthy way of understanding it. Is it real?”

Tim sighs at that, too. “Feels real. But, I haven’t gotten more than three hours of sleep in a row since Friday night, so…” Yes, Breena was getting up with Sean, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t wake up, at least a little, at each chirp. He’s hopeful that home, in his or Jimmy’s bed, he’ll sleep right through on the nights that aren’t his.

She smiles at that. “It’s always fun to work with people as self-aware as you are.”

“If you like that, try this one… So, um… I actually didn’t read most of the coverage of my fight with The Admiral. So, I don’t really know what you know about it. On my end, the Cliff Notes version is that I came out to him at the conference, he decked me,” Tim gently taps the almost healed bruises on his orbital, “and I dropped him. Then Tony arrested him for assault and a hate crime, and off to Leavenworth he’s gone.”

“You came out to him?” Rachel doesn’t look nearly as startled by that idea as she could, so Tim decides that idea isn’t completely out of the blue to her. He’s not shocked.

Tim licks his lips. “Getting into that will distract me from what I’m thinking about now, and if that happens I’ll never get back to it.”

“I’ll ask again later.”

Tim notices she doesn’t have to make a note to remember that. “Thanks. Anyway, I finally get to win. He’s down, I’m up, and besides a cracked orbital, all is right with the world. Sean shows up, and I guess we got eight, maybe ten hours before we knew about the hearing, and… There he is, my prefect little boy, looks just like me. Ten fingers, ten toes, big blue eyes, tiny bit of blond fuzz. Perfect.

“That was me for a while. According to my grandmother, in the almost literal sense, given how much alike we look. I mean… I was perfect to him for a while. Probably until I was two or three or something like that. Until it was clear that I wasn’t a water baby, and Admiral McGee The Third wasn’t going to happen. And, when I wasn’t perfect, he turned on me. He decided he was going to make me perfect, and if he had to break me to do it, then he’d break me.”
Tim shrugs. “Sean can’t hear. He’s literally not perfect. He’s broken. That’s how some of the nurses are looking at him, and I know I’ve heard the guys on the other side of the curtain asking quietly to one of them if Sean can be ‘fixed.’” Tim shakes his head. “And I can’t do that to him. I lived a version of it, and… No. My boy is perfect just the way he is. He’s perfect the way I didn’t get to be. So are his sisters and cousin. And, that’s all I need on that. I hope that’s all he’ll need on that, too.”

He smiles a little. “Um… I read somewhere that people with lousy parents tend to have issues with parenting themselves. No good role models for how to do it. Either fall into the same mistakes their parents made, or reject everything they did and make all new mistakes. So… Maybe this isn’t good, but I’m not making his mistakes. I’ll make my own damn mistakes on this one!”

Rachel smiles at that, nodding. “I’m sure you will. And it sounds like you’re on track to make healthier mistakes than your parents did.”

“I hope so, granted, that hurdle’s so low it’s in danger of melting from the heat of the Earth’s core.”

She chuckles at that, too. “Are you worried?”

“About making my own mistakes? Sean? Fallout from The Admiral mess?”

Rachel also looks pleased by him having that list. “Let’s start with Sean.”

“Not more than I was with Kelly at this age, and probably a little less. I’ll still drive them home ten miles an hour under the speed limit and try to swerve around every pothole, but I’m not afraid of breaking him if I breathe wrong the way I was with Kelly.”

“So, you’re officially not a virgin parent anymore.” It’s clear by her look that Rachel remembers how taking baby number two home was different from baby one.

“Yeah. Kelly’s a bit iffy about Sean, and not happy about missing out on her mom-time. I got her home, and fortunately Heather got there shortly after, and she’s Kelly’s second favorite person, so that went over pretty well, but if Abby’s around she wants to be glued to her.”

“All perfectly normal in an eighteen-month-old with a new little brother.”

“Yep. So, I’m not worried about it, but not looking forward to trying to juggle two babies wanting constant attention. I have the feeling that Kelly’s not going to approve of nursing time.”

“But you’ll handle it.”

“Exactly.”

“How about longer-term with Sean?”

Tim sighs. “Next week they’ll retest his hearing, make sure the first tests were right, and then… I don’t know what happens then. Lots of doctors appointments and tests and conversations about what to do. Lots of research. Ducky and Penny probably already have the list of every specialist we need to see in a two hundred miles range. And Gibbs and Abbi have been reading up on hearing aids and cochlear implants. So, at some point, we’re going to get a massive info dump, but I think that’s waiting for us to get past the ‘brand new baby!’ stage.”

“How about Jimmy and Breena? Jimmy’s a doctor, right? What are they doing?”

“Keeping us sane. We’ve been… mostly… we still have our own houses, but we swap between them… living together for several months now, so… Sean’s tiny. He eats every two hours. For the
time being, Jimmy, Breena, and I are swapping nights. Each of us gets one night of Sean fetching, clean up, and two night feeds. That way Abby gets at least two stretches of four hours of sleep in a row. And honestly, if Abby can take the pain, I’d be in favor of all the night feeds being bottle feeds. He can nurse during the day, and then, once she’s healed up, all four of us can swap out nights. I have a feeling we’ll all be better off with three full nights of sleep for every night on baby duty.”

There’s a lot of information in that paragraph, and Rachel takes a moment to parse it. Finally, she says, “I take it this is connected to ‘coming out’ to your father?”

“Yeah. Since I got back from the Stennis the four of us have been together.”

She flashes him a curious and… not disapproving, but not entirely comfortable look, either. “Interesting timing.”

“Almost getting killed puts things into perspective.”

Rachel nods at that.

“You’re wondering if we rushed into something stupid because we were afraid.”

She raises an eyebrow at him. He said it; she didn’t. “Do you think you did?”

“No. I think, after the year I’ve had, that I’d still be wearing that rubber band and probably on medication without them.”

Rachel appears to think that’s an interesting answer, too. “How does Abby feel about that?”

Tim inclines his head, not understanding the question.

“That she isn’t enough,” Rachel elaborates.

“Why would that bug her? I’m talking to you, too. And Gibbs, and Penny, and… Is Abby supposed to be so territorial over me that those relationships are supposed to bug her? I mean, who in the world has just one person to cover every possible need they may have? And more than that, if I only had one person to cover everything, you would tell me that’s not healthy.”

Rachel gives him a long look before saying, “Good point.”

Tim has the sense that she’s thinking that highly-intelligent, self-aware people are also really good liars when it comes to spinning a version of an emotional life they want other people to believe they have, but she hasn’t said it, and all he can do is tell her what’s going on, and then live it, so he keeps talking, “She doesn’t think it’s a competition. I don’t, either. I’ve told you how when I was in the Navy Yard, Jimmy got Abby and Kelly out. Was I supposed to be… jealous or… I don’t know… upset about that? He protected them, got them out safe when I wasn’t in a position to do it. If I’d had half a brain in my head, I’d have gone, too.” Tim shrugs. “Four is easier. I mean, I wouldn’t want to try it with the wrong group of people, or the wrong sorts of relationships. This would be hell if you weren’t all in on it, but… More support, more time to yourself, more time with your loves, the kids get more attention, you get more rest. Hell, dollars and cents, if we ever scale down to one house, more money… It just… works better.”

Rachel doesn’t look like she knows what to say to that.

“So, to answer the original question, Jimmy and Breena are keeping us afloat. They’re making sure I do stuff like come see you. They spent the night in the hospital last night, when they certainly didn’t need to, just to make sure we were okay. When Kelly was born, I was helping Abby get moving
around and washed off after they let her out of bed, and... It was okay, but... I'm a guy. I might be in line for Sensitive-Husband-of-the-Year award, but I'm still not a woman, I've never had a baby, I don't know what it's like, and all the blood meant I just about passed out the minute I got some alone time. This time Breena had her, and it went better. Abby gets the support of someone who's been there, done that, and *knows* what it's like. So, she's got better support, which means she's in a better place, and that makes us all better.

“And... we did this with teething, and depending on what sort of sleeper Sean is, we may be doing it again after he's home. Kelly and Anna were cutting teeth at the same time and completely miserable. So, two of us take the crabby babies, the other two take the healthy baby and get to sleep in a house that doesn't have screaming children in it. And then we swap around. Which means the crabby babies aren't constantly being parented by exhausted, crabby adults. The exhausted crabby adults know that in the next day or so there will be real sleep. *Everyone* is better off in that situation.”

Rachel does nod at that, and Tim has the sense that she's agrees, at least with the 'everyone being better when the grown-ups get to sleep' part of it.

“So, they're loving us. And in a bit, when we start getting hit with options and tests and piles of medical talk, I'll have a doctor who loves our son beyond all reason, who's looking out for him, helping to guide us on that.”

Rachel nods at that, too and jots something down. “Okay. How about making your own mistakes? Are you worried on that?”

Tim understands that she's asking if this relationship with the Palmers is potentially “making his own mistakes” as well as parenting mistakes in specific.

“Much less so than I would be as a single parent. I've got three co-parents who were raised by very good parents. I mean, I don't much like Breena's dad, he's a jerk, but he was a hell of a dad. That's not something I'll ever deny. And Abby's parents were awesome. Jimmy's parents... His dad passed on a while ago, but Jimmy loved him. I don't really know his mom or step-dad, and his mom seems pretty hands-off, but he thinks they did a good job. So, I know if I'm heading into the weeds, I've got people who have a better idea of how this works to pull me back in.” He shrugs again. “But, again, we're at the easy part of it. Teething rings, changing diapers, getting the ring of crud under their chins washed off, saying no to extra cookies, and enforcing bedtime isn't exactly parenting-existential-crisis-mode. We'll see how things go as they get older and start thinking more for themselves.”

Rachel smiles at that. “Okay, fallout from The Admiral?”

Tim shakes his head. “No. I'm aware there has been and will be some, but... Nope. Fallout of the government falling apart, reorganization of all of Federal Law Enforcement, that might prove to be interesting, but this... Nope.” Tim smiles at her. “He's gone. In Leavenworth for... who knows how long? They'll let me know what his sentence is, and when he's getting out, and once he's out, I don't think he'll be allowed within a hundred miles of me, so... Nope. He's gone. The dragon's dead, and now I get to grow old and tell stories about having slain it.”

“And will you?”

Tim knows she's asking about his writing. “Eventually. Been working on that one for a while. I've told you about that, right?”

“Your books, yes.”

“He's a man in the story. We're the dragons. He's just a man. I suppose dragon-slays-man isn't
exactly a man-bites-dog story, but, in the tales, the dragon never wins, so… Why not?”

“Your dragons are men, too, though?”

“Yeah.” Tim’s eyes glance to the clock, an hour has run by. “And my hatchlings are looking for Daddy. Jimmy said he’s got a Thursday appointment.”

She nods.

“I’m sure he’ll fill you in with more of the details.”

Rachel stands up to see Tim out. “I’m sure he will. Congratulations on your new baby.”

“Thank you!”

Jimmy gets into work a bit on the late side. Not obscenely late or anything, but close to ten minutes, which is later than he’s been since he’s been in charge.

A very amused looking Dr. Allan says to him, “Good weekend?” as he hangs up his coat.

Jimmy smiles at him. “Yes, very.”

“Exciting date night?”

Jimmy grins again, thinking of how the night ended. “You have no idea!” And Allan doesn’t, because he’s not on Tim’s baby text list.

Allan, who does not know the punchline to this story but feels like there should be one, adds with a mildly salacious tone, “Yes, and I’ve worked hard to make sure that stays true.”

Jimmy shakes his head. *Invite a guy to game with you, and suddenly he starts to get sassy.* Though he is pleased to see a bit more snark out of Allan. “Not like… Okay, yes, like that, too… And I appreciate you working hard to maintain your lack of ideas on that subject. Anyway, the really exciting bit was Abby going into labor, and Sean James joining the party a bit after four on Sunday!”

This time there’s no hint of anything but joy on Allan’s face as he smiles. “I take it you have pictures?”

“Of course I do!” And Jimmy gets to showing them off.

It’s as Jimmy’s showing off the shots of his namesake that he’s running into the same problem Tim did. How to broach the subject…

Allan’s looking at a shot of Sean in Jimmy’s arms, smiling gently at it, and Jimmy is, too. He can’t wait to get back to the hospital and spend some more time with little boy.

But, there’s still this thing he should say, that should probably happen sooner rather than later, that he hasn’t yet done.

“He’s a beautiful little boy.”
“Yes, he is. Looks a lot like his Dad.”

Allan nods, and flashes another smile at Jimmy. But, Jimmy’s fairly preoccupied with what to say next, so he misses that smile on Allan’s face or how Allan understands what Jimmy just said.

He doesn’t however, miss the look on Allan’s face when he says, “There is one… thing…” Allan is suddenly looking at him very intently, and with a lot of trepidation. No one wants to hear about babies and things. “He’s probably deaf.”

Allan doesn’t go white, but trepidation slides into alarm. He obviously sees this as a much bigger deal than Jimmy does, but, of course, he would. He hasn’t lived Jimmy’s life or his sorrows.

“Probably?” Finally comes out of Allan. Then he gets with it. “Of course, probably. They gave you the same spiel we give everyone else. Test once, test again later…”

“I take it a baby failed the hearing test when you were on OB?”

“A few of them. And that was the line, give it a week and retest.”

“Did any of them have hearing when you were on Pedes and retested?”

Allan shakes his head. “None of the ones I did retests on did. And because you haven’t gotten to the retest stage, you don’t know how severe it is, either.”

“Right.”

Allan sighs. It’s a long, sad sound. “Oh, God, I’m so sorry. Are Tim and Abby okay?”

“We’re all okay. He’s whole, and alive, and…” And that’s where Allan puts Jon Palmer into the picture and feels like he’s got his foot shoved ankle deep into his mouth. “we’re all okay. This is just… challenging.”

Allan nods. “That’s a good way to look at it.”

Jimmy shakes his head. “No. That’s what it is. This isn’t a look-on-the-bright-side attitude, this is… fact. It’ll be challenging, but it’s not cripp—“ Crippling trails off mid word. Because that’s exactly what this is. Except, like Tim was saying to Rachel, it’s not. But it is.

And Jimmy, like Tim, isn’t sure what exactly to do with that.

Allan smiles gently at Jimmy, nods, and then says, “So which picture are you putting up? Or all of them?”

When Breena gets into work, her parents are waiting for her. Allan may not be on the baby text, but Jeannie certainly is.

“I want pictures, and I want them fast!” she says, in full-on almost-grandma mode. (She also can’t wait to get Sean over for Sunday supper. New baby cuddles, new baby scent, being able to hand the new baby off to someone else when he gets fussy. Yes, she’s very much looking forward to that.)

Breena hands her phone over, and there are shots of Sean on his own, and with Tim, and with Abby, and with Tim and Abby, and… actually every possible permutation of Sean with the family is on her phone, but the one that Jeannie and Ed stop to coo over is one they took this morning, with Molly in
Breena’s lap, Sean in her arms, Breena helping to keep her steady, as Anna sits next to them looking on.

“Oh, my God! That’s ADORABLE! I want a copy of this!”

“You and everyone else. Jethro doesn’t know it yet, but the frame for that is one of his next projects.” Because he does make frames for the especially good shots, and she knows he’ll consider this one.

“He looks like Tim,” Ed says.

“Penny says that’s true. That this is exactly what Tim looked like as a baby.”

“How’d Kelly do?” Jeannie asks.

Breena sighs. “There’s a reason she’s not in that shot. She got into the room, and more or less grabbed onto Abby and wouldn’t let go. We had to pull her out, wailing away.”

Jeannie and Ed wince at that. “Amy did that when Christine was born,” Ed says.

Jeannie nods. “It’s normal. Is Tim making sure to get extra time with her?”

“Yeah, he is.”

“Now, she’s staying with you, right?”

“More we’re staying with her. Easier for everyone if she’s in her normal space. Jethro’s on it, too.”

Jeannie can imagine that. “He’s over the moon with his new little grandson, isn’t he?”

“Oh yeah,” Breena smiles at that.

“He should be, there’s…” Ed lets that trail off.

Breena and Jeannie understand. Ed had been especially looking forward to grandson time. He’s been sure that all the girls were boys, and unfortunately he was only right once.

Breena smiles at him. “We know.” She sighs, that note of Ed’s is bringing things down, so this feels like the right time to bring up the rest of it. “We did get some disappointing news. Sean’s probably deaf.”

There are times Breena’s parents surprise her in a good way. This is one of them. Jeannie just shrugs it off. “We’ll talk loud and clear. Make sure he’s looking us in the face,” Jeannie says. Breena’s surprised, so Jeannie explains, “Two out of five of our customers are old and can’t hear. Not like I’m not used to doing it. Not like we didn’t have to do that for your grandparents, and my grandparents.”

Ed shakes his head at Jeannie. “Your grandfather…” He turns to Breena, who only met her great-grandfather once, when she was seven months old. “He refused to get a hearing aid, or get his ears checked, and then spent every visit complaining about everyone mumbling.” Ed laughs. “He stood up and told the minister to speak up during our wedding, and to quit that damn mumbling. Your grandmom just about died when he did that.”

Jeannie smiles and laughs. It’s been enough years that she can find that funny, now. It wasn’t during the wedding. “She yanked him down so fast… face scarlet, apologizing to the minister. Ah… Poppop was trip, all right. And maybe that was a good thing, because Mom did get tested and got her hearing aids, and, you remember, talk slow and clear and make sure you’re looking Grandma in
the face.”

Breena nods; she does remember that. They’re quiet for a moment, and Ed pulls the first of their clients out of her drawer. Breena heads over and helps to get her moved onto the table.

Once she’s settled, Ed comes up with, “Will he be able to drive? When he’s older?”

“Deaf, Dad, not blind.”

“I know! Christine got that speeding ticket last month, and they dinged her for wearing headphones, too. That’s not about being unable to see the road, that’s about being unable to hear it.”

That’s something Breena’s never thought about, so she grabs her phone and checks. “Yes, but they’ve got a special license designation so that if you get pulled over the cop knows you can’t hear and doesn’t shoot you for not immediately responding to him.”

Jeannie looks through the pictures again. “God, what a sweetie!”

Tim’s off with Rachel. Breena’s gone back to work. Which means Jethro’s got some alone time with his girl, and her little boy.

Abby’s not talking a whole lot, but this doesn’t feel like the silent she fell into last time. This feels more like just being very tired and on a lot of pain medication.

He’s sitting next to her on the edge of the bed, arm around her, as Sean naps. He nods over to their boy. “You should be doing that, too.”

Abby nods, tired. “Probably. Just… Thinking about him, and everything that’s coming. Gonna be a lot of work, and today… Today it really feels like it.”

Gibbs kisses her forehead. “Yep.” He squeezes her a little tighter. “You won’t do it alone. Just like with a case, split the work up, and too much becomes doable.”

Abby nods and begins to scoot back a bit to lying down. Gibbs stands up and moves around the bed, fast. Then he helps her get lying down.

Once she’s asleep, Gibbs gets back to reading. From what he can tell, they’ll do more testing, and unless Sean’s got absolutely no hearing, they’ll try working with hearing aids and see if they help. If they do, then that’s great. Depending on how much they help, they might be looking at a lot of extra work, or not all that much more. For all they know, he might be mildly hearing impaired, and turning the volume up on the world may take care of it.

If hearing aids don’t do it, then they’ll do more testing, and see if he’s a candidate for cochlear implants. If he is, they’ve got some decisions to make. If they go for them, then there’ll be surgery, healing up, turning them on, and training to learn to use them. Though Gibbs wonders how much training a little guy who’s starting from scratch will need. Not like he’s re-learning how to hear. For Sean, if he ends up with cochlear implants, whatever it is they do for “sound” is all sound ever will be for him. But, if they go that route, there’ll be training for that, and speech therapy, and lip reading, and more likely than not, signing, and… And a lot of stuff.
If he’s not a candidate for cochlear implants… Then the path is pretty well fixed. Signing, Lip reading. Speech therapy. What the best school for Deaf kids is. Whether that’s a better option than their local schools with an interpreter or not. And if it’s enough better to make moving there (Gibbs is fairly sure that whatever THE BEST school for Deaf kids is, it’s unlikely to be within thirty miles of them) worth it.

Finite number of options. All with ups and downs. And none of them actionable right now. He puts his phone down and goes to pick up Sean. He’s very slow and gentle about it, and Sean sleeps through it. So far, he seems to be a pretty easy-tempered little guy. He’s a good eater. He settles into sleep pretty readily. But, like Abby, he’s also a bit on the dopey side. After all, most of his meals are laced with pain killers, so he might be a bit more mellow than usual.

Gibbs heads back to the sofa, Sean on his chest, and picks the phone back up. He’s reading about different types of deafness, and… He stops. He kisses the top of Sean’s head.

When it comes down to it, it doesn’t matter. Not now. Possibly not ever. It is. How and why are, especially at Gibbs’ level of caregiver, a moot point.

He watches Sean sleep on him for a moment, and then looks at his phone again. There’s something he wants to do, and… he’s never done this before, but he’s seen the kids do it, so it can’t be that hard, and… He assumes his phone has to be able to do it. He can’t imagine Tim would have gotten him a phone that doesn’t do it.

So, he messes around with it for a moment, finds the camera ap (he’s used that before) and then mucks around with it some more, looking for the thing that flips the focus around.

Once he’s looking at himself in the mirror, he takes his first ever selfie, with Sean on his chest, snoozing away, and sends it to Fornell.

*Look at you smiling like a son of a bitch!* Comes back from Fornell a minute later.

Gibbs smirks at the phone.

*I didn’t know you knew how to use the camera on the phone.*

This time Gibbs gives the phone a quiet glare.

*Texting works better when you don’t just look at the screen. You’ve got to put actual words in.*

Gibbs laughs. *No need. You know how I’m responding.*

*Don’t I ever? How old is he?*

*30 hours… Maybe a little older.*

*All fingers and toes accounted for?*

Gibbs sighs. *Yeah. Hearing may be AWOL, but all of his bits are there.*

This time there’s nothing from Fornell, but Gibbs can imagine his reaction. It’s likely colorful, and better off not repeated in polite company.

*May be?* Eventually shows up on his phone.

*More testing next week.*
But it’s not certain, yet?

It’s certain enough. He’s already failed two tests. You know the happy bullshit the Director gives you to go with a shit case?

Gibbs can feel Fornell sigh. They both know that. Here’s hoping that, for once, the Director’s right.

Gibbs doesn’t mind that, but… They call them forlorn hopes for a reason. Sure.

Another quiet moment. Sean snuffles and chirps a bit, but he’s just shifting around some, after a second, he’s back sleeping.

So, what happens if he’s deaf? Fornell asks.

And, for the next forty minutes, the two of them go over it, like investigators, looking at a collection of options, trying to figure out what the best might be.

It doesn’t help, not really, they don’t have enough information for that, but Gibbs feels more settled after getting to lay it all out and have Fornell look it over, too.

Gibbs wraps it up with. He’s waking up. Gotta get him cleaned up and ready to eat.

He feels Fornell laugh at that. Better you than me.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Enjoy it while you can. Bet you’ve got diaper duty again in the next ten years.

Bite your tongue! Thirty. No grandkids before she’s thirty! Gibbs laughs at that as he tosses the phone aside, gets his hands on Sean, and stands up, off to get him cleaned up and ready for lunch.

Tim’s back, with lunch, not too long after Sean wakes up. He sneaks in quietly, waving ‘Hi’ to the awake Dad and fussy baby on the other side of the curtain, and then over to his space.

“You’re up!”

Abby looks up from Sean and nods. She looks at the bag. “Tell me there’s something good in there!”

He grins at her, kissing her, and then giving Gibbs a hug, while putting the bag down. “Several somethings good.”

He gets his jacket off, tossed onto the sofa bed, and begins to unpack. “Wasn’t sure what you’d want, but I’ve got BLTs, and some chips, and chocolate cupcakes, and there’s a grilled chicken salad if you want something lighter, and some sushi rolls, too, and…” He holds up a plastic container like it’s a trophy. “I’ve got sweet potato fries in here. And there are some burgers in here, too.”

Abby’s grinning at him. “You went to eight places didn’t you?”

“Just about.” Gibbs is already sorting through, grabbing a plastic plate, and making up a selection for himself. “So, what’s on for you?”

“A little of everything and an extra chocolate cupcake!”

As they settle in to eat, Tim’s pretty relieved to see that Abby’s in an okay mood. Maybe she’s not entirely as bright as she usually is, but this isn’t that scary, detached sort mood she was in after Kelly
was born.

“You’re doing okay?” he asks her to make sure.

She nods. “Right now. Give it five minutes and the hormones’ll shift, and I’ll be crying, but right
now, I’m good.”

“Okay. We’ll try to keep you at good.” He takes a little swipe of the chocolate frosting on the
cupcake and holds it out to her. She takes a lick and her eyes go wide.

“You…”

He nods. “Yep. The same kind I swiped from you all those years ago.”

She starts to laugh a little, but it hurts, so she stops, and just smiles.

Sean finishes eating on that side, so Tim takes him, easily, he knows where his hands go, and where
Sean goes, and gets the spit up rag over his shoulder before settling Sean in for his pat and burp
session, while Abby gets to use both of her hands to eat some of the burger.

They talk about how Kelly got settled in. (Pretty well, once Heather got there, but she wants her
normal back, and that means Mommy at home, with her.) Their plans for the evening. (Jimmy’ll
come here, Tim and Breena’ll go to their house, and once the girls are asleep, Tim’ll head back to the
hospital.) What Gibbs plans to be doing. (Going to Tim’s house so Breena isn’t wrestling three
babies on her own in the morning.) How the meeting with Rachel went. (Pretty well, in Tim’s
opinion.) Work? What’s that? (Jimmy and Tony have sent updates, and they both have a million
congratulations on their phones.)

And, eventually, Sean burps like a full grown man living on a diet of beer and beans, and is given
back to Abby to nurse on side two.

And, eventually, he goes back to sleep, and Abby does, too. Tim and Gibbs spend some time with
each other, and their new boy.

Eventually, Jimmy shows up, so Tim and Gibbs head home, where Kelly is extra-clingy, and Molly
is extra excited, and…

It’s just life. One that, at the moment, with all ups and downs, and all the rest of it, Tim finds very
sweet.

He gets back to the hospital, to see his husband on the bed with his wife, both of them holding their
baby boy, as he’s getting yet another meal. Jimmy’s doing the same half-on, half-off perch on the
side of the bed to make sure that Abby’s got plenty of room and is comfortable. But he’s also got one
arm around her, and is very gently stroking the top of Sean’s head. Abby’s resting her head on his
shoulder, eyes closed, probably drifting, as Sean suckles away. Tim snaps a shot of it and sends it to
Breena, before going to join in on the other side.

She sends all three of them kisses, and pictures of sleeping girls.

And that, and moments like it, are the rest of their time in the hospital. It’s new, because it’s a new
baby, and new circumstances, but it’s old because they’ve done versions of this before. They know
what they’re doing, and with extra hands to help, it’s easier than it was the first time.

And on Wednesday morning, Tim packs up Abby and Sean, and brings them home.
More Adventures In Parenting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Their pediatrician is absolutely right. At four days old, Sean is functionally identical to every other newborn.

He sleeps, eats, cries, poops, and behaves just like any other little guy who has just gotten home, is starting to get the lay of the land, and wants everything the second he wants it with absolutely no wait time involved.

Like with Anna, adding a new baby to the mix makes for sibling issues. Unless she’s asleep or playing with Heather, Sean getting any attention from Abby causes Kelly to immediately start fussing and glom onto her.

That sets Molly off, who thinks Kelly’s being mean to Sean, who is her baby, and good God, do not suggest to Molly that Sean is not hers. Jimmy’s still not sure how he fell into that trap, but crying newborn, and two screaming toddlers, with crying nursing Mama (because, like all newly post-partum moms Abby’s got the emotional control of a drunk toddler) is a special layer of hell reserved for people silly enough to attempt four children in one home.

So, for the time being, there’s a lot of crying coming from the baby end of things, which isn’t exactly making for relaxed and even-tempered adults.

Fortunately, as Tim noted, the adults can, and do, swap out, so at any given time at least one of them is not in the middle of the storm, which means, at any given time, at least one of them has also recently gotten a break, and at least one of them will, in the near future, get a break.

That makes life a lot easier. Even if, when you’ve got sniffles all over the place, and are wiping snot and tears off of one child while another tries to bite a third, it doesn’t feel all that easy.

There are moments of new baby that are just heart wrenchingly cute. When they’re all quiet, (which does, occasionally, happen) two little curly haired girls and two little blonde kiddos, all on the sofa, or sharing playtime (in Sean’s case, laying on his tummy-staring-at-the-carpet time) has made for some exceptionally sweet pictures.

And some of them have been hysterically funny. On Friday, they pack everyone up, and head off to the house for Shabbos and the weekend with the family.

Sean does his usual routine in the car. (If, at not quite a week old, he can be said to have a usual routine.) This routine is also aided by his Mama and Daddy planning the trip for right after meal time for him. So they get him strapped in, and off to sleep he goes.

They get to the house. And Sean sleeps through being carted by his Daddy into the house, but, after a while, he notices he’s not moving, and he’s in a place that smells different, so one little eye pops open, and it’s time to reset the clock and start over again.
Which means, diaper time.

Which is where hysterical comes in.

At a month shy of three years old, Molly Palmer has noticed something. Namely, she is now in possession of a baby boy cousin/little brother. (The adults haven’t quite figured out what the kids should be calling each other, and use both terms interchangeably. This will likely lead to some confusion in the future, but right now, they’re too preoccupied to care.)

And while she’s aware of the fact that there are people called boys, and people called girls, as of this point in time she’s been awfully fuzzy on what the difference is. (Though she does know if she’s watching cartoons, girls have long eyelashes and boys don’t.)

But, in that her baby needs to have his diaper changed on a fairly regular basis, and in that it’s her duty to oversee and make sure Aunt Abby or Uncle Tim is doing it right, she’s noticed that Sean’s not shaped like her, or Kelly, or Anna for that matter. He’s different.

Aunt Abby patiently explains that those differences are a penis and testicles, and that’s what makes boys boys.

Molly knows her daddy has them. She’s seen that. And she knows Uncle Tim has them, too, for exactly the same reason. And when she asked why Sean’s didn’t quite look like Daddy’s or Uncle Tim’s, Aunt Abby explained about circumcision, and that was overkill, because the difference that Molly had spotted was that Daddy and Uncle Tim are a hell of a lot bigger than Sean.

Eventually, Abby figures out what it is Molly’s asking about, and she gets an answer out that makes sense to Molly. By that point, Sean’s all dried off and re-diapered, which means nursing comes next, which is pretty boring, and Kelly will be right next to Abby the whole time, and tends to get testy if Molly gets too close. So, Molly decides to do something with this new information.

Molly knows that Daddy, Uncle Tim, and Sean are boys. She also realizes she’s not sure about everyone else in this group, who has what, so to speak, so it seems like some investigation might be in order here.

So, Molly marches over to the nearest grown up, (Uncle Jethro, who’s standing on the edge of the kitchen area, where he can see Abby and Sean easily, and the rest of the crew, who are working on dinner, explaining that Abbi will be late) and brightly asks, “Do you have a penis?”

She says it loud enough that everything in the house, except Sean nursing, goes absolutely silent. (Okay, not really, but to the adults in the group it certainly feels that way.)

The other adults are doing the best they can at not laughing. (Not particularly well. Tony looks like his brain is about to explode at trying to keep it in.) They’re all, with the exception of Ducky, parents, and they all get the idea that kids aren’t born knowing what’s a boy or girl. Still Leroy Jethro Gibbs being flat out asked if he has a penis is making them want to giggle. (It’s possible that Jimmy may have muttered something to Tim about it being the size of a baseball bat, resulting in a glare from Jethro, an outright gasp of a laugh from Tony, wide smirks from Tim and Jimmy, and a back of the hand ‘you behave’ swat from Penny, who is also trying, somewhat more successfully, not to laugh.)

Gibbs scoops Molly up, so she’s in his arms and face to face with the grown-ups, and says, as seriously as he can, “Yes, I do.”

Molly nods at that, taking it in. Then another thought hit her. “Is it a big one, like Daddy’s, or a little
one, like Sean’s?”

By this point, the adults are vibrating with unvoiced laughter so hard they’re in danger of shaking the paintings off the walls, and Gibbs is looking down, eyes closed, biting his lip hard, shoulders shaking. But finally he pulls it together, looks up at Molly, and says, “A long time ago, I was a baby, like Sean, and when I was a baby, all of me was little.”

“Even your penis?”

“Even my penis.” He nods seriously at Molly, and with his free hand, without turning to look, gently whacks Tony for what he’s thinking. “And then I was a little kid, like you, then a big kid, and a teenager, and now I’m a grown up, and I’m big all over, just like your daddy.”

Molly seems to think that’s a good answer. “Can I see?”

Gibbs stops looking at Molly and starts looking at Jimmy, alarm in his gaze, not sure what the right answer is to that one. Jimmy just shrugs. Doesn’t bother him if Molly sees Gibbs naked. He’s supremely unconcerned about his kids seeing members of the family naked.

Gibbs doesn’t think Jimmy’s being particularly helpful with that, so he kicks it down the road. “Not right now. Next time we go swimming, you can help me get changed.” He figures that by the time it’s warm enough to swim, she’ll have forgotten, or he’ll have had the chance to have a real conversation with Jimmy and Breena about this sort of thing.

“Okay. Ducky—“

“Yes, I have a penis. So does Uncle Tim and Uncle Tony.”

“Really?” She knows about Uncle Tim, but starts to stare at Tony, who is grinning madly and nodding.

“Yes, my dear. We’re all boys, so we all have penises.”

Molly looks at Penny. “You don’t have one?”

She shakes her head, smiling. “No. I don’t need one. I’m a girl. I’m built just like you and your mommy, Abbi, Aunt Abby, and Aunt Ziva.”

That gets another minute of concentrated thought. Just as the grown-ups were getting ready to move onto a new topic, Molly adds, “Sean’s doesn’t have any hair.”

“No,” Jimmy says. “He’s a baby. Babies only have hair on their heads, and sometimes not even there.”

“But yours does.”

“Yes, that’s part of being a grown up. Grown-ups grow hair all over.”

“Sometimes Uncle Tim’s doesn’t.”

Tim’s blushing, waiting for the Earth to swallow him whole. (Gibbs looks perversely happy to see he’s not the only one getting to deal with uncomfortable questions.) And though he’s embarrassed as hell, Tim’s also pretty amazed at how well Molly’s remembering things, because it’s been a while since he’s been hair-free.

Jimmy laughs a little, nudges Tim, and then says. “Some grown-ups grow a whole lot of hair, like
Uncle Tony and Uncle Jethro, and some don’t grow as much, like Uncle Tim. And sometimes, we cut the hair we grow off.” He puts Molly’s hand on his chin. “Feel the stubble? See the little black specks?” She nods. “Little tiny hairs. They grow on our faces, and all over, and sometimes we cut them off. You’ve seen Uncle Tim and I shave.”

She nods. She has.

“That’s us cutting them off.” It hadn’t ever occurred to Jimmy that Molly and the rest of the girls had seen them both shave, but didn’t understand what they were doing.

“Why?”

“It feels nice,” Breena adds. “All soft and smooth. No prickly kisses.”

“You don’t shave,” she says to her mama, touching her face.

“I do, but not my face. I shave my legs and under arms. Girls don’t, usually, grow hair on their faces or chests.”

Everyone waits for a moment, to see if Molly has any more questions, but she seems pretty satisfied by that.

Much later that night, when Abbi gets home, and Tony explains the situation to her, she just about hurts herself she’s laughing so hard.

Friday night at the house makes for another change, and another bit of streamlining this new baby wrangling thing. When she got home, Abby did drop all of the late night/early morning feeds. She figured that, since she’s already on serious pain killers for the c-section, she might as well make them do double duty and handle not nursing at night.

And, yes, that’s resulted in some sore breasts, but by the time they were getting ready for bed on Friday, she can stand going from her last feed of the night, 10:00, until her first feed of the morning, 6:00, without feeling like she’s going to die. (Though she does have to get up around 2:00 to pump and let off some pressure.)

The upside of this is she’s getting sixish hours of sleep a night. Which means she’s doing… okay. Her body is still swamped with too many hormones, and she’s still sweating off the extra water, and her incision itches (but isn’t sore or inflamed), and she’s bleeding, but…

It’s better this time.

At Tim and Abby’s, whoever’s on baby duty sleeps on the edge of the bed closest to the door, and hops in and out as needed to deal with Sean. Tonight, as Tim and Jimmy are putting the sheets on their bed, it hits him that they’ve got two bedrooms, and the three of them not on baby fetching would probably sleep better if they weren’t getting constantly jostled by one of them getting into and out of bed every two hours.

So, as he tosses Jimmy a pillow, in its case, he turns back to the closet, and goes hunting for the sheets for the bed in his room. (They’re sleeping in Jimmy and Breena’s room for the time being. It’s much easier to get a recently c-sectioned tummy into and out of a bed that’s butt high, than one that’s low to the floor.)
“What are you thinking?” Jimmy asks as he’s tucking the pillow against the headboard and Tim’s riffling through the closet.

“We’ve got two beds. Sean and I can camp out in ours, and you three can sleep all the way through without any wake ups.”

Jimmy grins at that. Knowing that he’s on or off makes it easier to rest, but he still wakes up a bit when whoever’s on gets in and out. (Probably because unless it’s his night, he’s usually in the middle of the bed.) So, the idea of a full night of just sleep (or maybe not just sleep, he’ll have to see if Abby’s interested in watching/petting/being part of whatever he and Breena might get up to. He wonders if Tim’ll be game, too, or if he’s just planning on trying to nap as long as he’s in the bed with Sean… It’s the last night of baby making week, and Jimmy’s feeling hopeful… Anyway, that’s an after the kids are down, tooth-brushing conversation.) sounds great to him.

Tim finds the sheets, and he and Jimmy head into their bedroom to get their bed made, too.

“Though you guys tried co-sleeping with Kelly and it didn’t work.”

Tim shrugs. “Woke up with every single chirp, gurgle, burp, shift, loud breath… But… first night home, brand new Dad, and there was no end in sight. This time… I can’t sleep, just got to hold up until tomorrow. Or I can put him in his crib.”

Jimmy nods. “You do that, don’t put him in your bed until after Kelly’s down, and back to his crib before she’s up, otherwise you’re co-sleeping with both of them.”

Tim tucks the fitted sheet around the corner of his mattress. “Good point.”

Jimmy grabs the other corner and gets to work.

“She’s less freaked out about sharing me than Abby.”

Jimmy nods.

“I don’t remember Molly doing that.”

Jimmy laughs. “You weren’t living with us then. She wasn’t as clingy as Kelly’s being, but she was also a bit older, and… She’s,” his voice drops a few decibels, “not Abby’s daughter.” Then he remembers a few of Tim’s more territorial moments, and says, normal voice, “Or yours.”

Tim says, voice dry, “So, like the green eyes, you’re saying she’s coming by this naturally?”

“Only if that story about you getting upset at Dornaget staying over at Abby’s is true.”

Tim holds up his hands. “I didn’t know he was gay then.”

“Uh huh.”

Tim does join in for the fairly low-key, relaxed, slow, gentle shag that night. Abby keeps them company, but isn’t interested in being involved on any level beyond some hand holding and cuddling. Among other things, she doesn’t even want to be naked for more than a few minutes at a stretch, so any sort of real playing is completely off the list.

Fortunately, with this group, there’s always someone who’s interested in providing some hand
holding, cuddles, and warm, but not sexual, kisses.

As they’re lying about in the after sex glow, Jimmy’s fingers very lightly skirt over the crest of Abby’s hip. “We should make it a celebration, a ‘Welcome Back To Your Body Day Party.’ You tell us when you’re ready, give us a day or two of notice ahead of time,” he kisses Breena, too, letting her know this deal is for both of them, “And we’ll get it set to rock your world, or at least as much as said world wants to be rocked.”

Abby laughs a little at that, her world is supremely uninterested in any form of rocking at all right now, but she appreciates the idea. “If I ever get out of new mommy mode, I’ll let you know.”

Breena turns toward her (though Jimmy’s between them, so she’s got to lift up onto her elbows to have an unimpeded view of Abby). “You will.”

Abby sighs. She knows it’ll happen, but right now, sex is like some exotic meal she’s read about. It certainly looks interesting, but it’s not anything that’s involved in her real life. “Eventually.”

They hear a tiny wail, and for a second nothing happens. Breena laughs, and then pokes Tim, who jerks a bit (he’d been so content and sleepy, he’d all but passed out), rubs his eyes, and slowly gets up.

“I’ll report back in the morning with how this works.”

They nod, and he kisses each of them before heading off to grab his son.

Sean’s laying on his back in his crib, swaddled up tight, and fussing his little head off.

“You can’t possibly be that hungry,” Tim says as he picks him up. “We just did this two hours ago.”

Sean is unmollified.

“Yeah, I know. We’re going to try something a little different tonight.”

More crying as Tim lays him on his changing table and begins to get him unbundled.

“Once I’ve got you cleaned up, we’re going to take your bottles and stuff, and head over to my room. You’ll have dinner number three, we’ll get some quality time together, and then we’ll see if both of us can sleep in the same bed.”

More crying as Tim gets the onesie unsnapped and unzipped. “Yeah, I know it’s chilly. At least the wipes are nice and warm.” (Yes, he did go get a diaper wipe heater for Kelly after his own experience with the cold ones. She and Sean appear to approve.) And though he’s still fussing, Sean fusses a little less, and a little quieter, so it seems like warm and wet is better than cold and wet.

“Okay, there you go, all cleaned up and nice and snug in your blankets.” He picks Sean back up. “Okay. My room now. Then I’m going to lay you on the bed, and come back to get the other stuff. Food in like… maybe two minutes.”

Sean’s quiet as he’s being carried out of his room. Tim doesn’t know if he’s got ‘clean diaper’ associated with ‘food soon,’ and has thus decided that good things are about to commence soon, or if he’s just had his cry and is done.

He does expect what happens when he puts Sean down on the bed, and then leaves to get his bottle,

And soon he does have a bottle all set with milk (formula later tonight), and Sean curled into the crook of his arm, slorping way with abandon.

“You really like that, huh?”

Slorp, slorp, slorp.

“Good. Keep that up. They tell us that when you get up to sevenish pounds, you should start to go three hours between feeds, so gulp that on down.”

Slorp… slorp… Sean’s eyes start to drift shut, as the nursing slows down.

“Oh, no you don’t. You get me out of bed, and you better eat. None of this have a little snack and cuddle and back to sleep you go. Uh uh. I was perfectly happy back there, so…”

Sean cracks an eye and sucks a little faster.

“Good.” Tim gently pets Sean’s face. “You hearing any of this, or just feeling it?”

Sean’s face is pressed to Tim’s chest, and because he did just get out of bed, he’s undressed. Blankets wrapped around him, but Sean’s got unimpeded skin to skin, at least, on his face.

“Probably doesn’t matter. Not like I’m going to stop talking to you. Might have to do it with my fingers, but we’ll talk.” He kisses his son’s head. “People pay me money to talk to them with my fingers. Sort of… Wrote some books. Probably’ll write more of them. That’s talking with your fingers, too. I wonder if you’ll like that. If you’ll tell stories like your Ducky and I. I wonder what sorts of stories you’ll tell…”

Sean’s looking up at him as he’s eating away.

“I like mysteries and dragons. Stories where the bad guys die and the good guys win and everything works out in the end. Maybe they aren’t realistic, but… I live realistic, it’s nice to build a world where things end up ‘right.’”

He strokes Sean’s cheek again. “We’ll talk about that when you’re older. About right, and what that is. And, I hope, you’ll know that when I’m not with you, and when Abby and Jimmy are off, too, that that’s what we’re doing, or trying to do. And Breena, she does it, too. Different sort of right, but not any less important.”

Tim notices that Sean’s gotten through the first half of the bottle. “Good boy. Okay, let’s see if we can do this without me having to get out of bed.” He drapes the burp rag over his shoulder, and gets Sean out of nursing position and into burping position. Then he starts patting away. Gentle thuds against Sean’s back. It takes a minute before he notices that he’s tapping out a Coltrane beat.

“I wonder if this’ll be music for you.” Tap, tap, tap. “Vibrations and thuds and percussion. I wonder how melody will work, or guitar instead of flute or…” Sean belches.

“Good boy! Okay,” he shifts Sean back down, and dabs off the spit up. “Let’s get to side two.”

Tim grabs the bottle again, and gets it back into Sean’s mouth. “I guess this isn’t side two when I do it. Second half?”

Slorp, slorp, slorp…
“Yeah. Second half.” Sean’s in exactly the same position he was for the first half, so there’s no ‘side’ issue. Tim’s humming quietly, the same melody he was tapping earlier. “So, when we wrap this up, and you’re all done, I’m going to just put you down here, next to me, and with any luck we both get to sleep. That sound good to you?”

Sean appears to be indifferent to this concept.

“You don’t get to sleep on me, though. We do that, and you’ll be begging to sleep on us all the time, and we’re not doing that. So, you get your own little chunk of bed, and I get my big chunk of bed, and hopefully this works out.”

Sean wriggles a little, and sucks harder.

“Uncle Jimmy pointed out that depending on how this works, you might end up with your sisters wanting to join in on this, and… Not sure how that’ll work. And… you have a massive diaper blow out, like your sister did, and I’m going to be a lot less enthusiastic about this, too. This bed might be mostly a sleeping place now, but that won’t always be true, so… keep it tidy, okay?”

He’s not sure, but he almost thinks Sean’s taking that as a challenge, and now he’s thinking mentioning it was a bad idea. Which then makes Tim think he’s way too damn tired if he’s reading that into his… he finds a clock, it’s past midnight now, six-day-old son’s expression.

Eventually, Sean wraps up his bottle, and again, they do the burp thing, though second time isn’t quite so easy, so Tim does have to get up and walk him around some, but, after a few minutes, Sean lets fly with a huge belch, stops fussing, and it’s back to sleep time.

Tim plops him down, and Sean appears to be okay with the idea of sleeping next to the big guy. His eyes slide shut, and the sucking on his pacifier slows down after a minute.

Tim’s tired. It’s late, and he’d been in an excellent go-to-sleep space before Sean got him up, so he doesn’t have a difficult time settling down, either.

And, yes, in the morning he’s a zombie. Waking up to feed every two hours when it takes forty-minutes to eat is brutal, but in the morning, he can hand Sean off to the three adults who got a full night of sleep, and go crash himself.

Chapter End Notes

So, the Gibbs and Molly story is directly based on my oldest son asking my Dad, during Thanksgiving Dinner, if he had a penis.
Testing

Buzzing sound. Tim’s hand creeps from under the blanket to go find what’s making that annoying buzzing. His phone. He turns a bit, and pulls it close to see what it wants to tell him.

Leon’s number. AKA, the only person he’ll take a call from, on a Saturday, when he’s this tired, and 97% of his family is in the building with him.

Thus, he’s sitting up, cursing Leon for calling him this early... or not... the phone says it’s a bit after 1:00, on an aforementioned Saturday.

“What’s on fire?”

“McGee?” Leon was apparently not expecting quite this level of crankiness on the other end of the line.

“Yeah. What’s up?”

“Nothing’s on fire. Just needed to know what you’re doing with next week. It’s the CyberTech in Federal Law Enforcement Commission, and if there’s one of them I want you at…”

Tim rubs his eyes, and pulls himself more awake. “Uh… Yeah. That…”

“You can skip Monday night, that’s just the meet and greet, but…”

“Okay. Yeah.” Tim hasn’t said anything to the wider world about Sean possibly being deaf. “Uh… Monday…” And they do have the first of his doctor’s appointments on Monday. “Good. I…”

Apparently he’s not sounding cranky anymore, unplugged and half-brained, but not cranky. “Are you okay?” Leon sounds genuinely concerned.

“I was on night feeds last night.”

“Ah.” Tim can feel Leon smiling. He remembers those days. “And how is your little boy?”

“Hungry. Growing in leaps and bounds. And… I’ll be there as much as I can, but… They think he’s deaf, and we’ve probably got a lot of doctors’ appointments next week.”

He can hear Leon’s caught flat-footed. Technically, he’s on shaky ground by suggesting that Tim cut his paternity leave short. He’s on double thin ice by doing it if he’s got serious Family and Medical Leave Act stuff as well.

“Oh.”

“Yeah. First one is Monday morning, and… I don’t know when the rest will be. If we’re lucky, they’ll retest on Monday and tell us everything is fine, but… I don’t think we’re that lucky.”

“I’m sorry, Tim.”

Tim shakes that off. “Manner’s going to that one for Abbi. If I’ve got to stick a NCIS badge on him, too, we can do that. I’ll get there as much as I can, but… Hearing tests and talking to specialists wins out over hobnobbing.”

“Yeah… Okay. I understand.”
Tim thinks through his roster here in DC. “Might send Howard out, too. She cleans up nice and speaks bureaucrat.”

“Isn’t she twenty-three?”

“Not quite that young. I’d send Ngyn, but she’d collapse into an introvert coma or resign.”

Leon sighs. He really wants his top guy on this. If there’s any level where they need representation, this is it, and Tim’s the one who should be doing it. Which means he does not want the bureaucrat who was already doing everything by the book, or the… she really can’t be more than twenty-six… baby tech geek.

He needs the guy who’s got the bigger ideas, and who can work this room, see what’s coming up, and shape it.

Leon sighs. “What if I give Dr. Palmer carte blanche to show up or not as he sees fit next week?”

For a second, Tim doesn’t understand why that might help the issue. Then he does. “You mean, can Jimmy take my place at those appointments?”

“Yeah. If you’ve got one during Commission hours…”

“Uh… Let me talk to Abby and… Maybe. I’m sure he’d be okay with doing it, but… You know he’s the Medical Examiner, right? Dead bodies… That’s kind of important, and his job.”

“I’m well aware of what Dr. Palmer, and what Dr. Allan do. I’m well aware of what you do, too. Talk to your family, and get back to me.”

That stops Tim cold. Something big is up. “Why do you want me at this one so bad?”

“Because, from what I’m hearing, there’s a good chance they’ll try to spin all of you guys off to your own department, and that… It’s all intertwined these days. We can’t do our job without in-house computer guys.”

Tim remembers that he had his own thoughts along those lines. “Okay. I’ve got some ideas along those lines, as well… I’ll get them written up as soon as I can, and… Let me talk. I have no idea how much time there’ll be between Monday morning tests and the next round. This might be a moot point. 8:30 on Monday is our appointment, so, when I know, I’ll call in.”

“Thank you.”

““The first tests,” Dr. Ilhn says as she’s checking Sean’s vital stats, “were screening tests. They identify if there’s a possible hearing issue. Today, we’re going to do the first round of diagnostic tests.”

“Which are?” Abby asks.

“Basically the ABR, but we’ll do a longer one, at a bunch of different hearing ranges. It doesn’t hurt. He won’t even know we’re doing it, because he’ll sleep through it.”

“That’s why you told us to block out three hours?” Gibbs asks. Of course he’s along for this. First,
because there was no way he wouldn’t be, and also because he figures it’s a good plan for someone who’s resting every single night to be on top of note taking.

Illn nods. “Exactly.” She picks Sean up, snuggles him a bit, and hands him back to Abby. “So, you get to hang out here until he dozes off, and then we bring in the equipment, hook him up, and run the test. By the time we’re done, we’ll know what, if any, hearing loss he has.”

“How about everything else?” Tim asks.

“He looks fine. Growing like a weed in sunshine. He’s at seven pounds one ounce, which is great. I’m not seeing any signs of jaundice.” She strokes under Sean’s chin. “You’re doing exactly what you’re supposed to be doing.”

“He’s eating every two hours;” Abby says.

“Is he really hungry or just being social?” Illn asks.

“Bit of both,” Tim answers. Little guy seemed to be somewhere between hungry and lonely when he was getting Tim up, Breena and Jimmy don’t disagree with that read, either.

“He’s big enough you can start trying to spread the feeds out.” She sees the looks on Tim and Abby’s faces. “I know. Lots of crying. But, if he’s calling for food as soon as he’s just a bit hungry, then he won’t eat enough to get him going longer. Start slow, 2:10, 2:15, and stretch them out. A few days, and he should be getting closer to three hours at a time.”

“So… He’s getting enough to eat?” Abby asks. She’s been nervous, with him asking to eat every two hours, that he might not be getting enough.

“Most babies lose a pound in their first week. He’s gained more than one. The problem isn’t on the getting enough to eat side of things.” She strokes Sean’s head again, and nods at everyone. “Okay, let us know when he’s settled down, and we’ll get ready for the rest of this.”

---

Auditory Brainstem Response. That’s the test. They did this, and another one, though Tim doesn’t remember what it was called, the day Sean was born.

And now they’re doing it again.

It’s... odd to watch. Part of him wants to sweep Sean up and grab him away from this person who’s sticking little electrodes on his head. The rational part of Tim knows this is perfectly okay. The nervous Daddy part thinks this looks like the start of a bad science experiment.

Sean, however, does not appear to be fussed at all about this. He’s in Abby’s arms, snoozing away, happy as a baby being snuggled.

The nurse gets the sensors in place, and put the tiniest little earphones Tim’s ever seen into Sean’s ears.

Then she turns back to the testing unit. “We’re going to play what’s called a click. A click is a series of sounds, at different volumes and frequencies. We’ll start off low volume, and then ramp up high, and see what he responds to. What we’re looking for is the softest sound he can hear.”

And so, they sit, and wait. She presses buttons, and the computer that the device is attached to
records its finding. Whatever she’s doing, it’s soft enough Tim can’t hear it.

At least, that’s true at first.

They do get to a point where Tim can make out the sounds, and he’s trying to watch Sean, who isn’t responding, and the computer screen, which is useless because he doesn’t know how to interpret the data they’re getting. Gibbs is doing it, too, and Abby wants to know what they’re seeing, he can feel it, but they aren’t talking because they don’t want to make any noise which might… Skew the test somehow? Tim’s not sure why, but they aren’t talking.

It takes her about forty-five minutes to go through everything, and Sean doesn’t wake up at all.

When she’s taking the sensors off, and the earphones out, they all want to know, and she shakes her head. “I run the test. Dr. Illn reads it.”

She’s in a room with two investigators and one forensic scientist, they all know that’s hip high bullshit.

Illn’s back a half hour later, so… Maybe she’s seeing someone else, or maybe that data actually did need to be interpreted, either way, Gibbs has already paced the tiny examining room two thousand times, and Tim and Abby aren’t exactly calm or cool, either.

It’s one thing to be philosophical about the possibility of something. It’s a bit different when reality is staring you in the face.

Illn closes the door quietly, and, with the exception of Sean, who’s having second lunch, they’re all staring at her.

She smiles gently and shakes her head. “From what we can tell, he’s got no hearing in his right ear, and a ninety percent loss in his left. Next step, pediatric audiologist, who’ll be able to get into it deeper and start working on what happens next.”

“How does that mean… hearing aids? Cochlear implants?” Abby’s asking.

“That’s what you’re going to talk to Dr. Snyder about. He’s the specialist. He’s the specialist that I’d send my kids to. There are two kinds of deafness, conductive loss, which means something’s going on in the middle or outer ear. Could be how things are built or an infection or…”

“Too much fluid, maybe?” Abby says.

Dr. Illn shakes her head. “That, we know isn’t the case. His ears look fine. If he had enough fluid in them to cause this level of hearing loss, he’s be screaming all the time from the pain. Actually, their ear drums perforate before they lose all hearing due to fluid in the ears. If it was fluid, we’d know.”

“What’s your best guess?” Gibbs says.

Illn spreads her hands wide. “This level of loss, the question is, is there a dysfunction in the structure of the ear. Say, do the little bones not vibrate properly? That would be conductive losses. Or, is this a sensorineural issue? That’s a problem of the inner ear. So, does the auditory nerve not work properly? That’s the first thing that Dr. Snyder will work on figuring out.”

“How do they do that?” Abby asks.
“He’ll take the data we’ve just collected, and produce an audiogram, and depending on how it looks, that’ll explain what’s going on, and what the next step is.”

“What might those next steps be?” Tim asks as Gibbs is writing everything down.

“MRI? If it looks like a conductive loss. That’ll give us more information about what’s going on in there. It’s possible this might be an issue that can be corrected with surgery. If it’s sensorineural, they’ll start working on seeing if he responds to hearing aids. Usually, they start with hearing aids, see if they help, and go from there if they don’t. It’s possible, with the complete loss on his right, that he’s not a good candidate for hearing aids, but…”

“But you aren’t the specialist,” Gibbs says.

Dr. Illn nods. “Dr. Snyder will know.”

“So, when do we see him?” Tim’s got his phone out and is ready to start dialing to make the appointment.

“Already done. I figured you’d want as soon as possible, so we sent the information and got you booked. April 3rd is the first Monday in April, and you’ve got a first thing in the morning appointment. He’ll get back to you with the audiogram they produce from the information we’re sending over, so, if he wants Sean to get an MRI between now and then, you’ll have that ready to go, too.”

“April?” Abby says, sounding pissed.

Illn looks embarrassed by the wait. “Everyone is slammed these days. There used to be an entire department that did this in DC, but they’re gone, now, scattered all over the place. I don’t think you can get any sort of specialist in this area any faster, but if you can find someone you like further away, I’ll happily send the information on. I can get you names in Philadelphia if you want to make the trip. They’re got great pediatric medicine at Penn. Just let me know.”

Tim’s remembering the ‘functionally no different’ comment. “But you don’t think this is a rush situation.”

Illn shakes her head. “Sooner is better than later, but a few months, now, isn’t a big deal. Most places won’t do cochlear implants before a year, and the earliest I’ve heard of them was six months. Keep talking to him, keep signing, he’ll pick up a lot by seeing and feeling. When you get to Dr. Snyder, and you’ve got more of an idea of what’s coming next, they’ll get you set with social workers and support services. Read up on hearing aids and cochlear implants.”

“Been doing that,” Gibbs says.

“That’s right, you have been. So, you know what you’re looking at.”

He nods. “Enough.”

Illn smiles at them. “I know this is a lot, but… you’ve got a perfectly healthy little boy.” Who’s been busy munching down his lunch this whole time, paying no attention to the wider world. “He’s just a bit different. And that might make things more interesting in the long term, but right now, he’s a newborn, just like every other newborn. Enjoy him, enjoy his soft skin, silky hair, and new baby smell. Has he had his first bath, yet?”

Abby shakes her head. His umbilical stump just fell off this morning.
“Okay, today, swimming time. See if little boy likes the water. Get it nice and warm and I bet he will.”

And that’s that.

On the ride home, Abby says to Tim, “I suppose you can tell Leon you’ll be there for the Commission meetings.”

They’d all been quiet, living in their own thoughts. That wasn’t one that had been in Tim’s head.

But it is now. He nods. “You want me to?”

Both Abby and Gibbs nod. “Yeah, between Jethro and Heather, I’m good for the seven-eight hours you’d be gone.

Gibbs is driving, and Tim’s in the back with Sean. He strokes his little boy, who’s sucking away on his pacifier, actually awake, and watching the seat back avidly. “Feel a little weird about it. I was home for all of Kelly’s first few weeks.”

“Not shipping out, Tim,” Gibbs says. And that puts things in a certain level of perspective. Or at least puts who he should talk to about things like this into perspective.

Tim inclines his head, and holds Sean’s hand. Sean looks away from the back of the seat in his general direction. Tim’s still too far away for Sean to see him clearly, so he’s mostly just looking at a large vaguely person shaped blur of brown hair, pale skin, and dark gray coat. “I’ll be home in time for tonight’s feeds.”

Abby smirks at that. “So, you go to one of these drugged out of your head on pain killers, and the next one new baby exhausted.”

Tim shakes his head. “I don’t know what the hell Leon thinks I’m going to do with this, but…”

“But if he’s offering Jimmy time off to get you there, he thinks it’s important,” Abby finishes.

They drive quietly for another mile or two before Gibbs says, “This one’s at the Omni?”

Tim checks his email. “Yeah. Looks like they all are.”

“Omni’s a nice place, right?” Gibbs asks. He’s sure that over the years he’s been there, because he feels like he’s has at least one case drag him to every hotel in DC, but they’ve blurred in his mind over the years, and he doesn’t have a distinct image of the place in his head.


“Wedding coming up. Nice to have a place to have it.”

“Send me a text to remind me when I’m there, and I’ll grab you some brochures.”

Abby’s watching Gibbs. Sure, she, Breena, and Ziva have been chatting about the upcoming Borin-
Gibbs weddings since… oh their first date, but the idea that it might be that level of upscale hadn’t occurred to any of them. “It’s really nice, Gibbs.”

He nods.

“Like Senior and Delphine, nice.”

He nods again.

“So, you’re saying this may be the kind of wedding where Molly’s going to get her ultimate-fantasy-three-year-old-princess-dress-of-fluffy-flower-girl-pretteness?”

Gibbs flashes a quick little smile at that image. “More likely than not.”

_I’ll be there. Meet and greet starts tonight at 7:00?_ Tim text to Leon when he gets home.

A moment later he gets _Yes. Just like the rest of them, it’s at the Omni, and make sure to bring your work ID._

_I remember._ Tim stares at his phone, thinking through what he’s supposed to be doing, and fires off a text to Manner about meeting him at the Commission. By the time he’s done that, he’s got another one from Leon.

_Will Dr. Palmer be showing up for work this week?_

Tim supposes that Leon A: needs to know that, and B: that’s a somewhat delicate way of asking how the testing went.

_He should be. We got the first round of tests done, and--and for as fine as he claims to be with this, it still takes him a few seconds to commit the idea to words--Sean is deaf._ He swallows as he reads his own words on the phone screen, and realizes he hasn’t sent this out to anyone else in the family, yet, either. _There will be follow up care and appointments and lots of stuff, but not this week, and depending on what the specialist has to say about the test results, possibly not until April._

Tim hits send, and then sends out a larger, mass text, to everyone on the new baby text list. He figures he’ll have to deal with fewer uncomfortable silences, condolences, so sorries, and the like if he just gets it all out at once, online.

He pulls up the most recent video of Sean, laying on his back this morning, in his little blue and gray puppy pirate footy jammies, kicking his feet. He adds to it:

_A week ago we sent out word that Sean James had joined the party. On the day he was born, like all babies, he was given a hearing screening test, which he failed, and then another one, which he also failed. Today we’ve received confirmation that he is deaf, in both ears. We’re doing okay, and so is Sean. He’s growing like crazy and keeping us up at night, which is exactly what he’s supposed to be doing. We don’t exactly know what comes next, or why he’s deaf, though we’ve got an appointment with a pediatric audiologist set. That won’t happen until April, so we’ve got a few months before we’ll be able to answer any specific questions about what’s going on/happening next._

_We’ll keep you updated as we learn more. Thank you for all the congratulations and well wishes. It’s_
been a tiring week, and Kelly’s not entirely sure about this little brother thing, but Abby and I couldn’t be more in love with him.

Tim’s not sure if that’s elegantly done or not, but he hits send anyway.

I’m sorry, Tim. Come up from Leon as he’s writing his mass text, but he doesn’t have a good answer to that, so, again, he brushes it off.

We’re doing okay. He is, too. Anyway, working. I’ll get there, see what’s going on and... Go from there.

Thank you. Pops up a second later.

Tim got onto work stuff when he got home. Abby got Jimmy and Breena on the phone to talk to them.

“So, we just... wait?” Breena asks.

“Apparently. Unless Penny and Ducky have someone else, unless we want to pack Sean up and travel for... hours with a newborn.” Just the idea of that makes Abby feel overwhelmed.

“I’d say wait,” Jimmy replies. “We’re all tired, and I think your pediatrician is right, saving a few months here won’t matter much. Might as well settle into new baby hibernation. Rest, home, family.”

They hear Breena yawn.

“What’s that for? I had last night on,” Jimmy jokes, hoping to perk things up a bit. They’re all feeling... heavy. Maybe a little sad, but maybe trying to not be sad, too.

“Mom got a new coffee for the machine here, and I think it’s decaf. Been asleep all day.”

“Well, you get to sleep tonight, we all do,” Jimmy replies.

“I feel like I should be on night feeds,” Abby says. So far she’s getting to sleep “all night” which is code for no feeds between ten and six. Though she does have to get up to pump at least once during that stretch.

“No.” “Uh uh.” Both Jimmy and Breena veto that.

“Give it another week. You get all healed up, nice and solid, and then you’ll get your share of the night feeds,” Breena replies. “Besides, you get him at night right now, and what’ll happen? He’ll cry, your milk’ll let down, he’ll want it, and the idea of you not having to get all the night feeds’ll get shot in the foot.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Breena smirks a bit on her end of the phone conversation. “You really okay?” That’s the thing they haven’t been talking about.

“Enough. I hate not knowing what’s coming up next, but... that’s parenting, right?”

Tim walks over while she’s on the phone, and sits next to her. She puts it on speaker.
“Hey,” he says, as he settles in with Abby.

“Hey, back,” Breena says.

“Hello,” from Jimmy.

“You okay?” Jimmy asks.


Tim can feel Jimmy thinking, *articulately put*, but he doesn’t say it, and when it comes down to it *blah* covers the sensation pretty well. There are no sharp edges, nothing raw or urgent, just… blah. Abby snuggles into him. “Blah… That’s… Yeah, it’s kind of gray and mucky.”

“Jethro with you guys?” Breena asks.

“I’m here right now, so he’s heading over to spend time with Kelly and Heather, make sure she’s feeling properly doted on, and that Heather’s up to date on what’s going on.”

“What did she say when you first told her about it?” Jimmy asks.

“That she always thought ALS fluency would be a good thing to have on her resume. She already does the baby signing stuff, but that’s just basic words: eat, milk, drink, up. The kind of things an eighteen-month-old wants to communicate,” Abby says.

“You getting home soon?” Tim knows Breena’s usually done for the day in an hour or so, so he’s asking Jimmy.

“No dead bodies right now, knock on wood,” Jimmy replies.

In the background they hear Allan say, “Not feeling it today.”

“And Dr. Allan’s psychic vibes are saying we won’t be having any clients today.”

That gets a small chuckle out of Tim and Abby. They glance at each other, and the phone. They’d like to just sort of sit here and be with their loves, but everyone has things to do. “We’ll let you get back to it. See you at dinner,” Tim says.

There are goodbyes, and then it’s just, for the next moment or two, him and Abby. He holds her close, and kisses her neck. She snuggles into him. He holds her, and the feeling of peace that comes with being with her.

And, after a moment, Sean wakes up, calling for them. Tim kisses her again, and goes to get him. He’s back with Sean all cleaned up and ready to eat. Lying on her side is still a bit uncomfortable, so Abby’s on all sitting up feeds right now, which is fine for Tim. He sits behind her on Jimmy and Breena’s sofa, holding his wife and son, watching him eat, and her feed him, and he might be blah on the rest of this, but right now, this is bright and sure and steady.

This is love, and joy, and if there’s some dark, or gray, to go with this, then that’s just what it is.

Penny said something about when you get to a certain age, all of the bright spots have some dark to them, and that it makes the light shine just that little bit brighter in contrast. Maybe that’s true, maybe not, but he’s feeling it intensely right now.
They decided to wait until after they knew for sure that Sean couldn’t hear to tell the girls. Anna and Kelly really don’t get it, at all. They’re still learning what the senses are and what they do. Molly, on the other hand, responds in typical almost three-year-old fashion of rushing over to Sean and screaming in his ear.

He sleeps through it. Doesn’t flinch or give any hint at all that a toddler just yelled in his ear loud enough to peel paint from the walls.

And that, more than anything the doctors had to say, kills any hope that the tests were wrong.

So, from here, there’s just moving on.

As Tim’s getting dressed to go out, Abby’s got Sean in her lap, the girls in front of her, and they start to learn the sign for eat. Molly gets it in a flash. She watches Abby do it once, and has it down, and then wanders off to show Breena, and then ask for the sign for every other word she can think of. Anna, who isn’t talking at all, yet, watches, but doesn’t try to do it. Though Breena picks her up, holds her hand, and does the motion for her a few times. And after a few more examples, Kelly does it, too.

As he’s leaving, Abby’s showing Molly every word Molly can think of, and Jimmy and Breena get dinner put together with two little girls underfoot, and a baby boy in his bouncy chair on the kitchen table, dozing away.
There are tests, and there are tests.

Showing up Monday night is one of the latter.

He meets up with Manner outside the Omni, and says, “You sure you want to be seen with me at this thing?”

Manner blinks, shoots him a curious look, and it occurs to Tim that this might be someone who doesn’t actually know about what happened at the last one of these he was at. Or he’s so sure that Jimmy is Tim’s man, that the idea that anyone else might not know that hasn’t occurred to him. Either way, Tim shakes his head. He’s not explaining.

Manner shrugs. “Technically, you’re my boss for the next week until Abbi gets the paperwork and transfer done, so, you want me here, I’m here.”

“Great.” And in they go.

It takes Tim two minutes to spot the first problem, and it has nothing to do with the few people who were at the Tech in Anti-Terror Conference staring at him, and then Manner, and then back at him, clearly wondering who Manner is.

The problem is, he’s the youngest guy in the room. By at least five years. Manner’s the next youngest guy, and he’s got a good ten years under most of the other guys around here. Okay, they’re supposed to be the top brass for their departments, so it’d be weird if anyone was 22, but... This is Cyber. There should be more of them in the almost 40 range than the almost retired range. If he had to guess, he’d say that most of the people around him got their start in management during the Y2K compliance push.

It’s fossil central.

Tim’s also noticing, as he’s eyeing who he’s sharing a table with, Army CID, (And seeing it written out like that, he realizes why they don’t just go by their initials) and CGIS, he also realizes that there’s cybercrime and there’s cybercrime.

The big hitter here is the FBI, of course, they’re the main Federal Law Enforcement branch. From there, there’s what Tim’s considering the rest of the active crime teams: the ATF, DEA, and his tablemates, and then there’s passive crime teams, which makes up the majority of the non-FBI people here: Social Security/Medicare/Medicaid Fraud, IRS, Treasury, ACA Compliance. Those are the guys who make sure taxes get filed and fraud cases are followed up on.

And they’re all here in the same room because they use the same tools.

Literal tools. Computers.

He sighs. It’d be like going to a “Drill Conference” and having everyone from the local carpenter, to fine arts creators, to surgeons show up, and assume because they all use drills that, that being in the same room to chat would be useful.
Manner’s looking around, and he’s spotting the issue, too. “Umbrella’s too wide.”

Tim nods. “They let us have time on Thursday and Friday to give talks and plans and stuff, right?”

Manner nods.

“How do I get signed up for one of them?”

Manner rolls his eyes a bit. “You’re Tim McGee of NCIS, biggest Cybercrime wonk in the country right now. Go talk to any of the people running this thing, and they’ll give you all the time you want.”

So, Tim goes and finds one, and Manner is right. What the hell he’s going to do will all of Friday afternoon to himself, he’s not sure, but… He’ll be doing something.

There’s a thought that was hiding, far, far back in Tim’s mind when he was working on convincing Leon to let him hire without a college degree.

He’s been reading, and more importantly seeing, that the average age of Federal employees (except for military enlistees) has been going up and up. He knows that. He’s been with NCIS for 15 years, and he’s still one of the younger ones at NCIS. He shouldn’t be, but he is. His pet teams aside, new hires are more likely to come from another Federal Agency than from outside, and FLETC classes these days are more and more filled with people who have wrapped up military or law enforcement careers elsewhere, and are moving to the Federal level.

And, sitting there, chatting with Manner, watching the room, seeing all the gray hair, he knows a big chunk of the problem is that when the Feds try to recruit, they can’t find talent who can pass the drug tests. At 39, he represents, pretty much, the tail end of the generation that went to college where casual, regular pot use wasn’t a huge thing.

And he knows it’s worse among the people he wants to hire. That’s part of trying to get them out of high school. (Though it’s not a thought he’s articulated before, he knows it was churning around back there.)

It’s not that pot and computers necessarily go hand and hand, but… Casual drug use and not caring about rules do, and the kind of people who make really good computer guys are smart, driven, and don’t care about rules. Can’t get outside the box if you think the box is sacred, which is why Manner and his ilk can have fabulous skills, but are never going to be top tier talent.

Which means Tim and everyone else in their world is stuck with a multi-tiered problem.

There’s a small pool of talent they all want.

The top talent recruiters don’t care what a potential hacker puts into his body. As long as he can produce, what he does with the rest of his time is up to him. That’s the hiring model Tim would like to use. He eyes the DEA branch, who make up at least a quarter of the guys here, and figures the chances of him being able to say, ‘screw the drug tests’ is a non-starter.

Then there’s the work environment. Tim already knows that he can’t compete against Google, Facebook, or Amazon. Federal employees make more than their free market counterparts, as long as
they don’t have any particularly specialized skills. He was at NCIS for five years before he hit what would have been his starting salary at any private company. And that’ll be true for anyone Tim wants to hire, too. He doesn’t have the money, location, or work place culture to compete with the big boys. The only way he can get Google quality people is by grabbing them before they’re Google quality, and hoping they grow into it. So far, having hired Brand, he thinks that’s working pretty well, but how far out he can roll that…

The second tier of computer talent recruiters does care what a potential hacker puts into his body, but they pay better than the Feds do, recruit more aggressively, and offer more attractive work environments. So, that’s where most of the talent who can pass a piss test ends up. (Which is why Tim’s the youngest guy in the room, at least to his own assessment.)

And that leaves Tim in the same situation as a lot of the rest of these guys. He can’t find clean talent, and he can’t afford the talent he wants, not if it goes to college.

So, not only are the people he’s looking at his age or older, but they’re fighting against the guys like Kahn. Lots of talent, and nothing tying his hands.

He feels like he’s watching a group of people intentionally going to gun fights with knives.

The hunt for talent and better tools is about ninety percent of the non-introductions conversations. They’re going on all around Tim.

On one level, he’s liking that, because the big build he’s interested in is something these guys would be very responsive to. Several of them are talking about the same basic idea, though they’re only talking on the Federal level. If the idea of extending it to the Local LEOs has occurred to any of them, they aren’t talking about it.

On another level… It’s butt covering. The government pretty much fell four months ago, and a lot of these guys, especially the FBI, should have been on top of it. They should have been nipping this crap in the bud for years.

Every group here had some sort of corruption thing going on, and these guys didn’t catch it.

That looks bad.

So, they can talk about being asleep at the switch, or talk about not having the people and tools.

Tim supposes it’s human nature to blame the people and tools.

“Do you have any idea how disheartening it is to come to the conclusion that you might have been right about too much rule following?” Manner’s speaking quietly, keeping the conversation between them as they move through the line at the buffet.

Tim glances over to Manner as he says that. “Do you have any idea how disheartening I find this whole set up? This is…” He shakes his head.

“Vindication of your Cyberbabies. I didn’t…” He’s shaking his head, too. Too old, too stuffy. Manner knows there’s something wrong when he’s the wild card. He sighs and glances over to the
DEA table. “They’re getting the cold shoulder tonight.”

“Easier to blame them for the lack of people, I guess.”

Manner rolls his eyes. “They aren’t the problem. Not a big one, anyway. IRS screwed the pooch, big time.”

Tim glances over to their delegation. They’re auditors, not a group known for being especially engaging or lively, but they’re walking wounded these days. Hollow-eyed, nervous, jumpy. They’re getting a lot of the blame. In the legal world, pretty much everyone left at the IRS is facing some sort of investigation, and in the illegal world, people are still lynching IRS agents. One got killed in Tallahassee last week. Add in what happened to the DC branch… Tim figures he’d be walking wounded in that case, too.

Tim watches one of them flinch when someone lays a hand on her shoulder. “Blaming them would be like kicking a sick dog.”

Manner inclines his head at that. “Suppose so.”

It’s another rubber chicken buffet, and Tim is doing his part of having a bit, chatting with the people around him, and… though he didn’t expect it, soaking up a lot of attention.

Unlike Tech In Anti-Terror, where he was just another guy in the room, this is CyberTech in Crime, and he’s THE guy in the room. He’s the example of what you can do with sharp people, good tools, and the ability to do the damn job and say fuck it to the consequences.

Tim’s not sure if that’s a good thing or not, but the last time he had this many people treating him like he was awesome was when he went down to Cybercrime the first time and got to be a rock star because he was a qualified field agent.

Having people come over to talk to him is happening a lot, though. He’s not going to get to slip out of this one within a few minutes of the dessert course. 10:30 is his hard deadline, and he’s fairly sure they’ll want to be talking to him until 10:29:59. But there’s a little guy who’s going to want to eat, and tonight it’s his job to wield the bottle.

There’s a tall man, mostly gray hair, some brown in it, who’s been waiting by the side of Tim’s current conversation. (Chatting with a DEA and ATF representative about the paperwork software. It isn’t flashy or anything, but if you’ve got a set number of people, and you can free up a third of their time by having the computers do the work, you effectively end up with a 33% boost in your manpower.) He doesn’t interrupt, but it’s clear he wants the chance to talk to Tim about something.

So, after he’s talked through what his program does and how it does it, Mr. DEA and Mrs. ATF get the hint and head off, letting the new guy have Tim to himself.

“You’re Tim McGee, right?” he asks, as he offers his hand.

Tim doesn’t recognize the man in front of him, but his name tag says Tom Fenton FBI. (Tim is, just like Tom, wearing a name tag, too.) Tim nods and offers his hand. “I am.”

Fenton smiles. “Good. Tom Fenton, I’ve been waiting for you.” He’s edging Tim toward the bar. “Can I buy you a drink and monopolize a bit of your time.”
Tim shrugs. He’s not feeling wildly politic, and Fenton’s hitting him slightly wrong, though he’s not sure why. “Bar’s open,” he holds up his left hand, which has a sparkling mineral water in it, “and I’ve got a drink, but if you’ve got something interesting to say, you can have my time.”

“Fair enough.” He leads Tim further from the crowd. Private conversation apparently. Once they’re out of earshot of the rest of the Commission, Fenton says, “As I’m sure you know, FBI has jurisdiction over every other Federal organization and many state ones when it comes to public corruption charges. This last few months have shown us that we weren’t nearly active enough on that front, and we’re reorganizing to devote a lot more time and talent to that.”

Tim nods; that is interesting.

“We intend to have a cyber department that does nothing but watchdog every other Federal employee. We want you to run it.”

Tim exhales long and sharp on that. If that’s what he thinks it is… On the inhale he remembers rule eight. Never assume.

“You’ve got my undivided attention. Tell me more.”

Fenton smiles a bit at that. The look of a man who knows he’s holding a royal flush. “One of the laws that’s going through the new Congress is an act that will strip any federal employee, while at work, of his or her privacy rights. Sounds awful, but it means that our people will have no warrant requirements. Means we’ll be able to get cameras on everyone in the field. Means we’ll be able to go in and check out anything they do on the job. No firewalls, nothing to hide behind, if they do it, we get to know.”

Tim exhales long and slow on that, too. He’s got no idea how he feels about a law like that, but he does know that’d make the job a hell of a lot easier.

“There are millions of Federal employees, and this department will have over four hundred people who do nothing but keep an eye on them and their computers. We’ll be setting up a secure whistleblower system, so people can report and not have to fear reprisals, and we will investigate every report. Doesn’t matter who it’s on or how little it might be.”

That sends heady tingles through Tim.

“Who’ll be watching us?”

Fenton smiles at that. He likes the question, and the us even more. “We’ll watch and blind audit each other every year.”

“Why me?”

Fenton sends him a really, you’re gonna ask sort of look at Tim, but Tim wants to hear it. “You’re the poster child for the job we want to do, so we want you in charge of it.”

“The whole whistleblower program, or just the cyber part?”

The look on Fenton’s face makes it clear that he can’t tell if Tim’s negotiating or if he’s asking for clarification. Tim’s not entirely certain, either.

“You’d be the Director of Cyber Corruption.”

“Who would I report to?”
“We don’t have the person picked, yet, but we will have a Director of Public Corruption Investigation.”

For some reason this is making him think of sitting next to Tony, watching the Untouchables on the big screen at MTAC. “New Untouchables.”

“Basically.”

Tim thinks for a moment. He doesn’t know where this is going, not in the long run, but he also knows that right now, he is negotiating, and he knows that this… has potential, to do some serious good, and to take up a TON of time, and… And if he’s doing that, then he’s not working on redoing how Federal Law Enforcement works. So, that would be an issue, maybe, but… Whole department… Except it’s not the whole department, not the way he’s got it with NCIS, and no control over who he’d be reporting to, and that’s the poison pill in any job.

“Okay… Four hundred people?”

Fenton nods.

Tim shakes his head. “That’s a demotion. I’m the next head of NCIS.”

Fenton laughs. Then he shakes his head. “There isn’t going to be a next Director of NCIS.”

A slow smile crosses Tim’s face; he gets the game now. “You’re sure that all of the agencies are going to be combined, and you’re grabbing everyone you can to make sure you guys are the last ones standing.”

“We are going to be the only ones left standing. Have a chat with your grandmother, and you’ll be sure of it, too. ATF, DEA, all of you little military guys, you’ll end up under our umbrella.” He glances over to the IRS side of the room. “They’ll be off on their own, with the rest of the fraud guys, but crime, real crime, we’ll all be under one roof.”

And Tim knows why Leon’s got him here. And he can see that this is… maybe a whole lot of opportunity. And probably the end of a whole lot of opportunities. “The guy who runs your watchdog department, will he be building it from scratch?”

Fenton nods.

“How do you guys feel about… unusual family situations?” Tim figures that if Fenton knows who his grandmother is, he likely knows about the rest of it, but it’s worth asking.

Fenton shrugs. “Do you mean the dust up with your father, or the fact that you and your wife appear to be living with Dr. Palmer’s family?”

“Yes.”

“Your name and reputation for what we hope to do buys more good press than whatever it might be you do at home. So, boyfriend, girlfriend, unusually affectionate pet sheep, we do not care. Keep it discrete, and as long as we can trust you’re un-blackmailable, and given how little effort it took my people to find out what you’re doing, we’re assuming you just don’t care if the wider world knows, we’re good.”

Tim nods, slowly. That tells him how public this office is intended to be. His name has weight inside the government, where whatever he does at home isn’t that big of a deal, but the wider world… They don’t intend to be parading him around. Probably. “Send me the offer, for the head of the
whole watchdog department, not just the Cyber side. I’ve got a few plans of my own, and if that fits with them, we’ll talk.”

Fenton doesn’t even blink at that idea. He doesn’t agree to do it, either. He just watches Tim, sips his drink, and then moves on.

Driving home, Tim’s phone buzzes to let him know he’s got an email. At the next stoplight he checks. It’s from Tom Fenton. Tim pulls into the nearest parking lot and gets reading.

It’s a full Director position, at the FBI, with a department of 1000 people, all reporting to him.

Tim McGee, Director of Public Corruption Investigations.

Or, as he’s skimming over it, he gets what he’s being offered. The new version of IA, for the entire Federal Government.

He’s not entirely sure what to do with that, but he does have a pretty good idea of what he needs to do next. Namely, burn a little rubber so he’s home in time to grab Sean’s next feed.

The house is dark when he gets in, but no one is crying, so he’s probably got a moment or two to relax. He creeps upstairs. Three little girls snoozing in one room, check.

One little boy, snoozing in his crib, check.

Three grownups, snoozing in their bed, check.

And all is right at the McGee house.

He pulls off his tie, and creeps to his closet to hang up his tie and jacket. From there, he’s going through his going to bed motions as silently as possible. He doesn’t want to wake anyone up. Partially, because sleep is good, and partially, because he wants some time with his thoughts.

It’s a BIG FUCKING JOB.

Fewer people reporting to him than he’d have if he ran NCIS, but more power, more ability to touch everything, and shaping a department from scratch…

Less of the stuff he wouldn’t like about possibly running NCIS. If that offer is real… And he’d need to find out more… but this might not be a political position. This might be actual work. Less schmoozing and more building systems to catch bad guys and make sure that everyone else can do that, too.

That’s a heady feeling.

It’s not NCIS. It’s giving up his home away from home for somewhere else.

But, if Fenton is right… Giving up NCIS may be a foregone conclusion.

And he does know who’ll have a better idea of that. And, yes, it’s later than he’d usually call, but Penny’s something of a night owl, so…
He’ll text. If she’s asleep, she’ll miss it.

_Hey, you up? Can we talk?

He’s just pulling a t-shirt on when Sean starts to cry. Tim grabs his jammy pants, and then he’s on the job.

---

He’s got himself in his PJs, laying on his side in the guest room bed, Sean lying on his back, head propped on Tim's arm, next to him, nursing away, when his phone rings.

It’s Penny. “Are you okay? We saw that text…”

He supposes that he should have figured a midnight text after today’s news would make her think he was dwelling on Sean’s hearing. “Yeah, we are. This is… actually not about that. Um…” Tim lays out what Fenton had for him, “So, is this BS, selling me a best case scenario or what…”

“The law is real, and it’s going to pass by a huge margin. I don’t know if any of these guys have realized that it will apply to them, too, but none of them want to be seen as being against it. And yes, the FBI will be in charge of enforcing it.”

“So, that’s half of it. How about NCIS, our days really numbered?”

The sound she makes is non-committal. “Reorganization into one operation… They’re talking, a lot, about that. That’s part of why you guys are meeting with each other. Congress will be holding open hearings this summer about what to do. Leon’ll have an invite, so if you want to get a plan to him, that’s the way to go.”

“Got to make sure I’ve got an invite to that, too.”

“Leon’ll be able to bring his own people along. You’ll have an invite if you want to testify. Actually, round about spring they’ll be starting up the trials of the old regime. You’ll be up to testify for that, too. If you’ve got real plans, that’ll be the time to start making friends.”

“Ugh.” What he needs to do if he’s going to sell the computer idea he’s thinking of isn’t anything he enjoys, or thinks he’s particularly good at.

“Would you rather that was the time I started introducing you to friends?”

“Better. I’m not the only one with ideas in that direction. Mine are wider, so… that might be the sort of thing I can sort of plant in someone else’s head and occasionally play with.” He’s quiet after that, thinking about the system in his head, and the kind of work that would be necessary to make it real.

“Do you want a Public Corruption Department?” Penny asks after a moment.

Tim stares through the dark of the room he’s in, at the little glow of the nightlight on the far wall. “I…” He licks his lips. “I’d be better at designing the computer system. But the chance to do that is not a given. This is. And… if everything ends up under the FBI, me being there, at that level, would give me some power to work on the system. Build a basic level for my group, and roll it out wider after… Maybe… I don’t know. Not sure about any of this. If NCIS is going to be around, I might stick with them. I’d be home and comfy and…”

“Bored.”
He sighs a bit at that, too. Since he’s gotten Cybercrime up and working, and since he’s been done with the vote buying scheme, it has been less thrilling than he’d hoped. “Not exactly. But… Building the system to make it work better was more interesting than running it. Right now, pretty much any decent tech guy could do my job. I’m out of the office for, literally, weeks at a time right now, and it’s chugging along fine without me. Someone else could do my job, probably improve on it, too. Editing is easier than creating, but… A new system from scratch… I could do a lot with that.”

“But if you’re at NCIS, you’ve got weekends and nights free…”

“Most of the time. Not sure how that’d work with this. Doesn’t sound like I’d be low on staff, and it’s not like I’d be hunting down murders and kidnappers, so maybe less urgent than what I do now… so… I don’t know, Penny.”

“What are your loves saying?”

“Nothing, yet. I got home after bedtime. You and Sean are the only ones who know about this, and he’s supremely indifferent to this whole thing.”

She laughs a little. “He would be. And how is our boy?”

“Laying on my chest slurping away.”

“No hearing at all?”

“Maybe 10% in his left ear. Our Doc wants us to see Dr. Snyder.”

“Good choice. Unless you want to come up to Philly and see Dr. Harlen at Penn, you won’t do better. And even if you do, you won’t end up much better off. If they suggest surgical correction might be an option, come on up and get a second opinion, otherwise…”

“Close’ll be more important.”

He can feel Penny nodding. “You and Abby okay?”

“Eh… Enough. It… I don’t even have words. It just is. Started teaching the girls to sign today. Molly’s getting it fast.”

“She would. Ducky and I are picking it up, too. Slower. Neither of us have very quick fingers these days. We can see the guy on the video do it, but making our own hands… that’s a bit different.”

“I remember that. Just like any muscle memory, it’ll feel weird until your hands get it down, and then you won’t have to think about it.”

“We’re working on it. It’s getting pretty late.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I’ll keep my ears open, and keep finding people for you. People to cultivate. Friends who’ll be interested in the sort of computer work you want to do. See if it’s worth trying to hold out for it. Does your offer have a drop dead date on it?”

“Two months out, and thanks for looking.”

“What are you going to say to Leon?”

“Exactly what happened, and what I’m thinking of for the computer stuff, and… And all of it. If
NCIS really is about to be swallowed by a new, bigger FBI… He was planning on retiring soon anyway, I mean, not that soon, but... but he’ll want to know what’s going on, see what he can do.”

“Lots of changes coming up.”

“Yeah.” Sean’s coming up dry on his bottle. “Okay. He’s done with his bottle. Time for burp and sleep.”

“Good night, Tim.”

“Night, Penny.”

The last thing Tim does before going to sleep is to send off a text to Leon. *You’re right, you wanted me there. Tomorrow morning, my house, eightish. We’ll talk.*

He’s almost asleep when *I’ll bring the coffee.* comes back to him.
Tim doesn’t have Jimmy’s sleep discipline. When his mind gets racing, he has a very difficult time shutting it down.

So, he was able to drop off to sleep about ten minutes before Sean called for more food. At two hours after what should have been his last feed.

It feels like it’s been a long time since: Resolved, little boy weighs enough to not eat every two hours, but it’s actually been… Eighteen hours.

Which means fussing.

Tim gently pats his son, saying, “Go back to sleep. It’s not food time, yet.”

Sean’s having none of that.

By the time ten minutes of wailing has passed, Tim’s awake, Sean’s in a bloody mood, and if a newborn can eat spitefully, he’s slorping down his bottle with murder in his tiny little eyes.

“Not gonna be any faster next time. You’re better off just sleeping.”

Slorp, slorp, slorp.

Tim assumes he’s imagining the glare, because babies don’t glare. Hell, Sean’s so new he doesn’t even have tears when he cries, yet, so glaring is totally out of the question.

But, in that he’s feeding an angry little man, and given that his own restful state has been completely fried by this experience, Tim’s back thinking about the job, and about the FBI and about everything.

He grabs his phone and sends off a text to Fornell. *What do you know about Tom Fenton?*

Five minutes later, as Tim’s patting Sean’s back and walking him around the room, his phone buzzes. *Are you building a goddamned boat, too? Normal people sleep, you know!*

*That’s why I texted, one beep, done. Don’t want to talk, you roll over and go back to sleep.*

*I figured you’d know this by now, fathers with teenage daughters CANNOT sleep through a text. FBI Agents can’t sleep through questions about the number two guy in the whole FBI. What and why do you want to know?*

Number Two Guy in the FBI answers the ‘can he really do this’ question. Yes, he can.

*He any good to work for?*

*Never met him. He’s above my pay grade by a mile. Why?*

*He just sent me a job offer.*

No response for a good minute before *Good one?* pops up on Tim’s phone.

*Yeah.*

*He’s got a reputation for being a good guy. Straight shooter, likes rules and follows them, but he’s*
not big on rules just for the sake of rules. He lays one down, there’ll be a good reason for it. What’s the job?

Director of Public Corruption Investigations. Got any scuttlebutt on that?

There’s a long quiet moment, filled only by Sean’s burp, and Tim getting him resettled down to nurse.

Finally, Oh, yeah, there is. Been hearing whispers for a while. Part of Anti-Corruption would be the IA of the Gods. They were looking at Josh Leven, our Director of IA for the job. The other part is keeping watch on the guys who make the laws, Congress, Senate, Judges. You gonna take it?

Thinking about it. How’s working for the FBI?

I liked it. Suit and tie every day. No visible tattoos and they won’t let you wear the skirt.

We’ll see. Though in that case, Tim couldn’t care less about dress code for him. If he’s getting the people he wants for something like that… Of course, there’s also something to be said for hiring the straightest of the straight arrows for an anti-corruption force. They’ll expect me to live the job, won’t they?

They do if you want to move up the ladder, sounds like you’ll be, what, two rungs from the top?

Something like that. Reporting to Comey.

He’s the head of the FBI.

One rung from the top, and the top of my particular area. Don’t think they plan on putting me in the lineup to go any higher, and I wouldn’t want it. A lot of the rest of this might be upside down and topsy-turvy, but Tim’s sure of that.

Then as long as you get the job done, they won’t care how much you’re actually there. Question is: what’s the job? Leven hasn’t investigated an actual case in probably five years. They might expect you to not be there much at all. Off at conferences, talking to people, making connections. Be a good idea to see if you’re actually supposed to run this thing, or be a figurehead.

That’s something Tim’s wondering about, too. They’re offering a lot of money for a figurehead. Tim’s not sure what figureheads get paid, but he assumes it would be less than someone who does actual work. But maybe he’s got that backwards.

They would. You get to pick your own team?

So they say.

Meet with Comey before you answer. I’ve heard he can be… challenging.

Tim spends a moment remembering saying something similar to Jethro once upon a time. He smiles at that. On a one to Jethro scale, what are we talking?

Good point. Half a Jethro.

Thanks Fornell. Sorry to wake you up.

It happens. You want me to poke around some when I go in tomorrow. See if I can get anything more than rumors?
Sure.

There’s another long quiet period, where Tim makes goofy faces at Sean, and he slowly finishes off his bottle. His eyes are drooping, and Tim’s feeling so damn tired, too, but his mind’s too active to drop off.

Eventually, *Saw that text you sent out today. You and Abby holding up okay?* pops up.

*Yeah. Little guy is in my lap, nursing, right now. Just like any other little guy. He’s okay, just… Different. And we’re okay, too.*

*Just different. ;)*

Tim can’t believe Fornell sent him a smiley face, but… Miracles never cease, apparently. He writes back, *Just a bit. He’s slowing down, so it’s burp and back to sleep time.*

*Good luck on that.*

*Thanks.*

Sean, after his burp and snuggle, lays on the bed and conks out. Tim gently strokes his fingers over Sean’s tummy. “At least you’re a good sleeper. Just got to do it in longer stretches.”

For several moments, Tim lies next to his son, eyes closed, trying to think of sleepy thoughts, but they just aren’t coming.

Too much to think about, too much to process.

*What do I want?*

Home, family time.

That one’s easy. Stay with NCIS. Do the job. Catch the bad guys, and make the system he’s got run better. No real glory, not anymore. But, except for the occasional all-hands-on-deck, he’d be home by six, and have most of his weekends off.

*And when there’s no more NCIS?*

If…

When…

He’s got the sinking suspicion that(111,1013),(475,1039) is the correct answer. One of the big complaints about the system is that there’s too much overlap. And, especially with what his guys do, there really isn’t a good reason to have their own investigators. They could become a branch of the FBI, get moved over in one sweep, and piggy back onto the FBI’s support structures, legal, HR, computing systems… Stop paying rent for all of those little three/four men teams scattered around the country, just pop them into the closest FBI building…

Tim can see it happening.

So, when, not if… What happens then? Move into whatever they get folded into. Be another computer guy. Work with and for other computer guys. He won’t be the top of any given heap,
because it’ll have been a few years, and all of those positions will be filled. So, maybe he get a shot to make their systems run better, if they pay attention to him. If they haven’t already solidified their plans. If the system can still be changed…

That idea grates on him. Go from being the boy genius to just another computer guy reporting to the gray hairs… It’s making his toes curl, and not in a good way.

*What do I want?*

He can see it. The system. Put your crime in and the system handles the computer stuff. And he wants to build it.

To build the computer system that makes law enforcement work. That’s it. Really. That’d be his talent. That would be his skills being used to do something that no one else would do as well. That’s what he could do that would really change the world.

He’s not an anti-corruption guy, not any more than any other vaguely honorable person who doesn’t give two shits about kowtowing to the powers that be. He’d do it well. He could run that department, and he could make it sing.

And that’s where Tim hits the wall.

From what he just saw, not kowtowing to the powers that be might be rarer than his computer skills. Everyone in the room with him tonight could build the kind of system he’s thinking about. They might not have all the ideas, but once it’s laid out for them, once they have a blueprint, and they could do it.

Lay the idea out, and some of them would likely do a better job than he would when it comes to just building the thing.

If he explained the idea to Manner, in a month he’d have the whole thing laid out, people assigned to do it, testing procedures in place, all he’d need would be funding and bodies in chairs. He’d do it slower than Tim would, and he’d follow all the rules, and in the end he’d have everything documented so anyone else could use the system, too. Tim’s certain Manner could do it. And he’s certain that’s true of just about everyone else there tonight, as well.

But none of them twigged to the corruption around them. That’s why they were all giving the IRS guys the side-eye. They were eyebrows deep in the shit, and none of them noticed, or if they did, none of them successfully did anything about it. But, it’s not like the rest of the guys in that group were walking around with clean shoes. *All* of them were touching it in one way or another.

*Is there a shortage of brains in this world, or honorable men?* Tim fiddles with that idea for a while, and then what *everyone* was talking about hit him. Can’t find people. Why not? Because these guys are so locked into their rules that they couldn’t figure out how to hire high school students or loosen up their dress codes to make their offices even slightly more appealing to the people they want to hire.

What was he thinking earlier? That these guys would never be top talent because they can’t think outside the box? Something like that.

People who can’t think outside the box, can’t think past following rules and orders. They don’t question what their Boss does, or what his Boss does. They don’t look at what’s happening and see the red flags because they’re being told that’s the way it’s supposed to work.

He sighs long and hard. He’d trust Leon an awfully long way, but he’d also double check. He *has*
double checked. And he’s got the sinking sensation that no one else in that room could say that.

And he’s got the feeling that that’s the answer between what he wants to do, and what he should do.

What does an honorable man owe his boss?

He knows he’s not hiding anything from Leon. He’ll lay it all out for him, but… Does he need to stay? If NCIS is around for three more years, that gets Leon to early retirement. That gets Tim to middle age, middle management, and likely a demotion. If NCIS goes, there won’t be another small federal agency for him to run, or run a department in.

Maybe, maybe if NCIS gets folded into the FBI, maybe, they’d decide to keep them working with Navy and Marine cases, maybe, and maybe, they’d let him run that, as a department of the FBI…

Maybe…

But he knows if he were running the FBI, and he suddenly got jurisdiction over all military personnel cases, that he’d handle them just like all the other cases. A murder is a murder is a murder, so there’s no reason to have a special team just to handle one particular set of them.

The thoughts whiz and blur, not letting him sleep. At 6:08, (two hours and eight minutes,) Sean’s up again. Tim keeps patting him. “Come on, baby, give it a little more. Ten more minutes.”

Sean is again unpleased by this. Abby heads in before the lengthening period is over. She sees Tim sitting on the bed next to Sean, patting his back, bags under his eyes, and she feels the unsettled, frantic energy coming off of him.

“He keep you up all night?”

Tim shakes his head. “I was up all night, but not because of him. Grab my phone, and read the email from Tom Fenton.”

“Okay.” She’s picking up his phone and settling in next to him. Sean’s wailing louder because he can smell Abby, and knows the milk must be near. “Who’s Tom Fenton?”

“According to Fornell, the number two guy at the FBI.”

She kisses Tim and lays her hand on Sean’s back. “Soon baby. Breakfast is up soon. You need to be sleeping longer.” She shifts focus to Tim. “What’s he want with you? Talk about what you did in taking down the vote buying scam?”

Tim smiles at her. “Related to that, but not in the way you’re thinking.” He glances at the clock. “Okay, that’s 2:15. Now you get to get up.” Tim gets Sean cleaned up while Abby reads the email. She’s just about done when Sean’s all cleaned up, so Tim waits for her to finish, while Sean sucks on his finger, which he does not consider an appropriate replacement for a bottle/Abby’s breast.

When she’s done, she looks up at him, eyes wide, and he nods, handing Sean over.

“Wow.”

Tim nods again.

“What…”

Tim’s shaking his head. “I don’t know. I figured we’d all talk about it this morning. Any signs of life from the rest of the crew?”
“I think they’re still hugging the bed for a few more minutes. Awake.” She looks down to Sean. “Hard to sleep through you caterwauling,” and back to Tim, “but not moving yet.”

“Leon’ll be here at eight to talk. Let me get them up, and we can talk, first.”

Jimmy and Breena look awfully cozy. They’re all snuggled in under warm blankets, tangled together. He can tell neither of them is asleep, but those few morning moments of quiet, eyes closed, sleep just an inch away cuddling is awfully sweet, and he wants to get in on it.

Tim strips down, and sneaks under the covers, trying not to let in too much cold air.

“Mmm…” from Breena.

He gently kisses the back of her neck. He snuggles in for a moment, but can’t hold the quiet for much more than that, too much stuff in his mind right now.

Another kiss, and he reaches across her to lay his hand on Jimmy’s stomach. “Need both of you guys awake.” They’ve got about half an hour before the girls get up, and this conversation will be easier without trying to get little girls cleaned up, dressed, and fed, during it.

“Uh uh.” Breena’s eyes close tighter. “Sleeping. You need us sleeping.”

Jimmy nods. “Five more minutes.”

Neither of them had to get up with Sean, but that doesn’t mean they could sleep through his complaining about having to wait to eat.

“The FBI offered me my own department last night.”

That gets eyes opened. Breena rolls over so she’s facing Tim, and Jimmy rolls to his side and props himself up on his elbow for the same reason. “What kind of department?” Breena asks.

“Public Corruption. Be the head of IA for pretty much everyone drawing a government paycheck.”

“What are you thinking?” Jimmy asks.

“That we should get up, head to the other room, and talk with Abby, too.”

As Tim’s getting the other half of their family up, Abby’s fully awake, has read through the whole offer, and her mind is spinning.

First and foremost, leave NCIS? They’ve talked about that, a long time ago, in the sense of maybe doing it if they couldn’t work it with the kids, but… This isn’t leaving to get more family time, this is leaving for… a better (maybe, how could it be better somewhere else? NCIS is better) career.

Everyone shifting around, new jobs, new positions, that was hard enough, but this…

She doesn’t like it. Not one little bit.
Which is when the rational part of her brain kicks in and reminds her that she is married to this man, it’s not like she’ll never see him again if he works somewhere else.

But… that’s NCIS becoming even less home, and more work.

She sighs down at Sean… Thinks of the girls in their beds down the hall… Thinks of Ducky and Penny and Gibbs…

That’s the thing, NCIS isn’t home anymore. Half her family isn’t there all the time. Not anymore… Tim hasn’t been in the office since December. Not that she is, either, but…

Home is here, and Jimmy and Breena’s, and the House. It’s not there, not anymore.

And that feels… wrong.

But wrong or not, it’s true.

The other three head in a minute later. They get settled in the bed, curled around each other, as Sean nurses away, and Tim explains what happened last night.

“So you want it?” Breena asks when he’s done.

He shrugs. “I don’t know. If there’s not going to be an NCIS… If it’s what I think it is…”

“What happens to you if there’s no NCIS?” Breena’s looking at Jimmy and Abby.

Tim opens his hands wide. He doesn’t know.

Jimmy shrugs a bit, too, but… “People’ll still get killed. They’re going to need MEs and lab people. I can’t imagine they’d scrub the buildings and scuttle the whole thing.”

Abby nods along with that. “Might just change the name on the front of the building. It’s the government, they don’t spend tons of money to move people around if they can avoid it.”

“That’s if there’s no NCIS. They may not go there.” But Tim’s voice holds a hint that he’s not believing that.

“What did Penny say?” Abby asks, having a good idea why he might not be buying that.

“They’ll be holding hearings about it in the summer.”

“But the FBI wants your answer by April 1st,” Abby adds.

“Yeah.” He sighs… Anna begins to fuss, and time for uninterrupted conversation is over. “Leon’s coming over at eight. Jethro’s coming over to spend more time with Kelly, you want him to take the girls to daycare, and the four of us can talk with him?”

Breena shakes her head. “We’re slammed today, I need to be in as soon as possible. You talk with him, get more of an idea of what’s coming up.” She stands up, calls out, “Coming, Anna,” and then kisses each of them. Then she pats Tim’s cheek. “You’d do great things with it.”

He exhales. “Yeah, I would.”
She kisses his forehead again. “That’s the answer then, isn’t it?”

Abby, Tim, and Jimmy share a look. It’s not that cut and dried for them, because they do work together. NCIS is tied into their marriage and lives together and their web of interconnections in a way it isn’t for her.

But, of course, she’s also right, too. If doing the right thing matters… If he could do more with it than what he’s got now…

Tim sighs, and Jimmy and Abby get it.

And then it doesn’t much matter, because it’s morning, and it’s time to get ready to deal with the day ahead.

Jimmy sends a note to Allan. *Got a meeting this morning, not sure when I’ll be in. Let me know if we get a case, okay?*

He’s tying his tie when he gets back. *Sure. Big enough deal to be late for work, not so big as to miss actual *work.**

*That’s about the size of it. I’ll let you in on what I learn. It’ll end up effecting you, too.*

*Mysterious.*

Jimmy smiles wryly at his phone. *Yeah. See you this morning.*

Leon’s not sure who exactly he’ll be chatting with as he pulls up to the McGee house. He’s not sure how the domestic situation works there, and if he’s about to head into Tim’s office and talk with just him, or if, since whatever he’s learned may effect three quarters of them, if it’ll be the McPalmers, or if the whole of Clan Gibbs will be there for this.

As a result, he’s got five coffees, a dozen donuts, and a selection of muffins and cookies.

He’s thinking he’s got his bases covered, until he remembers that everything he’s got, besides the coffee, is filled with sugar, and he might be having a meeting with a diabetic.

He sighs and gets out of the car, juggling everything.

There’s one car he doesn’t recognize in the driveway. The car next to it, he knows is Dr. Palmer’s. Gibbs’ truck is in front of his. So, that gives him some idea of the guest list. Most of the clan, but not necessarily everyone.

Leon doesn’t have free hands to knock, so he kicks the door a few times, and in a moment, Gibbs, with Kelly in his arms, opens the door. “Morning, Leon. They’re all at the kitchen table.”

“You not sticking around?” He notices that there’s a young woman tucking diapers into a diaper bag in the foyer just behind the door.

Gibbs shakes his head. “I’ll get the highlights.” He kisses Kelly’s cheek. “We’ve got a date I can’t miss.”
“Mall!”

“Yep, going to the Mall.” Gibb signs mall to Kelly.

“Playground!”

He signs playground as he says, “Exactly.” Heather hands over the stocked diaper bag. “Have you met Heather?”

By this point, Tim’s also in the foyer, relieving Leon of snacks. Leon’s shaking his head, and getting introduced by Gibbs. A moment later, Gibbs, Kelly, and Heather have headed out to amuse the toddler, and Leon’s being herded into the kitchen, where Jimmy and Abby are finishing up breakfast.

Tim hands coffee over to Jimmy, and looks up from the cups, asking, “Any of them decaf?”

Leon shakes his head.

“Too many hours until sleep.” He grabs one of them, and hands another one to Leon as Jimmy gets up to grab milk, cream, and sugar.

“Oh, Leon! You read my mind!” Abby says, very pleased to see the donuts. And he’s pleased to see at least someone’s interested in eating them. Tim and Jimmy appear to be sticking with the coffee. Tim’s sipping his like it’s life in a cup, and Jimmy’s got a hand on his back with a don’t overdo it look on his face. Tim nods, and slows down on how fast he’s drinking.

“How are you doing?” Leon asks Abby, getting up to date and through the pleasantries as he’s watching the three of them... be married, he supposes.

They’re just about settled down and ready to talk when Sean starts to fuss.

Abby sighs. “Two fifteen.”

“Better than yesterday,” Tim replies.

“I’ll go see if I can get him down to two thirty. Back in a bit. You get Leon up to date. Hold off on the decision making part until I’m back, okay?”

“No problem.”

Abby kisses Tim on the way up, pets Jimmy, snags another donut, and smiles at Leon.

Tim smiles at Leon, too, though the look in his eyes is tired and buzzing, not happy. He explains that bit of conversation he and Abby just had. “We’re trying to get him to three hours between feeds. So, each time, we’re holding off another ten minutes. She’ll be down again soon… and…” He makes sure everyone’s got a drink and food, and then moves them into the living room. “More comfortable nursing environment for when they’re down here.”

Leon handles this with somewhat strained patience. He’s lived this. Sort of. When his kids were babies, he took three days off, and that was it. Jackie and her mom took care of most of the baby stuff, and if someone had wanted to talk to him, he certainly wouldn’t have done it with her in the room, let alone nursing.

Of course, if someone had wanted to talk to him about work, at home, with a new baby, he also wouldn’t have been married to someone who was actively involved in said work.

And then he’s done musing, because Tim’s explaining what happened the night before.
Leon’s nodding along, actually feeling a bit relieved because wanting new/better tools and a better pool of talent isn’t anything he’d consider threatening. The whispers he’s been hearing, where the computer guys all head off to do their own stuff, that’s been making him sweat.

Then Tim gets to Tom Fenton, and as soon as Leon hears the name he knows this is about to take a turn he doesn’t want to hear.

Tim lays it out calmly, the job offer, the end of NCIS, the reorganization of everything, and it’s not that Leon hasn’t heard those rumors, too, but… He’d been hoping they weren’t going to get any traction on that, but…

But…

If the FBI’s certain enough to start laying out the money to rebuild, that doesn’t bode well for the rest of them. Change and the FBI don’t exactly go hand in hand, and if they’re moving, it means they know something the rest of them don’t. They don’t reorganize on the basis of rumor.

They don’t reorganize fast, either. They’ve gotten the heads up a few years in advance to make sure they’re ready to go when the changes go through.

Leon sighs. He knew about the Public Corruption Investigations position, because a week ago Fenton popped over to have a chat with him about it. Fenton didn’t mention the idea of no more NCIS, probably because, for Leon, it wouldn’t much matter. If NCIS goes, he’ll be offered early retirement or a decent position somewhere. They won’t just boot him out.

Leon turned him down. Running a department for the FBI, even one along those lines, would be a step down for him. He wonders idly if Abbi got the same offer, and also turned it down, or if having talked to him, they decided she’d have a similar reaction. Or if they decided having a functional CGIS to absorb was more important than asking her about the Public Corruption Investigation Directorship.

McGee’s talking about his grandmother, saying they’ll be having hearings about it, and Leon’s nodding. That’s not the sort of thing that would happen without some sort of Congressional oversight. Granted, he’s not sure if this is real oversight, or if this is something to make it look like the rest of the country had some input just to make sure the change flows more smoothly.

When Tim wraps up, Leon says, “I’d rather they were talking about splitting you guys off.”

Tim doesn’t disagree with that. Splitting off it more or less what he’s kind of interested in doing. Having NCIS cease to exist isn’t.

Abby’s still not down with Sean, so Tim decides to get into the splitting the computer guys off part of it. If he’s going to take all Friday afternoon to talk about that, Leon deserves a heads up before it happens. “They… The rest of the conference… They were mostly talking about not having the right tools or people. And, they aren’t exactly wrong. We’re low on man power and we don’t have the cutting edge tools. And… I’m the one who’s going to talk about us splitting off, but not exactly in the way you’re thinking about it.”

Leon doesn’t look thrilled at that, but at this point, he’s figured that if McGee’s coming up with something more or less directly opposed to what he wants, he’ll have a good reason for it. Also, it’s painfully obvious that Tim has way too many ideas in his head right now, and if he wants to get to the bottom of all of this, he needs to just let McGee go, rather than trying to get him to focus down on Are you leaving me?
Tim says, “You’ve got to remember there’s cybercrime: crimes committed with the use of a computer, and then there’s computer tech: solving crimes with the use of a computer. And, really, there isn’t a huge reason for us to have the one.” Tim shrugs a bit. “Most places are big enough to not have both wrapped into one department. Cybercrime, that’s… maybe twenty-five percent of what we do. Maybe… five percent of what NCIS does. And if they’re all off on their own… That might be better off… Maybe… The rest of it is solving crimes with computers, and that’s vital to keep in house.”

Jimmy inclines his head a bit, and Tim nods. Jimmy, of course, already knows what Tim’s thinking on that, and he’s reminding Tim that he doesn’t have enough qualifiers on that statement. “Sort of… Here’s what I’m going to be proposing on Friday. It'll be moot if we all end up on one team… Sort of…”

“Sort of?” Jimmy asks.

“I want to build it for everyone to use, so the Local LEOs would still need it, and that wouldn’t be useless.”

Jimmy nods, and Leon wishes that they’d go back about six steps so he could catch up with them. “What are you going to be—“

Abby heads down with Sean, who has calmed down a bit on the fussing.

There’s another round interruptions that go with saying hi to the new baby. Leon’s not gritting his teeth, but only by supreme force of will.

Finally, Abby’s on the sofa, next to Tim, who’s got his arm around her, as Sean has second breakfast, and Tim says, “Thanks for being patient, here’s Friday’s plan…”

“What I’m going to suggest is one system for using computers to solve crimes. Cybercrime, in the sense of hackers hunting other hackers, that’s its own thing. I want to propose the ultimate crime database. I want a system where every bit of evidence, every lead, every person we talk to, all of, gets fed in, and it’s constantly taking that data, making connections, spitting them back out at us, and shifting who owns the case to whomever has the most relevant experience…”

Leon’s just staring at Tim, not sure what he’s thinking of that.

“Okay. Dead body on the street. The Local LEOs do their bit, and give us a call. We do our bit, and if the finger prints pop up something else, then we call in other people and get into a turf war. We settle that, and feed more data into the computer, say we’ve got a bullet casing, so we run that, and connect to other guns, and maybe we get into another turf war if the shooter’s been involved in something else. Say we’ve got a hair, so we run that, too, and more turf wars if it comes up to someone else with a record, and each level we end up fighting with each other department that overlaps to get their information out of them, and if the Local LEOs are involved, we don’t even know if they’ve bothered to put their information in, and it’s a mess.

“ar system, everything, every time, in it goes. And it’s one system, so we’re not juggling AFIS for prints, and facial recognition for another, and bullets for another, each with their own rules and log ins and systems, and on and on. Everything goes into one system. Our cases, Local LEOs, the entire rest of the Feds, all of them. So, say, I’m checking phone records. I run the numbers like I always do. While I do that, the system will tell me anyone else who is checking the same numbers. The system will tell me when the email address I’m looking at has been looked at before, by whom, and why. I talk to someone, and I’ll know who else has talked to him, and what he said. I won’t end up with a situation where I end up in a turf war, because all of the data is there.
“And because all the data is there, if I’m looking at a phone number, I can see there’s a cop in Peoria who’s checking into the guy my guy is calling, and we can get together and solve the damn thing that much faster.

“We’ll work it so it’s on our phones/computers. Say, a local LEO pulls a guy over. He puts the license plate into his computer, and right now all it comes back with is open warrants. With this system, it comes back with everything, including instructions on what to do with the guy. No more run a BOLO, as soon as someone goes into the system, they’ll hit an automatic BOLO. Stuff like that.”

Leon can tell that Jimmy and Abby have heard of versions of this before. And he knows that Tim’s been in this game long enough to know that what he’s talking about is illegal on a few levels, expensive as hell, and would require more manpower than NCIS could bring to the table.

But, everything is shifting, and if there was ever a time something like that could be built…

Leon nods slowly. He can think of, off the top of his head, at least five cases where they were behind the eight ball when some little detail popped up out of nowhere, and finally let them know that there were other cases intersecting with their case, as well. “If you could get it done…”

Tim nods. “Yeah. If. Most of what our cyber department does would be outsourced… Most of what everyone’s cyber department does would be outsourced. So, that’s what I’m going to get up and suggest on Friday. Or… maybe not outsourced so much as run like we do it at NCIS. Pop your case in, and the magic information fairies take care of it, and then everything pops up on your computer, and even a complete computer novice has everything he wants pop up in a few hours.”

“And if we’re all under one umbrella in a few years…” Leon can see where this goes.

Tim nods. “That’s the question, isn’t it? Are you getting anything…”

Leon shakes his head. “Not on that. The rumors I was hearing was a new Department of Cyber Technology that would handle most of what you’re talking about.”

“And your concern is that if it gets sent off site, it’ll be slow, clunky, unresponsive, and the big guys would get the first dibs on talent and time.”

Leon nods.

“If I build it, or design it, or just have oversight on the basic idea, it’ll triage, and it won’t care who puts the job up, just what the job is.”

Leon’s look is very elegant. They all know that the little agencies have to scramble for money, attention, tools, and people. And, even when they don’t, AFIS for example, can take anywhere from hours to weeks to return an ID, and that’s just fingerprints. Of course, if they’re all one agency… But even if they are, people will still have agendas and plans within plans.

Tim sighs. “Yeah…”

Abby strokes his knee. “That leads into your new job offer, doesn’t it? If you were doing that, playing favorites and cutting resources to smaller groups would be something you’d keep eyes on, right?”

Tim nods. It probably would be. Then he’s looking at Leon, asking with his eyes what Leon thinks about this.
“I’d rather you were working for me.”

Tim inclines his head. If he’s going to have a Boss, he’d rather it was Leon, too.

“It’s a better opportunity than anything I can offer you.”

Tim sighs. “If they gave it to you, would you take it?”

Leon sighs. “They did offer it to me. Not... not the level they gave it to you. I didn’t push. They didn’t send me a formal offer. Fenton came over to ‘have a chat’ with me. He didn’t hit me with the idea that there wouldn’t be an NCIS in a few years, just that I had capable seconds-in-command to take over my job, and that they needed someone who wouldn’t flinch when it came to going after the big guys.”

“Oh.” Tim’s not surprised he wasn’t the first guy they went to. But they didn’t expect to offer him the job they did, either. “What did you say to him?” Tim asks.

“That I was happy where I was, and perfectly capable of going after the big guys from here.”

Tim’s not sure what to do with that. He’s thinking of his job prospects, but Jimmy and Abby are thinking for theirs as well, and they both notice what Leon said.

“So, he didn’t mention anything to you about everyone under one agency?” Jimmy asks.

“He didn’t. Either he’s improving his negotiating position with McGee, or he knew that I’m in a position where NCIS being swept into something else won’t affect me too much. Depending on when it happens, they’ll put me out to pasture, or offer me something equally interesting. Diplomatic position, suggest I run for Congress, cushy advisory position with the Navy, something.”

“And Penny doesn’t know that it’s coming up?” Abby says.

“She tells me they’re going to run hearings. But she does know the law that’ll put the new Public Corruption Investigation office into play will pass.” Tim sighs at that one, too. “There’s something. I don’t know what’s in that thing, but we might not want to stick around after it passes. He said something about stripping all federal employees of their privacy rights while at work.”

“Isn’t that already true? There was something in our contract about anything we did on the NCIS computers, in the building, in the cars, and on and on, you guys got to know about,” Jimmy says. He remembered reading that when he signed up with NCIS.

Leon nods. “That’s true. It’s also, already, technically illegal to conduct work on your personal computers and phones to try to get around that, too. I think what’s changing is that they’re actually going to try to enforce it.” Leon sips his coffee. “What are you going to do?”

“Learn more.” Tim taps his cup, and rests his head on Abby’s shoulder for a moment. Then he looks up at Leon. “I’d like to run NCIS Cybercrime, and the build that computer system.”

Leon nods.

“But, as has been pointed out to me, I can probably do more good running the Corruption Department.”

Leon nods at that, too. He can see that Tim would be good at something like that. And, if he weren’t so unhappy at the idea of losing him, and more unhappy at the idea of losing NCIS, he’d be amused at the idea of seeing McGee fitting into the FBI.
“Assuming the job is what I think it is. So, learn more. Find out what they actually expect me to do. See what I can find out about NCIS’ future. They don’t expect an answer until April, and I can easily ask for 60 or 90 days notice. I’d be with you until at least June. Get through the hearings,”

“Even if we all stay different agencies, you’d still have the office, right?” Abby asks.

“I think so.”

Leon nods slowly. “You go, no poaching. As long as there’s an NCIS, I keep your teams.”

“Fair enough.” Tim glances at the clock. Nine. Time for him to get moving if he’s going to be at the Commission meeting to get more intel and do his job.

“It’s time for you to go, right?” Leon says.

Tim nods. “And you and Jimmy, too.”

On the way to NCIS, Leon starts thinking through who he knows in the next Congress. Probably… About 100 of them. Which would have been a big deal, back in September, but is now just a drop in the bucket.

Still, time to get talking, see what’s going on.

Time to decide what to do about that. Fight to keep NCIS NCIS, or see how to get all of Federal Law Enforcement into on bucket.

He thinks about Tim’s big plans for computers, and realizes that right now is the time to think about everything that’s ever bugged him about Federal Law Enforcement, and come up with the change.

If he were to start from scratch, and design the perfect law enforcement agency, how would it look?

He makes a note to have his secretary give Fenton a call. Time to start thinking big, though big might in fact be little. (Part of him is liking the idea of small, mobile teams, lots of them, who all use the same back up resources, but are able to be everywhere, fast and nimble… Sort of like the anti-crime equivalent of Navy SEALS…) If they are going to redo this from the ground up, he wants in on it.

Tim’s getting his laptop packed up. Just about time to go.

“Sorry we didn’t really get into the stuff that’ll effect you,” he says to Jimmy and Abby.

“Can’t get into what you don’t yet know,” Jimmy replies. Though both of them can see Abby’s unsettled.

She shakes her head. She wants the answers now, but she can’t expect them to just appear out of thin air. There probably aren’t answers to pull out of the air, yet, either.

Abby gives them a limp smile. “Always the private sector. I still get four or five offers a year.”

Jimmy nods at that. He’s got an open offer to work in the private sector with his favorite person on earth. Hell, if he ever takes that offer up, her dad might, finally, retire.
And all three of them can feel the tension, and ache, of not knowing what comes next.

Not enough of the good stuff. Not enough people. Not enough money to get the good people and equipment…

Tim’s heard it all before and lived it.

He’s trying to pay attention to the discussions of what equipment they want. On any other day, this would be interesting, because they’re talking about all the latest toys and what they want to do to super charge them.

It’s a tech guy’s wet dream. All the goodies and all the things to do with them.

But, his inner tech guy has been sent to the back of the brain, and career guy is in charge right now.

So, he’s half-heartedly taking notes.

An email pops up from Penny, only a few words and an attachment. *Here’s the law.*

He doesn’t have the time or attention to read it verbatim, but the quick scan he sees makes him wonder if he wants to be a Federal Employee after this thing passes.

Basically, it’ll give the FBI the right to ransack anything he does at work/during work hours. Supposedly, at home and on his private computer, they’ll still need a warrant, but anything done on the clock/with the Fed’s equipment/in one of their buildings/vehicles is on record, and they’ve got a big appropriation to pay for the tech to keep eyes on everyone, and the storage to keep what they record.

He’s pretty sure, that were he to be investigating under that law, the first thing he’d be doing is looking for off-the-books meetings. Congressman A and Lobbyist B meet up for lunch with no phone calls, no appointments on the books, no emails on their official calendars… Time to get a warrant.

He knows they say sunshine is the best disinfectant, but right now he’s thinking this might be the equivalent of sitting on the sunny side of Mercury.

Then again, he saw what they did with those privacy rights…

Maybe it’s more like chemo. Yeah, it sucks, but the disease it’s curing is worse.

He sends Penny a text back. *Thanks. You’re sure it’ll pass?*

*Probably with 85% approval. The only guys voting against it are the guys pointing out that it’ll basically allow for continuous monitoring of the military 24-7, and that those guys should have some privacy during their off hours, even if they are living on base. If it gets amended to cover that between the Congress and Senate bills, they’ll probably pull for it, too.*

Tim nods at his phone.

He rereads Fenton’s email. It’s got a general description of the job, the pay scale, his responsibilities, who he’d be reporting to, but there’s a lot of vagueness in those words. (Like, what exactly is,
‘promoting the effectiveness of anti-corruption actions’? Anti-corruption stings? Making what they currently do more effective? Going around and talking to the press about how great they’ll be at kicking corruption’s butt?)

He thinks for a few more minutes.

If they want *him* to do this, then they’re going to get *him*.

*Tom,*

*Set a meeting between you, me, and Comey. I’m free before 10:00 every day for the next two weeks. We’ll talk details.*

*Tim*
Tuesday night means it’s Breena’s turn on Sean duty.

It’s been a long day. “Slammed” just began to cover what was in store for the day. They’d had a pretty full schedule set for today when they got the call mid-afternoon yesterday. Car accident, three people, Jewish ceremony.

Mother, father, and little boy. Those cases are nasty to begin with, and the extra time pressure brought by a Jewish ceremony makes things tighter. But… They had the evening viewing time free, and one of Jeannie’s rules is that if they can help, they do. In the thirty years she’s run the front of the house, she’s never turned someone away if they’ve had the room free.

So, they did.

But that meant working fast, and two hours later than she usually does.

Which means Breena’s not in the mood for too much fooling around from Sean, who is looking up at her with those big murky blue eyes, crying his little head off, because it’s been two hours and twenty minutes and he wants food.

“Okay, little man!” Breena picks up Sean, one hand under his bum and the other behind his head, and has him looking her right in the eye. “Now, you listen… Shit…” She rearranges him so his face is pressed to her chest just below her throat. “Okay, you…” She know this is just rumbles to him, but, she’s in Mama laying down the law mode, so it’s time for little boy to… listen up? feel up? pay attention… that’ll do. “Pay attention! Now, we’re done with this waking up every two hours looking for a snack stuff. You are not a preemie, and you do not need to eat every two hours. And yes, we love the fact that you’re a little social butterfly looking for love and attention all the time, but that sort of behavior is for daytime. Right now, during these dark hours, you’re supposed to be sleeping. And you’re supposed to be doing it for three hours at a stretch.”

Sean responds by fussing at her.

“Nope. You’re getting out of this pattern of waking up every two hours at night. So now, you’re going back in the crib, and you’re snoozing for another hour.”

More fussing.

“Yeah, Mama and Daddy are taking it easy on you, edging things up by ten minutes at a time. Uh uh. We’ll be at this for weeks. And this is stopping in the next two days.”

More intense fussing.

“I know that sound. You’re not actually hungry, you’re just looking for a suck and cuddle. Back in the crib for you.”

Louder fussing. Breena puts her hand on his tummy and gently, slowly, pats him. She makes sure he’s got the pacifier in his mouth, and settles in for the long wait.

And after ten of the longest minutes ever, Sean does stop crying, and he does fall back to sleep. Sometimes, it’s better not to have mom or dad on the job.
Breena settles into the rocking chair next to his crib, unsure of how many times she’s going to have to put him back down before it’s eating time.

She rocks slow and gentle, remembering doing this with Anna. With Molly they were too fried and too new and ended up with Molly running the show, which didn’t work all that hot.

With Anna, she and Jimmy switched off feeds, and set the clock, and got her trained, which meant they all got more sleep, and everyone was better off.

She drifts off and catches a cat nap before Sean wakes up again, this time at three hours and five minutes out.

He’s gratified to see that she picks him right up, gets him cleaned up, and a bottle into his mouth in less than five minutes.

She watches him sucking away, cuddled in her arms, wrapped in new baby smell, and the soft weight of his little body snug against hers, and wonders if he’s got a little brother or sister in the works. Few more days before they get to find out.

Part of her hopes there is. That glow of a new baby, of one more little guy for their family. Part of her is remembering how sick she gets, and wants more time to enjoy this little guy before she’s tossing her cookies all the time.

Unlike last cycle, she doesn’t have a good sense one way or another this time.

When she shifts Sean around for burp time, she thinks about NCIS, or the lack of NCIS. Whatever direction Tim takes this, and she’s getting a pretty strong Pro-FBI vibe off of him, she knows Tim’s going to be fine.

Jimmy and Abby…

Jimmy’ll be fine, too. He’s easy to work with, and MEs generally run their own teams. If he gets shifted into a new unit, he’ll be just like every other ME, the final authority on whomever is on his table, and that’s that.

And, though she’s not entirely sure about it, she’s thinking he might not mind if he wasn’t in charge of the next department he ends up in. Especially if that next department doesn’t have NCIS’ efficiency when it comes to paperwork and case handling.

Solving the problems were always more interesting to him than managing the morgue. She’s certain he won’t complain if he never has to run an inventory again.

Abby…

The Lab is her second home. For a long time, it was her first home. It’s her nest and safe place. Doesn’t matter how bad the outside gets, there’s always the lab, where the work never changes and the truth is constant and…

And she’s going to have a hard time shifting around.

They haven’t had a good chance to really talk about it, yet. That said, all things considered,
ostpartum hormones are no one’s friend when it comes to dealing with upsets, she’s holding up pretty well. But, this weekend, when they’ve all got some quiet time, and hopefully a bit more information…

But how much information can they have about a decision that won’t be made, possibly for years to come? The old government was slow as hell on this sort of thing, and the new one… They don’t even have a president, yet, and it doesn’t look like the new one’ll come out of this next round of voting, either. Still fifty candidates to get through.

Might be two years, might be three…

That’s a long time to not know what’s going to happen.

Breena says a quick prayer for comfort and calm, knowing that it’s out of her hands, and trusting that God knows what He’s doing. She focuses back down at Sean, who’s happily slurping away, and starts quietly humming to him.

---

Tim switches nights with Jimmy, so he’s got Sean duty on Wednesday night, instead of Thursday. He wants to be good and awake for talking to Fenton and Comey, and ready to give his presentation to the rest of the cyber guys.

Right now though, with Sean in his arms, he’s thinking about him.

There are things Tim wonders about his son. Thoughts that never would have occurred to him if those hearing tests had come back normal. Like… how does crying work for him?

He assumes that babies have some sort of understanding of make noise/someone picks them up. Normally, if you don’t go in, they just cry louder and louder, and sure, eventually, after they’re exhausted, eventually they stop crying and fall asleep. But… How does, or would… Sean understand that? Open mouth, breathe hard… someone comes?

How does he think that works? (Assuming babies think… It’s occurring to Tim, as said thoughts are meandering around his head, shortly after one o’clock on his feed night, that he’s tired enough he’s getting oddly philosophical, but he’s okay with it.)

And, after all, Sean is crying. So, he’s reaching out, requesting something. (Though Tim’s damned if he can tell what. He’s fed, he’s got a clean diaper, he’s burped, what he’s fussing over, Tim doesn’t know.) There’s supposed to be a food cry, and a tired cry, and an irritated cry, but all of Sean’s cries sound the same to Tim. (Granted, most of Kelly’s did, too.)

Or… Sean chirps and coos like other babies, but… he won’t do it back. If Tim gets up close to him, face to face, and sticks his tongue out at Sean, Sean’ll do it back, little pink tongue slipping out, just like Daddy, but if he coos at Sean, he just opens his mouth in response. Tim’s tried putting Sean’s little hand on his throat when he coos at him, but that’s just way too obscure of a concept for a baby not yet two weeks old.

He does open his mouth back at Tim, just… no sound.

---

As he’s on circuit 78,029,948 of his house, Tim’s thinking about getting a Fitbit. He’s somewhat idly
curious about how many steps a night he’s going through as he’s walking Sean around. Might be nice to know.

He’s thinking about that as Sean’s cries slow down, and Tim begins to creep back upstairs toward the bed they’ve been sharing during feed time.

Sean’s still awake, eyes open but droopy, as Tim lowers him to the bed, hoping he’ll settle down, and that Tim’ll get… shit… forty-five minutes of sleep before it’s time for his next feed.

Although, compared to how they did this last time… He knows he’s getting a full night of sleep tomorrow, and the next night, and the night after that. This isn’t nearly as bad as it was with Kelly.

Somehow that’s cold comfort as he closes his eyes and tries to fall asleep before the seven pound alarm next to him starts to call for more food.

Tim’s not sure what magic Breena did, but Sean is sleeping almost three hours between feeds. He’s only got five minutes of fussing to get him to three hours.

In the blue gray hour of 4:00, Tim unwraps his son, cleans him off, gets him re-clothed and lying on the bed. Then off to wash his hands and make up the bottle. Then back to Sean, “Bottle time, little boy.”

And, of course, Sean doesn’t respond to that, but Kelly never calmed down when he talked to her, either.

Either the food is in his mouth, or it’s not, and if it’s not, it doesn’t matter how close it is or when it’s coming, because it’s not in his mouth.

One he’s got Sean set, his mind wanders. Fornell did get back to him, but didn’t have much in the way of concrete information. There will be a Department of Public Corruption Investigations. It will cover all of the Federal Government. It will have jurisdiction on any state case that’s brought to it, too, though it wouldn’t be able to just go hunting for state cases. It will have not just the power, but also the mission, to poke its nose into any chunk of the US Federal Government it sees fit to investigate.

They’re looking for a thousand people, spread all around the world. One of the differences for this unit would be the ability to investigate overseas, as long as the person being investigated is a member of the US Federal Government or one of the State Governments.

Internal Affairs of the Gods indeed.

Anyone, any case, anywhere.

Just setting up a good system to report those crimes/criminal suspicions and get the investigations started would put Tim squarely on the side of doing a hell of a lot of good. Maybe not solving murders level good, but… Maybe that’s the wrong way to look at it. The people he’d be investigating would be powerful, the kind of people who can go and get other people killed, sent off to die, if nothing else.

He’d be taking them out of the game. That…

That could do a hell of a lot of good.
He fumbles around for his phone and writes a note for himself. *Jurisdiction over contractors/providers?* There’s a lot his crew could do with that, too. One more note *Need full supply of forensic accountants.*

By his night on baby duty, Jimmy has come to the conclusion that Sean prefers songs with a seventy to eighty beats per minute range.

Or, pretty much, Abby’s heartbeat.

He doesn’t know how the songs feel to Sean, but, if he’s walking him around, keeping his pace and his voice (Sean’s head pressed to his throat, crown of his head just under his chin) in that range, he’s got the magic.

He can put Sean to sleep like nobody’s business.

Hand him an awake, fussy little dude, and a few choruses, some gentle bouncing, and several circuits around the downstairs, and he’s ready for dreamland.

The other three adults are not amused by the fact that of the four of them, Jimmy’s the only one who isn’t a complete zombie in the morning after his nights on.

He’s attempted to explain the magic, but even showing them the songs and the beat and the patting technique, he’s still the only one who can do it. (Sean especially likes Wonderwall, Ryan Adams, not the original Oasis, which is what Tim ends up with when he tries it. Too fast.)

And he’s not even pretending that that doesn’t tickle him pink.

As much as a newborn can have a favorite, he’s it, and it makes him glow.

Sean’s hand is just big enough to curl around Jimmy’s index finger, and like all little babies he likes to keep his hands in pretty tight fists.

But even more than that, he like’s holding onto something in that little fist.

So, in the dim glow of the nightlight, Jimmy sits up against the headboard of the guest room bed, Sean in the crook of his arm, bottle in one hand, and his index finger clasped in Sean’s hand.

He gently strokes his middle finger over Sean’s hand, as he hums a little, idle thoughts of this and that floating about in his mind.

He’s a bit surprised by how unfazed he is at the idea of NCIS not being NCIS any more. Maybe it’s not real, yet. Getting upset about rumors is never a good idea, and all they have now are rumors. So, maybe that’s why it isn’t hitting. Maybe it’s that he’s fairly certain that he can keep Dr. Allan with him wherever they may go next. No sane person breaks up a fully functioning ME team, especially not one with years of experience. Though… as he thinks about it, by that point Allan may prefer to run his own team, and Jimmy wouldn’t hold that against him.

Sean wriggles a bit in his arm, hand flexing against his fingers.
This is real. The rest of it… vapors of ideas, with no actionable options.

“Because maybe… You’re gonna be the one that saves me… Cause after all… You’re my wonderwall…”

Sean nurses away, looking up at him, as he sings softly in the midnight gloom.

Abby doesn’t have a midnight feed. Not until Monday. She does have the 7:00 feed, which is while the rest of the adults in their family are in bed, getting up, or starting the day and wrangling the other kids.

So, she gets her dim hour with Sean, with a bit more light, the occasional bit of laughter and conversation, small people snuggling in sometimes, and usually, a warm breakfast waiting for her when she’s got him back down again.

Today, as she slips her breast out of the nursing bra, she wonders what her parents would have thought about this. They always loved a good joke, and she can see them thinking that this would have been a fine one, at least, on a cosmic irony scale. The adopted child of deaf parents with a natural born deaf child.

And… she knows her mama always said that children ended up in the families where they belonged. Now, knowing that she’s adopted, that makes a hell of a lot more sense. She supposes that those conversations, about how God makes sure babies end up where they belong and with the people who’ll love them right were about getting her ready to tell her that she was adopted.

But, of course, they never got to have that conversation.

She nestles Sean close, making sure he’s looking her in the eye as he latches on. “You’re in the right place, love. You know that. We’re going to make sure you know that. Every day of your life.”

He just watches her and suckles away.

She starts to think about NCIS, but… Nothing good lies down that road. Tim’s got his meeting with Comey and Fenton today, and then his big talk at the Commission, so hopefully that’ll get them some intel. And they’re at the house for dinner and the weekend, so they’ll get to find out what Ducky and Penny have to say, and she knows that Tony’s been talking to Bishop and Jake, see what they could pick up, but…

But they don’t know. Tim hasn’t made any decisions, yet, and NCIS or not NCIS is still probably at least a year away from any sort of action.

So, she shuts that down, watches her son, and thinks more about her parents.

Penny went looking through the family records, and from what she could dig up, there were, over the course of one hundred and fifty years, three different McGillicuddys (her mother’s maiden name) were deaf.

And from what she’s reading, if this is genetic, and most forms of congenital deafness are, it’ll likely be a recessive gene. So it’s got to be kicking around in Abby’s family tree, too, and right now, she’s
curious.

Her adoption records are sealed. She can, obviously, get around that, but as of this point, she hasn’t.

Kyle, who from a young age knew he was adopted, has also never met their parents.

Abby wonders about them, too. Kyle’s five years younger than she is, so they… Stayed together? Had a one off for old time’s sake… Most of the people she knows who were put up for adoption didn’t have parents who stayed together. Usually, parents who stay together keep their kids with them, too…

She rocks Sean, wondering.

She wonders if she has any other brothers or sisters, wonders if they grew up with their parents, or were put up for adoption.

When she learned about Kyle, she ran Luca’s DNA against hers, and they don’t match. On any level. Luca matches the lock of her mother’s hair, which fits her memories of Mama being pregnant. She assumes the other half of the mix has to be Papa.

But, of course, she doesn’t, as a matter of fact, know that. And she’s not willing to do what she has to to find that out.

She is, however, thinking of running her DNA through the databases, see if anyone else comes up. She’s already in the system, had to do that to see if she matched Mama’s hair. It would only take a few strokes of her keyboard when she gets back to find out. For all she knows she may have other brothers, sisters, cousins… family, out there.

Parents. They might be in the system. The answer to who they are and who she comes from. That may be available.

She… probably wouldn’t contact her parents if she found them. They sealed the records, and… For whatever reason they didn’t want to/couldn’t take care of her.

God made sure she landed in the right spot. But… if they did pop up, she’d probably check them out online, see if Jimmy could get their medical records, just… ferret out the information that would be important for her and Kyle to know.

And then… like Tim’s parents, they can just be people who loaned a bit of useful DNA to the cause.

---

Tim pops into the room with Abby, and she looks up from Sean. “Oh, you’re ready to go, aren’t you?” He’s in his full “battle gear” kilt, eyeliner, black nail polish, hair fluffy, boots, dragon tattoo peeking over the edge.

Tim nods at her, and kisses her. “Gotta get going early. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

She pulls him down and kisses him again. “Love you.”

“Me, too.” He pets Sean, and kisses his head, too. And then he’s out the door, and the world swims along, changing every day.
Friday morning. Tim’s up and ready to shift his world.

More than that, if outing the vote buying scheme was him ripping down the old world, today it’s time to start rebuilding a new one.

He’s feeling like he’s in a good place for it, too. Either he’s getting more used to sleeping through Sean’s cries, or Jimmy had a really good night with him, but in addition to getting up and ready for battle, Tim’s decently rested, too.

Abby’s already up with Sean, nursing him. Jimmy’s already in the shower, and Breena’s hugging the bed for another few minutes of sleep.

Tim’s hoping that’s a sign of new baby on the way. He’s got a very strong, ‘baby on board’ feel. But they won’t find that out until tomorrow.

That idea makes him smile. He’s sure. No matter how today goes, tomorrow’s gonna have some pretty sweet news.

But he’s still got to get through today to get there, which means getting in the shower before little girls wake up.

“Gearing up for battle?” Breena asks when he’s out of the bathroom, towel around his hips, sitting in front of Abby’s makeup mirror, putting eyeliner on.

“Yeah. If I’d thought more about it, I’d have put on my nail polish last night.”

She smiles at that idea, pets his hair, and heads into the bathroom to get her morning started.

“You sure adversarial is how you want to do this?” Jimmy asks, once he’s got his glasses on and can see what Tim’s doing.

Tim smudges the black line under his left eye. “Been thinking about that for two days. But, if I’m going to take this, then I’m going to run it, and I don’t want them having any illusions about what they’re getting. They know I can blend in and play nice. They did enough background check to know about you guys, that means they know about Probie McGee and Agent McGee. And now, I want to show them that Director McGee doesn’t have to play by their rules if he doesn’t want to. I want them to know that if they put me in charge of this, I’m going to do it my way, and that exactly zero fucks will be given about if they like it or not.”

Jimmy raises an eyebrow as he pulls his boxer briefs on. Tim can tell he’s wondering if Tim’s torpedoing this intentionally. Tim’s fairly sure he’s not, but the question isn’t out of line.

“I’m protecting my future employees, too. I’ll expect most of them to look like Feds, but I’m also going to want some serious computer talent for this, and they won’t. If they can’t handle me, then they won’t be able to handle them. Good to get that out of the way now, not when I’ve put two years into this thing.”

Jimmy nods, stepping into his pants.
Makeup done, Tim dresses carefully for this meet up. In his most *look at me, I'm not the FBI* outfit he owns.

He can dress FBI. He owns and wears all of the usual accoutrements on a regular basis, and once upon a time he did the suit and tie thing every single day. Having been introduced to some decent suits, and gotten into fairly good shape, he actually looks good in a suit and tie these days. (It occurs to him, as he’s fastening the belt on his kilt, that part of looking okay in suits now might be that he’s *older*. He was twenty-five the last time he wore one every day, and that might have had something to do with looking like a kid playing dress up. But that’s another thought for another day.)

And who knows, maybe one day he will wear a suit and tie again, on a regular basis. But it’s not happening today.

So, big black boots, check. Visible tattoos, check. He even swaps his wrist cuff to his right wrist, just to up the number of visible tattoos. That leads into the next bit, visible leather: check. Kilt, of course. T-shirt and sweater, indeed. Eyeliner, lots of it.

He’s going to push them so far out of their comfort zone they won’t know what to do with themselves, and then he’s going to see if they can work with him and take him seriously.

Fornell knows about the meeting, was planning on heading in Friday morning anyway, and thus ended up in charge of making sure that Tim ended up where he was supposed to be.

He’s waiting in front of the FBI headquarters and notices a guy… He sighs. Yeah, McGoth in the skirt decided to show up for this thing. Once he’s in earshot, he say, “God, McGee, are you trying to get tossed out of the building before you even get to the meeting?”

Tim grins at him. “Yes.”

Fornell just stares at him and shakes his head. “You actually want this thing?”

“Depends on how much butt I’ll have to kiss. I intend to make it clear that my current set up is pretty sweet, and that I’m doing them the favor by thinking of taking this up, not the other way around.”

Fornell hasn’t applied for a new job in more than thirty years, but he can’t imagine going into one with that attitude. “You know you’re not the only guy they’re considering for this.”

Tim smiles again. “Yep. But I’m the only one who will walk into a meeting with the Director of the FBI with a middle finger practically tattooed to my forehead. And if I’ll do that for him, what do you think I’ll do for the guys I’m investigating?”

Fornell nods, slowly, at that. Of all of his kids, Tim’s the one he sees the least of Gibbs in, but… Then there’ll be a minute like that, where the pieces fall into place, and he can see the hand of Gibbs shining through. Granted, Gibbs wouldn’t do it in *that* get up, but, that’s how Gibbs would run IA.

“They let you run this thing, you’re going to be terrifying, aren’t you?”

Tim smiles one last time. Then his grin drops. “So, where are we going?”
Security checks his ID three times, including calling NCIS and asking for confirmation that he wasn’t in the building, and a request for someone to send over a copy of his picture.

As he and Fornell stand in front of the metal detector, waiting for the security guard to get his picture from NCIS, Tim says, “My irises are in the Federal Database, want to run them?”

The guard shakes his head.

“We don’t have a scanner down here, anyway,” Fornell adds.

Tim shrugs a bit.

The guard checks the picture that just came up on his computer, looks up at Tim, looks back down, and then back at Tim and says, “You can go through.”

Tim shakes his head. “I’ll set it off. I’ve got a ton of metal in my arm, hand, and foot.” He shows off the scars on his hand, sticks in into the metal detector, and the unit screams.

The guard sighs, grabs the wand, and slowly gets to it.

As they get through, Fornell says, “You enjoyed that, didn’t you?”

Tim shrugs. “Not exactly. Don’t love metal detectors these days. But, if he’s going to give me crap for how I look, I don’t mind tossing it back by making him get up and do some work.”

Fornell shakes his head. “What happened to you? Where’d that timid, nervous guy go?”

“He’s gone.”

“Yeah. Just remember, when you swagger in there with your big, swinging dick, that if you can do this job better than anyone else, you should do it, and maybe walking a little smaller might help you get this job.”

“If I walk too much smaller, I’m not the guy to do this job.” Fornell leads him to an elevator and pressed the button for the top floor. As the door opens, Tim says, “Look. Part of this is an affect, an image to provoke a response. I want to see what they do with this. Part of this is real, me, when I’m not being timid and nervous. And part of it is if I do this job right, I’ve got to have the balls to walk up to the President of the United States, whoever the hell he ends up being, and tell him that I will dissect his entire life if and when I feel like it. Hell, if I take this job, I need to be able to say that to Comey, too.”

Fornell glances at Tim, watching him. He stares for another second, and then hits the button for the floor they’re going to. “I always figured you were a computer guy.”

“I am a computer guy.”

“No. You’re no more a computer guy than Diane’s an accountant. You’re a cop who uses a computer. It’s not the same thing.”

Tim’s not sure what to do with that, so he says, “Thanks?”

“It’s a compliment.”

“Ah.”
When the doors open, Fornell points Tim down the hall. “Last doors on the left.”

“Thanks, Fornell.”

“No problem. I’ll admit, if you take it, I’ll be amused to see how it goes.”

“You and everyone else.”

Fornell smiles at that. Tim nods, and off he goes.

Comey’s secretary just about swallows her tongue when he walks in. She’s a beat late when he strides over, offers his hand, and says, “Tim McGee, I’ve got an eight o’clock with Director Comey.”

She blinks, hard, and says. “Uh. Yeah. I’ve got you on the books. Can I see your ID?”

He hands it over, and gives her a searching look. “So, the guys downstairs know you think they’re bad at their job?”

She blushes, and doesn’t offer him coffee when she hands the ID back.

He nods and sits down.

When he’s been waiting two minutes, it occurs to him that she also didn’t do anything to let her boss know he’s here. That makes him think he’s in for a wait.

He grabs his back pack, pulls his laptop out of it, asks for the wifi code, gets online, and starts going through his work back at NCIS.

Twenty minutes in, he’s responded to three emails, put out one small fire back at his own job, and decided that he’ll give it ten more minutes. When he’s got an appointment, if he’s running late, he’ll text whoever it is and give them a new ETA or offer to reschedule. He figures that since Comey’s the Director of the FBI, he’ll give him some slack, and wait for him, but only some.

His time is important, too.

Two more emails, and he’s standing up, packing his laptop into his backpack, when the door opens and Fenton comes out. “Tim, good to see you.”

He doesn’t blink at the outfit, doesn’t mention the time, and strides right over to offer his hand.

Tim has the sinking suspicion that they wanted to see what he’d do with a delay.

“Good to see you, too.” He takes Fenton’s hand, shakes, and nods at the door. “Everything ready?”

“Certainly.” Big smile, no explanation for the delay.
When Tim got confirmation that they were going to meet up, he googled Comey, and he’s a somewhat older, more tired looking version of his wiki photo.

Granted, for that matter, so is Tim. (He’s amused to see that he’s got two of them now. One on the vote buying scandal, and another as Thom E. Gemcity. So far, no one has linked the two of them.)

Comey also doesn’t blink at his appearance, which leads him to believe that either A: he’s a hell of a poker player, or B: the reason Tom could walk out the moment he was getting up to leave is that they were watching him.

Tim’s sure that A is true as a matter of general fact. He’s also pretty damn sure about B.

He offers his hand. “Mr. Comey, I’m Tim McGee, nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. I take it you’ve given our proposal some thought.” He ushers Tim and Tom to a conference table, already laid out with muffins, a coffee carafe, orange juice, and a collection of milk, creamer, sugar, and the like. Tim helps himself to a cup of coffee, heavy on the milk.

Tom does likewise, and Comey doesn’t drink anything.

“I’ve given a lot of thought to it. A thousand people, 200 million yearly budget, all of public corruption under my wings, get to build it from the ground up. Yes, I’ve given that a lot of thought. And all of those thoughts rest on a question, what do you expect me to actually do?”

“How do you mean?” Comey seems to be keeping his cards close to his vest.

“Okay. If you want, I will build you a take-no-prisoners public corruption unit. I’ll make a new Untouchables, if that’s what you want. But, I want to make sure that that’s what you want. I’m not going to be a name. I’m not a good political pet. I can handle the meet and greets and schmoozing, but prefer to do real work. And, unless it’s in writing, I’m somewhere between inept and useless at press conferences. That’s not me, and if that’s the job, I don’t want it. Likewise, if you’ve got someone else you want to design this thing, and you just want me to look pretty and rubber stamp it, I’m out of here.”

“Tell me about how you’d build this unit,” Comey says without answering his question.

“Tell me if I’ll be able to build it.”
He sees Comey’s eyes flick over his outfit, wander down his arm to his hands, cupped around the coffee mug, lingering on the three kiss marks visible on the inside of his wrist.

“We offered you the tech portion for your computer skills, and bumped the offer up because of what you did with your own department. That said, in the outside world you’re political poison, so we’ll make sure you don’t get too much attention from the outside world. Your lifestyle is too unconventional for you to be the face of this Department. Part of what we’d expect you to do, though, is to find a face for it.”

Tim nods at that. He can do that. Probably aim for someone a bit older, more stable looking, Gibbs back when they made him the poster boy of NCIS, something like that. Give him some sort of fancy title, ‘Director of Public Affairs,’ or something. Heck, he might actually see if he can find an actor for the job, someone who thrives in saying the right thing, loves to schmooze, and can be trained up on the rest of it. Got to be someone to fit that description.

“I can and will work with that.”

Comey and Fenton look pleased to hear that.

Tim gets into the details. “How to build it, first and foremost, we’ve got to make sure that there’s a way to let us know about cases in true anonymity. Part of why whistleblowers don’t like to blow, is because we do an awful job of protecting them. That stops on my watch. We’ll set up a case site that anyone can access. From there they’ll be able to report whatever they like, without having to fear reprisal. We’ll also make sure that where the reports come from is recorded. What ip address sends them. That way, we can start to weed out the crackpots. Say we get a hundred reports a day from one computer in DuBoise about a bunch of DC people, we know to put them on the back burner.”

“We will investigate every report,” Comey says.

Tim nods at that, too. “And we will. The system will triage what it gets. Depending on what the case is and how credible the report is, say it’s an IRS case and the computer doing the reporting is in the….” Tim quickly tries to remember where the hell the IRS is now. “Hagerstown IRS building, that’ll get it bumped up a few notches. Say it’s a case where a Director is taking bribes, that’ll bump it up a few notches further. Say it’s the third report on that guy, by different IRS computers, for different offenses, and even further up it goes. While a report from the middle of nowhere, that’s one of fifty other reports from the same computer in the middle of nowhere about a middle manager in the Office of Printing taking kickbacks from ink sellers, that one would probably drop several notches, and wait for a slow day to get picked up.”

Tom makes a note of that.

“That’s passive crime. Crimes that come to us. Then there are the ones we’re going to go after. Part of what I’m going to do is hire people whose whole job will be going up against these guys and lead them into temptation. We will try to bribe officials; we’ll encourage them to keep appointments off the books; we’ll offer kickbacks; we will try to get them to break the law, and then we’ll throw the book at them. We will have a unit that just handles sexual harassment charges. Whatever it is that the person in question likes to harass, I will have someone who can fit that description on staff, and we will aggressively go after proof, so we’re not just going in with he said/she said cases.

“I will have two teams of lawyers, one to prosecute these cases, and one to keep an eye on the laws that are coming up and make sure we know who benefits, who loses out, and who will be in a position to try and do something about them. We watched drug cartels pump piles of money into anti-drug laws to keep their profits high. I will have people who do nothing but watch the laws and figure out who might want to do what about them. They’ll help us keep up on targets for our stings.
“I will have a team of forensic accountants and hackers, and as soon as we get someone trapped into a bribe or kickback, we’re going to dismantle their lives.

“I’ll build a random number generator that will come up with Federal Employee IDs, few thousand a year, and we will audit them. If anyone had noticed how many members of the old government were living above their pay grade, we wouldn’t have had this big of a problem.”

“How are you going to do that, legally?” Comey asks. “You won’t have that level of discretion under the law.”

“The IRS is allowed to audit anyone it likes for any reason it likes. You” he looks to Fenton, “tell me we’re all going to be one group in a few years. That’s how we’ll do it. And if that doesn’t hold up, we’ll stick something into a law to make sure that every elected Federal Official can be audited at any time he’s in office. With all the new Congressmen, I could just do them and have that take up all of the time of my audit team.”

Comey and Fenton take that in stride.

“My hackers will also be watching the Fed’s computers, keeping eyes on what everyone is doing, what little niggly bits and pieces they toss into our systems. We are not going to end up with people skimming money out of our systems, rewriting laws for their own benefits, or spying. Not on my watch.

“We will have active investigators, the people who come in after we get a tip off, or after we’ve started a case, and they will be the straightest straight arrows you’ve ever seen.” He intentionally looks over Comey’s suit, and Fenton’s. “You have a look. That FBI look. It’s designed to make sure that anyone who sees you gets nervous. It radiates wholesome authority and imperviousness to corruption. My active investigators will match that. My undercover guys will look like whatever they have to. My trial lawyers will be so sharp they’ll have perps begging to plead out. Those are the branches that will deal with the outside world, and they will match the image they need to match.

“My auditors, legal analysts, and computer guys, they’ll look like whatever they want to, and you won’t give them any flack on it. They won’t be in ‘face’ positions, and as such, they can do what they want.”

Comey and Fenton are still nodding, and then Comey says, “What about the elections?”

“What about them?” Tim asks.

“Part of Public Corruption is insuring clean elections. What will you do about that?” Comey asks.

This time, Tim blinks. He’s thinking fast. 1000 people and 200 million dollars is tight for what he wants to do. He’s going to have more than half of that in salary, benefits, and overtime alone, and he’s going to have to scramble to build the rest of what he wants with the remaining money, and then put the elections on top of that?

Tim shakes his head. “Can’t be done. Not on that budget and that many people.”

“You’re supposed to be the tech whiz,” Fenton says.

“I am the tech whiz, so when I tell you, you can’t do this on that budget, believe me, it can’t be done. Especially since we killed the party system. If they were still doing the heavy lifting and giving us boots on the ground and money for the systems, maybe, I could do it, but just me? Cannot be done. More time, more money, more tools, and yes, I can build you a clean election system and keep eyes on it, but not with what you’re offering me.”
Comey glances at Fenton. Fenton shrugs. “We’ve been told it can be done. Invest in the tech, run the elections online…”

Tim laughs. “Have everyone register with their Social Security number and the ip address they’re going to vote with, each time that combination gets used, it can’t be used again, record the votes, allow everyone to print their vote out, and if there’s an irregularity tally the paper votes. Uh huh. Yep. I can build that system, and it’ll take two minutes to break it. Especially since Social Security doesn’t purge the rolls of dead people. You’d end up with more people voting than are currently alive. That’s the bare bones of a system that might, eventually, work. You’d want iris scans or something to prove the person voting is the person who’s allowed to vote, something like that.”

Comey smiles.

“And that was a test to see if I’d just tell you whatever you wanted to hear?”

Fenton nods at that, too.

“Ten years ago, if you’d told me to do it, I would have died trying. I’m out of that business. You’re already asking for the almost impossible, which I will deliver. I’m not breaking a sweat trying to get you what isn’t possible. Now, are the elections under my watch?”

“Sort of. Formal complaints of irregularities will be under your watch. Making the system, making sure it works, making sure someone’s got eyes on it to see that it’s working, all of that will belong to whatever replaces the Federal Election Commission,” Fenton replies.

“That I can do. That would be the kind of job my hackers would take care of. I can’t imagine we’re staying with paper ballots all that much longer.”

“Gone by the 2018 Congressional elections,” Comey replies.

Tim nods and gets back to explaining how he’d run the Department of Public Corruption. “As for what I’ll build, you’ll have oversight in the sense of I will allow you to know everything I’m doing. You’ll get full access and accounting. You’ll have no say in how I do it or who I hire. If you like what I’m doing, great. If you have suggestions, I’ll listen. But at the end of the day, I’ll do it my way, and you’ll let me keep doing it, or fire me as you see fit.”

Comey nods, looking Tim up and down. “And may I assume, this, is part of making that statement of independence?”

Tim raises an eyebrow. “It could be. Or it could be a test. If I hire the kind of people I want to run the kind of department that will do the job the way it needs to be done, what they’ll be wearing will make what I’m wearing right now will look tame. And if you can’t take me in a kilt and sweater, I’m sure the guy with the purple Mohawk, piercings, neck and face tattoos, is going to be a problem, and if he’s a problem, then we’re going to have a problem. Understand?”

“We understand,” Comey says.

“Do you like my vision?” Tim asks.

They glance at each other.

“Yes,” Comey says.

“If you want me, I can start the first Monday in July. I need your decision by April 1st.”
“Are you accepting our offer?” Comey asks.

“I’m giving you mine, and seeing if you want it.”

They glance at each other again. “The contract will be in your mailbox by the end of next week,” Comey says.

Tim nods. He stands up, and offers his hand to the both of them. Fenton offers to walk him out. As they’re in the hallway, Tim says, “It’s not a hard condition, but if you want me to actually get top computer and undercover talent, do what you can to drop the drug testing for FBI employees. Even better, get pot legal. It’d be nice to be able to actually get some people who have graduated college.”

Fenton inclines his head, indicating he’ll think about it. The elevator opens, and he steps in with Tim. “This isn’t a hard condition, either, but we’d prefer you looked like one of the straight arrows, too.”

Tim smiles a bit. “Some days, I will.”

---

When he gets back into his car, Tim lets out a long, slow breath. Then the rush of holy shit I just did that! streams through him, tingling his fingers and toes.

Director of Public Corruption Investigation. No more NCIS. No more…

He stops. If he gets thinking too much about that, he’ll stall out, and he’s got one more dragon to slay.

Time to get to the Omni, and redo how the world understands Federal Law Enforcement.

As he puts his key in the car, it hits him that, with the exception of days where he’s actually saved a life, this is the biggest day of his professional life.

And it’s about to get bigger.

Friday, at least at the last one of these he was at, was a mingle and schmooze day. It was likely supposed to be one at this Commission, too, which is why they had the afternoon free for him to take it over.

He’s coming in a bit late. That half hour dick move at the beginning of talking to Comey means it’s 10:14 when he heads in. So this time he’s getting mildly hassled for looking completely out of character and being late.

The security guys, who he’s seen every day this week, are asking for his ID again.

Tim rolls his eyes, shows them his badge, including the one they made him for the Commission meetings, and eventually gets let into the main floor.

And the schmooze-fest is in full force. They’re talking in small clumps, moving from crew to crew, passing out ideas. And staring at Tim.

He idles over to the closest of the groups, listening in, as they give him the side eye. Fortunately, they’re talking about getting more power out of the systems they have, and he can start adding tech to that, which rapidly overcomes his outfit.

After a bit of that, he starts having other people ease on over, curious, not just about the outfit, but
about what he’s going to do today.

Tim enjoys that, and keeps his comments non-committal and cryptic.

1:30 to 4:00. He blocked the whole time out, though he doesn’t think he’ll take all of it. He hopes, he’ll do this, and then they’ll get talking as a group, and by the end they’ll have an idea of who is going to move what forward.

They’ve got a podium for him, which he doesn’t love, but there are too many people here for him to do a functional campfire. So, up he goes. Tim waits a moment for everyone else to get into the folding chairs they’ve been inhabiting for the last week. Some of them are pulling out laptops or tablets to take notes, and he lets them get set.

Tim can feel them all staring at him. They’ve been doing it all morning, because he couldn’t look less like the rest of this crowd if he tried, because he did try. This is it. He’s as far out as he goes. Okay, he could possibly have lipstick on, too, and his collar. He’s almost as far out as he goes.

He’s as far out as he’s willing to leave the house.

And they are staring.

Which is where he’s going to start his talk.

“This is how I look on the weekends.” Not really, but he’s making a statement. He shrugs a bit.

“Actually, these days, since my son’s eleven days old, I’ve also usually got a spit up cloth over my shoulder. Now, I know you know I’ve got all the hacking cred anyone ever needs. A bunch of you have come over to chat with me, talk ideas about talent and tools, talk about what we do and how we do it.

“You all know who I am and what I’ve done.

“And today, I’m going to talk to you about talent, tools, and the future of computers in Federal Law Enforcement.

“So, let’s talk talent. Here’s the question, and you guys don’t have to do a show of hands, or anything along those lines, just answer it in your heads. I’ve got a Magna Cum Laude in Biomedical Engineering from Johns Hopkins. I’ve got a Summa Cum Laude Masters in Forensic Computing from MIT. I got through FLETC with the highest score to date, and I kept that record for eleven years. You’re looking at my resume, and it’s perfect. I walk into the interview dressed like this. As soon as I’m out the door, how many of you would toss my resume?”

He can see them, especially the sixty plus members of the crowd looking at each other.

“Yeah. And that’s why you can’t find talent. Here’s a good rule of thumb, if you are over fifty, and the computer guy sitting in front of you is under thirty, and looks like you, you don’t have top talent. You might have very good second-tier talent, and most of the time that will do the job. But you don’t have the top. The ability to blend into a Federal work environment should not be your primary hiring concern when you go looking for computer talent. Chuck your idea of what a computer guy is supposed to act and look like, how old he or she is supposed to be, and what he or she does in his or her off time, and you can start to find talent, too. Hire guys who look like you for human resources or accounting, get guys who look like me for computers. Boom. That one’s done. Next up, tools…
“Today, we’re talking about building a new tool, and how we’re going to completely change how all of Federal Law Enforcement uses computers to solve crimes.”

He sees them looking around again. This is Cybercrime not IT. “Yeah. I know. We’re going a bit off task, but right now you guys, and the people who work for you, represent the entire computer tech brain trust of the US Federal Government, and I’m drafting you into completely rebuilding how we deal with crime. Our sort of crime, and every other sort, too.”

That’s getting some looking around at each other, too. He can tell a good third of them are sure he’s wasting their time, but he’s got a few eyes flickering with interest.

“Right now, every person in this room has at least one device, and probably several, capable of getting you basically every piece of information on the planet.” Tim fishes his phone out of his pocket and holds it up. “Right here, I’ve got the mass of Pluto, the height of the Statue of Liberty, Marilyn Monroe’s lipstick technique, how to make chocolate mousse, and how to build an atomic bomb. Literally billions of people put information out there every single day, and this device sorts it out, finds what I’m looking for, and gives it to me in less than a second.”

His crowd is… curious. They don’t know where he’s going with this, but they at least look intrigued. Well, most of them. He can see some of them aren’t interested in this and just want to get back to the mingling.

“How do we deal with crime now? I know how my guys do it. We get a report of something hinky. Occasionally, very occasionally, that report goes straight to us. Most of the time, that report gets filtered through a few levels of LEOs. More than that, usually, there’s a physical crime that leads someone to check out a computer trail, which they will muck up, that will eventually result in said LEO deciding that maybe they don’t actually know what they’re doing, and then they call my guys in. Once we get on the case, we’ve got the tech side, but we’ve got to pull teeth to get the non-tech side, and once we’ve got the tech side set up, our LEOs don’t know what the hell to do with it? This sounding familiar?”

He seeing nods, though a lot of the crew isn’t seeing how this connects to his phone.

“Am I the only one in the room who’s been a full field agent?”

Four other hands go up, and all of them are guys who are past sixty. They likely started back before there was cyber anything, and worked their way up.

“Okay. For the rest of you, physical crime works pretty much the same way. We almost never get a case where the guys who will investigate the case gets it from beginning to end. Local LEOs get the ball rolling, and then the case meanders through a slew of groups. That case will be limited by what information the investigators can access, and how fast they can get it. I did twelve years in the field, and way more often than should have happened, we’d hit a block because we couldn’t get information that someone else had tucked away.

“And that’s going to end. We are going to rebuild how crime works. What does that have to do with my phone? I’m going to explain this system to you, and when you think ‘that’s too much,’ ‘it’ll be too slow,’ or ‘it can’t be done,’ or ‘there are too many moving pieces involved to make it work,’ I want you to think about your phone or laptop or tablet, and realize that the engine for how we’re going to do this already exists, and we’re just going to modify it for our purposes.”

Tim can see a collection of what the hell are you going to suggest looks, as different members of the audience glance at their phones or laptops.
“We’re going to build a system that uses every piece of information that we get on every crime, and then sorts it all out and gives it to our investigators in as close to real time as possible.

“I’m going to walk you through how this new system will work with a case I had this summer. This is the one that set a bunch of other cases unraveling.

“For me, it started when I got a call from the Navy’s Pension department. Little payments, nothing big, nothing more than two dollars were vanishing from retiree paychecks. When I got it, it was because our accounting guys had been able to hunt down the fact that the bank wasn’t the problem. I hacked the hell out of it, and hunted down the guy doing it. And I pulled it out of the weeds and solved the case because I was better with a computer than the guy doing it. But, that’s not how this should have gone.

“With the system I’m proposing, this is how that crime should have gone. Retiree gets his check. He notices that there’s a buck twenty-six discrepancy. And, yes, that’s how this case begins. Over and over and over again, old guys were calling in with stupid little fees like that. For months, that went on without anyone doing anything.

“Anyway, ideal world. Our retiree calls in, and makes his report. The guy he talks to at the bank says, “Not on our end,” and reports it. Okay, now the system has its first bit of information. Next, our retiree calls the Navy, and they take his report and say, “Uh, not on our end either,” and reports it. In the real case, for months, the Navy just credited his, and hundreds of thousands of guys like him, and that was the end of it.

“Now, with the system I’m talking about, it’s got two bits of information. There’s a discrepancy, but no one’s owning up on it. It’s a computer system, there can’t be a discrepancy with no one owning it. Someone, somewhere is making this happen. The system, because it updates in real time, already knows about the hundreds of other guys who are having the same problem. In fact, after about… five… maybe ten guys, the system has already decided there’s a case and gotten someone on it. Because even if this is a glich, it needs to be solved, and the chances of it being a glich are awfully low.

“In the real case, no one did anything for months. Millions of dollars in these little payments went scurrying off with nothing happening. And, if it weren’t for the fact that my step-mom’s department had just made a huge corruption splash, and my Boss had put out feelers for similar hints of things along those lines going on, this would have kept happening.

“New system, nope. It knows something’s going on, and it puts someone on it. The new system, it knows every investigator in the Federal Government. It knows all of their specialties, where they are, and how slammed they are on casework. Then it goes and finds the least busy, most qualified person for the job, and it hits their job queue.

“That someone starts to investigate. She double checks, and yeah, it’s not coming from the bank or the Navy. She gets that into the system, too, and the system notices that there are the same reports coming from Army Retirees, and with Social Security payments, too.

“So, unlike the real case, where the only reason I found out this was happening with every other branch of the US Government was a good guess and the guy who was doing it told me, this system we’re going to build would have already found the pattern, and gotten our NCIS investigator talking to the Army and Social Security.

“Now we’ve got all three groups working together, looking for where the money is going. Every time one of them has a breakthrough, all the others get it, too. Near instant information sharing.
“So, in the real case, I had to find out how the money was going AWOL. I came up with half dozen ways to code it, and went looking for that code. I’d find a bit in one spot, and another bit in another spot, and so on and so forth. It was slow and painful. My computers can only do so much searching at one time. And I’ve only got so many ideas for how to do this in my head.

“I lucked out. My ideas matched some of the hacker who was responsible for this’s ideas, and I was able to find his code. But, if he’d been that much better than me, I might have never found him, because I am one guy, working on my own.

“Now, with the system in place, we’ve still got to find the code that’s stealing the money. I’ve got a ton of code to go through and can only search it so fast. But, with the system, I’ve got Army and Social Security searching for the same sorts of things. We split the searches between us, and start knocking out terms, and finding them that much faster. The problem unravels faster, and on all three fronts. Each time one of us finds something, the other two branches find out, too, making each search faster and more efficient. Plus, because I know I’m not the only guy on the problem, I’ve got other people to work with, who will have other ideas of what to go looking for, and maybe one of them has the magic phrase that makes the money disappear.

“With the system, we break his worms in hours, not weeks. With the system, we all bring charges against him, instead of just me.”

He can see he’s got them intrigued.

“We’ll build our own web. Every case, every detail, it’ll all go into the web, and just like google, you go hunting for something, and it’ll find it.

“Our system, our web, will have every investigator, every team, in there. Whoever’s got the specialty in the area, and the least work on his plate, he’s going to get called up. We will constantly be working with each other, all departments, all the time.

“We’re going to drop whose department has jurisdiction over what, and act like we’re really on the same team. Once this system is in place, jurisdiction is going to be about skill. If I’m the best guy for a cyber job, and Manner over there is the second best, and we’re both light on work, it doesn’t matter that I’m NCIS and he’s CGIS, we’re on the case, working with each other.

“And that’s just for us. We’re going to roll this out for everyone. Imagine a murder. 911 gets the call. Our system is already in on that, and by the time the Local LEO is responding, we’ve already got background on the area and the number calling it in.

“Local LEO gets there. Any bit of information he gets is put into the system. Who the victim is, if that’s known, what sort of crime, if known, where, what weapon, as he’s working the scene, the system is also working. First off, it’s calling in the closest, least busy ME. There is no reason why one ME should be slammed, and the guy two miles away on the other side of an invisible line/with a different department is twiddling his thumbs. We’re going to use the system to assign agents based on specialty, geography, and case load.

“So, our ME is on the scene, and he’s going to take over the body, and everything he finds will also be going into the system, and automatically updating to everyone involved.

“He hits the scene, and first things first, takes a picture of the victim’s face. It’s automatically uploaded into facial recognition. No more cases where you’ve got a picture, and I’ve got a dead body, and we never find each other because I put my body’s finger prints but not face into the system.
“The ME loads the prints, and again, they automatically go into the system. If I’ve got a Federal murder, and you’ve got a local robbery, it’s possible before I’m even done processing the scene, you’ve gotten the note that I’ve got your robber.

“The ME takes the body back, and does his job. DNA, into the system it goes. Anything he finds, into the system. Pictures of everything. All of it’s going to build databases. Maybe our guy doesn’t have anything in our system, but his tattoo looks a lot like seventeen other ones in our system, so we use it to track down who did his art, and that’s how we get the ID.

“Back at the scene, every bit of evidence is collected and logged. That evidence is used to build connections and narrow the search. As soon as it’s declared a murder, the system is already slicing and dicing through every other murder to look for similarities. So, gunshot, that cuts out all the stabblings. .45 caliber, there goes all the rifles, .22s, and the like.

“While they work the scene, the system works the data.

“Evidence goes back to the lab. They do their job, and everything they upload, all goes into one system, and it is constantly searching. I’ve worked the forensics lab, too, and anyone who’s ever done that knows that every single system has its own inputs, its own idiosyncrasies, and own language. Instead of having to master ten different systems, we’re going to have one.

“Normally, we finish with the scene, come back, and start going through the victim’s life. Get back, and run phone and email and… No. On the scene, put in the victim’s phone number, email, facebook, all of it, and by the time you get back, it’s gone through, given you the people he was talking to the most, and letting you know if any of his contacts overlap with anyone else’s cases. Yeah, that one phone number that links a murder, kidnapping, and drug running scheme may just be a dentist, or he may be the guy who’s in charge of the whole thing. Either way, you now know all three cases have that number in common, which you wouldn’t have under the old system. Same with email, same with facebook, same with all of it.

“By the time you’ve gotten a death certificate and permission to start on financials, you will have a list of interconnections to sort searching through, and once you’ve got your permissions on the financials, it’ll do the same thing with bank accounts. I can tell you that a lot of the recent crap that went down would have gone down a hell of a lot faster if we would have been able to link where all of that money was coming from or going to.

“And each piece of the data improves your case and everyone else’s, too. You will have everything you need to do your job, you will be hooked up to the other people on that job, and there will be no more of these cases where you never get part of the deal because it’s stuck in a lab in Paducah, and you’re off working a case on a base in Berlin.

“This is what we’re going to build. And by the time we’re done, we will be faster, better, sleeker, and catching more of the bad guys than we ever did before.”

He’s got their interest, all right. At least on the ones who are real computer guys. The bureaucrats aren’t nearly as convinced.

“Here’s the last bit. Everyone uses it. We’re not going to run into a situation where we’re Feds so we’ve got a kidnapping, and the Local PD has a murder, and we never find out that the guy we’re hunting for is on a slab twenty miles away. All the data, all law enforcement, and if we build it, we will completely upend how law is practiced in the US.” Tim smiles at them.

“So, let’s talk tech. I’ve given you the end goals, now let’s go over the blue prints. By the time we’re done today, I want fifteen of you up here, willing to take over on this and make this baby your own.”
By the time he’s getting ready to leave the Commission, Tim feels jittery, high, buzzing, and like he owns the world.

There were about sixty people at the Cybercrime Commission, and he got at least twenty-five of them committed to this, another fifteen interested, and twenty more talking about how he’s insane and there’s no way this can ever possibly be done.

_Fuck them._ He thinks as he’s talking to the guys who set the Commissions up. They’re interested enough that they’re setting up one more Commission, first week of March, where the best of the computer brains of the Federal Government, from anywhere they can find them, his guys, IT, the military, all of them, are going to sit down and plan this thing out.

Right now, his goal is to have a working blueprint set up to take to Congress before summer. His second goal is to get Penny, and any congressmen she thinks would be interested in something like this to show up for that Commission meeting, because he wants this.

He can see two of the naysayers grumbling over in the corner about how this can _never_ be done, staring at him. He thinks they’re… IRS and Secret Service. And, yeah, he doesn’t want to deal with them, not really, but he knows they aren’t totally insane, either. Most of the last big technological things the government has attempted have been train wrecks.

He touches his phone. There’s no reason they should be, though. Run it like a web. Each case gets its own page. Each page has all the information in it. Set them up on a wysiwyg-style page builders, with each section already in place, and all they’ve got to do is type or hit the upload button. Searching for information would mean using good SEO style programming. Literally nothing he wants to do here is new or uncharted territory.

Of course, and it hits him this is probably why IRS is doing most of the grumbling, they were in charge of making sure people complied with the ACA, and the ACA was supposed to set up a simple, basic, website. A secure marketplace. Something that every major retailer on earth managed to pull off, on time and on budget and with security in place. And they couldn’t get the damn thing working properly for almost a year after it went live, and last Tim heard, the security features on it still don’t work.

Of course, the last he heard, the guys who built it, and the guys who made the deal for who would build it, were under indictment for kickback and bribes, so…

Tim sighs, more proof that they aren’t low on brains, just honorable men.

Assuming said men can be found for his system… The only thing they should have to program from scratch would be the ap to upload into onto every agent/cop’s smart phone. Then he rolls his eyes. How many times is he going to hear about how hard it is to do that? Let alone how often is he going to hear about how much smart phones cost?

Director of Public Corruption McGee has another thought, Agents and Cops _should_ be using official smart phones. Ones he can access. Field Agent McGee thinks they should also be phones with good cameras. Get rid of the digital cameras they use, take all the shots on their phones, which would be pre-loaded with the ap, automatically uploading all the pictures as soon as they take them…

Tech Guru McGee can see it. Click the ap, it would keep track of which cases which cop is working,
and open a menu to those cases, click which case you’re on, click the in ap camera button, and all of
the pictures you take would automatically upload and get sorted into the case. No lost shots, no ‘my
battery failed,’ no ‘oops my thumb drive died/got lost/was eaten by the dog/stolen.’

He makes a note of that as he’s starting to walk out. Manner falls into step beside him.

“I’ll admit, I wasn’t expecting that. The hiring stuff, I expected, but that…” he shakes his head.

Tim nods. He’s fairly sure that Manner’s never thought of that, either. But he’s sure of one other
thing. “But, now that you’ve got the idea, you can run it, can’t you?”

Manner snorts. “In my copious spare time.”

Tim nods at that. “I hear that.”

Manner looks up at him, catching something, besides the jittery, manic high on Tim. “What? You’re
on paternity leave right now. You should have time.”

“Spoken like a man who’s never had a baby.”

Manner shrugs. “Something else is up, too. You wouldn’t be even mentioning someone else building
this if it wasn’t.”

“There’s a really good chance I’ll be building something else, too, and won’t be able to do more than
be the idea guy on this.”

“Like your Navy security tests.”

That’s probably a good model for this. Get a plan, get it started, hand it off, and occasionally poke it
from time to time to see how it’s going. “Yeah. Make sure you’re at the next Commission meeting on
this one. If this is ever going to go anywhere, we’re going to need someone who can dot all the is,
cross all the ts, speak bureaucrat, make the Congressmen feel like they’re being paid attention to, and
rules followed.”

Manner smiles dryly at Tim. “And you think I’d be great at that.”

“Better than I would. I can come up with the idea, but I need someone who can actually get it built,
and that means someone who can make a whole bunch of people work together within a rule
structure. That’s you, right?”

Manner inclines his head, acknowledging that he is good at that. “I have a job.”

“This is a better, and more important one. Abbi’ll forgive me for poaching you. And… She knows
this, already, and you do, too, now, but don’t talk too much about it. Part of me talking about no
jurisdiction is that they’re talking about lumping us all into one team. Two-three years from now,
there probably won’t be a CGIS. Abbi’ll be in charge of Ocean Border Crime or something. Two-
three years from now, we will definitely need someone to run this system.”

Manner listens, eyes narrowing for a second, and then Tim can see him putting things together.

“But not you?”

Tim nods.

“What are you going to be doing?”
“Haven’t signed the contract, yet, but probably Director of Public Corruption Investigation.”

Manner exhales long and slow. Then he laughs. “You’re going to be the guy who makes sure everyone follows the rules?”

“Nope. We’ve got rules coming out our ears. Probably too many of them. That’s not the issue. I’m going to be the guy who makes sure people do their jobs. And I want a functional computer system to keep track of all my cases, make sure that I can get all the information I need when I need it, and that everyone else who’s got a case that intersects with one of mine gets it, too.”

Manner nods. “Okay. Well… We’ll see. I might not be the guy for this job, but if I’m not, I’m sure he or she’ll be at the next Commission for this. They’ll be digging tech guys out of woodwork for this one.”

“They will. I know who I’m sending, in addition to me.”

“Your Angels.”

Tim rolls his eyes. “They are not ‘my Angels.’”

“Fine. The Double X Dream Team. Better?”

Tim snorts at that. “You going to one of these next week?”

“Nope. I’m actually doing my job next week. We’re finally starting to get some butts in chairs, who actually know something about computers over at CGIS, and I want to get them working. Our backlog is years long. You?”

“Probably sending Howard so I can get back to being a dad on paternity leave.”

It’s closer to five when he gets out than he would have liked. That means a quick run to NCIS, grabbing Jimmy, and off to the House they go.

But, quick or not, he does owe Leon a heads up on what he did and said.

He’s got to drive through Rock Creek Park to get to the Navy Yard. It’s still as grim and gray as it was back in October. Granted, this time of year, it would normally be pretty gray. January in DC isn’t known for bright, green foliage.

This time of year, though, there should be joggers, and some kids on sleds taking advantage of the snow, and… just people. Sure, not a ton of them, it’s cold out, but at least some.

He drives past one guy walking across the park. Behind him, there are piles of rubble, the park is being used as a place to dump broken things until they can be hauled out of the city. There’s enough snow on them that they just look like mounds of white, but Tim knows there shouldn’t be large, jaggy, hills in the background. In front of him, closer to Tim’s car are stubs of burnt tree trunks.

January in DC should be gray. But the park is char black and snow white.

With the windows closed, he can’t smell death or char on the air anymore, and The Morgue is down to one tent and only a few refrigerated containers. Most of the bodies have gone home, now.
Through town he’s seeing more glass and fewer boards over windows and doors. There are construction crews all over the place, and trucks, either filled with rubble and moving it out, or being filled with rubble to move it out seem to be on every corner.

He’s not the only car on the street. More of them are moving around. There’s almost something he might, if he hadn’t worked in DC for the last 14 years, call traffic.

As he drives along, he gets a glimpse of the Washington Monument, still black from smoke and char. Cleaning it is probably way down on the list of priorities. At least, he can’t imagine Jarvis sitting there saying, “Well, we could be clearing streets and rebuilding hospitals and schools, but I think we should really wash off the Washington Monument.”

Coming back, and healing, but not there, not yet.

He drives past five blocks of rubble, whatever had been there before had burned, collapsed, and now was being used as a place to hold wreckage until someone can haul it away. Whatever had been there before, it’ll never come back. Not the way it was.

He thinks about what he’s building, about his job, and about what he’s going to tell Leon.

Tim pulls into the Navy Yard, showing his ID.

Nothing ever stays the same.

Tim’s texting Jimmy as he heads up to Leon’s office, letting him know he’s here and they’ll be heading off soon.

Karen’s at her desk, working away on something. “He got a few minutes?”

“I’ll check.” She picks up her phone as Tim pockets his. “I’ve got Director McGee out here.” She listens to Leon and then nods to Tim, pointing at the door.

“Thanks, Karen.”

Leon looks up at him as he walks in. “I’d been hoping the stories were exaggerating.”

Tim shrugs. “You’re the one who told me to shake them up, let them see your wonder kid with the ink.”

Leon shakes his head. “And that you did. I’ve gotten four calls checking in to see if you’re legit today.”

“Two from the FBI, what were the other two?”

“IRS called, and so did Medicaid.”

Tim snorts as he sits on the corner of Leon’s desk. “I ruffled some feathers today.”

Leon leans back, pops a toothpick into his mouth and chews it contemplatively, staring at Tim. “I’d imagine so. What’d you come up with?”
Tim thinks of the best way to describe this. “What’s your phone?”

“iPhone 6.”

Tim nods. That’s a phone that’ll do what he needs done. “Okay, imagine you had a case ap on it. Imagine all cops/feds do. That ap represents a web of cases, and the ability to search them, like Google. Case comes up, and a page gets made for it. That ap keeps track of every case you work, and updates your page. It runs your camera, does your case’s phone/email/social media searches, and links them to every other phone/email/social media bit that pops up into another case. Every person you talk to, you pop the name and address in, and if he’s been talking to someone else on another case, you’ll see it. You use the camera on your phone to take finger prints from bodies/suspects, the ap uploads them instantly, into your case. Same thing with facial recognition. The web then runs them against all the other images. DNA, prints on objects, trace, the lab still does that, but it all goes into the web and attaches to your page.

“Now, say you’ve got a phone number attached to your victim, click the link on it, and every other case, federal and local, that number appears in pops up. Now, imagine that for all of your evidence, all of your victims, all of your suspects, everything.

“That’s what I proposed.”

Leon takes the toothpick out of his mouth and exhales long and low. “Ambitious.”

Tim nods. “Yep. But if we get it up and going…”

Leon nods, too. “Yeah. If you could build it…” He can see exactly how valuable something like that could be, and he’s tech-savvy enough to know that Tim’s talking about something that would use off the shelf components. And he’s politics-savvy enough to know if this gets built “business as usual,” it won’t work.

“So, that’s what we’re working on. We’ve got another Commission meeting set for the first week of March, just to talk about building this. You’re more than welcome.”

“I think I will attend. Been talking to Fenton and Comey about all Federal Law Enforcement under one roof. It’s been… interesting. And what you’re talking about would make things easier.”

That reminds Tim of part of what his system will do. “Left out the best part on that. Case comes in, it gets its number, and some details popped in. First thing the system does is assess whoever is closest with the most specialization in that area. As more details emerge, it might reassign the case, and from the first responder to detective, it most certainly will.”

“Individual people?” Leon asks.

“I was thinking along those lines, build teams by whoever is best at whatever, closest, and has the least on their plate. Why?”

“I’d been thinking about mobile teams. We’d base them out of cities all over the country, and they’d respond to issues as they arise. Like Navy SEALs, but for crime. Like the SEALs, they’d have backup in the form of whatever the closest FBI hub is, but unlike our current system, they’d be more spread out. Instead of having them all out of Salt Lake and traveling to anything within a few hundred miles. We’d have them all over the Rocky Mountains, and only send them to the main hub when they need what’s back there.”

Tim nods with that. “I could see it working with a combination of teams and individuals. Individuals may start cases, get the base information in, handle evidence collection, and then hand off to teams…
Or some issues might only need one or two people, other bigger ones would call in teams. We could work with that. Or… have everyone set as individuals, with team rankings. I set my preferences, Tony and Draga for casework. Jimmy and Allan if I need an ME. Abby for lab work. If they just need a computer guy, I pop up on my own, but if they need a murder investigation, all of us come up, something like that.”

“I can see that.” Leon bites down on his toothpick. He’s quiet for a moment, waiting for Tim to say more, but Tim’s thinking through this additional bit of coding and how to build a sort function that works that way. Finally, after another moment, when it's clear that Tim’s off programing in his head, Leon says, “Got something else to tell me?”

Tim blinks, remembering what happened this morning. He’d been so into explaining this afternoon that he’d forgotten that he'd have to tell Leon something else, too.

“Yeah. Unless there’s a poison pill in the contract somewhere, June 30th is my last day. I’ll let you know once I’ve read it through and signed it, but… They’re offering me the whole department, to build from the ground up, as I see fit.”

Leon nods at that, and stands up. “You’ll do well with it.”

Tim smiles, looking up at Leon. “I hope so.”

Leon offers Tim his hand. “You will.”

Tim thinks about it for a second, and maybe it’s this afternoon, or the outfit, of just a general fuck it sort of attitude, but he stands up too, and pulls Leon into a quick hug. When he steps back, he says, “I’m going to miss it here, and I’ve been very proud to work for you.”

Leon brushes that off, not sure what to do with that or the hug. “You’re not leaving yet, and you’ve got to get your department ready to stand without you.”

“I’ll do you proud on that.”

Leon gives him a wry smile. “Do not hire an eighteen-year-old, ten minutes out of high school to run the place.”

Tim chuckles. He’s got a few ideas for a new Director of Cybercrime. “The guy who’s running my Pacific team’s pretty good. Might see if he wants to move up. Got to look through who else I’ve got.”

“No one from your current team?”

Tim shakes his head. “I’d love Ngyn, she’s got time in and the talent, but she’d hate it. I’ll offer it to her, because she’s more than earned it, but she’ll turn me down, and we’ll all be better off for that. Howard has the talent, but is too young. Brand is way too young. Beyond that… no. I got great followers on my team here, but not leaders.”

Leon nods in agreement with that. “That’s always the sticking point. Good followers are rare, good leaders are hen’s teeth rare. You find one, and you nurture him, and you protect him, and you keep him doing his job.”

“And that, in a nutshell, is why we were always able to get away with so much.”

Leon nods, that little, knowing smile on his face. “In a nutshell.”
Tim glances behind Leon and checks the time. “Got to go grab Jimmy and get on the road, can’t miss the sunset.”

Waiting for the elevator, Tim sends off a text to Delilah Fielding. Remember that computer thing we were talking about? I’ve got a full on Commission set up for it. First week of March. Get back to DC. I’ve got Storm in play, but I still need a Professor X for this project.

As the doors close, he gets back. You did not just make that joke, did you?

Tim can see it staring up at him on his screen, so apparently he did. Uh. Sorry?

Oh no. You do not call me a seventy-year-old bald man and just get away with it.

Very sorry. Get stateside and a working dinner, with Storm, Kitty Pride, and a few other X-men is on me.

There’s a second of pause. Then he gets. Why aren’t you Professor X?

Because I just got upgraded to Captain America.

Different team.

Yeah. Just about to head off for home. Clear your schedule and get back here. It will be worth your while. Tomorrow, I’ll write it all up and send it off to you. If you don’t agree, I’ll pay for dinner at wherever you want in Dubai, to make up for upsetting your schedule.

LOL. The place I’ve had my eye on here is *expensive* on a federal salary.

;) I don’t expect to have to pay it. More tomorrow, Prof X.

Okay, Cap.

As he steps out he gets one more text from Delilah. Who’s Wolvie?

Tim laughs, quickly sends back, Working with the Avengers. Because, if anyone is going to be Wolverine, it’s Gibbs, and he already knows what he wants Wolvie doing.
“You look like you’re having a good day, Director McGee,” Allan says as Tim walks into autopsy.

Tim smiles at him, putting his phone back into his pocket. “I am. Good day here?”

Jimmy heads out from the storage closet as Allan’s saying, “Yes, actually. No new clients today, so we got caught up with everything else.”

“Ah… Cutting it close?” Jimmy says to Tim.

Tim nods. “Had to see Leon.” He glances over to Allan and Jimmy nods; Allan’s in the loop. “Got talking about what happens next. If I can sell this idea I’m working on, you guys will be ‘on call.’ Whoever’s closest and has the least bodies in his building gets the call. Won’t matter if they’re Navy or civilians or whatever. And when you’ve got a body in each drawer, you guys go off call until you can take a new person.”

Tim looks around autopsy and Jimmy and Allan… “Actually, if this is going to work, I need to know what’s a good shift for you guys. How many bodies at a time is a good match for a two man team?”

Jimmy and Allan look at each other, both thinking about what a ‘good day,’ one that’s busy enough, but not insane, looks like. “We’ll talk about that Monday,” Jimmy says to Allan, pulling on his coat. “Come on, Ziva’ll be pissed if we’re late.”

Tim nods at that. “See, ya, Allan.”

Allan tips an imaginary hat at his boss and his husband, and nods them off.

“Did you take it?” Jimmy asks as soon as they’re in the elevator. That’s the part of this he’s most interested in.

Tim nods. “Almost. I’ll get the contract by the end of the week. Read it, make sure they’re offering what they say they are, and, yeah.”

Jimmy smiles, but it’s a little off. “Not sure if I should celebrate or be sad you’re leaving.”

Tim nods at that, too, stepping closer to Jimmy and holding his hand. “I know. I feel it, too.”

Jimmy pecks his cheek. “So, you want to get into it now, or hold it for dinner?”

“You mind if I hold it for dinner and spend most of the drive writing down notes. Got a lot of ideas in my head and it’d be good to get them down.”

Jimmy gives him an affectionate shove. “As long as we get your real attention at dinner, I’ll chauffer for you, buy you some more working time.”

“Thanks.”
This time, they’re the ones sneaking in two seconds before the sun sets and Ziva lights the candles. Tim can feel that the rest of the crew is curious as to how it all went, but the blessings come first.

But, once the prayers are said, the children blessed, the wine poured, and the challah broken, it’s all on Tim.

With them all staring at him, he’s not even entirely where to start. Hell, Tony and Ziva (unless one of the others told them) haven’t even heard about the job offer from the FBI, let alone him considering taking it, let alone him saying yes this afternoon.

“Okay… So, big day over here… Big day starts back on Monday,” and from there he tells them what’s been happening.

Abby gently squeezes his hand when he gets to accepting the contract, and he kisses the back of her hand. There will certainly be time for the four of them to talk more about how this changes things. Right now, he’s just getting through what’s up.

Tony’s about to break in about the FBI stuff when Tim holds up his hand, “Believe it or not, that’s only the beginning of today.”

“That’s the beginning? What’d you do accept it, and immediately go find another multi-national conspiracy involving everything that’s left of the government?” Tony snarks.

“That’ll be Tuesday. Today I may have worked on rewriting how all of us are going to do our jobs…” And from there it’s time to talk about the system he’s seeing and what it’ll do.

By the time he’s done, Tony’s just shaking his head. “You have no middle gears. It’s everything all the time, or just laying around with babies, isn’t it?”

Tim shrugs. “Yeah, well, that was my week. And maybe your futures. Leon’s told me I can’t poach from NCIS, so, as long as it’s around I don’t have a place on the Anti-Public Corruption task force, but…” He glances to Ziva and Gibbs… “You two don’t work for NCIS anymore.”

Abbi shakes her head and sends Tim a not too hot glare. “Oh no! You’re already taking Manner away, you do not get Ziva, too!”

Ziva laughs at that, and reaches for her glass of sparkling cider. “And what do you see me doing? I’ve almost gotten through your list of employees who need to be investigated.”

Abbi smiles a bit. “Just about the same thing you’re doing now, but instead of people, cases. Our backlog is insane, and I need someone to look through those cases and prioritize them. Trust me, until you decide you’re done, I will have work for you.”

“And how is getting done going?” Penny asks Ziva, passing Ducky the salt before he can ask for it.

Ziva glares at her belly. “Little person in there has decided that stabbing hip pain is exactly what I need. If I stand up for more than a few minutes at a time, my left leg starts to scream.”

Breena nods at that, looking at her oldest daughter, who’s snuggling in Gibbs’ lap, “helping” him “eat his green beans.” They’ve found that vegetable consumption goes up and vegetable drama goes down if it’s a game involving the adults. “Been there. That was Molly. Hopefully he’ll scoot a bit, stop poking you in the sciatic nerve, and it’ll get better soon. But, even if he doesn’t, come April, you’re done.”

Ziva looks to the sky. “Amen.” She glances back to Tim, who’s eating with one hand and holding
Sean against his shoulder with the other. “What were you thinking for anti-corruption work?”

He smiles at Ziva and to Gibbs. “I won’t have the department until July, so this would still be a ways out.”

“July I will be momming.”

Tim nods. “It might be a very part-time gig.”

Ziva shakes her head. Tim’s idea of “very part time” is unlikely to be her idea of “very part time.” Tim shrugs, understanding her look, and redirects his attention to Gibbs.

“What are you thinking?” Gibbs asks, wondering what Tim’s got in mind for them. “Also you’re the Director of Public Corruption, you think hiring family is going to look good?”

“For this job, yes.”

“What’s the job?” Ducky asks.

“Something you could do, too, if you’re not swamped with stuff up in New York. I’m going to have to build this thing from the ground up. It’s got 1000 people. Which means I need talent. Part of this group… You know what a Paladin is?”

“Heard the word,” Gibbs says, but he’s not exactly seeing how Tim wants it to fit that into this. Ducky, of course, knows what a Paladin is, but in that he’s thinking the historical reality of a Paladin, say the Knights Templar, he’s not exactly seeing the immediate connection.

“Okay, in the D&D games the Paladin is a holy knight. The best of the good guys. Lawful Good. Pure as the driven snow, in it for the glory of god/service to his fellow man. I need Paladins for this job, a lot of them.”

“You want us to find them?” Ziva says.

“Yeah, and not just in the usual places. I mean, I’ll have personnel forms to go through, too, but that’s not all I want. I don’t just want cops, Feds, and military. I also want kids, young men and women who have never thought about jobs as Feds. I want fire fighters and EMTs. Literal missionaries if you can find them. A crew of Mormon Boy Scouts might be exactly who I need for this. I want you looking through the news for the guy who donates bone marrow to strangers and runs into a burning building to save people. I need them smart as hell, straight as a level, and they’ve got to clean up good.”

Tony’s been listening, and he says, “I know what you’re doing.”

Tim nods at him. “Yeah. You do. Untouchables. Hunt them down from wherever. Go through those ‘heartwarming’ internet stories. I don’t care if the kid’s a twenty-two year old college senior, I’ll get him through FLETC. I need the character under that. I want my Men in Black to show up, once we’ve got a good case started, and make the guys I’m investigating wet their pants at the sight of them. I want these guys righteous, above reproach. I want them to know they’re doing the Lord’s work, and I want everyone they work with to know it, too.”

“Sounds like you’ve given this some thought,” Penny says.

“Some. Lots of thoughts this week.” Sean gurgles a bit, and Tim shifts his hold on him, so he’s in the crook of his arm, looking up at him and out at the rest of the table. “Better?”
Sean seems to approve of his new position. He sucks his pacifier a little slower, looking up at his Daddy, who makes a goofy face at him.

“I’d certainly expect that, Timothy,” Ducky adds as he passes the turkey toward Jimmy.

“You’d be right,” Tim says, getting back to the conversation with the adults. “We’re going to be having a week long meeting next month on the computer system… God, I need a real name for that.”

“That you need someone else to come up with,” Tony adds.

Tim shrugs a bit. Tony’s not wrong. He’ll just keep calling it The System or The Ap or something like that if it’s just in his lap. “Well, McNicknameGenerator, think of a name for this thing for me. You’re the one who’s good at that,” Tim shoots back to Tony. Tony inclines his head, liking that job, and thinking.

Tim manages to get a bite of his turkey into his mouth, and adds, “I should probably hunt down Senior at some point, too.”

Tony raises an eyebrow. “Why would you possibly want Senior on this?”

“Paladins on one side, Rogues on the other. I’m going to want con-men, undercover wizards, and shady businessmen to do some work for the side of the angels. We’re going to set people up, offer bribes, try to get laws skewed to benefit specific groups, offer illegal campaign contributions… If anyone knows people who do that…”

“Tread lightly on that one, Tim,” Ziva says. “He gets a bit touchy if you outright say he’s a con man.”

“I wasn’t going to put it like that, but…”

Ziva raises an eyebrow.

“I’ll work on my sales pitch.”

She smiles at him.

“Anyway, next month… Penny, Ducky, any Congressman or Senator you can find who’d be even remotely interested in this thing… Monday to Thursday we’ll plan, Friday we’ll present. Get them to DC for that Friday.”

“How do you intend to run this, and your new department, and your old one?” Ducky asks.

“I don’t. By that Friday I’ll have gotten the blueprint done, and I’ll step away. I’m already looking for people to put in charge. That’s what I’m stealing Manner for. He’s my make the system run guy, and I’ve got a call in to someone else who’s hot with the electronics to see about big picture issues.” He glances over to Gibbs, “And… you know, I might need a few retired law enforcement guys to work with these people and explain how a case works and what LEOs need. Think you and Fornell would be up to that?”

Gibbs swallows his wine and puts his glass down, and then asks, “Are we advising or making sure the system is fool proof?”

Tim shrugs. “Little of both. The biggest problem a lot of tech solutions have is the guy who’s supposed to use it can’t figure it out. My guess is that if we can get this ap set so you can use it, that’ll mean it’s ready for wider distribution.” Tim thinks a bit more about that. “Fool proof in both
directions. Make sure the guys who’ve never set foot outside of the computer lab can make something that a cop needs, and make sure cops who got dragged into using a smart phone kicking and screaming can make the ap work.”

“Congressmen will want to know how much it would cost,” Penny says.

“Yeah. I do, too. But that’s something I won’t have the answer to anytime soon. We can build it from already existing equipment. We can use people we already have on payroll to program and run it. We can’t do that and have all of those people doing their current jobs, too.”

“Security will be an issue, as well,” Penny says, already seeing the kind of comments other Congressmen would make.

Tim nods. “Yep. And in a month when I and a bunch of other people have been working on this, we’ll have a better idea. Right now it’s way too new. We’ll have a presentation worth watching, so get me people for it, but right now, seven hours into planning, it’s nebulous.”

“Fair enough,” Penny smiles at Tim, able to see he’s starting to come down from a long, exciting day. “So, what have the rest of you been up to? We’ve gotten official word, DC will go up for statehood on Monday, and it should pass the vote. Then all we’ll be waiting for is a President to sign it into law.”

“Does that mean you come home?” Breena asks.

Penny shakes her head. “Until a census can be taken and a vote put on the books, Jake and I are the acting Congresspeople representing DC.”

Abby smiles at that. “Congresswoman Langston? Congresswoman PhD. Langston? PhD. Congresswoman Langston? How does that work out?”

“There are many other doctors among our midst. A law degree is a doctorate, too. Unless it’s a medical doctorate, we just go by Mr. or Ms. So, he’s Dr. Mallard, and I’m Ms. Langston, and that’s that.”

“Technically, only lawyers who don’t practice law are allowed to use the title of Juris Doctor. The rest of them are supposed to go by Esquire. The idea being that those who practice law are not in the business of studying or crafting it,” Ducky adds. “Granted, on the floor of the Congress, that would be all of the lawyers. None of them have active practices right now.”

“What are you doing up there, as Congresswoman Langston riles up support for Tim’s pet project?” Tony asks.

“Eleanor and I have been working on a project for Mr. Jarvis. He’s given us a pile of papers on the effects of taxation on population growth and business growth, and is asking us to try and figure out which ones actually know what they’re talking about.”

“He’s got you doing economic research?” Abbi asks, as she butters a piece of challah.

“He does. They’re interesting to read, and Eleanor and I have had some fascinating conversations about the intricacies of statistical analysis and number crunching.” A mischievous spark lights Ducky’s eyes. “Or, as Mr. Twain put it, ‘There are lies, damned lies, and statistics.’”

That perks Tim back up. “That was something else I wanted on my team.”

“Statistics?” Abby asks, not immediately seeing where a statistician would fit onto his computer
“The anti-corruption team. This is the sort of thing Bishop trained for. I’m looking for people to read the new laws, and then figure out who benefits by having them pass, who benefits by breaking them, help me find where the corruption starts. Is that the sort of thing you’d think she, or you, would like?” Tim asks Ducky.

“I would find that quite interesting. And I imagine that Eleanor would, too. Though, like Ziva, she might be looking for a somewhat scaled back set of work duties in six or so months.”

“Bishop’s pregnant?” Ziva asks.

“They let everyone know the beginning of this week,” Penny says. “Though, since she’s been working with Ducky, he noticed the morning sickness months ago.”

“Their first child is due at the end of June or beginning of July,” Ducky adds.

“Are they happy about it?” Jimmy asks.

“Oh, yes.” Ducky says. “She’s as glowy as someone who throws up three times a day can be. And Jake is standing an extra six inches high.”

“Not getting her back anytime soon, then,” Tony says. He sighs at that. “I knew she wasn’t coming back, but… Time to actually get serious about hiring someone. I’ve got the resumes on my desk. If we don’t get a case Monday, that’s what Draga and I’ll get down to.”

“And how is Eric?” Breena asks, setting Anna free from her high chair. She’s finished her dinner and is thus free to roam about the living room and dining room. “Haven’t seen him around in a while.”

“He’s okay. Feeling like he can breathe again now that he knows he’s got full visitation with Kevin. In fact, he cut out early today to go pick him up. He and Diane are ‘taking a break.’ I think he’s okay with that, but he misses her, and Emily. He really liked having a little sister. We were talking today about what, if any sort, of relationship he can have with a seventeen-year-old girl he’s not related to.”

“The kind where her mom or dad is there all the time,” Gibbs says.

Tony nods, seriously. “That was my advice, too.”

“Who are you looking for to round out you and Eric? One guy, two?” Jimmy asks.

“Start with one. We got Bishop hoping to go in hard on the anti-terror stuff, but…” He glances to Tim. “You get this thing of yours built, and if we all do end up on one team, we’d never get terror stuff, would we?”

Tim shakes his head. “Unlikely. You might get called in on a murder, and you’d handle it until the terror aspect gets noted, then it’d shift off to the terror guys, or all of you would work together on it, depending on what’s going on with the case. But, yeah, Bishop might get called in to work analytics on a terror case, but they wouldn’t call you in for that. Well… You’ve got some terror experience, so if everyone else who’s got more is up to his eyeballs in terror cases, you might get one, but only if all the guys with more experience in it are busy.”

Tony nods. Though he can imagine the situation where that might happen, he hopes it doesn’t. “I want a cop. Or someone I can train into one. If we’re going to solve murders and thefts, then that’s who I want. Good eyes and a better gut.”
“He’s out there,” Jimmy says.

“Just got to fine her,” Penny adds.

Tony holds up his hands. “I’m equal opportunity. My best partner ever was a lady.” He flashes Ziva a smile. Ziva smirks at Tim.

“I thought I was your partner!” Tim adds in.

Gibbs rolls his eyes and shakes his head, sending a quick glare at all three of them. “Behave.”

“Yes, Dad,” Tim replies with a smirk of his own.

Breena takes over the conversation. “So, in totally not crime related news, Amy came into the office with a huge grin on her face today, and the big, sparkly ring to go with it. Last night was the anniversary of the first time she and Collin met. They’d been in line together at a coffee shop, and got talking when the shop ran out of milk while they waited. Last night, he texted her to meet him at the shop, intentionally waited until she was in line, and then said to her, ‘If I’d known then what I do now, I’d have done this,’ then knees hit the floor, ring came out, and he asked her to marry him. She’s over the moon, and Dad is almost not annoyed.”

That gets some chuckling out of the family.

It’s later that night, after babies have been put to bed, when the adult McPalmers have some time to themselves.

This is probably Tim’s favorite time of the day, when the four of them can lay around, be with each other. Sometimes they’ll read, or watch a show, or he and Jimmy might game while the girls talk. Just, low key, relaxing, together time.

Tim, who’s crashing from a very exciting day, suggested bed. It’s Breena’s night with Sean, so he’ll get to sleep (probably, depends on how fussy little guy is) through the night, and he’s looking forward to that, but he also wants some talking time, and for them, easy talking time is an in bed sort of thing.

So, they’re ready for bed, makeup off, clothing in the hamper, snuggled in for bed. He’s on his side, like usual, wrapped around Abby, who’s facing Jimmy, who’s lying on his back, with Breena at his far side.

Abby squeezes Tim’s hand, and turns a bit to kiss him. “You’re really leaving?”

“Yeah. Something Fornell said to me today, kind of wraps it up. If you can do the job, and do it better than the next guy, then you should. And I can. Maybe I’m not a better investigator than the next guy, but I build better systems. And I know how to build this.” He kisses the back of her neck, and squeezes Jimmy’s hand. “Every time I start thinking about it, I can see it more clearly. I know how the pieces fit together and where and why. I know where the support structures are and how we’ll build the webs to catch these guys.”

“It’s going to be really weird not having you in the building,” Jimmy says.

Tim nods. “I know. It’s going to be weird not being there. I hugged Leon when I gave notice.”
The rest of them laugh at that. “He swallowed that toothpick, didn’t he?” Jimmy says when he stops.

“Just about.” Tim’s hand is resting on Jimmy’s chest, and Breena’s tracing her fingers over his. They’re all quiet for a few minutes. Tim can feel sleep starting to lull him. “This is going to matter even more.” He kisses Abby and squeezes Breena’s fingers. “This is my favorite part of the day, because it’s the only time we get all four of us together. But work’s always been second, because I’ve got you and Jimmy nearby, and even if we’re not working together, I know you’re near.” His voice is a little shaky as he says, “And I’m going miss that so much.”

He’s on the far side of Abby, so she ends up in the middle of the hug between him, Jimmy, and her, but that’s okay, too. The hand on his back is broad and warm, and Abby’s head is tucked against his chin, her soft body snug against his, and under his hand is Jimmy’s strong bicep. It’s a good hug.

Breena gives them a moment to hold that with each other, to be there in that space they share that she’s not part of, and then she joins the hug, too. She might not share that bond with them, but she can understand its loss and offer comfort for it.

Tim’s voice is quiet as he says, “Abby and I already have this deal. At least five minutes, every single day, awake, together. Just, being with each other. And if the work gets too crazy and I can’t get home every night… If I have to drive to NCIS and Palmer’s to get that five minutes, that’s what’s going to happen. At least five minutes, just us, every day.”
The Almost Perfect Saturday

There’s no such thing as the perfect day. Though Tim would say he’s gotten awfully damn close.

And, though it won’t stick out in his mind as a specific date, Saturday is a day he’ll remember as “The Almost Perfect Saturday.”

He wakes up feeling awfully good. A bit sleepy, but even if you aren’t the one who’s doing the heavy lifting, a bit sleepy is as good as you ever get with a not-quite-two-week-old baby.

He’s in bed, snuggled up against Abby, who’s in the middle between him and Jimmy, when Breena brings Sean in for his first breakfast. He’s not awake enough to follow what Breena and Abby are saying to each other, but he does notice Abby sitting up.

He’s not snuggled against her back anymore. His face is pressed against her hip, and his arm is across her legs, his hand resting on Jimmy’s chest.

Soft humming and little muwf, muwf, muwf, nursing sounds filter through his waking up brain. He kisses Abby’s leg and stretches a bit, adding his own content, sleepy sounds to the mix. He feels her hand run through his hair, and he hears the sound of another kiss, but he’s not sure if that’s Abby kissing Sean’s head, or Jimmy kissing Abby.

Either way, it’s good.

He knows he’s got to get moving soon. If Sean’s nursing, they’ve got, at most, half an hour before the girls get up, but he’s not feeling any need to move yet. Soon will come soon enough, and warm and dozy next to his loves is good.

He hears the toilet flush, and the sound of the bathroom door opening. This time he’s awake enough to catch Abby saying, “Well?”

He catches the sound of Breena’s footfalls as she crosses the room. Abby makes an excited yip sound, so obviously she just saw something, probably from Breena, which peels Tim’s eyes open. He shifts up a bit, onto his elbow, and watches Breena slip into bed next to Jimmy, who’s also blinking open his eyes and starting to look alive.

He doesn’t see what’s got Abby glowing, but there’s a niggly little voice in the back of his head that knows what this is about. It’s just too sleepy to get to the front of his mind.

He does see Breena kiss Jimmy, and then lean over him to kiss Abby. Tim scoots up a bit more to get a kiss from Breena before she settles back in next to Jimmy.

“You awake?” Breena asks Jimmy as he’s curling in toward her, wrapping his arm around her waist.

“Enough.” (His eyes are closed again, and he’s resting his head on her hip.)

“Pregnancy test is positive!”

That sets grins to growing. Jimmy’s eyes open, and he hugs Breena tighter, his hand settling on her belly, as he kisses her again. Tim leans over Abby to give Breena another kiss, too, feeling giddy all over as his lips stroke hers.

Sean squawks a bit, not liking these people constantly moving around and brushing him while he’s
trying to eat. Tim pats him gently, then rearranges himself so he can kiss Breena again, and Jimmy, and Abby.

Then he pets Sean, and says to him, “Now we get to see if your little brother is exactly nine months younger than you are.”

Breena giggles at that. “October 8th, 2017. Could be.”

“Boy or girl?” Abby asks.

Breena shrugs. “I knew Molly was a girl, and beyond that…”

“Boy,” Tim and Jimmy say at the same time.

“He’s calling to his daddies, is he?” Abby asks.

“Yes,” Jimmy says, sounding awfully content. “He knows there is a serious testosterone imbalance in this house, and he’s out to get us closer to even.”

That gets some laughing, too. Granted, given how good of a mood everyone is, very basic concepts like “lettuce” or “moo cow” would have resulted in giggling.

Abby looks down at the little boy at her breast. “Give it thirteen years. You, Dave, and… Donny, right?”

“Donald Timothy,” Breena says as Jimmy smiles, and Tim feels that rush through him, probably about the same way it hit Jimmy, say, nine months ago. “Or maybe, Rose Jeannie.”

“Oh, your mom would be so thrilled with that,” Abby says.

Breena nods. “Yeah, she will be. Rose was her mom. Well, Rosaria, but we’re not very Italian anymore. And we’re really not Catholic anymore, so naming her after a rosary would probably miss the mark.”

“Still, good sentiment.” Tim says.

There’s a few moments of just quietly holding each other, feeling the joy, and hope, and, yes, for Jimmy and Breena, a tinge of fear, too. The shadow of Jon touches all of these moments. But, for the most part, it’s the rush of a new life and new possibilities.

It’s after little girls are up, after they’re marking sure everyone has cheerios, bananas, and adults have coffee, and in Jimmy and Abby’s case, food, that Abby says, “So, are we telling everyone? Tim and I are awful about keeping stuff like this quiet, but…”

Jimmy and Breena flash each other a look. They didn’t tell anyone, besides the McGees, Breena’s family, Ducky and Penny about Anna until they were sure she was okay.

Of course, back when Anna was cooking, they weren’t so tied to this group of people.

And, back when Anna was cooking, anyone who didn’t see Breena all the time, like, say most of this family, wouldn’t have noticed the constant morning sickness. It’s one thing to slap on some
makeup and fake functional for a few hours a week for Shabbos. It’s another thing to keep it going
all Friday night, and Saturday, and Sunday.

So, basically, as of this point in time, they know that everyone in the family will selectively go blind
if that’s what they want them to do, but… They’ll know. It’s a house full of cops, and of all the girls,
Breena’s the one least able to keep a pregnancy under wraps.

Hell, they all knew last time. After all, it’s one thing to slap some makeup on and fake functional for
a few hours, and it’s another thing to actually look healthy.

Absolutely no one will believe she just suddenly developed a five-month-long case of the flu. But
they will nod their heads in sympathy, keep the kitchen stocked with ginger candies and mint tea, do
dtheir best to not get her too close to smells that set her off, and pretend that this is a totally normal
occurrence, if that’s what she tells them.

Jimmy’s still watching Breena, and she’s still looking back at him. They didn’t talk about it last time.
They just… didn’t tell anyone. Probably a lot of reasons for that, avoiding ‘comforting words,’
avoiding having to hear anything along the line of them ‘replacing’ Jon, avoiding scorn… If Anna
had been another trisomy baby, they would have found out early enough to terminate, and… That
could have been a shit storm in the wider world. Hopefully wouldn’t have, but… At least at their
church there are some hardcore, pro-life in all circumstances types. And that was nothing they
wanted to even get close to.

But this isn’t the wider world, and no one in this group will do anything other than hold and support
them, no matter what happens over the next nine months.

Breena purses her lips a little, and Jimmy gives her a quick nod. “Yeah. We’ll tell them at breakfast,”
she says.

Having a big, black doggie who likes to play in the snow, a property with a long front yard that just
happens to be covered in snow, an aunt/step-grandma whose family runs sled dogs, and a fairly
handy grandfather-type-guy, means that while part of the crew is on, Mission: Make Breakfast,
Gibbs, Mona, Tim, and Jimmy, have a collection of little girls getting pulled around the yard on a
sled powered by a Labrador/Doberman mix.

Tim’s got Sean in his arms, all bundled up in multiple blankets, his ultra-plush little onesie, and his
two sizes too big fluffy bear outfit, watching Jimmy and Gibbs keep Mona from tearing around too
fast as the girls scream with glee.

There’s light snow falling, just enough to be pretty, not so much as to damage visibility or make the
Anna whine. (She doesn’t like anything wet falling on her this week, which has made for interesting
bath times.)

He hears Jimmy say to Gibbs, “So, she’s a Lab/Doberman mix?”

Gibbs shrugs. “That’s what the rescue said.”
Jimmy’s staring at Mona as she trots around in a wide circle. “Had a case this week. Went to the victim’s house, and his wife had three dogs who looked a whole lot like Mona. Only, they called them Rottweilers.”

Mona’s ears perk up at that, and Tim would swear that she’s staring at Jimmy with a *took you long enough to figure it out* expression on her face.

Tony pops his head out of the door and calls out, “Breakfast is on!”

The only thing Tim misses when it comes to breakfast at their house is bacon. If they were all at Elaine’s he could order it, and that would be that, but here… It’s not a kindness to make the guy who’s sworn off bacon have to cook the stuff in his own home and watch other people eat it.

And, pancakes, turkey sausage, scrambled eggs, overnight steel cut oats, (Ducky’s telling them how this is *the* only proper way to make oatmeal, and that any other way produces a soupy gruel good only for paste.) honeydew melon chunks, grapefruit, and lots of coffee go a long way to filling up any breakfast-oriented desires he might have.

They’re passing platters along, filling up their own plates, and when that’s done and everyone has the breakfast of their choice, there’s a few moments of content chewing before Breena says, “I’m going to miss this.”

The part of the crew that doesn’t know what that means looks a little alarmed, but they rapidly noticed the four way grin, and begin to put the pieces together.

Breena takes a big forkful of pancake with maple syrup, a bit of sausage balanced on top of it, and happily bites into it.
“But with any luck, I’ve got at least ten days until I can’t keep food down, so I expect all of you to help me find everything I’m going to want to eat for the next five months, and hook me up with it!”

From there comes the rush of congratulations and hugs.

The perfect day involves time for work and time to play.

And for Tim, working on the computer system he wants to build is something of a hybrid of the two. He’s in his room, his laptop on, Dragon up, and pushing it through its paces, hoping the email he’s drafting will make any sense.

The reason why he’s pushing it is that a certain baby boy has decided he has no interest in going down for a nap when the entire rest of the world is awake and doing interesting things.

Which means he’s fussy as hell.

Which means Tim’s got Sean on his chest, walking him back and forth, trying to master Jimmy’s pat technique as he talks to the computer, getting his ideas for how this system works and what it does down, so that he can send it to Fielding, and hopefully, get his Professor X on board.

So… Can Dragon pull his words out over small, annoyed cry/whines of a tiny baby?

The answer appears to be… sort of. About eighty percent of his dictation came through okay.

Work and playtime also means that when said fussy little boy finally falls asleep, he and Abby get an hour to work together on the computer system he’s talking about.

Abby’s not a computer pro, but she could be, and between the two of them, they’ve got a lot of good ideas for what this ap should do and how to make it do that.

They’re shooting ideas back and forth, talking programming, talking functionality, talking about what phone they’d want to do this, and all of the rest of it, and having a very good time doing it. They’re sprawled (well, as sprawled as someone with huge, achy nursing breasts and a still sore c-section scar can sprawl) on their bed, pillows strewn about in support, laptop between them as they work on ideas.

And both of them are having a good time with it.

He stops, kisses her, and she smiles, hand on the back of his neck, lips meeting his, with maybe a tiny bit of heat to go with warmth and pleasure. He smiles at her and she smiles back, and then they get back to it.

He’s pretty proud of the email he sends out to Delilah, and he CCs it to Manner as well. Might as well see if he can get Xavier and Storm talking to each other.

And from there, he shuts the ideas down as well as he can. He’s on baby walking tonight, which is
plenty of time to let computer stuff rampage though his head.

As Sean starts to chirp again, letting them know that he’s interested in yet another meal, and Abby responds by getting up slowly and mooing at him, it hits Tim that this might be one of the last times they work together.

If he’s FBI, and they’re NCIS… he might not be able to talk to them about what he does.

Tim shakes his head. If he’s got to put his entire family on the FBI employee list as unpaid advisors, or whatever, to get around that, that’s what he’s going to do.

He’s not the wonder-kid without them. That’s the point of the team. They work better with each other because they need these extra minds to bounce these ideas around with.

The house has three heat pumps. There are several reasons for this, but the main one would be that each floor will be much easier to keep comfortable, and will use a lot less energy if it has its own dedicated heating/cooling unit.

That said, they also go through a decent amount of firewood. And with the place empty during the week, there’s no one around to chop firewood.

So, log splitting is on the list of chores (in addition to make and clean up food) for the week.

Jethro’s the one who pointed out they were down to their last few logs, and Jimmy’s the one who decided that this would be a great way to see how well Jethro and Tim are doing on shoulder, back, arm rehabbing.

Tony’s along for this because Jimmy’s also pretty sure that the two of them are the ones who’ll be doing the real work.

When they were clearing out the downed trees, and taking care of some of the still standing but listing badly ones from the woods, Gibbs made sure to cut those trees into firewood sized chunks. And he made sure to pile them up neatly by the back patio. Before his shoulder got hurt, he even got some of them split. Enough to get them through to late-middle January.

And now it’s time to get more of them split.

Gibbs is annoyed at feeling a certain level of trepidation at this. His shoulder/back is healing, and most of the time, it doesn’t bug him. (Too much. His lung is a much bigger deal than the missing bone and muscle in his back.) But most of the time is not all of the time, and he knows he’s not back up to the level of strength he used to have.

But, somehow, he’s up first for this. Jimmy’s got the log up on the chopping block, and is holding out the axe, sooo…

He grabs the axe, waits for Jimmy to step back, lines it up, takes the swing, and… Yeah, it hurts. And not just on the physical jarring sensation of axe biting into wood, traveling up his arm, and settling into a low dull ache in his bicep and back, but also on the mental level of the fact that he didn’t hit center and the damn thing didn’t split.
He lifts the axe, this time with the log still on it, and... damn it, that’s heavy, before whacking it back down, this time splitting it, into... about a third on one side and two thirds on the other. He can feel the memory of his Dad staring at him, shaking his head. Back when he was... eight, nine, something like that, it was learn-how-to-split-logs time, so they worked on it.

He’d take a massive swing, and sometimes hit the log, or the chopping block, and once, missed his leg by less than an inch. “Control, Leroy. Slow and easy and hit it right.” His mom was sick that year. He remembers that. And control wasn’t his friend, because he was angry and scared and wanted something to hit. And it’s now, decades later, that he’s understanding why Jackson spent so many hours out there splitting wood, too.

Gibbs lines up the two-thirds side, and gives it a slow, easy hit, exactly where he’s aiming for, a third of the way in. Then picks it up again, and whacks the axe back down with the log still on it. Again, it splits.

He takes what’s left of that side, and this time, hits dead center and splits it in one go.

Jimmy stops him. “So?”

“Sore. Tired already. If I had to do it, I could, but...” Gibbs looks at Jimmy and Tony.

Jimmy nods. “Can you not swing in a full arc, or are you babying it?”

Gibbs didn’t realize he wasn’t swinging in a full arc, but that might have been why he couldn’t hit dead center easily. He shrugs.

Jimmy nods again. “Got some stretching for you. It’s pretty clear you’re missing some muscles and we’re going to work on that. Okay, Tim, you’re up.”

Tim shakes his head. This is the kind of thing he’s never done much of. Yes, he was a Boy Scout, and a good one, but Boy Scouts tend to scrounge wood. They rarely have piles of it just waiting to be turned into smaller pieces. Set him loose in the forest with a Swiss Army Knife, and he can get a decent fire going (eventually, it’s not a fast procedure) but this sort of thing isn’t part of what he’s ever spent any real time doing.

He watched Gibbs do it, and tries his best to copy it. Line the axe up, figure out where to hit, bring it down nice and steady, and... “FUCK!” He drops the axe and shakes out his wrist. “Arhs...” He shifts to rubbing his shoulder.

“I take it that hurts?” Jimmy says dryly.

“Yeah! Why’d you suggest that?”

“Wanted to see how solid your wrist and shoulder are.”

“Not very!” Tim’s still rubbing his shoulder. He feels like the vibration from the strike just crept into every break and all the rips from where his shoulder dislocated and is now dancing around in shades of pain. He winces again.

“Why aren’t you doing this?” he asks Gibbs.

“Because the force of the strike went through about ten broken bones and a whole mess of dislocations for you. For him, he’s got the bit of scar tissue in his arm from the bullet, and most of the damage in his back isn’t in the direct line of force,” Jimmy replies for Gibbs.
“And he didn’t hit a big, gnarly knot about an inch down on his log,” Tony adds, looking at where Tim’s axe strike stops. He picks it up, and whacks down, successfully splitting the log, but nodding after. “Yeah, he wasn’t giving up without a fight.”

Gibbs looks pained at that and mutters, “Damn.”

Now the other three are staring at him. He points to the two halves of the log. “I didn’t notice it, but that’s would have been a nice burl.”

“Can you still use it?” Jimmy asks.

Gibbs nods a bit. “Something small. Candlesticks…” He rescues both halves of the log.

“So, now that you know that hurts, what do you have for me?” Tim asks.

Jimmy sends him a smug smile. “All the reason I need to keep you out of the ring at Bootcamp for another six months. We doing that tomorrow?”

“Don’t see why not,” Gibbs says. “Looks like we’re still working with Ziva?”

Jimmy nods at both of them.

Tony’s got the axe, so he grabs the next log, and sets it up. “So, what happens to us,” he points to him and Jimmy, “if you and your computer wizard stuff goes through?”

Tim shrugs. “Job gets easier; I hope.”

Tony chops straight through the next log, and Jimmy sets it for the next cut. “I get that. What really happens?”

“If we’re lucky, your phone will do about 80% of the legwork you used to have me run for you. If we’re good in addition to lucky, it starts making connections I couldn’t make. And if it gets built by the guys who currently build stuff like that, it’ll be a giant electronic albatross that makes everyone’s life worse.”

Tony strikes again, and Tim grabs the logs, tossing them in the basket they’ll bring them in with.

“And us ‘on call?’” Jimmy asks, setting Tony’s next cut.

“Okay, why do we have jurisdictions?” Tim says.

“That’s a question for Penny or Ducky or Ziva,” Tony says.

“Federalism,” Gibbs replies. “They wanted a government big enough to do things like fight wars and build interstates, but small enough to keep local control. So, States and Federal level. The whole reason why DC exists is to make sure no State got to claim the Capitol of the United States for its own.”

The other three nod at Gibbs, not very surprised to see he’s the one who stayed awake during civics classes well enough to remember this stuff.

Gibbs continues, “Part of why ‘we’ve’ got jobs is for things that happen between states,” Tony splits the next log, Tim grabs the halves, and Jimmy sets the next one up, “or to cover things that aren’t part of any given state.”

“Military bases, soldiers…” Tony nods.
That makes a certain amount of sense to Tim. “Okay, so we’ve got these levels so people could have more control, but… It’s just biting us in the ass these days. And, I don’t know if I can get the States involved in this. I’m hoping we can dangle the ap at them and they’ll decide to get into it, but… Maybe it’s just us. But, I mean, there’s no reason why we handle crimes involving the Navy, and Army CID has the Army, and the FBI’s got interstate, and CGIS has the Coast, DEA’s got drugs, and Homeland’s got terror. We all do the same crimes.

“So, you and Draga, you’re murder guys. Day in day out, that’s most of what you do. Dead body shows up, you take care of it. And it shouldn’t matter if that dead body is in blue, khaki, or… hell, civilian pink. The tools are the same, the crimes are the same, it’s not like a Metro murder is radically different from a Navy murder two streets over. Same basic thing. So, instead of having you do a lot of murder, and a little terror, and the occasional kidnapping, and the once a blue moon talk a suicidal guy off a ledge, how about you just do murders, and Bob over at Metro, who does robberies day in and day out takes care of them, and Ed at the FBI who’s the Kidnapping King can get all of them.”

“And Sam and I?” Jimmy asks.

“You’ve told me that Metro’s slammed all the time, and most of the time we’ve got empty drawers. With the paperwork software, you don’t actually need Allan full time, not with the number of people you handle right now. So, why not take some of their bodies? Metro’s slammed, we’re swimming in corpses, Faluvia’s two hours away and has like three murders a year. They’ve got a morgue and an ME. It’s just wasted capacity to not use them. And it’s not like the old days when it would take a long time to talk to them. Phone, video call, whatever. Instant communications and you can see whatever there is to see. There’s no reason why we don’t spread the bodies out.”

“Except that it’s probably illegal,” Tony adds.

Tim shrugs and Tony splits another log. “Yeah. Probably. At the very least I can see if I can get our side of it working together,” Tim says. Jimmy’s placing another log for Tony, who hands the axe over, letting Jimmy get a few splits in. “So, what is a good day for you and Allan?” Tim nods to Tony and Gibbs, “I know what a good day for them is.”

Jimmy strikes the log in front of him, splitting it fast and sweet. He got a lot of practice at this up in Canada. Gibbs nods at him, satisfied at the tidy job he just did.

“One new case a day?” He thinks while Tony lines up a new log for him. “One questionable death. We can whip through an obvious cause pretty fast. Guy’s got all the signs of asphyxia, and he’s got a piece of beef lodged in his throat, that’s a two hour job for us. Heart attack? That’s a blood test and looking at the heart, easy enough. Gunshot? Usually we spend more time grabbing the guy and taking him back to the Morgue than working on the cause of death.

“So, say, eight hour day. On a good day, we’ve got three hours of getting there, picking up the body, getting him packed up, and back. That gives us time to get him catalogued, washed off, and all the basic tests taken care of, and a straight-forward autopsy done.”

“But not a complicated one?” Tim asks. Yeah, Gibbs always knew exactly when to go down, but that was almost never his job. While Jethro or Tony would do that, Tim would be working on phone, financials, emails… crunching the data and getting warrants.

Jimmy shakes his head. “Not just with two of us. Part of why we have a higher solved crime rate is that I’ve got the time to work with the little fiddly details. Metro doesn’t.”

“So, say you guys get four bodies in a five day week…”
Jimmy nods. “Yeah. Assuming they aren’t all complicated murders, or all accidents/old age, whatever, that’s a good rate. Time to get into the details, but not so empty I’m sending Allan home.”

Tim nods, taking out his phone, making a note.

Tony shakes his head. “You do this, you ever going to have downtime?”

Tim gives him an are you kidding look. “I’ve got downtime!”

Tony’s not buying it, and Jimmy’s also giving him the we’ll see look.

“I will make sure I get down time.”

Jimmy nods at him.

Tim watches him split another log, and then says to Tony, “I’m not allowed to poach NCIS, but, as soon as there isn’t an NCIS anymore…”

“I’m the murder guy, remember? There should be a lack of bodies in the crimes you want to handle.”

Tim snorts at that. “I can hope, I guess. But…”

Tony nods. They both know that Tim’s planning on getting into the kind of stuff people have and will kill to keep quiet.

Tim gives him a I didn’t get to my point yet look.

Tony sends him well, get to it look back.

“Eventually, I’m going to need guys who look good in a suit, know all the right words, can lay the charm on with a trowel and pretend to be swanky businessmen. And eventually, I’m going to need them a certain age, too.”

That gets Tony’s interest, because he has been wondering about what happens once he hits 57 and won’t be able to work field cases any more.

Tim nods at him. “Yeah. Gonna need guys who look old enough to have the kind of money to make the sorts of deals that get legislators in trouble.”

“And you’re going to need the kind of guys who know how to speak the non-verbal language that goes with that.” Tony’s got a bit of a smile on his face.

“Yeah, wear the right clothing, know the right brands, all that ‘stuff’ that goes with being rich and that I’m utterly useless at. So, say, ten years from now, you want to play James Bond for me?”

Tony laughs at that, a happy sound. “I can think of worse ways to spend my ‘golden’ years.”

---

Abbi heads out of the kitchen, where she and Ziva have been working on dinner goodies, to find Gibbs and Ducky playing chess at the kitchen table. As she heads out, Gibbs pulls his chair back a bit, so she can sit in his lap, and she does, watching the near silent game for a moment.
“Mate,” Gibbs says, sliding his queen into position, small smile on his face. He and Duck have been at it for two hours now, and he’s been behind since the third move.

Ducky grins up at him, whips his knight out of hiding, and says, “Checkmate.”

Jethro shakes his head. Teach him to play against the guy who’s been practicing his game since before he could walk.

“Awfully quiet down here.” Abbi says, looking around. Tim’s napping on the sofa, Sean on his chest, and Kelly curled up at his side. But besides them, Jethro, and Ducky, and Ziva punching down the dough in the kitchen, it’s very empty right now.

“Girls are napping. Mona’s keeping watch,” Gibbs adds.

“And, apparently Jimmy has never seen Mr. Smith Goes To Washington, which both Tony and Penny thought was an affront to nature and good taste, so the rest of the family is in the A/V room watching that.”

“You all done?” Gibbs asks.

Abbi decided that with a cold snowy day, and a woman who would soon be on not too much food, that today is a soup day. It took a bit of Googling, but she found a butcher that had soup bones, and right now the house is filled with the scent of sweet spices and beef broth, slowly simmering away.

By tonight it’ll be homemade pho.

“Got to skim the fat every now and again, add some more water from time to time, but any sort of real work is done. Why, you got some plans?”

He grins at her and pats her hip. “Was hopin’ to.”

She smiles a bit at that and kisses his temple.

“I had a serious thought, too.”

Abbi raises an eyebrow, and Ducky gives them a look.

“It’s for you, too, Duck.”

Ducky nods.

“I know you’re not very religious. And I’m going to Breena’s church because that’s where the rest of the family is. It’s not like I’m in love with the pastor or anything. I was thinking about what you,” he looks to Ducky, “did with Jimmy and Breena’s wedding.” His eyes shift to Abbi. “They had a real wedding, but none of us got to go because that was the week Deering decided to play hell with the Navy. Six months later, Jimmy and Breena had a wedding party, and Duck sort of ran it. Got up, did the Minister part. I was wondering how you’d,” he means both of them, “would feel about something like that for our wedding?”

Abbi thinks about it for maybe a tenth of a second before smiling. She much prefers the idea of someone who she actually knows and loves marrying them, as opposed to a pastor she sees maybe twice a season (about as often as she goes to church with Gibbs) and has no relationship with.

“I’d be fine with that. Ducky? You in?”

Ducky’s pleased by the request, but he’s seeing a glaring problem with it. “You two do know that
I’m not actually an ordained minister?”

Gibbs shrugs; Abbi doesn’t care. Then her eyes light up as she remembers her sister’s wedding. “You don’t have to be. At least, not in Alaska you don’t. My sister did a Quaker-style wedding. That didn’t need an officiant. Not sure if they’re legal in Virginia, but if they are…”

Gibbs is fine with that, and he adds, “Plus, if it’s not, would you be okay with jumping through the hoops to get ordained with someone online or something?” He looks at Tim, still sleeping, and decides not to wake him up. “Tim’d probably know, but a while back we had a case with this guy who was claiming his prostitution ring was legal because he was a minister and his ‘church’ was offering ‘healing services.’ He’d gotten ordained by some online thing, and was using that to avoid paying taxes.”

“How did you end up with that case?” Abbi asks.

Gibbs sighs. “He was the spouse of a Sailor. Was running the thing out of his on-base house.”

“Oh, I bet his house was popular,” Abbi can imagine how well that went over.

Gibbs nods. “Yes, it was. That’s how we got called in, too many sailors in and out all the time.”

“And, you’d like me to follow the lead of this pimp and procure an online ordination?” Ducky says, dryly, looking from Gibbs to Abbi, disbelief on his face.

“Okay, yeah, that sounds really sleazy when you say it like that,” Abbi says.

Ducky nods. “I’m more than far enough along to have come to the conclusion that I do not need to be annoying any possible deity that is watching. If this can be done without an ordination, I will be happy and honored to marry you, and if not…”

Gibbs and Abbi nod. They understand. Abbi pulls her phone out and starts googling. A minute later she says, “Looks like you need to dust off your wedding speech. Quaker-style weddings are legal in Virginia.”

The “almost perfect” afternoon involves naps.

There’s something about a very new baby, and a somewhat older baby, both of whom are snoozy and using him as a pillow that just zonks Tim out. He knows that one moment he was on the sofa, talking with Ducky about how to encourage the states to go in for his ap idea, watching him and Gibbs play chess, and then the next it was two hours later, his chest feels cold, and he can see that the reason that’s happened is Ziva appears to have picked Sean up, and is getting him tidied up and ready for another meal.

She’s in the far corner of the living room, where they’ve got a changing station set up, because with this many babies, it’s just easier to have one nearby, talking with Breena.

“Three in one year,” Ziva’s smiling and shaking her head.

“It’s fun. My Dad’s family is close like that. I’m the ‘on her own’ cousin. Amy’s got two in her year, and Christine’s got one. Always have someone to play with. Always someone going through the
same basic stuff. We were all at different schools, so we had someone to complain to about the rest of our friends without having to worry about it getting back to them. That was good.”

“Always someone to bug the hell out of you,” Tony adds. “I’ve got cousins coming out of my ears. Annoying snots.” He kisses Ziva, who’s fastening up Sean’s diaper. “But these three.” He tickles the underside of Sean’s chin. “You’re the smart one.” He pats Ziva’s tummy. “And he’s the handsome one.” Breena gets a cheek kiss. “And you’re working on the funny one. These three, they’re going to get on.”

“Like their daddies?” Ziva says with a smile.

Tony starts to grin back and then a little wicked light hits his eyes. “Hopefully not quite that well.”

Breena snorts a quick laugh at that. “I don’t think it matters as much if they’re all boys, but point taken.”

“Sounds like the set up for a buddy cop show or something,” Tim says quietly. Kelly’s still snoozing against his side.

Tony laughs at that idea and morphs into his TV announcer voice, “A tale of three cousins. By day they’re freshmen at Bellevue High School, but at night they roam the mean streets of Washington DC, looking for injustice and righting wrongs. They’re, THE WONDER TRIPLETS.”

They all laugh at that, and then Breena thinks for a moment. “Only if this one shows up a bit early. If he goes full term, he’ll be a grade behind these two. Cut off date is September 30th in our area.”

“So, show up a little early so you get to go to school with Sean and Dave,” Tony says to Breena’s tummy.

“Show up a little early so you’re not driving your mama crazy,” Ziva adds.

Breena nods, slow and steady on that. Sean, who’s all cleaned up, stares in their general direction, kicking his feet, and looking like he’s about to start asking for dinner.

Ziva picks him up. “Yes, I know. We’ve talked long enough. Come with me, your Mama fell asleep during the movie and is dozing on the sofa upstairs. Let’s go get her and more milk.”

Sean may not hear what his Aunt Ziva is saying, but he understands being scooped up, snuggled against a warm chest, and carried. He lets out a content little gurgle.

Having been given the mission to feed Breena as much good stuff as they can before she can’t eat, Abbi and Ziva are on top of it.

The house has been filling with incredible smells all day. Abbi decided, since she had a whole day, and, since it was cold and snowy out, that today would be a great day for soup.

And… if they’re going to do soup… They all like pho. And it’s not that complicated, just, time intensive. The only issue was if they could find soup bones, and that only took a few moments of googling to locate.
And, if they’re going to have pho, there should be baguettes, too. Ziva’s on that.

By late afternoon, the house smells like warm, sweet spices and fresh bread.

Tim’s in the living room, building intricate stacks of blocks for the girls to knock down, and he says to Jimmy, “Heaven is a family that cooks.”

Jimmy nods at that. Even better than a family that cooks is one that will go out of its way to feed you food you can eat. Stevia isn’t the traditional sweetener in pho, but Abbi was willing to play with it to make something Jimmy could eat easily.

Toddlers like meals they can “customize.”

They especially like it when Aunt Ziva gives them little bowls of mostly noodles with a bit of broth and a few pieces of meat, and then small plates with different leaves and condiments. (Not the peppers. They already know that won’t fly.)

Molly and Kelly had a blast nibbling on the herbs, dunking them in the soup, and ‘making pho’ for themselves. Anna likes gnawing on the bread. She’s making a gummy mess of it, getting it smeared on her face and hair.


Ducky’s working his way through cilantro, (a sprinkling gesture followed by spelling out c-i-l-a-n-t-r-o) and he notices his hands shaking, which they do, a lot, these days. Granted that’s been true for a while now, but… He’s much more aware of it when he’s signing.

“I suppose,” he says, as he forms the O at the end for Molly (who’s also whipping through this) to see, “that this little tremor will have to be the signing equivalent of my accent.”

No one’s sure what to say about that.

Later, as they’re cleaning up from dinner, Gibbs gets Ducky on his own. “You okay?”

Ducky smiles at him. “I am old, and last autumn was not any sort of kindness to my system.”

Gibbs gives him the quit the BS look.

Ducky sends him another one back, mostly resignation with a bit of frustration. He holds out his hands, and again, they’re shaking. “It’s likely just getting older. If it’s not… I am already well past the age where aggressively going after anything this might be would be worthwhile.”

Another look from Gibbs.

“Most of men born the year I was are already dead. Many of them didn’t make it to see the century turn, let alone now. If these are the first tremors of Parkinson’s, which would take years to fully
develop, the possibility of it ever being a problem are minimal.”

Gibbs eyes narrow a bit. He doesn’t like that, but Ducky isn’t wrong.

“I’ll be eighty-three in April, and I intend to celebrate it, and your wedding. And with any luck, I’ll be here for quite a few more birthdays and anniversaries, but time catches up to all of us, sooner or later.” He looks at his hands. “And my lead on it is getting smaller and smaller.”

As the guys are rounding up the girls, getting them ready for bed, Breena says to them, “You know, there’s something else I’m going to want to get as much of as I can before I start to feel sick…” She pats Tim on the ass and kisses Jimmy, and suddenly, they are both extremely motivated to get little girls ready for bed, fast.

For a second, they both stare at her, looking like horny just short circuited all higher level brain function. She grins at both of them and winks, sure this is going to be the fastest bedtime in the history of bedtime.

And, once they’re in the kids’ bathroom, stripping off little girls with reckless abandon, she and Abby head to the Palmer bedroom.

“You sure you don’t want to play?”

Abby shakes her head, hand very lightly touching her stomach. “How much sex did you want two weeks after Anna was born?”

Breena nods at that. When any of her babies were brand new, she had less than zero interest in having sex. For a good two months the idea was actively repulsive. “I get that, just, anytime you want to hop in…”

Abby holds a hand up. “Open invitation, I get it. I think I’m just going to watch, hop in for snuggles, and if it looks like you’re still going good when Sean wants his next meal, I’ll grab him, so you can keep the party going.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem,” Abby says with a smile.

Breena likes stories. Unlike Tim, she prefers to read them as opposed to telling them, but that doesn’t mean she can’t tell them, or that, every now and again, an idea or two doesn’t stick in her head and want to get worked out.

After the four of them got together, Tim decided that if she wanted to, she could see his raw work, though he did spend about ten minutes telling her that it was really rough, and he can’t spell, or be bothered to spell check, for shit when he’s on a boat load of Percocet.

He was right, his Dragon Knights stuff is rough, but it’s also blisteringly hot, and uncensored in a
way Tim rarely is.

She knows Jimmy’s going to be in those stories. She also knows that everything Abby sent her was her and Tim or her and Breena and Tim. (Breena’s not in any way surprised to see that everything written before the four of them started sleeping together doesn’t have Jimmy in any of the sexy bits.) Jimmy… Dae… shows up in the non-sexy bits, and obviously, he and Tim… Gabe… are extremely close, and she knows that all four of them together is eventually where the story’s going, so...

“Think our Dragon Knights might want to do some rescuing and ravishing?” she asks Abby.

Abby smiles at that. “No. Not at all.” She shakes her head while still smiling. “Neither of them ever wants to be the big damn hero sweeping in to save the day and then be ‘rewarded’ by the love of the pretty damsel.”

They both giggle at that.

“Jimmy okay with something like that?” Abby means this level of role playing. She’s not sure if Jimmy’s interested in pretending to be a knight.

Breena’s looking through her lingerie, seeing if she brought something damselish, as she says, “I think he’ll go for it. We’ve never played this game, but we’ve played before.”

“Ah, yes, Dr. Palmer.”

Breena smiles. Then she pulls out a long pink slip. It’s sheer and satin, with a lace trim. “This?”

“Unless you’ve got a corset?”

Breena shakes her head. “Only if you brought one.” Abby flashes Breena an are you kidding look. Breena sticks her tongue out at her. She tosses off her clothing and heads into their bathroom for a bit of quick cleanup. A few minutes later, she’s out, and then puts on the slip.

Abby eyes her, stands up, fluffs her hair a little, sniffs, and says, “Butterflies, Flowers, and Jewels Attending.”

Breena nods at her; that’s the perfume she was intending to put on. “Great minds thinking alike.”

“You want me to tie you to the bed, so they can properly ‘rescue’ you?”

Breena breaks into a very wide smile at that. “Oh yeah.” She eyes their bed. “We should be doing this at your place. That hook in the ceiling would work perfectly for this.”

“Next time. On the bed?”

“Nah…” She’s heading toward her closet, opening the door, and kneeling down to sort through the few pairs of shoes she decided should live here. None of them have any practical value at all. Most of them have never been worn outside of the bedroom. Especially since they’ve had kids, they only go out to the kind of place she might wear a shoe like these to once or twice a year, max. After a few minutes debating between two of them, she decides on the pair she wants. They’re small, light, delicate; pink, like her slip; and have a thin strap that goes over her ankle. They’re Jimmy Choos, and while some women buy expensive shoes as a present for themselves, she buys expensive shoes as a present for Jimmy. So far, he has never complained when she comes home from the shoe store with some sort of tiny, ridiculously expensive wisp of leather and satin to put on her feet.
She holds them up to Abby. “Instant hard-on for Jimmy. So… I need to be standing up, make sure he can really see them.”

Abby nods and heads over to the dresser. They don’t have a “toy box” here. They do have so little in the way of clothing, that the entire top drawer can hold goodies. (Granted, right now goodies are pretty sparse, but there are a few ropes.)

“At the foot of the bed, hands behind your back, tied to the post?” Abby says as she pulls the ropes (red, silk) out of the dresser.

“That’ll work.”

“Want me to gag you, too?”

“Uhhh…” She’s not sure about that.

Abby’s already past that idea. “Ohh, better. Tie your feet to the foot of the bed. Jimmy’ll get your legs, Tim’ll get your arms…”

Breena nods at that, too. Much better.

Breena stands by the foot of the bed, and Abby crouches down to her feet. “You really okay with that?”

“It’s sore, but… got to keep moving.”

“Good sore?”

Abby nods. “Jimmy’s checking every day, the scar’s coming along just fine, and no signs of infection.”

As Abby ties Breena’s left foot to the bed, Breena says, “It’s making a huge difference. You’re doing a lot better this time.”

Abby shrugs some. “Amazing what sleep and not being sick will do. Still feel weird, but… You’re right, it’s not nearly as bad.” She lays a quick kiss on Breena’s tummy. “And here’s hoping that’s true for you, too.”

“Amen. I’m not counting on it, but… It’d be really nice to not lose weight when I’m pregnant.”

Abby nods at that, fingers on Breena’s belly. “You hear that Donnie. No making Mom sick. She’s got a big job to do, and she can’t be doing it green around the gills.”
Breena laughs a bit, and they hear the guys heading into the bathroom. Like most of the rest of the crew, they spent the day in their PJs, so she’s pretty sure they’ve got at least a few more minutes while they get a fast shower, but it’s time to get moving if the scene’ll be set properly when they get in here.

“Think she’s got something planned?” Tim asks Jimmy as they’re in the bathroom, getting a very fast shower.

“That looked like an I’ve got plans sort of grin. But even if she doesn’t…”

Tim nods even if the plan is just a generic, let’s have lots of sex, he’s all over that. He crashed pretty fast last night. There was snuggling, and some talking, and he knows Jimmy and Breena were moving in a sex direction, but he and Abby stayed in cuddle and sleep mode.

And, of course, this morning was good, but it wasn’t that sort of good. And, in addition to not being that sort of good, he’s only getting into the shower now, so it’s not like he got a shot to take care of himself at any point today, or… yesterday… or… yeah, he thinks Wednesday was the last time he got off.

Might explain why he feels ready to run into the bedroom.

“Shave?”

Jimmy pets his chin. “Yeah.”

Tim gets to it. He usually shaves on Friday mornings, but he skipped it to add just that much more of a disreputable edge to his look yesterday.

“Me?” Jimmy asks.

Tim shakes his head. Jimmy usually does Friday morning and Sunday or Monday depending on if they’re going to church. He’s a tiny bit stubbly, but not bad.

Five minutes later, they’re out of the shower, wet, naked, skin pink from the heat, squeaky clean, and ready to go play.

Jimmy opens the door, and for a brief moment Tim’s very glad that he uses his glasses to see things that are close up. Because right now, Breena, pretty in pink silk, tied to the posts on their bed, hair long and fluffy, one breast almost free of her slip, is more than worth watching.

Jimmy mutters, “Shit,” under his breath, because all he’s looking at is a pinkish blur in front of the white/cream blur of the bed. He hops back into the bathroom, and is out a minute later with his glasses. His eyes trail down her body, settling on her feet, and then skitter up to her eyes, and that grin on her face gets wider and hotter.

Then she remembers the character she’s playing, “Brynne.” “Dae, Gabe, thank the Gods you’ve
found me! I was so afraid!"

Tim’s eyes light up and a grin spreads across his face fast as lightning. He almost laughs for the joy of it, but he shuts it down and snaps himself into Gabe.

Jimmy’s slightly unsure of what’s going on, but a fast, under the breath, “Dragon Knights. You’re Dae. I’m Gabe. She’s Brynne,” from Tim gets the idea across well enough.

Tim steps forward, “Always, Brynne, always find ya, luv.”

“Well, ya took yer sweet time, doin’ it.” Then Breena breaks into a giggle. Neither she nor Tim should ever attempt anything even remotely like an Irish or Scottish accent. They’re both doing an appalling job of with it.

(Jimmy’s snickering away in the background, catching Abby’s eyes, she’s also giggling at this.)

The Dragon Knights might be from some sort of vaguely Celtish place, but Jimmy knows he’s not even going to try the vaguely scots/irish, old fashioned, Lord of the Rings-esque voice that Breena and Tim are going for. He also knows that, after more than a decade of working with Ducky, that he can absolutely nail a highly educated lowland Scots accent.

“Did you doubt us, our Brynne?” he says, mimicking Ducky’s accent and speech pattern, stepping over to her, crouching down to start untying her feet, and place a gentle kiss on the arch of her foot.

Play stops dead for a second at that, the other three just staring at him. He looks up from Breena’s foot, grins back, kisses her ankle again, and then says, his own accent and cadence, “If all I learned in fifteen years with him was how to dissect a corpse, I wouldn’t have been paying attention.” That gets some head shaking. He kisses her foot again, grins up at her, and says, still in Jimmy, “And I love these!”

“Knew you would, baby.” Breena smiles back.

Tim’s hand caresses her neck, settling to cup around the back, and he kisses her deep and wet. “Corgon’s forces have fallen. You’re safe, now.”

“Isn’t that the bad guy from Highlander?” Jimmy asks, still untying Breena’s foot.

Tim glances back down at him. “You seem to be missing the point of this game.”

“I’m just hoping you’re not going to get us all sued into the next century for copyright violations when this thing goes live.”

Tim gently whacks Jimmy on the back of the head.

“Right, playing along.” He tugs the first of the ropes free. “It was a long and horrible battle, but we’re here. Naked, and wet, with no weapons. Terrible fight, in the rain, against unarmed ninjas, with no clothing, and, oh, look, a bed! Cue the porn music!”

Breena and Abby are outright laughing at that.

“Okay smartass. You want to go back and do wardrobe?” Tim says.

“Nah. I’m just playing. Okay…” He stops to think for a second, while Tim’s looking down at him. “We’re naked because the dragons don’t need to be wearing clothing, right?”

“And when they shift to human form, they don’t suddenly start wearing it. It probably is raining
outside, that’s why we’re wet, and we don’t need weapons because we breathe fire,” Tim adds.

“All right,” Jimmy nods.

“She’s a dragon, too. She knows how it works,” Tim says, kissing Breena again, hoping he’s got Jimmy on board enough to get into the game.

“And would be in no way surprised to see both of you show up naked in wet, assuming your rescue attempt was happening in the middle of a rainstorm.” She’s ready to get on with the game, too.

By this point Abby’s gotten her phone and added a rain sounds background music.

Breena nods to Abby. “Thanks.”

“Why do you need to be rescued?” Jimmy asks. Then he looks at Tim, “I mean, did you write this? She’s a dragon, can’t she just… burn the ropes and fly away on her own.”

Deep sighs from Breena and Tim. (And possibly some eye rolling.)

“No, he didn’t write this. I thought you guys might like it.”

“One of us does!” Tim adds, pointedly.

“I like it, just… I haven’t read the stories, so I’m a bit behind here.”

They all glance at each other, and the unspoken message to get back to the game is loud and clear.

“Come, love,” Tim goes back to his own voice, but keeps Gabe’s speech patterns. “Let’s get all three of us out of here before they realize we’re here.”

“They change the guards every hour, so the sooner the better,” Breena replies, also in her own voice.

“Then we’ve got about a minute before they find the first dead watchman,” Tim says.

Jimmy pulls the other rope free, and as much as he’d like to linger at her feet, gently stroking and nibbling along them, that’s not really part of this game, so he stands up, and says, still with Ducky’s accent, “And we are ready on my end. What have you been doing, Gabriel, sleeping? Those ropes still look frightfully tied.”

“Gabe” shoots “Dae” the stink-eye, and gets untying.

“Dae” smirks happily, and kisses his wife hello. He wraps his arms around her as his lips slide over hers, and when he pulls back, he looks her in the eye, saying, “I’ve missed you, my love.”

She kisses back, sweet and soft as his lips dance with hers. “And I you.”

Jimmy’s stroking her hair, neck and shoulders, looking into her eyes, lips hovering bare millimeters over hers, “They’ll never take you again. Never. The war ends tomorrow. Just past sundown, we’re ending this for good.”

Tim stands back up, wrapping his arms around both of them. “So, we’ll need to make the most of that time when we get home. Ready?”

Breena, who’s read the stories and knows that Gabe can teleport himself and others, nods. Jimmy’s not sure what they’re supposed to be ready for, so he doesn’t quite have the right expression, as Tim’s quietly murmuring something, but he rolls with it.
“Home!” Breena says, when Tim stops his “magic spell.”

Jimmy’s about to ask if they just teleported, and if they did why they didn’t just swoop in and grab Breena that way, and then decides that’s unlikely to be a detail that matters for this game. Instead he says, “Home. Where we all belong, and with any luck, we’ll soon spend the rest of our days here.”

“Amen,” Breena adds.

Tim’s already scrambled onto the bed, laying on his side, facing them, patting it, and Breena follows him, Jimmy a hair behind her. As she’s kneeling on the bed, he spans her hips with his hands, kissing her shoulder, and then lifts her slip over her body. He leaves the shoes on, looking forward to feeling them slip up and down his body. She flows into Tim’s arms, and Jimmy snuggles around them on her other side.

There’s a moment of snuggling and kissing. Of Tim’s lips followed by Jimmy’s, and the feel of large, warm hands stroking over her shoulders, hips, back and chest.

She rolls over, to face Jimmy again, for more kisses, and his tongue slipping over her lower lip, and Tim’s lips on her neck and ear.

Hands, so many hand. She’s laying with her neck over Tim’s right arm, so he’s not touching her with that hand, but his left is cupping her mound. Not stroking yet, just holding. A warm, firm pressure, and a promise of good things to come. Jimmy’s hands, one’s under her chin, thumb caressing her ear, fingers on her jaw, as they kiss. The other is on her breast, stroking gently, catching her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, offering her a light tug to counter the soft rub of his palm against her breast.

“I was dreaming of you…” Breena says with a long, content sigh. “All those nights on my own, and you’d fill my dreams.”

Jimmy’s kissing her neck, while Tim nuzzles her ear. He kisses her earlobe softly and say, “Tell us what you were dreaming, our love. What thoughts filled your dreams and kept the lonely ache away.”

“Not away, Gabe. Made it worse. I’d wake, wet and needy, body throbbing, aching all over for you.” Tim groans against her neck, kissing wet, open mouthed on the nape of her neck as those sounds settle in his dick, adding a bit of sweet ache of his own to the mix. “But you’d be gone. Just fantasies leaving me wanting.”


She purrs at that, and then speaks again, voice sounding sad. “Tomorrow night, Dae, it’ll all be dreams again, too.”

“Sweet dreams, love,” Tim says. “But in the morning, you’ll wake, and we’ll be there.” He bites her earlobe, sharp little nip, and then grinds against her bum, squeezing gently with the hand holding her pussy. “Nothing like a fight to make a man want to fuck, and day after tomorrow, as the sun rises, we’ll be back, so ready for you.”

“And tonight, we’re here,” Jimmy grinds against her, dick hard against her tummy, “And like Gabe says, so ready.” He kisses her, wet and steady, tongue slipping between her lips over and over, mimicking the old, beloved rhythm of them fucking each other. She knows the dance, loves it, and offers him a little suck to go with each thrust.
Jimmy groans quietly at that. A soft, satisfied sound.

“You weren’t the only one with dreams,” Tim says. “Been dreaming of this. You in our arms. Getting to watch him love you. Getting to do it myself.” His voice is soft in her ear, and his breath hot against her neck. “Tell us your dreams, Brynne. Let’s wipe away the lonely with lovin’ and fuckin’.”

She slides her leg up Jimmy’s, wrapping it over his hip, and pulling him a little closer, and slips onto him, with a happy sigh from both of them. “This, love. Dreaming of this. Between you two, filled up by you, both of you with me and in me. Gabe, love, you got me?”

“Gabe’s” got her all right. He scoots a bit, slipping forward so that he’s also in place, and for a moment there’s the sweet, full, tight hug of her body on him and Jimmy.

“This my loves. I was dreaming of this. Wrapped tight in your arms, feeling both of you filling me up. I’d lay between you, wet and full, kissing and loving, rocking back and forth between you, feeling that sweet, sweet ache build to bursting.”

“And, did you burst, dreaming in your—“ Tim starts to ask as Breena starts a slow, gentle rock and runs into a problem. Unfortunately, this is not, in fact, working.

Right now, all three of them on their sides, her rocking between the guys, is from a slow, close, relaxed, and very intimate sort of way, great. And, the three of them, on their sides, staying still, that worked pretty well, too.

But, as soon as she started to move, it fell apart.

The thing is, Jimmy, who at six feet, is a bit taller than the average guy, is also on the long end of average for straight guy dick size, but still average. At six one, Tim’s a little bit taller (and longer), but not huge. They both have very nice dicks that she’s quite fond of, but neither of them have what could be considered record setting equipment.

So, on their sides, which is, at best, a shallow position, when she rocks forward, onto Jimmy, Tim slips out. When she rocks back toward Tim, trying to get him back in, Jimmy slips out, and Tim, who slipped out a second ago, pokes her in the butt. They each need an extra inch or so for this to work, or she’s got to lose about two inches of butt. (Which would make both of them pout. They like that curve.)

Which means some level of rearranging has to happen, or this isn’t going to work the way she wants it to. But, she also wants this, close and tight in between them and very relaxed.

She kisses both of them, and says, “Okay, this isn’t doing it.”

(They appear to have both come to the same conclusion, what with neither of them having a dick inside her at the moment.)

“Lady’s choice, what do you want?” Jimmy asks, kissing her, and stroking his hand down her side. She purrs a little at that. This position is really nice. Tim’s warm and solid behind her, and he’s gently nibbling on her ear, his teeth smooth and hard, his tongue soft and wet, little bites interspersed with sharp nips, and his hand is doing good things to her nipple, while his other arm is under both her and Jimmy’s necks. Jimmy’s in front, and her leg’s over his hip, and he’s got his hand on her butt, rubbing soft and sure, while he kisses her deep.

So, yes, this is a very nice set up. And she’s debating. She could do each of them, one at a time, this way. That would be good. Jimmy’s scooted a bit, and has gotten his dick back into play, and without
trying to get Tim into the mix, she can rock soft and easy on him, which feels great.

She really likes this, other than the fact that she wanted both, this is really nice.

She kisses Jimmy, and twists to kiss Tim. Both. Both is really good, and tonight, she wants that.

She strokes her hand up Jimmy’s arm, feeling the strength and power in those muscles under her fingers. She knows he’s more than strong enough for it. Might not be lazy or relaxed, but he can keep himself up more than long enough. Tim’s the question. If she does this the way she’s thinking, her whole body weight will be laying on him, and she’s not sure if his ribs are up for something like that, yet.

“Can I lay on you?” she asks Tim, turning to kiss him.

“Probably. What do you want to try?” He scoots a bit, and they start to untangle from each other.

“You lay on your back.”

Tim smiles up at her. “I can do that.” He lays back, hands behind his head, erection pointing at the ceiling. “Now what?”

Breena straddles him, facing his feet, sinks down on his dick, which makes him groan, and sends a shivery rush through her, too. “Mmmm…” comes out of her once she’s settled, and she feels him gently stroking his fingertips up her back. From there she lays back, too. Her head on his shoulder, his lips on her temple.

“This okay?”

Tim nods, and she can feel him taking a few experimental deep breaths. “Yeah. I think so. If it’s a problem we’ll rearrange again.”

She turns her face to him, and kisses him. Little awkward, her neck doesn’t want to turn quite that far, but she’s doing it. Then she rests her head on his shoulder, and smiles up at Jimmy. “You know where you go, Dae, or shall I draw you a map?”

Jimmy’s eyes spark back at her. “Oh, I think I can figure it out. You good, Tim?”

“Good how?” He thinks he covered him being good a moment ago.

“Close to getting off?”

“I’m liking this, but not on a hair trigger, right now.”

“Excellent.” Jimmy leans over, each hand planted flat on the mattress beside Breena and Tim’s sides, and he kisses her lips, soft and wet and gentle. From there, he slips back into Dae. “And I’ve been dreaming of you, too, my lady. Dreaming of the glorious, wet pink of you on my tongue.”

He kisses each breast, wet, sucking kisses, and Tim gets in on it, too. Hands cupping her breasts, rolling and playing with the nipple Jimmy’s not laving with his tongue.

Tim rocks as best as he can, not a whole lot of range of motion on his back with Breena on top of him like this, but he can get a little motion and friction going, and at this angle he’s getting her right in the g-spot with each thrust, so a soft “Uhhh…” slips out of Breena each time he does it.

Between him and Jimmy they get a good rhythm going. Jimmy sucks each time Tim thrust. Breena’s got her head back, lolling on Tim’s shoulder, mouth open, small, exhaled gasps slipping out of her
with each of the boy’s moves.

Tim kisses her temple. “That’s it, our love. Sing for us.”

Jimmy sucks her nipple one last time, and begins to kiss his way down her belly, murmuring something, Breena’s checked out enough she’s not sure what he’s saying, just hearing his voice, soft and deep as his lips caress a wet trail closer and closer to her pussy.

Tim’s right hand finds the breast Jimmy left, and he toys with both of them.

Jimmy lays a gentle kiss on her muff, just saying hello. Another, soft, brushing kiss, more nuzzling her pubic hair then any sort of lip action, teasing her with these gentle kisses, while Tim slows down, not thrusting so much as just rocking slightly. The merest hint of friction, and some good, steady g-spot pressure to go with Jimmy’s gentle tease.

He blows on her pubes, a soft, tickly sensation whispers through her, and apparently surprised Tim a bit, because he jerks, too.

---

For Tim this is a very bizarre sensation. It’s sex. That part’s awesome. He’s all on top of (underneath?) that part. It’s also, very wet. He knows Jimmy isn’t exactly tidy about eating pussy, so he’s getting drooled on some, too. That’s not a problem. He honestly can’t think of a time where he was in favor of less wet sex.

No the odd part is the fact that he’s thrusting gently, getting Breena in the G-spot, making her very happy as Jimmy’s licking away, but, he’s also getting his dick rubbed by Jimmy’s chin. Not every single thrust, but, enough, and Jimmy’s chin is a little more stubbly than he’d prefer anything rubbing against his dick be.

Actually, that’s not quite true. Jimmy’s moving his head up and down a little, because that’s the stroke Breena likes, and apparently he does better by moving his head than moving his tongue (or maybe he does both, or he could be rubbing himself against the bed, Tim’s obviously not getting the entire picture as to what’s going on) but when his head is higher, Tim gets a very light brush of something just slightly rough just below the head of his dick, and he’s almost embarrassed by how good that feels. On the down stroke though, he’s getting nine o’clock shadow rubbed into the length of dick, and that’s not going to be winning any awards anytime soon.

At least, not for him. Breena’s vice tight on him, panting hard, and gripping Jimmy’s hair in two tight fists. Whatever he’s doing is working wonders for her.

---

Oh, God, this is her favorite. Jimmy’s eating her out, Tim’s fucking and they’re both so damn good at it. This… Oh yes! More of this!

Tim’s holding her pussy spread wide, and Jimmy’s got his tongue molded to her clit, moving it up and down, fast and focused and in exactly the right spot, and Tim keeps arching up into her and…

Oh God, just, a…

Fuck! Yes!
Ohhhhh….

Tingles all over, spreading from her toes inward. Her clit’s pulsing and pussy clenching and Breena’s crying out, whimpering, ecstatic, and then it gets better. Jimmy stops kissing and slides into her, next to Tim.

Tim shouts at that, and Jimmy stops for a second before he gets back to it…

God… he’s pulling out long and slow and in easy and deep and Tim’s doing as much as he can from below and one orgasm slides into two without slowing down or stopping. Maybe it’s just one long one. When he times it right, Jimmy can keep her going for almost a full minute, pulse after pulse after pulse, and it looks like that’s where he’s taking them.

She’s shaking with each wave of orgasm, and he’s timing his thrusts, deep, moderately fast, rubbing his pelvic bone against her clit as each wave starts to subside, just bumping her along, one extra twitch after another.

Okay, Tim might not have loved the rougher bit of Jimmy going down on Breena, but by the time Jimmy’s sliding into her with Tim, his dick is so sensitized and so wet that the feel of Jimmy slipping over his skin just about sends Tim levitating off the bed.

He shouts at it, character completely broken, “Jimmy, FUCK!”

Jimmy stops dead, not sure if that was a give me more or back the hell off shout, and Tim whacks him on the ass with the flat of his palm. “Move,” comes gasping out a second after that.

And Jimmy is happy to move. He’s going to get them both off, good.

It’s the best visual on earth. Breena’s pink pussy wrapped around Tim’s dick. Nothing else looks like that. It’s live action porn with two of his favorite people and he gets to lick it.

Best sound, too. Breena coming hard, panting and moaning.

Under him, both of them, Breena’s gone, rippling around him, face pink, eyes closed and lips open. His tongue strokes over hers, his body making hers crest. He kisses her, swallowing her come cries, basking in them. She’s slowing down, so he keeps the pace, just nudging her along, and switches to Tim.

He’s an inch away from coming, rocking as hard as he can, body tight, eyes open, staring right up at Jimmy.

Jimmy’s looking back down at him, seeing pleasure-blown pupils, and light green eyes gone dark at the intensity of this space shared only by the four of them.

And, for the first time, it’s really hitting him that Tim is beautiful.

His hips stutter for a second with it, but he gets back to himself, and kisses Tim.
Tim’s eyes slip shut. He does that when he kisses, and he’s got one arm around Breena, hand flat against her chest, feeling her heart pound under his palm, and the other one on Jimmy’s ass, urging him to go faster, fuck harder.

And Jimmy’s not a big talker when it comes to sex. That’s more Tim’s thing, but right now, Tim’s gone, and Jimmy’s hyper-present, very much here in his head and in his body, very aware of the people around and under him.

He doesn’t so much break the kiss as kiss his words to Tim. “Come on, Tim. Give it to me, baby. Breena’s all done, we’ve done her good, now it’s your turn.”

Tim’s hand tightens, hard, on Jimmy’s ass as he arches up, groaning. Breena twitches at it, giving them both a little happy squeak. Jimmy can feel Tim pulsing, feel the extra wet, the gush against the head of his dick as he’s rubbing in and out and that…

“Shit… Oh, fuck!”

That knocks him over the edge, too.

There’s lazy cleaning up, and quiet snuggling. It’s Tim’s night to get up with Sean, so he’s at Abby’s back, right next to the edge of the bed, and she’s facing Jimmy.

The last thing he remembers hearing before drifting off for not nearly as much of a nap as he’d like, is Abby saying to Jimmy, “You really saw him tonight, didn’t you?”

He hears a soft kiss between Jimmy and Abby, and a quiet, “Yes.”

“He’s beautiful, isn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

Tim kisses the back of Abby’s neck, and pats Jimmy’s chest.

And that’s where the Almost Perfect Saturday ends.
There’s been a stack of resumes on Tony’s desk for weeks now.

Okay, not a literal stack of resumes. It’s a thumb drive. But it feels like a stack.

And, with the official, ‘I’m pregnant and not coming back to full duty email from Bishop,’ in his inbox, that thumb drive feels like it’s mocking him.

Tony glances over to Draga, and then back to the thumb drive. He’s reaching for it, about to put it in his computer when the phone rings. “DiNozzo…”

He’s nodding, getting the address noted, and then gives his usual response. “We’re on it.”

Draga looks up from the case he’s working on. “Dead body?”

Tony nods. “Yep. And we’ve got a drive. Chesterfield County LEOs found a dead sailor in a car.”

“Where’s Chesterfield?” Draga asks.

Tony’s texting the address to Jimmy. “Outside of Richmond.”

“You weren’t kidding about the drive. I’ll go get the van gassed up.”

Tony nods. Then he grabs the thumb drive. “Make sure you bring your laptop, too. I’ve got some reading to do on the drive.”

Draga glances over at Tony as he waits at a red light. Tony wasn’t kidding about reading. He hopped into the van, and before they were even out of the Navy Yard, he popped the thumb drive in and got to work.

Draga sighs. He knows what that thumb drive is, and he got the email from Bishop, too.

He’s happy that she’s happy with Baby Mollop in the works, but…

He actually liked just him and Tony. Okay, it’s kind of slow, but he did the paperwork thing back before McGee flew the coop for Cyber. The two of them together aren’t going any slower than the four of them were back in the paperwork days.

And, if they get a newbie…

Since October, Tony’s been Eric’s partner. If they get a newbie, he’s going to go back to being Eric’s boss, and Tony’s a much better partner than boss.

Hell, lead partner, top partner, partner in charge, senior partner, any of those are fine with Eric, and all of them are better than Tony the Boss who’s… not a really good fit for the role. Not that he’s bad at it, but… Eric’s had some really great Bosses, and Tony isn’t one of them. He’s either going too hard or not hard enough, and can’t seem to stay in that keep everyone active, motivated, on track, and happily buzzing along for more than an hour or two at a time.
But he is a damn good partner.

Of course, a lot’s changed since October. They’re back doing the work Tony’s best at. He’s a murder guy, and he’s a really good murder guy, and maybe part of them having a solid partnership right now is that they’re doing, mostly, murders.

Maybe part of why this works so well is that this is Tony’s strong suit. Maybe, if they aren’t working endless terror cases, where a really good day is one where they manage to pin a six-year-old bombing on a guy they last caught on facial recognition three years ago, maybe Tony would be a better Boss.

The light shifts and Draga pulls the van out.

---

Eric doesn’t think there’s much chance of getting through this without at least one more guy added to the mix. He tries to think of something he’d like about adding someone else. They’re heading south on 95 when Eric says, “An extra pair of hands or two for evidence collection won’t rain on my parade.”

Tony looks up from the resume he’s reading. “Nope. Be nice to get done with a scene in less than a full day.”

“Got anyone in there who’s good and fast with prints?”

Tony shakes his head. “Not so far. Looking mostly at guys who haven’t worked crime before. No bad habits to unlearn.”

“Oh.” Draga thinks about that. “That part of what you liked about me?”

Tony nods. “It’s worked out well for us.”

---

The candidates are swimming in his mind. Tony’s reading them, skimming them, no one’s jumping out at him as really worth it.

No one looks like the A-Team. Hell, he’s not sure he’s got the B-Team here.

He glances over at Draga, who’s driving along, looking alert and calm. His usual driving posture

Philly and Baltimore Tony had a partner, not a team. Right now, he’s got a partner. It’s working pretty well. Like Draga said, it’s slow on collecting evidence. He makes a note to widen his search, see if he can find a crime scene tech who wants to take a level in badass and jump up to the majors.

They’re slow on leads…

But, if Tim can get his miracle computer thing into play, and if they do specialize…

All they’d need would be the two of them.

And if wishes were horses, they’re all be hip deep in horse poop. No way Tim’s miracle computer thing, even if everyone bends over backwards to make it work, will be ready in the next two years, and more likely five.
There’s a lot of time between now and then, and then might not ever come to be.

“Ideal partner for us, who is he… she…?” Tony asks.

“Smart like Bishop, but ready to hit the ground running.”

Tony agrees with that. He and Draga aren’t precisely stupid, but they’re heavier on street smarts than books smarts and a well-balanced team needs a book smart guy. He’s thinking about that, and feels Draga hesitate, not sure about saying what’s on his mind. “Just say it.”

“Okay. Maybe it was because she was so cute and little, but… I never felt like she pulled her weight on watching my back. I was out there protecting her. It wasn’t a mutual thing. And, I know she’s a hundred times smarter than me and her pattern finding skills linked more cases and solved more than me trudging through leads, but I’d like to feel like this new one could actually pull the trigger if push comes to shove, and I never actually knew that about Bishop.”

Tony nods. “She never did fire a weapon, did she?”

“Not even through October. I was near her on the wall that day…” Draga shakes his head. “I don’t think she fired. And… I don’t know. If Fornell hadn’t shown up with the tanks, her bullets wouldn’t have mattered one way or another, so maybe she decided that if she couldn’t win, she wasn’t going to kill anyone, but… I want someone who will blow the son of a bitch’s head off to make sure I get to see Kevin again, and I was never entirely certain about that with her.”

Tony nods. “So, you’d consider active military service a plus.”

“Something like that. Someone who’s been through at least one grinder and came through okay.” Eric taps his glasses, remember the accident that knocked his vision down enough he couldn’t fly anymore. “Okay enough.”

“You care if she’s a she?”

“Nope. Don’t have a preference either way. Like, I never had the sense that I was there to protect Ziva. When we went out, we went out together. You find me anyone like that, boy or girl, and I’m fine.”

Tony nods at that. “Languages, we need that.”

Eric nods in agreement. “At least, Spanish. Precision distance shooter. Especially if we’re talking about more and more murder cases, I want someone watching my back who can hit an apple from the other side of a parking lot. Doesn’t have to be a sniper, but I’d like a marksman.”

“That’d be good.” Neither he, nor Eric, can do that. They’ll get close, but they aren’t Gibbs, or Ziva, or Tim, even, with a rifle. “Evidence collection.”

“Yep. Electronic evidence as well as physical.”

“You don’t want to be the only guy with the computer?”

Eric shrugs. That’s not why he wants someone who can handle a computer. He debates saying why and decides to, worst’ll happen is Tony gets annoyed. He’s pretty sure the two of them are past the BS to make each other feel good stage. “I don’t think you can competently do this job anymore if you can’t run the computer side of it.”

“He says to the man who’s abysmal at it,” Tony replies, a little heat in his voice, but not a lot.
Eric nods. “You’ve got how many years left?”

“Eight years.”

“Eight years left. Okay, fine, I’ll handle the computer work and get you through. But this new guy, girl… We’re looking my age or younger, right?”

Tony nods. “Was thinking between twenty-five and thirty.”

“If you’ve got someone between twenty-five and thirty who can’t handle the computer work, he’s too damn stupid to do this job. Most of the computer stuff isn’t arcane knowledge anymore. Most if it is stuff people my age learned in junior high. The guy who can’t run phone/financials/social media isn’t the guy we want.”

“Okay.” Tony sighs, looking at the screen in front of him.

“That doesn’t sound enthusiastic.”

“It’s not. Kate, Ziva, McGee… Serendipity. Right place, right time, the hand of God came down and dropped these people into my lap and… I’m not seeing the hand of God in this thumb drive.”

Draga shrug. “We in a rush?”

Tony shrugs back. “Depends, how soon you want to get back home?”

Eric barks a short laugh. “Not nearly as soon as you do. Not like I’ve got a pregnant wife who wants to see me at home.”

Tony sighs. Two hour drive down, who knows how long to process, two hours back, if they’re lucky… Only upside is that “DC Traffic” is a thing of the past. Anywhere you want to go in DC, like his apartment, can be gotten to from any other part of DC, in about twenty minutes now.

At least it’ll be a fast case.

Jimmy and Allan beat them there, so when Tony gets to the crime scene tape, he ducks under it and heads right to Jimmy, bypassing the LEO who’s standing around drinking coffee, doing a bad job of keeping the scene secure.

Jimmy’s in the garage, next to a car, with Allan, surveying the scene. He more senses Tony than sees him, because he’s thinking through the easiest way to get a person in full rigor out of a car without moving the seat/steering wheel.

“I know we investigate them all as murders until we know for sure, but I don’t see this one staying one for long,” Jimmy says.

Tony nods. It’s a sailor in a car in a garage. She’s bright pink. The windows in the garage have been boarded over with cardboard and taped shut. Same thing with the door leading into the house. (He can see broken cardboard and tape dangling from the now open garage door.) There’s a hose leading from the exhaust pipe to the back seat window, also taped into place to make sure none of the CO can get out. He can see the note on the seat next to her, and the complete and total lack of anything that looks like signs of struggle.
“Yep. We know the drill. Time of death?”

Allan looks up from the stretcher. “Between midnight and two, barring new evidence.”

“Get her on her way, and we’ll do the rest. Draga—“

Tony turns to see Eric with his camera out. “I’m already photographing, then prints on the tape, make sure she’s the one who built the gas trap.”

“You’ve got it.” Tony looks over to the Local LEO who’s just noticed him there. “Time to find out what’s going on.”

It’s not exactly cut and dried, because no case is, but this one looks as close as a case can get. Once they get the prints back to the lab, they’ll know for sure, but…

But a woman who’s been battling depression for three years and was just dumped by her fiancée a month after her mother, who everyone said was her best friend, died of cancer, isn’t hard to see as a suicide. Add in that she stopped taking her pills three days ago, and… Tony’s really not feeling a murder on this one.

Assuming they don’t find a glowing neon motive hiding in the finances or phone calls, or a wrong print on the tapes, this one’s in the bag.

Which means Tony’s not thinking about Seaman Carol Conner as they’re getting ready to make the drive home.

Reddington, Mervis, Spader, Ashwanti, Burke, O’Lauchlin.

Names, names, names. They’re the best of the bunch on his resume list. (Though Tony’s got a suspicion that he pulled O’Lauchlin because it makes him think of Tim and Ducky.)

“Toss me the keys,” he says to Draga.

Draga does, and Tony catches them easily. “Reddington, Mervis, Spader, Ashwanti, Burke, and O’Lauchlin. Read up, pick your favorite two. We’ll interview them this week.”

“Just two?”

“I’m going to hit HR up for people who used to be crime scene techs. Might be nice to get someone who’s good and fast at that, right?”

Draga nods, getting into the van.

They’re just about to the I-395 on ramp when Draga’s done reading. It might not be the hand of God or instant love, but he’s got two he’s pretty satisfied with.

“Melanie Burke.”
“Former Atlanta firefighter, right?” Tony asks. She stuck out to him, too. Only lady in the bunch who looked like a possible good fit.

“Yeah. Worked with them for six years while putting herself through college. Has a BA in Criminal Justice from Emory. Decent but not amazing marks from FLETC. Did a year with the DEA, resigned when the shit hit the fan in October, and is looking to ‘join the good guys’ according to her cover letter.”

“I suppose that’s one good thing about last fall, we’re not hurting for job applicants.”

Draga shakes his head. “No, we aren’t.”

“What do you like about her?” Tony asks.

“Fire fighter, that takes guts.”

“Or a death wish.”

Eric would have to admit that’s true. Fire fighters are usually a hybrid of a deeply honed sense of service and adrenaline junky tendencies. “Could be. Quit the DEA the day the shit hit the fan. Looks like she didn’t want to be associated with them.”

“I liked that, too. No references from any of her past jobs, though.”

Draga nods. He hadn’t noticed that, but checking closer, he sees she wasn’t fired from anything, but she doesn’t have any recommendations, either.

That’s not a deal killer for Tony. “Granted, none of my past jobs would have recommended me, either. We can bring out talent if it’s hiding in there, and I’ve got personal experience of being a half-decent person in a bad department.”

Eric raises an eyebrow.

“You ever see Homicide?” Tony says.

“Yeah.”

“I worked Baltimore PD in the ‘90s. Homicide is a prettied up version of reality.”

Draga waits a moment longer, but Tony doesn’t say anything more than that.

“Who else?” Tony asks.

“Spader.”

“Makes me think of the actor,” Tony says as he hits the turn signal and eases them onto the interstate.

Draga snorts a fast laugh. “Everything makes you think of movies and actors.”

“Why him?”

“Joined the Navy out of high school, spent four years on a nuclear sub, college, and then re-enlisted as an officer, car accident means he can’t pass the physical for the US Navy, but we can still use him.”

“Kindred spirit.”
Draga shrugs a bit at that. “Maybe. Depends a lot on what he did with that accident.”

Tony doesn’t remember a job between the accident two years ago and now. FLETC would have eaten up some of that time. “Applied to work with us from the looks of it.”

“Yeah. Decent amount of healing up figuring out what to do next time. Not too much… I guess we’ll see how bitter he is.”

Tony glances over to Draga, and remembers that he didn’t leave the service voluntarily. The idea that having to bail over the deep blue, and coming out of that accident with a dead bird on his record and a need for corrective lenses, and how that may have shaped him, isn’t something that Tony’s ever thought of.

“You miss it?”

Eric smiles. “I miss being in the air all the time. The rest of it… I could take or leave that. And, apparently I did.”

“Why not fly for… I don’t know, United, or something.”

Draga’s smile goes sad. “Doesn’t matter if the bird you were flying died on its own. Doesn’t matter if they stopped making that model because it kicked off so many times. One crashes with you at the stick, and that’s the end of your career as a flier. No one’ll touch you after that.”

“The Captain goes down with his ship.”

“Yep.”

There’s not much for Tony to say to that, so he says, “Burke and Spader. I’ll make the calls tomorrow morning.”

On Thursday morning, Burke comes in, and Tony takes one look at her and knows she’s not the fit. He just knows. How, why… no clue, but the gut says she’s not the guy for the job.

There’s nothing terribly off about her. Not like she showed up in jeans and t-shirt and had a chat about her personal pet demon on anything.

In fact, she looks a lot like a cop. Looks a bit like a female version of Tony. She’s tall and broad, wide through the shoulders and hips. Solid muscle with a layer of too much fast food and desk work flub on top of it. Looks like she played women’s softball or lacrosse, and was probably good at it, but was is the operative word.

She’s got the red hair, green eyes, and freckles to go with her last name.

Her hair is short, her nails are, too. No makeup. Her pants suit looks right out of the Hillary Clinton ‘professional woman of a certain age’ catalogue. (Though Burke’s a good twenty years south of ‘a certain age.’) In his less sensitive days Tony would have called her a Bull Dyke.

One glance at Draga, and it’s clear that he’s not getting that ‘gonna need to protect this one’ sense he did off of Bishop. Tony doesn’t feel it, either. Burke can take care of herself, and anyone else, too. That gets a plus in Tony’s book.
She’s brusque and doesn’t seem to have much of a sense of humor. She doesn’t smile once the whole interview. That’s probably what gets to Tony the most. This job’ll suck the life out of you if you let it, and working with someone who can’t get into the black humor of it is a recipe for sorrow.

Draga’s not overly enthusiastic, either, but he’s not nearly as ‘NOPE’ as Tony is.

“Why not?” he asks when Tony immediately shakes his head as the elevator doors shut behind Burke.

“Not hiring two of you ginger bastards. People’ll start asking if I’m running a branch of MI6.”

Eric smiles at that. “Uh huh.” He looks in the direction of the closing elevator. “Just rubbed you wrong, too, huh?”

Tony nods. “We work too close and too long of hours to not get on. Yeah, we annoy each other, fine, but… My gut says no. Yours?”

Draga nods.

“All right. Spader tomorrow.” Then he sits down and starts going through the list of guys who, once upon a time, were Crime Scene techs.

Both of them.

Apparently, in the real world, Crime Scene Techs stay Crime Scene Techs. They don’t suddenly decide to be done with the world of forensics and strap a badge on. And when they do… One of them isn’t actually looking for a job. She’s already an FBI agent, and if Tony’s going to get her, he’s going to have to somehow woo her away.

Not impossible. The DiNozzo charm has wooed more than one lady away from a set position. He sends her resume over to Draga to check out.

He sends her a polite note asking if she’s content with her job and might be interested in looking elsewhere. He’s friendly, personable, and signs it Tony DiNozzo, Major Case Response Team Leader, NCIS.

Ten minutes later he gets back.

Tony,

I could be interested. One question, do your teams process your own crime scenes, or do you have people for that?

Ashley

He sends her the response that they do get into their own scenes, and that’s why, unlike the FBI, they’re able to solve crimes faster and more efficiently. He’s hoping she’s asking because she wants to use all her skills to really get into this. Handle the job from beginning to end.

So, he writes about that, and his tone is persuasive, drawing attention to what they do, and why his offer is such a good one.
Unfortunately he gets back,

Tony,

*If I never print another scene again, it’ll be too soon. Look me up when you’ve got a scene of crime’s team of your own to handle the messy work.*

Thanks,

Ashley

“There goes that one.”

“DiNozzo?”

He shakes his head at Draga. “Ashley Brett left crime scene work because she hated it. Shockingly enough, she wasn’t finding my offer interesting.”

“Ah. Think that’ll be true of the other one?”

“We’ll find out.” And with that, Tony makes the call to Beth Johnson, the ex-crime-scene-tech from the Pittsburg PD.

On the third ring he gets a voice. “Hello.”

“Hi. This is Tony DiNozzo from NCIS, I was wondering if I could speak to Beth Johnson.”

He hears the excitement in her voice. “This is her!”

“Hi. I have your resume on my desk, and was wondering if you’d like to come in for an interview?”

“Oh, my God! Yes! When?” Her voice is breathy, and she’s very excited.

“Monday, Tuesday? When can you get down here?”

“I can be there on Monday. What time?”

“Work starts at eight. Come on in then.”

“I will!”

“Excellent. I’ll email you the details, and we’ll see you on Monday morning.”

“Thank you, so much!”

“You’re welcome.” Tony says goodbye and hangs up and re-checks her resume. She should be somewhere in the 25-26 age range. He felt like he was talking to a teenager. Granted, people who want jobs tend to be happy about getting called for them.

He sends the resume over to Draga, and then sends off a description of the job, what they’re looking for, where they are, how to get into the building, and all the rest of it to Beth.

He sees Draga put down his pen, (he’s signing the copies of the paperwork that the printer just spit
out) and start reading. After a few minutes, he looks up and says, “CMU’s a good school. She
graduated from there, so she’s got to have some brains.”

Tony nods at that. “Three years with the Pittsburgh PD as a crime scene tech.”

“FLETC last year. Good marks. She might be exactly what we’re looking for.”

Tony nods at that, too. She might be.

If Burke didn’t trigger any desire to be overly protective, Spader really isn’t doing it. In fact, Spader
actually makes Tony want to take a step back, maybe hide.

It’s very rare that Tony finds himself being physically intimidated by someone. He’s six one, admits
to two ten, and once upon a time that was true, and he honestly can’t remember the last time he had
to look up to make eye contact with someone.

(Okay, yes, Draga is taller than he is, but not by enough that he has to look up to make eye contact.)

Zach Spader is six five, two-fifty, black hair cut high and tight, with ice blue eyes. He looks like the
kind of guy who can call The Rock a pussy, and get away with it.

Seeing him, the only thing Tony can think of is, ‘How the hell did you fit into a sub?’

Draga’s on the same page, but he actually asks it. “They let you in a sub?”

Spader smiles. “Been tall forever, but wasn’t always in this shape. I didn’t start lifting until I finished
rehabbing my knee. The Doc who was in charge of me said it’d never get back right. I proved him
wrong, but it’s in my file, so the Navy won’t let me back. Had a lot of free time since then, so I work
with other wounded vets, show them there’s light at the end of the tunnel, give them an idea of what
they can do.”

Eric nods at that and smiles. That sounds like the kind of guy he’s looking for.

Tony puts that bit of information into the back of his mind. He likes it, too, after all, he’s got a really
good history with guys who tell the world to fuck off when the world tells them they can’t do
something, but he’s got to see if Spader’s got the whole package.

He does. Not perfect, but good. He’s as good as Draga with a computer. He speaks French and
Arabic. Spanish would be more useful than French, but Arabic is good. His references are decent.
His CO says that he’d have happily kept Spader on, and confirms that Spader got screwed by his
Doc. His record isn’t spotless, but it’s good. One fight with another shipmate back in ’08, when he
was brand new. His FLETC scores are solid, and his instructors liked him well enough.

Tony’s seen a lot worse, and he’s got the sense he can work with this.

“You like him?” he asks Eric as the elevator doors shut on Spader.

Eric nods. “Enough to call him back and see what he might do with a day in the field.”
“We can do that. Got Johnson on Monday.”

“Got a good feeling about Spader. She’s going to have to knock it out of the park.”

Tony inclines his head. He’s not ready to cancel on Johnson, but he’s got a good feel on Spader.

“Wouldn’t be the first time that’s happened.”

The bread is broken, the prayers said, blessings offered, and food (roast lamb and potatoes, peas and mint, sautéed greens) passed around the table, when, like with most other Fridays, the ‘how was your week’ conversation begins.

Tony listens to Penny and Ducky’s updates. One more round of voting and there should be a President, though at this point he’s so burned out he doesn’t care enough to muster a vote for any of the guys who are left. When Stewart and Colbert dropped out of the race, he did, too.

Once they manage to get a President, DC, Puerto Rico, Guam, North York (previously Upstate New York), New York (previously New York City), and Chicago, can all be confirmed as states in their own right. Tony’s… dryly amused at that. If he wasn’t so burnt out about the whole thing, finally having the chance to vote for senators and congressmen might be nice, but… He’s burnt on it.

“Once we manage to get a President, the hearings will start, right?” Abbi asks.

“That gets his attention.

“Should be,” Penny says. “Once we’ve got a President, we’ll also have a Vice-President, which means the Senate will finally be complete, and from there, we should start the hearings up. Which means a lot of time in New York for you.”

Abbi nods. She was already in the process of doing a lot of testifying in front of Congress for what was going on with CGIS, having broken it to the wider government, she expect to do a lot more. “Leon, too.” She glances around the table. “And you.”

Tim nods. “Think they’ll let me skype?”

Penny shrugs. “I’d be for it, but I don’t know if the wider Congress will go for it.”

Abbi looks annoyed. “Is everyone going to be able to ask questions? Going up in front of one committee of twelve of them was bad enough, can’t imagine how long 5000 plus will take.”

“There will be an investigative committee,” Penny says.

“You on it?” Jethro asks.

She shakes her head. “I can’t be. Too close to you guys. Jake can’t be, he was in the thick of it, too. DC is going to be unrepresented on this committee.”

“How many on the committee?” Abbi asks.

“Fifty, picked by random draw.”

Abbi groans. “Oh, god. I’ll be testifying until I’m old.”

“Hopefully not. Remember a lot of the country will be watching this. They’ll be going full on
Nuremburg style trials for this. Televised, real lawyers on defense. I know the first round is the investigative Committee, and they’ve only got a year scheduled for that. Then comes the trials.”

“Just long enough for them to listen, come to some sort of conclusion, and then get replaced by a new crop of Congressmen,” Jethro adds.

Penny inclines her head in agreement. “Half of the team is made up of Senators. They’ll be around through the whole thing.” She adds some salt to her lamb and passes it to Tony, who’s next to her. “Tony, how was your week?”

“Getting closer to a new team member,” he fills them in on his options.

Ziva, who has heard this before, but hasn’t had the chance to talk to Tony, yet, today, has a bit to add. “I have more background on Melanie Burke.”

He flashes her a curious look. “A reason to give her another chance?”

“A reason why your gut may have been firing. She applied at CGIS, and has crossed my desk.”

“You didn’t mention that before,” Tony says, potato paused en route to his lips.

“I wasn’t sure if I was remembering the right person before. You were telling me about her last night, I double checked this morning, and it’s the same woman.”

“She didn’t make our to-hire list, either?” Abbi asks.

Ziva shakes her head. “Though she might be of interest to Tim and his quest for untouchables.” Tim looks up from wiping spit up off of Sean. “She’s got active lawsuits against three different organizations for sexual harassment or discrimination.”

“Whoa!” Tony says. “Why didn’t that pop up on my radar?”

“Because she’s the plaintiff, not the defendant.” Ziva says, “Whoever you hire, make sure he/she’s more qualified than Melanie is.”

“That’s why she’s got no recommendations, right?”

Ziva nods. “When I did background on her, the only thing I could get was confirmation that she worked for each group, nothing about what sort of employee she was.”

Tim’s very interested in that. “Good cases?”

“Sealed ones. One’s against the Atlanta FD, one’s against an instructor at FLETC, one is against a weight lifting gym in Atlanta.”

That sets a spark in Tim’s eyes. He’s thinking he wants to see what’s in those cases, because someone like Melanie could be invaluable to him. “If those are good cases, you’re right, I could really use her.”

Ziva nods.

Abby takes Sean from Tim, and says to Tony, “Is Spader more qualified?”

“Better FLETC scores, was in the Navy, he looks better on paper than she does.”

“Good,” Ziva replies. She looks over to Breena, who is eating her lamb. “Donnie is continuing to
play nicely?”

Breena nods at that, with a smile, and a bite of food. “So far. Granted, I can always get through the first month. Let’s see if I’m still sitting up and taking nourishment this time next week. How about Dave, is he behaving?”

Ziva groans. “No, he is not.” She glares at Tony. “He is taking after his father and doing little annoying things over and over and over, just to see how much of it I’ll take.”

That gets a look of commiseration from the family’s moms.

“He was kicking me in the bladder and stomach today, at the same time! Heartburn and had to pee, for more than two solid hours.” She gently whacks her tummy. “That works on your Daddy.” Then she makes a little ‘ngh’ noise. “But not, apparently, on you.”

Tony rubs her belly. “Three more months.” He looks across the table to Tim and Abby and Sean. “And how is little dude doing?”

“Eating, sleeping, crying, and pooping,” Abby says, holding her son.

“Behaving exactly like a newborn should,” Tim adds. “We did get a note from the ear specialist. He wants us to take Sean in to get an MRI of his ears.”

“What does that mean?” Tony asks.

“That whatever is wrong, isn’t just a nerve issue,” Tim adds.

“Depending on what they find, it might be something that can be surgically corrected,” Jimmy says.

Tony glances at Tim and Abby. He knows that if you ask these sorts of questions wrong, they can get kind of touchy. “That’d be good, right?”

“Depends on what sort of surgery they’re talking about,” Abby replies. “But, yes, if there’s a problem they can fix surgically, that’d be great.”

“If?” Penny asks.

Tim shakes his head a bit. “He sent us an email, and… the wording suggests that he thinks it’s a physical problem in addition to a nerve issue. You know how doctors like to keep things vague until they have enough information?”

“Because they don’t want to get your hopes up or make you want to go find a ledge to jump off of,” Jimmy adds.

“I’m not saying there isn’t a reason for it,” Tim replies, “but, it’s frustrating. I get the sense that this is more of a fact finding mission than a healing mission.”

“Either way, in three more weeks we get to see about trying to get an infant to stay perfectly still, on his own, in a big metal tube,” Abby says.

“That sounds like Hell,” Ziva says.

Tim nods and Abby says, “Yes. Supposedly, he’ll be sleeping, and it’ll be harder for Tim and I standing around outside, waiting, but…”

Tim strokes Abby’s back. Neither of them are looking forward to handing Sean to a nurse who will
take him away to do stuff to him. But right now, he’s in Abby’s arms, awake, looking around, watching dinner (or at least, watching the blurs around him) and being awfully chill for a little baby.

Tim changes the subject. “I got the contract from the FBI on Tuesday.” Abby, Breena, and Jimmy, already know this story, but the rest of the crew doesn’t. “It’s long.”

“Is it what they said it would be?” Ducky asks.

“Yes. All that’s left is signing it.”

“You haven’t signed it, yet?” Ziva asks.

“Probably for the same reason Tony hasn’t hired anyone for his team, yet. It’s really final.”

He and Tony share a look, both of them understanding the cusp they’re about to topple over.

Tim cooked, so he’s not on dishes tonight. He is, however, hovering at the edge of the kitchen, a mug of spiced cider in his hands, as Tony and Gibbs wash up.

They don’t have to talk about it. They all know, and right now, they’re all together in that space, just feeling it.

What it means to be the Boss. What it means to build and have a team. What it means to leave a team. What it means to lead one.

“Spader sound good,” Gibbs finally says after a few minutes of scrubbing out pots.

Tony nods at him. “Looks good, too. Now. Want to get to know him a bit more. Johnson sounds young. Really eager. I’ve got room for two if they both work out.”

Gibbs nods. He looks over to Tim. “Monday morning?”

Tim nods. “Yeah. I’ll bring it in, and my paperwork software. Hand in the contract, and hand over the software to their lead IT guy. Explain who I am and that I want an FBI version of it up and running by my first day. Fornell says they’ve got more forms and more internal tracking documents over there, so they can’t just copy what I’ve got, but the basic idea shouldn’t be too hard to implement, not when they’ve got a blueprint coded and sitting in front of them.”

“That’s a test, too?” Tony asks.

Tim nods. “Yeah, if they can’t get something like that done in six months, I know where the work starts, and it’s not the outside world.”

“You’re back to work on Monday, right?” Tony asks.

Tim nods at that, too. “Yep. Got to get my guys ready to go on without me. Have to have a chat with Ngyn, then start looking through the rest of my team leaders.”

“If we’re not on call out, come up and meet Johnson, I’d like to get your thoughts on her.”

“Sure.”
The good thing about trimester three is that Ziva doesn’t fall asleep any second she’s staying still. So, once the kiddies have been put to bed, and a cutthroat game of Trivial Pursuits has been played by the adults (shock of shocks, Ducky won), it’s bedtime for them.

She’s on her side, curled back against his chest, spooned up nice and close, both of them, for the moment, she’ll get too hot soon, enjoying the cave of warmth under their blankets.

Tony kisses her neck and hair, his hand resting on her belly, feeling Dave squirming around. There’s a wry smile in his voice as he says, “I keep looking up expecting to see you at your desk. It’s been months, we’ve had a whole other person come in and leave, and… I still expect to see you there.”

She takes his hand and kisses it.

“I keep looking for you in the resumes. Keep hoping that someone will just walk in and lightning will strike, and… It can’t happen because you’re not going to walk in and slouch provocatively, with your hair all wrapped up in a scarf, and ask if I’m having phone sex.”

Ziva smiles at that memory. “And you’ll be so unsettled by that, you’ll tell me you’re playing charades.”

He scoffs. “Over the phone.” Tony sighs. “They’re all fine, really. But, they aren’t you, and they’re not McGee or Gibbs or Kate and… I miss my team.”

“Draga is your team.”

“I know, and he is, and… It takes time. I know.”

She rolls over to face him. “You want the pah!”

“I want the pah! And so far, I’m not feeling it.”

“You can keep looking.”

“I think the lack of pah is more about me than about the people I’m looking at. When you went back to Israel, we were looking for someone else, and… no pah!”

Ziva smiles at him. “Then go find your pah!”

“I’ve got my pah! I just don’t get to work with her anymore.”

She kisses him. “I know.”

Beth Johnson is not what Tony’s expecting. Given the quick phone conversation, he was expecting something of a cheerleader. Cute, perky, blonde.

He supposes that she is, technically speaking, cute and perky. She’s young. But, unlike Bishop, he’s not secretly wondering if a Tim’s got another Cyberbaby roaming the halls and she accidentally ended up in front of him.
She’s in her twenties, and looks it. She’s got an easy smile, big brown eyes with mascara commercial lashes, and the most beautiful brown skin he’s ever seen. Like, model skin. He’s never seen anyone who wasn’t Photoshopped with literally flawless skin before, but she’s got it.

So, she’s not cute, she’s beautiful.

Draga keeps staring, and at one point, when she’s working on the computer, using Tim’s test to see if she can hack the data, he pulls him up to the landing in front of MTAC, and for the first time ever, smacks him upside the back of the head.

“Keep it in line.”

Draga nods. “Yes, Boss.”

They both look over to Johnson, who’s humming quietly as she kicks the data’s ass.

“This gonna be a problem?”

Draga opens and shuts his mouth. Then he says, “I will make it not be one.”

“Yeah, that’s the right answer to tell your boss, now tell your partner the truth.”

He opens and closes his mouth again. Then he sighs. “Just thinking of all of those late nights with Bishop. She’s married. I was with Diane… I knew, it was always, there, in the background, but never got past that. Now I’m single, and I don’t see a ring on Johnson’s finger. Asking for trouble, probably… Maybe… I don’t… God, she’s gorgeous!”

Tony applies another slap to the back of the head.

“Look, you can hit me with a brick, but she’s not going to be any less attractive when I come to.”

Tony looks up at the ceiling. Lightning may have just struck, but not for him.

Tim does swing by at lunch time, and offers to take all three of them out. Tony thinks that’s a good way to see how this group jells out and about, because a big part of what they’ll spend a lot of time doing is sitting around BSing with each other.

Can’t do this job with someone you can’t spend twelve hours in a car with.

So, lunch out, sure.

“It doesn’t look as burned out as I was afraid it would,” Johnson says as they head out of the Navy Yard. Coming from Pittsburg, she’s seen the news, but the news coverage seemed to thrive on disaster porn, so lots of pictures that look straight out of Independence Day or Fallout 3. Areas like the one they’re in, which are functional again, but battered, not so much.

“Should have seen it back in November,” Draga replies, and proceeds to spend the next ten minutes effusively telling her about the fall of DC. In his version of the story, he, Tim, and Tony are all big damn heroes, and Tony can see she’s enjoying the story, but she’s taking it with a pretty big grain of salt.

Tony’s driving, and he sees Tim watching them, and then flash an awfully amused look to Tony.
Beth catches it, and smiles a bit, too.

Tony, intentionally, does not laugh.

She knows a moonstruck guy when she sees one, and she’s putting up with it well. So, that’s a few extra points on her side.

“Why leave crime scene work?” Tim asks when they’re all settled in at Carlo’s. It’s worse for the wear. The windows are still boarded over. The menu’s been scaled down because they can’t get everything they used to. The tables and chairs don’t match anymore, and some jackass came in and broke the mirrors from behind the bar, so that wall is also currently sporting cardboard.

But, Carlo is still running the joint, the burgers are still good, and right now, they will happily support any restaurant that’s back in service, trying to make a go at it in what’s left of DC.

Beth nibbles a French fry. “I never got to see how the cases ended.” She swallows. “Like, okay, we’d go into a scene, and it’d be a blood bath. So, I’d be taking swabs and printing and photographing and then… Poof! Gone. The next day it’d be a new scene, and more blood and crime and no answers. I want to see how the story ends.”

“How do you feel about actively writing the end of the story?” Tony asks.

She smiles. “I’d like that.”

Tim lingers with Tony over the check, letting Draga and Johnson go ahead. Once they’re out of earshot, he laughs.

“Oh, Lord, it’s you and Ziva!”

Tony shakes his head. “Yeah, I see it, too. Is that a good thing, or not?”

Tim elbows him. “I don’t know, tell me about it in fifteen years when you’ve got some baby Dragas calling you ‘Pop.’”

Tony shakes his head, again. “Kevin calls me Tony.”

“Right, already one little Draga out there.” Tim watches them in the back seat of the car, snarking at each other. (Once Draga got out of moonstruck phase, he’s been alternating between big damn hero and charming snark.) He shakes his head, huge smile on his face. “We keep saying Karma’s a bitch. I can’t wait to see how this one bites you in the ass. You’ve got to hire her, just for my sake. Can’t wait to see this!”

Tony gives him a shove. “You’ll be off in your kingdom at the FBI. You won’t get to see it.”

Tim waves that off. “I’ll hear about it. That’ll be enough. Make some excuse to get Jimmy up there today, he needs to see this.”
On the way home, Tony makes a detour to see Gibbs.

He’s getting dinner ready as Tony heads in. “Smells good.”

“Just chicken.”

“Good chicken.” He sits down on the sofa, looking at chicken breasts sizzling over the fire. “Got the skin on them, that’s good.”

“Tastes like cardboard otherwise.” Gibbs sits next to him. “You here to talk cooking?”

He swallows. “Remember the horny idiot I was when Ziva walked in the door the first time?”

Gibbs nods.

“If Jen hadn’t forced her on the team, would you have hired her?”

Gibbs knows what Tony’s asking. Not, *was she qualified for the team*, but, *would you have put her on a team with me if you’d had the choice.*

Gibbs sighs. “Draga likes Johnson?”

“He’s looking at her like Mona looks at a raw steak. So far, all I can say on his behalf is that he’s not visibly drooling.”

Gibbs chuckles, many memories of Tony and Ziva, and earlier, Tony and Kate, in his head.

“Can he work with her?”

“He says he will. Not sure if putting them on the same team is doing either of them any favors.”

“She good?”

“Yeah. I think she is. She’s faster on the computers than he is, and did three years as a crime scene tech. She’s fluent in Spanish. Scored in the top 10% of her marksmanship class at FLETC. She’s got skills we need. I grab her and Spader, and I’ve got a fully balanced team again.”

“Which you need.”

Tony nods. “Got to see if those two can play nice, too.”

“They will.” Gibbs smiles at Tony, remembering.

“You’re thinking of you and me after we said goodbye to Vivian.”

“And of finding Kate and Tim. Give them a go. You’ve got a Probie year for a reason. They don’t work, off they go, no harm, no foul.”

“Gonna get 12 engraved on dog tags and make them all wear them.”

Gibbs laughs at that.
And If You Can...

Stay at home dadding with a very tiny little boy is a hell of a lot easier than it was with a tiny little baby girl. Probably because they’ve got a nanny now, and two extra parents helping with nighttime baby duty.

So, it’s in a pretty good mood, with not exactly a spring in his step, but something less than exhausted Zombie-hood, that Tim grabs Sean once he’s done nursing with Abby, gets them both geared up for the cold weather, and heads off to the postbox.

All of fifty feet from his front door.

Yeah, it’s not a huge long walk or anything, still, with a new baby, getting the mail is an adventure.

So, Sean’s tucked against his chest, head under his chin, fuzzy bear winter onesie ears ticking his cheek, as Tim says to him, “Okay, we’re off to go get the mail. And once we’ve done that, we’re going to get everyone in the car, and off to the house for our weekend we go.”

Sean gurgles a bit at that.

“It’ll be fun. You and Kelly’ll nap in the car. When we get there, you’ll still be snoozing, so into your room you’ll go. I’ll get dinner started and then…” he pulls the mail out, and like Comey said, there’s a thick envelope from the FBI with his name on it, “and then I’ll do some reading with your mama.”

It’s a thick contract.

Abby’s reading it out loud to him while he seasons the lamb for the oven.

She pauses while he flips the leg over, rubbing salt, pepper, and rosemary all over it. “You know, this is longer than my contract, your contract, and Tony’s all put together.”

He looks up from the lamb. “Yeah. By the time I sign this thing, the FBI’ll own me body and soul, this life and the next.”

She nods at him and reads some more. Then she makes a face at the document in front of her. “Don’t like this bit.”

“Gotta read it out loud, baby.” Yeah, she was reading, to herself. Which doesn’t do him, fifteen feet away, in the kitchen, much good.

“As per the terms of this contract,” Abby reads, “all communications in regards to the duties outlined herein are to be kept to members of the FBI with the correct clearances, see section 4:10, 4:11, and 4:12.” She flips around, reads some more, and then says, “You basically can’t talk to anyone about what you’re doing unless they work for the FBI or another Federal Agency and have a higher clearance than you do.”

“And that would be?”

Abby shrugs. She doesn’t know what everyone’s clearance is. “Abbi. Maybe your grandmother.
Maybe. Maybe not. Definitely not Breena.”

“Okay, first order of business is taking care of that. I’m handing this thing in with contracts for all of you, too.”

“Contracts for all of us to do what?”

“Advise.” Tim puts the leg of lamb on a roasting rack. He heads over to the sink and washes his hands, and then heads over to Abby. He stands behind her, hands on her shoulders, and kisses the top of her head. “I’ve told Comey I’m running this department however I like, and all he’s got is the power to veto me. And part of how I like it is me being able to talk shop with you guys.”

“Good luck on that.” She flips around a bit more. “Nothing in here about him being able to tell you how to do your job. He’s got the right to yearly audits of what you’re up to, and you don’t have any length of time on this. He can drop you whenever he feels like it.”

Tim nods. That’s pretty much what he’s expecting. “First order of business then is making sure I’ve got all of you on the list of people I can talk to. So, how do you feel about an unpaid advisory position at the FBI?”

Abby rolls her eyes a little. “Tingly all over. You know I’ve always wanted to be a G-woman.” She winks. “We do X-files roleplaying again, that’ll up my Scully cred.”

He giggles and kisses her. “I’ll have the badge to go with my Mulder suit.”

That makes her outright laugh.

She turns her face to him, and he bends a little to kiss her. Tim straightens back up. “Okay, let me get the lamb in the oven, and then we can finish reading this on the sofa.”

Saturday morning, Tim still hasn’t signed the contract. He should. He’s talked to everyone, and he knows he’s going to do it, but…

But shedding NCIS from his identity is harder than he expected. He said goodbye to Agent McGee readily enough. (Okay, yeah, there was some foot dragging with that, too. And as he thinks about it, he realizes his first year anniversary as Director of Cybercrime McGee has come and gone without his notice.) But this time…

He pokes the contract. Jimmy lays a hand on his shoulder. “You don’t have to go. None of us will be even anything like bothered if you turn it down.”

He looks up from his place at the breakfast table they got for their own section. “I know.” His fingers rest on the contract. “But I should.”

Jimmy kisses the top of his head, and hands him the pen that’s been sitting next to his hand for an hour. “Then do it.”

Tim signs.

For someone who’s spent almost his entire adult life involved with law, the fact is that Tim’s not
entirely sure how to write up contracts for the rest of everyone else.

He’s got the FBI small-phonebook-sized contract in front of him, and he kind of remembers what he signed with NCIS, but looking at the cursor blinking away on his laptop isn’t precisely inspiring him to greatness.

But Tim’s not going to be the guy who goes off to work and vanishes, and then comes home and can only talk about the kids or the weather.

He gets to typing. Each one is one page long, basically saying that the person who signed it is an unpaid advisor to Tim McGee. That position offered the advisor no wages, no benefits, no status with the FBI (beyond the ability to talk to Tim), and no claim to any of the above at any future point.

By dinner on Saturday, his whole family has signed up as Unpaid Advisors to Director McGee.

He’s mildly amused at the mental image he has of Comey looking at this when he hands it in.

Normally, on a Monday morning, Tim would catch a ride into work with Jimmy or Abby. They don’t usually all go together, it’s a good plan to have two cars there so that if they can’t all stay to the same time, everyone can get home easily enough. But, Abby’s still off, and Jimmy’s going straight in to the office today, and Tim isn’t.

Today he’s heading to the FBI, to hand Comey a signed contract.

It feels heavy. It’s a long document, and he added more pages to it. But, even as a long document, it’s not that big.

But, paper isn’t just pulped trees. It’s got the weight of the words on it, and words can be little light things or they can carry the weight of stone.

These are stone words. These are the words that break the tie NCIS has had on him for basically his entire adult life. And though he’s sure this is a move in the right direction, he’ll be damned before he can figure out how he feels about this.

This time, as he heads into the FBI building, he’s in his usual dressed for work outfit. Coat, jacket, button down, jeans, nice shoes. He even added a tie in deference to where he’s going today. He’s a bit casual for the FBI, but not insanely so, especially for a visitor.

This time, he doesn’t get a second glance as he goes through security.

Once he’s upstairs, Comey’s secretary barely glances at him, and she certainly doesn’t ask him for ID. She does let Comey know he’s waiting, and a minute later, she waves him in.

“McGee, is something wrong?” This would be when Tim realizes Comey expected him to mail the contract back.

“Nope. Just, handing it in.”
“Oh, good. Doris told me you were out there, and I thought you’d come to say you had second thoughts.”

“A ton of them, but that’s not stopping this.”

Comey flashes him a small smile. He appears to appreciate the frankness, and that Tim’s enough of a realist to have doubts about this.

“I’ve also got a present for you.” Tim pulls a thumb drive out of his pocket. “Actually, it’s for your head of IT.”

Comey looks intrigued. “Is that…” he takes the thumb drive, “the paperwork software I keep hearing about? Leon’s been bragging about how fast everything goes for a while, now.”

Tim nods. “It’s not like your guys can just upload it and get it working. You’ve got your own systems and paperwork, but this is what we use, and it’s got all the main bugs worked out. Should be pretty easy to modify it for your organization. I expect this up and running by the time I start.”

Comey smiles at that, too. This time the smile is amused and extremely doubtful. “Good luck on that. Todd Carney runs IT. He’s on the third floor. Go give it to him.”

Tim eyes Comey, not sure if this is a test. “Just to make sure, since I don’t actually work here, yet. You are giving me permission to do what I need to to make sure this system is up and running by my first day here?”

“You’ve signed the contract. If you want to get the ID badge made up, and then head over to IT, that’s fine by me. Or you can just head down.” Comey hands the thumb drive back.

Tim nods. He’s got a visitor badge right now. He doesn’t, however, have any paperwork to get an ID badge with. “You want to write me up a permission slip so I can get the ID badge?”

Comey takes care of it. “First floor, hallway to the right, just beyond security.”

Tim’s got the note. “The contract says I get an office and secretary.”

“You’ll be on four. You get to hire the secretary yourself. When you come in to work, you’ll have access to HR.”

“And if I want that ahead of time?”

“Have at it. You looking to hire people before you start?”

“At least some of them. Want to hit the ground as close to running as I can.”

Comey likes that.

---

Rules for the sake of rules. The FBI really seems to like them. Getting an ID takes the patience of a saint. He, of course, doesn’t have the proper paperwork, and a ‘make this guy an ID badge that says: Timothy McGee, Director of Public Corruption Investigations’ note from the Director of the FBI doesn’t speed anything up.

Probably makes it slower.
There’s a system for how this is supposed to work, and he’s mucking it up, and the ladies who run HR are not happy with him.

But, eventually, they find someone who can figure out how to do go around the system to get a picture of him on a piece of plastic with a clip on it, and from there, he’s off to explore.

He’s debating how much weight he should be throwing around. HR, he just waited patiently, pulled out his laptop, and worked on other problems while they dithered around looking for someone to do the job.

If HR is slow that’s not a huge deal. So it takes an hour to get an ID. There will never be a situation where getting an ID fast will matter a whit.

IT on the other hand…

That’s the question.

He’s talking about making them completely re-do their entire computer structure, in six months. Sure, they aren’t starting from scratch, but that’s not exactly going to make the day of whoever gets this foisted off onto them.

Tim actually laughs a little at that.

He finds IT. He’s surprised to see they’re above ground. They aren’t at NCIS. They’re kept below ground to make sure the computers are protected from pretty much anything short of a EMP. But here… He’s looking out at lines and lines of desks, all nice and tidy, to large glass windows that used to have a lovely view of DC and are now sooty, streaky, and overlooking a lot of charred wreckage and reconstruction.

He glances around, not seeing what he’s looking for. He heads to the nearest computer, and asks the lady sitting at it, “Where is Mr. Carney?”

She looks a little startled to be asked that. “Uh… His office is behind you. Down the hall, to the right, then left, and then all the way down.”

“Thanks.”

Tim turns around, follows her directions, and having walked past more computers than he thinks NCIS has at the Navy Yard, he finds the office.

Carney has a secretary, too.

Tim explains who he is, and that he’d like to see Carney if he has some time. She checks his ID, which of course, isn’t actually in the system, because he’s not in the system.

She’s eyeing him, holding the ID, and Tim sighs. “Either call down to HR, where I just was, or call up to Comey, who I left an hour ago. Take your pick. It’s real.”

Her eyes narrow, and she makes another call. “Hey Doris, I’ve got a guy here claiming to be the Director of Public Corruption Investigations… Uh huh… Yeah… Tall, brown hair, green eyes, black leather jacket… Okay.” She hangs up, and her posture straightens up a bit. “So, you’re the real deal, huh?”

He gives her a smile. “That’s the rumor. May I see Mr. Carney?”
“He should be free, let me check.” She does, and a moment later Carney, a tall Black man in his mid-fifties, heads out.

“Hi. Tim McGee,” Tim offers his hand, and Carney takes it, looking at him curiously.

“Hello, Tim McGee. I’m sorry, I don’t know why you’re here.” His eyes flick to the ID, and he starts to look a little nervous. Tim files that away. He’s basically IA now, which means everyone’ll get nervous around him.

“I’m here bearing gifts.” Carney is still looking wary, and Tim’s words don’t ease that. He ushers Tim into his office. “What do you know about the NCIS paperwork software?”

Carney shrugs. “I know it exists. I’ve got a few people nipping at my heels trying to get me to build one for us. Why?”

Tim flicks his ID badge. “Technically, I don’t start this job until July. Right now, I’m still with NCIS, and I’m the architect of the paperwork software.” He hands over the thumb drive. “You can’t just install it. You’ll have to modify it for your systems. But, in six months, when I start here, I want this up and running.”

“Six months?” Carney looks like this is the punchline to a very bad joke.

Tim nods.

“Really?”

Tim nods again. “Shouldn’t take you more than a month. It’s all in there, you just need to modify it for your forms. Another month or two for testing. Three additional months for SNAFU. You’re good to go.”

“I can’t even get this on the schedule of upkeep for two years.”

Tim blinks. “Two years? You are so backlogged that when someone has a tech call, you are two years behind?”

“No. But our maintenance and upgrade schedule is done two years out. We can start on this after the 2018 system upgrade.”

Tim purses his lips and blinks again. “This system will save the entire FBI tens of thousands of man hours a day, and you can’t install it for two years?”

“I’d like to, but… What should I bump? Getting new computers set up? Running system diagnostics? Making sure our current systems keep running?”

“Yes.”

Now it’s Comey’s turn to blink. “What? Things fall apart if I don’t follow that schedule.”

Tim’s not terribly impressed by that. If his system is that tight, there’s something wrong with it. “Crime. That’s our job. We solve crimes. Not you and I, not personally, not anymore,” Tim adds quietly, hoping that’s not really true. “But we’re here so they,” he gestures to the outside world, “can do that. They don’t get to go do that if they’re filling out forms. So, this just got bumped to the top of your list. It’s higher priority than anything not absolutely vital to keep the FBI running. Move back new computers and put those people on this.”
Carney is looking at Tim like he’s being particularly dense. “They’re installation techs. What would they do with this?”

Tim mentally groans. Of course they’ve got enough people here to have guys who just install computers. He thinks for a moment and then says, “Wait, you’ve got a two-year-long queue?”

Carney nods.

“Two-years-long?”

“Yes.” He puts a lot of emphasis on that, as if he’s talking to a particularly stubborn, and stupid, child. “We have all of our maintenance set two years in advance.”

“We’ve lost five states in the last three months, and sure, you didn’t have more than a handful of people in North Dakota and Alaska, but you want me to believe that you guys shut down your offices in California and Texas, two of what used to be the three most populated states, didn’t fire any of those guys, moved them around to what you’ve got left here in the US, and you can’t find thirty guys who are just twiddling their thumbs to implement this?”

Carney looks chagrined at that.

Tim’s eyes narrow. Rules for the sake of rules. They set those schedules up two years ago, and by God they were going to follow them.

Carney sighs and nods. “Six months?”

“Six months, and it better run smooth as silk.”

On the drive back to NCIS, Tim’s thinking through his next job. Talk to Ngyn. He’ll offer her the job, she’ll say no, and then he’ll spend the rest of the morning reading up on his other team leaders.

From there, it’s lunch with Tony’s new crew. That’ll be interesting.

Tim had forgotten that some of NCIS is a bit tense around him these days.

It comes slamming back into him when he goes breezing into Abby’s lab to show off Sean pictures with the guys, and they all give him the cold shoulder.

He prints out a picture of Sean in his fuzzy bear snuggli, and tapes it up on Abby’s computer. He can feel Corwin staring at him, eyes burning into the back of his head.

On the way out, Tim texts Abby. *Your guys are still righteously pissed on your behalf.*

He’s in the elevator when he gets back *What happened?*

*They all glared at me and couldn’t bother to even smile at the Sean pictures.*

*Wince.*
Yeah. Given how frosty the reception was, I didn’t stick around to chat. Didn’t mention that he’s deaf.

Okay. How’d dropping off the contract go?

Tim spends a minute texting her the details, and then heads into his own office.

It’s true that he lost a lot of popularity points with NCIS in general, it’s also true that he’s the Boss of Cybercrime, and when the Boss is taping up pictures of his new baby, people come over to say congratulations and coo over how cute he is.

Which Tim absolutely takes as Sean’s due. He is an insanely cute little boy, and even if people are looking at him like he’s a two-timing pervert, there’s no reason why they shouldn’t spend a moment basking in the joy that is looking at pictures of Sean in a series of ridiculously cute little outfits.

He’s still stuck with not having a good answer for “How is he?”

He’s fine. He’s growing in leaps and bounds. He’s already eight pounds and his hair is coming in nice and thick. He’s as healthy as a newborn can be, except, he’s deaf.

It occurs to Tim, as he’s taping those pictures up and answering questions about Sean, that one of these days, those pictures will have hearing aids or cochlear implants, or something, and that it’s going to be really obvious to anyone who sees a picture of Sean that he can’t hear.

So, as he’s talking to Connon (who is also a dad) about his little guy, he says, “We did have one hiccough. They did the hearing tests, and Sean’s deaf.”

Connon nods along. “Yeah, I heard about that. Last update said you guys didn’t know what was coming next, any news?”

This would be when Tim remembers that Howard and Ngyn are on his baby contact list, and of course, they got the Sean’s deaf email.

By now, it’s probably all over work.

“More testing coming up soon.”

“That’s got to be rough. Even when everything is fine, seeing them in the doctor’s office sucks.”

Tim inclines his head. “Yeah. He slept through the testing, easy as can be. I had to keep myself from grabbing him away from the nurse.”

Connon laughs a bit at that. “First time Seth had his vaccinations, I wanted to hit the nurse. She’s doing her job, but she made my boy cry, and… I almost grabbed her away from him.”

Tim shakes his head. “It’s crazy. But, yeah.”

Connon’s watching him, gaze intense. “Heard some rumors…”

“About?” Tim’s wondering if they’re on the verge of a really uncomfortable conversation about his sexuality.

“Some sort of big computer shindig coming up. Redoing how we run the whole thing. I want in.”
That Tim’s happy to talk about. “I’ll be sending out the email later today. Got a few big projects coming up and we’re going to need people on them. I’m good with you clearing out your calendar for the first week of March.”

“Good.”

He swings by Ngyn’s desk, and promptly remembers that she and the rest of the Dream Team usually work nights.

Which means… Email time.

He sends her off a quick one asking for some facetime when she gets in this afternoon. He sends a longer one out detailing what he hopes to do with the March Tech in Crime Commission, and how he wants all of them to devote some time to ideas for how this should work. He then sets out a plan for them to come up with a team to go to the Commission, people who will be on point for representing the rest of NCIS Cyber for this.

He sends that out to his guys and IT, too.

Anyone with the talent for it should be doing it.

Which leaves him with five minutes before lunch with Tony and his newbie.

Lunch was fun. Johnson’s so cute. She looks so much like Abbie from Sleepy Hollow Tim wants to pinch himself. And Draga is in so far over his head he doesn’t know what to do with himself. Tim can’t wait to see how this shakes out. Tony tells him that Spader is also a young guy, and Tim just shakes his head.

Team DiNozzo’s going to be a blast.

Tim’s in a fabulous mood as he gets back to the office.

He swings by Autopsy to go check in with Jimmy, get him up to date on Tony’s new kids, and suggest he needs to get up and see them for himself.

Jimmy also appears to be amused by Tony’s new team, and says he’ll get up as soon as he’s got the monthly inventory done.

“So, what are we doing for the ladies for Valentine’s day?” Jimmy asks Tim as he’s counting up the packs glass slides.

“Uh.” Right, there’s this thing, that’s happening in three weeks, that requires him to do something.

“Eloquent.”

Tim’s shaking his head. “No ideas. I’m gonna assume sex is out for Abby. Maybe not, but I’m not
going to plan on it.”

Jimmy offers up a lackluster smile. “Probably for Breena, too.”

They sigh. Both are hoping this will be a low or no morning sickness pregnancy, but neither is planning on it.

Tim dithers through his go-to romantic plans while Jimmy watches him. Tim looks back, getting the sense that Jimmy’s got an idea. “What?”

“How does writing poetry go?”

“Uh…” He doesn’t understand what Jimmy means by that.

“Like, do you have to be inspired, or can you just sit down and slug it out?”

“Never tried just belting it out, but I probably could, why?”

“You write; I sing.”

Tim likes that idea. A whole lot. He doesn’t know much about writing music, but he figures that if Jimmy can get a tune out of whatever lyrics he can come up with… “Ziva plays piano, and Tony plays guitar and piano.”

Jimmy nods at that. “Yeah. I can write the music. Been a long time since I’ve done something like that, but a note’s a note. Doesn’t matter if it’s voice or instrument. So… get me some lyrics.”

Tim keeps thinking. “Don’t suppose you could get me a tune first, and then give me something to build them on.”

“We’ll both work on it, and then shape it together.”

Tim smiles, huge grin on his face. The ladies should really go for that. A moment later, he’s still watching Jimmy when a thought hits. “Do we get each other Valentine’s presents?”

Jimmy shrugs. “Wasn’t planning on it.”

Tim nods. “I wasn’t either.”

“Okay, we’re good.”

Back to work. As he told Connon, he’s got two big projects and the second one needs people on it, as well.

He grabs his phone as he heads to his desk, and calls Tony. “Is Bishop still on the payroll?”

“Yeah. She just gave her thirty days’ notice. Why?”

“I’ve got a project that someone who’s good with statistical analysis should be on. If we’re still employing her, I’d like to run it by her.”

“Fine by me. As long as she’s got time to run financials and stuff.”

“I don’t think I’ll monopolize her time.”
“Okay.” There’s a pause while Tony thinks. “What do you need statistical analysis on? Terror stuff?”

“Closer to home. Back when the thing went down with The Admiral, Vance and I got talking to the press. We made some noise about NCIS using big data to hunt down sexual harassment and discrimination. So, I’m back, I’ve got a few minutes, time to get that going.”

Tim can’t see Tony’s expression, but he can imagine it. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

He gets to his office, writes yet another email, explaining what he wants to do to Bishop, and how, in order to do it, he needs a median number of assault cases baseline to play off of.

An hour later, as he’s working through the basic design ideas, he gets an email back from her, very excited, happy to be on it.

Tim smiles at that. Good to get her working on something she’s a good fit for.

He’s got the basic plan laid down. Not bad for three hours of work. Granted, nothing is done beyond the basic plan, and honestly there are more than a few sections where he’s got a set of parentheses and _insert functional code here_ as place holders.

It actually looks a lot like the outline of one of his novels when he’s just getting into it.

One last thing to do before going home, and that’s poke his head out of his office, and see that now, as the night shift is beginning, that Ngyn is sitting at her desk.

He ambles over. “Hey, got a minute to talk?”

She’s looking slightly worried as she stands up, saying, “Sure, Boss.”

Normally he’d say something like, “This isn’t a big deal, relax.” But it is a big deal, so he doesn’t, and he can feel her tense walking the twenty steps to his office beside him. Unfortunately, him closing the door behind them just freaks her out more.

“It’s okay, Ngyn. Nothing… Okay, not nothing, this is a big deal, and one I’d like to keep between us for the time being.”

Now she’s gone from freaked out to borderline panicked. “Everyone’s okay, right? Sean and Abby and Jimmy and…”

He smiles. “No one’s sick, hurt, or dying or anything like that. Since we shook everything up back in October, the world’s been changing. Hopefully for the better. One of those changes is that I’ve accepted a position with the FBI starting in July.”

“You can’t leave!”

He smiles at that, too. “Thanks. I don’t want to, not really, but… It’s a good job, and it’s a job I could do really good things with. It’s Director of Public Corruption Investigations. It’s doing what we did back in October, all the time, for anyone who works for the government.”
Ngyn lets out a long, slow breath. “Wow.”

Tim nods. “Yeah. Can’t say no to that. But, I can’t do that and still run this department. So, come July, I’m out of here, and we need a new Director of Cybercrime for NCIS.”

Ngyn’s eyes go wide and for a second he feels like he’s looking at a deer in the headlights. Then she blinks and straightens up and nods. “Okay.”

Tim wasn’t expecting that. “Okay?”

“Yeah. You’re offering me the job, right?”

Tim blinks. “Uh… well… yeah, but…”

“But…” she’s staring at him.

“But you were supposed to say ‘no.’ Ngyn, you don’t like working with people, which is like, sixty percent of this job.”

She shrugs. “Why are you asking me?”

“You’ve got the time in, you’re a great problem solver, you’ve got the technical skills and the vision to do great things, just… you’re weaker on getting other people to execute than I’d like, but I didn’t want to insult you by not offering you the job.”

“Do you want to leave NCIS? All else being equal, would you stay here?”

Tim nods. “Yeah. I love it here, but… It’s a great job I could do great things with.”

She smiles back at him, and he sees his own thoughts reflecting back at him. “You’re heading off in July, right?”

He nods.

“Four months. Give me four months to work on my dealing-with-other-people skills. If at the end of four months, you don’t think I’ve done well enough with it, I won’t blink when you offer this to your next best pick.”

Now it’s Tim’s turn to smile. “I like that idea. And I’ve got another one. You get online and read your emails, yet?”

“You got me ten seconds after I sat down, hadn’t even logged in, yet.”

Tim nods at that, too. “Get online, read the email I sent about the Tech in Crime commission. You’re point on the NCIS team. I want a blueprint for what this thing is going to be, based on what everyone at NCIS has to offer on this, and you’re going to be the one to handle the NCIS contingent at the Commission. If you can run that without wanting to curl up into a ball and cry, the day to day stuff of this job shouldn’t shake you.”

Ngyn straightens her back again. She doesn’t exactly look happy, but she doesn’t look like she’s about to go off to face a firing squad, either.

She starts to get up, and Tim has another insight. “It’s okay if you don’t want it.”

“I know. But, like you said, I could do great things with this, so I might as well be in a position to do them.”
“Yeah.” Tim nods at her again. “That’s the whole crux of it right? Why we do this kind of work?”

“Yeah, it is. So, do I still call you Boss?”

“Out there you do. I’m not going public with this for a while, yet. Leon knows, and you and him are all I need knowing about this until, say, late May. In here, in private, I prefer Tim.”

“Okay, Tim.”

All in all, as he’s walking to his car, he’s thinking that was a good day.
Feel like dinner at Fornell’s? Pops up on Abbi’s phone about mid-day on Wednesday.

She thinks about it, looks at the pile of stuff in her inbox, thinks about what’s left that she’s got to do today, and how many late nights she’s worked this week, and decides that, yes, she deserves an early night for once.

Sure. Pick me up here, and then over to his place? She sends back to Gibbs.

Be there at 5:30.

“What’s the occasion?” Gibbs asks as Wendy opens the door and kisses him on the cheek. He can tell something big has happened. The house smells like heaven, buttery-garlicy-seafoody scents wafting about. He can see that Fornell’s got champagne on ice, and wine glasses at the ready. The table’s set for a feast, and everyone has good mood vibes pouring off of them.

She’s hugging Abbi, and says, “Not my occasion. He wouldn’t say until you two showed up.”

“Mysterious,” Abbi replies.

Wendy shrugs, takes their coats and waves them through the dining room toward the kitchen, where Fornell’s cooking away.

“Win the lotto?” Gibbs asks. Fornell’s not quite as tight with cash as Diane made him out to be, but this level of expense on an out of the blue Wednesday night… That’s odd for him. And Gibbs always gets a bit uncomfortable when people start acting odd.

“Sea scallops were on sale,” he says, standing in front of the stove, browning up a little butter with some garlic and onions in it. “Too many to eat at once, and they don’t freeze.”

That strikes Gibbs as a good reason to get together. But he knows it’s not the only reason. Among other things, if he hadn’t wanted to get together, Fornell would have only gotten enough scallops for him and Wendy. Besides, Gibbs saw the bubbly, and knows Fornell well enough to know good scallops on sale is just the tip of whatever’s got him so happy.

“What are you doing with them?” Abbi asks, pulling closer to the stove, getting a quick kiss from Fornell.

“Scallop scampi. Pasta’s almost done. They’re just about ready to go in.”

“Short cooking time?” Gibbs asks. What he knows about scallops and how to cook them would fill a small thimble. He’s much better acquainted with eating them.

Fornell shakes his head. “Jethro…” He gently slips the first of them into the hot butter. “You just want them to,” he makes a little kiss sound, “the butter and garlic. And then,” one more kiss sound, “over they go. They’re just saying hi, nice and easy. Then a bit of stock…” he shakes his head, pouring the liquid in with the scallops, “Nona’d be rolling over in her grave if she saw me doing this with chicken stock.”
“With as often as you send her rolling, Tobias, you could strap a generator to her coffin and run the house off of it,” Wendy says with a smile.

He nods a bit at that. “She always had every sort of stock in the house. Whatever they’d eat, if there were usable left overs, they’d go into a bag, chicken, fish, beef, or vegetables. Bag gets full, the stock pot comes out, and then she’d freeze it in her ice cube trays and keep them in the freezer ready to pop into whatever needed it.”

Abbi doesn’t know Fornell as well as the other two, but he’s in an ebullient mood. “You’re in a goofy mood, aren’t you?” She and Wendy share a look on that one.

“That’s one way to put it.” He gently pokes one scallop as the stock starts to simmer. “Ah… hear that bubble? Another minute, a bit more simmer, and then it’s time for the parsley and lemon juice, and we’re ready to go.”

“What’s got you in such a goofy mood?” Gibbs asks.

Fornell shakes his head again. “You’ll never believe it.”

“Probably not,” Gibbs says.

Fornell gently stirs the scampi, turning down the flame, flipping the scallops again, and then spooning the sauce over them. “All right, just one last kiss.” He looks back at the other three. “Let’s get this on plates, and I’ll tell you about it at dinner.”

“Remember Don Calfalone?” Fornell asks as once food is on plates, butts are in seats, and bubbly is bubbling away in fluted glasses.

Gibbs thinks, the name is familiar, and then he knows... “You spent, four years, on and off, undercover trying to grab him, right?”


Gibbs nods, he remembers the two of them talking about Calfalone. Back when this started Diane used to be part of those conversations, and long after she was gone, the hunt for Calfalone was still running strong. But nothing ever stuck, Calfalone always had too many buffers, and he kept his people too well taken care of to make talking worthwhile.

Fornell takes a swig of his bubbly. “They just got him in the vote buying scheme. Both the RNC and the DNC required that any money be deposited directly from your personal bank account. That was part of making sure that no one talked about it. Not only did they have the information to destroy your finances if you talked, but they also made sure that you’d implicate yourself.”

Gibbs had been wondering for a while why no one talked about that. There had been tens of thousands of people involved, and in his experience that’s about ten thousand times too many to keep a secret.

“He spent twenty-six million dollars over the last twenty-five years, entirely on Senators and
Congressmen, all of them on the Judiciary committee. That’s part of why we couldn’t get anything to stick to him, he made sure the judges who were trying him owed him, indirectly, for their jobs. Got half a dozen federal judges that are in trouble now, too."

“And we’re… celebrating… this?” Wendy can see that it’s good this guy is going down, but, she’d have thought Fornell would have wanted to take him down in person.

Fornell smiles. “Guess who’s getting out of paperwork hell next week, and is going to be in depositions for at least the next month, plus all the trial prep. I’m the resident Calfalone expert, and I’m going to get to testify against all those judges who disallowed evidence, and cut testimony and witnesses. I’m back working on something *useful* for at least another month.”

Gibbs shares a smile with Fornell, they both know how off-kilter it feels to spends days on busy work.

By the end of dinner, Abbi is certainly seeing the potential for retirement. Okay, sure Gibbs and Fornell bitch about not having the job, but both of them talking about being able to go after the cases they want to, and not dealing with stupid crap like budgets and OSHA certifications and all the rest of that… Is actually reminding Abbi that she doesn’t really want to be retired, she just doesn’t want to be management.

She sighs at that.

Gibbs hears and glances over to her, stroking her hand. “Okay?”

She smiles, a wry look on her face. “Just got promoted higher than I would have liked. I had a kidnapping ring. Never got them. Tried. We knew how it worked and generally who was doing it, but… It was a service for people who wanted to screw over the ex who got custody. So, low priority to begin with. Yeah, they were kidnapped kids, but they weren’t being held for ransom, no one was in danger of being killed, they were usually being taken overseas on behalf of their non-US-Citizen Dads. But that’s still a lot of heartbroken moms begging to get baby girl or boy or both back.”

Wendy winces and Fornell and Gibbs nod. “And the guys kept weaseling out of your grasp?”

“Yes. Part of the problem was we generally didn’t know about the missing kid until after they went missing, which makes this harder to do. Can’t set a sting for something like that. You can’t set a watch on every kid in the US who’s part of a bad custody fight. Part of it is they took payment in cash. So, I didn’t have a money trail to run down. Add in mostly non-US citizens… It was a mess. I spent six years, on and off, on that case. Occasionally we could get the kids back, which is where I got at least some of the intel on how they were being taken out of the US, but never got the guys.”

“And you want to,” Fornell says.

“My white whale.”

“How about you, Gibbs? Got some white whales of your own?” Wendy asks.

Gibbs shrugs a bit. He blew the head off his white whale a long time ago, and then Ziva shot the next one, and all the rest haven’t quite risen to the level of whale. “Anyone who’s been on this job more than a year has a white whale or two. But most of mine, they’re more like white… sharks. Big,
“But not huge.”

“And you’ve got a Second-in-Command and Computer Boy hunting for them,” Fornell adds.

Gibbs smiles at that. “Does help to make ‘em look smaller. Someone’s gonna get them sooner or later.”

“Speaking of Computer Boy, I heard he signed up with us,” Fornell adds, bite of scallop on his fork, en route to his mouth.


Fornell nods, McGee at FBI feels odd to him, too. Might be the kind of odd the FBI needs, though. Then he says to Wendy, “Last time I saw him, he showed up at the office in the skirt, makeup, boots, and tattoos all over the place. Security just about died rather than let him in.”

“And you had a blast at that, didn’t you?” she asks, smile on her face, imagining Tobias enjoying that, a lot.

Fornell does look smugly amused. “I might have. He’s already got the head of IT pissed. Apparently, by pointing out that he had five state’s worth of currently underemployed techs sitting around, everyone wants their stuff done right now.”

Gibbs chuckles at that.

“Okay, start talking,” Wendy says after pulling Abbi into the kitchen for post-dinner cleanup and girly talk.

“About…” Abbi looks like the proverbial deer in the headlights.

“About? Really? About that ring on your finger and what’s going to happen about it! Come on, wedding details, woman! What do you have?”

“Errr…” Abbi’s got some vague ideas and an inbox the size of a whale, a blue whale. Right now, the inbox is winning.

“Oh, honey.”

“The Omni. We’ve got the Omni booked for December 31st 2017 into Jan 1, 2018. Quaker style wedding, so Ducky can do whatever level of officiating we need.”

“Oh…” Wendy smiles at that. “That’s a lovely idea.”

“Gibbs’.”

“Dress, colors, theme, details?” Wendy sees Abbi not say anything for a moment, and then adds, “You mean to tell me Gibbs’ girls haven’t dragged you out to go find a dress, yet?”

“They’ve been suggesting it, but… The job doesn’t really ever end, and all I want to do on the weekend is lay around, nap, maybe cook if I’m feeling inspired, and play with the kids. I’ve already spent ten million hours making decisions about everything, I don’t want to decide anything else
when I’m off."

“I get that. Twenty-five years as a social worker means I know every flavor of exhausted to ever
exhaust. But, you want the right dress, and you want it to fit, it’s time to get moving on it.”

Abbi nods. “Ziva’s been poking me in that direction.”

“Ziva?” Of all the girls, Wendy would have assumed Breena would be the one on top of this.

“Ziva plans a mean wedding when she puts her mind to it. I have one dress idea… Remember Grace
Kelly’s.”

Wendy’s eyes go soft as she imagines that. “Oh… I can see that. All proper and elegant… Hair up…
Soft makeup. Oh yeah, I can see that.”

“During lunch Ziva finds me pictures of dresses that might work. Breena’s sent me a few, too.
Nothing I love, yet. Abby’s trying to get me to go meet the costume designer who made her dress
and have her do it.”

“Having it made for you might be a good plan. You get exactly what you want, and you don’t have
to wade through two hundred not good enough dresses.”

Abbi nods.

“Of course, you miss the chance to stumble onto something fun if you do it that way. No chance of a
surprise popping out and grabbing you. Look, I’ve got a free Saturday, and a place in Virginia with a
million dresses. Drop the kids with the boys, grab your girls, and I’ll grab Emily, and we’ll make a
day of it. It’ll be fun.”

Abbi smiles at that, knowing that her ‘girls’ would love that, and glances toward the living room,
where one of the greatest surprises of her life is chatting with his best friend about… something.

“Let’s see how fried I am come Friday. If it’s all systems go, then we’re on.”

Wendy smiles at that. “We’re going to have such a good time,” she says, eyes sparkling.

“She’s got a boyfriend.” Fornell says boyfriend with the same tone and inflection he would use to
say suppurating pustule.

“It happens, Tobias.”

Fornell shakes his head. “Not like this. He’s a…” Fornell is visibly editing himself as he thinks about
Jared Ridge, Emily’s new boyfriend, “weasel.”

Gibbs sighs. He’s got a mental image of some brow beaten, timid little boy who treats Emily like a
goddess and just existing is enough to make Fornell hate him. “You think any boy that might be
interested in Emily is a weasel.”

Fornell shrugs a bit. That’s not an unfair characterization. “Wendy and Diane think he’s a weasel,
too.”
That clarifies the issue for Gibbs. If the ladies don’t like him, too… “Then we run him off.” For Gibbs, this is a complete no brainer. If there’s some little weasel keeping company with Emily Fornell, they all show up and drive him back to his burrow. “I’ll grab my boys, you get Draga, and we go visit him and his parents, explain the situation to them, and that’s that. He never sets foot near Emily again.”

Fornell sighs. “Not that easy. Wendy thinks part of why she likes him is that he gets our attention. And Diane thinks going all bonkers on him will just make him more attractive to her. We’re brainstorming ways to get rid of him without making her like him more.”

Gibbs opens and closes his mouth. That’s a complication he doesn’t know how to deal with. But if anyone does… “I’d talk to Abby about that.”

“Agent Fornell?” Jimmy asks.

There are a lot of people who Jimmy would expect to show up at Tim’s front door at eight o’clock on a Thursday. Any of the family. His minions. Abby’s guys. Heather’s friends on occasion show up looking for her here.

Tobias Fornell is not one of those people.

And there are several people that Fornell expects to open the door when he knocks at McGee’s house at 8:00 on a Thursday. Jimmy Palmer is not among them.

“Palmer?” For a second, Fornell’s not entirely sure he’s at the right place. Then McGee wanders over, which isn’t helping.

“Whose house am I at?”

“My house,” Tim answers. “Come on in. What’s going on?”

Fornell looks confused, but steps in. “I was wondering if I could talk to Abby.”

“She and Breena are on story time tonight. But they should be down any minute,” Jimmy says.

“Okay.” Jimmy and Tim lead Fornell into the living room where… There’s some sort of video game on the television, paused, two controllers, and a baby boy, on the floor, lying on his back kicking his feet a little bit. Fornell can see a glass of water, a cup of coffee, and a pacifier on the coffee table.

Fornell gives Sean the attention he deserves, a bit of a tickle under the chin, and he starts to coo at him and then stops, suddenly, feeling a little stupid.

Jimmy sits next to them. “It’s okay. Just talk to him like you would with anyone else. He’s going to be learning to pick up verbal communication though sight, so… have a little chat.” Sean gurgles at them. “He’s a talky little guy.”

Tim watches Fornell, who’s feeling a bit flatfooted at the idea of intentionally starting up a conversation with a baby while other people watch him, and rescues him by saying, “So…you want a drink?”

“Uh. Yeah. That’d be great.”
Fornell watches Jimmy pick Sean up, holding Sean between his legs, back against Jimmy’s pelvis, head resting on his belly. “Bedtime for this one is soon, too. But he spends a bit of time awake after every feed now, so we’re showing him Call of Duty.”

“We start gamers off young in this house. Coffee, cider, water?” Tim calls out from the kitchen.

Fornell nods at Jimmy, steps around him, and heads in to the kitchen with Tim.

“Coffee’s good. Unless Jethro taught you how to make it.”

Tim smirks at that. “I like mine a tad less aggressive than he likes his.”

“Great. Cream, no sugar.”

Tim heads to the coffeemaker. “It’s decaf.”

Fornell looks surprised by that but says, “Not a problem this late at night.”

Tim pours the cup, hands it to Fornell. “I’ve got milk...” He checks in the fridge. There is cream, but only enough for Jimmy’s morning cup, and while Tim believes in hospitality, he’s not putting Jimmy out to flavor Fornell’s drink. “No cream.”

“That’s fine.”

He hands over the jug of milk, and then back to the living room for his own cup. He tops himself up and stares at Fornell at his kitchen table, wondering what on earth could possibly have brought this man to his house. “So… is this an only for Abby sort of thing...?”

“Jethro suggest that she’d be good to talk to about this.”

They hear a loud exploding sound from the living room, and Tim winces. A moment later, Jimmy’s in the kitchen, Sean against his shoulder. “And I’m dead.”

“Told you, you need to wait for me.”

“Uh huh.” Jimmy looks dubious, and his voice is teasing as he says, “He’s not quite as hot as he thinks he is.”

“You shove a hardware store’s worth of metal into your hand and see how hot you are!” Tim replies, gesturing with his right hand.

The two of them snarking about the game, as Jimmy walks around McGee’s kitchen, with McGee’s son on his shoulder, gently bouncing a bit while patting his back is really… surreal… to Fornell. They’re two guys, buddies, very close buddies who… are good with each other’s kids… and… Fornell blinks. They’re a couple. He can see it. He knows what this is when he sees McGee and Abby do this, or Jimmy and Breena, but... No… No way. He can’t be seeing this. They’re just good friends, who are unusually comfortable in each other’s homes. Hell, he’ll let himself into Jethro’s place and cook for him, and people used to joke all the time about them being married. But it was never more than them just being good friends. Okay, maybe not never, the Diane thing complicated it, but it was never anything romantic.

This is just like that. They’re just buddies.

Good buddies, over at each other’s house, lateish, on a Thursday, while their wives put the kids to bed, and... Jimmy just helped himself to a sip of Tim’s coffee, from his cup. He’d do that with
Jethro. …And Tim just rested his hand in Jimmy’s back while he did it, which would only happen with Jethro if the hand in question were slapping him upside the back of his head for stealing his coffee.

Nope. That hand’s just sitting there, on the back of Jimmy’s neck, index finger gently rubbing up and down as Tim coos at his son and makes a few goofy faces for him.

Yeah… good buddies. One of whom got up and told the whole world he likes sex with men.

Fornell’s poker face slams into place. He’s a guest in this guy’s home, drinking his coffee, and he’s trying to get help from his wife. Now it not the time to have a possible meltdown about this.

If there is a this.

Fornell licks his lips and tries a tentative question, “The ladies are upstairs putting your girls to bed?”

Jimmy nods, handing the cup back to Tim, who sits down at the table across from Fornell. “Yeah, we take turns on that. Bath time’s a lot easier with at least two people on it.”

Fornell nods; he certainly remembers that. Actually, a few of his better memories of being married to Diane involve bath time for Emily on weekend nights when they were all in a good mood. Emily splashing around, bubbles, the three of them playing. Those are some good memories.

“Whoever’s on bath time gets story time, too, and then tuck ins,” Tim adds. “And whoever isn’t then heads in for a round of kisses and cuddles and songs, last minute requests, hunts down stuffed animals and pacifiers, and then, with any luck, and only two or three false starts, little girls are down for the night.”

That sounds like they do this a lot. But, little guys go to bed early, so if they enjoy spending the evening together, putting the kids to bed and then taking them home makes a lot of sense. He and Diane would do that, some nights, with Emily. Go visit a friend, put her to bed, carry sleeping baby to car seat, and home they go.

Not during the middle of the week, though.

“So, what does Jethro think Abby will be good with?” Jimmy asks as he continues his round of walking/patting with Sean, humming something low between spoken words.

Fornell decides that getting onto topic is probably going to be a lot more comfortable than any of the thoughts wafting through his head right now. “Emily’s got a boyfriend.”

“Ah.” Tim says, “And Gibbs thought you should talk to Abby about that.” Though he’s not immediately seeing why calling Abby in for that would make sense. Jimmy’s looking just as puzzled about that, too.

Fornell can see that why he’d be talking to Abby isn’t self-evident to Tim or Jimmy. “Don’t like him, at all. Little bastard treats her like shit.”

“Still not seeing why you want to talk to Abby about this.” Jimmy says, “Little bastard’s treating her like shit, we all get together and explain how it’s going to be to him. Draga alone should make him wet his pants, and we’ll just hammer home the idea that no one will ever, ever find his body.”

Tobias blinks slowly as he stares at Palmer. He’s fairly sure that Palmer’s a marshmallow with a pair of glasses. Sure, he’s a marshmallow in freakishly good physical shape, but he’s the last person you’d call for something like this. Hell, he’s standing there, holding a baby, wearing a knitted
sweater with little snowmen and snowflakes on it. “You’re volunteering to scare the hell out of this punk?”

“Jethro didn’t already volunteer us?” Tim asks.

“He might have.”

“Well, even if he didn’t, I’d be in. I like Emily.” Jimmy nods along as Tim talks. Sure, he doesn’t really know Emily, but as the future dad of two teen girls, he’s perfectly cool with Mission: Scare Punk Into Submission. “Tony’ll come along, too.”

“Jethro said that, too.”

“Good.” Tim’s got his this is settled look on his face. “Why do you want to talk to Abby? Give me his name, and I’ll start looking into him… Shouldn’t be too hard to make his entire life miserable with a few keystrokes.” Fornell finds the smile on Tim’s face disturbing.

“I think she likes the fact that he pisses me off. And Diane and Eric are done, but Eric’s trying to be a stand-up guy and still be Emily’s friend/big brother, and he’s the kind of punk who makes Eric want to stick around and pay attention to Emily. That might be why he’s attractive to her.”

“Oh.” Jimmy says.

Tim blinks slowly, understanding the problem. “And having all of us show up with the baseball bats might make him even more attractive.”

“Ew.” Jimmy winces and then shrugs. “I’ve got nothing for how to deal with that.”

This is a parenting conundrum Tim doesn’t have an answer for, either, and yes, talking to Abby is seeming like a better and better idea by the second.

“Yeah,” Fornell says.

“Gibbs is right, you should talk to Abby, and Breena. I bet they’ll have a better idea than we do,” Tim says.

“Talk to us about what? Tobias?” Abby says as she and Breena head into the kitchen. Abby settles herself onto Tim’s lap, and Breena takes one of the free chairs at the table. Tim wraps his arms around her, kisses her, and looks very happy with life in general. Then she stands up, and both he and Jimmy nod, time to go up and finish up with putting girls to bed.

Simple, easy affection. Between McGee and Palmer, and McGee and Abby, and he’s starting to think that if he sticks around long enough, he’ll see McGee pat Breena’s butt.

Fornell’s not sure what to do with that, but both Abby and Breena are watching him, eagerly waiting for him to get into the details, so he does.

The ladies listen, ask good questions, some of which he doesn’t know the answers to, and listen more.

By the time McGee and Palmer are back down, all kiddos put to bed, Breena’s saying to him, “We got the call from Wendy about taking Abbi out on Saturday, and Molly’s birthday party is next weekend. Saturday will be a fact finding mission. We’ll get girl time with her and investigate, and then for Molly’s birthday, bring her and Jared. Part of it’ll be a show of clan strength, let him know there are a whole lot of guys who will beat him into a pulp if he doesn’t shape up. Meanwhile, we’ll
get a chance to see him in action and how they relate to each other. Give us a better idea of what’s going on.”

“Okay.” Fornell’s curious as to what will happen with Jared and this crowd, but getting some expert help doesn’t bug him at all.

Abby adds, “If what you think is happening is happening, she’s either got a really low self-esteem and doesn’t think she can do any better. Or she’s doing okay self-esteem wise and is really pissed at you and/or Eric, so she’s picked a guy who hurts her because she knows it hurts you and/or him. Or she’s going with this bum because she wants more attention from either or both of you.”

Fornell looks into his cup of coffee. “Every time I try to spend more time with her, she wants to be with someone else.”

Abby and Breena share a look. “That’s teenage girls.”

Fornell glowers. “I thought this was supposed to be done by now. She’s leaving for college soon and…”

Abby smiles. “Put more points in wants more attention. Probably from everyone, because it is all going to change soon. You ever take her shooting?”

“No. Diane doesn’t like guns.”

“Well, she’s eighteen now,” Breena says. “Shooting with my dad is one of my favorite growing-up memories. I think it’s time you spend some time with her doing something she might think is cool.”

It’s Friday morning, and Fornell is enjoying yet another day of “retirement.”

He rolls his eyes as he fills in yet another document. See, the thing is, he will, eventually, be in depositions on the Calfalone case, but that doesn’t start until Monday. Which means, right now, he’s still on paperwork, and apparently, if you, say, use your FBI credentials to excuse “borrowing” a few tanks while telling your one-time partner to pretend to be a US Army General, and then, say, open fire with that tank on several crowds of rioters, you end up with paperwork until the end of time.

And he’s filling it out. At the rate he’s going, he’ll be done just about three years after he dies.

Pretty much, he’s got to account for every bullet he fired, or ordered fired, or was in the general vicinity of when it was fired. And, he’s got to do it from the other side, too, how many were fired at him, which, since he was inside the goddamned tank, is something of a challenge.

And given how many thousands of rounds he went through over the course of that month, accounting for them is a major pain in the ass.

Riding to the rescue with the tank was fun, this part, here, filling out the accounting of what he did with those tanks, not so much fun.

So, he’s not exactly whizzing through the forms.

The only upside is there is copious footage of him bringing food in, and taking people out. In one case, which got about ten million views on youtube alone, he’s the guy commanding the lead tank
providing the cover that got a few thousand starving/near starving elementary school children out of the city. All of that good press means that he’s sitting in a nice office, filling out forms, instead of under indictment for manslaughter, due to the aforementioned open-firing on rioters.

He’s trying to remember exactly what heading his gunner was using when they took fire while he was trying to get that elementary school’s worth of kids out of the city when his phone buzzes.

Jimmy’s number. Party’s set. 2/12/17 2:00. Make sure Jared shows up.

Fornell texts back. Thanks. Have already gotten Emily, she’s working on Jared.

See ya then!

Fornell rolls his eyes. Of course Palmer signs off with an exclamation point.

McGee and Palmer, and the girls. Probably. He winces at that. Something’s going on. Something he should probably just leave the hell alone, but… Gibbs said they were okay and he’s going to be so damn hurt if they’re not.

Then his breath stops in his chest. Gibbs said they were okay. Said no divorces are in the offing. Gibbs knows. Gibbs knows and is okay with it!

Fornell’s jaw literally drops. He can’t imagine… He blinks hard and… just… For a moment he sits there while the idea that Gibbs could know about something like that and be cool with it short circuits his brain.

By the time he can think again he decides he’s got to check. Maybe Gibbs is okay because there’s nothing there, just four really good friends. Because Gibbs would be cool with that, and… Good friends come in all sorts of shapes and sizes and… and he’s fairly sure that little tableau of four-way domestic bliss he walked into last night isn’t what most people would call “friends.”

Fornell feels weird doing it, but… He can. He shouldn’t be able to. None of his higher ups know he’s got this access code. (And he intends to keep it that way.) But, sometimes you need the Big Boss’s login information, so, he’s got it.

And he uses it. To read McGee’s background check. If anything hinky’s going on, their guys would have found it.

He’s a bit surprised at exactly how accomplished McGee is. For example, he didn’t know about the books. Okay, he knew they existed, he didn’t know they were best-sellers. He knew McGee was bright, he didn’t know he’s the one who took down Gibbs’ FLETCH high score, or that he kept it himself for 11 years. (He also hadn’t known that Gibbs had had the record score before McGee.) He didn’t know about the degree in Biomedical Engineering, he’d assumed the kid had always been a computer geek.

But it’s mostly stuff like that.

Then he gets to the personal section, and it’s blank.

And that’s all Fornell needs for confirmation. No one would write down in his official file that he’s in a four-way relationship.

No one.

But, normally things like he’s married, who he’s married to, has two kids, lives in Alexandria, stuff
like that, *should* be in there.

Leaving the whole thing blank is a code. It means *ask the guy in charge of the investigation*, because nothing on this gets written down.

Fornell sighs. He saw what he saw. Gibbs knows. And if Gibbs knows… The rest of the family’s got to know, too. He tries to imagine how Gibbs or DiNozzo or Ducky could be cool with this, but… But they must be. He was there at Christmas, and the whole family was happily buzzing away.

He sighs again, not sure what the hell to do with that.

One more sigh. Nothing. He does nothing with it. It’s got to be like being gay or pregnant. You don’t ask about it, and you don’t tell anyone what you suspect, and if whoever it is wants you to know, they’ll tell you to your face. If you do know, you don’t tell anyone without the express permission of the people involved.

Just like McGee’s file. That’s an intentionally blank space, filled with information that he can’t and shouldn’t share.
Saturday morning.

The Gibbs clan ladies have handed off little people. They’ve shuffled off into Abby’s Highlander, and are on the road, getting ready to hunt.

Mission: Locate Wedding Dress, Or At Least Get A Pretty Good Idea Of What We’re Looking For For Future Hunts, is on.

“For me, it was Belle,” Breena says. “That yellow gown! I had some little girl, princess ideas before that, but… that one stuck. For a really long time, that was my idea of ‘wedding.’ Okay, Abbi, spill. We know you’ve got one, which Disney Princess is yours?”

“Uh…” In all honesty, Abbi never hooked into the Disney Princess thing. Though she’s got no trouble at all seeing little girl/teen Breena being really into it.

“Ariel, right?” Abby says, eyes watching the road. She’s the one driving. “The red hair?”

Abbi laughs a little, and shakes her head. “I didn’t have one.”

“Oh, come on, no one’s that hard of a tomboy,” Breena says.

“I don’t have one, either,” Ziva adds.

“You didn’t grow up in the US. If you grew up in the US, and you’re a girl, you’ve got a Disney Princess. Even Penny’s got one,” Abby says. “You’ve got whatever the Israeli equivalent is.”

“Wait, Penny’s got one?” Abbi asks as Penny smiles a bit, looking borderline embarrassed.

“I was five when Snow White came out. Black hair, red lips, Prince Charming. It was the first movie I ever saw, and going out was a huge big deal. Everyone got dressed up in our Sunday-best, and we each got to have our own bottle of Coke, and shared a bag of popcorn. So, yes. I did have one. Did. A long time ago. Then I grew up and spent the rest of my life fighting against the idea of pretty dresses and a husband is all the goals in life a woman ever needs. Tania’s the only one of the lot I can even stand now, and Ariel makes my skin crawl.”

Breena shakes her head. “No fantasy life. Not to say I don’t like Tania, because I do, but there’s something to be said for the idea of a magic world where you get all the books you could possibly want, a castle that cleans itself, and a man who will keep you company while you read all you want.”

Penny rolls her eyes a bit, and shakes her head. “Enjoy your fantasy. I’m still telling our girls not to wait for a prince.”

“I don’t think little girls growing up in this house are going to get the message that sitting around waiting for anything, let alone a prince, is a good plan,” Ziva says.

Abby nods. Her girls can have the dresses, the prince, the unicorns, and the career involving multiple advanced degrees in hardcore sciences. For Kelly, Molly, Anna, and any other girls they have, it’s not going to be an either/or thing. At least, not if MamaAbby has any say in it.

“So, back to the main point, Abbi, what’s your wedding fantasy archetype? The image that hit you young and stuck with you?” Breena shifts the question a bit to get them away from princesses.
And Abbi sighs a bit. “I really didn’t have one. No long or fluffy dresses where I grew up. We didn’t have a TV. Only went to the movies once a blue moon, and I didn’t see a Disney Princess movie until I was a Marine. A few of the other girls wanted to go see a movie, and Mulan was playing, and… Yeah, okay, I liked it, but, I was already twenty-one at the time, and it didn’t set my heart yearning for fluffy wedding dresses.”

“Wait, you didn’t see one of the movies until you were in your twenties?” Breena sounds stupefied at that. Even Ziva’s looking pretty amazed.

“You have no idea how far off the beaten path where I grew up was. Hell, no one on the eastern seaboard really knows what rural means. No TV. Pre-internet days. An hour drive to a town with a movie theatre and library. I read a lot of books, and once I could drive, I’d get to the movies, but not so Disney films.”

Breena shakes her head. “So, what, pictures of mom and dad’s wedding?”

“My parents aren’t married, at least not in the had-a-wedding sense. And maybe not in the got a license sense, too. They don’t wear rings, but they do have the same last name. So, I didn’t get to look at pictures of their wedding as a kid to get an idea. It just wasn’t any sort of a thing where I grew up. Some people lived together, how that happened…” Abbi shrugs. “Fairytale princess weddings, that’s not part of my ‘little girl growing up’ fantasies.” Abbi thinks for a moment, remembering her five-or-six-year-old self. “Milk cows that would muck themselves out. That’s one of my growing up fantasies. Being warm in the winter. That’s one. Sparkly dresses, not so much.

“Okay, Ziva,” Abbi asks, genuinely curious, “what’s the Israeli equivalent of a Disney Princess?”

“First of all, I grew up in Tel Aviv, not middle-of-nowhere Montana, we had Disney princesses. But, I wanted to be Aladdin, not Jasmine. The princesses I wanted to be were at the ballet. Abba would take Tali and I at least once a season. The opera, too. That was our Date-Night-With-Abba time. We’d get all dressed up, and he’d tell everyone he was going out with the prettiest girls in Tel Aviv. When I was little, I was going to be a dancer, and Tali was going to be a singer, and together we’d write the music. She’d sing, and I’d dance.” Ziva smiles at that memory. “So, very long and tall women, with perfect posture, hair back in a bun, gems on her brow, dancing strong and elegant, with lights sparking off thousands of layers of gauze. Swan Lake, the dancers almost glittered, and moved like clouds across the stage.

“We’d get home, and she’d hum the music, make up words for it, and I’d spin and leap. Ari was home when we saw Swan Lake, and for months after he called us ברכות וברכה… His little swans. That was spring, and he went to University that fall.” She smiles again, this time bittersweet. She doesn’t say it, but she’s very aware of the fact that that was the last good year her family had. “I know we are not looking for a formal tutu. What are we looking for, Abbi?”

Abbi explains the Grace Kelly idea. “It doesn’t have to be a clone of that, but… something elegant and restrained and warm enough I won’t be freezing my butt off in it. Winter wedding, so it better have some sleeves.”

“No poof?” Breena asks.

“I’m not outlawing it, but if it’s poofy, it better be elegant poof. Ziva’s professional tutus might be good, but anything that makes me think of the little, plastic, fluffy ones for kids, nope.”

“White?” Abby asks.

“Doesn’t matter. If it looks good enough, it could be purple and I’d go for it.” Then she thinks for a
moment. “Maybe not. Purple and red hair aren’t necessarily friends.”

That gets a little laughter.

“Price range?” Penny gets to the practical stuff.

“Under two grand is good, under one grand is better. Not like I’m going to be wearing this thing over and over.” She looks at the rest of the ladies. “What happened to your dresses?”

Breena sighs. “I sold mine. We moved up the ceremony, and didn’t have time to do all the hair and makeup and the rest of it. I never got to wear it. Hopefully, it got some good memories attached to it with another bride. The reception we ended up having was less formal, and I still have that dress. And one of these days, when all these little guys are done wreaking havoc on my body, I will fit back into it, again!”

“You look fine!” Abby says, knowing Breena isn’t thrilled with the way she’s put on seven pounds in the last ten days.

“Uh huh.” She rolls her eyes. “I’m just glad I’m not trying to squeeze my butt into a dress.”

Abby shakes her head. “None of that. Tim’s got a rule, and it goes to you, too, no badmouthing your body in front of me. You look perfect, end of subject.”

“Fine.” There’s another eye roll to go with that. Yes, she’d rather gain ten pounds now and then lose them over the next three months, as opposed to drop them from her pre-pregnancy-test-positive-result-weight, but that doesn’t mean she likes what she sees when she tries to button her pants. “Where’d yours end up?”

“Stored in the attic.” Abby says. “Though I’m planning on getting it re-cut and dyed. One of these years, we’re going on another clubbing date, and I will rock that dress.”

“No saving it for Kelly?” Abbi asks.

“I’ve never met anyone who actually wanted her mom’s dress, and mine… It’s not like it’s a classic, timeless, elegant piece of work. It’s mine. It’s white and red and steampunk and goth and… Nope. Mine. She can go find her own wedding dress. Penny?”

“Gave it to Goodwill a million years ago. It was everything cutting edge of 1949 fashion. Didn’t have a daughter. No daughters-in-law that wanted to look like they’d stepped right out of the wedding scene at the beginning of the Godfather. After Nelson died, I took it out, petted it some, cried over a lot of memories, and then, like a lot of the rest of the stuff cluttering up our house, I gave it away. How about your, Ziva?”

“Still hanging in our closet.”

“If one of the girls wants a mom dress, they should go for Ziva’s,” Abby adds. “That one is elegant and timeless and will look beautiful no matter what or on whom.”

Ziva nods. “I hope for that.” And she does. She has a very clear image of Miriam, Miri, they’ll call her, DiNozzo standing next to her as she opens the box that dress will go into one day, pulling back the tissue paper wrapping, and taking about her wedding, looking at the pictures, and maybe Miri will want the dress, maybe she won’t, but that’s a very clear image of starting the conversation about Miri’s eventual wedding, and what to look for in a husband, which reminds Ziva of the other part of their mission. “What do we know about Jared Ridge?”
“According to Fornell he’s quote, a weasel, unquote,” Abby says.

“And he treats her like shit,” Breena adds. “Though, ‘like shit,’ appears to mean that he’s a dud as opposed to violent.”

“He’d be dead if he were violent,” Penny says. And the rest of the ladies in the car know that’s a literal statement.

“And we’re finding out why she likes him?” Ziva asks.

“Pretty much. They want to get him out of the picture, without making her like him even more,” Abby replies, shifting across two lanes of traffic as her phone begins chirping driving directions at her.

They’re quiet for a moment while the phone keeps sending them through a collection of tight turns in a small city filled with one way streets. After a moment, though, they find a huge parking lot, filled with cars, in front of a building that Abbi would describe as a slightly fancied up warehouse.

“Wendy wasn’t kidding about this place being huge,” Abbi says.

The other ladies nod. Breena’s got her phone out, texting Wendy. Her first plan of just show up and run into each other has been beaten into submission by the size of this place. “They’re just inside the front doors, waiting for us.”

And thus, Mission: Wedding Dresses and Weasels is on.

They get in to the store, and Abbi quietly says to Ziva, “I feel like that girl in last night’s movie, ‘I didn’t know there was this much white in all the universe.’”

Ziva nods, understanding how Rey felt. There’s so much white. She can see, just on the edge of her peripheral vision, bridesmaid land, where the color is, but in front of them, it’s white. In every shade, hue, intensity, trim, pattern, fabric and finish. She feels like she just stepped into some bizarre land of snow or something.

There’s an occasional splash of red or green or silver, and there appears to be a section for ‘older/second time brides’ in all sorts of pastels, but all the rest of it is white, ivory, cream, snow, eggshell, bone, chalk, more white, whiter white, whitest white, Damn That’s White, and Holy Fuck! So White! and, of course, Goth-Skin-Makeup-White.

There’s lace, and tulle, and crinoline, and satin, and silk, and brocades and… And Abbi’s out of vocabulary to explain what all this stuff is. It’s white. There’s a ton of it.

“I see you found it, great!” Wendy says, offering hugs. Emily’s a little behind her, looking to be in a pretty good mood for an eighteen-year-old drug off to get a wedding dress for someone she barely knows.

“Hard to miss,” Abby offers. She hugs everyone, and Emily smiles back at her.

“What are we looking for?” Emily asks with a smile. Okay, this might not be her favorite way to spend a Saturday, but she’s at least going to be pleasant about it.
“Uh… Simple, elegant, restrained, and it should be warm. If it looks like Grace Kelly’s wedding
dress, all the better, but I’m not crossing anything out, yet.”

That gets some nodding. “Okay, I grabbed one of the dressing room/viewing areas for us. Go put
your stuff down,” Wendy gestures off toward the back, and Abbi does spy an area that’s got a
familiar looking purse and a not even remotely familiar looking book bag, and a cooler (she wonders
why there would be a cooler) on a sofa, in front of a raised platform and a collection of full length
mirrors. “I’m thinking we all grab something for you, and then you start trying stuff on, and we get
rid of what doesn’t work. What size are we looking for?”

“Ach eight? Maybe. I don’t know. I wear something between a six and a twelve depending on who
made it.”

“Bra, waist, and hips size?” Breena asks, getting into shopping mode.

“Thirty-four C, twenty-seven, and thirty-six inches around,” Abbi replies.

“All right,” Breena’s eyes gleam, she’s planning on having a lot of fun with this. “Let’s get
shopping! Come on, Emily, we’ve got get our girl outfitted!” And with that, Breena’s got both tasks
firmly in hand.

Fortunately, the dresses are stored by both size and style. So they can just skip the sleeveless section.
That cuts almost sixty percent of them out of the pile.

Breena’s plan of attack is to locate something white, ivory, or cream, preferably in a good, thick silk
satin, possibly a brocade, with a structured bodice, long sleeves, and a floor-length skirt. The dress in
her imagination has pearl buttons down the front, and comes up to Abbi’s throat. While doing this,
she intends to just chat with Emily. Nothing probing, nothing too deep, just get a feel for her.
According to her parents, she’s a generally happy kid, but it’s good to get an outside set of eyes on
that.

She explains what she’s looking for, and then asks, “So, what do you want to see Abbi in?”

Emily’s flicking through dresses hanging in their bags. It’s hard to get a good feel for how they look,
but she’s whipping through the lace ones like they’re made of plutonium. “Nothing too lacy. I’ve
seen the Princess Grace picture, and I like the idea, but I just can’t see Abbi in that much lace.”

Breena nods at that. “I’m looking for a similar cut, but not that fabric.”

“Yep. But who knows, she might look great in it. She looked great at Dad’s wedding, and I wasn’t
expecting that. I’ve got so much cop in mind, the dressy girl is hard to see.”

Breena laughs a bit. “Did you feel that way about your dad in the tux?”

“Oh, God, him and Uncle Gibbs, too! Did a double take when I saw them all spiffed up. It was one
thing with Abby’s wedding, I had to beg, plead, cajole, and beg some more to get him into his sky
cavalry uniform, but Wendy just said, ‘black tux’ and off he went to go find one.” Emily smiles at
that.

“Looks like a happy memory.”
“It is. It’s good to see him have a life outside work and me.”

“Good to see him happy?”

“Yeah. I know so many kids with all this drama about their step-moms and step-dads and… Mom and Dad didn’t make each other happy, but I’m lucky enough they aren’t actively trying to make each other miserable, or, if they are, they don’t do it where I can see it. Sarah, my best friend, her mom is always badmouthing her step-mom.” Emily rolls her eyes. “I’ve met both of them, and okay, her mom’s not completely wrong, Cicily is young and kind of silly, but she’s not evil.”

“How young?”

“Twenty-eight.”

Breena winces. “That’s really young for a guy with an eighteen-year-old daughter.”

“I know, but… Draga’s thirty now, and he was barely twenty-nine when mom started dating him. Dad may have glared a bit, but he didn’t say anything. Sarah’s mom, she doesn’t want her dad to be happy with anyone. She’s a really unpleasant person to be around, and she blames that on Sarah’s dad, too.”

“You think that’s true?”

Emily shrugs. “She seemed pretty unhappy back when they were married. I don’t know.”

“Good answer. A bad marriage’ll make a person miserable, but a miserable person can’t make a good marriage.” Breena discretely eyes Emily, seeing if that gets her attention on any extra level. If it does, she can’t see it.

“Ooo!” Emily says, shoving the dresses in bags back. “Take a look at this!”

“Oh yeah!” Breena nods slowly and appreciatively. “We’re definitely taking that back to Abbi.”

“So, what, I just sit here and you guys scuttle around, finding stuff for me?” Abbi says to Wendy.

“That’s the idea. We hunt, you play dress up. Once we’ve done a few rounds of this, we’ll have a better idea of what you’re looking for.”

“I don’t hunt?”

“You can’t be trying on if you’re out there looking around.” Wendy fishes a bottle of wine out of the cooler she’s got next to the sofa. “You don’t want to make decisions, right?” She pulls out a corkscrew, too. “You sit back, relax,” she gets the chardonnay open, “have a drink,” she pours and hands the first glass over to Abbi, “and we will go out and fetch you dresses. You put the dresses on. We take pictures, and eventually there may be some decision-making but it won’t happen today.”

“What do you have in there?” Abbi asks, looking into the cooler, taking a sip of what is a very tasty chardonnay.

“Good stuff. Got wine, got snacks, got more snacks, more wine, non-alcoholic stuff for the pregnant mommy brigade, glasses, plates, here…” she puts the bottle of wine back into the cooler, after
pouring some for herself, too, and then begins to put an assortment of little nibbles, fruit, some cheese, little sandwiches, onto a plate. “You sit back and get pampered. Just make sure you don’t get any of the food on the dresses.”

“Yeah, that part I’ve got.”

“I’m going to go look at shoes for you. Eight and a half?”

“Wide.”

“No problem. You find a shoe you love, and maybe we can build from there.” Wendy snags one of the tiny sandwiches, pops it between her lips, grins at Abbi, and is off.

Abbi sipping her wine, looking around this massive forest of never-ending white, is coming to the conclusion that girly stuff, when orchestrated by Wendy Fornell, may be a lot of fun. She settles back, takes another sip, and relaxes, waiting for her team of bridesmaids to bring her dresses.

“You look comfy,” Breena says, seeing Abbi relaxing back on the sofa, wine glass in hand, plate covered with nibbles next to her.

“You know, I am. I could get used to this.”

Breena laughs at that, then gestures to Emily. “Show her what you found.”

“Come on, get up.” Emily says as she’s unzipping the bag the dress is in.

Abbi puts the glass down, and stands up, taking the dress from Emily as she pulls it out of the bag. She eyes it, holds it up to her in front of the mirrors, and nods. It’s passed the first look inspection. “Okay, let’s try it on.”

She heads into the dressing room. “You need help?” Breena asks.

“It’s just got a zipper up the back, I think I can handle it.”

“It’s not quite what you were looking for, but…” Emily says.

“It’s good. It doesn’t have to be exactly what Grace had on.” It’s not even close. Though, restrained and elegant do pop into her head when she sees this. Abbi shucks her street clothing, and notices that Wendy (or the people who run this place) stocked the dressing room with a robe, so between changes she can just toss that on instead of into and out of her jeans, t-shirt, and sweater over and over. She’s also, already, wearing the only strapless bra she owns, so that means this won’t look too silly.

She shimmies into it, whatever size it might be, it’s a bit too tight. Abbi decides she doesn’t need to know what size this is supposed to be. She does get the zipper all the way up, and spends a moment just looking at herself, the bride in the mirror.
She didn’t get to this point with Liam. She had the ring, and they’d talked about the wedding some, had a date a year and a half off, but she was waiting to get home to do anything like this.

She hadn’t even decided if she was going to wear a wedding dress, or like Liam, get married in her formal uniform. That uniform, and what went into earning it, meant just as much to her as it did to him, and, since they’d been talking about getting hitched by a Justice of the Peace, and then having a huge barbeque party on the beach, there wasn’t a lot of room in that idea for a wedding gown.

For someone who genuinely didn’t have any little girl, fluffy dress fantasies, standing there in the long white dress, satin cascading down her body, *that’s* got some powerful juju. She feels magic and pretty all over.

And Abbi wasn’t, at all, expecting that.

( Maybe Wendy slipped something into the wine. That thought makes her giggle a little, too. )

She steps out, and Breena inhales so fast she hisses, and Emily just stands there, dumbstruck.

“Oh, Abbi…” Breena says it with a huge grin on her face. “Come on, up on the dais.” Abbi does get on there, in the special pretty lights, with the mirror on three sides. Breena hops up behind her, and pulls her hair up, holding it in a bun.

Abbi looks at herself. It’s a soft cool white, in a thick, rich silk satin. There aren’t any little curly-cues or embellishments. Just yards and yards of impossibly soft statin, skimming down from her chest, snug along her torso, and then following a the a-line down her hips to the floor. At her chest there’s a ruched horizontal band covering from the points of her shoulders down to mid bicep.

Her collarbones, the very top of her chest, and neck are bare, and with Breena holding her hair up, she’s got a long line of naked neck dipping into what’s pretty much the poster child for ‘elegant and restrained’ dresses.
“Pop a string of pearls around your neck, teardrop pearls on your ears, and a strand around your wrist, and you’re ready to go.” Breena can see exactly how this should look. Emily picked well, the color of the dress is close to the pearl on Abbi’s engagement ring.

Abbi can see it. She can almost taste it. There’s an intoxicating image of walking down an aisle and Gibbs seeing her in this for the first time, and she can imagine the dumbstruck look on his face at her like this, followed by that grin of his that lights up his whole body.

Breena’s fingering the collar, giving it a skeptical look. “This is pretty, but, can you move your arms in this?”

That snaps reality back into place. Abbi attempts to raise her arms, and she’s only got about half her range of motion. And yes, she doesn’t think anything should be happening at her wedding that will require her to extend her arms directly above her head, but, given how life likes to pop up and surprise her, she’s not going to bet on it.

“You can throw a bouquet in it, that’s all you need,” Breena says.

Abbi’s shaking her head.

“Let’s get a picture of it, at least,” Emily says. Which makes sense. She snaps the shot, and one of the label, adds the note, too constraining, and Abbi tells her to put in, slightly too tight, and then she sends it off to the rest of the crew.

The hunt continues.

“Look, look, look!” Abby bustles over with a… something… in her arms. The dresses are all in bags, so it can’t be a dress, and it’s cool white with a silver shimmer where the light hits it right, and it’s overflowing her arms, so it’s big, but…

“I’m looking,” Abbi says from where she’s trying on the one Penny found. (Pretty much a replica of Kate Middleton’s dress, which was a revamped version of Grace Kelly’s dress.) It looks good, but it’s not sending happy bride tingles down Abbi’s spine. “I don’t know what it is.”

“Close your eyes.”

Abbi nods her head a bit, and then does. She feels Abby drape whatever it is, probably a cloak, given the feel, over her.

“Okay, open them!”
She does, and stares. It is a cloak: velvet, lined with satin, and it’s cool dull white with a subtle silver sheen. There’s an ornate silver clasp at her neck. And, it can’t be real fur, Abby wouldn’t grab anything that was real fur, but the hood and edges are lined in some sort of ridiculously soft, white, furlike stuff, with another silver sheen. More the suggestion of silver, than real silver. As Abbi turns, she catches hints of it along the halo of the fur.

Wrapped in that, she looks, and feels, like a snow fairy.

“If you don’t buy it, I will,” Abby says.

“What would you do with it?” Emily asks.

“I have no idea. Wear it to bed.” Emily looks scandalized at that, and Penny chuckles. She knows her grandson well enough to know exactly what buttons that cloak would hit for him. “It’s too pretty not to take home.”

Abbi nods slowly, looking at it, feeling it’s heavy warmth wrapped around her. “This is coming home with us.”

Breena eyes it, looking it up and down. She adjusts it a bit, and, yep, it’ll pull back some, drape
behind Abbi’s shoulders, or over them in front. She can control how much warmth this provides. “You know, you add this, and you can put all the sleeveless dresses onto the list now, too. This’ll be more than warm enough.”

“We’re not going anywhere, if you want a glass, you can have one,” Wendy says to Emily, as she’s watching the chardonnay.

“Dad’ll flip.”

Wendy looks right and left. “You know, I don’t see him anywhere. I’m cool with it, your mom would be, too. We’re not, by a long stretch, the only bridal party having a good time here, you want some, you can have some.”

And with permission granted, Emily does get a glass (closer to half, Wendy’s pouring, and she doesn’t put a lot in there. She just wants Emily talky, not drunk) she takes a sip and smiles. “Not bad.”

“Wine gladdens men’s hearts,” Ziva says. She knows what Wendy’s doing, and doesn’t mind it. “Ducky would have the whole quote. But this is what it’s made for. Something to make the good times that much better.” She pets David. “And in a few months, when we actually get to celebrate this wedding, I intend to enjoy some.”

Emily finishes her first few sips and then Ziva shuffles her off. “Come on, let us look some more.”

Ziva DiNozzo is very good at many things, among them the ability to read someone’s phone without looking like she’s doing it.

Emily Fornell is very good at many things, too. Realizing she’s being surveilled by people who’ve spent their entire adult lives doing stuff like this, isn’t one of them.

So, when she gets a text, and looks up at Ziva to say, “Jared,” she doesn’t pay any attention to the fact that Ziva just nods, and drifts off a bit behind her to ‘look at other dresses.’

Bored. Apparently, Jared’s a hell of a conversationalist.

Poor baby. Emily writes back.

Don’t make fun. You doing anything?

Yeah. Helping my aunt get her wedding dress, remember?

Oh. That. Get out of it. I’ll pick you up.

No! I’m having a good time.

Spending time with strangers is more fun than me. Great. Love you, too. Ziva can already feel the creepiness radiating off this guy, and she wants to slap him, sight unseen.
Don’t be like that. I asked if you wanted to spend today together before I said yes to this. You said you were busy. I’m free tonight.

I’m not. Plans got moved. Hence, bored. Come on, tell ‘em you just remembered a study date.

I am not going to be the person who drops a commitment because something else comes up. Ziva mentally cheers Emily at that.

Fine. I’ll just sit here, twiddling my thumbs.

Emily’s eyes roll. I know what you’ll be twiddling, and it’s not your thumb. That’s the only reason you want me with you so bad.

There’s a moment of quiet, where Ziva debates what to do with that information. Emily’s eighteen, so the idea that she’s having some sort of sex with her boyfriend shouldn’t be shocking. Ziva was certainly doing it when she was seventeen, but, for some reason it hits her hard. It’s Emily, who is a little girl or, apparently, not so little.

Also, this guy, just from fifteen lines of text, is such a slug. Okay, maybe Ziva’s high school boyfriend wasn’t that much better. If memory serves, all they liked about each other was how they could make each other feel, but he was at least respectful to her.

Ziva thinks for a moment longer. Or, he was respectful of the fact that her father could literally get him killed. Six of one, half a dozen of the other.

;) pops up from Jared. Wanna see?

Are you crazy? I’m in a store, with people around! And that’s the last of the conversation that Ziva gets to see as Emily makes sure she’s back to the dresses, with the phone held close and her hand covering most of the screen.

A few minutes later, when no texting has gone by, and Ziva’s picked up another dress, she says to Emily, “Good conversation?”

Emily blushes from her throat to her hair.

“You know, it’s early, but, we’re here, and they’ve got them, you want to look at prom dresses?” Wendy asks Emily as she and Ziva bring Ziva’s dress back.

Emily sighs.

“That doesn’t sound like a happy sigh,” Penny says.

“I’m not going this year.”

“Why on earth not? You love prom. You had a great time last year!” Wendy says.

“Jared thinks it’s stupid.”

Penny and Wendy share a look, and that look is not one of overwhelming approval. If anything, Wendy now thinks less of Jared Ridge.
“Uh huh.” Penny says. “That’s fine. He’s allowed to think it’s stupid. I’m not a huge prom person, either. But, you like it, right?”

Emily nods. “Yeah, it was fun.” Her voice sounds lukewarm as she says that.

“Fun,” Wendy says, matching Emily’s tone. “You spent six months working on your dress and costume last time. You and your friends all went to dinner, danced all night, had a hell of a good time at the after party. You talked about it for months. But it was fun.”

“Well, yeah, but… It’s kind of girly.”

“So!” Penny says. She might not love girly, but she will fight to the death against the idea that girly=bad. “You like girly stuff, that’s fine, you go off with your girlfriends, have a blast with the girly stuff, and Jared can sit on his butt doing whatever it is he likes.”

“He says it’s a waste of money.”

“You are allowed to waste your money however you like,” Penny says, voice sharp. “He doesn’t have any right to make any comments about how you spend your money.”

Breena catches the tail end of that, and homes on in. “We talking budgets?”

“No for the wedding. Her boy is criticizing going to prom because it’s expensive,” Wendy says.

Breena shrugs a bit. “Eh… I can see that. Tux, limo, tickets, dinner. That’s a lot of money for a kid.”

“No. He’s busting on her for spending her own money to take herself out,” Penny says.

“Ew!” Breena react as if she just found a fist sized slug in her salad. “Oh, that’s just wrong! Come on, honey, no guy gets to do that. He doesn’t want to spend his money on you and something you like, that’s… not cool, but at least fair.” Breena draws a little circle with her finger around them all. “What do you think would happen if Gibbs sat down and said, ‘You can only spend so much on a dress?’”

Emily looks perplexed at that. She can’t, under any circumstance, imagine Gibbs doing that. Penny reads that look. “Exactly. You can’t see him doing that, right?”

She shakes her head. “Nope.”

“No, because he’s a decent guy. Look, you end up with one bank account eventually, and you make budgets together, and you stick to them because you made them together. Abbi and Gibbs are doing that. But, the idea that he’d tell a woman who’s spending the money she made herself what she can or should do with it would never occur to him,” Penny says.

“Or any of the rest of our guys,” Breena adds.

Penny eyes Emily for a moment while Emily thinks about that. “So… I want to see the pictures.”

Again Emily bushes scarlet, and her eyes almost bug out of her head. Ziva knows what pictures she’s thinking of.

“He’s got to be awfully handsome for you to put up with a man who tries to tell you what you should do.”

Emily calms down, but Wendy didn’t miss that, and has a pretty good idea of what sorts of pictures must be on her phone now.
Emily finds a shot of Jared, and… he’s not ugly, but like most eighteen-year-old guys, he’s not about
to step out of a fashion shoot, either. Penny looks at the shot, and supposes he looks sort of Justin
Bieberish, minus the tattoos. Mostly, he’s tall, gangly, appears to have good skin, and can, when a
camera is directly pointed at him, produce a half-decent, cocky smile.

“He’s not really telling me what to do, he’s just telling me what he thinks about it. He’s allowed to
do that, right?”

“And he thinks prom is girly and stupid? Or he thinks you’re girly and stupid for wanting to go?”
Penny asks, eyes sharp.

“Prom. Not me.” And all of them know that she’s lying.

“Uh huh. And what great thing does he want to do instead?” Breena asks.

Emily looks confused.

“You want to do something. It’s a big deal for you. He doesn’t. And, yes, he’s allowed to not want
to do whatever it is you want to, but if he’s going to veto what you want to do, it’s his job to come
up with some sort of compromise. You want a nice celebration of the end of school, something
romantic and fun. Okay, doesn’t have to be tuxes and formal dresses, but he can at least offer to take
you to a nice dinner and movie, or go to the beach, or… you know, something fun, that you do
together,” Breena says.

“He hasn’t suggested anything.”

“Ah. What’s a fun date, normally?” Penny asks.

Emily blushes again.

Penny rolls her eyes and chuckles, then she makes sure she’s got full eye contact with Emily and
shakes her head a bit. “Uh huh. He’s got the magic rocket in his pocket. Emily, they’ve all got one.
And trust me, dear, they’ll all be happy as a clam to introduce you to it.”

Breena isn’t sure if Emily’s taking this in or about to have a seizure at Penny being so bold.

Penny’s enjoying this. Emily, like every young person, is entirely certain that sex is something that
ceases to exist after fifty and is totally forgotten by sixty. Likewise, in that she was born in 1999,
she’s also firmly convinced that sex was invented in 1998. Disabusing her of this is something that
pleases Penny to no end.

“My sisters started dating back in the late ‘30s early ‘40s and even then, rubbing on each other was
pretty much every young couple’s favorite activity. Honey, I’m eighty-four, and if I got online and
asked to see some dick, I’d get buried in an avalanche of offers. Go dump this twit and find someone
who’ll put a smile on your face when you’re wearing your clothing. Better yet, we’ll be doing some
honeymoon shopping for Abbi soon, Breena and Abby can take you on that trip, find you a battery
powered boyfriend, and get you set. It’s a lot easier to see the frogs among the princes when you take
care of yourself.”

Emily’s eyes are so wide they’re about to fall out of her head. Her color has dropped to ashy white,
and she slowly turns to Wendy. “You cannot, ever, say anything about this to Dad.”

Wendy is about to collapse she’s not laughing so hard. She’s got a smile tugging at the corners of her
lips and she’s vibrating gently as she tries to keep herself under control. She manages to nod before
succumbing to the giggles. After a moment, she does get herself under control, and Emily’s color
Even playing dress up gets tiring after a while. How this should be, or why, Abbi doesn’t know. It’s not like she’s running for miles with a full pack on her back, or on hour twenty-eight of a six-day stakeout, but… If she never sees another white dress again…

Okay, not never. She’s seen some she really likes, and the ‘to think about more’ pile is steadily growing.

But… she’s done.

Almost.

One more left. Ziva found it while scoping out Emily’s text chat with Jared. She’s getting Abby filled in on what Emily and Jared were texting about, which is a soft buzz in the background as Abbi pulls on the last dress.
The back has a long line of pearl buttons hiding a zipper, and a shimmery satin bow, like Abby’s cloak it’s white with a hint of silver.

In her mind, she can hear the announcer saying, “We’ve got a winner!”

When she steps out, Ziva and Abby go quiet. Both of them grin. Abby starts shooting pictures. Ziva stands up, grabs the cloak and drapes it over Abbi’s shoulders. She’s a princess in layers of filmy white, haloed in silver-tipped white.

Ziva nods, very satisfied. Abbi gets it, that this approval is beyond words. Her internal quiet and Abbi’s is synching up nicely. Abbi nods back at her. They’re done. This is it.
Just got to get it paid for and sized.

Abbi tips her head a bit, and says to Ziva, “So, what color are the bridesmaids wearing?”

Ziva eyes the dress, thinks for a few moments, and says, “Royal purple, more blue than red, silver accents.”

“Okay.”

Abbi’s in line, getting everything paid for, when Abby gets a text, from Jimmy.

*Looks like someone tired Daddy out.* It’s a shot of Tim on his back, on the sofa, asleep, with Sean, bright-eyed and ready to play some more, on his chest.

*We’ll be home soon. Ready to celebrate the victorious hunt!*

*You got a dress?*

*And then some. Good intel, too. ;)*

*Why does that smiley face fill me with dread?*

*Because Breena and I have one last trip out with Emily, tomorrow. And what’s involved with that trip is nothing you need to be thinking about in conjunction with Emily Fornell.*

*All right, bleaching out my brain right now. Home soon, right? Your menfolk are hungry. Bring us back dinner, too?*

*Yeah, we can pick something up on the way home. What do you guys want?*

*Supposed to be good Lebanese a few miles from you. We were about to order, just wanted to make sure you were okay with grabbing it.*

*We’re good. Give him a kiss from me when he wakes up.*

A second later, Abby gets back, *No kisses for me?*

*You can collect yours in person when I return.*

The kiss emoji pops up on her phone, and she tucks it back into her pocket.

All in all, she’d call this a beyond successful day.
“So, what does Emily like about him?” Jimmy asks Abby as they’re working on getting dinner unpacked.

“He’s good with his tongue,” Abby replies.

And at that moment, Tim decides there are certain thoughts that should not, on any level, be associated in his mind with Emily Fornell, so he willfully misunderstands her. “Good sweet talker,” he says grabbing forks to put on the table.

Abby, knowing what he’s doing, and seeing that Jimmy looks very happy to go along with that ride, says, “Yep. And we’re off to show her how to get all the romance she wants on her own.”

“Oh.” Jimmy says. “A trip to Barnes and Noble to peruse the love poems.”

“Exactly,” says Breena, putting falafel into a bowl. “We want her to see how good it can be, and what someone who knows what he’s doing can do for her. None of this second-rate-crap.”

“Sort of like food, introduce her to a great burger, and hope she loses her taste for McDonalds,” Tim says.

“That’s the idea,” Abby replies.

“Sounds like a fun trip,” Tim replies.

“We think it will be,” Breena says, carrying the crispy fried chick pea and almond fritters to the table.

The first time Abby went to a sex shop, it was with her first real boyfriend.

New Orleans in the early ‘90s. Probably one of the only places west of New York City, east of Los Angeles, and south of Chicago where a person could find a well-lit, non-sleazy, sex positive shop that catered to gay and straight clients, was covered in safe sex information, and condoms of every shape, size, color, flavor and size.

She remembers feeling like a kid in not just a candy store, but in Willy Wonka’s candy land. Sooo much stuff, a lot of which she’d never imagined before. They spend close to five hours (most of them skimming the books), giggled (a whole lot), had a quickie in the bathroom (and on the bus on the ride back to LSU), he maxed out his credit card, and she cleaned out her bank account, and both of them thought it was the best trip to New Orleans ever.

The first time Breena went to one… Okay, technically speaking, Breena’s never been to an actual shop before. The first time she did this, she was online, had been engaged for... maybe eight hours, and was getting ready to hit Jimmy with the ‘here’s this sex book, tell me what you like’ conversation.

To say she was eager to get married and enjoy everything that goes with that would have been a massive understatement.
She bought eight books. (After all, she needed to read a lot of them to see which would be the best one to share with Jimmy.) Previous to that point she’d always used her fingers to take care of herself, though a virgin she might have been, stupid or sheltered she wasn’t, so… She was there, she had money, she got herself a few toys, and some things that she thought Jimmy might like, and had an extremely good time when she got home a few days later and found the note in her mailbox saying there was a package waiting for her in the rental office.

And, looking back at that, both of them think that an excellent tradition that should start among the McPalmozo girls (assuming that at some point, there will be a DiNozzo girl) is that, when they hit a certain age, that whichever one of the ladies they get on best with, will take them out to a sex shop and have a long, frank, extremely detailed and graphic conversation about not just health class mechanics of making babies, but about making love, pleasure, orgasms, and the reason why it’s the joy of sex.

It’s also true that both Breena and Abby are of the impression that this is the sort of thing that one should be resolutely unashamed of. But, they are also aware of the fact that just because you aren’t or shouldn’t be ashamed of something, doesn’t mean you want to do it with your parents.

Thus, they’re getting ready to step into the role of ‘cool older person who can answer questions without risking any sort of feelings of judgement.’ Or, as Abby puts it when they get into the car to head off and pick up Emily, “We’re the Orgasm Fairies.”

Breena laughs a bit and gives her a look. “Kind of like the Tooth Fairy, but instead of a lost tooth, we show up and slip a vibrator under your pillow when you lose your virginity?”

Abby loves that idea. “Oh yeah! Though, hopefully with our girls, we’ll get there a bit earlier than that.”

“That’d be nice. I’d rather they not be playing catch up with this.” Breena knows Abby, Tim, and Jimmy’s first time sex stories, and all three of them have something in common. They weren’t great. Tim’s was physically and emotionally disappointing. Abby’s was physically disappointing. Jimmy’s was actually pretty good, he certainly remembers it fondly, but not amazing. Her first time; however, when she went into it with a head full of information, lots of time, a good set up, and someone she utterly adored, was amazing.

And she wants that for their girls.

“I can’t believe we’re really doing this,” Emily says as she slips into the car behind Abby and Breena.

“Believe it. This is something every woman needs to know, so…” Abby says.

“We’re off to round out your education,” Breena finishes.

She shakes her head a bit. “Dad would have a stroke if he knew we were doing this.”

“Then, for the sake of making sure Gibbs’ best man is in shape to do his job, you better not tell him what we’re doing,” Breena says.

Emily laughs, a bit of a blush lighting her face. “I’m saying nothing. But… How many people on your side know about this?”
“All of them,” Abby answers matter of fact. “Though most of the guys have decided that not thinking about you and sex in the same sentence is conducive to a long and healthy life, so they’re happily telling themselves that we’re off to Barnes and Noble to look at the love poems and have a long conversation about how real men treat women they love.”

“And that’s going to happen, too,” Breena adds.

Emily has missed the how good men treat women they love bit, and focused on everyone knows. “Oh, God, Gibbs knows! He’s gonna—“

“Say absolutely nothing. No one wants your dad having a fit. You are an adult. It’s your body. The better you know what it likes the better you’re going to be in the long run. And, not to put too fine a point on it, but the better you do getting yourself off, the less appealing those twits out there look. Being horny is like being drunk, suddenly a bunch of 3s start looking like 8s or 9s. And none of us, least of all your dad, want you hooking up with a 3,” Breena adds.

“And you all think Jared’s a 3,” Emily says with an arched eyebrow.

“2.5.” Abby adds. “But that’s based on Wendy and Diane’s assessment.” And what Ziva told them about that text. Bits of that made the hair raise on the collective backs of necks of that crew. That looked like step one of the kind of guy who starts off borderline okay, and two years down the line, is a real problem. “We’ll also watch. That’s why he’s coming to Breena’s next weekend. We’ll make sure that it’s not just mom and dad overreacting. But, you’ve got to realize, you are not in this on your own. You’ve got a wide net of people looking out for you, and if you do something that makes one of them worry, the rest of the crew swings into action.”

“So, this is an intervention? He’s not a serial killer, Abby.”

“It is an intervention, and none of us think he’s a serial killer. You ever get chewed out for getting an A minus on a test?” Breena asks.

Emily scowls at that memory.

“Yeah, I know, I didn’t like that, either. My buddies are squeaking by with Cs, but if I got two answers wrong, Mom would get that disappointed look, and Dad would pull me aside for a ‘chat,’” Breena says. “That’s what’s going on here. You can do better.”

“But I like him,” Emily says.

“Why?” Abby asks. “What about him makes you smile. Besides sex. We’re hooking you up with better sex than you can get with him. I guarantee that. It’s going to be at least a few more years before you run into a guy who can read you well enough to do a better job with you than you can do for yourself.”

Emily sighs, and both of the older women let her think. After a moment goes by without any response, Breena says, “Emily, it shouldn’t be that difficult to come up with something. Ask me what I like about Jimmy, and I can go on for a week.”

“It’s not difficult, it’s… I don’t know if you’d understand what I like about him.”

“Try us. I guarantee we can’t understand what you don’t say,” Abby replies.

“People like me when I’m with him.” She looks up at the ceiling of the Highlander. “Most of the time, no one at school sees me. I’ve got my three buddies, and that’s it. I’m more popular with the teachers than I am with the other kids. I might as well be an invisible ghost.”
“And when you’re with him, people notice you,” Abby says.

“Yeah. And not just as someone to copy homework answers off of. They listen to me, and talk to me, and some of them are really nice. I’m finally a senior, I’ve got my little crew of friends, we’re doing fine, and taking hard classes, making the final push to get into college, and we’re okay because we’ve got each other, and then everything went to hell last fall! A third of my class is gone now, including one of my good friends. Everyone scattered because we all had parents who worked for or with the government, and a lot of them lived in DC. He saw me sitting by myself at lunch, the lunch I should have been having with Stacy, but she’s in Georgia now, because her parents worked for the EPA, and that’s the closest office that’s open and had room for them! He sat next to me, talking about English lit, which we have together, and he’s not stupid, he had some good comments about why Twilight was just following the patriarchal tradition of spoon-feeding girls dysfunctional relationships as a romantic good and that making us read Romeo and Juliet and pretending it’s a love story was just doing the same thing with fancier language. And, I liked that, it was a good conversation, and the next day he waved me over to eat with his buddies, and…”

“And if you break up with him, you’re back to eating lunch on your own?” Breena says.

Emily sighs. “Three days of the cycle I don’t have lunch with my other friends, and because everything got flipped upside down, kids gone, their parents in jail or moved to different parts of the country, or, shit, I’ve got seven classmates who lost one or both parents last fall… Everything shifted, and when I stared eating with him, I brought my buddies over, too, and now they’re part of his group, and who knows if they’ll decide to stay with him or me if I leave him.”

“Do they think he’s a good boyfriend?” Abby asks, gently.

Emily sighs at that, too. “Sarah doesn’t. Kristin does. Stacy never got to meet him. Meet him meet him, she’d seen him around the halls, and knows his name, but never talked to him.”

“How about your new friends, his buddies, what do they think?” Breena asks.

Emily shrugs. “They’re his buddies. They like him.”

“Girl buddies, guy buddies?” Abby asks.

“Both. It’s about twenty kids.”

“So… Are you saying you like your social position with him more than you like him?” Breena asks.

“Eh… I like him, but… I like them, too.”

“Are you his first girlfriend?” Abby asks.

“No!”

“So where are they? Any in the group still?” Breena says, turning a bit to look behind her at Emily.

“Not his core group. There’s the core group, Jared, Seth, Cora, Miki, and Rob, and then there’s the wider group.”

“Are you core group or wider group?” Abby asks.

“Right now, both.”

“Is there someone in that group you really like?” Breena asks. “Or do you just like being part of it?”
That gets a long sigh, and more looking at the ceiling of the Highlander. “Seth’s really sweet. But he’s Jared’s best friend, and if I dump Jared, I won’t get to see Seth anymore.”

“Oh,” Abby replies. Breena nods. They’ve hit the soft, squelchy emotional target.

“And is Seth… fond of you?” Breena asks.

Emily shrugs. “I don’t know. He’s fond of Jared. They’ve been buddies since kindergarten. He told Jared to lay off on the prom is stupid stuff when I’m around, and smiled when he said it.” Emily has a little smile on her face when she says that.

Breena and Abby share a look. Both of them are on the same page here.

“You know, I have the feeling if you were to suddenly find yourself single, you might end up with a prom date shortly thereafter,” Breena says.

“Oh, come on. He is not going to ask out the girl who just dumped his best friend.”

The adults share another look. Abby chews her lip a bit. Breena thinks. They aren’t sure exactly how specific to be about this. Then Breena says, “You know, one of these days, maybe you should have a conversation with your Dad, or Gibbs, about what a guy might do when his best buddy has a girl he wants, and then he doesn’t.”

Which is when a few things that Emily knows about her mom, dad, and Uncle Gibbs click into place, and her eyes go wide. “Oh.”

Both of the adult ladies nod.

---

One of the perks of taking this trip in 2017, instead of 1991, is that sex shops are not secret things confined to the shady part of town.

Likewise, they are not, by a long shot, the only trio of ladies in the place, doing a “christening,” for lack of a better word, of a young woman off to start really exploring her sexuality.

When Abby first did this, the idea that a girl might do this with her ‘aunts’ just wasn’t a thing. But right now, they’re in the store, and it’s them, and probably three other groups of older women with a younger girl, most of them with some sort of coffee based drink, talking about the pros and cons of different styles of vibrators and which lubes they like best and on and on.

Abby thinks this is very much a sign of the world being a better place now than it used to be. And, for the moment, she’s wishing that Penny and Ducky weren’t already heading north to get back to New York, because she’s sure Penny would have had a blast on this trip. (If for no other reason than the fact that they can go on it.)

Okay, sure, in Virginia, people under 18 aren’t allowed in a sex shop, so Emily did have to show her driver’s license, but once they got in the door, there were no hints that she, or anyone else for that matter, didn’t belong in there or should be even remotely embarrassed about being there.

“First off, stocking up. Which kind of condoms do you like?” Abby asks, once they get in.
“He’s in charge of that.”

“And you make sure he never ‘forgets’ them?” Breena says.

Emily nods. “Yeah. He can get a bit whiny about that, but he knows nothing’s happening if he doesn’t bring one, so he’s always got one.”

“Do you have your own?” Abby asks.

Emily shakes her head.

“Okay, we’re fixing that.” Breena grabs three six packs. “Jimmy, Tim, and Tony’s favorites. Guys are not interchangeable and what feels good to one won’t necessarily feel good to the next one. That said, between the three of them, they’ve got almost seventy years’ experience of using these things, and, Tony especially, has tried them all, so these are the ones our guys like best.”

Emily understands why Breena knows which kind Jimmy likes best. She’s a bit startled by the idea that she knows what Tim and Tony like best. “You know which kinds Tim and Tony like best?”

Breena smirks. “We’ve had some fun over the years stocking play kits. One of our wedding traditions is making sure that the bride has a good collection of fun stuff for her honeymoon.”

Then Emily looks into the basket at the pile of condoms, curious. She knows Ziva is pregnant, knows Abby just had a baby, and doesn’t know that Breena’s got a plus one, but she did notice her not drinking when they were looking for a dress for Abbi. “You guys still use condoms? Isn’t…” she doesn’t know how to ask politely what she’s thinking, which is something along the lines of I didn’t think old, married people used them.

“Not very often,” Abby replies. “I’m not having much sex at all right now, but when we get back to it, I’ll be using condoms. When Sean’s old enough for a little brother or sister, I’ll say goodbye to them, and that’ll probably be the end of them for me. We don’t use them for disease prevention, just temporary birth control. It’s not worth going on the pill, getting your whole system upside down, if you’re only going to need it for three or six months.”

Breena nods with that. “The dynamics of the game are a bit different when you’re in the baby-having part of life. I don’t use them at all right now, and Ziva doesn’t, either.”

“And none of us were using them with our boys before we were trying to get pregnant.”

“Fluid-bonded,” Emily says.

“They’ve got a term for it now, of course,” Abby replies. “Yeah, we are. But right now, my hormones are already crazy, I’m nursing, menopause is lurking, and I’m not going to make them even crazier by adding birth control pills or a patch or something. I can say, Tim is eagerly awaiting the day the condoms get retired again.”

“Jimmy and I do something like that, too. After a new baby there’s a six month stretch with all the time condoms, and then my period starts back up, so I can start charting, figure out when I’m fertile…” which reminds Abby, and she goes scuttling off to the book section, finds the one that explains everything every woman needs to know about how her cycle works, and how to know where she is in it, and rushes back with it, dumping it in their cart.

“That one. Of everything we’re getting today, that’s the one you need to read and memorize. Life gets so much easier when you know why your body and mood are doing what they’re doing.”
Breena eyes *Taking Charge of Your Fertility For Women* and nods. “If there’s anything I’d mandate everyone read in school, this would be it.”

And, while it’s true that at any other time Emily would find that book fascinating, there’s a lot of stuff in this store, and she wants to do some exploring. Abby and Breena see that, and Abby says, “Okay, we’ve got condoms covered. Let’s get some lube to go with them, and then you’re free to explore.”

“Why are we getting lube with them?” Emily asks. “They’ve already got lube.”

“Put a bit, just a drop or two, on the inside, and that feels better for him, and add some to the outside for you. The lube on condoms isn’t very good.”

The lube section is a huge collection of tester bottles, along with a sealed, Fort Knox style location where the lubes live. Abby chuckles at that. “Apparently people shoplift these like crazy. Okay, you want a water-based lube for anything involving toys, and silicon if you’re thinking anal, and anything else is up to what feels good to you.”

The next hour involves playing with the testers. Abby and Breena appreciate the way Emily shops. She reads packaging, tests everything, and is even checking reviews on Amazon. She is thorough about how she spends her money.

As she’s looking through she runs into the ‘anal sex’ lubes. “Okay, why would I want lube that numbs… anything?” Emily asks holding a tube of Anal EEZE.

Abby shakes her head. “You don’t. At least, not for lube. You want a tube of it to keep in your apartment or dorm room to rub on bruises or small cuts, go for it, it’s good for that. But for sex, I don’t recommend it.”

“If it hurts, don’t do it! For anything!” Breena adds.

Abby adds a rider to that. “If it hurts bad don’t do it. Sometimes you might like a little sting or stretch or whatever, and that’s hurting good, and that’s fine, but if you need to numb yourself to do something, that’s you shutting down your body telling you to stop doing it.”

“And don’t do that!” Breena says, and this time Abby nods, vigorously.

Abby take the tube out of Breena’s hand. “Any guy shows up with this, and all he’s telling you is that all he knows about anal sex comes from porn. Send him home to google and learn until he knows what the hell he’s doing. Trust me, if he thinks this is how to do anal, he’s going to be lame in the sack for everything else, too.”

“And worse than lame, he’s telling you he doesn’t care if it hurts you.” Breena shakes her head, takes the lube away from Abby, and puts it back on the shelf. “Anyone who shows up with this stuff doesn’t have enough patience or care for you and your pleasure to be allowed into your presence, let alone your bed.”

“Best way to look at it, and this is something I got from Breena, is that your body is a sacred space, and only certain petitioners are worthy of being allowed access to the holy of holies.”

“I didn’t put it like that.”

“Well, no, but that’s the basic idea. Make sure he treats your skin like it’s sacred, and you’re in for a better time. Look, it doesn’t have to be until death do us part and love of a lifetime, but make sure he understands that he’s getting to taste the nectar of the gods when he gets his tongue on you.”
Emily laughs a little at that.

“Yes, you can laugh because it’s funny, but no, you’re not laughing because it’s wrong. Your body and access to it is a privilege, one that needs to be earned! When you’re deciding if he gets to have access, see how he treats the things that are important to him, make sure he treats you at least that well. If all he wants is a quick orgasm, he can do that for himself. And if all he wants is a quick orgasm, he’s unlikely to be willing to make sure you get off, too, so leave him to his own devices when it comes to quick orgasms for him,” Breena says.

“What if he wants a quick one for me?”

Abby smiles at that. “That’s a good time. Let him get on his knees and give you one, and then be nice and return the favor. Abby’s golden rule of oral sex, give as you want to receive! And that means no spitting. You don’t want him wiping his tongue off if he licks you, so don’t do that to him.”

Emily eyes the flavored lubes. “Then…”

“Just for play,” Abby says. “Something different. Though, most guys like how pussy tastes. If I brought some of this stuff home and gave it to him to use, Tim would just roll his eyes at me, and then tell me in extremely graphic terms about how the taste of pussy is a good two-thirds of the fun or oral sex, and he might as well put a condom on his tongue as use that crap.” That gets another wide-eyed look from Emily. Abby powers on, “If you’re both clean, as in recently applied soap and water, and healthy, you should taste good to each other. And if you don’t, that’s a good sign that you need to get checked out.”

“What if his… cum… tastes icky?”

“Swallow fast, and then gargle, brush your teeth, or grab some gum. Again, if he’s healthy, he shouldn’t taste bad. Nothing you want a gallon of, but it shouldn’t be repulsive. Neither of our guys taste like much of anything. It’s more mouthfeel than flavor,” Abby says.

“Jimmy’ll taste a bit off if his blood sugar goes too far off the day or so before. But I can smell that on him long before I’d be able to taste it.”

Abby who hasn’t run into that, gives her a curious look.

“You know how if his blood sugar gets out of whack he can have that sort of maple syrup scent?”

Abby shakes her head at that, too.

“Okay, yeah, usually he’s really good about keeping himself in line.” Emily’s still a few pieces of information short here, and Breena picks up on that. “Jimmy’s diabetic. If his blood sugar gets too far out of control, you can smell it on him, and, a few days later, taste it. He’s really good about keeping his sugar under control, but he’s had a few times where he’s let his insulin slip.”

Abby files that away to ask about later, and says, “And again, if he’s tastes awful, that’s a bad sign. And, honestly, in your age group, any guy you date shouldn’t have had long enough to develop the kind of bad habits that can make semen rank. If he’s eighteen and smoking so much that you don’t want his cum in your mouth, his skin, hair, and lips should all smell and taste so bad he shouldn’t have gotten an invite into your bed to begin with.”

“And if he’s not in your age group, you’ve got no business tasting his cum,” Breena says, without a trace of blush, though that’s not a sentence she ever expected to say. “And if he’s not in your age group, he’s got no business offering it, either. All of our guys are happily imagining us off doing
some romantic-love-oriented-thing, because if they think about what we’re actually doing, they’ll imagine it, and you, and doing things with you and what we’re buying, and they all know they’re way too damn old to be thinking about that.”

“They’ll be thinking about…” Emily’s somewhere between horrified and titillated at that.

“They’re guys. Who like sex. With women. A LOT,” Abby says. “You are an attractive woman who is genuinely pleasant to be around. Of course they’re thinking about it. But they also know that’s creepy, and over the line, so they’re working on not thinking about it.”

“Anyone over twenty-five is hitting on you, and he’s too damn old,” Breena says.

Emily looks confused. “How… twenty-five… Just like that?”

“Just like that!” Breena snaps her fingers. “Add seven years to your age, and that’s the line until you hit twenty-five, then have at it.”

“But…”

“Nope. Twenty-five. It takes 10,000 hours to get really good at something. Twenty-five gets you to 10,000 hours of sex, relationshipping, and adulting. That’s when you’ve got enough experience to go beyond the seven-year limit.” Abby says it, but both she and Breena are pretty sure they’ve come up with another rule for the future McPalmozzo girls.

In the end, Emily gets the variety pack of several different brands of lube, which Abby and Breena approve of. There’s only so much information you can get from rubbing a drop of lube between your fingers. Field-testing is a superior learning technique.

They let her spend a good chunk of time browsing the book section.

And then a longer period of time playing with the toys. That involves a lot more googling and reading up on reviews. They’re more than willing to buy whichever toy she likes as a gift for her, but they also want to make sure she gets something that’s solid, well built, and will get the job done.

“You’re not getting anything for yourselves?” Emily asks as she looks up from her phone, which is currently on a site that reviews sex toys.

“My toy box is well stocked these days,” Breena says.

Emily looks at her, and at Abby, and back to her. “What do you actually… use?”

“When we’re on our own, or with the guys?” Abby asks.

“Uh… Both?”

“Don’t do a lot of on my own these last few years,” Abby says.

“No time?” Emily asks.

“Not exactly. You really only want so much sex, and I get enough sex with other people that I’m generally not looking for on my own time.”

“Oh.” Emily’s not sure what to do with that. There’s almost a sense of pity coming off of her.
Abby shrugs a bit. “Right now, my body’s not into sex at all. That’s just what happens after a new baby. When I’m not this close to having had a baby, I was having sex almost every night. That’s plenty of sex for me.”

“Oh.” And this time, with a concrete number, Emily’s got a better idea of what’s going on and isn’t looking at Abby like she’s feeling sorry for her.

“When I was single, on my own time, most of the time was just fingers and thoughts, but once or twice a week I’d make sure to really do myself, and that’s when the toys and stories and videos came out. And in those cases I might go through a few toys. But, in general,” Abby taps a basic wand vibrator, “this, or something like it, is my ‘old reliable.’”

“I like a bit more stretch than is easy to do with just fingers, so once I got a dildo, it’s been part of just about all my own my own playtimes. But, like Abby, since I’ve been married, I haven’t been doing a lot of on my own play. It’s not that it doesn’t happen at all, it’s just… Sex with Jimmy is more fun than sex on my own, so, assuming he’ll be available in the not wildly distant future, I’ll wait to play with him.

“And with the guys… Most sex is easy, quiet, and relaxed. No toys, bells, or whistles. Maybe some lube. Half an hour or so, everyone has a good time, and is ready for a good night of sleep.”

Abby laughs.

“Okay, as good as you can get with little kids in the house.”

“It’s a lot like food,” Abby says, “you don’t want a seven course dinner every night. Or even most nights. But as a treat, oh yeah! Tim and I call it snack sex, meal sex, and banquet sex. Snack sex is a quickie. Like grabbing a potato chip when you want something salty. It’s great, but you don’t want to live on it. Meal sex, that’s what Breena’s talking about. That every night, every other night, at home, getting ready to sleep or waking up, put a smile on everyone’s face, start the day off good, or end it sweet, sex. For most people, that’s probably 90-95 percent of the sex you have.”

“And then there are banquet nights,” Breena says with a smile in her voice.

“And on banquet nights, anything you see in this store might come into play.” Abby finishes. “But, if you want to know what we like best, what gets used most often… Lube. Good lube makes everything go better.” As Abby says that, Breena heads over to the next row, and is then back a moment later with a little packet in her hand.

“Cock rings. Just a basic ring of silicon, you slip it on him, just over his dick for just a little snug, over his dick and balls for really snug. Both of our guys recommend them. And, if you like a bit of extra stretch, those are a treat for you, too.”

“Ropes. Not the stuff they’ve got here. This stuff is too expensive and doesn’t look very good. Just basic decorator’s rope. Head off to a fabric store, and look around, you find ribbons and cords, and that’ll do just fine. Unless you want to hang someone from the ceiling, you don’t need more than that, and honestly, we’ve done everything short of that, and have never come close to breaking those silk cords they use to tie curtains up.” Emily looks mildly scandalized by that.

Abby glances at Breena, and decides that Emily probably doesn’t need to know that the next most used toy in their box is the strap-on dildo. She’s not sure how much of that Tim wants out and about, so she edits that out of the list. Shoes for Jimmy’s enjoyment come next, and they aren’t going on the list, either, so…
“Sexy undies. That’ll just depend on what you like, what looks good on you, and what he likes.”

Breena eyes the lingerie selection in the store. “None of this stuff is bad, but… I’d buy online, where you can return it if the size isn’t quite right or it doesn’t look on you the way you thought it would.”

“I like anal play, so we’ve got a few toys for that,” Abby says.

“And I don’t, so it’s not in my toy box,” Breena adds.

“And that’s just different people with different bodies like different things.”

“Which is part of being here. Get you a few things, and then you play and experiment.” Breena nods to the toys. “Pick the one you like best, and that’s on us.”

Emily’s eyes go wide. She had seen one that looked really interesting and had great reviews, and it was 200% of her budget for all of this.

“Condoms, lube, basic supplies, having them on hand is on you,” Abby says. “One of my rules is that if you’re at a point in your life where you can’t afford the necessary supplies to have safe sex, then you aren’t in a position to take the risk that comes with sex. If you can’t afford condoms, you really can’t afford a baby or an STD, so no sex with other people for you. Let me take that one step further, if you hear yourself or anyone who wants to sleep with you say, ‘Condoms are so expensive,’ you or they don’t have enough money to afford the kind of sex where you need condoms. Anyone who says that isn’t getting more than a hand job, and if you’re the one saying it, that’s where you draw your line. So, you’re buying that” she points to what’s already in the basket, “for yourself. As for the toys. That’s for you, to play with on your own or with a friend, and that’s the sort of thing someone who wants you to be happy might buy for you.”

“But put a condom on the toy if you’re playing with a friend,” Breena adds. “You can spread STDs by using them without protection.”

“Which again invokes Abby’s ‘you must be able to afford condoms to play with other people’ rule.”

Emily nods slowly at that, and says, “And that would be rule number what?”

“Twenty-seven,” Abby says with a grin as Emily heads off to go look at the toys some more.

Breena raises an eyebrow. “You just make that up?”

Abby shrugs. “First time I ever said it out loud. Certainly lived by it when I was single.”

“Okay. You guys get done with this. I need to go pump,” Abby says, leaving Breena and Emily to face the checkout line on their own.

She’s almost done the first side before they join her in the car. “Long line.”

Breena nods. “No returns, so everything has to be taken out of the box, checked to make sure it works, and then packed back up, and we were behind the bachelorette party.”

Abby nods. “So, I’m guessing you want to run back home and get to try those out, but that’s not quite up, yet.”

Emily’s mouth opens and shuts.
“Part of this is also why, at first glance, we think Jared looks like a turd, and how to identify a good
guy,” Breena adds. “Where are your keys?” she asks Abby.

Abby hands them over. She’s already in the passenger seat. “You’re driving?”

“That’s why you’re over there, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So,” she turns to Emily, “where do you want to get a drink and a snack or something, and talk?”

Once they’ve settled into their seats at a quiet, almost deserted coffee shop, Breena says, “There are
frogs, princes, and vipers, and between us we’ve kissed an awful lot of frogs, lucked out to have
found a prince or two, and lucked out again in not getting bit by a viper.”

“Too hard,” Abby says, “but that’s the cautionary tale at the end of this story.”

“All guys, at the beginning of getting to know them, are frogs. They just are. You don’t know
enough about them to decide if there’s prince material under the frog or not.” Breena puts a teaspoon
of sugar into her cappuccino.

“Over the years we’ve rubbed up against a lot of frogs, looking for prince, and eventually we found
some frogs that turned into princes…” Abby says, sipping her raspberry Italian soda, and picking up
one of the cupcakes Breena had gotten them.

Emily’s sitting there, listening, trying not to look too bored at the combined wisdom of the ages being
spewed upon her. She is interested in the toys, and the cookie in front of her, and she’s not obviously
tuning them out, so that’s probably about as good as they can hope for right now.

“But we had a pretty good idea there was a prince under that frog skin before the rubbing
commenced.”

Abby laughs at that. “There are always hints that under that shiny green skin, there’s a prince
lurking. You can’t do it the same way I did, everyone’s phone has a map on it now, but back when I
was dating, one thing I’d do was suggest directions for how to get to where we were going.” That
gets Emily’s attention. And Abby smiles, she was figuring that actual hands on advice might be a
good way to get her attention.

“It’s just a basic little thing, but what does he do when you give him directions? Does he listen? Does
he take your directions? Does the idea of you giving directions annoy him? He doesn’t have to
follow your route, that’s fine, he might have a better way to get there, but if he acts like an ass about
you giving him directions to the restaurant, that’s not a prince. So, by the time I got to the restaurant,
I’d already weeded a quarter of them out.”

Breena nods. “I always said no to something in the first two dates. Something he wanted to do.
Movie, dinner, whatever. Just to see how he’d respond. The guy who won’t take your no for an
answer is the guy you drop like a red hot cast iron frying pan. If he’s a pain in the ass about not
going to see a movie, he will not be cool with you saying no to sex, and he will make your life
miserable if you try to break up with him after he’s invested some time and energy in you.”

“You said no to more than dinner,” Emily says, remembering Breena’s weed-out-the-slugs technique.
Breena smiled. “That was the big no. Guys who had already gotten past the little no test got to that one. Look, you don’t want to abstain until you get married, that’s fine, but I can guarantee you that if you say to a guy, ‘I love men, I love how they smell, and feel, and kiss, and how they make me feel, but I’m a virgin,’ or in your case, ‘I’m waiting for a man I… like, love, know better, whatever, and if you respect that, I’d like to see you again, and if you don’t, I’ll get my half of the check, call and Uber, and we’ll part ways, no harm, no foul,’ a herd of horny frogs will go hopping off, never to be seen again.”

“The problem with that technique is that it leaves you with the princes and the vipers. The princes respect you and your choices and still want to get to know you better. The vipers are now looking at you as a challenge to be overcome,” Abby says.

“And that’s what worries us, and your parents, about Jared. Ziva caught some of your text conversation,” Emily looks like she wants to die of embarrassment at that, but Abby keeps on, “and, after this shopping trip, it should be pretty clear we don’t care what you might be doing with him on your phone.”

“And given that you can’t get sick or pregnant over the phone, we’re all in favor of a mostly electronic sex life,” Breena says.

“But… and this is a big but—“

“Gargantuan but…”

“The earlier part, when you’re telling him that you’re having a good time, and he’s trying to get you to leave, that raised a lot of red flags,” Abby’s face is concerned, and it’s not like she’s making a show of this. Ziva told her about that bit of the conversation, and it did make the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

“For example, you’ll notice we’ve been out for a few hours, and though both guys have texted, it’s just to talk to us, see how things are going, and send us cute pictures from home. They’d like us to be home, but they know we’re having a good time, so they’re not being jerks about it. So, sure,” Breena grabs her phone, and finds Jimmy’s latest text, which is a picture of him doing bicep curls, with Molly on one arm and Kelly on the other and a mildly salacious double entendre about pumping some more iron later. “he’s looking to make me want to be home, with him, but you’ll notice what he’s doing, making home, and him, look appealing to me. He’s not telling me he’s bored, lonely. He’s not telling me to come home. He’s not telling me to break my commitments. He’s just, gently, reminding me that there’s a good time waiting at home for me, and that maybe I don’t want to spend all day on this mission.”

Abby realizes that Breena’s hitting near the target, and she decides to shoot closer. “Being bored, lonely, or horny isn’t a crime. Saying I miss you isn’t a problem. Setting the situation up so it’s a ‘you like them better than me’ issue, is.

“A viper will try to make your whole life revolve around him, and he’ll do it an inch at a time. He’ll start by being needy. Needing more of your time, more of your attention, and more, and more. Vipers strike fast, but they don’t set their prey up fast. They are patient, and they will slowly, gently, slip you away from the people who matter until you’ve only got them, then they strike like lightning.

“We’re a family of cops, we’ve seen this go wrong, which is part of what you’re seeing right now, but ‘reassure me that you love me best’ is a warning sign for us. That’s usually the start of bad things.”

Breena nods at that.
“Now for the cautionary tale. I caught a real viper. And, seriously, only luck, good timing, and a family full of cops saved me on that one. At first, it’s great, because a viper is *needy* and *you* and *only you* can serve his needs. He *loves* you, and *worships* you, and *never* wants to be apart from you —“

“How’s the different from what you’ve been saying about how a guy *should* treat me?” Emily asks.

“That’s one of the hard parts. When you’re just starting out, a viper can look like a really good boyfriend. The biggest thing is how does he act when you want to be on your own or with your friends and family? A good guy is cool with that. A viper gets whiny about it.”

“Again, cue us worrying about Jared,” Breena says.

“He doesn’t usually do that. He hasn’t texted all day.”

“Is that because he knows you’re on your own and he’s letting you have time, or because he’s trying to punish you, make you feel insecure? Like he doesn’t really care about you?” Abby asks.

They both catch the flicker in Emily’s eyes. She doesn’t answer, but she doesn’t have to. There’s enough doubt in her eyes that they know that at least the idea that this is happening is getting to her.

“Yeah. You have a tiff, and he just vanishes, also not a good thing. One day, okay, fine. Much longer… That raises some flags, too. When we were dating, Jimmy and I talked every day. Might just be a quick, *Slammed at work, tomorrow?* Sort of thing, but, even if we were fighting, we kept talking.”

“You were fighting?” Emily looks like she can’t believe that.

Breena smiles dryly. “We’ve had a few doozies over the years.”

“And Tim and I have, too. It happens. And if you can make up, forgive, and let it go, you’re once again in prince territory. Frogs hold onto things and get annoyed about them for years. Vipers hold onto them, bring them up over and over, beat you with them, subtly change the story so you’re the bad guy, and use them to make you feel like you owe them.”

They see that hit Emily, too.

“Uh huh,” Abby says. “Look, it’s possible, and likely for that matter, that Jared’s just a jerk, and a young one at that. Vipers aren’t common, and just being a jerk can look like a viper, too. Especially to over protective adults. But… Just because he may not be a viper doesn’t mean you want a jerk, either.”

“And if he is a viper… Abby…” Breena leads.

“My viper… He was so clingy and needy and everything was always a problem that only I could solve, and yeah, at first, you feel like a hero. You’re Florence Nightingale with a side of Wonder Woman. It’s great. But then there are more problems that only you can solve. And he wants all of your time. And he starts to get annoyed by you seeing your friends, or working—“

“And he hates your job and your friends,” Breena adds, knowing this story.

“Yeah, he’s suggesting that maybe one day you’d like to move away with him. Somewhere just the two of you. That sounds really romantic, right?” Abby asks.

Emily nods a bit.
“Yeah. No. It’s not. Your life, my life, Breena’s life, none of us, should revolve entirely around another person. That’s a bad sign if he, or you, want that. You want a week or two of just you, that’s normal. Everyone wants that. Too much longer than that… You’re starting to get into dangerous territory.

“He starts getting annoyed when you aren’t the solution to all the problems. And he gets annoyed when things don’t go exactly his way. And then things start changing. Something happens, you fight about it, that happens, but he keeps bringing it back up, and every time he tells you about it, you’re a little less reasonable, and it’s always you, he’s the pure as the driven snow little lamb, and if you stick to the truth about what happened, he’ll finally say something like, ‘Fine, if you have to see it that way, I’ll play along.’

“A guy ever says that, or anything along those line, you run the fuck away from him. You stop seeing him. You cut him out!” Breena says.

“And that’s where I got sick of my viper. I don’t like particularly needy guys to begin with, and he was just way too far over the line, and of course, he was constantly being ‘wounded’ by me, because I’m ‘cold’ and ‘distant’ and too focused on my ‘job’ and those friends who ‘don’t really love me the way he does.’ I left him.

“But he knew my number, he knew where I lived, and where I worked, and he wouldn’t leave me. He stalked me for almost a year before I could get the restraining order.”

“You had to get a restraining order? Why didn’t Gibbs—“ Emily asks.

“Didn’t tell him, and he asked me the same thing when he found out about the Viper. And I’ll tell you what I told him, ‘I wanted him restrained, not beaten within an inch of his life with a baseball bat.’”

“Why did you have to say that to Gibbs?” Emily asks.

“For the same reason he made sure to start teaching me how to shoot the day after that fiasco ended, because a restraining order is just a piece of paper, and a piece of paper has never stopped a man from doing anything he wanted to do. The viper, he set up a crime, the idea being that he’d ‘save’ me from the bad guy, and I’d be so grateful, I’d… I don’t know. I know he didn’t plan on having it last. They found the ‘suicide note’ he’d written in my handwriting for when I decided we were done.”

“Holy shit… Is he… Did…” Emily opens and closes her mouth.

“He gets out of jail later this year. They could only keep him for a decade. He does not know my new name. He doesn’t know where I live. And Tim’s made sure that he can’t find that out. We have three guns in our home, and one of them is mine. When I’m out, I always have a Taser on me. It’s in my purse right now. And you can absolutely bet that the second he steps out of prison that Tim will be tracking his every move, and if he gets within ten miles of me, all of NCIS, and the FBI likely, will show up and happily drag his ass back to jail for violating his parole.”

“Do you think…” Breena asks that time.

Abby shrugs. “I hope not. And beyond my usual pay attention to my surroundings, which everyone should do, I’m not sweating it, because I refuse to spend the next fifty years afraid. But… I got lucky. The situation with him could have been much worse, and if it was…” Abby sips her drink, thinking of how to put this. “If a viper bites you, bad things are going to happen. You got bit, that’s a bad thing. Bad things will happen to him. What happens to him will depend on how badly you get bit. Bad things will happen to our family when we’re done with him if we’re not careful. The whole
world is vastly better off with you knowing how to weed the vipers out ahead of time, because, trust me, if a viper needs his head cut off, we’ll do it, but that’s… messy.”

“Have… you guys…” Emily doesn’t finish that sentence, and Abby and Breena don’t respond.

They drop Emily off at her mom’s place.

“See you on Saturday!” Breena says, with a smile.

“See you then.” To say that it’s been an enlightening day for Emily Fornell is an understatement. To say that she’s about to call up Jared and dump him though… That is yet to be determined.

Abby looks over at Breena. “You think she’ll still be dating Jared by then?”

Breena shrugs. “Depends on how much she likes Seth.”

“So, part two of the plan, have a chat with Gibbs and Fornell about how you too can get the best friend.”

Breena nods.

Chapter End Notes

Taking Charge of Your Fertility For Women is a real book, and assuming you're the sort of person who wants to know how and why your (or a woman's) body does what it does, it's worth its weight in gold.
Like any child, Emily Fornell has a somewhat different view of her parents than the rest of the world, and of the view they have of themselves.

Unlike any other child, Emily is a hybrid of the Fornell and Anderson lines, and is thus incapable of letting a mystery set untouched.

And thinking about starting a conversation with her Dad or maybe Uncle Gibbs, she’s thinking that she’s got something of a mystery on her hands.

The first time she met “Uncle Gibbs” she was a little girl. Mostly she remembers her Dad was scared and angry. Her mom was terrified and angrier. Uncle Gibbs seemed calm, but sad. She remembers him looking at her, a lot, wistful.

After that, sometimes when she was at her Dad’s place, Uncle Gibbs would be there. She came to realize that he was a friend of her dad. Occasional mentions of ‘our ex-wife’ hit her radar, but since she there wasn’t a time when her parents lived together that she can remember, the idea that they were ever married is something that took years to set in, so it took a few years for her to realize their mutual ex-wife was her mom.

She was probably about ten then, and she asked about that. Diane told her that she had been married to Gibbs before Fornell. Tobias told her that he met Diane through Gibbs.

And being ten, that was enough.

When Sterling went missing, and she got to see her mom with Gibbs, it stopped being enough. She was 12 then, old enough to notice that there was something going on with them. Something she didn’t usually see with Sterling and her mom…

It took her another year, and another shot of seeing her Mom when she was dealing with Gibbs, to come to the conclusion that her mom had a crush on Gibbs. Which seemed odd since they weren’t married anymore and somehow her Dad had happened after Gibbs. Things fell apart with Sterling after that. But, after Sterling, if she needed some time away from her parents, they were both fine with her crashing at Gibbs’ place. And he was fine with her being there, seemed pleased that she was happy to work on whatever project he had going in the basement.

Her mom stopped getting angry when she talked about Gibbs.

Of course, that was also about the time she stopped getting so angry at Fornell, too.

Emily asked what had happened with them, and Diane looked sad and shook her head, and then said it didn’t matter, not anymore.

When she asked her Dad, he got a really guilty look on his face, and said that sometimes people do stupid things, and sometimes, they get insanely lucky and something good comes out of the stupid. “Your mom and I got really stupid. We knew we weren’t a good idea, but we tried anyway. That got us you, which is the best thing that ever happened to me, but us together, that was a bad idea.”

At that point, she thought she had the basic idea down. Mom on the rebound bounced from Gibbs to his best friend. His best friend knew it was a bad plan, but got together with her anyway. And she’s the result.
But, at home, after playing with her new toys, she’s thinking more about what Abby and Breena said, and what they didn’t say, about a guy, his best friend, and a girl they both shared.

She’s got an internet connection, some time, and… She checks the department of vital records. Two things become clear very quickly, her parents got married five months before she was born, not a year and five months, and her mom’s divorce to Gibbs was finalized a month before she and her dad got married.

Emily sighs long and low, staring at the screen in front of her. Dad hadn’t been kidding about stupid.

Then another thought hits. She has blue eyes. Light blue eyes. Both of her parents have greeny-brown hazel eyes.

Gibbs has blue eyes.

Emily blinks very slowly, and then jumps up and starts pulling on clothing, fast. She’s not sure which one of the three of them she needs to talk to, but she needs to talk to someone.

Her mom isn’t home. Not a huge surprise. She’s working pretty much every minute she’s awake these days. Jarvis has her doing basically everything that involves money for DC. She mutters a lot about not being a miracle worker and needing a staff, but Emily knows she’s thriving on this kind of work. She loves being entirely in charge and only having to report to someone who’s pretty much just told her, “I don’t care how it happens, just do it.”

She hits Gibbs’ place next, not sure if he’ll be there or at their home on the Chesapeake. She knows from Abby and Breena that they stay there over the weekends, and at 6:00 on a Sunday, that might qualify as weekend, or not.
She just doesn’t know.

When she pulls up at Gibbs’ place there’s his truck and Abbi’s car, so obviously they’re home.

Like always she heads in, and Mona leaps up to get some petting.

“Emily?” Abbi looks up from the computer on her lap. She’s on the sofa, reading something, and very curious to see Emily in her house. “Weren’t you with Abby and Breena?”

“I was. Is Uncle Gibbs here?”

“Yeah, in the basement. Dave’s crib needs some work.”

“Oh. Good.”

Abbi sizes Emily up. She looks rattled, and she can imagine sex talk with Breena and Abby could get pretty wild, but she’s also pretty sure that’s not the sort of thing that sends you scuttling over to Uncle Gibbs’ place. “You really okay?”

Emily opens and closes her mouth a few times, and then says, “Probably.”

“Is it Jared?”

“No. This is… Not him. Can I go down?”

“Yeah, sure.” Abbi’s sure she’ll get the full story from Jethro, but she’ll admit to being curious.

Emily heads down, as quietly as she can go. She stops, two steps from the bottom and for a moment, she just watches Gibbs work. She’s trying to see herself in him. Or maybe signs of him in her, but leaning over a plank of maple, running a plane over it, she doesn’t see anything, until he looks up at her with those big, blue eyes.

“You just want to sit?” he asks.

She shakes her head, coming all the way down the steps, still looking at his eyes.

“Mine are darker than yours, and the wrong shape. Your grandma and Aunt Gillian have the same color eyes as you.”

“How…” She can’t imagine how he could have known what she was thinking.

“You’d figure it out sooner or later, bound to have some questions. Wasn’t sure you’d come see me, though.”

“Mom’s working, and not sure I want to hit Dad with this.”

Gibbs inclines his head he pours himself a drink, and almost pours one for her, but decides that he’s gonna be in enough trouble with Fornell after this conversation, he doesn’t need to get Emily drunk on top of it. “You want a soda or coffee or something?”

“I’m… nah.”

Gibbs takes a sip. “So, ask.”
“What happened? With you and mom and dad?”

“Mind if I ask what’s got you thinking about it?”

She rolls her eyes a little and settles onto one of the stools. “You know Dad and Mom don’t like Jared, and have roped you guys into ‘doing something about it.’”

Gibbs nods.

“Okay, Breena and Abby get me talking and… I like Jared, he’s… anyway. He’s got a friend I really like, I mentioned that, and I saw Abby and Breena look at each other, and then think, and look again, and then Breena said that maybe I should have a chat with your or Dad about how it’s not the end of the world to hop from one guy to his buddy. Those looks got me thinking. How the three of you act got me thinking, too. So, I checked. You and mom didn’t get divorced in ’97.”

Gibbs nods. “Nope. Weren’t even married yet, then.”

She looks into his eyes again. “How’d you know I wasn’t yours? I mean… you wouldn’t have left mom, pregnant, unless you were certain, right?”

Gibbs nods at that, too. “I had the vasectomy years before I met your mom. And before I called the divorce lawyer, I had it tested. I’ve been sterile since ’91.”

“But…” she’s trying to remember the first time she met Gibbs, really remember, not put facts and ideas that are in her head now onto that situation. “But the first time you saw me, you weren’t sure.”

He shrugs a bit. “It wouldn’t have been the first time a Navy Medic got a test wrong. And, yes, the first time we met, I wondered. I know your mom and dad have, too.” Gibbs gets his phone and finds a picture of his Kelly. “That’s my daughter.” He finds a shot of Kelly and Shannon. “And her and her mom. Your eyes made me wonder some, but, not too much. This is what happens when I get together with a red-head with green eyes.”

“The brown hair and green eyes win.”

“Pretty much.”

“But… I mean, that’s not certain. DNA doesn’t always work the same way every time.”

“Which is why all three of us have wondered from time to time…” He shakes his head. “Go look at a picture of your grandma. You’ve got her eyes. Your Aunt Gillian, she’s got the same colored eyes, and both of them have that same light red hair.”

“You mean my mom’s mom and her sister? Yeah, we know I’m related to my mom. That’s not the question,” Emily says dryly. “No one on Dad’s side has blue eyes.”

Gibbs sighs again. He gestures up toward Abbi upstairs. “If that test had been wrong, we’d know by now. Been together a year next week, and that’s more than enough time to know. And by the time I saw you for the first time, if that had been wrong, I’d have known.”

Which is when Emily remembers the comments about condoms and the lack of using them and all the rest of it. Which is when it really hits her that all of these adults around her, all of them really do have sex, and that, maybe they kind of know what they’re talking about when it comes to this stuff.

“Oh.”
Gibbs nods.

“What happened with you three?”

Gibbs doesn’t shrug at that, though he wants to. He exhales long and low, trying to figure out how to put it into words. Then he swallows, and again, and remembers sitting down here, going mute with Diane, hiding in his protective shell of silence, and he going to do his damnest to do better by her daughter.

“When your mom and I met, we were both in a bad place. Trying to run away from ourselves. With each other. And that doesn’t work. Doesn’t matter how hard you run, you always bring yourself. But, for a while at least, we could distract each other, and we did, and had a good time at it.”

Gibbs bites his lip.

“But you’re always there. And… I screwed your mom over. I wasn’t a good husband, and she had every right to be angry at me. And she screwed me back. And your dad, he got caught in the middle.”

Her eyebrow rises. “She cheats on you with him, and he’s the one getting caught in the middle.”

Gibbs shrugs again. “I wasn’t having an affair, but I’d been cheating on her from the beginning. Never told her about Kelly or Shannon. And when things happened with your Dad, I’d left for afloat on the Med. I just went. Didn’t ask her about it, didn’t talk to her, just went. Only wrote once or twice a week, never called. I basically left her.”

“You weren’t kidding about being a bad husband.”

“No. You name the screw up, and I’ve done it.”

“You’ve cheated, for real?” Again the idea that these are real people who have dealt with the kind of stuff that’s happening in her life, and more on top of it, is starting to sink in. The idea that “good people” can do bad things, make bad decisions, and all the rest of it, that’s starting to sink in, too.

“It’s all real, sex, not sex, it’s all really cheating. Emily, and yeah, not on your mom, but, yeah. I was a good husband to Shannon, and I’m a good husband to Abbi, but your mom, Stephanie, and Hannah, not at all. Not even close.”

“So, you leave, and she hooks up with my dad?”

“I don’t know the details. Obviously, I wasn’t there. But I’d been gone for six weeks when I got the ‘I’m pregnant letter.’”

Emily thinks about that. “Doesn’t sound like you were gone long before she grabbed him.”

Gibbs sighs again. “Even when I was there, I wasn’t there. We had a great time dating. Our engagement was a lot of fun, and then we got married and I… left. I took myself away from our marriage. I made sure there was no shot of it ever coming close to being anything like what I had with Shannon. Your mom didn’t know what was going on, just that I went from being a good boyfriend to missing in action.

“Your Dad and I met before I met Diane. We were friends, worked a few cases together, and before Ducky introduced me to Diane, we’d spend evenings chewing over cases, drinking, hanging out. And after Diane and I got together the three of us would get together for dinner, hang out, have a good time. And we had some awfully good times the three of us together. It’s taken almost twenty
years, but I think we will again.

“Your dad went undercover not long after we got married. So she lost both of us within a month of each other.

“He came back a bit before I left, but she’s my wife, so he can’t spend time with her unless I am, too, and I’m not at home. I’m working as much as I can. Because if I’m home with her, I feel like I’m killing Shannon and Kelly all over again, so I’m not home.

“Your Dad and I spend time together at work, or grab a beer in a bar after work, we still get on fine, and he’s telling me that I’m being a jerk with your mom, but I’m not listening. I’ve got my stock answer for that. ‘She knows the second b is for bastard.’”

Emily smirks at that.

“He told me that after I left, she started calling him, just to see if I was talking to him. I wasn’t. And they still like each other. Dinner’s still a good time. And by the time a month’s done, you’re cooking along, and she claims she didn’t know for sure that you were Tobias’ until I served her with divorce papers.”

“How could she not know? You had a vasectomy.”

“That I didn’t tell her about.”

“Ew.” Emily winces.

Gibbs nods.

“I thought you two broke up and Dad was a rebound.”

“That’s not wrong. Your mom just didn’t know we’d broken up, because I wasn’t enough of a man to let her go.”

“You were running away from Kelly and Shannon?”

Gibbs gives her a sort of look. “I was running away from missing them, ran to your mom, and I started to get happy with your mom, and that felt bad, too, so I started running from that, too.”

“What was mom running from?”

“That question’s for her. She probably understands it differently than I do, or did.”

Emily thinks about that for a moment. “You and Dad are okay?”

“Yeah. Now. The last ten years. Uh... Once I got the test back, I sent him a letter telling him not to marry your mom. Found a divorce lawyer and sent her papers. Didn’t talk to her at all. When I got on land again, I beat the shit out of him, and he let me. Then we didn’t talk again until 2002, and when we saw each other on a case, he pretended he didn’t know me.

“But just like with your mom, we’re friends. We genuinely like each other... Eh, sometimes we don’t like each other. We love each other. And if backs are to the wall, we protect each other. Doesn’t matter what happened before, we’ve got each other’s backs. That’s why your mom knew she could come to us when Sterling got in trouble. Why you’ve always got a place in my home. Why your Dad’s keeping his eye out for Tim at the FBI.” Gibbs sips his drink again. “So, Jared’s got a buddy?”
“Yeah. And… I don’t think I can see him if Jared’s not around. Like Dad and Mom when she was married to you.”

“You’re not married to Jared, and the nineties have been over for a long time. And if they’re really friends, they’ll still be friends when whatever happens with you and them happens. Might take a while, but they’ll get it worked out.

“Just, break up with Jared before you ask the buddy out.”

“What if Seth, his buddy, doesn’t want to see me because I dumped his friend? I mean… I get to see him every day at school now, and if we break up… I won’t. And, I’ll miss him.”

Gibbs doesn’t know what to do with that. After all, there is something of a code, and don’t date your buddy’s girl is part of it. “Oh… Uh… I don’t know. I’m bad at this stuff. What did the girls say?”

“To talk to you.”

“Ugh…” He mentally gives Abby and Breena a headslap for dumping this in his lap. “Does he like you?”

“Maybe? I don’t know. He likes Jared.”

“Well, figure out if he likes you, too. That’s a good starting point. And… don’t date a guy because you like his friend.”

“Seth isn’t the only thing I like about Jared.”

“Yeah. So, I hear.” That gets a very long sigh out of Gibbs. “So, I’m not mentioning to your dad. I keep reminding myself that you’re two months younger than Shannon was when we met, over and over and over, so I don’t flip out about it myself.”

Emily laughs at that.

“Go talk to your dad, too. Yeah, you’re his little girl, and he’s going to be overprotective, but he’s not going to steer you wrong. He reads people better than almost anyone on earth, and if he thinks Jared’s trouble, watch out. And he can tell you if Seth likes you. He might not want to, but he’ll see it. And, unlike me, he can tell you all about wanting your best friend’s girl, and, what, in that situation, he would have liked to have had happened.”


He smiles at her.

---

When Emily gets to her Dad’s place, he and Wendy are home. They’re cleaning up dinner. She sits at the kitchen table, munching down the leftovers, and watches them work.

Wendy is the first of Dad’s girlfriends that she’s gotten to meet. She suspects there has to have been other women between her mom and Wendy, but she doesn’t actually know that for a fact.

Dad rinses everything off and loads the dishwasher. Wendy clears up and scrapes off any bits of food into the trash can. Emily’s not really paying attention to what they’re talking about; she’s watching them be married.
She’s trying to remember anything like this with her Dad and Mom, but… She wasn’t even two when they divorced, no memories at all of them together. Most of her memories of them are of tense quiet, and snappish conversations between them. And more quiet, which she thinks is because they had some sort of agreement to not badmouth the other one in front of her. So they didn’t say a lot about the other one.

They’ve warmed up over the last few years, though.

Tobias and Wendy are just cleaning up and talking, and moving around the kitchen easy and peaceful. Occasionally he’ll pat her on the bum, and she might give him a little peck, but for the most part they’re doing the chores, in rhythm, together.

Mom and Eric would do this, but not exactly like this. She has a system for everything, and the first few times Eric tried to help out, she got sharp on how it was supposed to be done, but once he got the idea down, they were able to work together on automatic, too.

But with Eric and Mom, Mom was in charge. Eric seemed okay with that. She wonders if he really was, and if that’s part of why he’s not coming around anymore.

She wonders if that’s part of why Gibbs and Dad are remarried or close enough, and her Mom isn’t.

She doesn’t get the sense that Dad or Wendy is in charge. Obviously, someone has to decide how and when things get done, but she has no idea who or how it happens here. It just does.

That gets her thinking about Jared, and he’s always got to be in charge, too. Might be part of what she likes about him. It puts her in mind of being with her Mom, and there’s a certain ease that goes with someone else telling you everything to do.

Granted, just like with her mom, she certainly doesn’t do everything Jared wants to do, or do it the way he wants it done. And just like with her Mom, when she’s had enough ‘my way is the only way’ she leaves and goes somewhere else, where she can do whatever it is her own way.

She fiddles with that idea while playing with the meatball on her plate.

“You going to eat that, or poke it to death?” Tobias asks, as she’s spearing it with her fork, for the twentieth time.

She puts the fork down. And, either Wendy’s got the sense she needs some time with her Dad on her own, or is just off doing something else, but she’s not in the kitchen anymore.

“Both, maybe. It’s long dead anyway, it doesn’t mind.”

Fornell smiles at her, and sits across from her at the table, cup of coffee in his hand. “What’s going on?”

“Big day, Dad. Uh… say you’ve got a crush on someone, and she’s dating your best friend, what do you do?”

What Fornell does is go white, swallow hard, and wonder who he’s got to kill for that getting out. Emily can see he’s distressed by that, so she adds, “And, like, you can see the guy she’s with isn’t a good fit. She likes him and all, but he’s not a great guy, not for her, what… If you could write it from scratch, what would you want her to do?”

That begins to intrigue Fornell, because he can see that she’s asking him for help on something that’s
hers. Asking for help with something he’s been through.

He sips his coffee. “If I got to write it,” he taps the cup with his index finger, “set it up from beginning to end…” He sighs a little, how would he have done it, how would he have liked it to go? He sighs again. “If she really loved the guy in the first place, I would have wanted him to be a better man for her, and I would have talked to him about how he wasn’t doing his job.” Which he had done, with Gibbs. They got married, everything was okay, and he went undercover for four months, and when he got back, they’d fallen apart. “Because if she really loved him, the two of us weren’t ever going to work out, and all the hoping, dreaming, and rearranging wouldn’t have changed that. But, if she really loved him, and he was a good guy under a lot of hurt and some bad history, maybe he could shape up and be the man she needed.” He sighs, wondering if there had ever been a shot of Gibbs shaping into that guy, or if that marriage was, as he’d been telling himself for years, dead, and all he did was hammer the nails into the coffin with his dick.

“What if she likes him, but she likes the fact that when she’s with him she gets to see his best friend even more?”

Fornell nods at that, and for the first time in a while feels better about this Jared thing, because he knows what Emily’s asking him.

“If that was the case, and if I was the best friend, I’d want her to dump the guy she only kind of likes, and then, after a bit, I’d go ask her out.”

“You wouldn’t want to stop seeing her because she dumped your best friend?”

Like Gibbs, Fornell isn’t entirely sure what to do with that. He sighs. “Honestly, I don’t know. Would depend on how much I liked her. How much I liked him. What kind of guy they both are.”

“Best friends since kindergarten.”

He winces. “That’ll be sticky. Invite them all over, and Wendy and I’ll lurk around, try to get a better read on them.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

He kisses her. “You’re welcome.”

A week later, sullen waves of radiant teenage malice are sloshing all over the place as Jared Ridge walks into the Palmers’ house. He’s vastly too cool to be doing anything like attending a three-year-old’s birthday party, so he slouches in, lands on the sofa, talking to no one, puts his earbuds in, pulls his phone out, and starts texting.

He’s been in the house for less than nine seconds, Emily isn’t even in the door yet, and Tim is already jonesing to go over and break his phone, and maybe a few fingers. He looks over to Jimmy, who is also vastly less than thrilled to have this punk in his house.

And that’s where it begins. He just sits there like a lump, not interacting with anyone, (besides the other side of his phone) other than to occasionally tell Emily to do or get things for him.
Other than the black lump of sullen teenage angst in the corner, it’s a pretty good party. Okay, yes, it’s a toddler party, and the larger Slater clan has turned out for this so, there are, by conservative estimate, fifty people at this thing.

It is loud. There are tons of food. Kids of most ages are running around. The guest of honor is having a blast chasing her cousins, both of the clan Gibbs and the Slater line, and shrieking as only a three-year-old can shriek.

She’s graduated from Muppets to Shaun the Sheep, so there are white fuzzy sheep all over the place, and in one corner Shaun and Co are on the TV, with several of the kids watching and giggling.

And, of course, as often happens in February, it’s cold and wet outside, so everyone is inside the house.

“So, do we know what the Valentine’s Day surprises are?” Wendy asks, knowing that A: Jared’s got nothing. She won’t even have to ask. The guy who thinks prom is a waste of money does not get his sweetie something for Valentine’s, and B: Hearing that other guys, real guys, adult guys who are not her father, actually go out of their way to make their ladies happy on Valentine’s Day, is something Emily should see.

“We—“ Abby starts, and shuts down, not sure how to phrase this, but Breena takes over, rescuing the mission, sure that if you don’t suspect anything is going on with the four of them, you’ll take ‘we’ to mean, me and my buddy, as opposed to, me and my wife. “We think Tim and Jimmy have teamed up to write us a song.”

Wendy nods, looking pleased. Emily looks a bit startled at the idea of that much effort, and, though they miss it, Fornell’s eyes go a bit wide, too. He’s awfully sure what ‘we’ means, and the idea that the guys are double teaming the Valentine’s goodies is giving him a very concrete idea of what all might be going on.

He sees Gibbs on the far side of the room, eating a cupcake, talking to Tim, Jimmy, and Tony, and shakes his head. Whatever is going on here, apparently it’s not just a sex romp. He’s romped that romp before, and it didn’t involve going out of his way to invent romantic treats for said rompees.

“A song?” Wendy asks.

“Not entirely sure about that, but they keep ducking off to Tim’s computer to ‘work on something’ and occasionally I’ll hear some music come out,” Abby says.

“They sing?” Emily asks, looking at Tim and Jimmy, and then back to Jared, who is still glued to his phone, though one of the Slater kids, Emily guesses she’s six, is hanging over him, trying to read over his shoulder, and he’s half-heartedly trying to swat said child away.

“Jimmy does. Tim’s the poet. That’s why we think they’re working together,” Breena says. “Neither of them has all the pieces on his own, but together…”

“Although, given how much quiet cursing I’ve also heard, they may be working on a song, but no song may be forthcoming,” Abby ends with.

“Is Tony part of this?” Emily asks.
The ladies glance at each other, and toward Tony, who is talking with Ziva and Ed’s brother, Wes. “We don’t think so, but we’re not sure. Jimmy might be writing the music on Tim’s computer, and if they get it done, they might get Tony and Ziva to play.”

“But, if they are, he’s got something else planned,” Abbi says. “He’s already asked me to block off the 14th for Ziva. She doesn’t know it, yet, but she’s got the day off.”

“Nice. You know what he’s got planned?” Wendy says.

Abbi shakes her head. “And I don’t know what, if anything, Gibbs has in mind. How about Tobias?”

“As long as I can remember, we’ve had Valentine’s Dinner together,” Emily says. “So, I know we’re going out. I know Wendy’s coming with us.”

“But we don’t know where. Balentino’s, our annual date, didn’t make it through the fall, so… Somewhere. It’ll probably be an Italian place, and it’ll be a good one,” Wendy adds. “And you know, next year, he’ll be gassing up the car to get to Charlottesville. Can’t miss his Valentine’s date with his girl, even if she is at UVA.”

That lights up some faces. “You decided on the University of Virginia! Oh, that’s awesome!” Abby says.

Breena’s smiling, too. “That’s a great school. One of my best friends went there and loved it.”

Emily smiles at them, looking a little embarrassed at all the praise.

Tim’s glowering at Jared. He just called Emily, “Babe,” and not in a cute, little pet name sort of way. Not the way he sometimes calls Abby, “Baby.”

“Fact-finding mission,” Abby says quietly to him.

“Oh, I’ve got a fact I want to find. I want to see what happens when I kick his ass so hard I can tickle the back of his tonsils with my toes.” Tim wiggles his fingers to illustrate the idea.

Fornell blinks slowly, not sure who the hell this guy is, and what happened to McGee, and then he knows, the little girl in his arms with her head on his shoulder, looking awfully snoozy because it’s getting onto afternoon naptime, happened. Then he nods solemnly, and says, “I’ll be for science. You like science. It’s your thing, right? I’ll write it down. That’s what those guys Emily likes to watch on TV say. The difference between science and messing around is writing it down.”

Tim and Abby both give him a genuine smile at knowing that line.

“I can’t believe you let him in your house,” Tim says.

“At least in my house I’ve got an eye on him.”

Tim shrugs. “I suppose there’s that.”

“She invited the whole crew of them over, and I got to see Seth. I’ve met him three times, actually. He’s” Fornell sounds grudging as he says this, “not as big of an asshole as Jared.”

“Wow, talk about an enthusiastic recommendation,” Abby says.
Fornell looks at Tim, and then at Kelly, and Tim nods. “That’s glowing praise,” he says, and Fornell nods again.

“Well, keep encouraging her about that, and about how it’s not the end of the world to make a play for your best friend’s guy.”

“Yeah, she actually talked to me about that,” Fornell says. “But… I don’t like Jared, and Seth does, so, what does that say about Seth?”

Abby shrugs at that. It’s a valid point.

By two hours into this thing, Abby’s coming to the conclusion that Jared is likely a jerk, and not a viper. Granted, that’s hard to tell without seeing what happens after they get out of here, but in her experience vipers don’t want you to spend time with your friends and family, but they also don’t want those friends and family to be wary of them, so when they show up at something like this, they at least make an effort to chat with the people around them.

And, assuming that Jared doesn’t have some sort of intense social anxiety issues, he’s just a jerk.

Three adults have attempted to engage him in conversation, resulting in monosyllabic answers. Sarcastic monosyllables.

She’s got Emily and Breena together, and quietly says to them, “Emily, he’s…”

“I know. He’s not usually this bad, but he really didn’t want to come to this.”

“How’d you get him to come?”

“I told him it was a really big deal to me and that my whole family would be here and that he needed to come, so he’s been whining about it, but he showed up.”

“What kind of whining?” Breena asks.

“Mostly that I better get hand warmers ready, because I better be at every ice hockey game he’s playing this next month.”

“That doesn’t sound like an even trade,” Breena says.

“It’s not that bad. Seth plays, too.”

Fornell finds the party… difficult.

And not because it’s bad or anything. Part of him, part that is looking at Jared Ridge like he’s a malignant tumor, is aware of the fact that one day, hopefully in the distant future, he’ll be doing the granddad thing, and it’s fun.

He actually likes playing goofy games with little kids, and he’ll happily snuggle babies if they end up in his hands.

He’s having a pretty good time with that.
The difficult part is that he keeps wanting to point out to Emily how Jimmy and Tim treat their wives. They’re just being themselves at a party, pleasant, attentive, on point, just nice guys who adore their wives. And he’s got no problem pointing it out when Tony’s doing it. (And Tony, who is on full-on show Emily what a good, charming, pregnant husband looks like mode, is being ultradoting to Ziva, whose hips are hurting, and has not had to get up once since they got here, because he’s happily off getting her treats and bringing people over to chat with her and rubbing her back and all the rest of it. His last Valentine’s before the baby game is on point.) He’s happily drawing her attention to Tony because he’s absolutely certain that when Ziva leaves the room he’s not fucking Tim.

Or… shit… uh… No. No! Not happening.

Tim and Jimmy, who may be off composing love songs to their wives (individual wives? Wives in common? Is this all four ways around or…) in their spare time, are still… Problematic. How does he show that off to his little girl as a good husband?

Kind, attentive, good with kids, sneaking away for quickies with his best friend… His male best friend… Tim’s talking to Abby and just rested his hands on Breena’s shoulders and is giving her a gentle rub. Or maybe the female one. Fornell isn’t exactly sure how it works, but he’s awfully sure that monogamy isn’t on the list.

Apparently he’s watching Tim and Jimmy and Abby and Breena play with the kids too hard, because Gibbs comes over and says, “You okay?”

Fornell shrugs a bit. “Got some wood to sand tonight?”

“I could. You need to talk.”

“Yeah.”

Since this is supposed to be a fact-finding mission, the adults of this group are just watching, but there’s only so much watching of the lump of black mood in the corner they can do before one of them breaks and starts doing to go with watching.

And, in this case, the one who breaks is Ed.

When Jared’s sitting there, earbuds in, texting fast, and then says, in a snotty, whiny, entitled tone, to Emily, who is twenty feet further away from them than he is, and who is actually interacting with the other people in the room, “Babe, grab me a cupcake,” Ed’s blood pressure shoots up.

When Emily brings him a vanilla one, and he rolls his eyes and says, “You know I don’t like vanilla, get me a chocolate one,” Ed snaps. The other adults can almost literally see the little twig in Ed’s head, that was keeping him from doing anything, shatter as he leaps forward, landing heavily on the sofa.

He sits down next to Jared, claps a hand onto his shoulder, squeezing hard, and grabs the cord on the earbuds, yanking them out of his ears, while glaring down at him.

Jared blinks at him, startled. “Dude!”

“Don’t dude me you little asshole.” Jared rolls his eyes, and Ed squeezes his shoulder, hard, again. The rest of the adults can see his fingers sinking into Jared’s flesh. That gets Jared’s attention, and he
stares. “You see this crowd here, Jared?”

He nods, looking like he’s humoring Ed, but everyone in this crew who’s run an interrogation can see the fear in the back of his eyes.

“Every single person in this group is a cop or a mortician, and every one of them has decided that you aren’t good enough to lick Emily Fornell’s shoes. Now, you are going to get your ass up, and walk out of this house, you will send a little note off, from the curb, to have someone come pick you up, and you will never be seen within ten feet of Emily Fornell again, or we will kill you, and I will make sure that no one ever finds your body.”

Jared starts to laugh, and then Ed squeezes his shoulder, again, hard, and makes sure that he’s staring Jared down.

“I don’t think you understand this situation, Jared. I’m not bullshitting you. I own and use, every single day, a crematorium.” He yanks Jared’s phone out of his hand, quickly switches onto the web, and puts in the address of his business. When the picture of Slater and Palmer’s pops up, he shoves it back into Jared’s hands. “That’s mine. I own it!” Jared starts to look a bit concerned. “And if I find out you’re hanging with Emily again, I will personally make sure that I will be the last person to see you as anything other than a few wisps of ash and char.” Ed nods over to the rest of the crew. “That one, with the tattoos and the baby, she’s a forensic scientist, she’ll make sure there’s no evidence. Emily’s dad, he’s FBI, the guys who handle kidnappings and missing kids, and they’ll make sure you stay on the missing person list. The tall one in the skirt, he’s the computer guy, and a writer, he’ll make sure there’s a record of you wanting to leave home. They’ll find your angst-filled personal diary hidden in your phone, spilling your guts about how you hate home and school and can’t stand it and want to leave. That one over there, with the pregnant wife, he’s a cop, and he’ll make sure that credit card mommy and daddy got for you for emergencies will have bought a few bus tickets. Get near Emily again, and we will take you out and make sure that everyone else thinks you ran away. Now get the hell up and out of this house!”

By the time Ed is done, all the rest of the guys in the house are just staring at him, as Jared sits there, eyes wide, skin white, shaking slightly.

“I… I… You can’t! I’m telling my parents!”

Ed smiles low and dirty. “Go ahead and do it, Jared. You don’t know the phone number here. You can’t get them here unless you remember how to get here, and if you do, and they drive up with you, that cute guy with the round glasses and the pink heart bedecked valentine’s day sweater, who looks just about as dangerous as a cream puff will open the door, listen to your parents, nod and say…”

And Jimmy jumps on that, and says, in his most harmless, concerned, creampuff voice, “Oh, yeah. Jared was here for Molly’s birthday. But, it looked like he and Emily were having a bit of a tiff. He was just sitting around texting with his buddies, wouldn’t talk to anyone, and then he got up and left.”

“And when Mommy and Daddy hear that, they are going to believe him because they know who you are and how you behave when you’re in a snit. Now get out of this house and make sure none of us ever sees or hears about you being near Emily again!”

Emily has her hand clamped over her mouth, and her eyes are the size of saucers.

Jared, once Ed lets go of him, scurries out of the house as fast as he can.

Then Ed gets back up, wipes his hands together like he’s trying to remove something nasty from
them, sidles over to Jimmy, who’s standing next to Collin and says quietly to both of them, “And that’s what I did to the ones I didn’t approve of.” Then he looks over to Fornell and says louder, “Wanna get a drink, Tobias?”

And Fornell just nods slowly.

A minute later Tim “wanders” into the kitchen, and hears Ed say, “Three daughters. Got one of ‘em married to a decent man. One engaged to one. One of ‘em still looking for one.”

Fornell says very quietly, “From what Gibbs says, you don’t like Jimmy.”

“I don’t. But that doesn’t mean he isn’t a decent man. And it doesn’t mean he treats her badly. He’d be gone if he treated her badly.”

Fornell nods at that. “What’d you do when your girls were getting ready to go to college?”

Ed sighs, and nods back, taking a sip of his iced tea. “Is that why she’s got that dweeb?”

Fornell shrugs. “Might be. Might want more attention from Draga or me. Might just like him. Might like his best friend and doesn’t know how to wrangle that. Probably a bit of all of it.”

Ed shakes his head. “High school. Senior year of high school with my girls meant a period where they wanted to be really independent, and be certain that they were still Daddy’s little girl. Go be her man, keep idiots like that moron away, make her feel safe and secure, and…” Ed sighs long and loud, “eventually she’ll bring one home you can’t run off, because he loves her too much to go, and you won’t run him off, because she loves him too much to banish him, and you end up with a dweeb at all of your family shindigs, but you get some beautiful grandbabies out of it, and a happy girl.”

“Why don’t you like him?” Fornell nods toward Jimmy, and wonders if Ed’s got any hints about Jimmy and Tim, because that would certainly be a reason for him to be anti-Jimmy.

“He just annoys me, possibly on principal alone. Amy’s boy,” he nods in the direction of Collin, who’s chatting with Jimmy, “bugs me, too.”

“Oh.”

“You know how it is. No man on earth is smart enough, rich enough, or good enough for your baby girl.”

Fornell nods along. Though, he sees the way Gibbs is with Tim, Tony, and Jimmy, and he hopes that one day Emily will bring a man home that he will want for a son-in-law.

Scratch that. He hopes, one day, Emily will go find his son, and bring him home.

Emily finds Abby and Breena, grabbing them and pulling them into the foyer. “Was that real?”

“Ed’s not killing anyone,” Abby says. “Not for this. Not for just seeing you. But Jared doesn’t know that. And he doesn’t need to.”

Breena quietly says, “That was just a threat. If there’s a guy who’s a real problem, someone who’s bitten you, or is so close to it that you raise the red flag, he won’t get a threat, he’ll just vanish.”

“Ed just gave you, and Jared, an out. You can claim you don’t want to see him because you’re
scared. He can say your family is crazy, and he doesn’t want anything to do with you. Both of you are out of this relationship without either of you having to take responsibility for it. And in a month or so, you can go give Seth a call and see what he’s up to,” Abby says.

“If Jared comes around again once, that’s just being eighteen and having more balls than brains. You say you’re scared or you don’t want to see him, or whatever, and you’re done. He comes around again, that’s the sign of a viper. And that’s when our guys all get together, go to Jared’s house, and have a long talk with him and his parents. Nothing bad, other than his parents knowing he’s a creep, happens to Jared then,” Breena continues.

“He comes around again. And you don’t want him coming around,” Abby looks over the party, seeing the guys talking, fooling around, playing with kids, “and we’ll take care of him.”

“What about taking care of your own messes?” Emily asks.

“A big part of being an adult is knowing which messes you need help for and which ones you can take on your own. A bigger part of being an adult is owning up to the fact that you can’t take care of everything on your own, and asking for help when you need it. A guy keeps coming around, after he’s been warned off twice, that’s time to get more help than just you on your own.”

“That’s part of why we have families, so we don’t have to do stuff like this on our own. So, you okay? I know Dad going off like that wasn’t something you were expecting. I certainly wasn’t.”

“I’m…” Emily opens and closes her mouth. “I don’t know. Uh…” She starts to smile a bit. “I didn’t just dump Jared.”

“Nope,” Breena says.

“And if he doesn’t want to see me again, that’s on him.”

“Yes,” Abby says.

“So… if his best friend were to be interested, he could just ask me out, because his buddy decided I wasn’t worth the risk.” That smile on Emily’s face spreads.

“Exactly,” Breena says. “Maybe the next time we do one of these parties, you’ll bring Seth around?”

“Maybe… It’s possible no guy will set foot near any of my family from now on.”

Abby shrugs. “College in August. Clean slate. Once you get there, high school stops mattering.”

---

Gibbs expects that it’s the combined history of him and Fornell and Diane that has Fornell heading over to chat and sand some wood.

He’s not expecting Fornell to show up with a bottle of pretty good scotch. (He’s not a bourbon guy, Gibbs isn’t a Campari and soda guy, so scotch is their compromise drink.) Everything with them and Diane is so over and done, it doesn’t need booze anymore.

Gibbs raises an eyebrow at the bottle.

Fornell pours them both a shot. “One of these years I’m buying you a set of glasses for down here. It’s just wrong to drink this out of the same jars you keep screws in.”
Gibbs shrugs. “Little metal never hurt anything.”

“You completely burned out your taste buds on that coffee you like. You know that, right?”

Gibbs shrugs at that, too, and sips the scotch. It is good, and he thinks Tim would enjoy it. “Save it up and share it with Tim, he’ll appreciate it.”

“I’m liking that kid more and more as time goes by.”

“Good.”

“And I’m worried.”

“FBI?”

Fornell shoots Gibbs a be less dense look. He wouldn’t be here with a drink if it were job related. And he’s talk to Tim directly in that case. “For him, and his family, and you. Remember me down here talking divorce lawyers. You said they were all fine. You suddenly change the definition of fine? Or you keeping his secrets close and lying to me? I know the third option, that you just don’t know what’s going on, is wrong.”

Fornell’s not wrong about any of it. Gibbs takes that drink. “What do you think is going on?”

“No telling tales, huh?”

“You’ve known me how long?”

“Yeah. Here’s what I know. McGee’s private life blows up when he stands up to his Dad and tells the whole world he likes to get fucked by men, apparently in pretty much those exact words. I get wind of it, and you tell me it was an op, and everything is cool. That doesn’t set my lie detector off, so, no matter what else is going on, that was an op, and for the time being things are cool. Fast forward to last weekend. You send me over to talk to Abby, and when I’m there, Palmer and his wife are over, too, and it takes me a minute to see it, but once I do, I can’t not see it. If Tim’s into sex with men, Jimmy’s the guy giving it to him. I decide to look into Tim’s FBI background check, see if they’ve caught it, and there’s literally nothing about his private life in his file, and you know what it means when part of a background check is intentionally left blank, so something is going on. There’s no tension with the girls, so the girls are okay with it, or don’t know. In the history of sex, there was never a man so good a liar that he could pull off what Tim and Jimmy are doing without the girls getting at least a hint that something is up, and maybe Breena could pull it off, but Abby’s not a good enough actress to keep cool if her guy’s banging another guy on the down low.”

Gibbs sips his drink wondering what to say to that. “What else did you see at the party, at all the family gatherings?”

“Two guys who’ve always set my not-quite-male-enough radar on edge who look like they were all but written by a romance novelist they dote so hard on their wives.”

Gibbs inclines his head.

“Are they overcompensating?”

Gibbs doesn’t respond. It’s not his secret to tell.

“You said they’re okay.”
“They are.”

Fornell’s eyes search his. “Shit, you believe that.”

“Because it’s true. No divorce on the horizon. Everyone who needs to know does, and it’s okay. Everything you see about them is real.”

Fornell drinks his scotch. “It can’t be. If it’s all real, it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Doesn’t it?” Gibbs sips his drink again. “You ever wonder what would have happened if we could have shared Diane?”


Gibbs gives him the look that says he knows what kinds of sexual shenanigans Fornell got up to when he was a young man drunk off his ass with some money to burn and a bunch of buddies in Saigon.

“You don’t do that kind of shit with your wife! That’s like the top of the pyramid of shit you don’t do with your wife. She’s your wife, not a hooker you met when you were drunk, stoned, and stupid.”

Gibbs shrugs. “Probably would have been a mess.”

“Probably? Probably! There is no possible universe where the three of us even… Just… No! NO!”

Gibbs nods. “Yeah. I was still me, and she was still her, and tossing you in the mix wasn’t going to make anything different about either of us.”

“If you think the problem with me, you, and Diane is that neither of you were in a good place for a relationship, then I’ve got my answer, your definition of okay did a one eighty when I wasn’t looking.” Fornell shudders. The idea of the three of them squicks him on a gut level. “So, I take it by that comment, you mean it’s all four of them. Or Abby and Jimmy have joint custody of Tim, or…”

He shakes his head. “How can this possibly be ‘okay?’”

Gibbs inclines his head again. “Because it is. Because you see them with the girls, and you see them with each other, and with the kids, and it’s okay. You feel it when you see them. Your gut isn’t in a knot. You aren’t waiting for the fight to break out.”

“I thought you and Diane were okay, too.”

Gibbs laughs. “God help both of us if we aren’t wiser than that by now.”

“How can you be okay with… whatever this is. You won’t even put a name on it for me. How okay can it be if you can’t name it? To me?”

Gibbs dithers for a moment. It’s not that he can’t name it. It’s that it’s not his secret to tell. “What did you see when you went to Tim’s house. Details.”

“You’re trying to lead me to the right answer without saying anything.”

Gibbs nods. “Not my story. Not my secret.”

“Palmer answers the door and for a moment, I’m not sure who’s house I’m at. The girls are putting the older babies to bed. So, it’s just McGee and Palmer. McGee’s making me some coffee, explaining that the girls do this a lot. Tubby time, girls go down. The four of them switch out who’s on tubby time and who’s on tuck ins. Palmer’s got the baby. He’s really easy with Sean. Holding
him, patting him, singing a bit. He’s good with kids, I know that, but he’s really good with Sean and Sean’s good with him. He and McGee are talking about the video game they’re playing, just, goofing around. Palmer takes a sip of McGee’s coffee, from his cup, and McGee rests his hand on the back of Palmer’s neck, pets him a little, and… And I can see it, they’re a couple. We’re good friends. If things had been different, I’d have been that good with your kids and you’d have been that good with Emily, and… But if I’d taken a sip of your coffee, you’d whack me upside the back of my head, not pet me, certainly not on the neck. Then the girls come down. Abby sits in McGee’s lap, and he’s happy as a clam to have her in his lap. Same little pet. She gets a kiss, same easy touch with Palmer and Breena, and then he and Palmer head up to handle tuck ins.

“The girls are talking about Emily, we’re spitting ideas, and the guys come down and they’re sitting around, happy, attentive, easy. Palmer and Breena are easy in Tim and Abby’s house. Comfortable, the way I am here. They’re easy with each other, too, not sharing a seat, but no tension. Four seats around the table, and Tim and Abby have one, Jimmy’s got one, Breena’s got one, and I’ve got the other. McGee and Abby are making sure there’s space for me, or they just like touching.”

“Both.”

“Both.” That makes sense to Fornell, and fits his idea of Abby and Tim. “Palmer and Breena walk me out, like I said, easy in McGee’s house, and Palmer keeps a hand on Breena’s shoulder, stroking her neck some.”

“Which hand?”

Fornell makes himself see it. “Left.”

“Details.”

“Just tell me.” Gibbs continues his look. “He’s a righty. Wears an off-brand Rolex wanna-be watch.”

Gibbs nods, that’s right.

“He had on a stupidly cute sweater. Just like today. Where the hell does he get those things?”

“Breena’s mom makes them for him. He’s the only one who actually wears them, so he gets a lot of them.”


“But not because of anything about how he and Breena get on.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Do you?” Gibbs makes sure that Fornell has that good and strong in his head. “You think Ed would miss it if he was making Breena cry?”

“No. If he was making Breena cry, he’d be gone and Ed would be in jail.”

Gibbs nods. “Left hand, what else?”

Fornell closes his eyes, bringing up the image. “Rings. He wears two of them on his ring finger. One’s old. One’s newer… They’re wedding rings, aren’t they? One’s Breena. He’s had it for years. The other… Tim, Abby, both?”
Gibbs doesn’t smile with his lips, but his eyes let Fornell know he’s on the right track.

“Breena got a ring for Christmas. You helped Jimmy make it for her. Wendy was telling me about that. It’s wood.” Fornell thinks, hard, trying to see it. “It’s three bands of wood made into a circle. She wears it on her right ring finger. But, McGee doesn’t have an extra ring. Or Abby.”

“You ever see him without his wrist cuff?”

Fornell thinks back, going through a collection of images of McGee… “When he interviewed at the FBI. He usually wears it left, and he moved it to his right.”

“What’s on his wrist?”


“How’d Tim and Abby look in Jimmy and Breena’s place today?”

“Just as easy as Palmer and Breena were at their place. Like they live there. They were co-hosting the party.”

Gibbs nods. “Good with all the kids, right?”

“Yeah. If it weren’t for the hair, I wouldn’t be able to tell which kids go with which adults. Not by how they act with each other.”

“The floor plan at our place on the Chesapeake? You and Wendy came in, and you put your coats…”

“Door to the right. Long hallway. Bedroom, really big bed… Palmers and McGees are down there. The girls share a nursery.” That gets another memory out of Fornell. “Afternoon nap time. The babies were in the nursery, McGee had sacked out on the sofa, and Abby and Breena were catching some zs together in the second bedroom.”

“Sounds like you’re describing a marriage,” Jethro says quietly.

“Yeah, if I was talking about two people. Sounds like a recipe for disaster if I’m describing four.”

Gibbs continues to just look at Fornell. “You gonna do anything?”

“Like what, pull Ed aside and tell him Palmer’s banging McGee?”

Gibbs inclines his head.

“No. Not even mentioning what I’m seeing to Wendy. Just like the personal section in his FBI file, I’m keeping it blank.”

“Think they’d have offered him the job if they thought it was going to blow up?”

Fornell sighs. “No. They’re good about that. Hoover could dress in drag, as long as he was discrete about it. Same for everyone else ever since. As long as it won’t end up all over the papers, they won’t blink about whatever the hell it is you do in your spare time.”

“So. I’m good. FBI’s good. You see it yourself, Tim, Abby, Jimmy, and Breena are good. They’re giving your girl good advice and stepping up to protect her if need be. What’s the issue?”
Fornell sighs, put like that... “It’s weird.”

Gibbs laughs, hard, at that. When he’s done he takes another drink and nods. “Yeah. I’ll give you that.” One more drink. “Emily was down here asking about the three of us. Having a heart to heart about boys. I’m giving her... not bad advice, about love. You’re married. I’m engaged. We’re retired. Got a crew of grandbabies who call me Uncle Gibbs or Pop. Tim and Ziva call me Dad now. We got a house on the water, and I’m making another crib. All of it’s weird.”

“So you love it.”

“Yeah.”

“Even... the stuff with the four of them?”

“My kids are happy, in love, and devoted to raising their kids right. Really, what more could I possibly ask for? I saw the way you were looking at Ed when he was talking about Jimmy. You don’t want to be that guy. I don’t want to be him, either. I want them to be happy and they are. And them happy makes me happy, so, yeah, I’m good with all of it.”

Fornell sighs at that, too. He shakes his head a bit. “DiNozzo shit a brick when he found out, didn’t he?”

“Sideways.”

Fornell smirks and gives Gibbs an affectionate pat upside the back of the head. “At least one of you guys is still sane.”

Gibbs nods. “Jared darken your door again?”

“Not a peep. Not yet. He’s probably smart enough to stay away. I hope.”

“Okay, tell me about this Seth kid...”
The aftermath of a toddler party is overtired little kids, and wiped out adults. Easy dinner (Chinese delivery), getting the kids down as quickly as they can, and then crashing into bed after them is the order of the night.

Slow lazy sex for Tim, Jimmy, and Breena. Abby’s still not really feeling up for anything along those lines so she watches and cuddles, gives and takes kisses, and by the time they’re done, they’re all feeling more human again.

And tired, but not sleepy. Don’t want to get out of bed tired. It’s 8:30, even for a turn in early night, that’s early.

But for a laying around in bed, talking, naked night, that’s perfect.

Laying around talking nights, they tend to cuddle into their original couples.

Abby’s on her side, the only one of the three of them not naked. Nursing breasts are way too sore to be sans bra, but post-baby bleeding stopped last week, so she’s feeling okay without panties, She’s almost naked, curled onto her side, spooned into Tim, who’s behind her.

He’s also on his side, pillow under his head, one arm under her neck, the other draped over her hip. When he’s just listening and resting, his lips are against the back of her head. Right now, he’s feeling very content and lazy. Especially since it’s not his night to get Sean, though it’s a somewhat moot point because little guy still has one more of his normal evening feeds (10:00) before they move onto the full nighttime rotation, where Breena’s got him.

Breena’s next to Abby, for the moment, she’s on her side, facing Jimmy, arm and leg draped over him, head on his chest. He’s got one arm under her neck, wrapped around her, hand resting on her shoulder. His other hand is on her low back. They’re trading lazy kisses and resting with one another.

And after one slow kiss, she rolls over to face Abby, and says, “Okay, after this week and all the drama with Emily, I want to hear about the first time someone else got each of you off.”

“Oh, God…” Tim says, closing his eyes, bringing that memory back. “Been a long time since I’ve thought of that. Uh… Senior Prom…”

“That the one with the pink vest?” Abby asks.

Tim nods. “Yeah, that’s the one. Salmon, not pink.”

“Oh huh,” Jimmy says. “Like you can actually see the difference.”

“I can tell the difference! Salmon and peach, okay, I can’t tell the difference between those colors. Which I know for a fact, because the first vest I picked was peach, and it didn’t match, so she and my mom went with me the second time and picked salmon because it did match. But salmon and pink, I’m good on.”

“Okay, great, we’ve covered prom tux colors, tell us about your girl,” Breena says. (She and Abby have hit the point where they suspect the only colors Tim can see are bright, vibrant strong ones or jewel tones. They’re fairly sure that all pastels are the same color to him, because three years into Uncle/Fathering, he cannot be trusted to get the light blue onesie if there is a light green and light
gray and light tan one next to it. Likewise, he’s got some interesting interpretations of the colors of some of the outfits they wear.)

He smiles again. “Jessica Mulray. She was a year older than me, which was good because the second time, we were parked in her car in a park that closed at dusk, and it was after dusk, after midnight. Fortunately, she was over eighteen, legal to be driving after midnight, and the cop didn’t think to ask if I was.” Tim laughs at that memory, too, though at the time he’d been about to shit himself, he was so scared.

“So, wait, you’re seventeen… Jailbait?” Jimmy asks.

Tim nods. “Like I said, it was a good thing he didn’t think to check my age.”

“That was the second time?” Breena asks.

“Well, it would have been the second time. We were well on our way to a second time, except a cop showing up kind of put a damper on things. Real second time was a few days later.”

“So how about we hear about the first time?” Breena asks.

“All right, so, Senior Prom, I’m seventeen, she’s three days past eighteen, and we’d been dating for four months, some kissing, a little petting, but nothing too heavy, but it’s prom night, and I’ve got some high hopes.”

Abby giggles. “Oh, I bet you did.”

“Oh, yeah. Matterhorn high. Higher than my hard-on.” That gets a bit more giggling. “So, I get a very careful shower, shaved off all seven of my downy, little bunny fuzz whiskers, desperately attempted to make both chest hairs look virile and manly, spent an hour messing with my hair, probably had enough cologne on to stun an elephant, and put on a rented tux that fit when I rented it but was about an inch too short by the time I got it.”

Abby and Breena giggle at that, too.

“So, you’re saying you didn’t precisely look like you were about to step out of GQ,” Jimmy says.

“I looked like I was trying.”

“Yeah, that’s why no one’s seen my prom pictures,” Jimmy says.

“I’ve seen them.”

“Bite your tongue, woman.” He gently swats Breena’s tush. “Those pictures don’t exist.”

Breena turns and nips his shoulder. “Uh huh. We’ll get to your story.”

“I had a driver’s license, but those days I didn’t drive, so she picked me up. And we did the whole pictures thing, and off to a nice dinner out, and then prom. ‘In Your Eyes,’ the Peter Gabriel song, that was our prom theme. And… It was really nice. We really liked each other, had Bio II and Calculus together. It’s the ’90s, so the dancing isn’t difficult. Hold each other and sway for the slow ones, grind for the fast ones.”

“And you liked that, didn’t you?” Breena asks.

“Pretty girl grinding against me? Yeah!” He nods. “Of course I liked that. I liked it a lot. Still like it. Three months after you put me in the ground, when Zombie Tim gets back up again and starts
looking for brains, I’ll still like it.”

Abby laughs at that, taking his hand in hers and kisses his palm, while wiggling her bum against him. He gives her a little grind and kisses her ear.

“Did she like it?” Breena asks.

“She didn’t seem to mind, and it’s not like me enjoying it was in any way subtle. I was a walking hard-on for most of that night, including dinner, just on the anticipation of what was coming later. She knew I was liking it, and she gave it a squeeze a few times, encouraging me, so I think she was pleased by it.”

They laugh at that image, too.

“I almost spit my soda across the room the first time she did it.” Tim’s got a huge grin on his face remembering this. “I pulled out the chair for her, and sat next to her, and we were talking and eating, and just having a good time, and her hand had been on my leg, a bit above my knee, which was the sort of thing that usually happened if she was sitting near me. And… I think we were talking about music, maybe… or dancing or… I don’t remember. I think her hand sliding up my leg blanked out the part of my brain that remembered words, but, she was smiling at me, and it was a little bit of a shy look, like she wasn’t quite sure if it was okay, little bit naughty, like she knew I wanted it, little smile, and she slid her hand up my leg, and then past my thigh, which was as high up as it had ever gone before, and she didn’t stop, and I just about choked on my drink.”

“Obviously, you survived,” Jimmy says.

“And managed to not do a literal spit take. To the dance we go, and we dance fast and slow and close and far apart and she sits in my lap when we’re sitting down, and her hands go wandering and mine aren’t exactly staying in nun-approved territory, either.

“Anyway, we cut out early. We were supposed to be going to an after party one of her buddies is having, but said buddy knows the real plan, so she’s covering for us. She’s got a job housesitting. Luckiest damn break of my teen life, and part of why I had high hopes. We had to be home by 2:00, so we don’t have a ton of time, but an hour and a half, alone, in a house… Oh, yeah, I had plans.”

“You lost your virginity at seventeen? I didn’t hear that story,” Jimmy says. He’s pretty sure he’s heard Tim’s losing it story, and his memory is that it involves a not fabulous experience in college.

“Because it didn’t happen. Well… Okay, sort of. I didn’t think of it as losing my virginity, especially not then, but… now… yeah… Probably qualifies more than the first time I had penetrative sex with a girl.”

“From now own, the first time another person gets you off, that counts as losing it?” Breena asks.

“Um… I’m good with that,” Tim says.

“I think we get to define it however each of us likes,” Abby says. “Keep going, Tim. I haven’t heard this story before, and I want to know more.”

“Uh… We do get to the house, and she’s got candles and music and all the rest of it. There’s even wine in the fridge, but she’s got to drive, and I’m not going to drink if she’s not, so it just stays there.

“Background: she had rules, and before that night they matched Breena’s pretty closely, clothing on, hands on top, kissing, petting, grinding, that was it. We were at a Catholic high school, so rules like that weren’t uncommon. And, I’m not going to push those rules. Never did, and wasn’t planning on
doing it. But especially with how she was feeling me up under the table during dinner, and how we’ve been dancing all night, and we’re going to this house on our own, and it’s prom night, I was really hopeful that she was thinking maybe it was time to ease up on those rules.

“She unlocks the door to the house, and we head in, close up behind us, and I’m so excited, just, here, with her, sex, in someone else’s house, oh, God, so naughty. What if they come home early? What if the neighbors saw? And the condom’s about to burn through my wallet it’s so eager to get out of there and into action. She’s messing with candles and I’m just standing there, wondering what I should be doing, then she turns to me, lit soft and peachy, and says, ‘We’re not having sex tonight.’ I think I pouted at her. She was tiny. Like, five two or something like that, and by then I was at least five ten, so I was a head taller than she was, and she stepped up right in front of me, almost touching, smiled up at me, pulled me closer, kissed me, and said, ‘But that doesn’t mean we aren’t going to have fun. There’s a lot of not sex for us to play with.’”

“Were you still pouting?” Breena asks.

“Maybe. If I was, I stopped it really fast, because she put my hand on the back of her dress, right at the zipper and said, ‘Well?’ It took me a second, but I figured out what she was asking for, and then just about ripped her dress when I couldn’t figure out the hook and eye closure at the top of the zipper.” Tim closes his eyes, thinking about it, about the rush of undressing a girl for the first time, the crazy, urgent, so turned on, fumbling, gotta do it NOW, OH HOLY MOTHER OF GOD, BOOBS! Feel of it. “Finally got her out of it, and…” he shakes his head a bit, and Jimmy grins, he knows what Tim’s remembering.

“Christmas, your birthday, Halloween, and Easter all together?” Jimmy asks.

“God, yeah. Times six.” He kisses Abby, and pets Breena with the foot closest to her. “Love you two beyond all reason, but first girl you see naked, for real, that’s the most beautiful woman on earth.”

Jimmy nods.

“I had to keep my shorts on, but she took everything off. Before that, we’d made out in her car, or at the movies, tight, cramped spaces, but here we had a bed, a real bed, and plenty of space. And she’s naked and I get to look. We lay down, and she was on top of me, all spread out, rubbing all over me, kissing. Yeah.” He knows he’s got a dopey grin on his face, but right now he feels too good to be bugged by it. “We put that hour and a half to good use.”

“You did not last an hour and a half!” Jimmy says.

“Nope. Not even close. Didn’t have to. You remember seventeen, perpetual hard-on!” Right now, at thirty-nine, less than half an hour after an orgasm, both of them are limp and sated. Seventeen didn’t quite work that way. He’s honestly not sure if his dick actually went down that night, or just went from hard to really hard to somewhat less hard. “Second and third time were pretty slow. Didn’t even try to wear my jockeys home. Just threw them in the trash can; they were so soaked. I hope the guy who owned the place didn’t open the can up and wonder how the hell he ended up with a crusty pair of whity-tighties in there. I swaggered home like I was eight feet tall and had just won a land war in Asia.”

“You get her off?” Abby asks.

Tim winces a little at that. “Probably not. She might have gotten herself off on me, all the right bits were rubbing against each other, and she made a lot of happy noises, but my hands and mouth didn’t get anywhere and stay there long enough to have done her that much good. Unless she did it herself
or it happened by accident, I didn’t get a girl off until grad school.”

Jimmy nudges him a bit, “That’s why you study.”

“Yeah, well, I was studying biomedical engineering and computers.”

“Wasted time,” Jimmy says with a smile. He kisses Breena and strokes Abby, “They’re what’s worth studying.”

“Okay, glorious guru of sex, tell us about your first.”

Jimmy knows that Breena asked the question how she did because Abby’s mentioned Tim’s first time having sex wasn’t all that hot. He also knows that Breena knows his first time getting off with someone else wasn’t that hot, either. He doesn’t think she’ll mind at all if he answers with his first *good* orgasm with someone else. And if they get to define it however they like, he’s liking Sasha Kannis.

(Not that his actual first time was bad or traumatic or anything, just… fast and sort of embarrassing, and he’d rather think about a time he enjoyed.)

“Sasha Kannis. My high school sweetie, and yes, we did lose our virginities together. But that’s later. When we started dating, her mom was in school, so she was home every day when we got home from school, but… when we wrapped up sophomore year, she also finished up her degree. Come junior year, she’s got a job, and Sasha’s house is empty from after school until 5:30 at night. Three hours a day.”

“And you used every possible minute of it,” Abby says with a dirty grin.

“As many of them as we could. I had choir, drama club, and soccer. She had field hockey, and was part of the drama club, too, so it wasn’t just non-stop making out. But we did both have nothing after school on Thursdays, and, better yet, both of our sets of parents’ were under the impression that we had after school activities on Thursdays.

“So, we’d get to her house after school, and it’s the first Thursday of the new school year. We’ve both been waiting for it all summer. ALONE time!

“We didn’t have ‘rules,’ not the way Breena did or Tim was talking about, but… She didn’t want to have sex until she got married, sometimes, and I was still fairly Christian back then, too, and the whole God doesn’t want you fucking message scared me sometimes. And neither of us wanted to be parents in high school. One of the girls in my homeroom was pregnant, and she had science with another one who got knocked up, so we were both aware of the fact that it really could happen. So, that tends to cut down on the ‘let’s do it now’ eagerness. But we both liked making out and… We’d kind of flip flop, she’d be in a ‘let’s do it’ place, and I’d get scared, and then I’d get over it, and she’d back off, so we had a pretty comfortable, ‘we’re not going all the way’ policy. One hard line, and pretty much anything that didn’t cross that line was okay.

“But, even sixteen-year-old-me wasn’t quite so horny as to get off on a bit of grinding at a dance.” Fifteen-year-old Jimmy had been, which is where the actual first time story comes in. Which wasn’t with Sasha, or for that matter a girl he liked all that much, but she had been soft, warm, pretty, pressed up tight against him, and rubbing. It kind of caught him by surprise, and he didn’t think the girl noticed because she kept right on grinding to the end of the song (which was a bit ouchy), but wet, sticky pants for the rest of the night wasn’t fun. “And a bit of grinding at a dance, making out in deserted corners at parties or in movie theatres was most of the on our own time we got. Neither of us had a car, for example. And when you go on dates by bus, you miss out on a lot of good making
out opportunities. So most of the time, we didn’t get a chance to even put that limit to the test.

“And then we’ve suddenly got Thursday afternoons.

“She got home first, and I’m trying to be really sneaky, so the neighbors don’t notice me creeping into her apartment and tell her parents.”

“Did you succeed?” Tim asks.

Jimmy winces. “Not as well as I had hoped. But no one said anything until… March. Which resulted in a long and excruciating conversation for her with her parents about safe sex and all the rest of it, and her Dad glaring at me for the next six months. Apparently, neither of them believed the ‘really, we’re not having sex’ line, which actually had a lot to do with us actually crossing that line come junior prom time.” Jimmy shakes his head and sighs. “It’s amazing what, ‘Really, you don’t need to keep lying to me,’ does when said over and over when you’re telling the truth.” He shakes his head at the stupidity. “Anyway, it’s Thursday, I’ve gotten into the apartment, and we’ve got all of this alone time.”

He grins at that.

“She told me to just go in. Don’t knock, because the neighbors would hear. And I’ve been to her apartment before, so I know where her bedroom is. And I go in, and I don’t know exactly what’s coming next, but I’m hard because I know something’s coming up, and I walk in and she’s already on the bed, naked, and I just about passed out so little blood made the return trip to my brain.

“I’d seen bits and pieces of her. Felt them, too. But, this was the first time I got to see all of her and my brain fried. She laughed, happy, not making fun of me, and I just stood there and stared.

“I think she said, ‘You just gonna watch?’ and I think I said, ‘Uh…’ and then snapped out of it and jumped onto the bed with her while trying to tear my clothing off.

“I don’t remember the details. Not… not anymore. I do remember the feeling. She was so soft, and smooth, and so naked. She had little breasts, just barely a handful, and I remember that soft, jiggly weight in my hand,” Tim’s nodding along at that, remembering that sensation. “Her hair smelled like Vidal Sassoon shampoo. They don’t make it anymore, but I can still smell it if I think about it, and for years later, I couldn’t smell it without getting turned on.

“Wanted to touch and taste and see and all of her at once.” He tries to make himself see it. Tries to pull images out of the sensations. “Kneeling. We were kneeling together, and she had my dick between her legs, and… so soft, so warm, so snug. I can remember my heart pounding, feeling it in my ears, and eyes, and dick, and her butt under my hands, and she was kissing me, all soft and naked, and we were rubbing together.” Jimmy’s got a soft, dreamy look on his face, remembering all of this. “Can’t imagine it took long, but it felt like forever, and I just came and came and came and…” He’s still smiling. “It was good.”

“Same question the girls asked me, you do her any good?” Tim asks.

“Not right that second, but like I said, it can’t have taken that long, because there was time for me to stretch her out and kiss her all over. And I didn’t get her off that time, but I did get my mouth on almost every inch of her body, and she appreciated the effort.”

“Did you ever get her off?” Abby asks.

“Yeah! Got good at it, eventually. We dated for almost three years. I can tell that story, too, if you like.”
“I want to hear that one,” Abby says.

Breena nods. She didn’t think to ask that question when she was hearing this story the first time.

“We didn’t just do it in her bed. We did it pretty much everywhere in that apartment. Her parents’ room was the only place we didn’t try it. Her bathroom had a tub, so we decided to get a bath together. She was between my legs, back to my chest, and had one leg up on the edge of the tub. Her toenails were sparkly blue. I remember that clearly. Her hair was wet, and I can remember the feel of that against my cheek.” Jimmy closes his eyes, remembering. “I was petting her breasts, and her legs, and pussy, stroking her all over, and she was rocking into my hand, pressing into me. I knew girls could get off. So, I had an idea of what I was aiming for, just kind of vague on how to get there, and kind of vague was probably the kind of job I was doing, too. Felt good, but not enough focus.

“She took my hand, and helped me. How fast, and where, and how hard, and kept me on target. And, with some help, I was able to do her some good. And once I knew what I was trying to do… Well, I wanted to do it, a lot. So, I did. That’s the day I strutted home eight feet tall, having conquered Asia.”

“Uh huh,” Tim says, dryly. “Show off.” Tim’s noticed something though. Between watching the earlier sex, and this conversations, Abby’s body is actually starting to act a bit turned on. She’s breathing a little faster, and that looks suspiciously like a little flush on her cheeks and chest.

He stays away from her breasts, and just rests his palm on her mound, while kissing her neck. “You want to tell us a story and see if I can do you some good?”

Abby sighs at that. She has been enjoying the stories. Tim’s behind her, so she slips her leg over his hip. “Slow and gentle?”

“Probably just fingers. But if I can get it up, I’ll give you all the slow and gentle you want. Breena, can you reach the condoms and lube?” Breena stretches, fumbles around in the bedside table for a moment, and grabs them, tossing them back to him. “Thanks, baby.” He kisses Abby. “Always be prepared.”

She grins at that. “Got your Wilderness Scout on?”

He smiles. “That’s the first time I wanted to have. And one day, we’re going back to that cabin by the lake, and we’ll play that one out.”

“Ooo!” Abby likes that idea.

He kisses her again. “Tell us a story?”

Abby sighs and settles in against Tim, as his palm starts a gentle, rhythmic squeeze. Just light pressure, waking her body up, reminding it that it likes stuff like this.

“First time I got off with someone else… I told Breena a bit about this when we were figuring out which sex store to go to.”

Breena smiles, snuggling into Jimmy. “It’s a good story.”

“His name was Patrice Leon.” She uses the French pronunciation and can see the look Tim and Jimmy are sharing. “He was from Baton Rouge. Having a French name wasn’t a big deal there. We were at LSU together, met during orientation, had been flirting like crazy, dated for a few weeks, and decided to have sex with each other. First time, for both of us.
“And, he was having a great time, and I was having an… okay time. A frustrating time. It’s second semester, 1992, barely, and… And we live in a place where it’s all about sex. Dick up, dick in, and boom, fireworks. But that’s not happening. Neither of us knew what we were aiming for. He’s killing himself trying to not get off, and I’m getting sore because I don’t need an hour of penetration, it’s not going to get me off.

“Petting had been good. Kissing, I liked that. Get condom on and… Wet and eager and fizzle.

“My roommate was off at the library, so we had a few hours of alone time in my dorm room, and we’re doing it, and he gets off, and I don’t, and he’s disappointed because he wants to get me off. And I’m frustrated because I went from ‘I’m so close’ to the dreaded ‘orgasm death march’ where he’s fucking away, going to get me off or die trying, and I’m getting less turned on by the second because ‘die trying’ is looking more and more like the right answer.

“He goes as long as he possibly can, and I’m doing everything I can to get him off faster, because it’s starting to hurt, and we’re both just not happy at all with this. So he gets off, rolls off of me, tosses out the condom, and then says, ‘Okay, what do you do to yourself? Just show me, and I’ll do it.’”

“Sounds like a winner,” Jimmy says, sarcastically.

“You gonna say you’ve never been on the giving side of an orgasm death march?” Abby asks with an eyebrow high.

He opens and closes his mouth, rethinking a few experiences over the years.

“Uh huh. Onto the good part of the story. I had to tell him I didn’t do myself, which he didn’t believe at all.”

“I’m seconding that,” Tim says. “Not saying you’re lying, just can’t wrap my head around it.”

Jimmy and Breena are nodding.

“Not everyone grew up in the liberal north. Some of us grew up Catholic in the part of the world that took the whole masturbation-is-a-sin thing seriously. And, even when some of us, by which I mean me, were feeling naughty, doing it didn’t do much, because I had my fingers and a candle and a basic understanding of how intercourse worked. And, sure, okay, but… fizzle. Hell, the anatomical drawings in my sex ed class didn’t even have a clitoris on it.”

“Oh, that’s just wrong!” Jimmy says.

“Didn’t need it on the sketch to explain how girls got pregnant, so it wasn’t there. Catholic school education. We got the cross section shot of the uterus and ovaries, and that was it. No external view. They all but told us vigorous hand holding could make us pregnant and then we’d get a horrible disease and die. And yes, we’d all seen our dads’ collections of smutty magazines, but none of them had anything besides naked ladies in them. And, yeah, I liked those just fine, but I knew what a naked lady looked like. That wasn’t the information I needed.

“So, we’re both thinking slot a, tab b, insert, rub, and all should be good.

“And it wasn’t. But, for as conservative rural Louisiana is, New Orleans isn’t. And I knew, from one of my Mardi Gras trips with Paulette, that there were stores in New Orleans that had information in them. So, we pool our Christmas present money, sell back a textbook or two, got some bus tickets, and down we went.

“And that store… Kids in the candy store. That was fun. And, again, it’s 1992, so the internet isn’t a
thing, let alone the sort of thing you can watch porn on, so sex shops had booths, where you could rent videos by the minute.”

“That sounds so seedy,” Breena says.

“Like you wouldn’t believe. And the smell… Oh God. And I’m like the only woman in the store, and the guys are staring at me. It’s flattering and a little scary. And we’ve been having sex for months, which I liked, but I’m not getting off. And everything around us is sexy. And, remember, bisexual, and this place is filled with pictures of gorgeous naked women, or girls in tiny, tight little bits of lingerie. I’m dripping down my thighs, tingling all over, what’d Jimmy call it, walking hard-on?”

“That was me,” Tim says.

“But I’ve been there, too,” Jimmy adds. “You feel like a good, stiff breeze in the right place’ll do it for you.”

Abby nods, and Tim ups his stroking game. He adds a bit of lube to his fingers, and starts gently slipping them between her lips. Intentionally not getting her clit. He’s rubbing all around it, though.

“We were in there for an hour, looking at the books, and clothes, and videos, and toys, and… Just couldn’t take it anymore. It’s a buck for five minutes, and we want to save as much money as we can for buying stuff, but we need some alone time. So, run back to the booths, find an open one. It’s a sex shop, so no one cares if you go in on your own or with someone else. But we don’t know that, we’re getting off on naughty and being so adult and so much sex all over the place.

“He pops two dollars into the machine, which opens up the door. Vinyl booth, smells like Lysol. There’s a spray bottle of disinfectant and paper towels and a cheery, ‘Please clean up after yourself’ sign.

“We didn’t even grab a video at first. Just got in there, pulling open his pants, and I’m wearing a little black skirt…”

Tim can see it in his mind. Young goth Abby, in a seedy sex shop, little black skirt, and knee high socks and boots, smelling like sex, and wet to her thighs, and his dick gives a little appreciative twitch at that idea.

“Yeah, I know you like that.”

He kisses her ear. “Did you like it?”

“Oh, yeah. That set a lot of future kinks. We’re kissing and petting and I’ve got him in hand, and… I mean we’re there, so we might as well watch something, right? He grabbed a video pretty much at random. And, I’ve never seen any video porn before. It’s a VCR tape, so the guy who had it last just stopped it where he finished, and it’s two girls going down on each other, sixty-nining.”

Tim focuses in a bit closer, rubbing his middle finger just next to Abby’s clit and she squirms a bit, whimpering.

He nibbles her ear. “Oh yeah, want me to get closer?”

“Please!”

“Keep talking, baby, tell me how seeing those pretty girls made you feel.”
“Hot and shivery all over. One was a pretty blonde, with the prettiest little pussy I’d ever seen at that point, and the other was a brunette, and she was holding the blonde wide open, licking her clit over and over and my own clit was throbbing at it, wanted to get licked so bad. Patrice is watching, too, and he’s almost moaning at it, because he hasn’t seen that before either. Really hadn’t occurred to either of us to try that and… It’s going to happen as soon as we can find a room. But there isn’t room in here.”

“He obviously didn’t know what he was doing,” Jimmy says.

“If there’s room to fuck, there’s room to lick,” Tim adds.

Both of them nod to each other.

“They were doing it on the bed, legs wide, and lots of room and light on the video. We’re in a booth that’s made for one person.”

Tim and Jimmy share a I don’t buy it look.

“Get over yourselves,” Breena adds. “What happens next?”

Tim starts to just lightly stroke over Abby’s clit. Dragging his finger, feather light over it. She wriggles, groaning against him, and his body perks up a bit more. Looks like he might be able to get his dick into this game. Hasn’t been that long since he got off last, but it’s been a damn long time since Abby’s been interested in sex, and if she is, he wants to be there to give it to her.

“Condom, that happens next. Get it rolled on. First time we’re trying it in anything other than missionary or cowgirl. He’s sitting on the little bench, and I straddle him, facing the video, still watching, eyes wide, and the girls, they’re so pretty and so naked and wet pussies and wet tongues and the sounds… Yeah, it’s fake, but it’s still hitting me hard.”

The story’s hitting Tim hard, and his body is rising to the occasion.

“And he’s watching, and I am, and breathing hard, nipples aching, every breath rubbing them against my t-shirt, and he’s got one hand on my breast, and the other on my clit, or trying to find it at least. We can see the girls are using their fingers to thrust, but aren’t fucking with their tongues, they’re licking, over and over, so he tries doing that with his fingers,” Tim speeds up a bit, focusing on her clit with his fingers, and tries to give Breena a, give me a hand with the condom, I don’t want to let go sort of look, which by some miracle of sexual telepathy she gets, and does give him a hand with the condom and the lube, and as he’s stroking Abby nice and gentle, she kisses her, wet and deep, as Tim very slowly, very gentle and shallow just edges into her, groaning along with Abby, deep in his throat at that feel of that.

“Love you,” whispers out of her as he eases in. His lips are on her neck/shoulder, and he agrees.

“Home again, baby,” he kisses to her skin.

She adds the roll of her hips, and Breena returns to Jimmy, who sets his own fingers to work. This is hot, but his dick is still out of the game and he’s not expecting a miraculous rise. But his fingers don’t go limp after an especially good time, so Breena’s in good hands.

“Only,” Abby pants a bit, “ten minutes of video time. And I’m in his lap, bouncing up and down, hard, so wet and so turned on and... That turned on everything feels better. Every stroke is wet and full and hot and dragging, dripping, wet, cum all over the place, moaning, fucking, sex.” Her voice caresses each word, stroking over them, like Tim’s finger is stroking over her, and her body is stroking over his.
Those words are killing Tim, he’s moaning into her neck, rubbing faster, focused, letting her set the speed of her hips. (And Jimmy’s realizing that miracles do indeed occasionally arise.)

“And he’s not quite got it with his fingers, and I don’t quite have it, either. No mirror in there. Aching, so close, so wet, and so, so needy. Whimpering, begging for it, needy.”

Tim bites gently on her throat, and rubs firmer, faster, feels her hips speed up to keep pace with him.

“And the girls on the video are moaning and panting and fucking, tongues so pink, pussies so wet, fingers rubbing deep and sure and tongues pointy and flicking fast and he finally gets it, drags his finger over my clit and I groan so loud someone in the store cheered for us.”

Tim smiles at that, and he can hear Jimmy and Breena giggle at it.

“He’s not stupid so as soon as that happens that finger isn’t moving. It’s staying right there. Just pressing and I’m rocking on him, bouncing up and down, and the girls are fucking in front of us, and he’s groaning, trying to not get off so I can keep going, and I’m so close, so fucking close, just need a little more, that finger not moving isn’t quite doing it for me, so I try rocking, anything to get some friction, just need a little more.” Tim rubs a bit faster and rocks a bit deeper, and Abby groans at that. He can feel her body start to grow tighter on his.

“That’s it baby, come for me, let me feel you ripple on my cock.”

“So close.”

He strokes faster, little harder. “There you go. Just like that. All wet and soft and feeling good. Feel so good, so good.” He keeps rocking into her, and she does feel good. Feels like sex and love and home, and it doesn’t matter he did this less than an hour ago, it’s Abby’s body on his, and he loves it and loves her and he’s kissing her and she’s half turned into him to get more of those sweet kisses as he’s rocking in and out and his fingers rub round and round over and over.

She’s pulling a little tighter, jaw going tight, and he’s sucking her tongue and stroking fast with his hand and slower, steadier with his dick. “Come on Abby, give it to me, baby.”

She moans, high and panting, and then is gone, rippling all over, twitching in his arms, and Tim’s grinning into her lips, riding the high of getting her off. Only takes a few more strokes of his own to get himself over the edge, too. And then they’re both lying together, wrapped in each other’s arms, and glowing with sex and lazy kisses.

He can hear Breena’s soft moan; she’s having a good time, too, and he enjoys that, but mostly he’s looking at Abby, seeing her right now, tired eyes, baby weight plump face, smile lines, a few gray hairs among the blonde ones. The changes of the years shining on her face. Some of those changes he’s at least partially responsible for.

He thinks of her at eighteen in college and just starting off with sex, imagining her then. He squeezes her tighter, careful to avoid her breasts. He wishes he could have been there for eighteen (even if that would have put him at fourteen) and loves that he’s here for forty-three.

He strokes her face, and she smiles at him, meeting his lips with a few more soft kisses.

Both of them can feel, and hear, Jimmy and Breena making love. And after a few more moments, their come cries finish the party.

There’s a quiet space shared between the four of them. Mostly just touching and petting. Then they start to move a bit, shift around, clean up. Sean’s going to start asking for his second dinner soon.
As they get up and get moving, Breena says, “So… Did you actually get off for the first time in a porn booth at a sex shop?”

Abby giggles. “Nah. Made the whole thing up. I mean, we went to the sex shop, but we behaved, sort of, we pretty much made out the whole bus ride home, until we got back to my dorm room, and then kicked my roommate out for pretty much the next two days. I was wild at eighteen, but not that wild.”

Tim nips her shoulder. “You tease!”

She kisses him back. “Come on, you loved that story.”

Jimmy’s laughing, hard, at that, and then they hear the little feed me squawk of Sean.

“Back to the grind,” Abby says, getting up, pulling on her robe, and heading off to get their youngest. Over her shoulder she says, “And don’t think you got out of telling us your stories, Breena. We’re going to hear about getting Jimmy naked for the first time one of these days.”

Breena and Jimmy, grin at that. “One of these days,” she says.
Love Song

Tim prefers music without lyrics, and as he’s spending what feels like hour 6,908 staring at a blank pad of paper, he understands why. Lyrics are fucking hard.

Granted, right now, Jimmy would tell you that lyrics are a snap and music is hard.

Though, as Tim pointed out to him, nothing at all was stopping him from coming up with lyrics if it was such a piece of cake, and he was more than welcome to write all the damn lyric he likes, and Tim could go off and find a piece of music to shove them into. After all, he’s got every damn jazz song ever recorded, a computer, and access to Abby’s sound equipment, so he could certainly rip lines of music out of a song, and build one for them, and then he can fit whatever lyrics Jimmy could dream of into it.

Jimmy didn’t look thrilled with that.

And both of them, realizing they were getting snarky and snappish, decided that that was a splendid time to put the project on the backburner and go blow some shit up online.

Unfortunately, Valentine’s is three days away and this project has been backburner-ing for more days than it should have been. They’ve hit crunch time, and if this is going to happen, it’s got to get on the front burner.

A long time ago, Tim learned that three quarters of wining any battle involving will power was to avoid temptation.

And, given how many cupcakes he had at yesterday’s party, he has given into temptation enough recently when it comes to sweet, sugary things.

The problem is, it’s awfully tricky to avoid temptation when living with two women, one of whom is in ‘eat everything that isn’t nailed down because tomorrow may be when I start throwing up every five seconds’ mode and the other one is in ‘I’m making all of the food our child eats, so I’ve got to eat all the time’ mode.

And, see… He’s trying to be good and strong, like Jimmy, who can sit there and watch them have ice cream and cookies after dinner and not eat them. But, he… his hand is inching across the table toward the Milanos, the mint and dark chocolate ones he loves, looking up at him succulent pastry and deep dark chocolate, and, gosh, he could just dip it in his coffee, and it’d be sooo good… Jimmy slaps his hand, for which Tim nods and says, “Thank you.”

It’d be easier if he could say, “Hey, could you just not eat this stuff around me?” But, A: it’s their home, too, and B: both of them are pulling in major calories to provide for his children. It’s not like this is just snacking for the sake of snacking, Breena’s legitimately looking at months of no fun with food, and Abby’s nursing. If she’s not eating or drinking, she’s hungry all the time.

Tim decides watching them munching away on dessert is not going to lead to good places, so he stands up. “Gonna get some programming in.”
He probably should be doing some programming. Ngyn’s been bouncing some ideas for how to run what she’s calling CrimeWeb (better name than he came up with) and he could be working on that. Or, he could be mucking about with the data sets that Bishop have been giving him, and starting to work on a program that will begin looking for problem spots in the Navy when it comes to harassment.

Or he could, and he should, because damn it Valentine’s day is after tomorrow, work on the lyrics for the song he and Jimmy have been trying to write.

Because, when it comes down to it, writing the lyrics is probably a more productive use of his time than hoping for a grisly murder to keep Jimmy away from home on Valentine’s day, and then using that as an excuse for not having it done.

So, he sits in front of a pad of paper, tapping his pen against the desk, feeling like he’s never even heard music before, let alone being capable of writing some.

---

Inspiration strikes in weird ways. He’s free writing, scribbling bits and pieces onto his pad, and then…

*I’m not gonna write you a love song.*

Tim’s staring at that, tapping his pen against the pad of paper, thinking of a somewhat successful pop song he knows he’s heard on Breena’s shuffle mix.

“Already been used,” Jimmy says, looking over Tim’s shoulder as he heads in to “help” with the “programming” while the ladies get babies cleaned up and ready for bed.

“Hush. I think I’ve got something here.”

Though you deserve it he writes down.

“Are you actually using the music for Sara Barellie’s *Love Song*?” Obviously, Jimmy can’t hear what’s in Tim’s head, but he can read the words and has a sense for how Tim’s trying to shove them into one of Breena’s favorite songs.

“Maybe… Let me work this.” He hunches over the paper, pen in hand, but nothing pops up. So, he leans back in his chair, and looks at Jimmy’s who’s half leaning/half sitting on his desk. “We do our own cover of someone else’s song it still counts, right?”

Jimmy thinks about that. “Especially if we rewrite the lyrics.”

Tim writes a bit more feeling something akin to inspiration starting to strike:

*And so much more.*

*I’m not gonna write you a love song/Though I tried my best, but I failed the test/The words just wouldn’t come.*

*I’m not gonna write you a love song/No words could ever really say/How much I love you.*

“Doesn’t scan.”

“You’re the musician, make it scan.” Tim shoots back.
“Ugh.” There are many things Tim is extraordinary at. Music isn’t on the list. “You know this is the chorus, right?”

“Ngh…” Tim slumps a bit. “Yeah.”

“How about, ‘I didn’t write you a love song, though you deserve it, every single day…” Jimmy sings.

Tim writes that down fast. “Yeah, that’s good.”

_I didn’t write you a love song/ Though I tried my best / I couldn’t pass this test/ You see_  
_When the words don’t come/ It’s completely not fun / But it’s true_  
_I didn’t write you a love song/ Because there just aren’t words to wrap up/ How much I love you_  

Jimmy’s nodding, looking at the paper, and then hops up to go find Breena’s phone and see if he can get a copy of the music they’re modifying as Tim fiddles with his pen.

Tim thinks a bit more and adds:

_Spent a million hours, staring at a blank page/ Crossed out words that didn’t work/ Played wadded up paper basketball for an age_  
_He hummed a million bars/ Worked out notes during rides in cars/ Spent hours on every tune/ And even if he’d tried ‘til June…_  
_We didn’t write you a love song/ Though we really tried/ And almost cried/ You see_  
_We didn’t write you a love song/ Because the words just can’t say_  
_How much we love you_  

When Jimmy gets back with Breena’s phone, he sees what Tim’s got, and nods. “Change most of it to we?”

Tim nods, too. “Yeah. And you’re singing, so flip the I and him on the stuff I just did.”

Jimmy plays the original song, and they both listen to it all the way through. Then Jimmy starts messing with the tune, trying bits of lyrics. After a few minutes of that, he says. “You realize; this doesn’t need to be full song length now. A verse or two, and, say… spa day gift certificates, and we’re good to go!”

That inspires Tim.

_We didn’t write you a love song/ Though we really tried/ You see_  
_We didn’t write you a love song/ But we know for sure / That you love the spa/ Oh yay!_  
_We didn’t write it/ No way/ Happy Valentine’s Day (hand over present)_  

Jimmy’s reading over his shoulder and laughs. “Yeah, that’ll do the job.” Then he grabs the pen and adds. _We’re still hoping/ to get laid!_

Now Tim’s really laughing. “We’ll be lucky not to get smacked upside the head with that.”
“Eh. They’ll think it’s funny.”

“That goes after the spa package, and it better be a good one.”

Jimmy nods. He heads over to Tim’s computer and get online, hunting for said spa packages.

Tim fiddles some more. *We’re didn’t write you a love song/Though we tried our best/ But we made a mess, you see.*

Jimmy looks up. He doesn’t think Tim’s aware of the fact that he’s quietly singing his lyrics. “That’s good. We’ll have to pop that in there somewhere.”

Tim does look a little startled at that, because Jimmy’s on the other side of the room and shouldn’t be able to read the page from there. “I don’t think we’re roping Tony and Ziva into playing instruments for this.”

Jimmy shakes his head. He’s not going anywhere near Tony with this. The eye roll alone at these lyrics should sprain Tony’s orbitals for weeks.

*We didn’t write you a love song/Though we liked the idea/ Couldn’t make it real.* That time he’s just writing.

They hear Abby call down from upstairs. “Kids are washed. Story and song time!”

Jimmy glances at Tim, who nods, story and *song* time, indeed.

---

“He’s Shaun the Sheep, he’s Shaun the Sheep, he even mucks about with those who cannot bleat…” Okay, as lullabies go, the theme song for Shaun the Sheep might be a bit off, but Molly loves it (she makes little m-mm-m-m bleating sounds to go along with her daddy singing), Kelly tolerates it, Anna couldn’t care less, and all music is just rumbly vibrations for Sean, so it’s a winner.

Jimmy sings, holding Sean against his chest and throat. Tim tucks little girls in, making sure they’ve all got stuffed animals, pacifiers, sippy cups with water, favorite blankets, kisses, and the rest of the seemingly endless array of accoutrements necessary to get a collection of three tiny girls to bed.

“Oh, come and bleat with Shaun the Sheep!” Jimmy wraps up, also kissing each girl, and then both of them ease out of the nursery, hoping that with a little luck all three of them are down for the night.

As they’re heading down the stairs, Jimmy says, “You know, you should sing, too.”

“The girls cry when I sing to them.”

“They do not!”

“Molly does.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes. “Once. And I’m sure that wasn’t because of your singing voice. Your speaking voice is not repulsive, and you were singing some of what you were writing, so I know for a fact that there is a range of notes you can sing.”

Tim rolls his eyes back at him and shakes his head. He’s not singing. There is no possible universe in
which him singing counts as a gift.

“Okay, Mr. Poetry Jam, add a spoken word verse. You do that, right?”

Tim sighs, bouncing Sean, who’s starting to fuss a little, yes, he “does” that.

“I don’t have anything. All the lyrics we have, which are not arranged in any particularly nice order, are on that sheet.”

“Wing it.”

Tim sighs as they head into his office. “I’m bad at winging it.”

“This song is bad, too. Wing it anyway. Add your voice to it. That matters.”

Tim, kind of, half-heartedly, nods.

If Sam Allan never has to be involved in song writing again, it’ll be too soon.

Tim may be chewing nails trying to get lyrics out, but Jimmy’s been on music, and as someone with an extensive background in choral music and barbershop quartet, voice isn’t just a matter of making words sound nice, it’s also, for Jimmy, an instrument.

Which means Dr. Allan’s been serenaded, quite a bit, over the last few weeks, as Jimmy works on tune and rhythm.

And worse, once Jimmy noticed that Allan can A: carry a tune, and B: has a pleasant singing voice, he’s been dragooned into actually helping with this, too.

And, okay, yes, if a guy, or guys were writing love songs for Allan, he’s be tickled pink, but he’s looking at yet another Valentine’s Day with only memories of the man he loves, he tends to be a bit sour on the day.

Jimmy’s humming different arrangements, apparently there was some sort of breakthrough last night resulting in bastardized versions of Love Song hummed and sung throughout Autopsy, as they’re working on removing the victim’s spleen, and Allan’s hoping he won’t be asked to start belting out the goofy lyrics Tim’s come up with, as he tries to think of a way to get out of this, gently.

Finally, Allan thinks of a TV show his parents loved back when he was a child.

“Dr. Palmer, have you ever heard of Jeeves and Wooster?”

Jimmy stops humming and looks up from his scalpel work. “Can’t say that I have. Jeeves as in the ever faithful butler?”

“Yes. That’s where Jeeves comes from. They’re stories by P. G. Woodehouse. And a collection of shows starring Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry. You might like them.”

Jimmy shrugs, no idea why Allan’s recommending this, but he’ll put it on their to-watch queue. “Light and fun to watch?”
“Quite. And, Wooster, who is nominally the Boss, keeps forcing Jeeves to help him with his music.”

That gets Jimmy’s attention.

“And Jeeves is not a music kind of guy, but it’s his Boss, so he tolerates it, but you can see the please make this stop radiating off of him during each scene while he’s being asked to sing along.”

Jimmy swallows.

“And Bertie, who loves his music, is completely incapable of seeing the Jeeves isn’t having a good time.”

“Point take, Dr. Allan.”

“Thank you, Dr. Palmer.”

99.999% of the time, Breena Palmer has guts of steel.

She’s a mortician, and that’s not a career for the squeamish. Dead bodies, even well-loved, gently-handled dead bodies are… well… yucky. There are various solids, fluids, and smells that even the most meticulously clean body produce.

And, in that a good percentage of their clients are not, due to the nature of death, meticulously clean when they get them, and that part of their job is to go about providing said meticulous clean, a new client on the table is often covered in an array of less-than-pleasant substances waiting to be removed.

Normally, this isn’t a problem. Normally, she and her dad strip off whatever clothing their client is wearing, then comes the shower hose, along with good strong soap, and a thorough washing and rinsing off before they get into anything else they’re going to do.

Pretty much, at the absolute least, everyone messes themselves when they die, and if they don’t get that all properly cleaned off, come viewing time, there are going to be some irate clients.

To make matters worse, this particular client was rather large, in the sense that an extra-wide casket has been purchased, and was not getting the sort of attention she should have been getting from her caregivers. So, there’s the reek of not nearly enough bathing, the yeasty smell of folds of skin that have been just lying on each other for days, if not longer, and the vaguely maple syrup scent of uncontrolled diabetes.

She and her Dad are talking about how if the people who “cared” for Ms. Jethry had spent half as much on making sure she took her meds as they did on her coffin, she’d probably still be alive, (They have versions of this conversation fairly frequently.) as they get her ready for her funeral.

Normally, she and her dad would just get to it. But normally Breena isn’t four days shy of a month pregnant.

Her dad starts to cut Ms. Jethry’s pjs off, and the wave of scent hits Breena, sending her running for the trash basin, and from there to the restroom.

And thus, 26 days pregnant, the day before Valentine’s, morning sickness has come to visit.
Her parents know she’s pregnant. They found out the day after the rest of the family, after Sunday supper.

So, Ed isn’t surprised to see her go bolting off when he begins to get Ms. Jethry undressed. They’ve done this three times before.

Just means he’s got a bit more work for the next few months. He’ll handle these jobs on his own, and Breena will take over more of the makeup work. With her trusty trashcan next to her.

He doesn’t want to get too close to her, because, of course, he too smells like Ms. Jethry, but he sends a quick text to her mom, so she’s not in the bathroom, puking, alone.

Breena’s sitting on the floor, head against the seat of the toilet, awash in the sickly green haze of “morning sickness.”

She’d been almost hopeful that maybe this time it wouldn’t hit so hard.

Ha ha ha.

She did get to almost a month before it set in, which was longer than the previous three times.

Her mom knocks on the door, and eases in. “Hey, honey.”

“Nghm…”

She pets Breena’s hair. “Yeah. I know.” And she does. Breena and Amy weren’t too bad, she felt a little green with both of them. Then came Christine and morning sickness of doom. Over the course of the nine months Christine was in utero, Jeannie went from 146 pounds to 142 pounds, which is not the direction a pregnant woman’s weight is supposed to go.

Ed’s vasectomy was done before Jeannie got out of the second trimester. He wasn’t taking any chances of that ever happening to his wife again.

She hands over the glass of cool water, and Breena gratefully swishes out her mouth. “Here.” In Jeannie’s hand is two things. One of the anti-nausea tabs Breena’s had in her purse since the test said pregnant and a Tums.

She takes the anti-nausea pill first. It dissolves on her tongue, which matters, because with a regular pill she’s got a catch-22, she can’t keep the pill down until it’s in her system, and it can’t get in her system if she can’t keep it down. This just fizzles on her tongue, absorbs into her bloodstream, and…

Five minutes later she’s just feeling mucky instead of horrible.

Her mom’s still on the floor next to her, rubbing her back. “You look like you’re starting to perk up, some.”

Breena pops the Tums into her mouth and chews. Her dentist says the only reason she hasn’t lost any teeth is that she keeps up a steady diet of antacids when she’s pregnant. “Some.” She groans. “I was
hoping it was going to be different.”

“Me, too, baby. And your dad.” Jeannie strokes her baby’s back. They adore their grandchildren, and they know there’s a huge baby boy shaped hole in both Breena and Jimmy’s hearts. Which is why, even Ed, with his lack of tact and mental filter, hasn’t said anything, but… “Maybe, this is the last one? For a few years, at least?”

Breena sighs. She knows what her parents, and a lot of the other people around them, haven’t said. People almost never intentionally have four pregnancies in four years. When they told people they were pregnant with Jon when Molly was just six months old, they did get some stares, she got a few ‘you know what causes that, right?’ comments, and she knows that’s part of why her Dad’s less than thrilled with Jimmy.

But losing Jon shut all of that up. No one says anything if you end up pregnant pretty much as soon as you possibly can after losing a baby.

And Anna was a girl and Jon was a boy, and if they keep trying for a boy, no one says anything. Except, maybe, her parents, who love her more than anything except her sisters, and hate the idea of seeing her sick for months at a time.

Breena sighs again. Even if this is a little boy, he won’t be Jon.

“Maybe.”

During his lunch, which is late, because they did have a body, Jimmy’s on picking up the gift certificate for the girls.

He’s quietly singing along, “We didn’t write you a love song/though we really tried/and almost cried, indeed!” as he heads into the day spa. “But the words didn’t flow/and the notes didn’t go…” He hums a bar of melody, “And it didn’t matter one way or another/cause the words can’t say/how much we love you.”

He’s actually starting to get pretty satisfied with that.

Sure, it’s not going to be a Top 40 hit, ever, but it’s getting the point across, shows genuine effort, and doesn’t sound terrible.

 Granted, he’s got no idea what the hell Tim’ll whip out for his verse, but right now, Jimmy’s fairly pleased with the bits that are under his control.

He’s more pleased as he picks up the envelopes with the gift cards in them. The lady at the counter reads his order back to him, and he nods. She smiles at him. “Looks like someone’s having a happy Valentine’s day. Mom and wife, or wife and daughter?” she asks as he’s slipping his credit card into the card reader.

He supposes he walked into that one. How many guys get good, meaning expensive, Valentine’s day presents for anyone else?

He smiles at her. “Wife and our best friend.”

“Oh.” She’s a little surprised at that, but rolls with it. “That’ll be fun. You know, we work with men,
too, right? You can join in also."

Maybe one of these years he might. But it’s not happening this one. “Four babies under four between the two of them. Someone’s got to watch the kids.”

And the counter lady flashes him a knowing smile. “Got ya! We’ll make sure they have a great time.”

“Thanks.”

On the way back to NCIS, Jimmy picks up a treat for the girls. For tonight. Because they like them, and he’s walking by the place that sells them, and it’s been a while since he’s brought some sort of little goodie home for them.

He makes a detour into the bakery, and eyes the goodies. Abby’s easy. She wants all strawberry everything right now. Probably part of jonesing for her beloved Caf-Pow and not getting any. So, he asks for a chocolate-covered-strawberry cupcake. Breena loves cannoli, and he loves watching her eat cannoli, so a pistachio one for her, and he’s pretty satisfied with that when one other thought hits. He’s not just going home to two girls tonight.

And there are little, single serve, tiramisus here, too.

It’s true that as a matter of fact he doesn’t get Tim little treats. But he’s not sure why not, or why he shouldn’t. (Other than this is the guy who’s trying to keep his weight under control so a small pile of sugary calories might not be an ideal treat for him. But, an unexpected little pile of sugar in exactly the form he loves might be an ideal treat for him, if Jimmy adds some extra yoga time to it…)

He orders the tiramisu, too.

Jimmy’s heading out for the evening, and the way out, he detours to Tim’s office, checking in to see how far behind him he is.

“Just about done,” Tim says. He’s spent the day going over Ngyn’s first blue-print and suggesting additional people to add to her slate of talent. So far, he’s impressed.

So far, he’s also noticed that she’s got Howard handling most of the people-facing aspects of the job, which strikes him as good delegation, and maybe something to get worried about. Or not. Depends on how she does with people who won’t toe the line.

“Great, see you at home, soon.”

Tim nods, absently, and as Jimmy’s opening the door to leave, he notices the bakery box in Jimmy’s hands. “Goodies for home?”

Jimmy stops, door open, and turns back to Tim, smiling. He’s aware of the minions at his back, so he chooses his words carefully. “Got a chocolate covered strawberry cupcake, a pistachio cannoli, and a single serve tiramisu.”
“Oh.” Tim’s surprised at that, because Jimmy doesn’t generally get him little treats, and he doesn’t get Jimmy little treats, and... he kind of ate through this week and last week’s ration of treats at Molly’s birthday party, so he finds himself in the really weird sort of situation where he wants to devour that, because, yes, a little tiramisu with his name on it makes him really happy, but his metabolism still hasn’t bounced back from the autumn, and he puts on weight like crazy when he eats sugary things, and...

“And I’ve got the workout to go with it.”

Tim nods. “Okay.”

Jimmy’s facing Tim, so none of the Minions can see him wink. He puts the snacks down, and carefully, slowly, spelling out more than a few of the words, signs, *If you’re lucky, it’ll be a fun one.*

Tim signs back, and hopes he’ll get it, *No better way to plank than with a woman under you. Think Breena’ll like that?*

Jimmy didn’t get all the details, but he’s got the basic idea of what Tim’s saying, and smirks. *Yep. I’ll lay back, watch. You do the work. I’ll take the credit for lasting forever.*

Tim laughs. *And if I’m not lucky, you’ll kick my ass with impossible yoga poses.*

*If I can do them, they can’t be impossible!*

Tim smiles at that. “Thanks.”

Jimmy nods. “See ya.”

As soon as Jimmy steps into the house, he knows that Tim’s not getting lucky tonight, and he’s not, either.

Breena’s on the sofa, skin grayish, eyes closed, nauseous vibes pouring off of her.

He sighs. So much for his surprise.

In he goes, saying hello, kissing and hugging the kiddos, who are spread out on the floor playing toddler games. Then he kneels on the floor next to her. “I’m sorry.” They’d both been hoping this time would be better.

She shrugs a bit. “Might not last long.”

His hand lands on her forehead, but, just like he suspects, she doesn’t have a fever, or swollen glands. She’s not ill, just pregnant.

She sits up slowly, and looks at the box on the floor. “Oh.”

He nods. “Yeah. You want me to tell you what I got?”

She nods. “Sure, maybe it’ll sound so good I’ll want to eat it.”

“There’s a pistachio cannoli in there for you.”

She smiles at the treat, and then shakes her head. The medication she’s on means she won’t throw
up, too much. It doesn’t mean she’ll feel good.

“Hey!” Abby heads in from the kitchen. She’s been getting the nauseous-lady friendly dinner ready. She hugs Jimmy, and he hugs back, careful with her breasts, and they trade kisses. “Got some ramen going for our girl.”

Jimmy nods, he can smell it. Chicken broth, noodles, meat, and veg. He’ll skip the noodles, but it sounds good to him. “Got a treat in here for you, too.”

Abby takes the box, looks to Breena, makes sure she can open it without triggering her, Breena nods, so she opens it, looks down, sees the cupcake with the chocolate covered strawberry on it, and lights right up. “Thank you, Jimmy!”

Tim’s in a good mood as he’s heading home. He’s got spoken word verses dancing about in his head, and feeling pretty good about them.

He opens the door, but he’s not seeing anyone, and all the sound he’s hearing is coming from the kitchen. He is running a bit later than usual. Traffic snarl two miles from home slowed him down.

Deep inhale… smells like some sort of chicken soup. He likes chicken soup, so that sounds good, and should balance out nicely with the little treat Jimmy got him.

He hangs his coat up, kicks his shoes into line beside Jimmy, Breena, and Abby’s, and puts his go bag into his office before heading into the kitchen.

“Hey,” he says, heading in. A collection of his favorite sounds wash over him. Cries of “Daddy” and “Uncle Tim”, “Hellos” from the other three adults. Abby’s spooning soup into bowls. So he heads over to her first, and gets and gives a hello kiss, and grabs two of the bowls, taking them to the dinner table.

It’s the same table he and Abby bought when they got their first apartment together. It’s a lot more crowded these days. All four chairs have an adult and there are kids at each corner. Two of them in high chairs. One has a “big girl chair,” a folding chair with a booster seat on it, and one has his corner of the table cleaned off so his sling chair fits on it. Tim’s idly thinking, that in addition to a bigger bed, they need a bigger table.

Jimmy’s standing next to the table, slicing the baguette into pieces, and buttering them. Little girls may not love chicken soup, but they do love butter, and will eat/gnaw on bread. He puts the bowls on the table in front of Jimmy and Breena, pats Jimmy on the butt, turns to kiss Breena, and sees how tired and gray she’s looking.

“Oh… I know that look.”

Breena nods. “Hit me like a hammer on an anvil this morning.”

Tim winces in sympathy. “Do you even want to be here?”

Breena nods as Abby puts more bowls on the table. “I’ll feel like crap here; I’ll feel like crap on the sofa, doesn’t matter. So, might as well be here. Listen to how today went, maybe get a little distracted by some stories.”

Tim takes that as a mission to distract his wife with good stories of how today went, so he gets to it.
And, okay, normally, ‘I spent the day overlooking the actions of my minions’ isn’t terribly interesting, Tim works that tale within an inch of its life (and several miles away from the truth) and makes it interesting.

Breena smiles at that, while slowly eating her soup. She knows he’s lying his ass off, but he’s doing it for a good cause.

The tiramisu is excellent, and Tim feels guilty as hell eating it because Breena’s in the bathroom puking up her soup. He’s not sure what, if any, rules there are about this.

Jimmy sees him staring at half a dessert. “Eat. This isn’t going away tomorrow, or anytime soon, so you can’t decide to not eat because she’s not. No, she doesn’t like to get petted while she’s throwing up, but once the retching is done, heading in with a glass of water, and keeping her company for a bit is welcome. She’ll want a lot of little, bland, snacks, and we’ll try to keep a smoothie of some sort in range, so she doesn’t get dehydrated. If this is like the last three times, she’ll throw up about three times a day. It’ll last for another twenty weeks, and there’s not a damn thing we can do to make it better or easier,” Jimmy’s voice is sharp and bitter on that one.

The toilet flushes, and Jimmy hops up, with that glass of water, to go pet his lady and commiserate with her.

Tim and Abby glance at each other, both of them want to make Breena feel better, and neither of them can.

So with a shrug, and a sigh, they set the girls free to play before tubby time, and start cleaning up the table.

“Do we have plans for the rest of the night?” Abby asks when Tim and Jimmy are done putting the kids to bed.

They glance at each other. Song’s… pretty much done…Tim’s not on an active case right now, so he doesn’t have anything to check in on, Jimmy’s done for the day, so…

“Jimmy’s going to beat my ass into submission in exchange for that tiramisu, but other than that…”

“Ohhh! Can we watch!” Abby says, big smile in her voice and on her face.

Breena smirks at that, too.

Tim rolls his eyes some. (Though he did intentionally say it that way, hoping to get that smirk out of Breena.)

Jimmy nods. “Probably be less exciting than you’re hoping for, but sure, watch.”

“Hold up for another hour, and once Sean’s down, I’ll join in, too,” Abby says. She looks down at large, sore breasts. “Not going to do anything bouncy or complicated, but moving around some more would be a good thing.”

Jimmy grins. “I’ll make him do bouncy and complicated. You just do whatever feels good.”
“Okay, this is completely fucking impossible,” Tim says, collapsing to the floor.

Jimmy gently lowers himself out of bird in flight pose. Eloquently, without a word, pointing out that it’s completely possible, because he’s actually doing it. “Just balance.”

Tim rubs his right arm. He’s not even trying to get where Jimmy is. He’s just aiming for the first stage of that pose, crow pose. “And arm strength.” He shifts around again, and gets back into his squat. “It shouldn’t be this hard. You do it just fine. Squat, plant palms on the ground, shift most weight onto palms, put knees on arms just above elbows, shift weight even more onto hands, and lift feet off the ground.” Tim attempts this while he says it. And like the last six times, he’s good until that last big toe lifts off the ground, and then he’s flopping over.

He looks up at Jimmy. “And then somehow you get your legs over your arms, straighten the damn things out, and pretty much manage to do a hovering split.”

“My legs aren’t that far apart,” Jimmy says dryly. “Give it a rest for right now. Back to Down Dog, we’ll do some more flow work, and take another stab at it at the end.”

“You mean when I’m more tired.” This is hard enough already. He can’t imagine trying this after Jimmy’s put him through “more flow.” Jimmy’s idea of “more flow” is like a Marine Drill Sargent’s idea of “a little jog,” he’s looking at at least another half hour of lunges, bends, twist, more bends,
more lunges, planking, chaturangas, up dogs, down dogs, and more planking, and then do it all over again backwards.

“I mean when your mind is calmer and more focused. Brain balances first, body follows. This isn’t going to work if your head’s cluttered.”

Abby smiles at both of them. She’s lying on her back, doing a gentle twist, feeling the tightness from her c-section scar slowly starting to give. It’s a good feeling. And, she’ll admit, the view’s awfully nice, too.

She catches Breena’s eye. She’s not doing anything even remotely strenuous. She’s been laying on their sofa, keeping them company, reading her blogs for herself, and reading out loud the bits and pieces of news they’d find interesting, watching the guys a little, trying to stay distracted from feeling like crud. And she’ll admit, she’s appreciating the view, too.

The guys started out in their jammie pants and t-shirts, but the more they work, the warmer they get. Jimmy’s down to his boxer briefs now, and Tim’s still got his pants on, but likely not for long. They’re both hot, flushed, sweaty and mostly naked.

As distractions go, she appreciates it.

But not enough to want to do anything more energetic than lie on the sofa.

So, quiet night. Yoga, (And yes, at the end of the workout, Tim did get his toes off the ground, and balanced on his hands for a good three seconds before tumbling over. Jimmy declared that victory, and they were done for the night.) reading/gaming, and then watched the first episode of Jeeves and Wooster. (Resulting in Tim musing about why Wooster’s voice sounds so familiar, and then being literally stunned by the idea that Bertie Wooster, affable fop, is played by the same guy who did House.)

It’s not their first quiet night, and it’s remarkably unlikely to be their last.

This is not, by any stretch, the first Valentine’s Day Jimmy’s faced with Breena that involved no shot of sex. The dating ones… only thing on for him was his right hand. Molly was born on Valentine’s day, so… nothing that year. (Though on Feb 13th while they were doing everything they could, short of him filling a prescription for Pitocin, to jumpstart labor, there was a lot of sex.) The next year, Jon had been born less than six weeks before, and even if it had been longer, neither of them were happy enough for sex. The year after that, Valentine’s was their first time back at it after Anna was born, and that was an exceptionally good Valentine’s day, and, of course, this year, Breena’s sick, and he supposes it’s not impossible that Abby will be up for something frisky, but he’d put it at low odds.

Plus, there’s I’m still nursing, my hormones are completely out of whack, my body is doing everything it can to make sure I don’t get pregnant, and the only reason I’m even remotely interested in sex is because you’re horny, interested in sex, which can, with enough will power and erotic set up, do the job with one husband. Two of them is like asking an origami cat to purr. Just isn’t happening. So, in that situation, he’d assume that any interest in any level of frisky would likely be primarily to the benefit of Tim, and he’ll mostly get some cuddling and a nice show to watch.

Better than nothing, but not going on his top ten Valentine’s Days.
This is not, however, how things have gone for Tim. For him, every Valentine’s with Abby (at least the ones of them as a couple) has involved some level of effort, by both of them, and lots of sex. Even the ones where they weren’t a couple, they always got each other some sort of little present.

And, they’ve got their treat for the girls done.

And he knows Abby and Breena have something planned for them. (Or at least they had something planned.)

And he would never, ever say anything along these lines, even to Jimmy, because it’s more presumptuous than he likes to be, and Abby’s got a good reason for likely not wanting sex, but… But he will be kind of disappointed if there’s no sex. Yeah, he’ll get over it. No, it won’t be a big deal. And he’d rather chop his dick off than make Abby feel pressured to provide him with sex.

But… it’s part of them. Valentine’s sex. It’s something they do.

Breena wakes up on Valentine’s day feeling gray. She is not thinking about love or romance or special treats. She’s not thinking of much of anything. She’s feeling sick and bolting from the bed, running to the bathroom, startling the hell out of Tim who’s on the toilet (which is one of his no visitors times), seeing that that’s not an option, and puking in the sink.

Eventually, she hears the toilet flush, and the shower turn on, and then with a damp hand, Tim gently pats her back, and presses the anti-nausea spot on her wrist.

Eventually, her body calms down, and the heaving stops, and she collapses on the floor, and Tim takes care of the mess in the sink, and fills a glass of water for her.

He sits on the floor next to her, holding her wrist, offering the water, but right now, that would mean having to get up to spit it back out of her mouth, so she shakes her head, and rests with her head against the bathroom wall, eyes closed.

She hears him put the glass down, and move around, the sound of more water, the door opening and closing, and then he’s back, gently draping a cool washcloth on her forehead, and saying, “Open your mouth.”

She does and he lays the anti-nausea tab on her tongue.

She nods at him, and he kisses her hand. “You okay?”

“Just skippy,” she replies, with heavy sarcasm. Then she shakes her head. “Nothing you can do. Get your shower and take over with the girls so Abby and Jimmy can get ready, too.”

“Okay.”

Tim’s getting himself washed up when Breena starts to move around again. Then, a moment later, she’s in the shower with him.
He looks a little startled to see her in there. (Granted, not nearly as startled as he looked when she bolted into the bathroom.) She can see the thoughts cruising through his head and he finally comes out with, “Are you going to work?”

She’s standing under the water, letting it run over her, and turns towards him, saying, “Of course. Business doesn’t close because I don’t feel good. We’ve got four funerals today, and I can promise you, I’m not hurting nearly as badly as anyone I’m working for today.”

Tim shakes his head at that.

“You want me to take the day off?”

“Yes!” he answers her like it’s a complete no-brainer. “Stay home, rest.”

She snorts at that. “Uh huh. Tell me about all the jobs you skipped because they were on a ship.”

He opens and closes his mouth at that.

She nods. “Exactly.”

He presses gently on her shoulder, indicating she should turn around. “I’ll get your hair, then.”

Breena sighs at that. It might not be a cure for morning sickness, but a soapy head massage still feels pretty good.

Abby and Breena had had plans for Valentine’s Day. And they were sexy (though that was mostly in Breena’s court).

And now…

Unless some sort of estrogen miracle occurs, Abby’s awfully sure sexy isn’t happening. She’s not feeling it at all, and she can’t imagine Breena is, either.

So that leaves… Okay, good dinner, check. Yes, it’s dinner with four kids under four, so it’s not the classic romantic dinner, but crab legs and steak is going to go over well with this crew even if they do have to feed tiny pieces of it to small people.

Cab sav is breathing, mellowing with the air.

Mood music to go with good dinner… Yep, got that. She’s got the playlist set with soft, sensual music.

Post-dinner movie had been sexy, but she swaps that out with Deadpool. Funny and violent is a better match for Tim and Jimmy than a sex romp comedy if there’s not going to be much in the way of sex post-movie.

She and Breena had mixed up a new batch of sensual massage oil. Abby sniffs it, and yep, it’s got a lot of good memories attached to it, but it’s not triggering any sensations below her neural cortex.

She finds another small bottle, and searches around, finding a light, pleasant, vanilla-based scent, and mixes the two. Not sexy, but the original plan had been sexy movie and oil-slick bodies sliding all over each other. New plan, funny movie, and good foot rubs.
Comfort, touch, pleasure… It’ll be good, just… not what they’d been hoping for.

Dinner, especially for dinner with a sick woman, goes well. Breena manages to have at least a bite of everything, and… as of this point, as Tim and Jimmy are finishing up with getting babies to bed, all of said food is still located inside of her.

Abby’s got clean sheets draped over the living room floor, and pillows spread around, bottle of massage oil ready to go, and this afternoon, she boned up on anti-nausea points. She’s not sure who exactly she’ll be working on, but if it’s Breena, she wants to be ready to do her some good.

Deadpool’s cued up.

Breena’s lounging against the side of the sofa, looking… well, okay, not good, but like she’s at least familiar with the concept and could locate good on a map if properly motivated.

Abby has another sip of her wine. She’s been nursing her glass since dinner. First drink in more than a year and it’s hitting her pretty hard. She’s feeling good and giggly, and who knows, maybe, if the massage goes well, perhaps her body might perk up… Happened a few days ago. It could happen tonight.

Babies are washed up, put into their various sleeping outfits, tucked into bed, sung to, and with any luck, down for the night.

Sean’s who’s not quite on the same schedule as the other three, is cleaned up, and bright-eyed, looking around at everything, and having a very animated chat with his daddies.

“So,” Tim says to Jimmy as they head downstairs. “We doing it now?”

Sean coos, and Tim pats his back, cooing back to him.

“Maybe after Sean goes down?” Jimmy says.

“Bit less distraction.”

Jimmy nods as Sean lets out a loud, talky wail. They get into the living room and find the setup. A comfy little nest, candles, not yet lit, Jimmy spies the oil, so he’s got some ideas of what might be coming up. He’s surprised and pleased to see Deadpool up. Sure, he and Tim have seen it, but the girls haven’t, and they should.

He sits next to Breena, and Tim settles on her other side, resting Sean in his lap.

“Is there a plan for tonight?” Jimmy asks.

“Movie time, pause for a bit, put little boy to bed, and then see where things go.”

“Sounds good,” Tim says, as Abby comes in. She’s got another glass of wine for Tim and Jimmy, and a cup of peppermint tea for Breena.

She settles in next to Tim, petting Sean, and says to him, “Okay, baby, these are Marvel movies, and by the time you’re a teenager, you’ll have seen a whole lot of them.” Sean doesn’t look at her; he’s
staring up at Tim. Abby gently strokes the side of his face, and that gets him to look in her direction. He coos at her, too, and she leans down, blows a raspberry on his tummy, and he squeals with delight.

All babies are in their bed. Movie is paused. Wine has helped to make Tim feel a bit less self-conscious about this.

It’s show time.

Jimmy’s on the floor, with Breena between his legs. He’s got his side against the soft, one leg bent, also against the sofa, and her back is resting against that leg, so he can hold her close and look her in the face. She’s holding his hand, and has her legs draped over his unbent leg.

Tim’s sitting cross-legged, facing both of them, with Abby’s head in his lap, her body stretched out so her feet are pressed against Jimmy’s hip.

Easy, comfortable positions, where everyone can see everyone else. Close enough they can all touch each other, too.

Tim glances to Jimmy. Jimmy nods back. Tim scoots a bit, gets his phone out of his pocket, starts the music, and it’s go time.

Jimmy starts off. He’s got the first three verses, and the last one.

“We didn’t write you a love song/though we really tried/and almost cried
“But the words didn’t flow/and the notes wouldn’t go…
“And it didn’t matter one way or another/’cause the words can’t say
“How much we love you…”

Tim may have teased Jimmy about serenading Breena with Bette Midler’s greatest hits, but when it comes down to it, he’s never really seen Jimmy sing. Really sing. Not just messing around to make himself, or the girls, happy. But actually work on something, focus on it, and perform.

It’s different.

His voice likely was never going to be good enough to go pro, but he loves what he’s doing, and he’s looking them both in the eyes, switching from one to the other, feeling those words, and yes, they’re light and a bit fun, but the meaning, the overwhelming devotion and adoration, that’s blazing through his voice. His tone lights some silly words, gives them more power and meaning than the dictionary had to offer.

And Tim gets what Jimmy meant by the idea that adding his own voice mattered, and why.

Jimmy’s voice goes quiet, his first three verses are done, which means Tim’s up… He takes one breath, feeling the music moving, and another knowing he’ll run out of music if he doesn’t move soon.

He’s not singing, just his usual speaking voice, and as he starts, with the three of them staring at him, he begins to hook into what he liked about poetry slams. And maybe stuff like this is easier to do with an audience. Maybe he’s just ready to let it out. Either way, music’s winding down, time to go.
“This verse is mine. He says I should wing it, and… God, I’m bad at that.

“I didn’t write you a love song, though I really tried.

“I get older, maybe wiser, and I can see the word and know the feeling

“Short word, soft word, just a breath exhaled

“Big feeling, all encompassing, touches everything

“Little word comes up short, doesn’t do much

“Love

“All soft sound, little vibration

“Love

“Even a cum cry has a more complicated articulation

“Love

“And I get older, and I know it’s real. Know how it feels

“Know the words grow short and shallow

“But they’re all I’ve got


“I didn’t write you a love song, though I really tried.

“But the words couldn’t wrap up how this feels.”

And he kisses them again, and the music shifts back to Jimmy, who flashes him a quick you couldn’t come up with that before?

Tim shrugs at him, nope clear on his face.

And Jimmy heads on, “We didn’t write you a love song, though we tried really hard/Turns out he’s not a bard…

“The word wouldn’t form up right/ but come what may/ we love you every day, every way” Jimmy flashes them a grin, and Tim whips out the spa day gift certificates, holding them up toward both girls, “Happy Valentine’s day!”

And, sure, it’s not the grandest romantic song ever sung, but the girls, even Breena, are grinning at them, and hugging them, and, yeah, they hit the ball out of the park.

A four-way foot rub isn’t sex.

And, as Abby’s rippling her knuckles against the sole of Tim’s foot, and he’s pressing the pad of his thumb just below the ball of Breena’s big toe, Tim’s realizing it doesn’t have to be.
He looks between his ladies, Abby looks like she’s having a better time than Breena is, but Breena appears to be enjoying the foot rub. Or, at least it’s keeping her from focusing too close on feeling cruddy.

She moans a little as he gets into a sore spot on the arch of her foot. Happy moan.

And he wriggles, happy, as Abby flexes his toes, worming her oil slick fingers between them to gently twist the top of his foot while holding his ankle.

And maybe there’ll be sex later, or maybe there won’t, but it doesn’t matter.

It’s still their day.
There’s nothing like sitting in the pediatric radiology department of a slammed hospital to make a person jumpy.

Sean’s fine. He’s chilling out in his car seat, snoozing, more or less the picture of perfect, content baby. He’s so cute, people routinely come over to look at him, compliment them on what a good sleeper he is, and how adorable he is in his tiny little bear onesie.

His parents are significantly less chill.

Everyone around them is in here because they’re caring for someone who’s hurt, or hurt themselves. And, of course, it’s the pediatric department, so they’re in a place filled with hurt and sick kids. And just like cases with hurt kids are the worst, being stuck in a room filled with hurt kids isn’t a picnic, either.

Tim’s getting ready to bubble wrap all four of the McPalmer kids, Breena, and Ziva as he sees a little girl, she can’t be more than three, in some sort of cast-like contraption from her chest to her knees. She’s on something that looks kind of like a wheelchair, except it’s laid flat. A mobile bed of some sort. Abby’s talking to her mother. Car accident. She ended up with a broken pelvis and spine, and this is the fourth week in a row of her in that device. Right now they’re about to do another scan to see how things are healing up. With any luck, as the swelling continues to go down, and her spine keeps healing, she’ll eventually be able to walk again.

The mom asks them what they’re there for. Nothing is visibly wrong with Sean, after all.

Tim feels a little surreal to see that Mom give him a version of the look he probably gave her hearing that her daughter may never walk again. That, oh, sorry to hear it, damaged child look. Then he catches the look she gives her daughter, and maybe he’s reading too much into it, but he would swear she has a at least my kid might get better look on her face.

He glances at Abby, seeing if she caught that, too. Abby gently squeezes his hand.

The nurse calls for the mom and her daughter, and off they go.

Snoozy little boy in the waiting room was great. Wide awake little boy about to go in for a MRI is less great.

The thing about a head MRI is that it takes about fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes with a sleeping child in an MRI is... in real time, for his hyper-concerned and nervous parents who have just spent an hour surrounded by hurt kids, probably about two hours.

Fifteen minutes with an awake, and as he notices he’s in a strange place, being handed over to a stranger, and thus, screaming, baby is about twenty-nine years.
Tim’s not sure if the setup here is designed to torture parents or not. They can see Sean on a video feed. They can hear him. So, he and Abby are standing next to each other, holding each other, desperately trying to not have a mental breakdown as they watch the nurse strap Sean into the blue, padded swaddle bundle, that keeps him perfectly still in the little tube, as he turns bright red, flails around as hard as he can, and screams his tiny head off.

The MRI tech gives them a half-hearted smile. “I know it’s hard. We’ll get it done as soon as we can. We have in intercom, you can sing to him, some babies calm down when they hear Mom and Dad singing to them.”

Abby’s nails are digging into Tim’s hand, she’s squeezing him so hard. She tries to smile back at the Tech, but it comes out as a wince.

And, with that wince, she’s doing better than Tim, who is using all of his willpower to not run in there and snatch his child back from these strangers who are causing him so much distress.

“Here,” the MRI tech flips the switch. “Let him hear your voice. It'll help.”

Abby sighs. Tim swallows hard. He’s the one who gets his voice back first. “You’re scanning his ears to see if his deafness is structural or neural.”

“Oh…” The MRI tech responds with a full body cringe. “I’m sorry.”

Abby nods. Tim sighs. “Yeah,” she says. Looking at Sean, who’s fully bundled into the swaddler, completely immobilized, looking straight up. “Only way for him to know we’re there is to touch him.”

“And you can’t go in there. I really am sorry.” He glances into the MRI chamber and sees one of the nurses give him a thumbs up, “Okay, we’re ready to go.” He starts the machine, and they see the padded table Sean’s on slowly ease into the MRI tube, and then the low thudding sound drowns out some of Sean wailing.

The fifteen longest minutes ever, finally, end.

Fortunately, for all involved, Sean conked out about six minutes into it.
But that didn’t do much to soothe his frazzled parents.

As soon as he’s out of the tube, he wakes right back up again, and lets everyone know he’s pissed about this whole situation. If a baby can be in a blood red rage, Sean is in a blood red rage. Abby gets him nursing, which helps some. Tim sits next to them, one hand on Sean, one on Abby’s back. All three of them together, the feel of Sean under his hand, and the slowly calming down sucking sounds from his boy, helps to calm Tim down. All of that, plus a flood of oxytocin, helps get Abby settled, too.

“I don’t suppose you can tell us anything about the scan?” Tim asks.

The tech shakes his head. “I just take them. Each doc who works with this hospital sends us the order for what they want scanned, we send it back to them, they read it.”

Given the tech didn’t know Sean’s deaf, that’s the answer Tim and Abby are expecting. The tech messes around with his equipment for another moment, and then says, “And it’s off. Your Doc’ll have this in his inbox the next time he checks his mail.”

Tim supposes that’s something. One step closer to… whatever comes next.

They’re in the car, on the way home, and Sean is, again, peacefully sleeping. The upside of being a baby is very short term memory. It’s been an hour and a half, and from everything they can tell, he has no memory of what happened.

(Though, if Sean is claustrophobic when he gets older, it won’t surprise either of his parents.)

They’re idling at a stop light, not really talking, when the idea that, in five weeks, they’ll talk to the audiologist, and… And they’ll have decisions to make, hits Tim.

He looks over to Abby, who’s watching the cars crossing the street in front of them. “What are we hoping this’ll find?”

She sighs long and low… Then swallows hard. “Am I a really horrible person if I say that whatever this is can’t be fixed surgically? I mean, no, not really, but…” She holds out her hand, and it’s still shaking. Tim nods, he’s calmer, not calm. “If we’re this big of a mess after an MRI, a safe, easy, doesn’t hurt at all, MR-fucking-I, what’s going to happen if they want to operate?” She shakes her head again, looking back at Sean. “I don’t mean that. Whatever he needs or… It’s not about you or me, But, God…”

Tim squeezes her hand. He understands everything she’s saying on a gut level. “I know.”

She nods again. “Honestly, for him, I’m hoping it’s… I don’t know, the little tubes aren’t formed right or something, and they’ll just go fix ‘em up, and he’ll be able to hear. For me… I’m hoping vodka and Vicodin for getting through sitting in the waiting room while they do it. I walked in that hospital room and saw you beaten to hell and gone, and I thought that was as bad as it’d ever get…” she exhales long and low as the light shifts and Tim starts driving again, “but, yeah, six minutes of screaming while I couldn’t do anything for him… You know, at least when they get shots, we get to hold them and pet them, and comfort them, and… and we had to give him to strangers and let them take him away from us, and he was so scared, and next time it’ll hurt, too, and…”
And Abby, who did a fairly good job of keeping herself functional while they were in the hospital, allows herself to fully melt down.

Tim drops Abby and Sean at home, and then heads into NCIS. He’d rather take the day and spend it with Abby, Sean, and Kelly, but… Sunday night, he’s got a pile of techs getting together to get ready for his Commission, which starts on Monday.

He should go in, head straight to his computer, and get right to it. He’s got emails coming out his ears, looking for details about this thing, he’s got meetups to plan, he’s got his own overarching blue prints to finish up, and he’s hitting the button for the Morgue, not his own floor.

He walks into the Morgue, and apparently looks like he was shot, or something, because Jimmy looks up from his computer, sees Tim, stands up, puts his hands on his shoulders, gently pushes him toward the chair, and has him sit down.

Then, and this is something Jimmy’s done, maybe, twice, since he’s been the ME, he digs the bottle of scotch he keeps in his desk drawer out, and pours Tim a shot.

“How bad was it?”

Tim shoots back the scotch, and lets it squirm through his system. “We’ve had better days. On the upside, neither Abby or I cried while we were there.”

Jimmy stands behind Tim, rubbing his shoulders. “They’re making your baby cry, and you can’t do anything about it. It’s supposed to hurt.”

Tim looks around. “Where’s Allan.”

“No bodies. He’s got an on-call day.”

Tim nods, and then leans his head back against Jimmy’s tummy and closes his eyes. Jimmy keeps kneading his shoulders, helping to burn some of the tension off. “They sent the MRI to the Doc. Can you take a look?”

“Sure, but it won’t help. I’ll see just about as much as you will. I didn’t train on this. I’m not sure I could pick out which bit is which, let alone on someone as small as Sean.”

Tim sighs.

“Appointment is coming up soon. Just a bit more wait, and then you get to have someone who’s spent his whole career learning this stuff tell you what’s going on.”

That gets another nod.

Jimmy bends down and kisses Tim’s forehead. “And that matters fuck all, because he’s our boy.”

Tim nods again.
He’s in the elevator, heading to his office, and he can hear his mother’s voice in his head saying, “Doing things your kids hate is a ton of being a parent.”

He can feel his boy screaming in his arms, furious, scared, and he did it anyway, even though Sean hated it, and…

And he flicks off the elevator. Standing with his head pressed to the door, feeling… He doesn’t know. Like the rug’s been pulled out from under him.

Part of him gets what Abby’s saying, hoping that this can’t be fixed surgically. Sean’ll just be deaf, and maybe he’ll do hearing aids, and that will be that. No handing the screaming baby over to the surgeon who will go cut him open and make him scream even more.

Even if it is for a good cause. Even if he won’t remember it. Even…

Part of him doesn’t want to be the man who makes the choice that makes his boy cry.

His mom’s voice in his head again, “You're the adult, you're the one who knows how to survive in this world, and you will do whatever it takes, even if she hates every single second of it, to make sure she has what she needs to make it through.” She was talking about Kelly, but it stands for Sean, for any child whose life he’s part of.

They’ve done the reading, and more reading on top of that. He’s got his family researching away on this. He knows that, given how severe Sean’s hearing loss is, that if he wants a shot at normal speech, he’s likely going to need cochlear implants.

Even with the implants, he likely won’t have perfect speech or the ability to ‘hear.’ He might be able to follow about 80% of the conversations around him. He’ll have some ability to ‘hear’ what’s going on around him, too. Music won’t just be an abstraction or sensation. Someone yells ‘Duck’ at him, he’ll be able to hit the floor.

And maybe they’ll be able to get that with hearing aids. Probably not.

And if they can’t…

He and Abby are the parents. It’s their job to make the hard choice. It’s their job to take the screaming if screaming gives their son a better shot in life.

He supposes someone with a different history would have an easier time with this. Someone with normal parents could look at this and say, “Here’s the line. This is doing something for the good of your child that is reasonable. This other thing isn’t.”

But his Mom’s voice is still in his head as he turns the elevator back on. “It was done with love.”

And he doesn’t know what to do with that.

For a man with three spouses, Tim’s awfully low on in-laws.

Abby’s parents are dead.
Jimmy’s mom and step-dad, in addition to being people he barely knows, are totally unaware of the fact they are his in-laws.

Breena’s parents, like Jimmy’s, aren’t exactly aware of how related they are, but, he does know them, and they raised one of his favorite people on earth and did a hell of a job at it.

And, unlike Gibbs, Penny, or the rest of the family, Ed and Jeannie aren’t deeply invested in telling him and Abby whatever they think he wants to hear about Sean. That’s the perk of in-laws, they want you to succeed, because they want their kid to be happy, but they aren’t so in love with you as to spare you anything that might annoy you.

He gets into his office, opens up his email, and grabs his phone, calling Breena.

“Tim?” He’ll text her little tidbits during the day, but rarely calls.

“Hey. I was wondering if I could talk to your dad.”

“Oh…” He can tell he’s got Breena flatfooted with that request.

“IT’S… I’LL EXPLAIN TONIGHT. NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT. JUST, WANT TO TALK TO SOMEONE I KNOW IS A GOOD DAD, WHO’S NOT TOO WORRIED ABOUT BEING NICE TO ME. MIGHT CALL FORNELL FOR ADVICE, TOO.”

“All right. He’s three feet away. We’re doing makeup right now and need our hand. I’ll have to put it on speaker, you want me to head off?”

“You can stay. This isn’t a secret or anything.”

He hears Breena hit the call button, and then Ed’s voice saying, “Tim?”

“Hi, Ed… I was wondering if I could ask you for some advice.”

“REALLY?” Ed sounds stunned by that.

“Yes, really. Umm… Breena tell you much about me and my parents?”

“ENOUGH TO KNOW IT’S A MESS.”

“Yes.” Tim flashes an irked look at his phone, but it doesn’t care much about that, and Ed and Breena can’t see it. “That’s… the nice way of putting it. Uh… Mess… Yeah. I’ve talked with my mom some about it, and… she kept saying it was for my own good, that it was about making sure I’d be able to be on my own, do what I wanted to do, you know, feel-good bullshit.”

“Okay…” It’s clear from Ed’s voice that he’s not seeing the immediate reason for Tim on the phone with him.

“We had the first MRI with Sean and… they’re painless, only take fifteen minutes, he slept for ten of them… And he hated every second he was awake, screamed bloody murder the whole time, and… and depending on what they find next… We may be handing him over to a surgeon to cut him open, drill holes in his skull, and stick little electrodes in his brain… And I don’t want to be saying, ‘But we did it with love’ or ‘it was for your own good’ thirty years from now to a furious adult who thinks I abused him.”

Ed sighs. Tim hears that. And he hears Breena moving around, can feel the way she’s looking at him. And he knows why he’s not talking to anyone else in the family, because they’d just pet him and say, ‘Of course your heart is in the right place and you’re doing the right thing,’ because they
love him and want him to feel good about this.

“If you don’t do anything, he’ll grow up deaf and signing. Maybe he’ll be able to talk, maybe not?” Ed asks.

“Yeah. He should, either way, be able to talk. How easy he’ll be for strangers to understand is up to debate. The more he can ‘hear,’ the clearer his speech should be.”

“And there are deaf people who go on to do great things, and they’re part of the wider world, and they’re successful, and everything along those lines. Breena’s told me that about Abby’s parents.”

“Yeah. It’s not as limiting as being blind would be.”

“But it is limiting. And you want him to be able to do anything he wants to do.”

“Yeah.”

“And it’s surgery, and it’ll hurt, and it has risks,” Ed also says.

“Yeah. I try not to think too hard about that. The MRI, which was painless, was hard enough. Drilling holes in his head…” Tim shakes his head, not thinking about what could go wrong with that.

“Tim, be a good dad day in and day out. Be kind to him. Be respectful. Love his mom and sister. Give him a home as free of stress as you can. Support his goals and dreams. Do the best you can for him with everything else in his life, and… If it doesn’t work, he’ll forgive you. Not saying he won’t get pissed at you, but it takes a lot of effort to screw things up so badly that your kids decide to burn bridges with you. If it gets that bad, it’s not an accident, and it won’t be based on one decision he doesn’t approve of. I don’t see you letting things get that bad.”

“Thanks. Needed to hear that from someone who’s not worried about hurting my feelings.”

Ed smirks at that, and Tim can feel it through the line. “Trust me, if it looks like you’re about to do something god-awful stupid with the kids, I will have no trouble smacking you upside the back of the head. Actually, if you weren’t doing a good job with your kids or Abby, you’d already know how I feel about it.”

Tim smiles a bit. “Okay. I’ll let you get back to work.”

Breena takes the phone back and turns it back off speaker. Tim hears the room sounds die off. “How bad was the MRI?”

“Sean’s fine. Abby and I are frazzled. We’ll all live.”

“I know that. But, it had to be bad to get you thinking like that.”

“Just, standing in the elevator, remembering my mom telling me about how when it’s someone you love, you do whatever you need to, and… And I don’t know where the damn line is. He’s screaming and… I know how it feels to me, and it feels different. Like this is necessary, in a way dragging me to swimming lessons wasn’t, but she felt that was necessary, couldn’t let me drown… and… The MRI felt like shit, too, and… And… I want to talk more, but, at home, later.”

“Okay.”

“I love you. I know you can’t say it back. See you tonight.”
“Yep. Bye.”

“Bye.”

When Breena hangs up, Ed glances over to her. “He and Abby okay?”

“He and Abby will be. It’s just hard. His parents put him through a ton of shit, all of it ‘for his own good,’ so now he’s looking at Sean and having a hard time figuring out where the line really is.”

Ed nods at that. “Hardest thing your mom and I ever had to do for you was decide if you needed your arm set. When you broke it, you remember that?”

“A little. I remember hearing it crack, and mom cutting the sleeve of my shirt off. I don’t remember it hurting.”

“It didn’t, or at least you didn’t say it was, and you were never shy about letting us know you were hurting. The EMT thought you were in shock. The Doctor told us that they could just set the bone, but you’d never have full use of your arm again, or they could pin it into place, and you would get the full use, but that meant surgery, and that meant anesthesia, which I’m allergic to, and we didn’t know about you, and maybe infections…” Ed shakes his head. “And we had to decide right then.”

Breena straightens out her left arm, all the way. “And you let them operate.”

“And hated every minute of it. And you were so pissed at us when you got out of surgery and really woke up. You could not believe we let them do that to you, because your arm didn’t hurt, until they got a hold of it.” Ed shakes his head again, little smile starting on his lips. “You didn’t talk to us for three hours. Which was a lot for a three-year-old.”

“I don’t remember that part.”

“No. You remember Mr. Bunn?”

“That little stuffed rabbit?”

“Your Uncle Wes got it for you at the hospital gift shop. You carried that little thing around for the next five years.”

“Yeah, Mr. Bunn I remember.”

Ed smiles at the image of his little girl, the spitting image of Molly, but with long blonde hair and blue eyes, a cast from her fingertips to her armpit, and a small, stuffed, white rabbit clutched against her chest.

“They’re going to do fine by Sean. He hears, he doesn’t hear, it’ll be okay. He’s not going to hate them for one, or a few even, bad decisions. Not when the rest of his home is filled with that much love.”

Breena kisses her dad’s cheek. “Thanks, Dad.”

He smiles at her.

Work helps. Fiddly, detail-oriented work, that requires he pay close attention and keep a lot of balls in the air helps even more.
Granted, that’s part of why he, and team Gibbs were always so good at their jobs. There was always work. Everything else could fall apart or go wrong, but the job was always there to soothe any aches or boredoms or dissatisfactions.

And today is no different.

At the Tech Commission where he floated this idea, he got about fifteen people interested in running/shaping CrimeWeb.

What he didn’t do, and if he’d been thinking, he would have realized was just as important, was get people in place to run the damn Commission.

Since he didn’t do that, it’s fully in his court.

So, he’s collecting each of these people, their teams (because just like Ngyn’s got the NCIS team, they each have a team on this, too) coordinating who’s doing what, and organizing who goes where and when in the week of presentations, making sure they’ve each got time to work the crowd, talk to each other, plan and make new stuff, and, on Friday, have everything set to run a presentation for Penny, Jake, and any other Congress-person they’ve managed to get down to DC for this thing.

He’s also noticing, as he gets into his emails, that there’s a large number of non-tech guys who want to come to this thing. Higher ups from different law enforcement branches, including a few of the bigger state and city departments want invites. Since he hopes this will touch on all of them, he’s tempted to tell them to come join the party.

Since he wants this time and space to be about building a system, not politicking, he’s wary of having them there.

He ends up splitting the difference, inviting each agency to send their own tech delegation, and letting them know that Friday will be show and tell for any non-tech personnel, and they’d be welcome then.

He’s sitting at his computer, looking at the draft of the email that will let the non-federal agencies know his plans on their involvement when it hits him that this, and things like it, is going to be his job from pretty much now on.

Sure, between now and leaving NCIS he’ll work cases, but once he leaves, he probably won’t investigate another case on his own again. He’ll build teams and systems and they’ll investigate.

Hell, when he leaves here, he won’t really be Boss anymore, either. ‘Boss’ is the guy who runs a team or a department. He’s the guy who points everyone in the right direction, but is also doing a lot of the same things they are. ‘Boss’ is, like Gibbs, a sergeant, maybe a Gunny, but definitely a non-con.

And that won’t be him.

For all his, “Don’t call me, Sir, I work for a living,” he’s become ‘Sir.’

Tim’s fully made the leap to officer country. And none of this piddly First Lt. stuff, either. He figures, given what his department will be in charge of, that his rank has to be equivalent of a Colonel, if not higher.
He doesn’t, not the way he meant it when he’d say, ‘Don’t call me, sir. I work for a living,’ work for a living. Not anymore.

And he’s not sure what to do with that.

“Okay, on Sunday night, I’ve got the informal, NCIS team get together,” Tim’s saying to his family as they’re getting the table cleared after dinner on Thursday night.

“Who’s the informal team?” Breena asks as she pokes her baked potato, trying to will herself to take another bite before tossing what’s left of her dinner into the ‘leftovers for lunch’ pile. She doesn’t succeed, so the potato goes into a zip lock baggie, where it might end up part of a future lunch.

“Me, Manner, his pets from CGIS, Ngyn, her Angels, Fielding’s coming in from Dubai and bringing her best tech guy, too. Abby… You want to come?”

Abby sighs, opens and closes her mouth. “Let’s see how bad the case of Mommy brain is that day.” She’s more than tech savvy enough to add to the discussion and offer good ideas, assuming she can kick her brain out of the all nursing/lullabies zone it’s been hanging out in for the last few weeks. But, as she’s carrying a plate to the dishwasher in one hand, and Sean against her shoulder with the other, she’s not feeling very tech savvy.

“I’ll make sure you’re in the count for the dinner reservation.”

She smiles at that. “Thanks.”

“Penny and Jake are coming, too,” Tim says. “Hopefully they’ll give us a heads up on who’s coming Friday and how high we’re gonna have to turn the charm up to get them interested in this thing.”

“Does that mean we’re having Jake and Bishop for Shabbos tomorrow?” Jimmy asks. He’s on washing pots and pans.

“I think so,” Abby replies. “Penny said something about that. Since we’ve got the room, they’re staying at the house during the week.”

“Sarah and Glenn are supposed to be coming, too. Should be a busy night,” Tim says.

“Guess that means we’re on company behavior for the weekend,” Breena says.

“I’d appreciate that. No idea if that’s the sort of thing that would bug either of them, or if it did bug them, if it would bug Jake enough to put a kink in eventually getting CrimeWeb off the ground.”

“But you don’t want to find out,” Jimmy replies.

“Yeah. I’d like to see funding secured and legal status ironed out before adding any potential personal scandals to the mix.”

Jimmy looks around at them. Eight people, in a kitchen, little girls playing on the floor, baby boy in Abby’s arms as she and Tim clear the table. Breena’s salvaging food that didn’t get eaten. He’s washing dishes. “Yeah, we’re the poster kids for scandalous.”

“Tonight on TMZ,” Abby starts in a television announcer voice, “the utterly depraved lifestyle of the McPalmers. Two wives, two husbands, lots of kids, and all the dirty dishes. Tell us all about it, Bob.”
That gets a laugh, and Tim rolls with it, “It’s an open secret that there are four of them, together, and sometimes, every now and again, they buy non-fair trade, non-organic coffee.”

Jimmy adds, “There’s a rumor that sometimes they don’t recycle all of their plastic baggies.” The other three of them make mock-appalled noises at that.

“Once, I saw them out with the kids, and they were feeding the girls French fries, from McDonalds!” Breena adds.

There’s a lot of giggling at that. Finally, when they’re done laughing, as Tim wipes up the table, he says, “Yep, scandalous.”

After getting the table cleared, they put the girls down, and Breena decides to go to bed, too. Before heading up, she and Tim share a wanna talk look followed by a go, rest, this’ll still be here later look from him.

Besides, given the chance of focusing on his doubts about Sean, or focusing on Breena, focusing on Breena’s a hell of a lot easier.

Morning sickness with Abby was kind of cute. (Though Tim is not stupid, so he would never, ever say that out loud.) Yes, she had a few days of feeling pretty green, but she’d take the meds and perk up in about twenty minutes and then it’d be pretty much okay until it was time to take them again the next morning.

Morning sickness with Breena is not cute.

First of all, Breena is METAL. She is the strongest woman he knows. He’s done full body nausea for up to a week, and knows exactly how bad it sucks, and knows that you’ve got to just keep going on but…

It’s day nineteen. She’s on medication and still throwing up three times a day. And apparently, whatever the really horrible morning sickness is (Jimmy told him the name but it went in one ear and out the other) this isn’t it because they haven’t had to hospitalize her for dehydration.

But it’s bad enough.

She’s limp and tired and her skin has a grayish tinge. When she’s not actively working, she’s lying on the sofa or their bed, dozing or full-on sleeping.

They try to keep enough calories in her so that she doesn’t lose too much weight. But day by day goes by and the hollows under her eyes and cheeks get more pronounced. Breena, normally, has a very round face, and usually a plump little tush and nicely round and soft boobs. The boobs are still there, but her face and butt are getting smaller by the day. She’s six pounds down, and the bones on her wrists are starting to get too easy to see.

According to Jimmy, who laughs, but it’s not a happy sound, when Tim mentions it, this is normal. This has happened every time Breena’s been pregnant, but since he wasn’t living with her, let alone watching her this closely, or seeing her naked, he didn’t notice before.

At this point, Tim would rather undergo a vasectomy via weed whacker than ever even remotely suggest that Breena should get pregnant again, let alone be involved in doing it to her.
Jimmy laughs at that, too, and says to him, “Really, two years from now, she’s naked and wet and pink and ovulating and asking for a baby, you’re going to say no?”

“Shit.” Because the only way he will say no to that is if said vasectomy has been procured, preferably without the weed whacker. And he’s got the sinking suspicion that should said vasectomy be procured that both of the girls will be beyond annoyed at him.

“Uh huh, and thus we’re working on baby number four.”

“How can you stand this? I just… Every time I look over at her…”

Jimmy points a very sad smile in Tim’s direction, but he’s looking at the sofa, where Breena was, until she went upstairs ten minutes ago, for an early bedtime. He doesn’t say anything, and it hits Tim that this is probably worse for Jimmy because he’s got the fucking MD and should be able to make things like this better.

But he can’t.

No one can.

And watching a woman they love literally shrink before their eyes is the cost of adding to their family.

Then Tim wants to kick himself. He’s watching it. She’s living it. “Come on,” he says to Jimmy, pulling him toward his laptop.

“What are we doing?”

“Finding something she can keep down, or die trying.”

“Tim, we’ve done them all.”

“Not with me you haven’t, and not with Abby. I can find parts of the web you don’t even know exist.”

“And you think cures for morning sickness will be hiding there?”

Tim just stares at Jimmy, who eventually nods, and both of them sit down, on the sofa, laptop between them, and start googling deep, looking for some miracle that, as of yet, hadn’t occurred to them.

It’s Tim’s night with Sean, so instead of curling up to sleep with his spouses, he’s got Sean on his chest, humming quietly, while he slopps down his bottle.

Right now, Sean’s in a good mood. He’s happily nursing away, looking up at Tim, content and sleepy eyes, little muwf, muwf, muwf sounds of eating dinner filling the night quiet of their home.

Tim strokes his head. He doesn’t have a lot of hair. He’s not bald, but all of his hair is very fine and awfully blond. Soft, silky fuzz under Tim’s palm. His skin is so soft. Baby soft isn’t just a marketing ploy. He’s pale, too. In the light they can see some of the tiny veins at his temples. That’s why he flushed so dark red when he was angry. Not much melanin to cover that up.

His little ears are perfect. Tiny little shells, almost the exact same shape as Tim’s, just smaller.
Tim’s trying to imagine the littlest hearing aids ever. He wonders if they’ll annoy Sean. If they won’t feel right, or if suddenly living in a world with sound will be scary for him.

And if not hearing aids… Cochlear implants still kind of look like hearing aids. There’s the little plastic part that wraps over the ear, just like a hearing aid, but unlike one, it doesn’t attach to something in the ear canal. That piece will have the microphone and the batter. There’ll be the round device that’ll use a magnet to stick to his head. That’ll be the transmitter. Take the sound from the microphone and send it to the part of the implant that’s *implanted*. A little wire will attach that to the ear part.

Tim’s fingers slip behind Sean’s ear. He’ll have little scars, though, they’ll be behind his ears, hard to see.

And, he’s got no hair real hair length, so for the time being he might be wearing a lot of little headbands to help keep the magnetic transmitter on his head and out of his reach.

His family is good with cochlear implants. But he’s seen the people who aren’t. Read them talking about Deaf people aren’t broken and don’t need to be fixed, and how when parents do this, they take away their child’s choice and risk their lives to try and make them conform to the larger society.

Can’t be *Deaf* with a cochlear implant. Can’t decide in favor of cochlear implants without making the judgement that Deaf is bad. That seems to be the thinking of that side.

Most of that makes him uncomfortable. He doesn’t think Deaf is bad or broken. “How about, Deaf is difficult, and I don’t want your life to be any more difficult than it has to be?” Tim sighs at that. He should probably talk to Sarah again. He has the sense he was too snippy with her about that when they last talked. She’ll be around tomorrow night, so that’s something.

Sean’s nursing slows down, and Tim jiggles him a little. Yes, he too would like to go back to sleep, but if Sean doesn’t finish this, they’re both going to be up again sooner than they want to be.

His eyes jerk open and he sucks a bit more intensely.

Tim kisses his forehead, and again strokes the back of his ear, where the cuts would go.

When it comes down to it, this is risking Sean’s life. The chance of death is small, but it’s there, and it’s real. Of course, that was/will be true with his vaccinations, too, and they didn’t think twice about that. Some kids are allergic to them, some kids really do have bad effects from them, but those effects are rare, and they didn’t blink. Risk mumps or risk the possibility of an allergic reaction to the mumps vaccine. No brainer, bring on the vaccines.

But no-cochlear-implants isn’t precisely the same as skipping the vaccinations. Not operating doesn’t open Sean, or anyone else’s kids, to any danger.

Not physical danger.

Anything that requires hearing will be off the list for Sean. Not in the traditional sense of he can’t be a musician. There are deaf musicians, just like there are blind painters… photographers.

But… Military, that’s out. Or anything else where a team member has to get your attention fast. Can’t be a cop if your partner can’t shout an instruction across a room, or street, to you. He’s literally laying here, and for that matter so is Sean, because when Gibbs yelled *run*, he ran. Who knows if he’d have made it out of that explosion if he hadn’t been able to hear that.

Most sports… team sports at least. Out for the same reason. Sean could probably be a hell of a
swimmer or runner, but if he can’t hear the instructions yelled at him…

School… Walk around for years with two little devices on his head, or walk around for years with a person who has to translate everything said around you into sign. Can’t lip read if the teacher is speaking the instructions while writing the problem with her back to you on the board.

Different school. With tons of other Deaf kids. That’d take care of that problem. Until Sean’s out doing anything else. Yes, their family will sign. They’ll do everything they can to keep his home life as easy as possible for him, but one day Sean will leave their home.

Sean’s eyes are drooping again, and this time the bottle is almost done. “Okay. Come on, we’re not solving this tonight.”

He takes the bottle away, shifts Sean so he’s lying on his tummy, across Tim’s knees, and starts the gentle percussion on his back to get the gas bubbles out. A few moments of gentle thumping, a not even remotely gentle belch, and Tim’s got an extremely satisfied and sleepy little boy on his hands.

Tim cuddles him for a few more moments before lying him on his back on the bed next to him.

It’s clear Sean doesn’t remember earlier today. He won’t remember this surgery. (If there is surgery.) And Ed’s right, he may not like how they make this decision for him, but…

But he doesn’t loathe his mom because she made him learn how to swim. Or made him run around and do sports when he didn’t want to. Or made him always get the extra credit. Or…

Or…

Actually yes, he’s pissed about all of it. Still. Because there was nothing, until he got out of their house, that was ever good enough as it was.

Ed and Jeannie figured out how to have high standards for Breena without tying her sense of self-worth into her ability to get As. They managed to let her be interested in the things she liked without getting offended about them. He knows there had to be times when they made her do things she didn’t want to do, but they also let her do things she wanted to do, and supported the things she wanted to do, even when they weren’t the things they wanted her to do.

And his parents didn’t.

The things Breena’s parents didn’t want her to do were genuinely bad for her. Things that would severely limit her future choices. (Like getting pregnant in high school.)

The things his parents didn’t want him to do were bad for the future of Admiral Timothy McGee. (Like spending time writing role play adventures instead of outside, running around, building up his lung capacity, so he could pass the damn physical for Annapolis.) The only future choice for him that they approved of. They were working to limit his choices, force him into one “perfect” future, not give him the tools to be any Tim McGee he wanted to be.

And that’s the line.

He lays his hand gently on Sean’s tummy. Hearing aids, implants, whatever comes next, it’s about making sure that Sean’s got every choice he could possibly want.
Jimmy and Abby get up a bit earlier than usual, head downstairs, and get cooking. They creep back up the stairs, with smiles on their faces, just about the time Breena’s blinking her eyes open.

She gives both of them a confused look, because they’re beaming down at her from both sides of the bed, and Jimmy’s holding out a cup like it’s the Holy Grail.

“You wanna try?” he asks.

Honestly, no. She’s not, even on a good day, a leap out of bed with a smile on her face kind of gal, and right now isn’t a good day. On top of that, she doesn’t want to put anything into her body. She’d live on air right now, like an orchid, if she could. And they’re brandishing food at her.

But she’s not an orchid. So she sighs, sits up slowly, feels her head spin and stomach lurch, and takes the cup from Jimmy.

The smell isn’t revolting. There’s a start. Mint, sweet, vanilla. It’s green. Doesn’t look chunky or gritty, so there’s something.

Breena takes a little sip of the smoothie. Very tentative, just letting it touch her tongue, and lucky for her, this time her body doesn’t immediately respond to her attempts to nourish it by rebelling. It is minty, and sweet, little vanilla in there, maybe ice cream or yogurt, she’s not sure. She takes a slightly larger sip, actually swallowing some, and again, she’s able to get it down.

“What is it?” she asks.

“The brainchild of Tim, Jimmy, and I, along with every pregnancy website ever written. Whole milk, organic mint ice cream, fresh mint, ginger, two TUMS, vanilla protein powder, a little honey, an iron-free pre-natal vitamin, and a partridge in a pear tree. If you can keep it down, it’s half a day of nutrition and a third of a day of calories.”

She takes another small sip. “It’s not bad.” Granted, in any other situation this isn’t anything she’d want a lot of, but… It’s not immediately causing her stomach to attempt to leap out of her body, and that’s even with her not having had one of her pills yet.

“If you like them, we’ll have them available around the clock,” Jimmy says. They hear a small wail, and realize Tim and Sean will be joining them soon.

Breena nods, tiredly. Puking all the time means she’s not getting any energy from food, feeling sick means she’s not getting any solid sleep. She takes another sip, very tentative. This is usually when her body notices that she’s attempted to feed it something, and starts sending clear get to the bathroom signals, but it hasn’t happened, yet.

“Is this agreeing with you?” Abby asks.

Breena gently knocks on her wooden dresser, takes another small sip, and grabs her daily anti-nausea tab.

Sex comes and sex goes. That’s just part of being alive and loving.
And, granted, though he wouldn’t admit it to anyone (except maybe Jimmy) but there was a small, horny, lizard-brained part of Tim that was thinking that with two wives, the whole ‘goes’ part of life could be cut down even further.

He didn’t exactly have a blast with the nine weeks between pelvic rest and somewhat regular-ish sex (sort of) starting up again when Kelly was born, but there weren’t any other options, so that was that.

And he was kind of hoping, even before the four of them moved into this relationship fully, that, while Abby was healing up from Sean, that Breena could, on occasion, lend him a hand, so to speak.

That would be before they had the brilliant idea of having a newborn at exactly the same time they got Breen pregnant, resulting in vicious morning sickness.

The lizard-brained part of Tim does not consider this the brightest plan they’ve ever had.

And, he’s not exactly proud of this, but... he misses sex. A lot. He remembers Jimmy’s comments about going back to being best buddies with your hand, and yeah, he and Ms. Lefty have been getting to know each other real good again, but... It’s not exactly doing the job.

And, it’s also true that Abby’s not entirely out of the game. But she’s interested in very soft, very gentle, very one-or-the-other-of-them-but-not-both-husbands-at-once sex maybe every week, or more realistically, once every ten days, and... There are two guys in the equation right now, who will happily provide Abby with all the sex she could possibly want. So, that’s working out great for her. But, that cuts the number of opportunities for sex with a woman in half for Tim and Jimmy.

The lizard-brained part of Tim is quite aware of the fact that he somehow ended up with two wives and half as much sex, and that was not the deal he thought he was signing up for.

But again, sex comes and sex goes and...

Cuddling is good. He loves warm bodies all around him. He is getting all the cuddling he could possibly want and then some.

He’s not nearly as tired as he was this time with Kelly, because with two extra parents in the mix, he’s getting more sleep. (Granted, right now after his night with Sean, he’s not exactly feeling like he’s well rested or has a spring in his step.)

And his emotional needs are beyond taken care of. Feeling a bit off, want someone to talk to, need to hash an idea out... He’s got options galore.

But the sex fountain is looking awfully dry right now.

And he doesn’t want to be the asshole who’s pushing for sex when his ladies aren’t feeling well. It’s not like they’re just brushing him off here. He’d rather have sex with himself for the rest of his life than be the guy who whines about wanting to get laid to someone who is legitimately hurting.

But, god, he’s HORNY. He’s dreaming about sex, waking up with his dick rock hard and pressed against whoever’s next to him. And it’s not like ten days is anything like a record for him. (Though these days he’s not sure how he went entire years at a time with no sex with another person. He knows he did it, but... no idea how. The only guess he has is that he wasn’t going cold turkey back then.)

But, he’s at cold turkey right now.

And he doesn’t like it.
He’s only tangentially thinking about any of this, because right now, he’s in the shower, on his own, taking care of himself (quickly) when Jimmy breezes in, pulls back the curtain, and both of them sort of freeze, Tim with his hand on his dick, and Jimmy with the shower curtain in his hand.

For a second, they just stare at each other, not sure of what to do about this.

“Uhhh…” Comes out of Jimmy. Which is more verbal than Tim manages to be.

Finally, Jimmy steps in, staying at the far end of the shower, and says, “If I head back out there, they’ll wonder what’s up.”

Tim slowly nods, realizes he’s still holding himself, and lets go.

“You don’t have to stop.” Jimmy shrugs a bit. “I figured you’d get out before I got done, and I’d do the same thing.”

Tim nods slowly, but doesn’t immediately grab himself again, but he doesn’t know why. “Not like you haven’t seen it before.”

Jimmy inclines his head. Then his eyes narrow a bit. “Actually, I haven’t seen,” he eyes Tim’s hand, which is resting on his thigh, “that before.”

“If I’ve got a free hand, I touch myself when I go down on the girls, if they aren’t doing it for me.”

“I’m not looking at your dick if you’re going down on the girls.”

Tim inclines his head at that, too. If Jimmy’s kissing one of the girls, he’s mostly watching mouth and pussy, or whatever he’s doing to himself or the other girl. Mostly, he’ll check and see what Jimmy’s doing, too. Jimmy so turned on playing with the girls he’s stroking himself is part of what makes all of this stuff good.

Tim rolls his eyes a little, feeling a bit silly, but… he wants to get off, he’s still hard, and he’s not going to get another decent shot at it until after Shabbos, which given the invite list, will run late into the night, plus this guy has been with him while he’s gotten off basically every other way he can get off… so… why not? Not like Jimmy’s not in the exact same almost-no-sex boat he’s in. Not like he’s not going to do himself, too.

His hand finds his dick again, his eyes close, and he starts stroking. Quick, firm, getting the job done, not dragging anything out or particularly making love to himself. He’s trying to get into a fantasy again, but he’s very aware of Jimmy staring.

Jimmy’s watching, closely, not touching himself. Tim can’t see it, but he can feel it, and he’s almost feeling uncomfortable with that level of scrutiny. Finally, his eyes pop open and he says, “It can’t be that different from what you do to yourself.”

“It’s not, just…” Jimmy steps closer to Tim, and pulls him a little closer, too. There’s still a good six inches between them, and Tim turns them a bit more, so Jimmy’s getting some of the hot water, too.

“Just…” Tim’s eyeing Jimmy. This didn’t work out all that hot the last time it was just the two of them, but he’s not seeing a girl about to jump into the shower with them, but honestly, right now… Better than just by himself.

“The metaphorical desert island.”

Tim nods. He got the general idea of where Jimmy wants to go, but not sure of the details, though.
“Do you want to…” He leaves it open for Jimmy to fill in the blanks.

“Do you?”

That doesn’t help Tim figure out what Jimmy’s thinking of doing. He thinks of what could possibly be on the menu and decides he doesn’t care where Jimmy wants to go, it’ll be better than where he is now.

“Yeah.” Tim wants to get off. That’s really all he wants right now. Okay, not all he wants, he wants Abby and Breena and Jimmy everyone happy and healthy and hot and slick and all wrapped around him and lips and breasts and pussy and wet slippery thrusting and tight clenching muscles and moans and gasps and sex. He wants sex. Lots and lots and lots of sex. He wants sex in every color, position, speed, and place possible, and he wants all of it NOW.

Jimmy licks his lips, and then steps a bit closer, but still leaving a few inches between them, and kisses Tim.

Tim sighs a bit, feeling Jimmy’s lips warm and firm against his. They’re getting pretty good at kissing each other, and it’s been a while since Tim’s gotten anything more erotic than a quick, affectionate peck. He sighs again, sucking Jimmy’s bottom lip, and as he starts getting into the kiss, he feels how stressed out he’s been, with Sean, with work, with short sleep, with Breena sick, and all the rest of it, and some of that starts to bleed off in a way it doesn’t when he’s fucking himself.

Tim’s kissing back, and he hears Jimmy purr a little, along with the slippery wet sound of a hand on a dick. Since the dick in question isn’t his, and neither of his hands are doing anything right now, he’s thinking he’s got the idea of Jimmy’s plan of attack.

And it’s not a bad one. This is well within his comfort zone. So, he kisses back a little harder, and starts to stroke himself again.

There’s a moment of figuring out where hands and dicks go, so they’re not bumping into each other, but a quarter step to the left takes care of that, and keeps them close enough to kiss easily.

Yeah, this is better. Way less lonely, and lips and cock are way better than cock alone. Tim wraps his right hand around Jimmy’s neck, shifting a bit so more of his side is pressed against Jimmy, but that’s not very useful because Jimmy’s a righty and he’s pinning Jimmy’s arm to his side. Which Jimmy lets him know about by making a sharp, annoyed sound. Tim shifts back again, making sure they’ve got enough room to move, but close enough to kiss.

After a few more seconds, he feels Jimmy’s left hand tracing down his back. Just stroking up and down his spine, which is nice, too. Not earth-shatteringly erotic or anything, but nice. More of a comforting touch than a turn on touch.

A way of underscoring that he’s doing this with another person, not just the figments of his imagination.

Though his imagination is doing good things for him, too. In his mind the girls are here, watching, wet and naked, eyes wide, skin pinking up, cooing at them, about to leap in and join them.

Tim’s getting into it way faster now. Lips and tongue and fingers, yes, very good, and okay, the little brush of the back of Jimmy’s hand against his tummy every now and again is a little distracting, but it’s not bad.

Slippery, stroking sounds, and soft little moan-grunts, with heavier breathing. He’s missed that sound. He’s never really considered the sound of jerking off very sexy, but that’s probably because
he’s never done it with another guy. But it sounds like sex. Wet and slippery hands and dicks moving fast. And those soft little grunt-moans of Jimmy’s. Jimmy making noises like that is hardwired into his mind as sex, so that helps, too.

Tim tightens his hand a bit and pumps faster, kissing harder, and Jimmy’s got his bottom lip between his teeth, nipping at him.

God, yeah, this is working. It’s good. His dick is hard, and his balls are tight, the rest of his body feels ready, primed, waiting to go off, and the tingles are just about to start when what happens after those tingles start hits him, and Tim stops cold.

Jimmy, who’s a few steps behind him, not nearly as ready to get off, notices and opens his eyes, breaking the (currently one-sided) kiss.

“What?”

“You’re standing right in front of me.”

Jimmy nods. In that they were kissing two seconds ago, and are now looking each other in the eye, that’s an exceptionally obvious statement.

Tim’s looking at him like he shouldn’t have to fill in any more blanks than that. And after a few more seconds of Jimmy looking somewhat confused, he finally gets it. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Jimmy thinks about it for a moment, then he shrugs. “Sad though it is to say, this is the best sex I’ve had in five days, so… we’re guys. We cum. Not like I’ve never gotten any of yours on me before. Not like I haven’t squirted you before. Is it a problem for you?”

Tim feels silly but he says, “Not really. Just, didn’t want to spray you by surprise.”

Jimmy licks his lips, gives Tim his best, I can’t believe you just said that, look, and says with Saharan dryness, “I’m vaguely familiar with how the equipment works.”

“Yeah, I know,” Tim adds, snark radiating off of him, “but, did you think it through before suggesting this?”

“It’s not like you’ve got your dick in my mouth.”

“I did in January, and I’m wondering if how that should have ended is part of why you froze and backed off.”

Jimmy sighs, shakes his head a bit, and cups his hand around the back of Tim’s head, pulling him in for another kiss. When he breaks it, he says, “Two teaspoons of cum, on my belly, in the shower, isn’t the end of the world. But this is sounding like it might be an issue for you.”

It is, a little, but it’s not just on his side of this. “I asked Abby before I came on her, and it’s one of Breena’s hard lines. It’s... I don’t know, polite.”

Jimmy nods, a quiet chuckle underlining his amusement at that idea. Tim isn’t wrong about that. Then he adds, “It’s not a kink or anything, but I like cum. You know, if I’m watching porn, or me with the girls, or you with the girls... I like seeing it.” He shrugs a bit. “Sign that everyone had a good time, you know?”
“Okay.” Tim thinks for a second about not much of anything and then, “Would you blow me?” pops out of his mouth. He blushes a bit at that, shocked he said it. Obviously, he’s tired enough his filters aren’t working too well.

Jimmy eyes him for a second before saying, “Is that a request or a question?”

“Uh…” Tim’s not entirely sure how that got out of his mouth because it appeared to have entirely bypassed his brain to do it. He’s pretty sure he wasn’t thinking about it until he heard himself say it, but now he’s got to respond to Jimmy and… “Mostly just asking… Wouldn’t mind if it happened though.”

Jimmy nods at that. He certainly wouldn’t mind a mouth wrapped around his dick, too. But he does know that if he gets down on his knees and even tries to give Tim a blow job without inviting the girls to watch, they’ll pout. And, hell, if he’s going to do that, and if the girls are watching, that might actually get them interested in having sex, and he’s sure as hell not missing that opportunity, either.

“Not today. Here.” He settles against the shower wall, and pulls Tim to him, Tim’s back to his chest. “Lean into me.”

Tim does, then reaches up and moves the water so it’s flowing over both of them, and then settles back against Jimmy. It feels nice, warm skin on his, arms around him. His eyes shut and he relaxes a bit more, waiting to see where Jimmy takes this.

Jimmy kisses his cheek. “We’re ever horny enough for it when the girls can play, or watch, and then, yes, I’ll try that again.”

“If they’re feeling good enough to play… I mean, no offense, but…”

Jimmy nods, kissing Tim’s neck. If he’s looking at the option of a blow job by Tim, Abby, or Breena, Tim’s at the bottom of that list, by several miles. “Yeah, I know. But… It’s an option. I don’t think I can ask them to do it to me and not be willing to do it in return. But I also think that’s not the sort of thing we should do without giving them an opportunity to watch.”

Tim nods. “Makes sense.” He turns his head and kisses Jimmy again.

Jimmy’s hand curls around Tim’s dick, and Tim sighs into the kiss.

He’d started to go soft when he was talking to Jimmy, but his hand, warm, firm, not his own, is very rapidly getting him back up to full-on hard. A little soap to make everything slick helps even more, and not knowing exactly what Jimmy’s going to do, how fast, how hard, has Tim ramping up fast.

He’s rocking his dick in counterpoint to Jimmy’s hand, which means he’s also rubbing his butt against Jimmy’s dick, which is nice, too. Jimmy seems to like it, too, he’s kissing Tim harder, holding him tighter. Then he stops, and Tim whimpers, but Jimmy scoots him a step forward, grabs the soap, squirts it onto his own dick, and quickly pulls Tim back to him, kissing harder, rubbing between his butt cheeks harder, too.

Tim moans, that’s awesome, all slick and slippery and rubbing on one of his favorite spots. He crosses his legs, and Jimmy groans, appreciating the extra snugness.

Jimmy’s hand is tight and hot and Tim’s fucking into it hard. This time, he’s getting off. None of this close and stopping stuff.

God, so hard, and so tight, and full and slick and… Tim’s biting Jimmy’s lip, then breaks the kiss, not wanting to bite too hard. Can’t send him off to work with an obvious love bite. He leans his head
against Jimmy’s neck, trying not to moan too loud, and Jimmy speeds up a bit faster, hand tighter as he thrusts harder against Tim, and that does it… “God… Oh God…” he’s tingling and pulsing and Jimmy’s stiff behind him, biting his shoulder, hard, moving fast and erratic.

They’re both breathing fast, flushed pink, and with certain bits of them extremely well-washed. Tim gives Jimmy a gentle kiss, and Jimmy kisses back. For a moment, they hold the quiet, and then Jimmy grabs the shampoo. “You doing your hair today?”

Tim shakes his head, stepping back, adjusting the showerhead to its normal position, letting the water rinse Jimmy’s cum off of him. “I’m pretty much done.”

“Okay.”

Tim kisses him again, makes sure he’s all rinsed off, and steps out of the shower.

When he goes back into his bedroom, Abby’s nursing Sean, Breena’s lying on her side cuddling with Anna, while sucking on one of the ginger candies that don’t do much, but don’t seem to hurt, either. Tim notices there’s an empty smoothie glass next to her, and he smiles at that.

Kelly and Molly are on the floor showing off their big girl skills by successfully putting clothing on. Molly’s mostly dressed. Kelly’s got one sock on. Not bad for not quite two years old, not bad at all. He kneels next to the girls to help them get the rest of their clothing on.

Abby looks up at Tim, smirks a bit, and says, “Good shower?”

He doesn’t blush. “Uh, yeah.”

She nods and very gently pokes Breena, who slowly looks up (moving fast makes her feel more nauseous) and a wide smile breaks over her face. “You win.”

Abby nods.

Tim stares at them.

“She had nine days. I had seven,” Breena says.

He opens and closes his mouth. “Okay, the sound proofing in there isn’t that bad, how…”

“Look at yourself in the mirror,” Abby says.

So he does, and on his shoulder, is a perfect, bright red, match of Jimmy’s teeth.

“Does he have any interesting love bites?” Breena asks.

“Only if you snuck in and put one on him when we weren’t paying attention.”

That gets a little smirk out of Breena. “Maybe next time.”

Tim crosses over to her and kisses her shoulder. “Hope so.”
Though it’s true that if the three of them are going to NCIS, they take two cars, it’s also true that on most days, if it’s just two of them, they take two cars. No way to know until they’re there what the day will bring. And, it’s true, for Tim, most of the time, he’s done at traditional quitting time. It’s true for Jimmy that he works late at least two days a week. And Abby… When she’s there… No way to tell. Her crew means she’s working fewer late nights, but fewer and none aren’t the same thing.

So, at least two cars always go to NCIS to make sure that everyone can get home whenever it is it’s going home time.

Today, it’s Tim and Jimmy to NCIS. Abby’s got the next week off on maternity leave, and then she’s back to the grind, too.

Tim’s glad to have some time alone in his car to think.

Mostly, he’s thinking about today, tonight, and getting everyone together for Shabbos, but… he’s also thinking about Jimmy… a niggling sensation that things should feel… different.

But they don’t. Shower sex with Jimmy. Just the two of them. No women in the equation at all. Hell, once they really got going, he wasn’t even fantasizing about the girls being part of it. That should be a big deal, right?

But it’s not. Mostly, he just feels the way he does any other morning he manages to get laid before going to work, relaxed, happy. In a nutshell, he’s feeling pretty damn good.

And right now, he’s not looking any gift horses (or hand jobs) in the mouth.

Jimmy’s driving in twenty minutes behind Tim. He made the detour to drop the girls off at daycare before heading to work.

And like Tim, he’s in a pretty good, post-sex sort of mood.

Unlike Tim, he is looking gift handjobs (frotting?) in the mouth (fist?).

Mostly, he’s wondering what’s different this time. As Tim said, last time, he froze. This time… hell, this time he took the lead, and given a shot to back out (off?) he upped the ante.

And, given that he’s feeling pretty loose and happy, obviously, it worked.

Why?

He supposes he could be a bit hornier, or at least a different flavor of horny, than he was last time. Five days without sex, two without jerking off… not a record by any means, and he did really want to get off, but he wasn’t at willing to fuck a barracuda level, not like last time.

He was craving the emotional connection that sex has and masturbation doesn’t more than he was last time. Maybe… Or maybe this time he found the right spot on the line and didn’t overbalance lonely with horny by quite so much.

Maybe…

He’s not sure.
Breena said do what feels good, and go at it a kiss at a time. He supposes that’s more of what this morning meant. Probably.

The best Jimmy can come up with is that this time he didn’t throw himself at full speed into the wall to see if it could climb it. He went at it, sideways… probably. He was pretty sure what Tim was doing in there when he headed in. The unless it’s a hair and skin day, the guy only takes five minute showers, so if it’s minute ten of this morning’s shower and he smelled like shampoo yesterday, they all know what he’s up to.

Jimmy had an awfully good idea of what he was walking into and where he was going to go with it.

And with just the two of them… They staked out some comfortable territory, and stayed in it.

And maybe next time, comfortable territory will be an even wider area. Or not. Maybe it’ll be another hand job in the shower. Though, as he’s thinking more about Tim’s blow job comment, and about how the girls react to them playing together, he’s thinking… depending on if they’re using the extra McPalmer bedroom as a guestroom for Bishop and her husband, that maybe Saturday night might be a good time to see about expanding this area further.

Maybe it will get them interested in playing, too.

Yeah, Jimmy’s feeling pretty good this morning, but that doesn’t mean he’s not craving sex with the girls, too.

Maybe, if he’s really lucky, Breena will keep being able to drink those smoothies (as of him heading out with the girls, the first smoothie of the morning was still located inside of Breena), actually get some food into her, and her energy level with perk up some, and between them messing around and her feeling a little better, maybe they might be able to get something good with all four of them.

A man can dream, right?
Baby Central

Somehow when he wasn’t looking, Tim’s home turned into baby central.

His *life* turned into baby central.

And nowhere is this more clear as he heads into their house for Shabbos, and finds: four small children ranging from barely three to not quite two months old; one nursing woman on the cushy chair (with the smallest of the babies in her arms), one pregnant woman on the sofa, complaining about how her hips hurt, to the other pregnant woman, who is not nearly so far along, but is bitching about puking all the time, to the third pregnant woman, who is a guest, but just gotten past the puking all the time phase, and isn’t quite into the hips hurt all the time phase, and is happily enjoying the sweet spot that is eighteen weeks pregnant.

And, while he’d much rather all the ladies be comfortable, he’s awfully content with this kid-filled setup.

He heads in, kisses Abby, kisses Sean, kisses Breena, completely forgetting that Bishop and Jake are outside of this, and rapidly saves by kissing Ziva, too. He grins over at Bishop, “Got a thing for pregnant ladies. You want a hello smooch, too?”

“I’m good, McGee.” Though she does stand up for a hug.

His hand hovers over her belly, asking permission to touch her tiny little baby bump. She nods.

“Boy or girl?” he asks.

“Two more weeks to find out,” Jake says, coming in from the kitchen, where he’s been helping get dinner ready. Jake shakes his hand, somewhere between ridiculously proud of having spawned a new life, and shell-shocked because the Gibbs clan house at Shabbos time is *not* quiet or calm. There are small people all over the place, and one of them (Tim steps over and grabs Anna, starting to bounce her a bit, getting her calmed back down) is snuffling against her uncle’s chest.

Tim reads that look on his face, grins at him, looks around, figures out what the problem with Anna is, and then kneels on the floor, grabbing Anna’s pacifier back from Kelly, who somehow snagged it, thus calming baby A, and pissing off baby B. Anna stops whining, happily sucking away. Kelly bursts into tears. “Come on, Kelly, let’s find yours.” He picks Kelly up, and says to her, “Hello.”

She’s too upset about the lost pacifier to care about being greeted. “Abby?” he asks.

“Last seen when she toddled into the kitchen to see what Pop was up to.”

Tim nods at her. “Okay. Come on, Kelly, let’s go see if Pop has your paci.” The idea of maybe getting her pacifier back calms Kelly down a bit.

In the kitchen, it appears that Gibbs, Penny, and Ducky are on dinner tonight, though Tony’s leaning against one of the counters “keeping an eye on things.” Tony holds out the missing pacifier. “Saw this on the floor a minute ago. Figured one of them would be looking for it soon.”

“Thanks.” Tim heads to the sink.

“Already washed it.”
“Double thanks,” he pops the pacifier back into Kelly’s mouth, and suddenly he’s got his little love back. She snuggles into him, all happy and cuddly. “Oh, now you’re happy to see me, huh?”

He's answered by a soft little head on his shoulder and blissful sucking.

Kelly’s immediate need taken care of, Tim hugs the adults, and gives Penny a kiss, too. She raises and eyebrow at him when he does it, he’ll usually hug her, but he’s not that much of a kisser. He shakes his head with a tight, small motion, letting her know to just go with it.

He’s hugging Tony, who steps back after, looking at Tim, and shakes his head. “When did we become these guys?”

Tim raises an eyebrow.

“What, nine years went by without us touching unless it was a headslap or someone was going to die, and now we hug ‘Hello?’ I saw you at lunch today. Not like we’ve been apart for years or something.”

Tim inclines his head, everything Tony’s saying is true, but it doesn’t much matter to him. Now, he’s a guy who hugs people. Well, people he likes. He’s never going to be Abby-level everyone gets hugs, but his family… sure.

Of course, Tony could be complaining, so… “You think it’s a bad thing?”

“No, just…” Tony looks around at this house full of people, full of family, “feeling aware of the change, right now. I hugged Bishop. I almost hugged Jake. When did we become those guys?”

Tim nods, getting it. He sees Gibbs give Tony a sincere nod, too.

Tim hears the door open, only three people it could be, and at least for him, all three of them will get hugs. “Well, get ready for more of it.” He pokes his head around the fireplace separating the kitchen from the living area, and spies Jimmy. “Hey!” He heads out of the kitchen to hug his husband, and not kiss him hello.

“Are we telling them?” Sarah asks Glenn as they drive toward the Gibbs family Shabbos.

“Isn’t that why we made sure to have tonight free?” he asks. Getting a free Friday night for Sarah is easy enough. She just shifts her work around. Anytime she’s got a computer and an internet connection, she can work.

Glenn’s schedule is a bit more packed and concrete. As an arson investigator for the DCFD, he’s working every minute he possibly can. It feels like every insurance company on earth is battering his department with an unending string of calls. And when he hangs up the phone and opens his email, there’s an unending string of requests from teardown crews begging for updates. Neighborhoods can’t be demolished until he and his people have written their reports.

She nods at him, smile spreading over her face. “Yeah… I don’t know… Saying it…”

He grins back at her, understanding how saying it makes things real, as he pulls into the driveway, seeing the wide array of cars around them. “Packed house. News’ll go wide when you tell this
“Yeah.” She squeezes his hand. He squeezes hers back.

Once Jimmy’s in and been greeted by everyone, Jake pulls him aside. “Penny says we’re in your room, and… Breena’s already said it’s okay, but… Really, is it okay? I mean… I don’t want to be putting your pregnant wife out of her bed.”

Jimmy nods at Jake. “It’s okay. When we were getting this place wrapped up, we were racing Christmas, trying to get it done fast, you know?” Jake nods, he gets that idea. “Anyway, we have space for guests, but when we got done with all of the main living areas we kind of stopped, ’cause, all of our rooms are done, so, guest rooms aren’t done, yet. And no, I’m not sending your pregnant wife up to sleep on bare carpet.

“I’m sure, eventually, we’ll feel like doing more shopping and decorating and putting furniture together, but…”

Jake smiles. “When we moved to DC, we still had things in boxes two years later. We ran out of gas and didn’t feel like unpacking them.”

“Exactly. Anyway, when we’ve gone to Breena’s parents’ place, we bunk with the McGees, it’s not a problem. Isn’t the first time we shared a room, and, if it’s big enough, a bed, won’t be the last. Neither of them snore, and I’m the bed hog, so we’re good.”

“Really?” Jake doesn’t look completely comfortable with that.

“Really. Besides, you can call it a crash course in parenthood. You can hear all the little guys from our room. Sean’s up every three hours, and at least one of the girls wants a bit of attention at some point in the night, too.” Jimmy gives him a mean grin. “It’ll be fun.”

Jake goes pale. This whole place is a crash course in parenthood. And sure, some of it is amazing, Ellie snuggling Sean is hitting all of his wife with his baby buttons and making him feel… he honestly doesn’t have words for it, protective and lovey and husbandly. That’s probably it. He feels more like a husband than he ever has before.

But the racket of four babies in one place is making him think they do not need to have four kids.

Jimmy’s still grinning at him, seeing it on his face, nodding, “Yeah, Tony gets that look a lot, too.”

Jake nods back at that. He can imagine.

Behind them the door opens again. Which means Jimmy’s the first one who gets to hug Sarah and her fiancée. “Hi!”

“Hey, Jimmy,” she gives him a squeeze. “Who’s this one? We have a working dinner tonight?”

Glenn shakes his head, taking Sarah’s coat. “You know who this is, or would if you ever turned on the TV. Penny’s talked about you. Sarah’s just never seen a picture.” Glenn extends his hand. “Congressman.”

Jake laughs wryly at that, shaking back. “Don’t remind me. Jake Malloy. Penny’s talked about both
“Of you.” He smiles, and it’s genuine, but also practiced. Jimmy gets the sense that Jake’s moved into politician mode. “Sarah and Glenn, right?”

“Yeah,” Sarah replies.


As they’re waiting in the kitchen to go through the ritual hand washing (which takes a while with a group this large) Tim pulls Sarah aside and says, “I think I was kind of harsh with you when Sean was born.”

She shrugs a bit. “Not like you hadn’t had a very big day.”

His face accepts that out, but he also wants to own up to what he did. “Well, yeah, but… It is going to be hard, and Deaf is difficult, and it is okay to be sad or bothered or… whatever… about him having to deal with that. And I don’t want to look at him and think of it as a handicap and… And it’s still confusing, but…”

She gently bumps his shoulder with hers. “But it’s your job, PapaBear, to jump on anyone who even gets near saying anything to indicate your baby is anything less than perfect. I get it.”

That last bit sounds very sincere, in a way Sarah isn’t usually, which gets Tim’s attention. His eyebrow jumps up. “Do you?”

She grins. “Yeah.” And a slow nod confirms the grin spreading across his face. “For about… eight weeks now…”

He pulls her into a hug. She quietly says to him, “Sean was born two days after the test turned positive, and… Part of it was me freaking out, too.”

He kisses her cheek. “Yeah. So…”

“Announcement later. With dessert? Breena’s pregnant, too, right?”

“Yeah. That hasn’t gone beyond the immediate family, yet. If you’re here, you get to know, but no formal announcement for another month.”

“Okay,” he can tell by the tone of her voice she’s wondering if the baby in question is his or Jimmy’s. His look lets her know they can talk more later, when Bishop and Jake are unlikely to catch the wrong bit of conversation.

Tim pulls back, since it’s their turn for the water, huge smile on his face.

“How was the trip down?” Sarah asks Penny.

“Fine. Getting into and out of New York is an adventure. All of the mess that was New York City,
with the added adventure of everyone who is part of the government all in one area trying to get out of the city on Friday afternoon. It’s…”

“Exhilarating!” Ducky adds, a glint in his eye.

Bishop sighs and shakes her head. “Did you know that back in the day he used to race cars?”

Jimmy smiles at his mentor. “The question is what didn’t he used to do. So far I’ll I’ve been able to find is elephant hunting and cannibalism.”

Ducky raises an eyebrow at Jimmy and adds, completely deadpan, “And Morris dancing.” Alas, that joke falls flat due to the deplorable lack of other Brits at the table. He shakes his head and then says, “My dear, racing was only a few times. I built that Morgan for a reason, and that reason was not just to look stylish to get to work.” Ducky grins. “But it was fun. And… there are moments that rekindle that feeling when trying to get onto 95.”

“With his passengers screaming in the back, begging him to slow down,” Jake adds, a tight smile on his face.

Tony’s laughing at that. “You start giving him driving lessons?” he asks Ziva.

She holds up her hands. “I am innocent of that.”

Jimmy’s eyeing him. “You were never a speed demon with the van.”

“Because the only way to get the van up to sixty-five miles an hour in less than a week was to drop it out of a helicopter. With a more responsive vehicle, I’ve been known to… put the pedal to the metal.”

“And enjoy the horrified shrieks of his backseat passengers,” Bishop kids.

“And yet, we’ve all gotten here alive,” Penny says.

“That one’s a speed demon, too. I’m waiting to hear about the two of them in some ridiculous car, helmets on, setting the land speed record for octogenarians on the open road,” Jake says.

“It will be, for that sort of trip, a very sensible car,” Ducky replies.

“Something designed to eat up the miles on those long midwest highways,” Penny adds, both of them grinning at each other, with ideas for Congress’s summer break in mind.

“Just don’t get arrested. We don’t need the scandal,” Jake says, only half kidding. Then he nods toward McGee, “After all, you don’t want your first job at the FBI to be busting your grandma for flouting federal speed limits.”

Tim sniggers at that idea. “I have a feeling I’ll have some bigger fish to catch.”

Sarah and Glenn, who haven’t heard about the FBI gig, spend the next fifteen minutes getting up to date on that, followed by several more minutes on ‘Leaving NCIS? Really?’

Breena’s got another of the smoothies in front of her, to go with a piece of challah, and one, tiny, piece of roast lamb, which under any other circumstance she adores, because Ziva’s recipe involves rubbing it with garlic, black pepper, whole grain mustard, and honey and, even though Penny and
Ducky handled most of the cooking tonight, they still used Ziva’s recipe, so it smells amazing, but the one bite she’s taken has settled in her stomach like a lead weight, and she’s got the feeling she’ll be paying for that later.

Tim’s on the far side of the table, but he looks at the smoothie and asks, “Any better?”

She nods, looking not nearly as tired as she has for the most of the last week. (Granted, that’s not a high hurdle to clear.) “Still feel sick all the time, but these have stayed down. Dad was really impressed, first time in weeks I haven’t had to take a ‘break’ at work.”

Tim smiles wide at that.

“When are you due?” Glenn asks.

“Not soon enough,” she says with a wry half-smile. “Early October.”

“Hopefully not too much longer feeling green,” Abby says as Jimmy strokes the back of Breena’s neck.

“Amen,” Breena adds. She takes another sip of the smoothie. Molly’s already left the table, and Anna’s in her highchair on Breena’s left side. She looks at both of her girls. “If previous experience is anything to go by, I’ll be feeling mucky until June.”

Bishop shudders. “Ulgh. I did ten weeks, and that was ten more than I ever wanted to do. Hungry and nauseous the whole time.”

Breena nods at that. “Yep.” She pokes her belly. “Quit it!”

Bishop laughs. “Yeah, for some reason they don’t get that message.”

“Nope.” Breena takes another sip. She pats the cup. “I think I’ve met my new best friend for the next three months.”

Family dinners roll from conversation to conversation. A bit of talk here and there.

“Everyone voting next week?” Jake asks.

That gets some groaning.

“Yeah, that’s how we’re feeling about it, too. This time we should get a winner.” They’re down to seven candidates. It’s possible to, yet again, end up with no two guys with a combined percentage greater than fifty, but it’s unlikely. It’s impossible that they’ll end up with more than one more round. If this goes to April, they’ll be down to three candidates, and there’s no way for two of them to not get over 50% if there’s only four people.

“Woo hoo,” Tony says, voice flat and expressionless, underscoring exactly how much civic devotion is pouring off of this crowd.

“At this point, the only people who are even interested in how this works out are the ones running,” Abbi says sarcastically. (Any candidate she was interested in got booted out of the running two months ago.)
“We’re working on a plan to avoid this next time,” Penny says. “Jake’s especially happy with this, because he’s the one who put the bill forward.”

“Your DC representatives at work.” Then Jake really looks around and thinks, “Okay, that’s just you and Tony, right?” he asks Ziva.

“We’re in the city, too,” Sarah adds.

“What’s the idea?” Glenn asks.

“Approval voting. It’s not my idea. I stole it, but I hope it goes somewhere. Instead of months of run-offs, we get our ballots with all the candidates on it, and we vote for everyone who’d be an acceptable candidate. So, say there’s four thousand guys on there, and you think 200 of them would do an okay job. Vote for all of them. Leave off the guys you hate. Guy with the most votes wins. Guy with the second most votes gets VP. Counting will take a while, but when it’s done, it’s done. That way we don’t get these God-awful elimination rounds. And one guy with a fired up base can’t knock out six other guys with less fired-up bases but wider mass appeal.”

“Anything that cuts this shorter sounds good to me,” Abbi says.

That gets a lot of nods.

“So, what’s happening with your new agents?” Abbi asks Tony as she butters a piece of Challah. “Last I heard, you thought Draga was in love.”

“Holding pattern right now. Officially, you,” he points his fork toward Bishop, who’s got Anna on her lap, “still works for me. So, I’m waiting for you to get off the payroll, and then starting them up together. Draga and I didn’t think having them two weeks apart in their training was a good plan. So, March 20th, we’re breaking in two at once.”

Tony gives Gibbs a _God save me from myself_ look, and Gibbs nods, looking awfully smug. He can’t wait to hear how this works out. He might even decide to drop by NCIS and take a look.

Tim smirks. “You call out Probie, and both of them come? That’ll be interesting.”

Tony shakes his head. “I’m gonna need new nicknames.”

“Johnson and Spader, right?” Jimmy asks.

“That’s them.” Tony sees a little smirk light Tim and Jimmy’s faces. “Johnson’s the girl, so wipe those ideas right out of your heads. I’m the Boss, I can’t be messing around with anything like that.”

That gets a little sniggering. “And when did you ever let something like that stop you?” Abby asks.

“I’m not saying I won’t have them in _my_ head. Just can’t use them out loud.”

That gets more laughing.

“Besides, in a four-man team, it’s the second-in-command who gets to use the nicknames. Draga’s gonna be the one to think them up, and,” he gives Gibbs a good long look, “I’ll pretend to be above it while being quietly amused.”

Gibbs smiles back.
Bishop sees that talking shop isn’t an issue at this table. Yes, they’ve also covered family topics, like how Gibbs is doing on getting Baby DiNozzo’s crib done (one coat of finish and one last sanding, and it’s ready to go), Gibbs and Fornell taking Emily for her first shooting lesson, and Anna looking like she’ll take her first step any day now, but they’ve also covered dead bodies, cases, and Jake and Penny’s political stuff (with a promise of more of that to come with Tim later).

So, with that in mind, as conversation pauses while people chew, she says to Tim, “I’ve got your data sets ready to go.”

“Already?” he wasn’t expecting her to plow through the Navy’s harassment numbers that fast.

“The hard part was getting the numbers, once I had them, baselining was just a matter of setting up demographic groups, sample sizes, and averaging.”

“Better or worse than you were expecting?” Tim asks, wondering how long it’ll be before he’s got the time to get into those numbers and start messing with them. Not next week, that’s all Commission-time. Week after? Maybe.

“Better than the rates for the general population, but they would be, the general population includes everyone who’s already in jail for that sort of stuff. And, of course, our numbers don’t. Worse than I would have liked to have seen.”

“So, real world kind of numbers?” Abby says.

“Pretty much. The Navy and Marines don’t employ angels, just real people, who do stupid and evil things sometimes.”

“Can you do something like that for cops?” Abbi asks.

“Sure. All I need is raw numbers. How many officers, how many complaints, from there I can come up with an ‘average’ number of complaints. I can slice and dice that further. Like, with the Marines, the complaint baseline is higher for stateside units than for people overseas. If I give you one average, suddenly almost everyone in Afghanistan looks like they’re awesome, and every unit out of LeJeune looks like a group of jerks. Comparing like to like gives you a better idea of what’s going on. You want harassment cases for cops against cops or against civilians?”

Tim lights up at that. “I know I’m eventually going to want that, for both.”

Abbi’s nodding. “Same. Though for me, I’d be looking more for internal issues. Use it as a tool for us investigating the rest of the Coast Guard. But it’d be nice to know what’s an average number of complaints for a Coast Guard official. See how often we piss the rest of the world off.”

“The best way for me to give you good numbers on that is for you to collect good data,” Bishop snags another helping of green beans, happily munching a few down. “These are amazing, Penny,” Penny nods at the compliment. Non-pregnant Bishop ate everything that wasn’t nailed down. Pregnant Bishop has eaten everything that wasn’t nailed down, then grabbed the crowbar, pried up the stuff that was nailed down, ate it, and the nails, and the crowbar. How she can do that and stay so tiny is a mystery. “That was the biggest problem I had with the Navy, they’ve got numbers, but are they ‘good’ numbers? How many cases get shifted aside, lost, misplaced, circular filed, in order to make things look better? I just don’t know. Those averages might be way off.”

“Leon’s behind me on this, so we can see what we can do about getting better numbers,” Tim says.
“Keep in mind, if you crank the pressure up too high to keep those numbers low, you don’t get fewer case, you just get people who are better at not reporting what is going on,” Penny says.

Tim nods, filing that way for future use. Any system he builds for this will have to focus just as much on how the reporting side works, making sure they can get the data, as on the cutting down the number of things to report.

“Wedding stuff almost ready?” Abby asks Sarah as they’re all getting started on dessert (vanilla ice cream and Tim’s mint chip cookies). “We’ve got our invite on the fridge.”

Sarah smiles at that, and shakes her head a bit, too. “Just about. Rehearsal dinner is three weeks from today. Wedding three weeks from tomorrow. I’m still getting RSVPs trickling in, and final counts are due soon, but besides that—”

“And twenty million tiny, little details that your Mom’s flipping out over,” Glenn adds. Two hours before they left for dinner, they’d gotten a frantic call about if the catering was offering a vegetarian or vegan option. Apparently one of the cousins is vegan, not vegetarian, and Tori wanted to make sure the food was right.

Given the ‘diverse’ nature of Sarah’s friends and writers, not only is there a vegan option, there’s also a gluten-free one, and a paleo one. This is the first wedding Jimmy’s been invited to, including his own, where there was a meal on the menu that wouldn’t require him to do anything to it to make it edible.

“And mom being mom, wanting to make sure this is so carefully planned as to make the invasion of Normandy look like a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants operation, all is well. Tim, you’re coming to the rehearsal, right?”

“That’s the plan. Don’t want to leave you high and dry on the giving the bride away part. I might skip out on the dinner. See how fried I am.” He chooses his words carefully. That could easily be him talking about a lot of work and a little baby at home. Most of the people at the table get the subtext of seeing how long he can take being in a room with his mom.

“We’re fine with that. Not quite three-month-old at home seems like a really good reason to cut out of boring social engagements,” Sarah says, grinning at Glenn, and he smiles back at her. For her and Glenn the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner is a chance to hang out with all their friends and family from out of town. For Tim it’s a shot to spend a lot of time with a bunch of strangers, two people he’d rather avoid, a few family members he’d like to see, and maybe (depending on how much time they’re with the buddies they don’t get to see regularly) his sister and her man. Sarah understands that’s not necessarily Tim’s idea of an excellent time.

“Which is something we’ll know all about, say, around Christmastime!” Glenn says, huge smile on his face.

It takes a second for that to click with the group, and then smiles bloom, congratulations flow, and hugs are given all around.

“So, we’re looking at…” Penny eyes this crowd as everyone heads back to their seats to finish dessert. “The end of April,” Ziva smiles, “late June,” that’s Baby Bishop’s due date, “late August,” that’s Sarah, “and early October,” Breena crosses her fingers.
Tony says, “This time next year, we’re gonna be hip deep in babies.”

And Gibbs nods.

---

After dinner, Sarah asks Abby, “Could you, when you get back to work, find out if Tim and I are siblings?”

“I can. Just need some hair from you. He’s already in the system. You wondering if whatever got Sean might be in your DNA, too?”

“Not really, but… I mean, if it is, it is, nothing changing that now. It’s more… I’m curious. More curious now about who I come from. When it was just me, it didn’t matter as much. Little person in there might have some questions and… and on this level, yeah, Sean does make me think, that it might be nice to know what might be lurking in my DNA. You get that, right?”

Abby nods; she does know. “Yeah. I’ve been thinking some similar thoughts about my birth parents, too. I’ve got one full brother, who was also put up for adoption at birth, so they got together at least twice, over four years. So, what’s the story with that?”

Sarah smiles. “Yep. I know my mom was in the Navy. Well, at least that’s the story my father told.”

Abby’s eye narrows at the mention of John.

“Sorry.”

She shakes her head. “You should be able to mention him without me wincing. It’ll just take a while.” She looks away from Sarah for a moment, and then asks, “Have you heard anything.” She swallows. “Because Tim’s the ‘victim’ he gets some updates, namely that John’s supposed to be away for the next two years. They’ll let him know if he gets parole early. But, that’s it.”

Sarah shakes her head, too. “I’m not next of kin anymore, so I don’t get any updates.”

“Okay.”

“If anyone knows, it’s probably Uncle Mike or Uncle Tom. Rumor has it they’re both coming to the wedding, so you can certainly ask.”

Abby thinks about it. “I might.”

Sarah looks around, sees Tim and Bishop and Jake on the far side of the room talking about something as her brother cuddles his baby boy. That’ll probably do for making sure Bishop and Jake don’t overhear the wrong bit of conversation. “Breena’s pregnant, so… For people who know, what’s the deal with that?”

“Breena’s kids are Jimmy’s. My kids are Tim’s, and if they don’t quite match up perfectly, no one cares.”

Sarah nods at that. “Okay.”

“You and Glenn are Aunt Sarah and Uncle Glenn to all of them, though.”
“I thought we already were.”

“Oh,” Abby shakes her head. “Mommy brain. Details go flying out.” Then she smiles. “As you’ll know soon enough.”

Sarah laughs dryly. “I’ve got another question for you, about Tim.”

“Fire away.”

“Is he going to be okay with mom? I don’t mean, will he behave. He’ll do whatever he does and she’ll do whatever she does, I mean… Am I asking too much of him with this?”

Abby sighs. She almost answers, then decides to think for another moment. Then she comes up with, “Especially after this last year, I think he’s got a really good idea of where his boundaries are. And, more importantly, I don’t think he feels like he’s got to push past them to impress anyone else. So… yeah, I think he’ll be okay, and more importantly, I think if he decides he’s not okay, he’ll let Uncle Mike walk you down the aisle. He won’t try to force himself through it if it’s not working.”

“All right. I want him there, but not at the cost of making him miserable.”

“Yeah.” Abby watches her husband talking, animatedly, with Bishop and Jake, from the way they’re chatting she’s sure they’re talking numbers, data, and tech. “What do you mean by, ‘she’ll do whatever she does?’”

Sarah shrugs. “Hopefully, I mean she’ll be hyper-detail oriented and driving people crazy making sure they’re in exactly the right place doing exactly the right thing. With any luck, she’ll be so focused on making sure the flowers are in the right places and all the bows on the chairs are properly tied, that she won’t be a bother to anyone who isn’t our wedding planner.” And then Sarah takes a breath, “But… That’s a hope. And I know the more nervous and stressed out she is, the more hyper-concerted she gets and…” And she sighs again, “Both Penny and I have been telling her that giving Tim a wide berth is a good plan, but…” she licks her lips and sighs, “but she’s sorry, and she misses him so much, and she hates being out of his life, and she wants to make it better, but she doesn’t know how…” Sarah swallows hard at that. She hates the fact that her family is ripped in half. Not that it was ever Hallmark Card perfect, but… For a long time, it at least, worked.

Abby’s not sure what to do with that. Her protective toward Tim feelings are kicking up, given extra fuel by new mommy hormones, and mixed in with those hormones are all the confusing thoughts and feelings that go with trying to do the best they can with Sean and hating doing things that will hurt him, and there’s rage at the crap Tori put Tim through, and there’s the fact that she knows deep down, below a lot of the stuff Tim’s willing to deal with, is the fact that he misses his mom, too.

And right now, there’s too much anger, and too much history, and too much present for him to get to that, to touch it, but she knows it’s there.

And she doesn’t know what to do with it, other than, eventually, poking him into chatting with Rachel about her.

Sarah sees all of that on her face, feels it in the shift in Abby’s emotional vibe, and takes a literal step back. “I’ll do what I can to make sure she’s not bugging him. Penny and Ducky are going to try to make the rehearsal dinner, so they’ll help. The four of you will be at the wedding, so… It’ll be okay.”

Abby flashes her a weak smile, and makes a mental note to make sure that Tim’s got all the buffer he wants for the wedding.
And she also makes the note to find out how much buffer he actually wants.

Getting ready for bed involves some shuffling around of their usual schedule.

It’s supposed to be Jimmy’s night with little boy. But… between the bed he’d normally be snoozing next to little boy being filled with the Mishoys, Mallops, Balloys? Whatever the hell the combined noun form of Bishop and Jake is, and the fact that being on baby duty for a child who is not biologically yours is the sort of thing that causes the outside world to raise eyebrows, Tim’s on baby duty, again.

Abby’d offered to take tonight, but he wants sleep tomorrow night so he’ll be sharp going into the Commission.

Likewise, instead of the four of them in the bathroom at once. They’re taking turns as ‘couples.’ The soundproofing is good here, but not perfect, and Jake and Bishop don’t need to be hearing Tim talking to Breena in the bathroom.

So, for the time being, all babies are fed, sleeping. Jimmy and Breena are taking care of their nightly bedtime routine in the bathroom. And Tim and Abby are getting ready to settle into bed.

Or they would be, except Abby’s remembering back to after DC fell, and Tim telling them about Rachel and her ‘emotional allergy shot’ technique. Little doses of something emotionally painful now, in a safe and controlled environment, so it doesn’t always trigger a huge painful/scary emotional response later.

She’s getting undressed. Tim’s putting on PJs, since he’ll be getting in and out over the course of the night. When she’s naked, except for her nursing bra, and sitting on the bed, Abby says, “So… how much Mom-time do you want for the wedding?”

He looks up from tying the knot on the drawstring of his flannel jammy pants. “Uh… As little as possible.”

She smiles at him. “I get that. I mean, do you want active buffer zones? If she looks like she’s closing in, should we head her off, or… you know, like with going back to NCIS, do you want some small, safe doses of time with her?”

Tim blinks. He hadn’t thought of that. “Uh… I… I’ll think about it.”

Abby hugs him. “Good. Whatever you want, we’ve got you.”

He slips into the bed next to her. Tonight she’s got one of the middle spots. He snuggles in against her back, and closes his eyes. He hears the bathroom door open, and the sound of Jimmy and Breena locking it. No Jake or Bishop ‘accidentally’ wandering in.

Once they get settled in bed, Jimmy next to Abby, and Breena on the far side of the bed, she also needs easy in and out access, Abby says something else. “Sarah reminded me that we’re not going to be the only poly relationship at the wedding, and… If we want to be out, that’s fine with her and Glenn.”

That gets a lot of thoughtful quiet directed at Abby.

“A lot of people are coming to this thing, right?” Jimmy asks, sounding a little tentative.
“Yeah. More than a hundred and fifty at the last count. Glenn’s got a big family. Not too many McGees, but she’s got all of her author buddies and clients invited, so lots of people, almost all of them will be strangers we’ll never see again.”

“The ones we will see again, for sure, are Penny, Ducky, Sarah, Glenn, and baby Holland. They all know already. Maybe Uncle Mike and his family, maybe Uncle Tom and his,” Tim adds feeling a lot of weight on this. They’ve been out, sort of, before. In Winchester, where no one knew them, and this would be… similar to that. Sort of.

And he remembers, being out, sort of, in Winchester, felt good. And, hell, after the thing with The Admiral, it’s not like everyone isn’t whispering about what he might get up to in his private life, anyway.

“And, in this crowd, I guess I’m better known as Thom Gmcity than Tim McGee, and if Thom has an unconventional family life, it doesn’t really matter. If it looks like a book will sell, publishers couldn’t care less about who, or how many, people you sleep with.”

He’s testing that idea out. It feels right to him.

“Yeah, but I’m still Breena Palmer, of Palmer and Slaters’, the name you want a lot of conservative respectability to go with, so that the web of pastors, ministers, and priests our family’s built up over the years doesn’t think twice about recommending me to people in need.”

Tim nods. “Got it. Total respectability.”

“Thank you.” Breena’s got one alternative motive, in addition to her very good reason for not wanting to risk being out to people who live in DC, especially this close to Tim’s statements to the Admiral, and that’s the way Tim sounded as he left his mom out of the list of people he’d be seeing again.

Namely, she can feel he’s thinking about picking a fight.

Probably a lot of reasons for it, and she doesn’t think they’re necessarily bad, but given how dramatic her Dad tried to make her wedding because of his own crap, she’s not paying that down the road to Sarah.

Sarah, if Breena has anything to do with it, gets to have an easy, painless wedding, without any extra drama of Tim picking a fight with his mom. If he wants to be out in front of her, in any other circumstance, she’ll back him, but this time.

Nope.

They’ve been quiet for a moment, and she decides to dive into it. Better to talk it out than to let it sit.

“You want to be out, party as a foursome where other people are doing the same thing, or you want to rub your mom’s nose in it and see what she does?” Breena asks.

Tim sighs. Breena’s got him on that. He wasn’t really aware of it, but now that she’s said it. “Yes.” Abby snuggles against him a bit deeper, and Jimmy pets his neck, saying, “Keep talking.”

But he can’t talk, because he needs to think. He makes a little, “Mmm..” sound, letting them know, in the snug dark of their bedroom, that he’s thinking.

Finally, he’s got the lines in place. “I got to piss him off so hard that he hit back. And, that was…
good, satisfying. You know? I got to be the one pushing the buttons. I got to be in control. I got to be
the one doing the hurting instead of getting hurt.”

“And you think the four of us would hurt her? Make her mad?” Jimmy says quietly. He didn’t pick
up on the same vibe Breena did, but those words make him feel squirmy.

“Yeah!” Tim’s voice is soft, but there’s something nasty in it. “She just… We talked that one time,
and she was hurting, but… not enough. Not the way I want her to hurt. ‘We did it for your own
good.’ ‘You needed this stuff.’ ‘It was important.’ ‘It made you who you are today…”

Abby rolls over to face Tim, and pets his arms. She remembers what he said when he came home
from that meet up. “No one’s the villain in their own story.”

He nods. Jimmy kisses the back of his neck. Breena’s got a hand on his hip.

Abby’s hand cups his face. “You want her to acknowledge that she did you wrong. That she was
wrong. You don’t want her to have the refuge of ‘I did the best I could.’”

Tim nods again.

“This won’t get you that,” Breena says quietly.

Tim nods once more. “I know.” He blinks hard. They’re making him dig deeper on what he really
wants. So he lays there, quietly, and thinks more. It takes a good ten minutes of quiet, of just
thinking, and they let him have that space to sort it out.

“Seventeen years of hell. When I was living with them. When she let him… When she backed his
plays and… He wasn’t there most of the time, so she was doing most of it.” His voice is tense and
sour. “And then I’m out, on my own, and she’s going for mom-of-the-year. She’s got my picture on
the mantle, and loves my books, and anything I want to do is fine, she’s all supportive, and… And
we’ve got hand knitted baby gear for Kelly like a month after she knows she’s on the way… And…

“I want her to be a cut and dried bad guy. I don’t want any lingering thoughts in my mind about she
did the best she could, and she was trying to be a good parent in a bad set of circumstances, and if
she sees us and flips out… then I can just blow up at her, and she’s the one with the problem…”

Tim doesn’t make noise when he cries. That’s a long ingrained defense mechanism. And it works
well tonight, too. In the other bedroom, less than thirty feet away, no one has any idea that anything
other than an early spring’s night of napping is happening in Tim and Abby’s room.

But he is crying, and his loves are holding onto him, until another, smaller cry tears through the
night. Tim sits up and wipes his eyes. “Okay… I’ve…” he doesn’t sound steady, because he’s not,
but beyond and above everything else, he’s a dad, and his job is to go get the crying baby, and make
sure he’s cleaned up, fed, and snuggled.

Because that’s how a baby knows love.

And that’s the job.
Tim’s not nervous as Sunday night, and the first bit of his Commission work, begins.

Excited, that’s definitely part of it. And maybe a bit of foreboding. He’s not sure if he’s getting ready to launch the maiden voyage of the Titanic or not.

He thinks about that as he tying his tie, (They’re going out for dinner, at a nice restaurant. He’s in charge of this. He might as well try to look the part.) and decides if he’s mulling over the idea that this might be a Titanic-level disaster that just possibly he is nervous.

New flavor of it, then. He’s not jittery. He doesn’t feel the need to fill the air with more and more and more chattery details. His hands and heart are steady.

So, maybe not. Maybe this is him being realistic. This is a huge project, he’s about to set it into motion, and if it works, it’ll be a thing of grace and beauty moving a lot of people to somewhere they want to get.

And if it doesn’t… Yeah, Titanic.

“Tie?” Abby asks, stepping out of the shower, toweling off her hair.

Tim shrugs. “Feeling like a grown up today?”

Abby nods and heads to her closet. She’s feeling like she might indeed have enough brains in her head to go along on this. “Let’s see if I can get myself into anything that resembles adult clothing.”

“Oh.” He’d forgotten she’s at a point where her body isn’t necessarily going to slip into her out and about clothing, let alone her nice out and about clothing. “Wear what you can. If nothing fits, I’ll dress down to match.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t need to do that.”

He shrugs one shoulder. “Don’t want you feeling out of place.”

Abby grins at him. “Honey, I know you’re used to looking at me, but have you forgotten the neck tattoos? I don’t blend anywhere ‘adult.’”

He steps closer to her and lays his lips on the tattoo of them on her neck. She sighs, wanting to press into him, but not doing it because he’s mostly dressed and she’s, aside from the parts covered by her towel, just stepped out of the shower, wet.

She turns, kisses his lips, and then gets back to her closet as he goes back to his, shuffling hangers around, looking for a jacket. (Which, before they ended up with at least three outfits for all occasions belonging to the Palmers, used to be a fairly easy task, but right now he’s eyeing a black wool sleeve and wondering if it’s his or Jimmy’s.) “Okay, I know we’ve got Penny, Ducky, Jake, and Bishop going. I know they’re the ‘political’ delegation. I know you and I are on… administration?”

He shrugs, finding his black suit jacket. “That’ll work. Bishop’s also got ‘big data’ cred. For us, tonight is mostly tech, some running things, and setting up how and what I want to work. I’m definitely there as admin, and if you want to poke me when it looks like the ship’s in danger from the rocks, please do, otherwise, you’re another set of eyes and ears to keep watch on this, make sure the tech works.”
“I can do that. Who else?”

“Manner is coming. He’s who I’m hoping will take over admin from me. When I hand this off, I’m going to need someone who can keep all the balls in the air and wrangle the tech guys while keeping the pols happy, and, I think he can do that.”

“That’s one hell of a job.”

“Yeah. All of this is one hell of a job.”

“You aren’t wrong about that.” Abby pulls out a white blouse and eyes it skeptically. She hasn’t put on anything that wasn’t a soft, nubby fleece or knit piece of clothing since before Sean was born. This is tailored silk. It’s part of the clothing she got after Kelly was born, and she needed new stuff for going back to work, and more specifically, going back to court. It’s cut to be especially flattering to a nursing mom’s figure, but demure enough to be appropriate to wear to court. The only questions are: A: does it still fit, and B: if she puts it on, will Sean (who is currently downstairs, with Jimmy and Breena and the girls) spit up on it before they get out of the house.

Only way to find out is to try it on.

She lays it on the bed and hunts down a bra. “Let’s see if I can get into this.”

Tim sees the blouse on the bed and smiles at it, and her. Then he finishes answering her question, “I’ve got Fielding coming in with her guys. When we were talking about this before, she had some really good ideas on it. So, they’re mostly tech with a side of having spent a lot of time working with the DoD’s big data and internet mining.”

“Your Angels are coming.”

He nods. “And Ngyn’s showing off her, ‘I can run this myself,’ cred. So, other than occasionally taking a second or two to check in on this, I’ve been letting her do her thing. She’s handling the NCIS delegation for this. Some of tonight, you know just about as much as I do on.”

Abby gets the bra on, and then pulls on the blouse. A bit of tugging, a moment of wondering if she’ll have to suck in her breath, but… “It fits!”

Tim nods, enjoying that fit quite a bit. It’s a little snug across the chest, but he doesn’t mind that at all.

“Who else?”

“Ngyn brought in Atherson out of Rota.”

“He’s your cryptologist, right?”

“Yeah. She’s got he and I as security for this thing. He’s doing most of the heavy lifting on that, though. Got to make sure a million or so people have access to it, but, at the same time, got to keep the rest of the world from hacking it. That’ll be…” Tim sighs.

“Impossible.”

“Yeah. Probably. But we’ll build it up as well as we can, or die trying. Probably try to set it so that each piece of equipment used to access the data is registered, so you’ve at least got to get onto the right piece of equipment to get into CrimeWeb. Been thinking, since we’re going to run it on smartphones, of making sure the damn things can take really good pictures, and use irises to get in. That way no one has to remember a password or anything. Get a registered phone, maybe each
agency has its own password to get to the ap, get onto the ap, snap a picture of your eye, and that gets you in. Atherson’s in charge of making sure that if you can’t get the phone and eyeball of someone who’s already on the system, that you can’t raid the data from the outside.”

“Sounds good.” She’s tugging on the pair of black trousers that go with that blouse, and gives up with them at her hips. They’re a wool/silk blend and have no give to them. And right now, her post-baby bottom half is not going to squeeze into those pants. Abby glares at the pants and goes back to the closet, hunting around.

“Breena’s got some pregnancy jeans. Put them under the blouse, add a jacket, and that’ll be good.”

She shakes her head at him. “Nope. If I’m going to wear this, I’ll get the rest of my ‘professional’ clothing on. Otherwise, I might as well go for one of my skirts and t-shirts.”

Abby’s been in PJs for pretty much two solid months, so even a skirt and t-shirt sounds really good to Tim. He’s still grinning.

She shakes her head a little and goes diving back into the closet. She thinks she’s got a skirt her butt and post-baby tummy can be shoved into.

“Breena’s got some pregnancy jeans. Put them under the blouse, add a jacket, and that’ll be good.”

“Which part.” By this point, she knows him way past well enough to tell something, beyond the details of running the Commission, is churning about in his head.

He half smiles, but it’s a somewhat confused looking gesture. Weird is coming off of all of this. “It’s… Okay, you know if someone calls me Sir, I say, ‘Boss or McGee, not ‘Sir,’ I work for a living?'”

“You stole that from Gibbs.”

“And he stole it from a million other non-coms, and Ducky would probably say they stole it from a squire or page or someone with a sword who wasn’t actually a lord, and it probably goes back further than that. Anyway…” He sighs a bit. “I was thinking about this before, and it’s hitting pretty hard right now, this is ‘sir’ territory. I’m not building CrimeWeb. Not literally. I won’t code it. I won’t be the guy who figures out how to make it scan eyeballs or anything like that. I’m… Coming up with a shape, and then finding other guys to build it, and hooking them up with the guys who’ll get it paid for, and… Shit, this is Senior’s territory. I’m coming up with an idea, shaping it, and then putting people into place to make it real, and then selling it to other people, and then I’m going to hand it off.”

“And that feels weird.”

“That feels really weird. I’m not ‘working’ on this. I’m setting up other people to work on it. Maybe I’ll keep eyes on it enough to make sure it doesn’t go off the rails, like I do with the Navy’s cyber-testing program, but… Once this is in motion, it won’t be mine.”

Abby thinks about that for a moment. She can hear he’s feeling uncertain about it, but wants him to
“keep talking. “Is it good weird?”

“I don’t know, yet. Right now, just weird. When this is done, I go back to NCIS, work on the harassment software, really work, I’ll code that myself, have the rest of the crew test it, and I’ll work cases until it’s time to head to the FBI, but once I’m there… everything I do will be like this. I don’t think I’ll be working anymore. I’ll be ideas and structure and getting other people to do things.”

She smiles at him, squeezing his hand. “This sounds like something to talk to Leon about. I’m fairly certain he’ll tell you it’s still work.”

“I know, but…” That but lingers, waiting for help.

Abby’s not sure if he can give it the help it needs, but she has an idea of some of the context he might be looking for, “But you intentionally weren’t an officer. You didn’t want to be the guy in charge. You wanted to be the genius in the back who saves the day by whipping out that little bit of know how no one else could do, and then go back to being out of the limelight.”

Abby’s got him nailed on that. He nods. She flashes him a little salute. He rolls his eyes. The last thing he ever wanted was people jumping to attention and snapping off salutes at him. “You wrote something about destiny a while back, right?”

He shrugs, not immediately sure what she’s talking about. “I’ve written a ton of things about everything.”

“Something about how we’re born with many options, and whittle it down to one, and destiny can’t be denied, and it’s about how we go about getting there that matters.”

“That’s triggering some faint memories. I was probably feeling pretty pompous when I wrote that.”

She sniggers. “Yeah, it wasn’t one of your more laid back statements. Anyway… Maybe running things, being the idea guy who gets everyone else moving in the right directions… Maybe that’s where you’re supposed to be. I mean… Look at who you come from. People who aimed low and didn’t do much aren’t your family tree. If something like this can be in a person’s DNA, it’s in yours.”

He shrugs at that, too. “I’d prefer to believe that isn’t a DNA sort of thing.”

She shrugs back, his preferences on the point are moot. Either it is a DNA sort of thing, or it’s not.

He nods back at her, well aware of the fact that the universe is supremely indifferent to his preferences on this matter, and the science that’s coming out seems to be saying that DNA’s at least as involved in all of this as environment.

He drives for about six more miles, thinking about DNA, family trees, ‘Sir,’ being an officer, and all the rest of it.

When it finally hits him, he feels blindingly stupid about it.

“I had to call him Sir.”

Abby doesn’t need a heads up to figure out who him is. She’s known for a long time that The Admiral is why Tim intentionally did not become an officer or anything like command rank for such a long time. If he’d gone to Annapolis, he would have gotten out a twenty-one-year-old Naval Ensign or Marine Second Lieutenant. With his grades and work ethic, at Annapolis he would have been ordering his classmates around. And even without that, even with the route he did pick, he
ended up turning down command ranks and doing his best to let Tony or Gibbs run as many of the cases as possible.

The Admiral wouldn’t have spent more than a decade the third man on a four-man team, but Tim did, because he wouldn’t.

“Stayed… a specialist, with Gibbs’ team for a very long time, too long, maybe. Finally made the jump to management and ran it like a non-com to avoid being him.”

“I know.” She strokes his hand.

He smiles a little, but it’s not happiness, just, not wincing.

The fact of the matter is he likes this.

He’s sitting at a long oval table with a dozen other people, going over the shape of what they’re going to build, how it’ll work, the tech involved in making it happen, the political realities that will have to be observed, how to package this and make it go from being an idea into a thing, and…

This feels good. And not just on a this is enjoyable level, but it also feels right. They’re talking around the table about how much information this system is going to have to deal with and how to make it do that fast enough to be useful (after all, this app will be useless if it takes six weeks to return a match), and Penny’s asking about how much of the underlying infrastructure will have to be redone to make this work. (They’re hoping to piggyback off of the existing databases, but a lot of them are slow.) And Jake wants to know if they’ll eventually want to rebuild the whole web. And he’s got Ngyn and Fielding talking about how they’d love to rebuild it all eventually, but that’s a multi-decade project, so it’s got to be functional with the infrastructure currently in place, and…

It is good.

He’s the four-star general sitting at HQ with his hand-chosen team of one-star generals, laying out the battle plans for the entire damn invasion, and… It’s fun.

Tomorrow, when they open this up to the wider group…

Tomorrow’s going to be awesome.

And if this gets off the ground…

They’re walking out of the restaurant, and Tim shivers at that idea. If they can get this built, get it working… The world of law enforcement will shift. Better, faster, more streamlined, all one team working together to put the bad guys away.

If it works, he’ll change the world with it. Change the world the way an officer, a general… or an admiral, changes the world, by seeing the future, laying out a plan, and handing it off to other people to do.
“I work for a living…” Tim’s thinking (and apparently saying out loud) as they drive home.

“Uh, yeah…” Abby says back. “Good work. Did you see the way Atherson and Ngyn lit up at those security ideas, and Brand, she knew exactly what to do to take it a step further. This team is gold, Tim.” Abby’s smiling; it’s been too long since the working part of her brain’s been online, and she enjoyed every minute of that dinner. “I can’t wait to see this come up. Do you know how long I spend every shift updating databases? Get this in play, put it all into one system, and it’ll take care of spreading the information around.” She’s grinning as she shakes her head. “I was thinking though, you want to run this as an ap and a web, do we have any really good web developers coming to this thing?”

Tim nods. “Uh, yeah. Tomorrow. Got a few of them. A friend of a friend scalped some talent from Google and Facebook. Got a few ap designers, too. And before you ask, yeah, we snagged two guys from Amazon to talk server farm design.”

The smile on Abby’s face gets even wider. “This is going to be amazing!” Then she pulls out of the fun of building dream systems to focusing back onto Tim, who is, right now, not all giggles and smiles. That’s when she realizes he’s not talking about work but work, like he was earlier today. “You’re back at the officer stuff, aren’t you?”

He nods. “Yeah. Thinking about it, a lot.”

“What are you thinking?”

He shakes his head. “Hard to find words for, but… Feels like a major shift. I’ve been in charge for the last year, but… This is different.”

“You’re not reporting to anyone else on this. Before, the buck stopped with Leon. Here, the buck stops with you.”

He inclines his head, eyes darting between the cars on the road around them. “There’s that. More to it, though, probably.” Or not. Maybe. He is very much the guy in charge on this. But… he feels like this officer stuff will follow over to the FBI, and he won’t be the guy in charge there… Except… He’s the guy who will have the job to take out the Director of the FBI, should he need taking out. So, maybe Abby is onto something with that. If you’re the guy who watches the watchmen, the buck does stop with you.

“There always is. Keep thinking. Or spitball more tech ideas with me, let it bop around in the back of your mind, and wait. It’ll pop up, as long as you’re not actively trying to shut it down, this stuff always does.”

He nods at that, too. “I think it’s trying to pop up now. That’s why I can’t seem to let it go.”

“Oh, okay gnaw on it for a bit, and I’ll go text some ideas to Delilah. When you’ve got words, I’ve got ears.”

Tim nods, still thinking. This does feel like the verge of something big, but… It’s burbling around back there, but not breaking through, not yet.

Abby spends another moment on her phone and then says, “I am so glad you grabbed her for this.”

Tim smiles at that. Fielding knows her stuff, DoD does a lot of big data work, and she does a ton of it, taking billions of bits of information, looking for threats on the internet, and then pulling people out of the chatter, hunting them down online, so she’s got two parts of what they’re hoping this system will do, down, and she’s fun to work with.
She also appears to have smacked Manner with a bad case of ‘Pah!’ He wasn’t literally drooling, but the last time Tim saw someone so thunderstruck it was Draga looking at Johnson. “Those ideas you’re texting her about, wouldn’t be about Manner, would they?”

Abby flashes him a naughty smile. “It is possible, that between details on how to set up our database so that everyone using this device doesn’t have to go through every single piece of data, every time they run a search, thus upping our speed enough so that this is usable, that I may, just possibly, find a moment to mention that Manner is single.”

Tim laughs.

---

He’s lying in bed, later that night, back in his own home, with Abby on one side and Breena on the other when he finally remembers the thing Abby had mentioned earlier.

He didn’t write it. Well, he wrote it. It’s in one of his books. MacGregor’s talking about destiny, so he typed it out onto a piece of paper, but he didn’t write it. It’s a quote. He had to take a certain number of humanities classes at Johns Hopkins to graduate, and his Introduction to Western Philosophy class introduced him to Heidegger. He figured it was well enough known that he didn’t need to exactly spell out (beyond the use of extra quotation marks) that it was a quote. Apparently not.

“Anyone can achieve their fullest potential, who we are might be predetermined, but the path we follow is always of our own choosing. We should never allow our fears or the expectations of others to set the frontiers of our destiny. Your destiny can't be changed but, it can be challenged. Every man is born as many men and dies as a single one.”

When he says that, MacGregor is talking to Tibbs about moving on. It’s the last book of the series, and Tibbs is retiring. The uber case (The murder of Tibbs’ wife and daughter, always hinted at, occasional bits and pieces of information offered up, but never fully worked on until the last book.) has been solved. Tibbs is done. MacGregor is getting ready to move over to CyberCrime. Tommy and Liza are going to take over Tibbs’ team. Everything is shifting.

And MacGregor says that to Tibbs, talking about the destiny Tibbs should have had, the one that got knocked off kilter by the murder of his wife and child. And how, case done, bad guy dead, it was finally time for Tibbs to go back to being the man he was supposed to be.
That’s where the book ends. Tibbs getting ready to move onto what comes after being a cop. After his wife’s killer has been caught and killed.

But, lying in bed, with Abby cuddled against him, and Breena’s back against his, he’s feeling those words, and what they mean to him.

Now. As opposed to then, when he was just looking for a nice sum up to go with the series.

He sighs long and low.

Admiral Timothy McGee. That’s who he was supposed to be. At least, if you had asked his parents. He was supposed to be the man who came up with the big plans and told everyone what to do and when and how, and then have them go do it, keep an eye on the results and re-plan as needed to get the big goal done.

He was supposed to be the guy with the big goals.

He was supposed to be “Sir.”

Maybe. He’s never tried to untangle who he is supposed to be from who his parents thought he was “supposed” to be. Not on any level beyond the knee-jerk you wanted this so I’m making a 180 and going the exact opposite direction.

So, fate? Destiny? The idiot goals of power mad twits who couldn’t see the person in front of them?

His own destiny, or a mold they tried to shove him into?

Only one destiny, many paths. So, right end goal, wrong path? Was he on the wrong path, or were they trying to shove him onto the wrong path?

Has this been almost forty years of his own fears trying to shove him off the path he was supposed to be on? Had he run as far away from who he was supposed to be as he could, but it still caught him? Was this just him taking his own route to get where he was supposed to be?

In the dark, he doesn’t know.

In the dark, between two of his loves, he’s not even sure if he’s asking the right questions.

---

Being the guy running the Commission is not the same thing as being the guy running CrimeWeb.

For example, the guy running the Commission, Tim McGee, shows up two hours early to make sure everything is in place, the food will be ready, security is doing their thing, the guest list is set, blah, blah, blah…

It’s the first night, and like all the other ones, this is a cocktail hour, dinner, meet and greet. None of the other ones started with any heavy lifting until Tuesday morning, so Tim’s got them following the same pattern.

Plus, that meet and greet allows the guy who’s running CrimeWeb to get the last bit of intel he needs to do a good job of connecting people to jobs. There are way too many people here for this to work the way he wants it to, so he’s got some weeding to do.
The people around him are wrangling code, networking with developers, buzzing with conversation, some of them talking big ideas with him (which he enjoys), some of them are snarky little bastards waiting for this to fail, some want to be here, but they’re not top tier talent. Tonight, Tim’s finding out who is who.

He’s also doing a lot of behind the scenes stuff. Like making sure, tomorrow, when they get into big ideas, they’ve got functional wifi that’s properly secure, and that he (and everyone else who’s going to speak) will be able to show off what they’ve got on a big screen, and lunch will show up at the right time, and when they get talking what sort of device to work, they’ll have prototypes (mostly iPhones) to play with, and just…

Details.

He might be the Four Star General for CrimeWeb, but he’s doing non-com work for the Commission.

In some ways, that’s really comfortable. Given a job like: make sure there are enough plugs so everyone can charge their devices without blowing out the circuit, he’s feeling pretty secure. It might not be fun, not the way spinning big ideas is, but it’s real. And he’s good with real.

On the ride home, it hits him. He doesn’t have a secretary. He barely has a second-in-command. If he needs grunt work, detail work, any sort of little job: set meetings, get airline tickets, send out memos, keep track of his phone and email, he does it himself.

He’s got the budget for it. If he wanted a secretary, he could have one.

And, other than the very occasional thought that it might be handy to have someone do stuff like that, the idea of actually getting one never occurred to him.

Because non-coms do all the jobs. They may delegate some of it, but they don’t have a person whose whole job is to take care of the detail/grunt work so they can do the idea work.

Officers have adjutants or secretaries or… someone to take care of the little things so they can do the big things.

And he wonders, as he’s driving home, how much not having someone to deal with the little stuff was his subconscious making sure he didn’t make the leap into officer territory.

When he gets to Jimmy’s, a bit past midnight on Tuesday, he expects to find a dark house full of sleeping people.

Not so much. When he opens the door he sees the cool light of the TV flickering, and very soft voices quietly murmuring in the living room. Instead of heading straight up, he detours, sees Breena snoozing on the sofa, and decides to tuck her in.

He’s turning off the TV, facing it, when he hears, “Leave it. I’m not really sleeping.”

“Oh.” He turns back to her, crosses the room, and sits on the sofa next to her. “Bad night?”
“Blech.” She sticks out her tongue. “Not puking, but too sick to sleep. You need to crash?”

He does. Tomorrow’s an early start, and it’s already late. “Soon, but I’ve got a lot of ideas in my head.” He could certainly use some time to get them out. He’s stroking her hair, and she’s turning her face to his palm. “You want the distraction?”

“Please.”

“Final headcount was 243 people. I met and talked to all of them. The only thing they have in common is the idea that the current system can be improved. About a hundred of them are there because they want to build this thing. Another hundred want to glom on and grab credit. The other fifty or so are expecting it to fail, and I think they want to be there and laugh when it does.”

“Doesn’t sound encouraging.”

He’s not sure, but he figures those kind of numbers are par for the course for something like this. “That first hundred, though.” He shakes his head slightly, grin spreading across his face. “We’re gonna build something amazing with them.”

Breena sits up a bit, leaning into Tim. He takes her wrist in his hand and works the anti-nausea point. It never did much for him except let him feel good enough to sleep.

She sighs as he works that point. She’s not feeling better, but tired is starting to take over, and she’s pretty sure that his voice and touch may lull her to sleep. “Tell me about amazing.”

“Last time I was in a room with that much raw computer talent, I was wearing a cap and gown and walking down the aisle for my MIT graduation. I’m thinking we’ll fob off the naysayers until it’s testing time. I’m going to want people to shoot it down then. We’ll weed them out and call them phase three. The ‘want to be on it for the glory’ guys… This is so big, I’m sure I’ll have plenty of jobs for them. Clean up coding, testing, selling it to their own delegations, the sort of stuff that comes after the plan’s been made. And those first hundred.” Tim’s got a dreamy look on his face, “they’re going to build it. I’m going to lay it out tomorrow morning, give them my sketch, and then I’ll split them up, get them on it, send groups B and C home, and we’re going to build it.” He’s still grinning.

“I’ve got a shape and a function and a finished idea in my head, and they’re going to make it so much better! I’ve had twenty people suggest tweaks I’d have never thought of, snippets of how to make it more functional, faster, smaller, how to… God, every time you hear about the government building something it’s a fucking train wreck. It’s a million percent over budget, ten years late, and doesn’t work.” He can’t stop smiling, and sees Breena looking really tired, so he shifts again, so she’s lying on her back, and he’s kneeling on the floor, next to the sofa, still holding her wrist and facing her. She squeezes his hand and pulls the blanket over her shoulders.

Tim keeps talking, keeping his voice low. “But this, God, baby, this is going to work! We’re not fobbing it off on low bid contractors who pocket the cash and produce nothing, no one profits from it taking ten times longer than expected, most of them, the ones I’m grabbing for phase one, are taking leaves of absence from other projects to do this. They don’t even know for sure if they’re getting paid for this, but we’re doing it.

“I’ll beg, borrow, steal the funding to get this working. Penny’s got appropriations committee members coming for this, and we’ll schmooze the hell out of them. I’ll get my DiNozzo Senior smile in place and sell this damn thing, because we need it, and it’ll work.”

Breena’s smiling at him, enjoying how happy this is making him as her eyes grow heavier and sleep begins to tug her away from the waking world.
Tuesday morning, Tim’s up beyond bright and early. He’s got to get in, make sure everything is up and ready, and take care of one last detail as people come in.

Like all the Commissions he’s been to, when you get in, you check in. He’s got his guys doing this, too. Check in is an easy way to control the room, which he can’t do just by line of sight. Too many people will be at this thing to do it by line of sight.

He wants to make sure the right people get into this.

And his last detail comes from having made sure to talk to literally, everyone, on his list last night. (He had the list on his phone, and kept updating it.)

He wasn’t kidding with Breena when he talked about getting more than half of these people out of his hair. He’ll have jobs for all of them sooner or later, but not right now. So, he talked. He got an idea of who wanted to do what and how. And all night long he kept adding 1, 2, or 3 to the names on his list.

So, he got in after everyone (but Breena) had gone to bed, and leaves before everyone (but Jimmy, he’s on with Sean) is up, and gets himself to the Omni, early.

Hotels are never really still. People tend to be moving through them all the time, but, the hallway his Commission is on is quiet.

He’s got his coffee, (Half-caf, he figures he’ll need the boost, but he’s not back to full strength, yet.) half a dozen phones, his laptop, and his own personal phone.

He sees the security ladies aren’t here, yet, but their computers are. He’s not thrilled by that. It’s bad security to just leave them lying around. But, he’s here now and about to check the list. If anyone new is on it, he’ll find them.

Then he takes his coffee, and his laptop, and heads into the Commission room, currently set up as a huge collection of chairs facing a podium, and gets working.

10:00. Showtime. Everyone is in, everyone is sitting down, the conversation is starting to dull down as Tim moves toward the podium to get this show on the road.

“Good morning,” he says in his best teacher running the classroom voice. He figures, in his jeans, purple button down, black tie, and black suit jacket, that he likely looks a lot like a teacher in front of a classroom, too. “I wanted to thank all of you for taking the time to come to this. I do have ideas and jobs for everyone, but not all of you will need to be here for all of this.” That gets some annoyed muttering. “Over a long career of law enforcement, I’ve found that if you can scale down, you should. Get the plan hammered out, and then expand outward. Right now we’re in a classic, too-many-cooks, situation.”

That’s not winning a lot of happy comments, either. But Tim keeps plowing on. “When I’m not in charge of this sort of stuff, I’m a writer. And books, good books, get made a certain way. There’s the original writer, who puts everything together, and he thinks he’s got the greatest idea ever, because he’s off writing it, making his baby come to life on the page.” Tim smiles a bit, and he’s starting to get some more interest with these remarks. “Problem is, it’s the writer’s baby on that page, and just
like any new parent, a writer can’t tell if his baby is ugly!” He pauses while that line gets a bit of a laugh. That makes him feel better. This is starting to move in the direction he wants it to.

“So, look at your name tags. If it’s got a one on it, you’re in the writer group. You’ll be staying here, with me, this week, and we’re going to bang out a rough draft which we will love beyond all reason, and be completely blind to the flaws of, just like a baby.” A bit more laughing.

“Now, if any of you have ever read a first draft, or seen an ugly baby, you know that sometimes, writers and parents are not objective about what they’ve brought forth, and at least in terms of a rough draft, sometimes a lot of work will be needed to make that draft into anything anyone would voluntarily read. Normally, in the writing world, we call the people who do that work, and point out, often not too gently, that the baby is in need of massive cosmetic surgery, editors. If you’ve got a 2 on your name tag, you’re going into the editing pile. Once we’ve got the draft done, you guys are going to take a whack at it. You’re going to see the good ideas and the bad ones, help us make the good ones better, and whittle out the bad ones. You’re not going to be on this week, because I don’t want you guys falling in love with the baby, and honestly, I don’t want you too friendly with group 1. I don’t want you to worry about hurting feelings or anything like that. So, thank you for your time, thanks for coming, and when we have that first draft, you’ll come out and beat it into shape, and then toss it back to group one.”

He can hear that group 2 is split on this. Some of them seem intrigued, some of them are grumbling. He’s not too worried. He feels like he’s done an okay job of weeding the real talent from the second string, and this will make sure the second string who is just in it for the glory likely won’t return his… Manner’s… calls in a few months.

Better off with them out of this.

“Okay, to carry this book analogy a bit farther, there’s what happens after the book goes live, namely critics get it. And they get paid to say nasty things about pretty much everything. Now, with books, usually, if it bombs it bombs and there’s no time to fix things. CrimeWeb is too important for that to happen. So, if you’ve got a 3 on your name tag, you are part of the Critic group, and you’re out of here. When we’ve got our working prototype up, you will get a copy to test, and I am asking you to rip it to shreds. I want every mean, nasty, non-functional, nit-picky comment you can come up with on this. Everything from the font is annoying, to the background color strains your eyes, to it’s unintuitive, to structural issues, to how your favorite sixty-seven-year-old technophobe LEO can’t turn a smart phone on, let alone use this thing, anything you could possibly complain about, that’s what you guys are going to do.

“I am going to give you an early version of CrimeWeb and carte blanche to voice every, single problem you’ve got with it, and then, we’ll take it back to group one, who will redo it again, and send it again back to group two, and then you’ll get it one more time, and from there, we’ll talk about going live.

“So, two and three, thank you for coming. I have names and contact information, and when we’re ready for you, you will get the call. Group one, let’s get to work!”

Like Abby said, this team is gold.

This is the most fun he’s had on a job in… years probably. Maybe ever.

Eh… maybe not. He doesn’t want to cheapen what he had with Gibbs’s team, or what he was doing
in the basement. This is a different kind of fun.

For this crew, right now, he’s gotten through the main idea, how this will work, and he’s got his people broken into their sub-specialties, working on how to do whatever it is they do, and they’ll keep that up until Thursday. Then they’ll each present their first bit of it. Thursday afternoon, there’ll be the fast and dirty cobble it all together into one unit. Friday morning, more of that.

Friday afternoon, talking to the money guys. Selling it to congress. It won’t, by any stretch of the imagination, work by Friday. But they’ll have some pretty pictures, and some charts and graphs, and a few ideas on how much it’ll cost to build, and all the rest of that, ready to go.

In his subgroup, he’s got a few of the coders, one AFIS expert, an ap designer, his own security background, and between sessions of Tim circling the room talking to people, they’re working on a very simple prototype to show Penny, Jake, and whomever else they get down here for this.

He hopes, for his demonstration, to put a print on something, a mug maybe, powder it, and then shoot a high def photo of it with the phone, and have it pop up all of his ID stuff.

For show, and with a database of only one print, this is easy to program, but his guys get talking about how to do it for real, too.

“Why not just feed the picture directly into AFIS?” he hears Jerri Blanchare, his ap developer ask Tom Rawson, the AFIS guy.

Tom shakes his head. “AFIS has a specific way of uploading prints. This is part of what we’re streamlining, a way to get a picture of a print directly into the system without two hours of setting it up.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. If I don’t orient the print correctly, blow it up to the right size, put my markers in the right spots, AFIS can’t use it. So…” Tom eyes Howard, who’s on this crew for her programming skills.

Catherine’s been listening, thinking about the problem. “Yeah, we can do it. Just takes time. Get the system to know what a loop and a whorl and an arch is, figure out where to put the markers, figure out how to put markers in place… You’ve got most of it ready to go, we’re just talking about automating what the lab tech does.” She eyes Tim. They’ve been getting a lot of pieces of programming to make this thing work.

Tim gestures to the rest of the crew. “You want me to set up a version of our job software for this. Everyone spitballs ideas, lists jobs that need to be done, and build a database of who’s got what talents to put on them?”

“Get the B team in on it, too. We’re going to need the extra manpower,” Manner says, popping up from somewhere.

“I can do that.”

Manner pulls him aside after that. “I like what you did with the C team.”
Tim nods. “We’ll need the rain on our parade sooner or later, but not now.”

Manner nods, and both of them watch the crowd buzzing around them, working ideas, putting together different sections of the blueprint. “You get funding for this, and it’s mine, right?”

Tim nods again. “Yeah, if I can get it in the air, I’ll hand it off.”

Manner smiles. “Good. How about this, then, if we can get it in the air, I’ll take it over. I’m the one who’ll have to deal with these people after you leave, so, how about I do what I’m good at, wrangling bureaucrats, and you do your thing, looking smart and earnest. You show them the baby is beautiful, and I’ll show them that it’s cost effective, will feed itself and change its own diapers and how it will increase accountability. Just because you love a cowboy doesn’t mean Congress does, and right now, I’d imagine they’re pretty wary of guys shouting ‘Yippie Ki Yay, let me make my own rules.’”

Tim inhales and that and then nods again. “I think you’ve got a point.”

“Good. So, where’s your grandmother?”

“Last I heard, back in NYC. They’ll come down again for Friday.”

“Give me her number, I’m going to want to know everything there is to know about the people she’s bringing down.”

Tim pulls out his phone, and texts Manner Penny’s number. Then he texts one more number.

Manner looks up from that one. “Uh?”

“So you don’t have to come up with some lame excuse to get it from me later.”

Manner smirks as he looks at Fielding’s number. “Got it last night after dinner.”

Tim laughs. “Good job.”

“Got to be more to life than work, right?”

“I certainly think so.”

Tim watches Manner head off. Manner’s an officer. He’s a bureaucrat, too. A good one. He’d be an excellent general staff member.

Not enough imagination to come up with the big picture, but once he’s got the big picture spelled out for him, he can get people on it and build it.

Tim sees Manner talking, sees him grabbing a few of the B team who are lingering around and start to put them to work. Tim can imagine what he’s got them doing, probably making pretty documents about how spiffy this is and how much better it’ll do the job than the current system.

Once he gets a headcount from Penny, he’ll probably get them researching each person coming, finding out who they are and working on the sales pitch.
What Manner doesn’t do, at least from where Tim is sitting, is attempt to research the at least fifty people who are coming to this thing all by himself. Tim sighs; he knows that if he wasn’t handing this bit off to Manner, that he would be attempting to get everything on each of these people by himself.

Officers delegate. They know what it is they can do that no one else can, and all the rest of the stuff they hand off.

Manner can get other people working on the objective: Sell this to Congress, better than everyone else here. So that’s what he’s doing. He’s using his people, effectively.

Tim’s seeing it, feeling it, in a way he hasn’t before. He looks around at this crew buzzing away around him. If he wants to, he can circle around and keep eyes on what everyone is doing, see the bigger shape and guide them toward it. Or he can go back to his own group and work on one smaller aspect of this job.

Tim rubs his lips together uncomfortably.

He’s the idea guy. Anyone else here can make sure the damn wifi works. There’s no reason for him to do stuff like that. He’s a security guy, that’s true, but so are six other guys here. He’s not adding anything to the prototype group that three other guys here couldn’t.

But no one else here could come up with CrimeWeb. No one else here has a more complete mental image of the whole design.

And if he’s working on the wifi, or making sure lunch shows up on time, or designing the code wall keeping people out of CrimeWeb, he’s wasting his time.

________________________________________

On the way home from the Commission on Tuesday, Tim wishes he could talk to his grandfather. Nelson, not his Pop.

With his aversion to his father, he’s done everything he can to avoid ‘the officer class.’ That’s covered everything from not leaping up to management years earlier, to not socializing with active duty military, to avoiding situations where he’d be the one giving orders, to… all of it.

It’s not that he can’t do it. It’s not that he isn’t good at it. It’s not, even, on a rational level, something he was aware of, but it is very much something he did.

His comfort level maxed out with guys like Gibbs, higher ranking non-coms. Guys who ran teams. Sometimes even large teams. Guys who did everything that everyone on the team did, too.

But, he looks at what he did as he moved to Cybercrime. He tested his team. That’s right out of the non-com playbook. Learn your players, find out what their strengths are, and use it. Because he thought he was the DC Branch Cybercrime Team leader. Leon was the officer, and he was the sergeant who really ran the team.

That was a comfortable move he was more than ready to make.

Turns out Leon had some tricks up his sleeve, and apparently gave him a stealth field commission. So, the next thing he did was build an entirely new system to make the whole damn army he worked with more effective.
Which is not a *team leader* sort of thing.

That’s officer land. Officers build systems. They look at big objectives and come up with end goals. Put a beachhead on Normandy. Go redo the way NCIS handles paperwork and free up hundreds of man hours a day for the whole agency. Build a system for rooting out corruption in the entire Federal Government. Officer-land.

Tim swallows. Given some power, apparently his first instincts are to do ‘officer’ things. While trying to look as much like a sergeant as possible.

Non-coms run teams. They run good teams who, when given a job, can see the job, do the job, and make whatever stands between them and the job go away.

And that’s Gibbs, and these days, Tony. Dispatch calls. They drop a job in his lap. And he does whatever has to be done to get the job done. And if that means unraveling a twenty-part conspiracy, the conspiracy gets unraveled.

But Gibbs, or Tony, doesn’t go out and find the jobs. They don’t make the jobs. They really don’t build the tools that lets everyone else do the job, too.

On top of that, jobs aren’t system. Go get this bad guy, go solve this puzzle, that’s a job. It might have a ton of parts. It might be a very complicated job. They might have immense leeway on how to do the job.

But it’s a job.

Look at the job, look at all the jobs, and see what people need to do it better. Give them better tools, better environments to do the job, get the right people in the job. That’s a system.

And Tim, driving home from CrimeWeb, and on the verge of an FBI career, builds systems now.

And he wishes, as he’s driving home, that he could talk to Admiral Nelson McGee, who was once Lt. Nelson McGee, standing on the deck of a sinking ship in Pearl Harbor, shooting a gun he wasn’t rated on because the gun crew was dead, rapidly coming to the conclusion that in a world of airplanes, battleships were overrated.

Nelson saw a system problem, and spent his career shaping that system. And when Admiral Nelson McGee died, his fingerprints were all over the entire Naval Aviator system, from the design of aircraft carriers, to the policies that got them built, to the reworking of the Navy to shift focus away from bigger and bigger battleships to faster and better planes with longer ranges.

As he pulls into his driveway, seeing all the cars but Jimmy’s, he wishes he had more memories of Nelson. Wishes he could guess what he would have said.

Well… he closes his car door behind him and heads in, he wishes he could guess what he would have said besides, “Get it done.” He’s absolutely sure Nelson would have said something along those lines.

“Earth to Tim…” Jimmy’s saying as Tim’s standing in the bathroom, holding Sean, who is screaming his little head off. Yes, his sisters may like tubby time, but Sean is under the impression that bath time is his own personal hell and he should never, ever have to be dipped in a bathtub. And soap… The less said about intentional attempts to apply soap to his tiny person, the better.
In that he’s starting to get crusty (and smelly), his parents (all four of them) have unanimously decreed that Sean’s getting his bath tonight.

“Yeah…” he’s patting Sean, making shushing noises, he’s not even in the water yet. Tim hasn’t even gotten him undressed, yet.

Jimmy’s drying off Anna. They’ve got the girls done and out of the tub. They decided that tubby time with a guy as little as Sean will go much better if there aren’t three bigger girls in the tub at the same time. “We’re out.” Tim nods, seeing the water draining out of the tub. He waits for it to finish, hushing Sean, bouncing him gently, “Come on, baby, it’s not that big of a deal. Someone’s pretty stinky and needs a tubby.”

Sean is not mollified.

“I’m getting in, too!”

More wailing. The water finishes draining away. Tim gives the tub a quick rinse, and then gets the water going again. “It’ll be fast.” He puts Sean on his back, on the bathmat, and begins to strip his own clothing off. Sean, apparently deciding that he’s been given a reprieve from a fate worse than death, begins to calm down.

Jimmy sees that and says, “I wonder if he can see the tub when you’re holding him up, and that’s why he flips out.”

Tim shrugs, pulling his socks off. “I’d think he wouldn’t be able to see it from that far away. His eyes aren’t that hot, yet.”

“Even I can see a bathtub from six feet away. His eyes aren’t that bad. When we get done, let’s order one of those baby tub things people pop in their sinks, and see if it’s just the tub that flips him out.”

Tim nods. “Fine.” He finishes undressing, and then strips Sean out of his onesie and diaper, lifting him to his chest. Once Sean’s up, he starts yelling again. “I think you’re onto something.” Tim grabs the baby soap, and, chin on Sean’s head, says, “Come on. No tubby for you. Let’s see if you like the shower better.”

Sean calms down some as they leave the kids’ bathroom, and he’s done crying by the time Tim gets him to his bathroom. Tim turns on the water, waits a moment for it to get warm, and steps in, his own back to the water. He gets the washcloth wet, and gently rubs is over Sean’s back. Sean’s startled by suddenly being all wet on his back, but he doesn’t scream.

Tim shuffles him around a bit more, once his back is done, so he’s cradled in his arm, looking up. He gently dabs soap on Sean’s tummy, legs, and feet. “So, what is it about you and bathtubs? Or do you just want some time without all the girls?”

Sean stares up at him, face going red, grunts, and poops on him.

Tim shakes his head, rolls his eyes, and says, “At least you waited until we were in the shower.” Then he yells to Jimmy, “Hey, we need the bleach wipes in here!”

---

Kids are asleep. Shower is sanitized. It’s a bit before nine and the adults are “done” for the night.
(Okay the three of them who aren’t on Sean duty are ‘done’ for the night.) Tim’s already in their bed, trying to get an early night, because he’s got another early morning.

“Where were you when we were getting Sean ready for his bath,” Jimmy asks as dries off his hands, heading out of the bathroom. (Wipe down shower with sanitizing wipes, toss them in trash bag, take bag to trashcan, and then wash up hands. They’ve done this more than a few times.)

“Uh…” Tim thinks back. He got Sean washed up, and himself, and then dried, dressed (Sean, Tim’s under the blankets, so he’s perfectly fine in his skin.), and into bed. “It’s silly.”

Jimmy shrugs, sitting on the bed, unbuttoning his shirt. “Don’t want to talk about it silly, or feels stupid silly?”

“Eh. Some of both maybe…”

“The ‘Sir’ thing Abby was talking about?”

“Yeah.”

Jimmy waits to see if he’ll say more.

Tim shrugs again. He licks his lips and looks up at the ceiling. “In The Captain’s house, he was in charge. Always. For everything. Immediate, unquestioning obedience was the drill. And God help you if you failed drill. That’s why we called him, even mom, The Captain. I called him, Sir, most of the time. Dad was okay, but if he was talking to me, sir was how I responded. ‘Please pass the salt, Dad,’ was fine. ‘Go clean your room.’ ‘Yes, Dad,’ wasn’t. That had to be ‘Yes, Sir.’”

“Sir was the mark of respect, and Dad was his title.”

Tim nods at that, rolling on his side, facing Jimmy, who’s standing up, getting undressed. “Yeah… Why you’ll absolutely never hear me tell any of the kids to call me, or you, or anyone else, ‘Sir.’ Mr. or Ms. will be more than enough for that.”

“Okay.” Jimmy pets Tim’s knee. “And…”

“And that was being an officer. Stand around, bark orders, and expect immediate, unquestioning obedience, followed by more orders, and more yelling, and then chew everyone out for not doing a good enough job.”

Jimmy’s following along just fine with this. “So, it’s not a mystery why you wouldn’t want to be that.”

“Exactly. And… But that’s not it, you know?”

Jimmy eyes Tim, heading into the bathroom to grab his toothbrush and start on his teeth, en route he says, “Uh… No. You’re not being specific enough about what’s it.”

Tim talks a bit louder to be heard over the water. “Any level of command will have people who bark orders and demand immediate compliance. Corporals do that. Screaming at people isn’t what makes you an officer.”

Jimmy pops out of the bathroom, toothbrush in his mouth. “I’ll take your word for it. My clients don’t order me around.”

“Gibbs isn’t an officer.”
Jimmy looks confused. He holds up a finger, darts back into the bathroom, finishes up with his teeth, and comes back a moment later, sitting on the bed, saying, “Uh… He’s the guy who’d say ‘jump,’ and we’d say ‘how high.’”

“I know. That’s… part of what I’m sorting out here. He’s not an officer because he’s the guy who gets told what the job is and then goes and does it.”

Jimmy looking confused intensifies. Obviously this means something to Tim, but it’s not his understanding of what an officer is. “How is that different from being, I don’t know, a Marine Captain. They get told to do stuff.”

Tim winces, that’s also part of what he’s trying to sort out. He wiggles his fingers to let Jimmy know he’s thinking about that, but doing it too deep will derail what he’s got in his head right now. Jimmy nods and Tim keeps talking. “Gibbs isn’t an officer because he’s not. He’s Gunny and probably Sarge before that, and then Boss after. Not… Sir.”

Jimmy nods along. That part’s solid.

“But The Admiral, he’s in jail, and he’s probably still got them saluting him. He was always Sir. And he was raising me, training me, to be Sir…” Tim’s still failing around here, feeling like he’s on the verge of something, but not sure, not yet.

“We’d get along, maybe once a blue moon.” Tim licks his lips. “Probably less. One blue moon per year, right?”

“Something like that. Thirteen full moons, twelve months, so, yeah, one a year, maybe two if they hit in January and December.”

“Tenth grade science fair. I don’t remember what I built for it, but I didn’t just get the top mark, but I also got a prize, best science experiment at a Catholic school in California, something like that.”

Jimmy nods, listening to this.

“I had to write him every week, at least five hundred words. And didn’t have to, but I chose to, write to Penny pretty regularly. So, I had a typewriter, and I wrote the letter to her, stuck a carbon paper and another sheet under it, left the space after Dear blank, and popped in his name or hers in the right space when I got done.” Tim’s looking far away as he says this. “Circuitry. Um… It was a printed circuit. The guys who did stuff like that were bounding ahead, but I pulled out a version of it.”

“How do you print a circuit?” Jimmy’s aware that circuits are a thing. He can identify one if he sees one. How they get made is a nebulous concept for him.

“They made spiffy printers. I cut a block out of wood, carved the lines out, really fine, detailed lines, applied a few layers of gold leaf to it, and pressed it onto a non-conductive surface. Could just stamp them out from there. Smaller and used fewer resources than the traditional ones. They weren’t great or anything, a few minutes of use would burn them out, but, they did work, and I think that’s how I got my scholarship to Johns Hopkins. They liked the idea of their future engineers coming up with stuff like that.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. So I wrote Penny about it, happy, excited, proud of the award, and sent him a copy with his name on top.” Tim sighs, voice shaky. “He… um… he sent me back a really happy letter.” A sort of sick smile spreads across Tim’s face. He’d floated around for a full week after he got that letter, until he got the next one bitching about getting how he’d gotten an A- on his latest French test. “He was
really proud, and sent a few books about electronic engineering and conductive metals. He was thrilled that I wasn’t just redoing what someone else had done before, but going ahead, shaping things, and…” His voice is catching… “And… And that was how I’d get to Admiral McGee the Third.

“That’s a lot of how he got there, too… He was always fiddling with robotics. Not on the water… I guess he was reading up and studying then. When he was home, he’d spend hours in the garage or basement messing around with them. Computers were getting bigger, but it’s the early ’90s so what they can do isn’t known… And… Uh eventually he puts it together and becomes one of the big names in smart warfare, and then drones.

“Grandpa… Nelson, he did the same sort of thing. He’s the reason my dad had an aircraft carrier to be on.”

Tim’s voice is tight as he says, “And that’s what officers did, to him. Grandpa saw something, a hole, and he rebuilt the whole damn Navy to fix that hole. He’s the one who made a name by yelling longest and loudest about how blue water Navy was a thing of the past. And he made them listen. And The Captain, he started with robots, and he made Admiral a few years later on drones and smart warfare. And that’s what he wanted me doing, too. I’d go to Annapolis and find a thing and… And I’d use it to change the way the Navy, and warfare, works.”

Jimmy lays his hand on Tim’s shoulder. “And you’ve found your thing?”

Tim shrugs. “Maybe. One of them.” He swallows hard. “If this goes through… It’ll be the aircraft carrier of law enforcement. It’ll change tactics and organization, redo how we see the problems and how we solve them.”

“That’s a good thing, right?”

Tim nods. “If it works.”

Jimmy lies on his stomach next to Tim, resting his hands on Tim’s shoulder, looking into his eyes. “Just because he did it, doesn’t mean you can’t.”

Tim nods again. “I know.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t go further, and do better.” Jimmy gestures to the bedroom, but meaning their family. “Like with this. You didn’t have to stay single because he got married. You just needed to do a better job of it.”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t become him by doing stuff like this.”

“I know.”

“Then…”

Tim sighs, staring up at the ceiling again. “If I do this, run this and whatever comes next, become ‘Sir’, did he win?”

Jimmy opens and closes his mouth. He doesn’t know what to do with that.

Tim sees him do it. “Yeah. I don’t know, either.”
That snaps Jimmy out of not sure what to do. He carefully applies a light head slap and gives him a gentle shove. “No. Because that’s… No. Because it wasn’t about where you were supposed to go or who you were supposed to be. That was just… cover… for who he was. The crap he put you through was about him, and who he was and… Your grandfather wanted his boys in the Navy, wanted officers, and he managed to do it without torturing them, because it was about them. The shit The Admiral pulled wasn’t ever about you. The last time you saw him, you were the number two guy at NCIS. You’d blown up the damn world with a crime you’d broken open, took out a sitting President, and his entire administration, and the Supreme Court, and 85% of Congress, and both of the major political parties. You’ve already done more to change the world than he and your grandfather, combined, ever did. And it wasn’t enough, because it’s always been about him.”

Jimmy’s shaking his head, and keeping up deep eye contact with Tim, doing everything he can to make sure he feels these words. “Look at Sarah. Didn’t matter what she did, it was fine. Because it was never about being an admiral, or doing the Navy proud, or any of it. She could have been the youngest female admiral in the Navy, and that would have been another jewel in the McGee crown, and he couldn’t have cared less. Because it wasn’t about being in the Navy or doing Navy things or any of that. It was him… and whatever rats’ nest of fucked up shit is in his head, not… anything real, or tangible.”

Jimmy can tell Tim’s listening, but he doesn’t know if Tim’s hearing. “He was always going to keep moving the goalposts on you.”

Tim offers Jimmy a halfhearted smile. It’s not that he thinks Jimmy’s wrong about any of this, but… The brain knows, and the guts… not so much.

There’s a deep softness in Jimmy’s eyes as he says, “You do this, you’re… doing what you can to make things better. Really better. You tore it down, and now you’re rebuilding. Any guy with a gun can tear things down, but, rebuilding… That’s special, different, rare.” Jimmy gives Tim a quick kiss. “That’s not him winning. That’s you winning. Our world winning. He’s… Not part of this.”

Tim lifts the right corner of his mouth in something that looks vaguely like a smile, but isn’t one. “Other than he is.”

“No. He’s not. You’re here. And you’ve got his fingerprints and scars on you,” Jimmy lightly touches the scar through Tim’s eyebrow. “but it’s about you not him. Tim, he doesn’t even know this is happening. He’s a thousand miles away in a cage, completely out of the picture. The only way he’s here is that version of him you’re still carrying around. It’s all on you.”

“That sounds deep,” Abby says as she and Breena head in. They pile onto the bed with Tim and Jimmy.

“We’re in existential crisis mode,” Jimmy fills them in. “He’s on the verge of as close to Admiral as he’s going to get, and it’s freaking him out.”

Tim opens and closes his mouth at that, but… Yeah, Jimmy’s got that wrapped up pretty succinctly. And yes, people can tell you it’s okay, they can say that this is what you should be doing, that it’s all on you and all the rest of it, but… By the time he crashes into sleep that night, Tim’s not really settled.

“You’ve just got to do a better job than he did…” Tim’s thinking about that as he drives in for day
three of the CrimeWeb Commission. “You’ve got his fingerprints and scars all over you, but he’s not here…” Or something like that. Jimmy said a lot last night, and Tim thinks he’s got the gist.

He remembers the six hundred versions of his wedding vows that he crumpled up and tossed out. Almost all of them variations on the theme of ‘I won’t be The Admiral.’

Tim sighs. He wasn’t able to get something he loved until he moved past, I won’t be you, and into I will be me.

His hands are on the steering wheel, and it’s a nice enough day that he’s not wearing gloves. Might even get into the low sixties today. Very good weather for March. Snowstorms this weekend, so something big and cold is moving down from Canada.

Good weather means he can see the scars on his hand right now. Big storms this weekend means he can feel the ache in his bones and joints, and that’s just going to get worse as the barometric pressure continues to change.

The thing is, the me he’s trying to be has been so thoroughly shaped by the you he didn’t want to be that he can’t pull them apart.

Those fingerprints and scars Jimmy’s mentioned won’t come off. They’re part of him now, and…

And the man walking around, covered in scars, is going to feel some trepidation if he’s taking steps to move him closer to what got him those scars in the first place…

Eh… That doesn’t feel right.

The man walking around, covered in scars, is going to feel some trepidation if he’s taking steps to move him closer to doing something that would please the guy who put the scars on him.

But, he wouldn’t be pleased, because he couldn’t be pleased, not by anything Tim does. That's Jimmy's point.

But the ghost in his head sees this as moving toward where he thought Tim should go.

As Tim hands his car over to the valet at the Omni, he’s thinking that’s closer to right.

---

Wednesday, all the brilliant minds opened up and worked together and played with ideas and built a really solid blueprint.

Tim’s so in love with this baby it’s like Kelly, Sean, his first novel, and the job software all wrapped into one.

As the ‘blueprint’ guy, he gets to bop from group to group, see what they’re doing, poke around in it some, point out things they’re missing, and get them talking with other groups that are verging on similar territory.

They’ve got the chairs pushed aside. Whiteboards are all over the place, huge rolls of paper laid out on the floor, everything covered in scribbles, plans, laptops strewn about with people working on them, the hum of cooling fans and chattering people all buzzing around.
Tim’s got big screens up around the room, and at each one there are smaller groups of people pointing things out, talking, building, arguing, sometimes heatedly, about what they want to do. He’s got two database designers squabbling over search algorithms, looking like they’re about to start physically fighting.

“Hey!” He’s yanking them apart. Okay, one of them is about 5’11” and 275, he’s not doing anything with him other than laying a hand on his shoulder. He is gently pushing the 4’10” and maybe 97-pound female database whiz who looks like she’s about to attempt to chew the big guy’s kneecap off back a step. They’re now glaring at him instead of each other.

“It’s a prototype. You build yours. You build yours. Then test the damn things, and whichever one works better we’ll go with.”

He can see them about to draw metaphorical knives on getting the ‘best’ one done, and decides this isn’t the way to play it.

“Scratch that. Build both of them, test each other’s, publish your methods and results, open it up to the rest of the group, and we’ll see what each one is really good at, and then we’ll merge them into one that’s better than either of the original ones were.”

That gets some sour and pouty looks. No one goes home with the glory if they’ve got to build a hybrid system.

“Fine,” Mr. Big and Mopey says.

“Yes, Sir,” comes out of Ms. Little and Annoyed.

“McGee or…” And he stops, not sure if he should finish that. After all, he was just barking an order and expecting them to follow without any argument. “Just… Call me McGee.”

“Okay.”

He’s taking a lunch break. (Okay, technically, he’s taking a bathroom break. He, and everyone else in the room, worked through lunch. Or, since lunch indicates not just a mid-day meal, but a pause in the regular day to eat said meal, they worked while munching on something.) His phone, which has been sitting in his pocket all day, ignored, has wormed its way into his conscious again, and the idea of the world outside this room comes wandering back to him.

In his text inbox is a note from Abby. It’s a link to a page about systemizers versus empathizers, and he knows she’s gently suggesting that maybe his officer/non-com framework isn’t exactly helpful right now, so a bit more reading and reframing may be in order.

He sends her a kiss emoji, along with a few words about how today is going, and then finishes up.

More good stuff as soon as he gets back out there.
Tim supposes that Jimmy’s point about how officers get told to do jobs is relevant. He supposes Abby’s systemizer v. empathizer is relevant, too.

Or he would be.

But he’s not, because today was awesome and he’s been in his sandbox building his dream castle with a bunch of other people who are also amazing architects.

And though all of his family is happy to see him enjoying this so much, only Abby’s really following what he’s talking about as he babbles his way through dinner, tubby time, and bedtime that night.

But, even not getting exactly what he’s talking about on data throughput optimization, Bayesian analysis, server farming, potential cloud utilization, security protocols, and the like, Jimmy and Breena are very pleased to see they pretty much can’t get a word in edgewise because their man is a bubbling cauldron of big ideas boiling away.

Given the option between Identity Crisis Tim and Happy Genius Tim, they prefer Happy Genius.

Jimmy says to Breena, as they’re cleaning up the last of dinner, and Tim and Abby are getting the kiddos cleaned up, “You know, for the longest time I thought she was the only bouncy one of them.”

Breena laughs at that. “Just got to hit his buttons right. God, he’s not on any caffeine right now. Can you imagine that with about two Caf-Pows an hour?”

He shakes his head, chuckling, “He’ll turn into a large humming bird, zipping from…” Jimmy works on remembering any sort of term Tim was using, “SQL to Python to… compliers?”

Breena shrugs. For most of that conversation, Tim could have been talking in French for how readily she got it. But just like she doesn’t expect Tim to get it when she’s having a good day talking about funeral home regulations and inspectors, she doesn’t expect to always get it when he’s talking.

It’s okay, as long as they listen attentively, and offer support. He’ll do it for her the next time she gets talking about the 1045-ws, or new regulations for disposal of used chemicals and hazmats.

Thursday, last day of planning and getting bits and pieces done.

First day of trying to cobble together something to show a bunch of people with lots of influence and power tomorrow.

Tim hasn’t seen a lot of Manner. He’s been circling the room, too. Also talking, poking his nose in, and, more importantly, he’s been sitting there on his own laptop, working his own side of this.

So, as Tim pulls back, letting his commission do their last few hours of design work, Manner grabs him.

“I’ve got numbers.”

Tim starts to look worried. “How bad are they?”

Manner shrugs. “Could be a lot worse. For ongoing costs, we’ve got the people to keep it up, the people to get stuff into it, and the servers.”

That matches Tim’s ideas on this. They’ll need to build something to hold all of this data, which
won’t be cheap. Then they’ll have to have people to run it. Also, not cheap. And people to shove
data into it, that probably won’t cost a ton, but it won’t be inconsiderable, either. The rest of it… It’s
all off the shelf or open source, intentionally, to keep the price down.

His ap guys are telling him that they can make this work on any phone that’s got a good enough
camera to get the details necessary to do the job. Most LEOs already have phones from work, and
they can be updated as old phones die. As long as someone on the team’s got a phone with a good
enough camera, they can run the ap. That by itself makes this very inexpensive to roll out.

Inexpensive, as government plans go.

“Ten-year plan, at least two billion dollars, if we can get a cold enough location to run it so we can
cut back on the cooling structures for the server farm.”

Tim curses quietly. Alaska, his top pick to stick a server farm, is part of Canada now. “We’d want it
in the US somewhere, right?”

“Preferably. There’s got to be somewhere that’ll want one. I’ve got Congressmen from Idaho, South
Dakota, and Michigan coming, hoping we can sell them on the idea of a huge, expensive project in
their area that’ll bring in jobs galore.”

Tim half smiles. “Politics is always politics. Northern Michigan, though…”

Manner nods. “Yeah. That’s the one I’m hoping for, too. We’ll still need some level of warm
weather cooling capacity, but not nearly as much as if it was in Atlanta.”

“And Michigan’s been in bad shape for a while now, so it would like a big job prospect, wouldn’t it?”

Manner shifts a tight smile toward Tim. Michigan, as a whole, isn’t as well off as it was in the ‘50s
and ‘60s, but, as a whole, it’s not in horrible shape. Still, not horrible isn’t great, and they wouldn’t
mind something to create a higher tech version of the Detroit auto-boom, though. “They seem eager
at the idea.”

“They have the infrastructure for it. This is going to suck up a ton of power.”

Manner wiggles his hand, indicating sort of. “They have capacity that’s been doing nothing for the
last twenty years as their population’s been shrinking. So… Who knows if it can work, and if it’s
been mothballed since the ‘90s, there’s no way to tell if it’s up to code. Your grandmother’s been
talking about a grant for some sort of major, sustainable,” Manner puts air quote around that, “power
upgrades. Senator Mayhew, also from Michigan, has been talking about doing some sort of thing
using Lake Superior tidal power. Penny’s in love with that.”

Tim’s not up to date on it. “If it works…”

“Exactly. Plus, University of Michigan’s got talent. It’s got a decent population size, at least
compared to South Dakota and Idaho.”

“So, that’s where you want to see this.”

“That’s the one I’m rooting for. South Dakota and Idaho… I mean… There’s no people there. No
good universities. That might be a reason to stick something like this in one of those states, jump start
them, but…”

Tim kind of remembers something about South Dakota booming with a natural gas and oil rush, but
he’s not sure about that. Could have been North Dakota. He knows it was awfully empty looking when he was there. “Might be a good place for our backup server farm. This thing can’t go down, so main building in Northern Michigan, smaller, quiet, unknown backup building stuck somewhere in South Dakota.”

“Something like that.” Manner’s plans and costing out did involve a backup server farm, and having both of them far away from each other is likely a good idea.

Tim smiles a bit. “That’s for you and the planning committee to deal with.”

“Exactly. After we’ve got funding. Just get me the baby to sell, and I’ll make sure it lands in a nice crib.”

“I’m working on it. Let’s see how we’re doing on our ‘prototype.’”

Technically speaking, as they’re rolling into Friday and the dog and pony show of all dog and pony shows they do not have a prototype.

A prototype is a basic version of the final product that does whatever the final thing does, on one level or another.

The thing that’s sitting on Tim’s phone, with a little spider web icon is a prop.

It looks like what the real thing is, but it doesn’t do what the real one does.

But, with twenty minutes to go before the political delegation shows up, Tim’s going over his spiel again and again, as he straightens his tie, (He’s in a full suit today. His good, gray, made for him by Tony’s tailor, looking-sharp, date-night suit.) and fidgets a little. It’s a good prop. It looks right, it will do something that approximates what the finished project should, and it’s sturdy enough that he can hand it off to these people and it shouldn’t (fingers crossed) crash.

Penny and Jake got a collection of eighty people down here for this.

More than Tim was expecting, but, given how big Congress is now, probably fewer than optimal.

“Only takes one of them to get an appropriations bill drafted,” Manner says to him quietly. Manner is not fidgeting. And his tie is so damn straight he could use it for a plumb line.

“Yeah, but it takes what, 3500 of them to get it approved.”

Manner smiles brightly. Penny’s delegation is getting closer. “Just show it off. They’ll play ball.”

Tim slaps a smile on his own face. “Wish I was as confident as you are,” he says under his breath.

“We’re Steve Manner and Tim McGee, we took down the old government, rooted out corruption that lasted for almost a century. They’ve got their jobs because of us, and we’re offering them a tool
to make them look like they’re really doing something new to make things better. As long as it works and we keep smiling, they’ll buy it.”

Put that way, Tim’s smile reaches his eyes, and he gets ready to show off his baby.

Hand shaking, introductions, more smiles, okay, this is significantly less fun than building. But this gives him what he needs to keep building, so Tim’s got a smile on his face Senior would be proud of.

(A few years ago, Tony told him that according to Senior the difference between a dreamer and a con-man is that the dreamer believes in what he’s selling and the con-man doesn’t. Well, Tim believes. And, though it never occurred to him that this might be good for anything other than law, after more than a decade of interrogations, he knows how to read the people he’s talking to. He sees how they respond to what he’s saying, and he’s matching his meet and greet technique to their reactions and making them think he’s the spiffiest thing to ever spiff.)

Once introductions are done, it’s show-and-tell time.

“So, I know your time is valuable and you want to get down to it.” Tim’s got them herded in a smaller side room, sitting in a collection of semi-circles around him, Manner, a podium, and a big screen television. His guys are all in the main conference room, still working away. (He instructed them to all look like they were going to testify in court today, because eventually, he and Manner will send the Congressmen in to see what’s on the other side of the wall, but he’s also getting all the working time he can out of this week.)

On his podium, he’s got a camera to show them what’s on the test phones. He gets the camera running, and an image of two hibernating phones pops up on the big screen behind him.

He taps the first test phone. “Basic iPhone 6. We got it two days ago at the Apple store in Arlington.” Then he touches the other test phone. “And a Samsung Galaxy 7, bought it yesterday down the street. Other than upload our ap, we’ve done nothing to these. They’re straight out of the box. We got these because they were easy and available, but any phone with a good camera will run this.”

Tim touches the iPhone. “And here’s how it runs. Get into the phone.” He puts his passcode in and up pops a collection of aps. “And there it is.” He taps the small gray web icon.

“First layer of security,” he puts in another passcode. “This number will tell us which department is accessing the ap. The ap knows which phone it’s on, and if the department and phone don’t match, it won’t open. I put in the NCIS passcode, so…” On his phone, the photo screen opens. He picks the phone up and snaps a shot of his eye. “Not blinking is the tricky part. Once you’ve shot your eye, it matches your iris to the approved users and logs you in.” Tim puts the phone back down so it’s back on the big screen again. It takes a second, but everyone sees the camera screen image of Tim’s iris vanish, and the main page open.

The main page is a list of addresses.

“Okay, as you can see, we’ve got a list of addresses. When 911 gets a call, a case starts. If it’s a crime type of case, instead of say, a fire, 911 will get CrimeWeb into play. They’ll upload the recording of the call, put the address and details in, and hand it over to the Local LEOs dispatch.

“Dispatch will send out whoever’s going to be on the first bit of the case. Their phone will update
with the address and relevant details as soon as they’re assigned to the case, which is how this line gets here.” Tim taps the address. That takes them to another page with several icons on it. The first one is a crime scene tape. Tim taps it and two more icons pop up: Photographs, Recordings.” Tim taps recordings.

“This is active crime scene mode. Our LEO hits this as soon as he’s on the case. This lets us know who’s working the case, and her phone will automatically begin recording everything in ear shot. Now, most phones don’t have amazing sound quality, so it’s not like this will be able to pick up conspirators whispering in the background, but anything the LEO has to say, anyone she talks to, things like how many gunshots she hears, all of that will be recorded.

“If she’s wearing a body cam, that feed will also end up in this folder. Every three minutes, all of this information will be uploaded to our servers and deleted from the base phone. That’ll keep the phone from bogging down with too much data. When she needs the data, she’ll pull it up, streaming, from the web.

“The recorder, while in crime scene mode, cannot be turned off. So, as long as she’s at a scene doing scene related things, every sound she makes is being recorded.

“In active mode, there’s also the photography option.

“When we work a crime scene we photograph everything, and then collect it. And then go back to the office, upload the photos, and arrange them. With this phone, you photograph everything and then tag it while your crime scene people are bagging it up and taking it back to the lab. So…” Tim puts the phone down and picks up his coffee cup. It’s white, intentionally. He touches his thumb to it, and then shows off that he still knows how to print a cup. Then he takes a picture of the print. Having done that, there’s a picture of his print on the big screen.

“Okay. Tagging. Since we’re in active mode, at a crime scene, everything will automatically update to this case, we add extra tags to help sort things out, later.” He clicks on the print. And on the screen they can see him type: evidence, print, coffee mug. “Normally, I would have had to have taken that print off of the cup. With this, I get to leave the evidence where we found it. That’s usually not a huge deal, but when you’re looking to see if a scene’s real, as opposed to made up, little things like where a person’s left thumb is on a coffee mug matters.”

His phone shifts from the fingerprint to a picture of Tim.

“And it’s found me. Now, we do have a device that will take a fingerprint off a person and give us an ID, but usually, if I want a fingerprint off of a thing, I’ve got to powder it, lift it, send it to the lab, and in the lab the tech will take almost an hour to get it into AFIS properly, which will then, eventually, send me an ID. That ID will have a ‘file,’ namely my legal name, my social security number, my address, any legal cases pending about me, and that’s pretty much it.

“Check this out.” He taps himself. “Here’s all the stuff I was talking about.” Tim scans through his ‘legal’ stuff. “And now we take it a bit further. As soon as AFIS brought in a name and address, CrimeWeb hit the web, and got everything online about me.” Tim flashes through his top Googles, quickly, since most of them are about his dust up with The Admiral. “And…” He switches to the AKA section, “It’s got my alter ego.” He goes through the Tom Gemcity at a speed where the people in the audience can actually read what’s on the screen.

“Now, that’s just a slightly more in depth and streamlined version of what the current system does. CrimeWeb’s saved us maybe two days at this point. Which is nice, but it’s not a big deal. Cases where every second matters are few and far between. Here’s where CrimeWeb really speeds things up and becomes worth its weight in gold. As soon as I popped up on this, any other agency that had
me in their data got a heads up, and all of their data on me just went galloping into…” He backs out of Photographs, to the next icon at the top level, a manila folder with the word Cases on it. “Cases.”

He taps the folder and the time he and Tony got arrested pops up. “Hmmm… looks like I annoyed Metro PD at one point. With the old system, my Metro arrest would have popped up, and then I could have called Metro, waited on hold for God knows how long, and eventually, a file, may have, if they could find it and were willing to let us see it, wandered over to NCIS. And, maybe, if they were feeling really sharp, they may have asked what was going on and updated their information on me.

“Or they may not have, because they’re city cops and I’m a Fed, so if they were feeling peevish, or didn’t want to share, I would have had to go bug my Boss, who would have bugged their Boss, and maybe, depending on who won the staring contest, I may have gotten that file.

“With this system, I get the file. They would have just gotten a heads up letting them know where I am and what’s going on. So, that’s great, I get direct information relating to a print found at a crime scene. But, that’s a drop in the bucket. With CrimeWeb, once that print pops up an ID, every case where I’m a suspect, person of interest, witness, bystander, LEO, if my name ever goes into any case anywhere, it’ll show up in my cases folder, and I’ll have all the details.

“And, just like every case I’m involved in is sitting in this folder, so is every case any of our evidence showed up in, any case that happened at this address, anything with an identical MO, anything like that will pop up.

“And, speaking of evidence…” The next icon at the top level is a finger print with Evidence written on it. Tim taps that. “So, my guys bagged everything up, took it back to the lab, and they did their magic, and then put all of their stuff into CrimeWeb. And, just like with my ID, anything they got is also lighting up phones all around the country as bullet matches, DNA, blood spatter, drug chemical analysis, tool marks, and all the rest of it go cruising around the web, letting anyone who is looking for a clue, get the clue.”

The next icon is a smiley face. “People.” He taps it. A collection of pictures and names pop up. “Everyone we talk to goes into this section. Anyone who gives a statement has their picture taken and gets put in here. We keep every bit of intel from each person in here, and,” he taps the picture of himself, pictures of Abby, Penny, Jake, and Manner pop up, “everyone they’re linked to, that we talk to or just find in the search, pops up, too. Can’t figure out how guy A and guy B are talking to each other, this feature here will show you that they’ve got the same dentist.”

Tim exits back up to the case level. “Now, what I’ve been showing you is the version of this a LEO would have. Judges, prosecutors, defense lawyers, they’ll all have a version of this, too. We won’t be worrying about exculpatory evidence, because as soon as our suspect has an attorney, he’ll get everything we’ve got. And as soon as the defense attorney finds something, we get it, too. Part of this system is to help us not take bad cases to trial. Sticking someone in jail for ten years because some prosecutor didn’t think that one, lone print belonging to an unknown subject was worth mentioning to the defense isn’t happening with CrimeWeb. We want to make sure we’ve got a solid case before a grand jury gets brought in.”

Tim smiles at all of them, and he can see that he’s got most of them interested. “So, that’s CrimeWeb 101. I’m opening the floor to questions. I’ve got functionality. When we all feel like we know how it works, Mr. Manner will hit you with the price tag and the practical considerations.”
“If you can do the job, you should do the job,” Fornell had said that, or something close to it, to him just a few weeks ago.

Tim’s showing off his guys, who are working away, trying to explain what they’re doing, as the group of Congressmen go wandering through, asking questions and watching the work.

Tim licks his lips. He can do the job. And the job isn’t coding CrimeWeb. Technically, it’s not even getting the basic idea for it. People come up with ideas all the time. As they say in the fiction world, ‘Ideas are cheap.’ The question is: can you sit down and write the story? That’s the part that matters.

But it’s not. Well, follow through matters, finishing the story matters, but the story, that’s a small part of this. And that’s not the job, either.

He’s gotten the idea, outlined it, found the ghostwriters, got them working together, brought in the editors, found the concept artists, hired out the publicity, located the funding, put on the show for the critics, made sure the book had proper distribution.

These days, unless he’s sitting in front of a typewriter, he doesn’t ‘write the story’ anymore.

Tim listens with half his mind as Manner explains the miracle of open source code to three Senators and why they won’t be paying millions of dollars in licensing fees for this.

He doesn’t do things anymore. Writing the story, coding the software, those are things.

That’s not what he can do that no one else can. Most people can do things. He’s very good at doing things. There are things he’s done that he’s immensely proud of.

But that’s not his gift. Not anymore.

The man who can make sure all the things get into the hands of the right people, who can use those things to build better things… The man who can see what those better things are… and make other people see that they are better…

Like Jimmy said, that’s rare.

The man who can build the system that lets other men do their things is one in million.

If not more.

And you don’t let that go to waste. You don’t hide that, or pretend you can’t do it because other people did bad things with it. You don’t avoid it because it matches an idea that was used to hurt you. Can’t skip it because it might make the wrong person happy.

Who wins? Maybe that’s the wrong question. Who loses? If he’s not doing this, everyone loses.

He can do the job. He is doing the job.

And, if he’s got stars on his shoulder, or if he’s the CEO of the company, or if he’s the guy with the blueprints, standing where the skyscraper’s going to go...

And it’s not about lording over everyone else. It’s not about snapping out orders. It’s not about some sort of inherent I’m-better-than-you-are-so-get-on-your-knees-and-kiss-my-toes. At least, not if you’re really doing the job, and Tim is.

It’s about recognition that he’s the guy who can see the big picture. He’s the guy who’s juggling all the balls. And there’s something they call the guy who keeps all the pieces in place…
“Sir?” It’s one of the younger members of the A team, trying to get his attention, and for the first time ever, Tim just turns toward the voice, accepting the title as his. “Yes.”

He flashes a relieved smile at Tim. “I’ve got two Congressmen here who’ve got questions I can’t answer.”

“No problem,” Tim reads the kids’ name tag, “Lin. Mr. Barnes and Ms. Kohn, what can I do for you…”
On Friday night, later than he would have liked, but earlier than Penny, Ducky, Bishop and Jake will get in, Tim sweeps in, in conquering-hero-home-from-the-wars mode, while Shabbos is in full swing, snags Abby, the closest of his spouses, gently pulls her out of her chair, bows her back into a Hollywood kiss, and once he’s got Abby on her feet again says, “They bought it! Appropriations bill for CrimeWeb with 78 sponsors will hit Congress whenever they get it beaten out!”

He follows that up with hugs and kisses for the rest of the group, and then more or less flops into a chair, where he finishes the rest of the meal by eating everything that isn’t nailed down, (he’s coming to the conclusion that he might not have fed himself anything between now and breakfast) and then heads to their bedroom to crash into a dead-to-the-world sleep.

Saturday… Afternoon on Saturday, he’s awake. Just about the same time Abby crashes for a nap.

That feels good, she’s soft and warm and pressed up against him, and his body, which after getting some sleep and moving off of massive job/existential crisis mode, is reminding him, in no uncertain terms, that yeah, getting himself sorted out on a brain level is lovely, but he’s got some other things he’s been ignoring this last week, and they’d really like some attention.

Lots of attention.

Warm, wet, slippery attention, preferably from both of his ladies.

He hears retching from the bathroom. Breena heads in to join them, too. Must be naptime, which means he’s been in bed for eighteen hours. He rolls over to give her a little kiss when she drags herself into bed, and she groans, with a bit of a retch, which is when he notices he hasn’t brushed his teeth since yesterday morning and likely isn’t very pleasant to kiss.

“Sorry.”

Another groan. Mental note, if your breath is bad enough to peel paint from the walls, don’t talk to the woman with killer morning sickness.

He sighs, one lady down, and then gets up, because not only is he horny as sin, but his bladder is about to explode.

Abby’s in a crabby mood, which makes sense, Sean’s hitting his two-month growth spurt and right now he wants to feed all the damn time. So, sore boobs, a little barnacle who’s also in a crabby mood, because his sleep schedule is upside down, and even though he’s got a house full of people who will happily apply food to him and let his mama nap in an effort to make her feel better, Sean ONLY wants Abby.

And, of course, if Sean’s getting all the mommy time, then Kelly wants all the mommy time, too. Or as she put it when he tried to put an arm around her when she got up from her nap, “I’ve had another person clinging to me all day today, if anyone else touches me, I’m going to scream.”
Tim removes his arm, while Breena and Penny commiserate, Bishop and Ziva take notes, and Jake backs slowly away, a look of horror spreading across his face.

Two ladies down. Looks like Ms. Lefty’s getting a workout come shower time.

Jimmy catches his eye, and the look is supposed to be a *maybe if we can pry Sean off of her and get her a few hours on her own she’ll perk up* sort of look, which Tim gets, but it also reminds him that Ms. Lefty isn’t his only option.

And, as he tries to remember the last time he got off with someone else (Sunday? Morning? Maybe?) or got off period (Monday? Tuesday? Eh… not recently) he’s thinking that he probably does qualify as more than horny enough to play with Jimmy, and hell, maybe that’ll cheer his ladies up, too.

He smirks a bit at that, and Jimmy’s who’s watching him catches it, flashing him a *what?* sort of look. Tim shakes his head, no way to say, ‘Never let it be said that I can’t multitask,’ without literally saying it. Jimmy’s learning sign language in leaps and bounds, but if he starts signing to him, Jake and Ellie will wonder what’s up.

It’s a quiet afternoon. That snow storm has shown up with a vengeance, and is dumping a pile of snow on them.

Which means Bishop and Jake are here, sleeping on the other side of their bathroom, for the duration. For that matter, so is everyone else. Short of an all-hands-on-deck situation (and with fifteen inches of snow on the ground, and more coming down, Tim’s thinking that as long as the power holds out, all-hands-on-deck will mean all-hands-remoting-into-work) no one’s going anywhere.

The guy on the weather channel says this is some sort of weird polar vortex thing that’s going to be giving them a colder, snowier, and all around less pleasant spring than usual.

On the upside, Jake might not look like the kind of guy who knows his ass from and ax handle, but he grew up a farm boy in Oklahoma. He’s used to hard winters and chopping firewood.

They’ve got frosty cold, a fire tearing through their firewood stock, and an extra set of hands, which Jimmy and Tony (who tends to get the bulk of wood chopping work these days) really appreciate.

And once the chopping is done, there’s playing with the kids, some snow shoveling (a quarter mile long driveway is hell to shovel, unless you’ve got twelve people doing it) and Gibbs breaking out his dad’s copy of Monopoly.

A long snowy afternoon bleeding into a dark snowy night, bowls of beef stew, golden wedges of cornbread, little people romping around with Mona, and a cutthroat game of Monopoly makes for an awful nice Saturday.

“What was that look you were giving me?” Jimmy asks as he and Tim creep out of the girls’ room, having given them all their goodnight kisses.
“Uh?”

“We were talking about Abby being in a porcupine mood, and you flashed me a look, and I knew it meant something, but not what?”

“Oh… Yeah. Uh…” Tim licks his lips, feeling a little weird saying it. “Okay… Haven’t gotten off since… I don’t actually know when, and… like you said, horny enough to play with each other when the girls can watch… and… Maybe if they got to watch it might help perk up Abby’s mood and distract Breena from feeling like shit.”

Jimmy smiles dryly. “You’re looking to altruistically get your rocks off?”

Tim sneers. “That’s just the kind of guy I am. Are you game?”

“If you were serious about giving as well as receiving, yeah. Probably not as long as it’s been for you, but… I’m missing getting loved on by something not attached to me.”

Tim was more hoping to receive than give, but, he was more on the getting end last time, and if he’s going to ask, he should also be offering. “Yeah, I was. You still want that blow job.”

Jimmy’s eyes go wide at Tim saying it that bluntly. “Uh… Yeah.”

“Okay. I hope I’m not terrible at it.”

Jimmy laughs. “Me, too.”

Bishop opens the door to their hallway just on the tail end of that ‘too.’ “That kind of laugh sounds like someone’s telling dirty jokes.”

Both guys stop dead and blush.

Bishop rolls her eyes. “Oh come on! I’m married! I’ve got three older brothers. I know you guys talk about sex and joke about it.”

“Yeah, well…” Jimmy says.

“So…”

He flashes a panicked look at Tim, and Tim quickly saves, “Bishop, if I even attempt to tell you that joke, Penny will string me up by my toenails and force me to read the Feminist Manifesto until my eyes bleed. Hell, if she even finds out that I know this joke, I’m going to end up neck deep in shit.”

Bishop rolls her eyes. “Fine. Is it okay if I pop my PJs in your drier?”

“Sure,” Tim says.

“Why just the drier?” Jimmy asks.

“I like them nice and toasty when I put them on. Tony’s got a copy of Chinatown queuing up. You guys in?”

Jimmy glances to Tim and then yawns. “Probably not. That’s like two hours long, and I don’t want to stay up that much later.”

Tim nods. “Yeah. I’m still feeling drained from the week. I bet the girls want an early-ish night, too.”
“With any luck, Sean’s had everything he wants to eat, and he’ll go back to sleeping in three hour stretches, and everyone will be in a better mood tomorrow,” Jimmy says.

Bishop nods at that. “I hear that.” She heads into Jimmy and Breena’s room, and a moment later is out with jammies in her arms. “Look, if you and Breena want your room back, get some real sleep… I mean, you’ve got sofas, it’s not a problem.”

Jimmy waves that off. “You’re right, it’s not a problem. Go, sleep. The girls get the bed. We camp out on the floor. And occasionally, that one forgets who he’s next to and pokes me to go get Sean.” Technically it’s Jimmy’s night with Sean, and Tim’s appreciating how Jimmy’s building in a reason for why they may see him roaming the halls with the little guy. “It’s okay.”

---

“We’re getting an early night?” Abby asks with an eyebrow high. (She been looking forward to Chinatown.)

Tim nods, giving her her best, really, you want to come to be, swear to God and on a stack of Bibles, you’ll like this.

She shoots him back a I’m so not looking to get laid tonight look.

He sends back I know that. Just come to bed.

“Okay, I guess we’re getting an early night. Apparently someone wants his snuggle buddy.”

“Yes.” Tim smiles, grabs Abby’s hand, and draws her back toward the bedroom. Breena’s already in there, she crashed shortly after babies went down, and Jimmy’s in the bathroom, brushing his teeth.

“Oh, you are so right! That is way better than Chinatown!”

Tim smirks and telegraphs very clearly that he’s about to hug her. She nods at that, so he does it. “And yes, I’m missing my snuggle buddy, too. But I also get not wanting to be a full time teddy bear.”

She sighs… “It’s just…”

“As much as any guy can get it, I think I do. I’m fairly certain I wouldn’t want to be chewed on for five hours a day, with big sister deciding little guy’s getting too much Mom time and glomming on from the other side.”

“Thanks.”

So, it’s bedtime. The girls are really looking forward to this. Tim’s certainly looking forward to… half of it. He’s really looking forward to the girls looking forward to it. And his dick, which has gotten the idea that there may be some sex in the offing, soon… ish, is perking up.
But, they’re still a bit awkward on how this all works.

Just roll over and start necking isn’t exactly part of his routine with Jimmy.

But, as horny as he is, he’s not the kind of guy who’d just go straight for the dick. So… He settles in next to Jimmy, and they shuffle around for a moment, figuring out where arms and legs go (both of them are used to being the guy who’s holding onto, instead of being held, for example), and how to get comfortable lying next to each other.

It takes a moment, but they find their spots, and settle in.

---

Kissing is good. Happy girls watching makes kissing even better. And, hell, they’re guys. They’re horny guys. Neither of them is really looking for much in the way of foreplay, so it’s not long before Tim’s got Jimmy on his back, kneeling between his legs, dick in hand and…

The thing is Tim has an exceptionally vivid understanding of how a really good blow job feels, and a rather vague understanding of how one goes about producing said sensations.

Suck, lick, nibble, slide, he has the basic techniques down, in the sense of he can name them, but… he doesn’t know what his mouth is supposed to be doing for this. He doesn’t have any muscle memory because other than a few licks and a very short bit of gentle sucking, where Breena was producing most of the stimulation, he’s never done this before.

But, a lick is a lick, and a dick is a dick, and it’s not rocket science, so…

Half the time, when Abby’s doing it, she’ll pull him straight into her mouth. Full immersion shock. Dry and warm and then wet and hot and nothing in between. The other half, she’ll take him in hand, and start with licks.

He figures that’s the way to go with this.

Jimmy’s dick fits pretty comfortably in his hand. It’s a little thicker than his is, and it fills out his fist nicely.

“Okay?” He looks up at Jimmy, who’s lying there, one hand behind his head, other gently petting Tim’s hair.

“I’ll talk you through it.”

That gets a little smile out of Breena. “There’s a good memory.”

That’s got both Tim and Abby’s attention. “I want to hear that story,” Abby says.

Tim nods. “Me, too.” He figures story time will help with this quite a bit.

He starts to sit up, and Jimmy shakes his head. “Don’t let go.” Okay, yeah, it’s Tim holding on, but it still feels nice.

Breena flashes him a genuine smile. “Yeah. We’ll talk. You listen, learn, and play.”

Jimmy smiles back at her, a very warm glow in his eyes. Yeah, this combination will work splendidly for him. He twits a bit, and kisses her hip. “And anytime you want, feel free to climb on,” he wiggles his tongue. “You can keep still, and I’ll do all the rocking.”
Her hand strokes up his arm. “If I feel up to it, I’ll join in. Just…” she sighs.

“Yeah, we know.” Tim replies. “I’ve always had absolutely no interest in sex whatsoever when I’m feeling sick.” He lifts up and kisses Abby. “Same for you, though. Party’s always better with you, baby.”

She kisses back. “I know. Maybe in a day or so… So, tell us a story, Ms. Breena.”

“Okay, so…”

Tim’s mostly listening, but he can’t not pay attention to what he’s holding onto, too. He’s never looked at a dick this closely. He can’t see his own from this angle, and that’s the only other dick he’s got anything like this close of a relationship with.

It’s actually… Kind of nice to have the freedom to really look.

He’s not sure if Breena knows what he’s doing, or if this is just how this works, but she’s saying, “You’ve got to remember, I’d never actually seen Jimmy naked at this point. We’ve petted and played some, but I was serious about no sex before we got married. So, I’ve felt it, through his clothing, seen it the same way, and that’s it. And, anyway, this seemed like a good way to get to know it.”

“God, yes!” Jimmy says. “Our wedding fell apart, and I’ve been working flat out, and then I finally get to go home, so I sent her that text, and she sent me that note back, with everything she wanted to do on it, and on the top was ‘learn how to give a’ bold, italics, underlined, with asterisks around it, in all caps, ‘AMAZING blow job.’”

Breena smiles prettily at that, and the rest of them laugh.

“And you were happy to be her guinea pig?” Abby says.

“Shockingly enough, I was indeed interested in that,” Jimmy says with a grin of his own. “And not just on a this sounds like it’ll be a ton of fun sort of thing, but also… We finally get to the having sex part of our ‘honeymoon’ and… It’s like being fifteen with a naked girl for the first time all over again. Except, this time I kind of know what I’m doing, but… Giddy and so excited, and I don’t want to be a thirty-second-wonder, so something to blow off some steam ahead of time so I can focus on her seemed like a really good thing.”

“And, I wanted to actually get to look and touch and play and explore before getting to the ‘main event’ so to say, so this seemed like a good plan to me, too.”

‘Look and touch and play.’ Tim’s looking. On one level, it’s a dick. It looks, pretty much, like every other dick. But, just like every pair of brown eyes look more or less the same, there’s a lot of variation covered by ‘more or less.’ And just like a pair of brown eyes belonging to your lover are vastly more interesting than a pair of brown eyes on a stranger, the same is true with dicks.

It does fit comfortably in his hand. There’s a gentle curve up toward Jimmy’s tummy. Built in g-spot stim. Skin colored skin, and the head is about the same color as Jimmy’s lips and nipples. So… about like pretty much every other guy… Probably. Not like Tim’s got an encyclopedic library of mental images to compare to.

“I was doing the same thing Tim is. Just, saying hi, getting acquainted.”

And that’s pretty much what Tim is doing. He can remember doing this with Abby, too. Laying her out, propping up on one elbow, and just looking. Granted, in that case, looking didn’t last all that
long, because he wanted to touch and taste. He knows he did this with Breena, too, feeling the rush of just seeing everything for the first time.

Jimmy’s pale enough that Tim can see a few veins under the skin, and he’s got a little freckle just below the head of his dick.

He lets go, and gently draws his finger up Jimmy’s dick. Trailing from base to tip, and then circling it, just feeling. His skin is soft, softer than anywhere else on his body, and the head is broader than Tim’s, nicely firm under his finger. Jimmy twitches a little when he does it.

“It wasn’t exactly what I was expecting,” Breena says. “Sounds stupid. I’d seen pictures, read the sex books, and certainly rubbed up against it enough, but… Just sitting there, holding it, getting to really see…” Breena pets Tim’s shoulder. “It’s different, isn’t it?”

Tim nods, looking up to Breena. “Probably not quite as different for me. I mean, I’ve got one, too.”

“Yeah, but you never expected to be doing this, did you?”

Tim inclines his head a bit. “There is that.”

Breena wraps her hand around Tim’s, and Jimmy sighs, a happy little exhale. “It’s warm and fills up your hand, and so soft.” She strokes Tim’s hand up and down Jimmy, and Jimmy groans. “I didn’t expect it to be that soft.”

“What did you think it would feel like?” Abby asks.

Breena shrugs. “I don’t think I had an expectation… Harder, maybe.”

“Baby, it was plenty hard,” Jimmy says. “There was literally not a single cell of blood not required to keep me alive, anywhere else.”

“Well, yeah, but… It doesn’t actually feel like wood or steel or rock, you know?” She squeezes Tim’s hand, and by extension, Jimmy. “There’s some give, and this really soft, smooth layer, and the firm core underneath…”

And as she’s saying it, Tim’s feeling it. He hasn’t paid this sort of attention to his own dick since he was twelve, probably, and still figuring out what all it could do.

He can feel Jimmy in his hand, and the smooth skin Breena’s talking about, feel it slide over engorged spongy tissue under, feel that getting fuller and harder in his hand. He isn’t expecting how that makes him feel. There’s a rush at it. He knows how it feels to go harder like that. He knows the pleasure and the full feeling that goes with it, the stretch of skin growing tighter and dick getting harder, and feeling it happen in his hand, from something he’s doing (at least partially) is a kick. It sets his own dick to perking up.

That’s… He doesn’t have a good word for it, trippy, almost. He’s feeling it from both sides. The emotional, sensational feel of sex, the pleasure centered in his own body, and the physical, real, tangible feel of it in his hand, all at once.

“Oh.” Falls out of his mouth.

Breena lets go of his hand and strokes his hair. “You okay?”

Tim blinks. “Uh, yeah, just…” He scoots around a bit, so he’s next to Jimmy, heads to tails, and tugs him a bit so Jimmy’s propped on his side, facing Tim. “Try it, too. It’s… You’re doing it, but you’re
feeling it, too. It’s… like turning on the girls because that’s good and makes you feel good, but it’s more intense because you’ve got all the parts, too, and…”

Jimmy raises an eyebrow at him.

“I’m not explaining it well. Just… You’ve got a dick, and it knows, and when you’re doing it… It’s a good positive feedback cycle.”

Jimmy shrugs a bit, and then rearranges the pillows, so he can lay comfortably, and tosses one to Tim so he can do likewise, and then takes Tim’s dick into his hand.

Tim’s turn to sigh. Yeah, nice, warm hand. Nice, warm, BIG, hand. Like his dick, Jimmy’s hand is wider than Tim’s, too.

“We didn’t exactly do that,” Breena says.

Jimmy’s lightly tracing over Tim’s dick, which Tim is really liking, as he says, “Would have lasted about three minutes sixty-nining.”

Tim nods. He’s been there. “Yep. That’s full body, and full brain sex. Everything about you that likes sex or is part of sex is involved.”

“So, you two look like you’re in a pretty good set up,” Abby says.

“Mmmm…” Tim says as Jimmy gives him a pleasant little twist, and then Jimmy groans when Tim does it back to him. “Yeah. See what I mean?”

Jimmy nods. It is different, more intense, when you’re feeling what you’re doing and feeling it being done back to you.

“I still want to hear about learning how to do this,” Tim adds.

Jimmy and Abby second and third that.

So, Breena continues. “I’d read enough sex books to know that a dick might be the most obvious part, what with it standing up and looking you right in the eye, but it’s not the only part that wants to get touched.”

Tim agrees with that. He lets go of Jimmy’s dick and gently cards his fingers though his pubes. Abby does that to him sometimes, and it’s not earth shatteringly sexy or anything, but it’s a nice hello sort of move. Plus, it’s also a chance to really feel them. Which is something else he’s never done much of before.

They’re thicker than his. Not just in the sense of each individual hair, which is true, but Jimmy’s pubes are also more densely packed. Rougher, too, which probably goes along with thicker. And… and this makes Tim smile. Some of them are gray. The hair on his head, after October, rapidly overtook Jimmy on the gray front, but at least he’s still young down below.

“What are you sniggering at?” Jimmy asks.

“The many marvelous variations of human anatomy.”

“Bull,” Abby says.

Tim chuckles a bit. “You’ve got some gray pubes.”
Tim can feel the eye roll, and he really feels Jimmy nip him on the hip.

“I’ll behave.”

“You better.”

Abby gets them back to Breena’s story. “So, you’re… kneeling…”

“Yeah. He was laying back, like he was when Tim started, and I was kneeling between his legs. I started with his thighs, brushing my hands up the insides of them. Familiar territory, but… naked, you know… That feeling of this is mine and I get to touch it. Then, what Tim’s doing, getting to sort of pet. Run my fingers over and through.”

“You tugged it, too. I liked that. Which was a surprise. Never thought about anyone doing that, but, it felt nice.”

Tim tries a gentle tug, and Jimmy’s hips follow his motion, a quick jerk to go with the sensation. Then he does something he likes, very lightly trailing his fingers over the hairs, skirting the edge of Jimmy’s leg, tracing the line of hair up his belly, and down again. Jimmy wriggles a bit at that, and does it back to Tim, which fills him with a light, shivery sensation.

He tries blowing on it. Abby, when she has pubic hair, likes that, and Breena does, too. Might be a treat for Jimmy. He feels Jimmy look up at him, but that feels more like a what did you just do? moment than a that was awesome, do it again! response.

“And, that’s where I… didn’t run out of ideas, I had ideas, but… I didn’t exactly know how to start. So, I asked Jimmy what he liked, and he said—“

“Anything you want to do; I’m going to like.’ And I did!”

“Yeah, but that wasn’t exactly what I was looking for. But, I didn’t know how to ask for what I was looking for, either, so… I wrapped my hand around it…” Jimmy sighs as Tim matches Breena’s story. He’s not sure if he’ll stay with it or not, but right now, this works fine. “And then I just licked. Like a popsicle.”

Tim tries that. Jimmy tastes good. Tim’s not really expecting that. Clean skin tastes like not much of anything normally, but… He knows he likes turned on woman, and he knows he likes that even better when some of his own musk is added in to it, and… Turned on Jimmy works for him, too. The scent/taste isn’t as strong as with a woman, but, Jimmy’s not as turned on as Abby or Breena would usually be by this point, and he’s really not as far along as Tim would be if his own scent/flavor is getting added to the mix, let alone licked back off of one of the girls.

He liked doing it better with Breena on Jimmy, and God, he can’t wait to do this with Abby in the mix, too, but… It’s not bad on its own.

He presses his tongue flat against the base of Jimmy’s dick, and drags it slowly up the length. Tim knows he likes that, and the nudge of Jimmy’s hips toward him lets him know he’s doing okay. And, like with the scent/flavor aspect, he also wasn’t expecting that doing it would feel good.

Pussy feels good against his lips. Especially wet, bare pussy. It’s all soft and slick and it’s like the best kissing ever because it tastes better than a mouth and smells like sex and it’s just an all around really good kiss that makes him feel good all over. Okay, no tongue action unless it’s his, and no sucking either, but even with that, kissing pussy doesn’t just make Abby or Breena feel good, it feels good to Tim, too.
It makes his dick hard. It’s completely hardwired into his mind as sex. Hell, the first time he went down on a girl, he was laying on his tummy, and just the taste and the smell and the position meant he got off doing it. (Which also meant he had a better time than his girlfriend did. It took a few more times before he got the trick of it.)

And apparently, so does licking a dick. It’s nicely firm and smooth and it feels good against his tongue. He’s got the idea that sucking on it probably feels nice, too, so he tries it. Just the tip. He’s not sure about doing much more than that, yet, but the top half inch of Jimmy’s dick slips easily between his lips, and sucking gently, sliding his lips against Jimmy’s glans feels good.

Abby squeaks at that, and Jimmy lets out a little startled gasp, apparently not expecting Tim to move that fast.

He feels a hand against his head, and hears Abby say, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you might be a natural at this. What do you think Jimmy, does he feel good?”

Jimmy’s still a bit stunned to be watching/feeling this, this quickly. Tim’s either having a significantly better time at this than he did, or, like Abby’s suggesting, there’s some sort of inherent cock-sucking ability that he’s got that Jimmy doesn’t.

Finally, he realizes Abby asked something, and what she asked. “Yeah. Uh… This okay with you?”

Tim pulls back. “Not what I was expecting. Abby’s mentioned it feels good and… It does.”

“Smooth and round and slick on your tongue and lips,” Breena adds.

“Yeah. Nice slide. Kind of like tongue kissing, all wet and slippery.”

Both of the girls are nodding at him.

Jimmy’s thinking maybe he was too damn far into his own head last time, because he doesn’t much remember how doing it felt, beyond his mouth being open wider than he expected it to be.

Granted, Tim’s not running into much of that yet, because he’s… again… “Ahh… yeah… that’s good…” got only the top half inch of Jimmy’s dick in his mouth, but he’s doing good things with it. And, with the position they’re in, Tim’s dick is pretty much looking him in the eye, and suggesting that it’d really like some attention, too, please.

Jimmy closes his hand around the base of Tim’s dick, pulling it down, closer to his lips, feeling it twitch a bit at his touch, and Tim’s got his hand around Jimmy’s dick, and his lips around the head, practically nursing on him with the way he’s just happily sucking away on the tip, and that connection, the feel of what’s happening to him, and the feel of what he’s about to… he shifts his position a little, opening his mouth, and just giving the tip of Tim’s dick a wet kiss, and that kiss shifts into a wet lick, and from there, because he’s hooking into it, into the feel of doing it and having it done to him, he shifts into that soft, nursing suck that Tim’s using on him and…

He groans long and low.

Tim agrees; he adds the rumble of his own voice.

It’s not even a really great technique. It feels nice, but not amazing. But… Tim’s doing it and feeling it at the same time. He and Jimmy are having no problem at all keeping in a matched rhythm for this.

It’s just… trippy. Tim feels like he’s blowing himself.
Tim feels Abby’s breath against his neck. She’s curled up behind him, cuddling against his back, and she says, “Feels powerful, doesn’t it?”

He can hear the smile in Breena’s voice. “That! I remember that. Holding Jimmy’s cock in my hand, licking it from tip to base and back up again, and his hands were tight, and his eyes closed, little uuh sounds coming out of his mouth with each breath. I felt like a goddess.”

Tim doesn’t know about feeling like a goddess, but yeah, this feels good. Granted, if he could talk, he might mention that, yeah, this does feel good, but he’s had a much easier time hooking into the sex god feel with the girls. For him, this is way more of the surreal sensation of doing and being done to and having a hard time figuring out where he’s ending and Jimmy begins.

He gives Jimmy a firm squeeze to go with the sucking, just to break the illusion of fucking himself. But he’s not even done doing it when Jimmy does it back. He’s tempted to thrust forward at that sensation, but stops himself. He doesn’t want a deep mouthful of dick, yet, so he’s better off not choking Jimmy.

Tim tries something else he likes when Abby or Breena’s doing him. Instead of just holding the base and keeping Jimmy where he wants him, he starts to stroke his hand up and down. His mouth isn’t going anywhere, it’s staying steady on the tip, but if there’s anything Tim knows how to do with a dick, it’s a hand job.

He’s got really nice pressure, glide, control, speed and Jimmy groans, loud, vibrations adding a lovely tingle to the sucking he’s doing.

Jimmy ups his game in response. He slows down, and instead of just lips, he starts letting his teeth run, lightly, over the head of Tim’s dick.

Wet and sharp and… Tim’s turn to groan, loud. That’s genuinely good technique, and it feels amazing, for a few strokes he just lets it flow over him, trying not to thrust too much but it feels good and he wants to move.

Enjoying what Jimmy’s doing, Tim just stops on his end of the giving the blow job. He’s still got Jimmy’s dick in his mouth, but his hand has gone still and the only thing he’s paying attention to right now is Jimmy blowing him.

Tim breaks out of that with a jerk. If they’re sixty-nining that means he needs to be moving, too.

If.

He pulls back. And Jimmy lets go, startled, he thought he’d been doing a pretty good job. “We okay?”

“Yeah, just… can’t do and be done to at the same time, yet. Figured you’d be cool with getting to go first.”

Jimmy settles back onto his back. “I can handle that.”

He’s debating between going back to what he was doing, offering Jimmy’s tooth work back to him, or going for something that drives him crazy when Breena or Abby does it.

Jimmy’s on his back, propped on his elbows, watching Tim.

Tim grins at him, settles down further, worming his hands under Jimmy’s butt, and lays his tongue on Jimmy’s right ball.
Jimmy shivers a bit at that. He’s always liked having his balls played with, and so far, three licks into it, Tim’s doing a splendid job.

Really wet, really slick. That’s what Tim likes when Abby or Breena’s licking him, so he goes for it himself.

Mouth open wide, he’s more holding Jimmy’s right ball in his mouth than sucking on it, but he’s holding and licking and Jimmy’s groaning. It’s easy to go from really good suction to sucking too hard, balls are sensitive, but a warm, wet mouth and a little suction and tongue action, Tim knows that’s good.

Mouth full of pubes are a bit distracting, but not all that different from licking unshaved pussy, and it’s a testicle, so not nearly as fuzzy as Abby or Breena when they’re all natural.

And Jimmy trying to thrust into him, groaning, that’s… Okay, yeah, Tim’s still not sure about Sex Goddess but he’s feeling awfully good at getting those sounds out of Jimmy. He obviously can’t talk, but he does worm one of his hands out from under Jimmy’s butt, and holds it out, wiggling his fingers. Abby knows what he’s thinking of doing and rolls over, reaching for the lube.

Breena sees it, too, and she knows Jimmy likes that when she or Abby’s doing it, but figures that it’s probably a good idea to make sure Jimmy knows what’s coming next.

“You okay with Tim getting his fingers into you?”

Tim hears her ask and decides that’s a good plan. He flashes her a thumbs up for asking.

Jimmy doesn’t tense at that, but he does pause. He does like that when the girls do it, and… Tim’s not that much bigger than Abby, so his fingers… finger… he’s still firmly in the one finger camp, shouldn’t feel that different, but, even with liking it when the girls do it, it’s still a fairly slow and gentle operation, and he didn’t exactly prep for this ahead of time, so he’s not clean inside and out, but Tim knows that and is still offering, so…

“Go slow. Abby, can you grab some of the baby wipes, too?”

Tim nods a bit, and the little tug on his ball that goes with that makes Jimmy groan. Abby grabs the wipes, so Tim’s got easy clean up within hand’s reach, and they’re good to go.

Tim pulls back for a second, “Still want to hear your story, Breena.”

“Yes, well I wasn’t doing anything like that.”

Abby takes over on talking, because she wants to hear Breena’s story and watch Tim blow Jimmy. “It’s safe to say we don’t care if he’s playing out your first time. And Jimmy, you were supposed to be doing some talking through, remember?”

Jimmy groans as Tim rubs his knuckles over his perineum.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what he did for me, too,” Breena says.

Jimmy whimpers a bit. Tim might not really know what the hell he’s doing with his mouth, because, of course, he’s never done that before, but he sure as hell knows what he’s doing with his hands, because he has done that before, a lot, and has a deep, intimate understanding of how that gentle pressure on his perineum while a slick finger just strokes over his asshole feels.

He’s got that part of this wrapped up in sparkly paper and tied with a pretty bow.
And his mouth… Yeah, that’s doing good things. Breena and Abby know a little more suction and a little less tongue, and him rocking his hips, trying to get his ball further into Tim’s mouth isn’t getting the idea across, but a wet mouth and lots of licking feels good.

Just not as good as those slick fingers and firm pressure and…

“Nghm…” and soft, panted breaths come out of Jimmy before he manages to gasp out. “Suck harder.”

Tim does, and misses the mark. Jimmy thrashes, pulling back. Tim doesn’t need Jimmy to tell him that was too hard. “Sorry.”

His next shot at it works better. Still a little softer than Jimmy wants, but Tim’s feeling tentative after that last try, and Jimmy sighs happily. “Better.”

Tim squeezes his thigh.

“Just… a little harder.”

This time Tim nails, a little harder and Jimmy groans again, fingers clenching in the bedsheets. Tim’s got him in the sweet spot right now.

Breena smiles at that, remembering… “I was treating him like he was made of spun sugar. Never played with one before, not like this, and we’ve all seen the joke about how bad a hit to the balls hurts, so I was just gently, tips of my fingers stroking over his dick, giving it light little licks, and nuzzling it a bit.”

“Treating him like a baby chick?”

“Yeah. Like if I touched it too hard it’d shatter. And… I think he was just letting me play.” Jimmy nods. He’s not really in a talking place right now, but he’s aware of what Breena’s saying. “But, after a little bit, he wrapped his hand around mine, letting me feel what good pressure was, which was probably more useful than a week of harder, softer, less soft, would have been.”

Tim’s mostly focused on Jimmy right now, but he hears that, and he’s got a hand that’s just sitting under Jimmy, cradling his butt. That hand could be doing something. He pulls his right hand out from under Jimmy, wiggles his fingers at Breena in a show me sort of way, and then wraps them around Jimmy’s dick.

Jimmy whimpers. He’s got wet and hot mouth on his ball, and slick knuckles slipping from just behind his balls to over his asshole and back, and now Tim’s other hand is wrapped around his dick, and Breena’s wrapping her hand around his, and between the sensation and the visual of two of his three loves playing him, together, he’s dying in the best possible way.

His head is back, eyes starting to close, low groans slipping from between his lips, and that’s when Tim starts to finger him. This time, when he practically jerks off the bed, it’s not about pain. Slow, dull prod, very gentle pressure, because, again, this is something Tim’s done to himself, so he’s got a pretty good idea of how much force to use to get Jimmy’s body to just slowly give around him, and eventually, assuming Jimmy works about the same way he does, he’ll pull Tim’s finger in.

And he does. Takes a few… seconds, minutes, Tim’s not sure, before he’s two knuckles deep and Jimmy’s body starts to ripple around him, feeling like a pair of pursed lips pulling against his finger.

Tim grins at that. He knows how that feels, on the receiving side, too. Almost there. Yes, he loves getting tea bagged and his prostate rubbed at the same time, but he’s not looking to draw Jimmy out
for an hour here. Just looking to do a half way-decent job of getting him off.

Which means moving back to the side of this he doesn’t know how to do.

So, as he’s gently nudging Jimmy’s prostate with his index finger, he lets go of his ball and moves up to his dick.

Breena’s smiling at him, and he’s sure Abby is, too, though she’s outside of his view right now.

“Start with the tip,” Breena says. “Just like before, get it good and wet and slippery.”

Tim does. Licking all over and around, and again, it feels nice on his tongue, and good against his lips.

Jimmy’s trying to hold still. At this point he’s had all the foreplay he wants. He wants to get fucking!

“He was making that impatient little sound with me, too.”

“Two years,” Jimmy pants. “Impatient doesn’t begin to cover it!”

Tim kisses the tip of his dick and gently wriggles his finger. “It’s been a week.”

“Nghm!”

“Looks like you know what you’re doing with your hands,” Breena says, and Jimmy nods, emphatically, at that. “So, hand on his dick, wrap it up nice and snug, put your mouth on whatever’s not in your hand, and then go slow and easy. You’ll get a feel for it.”

Put that way, it doesn’t seem terribly difficult. After all, it’s oral sex, not defusing a nuclear bomb.

Tim slips his hand up so all but the head of Jimmy’s dick is sticking out of his fist, and then wraps his lips around it while keeping up a slow, steady rub with his finger.

Jimmy moans, loud. Mostly about what’s going on with Tim’s finger, but finally, getting a wet, hot mouth around his dick is doing good things for him, too.

Tim’s hands are bigger than the girls’, so, even with his fist all the way at the base of Jimmy’s dick, he’s only got a few inches sticking up on the other side. As long as he keeps his hand in place, he’s in no danger of getting poked in the tonsil.

Which is good because this is different. It’s wider and, even with his hand in place, longer, than anything Tim’s ever put in his mouth before. After all, when he eats a banana or popsicle, he takes a bite out of the top, he doesn’t try to shove the top third of it into his mouth all at once.

“Just up and down, nice and easy. Your hand’ll get wetter and slide smoother.”

He follows Breena’s voice, mostly just doing his usual hand job with his mouth on top of it. He’s not sure if this qualifies as giving head, or a really wet hand job, but Jimmy’s wriggling around and making some happy noises, so he doesn’t think it matters all that much.

“It gets more slippery, right?” Breena says.

And… actually, yeah, it does. It feels like his spit’s gone from just wet to slick, which is… cool… unexpected.

Breena takes his hand in hers, pulling it off of Jimmy’s dick and laying it on his hip. “You stay put,”
Tim assumes she’s talking to Jimmy. “Okay, slow and gentle, as low as you want to go. Just, be aware of where your teeth are.”

He can do that. And, as low as he wants… Uh… He knows what feels good from the having this done end, which is all the way down. He doesn’t think that’s happening. But, maybe, who knows? There was no version of the world where he thought this would ever happen, so…

Slow, easy, wet lips, and wet tongue, and down he goes. And nope, his nose isn’t buried in Jimmy’s pubes, his chin isn’t resting on his balls, and he’s thinking that’s probably never happening, because if he goes much further, he’s going to start gagging, and puking on Jimmy is really going to kill the mood. Four maybe five inches is more than enough.

Jimmy’s petting his hair. “You can suck as hard as you want, and go as fast.”

Tim gets that. A dick is not a testicle. It’s much happier with harder and faster. Plus, this turned on, extra stimulation is good. He sucks hard, pulling his head back up and Jimmy manages to get out, “Yah!”

He tries a few quicker strokes, and decides this wet and slick, especially when Jimmy’s hips start to roll counter point to his strokes, if he wants depth control, he needs his hand in place. So it gets back into the game, and, again, a spit slick hand on a dick is something Tim’s been doing for more than twenty-five years at this point. He knows what he’s doing with that hand.

He’s rubbing fast and steady, keeping his hand tight and a moderate amount of suction with his mouth, and he can feel Jimmy tensing up, feel the crest coming.

And like before his own dick gets into it. He can feel Jimmy stiffen, feel the extra girth, the way the skin goes tighter, and his dick throbs at it in sympathy. It wants what Jimmy’s getting, wants to be where he is. If they ever do get around to sixty-nining, he’s got the sense that it’ll be amazing.

Jimmy’s rocking against him, fast, thighs tight, one hand resting on the back of Tim’s head, his hand tight in Tim’s hair, and with every breath he’s grunting along, getting closer and closer. He’s not sure if Tim’s keeping him on edge intentionally, or doesn’t quite know how slow of a build he’s going for here, but either way, Jimmy can see the edge but isn’t quite at it.

He’s whimpering now, because Tim’s dancing him on the line.

Tim’s not intentionally spinning Jimmy out. He’s just not used to doing this, so his coordination between mouth, hand, other hand, and the rest of his body isn’t quite on point, yet.

Jimmy’s been rocking his hips against Tim, trying to get over the edge, but it’s not doing it. He’s stuck at a hair away from the tingles starting. He plants his feet on the bed, and gets his legs into it, giving himself a bit more leverage and a bit more speed, and there…

Tim feels Jimmy shift, feels the change in speed and angle, and then the dick in his mouth and hand stiffens further, and Jimmy’s ass clenches around his finger as his whole body tightens and then pulses.

Jimmy cries out at it, and much to his surprise, Tim moans, too.

He’s not sure, what, if any, expectations he had about Jimmy cumming were, but… On the one side, namely his finger, it’s exactly like with the girls. Tight and twitching. Emotionally, it’s like with the girls, awesome waves of Sex God! Mouth-wise… That’s different. There’s the pulse of Jimmy’s dick in his mouth, again and again, and not being sure how hard to suck after (if at all), and Tim knows he’s going to swallow, but he’s not entirely sure if it’s time to do that, yet.
Jimmy’s not a porn star, and Tim didn’t spin him out that hard or long, so it’s not like he’s got cum dripping out of his mouth or down his chin or anything. And, okay, it’s not a flavor he’d order a milkshake in, but like his own, it’s not nasty. He’s certainly heard about/read the salty, bitter stuff, but that’s just not part of his experience. It’s more a mouthfeel issue, warm, slimy, almost tingly, than a flavor. After a few seconds of Jimmy’s dick not doing much of anything, Tim pulls back and swallows. Then he kisses the tip of Jimmy’s dick, rests his head on Jimmy’s hip, and cuddles with him.

Jimmy’s lightly stroking Tim’s hair. “That was better than I expected.”

Tim kisses his hip. “Easier than I expected.” He looks up at the girls. “Enjoy the show?”

They glance at each other. Abby *really* wants to hop in. They’re both so fucking delicious like this, Jimmy spread out and spent, pink, slightly sweaty, dick soft on his belly and Tim curled between his legs, face on Jimmy’s hip, and dick hard. She’s actually wet, and hasn’t been this turned on since before Sean was born… And she’d rather cut her arm off than break into this. Yes, they’ve invited her to play, but…

This matters. In a way sex doesn’t usually matter, and she doesn’t want to cut this short or distract from it.

She glances at Breena, noticing that her color is pinking up, and nipples are hard. Apparently this has slain, or at least temporarily subdued the Morning Sickness Monster. Breena squeezes her hand and nods. She’s not cutting in on this dance, either.

“Yes, but we’re good.” Abby grabs one of the baby wipes for Tim, and gives his hand a quick cleanup.

Tim and Jimmy are not new to this dance. They can both see, even Jimmy, even without his glasses, that the girl want sex, a lot of it, NOW. And they both understand why they’re bowing out.

Tim raises an eyebrow at Jimmy. Jimmy’s done on the getting off side of the night. If he wanted to lay back, relax, and watch as the girls do him, Tim’s good with that.

Jimmy inclines his head at Tim. Like Tim’s noticed, he’s done for the receiving side of things. So, really, it’s up to Tim what he wants.

Having the ball tossed back to him, Tim gets that this is his choice. Right now he’s got the option of going with his ladies. They’re certainly willing to go on the back burner tonight, but he really doubts if he lays back and asks them to ride him, they’ll say ‘no.’

And Jimmy’s giving him the space to go with them, too, because they both know that when it comes down to it, breasts and pussy is more Tim’s speed than dick, but…

But it’s a choice. He’s got the sexual buffet of the gods in front of him, all the delicious people he could possibly want, and he gets to pick.

And sure, he loves steak. Steak is awesome. Stuck on a desert island with nothing else to eat, he’ll pick steak, but… well… maybe the occasional dish of tofu might be worth having. Variety is the spice of life, right?

He sits up. “Let me wash up, and then it’s your turn.” He pats Jimmy’s knee with his clean hand.
Tim loves to watch. When he’s having sex, his eyes are open. (Unless he’s kissing, focusing that close doesn’t work all that well for him, and the view of another eyeball, even one he loves, from half an inch away doesn’t do anything for him.)

And he loves to imagine. Sure, the line about guys thinking about sex ninety times a day, or whatever that ridiculous stat is, isn’t true, but three or four times a day, he’ll have an image of at least one, often two, sometimes more, naked people happily dancing through his mind.

And he’ll admit, that even with that, and with the fact that he and Jimmy keep getting more physically intimate, and the fact that Jimmy’s blown him before, the idea of the image of Jimmy between his legs, hand wrapped around his dick, lips wet and parted as he’s about to swallow him down had never wandered into Tim’s fantasies.

Let alone the idea that he’d like it.

But… as he’s sitting here, watching, feeling it, he is liking it. And, honestly, quite a bit more than liking it.

Jimmy’s beautiful. He’s got Tim on the side of the bed, sitting up, and he’s kneeling between Tim’s legs. He’s naked, glasses off, hair wild, little bit sweaty, and curling because of it, tongue slipping over his lips, wet lips, lips that were just wrapped around his balls, and those big hazel eyes are looking up at him, and…

And Jimmy’s fucking gorgeous. Everything Ned said about Jimmy is pouring back into Tim’s head as he’s finally seeing it.

Jimmy’s keeping up eye contact as he slips Tim’s dick into his mouth, and Tim whimpers, hand stroking over Jimmy’s cheek and chin as he restarts his experiment on fucking Tim.

Tim swallows hard as Jimmy keeps working him. Same thing he was doing earlier, hands and mouth and a bit awkward because Jimmy’s got the wet hand on dick part down pat, but he’s also not practiced at blow jobs, and even though he’s done several of prostate exams, it’s not part of how he plays with himself, so he doesn’t have Tim’s skill at that. But Jimmy did have the brains to pick a position where his legs are well situated to take his weight while he’s moving around, so he’s able to ramp up speed easily, and it’s not taking him long to get Tim cursing, happily, at him.

“Jimmy, fuck… Ahh… oh god, fuck, baby, fuck…”

Wet mouth, and those dark green eyes looking up at him, and hand, warm, tight, fast, thrusting fingers, and suction and friction and wet…

And those eyes… Waves of pleasure, sparking through his body as his own vision starts to gray out, and focus narrows down, pleasure, pulse after pulse of it centered on a mouth and dark hazel green eyes looking up at him.

There are feelings that go with his honeymoon that Jimmy’s never tried to verbalize. Having felt them, lived them with Breena, that was enough.

And, right now, as he’s got the first of Sean’s nighttime meals, they’re not precisely verbal, but he’s aware of them, again.

He and Tim talked about the thousand-dollar blow job, and the five-thousand-dollar blow job, if such
a thing existed.

His first time with Breena was a five-thousand-dollar blow job. And not because of any astonishingly good technique or natural skill or any of that. On a pure physical sensation level, he’d had better blow jobs before, and vastly better ones since, but physical sensation is only part of the game when it comes to sex, and a rather small part of the game when it comes to making love.

And that night, they were making love.

It was late May, so the sun hadn’t quite managed to set, yet, and he had a few candles in the room. It was light enough to see, and see well. He wasn’t wearing his glasses, so Breena was in focus, but most of the rest of the room wasn’t.

So, he has the memory of her in sharp focus, and the rest of the world a golden-orange sunset blur.

She was rocking back and forth, listening to whatever bits of instruction he managed to get out, doing it. His astonishingly beautiful wife, naked with him, for the first time, loving his body with hers, for the first time. There was the glow of being so completely in love, enraptured, and of this moment, of being touched by hands that loved him, of laying completely open and naked, and feeling her do it, get him off.

And, he’s never been much of the no sex before marriage thing, he still isn’t, not in the sense of feeling like anyone should have to do it if they don’t want to, but…

But that space, that feeling, her lips on his skin and his body tight, full, pulsing with pleasure caused by her.

That was the intangible emotional state of love made into an all-engulfing physical sensation.

And she was absolutely right, it was the best possible wedding present she could have given him.

And then as the night wore on, it got better.

Sean’s down. Since he’s getting up to grab him again, Jimmy should be on one of the sides of the bed, but he doesn’t want that.

He worms himself into the bed, between Tim and Breena.

Breena snuggles into her usual place, on his side, arm across his chest, face against his shoulder. He kisses her forehead. Tim’s on his other side, back to Jimmy’s flank, Jimmy’s hand resting on his hip.

“You really saw him…” he remembers Abby’s voice, talking about the last time he really worked on Tim. He remembers the way Tim looked down at him tonight. Eyes low, mouth open, long spill of inarticulate pleasure as his body went tight and shuddered. He remembers the feel of Tim’s mouth on him, the feel of suck and wet, of arching up into his mouth, and the feel of Tim’s hand tight on his dick as he sucked hard, sending every nerve in his body singing.

No, not a great blow job, not on a pure physical sensation level. Tim doesn’t have the girls’ touch or experience. He’s not, when it comes to dick wrangling, a sex god, not yet, maybe not ever. And Jimmy very much doubts he qualifies as good at blow jobs, either.

He doesn’t think it matters, though.
Jimmy can feel the piece falling into place, why the “experiment” didn’t work. Why he froze.

He’s straight. He doesn’t want to have sex with men, or even, a man. He’s not ever going to be looking to get laid, with a man.

But he’s also a lover, he’s Tim’s lover, and he does want to make love with Tim.

Make love. Making love. Silly term. Jimmy, especially before Breena, considered it a euphemism for people uncomfortable with sex. But it’s not, and he gets that now. It’s the physical actions, the touches, the nice gestures, the verbs, that go along with the noun, love.

And he wants to make love with Tim in all the different ways there are to make love. And sometimes making love involves bodies and pleasure so sharp it makes you want to cry.

That’s why afterglow is good with Tim, or just sitting around talking, or fighting, or a back rub, or… any of it. It’s making love. It’s some of the physical manifestations of being in love.

But the sex part of making love is easier with the girls, because he’s wired to want sex with them. He’s had plenty of sex over the years, and devoutly hopes to have a ton more of it. But he’s not wired to want sex with Tim.

He can’t or won’t or doesn’t want to (he’s not sure where the line is) fuck Tim. He can, and will, and looks forward to, making love to and with him.

And he gets why on say, day two, of on their own, he wasn’t just jumping Tim. He was certainly horny then, but that was it, just horny, a decent toss off in the shower scratched the itch. He gets why denying himself all sex didn’t do it, either. That was looking to fuck. To get it up and off and was all about him and his dick. His brain, soul, heart, whatever, wasn’t involved in that transaction.

No sex had to go on long enough to switch away from taking care of myself into taking care of each other mode before he could get in the shower, knowing what Tim was doing, and basically make the first move.

He turns his head and kisses the back of Tim’s shoulder.

Apparently, he’s not entirely asleep, because he reaches back to pat Jimmy’s hand, before scooting back a little to press more firmly into him.

“Love you, Tim.” He keeps his voice low. He knows by the way she’s breathing that Breena’s asleep.

Tim takes his hand and pulls it to his lips, giving him a quick kiss. “You, too, Jimmy.”
Back to work after the CrimeWeb Commission almost feels like a letdown.

It’s not, not really. He’s doing good stuff, getting into the data Bishop offered, using it to build a system that tracks harassment complaints, updating the “average” and then highlighting units that are more than a standard deviation above (or below) that average for more attention. Yes, few complaints are good, but too few complaints might mean those complaints are being ‘discouraged’ if not actively ignored.

He’s not sure if that’s the golden bullet for making sure that people don’t actively try to bury complaints, but he hopes it’ll help.

It’s good work. Useful work.

It’ll make (hopefully) the Navy and Marines a much more pleasant place for a lot of people to work.

And if he’d gotten more than six hours into it before a major identity theft case rolled out of Manilla, that would have been good.

But, as it is, he’s working, along with everyone else with a skill in security systems, to nail down how a hacker got into the VA Hospital internal web in Manilla and to keep him (them?) out of it in the future, this is less build systems that change the world, and more patch holes in a fence. And somehow, fence patching has lost a lot of its shine.

But the fence has holes in it, and he’s got the tools to patch it.

So, patching he goes.

With a sigh.

Manilla is twelve hours off of DC, and Tim’s days and nights just got flipped for the duration.

8:00 AM, everyone else is getting up, and Tim’s going home. To Jimmy and Breena’s home, where he can sleep because there won’t be any little babies being little babies.

He almost drove home to his place, because sometimes Abby snags a nap when Sean goes down in the morning, but, in that it’s her first week back at work, she won’t be in the bed with him.

So, to Jimmy and Breena’s, which is currently empty.

He stays up just long enough to shovel some food into his mouth, and crashes into Breena’s bed, asleep shortly after he touches the sheets.
A few hours later, when Breena gets home, he stirs a little, snuggles in against her, and goes back to sleep.

Footsteps. One second Tim was asleep, nicely snug around Breena, and then the next he’s hearing footfalls from downstairs.

Footfalls in what is supposed to be an empty house. With Breena feeling so cruddy, the girls have been staying at daycare until Jimmy (or Tim or Abby) picks them up, closer to dinner time. That gives her some time to rest, which she’s been appreciating.

So, right now, the house should be silent.

But it’s not. Someone is moving around down there. Tim glances out the window. Whoever it is didn’t park in the driveway. His car, Breena’s car, nothing else. He scans the street. Jimmy’ll sometimes park on the street to make sure they can get out of the driveway easily. Gibbs always parks on the street. And that exhausts the list of everyone who should be moving around this house in the middle of the day.

No cars he recognizes. There are two cars he knows aren’t part of the usual cars hanging around Jimmy and Breena’s neighborhood during the day.

He rolls out of the bed fast, takes two, very quiet, steps to the closet, and has Breena’s gun safe open in a second.

She’s got a little Beretta. Ziva’s pet gun. Great. Tiny thing in his big hands. But it’s a gun, so that’s better than nothing.

He locks the door behind him, and has Tony already up on his phone.

“At Jimmy’s. Someone’s in here with me.”

No questions asked, no need for clarification. “On it. Twelve minutes out.”

Tim stalks through the hall, checking each room, but all he hears are the sounds of someone moving around downstairs. Kitchen by the sound of it.

Down the stairs, senses on high alert, whoever it is, is messing around in the kitchen, going through the drawers from the sound of it.

Tim clears the hall, gun out, finger next to the trigger, every muscle tense and ready to attack. “Freeze!”

Ed drops the bowl in his hand and all but wets his pants.

Tim feels his own adrenaline spike and then start to crash as he recognizes who’s standing in front of him. “Good God, Ed! KNOCK when you walk into a cop’s house!” Tim lowers the gun and grabs his phone. “False alarm, Tony, just Ed.”

“Doesn’t he know to knock?” Tony asks over the speaker phone. Sure, they all just walk into each other’s homes. They don’t wait for someone to open the door for them. But they also knock because it’s a bad idea to spook the guy with an enemies list and a gun.

“I think he does, now. Call off the cavalry.”
“Okay.”

Finally, Ed’s brain starts working as he decides he’s not about to get shot. “I’m not in a cop’s house, Tim. What the hell are you doing here?”

Hmmm… Those are somewhat relevant points. And, as Tim pulls out of full red-alert mode, he feels get-down-on-his-knees-and-pray level thankful that he was tired enough to just crash, because if he’d been feeling any more energetic, he would have taken off his clothing, and in full red-alert mode, he would not have put them on before going to make sure Breena was safe.

Tim swallows, sees the take out bag, sees the bowl on the floor, and says, “Probably the same thing you are, making sure Breena gets some food.”

“Oh really, where’s the food you brought?” Now that Ed’s not about to wet his pants, he’s angry, and suspicious. Yes, he saw Tim’s car when he pulled in, and he knows that the McGees are here a lot, he assumed it was Abby visiting, so he wasn’t bugged or worried about that until he heard those footsteps coming from upstairs and Tim appeared.

“In Breena. Let me put this back,” Tim says about the Beretta, hoping to buy himself some more time.

“It lives in her room!”

“Yeah, I know. That’s where I got it from.” Tim heads upstairs, fast. He pulls out his knife and pops the lock on Breena’s door (and makes a mental note to get her a better lock on her door).

“What the hell was that?” Breena sounds a bit groggy, and very ill. She woke up to the sound of a “Freeze!” and a crashing bowl. She had 911 up on her phone practically before she had her eyes open.

“Ed.” He sits next to her on the bed, and kisses her gently. “Here.”

He takes the phone from her, explains what was happening, gave the 911 dispatcher his badge number, and got that sorted out as Breena lays back down and tries to get back to sleep. When he’s done, she’s still up, so he says, “Let me put this back, and take your plates down.” Tim’s lucky enough that the plate Breena’s morning eggs were on, and her smoothie cup, are still up here. “He’s wondering why I’m here.”

That gets a small, wry smile out of her. “You mean, he knows why you’re here and wondering if he’s right?”

Tim smiles a bit at her. “Yeah. Anyway, if he asks, I showed up to get you something to eat, and do some chores. You wanna see him?”

“Sure, he can come up… OH…” She leaps out of bed and rushes to the bathroom. Tim follows, and spends a moment petting her back as she throws up. Between retches; she waves him off.

Tim gathers up the plate and mug, and heads down. He holds up the crockery to Ed. “See. Anti-nausea smoothie, which doesn’t appear to be doing the job, and two scrambled eggs.”

“You cook for her?” Ed’s staring at Tim, hard.

Tim loads the dishes into the dishwasher. “Sure.”

“Where’s Jimmy?”
“Should be at work, might be in the field.”

Ed’s watching him very carefully, seeing how easy Tim is in Breena’s home. “Uh huh… Why aren’t you?”

“I’m on eight PM to eight AM all week. Case that went hot is out of Manilla, and that’s their hours.”

“Does Jimmy know you’re here?”

If there was ever a time for balls-out no-shame, Tim figures this is it. He pulls his phone out of his pocket again, and this time dials Jimmy. “Kind of busy right now,” can be heard on speaker.

“Yeah. I know. Ed’s here and wants to know that I’ve got your blessing to be here.”

“Ed, I’m elbow-deep in intestines right now. Tim’s not doing anything Breena and I don’t want him to be doing.”

“He was in your room.”

“Yeah, Ed, I know. That’s where Breena is most of the time, right now. That’s where you’ll be if you go visit her. Get your panties out of a twist. Gotta go.”

“See you this evening,” Tim says, and a dial tone follows his words.

“Why aren’t you home with your own wife and babies?” Ed’s eyes narrow, but he starts ladling the chicken soup into a new bowl.

Tim sighs. “My wife isn’t at home, she’s at work. Sean and Kelly are with Heather, right now, which is where they usually are this time of day. I’m here because Breena’s hurting and wanted some company. I spent the morning at my place, with my wife and kids, and then came over here to help out. I did laundry and vacuumed, too. Then because there are small children at my place, who make a lot of noise, I caught a nap here, which you woke me up from, stalking around the house without knocking, setting off my defend-the-girl-alarm.” Which is true, sort of, he did the chores part yesterday. “You want me to call Abby and check with her to make sure this is okay?”

Ed’s eyes narrow again.

“Come on, helping people who are sick isn’t a radical notion. You’re here doing it, too.”

“Helping your family when they’re sick…”

“It looked like you guys hosting the christening party, I know Jeannie’s got another one in the works for Sean, I’m sure you were at the Christmas shindig, and I’m Uncle Tim to your grandkids. We’re family.”

They hear the toilet flush from above, and the sound of someone walking, slowly across the bedroom. Ed grabs the bowl, and Tim hands him a spoon. “Might want to leave it in the hallway, make sure she can take the smell of it before getting it too close.”

“Done this before, Tim. Her mother got sick like this, too, with Amy.”

“I’m sorry.”

And that, his tone, his genuine, I’m sorry she had to go through that, and Breena’s dealing with it now, and all of this sucks, gets through to Ed more than anything else Tim’s done.
(Though, in retrospect, when Ed thinks about it, the fact that Tim almost shot him for intruding on Breena impresses Ed. No, he didn’t like the fear that went with that, at all, but that level of got her back, that matters to him.)

Around six, Jimmy and Abby, and the kids all get home.

“How’d it go?” Tim asks Abby as she’s holding both of their babies. He didn’t get much time with her yesterday, so the ‘first day back’ report was cut short.

“I missed both of you, so much!” Kelly glows at that, and Sean appears to be basking in Mommy time, too. She looks over to Tim, who’s putting dinner onto plates. “Easier than going back after Kelly. We’re backlogged, of course. Four-man team with only three people on it means things go slowly, but the system’s in place and working.”

Breena’s sitting at the table, Anna in her lap, listlessly sipping her smoothie.

“You look like you’ve had a shit day,” Abby says, bowing her head to Breena’s for a kiss.

“Blech. Yeah… Cut out two hours early, and when he finished, Dad came over, and got a hell of a scare when Tim almost shot him.”

“Is that what that was about?” Jimmy asks.

Tim nods, and proceeds to tell them about today’s adventures. That fills up the first half of dinner.

“Did he buy it?” Jimmy asks.

Tim shrugs. Breena wiggles her hand in a maybe gesture. “He may have just decided he doesn’t care much if,” she gestures between her and Tim, “are fooling around. At least, if Tim’s first instinct is to run down the steps and threaten to blow the intruder away, as opposed to trying to jump out the window and hide.”

“Yeah because our car in the driveway is so stealthy,” Abby adds. “Wait, didn’t you check to see if anyone was parked in the driveway?”

Tim nods. “Yeah, I did, and the street, too. Ed drives a Lincoln, right?

“Not since last week,” Breena says. “Mom drug him kicking and screaming into the 21st century and got him into Hyundai.”

That makes sense to Tim. It’s been niggling in his head that he didn’t recognize Ed’s car. Which he should have. He decided he was tired and scared and missed it, but new car would more than explain not seeing Ed’s car and relaxing.

Tim rolls his eyes a bit. “I think he was expecting Abby in our car. Not me.”

“And I know he was expecting me to be napping. He doesn’t usually knock, but he does usually yell out ‘Hello’ or something. So, the plan was: bring over some soup, just leave it for me if I was asleep, try to get me to eat it and keep me company if I wasn’t.”

Tim sighs. “Being a good dad. That’s pretty much exactly what Gibbs did for me when I had the flu.”
“Yep.”

That seems to cover all there is to cover with this. They’re all quiet for a moment, eating, making sure kids get at least a bit of food in them, and then Abby says, “So…” with a gleam in her eyes. “Tony’s new crew is in.”

That gets some grins.

“I got to see them, too.” Jimmy adds. “You know how you look at Draga and think, ‘God, he’s BIG?’” he says to Breena.

She nods. She’s used to Draga now, but when he started, she remembered thinking he was huge.

“Yeah, well, apparently Tony decided that Draga and a pile of guns wasn’t enough on the physical intimidation factor, so he grabbed Spader who’s got two inches and thirty pounds on Draga. No one in his right mind will ever try to fight this team.” He pauses on that. “Okay, they might try to start some crap with Johnson. She’s painfully cute. But in less than a minute something like 500 pounds of pissed-off alpha-male cop is going to come and spatter whoever tries that.”

“I thought they were trying to avoid small and cute this time,” Breena says.

“Ex-crime scene tech for the Pittsburgh PD. She’s got skills they wanted,” Abby adds. “Good ones, from the looks of it. They came down today to get introduced and say hi. She’s not a lab tech, but she knew her way around the evidence we were working on. Pointed out a way to improve our bagging technique for bullet shells.”

Tim raises an eyebrow. “Instead of getting however many casings, each in their own bag, all of the bags loose in the evidence box, roaming around in there, getting smushed beneath the fingerprints and other evidence, her crew would carry larger ZipLock baggies, the gallon sized ones, for example, and tuck all ‘like’ evidence into the larger bag. So, all the bullet bags would be in one bigger bag. The prints all in another. Stuff like that. Memo about doing that went out today.”

Tim shakes his head. It’s a blindingly obvious and simple idea. One they’d never had. “It’s amazing how many easy little fixes there are out there.”

Abby nods. Not that it takes tons of time to sort the bullets out of the box, but pop them all into one big baggie, and that’ll save whoever’s on bullet casings a good three minutes of hunting them down per case. Add that up over the course of a year, over all the different types of evidence, and it’s probably a week of man hours saved.

“How was Tony doing with them?” Tim asks.

“Didn’t really see. Draga was on show and tell,” Jimmy replies.

“Supposedly, if no dead bodies pop up, we’ve got lunch with him tomorrow,” Abby says.

Jimmy holds up crossed fingers.

“Okay, how was Draga doing?” Tim asks. “Still looking moon-eyed at Johnson.”

Jimmy shakes his head and Abby says, “If he’s still doing it, I didn’t see it.”

“He looked okay. He put on his older, more-experienced big brother hat, and it looks like it’s fitting him okay.”
Abby nods at that. “I’ve got a feeling that after another year or two in second-in-command, Tony’ll put him up for his own team.”

Tim can see that. Draga’s got a good base. Some more experience, and maybe a good partner of his own, and he’d make a good team leader. And, if he ends up being serious about Johnson, getting him on his own team might be a good thing. Or not… After all, working with his loves certainly didn’t hurt Tim, or Tony for that matter.

They get an hour together. Eating, talking, Tim plays with each of the kids some, gets to kiss everyone goodnight, and then he’s off for another night of attempting to beat the clusterfuck that’s the Manilla VA Hospital’s internal web system into shape.

Long night. Victory is… almost… theirs. Probably. He hopes.

It looks like the attacks are coming from the inside. Maybe. (Tim’s certainly pulled that trick before.) They’ve been able to trace where the information goes after it leaves the VA, whoever’s doing it is using the VA system to send the information on its way, but not exactly how it’s being accessed in the first place.

He’s got a field agent keeping eyes on the terminal that’s being accessed. Someone’s about to get arrested, or his crew’s about to do a lot more work.

At 5:57 AM, he gets the call. The arrest has been made, and Special Agent Billy Dunn and the as of yet not talking and not identified hacker are heading toward a plane to take them to DC.

“You got anything on him?” Tim asks.

“He’s white, looks like he’s from California or someplace like that,” Tim doesn’t ask what, looks like he’s from California means, “and a VA ID. According to the ID he’s a web administrator here. So, he might work here, or he made up an ID to get him in the door. We’ll get him matched up before deciding that.”

“Okay. Get him over here. We’ve got some people who are going to want to talk to him.”

“You?”

Tim smiles on his end of the phone. “Among others.” Right now, crimes involving the VA isn’t his sandbox. (The only reason they got this was the first batch of victims were Marines.) In four months, they will be. So, he’s figuring that the FBI will be willing to let him sit in on this. “What’s your ETA?”

“At least sixteen hours out.”

“Thursday morning, bright and early, we’ll get into it. I want him tired, and me well-rested before we start interrogating.”

Dunn laughs. “Given how long we’re going to be in transit, I think I can get him to you, tired.”

“Wonderful.”
This time, he gets home around 6:30, just in time for everyone to be getting up and moving around.

Abby’s got Sean. He’s getting his first morning snack. Breena’s lying, very still, on their bed, and Jimmy’s grabbing as much yoga time as he can before the girls wake up.

Pretty average morning at the McPalmer household.

Tim gets the sense she’s been waiting for a time when they were all together to say this, because as soon as he hits the bed, she says, “I’m done. This is the last one.”

No one has to ask what Breena means by that. Her skin is gray. She’s got dark circles under her eyes. Sick and tired and wrecked is radiating off of her. “I… can’t do this again.”

Jimmy drops out of mountain pose and crosses the room to sit next to her and kiss her temple. “No one expects you to, baby.”

“If she’s a she…” (Which is when Tim remembers that their first baby check-up is on Friday.)

Jimmy shrugs. “Then we raise daughters and nieces and nephews. It’s okay. You don’t have to do this to yourself. Not for me. And not to get us boy.”

“When this is done, I’m getting my tubes tied.”

“Oh.” He pets her hair more, and Abby strokes her foot.

Breena does go to work that morning. As she’s said, any day she’s not actively puking on the corpses is a day she’s working. Though, given how sick she’s looking, all of them would like her to stay home and rest.

She gives them the stink eye on that. “I can stay home, do nothing, and feel sick, or I can go be useful and feel sick. I might as well be useful.”

And no one’s got a good argument against that.

Tim naps until lunchtime, figuring that the easiest way to get himself back onto “normal” time is to get some sleep in the morning, and then go to bed with everyone else tonight.

So, he’s driving toward Carlo’s, joining Jimmy, Abby, and Tony for lunch.

He’s not sure what, if anything, he’s supposed to feel about Breena being done with babies.

Realistically, five kids is pretty much all they need. They’ve already hit the point where they can’t go anywhere with all of them in one car. (Granted, they hit that when Sean joined the party. Jimmy and
Breena’s minivan seats seven, and there are eight of the now. They’re out of bedrooms at both of their places. Kids are going to be sharing. When Donny (?) joins in, they’ll be outnumbered.

Yes, all of the adults have jobs, good ones, with good pay and good benefits, but… Hell, they’re probably looking at at least three million dollars of college tuition. And… depending on what happens with the local schools, maybe a hell of a lot more than that if they end up needing to send the kids to private schools and…

So, yeah, five kids between the four of them is probably enough.

And he doesn’t want to see Breena sick like this ever again. He’s entirely on board with that.

But there’s still a sense of loss that goes with the idea of Donny (?) being the last of the kiddos.

Okay, maybe not the last. It’s not impossible that Abby might get pregnant again. She’ll be almost 44 when Sean stops nursing, and women have gotten pregnant later than that…

But it’s not likely.

Tim’s the first one at the restaurant, which makes him wonder if a case just went live, but two minutes later when Tony walks in, he’s certain it hasn’t.

“Hey!”

Tony smiles at him and makes a bee line for their table. He looks over his shoulder and nods to the brand new, and very welcome, glass that’s now in the windows and door. “And we’ve got light again.”

Tim nods. “I noticed that driving in today. More windows. Fewer rubble piles. Google maps took me back through what used to be my usual route. So, that’s two more streets cleared up enough for people to drive through them.”

“Looking more and more like a city and less and less like a warzone every day. I wonder how many butts Diane’s had to kick to get that to happen.”

Tim nods. That makes him think of something. “Yeah. You know that story I’m working on…”

“Yet another alternative version of all of us off doing stuff, as… dragons… this time?” Tony knows there’s a story, but he hasn’t paid too much attention to it. Okay, yeah, mysteries starring them were kind of cool, but dragons strike him as silly.

“Something like that.”

Silly or not, he does have a mental image of what he looks like as a dragon. “I want to be a huge red dragon with massive claws, great big teeth, and fire breath.”

“You’ll be pleased to know I already wrote you like that.” Tony smiles. “Except the red part.” Then he pouts. “Just like the rest of Lorcan’s kids, you’re dark. Jimmy’s full on black. You’re sort of gray, but I can make you a sort of reddish-black instead.”

Tony chews on that idea for a bit.

“Trust me, it’ll be cool.”
He snorts at that. Tim’s making them into dragons. This is a guy who couldn’t find cool with a map. Then he smiles because he can see that to Tim, this will be cool. “Why gray? And, why are you bringing this up?”

“Because we were talking about Diane.”

“Oh, there’s an obvious leap.”

Just keep listening is clear on Tim’s face.

Tony rolls his eyes.

“I’ve got Diane figured out. Okay, so the Vikings had their raiders. You know, long boats, going all over the place, harrying the coastal villages.”

“Did I tell you Ziva’s been watching that Viking show?”

“No, but I’m not shocked. Kick ass warrior people doing kick ass things and Ziva, wow, there’s a shock. Does she like it?”

“Yeah. Enough she’s been finding some history classes online and starting a few of them up. One of them is about Vikings.”

“Awesome.” Tim and Tony share a moment to smile over the idea of Ziva starting to get some of her college dreams into play. “And that works even better for what I’m going to do with this.”

“Eh? Again, this is not an obvious leap for anyone not in your brain, McWordsmith.”

“Okay, our core group. Me, you, Gibbs, Jimmy, Breena, Abbi, Gibbs’s Abbi, not my Abby, we’re all one dragon clan. Up in the North. Think Irish/Scottish clans.”

“You’re making me into a kilt-wearing dragon.” Tony shakes his head at Tim’s fantasy land.

“No one in his right mind sticks a kilt on a dragon. The damn thing would have to be the size of a tent and as soon as they got flying it would fall off.”
Tony snorts a laugh at that mental image. And Tim flashes him a smile.

“So, we’re the M’Gys.” Tony sighs. “I’m getting to the point. Diane, Fornell, Emily, Ziva, they’re all part of a group of Caribbean looking Vikings. I’m making Diane the Pirate Queen of the South.”

Tony does laugh at that. “So, let me get this straight, you’re putting her in charge of a navy of longboats, out to raid and harry the local coastal villages.”

Tim nods. And Tony, imagining that, lights up with glee, as Tim says, “She’s got a loose alliance with us, because she’s Lorcan’s ex and Dae’s mom.”

Tony’s eyes go wide. “Wait, you made Diane, Jimmy’s mom?”

Tim shrugs. “Why not?”

“Because I’ve got a perfectly good mom of my own!” Jimmy says, pulling out a chair for Abby and sitting down. Tim stands up to give Abby a hug and kiss. “What are you doing to us?”

“Tangling the family tree even further,” Tim says when he sits back down.

“So, where do I come in?” Abby asks.

“Whole other kingdom all together. Other side of the sea. Katie of the Sky Lands. I’m thinking maybe a sort of hybrid plains-Indian and India-Indians sort of culture. Huge lands filled with nothing but sky and grass. Traders going back and forth across, long pony caravans, huge wagons filled with exotic goods. Most traders have trade secrets for how they make things. Your crew’s trade secret is knowing where the water is. That’s how you guys can get your caravans across the Sky Lands when other traders have to go around or go by sea, and risk Diane’s pirates.”

Abby squeezes Tim’s hand. It makes her happy to see him creating things like this.

“And again, why is Diane my mom?” Jimmy asks.

“Because I wanted Lorcan to have living children.”

“Diane’s a fine mom. Emily thinks she’s cool, and when your teenage daughter thinks well of you,
that says a lot about your momming skills,” Abby replies.

“Yeah, that’s because you don’t have to be her kid… Wait, Tony’s one of the Lorcan kids, too, right?” Jimmy says.

“So, we’re,” Tony gestures to the three guys, “half-brothers?”

“You and Jimmy are. I’m a cousin.”

“Who’s my mom?” Tony’s starting to look concerned.

“Don’t know yet.” Tim shrugs. He knows Lorcan has had a few wives, but he doesn’t have an image of Tony’s mom. “I can make her up whole cloth or…”

“Not Jen. And… you only met Stephanie the one time, right?”

Tim nods. “Yeah, even if I were to base your mom off of her, beyond looks I don’t have anything. I’m probably just making her up.”

“Is Kate going to be part of this? She wasn’t, not really, in the first series,” Abby says.

Kate’s murder had gotten the Tibbs novels started. So Kate was there, but not there.

“She’s going to be part of your Sky-Land crew.”

Abby smiles at that. Their waitress heads over. “Hi! Been a while since I’ve seen you four all together.”

That gets some nodding.

“So, we doing our regulars, or going out on a limb and trying something new…”

Once orders have been placed, all three of them are staring at Tony, spill the beans clear on their faces.

“It’s going good. Haven’t gotten a call out yet, so right now I’m just watching them on paperwork. And, yep, they can both type.” He glances at Tim. “For some reason, paperwork’s not so much of an endurance test, anymore.”

“Sorry about, Tony.”

Tony shrugs. “Johnson’s got a good vibe to her. But this is also familiar territory. Sure she just jumped up a level, but her entire professional life has been working with cops.”

“She showed up with coffee this morning?” Abby asks. She knows what cops like.

“Basically. She got in, looked around, and then asked what we liked and went to get it, without being asked.”

“Spader?” Jimmy asks.

“So far so good. But, again, all he’s doing is typing notes into the computer. Hopefully we get a case soon, and I get to take them out.”

“Draga and Johnson?” Tim asks.
“I’ve caught him looking twice, but not so bad that I need to do something about it. She’s tolerating it. I get the feeling she’s used to having guys stare.”

“She staring at him?” Abby asks.

Tony shakes his head. “It appears to be one-sided.”

“How about Spader and Johnson?” Abby asks.

“Friendly. They’re not each other’s types. Spader’s a bit too into physical fitness. At least, that’s what we know about him now. I’m sure he’s got to have other hobbies. But, Johnson basically rolled her eyes and sighed when he and Draga got talking about which gyms he should be looking into, and if the equipment here was worth it.”

Jimmy sniggers at that. “Spader another no-carb, all protein, mega-lifter with a side of Insanity just to shake things up?”

Tony shrugs. “I was too busy silently commiserating with Johnson, both of us enjoying our bear claws, to get all the details, but I did notice a fifteen-minute conversation on which vitamin supplements they preferred.”

All three of them snigger at that.

Tim shakes his head at that, as he takes a sip of his (decaf) coffee. “You ended up with two health fanatics.” He laughs again. “Can’t wait to see how your first lunch order goes over.”

Tony sighs, long and dramatic, as their waitress brings over their lunches, handing him a hamburger and fries. “Did that yesterday.” Tony holds up a fry. “From the looks I was getting, you would have thought I’d brought in a bag of crispy, fried arsenic.”

More laughing.

“Johnson’s a vegetarian, so she’s eyeing my pastrami. And the protein patrol was fine with the pastrami, but were staring at the grilled rye it was on like it was poison. Last time I took this much crap about my diet, Kate was handing me tofu veggie rolls.”

“Ulgkk!” Tim winces. “I still remember those things.” Another wince, this time shared by Tony. “So nasty.”

“You eat tofu,” Jimmy says.

“Yeah, if you cook it right. This was like… sour, raw silken tofu smushed up with a collection of unseasoned, old, wilted veggies. It was nasty!”

“With some sort of carb free, low fat, taste-free tortilla wrapped around it,” Tony adds.

“Steamed cardboard. That’s what that thing was. I’m still sure she was pranking us,” Tim says, looking at his own lunch, grilled chicken salad, filled with lean chicken and lots of veggies. Kate would have approved.

Tony laughs at that. “You know… We didn’t see her eat hers…”

They both look at Abby. She shakes her head. “If it was a prank, she didn’t let me in on it.”

Tony’s lifting his burger to his lips, and his phone buzzes. He checks and mutters, “Of course you call now.” Then he hits the answer button. “DiNozzo. Uh huh. Yeah. Falls Church. Text me the
details. Okay.” And then hangs up.

“Call out?” Jimmy asks.

“Of course. Hopefully on Friday I’ll have some more details about how they work as a team.” He signals their waitress. “Lunch to go, for me.”

Jimmy’s phone buzzes. “And me.”

She grabs their plates and says, “I’ll get you wrapped up in a minute. One check?”

Tim nods. “My week for it.”

After Tony and Jimmy leave, after Tim and Abby have finished their lunches, and the check is sitting on the table next to them, Abby says to Tim, “You want to do some sort of joint bank account with Jimmy and Breena?”

“We should probably talk about it at some point, but… I’m not feeling a burning need for it.”

She half smiles at that. “The glorious joy of adulting.”

“Something like that. Though I was thinking about what five college tuitions were going to cost, and… if we end up in the same boat Tony’s in, lousy public schools, getting those kids to college is going to cost a ton of money.”

Abby sighs at that and then nods. “Once Donny’s on the outside, Jimmy and Breena will be paying thirty-five hundred dollars a month in daycare.”

Tim winces at that. He knows what they pay for Heather, for two kids, for full day care. What Jimmy and Breena are paying for two kids for six hours a day strikes him as insane… Three kids, that’s beyond insane.

Tim runs the numbers in his head. “If we had all five of them in one place, we could keep Heather, give her a good raise, get her a part-time backup nanny for mornings, when they’re all awake, and break even.”

“That’d free up some morning time for all of us.”

“And evening getting home time, too,” Tim says. Dropping off and picking up the girls doesn’t take hours or anything, but… It does eat up twenty or so minutes a morning, and twenty or so minutes a night, that’s assuming little girls are ready to leave when they get there, which they routinely aren’t. Add in traffic and the rest of it, and, sure, that’d save whoever’s on pick up and drop off an hour a day.

“This is a conversation we should be having.”

Tim nods as their waitress takes the check.

He walks out with Abby, arm around her waist. “You going in today?” she asks.

He nods. “Maybe an hour or two. Just want to bone up on this latest case, and try to figure out who I
need to call in from the FBI. It’s stupid, but… I don’t know anyone between Fornell and Comte and this feels like, I don’t know, something higher than a retired Agent but not necessarily the sort of thing you call in the Director of the FBI for.”

She smiles at him. “Does it feel like the sort of thing you’d call you in for?”

“Or one of my minions. I’m not into it deep enough to know if this is just God-awful incompetence that left open a hole for someone to break into, or if it was a doorway to let someone take advantage of a system.”

Abby glances at the city around them, and the stark physical reminders of how incompetence and taking advantage set them up for ruin. “It’s the VA, probably incompetence.”

“After this last year, I tend to think ‘incompetence’ was cover for a bunch of bastards to enrich themselves.” Tim glances around, too. Most of this street is rebuilding. A third of the buildings still have boarded up windows and doors. Half of the buildings, repaired or not, have for rent signs. Winter’s hanging on with a death grip, so even if the trees weren’t singed, they’d still be leaf free.

“Which is why the FBI wants you.”

He smiles at that, acknowledging that she’s right. “Anyway. Depending on how that hole in their protections got there, and if anyone ever tried to get them to fix it, and if the guy who was exploiting it really is an employee, I’ve got something between a crime and a conspiracy.”

“And in either case, your jurisdiction is shaky because it’s the VA.”

“Exactly. So, that’s my afternoon. Might head home early, grab another nap, and then grab the girls and meet you at Jimmy’s. You?”

“Blood spatter modeling. Dornie’s on his first double homicide, and he thinks the blood and the bodies aren’t matching up right. Right now, I’ve got the computer typing which spatters go with which people, and when I get back, I’ll start building the model.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“I think it will be. Nothing like flying liquids in three dimensional space.”

Tim kisses her, and they start to mosey back to the Navy Yard.

Thursday morning. Bright and early. Tim’s not feeling too tired. (Tomorrow morning, when he’s had his night with Sean, that’ll be a different story. But right now, he’s good.)

The man sitting across from him at the interrogation table is not looking bright-eyed or bushy-tailed. Agent Dunn did his job excellently. He delivered Ely Mait, beaten down, exhausted, all but falling asleep in his seat.

Looks like he’s from somewhere like California, is also clear. Tired Mait may be, but that doesn’t hide shaggy blonde hair in what Tim would call a skater cut. It doesn’t hide absurdly white teeth, or golden tan skin. Put this guy in board shorts and hand him a surfboard, and he’s the image of “California.”
Tim smiles in his head. Then he opens the file the VA wasn’t willing to send him, so he stole.

“According to your personnel file, you’re a web admin for the VA.”

Ely nods, slowly, bleary eyes focused on Tim’s coffee. Sure, it’s decaf, but there’s no way to tell that by sight or smell.

“You’ve been an admin for the last three years.”

Another slow nod. “So, here’s the deal. Right now, you can give me your password and let me ransack your files, see if you’re just a greedy son-of-a-bitch who exploited a hole, or if you’re the bastard who knocked the hole in the wall in the first place. And once I’ve got that password, you’ll get a nice, quiet place to sleep. Or, I’ll make sure someone gets you up and walks you around every fifteen minutes until I’ve hacked my way into your files, and then I’ll do exactly the same thing I’d do if you gave me the password, but you won’t get to sleep through me doing it.” Tim smiles.

“So…” he passes a pen and a pad of paper across the table to Ely.

Ely writes down the password.

Tim nods, smiles, and in a minute, Dunn, who had been in observation, pops back in to take Ely to processing.

Dunn quietly says to Tim as Ely zombie shuffles in front of them, “Isn’t that technically illegal?”

Tim shrugs. “You read him his rights, right?”

Dunn nods.

“Got a recording of you doing it?”

He nods again.

“I think we’ll be fine. I can’t imagine the VA, what’s left of it, is going to yell if we put a corrupt Admin’s feet to the fire.”

Dunn nods along with that. He’s got the sense that it’ll be a very long time before any Federal Agency will be willing to defend any of its people against charges of corruption, especially in cases where the person in question got caught red-handed.

Two hours later, in the internals of the emails that Ely thought he had deleted, Tim found his metaphorical smoking gun.

It’s a report, from one of the security techs, letting Ely know about a hole he’d found in their security. It’s all above board and looks exactly right.

Ely’s response to it is good, too. He’s talking about getting right on it, puts a commendation in the tech’s file, actually got the hole patched, and five months later, when a position opened up, he offered the tech a lateral promotion, involving a move to Massachusetts.

And a month after the tech who found the hole had moved on, out of watching the system, Ely came back and ripped that hole back open and started raiding the VA for personal information on Vets and
using it to set up credit cards.

He starts writing up the report. Once it’s done, he’ll send Ely and what he’s found to the FBI, where, they’ll hand it off to someone who will probably start reporting to Tim in July.

Tim’s muttering to himself about what exactly he wants to do to Ely as he types. Bad enough they can’t get these guys decent health care, fast, now he’s taking their personal information and racking up millions of dollars of credit card debt for them, too.

Maybe it’s because of the number of times he’s had his own ID stolen, but by the time he’s got the goods on Ely, he’s really hoping the guys in prison don’t take it easy on him.

---

Friday morning. Time for Jimmy and Breena’s first visit with Dr. Jun for baby four.

They’re both excited, pleased, a bit nervous. Mostly pleased. They’ll get the first ultrasounds for little guy, and they’ll do the DNA test, find out if little person is male or female, and which name they’re going to stick on him/her.

This should, hopefully, be fun.

But that tinge of fear is always there.

At least it’s only a tinge this time. Going for Anna’s first checkup was nerve-wracking. This is just… on edge.

---

It’s a salad shrimp. A grainy black and white salad shrimp with little arm and leg nubs on a low-resolution ultrasound screen. But it’s their salad shrimp, and that’s all the matters.

Okay, not all, Jimmy’s got enough of an eye for this to see that the heart has all four chambers, blood appears to be whooshing around the way it’s supposed to, brain looks to be about the size it’s supposed to be, spine is curving the way it should (hence the shrimp look), umbilical cord appears to be the right size and place.

Everything looks the way a baby should look.

And he and Breena couldn’t be grinning wider.

---

Back in the office, waiting for Dr. Jun, Jimmy sits with his arm around Breena, as she slumps against him, resting.

Dr. Jun heads in, looks at the two of them, and says, “I take it the morning sickness isn’t any easier
Breena nods. “Pretty stable the last two weeks. All of that was the first month.”

“Ouch.”

Breena nods again, and sighs. “What’s involved with getting my tubes tied after little guy comes out?”

Dr. Jun is in no way surprised that Breena’s done with being pregnant. She is surprised about this potential choice of ways to not get pregnant again.

“If you want to get your tubes tied, that’s fine, and we can do that, but…” She eyes Jimmy. “We’re talking invasive surgery. Even the laparoscopic version involves having to cut through your abdominal muscles. Little cuts, but still. In most cases with a monogamous couple, we suggest vasectomies. Faster, easier healing up, we’ve only got to go through skin, much less damage to the rest of the body…” She’s still eyeing Jimmy, who’s rapidly deciding if they’re outing themselves here or not.

“Diabetic,” he says, feeling weird about the fact that that’s actually coming in handy for something. “My doctor generally doesn’t want to cut me open unless he doesn’t have any other choice.”

That’s true and allows them to kick the decision down the road. If anyone is going to know about the four of them, Breena’s Ob-Gyn is likely a good choice, but he doesn’t want them making that decision right this second, cold.

Their OB doesn’t look incredibly impressed by that, but she’s not arguing, and given the way malpractice insurance works, Jimmy’s Endo probably would counsel against any surgery he doesn’t absolutely have to have, which is true about a vasectomy. But as Breena’s OB, she’d also suggest the lower stress alternative, to her patient, which is Breena.

“If you want to get one done, we can do it. It’s easiest to do when you deliver. Everything will be swollen, which makes it easier to find everything. So, baby comes out, I put a small hole under your naval, add some gas to make sure that I’ve got plenty of room to see, another small hole for the instruments, a few cuts, seal everything off, and you’re good to go.”

“Will I be able to hold our baby right after birth?”

“Yes. We’ll wait at least a few hours, let the swelling go down some, but I don’t like to hold out too long, because we keep the epidural in place so we don’t have to do that twice.”

Breena nods along at that. It makes sense to her. She’s not looking forward to the idea of having
someone stick a needle in her spine any more than the absolute minimum number of times to get the job done.

“That said, I’m still going to send you home with a selection of pamphlets about long lasting birth control, and suggest that it’s a very good idea to have a chat with your Endocrinologist about the risks involved with a vasectomy.”

Breena smiles a bit and takes the plunge. “We’re not a monogamous couple.”

“Oh.” They can see they just knocked the wind out of Dr. Jun. She takes a moment to recover. “Uh… I should add a panel of STD tests then, too.”

Jimmy shakes his head. “No need. I ran the tests on our partners, they’re clean. We’re not in an open marriage, with multiple new partners. It’s a stable foursome.”

“My wife,” Breena says, “would like to get pregnant again. That can’t happen if the boys get vasectomies.”

Jun is just watching them, not sure how to react, but, she’s a doctor, with a job to provide the best care possible for her patient. “Okay… Uh… I’ll still give you information about different IUDs. ParaGuard can last up to twelve years, and by then you’ll be out of your prime fertile time. It works as well as a tubal, is less invasive, less expensive, and takes significantly less healing up. I’m not saying I won’t do a tubal for you, but… read up. In the same place, with a similar, I’m not getting pregnant again mindset, I’d opt for an IUD.”

“Don’t they involve some sort of hormonal stuff?” Breena asks. Jun knows Breena and most hormonal birth controls don’t get along all that well.

“ParaGuard doesn’t, which is why it lasts so long.”

She hadn’t known that, and it hadn’t occurred to Jimmy, at all. “Okay, I’ll read up.”

Jun nods. “So, you’re eight weeks along, little person is doing fine, I’ve got a note here saying you’d like to do DNA testing to find out of the sex…”

“Oh yeah!” Jimmy and Breena both say.

“We can do that. Any other… concerns…”

“Not until the nuchal fold testing,” Jimmy replies.

Jun checks her notes again. “Which we have scheduled two weeks from today.” They both nod at her. Jun shuts her folder. “All right. We’ll get a urine sample, do the testing, and you’ll know which set of names to put on this little person.”

Jimmy and Breena beam at that. And, though it’s true that Jun’s still awfully shocked at the idea of these two particular people being in a foursome, and not really sure what to think of it, she also knows that it’s hard to be uneasy when Jimmy and Breena Palmer are smiling at you.

Tim’s in his office, back working on the harassment software when his phone buzzes.
He feels a massive grin spread across his face as he sees the tiny black and white shrimp, and the words, *Donald Timothy Palmer, ETA 10/8/17!* 

That night, as Tony tells them about the joys of his latest case, and breaking in his new team, Penny looks between her husband and grandson, both of them in exceptionally good moods, and mentally debates which one of the two of them is more pleased by his new namesake.
“Grab your gear!” There are more than a few tricks from the Team Gibbs playbook that Tony’s kept in his bag. ‘Grab your gear!’ is one of them.

Cases feel more… structured when they have a specific beginning, and those words, that’s the beginning.

Draga’s got Tim’s old desk. Most of the time, Tony doesn’t even think of it as Tim’s desk anymore. Okay, yes, every now and again, he glances over and expect to see the skull looking back at him. That thing was there for more than a decade, but, most of the time, in most ways, that space is Draga’s now.

Bishop had moved into Gibbs’ desk. But she wasn’t there long enough to erase the Gibbs from it. He glances over to Spader, who hasn’t made that desk his own, yet. Maybe one day, it’ll be Spader’s, but right now, it’s a very generic space. A desk, a few computers, and a huge guy behind them.

Johnson has Ziva’s desk, and Tony’s not sure if that ever won’t be Ziva’s desk. But, it’s also clear that Johnson’s working on making that space hers as quickly as possible. She’s got Steelers gear up. There are pictures of her parents. There’s a picture of her cat.

It’s as much hers as a space she’s been in for less than a week can be.

And she, and Spader, and Draga, are his.

His team, for real.

The maiden voyage of Team DiNozzo.

Another trick from the Team Gibbs playbook is the quick sit rep as they’re heading for the elevator. “Got a deal Marine in Falls Church.” He tosses Draga the keys to the van. “Draga, show them around the motor pool, get them up on leaving procedure, and gas up the van.”

Draga waves that off. He’s already shown them every inch of NCIS. He tosses the keys to Johnson, who drops them, and scrambles fast to pick them up. “Spader, get us signed out. Johnson, gas us up.” He looks over to Tony. “Out of here in seven, right?”

Tony nods, pleased with Draga.

Spader gets to drive. Tony’s in the co-pilot seat. Draga and Johnson are in the back, leaning over the back of the seat to listen in. Spader’s either a really cautious driver, or decided that since this is a vehicle he’s not used to, and the guy he’s driving around is his Boss, that just maybe doing the speed limit and obeying every traffic law ever written is a good plan.

“What do we have?” Draga asks.

“Not much. Local LEOs—“ Tony begins.
“Law Enforcement Officers,” Draga adds.

Tony continues, “Got called to an abandoned car. They knew it was trouble just from the smell. The car is registered to First Lt. James Dowling. They popped the trunk just to make sure there wasn’t anyone alive in there. There wasn’t. Now we’re on the scene. Okay, Johnson, pop quiz, what questions do we need to ask?”

Johnson thinks for a moment. It’s clear she’s got a lot of possible questions in her head, but she’s looking for the best of the bunch. “Has anyone placed a missing person report for Lt. Dowling?”

“Good question. Draga?”

Eric holds up his phone. “Give me more than two minutes. I’ve just gotten into his file… Uh…” His eyes scan over the pages. “No. He’s on a seventy-two.”

“Three days of leave,” Spader says to Johnson.

“He’s not due back for another twenty-six,” Draga says.

“All right. Next question.” Tony says, “I know Johnson knows this, so it’s for you, Spader, why is this hinkey?”

Spader stares at the road, keeping watch on the traffic, thinking hard. Finally, it’s the fact that Johnson knows that tips him off. “It’s wintertime. Hasn’t gotten past 50 in the last five days. Even if he was killed ten minutes after leaving the base, he shouldn’t smell, because he’s basically been in a refrigerator the whole time.”

Tony nods, again pleased. “Okay, Draga, give them the twist.”

“Local LEO’s tag the car the first time they see it. They check back twenty-four hours later, and if it’s still there, they get it towed. Twenty-four hours ago, someone checked that car, and it didn’t stink. Twenty-four hours later, it smells bad enough they can tell there’s a dead body in there without opening it, which tells us…”

Johnson beats Spader to the punch. “Someone put the body in there after the car was abandoned.”

“That’s our working theory,” Tony says with a nod as they pull up to a cordoned-off stretch of roadway.

Before they even get out of the van, Tony says, “First things first, look around, notice that you do not see Palmer’s van. This means we do not touch, get too close to, breathe on, or even look too hard at, the body. Until Palmer and Allan are done with it, the body is a no-go zone for you two.”

Spader and Johnson don’t look thrilled with that, but they’ll abide. They all get out of the van, and Tony starts handing out cameras.

“Evidence gathering, on the other hand, is what you’ll be doing.” Tony glances around. They’re on a two lane road in the middle of not much. Suburbs to the north and south, but this mile or two here is still fairly undeveloped. “Set a perimeter two hundred meters out,” wider than he’d usually do, but someone had to put a smelly body in this car, and there’s no way they did that without leaving a
trace, “photograph everything, tag anything you see…”

“Even litter?” Spader asks, his toe nudging an empty beer bottle.

“Especially litter.” Tony thinks of having a very similar conversation with Ziva. “Our body dumper might have dumped that, too. That right there might be the only clue that he was here.”

Spader looks up and down the road, at a stretch of almost half a kilometer, covered with snow, road salt, slush, and various bits and pieces of detritus half to fully buried in the snow.

“It last snowed on Sunday. Anything under the snow would have been there since before Dowling went on leave.”

Part of Tony wants to smack Spader for trying to get out of work. Part of him is aware that that’s true, and digging out beer bottles from last spring is a waste of time. “Check and see the last time this road was plowed. If it was plowed before Dowling went on leave, you can skip anything under the snow. If it was plowed after, you’ve got to bag it, because you don’t know if the snow fell on it, or if it was tossed on it later.”

Spader gets his phone out and begins looking that up. Johnson grabs her camera, and starts walking off the distance.

A moment later, Spader says, “Last plowed on Monday, before Dowling left the base.”

“Then if it’s under the snow, leave it be.” Tony glances to Draga, an unspoken, keep eyes on him.

Draga nods, and the two of them head off in the opposite direction of Johnson to get started on Documenting a Crime Scene 101.

Tony turns toward the car, and starts to print it, waiting for Jimmy and Allan to show up.

When the familiar black and white van pulls up, Tony heads over to open the back doors before Allan can get to them.

“Feeling eager, Agent DiNozzo?” Allan asks as he steps out a moment later.

“Always. Get within about ten feet of the car, and tell me what’s wrong.”

Allan shoulders his bag and does as asked.

Jimmy heads back, grabbing his own gear, and says to Tony, “Co-opting my guy?”

“Making sure the first opinion I got on the scene is right.”

Allan’s close to fifteen feet away from the car when he says, “Phew… Unless this car has a heater running in it, the body was moved.”

Tony glances to Jimmy, and Jimmy says, “That’s the opinion you wanted tested?”

“Body found in a car in winter by the smell.”

The LEOs had opened the trunk to make sure there was no one alive in there. And then they closed it to protect the body and the scene. Jimmy finds the trunk latch, and opens it. A soft snick, and the trunk lifts, and inside lies the probable remains of Lt. Dowling. The very decayed remains of Lt. Dowling.

“Did the LEOs ID the body?” Jimmy asks.

Tony shakes his head. They’re here based off of the car registration. And, though the car has a Marines sticker on it, and is registered to a Marine, nothing about the very dead person inside suggests he may be military. At least, not at first glance. He’s not in uniform, isn’t wearing visible dog tags, no rings or tattoos to suggest service.

Granted, given the condition of his visible skin, it’d be hard to tell a tattoo from the corruption of decay.

Jimmy looks to Allan, who grabs his finger scanner and gets working on the ID.

“Time of death?”

“You’re worse than Gibbs, you know that?” Jimmy shoots back.

“Come on, Jimmy,” Tony says with a clear, cut the BS look on his face, “he looks ready to star in his own episode of The Walking Dead. That’s got to be… days?”

“Dr. Palmer, we’re going to need to take him back to get an ID. The top layer of his skin is too decayed to print.”

“Okay, Dr. Allan. And Tony… Yeah, by smell and sight, I’d say he’s at least four days gone, four days in summer, but, and you know there’s always a but…”

“Like the fact he was last seen less than three days ago,” Tony says with a tight smile.

“That’d be a huge but, and here’s another one, without knowing where he’s been for the last however many days, I can’t say how long he’s been dead. Let Dr. Allan and I get him home, do our job, and we’ll give you a time frame.”

They both look at the late, and as of yet, not terribly lamented, possible Lt. Dowling. Jimmy points to the four-inch-wide two-inch-deep caved in section along the left side of his skull. “At first guess, I’d say that’s your cause of death.”

“And if it’s not, it certainly didn’t help anything,” Allan adds, and Jimmy nods.

“If you find a baseball bat, or anything like that, grab it,” Jimmy says.

“Will do.”

Jimmy looks to his assistant. “All right, Dr. Allan, do you want shoulders or feet?”

Tony goes back to printing the car as he hears Allan and Jimmy working on removing the body from the trunk.
On the upside, there’s snow. This means tracks stick out beautifully. Anyone who’s been wandering through the woods around them since Sunday has left marks.

On the downside, there’s snow, which means tracks stick out beautifully so they’ll be trying to hunt down about twelve people, most of which, if not all of them, are likely to be locals out for a walk in the woods.

Or, as Spader puts it to Johnson when they’re back to the bullpen the next morning, still without an ID because the hands will have to soak for twenty-four hours before they can get his skin off for prints, “Do you have any idea how many men wear size eleven Nikes?”

“Sixty-four million,” she deadpans.

“In this building alone,” he replies.

“Do you want to try dental records?” Allan asks Jimmy.

Jimmy shrugs. They’ve already got Mr. Doe’s hands soaking. “We could, but…”

“But, because as you said, there’s always a but,” Allan says, looking at the caved in skull of their victim.

“So much of his left jaw is gone. We can use it to rule him out. We can’t use it to definitively rule him in.”

“Then let’s do that. You know Agent DiNozzo will be down here in—“ They hear the beep of the elevator. Allan flashes Jimmy his, told you so look.

Jimmy nods.

“What’s ya got?”

“The bizarre sensation that you were about to call me, ‘Duck,’” Jimmy replies.

“Yeah. I’m feeling him a lot today. Always happens when I’m breaking in probies. So…”

“That large cavity in his skull is your cause of death,” Allan says.

“And, assuming this is Lt. Dowling…” Jimmy glances over to Allan, who’s putting up the dental x-rays from Dowling’s file, and placing the x-rays of their Doe over top of them. Allan shrugs back at him. “And we just don’t know for sure.”

“How can you not know?” Tony asks.

Allan wiggles his finger at the X-ray. “As you can see, these parts line up just fine. That would suggest we’ve got the same person. This part,” he circles the destroyed bit of the man’s jaw. “Is a complete loss. No way to tell if this ever lined up or not. And this,” he taps a filling in the lower right bicuspid, “isn’t on the original films. New work? Could be. Different person? Could be.”

“DNA?” Tony asks.

“Sure, but Abby can’t get that done any faster than I can get you prints. I’m sure we’ll do both just to make sure we’ve got all the bases covered. Anyway, as I was saying, assuming this is Lt. Dowling,
we can guess that time of death can’t be more than a certain number of hours ago, but, beyond that… His liver temp was 92 degrees, and I can absolutely tell you there is no possible way he got that decayed in the few hours necessary to drop from 98 to 92 in the kind of cold that car was.”

Tony sighs. “Tell me you’ve got something else.”

Jimmy smiles at him. “I do. He’s covered in a fine salt residue.”

“Like someone was trying to preserve him like a ham?”

Jimmy and Allan share a look, and then both of them look back to Tony. Jimmy says, “First of all, ew, and second of all… actually, that’s not a terrible idea. We were thinking he was in warm salt water, like a salt water pool or large tropical fish tank, but…”

“But a smokehouse would be warm. We saw signs of his blood pooling in his feet, not his back, and he had bruises and tie marks on his wrists. If someone were to salt and hang him up… That would pretty much do what we found,” Allan says, testing the idea out loud.

“I thought you salted the ham so it wouldn’t go bad,” Tony says, looking at the very decayed person in front of them.

“You’d usually take the pig, hang it up, drain it, remove the blood and internal organs, put a hell of a lot more salt on it, and in it, and try to keep it cool while smoking it,” Allan replies. Both Jimmy and Tony are watching him. “I watched a documentary on how Andalusian hams are made.”

Jimmy looks at Allan with a general sense of pleasure and pride. “You never know when some random bit of information will come in handy in our line of work.” Then he turns to Tony, “So… you might be looking for a smokehouse. Or, probably, a saltwater pool.”

“And someone who doesn’t know how to deal with bodies,” Tony says, eyeing their corpse.

“People hams…” Johnson says, staring at the top of her desk. She shakes her head long and slow, and then looks up at Draga. “You know, I thought I saw some messed up stuff when I was working on the evidence gathering side of this, but… people hams…”

Draga inclines his head and nods a bit. He’s seen some messed up stuff, too, but… people hams? He’s half-tempted to go down to autopsy and see if Jimmy, Allan, and Tony are just pulling their collective leg. “It’s a theory. We get facts. We make theories. We add new facts and cross out old theories as we keep going.”

“Let’s cross out people hams,” Spader says, facing Johnson’s desk, leaning butt against his. “How about, tried to fake time of death to make it look like he’d been dead longer, or less long, than he really was?”

“That’s a theory, too,” Draga says. “Likely a decent one. But, before we get rid of people hams, go looking through the aerial photos of the nearby homes and make sure there’s nothing that looks like a smokehouse. And while you’re at it, go looking for anything with an open pool or hot tub that might be filled with saltwater.”

“Hams… pickles…” Johnson’s sitting at her desk, tapping a pen against a pad of paper. “You
know… Okay, if you didn’t know much about bodies… If you had a saltwater pool or hot tub or… bathtub even, I guess, you might think you could just pop the body in there, and like a pickle, it’d just stay… fresh…” Johnson says, tentatively. “You’d be wrong. I mean… you’d have to put a ton of salt in there to do it, and even with that it wouldn’t come out looking like it was brand new, but… It’d certainly mess with time of death.”

Spader thinks about that. “And, if you had a pool, with say, a cover or something, you plop a body in it, keep the cover on, and if the salt did its job, it wouldn’t smell or anything. That wouldn’t just mess with time of death, that’d give you a place to hide the body for however long you needed to.”

Draga thinks that’s a good idea. “Not like anyone expects to go swimming in March. So, if you had enough salt in there, that would buy you… weeks, months maybe, to find a good place to eventually stash the body, and… assuming the body stayed in the pool, even if the cops come looking, they aren’t going to go splashing around in your pool unless they already know you killed the guy… so… Okay… That’s not a terrible plan.”

“Except they didn’t have enough salt in the pool. So, instead of setting up a nice, sterile place for a body to hide out, they created a corrosive soup that increased decomposition speed.” Johnson sits on that for a moment. “Heated. It’s a heated pool. Hot tub, pool, bathtub with warm water, something like that. Whatever it is, it’s warm, at least eighty degrees, probably more.”

“And they went from nice, sterile place to tuck a body to a neon lit stink-bomb screaming, DEAD BODY HERE,” Spader says.

“And that’s why they had to move the body, because wherever it is they are, there’s someone else close enough to notice the stink,” Draga finishes. He’s got a smile on his face to encourage his probies, and one in his head, because he’s pleased with how quickly they’re getting into this.

“Anything interesting, Abby?” Tony asks as he heads down with a cherry smoothie for Abby.

She smiles over at him. “Yes. We’re just getting started, so not too much, but, your Doe’s shoes made this set of prints,” she points to a line of prints heading to the road about three hundred feet past the car. “He was wearing the shoes when you found him, right?”

Tony looks at the prints, leading toward the car. “Yeah, and I’m awfully certain he didn’t walk himself back to the trunk of his car.”

“Looks like you’ve got some backtracking to do,” Abby says.

“And… sweat?”

Abby smiles at him. “We have done swabs of the insides of his shoes, looking for sweat and epithelials. I’ll get you all the DNA I can find.”

“Thanks, Abs.”

Corwin pops over. “That’s not all. Dr. Allan sent us trace from the wounds on his wrist and head. His wrists were bound with duct tape…”

“But we found him un-taped,” Tony adds, putting the pieces together.

“And there were a few flakes of varnish and splinters in his head. You’re not looking for a baseball
bat, you’re looking for a cricket bat. An old one. That’s actual shellac. No one’s used it commercially for at least fifty years.”

Tony sighs. “I’m looking for a cannibal with a taste for people ham and cricket. Did Thomas Harris write this scene?”

Abby smiles at that. “You read a book!”

He glares at her a bit. “Ziva read the book. I watched a movie based on a book. Good movie. And with the way this case keeps unraveling…”

“I really doubt we’re dealing with a cannibal, Tony,” Abby says. “How’s the hunt upstairs going?”

“Slow. We don’t have a formal ID, so I can’t get into Dowling’s stuff, because he’s not officially dead, or even missing, yet. His CO tells me that he’ll let me get into his personal belongings once he’s missing, but that’s not for another.” Tony checks his watch, “hour. I’ve got them looking for smokehouses, hot tubs, and as soon as I get up there, back tracking those prints.”

“Then get going!” Abby says, sipping her smoothie.

Zach Spader had some ideas of how his first case would go. Tromping through the woods, following a set of tracks wasn’t it.

It is exciting, though. Somehow, their body ended up back in his (?) trunk, and someone (him?) wearing his shoes followed this path to get him there. Maybe.

Or not. Hard to tell. So many guesses and not enough facts. He’s following the path and photographing it, making sure that if (when?) this goes to trial, the jury will see how they found the house they’re about to visit.

Johnson’s next to him with a map up on her phone. “We’re heading toward one of the houses with a hot tub in the back.”

“What do you bet it’s got salt water?”

Tony’s a few steps behind them, watching, he’s also got a good feeling about this.

A minute later, he’s got an even better feeling. His phone buzzes. It’s Draga.

“Are you heading toward 3347 Lane St.?!” Draga asks.

He looks over to Johnson, who heard that. She nods. “Round about sort of way, but, yes, it looks like that.”

“Yeah, why?”

“First off, I’ve got confirmation that our Doe is in fact, Dowling. Second of all, I just got into Dowling’s emails. He’s got a girlfriend. A young girlfriend. She lives there.”

“How young?” Tony asks.

“Eighteen next month.”
“Oh, that’s not gonna fly,” Johnson says with a wince, and Spader nods.

“How old is Dowling?” Spader asks.

“Old enough to know better,” Tony says as Draga answers over the phone with, “Twenty-three.”

They take a few more steps through the woods before Draga adds, “And guess what, Daddy’s Indian.”

“Are you thinking honor killing?” Spader asks.

“Now that you mention it, maybe. I was thinking India is a country that plays cricket.”

“Oh!” Johnson says. She wiggles her finger at the house that’s just visible through the edge of the woods. “Here we are.”

It’s a generic, suburban cookie-cutter house in a neighborhood filled with them. There is a hot tub in the back, though Tony notices that it’s covered. He also notices the lack of snow on the cover or the patio around the hot tub.

Like, perhaps sometime between now and the snow, someone took the cover off of the hot tub, and swept off the patio.

He’s thinking it, and Johnson says it, “No snow on the patio.”

“Or the hot tub,” Spader adds, grabbing more photos. “Think someone’s gone for a winter soak?”

“Could be.” Tony gives them a small smile. Then he says, “Okay, Johnson, you’re going around the left side of the house. I’m going right. We’ll meet up in the front and then knock on the door. Spader you stay here in the back. Anyone tries to run out, grab them.”

Spader nods. This is the kind of thing he was hoping to do.

Tony sees that excitement. “Gun stays on your hip unless someone starts shooting at you. You are way too green to make an ‘I saw a gun’ argument stick.”

Spader nods again. He wasn’t exactly envisioning a shootout, but… he kind of was, too. It’s been a long time since he’s seen anything like action, and he misses it.

“I will let you know when it’s time to join us, until then, or until someone tries to sneak out of that house, stay put.”

“Staying put, Boss.”

Tony smiles a bit at that.

There are lights on at the house. One car in the driveway. Tony circles around without any issues, and he sees Johnson approaching from the other side. He nods to the door, and they head to the front of the house.

He knocks. They can hear people scrambling around in there, but no one answers the door.

Tony rolls his eyes slightly, knocks again, this time saying, “Naval Criminal Investigative Service,
open up.”

“You do the full name?” When she was training, they never yelled out the whole name.

“No one knows what NCIS is. I yell that out and nothing happens.”

The door opens half an inch, and one very dark brown eye, belonging, judging from the height, to a teenager, peers up at them through that crack. “Naval what?”

“Naval Criminal Investigative Services. Have you seen…” Tony holds up a picture of Dowling.

“Mum says I don’t have to talk to cops unless she’s here.” Tony flashes a look to Johnson. This kid’s been coached on what to do when the cops show up.

“May I speak to your mom?” Tony asks.

“Not here.”

“How about your Dad?”

“Not here.”

“Your older sister?”

“You can’t talk to her unless they’re here, too.”

“Okay, when will they get back?” Tony says with a mental sigh, wondering if Mom and Dad and Sis are already on the run, or hiding behind the door, hoping he’ll go away. Tony sees the sliver of a shoulder jerk up in a shrug. “What’s their number?”

“No phone, except the one in the house.”

“Okay. We’re going to sit here and wait for Child Protective Services or your parents, whoever shows up first, to get here,” Tony says.

That one eye starts to look very alarmed.

“As long as you’ve got an advocate present, it doesn’t have to be your parents. So, we’ll wait for them to get here, or maybe your mom or dad might want to come to the door and talk to me.”

“I told you. They aren’t home!” The voice is adamant, and scared, and to Tony’s ears, not lying.

“When are they due home?” Tony asks.

“I dunno.”

“All right, sit tight. I’m calling CPS.”

The door shuts. Tony gets child services up on the phone, and ten minutes later, before there’s time for anyone from CPS to have even gotten a social worker into a car, Spader comes around to the front of the house with two very shifty looking teen boys, fourteen and sixteen if Tony had to guess, one of his huge hands on each of their little shoulders, both of them radiating waves of scared, guilty, annoyed, and trying to look cool.

“Found these two trying to sneak away.”
Tony nods. “Johnson, get the van. Guess what kids? You ran away, which means now I get to take you to the Navy Yard and chat with you there.”

“But… our parents…” the older one, who Tony thinks is the one who answered the door, says.

“We’ll make sure they find out where you are. Is anyone else home?”

They both shake their heads.

Johnson pulls the van up.

“Okay, Spader, you’re on babysitting duty. You keep them in the van. Keep them quiet. You don’t talk to them, and they don’t talk to each other, okay.”

Spader nods at that, and smiles at the kids. He may have meant it to look reassuring, but it comes off like he’s about to eat them alive. Both of them blanch.

Tony checks his phone, and smiles at it. Draga’s already got the search warrant waiting for him. He holds up his phone, showing off the warrant. “Okay, Johnson, you and I are going to go looking for anyone else in that house, evidence of Lt. Dowling having been there, and, possibly, a cricket bat.”

It’s true that outside of class at FLETC, Beth Johnson has never executed a search warrant before.

It’s also true that as a crime scene tech for the Pittsburg PD, it was her job to go and find all the little bits and pieces.

So, this is like that, just… different.

For example, because this isn’t a crime scene, yet, she doesn’t have carte blanche to just grab everything. Their warrant is for several specific things, duct tape, a shellacked object that could be used to put a large dent in someone’s head, a body of salt water, anything belonging to Lt. Dowling, and Sarai Sirianapantha’s computer.

They know where they’re going first. There’s a back patio with a nice, deep, hot tub with room for six.

“First off, gloves,” Tony says to Johnson. “We’re not in crime scene mode, yet, but we don’t want to mess anything up.”

She’s got her gloves in her back pocket, and with practiced ease, snaps them on.

“We have a warrant, so right now, all we can do is test the pool, see if it’s salt water,” Tony says. “We don’t print it, we’re not going to go over it with a fine tooth comb, unless…” They’re opening the door to the patio, and both of them are very carefully trying to not touch it. They don’t want to mess up any prints. As soon as they’re within a few feet of the hot tub, the smell of dead body hits them.

“Unless we can smell corpse on the air,” Johnson says as they step to the cover on the hot tub.

Tony nods. Both of them get a fingernail hold on the cover and gently lift it off, carefully settling it onto the ground.

The water is murky and reeks of dead body. Tony pokes a gloved finger into it. “About 100
degrees.”

“So, Dowling soup?”

“Probably.” He takes off that glove and grabs his phone. “Hey, Jimmy, I think we’ve got a pool filled with some sort of human remains… Uh huh… Yeah… Can you bring a few extra people with you, we’re going to need someone to transport and watch the kids we found here. Okay… Thanks.”

“People?”

“We’re field agents. We solve crimes and stuff like that. But, at any given time we’ve got people floating around who don’t go out in the field, usually. They crunch numbers or work cold cases or whatever. Jimmy’s going to grab one or two of them, and they’ll take the kids back to NCIS. That way you and Spader will get handling the scene practice, and then, when we’re done, you two can watch Draga and I interview the older one, and then you and Spader will get to take a swing at the younger one.”

“We’re going to get to do an interrogation, on our own?” Johnson’s eyes light up at that thought.

Tony nods. “I have a feeling you two can break a fourteen-year-old, gently, without too much hand-holding.

Johnson beams at him as they get more samples of what’s floating around in the hot tub.

It’s well after dinner time when they’ve finished with the scene. They don’t have all the pieces of the puzzle, but what they do have…

A: A positive ID that the body in question is Lt. Dowling.

B: His blood and “fluids” in Sarai’s bedroom. (This resulted in Jimmy muttering something about how if some 23-year-old predator gets messing with any of his under-aged daughters, he damn well isn’t going to get caught based on sloppy cleanup. Tony pretends not to hear him while Johnson and Spader give each other worried looks.)

C: More of his bodily fluids and tissue floating around in the hot tub.

D: A wall covered in Daddy’s cricket memorabilia, and an empty space where a bat likely used to live.

E: An empty space where Sarai’s computer likely used to live.

And F: Mommy, Daddy, and Sarai are ‘missing.’

It’s not an open and shut case, but it’s about as close as they ever get. The only question is, who killed Dowling?

“Do you think they understood that if we had Dowling’s computer, we could read everything they were sending to each other?” Johnson asks as they’re driving back to the Navy Yard.

Spader shrugs. “No idea. Hell, we don’t know what’s on Sarai’s computer.” He bites his lip. “Uh…
Draga… you read the emails… Did Sarai seem… unwilling or coerced.”

“That’s dangerous territory,” Johnson says. “Legally, even if she wasn’t, she was.”

“I know, but…” Spader’s looking at Draga.

“It looks like he’s the older brother of one of her buddies. They met at a party two years ago and have been sneaking around since she’s been fifteen. Yes, it looks consensual, but… messy as hell. They both know they shouldn’t be doing it, and they write a lot about her turning eighteen so they wouldn’t have to hide anymore. Um… They were both talking about getting married…”

Tony groans at that. “Romeo and Juliet from hell?”

“Looks like the Capulets didn’t go for it,” Johnson replies.

“Anyway, the point I was making, just because we can read the emails doesn’t mean we know what else might have been on her computer. Or phone. Sexting is a thing, who knows what video files are lurking around on there,” Spader says.

“I didn’t see anything like that on Dowling’s computer, but who knows what’s on his phone.” Tony makes a mental note to add that to the list of missing things. “And, sure, if she had a camera on her computer or something like that, Mom and Dad might have decided it was just easier to take with them than to try and delete whatever was on it.” Draga replies. That’s something of a dead end, so the follows up with, “What are we thinking about the kids?”

Johnson and Tony share a look, and then Tony nods, letting her know to talk. “Nope. There was high velocity spatter on the walls, and a big dent in his head, and neither of those kids has the build to do that.”

Spader shakes his head, too. “They may not have approved of their sis and the Lt., but they didn’t kill him for it. They’re alone, and they’re scared.”

“ Alone…” Tony says, letting Spader know to keep going with that thought.

“Mom and Dad and Sis are gone. They aren’t coming back anytime soon. The kids know it. My guess is they’re supposed to keep going to school and pretending everything is okay, and eventually they’ll run off, too.”

“Suitcases!” Johnson says. “We didn’t find any suitcases! Everyone’s got at least one in their place, right?”

Draga smiles at her, pleased with that. “That’s usually how it works. So, what do we do when we get back?”

Spader and Johnson look at each other, and then back to Tony and Draga… “Uh….” Neither of them want to say, “Pack up and go home,” but it’s on both of their faces.

“We make sure that CPS has the kids, and that they aren’t going anywhere. We set a BOLO on mom, dad, and sis, and flag their travel documents. We get the request for financials set. And then we go home,” Tony replies.

Draga raises an eyebrow at Tony. He’s ready for another long night.

“I want a better idea of what happened before we talk to the kids, and by the time we’ve got that, it’ll be too late to talk to them. So, get the basics in play, let that collect us some intel while we rest, and
then bright and early tomorrow, we break this wide open.”

Tony says that, and his three team members appear to agree with this plan.

On the ride home, Tony wonders if he’s going soft. Then he decides it doesn’t matter. Dowling isn’t getting any more dead. The sister is with her parents, safe enough. The kids are stewing with CPS, hopefully thinking long and hard about what’s going to happen to them.

There’s nothing that needs to happen right this second. Nothing that can happen right now, except them burning through pizza and antacids, staring at computer screens, willing them to give them more intel.

So, they might as well go home, and actually have lives outside of the job.

And when he goes to bed that night, after having talked the case through with Ziva, he’s awfully sure that that was a much better way to spend the evening than drinking coffee and mentally berating the Local LEOs for not catching his suspects in his BOLO.

Tony gets in on Friday morning and sees a report on his desk. “Shit.”

Draga, who beat him in and had placed the document that caused the profanity in question on his desk, nods. “Yep.”

It’s the credit card information from Mr. and Mrs. Sirianapantha.

And right there, highlighted by Draga, are the airline tickets.

From Tuesday. The day before they found Dowling’s body.

To Pakistan. To Lahore Pakistan.

“I’ve already got the call into our Embassy in Karachi. They tell me they’ll talk to their guys in Lahore, and they’ll see about working on getting an extradition set, but…”

Tony waves that off. Suspected of a murder will get them some level of cooperation, but it won’t get them a full-on man hunt, and it’s bleeding Pakistan which isn’t exactly the most difficult country on earth to hide in. And, hell, they’re Indians… He can’t imagine the Pakistani government being willing to do much of anything on this. He rubs his eyes. “Add kidnapping and honor killing to the write up.”

That gets a raised eyebrow from Draga. Absolutely nothing they’d seen indicated Sarai might be in
any danger from her parents.

“I know. But they aren’t going to run like crazy for a dead man. They may decide to move and get on this if they think the girl is in danger.” Draga updates his information and gets it going through the chain of command.

“Are we going to go?” Draga asks.

Tony shakes his head. “Not with what we’ve got now. We don’t speak the language. We’re not looking for someone in the military. Besides Lahore, we don’t have any idea where they are. We have no good contacts. We work on charming whoever’s in charge over there and sweet talking them into helping us, because otherwise, we’re fumbling around blind out there.”

“We still have the boys,” Johnson says. She’s been listening quietly for the last moment as she took off her coat and got seated at her desk.

“We do, and we’re going to try and see if we can get out of them where Mommy and Daddy are, and if we can do that…” Draga lights up. “You may get to go on a little trip.”

“Trip?” Spader says as he strolls in. “I like trips. Where are we going?”

“Maybe Pakistan…” Draga gets the whole crew up to date. As he’s doing that, Tony gets the call. The kids are in the conference room, ready to talk.

“Rule number one, don’t let the suspect stay together. Now, why are we breaking this rule?” Tony asks as they head to the conference room.

Johnson and Spader glance at each other, Spader decides he gets to answer this one. “Because they’ve already been together for more than two days since the crime went down.”

Tony nods. “Exactly. Between elapsed time, the fact they’re already been coached by Mom and Dad on what to say, and that they’re kids, rule number one becomes more like, suggestion number one.”

“Are we going to keep them together for the interrogation?” Johnson asks.

“No. And we’re also not going to use the word interrogation. We’re,” Tony’s voice suggests the use of air quotes without him having to make the gesture, “having a little conversation, with them.”

“We know they moved the body,” Draga says.

“Why do we know they moved the body, Johnson?” Tony adds.

“Mom, Dad, and Sis were… Wait… Do we know they got on the plane, or just that they bought tickets?” Johnson replies.

“A, good thinking on that, you get a gold star, and B…” Tony turns his gaze to Draga.

“Yeah, we’ve got the security footage of them getting on the plane. I don’t know if they got off in Lahore, but they got on in DC. When we’re done talking, I’ll run that down. Only four different stops between DC and Lahore where they could have decided not to get back on the plane.”
Tony nods at that.

“So, Mom and Dad and Sis got on the plane before Dowling could have gotten into the shape he was in. So, they didn’t move the body. That leave the kids. Kid… One set of prints leading from the house to the car. Are we thinking one of them put Dowling’s shoes on and made it look like he left the house, and the other one drove Dowling’s car over and tossed him in the trunk…” Johnson says.

“Maybe,” Draga replies. “No unknown prints on the car, but we did have smudges that would have gone with someone with gloves messing around with it.”

“And, maybe if you didn’t know too much about abandoned cars… you might think the county would just tow it away… Or… Wait, no. They moved the body because it smells so bad the neighbors are going to start complaining soon, so… Do these kids want to get caught?” Spader asks.

“Another good question,” Tony replies. Then he stops the four of them. They’re only a few feet away from the Conference room. “And we’ll get into that in a moment. You two, head to Observation and observe. Draga and I are going to take Micah,” the older of the two boys, “into interrogation for our ‘little chat.’”

Micah looks nervous. He probably should. The Child Advocate next to him doesn’t look nervous. She’s done this a million times before.

“Mrs. Brandt.”

“Agent DiNozzo, Agent Draga. Just to make sure we’re clear, you don’t consider Micah a suspect?”

“No.” Tony waves that off, sitting across from Micah, holding out two cans of soda. One Coke, one Mountain Dew. “We’re looking for confirmation of things we already know.”

Micah takes the Coke and mumbles, “Thank you.”

Draga sits next to Tony, across from Micah and the Advocate. He’s got the file in his hand.

“Look, Micah,” Tony says, voice calm, sincere, “we already pretty much know what happened. We’ve put most of the pieces together. All we want to do is make sure your sister is safe.”

That confuses Micah. “Why wouldn’t she be?”

“Your parents took her to Pakistan. Your family is Indian… Just…”

Micah sighs. He bites his lip and looks at the mirrored window that Johnson and Spader are behind.

Tony keeps his voice gentle and soothing. “Right now, if we can get them home… Nothing’s going to happen to your sister. She’s the victim here. If your father had called NCIS when he caught Dowling, we would have put him in jail for a long time. And… look, if there’s a guy raping my teenage daughter, I’m going to get the nearest thing I can find and hit him with it, too. That’s true for every guy. There isn’t a jury on earth that will convict your father of murder for that.”

Spader smiles behind the glass. “Murder. That’s a nice distinction.”

Johnson nods. “Yeah. First degree murder, nope. He can’t get a conviction for that. Manslaughter on the other hand…”
Micah bites his lip harder. Tony keeps rolling on. “We just want to get everyone back home, and safe. If we can’t get them back here on their own, then we’re going to have to go hunting for them, and that can get messy. If they just come home…”

“God, look at how he’s playing that kid,” Spader sounds a little star struck as he says it.

Johnson nods. “He’s laying it on with a trowel.”

“Yeah, but the kid’s nervous and scared, looks like he hasn’t slept well in days, hip deep, soothing, everything-is-going-to-be-okay-if-you-help-us, bullshit is exactly what this kid needs right now.”

“You’re not wrong. Taking notes for our shot?”

“Yep.”

On the far side of the glass, Draga takes over. “We ran your phone records, there’s an international number you’ve been calling. A cell phone. Does it belong to your parents?”

Micah gives the tiniest head shake he can manage.

“Your sister? Do your parents not know she’s got it?”

A nod. His eyes are tearing up. “It… It…”

“IT what, Micah…” Tony’s keeping up the soft voice. “We know, it’s your Mom and Dad and Sister, and they told you to do things, and you want to do right by them, but… You’ve got to protect your family, and leaving them out there… Waiting for the Pakistani police to go and find them. They aren’t usually kind to Indians, let alone Indians wanted for murder and kidnapping, are they?”

Micah winces. “Mum’s from Pakistan. Dad’s Indian. They met in university in New York, and… That’s why she thought she could tell them. She thought they’d understand. They’d had to run away from their own parents and…”

“And they didn’t understand,” Draga says gently.

“I… I don’t… By the time we got home, Sarai was sobbing, and Mum was packing, and Dad…” He shakes his head.

“What do you bet Mom and Dad came home early, caught the love birds in the ‘private’ part of their reunion, and Dad went batshit crazy?” Spader says behind the glass.

Johnson sighs. “Like Tony said, you see some guy, some adult guy, on top of your seventeen-year-old daughter…”

“He’s at least getting thrown off of her.” They keep watching the unfolding story on the other side of the glass.

“And then they left? Told you not to talk to anyone without them there?” Tony leads.

Micah nods. “We didn’t know what had happened, not for sure. But there was this smell, and we couldn’t just leave him there. People would notice. So, it gets dark. Saakaar puts on his shoes and makes it look like he left. I get his car, and we take care of it.”

“Why did you put the car back where you found it?” Draga asks.

Micah shrugs. “Where else should I put it? I can barely drive. I don’t have a license. I don’t want to
get pulled over in someone else’s car with a dead body in the trunk. We hoped that they’d just tow it away.”

“There was duct tape on Dowling’s wrists…” Draga leads.

Micah takes another sip of his soda, his eyes far away, seeing something he doesn’t want to. “He was in the water, slippery, and he’s heavy, too. We couldn’t get him out. He kept slipping back in. Saakaar decided that if we got his wrists together, we could get him around my shoulders and I could just walk out and he’d come with us.”

“That explains the tape and the blood pooling in his feet,” Spader says.

Johnson shakes her head. “How many tries do you think it took for them to get him out?”

“Too many. He was at least six inches taller than Micah. They had to be desperate to get him out of there.”

In interrogation, Tony sighs. “Are your parents coming back for you? What’s the plan on that?”

Micah fiddles with the pop tab on the Coke. “There wasn’t enough money to buy tickets for all of us at once. Dad gets paid on Friday. More money in the account. That’ll get a ticket for Saakaar. Two more weeks, and there’ll be a ticket for me.”

“So, you’re supposed to just be on your own for three weeks?” Draga asks.

“There’s a lot of food in the house. We’ve got some cash. I can drive, a little, enough to go get more groceries. We go to school during the day, stay home at night. I can look after myself for a few weeks.”

“And then… what… start over in Pakistan?” Draga asks.

“For a little while. Mum’s sister is there, and they still get on. Get us all together again and… I don’t know what happens next. Sarai… She loved him. And Dad…” Micah takes another drink of his Coke and falls into miserable silence.

“Okay. Thanks, Micah. We’ve got it from here. We’re going to talk to your brother some, and then both of you are going to go with Mrs. Brandt. She’ll make sure you’ve got a place to stay, and as soon as we find your parents and sister, we’ll let you know.”

Micah looks up, a tiny spark of hope in his eyes. “You’ll bring them home. Home safe and okay and…”

“We will. We’ll make sure they think they’re picking your brother up at the airport, and we’ll scoop them up nice and easy, and bring them home. You’ll see your Mom and Sister by Sunday. Hopefully not too long after that, you’ll see your Dad, too.”

Micah nods, tears in his eyes.

“Hello Saakaar, I’m Agent Johnson and this is Agent Spader, we’d like to talk to you about this last week.” Johnson is doing her best to copy Tony’s soothing BS voice, but she’s having a hard time of it. She’s excited, which makes keeping her voice calm difficult.

Spader picks up on it, and so does Saakaar, who does not appear to be nearly as interested in
cooperating as his older brother was. He’s staring in stony silence at the soda he’s been offered, glaring at it like that can of Mountain Dew personally set his family on the road to destruction it’s currently on.

Spader decides to try a different tact. “You’re angry.”

That gets a tiny flicker of recognition from Saakaar.

“I would be, too. Right now you should be at…” Spader leads, and Saakaar stares at the table, slouching in on himself.

They wait a beat, and Johnson adds, “School right? You should be in your second period class?”

Tiny nod in response to that.

“We’d like to get you back there, as quickly as we can,” Johnson adds, this time doing a better job of sounding sincere.

Saakaar snorts at that.

“None of that,” Spader says a hint of his, bucking-up-the-distressed-seaman tone in his voice. “We can get you back to school. We can get you back with your friends. And, with a little help, we can get you back with your mom and sister.”

That gets another snort. “You can help them into jail, you mean.”

“Your sister isn’t going to jail. When we get your sister, she’ll join you and Micah. In a month, when she’s eighteen, you and your brother and her can all go home. Your mother, probably, isn’t going to prison,” Johnson says, using Tony’s very careful lie technique. Jail, she’s likely going to jail, for at least a while, but if Dad cooperates, they likely won’t bring charges against Mom.

“And my Dad?”

Johnson and Spader share a look. They know that lie won’t tell.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought.”

“Do you want to help us get your sister back?” Spader asks.

“Does it matter?”

“Yes, it does. We can do it without you, but it’ll be easier, for us and them, if you help. Your parents will tell you about the tickets somehow, right?” Johnson says.

“Yeah. They’ll text. I’ve got my phone, and they’ll send the details.”

“All we need is the use of your phone for a few hours, then,” Johnson follows up.

“And if I say no?” Saakaar sounds like he’s testing them, waiting to see if the patient façade will break.

“Then we reroute your number, have the text come to us, and answer it that way,” Spader says.

“How is that easier for them?”

“That part isn’t. The part where you get to come to Pakistan with us, and help us talk to them, so
they come with us, is the part that’ll be easier for them,” Spader replies.

Johnson’s not sure, but she thinks she hears a groan from behind the glass.

But, that appears to be the absolute right thing to say to Saakaar. It gets a flicker of life out of him, something that looks like interest, and hope. “Can you help us like that, go with us, and help convince them to come back?” Johnson lays on top of Spader’s lead.

“I can do that.”

“Okay, good. Can we have your phone?” Johnson asks.

Saakaar slides it over. “One, three, six, eight. That’s the passcode.”

“Thank you, Saakaar,” Spader says. “Mrs. Brandt, we’re done here. We’ll let you know how things go, okay? And once we’re ready to go we’ll get you and be on our way.”

Mrs. Brandt puts a hand on Saakaar’s shoulder, and gently leads him out of the door.

A minute later Tony’s in there with them. “Are you out of your mind? I am not taking a fourteen-year-old into God alone knows what situation in Pakistan!”

“No. I’m not insane. We’re allowed to lie to them, say whatever we want, to get what we need from them,” Spader replies, and then he hands over the phone. “We’ve got the phone, we’ve got the code, and now we just text to his parents. They’ll know when to expect him, and we’ll get to the airport before he would have. They won’t expect us, they’ll be waiting for him, and we’ll sweep ‘em up nice and easy.”

Tony groans and applies a swift whack to the back of Spader’s head.

Spader looks confused; he expected praise for that. Johnson looks confused; she thought they were really going to take the kid along with them.

They both stare at Tony, waiting for what comes next.

“We build rapport with kids like Saakaar. We still have to take this to trial, and now he and his brother will hate us and will not be helpful come testifying time.”

“We’re not going to make them testify, are we?” Spader looks horrified at that idea.

“I hope not, but if we do... Don’t burn bridges. Especially with kids.”

“Okay… I can fix this,” Spader says. “Just, let me go get him. I’ll tell him I’m new and overstepped and… I’ll explain.”

Tony waves at the door. “Go.” Spader books out of there, going to catch Saakaar. “Lesson learned?”

“Judicious application of lying. Working on it. What’s going to happen when Micah notices how careful you were about murder versus manslaughter?”

Tony levels a long gaze at Johnson. “That’s why you can’t screw them on the little stuff. I already told the lie that’ll make them hate us. At least someone on this team has to be the good guys, and today, it wasn’t me.”

Johnson nods. “Okay. What next?”
“We keep an eye on the phone, find out where the tickets are for, and then get you or Spader and Draga on a plane to Pakistan.”

“So…” Abbi asks as Tony gets them up to date at Shabbos that night.

“So, Spader won the coin toss, and he and Draga are in the air.”

“But not you?” Abbi has a mildly confused look on her face, as she passes the challah down the table to Abby.

“Round about midnight, they’ll give me a call, let me know how it went. Then, once everyone is back in DC, around dinner time tomorrow, Johnson and I will go after the parents and see how it all shakes out.”

Ziva smiles at him. “He is nesting.”

“I am not nesting!” Tim, Jimmy, and Gibbs share a look with Tony, and all three of them nod. “It is perfectly cool for a pregnant daddy to not want to be on the other side of the planet when baby is less than two months out. And, especially when you text me in the morning to let me know that you’re starting to get those warming up contractions, for some reason I don’t feel the need to be in Pakistan.”

“Not when Draga’s perfectly capable of going there,” Gibbs adds.

“Exactly,” Tony replies.

“And is he ‘perfectly capable?’” Abbi asks.

Tony nods. “Yeah. He really is. I’m liking how he’s handling our Probies.”

“And how are you liking the Probies?” Breena asks.

“I’ve had Probies I’ve liked better, but these two… Draga and I’ll make good cops out of them.”

Gibbs has an immensely satisfied look on his face at that.

Jolting up and down on a cargo transport flight, the sound of the engine roaring away, flying towards the rising sun to go grab a murderer, that’s what Zach Spader had hoped this job would be like.

Granted, he’s got more hours to go until they get to Lahore. And more hours until they spot the Sirianapanthas, grab them, and get back on another of these flights to take them back home. So, this is a tad more boring than he had hoped for, but…

This is the verge of doing something.

And it’s been so damn long since he’s had something to do.

Draga’s strapped in next to him, head against the bulk head, eyes closed, but Spader’s pretty sure he’s not sleeping.
“First time to Lahore?”

Draga shakes his head. “Nah. We were going hard on anti-terror before the fall. That got us in this neck of the woods a few times.”

“You ever here when you were flying?”

Draga shakes his head. “All Pacific all the time. You?”

Spader smirks. “Lahore isn’t exactly submarine territory.”

Draga rolls his eyes. “Okay, Squid.”

“Uh huh… Flyboy.”

They sit quietly for a moment. “You miss it?” Spader asks, patting the hull of the plane.

“The flying I did, yeah. These monsters?” They’re in a Herc. “This is… This is like asking a formula one racer if he misses driving when you’re in a bus. Yeah, they both drive…”

Spader waves that off; he gets the basic idea.

“How about you?” Draga asks.

“All the time.” Zach glances around the Herc. “It’ll sound stupid but this isn’t that different. Close in, tight quarters, everything is metal, bouncing all over the place when it gets rough, constant noise. Pack an extra twenty people in here, and this feels like home.”

Draga shakes his head. “Tighter than I like my quarters.”

“Didn’t think the planes had a lot of space.”

“Windows. I had 270-degree line of sight.” He smiles a little.

“And nothing on earth has more space than the flight deck of an aircraft carrier on the open ocean,” Spader fills in.

“Yeah. Creep over to the edge, look out, and there’s a million miles of sky and sea. The plane is small, but the view is big, and in there, you feel like you can see forever. You don’t have that on a sub, right?”

“Right. The newer ones don’t bother with portholes, and even if they did, there’d be nothing to see. Light only travels through water so far, and we go further down than that.”

“Not like your conning crew is going to try and look out the window and steer like that.”

Spader laughs at that idea. “Exactly. If we’re in such bad shape we’ve got to steer by sight… We’re never in that bad of shape. We all died long before that happens.” He rummages around in his go bag and pulls out a protein bar. “Split it?”

“Sure.”

Spader breaks it in half and gives half to Draga. “What’s waiting for us down there?”

“If we’re lucky, we land, we find a decent spot at the airport, blend in as well as we can, and then wait for the family to show up.”
“You want me on Dad?”

“Sure. I’ll keep eyes open for the girls. If anyone tries to run, we make sure we get Dad. If we grab him first, we can secure him and then go back for the girls.”

“You know, it’s not impossible Mom brained Dowling,” Spader says.

“Not impossible, but unless she’s your size, it’s really unlikely. It takes a lot of force to put that big of a dent in a guy’s head.”

“Think they’re going to tell us that Dowling and Sarai were in the hot tub, and Dowling slipped, hit his head, and they ran?” Spader asks.

Draga thinks about it, and what they boys told them. “I’d give you even odds on that. But he would have had to have been on the roof of the house, and landed on his head, to have ‘slipped’ and gotten that badly hurt.” He chews a bite of the bar. “I’m wondering if we’re going to get both of them blaming the other one. I don’t think we can prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Mom or Dad did it. If the lawyers are smart, they’ll each blame the other one.”

“Wouldn’t they have to lie?” Spader asks. “I mean, the lawyers are supposed to not encourage people to flat out lie on the stand.”

“If he tells them to lie, he’s breaking the law; you’re right about that. But he doesn’t have to call them up, and they can refuse to answer questions based on if they knew the other one did it and fled, they’d be incriminating themselves.”

Spader winces. “That’s nasty. Can we win this?”

“Hope so. With any luck Sarai saw the whole thing, and she will tell us what happened.”

“Here’s hoping.”

---

It’s later, much later, when Tony gets the sit rep. And yes, swooping up the Sirianapanthas went easy. Once they saw Draga and Spader, they just gave up. Sarai wasn’t with Mom and Dad when they went to the airport, but Auntie, who was, to put it mildly, not happy with having her brother-in-law camped at her place because he killed a guy, was willing to give her to the Americans who were going to take her home to her brothers.

Tony’s pacing the main floor as he gets that update. Ziva’s already in bed, asleep, and he’s not about to wake her up with this. She’s hit the point where she’s having a hard time staying asleep, so he’s not about to cut her sleep any shorter than it already is.

Little Boy needs her to get a lot of rest so he can grow big and strong, and she needs a lot of rest so she can get him out into the world when the time comes.

And it’s his job to make sure that happens.

He finishes with the update, tells Draga and Spader to sleep on the plane, and then hangs up.

Once he does that, he hears weight shifting on the stairs leading to the upper level. It’s a familiar sort of shift, and a familiar sort of quiet.

“Hey.”
Gibbs comes closer, not making much noise. He looks up at Tony, steps closer, and pets the back of his head.

Tony understands that. If anyone knows how… off… it felt to send Draga off with a Probie, Gibbs does. But, apparently, he approves.

“Not a lot of things I wish I could have changed about my time with Shannon, but if there was something I could have done differently, I would have been home more.”

“You think she minded?”

Gibbs nods. “Not enough to say it to me. Not enough to let it poison things. She knew I was as married to the Corps as I was to her. She understood. But… Yeah. She wrote about it in her journals.”

“Ziva understands, too.”

Gibbs nods at that, as well.

“Senior was gone all the time. We lived in the Hamptons, and he was only with us on the weekends. I’m not going to be that guy. There’ll be enough cases where I have to be gone, and this wasn’t one of them.”

“Good.”

Beth Johnson’s first interrogation had taken a certain level of skill and effort. Her second…

She’s sitting across from an all-cried-out, furious, girl who is ready to bring down the wrath of Hell on her parents for killing her boyfriend and dragging her across the planet.

And if Hell isn’t available, NCIS will have to do.

Beth doesn’t even get, “Do you want to tell—“ all the way through before she’s got a torrent of invective flowing around her.

All she and Tony have to do is sit there, offer the occasional tissue, and nod. A little verbal prod or poke here and there, gets even more information flowing.

The quick version goes something like this: Even if your parents aren’t supposed to be home for a few hours, do not make a ton of noise, say, almost screaming, when having a good time with your boyfriend, because, otherwise, when Daddy gets home early and hears you screaming, he is going to run into the house, grab the nearest thing he can find (his cricket bat), and when he finds you screaming with a naked guy on top of you, he will kill the naked man on top of you with it.

Her third…

Rajit Sirianapantha looks wrecked.

He was certain there was a guy raping his daughter and he took care of him. One minute he’s in his car, pulling up, running home to grab a model he needed for one of his reports, and in the driveway
he hears faint screams.

His daughter’s screams.

So he runs in, as fast as he can, grabs the only thing he’s got in the house that might be a weapon, bolts into her room, finds all of his nightmares coming true, and he hit Dowling as hard as he possibly could.

And that’s when he found out about a whole other crop of nightmares he’d never imagined, but that didn’t make them any less real.

When they get done talking to him, and head out of interrogation, Johnson feels flat. This… Isn’t justice. She’s not even sure what a win on this case would be.

She looks up at Tony as they both head back to their desks to start filling out the reports. “Tell me they aren’t all like this.”

He shrugs. “They aren’t. Not this messy. But, every case we have, every person we talk to, they all think they’re doing the right thing, given the circumstances they’re in. All of them. No one we work with is going to have handlebar moustache and spend his evenings twirling it.”

“I know, but…”

“Most of them, we’ll get a clear ‘bad guy’ and you won’t be rooting for the defense lawyer to find we messed something up.”

“I don’t know that I want that. I mean, he killed Dowling, just took him clean out, and… If there was ever a ‘When seconds count, the cops are minutes away’ moment…”

“I know, Beth. And if he’d hit him a bit less hard, or aimed for his ribs, or… something else… They’d have probably worked it out.” Tony sits down and turns his computer on.

“But they didn’t.”

“Nope. ‘They didn’t work it out’ is going to be the start and end of a lot of the cases we see.”

Johnson listlessly turns her computer on. She knows that it's in the lawyers' hands now, and that they'll work some sort of deal out, murder will become justifiable homicide, but he'll do time for hiding it, and running, and Sarai wants to bring kidnapping charges, so... Even if Rajit isn't in prison for the rest of his life, this is still going to be a huge mess.

Tony’s phone rings. She hears him pick it up and say, “We’re not on today. Uh huh… What about… No… Okay, I’ll get them back.” He hangs up and says to her. “Call Johnson and Draga back in, we’ve got a dead body in Manassas. Maybe this time, we’ll be the white knights riding to the rescue.”

She smiles a little, and picks up her phone.
Just another wedding. Tim feels like there have been a lot of them over the last few years. He’s fairly certain that, say, back when he was in his twenties, entire years could go by without a single wedding, let alone multiple ones, but for some reason he’s hip deep in them now.

Though, technically, he’s not exactly in wedding territory, yet.

Right now he’s in rehearsal dinner territory.

Okay, actually he’s in getting ready to go to the rehearsal dinner territory.

Though, as he’s in the NCIS men’s locker room, putting on his suit, getting ready to go to Alexandria, instead of driving with Abby and Jimmy to their place for Shabbos, he’s thinking he’ll cut it short on the ‘dinner’ part of this.

Home with his loves, snuggle time with his girls and boy, dinner with everyone… Almost everyone, Penny and Ducky are invited to tonight’s shindig, too. Or socializing with strangers.

He’s not wildly enthusiastic about that.

Granted, if he were willing to really think about this, it’s not socializing with strangers that he’s feeling reticent about. Spending a few hours talking shop as Thom E. Gemcity really isn’t a problem for him. So much of his real life doesn’t touch Gemcity, that it’s actually something of a treat to be him for a while.

(And if he were to ponder that, he might realize part of why being Gemcity used to be fun is that Gemcity was a vastly cooler version of McGee, and maybe part of why he doesn’t need Gemcity so much anymore is that the real Tim has finally shot past Thom on the cool and comfortable in his own skin scale.)

Nope, it’s not strangers that’s the problem. It’s the Texas contingent of his ‘family’ who’ll be at this thing.

And it doesn’t much matter. His phone beeps. His Uber is here. Working his way out of NCIS, he stops at autopsy and the lab to kiss his loves (Abby gives him a pat on the butt and approves of the suit, making him double down on the get-out-of-this-thing-early plan, and Jimmy’s working on his report, so he allows himself a quick, silent kiss that adds an odd pause to his dictation, but nothing so noticeable as to raise questions.) and is on his way.

He understands the purpose of the rehearsal part of this: make sure everyone knows who goes where and all that.

And, given that this is a hybrid of a Quaker ceremony and a Handfast (Because why wouldn’t it be? he thinks with dry sarcasm. The McGee-Allister-Langston-Mallards are some sort of vague flavor of mostly agnostic Christian-ish types. Glenn’s family is Mormon, ish, sort of. His grandparents and cousins are. His parents are less so. So, sure, a mostly Wiccan ceremony, why not?) he gets that
beyond Glenn and Sarah who set this thing up, and their… Minister (Tim’s not sure what to call the lady who’s running this thing) no one really knows what they’re doing. This isn’t the same thing they’ve all done over and over at every other wedding they’ve ever been to.

So, yes, rehearsing, great.

He even knows, on a he’s been told this is going to happen level, and asked if it was okay, that at some point, he and his mom will both take Sarah’s hands and walk her down some sort of vaguely aisle-ish thing, and present her to Glenn, while his parents do the same thing for him, and all four of them will tie the first knots that bind their hands together as a sign of all the families coming together and approving of this. (Cue Mormon grandparents quietly groaning in the back of the audience.)

But knowing it and standing here, in his suit, next to Sarah and his mom, holding a length of green ribbon, waiting for the universe to swallow him whole because there is literally nothing he wants to say to that woman and the weight of the silence between them is getting heavier and heavier as she and Sarah talk about some flower-oriented detail, is not, on any level, the same thing.

His phone buzzes, breaking his feeling of suffocating. He grabs it, and sees a text from Penny. Get out of your head.

His eyes find her, on the far side of the room, and he nods at her, flashing her a bit of a smile.

Finally, the lady who’s ‘officiating’ this thing is done fiddling with the altar they’re practicing walking Glenn and Sarah to. He takes his sister’s right hand, and their mom takes her left, and he successfully walks her the fifteen feet to the altar.

Cassidy. The officiant, there’s a good word for her, smiles at everyone and gets talking. “Okay, so, you guys get up here. Sarah and Glenn spend a moment mooning over each other. I do my bit talking about how a full binding works, and then, those of you who are paying attention to the ceremony,” She smiles at Tim, his mom, and Glenn’s parents, “will hear me say, ‘In our tradition, the bride and groom marry each other, but our tradition also recognizes that a marriage is a blending of families, not just two people. So we ask for the blessing, in the form of the literal giving of their children/sibling, to this union. Tim and Tori, you’ll each offer one of Sarah’s hands to Glenn. Vera and Carlos, you’ll do the same for Glenn. Glenn and Sarah will clasp hands. Left to left and right to right. If we do this right, both of them will have a free right hand when this is done. Once hands are being held, Tim and Tori, you tie first. Easy knots please, on their left hands. The last thing we want to do is spend the rest of the night sawing through the ribbons. Then Vera and Carlos, you do it, too. Same hands. They’ll tie their own knots last, so leave those right hands free, okay?”

Tim and Tori nod. Tim ties first, looping his green ribbon loosely around his sister and soon to be brother-in-law’s wrists.

“You can maybe do it a bit firmer than that. It’s a handfast not a handlose.”

Tim rolls his eyes and adds a basic bow to the ends of the ribbons.

“Perfect. Okay, Tori, you’re up.”

And with his part of the job done, Tim zones out.

Sara had done everything she could, besides cutting the handfast out of the ceremony, to keep her brother and mother away from each other.
They aren’t sitting at the same table for dinner.

They’re in a large restaurant.

She’s got a lot of people at this thing, so they can both just blend into the crowd.

Basically, if they want to pretend the other one doesn’t exist, she’s gone out of her way to make sure they can do that.

And they’re doing that. Tori and her husband, Ben, are spending time mostly with Glenn’s family. Tim, Penny, and Ducky are spending most of their time with each other, and to a lesser extent socializing with Sarah’s writers, talking shop. (Tim’s been in the market for a new agent, and he’s got three new contacts on his list. On a professional level, this is proving to be quite a bit more useful of an evening than he was expecting.) So, in an effort to make sure his sister has a pleasant, drama-free wedding, he and Tori are basically ignoring each other.

And Tim is rationally aware of this. But he feels like there’s a spotlight on him, and on her, and that there might as well not be anyone else in the entire room. Even when Tori’s not looking at him, he feels like her eyes are on him.

“You ready to get going?” Penny asks a bit after eight.

“Please!” Tim replies. They’ve hung around, they’ve eaten, they’ve socialized. He’s done his duty by his sister for tonight, and she and Glenn both look like they’re ready to get onto the pre-wedding parties they’ve got with their buddies. (And Tim is very relieved to have not been invited to the bachelor party. He knows in some families it’s traditional to invite the bride’s male relatives to the night before revelries. Gibbs has mentioned Wendy’s sons being at Fornell’s bachelor party. And, sure, Glenn’s fine and all, but Tim really doesn’t want to go get drunk and ogle naked women with the guy.)

The rehearsal dinner is done, and so is Tim. “I’ll go get our coats.”

She smiles at him. “Meet you at the valet?”

“Perfect.”

He figures it had to happen. They’d gotten through the rest of the night without bumping into each other, but, only so many places you can wait for the coat check girl.

Tim figures Ben must also be at the valet, waiting for their car, or maybe not, maybe they’re Ubering, whatever, he’s not here.

It’s just him, and his mom, and a few strangers, standing around, waiting for coats.

“Where’s Abby?” his mom asks, tentatively breaking the silence. “I mean… is she feeling okay?”

Tim sighs a little. “Sean’s not even three months old. He still wakes up to eat every three hours. Which means we’re both tired. So, she’s at home, resting.” It was Abby’s night last night, and she is tired. Mostly though, they, as a family, decided that minimizing the time the postpartum, still hormonally unbalanced woman was in the proximity of the woman who hurt her most favorite person ever was a good plan for ensuring the peaceful proceeding of Sarah and Glenn’s wedding. One night on best behavior seemed doable. Two nights… They all know Abby, and they’re all sure
she’d pick a fight with Tori, just to do it. “She’ll be here tomorrow.”

His mom keeps watching him, and now he’s wondering how many rumors and bits and pieces about the last few months she’s gotten.

“What?”

She shakes her head. “I heard about… you and John.”

“Sarah fill you in?”

“She and Penny have been doing a good job of saying nothing. They won’t tell me about you or your family, and I know better than to ask, now. Emily,” his mom’s best friend, a Navy wife, “saw the write up in Stars and Stripes about John ending up in prison. Not a lot of details in there, but busted by NCIS at a Tech in Anti-Terrorism Conference in DC, in a hate crime sting… That was you, right?”

Tim nods.

“Scuttlebutt is he hit you. Is…” She eyes the scar through his eyebrow. “Did he do that?”

“Not directly. That’s from when he tried to have me murdered on his ship.”

Tori hadn’t heard any of that, and goes pale. “He… Timothy… I…”

Tim watches her sputter syllables and words as her mind whirls. Finally, she settles on, “What did you…” She stops there, recognizing that’s the wrong question before Tim turns his back and stalks off and tries again, “What happened?”

“I beat him at his game, so he had his buddies literally beat me.”

“Like hazing?”

Tim’s ready to be done with this. He snorts at her and rolls his eyes. “Yeah. *Hazing*. I was in the hospital for a week with more than ten broken bones, and have a ton of screws in my hand and arm. I still don’t have full use of my right hand back, yet, and it’s been eight months. No. Not like *hazing*. Not even hazing getting out of control. *Attempted murder*. He set me up, got me locked in a cage with four guys who believed I’d killed their families, and had the guard walk away. The only reason I didn’t die on his ship was I told SecNav not to leave me alone for too long.” And with that, Tim’s collection of coats have been retrieved. He grabs them, and heads off to find Penny and Ducky.

He looks back as he’s heading off, and sees how hurt she looks.

And he’s not sure if that makes him happy or not.

________________________

He is sure, that when he gets home, and Abby, in her black, silky robe, grabs him by the tie, wrapping it around her hand, and pulls him to bed, where Jimmy’s already naked and ready to play, and Breena’s naked, and looking like with proper encouragement, that she might want to play, that he likes that a hell of a lot.
For Tim, who’s in the wedding, prep starts fairly early. He’s got to be out by noon because… Because he does.

He’s not sure why. Unlike, say, the bridesmaids, he’s not getting his hair done, or going to the salon, or applying any makeup… okay, he’ll fill in the scar through his eyebrow, any serious makeup… or anything along those lines. But, team bride is converging on the wedding at one, which means he’s got to leave at noon.

As he’s heading out, Gibbs shoots him a commiserating smile. There’s not much for the guy in the ‘father of the bride’ position to do, other than stand around and, “Offer to get snacks. That’ll get you out of the girly fest, and be useful.”

Tim nods. He can get snacks with the best of them.

He slings his suit bag over his shoulder, kisses his loves, and he’s off.

As Ducky unpacks the little bag he’s brought with him for this week’s sojourn down to their home, Penny’s coming to the conclusion that he likely shouldn’t be allowed outside, in New York City, on his own, with a credit card.

She stares down at the tiniest kilt ever made, along with a little, bitty black wool jacket, and the tiniest bow tie (also in the McGee tartan), along with a wee little sporran, and says, “I don’t ever want to know how much that costs, do I?”

He slowly shakes his head. “No. You don’t.”

She nods. “And you loved every second of getting that, didn’t you?”

He grins wide and happy. “Indeed. What is the point of finally having a grandson if I cannot, occasionally, spoil him rotten?”

Penny laughs at that. She, and Ducky, know that Sean couldn’t care less about this, thus, it’s not about spoiling him. It is very much about the enjoyment of his be-suited and bow-tied bedecked GrandDuck. “Well, let’s go show Abby what you’ve got him.”

To say the excited squeeing coming from Abby at seeing that outfit, and then at getting her son into it could be heard from Mars is only a slight exaggeration.

It’s a mostly idle thought as Tim’s checking out the wedding venue. Namely, this is a wedding, and he and Abby, and apparently Jimmy and Breena, have certain traditions for celebrating weddings.

And, he’d kind of like to continue to keep said traditions up. As he’s walking around, getting pictures of the flowers and chairs and table settings and cake, and all the rest of it, so his sister can see that everything is on the up and up, he’s also scouting the terrain for quickie territory.

Granted, given the not-wildly-sexy condition of their ladies, and the wildly sexy night they had last night, (Even Breena eventually felt motivated enough to get into it. Certain bits of his anatomy twitch appreciatively at that memory, and he tells them to stuff it because nothing’s happening along those lines for at least a few more hours, if at all) he’s not exactly banking on sexy time for this particular
wedding.

He does locate an out of the way nook, off behind the fire exit stairwell, which he takes a picture of and sends to his loves, along with a winking kiss emoji, and then ponders the concept of how a four-person quickie works.

Maybe… If they… Or… If his shoulder was a little stronger they could… Or…

Nope. A four-person quickie doesn’t work.

Nothing they do, as a foursome, is quick. It’s… just… too damn many people. So, him and Abby and then another round of him and Breena… And then him and Jimmy (?) and… Okay, he knows that’s more fucking than he can do over the course of one four-hour wedding. He and Abby and he and Breena, or, he and Abby and Breena… He’s got two hands… That he can likely pull off fast…

So, okay, yeah, two threesomes… He thinks through a few good plans on that.

Assuming everyone’s interested. And… actually, threesomes work better because Sean’s coming too, and someone should be on baby duty.

Tim smiles a bit, feeling like he’s got everything well planned out.

He sends one more text, to Breena and Abby, Want to see how far I’ve come on my hand rehab?

That gets a predictable Sure, how? From Abby, along with ? from Breena.

He shoots another shot of the stairwell. Coin flip on who gets right and who gets left. Then I see which one of you I can get off first.

He gets a smiley back from Abby and a kiss from Breena.

And given that, Tim heads off from the stairwell, feeling pretty pleased with himself and the rest of the world.

Breena puts her phone down with a sigh. It’s good that she’s keeping Tim’s spirits up, but her own are awfully low.

She could not be less interested in attending this wedding if she tried. She’s sick. She’s tired. She’s not sure which one is winning today. Probably tired. She’s get down on her knees thankful that she’s got plenty of family here to ride herd on the kids, so all she’s had to do today was move from one horizontal position to another one, with occasional moments of being upright and sipping a smoothie in between.

Jimmy’s getting out of the shower. Abby’s getting dressed. They’re both moving around, but just the idea of getting up makes Breena want to give up on life.

Abby’s got her stockings on, when it hits her that they all came in here to get ready, and she and Jimmy are getting ready, and Breena is lying on the bed, eyes closed, not moving. She takes one look at her wife and correctly diagnoses the problem.

“You don’t have to go.”

Breena nods. “I don’t think I am. I’m just… beat.”
Abby sits down next to her, petting her hair. “That’s okay. Tim’s not going to be bothered at all if you bow out on this.”

Jimmy looks up from toweling off his hair. “You want me to stay home, too?”

That gets Breena up on one elbow to look at her first husband. “Jimmy, go! All I’m going to do here is sleep. Gibbs and Abbi and Tony and Ziva are doing the baby watching. You guys are taking Sean with you. I’m going to sleep, maybe go up to Ziva’s bathroom, get a bath, and then go to back to bed and sleep some more.”

“You sure…” Jimmy’s saying it, but Breena can feel Abby thinking it, too.

“Go. Support our man. I don’t need you around to nap. He might need an extra soul that loves him at this thing, so go with him.”

“Okay.”

Two hours to go. Tim’s gotten snacks. He’s run errands. He’s visited the venue, and taken pictures, sending them to Sarah, who likely gave them to their mom, and thus made sure everything was in tip top shape.

But, eventually, he ran out of ‘stuff’ to do to keep him attached to, but not really in the same place as, or interacting with, the wedding party.

Which means it’s time to bite the bullet and mosey back to the wedding party and do his job as the male family member who’s involved with this thing.

Team Bride is staging at Sarah and Glenn’s new place. And though he hasn’t been there too many times, he’s more than familiar with the building, because they’re three floors down from Tony and Ziva’s apartment.

After the fall, Glenn wanted somewhere not too badly broken up, and in the city. Sarah needed power and functional wi-fi. Until December, this was one of a handful of places that fit that description. So, here they are.

It’s not a clone of Tony and Ziva’s place. Same two bedrooms, one bath stats, but a different set up. Sarah and Glenn have a small office and a galley kitchen to go with the living room. Tony and Ziva have a walk in kitchen and a slightly larger living room. Tim smiles as he sees the second bedroom, currently filled with women getting dressed up, and wonders who else in this group knows about Baby Holland.

The maid of honor, a brown-haired woman named Liza, his sister’s best friend since her Waverly days, immediately offers him a glass of champagne as soon as he’s in the room. Looking around he notices that this is not, by any stretch, the only bottle of wine that’s open.

And thus, with Sarah not drinking, he very rapidly comes to the conclusion that everyone in the room knows she’s pregnant.

The fact that Liza and two other bridesmaids are also talking about what sort of baby gear to get is another hint in that direction.

So, with a glass of wine in one hand, and his phone in the other, he wades in amongst the girls and
starts showing off photos of Sarah with his kids and bragging on her ‘Aunt Sarah’ skills, thus earning him, and her, many a brownie point for being good with kids.

He realizes he didn’t think that through about a minute into showing off Sarah with Kelly shots when he can feel his mom, who has not been allowed to see any of these pictures, staring at him.

Her eyes are burning a hole into the back of his phone, but she’s not easing around to get into position to see them. She’s continuing to respect his ban on information about his family, even if she can’t make herself look away from what he’s doing.

Tim sighs. She’s not The Admiral, and showing the pictures to strangers, in front of her, and not letting her see them, crosses the line from self-preservation to cruel.

So, Tim nods at his mom, and she rushes over, standing a step away from him, carefully not getting too close, but avidly devouring the shots of her daughter and granddaughter, and in some of the more recent shots, her daughter and grandson.

He gets the first picture of Sarah and Sean open, and his mom gasps at it, “Oh… He looks so much like you!”

Tim nods.

He feels his sister come over, she’s between him and their mom, one arm around Tim’s back, the other around her mom’s, smiling, and there are small tears in her eyes, Tim can feel hope radiating off of her, and he knows he’s neck deep in the shit because there’s way too damn much going on with this right now.

He hands Sarah his phone. “Here… you can… I need to get dressed.”

He all but sprints out of the room, and then does the slowest job he possibly can getting into his kilt and suit.

Half an hour to go. They’re at the wedding venue, hiding out in the bridal nook, waiting for things to get moving. Everyone is dressed and ready to go. People are coming, guests arriving. Almost time. There’s a photographer getting shots of everyone there. Tim thinks Sarah’s warned him ahead of time, because he doesn’t try to get a shot of the three of them together. Which Tim appreciates. He doesn’t want to try and force himself to do a version of the three of them smiling together shot from his wedding.

But he can feel that both his sister and mother would like them to be in a place where something like that could happen.

But Tim doesn’t. Not now. And, right now, they’re both working with him on that.

Visitors come in and out, the various plus ones of the bridesmaids, Glenn’s parents, Glenn’s best man delivers a present for Sarah, stuff like that.

He’s on his phone, reading up on Inspector Generals, who he’s vaguely aware exist, and from the looks of it, they didn’t so much drop the ball last year, as didn’t show up to play the game. He’s
figuring out where in the grand scheme of what he wants to do at the FBI they’ll go, when he hears the door open and more voices, none of which meander through his note taking, but finally a “Tim.” from his sister does.

“Oh!” he jumps up, smile spreading across his face as he sees his family. First and foremost, he sees Sean in his stroller in… He’s picking his boy up and cuddling him as he takes in the details of the tiny kilt and the little jacket and aside from the fact that he’s wearing long tie and vest, and Sean’s got a bow tie, and no vest, the basically matching outfits. “Oh…” he’s laughing. “Did…?” He’s looking around at them, Abby beaming, Jimmy with a wide grin, and then he lands on a particularly satisfied smile looking up at him from twinkling blue eyes. “Ducky!”

He hugs Ducky and Sean together as Ducky says, “One is never too young to be properly Scottish.” Tim raises an eyebrow at that. “Or too Irish?”

Abby elbows him gently. “And Italian.” Tim wraps an arm around her and kisses her hello.

Ducky waves that off. “Details.”

Sean, alert, awake, sucking busily on his pacifier, takes all of this adoration as his due. He looks up at his daddy, and promptly grabs onto the tie, getting a death grip on it.

Tim kisses him. “I’m going to have to pry you off with a crowbar, won’t I?”

Sean gurgles.

Sarah’s stepped over. “If he doesn’t want to let go, you can certainly bring him along. I’m sure Mom’ll be fine doing all the tying if your hands are full of this little guy.”

Mom. He again feels the eyes on him. This woman has never seen him, save for ten seconds with Kelly, interact with one of his children before. She’s never seen him be a dad. And she is watching.

“That would be no problem at all, if he doesn’t want to move,” Tori says, quickly.

Tim can feel Abby tense up, feel her working on shutting Tori down. He gives her a gentle, I’m okay squeeze. “Um… We’ll see. How long has he been up?”

“He ate in the car on the way here. Right now, he’s in his quiet, well-fed, awake period. About the time you want to be walking down the aisle, he’ll want to be going to sleep,” Jimmy says.

Tim nods. “Then I’ll be handing him back before then. No one’s going to be better off with me lugging around a crabby baby.” He nuzzles Sean. “Least of all you. You’re going to go and have a nice snooze in your stroller, right?”

Sean’s look could best be classified as we’ll see.

Tim glances around, noticing that part of the party isn’t here. “Breena?”

“Is having a very pregnant day,” Jimmy says.

Sarah smiles at that and sighs. “Say no more. She’s not watching the kids is she?”

“No!” Abby says. “Gibbs and Abbi are doing most of the kid watching. Breena was sleeping when we left, with any luck she’ll get to eat something, and then get some more sleep.”

“And if we’re really lucky, she’ll wake up feeling good,” Jimmy adds. Just because it isn’t going to
happen, doesn’t mean he can’t wish for it.

Tim’s mom makes a small noise, and Sarah understands it. Tori knows everyone in this group, except Jimmy, who she’s only met once, as Abby’s best man, at their wedding. “Tori Allister, this is Jimmy Palmer, Jimmy, this is our mom.”

And, if Tori was less than satisfied with that introduction, because it doesn’t actually clarify who Jimmy is, or why he’s that intimately acquainted with Sean’s sleep cycle, let alone here at the wedding, that’s rapidly burned away when he turns his attention to her, eyes frigid, doesn’t offer his hand, and says, “Ah.” He stares at her for what feels like a very long time before saying, with the darkest, coldest smile she’s ever seen form on human lips, “I’ve met your ex-husband.”

And Tori doesn’t know what the hell that means, but she knows danger when she feels it, and right now every nerve in her body is screaming at her to run away and make sure she is never alone in the same room as the man staring her down.

She licks her lips and steps back. “I…”

As she starts to turn away she sees Tim rest his hand on Jimmy’s forearm and say, quietly, “It’s okay, Jimmy. I’m okay.”

Jimmy looks back at Tim, a lot of tenderness in his eyes, and he waits for Tim to nod again before saying, “Okay.”

Just like every other wedding he’s been to, Tim finds this time and space a good place to focus on his loves.

He kisses his sister’s cheek, and hugs his almost brother-in-law, and then ties the ribbon around Sarah and Glenn’s hands. Then he steps back, letting the rest of the family do their thing. His eyes find Jimmy and Abby. They’re in the back, mostly to make it easy to duck out if Sean gets fussy, but also because back there, no one’s watching them.

Jimmy’s holding Abby’s hand, and both of them give him a smile when his eyes meet theirs. He smiles back, wishing Breena could have been here for this, and hoping she’s getting a good nap.

Penny and Ducky are next to them, with Sean between Abby and Penny. Penny’s gently rocking his baby seat, keeping little guy quietly snoozing away.

Bound. That’s what Cassidy has been talking about.

The ties, literal ones for the ceremony, and the metaphysical ones they symbolize, and how lives weave and connect into each other, making a knot that can never be undone.

Standing up there, he’s very aware of the ties between him and Abby, and Jimmy, and Breena, and with each other and all of those threads of life, love, affection, lust, time, history, blood, sweat, tears, all of it, keeping them cemented to each other.

*Until my last breath.*

He sees Abby smile again, and wonders if she knows what he’s thinking. If she can feel it, or if, by now, she just knows him so well as to know what would be in his mind.
She signs it back to him, and Jimmy kisses her cheek, adding his own promise to it.

He’s sure Breena can’t feel it, not from miles away and sleeping, but he thinks it at her, too.

When The Admiral kept watching him/sidling over to say something at the Tech in Anti-Terror Commission there was a certain feel that went with that. John was trying to pick a fight.

Tori’s not. Tim can feel that.

He’s not sure what she’s trying to do.

He’s got the sense she’s not sure, either.

But whatever it is, she’s doing it, a lot.

He can feel his mom watching them. It’s been happening all night. She watches him, and then Jimmy, and him and Jimmy, then him and Abby, and Jimmy and Abby, and back again. And he knows what she’s got to be thinking. If all she’s got is the secondhand write up in Stars and Stripes, which specified that John had pled guilty to assault and a hate crime, but not which hate crime, or who had been assaulted, she might not have reason to be curious about Tim being at a wedding with a man and a woman. But if she had read Leon’s speech about the direction he was going to take the Navy, it would have been awfully clear which hate crime was in play, add in who got hit... And it’s not like she’s stupid; she’d have to have her suspicions. Plus, it’s not like she didn’t live with John for more than twenty years. She knows his hot buttons. And that’s not all she’s got. After all, John wasn’t there all by his lonesome. He was part of the Navy delegation, which was ten guys, and their dates, and it’s entirely likely that his Mom knows at least a third of those guys, and if those dates were wives, probably half to two-thirds of the wives.

As Penny said, becoming an Admiral is a political game as well as a strategic one, and for a while, at least, his mom played the game. She has friends, and some of them are in high places, or at least, married to high places.

If she had wanted it, she would have gotten the scuttlebutt. All of the scuttlebutt. And as Tim thinks about last night, and her asking about where Abby was, he’s sure she’s got the scuttlebutt about what happened, all of it, at the tech conference.

As he thinks about it, by now, she’s likely got the scuttlebutt about what happened on the Stennis, too.

Though, in that case, scuttlebutt was likely to have been a hell of a lot less accurate than it was about the Tech in Anti-Terror Commission.

Tori does wander over as he’s feeding Sean, and Abby and Jimmy are dancing. Good timing on her part, both of them have been radiating stay the fuck away vibes at her all night. He glances up at her from Sean. “You brought your friend to your sister’s wedding?” She’s watching Jimmy and Abby dance as she says that to Tim. He’s got the sense ‘friend’ isn’t her first choice of words to describe Jimmy.
“My sister invited my family to her wedding. I happily brought them. I just wish Breena had been feeling up to coming, too.”

Tori thinks about that for a moment. She nods slowly. “Only some of it. Gibbs isn’t here.”

“He and Abbi have Kelly, Molly, and Anna tonight.”

Tori nods at that. “Penny’s mentioned all of them.”

“They’re her family. I’d think she would.”

“She’s mentioned that Sean’s deaf.” She’s looking at the tiny boy snuggled into the crook of Tim’s arm, wide blue eyes looking around as he slurps down a bottle of Abby’s best vintage. Looking like she wants to stroke his head, hold him close, smell his sweet baby scent. Tim scoots back from her, arm tightening around Sean, unconsciously protecting his child, and she winces.

“Yes. Week after next we go to the first appointment with the pediatric audiologist.”

“Oh. I’m… sorry. But they can… fix that, right?”

Tim takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly, and then does it again. He’s gotten versions of this before. It’s not judgmental, just a matter of not knowing how to ask the question. “He’s not broken, Mom. He’s different. They can’t make his ears work. At least, that’s unlikely. We won’t know for sure until we meet up with the Doc. Our pediatrician thinks he’s a candidate for cochlear implants, and, if he is, and if that’s the best route to take, he’ll get them. But, odds are he won’t ‘hear,’ not the way we do. The implant turns sounds into electrical impulses that’ll go into his brain and let him experience aural stimulation. He should be able to learn how to talk fairly normally. He’ll ‘hear’ enough to allow him to make sounds that are fairly normal. He’ll, hopefully, be able to catch something like eight words in ten with the implants. Abby and I both sign, and so does Gibbs, and the rest of the family is learning, too. We’ll make sure he can get those last two words easily.” Tim’s had way more experience explaining this plan than he wanted to. “He’ll grow up able to navigate hearing spaces easily, but also able to immerse himself in Deaf culture if he wants to.”

Tori’s staring at Sean, who’s still happily nursing away. “Is the surgery dangerous?”

Tim shrugs. He hates thinking about that. “More than getting tubes put in, less than open heart surgery. They’re going to put little electronic devices in his head. It’s not a walk in the park.”

Tori nods, and Tim can feel her thinking. “It’s dangerous, and hard, and he’s not going to like it. He’s going to cry and scream and you’ll feel terrible about it. But you do it because it gives him the best shot at a successful life. But she doesn’t say it.

That doesn’t stop him from saying, “It’s not the same thing, Mom.”

She shrugs.

“You’re making the point that I’m doing something he won’t like for his own good. That that’s the heart of being a parent. You make the best decision you can, and you hope like hell it works out.”

“Exactly.”

Tim shakes his head. “Whatever lets you sleep at night.” He stands up and walks away.
There’s a song that Tim remembers liking, way back when, as a teen, and he can’t for the life of him remember the name or the artist, or, even, really, what it sounded like, but the lyrics are floating around his head, “I’m learning to live without you now. Though I miss you sometimes. The more I know, the less I understand. All the things I thought I knew, I'm learning again. I've been trying to get down to the heart of the matter. And the will gets weak. And my thoughts seem to scatter. But I think it’s about forgiveness, even if, you don’t love me anymore.”

He’s dancing with Abby, but keeps looking over to his mom.

“You okay?”

Tim shrugs.

“Want to leave?”

“Not yet.”

She stares at him, eyes searching his. He flashes a quick, somewhat limp-looking smile. She nods at that. They can all feel he’s very confused right now, a lot of emotions he’s not really sure where they all go together and how they’ll all shake out.

She gives him a kiss. “We’ll stay as long as you like.”

He nods, and kisses her back, and then she rests her head on his shoulder.

A song later, the music shifts, faster, happier, and they’re still dancing. Her hand trails down his chest, lightly brushing against his belt. “Want to…”

He smiles a little and shake his head. Too many things buzzing in his head for him to get into sex mode.

She kisses him again. “I was hoping to take your mind off of it.”

“I think my mind’s supposed to be on it, right now.”

“Okay.”

He and Jimmy have been taking turns dancing with Abby.

And, yes there is a practical reason for that, someone should be with Sean. But, it’s not like the three of them are the only family Sean has here. His great-grandparents are also here, and both of them have been known to be willing to keep an eye on a sleeping infant for five for six minutes at a time if asked nicely.

Hell, if asked really nicely, they’ve even been known to change the occasional diaper. So, getting a dance or two in shouldn’t be an issue.

Tim's got Sean right now, and he’s watching Jimmy dance with Abby, and thinking about how, at every wedding they’ve been to since his own, the three/four of them have danced together.

He remembers standing in front of the mirror before Jimmy and Breena’s wedding, putting on his tie,
thinking about how he and Abby would have acted if they hadn’t been sleeping together, versus how
they’d act now that they were, and figuring out where to draw the line so they didn’t end up
ricoeheting from suspicious because of too much affection to suspicious because of too little.

They danced as a foursome at Tony and Ziva’s wedding, and at Senior and Delphine’s. Because
they weren’t fooling around then, they weren’t worried about how people would see it.

Eh… that’s not all of it. He didn’t stand up in public and admit to fucking men before that.

*That.* That’s the glowing neon line which makes it so he can’t play with Jimmy in public. Not
without causing trouble.

He feels someone standing next to him before he sees her.

“Hi, Mom.”

She’s watching Jimmy and Abby very intently. Then she turns to Tim. “So, your sister invited your
*family* to her wedding.”

Tim nods.

“But not Gibbs, and not Tony and Ziva.”

“Nope.”

She scans the room, and there is a trio on the dance floor. Two girls and a guy, all of them dancing
together. Having a blast from the looks of it. Sarah introduced them, but Tim’s blanking on the
names, other than the girl is one of Sarah’s writers. He knows there’s another quad around here
somewhere, but he’s doesn’t see them.

“You want to be out there with them.”

Tim nods at that, too. Sean stirs a bit, shifting against his shoulder, making a small chirpy noise
before settling into deeper sleep. He kisses his son’s head. “Yeah, I do. But shooting down the
Admiral means I can’t do that anymore.”

“Why not?” He can see she’s genuinely curious about this.

“Slater and Palmer’s, Breena’s mortuary, is a closely held family business. Most of their customers
are devout something or others, and besides Wiccans, there aren’t any devout something or others
that think what we’re doing is cool. Jimmy can dance with Abby, and they’re just being friendly. He
can’t go dancing with me. That’s *not* friendly. And the three of us together might get the wrong
tongues wagging, especially after this winter. So many people here, and we don’t know a tenth of
them. So, no, we won’t risk it. Gibbs’ wedding, that’ll be closed, family and friends only, we’ll get to
be out there.”

Tori nods, watching Jimmy and Abby dance. They look good together. But they would. They’ve
been dancing together for years, and this is easy music. They’re talking, and Jimmy’s said something
funny, from the way Abby’s laughing.

“*He’s* as much yours as hers?” she asks, eyes on Jimmy and Abby.

Tim nods at that, too. “All four ways. I belong to all three of them, and they’re mine, and all the other
variations you can think of.”
“Okay.”

He glances away from his wife and husband to look at his mother. “Okay?”

“Okay,” she says with a tiny nod.

“How?”

She shrugs. “What would be the point in not being okay? I see you for an hour twice a lifetime, so… Why not?”

Tim inclines his head at that. But that doesn’t feel like all of it. He’s been an investigator for too long to not see the tells. “Go ahead, say the rest of it.”

“I doubt there’s much point to it.”

“Maybe not. But you’re thinking it. You want to say it. I can feel that, see it. So, might as well say it. Not like things are going to get any more awkward.”

A sad half smile lifts one corner of her lip. “I wonder sometimes, how much happier we all would have been if your father could have done that. Could have admitted what he wanted, and gone and got it.”

Tim parses that for a moment, and decides she’s probably onto something. From his vantage as a child, it seemed like The Admiral had everything he wanted. But as an adult, an adult who has everything he wants, or is as close as anyone gets, he knows that content, happy people don’t act like The Admiral.

“You think The Admiral wanted… a man… a trio…”

“A man? Men? Maybe.” Again, Tori shrugs. She never got the sense that sex, or love, or relationships were really John’s thing. “Whatever it was, it wasn’t me, and it wasn’t you, and even being The Admiral didn’t really do it. The hole was always there.”

“Yeah.” Tim sighs at that. He’s not sure there was anything The Admiral wanted that ever could have filled that hole. “When we were in Texas, before Abby and I got married, I meant it, even… with everything else between us… you deserved to be important.”

“So did you. And you deserve to be loved,” her eyes flick away from him to Jimmy and Abby, “for who and what you are.”

He nods, briefly, at that, feeling his eyes fill. Tim bites his lip, hard, and says, “Thanks.”

“I love you, Tim. And it doesn’t end, or stop, or go away. I always have, and I always will.” She eyes the way he’s holding Sean, and he understands the message of that look. “And you’re angry. And that’s okay. You’re allowed to be angry about what we… I… did to you.”

He blinks, hard, nods once, and steps away, heading to the dance floor to cut in on Jimmy and Abby, because right now, he really needs a hug.

Tim’s holding Sean and Abby close, and Jimmy makes a quick executive decision. He doesn’t move back or away, he stays close, his one hand on Tim’s back, other hand on Abby’s.
“Are you…” Abby starts to ask, and Tim shakes his head. He just needs to be wrapped in his loves right now.

She kisses him gently, and accepts his silence.

Jimmy scans the room, looking for Tori, but he doesn’t see her. He does see Penny, but she’s talking with Ducky and a few other people he doesn’t know, so no help there.

“Should…” Jimmy starts, and Tim grabs the hand against his back, and holds it there, non-verbally letting Jimmy know not to go hunt down his mom.

Tim’s breathing deep and slow, getting himself under control. Abby’s holding onto him, petting the back of his neck.

The first blow up with his mom, back the night before Kelly’s christening, felt like draining a putrid wound. Letting the poisons latch out. It hurt, sick hurt, infected, festering hurt. And letting that out didn’t make anything magically better, it just left him in a position where he could start healing.

This feels like rehab hurt. The burning, ripping ache of loosening bound muscles and joints.

If the first confrontation got him to the point where he could start healing, this is the first step in actually doing it.

Tim’s aware, as his forehead rests on Abby’s shoulder, and she pets his neck, and Jimmy’s hand anchors him on his back, that the ball is entirely in his court now. Whatever happens next is up to him, and no one else.

He’s in a contemplative mood as his sister and Glenn cut the cake. His arm is around Abby’s waist, as she holds Sean, who is awake and watching as eagerly as a ten-week-old can. Jimmy’s next to Abby, looking like he’s got his arms crossed across his stomach, but that gives him cover to have his hand stroking Tim’s.

The first time he fought with his mom about this, he remembers saying, “You were making me hard enough to live your life.” That night, he shut that train of thought down, fast, knowing it was a way to restructure things and protect her from responsibility, but now he feels ready to look at that, again.

She was so alone for so much of it. The Admiral wasn’t on land for more than a few months at a time, and best Tim remembers he didn’t spend much time at home if he was on land. They moved every two years, and most of those years predated the internet and free long distance calling. All she had of her parents, and Penny, back in those days, were letters.

And who knew how much she would have been willing to put in a letter.

Move every two years, who knows what she had in the way of real, close, blood friends. Contacts, buddies, ladies who would watch him for a few hours and let her get out of the house, other Navy wives, sure, but friends? Friends like Tony and Abbi… People she could show up at their home in three in the morning and ask for help hiding a body, and they’d do it, no questions asked… Those kinds of friends?

Just her, and this kid, and the ghost of a husband who her whole life was supposed to be dedicated to supporting. Tim doesn’t know what John and Tori’s marriage was like, not from the inside, but he knows what the Catholic pre-marital counseling they went through was like, and it was heavy on
work everything out as well as you can, along with a lot of help on how to get things worked out, but there was always the underlying foundation: if you can’t work it out, Hubby wins.

He can’t imagine The Admiral was good with that sort of power. Can’t imagine he ever attempted to work anything out.

Tim kisses his wife. He strokes Jimmy’s hand with his. He wishes he could touch Breena right now.

He got married as an adult. A fully secular adult with no overhanging belief structure in place telling him he had to do whatever this person he hooked himself up to wanted or else he’d face eternal perdition. His mom got married in 1974. She was twenty-three years old, star-eyed in love with a guy she didn’t really know, raised in her very Catholic parents’ home, a home that took things like ‘The husband is the head of the house’ seriously.

A house that believed in sin. A house that prepared her to be a ‘good wife.’

A house that believed in shame. And a divorce… That was sin and shame.

Another level of their marriage, and the end of it, hits Tim. Divorce wasn’t just sin and shame, it was sin and shame and poverty. The Admiral’s wife couldn’t have a job of her own. Oh No! That wasn’t done. Which meant the Admiral’s wife didn’t have any money of her own, either.

As a kid, money wasn’t a thing. Not really. He knows The Admiral always groused about three meals a day, a roof over their heads, and the best education money could buy, but he never got the sense they were poor, or even close. He got the sense The Admiral was making sure everyone knew who was making the money that paid for those things.

He, like his sister, got an envelope with a certain amount of money in it each month, and that was his allowance. As a kid, it was pocket money, something to get candy or toys with. Once he was fourteen, it was supposed to cover books, clothing, his lunch at school, any extracurricular activities he was part of, and whatever ‘fun’ stuff he might want. When he was sixteen gas and car insurance were supposed to come out of that, too. It was his job to save and budget that money, so that at the end of the month, he could still buy himself lunch.

When he had jobs, he gave the money to his parents, and they upped his monthly allowance accordingly, and put half of what he earned of it aside for college. But that money didn’t go into an account in his name, and when he started talking about going anywhere other than Annapolis, The Admiral made it clear that he wouldn’t have access to a penny of the money he earned that they’d been ‘saving’ for him.

He wonders if his mom was on the same system. He knows she didn’t pay for things with a credit card. He doesn’t remember ever seeing her paying the monthly bills. He wonders if she got an envelope, too, and if however much cash was in that envelope was all the money she had.

He wonders how tightly The Admiral was holding onto her. He wonders how much she had to be willing to bear to break free.

He cuddles in closer to his loves, thinking about what he’s done since he’s been adored. He tries to imagine where he’d be if he was on his own, or, worse, stuck with The Admiral, for decades at a time.

He wonders, in that case, if he’d have had the strength to fight, to get his kids out.

He likes to think he would have.
But he doesn’t know.

Seventeen bad years.

Twenty good ones.

He broke free over Christmas break of his senior year of high school. Less than twenty-four hours after his graduation, he was on a plane heading east.

His mom and sister went to his graduation. The Admiral didn’t. There wasn’t any graduation party at their house, so Tim got his picture taken with his mom and sister, and he got hugged and congratulated, and then he got permission to stay out all night. (His usual curfew was 1:00.)

So, he went to a bunch of other kids’ graduation parties, slept on his best friend’s sofa that night, and didn’t go home until noon, when he stopped back just long enough to say goodbye to his sister, grab his suitcase and ticket, and then he was in a cab heading for the plane that would take him east.

The Admiral went back to sea in August.

His mom moved back in with her parents that August, too. Set Sarah up to go to school up there. At the time, she told him she was helping Gran out with Pop. He wonders if that’s what she told The Admiral, too.

Just helping out her mom with her dad.

The divorce was final by the time he finished his freshman year.

He wonders idly, watching Tori across the room, if seeing him break free motivated her.

He knows that once she got free of the Admiral, he never had any reason to complain about her as a mom.

The night is wearing on, and they’re almost ready to go when Tim gets a quiet moment with Penny.

“You’ve been thinking about her, a lot,” she says.

“Yeah. That obvious?”

She nods. “You’ve got something you want to ask me, too.”

He nods at that, too. “Yeah. You’ve said before you told her to leave him. When was that?”

Penny sighs. “Oh, Lord… Uh… Before Sarah was born. After, too. First time was before he hit Captain.”

“And if she had wanted to run, you would have given her a safe place to land, right?”

“You’re not going to argue with me.”

Of course! We, Nelson and I, love Tori. And we didn’t think she was a good match for John. We didn’t think she was ever going to be a good match for him. Not because she wasn’t a good person or wasn’t willing to go the extra mile, she put up with a lot of crap from him. They just didn’t line up
well.”

“She knew you thought that?”

“We told her. Nelson told her. I told her. There was a pretty rough patch about a year before Sarah, right when John was making the leap to Captain, and he was going full bore on everything had to be perfect in all ways at all times…”

Tim thinks back, and he sort of remembers that, but it’s vague. Of course, if it was the year before Sarah was born, it was back when he was still young enough that he was willing to do pretty much anything anyone asked him to, often with a smile.

“She had an out; she just didn’t take it.”

Penny shrugs. “She had an out, literally. But it was the ‘80s, and staying together for the kids was still considered the best thing you could do for your kids. The idea was splitting up would mess them up for life. Between that and the church… And her parents…”

He stands there and digests that.

“Does it help?” Penny asks.

He shrugs. “It’s context. You guys heading home soon?”

Penny nods. “Yeah, we’ll see them off and then get ready for the drive.”

He kisses her cheek. “I think I’m going to find Sarah, say goodnight, and get us on the way.”

Penny hugs her grandson. “Okay. We’ll see you at the house in an hour or so.”

On the drive home, he says, “Thinking about forgiveness. And… I think I can see how it looks, now, even if I can’t feel it, yet.” And, as much as everything else is upside down and confused, he knows that about himself. He is angry, and he’s not ready to let that go, not yet. But… he feels like there might be a time when he could let it go.

“How’s it look?” Jimmy asks.

“Like she did the best she could with the hand she had, and it wasn’t good, and it wasn’t enough, but it wasn’t malice, either. It wasn’t him. She didn’t set out to hurt me, she just… did.”

“You think you’ll ever feel it?” Abby asks.

“I don’t know. I can identify it, at least. That’s a start, right?” A half smile lifts one corner of his mouth.

“Probably,” she says.

They drive in quiet for another moment. “You ever forgive the man who killed your parents?”

Abby shrugs. “Not consciously, not intentionally, but… enough time passed and I don’t hate him anymore. I don’t rage about it. Not planning elaborate, or even boring murder schemes anymore. It just… happened.” She’s quiet for a moment. “I don’t know if that’s forgiveness or not. I never consciously decided to be ‘okay’ with him…” She keeps thinking. “I’m not okay with him. I’m okay
Tim squeezes her hand. Jimmy’s in the backseat, and he leans up to pet her face.

Tim’s hoping, eventually, that’s how he’ll feel about the Admiral, too. They drive in silence for a few more minutes, before Abby asks, “If you ever can feel it, then what?”

Tim shakes his head. “I don’t know.” Tim’s not eager to even attempt to untangle his mom and Abby, or his mom and Jimmy, or his mom and Gibbs, and all the other complications that go with attempting to deal with those relationships. “Let’s give it more time and see if I can ever feel it.”

Abby smiles at him, just a little one. “You will. Sooner or later. That’s part of who you are. You forgive, everyone, sooner or later.”

Tim sighs. “Maybe. Or maybe it just looks that way because most of what I deal with doesn’t even get to a one on the ‘shit I’ve been through’ meter.”

Abby squeezes his hand this time. “Maybe. Do you want to forgive her?”

“That’s okay,” Jimmy says. “You don’t have to.”

They’re quiet for another long moment before Jimmy says, “I still haven’t forgiven my Dad. I love him. Always will. But the son-of-a-bitch wouldn’t take care of himself for us. Eat better, exercise more, lose weight, keep track of his damn blood sugar. It’s... I’m not going to say it’s easy, but, he didn’t have to die at forty-eight.

“We loved him, and he left us. I’m still pissed about that. He missed my graduation, and didn’t see me get my MD, or my wedding. He never met his grand kids and you guys. He didn’t get to see Clark and I be men... And Mom... I like my step-dad, but, he’s not Dad.” Jimmy strokes Abby’s cheek. She reaches back to hold his hand, and kisses his palm. “Maybe I’m not okay enough with me for there not to be any room for not being okay with him. I don’t know. Usually I feel pretty okay with me. But it’s there, every day. Every time I check my sugar, when I weigh myself every morning, when the desserts are sitting there looking yummy, that memory of standing there with my mom and Clark, arm around her as they dropped his coffin in the ground, it’s there, keeping me going.

“I’m going to see forty-eight, and forty-nine, and a lot more after that. And I don’t think you need to forgive anything a second sooner than you want to, especially if you’re doing something useful with it.”

Tim wishes he wasn’t in the middle of a highway, because he’d like to do more than reach back blindly and squeeze Jimmy’s hand.

He wonders though, as he’s driving, if he’s doing anything useful with this, if there is anything good that could come out of it.

Sean chirps. There is that. He’s going to be a vastly better parent than the parents he had.

Somehow though, he doesn’t think he needs a lot of anger to keep him moving in that direction.

Chapter End Notes
The song Tim's thinking about is by Don Henley, and it's called The Heart of the Matter.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSLNYZ5rIEM
Dr. Snyder

The ten days between Sarah’s wedding and Sean’s first appointment with Dr. Snyder go skittering by without much notice.

Crime, computers, babies, family time, a huge heaping pile of Normal for Clan Gibbs.

Tim supposes, sitting in the waiting room with Sean, Abby, and Gibbs, that this is part of his new normal.

Unless by some miracle of the MRI, they found some sort of little issue that could be cured with some surgery, they’re going to be here, a lot.

And from the research they’ve done, miracles of MRIs, that find an easily fixed problem are more or less non-existent.

Tim is also glad, that part of his new normal is life out of the field. Right now, Tony’s on day five of a serial murder case. The bodies are piling up, and he and Jimmy have been working full out for almost a week now, with no breaks in the case.

And if Tim were still a field agent, or if Abby didn’t have three other lab techs, Gibbs might have been here, on his own, with Sean.

But he’s not, because neither of them have to be on the case right now.

No, right now, the three of them are in a waiting room. This is a pediatric audiologist, so the room is bright, there are a lot of toys and kids’ magazines, across from them there’s a collection of little chairs and a few large wooden puzzle blocks. It’s not silent, but there is less talking than Tim expects in a waiting room. There are several kids, the oldest one looks to be five, Sean’s likely the youngest one, and the kids are either stone silent, or way too loud.

A little girl, who’s probably four, comes over to look at Sean. She stares at him in his little green onesie and tan pants, and says, in a very loud voice, “IS IT A BOY OR GIRL?”

Abby starts to sign back that Sean’s a boy, but the girl looks blankly at that, obviously not able to understand signing herself.

“Oh, HIS NAME IS SEAN,” Tim says back, also very loud.

“Oh, HE’S CUTE!”

“Oh, THANK YOU!” Abby replies.

The nurse heads in, and calls a name. The little girl either didn’t hear it, or was paying too much attention to Sean to notice, but her mother comes over, gently taps her on the shoulder, and then points to the door. The girl nods and waves goodbye to them.

One of the parents near them was watching that, and asks Abby, “You already sign?”

Abby nods; she’s been offering variations on this for a while now. “Yes. My parents were deaf. I’ve been signing my whole life.”
“Oh. I was going to ask if it was hard to learn.”

Tim takes over. “I learned as an adult. It’s not simple, but it’s not impossible, either. Set an hour or so a night for it, and,” he scans the room, and then nods to the eighteen-month-old looking baby with the same bright red curls as the woman speaking to them, who’s whacking at the sliding bead toy in the middle of the waiting area, “as you teach her, you learn it, too.”

The mom sighs. “Kind of hoping I won’t have to learn, and she won’t either. I want her to be able to speak normally.”

“Learning to sign is about you being able to talk to her. Learning to speak is about her being able to talk to hearing people. If she’s anything like my parents, she’ll use, and need, both.”

That doesn’t appear to please the Mom. She watches her daughter play, and looks at Sean, who’s kicking his little feet and watching the room.

“You mind if I ask what they did?”

“No. I like talking about my parents. They ran a salvage yard. Mostly old dead cars. When a cool one would come in, Papa would snag it for himself and rebuild it. Some they’d keep. Some they sold. Mama ran the books and made sure the business end was taken care of. Papa took care of the stock, paid for things people left, sold parts people wanted.”

“They dealt with people who could hear, then?”

“Yes. Customers every day. My brother and I hear, too. They were good lip readers, but for details they made sure things were written down. A lot of sounds look awfully similar when you’re talking. And you don’t want to think you made a deal for fifteen dollars and the seller thinks he’s getting fifty. They could both talk, and most people could follow them, but it was clear from their speech they couldn’t hear. They’d sign with each other, and with us. It didn’t stop them from doing anything they wanted to do.”

“Dance, sing?” she asks watching her daughter.

“They didn’t sing. They did dance. We usually had music on in the shop. Loud enough to rattle the windows. They liked the feel of it.”

Tim’s not sure if the Mom finds that comforting, but she seems interested.

“We don’t have any deaf people in our family. Mandy was born hearing. When she was ten months old, some…” she’s very clearly editing herself, “members of our church came back from mission with mumps. Three of the kids got sick. And when she was better, Mandy couldn’t hear anymore.”

Tim, Abby, and Gibbs wince at that. “I’m sorry,” Abby says.

“Yeah, well… It took a while to catch it. She was so sick, and for so long we were focused on that, making sure she could breathe and there wasn’t permanent lung damage. When it got really bad, she didn’t breathe for three full minutes, and at first we’re just on our knees thanking God she was still alive, but after that… Did she have brain damage? That’s hard to tell in a baby, but finally, she’s laughing and playing and she’s a year old, but she’s not talking or repeating sounds or babbling. But, okay, she’s had a rough time, give it a bit longer. Another few months, and she’s still not making much noise. We mention it to the pediatrician, and he checks her hearing, and it’s gone.”

“I’m really sorry,” Abby says.
“Yeah. Well…” Those two words cover a lot of anger, and a lot of frustration, and a lot of feelings of hopelessness. Tim’s glad that they aren’t in that emotional space. “They say Dr. Snyder is really good.”

“That’s why we’re here, too,” Tim says, not sure what to do with this lady’s story, other than get down on his knees and thank the God he rarely believes in that none of his babies have run into some idiot with a contagious disease and no understanding of how vaccines work.

“Mandy Barnes…” The nurse says. The Mom looks up, and nods at the nurse. “Off we go.” She heads over to her daughter, picks her up, and back they go.

They wait for another six minutes before a nurse calls out, “Sean McGee…” She’s perky and pleasant and coos over Sean while getting his weight and length. (Eight pounds six ounces, twenty-one and a half inches long. Little guy is growing like a weed. Little guy is also not happy about being stripped out of his clothing, handled by a stranger, or put on a scale. He complains, vigorously, about this, and doesn’t start to calm down again until Abby’s got him back in his diaper and onesie.)

Then she takes them to an examination room, and lets the know Snyder would be in soon.

This feels familiar to Tim. They’ve done this over and over and over with all of Sean and Kelly’s baby checkups. Abby hoists herself up onto the exam table (another sign of things going back to normal post-Sean. This time last month Abby’s abs would not have gone along with that.), and Tim hands her Sean. He and Gibbs take the chairs, and they wait.

Not too long. The nurse wasn’t kidding about Snyder being in soon.

There were things that they expected Snyder to be. Male. Older than Tim and Abby. (He’s probably fifty-ish.) White. (Though, when Tim realizes that’s part of what he was expecting, he’s irked by it.) Wearing a nice button down, slacks, and a lab coat. Check. One of those things (Jimmy would know what its name is.) for looking in a kid’s ears or nose, in his pocket. That’s part of Tim’s mental image of Doctor.

And then there was the thing they weren’t expecting. Hearing aids. Bright blue ones, with a little Captain America shield on them.

For a second, while Snyder is introducing himself, shaking hands, giving Sean a little pet, Tim’s staring at them. He can feel Abby’s dumbstruck, too, but she gathers herself quickly.

“You sign?” Abby finishes the sentence with her fingers.

“I learned so I could talk to her without other people listening in. I was a cop, she runs the forensics lab, and we were thinking our kids didn’t need to be hearing conversations along the lines of ‘Guess where I found the victim’s spleen?’”

Snyder seems to think that’s a fine reason to learn how to sign.
Abby takes over. She looks over to Gibbs, but like with his tongue, his fingers don’t leap into action. *His grandfather signs, too. And most of the rest of the family is learning, too. So… this or “shall we talk?”*

Snyder smiles. “I actually prefer to talk. Between the hearing aids and lip reading, I’m faster with speech and follow it better.”

“Oh.” Tim says. “We’ve been reading and…”

“And you’ve read about Deaf people missing words.” Snyder nods. “I have fifty percent of my natural hearing on the right side, and seventy percent on the left. Apparently they weren’t kidding about listening to high volume music for extended time with ear buds being bad for you.” Tim shoots a glance to Abby. She rolls her eyes a bit. Listening to loud music in a room isn’t quite the same thing as ear buds. “It’s true that I don’t catch everything said to me, and if you turn away when we’re having a conversation, my ability to follow it is going to drop, but not that badly. For me, all I need is someone to turn up the volume on the world, and I’m good.”

There’s a pause, and then Tim says, “But from what we’ve been told, Sean isn’t.”

Snyder nods at that. He puts Sean’s file on the table next to him and Abby and flips it open. “I’ve gotten Sean’s test results, and he is profoundly deaf.”

“What does that mean?” Abby says. “I mean, yes, he can’t hear, but…”

“Oh, back to basics. There’s sensorineural deafness, and there’s conductive deafness. Sean has a combination of the two. He’s got 100% loss on the right side, because in addition to neurological issues, the little hair cells deep in his ear not taking all the sounds to his brain, the bones in his ear are fused solid. He’s got a 95% loss on the left because the bones are almost fused, and the nerves aren’t sending messages to his brain the way they should.”

Tim and Abby look at each other, and then at Sean. Abby licks her lips and then says, “So, does that mean there’s nothing we can do?”

“No. It means that I’m not going to suggest trying hearing aids. Sean isn’t in a situation where turning up the volume will help. I could grab an air horn and blast it off an inch from his head, and he won’t twitch. It also means, that I won’t suggest trying to surgically correct the bone formation. If we got them freed up on the left side, that could improve his hearing, but with no hearing at all on the right side, and the sensorineural issues, that’s a lot of pain to get him to twenty or thirty percent on the left, which isn’t going to do all that much.”

“Cochlear implants?” Tim asks.

“That’s going to be the question. You realize they aren’t a magic bullet. We don’t do this and he’s suddenly got perfect hearing.”

They both nod. “We’ve read up on all of this.”

“It’s possible that even with implants, his best side will have fifty percent hearing.”

“By possible do you mean likely or worst case scenario?” Abby asks.

“Worst case scenario is they don’t work at all. Fifty percent on one side is the worst of the likely outcomes.”

“What’s the best of the likely outcomes?” Tim asks.
“About where I am without my hearing aids. Say sixty percent on one side, eighty on the other. He will absolutely need to learn to lip read because unless the technology keeps leaping forward, he won’t ever hear well enough to catch everything. Having a family that signs will be important for him, too.”

For a moment, Tim and Abby digest that. Snyder lets them. Then he says, “It would not be unreasonable for you to decide there’s not enough benefit to make going ahead with the surgery worth it. Not now. Not with how the technology currently works. It would not be unreasonable to go ahead, either. Assuming they work, at all, he will have an easier time learning to speak. Lip reading, if you can make out any of the sounds the person you’re reading is making, is much easier.

“But this isn’t a walk in the park. This is major surgery. And if you want to wait, you can. If you want to focus on signing and lip reading I will happily get you in contact with some of the best speech therapists in this area to help him learn to speak without hearing.”

Tim and Abby both nod, and Gibbs is the one who says, “If we do do this, when would you suggest?”

“The sooner he can hear, the sooner he starts to develop an idea of sounds and how they work. The American Academy of Pediatrics has cleared infants down to a year for the surgery, and most of the surgeons I know who do the surgery are willing to go anytime after six months. Assuming he’s generally healthy, and I’ll confab with his pediatrician on this before setting a time frame, I’d say between six and nine months is when I like to do this.”

“The articles say you don’t just pop them in and suddenly he hears,” Abby says.

“That’s true. We put them in, we give him time to heal up, and then we’ll turn them on. Because he’s so young, he won’t remember learning how to hear, but he won’t have immediate context for what’s happening. There’ll suddenly be this huge, new ton of stimulus. You’ve seen the videos of the babies who get the implant turned on and suddenly start to smile or laugh…” They all nod. “That’s true about half the time, the other half they cry because it’s scary to suddenly have all of this new stuff going on in their heads.”

“I was reading about people having to learn to hear and not doing well,” Tim says.

“Mostly older people. For you, sound has always been your primary form of communication. Sight came later. Reading came much later. Your name, the people around you, your ability to call someone to you has always been sound. But, if you’re a Deaf child or adult, that’s not how you learned to communicate. For us communication has always been a feeling. The vibration of voice, the stroke of touch, and then sight. So, there’s no automatic this sound equals this word. That is a learned skill.

“Mom and” he switches to signing, mom “aren’t connected in a deaf mind. It’d be like expecting someone to suddenly be fluent in French just because you dropped them in Paris. That’s one of the reasons why we like working with babies, they’ll learn sounds and words together. And maybe they won’t have the whole range of sounds, but they’ll at least have,” and this time he signs and speaks at the same time mom, “Mom, as one unit.”

“Except you’re not sure that Sean will ever be able, even with the implants, to put that together,” Gibbs says.

“That’s the worst case scenario. I’ve done this more than fifty times a year for the last five years, and as of this point I haven’t met anyone who didn’t have some level of improvement from the implants. I don’t expect Sean will be any different. What I don’t know is if you’ll think the level of
improvement is worth the risk.”

“How much risk?” Tim asks, nervous.

“It’s a range. There’s a 100% certainty that he will be mad, sore, crabby, and unhappy with you for at least a few days after we do the surgery. His head will hurt, and he will feel upside down and sick from the anesthesia and pain meds. You and he will be in for days of what feels like the worst week of teething mixed with a tummy bug and an ear infection while he’s healing up. That’s certain. Less certain, he might end up with an infection. Most of the time, that infection would be redness, swelling, and more unhappy-baby-time as we give him antibiotics to kill that off. Very unlikely, that infection could spread into his skull or brain. Extremely unlikely, he could be allergic to anesthesia, and that would be bad. There is a lower than 1/100 of 1% chance that he might die.”

That gets a lot of quiet thought.

“Let me add this to put it into perspective. Giving birth to Sean was more dangerous, for you,” he looks at Abby, “and him, than this will be. I have pamphlets that spell everything out, that give you the risks, and my own statistics on my patients. You get to see my batting average, so to speak.

“Any more questions?”

They all look at each other.

“It’s silly, but… Are we talking one implant or two?” Abby asks. “Most of what we’ve read doesn’t actually say.”

“Because that’s a personal thing. You can do one. You can do two. We’re designed to hear on both sides, and two would give Sean the best shot of enjoying everything that goes with hearing. He’ll have a much easier time figuring out where sounds are coming from, and it’ll be much easier for him to focus in on one sound, say a voice, if he’s in a noisy location. But he doesn’t have to have two. Two means more surgery, it means longer healing up, more risk, so a lot of people go with one, because one provides at least some level of improvement.”

“Can we try hearing aids?” Tim asks. “All of the reading we did…”

“Said that’s step one. We can. If you like, I can get one of the nurses in here, and we can make a cast of his ear to get started on that. I’m not recommending it because I don’t think it will work, and it’s expensive. The surgery isn’t cheap, and I’m thinking you don’t want add more expense, possibly several thousand dollars, depending on your insurance, on a device that’s extremely unlikely to do anything for him.”

“What if it’s not expensive?” Gibbs asks. “Federal employees, they’ve got health insurance that covers everything.”

The Doc shrugs. “Sure. All you’re out then is time, so… Shall I call one of the nurses?”

“You said cast of his ear, singular.” Tim adds.

“There’s no point on doing it on the right side. With the hundred percent loss on that side, it doesn’t matter how loud we make things, he can’t get it. That gives you another potential option. Hearing aid on side A, implant on side B.”

“Assuming the hearing aid makes a difference,” Gibbs says.

“Assuming.”
They all glance around. “How long would it take to make a hearing aid?” Tim asks.

“A few weeks. We’d do the cast today, and then send it off, and then the hearing aid guys make one for him. Then we fit it for him, we program it, and we see if it helps.”

“Can we do the cast, go home, talk more, and then have you send it off after we’ve made a decision?” Abby asks.

“Sure, we can do that. We’ll do everything we can to work with you on this. There isn’t one ‘right’ answer. There are a lot of different options, and they all have different pros and cons.” He gently taps his hearing aid. “This is what works best for me. What works best for Sean will be as unique as he is. And, likely, it’ll change a few times over the course of his life. By the time he’s an adult, cochlear implants may be radically different, or completely surpassed by new technology.” Dr. Snyder stands up. “Any more questions?”

They all shake their heads.

“Okay. I’ll get Greta in here to do a cast, and then you’ll go home, talk with each other, read more, and then give me a call when you know what you want to do.”

Sean does not appear to enjoy having blue goo smooshed into his ear. If a three month old can be irked, he’s irked. But, he’s also not angry or scared. He isn’t crying, though his little blond eyebrows are knitted together, and he keeps trying to turn his head to see what’s going on.

It takes a few minutes for the goo to set up, and then the nurse gently removes it.

In her hand is a tiny blue cast of Sean’s ear. “The only question is, what do you want this to look like? Do you want it plain, skin color and clear tubing, or we can do it bright blue, or black with little pirates on them, or Captain America, or whatever you like?”

“Little skulls?” Abby asks.

She thinks about that. “Other than a little jolly roger, I’ve never seen a skull, but, I can check.”

Abby shakes her head. “Nah. Not now. Skin colored and clear is fine. He’ll grow out of them fast, right?”

“We have to resize them every three months for these little guys. Sometimes faster when they hit a quick growth spurt.”

On the car ride home there’s a sense of now what?

That pretty much wraps it up. It’s decision time.

Sean’s not going to get any less deaf while they dither about this, so…

“Hearing aid on the one side, see if it helps, and if it does go with that and the implant on the other?” Abby says tentatively.

“We could see if he’d schedule surgery for the right, and while we wait for that, test out the hearing
aid, if it works, great, if it doesn’t, move to two implants,” Tim tries.

“If you do two implants, there’ll be no shot of ever getting his inner ear working on its own again,” Gibbs says, voicing the thought they’ve all had but didn’t want to focus too hard on. The implants destroy the cochlea nerve. Which means genetic therapies, trying to get the hair cells in Sean’s ear regrown, won’t work. At least, not given the current state of the technologies.

On his right ear, that doesn’t matter all that much. Between the bones and the sensorineural loss, even if they did manage to find a way to regrow the hair cells, he’d still be very deaf on that side. But on the other side, if those cells could be regrown, and those bones freed up, he might have something approaching normal ish, hearing on that side.


If the bones could be freed up enough to make a difference.

That’s a long time to be deaf on one side, especially if the hearing aid can’t get the world loud enough for him on that side.

“We should definitely test the hearing aid. He won’t do the surgery for at least three months, and we’re not paying for it out of pocket, so there’s no downside to it,” Tim says.

Abby nods along with that. They both glance back at Sean, who’s snoozing in his car seat.

Gibbs is sitting next to Sean, his big hand gently resting on Sean’s tummy. He smiles back at Tim and Abby. “Can’t wait to see you try to keep a hearing aid in an infant.”

Tim groans at that. Abby does, too. Neither of them are looking forward to trying to get a small, squirmy, very active person with no concept of ‘valuable,’ ‘expensive,’ ‘good for you,’ or ‘fragile’ to not destroy the all of the above tiny device they’re going to attempt to attach to him.

Abby looks back at Gibbs. “Other parents somehow manage to keep these things on their kids.”

Tim thinks as he pulls up to a stop light. “Maybe I’ll get the sewing machine out and make him some headbands. Make it so he can’t just whack it free when his little arms go flailing.”

Abby smiles at that, images of little headbands for Sean dancing in her mind. “When we get home, I’ll go looking for fabric.”

“Let’s make sure headbands won’t screw it up, first. He probably doesn’t want to spend all of his time listening to fabric rubbing against the microphone,” Gibbs adds.

That’s a good point.

They get home, and both Tim and Abby need to get back to work. Gibbs doesn’t, so he decides to stick around and play with the kiddos.

He and Kelly spend an hour building up block towers and knocking them down. According to Heather, Kelly’s got insane levels of focus for a toddler. Usually, if you can keep an under two-year-old on one thing for five minutes at a time, that’s impressive.

But Kelly, if it’s interesting to her, she can spend an hour or something.
And watching blocks fall down is interesting to Kelly. (She also loves watching flowing water. She can happily spend an hour sitting next to a fountain, watching it go.)

Talking is also interesting to Kelly. She’s not great at it. But she’s keeping a running commentary of mostly one word statements going about the falling blocks. “Fall! Down! BANG! Down!” And “Up Pop!” or “Stack” when she wants him to make the tower higher.

Not quite twenty-one months old. She doesn’t talk in sentences, but she absolutely knows a lot of words. She understands way more than she can say, (she signs more than she can say these days, too, but little baby ears hear and understand more than baby hands or lips can form) and she gets so frustrated when she wants or needs something and can’t explain it to the people around her.

If Gibbs had to guess, a good third of Kelly’s toddler tantrums have to do with her not being able to communicate something. The other two thirds come from getting her idea across (Resolved: I shall not get a bath) and her parents vetoing it.

He wonders though, as she’s sitting in his lap, how hard this would be if she couldn’t get everything people were trying to tell her…

Eh… Okay, not quite. Sean will grow up in a house that signs for him. He’ll get words the way Kelly does, just visually, but unlike Kelly, he won’t get them from anyone else.

Not that big of a deal right now. Probably 90% of the time Kelly’s with someone who’s part of the family or Heather. But she’s going to start pre-school soon. Come fall, she’ll start with the two-and-a-half-year-old class and have a few hours a day playing with other kids and adults and that’ll be really different for her.

He tries to imagine how different that will be for Sean. Even with all the interventions they’re talking about, he’ll basically be walking into a world of sounds, all of them muffled and indistinct. Yes, he’ll learn how to lip read, and put that with hopefully some sound…

But little kids like to run and play, and they don’t want to hold still so they can hold eye… eye to lip contact, while you talk to them. They like to look at the pictures of the book, while you read it to them, not look at you so they can hear the story. They don’t want to have to stop doing whatever it is they’re doing to focus on a conversation. They like to play while they talk. Kelly’s got no interest at all in stopping knocking the blocks down so she can sign her commentary on doing that. She doesn’t want to look away from the falling blocks so she can hear him talking back to her.

She wants to talk, and she wants to play, and she wants her Pop to keep talking to her, too while they do it.

And that’s the moment where being deaf goes from a vague concept to something concrete for Gibbs.

That even with the best they can do, this isn’t going to be a stubbed toe sort of thing. A lot of time and energy is going to have to be spent on making sure Sean can do the sorts of things other kids do.

Hopefully, the hearing aid will help. Hopefully, add that to an implant, and he’ll be able to hear a lot of what’s going on around him. Hopefully, it’ll be enough.

But Gibbs, who’s been a bit adrift lately, once again without a case or a cause, knows what he’s doing when he gets home. When he went undercover and learned how to sign and lip read, there were people there who specialized in helping deaf people live in a hearing world.

And right now, he wants to know everything about what they do.
Simple as a Seder

Most of the family had a fantasy of the perfect Christmas as a family all together at the house. And it’s not that Ziva didn’t have an ideal of that, too, but it wasn’t nearly as big of a deal for her as it was, for, say, Gibbs.

Which is not to say she doesn’t have a family holiday fantasy. She does. And it starts at sundown on Monday.

Passover.

That was the big family gathering they all got together for when she was a child. That’s where everyone caught up and sang and visited and celebrated. That was the night of wine and food and good feelings and togetherness.

And that’s what she wants for their first Passover in their new home.

------------------------

Step one on Fantasy Passover, is the same step one as any Passover. Clean.

Normally, cleaning wouldn’t be on the Sabbath, but she’s not sure how long it’ll take, and since they don’t live here fulltime, they’ve only got Saturday, Sunday, and a bit of Monday.

Fortunately, cleaning with nine adults is a fairly rapid endeavor. Yes, Breena’s not feeling up to much, so she’s bowing out on cleaning, but she, along with Mona, are keeping an eye on the kids as everyone else goes through their home with a fine tooth comb. Unfortunately, even going rapidly, it’s a big house.

And it doesn’t matter if you’ve got six people who can vacuum if there’s only one vacuum.

The same thing is true for window washing (only one squeegee), or dusting (only one dust mop).

Still, they’re powering through it, as rapidly as the tools they have will allow.

------------------------

Tim, as one of the two tallest members of the group, has half of the reaching overhead jobs. He and Tony are on making sure all of the ceiling fans have been dusted (top and bottom), the corners where the walls and ceilings meet have been swept, and the ceilings given a good going over with duster. Once that’s done, they’re supposed to be taking down all the curtains, and making sure they get a run through the washer and dryer, and then putting them back up.

High ceilings and lots of ceiling fans seems like a great idea when you’re planning out your house. They keep you cool, they cut down on the electric bill, especially in Jimmy and Breena’s room, they add to the soft, tropical feel.

They are, in pretty much every way, lovely.

Until you’re on ceiling fan five of seventeen and you feel like your arm, wrist, and ankle are about to fall off.
Tim gets off the stepladder, tossing his wet rag into the bucket, and gesturing to Tony, who’s got the dry rag, to head on up and dry off yet another fan.

“This isn’t kicking your butt, is it?”

Tony looks down from the fan to Tim with a *huh?* on his face.

Tim nods, and then grabs his phone. And then rolls his eyes. His early warning system is working just fine. Low pressure front, and a hell of a storm, are rolling in out of the northeast.

“What?” Tony asks.

“You know that Nor’easter that Penny and Ducky were talking about yesterday?”

“Yeah, they weren’t sure they were going to be able to make it down here. Thing veered east and ended up clobbering the Atlantic instead of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, and they made it down.”

Tim holds up his phone and shows Tony the latest weather map. The storm, in lovely shades of red and yellow, has turned west again, and is now heading right back to the Mid Atlantic.

“Again?” Tony looks fiercely annoyed. “When the hell is this winter going to end?”

Tim shakes his head. “Supposed to be snowing by tonight. Temperature’s dropping like a rock, and then raising all tomorrow. Freezing rain and sleet, wrapping up with rain and highs in the sixties by Monday.”

“Shit. Schmiel’s supposed to be landing in New York Sunday afternoon.”

“New York’s going to miss most of this. He should be fine there. Not sure if anything south of Philly and north of Raleigh will have functional airports.” Tim pockets the phone. “Time to change plans. Got to get the grocery run in today, and not tomorrow.”

“That’s if we’re even staying here…” Tony sounds a little nervous on that.

Tim nods along with that. He knows what Tony’s thinking, feeling. Because if Breena were weeks away from her due date, he’d be feeling the same thing. He also knows how much Ziva’s put into this, and since it’s not his wife or his kid, he’s not in hyper-protective pregnant daddy mode. “She’s not going to want to go home.”

“I *know.* She was less into making sure out wedding was perfect than this. This is… home and family and… and the childhood she lost and… *Shit!*” Tony’s got a ton of nervous Daddy-to-be vibes pouring off of him, along with a lot of this is the *one* thing his wife wants right now, more than anything. She’s invited *everyone* to this, has spent hours planning this out, getting the perfect Seder place settings, tricking out the menu, hand inscribing prayer books for everyone.

This *matters* in a way very little has for Ziva, in… not just years, for the whole time he’s known her.

And he knows that if he says, “Honey, I love you, but I want to go home and cancel this thing you’ve been working on for weeks and dreaming of for months, because I don’t want us more than an hour from a hospital,” his very pregnant ninja is going to explode in a hormonal frenzy.

And sure, Abby and Breena in a pregnant-hormone whirlwind is scary, but his Ninja is a trained killer, and even nine months pregnant she’s still got moves.
Tim can see what’s going through Tony’s mind. He does a little checking and then says to him. “Nearest hospital is eight miles from here. We’ve got Gibbs’ truck, and Gibbs who learned how to drive in the frozen winter wasteland of northwest PA, I can’t imagine it’d take more than an hour to get there.”

Tony gives him the look.

Tim lays a hand on his shoulder. “Yeah. I know. I’m going to get Gibbs and the girls and get groceries. You get to go face the dragon. Good luck.’’

Tony gives Tim a gentle shove. “You’re an asshole.”

Tim smiles. “I try. She’s not due for two weeks. Last checkup she was…”

“Negative two station, no dilation, he’s head down and in the right position, just not heading for the door, yet.”

“You’re in a house with two doctors, and a pregnant wife showing no signs of getting ready to give birth. It’s probably going to be fine.”

Tony sighs. “Famous last words.”

“Why are we getting rid of all of the bread?” Jimmy asks Ziva as he cleans out the pantry.

“It is the feast of the un-leaven bread, Jimmy. Everything that might have yeast in it has to go.”

Jimmy turns from the pantry to look at Ziva, who is currently scrubbing out the corners of the silverware drawer. “You realize literally everything in this house, including all of us, has at least some yeast on and in it. They’re floating around in the air.”

Ziva has a very determined look on her face. “That means you’re just going to have to do a better job of cleaning.”

Jimmy decides not to poke the porcupine. “Cleaning!” He grabs a perfectly good loaf of cinnamon raisin bread, (Molly’s favorite.) and tosses it into the trashcan.

Ziva sees him do it, and nods. Then she glares. Tim and Tony are heading into the kitchen, and there is no possible way they’re done cleaning all of the fans, yet.

Tony looks to Tim; Tim looks back, then he nods. “We’re going to have to change the schedule around.” Then he heads over to the computer on the table. (Tony’s.) Currently it’s playing music, keeping them all in a good place while they clean. He flicks the screen on, and gets the Weather Channel website up.

Ziva comes over and starts cursing quietly, in… probably Hebrew… under her breath.

“While you two talk it over and make a decision, I’m getting the grocery list, and we’re going to stock up. If we’re riding out the storm here, I want us to be well-provisioned.”

The conversation where they ‘make a decision’ is exactly as much fun as Tony thought it might be.
He’d rather pull several teeth out, without an anesthetic, than have this conversation.

On the upside, Ziva’s staying pretty cool.

On the downside, she’s cool because she’s decided he’s being an overprotective moron, and as long as she explains everything in small, easily digested words, she’ll win.

“Tony, we live in the city. Our hospital is ten miles from home. The one here is eight miles away, and not packed full of everyone who used to go to the hospitals in DC and Northern Virginia. You remember the room Tim and Abby were in for Sean? That closet they told us about, or the room they shared with that other couple? That was just an average day, not one where the hospital was packed with car accidents and all the other troubles that go with a bad storm. All of which are worse than they ever were in DC because they’re out of money for things like snowplows and have been for months.”

Tony sighs and grits his teeth. All of those are logical reasons to not bug out right this second. Out here, they don’t get a lot of snow clearing or road salting, but they at least get some. DC’s coffers went dry for that in February, and since then, if it’s not I-95, or one of the main routes through the city, it hasn’t gotten plowed or salted. The last two snow storms had involved him having to walk to work, because there just wasn’t any way for him to get his car, or a bus, or a train, or even the subway (why the freaking subway, which is under the damn ground, closed for snow, he’ll never know) moving through the snow.

So, she’s making relevant, logical arguments. At least, they’re good reasons for why home isn’t necessarily better than here. Tim’s house, which is four miles from a hospital, though…

What her argument is really doing is making Tony want to take her to the nearest hospital and just spend the storm there, hanging out, waiting.

To quote Han Solo, he’s got a bad feeling about this. The gut is not happy.

But, in that he is not the one currently in possession of the uterus, and, as she’s pointing out, she hasn’t had a contraction in days, and as of right now, there’s not a single flake of snow in the air, he supposes keeping on track for Passover-at-Home, isn’t a terrible idea.

But he does tell Tim to buy out the road salt. If they’ve got to stick her in the truck, and fucking walk in front of it scattering salt on the road to get her to the hospital in time, he’s doing it.

Lately, Tim and Gibbs have added a trip to their Saturday routine. They grab the oldest two girls, Gibbs’ truck, Mona, and the grocery list, and off they go to “The Museum of Food!” for “Adventures!”

This time, Jimmy, who doesn’t usually go along on this trip, is coming, too.

He’s got a list of things he and Ducky have put together.

They already have the most complete first aid kit anyone could want. But first aid and possibly deliver baby in a major snow storm are not precisely the same thing.

So, while Tim and Gibbs are making sure they’ve got lots of (non-yeast bearing) food, Jimmy’s heading to the local pharmacy and making sure they’ve got plenty of rubbing alcohol, lots of bleach, a pediatric bulb syringe for clearing airways, Novocain, Tylenol 3 (He can write a prescription for
better pain killers than that. He can’t get the spinal epidural kit necessary to make sure he’s not dosing Dave with it, and honestly, unless he’s got to try a c-section to go with it, he wouldn’t want to attempt a spinal.) a stitch kit (He hopes they won’t have to try an episiotomy, but even if they don’t, some level of tearing is normal, so having something to fix the rips with is necessary.), extra gloves (Sure, he’s got a box of them in his car, and so does Tony, and Gibbs likely does, too, but he prefers the non-latex ones.) a small scale (It’d be nice to know how big Dave is if he decides now is the time to show up.) more diapers, more wipes, heavy duty pads, nursing pads, extra towels, sterile wipes, a Z-pack for Ziva (If they’re going to deliver a baby in a private house, even a very clean private house, he wants piles of antibiotics around for Ziva.), and three packs of pacifiers.

He’s got everything but the little head caps, and if they sold them here, he would have bought some.

The lady at the counter looks at that pile of stuff, and checks his medical ID to make sure he can legally purchase most of it, and then says, “So, what’s her due date?”

“Not for two weeks, but we’re further out from a hospital than we’d like to be. Better safe than sorry, right?”

The counter lady smiles. “Here’s hoping you don’t need any of this.”

“Yeah, thanks!” He swipes his credit card. “I can return everything but the antibiotics if we don’t need them, right?”

She laughs at that. “Yeah.”

By Saturday night, the house is sparkling.

Every speck of non-airborne yeast has been eliminated.

The silver Seder plate is gleaming.

Ziva Ima’s charoset recipe is in the fridge, coming together, flavors mingling for maximum sweetness. She’s got fresh horseradish waiting to be grated for the maror. All the food prep work that needs to be done is done.

And Ziva’s bouncing around, feeling great. She hasn’t felt this energetic in weeks, and she actually feels like she can breathe again. Little boy must have shifted some because he’s not kicking her in both lungs today.

And seeing her perky and moving and googling napkin fold designs for the meal, Tony is relaxing some. The fact that they have personally salted not just the driveway, but about two miles of road toward the hospital is helping him relax.

The fact that the storm hasn’t hit yet is doing a whole lot more.

According to the weather map it was supposed to be here two hours ago, but they’ve eaten dinner and are in the post-meal, post-babies down, quiet part of the night, and the weather is still playing nice.

And then it isn’t.

Literally every hair on his body leapt up when the wind started to howl. It wasn’t a gradual thing.
There wasn’t a few soft moans of wind, followed by a few louder breaths, and then full on screaming. Nope. Total silence, everything is fine, and then BAM! screaming wind.

He jerks away from the sofa (they’re lying around the family room, talking, and enjoying each other) and rushes to the sliding glass door.

“FUCK!” Less than a heartbeat later, Tim, Jimmy, and Gibbs are next to him, and none of them have said it out loud, but he can feel them agreeing with him.

Tony’s heard of the concept of whiteout snow. He’s always thought it was an exaggeration. Something people say to make a bad storm sound worse. But this is whiteout. They have a porchlight. It’s on. He knows this because a few minutes ago he could see the grill and outdoor kitchen. Which is located about fifteen feet from the door he’s standing in front of.

And now it’s gone. There’s just a wall of whirling white. He figures the porch light is giving him, maybe, four feet of visibility.

A minute after that the thunder hits. “Thunder snow?” Tony asks, looking at swirling nothing.

And then Ziva says, “Uh!” It’s an almost pained sound, mostly surprised. He whirls around, about to shit his pants, and sees she’s grinning.

“Be calm, Tony. I am fine. Baby here is not moving.” She pats her tummy, and Dave makes her a liar, at least on the literal level, when he kicks back. On the larger one, well, Tony’s not seeing any fluids leaking out of his wife, so she’s probably right about him not heading out. “We are home, and safe, and the storm cannot touch us here. Who wants hot chocolate?”

Not all that much later that night, Ziva and Tony are tucked into bed. Their room is on the second floor, and they have, intentionally, a lot of windows. In the daytime, the light in their room is lovely, and at night, when it’s not storming, they have a great view of the forest and sky.

Ziva cuddles in close to Tony, feeling him settling down for the night.

She listens to the storm rage, and yes, Monday, or whenever they get thawed out, there’ll be branches to clean up, but anything that could have toppled over and hit the house was cleared out long before they moved in.

“It is funny. On Monday, we celebrate people huddling in their homes, not daring to set foot outside because a different sort of storm raged. They stayed close with their families, feasted, and prepared for a journey. Outside lay death and sorrow, but inside, everyone was safe and warm.” She lifts the hand he has resting on her belly to his lips. “The storm will pass over us. God’s given us that promise. And the journey that comes after… It’s a new life, Tony.”

That’s both more metaphysical, and trusting, than Tony wants to be right now. He also doesn’t want to argue. He kisses the back of her neck. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Sunday starts well. Babies get up early. Baby parents get up and deal with them. The rest of the crew
sleeps in.

At least, that’s usually how Sunday starts. Ziva wakes up early.

Nothing new on that. Between having a hard time staying asleep for any real length of time because she’s insanely pregnant, and five AM being her usual wake up time, Ziva’s not normally known for hanging in bed too long.

Granted, for the last few months, she wakes up early, groans, eyelids feeling like they just want to droop back down, staggers off to relieve her currently thimble sized bladder, and stumbles back to bed to try and get comfortable again (a long, drawn out processing involving four pillows and a lot of scooting around, which invariable wakes Tony, who does not, usually, have a five AM wake-up time) before she’s able to drop back into an hour or two of sleep.

Today, when her eyes go springing open along with her bladder sending urgent, “Overflow Imminent!” alarms her way, she’s not feeling sleepy.

She’s fairly alert and maybe not rested, but… There’s a feeling of urgency, (beyond her bladder) a need to get things done!

She gets the most immediate thing done, and before flushing sees… Ugh… Both Breena and their Lamaze teacher had mentioned it was pretty ugly, and it is. It looks kind of like a small, mucousy, bloody, jelly fish… sitting in the bowl.

She pats Dave. “Good to know you are on your way, but not today.”

Part of having babies, there’s a plug of thick mucus that keeps the cervix shut tight, barring bacteria and all other manner of nasties from entering. And before baby comes out, it’s got to get out of the way. But usually, it gets out of the way in the week before baby’s en route.

So, yes, things are moving, but not fast. She continues to stroke her little boy. “Tuesday morning. Any time after Tuesday morning would be really good.”

Dave gives a wriggle and a kick. She’s thinking he’s agreeing, or maybe he’s just noticed someone’s talking to him. Either way, it’s in an awfully good mood that Ziva tosses on her robe, and heads downstairs to the McPalmer wing, where she’s sure someone will be up.

There are several McPalmers up and about. Jimmy had Sean last night, so he’s hugging the bed getting some extra zzzs. Breena is still feeling like death warmed over, so she is also hugging the bed.

So she finds, in the glassed off observation room, Tim, Abby, and three little girls. (Sean’s still in one of his sleep cycles.)

Tim’s applying Cheerios to bowls, and dousing them with milk and sliced bananas. Abby’s got a flashlight, and is shining it through the window into the storm outside. The wind has died down, at least, even Ziva’s ‘horse-like’ hearing can’t make it out, but the flakes they can see swirling through the beam of light are going awfully fast…

And awfully straight down.

Abby sees Ziva in the reflection in the glass. “It’s about half snow and half freezing rain.”
“Wonderful,” Ziva says dryly, taking one of the bananas. Keeping her potassium levels up is especially important these days. “The windows don’t look too frozen over.”

Tim nods at that, and then adds the caution to her statement. “Our windows, which are attached to our nice, warm house aren’t. When the girls are done, I’ll head out and see if we can get the truck doors open.”

“I do not think we’ll be making any emergency runs to the hospital today.”

Tim nods. “Excellent. You want to guess what your husband will do to me, and the rest of us, if you spring a leak and there isn’t a truck ready to get you to said hospital?”

Ziva chuckles at that. “By all means. Scrape away.”

Abby gives Tim a bit of side-eye though. “Carefully scrape away. None of us want you to get out there on that skating rink and take a tumble.”

“Tony practically had us put an inch of salt on the front walk and the driveway. On the basis of just traction alone, I should be fine.”

“Uh huh.”

Tim sighs. “I will be careful.”

She nods. “Thank you.”

Seven AM, babies are fed, Tim’s out attempting to chisel open Gibbs’ truck, and Ziva needs to be doing something.

The problem is, there is only so much you can do thirty-five hours before the big event. All the food that needs to be prepped is prepped. If she seasons, chops up, or begins cooking anything else now, it won’t be its best come Seder time.

She wants to go out and help Tim with the truck. That way she could burn off some of this need to do something, but both Tim and Abby explained to her in no uncertain terms that neither of them wanted to see what Tony would do to them if they let his extremely pregnant wife out in an ice storm to go and do hard, physical work requiring good balance. Which, due to the twenty or so pounds of small person and small person support equipment strapped to her belly, and her softer more, flexible joints, Ziva no longer has. (Okay, yes, she has good balance, but she used to have phenomenal balance, and now she’s just at about normal person in good shape balance.)

And they really didn’t want to know what would happen when Tony got tired of beating on them, and then handed them over to Gibbs. Because they both know that if she goes out there to chip his truck out of the ice, both of them will tag team the punishment, letting up only when they get so tired they can’t swat an idiot any longer.

Or, as Abby put it, “Do either of us look like we want permanent brain damage from the amount of head slapping we’ll get if we let you out there?”

And Tim followed up with, “Tony’ll smack my brains out through my nose, and Gibbs’ll stomp them when they land. Go, rest. I’ve got this.”
But Ziva does not want to rest.

So, instead of resting, she is folding napkins. Because table-setting origami is supposed to be A: calming, and B: will not result in any head slapping.

However, it isn’t calming, not really. It’s just barely taking the edge off of the desire to do something.

Tim comes back in a bit before eight. He’s cold and smells like the storm, icy, snowy mush on his hat and jacket.

“How bad is it?” Ziva asks.

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head as he hangs up his winter gear. “Snow’s up to my calves, and there’s an inch of sleet under it, and a half inch of ice on top. The driveway and walk are in better shape because of the salt, but there’s at least four inches of frozen crap on it.”

That gives Ziva a mission. She knows the guys, and definitely Abbi, and likely Abby, are going to be shoveling out when they start getting up. (And judging by the sounds of showers going and people moving around, is starting soon.) And shoveling out is hard work. Which means it’s time to get cooking for breakfast. She might not be able to do the hard work, but she can keep the people doing the hard work well-fed.

Though they did clean out all the bread and yeast, technically, it’s not Passover until tomorrow, so off Ziva goes in search of the flour. After all, there’s nothing about having to clear all the baking soda out of the house. And right now, she’s thinking this crew needs muffins. Lots of muffins. Muffins with blueberries and orange zest and cinnamon-sugary crumbles on top.

Oh, yeah! Lots of them. And turkey sausage. And eggs, lots of eggs, got to have a good solid base of protein for hard work. Probably need some oatmeal, too. Coffee, need to get that going, can’t have breakfast here without coffee…

Yes, Ziva’s got a plan. Tim crashes at the dining room table, and a minute later, arms and legs tired from de-icing Gibbs’ truck, he very gratefully accepts a large cup of hot coffee, rich with milk and cream.

After breakfast, after the first and second round of driveway clearing Ziva runs out of steam.

She suddenly feels like someone pulled the plug. All of that lovely energy that had been keeping her going got up and went. Fast.

She’s still feeling the need to be doing, something, anything, but her body is sending her very clear messages that the thing she needs to be doing right now, is getting a nap.

Good nap. Easy nap. She didn’t have to spend six hours tossing around trying to get the pillows in exactly the right spot. She just waddled up to bed, got herself into it, made sure Dave was on the tummy pillow, and the knee pillow was between her legs, and she was out.

She wakes up to dull, stiff ache in her belly. And sighs. Nothing new there. She hasn’t had one in a few days, but this is normal. Like the Lamaze teacher, and Breena, and Abby have all mentioned, for
weeks, sometimes months before little guy is ready to go, there are these little, annoying, warming up contractions. And, like the last six hundred warming up contractions, it goes wandering off less than a minute later.

She pulls herself up, feeling a bit better for the nap, and again heads down to see what’s going on.

The storm is still storming, though right now it’s completely switched over to freezing rain.

Ziva rarely feels like she’s made a bad decision. Which is not to say that she always makes good ones, but the decisions she makes don’t often have a long period of time between make decision, and suffer the consequences thereof.

Normally the one is hard on the heels of the other, and space to ponder the idea of Did I make a bad decision? is limited to a matter of minutes if not seconds.

That’s not true right now, though, as Abbi, Jimmy, and Gibbs get back in from what is their second swing at driveway clearing and truck de-icing. And as Ziva heads into hour two of fairly steady contractions.

“Fourteen inches and still pouring down?” Tim’s asking as he’s handing around hot drinks, and even better, towels fresh out of the dryer, all toasty warm, to wrap around cold, wet bodies.

“How can we possibly be getting this kind of weather in April?” Jimmy responds with.

It’s gotten dark again, so the members of the house inside can’t tell, without help, what’s going on out there.

“What’s falling down, now?” Ducky asks.

Gibbs shakes his head. “Supposed to be rain by now, but it’s snow and sleet again. By the time we got to the far end of the driveway, the top had half an inch of sleet on it.”

“And it doesn’t matter much if we keep killing ourselves on the driveway, not until the snowplow comes through again. I’m not sure that’ll matter then, either.” Jimmy says, “Whatever mix of crud is on the road, it’s ice slippery, and hard and deep enough I can stand on it without sinking into it.”

Ziva hears that and closes her eyes, licking her lips. Abby glances to Breena, who also caught that, and the two of them look at Ziva who looks back, a slight edge of panic in her eyes.

Breena gets up, “Come on Ziva, let’s see what we’ve got for making dinner,” pulling her, and Abby, into the kitchen. Penny sees that and hustles in, too.

The guys are looking at each other, all feeling that tinge of ‘something’s up’ and the mixture of excited dread because they’re all fairly sure what’s up. After all, the absolutely last place Breena wants to be right now is in the kitchen making food.

But in the kitchen for a minute of girls’ only conversation…

“How far apart are they?” Breena asks.
“On and off since I woke up. That’s only two hours, but they’ve never been this regular.”

“How regular is regular?” Penny asks.

“Twelve minutes.”

Breena waves that off. “Even if this is the start of labor, you’ve got plenty of time. Twelve minutes apart I was still two days out with Molly.”

Ziva looks to Penny. “I don’t remember twelve minutes apart. I remember thirty hours in the hospital, stuck on a bed, not able to move or eat really until the contractions got right on top of each other, and then they gave me a boat load of drugs, and about a week later I woke up and had a baby boy.”

Ziva looks to Abby, who shrugs. “Never got that far. Four in an hour and off to the Doc’s I went.”

Penny’s checking her phone, seeing what Google thinks the ETA from their home to the hospital is. “Google’s thinking it’ll take twelve hours to get to the hospital, but Gibbs driving, so… ten?”

“I do not want to have my son in a truck!” Yes, she knows that Gibbs has delivered a baby in car, after all, she was there, and having Ducky and/or Jimmy around means lots of medical attention, but Gibbs’ truck is the absolute last place she wants to have her baby.

“Don’t blame you on that.” Penny says. “Jimmy or Ducky’ll go, too, so you’d have a doctor with you, and a full tank of gas… Gibbs’ll get you there sooner or later, just…”

“Just the longer we stay here, the more time everything has to melt, and the more likely we are to get to the other side of the storm,” Abby says, checking Weather.com. “According to this we’ve got another hour of snow/sleet, then rain, then clear and rising temperatures all night. If you can make it to noon tomorrow, we should have almost clear roads.”

“Tony will worry.”

They all feel him hovering a second before: “That ship sailed a long time ago. Were you planning on letting me into the decision making confab?” he says, voice dry, leaning against the doorway to the kitchen.

The other ladies, and the rest of the family, all decide that right now is an excellent time to get out of earshot of the kitchen.

Once the rest of the family has melted away, Ziva says, “I’m sorry.”

An apology that open, honest, and fast takes Tony’s breath away. Yes, after more than a year of marriage counseling they’ve gotten a lot better at having ‘functional’ arguments, as opposed to angry, hurt-each-other arguments, but Ziva apologizing, unprompted, is hen’s teeth rare.

“For which part?”

“Right now, for not taking the idea that David might come this weekend seriously.”

“But not for shutting me out?”

She shrugs. “Neither of us likes to worry the other one until we have all the facts.”
She’s right about that. That’s how they play this game. They don’t tell the other one something that might be upsetting until they know what they’re dealing with. “And the girls had facts that I didn’t?”

“That was the idea. More importantly, they had facts I didn’t. We’re still two Lamaze classes away from the end, and… They have done this, and I have not.”

Tony’s not sure if he should be comforted by this, or not. “And what wisdom are they offering?”

“That this is nothing to get worried about. Not yet. You remember the first day of classes, unless your water breaks, do not go to the hospital until contractions are four minutes apart and you’re having a hard time talking through them. And even then, you might be there for more than a day? Water is still inside me, and contractions are twelve minutes apart.” She winces slightly, and checks the clock. “Fourteen. It has only been two hours, and it is probably nothing. But… I am starting to feel your nervousness now.”

Tony closes his eyes. The only thing he can do right now is make this worse. If he panics, she’ll pick up on it, and they’ll feed each other’s fear. He inhales and releases a slow, easy breath. “So, we wait and see.”

“Unless you want to get into the truck and start the trek to the hospital.”

The idea that she’d meet him on that really hits him with the idea that she might be starting to get spooked.

He checks the weather again. They’re promising two more hours of storm, and then clearing skies and rising temps. Every hour after the storm stops makes the run to the hospital shorter. What’s a ten hour drive now may be an hour drive ten hour from now. Which is great, assuming all systems aren’t go ten hours from now.

But there’s no way to know that.

Which means, the two of them have the one option neither of them is good at, wait and see.

It’s a long night. And not just in the sense of how fast are contractions coming (Correct answer, about ten times an hour, ish, by midnight, though from ten to eleven featured no contractions at all.) but also in the sense that with the storm in place it got dark much sooner than normal, so it feels like they’re in hour six hundred of the longest night ever.

On the upside, the storm has stopped storming. Nothing’s doing now. They can hear dripping from the eaves as the snow and ice on the house melts.

And, at last check (ten PM) Gibbs’ truck was ready to go. It didn’t need any more de-icing because all ice was gone.

So, things could be a lot worse. They’ve got a way to get where they need to go, though the path between here and there is long and covered in frozen crap.

And that’s keeping Tony on edge, and the world moving very, very slowly.

By midnight, Ziva’s walked all over the house, she’s floated around in their tub quite a bit, and she’s tired and crabby. Just enough in the way of contractions to keep her from resting, not enough to get the kid moving.
Which is great for not trying to go for a drive on the ice, but not so hot for keeping the Ninja in a good mood.

She’s on the bed, trying to snooze, every time she’s almost, just, barely asleep her belly stiffens and she jerks back awake.

Tony’s behind her, hand on her back, gently rubbing his thumbs into her sacrum, trying to keep her more comfortable.

Then they hear it, the slow grinding thrum of the snowplow. They can’t see the road from their window, but Tony hops out of bed and leaps to the window anyway. Nope, he can’t see the road, but he can see the flashing yellow lights through the trees.

A wide happy smile spreads across his face as he starts to pull on his clothing. “I’m grabbing Tim and Jimmy, and we’re going to dig through whatever the snowplow just tossed up onto the driveway, and then your water can break at any time because we’ve got a car and a road and a hospital ready to GO!”

Ziva sighs, also feeling a lot better. Her hand strokes over Dave. “Give them a few more hours, okay?”

Dave kicks her, and then her belly stiffens again.

At any other time, both Tim and Jimmy would resent the hell out of being dragged out of a very nice warm bed, currently filled with sleeping women. They are both extremely fond of being located in said nice, warm bed, especially since they’d both been in a rather splendid post-orgasmic snooze.

However, there are things which they will get out of bed with a minimum of grumbling for, and digging out the mound of frozen crud at the end of the driveway, so that Ziva can get to the hospital with a minimum of trouble should she need to, is on the list.

“Contractions still going strong?” Jimmy asks as he flings a mound of frozen slush.

“Stopped for an hour, and then started up again an hour before I got you two up.”

Tim and Jimmy nod at that. Tim holds up crossed fingers. “Hoping I’m not jinxing it, but, sounds like Dave’s en route.”

Tony grins at them as they dig out the slush in the dark.

When Tony gets back in, Ziva’s either very, very still, or asleep. A moment later, he hears the buzz saw snore of his astonishingly un-stealthy sleeping companion, and decides she’s asleep. He grabs a pillow and blanket and heads for the AV room.

Yes, it’d be nice to snuggle up, but it’d also be nice to get some sleep between now and whatever tomorrow’s going to bring.
After the longest night ever, the longest morning ever begins.

Because today was going to be their big Passover celebration, most of the family has today off. Abbi’s remoting into work on her computer, and Tim is doing the same. If a murder gets called in, Jimmy’s up, but for the time being, he’s off for the day. It’s Monday, and that’s a big day for a funeral home, so Breena’s off for her usual morning at Slater and Palmer’s. But the rest of them are supposed to be helping to get the party ready.

If there’s going to be a party.

Breakfast time on Monday, contractions are getting stronger, a lot stronger, but not much faster. Still at ten or so times an hour, though she’s hit the point where she doesn’t want to talk or move too much through them.

So, as the family munches on leftover muffins, they watch Ziva pace the downstairs, and deal with a question:

“What are we still having everyone over?” Abby’s the one who asks it, but everyone else is thinking it.

Ziva whips toward them. “Yes! We didn’t do all this for nothing!” Then she stops walking, closes her eyes and grabs tight on the back of the sofa as another contraction hits.

“That’s five minutes,” Jimmy says, voice bright. When Ziva stops wincing, she glares at him. “Just trying to be helpful. They’re speeding up.”

Abby flashes him a quick headshake, and he shuts up.

“We can still do the party, but… If you aren’t here?” Penny says.

“Celebrate it for me. For David.”

“We can do that.”


“Schmiel!” Ziva says with a huge smile three hours later.

“My Ziva, look at you!” He hugs her close and then pulls back to marvel at her very pregnant form. “Oh…” He grins.

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Well, I am here.”

“Good,” Tony says, “Don’t take your coat off. Gibbs?”

Gibbs nods, grabbing his keys.

Tony gives Schmiel a quick hug, too. “Come on, we’re off to the hospital. Contractions are at four minutes apart.”

Schmiel lights up even further. “He is coming! Perfect timing.”
“Dad…”

Anthony D. DiNozzo Sr. is doing his best to be the pregnant daddy in the waiting room cliché. Pop a cigarette between his lips, and he’d be right out of a 1950’s comedy.

“You’re gonna wear a path in the linoleum,” Tony says as he finds his father and Delphine in the waiting area.

“News?” Senior demands.

“We’re all settled in. She’s six centimeters dilated. They’re thinking maybe tonight it’ll be pushing time. Not more than two visitors in there at a time, so when Gibbs and Schmiel head out, you can go in.”

Senior holds up his hands. “I don’t… Once he’s out.”

Delphine shakes her head and smiles. “He’s afraid of compromising Ziva’s modesty.”

“You remember Bob’s story about when his daughter was in labor, the nurse just came in and all of a sudden--”

Tony cuts that story short. There’s nothing at the end of the sentence he wants to hear. “Right now, she’s in a t-shirt and sweat pants, Dad. I don’t think Gibbs or Schmiel are planning on sticking around when we get to the gown and body parts flashing around part.”

“Oh. In that case, sure. We’ll go say hello.” Senior grins, looking forward to seeing his daughter-in-law before the adventure begins in earnest.

Gibbs didn’t get to do this with Sean and Kelly. He’s not sure there was time for this with either of them. But, since they’re just waiting around for Ziva’s body to kick it into overdrive, there’s time.

And this, right here, with Ziva, while Schmiel goes off to find her ice chips, able to quietly sit with her, and hold her hand when the contractions get bad, rub her back a bit and hopefully help, is pretty sweet.

Her fingers unclench from his, and she flashes him a bit of a smile as the latest one eases off.

She breathes deep and steady, and rests her forehead on his shoulder. He wraps an arm around her and kisses the top of her head.

A second later she jerks away from him, and they both notice the rush of fluid that means she and Dave have hit the point of no return. Once her water breaks, there’s no going back.

She gets up slowly and begins to waddle toward the washroom. Gibbs calls out, “I’ll get a nurse.”
Senior hears that just as Tony’s opening the door to the room. “Nurse?”

“Her water just broke.”

Senior hugs Tony close for a second, and then pushes him into the room. “And it’s time for us to get out of here.”

Gibbs pats the back of his head, and also gives him a hug. “Less than a minute away if you need anything.”

Tony nods. He thinks they’ll be fine. And then he steps in to help his wife get ready to bring their baby into the world.

Pushing hard, going with the contractions, easing David into the world wasn’t how Ziva intended to spend dinnertime on April 10th, 2017.

Right now, she should be at the house, with the entire extended family (most of whom are having a Sederless Seder in her and David’s honor), drinking the cups of wine, telling the stories to the girls, passing around food and tales of a culture that predates her by four thousand years, and will, with any luck bind her children and grandchildren to a shared history with her.

But right now, as the Doctor is saying, “You’re doing fine. Push slow and steady, there you go…” Ziva’s focused, intensely, on the here and now, and the bizarre sensation of a child easing his way into the world, and the feel of that child’s father helping to keep her up and steady.

It doesn’t hurt. Not now. It hurt a few minutes back, but supposedly once the baby gets far enough down, his body blocks some of the nerve paths or something like that. She’s past what the Lamaze teacher referred to as the ring of fire.

“Oh… I see hair! Lots and lots of black hair. Little person’s gonna have your curls!” The pediatric nurse says.

The contraction passes, and Ziva slumps into Tony. He’s petting her hair and face, murmuring about how well she’s doing and how strong she is, how much he loves her and their little boy.

The next one comes, and she starts to tense again, working on easing David into the world.

“Perfect, Ziva. The difficult part is almost over. Just a little more. And we’ve got ears. If you reach down you can feel his head.” Their doctor tells them.

Ziva does, feeling wet, sticky, somewhat goopy hair. She starts to giggle at that, and refocuses, pushing harder. “Can’t wait to see you, baby.”

“One, maybe two more pushes, Ziva. Almost there.”

“You’ve got this, baby, you’ve got it,” Tony’s whispering to her, lips a hair from her ear, arms strong on her shoulders, keeping her in the right position.

Once again the contraction eases off, and Ziva gets a moment to catch her breath before the next one starts. The next one is hard. She couldn’t talk through it if her life depended on it.

All of her world’s narrowed down to a sensation, the tight, vice clench of her body squeezing a little
body out.

“Keep going, nice and steady. And… almost…”

They hear a tiny little cry. Ziva’s world opens back up again at that cry. The tiny, first-breath wail of her son cutting through all the sounds of their delivery room.

“Nurse…”

“You maneuver him, I’ll catch.”

Ziva feels the contraction, feels her body tense, pushing, then a tugging sensation, she hears the nurse say, “He’s beautiful.” Followed by Doctor saying, “Hello, baby.” There’s a moment of fussing from Dave, followed by, “He’s a boy!”

And then her son is in her arms.

And, for all of her Passover wishes and dreams, she is utterly certain, that this, right here, right now, with her son, still wet and goopy, in her arms, with her husband leaning over her, his tears dripping onto her shoulder, as he pets the child they made together, that this is the perfect Passover.

The doctors give them a good twenty minutes to just cuddle Dave. To look at him and pet him and all the rest of it, before gently peeling him away from Ziva to get him cleaned up, weighed, swaddled and the rest of it.

Tony hovers near the entire time they’re doing that.

And when they’re done one of the nurses holds Dave, in his insanely tiny, little bundle of blankets, out to Tony and for the first time ever, Tony gets to hold his son, on his own.

He stares down at this little boy, with the big, murky blue eyes, staring up at him, marvels at a person he can hold in his two hands, and grins at him.

The nurse gently lays a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “We’ve got a few more minutes of getting Ziva stitched up and back to the room, do you want to take David out to meet anyone?”

For a second, all Tony wants to do is stand there and gaze at his boy, and then he remembers that there are people here who want to meet this child.

Gibbs allows Senior first snuggles with David DiNozzo, who has his mother’s curly black-brown hair, and his father’s eyes.

That curly black brown hair is tucked under a little blue cap, and Senior’s hands are shaking as he beams at his grandson, saying, “I’m your Poppa. I held your Daddy just like this almost exactly forty-nine years ago, and you look so much like him.”

Gibbs eyes Dave, and mentally shakes his head. Those are Tony’s eyes, but Ziva’s round face, and lips. Senior looks up to Tony’s who’s radiating tired elation. “Does he have a middle name?”

Tony smiles. “Yeah. Jethro. He’s got a perfect Hebrew-Italian name.” Tony rolls over the dual
pronunciation, the Hebrew David and Yethro, followed by the New York Italian DiNozzo.

That makes both Gibbs and Senior smile, and a minute later, Senior hands David over. “Hello.” Gibbs says to him, cuddling him close on his shoulder. “Your Mama wants you to call me Saba, and your cousins call me Pop or Uncle Jethro, and it doesn’t matter which one you like, I’ll always come when you call.”

David’s swaddled up nice and snug, but his eyes are open, and he’s staring up at Gibbs as he says that. And if a newborn can have a look that indicates, Okay, sounds good to me Dave does. Or maybe Gibbs is just reading that into it. Either way, it doesn’t matter, another nurse returns and says, “We’ve got Ziva all stitched up and moved back to your room. How about you take little boy in, because I bet he wants to nurse.”

Tony takes his baby, his little boy, his… right now… everything from the father who shaped him and the father who made him, and heads back to his wife, and, in a room with no doctors and no nurses, the first moment of the three of them, alone, as a family.

About twenty minutes later, there’s a shout of celebration loud enough to wake the babies at the Gibbs Clan house, as everyone gets the David Jethro DiNozzo, 8lbs 6oz, everyone is fine! text from Gibbs.
With the arrival of Dave DiNozzo, Gibbs has been splitting his time between helping out and being an active hands-on Saba, and getting his ducks into a row to do the same for Sean.

For Dave, Saba duty is pretty light. Messy. Clean spit up off the one end, clean poop off the other, and make sure his parents get all the sleep they can during the day. Because at dinner time he goes home, and then they're on, on their own, all night.

He and Dave are getting a good bit of ‘bonding’ time during the quiet hours between feeds.

“You get called back in on a case?” Abbi asks when she finds Gibbs in the attic going through his collection of notebooks.

For Sean, he’s on research mode.

A good cop keeps his notes, pretty much, forever. Gibbs doesn’t get rid of notes until everyone involved in the case is dead. Which means he’s been able, over twenty-six years, to get rid of about six cases.

But like with the way he talks, he wasn’t a voluminous note taker, either.

Details, impressions, facts, and contact information, that’s most of what he jotted down.

He’s also very organized. He’s got his notebooks by year, and month, and wrote the names of the victims on the cover of the notebook. It doesn’t take him too long to find what he’s looking for. He holds the notebook up to her. “Case is done, has been for a long time. Just hoping to find a lead on how to help Sean.”

“You deaf Marine case.”

He nods, opening the notebook. It wasn’t a terribly difficult case. “Pretty straightforward once we got into it. Just took a while to get into it.”

Abbi shoots his an explain more look.

“Had to learn how to read fingers the same way I read voices. That took a while. Had to learn to watch faces while watching fingers, that also took a while. But,” he shrugs a little, “I got it down.”

“You hoping to dig up old contacts?”

“That’s the idea. The man...” He flips through his notes. “Jim Nelson, he ran the program. He’d probably know what direction to point me in.”

Abbi smiles at that, glad to see him with something to do. (Without a case he’s been... intensively wedding planning, and... If there’s anything scarier than a Bridezilla, it’s a Marine on a mission, even if that mission is: Plan a Wedding. On the upside, he’s got the caterer beaten into submission, and instead of the wine list most people go for, they’re having a coffee and scotch bar.)

“What do you hope to do with this?” Abbi asks, pulling him up from the floor in front of the boxes he keeps his notebooks in.
“I don’t know. Find the right direction.”

“A start.”

“Yeah.”

“How do you feel about starting on dinner?”

“That sounds like a very good idea.” He tucks the notebook into his back pocket, and down to the kitchen they head.

It does take him a while to do anything useful with that notebook. The program, which worked with deaf veterans, got folded into a larger program out of Walter Reed back in the early 2000s, and then vanished into a morass of VA red tape. Jim Nelson is dead now. His second in command retired five years ago and the latest address for him burned down in the fall.

Gibbs is pacing around Tony and Ziva’s apartment, Dave on his shoulder, patting gently, while he googles people, looking for someone in that notebook he can talk to.

It takes him a few hours to find a live person who’s willing to talk to him.

Deidre McClausky still teaches sign language and lip reading to deaf vets and their families. And she’s got some free time, in the morning, though, he gets the sense she’s not thrilled to see him from her email saying that yes, he could come.

Gibbs doesn’t care much about that. She’s a link to whatever comes next, and that feels good. Yes, she works with adults, but with any luck, she’ll know where to point him so he can learn more about how to be Deaf.

He kisses the top of Dave’s head. “Got a lead, little boy.”

Dave chirps at him, and that chirp rapidly turns into the *it’s naptime, get me to my crib* cry.

“Oh look, *it’s Gunnery Sargent Jason Anderson, 1996’s star pupil.* If it’s possible to sign sarcastically, Deidre McClausky is signing sarcastically.

She’s older. Obviously. He is too. But the twenty years between twenty-three and forty-three are quite a bit easier on the face and body than the twenty years between thirty-eight and fifty-eight. She still has brown hair and most of the same figure she had in ’96. Jason Anderson had brown hair back then, too. (The one and only time he ever attempted to dye the gray.) And compared to this time two years ago, Gibbs is closer to Jason’s physique, but he can’t pass for an active duty Marine any longer.
Gibbs expects the sarcasm. After all, he was investigating her, as well as everyone else at the place, and… well… if you can hear the conversation it’s a hell of a lot easier to “lip read,” so he was a tad better at it than the other people in the class, and he may have… not exactly gently… suggested that Deidre knew more than she was letting on (she did, but not about the case) and he didn’t exactly endear himself to her when it became clear that he wasn’t actually deaf.

He has the grace to offer her a rather sheepish look about his deception though. *I did finish the program.* He signs back.

She nods curtly, gesturing for him to follow her into her office. Once she’s got him seated, she signs, *So, what, case go hot again. You here to pick my brains?*

*Yes, but not about that. My three-month-old grandson is deaf, and I want to be able to do… everything… anything… I can to make this easier for him.*

That gets a bit of a smile out of Deidre.

*How deaf?* Deidre has no hearing at all. And seeing how she doesn’t have hearing aids, or implants, Gibbs guesses it’s because they wouldn’t help. Though he supposes it’s possible she may have chosen to not take any interventions.

*Complete loss in his right ear, 95% loss in the left.*

*Hearing aids? Implants?*

*We’re waiting for the aid for the one side, see if it helps. Implant on the other.* He hopes that won’t piss her off, and it doesn’t.

*Sounds like you’re on the right track. What do you want to know about? You want to learn how to be a speech therapist?*

Gibbs thinks about that. He supposes he could. Though he can’t imagine the way the family would react to him saying he was learning to be a *speech* therapist. Tony’d wet his pants he’d laugh so hard at that idea. *I want to know what can be done, and then find something that I’m good at.*

One of the things Gibbs found most interesting about being undercover in a program for the Deaf is that people who have never heard, or at least not well, don’t have the same communication style as people who do hear. If he had thought about it before he got there, he would have known that would have to be true, but he didn’t, so it took him by surprise to see that all of those little sounds and verbal placeholders that tell hearing/speaking people what’s going on between the words aren’t part of non-verbal communications.

For example, given what Gibbs has asked for, a hearing person might make some sort of small noise to indicate, *I’m thinking, give me a minute.* Deidre twiddles her fingers and looks away from him. Same basic idea, but different ways of getting it across.

A minute later she signs *Long list. Besides pretending to be someone you aren’t, what are you good at?*

*I really was a wounded Gunnery Sergeant invalided out of the service.*

Her look makes it clear that’s not good enough.

*I’m good with my hand. Not just like this. I can build pretty much anything you can think of. I can pick up things from books fairly easily. Good with animals and kids.*
He sees the interest light in her eyes when he says animals.

What?

Dogs?

I like dogs. Have one at home.

She smiles at that. Do you know what Dogs for Deaf is?

No, but I can guess from the name. Hearing ear dogs?

Yes. After this autumn, the closest branch is in OH. They want to expand, get a branch back down here. If you’re really good with animals…

I get on great with dogs.

You would.

Alas, lack of voice means that Gibbs isn’t sure if that’s a backhanded compliment or not. And Deirdre’s poker face is good enough, he can’t tell just by looking.

This wouldn’t just be something you do for your grandson. This is the kind of thing you’d do to help a lot of people.

I’m a retired cop. I’m itching for something to help a lot of people.

Well, this could be it. The first level is puppy socialization. Puppies come to live with you, and it’s your job to make sure they get to experience a lot. Kids, other dogs, all sorts of places, lots of adults. You make sure they’re comfortable pretty much everywhere, and have laidback personalities.

I’ve got a house full of kids and adults.

Can’t just be your family. They need to be able to handle anything.

Gibbs can do that. He spent years training people to handle anything that could get thrown at him, puppies can’t be that different, and unlike certain Marines and Very Special Agents, he’d get a puppy when it’s tiny, no bad habits to break. He’s starting to get an image of him, Mona, and… hearing ear dog, that’s probably like a seeing eye dog, so he’s imagining the two of them with a German Shepard going everywhere. Next level?

Training them to be hearing ear dogs. That’s way more involved, and takes a while to learn, but… I don’t see why you couldn’t do it. Not like you’re in a mad rush.

Little guy’s too little to know what a dog is, other than the big black thing that licks him occasionally. Kids have to be at least a few years old before a hearing ear dog would come in handy… right?

At least old enough to be wandering around without a parent hovering over them. However old that is in your family.

Oldest one of the kids is a bit over three, and she’s usually got a grown-up in eye sight, definitely in earshot. So, what exactly does a hearing ear dog, do?

Listen.

Gibbs rolls his eyes. I got that. The dog can’t talk though. And it doesn’t sign, so…
Fire alarm goes off; the dog makes sure you get out. Someone rings your doorbell; dog grabs you. Someone calls your name, I’d imagine that comes in handy for little guys, the dog lets you know. He’s keeping ears on what’s around you, and gets your attention if something important is going on around you.

Like your pre-school teacher just said ‘Pack up the blocks?’

Maybe. That’d depend on how smart the dog is. But… what’s your grandson’s name?

Sean.

But, ‘Sean, pack up the blocks’ is something they train the dogs for.

Gibbs leaves that meeting with a spring in his step, a promise that Deidre will send off letters to two of the breeders in the area that work with Dogs for the Deaf, and the names of two people who he’s very eager to get to know better.

“Good meeting?” Ziva asks an hour later, as she gets Dave settled for his second breakfast of the day.

“It was.” Gibbs is in her kitchen making her what Abby and Breena call nursing fuel. It’s mostly milk and vanilla ice cream (fat, sugar, calcium), but it’s also got cocoa powder (iron, antioxidants), spinach (more iron and calcium, the cocoa is in there to kill the taste), a prenatal vitamin, and the chocolate protein powder Dragana says is the best of the bunch. (Gibbs has been unwilling to taste it to see what that means.)

The ladies like it. None of the kiddos have rebelled against it, so, he’s making it. A moment of the blender on high, and then he’s got the smoothie, and heading to sit next to Ziva on the sofa.

“How are you doing?”

Like he needs to ask. She’s got dark circles under her eyes and is sitting on a donut shaped pillow.

She says it anyway, “Tired and sore.” And she takes a long sip of the smoothie, sighing a bit at the infusion of calories. “Little man here decided last night was a perfect time to party.”

Gibbs smiles at Dave, who’s looking awfully content and snoozy right now, as he’s cuddled up to a breast and gently slurping away. “Taking after Daddy?”


Gibbs laughs. “He’s got good taste.”

Ziva looks appalled for a second, and then shakes her head. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.”

“By all means, you want anything else?”

“More water?”

Gibbs goes to get that.

“So…” she says as he hands over the water.
“She still doesn’t love me, but she did give me the name of two people who breed hearing ear dogs. Apparently, the people around here who used to socialize and train the puppies are in West Virginia now. I got a note back as I was driving here saying that one of the breeders has a puppy she was hoping would be in the program. That’d be step one, socialize. Step two, learn how to teach them to be hearing ear dogs.”

Ziva grins at the idea of a collection of little puppies following Gibbs around as he whips out his Probie Training techniques on them. “Excellent. Are we going to find a collection of puppies at your house?”

“Maybe not a collection.” Gibbs tries to imagine one puppy, which… okay, for the greater good, sure. But three or four of the little things all romping around and peeing on his furniture. “Er…”

“Second thoughts?”

“I don’t know. It feels right. Mona’ll help get any little guys we have trained up.” He looks at Dave, who eats every three hours, and thinks that, if he remembers right, puppies are very similar to babies, requiring a ton of work. And while he’s happy to help out with baby work, during the day, he likes to go home at the end of that day to a house that’s blessedly free of puppies, or babies, and get some time in a quiet, comfortable, adult-oriented space.

“Any idea what sort of dogs?”

Gibbs shrugs. The one who wrote him back didn’t say. “They’d have to be smart, easy to train, laid back, social critters, so… Retrievers? Shepards? Something like that, right?”

Ziva shrugs, too. “I’d assume, but…”

“I know. Eight.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll make sure to find out what they are first. Dogs are dogs though. We get on.”

Tony stumbles through the living room at that point, looking three quarters asleep. They hear the fridge door open, the sound of something being banged around in the kitchen, the coffeemaker hissing, and then more banging around, followed by Tony staggering, clutching his coffee like a lifeline, back into the living room, and then flopping onto one of the chairs with his eyes glued shut.

“I take it you were walking Dave around while he was in his party mood?” Gibbs says.

Tony’s too tired to even nod. His eyebrow twitches a bit. He’s also dressed for work. Haphazardly. His shirt is buttoned wrong, with the holes and buttons not lined up properly, and he’s got unmatched shoes.

“Tony, you don’t have to work today,” Ziva says.

He groans with pleasure at that.

“Go back to sleep,” Gibbs adds. “I’ve got ‘em. You’re on after dinner, remember.”

He groans and staggers back to bed.

“Dave wakes up, he cries, Tony gets him, gets him cleaned up, and gives him to me. He crashes. I feed Dave, get him cleaned up again, walk him around, and get him put back down. Last night, we’d
do that, he’d sleep for half an hour, and then wake up again, wanting… To eat, maybe. Tony gets up again, cleans him up again, gets him ready for me, again, and then I do my part, again… all night long.”

Gibbs winces. Then he gently bops Dave on the back of his head. Just tapping his finger against the back of Dave’s skull. “None of that. Ima and Daddy need their sleep. You wake up, you get cleaned up, you eat, and then you sleep, for two hours. You hear that, little man!”

Ziva’s staring at Gibbs. Dave, who can’t focus that far away, is staring in Gibbs’ general direction.

Gibbs shrugs again. “His daddy does well with direct orders.”

Ziva shakes her head, laughing.

Forty minutes later, when Ziva’s done nursing, Gibbs says, “Give him here. You go get some more sleep, too.”

Ziva cracks a wide yawn and nods, slowly, as she drags herself off the sofa and heads back to bed, too.

Gibbs cradles Dave in his hands, and holds him up for a bit of face to face time. “All right. We’ve got a routine here. She feeds you. You eat. Then burp time. Diaper time. Cuddle and song time, and then back to the crib you go. Where you will sleep. Got it?”

He’s fairly certain that a newborn cannot, in fact, provide someone with a snarky look as a response, but if that isn’t Tony’s smartass look coming back at him he doesn’t know what else it could be.

Gibbs shoots him the same look he’d have given Tony fifteen years ago. David is supremely unconcerned by said look.

Gibbs drapes the spit up rag over his shoulder, and then drapes Dave over the rag, and gets to patting and strolling around. “It’s a good thing you’re awfully cute.”

Dave may be a newborn, but, like his older cousins, he is in full possession of his own will, voice, and set of needs.

So, while: “Resolved, Saba is putting me to bed.” may be Jethro’s plan, it is not Dave’s plan.

Gibbs has successfully gotten the burps out of Dave, he’s got him in a clean diaper and onesie, he’s swaddled him snugly, he’s walked him around and sung to him until his little eyes started to droop. He, very gently lowered Dave into the crib, and as soon as Dave’s back hit the mattress his eyes went shooting open, and he began to wail.

Gibbs looks down at the little guy, who is expressing with loud vigor, in a way that puts him in mind of both of his parents when they’re in a bad mood, that he is NOT liking this development. AT ALL.

Gibbs stares down at him, and lays a hand on his tummy. “This is what your Aunt Breena does when you little guys want to stay up forever.”

Dave is unmollified by the parenting excellence that is Breena on getting babies to sleep. He continues to wail.

“Yeah. I hear it. You’re sleeping in there. I made that crib for you, and you are going to use it.”
More wailing.

“Give it up. I’ve had full grown men beg me for things, and I’ve had them demand them with a gun at my head. You aren’t gonna win this pissing contest. You’re gonna get sleeping in this crib, and your parents are going to get to sleep, and everyone will be happier in the long run.”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

“Uh huh. Sleepy time, Dave. Sleepy time.” Gibbs hums along, fairly certain Dave can’t hear him over the crying.

He can feel the eyes on the back of his head. “He’s okay Tony, we’re just having a little conversation about where little guy’s sleeping. Grab some earplugs and go back to sleep.”

Gibbs can feel the indecision behind him. Tony’s boy is crying. The man he trusts beyond all others says it’s for a good cause.

Tony steps close. “Tough love at four days old?”

“You want another night like last night?”

“Nope.”

“Ziva and I made sure he’s got everything he could possibly need. He’s not hungry, wet, uncomfortable, or anything like that. He’s just missing a human mattress. Earplugs, turn the water on in the bathroom, and go back to sleep. He’s four days old, he won’t fuss too long.”

“What if I don’t want him missing a human mattress?” Tony’s watching Dave yell his little head off, as Gibbs gently pats his tummy.

“You want him sleeping with you until he’s eight?”

“Not really…”

Gibbs looks up from Dave to Tony. “He’s not going anywhere, Tony. You’ve got tons of snuggle time coming up. He doesn’t need to sleep on you, too, unless you want to set a pattern that’ll be harder to break every day you keep it up.”

“I… No. Earplugs.”

Gibbs nods.

Seven minutes. The longest damn seven minutes in the history of seven minutes. Tony’s been in armed standoffs that went faster than listening to Dave wail for seven minutes.

But, eventually, the crying slows down, and gets quieter, and Tony risks popping out one of the earplugs… nothing.

Just quiet.

He’s not sure how to feel about that. If he were less tired, he might ponder this, but as it is, his body’s screaming for sleep, and nothing needs his attention right now, so…
Sleeping time.

Gibbs stands next to Dave for a long period after he gets him down. He’s hand rests on Dave’s tummy, rising and falling with each breath.

Gibbs has often wonder what Tony was like before his mother died, what Ziva was like before Tali was murdered.

He gazes down at the sleeping infant with Tony’s eyes and Ziva’s hair, and wonders if he’ll get to see a version of both of them, and, though those tragedies built some amazing adults, he hopes this child will be able to skate through an easy life of average hurts and scrapes.

After a few more minutes, when it’s clear that Dave’s really out, Gibbs heads off to the living room. He takes a quick listen at Tony and Ziva’s room, but he’s hearing concert snoring, so it sounds like everyone who should be sleeping is.

Which means he’s got some time to get into his ‘assumption.’

For example, when he got the card that said, “Patty’s Papillions” he assumed that the lady in question was a fan of butterflies. Why she’d name a kennel after them, he’s got no clue, but… People are weird.

A few minute of googling informs him that Papillion is a breed of dog. They’re some sort of spaniel. Little things with big perky ears. Kind of look like butterfly wings if you’re very poetic and have never seen a butterfly.

More googling says they’re very smart, easy to train, tend to like people, and high energy.

Gibbs smirks. If that didn’t describe Tony when he first met him…

He doesn’t want to talk on the phone. Too many people are sleeping, so he replies to Patty’s email asking if he can meet with her about maybe socializing a puppy for hearing ear work.

He gets an email back an hour later, saying that sure, she’d be happy to meet him about it.

A bit after that, he’s got a date to talk to a lady about a butterfly, and a crabby little boy who wants first lunch, now!
When he’s not fussing, Dave DiNozzo is a treat. Between him being a tad bigger than normal for a newborn, and Sean having shown up three months earlier at a tad small for a newborn, thus resulting in both of them being almost the same size, he seems like a huge baby boy.

He’ll just melt into hugs. Pick him up, drape him on your chest or shoulder, and he just conforms into a soft, warm weight that likes to coo contentedly as you pat his back.

He’s also a bit drooly as he does that, but that’s normal for a little guy.

Ziva’s on day five of nursing all of the feeds, and while Gibbs would never, ever suggest that Abby or Breena should give up their system for maximizing everyone’s sleep, he can also say that a baby fed nothing but breast milk smells like… heaven. (Okay, a clean baby fed nothing but breastmilk… Dave can get a bit whiffy when he’s in need of a cleanup.) He likes to stand there, holding Dave, face against the top of his head, just smelling him.

(Which is not to say the Sean doesn’t smell good when he’s all tidy, too, but… He doesn’t have the magic, cuddle-me, milk-fed baby scent. On the other hand, his mama looks significantly less like a sleep-deprived Zombie, even though both of the little guys are on the eat every three-ish hours routine. There are tradeoffs in life.)

Gibbs has a good afternoon with Dave, and with Ziva, while she’s feeding him. She’s pretty much doing everything she can to be sleeping as much as possible when Dave isn’t eating. That makes plenty of sense. She’s still healing up, she’s making all of his food, and for all of the ‘newborns sleep twenty hours a day’ bit, none of the ones Gibbs has ever seen have done that.

Dave probably sleeps about eighteen hours a day. Maybe. But he does it in hour and a half (ish) stretches. Which isn’t really enough time for an adult to lay down, get to sleep, sleep, and then wake up and feel like a human again. Yes, Ziva’s well-trained to drop off to sleep fast, and sleep deep, but her body still thinks it’s supposed to get several ninety minute sleep cycles, in a row, each night.

And that’s not happening.

When Dave’s in the last of his afternoon sleepy periods, Gibbs makes dinner for the grownups and just before putting it on the table, he pokes Tony awake.

Tony’s been sleeping most of the day, and is looking significantly more alert than he was the last time Gibbs saw him.

“Better?” Gibbs asks.

Tony rubs his eyes. “Yeah.” He sniffs the air. “Mmm… Smells good.”

“Thanks.” It’s just baked chicken, potatoes, and veg, but it’s got a lot of garlic and oregano, so the house does smell awfully good. “It’s in the oven, on warm. Not sure if you want to wait for her, or eat in shifts.”

Tony stretches, and then gets up, quietly leading Gibbs out of his room. “Not sure, either.” His stomach rumbles. “I’m eating now. We’ll work the rules out later.” Tony blinks at the clock. “5:30. About time for you to get home to your own place if you want to feed your own lady, right?”
“She’ll forgive me if I’m late.”

“Got a good reason for staying out?”

“Exactly.” Gibbs grabs his jacket, and both of them hear the first chirp of Dave waking up.

“And there’s my call,” Tony says. Gibbs nods. “Tomorrow morning?”

“Probably lunchtime.”

Tony shoots him a curious look as he heads towards Dave’s room.

“I’ll tell you about it tomorrow.”

He’s telling Abbi about it later that night when she says, “Jethro, have you ever seen a Papillion?”

“I googled them. They’re fluffy little things with big ears.”

She nods, that’s right. “All right. You think Mona can look at one and not decide it’s lunch?”

Mona looks up from her spot in front of the fireplace when she hears her name, and flashes Abbi a *I would never incorrectly assign a prey designation.*

Abbi looks back at her. “Yeah, wait until you see one of those things.” Then she looks back to Jethro. “So, you’re saying we’re getting another dog?”

“Maybe. I need to learn more about it, but… would it bug you?”

She laughs. “The idea of you and Mona training a Papillion makes me,” she’s got a huge grin on her face as she’s saying this, “smile so hard, there’s no possible way I could say no to that. You really googled them?”

“Yes. Okay, yeah, their cute and small, but…”

Abbi holds up her hands. “If you know what you’re getting into, I can’t wait to see this.”

When Gibbs read that Papillions were part of the ‘toy’ dog class, he didn’t understand exactly how tiny that was.

It took a few minutes to sink in as he got to Patty’s, because he thought the little things frisking around him were the *puppies.* They’re active, lively, friendly, and *tiny* little things. He figures if one of them really jumped it could maybe hit his knee. He’s picked one of them up, and… she weighs less than Dave, she’s also not as long as he is.

But, she’s friendly, and appears to appreciate his laid back say hello to the pooches technique. She doesn’t bark a whole lot, though Patty says that’s part of the training. If they aren’t properly trained they tend to be yappy little things.

That was the first clue that perhaps the tiny, little ball of fluff and ears in his hand, his *one* hand, might not have been a puppy.
The second clue followed hard on the first clue’s heels.

The even tinier little furballs come skittering in, and Gibbs realizes that the three overgrown guinea pigs frisking about at his feet are the adults and these tiny things that actually are smaller than guinea pigs are the puppies.

He’s staring at them, and “I’ve got softballs bigger than these things,” comes out of his mouth.

Patty, who’s been vastly amused at this whole exchange begins to laugh. “How did you get here again?”

“I…” Gibbs mouth is open as he watches Patty scoop up a puppy who just fits into the palm of her hand, and gives him to Gibbs. Gibbs shuts his mouth and looks at the little guy. He’s tiny, mostly white, with brown and black splotches on his ears and back. He’s soft, with silky hair, and, Gibbs looks at the ears more carefully, and gently lifts one up, it flops back down. “His ears are wrong, aren’t they?”

“Not for a Phalene, but for a Papillon, yes. They’re supposed to be up, and his are floppy. They make great pets. They’re still very smart, and easy to train, and because they’re little guys, they live a good long time for a dog, but, when people buy from me they want Papillons, butterflies, not Phalenes, moths.”

“So, the Phalenes become service dogs?”

She nods. “That’s the idea.” She carefully watches Jethro with…

“What’s his name?”

“Jackson.”

Gibbs looks up from the dog on his palm to the woman in front of him. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“Nope.” She points to the puppy in his hand. “Jackson,” then to the ones on the floor, “Lee, Sherman, Grant, and Sheridan. When I’m not delivering puppies, I’m a civil war historian. Why?”

He shakes his head again, looking into the blue-eyed Phalene in front of him. “That was my dad’s name.”

“Might be destiny.”
Jackson yips at him. And then pees on his hand. And Gibbs remembers why he said something along the lines of, “I’m too old for a puppy,” when he got Mona.

“Let me get you a towel.”

“I take it they’re still being paper trained?” Gibbs says as he wipes off his hand, and then goes to wash them off.

“Yeah. They don’t normally get to leave the mudroom.”

“How old are they?”

“Six weeks. At eight weeks, Jackson would normally go off to learn how to play with other dogs and kids and everything. For pets, we keep them with us until they’re twelve weeks, but that’s because we want them to see home as pack number one, and then the new family as pack number two. With service dogs, they’ve got to be comfortable all over the place with a lot of different experiences, and a lot of different people, so they leave a bit earlier.”

“Except the person who used to do that for you is now…”

“In Atlanta. They moved all of the surviving IRS people down there.”

Gibbs winces at that, and Patty nods.

“Deidre said that socializing them isn’t exactly like training a pet.”

“It’s not. You don’t want a service dog to be territorial. You want him to be protective of his master, but not so protective that he causes trouble. You need him to be able to go anywhere and handle anything. Most of the people we place these dogs with are children, six to eight years old. We like them old enough to know the dog is a dog, and not a toy, but because they’re so small, agile, and smart, little guys like these do well in schools. If you get a Phalene as a service dog in first grade, he’ll get you through high school, and likely a bit of college.”

“How long does socialization training last?”

“I like to see ten months or so. Get them to a year old, and then they move onto service dog training.” She watches Gibbs eyeing Jackson, who’s playing with his brothers and sisters. “Which gets us to the hardest part of this. You don’t get to keep him. Ten months from now, you give him to a trainer. If you become the trainer, you’ll give him up when he’s two. When he’s about twenty months, you’ll find a new owner for him, and you, and the child, and the puppy will work together, and then you’ll say goodbye. I’ve lost more socializers on that last part than anything that happens on the rest of it.

“These are great companion animals. They’re lovely little balls of wicked smart fluff. They’re high energy. And they’re fun to be around. And you’ve got to shape this dog into something anyone would love to have for the rest of its life, including you, and then give him away.

“That’s the kicker, can you do that?”

Gibbs watches the puppies frisking around, on the other side of a baby gate, and nods. “Yeah. Rule eleven.”

“Rule eleven?”

“When the case is done, let it go. I was a cop for a long time. At the end of the day, you’ve got to let
them go, or they’ll eat you.”

“Might not be exactly the same sort of thing, but, yes, something like that. You mentioned you’ve got another dog?”

Gibbs nods.

“What is she?”

He looks away from the puppies to Patty. “Big. The rescue said she was a Labrador-Doberman mix, but one of my kids thinks she’s a Rottweiler.”

“Rotties, Dobies, and Pitbulls have a hard time getting adopted. That wouldn’t be the first time a shelter fudged a dog’s background to get her a home.”

“Well, I didn’t care much one way or the other about that. She’s good with kids, protective of my house, and like you said, razor smart. One intro, and she knows who’s allowed in the house and who isn’t.”

“Good. Still, first few days, don’t leave a big dog alone with one of these little guys. They tend to look at them and think, lunch. And even if your personal dog would never do that, they also tend to look at them and think, toy, and it’s way too easy for a big dog to kill one of these little guys just playing with them. How big is…”

“Mona. Eighty-five pounds.”

“If she sits on a Phalene puppy, that’s the end of the puppy. You can’t accidentally step on him, either. They’re generally pretty good at getting out of the way, but you’ve got to be careful about that. You can’t let little kids play with them unsupervised, either. We don’t let children under five have one of our dogs, because they just don’t get that they aren’t toys. And unlike a Golden Retriever or something that sized a little kid can really hurt one of our dogs.”

Gibbs nods at that, too. “Got a lot of little kids at our place. Five grandchildren and one on the way. But one of us always has eyes on them.”

“Good.” She nods to the other side of the baby gate, into the mud room. “You want get in there and spend some time with Jackson, see if you two hit it off?”

“Yeah.”

When he was a kid, Jethro had had a pet guinea pig. Picking Jackson up, he’s surprised at how easily he can remember playing with Wayne. (He thinks he named him after John Wayne, but he was young enough it also could have been a Batman reference.)

Jackson has the same sort of soft weight, and fills out his palm the same sort of way.

He’s a lot more expressive than Wayne was. And way more energetic. He’ll run up to Gibbs, scamper into his lap, leap up on him, trying to lick his face (not gonna happen unless Gibbs lays on the floor or Jackson grows wings), then he chews on Gibbs’ fingers some, and runs back off to wrestle with his brothers.
When Mona wants to frisk, she likes to go for a jog/walk with them, or she’ll run around the backyard fetching tennis balls. Gibbs imagines tossing his tennis ball. For Mona, it’s dart off, grab it in her mouth, and bring it back. Jackson is two tennis balls high. Gibbs is fairly certain that if he tossed a tennis ball, Jackson would go tearing off after it, but what the hell he might do with it if he caught it, Gibbs has no idea.

Jackson comes bounding back to him, scuffling up into his lap, trying to climb up his tummy. Gibbs picks him up, letting him get to the face licking he wants to do.

After a few enthusiastic licks, Jackson settles back on his hind paws on Gibbs’ palm, and puts one of his front paws on Gibbs’ nose, looking at him, (from very close up) in the eye.

Gibbs can’t see that close up, even with his glasses on. He pulls his hand further away, so he can focus on Jackson. Little blue eyes are staring at him. A tiny furry head with floppy little ears is tilted to the side. If a puppy can appraise someone, Jackson is doing it.

“We gonna make some kid’s life easier?”

Jackson barks at him.

Gibbs gently pets the top of his head with his forefinger. He nods. “Good probie.”

Jackson looks confused.

“Right now, you’re a probationary hearing ear dog. A probie. We’ve got about fifty rules, and it’s my job to teach ‘em to you. You learn my rules, and you get to stop being a probie, and become a full-fledge hearing ear dog. Sound good?”

Jackson barks again.

“We’re going to meet a lot of people. We’re going to go a lot of places. You’re going to have to be okay with that.”

Jackson tilts his head again. He’s looking behind Gibbs.

“Probationary hearing ear dog?” Patty asks.

“Works with baby cops. Might work with baby dogs.”

She laughs. “Sounds like you’re in.”

“I’m in, assuming little guy is.”

Jackson barks again.

Half an hour later, in the midst of an eye-bleedingly boring meeting, Abbi gets a text. It’s a picture of Gibbs with Jackson. *His name is Jackson.*

She’s laughing as she looks at it. *He’s a gerbil!*

*He’s a little bigger than that.*

*You’ve got to bring him home!*
In two weeks, when he’s old enough, he’s coming home.

She sends him back a grinning emoji.
Getting ready to attend a Bris feels really bizarre to Tim.

It’s pretty much the same thing as the christening parties they’ve had for his kids and Jimmy’s. He gets that. But…

But a bit of water on the forehead is not the same thing as having your foreskin snipped off. Especially with an audience.

He knows, intellectually, that this is not a big deal. His own foreskin didn’t make the return trip from the hospital with him after his birth, nor did Jimmy’s, or Tony’s, or Gibbs’ or… actually… okay… Ducky wasn’t born in the US, which means he likely still does have a foreskin, which is something Tim’s thinking he doesn’t need to contemplate in too great of detail.

The point being, most of the men he knows have had this bit of surgery, and gone on to have fulfilling lives, great sex, father children, blah, blah, blah.

But, given the option for Sean, they decided to follow the sage advice of, ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t snip it off.’

Still, even though he’s personally gone through it, though he obviously doesn’t remember it, he’s not sure he can watch a Bris without wanting to curl in on himself and whimper.

Likewise, Jimmy’s not exactly a looking forward to watching this, either. As of this point in time, the plan is that all of Donny’s bits will remain attached to him, too, upon his arrival in the outside world.

And, Tony, whose conversion involved a few drops of blood from his penis, isn’t looking like he’s really enthusiastic about it, either. The three of them are helping to get Tony and Ziva’s apartment ready for the party. And though they’re “putting the snack trays together” what they’re actually doing is commiserating in the kitchen.

“It’d be one thing if I didn’t have to watch it, you know?” Tony says.

And they do. “I had to do two in medical school.” Jimmy winces a bit. “And compared to say, working with a baby who’s screaming from a perforated eardrum, a little guy who’s fairly chill until you give him the Novocain, and then he fusses for a bit, until he zons out, isn’t that bad, but… You’re standing there pretty much thinking, ‘God, sorry, little guy,’ feeling like the world’s biggest pervert because you’re holding this strange baby’s dick between your thumb and finger, while whichever Pede is in charge of teaching that unit hovers over your shoulder and talks you through it.”

“Whoa, they let med students do that?” Tony looks horrified.

“How do you think we become doctors? Gotta learn somehow, and that learning involves real people. On the upside, there’s no shot you’ve got the Mohel-in-training, right?”

“NO! He’s like sixty-years-old and has been doing it forever.”

“Good. You know how they give you those malpractice numbers…” Tony nods. “I’m not saying the older guys don’t screw up, but especially on ‘routine minor surgery,’ if you’re looking at a catastrophic screw up, you’re likely looking at a med student.”
“You didn’t…” Tony says.

Jimmy shakes his head. “NO! Both of them turned out just fine. I was so nervous I almost cut myself on the first one, but once I got over it, I did a tidy job. Still, I don’t think it’s an accident that most of the people who do them are women.”

“Wow, all of the food is still sitting in the fridge. You guys are setting some serious records for efficiency here, aren’t you?” Abbi says as she heads in to get ingredients for punch making.

Chastised, they get back to actually doing some work.

And, if the idea of watching this is bizarre, the idea that it’s a party strikes Tim as even odder. Okay, yes, he’s aware of the fact that inviting everyone you know to watch someone dribble water on your baby is in no way sane. It’s a tribal ritual designed to provide some sort of ceremony to show you’ve got a new tribe member, Tim gets that.

But, water, minor surgery…

It feels weird.

But the Rabbi is happy. The Mohel is happy. Schmiel, who’s been staying at their house, and pretty much won’t put Dave down now that he’s here, is about to burst with joy at seeing his favorite girl’s little boy and welcoming him into the fold.

So, it’s a party.

Where the people who see this as a rite of passage are having a blast.

And like with a christening, it starts with about half an hour of socializing, of showing off Dave, and letting everyone congratulate Tony and Ziva and pet the new baby.

That part feels familiar. And then it’s not familiar.

Tim and Jimmy have been picked to be kvatters, messengers. Once the Rabbi lets them know it’s ceremony time, it’s their job to hunt down the special ceremonial pillow (Jimmy), take Dave from Ziva (Tim), and then carry Dave, on the pillow, to Elijah’s chair.

Schmiel told them that Elijah, in spirit, attends all B’rit Milahs and Seders. So, Tony’s special comfy lounge chair, the only one in the house big enough that Dave’s parents aren’t nervous about Dave possibly toppling off of it, has been roped into hosting the Prophet.

As Tim and Jimmy take Dave to the chair, the entire group, says, in varying levels of approaching correct pronunciation, “Baruch haba!”

Senior, Dave’s only blood grandparent, then picks Dave up, and settles himself, with Dave, into the chair.

Senior’s looking… nervous about this. The Mohel recites his prayer of blessing for Dave, and then, with Dave being held in Senior’s lap, gets to it.

Senior looks away.

Most of the people who didn’t grow up with this, especially the people of a male variety, who greatly
outnumber the people who did grow up with this, are doing their best not to cringe. (Even though a select group of said male people (Tony, Jimmy) know that Jimmy did not return the Novocain he got for Ziva, and has made sure that Dave is not going to feel this.)

Tim is mildly amused that Fornell, who has been in live fire fights, who has been in shootouts, who saved the damn day in a freaking tank less than a year ago, goes gray and almost passes out. His daughter also finds that vastly amusing, too.

Tim supposes, given his own, somewhat less impressive, but not miniscule history of daring-do, the fact that he’s watching Fornell rather than what’s going on with the Mohel, could also be seen as amusing.

And then, after a moment or two, it’s done.

Dave’s crying, but he was crying before it started, and he’s likely to be crying for a while after. And Jimmy’s right, that’s definitely a pissed off baby cry, but compared to Kelly with a double ear infection, fever, and first teeth starting to cut through, it’s not that pissed off.

And being immediately handed back to Ima, and a moment later, getting a breast in his mouth, seems to be mollifying Dave to some degree.

From there, there’s another prayer, and Tony’s Hebrew has gone from passable to good over the years, and he gets through the traditional father’s blessing with not just ease, but grace, and though almost everyone in the group knows this child’s name, it is a naming ceremony, so Dave’s name, and the meaning behind it, is announced to the group.

---

Once the deal is done, so to say, it’s basically a christening party. The whole family is here, including the collected Slaters. There are lots of blue and silver decorations. The food is good. And everyone wants to see, pet, hold, and love on Dave.

Though, everyone, is having an awfully hard time prying him out of his Papa’s hands.

DiNozzo Senior is over the moon. He is firmly convinced that the baby in his hands is the finest thing in the history of things and the sun rises just to light up the little person he’s holding.

He took his jacket off shortly after getting in, draped the spit up cloth over his shoulder, and has been providing Dave with a soft, comfy chest and shoulder to lounge on every minute Dave hasn’t been in the hands of the Mohel or Ziva.

He’s patting his boy gently, bopping up and down a bit as he walks the house, showing him off to everyone, and just glowing with him.

He’s not even talking all that much, something of a first for Senior. As often as he can, he’ll sneak off with Dave, find a quiet spot, sit down, and just hold him, gazing at him, gently stroking his ear or cheek, feeling his little fingers clenched around one of his big ones.

He is, as Ducky put it, with a huge smile on his face, “besotted with love.”

Tony watches it, wonders if that’s what Senior was like when he was a baby, and decides it doesn’t matter.

His son deserves adoring grandparents.
Senior notices Tony hovering, watching him, as he sits on Tony’s bed, with Dave on his knees, and waves his son over.

“He’s so beautiful, Junior.”

Tony smiles. “I know, Dad.”

Senior pries one of his fingers out of Dave’s grasp and wraps his arm around Tony. He bends down a bit to rub Dave’s nose with his own, and then straightens back up. He swallows before he says, “Your mother’s been gone for so long… I don’t think about her much, or miss her often, but… I wish she could have seen him. She always loved babies. She barely ever put you down.” He smiles softly at that. “I used to have pictures of her and you, sleeping together on our sofa. That thing Abby’s been using to carry Sean around on her chest, she would have loved one of those.”

Tony smiles at that.

“Do you… remember much about her?”

Tony shrugs and sighs. “I… This much time… How many of the memories are memories, how many of them are stories I made up? I’ve still got some pictures of her. I remember going to movies with her. I remember her vampire obsession…”

“You’ve got her eyes. Little boy here does, too. Your sense of humor, the willingness to be silly and clown around, that’s entirely from her. Basketball was her, too. There was a girls’ team at her high school, and she was the center.”

“Dad… what happened to her?”

Senior exhales a long, slow breath, and gently strokes Dave’s cheek, looking at his eyes. He sighs again. “She always had dark periods. That was just part of who she was. And… no one thought much about that. Some days she was in a ‘mood.’ Her mother used to say it was a ‘lady problem’.”

“But it wasn’t.”

“No. When she wasn’t in one of her ‘moods,’ she was the most sparkling, amazing woman. High energy, creative, spirited…”

“Bi-polar.”

Senior nods. “We didn’t know it then. And back then the term was manic-depressive. But her manic phase just looked really… healthy and accomplished. She could get so much done and have such a good time doing it on the manic side that no one knew it was part of the problem, at first.”

Senior licks his lips. Dave chirps at him, and he lifts him from his lap to his shoulder. “Better?”

Dave coos.

“Good.” He kisses Dave’s head. “When you were about three she fell into a dark period that she couldn’t shake. Before that, dark periods would never last more than a week or so, and this one just kept going and going. The doctor said we should reduce stress, get her somewhere less hectic. We got a nanny, and a housekeeper, and moved out of the city. And, for a little while, she came back. Bright and funny and active. She spent, maybe two months, on non-stop house decorating. And then the dark came back.

“We got new doctors. They didn’t have a lot of treatments for depression, but we tried them. And
she hated them because they made her feel horrible. Probably because she didn’t actually have depression.

“And it took about three years for someone to finally ask what the ‘light’ times were like. And, we got her on the right meds, and you two went to see movies, and she evened out, and… I thought it was getting better.” Senior’s looking in the direction of the mirror on above Tony and Ziva’s dresser, but he’s not seeing it.

“On the meds, there are no lows, but there are no highs, either. She started to swing into a manic side, and she wanted to feel that good again. At least… that’s what we think happened. She didn’t leave a note or anything. But, we’d get three months of the pills at a time, and there were two and a half months’ worth when we found her. Should have been something closer to ten days’ worth. I didn’t know she wasn’t taking the medication. Until it was too late.

“I was working in the city. She was good on Sunday when I left, and on Wednesday, the housekeeper found her unconscious. She’d drunk a full bottle of vodka and taken five of my sleeping pills.” Senior swallows, hard. “I don’t know if it was intentional, or not. When she was ‘on,’ she always had a hard time sleeping. Too many ideas to work on. Less alcohol, two fewer pills, and she probably would have pulled through. The doctor thought she was just trying to get to sleep, but… He would have told me that, anyway.”

Tony’s watching Senior staring at nothing, and feels a hardness creeping up on him. That might not be a rose tinted glasses version of what happened, but it’s certainly missing some major details. “Didn’t help that you were never home and screwing anything in a skirt.”

Senior turns toward Tony, and looks him in the eye. “No, it didn’t.”

Tony’s stunned to see his father just take it. No deflection, no attempts to defend what he did. “That’s it?”

“When you know you’ve behaved like a jackass, Junior, and the person you’re talking to also knows you behaved like a jackass, there’s no reason to pretend you didn’t. She was sick, and hurting, and that hurt so bad… I didn’t know what to do, but I knew I didn’t want to feel it, so I ran away from it. I didn’t want to watch her fall apart, so I didn’t. I was home more, before she died, because she was getting it back together, but for a few years there, I saw her as little as I could.

“No highs, no lows. That’s why she didn’t like the meds. The lows were killing her, and she didn’t like them, but she loved the highs, and… And you can’t get the highs without risking the lows.

“I spent a long time running away from anything that looked like it could be a low. You never get the highs, either. Not real highs. Can’t do it without risking the lows. But that was okay, because the lows are terrifying.”

Tony nods. He knows everything anyone ever could about that.

“Losing her… when she was in the dark, and it didn’t look like it would ever end, that hurt so bad, scared me so much, I pulled away. Pulled away from you, too. Couldn’t risk the low, so we didn’t get to have any of the highs, either.” Senior strokes Dave’s cheek. “I did a bad job with your Daddy, but I’m going to do a better job with you.” He turns his focus to Tony. “And I do regret it. I’d make it different if I could. But I can’t. So I’ll be the kind of grandfather your son deserves.”

He still has an arm around Tony, and he pulls Tony a little closer, and kisses him on the forehead.
Most of the guests have left, and Dave is in his crib, snoozing, as Schmiel gets a moment alone with Ziva.

“And how are you, my Ziva?”

He’s caught the onslaught of emotions on her face through the course of this morning.

She switches into Hebrew. It’s not so much that she doesn’t want everyone to overhear this, it’s that… Moments like this are very full, and happy, and rich, and real, and… at the same time they are hollow, missing the people who should have been here.

And right now, Hebrew, the language she learned to speak as a baby, the first words that filled her world, are part of trying to fill that hollow.

“I do not know, Schmiel.”

He waits for her to keep going, to set her words and feelings into place in her head.

“We celebrate, and the celebration is good. It matters. But… So many empty chairs.”

Schmiel gathers her close. He smiles gently. He survived Buchenwald. His family did not. He, like Ziva, is the last member of the family he was born into. “We celebrate all the harder, love deeper, live more, for the ones who aren’t here. And we still miss them, still feel the holes where they belong.”

Unlike everyone else here, Schmiel knew her family before it fell apart. Before they lost Tali, before Eli went cold, and Ari went hot. He knows, better than anyone else, that even with all of the pain of her family, she still feels like her father and brother should be here, that she misses the sister she used to whisper secrets to, and above and beyond all of it, there should be a woman here, the one who gave birth to her, to help her be a mother.

So many holes.

“It is hard to stay on the happy side of it. Hard to keep up the smiles.”

He nods, kisses her. “That is normal. We laughed at Jacob’s,” his oldest son, “bris, and we cried, too.”

Tears are leaking from her eyes. She wipes them away, feeling a bit silly, and Breena can tell her over and over that being on a hormonal rollercoaster is normal a week after you have a baby, but she doesn’t feel like the kind of person who should cry at sad memories. Or at wishes for that which cannot be.

But should and are are not the same thing, and no matter how much she’s like dry eyes, they aren’t going along with her desires on this.

Schmiel cuddles her.

____________________

Tony had been seeing the Rabbi out, and when he turns back into their apartment, he sees Ziva sitting on the sofa, with Schmiel, crying.

Eight-day old baby, she’s been a bit… variable… as to her mood lately. It’s normal.
He heads over. “Hey…” He’s keeping his voice quiet and soft. Sometimes she likes that when she’s in a sad mood, sometimes she thinks it’s patronizing. He’s hoping he’s on the right side.

He is. She looks up and offers him a half smile.

“We are missing our lost loves,” Schmiel says.

Tony sits down with them, and wraps an arm around Ziva, too. She rests her head against his chest and shoulder. “Dad and I were talking about that, a bit, too.”

Schmiel, realizes that he’s never met Tony’s mother, and there’s a reason for that. “Your mother should be here, too.”

Tony nods. “But she’s not. And so should yours,” he says to Ziva. He forces a smile onto his face. “You knew them, right?” he says to Schmiel.

“Yes.”

“Tell us a good story about them. Something happy and fun?”

“I can do that.” Another smile spreads over Schmiel’s face. “In fact… About thirty-five years ago, I was invited to a celebration similar to this one.

“There’s a small kibbutz, ringed in orange and lemon groves. Only about fifty people live and work there at any given time. A young woman named Miriam had been born there, and as she grew close to the birth of her own daughter, she wanted to be near her mother and her grandmother.”

“Ima,” Ziva says.

“Yes, your Ima. You have much of your father’s face, Ziva, but always her hair and smile. She and your father, who in those days was still a Mossad agent, headed south to your grandparents. For what felt like a long wait.” He eyes Ziva. “Someone was supposed to show up around the end of August or the beginning of September.” He strokes her face. “Never patient. Always in a rush. As a child everything had to happen now, but when it came to your birth, you were willing to linger. Your Ima would say that was the only thing you weren’t in a hurry for.”

Ziva smiles a little at that. “I was comfortable.”

“Apparently so. But when you finally came, the word came out, phone calls sang through the country. ‘It’s a girl!’ ‘Miriam’s daughter is here!’”

“No name,” Tony says.

“We take not telling the name until the ceremony seriously back home. Only your parents knew your name. For the first eight days, you were beautiful baby girl, or Miriam’s daughter.”

“Not Eli’s?” Tony asks again.

“No. Our families are matrilineal. Ziva may have been a David by name, but she was a Jew because of her Ima. As the word spread, unless it was being given to someone who only knew Eli, she was Miriam’s daughter.

“And so, seven days after your birth, I and a lot of other people made the trip down to a Kibbutz ringed with trees full of ripening oranges and lemons. Because on the eighth day, we were going to celebrate!
“There is one way Israel and America is very similar, almost everyone is from somewhere else. It’s a bit more literal in Israel because the country is younger. It’s only the children who are the age of David who reliably have both parents born in Israel. And it will be their children who will have, on average, three grandparents born in Israel.

“But, like here, the way we celebrate new babies varies quite a bit depending on where those baby’s parents are from. And Ziva’s family, who settled from Russia to a communal, egalitarian, Kibbutz believed that every baby, not just the boys, deserved a Bris.

“So we came for the B’rit Milah.

“Your grandfather and I carried you to the Rabbi. And he announced your name, Ziva Azar David. The radiant flame.

“Your father stood up and told stories of his mother, Azar, and how he hoped you’d be strong and clever like she was.

“Your mother told us about her name choice, Ziva, and how you were a light in her life, and how she hoped you light the lives of others.

“Both of them held you, and blessed you.

“And we spent the day, celebrating, eating and drinking in your honor, at tables laid with fruits and pastry, amid the lemon trees.

“And you, beautiful girl, watched everything. You didn’t cry much as a baby, but you did watch. Eyes open wide, taking in, and thinking about, everything.

“Three years later, when we gathered together again to do it for Tali, you got to hold her while your parents blessed her. I have two very clear images from each B’rit. The first one, from yours, is your Ima holding you, and your father is standing behind her, his chin on her shoulder, looking down at you. Both of them,” Schmiel smiles gently at Tony and Ziva, “had dark circles under their eyes. Like your David, you weren’t exactly the greatest sleeper when you were brand new, but they were both so in love with you. The image from Tali’s is similar. Your Ima was again holding Tali, but you were in your Abba’s arms. He was holding you up so you could see her well… The oldest of the girls here… Molly?”

Ziva nods at that, he’s got the right name with the right girl.

“Her coloring is lighter, but she has the same build and curly hair that you did. Eli had you in one arm, and the other around Miriam. You were reaching over, trying to get to your sister. I remember your one little hand touching her face.” He chuckles a bit. “Eli had a very startled look on his face, because you moved fast, and he was afraid he was going to drop you, but Miriam was smiling.”

Ziva’s almost afraid to ask, worried that it will tarnish this image, but she wants to know. “And where was Ari?”

Schmiel can see the edge of fear in her eyes, and smiles again. “Taking the picture of it. There’s a reason why I have such a clear image of that moment. Your father had the picture of it up in his office for a long time.”

“Oh.”

“Ari wasn’t at your B’rit. It was held during a school day, and his mother didn’t want him to miss classes. Tali’s was during a holiday, so he was allowed to come. There was another picture from that
day, your father took that one, of you and Ari holding Tali. You and Ari are smiling, and Tali’s wailing. I think, by that point, it was naptime for her.”

They hear a small cry coming from Dave’s room.

“And it sounds like naptime is over for your little boy.”

Ziva heads into Dave’s nursery. He’s lying on his back, flailing a bit, looking… crabby. Quite a bit crabbier than he usually is upon first waking up.

She gathers him up, and he fusses and glares at her.

“Clean diaper, a little baby Tylenol, and nursing time. You will feel better soon.”

He indicates to her that none of that is happening quickly enough to suit him. Her breasts, also responding to a crying baby, are letting her know to hurry up on getting Dave on them, too.

She does a careful job of getting him cleaned up, makes sure to reapply the antibiotic ointment, and gives him a few drops of baby Tylenol. None of that appears to be making him happy.

Sitting back in the rocking chair Gibbs made them, opening her shirt, and getting him settled in her arms on her breast, does.

Skin to skin, his little heart thumping against her stomach, his tiny hand resting on the top of her breast, as he’s blissfully sucking away, eyes open and looking up at her, Ziva feels new tears forming. These are happy ones.

Tony slips in, quietly, and kneels next to the chair. Ziva doesn’t look up from Dave, but her free hand finds his and squeezes. He kisses her forehead and and gently strokes Dave’s face.

And a day later, he finds an email in his inbox. It’s from Schmiel. No words, just a picture of that moment.
First day back. Tony peels his eyes open as his alarm wails at him, whacks it with the back of his hand, fast, hoping that Ziva and Dave have slept through it. He glances up, and sees both of them snoozing in the bed next to him.

If he had to guess, he’d say that Dave got his first breakfast, or second midnight snack, and dropped off right after or during. From the looks of it, Ziva did, too.

There’s a moment of him just staring at them. His woman cuddling his baby, both of them sound asleep in his bed, and a very primal sense fills him. He snuggles into Ziva, wrapping around her, and gently rests his hand on Dave’s tummy, holding both of them, and this tiny moment of quiet, for as long as he can.

Which isn’t very long at all. He already pushed his wakeup time as far back as he could and still get to work at something approximating “on time.”

So, out of bed, into the shower, into clothing, all of it done fast and somewhat haphazard, and then, stuffing a bagel between his teeth, he grabs his keys and go bag, and gets out of his home and back to work.

It’s stupid, but for a second, he feels like he’s in the wrong place when the elevator opens. His default mental image of the bullpen is orange and gray. But it’s not orange and gray anymore, and hasn’t been since last year.

Sunshiny (blinding) yellow, and green meet his tired eyes as he heads in to his desk. Draga’s already in, at his computer, working on something. As Tony gets a bit closer, he can see Johnson at her desk, too.

He turns into their quad, and finds that Spader isn’t in, yet. And he sighs, pleased by that, good not to be the last guy in.

Draga looks over to him as he flops into his chair. “Oh, I know that look.”

Then he stands up, roots around in his desk for a moment, and comes up with a Red Bull can. He takes it over to Tony. “Started drinking these when Kevin was born.” He places it on Tony’s desk, and then gently pats Tony’s top drawer, a grin on his face.

Tony opens the drawer, and there’s twelve more Red Bulls in there.

“Oh… Thanks.”

“No problem, Boss.” Draga just sits there, next to his desk, and a moment later Johnson’s right next to him, both of them waiting, expectantly, for something. It takes a moment for it to click. “Oh, right. You want pictures!”

“Haven’t seen the little guy since the Bris last week, so yes, we want pictures,” Johnson says.
Tony nods, and then opens the damn Red Bull, because he’s apparently so tired he’s getting stupid. He takes a sip and… It’s not a flavor he enjoys, but it does appear to be zinging through his system and making his teeth buzz with energy. It’ll do.

Then he grabs his phone, opens it up, and proceeds to show Johnson and Draga, and eventually Spader shots from home. (Spader apparently had gotten in before him, but got sent on the breakfast run, and was out getting him a bear claw and coffee, with extra sugar, which Tony appreciates. The bear claw is raspberry chocolate, and after a few sips of coffee, he pours the Red Bull into the cup, and that not only kills the taste but gives him enough caffeine he starts to feel alive again.) Most of the pictures are variations on the theme of Dave with his eyes open, or Dave sleeping, or Dave flailing his hands and feet around. He’s a not quite three-week old baby, they don’t do a whole lot.

He’s showing off Dave sleeping on his belly, on the floor, with Mona wrapped around him, muzzle on his back, (Ziva set that up, she wanted a shot of them together.) when the phone rings.

Tony grabs it. And he knows this dance, and his team does, too. Okay, they aren’t quite as smooth as could be, Johnson and Spader wait for him to get off the phone and say, “Grab your gear” before going back to their desks to get their stuff, but they do have everything packed and ready to go.

It’s a good first day back case. Apparently, there’s a tank missing from the marine base at Quantico. It’s so thoroughly missing that it’s now officially “stolen.”

They roll on out, in their NCIS jackets and caps, ready to get to the bottom of this. Tony takes notes of the few sets of eyes on them as they head to the motor pool in their blue jackets and caps. He’s behind the other three, and yeah, he smiles, they do look like LAW, out to go and set the world right. He approves.

“How do you lose a tank?” Johnson asks once they’re in the van.

“Yeah,” Spader says. “I mean, they can’t be easy to steal, can they? Not like you just put one in your pocket and wander off with it.”

Tony and Draga share a look. They both have a suspicion of where said tank might be. Or, a suspicion of who can tell them where said tank may be. Still, this is probably a good training exercise for their newbies.

“So, tell us what happened?” Tony says to Lt. James Segal, the poor quartermaster in charge of this problem.

“If I knew what happened, I wouldn’t need you guys!” He’s tall, harried, and looking so frustrated that he’s ready to chew through concrete. “All I know is that it’s on inventory documents until September, and then it’s gone.”

“When did you last do an inventory?” Johnson asks.

“We do them every month.” Segal is gritting his teeth.
“September was eight months ago,” Spader says.

“You aren’t from around here, are you!” Segal shoots back. “Just moved in from… anywhere else?”

Spader would have to admit that’s true. “Uh, yeah.”

“Things have been a bit…” Segal chooses to keep his language PG, and doesn’t say the words that are clearly in his head. “upside down lately. And the Virginia National Guard had one system, and we had another system, and we’re just getting things back to something approaching normal.”

“Okay. So, we’re getting back to normal. When did you notice the tank was missing?” Tony asks.

“In March, when we got control of this base again.”

“That’s still two inventories, right?” Johnson asks.

Segal nods. “First one, we just assume that everything is upside down and backwards. Because the first one, everything was upside down and backwards. The jackass from the National Guard didn’t know his…” Segal stops himself again. “Anyway, we were spending a lot of time rearranging, and figured that it was just in the wrong place.”

“A tank?” Draga says, with a smile. He can’t help it. This isn’t a spoon. It’s not like you can stick one in the wrong drawer or something.

“Cut it. Do you have any idea how big Quantico is? Or how about every other military base in Virginia, all of which ended up being run by the National Guard, who didn’t give a... about which branch of the military normally did what. We checked all of them, looking for the damn thing. We found three other tanks in the wrong damn place, but not ours.”

“I’m sorry. So, you find several tanks in the wrong place, but not your tank,” Draga says.

“Right. Some as...jerk apparently decided to play scatter the tanks, and then didn’t put them back in the right places. We aren’t the only ones missing some, but most of the AWOL ones belong to the Army.”

“Ah…” Tony says with a smile tugging at his lips. “So, do you think these are stolen, or just reallocated?”

“Right now, I don’t care. I’ve called everyone in Virginia who might have one, and mine is gone. So, I called in you guys.”

“All right,” Tony says with a smile. He taps a folder. “This is all the specs for the missing tank?”

“Yeah.”

Tony smiles again, flipping through the folder. He doesn’t know, not by sight, if this was one of Fornell’s tanks, but he’s pretty certain that only one “as...jerk” was playing scatter the tanks, and that he’s got said “as...jerk’s” phone number on his contact list.

He’s also, intensely, looking forward to tweaking Fornell on his “We gave them back” abilities.

“Guess who I was just talking to,” Tony says to start his phone call to Fornell.
“DiNozzo, do I sound like I’ve got time for guessing games?”

“You’re retired; I thought you’ve got all the time in the world.”

“I wish. I’m busier now than I used to be.”

“Ha.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’m in and out of depositions all day. The Calfalone case.”

“Oh, right. Jethro was telling me about that. Well, guess what, the Ghost of Cases Past is about to pop up again.”

“Great. What’s about to bite me in the ass?”

“Open your email for the tag numbers. Apparently, not all of those tanks got put back right.”

Tony hears Fornell cursing under his breath. A minute later he says, “Yeah. I know who was driving that one.” A long sigh follows that. “I’ll call you back.”

Spader and Johnson are looking at Tony as he gets off the phone and Draga drives them back to the Navy Yard. “You’re saying one of your buddies, a retired FBI Agent—“ Spader says.

“He wasn’t retired then,” Draga adds.

“Stole a bunch of tanks, and used them to shuttle food into DC and people out?” Spader finishes.

“And saved our lives with them. Technically speaking, he borrowed them, just without official permission,” Tony says, tucking his phone into his pocket. “As he said, he gave them back. Just looks like they didn’t all get back exactly where they belonged.”

“And, same question we had before, how do you steal a tank?” Johnson asks, disbelieving. “They’re not tiny, you don’t just slip one into your pocket. And they aren’t cars. It’s not like people park them on the road and you can hotwire one.”

“Paperwork, attitude, good posture, a lot of confusion, and eventually, if you show up with several other tanks, wear the right uniform, and act like you expect a tank, people will generally give you one,” Tony says.

“I don’t know if that’s the most depressing thing I’ve ever heard, or…” Johnson lets that thought dribble off. “Yeah… That’s just… So cynical.”

“Cynical works, especially in the military. Show up with a high enough rank on your shoulder and proper paperwork, and you can pull almost anything off,” Tony replies.

Cynical doesn’t even begin to cover it, as, three hours later, Tony, Draga, Johnson, and Spader pull the NCIS van up to a small parking lot outside of Rickets Hall at the Naval Academy.

Next to that parking lot, there’s a small triangle of grass.
With a tank on it.

As they get out of the van, moving toward the tank, wind from the bay sweeping over them as a small crowd of Midshipmen stare at them, in something that might be called awe, cynical goes whizzing by, leaving them miles back, in the territory of… Hell, Tony doesn’t know what’s past cynical, but this sure as hell is it.

He stares at the tank, and more specifically, the small bronze plate that’s been attached to the side of it.


“Ummm…” Spader strokes the metal in front of him. “Okay, I’m a know-nothing Squid, but… This tank isn’t that old, is it?”

Tony’s shaking his head. The tank in front of them can’t be more than ten years old, and might be younger. “Nope.”

“And…” Johnson pulls out her phone to check. “Yeah. My Daddy’s told me a lot about Vietnam. He was there. And, March 3, 1969, that’s a tank battle all right, but an Army tank battle. Who was driving this thing?”

“Fornell wasn’t saying, and I wasn’t asking,” Tony replies. He knows Fornell drove a tank for the Army. In Vietnam. But he also knows that the first people Fornell called to back him up on this also drove tanks for the Army, in Vietnam. And they got called in probably for the same reason that if Gibbs suddenly needed a bunch of snipers, a whole pile of Marines who saw action in Iraq or South America would pop up.

A small crowd of midshipmen are now gathered around them, watching. Tony nudges Johnson, and she turns to them. Several of them suddenly snap to attention and become intensely more interested in this endeavor.

“What’s the story with this?” she asks.

Three of them fall over themselves trying to answer her first. As words go spilling out she says, “Okay, you.” She reads his name badge, “Henadze. What’s the scuttlebutt?”

“Just showed up. School closed down when things went bonkers. It wasn’t there when we left. It was when we got back.”

“A tank shows up out of the blue, and no one asks any questions?” Draga asks.

“That’s a LAV-25. A Light Armored Vehicle, sir.” Another midshipman, this one with Ricard on his nametag says, “And, it’s got a little plaque on it.” He points to the plaque, nodding. “It’s a memorial. We get them all the time.”

Draga sighs. “All right, Skippy. Who’s in charge of keeping track of memorials?”

The midshipmen look around at each other, none of them having a clue as to what the answer to that might be. Finally, one says, “Maybe… the physical plant guys? I mean, someone’s got to mow the grass around it, and clean it up.”

Spader nods at that. It seems as good a place as any other to begin. “And they’d be…”
A moment later, they’ve got directions to the maintenance building.

By the time they’ve talked to the groundskeepers, and the physical plant guys, and the administration, and then the next higher level up of administration, they are absolutely certain that look like you belong and just do whatever it is, will get you everywhere in the military.

“Did you keep any personnel on base when everything shut down?” Tony’s asking (Ret) Lt. Commander Thom Sharpe, the Director of Campus Affairs.

“Like the entire rest of the military, we were given orders to turn ourselves over to the National Guard, so we did.”

“And, you leave, and when you come back, you’ve got an extra ta—LAV-25, and no one says anything?” Johnson asks.

“Ma’am,” Sharpe’s using his dealing with idiots/civilians voice, and it’s very clear that he’s doing it. “Between the time we left, and when the Maryland National Guard decided to post people back here for security, an undetermined number of people decided that looting our campus would be a wonderful idea. Everything was complete chaos for weeks. And it took months to get things back into some sort of order. So, no. When my people were busy scrounging up every bit of window glass they could find to replace damage to our buildings, a new monument was not on the list of things we were interested in.”

“Did anyone ever ask any questions about it?” Spader asks.

“If they did, it didn’t get to my desk. Do you have any idea how much time and effort had to go into getting the campus back into shape for graduation, let alone getting all of the lost hours of instruction in so the class of ’17 could graduate on time, and do it on a campus that’s worthy of them? We have been working 24/7 since January. Commencement is ten days away, and we are going to just barely pull it off.

“So, no. No one has given a feather’s worth of care about an LAV-25 sitting on the grass doing nothing, why?”

“Because someone stole that tank from Quantico,” Tony says, not seeing any need to fill in what the not-tank had been doing in the intervening time.

Sharpe blinks, hard, at that.

“And then decided to plop it on your lap,” Draga adds.

“But we don’t know why, and we do need to get it back to Quantico,” Johnson finishes.

He opens his mouth, and then shuts it, and opens it again to say, “Well… We don’t have the equipment to move it here, but, that shouldn’t be too hard to find. And… why here? I have no idea.”

“That was really fast,” Segal’s saying.
“Helps if you were in DC when everything went to shit,” Tony replies. He’s on his phone as Spader, carefully, in compliance with all of the traffic laws, drives them back to DC.

He can hear the cringe in Segal’s voice when he says, “You were in DC?”

“At the Navy Yard, and we got our butts saved by some tanks showing up at the right place, at the right time. Anyway, I need to know if you’ve got something that can move it from Annapolis back to you.”

“Yeah. I’ve got that. And some people to do it.”

“Okay, case closed.”

“Case closed? You’ve got the guy who took it?”

Tony decides that Segal doesn’t need to know that there is no way in hell he’s going to grill Fornell about how they got that tank or who was driving it. “We’ve got everything we need to to take care of him.”

“Okay. Call if you need me to testify.”

“I don’t think it’ll go to trial. He didn’t seem eager to make a big fuss about it.”

“Excellent.”

Home again go the conquering heroes.

Tony watches them moving into NCIS, heads high, shoulders back, the stride of the righteous and successful bounding about, and he’s feeling good about today.

Case is solved, no one got hurt, and Fornell is spreading the word that perhaps a few, “Hey, are you missing a tank? You should look here.” notes should be going out.

And, they’re done by 5:00.

It’s the perfect day.

He heads home, takeout Chinese in hand, looking forward to seeing Ziva and Dave.

Little man is snoozing when he gets in, so he and Ziva have, what feels like, their first uninterrupted conversation in weeks while, chowing down on bourbon chicken, garlic green beans, and fried rice.

“Mmmm…” she’s looking especially pleased as she munches on a bite of the sweet, savory chicken.

He agrees. It’s beyond yummy, and he didn’t have time for a real lunch on the road, so he’s hungry.

Once she’s done with that bite, she says, “Are you going to look into the plaque?”
He shrugs. “I don’t know. Obviously, whoever it was, was making a statement, but… If I look into it, I’m going to end up identifying him, and if I do that, I’m sort of bound to actually go arrest him for taking the tank and… I don’t want to do that. I probably owe my life to that guy, so…” He shakes his head.

“I understand that.”

He takes another bite, and watches her sip her water. For a moment, he just gazes, and then gently strokes her shoulder. She smiles back at him. “You are looking very content.”

“I’m feeling very content. It was a good day.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

“Good day for you?”

“Enough. Sleep, eat, feed baby, sleep, eat, feed baby… Jethro was over for a lot of the day. He is bringing home Jackson tomorrow. And the day after or so, he’ll bring him over here.”

Tony smiles at that. “I cannot wait to see that. Has he shown you a picture of him?”

“Oh yes. He’s so tiny. Dave is bigger than he is.” Ziva’s grinning.

“You’re going to get a picture of Dave with Jackson, aren’t you?”

“I was thinking of that. Like the one with Mona wrapped around Dave, this one with Dave wrapped around Jackson.”

Tony thinks of that, and of how much fun she’s been having getting some time to practice her camera skills. “I’ve got a few square inches of my cubical not covered in Dave pictures. I need at least one more.”

Ziva smiles at that, and then, because that put them dangerously close to an entire half hour of adult conversation, Dave calls out, looking for another meal.

Tony gets up. “I’ve got him.”

An hour later, Tony’s on his sofa, with Dave on his chest, enjoying the about ten minutes that usually go between end of feed and nap time. He’s stroking Dave’s back, telling him about his day, nuzzling the top of his head, and finishing up his third glass of wine for the night.

Tony’s not exactly the epitome of social media guru, but he’s spent enough time online to at least be aware of the concept of ‘squad goals.’

And, as he’s telling Dave about how Daddy and his team went marching through the Naval Academy, and the midshipmen watched them go through, eyes wide, staring at the metric shit ton of awesome his NCIS crew is, he’s enjoying the fact that they’re one fine looking squad.

Skin on skin is supposed to be good for babies. And Dave is under the impression that Daddy’s chest is the best nap location on earth. Something about warm skin and fuzzy chest hair just puts him out like a light. Tony’ll lay him on his chest, Dave’ll open his little fingers, spread them wide, and clamp them down into his chest hair, and not let go until it’s nursing time. (And honestly, if he could do that with Tony, he probably would.)
However, this means Tony’s spending way more time awake without a shirt on than he has at any time since his early forties, and he’s very well aware of the fact that he does not look like he did in his early forties.

He puts the glass of wine down, and really looks at himself.

He sighs. They are one fine looking squad.

He started noticing it when it was just him and Draga. The way people looked immediately at Draga. The way women stopped checking him out and started paying attention to the young, hot guy with him.

He pats Dave’s back gently. Gibbs must have had this experience, right? Back when it was him and Franks, he was the hot shit, pretty guy, and then…

And then Tony showed up, and Gibbs wasn’t.

He was the older guy with the white hair and a bit of tummy flub and the fashion sense from JC Penny’s and he had this young, pretty partner with the cheekbones that could cut glass and the ripped abs and the charm oozing from every pore.

The partner who was so young and pretty that his wife was hitting on him.

Now he’s the old guy. (Hell, he’s almost a decade older than Gibbs was when he joined up, and back then Gibbs was fucking ancient.)

He tries to remember how he looked in ’08 and ’09. It’s a kind of fuzzy mental image, but he does know that, while his chest may be an ultra-soft and comfy napping location for a baby boy, that once upon a time he could locate his pectorals by something other than his nipples.

And the less said about his belly, the better.

And he knows that there was a time when most of the suits in his closet fit.

And the less said about the condition of the jeans sitting in his pants drawer, untouched since before the fall, when he was losing weight and feeling hopeful about getting back into early 40s shape, the better.

Dave makes a content gurgling noise. He’s happy where he is and with Tony the way he is.

Tony’s not sure if he’s happy though.

He guesses that’s part of it, is he ‘growing old gracefully?’ (And would that involve stopping dying his hair? He’s been getting kind of lax on that. One cannot dye one’s hair and be a napping spot for a baby, and right now, napping spot wins out over brown hair. However, this means he’s starting to develop some interesting roots.) The Wonder Twins are both graying up, so it’s not like he’d be the lone gray hair of the bunch, but…

Ziva’s napping, too. She’s going to be getting up again at least four times tonight, so as soon as she finished feeding Sean, she hit the bed. That makes a lot of sense to him.

He’s sure she’s okay with how he looks. She signed on for the long haul and loves him and all the rest of it, but…

But maybe it’d be nice to at least make some effort to try and stay physically attractive to her. He can
remember his younger self scoffing at the guys who got married and then immediately stopped making any effort whatsoever to keep themselves up. (And he really remembers a lot of extremely un-pc conversations about women who did the same thing.)

She doesn’t run every morning. Not anymore. Doesn’t have the time, and honestly, she’s not supposed to be doing that this close to Dave’s birth. Let everything get good and healed up before bouncing it around for five miles a day.

But, even with her hip hurting, even with her balance feeling off, she made sure to get out there every day until she was nine months along and her Doc told her to cut it out.

She did some sort of yoga thing, too. Pilates… And she kept up with Tim and Gibbs on rehabbing until the week before Dave was born.

She’s making an effort. He knows that part of it is about making herself feel good. She gets really crabby when she doesn’t get to move around enough. But part of it is also making herself look good. For her. And for him.

And he appreciates it. (Sincerely, as often as he can, and then he stops thinking about that, because right now that’s not on the menu, and he doesn’t want to get himself riled up when there’s nothing he can do about it.)

Dave chirps and squirms against him, letting Tony know he’s noticed the story has stopped, and he’d like a bit more please.

“That’s really all there was. I can’t wait for you to be able to tell me about your day.”

That gets a coo.

He kisses his boy again, and then reaches over to his phone, and sends Jimmy a text. We on for bootcamp on Sunday?

A minute later he gets back. Sure. I know Collin’s been itching to get a real fight on.

Then he takes another sip of his wine, soft, subtle red, blushes of plum and cherry on the nose, a bit of leather in the finish, he sighs at the flavor. He an Ziva would usually split a bottle of wine with dinner (or maybe two dinners) but when she got pregnant, he was on his own for that. Before the fall, he’d just have his one drink, seal the bottle up, and put it back on the counter.

These days, he’ll usually finish it.

He holds the phone, thinking of those awful rations in the Navy Yard, and thinking about how he’s been more or less eating and drinking everything that gets in range since. How he gets a bit nervous when he can’t see something tasty, because it reminds him of weeks of nothing tasty. How food, and drink, helps him to shut up the memories of being in DC.

He pokes his belly, feeling pounds of soft, hairy flub. Dave, who apparently feels what he just did, gives him a little kick to go with it, and then realizes he can get his toes curled into Tony’s belly hair to go with his fingers, and has at it.

“You realize that in, two minutes, I’m going to have to pry you off.”

Dave couldn’t care less.

Tony thinks a bit more about his current state, and the way those Midshipmen were reacting to his
team. They weren’t looking at him like he was God’s gift to policing. They weren’t staring at him, thinking of upping their exercise game. That look was for Draga and Spader.

After Shabbos, can we talk diet? he sends to Jimmy.

Of course. Better yet, head on down to Autopsy during lunch. We can talk then.

Tony would rather put it off a bit, but he knows that’s just avoiding committing to it. And he knows that Jimmy knows it, too.

Barring a body, I’ll see you then.

Good!

Jimmy eyes Tony’s lunch, not saying much.

For this meet up, Tony even tried to go healthy. There’s an apple next to his hamburger and he skipped the fries.

Jimmy, of course, has one of those Tupperware containers from home filled with bunny food. There’s lettuce and green things, and he thinks it’s probably some sort of organic, kosher, free-range, grilled tofu or whatever other taste-free stuff Jimmy eats on there.

Jimmy looks at Tony’s lunch and shakes his head. He holds up another Tupperware container of bunny food and hands it to Tony.

“Even the apple?” Tony says, appalled, looking at leafy greens, protein, and good fats.

“It’s a nine month old red-delicious. You might as well dip a baseball in sugar and eat it.”

Tony rolls his eyes, but he tosses out the burger and apple.

Jimmy smiles at that. “You want lots of veggies. Any unprocessed meat you like. I haven’t seen your cholesterol numbers, but you haven’t had a heart attack yet, so I’ll say you can have fats, saturated and unsaturated. Nuts are your friends. Avocados, too. Cheese, cream, butter, oil, and salt make vegetables taste good, so put some on. But keep it at least five-parts veggies to one-part fat, by weight,” Tony had started to feel like maybe there was a light at the end of the tunnel with that, but nope, “fresh fruit has a lot of good things in it, but fresh. Apples get picked in the fall, that sad little thing you traded your fries for lost all of its vitamins months ago. This time of year, skip fruit. Next month into fall, that’s local harvest time here, and have at it. Winter, that’s harvest time in the southern hemisphere, so look for those ‘Product of Chile’ stickers, and have at ‘em.”

That makes a certain amount of sense. “Sugar?”

Jimmy shrugs. “I don’t eat much of it. You probably shouldn’t, either. But you don’t have to cut it out of your diet. It’s not actually addictive, not in the medical sense of addictive, and your body can’t tell the difference between glucose, fructose, and the rest of it. So swapping out sugar A for sugar B doesn’t do anything for you. If you want to count calories and just drop weight, you can cut back. If you want to drop a lot of body fat, reshape yourself, it’s a good idea to say goodbye to it, except as an occasional treat.”
Tony’s not a huge sugar fanatic, so, besides his coffee habit, he wouldn’t have to alter things too badly to deal with that. His next question though… “Pasta…”

Jimmy knows how much this next bit will hurt Tony. “Same thing. If it’s made from a grain, it’s probably better off not inside you. Wheat, rice, corn, rye, oats… all of them. Think about your end goal. If you want to look like me, you say goodbye to all of it and run or yoga or something, every day, and hit the gym three times a week for weights. You want to look like Draga, you say goodbye to all of it and lift every day and run or yoga or something. And honestly, I don’t know how you get to look like Spader. Tons of work, perfect DNA for it, and maybe a side of steroids. I could work out until the end of time, and I won’t look like Spader. I’m just not built for it, and you likely aren’t, either. If you want to look like Tim, have dessert once or twice week, be careful about how much you eat, work out every day. Big thing is fewer grains, less sugar, less alcohol, and more moving around.”

“Am I drinking too much?”

Jimmy nods. “Not from a getting drunk perspective. At your size, and the speed you go through it, you’re okay. But, calorie-wise, yeah. You want to look like you last year, drop back down to one glass of wine, and cut your coffee consumption in half, or start drinking it black, and that’ll take care of 2/3ds of it.”

“Potatoes?” Jimmy’s just cut most of what Tony likes to eat out of the picture, but maybe there’s still some hope.

“They’re actually pretty good for you, assuming A: they’re fresh, and B: you aren’t eating them by the pound. They’re still carbs, but they’re carbs with a lot of vitamins and fiber.” Jimmy eyes the wrapper from the burger he tossed. “The burger’s crap, but they cut their fries to order there, they’d be a fine treat.”

“Define treat.”

“Fewer than ten percent of your total calories per week.”

Tony groans.

Jimmy sighs and shakes his head. “If you think about it like that, you might as well just buy the fat clothing because you are never going to keep the weight off with that attitude. If this is a punishment, then you won’t stick to it, and if you don’t stick to it, you’re going to get fatter.

“So, your choice: fat clothing or attitude adjustment.”

Tony looks hurt by that choice.

Jimmy thinks for a moment about how to repackage this so it doesn’t sound like a jail sentence to the land of bland food. “Okay, your body needs pleasure. It wants it and will seek it out. Food lights up the pleasure centers of your brain, big time. Sugar, carbs, fat, they’re all easy energy. A million years ago when you had to run down your food and run away from something that wanted to eat you, your brain got programeed to shoot off a huge, ‘Oh, this is awesome!’ message to your body when you ran into a good source of easy energy.

“The problem in, you run about once a month, and you do it for, maybe half a mile, and more and more, you just let Draga do it, and you cut around the back and look smart when he chases the bad guy to you.”

Tony nods. He does that. He remembers Gibbs doing that, too.
“So, your body still thinks its job is to run away from lions and run down gazelles for supper. So, it rewards you with a lot of pleasure when you eat something that will help it do that. You need to replace that with something else, or else your body’s just going to sit there, craving pleasure, and every time you see a donut, your body will beg you for a hit. It is not a coincidence that Tim’s managed to keep the weight off since he and Abby got together and he didn’t before. His brain’s getting his pleasure hits from other sources now, which is making food less of a thing for him.”

“He’s not just burning off more calories… with Abby, and then with you guys?”

Jimmy laughs. “If you keep eating the way you are now, or if he kept eating the way he was then, you’ll to need to start running ten to fifteen miles a day to lose weight, and I can guarantee you, no one, especially not Tim, is that hot in bed.”

That gets another sigh from Tony. He’s in his own personal sex desert right now, so it’s not like he’s got that for lighting up the pleasure center of his brain anytime soon, either.

Jimmy nods, getting it.

“Should I even bother to start now?”

“Oh yeah. It’s a good idea to have something other than sex to light you up. Time to hunt down things that feel good, and reward yourself with them instead of cookies. Get moving more, too. Strap little boy to your chest and walk around with him. Ziva will rest better if you’ve got him out of the apartment, and an hour of walking around will be good for you, too. When he can hold his head up, I’ll show you my workout with a baby routine, which is good for upper body strength and babies like it.”

“Which is good for you because it seems like you’ve always got a new one around.”

“That does seem to be the case at my house.” Jimmy says with something of a grin.

Tony takes a bite of the bunny food in front of him. He supposes that Ziva would tell him it’s light and refreshing. To him it’s like chewing on water.

“So, what do you do? You already eat like a carnivorous bunny rabbit. Except for steak, everything that tastes good’s been out of your diet for years.”

Jimmy gently whacks him with the back of his hand. “I don’t look at it like that. You guys are just a bunch of deranged carb junkies who don’t know what anything actually tastes like.”

Tony shoots Jimmy a very dry look. “Uh huh… So, you’re not eating for pleasure, not the way we do.”

“Ish. I like food,” He’s got a really good salad in front of him. Kale, arugula, romaine, cilantro, avocado, red and yellow bell peppers, tofu, salmon, and cashews. Little balsamic vinegar and good olive oil drizzled on it. It’s yummy. “but no, not the way you do, not the way I used to, too. Once upon a time, I’d order the large pizza with everything on it, and a two-liter Coke, and eat it for dinner by myself. I can’t do that now.”

“So… what? You’re aren’t pestering Breena for sex, not with her puking every five minutes, and Abby can’t be all that hot on it right now, especially with two of you guys to deal with, and last I heard you and Tim were still ‘evolving’ which didn’t sound like going at it hot and heavy, so…”

Jimmy shrugs.
Tony catches that. “Or are you two ‘evolved?’”

Jimmy rolls his eyes a bit. He’s pretty sure what ‘evolving’ means, but, he didn’t have that conversation with Tony. “If evolving means that sex between the two of us is a shifting situation, and evolved means it’s done shifting, then yes, we’re evolved.”

“So, you and Tim are taking care of each other? You’re bi now?”

Jimmy doesn’t roll his eyes, though he wants to. “Probably not. You know the difference between how fucking feels and how making love feels, even though,” he adds an extremely descriptive hand gesture, index finger slipping in and out of an almost closed fist, “you’re physically doing the same thing each way?”

Tony nods. Like probably every other adult on earth, he’s gotten his rocks off, and he’s made love, and yeah, in both cases the physical part is all about slippery friction, but the head game is substantially different.

“Oh, fucking Tim doesn’t work all that hot. We get horny enough, and it’s an option, but we’ve got to get pretty damn horny before fucking works, and even then… We tend to run out of steam with each other. That, ‘climbing the walls, just gotta get laid’ feeling, Tim doesn’t do much to satisfy that, because he’s not a woman. Better than nothing, better than jerking off, but not a girl. So, if it’s just horny, we’re more likely to take care of ourselves.

“Making love… We’re better at that.”

Tony squints at Jimmy a bit, trying to imagine it, in a not very explicit sort of way. “You mean like candles and flowers and you two whispering love poems to each other?”

Tony’s halfway between joking and serious, so Jimmy flashes him the stink eye, and goes on. “So, yeah, evolved. But, just like you don’t make love every time you’re in bed, we don’t either. So, right now there’s less sex than either of us would like, but more than we’d have if it we were just two couples.”

Tony was halfway between joking and serious, so he’s also honestly curious about this. “Wait. Okay, I know what I’m doing when I’m making love. I know how it’s different from getting laid. I’m trying to wrap my head around how it works for you and Tim. You singing him songs and talking about butterfly kisses?”

“You’re going to beat me with that vow until the day I die, aren’t you?”

Tony breaks into a wide grin. “I certainly intend to. What do you do?”

Jimmy opens and closes his mouth. “It’s just… different. Some nights you go to bed and you expect to have your usual twenty-minute good night sex, and it just clicks and you’re in the right place and your mind and body and heart all gel, and it’s good. And other nights you’re just getting off with one of your favorite people. Well, the horny bit never triggers for the two of us with each other, so heart and mind have to be gelled in the first place before the body swings into action.”

Tony thinks about that. “Like, some nights, you just look at her, and you love her so much you feel like your heart can’t hold it, and you’ve just got to touch and kiss and…”

And Jimmy’s nodding along. “And some nights, she’s wearing a tight shirt, maybe without a bra, and you’re getting a really nice view and you don’t just want to look, you want to touch and taste. And, yeah, one of those things can happen for Tim and I and the other one doesn’t.”
“Huh…” Tony inclines his head. He gets that. Then he spends another moment really looking at Jimmy. “So…” he licks his lips almost looking embarrassed, but he is curious, too, and Tim doesn’t like to get into this much detail, but maybe Jimmy will, “who does what?”

Jimmy eyes Tony. “Who does what?”

“You’re both guys.” Tony extends both index fingers and bops the tips of them together a few times. “I already know that’s not going to do it for either of you, so… Who does what?”

Jimmy thinks about it for a moment and says, “Do you and Ziva always do the same thing?”

“On the level I’m asking about, yeah. We’re not built to switch that up.”

Jimmy shrugs. “The general rule of thumb is don’t ask for it if you aren’t willing to do it/have it done to you. That goes for all four of us. Beyond that…” Jimmy shrugs. “Anyone does anything any of the others of us are interested in having happen. That goes for Tim and I as much as it does for the girls.”

“So, you’re not saying.”

Jimmy smirks. “I just did.”

Tony eyes Jimmy, and Jimmy gets back to the main reason they’re down here. “Anyway, food, dieting, pleasure. I look the way I do because food isn’t the main thing lighting up the pleasure center of my brain. And, as you asked, yeah, I love sex, and yes, that’s my pleasure of choice, but it’s not my only pleasure. It’s just the one I like best. So, when the amount of sex runs low, I’ve got other things to switch onto. I like yoga. I like running. I like working out with babies and playing with them. None of these things are chores that I punish myself with. All of them are physical things that light up my brain with endorphins.

“I like doing this job. I get to do this and feel good about finding the bit or piece that breaks the case open. That’s a different sort of pleasure than what my body can do for me, the deeper feeling of having done something intellectually satisfying. The question is, are you here because you like it, or because you have to do it? If you have to, it’s not going to work as a way to feel good. It’ll just be something to get you to normal if it’s something you have to do.”

Tony thinks about it. “I had an answer for that before everything went to shit in the fall, but now…”

Jimmy nods at that. That’s true for a lot of the people who still work for NCIS, and likely, the rest of the government.

“Anyway, all of it makes me feel good, so I don’t need to grab a mound of deep-fat-fried-sugar-coated-carbs to make myself feel good. What do you enjoy doing? What makes you feel good? Movies? Music? How long has it been since you played that piano in your living room?”

That catches Tony flatfooted because besides work, and Ziva, and family time, it has been a long time since he’s done something that was fun for him.

He’s sitting there, trying to think of the last thing he did that was just fun. At least since before Dave was born. Not to say he hasn’t done things he’s enjoyed, but not the way Jimmy’s talking about.

“Fun… You mean… Uh…”

“Something you enjoy, preferably a physical something. Your body makes chemicals to hook your brain and body together and link it to the idea of pleasure. You cuddle Dave, your body produces
more oxytocin, that ups the level of ‘good’ feeling you get from being with him. Sex does that, too. Some of the same chemicals even. Running around, working hard, physically, that all pumps your body full of endorphins. Those endorphins make you feel good. They literally make you happy. Food, alcohol, most drugs, they do that, too. So… When was the last time you did something fun?"

Tony shakes his head. “Shit. Besides cuddling Dave… or Ziva… I mean, I do things I love and all…”

Jimmy’s nodding. “But you’re a new dad, and during the day you’re all work all the time, and you go home and you’re all baby, and those weekend hours aren’t enough because you do family things, but it’s been a long time since you’ve carved some time out to do something you personally enjoy.”

Tony nods.

“It’s springtime. We’ve got a backyard. Maybe we mow that sucker this weekend, get some balls and gloves and play some baseball or something like that. We don’t always have to do MMA for bootcamp. You like basketball, we could play that. Besides sex and alcohol, what did you used to do that was physically fun?”

Tony shrugs. “A big part of basketball was showing off. I liked the cheering as much as the playing.”

Jimmy smirks. “Take your shirt off and play with us; I promise you the girls will watch and hoot at you. And, on a basketball court, compared to Tim and I, you’ll be an Olympic-level athlete.”

Tony sniggers at that. Then he shakes his head. “No one needs to see what’s under this shirt.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes at that. “Okay, I can promise you, no matter what you do with the rest of this, that’s not helping anything.”

“Says the guy with the ten percent body fat.”

Jimmy shrugs again. “I’m not wrong.”

Tony sighs. “You’re not.”

“Fifty’s next year for you. Forty’s coming in December for Tim and I. We’re all getting older. We’re all gonna get saggy. So what? We run around and play and do things that make us feel good. We show off and make our girls feel good, and that makes us feel even better. Keep thinking about it, and find something that makes you feel good. Something we can do this weekend.”

He gets home a bit after five again. (No bodies today, just paperwork. Officially, he got an anonymous tip as to where the LAV-25 was. He figures that Leon won’t blink at that.)

When he opens the door, a tiny ball of floppy-eared fluff comes running up to him, and attempts to climb his leg. Tony very gently picks this little thing up, holds him, firmly, because he’s trying to leap off of his hand and start licking his face, and says, “I take it you’re Jackson.”

Some excited yipping follows that, along with Gibbs heading out of the kitchen.

“Heingh you. Rule number three: only bark when you need attention. You’ve got it right now.” He
Tony very gently taps the back of Jackson’s head (with the pad of his index finger) and Jackson hushes up. “Good boy.” Then he gently rubs Jackson’s ears.

Tony’s about to start laughing hysterically at this. He doesn’t because he’s afraid if he drops Jackson he’ll get really hurt. So he gently puts him down, and Jackson, once down there, scampers over to Gibbs, and sits on his foot.

“He’s so small,” Tony says with a laugh. “That’s… You said he was small, but… That’s not a dog… That’s a… guinea pig.” Tony’s giggling away. He knows one thing he’s going to do that’ll make him feel good. Later tonight, he’s getting online and finding one of those dog carrying purses that people like Paris Hilton have, and getting a pink, personalized one for Gibbs.

Gibbs nods. He has indeed gotten himself a tiny, high-energy, affectionate, vaguely-dog-shaped sort of thing, that could, in time, with some serious growing, become a dog. “Yeah. Smart though. He’s got my place down, and yours, and, before you were here, he was hanging out under Dave’s crib, keeping watch.”

Tony reaches down to stroke Jackson’s ears. “Good job, little man. Keep the babies in sight.”

Jackson looks pleased at that.

Tony sniffs, good smells are coming out of the kitchen, and Gibbs is heading back in there, Jackson frisking about around his feet, so he follows.

Gibbs has apparently gotten a heads up on the food situation because there’s a big bowl of roasted veggies sitting next to some steaks. Good looking steaks. Tony’s stomach rumbles some. He hasn’t been hungry since lunch, his body isn’t asking him for more food in its usual way, but it is begging him for some sugar.

He’s told it no.

Gibbs smiles at him, and nods, offering what support he can. “They’re just resting for a few minutes.”

“The steaks or my crew?”

Gibbs nods.

Tony’s really looking at Gibbs. None of his hair is dark anymore. All of it has gone gray. His face is wrinkled and his jaw is starting to sag. He didn’t eat everything that wasn’t nailed down since they got out of DC, but he put a fairly decent-sized dent in it, and it shows in the fullness of his face, and the roundness of his belly.

With his shoulder banged up, and his lung unhappy with him, he hasn’t been exercising hard. Well, he exercises as hard as he can, but that’s not the running he was doing before.

“Twenty-five pounds more than this time last year,” Tony says, also remembering that this time last year was right before his last, let’s get in shape attempt. “You?’

Gibbs shakes his head. “Don’t know. Don’t want to know. New pants don’t fit anymore.”

Tony nods. “We’re old. We’re not going to get any less old anytime soon.”

Gibbs nods at that, too. Both of them have gotten past any reasonable approximation of middle-aged.
“But, we’re getting you married in seven months, and I’ll be damned if the WonderTwins are going to be the only ones looking hot in a tux.”

Gibbs starts to laugh at that. “You’re getting in shape, and you’re dragging me along for the ride.”

Tony nods. “You game?”

Gibbs looks down at himself, and then he nods. “Yeah. I’ll get in a bit earlier tomorrow, and we’ll take the dogs, and Dave if he’s up, and get a walk, maybe jog some.”

“Palmer was talking about mowing the backyard, getting some ball gear, and playing.”

Gibbs flexes his shoulder. “Probably something I need to be doing. Ziver’d want to join the catch, too.”

“She would. Blanket on the grass, let the little guys chill out in the shade, throw a ball and run around some. Sound like fun?”

Gibbs smiles at that. “Yeah, it does.”

The last thing Tony does before getting ready to go to bed is sit at his piano. He’s got Dave in his snuggli, pressed against his chest. He strokes the keys for a moment. His fingers feel a bit stiff, it’s been a long time since he’s done this.

He spends a moment fooling around with a few soft medleys. Dave seems to like it. If a newborn can look pleased, he looks pleased.

Then he gets into it, fingers finding the keys and rhythm. “Your grandmother used to sing this to me,” he says as he begins to hum the theme to “Drift Away” while he plays it softly on the piano.

And, yes, it feels good. He still wants a glass of wine, or a pile of pasta, but this is… okay.

Good enough, for right now.

Dave chirps at him, and that look on his face might be a smile, and that’s much better than okay.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Nope, I’m not going to cheat you on Jackson coming home. It’s next chapter. When is next chapter coming up? Good question. It’s summer, so the kiddos are home, which slows down my writing, and next week we’re going on a nine-day long adventure to Wyoming, where Grandpa lives. I hope to have some writing time, but I don’t know how much.

Anyway, if I go silent, that’s what’s up. My pale, tender-footed, East-coast self is heading out West. If you follow me on twitter, @KerylRaist, you can get pictures.
“Okay, now you’re going to behave, right?” Gibbs says to Mona, as they’re sitting in his truck, in front of Patty’s house. “This is another dog’s territory, and you are a guest, got it?”

Mona shoots him a Have I ever disappointed you? look.

He pats her head. “No, you haven’t. Let’s go get our probie.”

Mona is immensely chill. The yapping storm of tiny furballs around her, aren’t. But, Gibbs figured that letting Jackson meet her on his territory, rather than just dumping him into hers, was a good first move.

After a few moments of removing Papillion puppies and their mamas from the living room, it’s just Jackson, Gibbs, and Mona.

Mona had been standing up when the swarm of little guys had been running around her, but once they’re gone, she lays down.

Jackson, who had been staring up at her, starts to come closer. With all of his brothers and sisters, he was fine with running around Mona, on his own, he’s a lot more cautious.

Gibbs hovers nearby, ready to lunge in and grab Jackson if need be, but hoping they can sort this out on their own.

Jackson closes the gap, and keeps watching Mona as he begins sniffing around her. Mona lifts her head and watches as this tiny ball of puppy circles around her, sniffing her all over. Once he gets back to her head, she cocks her head, and then licks him.

It staggers Jackson, and he’s got to sit back on his haunches to brace for it, but he seems to think it’s good, because once Mona’s let go of him, he springs back up and starts trying to climb her.


“It’s for a good cause. They all start out young.”

Woof.

Gibbs translates that as If you say so, but I’m humoring you.

He gently grabs Jackson, who’s standing on Mona’s back, tugging on her ear, and holds him up so he’s looking him right in the eye. “We’ve got rules, Jackson,” he’d like to call him Probie, but he figures that would just confuse him. “Rule number one: Don’t annoy your partner. Mona there, she’s your partner. She’s gonna show you how to behave. You watch her, and you do what she does.”

Jackson yips.

Jethro gently pets the top of his head with just the tips of his fingers. “Good boy. You ready to come home?”

What that question’s worth to a puppy who’s entire understanding of the world is three rooms in one
house, Gibbs doesn’t know, but Jackson looks ready for the adventure.

“The Adventure” begins a bit rocky.

There are certain things Gibbs just doesn’t think about, and getting into his truck is one of them. He opens the door, Mona goes bounding in and…

Oh, right. Little guy is two pounds and four inches tall at his shoulder. He’s not bounding into anything. He looks up at the truck, and goes sprinting under it, running around with abandon, sniffing everything.

Mona looks at Gibbs, and then, if a dog could roll her eyes, she’s just about to do it, before hopping back out of the truck, corralling Jackson with a loud woof, and then (and this has Gibbs lunging for them before he realizes what he’s seeing) she picks him up by the scruff, and plops him into the truck.

On the floor.

In front of the seat.

The seat is hers, and she’s not sharing it with him.

And then, because Gibbs was aware of the fact that he couldn’t just plop a tiny puppy in the front seat of a truck, she picks up the little, towel-lined box he got for Jackson to travel in, and drops that on the floor next to him.

Gibbs decides that she’s made her lines awfully clear, and for right now, with Jackson having a fine old time investigating the floor of the truck, he’s good with maintaining those boundaries.

Might shake them up a bit later, but not right now.

For a second, it looks like Jackson’s in danger of attempting to “mark” the floor of the truck as his territory. Gibbs quickly gets him into that box. “Rule number two Jackson: The bathroom is outside.”

Jackson yips with excitement, does not pee in the box, and then spends the next moment hopping up and down, sniffing the entire box, before he stops, dead, yipping even more, when Gibbs turns the truck on.

“This is a truck,” Gibbs says. “It moves from place to place. You’re going to go in a lot of things that move all over the place.”

Jackson keeps yipping, and Gibbs has an epiphany.

He puts the truck back in park. (As of this point, he has successfully pulled out of the driveway.) Then he leans over and picks Jackson up again. “Rule number three, Jackson, only bark when you need attention. Right now, you’re fine.”

Jackson barks.

Gibbs isn’t sure if he’s agreeing or not, so he gives him a tiny bop on the top of his head. “Only when you need attention.”

This time Jackson doesn’t bark. Gibbs lavishly pets the top of his head. “Good boy.”
“Okay, this is your new home. Right now, we’re going to start with the kitchen and the backyard. You get to go explore as much as you like.”

Gibbs had blocked off the kitchen from the rest of the house. He wants to let Jackson get settled a bit at a time, and he really wants him to get the idea of where the bathroom is, as quickly as possible.

Mona came to him already trained.

Jackson’s about as reliable as Molly is. He’s got the basic idea down, but… If he gets excited, or he’s in a new place, both of which are true, accidents are going to happen. Add in the fact that he’s got a bladder that’s literally the size of a thimble, and Gibbs expects to be doing a lot of cleaning in the not wildly distant future.

So, there is sniffing. Jackson locates his food and water bowls, and happily chows down. He locates Mona’s bowl, and almost gives it a look before Mona growls at him, and he decides to stay away from that.

More sniffing, more walking around. He’s getting a feel for it. He sees Mona head out the doggy door, and looks to Gibbs.

“You can go out.”

So, he scampers over to it, puts his head against it like Mona did, presses, and… Nothing.

Gibbs sighs. The tension on the door can be changed. He’s got it a bit stiff because he doesn’t want the heat running out or the wind blowing cold in, but he’s got it set so stiff that little guy can’t open it.

“So, this time, I get it for you.” He opens the door, and out Jackson goes.

And for the rest of the afternoon, Jackson explores the backyard and kitchen, and Gibbs re-does the door, getting it set so Jackson can get in and out.

“You got him?” Abbi asks as she steps into their home. Then she spots the ball of fluff and floppy ears who’s leaping up against the small blockade Gibbs has in the kitchen, trying to see the new voice. She certainly hears the yipping.

Gibbs stands up from the chair he’s been reading in. He hugs Abbi, gives her a quick kiss, and takes her over to the kitchen.

Jackson keeps yipping as they head over, and once they’ve stepped over, and he’s still yipping, Gibbs picks him up and says, “Rule Number Three Jackson: no yipping unless you need attention.” He gives him another gentle bop. “You’ve got our attention. Time to quiet down.”

Jackson quiets down, and Gibbs follows up with “Good boy!” and gentle petting. Then he hands him over to Abbi. “Jackson, this is Abbi. She lives here, too.”

Abbi’s holding him up, trying to look him in the face, and he’s trying to leap around, out of her hands, and lick her face.
“This is going to work better on the floor, isn’t it?”

Gibbs nods at that. In some ways, this is a lot like playing with the girls. The world is a whole lot shorter, and more carpet/tile oriented. His knees are less than pleased, and his shoulder hasn’t loved the amount of grabbing onto things to lift himself up and down, and he’s told them all to stuff it. Up and down is necessary, so it’s going to happen.

He sits down, and she lies down, and like with Mona, Jackson circles around, sniffing at her, before he gets up to her face and starts licking.

“Hello to you, too,” Abbi says, grinning. “He’s even smaller than I imagined.”

“Full grown he’ll be eight to ten inches at the shoulder. Tiny for us, but… For a six-or-seven-year-old…”

Abbi can see that. Right now, this is a perfect-sized dog for Molly. Not that there’s any chance that Jackson and Molly will be getting any time alone. That’s a disaster waiting to happen, but with the grown-ups watching…

“How’s Mona doing?”

She looks up from her place in front of the fireplace and woofs.

“Reminding me a lot of how I felt when we first worked with Tim. Suddenly there’s a very young, enthusiastic thing roaming around her territory, trying to be helpful, occasionally peeing on the floor. We’re teaching him the rules.”

Jackson curls up on Abbi’s shoulder and licks her ear. “So, I noticed. Rule Number Three?”

“Only bark when you need attention. Not sure if this’ll be a rule for all of them, but Phalenes tend to be yappy, and that can’t be good for something that’s got to go to schools and businesses and everywhere else. Can’t have him barking up a storm in church.”

“Rule number two?”

“Bathroom’s outside.”

“And one?”

“Don’t annoy your partner.”

She smiles at them. “Any more?”

“I’ll think ‘em up when I need it.”

Abbi laughs at that.

After dinnertime, Jackson’s looking pretty tired, and he keeps going back to the door. If a puppy can signal by body language, “Ok, this was fun, but I’d like to go home now,” he’s doing it.

Abbi picks him up, and snuggles him, and he’s okay with that, but he keeps looking at the door.

“This is home now, Jackson,” Gibbs says, petting him.
Jackson whines.

“Yeah.” Abbi strokes his head. “I felt like that my first night in the Marines. It’ll get better. A year with us, maybe another year with us, or with another trainer, and then we’ll find your forever home.”

He’s still whining.

Abbi looks at Gibbs. He shrugs back. He’s got a lot of ideas for how to socialize a puppy. He’s done a decent amount of research on how to train them. How to comfort one that’s missing his pack… That’s a different kettle of fish.

He pets Jackson.

And if a crying baby is nerve-wracking, because you don’t know what it wants, a crying puppy, who is crying because he’s lonely, is killing both of them.

Mona woofs up at them, and they put Jackson down where she can get him. She nuzzles him, licks him a few times, grabs him by his scruff again, and takes him to her bed. She plops him down, and then curls around him.

He doesn’t stop whining, not completely, but it does slow down, and after a bit, he falls asleep.

Mona looks up at her people. She yawns, licks the puppy at her side, and then plops her head down. It’s bedtime for her, too.

Abbi watches that. “You think she had her own puppies at one time?”

“Rescue never said, but right now, I’d bet on it.”

Day two of Hearing Ear Dog socialization goes a little smoother.

Okay, maybe not, but when Gibbs wakes up, Jackson isn’t actively crying, so he’ll chalk that up as a win.

“We have a routine here,” he says, as he’s making breakfast for himself and Abbi. “First off, food.” Mona’s got her big bowl of kibble. Jackson’s got his tiny one. Gibbs is standing at the stove, whisking up eggs as his frying pan heats. A minute from now, he’ll get the English muffins out for toasting.

The sound of happy doggy chewing accompanies the sizzle of eggs in the pan.

Both Mona and Jackson are fast eaters, so they get done well before Gibbs is ready to take his eggs off the heat.

“Step two: outside.” He shoos Jackson out after Mona. This time, Jackson butts his head against the doggie door, and it opens. He cautiously heads out, and yips a bit when the door swings out and swats him on the tail. Gibbs decides that’s an allowable yip and ignores it.

“What’s on for today?” he asks Abbi a few moments later when she’s down.

“Research. I got my official summons to testify before Congress, and a copy of what the first level of
questions are going to be. They want me up there next Monday, so right now, I’m prepping.”

“How long are you going to be in New York?”

She shrugs. “If it’s more than a week, I’m hitching a ride home with Penny and Ducky for the weekends.”

“How many questions?”

That gets a groan. “Fourteen pages, and that’s the first level. Half of it’s crap I already testified about when we thought it was just CGIS. I have to submit all my documents by Friday. Testifying starts on Monday, and they’re probably going to ask follow up questions for all of it.”

Gibbs grits his teeth. He doesn’t want her gone for weeks at a time.

She nods. “I know. They’re putting me up in a nice place. Come visit. Abby’d be happy to take the dogs for a bit.”

Gibbs knows that’s true, but he’s also not sure how much the rest of the McPalmers want a tiny puppy to go with a three-month-old, three toddlers, and a morning sick mama. Then he thinks about how long he wants to sleep in an empty bed.

“You’re up there too long, and I will.”

After Abbi heads off, it’s time for part two of Jethro’s day, and a new adventure for Jackson.

Upstairs.

This time, because he saw how well getting Jackson into the truck worked, Gibbs knows to scoop him up and just carry him up the stairs. It’s not that his steps are particularly high, but if you’re four inches tall at your shoulder, an eight-inch step might as well be a mountain.

He puts his baby gate up at the top of the steps, figuring it’d make sure Jackson wouldn’t try to get down the steps intentionally, or unintentionally. Gibbs doesn’t want to see him get running on the hardwood floor and find out that his little claws won’t stop him on a hardwood floor and go skittering off of the steps.

“Okay, go explore. When you get bigger, I’ll take the gate down, but right now, it’s making sure you don’t go off the edge.”

When he gets out of the shower, he sees two sets of eyes staring up at him from identical sitting positions on the bathroom floor. Big brown ones from about waist high, and little blue ones from about shin high.

“I take it you’re ready to start the day?”

Mona woofs. She knows it’s okay to bark when asked a direct question. Jackson watches her, notices she doesn’t get a repeat of rule number three, and then yips.

“Okay, let me get some clothing on, and then we’ll go see Ziva and Dave.”

Mona looks pleased and trots out of the bathroom. Jackson has no idea what a Ziva or Dave may be, but he follows her, and then continues to explore the upstairs.
Officially, pets are not allowed in Ziva and Tony’s building. But, when Mrs. Elthel met Mona for the first time, she made an exception. Especially because Mona doesn’t live at the DiNozzo’s place.

Gibbs didn’t ask if Jackson could come. He did tell her that he was expanding his pack, and why, and she thought that was a good plan.

He does keep both of them on a leash when he’s heading into the building. They can go off leash when they get into Tony and Ziva’s.

Mona leads the way. She knows where she’s going. Specifically, she’s going to say hello to Mrs. Elthel, who is, like usual, outside of the building, working on fixing it back up. She’s been pulling all of the rocks, rubble, and litter out of her flower beds and putting new dirt back into them. As she put it when she started, back in November, “This was a nice place, and it’s going to be a nice place again. I didn’t sneak out of Russia to let a bunch of hoodlums wreck my home.”

And today, six months later, she’s got most of the windows replaced (she’s fixing them as fast as she can get glass, which is still a slow process in DC), all of the graffiti scrubbed off, the trash cleaned up, two new doors in (also hard to get in DC), and all of her flower boxes replaced. Now it’s time to fill them with plants.

She’s planting pink and white begonia bulbs when Mona comes over to her and gives her a gentle nuzzle. “Well, hello you.” She pulls off her gloves and gives Mona a warm welcome. “And who do you have here?” she asks when Jackson comes up to say hello, also.

She looks up at Gibbs. “This is your new mission?”

He nods. “This is Jackson.”

She stares at Jackson, and then looks up to Gibbs, and starts to laugh. “I am sorry, he’s just… so cute!”

Gibbs looks irked and nods. “Yeah, he is.”

“And tiny!”

“Oh huh.”

She pets him, smiling. Then she pats Mona again. “Are you enjoying having a little brother?”

“More like baby, but she seems to be settling in.”

Mrs. Elthel pets Mona again. “Good mama. Speaking of which, you are here for Ziva and Dave?”

“Let her get some more rest. Get him out for a walk or something.”

“That is good. New mothers need rest.”

Gibbs nods, and takes a step, Mona follows, and Jackson, a beat later, realizing that he’s not supposed to be sniffing at the bulbs, follows, too.
Dave is sleeping, but Ziva’s up, and eating breakfast, when Gibbs lets himself in. She would, if later asked, blame what happened next entirely on the post-pregnancy hormones.

Mona leads the way, and Jackson follows, and she finds herself staring at this tiny ball of flop-eared fluffy cuteness, staring up at her with big blue eyes, and a little, bitty cocked head, studying her, and she… squee’d.

This high-pitched squeal of pleasure at the adorable, little ball of fluff came pouring out before she could stop it.

Abby would have been proud.

Ziva, as soon as she’s scooped Jackson up to cuddle him, notices that Jethro’s in the room, and immediately says, “That did not happen.”

He nods. “I heard nothing. Jackson and Mona didn’t, either.”

“How is training going?”

Gibbs nods. He pats Mona. “She’s doing a great job of showing him the ropes.” Mona looks pleased at being acknowledged. She’s a bit annoyed that Ziva, who is usually one of her two biggest fans, hasn’t given her her usual lovey reception, but she’s gratified that Gibbs remembers.

Ziva puts Jackson down and gives Mona the petting she usually gets when she comes over. “I didn’t not forget you.”

“And Jackson’s picking up the ropes fast.”

“Excellent.”

“So, what do you need today?”

“Five hours of uninterrupted sleep and groceries.”

“Don’t think I can get you the former, but I can do the latter.”

“That will be enough.”

It’s a few days later before she’s got the time to play with the color and light balance to get the shot the way she likes it, but everyone in the crew appreciates the photo she eventually sends out of Gibbs with the stroller, Dave in the main compartment, Jackson riding on the little shelf under it, and Mona strolling next to them.
Get in better shape. Gibbs sighs, pokes his belly, and sighs again.

Tony’s not wrong about that being a good idea.

Abbi hasn’t made any comments to him about his expanding waistline, but he knows she’s noticed. Hell, like him, she got out of DC and ate everything she could, too.

But, by New Year’s she cut it out. (If asked, she wouldn’t admit it, but getting into a wedding dress had a lot to do with that.) And by New Year’s she also got back to her full, regular exercise routine. Which Gibbs has gone along for as much as he can, but...

But his back is still not working quite right, and his arm isn’t as strong as it used to be, and his wind isn’t up to running with Abbi, and he feels like he’s dragging her down when he goes along.

So, instead of running with her, he’s been walking on his own, and it’s better than nothing, and his wind is better than it was, but he’s not running one mile, let alone five, and swimming… That’s just not happening. His lungs are unhappy enough on dry land, adding water into the mix just makes it harder.

Instead of his usual outfit of cargo pants and work boots, Gibbs grabs shorts and sneakers, as he gets ready to get out of the house earlier than usual to catch Tony for day one of: Do Better.

Ziva’s sleeping, but Dave is up when Gibbs gets there. Tony’s wrapping up breakfast. Gibbs raises an eyebrow at it, and Tony says, “According to Jimmy, I can have eggs, cheese, butter, and stuff like that…”

Gibbs looks at the plate. “Might want to get some ideas of portion size, too.”

“Four eggs can’t be too many. He’ll have three with all of his bunny food on the weekends. And bacon or sausage.”

Gibbs nods, that’s true. “You got bunny food for lunch?” (Which is why Gibbs thinks Jimmy’s breakfast on the weekends tends not to be an issue.)

Tony nods. “Yeah, and added more stuff to the grocery list for the week. Green, leafy veggies and stuff like that. Ziva was practically glowing at it when I got talking about it.” He opens the fridge and points to a water bottle full of green stuff. “She’s making me snack smoothies. That’s got like, spinach and kale and God knows what else in it.”

“That stuff Draga gave her. We put that in all of her smoothies, too.”

“Great.” Tony sighs. He pats Mona and Jackson, and peels Dave out of Jethro’s hands. “We running?”

“Or something.”

Mona has no problem keeping pace with Jethro and Tony. They’re not exactly running, or jogging, a bit too slow for either of those gaits, but faster than walking. Loping, probably.

She’s eating up the sidewalk next to them, looking awfully pleased to be out and running around.

Dave had a really good time in his stroller, watching everything, getting pushed a whole lot faster than he usually goes. He’s gurgling in a very pleased sort of way, for about ten minutes, until a
slightly bumpy, fast-paced stroll puts him out like a light.

Jackson is having less fun.

The first block was awesome. He got to run full out, which he adores. For a little while, he was leading the way. Block two, he’s pacing them, starting to get tired. Block three… There’s only so fast and so long a puppy can go.

When Jethro feels like he’s dragging Jackson, he scoops him up and puts him in the stroller with Dave.

Dave gurgles at that, too. As much as a newborn can like anything, he seems to like Jackson. Jackson sits next to Dave, front paws on the bar across the front of the stroller, looking like a tiny masthead on the prow of the USS Dave’s Stroller.

And so they go for a two mile walk/jog/lope, Jackson running along them for about three blocks of it.

Gibbs is breathing hard, and both of them are sweating when they’re done. Tony checks his watch. “Twenty-four seven.”

Gibbs nods. “Tomorrow we do it under twenty-three thirty.”

Tony nods. That’s a goal he can get behind.

When they get upstairs, they put both the human puppy, and the dog puppy, to lay down for a good long nap.

---

The next day, Jackson gets to meet the McPalmers.

Quick visit. It’s getting onto dinner time, and Gibbs doesn’t want to interrupt anything too much.

Breena, Abby, and the kids are home. Tim and Jimmy should be home, with food, within an hour.

Abby also squees with joy, and Breena grins, really grins, like for a moment she’s feeling okay, as they see the little guy with his much bigger partner.

But, it’s the moment when Molly notices something’s up, and heads over to see what her Mama and Aunt are paying so much attention to, that steals the show. Her eyes go wide, and then light up. “Doggy! Baby Doggy!”

“This is Jackson, Molly.” Breena’s got Jackson on her lap. “Hold your hand out and come closer.”

Molly does, creeping closer, huge smile on her face. Abby’s got a hand on Molly, making sure she doesn’t go lunging for their newest family member. Jackson quivering on Breena’s lap, ready to leap up and lick Molly.

He settles for sniffing her hand once, and then slobbering all over her. She starts to laugh. “He’s soft!” He licks her more. “MY DOGGY!”

“Uncle Jethro’s doggy.”

“MINE!”
Abby lifts her up to sit between her and Breena on the sofa. And Breena lets Jackson scamper over to Molly’s lap. Kelly’s starting to notice something is up, and is toddling her way over, too. Jackson’s leaping up and down on Molly, licking her face, while Molly giggles with delight.

Kelly comes over. *Dog* she signs.

*This is j-a-c-k-s-o-n.* “Jackson,” Abby says, lifting her up and scooting over a bit so she can sit next to Molly. “Very gentle, both of you. He’s a very little puppy, and you could hurt him and not mean to.”

Jackson, noticing that someone new has joined the party, yips happily, and hops off of Molly to Kelly, licking her. Kelly starts to laugh. Molly starts to cry because Jackson’s paying attention to Kelly, and Abby and Breena glance at each other, and then Gibbs.

“Molly, stop that. He’s less than a foot away from you.” Breena reaches Molly’s hand out so she can pet Jackson while he’s in Kelly’s lap.

Molly stops crying, but she’s not looking thrilled at sharing. She’s alternating between glaring at Kelly and patting Jackson.

Kelly, having been licked about ten times by Jackson, decides to lick him back, and then spends the next few minutes making sounds along the likes of ‘ack’ ‘ick’ and ‘blrgh’ trying to get the fur off of her tongue.

Or, as Tim says to Jimmy as they walk into this maelstrom, “Situation normal: loud and crazy.”

Jimmy’s heading over to sit on the floor next to the sofa, in front of the girls, and says to Jethro, “A man walks into a room with a dog like that, and you know he’s fearless.”

Jimmy does get a headslap for that. Jimmy grins his smartass grin, and holds out a hand to Jackson, while kissing all four of the girls.

Jackson’s almost in excited-overload mode, this is too many new people, too fast, and he’s starting to go from good excited to meltdown excited.

Abby’s mommy sense catches that, and she hands Jackson to Jimmy. “Upstairs, maybe?”

Jimmy usually changes out of his work clothing when he gets home, even on days without bodies, he doesn’t like to smell like work when he’s home, so that’s not a problem.

“Come on Jackson, let’s see the rest of the house.”

He’s yipping like a banshee, and Gibbs takes him from Jimmy, planning on heading up with them. No need to dump Jackson in a strange place with a stranger. He holds Jackson, nice and snug, keeping him against his chest, and says, “Three, Jackson.”

Jackson tries to stop yipping, he holds his quiet for a good thirty seconds, but everything is too new, and too much, and he starts yipping again as soon as they get up the stairs.

Gibbs doesn’t give him a little smack. He just holds him snug, and tries to radiate calm. “That was too much too fast.”

Jimmy nods at Gibbs, and then gently strokes Jackson. “It’s hard to be a little guy in a new place and behave. Same reason why we don’t toss the girls in the deep end and expect them to be perfect.” He looks up to Gibbs. “You staying for dinner? Might want to keep him up here if you are.”
Gibbs knows that dinner with this crew is, at best, chaotic.

“Abbi’s supposed to be getting home tonight. I’m feeding her.”

“Good. Tony told me you two went jogging.”

Gibbs nods at that.

“Good?”

He inclines his head a bit, indicating it was okay.

Jimmy steps into his room, waving Gibbs in, and starts to pull off his shirt. “Use words. I don’t know what exactly about what you were doing didn’t work for you.”

“Annoyed at how slow and out of breath I am.”

“You hurt yourself?”

Gibbs shakes his head, and then adds, “Sore, worked hard sore, not injured sore.”

“Put ice on it, anyway. I’ll tell you the same thing I told Tony, don’t run tomorrow. Do something else. Different muscles. Let whatever you hurt rest, and give something else a workout tomorrow. Abs and arms is a good plan. Alternate it until you can run without getting sore, and then start doing that every day. I gave Tony a list of videos Tim was working out with when his arm was healing up. They might be a bit easy for your shoulder, but it’s a good starting place.”

Gibbs nods along with that, feeling a sense of… trepidation isn’t quite it. He’s not really scared or annoyed, but he knows that whatever the hell it is Jimmy’s got on that video, he and Tony’ll have a good time bitching about it.

In a quieter place, with only two voices, and a steady, calm heart beating against him, Jackson’s calming back down again.

He’s starting to look around again, and trying to squirm away from Gibbs, wanting to explore. Jimmy sees him doing it, and nods. “You can put him down.”

On the floor, Jackson scampers over to Jimmy, and Jimmy kneels down, and holds out his hand. Jackson sniffs him all over, and starts licking his fingers. “You’re a very friendly little guy, aren’t you?”

“He is.”

Jimmy lays his hand flat on the floor, and Jackson steps onto it, letting himself be lifted. Jimmy keeps him a few inches from his face. “No licking me. I’ll pet you all you want, but I don’t want to be slobbered on.”

Jackson yips, and Jimmy pets him. “Good boy.” He puts him back down, and gets into his laying around at home clothing. While he’s doing that, Tim comes up.

“Hey, food’s on plates.”

“Be down in a sec. Contacts.” Jimmy heads into the bathroom to swap out his glasses for his contacts, and Tim sits down on the floor, next to Jackson.

“Hello.” Jackson, who had been about to follow Jimmy, notices yet another new person and changes
direction to say hello. Tim’s petting him, and rubbing the top of his head with one finger, when he says to Gibbs, “How’s it going?”

“Pretty well. We’re getting settled in.”

“Good.” He picks up Jackson, letting him lick his face. “Good doggie.” He pets him again. “You’ve got a big job ahead. You’re giving my dad a mission, again.” He looks up at Gibbs and smiles at him, the first time either of them have explicitly said anything about how this isn’t just about helping kids out. Then he looks back to Jackson. “And one day, you’ll be helping someone like my son. That’s a lot on your plate, and it’s going to be hard, but you’re going to be great at it.”

Jackson yips at that. Tim pets him again.

On Thursday, Abby stops over at Gibbs place with a little present for Jackson.

Gibbs is on the back porch, reading his paper, drinking some coffee, playing toss with both of the dogs. Mona’s got a tennis ball. Jackson has a ping pong ball (and Gibbs is thinking if he can find a smaller ball, he needs to get one). He’ll toss Mona’s, and she goes tearing off after it. Jackson’s ball, he balances on his palm, and flicks with his finger, sending it skittering off.

Both doggies are loving it.

Abby spends a moment watching the three of them playing. “You’re looking happy.”

“I’m feeling good.”

“How’re they doing with the woodworking?”

“Mona’s fine with it. Jackson sneezes when he’s down there. He stays up here when I’m sanding.”

Abby smiles at that, sitting next to Gibbs, taking the tennis ball from Mona to throw it. When Jackson skitters up with his little ball, she picks him up and pulls something out of her bag.

It’s a little vest that goes over Jackson’s shoulders and back. It’s black (of course) and has “Probationary Service Dog” written on it.

“Service dogs usually have something like this. Just needed to make one small enough for him.”

Jackson keeps trying to circle around and see what’s on his back. Abby takes it off so he can investigate it properly. He sniffs it, barks at it, chews on it a little, and decides it’s okay. Abby puts it back on him.

“You wear that like a crown, little boy. That tells the world that you’re a very special doggy with a very special mission.”

He stands in front of her, all two pounds of him, head high, ears alert, tail whipping back and forth, and basks in the petting he’s getting.

By Friday night, Gibbs has come to a few conclusions:
A: Jimmy’s a freaking sadist. Arms and abs… Yeah… He hasn’t felt that battered since day one of the Marines when he got to enjoy “calisthenics” for the first time. He’s got the suspicion that when Jimmy gets a hold of him over the weekend, and then “tailors” things to his shoulder and lung capacity, it’s not going to get any easier.

B: Bitching about it with Tony is *fun*. In fact, having someone to bitch about this with makes it a lot easier for both of them. And for as annoying as Tony moaning about things when he was the one telling Tony to do it was, when someone else is giving the orders, Tony moaning about it is awfully entertaining.

It occurs to him, as they’re wrapping up one-armed side planks, and Tony’s grousing about how he could at least sort of understand doing it one-handed when you’re stomach down (“After all, there might be a woman under you, and then you’d have something to do with that hand, but this… This is useless! When are you ever going to need to hover on one hand and one foot? Even Palmer isn’t enough of a pervert to come up with something where this’ll be handy!) that he and Tony have moved fully out of “Boss” and “DiNozzo” into *friends*.

C: Dogs are dogs. Little bitty ones, very big ones, they all want to be petted and praised by the alpha, which is him. Jackson is doing very well with easy, specific instructions, lots of petting for obeying, and a little bop on the head and a no, for not obeying.

He’s got a good feeling about this. Something he hasn’t felt since the last time he was working a job with his team. This satisfies the little voice that needs to have a goal, a vision for how to get there, and good people, well dogs, to get there with.

And D: It’s been a good week.

On Saturday, when he’s outside, in the backyard, watching the boys mow the grass down low enough so they won’t lose the kids or Jackson in it, as he and Ziva get the baseball gloves out, oiling them up, getting them ready for some play, he’s thinking this next week will be even better.
Supposedly, normally, for the “average pregnancy” (if such a thing exists, and Breena truly doubts it does) morning sickness ends ‘round-about’ week twelve. In that it’s the beginning of May, Breena is officially fifteen weeks along.

In that she’s never gotten it to go away a day before week eighteen (Jon), and it lasted to week twenty with both of the girls, Breena expects it to go at least that long this time, too.

So, she’s more than pleasantly surprised to wake up and not feel like complete and utter shit.

She also doesn’t trust it. Her first thought is that it’s a fluke, and that she’ll stretch or move or something and all of the nausea will come slamming back into her.

But it doesn’t. She gets up, and the room doesn’t spin, and her head doesn’t hurt, and her stomach doesn’t lurch. She goes downstairs, and the smell of breakfast doesn’t make her want to retch.

And that freaks her out. She goes running back upstairs. In other circumstances, this would alarm her spouses, but they assume breakfast is making her retch. She’s actually running back upstairs to see if they’ve got an extra pregnancy test lurking around. (They do.)

She’s already peed, but she manages to get an extra teaspoon out, and waits, on the verge of hysterical, to see if she’s still pregnant.

Because that’s something she remembers from Jon. She stopped feeling nauseous a few days before the ultrasound. At the time, she thought she’d just hit the end of morning sickness and had been really glad to see it come.

Afterward, she realized that’s when she’d lost Jon. No living baby means no more pregnancy hormones. And once those hormones go away, so does the morning sickness.

So she holds the test, hands shaking, praying hard, for the longest minute ever.

It flickers up at her, and the word positive pops up, sending a hot rush of relief through Breena.

So… Maybe… It could be… This is a normal-ish pregnancy?

Breena doesn’t say anything about it that morning. She doesn’t want to jinx it. But… As morning wears on, and lunch time goes whizzing by, and lunch is actual food, granted, bland, easy food, she hasn’t had a real, full meal in weeks, so she’s not about to run off and get a burger and fries first thing… (Though, God, a big, thick, juicy burger with lots of lettuce, and pickles, and a huge stack of hot, salty, crispy fries right next to it, maybe with a brownie, with vanilla ice cream, and hot fudge sauce, and some cherries, and…) It’s possible that Breena is genuinely feeling better as she’s fantasying her way through the meal she wants as she actually eats a bowl of chicken soup, with some rye bread toast, and an apple.

Her dad sees her slurping down the soup with a lot more speed than usual, and quickly goes through
his memory of the earlier part of the day, where they did the heavy lifting on one embalming and the
makeup for three of their guests, and rapidly comes to the conclusion that at no point did Breena
leave the mortuary, nor did her trusty waste basket get any use.

“You’re feeling better.” He’s got a grin on his face.

She holds up crossed fingers at him, while chewing. Then she knocks on the wooden table they’re
sitting at.

He knocks on it, too, and grins at her, not saying another word about it, also not wanting to jinx it for
her.

Tim’s the first of her spouses to get home, so he’s the first to notice something different is up.

Specifically, Breena is up. As in sitting up, at the kitchen table, working through her P&L statements
for the quarter.

“Good nap?” he asks as he heads in and kisses her.

She grins up at him, and her kiss back actually has a little heat to it.

“Very good nap?”

She smiles. “You’re on dinner tonight?”

“I got the long straw. Jimmy’s getting your girls. Abby’s getting our kids, and I’m here to make some
dinner. Why? Anything you want me to avoid tonight?”

“Nope!” She’s smiling.

“Extremely good nap?” Tim asks, wondering what’s up.

“Extremely good nap. Extremely good morning. I woke up feeling good, I still feel good, and right
now, I’m hungry!”

Tim lights up at that. “Well then, what do you want?”

“Everything!”

He starts poking around in Jimmy and Breena’s fridge and pantry. “Don’t know about everything,
but I’ve got what I need for grilled pork chops, corn on the cob, and salad.”

“Sounds amazing.”

He digs around in the freezer a moment longer, and comes out holding up a familiar canister of ice
cream. “And we’ve still got a pint of the Ben and Jerry’s Chunky Monkey!”

Her eyes light up at that. “Oooo!”

And as he tells her about his day, and she tells him about his, he gets to making the pork chops.
Breena feeling better produces a generally celebratory sort of mood among the McPalmers. Certainly there is the general feeling of relief that she’s not hurting anymore, and that they’ll get to enjoy the rest of Donnie’s in utero-time.

There is also a much more specific level of celebration that Jimmy and Breena, who remember this from Molly and Anna’s pregnancies, are looking forward to, intensely.

Once the morning sickness backs off, pregnancy horniness comes into play, and it hits hard.

Like Jimmy said all those years ago at Tim’s bachelor party, first trimester, not so good for sex. Second trimester, oh yeah! Jimmy very fondly remembers several weekends of Molly’s pregnancy. One in particular, that still makes him smile, was when they found out exactly how many times he could get off before his dick just looked up at him and said, “Nope.” (Correct answer, eleven between end of work Friday, and bedtime, for sleeping, Sunday night.) And there was one especially good one of Anna’s where they basically found out how many times the quickie master could get Breena off in one naptime. (Correct answer, they don’t know. They both lost count. More than four, likely less than ten. It was an awfully good nap.)

And so, it is with this level of celebration in mind, and with her body rapidly swinging from wanting nothing at all, to wanting everything, all the time, that Breena wants to ask her men for something to celebrate with.

They’re getting ready for breakfast the next morning, all of them in the kitchen, in that not exactly calm or serene morning routine of juggling four children, breakfast, lunch-making and all the rest of it, when she says, “How would you guys feel about me taking some pictures of you.”

“Is this gender neutral guys, or do you mean the boys?” Abby asks.

“I was meaning the boys.” She smiles at Abby. “Hoping you’d help me get the pictures.” She’s got some ideas of how she wants the final images to work, but she’s not sure how to get those final images.

“I can do that, what are we shooting?”

Both Tim and Jimmy are happily smirking at this idea. Both ladies have taken some shots of them they immensely enjoyed posing for, and they are both eager to do that again.

“Remember when we did those pinup shots for them?”

Abby’s got a huge gleam in her eye as she settles Sean in for his breakfast nurse. “Oh yeah.” She’s eyeing both of the guys, who are suddenly realizing this might not exactly be the sort of pictures they were thinking about.

“So… would you want us to dress up?” Jimmy asks, sounding a bit tentative about that. Yeah, he did have a lot of fun the last time they got all dressed up and went out, but he’s wondering how self-conscious he’s going to feel about getting dressed up, and then standing around, posing for something like this.

Breena licks her lips, eyes tracing over Jimmy, who’s at the stove, cooking everyone’s morning eggs. “Well… maybe not dressed up.”

Abby’s also eyeing him, and then Tim, who is cutting up bananas for the kids, and then back to Jimmy, and back to Tim. “Yeah, probably not… costumes… per se. But… maybe not entirely naked, either.”
Breena shakes her head. “Not entirely naked. I have those pictures, and I love them. Just want something different. Something, seductive, not necessarily outright porn.”

“Both of us in our boxers, him in my lap, making out?” Tim asks. After all, that was his favorite part of that Valentine’s present. He certainly likes the pinups, too, but… The girls playing with each other hit a lot harder.

That gets some happy smiles, and then Breena says, “That might just be for kicks, after. I want to get you guys all pretty and then take your pictures. And then,” she grins at all three of them, and switches to sign and shifts a bit so Molly and Kelly can’t see what her hands are doing, she doesn’t want to explain what certain gestures mean, we’re going to fuck like crazy all night long.

And yes, there are certain things that may make Jimmy feel a bit self-conscious, but fucking like crazy all night long goes a long way toward soothing that.

“So, tonight?” Jimmy asks.

Breena shakes her head. “Friday or Saturday. I know where I want you, and that’s in our star-gazing room at the house.”

First Shabbos dinner since morning sickness set in, and Breena is eager for it.

She gets done with work at her usual time, 1:00, picks up the kids from daycare, and heads to the house. The girls fall asleep in the car on the ride over, so it is, with the traditional prayer of the parent of the sleeping baby, Breena carefully picks up Anna, and very gently takes her in.

Ziva and Jethro are already there, and he sees her carrying in sleeping child number one, and gets up to grab sleeping child number two.

After a moment of silent please, please, please STAY ASLEEP, where Anna opens her eyes, looks around a bit, and then decides, ‘nah, not worth it’ and shuts her eyes again, Breena’s ready for Shabbos.

She heads into the living room with Jethro, and sees Ziva sitting on the sofa, on feed number who knows what for Dave. She closes in, and kisses Ziva’s cheek. “How are you?”

Ziva looks up from Dave and sighs and says, “I now understand why when I asked Abby that when Kelly was little, she said, ‘Mooo.'”

Breena nods, sitting next to Ziva, petting Dave’s cheek. “Yep. I know you want to do this, and I don’t want this to come off as pressuring you, but, like I told her, if the ‘moo’ gets too much, you don’t have to do every single feed yourself.”

Ziva flashes her a tiny smile. “It is good to have options, but like you said, I want to do this.”

“Then I’m backing off.” She looks around a bit. Ziva and Dave on the sofa with her. Mona on the floor in front of the fireplace. Jethro’s in the kitchen… She raises her voice a little so Jethro knows she’s talking to him, “Are we missing a little guy? Where’s your baby?”

He’s out a minute later, with coffee for him, and decaf with lots of milk for Ziva. Breena sees it and
“Just, hold up on that. I want some…” And goes to get herself a coffee, too.

When she’s back out, Gibbs and Ziva eye the cup in her hand, and then her, and then the cup again. “Yes, I’m feeling better. Been about four days now. Other than I want to eat everything in sight, and I plan to go crazy cooking in a few minutes, there’s not much to say about that. Okay, tell me about Jackson.”

Gibbs sips his coffee. He’s about to say he doesn’t know exactly where Jackson is, in the house, somewhere, but hearing his name, he comes scampering out of Ducky and Penny’s part of the house and tries to climb Breena for pets.

She does give him the affection he wants, and then sniffs. Pregnancy also means her sense of smell is on hyper-overdrive, but even if it wasn’t, his back paws are wet. “Someone had an accident.”

Gibbs winces and heads to the kitchen for cleaning supplies.

“Isn’t be the first time we’ve had baby pee on the floor,” Breena replies to his wince. “Certainly won’t be the last. Kelly’s been watching Molly use the potty, and she’s indicating she’s interested, too.”

“So, you are saying we should not go anywhere in this house barefoot anytime soon?” Ziva says with a smile.

“We’re going to start diaper-free time at one of our own places, first. Right now we’re just asking her if she wants to use it, a lot.”

“Any success?” Jethro asks, mopping up a small puddle on the fortunately hardwood-floored foyer. Then he takes Jackson to the sliding glass door between the living room and patio, and points to the doggie door next to it. “Number two: Bathroom is outside.” Jackson butts his head against it and heads out. Mona goes out with him, to make sure he doesn’t wander off.

“Heather had some. We’re mostly just spending a lot of time in the bathroom, reading potty stories.”

Ziva looks down at Dave. “Are you done?” He’s been slowing down, and his eyes are awfully droopy. He, obviously, doesn’t say anything, just gives her a slow, easy suck, and closes his eyes.

“That looks like a finished baby,” Jethro says, tossing out his paper towel and washing his hands. “Hand him over.”

Ziva does, getting herself tucked back into her clothing, and yawns.

Gibbs gives her the naptime for you look, and she nods. “I feel like I should be doing more.”

Breena shakes her head at that. “You are doing more than enough. You sleep and eat. Let us take care of you while you take care of him.”

Ziva nods, and then begins the trek up to her room. Sleeping sounds really good right now.

Jethro’s got Dave on his chest, gently patting him, as he and Breena head into the kitchen.

“What’s on the menu today?” she asks.
“Got a few chickens. Though we’d roast them up.”

Breena smiles at that. Then an idea hits. “What’s a few?”

“Four.”

That smile breaks into a full faced grin. They’ve got enough oven space and cast iron frying pans for this to work. “Potatoes, carrots, onions, too?”

“Turnips, too.”

“Mmm… Sounds good. How about we cut up the veg, put them in the frying pans, then cut up the chicken, rub it with spices, lay it on the veg, and cook them all together.”

Jethro nod, that sounds good to him. David finally lets go of the massive blech he’s been holding onto. Jethro kisses the top of his head and says, “I bet you’re feeling better now.”

Dave gurgles a bit.

“Uh huh. Okay, time to head up for your nap, too.”

Jethro goes up, and Breena gets started on dinner. Mona pads into the kitchen, and watches her.

She’s cutting up the chicken, and Mona’s eyes are on her, very heavily.

“You enjoying training your Probie?”

Mona woofs.

A second later she hears much smaller feet, and feels another set of eyes on her. Her back is to them, but she can feel them watching her every move.

“Uh uh. No raw chicken for you.” Sometimes this sort of behavior will get an occasional treat in the form of a bit of beef or lamb, but no one in their house, even Mona, gets raw poultry.

Mona doesn’t whine or anything like that. She’s vastly too dignified for that sort of behavior. She does settle down on the floor and lie her head on her paws, looking up at Breena. Jackson, who at nine weeks old, is not particularly dignified, does yip about it. Breena turns to him, shakes her head, and he rapidly figures out that there will not be gifts of food, and thus goes back to running around the living room.

Jethro comes back down, and grabs a cutting board, knife, and some of the veggies.

“Good week for you?” Breena asks as she trims the second chicken.

He nods.

“Getting your full-time Saba award?”

He smiles at that, carefully turning a potato into nice, uniformly sized chunks.

“Mona at least woofed at me.”

Gibbs takes that as a ‘add some damn words, I’m not a mind reader’ and starts to talk. “It was a good week. We’re getting a routine. Get over to Tony and Ziva’s. Work out with Tony. He goes off to work, and then Ziva and I have little guy. She handles the waking up part, and then feeds him. I do
burps and put him back down. Then they both sleep. And I… do whatever.”

“What’s whatever?”

“Anything from getting groceries, to walks with my crew, to puppy socializing, to researching more puppy training. I was watching this thing with a kid teaching her dog sign language, and that sounds useful. No idea if Jackson’s future human will speak or not, so, he should know words and hand signals.”

Breena nods, that makes a lot of sense to her. “Any more wedding stuff?”

“Invitations are ordered. DJ is booked. It’s starting to look like a party.”

“Flowers?”

Gibbs shakes his head. He’s perfectly fine with getting most of the wedding stuff on his own, but ordering flowers requires him to know colors, and to actually care about how the damn things are arranged.

“We’ll get that figured out for you this weekend.”

He nods at that. If he’s got pictures, and a list of what to get, he can comparison shop and order them just fine. He just doesn’t want to go at it cold.

“Are we going to be hosting Abbi’s family out here, or closer to town?”

Gibbs shrugs. “Probably closer to town. No idea how long they’ll take off for. Might just be here for two days, or something.”

“You going to try to get back out there this summer?”

“That’s the idea. Get to see it in bloom. Maybe bring the dogs. Probably have to drive to do that.” If he can pry Abbi out of work for long enough to do it, driving out with the doggies sounds like a lot of fun. Hell, maybe get a Winnebago or something, go see everywhere in between. He didn’t have any really hot honeymoon ideas (beyond not Cancun, again.) and that might be fun.

“They rent cabins, right?” Breena asks, bringing him back to getting dinner ready.

“Yeah.”

“Maybe in five, six years, we’ll all head out. Show the kids the whole world doesn’t look like Virginia.”

Gibbs smiles at that idea, too.

A properly roasted chicken, with a crispy brown skin, succulent, juicy meat, resting on a heap of golden, roasted vegetables is a thing of sublime joy and beauty, and Breena Palmer hopes to never go without it again.

She’s happily tearing through her chicken leg, as the rest of the family starts their normal, what-we-did-this-week conversation.

Abby’s got the floor, now. “I’m in the lab, working on recreating a scene for Dornie, when Corwin
comes over and says, ‘Abby, Major Mass Spec isn’t sounding right.’ I roll my eyes a little, and get up. They all know that if you don’t go to Major Mass Spec with the right attitude, he’s going to complain, but…” Abby shakes her head. “I go over, and I give him a little pet and some sweet talk, and—”

“He magically got better the same way he always does when you go pet him?” Jimmy adds.

“NO! He kept growling!” Abby looks stupefied that this should have happened. “I talked to him. I explained what we needed done. And, just GRRRRRR…” She makes the sound of gears grinding on each other.

Tim, Tony, Ziva, and Gibbs all share a look. They’ve all heard the GRRR of the unhappy Mass Spec.

“So, I talk to him some more, and… He just wasn’t happy. I spent all day working with him. I took him apart top to bottom, pulled out his innards and…” Abby looks spitting mad at this. “Every season he gets a service call. And there’s a little spot on the inside, where the technician signs his initials and dates his work, and…” She’s shaking her head, looking angry. “They didn’t call him in while I was on maternity leave! ‘Get Major Mass Spec serviced’ was on the list of instructions I left, and they didn’t do it.”

“Oh, good God!” Tim looks a bit chilled. He, of all people, knows, intimately what an upset Abby is like. “You chewed them out, didn’t you?”

Abby nods solemnly. “You would have been proud Gibbs, I even applied head slaps.” Gibbs does smile at that. “First day the technician can get in is Wednesday, so we’ve got to hope what I’ve done’ll keep him running for another half week, but…” She’s shaking her head again. “You don’t get almost twenty years out of a piece of equipment like that if you don’t take care of it!” She’s got her I’m boiling you in my mind look on her face as she thinks of them, and then stabs her fork through a potato. “Okay, better news. Tony tell us about the newbies.”

“First day back, Draga sidles over, and hands me a Red Bull. He says, ‘Didn’t use to drink them. Then Kevin was born. He opens my top drawer, and he’s got two six packs in there. Then he pats me on the shoulder and says, ‘Good luck,’ and then smirks at me before sauntering back to his desk with a huge grin on his face.” Tony softens that with a smile. “I mean, come on, just because the black circles under my eyes were so dark they look like the black stripes football players put on their faces to cut the glare, doesn’t mean I need intravenous Red Bull.”

They haven’t heard that story, but Tony’s been back to work for a bit, so he’s got to be telling it for a reason.

“How was it?” Abbi asks.


“And your newbies?” Penny asks, getting him to lead to where this goes.

“Settling in. Johnson’s doing the job well. Attentive, good with details. Cool.”

“And Spader?”

Tony shakes his head. “I’m not sure what he’s doing, but it’s why I mentioned the Red Bull. I’d call it sucking up, but, I mean, I’m his Boss, so… He’s supposed to watch me, figure out what I want and need, and then get it for me before I ask, right?”
“Always hoped I’d get one of you that well-trained,” Gibbs says, with a bit of a smirk.

“Well, he’s coming along. Also, he smiles at me, a lot.”

“Like he’s got a sunny personality?” Breena asks.

Tony shrugs. “At work, he seems to. Kind of puts me in mind of your man, back when he was new, just, little less likely to stick his foot in his mouth.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes. “Having a sunny disposition can be a defense mechanism. Everything around you sucks, so you slap a smile on your face and look on the bright side.” That’s part of what drew him to Breena and vice versa. They both have, on the face of it, horrible jobs, and they both intentionally wear a smile and cheer to keep themselves, and the people around them, from drowning in sorrow.

“Which he could be doing. Or not. I don’t know, yet. I do know that it’s almost eerie to have the new coffee appear, with the Red Bull in it, almost before I finish the old one. It’s like he’s watching me, and waiting to do things for me I might like.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Tim asks.

“It’s just weird. Like… I don’t know, weird. Maybe it’s because he is who he is. I…” He glances at Penny. “You’re going to want to slap me for this, but, if Johnson was getting me drinks and smiling all the time, it wouldn’t hit my radar, but he’s huge, and a he, and…”

Penny nods to Jimmy, who’s sitting next to Tony, and he does apply the head slap to the back of his head.

She gets up and drops a few bucks in the ASSHOLE jar to cover it and then returns to the table. “You were right about that. So, are you uncomfortable with a big, muscular man playing a subservient role, or is he flirting with you? Is that the problem?”

Tony’s eyes go wide. There’s an option he hadn’t thought of, but… “Uh… I…” He licks his lips, staring at Penny, who likely has opinions about him being uncomfortable with both of those things. “I… am going to shut up now. Tim, I heard some scuttlebutt about one of the Cyberbabies, what’s up with that?”

“Uh…” To Tim the ‘cyberbabies’ are Howard (25) and Brand (almost 19) and he hasn’t heard any scuttlebutt about them.

Tony can see Tim doesn’t know what he’s talking about, so he expounds. “One of them’s taking over. I was hearing something like that…”

“Garbled translation,” Tim says. “Unless I’ve been too deep in my office. Are you talking about Ngyn?”

“Dark hair, shy?” Tony asks.

“Ngyn. Yeah. It’s not out yet that I’m leaving. Soon though. I’ll give proper sixty-days-notice, so that’s…” Tim thinks about it. “Uh… That came up fast. It’s next week. I didn’t think she’d want my job, but she’s the best combination of years in and talent, so I offered it to her, expecting her to give me an ‘are you insane look’ and then head off. But she didn’t. She stepped up, so I gave her the NCIS branch of CrimeWeb, and she ran with that, and then I kept giving her more and more of my job, and so far, she’s doing okay.”
“What’s okay?” Ziva asks.

“She doesn’t love the face to face stuff, but she’s delegating it well, or putting it into online communications. She can IM faster than I can think. Most of who she deals with is scattered around the globe, so… It’s working out okay.”

“Haven’t heard anything about CrimeWeb in a while,” Penny says.

“You got us funding, and the last report I had indicated they’d found a place to stick computers and some people, and that—”

“Manner gave me notice and buggered off to run the damn thing,” Abbi says, glaring at Tim.

“Not my fault. You wouldn’t have had him at all if it weren’t for me.”

That does not cause the glare to abate. “I’m scrambling for a computer guy again.”

“Probably a good idea to get more than one of them,” Jimmy adds.

“Ya think?” Abbi shoots back at him. She knows she needs more than one of them. But she doesn’t entirely trust her HR guys, and she doesn’t know what she needs in a Cybercrime guy. It’s frustrating. Manner tells her the people he got in play are good, and they may be, but…

“And I’ll go back to eating,” Jimmy says.

Gibbs strokes his hand up and down Abbi’s back. “I’m out of the office for at least the next week, and I just got the word from him today.”

“Sorry,” Tim says. “Long run, he’s doing more to make your life easier than he could in your building.”

“Sure. Just one more thing that’s got to be dealt with.” That’s not cheering Abbi up.

Gibbs knows Manner’s the tip of the iceberg. “How’s getting the testimony going?”

That gets a huge sigh and eye roll. “I’m wishing I knew something about computers so I can run off and go make law enforcement work better. I got word back yesterday that they don’t want copies of a lot of my ‘evidence,’ they want originals, but in half of the cases, I can’t give them originals because I gave the originals when I was originally testifying. The damn things are already in evidence. In DC. In burned out buildings.” She looks to Penny. “If I tell them to drag their own asses down to DC and go spelunking in what’s left of the Capitol building, will they hold me in contempt?”

Penny smiles a bit. “If they do, I’ll break you out. So far, at least for the ones I’ve been hearing about, if you’re giving evidence for the right side, and you’re on the right side, questions have been easy and gentle. We haven’t gotten to the point where defense has been able to cross-examine anyone, so that might not be so lovely, but right now, you’re looking at a lot of softballs and having to listen to speech after speech about how you and yours did such an amazing job of saving the day.”

“Not that I mind softball questions and praise, but I could be back in my office doing my job.”

“That’s how a lot of the people we’ve talked to have felt,” Penny says.

“Who have you talked to,” Breena asks. “Sometimes we have c-span on when we work, but most of the time we don’t.
“Not too much, yet. Abbi’s one of the first ones up because of how this unraveled. But, we’ve heard from your friend Harland. He got called up early because he’s a Congressman now, and his name was on a lot of the warrants you guys used. Jake already gave his testimony, for the same reason. I’ll be going up soon. Leon’s on the calendar for right after Abbi. Ummm… no one else you know, for a while.”

“Not calling me?” Tim asks.

“Not as of yet. I think Leon’s going to be getting your questions.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Of course, right now, this is just general admissions of evidence. Each individual person will get called up to be tried. So, with each new case, you’ve got another shot of getting called in,” Penny replies.

Tim nods. “They’ll bring me in for those. They always did in the criminal cases we used to handle.”

“And, eventually, these’ll be criminal cases. Just, not yet,” Penny says between bites of roasted carrot.

“You don’t get to sit in on them, right?” Ziva asks.

“Right. I was too close to the whole thing, so I’m not on any of the trials.”

“So, what are you up to?” Breena asks.

“Fun stuff.” There’s a lot of sarcasm in her voice. “North Dakota voted to join Canada. Great, we all know that. North Dakota also has several Native American reservations on it. They are not part of the state of North Dakota. They’re also claiming to not be part of the United States of America. So, I, and a few representatives of the Sioux, Chippewa, Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara, and representatives of North Dakota, and representatives from Canada are busy working out a treaty.”

“Uh, yay?” Breena asks.

“It’s important, but dull. What they want, to be their own country, isn’t going to happen. I and the Canadian representatives have been told in no uncertain terms that that’s not a deal we’re making. So, right now, we’re just seeing if they’ll opt to join Canada, or be little islands of America in Canada.”

“Why don’t they get to be their own country?” Jimmy asks.

“No one cares if the Native Americans have their own country, not for them as people. However, much of their land is on top of a treasure trove of oil,” Ducky says. And that turns the light on for everyone else.

Penny adds, “And the deal with Canada holds that they’ll pay royalties to the US for any oil money on land they got from us for the next fifty years. Which is why we’re perfectly happy to see them become Canadians, and since the Canadians get the bulk of that money, they’re fine with them being Canadians, too, but no one is going to let them become their own country.”

“So, they don’t get to hold onto their own wealth, and you’re the one negotiating this?” Abby asks Penny.

“With my teeth gritted. As a condition of the treaty I’m working on, we’re making sure they get to
keep fifty percent of the money, themselves. Before the fall, the Feds used to keep that money ‘for
them’ and then hand it out, as it saw fit, when it saw fit.”

“And use it as a private slush fund,” Ducky says. “All of that money was gone long before things
went crazy last autumn. The reports on the Bureau of Indian Affairs indicates they were up to their
ears in corruption. It is thoroughly distasteful to see exactly how…” he’s editing himself, “abysmally,
run many of the government bodies were. ‘A few bad apples,’” he shakes his head. “We were living
in an apple graveyard, staring at acres of rotted apples, crawling with maggots.”

“I remember Bishop saying something like that to me, about why she left NSA,” Tim says. “How’s
she doing?” He hopes that’s a happier topic.

“Quite well. Baby Malloy is officially due toward the end of June, so she’s hit the ‘any day now’
part of the pregnancy. Between bouts of nursery painting and being crabby about being very
pregnant, we’re continuing to try and figure out what Jarvis should be doing to get his tax base back
into shape.”

“Fun?” Gibbs asks.

“Frustrating. Many ideas. No clear answers. Onto something lighter, Jethro, I do not see a tiny puppy
scampering around. Where is Jackson?”

“I’ll bring him down to get acquainted after the… dinner.” The girls aren’t really paying attention to
this conversation, but if he says he’s going to do something after they go to bed, he will suddenly
have some laser-like focus on him, and that will be a bit of a problem. They’re all still young enough
they think everything stops when they go to bed, and he’s perfectly happy to not disabuse them of
that notion. “This is still way more excitement than he can handle at once. So, he’s in our room,
hopefully not chewing anything irreplaceable or peeing on the rug.”

That gets a look between Penny and Ducky, who have not yet seen the little guy in person. They hit
traffic north of Philly, and ended up getting in less than a minute before the blessing.

“He’s got a little nest of newspaper in the corner, that he’s pretty good with. And he… mostly…
knows where the outside is, but he’s still too little to easily get up and down the steps,” Abbi adds.

“And if we leave the door open, he’ll get himself down here. He’s social. He likes people. But he’ll
end up running around like crazy, barking at everything, trying to jump on everyone, and…”

“Act like the over-excited baby he is?” Ducky finishes that sentence.

Jethro nods.

“So, he’s having some quiet time with Mona,” Abbi says. “And later, he’ll come down and say
hello.”

“And will he put me in mind of Mother’s hounds?” Ducky asks Jethro.

Tony’s already shaking his head, no. “Only one of him to start with.”

“And he’s a lot quieter,” Jethro finishes. “Just as easily excited, but I’m hoping to mellow that.”

“Is that the first time anyone’s ever heard you use the word mellow in a sentence?” Abby asks
Gibbs.

He sends her a smartass glance.
She holds up her hands. “Just saying, Gibbs and mellow aren’t usually complimentary ideas.”

That gets a bit of a laugh, and dinner rolls on.

“We ready?” Breena asks Abby as their guys get the girls all washed up with post-dinner tubby time.

Abby plugs the last of the nightlights into the wall sockets of their star-gazing room. “Yep.” She stands up and hands Breena the camera. “Basic digital SLR. Point, click, and boom, pictures. Or,” she touches the screen, and clicks the play triangle. “Hit that, and you’ve got video. Just remember, you want to stay,” Abby walks off a ten-foot patch of floor, “on this line, and everything will look great.”

Looks easy enough. “And if I do video?”

“Just like when we did the pinups for the guys. I’ll pull shots out of it after. Video will probably be easier, especially since you intend to have Jimmy moving around.”

Breena grins, wide, happy smile on her face. Oh, yes, she intends to have Jimmy moving around, and she intends to enjoy every second of it.

“Got some washed-up girls in here,” they hear Jimmy call out. Time to move onto tuck-ins.

Like Jimmy, Tim also feels mildly silly about pinup pictures. He shouldn’t. Both Abby and Breena have collection of vastly more explicit shots featuring him in a wide array of pornographic situations.

But, those pictures were taken as part of playing, while he was into it.

It’s fairly easy for him to look sexy while he’s having sex. He has no problem with come hither eyes when he’s naked, tied up, and he’s trying to get the woman with the camera to literally come hither and get him off.

This isn’t quite the same thing.

This is get dressed up, and pose, and… go at it cold? Maybe? He’s not entirely sure what the camera crew half of this is intending to do.

He does know that what’s in his hands isn’t exactly a costume, but it’s not his normal sort of clothing, either.

It’s an almost translucent white button down. The kind of thing he wouldn’t normally wear, or buy for himself. It’s linen, with a tropical sort of feel to it. He’s got the sense it’s meant to be worn at a beach or pool, probably unbuttoned, maybe with a t-shirt under it. Maybe not. He tries to imagine wearing a t-shirt under a button down that the t-shirt would show through. He’s not seeing it.

Knowing Abby, and her tastes, and Breena and hers, they might be thinking a shirt like that, soaked in water so it’d go from near-translucent to completely see-through linen plastered against his skin, is the look they’re aiming for. (That he can imagine.)
There’s only one other part to this, a pair of tight, black skinny jeans. Judging by how tight they are, they’re from wherever Breena got those red jeans Jimmy wore when they went clubbing.

He’s suddenly wondering if Abby and Breena intend to plop him in the shower or the river for this.

He hopes not the river. The moon is full, and Abby knows enough about how to use a camera to get some shots of him, but it’s chilly for early May, and yes, he can see in his head how this would look, him all wet in clingy, skin-tight clothing, lit by the moon, but he doesn’t think he’s going to be able to approximate anything like sexy body language or expression if he’s shivering.

Jimmy walks into their room. He’s just finished kissing babies goodnight.

Then he looks around the room. Tim’s costume is fairly obvious. It’s in his hands. Jimmy’s not seeing anything for him.

Tim’s got the sense that at some point the girls switched up the plans, because while he’s got a white button down and tight jeans, Jimmy’s got… nothing.

At all.

No costume, no makeup, nothing.

“So much for not porn,” Tim says to him, shucking off his (rather damp from tubby time) work clothing.

“Naked isn’t necessarily porn,” Jimmy replies, pulling off his shirt. He doesn’t need explicit instructions to figure out what Breena wants him in.

Tim has to admit that’s true, but… “So, what, you lay back on the bed and eat grapes seductively or something?” Tim supposes they could be planning on plopping Jimmy onto the bed in their harem room, maybe drape one of the satin sheets on him, carefully locate a pillow or two, and have him just lie around and flex some. Tim’s not, by any stretch, a connoisseur of pinup photos, but he thinks that’s a recurring theme.

Jimmy ripples his stomach muscles, wearing a cocky expression on his face. “They know where the good stuff is, and don’t want to cover it up.” Then he smirks at Tim’s shirt and pants.

Tim whacks him on the shoulder with the back of his hand as Breena heads in, a huge smile on her face, having heard Jimmy’s last comment. She pats him on the butt and then kisses him. “You know it, baby.” Then she glances at both of them. “Okay, you’re not undressed enough, and you’re still way too undressed. What are you two doing?” she asks as Jimmy starts pulling off his boxer-briefs and Tim begins to pull on the shirt.

“Speculating,” Jimmy replies.

“Well, get naked, follow me, and you’ll speculate no more.”

So, Jimmy does, and Tim, jeans in his hands (they’re way too tight to pull on quickly) follows, as well.
When Breena started up with this idea, she knew how she wanted Jimmy to look, and explained it to Abby, because she didn’t know how to make it happen.

Abby grinned and got to it.

She set the octagonal star-gazing room for pictures. It’s fairly dim. The overhead lights are off, and so are the hall lights. She’s got small votive candles in frosted glasses where the window panes come together. So, six tiny lights on the floor. And two of the kids’ nightlights carefully arranged to brighten the glow just a bit.

There’s Jimmy’s yoga mat on the floor, so it’s fairly obvious what they expect to happen, and who they expect to be doing it.

“All right,” Breena takes Jimmy by the hand, leading him over to his mat. “You’re up first.”

And then it clicks for Tim, all of the light will hit Jimmy from one side. Yeah, he’ll be naked, and… Breena’s carefully rubbing oil on him, making sure not to get any on his hands or feet, which Jimmy does not appear to mind at all. He’ll be dark on the side facing them, and the side away will reflect the light.

He’ll glow, with a sort of silhouette, or halo. And, if they angle the shots right, there’ll be the reflection of him in the glass behind.

If Abby can keep him moving slowly enough that the shots don’t all blur, this should look awesome.

He hears Breena say, “This setup okay for your moon salutations?”

Jimmy nods, looking around. “No problems. Is that what you want to see?”

“Yes. Say, slowed down to half speed.”

“Low light photography means we need longer exposures,” Abby says.

“No flash?” Jimmy asks.

“It’ll ruin the effect. We’re actually filming you, not taking still pictures, so don’t worry about ever going completely still, but keep moving slow so the camera can still catch you,” Breena says.

“You want some music or anything?” Abby asks Jimmy.

He shakes his head. The point of yoga for him is to go inward. The point of music is to get him out of his head. The two don’t go together in his world.

“You guys have anything you want me to do?” Tim asks.

Abby grins at him, eyes raking over him standing in his boxers and that shirt, currently unbuttoned. He knows she likes what she’s seeing. “You get to hang out and relax. Just make sure those boxers are off and the jeans are on by the time Jimmy’s done.”

“At half speed, that’s going to be about twenty minutes. It’s not a long routine,” Jimmy says.

Tim grabs a few of the pillows the girls had taken out of their lounging-about-looking-at-the-stars-area in the octagonal room, and settles in to watch them play.
The first few seconds are a bit self-conscious for Jimmy. He doesn’t do yoga to show off. Okay, not precisely true. He doesn’t *usually* do yoga to show off. Sometimes he is. But… Even if he is showing off, he’s not doing it to be watched, like, as entertainment, for anything more than a minute or two at a time.

So, yes, it feels a little weird to have all three of them just staring at him as he gets into this, let alone feeling the camera on him.

But, this is what his ladies want to see. After months of feeling awful, if what Breena wants is to watch him bend and flex and glow, then he’ll bend and flex and glow. Not like she’s asking him for something he doesn’t normally do.

She just wants to record, and enjoy, it.

So, he takes a second, pulls himself into his mind and body, and starts to breathe, slow, easy, calming his heart and head, planning this routine. He wiggles around a little, loosening muscles, and then brings his hands together in front of his heart, and bows to his ladies.

The first time Breena Slater saw Jimmy Palmer, what she noticed was the glasses. Well, the glasses, the dark, unruly hair, and his green (turns out they’re hazel, that day they were green) eyes.

She decided he had to look a lot like a grownup Harry Potter.

Which appealed to her. He caught her looking, noticed her smile, and when there was a break in the conference, came over to say hello.

She’s extremely glad he did. Granted, it wasn’t the smoothest come-on she’d ever gotten, but his eyes were soft and gentle, and a sort of pleasant goofiness radiated off of him. So, she said yes when he asked if she wanted to get a drink.

It was winter, so the idea that there was much below Jimmy’s neck really didn’t occur to her. Obviously, he had to have a body, but beyond noticing that he seemed nicely trim, she didn’t pay much attention to it.

Fast forward, through a successful drink, a few charming dates, and some very, very hot kissing she enjoyed immensely, and Breena started to wonder what was under his clothing. She could feel firm muscle, and the bits she could see, because, again, it was winter so nothing he had on was coming off, looked very good.

Fast forward a few months more, and bits and pieces of clothing started to get peeled off as the weather got warmer. A view of forearms first. (Her mouth went dry the first time she saw him in a t-shirt. She’s always been an arm guy, and HOLY SHIT! Jimmy’s got arms!) Then shorts. (And his legs were just as good.) And finally, they went to the beach, and she’s immensely proud of the fact that she didn’t pass out or drool on herself the first time she saw him in a bathing suit. (She was equally pleased to see him have pretty much the exact same reaction to her in a bathing suit.)

It was summer of 2009 the first time she saw him in a bathing suit. Almost ten years now. And she likes what’s under his clothing even more now. Maybe he doesn’t look that different, not below his neck, his face has certainly changed, but he’s more… him… and more hers… than he ever was.
before.

And she adores it.

And lit gold, glowing, he’s so beautiful it makes her heart ache, and giggles want to pour out. Too much joy, too much love, for it all to stay inside.

First off, Jimmy’s showing off. Tim is absolutely certain this is not his normal moon salutation routine. Granted, he’s never seen said routine, but Jimmy mentioned doing it on the beach, and he knows there’s no way Jimmy’s trying any of those arm balances on uneven ground, and especially not on uneven sand.

Second of all, the girls are enjoying the ever loving fuck out of this. He’s watching them as much as Jimmy because there are a lot of things he loves seeing in this world, and his two favorite women turned on and happy is definitely at or near the top of that list.

And he knows why they’re enjoying it. For the same reason he’s feeling insanely envious.

Right now, Jimmy is power, and strength, and control, and grace, and elegance and…

And Tim can see them lapping it up. Jimmy is the image of everything male strength is supposed to be about. Miles of glowing muscle, moving him carefully, precisely, slowly, through stupidly difficult positions.

He’d started with the more basic moves. Just standing still, in mountain pose, looks amazing when you’re lit gold, each and every curve of your body highlighted, and have maybe ten percent body fat. And then after a few rotations of his basic salutation, Jimmy starts to play.

And, third of all, Tim’s thinking that, with a lot of effort and maybe another one… His eyes go wide as Jimmy… Tim shakes his head; he can’t possibly be doing… Nope… He is… How the fuck is he getting his knee to stay there, with his skin oiled? … Okay two… No… Three more years, of serious practice, he too, may, be able to go from a bird in a basket, to a handstand, to planking without his feet touching the ground and then back into bird in a basket.

It’s clear, as he’s watching the girls that this hits them, hard. Lips are being licked, nipples are perking up, and it’s too dim in here to really tell, but it’s not like he just met either of these women, if their bodies are that far along, cheeks are pinking up, too.

It’s not just the strength. Though he knows both girls are digging that, but they’re just as into it when Jimmy’s not doing wildly impressive strength moves. It’s the control. It’s each finger in the right spot. The way he shifts from a lunge into warrior one, with a smooth twist and sweep of his arms and torso. Every inch of Jimmy is exactly where he wants it to be, doing exactly what he’s telling it to do, and every inch of Breena and Abby is responding to it, enjoying it, quivering, eager to see that kind of focused power spent on them.

This is male strength controlled, mastered, and the girls love it.

He’s wondering how good Breena’s camera work can be if she’s breathing that hard, watching their man bend and flex. He figures it doesn’t matter. She’s probably got at least a few shots to keep.

As Jimmy’s wrapping up, and Tim’s pulling on his jeans, he’s come to a conclusion: There’s no way he’s ever going to do the work he’d need to do to get as strong as Jimmy is. He knows himself, and
it’s just not going to happen. It sure as hell isn’t going to happen between now and the minute and a half from now when Jimmy gets done and they start photographing him.

But that doesn’t mean he can’t find other male “virtues” to exhibit for tonight.

And if Jimmy’s going to slowly blend and flex and be the embodiment of strength, then he’ll set his gaze on fire, stuff himself into those tight jeans, and be desire.

“So, you didn’t feel too silly, did you?” Breena’s asking Jimmy when he’s done his routine.

He smiles back at her. “No. That went a lot easier than I thought it would. You get any good shots?”

“Oh yeah!” Breena says, as Abby grins, nodding.

“And they’ll be even better once I get done with Photoshop.”

“You’re going to Photoshop me?” Jimmy looks borderline appalled at that.

“Not the way you’re thinking. Got to pull out still pictures, and then tweak the lighting. I’m not going to mess with you, just how exposed you are.”

“Oh.”

“Ready for me?” Tim asks.

The ladies look over to him, having forgotten him while working with Jimmy, and their eyes go wide. Jimmy looks over too and mutters, “Show off.”

Tim rolls his eyes in Jimmy’s direction, shooting off a very clear, like you weren’t look, before focusing back on the ladies.

He did wet down the shirt, (with warm water) and put it on, unbuttoned, rolled up the sleeves, before fluffing up his hair a little, and adding the sort of messy eyeliner Abby likes. Then he turned on the lights to his and Abby’s room, made sure he was standing in the doorway, leaning against the door jam, the bed, quilts turned down, visible behind him.

He licks his lips, looking each of them up and down. He drops his fingers to the button on the jeans, lightly strokes over it, and then drags the tips of his fingers over the bulge in his pants.

“Good God, Tim, warn a girl before you do that!” Breena says, lunging for the camera. “I wanted pictures of that, not just the memory!”

Breena doesn’t remember the first time she met Tim. Or the second. Probably the third, too. He just sort of blended into the background. She knows he had to have been there, but between Tony and Ziva and Gibbs, he vanished.
So, when Jimmy told her that Tim wanted to get together with him for dinner to talk about some mysterious secret, she had to think for a moment about which one Tim was. (And, even at that point, she didn’t have much of a mental image of Tim, what she had was a memory of Jimmy saying that McGee thought the retro-tux idea for the wedding was cool.)

She eventually put it together. And when he got home with the story of the secret romance, and the guy who sought him out to get advice about said secret romance caught her attention. She’s always liked the idea of guys who decide to court a woman, and from what Jimmy was saying, Tim was getting his ducks in a row for some serious courting.

She knew Abby, of course. She was Jimmy’s best woman, and had been part of the wedding planning, and all the rest of that, and they’d gotten on fabulously. So, she approved of the idea of the guy who wanted Abby doing some work to be worthy of her.

The first time she can remember seeing him, really seeing him, attaching a face and personality to the name was at her “wedding.” Jimmy didn’t need to point him out. She knew who everyone else at the table was, and she certainly knew which one Abby was, and could see the guy with the heart eyes looking at her.

She remembers dancing with him, talking about Abby, and noticing that he was a much better dancer than she would have assumed. His hands were softer than she expected, too, and he smelled good. All of which she approved of, on Abby’s behalf.

Later that night, when Abby swung by, and was covered in Tim’s cologne, but hadn’t been gone for very long, or dancing with him, the way she would have had to to end up smelling like that, she and Jimmy enjoyed some naughty giggles, wondered if they’d found the same spot they had used, and her opinion of Tim went up a few notches.

From then until that second clubbing date, she got to know Tim better, and liked him more and more, but that was it. The fact is, plump guys don’t do it for her. And for the first almost year she knew Tim, he was still dealing with almost getting killed by Deering by snorking up every bit of sugar he could find.

She liked the guy well enough, but the body was just a thing moving a brain from point A to point B. Yes, Abby had some awfully good stories about what that body could do, and she really enjoyed those books Tim wrote, but Breena wasn’t terribly intrigued about Tim as anything that could be called ‘an object of desire.’

And, until that clubbing date, that stayed in place. She was an extremely happily married woman, and then a very pregnant one, or a new mom, and wasn’t looking for anyone else, so she didn’t look.

And while she wasn’t looking Tim started to lose some weight, and get into better shape, and then, they’re getting ready to go to a club and he’s in a freaking kilt with eyeliner and nail polish and Breena was looking.

She loves Jimmy’s wholesome, clean-cut, preppy look. He’s very tidy, and straight-laced, and actually wears the cute little sweaters her mom knits for him, and she loves that. But… there’s something to be said about the bad boy, too. Especially the bad boy you know is actually a really good guy. Someone who just looks dangerous, instead of is dangerous.

Tim kept the kilt and nail polish on all night. He tidied up the rest of himself for that date, but that was the first time she really looked, and with looking put together the sorts of things Abby would say, and what was in those books, and began to internalize that fact that the guy who could write a sex scene like that could probably actually fuck like that, too.
And then Ziva asks if the four of them are fooling around and…

And the floodgates in her head opened, and she started to really look at Tim.

He’s been getting better and better to look at over the years. She’s happy to admit that. But… when it comes to physical bodies, she likes Jimmy better. No slight to Tim, she likes looking at him just fine, but Jimmy’s just more of her type.

But the guy in that body… Tim’s a hell of a lot of fun. And he’s fun in ways Jimmy isn’t. (Not more fun, just different fun.) And put the two of them together, or get them trying to one up each other, and that’s even better yet.

So, when she and Abby sat down to talk about what to do with Tim for tonight, neither of them had much of a set plan for how to get pictures of him. Abby had an outfit idea she wanted, so Breena was good with that. And both of them came to the conclusion that if he was given something to play, he’d knock it out of the ballpark.

He’s standing here, hand on his jeans button, eyeing Breena like he’s going to eat her alive and relish every moment of it, and Breena grins, this is exactly the kind of fun she was hoping to get out of Tim.

Tim keeps his eyes hot, on hers, and says, “I’m not going anywhere. Well, except that bed, and I’m taking you,” his eyes flit to Abby, “and you, with me.”

Abby didn’t exactly have a script for what she wanted Tim to do. Or, more exactly, she was pretty sure that given the outfit they could improv this with some lovely results, and he is not disappointing her at all.

“And what are we going to do in that bed?” Abby starts walking toward him. She’s going to stay out of camera range, but the two of them can light a fire with several feet between them. That should get Breena any pictures she wants.

Again, Tim’s fingers find the button on his jeans, and again they flit over it. He shifts gaze from Abby to Breena, and to the camera, he raises an eyebrow at her, and she nods, this is what she wants from Tim.

His eyes linger on Breena’s and then drift down her body. Then he eyes Abby, and licks his lips. “I was thinking about how long it’s been since I got to lay back and have both of you ride me. Not sure who’s on top and who’s on bottom though… Maybe you’ll switch. Oh… No… I know.” A wide, lazy grin spreads across Tim’s face, as he strokes himself through his jeans, knuckles dragging over his dick, both Breena and Abby’s eyes following his hand. “Breena,” He looks to her, and she makes sure she’s getting pictures of that look, “You’re going to start with Jimmy, ride him ‘til you’re quivering for the first time, ‘til his hands are white-knuckled on our headboard, but you don’t let him get off. Just get him good and hot and bothered. Make him drip. And then you come over to me, sit on my face, and I’ll lick every drop of him off of you. Then you’re going to scoot down and ride me home.” Tim gently bites his lower lip as those long, elegant fingers of his stroke over his dick again. That gets a little whimper from Breena. That view, those words. Yeah, this is exactly what she wants from Tim. “And Abby, you start with me. I’m gonna spread you wide, and bury my face in your pussy, and get you off so many times, so you’re so wet, that when Jimmy’s about to snap he so turned on, you can just slip over to him and slide right down him like oiled silk.”
Abby’s grinning at him, enjoying this game. She runs her thumb over the bottom lip, gently sucking on the tip of it for a moment, enjoying the way Tim’s watching her lips, and then says, “What if I have a taste for something else?”

Tim looks away from Breena and the camera to Abby. “Then tell me all about it pretty girl, and I’ll see if I can make it happen.”

“Oh, I know you can make it happen.” Her eyes have a lot of promise in them as she says that.

“Even better.” He grins again, feeling and looking, in all manner of the word, cocky. Sometimes it amazes Breena when she thinks about who he was when she first met him. How the invisible man could become this.

“I want to see you peel those pants off.”

Tim glances to Breena, and she nods, so much for his pictures not being pornographic. The first ones aren’t.

He traces his left fingers from his throat, down his chest, over his few fine chest hairs, down his belly, to brush lightly against the few hairs trailing down from his navel to the button on the jeans, and then pops it. All while staring at Breena and her camera. A second of lingering there, before he goes to the zipper, easing it down, nice and slow.

The jeans are tighter than any he’s ever worn, so he’s hoping he can get the rest of the way out of them elegantly, because he’s got a mental image of godawful stupid-looking hopping around on one foot, trying to get free of them, but apparently the live-action-porn-gods are feeling benevolent, because he is able to shimmy out of them without looking like a twit, or breaking eye contact with Breena.

She’s devouring him with her eyes, watching his every breath, watching him mostly naked, dick hard, jutting out, arms and chest barely covered by translucent white fabric plastered to his skin.

He’s standing there, tattoos visible through the fabric, eyes smoldering with lust, and smoky with liner, hair tousled… Not tousled enough. He takes his left hand, still wearing his wrist cuff, and slowly runs his hand through his hair, closing his eyes, and flexing a bit.

And, sure, he’s not cut like Jimmy. He’s thin, but his belly has a gentle swell to it. And he’s working toward getting back to the muscle mass he had before the Stennis, but not quite there, yet. Right now, he’s doing an awfully good job of looking like the poster boy for sex, drugs, and rock and roll. He’s got that air of danger, and Breena feels her body respond to it. Throb at it.

He opens his eyes, and drops his hand, letting it rest against his hip. “Like that, baby.”

“Oh, yeah,” Abby says.

“So, now what? You got the pants off of me, want the shirt, too?”

Abby shakes her head. “Not yet. Got an idea for that.” She runs off, fast, and he hears the running water out of their bathroom. A minute later, she’s back with a wet hand towel.

“Breena, get closer so you’ll be able to see it on the camera.” Then she gently squeezes the towel, so he’s standing there, mostly naked, damp shirt plastered to his skin, with small rivulets of water meandering slowly down his chest and belly.

Breena moves a bit closer and does get those shots. “Very good idea!”
Tim’s enjoying this. He’s radiating confident and cool as both of the girls coo about how hot he is like this.

“You know, if you told me you wanted smut, I could have done smut,” Jimmy says. He’s... mostly joking… probably. No heat in those words.

“Oh, they were panting for you, too,” Tim says. “You were just too far into your head to notice it.”

“Well… good…”

“Do you want to do smut, Jimmy?” Abby asks. “Cause if you do…” She gestures to the fact that he’s naked and oiled, and Tim’s all by himself in that doorway.

“Next time. I got my twenty minutes. I’m not cutting his short.”

“Thank you,” Tim says. He shifts his gaze back to Abby. “So, wet, hard, barely covered. What else, baby?”

“A picture for me.” She crouches in front of Tim, and Breena gets the shot of her delicately licking one of those rivulets of water from just above his navel to his lips, and then brush gently against him with a wet kiss.

When she breaks the kiss, he says, “I like the pictures you want.”

“Good.” She runs her fingers through his hair, and kisses him again. Breena gets another shot of it. Abby wasn’t planning on being in these pictures, so she’s just in her hanging-around-the-house-wear, a pair of black pj pants with little skulls on them, a white t-shirt, and her black nursing bra visible through it. Not wildly sexy in and of themselves, but the shot of her hands in Tim’s hair, lips on his, as he’s holding her close, hands cupped over her ass, grinding into her, are red hot.

Her hands slide down from his head, trailing over his throat, arms, and come to his hips as she grinds back into him. “So, in your little fantasy, I didn’t get to play with Breena.” Abby mock pouts a little at that, and then turns to look at Breena with a lot of heat in her eyes. “And I don’t think you boys get to hog all the pussy. I think, we need to do everything we can to remind our girl about what she’s missed out on, and why she loves it, and why we’re so happy to have her back.” Abby’s standing, back against Tim, rubbing up against him, as she says to Breena, “I think, you get off three times tonight. I think we each try what we’re best at, and you get to just relax and enjoy.”

Then she turns to face Tim, kissing him long and slow with her tongue dragging over his lower lip. “And baby, I give better head then you do.” She flashes a grin at Jimmy. “And you, too. So you’re finding something else to do, because tonight, I’m the one licking pussy.” She steps away from Tim to Breena, and then rubs up against her, lips gently ghosting along her neck. “That is, if you want me to.”

By now Breena’s flushed down her neck, and her nipples are hard. She grabs Abby by the hand, tosses Jimmy the camera, and drags her into the bedroom.

____________________

Of all her lovers, Abby was the one she never expected. Even when she and Abby were dancing together to make the boy’s head’s explode (and dicks get hard) she didn’t think she’d ever move onto anything… like this, with Abby.

Yeah, maybe fool around some to turn the guys on, but, sex with Abby for its own sake...
That was the surprise.

But they were getting ready to take those pictures for Valentine’s Day, and Breena wasn’t exactly feeling like a sex kitten. Hard to do with a two-month old baby. She was mostly feeling like this was an exercise in futility. All the makeup and sexy clothing on earth wouldn’t cover how flabby and saggy and post-partum she was.

But Abby and Ziva did her makeup, played with her hair, and picked out sexy undies for her. Abby kept telling her how beautiful she was. Ziva was doing it, too, but, not the same way. In retrospect, Breena knows what the difference was. Ziva was telling her that she was aesthetically appealing. Abby was telling her she was delicious, and sexy, and desirable, because she desired her.

Breena hadn’t quite figured out what exactly Abby was telling her. Not when she was doing it. But she could feel it, even if she couldn’t name it. And those words, that soft, dark voice, telling her how lovely she was, and how Jimmy was going to pass the fuck out when he saw those shots, that got her in the right mindset to be beautiful.

Top that off with those soft, wet kisses...

Abby’s soft. Jimmy’s got smooth bits, but nothing about him is soft. He’s all long angles, and firm muscles, crisp, tickly hair, sometimes rough stubble. But not soft.

And Abby was soft. The softest, smoothest lips she’d ever touched, and skin that was a hybrid of velvet and suede, and… And kissing Abby was fun, and not just on the feel like a sex goddess getting a response out of Jimmy level.

But Jimmy did practically pass out when he saw those shots. That yanked the sex-goddess up to the stratosphere.

He told her later, a lot later, that once he got the pictures of them making out, that all of the blood in his body went galloping to his dick, and all he could see was the two of them together. He told her he ended up jerking off in Tim’s bathroom to it, couldn’t not touch himself, seeing her all pink and pretty and turned on and kissing Abby.

And that felt so amazing.

Still, it wasn’t until they were at the beach that Breena (along with Tim apparently) really got how a quarter of this affair was going to work.

And with all of the almost sex that weekend, all of the playing, and watching, and talking and thinking, what Breena was thinking about was Abby. She knew she wanted Tim and Jimmy, and was awfully sure they could keep the four of them happily balanced. She wasn’t entirely sure how much she wanted to be doing with Abby. Yeah, fooling around was fun but… more than that?

And the answer, once she actually tried Abby, as Abby, for her own sake, not to just turn on the guys, though that helped make everything more intense and better, but as a lover, was yes.

Because, at least for Breena, when it comes down to it, the skin doesn’t matter, it’s the person in that skin, and if that person is lovely, and loves her, and she loves her back, and, as that person’s gently tugging off Breena’s clothing, eyes roaming over her body, licking her lips and reminding her that she’s exceptionally good at giving head, the shape of that skin just doesn’t matter.
For a few moments, Tim and Jimmy just sort of stand there, looking like horny just short-circuited any higher level brain functions, watching Abby strip Breena out of her clothing.

Finally, with a jerk, Jimmy realizes he’s holding the camera, and he’s going to hate himself forever if he doesn’t get footage of both of the girls playing with each other. He leaps into the bedroom, and hops onto the bed, looking for a good place to shoot from.

What is he best at? Best at. Tim’s mind flails around as a million things he wants to do to Breena all go skittering through, each one making him harder than the last, each one something he’s sure she’ll like.

But… Best?

God, what’s best. What has she liked the most? What does he do that the rest of them can’t or won’t or just aren’t as good at?

Abby’s got Breena sitting on the side of the bed, slowly kissing her way up her leg, running the pads of her fingers gently, teasingly against the back of her knees. She’s taking her time, warming Breena up, probably longer than she’d like, but it’ll be so sweet when her lips finally touch Breena’s.

Marathons… Spinning a woman out. Keeping her an inch from getting off forever, until she’s shaking and begging. That’s what he’s best at.

And that’s, if his mental clock is even close to right about what time it is and when Sean’s going to wake up next, not going to work.

“What are you best at?” he asks Jimmy, who’s filming Abby playing with Breena. He looks away from that and smirks at Tim.

“Speed. Especially with Abby working her over like this. I’ll get in there next and get her off over and over and over.” Breena flashes him a thumbs up. She’s beyond okay with that plan.

“I get the picture. The Quickie Master at work.”

“Exactly. You?”

“Marathons.”

Jimmy shakes his head. “Not tonight.”

“I know.”

“Story time?” Jimmy asks. That’s what he thinks Tim is best at. Granted, Tim’s never spun him out, either, so he doesn’t have the full complement of experiences to pick from. Breena’s flashing a thumbs up as she kisses Abby.

That’s what she thinks Tim’s best at, too.

Then story time it’ll be.

And maybe he doesn’t lay a hand on Breena, not to get her off, maybe he leaves that to Jimmy and Abby tonight, but he can say the words that ramp her up that much faster, and that much harder.
Take her higher than just touch would alone.

And, as Abby kisses her way up Breena’s leg, her glorious butt high in the air, Tim’s got an awfully good idea of something that would make him very happy to go along with story time.

Jimmy’s got the camera on the dresser, and as long as they stay more or less where they are, it’ll get everything. And with it set, he’s heading back to the bed, getting behind Breena. Maybe he and Abby’ll take turns, maybe they’ll both go at once, Tim’s not sure if they’ve got a plan or not, but he’s got one.

He picks up the camera, and begins to take his own pictures. He should have at least one free hand all night, so, might as well use it to make sure they’ve all got every shot they want.

Abby’s gently nibbling on Breena’s thigh, her hands cupping her butt, and Jimmy’s sitting right behind her, kissing her neck, as his hands find her breasts. He makes sure to get still shots and moving shots of that.

He gets more shots of all three of them as he heads for the bedside table, grabbing the lube and a condom. He knows he’s going with Abby tonight, and yes, she’s breastfeeding, and Sean’s only three months old, so it’s not likely, but… Not risking two kids in one year.

“So, what we’re best at, huh?” he says, leaning over Abby’s back, lips an inch from the back of her neck. He kisses the back of her neck, and then Breena’s knee. “That’s talking you three off, right?”

Abby purrs at that, and Breena says, “Please!”

He stands up, so he’s behind, and over Abby, and kisses Breena. “Then thank your other man there, because he’s the one who had the good idea.”

She turns to kiss Jimmy, and he nudges her a bit, up into his lap, so her legs are draped over his. Abby lightly touches the insides of his thighs letting him know to spread a bit wider, she wants plenty of room to work.

He takes another picture of the three of them, of Jimmy’s hands stroking over Breena’s breasts, and Abby kneeling in front of her, her wet, pink tongue just darting out to lick the line between leg and pelvis.

Then he squeezes himself. Desire. “God, that looks so good. All three of you like this.” He keeps his eyes hot and sliding over them. Then he leans forward to kiss Jimmy, mostly just a quick buss, then Breena, a long, wet kiss, and he kneels behind Abby, knows he can’t get the t-shirt off of her in the position she’s in, but he can tug down those PJ pants, and lay a wet, soft, bite on her right butt cheek.

“And right here, where I can see and hear, and,” he strokes his hand between Abby’s legs, and she moans deep at it, “fuck… Best show on Earth.” He begins a soft, gentle stroke with Abby, just saying hello. She’s not very wet, not yet. Not for as turned on as the rest of her seems. Joys of post-baby hormones. “Gonna feel so good.” He wraps his hand in Abby’s shirt, and gently tugs her up for a moment, making sure she’s flush to him, back against his chest, holding her close, his arms wrapped around her, below her chest, and then, after another kiss, he pushes her forward a bit and tugs off the shirt.

“Look at her, Jimmy. Look at those pretty breasts, all round and succulent.” He turns Abby’s face and kisses her, sighing, feeling her melt into him. He’d like to be touching those breasts, too, but they’re still a ‘look, don’t touch’ sort of thing, so he drags his fingers down her hips. “Taste so good. Gonna taste even better soon.” He gently licks over her lips. “Just a hint of Breena here. More than a
hint soon. You going to teach me all of your tricks?"

Abby grins. “Nope.”

“What if I tease them out of you?”

She’s got a mischievous look in her eyes. “You can try.”

“Oh, I will.” He strokes Abby’s face, and then reaches forward to trail his fingers over Breena’s belly and pussy. “Beautiful. Ripe and soft,” his fingers flit over her pubic hair, sending shivery sensations through Breena, “golden and pink. Love that. Love seeing you naked and spread like that. Love you in his lap. Love her lips on yours, and her tongue lapping at you…” he squeezes his dick and moans gently, “Can’t even think of it without touching myself.” He glances to Jimmy, “And we’ll get your other man into it. He’ll spread your gorgeous pussy wide with his dick, and Abby’ll lick you wet and coming, and I’ll… God… Don’t know what, not yet, but we’re all going to like it!”

Talk.

Tim’s going to talk. He’s going to say every hot, filthy, dirty, scalding sexy thing that goes flitting into his head, and with his three loves naked and splayed out and fucking in front of him, he’s not having a hard time, at all, thinking of things to say.

And he’s going to take pictures. Breena won’t see them until the next day, but she’ll love them.

He’s going to get Breena slowly easing down Jimmy’s dick, her arms high, wrapped around his neck as they kiss, his hands cupping her breasts as Abby sucks her clit.

He’ll get a shot of him and Abby kissing as he licks Breena’s cum off her lips, and then he’ll tell them exactly how good it tastes and how much he wants more of it.

He’ll get Breena with her eyes closed, mouth just a little open, face tight, shuddering through her second (maybe third) orgasm of the night. And he’ll get Jimmy staring at her, naked love and lust and adoration and tenderness all blazing through his eyes as his fingers just ghost down her throat.

He’ll get insanely graphic shots, Breena’s pussy twitching on Jimmy’s cock. Abby’s tongue, long and pointed, just tracing over Breena’s clit. His own dick sinking into Abby’s pussy (though his camerawork isn’t very good on that shot, it felt too good for his hand to stay steady.)

He’ll get romantic shots. Abby and Breena kissing, just gentle lips on lips. Or the play of Jimmy’s knuckles against the back of Breena’s neck. His fingers twined in Abby’s hair (keeping it out of the way).

He gets one she wishes she could display, put up next to the shots of her girls at her office or something. It’s Breena’s belly, the gentle swell of four months pregnant with Donnie, with Jimmy’s hand, entwined with Tim’s on the left, and Abby’s on the right. She doesn’t know where they might put it, maybe in the bedroom, here, but she wants a print of that one.

He’ll get the pleasure/pain look on Jimmy’s face as he’s just teetering on the edge of orgasm. And he’ll get the next shot, that glow of joy and relaxation as the first spasm eases off, and the pleasure rushes through Jimmy.

He doesn’t get the shot of Abby getting off, though he tries. (This one makes Breena giggle when
she sees it.) He gets a shot of half of Abby’s face, Breena’s pubes, and the ceiling. She was going down on Breena when she came, and took him along for the ride. His hand, and body, jerked at the exact wrong time for that shot, but Breena doesn’t mind, much. She can remember how both of them looked at that moment, and yes, a picture would be great, but this shot, with the obvious loss of control, makes her happy.

And through it all, looking at those pictures, she’ll remember words.

“Fuck baby, so beautiful…” “God, spread her wide and lick!” “Wiggle those hips, ride our man, good!” “Oh, fuck, nothing looks like that, you all pink and wet and wrapped around him. Nothing! Best show on Earth!”

Some of them were whispered, hot breath against Abby’s ear. “I know you can’t see it, not from here,” she was licking Breena’s pussy, keeping her view limited, “but she’s so pretty right now.” Tim lifted his eyes from Abby to Breena, staring at her, as he spoke to Abby, “All pink, wriggling on Jimmy’s cock. Her hands are clenched on his, and he’s kissing her, that’s so pretty, too. His lips all wet, sliding on hers, sucking, soft and gentle, on her lower lip.” Abby moaned, and Tim gave her a little grind, rubbing his finger over her clit and thrusting deep and steady. “Feels good, right?” Abby moaned, again. “Yeah. Feels soo good to me, too. All tight and hot and smooth, so good, Abby.”

Some stutter. Breena doesn’t know if Tim knows that sometimes they don’t exactly come out smooth, but sometimes he gets so into it the syllables trip over each other. “Oh… God… fu…fu… fuck! OH!” (Tim and Abby were fucking, slow and easy, and Abby shifted up, scooting in closer, kneeling in front of Breena, and kissed her slow and wet, licking her lips, mixing that with little, ripe sucks, while shifting back, hard onto Tim. His words started to trip when she did that.)

Some didn’t exactly make real sentences. “Looks so… so… uh… uh… fuck!” Breena had her eyes closed then, just about to topple over for the last time that night. She doesn’t know if he was talking about how she looked, or Jimmy, or Abby, or all of them.

But he kept talking. Kept his voice and mind running. Kept lifting them higher with each word, giving desire voice and letting all of their senses and minds, get into the game.

And towards the end, as his camera work was getting shakier and shakier but the pictures he does manage to get are that much more intense, his voice shifted, lower, rougher, more grunts and groans, and the words that do manage to come are more about love and less about fucking.

“Loveyou…love…you…fuck…ah…uh…love!” That’s what was coming out of his mouth as his body jerked, and the camera didn’t get the shot of Abby’s face.

They crash after, sprawled across the harem room bed.

Tim’s on his butt, on the floor, Abby curled into him, both of them relaxing. He’s got his hand wrapped around Breena’s ankle, she’s mostly on the bed, her one leg is dangling off, with Jimmy, who’s entirely on the bed, so Tim can’t touch him from where he is.

He gives her a gentle squeeze. “You get what you wanted from that?”

“Oh yeah.” There’s a huge smile on her face. And then there’s a huge yawn. “And you know what’s even better?”

“What?” Abby asks.
“I’m not the one on baby duty.” She lifts her head up to grin at all of them.

Tim scoffs, slowly sits up, and gives her a quick kiss. He seems to notice he’s still got the (now dry) shirt on, and tosses it into the corner of the room. “Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

He finds his PJ pants and heads to the bathroom to get rid of the condom. A minute later he’s back in their bedroom, pulling them on, as Abby gets onto the bed with Jimmy and Breena. Now that they aren’t moving much, they’re all cooling down rapidly. He kisses Abby, and Jimmy, who’s already asleep, and then they hear the cry of a little boy looking for more food.

“And off I go.”

Abby and Breena hug him again, before they snuggle in, deep and warm into their bed.

Breena’s looking forward to good dreams.

Chapter End Notes

If you guys want to see the inspiration for Tim's shirt, google Sean Murray Heal The Bay. He's got that translucent white shirt on. (Alas, he's got a t-shirt under it.)
Leon heads down on Monday. Tim looks up from polishing his abuse reporting software, and says, “Trouble?”

“Not exactly. I got my summons from Congress. They want me up there week after next to explain why we toppled the old government.”

Tim inclines his head. Abbi went up yesterday, with Penny and Ducky, so he knew this was coming.

“They sent a huge stack of questions, and some of them, I’m handing right off to you.”

“They’re not calling me up?”

“They may do that, too. But they’re questions I can’t answer on my own, so you get them.”

Tim nods at that. “Fire away.”

Leon taps his phone a few times, and his computer chirps, letting him know he’s got a new email. And with that chirp, Tim’s well aware that this wasn’t something Leon had to come down for.

“Housekeeping out of the way… What’s really got you down here?”

“Checking the calendar today, and noticed you’ve got less than sixty days here.”

Tim winces a bit at that, he’s been… maybe not trying to not think about that, but… putting it off.

“Yeah. June 30th, last day. Feels…” He doesn’t finish that.

Leon inclines his head, and chews his toothpick harder. “Last time we talked you didn’t exactly have a second in command. So…”

“It’s gonna be Ngyn.”

“Didn’t you say she didn’t want it?”

“I was wrong. I offered it to her, like I told you I would, and instead of her turning me down, she jumped at it. That caught me flatfooted, so I’ve been giving her more and more to do, and… she’s doing it.”

“How well?” Leon’s got his very interested, scrutinizing look on his face.

Tim tries to think of a way to say this without sounding like an asshole, but he’s not coming up with it, so, “Better than Jenner, not as good as me. Competent, solid, good ideas, but she’s not going to turn everything on its head.”

“I can live with that.”

“My team likes her… Well, as much as they know her, they like her. They respect her, which matters more. And she’s doing okay with keeping Howard on her face to face work. Sort of like how Gibbs used to make Tony do anything that needed serious personal interaction.”

“Okay. I can live with that, too. What are you doing?”

Tim knows he’s asking about how he’s filling his last two months. “Getting your abuse reporting
“I’m not poaching on the field teams who get the jobs, just keeping tabs on it. Making sure they know what to do with the reports they’re getting. I don’t want to see any, ‘But, this says there have been no reports of abuse, why are we here?’ sorts of responses. I also want to make sure that they know a command with too many reports might not be a sign of things going wrong, so much as a place where people feel comfortable making reports. We’ve got data, we don’t necessarily know what it means, so these first cases will involve a lot of feeling around.”

Leon chews his toothpick thoughtfully at that. “And by the time you head off…”

“It’ll be up and running, maybe not as smooth as possible, but… You’ve got analysts, use them. Really, all Cybercrime is supposed to do with something like this is make it work. There should be a data wonk somewhere to dig into it.”

“Would somewhere be New York?” Leon asks. The only analyst, trained analyst, he had working for him is Bishop.

“That’s who I was thinking of, but… Ducky tells me that Jake and Penny keep them busy digging through numbers for DC. And on top of that Baby Bishop is due any day now, so, probably not. The NSA, FBI, CIA, all of them had people on staff who did nothing but look at numbers and figure out trends from those numbers, and a lot of them are looking for new jobs, so… Maybe it’s headhunting time.”

“Maybe.” Leon thinks about Tim’s program. “Feels like the future. Instead of waiting for reports to tell us where the crime is, we’re using lack of reports to figure out where there’s unreported crimes.”

Tim smiles at that. “Welcome to 2017. No flying cars, but we can do some spiffy things with numbers.”

Leon shakes his head a bit, and heads out.
their parents are very interested, too.

So, as Abby and Gibbs get into a signed conversation about what hearing ear dogs are and what they can do for Deaf people, and how to get hooked up with one, Tim’s holding Sean, who’s awake, watching everything. He’s also keeping track, as well as he can, of the little puppy and the girls playing with him.

Tim’s trying not to get his hopes up.

At a bit more than four months old, it’s starting to get clearer that something isn’t quite normal with Sean.

Like any other baby, he’s bright-eyed, and very interested in anything he can see. He’s got laser focus (for the minute or two anything can hold his interest) in anything he can see. But, it’s just there for things he can see.

Obviously, unlike a hearing baby his age, his attention cannot be had by making noise.

He won’t turn toward sounds.

And… he makes noises, but, he doesn’t sound like other babies. He’ll gurgle and coo and cry, and he babbles, too, but not the same sort of way any of his siblings did. Especially with babbling, his pacing is off. He’s not mimicking anyone’s speech patterns. And, he won’t do it back.

That’s probably the thing that gets to Tim the most. He remembers lying on the floor with Kelly, hovering over her, cooing at her and having her coo back to him. When he does that with Sean, he’ll mimic the mouth movements, but, no sound.

He’s really good (for a four-month-old) at mimicking facial expressions. He can stick his tongue out at someone like nobody’s business.

Tim’s holding him close, face to face. He sticks his tongue out, and Sean does it back. Tim smiles and Sean smiles back. He doesn’t coo, because Sean won’t.

“Sean McGee…” And it’s time for them to go in.

The nurse pays attention to Sean, though they can see she’s also eyeing Jackson. She reads his vest, looks at Gibbs, who’s radiating just try and stop us, and decides that she probably doesn’t want to attempt to keep him out.

If Sean could get the hearing aid out of his ear, he would. He doesn’t have the coordination to do it. His hand is flailing in the general direction of the side of his head, occasionally making contact somewhere near his ear.

“Think it’s a sign that it’s working?” Abby asks.

The nurse smiles a bit. “They all do this at first. Mostly, I think it’s a sign that it’s cold.”

“Oh.”
“Because of his age, we can’t just ask him how things sound, so, like the rest of his hearing tests, we’re going to wait for him to fall asleep, and test him again. It’ll take longer, because with each sound, we’ll adjust the hearing aid, to see if we can get a range where he’s got some hearing.”

They all nod, and then settle in for a long wait.

Watched pots never boil, and watched babies do not sleep.

At least, it feels that way. But, eventually, Gibbs creeps out of the little waiting room to let the nurse know that Sean’s ready for his test.

Then he creeps back, easing open the door, and stops halfway in, feeling stupid. Even if the hearing aid works splendidly, it’s not going to make things so loud that this child might be woken up by footsteps on a floor.

Especially given that this child is sleeping through Jackson enthusiastically saying hello to Gibbs as he heads back in.

Obviously, tiny barking dog is not in the range of sounds that will wake him up. Granted, that doesn’t mean he can’t hear it. All of the McPalmer kids are good sleepers. Once they’re out, they’re out, but it doesn’t bode well, either.

So, they sit, they wait, they watch the nurse put the little electrodes on Sean. They watch her run sounds, and then run more sounds, and adjust the hearing aid, and adjust it again, and again, and more sounds, and more adjustments and…

And at the end, she shakes her head. She slowly takes the electrodes off Sean’s head. “If I set the volume on maximum, and then play the sound at one notch below full volume, it barely spikes the reading. He’d be hearing it the same way you hear,” she drops her voice to a bare whisper, “this.” Her voice goes back to normal. “Anything less than a train blaring by won’t come through. Turned all the way up, he’d only be able to hear the guys screaming at the top of their lungs. Anything higher pitched, like your voice,” she looks at Abby, “or a softer volume, won’t come through for him.”

There’s trying to be positive. There’s slapping a smile on your face and saying, “It’ll be okay.” There may, eventually, even be believing it, but right now…

Tim’s been keeping himself, intentionally, in this cloud of ‘This is okay.’ ‘It’s not that bad.’ ‘This is a situation that can be fixed or… managed.’ He hates the word fixed in regards to his son.

And it’s not that any of that is wrong. And it’s not a bad place to keep himself. As coping mechanisms go, as a way to keep himself in a useful, non-depressed, non-panicked mindset, it’s a good thing, but…

But it’s not okay.
Sean’s not okay.

And this isn’t something they’ll just flip a switch and make better and…

And he’s finally letting himself feel the punch to the guts.

And it runs from everything from disappointment, to wondering if he’ll ever hear his son say, “Daddy.”

Sean’s sitting in his car seat, and today Tim’s in the back, with him. He gently lays his hand on Sean’s tummy, and Sean looks in his direction. Tim smiles at him, though his eyes are burning, wondering if his son will ever hear him say, “I love you.”

On the car ride back to their place, he’s not crying. Intentionally. Determinedly. Gibbs and Abby can both see what he’s doing, and they don’t press him. They know he’s more than comfortable enough with them, that if he wanted to break down, he could.

And if he’s not, it’s intentional.

 Mostly it’s that he feels this… sick… awful sensation all through him, and the little rational voice keeps telling him that it’s stupid.

Abby’s dad was just as deaf as Sean and it didn’t hold him back. Maybe. Who knows what or who he would have been if he could have heard? Among other things, alive. He might still be alive if he could have heard that car coming for him.

But… In the cosmic scale of things, Thomas Sciuto made a fully functional life for himself. He learned to speak. He ran his own business. He got married. He raised two amazing kids. He did everything most everyone wants or needs to do, and he did it in a silent world.

And Tim knows their doctor said the hearing aid probably wouldn’t do much. The guy who went to medical school and got the degree and spent years mastering this told them it wasn’t worth the effort, but…

But he’s staring at his little boy, currently in his little black onesie with the skull on it (hand me down from his sisters), little feet kicking at bit as he watches the seat back of their car, in his completely silent world.

And that stings.

Non-functional hearing aid means decision time.

Cochlear implants? Yay or nay.

One ear or two?

All at once, or one at a time?

There’s no ‘right’ answer.

He thinks that’s the part that hurts the most about having to make this decision. He and Abby spend the car ride back to NCIS bouncing this around, up and down and back and forth and…
“There’s no fucking right answer!” he finally spits out.

And she smiles at him, weakly, and nods. “And that’s killing me! All day, we find answers. We find the right answer. That’s… how we make the world, or at least a bunch of little worlds, better. And…”

“And we’ll spin on this forever because there’s no right answer. There’s just, tradeoffs. Both ears, and he’ll ‘hear’ better, have an easier time learning how to speak, but the nerves will be so damaged that if they come up with a way to regenerate those nerve cells, he won’t be able to get it. Just do one ear, he won’t be able to locate by sound, he’ll have a harder time pulling words out of a crowd, and there’s no guarantee ‘better’ is coming up anytime soon.”

“And no guarantee they’ll help all that much in the first place. Even if we do one ear at a time, not having much benefit in his left ear doesn’t mean that’s how it’d work for his right! I know!” Abby sounds frustrated enough to spit. And Tim’s not far behind.

“So…” he says, quietly, feeling almost overwhelmed by all of it. He realizes he’s paying way more attention to their conversation than the road, so he pulls over. The last thing they need is to boot this decision further down the road by getting into a car accident.

She opens and closes her mouth. Do the best they can for their child. That’s what they’re going to do, but right now, they don’t know what that is.

He bites his lip and his voice is not even remotely certain as he says, “I’m leaning toward all in. Do them both, do them at once, get it done, and go from there.”

“If they don’t work…” If they don’t work, that will limit his options for something else. If they do, that’ll get him as close to growing up hearing as he can get. Maximum risk, maximum possible reward.

They’re both just looking at each other. It’s not an argument, she’s not against doing it. She just isn’t necessarily for it, either. And neither is he.

They just… don’t know.

“If we do one… we’ll have more options,” she says.

“If we do one, and it works, we’ll do the other, and that’s taking him to be operated on twice.”

Neither of them like the idea of that, at all. Just sticking him in the MRI hurt, they don’t even want to think too hard about handing him over to be cut open, twice.

Both of them sitting there, their internal wheels spinning, Tim knows why they opted for the hearing aid, even though it wasn’t going to work. It put this conversation off for a month.

The Easy Answer Fairy does not deign to visit them that day.

Or the next.

Or the one after that.

They keep going over different courses of actions. The pros, the cons, the huge, massive, mind-dulling piles of information online.
It’s Thursday at lunchtime when Breena does something she doesn’t usually do, and that’s go find Jimmy to have a one on one lunch.

Before the kids, they’d have lunch together on a somewhat regular basis, because before the kids she’d just head back to Slaters and finish the day there. Since she leaves at one now, she usually eats there, eats fast, and is then back to work to get as much done as she can.

But right now, she wants a moment with her first husband, alone, to talk about her other two spouses.

It’s often easier to see the problems of a marriage from the outside. This is why people go to marriage counseling. Get an outside view of the problems.

Tim and Abby have a very solid marriage. That’s not the issue. But, they also have a deep, deep need to be “right.” This helps them get along with each other, and when there’s a “right” answer to be had, it makes them an unstoppable team.

If, for example, you happen to be innocent, and are being framed, you want Tim and Abby on your side, because they will go to the ends of the earth to find the “right” answer.

But right now, where there’s no right answer, it’s turning them into a whirling mass of “research” as they do everything they can to put off making the “wrong” decision.

“They’re dithering,” Breena says as she and Jimmy sit down at Carlo’s for lunch.

He holds his hands wide, agreeing with her, and also signaling he’s not sure, what, if anything, they should do about it.

“Yeah, that’s the question. I mean, should we… do something?”

“What’s something? We’re already telling them they’ll make the right decision, and it’s going to be okay.”

She sips her Coke. “Not that. That’s not helping. That might be making things worse, because they’re so caught up in the ‘right’ decision.”

“So…”

Her voice is tentative on this. “Maybe we could… have an opinion on something?”

They’ve been intentionally not having an opinion on any of the options because they’ve been trying to provide maximum support for anything Tim and Abby might want to do.

Jimmy sighs long and low on that, and then takes a drink of his water. “That’s…”

She nods. “Yeah.”

“Do you have an opinion?” Jimmy asks.

“The only one I’ve really got right now is that both of them continually going over the same information over and over and over, hoping to find some grain of sand they haven’t seen before, isn’t
healthy.”

“Yes. You’re right on that.” Jimmy taps his fingers against the table. He’s read everything Tim and Abby have, and helped them with the bits they didn’t have the background to figure out for themselves. And, just like Dr. Snyder, all he can do is lay out options, he can’t tell them which one is right.

Because none of them are right. Or all of them are. They’re just different flavors of right.

“I’d probably lean toward one implant now, and if they haven’t started human trials for some sort of cellular regeneration, or are at least really close to them by the time he’s five, then go for the second one. Make sure he hits school hearing as well as he can.”

“That sounds reasonable.”

“Yeah, well, they’re all reasonable. Do nothing surgical, go for extensive speech therapy, and wait, hoping for something better, is reasonable. What makes Sean’s life easiest?”

“And we go round and round. Easiest how, and when?”

Jimmy groans at that. “On the upside, neither of us is carrying around a lifetime of ‘We did it for your own good.’”

Breena sighs at that, too. “How much of that is stalling him out?”

Jimmy shakes his head. “Don’t know. Can’t read his mind, and he’s not really talking about it. All three of us know it’s there, though.”

Breena reaches across the table and squeezes Jimmy’s hand. “Yeah. Okay. One now, hold off for number two, that seems reasonable to me, however you want to define reasonable. Let’s just… indicate that sounds like a good plan the next time they bring it up. Maybe if instead of ‘everything is good’ we go with ‘this specific plan is good’ and they’ll have an easier time settling on a plan.”

“You gonna see Gibbs today?” Jimmy asks. He knows sometimes Gibbs’ll bring Dave and Jackson over to hang out with the girls.

Breena shakes her head. “Window of opportunity’s closing on that fast.”

If he’d been thinking, he would have realized that was true. “Right. Naptime starts at 2:00, and you’ll just be getting home then.”

“Exactly. Tomorrow at Shabbos. I’ll likely see him before you do.”

“And Ziva, too.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, let’s see if we can get them enlisted in ‘project, provide approval for a specific course of action.’”

“I’ll spread the word.”
It’s much later that night, when Tim’s up, walking Sean around after his feed, that Jimmy gets up, too.

Maybe it’s because they tend to be tired at these late night walks, maybe it’s just easier to be scared and vulnerable and worried in the dark… Maybe. Jimmy doesn’t know. He does know he’ll have an easier time getting into the knots in Tim’s head now.

Tim’s got his throat against the top of Sean’s head, and he’s quietly humming. When he sees Jimmy, he says, “Go back to sleep. It’s my night.”

“I know.” Jimmy yawns and sits on the, rocking chair watching Tim pace. “He’s not going to hold it against you, Tim.”

For a second, Tim’s eyes scrunch into a curious look, and then smooth out as he understands.

“I’m sure my mom thought the same thing.”

“No. I don’t think she did. She might say that, but… No. I don’t think she ever got that far into it. She was doing the right thing, and she was going to make you do the right thing, and that was that.”

Tim nods a little. That fits.

“I’m not saying he’s gonna like what you and Abby pick. I don’t know that, can’t. But I do know you’re not going to spend your life torturing him, or covering for us torturing him, so when you say to him, ‘Here are the options we had, we looked at all of them, and then we made the best decision we could,’ he’ll believe it. Maybe not as a kid, but by the time he’s your age, he will.”

Tim pats Sean, who is fussing quietly about the burp he’s holding onto like it’s made of gold. “Just let it go, Sean, you’ll feel so much better.” This does not cause the fussing to stop, or a belch to appear. “I think there’s a hole in that nipple or something. He’s getting too much air sometimes.”

“Way to skirt the issue.” But Jimmy does get up, find the bottle in question, and toss the nipple out. “And now it’s taken care of.”

“What if we’re wrong?” Tim’s eyes are wide, and that’s the one thing he’s not been willing to say to Abby, and vice versa, because they both know that’s what scares both of them more than anything, and they’re both trying to not freak the other one out, too badly. He’s being strong for her. She’s being strong for him. And they’re both spinning their wheels.

Jimmy stands up and holds Tim, kissing him, and then kissing the top of Sean’s head. Sean squeaks and jerks a bit in surprise at this sudden, new, warm body against his. And that sudden jerk appears to dislodge the burp he’s been holding onto. A second after that, he’s soft, and snuggly, and not fussing at all.

As soon as the belch has died down, Jimmy says, “Then we’re wrong. God, Tim, we’re gonna be wrong! A lot. By the time they’re teenagers, I’m fairly certain they’ll think we live in the world of perpetual wrong, incapable of finding right with a GPS and both hands.”

Tim waves that off. “Curfew time isn’t putting him at risk of death. It’s not permanently hampering his ability to speak. It’s… bullshit. ‘Get your homework done;, not gonna matter all that much. ‘Make sure that skirt covers your ass,’ really, not a big deal. Possible allergic reaction to the anesthesia, or maybe a massive infection and… And, this is the possibility of wrong. Permanent, life-altering, wrong hovering on the horizon.”

Jimmy kisses him again. “Sixteen years from now, you’re going to let him drive, right?”
Tim rolls his eyes. He doesn’t really want to be comforted right now, and he doesn’t want to be rational, he just wants to not have to do this.

Jimmy sees it. And he sees Sean’s eyes drooping. “Put him down before he falls asleep on you.”

Tim steps over to the crib and lays Sean down. He spends a moment wriggling and scooting a bit, but after that, he’s on his back, with his eyes getting heavier and heavier, and… they close. Sleeping baby. Of all of them, Sean’s the easiest sleeper.

Tim’s standing there, next to the crib, looking down at Sean. “I should have to leave to do this. Say a word when Kelly’s this close to asleep, and her eyes’ll fly open, and boom, awake kid.”

Jimmy stands back up and walks over to Tim, laying his hand on his back. “I know.” Once Sean’s eyes close, the outside world vanishes for him.

Both of them are quiet for a long time, watching Sean settle deeper into sleep.

“It’s not going to just get better,” Tim says quietly.

“Nope. He’s got a long road, and it’s going to be difficult. It’s covered in brush and vines, and steep, and rocky, and he’s not going to like a lot of it, but it’s walk the road or curl up and die, and we’re not letting him do that, so… We take his hands, and we beat the path down as smooth as we can, and we’ll give him a machete to cut through the brush, and make sure it’s good and sharp for when he heads off on his own.”

“I feel like anything I grab for him will be a spoon, not a machete.”

“That’s not true.”

“I know that. Abby knows it, too. Knowing isn’t the problem.”

Jimmy gently strokes his back.

“And what if that machete ends up cutting him? I know it’s a longshot. I can read the reports. I know what they say. I know all of it. But I can’t feel it.”

“Once you’re on the other side of it, you’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, as long as the brain’s right and the heart isn’t.”

“Your brain is right.” Jimmy gently rubbing up and down Tim’s back as he says this. “This isn’t Gibbs’ gut telling you to keep wary on the Stennis. This is you looking at one of the two people you love beyond all reason, who you can’t imagine your life without, who just the idea of them hurt makes you want to curl into a little ball and cry, and your heart running away with that. This child is not allergic to anesthetic. He got some during the c-section, and more every meal he had the first few days. He’s not allergic to antibiotics, because again, he got some during the c-section, and more every meal he had for the first few days.” Jimmy’s not exactly lying, but he’s not exactly telling the truth here, either. With allergies, dosage, and number of doses matter. What he is doing is trying to get Tim’s brain back in charge.

“I know.”

“And you putting this off, dithering and dithering… You’re not making him any better off, and you and Abby are just torturing yourselves.”
“We’re not making him any worse off, either.”

Jimmy sighs. *We carry each other when we can’t walk.* “Do you need Breena and I to make the decision?”

Tim’s eyes close slowly at that, and Jimmy feels a tremor through his back. He inhales fast and sharp, and then bites his lip. Then he exhales, long and slow. “Monday, dinner time. If we haven’t made an appointment for something by Monday, then… yes.”

“Okay. Come on, he’ll be up again soon. Let’s get back to bed.”

---

Friday, lunchtime. This time it’s Tim and Abby on their own.

They’re in Tim’s office, with two untasted lunches, and Tim’s phone, on speaker, ringing.

Abby hits the off button, this time. Tim’s already done it twice, too.

“People can learn to speak really well just with speech therapy.”

Tim nods at that. She’s absolutely right about that. But, all the speech therapy on earth won’t let a person *hear.* “But we’re not going that direction. Not unless we have to, and…”

She nods again. If there’s any way he can “hear,” they want that. She again hits redial.

One ring, two, three, “You’ve reached Dr. Snyder’s office. If this is a medical emergency, hang up and dial 911. To speak to a nurse press one. To renew a prescription press two. To make an appointment, please stay on the line…” Soft, upbeat music fills Tim’s office.

“Dr. Snyder’s office, this is Brigitte speaking, how may I help you?”

Neither of them says anything for a long moment. Then they hear a collection of beeps. Probably Brigitte putting in the information a Deaf person would need for the talk to text device to turn words into text.

“Uh…” Abby says, letting Brigitte know there’s a hearing person on the line. “I’m here.”

“Excellent. What can we do for you?”

Tim exhales long and slow, making himself calm down. “We’d like to make an appointment for a pre-cochlear implant consultation.”

“Excellent. Let me check the calendar. Dr. Snyder has time on June 19th at 9:00 for a consultation. And if you like, we can pre-schedule a date for the surgery, today, too. That way, if you decide to go ahead with it, you’re already on the calendar.”

Again, silence from Tim and Abby. This time, she’s the one who speaks. “Yes. Our son is four-months-old now, so…”

“No problem with that…” Her voice is light and perky, like she’s talking about scheduling a vacation to BoraBora. Tim hates her. He knows he won’t tomorrow, but right now he’s pisses that she doesn’t sound like she’s scheduling this massively grave, important, possibly life shattering event. “We’re scheduling surgeries for November now. What’s your son’s name?”
“Sean McGee,” Tim says, squeezing Abby’s hand.

“We can’t give you an exact time, but early morning on November 6th is open.”

“Okay. We’ll take it,” Abby says after another long moment of her and Tim just staring at each other.

“Great. Okay, I’ve got Sean in the system for June 19th at 9:00 and November 6th in the morning.” Abby’s putting that into their calendar.

“Uh… Thanks,” Tim says.

“No problem, see you next month.”

“Yeah,” Tim exhales, hanging up. “Why do I feel like a bullet just whipped by my head?”

“Because your adrenaline spiked just as hard as mine did.”

“Yeah.” His hand is shaking, and he notices hers are, too. “Jimmy says this’ll be better when it’s done.”

“Then we’ve only got six more months of this.”

“Yay!” Tim says with vicious sarcasm. Then he looks at his food, and pokes it. He looks at Abby’s and slides it closer to her. “I’m allowed to skip meals. You need yours.”

She snorts at that, and pokes his food closer to him. “Together.”

He opens his salad. “Okay.”

Half an hour later, when the adrenaline’s finally burned off, he does feel a little better. A bit more settled.

By the time they’re at dinner, and Abby’s explaining what they did today, that aching, sick, morass of indecision doesn’t tinge every word he and she says.

He supposes that’s all for the good. And by bedtime, he’s able to sleep fairly well.

Fairly. There’s still that little voice in the back of his head that doesn’t know how he’s going to live with himself if Sean doesn’t come out of surgery okay.
When it rains, it pours.

Tony’s on the phone saying to dispatch, “You know I’m already on a case, right?”

“We know that, Agent DiNozzo, but you’ve got a four-person team, and the case you’re on right now is a rape, and we’ve got a double homicide in Blacksburg…”

“Dorney?”

“Currently on a murder of his own in Fredericksburg.”

“Sanders?”

“Two man team, handling an assault in Quantico. Agent DiNozzo, you can give me the whole roster, and I will tell you that all of them are already on assignment. You’re the Senior Team Leader for the entire DC branch, and you’ve got a team and the assignment that allows that team to be split most easily.”

Shit. “Okay. Text me the address and tell Palmer I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Thank you, Agent DiNozzo.”

Draga drifts over. Right now, he and Spader are bagging clothing, bedding, and taking fingerprints and swabs of Petty Officer Camile Rohdes’ room. Johnson’s at the hospital, Norfolk General, talking to Rohdes.

“Trouble?” Draga asks.

Tony wiggles his hand and says, quietly, “Maybe. Just got a murder call. Got to split the team.”

Draga winces. This is already a “sensitive” case. All rape cases are, but unlike a robbery or even a murder, making sure you’ve got a good, solid rapport with the victim, so she keeps talking, and feels safe and comfortable talking, is paramount in these cases.

“Johnson’s staying here,” Draga says.

Tony nods. That wasn’t the question. The question is, is he staying here with Johnson, or is Draga?

For the most part, Draga’s been doing a pretty good job of not acting like a love/lust struck idiot. And, in an effort to try and keep things copacetic, Tony’s actually spoken to Johnson and told her that if any of the guys (he kept it vague but they both knew who he was talking about) turned into a problem, or looked like they were going to turn into a problem, that she could talk to him about it, and they’d get it worked out.

He doesn’t know if that was the right way to handle it, but she smiled and said she’d keep it in mind.

Gibbs wouldn’t have thought twice about it. He would have kept Ziva or Kate on the rape case, and put him with her, because he was the senior agent, and then taken Tim up to handle the murder. And, Gibbs having done that, and Tony being who he was, means that both Kate and Ziva had to deal
with some horribly inappropriate behavior.

Tony doesn’t think Draga would pull anything even close to hopping into the bathroom with Kate in the shower, wearing only his boxers, singing along with her, but, on the off chance the little head ends up in charge of the decision making, say maybe under the influence of a beer or two with dinner, because this is the kind of case where they will be here at least one night, something could happen. And Tony wants to avoid that.

So, he could stay here with Johnson.

Except, of course, it’s a double homicide up in Blacksburg, and, yes Draga is good, but he’s not sure he wants to trust Draga and Spader, all on their own, with a double homicide. Not yet.

He pulls Draga further away from Spader. This is not a conversation he needs to hear.

“Tell me, that if I leave you here with Johnson, you won’t get stupid.”

Draga doesn’t look insulted by that, so that tells Tony it’s enough of a possibility that he’s concerned about it, too.

“Good. I want you concerned. No booze. You don’t set foot into her room. She doesn’t go into yours. You work in the lobby or restaurant if you have to do anything after hours.”

“Sounds like we’re talking about a really strict college.”

“Well, unlike when I was pulling this shit, if she fusses…” Actually, with the sort of stuff Tim’s putting into play… “Even if she doesn’t fuss, if I know/see/hear about/suspect something happens, I’ll have to fire your ass, and I don’t want to do that. You are a good agent, and so is she, so… Can this work? Or do you and Spader need to head off on your own?”

Draga thinks about it for a moment, and that also comforts Tony. He would have immediately said yes, and been lying. Draga nods. “I can be on the straight and narrow without having a chaperon.”

“Good. Okay. Since she’s the one who’s actually interacting with the victim, it’s her case and her lead. Back her up, point out where she needs to go if she needs it, but pretty much, let her run it.”

“I can do that.”

“Good. Okay. Spader and I are going to take off. It’s a double homicide in Blacksburg…” Tony sees Draga crack a wide grin. “Why are you smiling?”

“You’re going up to the home of Virginia Tech for graduation weekend!” Draga suddenly looks a whole lot happier, and more comfortable, with the half of the team he’s got.

“Fuck!” Tony winces. “So, you’re saying, start trying to find the hotel room now?”

“You drive. Spader does his magic with a computer, and hopefully finds something. There’s a good shot there’s not a single hotel room in town.”

Tony groans.

“Oh, and by the way, Blacksburg is way the hell out in the middle of nowhere, so, no room in town, no room anywhere else, either. Just in case, take one of the vans and bring sleeping bags”
Tony shoots Draga a *you’re enjoying this way too much* look. Draga smiles at him, and gets back to processing the scene.

He and Spader get back to DC. (Three hour drive up from Norfolk, Tony put the flashers on and never got below 85 the whole way.) They get a van, they get everything geared up, they get a quick lunch, and then they drive. It’s supposed to be a four and a half-ish hour drive. It takes them six. (Spader follows every traffic law, doesn’t turn his flashers on, and they hit traffic as everyone else on earth heads to Tech for graduation weekend.)

By that point it’s after seven pm, and all Tony really wants to do is get dinner, talk to Ziva, and then crash for the night. But that’s not happening.

Jimmy’s been waiting at the scene for them, (hopefully not for too long) and they need to go and at least get the first brush of the lay of the land. At least, photograph everything.

So, off to the Sigma Delta Rho frat house they go.

Once they get there, they’ve got to shoulder their way in through approximately twenty-five guys, all of them irate. It’s the Friday before graduation. They are supposed to be having the last, great, epic college party of their lives, and instead, they’re being held, (together, Tony winces at this, but he supposes there isn’t a great place to stick 25 guys individually) in the frat house until the body has been collected, and the scene released.

So, through the scrum of yelling/grumbling/threatening (‘I’m pre-law, and my father’s a Congressman!’) voices, they go to the basement where…

“Allan, where’s Jimmy?”

Allan looks up from his phone. He’s in the basement all on his own, well, unless you count the two dead guys with him. “He’s in DC, doing the autopsy for Dorney’s murder.”

“Right,” Tony says. Dorney’s got a murder, too. Allan and Jimmy probably flipped a coin on who’d be going out here. “So…”

“Private Seth Anderson,” Allan gestures to the body on his right, who is lying, face up, eyes open and vacant, with a badly broken nose, “has been, based on rigor and body temperature, dead since around 1:00 am this morning.”

Allan gestures to the other man. Also, lying on the ground, though he’s face down, though Tony can see the bruising around his neck. “Private Clinton Tynn. Also, based on temperature and rigor, dead since about 1:00 AM.”

Allan circles around. “Based on bruising on their faces and hands, I’m going to guess they managed to kill each other, though, of course, we won’t know that for certain until I’ve got them back home.”

Spader’s already photographing everything, but Allan’s got his interest with that, so he stops taking pictures and asks, “Okay, how do two guys manage to beat each other to death. One or the other, sure, I can see that, but both?”

“Again, this is based on having sat here for the last few hours after pondering this case after I got done with my initial examination, and I may be wrong, so take it with a few grains of salt, but… My guess is Tynn hit Anderson hard enough to cause a fatal brain bleed, which is slow, and Anderson
choked Tynn to death while he was also dying.”

“And they kill each other… Okay…” Tony looks around. “They aren’t students here, are they?”

“Nope,” Spader says. Looking at his phone. They’re squadmates, on leave until the 20th, uh… Nothing in their files to indicate why they’d be down here.”

“Down here this basement, or down here Blacksburg?” Allan asks.

“Either, both,” Spader responds.

“Wonderful,” Allan says, dryly. Then he looks around. “You have all the pictures you want?”

“Just about,” Spader says, and goes back to shooting the scene as it is.

Tony, knowing that Allan on his own can’t get these two out of the basement, nods and says, “I’ll help with the gurney.”

“Thank you, Agent DiNozzo. It’s a long drive back, and I want to get on the road as soon as I can.”

“Yeah, I know it,” Tony replies.

_____________________________________________________

It’s after nine by the time they’ve got the scene cleared, the bodies on the way back to DC with Allan, and Tony’s done.

He supposes he could, and probably should, push. He should get all of the witness statements done tonight, and then roll into their hotel around 7:00, catch a catnap, and then up by 9:00 to start working on the leads they find in those statements… but… nope.

Maybe if he’d been getting more sleep at home…

At this point, he figures that if someone were to do a blood test on him, they’d find that it’s already two thirds caffeine, and if he keeps going, he’s going to miss something, or do something stupid. Granted, not Draga-type stupid, but contaminate a sample or something like that stupid.

He calls time, and on the way out, much to the annoyance of the frat kids, he tells the LEOs, “Keep ‘em all in there, don’t let them go near the basement, we’ll be back first thing.”

_____________________________________________________

It’s a crappy little room in a generic knock off of a Motel 6.

It’s not the worst place Tony’s stayed, but, for the US, it’s in the top ten.

The beds are lumpy, creaky, and too small. The sheets look like they’re made of polyester, and low thread count polyester at that. But as Spader points out there are two of them, and that wasn’t true in any of the other options. And, for that matter, if they’re here tomorrow night, too, and it looks like they will be, that won’t be true then, either.

Tony groans again, grabs his go bag, heads to the bathroom, and gets ready for bed. He’s tired, and this place sucks, but, and he considers this a sign that it’s been a while since he had a full night sleep, he doesn’t care all that much because he’s got at least nine hours between now and when he’s got to
move again, and during those hours there will not be a crying baby looking for a meal.

He has a moment to feel bad for Ziva, who’s on her own tonight, until she remembers it’s Friday, and she’s at the house, with all of the rest of the family, and about as not on her own as she can be.

He sends her a picture of the bed, along with Missing you, and then goes to sleep.

In the morning… Okay, it’s morning, no one’s had their coffee, and the last nine hundred times he was away when he didn’t room with Ziva he roomed with Gibbs or McGee or Draga all three of whom know how this works.

And look, he’s a guy, so having another guy walk into the bathroom when he’s peeing to start his shower, especially when there’s one bathroom and the schedule is tight, is no big deal.

And Spader’s young. Kid can’t be much past twenty-five. And there are things that tend to happen to guys, especially young ones, while they sleep, and those things are usually still happening to them when they head to the bathroom. Not like Tony’s never seen a hard-on before, let alone a guy scratching his balls through his briefs as he heads into the bathroom in the morning, still three-quarters asleep.

He’s seen McGee, Gibbs, and Draga do that. No problem. Because they don’t make eye contact and they sure as hell don’t watch him pee.

They head into the bathroom, get undressed, facing away from him, maybe mumble ‘Morning’ (Tim or Draga) or grunt (Gibbs), and then get into the water and stay there, behind the shower curtain until he’s out.

And they absolutely do not get undressed still facing him, talking to him, looking at his dick, and then, slowly get into the shower. Never.

Still, Spader’s twenty-three years younger, and he was a submariner, and Tony knows those guys get no privacy at all. So, naked bodies probably aren’t a big deal to him, and Tony doesn’t want to read anything into this that isn’t there. So, he finishes brushing his teeth, and heads into the room to get dressed.

Frat Boy Statement Number: Who Gives A Fuck. They’ve all had vastly too much time with each other, so they’ve all got exactly the same responses.

“Dude, it’s graduation week. So, like, Thursday, that’s party night. Finals are over, underclassmen are gone, everything’s done, time to let loose. House was rocking. I didn’t see either of those guys come in, but, hell, there had to be more than two hundred people coming in and out.”

“The basement?” Insert sound of derision or amazement. “It’s locked. It’s always locked. That’s where we keep the booze. Have a party like this, and keep the basement open, next thing you know you’re out of booze. Hell, even without a party, these guys, if they could get down there… we’d blow our whole budget on alcohol. Only Pat,” the bartender and the frat house president “has a key.”

“Hear a fight? You’re kidding. Have you ever been to a frat party?” That one kills Tony. He’s been to parties that would have made this one look tame. “They could have been dueling with
jackhammers down there and we wouldn’t have heard it.”

“Know them… Uh, no. Our graduation bash is a big deal, people come from all over for it. Tyler worked the door, so he was checking IDs, he said he got one from Wyoming. Seriously, people who love to party, they come for our grad bash.”

Tony’s sitting in a kitchen last cleaned by… Shit, this kitchen has never been cleaned. It’s a place in a house filled with teen/early twenty-something boys used primarily to keep beer cold. He’s lucky the scunge on the floors and walls hasn’t gotten up to eat them.

Spader comes in. He doesn’t need to sit there and listen to exactly the same series of stories over and over and over. He does place a cup of coffee next to Tony, and then smiles at him, and sits down next to him. “Want me to grab the next one?”

“Sure. In a minute.” Tony takes a sip. It’s just coffee, no Red Bull, obviously Spader decided that sleep last night meant Tony didn’t need the extra caffeine. Tony rubs his eyes. “There was a time I loved this.”

“Thought you still loved the job.”

“Not the job.” He gestures to the frat. “This. Delta Beta Chi.” Tony names his own frat. “Back in the day I was the king of these guys.”

“Then you’re the right guy to be here and build rapport.”

Tony smirks at that. “Unless we’re at Ohio State, no I’m not. I’m too damn old.”

“You’re not that old,” Spader’s looking at him really intently as he says that, and then, and Tony doesn’t know what to do with this, he pats Tony’s hand.

Tony swallows, hard, pulling his hand off the table and putting it in his lap. “Uh, yeah. Thanks. Almost fifty. Might as well be dead to these guys.”

“Nah. They know some serious shit went down, and they’re closing ranks. That’s why we’re not getting anywhere. All of them know what happened.”

Tony nods at that. Spader may have fuck all for instincts when it comes to things like how to behave in the bathroom or touching other people, but he’s dead right on this.

Tony sits back and watches Spader get exactly the same series of answers, down to “dueling with jackhammers,” which, Really, what’d they do, write a goddamned script?

He gets up to check in with Allan.

As he paces around the grounds of the frat house, apparently kept up with a bit more attention to detail than the kitchen, though he supposes the college may do that, so the campus looks good for tomorrow, he hits Allan’s contact number.

A few rings, and then, “Good timing Agent DiNozzo, I’m almost done.”

“Great. Got anything good for me?”

“Not sure about good, but interesting. First off, strangulation and severe subdural hemorrhage are
“Choking and a brain bleed, like you said.”

“Yes. Now for interesting part number one, no traces of alcohol or any other party drug in their system. They didn’t go to have a good time.”

“Sounds like there’s an interesting part number two.”

“Yes there is. Corwin in the lab is telling me that both of our victims have each other’s skin cells and blood on them, and Anderson has one other, as of yet unknown, male donor, as well.”

“Three people in the fight?”

“Only if Tynn never laid a hand on one of them and managed to not get hit by any flying blood, sweat, or saliva.”

“Two fights,” Tony says. He’s been in more than enough fights to know there’s no way to get three guys fighting and not have any of the two other guys rub off on guy number three.

“I’m thinking Anderson and Tynn fighting each other was the second round. It’s possible that Anderson’s brain bleed didn’t come from Tynn. It probably took about fifteen minutes to kill him, and we don’t know how long they were fighting for.”

“Great. Would there be any way to tell who caused the bleed?”

“Not from what I have now. We swabbed his face and head, and found samples from Tynn and one of the unknown males. Anderson’s blood was on Tynn’s clothing, and given the fact there was mucus in it, we know it’s from his nose, what we don’t know is if it came from when his nose was broken, or if he bled on Tynn afterward. If we can find what the other assailant was wearing, and it didn’t have nasal blood on it from Anderson, we could rule him out as having been the one who broke Anderson’s nose.”

“And the break is what killed him?”

“Not immediately. If you do that strike right, it’ll force the bones into the brain and kill the person quickly. The hit was off, a bit to the side, so instead of an almost instant kill, it took a while for the swelling to finish Anderson off.”

“Great. And that’s what gave him time to finish Tynn off?”

“That’s how it looks.”

“Okay, thanks Allan. Is Jimmy around, I’d like to say hi.” And find out how last night went, and also, have a moment to talk to someone about how flipped out he should be if one of his employees just patted his hand to comfort him.

“Not now. He worked way late, finished up, and then went home.”

“Okay.”

Statement, statement, statement… It takes a long time to go through twenty-five statements, but by the end of the day, they’re able to release the frat brothers, with the ‘don’t go anywhere’ caveat.
They all give Tony and Spader a look along the lines of ‘Are you stupid? Graduation is tomorrow, we’re not going anywhere.’

Tony asks the LEOs to keep an eye on the house and grab anyone who might try to run. Someone in there knows something, and if they’re lucky, one of them will get stupid and make a break for it.

“So, what do you want for dinner?” Spader asks as they get into their car.

“God, I don’t care. The stuff Jimmy’s got me eating all tastes like crap.”

“It’s good for you.”

Tony rolls his eyes. Especially right now, far away from everything he loves, not getting a hit of sugary, fatty, alcoholic pleasure hurts. “I could use a bit less good for me.”

Spader breaks into a wide smile. “I know that feeling. I’ve got a cheat day every week. Come on, let’s go get a huge pizza with everything, wash it down with a bunch of beer, and then go over the reports Corwin sent us.”

And that sounds good to Tony.

Fortunately, in a college town, it is not difficult to locate pizza or beer. There’s piles of it.

And Tony is groaning with pleasure as that first taste of cheesy, meaty (he figured if he was going to cheat he was going to cheat. He’s not only off his diet, but it’s not kosher, either.) spicy, crusty goodness floods his mouth and he’s in rapture. Washing it down with ice cold malty, hoppy, bitter, yeasty beer just makes everything better.

Spader laughs. “There’s a man who loves his food.”

“Haven’t had a pizza with everything since before I got married.”

Spader sighs. “She must be a hell of a woman.”

“Oh, you have no idea. Yeah, she is. Sometimes though, I miss this.”

“That’s long term relationships, right?” Spader smiles a little, and his blue eyes stay glued to Tony. “Give and take, and you do things to make the other one happy.”

“Exactly.”

“And when you’re on your own…”

Tony takes another bite of his pizza, grinning. “Yeah, what she doesn’t know, won’t hurt me.” It’s a few hours later when he realizes that that might not have been the best way to express the idea of It’s okay if I have a little food splurge now and again.

Spader takes a bite of his, smiles at Tony, and then switches around so he and Tony are on the same side of the table, his leg brushing against Tony’s, which has Tony feeling alarmed, until a second later, when he opens up his laptop and pulls up the reports from Corwin in the lab.
No way for them both to see it unless they’re on the same side, and the booth is small, no way for the two of them to sit on one side without touching.

The pizza is excellent. The beer is amazing. The case is… shit.

On the upside, they can call out everyone in the frat on one lie. There were tons of fingerprints all up and down banister to the basement. There were prints all over the door. Everything they printed, including the victims, had lots of prints on them.

That, of course, is a tiny thread to go on. It’s enough of a thread to print everyone, so there’s something.

Once they finish dinner, they head back to the frat, find that all of the members are still there, and explain that they need everyone’s prints.

This results in immediate requests for lawyers, and Tony and Draga head to their room (a new one, because last night’s hotel was booked for today) while the Sigma Delta Rho boys gather together a half-dozen legal-beagle parents to go head to head with them in the morning.

This is not a generic Motel 6 knockoff. It’s an AirB&B. They’re in someone’s home. A very interested someone in what they’re doing this weekend, but finally Tony gets his hosts to back off and leave them to crash.

The room is really nice. Clean, comfy looking, offers breakfast in the morning, and wifi.

So, of course, the only bed is a king. No double beds. (Why, why, why are they in Blacksburg during graduation week?)

“You want the sofa or the bed?” Tony asks, being, honestly, a lot more conciliatory than usual. But he’s nervous. Spader just… stands too close, smiles too much, and is way too eager to please.

“There’s more than enough room; we can share the bed.”

Spader steps a little closer to him, and for the first time Tony’s really aware of the fact that he’s 6’5”, more than twenty years younger, and probably 250 pounds of solid muscle. It's the first time in a very long time that he's felt, in his guts, that he's next to a guy he couldn't take down without a gun.

“I’m good with the sofa,” Tony says, fast.

Spader’s staring at the sofa, which is maybe five feet long. “You sure?” Like everything else in the room, it’s nice, but it’s small. It’s designed for a small person to sit on and maybe watch some TV or read for a little while. A kid could sleep on it, but Tony? Way too short for that.

“Well, yeah, but…” Tony looks at the bed. He’s a big guy. Spader’s a huge guy. And that might be a king, but it’s not one of the McPalmer-made-for-four-people-sized beds, which is about as much space as he wants between him and Spader if they’re going to be in the same bed.

Spader looks at the bed and shrugs. “Plenty of room. In a sub your berth is twenty-one inches wide
and six feet long. So, I'm good. Or are you a bed hog?"

“No. Just…”

Spader turns down the covers and smiles brightly. “Then get in. No reason for us to be uncomfortable. And we’ll both work better tomorrow if we get good sleep. You've been rubbing your neck all day from sleeping on that slab of lumpy cement they called a mattress at last night's place.”

Tony hadn't noticed he'd been doing it, but once Spader mentioned it, he knows he has. His neck pops every time he's turned it too far to the left today. He looks at the sofa, and imagines that he'd have to sleep sitting up, back curled up, neck all the way on the head rest, or on his side, curled into a little ball. His body doesn't like either of those positions. He sighs.

“True.” So, Tony gets in and lays down, and was very pleased when he didn’t jump out of the bed when Spader said good night and patted his hip.

Tony loves pizza with everything on it. Pizza no longer loves Tony. His heartburn is bad enough it's about to chew through his stomach and eat his lungs alive.

He tries sitting up, and walking around, and anything he can think of, but it doesn’t help.

At midnight, he’s out at the 24-hour drugstore, buying all the antacids. He eats too many of them on the way back to his room, but he finally starts to feel a little better.

When he gets back to bed, he notices that Spader’s not actually asleep. His eyes are closed, he’s breathing normally, but… Not sleeping.

Two hours later, when Tony’s almost fifty-year-old bladder wakes him up to let him know it’s time for his nightly pit stop, Spader is still awake, still pretending to be asleep, and from the looks of it, watching him.

It’s creepy. And really uncomfortable. And he’s not sure what the hell to do about it.

“Good morning!” Spader chirps, bright and sunny, as Tony’s in the shower. “Sleep well?”

Tony growls at him, and begins to wonder if he was wrong about Spader not being asleep. No one should be that perky on that little sleep.

He’s also coming to the conclusion that unless he locks the door, Spader’s just going to keep wandering into the bathroom while he’s in there.

As Tony gets out, Spader is still in there, eyeing him, brushing his teeth, and looking vastly too chipper to be allowed.
“We got another report from Corwin,” Spader says, as he puts down his toothbrush and strips out of his boxers, heading for the shower.

*Great, now I’ve got to stay in here and talk to him while he’s getting naked and into the shower.*

“You read it?”

“Oh yeah, it’s short. Everything we sent back to be tested, has tested positive for blood. Trace amounts, not enough to ID, but blood nonetheless.”

“Everything?”

“Even the fingerprint tapes.”

“Holy shit! What were they doing down there?”

“Don’t know, but how about you deal with the lawyers and I get the Luminol?”

“That’s a plan.”

“We just want fingerprints to start ruling people out…” Tony’s explaining to what appears to be nine lawyers, all of whom are furious not to be having a big breakfast to get ready to send their kids off to graduate.

“You have no right to be…” one of the lawyers says.

“Stop it. All twenty-five of your kids said that door was locked and no one ever went down there but Pat. Well, guess what, there were literally *hundreds* of prints in the basement. Now, unless Pat somehow has hundreds of different prints,” Tony mockingly searches the room for Pat, and then looks at his hands, “Oh, wait, nope, just ten fingers, at least some of them are lying.

“So, we can get prints, and anyone who doesn’t match up to a print in the basement can grab his cap and gown and still make it to the graduation ceremony, or I can hold all of you here.

“So, who’s giving me a print?”

The cadre of lawyers talk with each other, and with their kids, and with each other some more.

“We’re going to need a court order before we hand over any prints.”

That’s when Spader comes up and says, “Sir, given what we just found down there, you might want to rethink that. I have a feeling the judges are going to be a lot more lenient if you at least try to cooperate.”

Tony’s eyes go wide. “You all stay put.” Then he heads back down with Spader.

Spader hands over the glasses, and begins to shine his light around.

“FUCK!” Tony says it loud enough to be heard upstairs. Part of it is genuine. With the exception of the staged scene with the President’s Daughter, he’s never seen this much blood, anywhere. And this time, he’s awfully sure it’s all *human* blood. Part of it is he wants those lawyers up there to feel their blood go cold.

Tony scans the whole basement, and everything down here, the walls, floor, ceiling, stair case, kegs,
cases of six packs, bottles of harder alcohol, is covered in blood spatter.

Tony gets closer. He goes to one of the kegs. Hundreds of overlapping spatters. None of them are big. It’s genuine spatter, but it looks like someone put a sprinkler in the middle of the room, and somehow got it to spray blood, everywhere. He opens and closes his mouth. “This didn’t just happen on Thursday,” finally comes out.

Spader shakes his head. “No way. Both of our victims would have had to have been hung up like a butchered animal, drained, and then had some maniac with a toothbrush go and spatter the entire room in their blood, and then clean everything but a few blobs off the floor away.”

Tony heads upstairs to the lawyers. He points to one of them. “You’re the criminal defense attorney, right?”

He nods.

“You come with me and don’t touch anything.” Then he hands the attorney his glasses and takes him down to the basement.

The attorney’s eyes go wide. He mutters something that is certainly a curse, but Tony doesn’t know which one.

Tony says to him, “Now would be a really good time to make sure your kid’s prints aren’t down here.”

Within an hour, the flavor of the case has shifted, intensely. Defense Attorney Dad rapidly gets into an animated conversation with his son, which results in demands for a court order, but two of the other kids and their parents suddenly decide now would be a really excellent time to start cooperating.

Apparently, they may be ‘brothers’ but not the sort that are willing to go to jail for each other.

So, while Spader goes off in search of a court order for the fingerprints of everyone who lives at Sigma Delta Rho House Tony gets to sit down with Astin Settle and his friend Carson Hayden.

“So, am I finally going to get the story?” Tony says, as Astin and Carson’s parents glare at their kids for being so stupid.

Astin nods. “It’s… um… like Fight Club.”

“But, like, if we were always running around with bruises and cuts, people would notice, so we don’t fight,” Carson says.

“We just host them…” Astin adds.

Carson looks down at his hands, “And run the book on fights.”

Tony winces, illegal betting ring in the frat, along with a fight club, this is going to go over great.

“We make sure there’s a party upstairs, that way no one notices extra cars or the noise. So many people in the house, no one notices a few heading down. We film the fights, stream them live for $3.99 a minute, and run the book online, too. Fighters set their fights online, do everything online, then they show up for a party, ask Pat for a virgin strawberry daiquiri, down they go. Jace refs. No
holds or strikes barred, winner’s the last one standing. He gets half of the take from the streaming, and of course, he can bet on himself. They can set it up for one on one, or melee, or however they like,” Astin says.

“What happened Thursday night?” Spader asks.

Astin shrugs. Carson shakes his head. “We don’t go down there. Haven’t seen Jace since Thursday night. Not a tech guy, so I don’t know what happens to the video after it streams, but I can give you our website.”

“Okay, stay put,” Tony says.

“You’ll note they cooperated, right?” Astin’s mom asks.

“I will make sure to let the judge know that after two days of lying to me, and not mentioning one of their brothers were missing, that once confronted with evidence that I’d be able to put them all away forever, your son was willing to finally stop lying to me.”

She doesn’t appear pleased by that answer.

From there the case unravels. Not as smoothly as Tony would have liked, for example, Jace was last seen getting on a plane to Moldova, (Of course he was! Goddamned Eastern European History major! Why can’t these little punks flee to somewhere easy to get to?) and the video wasn’t just offline, the whole damn website was gone, (McGee’s Minions got some overtime digging the whole thing back up again. The kid who took it down was good. They were better.) and when it became clear some seriously illegal shit was going on, not only did he end up having to deal with twenty-five legal teams (because a bunch of these parents got multiple lawyers for their kid), Sigma Delta Rho, also sent in a legal team and Virginia Tech sent in one, too.

But, and this was the part he was most pleased with, once everything fell apart, he could drag them all to DC, make them stay in hotels with uncomfortable beds and even less comfortable roommates, and go to his own home, snuggle his wife and baby, and finally get to relax.

It’s two days later, and Tony and Spader are watching the video of the fight. It had taken a while to get it back, but once they had it, all the answers, at least on who killed who were in the open.

Sort of.

Anderson had two fights that night. They don’t know who the first guy is. Though, since they have the video, they can see what he touched, and hunt down which prints are his, along with whatever online stuff he did to sign up.

They watch the hit that will, eventually, kill Anderson. He wins the match though, at the end of it, he’s the last guy standing. Swaying, but standing nonetheless.

He’s grinning, covered in sweat, dripping blood all over the place, looking like he’s having a good time.

It’ll take some time, but since the guy who lost that fight doesn’t know he killed anyone, he’s not
hiding. They’ll find him. (Probably. With Tony’s luck, he’s in goddamned Moldova, which is not going out of it’s way to offer help finding Jace Frojers, too.)

They see Anderson go up against Tynn and it’s clear they’ve got some sort of beef. The reports they’ve gotten from their CO said things were ‘tense.’ Scuttlebutt all over the place, but no one knows for sure why those two didn’t get on.

It’s a short fight, angry, fast, hard. Anderson gets a good chokehold on Tynn. Keeps it going a bit longer than necessary, and then drops him. He does his little victory routine again. They see Jace congratulate him, and he does a bit about how that’s the last fight of the season, but summer session would start up soon, and they’d be back.

Tynn and Anderson’s buddies were betting on the fight, and apparently watched it, but there was no way to tell from the feed, which shuts off shortly after Anderson wins the second fight, that Tynn is dead or dying in that shot, and Anderson will join him in another minute or two.

“Think he knows what’s about to happen?” Spader asks.

“Which one?”

“Either of them, though I was thinking about Jace. I mean, look at him, he’s grinning, goofing around for the camera, palling around with Anderson. Then he shuts off the feed, and boom, two dead guys.”

“Play with fire, get burned,” Tony says.

“Yeah, I guess. Just… I remember being that young and stupid. Wasn’t all that long ago, you know?” Spader says.

“Yeah, I know. And I kept it up a lot longer than I should have. And I lucked out, and didn’t get burned, not like that, at least.”

Spader nods, and then pats his own knee. “If this hadn’t happened, I probably would have had a good long run of stupid, too. Kind of focuses your life when everything you planned on falls apart. Makes you decide what matters, and makes you want to go after it.” And then Spader just looks at Tony, heavy eye contact, for what feels like a really long time.

Tony, and he didn’t think he could do this anymore, blushes. Then he says, “Yeah, I know about that. We were bombed here. Ziva and I were in the elevator when the explosion hit. Fell ten feet, so that was a shock, couldn’t get out, trapped in there. Didn’t know when, or if, they’d be able to get us out. Didn’t know if any of our loves were still alive. The last time we saw McGee, he was out in the open, so…

“So, we’re in that elevator, saying stupid shit, just talking to kill time, and it’s hot. No AC. We’ve got emergency lights, but main power is dead. We’ve been trying to break out, get the top popped off the elevator, but something’s crashed down on it. We’re trapped. Just have to wait.

“So, we’re in there, smelly, sweaty, dirty, scared, and we’re talking in a way we normally don’t. Usually, we’re both so good at keeping our walls up, but then we were really talking. Not the way we would later, but that was one of the first cracks in that wall, and that was the moment I knew what I wanted.

“I wanted her, Zach. More than anything. Still do. And I didn’t know how to get her. Took a while to figure it out. Had to get me right. Had to break those walls down, mine and hers. Took almost a year before I even asked her out. But, it was good. It is good.
“And you’re right, it’s hard to be stupid once you know what you want, and you’ve dedicated yourself to holding and protecting it.”

Spader licks his lips, swallows, and nods. “I understand.”

Tony smiles. “Good.”

---

He doesn’t know if that’s taken care of whatever might be going on with Spader, but he really hopes it does.

---

And with that done, he’s got enough breathing time to see how the rest of his team is.

He’s checked in and been monitoring their case, too, but he wants more than the reports of what’s going on in the case.

“Johnson, come on the coffee run with me.”

She shrugs, gets up, and follows Tony into the elevator. A second, and maybe three vertical feet later, he shuts it off, and then says, “I’ve read all the reports, anything that didn’t get into them you want to talk to me about?”

She smiles and shakes her head. “Look, it’s sweet that you’re so concerned about this, but Eric’s behaving just fine. Yeah, he looks. Yes, sometimes he stands too close. But he doesn’t push it past that, he doesn’t make me uncomfortable, and he never makes me feel like if I draw a line, he won’t respect it. And really, that’s all I need.”

“Don’t you want… I don’t know, better than that?”

She laughs. “I might like better, but that’s as good as I can hope for. Can’t work with mostly guys and expect them all to be gay. Well, I suppose you could, but not in this sort of field. Be one thing if I worked at a gay bar or something. But…” she sighs. “Okay. Pittsburgh. I liked most of my co-workers just fine, but a few of them, they didn’t just look. Some of them would accidentally touch me. And the constant jokes. And god-forbid you call them out on a joke because if you do, you’re the bitch with no sense of humor. And if you swat a hand that accidentally brushes your ass, you’ve got some sort of anger management issues.

“So, look, compared to some of that, Eric’s fine. He’s allowed to think I’m hot. I am hot. I’m fine with him recognizing that, as long as he’s a good boy about dealing with it, and he is.”

“Okay.”

“And, really, I will let you know if there’s a problem. With him or any of the rest of them. You’re doing a good job of setting a good example here, so I won’t undermine that by staying quiet.”

“Uh… Thanks.” Tony doesn’t quite know what to do with that. Doesn’t know what to do with a lot of this, but… one idea springs to mind.
He hasn’t been here since the funeral. He doesn’t like to think of Kate, here.

Anywhere other than here.

Sometimes, he likes to pretend that the bullet missed by a hair, and she decided she’d had enough. She went back to school became a doctor, and now uses medicine to solve crimes. (This fantasy may have something to do with that TV show he can’t make himself watch, because the actress looks so much like Kate.)

But she is here. And has been for way too long.

Tony sits down next to her tombstone. His back is against the side of the stone, and he’s careful not to sit on the now flat and green grass above where the put her… shit… It’s almost exactly twelve years now. Twelve years week after next.

He’s not sure where to start. First time in a long time that he’s felt tongue tied, but that was part of what he liked about Kate. Sometimes he’d look at her, and she’d have that smile, and he’d start to blather, just spew words because real thoughts would go skittering out of his head at the sight of that smile.

He tells her about his week and adventures with Spader, and wraps up with, “I can hear you saying, ‘Karma’s a bitch, DiNozzo.’ I can see the way you’d smile at it.

“You’d probably make a crack to Abby about how some guys just can’t get it if it doesn’t happen to them. You and her would share that look, and smirk, and stare back at me and… and… Okay, guilty as charged. But, it did happen, a very mild version of it, and… I’m learning.

“And… I wanted to say I’m sorry. I am, really. And I’m embarrassed that I treated you like that. I look back at it and want to cringe.

“And it’s way too late, and I’m growing up slowly, but… It’s happening, and I wish I’d been a better partner for you. I wish I would have treated you well.

“I have a son, now. He’s a little guy. Not even eight weeks, yet, but I’m going to raise him to be a better man than I was.” He pats her tombstone again. “When you meet him, he’ll treat you right.”

He stands up, pats the stone one more time, and then says, “Time to go home. If you think I was a jackass with you, you should have seen the shit I pulled on my wife. I’m off to get her an excellent dinner, and apologize for about a week to her.”

He can see Kate smile at that.

A/N:

Some of you have been asking about the M'Gy Dragons.

September 15th, 2016, the first chapter'll go live on my Patreon. More information coming up as I get it. Until then...

Teaser image: Dae and Gabe.
Tim buckles his seatbelt, and feels almost bizarre. It’s been a long time since he’s done something like this, and it’s going to be a long time before he does it again.

He’s riding shotgun with Agents Setter and Caln.

Setter, a tall Black man, with a mother from Honduras and a father from Peoria is just as Navy as Tim is. Mom met a sailor, that sailor was the third generation of sailor in his family, however, unlike Tim, when Setter told his parents he wanted to go to college, and then law enforcement, and then NCIS, they clapped him on the back and petted him, and upon graduating FLETC, they had a party.

Caln, a petit white woman, has almost the same story, but instead of Navy, her family is law enforcement, back a long, long way. She’s the first Fed in her family, but her oldest son is in college now, and he’s looking at following her into Federal Law Enforcement.

So, between the three of them, they’ve got a lot to talk about in the ways of family traditions. Tim and Setter chat their way through growing up at half a dozen bases. The three of them talk about parents who want them to carry on the family tradition, though, Tim’s fairly quiet. (He talks mostly about Breena’s family in that case.)

And, eventually, they roll up to the Naval Surface Warfare Center. They’re here to have a chat with Commandant John Mahoney, who has the honor of being the only base commander on the east coast with no harassment claims, not one single one, in the last year.

Setter and Caln are as close to a ‘white collar crime’ division as NCIS has, which is why Tim picked them for this.

Harassment claims are fairly easy to deal with. They have a standard operating procedure for that. Lots of harassment claims are… not easy, but intuitive to deal with. If you’re looking at a base with two standard deviations from the norm on cases, then it’s time to get looking at those cases, pinpoint where they’re happening, who’s involved, and either start kicking some asses, or go and investigate and see what they’re doing that has people feeling comfortable enough to report abuses.

But they aren’t investigating any harassment claims right now. They’ll leave that to people who do it regularly. They’re investigating the lack of harassment claims, and looking to see if this is a higher level cover-up, or it’s a place where people can’t report issues.

Mahoney has more than six thousand people on his base.

There is no possible way that all of them get along perfectly and no one has ever made an untoward pass at another person, let alone got inappropriately touchy-feely. If numbers for the rest of the east coast bases are to be believed, he should be averaging at least two or three reports a month.

So, are reports getting hidden? Is this the kind of place where it’s clear that making a report will go hard on the reporter, so no one makes one? Is there some eagle-eyed staff member transferring guys before they cause problems?

They don’t know, but they’re going to.
Tim’s job on this is to mostly sit in the background and observe. Caln and Setter have done versions of this before, and they don’t need him butting his ass into it.

What he needs to do is pay attention, and write this down, and set up a ‘how to handle this’ instructional manual for the other teams who will be handling these sorts of investigations.

He does know one this as they wait for Mahoney, next time, a ‘perfect’ base comes up, they need to get someone, or several someones inside, to make a report, and then tell them what happens. Tim’s going into this cold, and he hates that. Any good investigator knows that you don’t start asking questions of the suspects until you’ve got at least an idea of the shape of the problem.

He makes a mental note to see about getting people onto that. They might still do it here. Tim’s sure that they’ve got more than a few people who wouldn’t mind a deep cover operation that won’t get them killed.

And, sure, Mahoney and Co. will be primed for it. With them coming here and asking questions, it’ll be on their minds, but… Give it a few months. Go find some young things, (and in this case Tim’s envisioning Johnson… Except she looks just about as ‘Navy’ as Jackson does… Okay, they might have to get some real sailors in for this,) send a few of them in, and stage some, ‘uncomfortable’ working environments to see what happens.

He makes a little note for himself to see when the next personnel transfer gets here, and how to go about getting a few ‘plants’ inside of that transfer.

“Commander Mahoney,” Setter extends his hand, with a wide smile. Caln is smiley, too, as she shakes his hand, and Setter introduces the three of them. “As you may know, at NCIS we’re cracking down on all forms of harassment. It’s our primary goal to make sure that our soldiers and sailors are as safe as possible when they’re on base.”

Caln takes over. “Your base has the best record on the east coast,” her voice is warm, effusive, and complimentary, “and we’ve been sent here, along with Director McGee, to see what it is you’re doing, so we can roll it out to the rest of our bases.”

Mahoney laps it up. He doesn’t know he’s being played, and he is genuinely proud of his camp’s record. All three of them have been doing this job more than long enough to know that if he were hiding anything, they’d twig to it. Mahoney genuinely believes that his base has some sort of magic that makes everyone get along.

“Anything you want to know, anyone you want to talk to, that’s fine by me. I like to think leading by example goes a long way, so all of my men see me treat everyone, even the newest privates, with kindness and respect.”

The three of them smile at him. They can also feel the unspoken message of that sentence, until kindness and respect isn’t warranted anymore, and then I come down on them like a ton of bricks.

But, that’s pretty much what they want in a military commander.
As they head out of Mahoney’s office, in search of his ranking MP, Caln says to Tim, “You know what would be useful for something like this?”

“Have at it, I’ll get it for you guys next time, if I can.”

“Numbers on the rest of the crimes going on here. Right now you’re just looking at sexual assaults and harassment. Okay, numbers for that is low. What’s the rate of every other crime here? Are they in line with everything else?” Caln asks.

Tim nods, that’s a good question. He adds it to his notes. “Let’s take the long way to the MPs’, I can’t get detailed data between now and here, but I can at least see if anything gets reported here.”

So, they stroll around the base, and as military bases go, it’s a very pleasant sort of place. Of course, it’s late May, the sun is bright, the air warm, and the trees and plants budding out with a vengeance after that long winter and cool spring.

“What do they do out here?” Setter asks Caln.

She doesn’t know, but Tim does. “Energetics. Things that go boom. Things that make other things go boom. And things that shoot things all over the place when they go boom.”

Tim’s always been pretty interested in what they do out here. If anyone is going to make a functional jet pack, it’s these guys here. If the X-Files were ever going to show up at a Naval facility, this is where they’d come. This is where the guys with the chemistry and engineering degrees get together to do fun stuff. Hell, there are rumors they even work on dematerialization here.

It takes two more minutes, and they’re ambling closer and closer to the MP’s office when he finds what he’s looking for. “Three reports in the last year.”

“Total?” Setter looks stunned. NCIS home office has more than three reports a year, and they’re the freaking cops.

“Total. Two thefts and one assault.”

“All right,” Caln says, “this stinks. There is no way you stick 6000 guys together and they all turn into angels. I don’t care if they are all getting their jollies off blowing stuff up every day. NO WAY! It’s not happening.”

Tim’s nodding. Sure, he personally would find the ability to blow stuff up on a regular basis a good way to let off steam, but… no… There are just too many people here for those numbers to be right.

Lt. Commander Marcus Jasten, the highest ranking MP, is more than happy to walk them through his technique for keeping calm and quiet on base. (Other than the thuds they can hear in the background, thuds that rattle the walls and they can feel in their chests. Apparently something is getting tested today.)

“It’s called peer mediation. We get lots of complaints, but every time we get one, we have all the parties get together with one of the chaplains or counselors, and a few members of different teams, same ages and ranks, those are the peers, and then everyone talks to the group about what happened, why and how, and they work through a plan for how to resolve the issue.

“If, after it’s been talked through, and the plan for resolution put into play, the complainant still feels
like she or he’s been wronged, we take a formal complaint and work the case.”

Jasten feels shifty. But Tim can’t tell if he’s being shifty because this is so far off from by-the-book that it’s not even in the same library as “the book” or if “peer mediation” means “we make it very clear how bad it’ll go for you if you make a formal complaint.”

Jasten continues, “It’s a very effective technique for improving morale. Everyone knows that they might get called in to be part of one of the mediation groups, so they’re always working on and thinking of ways to get along better with each other. So, say two privates get into a fight. By involving the whole base it goes from a problem between two men, to something everyone has a stake in working out.”

Setter and Caln are nodding. “So, what sort of plans do your mediation groups come up with?” Caln asks.

“That’ll depend a lot on what the issue is. Say, again, we’ve got our two sailors fighting. First off, what’s the problem? Each sailor will have his own group to talk to, and they’ll find out what the problem is. For a lot of our men, it’s much easier to talk about getting their balls busted by a squadmate with someone who’s in the lines with them, than it is to tell an officer about it. The peer groups break down the idea that they’re ‘tattling’ or ‘can’t handle the problem themselves and have to call in Mommy or Daddy.’

“Both peer groups will elect a leader, and that person will report to the chaplain or counselor, and he’ll help them with a line of further questions to ask, and ideas for how to work things out.

“Then each peer group will brainstorm ways to work the problem out with the sailor. They’ll offer techniques to each sailor for how to get along with each other. They might suggest something like just making sure they aren’t on duty in the same place or the same time. Maybe they’ll end up with anger management classes. Stuff like that.

“The last step is to get the two sailors together, both with a plan for what to do, and have them, and their peer groups, come up with a final plan. They all follow the plan. And we’ve got the highest morale of a non-deployed unit.”

“That sounds really healthy,” Setter says.

“I hope so. So much of the military is focused on a punishment mode, and we want to change that. Everyone’s better off if we work problems out, rather than just keep slapping guys with black marks on their records,” Jasten says with a smile.

Tim’s privately wondering how the hell this guy got to be an MP. This is way too touchy-feely, hippie dippy shit (he can hear Tony calling it that in his head) to be believed.

On the other hand, if it works…

“Do you keep notes on the ‘mediations,’” Setter asks.

Jasten looks horrified at that idea. “Lord, no! All informal, all anonymous, all off the books. If we kept notes, we’d have to do something, and that gets us back into punishment mode. Only if everyone isn’t satisfied, do we move onto formal action.”

Setter and Caln look at each other, and Tim knows what they’re thinking, he’s thinking it, too. He decides he’ll be the one to ask, “And, how do you know if everyone is satisfied?”

Jasten looks like that’s the dumbest question ever. “If they aren’t satisfied, why wouldn’t they report
it? We’re still here. We still take reports, and follow through on them.”

Tim nods at that. “Of course.”

“What about real crimes? Not just two seamen scuffling. Say… you get a rape case, would you send that to mediation?” Caln asks.

“Of course not! ‘Real’ crimes, something big gets stolen, drugs, someone gets really hurt, raped, killed, anything like that, we immediately go to our regular techniques. I’m not sending a rape victim in to go chat with her assailant about how to come to an understanding about what happened!”

“Okay, good. Just had to check,” Setter says.

“Moot point really. We haven’t had a rape in six years. Only one real theft this year. I mean, little stuff, a cell phone or watch or something, that we send to mediation, let them work it out, get their property back, but this one boosted a car and then sold it. Can’t just let them work that out.

“This system, it really helps. Makes it easier for the men to see each other as real people, not just a pain in the ass in a uniform. Here, we aren’t just brothers because we survived all the shit together, here, we lift each other up, and help each other out, too.”

“You mind if we talk to the chaplains and some of the men about what you’re doing? We’re looking to roll out systems that work across the Navy and Marines, so…” Caln asks with a big smile.

“Certainly. Father Sergio is usually on base this time of day, and he can help you find people to talk to.”

Tim, Caln, and Setter leave, all nodding along.

“So, do we believe that?” Setter asks once they’re out of the MP’s office.

Caln shakes her head. “Not entirely. I’m sure it works to an extent, but he was nervous about something.”

“Yeah, I got that, too. Don’t know if he was nervous about not doing it by the books, or nervous because he’s got a lot of crap hiding behind his peer mediation,” Tim replies.

“Obviously, whatever he’s got, he’s got happy upper management. Mahoney probably thinks the sun rises and shines on this guy’s ass because this plan has his complaint numbers down so low,” Setter adds.

Caln nods to the guys. “Go chat with the Father, I’m going to see if I can find some women to talk with.”

“Figuring a bit of one on one might get more information flowing?” Setter asks.

“Yeah.”

The conversation with Father Santiago goes well. He’s bright, forthcoming, and, as Setter puts it as they walk away, “Hip deep in the bullshit.”
That’s Tim’s impression, too. “You know Tony DiNozzo?”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Okay, he had a case last week. Twenty-five frat boys running a fight club and illegal betting ring out of their house.”

“Ow.”

“Yeah, he’s still trying to sort out all the lawyers. Anyway, he mentioned that the kids kept using the exact same words to describe their lies.”

Setter nods along, knowing where this is going, “And Father Santiago, and his ‘everyone has a stake in everyone getting along, building each other up, brotherhood, is setting off your lie detector?”

“Just sounds a little too polished.”

“To me, too. Think Caln’s getting anything interesting?”

“I hope so.”

While Caln’s off in the ladies’ barracks, Tim and Setter continue meandering around.

“So, what do you do with this?” Setter asks.

“If it really works, suggest it up the line.”

“If it doesn’t or if we can’t tell?”

Tim shrugs. “Undercover. I’ll admit, I was hoping we’d get a much clearer vibe just by being here. It might be cases like this, where the report numbers are too damn low, that we’ll have to stage something just to see what happens.”

“Stage how?”

“Grab two new transfers, make sure they’re both game, and have one of them harass the other one, then see what happens.”

Setter thinks about that. “Probably cleaner than what we’re doing here.”

“I’m thinking that’s what we’re going to recommend for this base. Find out who’s up on the roster and coming here, and send them in to see how well the peer mediation works.”

Caln catches that last line as she rejoins them. “I’ve got some insight onto that.”

“Does it work?” Tim asks.

“Sort of. If we’re talking about something where everyone in the group thinks it’s a problem, like say smacking someone or taking their stuff, it works fine. So, the ladies I was talking with, they were able to say that if someone was getting handsy, that was the sort of thing the other guys in the peer group could usually identify as a problem. None of them want another guy pinching them on the ass, either.”
“But… okay, and I don’t know if our current system could do much with this, either. Private gets her phone stolen. She doesn’t know who stole it, no idea. So she can’t do the mediation route. She reports it stolen, and a day later, it’s back. Awesome, maybe she just put it in the wrong spot or something, at least that’s what she thought, until all of her ‘private’ pictures ended up all over the base.”

“So, mediation group gets together, and they definitely are all over hunting down the guy who posted the photos. He gets hunted down, spends two months in the brig, or whatever they have here, has to apologize formally to her, gets busted a rank, and pays her a fine. Great. She’s good with that.

“Problem is, those photos are all over the base. And, as I said, private photos. And, said photos showed all of her, and… her personal grooming choices. So, now there’s a group of people calling her ‘Private Hardwood Floors…”

Setter squints at his partner. “Uh…”

“Does the carpet match the drapes?” Caln says, voice ironic.

“Oh… Yeah. No carpet, hardwood floors!” Setter looks like he’d blush, if he could, about not having gotten that.

“And she keeps getting assholes offering to ‘get down on their knees and wax her floors, get them good and wet and make them shine.’ So, what do we do with that? The mediators, who are firmly convinced that’s just annoying, are suggesting she work on anger management. Because to them, it’s not a big deal.”

Tim thinks about that. “Any chance she’d report it?”

Caln says, “Over her, and my, dead bodies. I offered to take the report and she got very adamant about not doing this on the record. She’s already done the mediation thing, saw no one in the group thought it was an issue, and got the message loud and clear, ‘this isn’t worth ruining a career over.’”

“Great,” Tim says, voice clipped. “Who’s career are they talking about ruining.”

“Good question, I didn’t think to ask for clarification. I’m assuming the assholes’, but she could have meant they’d start in on her, soon.”

“Better question, what do we do about stuff like that?”

That has the three of them staring at each other. Unwanted sexual advances, especially frequent ones, qualify as harassment. But if the harassee isn’t willing to report it…

“Got to work it from the top. Change the ‘this isn’t worth ruining a career over’ attitude,” Tim says.

“Your undercover stuff.”

Tim nods. “Got to get people who aren’t afraid to report it. I’ve got the feeling a lot of careers are going to get ruined soon.”

Back in his office, Tim starts writing this up. His undercover idea can’t take out individual harassers. It’s not designed for that. It will take out the people who look the other way, or encourage others to look the other way.
His report covers how to use his harassment software, how to find targets, and then he works out how to use undercover teams to weed out commanders who aren’t doing their jobs.

He’s sitting in his office, fingers zipping over his keyboard, and it hits him: this is it. This is the last thing he’s doing to shape NCIS. In five weeks, he’s done. He’ll pack up this office, and say goodbye and…

And he won’t be, Agent, or Director McGee, NCIS, at all.

He looks at the report in front of him. And again, this is it. It’s maybe twenty pages. A few pages of here’s what we found, and about fifteen pages of what to do about it.

And those twenty pages, and the software to go with it, will touch literally every single person in the Navy or Marines. If Leon will put the necessary resources behind this to do it, it’ll change a culture. Weed out the bad apples, and teach the other apples that they may want to be bad, but they’ll never know if the opportunity to be bad is a sting or not.

They can’t make men into angels, but they’ll keep them scared into staying on the straight and narrow.

Tim blinks. He can’t make men into angels, but he’ll keep them scared into staying on the straight and narrow.

Because this is it. And five weeks from now, he’ll head to the FBI, and he’ll start rolling stuff like this out for everyone.

He feels that rush through him, and for a moment he doesn’t know what to do with it. But only a moment, and then a smile spreads across his face.
“Tim, what brings you down here?” Allan asks.

“Looking for Jimmy.” Actually, he’s been working on his plans for NCIS, and the FBI, and everything else, and hit the point where his brain is just circling around over and over, so he knows he needs a break. He hit the lab first, but Abby’s knee deep in evidence right now, so he said he’d bring her and her LabRats some lunch, and he’s here to see if Jimmy wants to eat some lunch with him before bringing more of it back here. “So, he around?”

Allan glances at the door. “Should be back soon. He’s giving blood. Did you give blood?”

Every year NCIS has a blood drive, and every year they aim for 90% of the employees giving. Last year they got up to 84%. And every year prior to this one, Tim has given blood, because no matter how much he hates needles, he hates the idea of people dying because there wasn’t enough B negative to go around.

But this year he didn’t. And he catches that look on Allan’s face, and sees the little blood drop sticker on his scrubs. Then he thinks for a moment.

He knows from previous years that you go in, fill out the questionnaire, and then they take you over to the computer that asks you more questions, and if you answer yes to some of those questions, like “Have you had sex with a man who’s had sex with a man in the last year?” then you don’t get to give blood.

And since the answer for that is yes now, he just didn’t go.

Allan’s still looking at him, a very curious expression on his face. Tim knows that Allan knows he’s got some sort of relationship with Jimmy, and that he likely assumes it’s of a sexual nature. But with him not giving blood, and Jimmy out there doing it… There is likely something of a mixed message going on.

Tim was perfectly willing to go full bore on the woman who called from the Arlington Blood Bank asking him to give blood, explaining to her in vivid detail about how he’d like to give blood, and how he’d certainly done it every year before, and how because of the fact that they were morons who couldn’t get their homophobic heads out of their asses he couldn’t give blood anymore, even though he was perfectly healthy, and that as a result people might die. But, for some reason, he’s not feeling any need to have that discussion with Jimmy’s assistant.

Sigh. Jimmy’s gay assistant, who likely already knows this issue inside out and probably doesn’t need him venting about it with the newfound fervor of someone who never used to think about it until it suddenly jumped up and bit him in the ass.

So instead he says, “Not this time. Feel like I’m coming down with something. Don’t want to risk it.”

“Okay.”

Tim eyes Allan’s sticker. He licks his lips, and decides to jump into the deep end. “Uh…”

Allan sees Tim eyeing the sticker and shakes his head. “Been a long time since I had a boyfriend.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”
Allan shrugs. “Me, too.” He sighs. “Nothing to do for it.”

Jimmy heads in a few seconds later, and yes, he does have a bandage over the crook of his arm, and the little sticker on his scrubs.

“Tim?”

“Wondering if you had time to grab some lunch?”

Jimmy looks around at his currently empty morgue. His eyes jot to Allan, and Allan nods, he’s more than capable of holding down the fort for another hour or so.

“I have time.”

“Great.”

They’re in the elevator when Tim says, “You gave blood?”

“Yeah, I do every year. Thought you did, too. I certainly remember us ragging on Tony about it.”

“I used to.”

Jimmy shrugs. “I’m clean. You’re clean. What they don’t know won’t hurt them, and what I’m giving will help others.”

“So, you just lied on the form?” Tim knows that Jimmy’s not exactly Mr. Honest To A Fault, but somehow the idea of lie on the form hadn’t actually occurred to him.

“Yeah. Look, it sucks, but I get it. It’s way easier to just exclude people. No test is perfect, and no one wants a compromised blood supply. Hell, they won’t let you give blood if you’ve had a transfusion or any other blood product. Or if you’ve set foot in Africa, or a bunch of other reasons…”

“Still smells like homophobic crap.”

Jimmy shrugs. “It might be, but it’s still the way it is, and no matter how much crap it is, guys who have sex with guys are still more likely to have some sort of social disease than any other population. And it’s not like it’s a slightly higher rate. It’s like seven times the rate for the rest of the population. They’ve got higher rates for HIV, AIDS, Hep A, B, and C, and no one wants their hemophiliac kid getting a dose of blood with something hinky in it.”

“Fine.”

“With the way the VD rate is skyrocketing in old people, they’re starting to talk about capping the age at 55.”

Tim hadn’t heard that, and something along those lines would actually make him feel a bit better about this. “Really?”

“Well, that was in one of the public health journals I was reading. Not sure if they’ll do it, but some people are floating papers about it around.”

“Huh…”
The elevator opens, and they’re on the ground floor, ready to head out. “So, besides being in a snit about the blood bank, what’s up?”

“Fried. Needed a break. Abby needs food. Thought I’d see if you had some down time.”

“And I do. For a few minutes, at least.”

“Medical examiner senses tingling?” Jimmy’s got awfully good upcoming case radar.

“Not yet, but I can see them starting soon. It’s just been too quiet lately. We got slammed in the beginning of the month, and now crickets. Something’s coming up soon.”

“It always is.”

“Oh, yeah.” Jimmy takes three more steps, and they’re almost out of the building when his phone buzzes. He gives Tim a speak of the Devil look, grabs his phone and, “Oh. Hey, Breena…”

Tim listens to half of a conversation, fairly sure that she and Jimmy are making sure they’re both free for Donnie’s twenty-week ultrasound. A moment after that, when they actually are out of the building, Jimmy’s wrapping up with, “Yeah, the 3rd at 3:00. No problems. I’m all over it. Okay. Yeah… Actually, Allan can take it on his own for a bit if he needs to… I’ll be there… Love you, too. Bye.”

“Ultrasound soon?”

Jimmy nods. “Our OB called, she had to reschedule, so Breena wanted to make sure she had a good time for us.”

“Barring a dead body.”

Jimmy shakes his head. “I’ll be there. Allan’s not a wet-behind-the-ears newbie anymore. He can take a few hours without me if he needs to. Hell, he took Tony’s whole case on his own. We just worked next to each other.”

“Feel good?”

“Yeah. Help is good, and a case is a lot easier with two sets of hands, but it’s really reassuring to know that I don’t always have to be here.”

Lunch is good. It’s just the two of them at Carlo’s munching through a few salads and drinks, but by the time it’s done, and Tim’s got a heavy bag full of lunches for the Lab crew, he’s feeling much closer to human again.

He’s ready to drop off the lunches, get a few minutes of talking/snuggle time with Abby in ballistics, and then he’s going to start getting ready, personally, for the transfer from Director Tim McGee, NCIS Cybercrime, to Tim McGee, Director of Public Corruption, FBI.

“And I have food!” Tim says as he heads into the lab. To a much less welcoming response than he’d hoped for.
It’s just Zelaz in there, and he’s been frosty since Tim took down The Admiral.

So, Tim gives him his box from Carlo’s and says, “Abby’s…”

“Upstairs. She found a big enough hole in the case she rushed up.”

“Okay. Back soon?”

Zelaz shrugs while opening his lunch.

Tim sighs. “I’ll put it in the fridge for her.” He sends Abby a quick, Lunch is in the fridge text, along with a Guess we’ll see each other on the ride home, note.

It’s Friday, so long drive home, and then all weekend, hopefully, with each other. That’ll be good. He’s smiling at it, as he gets ready to head back to his office.

“You didn’t give blood,” Zelaz says, pulling him out of his train of thought.

Tim glances up. “Uh, yeah. Sore throat.”

Zelaz is eyeing him, and wearing his little blood drop sticker. “Abby didn’t either.”

“Would you want your wife a pint down when she’s nursing?”

Zelaz shakes his head. Sure, Abby’s down to three feeds a day for Sean, dinner, second dinner, and breakfast, but even with that, Tim wants her in the best shape she can be for that. And apparently, Zelaz, as a veteran husband and dad, feels the same way.

“Did Dr. Palmer give blood?”

“Uh, yeah. Why?”

Zelaz’s eyes narrow.

It takes Tim a second to get it. “God, are you still on that? It’s been six months!”

“She’s an amazing woman, and she shouldn’t have to deal with you…” Zelaz won’t finish the sentence, but he’s staring at Tim, hard.

“I agree about the first part, and for the second, she’s not dealing with anything she doesn’t want to. We’ll be celebrating our fiftieth wedding anniversary, and you’ll still be pissed on her behalf. This can’t be about me and Jimmy and her, because we’re fine. What is going on?”

Zelaz is still glaring at Tim, not saying anything, and Tim’s about to leave because he’s got way better things to do than stand there with an annoyed lab tech when, “My wife left eight months ago. She met someone and… And she’s just gone, now. Took our kids, and… House is empty. And… I had no idea. At all. Probably because I spent more time here than with her.” He’s shaking his head.

“And things are not just fine with you and Jimmy and Abby. You and Jimmy are not friends. I have friends. I know how friends behave, and it’s not how you two treat each other. I may have been blind at home, but I am not blind here, and I am not stupid and… And Abby is a good woman, a good person, and she doesn’t deserve to wake up one morning and find her entire home is a lie.”

Well, that’s a punch in the guts. On a lot of levels. Tim rubs his hand across his face. “God, Roger, uh… Shit, I’m sorry. I really am.” And Tim also doesn’t know what to do. He knows what The Admiral would do, and that’s make Zelaz feel like he’s unreliable, like he’s not seeing what he is seeing, because of what’s going on in his home life.
Zelaz makes a small, dismissive noise. “Yeah. Sorry… I don’t need sorry. I need you and Palmer to man up and stop fucking around with each other. People see things, McGee. DiNozzo doesn’t just pop into your office for little chats all the time. He especially doesn’t do it, and then shut the door and blinds. You don’t go out to lunch with him every other day. You don’t come into work with him, or leave with him. She’s here, stuck in this building, with you two practically fucking each other in the lab, and people see, and they talk, and they’ve been doing it for six months. It’s great that you’re so far off the beaten path of gossip that you don’t notice, but I’m not, and I hear it, the questions, the gossip. I see the looks. And they’re all looking at her, thinking she’s some poor stupid twit with these two fucking assholes hanging around her, using her as a beard.”

Tim sighs at that. He can’t… no, he won’t gaslight Zelaz on this. He also isn’t going to out them any further than they already are. The problem is, knowing what you aren’t going to do isn’t the same thing as knowing what you are going to do.

He sighs again. “Well, they’ll have less to talk about soon. My teams know. Leon knows. It hasn’t been fully announced, yet, because my official 30 days starts next week. I’m heading to the FBI in the beginning of July.”

Zelaz’s eyes go wide.

“It’s just a career move. Nothing about Abby and I is changing, other than, as you note, I tend to come in and leave with Jimmy, but you left out, Abby’s routinely in the car, too. Because the three of us carpool to work. She’ll be coming in with Jimmy, or maybe not. Two cars, three people, because that way there’s always a car for late nights. Maybe they’ll move to full carpooling and rely on Uber for late nights. Might be a good plan.

“Anyway. Come the beginning of the month after next, they’ll be nothing to gossip about, unless tongues want to wag about the amount of time Jimmy and Abby spend together. You know, like those lunches I can’t make it to, because I’m swamped or out of the building. Like last week, when I was working on the harassment reporting system. They had lunch on their own, right?”

Zelaz nods. “What are you doing at the FBI?”

“Director of Public Corruption.”

Zelaz shakes his head. “You’re having an affair, and they hire you for that.” He snorts.

“I passed their background check, and trust me, they found all the skeletons in my closet.”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m not impressed.”

“You don’t have to be. But me gone, that should shut a lot of the gossip up, right? Can’t titter about what you don’t see.”

“I guess. You know what really shuts gossip up? Not doing the shit they’re gossiping about.”

Tim shakes his head. “I’m done rearranging my life to make malicious strangers happy. You don’t like how I love my family, I don’t care. There are exactly two people in this building who get to have input on how I treat Abby and Jimmy, and that’s Abby and Jimmy.”

“Of course.” Zelaz shakes his head.

Tim’s not sure what to do with this, but he’s pretty sure there’s nothing left he can do, so he heads back to his office.
He sits in there for an hour, tapping his finger against his desk, as he stares at his computer screen. Most of the time he’s ‘working.’

Some of it, he’s thinking about what he said to Zelaz. ‘Done rearranging his life to make malicious strangers happy…’

He can’t stop people from gossiping. He never can and never will.

And he’ll be damned if he starts behaving in a way to give them nothing to talk about. The things they might gossip about, like, apparently, coming into and leaving work with Jimmy (and usually Abby) matter too damn much to skip them.

His fingers fall to the crook of his arm. He’s healthy. He knows he is. The only person he fools around with who wasn’t tested for VD before saying goodbye condoms is the one who never had sex with anyone not in the party.

And he’s a guy who gives blood. It’s part of him. People need blood, and every year, he goes and gives it. Because he can. Because that’s who he is. If there’s an easy way to help, he does it.

And he’s not going to rearrange his life to make malicious twits happy.

Because that’s who he is now, too.

He clicks off of his reporting software onto the blood drive signup sheet. There are a few empty spots left, and he grabs one.

Two hours later, he’s also got a sore spot on his arm. No blood drop sticker, not after telling people he wasn’t feeling well, but he’s feeling pretty good about that small ache.
Yet another dim room, lit mostly by the glow of the ultrasound screen.

Jimmy and Breena are grinning. Some of it is genuine. Some of it is encouraging the good feelings that go with seeing Donnie, trying to get them to drown out the fear.

They know Donnie’s okay. The nuchal fold test came back clean. He’s doing great, and they are extremely excited about seeing him for the second time, but…

There’s always that tinge of fear.

For Breena especially, there’s the memory of cold, wet gel on her belly, and the tech scooting the wand around for a moment, looking for a good view. She was going to check Jon’s heart first. Because that’s how they did it. The important stuff gets checked first. (That’s what’s happening now, they’re watching all four of Donnie’s ventricles doing what ventricles do.)

And she sat there, excited, and for a second she didn’t get it. The tech was still, ‘looking for a good angle,’ and then she was standing up, calling in Dr. Jun, and Breena started to get very worried because this is not how it went with Molly, and from there it only got worse, because there’s only so long someone who does prenatal ultrasounds eight hours a day, five days a week can pretend she’s not using the wand anymore because she ‘can’t find a good angle.’

Real time, right now, not the past. More poking, more prodding, and… “Oh… look at him!”

Donnie’s sucking his thumb, but it seems like he knows the camera’s on him, because he stops. He drops his hand and they get a perfect view of his face on the 3d ultrasound.

And there’s cooing and pleasure and love, that tiny little face, looking at them, or so they’d like to think, and the memory of sitting in here, with Dr. Jun, in aching, terrified silence as she started with the wand, and then the Doppler microphone, and then the wand again, and there were no cute pictures of a face on the ultrasound screen. There were no pictures on the screen she could see at all, because Dr. Jun had tilted the screen away, so she couldn’t see what was coming up, and then there was more silence, followed by, “Breena, I’m sorry, his heart isn’t beating. When’s the last time you remember feeling him move?”

Right here, right now: “That is definitely a boy! Do you have a name, yet?”


“Well, Hello, Donnie,” the tech says.

They did this with Anna, too, and…

And Breena’s eyes are bright with tears, and some of them are happy ones. Most of them are. But some of them are from being here, literally here, in this same room, on the same table, when she learned her first son had died.

Jimmy intentionally didn’t plan on going back to work today. It’s one thing if they get called in on a case, but right now Allan’s just working on finishing up the final report of Heston Smith.
The girls intentionally are in daycare today, all day, too. Tim and Abby’ll get them and bring them home tonight.

This is time, just for them, together.

“Walk?” Jimmy asks.

She nods. For several moments, they just stroll around their neighborhood. Nowhere else to go, really. He’s got his arm around her, and they fall into an easy, matched pace.

“It’s why people have graves, you know, so there’s somewhere to go, to do stuff like this.”

He nods. The arm with the ID bracelet with Jon’s diamond on it is around her shoulder, so he can’t touch the stone or anything, but he’s very aware of it, right now. “We could get one.”

She shrugs. “Not ready to take him off, are you?”

“No. Not sure…” He licks his lips. “It doesn’t hurt the way it used to, but… not sure I’m going to ever want to take him off. Even… even if there’s ever peace, you know?”

She nods, because she does. “I thought it would be less intense this time.”

Jimmy nods at that, too. But it wasn’t. And if every time they do this, Breena relives those moments of fear, Jimmy relives the guilt of not having been with her for them. He feels his heart stopped, aching, fear rushing through him as he stumbled/ran through the hospital to get to her, knowing, all throughout his body that he was too late. The only time of their marriage she ever, really, truly needed him to be by her side, and he wasn’t there. And it was just as strong, sitting there, watching Anna come up on the ultrasound as it was for Donnie.

Jimmy kisses her, and then says, “Is it horrible that I’m a little relieved that this little guy is the last one, not because I don’t want more babies, but because I just…” he shakes his head a little. They both know that this child has to, eventually, come out. And they’re awfully sure how he’ll go about doing it. “Okay, I can do that, and you’ll do it, and he’ll be beautiful and we love him to bits, but…” he sighs, “I don’t think delivering him is going to be any less intense than Anna was, either.” And that was a rollercoaster of joy and pain, memory wrapped up with the physical and emotional highs and lows of a birth.

Breena kisses him back. “No. It’s not horrible. I can’t wait for him to be out, but… I’d happily skip the getting him out bit, and not just because of labor pains, and constant leaking, and all the rest of it.”

For Breena it’s not just the feel of it, though that’s always there, but it’s the smell. That’s a big chunk of not spending too much time in the hospital with Abby and Tim after Kelly and Sean was born. A big part of trying to get out as soon as she could after Anna.

The smell of dead bodies… That doesn’t faze her at all. The smell of post-partum bleeding, and antiseptic, and sweat, and amniotic fluid… That smell is eternally tied to sitting in a hospital room, with Jimmy, both of them holding Jon, who was so tiny he fit in their joined hands, not wanting to let him go, but knowing they couldn’t stay there forever.

His hand rests on her belly. Both of them can feel Donnie wriggling away in there.

He’ll come out, and he’ll be fine, and… They know it. But those memories are burned into both of them, and both of them need time, with those memories, and each other.
By dinner, they’re doing better.

By dinner they can really enjoy the shots of Donnie, and, enjoy showing him off to the rest of the family.

He is, and this, of course, is their totally unbiased opinion as his parents, the most beautiful fetus to ever fetus, and that’s all there is to be said on the matter. (This was also true of his siblings.)

3D ultrasounds don’t have the most realistic look ever, but they can make out enough of the details to see that Donnie has all the bits he’s supposed to have, and that he is very much a boy, and, as Tim’s looking at the scans, a huge grin breaking out on his face, he’s also got a certain pouty-ness to his lower lip that doesn’t look much like Breena or Jimmy.

But does look an awful lot like his “cousin” Sean.

---

Seeing Donnie for the first time, seeing Tim react to him, Jimmy was wondering if he’d feel… anything really.

It’s one thing to be aware that you might not be the sperm donor. It’s another thing to know it.

And, going into this, he was fairly sure he was cool with that, but that was his brain talking. And what happens when the brain is in charge, versus what happens when the guts are in charge, aren’t always the same thing.

But… He’s sitting on the sofa with Tim, who’s patting Sean’s back, working on getting him burped, as the girls get the first round of getting his older siblings ready for bed, and both of them are looking at the shots, and… Tim’s stroking his finger over Donnies face, and then says, “We’re okay, right?”

Jimmy nods at that.

It’s okay.

It’s really okay.

In a way Jimmy wasn’t expecting.

Tim appears to be expecting him to say something so he tries to sort the feelings out. “You know how some guys get weird about the fact that their wives are, necessarily, closer to their kid than they are. What with it being located in her body, and she makes all of their food…”

Tim nods, and the look on his face makes it clear that he thinks those guys have something seriously wrong with them.

“Yeah, I agree.” Jimmy puts his hand on Sean’s back. Last night, he was the one patting the burps out after Abby got done nursing, and Tim and Breena got tubby time for the older girls. Tomorrow night, he’ll be the one getting up to get him in the middle of the night. “So, Donnie looking like you… It just feels like Breena.”

Tim squints at Jimmy. Obviously his train of thought skipped the station Tim was waiting at.
“You’re just one of the other parents. I’m not the one who’s pregnant. I don’t need to be the one who’s pregnant for it to be my kid. And, apparently, I don’t need to be the one who offered up the semen, either. That’s still my kid. And getting weird about another parent having more of a ‘connection’ is stupid.” Sean squirms around a bit, so he’s facing Jimmy. Jimmy strokes his face and smiles at him. Sean smiles back. “I know what we said when we started this, that Abby’s kids were yours, and Breena’s are mine, and for legal reasons, that’s fine, but… They’re all yours and they’re all mine, and same for the girls.”

Tim’s nodding at that. He kisses the top of Sean’s head, and then Jimmy’s hand. “Yeah. It’s a family."

“Yep. And sure, I expect to hear at least once, per kid, at some point down the line, ‘You aren’t my father!’” Jimmy’s impression of a pissed-off teen is awfully funny, and Sean starts when Tim begins to laugh, hard. “But… I am. And if I’m Uncle Jimmy to half of ‘em… I’m still their dad.”

Breena’s leaning against the doorway to the living room, soaked, looking like steam is about to start pouring out of her ears. “Get moving, Daddy,” she says.

He and Tim get up, ready for their part of bedtime. “I take it bath time wasn’t as peaceful as it could have been?” Jimmy says.

She glares. Tim hands her Sean, who’s in cute, awake, cuddle time right now, and asks, “Do I need to get the mop?”

She nods. “And you,” she says to Jimmy, “need to grab a few more towels out of the drier.”

And with that, the Dad brigade heads up to work on tucking in kids and cleaning up the bathroom.

Tony looks at the ultrasound that Jimmy just proudly handed to him, huge grin on his face.

At first, Tony’s grinning along with Jimmy. That’s his boy, and he’s perfect. Small, but he’s only 20 weeks along, he’s supposed to be small at this point.

Draga’s slapping Jimmy on the back, grinning with them, offering his congratulations. Johnson’s cooing. Spader’s got a grin on his face and nodding.

Jimmy’s stroking his fingers along the face shot, which gets Tony really looking. Those 3D ultrasounds are awesome. He loves that he’s able to see shots of the little guys before they come out. Makes being a “pregnant Dad” more real.

But he’s looking at the face that Jimmy’s stroking, and then glancing through some of the other shots, he’s noticing something. Jimmy has wide, thin lips. Breena has full, wide lips. The little guy he’s looking at has narrow lips, with a very thin top one and a full, pouty bottom one.

Tony tries not to groan, because unless it’s just the fact that ultrasounds have shit photo quality, then this kid has Tim’s lips.

Draga and Jimmy are still talking, both of them happy, as Tony tries to figure out what to do with this.
Tony waits until he’s on his own to do a bit more thinking on this.

Okay, first and foremost, Jimmy has to know right? If the McPalmers are all McPalming around with each other, then he has to know. Theoretically he was… there… right?

And he’s not acting weird or anything, so… either he’s not seeing it or he’s just… okay… with that being Tim’s kid…

Tony’s not sure what to do with that. Well, he knows one thing, don’t flip out about it, because otherwise everything gets nasty and tense, and those two’ll close ranks on him and… yuck.

But… they say it’s a marriage, that it works all four ways, so… he supposed that part of that would be not really caring who’s donating the DNA.

Maybe?

But, shit, if he can see it looking at an ultrasound… Senior’ll see it, too. Same with the rest of the extended family. And God, they don’t want Breena’s folks to know… Shit… God, this is going to bite them in the ass!

Hell, this kid comes out, and if those lips look the way he thinks they will… Along with… God… Tony’s not entirely sure how the DNA works, but he’s absolutely sure that if Jimmy’s not part of the mix, then Donny won’t have the same curly hair that both Molly and Anna have. Give it a year and… Blue eyes like Breena, maybe, if they’re lucky, or green eyes, like Tim…

Everyone who knows Tim will be able to see this isn’t Jimmy’s kid.

Be calm. Check. He texts Ziva. You get to see the shots of Donnie?

A minute later he gets back a heart-eyed smiley emoji.

Am I seeing what I think I’m seeing when I look at them.

There’s a longer pause before he gets back. Yes. Breena's face. Tim’s lips, and maybe eyes.

Okay. Uh… Do we… say anything about this?

I wasn’t planning on it. Are you going to?

He stares at the phone for a long moment. Nothing that’ll piss ‘em off. Gonna find out what sort of damage control they’re planning.

That sounds like a good idea. See what, if anything, we’re doing about Ed.

_________________

Tony heads down to Autopsy on his own a bit later.

Jimmy and Allan are working on their yearly inventory.

“Feel like some coffee, Allan?”
Allan doesn’t need to be told twice that Agent DiNozzo wants a private word with Dr. Palmer, and given the nature of the ultrasounds that are now proudly hanging on the back wall next to all of the rest of the baby pictures, Allan has a clue as to what Tony wants to talk to Jimmy about.

“No problem. Want me to bring anything back for you?”

Jimmy shakes his head, and Tony waves him off, too.

And out Alan goes.

“Tony? Something pop up while we were working?”

“Not exactly.” He drifts back to the ultrasounds. “Donnie isn’t yours, is he?”

“Of course he’s mine.” Jimmy’s dead serious about that, and Tony can feel he’s getting defensive.

Tony holds up a hand. “Not… like that. Yeah, he’s yours. He’s a Palmer, but… He’s Molly and Anna’s half-brother, right?”

Jimmy glances to the pictures on his wall. “Probably. Those aren’t my lips, and they aren’t Breena’s, but we’re not planning on getting his DNA tested or anything to know for sure.”

Tony bites his lips and tries to think of how best to say this. “Okay… I’m not trying to be an asshole about this, but… what were you thinking? If I can spot this on an ultrasound, anyone who knows Tim will see it, too. Especially when Donnie’s on the outside. You guys go everywhere together. People will see Donnie with Tim! My dad will ask. Or he won’t, but he’ll get weird around you and Tim. Sooner or later Draga’s gonna ask, or at least start speculating about it, and he might not be speculating with me. Your father-in-law’s gonna shit a brick, sideways, and then beat you with it. Your parents… I mean, I know we don’t see them a lot, but… They aren’t blind, and they’ve seen your girls. Your church, where all four of you and the kids are every week… Are you guys coming out or... what?”

Jimmy smiles a bit. “Or what. Most everyone who can glance at Donnie and see that he’s not a mix of Breena and I also knows we lost a child to a genetic disorder. I don’t mind if anyone who’s speculating gets a story along the lines of we tried again with both of us, didn’t enjoy months of terror waiting to see if the nuchal fold test would come back clean with Anna, which we didn’t, and for our fourth child decided that a different DNA mix minimized the potential for issues, so we got a little help from our best friends.”

Tony nods and sighs; that’s not a bad story. “I can spread that story around.”

Jimmy inclines his head. “It’s not even false, you know? It’s just, misleading.”

“So… I mean… did you always know Donnie was Tim’s?”

Jimmy shakes his head. “Ours.”

Tony just gives Jimmy a look.

“No. No way to tell until we got to see him. Depending on how he looks once he’s out… I mean, he’ll probably look a whole lot like Breena. Light hair, light eyes.”

“You mean he’ll look a whole lot like Sean. His identical twin cousin.”

Jimmy inclines his head. Tony likely isn’t wrong about that.
Sean causes another thought to spring to Tony’s mind. “And… I know it’s a long shot, but if there’s a curly haired McGee with dark green eyes… You’re… returning the favor?”

“Something like that. Though that’s not likely. If it happens, great, but Abby’s been dealing with pre-menopause issues for the last two years, add in nursing time, and she’s probably done. But, if she isn’t… We’re just dodging whatever combination caused Sean’s deafness.”

“Okay.”

Tony wasn’t wrong about Draga speculating. He’s been back upstairs from his visit with Jimmy for, maybe, five minutes, before Draga’s got an excuse to talk to him on his own.

“You got the official story now?” Draga asks, as they’re both leaning against the wall, behind the stairs, keeping eyes on the flow of people around them, making sure that if any of them get too close, they’re ready to change topics.

Tony raises an eyebrow.

“Come on. I’ve been here the whole time. I go to your family parties. I was here when the shit hit the fan. I was there when Tim took down his Dad, and then when Jimmy showed up to offer medical help and then mysteriously left in the middle of it. Apparently, I was wrong about all the ins and outs of what was going on, but in the right neighborhood, at least. That kid is McGee’s. What’s the cover story?”

That was more direct than Tony was expecting. “Uh… Shit. Okay, you know about Jon Palmer?”

“The pictures Jimmy’s got downstairs of a very tiny baby hand holding his finger?”

“Yeah. That’s Jon. He was stillborn at about 20 weeks.” Draga winces. “Trisomy 13. It’s a random genetic malfunction. It’s… It’s what gives pregnant parents nightmares.” He knows it was on his mind when Ziva was pregnant and they were waiting for the genetic testing. “Official cover story is they tried on their own again, resulting in Anna, and didn’t enjoy the period of waiting to see if she was okay. For Donnie, new DNA combo, no fear of another trisomy child.”

“If it’s random…”

“There’s one inherited version of it. Jon didn’t have that, but whoever you’re talking to doesn’t need to know that.”

Draga nods. “Got it.”

“And by cover story, that means, everyone gets that story. In this building, Allan’s the only other guy you can talk about the real story with, got it?”

“Got it. And… If I were to show up with some pre-emptive, hot gossip about the latest baby Palmer…”

“As long as it’s the right gossip, say, something about overhearing Jimmy and I talking about the semen donation being successful, that might go over well.”

“On it, Boss.”

Tony nods. “Thanks, Eric. From them, too.”
“No problem. There’s enough drama here, we don’t need people getting weird about stuff that doesn’t concern them.”

“Amen on that.”

“Abbie okay? I could see Palmer is. That man isn’t an actor, whatever he’s feeling is on his face, and that face was ecstatic.”

Tony blinks. It didn’t occur to him to check on that side of things. “I’ll find out in a bit. Can’t imagine she isn’t.”

Eric nods again. “Okay. Work?”

“Work.”

“Work” takes Tony down to the Lab in a few hours.

He’s got his answer before he’s even able to talk to Abby.

Since she got her new LabRats, they’ve each ended up with their own little personal areas. Abby’s in is the new computer lab. And in there, she’s got a collection of photos. All of their little guys are up on her wall. And, there, next to several shots of Dave, are prints of Donnie.

Tony’s eyes flick to the wall, and Abby nods at him, smiling, as they chat about the case. Zelaz and Corwin are in the Lab right now, so they can’t really talk beyond the case, but she knows what he’s doing, and sends him the answer he needs.

After he’s got what he needs for the case, she walks him to the elevator, and slowly signs, Checking up?

He nods.

We are all good.

He nods again at that, and then, slowly, spelling out a bit of it, signs back, Good. He is b-e-a-u-t-i-f-i-l.

Yes. He is.
What on earth does one get a two-year-old for her birthday?

That’s what Tim is musing about as he’s on his semi-weekly Target run, looking to make sure that his family is all stocked up on the little bits and bobs they go through in a week.

So, for example, he’s getting (even more) pacifiers, swimming diapers in an array of sizes, what feels like a few gallons of baby shampoo and sunblock, stuff like that. The stuff they don’t/can’t get at Costco and just split up between their homes.

And, of course, because June 16th is coming up, there’s sitting there, at the bottom of his list: Kelly’s Birthday Present.

He assumes stuff like this will be easier when she’s a bit older, and will, if she’s anything like him or Abby, be providing them with a list, broken down by category and price point, of what she wants.

Right now though, she wants pretty much everything she sees, for about five minutes. Longer than that is a challenge.

He’s standing in a very pink aisle, looking at reams little girl of stuff, getting the idea that in the future he’ll be in here a lot, but right now this is all too old for her, and goes off in search of the toddler toys.

Another aisle of stuffed animals, lots of little blocks, a kiddie kitchen… He’s in the right place now. Nothing’s exactly jumping out at him. Partially because they already have pretty much every toddler toy ever made, and partially because there’s only so many variations on the theme of knocks things over or put things in little holes that a toy company can make.

He’s pushing the cart slowly, looking at sets of blocks, and a collection of tubes that blow small balls around when he sees a little doctor’s kit. It’s probably for kids a bit older than Kelly, but it’s cute, and… He’s starting at it feeling… weird.

There’s a stethoscope, and a little x-ray looking thing with a broken arm, and a cast, and…

His breath is coming fast, heart starting to race, and he can’t figure out why. He doesn’t have the rubber bands he was wearing, so he pinches himself, makes himself stare at the little box, focus on the fact that it’s a child’s doctor’s kit, and that he’s standing in a God-damned Target for fuck’s sake.

He’s perfectly safe, nice and comfy. Or he would be if his heart rate wasn’t spiking and a cold sweat trying to break out down his back.

He breathes slow, easy, forcing his heart to slow, and then takes the time to figure out what the hell is going on.

It takes him, what he considers, a stupidly long time to realize it’s June 11\textsuperscript{th}. One year ago today, he got on the \textit{Stennis}, and he feels perfectly comfortable saying, what followed was the worst six months of his life. Some of the best \textit{days} of his life, but as a whole, that was an awful half year.

He looks at the kit again. Little girl, wearing a cast on her arm, as her little buddy, in the Doctor’s lab coat looks at the x-ray. No wonder it set him off. Tim flexes his right hand, moves his fingers through their range of motion.
Still not as fast or easy as it used to be. His wrist clicks in a way it didn’t used to as he circles it. And his shoulder and wrist and ankle are all perfectly happy to let him know anytime a storm front is coming in.

Tim doesn’t normally spend a lot of time just looking at himself. It’s not really who he is, but right now, he wants to. He should have probably held off for a day when he was at his place, better mirrors, but he’s at Jimmy’s, and getting to look now matters more to him than getting the view from every possible angle.

He digs around in his phone, looking for the pictures Abby took of him closest to getting on the Stennis. There are a few from two weeks before.

He’s got some bruises in the pictures. Faded yellow-purple knuckle marks… probably Ziva’s given the size and how close they are, on his chest, and a large yellow-green blob on his thigh. That one’s from Jimmy, he remembers taking that hit. But those days, he usually had a few on him. Can’t do semi-weekly MMA and not sport at least a few.

He likes his dessert and coffee with milk and sugar too much to be cut, but he’s slim, and his arms and legs, chest and shoulders have nice definition to them in that picture.

What a ‘fit’ guy used to look like before Jimmy’s no-body-fat physique became all the rage.

He’s still slim. Bit more tummy pudge than he had in that shot. And less definition. He probably weighs five pounds less now, and his clothing is a bit tighter.

More fat, less muscle. Between less exercise, and his metabolism still not recovered from last fall, he’s… okay.

But he’s not who he was.

He’s naked in the photos, and having a very good time, as he tends to do when he’s naked and Abby’s taking pictures of him.

No scars in the photo… Almost no scars in the photo. Of course he’s got the few faded leftovers of his first meeting with Jethro (his dog) and the almost completely invisible one on his side, where the glass got him after the Deering bombing, but…

It’s a year later, and the scars down his arm, across his wrist, over his hand, along his ankle, and through his eyebrow are all still pink.

Light pink. Lighter than his lips. And, maybe in another six months, they’ll fade and vanish, or close enough. The one through his eyebrow won’t vanish. It’s too big for that. But the ones on his limbs are all surgical cuts, from where they had to open him up to pin and screw bones back together, so, eventually, they’ll fade to the point where they’ll just be a line where skin meets skin.

Eventually.

But the man in the picture could walk through a metal detector without setting it off. He could be
depended on for pinpoint sniping and fast reflexes when he gamed. Tim looks at his right hand, and he can still see where the lumps from a few of the screws are. He wiggles his fingers. They move. His hand is there, really there, still on his wrist, and mostly working.

He can still remember seeing his hand, wrist down, palm up, and the absolute terror that went with that. The burn of vomit in the back of his throat at the sight of it.

He didn’t lose his hand. Or anything else. Other than some unblemished skin and some time on his reflexes.

Other than the guy in that picture.

He runs his right hand and arm through its range of motion again. It could have been a lot worse.

He’s not sure if his family doesn’t remember. If Kelly turning two, and the job, and life with the four of them and all the kids is wiping it out, or if they’re trying to keep him from remembering.

No one’s mentioned what they were doing this time last year.

Sometimes he thinks he catches them watching him. Or a glance between Jimmy and Abby, or Breena and Abby, or something.

Or maybe not.

Somewhere, lurking deep in the depths of his hard drive, is the yoga video he was working with before getting on the Stennis. Like now, part of his morning routine involved getting some sort of exercise in.

Granted, with Sean not exactly on the same page as everyone else on the eat three times a day plan, all of their get up in the morning workout routines are a bit off. So, for example, some days his workout is before bed. Some days it doesn’t happen.

But, most days, at least three out of four of them, he gets some sort of workout in, and right now, he’s rummaging through the videos he’s got on his computer, trying to find the one he was doing before he got on the Stennis.

It was part of a series, he knows that. And, not the day he left, because he left god-awful early, but the day before that, he’d done the strength-training one, though he thinks there was a balance one, too, and some sort of meditation one, and a cardio one, but he ignored the cardio one. He got his cardio pounding on his buddies.

He finally locates it, and yes, there’s a balance one, a strength one, a flexibility one (Apparently his mind blanked that out, and judging by the position the person on the tag picture is in, he knows why. His hamstrings are aching just looking at that position) and then targeted ones for arms, abs, and legs.

It’s after dinner. Kids are in bed. He can hear Jimmy, Abby, and Breena downstairs, doing… something. He’s not sure what. They didn’t have any set plans for tonight, and when that happens, they’ll often wander off on their own directions to amuse themselves before regathering for bed.
So, he hunts down Jimmy’s yoga mat, puts his laptop on Breena’s dresser, he can see it easily enough from there, and gets the balance video up.

He already knows the strength one will kick his ass. It was kicking his ass this time last year, which is why he was using it. That was the goal: regularly get ass kicked by exercise video, and then, when it stopped kicking his ass, move up to the next level.

But he kind of remembers being able to do the balance one, okay. It was challenging, but good challenging. Hard, but he could do it. Wobble a bit, keep trying, and usually get it on attempt two or three. He was, probably, within a month or two of moving up a level on that.

He taps his mouse pad, and the video starts. Easy enough in the beginning. Even he can stand on two feet with his eyes closed, breathing slowly, with his hands at his heart, but it starts ramping up fast after that first few moments of mountain pose.

Abby comes up as he’s trying to make himself stand on his left foot, keep his knee straight, bend at a ninety degree angle at his hip joint, extend his hands over his head, and then keep his body in a long straight line from his fingertips to crown of his head to the tip of his right big toe. It’s not happening.

“Been a while since I’ve seen you try that.”

He’d nod, but if he nods, he’ll topple over. He’s already hopping a little to keep himself upright.

Tim stands back up and pauses the video. “Yeah.”

“How’s it going?” Her voice is gentle, and with that, it’s very clear to him that all of them know exactly what day it is, they’re just giving him space to deal with it.

Tim sits down. “It’s going.” He moves into one of the ab exercises Jimmy’s had him doing. Sit down, balance on his tailbone, stick his right leg out, and left one up, then alternate, while keeping his back straight and chest high. It’s easier than what he was doing a year ago, but challenging for right now. Supposedly, in the next month or so, he’ll add weights to it. Hold a dumbbell between his hands and then tap it on the floor, first on the left side, then the right, while moving his legs. Left leg out, tap on right side, and then switch. Get his abs and obliques.

Then he sighs. This is harder than it should be. And adding weights doesn’t sound fun to him.

“Slowly.” He smirks some. It was easier, mentally, to be getting in shape the first time. Plowing through virgin territory, where each new day meant getting to a new level. Now he’s trying to get back to where he was, and that’s… not futile, but not satisfying, either.

She sits next to him and balances on her tailbone, too. She can get her legs up if she holds them with her hands. “Yep. You’re ahead of me, just thinking about that makes me ache.”

“Yeah, well, they cut your abs to get little boy out, five months ago. That didn’t happen to me.”

“True.” She lets her legs go, and they stay up, but they shake. “But company is good, right?”

“Yeah, it is.”

She goes back to letting her arms take most of the weight. Tim watches her, adding the upper body
twist to his leg extensions. “You okay?” he asks.

“I am. You?”

“I don’t know. Don’t know what I’m doing here, either. Taking stock, I guess.”

“Taking stock is a good thing. How are you adding up?”

He extends his left leg, feeling the burn in his abs as he pulls the right leg closer in. He used to be able to do this for more than a minute.

He shakes his head, feeling his leg shake. After another few seconds, he drops his legs, his abs feeling like Jello.

“Not well enough. Too many scars, not enough of my body back. I could do this, maybe not well, but I could do it, last year.”

“I know.” She stops working, too. “I could too.”

“And again, we got our son out of your being out of shape. Not to say I don’t love tight and toned Abby, but I’m feeling like that was a worthwhile trade.”

She rolls her eyes at that, and then shrugs.

“Yeah, I know.” He lifts his legs again, this time though, he’s looking at the scars on his left foot. “Just… sort of feeling like this was all so… useless.”

Abby strokes his face. Then she pokes her very not flat, tight, or toned tummy. “Got Sean out of that.” She lightly strokes the scar through his eyebrow. “And you got you out of it. Fearless you. Free you.” She kisses him, and then looks around, making it very clear that he’s doing this in Jimmy and Breena’s bedroom. That tonight, they’ll go to bed, all four of them together. They’ll probably have sex, and if he ends up playing with Jimmy it won’t freak him out. Tomorrow, he’ll go to work, and he’ll start getting ready for his move to the FBI, where he’ll start to really change the world, and… Abby’s saying, “This last year sucked, and it hurt, and… And I will happily never, ever do that again, but, look at where we are and who we are now.”

He holds her hands and kisses her. “And it was worth it. I know.” He kisses her again. “And you went with me through every step of it, even the steps I probably should have skipped.”

“Probably could have done without the adventure in the Navy Yard.”

He nods. “If there’s ever a next time, I’m running with you.”

“You damn well better.” There’s still heat in her voice at that.

“I will. Nothing left to prove.” And there isn’t. Really. He wonders idly for a moment if feeling like he had to… be man enough… stick it out… finish what he started… He doesn’t know. If something like that made him not leave the Navy Yard with them.

She kisses the scar through his eyebrow, taking his mind away from that thought.

His fingers find the line of her c-section. That’s a much better, happier line of thoughts.

“I love you.”

“I know.”
They hold that for a moment. Just being with each other, and touching, and then there’s something else that pops into Tim’s mind.

Something he hasn’t done in more than a year.

Something he’s a little hesitant to try, because if he can’t do it, that means he’s not just well back from where he was when he got on the *Stennis*, but he’s lost everything he gained over his entire relationship with Abby.

She’s watching him think about it, and her eyes narrow a bit. “That’s your tense wondering look.”

“No a bad term for it. I’m wondering, and feeling a bit tense about it.”

“Bad wondering?”

“No sure I want to know the answer.”

That gets one of her eyebrows up.

He scoots a little closer to her, takes her hands in his, and kisses her, soft, gentle, just lips on lips. No tongue yet, and not a lot of heat. Right now this is just comfort.

When he breaks the kiss she says, “Wondering about kissing?”

“No precisely.” His hand trails down her throat, and then rests, gently, on her breast before settling to her hip. He rubs his lips together, and she knows that look, too.

“You want more processing time?”

He blinks, and shakes his head.

She leans into him, and kisses him. Again, this is soft lips on lips, much more about reassurance and cherishing than sex. “Talk to me?”

He sighs. “Remember the first time we had sex standing up?”

That gets a wide grin on her face. “Oh yeah! Jimmy and Breena’s wedding.”

He nods. “Good memory.”

“Very good memory.” She’s still grinning. “Fast and dirty and up against the door and… Yeah… I remember that.”

He half smiles at her. “First time I’d ever done it standing up. Not that I had a lot of opportunity for it, before, but… Fast and dirty and up against the door and everyone could hear but not see, and all of that, but also, it was strong. I was holding you up. And, sure, didn’t go for long, but… I liked being able to do that. Almost like wearing a cock ring.”

She looks really confused by that.

“Not physically. Not on my dick. But… it felt very *male*. Strong, and powerful… Like having an eight-inch dick… Just, good. And every time after that, held you up longer and easier… Being able to do it was a kick. I didn’t just get you off; I literally swept you off your feet to do it.”

“And now it’s been more than a year.”
He nods. “And I’m not sure I can keep you up as long as I did when we were in the Adam’s House, setting the record for the fastest time getting me off.”

She kisses him again, smiling, gently. “That was after Afghanistan. Adam’s House was second runner up.”

He laughs a bit. She’s right on that. “Okay, second fastest time.”

Another kiss, slow and easy, and this time there’s some heat in Abby’s touch. “I loved after Afghanistan. Okay, maybe not the peak physical experience of my entire sexual history, but you were home, and with me, and so eager… I mean, if you got me off in thirty seconds, you’d take an ad out in the paper to brag about it.”

He gives her a Well, of course, that’s worth bragging about look.

“The point being, fast, slow, up, down, it’s us. Together. And if we start out on the side of the bed with me in your lap, and slowly work up to standing again, I’ll enjoy every minute of it, and you will, too. And one of these days, we’ll get it back. I’ll lose more baby weight, you’ll get stronger, and we’ll meet in the middle, and you know how much fun that is.”

He smiles at her, stroking her face. “You want to try?”

Her smile doesn’t fall, but he can feel the flavor change.

“Or not?”

“Standing up with you holding me is deep, and fast, and hard, and…” she shakes her head. “Not there, not today, but… remember after Kelly was born, you and Gibbs get back from that one case, and you were just holding me against the wall. We were naked and making out. I will gladly do that with you. And maybe we lay or sit down for the actual sex, but I’d love to hear you tell me about up against the wall.”

She stands up, and steps to the edge of Jimmy and Breena’s bed, patting it, as she pulls off her clothing. “You go here.”

So he does, sitting on the edge, and a moment later she’s in his lap, facing him, legs wrapped around his waist. This time, there’s real heat, from both of them, in their kiss. His hands trail down her back, and hers rest on his shoulders.

They continue their kiss, lips sliding easy and wet. He feels her tongue trace his bottom lip, and then a soft, little suck followed by her teeth grazing over his flesh.

He goes quiet, letting her kiss him, and then she retreats, her lips just touching his, letting him come to her, with light, delicate nips that send sharp shivers through her body. Then there’s tongue, just a brush at first, wet skin on wet skin.

She opens her mouth, and that gentle brush slides into a swift thrust.

Abby answers that trust with a suck, and a firm grind on Tim’s lap.

He breaks the kiss, smiling at that, feeling his body rising against hers. She grinds against him again, and he shifts his lips to her throat. No kisses here, just light nibbles. He doesn’t want to bruise or redden the skin, just wake it up.

The little moan he gets out of Abby makes him think he’s succeeded. Her nails, short and blunt, trail
down his back. Not quite as intense as when Breena does it, but they still raise goosebumps on his skin.

Tim makes sure he’s got his hands on Abby’s butt, and then kisses her again. After a moment of that, of wet lips and soft breath, and skin on skin, he says to her, “Got a good grip?”

She laughs, wriggling against him, he can feel her pubes tickly against him. “Not yet, but I intend to get one.”

Tim smiles, and kisses her again. Then he makes sure he’s got a good, firm hold on Abby, and stands up.

She’s heavier than he remembers. Duh, she’s still got twelve extra pregnancy pounds, and he hasn’t done this in a year. But, he’s not feeling like he’s going to collapse or drop her, so that’s good.

He is feeling like extra support from a wall would be an excellent plan right about now. In fact, extra support from the wall would have been an excellent plant from the start. Which is when he really looks around Jimmy and Breena’s room and rapidly comes to the conclusion that he needs to slap Jimmy upside the back of the head, because there’s no comfortable chunk of empty wall. Everything has a piece of furniture, a mirror, or some sort of art attached to it.

So, he sits back down.

Abby looks concerned. She knows how it feels when he’s getting tired, the tiny muscle tremors, and that wasn’t happening. “Okay?”

“Yeah. Just noticing that Mr. QuickieMaster apparently didn’t plan on ever doing that in this own room. No empty bit of wall.”

Abby looks around and then giggles. “Hallway?”

“Not risking waking up the girls.”

Her eyes light up. “Bathroom. Next to the sink.”

His do, too. “That’ll work!”

It is true that Jimmy and Breena have a lot of cute pictures on the walls in their room. Some of them are family shots, some of them art shots, but it’s also true that the master bathroom is clean lines and uncluttered. The walls are tile halfway up, and then light blue paint from the top to the ceiling. So, besides the fact that the wall might be a bit cold, there’s nothing to hamper them using it for support.

Tim gets a good grip on Abby again, and she tightens her legs around his waist, and makes sure she’s got her arms around his shoulder, leaning in as close as she can without smooshing her breasts.

He does make a little “Uff” sound as he gets standing up, but he’s able to walk them to the bathroom without staggering, and he’s able to press her against the wall, but not crush her to it, or collapse into her when he does.

“You good?” he asks.

She nods. “I’m good.” She wiggles against him, and then kisses him again.

His lips meet hers, and they trade licks and sucks, each one taking over, and then retreating. The same dance their bodies do when they make love, just on a smaller scale.
By the time he breaks the kiss, she says, “Very good. Tell me about how you’ll make me feel better when I’m back to normal again.”

“When we both are?”

“When we both are.”

Tim kisses the base of her throat. He grinds against her, feeling her soft tummy against his dick. He’s thinking about what they’re going to do and when, and a grin lights him up.

“New Years Eve, 2017.”

A huge smile spreads across her face. “Gibbs and Abbi’s wedding.”

“Exactly, and we’ve got a tradition to uphold. Twice. Skipped out on Sarah’s wedding, so, we’ve got to make up for lost weddings.”

She gives him a quick happy peck on the lips.

“And will you be in your tux or kilt?”

“I haven’t gotten instructions on that, yet. I assume at least the top half of me will be in the tux. The bottom… for this story… I’m wearing the kilt. And you’re in…”

“They’re so pretty. Abbi picked out these long, dark plum colored dresses. They’re sleek, and kind of tight. The skirt is slit up to the knee though, so a little creative shifting around will take care of it.”

He shifts around a bit, and she adds a roll to her hips. Right now, of course, his hands are under her butt, holding her up, so there’s not a whole lot of good he can do her with them, and his dick is against her tummy, so it’s also not doing much, but she moans gently to go with that roll, so apparently she’s getting at least some good friction.

“Straps?”

“Nope. Just columns of plum silk, with a sort of silvery inlay over the bodice.”

Tim nods. That sounds good to him. “We’re at the Omni, lots of good nooks and crannies there, but anyone could walk by and see us.”

“Scandalous!”

He nibbles her lip. “I know. A Senior FBI Official and an NCIS Forensic Scientist, engaged in an illicit tryst, in public.”

She kisses him again. “Put those rumors about you being gay to rest.”

He laughs at that. “Oh yeah. They catch me with you, your dress hiked around your waist, breast out, my lips on your nipple, my kilt hiked up, too, balls deep and fucking like the world will end if you don’t come screaming before the clock strikes twelve. That might, just possibly, get your LabRats to stop thinking I’m about to leave you for Jimmy.”

She sticks her tongue out at that, and he sucks it, slowly sliding his lips down it, as he gently increases the pressure. That also gets a soft moan.

“Yeah, baby, just like that. You, me, a half-hidden nook. I’ll be quiet, and you’ll suck my tongue to keep your own voice muffled.”
“You’ll be quiet?” she laughs at that.

“I’ll be less loud than usual?”

She nods.

“There’ll be people walking down the hall, and they’ll hear a gasp, or maybe a wet slippery sound,” he nuzzles her chin and throat and groans, quietly. “Or maybe they’ll hear that. And they’ll look around, see my back, and your legs wrapped around my hips, and they’ll blush and run off.”

“Maybe.” She grinds against him again, tightening her legs around his hips.

“Maybe,” by this point his arms are starting to shake, to Tim turns them, so he’s back against Jimmy and Breena’s bathroom wall, and slides down it, so he’s sitting on the floor, with her still wrapped around him. “Maybe they’ll decide to watch.” His eyes light up. Sure, getting watched is Jimmy’s pet fantasy, but that doesn’t mean they can’t play with it from time to time.

She kisses his lips, and then his neck, and now that she’s down, she can take her arms from around his shoulders, and stroke his arms. “They going to like what they see?”

“Oh, I think so. I think they’re really going to like it. In fact, I think they’re going to run back to their room to get it on themselves.”

“Chain fucking throughout the Omni?”

He nods, and then licks her lower lip, his tongue dragging slow and firm against her. “Yes. You and I’ll raise so much heat that everyone around us won’t know why they’re suddenly horny, but they’ll want to grab their loves and get fucking as fast as they can.”

“In that case, I think I know who’ll be watching us.”

“Oh yeah. Maybe they’ll find their own bit of wall, and decide to pace us. You and I on one side, Jimmy and Breena on the other. You can watch Jimmy do her while I’m doing you.”

She kisses him again, and again, and again, rocking back and forth against him. He nudges the inside of her thigh with his hand, and she raises up a bit. Tim shifts his dick, so it’s against her pussy. Not time to slip in yet, but her rocking on him will do both of them good.

She grinds a bit, and he groans. “Yeah… Just like that.” And it does feel good, so good, but he’s also noticing she’s pretty dry, and yes, a lot of friction feels awesome to him, but he wants her to feel good, too, so, “Stand up, beautiful lady, let me lick you.”

She does, standing up, pussy at face level, hands in his hair, as he spreads her wide, and for a moment just looks. “So pretty.” He lays a tiny, quick kiss, just on her clit, and then starts in with wide, gentle licks over her whole pussy.

Her hips rock as he gradually narrows focus. Everything between her legs likes to get licked, and he loves hearing, feeling, tasting her respond to it. He gets his fingers into the game, starting with light little tugs on her pubic hair, and then stroking over her lips as his tongue gets to her clit.

Round and round and round it goes. His favorite dance and hers. He pauses long enough to suck on his fingers of his left hand, and slip them into her, and then grab himself with his right.

He can feel her, wet, silky, hot on his fingers, and his hand wrapped tight around his dick is good, too. Not perfect, but good.
And those sounds she’s making. Soft, little pants, her breath hitching as he crooks his fingers into her g-spot, rushing out of her as he sucks her clit, speeding up with a fast inhale when he goes back to those circles she loves.

Her hands are getting tight in his hair, and she’s grinding against his mouth, and he’d love to talk her off as well as lick, but he can’t do both at once, so he revels in her moans and savors her cum on his lips as his tongue moves fast and focused, taking her toppling off the edge.

Her knees are a bit shaky as she relaxes, and for a moment there’s just hot breath and thundering heart, as she stands in front of him, his lips gently pressed against her.

Then she drops to her knees and has him inside of her and both of them are groaning.

“Oh, fuck, Abby! Fuck!” Feels so good it’s blanking out anything but how good it feels. So hot and wet and rippling against him

She leans back just a bit. His dick can get her g-spot better in that position, and he can touch her clit, and she’s rocking fast, not too deep, but fast, rubbing herself against his fingers because right now he’s feeling so good he’s not terribly useful for much.

His head is back against the wall, neck long, mouth open, panting, soft little moans following each breath as she rises and falls in his lap.

He’s watching her, always watches, as she bounces along, skin pink, breasts swaying, hair flipping with each move, and he’s not going to last. This is just too good. His hands are clenching, eyes drooping to that three quarters closed position they land in when he’s about to get off, and the tingles are just, almost…

She shifts off of him, fast, and grabs his dick, pumping him twice, again, fast, and he’s spurting all over her, moaning because that’s a game she usually isn’t interested in playing, but he loves the sight of it, his cum striping over her hand and belly.

It’s only a moment later, as he’s coming down, and she’s kissing him, that he realizes they didn’t have a condom and that’s why she hopped off.

He kisses her again, and then says, “Sorry. Should have grabbed one when we were in the bedroom.”

She gives him one last peck. “It’s okay. I didn’t remember until you were a minute away, either.” She stands up and goes looking for a washcloth. “Saw an article a while ago saying it’s supposed to be as effective as condoms.”

Tim’s head thumps against the bathroom wall. He’s feeling warm and happy and good all over, and a bit sleepy, but that’s got his attention, and is waking him up, a little. So he stands up, and grabs his toothbrush. After this, he’s going to bed. “Really? I remember the ‘don’t ever even think of trying’ lecture we got back in school.”

“Yeah, me too. More research, turns out it’s got about the same success rate. The high school ‘Don’t even think of trying’ it lecture might have had a lot to do with high school boys not exactly being known for their control.”

Tim’s eyes light up at that. “Not an issue for us.” He puts toothpaste on his brush. “I mean, if you’re willing… I’m fine with finishing like that.”

Abby shrugs, tossing the washcloth into the hamper. “Messier than I like for anything regular.”
Tim nods. “Like with the rest of it, lady’s choice. But, if you want to skip them and just hop off, I’m not gonna say no to watching that. And Jimmy really isn’t.”

Abby shakes her head a little, and then reaches for her toothbrush. “Every porno with a guy in it ends like that, and you all like it, right?”

Tim shrugs a bit. He’d kiss her, but his lips are foamy with toothpaste right now, so he gently pets his hand down her side. “It’s a deeply entrenched visual memory.”

She laughs and gets to brushing her teeth.

He does go to bed after that, and crashes pretty quickly. Last night was his night with Sean, and he’s sleepy.

But much later… probably a bit after one, though he doesn’t feel like moving enough to look for the clock, he wakes up when Jimmy scoots back into bed.

Abby’s in his arms. Breena’s at his back. The feel of her shifting around to snuggle into Jimmy must have been what woke him up.

He wonders, a bit, drifting between half dreams, if he, they could have gotten here without the Stennis. He wonders if the scars striping his body were the fee he had to pay to get here.

That feels much too close to everything happens for a reason, which he doesn’t personally believe in, though he knows Abby and Breena do, for his liking, but… Maybe it does. Or maybe, like the rest of life, it’s just a progression of things, and if you’re working hard, paying attention, and learning from those things, they lead you to new things, better ones.

That’s more to his liking.

And laying here, in bed, between his ladies, listening to the quiet night noises of his family, Tim’s perfectly content with here, and now.
“So, you feeling ready for this?” Tim asks Ngyn.

She nods.

“Okay.” He reaches forward, grabs his mouse, and sets his computer to calling all of the Minons, world over, to log in and see the live stream about to start. Then he stands up, and yells out, “My office!”

It’s the middle of the day, so the Dungeon is as full as it ever gets, but that’s still not packed. Six of his guys come over. Most of them already know, or suspect what’s about to be said, but outside of the office, he doesn’t think much scuttlebutt has gone spreading.

Tim checks his computer. He’s got 78 people logged in world over, that’s basically everyone who could be logged in now. It’ll do.

He’s not a huge fan of talking to the camera on his computer, but that’s really the only way to talk to all of them at once. And faced with a (small) sea of eyes peering at him from all over cyberspace, he’s not entirely sure how to start this.

Which doesn’t much matter, because he’s got to get going, everyone’s waiting, and they all have work to do.

“Okay. Hi. It’s been a while since I did this, and, well, this time nothing drastic or horrible is about to happen. I wanted to let all of you know that as of the end of June, I’m resigning from NCIS.”

The Minions in his office are staring at Tim, not too shocked. They’ve seen Ngyn stepping up and taking over more and more of the job as the last few months have gone by.

And while he can feel the eyes on him around the world, he can’t actually see them, so he’s not sure how they’re reacting to this.

“In the beginning of July, I’m moving over to the FBI.” He gestures to Ngyn.

She takes a deep breath, and Tim can see her straighten her shoulders, slipping into Boss-mode. He smiles at it. “As of now, I’m taking up the position of Director of Cybercrime. For the next two weeks, Tim’ll still be around to help the transition go smoothly, work occasional cases, and make sure the ship keeps running properly.

“Unlike when Tim took over, we aren’t planning any massive changes to our roster or how we do our jobs.”

“Just got to get used to calling a new person, ‘Boss,’” Tim says.

Ngyn shakes her head. “Ngyn is fine. For the time being, I’ll still be in my cubicle, but eventually he’ll get his stuff out, and I’ll move in. If any of you know someone who might want my old desk, now’s the time to get resumes heading my way.”

Tim pulls back, and allows the rest of the Minions to congratulate Ngyn, after a few minutes, some of them start easing over to him, asking about the FBI. Tim doesn’t say all that much about it. He’s not sure why, it’s not like it’s a secret, but… maybe he’s not jinxing it? Maybe he doesn’t want to take the spotlight off Ngyn. Maybe it just still feels really weird to say, “Tim McGee, FBI, Director
“So, do we have a decision?” Dr. Snyder asks a day later.

This time, it’s just the two of them and the Doc. Sean’s not getting checked, and though he certainly might have an opinion on the matter (“Do not give me to the strangers who will make my head hurt!”) at five-months-old, he doesn’t get a vote in the matter.

Tim and Abby stare at each other.

“Jimmy, Sean’s Uncle, is a doctor, and he’s suggesting we go with one ear now, and then, if there aren’t any human trials going on for other therapies by the time he’s getting ready for kindergarten, revisit the idea of the second ear then,” Abby says.

Snyder nods at that. “That’s a completely reasonable suggestion.”

“Are we just putting off the inevitable?” Tim asks.

Snyder shrugs. “Five years is a long time, and, especially if things start changing at the FDA, it’s more than long enough for some really interesting things to come onto the market.”

“And if things don’t change?” Abby asks.

“Nothing that’s in the concept stage will be out in less than fifteen years. That’s just how they work. Everything has to be proven safe, and proven safe takes a lot of time. If I come up with a miracle hearing cure today, it will be 2031 before I can get it through the FDA.”

“Is anything closer than that?” Tim wants to know.

“Sure. And some of it may be on human trials by the time Sean’s ready for school, and he may qualify for those trials, and he may end up in the group that gets the experimental treatment instead of the control. I can say, that with things the way they are now, there will not be a guaranteed alternative available for him, in the US, in the next five years. Seven years, maybe. Ten years, likely. Fifteen years, I’d put good money on it.”

“Would you put him not hearing in one ear on it?” Abby asks.

Snyder thinks about it. “No. If he had more of his natural hearing in either ear, I would, but… He’s not going to end up with one implant, and then have good hearing in that one ear and no hearing in the other one. He’ll have… probably… okay-ish hearing in the one ear. He’ll get most words. He’ll have a much easier time lip reading because he’ll get most of the sounds with one ear.

“Really, I would make the decision about one ear or two based on how well he does in speech therapy. I’m guessing you want him to speak as normally as possible. If he’s picking it up well, and sounds like any other three-year-old when he’s a three-years-old, then keep putting the second ear off, and look for something better.

“If you get to three, and his speech is still lagging… Unless something is right around the corner, that’s when I’d say it’s time for the second implant. Make sure he gets to school hearing and speaking as well as he can.”
“Do both now?” Abby says. Three years doesn’t sound like a lot of time to her.

“Go for one now. There are cellular therapies in animal testing now. If everything goes well, and the FDA lets up some, they might be on human trials by the time Sean’s four or five. If he’s speaking well enough by then, we might as well see if we can get him in testing for them when they start with human testing. And, like I said, if things change with the FDA, and right now, everything’s changing with the new Congress, even if we can’t get him into a trial, there might be an available therapy on the market by the time he’s school-aged. If they let up and let therapies from Europe and Japan in, what we might be able to do for Sean will increase exponentially.

“If he’s doing okay with his speech, and he gets to kindergarten, and we still don’t have a better alternative, I’d say go for the second implant then.

“I can say, by then, the implants will be better. They’re constantly getting better. That’s just how technology works. If they’re enough better, we might swap out the side he’s already got when he’s five.”

Tim and Abby glance at each other, and then at the Doc. Then back to each other.

“So…” she says.

Tim nods. “Okay. We’ve got a plan.”

Dr. Snyder checks his phone. “And it looks like we’ve got a day set, too.”

Tim and Abby nod at that.

“Okay. We’ll see you in November.”

And, like with making the appointment to have this conversation, getting the plan set helps. Both of them are feeling a lot more comfortable, settled, right for lack of a better word, than they were going into this, but…

It’s still there, gnawing in the back of their minds, is this the right thing to do?

And, like with making the decision to do this, there’s no clear answer. The Good Parenting Fairy doesn’t show up as they drive back to work to pat them on the back and tell them they did good.

It’s a quiet ride back to NCIS. Abby holds his hand the whole way back.

Parenting is hard. Work is… easy…

No, it’s not.

Different. Work is different. Especially now. Ngyn’s doing most of the heavy lifting right now. He’s, keeping an eye on thing, poking people toward Ngyn when they need help, and realizing that moving to the FBI is getting dangerously close, and there are things he wants to do once he gets there.

He’s got the vague idea of his team of Untouchables. His ultra-straight-arrow,-cream-of-the-crop,-
Mormon-Boy-Scouts, but beyond that…

Yeah, he wants snakes, too.

The more he thinks about it, (especially with that conversation with Dr. Snyder in mind, he’s been googling what the FDA does, and there are more than a few red flags popping up that make him think they might not be entirely on the up and up) the more he wants people who can go into organizations and set them up to fail.

He wants serpents. Serpents like he learned about in Catechism all those years ago. He wants Satan, with his apple, and his questions and doubts. He wants to tempt the “good guys” and toss the ones who fail off the wall when he’s done with them.

He can’t make men angels. He can make the chance of getting burned for setting a toe out of line so high that men don’t need to be angels to behave. They’ll just need a good sense of self-preservation.

But that means he needs serpents. And serpents bite.

Serpent handling 101: Protection.

Tim’s thinking about what he’s going to need to be able to do what he wants to do.

Expert watchers for one. If he’s going to hire people to break the law, and set them up to do it splendidly, they might start to actually try to do it for real. He’s thinking that’s where some of his Boy Scouts will come in handy.

He’ll keep them investigating his own guys as well as the outside.

Even better if they don’t know half of the team they’re investigating are his guys. He’s certainly seen other undercover teams use a variation on that theme. The sudden, ’Get out of jail free card’ lends credence to the idea that the guy in question is properly connected.

That’s a usable angle.

It’ll piss the Boy Scouts off. It certainly pissed him off when he was among the Boy Scouts and one of their bad guys got his get out of free card, but… His guys won’t be killing anyone.

Of course, the thing about serpents is that they don’t just try to bite the people around them. They’ll also try to bite their handlers.

That’s the idea that has Tim coding away. He wants to hire people he won’t trust. He wants to hire people he shouldn’t trust. And, he’s a man with things he’d prefer the rest of the world didn’t know about.

Which means, before he gets into this, his own, personal defenses need to be in tip top shape.

He’s got great cyber defenses on his own systems. But if the serpent he’s dealing with is as slithery and smart as he wants him to be, he’ll go after the Palmers, or Gibbs.

He’s coding away, building a mirror system for Jimmy and Breena’s personal computers, thinking to
himself, *What would Khan do?*

Sure, if there’s a serpent he can get, that’s the one he wants, but he’s awfully sure that’s a serpent he can’t get. But, he can use him, or the image of him, for motivation. Khan’s out there, somewhere, hopefully gone far, far, far off the map.

Still, building his family’s cyber defenses like Khan’s about to get hacking, them, with a vengeance, seems like a good idea.

---

Saturday morning. Tim and Gibbs and the girls are out for their semi-weekly adventure to the Museum of Food. (AKA Grocery Shopping.)

 Granted, there’s usual grocery shopping with a Marine, which involves having a list set up by which aisle everything is in, followed by a tactical operation in which groceries are apprehended as quickly as possible in a lightning strike pattern that allows for no deviation from the list.

Then there’s “The Museum of Food” in which toddlers and tiny, excited puppy are allowed to wander, more or less, at random, looking at bright pretty colors, while the adults trailing along behind them put things in the cart as they go by.

Conversations at the Museum of Food, tend to go something like this: “Three sentences spent on main topic A”/“That’s an orange Kelly, can you say orange?”/“Wrangle!”/“Good job, baby. Orange. So, anyway, back to main topic A”/“Molly, put that down. You can look at the roses, but don’t touch!”/Pouting/“Molly…” (Done in Tim’s best Dad-voice.)/One more sentence, usually from Gibbs, on topic A/“No Anna!” Put small child attempting to lunge out of baby seat more firmly into baby seat./“Yes, he’s a service dog in training. He’s going to be a hearing ear dog.”/One more sentence on topic A.

And so on and so forth. These are not constructive, laid back, easily flowing conversations.

So, Gibbs isn’t expecting Tim to try to get into anything real as they’re standing around in the grocery store, going at toddler pace (slower than a glacier, but significantly more random) as Molly stares at the fountains for sale in front of the store, watching the water burble over the stone, and Kelly excitedly attempts to smell every flower in range.

But, Tim, who’s got half his mind still back at work, trying to get his FBI plans in order, says to him, “You’ve been sending me Untouchables for a while now,” and Gibbs has. He’s got a collection of Marine buddies and cops who have been on the lookout for WhiteHats and passing their names onto Gibbs, who keeps sending them to Tim. “What if I want some BlackHats?”

Gibbs is familiar with the sort of plans Tim has for this, so he kind of gets what Tim’s asking, but… “How black do you want them?”

“Like… Damon Worth. I mean, I don’t think he’s got skills I need, but, someone like him. DarkGrayHats? CharcoalHats.”

Gibbs pulls out his phone and checks. “It’s not on the list, but we need more charcoal.”

Tim nods, holds up one finger, and heads out of the store to grab a few bags. He’s back a minute later.

Gibbs nods back at him, approving the natural chunk charcoal he grabbed, and the fact that he
carried the two twenty pound bags without any look of strain. “Shoulder’s getting better.”

“Yeah, slowly.” He steps forward and pulls Molly back from the fountain. “We look at the water, no splashing. You want to splash, you can splash in the river when we get home.”

She’s mollified by that, and decides to go check on the flowers next to Kelly. Gibbs and Tim follow along. Both of them keeps their eyes on the girls. They’re fine with them looking at the flowers, but neither of them want to buy a large collection of mangled flower arrangements today.

“What do you want me putting feelers out for?”

Tim sighs. He’s not even sure, not really. Maybe… “I’m going to need some guys who can convincingly play a sexual harasser. I’m going to put some ‘bad apples’ into a bunch of carts, and then see what happens.”

“Play one, or be one?”

“I’d rather they were playing, and the person they were going to harass knew it, but…” He shrugs. “It’s got to look real, you know, and… I guess that’s the sort of thing where you wonder where the line between real and an act is.”

Gibbs nods at that. “Bad apples…” He deftly grabs a bunch of roses, lifting them up into the air, above the small, chubby fingered grasp of his granddaughter. “No Kelly. Looking, not touching. Come on, let’s go check out the fruit.” They start to amble in the direction of the apples, and Gibbs puts the roses into his cart. Kelly didn’t mangle any of them, but he’s got them in hand, and Abbi likes them, and why not? “How about bad oranges and figs or something?”

Tim squints at Gibbs, that’s a bit more metaphorical than he’s having an easy time tracking.

“You’ve got the FBI, CIA, NSA, all the rest of the investigative alphabet soup under your jurisdiction. You want to stick some guys who’ll play fast and loose with perp’s rights, and rule of law, and all the rest of that, in there, see who comes down on them like a ton of bricks?”

“You mean my own brigade of undercover Mike Franks…es? See what happens when people are blatantly breaking the rules right and left?”

Gibbs nods.

Tim exhales, slow. That’s significantly less comfortable territory. Sometimes, and he knows he’s done this, personally, you break the rules to catch the bad guy, and the bad guy is bad enough you don’t feel bad about it.

But the rules are there because you may be getting the bad guy, but “Bob” over there is just getting his conviction numbers up. And “Bob” may not care if the guy he’s getting is bad or not. Or he may be convinced the guy is bad, but he’s not.

He thinks about that maniac they dealt with last summer, Clemens, the guy who brought Khan back onto his radar. There’s a case that started with a “Bob” who didn’t care about the laws, or the rules, and he screwed an innocent man just to make a case, and that innocent man turned bad because of it.

Which then, in turn, left Tim having to break the rules to take out a bad guy much worse than anyone ever wanted to deal with.

How many bad guys is he willing to let go, to keep “Bob” from going on the rampage?
Gibbs inclines his head a bit and gives him a nod, understanding the issue.

They’re a few more aisles down the grocery store, still ambling away, when Tim says, “So, Franks… How’d he end up at NCIS?”

“Did his time as a Marine, got out, did a bit more time as a cop, and shifted over to NIS after he had a few years under his belt.”

“I know he was a Marine, saw the coffin you made him, but… He never struck me as the type.”

Gibbs shrugs a bit at that. They say you can always tell a Marine, but… He certainly didn’t know that about Mike until he pulled out his best Drill Sargent manner and ordered Gibbs to eat and get a shower. (At that point, Gibbs was so beaten down missing Shannon and Kelly, that a voice barking orders got him up and moving without his brain engaging.) Eventually, after they’d worked together for a while, Gibbs asked him about it. “Got drafted at eighteen for Vietnam.”

Tim nods. “That’ll do it.” Tim rapidly shifts focus, “Good girl!” He grabs the bag of goldfish crackers Molly just brought him. “Okay, now, can you get the Milanos?”

Gibbs raises an eyebrow at that.

“Abby loves them. Breena does, too.”

“So does Tony.”

“I’ll keep ‘em in the car and take them home with us. Won’t wave them around in front of him. Not gonna sabotage him.”

Gibbs nods.

“How’s that workout thing going?”

“Slow. Same as with you.” He stretches his right arm all the way across his chest.

“Jimmy’ll be happy to see that.”

“He already has.”

Tim lunges over toward Molly when he hears a ripping noise. Breena and Abby aren’t the only ones who love the Milanos, and someone, a small someone with hazel eyes and shoulder length brown curls thought maybe she’d have one before handing the bag over to Uncle Tim.

She tries grinning up at him, and holds the cookie out.

Tim shakes his head and takes the open bag from her, and the cookie, which he puts back in the bag. He’s tense for a moment, waiting to see if this will trigger the toddler meltdown, but, apparently Molly knew it was a long shot, and she doesn’t fuss.

Tim sighs. “Okay, so… You ever… I mean, the first time we met Mike, we couldn’t tell which side of the line he was on, you ever… wonder about him?”
Gibbs shrugs. “All the time. But you would have wondered about me if you’d met me back in the day. We knew who the bad guys were. Probably. We didn’t have a problem dealing with them. Definitely. And, back in the day… I came in at the absolute end of the cowboy era. By the time I had Stan, and part of why I had Stan was to make sure I didn’t go completely off the reservation, ‘get your conviction any way you can’ had gone out. We were starting to pay attention to things like letting guys have their phone call and backing off when they asked for a lawyer and stuff like that.”

“But that wasn’t how it played when you started?”

“Not with Franks. Not with a lot of places. Tony’s got stories like that, too. That TV show…” Gibbs is thinking. He knows there’s one that Tony said was basically where he worked. It was even set in Baltimore. “Cops in Baltimore.”

“The Wire?”

That doesn’t sound right to him. He shakes his head, and Tim shrugs. That’s the cop show in Baltimore he knows.

“Anyway. They were the bad guys. You’re the good guy. You do what you have to take them out. End of story.”

Tim exhales long and slow at that. He’s been in this too damn long for that to work anymore. “Big changes between 1991 and now.”

Gibbs nods.

Tim’s strapping little girls into their car seats. Jackson, who got put into the van first, keeps running over to Tim and bonking his hip with his head.

Tim looks down at him. He’s about to say, “What do you want?” but it’s not like Jackson can tell him.

Jackson sees him looking down, and then scuttles over to the spot on the floor between Anna and Molly’s car seats, he puts both paws on the seat, and hops.

“Ah.” Tim lifts him up to the seat, and he hops onto Molly’s lap.

“Ready?”

“Yes!” from Molly. Kelly signs yes. Anna makes a small noise, probably ascent. Tim’s phone buzzes and he checks it, expecting to see that he needs to run back in and grab something that didn’t make the list, but he doesn’t.

On his phone is an email, forwarded from Ducky, with a picture of a tiny person, eyes shut, wrapped up snug, little cap on, with Taylor Mason Molloy joined us last night. 8lbs, 7oz, everyone’s tired but doing fine!

Tim shows the picture to Gibbs, and both of them look at it, nodding, until Tim says to Gibbs, “You think it’s a boy or girl?”

Gibbs shrugs. “Did they say over Christmas?”
“Not that I remember.”

Gibbs is watching the parking lot, shifting into reverse and getting ready to get them out of there.

“Abby was asking if we’re doing tuxes for your wedding.”

Gibbs nods. He’s still got to get one for him, but since all three of the guys still have the ones from Tony’s wedding, he’s just going to go with them. “You’ve already got them, seemed easiest way to go.”

“I appreciate that.”

“You can wear the kilt, if you want.”

Tim smiles. “Abby and Breena appreciate that.”

Gibbs smirks. “Just don’t let me catch you guys appreciating it.”

“You’re the groom. Last thing you’ll be paying attention to is us.”

Gibbs rolls his eyes, that isn’t precisely the we’ll keep our sexual adventures in our room he’d been hoping for.

Tim’s turn to smirk. “You haven’t walked in on me yet, and you’re not going to.”

“Good.”

“Jimmy’s another story,” Tim says with a little smirk.

Gibbs extends his hand and gives him a light whack to the back of the head.

They drive another mile before Tim says, “I’ll admit, this is a lot… fancier… than I was expecting.”

Gibbs inclines his head at that. It’s fancier than he was expecting, too, but… “Feels right.”

“Okay.” Tim leaves that open, if Gibbs wants to say more. Gibbs doesn’t. “Kind of thought you felt what Abby and I did, all the party and bling, was kind of silly.”

“Your money, you get to use it how you like.”

Tim laughs. “Uh huh.”

“Leon and Tobias in costume was worth the cost of admission.”

“Especially since it was free.”

Gibbs smiles.

He continues driving, able to feel Tim thinking keep talking at him, without saying anything. “You just gonna keep looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

Gibbs glares at him. Tim smiles.
“Had enough disposable marriages. Had two weddings I didn’t care about, and a third I enjoyed mainly as a way to argue with Diane.”

Tim nods.

“Want to enjoy this one. I love what’s going into it, might as well love celebrating it, too.”

Tim smiles widely at that.

Gibbs swallows, looking a bit uncomfortable, but then glances away from the road to Tim. “You wouldn’t help Tony with his vows.”

“He wanted me to write them from scratch, before he figured out he didn’t need them.”

“You didn’t want to do it?”

“T ook me forever to get my own ones, and I didn’t want to write a script for him. I offered to work with him on them, though.”

Gibbs nods again, eyes returning to the road. “If I get an outline in place, would you help me with mine?”

Tim feels the grin spreading wide over his face. “For you, I’d write them from scratch.”

Gibbs ruffles his hair, and Tim gives him a gentle shove.
Goodbye

Tim’s not sure how it happened, but somehow, when he wasn’t looking, June went skittering off, leaving him walking in to work on the 30th.

His last day at NCIS.

It feels really bizarre.

Less intense than leaving his team for Cybercrime. Probably because he liked Cybercrime, and thinks he did good things with it, but it didn’t become his family. Shaking off Agent McGee was a much bigger deal than swapping out Director McGee, NCIS for Director McGee, FBI.

But it should be intense, right?

He doesn’t know. He does know, that way back when, when he was wrapping up MIT and every major investigative service with a computer team was begging him to join them, that he picked NCIS because he hoped The Admiral would approve. Would see it as a halfway point, compromise between the Navy and not the Navy.

That dream fell to ash within days of getting his assignment to Norfolk, and those ashes blew away, never to be seen again when he told The Admiral about making it onto Gibbs’ MCRT, and his response was, “Stop wasting your fucking time dicking around with that shit and enlist. You’re not too old, especially for an officer. You’ve got a master’s now, once you get done with Basic, you could go on to be a SEAL.”

Tim hung up, and given exactly how well he was doing with Tony and Kate those first few weeks, had made the decision that he’d do his two years, get his status up to full Agent, and then call the CIA and see if they were serious about paying for his doctorate as long as he was willing to get it overseas and keep his eyes on the other guys in the program.

Obviously, that didn’t happen, but the original plan, well, the almost original plan, was never a lifetime career with one organization.

By the time he’d been with NCIS for five years, he was certain he’d retire, old, from NCIS, unless they put in him a box before then.

Obviously, that plan didn’t happen, either. (Well, he’s got nine more hours as an NCIS employee, it could happen, but… He’s not feeling it.)

As he’s walking in with Jimmy and Abby, it occurs to him that part of why this isn’t as intense as leaving the team is he was the first one to go.

Sure, Gibbs left a week later, but… He’s the one who broke their team.

And, there just isn’t a team, not the way they were, anymore.

He’s got a really nice work environment, with people he really enjoys, but…

Normally, they take the stairs down to the Morgue, Lab, and Basement, but today he nudges them
toward the elevator. Once in there, he kisses Abby, and Jimmy.

He doesn’t have a team, not anymore. He has a family. And back when what he had was a team he didn’t know the difference.

But he does now.

---

Jimmy gets off the elevator first. He winks at Abby as he heads off.

“Got a surprise for me later?”

“I’m not telling.” She grins, and then kisses him, stepping out one floor down from the Morgue, off to her own work, leaving Tim on his own to head down.

On his own, he steps out.

For a moment, he just looks. This is his. He built it; he made it work; he’s smiling at it. He did good here.

But, as he’s walking to his office, getting ready to box up the last of his things, and help Ngyn move her stuff in, he doesn’t feel like Director of Cybercrime was really him. Agent McGee, that was him. That was identity, purpose, meaning. For a long time, that was his life.

Director of Cybercrime is something he did. Something he did really well. But it wasn’t him.

His fingers find the lip tattoo on his wrist, dipping under his wrist cuff. Husband, father, son, friend… That’s the bedrock. That who he is. Architect, solver of problems, big picture guy, that’s what he does.

He looks around Cybercrime. It’s fairly quiet right now, which it tends to be this early in the morning. By ten, there’ll be more people in here. Tim heads to the coffee maker. The one he bought for here. The one that gets a constant, steady stream of use.

He pets it a little, and pops a K-cup of his blend in. While his coffee brews, he looks around again, and smiles, feeling awfully good about what he did here, and eager to see what he can do with a several thousand person department in charge of keeping the rest of the government on the straight and narrow.

---

He figures part of this not hitting as hard is the fact that he’s going home with two of these people, will see a third one shortly thereafter (it’s Friday night, so everyone is heading to their house tonight) and then, after that, on Sunday, they’ve got their Fourth Of July Bash, which, apparently, Gibbs decided needed to be one hell of a party, because everyone is invited.

So, he hands Leon his ID, again, and this time it doesn’t feel anything like handing in the badge.

This is just moving on to the next step.

He wonders if it’ll really hit on Wednesday, when he walks into the FBI.

He wonders if the fact that Leon’s on the list of guys working on reshaping Federal Law
Enforcement, working it into what will likely be its future organization, everyone under one umbrella, each with their own specialties, that’s making this not hit all that hard.

From everything he can tell, in a few more years, he’ll be working with all of them again.

Not Goodbye so much as So Long, See You Around.

This time, there are more than three boxes. Granted, this time, he had a full office, not just a desk and cubicle.

He’s about to pull the target with the smiley face shot into it off of his wall, when Ngyn says, “Leave it.”

“You want Mr. Smiley?” (That’s what Abby calls him.)

“Yeah. I’ve still got a year or two of practice before I can do that myself, and… I don’t mind if people who come in here think I did it myself.”

Tim smiles at that. He looks over at Mr. Smiley, and realizes that, yes, if you have a target up on your wall that you shot a smiley face into, it’s possible that the people who come down here to deal with you may get a certain impression of what sort of person you are. Having that impression, they may be slightly less interested in giving you any crap.

“Plus, I’m planning on keeping up your requirement that all of the techs certify every year on handguns and physical combat. It’s good for us to know how to handle ourselves, if for nothing else than getting home from work at night.”

“Okay.” He looks around at a mostly bare office. The computer is still on the desk, but just about everything else is gone from this space. Except for five boxes, sitting on the floor.

She sees him looking. “I’ll give you a hand getting them out of here.”

He picks two of them up, and she grabs the third, and then puts it down. “You stuck all of your books in one box?”

Technically, he stuck all of his books, and the marble bookends Abby got him when she noticed some of his books listing on the shelf in that box. He points over a bit. “That one’s pictures.”

That one she picks up, and they head to Abby’s car, cleaning out his office.

There is cake. And champagne.

Tim idly wonders about that. Why, of all the drinks in the world, that’s the one people pick for celebrations. Bubbles? He supposes back in the pre-soda era, a drink that sparkled could be a big deal.

He’s got a cup of coffee.
It’s not that he hates champagne or anything, but if he’s going to drink something, he’d rather it be something that genuinely tastes good to him.

Plus, coffee and chocolate cake go together much better than champagne and chocolate cake.

He’s explaining how they’re basically turning him into the head of the IA of everyone, when Jimmy heads over. “Hey, just need you for a minute…” That gets a bit of smirking as Jimmy takes his hand and literally pulls him away, toward the elevator.

“Okay, I got Corwin out of the building, and Abby’s already down there, you’ve got maybe ten minutes. Make the best of them.” Then Jimmy grins and gives Tim a little shove into the open elevator door. He leans in and whacks the button that’ll get him to the Lab.

Tim’s grinning as the elevator doors close.

The Lab. It’s not the first place he went to in the Navy Yard, but it almost is. It’s why he ended up in the building in the first place. Delivering that report by hand was just overkill. He was really here to see Abby.

Kind of fitting it’s one of the last places he’ll go, too. (But not the very last.)

“Hello.” Abby says, grinning at him as he heads in. “No Caf-Pow?”

“Didn’t know I was coming down.” He smiles back at her, closing the space between them, wrapping her in his arms. “This is what you and Jimmy worked out?”

“Seemed kind of fitting. I want you leaving here with happy memories.”

“I met you here. I could have never come back here after the fall, and I’d still have happy memories of this place.” And that’s true. Everything he loves about his life comes from having decided to make a lunch date based on a few seconds of video footage and a voice. “You think Gibbs would have hired me if I hadn’t kept coming back up here to see you?”

She kisses him. “I’m perfectly comfortable never knowing the answer to that.”

Tim nods. Besides, he could ponder the vagaries of fate, or he could pay attention to the woman pulling him into the computer nook, and… “You brought them.” The white, fuzzy, lambskin rugs are on the floor.

“Yep. And we don’t have much time to put them to good use.”

He pulls her closer, both of them kissing hard and fast, as he undoes his belt.

In November, it would have been fourteen years. November 2003 he worked his first case with Gibbs. Almost fourteen years since the first time he did this, too.

Okay, not this. The first time they dated, they never did it in the Lab. Fooling around down here
(Gibbs’ comments about ‘grab-ass in the Lab’ notwithstanding) was (is? hopefully this’ll happen again at some point) an entirely second round sort of thing.

But, it is getting onto fourteen years since the first time they met, touched, kissed. Since she slid her body down his for the first time.

And all of that started here… Okay, technically, all of that started twenty feet away, in the Lab proper, this little computer annex didn’t exist back then, but it’s nice to have an extra door between them and the outside world.

Especially since he’s on his ass, sitting, holding Abby in his lap as she rises and falls against him, both of them mostly dressed, but anyone who’s ever had sex before can tell what they’re doing.

Having a good time, a very good time.

Until Zelaz, who decided to come in early today, walks in.

They, obviously, weren’t paying attention to the door, until they both hear something akin to “Gurk!” And see a white-as-a-sheet LabTech staring at them.

Abby looks over her shoulder, and musters the best no shame Tim’s ever seen. “I told you, Roger, we’re fine. Be a dear and shut the door. We’ll be done in a few minutes.”

Actually, both of them would spend a few minutes giggling uncontrollably. A minute after that, though…

And, if he’s a bit pink, and slightly rumpled when he gets back to the basement, well, no one mentions anything.

A minute or two behind him, Abby joins the rest of the crew. He wraps his arm around her as he goes back to cake and coffee.

Tony makes it down a few minutes after that, and tells the entire crew a few tales of Probie McGee.

Tim remembers him doing basically the same thing when he left to go down to Cybercrime, but this time, just like the rest of it, it’s not as intense. He catches Tony’s eye as Tony’s talking about the little surgical mask he was wearing on that first case, and Tony nods a bit.

They’re going through the motions. They’re good motions. This is satisfying. Endings should matter, but the real end was a bit over a year ago, when he left the team.

And all of the ‘this isn’t as intense,’ all of the sense that this is just ‘moving on,’ all of that falls to shit as the coffee and cake are cleaned up, and Tim’s walking out of the building with Jimmy and Abby.

He feels the tears in his eyes as he turns to look at the basement for… probably not the last time, but the last time as Tim McGee, NCIS.

He steps into the elevator, holding both of them, and then Abby whacks the off button and lets him
have his cry. Jimmy rubs the back of his neck, and Tim, quietly, lets how much this place mattered, matters to him, seep out in a flow of tears.

“You going to be okay?” Abby asks.

He nods, wiping his eyes. “Yeah. I was okay all day. It’s just… real now.”

Jimmy kisses him. “Yeah. It’s good to hurt when you say goodbye to the things that mattered. Even if better days are ahead.”

Abby strokes Jimmy’s shoulder at that, agreeing.

Tim nods again. And kisses both of them. And gets himself into some semblance of looking normal before Abby flicks the elevator back on.

Last day of June, that means long summer nights, but eventually, it’s bedtime for little people, and Tim notices that Abbi offers to help get the McPalmer kids in bed, and Jethro and Ducky herd him to the back patio away from everyone else.

For a few moments, it’s just the three of them and the lightning bugs. Eventually, Ducky says, “And how are you doing?”

Tim shrugs a bit.

Duck and Gibbs nod.

Tim realizes they, too left careers they intended to do for their entire lives.

Ducky taps his glasses. “Before I needed them, I could see the tiny tears, the minor bleeds, needle fine shards of bone or cartilage. All of the wreckage that needed precision surgery to correct. And then there was day where I couldn’t make them out anymore, not reliably.”

“That’s why you became a medical examiner?”

“I could still see, more than well enough, anything that was a problem with a dead body. And it wasn’t like I could possibly make things any worse for my new patients.”

Gibbs chuckles at that. He doesn’t mention why he left the Marines; they all know.

“Even when it’s time to move on, Timothy, pleasures of the past hold onto us.”

“Yeah. I know. I’m feeling it.”

“And are you feeling doubt, too?” Ducky’s voice is gentle as he asks.

Tim sighs. “Not consciously. But you say it…” He shakes his head. “No, not really. I’m going to own this.” He shakes his head. “Maybe some… trepidation for how it’s going to start, but I’ll get it beaten into shape.”

Gibbs smiles at that.

Neither he, nor Ducky, has to point out how amazing things can come from later in life career changes. Just the three of them standing on the back patio pounds that lesson home for Tim.
The world changes, people move on, things shift. He’s going to be doing something that matters, something he’ll do better than anyone else can. He knows all of those things, but it there’s still the ache of leaving something beloved behind him.

Gibbs lays his hand on Tim’s back, and they watch the fireflies glow.

It’s September 15th, that means my other project, the M'Gy Dragons is live on my Patreon.

https://www.patreon.com/KerylRaist

Please come check it out. Chapter one is free, and chapter two through who knows what can be had for as little as a dollar a month.

No, this doesn't mean the end of Shards To A Whole. I'm taking us to Gibbs' wedding, and will likely update sporadically with in-universe stories after that. But, for the time being, I'll have M'Gy dragons flying about on my Patreon, and McGee family saga going on over here.

The Dragons are HERE!
Fourth of July weekend.

And it’s a long one this year. Technically, the Fourth is on Tuesday, so rather than off for the weekend, and then on Monday, and then off Tuesday, all of the Federal buildings are closed for all four days.

And Tim’s been *enjoying* his long weekend.

Last stretch for who knows how long before he’s got ‘normal’ again. Wednesday is his first day at the FBI, and he’s not sure how it’s going to go, but he is sure it’s not going to be relaxing, easy, or ‘normal.’

Okay, rather than have their big bash on Tuesday, and then have everyone stagger off to work, at the very least tired, and possibly hungover, on Wednesday, Gibbs sent the invites for Sunday.

Technically, they’re having a 2nd of July party, or, as Ducky pointed out, the day the Continental Congress actually voted to succeed from Britain. The Fourth is the day they ratified the wording for the text, (‘Wrote the breakup letter,’ as Tony put it.) and let the rest of the world know what they were doing.

‘Did you know, that John Adams wrote, ‘The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epocha in the history of America. . . . It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward, forvermore.’?’ Ducky asks, as he chops up cucumbers for their salad.

“No, but I’m not surprised you do,” Breena replies.

“Well, of course, as a lad, I learned it from the British side, which, growing up in Scotland, is interesting…”

Breena raises an eyebrow, chopping her tomato.

“Scotland is not always under the opinion that it wants to be part of Britain. Thus… the lesson can be interesting. We’re supposed to learn it as the Colonials were being utterly unreasonable, with a side of King George being the lest competent monarch of his century, but… when your teacher is quietly hoping his homeland will manage to break away within his lifetime, the lesson develops a certain flavor of envy and sarcasm.”

Breena smirks at that and reaches for the carrots.

“And then, I learned it again when I became a citizen here. First, on the very surface level that all new citizens must learn, and then, because the story, as told here, is rather different than told in Britain, in greater depth.”

“And would you say the ‘Colonials’ were being unreasonable?”
Ducky smiles. “I have no comment on that. I will say, I agree with the statement that King George was the least competent monarch of his century.”

“So, you’re saying we didn’t go up against the A-Team?”

“My dear, no one who studies, on either side, the American Revolution thinks you went up against the A-Team. And many of us think that had Britain enjoyed the rule of a better monarch, you’d be part of the larger British umbrella, like Canada.”

Breena smirks at that, too. Nothing against Canada, but… It’s not very America. Australia though… Still not quite there, but closer. “‘Like Australia, maybe.’”

Ducky smiles. “Maybe.”

Gibbs wasn’t kidding about inviting everyone. Tim’s carrying the now finished salad to the dining table, noticing more and more people heading into their home.

He hugs Breena’s sister, Amy, and nods to Collin. Been a while since he’s seen them… He rubs his shoulder a bit, wondering if it’s time to try to start up MMA, or something like that, again.

He says hello to his Uncle Tom and Aunt Lynn. (Apparently, after things went bonkers, and then calmed down, his job in Japan was, obviously, no longer a thing, so they got a place (cheap) outside of DC. Tim hadn’t realized they were settling down this close, but, he imagines having at least one of her sons nearby will make Penny happy.)

He helps Jeannie Slater lug a tray of cannoli into the house, along with another tray of (of course) handmade Italian cookies. (He’s barely got them on the table before Fornell appears from the ethers to snack a few of them down, and it’s possible that not every single cookie made it from Jeannie’s hands to the table where Tim put them.) Trailing in behind her are her husband, his brother, and his wife. Apparently, the Slaters got invited, and Uncle Wes and Aunt Crissy decided to come along.

Sarah waddles into the house, Glenn a few steps behind, carrying two pitchers full of Virgin Mojitos. “Breena’ll be really glad to see those,” Tim says to Glenn as Sarah plops herself onto the sofa, groaning.

Glenn nods.

“Very pregnant sort of day?” Tim asks Sarah, sitting next to her.

She glares at him.

He nods. “The river is cool, calm, and you’ll be weightless down there. Want to get into a bathing suit…” that starts to get a glare, “or borrow a t-shirt and some shorts from Abby or Breena, and go float around? I’ll even bring you the mojito?”

That gets a bit of a smile, and Sarah grabs her bag, heading into Tim’s bathroom to get changed.

And from there… Vances… Emily, Seth (Emily’s new, parent approved, boyfriend), and Diane. Draga with Kevin. Johnson and Spader. And Spader’s date. (“Tony, why do you keep staring at her,” Tim’ll ask a few hours later. Tony’ll shake his head, and eventually say, “Because she’s a she.” “Uh…” “Don’t ask. Just didn’t expect him to have a woman for a date.” “Okay, I’m not asking.”)
Murray Harlan’ll roll onto the back patio along with his wife.

Abby’s buddy Carol, who’d been transferred to the Atlanta branch of the CDC is in town this weekend, so she’s here.

Senior and Delphine roll in as Gibbs gets the meat on the grill.

Tim’s half expecting to see his editor pop up, because, after all, that’s a human Gibbs has spoken to and didn’t arrest, and apparently, he invited everyone that was true of.

The party has a few zones:

Inside the house. This is where people who are particularly fond of air conditioning, or really hate mosquitoes are. (Yes, they have bug spray and those candles. The mosquitoes are still under the impression that they’ve been invited to an all-you-can-eat buffet.)

The food is here, too, and everyone is bringing something to eat, and, of course, Gibbs is at the grill, showing off his meat mastery, and, and this is something that’s making everyone else smile, he’s got a partner next to him there.

Borin’s got the pizza oven going, and is showing off everything she ever learned about wood-fired pizza.

There’s the backyard. It’s been… tamed… maybe. Mowed into submission. Possibly. It looks like it’s ready to start turning back into wilderness if good rain and a week without the application of a lawnmower go by.

They likely won’t have enough people for a full softball game, but, balls, gloves, and bats are available.

As Gibbs and Abbi are at the grill, Jimmy, Tony, Jared and Kayla Vance, Emily Fornell, Seth Ska, Tom McGee, Tim, Ed, Wes, and Jeannie Slater, Collin, and Glenn, are all running a haphazard pickup game.

And there’s the river: The pier is cleared off. It’s July, so the water is comfortably cool, but not cold. At the end of the pier, the water is close to twenty feet deep, so that’s plenty of room for diving, and at the waterline, there’s a nice slope of land into a few inches of water, great for toddler splashing.

As the day winds on, it gets hotter and hotter. July in Northern Virginia is not a cool or breezy sort of place.

It’s a sweltering 94 degrees, and by the time everyone had eaten lunch, the party has moved to one of two zones, the river, or inside.

Jimmy and Glenn spend a moment enjoying the view. Right now, they’re both in the water, watching their ladies get into the water.

See, if you happen to be the sort of guy who appreciates a woman with pregnant curves. And if you happen to be the guy who wears the matching wedding ring of the woman with the pregnant curves,
you are allowed to loudly, and sincerely, appreciate those curves.

(Tim is, from the river bank, where most everyone else can’t see him, also appreciating, quietly, Breena’s curves. After all, the other pregnant lady is his sister, and that’s fairly icky.)

And while it is true that neither Breena nor Sarah particularly enjoyed trying to squeeze a pregnant body into a bathing suit, both of them are appreciating being whistled at by their respective guys.

And they are really appreciating cool, wet, and weightless.

“End of August, right?” Breena asks Sarah as both of them, and Jimmy and Glenn, float about.

“Goddess willing!” Sarah answers. “You’re…”

“Beginning of October.”

“I’m guessing you guys have everything ready?” Glenn asks.

“Just about,” Jimmy says. “He’ll bunk with Sean until they’re big enough to need two cribs. Then we’ll see how to fold time and space to get more sleeping room out of the two kids’ rooms at our place.”

“Talk about needing extra space…” Sarah says.

“Well, I’ll admit that a three bedroom place didn’t seem small when we got it. Now… Yeah, we’ve got days where I feel like we’ve got kids coming out our ears,” Breena replies. “How about you two, all nursery’d up? Or are we heading over to your place to help paint things?”

Glenn glances at Jimmy. “Is help on offer?”

Jimmy shrugs. “Sure. You want or need it?”

Glenn nods. “I’ve got two weekends off between now and when she’s due, and it’d be nice to knock the whole nursery out on one of them.”

Jimmy nods at that. “Just fire off an email to Tim, and he’ll make sure we show up with brushes.”

Sarah laughs at that, and then says, “So… It’s just hitting. I got you as a brother, and you as a sister now, right?”

Jimmy smiles, and Breena says, “I think that’s how the deal works.”

So, here’s the thing. If you invite everyone you’ve ever liked to your home, and said home is on a river, and a bunch of said people are Navy, and part of said celebration involves splashing around in said river, this will result in a group of rather cocky Navy-types attempting to show off how they rule the waves.

(Or in this case current.)

(Even if one of them was an aviator.)
And, thus, as said Navy people are cannonballing about, pointing out their vast superiority, that a new Gibbs family tradition begins. The Inter-Service Fourth of July Cannonball Championship.

So, on one side of the pier, there is Vance (Leon and Kayla: okay, yes, Kayla is honorary Navy, but if Annapolis doesn’t happen, (extremely unlikely) she’s planning on enlisting after graduation.), Draga, and Spader, all thinking they are *God’s Gift to Water*. And strut about with their metaphorical dicks a mile out.

“You see,” Leon says, showing off for the assembled collection of people hanging about the pier (but especially for Lara, who claims to enjoy watching him splash about), “the heart of the perfect cannonball is in the leap.” And he goes running off the edge of the pier, doing a particularly impressive job of grabbing maximum air before splashing into the water.

“I remember that. We had this one instructor, and God forbid you couldn’t leap like Michael Jordan going for a three-pointer when you left off for a dive. I don’t think we even had to do it. I think he just liked screwing with us,” Spader’s saying.

“I had his clone,” Draga says. “But, Sir! I’m training to be an aviator. When am I ever going to need to jump off a ship?”

Draga mimics the likely entirely imaginary driving instructor, “Aviator, huh? You better go twice as high then.” Draga runs for the edge of the pier, and he does clear at least eight vertical feet before he starts to drop.

Of course, if there’s one thing that’ll get a certain personality type ready to throw down, it’s cocky Navy people. So, on side B, there’s a collection of Army-types (Fornell, DiNozzo Sr.) who, being a bit older than the Navy crew, are not just letting it be known that Squids don’t know shit about how to really play in the water, but, that they need to get out of the way and see how it’s really done, because they were all toddling about the sandbox back when Team Army mastered the cannonball. And when it comes down to it, a good cannonball is all about experience.

“Okay, Flyboy,” Fornell says, waving a now soaking wet Draga aside. He looks over to Senior, and says, “Come on, let’s show them how this is done.”

Senior, who’s peeling off his Hawaiian shirt, puffs up a bit, and says, “A cannonball is all about the splash. Height,” he makes a *pah* sound, “anyone can do high. But it’s the splash that matters.”

(Tony sniggers something about how if anyone in this crew is ‘equipped’ to make a big splash, it’s Senior.)

“I heard that, Junior. A splash isn’t just about mass, though that helps, it’s about *style*. Tobias.”

Fornell nods. He tears off down the pier (to the hooting and cheering of Wendy, Emily, and Diane), leaps, with, yes, not a lot of height, pulls his arms and legs in tight, and then, a second before he hits the water, he relaxes his hold, taking up more space, and making on hell of a splash.

His head’s barely broken the water when Senior goes barreling down after him, and like Fornell, he doesn’t produce a lot of vertical lift, but decades of good food and wine, in addition to his less that perfectly compact cannonball shape, do produce a massive soaking for anyone on the left side of the pier.

And, of course, if you go there, the next thing you know, you end up with some rather amused (and possibly slightly drunk) Marines, one of whom runs the freaking *Coast Guard Investigative Service*, pointing out that the whole point of being a Marine is to be able to do anything a Squid or Doggie
can do, and that they all need to bow their butts down and acknowledge the vast superiority of their experience.

Abbi was more than holding her own in the metaphorical dick a mile out department when her backup shows up. While she’s explaining correct Marine cannonball technique (fast, deadly, you don’t even know they were there) Gibbs runs down the pier, and… Okay, Tim would have to admit that at this point in the party he’d had more than two ciders in the last hour, and well, he knows Gibbs did something but… whatever it was, at one point he was in the air, at the next point he was in the water, but for all Tim saw of it, he could have teleported between those two states.

What he does know is that, after Gibbs is out, Bleach has joined team Marine, and he’s not letting a little thing like two missing legs keep him out of the competition. “Grave, Red get over here.”

For a second, Tim sees the three of them get into a huddle, and then… Bleach has one arm around Gibbs, another around Abbi, and they run him down the pier and launch him. He goes flying through the air, hollering with laughter, wraps his arms around himself, and slips into the water with barely a ripple.

There’s much muttering of ‘show off’ around the bank as Bleach swims back, and Gibbs and Abbi give him a hand getting back to his wheelchair.

And that’s going great until the SEAL gets into the game, who, sure, is technically Navy, but they consider themselves a breed apart.

Uncle Tom doesn’t say anything. That’s part of the whole SEAL thing; they don’t make a big deal out of themselves. They just do whatever it is, better than anyone else. So he goes sprinting down the pier, gets more air than team Navy, and makes less splash than team Marine, and then vanishes (to the point where people are starting to get worried) before strolling back to them, not a drop of water on him, from the direction of the house.

He then sits on the bank of the river, sipping his beer, looking smug.

And, okay, look, if you’ve got all those branches of service talking big about how awesome they are, and how each and every single one of them is the King of the Cannonball, then next thing you know, a collection of Cops (Johnson, DiNozzo Junior) have to point out how sure, the military gets to head off on all-expense-paid-vacations courtesy of Uncle Sam, but they’ve got to stay back and keep everyone in line, and obviously they rule the river.

“Okay, yeah, you all did your bit, and made some big splashes,” Tony’s saying. “But while you were all off getting tans on the Fed’s dime, some of us were in dirty, grimy cities dealing with the least desirable elements on earth.”

“And eating a lot of donuts while you did it,” someone, who might have been Jimmy, but he promises he would never say anything like that, says.

Tony glares in the general direction of that voice, but there are several people floating about in that bit of river, all of them with stupid grins on their faces, so he’s not certain Palmer’s the one who said it.

“And while you’re all getting to go swimming, some of us had to work,” Johnson adds.

Tony’s back on top of that. “So, these are extra-curricular skills.”

“Honed on our off time,” Johnson says, heading to the end of the pier.
She and Tony both produce passable cannonballs. Tony’s got the mass for a huge splash, which he does with style. And Johnson’s sleek and elegant slipping into the water.

But, of course, it’s not enough for the cops to show off, because Glenn’s DCFD, and Team First Responder may be a tad skimpy, but it’s not about to sit this one out.

“Okay, out of the way, all of you posers. Yeah, you’ve all got balls the size of cantaloupes, even the girls, I get it. Watch and learn what happens when someone who voluntarily runs into burning buildings—“

“I did that once!” Tony chirps up, treading water near the pier.

“For a living,” Glenn specifies, “shows you how to run into something.” And Glenn doesn’t have a lot of style, but he’s got a lot of speed, and he goes tearing down the pier, launching himself off like he’s trying to outrun the flames of hell, and he goes further than anyone else.

Jimmy, Allan, Breena, Abby, Tim, and the kids have been hanging out in the shallows, keeping a collection of small people copacetic and happily playing before naptime. Having done that, they had an excellent view of the competition, and Jimmy and Allan have been discussing, quietly, something.

Up they get. Both of them with their best king of the land strut, off to win this thing for Team MD.

As they’re beginning their argument of who’s the awesomest in the land, a different argument breaks out.

Ducky appears, and well…

“Ducky, perfect timing. Team Doctor is about to show those twits how to properly cannonball,” Jimmy says, “Come join us.”

“Excuse me?” Fornell adds. “I don’t think so. Ducky, you’ve got a spot here on Team Army waiting for you.” (Senior raises an eyebrow at that, and Fornell says, “Royal Army Medical Corp.” Senior nods, that’s good enough for him. No one has said it has to be the US Army.)

Ducky is chuckling at this, looking at both of them, when Tony adds, “Wait. No, no, no. Team Cop.”

Ducky smiles, rolls up the cuffs on his linen drawstring pants, but doesn’t start to unbutton his loose linen shirt. (Looks a bit like Tim’s play shirt, other than this one isn’t translucent and really was designed to be worn on a beach, or river.) “Were I to join a team, it would have to be Team Doctor, however, I have no desire to throw myself in the river. I’m fine with wading.”

There’s some gentle cajoling as Jimmy and Allan prepare (with surgical precision) for their leap. They’re just about ready to go when Penny shows up. That gets another pause. Penny’s got a bathing suit on under her sarong, and that indicates she might be game for this.

“Honorary Member of Team Doctor. Doctorate in Biomedical Engineering is close enough. Get on over here, Penny, and let’s show ‘em how it’s done,” Allan says, and Jimmy’s waving her over.

Penny nods, grinning, unwrapping her sarong, handing it, and her big, floppy straw hat to Ducky. “Oh yes!”

And maybe she’s not as fast or splashy as some of the younger members of the crew, but she’s got a huge smile on her face as she goes running down the pier.
Jimmy and Allan take another moment to do some showing off on their “warmup.” (Given how Jimmy’s stretching out, mostly just letting Breena and Abby watch him, you’d think he’s about to run a marathon. Tim points out, loudly, that he’s not.) And both of them hurtle down the pier and land in a huge splashing mess.

It would be at that point, when Team Mossad, who had been nursing a little baby as the different branches of service in their family talked up their skills, finally got herself tucked back into her bathing suit, handed said little person over to his Aunt Abby, silently walked down the pier, stood at the edge, stared them all down, and then backtracked ten feet, running fast and silent, launching herself high into the air, curling into a perfect circle, flipping in the air, and splashing down into the water with basically no splash in the most excellent cannonball anyone had ever seen.

When she breaks the water, grin on her face, she says, “You must remember, Israel is on the ocean.”

And thus, the multi-service cannonball competition ends, with Mossad taking gold.

(Though Navy’s got plans for next year.)

Watching a certain Flyboy splash about in his board shorts, wet from head to toe, tattoos and muscles ripping in the sunlight, is making Diane wonder exactly why they broke up.

Okay, no it’s not. She knows, and with her current all-work-all-the-time schedule, it’s not like she’s really got time for anyone other than Emily.

Draga in the sun, tossing Kevin and Molly about in the water, and the collection of tasty beverages she’s consumed, is making her wonder if he might be interested in ‘blowing off some steam’ later tonight, possibly during the fireworks.

After all, most everyone will be in the backyard, or on the water, and if they were to head on back to his car… Not like anyone else will be back there.

Might make some sparks themselves.

Draga feels her looking, turns to her, and sees her lick her lips.

He raises an eyebrow, and she grins. Then his eyes drag over her body. She’s not exactly looking too shabby in her emerald-green, one-piece bathing suit. She smiles at him again, and is pretty certain he’s got the message.

Eric grins back at her, and gets back to playing in the water. Later tonight, when Kevin’s sacking out with the McPalmer kids, they’ll hash out the details.

Jimmy tosses the sunscreen to Tim. “You’re pinking up.”

Tim rolls his eyes. His uncle smirks at him. “Glorious Irish genes. Part of becoming a SEAL was about getting off the damn ships. They’d have us working on deck, in the full sun, in the South Pacific, all day long. Just about died out there.”

Tim laughs at that, squirting some of the sunscreen into his hand, and then tossing the bottle to his
Tim’s rubbing it on his arms and chest, gets his shoulders just fine, but there are certain places he just can’t get on himself anymore. The arm he had that was flexible enough to get the middle of his back stopped being that flexible a year ago.

Jimmy sees it, takes the sunscreen, and gets his back, without being asked. “Okay, all done.”

Tim smiles at him. “Thanks.”

---

Tim’s sitting at the edge of the river, back against the bank, butt and legs in a few inches of water, while Sean sits between his legs splashing around, and Anna toddles about, a little farther afield. (If she gets past his toes, he pulls her back, both of these little guys have to stay in arm’s range.)

Fornell, burger in one hand, beer in the other, heads over and settles down next to him, butt on the riverbank, toes in the water. He tucks the beer into the water, too, keeping it cool.

“So, joining the big leagues on Wednesday?”

“Apparently. Any tips, I mean, besides show up with a tank?”

Fornell laughs at that, and sips his beer. “Yeah, that’ll get a reaction.”

“I’d imagine.”

“Bring a pen you like. You’ll have a lot of paperwork to fill out. And, maybe, if you’ve got one, you could wear a suit.”

“Don’t rock the boat too much on day one,” Tim says with a smirk.

“Just saying.”

“Anyone whispering about me coming on?”

Fornell snorts a laugh. “You’re not that big of a deal.”

Tim smiles, cocky little grin. “I will be by the time I’m done.”

Fornell laughs at that. “Oh, God… I can’t wait to see this.”

“You and me, both.”

Tim eyes Fornell’s shoulder, where the tattoo, never spoken of since Diane mentioned he had one, sits. This is the first time he’s ever seen Fornell without a shirt, and as he looks, he’s smiling. “So, a bumblebee?”

Fornell shakes his head and rolls his eyes. He picks up his beer and sucks down a long swallow. “Don’t ever get drunk, decide to get a tattoo, and do it in a country where the guy doing the damn tattoo doesn’t speak your language. It’s supposed to be a hornet.”

Tim’s happily sniggering away. (And planning this as a cautionary tale for the kids when they start to get interested in tattoos. He’s noticed Emily doesn’t have any, and wonders if that’s part of watching her dad walk around with a cartoon bumblebee on his shoulder for the last forty years.)
“Yeah, laugh it up. What the hell is that thing you’ve got where your cuff usually is? Lips?”

“The things we do to keep our wives happy,” Tim says. He’s in the water, so he doesn’t have his cuff on, though he had been doing a fairly good job of keeping a child or a cider bottle in front of the inside of his right wrist. He wants to splash around and play in the water, but he doesn’t want to draw attention to what’s on his wrist.

Fornell’s still looking in the direction of Tim’s wrist, so he shifts Sean a bit, so he’s got his left hand keeping his boy steady, and lets Fornell really look.

Fornell does, and then nods. Then he shifts the subject. “Gibbs says you guys made the decision about Sean’s hearing.”

Tim nods at that, too. “Yeah.” He goes back to holding Sean with both hands. Both Sean and Anna are splashing each other. Well, mostly just slamming their hands into the water and getting each other wet as a result. They like to do that at tubby time, too. “Come November, they’ll do the first ear, and then… We’ll see. Hopefully he’ll get at least some hearing out of the deal.”

“Hopefully. But, even if he doesn’t, you guys are gonna be okay.”

Tim smiles, touched at Fornell saying something to kind to him.

“Now, give that kid back to his Mama, time for Team FBI to get up there and show ‘em how it’s done.”

“I thought you were team Army.”

“That was round one. Team G-man’s up now.”

Tim glances over to Abby, who’s deeper in the water, and apparently heard all of this, and is grinning hugely at this idea. She holds out her arms, and Tim gives her Anna and Sean.

And, it’s true that Tim’s not giving Ziva a run for her money, let alone most of the rest of the crew, but running full speed down a pier to leap into the water is fun, and the sort of fun he’s not sure he ever really had before.

Absolutely no one was surprised that Mona loves to swim. Big black doggie, hot July day, people playing in the water… No-brainer.

In fact, if it wasn’t for the fact that Ziva owned all of them on the cannonball competition, Mona might have placed. (For enthusiasm, if not style.)

Jackson, on the other hand… Somehow the idea that itty-bitty dog loves to swim didn’t occur to anyone. Maybe it was the fact that getting to the river meant he had to somehow navigate the forest, which might as well be a jungle to his little self. Or maybe it was the fact that he’s got all of that pretty, long hair, which doesn’t exactly scream water-dog. It could be that he’s still shy of four months old, so he’s just a really little guy, and little guys don’t exactly swim. (After all, it’s not like Molly or Kelly are doing laps. Actually, right now, they’re in the water, with Jimmy and Abby. It’s about stomach deep on the grown-ups, who are holding little girls, helping them to float on their
backs. So, yeah, they’re floating, with help, but not really swimming on their own, yet.

But, eventually, Jackson did make it out to the river, and he noticed that Mona would find a human getting ready to dive/leap off the pier, and run with them, launching herself into the air along with whichever human, land with a massive splash into the water, and then swim back to the side of the river, shake herself off (to a chorus, of “Ugh! Mona, not here! Move!” As various humans, mostly Tim, decide they didn’t want a shower of wet dog next to them.) and then do it again.

So, Jackson trots up to the pier, he notices that Tony’s getting ready for one of his leaps, and, he runs with Tony just about every morning, so this is just what they do, right?

Tony runs down the pier, and Jackson follows, quietly. He has learned not to yip unless he needs attention, and he doesn’t right now. But, as he launches himself into the air, he’s awfully excited, and starts yipping, which is when Tony notices the tiny ball of fur, that’s about knee high on him, also hurtling through the air, toward the twenty-foot-deep water, and he feels his heart stop, as he comes to the conclusion that he’s going to have to rescue Jackson or face explaining to Gibbs how his dog drowned on his watch.

Tony breaks the surface of the water, inhaling hard, looking around frantically, and, “Thank God,” sees Jackson happily paddling back toward the riverbank.

Tony swims next to him, and says, “Don’t ever do that, again.”

Jackson looks confused. Mona gets to do it.

“Scare me, not leap.”

Jackson yips, happily paddling back to the side of the river. Like Mona, he heads toward Tim. Unlike Mona, when he’s right next to Tim’s hip, he still in water up to his chest, and he also can’t get out of the water up to the river bank. (It’s a sixteen inch drop.)

Tim looks at him. “Didn’t think that through, did you?”

Jackson barks, and scampers over Tim’s leg to go play with Sean in the water.

Naptime. They’ve finally got all four McPalmer kids on, more or less, the same schedule for afternoon nap. (Sean still isn’t quite on the same morning wake-up schedule as the rest of them. At a week shy of six months, he still has a 4:00 early breakfast, and then sleeps until about eight for his next meal.)

And, by naptime, the adult McPalmers are ready for some air conditioning, and a bit less sunshine. Even with the application of sunscreen, and staying in the shade, both adult McGees are pinking up and need some time indoors.

They’re also, especially the kids, soaked, covered in river water, with muddy feet and legs, and practically waterproofed with sunscreen and bug spray. But the grownups aren’t exactly sparkling clean, either.

So, as they’re herding children into the house, and wiping up the muddy puddles left by said trip, the idea of just tossing everyone in the shower all at once comes to the fore.

Tim would have to admit, when they were building their shower, he wasn’t thinking of it as a
practical solution to anything. It was just a big space for him to get wet, apply soap, and, on
occasion, play. However, if you are ever going to attempt to put eight people, one of them six
months pregnant, into one shower, their shower works a treat.

And, nope, it wasn’t the most relaxed shower he’s ever gotten, but it did get everyone clean, fast.

And when you’ve got a collection of tired kiddos, one of whom was loudly complaining about the
idea of naptime (while rubbing her droopy eyes) fast matters for a lot.

By the time the kids are down, the adults are debating naptime, too. Not because anyone is massively
tired or anything, but they’re all kind of hoping to stay up late. After all, they’re the ones with the star
gazing room, which means they’ve got the excellent view of the fireworks, that won’t involve getting
eaten alive by the mosquitos.

And, of course, since it’ll be dark, and everyone will be looking up, they might be thinking of adding
a few of their own sparks to the mix, too.

Or, maybe they’ll hit the bed, all comfortably cool and dry, notice that no one falls asleep in the first
ten minutes, and decide to make their own fireworks a bit early.

Lazy summer afternoon. Lunch is done. People are milling around, some of them inside, some out,
and Gibbs is stretched out on one of his lounge chairs on the back patio, just in his swim trunks, and
Abbi’s draped next to him, in a pair of cargo shorts and a bikini top, both of them sharing a cider and
just gelling as the party whirls around them.

Wendy Fornell gets a shot of it, smiling as she takes it.

“Oh God, more food?” Tony says as he sees provisions for dinner being drawn out of the fridge.
“I’ve blown this week, next week, last week, and the week after on my diet already, and you’re
going to feed me more?”

“Yes.” Gibbs says, huge smile on his face. (He’s on a pretty similar diet, and has just as thoroughly
blown it today.) “Give me a hand.” He gestures to the pile of un-shucked corn.

Tony’s got Dave in his arms, and he’s not about to attempt to shuck corn and hold a four-month-old.
“I’ll find you some reinforcements. He strolls out of the kitchen and notices Tim, hair fluffy, t-shirt
on backwards, shit-eating grin on his face, creeping out of the hallway to his room.

Tony smirks at him. “Get your shirt on right, and give us a hand with the corn.”

Tim looks down, realizes he’s not quite as put together as he thought he was, and follows Tony into
the kitchen, turning his shirt around.

“Here, I found this one looking for something to do.”

Tim rolls his eyes a bit, and grabs an ear of corn. “How many of these do we have?”

“Five dozen.” Gibbs replies, shucking his.

Tim looks to Tony. “We’re gonna need backup.”
“On it.”

He’s back a minute later with Ziva.

Five years ago, if you had told Tim that there would be a time when he would be shucking corn, with his “team,” in the kitchen of what would be their shared home, while Tony gently bounces his son, as the four of them talk about Gibbs’ latest adventures in training a small dog how to help hearing-impaired people, and Ziva talks about learning how to use light when photographing things, he would have asked what kind undercover mission they’d be on, and who would have been crazy enough to give Tony a kid?

But today, he’s peeling back corn husks, tossing them in the compost bin, (Penny and Ziva are both big on them not throwing out organic trash. So it goes in the back, and occasionally, they poke it a bit. Mostly, Tim thinks, they’ve created an all-you-can-eat-buffet for the local raccoon population.) listening happily, enjoying this quiet a bit.

There’s something to be said for a life outside of work.

There are a lot of somethings to be said for a life outside of work.

But right now, in the kitchen, with his family, chatting and making a big job small, Tim’s way too damn content to try and think of any of them.

“Mmmmmmmmmm….“ Purrs out of Tim two hours later as he’s happily chowing down on fire-roasted corn with garlic-lime butter. Yeah, next year, they’ll get at least eight dozen ears, because he’s happily plowed through four of them, and the rest of the crew isn’t exactly going easy on ‘em, either.

Abby’s in his lap, agreeing. She’s got a few ears next to her, too. He kisses her neck, and she squeaks about getting butter on her neck, so he kisses her again. “There, all clean.”

She gives him a gentle shove, and laughs.

As the sky darkens, and twilight grows deeper, Abby gets more and more excited.

She would happily tell anyone who’s listening that fireworks are a wonderful thing. She’d also be happy to tell you about how to make fireworks.

And this year, she’s had access to a workshop, certain chemicals, and a boat to launch them off of.

“You made the fireworks?” Diane is asking, looking horrified, rethinking her date with Draga. If the boat’s about to explode, they may not get a decent amount of quality time.

“I’m not saying this is something that anyone who wants to should do, but, come on, I’ve got a Masters in Chemistry and work in a lab fulltime. Mixing up some things to make pretty booms, not that big of a deal.”

Diane still looks unsettled.

“Really, they’ll be awesome.”
“I’m not worried about awesome, I’m worried about burnt-down-boat.”

“Eh… Nothing I made will get a temperature high enough to make anything on *Semper’s* deck ignite.” Abby’s eyes sparkle with pleasure. “Really, it’ll be awesome!”

Diane sighs. “I don’t suppose you got permits for this?”

“Er…”

Diane looks over to Tim, who’s been lounging back on one of the deck chairs, nursing a hard cider. He says, “Hey, I’m not anti-corruption for forty-eight more hours. I’m not even law enforcement, period, right now.”

Abby rolls her eyes, realizing they’re all about to get a lot more visible. “Next year, we’ll get the permits.”

“You sure you’ve got it?” Abby asks Gibbs.

He gives her a *really?* look.

“Okay, yeah, I know. Not that complicated. Take the tarp off the fireworks, and then hit the button, and off they go. A trained monkey could do it. Not that I’m calling you a trained monkey, because you’re not. Though if—’

“Abbs.”

She grins at him. “I can come, too.”

Gibbs shakes his head. He, Abbi, and the *Semper* are heading off on their own. He’s enjoyed seeing everyone today, and now, he’s looking forward to enjoying some time with just Abbi.

And a few hundred small explosives.

He kisses Abby, and then waves her down the pier. Most of the crew is out on the riverbank, or on their pier, looking forward to a great view of what’s about to happen next.

Gibbs and Abbi are going to get a better view of the show.

Gibbs pulls the ropes off the pier, and gives *Semper* a shove, and they’re off.

It’s only a few minutes of sailing to get themselves away from the tree line. A few more minutes and Gibbs’ GPS is telling him that they’re right on the Virginia/Maryland line. A few more feet and… Over the line into Maryland, where vastly more in the way of fireworks are legal, they go.

He drops anchor while Abbi’s pulling the tarp off of the… contraption is the only word she’s got for this thing on the back of the boat. According to Abby, who designed it, and Tim and Jimmy, who built it, and again, Tim, who wired it, this *thing* is perfectly safe.

Perfectly.

Gibbs is holding the remote start.
“You sure you want to try this?” Abbi’s asking, thinking twice about the safety of allowing a bunch of people who aren’t professionals to load a few hundred pounds of fireworks onto the bridge of Gibbs’s handmade, wood boat.

Gibbs ducks below decks, and comes back up with three full-sized, professional strength, fire extinguishers. (Courtesy of Glenn, who’s only comment on the subject was, “I’m going to pretend I don’t know why you want them.”)

He hands the remote to Abbi, and says, “Go for it.”

She takes a deep breath, crosses her fingers, and presses the button. For a moment, nothing happens, and then there’s a hissing sound as the first of Abby’s rockets goes shooting skyward. A second after that, the sky lights up with brilliant scarlet sparks. Another second, another hiss, and then they start going, faster and faster, rocket after rocket spinning skyward in arcs of light.

On the Semper, it’s loud, and not bringing the doggies was a very good idea. Both Mona and Jackson would be melting down at this, but for Gibbs and Abby, both laying on the prow, watching the rockets fly overhead and explode in scarlet, cobalt, azure, rose, white, silver and gold, this is one hell of a show.

Further up and down the river, other light shows begin. Bangs and crashes echo over the river. They’re more than far enough away to not be able to see the DC show, but they can catch sound and glimmers of it.

When their own load of rockets is done, Abbi raises up on one elbow, looking down at Gibbs, and says, “So, gonna add our own bang to the celebration?”

He grins up at her and pulls her down for a long, deep kiss.
McGee, FBI

“Oh my, look at you!” Breena says as Tim heads down for his first day at the FBI. “My very own G-man!”

Abby comes up behind him, resting her hands on his shoulders, and whispers in his ear, “Mulder.”

Tim laughs, looks at the ceiling, kisses his first wife, crosses the kitchen, kisses the second, and says to both of them “You’re killing me, you know that, right?”

“And you love it,” Abby says, patting his ass.

“Yeah, I do. So, look the part?” He broke out his good suit for this. He looks cool and put together in his gray wool/silk blend suit. But, he’s not exactly a Fed, no white shirt. He’s got on a jade green one with a gray tie. So… he’s at least following the basic idea of the dress code, if not the particulars of the navy/black suit, white or blue button down, and navy or burgundy tie.

“Like you’re about to show up and turn everything upside down?” Breena says as she starts putting lunches together.

Tim nods, sitting down to eat his breakfast and take over from Abby on riding herd on the little guys.

Abby eyes him up and down, grinning. “Yeah, you’ll do.”

It feels weird to walk into a job where no one knows him.

Okay, that’s not literally true. Some of the people here know who he is in a general sort of way. There are rumors about McGee, some of them may even be true.

But this isn’t home, and it’s not family, and no one here knows Probie, let along Agent, McGee.

There’s no one lurking around here with a mental image of a wet-behind-the-ears, overweight geek, desperate to make everyone around him happy.

Tim’s not sure if he likes that or not.

Apparently, at the FBI, even Directors get badges. (Though his is only for a certain set of specific occasions outlined on pages who-knows-what to you’ve-got-to-be-kidding-me in the approximately sixteen pound stack of rules and regs they handed him before they gave him the badge.)

And there is an oath of office, too.

NCIS had a creed. And it’s a very NCIS sort of creed. It’s a very Gibbs sort of creed. It’s the sort of creed that might be seen as winking at the idea of laws and rules and whatnot.

“I am an NCIS Special Agent. My duty is to serve and protect the United States and our Navy and
Marine Corps across global boundaries. As a criminal investigator, I vigorously pursue the truth and remain objective at all times. I recognize my badge is a symbol of authority and public trust. I will live my life above reproach, understanding my actions reflect upon my fellow Special Agents and our agency. Like those who came before me, I am always mindful that professionalism, integrity and honor are the very foundation of the NCIS.”

It’s pretty much Gibbs on paper.

The FBI has an Oath of Office. Which Tim is repeating, and as he does so, he feels like this, in a nutshell, is all the difference anyone needs to know about NCIS or the FBI.

“I, Timothy McGee, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter.”

He skips over the “So help me, God.” bit at the end, and accepts his new badge and ID.

NCIS was all about NCIS. It was about truth, and honor, and justice. About protecting your men and your family.

The FBI is about law.

Timothy McGee, his face staring back at him on the laminated plastic of his ID, Director of Public Corruption. FBI. Apparently, he’s all about law now, too.

He supposes, given what he just swore to, and the weight of the gold plated shield in his pocket, and the basically unnoticeable pull of his ID on his lapel, that he should probably go find a copy of the Constitution and read the damn thing.

Granted, given what they’re up to in New York these days, he’s got no idea how much any of this matters, or can matter, anymore.

Tim whistles softly as Janice (the HR lady who’s taken him in hand) leads him to his office.

“Wow.”

She smiles at him. “You got one of the good ones. Anyway, take your time, set it up how you like, and then, all of your intake paperwork is in your inbox, and there are a collection of resumes on a thumb drive for possible secretaries. You don’t have to pick one from that collection, but if you go outside of it, whoever you get will have to pass our background check.”

Tim nods absently, still staring at this space.

Janice pats him on the shoulder, and says, “If you have any questions give me a call,” before heading off.

Tim barely notices her go. He’s still staring at this space. This is an office.

He’s got… actually, he’s not entirely sure, yet. This is the space where his secretary goes, and it’s already nicer than the office he had at NCIS.

He’s on the fourth floor. His secretary has two huge windows overlooking what used to be a really
nice view of DC, and is now an awfully stark reminder of why he’s got his job. She’s got a sleek black desk, a top of the line computer, books shelves, filing shelves, in boxes, out boxes, more shelves, a sink, a mini-fridge, a small sofa and a coffee table. There’s actual room for people to sit out here and wait for him. (Just the idea of which is staggering to Tim.)

And this isn’t even his office.

He starts taking pictures and fires them off to Jimmy, Abby, Breena, and Gibbs, along with *I have an anteroom.*

Tim decides to open the door behind and to the left of the desk where the secretary will go at some point.

He’s proud to say his eyes do not, in fact, jump out of his head. (But only because his eyelids can only open so far.) He does have a desk, with an awfully spiffy computer on top of it. He, like the secretary, has shelves galore. Like Leon, he’s got a sofa, and two more comfy chairs around a small coffee table. He’s got a conference table that’ll sit at least six. There’s a big screen in here, ready for him to… He’s not sure… Do something with it.

He’s got a full on-closet.

And… He wasn’t sure what the hell he was expecting door number two to open onto, but an actual bathroom, with a shower, wasn’t it.

That gets him thinking, and he checks. Yes, the sofa folds out into a bed, and there are sheets and a pillow on the top shelf of the closet. If he needs to crash here, he’s completely set up to do it comfortably.

He’s taking pictures and sending them to his loves when he hears a voice.

“Who let you in here?” Fornell asks from the door to Tim’s office.

“I keep wondering that myself,” he replies, looking up at Fornell like he can’t believe this is his.

“Yeah, pretty spiffy, huh?”

Tim’s mouth opens and closes. “I had no idea.”

“Wasn’t kidding about the big leagues. Wait until you see what kind of cars they’ll let you use if you ever need one.”

Tim’s eyebrow jumps up.

Fornell grins. “You’ve got no idea.” He glances around. “I don’t see any boxes; let me give you a hand.”

As Tim’s pulling pictures from one of his boxes, Fornell says, “So you do own a suit.”

“I wore one to your wedding.”

Fornell shakes his head. “I wasn’t paying attention to you.”
“Something’s seriously wrong if you’re paying attention to me at your wedding.”

“Oh yeah.” Fornell strolls around the office, nodding. “A million years and I never would have imagined this.”

“Join the club,” Tim grabs his box of books out of Fornell’s arms and starts putting them on his shelves. “So, aren’t you supposed to be retired? They own your soul or something?”

Fornell groans. “Or something. You lose a few tanks…”

Tim raises an eyebrow.

“Okay, five. They said they put them back, and I was a *tad* busy, so I didn’t exactly *check* to see that they all got back where they belonged.”

Tim winces.

“Yeah. No one sold one. Though one of the guys parked his in his yard and hung a Gadsden Flag on it.”

Tim sniggers. “There’s a guy who isn’t going to get tread on.”

Fornell nods. “Anyway, lose a few tanks, next thing you know you’re doing paperwork until the end of time.” Fornell keeps telling Tim about it, and Tim keeps working on getting his office into shape, when what Fornell is saying, really saying, finally filters through.

He looks away from his books, back to Fornell, turning to him. “Wait, are you doing actual paperwork?”

“As opposed to imaginary paperwork?”

“I mean, on paper, with a pen?”

“No, I’m dreaming it up and angels are transcribing it for me. Yeah, with a pen. I’ve got to do a goddamned incident report for every damn tank, and every damn guy in the tank, and every time the tank fired and on and on and on. I think they decided they couldn’t do anything to me because I’m the guy standing up, head out of the turret, using tanks to get kids and sick people out of the city, so they’re making sure that I’ll be filling out forms until I die of ink poisoning.”

Tim blinks and licks his lips. Then he goes back to the secretary part of the office and sees a stack of physical paper in the inbox. He turns back to Fornell. “I don’t suppose it’s just *you* filling out forms?”

“For the tank thing, it is.”

“No, I mean… Sacks, he gets a case, what does he do when it’s done?”

“Sit down with his pen and get to it. We don’t have that magic doohickey you set up at NCIS, though some people here know about that and are hoping you’re going to roll it out.”

Tim’s eyes narrow. He’d be among the people here hoping he’d managed to roll that out. “Uh huh… Any scuttlebutt that it might already be in the works?”

Fornell shrugs. “If there is, I’m not part of the loop.”

Tim nods, slowly, and Fornell wonders what that look on his face means. “Do you know the name
of the head of IT? I’ve talked to him before, but I don’t remember it.”

“Nope. But I can show you how to find it, why?”

“You want to guess who I gave my magic doohickey to, and directly ordered to have it up and running by the time I get here?”

“Oh, that’s not gonna go over well.”

There’s a gleam in Tim’s eyes, and Fornell doesn’t know if he’s angry or getting ready to enjoy this. Fornell knows he’s going to enjoy this, though.

“Can I watch?”

Tim nods, again. He doesn’t mind if scuttlebutt goes wide and fast about what happens when you fuck with McGee.

It takes Fornell less than a minute to find the head of IT.

Apparently, there’s an inner-office directory online. If he’d used his own ID, he could have gotten it in less than a second, but Tim wanted to see how it worked, for him. So it does take Fornell a moment to hunt down Tim’s ID number and login from the pile of paperwork on the secretary’s desk. Tim then puts on his to-do list, ‘Do not let HR just lay your ID and login info on the desk, waiting for you, where anyone can pick it up.’

“Carney,” Fornell says, reading the screen.

Tim’s nodding, his memory filling in the blanks. Among those blanks was the idea that the FBI’s maintenance schedule was set two years out, and Carney didn’t appear to be particularly interested in putting the paperwork software at the top of the list.

He remembers what felt like the conversational equivalent of pulling fingernails out. He also remembers Carney agreeing that the software would be up and running by the time Tim got here.

Well, he’s here, and there’s no paperwork software.

Time to find out what happened.

He decides to get into fact-finding mode, and there’s one fact he wants to find before he gets into this. Tim makes a quick call to Comey, and waits on hold for several moments before he’s able to talk to him.

“Tim, how are you getting settled in?” Comey’s voice is welcoming.

“I’ve got three pictures and my books up. One of my friends stopped by, and, I want to check on something, I told you about my NCIS paperwork software, and I was under the impression that you were interested in having that up and running here.”

“You weren’t kidding about hitting the ground running.”

Tim waits for an answer.
“Yes, I am. Your last Director, and his budget numbers, brag about it all the time.”

“All right. And, as a Director, I can fire people, right?”

“With cause, yes. Do you think you have cause?”

“I may. Just to check, not doing something you’re ordered to, that’s cause, right?”

“Assuming the order wasn’t illegal or impossible, yes. Doing it badly or slowly, isn’t.”

“Okay. Yeah, I may have cause. Got to get into it deeper.”

“Good luck.”

“Thank you.” Tim hangs up, and Fornell, who’s heard half of that conversation, is smirking.

“You planning on having a chat with Carney?”

“I am planning on having a chat with Carney. I need to know why that software isn’t running.”

Tim makes an appointment with Carney’s secretary. He decides to go in on this with an attitude that something just didn’t work right, and the system is in play, just moving more slowly than anticipated. It would not be, by a long shot, the first time something got SNAFU in a government office.

An hour later, he’s got more of his office set up, Fornell’s helping him do it, and they’re talking about what Tim’s planning on doing with this office. He lets Fornell know that if he ever wants any sort of job, Tim will happily give him one, retired or not.

Fornell waves that off, he’d like to, eventually, not go into work four days a week. He talks about how there’s about a half-dozen places he and Wendy want to go to, and he intends to be doing it by winter. “Emily’ll go back to school for the winter, and we’ll go somewhere warm and sunny. We had a great time on our honeymoon, and I want to see all the islands.”

Tim smiles at that idea. “Yeah…” He does a little math, “Only nineteen more years. Get ‘em out of the house, and… Breena’s been talking about Croatia. We’re watching Game of Thrones, and that’s where they film King’s Landing. She wants to go see it. Looks awesome.”

Fornell stops putting up books. He turns to Tim, starting at him, hard. “Looks awesome for her and Jimmy, you mean?”

Tim shrugs at Fornell. “Come on, you aren’t stupid, and I’m not, either. Figured you asked about the tatt for confirmation.”

Fornell did, for exactly that reason, so it’s not like Tim read him wrong, but he is curious how Tim knew. “Jethro told you I was asking questions?”

Tim shakes his head. He didn’t know Fornell had gone that far. “You showed up when I was in ‘relaxing at home mode.’ I forgot you didn’t know, and petted Jimmy when you were asking about Emily’s boyfriend problem. I like Seth, by the way.” Fornell nods; they all like him. “Anyway, saw your eyes bug out of your head, figured there was no shot you didn’t put it together after that. You didn’t flip out or act weird after that, so I decided we were cool.”

Fornell looks Tim over up and down. “Cool enough.”
“That’s all I need.”

“All four of you, really?”

“All four of us, really.”

“How does that—” Fornell shakes his head. “I don’t need to know.”

“And even if you did, I’m not telling.”

Fornell shakes his head again. “God bless, ya.”

“You tell Wendy or Emily?”

“Nah. Just talked with Jethro. He wouldn’t tell me what was going on. He made me fill in my own blanks.”

Tim inclines his head at that. “Look, I’m not going to tell you to keep secrets from your wife, but we’d prefer it didn’t end up flying around Emily’s social media platform.”

“Got it.” A wicked smile crosses Fornell’s face. “I’ll admit, I’d love to see the look on Diane’s face.”

Tim starts to laugh at that. He nods. “Oh yeah. Not enough to actually tell her, but… Damn.”

Fornell is nodding, too. “Might actually make her speechless.”

“Mr. Carney, thanks for coming up,” Tim says with a smile as he offers his hand.

Mr. Carney is not looking like he’s in a good mood. He’s looking like he just got news that someone pissed in his soup, after he ate the soup.

“Director McGee,” he notices Fornell in the corner. “And…”

“Agent Tobias Fornell,” Tim says as Fornell offers his hand. “He’s just here to observe.”

“Observe what?” There’s definite fear in Carney’s voice, now.

“That’s the question now, isn’t it?” Tim says, gesturing to the chairs and sofa in front of his desk. Fornell, in interrogation mode, moves into the corner, standing, arms crossed, back to it, watching Carney. Tim, mentally grinning, sits across the table from Carney.

He doesn’t know it, but he’s about to be interrogated, and depending on his answers… Well, at least he won’t end up in jail.

Carney sits down, looking edgy. Tim nods to Fornell, and he goes to the K cup machine, and gestures to it. Carney shakes his head, no coffee for him. Tim nods, and Fornell makes a cup for both of them.

“Last time we talked, you told me the paperwork software would be up by now. I’d like a sit rep.” Tim sits there, looking relaxed and comfortable, in this barely put together office. Fornell hands over the first cup, and Tim takes a sip. It’s black, nothing added to it, not the way he normally likes it, but
this is about the image of comfort and confidence, so he says to Fornell. “Perfect, thanks,” as he settles back into what is a remarkably comfortable chair.

“No problem.” Fornell takes his own cup and heads back to the corner.

Carney just watches that, not saying anything.

“So, sit rep? How’s it going?”

“It’s not.”

Tim nods slowly. “It’s not, what?”

“Going.”

“Ah…” He inhales and exhales deeply, nods, and takes another sip. Then he carefully places the cup on the table in front of him. “And, would you care to explain why it’s not going? Did you, perhaps, run into unexpected difficulty adjusting the already coded software I gave you.”

Carney swallows. “No.”

Tim nods again. “Then I fail to see why that software is not up and running.”

“I am the head of IT. It’s my job to keep literally hundreds of thousands of computers worth hundreds of millions of dollars running all around the world. I am not about to stick some unknown program into them based on your say so.”

Tim keeps nodding. He gently taps the arm of his chair with his fingertips. “Uh huh… You know, that’s not a terrible line. I’ve heard significantly worse lies in my life.” Fornell nods along with that. “In fact, I bet, if the person you said that to didn’t know anything about computers, they’d sit here and go, ‘You know, that’s a relevant and prescient bit of defensive computing. Only a moron sticks an unknown thumb drive into their system.’ But here’s the thing, I wrote that program. I am not a person you can spew tech speak at and beat into stupefied submission with a wall of words. I run… ran computers for a living. So, I know that all you needed to do was take one computer, unplug it from your system, and from there you could have dissected every single line of code on that thumb drive without any risk to your hundreds of millions of dollars of computers and seen it was exactly what I said it was. So, I’d like an explanation for why you didn’t do that.”

Carney licks his lips and blinks. “We have procedures in place. Those procedures are in place to keep our systems safe. I cannot just jump the line because you tell me to.”

“Oh.”

“And you didn’t want to hear that.”

“True. Do you think I want to hear it, right now?”

“No.”

Tim smiles again. “Good guess. So, explain those procedures to me.”

“First things first, you have to submit a report for what the software does and why we need it. Then we schedule a feasibility study. Once that study is done, we talk about it. If it makes it through that conversation, it goes on the schedule.”

“The schedule that’s two years out?”
“Exactly.”

“Uh huh… So, you want to tell me why that sit rep didn’t go, ‘I took your plan and gave it to the feasibility study people?’”

They sit there, waiting for an excruciatingly long minute before Tim says, “Perhaps you were thinking someone along the lines of ‘This jackass doesn’t get to walk into my office and tell me what to do?’ Or maybe something like, ‘We have rules for a reason, and I’m gonna make this guy follow them?’”

There’s a tiny nod from Carney.

“Ah. Okay, so in that six months has now been wasted, I’d like to know what has to happen to get this software up and running, yesterday, and barring that, as fast as possible.” At this point, Tim’s debating what to do with Carney. Trying to figure out if this is just stubbornness he can work with, or if he’s got to go. He figures the answer Carney gives him will tell him a lot about what’s happening next.

“I’d need another copy of the program, and we can get the feasibility study on the calendar.”

“Oh, and that would be for…”

Carney licks his lips. Tim can see he’s thinking about what date to give. He’s also trying to test out the bounds and see what he can do. “March.”

Tim nods. “It’d be done by March.”

“No, it would get started in March.”

“And it would be done by…”

“The March after.”

“So, you’re telling me the fastest you can possibly get this online is almost four years from now.” And Tim knows this is the question that’s going to kill Carney, or not.

“Yes.”

Wrong answer. “That’s slower than when I talked to you last. Did you somehow lose all of those extra techs who were twiddling their thumbs after the FBI lost all of those offices?”

“No, I still have my full force.”

“And what are they doing?”

“The same stuff they were doing before.”

“Interesting. The FBI is in charge of investigating fifty million fewer people than it was this time last year. You have all of your staff, and you’ve still got the same workload?”

“Doesn’t matter how much crime you’ve got, we’ve still got the same number of agents to support.”

“Of course you do. Mr. Carney, thank you for this chat, it has been informative. As you know, it’s almost impossible to get rid of a federal employee. In fact, pretty much the only way to do it is to have one disobey a direct order. Head back to your office, clean out your desk, and send your number two and three men up here. You are fired, Mr. Carney.”
“You… can’t…you…wait…” Carney looks like someone just pulled the chair he’s sitting in out from under him.

“As you saw the last time I showed you this badge,” Tim flicks the ID badge on his suit. “I’m the Director of Public Corruption. I’m here to revamp and rework how the entire US Government polices itself, and anything that stands in the way of the FBI doing a good job of that, I can get rid of. You had the time and talent to get that software in place. You told me you’d get it in place. And it’d be one thing if you couldn’t get it in place, couldn’t make it work, but you never got that far. You didn’t make it work.

“If it was in place, it’d be saving literally tens of thousands of man hours a day here, and millions of dollars in cash.

“You have wasted my time. You’ve wasted the time of every, single, person in this building. That is not acceptable. That is not doing your job. Get out of my office, get out of this building, and send your two best men up to me.”

Carney looks stunned as he stumbles out of the room.

Fornell whistles.

Tim stands up, goes to the mini-fridge that’s under his shelves, and grabs his milk, adding it to his coffee. A moment later, after sipping the coffee, now the way he likes it, he says, “You told me I’d be terrifying at this job, am I living up to expectations?”

Fornell laughs.

Amanda Covington and Rollin Heyes are in Tim’s office about twenty minutes later.

Neither of them look happy.

“You can’t just fire people—“ Amanda starts.

“For not doing their jobs, oh yes I can and will,” Tim eyes Amanda, “and if you don’t want to work for someone who expects you to perform, you can start sharpening up your resume and hand in your notice.”

Her eyes go wide at that, and she shuts up.

“In your inboxes is a copy of a piece of software. It’s already coded, designed, and tested. It’s a database. You fill in information, and then it puts that information into every form you regularly fill out, then prints out the form, and your people sign it and file it. It, on average, saves a field agent three hours a day in paperwork time. At NCIS it saved literally millions of dollars a year in overtime, comp time, and personnel costs.”

They’re both watching him.

“You two have an opportunity now. You can get that software up and functional, in the next month, or you, too can go hunting for a new job, and I’ll talk to your second-in-commands. And we’ll keep doing this until I’ve fired everyone in IT, or I have a running paperwork system.” Tim smiles at them.
“So, August 5th is a month from now. I expect to see you both up here, at 9:00, telling me how you’ve got my paperwork software up and running.”

“You gave Carney six months,” Heyes says. Tim can see his mind skittering around, frantically looking for a way to get more time for this.

“I wasn’t going to be here for six months. I am here now, and my plan was to hit the ground running. My guys are not running if they’re sitting at their desks filling out papers. I am not building teams, redoing the way people report corruption crimes, or investigating anything, if I’m filling out forms. So, make it work!”

“Can’t be done. I don’t think we can even find all the forms in a month!” Covington says.

“The last guy who told me something was impossible was talking about this system, too. It took my team six weeks to code it, a month to test it, two more weeks of coding, and another month of testing. You don’t have to do any of that because it’s all done for you. Literally, all you have to do is find someone to change the names of the forms. Three fairly decent typists could do it in less than a week.”

“Do you have any idea how many forms we have?” Covington asks.

“Where do you think I came from? I worked for a Federal Agency before I came here. I know exactly how many forms you’ve got. Unlike you guys, I used to spend hours a day, filling them out. The program is already set up for most of them, because most of the time, we fill out the exact same paperwork!

“Now, make it happen or hand me your resignations.”

He doesn’t get any resignations, but he also doesn’t have happy, excited, ready to go mess around with a new challenge, people skipping out of his office.

“So, besides ending up running IT, what are you supposed to be doing here?” Fornell says to Tim.

Tim sighs. “Not supposed to be in charge of IT.”

“Do you get the fact that lack of change is the design here, not a flaw? Things are supposed to be hard to change because that makes sure things keep working the same from one Director to the next.”

“Yeah, I’m fairly certain killing that is nine tenths of why Comey didn’t laugh in my face when I said I wanted the whole thing and not just Cyber.”

Fornell opens and shuts his mouth at that.

Tim sighs, and starts setting up the computer on his desk. Once he starts paying attention to the desk, he does notice a huge pile of papers in a literal inbox on his desk, too. His shoulders slump. “You weren’t kidding about paperwork.”

“Really wasn’t. You brought a pen, right?”

“No. I don’t do anything with actual paper unless it’s in my typewriter or I’m editing something from said typewriter.”
Fornell sighs, and hands Tim a pen.

“Thanks.”

Tim roots around a bit more, finds his printer, (which makes him wince. He shouldn't have a printer. There should be NO PAPER, at all, in any of this) and the paper that goes in the printer, and then roots around in the desk a bit more and locates a roll of tape.

He takes the paper, writes on it: ALL COMMUNICATIONS ON PAPER WILL BE INCINERATED UNREAD. SEND COMMUNICATIONS TO TMCGEE@FBI.ORG and then tapes it onto his door.

Fornell shakes his head. “You realize there are going to be papers that require your literal signature on them, right?”

“Nope.”

Fornell gives him the sweet, sheltered child look. His voice is cloyingly gentle as he says, “Oh, Tim… This is the FBI. We have rules here. We like rules here. And some of those rules mean you have to deal with actual paper.”

Tim shakes his head, “Nope. It’s been more than twenty years since it became legal to put an electronic signature on a document, that’s more than enough time for it to have filtered through to you guys.”

“Anyone can type your name on an email.”

Tim slumps even further; he’s about to end up on the floor at the rate this is going. “Please tell me your cyber security isn’t so bad that you can’t tell if someone really sent you an email or if they just faked an account.”

“You can do that?”

“I’m feeling a lot better about firing your top IT guy.”

———

By the end of the day, Tim’s come to the conclusion that if he never has to use a pen again, it’ll be too soon.

He knows that less than two years ago, he used to spend hours a day, most days, filling out page after page of forms, but now…

He’s feeling like he doesn’t just want Carney fired, but he wants to drag him back up here and punch him a few times, too. Six months, and nothing happened, but when it all comes down to it, it’s his fault for not keeping on Carney’s back.

Just because you’ve got the title doesn’t mean people will immediately say ‘how high?’ when you say ‘jump.’ Though tossing the head of IT out on his first day should get a bit more in the eagerness in the responses from people dealing with him.

Tim reaches for yet another piece of paper.

The paper has to be filled out. Somehow, the records have to be maintained, especially since he’s the damn guy making sure everyone else fills out their work, he’s really got to do his. (He mentally
glares at Carney for a few more moments as his fingers cramp around the pen.)

Which means, until he can get someone in IT to get his software up and running, he’s got to fill out the damn paperwork, too.

He’s idly thinking of taping a picture of Carney on the target he’s going to shoot the next smiley face into, (that’s making him smile) as he fills in yet another blank.

Eventually, after, by conservative estimate, fifty-four hours of filling out papers, 5:00 rolls around, and Tim’s done for the day.

He lays all of his finished papers into the outbox, wondering if the magic paper fairy will make them vanish over the course of the night, bringing him new ones before morning.

He’s standing up, eyeing the unfinished ones, tucking his things into his go bag, when he senses someone at his door. He looks up to find Comey chuckling at the note on his door. “If I thought that’d help, I’d have put it on my door, too.”

Tim waves him in. Then he opens the top drawer of his desk, and pulls out a lighter. (After last fall, he's always got food, water, a candle, band aids, antiseptic ointment, and a lighter in his go bag and desk.) "Maybe if I actually light a few of them, they may start to take the sign seriously."

Comey laughs. And Tim isn't sure if what he's said is just funny, or funny because it won't work. “So, how’d the first day go?”

Tim holds up his left hand, smears of black ink are visible on the pinkie side. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“Ah, and what did you do about it?”

“Fired your head of IT, scared number two and three into getting the paperwork software into play in a month. I don’t know if they’ll get it done, but I can’t imagine they’ll get less done than Carney did.”

Comey holds up both hands. “It’s the FBI. Change can be slow.”

“Fornell said that, too.”

Comey’s looking around his office, and Tim’s watching him.

“You going to give me any crap about Carney?”

“I hired you based in the idea that you’d do what you’d do, and if I didn’t like it, I’d send you packing. So far, you still have a job.”

“All right.”

“Granted, I would prefer you at least attempt to work with the rest of the organization.”

Tim's thinking he would prefer to at least attempt to work with the rest of the organization, too. “Given what I did today, that should be a bit easier.”

“It just might.” Comey continues to look around at what Tim’s done with his office. “Do I get to
know your plan?"

“How detailed do you want to get?”

“How about you give me vague, now, while you head out, and we schedule a meeting to talk serious
details for later this week.”

“I can do that.” Tim shoulders his bag and allows Comey to leave the office first. “In terms of
general plans. Tomorrow, I wrap up paperwork. I hire a secretary. Then I start sketching out teams. I
have ideas of who and what I want, and once I’ve got a secretary, we’re going to start working on a
full re-org.” There’s something else Tim knows he’s going to do. “You had guys here investigating
public corruption before, and I am going to be going through them, carefully. I’m guessing everyone
who ever worked an election case, or any of the last few presidents, or the rest of that, is going to be
out. Once I know who’s still in, I’ll have a better idea of what I’m going to need staff-wise.”

Tim catches that little swallow Comey does before he says, “Sounds logical,” but he doesn’t know
what it means. Other than, he needs to look into it.

“Then, build up the staff, get them into teams, get those teams online, and start talking with your IT
guys, this time run it through proper channels, to build up a system so that we can get whistleblowers
complaining without fear of retribution. I’ll let them do their studies and all the rest of it, but we’re
gonna do this fast. I want people able to report things to us, safely, within two years.”

“They’ll fuss about that.”

“I know, but I also know I’m not asking for the impossible. Not even improbable. Just challenging.”

Comey nods. “It’ll help that you can really talk tech with them.”

“I hope so.”

“Once that’s rolling, I’m going to start talking to your analytics department, and explain what we’re
doing at NCIS, using crime reporting to look for patterns. Like, if we’ve got a base with too many
assault cases, or not enough assault cases, we’ll send someone in to poke around and see what’s
going on. We’re going to start doing that, too.”

“Poke around who?”

“Anyone we have jurisdiction over. So, other feds to begin with. Ourselves. Definitely start with
ourselves. Can’t clean anyone else’s house when you’re sitting in a mess. I’ll have to get into the
nitty gritty, but if we can go after state and local cases--”

“That’s playing with fire. They need to call us in.”

“Okay. Just working with the Feds should keep us going for a long time. Basically, with enough
data, we can find patterns. When we find outliers, we can go after them. That kind of data use can be
rolled out from everything from police brutality claims to benefits fraud. On the most basic level, we
can just check what bank accounts and addresses all payouts go to. I could probably have five guys
write a code that goes through each agency that sends out money, flags the accounts the money goes
to, and then matches them against every other agency. Any account getting too many benefits gets
red-flagged. Boom, we check into it.”

Tim starts to turn toward the stairs, and Comey’s heading for the elevator. He points, and Tim
decides that taking the elevator is probably a good plan. A bit more private.
They wait for the doors to open. “We can reverse that, too. See where money comes from. That one’s a bit more tricky, but not impossible. Should make finding kickback schemes a lot easier.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Me, too. So that’s my big data department. I’m going to want a bunch of lawyers…” Tim thinks for a moment, not sure if he wants to get into all the ins and outs of why he wants this. He decides that if Comey doesn’t already know about the Clemens case, he doesn’t need to. “And I’m going to have them going through each new law that passes. With a fine tooth comb. I want to know what those laws do, how, why, and who can scam them, and how.”

“It almost sounds like you’re working on ‘pre-crime;’ get them before they break the law.”

“I just want to know what they can do. Though, in the read all the laws case, part of it will also be a way to see who wrote what, and if it’s got any little perks or benes that make us wonder who they’re really working for. I don’t think I’m going to have to bust too many people for writing a special law just to benefit one of their pet donors before that’ll start to go out of fashion.”

Comey laughs at that. “It’s nice to see someone with some idealism. Trust me, you’ll never kill that.”

“Maybe not, but I might as well whack some heads off the Hydra if I can, right?”

“Go right ahead. Just remember, you’ve got to stuff molten lead down its throat to actually kill it, assuming you’re trying to kill it, and don’t consider whacking it’s heads off some form of cardio or something you do for fun.”

Tim takes the advice. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good.” They’re down a floor. “And I get off here. Once you have a secretary, make the appointment to talk more.”

“Sure.”

---

In his car, Tim thinks about the Hydra. The thing is, he doesn’t know how to stuff the molten lead down its throat. All he can think of is ways to chop the different heads off.

He supposes, for right now, whacking off heads is good enough. Hopefully, if he’s got enough heads on his wall, he might encourage some other people to not risk getting their heads lopped off.

But Comey’s right. Whacking off heads isn’t enough. He’s got to find a way to kill the beast.

But, as he’s driving home, he’s afraid that corruption, that trading power for more power, money for access and special privileges, may be immortal. It may be that all he can do is behead the beast. Maybe make them have to work harder, smarter to do what they want to do.

Sitting in traffic, waiting for a light to change, Tim wonders if five or so years from now, when he’s got his systems in place, and he’s hit the point where he’s gotten all of the easy corruption, if he’s going to hit a wall.

And he wonders, if he hits that wall, if cleaning up the easy stuff will have been enough.
Hiring a secretary feels a lot like hiring a nanny.

He’s got a thumb drive, full of extremely qualified people, most of whom are women, many of whom are black or brown, and all of whom will… apparently… have a career built around taking care of him.

It feels really odd.

So, he dithers. And fills out more paperwork. And then checks his email.

417 emails. He’s had the job for fewer than eighteen hours.

Tim rapidly comes to the conclusion that he cannot do this damn job without someone who is dedicated to taking care of him, because if he doesn’t have that person, he’s going to spend all of his time on paperwork and emails alone.

Staring at his inbox, that he’s had for one day, he’s realizing that he could literally spend every minute of today just responding to emails.

“This isn’t going to happen,” he says to the room at large, and opens that thumb drive back up again.

Since he’s not entirely sure what a secretary does, he’s also not entirely sure what he should be looking for in this person.

Ask Tim what an ideal head of his sexual harassment division looks like, and he can talk about him/her for days. Who is his chief Untouchable? Yep, he’s got that in mind. The “spokesman” for his team and what they’re doing: he knows exactly who that is, and how she looks, what she sounds like, and all the rest of it.

But, a secretary?

Eventually, he grabs the five names on the list with the most experience, and asks HR to do whatever it is they do (another arcane subject with which he isn’t familiar) and get said potential secretaries to show up and meet with him.

They promptly write him back, asking when he’s available.

Tim stares at that email, sighing, again. If his email inbox is anything to go by a lot of people want meetings with him.

Then he delves into the software they set him up with, looking to see if he’s got some sort of calendar. There is one. He can edit it, other people can, too. All he has to do is link it up with his phone and he’s got something to tell him where he’s supposed to be, and with whom.

That’s a start.

He gives HR the link, and then gives them some time to mess around with it while he sets up his email auto-response.
It’s a vague “Hi, thanks for writing me. I’m getting settled in just fine. Here’s my calendar, schedule something if you want face time, otherwise, I’ll get to the emails as soon as I can” sort of note.

By the time he’s done with it, he’s got two interviews on his calendar. One in three hours. He smiles at that, and then he fills out some more paperwork while thinking about what sorts of things he’s looking for in a secretary.

Jennifer Malone is his first interview. She’s been an executive assistant (and Tim makes a note to use that title, and not secretary) for the last twenty-five years. She’s a bit older than he is, probably hovering just below fifty years old.

She’s wearing a tidy pantsuit, has short, curly blonde/gray hair, along with professional makeup, no nonsense shoes with a sensible heel, and everything about her radiates competence.

(Tim’s got the sinking sensation this will be true of all of them, and he won’t be able to cross anyone off the list on a glance.)

She’s worked in Federal offices before, has the highest security clearance assistant staff can achieve, but, again, that’s true of everyone he picked. (Actually, the security clearance was true of everyone in the thumb drive.)

As she enters his office, and shakes his hand, her gaze is direct, her touch firm, and she’s…

Perfectly fine.

Which is great, except he’s got to find someone who’s better than perfectly fine.

“Coffee,” he asks. “I think I’ve got a tea k cup lurking around in here, too, if you prefer that.”

“I’m fine, Mr. McGee.”

He nods, grabbing a cup for himself. “Just, McGee or Tim is fine. Unless you prefer honorifics.”

“Tim and Jennifer works for me, too. So…”

“Yeah…” He sips his coffee. “Okay, so, if this isn’t already abundantly clear, I’ve never had an assistant before, and am, at best, fuzzy on what your job is supposed to be. I know it’s not fetching me coffee.”

She offers him a wry smile. “I’ve been known to do that, too.” She glances at his K-cup machine. “Believe it or not, I’ve worked for men who didn’t know how to use one of those.”

“That’s disturbing.” Even Gibbs, without having anyone explain it to him, could master the basic concept of put coffee in one end, stick the cup on the other, and push one button.

She gestures to indicate it is what it is.

“Okay, so… How about you tell me what you think the job is, what you expect to be doing?”

She thinks about that for a moment. “Okay. There are a collection of things that I know how to do, and you don’t.” Then she looks more carefully at him. “Wait, how old are you?”

“Forty in December.”
“Hmmm… I usually like to research job opportunities before I interview for them, but I didn’t have time for it today.”

“Good enough. I appreciate you being here less than four hours after I sent down my go to list.”

“Anyway, I was going to say, I know how to do things you don’t, like how to do a mail merge, but… You’re young enough you might know how to do that.”

Tim smiles. “As of this point, it would be safe for you to assume that if there’s a version of it on Microsoft Office or Open Office, I know how to use it. I can also type faster than I speak.”

“Ah. Okay. In that case, there are a collection of things we may both know how to do. A collection of things I can’t do, that you can. And probably some things that I know how to do that you either don’t know how to do or don’t want to do. My job is to make sure you get to spend your time doing the things I can’t do, and I spend my time on the things we both can do, and the things you don’t want to do.”

Tim’s nodding along with that. “Sounds good to me. Concrete example time: I’ve been in this job less than twenty-four hours. There are already 417 emails in my inbox. What do you do with that?”

She smiles a little. “How honest do you want me to be?”

“Go for it. I’m not in the business of ignoring people who know what they’re doing when they give me good advice.”

“First off, tear down that sign on your door. Paper takes effort, email doesn’t. If someone has to write it up, print it out, and then have it delivered to you, they won’t bother for stupid stuff. An email takes thirty seconds, so they will fire it off for anything.”

That’s an idea that’s never occurred to Tim before.

“Second of all, your TMcGee address, that’s the one I run. That’s the address on your card. That’s a buffer account for people who don’t know you personally. Set up a TimothyMcGee address, or something like that, for people who you know won’t waste your time, so they can get directly to you.”

Tim nods at that.

“As for the TMcGee address… Going through that is my first job of the day. Most of those mails won’t matter. And most of the time, you probably won’t get more than 100 a day. Probably 200 of those emails in your box now are people saying hello and introducing themselves. I put them in a database along with some bit of information on them, so if one of them asks for your attention at a later point, you’ve got a CliffNotes version of who they are and how ‘you’ve’ interacted with them in the past.

“Of the remaining 217, some will have issues that need your attention. I forward them to the TimothyMcGee address, and if it’s a really big deal, I come get you in person and show it to you. Some of them don’t need your attention, and I take care of it, say setting up meetings and the like. Some of them really don’t need your attention. They’ll need someone working for you, but they don’t know whom. It’s my job to get them to the right person.”

That sounds great, but Tim’s not seeing how she’d do it. “How do you know which is which? How can you determine who needs to talk to me in person or not?”

“At first, I’ll send a lot more of your communications through to you. Part of that is you’re learning
the job, too. Part of it, is when you handle it, you’ll let me know if that was something you needed to do, or if it could have been handed off. I make notes of that, keep track, and when I see that issue again, I know what to do with it.”

“You do that in your head?”

“Lord, no. No one’s got that good of a memory. I do it in Excell. I make databases like nobody’s business. Eventually I’ll have lists of issues, how you’ve handled them in the past, and when I run into something that’s not on the list, I’ll hit you up for more help. Or, say, if the same issue keeps coming up again and again, I’ll escalate it to you.”

Tim’s smiling. “You ever do any coding, say SQL?”

Jennifer shakes her head.

“I mostly work with Python now, but SQL is a computer language designed to build the kind of databases you’re talking about. It’s a bit more flexible and responsive than Excell.”

She’s not looking convinced. “The thing I can’t make Excell do is the thing that can’t be done.”

“Then I won’t poke you away from it. But, if you’ve got some spare time, it might be worth a bit of research.”

She inclines her head, and dares a little smile to go with some dry humor in her voice. “Well, now, whether or not I’ve got a bunch of free time coming up is in your hands now, isn’t it?”

“Right.” Somehow Tim had forgotten that. “How do you feel about working from outside the office?”

“I prefer to be at my computer, but I always have a laptop handy, and can get whatever you need at a moment’s notice. Granted, I prefer not to be woken up at two in the morning with a request for something you can do yourself.”

“No what I was thinking. I have a family, and I intend to see them, every day. Preferably when they’re awake. So there will likely be a decent number of days where I’ll work my normal eight to five, head home for dinner, and then get back to it after the kids are in bed. My last Boss, he preferred to be in his office, and his secretary tended to be in hers the entire time he was in his. I’m fine with you not being in the office, as long as you can grab me as needed, and vice versa.”

“I like the idea of getting home for dinner every night.”

“Even if it means being on call, maybe from seven to ten?”

“Better than cooling my heels in here.”

“Okay. Any night I don’t need you, you’re off. Other nights, we’ll likely be on all night.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time I had that sort of arrangement.”

“Do you have questions for me?” Tim asks.

“I got called in for this less than an hour before getting here, so… What are we doing?”

“The sign on the door says Director of Public Corruption. Basically, I’m the guy cleaning up the mess left over from last fall. We’ve got jurisdiction over the rest of the Federal Government, and it’s our job to weed out the bad apples. Don’t let them poison the rest of the bushel.”
“Interesting.”

“We’re going to piss a lot of people off. You will likely get yelled at by a lot of unhappy people. I will, too. I’m sure there are going to be people who will try and get you to muck up investigations. And, this isn’t a personal judgement or statement or anything like that, but if you have something that can get you blackmailed, I’m sure, eventually, someone will try to use it against you.”

She takes that in stride. “I’ve worked for a Virginia Attorney General before, and a Federal Judge, I’m used to that.”

“Okay. Just… Realize this time, we’re going against Attorney Generals and Judges. I’m thinking it won’t be likely, but crap like your kids are driving home late at night, and the DEA may show up to bust the for ‘drugs.”

“Be on the lookout for people playing hardball, got it.”

“Anything like that happens, first thing you do is come screaming to me. Seriously, no matter what the threat is, or how much pressure they put on you, come to me. We’ll get it sorted out. I spent twelve years sorting things like that out. I’m really good at it, and I’ve got a team of people who will drop everything to help me get my people out of those sorts of problems.”

“I can do that.”

Tim’s watching her, thinking about something. Namely, every story he’s ever read with a good secretary in it, that secretary has known everything about her Boss. He’s not willing to open up about his personal life yet, but he knows that it would be a deal breaker for some people. So, he edges around the question.

“We’re going to go hard on all forms of public corruption, including sexual harassment. And, again, this isn’t personal, I’m going to ask everyone I interview this, but, will you go to bat for people who aren’t ‘normal?’

“My sexual harassment team will involve people who have their jobs expressly for the purpose of being ‘different’ and then using those ‘differences’ to weed out people who can’t work with people who don’t fit straight, male, heterosexual norms.

“So, if I’ve got a six foot three person in here, who goes by xie/xim instead of her or him, wearing a skirt, with visible tattoos, an Adam’s apple, and breasts, will you be able to handle that? Can you welcome xie into my office, be polite and respectful, and work with xim as needed?”

“I might get tripped up on the xie/xim stuff, but I will try to use them correctly. I won’t be rude. Anyone who gets into this office has already passed through my screening, so they’ll be offered a warm welcome.”

“That’s good enough. Anything else?”

Jennifer shakes her head.

“Okay. I’ve got four more interviews. Get the job or not, I will call you back and let you know what’s going on.”

She stands up, shaking his hand. “I look forward to it.”

“Thanks.”
Interview number two goes much the same way. Polite, competent, somewhere in the range of fifty years old, Melissa Cartwright might as well have been produced by central casting when the call for “Perfect Administrative Assistant” came up.

When he asks her what she thinks the job is, she laughs and says, “What isn’t it? An Administrative Assistant is basically your Girl Friday. I do whatever you need.”

“Give me some concrete examples of what you expect to be doing?”

“I run your calendar, make sure you get to where you need to be when you need to be there, and are properly prepped for it. I handle the emails you don’t need to. I schedule all of your travel. I greet your guests when they come here. I buy thank you gifts and send notes when need be. I keep track of your wife’s birthday and anniversary and make sure you remember to send her something nice.”

“I’ve got that one down.”

“Good for you. The last person I worked for had a husband, three kids, and nine grandchildren. Keeping track of all of that and making sure everyone got a birthday card, Chanukah gift, Valentine, and Halloween treat from Nana was part of my job.”

“Our oldest,” there’s barely a pause as he remembers to stick niece in there, “niece will be four in February. Right now I’ve got minimal effort necessary to handle kid’s celebrations.”

“Do you have children?”

“Yes.” He heads into his part of the office and grabs a shot of the whole family. “This is us. These two little guys belong to Abby and I,” he points out Kelly and Sean, “Kelly’s just over two. Sean’s seven months old.” He points to the bit of family next to him and Abby. “Jimmy, Breena, and their girls. Molly’s the one that’s edging toward four. Little girl there is Anna. Baby bump is Donnie.” Then he points out Tony and Ziva, “That’s the DiNozzo branch of the family. Tony, Ziva, and Dave. The older couple in the back are Penny, my grandmother, and Ducky, her husband. The white haired guy is my dad, and the redhead he’s got his arm around is his fiancee, Abbi.”

“Two Abbies?”

“Makes things interesting.”

“Well, maybe I won’t be sending out presents to the grand kids, but making sure everyone gets a treat on their birthday looks like a full time job with this crew.”

Tim smiles a bit. “It might be. But if it is, it’s a job I intend to do for myself.”

Melissa gives him a look, and he thinks she’s thinking at him, “You can certainly try, but I don’t think it’ll happen.”

Tim finds that look disturbing. Not because it’s insulting, but because of what it may say about how much of one’s life this sort of job consumes.

It’s on the third interview that Tim realizes that any answer but, “Of course I’ll work with xie/xim
and do it with perfect politeness and tact’ is likely illegal.

His third interview, Glynnis Bluchard, gives him that same answer, but he’s been an interrogator too long to not notice her eyes go hard, and her body language start to show off how uncomfortable she is with the idea.

That’s one he can boot off the list.

Interview number four: Katherine Willis. Again, perfect, polished, competent. She’s pleasant, and seems to know what she’s doing.

As she’s leaving, she looks out the window, and says, “I hate this view.”

Tim nods. He doesn’t exactly love looking out at destroyed DC, either.

“This is why we do our job.”

She nods, looking away from the destruction. “Yeah. It was a pretty picture, but the foundation was rotten.”

“Exactly.”

“You go in and tear out the rest of the rotted support structures.”

He nods again.

“Is anyone putting up any new ones?” Katherine asks.

Tim sighs at that, too. “I don’t know. That’s not our job. Our job is to clear out the rot.”

She gestures to the miles of wreckage and rebuilding. “You think we’ll end up with more of this?”

Tim shrugs. “I don’t know. I hope not.”

After she leaves, he wonders about that. Is it better to have people do the job badly, or not do the job, at all?

Interview number five, the last thing on his schedule before heading off for his weekend on Friday evening, doesn’t feel right at all.

Kristin James’ answers are perfect, she’s polite and polished and calm and… does not like him, at all.

He doesn’t know if it’s the fact that it’s Friday, so he’s in jeans and a purple button down, sleeves rolled up, wrist collar visible, and just doesn’t look like her idea of a Boss, or if there’s something about him or what he’s supposed to be doing that hits her wrong.

That’s two he’s managed to boot off the list.
“So, that’s two I was able mark off,” he’s saying at their family dinner, in response to the question of, “So, how did the first week go?” “but the other three?” Tim gestures with his hands to indicate he’s got no idea.

“No personal demons to help you decide?” Jimmy asks, eyes amused, chewing a bite of asparagus.

“Yeah, the universe didn’t see fit to gift-wrap me an assistant and plop her at my door.”

“Could you skip it?” Abbi asks. “I don’t have one.”

“I’ve spent all my time between interviews and meetings filling out paperwork and answering emails and I still have more than 900 of them in my inbox.”

The collected Gibbs clan winces.

Tim nods. “And from everything I can see, go yell at your higher ups and get some budget for an assistant of your own. You might be able to get home for dinner more than twice a week if you weren’t hacking through your inbox with a machete every day.”

“Not my inbox keeping me away right now,” Abbi replies between bites of grilled salmon. She’s been commuting to New York City to testify before Congress for much longer than she wanted to. “But, they tell me, and Penny, if they’re lying, don’t tell me, because I want to enjoy the fantasy,” Penny smiles at that, sipping her wine, “that I will be done with my commuting to New York and testifying as of Monday.”

“Last I heard, that’s true. One more day of questions for you, and then off you get to go until we start pulling up cases against individuals.”

“How are you doing cases if not against individuals?” Breena asks.

“All the cases are against individuals, but right now, for opening statements and evidence collection, we’re running the Congress of the United States V. Multiple Conspirators.”

Tony, who hadn’t been reading up much on that case, looks up from grinning at Dave, who’s in his lap, chewing on his finger. “That’s really the name you’re going with?”

“For right now,” Ducky says. “Once they get into individual cases, the name will shift to each person.”

“Any of the three you’ve got left who you really like?” Gibbs asks Tim a moment later, pulling him back to his assistants.

“Not in the sense of I met one and just clicked with her.” Tim chews one of his green beans, thinking. “Okay, the first one likes to build databases to do her job better, and that resonates, I guess.”

“Like calling to like,” Abby says, stroking his hand.

“Yeah. I guess.”

“Then give her a call and get her into your office on Monday! Every day this week, you’ve come home dead on your feet,” Breena replies, eyeing him. Her voice has a little joke in it, but only a little. He has pretty much come home, eaten, helped get kids to bed, and then crashed.

“Your paperwork tolerance dropped that fast?” Tony asks with a smirk.
Tim shakes his head. “It must have. I go in, I deal with stupid stuff, eat some lunch, deal with more stupid stuff, and I go home, dead. Three days, and I haven’t gotten to do anything. I’ve been on stakeouts that didn’t wipe me out this much.”

“Are you feeling well, Timothy?” Ducky asks.

“Yeah, Duck, and if I wasn’t,” he nods to Jimmy, who’s sitting across from him, trying to get Anna to try a bite of the fish, “he’d be all over me.” And, on day two of dead tired, Jimmy was checking him out. And Tim swatted at him, mumbling something about, ‘I’m fine, let me sleep.’ “Just tired.”

“What constitutes ‘stupid stuff’?” Ducky asks.

Tim rolls his eyes, and shakes his head. He’s about to add words to that, when Sean, who’s sitting on Abby’s lap, decides to try to lunge over toward him, catching both of them by surprise, resulting in him almost ending up on the floor if it hadn’t been for quick reflexes on both of their parts.

A moment later, when Sean’s in his lap, and Tim’s heart has calmed down a bit from the adrenaline spike of baby trying to leap into space, he says, “Stupid stuff. Paperwork. Okay. The forms have to be in ink, uncorrected, and original. So, I don’t put any dashes in my social security number. Because when I type it into a computer, it doesn’t need the dashes. But, some poor person is apparently taking all of my forms, and manually typing them into a computer, instead of having me do it in the first place. That person apparently wants dashes in my social security number, so I had to redo every page that number was on.”

“Ouch.” Tony replies.

“And no, they won’t just let me go down to HR and type the damn forms in myself. I could do that faster than filling them out with a pen, but they need the ink on paper version, too, for God alone knows what reason. So, it’s just stupid things like that. Rules, forms, and paperwork for the sake of rules, forms, and paperwork.”

“And you are hoping to change that?” Ducky adds.

“That’s the plan. Don’t know how well I’ll do at it. Hell, at this point I don’t know if I’ll even get a chance to do it. This is very much not a part of the military. Having someone show up who outranks you and tells you what to do doesn’t mean it’s going to get done.”

Gibbs smirks at that. “Spoken like someone who’s never been in the military. Not doing what you’ve been told to do is a high art.”

“Fine. Looks like it’s been perfected at the FBI.”

Abby rubs the back of his neck. “You’ll get them moving.”

“I hope.”

“But first off, go give Database Lady a call, and get her in your office Monday morning. You can hold off until after the weekend to call the rest of them, but you need someone to hand the paperwork off to, so get it done!” Breena adds. Granted, she’s been rooting for him to hire whoever showed up first, hand off the stupid stuff, and then once he could breathe and see what he’s doing, figure out what he needs in a secretary, and then, if lady number one wasn’t it, go hire a new one. When she told him that, Wednesday night, he laughed grimly, and then dropped the 250 page hiring and firing manual that he’s supposed to read and follow, in her lap.

That said, at this point, he doesn’t think she’s wrong. “After the kids are down, I’ll give her a call.”
“Good.”

“Hi, may I please speak to Jennifer Malone?” Tim’s thinking the voice that answered is her, but he’s hedging his bet.

“This is her.”

“Hi. It’s Tim McGee… So… um… If you were planning on spending some time on SQL, I’m thinking that’s not going to happen.”

“Really?” he hears the smile in her voice.

“Yeah. I’ve got some projects I’d really like you to get started on as soon as possible.”

She chuckles, likely with the mental image of him drowning in paperwork or emails. “Monday morning, eight o’clock?”

“Yes, please!”

“Wonderful. I’ll see you then.”

“Thank you!”

And, like every other night since he started with the FBI, he hits the bed, and crashes, hard. But, drifting off to sleep, he’s hopeful that maybe something useful will actually get done this week.
“Oh Fuck!” It’s somewhere between a whisper and a breath. Right now he feels too good to make too much noise.

Tim knows it’s dream sex. He’s seeing it from outside of himself, and feeling it, too. No way that’s happening in real life.

It feels like a dream, too. He can’t remember how he got here, and for that matter, he doesn’t care. He’s hot and hard and Breena’s spooned up in front of him and Abby’s behind and he’s getting done and doing to at the same time and his body is singing with the pleasure of it.

Dream sex… Feels better than real sex, but frustrating, he can’t come. God, he wants to. Wants to fuck harder and faster and he can, does, moving slick and liquid between the girls. Abby’s grinding into him, her hand on his chest, lips on his neck, and her plastic cock is hitting him exactly right. Breena’s in front, and she’s wet and slick, gripping onto him, rippling around him as he fingers her pussy and thrusts as deep as he can…

But deep pulls him away from Abby and the glorious pulse of that cock hitting just right.

But arching back onto Abby pulls him out of Breena, and he wants that tight, wet heat of her completely enveloping him.

He’s rocking back and forth, fast, whimpering at how good it feels. He’s so hard and wants to come so bad, and

Buzzing…

The dream starts to fade away. Bits of it, the real ones, like he’s got Breena in front of him and Abby behind him, and the… Yes, that is definitely buzzing… And Jimmy groans, at being awakened again (he had Sean last night), that definitely wasn’t part of the dream.

Breena sits up, confused. “That’s my phone.”

And with that, every vestige, except for an extremely hard hard-on, of the dream is gone.

Breena’s getting out of bed, looking really puzzled. In all the years she’s been married, she’s never been pulled out of bed by an early call on her phone.

She gets herself out from between Jimmy and Tim, and to her phone by the third ring, at which point her other three bedmates are all watching, feeling wary, wondering what could possibly be going on.

She picks up, and it’s her Dad, and for a moment she’s feeling pretty scared, but then he starts talking, and it’s sad, but it’s not a hammer’s blow. He keeps talking as she nods, and when he’s done, she says, “I’ve got it Dad. I’ll drive her down and take care of it. Tell Mom to pack up, and that I’ve got Aunt Nancy. I’m at our place on the Potomac, so it’ll be about two hours before I get to you, but I’ll be there. Jimmy’s got the girls, and Abby and Tim can help out if he needs a hand.”

They see her nod again, and another moment of quiet before she says, “No problem, Dad. Give Mom a hug for me, and I’ll be there soon.” She hangs up the phone and sees her three loves looking worried. “Not as bad as it could be. My mom’s best friend died last night. We’re going down to Georgia for a few days to take care of her. Make sure she has a proper send off.”
And Breena’s right, that’s not nearly as bad as it could be, but… “We’ll miss you,” Abby says it first.

Tim’s nodding, and Jimmy’s up to give her a hug. “Just a few days?” He’s a bit edgy at the idea of his six months pregnant wife away for too long.

“Funerals are weekday affairs, so… Down today. Get ready tomorrow. Viewing on Monday, Tuesday at the latest. Our family has a friend down there who runs his own funeral home, he’ll let us use his place. Mom’s…” She shakes her head, trying not to see her own future in this. “They’ve been best friends, talked to each other every day, for… got to be forty years now. Mom’s wrecked.”


“Heart attack. Mom was telling me yesterday how Aunt Nance wasn’t taking care of herself right. She’d been feeling off for a while now, and that she’d been nagging her to go see her doctor.”

“You want one of us to go with you?” Jimmy asks.

Breena gives him that look, the one that says loud and clear that she knows why he’s concerned and that she’s fine.

“I know. Still, it’s a long drive with a tiny little bladder.”

Jimmy’s next to her, and she gently strokes his face. “I’m okay. Donnie’s going to be okay, too. You guys enjoy the kids, have a good weekend, and… make me some videos for after-hours viewing, okay? Get my mind off of how sad this for an hour or so a night?”

Tim and Abby perk up on that. “We can do that!” Abby says. “You go get your shower, and I’ll get….” Abby’s looking at what they keep here. “Okay, I won’t get you packed up because all of your work clothing is at home.” They hear Sean’s cry. “We’ll get the kids up and ready for the day, and have some breakfast waiting for you.”

“That I could use.” Breena kisses Abby, and the four of them break apart to start the day.

As he gets his morning shower, Tim decides to not take care of his dick. Yes, it’s looking up at him, begging for some attention, but, if they’re going to be filming for Breena, he might as well see about offering up something worth watching.

He doesn’t have too long to think about that, anyway. Kids are up, and Molly and Kelly are both in the bathroom, making it extremely clear that it’s way beyond time for him to get out of the shower, grab Uncle Pop, Mona, and Jackson, and take them on their weekly adventure in the Museum of Food!

As he’s brushing his teeth, trying to keep little girls quiet, he sees Jimmy in their bed, grabbing some extra sack time.

And, as much as he loves their kids, there are times where this whole family thing is vastly overrated, and what he’d really like to do is live in a bubble with just the four of them.

A bubble where they all get to sleep as late as they like and fuck as much as they can, and maybe go out to eat in restaurants that don’t have menus that can be colored on.
“A man can dream,” he mutters, picking up Kelly, letting her sit on their sink, and then asks, “What do you think, should Daddy shave?”

(He already knows what the answer will be.) “NO! Adventures!”

“All right, just let me get some pants and a shirt on, okay!”

“NOW!”

“If I go out now, they’ll arrest me.”

That flies right over Kelly’s head and Molly’s just staring at him. “Go find Uncle Pop and have him get your shoes on, okay?” He puts Kelly back on the floor. And with a job to do, that gets them closer to out of the house, the girls go.

Quiet rainy summer Saturday, made doubly quiet by the low energy time between afternoon nap and dinner.

Tim’s lying on the floor in front of the fireplace, next to Molly and Kelly, and the three of them are “coloring.”

Molly is starting to draw things. Blobby, impossible to interpret without help things, but things nonetheless. Kelly is just applying color to paper. Primarily his job is to keep them calm and prevent Kelly from eating the crayons.

So, on Kelly’s page, there are scribbles of blue and green and red. On Molly’s there’s… Tim’s betting they’re supposed to be people, but he’s thinking they look more like jellyfish, and on his paper is a collection of circles, with lines coming out of them, and words inside of them.

Abbi sits down on the floor next to him, grabbing her own piece of paper, and a few crayons, and then asks, “Lawful Good? You starting up one of those games?”

Tim shakes his head. “It’s just how I think of it, right now. This is, assuming I get to stop dealing with stupid stuff, what my department is going to look like.” He taps the circle at the top of the page. “That’s me.”

Abbi looks closer. “Hence, me in the middle of that circle.”

“Yeah, I know, I’m amazing at naming things.” He taps the three circles below his name, each one with a line drawing up to his circle. “Lawful Good. These are my Boy scouts. The guys who follow all the rules, dot all the is, cross all the ts. They get called in for straightforward investigations, and likely the formal arrest part.”

“Easy enough. Someone calls in saying a department head is taking bribes, in they go.”

“Exactly.”

“What’s Lawful Neutral?” She points to circle number two.

“These are my guys who work the data. They don’t have to be white knights, they just have to be good at the job. So, they’re the ones who do the analytics and look for places with too many or too
few complaints. They’re my legal team, who go looking for how to break the new laws. They’re the ones who will program the software and build the infrastructure I need so team Lawful Good or Lawful Evil can get called into play as needed.”

“And Lawful Evil?” She taps the last circle.

“My snakes in the grass. My undercover guys. These are the guys I’m hiring to tempt other people into breaking the law, or to break it themselves and see what their supervisors do about it.”

“So, neutral handles all the tech stuff?”

“I’ll probably break pure tech, the guys building the tools I’ll need to do the job, off of LN, but yeah, that’s the current idea. I’m going to need someone to program software, and someone to work the data, and that’s likely not the same job.” Tim crosses out a few of the circles that led off of Lawful Neutral, and adds them to another circle directly off of his name.

“So, if I do this right, I should have four to six guys who report directly to me, and they’ll each have their own subspecialty.”

“Who are five and six?”

“Not sure about six, but five,” he draws another circle that comes off of his name, and writes PR in the middle of it. “They say sunshine is the best disinfectant, so here’s my human version of the sun.”

“Someone to do daily press updates?”

“Or the like.” Tim writes a name and Abbi looks at it with her eyebrows scrunched together.

“Jill Stein?”

“Not her personally, but that’s my image of what this person looks like. Attractive, polished, female, gray hair, somewhere north of fifty, but still looks vital. I want this person to radiate wholesomeness.”

“And Jill Stein makes you think of that?”

Tim shrugs. “Penny and Sarah like her. I don’t know much about her, other than she looks like the kind of person I want for that role.”

“Fair enough. I suppose for a spokesperson, image really is everything?” Abbi knows that since she’s been “the face” of CGIS she’s gotten some suggestions about how that face is supposed to look. And, in what she considers a moment of great restraint, she did not tell said suggesters to fuck off and die.

“I guess. Probably a good idea to make sure she’s got the clean background to go with the looks, but… Yeah. It’s a face job, so I want her to look the part.”

“And you don’t?”

“Even if I did, I don’t want that job.”

Abbi smirks. She doesn’t want that job, either, but right now, for the Coast Guard Investigative Service, she’s got it.

“I am going to want to hear how things go with the assistant.”
“I can’t imagine I won’t talk about it.”

She nods. “I think that’s why I didn’t want to let go of Ziva. She was doing… not things like my email, but taking over a lot of the bits of the job for me.”

Ziva’s upstairs, getting a nap with Dave right now, so Tim’s not too worried about talking about her. “I know I’m going to need a few Zivas, too. Janes of All Trades, able to do a bit of everything. There are going to be problems I can’t even imagine now, and I’ll need people to throw at them.”

Abbi’s drawing a ship. It’s a good likeness to Semper. “That’s why teams are easier. You might not be able to imagine the problems, but you know who you’ve got and who you can toss at whatever it is. I’ve got six hundred people under me right now, and… maybe I know fifty of them.”

“And you’ve got to trust that they know who to throw at the problem?”

“Yeah. That’s a… unsettling feeling.”

Tim nods along with that. “I have a feeling I’m going to know that all too well too soon.”

Sometimes the stars align all perfectly, and a drippy rainy day leads into a quiet dinner, where little people all actually eat, and then a fairly easy bedtime. Easy bedtime leads into grownups spending a few hours playing Trivial Pursuits (Team Medical Examiner won, to the shock of absolutely no one.) while munching on popcorn and fresh fruit.

Eventually, Sean, who’s on a somewhat different schedule than his sisters, wakes up for his last evening feed, breaking the game when the McPalmer contingent decides that’s bedtime for them.

And eventually, it is bedtime.

Abby’s heading back to their room from putting Sean down, finding both of her guys already in bed and naked, waiting for her.

“What are we filming for our girl?” Abby asks as she hops onto their bed.

Jimmy snuggles in behind her and pats her ass. “I know what I’ve been looking forward to for a while.” He kisses up her throat and gives her butt a gentle squeeze. “Want to sink into this, nice and slow.”

“Mmmm…” A happy smile lights her face and she wriggles her bum against him in an encouraging manner. “So, how about it, Tim? Oral, both of you guys at once, what do you want?”

Tim’s somewhat nervous asking for what he wants. ‘Cause… it doesn’t exactly go hand in hand with what Jimmy wants… Well, sort of. Ish.

Jimmy would get what he wants out it… Kind of. It can’t feel that different, right?

Okay, yes, his own ass isn’t nearly as plush as Abby’s, or as smooth, but… Okay, he’s making excuses now.

Granted, making excuses makes sense, because, he’s not entirely sure he wants what he wants. He was dreaming of Breena and Abby doing it, and woke up hard with the idea and feel of it, and that
got the idea in his head, and yeah, every time they’ve done that, he’s loved it, and he’s got no reason
to think it’d be that much different with Jimmy, but…

“He’s blushing,” Jimmy says, pulling Tim out of his thoughts. “How kinky is this?”

“It’s…” Tim feels the blush intensify.

“I’m not calling you Gibbs or letting you slap the back of my head,” Jimmy says with a huge grin.

Tim does whack the back of his head for that, gently.

“I didn’t know you still could blush,” Abby says, looking very intrigued. “At least, not about sex.
I’m going to really like this, aren’t I?”

Tim nods. “You will… Breena will, too. We film this and her phone and panties will melt when she
sees it.” He looks at Jimmy. “Probably…” And he starts to feel a little squirmy asking for it,
because… It’s… it. The line. Decades of sex with lots of other people have passed, changed how he
thinks about and understands sex, but there’s still young Tim, deep inside him, and he feels like he’s
on the edge of it. Real sex. Everything else is a warm up.

He may not agree with that, when his rational mind is doing the thinking, but judging from the blush,
his guts still feel that this is a serious line to cross.

Tim inhales, exhales, swallows, bites his lip, and then says, “You want anal, I want to be in the
middle tonight… Two guys and a girl. That’s got a fairly obvious answer. Just, not sure if you’re
game, or, really, if I am.”

Jimmy’s eyes slip over Tim’s naked body. He spends a moment pondering as he gently strokes
Abby’s hip. He’d been really looking forward to anal with her. It’s been a while since they’ve done
it, and it feels amazing. Add Tim to the mix (he was hoping Tim would go for vanilla sex, because
that feels even better, all sorts of moving and stroking) and he really liked that idea.

He also thinks it’s important that Tim’s actually comfortable enough with the idea of the four of them
together to ask for this, and he doesn’t want to squash that flat the first time he manages to get up the
nerve to ask. Plus, Jimmy assumes that it can’t be that different with Tim, at least, not on a physical
sensation level. And Breena and Abby always look like they have a blast when they do him, and
they aren’t even properly equipped to really enjoy it, so…

“You want me to fuck you?” Might as well make sure he fully understands what Tim’s asking for
here.

Tim remembers how it feels. Full and tight and wet and slippery and everything he loves about sex
wrapped around him from all sides, that gets his heart rate up, and his dick is starting in that direction,
too. He can feel the flush across his face, and down his neck. He’s blushing to his collarbone, but
god the feel of it. “Yeah,” slips out of him. Abby squeaks with excitement when he says that.
“Unless you don’t want to do it.”

Jimmy looks from Tim, who’s starting to really look into this, to Abby. “It’s not quite the same
technique, right?” After all, he doesn’t want to be bad at it.

She nods. “More of an up-down motion with girls and a back-forth with guys. Fuck like you’re
trying to hit a g-spot, and you’ll get it.”

Then he looks to Tim. “Might take a bit to figure out how to do much for you. And…” Speaking of
still able to blush, apparently Jimmy can. “I mean… God, I feel stupid saying this, but… you’ve
talked about being sore… I’m bigger than the dildo the girls use on you.”

That is true. Tim looks down. Jimmy’s still soft, so right now, he’s not bigger or longer than the dildo, but by the time he’s ready for action he will be, and not by just a little bit, either. It’s also true that the stretch bit isn’t exactly Tim’s favorite part of this, but… He’s starting to get the image of it and the feel in his head, Jimmy behind him, rocking back and forth, and he’d be warm, not cold, and firm, but with some give and… Abby with her leg hooked over both of them and slipping over him on the other side. Full, and slide, and wet grip, and that feeling of cumming with each stroke as Abby glides over him. Tim’s breath is coming even faster. Yeah, he wants that. “I know what I’m asking for, and I know you haven’t done it with a guy, but there’s no shot in hell of me lasting an hour in the middle, which is where sore tends to come into play, five minutes’ll be a stretch, and… well… you aren’t bigger than the first dildo Abby used on me.”

Abby doesn’t nod. As well as she can remember, Jimmy actually is about the same size as the dildo she used with Tim that first time. She does smile though, because they know how to prep for this now, which they didn’t then, not really, which is why that dildo felt so huge. Besides, Tim’s bigger than she is, and she can take Jimmy just fine. She knows for a fact that Jimmy feels excellent, and that Tim’s going to enjoy the hell out of him. So she says, “And, he’s bigger than I am, and we all know you fit in me just fine. You’re not going to break him. We just need to make sure to take our time, and go slow and gentle on the prep.”

Jimmy looks over to Tim. “You sure?”

Tim nods. “Yeah. But… I mean, you can back out if you want to. I’m not going to mope or pout or anything. It’s okay if you don’t want to. Abby in the middle, and I’ll be perfectly happy with that, too.” He smiles as he says it, and kisses Abby, because, yes, there is something he wants tonight, but if he doesn’t get it, it’s not a big deal. The three of them playing in their normal comfort zones will keep him awfully happy, too.

Jimmy gives him a little shove. “Same for you. Go hit the head.”

Tim prefers sex with all four of them. Even if it's just the as two couples in the same bed, having all four around feels, at least emotionally, better.

That said, especially if they’re all together, three is easier. Within a few seconds, Tim and Jimmy have slipped into one “team” focusing on Abby, which tends to hit everyone’s buttons nicely.

And, on a more practical level, Tim knows being in the middle feels so good, he’s pretty much useless there. He’s mostly just going to lay there and purr while they fuck him. Which works great, for Jimmy. He will have absolutely no problem, at all, getting off in that situation.

Abby requires a bit more work than him just being there, though.

Granted, with how pleased she seems to be with this idea, and both Tim and Jimmy know that gleam in her eyes, today may be the sort of day where she won’t need all that much more than him being there.

But whether she needs it or not, they’re giving it to her, double time.

Tim would absolutely tell you, that if he is going to be in the middle, and prep for that is going to be
slow and gentle, that 69ing with his wife, both of them on their sides, his head pillowed on her thigh, while she slips bigger and bigger dilators into him, and his husband fucks her from behind, is his absolute favorite way to do that. (Plus, the idea of Breena, who’s likely had a pretty sad day, opening this up and watching it later tonight, or maybe tomorrow morning, is doing some awfully good things for him, too.)

There’s nothing on earth that looks like Abby’s pussy wrapped wet and slick around Jimmy’s dick while he licks her to a panting, cursing orgasm. Nothing tastes better than ripe, flushed pussy on a hard cock.

And the feel of it! He keeps focusing on Jimmy’s hair and face against his leg, because otherwise, the feel of Abby’s mouth, wet and hot and suck, as she’s slowly easing the dilators in and out, carefully making sure to keep bumping his prostate as she does it, might toss him over the edge, and no matter how amazing this is, he doesn’t want to come from it.

Abby’s gently twisting the dilator. He can’t feel the twist much, lubed glass is way too slick for that, but he can feel her moving it, feel his body soft and relaxed (as much as he ever gets) around it.

She kisses his thigh. “You two ready to shift around some.”

“Oh yeah!” He’s been expertly blown within an inch of his life and got to watch the best live porn ever while going down on his wife, yes, he’s ready. “You ready to see this?” he asks in the direction of Abby’s phone. He knows she’s recording this, and then he air kisses in Breena’s direction.

He grins, wiggles his butt a little at the phone, and Abby and Jimmy laugh.

Jimmy gives him a gentle slap to the ass, and says, “Stop wiggling it for her, she’s not here. Wiggle some for me.”

“You don’t like watching me wiggle.”

Jimmy sticks out his tongue at Tim. And Tim leans forward, pulling Jimmy into a kiss, and sucking his tongue as Jimmy moans at the taste of Abby on him.

“So, how are we doing this?” Jimmy asks.

This would be where it occurs to Tim that they’ve got options. Every time they’ve done it before, they’ve been on the bed, spooning.

But, especially filming it… Spooning gives Breena a really great view of their sides, which… Tim’s more visually oriented that Breena is, so he knows when he’s watching sex, he tends to like to see sex. Not three people rubbing against each other. And maybe a view of their hips and sides and whatnot might do it for her, given that she knows what they’re doing, but…

If they can arrange themselves so she’s got a view they may as well give her one, right?

He pats the head of the bed, tossing a few pillows against the backrest. “Okay, Jimmy, you go here.”

“And just sit back?”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”
“I can do that.” And he does. Abby’s already got an idea of what’s coming, and she’s moving her phone to get the right angle. She’s got it propped on a pillow, facing where they’re going to be. She’s adjusting it and says, “So, do we call it cowgirl when you’re the one in the saddle?”

“Only if I’m wearing the kilt and eyeliner.”

Jimmy smirks at that. “Just get down here, I’m getting lonely.”

“And we wouldn’t want that,” Abby replies, grabbing the lube and adding more to Jimmy. “There, all nice and slick.”

Tim turns, so his back is to Jimmy’s chest, and gets him into place. He’s done it before with a dildo, but it feels a little odd to grab something that twitches a bit when he curls his hand around it. Then he starts the long, slow descent.

“God, you’re tight!” Jimmy hisses, starting to slide in.

“No, you’re just big.” Which is part of it. Jimmy’s wider around than Tim, and a lot wider than the dildo that Abby or Breena use. “And I haven’t done this with something this big in years.” Which is also part of it. But, the more important part, which has Tim squeezing down, is that he’s never done this with someone who can feel it, and the way Jimmy’s holding him, the tremors through his body, the clenched jaw and white knuckles, is hitting Tim hard.

It’s different. Sex doesn’t work that way for him, not usually. Someone sinking into him, slowly, thank God, slowly, because Jimmy does feel a mile wide, and taking pleasure from his body is new.

Jimmy’s panting, soft, breathy, sounds right on Tim’s ear. That feels familiar. The feeling that goes with knowing you’re making someone feel good. He knows he loves that, but usually, unless he’s tied up, making someone feel that good involves him actively doing something, beyond just trying to relax and let gravity take care of things.

Right now, he’s trying not to clench down, though doing it makes Jimmy hiss and twitch, and he knows why Abby and Breena’ll do that, why they like that, now. He wants to make Jimmy hiss, and he knows how good having a tight little ass ripple over the top inch of your dick feels.

He also knows how sore he’s going to be if he keeps doing that, and right now this’ll go a bit more smoothly if he just lets Jimmy in.

Jimmy has his hands on Tim’s hips, just holding on. The grasp is gentle, though Tim can feel the tension in his fingers. Tim twines his fingers between Jimmy’s and bears down a bit, causing the head of Jimmy’s dick to almost pop into place, and from there, he just lets himself slip all the way down.

“Shit!” hisses out of Jimmy, and Tim agrees, though not for the same reason. On Jimmy’s end, this is hot and tight and just like with Abby it’s like a fist of hot, rippling gel around him, and that feels so good. For Tim, it’s a stretch, almost too much; Jimmy’s at least an inch and a half more around than the dildo they use for this, and even with the prep time, Tim can really feel the difference. He’s not in pain, too much prep for that, but his body definitely knows it’s not doing its normal routine. A moment of still works for both of them for very different reasons.

But, eventually the sensation of stretch lessens, and Tim relaxes back against Jimmy, feeling his breath hot against the nape of his neck, and hearing the low groan as he starts rock his hips a little.

Every little gasp and groan as he starts to move lights Tim up. Maybe not physically, not so much, not yet, but mentally… It’s that Sex God feeling. Like having his face buried in one of the girls’
pussy, making them gasp and sing and cream. That sets an image in his head. On his knees, Jimmy nailing him, mouth between Abby’s legs as Breena sucks him off. He whimpers at that and decides they are doing that as soon as they can.

Tim wriggles a bit, and that gets another grunt out of Jimmy.

“You all set?” Abby asks them.

“Oh yeah,” slips out of Jimmy, sounding a bit dreamy.

“Good.” She leans over Tim and kisses Jimmy.

Jimmy’s making some very happy noises, and Tim’s enjoying this because he’s got her breasts hanging in his face, so he gets to nuzzle and kiss. When she pulls back she says to Tim, “How about you? All good.”

He nods. “Yeah.”

She kisses Tim. “He feel good, all hot and hard inside you?”

Tim nods. “Big. Really big.” Tim can feel Jimmy’s pleased smirk at that, along with a kiss to his shoulder.

Jimmy cants his hips, trying to do Tim some good with that big, hard, hot dick of his.

“His aim needs some work.” Tim looks behind him and grins.

Jimmy rocks his hips again, but unless he wants to plant his feet and really get his legs into it, there’s not all that much he can do on the bottom. And yes, he can, with Tim and Abby on his lap, shift them around and probably bounce the life out of both of them, but that sounds like a workout, not sex, and he’s not looking to recreate his leg day workout, he’s looking to get off.

“You’re the on top. I think you’re the one who’s aiming.”

And Tim is, so he experiments a bit with what to do. It’s not the first time he’s done this in this position. But it’s been fewer than five times, and he’s still not entirely sure how to move himself to get Jimmy’s dick where he wants it.

He tries rocking the way he would if he were using his anal plug, but Jimmy’s too long for that to work the same way, and if Tim’s facing away from him, his dick curves in the wrong direction.

“When you’re not nursing anymore, we’re going to try this with you between us,” he says to Abby, rolling his hips a bit, still not finding exactly what he’s looking for.

“Why?”

“His dick curves, and I’m in the wrong position to do much with it.”

Jimmy likes the idea of that. Yeah, Tim feels good, but the way he’s moving isn’t involving any sort of meter or rhythm, and his back and neck aren’t exactly erotic delights for Jimmy, so having a lapful of Abby or Breena, and some breasts in his face, would certainly take this up a few notches.

“Next time,” Abby knows that if she gets into the middle, one or both of them will be touching her breasts, and she doesn’t need her milk letting down right now.

But she also knows, that her g spot is about the same place Tim’s prostate is, and she’s very happily
ridden Jimmy before, back to chest, and had him get her just fine.

“Pull up some, and lean back, Tim, then go shallow.”

He does, and as he’s raising up and leaning further back the head of Jimmy’s cock gets him just right. “Fuck!” eases out of his mouth, and then Jimmy rolls his hips, rubbing over him again, and that’s exactly the right spot. “Oh!”

Abby grins at both of them, kissing Tim, and then Jimmy, and Tim again, before switching around, bum to Tim, on her hands and knees, and sinking back onto him.

Tim groans again, loud.

And he is ecstatically in the middle.

Rhythm with three people is more complicated than rhythm with two. Tim supposes that he should be doing this with Jimmy for the first time with just the two of them, because he’d be having an easier time figuring out how to do this, but… if it was just the two them, they probably wouldn’t do this.

Either way, he eventually gets an alternating rhythm, because the strokes that feel best to him, shallow, kind of miss the target for Jimmy. And the ones that feel best to Jimmy, long and deep, are okay for Tim, but they don’t spark that glorious, full, cumming, getting fucked through his goddamned dick feel that shallow gives him.

Abby eventually gets what he’s doing. And once she does, she mirrors him.

So, when he goes deep with Jimmy, she stays shallow. When he’s shallow on Jimmy, she goes deep.

And Tim more or less basks in it. With the way he’s built, shallow from Jimmy means his prostate’s getting all the attention it wants, and deep from Abby, means his dick is buried in her, and both together means he’s 174 pound bag of sexual pleasure, sparking from toes to head, moaning and cursing, loud, babbling about how good this feels and how much he loves both of them.

He can feel himself cresting, and is trying to control it, because he knows that once he gets off, the ride is done for Jimmy, too. He’s way too sensitive post-climax to take any anal after, and they didn’t think this through enough to get a condom on Jimmy, so it’s not like he can just switch to Abby when Tim’s done.

“Jimmy, come!” he gasps out.

If he was able to think, being told to get off would have confused Jimmy, but in that he’s all sex right now, he just goes for it, shifting rhythm again, faster, harder, deeper, pulling Tim onto him, and Tim’s far enough along that that’s feeling awesome, too.

Doesn’t take more than a few strokes, and he feels Jimmy pull him even tighter, biting on his shoulder, pounding into him, and then going deep and pulsing, and that…

He loves the way it feels when the girls get off, that tight, rippling clench, and feeling it from the other side, the twitch and pulse and Jimmy’s dick actually getting bigger and thicker and harder before he slams in one last time…
So close, just a little… Abby takes him deep, moaning. He can feel her hand moving fast on her clit, and… she starts to ripple and he’s gone.

Pleasure sparking, twitching, his whole body tensing and relaxing and glowing with it.

---

He doesn’t want to move at all. Tim would very happily spend the next ten hours in bed doing nothing.

Abby has a different idea on that. “Get up.”

Tim raises a sleepy eyebrow at her. He knows that when he’s on the doing side of anal (like Jimmy, who’s in their bathroom right now) that he’s got to do some extra cleanup, but… Other than being a bit sweaty and slippery, he doesn’t think he’s got anything that’ll need more than ten seconds with a Kleenex to take care of.

She nudges him again, and he finally gets why she’s poking him. Dildos don’t cum. Jimmy does.

He nods. “Oh.”

“Yeah. Bear down, and then use baby wipes. You might be a bit drippy tonight, so you might want to tuck a tissue between your cheeks.”

Tim pulls himself up, and notices he is wetter than he’d normally be. He’s not sure how much he likes that, but… The girls do some variation on this every single time they have sex, so he’s not feeling like he can complain.

He kisses Jimmy as he heads out of the bathroom. Just a quick peck, and then hears Abby saying to the recorder. “Okay, Breena, hope that keeps you all warm and happy tonight!”

Jimmy’s voice adds, ‘Love you, Baby, see you day after tomorrow!’

---

Sunday morning. Since Breena and Jeannie are in Georgia, there’s no Slater family supper today. So they decide to skip church, stay home, have breakfast with the rest of the family, and, come naptime, head back to Jimmy and Breena’s.

Sundays are always a bit bittersweet. Each weekend, they get basically a day and a half stolen from the rest of the week, time where they can be with their loves.

But Sunday is the day the real world calls them back. Ducky and Penny always have to leave right after breakfast. If traffic behaves, and it often doesn’t, the trek back to New York takes seven hours. But they’ve had that run take fourteen in the past.

Usually, on Sunday, the McPalmers stick around just a few minutes past Ducky and Penny, and then load up the kids for church with Breena’s parents and Slater family supper.

Some weeks Gibbs and Abbi come with them.

Some they stay at the house, with Tony and Ziva, who generally don’t make the return trip to DC.
until Monday morning. After all, Tony’s got to drive them past their apartment to get from the house to the Navy Yard, so for them it’s just easier to stay.

“What are you doing with all the spare time?” Tony asks as he’s laying lox on his bagel. (Sunday morning breakfast: bagels, lox, cream cheese, capers, and mounds of scrambled eggs next to them.)

Tim shrugs. He’s not got any plans, not really. “Write some, maybe, when the kids are down.”

“I’ve got a stack of journals I need to read,” Abby says. “So, come naptime, I’ve got a date with a forensics magazine.”

Jimmy looks up from his eggs. “I was going to hit the range. Been a while since I’ve been, and this one’ll jump on me if I get rusty,” he nods towards Gibbs. “You want to come?”

Gibbs shakes his head. Abbi’s actually home today, and he’s spending it with her. He strokes the back of his index finger along her wrist. “Got better things to do than watch you shoot.”

That gets a little chuckling.

“And what would that be?” Abbi asks.

“You, me, bottle of suntan lotion, and the bay.”

She grins. “Much better.”

Tim’s thinking as he’s chewing his own lox and bagel. “I let Ngyn have Mr. Smiley. Maybe instead of time with my keyboard, I’ll go with you.”

Jimmy nods at that, company sounds fine to him.

There’s something Tim hasn’t done in forever. Well, since the fall. It didn’t occur to him when he was packing up his office, and let Ngyn have Mr. Smiley, but in that he’s got to get a new one, for himself, it’s hitting him, hard, that he has not fired a gun since he dropped his rifle off the roof of the NCIS building.

He and Jimmy are at the range, loading up.

It’s his gun, so it doesn’t feel odd in his hand, but… It’s like his hand doesn’t want it any more.

He’s remembering Jimmy talking about not wanting to handle a gun after he’d been kidnapped and needed to shoot that guy. (Of course, the fact that Jimmy is standing slightly behind him might have something to do with why he’s thinking about that, too.)

So, he’s standing at the range, feeling… Like this is new. But not. His hands know the drill. They’ve done this hundreds of times.

But it still feels different.

He doesn’t feel fear, or nerves, but… He shakes his head. He can’t name it. It’s not revulsion, but it’s in that neighborhood.
He’s almost tempted to just pack it up, and head home, but, again he shakes his head. Like he told Jimmy, “Two more minutes and we would have never been more than friendly co-workers. You need to be able to rescue yourself.”

And Tim does. And that means not feeling, whatever this is, about using a gun.

He scrolls his target out. Black outline of a torso and head on white. He slips on his ear protection, and flips the safety goggles over his eyes, and fires.

And with that tiny explosion a lot of sitting on top of the roof at NCIS comes running back. What hits first is hunger, his stomach screaming at him, begging for food. Then literal screaming slams into him. The people on the street were screaming, and he may have been, too. The smell crashes into him, next. Appalling body order, mildew, and foot rot, all of it creeping through burnt smells. His rifle, hot, cordite smoke. DC, old, cold, wet char. Gasoline fire, acrid and chemical.

And above and through that, the gray, blank, watching-it-happen-to-someone-else disassociation of it pours through him.

Tim swallows hard, forcing himself out of that. He’s in the shooting range. Other people are firing, which is likely adding to memories. It’s been nine months. He doesn’t even think about being trapped in the Navy Yard all that often. Maybe once every few weeks now.

He reels in the target. Now, as then, he’s been able to do what he needs to do. No there isn’t a smiley face, but there is a bullet strike, dead center in the head.

Tim takes it down, deciding that that’s good enough for right now.

He doesn’t realize Jimmy’s hand is on his shoulder, or that he’s holding it, until he reaches to take the target off the reel.

Staring at the one, lone hole through the center of the target’s head, Tim realizes he’s never going to be able to make a joke like Mr. Smiley, again. It doesn’t matter if he wants to project the image of “I can kill you and laugh about it,” because he won’t, can’t do that anymore.

He knows what he’s capable of doing now. How far he’ll go to keep himself and his people safe. And that’s not funny.

“Want to tell me where you were right after you fired?” Jimmy asks as they’re walking out.

Tim only fired the one shot. Jimmy did his usual monthly or so practice rounds. He’s fairly certain at this point he’s never going to be able to make a joke like Mr. Smiley, again. It doesn’t matter if he wants to project the image of “I can kill you and laugh about it,” because he won’t, can’t do that anymore.

He knows what he’s capable of doing now. How far he’ll go to keep himself and his people safe.

That said… “You want to talk about it?”
Tim shakes his head. And from the set of his face, and the way he’s gazing at the car, Jimmy’s sure that he really doesn’t. That is not Tim’s, *pry it out of me* look.

So, Jimmy changes the topic. “Being in the middle is your favorite, right?”

Tim looks relieved to have something else to think about, and wiggles his hand. “Favorite when we’re not looking to spend a whole afternoon or night going at it. Getting spun out for an hour or more is my real favorite, that’s…” Tim’s got a huge grin on his face. Maybe it’s a little forced, but only a little. “Nothing else is like that. But, if we don’t have a few hours to play, then, yeah, being in the middle is my favorite. Why?”

“You sore at all?”

“No.” He gives Jimmy a gentle shove. Then opens the car door while Jimmy circles around. Once they’re in he says, “You’re not *that* big and we didn’t go *that* long.”

“Felt like you might have been in pain at first.”

“Okay, yeah, first little bit, yeah, that was tight. No worse than holding a pose a bit too deep though.”

“Did it feel different?” Jimmy buckles his seatbelt.

“Different than what?”

“When the girls do it.”

Tim’s nodding as he slips the key into the ignition. “Yeah. Even if you hadn’t been hugging me I would have known it was you, and not one of the girls with the strap-on. You’re… I get why they like it. It’s… The strap on is mostly just for me, you know? Abby gets off on it in her head, and Breena does, too, but fucking me doesn’t do anything for them physically, and it does for you, so that was different and… good… in a way I wasn’t expecting, and… Might just be the dildo we use, but, once I got used to the size, you feel better than it does.”

*Explain more* is on Jimmy’s face as Tim pulls the car out of their parking space.

“You’re warm, firm but with some give, not room temperature plastic. I can feel you liking what we’re doing. Feel you get off from it.”

“Better with me or one of the girls?”

Tim winces, because he’s not sure how to answer that. He keeps thinking. “Eh… I like your dick and their boobs.” That makes him think for a moment. “Those futa guys might be onto something. Because, at this point, if Breena and Abby came equipped with all the options, I’d *really* go for it. You thinking about trying it?”

“Yeah. Little wary, Breena really didn’t like it, and, okay tongue’s great, but she likes that, too, and… one finger is good, too, but…”

“Try it. You don’t like it, we stop. We all know what we’re doing these days, so if it hurts or just feels weird, mentally or physically, and that’s that, we stop.”

Jimmy nods. “Kind of want to do it with Breena.”

Tim nods, too, and smiles. “She’s good at it. Got this little grind thing that’s a treat.”
“That she can’t do until she’s done being pregnant.”

Tim thinks about that. “I figured out how to have sex when I had a hell of a lot more stomach than I do now.”

Jimmy shakes his head. “Not six months pregnant sort of stomach.”

Tim blows that off. “Guys with beer guts somehow manage to have sex. Abby’s done me, and done me good five months pregnant, Breena’s not that much further along. You tell her you want to try, and I’m sure she’ll become really motivated to find a solution for this.”

They’re about fifteen minutes from Jimmy’s, having picked up some dinner on the way home, when Tim and Jimmy’s phone chirps at the same time. Then they chirp again. Since Tim’s driving, Jimmy checks.

He’s grinning: a wide, happy, dirty look on his face.

“She saw the video. Sent us a recording of her watching it. Apparently we’ve got some good stuff for tonight.”

Tim smiles at that.

Jimmy’s fingers are flying over his phone.

“How’s the rest of it going?”

“I’m finding out.”

A moment later he says, “Sad. Long. No one got to say goodbye, and everyone’s walking around half-stunned, half-sobbing.”

Tim nods. “Tell her we’ll keep sending stuff to make her feel better.”

“What are you thinking of for tonight?” Jimmy asks.

“Sex-wise, don’t know yet. But tubby time pictures. You, me, the kids, naked bath time. She’ll like that.”

Jimmy smirks. “How about we get at least some footage where we’re both dressed. That way she can show babies getting tubbies to Jeannie, too, help perk her up some, as well.”

“Good point. She’ll probably find the two of us in charge of it funny, too.”

“Especially if we screw up a bit.”

Tim smirks at that, too. “I imagine the girls will do a good enough job of keeping us on our toes without either of us trying to be funny.”

Jimmy chuckles a bit at that.
As they’re heading home, and Jimmy’s thinking about what to send Breena, his mind keeps wandering off of possible sex tonight, to possible, future sex, with her.

In the months coming up to getting married… Actually from about forty seconds after she told him she was a virgin to waking up, finally feeling like a person again and remembering that at some point his wife would get home and they’d actually, finally, really, get to have sex, Jimmy had devoted a lot of thought to how to go about having sex with a virgin. (Both on the fantasy, wank fodder level, and on a mechanical, how do I do this well, sort of way.)

Wank fodder aside, the how to do it well aspect mattered more for actual sex with Breena. He’d done it once before, when he too was a virgin, and it’s a sweet memory. But… happy fumbling around, and then finally getting the condom on (he didn’t practice that part ahead of time, and it kind of got stuck under the head of his dick, so it took a bit to get it into place right, and it was a good thing he was with a girl he liked enough, and liked him enough to laugh it off with) followed by a lot of, “Good?” “Yeah?” “Here?” “There?” “Uh?” “OH!”, was not precisely what he was looking to do with Breena.

He was supposed to be the one who knew what he was doing. And he did. At least, as well as anyone can transfer experience with a bunch of other people to a different person.

But, even having a decent amount of experience in his brain, it wasn’t experience with Breena.

And the only thing he knew for sure was that unlike his first time ever, he wasn’t going to try it on top.

But that plan didn’t actually make it through to reality. He’d been between her legs, happily licking away, finally getting her on his tongue, fingers inside of her, dick so hard it was ready to explode, and he could feel how close she was to getting off, feel her body tight on his, legs around his shoulders, fingers clenched in the bedsheets, and he just knew.

He shifted up, fast, and slipped into her, giving her a good grind with his pubic bone, and got her off on the first thrust. He didn’t last all that long after, but he didn’t need to. They spent… felt like forever, lying together and kissing and petting after, and eventually he got hard again, and they did it long and slow… and he rolled onto his back, and she got on top of him and they spent a long time playing with what felt good, learning what she liked, showing her what he liked.

And he still can’t think about it without a huge grin spreading all over his face.

But there’s an image… It’s a lot clearer than sinking into her body for the first time, that’s… He doesn’t have an image for that, probably meant his eyes were closed, or the feel of it wiped the image right out of his mind.

But there is an image of her straddling him, and she’s the only thing in his world in focus, and it’s the look on her face as she’s slipping down his body. She was looking him in the eye, and biting her bottom lip a little, her hands twined with his, breathing a little fast, and so much love and wonder and new.

And he never got to give her that. It was new, with her, but not new in the sense of never done it before and…

And this would be new. He’s never done it, and… he could give that back to her.

Jimmy smiles, thinking she’d like it. And if she wants to wait until Donnie’s on the outside, he can do that.
“Speaking of not being here,” Tim says as they spend two full minutes in the car, with the engine stopped, in the driveway, with Jimmy just looking out at nothing, a dreamy expression on his face.

He jerks a bit at Tim’s voice and says, “Just… Thinking of Breena getting home.”

Tim smiles at that. “Yeah. Tuesday, right?”

“If everything goes well. Funeral Monday, drive home Tuesday.”

Tim’s seen video of dads leaning over the side of the tub to give their kids a bath, but he can’t for the life of him figure out how that actually works. Especially not with multiple kids, in the tub, at once. So far, every time he’s tried this, everyone gets sopping wet, and at least one child slithers away while he’s trying to soap them up and ends up underwater, looking really shocked to be there.

The first few minutes of tubby time, where he and Jimmy are corralling the kiddos while Abby films it is not doing anything to dissuade him from his conviction that this just doesn’t work. Babies, unlike normal humans, become completely frictionless when immersed in water, and can wriggle away in under a second.

Sean’s the one, who, literally, less than a minute into this tries to go leaping from Tim’s hands into the water, and he barely keeps a hold of him.

So, they get about two minutes of Tim and Jimmy getting soaked as small people splash around, and then send that off to Breena and her mom.

What follows is normal tubby time, where Tim strips off, and gets in the tub with the little guys. With Sean in his lap, he’s got much better control of the situation, and because he takes up quite a bit of the space in there, the girls don’t have quite as much room to roam around.

A few minutes after the first video goes out, Breena gets another one, this time, just for her. This one has Tim in the tub, snagging each child, washing them off, with lots of tickles and cuddles, and then handing each one over to Jimmy, who’s got each of their favorite bath towels. (Molly has the pink unicorn, Kelly’s got the green dragon, Anna’s got a brown puppy, and Sean doesn’t have a favorite, so he’s got the blue dinosaur.)

Jimmy takes each child from him, wraps them in their favorite towel, gets them all dried off, and then Abby’s in charge of video and brushing teeth.

Molly blows a kiss to the camera and says, “Good night, Mommy! We miss you.”

Jimmy’s not in the picture, but she can hear his voice adding in, “We really do. Haven’t watched your video, yet, that’s for after tubby time. We’ll send you more good stuff in a bit.”

Kiss sounds from Abby and Tim follow that.

Breena sees the second video, labeled “Watch on your own.” She pops her earbuds in, and angles the phone so her mom can’t see it.

She watches and smiles, and tries not to cry.
Her mom’s curious about what might be on the second video, that her daughter is watching with so much emotion, but Breena shakes her head. “From Jimmy, just for me.”

Jeannie nods, then swallows, hard. Breena tucks her phone into her pocket. Now’s about the time her mom and Aunt Nance would talk every night, and she knows Jeannie’s missing her love very much right now.

She gently rubs her mom’s back. “Tell me about how you two met, back in college…” She’s heard the story before, but figures it’s a good memory for her mom.

Jeannie sniffs again. She taps the pocket with the phone in it, and says, “Don’t let any of it just go by. It’s so sweet and so swift.”

“I know.”

“You want to give him a call?”

“It’s okay. We’ll talk later, after the babies are down.”

“Okay.”

They do get to talk a bit. Sean’s having the last of his “dinners,” and they’ve got skype set up while they get ready for bed. Kind of early for a Sunday, but Tim’s got an early morning, and he’s on baby wrangling tonight. Plus they all want to see Breena’s video.

And make a response piece.

Still, Tim thinks this, and time like it, is one of his favorite pieces of the day. They’re in bed, he’s got Abby in his lap, and Sean’s in her arms, having his last nurse of the day. Jimmy’s next to them, and they’re just talking about silly things.

He’s telling them about this weekend’s adventures at the Museum of Food. Ziva and Dave came along this time. The ladies at the store are used to Tim and Gibbs, but they haven’t seen Ziva there before. They were happy to coo over Dave, and when asked who Ziva was Tim put an arm around her and said, “Little sis.”

She smirked at him, and poked his side, but didn’t correct anything about that.

Tim’s telling the story, “Then the checkout lady eyed Gibbs, looks at me, green eyes, looks at Ziva, brown eyes, and back to Gibbs, blue eyes, and said, ‘How many kids do you have?’ And he says to her, ‘Collected a bunch of ‘em over the years. Got seven of ‘em now.’ And she shook her head and says, ‘Lord love you. It’s got to be loud at your place come Christmastime.’ Gibbs laughed and said, ‘You’ve got no idea.’”

Breena smiles at that. “That’s a good story.”

“Yeah, she’s from somewhere down south, and she was just about to start blessing our hearts, too.”

Breena shakes her head. “I’m getting a lot of that down here. Aunt Nance has a huge family. Cousins and in-laws coming out the ears, and they don’t exactly get on, so I’m hearing a lot of things like, ‘It’s not his fault, sweet thing, but Rodger, bless is heart, is dumb as a stump!’”
“Why are they badmouthing Rodger?” Abby asks.

Breena sighs. “He wanted red carnations for the funeral flowers.”

Tim will happily admit to not being the branch of the family that deals with the funeral end of things, but, he doesn’t see why red carnations would be a problem.

“And…” he leads.

“It’s not like they’re evil or anything, but a lot of people think bright, showy flowers at a funeral are tacky. Most people go for white, ivory, light pink, light yellow. Flowers that blend into the background.”

Tim nods at that, and then kisses Abby’s cheek. “You’re going to want black ones, right?”

She scoffs. “I’m living forever. I’ll bury you with the black ones.”

He laughs a bit at that, and sees that they’re getting too close to something that’s too real for Breena to joke about it comfortably, so he says, “Just remember, I want a special viewing for my FBI guys, face down, with a big sign on the small of my back with an arrow that points down and says, ‘Kiss HERE!’”

That does get all of them laughing, Breena most of all.

“You’ve been on the job for three days and you’re already turning into Gibbs,” Jimmy adds.

“Just you wait, I’m already measuring out the basement for a boat.”

“You’re measuring out the basement for a bed, if that last week was anything to go by,” Abby says, stroking his cheek. “Sleepy boy.”

Sean’s slowing down on his nursing. “That one’s the sleepy boy.” He pets his son, who blinks a few times, and sucks a little faster. “Not quite done, yet.”

Abby’s patting his back. “Not yet. How’s little boy mark II doing?”

They can see Breena laying her hands on her tummy. “Likely sleepy, too. He’s pretty still right now. Kicking up a storm earlier, but right now, he’s getting a nap.” Jimmy looks like he wants to pet her tummy, feel her warm under his hand, and his boy resting. She smiles across the camera at him, and nods. “I know.” She strokes her belly for him. “I should probably let you three go. Sean looks almost done, and I know it’s playtime once he’s down.”

So, as Sean wraps up, they slowly break away, and get ready for the next bit of the night.

---

They didn’t tell Breena what was on the video they sent. Obviously, given what they were doing to Tim, she had to have some idea of what was going to happen, but she had no idea of who was going in the middle until he started wiggling around.

She decided it would be fun to take another video of her watching what they sent.

Speaking of phones melting.

They’re watching her pace herself to the video, watching it hungrily, playing with herself, speeding
up and slowing down to the rhythm they set. And she’s having an awfully good time watching it. She’s giggling when Tim gets up and does his little wiggle, and then they can hear Jimmy’s comment about wiggling for him, and her eyes go wide and her mouth drops and a moment later *everything* goes up about six notches.

Tim, obviously, hasn’t watched their part of the video. He was busy doing it, but watching Breena react to it feels almost as good as doing it the first time. And it’s making him wonder how good it *looked*. If the expression on her face, the flush spreading across her body, high hard nipples, wet, spread pussy is anything to go by, it *looks* amazing.

The three of them watch, petting each other, eyes never leaving the screen. They don’t kiss, because they can’t kiss and watch at the same time, but… None of them is missing that right now. They don’t want to look away.

What follows is a lot less coordinated than the night before. They didn’t plan ahead of time, just went with the flow. And the flow took them from petting to kisses to more petting. Flowing from sitting next to each other to spooned onto their sides.

This time Abby’s in the middle, with both of the guys focusing on her.

She’s facing Tim today, leg over his hip, with Jimmy behind her, her, and Tim’s necks over his arm. Tim’s got his arm across Abby’s body, with his hand cupping Jimmy’s right hip.

Maybe this isn’t as visually interesting as last night, but it’s close and warm, everyone touching all over, happily wriggling together.

And Tim doesn’t know how long they went last night, but this night is slow. Long, easy strokes. Both Tim and Jimmy drawing all the way out before easing back in. They don’t have all the time in the world, but they’ve got more than enough to set Abby alight and get both of them shaking with the need to get off.

Eventually, slow and easy fades to fast and urgent. Tim can feel Jimmy’s hand tight on his shoulder, and Abby’s heel tight on his hip. He knows he’s thrusting as fast as he can, arm tense, pulling Jimmy deeper into Abby, toward him.

He’s deep enough into it that he doesn’t know who gets off first, just that he’s wrapped in skin tingling love.

---

Last job of the night. A crying six-month-old, and he’s almost exactly six-months-old now, does not sound like a newborn. Sean’s a lot louder now, and more insistent.

Tim drags himself away from their snuggle, and lumbers toward Sean. “Hey, you.”

Sean doesn’t respond until Tim picks him up. Then he quiets down.

“I’m here.” Sean gets his wipe down, fresh diaper, and onesie put back on. Then Tim lays him back in his crib, Sean never likes that part, as he goes off to wash his hands and make up Sean’s bottle. But, a moment later, when he’s back with the bottle, and has Sean on his chest, slurping away, he says, “You know, when your sister was this age, she’s gotten to the point where she could sleep from ten to six.”

Mwuf, mwuf, mwuf… Sean’s utterly unconcerned as to what Kelly may have been doing at six
Granted, she’d eat at seven, and again at ten, and that’d be it for the night. Sean eats at eight, midnight, and then five. He’s also three pounds smaller than Kelly was at this stage. He’s plumping up like a champ. He’s almost three times the size he was when he was born, but that still only puts him at fifteen pounds.

“You think when you hit seventeen pounds maybe we could get a full eight hours out of you?”

Mwuf, mwuf, mwuf…

“Yeah, I know, you’ll do it when you can.”

Sean looks up at him, big dark eyes in the blue nightlight glow of the nursery.

Tim rocks him back and forth in the rocking chair Gibbs made for Anna, feeling him slurping down his bottle, as he tunelessly hums to him.

7:00 rolls around a lot sooner than Tim would like, but even with the interrupted sleep, he’s feeling ready to hit the FBI, and take on all comers.

He’s not exactly perky in the morning. (He’s rarely perky on mornings that don’t involve sex, and pretty much never perky in the morning if it was his night with the kids.) But he’s ready.
Having someone to beat the paperwork into submission means that Tim can finally start to do some actual work for his work.

Which he’s looking forward to. First off, get that meeting with Comey on the board. It feels really bizarre to him to ask Jennifer to schedule it for him, but… That’s part of the stuff she can do, so, she’ll just… do it. Apparently.

Meanwhile, he begins to prep for it.

Two hours into it, while he’s putting together his presentation to show Comey how he wants his department to work, Jennifer comes in to let him know when they’re meeting, along with handing over a few pages that still need his signature, and she looks at what he’s got up on his big screen.

“You really weren’t kidding about knowing your way around a computer.”

He smirks a bit. “You should see what I can do when we need to get into the CIA on an hour’s notice without their permission.”

Her eyes widen a bit, and then settle back to their normal state as she says, “I’m going to pretend you’re just bragging.”

Tim nods, a little smirk on his face. “It’s probably better that way.”

“Anyway, what I meant was, I’ve worked for guys who couldn’t figure out how to use the clicker to put the presentations I put together up on their big screen.”

“Oh.” Tim’s looking at what he’s got up right now, more of his circles, this time all nice and tidy. “Yeah. This. I’ve been doing this since 2004. For one of those guys who doesn’t know how to use the clicker.”

She smiles at that. “You came up from the ranks.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Tim supposes it’s possible to start off as an Executive Vice President or whatever, but every job he’s worked has required at least some time at the bottom of the pile to move up.

“I suppose they do. But, when you work for a Federal Judge, maybe he was a prosecutor for a while, maybe a private lawyer, but by the time he’s that high up, it’s been two decades since he did any of his own work. The federal prosecutor I worked for… He’d been in his position for twenty-five years. His secretary retired a bit before he was planning on going, so I was there for his last three years. He left law school in the ‘80s finished scutwork in the ‘90s, and by the time I was working for him, hadn’t done anything involving working for someone else in a decade.”

“It’s been less than three years since I was in the field.”

“How did you jump that far that fast?”

Tim shakes his head. “Google me if you want to. I’m not a big fan of talking myself up. Not like that.”

She nods. “Looks like you’re getting that done.” It didn’t take him a ton of time to make up the
graphics he needed. After all, compared to full victim/perp dossiers, a collection of circles with lines on them is child’s play.

“I am. Next up, looking for talent.”

“What do you need for that?”

“To start with, the employment records of everyone currently on anti-corruption at the FBI.”

“I’ll get them.”

“Oh, God, they’re on paper!” Tim half-whimpers, half-shrieks when Jennifer begins to wheel in cart stacked high with boxes of personnel files his office a few hours later.

She gives him a very long look, slowly pushing the cart deeper into his office, and says, “You’ve just got to read them.”

He immediately hops up and begins to push the boxes in, and then groans when he sees four more carts in her office.

Seven hundred employment files. Twenty-three boxes, of paper.

He’s staring at her, saying, “Why?”

“Believe it or not, this isn’t nearly as stupid of a reason as you’d expect. Security. The employee service files are unhackable and require you to be able to get into the building, and then lug them out, if you want to steal them.”

Tim sighs again. “You’re right, that’s not nearly as stupid as I thought it would be.”

She nods. “And let me guess, you now want to fire our information technology security guy?”

Tim half smiles. “It’s tempting.” Really tempting. The job that should have taken a thumb drive, two hours of coding, and another four hours of processing just became a… month? (Please, no) long job. “But, no. I would like to set a meeting with whomever he is so we can go over how to drag this system, kicking and screaming, into the 21st century.”

Tim’s sitting at his desk, staring at the boxes. There is no possible way he can go through all of this on his own. He’s practically dialing before he’s realized he’s got his phone out of his pocket.

“Tim?” Gibbs asks, surprised to hear from him a bit before lunch on a Monday.

“What are you doing right now?”

“Walking around the park, tossing a ball around for Mona and Jackson while Dave chews on his toes.”
“Buying Ziva enough off time to stay sane?”

“That’s the idea.”

“Shit.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to take you away from her…”

“But you’ve got something for me?” Tim can hear the light sparking in Gibbs’ eyes at the idea of real work.

“Yeah. Before I got here, the FBI had 700 people working corruption cases. Obviously, a lot of them weren’t very good at their jobs. I need to weed out the deadwood from the actively corrupt ones, from the guys who just didn’t know what was going on.”

“And you need help.”

“I do. 700 files, on paper. I’d been planning on building a database, importing their employment files, and using that to do a fast sort, but… Paper. Someone’s got to read these damn things.”

“Dave’s got lunch in about half an hour. I’ll hand him off to Ziva, and be over.”

“Thank you. Tell her that she and Dave are welcome to come and read if they want, too.”

“I’ll pass it on. You need me to bring band aids?”

Tim grits his teeth. “Yes.”

Okay, one call down. Next one up. “Fornell.”

“Yeah.”

“Is your paperwork detail punishment duty, or is someone expecting you to actually finish it at some point?”

Fornell goes quiet on the other side of the phone line. Tim can tell he’s thinking.

“Why?”

“I need eyes. And if no one cares when your paperwork gets done, then come on up here and do something interesting for a bit. By the time we’re done with this, my paperwork software should be online, and then you can just put the information into the blanks and have a computer spit out the rest of the reports you’ve got to fill out.”

“I’m on my way.”

Fornell’s main concession to being retired is that he comes into the FBI usually without a tie.
Sometimes he’ll have on jeans to go with his jacket and button down.

And of course, he no longer has a badge. They make him wear a little visitor sticker now.

But with all of that, he still looks FBI, and Jennifer sees him come in, and when he does, she just waves him on in.

Fornell looks at the boxes around Tim and groans. “Did you just call me up here to do your paperwork instead of my own?”

Tim’s at his table, where he’s got three piles: fire, investigate, keep. “I wish. She’s here to do my paperwork.” He gestures to the boxes. “That’s everyone who worked FBI corruption as of last year.” Tim glares at the boxes again. He’s already got two papercuts. “We’re going through all of them, and figuring out who we’re keeping, who we’re investigating, and who’s too incompetent to keep his job.”

Fornell’s already pulling out a chair, and dragging a box over to it. Then he heads to Tim’s coffee maker, and gets himself a cup. “You got any snacks?”

Tim shakes his head. “Order out? But I’d thank you if you didn’t. It’s a lot easier not to eat the snacks if they aren’t in front of me.”

Fornell shakes his head a bit. “You’re already too skinny.”

Tim snorts. “Yeah, but Jethro doesn’t think he is, and he’ll be here in an hour or so.”

Fornell’s shaking his head, and getting on his phone. “Investigating takes fuel, McGee, not just piles of coffee. I’ll get something healthy.”

“You’ve got a sick idea of healthy,” Tim says, half an hour, one more paper cut, and two folders later.

“It’s good for the soul,” Fornell says as the delivery guy brings in a plate of antipasti and cookies/pastries. “And brains don’t work without food. And this,” Fornell smiles, pulling the lids off the platters, “is food!”

“You’re an enabler,” Tim says, snagging a mini pistachio cannoli, and then buries himself in a folder, trying to ignore the rest of the cookies, or the really yummy, spicy, garlicky smells coming from the antipasti plate.

“I’m sorry sir, you’re not allowed to have a dog in here,” Tim hears Jennifer say.

He’s getting up to go get Gibbs, and apparently Jackson, into his office when he hears, “This is a hearing ear dog, in training.”

“That’s a puppy. The only thing it’s being trained on is not peeing on the carpet.”
Tim heads out. “We’re working on that, too.” Tim gives Gibbs a hug, and pets Jackson, who not usually getting this warm of a welcome from Tim, yips. Kneeling on the floor, picking up Jackson, and holding him out so he can get a little pet from Jennifer, Tim says, “Jennifer, this is Jackson, who is a hearing ear dog, in training. Right now he’s learning how to go everywhere and be around people and not flip out at them. When he’s a bit older, he’ll start learning how to help Deaf people.”

She glances from Jackson, who is trying to be as cute a possible, which is awfully cute, to Tim. “Cleaning pee off of the rug is not in my job description.”

“Noted.” He nods to Gibbs, putting Jackson back on the floor. “This is Jethro Gibbs, my dad. He’s always welcome in here. Even if I’m not around.”

Jennifer raises an eyebrow at that, giving Gibbs, in his cargo pants, Marines t-shirt, and NCIS cap the once over. Then she nods. “Okay.” She extends her hand, and Gibbs takes it.

Gibbs smirks at Tim. “I like this one.”

“This one can hear you just fine. I’m a person, not a chair. Don’t talk like I’m not here.”

Gibbs turns to her and full on smiles. “Yeah, you’ll do.”

She rolls her eyes, and he nods, still smiling, as he heads into Tim’s office.

On the upside, Tim doesn’t have to explain what he’s looking for in the “keep” pile.

On the downside, they’ve been at it for four hours and there are three folders in there, all of them young agents, who noticed something hinkey with what they were doing, reported it up the chain of command, and then ended up transferred to a different department.

The bigger issue is where’s the line between incompetent and part of the problem?

Tim’s pacing as he reads. First off, he’s less likely to reach out and grab another one of those ridiculously delicious, damned, cookies if he’s pacing, and second of all, having something to do to burn off his frustration is a good thing.

He snaps the folder shut, tapping it in the palm of his hand. “Martin Bleewether, you know him?”

Fornell shakes his head. He doesn’t know most of these guys. He knows of some of them, but personally, nope. The one thing he’s never worked was anti-corruption.

Tim scowls. “His fitness evals are low enough I can’t tell if he’s just too dumb to chew gum and walk at the same time, or if he was intentionally blind to what was going on.”

“What was he investigating?” Gibbs asks.

“Complaint about election fraud in New York. Certain districts just magically ‘lost’ a bunch of registrations. He went in, gave it a once over, and let it go. So, did he not see anything? Did he get paid off? Was the election he checked out actually clean? We know on the national level they were screwing things right and left, but local?” Tim groans. “I do not want to have to reinvestigate every case these guys did to see if they were doing the job.”
“How are his other cases?” Fornell asks.

“Indifferent. He’s got an okay record. An okay number of convictions. Low, but passing fitness evals.” Tim tosses the file into the ‘fire’ pile. “He’s not one of my Paladins, I know that. And I don’t have anything screaming about him in his file to put him in the investigate pile, but…”

“Gut?” Gibbs says.

Tim shrugs. “Yeah, but it’s firing all the time with these guys. A steady drumbeat of Why didn’t you bastards know any better?”

Fornell stands up and stretches. “Feeling it, too.”

Gibbs nods. “And when Ziva comes tomorrow, she’ll feel it, too.”

Fornell shovels the pile of ‘fire’ folders into one of the boxes, and drags it off to what’s becoming the ‘fire’ corner of Tim’s office. “Want me to rain on the parade some more?”

Tim’s rubbing his eyes, remembering that he’s supposed to be wearing his glasses when he’s reading, but they’re hooked into the collar of his jade button down, not on his face. “Sure, dump some more gloom onto this.”

Fornell kicks the box, gently. “You can boot ’em off your team, but I don’t think you can fire them. I haven’t seen anything in any of these files that qualifies as ‘cause.’”

Tim groans at that, too. Then his phone buzzes. “Saved by the buzz.”

Gibbs raises an eyebrow at him, while rubbing Jackson’s ears. (Jackson, having decided the floor is boring, is sitting on the table, next to Gibbs, where he can see everything. He’s being very good up there, sitting quietly, watching, and being fed the occasional bit of cheese or cold cuts, which might have something to do with him being very good.)

“Meeting with Comey. I get to do something fun, namely explain what the hell I’m going to do with all of these guys once I’ve got them.”

That gets a smile out of Gibbs, and a ‘Have fun’ from Fornell, as Tim heads upstairs.

Meeting with Comey feels good. Actual moving forward, progress, that’s making Tim smile.

“McGee,” he offers his hand to shake, and Tim winces a bit at the grasp. “Are you okay?”

Tim holds up his hand and Comey sees the four band aids.

“What happened to you?”

“Your employment files are on paper.”

That gets a bit of a chuckle. “I take it you’re working then.”

“I am working. And not just filling out forms. I’m digging my way through who I’m keeping, and who’s going.”
“And…”

“And it’s not pretty. I’ll probably want to get together with you about that at some later point. Probably with our legal department, too. But that’s not today. I don’t have it all planned out, yet, and I’m betting your time is tight.”

“It is.”

“Then let me get to what I do have prepped.” He flips the first of his screens up. “Okay, anyone who’s worked with Thom Gemcity knows I’m terrible at naming things, so, all of these will have more ‘professional’ sounding monikers by the time I’m rolling this out for real. This is just shorthand to keep you and I in the loop and on track.”

“Game master?” Comey asks, looking at the first circle, as they sit in his office, in front of his big screen, Tim holding the clicker.

“Yeah. That’s the guy who—“

“I know what one is. I’m just… amused to see this.”

“You know?” That surprises Tim quite a bit. Nothing about Comey suggest “gamer.”

“Ten and thirteen-year-old grandsons. I know.”

“Great!” That will make a lot of this easier.

“I take it you’re the Game Master?”

“That’s the idea. So, I’m the guy who makes sure everyone else can do their job.”

“And those jobs are broken into four main categories.”

Apparently, Comey can read a basic chart. It’s occurring to Tim that he may have aimed his organizational outline a few levels too low.

“I’ll start with the really obvious one: Public Relations. I’m going to make sure we’ve got someone who keeps the rest of the world aware of what we’re doing. Two reasons for this, from what my grandmother is telling me, people lost a lot of confidence in the idea that the government would do the right thing. We’re going to rebuild that as well as we can. The second part is I want a constant drumbeat of people getting caught doing whatever it is they’re doing. That way, when someone else is thinking of breaking the laws, they’ll have this in their head.”

“People are less likely to break the law when they think they’ll get caught.”

“Exactly. That’s why people loot during protests. They know the cops already have their hands full, and they’ll blend into the crowd, so they take advantage of it. I want everyone to know the blending in and using everyone else as cover days are numbered.”

“Reasonable. How many people are you thinking of for that section?”

“Maybe five, possibly ten if it’s more work than I think it is. One spokesperson, someone to keep her up to date on everything we’re doing, and a few more people to be constantly working press releases and making sure our spokesperson keeps granting interviews to anyone who’s interested.”

“That’s your easy one.”
Other than he’s not sure how to go about finding a spokeswoman, yeah, easy… “That’s my easy one. Now for the backbone of how this will work.”

Comey looks at the next circle. “Lawful Neutral?”

“My infrastructure guys. They’re going to be broken into four subgroups. Tech. Those are the guys who are going to build, and keep running, our reporting system.

“When they’re done, they’ll have a system in place that will allow anyone, anywhere to report any issue in complete anonymity. That system will know the IP address of where reports come from, and that’s it. The system will triage reports, and then send them to whomever works best with that sort of issue.”

“How will it do that?” Comey’s got his own notepad and is actually taking notes on this, which impresses Tim.

“Complicated algorithms. With help from people, too. Each time an agent gets a case, he’ll also rank how important it is. If it matches the computer’s assessment, great. If not, the computer will learn that that type of case isn’t what it thinks it is, and adjust for later cases.”

“Again, how?”

Tim licks his lips. He didn’t budget two hours of explaining code into this meeting. “I don’t want to sound insulting, but unless you’ve got a masters in computer learning hiding somewhere, I don’t think the explanation will make much sense.”

Comey’s not buying that. “You don’t have one, and you know how it works.”

“True. I do have the masters in forensic computing, and more than fifteen years of work as a computing professional.”

“Okay. Give me the ‘For Dummies’ version.”

“The really short version is: key words, time frame, severity of the crime, proximity of the IP address to wherever the issue is, if that IP address has offered us good intel before, things like that. The program will mix it all together and spit out a severity rating. Our guys will correct from there, and tell the computer why it was wrong. The computer will then adjust how it weighs things like key words, and goes from there.”

“How many people will you need to build this?”

“The right ones, twenty. A mixed bag, thirty. The wrong ones, it won’t work, so let’s not get them.”

“People we already have?” Comey asks.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Seeing how your guys do with my paperwork software will help me know. And I’ll need to get into your IT employment files and see. Maybe. Or I may be headhunting from scratch.”

“They wouldn’t be coming out of FLETC though?”

“Extremely doubtful. If they’re good enough for this, and they’re out of FLETC, I’ll have something else for them to do.” If they’re good enough for this, and they’re out of FLETC, they’re going onto his Lawful Good or Evil teams, both of them will need people who can hack their way into and out of a tight situation.
Comey nods, and then says, “Big Data?” looking at the next circle.

Tim clicks on it. There’s the Big Data circle, with a bunch of little circles off of it, each one with the name of a branch of the Federal Government in it. “These are the guys who are going to get, and then use, reports from all the other branches of the federal government. Depending on how easy of a time we have prying those reports out of different branches, we’ll have one group that just does FOIA requests. The rest of them will collect and use that data.”

“Use it how?”

“We know that no branch of the federal government is made up of saints. Each branch should, with its own Internal Affairs, be getting complaints. Sexual harassment, roughing up suspects, due process violations, cheating on overtime, just, stuff like that. We’ll take that data, and use it to find outliers. Then we investigate them.”

“Great, but… Say ICE has a huge number of complaints in New Mexico and almost none in Montana.”

Tim knows where Comey’s going with this, and he’s impressed at this level of question. “I’ll make sure the algorithms work based on number of agents and number of engagements with the public. An ICE station in New Mexico should have more complaints than one in Montana, just because there’s four times as many agents down there. But, if it doesn’t, or if Montana’s redlining, that tells us something.”

“We’re going to investigate people for not having enough complaints?” It’s not that Comey doesn’t like the idea, but as he’s sipping his coffee, he looks like he’s staring the future in the face and not sure he belongs there.

“And for having too many. Come on, we’ve both been around too long to believe that any branch has such great morale, and does so well with the public, that it’s got no complaints. We see that, and something or someone is covering up.”

“Likely true.” Comey’s looking at all the little circles off of the Big Data circle. “You’ve got FBI twice.”

Tim nods. “Intentionally. I’m sticking one group of them here, and another in Portland or Denver. They will not know the other group exists. They’ll both work the data. With any luck we’ll get a lot of overlap, but if we don’t…”

“Built in redundancy,” Comey says.

“And making sure that if someone’s covering for someone else, the other team’ll get it.”

Comey’s nodding along with that as he says, “You’ve got a full ten percent of your people here.”

“Are you thinking that’s high or low?” Tim asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Right now, I don’t, either. We’ll see how fast they can move on this. I might end up shuffling some of these people around to the Money circle.” Which Tim clicks to.

“That one is pretty self-explanatory.” It looks a lot like Big Data, the same main circle with a bunch of little circles, one for each branch of the Feds off of it.
“Yep. That’s my crew that’ll be following the dollars. Again, depending on how easily we pry the data out of other agencies, I’ll have a collection of guys just FOIA-ing it. They’ll be doing pretty much the same thing the Big Data guys are, just following different numbers.”

“And your last Lawful Neutral circle?”

Tim clicks on it. “Law. I’m going to have twenty lawyers and all they’re going to do is read the laws, pick them apart, and tell me what to look for. Someone puts a paragraph in the middle of a three hundred thousand word bill, making his apartment a sovereign territory, they’ll find it.”

“There’s a reason you write fiction, isn’t there?” Comey looks really amused by the idea that such a thing could happen.

“Yeah, there is, but that case is real, and if you don’t know about it, you don’t need to.”

“Oh.” Amused drops, fast.

“We got burned, bad, on that, so it’s not happening on my watch.”

“Ah… So, that’s about 450 of your two thousand people.”

“Let’s call it five hundred, they’re going to have support staff, and it’s likely I’m underestimating how difficult some of this will be.”

“All right. You’ve got fifteen hundred left for Lawful Good and Lawful Evil. Are you going to split them up evenly?”

Tim shakes his head. “No. About six hundred of them will be Team Lawful Good. These are the guys who are going to go and investigate straightforward crimes. Someone blows the whistle on a bribery scheme, and in my Untouchables go.”

“They’ll work the crimes you get from the tip line.”

“Pretty much. They’ll also do the final step of Team Lawful Evil’s job, sweeping in for the final arrests. The Untouchables are going to get a lot of the credit. Part of their job will be looking good, going in, clean cut, pillars of law, and taking down the bad guys.”

“Why are they arresting Team Lawful Evil’s catches?”

“Because Team Lawful Evil are my undercover guys, and I want them to stay that way. I’ll have about nine hundred of them, and their job will be to go after whatever my Data, Money, or Law circles come up with. They’re going to offer bribes, they’ll go in to get sexually harassed, or do the harassing—“

Comey looks appalled at that.

Tim holds up a hand. “They’ll work in pairs or teams. If we’re getting complaints indicating the higher ups look the other way, we’ll send in someone to do the harassing and get harassed. And then team Untouchable will jump on Mr. Looking The Other Way when the reports don’t get filed or he winks and nods at the harasser.

“If we’ve got reports of an individual doing the harassing, we’ll send people in who fit what he/she likes to harass. So many people work with the idea of, it’s only a few years, this isn’t worth busting my career for, so they don’t report thing. We’re going to send people in to report things.”
“You’ve got a lot of attention on sexual harassment.” There’s almost a question there, but not quite.

“I feel like it’s the canary in the coal mine. The guy who thinks it’s okay for his underlings to be pinching asses and telling his assistant she’s got to sleep with him to keep her job is likely a bad boss on a ton of other levels. This is one we can get rid of him on, though.”

Comey nods at that.

“Team Lawful Evil will have hackers, conmen, snake oil-salesmen, you name the version of sleaze, we’ll have someone who can at least pretend to be it. And I’ll have all of them heading in and offering officials too good to be true deals, and then, if they say yes, Team PR will be shouting their names and playing the audio to the heavens.”

“Ouch.”

Tim flashes Comey a very satisfied looking smile, as he imagines Senior, or someone very similar to him, offering a Congressman a ‘deal’ and then busting said Congressman.

“Any ideas who’s going on which team?” Comey asks.

“I’ve got twenty-three boxes of employment records in my office right now. I’ve been headhunting team Lawful Good since before I started here. I’ve got a few ideas of who will be in charge of that branch, and they’ll arrange the Untouchables into teams. Team Lawful Evil… Again, I have some ideas. I’m not sure who runs it yet, but I at least know one Team leader if I can get her, and there’s someone I want, but I don’t know if I can find him.

“Team Lawful Neutral, right now, I’m the one directly in charge of that. I’m not handing that one off until I’m sure the blueprint is solid.”

“That makes sense. I’ll let you get to it.”

“And I’ll send you weekly updates.”

Comey shakes his hand, and as he’s heading out, Tim mutters, “What I wouldn’t give for AD Skinner.”

Comey stops. “Did you say something?”

Tim shakes his head. “Just being silly. Remember the X-Files?”

“You pretty much can’t work here and not be aware of them.”

“I was thinking of Skinner. I’d love a version of him to run the Lawful Evil Team.”

Comey laughs.

Two hours later, wrapping up day one of going through folders, there’s an email in Tim’s personal inbox from Comey.

Tim,

His name is AD Walter Karningham. Extension 4498. Not sure how much the show changed him, but he’s been on the shelf since our “Unexplained Illegal Phenomena Department” shut down in
2010.

Comey

Tim stares at that email, and then begins to laugh.
“You look like you’re in a much better mood!” Abby says as they’re sitting down to dinner that night.

“Other than missing our girl, I am! Shockingly enough, actually working at work makes me a happy guy,” Tim replies.

Jimmy grins at that. It’s a bright enough smile, but they can all see he’s missing Breena.

“News?” Tim asks, as he’s putting Anna in her highchair.

“The funeral went without a hitch. They’re at the wake now, and… With any luck, tomorrow morning they’ll be on the way home.”

“Good,” Abby strokes Jimmy’s back, and gently kisses the nape of his neck. “Not that we don’t want to see her, but, maybe, she gets home, loves on the kids until they go to bed, and we hold down the fort and you two get some alone time.”

Jimmy’s smiling at that idea. “We’ll see what she’s up to. She might want some loving on you two, too, time, but, maybe Wednesday…”

Tim nods along. He know he and Abby have been missing Breena, but not the way Jimmy is, and making sure they get some time to be married, with just each other, matters.

Molly’s watching them. “Mommy?”

“Tomorrow, honey,” Jimmy says. “Tomorrow we get all the hugs and kisses.” And Molly, with her hazel eyes and curly brown hair, lights up in a smile that looks so much like Jimmy, both Abby and Tim can’t help but grin back. (Abby gets a picture of it, and sends it on to Breena, later that night.)

There are people Tim knows he wants on his team. Some of them are easy to find, just a phone call and he’s got them. One… one’s going to take some effort to get a hold of but he’s determined to do it.

If this is going to be the best IA team ever, it’s going to need the best people, and he is going to find them. Even if that means tossing more than three quarters of the people he currently has.

While, he, Gibbs, Fornell, and Ziva go through folders, he hands off two assignments to Jennifer. One’s a phone number and a request for an interview. The other took him a while to hunt down. It’s a bank account number, and he needs a forensic accountant to locate the guy who emptied that account.

“Do we know the name of the guy?” Jennifer asks as she’s writing down the details.

Tim shakes his head. “Not now. Once upon a time, he might have been a college buddy.”

She’s eyeing him over her computer. “That’s cryptic.”
Back in the office, where, yet again, Fornell’s made sure they’re got piles of coffee and “snacks,” Ziva looks up from the folder she’s reading, and says, “I know one of them is Melanie Burke, who is the other?”

Tim shakes his head. He’s not saying the name in this building. “Like I told Jennifer, once upon a time, he might have been a college buddy.”

Ziva and Gibbs spend a moment thinking about that, and then Ziva inhales, sharply, and nods. “Once upon a time.”

Tim nods again, too.

“Might,” Jethro adds.

Fornell tosses a folder into the fire pile. “I’m better off not knowing.”

“Especially if I can’t find him,” Tim replies.

“You really think…” Ziva’s asking.

Tim shrugs. “Let’s see if we can find him. He’s likely vanished, but, maybe… I mean… If I could turn him, I can find him something to do, something useful. If I can’t turn him, I’m much better off knowing where he is and what he’s doing.”

Fornell dips an almond biscotti into his coffee. “I really don’t want to know.”

“He says, hoping someone will tell him,” Ziva replies. She also reaches for a biscotti, dipping hers into her chocolate smoothie, being careful to not drip any on Dave’s head as she takes a bite. (He’s happily nursing away as his Mama talks and reads.)

“Guilty. Who is he?”

Tim grabs his phone, puts the name in, lets Fornell read it, and then deletes it.

“Isn’t he dead?” Fornell says, a lot of doubt on his face. He knows that the reports he got had him listed as missing, and then found, but dead.

“Very,” Tim replies.

“Ah,” Fornell decides right now is a great time to have another bite of biscotti.

Tim doesn’t have the phone back in his pocket when it buzzes again.

“Another one?” Gibbs says.

“Maybe. I’m off to meet the guy who may, possibly, end up running the Black Hats.”
he’s Black.

Tim would have to admit that he’s having a blast at this. All of his little, latent, college boy geek fantasies are coming true. Karningham even works in the basement. It’s not exactly like the set from the TV show, but the drop panel ceilings, the filing cabinets, the high up windows, all of that looks the same.

Karningham doesn’t appear to have a secretary. He’s the one who opens the door and lets Tim in. He glances at him, rolls his eyes, and says, “Every third new agent comes down to gawk. So… Is it everything you wanted to see? The alien cases are over there,” he waves at a filing cabinet. “There never was any black ooze, the conspiracy was just a bunch of men who wanted more power, and every single case I ever had anything to do with had a completely boring, human, explanation.”

Tim sighs, and then smiles, and offers his hand, “Hi, I’m Tim McGee, and yeah, I loved the show, but… That’s not why I’m down here.”

“Uh huh… They all say that. You’re deeply interested in my opinion on whatever the hell case you’re on and next thing I know you’ll be asking about bees and who Mulder and Scully were based on.”

Tim would have to admit he’s curious about that, but… Now’s not the time. “Not on a case right now. How about I ask you, how do you feel about rules for the sake of rules?”

Karningham just looks him up and down about that. Looking more closely, he can see Tim’s young, but not brand-new-agent young. He’s also not dressed like a typical agent, he’s got on a jacket, but it’s leather, not part of a suit, and he’s not wearing a tie, nor did he refer to himself as Agent McGee. “Who are you again?”

Tim offers his hand again. The first time Karningham didn’t shake it. “Director Timothy McGee, Public Corruption.”

This time Karningham does, eyes going wide. “I didn’t have anything to do with… all of that stuff.”

“Good.” The idea that he might have didn’t occur to Tim, but given how many people he’s putting in the ‘fire’ pile, he probably should start checking everyone. He mentally sighs at that before saying, “So, how do you feel about rules for the sake of rules?”

“Why are you asking?”

“Let’s leave it at this, I’m not trying to waste your time, but I don’t want to tip my hand.”

Karningham gives Tim a long look, letting him know he’s doubtful about the time-wasting aspect of this. “I’d say it really depends on if they’re there really for their own sake, of if they’re there for another reason.”

“What would another reason be?”

“That would depend a lot on the rule.”

Tim thinks, “Say, dress code, for adults. Not like anti-sexual harassment stuff, but telling you what color tie to wear, stuff like that.”

That look of doubt has morphed into full on disbelief. Tim can only guess what sort of crazy has passed through this office, but right now Karningham is looking at Tim like he’s the king of it. “With something like that, I’d assume it’s about creating a uniform. The uniform helps to develop a ‘team
identity.' The team identity makes it easier for your people to work together. So, to an outsider it might be seen as a rule for the sake of rules and kind of stupid, but it’s there to help your co-workers get along.”

Tim nods, that seems reasonable to him. That’s part of what he intends to do with his Untouchables. Though he hopes he’ll build the teams through mutual accord, and the reputation through the look.

“How about requiring forms to be filled out, in triplicate, in ink, with no corrections, and then tossing them into a hole for five years, shredding them, and making the person who filled them out fill new ones out.” Apparently the FBI can’t actually hold onto all of that paper forever. So, every five years, they shred everything, and if you still work here, you fill out the forms again. The wall of mental curse words that sprang up when Tim found that out would have made Gibbs blush, had they gotten out of his head.

“That’s a case of, we’ve always done it this way, so we always will do it this way. I don’t have much use for that.”

Tim smiles.

Karningham gestures to one of the chairs near his desk, and Tim sits down, while he returns to his own seat, behind his desk. “You going to tell me why you’re down here smiling at me?”

“Yes. One more question, how do you feel about working with people who might not be… entirely engaged in FBI approved methods?”

Karningham groans. “I don’t care what you’re doing, or who you are, I am never working with psychics again.”

Tim opens and closes his mouth. “I… didn’t know that you ever had.”

That gets Karningham thinking that maybe Tim’s not exactly there to fanboy at him. “A child goes missing; it’s bad. When you get a serial kidnapper, it is worse. The parents will try anything to get their kids back, and… I got a few of those cases, where the people doing it tried to cover it with spooky mumbo-jumbo. Make the kids look like they were ‘abducted’ by something ‘not of this world.’ It was all BS, but… The parents will bring in tips from psychics, and… after a few years, what the hell, it’s not like you’re going to make things worse.” He scowls. “Except, of course, it does. It always does. So, no psychics.”

Tim nods. He can begin to imagine what levels of worse a crew of ‘psychics’ could inflict on a case like that. “That wasn’t the version of not-entirely-FBI-approved methods I was thinking.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I need someone who can run a department, a big one, of undercover people. Their whole job will be to go in, investigate, find the bad apples, and root them out. They won’t exactly be using ‘traditional’ methods to do this, so I need someone who can tolerate people who break the rules that are there for the sake of being rules, and the rules that are there for the sake of making everyone look like one team, and, even, for that matter, the rules that are there for fairly good reasons, too. These guys are going to break the rules, they are going to encourage other people to break the rules, and when they do, we’re going to snap them up and toss them out. At the least, we’ll fire them, and with any luck we’ll be able to prosecute them, too.

“So, not only do I need a guy who can deal with that, I need one who will go to the mat for people who are sticking their necks out to take down powerful and well-connected people who wrote the
damn rules to protect themselves in the first place.”

Karningham rubs a hand over his face, and nods, slowly. A look of… Tim’s not sure it’s wonder, but there’s a lot of desire in it. Tim smiles on the inside, Karningham wants this. “You want me to run that?”

“I want to know if you’re the guy who can. How’d you end up down here?”

Karningham makes a sound, somewhere between a hiss and a groan. “The eighties and nineties were filled with weird stuff. I was young, and new, and ended up with a kidnapping. Like I said, someone tried to cover it by making it look like a ‘cult’ had taken the kid, used it as a sacrifice, and then it just ‘vanished.’”

“But kids don’t vanish into thin air.”

“Exactly. Turns out Mom had custody. Dad wanted it. Dad and new girlfriend liked horror movies, and dreamed up this idiot plot. Babysitter was some sort of New Age Crystal-worshipper-type, so they pin it on her, get everyone in a frenzy about how a Satanic cult had stolen the kid, and the whole time, the kid’s in the girlfriend’s basement, just fine, bored, and wanting to know when she can go home.

“I’m the guy who decided to get the warrant and actually check the girlfriend’s house. And since then, they kept sending the weird ones to me. Next thing I know, I’ve got twenty guys working for me, all doing weird cases.

“Step on some toes to get them?”

“Maybe.” A small, tight smile lights Karningham’s face. “Might have crushed an instep or two, as well. Possibly kicked a few shins. I know a bunch of the guys I had did.”

Tim chuckles at that. He’s got a feeling Karningham and Gibbs are going to get on. “You’ve been down here for how long?”

“Seven years since they shut down my official department. Since then I… They can’t demote me. Can’t fire me, I do my job well. I’ve got twenty-five guys under me doing odds and ends. The cases no one else wants. I’m supposed to sit down here, babysit them, and while away the time until I hit mandatory retirement in three years.”

“Is that what you want to do?”

Karningham smiles. “Tell me more about your unconventional methods.”

So Tim does. When he’s done Karningham says, “Sounds like entrapment.”

“Is this my first assignment as the AD Karninghman, Public Corruption?”

“If you want it, I will absolutely have something for you to do. This though, is the last assignment before I decide if that’s where you’re going. You can see if you like working on the kind of things
I’m giving out, and I can see if you do the kind of work I like.”

“Fair enough, what’s the homework?”

“There’s going to be nine hundred people in this branch. I’ll send you a more detailed description of how I want this to work. Organize it for me. Set up the teams. Float names for some of them. I know I’ll make changes to it, and I’ve got some of my own teams I’ll want to set up, but… Show me you can organize more than twenty-five people.”

“When do you want it done?”

“End of the month?” Tim knows it’ll be at least that long before he’s ready to move on anything else.

“I can do that. My current guys?”

“If they’re up for it, bring them along with you, if not, figure out where to put them.”

Karningham nods. “I’ll get it done.”

Tim stands up and gets ready for his next appointment. “Good. Thank you.”

“Got a leader for Team Lawful Evil?” Fornell asks as Tim heads into his office.

“Maybe. More research to do. I want to make sure I’m not promoting him way above what he can handle.” He eyes the table. “I see the fire pile keeps getting bigger.”

Gibbs tosses another folder onto it. “Now I know why you had to work with us to finish anything, Tobias.”

Fornell glares at Gibbs. “Not in my department. These guys… We haven’t gotten to the guys in charge, yet, but I have a feeling there’s a reason why they kept picking these lackwits.”

Ziva’s nodding as she pats Dave’s back, strolling around Tim’s office. “This might not be a barrel full of bad apples, but it does look like this barrel was filled with apples that had already fallen off the tree, were lying on the ground, and were just on the verge of turning.”

“And if every apple in the barrel looks that way, it means the guy picking them is grabbing them off the ground, intentionally,” Tim fills in, as Gibbs sips his coffee, silently agreeing.

“And there’s only one thing you do with that sort of apple,” Fornell adds. “Make cider.”

“Great.” Tim steps out. “Jennifer, I’ve got another research job for you, who’s the FBI employee’s union president?”

“Tim?” From the bits and pieces she’s been hearing from her side of the door, she’s not immediately seeing why he’d want that.

“Trust me, it’ll make sense eventually. I’m going to need his name, and say, the top four guys in their union.”

“Okay…” Like Karningham, she’s got the “King of Crazy” look on her face, too.
Tim smiles brightly and says, “Thanks.”

Everyone heard what he said as he heads back in, and they’re all looking at him. Tim shrugs. “I don’t have cause, but I don’t want to shuffle them around and let them poison other barrels. That means I’ve got to get rid of them. As soon as I try that, their union will scream. Got to head that off.”

Gibbs smirks at that. He’s got the feeling he’s going to be doing some much less official, and significantly more interesting research in the not wildly distant future.

Tim nods. His little crew here may be doing a bit of not entirely above board snooping soon.

He laughs and shakes his head. “So much for being one of the good guys.”

---

Melanie Burke. She’s coming in, in a few hours, his meeting of the afternoon.

He’d written the name down when Tony and Ziva got talking about her, and now that he’s got this department full of empty seats, he might as well start looking for some people.

She does have three sexual discrimination lawsuits. Though two of them are closed now, and all three are sealed.

Which takes all of ten minutes for Tim to unseal. (And compared to his compadres, who are still going through files, significantly more fun and much more interesting.)

Burke V. Marietta FD. Six years on the job, four of them pretty good, then she gets a new supervisor. Burke starts getting bad shifts, and bad reviews, and their one-time fast-track-for-captain-star is suddenly ‘difficult, hard to work with, can’t take a joke, and obstructive.’ Promotions stopped coming, even though she outscored the men who were promoted above her on the standardized tests.

Marietta settled three years ago for close to $800,000 and offered her back pay and a promotion, which she didn’t take. Apparently they weren’t willing to do what she required, which was fire that supervisor.

Tim does a little more checking. He’s a captain of his own precinct now, and has… yep… only guys working for him.

After Marietta FD, she spent a four months working for a weight-lifting gym. The case against them is still open. She charges that the supervisor kept telling her to wear tight clothing, more makeup, and to provide sexual access to the wealthier clients.

There’s a three year band of nothing legally interesting, and then FLETC.

Burke V. Sothomoe. Tim winces, he remembers Sothomoe. Taught physical combat. He’d had a hard enough time with Tim, who was too ‘gentle’ and ‘tubby,’ he can’t imagine he did well with Burke.

She wasn’t top of any of her classes, but except for Physical Combat, she was in the top 25%. In physical combat, she was ranked at the bottom, barely passing. She brought suit claiming that her grades were based solely on Sothomoe’s dislike of her, and not her physical prowess when it came to combat. She claimed the low grade in his class had made it impossible for her to get any sort of field
job.

Tim could see Sothomoe doing something like that. He had to personally wrestle the guy to the ground and pin him in less than a minute, and then keep him down to pass the class, and then, later on, when a new instructor was brought into the rotation, he retook it just to get his grade up.

FLETC settled that case in less than a year for $500,000. Sothomoe also ‘retired’ as part of the deal. Tim digs around a little more and sees that there were four other pending cases on Sothomoe.

“Good riddance to you!”

Tim checks his calendar. Jennifer’s got the appointment set with Burke at three in the afternoon, which means he’s got time to run to NCIS and chat with Tony, if Tony’s free.

He should probably call, see if Tony’s free, but… Nope. He’s heading over, getting a few minutes with Abby and Jimmy, and, if he’s lucky, Tony will be able to spend a bit of time with him, too.

“You’ve only been gone a week. You missing the place that bad?” Tony asks Tim, as he perches himself on the corner of Tony’s desk.

“Not exactly.” Though getting a few minutes with Abby and Jimmy certainly perked his day up quite a bit. But he can’t just hang around and play with his loves.

“So, what’s got you here?” Tony’s asking, but he can see the rest of Tony’s team watching him, wondering.

“Several things, first of all, getting away from Fornell, who is a freaking sadist.”

“Tim…” Tony’s looking pretty distressed by that. Tim can feel Draga grinning about that.

Tim shakes his head. “I’m sure Jethro and Ziva will tell you about it, too. We’re going through employment files, trying to figure out who’s staying and who’s going, and, okay, lots of coffee, great, we all need the coffee. But he keeps bringing in ‘snacks’ to go with it.”

Tony’s really laughing at that.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, keep laughing. I don’t know how Jimmy does it. He’s around yummy food all the time, and doesn’t eat it. Me, I’ve got to keep it out of sight, but I can’t, because it’s sitting there, in front of me, while Fornell and Ziva happily munch away on it. And great for them. Wendy doesn’t care if Fornell ends up the size of a house, and Ziva’s nursing, she can have all the calories she wants. Jethro and I are just about whimpering because every day, he brings in something else, and now, with Ziva there, he’s getting all nurturing and protective of her, and making sure to bring in extra yummy treats because she needs lots of food to keep herself and little guy big and strong.”

Tony’s really laughing at that.

“Yeah. It’s freaking hilarious. Wait until I drag your ass in—“

“Oh no you don’t! I am not one of your little FBI toys. You get to ask me for consults, and that’s it.”
“Well, consult is the second reason I’m here. Let me buy you a coffee, and you tell me about Melanie Burke,” Tim says.

Tony rolls his eyes as he stands up. “Draga…”

Draga waves him off. He’s more than capable of holding down the fort.

“How frank do you want me to be?” Tony says as they’re standing in front of the elevator.

Tim’s got a good idea of how Burke must come off to a certain sort of person, he’s just looking for confirmation. “Go back to 2005 Tony and describe her.”

Tony waits until they’re in the elevator, and then stops it, making sure they’re as alone as they can be at NCIS. And he still, almost, looks around to check before saying, voice quiet, “Bull dyke, man-hater with a chip on her shoulder the size of Manhattan, who wouldn’t know a joke if it walked up and bit her on the ass.”

Tim nods at that. That’s what he expects a certain type of guy to see, judging from the lawsuits.

“Competent?”

“Passed every test we threw at her. Just, joyless.”

“Makes you want to haze her just for existing?”

Tony looks annoyed by that question. He’s out of the hazing business, and he hoped Tim had noticed that.

“Not now. I know not now. 2005 Tony, what about him?”

“Hard, and all the time.”

“Pretty?” Tim’s fairly sure that Burke is either too pretty or not pretty enough, but he doesn’t know which side she falls on.

“No.” Tony says with a head shake. “Intentionally not pretty. She’s never gonna be gorgeous, but a little makeup, a hairstyle that doesn’t match yours, and losing twenty pounds wouldn’t hurt, you know?”

“Kind of woman who makes the DudeBros’ skin crawl just by existing?”

“DudeBros?”

“Fratboys.”

“Yeah.”

Tim grins. “Excellent.”

Back at his office, Tim sets the stage. He doesn’t want to upend the work Gibbs and Tobias are doing, (Ziva went home with Dave about an hour ago) so he asks Jennifer if he can have her office
for the meeting.

She grabs her laptop, and heads into his office, leaving Tim the run of hers.

*Perfect.* Plus, he’s got a bunch of extra ears in the next room over, so he’ll get some extra opinions on the situation.

Melanie shows up *exactly* five minutes early. And Tony’s right. She’s perfect for what Tim hopes to do. She’s still job hunting, and hasn’t, apparently, caught on anywhere else, and Tim can see why.

She might be great at what she does, and she might be more qualified than the people around her, but as soon as she walks into his office, she just sucks the life out of the room. Add in the fact that she’s almost as tall as he is, wearing a pants suit designed for a woman at least twenty years older than she is, about thirty pounds overweight, with a very plain, very round face, and short red hair that’s not doing anything to make her face any prettier, and Tim can see how this is a woman that just *grates* on a certain kind of man.

And he’s really hoping to take advantage of that.

She’s not glaring at him, but unlike most people who’d get a call out of the blue from the FBI asking for a meeting, she’s not curious or scared. She’s annoyed. Hiding it… not well enough. Most people might miss it, but Tim’s done more than enough interrogation work to see it.

He offers her a seat and coffee, getting her settled on the sofa in Jennifer’s office, asks if she’s comfortable, does his best polite, sincere-beta-male-routine, and can see her starting to, barely, relax.

“You interviewed for a job with one of my friends—“ he says as he pulls a chair over to the sofa, so he’s facing her, and sits down.

“Which one?”

“Tony DiNozzo, NCIS.”

He sees her face tighten slightly. Looks like she took to Tony about as well as he did to her, and Tim can see her opinion of him dropping at the idea that he has friends like Tony.

“And what did DiNozzo say?” Her fingers are a little too tight on the coffee cup. Yeah, she really didn’t take to Tony.

“You weren’t a match for his team, but you might be a match for mine.”

“And why is that?” She’s got a lot of walls up, and he can read her extremely defensive body language.

Tim smiles. “Because you’re a bull dyke with a massive chip on your shoulder, no sense of humor, and the DudeBros take one look at you and start plotting ways to make your life miserable because they can’t stand to see a woman who doesn’t fit their ideas of proper gender norms.”

Her cheeks go red and there’s a palpable flash of rage through her as she slams the coffee cup down on the coffee table in front of Jennifer’s sofa. “Are you trying to get sued?”

Tim’s still smiling, but she’s glaring. “Nope. I’m trying to offer you a job. All of that makes you *supremely qualified* for what I want to do. Did you check to see who I was when I asked to meet up?”
“You’re the guy who’s going to get the whole FBI settling out of court and apologizing to me for the next ten years! NCIS, too!”

Tim continues smiling, and she finds it unnerving.

“You think this is a joke?” she asks, voice hard, accusing. Her hand is in her pocket, and Tim is sure she’s recording the conversation, now.

“I think you don’t know who I am or what my department does.”

“Fine, who are you?” She sounds very annoyed. “What makes you so sure this is funny instead of career suicide?”

“I’m the head of public corruption investigations, which will include investigating all federal departments for sexual harassment and discrimination. I’m the guy who’s going to hire you to go undercover in departments that have bad track records, get hired, collect evidence, and then blow the old-school-frat-boys out of the water. I want someone who makes guys like that take one look and have their skin start to crawl, and then I want you to help me take them down. By the way, it’s illegal in DC to record someone without their knowledge. If you let me put a badge on you, that’ll change, because I’m a government employee and no longer have privacy rights when I’m on the clock.”

Tim’s very satisfied to see that’s left her flatfooted. “Now, you still want to sue me?”

And, though Tony didn’t believe it when Tim told him about it later, Melanie Burke smiles. She pulls out her phone, and lays it on the coffee table. Tim nods; she was recording. Then she makes Tim smile again by saying, “Maybe. We’ll see how it goes.”

“Good enough.”

“Why me?” she asks after a minute, picking her coffee back up. “You expect me to get harassed a lot?”

He shrugs a bit. ‘I’ve had some past experience with this, and it seems that, ‘This isn’t worth ending a career over,’ is an awfully common sentiment. Too many of the higher ups are willing to look the other way, and too many of the people getting harassed are willing to grin and bear it because they don’t expect to have to deal with it for too long. You’ve got a track record of saying, ‘I’m not going to take this,’ and that’s exactly who I need for this.”

She appears pleased with that assessment of her character. “So, how does this work?”

“Statistical analysis to start with. We’re going to collect data on everyone, and figure out what’s a ‘normal’ level of harassment. Anywhere with too much or too little, we’ll get someone into. Find out what’s going on. Too much might just be about getting rid of a guy whose balls are in charge. Or too much might mean it’s a department where people are actually comfortable reporting issues, so it looks like too much, but it really isn’t because other departments aren’t reporting enough. Too little might be a place where no one feels comfortable making a report. Or it might mean they’ve got a really good set up. However it works, you and your ilk will ’get transferred in’ and go to work.”

“Who’s ‘my ilk?’” She sips her coffee watching Tim over the lip of her cup.

“A bit of everyone. Since this is the sexual harassment team, I’m thinking any minority sexuality that’s visible, as well as some extremely young and pretty girls. Might even get a few guys who look like DudeBros, and stick them in there to see what happens when the higher ups don’t feel like someone’s breathing down their necks. That’s probably one of our plans for places with a lot of complaints. Don’t want anyone to figure out exactly what we’re doing or how we’re doing it.
“Once people like you have gone in and collected evidence, my face team, ‘The Untouchables’ will show up in their perfect suits, and perfect manners, and grab whomever it is, and then have a conversation with them about what’s going to happen next.”

“I’m not ‘Untouchable’ material?”

Tim laughs. “Hell, I’m not Untouchable material. I’m not kidding about ‘Face Team.’ These people are being hired to make criminals wet their pants when they come in for them. They’re going to look perfect, and be perfect.”

“Chiseled jaws, crew cuts, and Marine posture?” Tim can feel she’s leading him on.

“And whatever the female or non-binary equivalent of that is. I don’t care how they identify, just that they look like a Photoshopped Brooks Brother’s model of it.”

That gets a wary smile out of Burke. Almost like she can’t believe he’s what he looks like he is. “You did your homework.”

“My grandma would hang me up by my toenails if I didn’t.”

“I’d like your grandma, wouldn’t I?”

“Most people do.”

She sips her coffee again and thinks for a moment. “This is too good to be true.”

“I’m not saying it’ll be easy, or that we won’t face a lot of backlash, but the job, and the offer is real.”

She shakes her head. “That’s not what I’m talking about. I’ve got some ‘experience’ with this, as you say, and you need jurisdiction to prosecute a case. This is the FBI, why would you have jurisdiction for this, instead of each group’s Internal Affairs?”

“ Probably because right now, everything is upside down and no one wants their bit of the alphabet soup looking even worse than it already does.” Tim sighs. “It’s entirely possible I don’t have the jurisdiction to do this, but that’s not going to stop me from doing it. They’re members of the public, and public corruption is my beat.”

That gets a smirk. “You’re going in on a wing and a prayer, and hoping they don’t sue you into oblivion for wrongful termination.”

“That’s true, too. But in these cases, I intend to prosecute.”

Burke looks very pleased by that. “Even more interesting.”

“If they chose to resign, and never work for the Feds again, they may be able to avoid prosecution.”

“And that’s how you get around the wrongful termination suits.” She’s nodding along with that.

“That’s how I try. So…”

“When do I start?”

“I won’t have the sexual harassment team up and running for probably a few months. But I’ve got a lot of deadwood I’m clearing out now. If you feel like reading employment files and helping with that, you can start tomorrow.”
“Eight AM, bright and early.”

Tim nods at that, too. “That’s the idea.”

She stands up, and Tim does likewise. “I’ll see you then.”

Tim heads back to his office a few minutes later. “One down, eight hundred and ninety-nine to go. Tomorrow, we get another set of hands to help with this.” He glances to Gibbs and Fornell, “Best behavior, both of you. I’d like to see us not get sued for at least a week, okay.”

Fornell smirks. “Says the guy who called her a dyke.”

“Only to set the scene. That word’s not coming out again.”

“Hell, McGee, I didn’t know you knew that one.”

Tim rolls his eyes. “Find anything interesting while I was talking to her?”

Gibbs nods, and pushes a folder forward. “First of the higher ups. He’s mid-management, but built several of the teams we’re put in the fire pile.”

Tim grabs it, curses again, and sucks on his new papercut while flipping through the file with his other hand.

“How can your hands possibly be that soft?” Fornell asks while tossing Tim the box of band aids that’s been sitting on their table. “You’re off talking to people, working on your computer, visiting with Tony, and you’ve still got three times as many papercuts as the rest of us, combined.”

Tim applies the band aid (number eight) and debates about how badly he wants to shock Fornell. Ziva’s left for the day, Jennifer’s back at her part of the office, the door is closed, so it’s just the three of them… He could be a bit… risqué…

Tim wiggles his left index and middle finger at Fornell, both of which have several band aids a piece, and says, completely deadpan, “Cum. Especially the girls’. Keeps everything soft and supple.”

When Fornell picks his jaw back up off the table, Tim says, grinning, “See, I know lots of words.”

Gibbs smirks, silently laughing, as Fornell slowly shakes his head. Then, just as deadpan back, he says, “Yeah, well, if you want any more of it on your hands anytime soon, they better not be covered in band aids. Put some latex gloves on.”

That is actually awfully good advice. Tim goes off in search of some, and manages to end the day without cutting himself again.

He doesn’t end the day with a sense of the goodness of mankind, or that the FBI was in any way interested in actually catching corruption.

He’s going through the employment record of the first of the middle management guys, Bob Bergen,
and decides to do some deeper digging.

Seventeen years at the FBI, fourteen of them on anti-corruption, ten in management. And, in every case he worked, if finding the person or thing he was investigating guilty would have been embarrassing for whomever was in charge, the case just died. If finding them guilty looked good for whomever was in charge, they were investigated.

Tim’s fairly sure he’s going to see that pattern, a lot.

That’s the first of the files Tim tossed into the prosecute pile, instead of fire. He’s not entirely sure if he can prosecute that, but, he’s going to try. He’s got a sinking suspicion though, that it’s not illegal to just drop cases. After all, there’s no hint of cover up, nothing to suggest Bob Bergen was taking bribes or anything, he just stopped working cases where working them might prove embarrassing.

Gibbs sees him put that file in the prosecute pile, and gives him the look.

“I’m hoping at least.”

Gibbs nods, and Fornell says, “You ever have anyone ask you to look the other way?”

Gibbs nods again. “Too many times, you?”

“Only had to happen once before I got the reputation that if asked that question, I’d throw everything I had at it.”

Tim thinks about the employment histories they’re looking at. “Probably explains a lot of the transfers out of this department we’re seeing.”

“Probably.” Fornell nods to the prosecute pile. “I don’t think it’s illegal to not go after a case. All of us have a bunch of them going at any time. And there’s nothing that says what order you have to work on them.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Tim replies. “I’ll talk to legal tomorrow, see what I can do with it. One thing that talking to Burke reminded me of, the more of the fire pile I can toss in the prosecute pile, the more of them I don’t have to fight wrongful termination lawsuits on.”

“So, prosecute not to put in jail, but to get a resignation?” Fornell says.

“Yeah.” Tim shakes his head. “I don’t know how many of ‘em I’ll even be able to try it on, but…”

Gibbs nods toward the fire pile, it’s got at least nine out of ten of the cases they’re looking at in it. “But you’ve got to get them out somehow.”

“Exactly.”

Jennifer pokes her head in. “I’m done for the day. Do you need me any longer?”

Tim shakes his head. “Nope, and barring a fire, I’m off tonight, too, so no need to keep your phone on.” He’s off because Breena’s getting home today, and he wants to spend some time with her.

“Oh, okay. See you in the morning. You want new employee paperwork for Ms. Burke, right?”

“Yes, please. Thanks, Jennifer. And if you could get me some time with whoever’s in charge of our legal department, I’d really appreciate it.”

“No problem.” Jennifer heads back out, and when he hears the door shut, he says to Fornell and
Gibbs. “Tomorrow, when Jennifer has the names of the Union reps, I want everything you two can find on them. Everything. I’m thinking the first thing the new office of Public Corruption is going to do is a press conference where my spokesperson goes over who’s going and why, and how we’re reorganizing, at the same time my Untouchables are going to be running into the Union offices and arresting them, exactly the same time I start sending those pink slips out.”

“If we can’t find anything?” Fornell says.

“You worked undercover in the Mob for how long? Did you ever see a clean union boss?” Gibbs says.

Fornell shakes his head.

“If, by some miracle, any of them aren’t up to their eyeballs in hinky dealings, though, given how badly the election laws were being fucked with, I’m willing to bet that just going through their finances for illegal campaign contributions should get us something, I’ll come up with another plan. But I want them focused on saving their own skins. And if they’re all under indictment, that’ll make those ‘Our poor boys are getting sacked for no good reason’ press conferences a whole lot less believable.”

Fornell’s watching Tim, slowly chewing a bite of his (last) biscotti. Then he nods and says, “So, this is what happens when a writer gets some power.”

Tim grins. He hadn’t been thinking of it that way, but, looking at it, he realizes he is orchestrating a story. Setting it up the way he would in one of his books. Swoop in and set the bad guys against each other, or distract them from what he’s doing.

His only hope is that it works as well as it does when he’s putting it on a page.
Harry and David’s Moose Munch is a real thing. It comes in several varieties, but basically it’s popcorn with a crunchy caramel coating mixed with chocolate and nuts. It’s ridiculously addictive.

Breena gets home a bit before dinner on Tuesday, and Jimmy’s so happy to see her he feels like he can float.

This is the longest they’ve been apart. He’s been on a few overnight jobs, and Tony’s bachelor party, but that’s it. Since they got married, three days haven’t gone by that they haven’t seen each other.

And while taking Tim and Abby up on their offer of sweeping Breena up and basking in time with just her is awfully tempting, he can see the girls, Molly especially, want a lot of mommy-time, and Abby and Tim have been missing her, too.

So, as Tim’s talking about his new hire, Jimmy decides that tomorrow, Wednesday night, that’s all theirs.

And Jimmy has plans.

It’s been a while since Jimmy’s done this, probably because he’s getting pretty good at this whole ‘being married’ thing, and this is something he used to do make up when he’d annoyed Breena.

It’s been a while since that’s happened, but she likes it, and it’s one of the arrows in his quiver of ‘romantic treats’ so…

Harry and David’s Moose Munch in milk chocolate. Check.

The latest episode of Outlander. Check.

He’s not sure when it started, but somehow Breena found the show, and she got Abby watching it, and then Abby started up some sort of girly afternoon TV treat on Saturday afternoons when they’re at the house, dragging Ziva into it, and next thing he knew Penny and Ducky were watching it, too. (Ducky claims he’s watching purely for the historical significance.) And then, somehow, he really doesn’t know how, Gibbs started watching, and he got Abbi into it, and, anyway… There’s been many a Saturday naptime when the majority of Clan Gibbs is watching the adventures of the Fraisers. (As Tim makes somewhat snarky comments along the lines of, if they want to ogle pretty boys in kilts, he’s got several.) So far, Jimmy doesn’t watch it, (these days he and Tim are usually doing something hard and sweaty with Tony, like one on one on one basketball) but, since Breena was on the road, she didn’t get the Saturday update, and, well, if Gibbs watches it, it can’t be that painful.

Soft, nubby blankets and pillows on the bed. Check.
Hot cocoa. Check. (This bit works better when it’s not ninety degrees out, but, hell, they have air conditioning; he can make it a cool, snuggly night, so he will!)

So, for date night, at home (technically, date night at Tim and Abby’s home, but more and more home is becoming untethered from a physical location), with his number one sweetie, Jimmy’s got Chick Flick and Snuggle night set. And he’s got some plans (which is why they’re at Tim and Abby’s, because the tools for said plans live at their place) for what might happen after.

And Breena, when she steps into Tim and Abby’s room, and sees that he’s got everything set up for Chick Flick and Snuggle, breaks out into a massive grin.

She curls into his arms, grabs a few of those caramel and milk chocolate coated popcorn pieces, still grinning, and starts the video saying, “Ziva texted me. She said this last week was amazing!”

Jimmy kisses her hair, holding her tight, happy to just be next to her.

An hour later, Jimmy’s come to the conclusion that he’s damn well going to have to watch this stupid show, and Tim and Tony will end up teasing him mercilessly for it.

Maybe he can get away with reading it. Breena says there are books.

Of course, unless those book are illustrated, he’s thinking he won’t be quite as interested in them. Whoever plays Sassenach is an awfully lovely woman, and he’s not minding the sight of her at all. The fact that the people who make this show seem to enjoy shooting her (at least in this episode) without a whole lot of clothing may have something to do with him enjoying this.

But he likes the view in front of him, even more.

They didn’t exactly get dressed up for this. He’s in his bumming-around-the-house-wear, this time of year, that’s just a light pair of cotton drawstring pants. Breena’s wearing a long t-shirt, given how long it is, almost to her thighs, even with Donnie’s bump adding to the amount of body that shirt’s got to cover, he’s thinking it’s one that’s been pilfered from Abby, or, since it’s fairly plain, just soft navy blue cotton, maybe Tim. (Jimmy knows it’s not his.)

Her hair is soft and loose, and she’s already washed her makeup off. She smells like chocolate and caramel, the moisturizer she uses on her face, faint traces of her shampoo, and the fabric softener Tim and Abby use.

She smells like home.

She’s in his lap, facing him, hands on his chest, as they cuddle and talk.

Some of it is about the show. Breena’s hoping she can get him watching. She wants to share this with him, too.

Some of it is about the weekend. Her mom is sad, and to an extent, Breena is, too. Aunt Nance, as she knew her mom’s best friend, didn’t live close enough to be part of her day to day life, but at least
twice a year, she’d be up to visit, and at least twice more, her mom would go down.

They talked every day, so at least twice a week she’d get updates on Aunt Nance and what she and her family were up to.

“They were going to retire together. The house on the beach, that’s where mom and dad go. Aunt Nance and Uncle Bill have a place further inland…” she sighs at that.

Jimmy holds her close and lets her talk, feeling the same chill she is, of how short a time there is to love and be loved. They deal with lives cut short, or cut long, or just… cut really, every day, and on most days they can keep that wall between them and death, but her walls are very thin right now.

He’s kissing her, holding on, letting her talk, when she finally says, “This is too sad.”

He half smiles at her. “You’re allowed to be sad.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to be, especially not right now. So… happy thoughts. Those videos… Did Abby put you and Tim up to that?”

Jimmy smiles at her. “She certainly didn’t put me up to it, and judging by the way Tim was blushing and almost stuttering when he asked, I don’t think she put him up to it, too.”

“He was blushing…” That also gets a smile on her face.

“I might have been, too.”

“Awww…” She strokes his chin. “So… was it good? I mean… You obviously looked like you were having a good time, but I still can’t believe you did Tim.”

Jimmy smiles a bit. “Is that a good thing or not?”

“Very good, amazing good, just about came watching it good, but… I didn’t think you’d ever… go there.”

“I wasn’t sure I would, either, but… You know. They’re both looking at me with those big green eyes, and I didn’t want to say no.”

She laughs at that. “Oh, yeah, I know those big green eyes. Both of them went to ‘Advanced Puppy Eye’ school or something.” She laughs a bit. “If he works at it, Tim can give Jackson lessons in puppy eyes.”

He smirks at that. “Yeah.”

Breena strokes his chest and curls into him as best as she can with Donnie in the way. “More seriously, though… God… Watching that…” Breena doesn’t curse a whole lot, so when she says it, laying a kiss on his collar bone to go with the word, it sort of shivers through Jimmy. “God, baby, so fucking hot.”

He’s grinning. “Glad you liked it.”

“I did. The bit where you’re figuring it out was cute, and then once you guys got it…” She shakes her head. “Did you watch it?”

“I was there.”

“I know, but… You couldn’t see your face, could you?”
“No. Even if I had had an angle for it, I didn’t have my contacts in.”

Breena kisses him, long and sweet. “So beautiful. I could have just watched your faces. Actually, I did. I mean, not the first time through, but the second…”

“You watched it more than once?”

“How many times did you watch the video of Abby and I making out for Valentine’s Day?”

He cups her face in his hand and kisses her, lips firm and with some real intent behind the move. “I couldn’t have counted it. More than five, less than a hundred.”

She laughs at that. “Not quite that many times.”

“You were only gone for three days.”

“There was the one bit, right before Tim told you to come, he’s kind of bouncing between you and Abby, and you’ve got your eyes closed, hand on his chest, lips on his shoulder, and… God, your face…” She’s smiling. “So beautiful. I mean, Tim and Abby were, too, but…” They’re face to face, and her eyes are searching his face, taking in the small wrinkles around his eyes, and the somewhat unruly hair, the way he’s smiling more with his right side. Her fingers follow her gaze, stroking over this face she adores. “I love you.”

He kisses her. “Love you, too.” He took his glasses off when they finished watching the show, knowing where they’d end up tonight, and not needing them for this. Even he can see a face from four inches away. He watches her face, too. No real wrinkles, not yet, though it’s rounder than it was when they first married. He feels his son squirming in her belly. Right now, all of her is rounder than it was when they met. “I was thinking about it, after.”

“Which part,” she’s gently stroking his chest hair, fingers slipping between the mostly black/brown strands. Though, like the rest of his hair, a few gray ones have joined the party.

“I’ve… never done what Tim did, and… I’d like to, with you.”

That takes Breena by surprise. She had been watching her fingers on his chest, but she looks up to his face. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“With me? Not with Tim… I mean… I think he’d have a better time with it.”

“Uh…” Jimmy licks his lips. It certainly looks to him like the girls really enjoy doing Tim, but… yes, on a purely physical sensation level, he can’t see how Tim wouldn’t get more out of it than they do. But, this isn’t about purely physical sensation. “I couldn’t see our faces, not last weekend, but… I remember yours, the first time… okay, technically second time, we had sex. And, you’d rolled on top of me, and we were just sort of moving around, finding what worked and what felt good, and… You were holding my hands, and easing up and down, and your face was lit up with love and new and… and I wanted to give that back to you. I wanted to let you light me up with love and new. I mean, barring something that breaks one of our hard lines, this is the last ‘first time’ I’m ever going to have for anything sexual, and, I like it to be yours.” She grinning from ear to ear, eyes soft and shining at him, and he grins back at her. “It looks like you like that idea.”

“Well… I mean, yeah,” she gently licks her lips, the tip of her tongue trailing wet and pink over plump flesh, “and… I mean, you know, it wasn’t anything I’d been dreaming of, but getting to do it with Tim was a blast, so… Yeah, I’d love to do it with you, but… You don’t have to…”
“I know, but… I…” It feels odd to say it. “I want to give it to you.”

Breena smiles widely at that.

“And, okay, yeah, given everything else between us, it’s probably silly, but…”

“It’s sweet.”

Jimmy shrugs a bit. His hands trail over her hips and sides as they kiss. “I don’t know if I ever said it, not in so many words, but… you were right, it mattered and… felt really good, that your first time was with me.”

She smiles even wider at that. “Those magic words, ‘You were right.’”

He kisses her again. “I know, better than all the ‘I love yous’ ever, right?”

“Maybe not better, but awfully good.” She kisses him, slow and lingering. For a moment, they just breathe in each other. “Still, you really want to? I appreciate the sentiment, but… Part of why it mattered, at least to me, was putting off something I really wanted so I could share it with the person I wanted most, and…” she strokes his face, “I’ve never gotten the sense that’s anything you crave.”

“True. Tim really likes it though. Might turn out I really like it, too.”

“You might. You like one finger and tongue, so…”

Jimmy’s hand traces down her back, settling lightly on her butt. “Yeah. No reason to think I wouldn’t like it, but… It’s not the sensation of it. Not… I want this and I want you to give it to me. Not really. Not on a physical level, at least, not now, maybe I’ll feel differently about it after I’ve done it. Maybe I’ll really like it. But… um… Everything I’ve ever wanted sex-wise you’ve given me, and beyond. It’s… um…” He’s biting his lip, trying to put these feelings into words. “It’s the intimacy, maybe…” That’s in the neighborhood of what he’s trying to express. “I mean… Okay, it’s not like I feel like we don’t have enough intimacy and I want more of it… It’s… I’ve never done this, and I want to leap off the edge of the cliff and trust that you’ll catch me, and make sure I have a good time flying.”

“Even if you’re kind of scared of flying?” she says, gently. She knows that’s part of Jimmy’s one finger only rule.

He nods; his forehead brushing hers. “Even though I’m kind of scared of flying, and,” he sighs a little, “maybe I still have a sense that I shouldn’t like flying, cause, I’m… um… not a bird?” which is a much bigger part of it, “I’ve beaten that metaphor to death, haven’t I?”

She’s still smiling at him, and he kisses her again. Kisses her lips and the tip of her nose and eyelashes.

“Do you want to fly?” Breena asks.

“I want to fly with you.”

Jimmy’s not sure how exactly this’ll end, but he knows how to start it. Breena was gone for three days, and last night didn’t involve any oral sex, and there’s a pussy he’s been aching to kiss.

So, kissing and petting and more gentle words and touches eventually leads to them on their sides,
tops to tails, with Jimmy very happily kissing away.

He may not be the most experienced guy in the world, or even in his circle of friends and family, but he does feel like he qualifies as a connoisseur of pussy, and this is one of his two favorites.

Breena’s keeping herself trimmed but not shaved these days, so he’s got a glistening wet pussy, framed with dark blonde hair, lips pink and pouting at him, a perfect little clit standing up and begging to be licked, and he is very happily licking every inch of it.

And she’s got him in hand, and mouth, and that’s making him happy, too.

He jerks a little when one of her hands moves back behind his balls, and she lets go of his dick to say, “You really sure you want this?”

He breaks his own kiss, and looks up at her. “Yes, just a little startled.”

“Oh…” He kisses her again, and then says, “I am kind of afraid it’ll hurt. You didn’t like it when I did it to you, so…” They tried anal once, not all that long into their marriage, and maybe they didn’t get the whole prep aspect down pat, but they did get slow and lots of lube, and he could tell she wasn’t exactly loving it, but he didn’t know it was hurting her, and she didn’t tell him to stop for a few strokes, hoping it would start to feel better, but it didn’t. When he tried to speed up a little, Breena jerked away from him saying, “Ow!” and that was the end of that. By the time they did have a better handle on the prep aspect, Molly’s birth had resulted in hemorrhoids that kept anal off of the menu for Breena.

She shifts a bit, so they’re on their sides, face to face. She kisses his lips, and he gives her tongue a gentle suck, before she says, “I remember that. Before we had sex the first time.”

“Being afraid it would hurt?” That surprises him.

“Yeah, I mean… Everyone said it could or would.”

“You never said.”

She shrugs a bit. “I felt like it was kind of silly. My own fingers didn’t hurt, so… why would your penis? But, yeah, I was a little worried about that. One of my best friends had had a story about having to get on top, sit on the guy, force herself down, feeling like she was going to die, and then bleeding for two days.”

Jimmy winces. If one of his best friends had had a first time story like that, it would have put him off sex for a while, too. Then another thought hits him. “It didn’t hurt when we did it, right?”

She smiles again. “No! If it hurts or is uncomfortable or whatever, I’ve told you. I wasn’t shy about telling you to stop when we were trying anal with me on the receiving time, was I?”

“Nope.”

“Or stopping for more lube and going slower after Molly was born?”

“Not at all.”

She kisses him again. “And you do the same.”

He nods. “And I do the same.”
Back heads to tails. He doesn’t know what he loves best about oral. Maybe it’s the glide. His tongue and her pussy and they’re both so wet. His tongue just whispers over her skin, barely any friction. So wet and smooth and easy. No drag at all.

Maybe it’s the view. He pulls back for a second to watch her, all pink and wet, and the way her body looks as he drags his finger between her lips. He slips it inside of her, and watches her body engulf him, and back arch into that touch.

That sight is too much of a good thing; he’s got to taste again.

It could be the smell, and taste. He’s got a mouthful of sex right now, and he loves that.

Breena moans, and right this second, it’s the sounds. Definitely. The sounds. He’s making her sound like that. He’s pulling those moans out of her. It’s his mouth, his fingers, his love, making her body quiver.

Once she’s done twitching, he can relax, let himself focus on what she’s doing to him, and… Good Lord!

She’s gently sucking on the tip of his dick, rocking her head just a little, just enough to slip her lips over the tip. She’s using the suction to pull him into her mouth, and keeping her lips wet and sealed around him.

And fingers. Well, right now, finger, one of them. She’s not doing much with his prostate, not yet. Right now it’s just about more of that slick, wet glide.

One finger fits just fine. No ache, no burn, and with the amount of lube she’s using, and the way she’s just using the tips of her finger, it’s… It’s almost that sensation of blowing Tim and getting blown at the same time. It’s almost like he’s fucking himself.

He’s making himself just float on it. Licking Breena gently, mostly just to enjoy the taste, and feeling her mouth and finger and the all wrapped up in pleasure sensation of it.

And then it’s a bit less comfortable. She’s slowly squirming finger number two in, and he’s making himself relax, breathing deep and easy, focusing down on the muscles that don’t exactly want to just open up and give her access.

She’s moving her head a bit faster, which feels really good, but his body likes to tense when he’s feeling really good, which is making his ass burn.

“Slower.”

She slows down what she’s doing with her fingers, which helps, but wasn’t exactly the idea he was attempting to get across.

“Mouth. Feels too good. Makes me clench up.”

She slows her mouth down, more of that wet, slick suction as she keeps easing finger number two in.

Jimmy makes himself relax, makes his breathing slow and easy, makes his mind calm down.

Honestly, it doesn’t hurt. Not really. It’s not amazingly comfortable or anything, but it’s not painful. So he feels like he’s tensing on the idea of the anticipation of pain. Like he almost expects it to hurt a
lot worse than this.

But it doesn’t.

And Breena gives him a moment of still, not moving at all, before she starts a slow easy stroke and… It’s not his favorite sensation ever, but it certainly isn’t bad. She stops, adds a bit more lube, and slowly works those fingers in again. This time it’s pretty easy.

And when she starts to speed her mouth again, and match the glide of her fingers to what her lips are doing, Jimmy notices his hips are rocking with her, and after another thirty seconds or so he starts to appreciate the glide, on both sides.

He keeps rocking with her, and she starts slipping her mouth all the way down, and her fingers all the way in, twisting them a bit to give his prostate a little nudge and Jimmy moans, loud.

*That’s* hitting all of his buttons just right.

And that’s about as much of *that* as he should take, unless he wants to come from her lips and fingers. Maybe tomorrow or the next day he will, but that’s not the goal for tonight.

“I think I’m ready.”

Breena licks, wet tongue laving up the underside of his dick, before meeting his eyes and grinning at him. She lets him go and rolls over, grabbing the harness of the dildo.

“How do you want to do this?”

“Face to face, or as close as we can get. Want to see and kiss, too.”

Breena thinks about it as she’s pulling the straps on the dildo tight. “Face to face, on our sides.”

Jimmy grins at her. “Sounds perfect.”

---

Jimmy knows he’s not the most flexible guy ever born. He knows he’s not even in that guy’s zip code. That said, he’s still an awfully flexible guy. He can get into positions most guys can only dream of, but, even with all the good will and scooting and tucking his pelvis and butt under him, he cannot curl in on himself enough to do face to face sex with Breena, not almost seven months pregnant, not on their sides, not with her on the penetrating side of the equation.

This is reminding him a lot of the first time he had sex. A lot of poking about, looking for something that she knows has to be there, but can’t seem to find, made even more complicated by the fact that Breena can’t feel what she’s doing.

So… “Maybe if your leg was…” And they re-arrange…

He’s shaking his head. “How about…” He curls his pelvis under a bit more, and drapes her top leg over his bottom one, and… maybe… if the dildo was a good three inches longer… Mostly it’s just nudging him in the balls right now.

“Oh, okay, here…” She tries laying between his legs, on their sides, which just isn’t working. Not only is his left leg about to fall asleep, but that just isn’t comfortable for her, either.

She rolls away, frustrated, and he’s feeling something less than amazingly turned on. Mostly he’s wet
and slippery, and not in a really good way. There’s lube smeared from his ass to his thighs because of all the places the dildo ended up that weren’t inside of him.

“How do we do this when you’re the top?” Breena’s asking. “It works, right?” There is a point where she’ll be so pregnant they just can’t have face to face sex, but she didn’t think they were there, yet. Not too far off, she feels like they’ve still got at least a week or two.

Jimmy slips her leg over his hip, scoots down a bit, drapes his top leg over her bottom one, and shift his hip a bit, twisting his pelvis to fit it snug against hers, and bending his back to give her belly a bit more room. Then one, long push, and they both groan with pleasure.

His eyes have slipped shut, and then laze open to meet hers. A smile lights his face. “Yeah, it works.”

She sighs, a deep, happy sound. “Oh, yeah, it does.”

For a moment they just rock, soft easy strokes. Wet, slick friction lighting both of them up. Her head is resting on his arm, and they’re face to face, kissing gently.

After another moment, she breaks the kiss. “Okay, what are you doing that I wasn’t?”

Jimmy rocks his hips. In this position he can’t get a lot of motion, just some gentle, shallow back and forth. But, doing so does illustrate the issue. “I’ve got two inches more dick, and I can kind of twist myself in below your belly.”

“We can raid the toy box for something longer.” Which they certainly can. This isn’t the only dildo Tim and Abby have. It’s not even the only one that fits the harness. It is the only one that’s this narrow though.

“But even if we do, and… I’m thinking no on that,” he and Tim have certainly enjoyed watching the other dildo in action, but that doesn’t mean either of them are enthusiastic about having one of them used on them, “you still can’t tuck yourself under your belly.

“Hands and knees?”

Jimmy figures that would likely work, but… “Want to see you, and not in a mirror. Can you lie on your back?”

“No for more than a minute or two.”

“Yeah, I’m going to need more time than that.” His hands settle on Donnie’s bump, his lips to Breena’s belly button as he says, “How do we scoot you up a bit?”

“Here…” She rolls back from him, and pushes some of the pillows into an incline. “Let’s see…” She’s lying on the incline, not exactly on her back, but not fully sitting up, which covers the dildo with her belly.

He smiles at that, leaning over her on his hands and knees, kissing her lips, and then sliding down to her breasts, and belly.

“So, just cowboy up?”

“Sounds like a plan.”
Sliding down the dildo is slow. Very slow. Apparently, it doesn’t matter how carefully you prep if you spend ten minutes fumbling around between finishing up with that and actually getting into a position where everything fits together.

It’s actually almost difficult to go slowly enough with this. Everything is so slick, and to a certain extent he just wants to get to the other side of this. (He’s remembering some of Tim’s comments about the penetration part not being his favorite bit of this.)

It would, probably, be fairly easy to just let gravity take control, and plop himself down.

Except he’s already feeling that sort of tight, stretched, holding a pose too deep sensation. And, while it’s true that Jimmy does like the occasional shot of pain, he likes it when he’s already all but out of his head turned on, and he’s not nearly there. (Though he is thinking about how to possibly use this on later occasions, because unlike a spanking, he knows this won’t trigger any bad memories for Tim.)

This is where years of yoga is coming in to help. He does know how to relax, and hold a position, and take the time to ease into something.

He might not want to, but he certainly can.

“You okay?”

Jimmy’s eyes are closed, but he can feel the way she’s watching him. He nods. “Just getting into it.”

“You don’t have to do this.”

He opens his eyes and smiles at her. “But I want to.”

She wiggles her right hand at him. “We could go back to fingers.”

“I’m good.” He’s about to say something along the lines of she doesn’t need to keep checking in quite this much when he realizes he’s just about all the way down, and by talking to him, she’s getting him focused on something else.

Jimmy decides to get focused on something even better. He leans in forward and kisses Breena.

She’s kissing back, and between lips, and the fact that in this position his dick is slowly dragging over her belly, it doesn’t take too long before he’s starting to feel good.

________________________________________

Going from good to better takes a bit of effort. He’s a medical doctor, so he knows intellectually what he’s attempting to do. Get prostate rubbing up against dildo. It’s not rocket science.

But it’s also the first time he’s done this, and he’s still learning what to do with himself, and with Breena.

She’s stroking his legs and hips, and it’s true, she does have this little circular grind that is a treat. And it’s actually one of those little grinds where she get the angle just right, and suddenly Jimmy’s flying, that puts him on the right track for how to move himself.

The dildo has a bit of a curve, and to take advantage of that, he needs to lean back a little.

And from there Jimmy’s experimenting with rocking his hips, short little thrusts, or long up and
The sweet spot is a combination. If he does a long up and down thrust, there’s this feeling, like… Words don’t do it justice. Like he’s getting fucked through his dick. Like there’s a dick in his dick rubbing his dick from the inside and that… That’s got him gasping.

And it’s got Breena grinning, very lightly stroking her fingers up and down his dick.

Then there’s short little thrust. They rub the tip of the dildo over his prostate, again and again. That makes him feel like he’s cumming. Like each stroke is another pulse on an unending orgasm.

An orgasm coming from inside of him, from getting fucked through his dick.

He’s dripping. A steady stream of pre-cum oozing down his dick, and that’s not… That’s not how sex usually works for Jimmy. Normally, if someone’s playing with his prostate, making him leak like this, his dick is happily located in a warm, wet mouth or pussy. So normally, he can feel the sensation of pulse, that almost cumming surge each time something nudges him, but he doesn’t feel the *wet*.

But he can now. Each shift he feels another drop, slowly meandering down his dick. He feels the slick, wet trail he’s left on Breena’s belly. He can feel the head of his cock gliding against her. And watch that line of dry skin and wet cum and…

FUCK…

Every shift, every time he pulls up, that little curve just hits him perfectly, and another bit dribbles on out, and he almost wants to just hold there, rocking on that one spot.

Then he wants to slam down, feel that rush through him again, so he does, jerking a little each time he settles himself all the way down before jerking back up again to rock right on that *spot*.

Breena jacks his cock, smearing that wet all along the length of his dick, slipping up and down and down and up and over and over, and he rocks just a bit, just keeping himself right in that spot, one more slam, down and up really fast, and it’s fucking, fucking flowing through him, inside and out, and then back up again, rocking on that spot and the stars all but dance behind his eyes, *God, right there*, just, rock, back and forth and up and down, and not a whole lot, when it’s all about his dick he’s trying to keep six inches moving up and back but all he wants right now is, maybe, an inch, maybe two, just, keep… right there… just, a little…

“God…” he’s panting it, over and over, leaning back, hands next to his feet getting just that bit more pressure, as he rocks his hips. Breena knows how to read that expression on his face, eyes closed, jaw tight, head back, and his bowstring tight muscles. She adds just a little more friction, all the way up, all the way down, hand gliding over her dick, just a bit harder and a bit faster.

He crashes down one more time, making his dick feel full to bursting, as her hand flies over him, landing down hard at the same time, and Jimmy shouts, eyes closed, body pulsing, pleasure coursing through him.

For… he doesn’t know how long, he rides the pulses and tingles, aware of spurt after spurt after
spurt, and his heart pounding in his chest.

And for a moment after that, there’s Breena’s lips on his, and her hands gently stroking over his arms and back as his heart and breathing slow down.

He untangles himself and collapses after another moment, wet, high as a kite, way more sensitive post-climax than he ever remembers being, and feeling thoroughly fuckered. He can hear Breena doing some clean up, feel her mopping him up some, too, but all he wants to do is lay there and twitch a bit.

After a few seconds she’s back in bed with him, snuggling close, and he turns his face to hers for more lazy kisses.

“You fly?” she asks him.

He kisses back, and peels his eyes open to watch her. She traces her fingers over his cheek and down his throat. His pupils are still wide from the excitement, and his skin is still pink and a bit sweaty. He doesn’t just feel fuckered, he looks it.

Jimmy flashes her a goofy smile, and then says, “Maybe I’m not a bird, but I’m definitely a bat, or… a dragon. Dragons fly, right?”

She kisses him. “Dragons fly.”

“Then we’re dragons.” He giggles. “God, I love flying.”
By the end of the first week, the rumors about what McGee is doing up there in his office are starting to fly.

And Fornell is not in the least surprised when his old partner, Ron Sacks, is lingering at his favorite pastry shop as he gets their morning fuel.

“Tobias! Fancy seeing you here.”

“Yes, I know, it’s deeply surprising to find me here, at the same place I get breakfast, every day, for the last fifteen years.”

Sacks rolls his eyes a bit. “Okay, I should have known better than to try it like that. Though I did want to see you, out of the office.”

Fornell grabs his bag of bear claws, biscotti, and scones, and says, “And here I am, out of the office. What’s up?”

“With me, a whole lot of the usual. What’s up with you? People are getting jittery seeing you closeted away upstairs with McGee.”

Fornell raises an eyebrow. “What sort of jittery?”

“Not sure. Sharpening up resumes, jittery? Looking over past cases, jittery? Everyone saw all of those boxes go into his office, and that’s got everyone nervous.”

Fornell knows that A: Sacks is not telling him everything he knows. B: If he outright lies, Sacks will twig to it, and C: If he lets slip what they’re really doing, that will get preemptive wrongful termination suits in place.

Fornell steps closer to Sacks, and keeps his voice down. “You remember working with McGee?”

“Not really.” Though for the last month he’s been trying. “I know he did some hot shit stuff since we worked ‘together,’ but I don’t really remember him. He sort of blended into the background. Computer guy, right?”

Fornell nods. “Those boxes are employment records. He’s planning on breaking Public Corruption into two major departments. Untouchables and Black Hats.”

Sacks blinks. “I know what an Untouchable is, what’s a Black Hat?”

“Undercover work.”

Sacks nods. Then he quietly says, “Look, this doesn’t go through my boss, but… I look awfully good in a nice suit, you know.”

Fornell smiles. “Yes, you do, and if you want a reference as to your Untouchable qualities, I’ll be happy to give you one.”
"I do."

“I’ll pass the word along.”

Tim’s talking to Burke when Fornell gets in. “So, here’s the deal, right now we’re going through the employment records of the current people in the public corruption department.”

Burke’s eyeing the ‘keep’, ‘fire’, and ‘prosecute’ piles.

“I know what I’m looking for for the keep pile, and they know, too. What I want you to do is start going through the ‘fire’ pile, and see if any of them can be moved to the ‘prosecute’ file.”

She’s smiling at that. “What are we prosecuting them for?”

“I’ve got a meeting with Legal next Wednesday, but for right now, let’s act like we can prosecute them for looking the other way when a hot case falls in their lap.”

“I can do that.”

“Great. But first, paperwork.” He points Burke toward a huge stack of pages, and then says, “Tobias Fornell, this is Melanie Burke.”

Fornell offers his hand, and both of them are a bit wary, until he opens the bag of pastries and says, “I’ve got bear claws, scones, and biscotti, what do you like?”

She grabs a biscotti, and a cup of coffee, and gets to it.

As she’s getting settled, Tobias tells Tim about Sacks.

Tim thinks about Sacks. He’s a good distraction from the pastries Fornell’s laying out on a plate in the middle of his conference table. As he’s doing that, Fornell says to Burke, “Let him know what sort of coffee you like, or, whatever it is you drink, and he’ll make sure there’s some of it for that machine of his.”

“The darkest stuff you can find, and I drink it black.”

Fornell smiles at that. “Oh, Gibbs is going to love you. You weren’t a Marine once upon a time, were you?”

“No.” She’s still a little wary, but looks like she’s trying to relax. Then Ziva, Dave, Gibbs, and Jackson come in, and her eyes open wide. She looks over to Tim. “You work with a baby and a dog?”

“I work with my sister and dad. The baby is hers, and nursing, so he goes where she does, and the dog is a hearing ear dog in training, so he goes all over the place, too.” He turns to Ziva and Gibbs, “Ziva DiNozzo and Jethro Gibbs, this is Melanie Burke.” He looks over to Burke. “Melanie, this is Ziva and Jethro, or Gibbs, he goes by either. The little guy is Dave, and the even littler, furry guy is Jackson.”

Melanie shakes hands, and seeing Ziva, and Dave, seems to have finally eased whatever is making her feel wary. She actually relaxes as she sits back down to fill in more paperwork.
Everyone settled, Tim gets back to thinking about Sacks. He liked rules and laws and doing things by the book.

“How old is he?” Most of the people in the room have no idea what he’s asking about, and Fornell, who could, lost Tim’s train of thought between talking about Sacks and saying hello to everyone. Tim sees the blank looks. “Sacks?”

“Fifty-five,” Fornell says, looking up from tickling Dave’s chin.

“Not ideal.”

“You need team leaders. People with experience.” Fornell gestures to himself and Jethro. Tim gets the message loud and clear.

“Tobias!” A warm and cheery voice says as Fornell’s paying for Friday morning’s Danish and crullers.

“Seeley!” He turns and looks up at the tall man walking toward him. “Lord, man, I haven’t seen you in…”

“Five years.”

That sounds about right. Even though both of them work out of the same main building, the FBI has a lot of people in it, and they don’t usually go bonking into each other.

“What have you been up to?” Like Tobias doesn’t know. He’s getting the sense that as long as he keeps hitting up this shop for morning pastries, he’s going to keep finding people wanting to ‘bump into him’ to ‘chat.’

“Murders, unsolved cases, dead bodies, serial killer hell. The grind.” Seeley waves that off like it’s no big deal, but Fornell’s heard some rumors indicating there have been some very big deals for Agent Booth in the last few years.

Tobias nods. “Been there, done that.”

“Yeah, I know. Look…” Seeley draws a bit closer to Fornell. “Rumor has it you’ve got an in on the new public corruption department.”

“Rumor is correct, assuming you consider sorting through files looking for experience in undercover work an ‘in.’”

“You’re sitting next to the guy running the thing when you do that?” Booth asks.

“I am.”

Booth smiles. “That’s an in.”

“So, what do you want to do with my in?”

Booth grows serious. “I’ve got kids now, and a marriage that can’t take another…” he doesn’t fill in what else his marriage can’t take, but having seen how many law enforcement marriages die on the
rocks of bad cases, and some of those rumors he’s heard, Fornell can fill in the blanks. “It sounds like your guy is going to fight the good fight, just a different good fight, and if I can get in on it… It’d be nice not to have psychopaths trying to kill my family, you know?”

Fornell nods. “Oh yeah, I know. But, look, we’re going to be going up against real power here, and those guys… This might not be the safest thing ever.”

Booth shrugs at that. “Nothing in this line is safe. Still, if these guys are in it for the power that probably means they won’t get stupid about what comes up when they’re in the crosshairs. We’re talking fighting with lawyers and blackmail, not guns and blood. My wife would certainly appreciate me getting shot at less, and I wouldn’t mind it, either.”

“I hope. But I can’t guarantee that.”

Booth nods again. “I got it. Still…” Booth’s eyes are far away, and Fornell doesn’t know what case he’s seeing, but he can fill in the blanks with his own personal list of hell cases.

“I’ll put you on the list.”

“Thanks.”

Tim’s looking up from his computer, where he is starting to put out feelers for the kind of computer talent he wants. “Seeley Booth, never heard of him.”

“He’s a good guy. I haven’t worked with him, but I’ve worked with people who have, and they all speak highly of him.”

“Is he an Untouchable or a Black Hat?”

“Probably an Untouchable, but he did spend years mostly working with the guys at the Jeffersonian, so he’s used to not-exactly-FBI-standard methods. You might be able to use him on either side.”

Tim’s nodding. He fires off an email to Jennifer, asking for Booth’s employment records.

Gibbs gets the next of the talent working its way out of the woodwork visits. Monday evening, after another long day of file sorting, he’s heading home, looking forward to dinner, and some quality time with Abbi.

Granted, unlike Fornell, he’s been actively looking for people, putting out feelers for the Untouchable’s team. So, it’s not exactly astounding that someone would seek him out. However, he’d been asking his web of Marine buddies for guys just getting out, straight arrows, young ones, to send to FLETC and turn into agents.

He’s gotten a decent-sized collection of them. Tim may have a bare bones list of people for the Black Hats, but junior Untouchables are coming along nicely. Granted, the Junior Untouchables all have to get through FLETC before they can join up. None of them will be ready to work before January.

He wasn’t expecting to see the man waiting on his doorstep, though, of course, he would have been
a link in the chain of friends of friends looking for talent.

“Mac?”

“Hello, Gunny.” Mac Taylor says, standing up, smiling at Gibbs, offering his hand.

Gibbs hugs him, shaking his head. “Lord, it’s been a long time.”

“More than twenty-five years.”

“What’s got you on my doorstep? Last I heard you were… Chicago, right?”

“Ended up in New York.”

Gibbs opens the door and waves him in. Mac’s staring at Jackson, wondering about the little dog. Maybe it’s Kelly’s pet, but… He makes himself apply time to Kelly Gibbs, she’s not seven-years-old anymore, she’s got to be in her thirties now, and likely doesn’t live at home.

Mona, who’s coming over to say hello is much closer to his idea of what sort of a dog Gibbs would have. Mac pats Jackson, and then Mona, as he looks around Gibbs’ home.

Years as a cop means he notices the pictures on the mantle, and seeing them, very quickly comes to the conclusion that he shouldn’t ask about Shannon or Kelly. There’s only one reason why the pictures of them on the mantle match his mental image of them, and it’s not a good one. Maybe, eventually, he will ask, but not now.

“As for why I’m on your doorstep…” he says, scanning the room, getting more of an idea of who ‘Gunny’ became over the years, “You’ve been looking for people to join in on this fancy new anti-corruption department. I’m people.”

Gibbs blinks. “You are.” Mac Taylor, the Mac Taylor he remembers from the six weeks they were together in Beirut, and the six months in Iraq… yeah, he’d be the kind of guy for this team. “What have you been doing for the last twenty-five years?”

“Been with NYPD. Ran their crime lab.”

Gibbs heads into his kitchen. Last he talked to Taylor, he was thinking the Chicago Fire Department, or something like that. Obviously life didn’t take him where he was planning to go. “You still like beer?”

“I still like beer.”

Gibbs grabs two of them, and heads over to Mac, handing him one. Then he nods to one of the pictures of Abby on his mantle. “One of my kids. That one runs the lab for NCIS at the Navy Yard. She’s a great crime fighter, but… I’m not seeing her skills with the computers and test tubes overlapping with what we’re talking about doing.”

Mac sips his BlueMoon and looks at the picture. It’s Abby in the lab, working away. He also noticed Gibbs referring to her as one of the kids, and that’s got him wondering. But, that’s not the topic they’re talking about right now. “There are shots of me in the lab coat, too. And I do know my way around a test tube, but for NYPD, I was a field officer, too. I did crime scene work, chasing down bad guy work, all of it.”

Gibbs eyes Mac. He’s a bit younger than Gibbs is, but not a ton. He’s got the same white hair. The same lean-and-keeping-in-shape-but-fighting-time physique that Gibbs is working himself back to.
But his eyes are still sharp, and he looks like he’s able to work.

“What’s mandatory retirement age for NYPD?”

“I’m not that old, Gunny.” But he’s not that young, and he knows it. “But that’s part of what’s got me thinking. I got married again…” He stops, realizing that Gibbs missed out on Claire. Gibbs gives him a soft smile. They’ll catch up properly before this is done. He’s thinking a few steaks on the fire with Mac and Abbi sounds like a good night. “I still need to do something. Need to protect and serve. But I want to be able to spend time with her, too. And…” He pats his chest. Gibbs was there when he took that hit. He’s got more than a few of those scars, too. “I don’t bounce back as quick as I used to. But I can run a team like no one’s business. My department did their job, on time, and under budget. And I can hunt down leads. And I can, and will, enjoy hanging the guys who abuse their positions up by their entrails.”

Gibbs grins at that. “How long are you in DC?”

“A few days.”

Gibbs touches the photo of Abby. Tim’s in the background of that shot, working on the computer behind her. “That’s the one running the show. I’ll make sure you get to meet him.”

“Thanks.” Mac steps closer to the mantelpiece. “Okay, I see piles of kids here. Who’s who?”

Tim opens the file on Mac Taylor, spends five seconds glancing at it, and says, “Any job he wants, he can have.”

Gibbs smiles at that. “He probably wants to stay in New York.”

“I need someone in charge of my New York branch of the Untouchables.”

Fornell doesn’t recognize the next one. But she, apparently, knows him.

“Agent Fornell.” Her voice is low, deep for a woman, and… He’s surprised by the combination of accents, she sounds… almost… not Mexican… but south of the border somewhere… with a foundation of West Virginia.

Everything about her oozes class and taste. From her cream silk dress, to the elegant teardrop pearl earrings, to her perfume, which whispers around him with a haunting melody, she’s the physical embodiment of style.

He can’t imagine why he doesn’t know her. He’s fairly sure a woman like that would stay in his mind forever, but… He’s drawing a blank.

“Hello.” She offers her hand and he shakes it. For a second, he wants to kiss her hand, and he almost blushes at that impulse. “I’m sorry, you’ve got me at a disadvantage.”

She waves that off, perfectly manicured fingers gently flicking his words away. “We only worked together once. You were still a new agent.”
“Ah.” That’s not helping at all. Other than telling him that if he was a new agent, it would have to have been back in the early nineties or late eighties. He tries to erase time, rewind the gray strands from her auburn hair, sharpen the time-softened curves of her face, but he can’t see her. Can’t attach this woman, here, now, to any sort of past, let alone a past as an FBI Agent.

“A drug raid that went bad. The woman used an infant as a human shield.”

Fornell nods, slowly. He remembers that case. He was new. Not brand new, but far enough down the food chain that his job was to linger on the outskirts keeping eyes on the situation.

He doesn’t remember her, and he feels like he would. Her hair would have been red then, deep russet, maybe, clear blue-gray eyes, the little beauty mark high on her cheek… Add that to her style, and any straight man with a pulse should remember her. But he doesn’t.

“I got called into that one last minute,” and he had, someone had called in sick that day, so he was up, “they needed an extra person to blend in and keep eyes on the street, and grabbed me.”

The woman nods at that, and then she clasps his hand, offering him a thumb drive. “Much of this is old. Most of it you can’t use in court. Some of it you shouldn’t admit to having. But I imagine your department will find it… interesting.”

Then she steps away from him, heading to a table where an elderly man, white-haired, with a gaze that makes Fornell feel not just naked, but dissected, in an impeccably crisp linen shirt, sips a coffee. He stands up and offers her his arm, as he dons a fedora at a jaunty angle, a moment later, they both amble out of the coffee shop.

It’s a good two minutes later, as he’s taking his bag of pastries from the Barista, when Tobias feels the ice shoot down his back as he remembers who she is. The hair on the back of his neck literally rises when he puts the beauty mark, except it wasn’t a beauty mark; it was a powder burn, a powder burn earned shooting blindly, in a basement, with her gun too close to her face, to a name.

He looks around, frantically, to see if she’s still near, or, and he shudders, if her companion has lingered.

No. His shoulders slump as he feels like he can breathe again. For the moment. He knows he’s going to be looking over his shoulder for a long time. He knows he’s never setting foot in this coffee shop again. He’s also fairly certain he and Wendy are moving, as soon as possible.

He was new agent, barely involved in that shoot, but it went bad, and he had to give testimony as to what happened. One of the lead Agents was a woman, with red hair, and a powder burn on her face, that looked like a beauty mark. She shot a drug dealer, who was using an infant as cover, and that was the last domino that had to knock over to send her to the dark side.

His hand is shaking as he looks at the thumb drive Clarice Starling, formerly of the FBI, currently, and for the last twenty years, on their most wanted list, has handed him.

He remembers the elderly man who walked out with her, and prays that he was properly polite.

It’s about half an hour later when Fornell gets to Tim’s office. He’s there, so are Gibbs and Ziva, but Burke isn’t.
Fornell carefully takes the thumb drive out of his pocket, and places it on Tim’s desk, before rooting around in one of Tim’s drawers for the latex gloves. He tosses them to Tim and nods to the thumb drive. “Treat it like it’s made of nuclear waste. Get it onto a computer, and then that goes into evidence.”

“Fornell?”

He shakes his head.

“I don’t want to know what’s in there, and you don’t want to know who gave it to me. Just get the intel, wipe the drive clean, really clean, not they-can-find-the-data-again-later clean, and stick it in an envelope. I’ve got to see… God, Crawford’s been dead for decades; I’m not sure who even gets this case now.”

Gibbs and Ziva are staring at him.

“Is this like Tim’s ‘college buddy?’” Ziva asks, watching Fornell walk across the room, and begin rooting around in the cabinet under the coffee maker, where Tim keeps the extra coffee.

“Do you have any alcohol in here?”

Tim shakes his head.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t drink on the job. Who gave this to you?”

Fornell shakes his head again. “She’s supposed to be dead. He is, too. And we’re all better off if they go back to being dead.”

“Uh…” Tim’s staring at the thumb drive, as he crosses his office, opens up the closet, and grabs one of his disposable netbooks.

Gibbs is staring at Fornell, never having seen him look so shaken, and Fornell’s dealt with some seriously messed up people over the years.

“Someone step on your grave?” Burke asks, walking in.

Fornell nods slowly. “Yeah! That’s a way of putting it.” He swallows, hard. “I’m going to get a bottle of scotch.” He points to the thumb drive. “Don’t touch it. Just grab what’s on it, make sure whatever that is is safe, wipe it clean, and put it in an envelope. I’ll… try to figure out what to do with it. The Behavioral Sciences Unit has to have someone lurking about still interested in them.”

“Wait, is it a she, or a them?” Burke asks.

“It’s a mess, and one all of you are blind, deaf, and dumb about, okay?”

No one’s ever seen Fornell this serious, except Gibbs, and the only time he’s seen this kind of energy off of Fornell, it was when Emily was in danger.

That gets several okays, as Fornell stalks off, Gibbs a few steps behind him, in search of a bottle.
“So, what’s on there?” Burke asks, as she and Ziva hover behind Tim, while he goes through the files on the drive.

They can all read, so it doesn’t take too long to come to the same conclusion.

“I guess if the people we’re investigating are the Powers That Be, these are the Powers That Were,” Tim says.

Ziva’s eyes are flicking over the screen. “There is nothing in here from after 2010.”

Tim keeps scanning. “Most of them are from before ’95.”

“Are these… medical files?” Burke asks, looking at the headers of some of the files.

“Psych evals,” Tim says, opening one up, eyes scanning the page, quickly. “Oh… Uh…” He closes it fast. He doesn’t recognize the name, but he’s awfully sure he doesn’t have the legal right to read privileged medical files, not of private citizens, not without a warrant. “I don’t think we’re supposed to be reading this stuff.”

“Nuclear waste…” Ziva says, copying Fornell. “I’ll take the list of names and find out who’s dead and who’s getting paid by the government. We can read those files…”

Tim sighs. That works for him. “And we can go from there.” He gently removes the thumb drive from his computer, lays it on the magnet he keeps precisely for this reason, letting it scramble whatever might be on it, and slips it into an envelope.

“Come on, the scotch is at my place. You’re shot right now. I’ll drive.” Gibbs shepherds Fornell into his car, and gets the engine on, and running, before giving Fornell a long look.

Fornell sits there, gently stroking Jackson, eyes far away.

After a minute, he says, “You weren’t on the job yet, not when this stuff went big. You were still off getting shot at in the desert. There was this agent, and she made a big name for herself hunting down a real psycho. Like, remember that case we worked on where the wife was killing people, but we found the victims’ toes in the husband’s stomach?”

Gibbs nods.

“Yeah, okay, that guy, times ten.”

He winces.

“She pissed a lot of people off with that. That big name, she made it as a trainee, and… It was the eighties, and a lot of the higher ups did not want to see a pretty, young woman knock it out of the ballpark. Especially not on a case a lot of experienced men had been stalling out on for years. A lot of them had a vested interest in making sure women failed as agents. So, when she knocked it out of the ballpark, they stuffed her in a corner and made sure no light would ever shine on her again.

“Anyway, to catch Mr. Psycho, she had to hook up with Dr. Even Worse Psycho, and in the course of catching Mr. Psycho, Dr. Even Worse Psycho got free.”
Gibbs is glaring at the road as he hears this. “She in on it?”

“Maybe? I don’t know. She stayed with the Bureau for years after Dr. Psycho went free. After a few years, the higher ups really screwed her over, and Dr. Even Worse Psycho, who apparently decided he liked her, or something, went after them. He caught the guy who’d fucked her career, cut his head open, took his brain out, and cooked it, and ate it, while he was alive. Tied the guy up at the dinner table and cooked his fucking brain in front of him.” Fornell shivers. He hadn’t been on that case, either, but one of his friends had been, and… There wasn’t enough alcohol on earth to erase the image of what they walked in on when they found Lecter’s house.

“She had vanished before that. But, from the prints, she was at the meal, too. That was back in ’93, and no one has seen them since. And we like it that way.”

Gibbs rubs his face.

“Dr. Even Worse Psycho, he… If you pissed him off, if you were ‘rude,’ he’d hunt your ass down and… God… One guy. He cut his back open, pulled his lungs out, and then tied him up like some kind of angel or something. Used his lungs as fucking wings!” Fornell shudders. “Decades. They’ve been looking for them for decades, and they’re just sitting in a coffee shop, tuned into the grapevine well enough to know who I am and hand me a Goddamn thumb drive!”

Fornell’s shaking his head.

“Every agency has horror stories. I know that, but ours… Shit, like she said, I even worked a case with her. Her last real case. Drug bust, went bust, she ended up shooting a woman, who was using a baby as a human shield… I testified about that.”

“What’d you say?” Gibbs asks.

“The truth, I was two streets away, watching the traffic flow, making sure no one unexpected was about to show up. I didn’t say Boo about her. I didn’t know her. I know the guy who was running the review, the guy who had his brain cooked, had a hard on for getting her out of the FBI, but if I’d lied, and if her people had seen it, they would have been free to start asking me about why I wasn’t at my post, and no matter how many times I got asked if I’d seen anything I wasn’t about to say yes.”

“If they’ve been gone since ’93… What could they have?”

“Lord alone knows. He was a hot shot psychiatrist back in the day. He’s probably got dirt on everyone who was anyone in the DC area from back in the ‘70s and ‘80s. Might be useless now. Might have information on how things that are biting us in the ass now got set up. I don’t know. I don’t want to know. I’m passing that on, and that’s that. I’m done.”

“You need to watch your ass on this?”

“God…” Fornell shuts his eyes and lets his head drop against the headrest of the truck’s seat. “I don’t… It’s… I don’t know. Twenty-four years of nothing. We figured they were dead. But… Obviously, not. So… Hiding out? Found a place that didn’t notice when the locals got murdered and turned into corpse art?”

“Quit?”

“Serial killers don’t just quit.” Fornell stares out the window. “Her accent sounded Spanish… He was tan. Maybe they’ve been in Guatemala or something.”

“Even Guatemala notices serial killers,” Gibbs says, quietly. “If they’ve been completely under the
radar for twenty years, they move way too often to get caught, or they quit.”

Fornell looks out the window as Gibbs pulls them into his driveway.

It’s later that afternoon when Tim gets one who actually made an appointment.

Like the last time, he’s hijacked Jennifer’s office. His team is slowly beating the employment files into submission, but *slowly* is the operative word there, especially with no one actually working on them today (Burke’s on prosecute, so making no headway on new files, and Ziva’s searching the names on the thumb drive they just got) and he doesn’t want to move them around too much.

Another tall, thin, gray haired detective. This one has glasses, almost too big for his face, and a pronounced ‘New York’ style of speech.

“Sergeant Munch, it’s nice to meet you.”

Munch nods, and shakes Tim’s hand. “Good to meet you, Director McGee.”

Tim offers coffee, and Munch takes one.

“When my secretary said you wanted to meet, I did my homework. What does a retired NYPD Sergeant, specializing in murder, sex crimes, and conspiracy theories want with me?”

Munch looks pleased to see Tim looked him up. “A job.”

Tim thinks about that. He couldn’t find a birthday for Munch, someone went to some trouble to hide that, but his employment records with the Baltimore PD go back to 1972. If he joined the Baltimore PD right out of high school that puts him at sixty-three, but he looks older than that.

“As what?”

“Anything. You name the job in law enforcement, and I’ve done it. I’d likely be most useful these days finding connections. Give me case files, and I can pull out the threads that wind everyone together.”

Tim’s nodding. He can see how that would be useful. And, as he thinks about it, he can also probably find more than a few opportunities for a ‘retired NYPD’ officer to go into something and worm out a few bad guys.

“How do you feel about going undercover as yourself?”

Munch is curious about that idea. “How undercover can it be if I’m being me?”

Tim smiles at that. He’s writing down Karningham’s number on a card for Munch. “I’m going to have a collection of people whose entire job is to find public officials, and tempt them into breaking the law. Think you’d be good at that?”

“You mean, instead of piecing the conspiracy together from clues, I’d… go undercover and be part of it?”

“I’d like you to do both. Find the clues, figure out where they point, and then you’d hunt them down
and worm your way in, or maybe even start a few from scratch. And yes, you’d definitely be bringing them to light.”

Munch grins, widely, as Tim passes him the card. “That’s Walter Karningham’s number. He’s the one who is working on designing that half of the public corruption department. Give him a call and have a chat. If you want adjunct work, undercover and keeping track of people, you can do that just fine. If you want a badge to go with what you’re doing, all those years as a cop won’t matter, you’ve still got to get through FLETC.”

Munch nods. “I’ll talk with Karningham, and see what he’s thinking about.”

With the addition of a shot of scotch, and then another one, some time playing toss the ball around with Mona, one more shot, a few more rounds of toss the ball around, calling Wendy, making sure she’s okay, and talking a bit more about the horror story the Lecter case had been, Fornell starts to come back to himself.

Eventually, he and Gibbs get back to the office, and while Gibbs continues along on the employment files, Fornell goes hunting around to figure out who he should be giving that thumb drive to.

Apparently, back in 2000, the Behavioral Sciences Unit became the Behavioral Analysis Unit. He calls down and says the magic words, “Hannibal Lecter sighting.” That kicks the hornet’s nest, and within a minute he’s looking at…

“Good God, you’re even younger than Skippy,” he nods at Tim, letting the sweater-clad not quite teenager in front of him, know who Skippy is.

“That’s Director Skippy, to you,” Tim adds dryly. “Unless you want to go back to your paperwork.”

Fornell shudders again, but this time it’s not real. “They said they were sending Dr. Reid up.”

Reid, who’s done this more times than he can count, says, “I am Dr. Reid.” He looks at Tim, “And, it’s extremely likely I’m within two years of the same age as Director McGee.”

Fornell and Gibbs share a look about a world filled with babies, but neither of them has to say anything.

Tim offers his hand. “We’re a bit informal up here, and he’s having a bad day. Welcome, Dr. Reid.”

Reid nods at that. “Director McGee. Agent Fornell said there was word of Dr. Lecter.”

As Tim hands over the envelope with the thumb drive, Fornell gets Reid up to date. He ends with, “I don’t know for certain that the man was Lecter, but the woman was Agent Starling, and unless she’s got a collection of old guys who can take a person apart with a look, that had to be Lecter with her.”

Reid’s listening, holding the envelope, thinking about it. “We’ve had a few cases over the years, all secondhand, none of them in the United States, which looked similar to the Chesapeake Reaper. But we never had enough information to confirm that it might have been him. And they always got to us well after they happened.”

“Spain?” Fornell asks.
“One of them. Buenos Aries, Santiago, Mexico City… Every major city in Latin America with a first rate opera and ballet. Never more than one or two victims. Not enough to make a pattern. And nothing in the last five years.” Reid’s voice gets very dry. “It’s almost as if he’s got someone with an intimate understanding of how law enforcement works along for the ride, now.”

“If it was Lecter, he’s… got to be getting close to ninety now,” Fornell adds. “Maybe even serial killers eventually get too old for it.”

“Perhaps,” Reid says. He holds the envelope, looking quite thoughtful. “We’ll get a BOLO out, and see if any of the cameras near the café were working.” He sighs. “After last fall, almost none of the surveillance equipment in DC works anymore. May I ask what’s on the thumb drive?”

“Nothing, now,” Tim says. “Its contents are classified. The drive itself isn’t. You’re welcome to anything it can tell you.”

“The contents could tell us where they are, or will be.” Reid looks annoyed at having lost what was in that little bit of metal and plastic, and Tim sympathizes. If he had been handed this dead thumb drive, he’d be ready to pounce on it the second Abby got done with trace. He doesn’t know if Dr. Reid has a computer guy in the wings, but he’s going to be pretty disappointed when he tries to get what’s on here.

“I understand, but, literally, you can’t use them. They were medical records; and we have neither permission from their owners nor a subpoena for them. None of them from after 2010. We’re hunting down which people are dead, and which ones work for the government, when we find that out, I’ll send you what’s in there.”

Fornell says, “We might still have the hard copies of some of what’s on there. When we raided his place on the Chesapeake, we found his medical records. But God alone knows where he’s trying to point us with this.”

Reid stands up, ready to head back to his unit. “That is the question now, isn’t it? Where is he pointing you? Why you?”

Fornell feels the shiver of those questions. “Trust me, I know.”

Tim’s the last one to leave that night. He spends a moment staring around his office, thinking, *I’ve got everyone from ex-NYPD to serial killers offering me help. Either I’m doing something very right, or very wrong here.*

He pulls on his jacket, checks his piece, with news of Lecter on the loose, he’s feeling a bit more secure with a gun on him, even if it is just for the walk from his office to his car in the parking garage, and then locks up.

As he heads off, he hopes he’s doing something very right.

Chapter End Notes
:) I had a lot of fun with this one.

It may be obvious to some of you, but maybe not so much to some others, that I'm using Hannibal and Clarice from the books, and not the TV show. If you haven't read the Silence of the Lambs books, go find a copy, they're awesome.

Also, I love the idea of Criminal Minds, but it's too grim for me to watch more than an episode or two at a time. So, I LOVE the idea of setting the BAU against Lecter, (Seriously Drs. Reid and Lecter, together! Mad fangirl squeeing!) but I don't have the time, or level of detail to write it. That said, if any of the rest of you do... PLEASE!

I hope this was fun for the rest of you, too.

And no, that's not the only cameos of other beloved law types, just the ones who are popping up now. :)}
Honestly... If you're feeling really emotionally unstable because of the election, you might want to skip this one and likely the next one. They aren't exactly apolitical or fluffy and uplifting.

More notes at the end getting into the nitty gritty, details. I can back up the shit I'm dishing out, though I wish I could have kept this all in the land of pure fiction.

There are moments of putting together this new team that make Tim feel really great. Like he’s on top of the world and making a real difference.

Like there’s a shot of actually cleaning out the bad apples.

And then there are days like Wednesday.

He’s finally gotten a chance to sit down with one of the guys from legal, and he’s got a very straightforward question for him. Several of them.

“Just to check, anything we talk about is in confidence, right?” Tim asks after Harold Kane offers him a cup of coffee and makes sure he’s comfortable in his office, a space filled with legal books, most of which Tim assumes have never been opened.

“Right.” Kane isn’t the top of the FBI’s legal talent, but he’s in the top five. He’s in his late fifties, a bit plump, with sharp gray eyes, short gray hair, impossibly white and straight teeth, and a tan that looks a tad deeper than necessary.

“Even from other members of the FBI.”

“Without your express permission, I can’t talk about any of this to anyone, even my assistant.”

Tim smiles. “Excellent.” He sips his coffee. “As you know, I’m reworking the Public Corruption Department, and I’m hoping to make a definitive statement about how things are going to change around here.”

Harold nods, sipping his coffee.

“Going through the employment files, and the cases these people worked on, I’m noticing a pattern. Very high visibility cases, whether they were embarrassing or not, got investigated. Anything that wouldn’t make the front page of the New York Times, though, if it was embarrassing, it just got dropped. I don’t mean covered up, or anything like that, the cases got logged, the investigator noted he had received them, and then they died.”

Harold nods again. “And your question?”

“Is that legal?”
“Of course.” He sips his coffee, looking Tim over, surprised that Tim would even ask. “You were a field agent not that long ago, correct?”

Tim agrees.

“You have more cases come in than you can possibly investigate, so the high priority ones get attention, the lower priority ones get mothballed for your non-existent free time.”

“NCIS made sure to investigate anything that crossed our path.”

There’s a smile in Harold’s eyes; he’s clearly looking at Tim like he’s hopelessly naïve.

“Ah. Yes, well, technically, the FBI claims that, too. But… Cases get old, they go cold, more important cases pop up,” Harold gestures, indicating ‘what can you do?’ “And sometimes something falls through the cracks. It happens. And it is entirely legal. This has gone up against the courts on the state and federal levels, and there is no requirement that any level of law enforcement actually investigate or involve themselves in any sort of crime.”

Tim sighs at that. “So, you call 911, begging for the help, the cops don’t show, you can’t sue them.”

“Exactly. And it’s the same for us.”

Tim sighs louder and longer. “Okay, do we have any regulations requiring that our people investigate every crime?”

“Yes—” Tim starts to light up. “But, in this case ‘investigate’ means the crime gets logged, handed off to an investigator, and that’s it.”

Tim slumps. “So, I’ve got people burying cases of corruption for decades, and I can’t fire them for it?”

“Were they getting paid or receiving any benefits for ignoring those cases?”

“Keeping their supervisor happy? Getting good performance reviews? People who kept investigating anything handed to them tended to get transferred out of Public Corruption.”

Harold’s shaking his head. “You might, possibly, if there was a direct, ‘you will look the other way’ order involved, have a case against the supervisor. But, if it was a matter of unspoken understanding that certain cases don’t get rigorously investigated, then no, you’ve got no case.”

“I don’t have anything like that. Their job was public corruption, and they were just… letting them get away with it. There’s nothing I can do about them?”

“Were they investigating other crimes?”

“Yes.”

Harold shakes his head. “No, you only have cause to fire if they don’t investigate anything, or if they were specifically told to work on a case and didn’t, or were specifically told to not work on a case.”

“What about the Boss who only promotes the guys who look the other way? He doesn’t specifically say anything, but he rewards less than vigorous investigation techniques.”

“Is anyone telling him to do it? Is he getting anything for it?”

“Not that I can prove.”
“Is he directly telling any of his people to only prosecute certain cases?”

“No.”

Harold shakes his head. “As a supervisor or director, at the FBI, you can promote anyone who does well on their evals and works cases in the manner you think most appropriate.”

“Shit.” Tim says it quietly, but it’s clear from the look on his face that this is not making him happy. “So… I can’t get rid of these people?”

Harold settles back into his chair, holding his coffee cup. “Not for this.”

Back in his office, with the rest of his team, Tim says to Fornell, “I don’t suppose the FBI has…” he glances at the fire pile, which grows higher and higher every day, “more than 250 punishment positions.”

Fornell shakes his head. There are more desirable posts and less desirable posts. There are extremely undesirable posts, but they don’t have a place to stick 250 guys. Let alone the six hundred they expect to have by the end of this. “No. I take it you didn’t get the answer you wanted?”

Tim slumps down into the seat next to Gibbs, and then grabs one of the Danish that Fornell brought in today. He takes a bite, chewing thoughtfully. “These are from somewhere new, aren’t they?”

Fornell nods. “You think I’m going back after they found me?”

“Good point.”

“You’re stalling,” Ziva says, and Burke, who isn’t quite clear what level of interaction she’s supposed to have with Tim, nods tentatively.

“It’s think about… what is this, almond cream?” Tim’s eyeing the bit of Danish he hasn’t eaten.

“Yeah.”

“It’s think about almond cream Danish, or the fact that I, apparently, can’t get rid of these twits.” He scowls, chewing angrily. “No, it’s not illegal to look the other way. No, looking the other way isn’t even cause to fire someone. No, there’s nothing you can do about a Boss who only promotes the guys who look the other way. And there’s nothing you can do about the bright boys who notice the guys who look the other way get promoted, so they do it themselves. Not only is none of it illegal, it’s not even against the FBI’s internal rules. As long as no one out and out said, ‘Don’t investigate X,’ there’s nothing I can do with them.”

“Change the rules,” Gibbs says.

“Yeah,” Tim sighs, not sure how to do that.

“Apply the headslap, Tim, make them ashamed of what they did, and a bunch of them may come around,” Gibbs says.

Tim sighs at that, too. The headslap he had intended to apply to them, loudly, and with much vigor, just got yanked out of his hands. “The entire country headslapped these assholes last year,” but it sounds flat as he says it.
“Slapped them as a group,” Ziva says. “You slap them personally. Shame isn’t motivating for groups. They can all hide behind each other, claim it wasn’t them, but the other guys, but for individual people…”

He nods, and again sighs; he’s got to get a new plan in place. Before he gets thinking about that, he notices the way Burke is watching him. Tim doesn’t get the sense that Burke often finds herself in a situation where she’s not sure what to do. But right now, she looks like she’s not sure.

“Go ahead and say it. I might not like it, but you won’t get a headslap for it.”

“We’re talking about metaphorical headslaps, right?” Burke asks.

The other four exchange glances as Tim says, “When they come from me, yes.”

“Ah… Well… If you want the headslap to matter, then you need to start at the top.”

“That’s what we’re working on,” Tim gestures to the files. They’re starting to move from middle management into upper middle management these days.

Burke looks confused. She knows for a fact that the person she’s talking about doesn’t have a file in this pile. “No. I mean the top. Comey.”

The other four of them glance at each other, not sure where she’s going with this.

Burke starts to look exasperated. It’s fairly clear no one at this table knows what she’s talking about. “Were you all under a rock last July?”

“I was in the hospital, then home recovering from more broken bones than you can count, and on a boat load of painkillers. Those two were starting to get into the conspiracy that unraveled in the fall, and Fornell was getting married. What happened last summer that we weren’t paying attention to?”

Burke continues to look exasperated as she grabs her phone, goes hunting along on it, and then plays Comey’s press conference from July, 5 2016.

He doesn’t look away from the tiny screen, but Tim knows all four of them don’t like what they’re seeing. Everything Comey’s saying is bad, everything he’s mentioned would get any one of them tossed in prison for years. For Tim specifically, who has broken some of the laws around these laws with his hacking adventures, Leon’s get-out-of-jail-free card has meant that if they got caught, Leon would go to jail for what he was doing. And, if they got caught, Tim wouldn’t have been prosecuted, but he’d have been fired and lost his security clearance, likely before they finished figuring out what stuff he’d lifted, from say, the CIA.

Classified stuff is classified, and you don’t mess around with it.

When they get to the bit where Comey says, “To be clear, this is not to suggest that in similar circumstances, a person who engaged in this activity would face no consequences…” all of them wince.

Once it’s done, Tim says, “So, look the other way came from the top down.” He fires off an email, his personal account to Comey’s asking for a meeting.

Two days later, he’s got it.
Having talked to Legal, Tim’s coming to the conclusion that the laws against Public Corruption are somewhat lacking in rigor. He’s not entirely certain that this is true, or if it’s just here at the FBI.

But, if there’s anyone he can talk to, off the record, who likely knows how to work those laws…

He punches up the number, and in a moment has a friendly voice on the other line, “Timothy!”

“Hi, Senior. Are you anywhere near DC?” Ever since his and Delphine’s place in DC went up in flames, they’ve been spending more and more of their time abroad, or in other parts of the country, scouting land deals for future seats of the new government. Last he heard from his grandmother, they’re staying in New York until the next Presidential cycle, when they’ll be moving to Chicago.

“Not right now, Tim. We’re in Barbados.”

“Then I’ll have to owe you the coffee. Can we talk?”

“Sure. What’s got you calling? Is everything okay?” Senior can tell by Tim’s voice that nothing is wrong in the sense of someone being ill or hurt, so he doesn’t sound urgent as he says ‘everything okay?,’ just mildly concerned.

“Somewhat. And…” He realizes that, ‘Could you talk me through how this corruption game usually works?’ might be a tad insulting if gone at the wrong way. “I need to ask you about something, because I think you have a pretty good idea how it works, and… I don’t want to sound insulting, but… It’s kind of sticky.”

Senior laughs at that. “Oh my.”

Tim sighs. “I’ve had the Public Corruption department for almost a month now, and I’ve gotten to talk to my legal guys and… It’s pretty clear the public corruption laws are written to catch only the most blatantly stupid people. The guys who can’t walk and chew gum at the same time. And at the very least, I want to tighten up my internal rules on this, so um… if you wanted to… bribe someone… or get them to do an inappropriate favor for you…” He feels like his foot is a mile deep into his mouth. “How would you do it?”

Senior laughs again. “Junior’s got you thinking I might be the kind of person who knows how to do that?”

Tim cringes. He doesn’t want to throw Tony under the bus on that. “More a longstanding prejudice against people with lots of money who wear good suits all the time.”

“Uh huh…” He hears Senior sigh. “Well, Tim, let’s start at the very beginning. By the time you get to my level, and that’s generally deals in the ten to fifty million dollar range, no one ever pays bribes. Like you said, the only people doing it are too stupid to walk and chew gum. And, just as a side note, Junior’s been telling me about you ‘Black Hats,’ and if any of them attempt to flat out bribe someone who’s higher up the food chain the county dog walker, they will immediately shut the conversation down, and likely call the cops to report your Black Hat because we all know that’s not how the game is played.”

So much for that plan. “So, tell me how to play the game.”

“First question, who are we playing with? For example, I have no idea what to do if I wanted an individual FBI employee to do something.”

“Okay. Who do you normally play with? Tell me how the game works for them.”
“I usually work real estate, but I did some work with the ACA as well, on behalf of some drug manufactures, and that got me involved with some big names. First things first, you cannot make someone act against his own interest. That’s why bribes do not work. If you offer a bribe, you are trying to get something to do something that could hurt him, and you will fail. So, step one of the game, find someone who is of the same mindset you are. Someone who already wants to do what you want to do.

“If I were working a real estate deal, I’d go looking for the City Council member who’s big on development and bringing in new construction jobs, and likely the one who has ties to the local electrical, construction, and plumbing unions if we’re in a Union town. He and I will get together, and we’ll have a chat about my project. I’ll point out how good it’ll be for him and his constituents.

“He’ll generally agree with me about this, because I’ve made the case that this is the kind of project that will make the people who give him a lot of money happy. If he’s in a Union town, I’ve already had a chat with the head of the Electricians, Plumbers, and Construction Locals, and promised them that I’ll only use their labor for the project.

“At some point in this conversation, he may mention his charitable work. That mention will flow naturally, because we’re talking about how what I want to do will improve the community, and he’ll mention how he’s working to make things better, too. We’ll agree about this, too. And because we’re agreeable guys working together for a common goal, this charity will be doing something I and my people will approve of, and it will be, at least tangentially, related to what we’re talking about doing. So, for this kind of thing, it might be an organization that helps high school drop outs get trained in the building trades, or something like that.

“In most cases, that charitable organization he’ll mention really does do some sort of good thing. It will also donate money to his campaign, and to the campaigns of the men who help support him. It’s possible his kids, grandkids, or nephews and nieces will have a cushy job with said charity, too. Maybe his wife will be on the board. Maybe he’s on the board. All of that will be true, but it will also be true that there are going to be large, visible projects with that charity’s name on it.

“Now, after we’ve had our meeting, my corporation, which has a charitable giving department, will give that charity a sizeable donation. My corporation will also donate the largest legal amount to his re-election campaign and the re-election campaigns of everyone he works with who shares his views. Back when we had political parties, we’d give them a huge donation, too, and generally there was no limit on how much we could give the party.”

Tim’s listening, nodding along, jotting down notes.

“But what you have to realize is, I’m not bribing him. It’d be stupid for me to even try. I’ve picked someone who already wants to do what I want him to do, and I’m helping him stay in power so he can keep doing what he wants to do. He wants my continued support, so he’ll kick me the occasional useful tidbit, like letting me know when the building inspector is on the way, and making sure I get the permits I need, because he knows I’ll be properly appreciative of it.”

“So, say you want a… I don’t know… lower tax bracket…”

“Again, it’s not a bribe. If there’s no tax break already on the horizon, I may, some afternoon when we’re playing golf, mention that other cities have ‘economic enterprise zones’ or something like that. I will never ask him to make one. I won’t even suggest that I want one. I will point out how well they work for the places that have them. And, he may, if it’s to his advantage, see about getting my building listed as part of said zone. But, only if it’s to his advantage.”

“And if it’s not, you won’t ask him to do it, because you’ve already got a pretty sweet deal with
“him?”

“Exactly.”

Tim growls. “Okay, up the ladder. How’d the ACA deal work?”

“Similarly. Drug manufacturers want to make money on their products. Easiest way to do that is for them to have a lock on the market. The fewer people selling a sleep aid, or decongestant, or whatever, the more likely you are to buy their decongestant.”

Tim’s following along with that. “Senators don’t make decisions like that, right?”

“No, they don’t. This is the kind of case where you move up and down the chain. Up the chain, you find your Congressman or Senator who is interested in medical issues. Find the one who has a point of view amenable to whatever it is you want. In this sort of case, you wanted someone who really liked the ACA.”

“Why?”

“Because he’d be the guy who helped get it passed, and once it passed, you could go down the chain.”

“What’s down the chain?”

“Down the chain is a guy at a desk. It’s his job to decide which drugs go on the list of medications ACA compliant plans have to cover. The Senator will have an Aide, that Aide will know who’s on the committee to decide what drugs will be on the formulary. You and yours will never have direct access to him, but that Senator’s Aide may say something nice to him about how cost effective and reliable your drug is, but she will never ever suggest said drug should go on the formulary, or that other, similar drugs, shouldn’t. If you’ve done your legwork, and been properly attentive to the Senator’s pet charities and re-election plans, you may find your drug on the list.”

“Okay, why do you do this? You don’t work for or with a drug company.”

“Because I don’t work for the drug company. I don’t talk to the Senator, either. I talk to his wife, or nephew, or a few of his buddies and I get together at a bar or a show. Maybe I’m on the same jet his wife is on as we go to Paris. People like me plant ideas. People like them know who those ideas are supposed to get to.”

Tim growls again.

“Bad case, Tim?”

Tim shakes his head, but Senior can’t see that. “Just human nature.” There’s no way to write the law so likeminded individuals can’t work together to make the world look the way they want it to. That’s politics at its most basic. That’s the point of politics.

Move that idea around and… Most people who work for groups like the FBI have a certain set of preferences, about politics, and how they want their jobs to work, and… And if turning a blind eye to certain cases kept them safe and comfy in their own chairs, keeps the money flowing, and makes people think well of the right people…

No one would need to say anything. They’d ignore cases like that because investigating them wouldn’t be in their own best interest.
“That’s how it works, Tim.”

“Thanks, Senior. At some point, would you be interested in sitting down with my Black Hats and having a chat with them?”

He can feel the wide smile on the other end of the phone. “I’d be delighted to.”

---

“You know why I’m here?” Tim asks when he heads in to see Comey on Friday.

“Weekly update?”

Tim shakes his head. “I’ve been going through everyone who worked for the Public Corruption department, sorting them into three piles: keep, fire, prosecute. Nine out of ten of the employee files I touch involve someone who was happy to look the other way. A case would come up, they’d take it, glance at it, see who was involved, and if the right people were involved, that case would go into the ‘I’ll get around to it shortly after Hell freezes over’ pile. I tossed those people into the fire or prosecute pile. As I’ve been doing this, I’ve talked to our legal department. They tells me that I cannot fire, nor prosecute, almost everyone in that pile.

“They tell me that unless there was a direct order to not go forward on a case, there is nothing I can do.

“They tell me that strong hints, and an understanding that ‘this is how we do things’ is not enough.”

Tim’s silent for a moment, letting that sink in, watching Comey watch him. He’s looking… not interested, and not like someone just stepped on his grave, but… resigned, that’s probably the best way to describe it.

“I spent most of last summer on a lot of painkillers, or unraveling the corruption case that would take everything down. So, I wasn’t paying attention to what you were doing. But, that couldn’t last forever, and on Wednesday, I got to see what you were up to last summer.”

Comey looks him up and down as Tim sits down, across from him. “You’d like to know if there’s a direct case for you to investigate?”

Tim shakes his head. After that chat with Senior, he’s sure there isn’t. “I’d like to know if you looked the other way, got bought off, were threatened, or…”

Comey smiles, but it’s a sad one. “No one is so uncouth as to say anything. Certainly not to the head of the FBI. I sat down with the Attorney General, and we had a little chat. See, two weeks earlier, she had had a chat with Bill Clinton. I think they talked about their grandkids or something. She was out doing her job, and he just popped up.” Come half smiles again. “It was enough.”

After his conversation with Senior, Tim’s seeing how this worked, too. No one would need to say anything. She’d get the message loud and clear. If she wanted to keep her Party happy, this thing needed to go away.

Comey sighs. “That said, it was not said, or hinted, even in the most tangential, round about way, that if we wanted to see the Attorney General continue to support us in our cases, we’d suddenly develop an appreciation, at least on this one case, for the idea that it wasn’t enough to break the law,
you also had to mean to harm the country by doing it.”

Tim’s following along with that, but he’s not seeing why Comey would take that deal. It looks back for the AG if the FBI’s cases just sit there not getting prosecuted. “So, you tell her to fu- kiss off and shame her into doing her job!”

Comey sighs, again. “There’s a reason why we were willing to go with a field agent for your job, and it was the hope of seeing versions of that response. However, when it comes to the entire FBI, that response is not appropriate. The Attorney General doesn’t just prosecute federal cases, they also defend them, specifically they defend us from cases suggesting that we shouldn’t be able to investigate certain things, get our hands on certain bits of information… You get the drift.”

Tim does. “So, say you want to… Force a company to put a backdoor into a product they make…”

“The AG handles that case. And all of the cases like it.”

Tim nods, not feeling good about this. “So, you got up there, wore the egg on your face, and…”

“And said very clearly that she was lying about pretty much everything, that she had classified documents on her personal servers, but we wouldn’t do anything because no ‘reasonable prosecutor’ would take the case.”

Tim nods at that, too. Then he inhales, long and deep. He lets it out slow and smooth, too. “That doesn’t fit with how I want us to run things.”

“I’m sure.” Comey’s watching him, intensely.

“The Attorney General went missing last fall.” Whether she ran because she was implicated in the political conspiracy, on several levels in the mess, or if the mob got her, no one knows. With everything else going on, hunting her down is a ‘low priority’ issue. He knows there’s a Congressional Warrant out for her, and maybe one day they’ll get around to actually looking for her.

“Also true.” Comey’s got a hell of a poker face, and Tim has no idea if he knows what happened to her. “Nothing was ever recorded, and there’s no possible case to be made. Trust me, everything between us was entirely legal.”

“Of course it was.” Which is part of the problem. A big part of how they ended up where they are. “In a month or so, I’m going to finish going through the public corruption employment files. At that point, I’ll have to figure out how to motivate these people I can’t get rid of to start truly doing their jobs.” Tim breathes deep again. “It would be quite a bit easier to get the message that this is not acceptable behavior across, if you weren’t sitting in that chair.”

“You’d…” Comey lets that drift off, interested in seeing how far Tim will take this.

“I can’t prosecute you. As you said, and as I’m seeing, pretty much everything I want to shut down is legal. I am asking you to resign, and to explain why you are leaving. I would like you to make an extremely public statement about failing at your job, and I would like you to encourage the people who behaved like you did to leave, too. I’d especially appreciate it if you were to add something about how things are changing, and how the old systems won’t work any longer.”

Comey cocks an eyebrow. “You don’t ask for much.” His voice is painfully dry, but he doesn’t appear to be angry.

“Nope. Just that you behave like an honorable man who made a mistake. Own up to it, and then get out of the way, so someone else who’s better suited for the work can take the reins.”
“You?” Comey’s looking him straight in the eye as he asks.

Tim shudders. “Good Lord, NO! I’m busy enough with what I’m doing. Pick a good man or better yet, two to replace you. I’d like you to write up a new set of guidelines before you go, making it, at least, against the regs to ignore a case because it would embarrass the wrong people. I’ll make sure we get the software that triages cases; I just need you to make sure that ignoring a code red because it would annoy the powers that be is a firing offence. I can’t fire them for that now, but I damn well want to be able to next year.”

“I can change the regulations, but you’ll still need to get them into the Union contracts, and they are exceptionally resistant to anything that makes it easier to fire anyone. I don’t get to pick my successor. The President does that, and Congress approves.”

“Change the regs, I’ll take care of the Union, and suggest some good names to whoever you know in the government.”

Comey stand up, looking out his window, at the rebuilding of DC. “I don’t suppose you look out on it, and think about what more you could have done?”

Tim stands next to him. Eyes flitting over construction sites, rubble, and empty lots. “No. I wonder if it was worth it. If I should have looked the other way. That hits me all the time. But, no. I did everything I could.”

Comey nods. “Let me know when you’ve got your list ready.”

“Okay.”

“What exactly are you going to do?”

“I’m thinking I’m going to call them all in, lead them on a guided tour of the Capitol, show them hours of youtube clips of the riots, more clips of starving people scavenging for food, I’m going to sit each one down, and beat into their thick heads that what happened was their fault, that it was their job to stop us from getting to a place where this could have happened, and then, I’m going to have them sit in the audience and watch you resign. If I’m lucky, a lot of them will fall on their swords, too.”

Comey sniffs, and then swallows, and nods again. “I’ll make sure it’s a good speech.”

Tim’s quiet during dinner. It’s Shabbos dinner, so the lack of his voice barely makes a dent in the general chatter. The rest of the family lets him mope a bit, without too much poking. Gibbs and Ziva are there, so they’re filling in the blanks with the general frustrations of trying to beat the FBI into shape, and the wider fears that if getting the FBI into shape is this hard, what the hell are they going to do with the wider world?

It’s that evening, after the kiddos are in bed, when the rest of the family is laying around the living room, that Tim starts talking.

He’s lounging with his head in Abby’s lap on the sofa, while most of the rest of the crew plays scrabble at the dinner table when he says, “I hate law.”
Him finally starting to talk gets a lot of attention aimed at him.

Breena’s the one who says, “Uh… That’s… a pretty impressive statement from an FBI Director.”

Tim groans. “Yeah well…” He’s rubbing his eyes, looking pretty lost. “Rule 13, never involve the lawyers. Okay, fine. We’ve always known that law and justice don’t walk hand in hand, but at NCIS we were in the justice business. We knew who the good guys were. And Leon did something to make sure the bad ones went to jail, and the good ones went home again and…” Abby’s gently rubbing circles against his temples. Tim snorts, and it’s an extremely jaded sound. “But I’m playing Law now, not justice. The game is rigged. Unless I want to go vigilante, I can’t do anything about so much of this.”

“You afraid there’s no point to it?” Abby says.

“I’m afraid I can’t change it. I’ll stand up there, and make a pretty picture, and put a coat of whitewash on a structure of shit.”

None of them like hearing him sound so defeated.

“I should… I don’t know… feel better than this. I got Comey to say he’d resign today.” That’s one bit none of the rest of them knew, and they’re all staring at him. “And I’ll put on a dog and pony show, and probably only get the people I could have given a decent second chance to will be shamed into leaving. And then I’ve got… I’ve got to somehow make this work, with the people who let it happen the first time.”

He’s licking his lips, staring past Abby, to the ceiling. “And it’s not like they’re particularly bad guys or anything. Not really. They just protected their own. And ‘their own,’ they weren’t necessarily doing anything illegal. Just working with other people who all wanted to see the same things happen, and… And what the hell do I do about that? If my job is law and they aren’t breaking any, what can I do? Hell, with the way Senior explained it, I can’t even change the laws to make what they’re doing illegal because that would make doing pretty much any other working together to change things illegal, too.

“I’m not stupid or naïve. I know evil is eternal. I know all we can do it fight it one battle at a time, but… With murders and hacking and things like that, I had tools to fight with. If I caught you doing it, I could make you not do it again. I can’t even fire these guys. Best I can do, is maybe, make them feel bad about themselves.”

He sits up a bit, to look toward Penny and Ducky. “Anything? You guys have anything? Any spiffy new laws I can use? What does it matter if I’ve got free rein to investigate whatever I like if none of this stuff is illegal?”

No one says anything.

“Come on Ducky, no words of wisdom, or bon mot, or…”

“Timothy, there was never a law that was ever worth more than the man enforcing it. As you said, evil is eternal. But law is not the tool we use to fight it. It’s… a system that gives us guidelines for how to fight it, but it’s not the fight, nor is it the weapon.

“Our weapons are literal weapons, and they are metaphorical ones. We fight with guns and knives and our physical bodies. And we fight with culture. A gun is easy. Put a bullet in the right place, and the threat is gone. Culture is hard. Culture is you changing how people think and feel about the game, so that it doesn’t matter what the rules are, certain plays become unthinkable.
“Change the culture. Find better men. That’s your job. Make it so the idea of looking the other way is so shameful that no one at the FBI would even dream of it. Shifting it, especially since you cannot fire people, will be difficult, but I do not believe it will be impossible.”

“Feels like it.”

“I’d imagine so,” Penny adds. She feels versions of this all the time in Congress. “We’ll work on backing you up with better laws, but for right now, find them men who can enforce them and give them the system to do it well. That’s what you can do, so do it.”

“I don’t think it’s enough.”

Unfortunately, it doesn’t matter how many times people tell him it is, when Tim goes to bed that night, he’s still feeling hollow, realizing he signed up to kill the Hydra, and the Hydra, unlike in the myths, can’t be killed.

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes I make decisions that bite me in the ass.

I didn’t expect using the real head of the FBI for this story to be one of them, but… Oh well. I did, and things went bugfuck insane with him this summer in a way I really didn’t anticipate.

So, I started writing this chapter long before the Clinton email stuff was even on the horizon. In the original version of this, Comey was loosely involved in the bigger corruption blow-up, and Tim and Co would notice it going through the employment stuff, and that would be that.

Anyway, between this chapter going live, and its original version, the Clinton Classified Email scandal went live. In late June, Bill Clinton had a chat with Attorney General Lynch. “A chance meeting.” July 5th Comey got up live on national television and literally told the world that if anyone other than Hillary Clinton had had a pile of classified documents on an insecure, personal server, that person “would have faced consequences” but because “no reasonable prosecutor” would take the case, they wouldn’t suggest charges. (Seriously, I’m not kidding. Those are word for word quotes. Google: Comey Remarks July 5th 2016. If you told me to write a speech where Comey lets someone get away with breaking the law, and he didn’t want to do it, that’s what it would look like.)

Then because we live in a rotten system, between then and getting to the next draft of this chapter, Christian Saucier ended up sentenced to a year in jail for having *six* classified (at the lowest possible level) pictures from his submarine on his phone *and* for attempting to destroy the evidence of having said documents on his phone. (Again, go reread Comey’s remarks about what Clinton had on her devices. Oh, by the way, did you know that lying to the FBI is a felony in and of itself?)

And you know, suddenly, I had a bit more focus for this chapter, and how things would work. As long as doing your job and going after people who broke the law worked out well for the guys doing it, they’d do a great job of it. And if looking the other way worked out, then maybe they’d look the other way.
That said, I still feel, tentative about putting this out here, especially today. Ripped from the headlines and what all.

Everything in this chapter about legal stuff, that’s legit. Cops don’t have to investigate any given case. They may have internal rules about doing it, but it’s not illegal for them to just not investigate. And, even if the cops do choose to investigate, Prosecutorial Discretion (coming soon to a STAW chapter near you) means the Prosecutor has the choice to go after a case or not, and again, is in no way required to prosecute any given case. (Hence Comey’s remarks about no prosecutor taking the case.) Bribery, and pay for play, and quid pro quo all require a specific request of a favor for money. Everything Senior talks about, completely legal.

All but the last bit with Tim on the sofa was ready to go as of Tuesday. Just had that last bit to write yesterday. Of course, like everyone else, I got the election results yesterday.

I wish I’d pushed a bit harder and gotten this out on Tuesday, because on Tuesday I could have written a happier ending.

I had planned a much less grim end, with a lot more rousing, buck-upping from Ducky and the power of a good man in a good place and all of that shit, but… I’m sorry, I couldn’t write it yesterday, and today didn’t do it, either.

On the upside, when you’re as jaded about politics as I am, and you firmly believe the whole system is corrupt, nothing comes as a surprise. But, I have to wonder, if we didn’t have two systems, one where laws are optional for powerful people, if maybe Wednesday wouldn’t have been so sad. I wonder what would have happened if Comey had done his job, Clinton had bowed out, and Kaine had headed their ticket without her. Somehow, I can’t imagine that we’d be worse off it that had happened.

Okay, I’ll pull it together and hopefully get back into kick the shit out of the corruption mood soon. Tim’s got some more fun chapters coming up soon, and I think we all need them.

Love you all. Keryl
“Rule Number 13: Never involve lawyers.”

Well, Tim’s stuck. He needs some damn lawyers because if his job is enforcing the law and if what he thinks of as criminal corruption is in fact legal then he needs help.

Yes, he can stand up and do his dog and pony show. That’s him changing culture. Lovely. He still needs something for all of his Untouchables to do, and he’s coming to the conclusion that unless he’s got a lot of extremely stupid people engaging in corruption, his Untouchables are going to spend a lot of time sitting on their asses, twiddling their thumbs if they can’t come up with some law that these people are actually breaking.

Yes, he’s looking forward to busting those sexual harassment cases, but he was kind of hoping his department would do more than that, and right now, he’s got the sinking suspicion that’s the only thing on his horizon that’s actually illegal.

Having come to that conclusion, Tim’s sitting at his computer, staring over the heads of the rest of his team, stuck.

They don’t involve the lawyers if they can possibly avoid it, and they really don’t involve civil law lawyers. The lawyers he’s most often dealt with have been JAGs or the like. Guys who specialize in military law.

Which means he doesn’t know a whole bunch of them to call.

Jake.

Okay, great, he’s a Congressman now, and likely a tad busy, and also didn’t specialize in this sort of law.

This sort of law… Shit… Who the hell am I looking for?

That’s level one of this. He can’t just call up the first lawyer in the book. He need someone who really knows the ins and outs and all the rest of this.

He needs a… and he feels squirmy thinking it… a defense attorney.

On the upside, that realization gives him a place to start looking.

The downside is, when they talk about lawyers what they really mean are defense attorneys. Who are, in general, just slightly below Satan in the eyes of most cops.

Because, of course, the job of a defense attorney is to make sure the cop doesn’t get to do his job.
That’s how the system works. Doesn’t matter how guilty a person is, his defense attorney’s job is to make sure he gets off. Better a hundred guilty men go free than one innocent one rot in jail, or something like that.

It’s supposed to be an adversarial process.

And it is.

So it’s not like Tim’s got a pile of defense attorneys he can buddy up with, and he’s not entirely sure one would even want to do what he’s hoping to do.

He fires off an email to Bleach, asking him if he knows any really good defense attorneys who work on this sort of stuff, and decides to spend more time with his LinkedIn profile looking for computer guys to build the software that’s going to make the system work.

The upside about hunting for computer talent is that Tim actually knows what he wants and needs for this. Two hours spent carefully combing through the list of friends, friends of friends, former professors, and other hackers, leaves Tim in a much better place.

A hopeful place where he feels like he can actually add some value to this situation.

Okay, sure he might not be able to find people breaking the law, but by God, he’ll have a system in place to triage their cases as soon as they get one!

His day gets even better when he gets an email from Covington saying that the beta test of the FBI’s version of his paperwork software would go live on Monday.

Tim checks his calendar and realizes that Monday is August seventh, or, since there’s a weekend in play, as close as he can get to a full month on the job.

He’s glancing around his office, and Gibbs, Fornell, Ziva, and Burke chat. He hasn’t gotten as much done as he wanted to, but he’s done… something.

He checks the email again, the beta version test is going live.

He glares at the pile of people he can’t get rid of. A lot less done than he wanted to.

They’re eating lunch when his email chimes, and glancing at his watch, he sees that this one is from Bleach.

He’s greatly disheartened to see a long line of HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA as the topic.

Inside he finds:

Tim,

*The kind of person you’re looking for is the kind of person I never saw in my courtroom. He’d be on*
retainer, and he would arrange everything ahead of time so I never saw him. These kinds of cases, even if, by some miracle, they find something to prosecute, never get to court. They’re settled long before that’s even an issue.

That said, give your grandma a call. They caught a lot of Lobbyists when they swept through who was involved in the corruption scandal. They’re the people who, for a living, legally (to an extent) packaged money and power into nifty little units and then sold them to whomever needed it.

I’m sure she’s got to know someone who’s desperate for some sort of deal and would happily talk you through whatever you want, if the Director of Public Corruption were to put in a good word for him.

Murray

That’s disappointing, but also helps.

“Do we know any lobbyists, ones good enough they aren’t in jail?” Tim asks.

They all glance around, yeah they know them, in the sense they’ve all been in the same room with one, feeling distinctly uncomfortable with the pervasive sense of sleeze oozing off of them, but… know one?

“Senior does,” Ziva says.

Tim nods, and writes up a note to Penny and Senior, hoping they’ve got someone he can talk to who specializes in buying and selling politicians.

Tim’s not sure, early the next morning, when he’s the first one in, if the fact that Senior and Penny both sent him the same name is a remnant of the fact that K Street, and everything it stood for burned to the ground, so there just aren’t that many Lobbyists, total, left in the Greater DC area, or if, when it comes down to it, the guys at the top of the power game make up a very small group.

Either way, he’s calling Perce Masters, a man he’s never heard of, and asking for an hour or so of his time.

Which he gets two days later.

For this meeting, he does give the rest of his crew the afternoon off. He’s not sure if it matters, not really, but he wants the image of power and control and… professionalism for this. He’s not just in his office, his tidied up office (all the files have been shoved into his closet), on his own, wearing his best suit, he’s also borrowed a really good watch and tie from Tony. (When Ziva asked for said watch and tie, Tony sighed, shook his head, and said, ‘Tell him to get some real shoes if he’s going to do this, right.’ Tim’s made a mental note of that, and on Friday, they’ll have a chat about what ‘real shoes’ are. He has a feeling that at some point, he’s going to get Senior in and have some sort of symposium about how to dress like a guy who makes more than a grand a day.)

At the stroke of 1:30, Jennifer walks an older gentleman, and that’s the word that springs to mind, this is a gentleman, in.
Right now, Tim’s wearing his made for him, gray, date night suit. He’s as spiffy as he ever gets, at least, in this direction.

Perce Masters, with his perfectly done steel gray hair, and charcoal suit with a thin maroon pinstripe, and perfect, crisp, Platonic Ideal of a white silk shirt, and probably five hundred dollar maroon silk tie, and freaking cuff links, expensive cuff links (Tim thinks they’re platinum; they’re small and subtle, but that sheen looks familiar) that match his tie pin (of course he’s got a tie pin), blows Tim so far out of the water, he’ll land in Kansas.

Rewind time a hundred years, and this is the guy who could, with perfect ease and comfort, wear a silk top hat, tails, white gloves, and carry a cane.

Tim shakes Masters hand, notices the perfect manicure, and swallows any feeling of being vastly overshadowed. He does make another mental note that, yes, he does need to learn how to swim in these waters, because without that, he’s not going to do a good job hunting in them.

Once the pleasantries are over, and Masters is sitting in front of Tim’s desk with a cup of coffee, he says, “I’ll admit, Director McGee, I’m a tad nervous about this. People in my… position, aren’t exactly popular right now, and you run the Public Corruption Department.”

Tim offers up his most disarming smile. “You’re not here because of any investigation. At least, not of the criminal variety. I’m a computer specialist. I worked as a field agent. I can spend the next year telling you ways to hack systems and kill people. I know how to play that game inside and out.

“I don’t know how to play this game. I’m doing this job because I’ve got ideas of how to do a better job of building a system to play the game, but… apparently the stuff I think shouldn’t be legal, is. So, I’m asking you for a crash course on what the laws are, how they work, and how do I catch the guys who are selling us out?”

Perce laughs, suddenly looking a whole lot more approachable. “In an hour?”

“Give me the Cliff Notes version.”

“Do people still use them?”

Tim scoffs. He never did. “I don’t know. I know that I can build a system to do this better than anyone else ever dreamed of, but if the best system on earth won’t help if they aren’t actually breaking the law, so…”

Perce smiles a bit. “Okay. Let’s start here, what do you think corruption is?”

Tim’s about to whip out a very basic ‘you get rich off of cutting corners and selling out the people’ sort of answer, but decides he needs to actually think about it some.

And that leads to some very uncomfortable thoughts.

“Shit.”

“Well put,” Masters says, dryly. “It’s like pornography. You know it when you see it, but defining it so it doesn’t bite your pet projects is tricky, isn’t it?”

Tim grits his teeth and nods.

“I’d say the first bit of this is: everyone who’s in this game is working on someone’s pet project. Your corruption is someone else’s idea of how a good world works.”
Tim grits his teeth again. “Let’s start with what I can see. Developers are scrambling right and left looking to grab up real estate wherever the next seat of Government is going to be. Senator Whomever knows the answer to that before everyone else does, and lets a few of his buddies know, too. They buy up the land, get rich, and put money in his re-election campaign.”

Masters sips his coffee and then says, “Totally legal. At least, it was back when people could get re-elected. Now… I assume they donate to his hand-picked successor’s campaign. However they do it, it’s not illegal. It’s possibly against the internal rules Congress has in play about revealing secrets.”

Tim sighs. That’s not his jurisdiction. “How about this? Senator Whoever has a pile of property located wherever, I don’t know, Peoria. He then lobbies like hell to get everyone else to think Peoria is a great plan, too. Some of them also buy up chunks of Peoria ahead of time, planning on selling high when Congress gets there. They vote, Congress goes to Peoria, and Senator Whoever and his buddies clean up.”

Perce smiles. “Again, legal, but maybe against their internal rules. Not your sandbox. Congress could sit down, look at a map of the US, find the most run down, inexpensive city on the map, each of them buy huge chunks of it, and then vote to move the Congress there, and once there, enjoy long and wealthy retirements bankrolled by the land they bought, and that’s legal.”

“Great.” Tim’s really gritting his teeth. “The Peoria Board of Supervisors or whomever goes to Congress, and talks up Peoria, and then gives piles of money to any Congressman who will take it —“

“As long as it’s below the campaign finance limit, legal.”

“And their wives and kids…”

“As long as they declare it on their taxes as a gift, legal. As long as there’s no ‘I will vote for Peoria if you give me this money…”

“It’s legal.” Tim’s still gritting his teeth. His jaw is starting to ache, so he forces himself to unclench. “Okay, fine, what isn’t legal?”

Perce sighs. “That’s a difficult one. The laws are written by Congress for the purpose of making sure Congress can safely get and stay rich. If there’s a direct statement of, pay X get my vote. That’s illegal. We had some cases a few years back where Congressmen were silly enough to have a… menu… for lack of a better word, where for donations of certain amounts, they had whatever favors they were willing to offer, listed.”

“Too dumb to walk and chew gum at the same time,” Tim mutters.

“If you can prove a pattern where votes on certain matters are only available to the person who pays for them, that’s something you can go after.”

“And let me guess, I can’t because everyone gets offered funds for everything these days.”

“Actually,” And Perce has a little grin now. “Now, you might have some luck with that. Before the fall, all of Congress was fewer than 600 people. So, of course, all of them had someone offering them money for anything they could possibly want to vote on and any way they could vote on it. Now though… we’ve got so many new ones, and everyone is scrambling around, trying to figure out who is in charge of what, so… It’s possible, you might be able to find patterns where someone is getting careless about how they vote.”

“What patterns would I be looking for?”
“In this case, if you’ve got someone who only votes for issues they’ve been paid for, that’s a good
hint that something is wrong.”

“Great. That should be easy to find.” Tim’s sounding sarcastic on that, though not as much as he
could be. He figures it would take all of an afternoon to write the program that would cross check
voting patterns with donations.

“You’ve got your law team, have them check over voting records. People who abstain a lot, and
there are some, might be worth your attention.”

Tim perks up a little to hear that, not because of the way to do it, he’d automate it, but because it can
be done. “So, it’s one thing to accept funds from people who want you to do things, it’s another
thing if you only do things when you’ve been funded?”

“Exactly. Now, I don’t know how much longer you’ll be able to make a case like that, with time, I’m
sure they’ll all end up with their crowds of followers tossing cash at them right and left, but at least
for now, you might have a window of opportunity.”

“I’ll take whatever I can get,” And right now, Tim most certainly will.

“What else looks like corruption to you?”

“Um… You vote for something that directly benefits you?”

“Be more specific.”

Tim spends another moment working on an idea. “Um… I don’t know. You own a… funeral home,
so you write a law that funeral homes don’t have to pay income taxes.”

“If you can get it through Congress, totally legal.”

“Really?” Though given how the thing with Clemens worked out, Tim’s not particularly hopeful
about being wrong on that.

“Google Gallo Winery Estate Tax Law one day.”

“That’s going to make me want to rip my eyes out, isn’t it?”

Perce offers him a grim smile. “Probably. Writing laws to benefit you and yours is not only not
illegal, it’s, to a certain extent, encouraged.”

Tim’s head thumps onto his desk and he bangs it there, softly, for a moment, before looking up and
saying, “Encouraged?”

“Well, yes. That’s why you got elected. To make sure the people who elected you get the things they
want. And in many cases, you were elected because you know something about… whatever it is,
because you were one before you got into politics.”

“Isn’t ‘the people’ supposed to be a… broader category?” Tim feels like a child getting his hopes
dashed as he says that, but… He can’t not say it.

Perce smiles again, this time gently. “It should be, but it isn’t. Unless you can find a way to…
dissociate the people voting from the people getting elected… That’s how the system is supposed
to work.”

“Tell me what I can go against.”
“Deliberate pay for play. Deliberate bribes…”

“People so stupid they aren’t in the game.”

“Some of them are, and with as big as Congress is… You will certainly find them. Before the fall, the average member of Congress had been there for more than twenty years. He or she knew how to play the game. Now, they get four years, that’s it. You are going to have a much easier time catching Congressmen. Senators will be a bit more difficult because they get to stick around long enough to learn the ropes, but instead of thirty years, they’re out in six.

“However, and here’s the first thing I think I can give you of value, you’re looking at the wrong targets. Yes, Congress and the Senate can be problems, but they come and go. The Bureaucracy is eternal, nameless, faceless, and that’s where the real power to make actual change lies.

“Those are the guys you need to be looking at.”

Tim smiles. That’s useful, and matches something Senior said. He smiles even wider, that’s the sort of thing he can send his Black Hats into.

“Congress passes laws, those laws go into committees, those committees sprout departments, those departments create the mechanisms that enforce those laws. A lot of those guys are so far off the radar, they may be getting direct bribes.”

“The guy who decides who to buy the bolts that get used to build the airplanes. Go looking at him for kickbacks?” Tim asks.

“Most certainly. He and his ilk make up hundreds of thousands of mostly unknown people all over the Federal Government. The people who write the actual regulations. Again, Congress passes the law, but usually some subcommittee actually writes the regs. Go through those guys’ taxes with a fine tooth comb. They tend to be so far out of the limelight that techniques tend to be a lot less hidden.”

Tim makes a note that he’s going to need accountants. “What else is actually illegal?”

“Many companies will offer ‘stock tips’ to people in the right places at the right time. Technically it’s insider trading. Which is illegal, but not the sort of thing that tends to raise ‘anti-corruption’ flags. There’s no law against a Congressman buying a stock, selling it short, and seeing it go tumbling the next day, thus he cleans up. It’s an easy way to funnel funds to him, without triggering the campaign finance laws.

“On the theme of insider trading, say you’re on the congressional subcommittee that approves some sort of deal. If you buy up a pile of stock, bonds, or whatever right before that news goes live, that’ll qualify as insider trading, and is illegal.”

Tim can’t tell why that should be illegal but his real estate idea from earlier wouldn’t be, but… He shakes his head and makes a note to send to Penny. If it’s illegal to do it with stock, shouldn’t it be illegal to do it with land?

When he’s done writing he says, “And let me guess, if you’re good at this, you never do like that?”

“If you’re good at it, you’ve got a corporation that is only tangentially attached to your wife’s cousin’s brother-in-law, and it does all of your investing.”

“And that’s completely legal.”
Masters smiles. “It is until they can hunt down where that corporation is getting its stock tips from.”

“Lovely. Accountants, huh?”

“Assuming financial corruption is what you’re looking for, yes. Lots of them. Good ones. Get yourself some money launderers while you’re at it, too. They’ve got tricks I don’t, and trust me, they use them.” Perce puts his cup down and continues on. “Speaking of tricks… Banks will often offer financing on especially good terms. For example, your congressman’s brother gets his mortgage at 0% interest with 100 year terms, and no down payment. Okay, no, it won’t be that obvious, but it’ll be in that neighborhood. That’s not technically illegal, either, until you go looking through their taxes to see what they’re doing about their mortgage interest deduction.”

Tim’s writing that one down. A lot more accountants. And maybe a lot fewer Black and White Hats. Though, he is thinking that a bunch of Senior-type guys who are pretending to be working for… whomever… could be offering hot stock tips… Get them for attempted insider trading if nothing else. That’s a start.

A wicked little thought lights through Tim’s mind. He smirks at it. Get his Senior-type Black Hats to offer bad stock tips. Maybe he can’t bust them for taking that kind of tip, but he might be able to burn them on it.

He sighs. He might be doing a lot of burning people. That gets him thinking about those boxes of people he can’t fire.

Change the culture. If he can’t bust people, maybe he can shame them onto the straight and narrow.

“What else can I do?”

“This is a perennial favorite. Ask questions they don’t want to answer, ‘Just to clear things up’ and when they lie to you, go after them. Lying to the FBI is a felony offense. They do have to know you’re FBI, though. Can’t use your undercover guys on that. But, even if whatever else you are doing is completely legal, lying about it, even accidentally, is a felony. You have the right to shut up or answer truthfully, you cannot lie to the FBI.”

Tim thinks about that, and comes to the conclusion that he will make that be useful. Especially if the people in question might be feeling a tad guilty about how they got those great terms on their mortgage. He’s nodding as he jots that down.

“Here’s my last bit of advice, with no more re-elections, the game has changed. Everything we’re talking about is based on the idea that someone will be around for decades to help you out. And I honestly don’t know what and how people are going to shift their patterns to go with this new reality.

“The first job of any member of Congress was getting re-elected, so people who wanted dibs on his second job, making laws, had an easy lever to move him with. Now… I just don’t know how it’s going to work.”

“But you know people are going to want Congress and the Senate to do things for them.”

“The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. Yes, I know that won’t change. The game goes on. The players and the rules just shifted, but the game didn’t end. If you’re looking for help with this, I’ll suggest you hire a bunch of Congressmen at the end of this session and the next one, and squeeze their brains for what was going on.

“Traditionally, Mr. McGee, this isn’t a young man’s game. Traditionally, it took years to build the networks to get money and power to coalesce in ways a politician wanted them to. Traditionally, a
first term senator or even third term congressman would be shut out of this game. They’d need to prove they can stick around before they could even get in on this sort of thing.”

“Are you still in the game?”

Perce doesn’t respond.

It takes Tim a second to realize what Perce is doing. “Right! You can not answer or tell the truth. Okay. Here’s a question for you, would you be interested in taking a massive pay cut and working for me, brainstorming ways to play the game, so I can use your skills to catch other players?”

“You ask leading questions Mr. McGee.”

Tim thinks over what he just asked. Finally he realizes ‘interested in taking a massive pay cut’ is a trap.

“Can I hire you to brainstorm ways for us to catch people in the corruption game?”

“No. I may, on occasion, be available for a pro-bono consult, like today. But you absolutely cannot hire me for this.”

Tim sighs. And then it clicks. “Government employees have no privacy rights.”

“And, as one of the six successful lobbyists currently not in jail, I am loathe to give mine up. However, felons have no privacy rights anyway, and some of the hundreds of lobbyists now in jail may be interested in offering you aid.”

“Do you have recommendations?”

“I do. I’ll email you a list of people who may be helpful.”

“I’d appreciate that, greatly. Especially if you know any really good accountants.”

Perce smiles about that, and stands up, heading out of Tim’s office.

Tim sits back, thinking for a few moments, the bureaucracy is eternal. Nameless, faceless, and able to do this forever because no one sees them.

He shakes his head. There’re more than a million federal employees, double that if he counts all the military and military adjunct people. There’s no possible way for him, or anyone in his position to go after them…

Not using people. That’d be blindly flailing around, hoping to hit someone breaking the law by luck alone.

He thinks about his reporting software. How he’s going to be sending in his tech guys and their FOIA requests to pry incident reports out of different branches of the government. And once he’s got those reports, he’ll find the outliers. And that’s how he’ll know where to look.

He needs another version of that. Government employees, tax records, real estate records, credit card statements. No privacy rights, and he’s going to use that. He’ll build that system, and if someone is living way beyond their means into the spotlight they go.
It’s a hell of a lot less sexy than his Black Hats sneaking in, pretending to be someone else, seducing them to the dark side, and busting them for going dark.

But it’ll work.

Slow, boring, numbers. Databases, algorithms, and tax law. The future of law enforcement is numbers.

And Tim’s good with numbers.

One last thought hits him as he’s sitting there. A long time ago Diane had mentioned the tax laws were set so everyone was breaking them.

They got Al Capone for tax evasion.

“Numbers.” He shakes his head, and sends Diane an email. Topic line: I Need Accountants!

Chapter End Notes

Alas, the Gallo Winery thing is real, too. They managed to give money to pretty much everyone on both sides and were able to get estate tax laws shifted so their personal fortunes could be passed along at a much lower tax rate than everyone else's.
There’s an actual, physical note, in paper, on his keyboard when Tim gets in. He smirks at it. Leaving him little, paper notes is part of Jennifer getting snarky with him. He appreciates it. And it’s also a good shorthand for THIS IS IMPORTANT! If it’s on paper on his desk, he knows she really wants him to see it.

Prince Imin Adid Abdullah  347 Flamento Dr. Coral Gables, FL.

It takes Tim a second to realize what he’s looking at, and then he’s got it. His maybe, sort of, could have been college buddy is pretending to be a member of the Saudi Royal Family down in Coral Gables Florida.

Tim’s slowly shaking his head, of all the places and names Ajay Khan could have used to hide, a Saudi Royal Prince, and Florida weren’t on the list of possibilities Tim could have imagined.

Oh well, that makes it easier for him. Getting down to Florida should be a breeze. And, besides, he doesn’t mind the idea of spending a day or two in South Florida. After all, unlike some of the people he’s wanted to talk to, he’s certain Khan won’t come to him.

Tim smiles, sends an email to Jennifer, asking her to set up travel for him to Miami ASAP, along with getting him a few moments of the time of whomever is in charge of the Miami field office.

Then he pulls out on of his numerous laptops, sets it at the table, where Fornell usually sits, and gets it up and going.

After all, he’s stolen Fornell for the last month, without any paperwork getting done, so, since, supposedly, the paperwork software is up on its Beta Test, he knows just the guy to take it for a spin.

Harold Keller is head of the Miami field office and he’s more than a tad confused to get a cold call from the Director of Public Corruption.

Confused and nervous.

Tim’s noticing that’s a thing these days. Most people, especially ones he’s cold calling, are nervous talking to him.

Probably because of what happens as soon as he can tell Keller is nervous, he goes into the check this guy out pile.
Tim wishes he could be more trusting about this, but he’s got the feeling that for a long time to come, if he gets a nervous vibe off of someone, that someone is going to have his life dissected.

But, Keller doesn’t know that, yet, and Tim still needs his help. He explains his “Saudi Prince” issue, and that he should be in Miami the day after tomorrow, and he needs someone to just keep an eye on the him and his home. Make sure he’s actually there. Stuff like that.

Of course, as they keep talking, and Keller finally asks, “Sir, shouldn’t we have a warrant or something like that?” it occurs to Tim that it could be that Keller’s actually a decent guy, and he’s afraid he’s getting caught in a trap.

That makes Tim smile. Soon enough, this may be a trap.

“I just want to drop by and give him a job offer. So, no we don’t need a warrant for that. I do, however, want to know what I’m walking into, and he’s in a position where a visit from the FBI would be bad for him, so… Don’t talk to him. Don’t let him know you’re doing it. Hijack a local camera, or pop an eye on his place. I’m going to need to go visit him, and I just want to know what I’m walking into before I do it.”

“You’re going to offer him a job?” Keller doesn’t sound like he believes that.

“It’s a long story. And depending on what you guys see, that plan might change. But, if what I think is going on is going on, it’ll be perfectly fine for me to just drive up one day.”

“Is he… expecting you?”

“I very much doubt it.”

“And you want how much backup?”

“Get eyes on the place, send me a report, and we’ll figure it out from there. But, in all likelihood, I’ll tell you where I’m going and when, and if I’m not back by a certain time, you come and get me out. Otherwise, no backup.”

“Okay… Sir.”

“Thanks. I’ll be down in the morning—“

“Your secretary already sent the details. We’ll have someone to meet you at the airport.”

Tim’s in a really good mood when he gets home that night. And while he’s not relishing a night away from home, he is looking forward to this particular job.

Okay, so… He never got to do this when he was in the field, and… for as much as Tony likes to play James Bond, Tim’s wanted to play Michael Westin. It’s not just that this is as close to undercover as he’s going to get for, in all likelihood, the rest of his life, but, he gets to go into uber-cool Florida, visit a fifteen million dollar house, and (and this bit makes him smile) tweak Khan’s nose.

And, if the gods were ever going to set up his little Michael Westin fantasy… This is it.

He got his surveillance report just before heading home. That address is a mansion outside of Miami. And from the looks of it, Khan’s got a party going 24/7.
This is great for him, because all he’s got to do is show up with a flash car, and, and this is the important bit, not look like a cop.

Easy enough, right?

Well, for him.

Abby and Breena are looking at what he packs that morning. Half of it is his normal (ish) somewhat professional clothing. Nice khaki-colored suit pants, light blue button down, belt, sensible shoes. The other half is a pair of sandals, (borrowed from Jimmy, they’ll do for the few hours he intends to wear them) his black kilt, the almost translucent shirt Abby and Breena got him, and his favorite eyeliner. He figures in that outfit, he’ll look as little like a cop as it’s physically possible for him to.

And, sure, maybe it’s not exactly Burn Notice chic (his ‘regular work clothing’ is as close as he could get it), but he plans to go in there with proper Michael Westin, blend in anywhere, be cool with everything, style.

“Going undercover?” Abby asks. She expected his best Burn Notice look, she knew how to read that gleam in his eyes when he said Miami, but the kilt has her asking.

“Or just planning on having a hell of a good time without us?” Breena adds.

He kisses both of them. “No such thing as a good time without you. And yeah, way undercover. From the intel I could get, anyone who wants to can drive up and head in, as long as the security at the gate doesn’t think you’re a cop.”

“So, you aren’t a cop,” Breena says.

“Nope, just an old college buddy looking to catch up.”

“That’s stretching the hell out of the truth,” Abby says with a grin.

“But it’s not a complete lie, either.” He grins back at them. “Should be home tomorrow.”

Okay, this is fun.

On several levels.

First up, Jennifer saw no reason to book him a seat on a commuter flight out of Dulles. She did whatever magic she does, and then shortly after the rest of his family headed off to work, an Uber showed up at his house, took him to a private airfield, where there was a jet waiting, and an hour later, he was at another private airfield in Miami where Agent Fasial is waiting for him.

Tim still doesn’t love flying, but it’s a hell of a lot nicer when he’s got the jet more or less to himself and can easily stretch out and work while a very kind woman offers him vastly more food and drinks than he could possibly need.

And yes, stepping out of the plane, into the humid Miami air, in a crisp blue button down, khaki suit
pants, khaki jacket, and sunglasses does hit all of Tim’s playing Michael Westin buttons.

Next of all, Keller just about swallowed his tongue after Tim stepped out of the men’s room having changed into his “undercover” gear. There’s a very clear expression of How the Hell did YOU get this job? on his face, and Tim, may, just possibly, be smirking internally at it.

On top of that, no one at the Miami office has ever met him before, or for that matter, anyone else in the higher up levels of the FBI, and they’re all scurrying around, waiting for him to say ‘jump’ so they can all leap up shouting ‘how high.’ He’s starting to understand that almost perpetual smirk Gibbs would wear when underlings would scurry around trying to do anything he wanted.

And best of all, he did get a flash car. The FBI has confiscated a lot of pretty toys over the years, and they let him borrow one of them. (Though, even the Director of Public Corruption has to spend an hour signing releases about how he’s got to be damn careful with it, and that if he damages it, the FBI will own his soul until he’s paid them back for it.)

It’s a silver Audi R8, white leather interior, handles like silk, and looks like a car guy’s wet dream.

He loves it unreservedly, and is coming to the conclusion that it’s a good thing he doesn’t regularly get to play with stuff like this, because otherwise he’d start seriously thinking about trying to buy one, and they don’t have the money for that.

Khan lives in a nice neighborhood. Though Tim’s not entirely sure he’d call this a neighborhood. He’s thinking about Tony talking about Halloween as a kid, and the houses being really far apart. What’d he call that? A compound? An estate? Something like that.

None of these houses are on less than ten acres. And they all have walls with gates, and security at those gates. (Why the surveillance footage he got of this was aerial makes a bit more sense. There’s nowhere in this neighborhood to stick a van or the like without anyone noticing something being very wrong.)

He drives up to Khan’s gate in the Audi, rolls down the tinted window, and the security guy sees a youngish man with tousled hair, eyeliner, a mostly unbuttoned, translucent shirt, wrist cuff, and the ghosts of a few tattoos through the fabric of the shirt.

“ID?”

Tim hands his driver’s license over, and the guy at the gate just writes down his name. He hands it back and gets waved through.

He pulls up to a long roundabout driveway. There are cars line up along the edges, and Tim doesn’t immediately see where to stick his, but after ten seconds he realizes he doesn’t need to. There’s a man waiting by the front door, and a rack of keys sitting next to him.

A second after Tim’s noticed that, that man is heading to his car.

Valet parking. Khan’s got personal valet parking at his home. Tim tosses over the keys, and just walks on it, strolling along, feeling pretty awesome.

Tim can see how Khan would love this. He’s basically got his own fully-staffed luxury hotel at his
disposal. As he heads in, he sees it’s not just fully staffed, but filled with “beautiful people” most of whom appear to be partying.

Within seconds of getting in, someone hands Tim a drink, and he takes a small sip, basically just letting the liquid touch his tongue. It’s a mojito, a good one. He approves. He’d drink more of it, but he’s here to work. Plus, just because he walked in easy, doesn’t mean the rest of this will be easy, and there’s no way he’s getting roofied and kidnapped.

Then he heads further in, walking around, greeting people like he knows them, and making sure he looks like he knows where he’s going. It’s an amazing house. He’s seen pictures of houses like this, on TV and in magazines, and he knows intellectually houses like this have to exist, but he didn’t think they were real. Not on any gut level.

But here he is. In one. It’s practically a palace, bigger than their place on the Chesapeake, and apparently decorated by someone with exquisite taste and an unlimited budget. The entire first floor opens out onto a huge swimming pool flanked with long green yards, and all around the pool, and on the grass, are more beautiful people laying around, tanning, and playing.

Tim’s not sure who the band is, (of course there’s a band) but he approves of them. Tony mentioned Khan was into music, and this is good stuff.

He’s smiling at a gorgeous woman wearing a practically translucent sarong wrapped around her hips, not really covering a bikini bottom so tiny he has no idea why anyone would bother wearing it, and apparently Khan’s place is perfectly fine with topless sun tanning, because that’s all she’s wearing.

She smiles back, breezes by him, kisses his cheek, and calls him Chet. He’s got no idea who Chet is or may be, but he doesn’t care. That’s not an issue. It’s all about the appearance. So he keeps his head high, keeps “sipping” the drink, without actually swallowing any, swaggers about, and scans the crowd. Smiling, chatting, saying hello, looking really pleased with himself and the world in general.

Khan’s got to be here somewhere, but, he doesn’t appear to be anywhere on the first floor. Or at the pool.

Tim keeps looking, and realizes there’s a private balcony on the third floor, overlooking the pool. He can’t see anyone up there, but he’s feeling like that’s where Khan would be.

Upstairs, other side of the house. Up he goes, making sure he looks like he belongs. He gets an occasional glance, but a wide smile seems to take care of them. Khan may have security on the outside, but Tim can’t see anyone who looks like security on the inside.

Of course, if the guys on the outside are good, he wouldn’t need extra people on the inside.

 Granted, anyone who was looking for Ajay Khan knows he died last summer. Right now, Tim’s sitting in Imin Adid Abdullah’s house. Officially, Khan is now a much lesser known Saudi Princeling. There are so many members of the Saudi Royal Family that no one knows all of them, and here in the US, Khan’s black hair, black eyes, and brown skin means he can call himself pretty much any ethnicity he wants, and no one will blink.

The whole house is posh. It’s cool and clean in whites and creams with marble floors and lots of wide open windows. The furniture is modern and pretty. Maybe not wildly comfortable, but it looks right out of a high fashion magazine.

He heads down a long hall, trying to figure out which one of the doors will lead to where he wants to
be. His first two choices don’t pan out, but the third… Tim grins, catching sight of the man he’s looking for.

The room is empty. It’s a bedroom, huge bed, huge TV, bathtub a man could swim laps in, and behind all of it, are two French doors, opened to the balcony Tim had spotted. And on that balcony...

Khan, on his stomach, on a massage table, getting what looks like a really good rubdown from two extremely lovely ladies.

Tim quietly eases through the room, made a bit quieter by taking off Jimmy’s sandals. He doesn’t want the sound of his feet on the marble floors to announce him. The ladies are focused on Khan, and he’s face down, small towel over his butt, occasionally purring at them.

Sort of a shame to interrupt that massage, but… Tim smirks at it. He intends to enjoy this. He tucks his sandals behind one of the French doors, steps onto the balcony, which is when the ladies notice him, and stop rubbing, watching him, eyes very curious. He puts his finger to his lips, and they both relax a little, expecting him to be a friend in on some sort of joke.

It is a joke, but not what they’re expecting.

He’s still smiling when he says, “You weren’t kidding about finding some beautiful women.”

For a second, he sees Khan’s back and shoulders tense, and then hears a long groan as they slump down into the table. Khan slowly levers himself up, resting on his elbows, so he can meet Tim’s eyes.

Tim smiles at him. Khan rolls his eyes. Tim can feel that he’s annoyed, and not scared, and… not shocked, either. Tim’s interested in that.

“Ladies, this is a private conversation,” Khan says.

He’s changed a bit since Tim saw him last. His hair comes down to his shoulders, and he’s wearing a short and tidy beard. Tim’s not sure if Khan is Indian or Pakistani, but he knows he’s one or the other, so he can’t see him as Arabic, but… If he didn’t know… Yeah, he’d probably believe it.

The ladies look like they’ve done something like this before. They quickly wipe the oil off their hands, and then head out, all without saying anything.

Once they’re gone, Khan says, “Did you just sneak into my house?”

Tim blows that off. “Please! I gave my car to your valet. Your security sucks. I even used my real name to get in. Two seconds of googling should have put me on the do not let in list, but your guy saw the car and the ink and let me in.”

Khan sits up. He’s naked under the towel, and the towel is next to him, now. “You’re like a bad case of the clap. You just keep coming back.”

Tim shrugs, pulls one of the seats over from the corner of the balcony, and sits with his feet propped up on the corner of the massage table. Khan gets up, finds his shorts, and pulls them on. “You here to bust me?”

“Nope.”

Khan eyes him, and his outfit. “You go dark side when everything went bugfuck insane last year?”
“Nope, not that, either.”

“What, are we having a college reunion?”

“That’s how I got in the door. Flashed my driver’s license and told him I was a buddy from your MIT days, Prince Abdullah.”

“I’ll have to have a chat with my security people.”

“Probably a good idea. Apparently a hundred and fifty grand car and visible ink is all they need to decide that a person isn’t law enforcement.”

“Let’s start here, are you still law enforcement?” Apparently his outfit, and his leg, with the almost full sleeve dragon tattoo, along with what Khan can see through his shirt, is making Khan wonder, too.

That gets a chuckle out of Tim, too. “Oh yeah. Bugfuck insane was good for my career. And, it might be good for yours.”

Khan smirks. “I don’t have a career. I have a pile of money and a mansion in South Florida. I don’t need a career.”

“Oh, come on, you’re bored.”

Khan sits on the massage table. “I was about to have two beautiful women give me the happiest ending ever, and you think I’m bored?”

Tim nods. “I’ve been all through here, didn’t even see a computer. You’ve got to be getting itchy by now.”

“Okay, either you’ve got to unplug more often, or your idea of fun is so far off the charts the only reason you’ve still got a badge is they haven’t caught you, yet.”

Tim shrugs a bit. “Not to insult either of your ladies, or the party, but yeah, this is a bit vanilla for my tastes.”

And for a moment, it looks like Khan might believe that, then he shakes his head. “Sure.” Then his eyes scoot back to the ink, and the wrist cuff... He shakes his head again. “So, you’re here because you think I’m ‘itchy,’?”

“Not exactly. I’ve got some rules, and a change in position allows me to put one of them, regarding you, into play.”

“Oh God. Really, you going to try and bring me in, now?”

“No. Rule number five: don’t waste good. You’re good. I don’t want to waste you.”

Khan just stares at Tim, and then blinks, then he squints at him a bit, and blinks again. “Uh... Are... What the hell are you talking about?”

“In January I got a job offer. The FBI is nominally in charge of all public corruption cases. They offered me control of their Public Corruption Cyber Department. They wanted me to go in, worm my way around, and find all the hidden skeletons.”

“Are you offering me a job? For you? As one of your... hackers?”
“Yes, but not as one of my hackers. I’m not the head of Cyber Department of Public Corruption. They offered me that job, and I countered with head of the entire Public Corruption Department. They took me up on it. I’ve got jurisdiction over basically everyone in the US Government, and everyone who works with them. And right now, I’m offering you a team, of your own. We pay out tons of money to different contractors to make sure the government systems are safe. I want you to break them. We’ve got idiots thinking they can hide whatever they’re doing in their private servers. I want you to break them, too. Some of those asshats had bank accounts lurking about all over the place. Go find them.”

Khan stares at Tim for a long moment with wide eyes, and then laughs, loudly, for a long time. When he finally stops he says, “Did you go insane? I am a cyber-felon. I’m not legally allowed to be within ten feet of a computer. I am not one of your white-hatted Dudley Do-Rights.”

“First off, if you’re using the computer for me, you sure as hell can be within ten feet of one. Secondly, I already hired Dudley, and a bunch of his buddies. I’m on the lookout for even more of them, too. I’ve got entire teams of them getting ready to go out and be the Untouchables. But that’s only one front of the battle. I want some snakes in the grass, too. I want you to break the unbreakable systems. I want you to crow as loud as you like about all the hypocrisy you can find.”

Khan runs his fingers through his hair. “You woke up insane. Got on a plane, still insane. Came to my house, totally bonkers. And are offering me a job? Reality no longer has any hold on you. Look, I don’t care about the system being corrupt. I never did. In fact, the system being corrupt was good for me. Money. I like money. I like what money gets me,” he gestures at the house, “a corrupt system got me a lot of it, and unless things have really changed…”

Tim smiles at that. He knows he doesn’t have the budget to pay Khan. He’s fairly sure he’s got a work around for that, though. “You go in once, break everything open, and write up the report. They get six months to make as much of a fix as they can. After six months, you can go in and ransack the place. Take what you like, sell what you can.”

That was exactly what Khan was doing before he got arrested. Well, not the six months of downtime bit. But break into systems and steal the goodies, that’s what he made his first fortune doing. Khan licks his lips. “You can’t make that deal.”

“I’m offering it.”

“Yeah, for five minutes, until they put my ass in jail. Maybe actually toss me in Gitmo this time.”

Tim shakes his head. “Go ahead, sell to the highest bidder. A bit later, we’ll take them down, too. As long as I keep getting reports of what you’re getting, and where you’re selling it, you can do whatever you like with it and you get to keep everything you can take.”

Khan’s eyes narrow. That’s way too damn good to be true. “Whatever I like?”

“Hell, you can hack me, if you can get in. Don’t think you’ll find anything terribly interesting, besides some racy photos. And everyone who might be willing to pay anything for them already has copies.”

Khans eyes skitter over Tim, lingering on what Tim’s wearing before heading back up to his eyes. “I really don’t want to know, do I?”

“I really doubt it, unless there’s a male masseuse hiding around here, too.”

“Uh… No.” He’s glancing at Tim. “Last time you said naked ladies.”
“I did.” Tim grins, remembering when Khan asked how he slept, and he said naked between two beautiful women. “Like I said, your set up here is a bit vanilla for me. Never said I didn’t like vanilla, though. Mmmmm… vanilla. It’s just better with some coffee and maybe a bit of chocolate, too. Variety is good, right?”

Khan looks slightly disturbed. His eyes flick to Tim’s wedding ring. “Okay… So… anything?”

“And you’ll have your own spiffy new badge to go with it. I mean, if you want one. One of the new changes is that anyone who works for the government gave up their privacy rights as soon as they accepted the job. So, no warrants. No having to muck about with getting permission. You want to go through the president’s financial statements? Have at it. You’ve got to toe the line with civilians, unless it’s part of an investigation of a government official. Personally, first order of business, I want you to hack the FBI. I haven’t had the time to really see what sort of a fortress I’m in charge of.”

“So, I hack you guys, and if you can’t figure out how to fix the holes I find, I can go back in and drain the US Treasury?”

“Sure, but…” Tim’s not seeing much point to that. “They print the money. They’ll just keep adding more zeroes to their accounts. Not like they go broke, and inflation will eat up everything you’ve taken.”

Khan’s annoyed by the fact that Tim’s right about that. “Okay, I can hack you, and drain the FBI accounts?”

“If me and mine can’t keep you out, yes. Consider it a bounty on a job well done.”

“I can take all of your undercover guys and sell that to the Mob?”

“That one I’m going to want a heads up on before it happens. But once I know about that, go for it. I’ll follow the money, see who gets told about what, and bust them before our guys are in any danger. Go hack the CIA, find their assets, sell them to the Taliban, just make sure I know who you’re selling before you do it. I’m not leaving my people out there naked, but I’m fine with Ajay Khan returning from the dead, getting back into the hacking game.”

Khan thinks about that, and Tim can see he’s got him interested. Then his eyes narrow. “If everything I sell results in people getting busted, I won’t have any buyers soon.”

“Then come up with a dozen names and bios. Get a bunch of IDs to sell from, hack other hackers IDs if you need a history to work with. We’ll make sure to use what you sell judiciously. Some of it we’ll set up as a way to watch things. Some of the time we’ll give you bad intel to fob off, just to see where it goes and who does what with it. Plus, you’ll know what we’re doing with what you have on offer, before you offer it. No selling bad intel to the Mob if it’ll burn you.”

“If I sign up for this, I end up a government employee, and say goodbye to all my privacy rights, too.”

“You’re a convicted felon; you have no privacy rights.” Tim shrugs. “I can bust you right now and toss you in a hole. Not like the ace up your sleeve matters, not anymore.”

Khan sighs at that. “Fuck. I never should have let you slide on that.”

“But you did, and because of that, if you tell me, ‘Nope, I just want to lay around on the beach, pretend to be Saudi Royalty, and get hand jobs from beautiful ladies,’ I’ll get up, finish my mojito, and head back to DC, and burn any trace of you and how I found you.”
“How did…”

Tim shakes his head. If Khan can’t figure it out, he’s not going to help.

“And if I say, yes?”

“You’ll get an ID, a budget for a staff of ten, you pick them yourself, you can work here, or move to wherever you like. Every week we have a little chat about what you’re up to—‘

“And you’ll be up my ass with telescope making sure I’m doing what I’m telling you,”

“Definitely.” Tim drops the fun, smiley persona he’s been using for this conversation, lets the fact that he knows he’s trying to put a saddle on a tiger come through. “I won’t waste good, but we’re not friends, and I don’t trust you.”

“Ditto.”

“You’ve still got your lawyers, so you can run everything by them.”

“Yeah, because that was worth so much for Clemens’ guys.”

“Irony, huh?” Tim’s smile comes back. It’s even half real.

“Yeah.” Khan pads into his bedroom, and then opens what Tim thought was a closet. Inside there’s a huge, beautiful computer setup. “I’ve just been using it to game.” He strokes his keyboard lovingly. “Be kind of nice to do something interesting with it.”

Tim heads over to him, eyeing the setup. “You could be hacking the FBI before I get on the plane back.”

“But I can’t do anything with what I find for six months?”

“Yeah. Six months from when you report it. You’ve got to give me, and anyone else, a shot at keeping you out. But, go ahead, build the backdoor into the code. You’ve got to say you built it, but not how, and not where. If they can’t find it, have fun.”

“This can’t be legal.”

Tim shrugs. “It might not be, but if it’s not, that’s on me, not you. We’re not getting another Clemens on my watch, and you’re going to help me make sure it doesn’t happen.”

“Shit. I… Why the hell am I even thinking about saying yes?”

Tim has a cocky smile on his face as he looks at the setup in front of him. “Because, you might be a mercenary, but you can’t get as good as you are without loving it. And you’ve been on the shelf too long.”

Khan sighs. “My own ID?”

Tim nods. “You’ll have the chance to build your own team, ransack anyone who’s a government employee, use what you find to enrich yourself, but you’ll have rules, too.”

“Report to you, that’s one.”

“No screwing your team, that’s two. They’re employees, and you’ll treat them well.”
Khan waves that off. He’s got a few people he’s thinking of.

“And you’re going to make sure they play by those rules, too.”

And he’s thinking finding people for this is going to be harder than expected. “They’ve got to find the holes and then just… leave them alone?”

“For at least six months. In some cases, if things are really bad, a year. Got to give them a chance to get things patched up before you go back in.”

Khan rolls his eyes. “What if I want to do this on my own?”

“Smaller budget. Find some people, or don’t, we’ll work with what you’ve got.”

“Will I be on the books?”

“Nope. Ajay Khan is dead. We’ll get a name and social security number for you, but it won’t be your name then, and it won’t be the one you use now. The only people who will know you’re an employee of the FBI is you, me, the new Director of the FBI, and a few congresspeople. And anyone who catches you. You’ll have a get-out-of-jail-free card, and as long as you stay in the USA and keep working with government employees, it’ll work.”

Khan touches his computer again. “I want it in writing. I want my lawyers to look at it. And if the deal is what you say it is…” He blinks looking like he can’t believe he’s doing this, “I’m in.”

Tim smiles. “Excellent.”

“I’m hacking the shit out of you as soon as this goes through.”

Tim shrugs. “Enjoy the pictures. I really liked taking them.”

Khan eyes him again. “I’m going to find six thousand gigs of baby pictures, aren’t I?”

Tim grins one last time. “Those, too.”
Six weeks into his new adventures at the FBI, Tim feels like they’re getting into a routine.

He likes to think of it as: The Same Thing Happens Every Night. (Though it doesn’t.)

These days, because he’s the one who isn’t coming home from the Navy Yard, he’s usually the last one home.

Where home is… That’s a moving target. Sometime in the afternoon, he’ll get a text suggesting his place or Jimmy and Breena’s, and that’s where he’ll head. (Usually, a bit later in the afternoon, he spends some time fantasizing about some of those really big houses in the swanky neighborhoods outside of DC. Someplace with a lot of space for all nine of them. Real estate prices are, as Ed keeps mentioning, and looking pointedly at Jimmy’s place, very reasonable right now. The downside of that is, the value of their homes has tanked, too, which is why he’s fantasizing about the big house, instead of looking through Zillow for one.)

Tonight, home is Jimmy and Breena’s. They’ve been doing that more often of late. Donnie’s growing like a weed, and he’s got his head pretty well wedged into Breena’s hip. So, if she doesn’t have to be moving around, she doesn’t want to be moving around.

Thus, they often go to her, instead of having her come to them.

A bit later in the afternoon, once they know where they’re going to land for the night, another series of texts comes out.

*Kids? Me or you?* This time Abby’s sending that to him.

*They’re more on my way than yours, so I’ll get them.*

*Thanks.*

Generally, if they are going to the Palmers’, he’s on get their kids’ duty. It is less of a trip for him. That said, it doesn’t always work that way, some days he’s on until he’s walking out the door. Some days, even if he is on until he’s getting into his car, he’s still getting the kids, because Abby’s on even longer.

Today, he’s pulling up, seeing Heather’s car in his driveway, and heading inside to the sound of small people laughing.

Heather’s on the floor, in the living room, building up the blocks for Kelly and Sean to knock down. Both of them adores that game, and would happily spend every waking moment knocking down blocks, whacking them hard enough to send them skittering across the room, and (for Kelly) kicking them.

(It’s still a few months off, but Tim knows they’re getting some of those soft, ultra-sized blocks, the ones that are about as big as her head, for Kelly for Christmas. She’ll be able to build towers as big as she is, and run through them. She’ll love it.)

“Daddy!” Kelly’s facing in his direction, so she sees/hears him come up, and leaps up, running for a
Tim scoops her up, and gets a few wet slobbery kisses. (And gives a few back.) While he’s kissing her hello, he scoots around to the other side of the room, so Sean can see him, and once he does, he smiles at his Daddy.

Tim kneels down, putting Kelly back on the floor, pulling Sean into his arms, while saying, “Hi, Heather. Good day?”

“Yeah, it was. Pretty quiet. We went to Petsmart to pick up some extra dogfood for Gibbs,” sometimes bits of Gibbs’ grocery list ends up at the McGee house. Since he’ll see Gibbs tomorrow, he might as well just take him stuff. “and Kelly and Sean both watched the fish for twenty minutes. I’ve never seen anything keep him interested that long.” Heather says/signs everything these days, which Tim appreciates. These days, whenever they’re around Sean, they say/sign everything, too. Tim would be doing it right now, except he’s using his arms to snuggle his boy.

“Kittens!” Kelly adds. She’s got the sign for cats down, and uses it.

“And there were kittens,” Heather adds.

“How many kittens?” Tim asks.

“Lots!”

Kelly’s razor sharp for a two year old, but she still counts like this: one, two, three, many, lots, more. She does hold up all ten fingers, and Tim doesn’t know if that’s her being enthusiastic, or if there were ten cats.

“You’re allergic to cats, right?” Heather asks.

Tim nods. “Why?”

“Well, there was this amazingly sweet little gray one, and since Mona and Jackson can come over as much as they like…”

“You were thinking you could adopt a cat and it could hang out over here while you’re working?” She nods, looking hopeful.

Tim dashes that one. He’s not just slightly allergic to cats. “Sorry. The cat hair gets into everything, so even if you made sure she was out of the house before I got here, I’d be sick all the time.”

“Scratch that plan, then.”

“However, I’m good with dogs, especially small, cute ones, who in a really vicious fit could maybe leap to my mid-shin.”

Heather smirks at that. She’s heard rumors that Tim doesn’t exactly love dogs. “Did we see any puppies needing a home when we got food for Jackson?” Heather says/signs to Kelly.

“No puppies. Kittens, turtle, FISH, hamsters.” Kelly’s very enthusiastic about that and gets about half of it signed, too.

Tim nods at that, too. He glances to the clock on the wall. “Okay, so, it’s time for us to get going.”

“I’ve got their overnight bag packed,” Heather says. Of all the futures Tim could have imagined, the
one where his kids have their very own go bags wasn’t in it. But, it’s working out pretty well for them.

Tim shifts Sean a bit, so he’s only in one arm, gets Kelly by the hand, and in a matter of minutes, he’s got them in the car, and is heading toward Jimmy’s.

For all of the kids, there’s an afternoon nap. Molly and Kelly are usually down from a bit after two to five. Anna and Sean still get a morning nap, nine to ten-thirty (ish) and then a shorter afternoon nap. (They usually go down 3:00ish). But no matter when they went down, they all get up about the same time, and for all four of them, post-nap to dinner time is generally quiet time.

When Tim opens the door to the Palmers’ house, quiet time is in full swing. Anna and Molly are laying on the floor, watching Little Bear. (Kelly goes tearing over to join in. She’s seen every episode about nine times, but she loves them all.)

Tim, with Sean in his arms, and two kiddie-sized go bags over his shoulder, heads in a bit more slowly. He kicks his shoes off, lining them up next to Breena’s, Jimmy’s, and Abby’s (he’s the last one in, tonight), and quietly calls out to Kelly, “Shoes, Kelly!”

She meanders back to the mudroom, and puts her flip flops next to Molly’s. Tim’s glad for the flip flops. It’s a lot easier to just tell her to take the shoes off, than it is to get Sean situated, and then get her shoes off.

He heads into the TV room quietly. Like usual, Breena’s taking advantage of quiet time to grab a quick nap. She’s lying on the sofa, dozing. In addition to hip pain, Donnie’s making sure she doesn’t get to sleep for more than an hour or two at a time. (Yes, Breena does have a calendar counting down to two weeks after Donnie’s due date. She knows when her induce labor date is, and how far away it is, to the minute.)

Tim crosses the room, walking quietly, and kisses Breena. She murmurs and shifts a little, and Sean squawks a bit at the amount of dipping he gets as Tim bends down.

“Shhhh…” He doesn’t so much say it, as hum it against Sean’s head, and he does stop fussing. Though stopping fussing likely has more to do with being upright again than Tim’s shushing.

From there, he’s heading to the kitchen, to say hello to his other spouses.

Tim can hear voices, the sound of something sizzling, and small clinking noises that go along with getting the table set for dinner.

“Hey!” He keeps his voice lower than normal, but not the bare hum he was using in the living room.

Abby’s moving toward the sink with a pot of boiling something, so Tim decides she can get the second kiss. He crosses the room to Jimmy, pecks him on the lips, and offers up Sean for some snuggles. Jimmy takes the boy from him, and Tim heads over to Abby, who’s no longer holding a pot of boiled potatoes.

“Hi,” she says smiling up at him.

“Hi back,” he replies, pulling her into a full hug, and a deep kiss. The sweet pressure of her body against his warms him from toes to ears. Maybe, if the stars all align right, tonight will be a really good night.
She pats his ass as he steps back, another hint in the direction of a really good night. “You need any extra hands for this?”

Jimmy says, “Nope, we’ve got it. If you want to begin rounding up the kids…”

Tim nods, knowing what comes next. He takes Sean back from Jimmy, gets him into his highchair, and goes to find one of the wetnaps. Before meals, each child gets a hand wash. For the little guys, Sean and Anna, it’s just easier to grab a pre-moistened towelette and mop them off.

“Kelly, Molly, wash hands,” he calls out. (Breena knows that’s her cue to lever herself up out of lying down, and start blinking, readjusting to awake life.)

Once Sean’s taken care of, Tim heads back to grab Anna. At twenty months old, she does walk, but if you want her in a specific place at a specific time, it’s easier to just pick her up. He found her sitting under the dining room table, which is not precisely en route to the kitchen.

“Come on you, getting ready for dinner!” Crouching under the table, reaching for her, Tim’s speaking and signing, too. At this early in the process, he’s got no idea if this is of any use, at all, for Sean, but it is making it easier for the rest of the family to pick up signed vocabulary, and… Good for Sean or not, it feels rude to talk in front of him without him being able to “listen” so to speak.

She snuggles against him as he picks her up. As he’s carrying her in, he sees Abby mashing the potatoes. “We’ve got mashies!”

Anna can talk, some, but generally doesn’t, so she doesn’t say anything to that, but Tim’s fairly sure she’s smiling. Mashies are the highlight of her dinner.

He plops her down in her highchair, and begins wiping off her hands. She responds by trying to yank her hands away and shouting “NO!”

Tim stares at the ceiling and grabs her other hand. “You’re not going to win this one, love. Hands will be washed before you eat.”

“NO!”

They do this every other, sometimes every third time he wipes her hands off, so it’s not unusual, and at least this time her hands aren’t too dirty, so he gets them done before a high pitched shriek joins the “NO!”

By this point, Jimmy’s got the table set, and he’s heading into the bathroom to monitor the two older kids and see how handwashing is going. In that none of them can hear the water running, Tim’s betting it’s not, as of yet, going.

“This doesn’t work without water…” from Jimmy confirms Tim’s theory on what’s going on. Then there’s the sound of water rushing and simultaneous cries of “Too hot!” “Too cold!” Along with, “It cannot possibly be both at once! Hold still, let’s get some soap on you… Wait, no! DON’T RUB YOUR EYES!”

Tim tries not to laugh, but that’s also about par for the course with their nightly handwashing routine. The girls seem to be under the impression that if they make this miserable enough, the adults may stop demanding it. It’s not going to happen, but he’s still rather pleased it’s his night for wiping off instead of washing off.

Since hysterical crying doesn’t come hard on the heels of ‘Don’t rub your eyes!’ it sounds like Jimmy prevented that catastrophe.
And a minute later, an only slightly soaked Jimmy gets Molly and Kelly into their booster seats, and they are, finally, ready for dinner.

There is nothing in the world all eight of them eat. Okay, not literally true, there is nothing in the world that all eight of them should eat.

So, for example, those mashed potatoes. Those are for the kids, Abby, and Breena. Tim can eat them, but generally doesn’t. Jimmy can eat them, but generally shouldn’t.

The sizzling sound Tim heard as he was heading into the kitchen was kale getting a toss in a hot frying pan with some bacon and pine nuts. All four adults will eat that. (Jimmy would happily eat a plate piled with just that.) Sean will smush it between his fingers if a small piece is put on his plate. The girls will complain, at maximum volume, if any greens show up on their plates. (Though Molly will pick the bacon out, and eat that, while complaining about the green stuff.) So, each adult has a good sized serving, and the kids don’t.

The microwaved bag of mixed veggies (corn, carrots, and peas) the adults will eat, but don’t enjoy. The kids will eat them, too, which is why every, single night, one of those bags gets tossed into the microwave. Sean, whose definition of “solid” is baby mush, or one single kale leaf cooked soft, doesn’t get any of this.

The meat of the night is pork chops, which everyone but Sean eats. So, for a few minutes, Abby, Breena, and Tim are all cutting tiny pieces out of their pork chops to put them on little plates belonging to small people. Jimmy, meanwhile, has the little plastic tub of mashed peas and carrots, and he’s feeding them to Sean.

They came to the conclusion, long ago, that there’s really no point in trying to have a functional conversation during this part of the meal. Right now is about managing kids. So they manage.

Eventually, Kelly, Molly, and Anna will finish their food. Having done so, and gone through another mopping off, they are free to go play.

Sean would likely want to join them, but they’ve noticed that if they put him on the floor, he can’t see the adults on the far side of the table, and that freaks him out. He’ll start yelling if the people he expects to be around get out of eyeshot.

Tim supposes that makes sense. If Sean can’t see you, you suddenly cease to exist, and that’s got to be spooky.

With the three oldest kids down, and Sean working on grabbing his puffed cereal stars and getting them into his mouth, they finally get to talk to each other.

“So, good day?” Tim asks.

Breena nods. “Easy day. Everyone got along.” They all know she means the customers. Her family may have its tangles, but they generally behave at work. Some of their clients… Yesterday, she had a story about the family where the two sons got into a fist fight over who got better flowers for Mom.

“I’m sorry for your loss, hand over the tissues, It’s time to get Mr. Blah to the graveyard, and the
“Exactly. The only drama we had wasn’t on my watch. They get to the gravesite, and the grave wasn’t open.”

“Uh…” Tim says as Abby looks appalled at that.

“Yeah. Apparently, and it took us a while to figure this, there are two headstones with Hartman on them, and they opened the wrong one. Fortunately, it was a cremation, and the pastor who ran the gravesite service had a shovel, so he was able to get it open, fast, but…”

“Nothing says professional like ‘I opened the wrong grave,’” Abby says.

“Oh yeah. Mom was pointing out that we’re not the ones in charge of the grave digging, but that wasn’t the happiest client ever. You guys?”

Jimmy takes a bite of his chop. “Dead body this morning, no apparent cause of death. No blood, no wounds, nothing we can see. None of the hints we usually get with an overdose. So, when we pick up Lt. Morgan, we think we’re looking at natural causes, which is weird in a twenty-seven-year-old, but not impossible.”

Abby takes over, because half of this story is hers. “So, I get the bloodwork, and there’s nothing. I mean, Morgan’s in pristine shape, and has not been drugged or messed with on any level. But, he’s also not showing signs of a heart attack or infection, or anything. All of his levels are perfect.”

“I get Abby’s report, and now I’ve got a corpse who shouldn’t be dead. As Duck once said, perfectly healthy people do not just drop dead. Allan and I spent hours going over every inch of Morgan. We checked every organ. No congenital issues. Finally, there’s nothing left to do for it, we’ve got to get his brain out.”

They all know that if that can be avoided, they avoid it, because when Morgan’s family gets his body back, it’s going to be a lot more work to make him look right. Granted, Breena and her family know what to do, any good mortician does, but if they can skip it, they do.

“So, we make the incision at the hairline, and that’s when we see it. A tiny puncture wound right at the nape of the neck. Someone pithed him. Did it just right, too. The spinal cord was soup, but the brain was fine, so there wasn’t anything to see on the brain scan, and since the spine wasn’t broken, we hadn’t bothered to scan the cord.”

“Which means Tony, Draga, Johnson, and Spader are out looking for a primary crime scene, because there was no blood or synovial fluid at the scene, and trying to figure out who knows how to kill a guy like that,” Abby finishes.

“Wait, how do you pith someone without sedating them?” Tim asks. They’ve had some weird cases in the past, but he’s not seeing any situation where someone sits still for that.


Abby takes over, “We did a blood test to see if he’d been drugged. Those came up clean. Once Jimmy found the puncture wound, we tested his synovial fluid. He had enough anesthetic in his spine to put down an elephant.”

Breena shakes her head, and Tim sighs. Some days he doesn’t miss being in the field at all. Yes, what he deals with is frustrating, but he’s fairly sure none of the half-wits he can’t fire intentionally murdered anyone.
Probably.

How many people died because of what those fuckwits did unintentionally is a different story all together.

“Tim?” Abby asks.

He takes a sip of his iced tea. “Beta test of the software program is going well. Fornell’s managed to break it twice, but only twice, and Gibbs had to help him on one of them.”

“How did Gibbs help him?” Breena asks, looking alarmed.

“I think he touched the computer and it froze up in revolt. The netbook I gave Fornell hates Gibbs. If he gets too close to it, it goes on strike.”

“I didn’t think you believed computers did things like that,” Jimmy says, smirking, having seen Tim do his standard lecture, *This is a machine, it just does what you tell it to do…*

“They shouldn’t, but I know a computer with an attitude when I see one, and that one’s got attitude. Once Fornell’s done with it, it’s going back to IT to get scrubbed.”

“Uh huh…” Jimmy’s giving him a mock stink-eye.

“Or Gibbs really does have anti-computer cooties.”

That gets some sniggering.

“And what happens with Fornell when Fornell gets done?” Breena asks when the giggles subside.

Tim shrugs. “I hope he sticks around for at least a few hours a day, but if he wants out…” Tim spreads his hands wide. “He’s retired. I can’t make him stay if he doesn’t want to. And Wendy’s been *beyond* understanding. They’ve been married ten months, and he was supposed to be retired for them.” Tim shrugs again, “Hell, if he does stay, he’s volunteering. I know we’re not paying him for anything.”

“How close to done are you?” Jimmy asks between bites of kale.

Tim shakes his head. “Pile’s getting smaller, but I spent today hunting for computer guys and sketching out the base architecture for the triaging system I want for our cases. Ziva, Gibbs, Burke, and Fornell sounded like they were whipping through, but I don’t know how far they actually got.”

“What’s smaller?” Breena asks.

“We’re down to the last two boxes.”

“That’s good!” Abby lights up at him.

Tim nods at that, but the responding smile on his face is limp. “Yeah. Soon we get to see how well I can put the ‘Fear of McGee’ into people.”

“It’s going to be fine,” Breena squeezes his hand.

He inclines his head a bit, and takes another bite of his chop. Then he swipes a bite of Abby’s mashed potato. He likes them just fine, but he doesn’t need the calories, especially with Fornell on a mission from God (apparently) to make sure that Ziva and Dave stay round and plump with a steady supply of cookies and pastries in front of them. Basically, if they’re on her plate, he has a much
easier time just having a taste.

And it gives him an excuse not to respond for a few more seconds. Finally he says, “Yeah… Sure… Okay, something else… How’s Allen? I haven’t heard much about him lately.”

His three spouses glance at each other, knowing there’s got to be a big old lump of emotional crap in there if he’s going to shift topics that blatantly, but Jimmy does fill them in on the continuing adventures of Sam Allen, AME (Assistant Medical Examiner) and how he’d signed up with a group that helps to haul rubble out of DC on the weekends.

Jimmy’s shaking his head as he fills in the details, “Almost a year later, and they’re still working on cleaning bits up. Right after it happened, they just lugged stuff to any open spot they could find, just to get it out of the streets, so he was telling me how last week they were clearing out a community garden, stuff like that.”

“Sounds useful,” Abby replies.

“It is. He likes doing it. He’s talking about maybe getting a truck so he can help lug more stuff. And, I’m noticing a certain spring in his step, so maybe he’s met someone while doing it.”

Abby looks up from petting Sean and says, “I have noticed that. He’s been a bit perkier over the last week.”

“If anyone deserves some perk, it’s him,” Breena says.

Jimmy nods. “Oh, that reminds me, his friend is coming in to visit next week. I suppose that could be a source of perk, too. She sounds like an interesting character, and he’s promised to let me take them out to lunch. Should be fun.”

“Is this the lesbian sometimes girlfriend?” Breena asks.

“He tells me they’re all queer, but, yeah, something like that.”

“If they don’t have anything else planned, invite them to Shabbos. I bet Ducky and Penny would like to see Sam again,” Abby adds.

“They’ll probably have something else planned.” Jimmy flashes them a not everyone finds hanging out with their boss and his family the highlight of their week sort of look.

“You saying we’re not exciting enough for them?” Tim asks.

“Yes!” Jimmy says back.

They all laugh at that.

Dinner, the part where the adults get to eat, lasts about twenty minutes. Long enough to talk a bit and touch base, and then it’s back to the managing the kids.

Playtime is next.

Two adults, and tonight they’re Abby and Breena, are on cleanup, and two, Jimmy and Tim, are on
playtime. (Since playtime is generally more fun than cleanup, they swap through it.)

Of late, the girls’ favorite game, originally dreamed up by Jimmy, is flying.

Jimmy lays on his back, sticks his feet up in the air, flexing them so they’re parallel to the ceiling, and Tim grabs a child (Sean’s up first) and plops said child on his/her belly on Jimmy’s feet. Jimmy grabs his/her hands, and then rocks back and forth, and lifts his feet up and down, all to the raucous laughter of little people.

The three who aren’t flying are being corralled by Tim. Otherwise, they tend to try and crawl/barrel onto Jimmy, and that only had to knock him off balance once before that went onto the NOT HAPPENING AGAIN list.

They’ve made that a game, too. Tim’s at one end of the living room, and the girls try to run/toddle/crawl past him. He swoops them up, almost tosses them (he doesn’t actually let go of them) and then plops them back by the wall. Eventually, after one of them’s had a few minutes of flying, Tim “fails” to catch one of them, and Jimmy puts whichever child had been riding him down, and grabs the next one.

And on they go.

That’s an easy (if somewhat tiring) way to burn the time where the other half of the team is cleaning up from dinner.

Next up, tubby time.

They’ve broken it into two parts now. For a while all the kiddos were going at once, but that just doesn’t work. Sean’s still small enough that everyone is better off if there’s an adult in there with him, and one grown up, plus four kids, even if, combined, there are fewer than 100 pounds of child, doesn’t fit well into one standard-sized bath tub.

So, first off, Sean and Anna. Tim knows it’s his night with them.

Sean’s on his back, near Jimmy, his feet in the air, grabbing at them, and, often with a surprised squeak, flopping over to his side as he tries to roll.

He grabs Sean, and Abby gets Anna, and up they go.

Tubby time, at least this part of it, is technically speaking, a misnomer. Sean still hates the bathtub. Why? None of them have a clue. But, if an eight-month-old can have a phobia (Jimmy and Ducky assure them that he can’t) Sean’s got one about bathtubs.

However, he’s fine with the shower.

So, step one, Tim’s out of his clothing and the water is on, warming up.

Step two: remove Sean from his little blue onesie with the huge drool spot on the chest and a few mostly dry (ish) smears of dinner. If it was cooler out, they likely would have put some more clothing on him, but no one in their home cares if Sean’s got pants on, and little guy seems to overheat pretty easily, so he doesn’t need extra layers in August.

Step three: remove diaper and deal with localized clean up.
Step four: take small, snuggly little boy, cuddle him against your chest, head under your neck, step into the shower, back to the water, while humming away. (Tonight Sean’s getting a medley of Blue October’s Greatest Hits. Jimmy likes them, so he’ll often have them on when he’s in charge of cooking. Breena really likes some of their songs and absolutely loathes others, so she’s edited the mix. Tim doesn’t know any of the songs all the way through, so Sean’s getting a verse here and a verse there, all sort of mangled together.)

Step five: slowly turn so little guy is in the water and then wash off his back, enjoying the soft, pleasant little cooing sounds he makes because, as long as he’s not in a bathtub, he’s a huge fan of warm water and being gently petted with a soapy hand.

Step six: crouch down onto the base of the shower and end up sitting cross-legged in there. Turn Sean around so he’s face up in his Daddy’s lap, looking at Tim, kicking his feet up, and apply soap all over his front. Sean’s less fond of this part, and absolutely abhors when Tim (or anyone else) attempts to wash under his chin. (Tim’s wiggling his fingers under Sean’s chin, saying, “Yeah, I know. But you smell like Jimmy’s used workout clothing after it’s been cooking in the car for the afternoon. You’ve got to get all clean so you smell sweet for Mama.” Sean is not mollified by that.)

Step seven: stand up again, holding Sean out to the water, so he can get rinsed off on all sides.

Then comes the swap. Abby, who’s been keeping him company, has gotten Anna naked, tidied up, and ready for her shower, takes Sean from him, wrapping him in his brown puppy towel, and hands Anna over for the second shower of the night.

The steps stay the same, but Anna’s a lot easier to get clean. She likes shower time, and though she doesn’t like having her hands wiped off, she’s just fine with getting washed off in the shower. She especially likes it when Uncle Tim washes her hair, because he makes sure to get a lot of suds and then shapes her hair into a unicorn horn, and steps out of the shower, holding her up, so she can see her horn in the mirror.

With the two littlest members of the crew all washed up, and dried, and in their diapers and jammies (this time of year, they’re both in onesies.) it’s time for real tubby time. Tubby time with an actual tubby.

Tubby time where Tim doesn’t have to literally get into the bath with them, though he does sit on the edge, ready to lunge over fast and grab someone if they slip.

And sitting on the edge of the tub, naked, turning on the water, knocking the (by conservative estimate) 40,000 tubby toys into the tub, Tim calls out “Molly, Kelly!” and eventually, he hears Molly scrambling up the stairs, and Kelly’s on her way up with Jimmy’s help.

Jimmy hands the oldest two off, and more or less skips downstairs, looking forward to some quiet, alone time with Breena. Abby chuckles at that, and catches Tim’s eyes. But they both know that, assuming Breena’s not hurting too bad for tubby time, tomorrow night, they’ll do the exact same thing.

Molly can get out of her clothing on her own. She’s got on a t-shirt, shorts, and big girl panties (which she’s still very proud of because she gets to wear them all the time, and Kelly’s only on training diapers). So, to begin their tubby time, Tim’s watching an almost four year old get almost naked, and then wiggle her pink unicorn clad butt at the twenty-six month old while loudly proclaiming her potty superiority.

“Stop it!” The voice of adult authority says, trying hard not to giggle.
Kelly’s not happy about the wiggling, and she’s trying to bite Molly in response. He grabs Kelly. “Really, stop that. No biting!”

Of all of the toddler sibling battles, this is one Tim never dreamed of. Though, they’ve had versions of this over the last few months, and Penny tells him it’s perfectly normal, at least all of her boys did versions of this, and so did a decent number of the grandkids who were close enough in age.

Tim’s absolutely certain nothing like this ever happened with him and Sarah, but… nine years apart. (Though he does have a memory of Sarah working on her potty skills, and being really shocked when standing up to pee didn’t work for her the way it did for him.)

Molly, stopping it, scrambles into the tub, as Tim helps Kelly get undressed. She does have her training diaper and if someone suggests using the potty to her, she’s pretty good about it, but it’s nothing she seems to notice on her own. Which is, apparently, pretty par for the course for this age group.

He plops Kelly in a minute later, and they both do an okay job of claiming different sides of the tub, and different toys, and pretty happily entertain themselves.

Molly’s starting to hit the age where kids actually really play with other kids. Kelly’s still pretty firmly in the age where other kids are just things to her. So, they get along as well as it’s possible for two little people who are in vastly different developmental stages to get along.

They get ten minutes of playtime. That’s about as long as any of the adults want to hover on the side of the tub on lifeguard duty. Then comes washing off time, which both of them are, generally, pretty good about.

Molly’s in charge of application of her own soap, and as long as an adult is around to point out things like, ‘Get your hair’ she’s pretty solid on her own. Kelly still needs to be lathered by someone else.

And both of them love the last part.

“Okay, you two, up against the wall!”

They know what comes next, and they scamper into place against the back wall of the tub.

“Arms up.”

And arms go up. Tim grabs the shower hose, makes sure the spray is warm enough, and gives the magic command, “Twirl.”

He’s got two little, soapy ballerinas twirling around as he rinses them off. He makes sure they do it slow so no one gets dizzy or falls over, and by the time he’s done, they’re giggly, and all rinsed off.

By this point, Anna and Sean, who have been hanging out with Abby, are in their room, in their crib, usually quietly chilling out. It’s not quite sleepy time, but it’s close enough, and as long as Anna’s close enough that Sean knows he’s not entirely alone, he’ll allow Abby to leave the room without having a meltdown.

Which means Tim’s got a second pair of hands to get little girls dried off and into PJs. Getting the girls into their jammies seems to go easier when whichever adult was on hovering duty also gets into his/her jammies.

So, as Tim pulls on a soft t-shirt and a pair of boxers, both of the older girls get into their summer
sleep sets, which are also t-shirts and soft shorts. (Tim was under the impression that nightgowns were a thing, but apparently, they’re a major fire hazard, so nothing even remotely like that is going on their girls.)

Then teeth brushing. Molly’s on her own. Abby’s kneeling on the floor in front of the sink getting Kelly’s teeth. Anna’s on Tim’s arm as he uses a tiny, pink toddler toothbrush to get her teeth. Sean’s sitting on the bathroom floor, watching. His three teeth get the last bit of attention for the night.

It’s a lot of people to shove into one average-sized bathroom, but it’s a lot faster than doing each kid one at a time.

And, finally, once everyone is clean, brushed, and dressed, it’s time to hand the kiddos off.

“Storytime,” Abby calls out, and a moment later, Jimmy and Breena are up, and ready to take over the next leg of bedtime.

“Hi,” Tim says to his wife as they finally get a moment alone with each other.

“Hi, back!”

They’re in the living room, on the sofa, enjoying a few minutes of quiet before they head up for final kisses and tuck ins, and then, theoretically, save for Sean’s last nurse of the night, they are more or less (because at least one of them wakes up at least once a night) done with their major parenting jobs for the night.

“You actually free tonight?” Abby asks, some concern in her voice. Tim’s putting in a lot of hours to get his version of Public Corruption up in the air, and most nights, once the kids are down, he’s into his office, or when they’re here, in Breena’s office with his laptop, working away.

Tim shakes his head. “Like I said, I did nothing with thinning the herd today. They’re going to be done with those boxes soon, end of the week at the latest, and I need to get what I want Comey doing set in my head. I need to get this whole dog and pony show set.”

“You need thinking time?”

“Writing time. I’ll start it as a scene… How would I like it to look if I was writing the dramatic payback scene? Then figure out how close I can get to it.”

“Sounds like a good starting place.” She’s kneeling next to him on the sofa, gently petting the back of his neck.

“I hope.” He leans his head back, letting it rest in her palm, and closes his eyes. He’s sincerely looking forward to this weekend. That’s the promise he’s made to himself and his family, Friday night and Saturday, he’s off. He’ll work extra on weeknights and Sundays to make sure he gets those hours with them.

So far, it’s working.

“Good night!” He’s kissing little, sleepy, shampoo-smelling heads, and creeping out of the dim
bedroom Sean and Anna are sharing.

He, Breena, and Abby head down. Jimmy’s going to spend a few more minutes up there, lurking around, waiting for the traditional post-bedtime request.

There’s always at least one, and as Tim’s closing the door to Breena’s office, he hears a tiny voice asking for water, and Jimmy responding with, “There’s a sippy cup with water in it in on your bed.”

“I dropped it.”

Tim smirks, feeling Jimmy’s sigh, and hearing heavy footsteps crossing the upstairs, and the sound of the door to the room Kelly and Molly share opening. “Molly, you know you’re allowed to get out of bed to pick things up off the floor. Get your cup, and then go to sleep.”

---

Writing. Tim’s got his earbuds in, and his music going, as his fingers go flitting over his laptop. It’d feel better on his typewriter, but these days, that lives in his office at work.

He pauses, eyes skimming what he’s just done.

It makes him smile. It’s the wanton destruction of pretty much everyone who used to work in Public Corruption. It’s a massive, bloody festival of firing, with a lot of these assholes going to jail, too.


None of that’s going to happen. But, it did feel good to get it all written down. It was lovely to imagine.

Back to the beginning.

He checks the clock, it’s a bit after nine. He’ll give himself another hour, and then call it a night.

A “realistic” plan takes a lot longer.

When he calls time, as the soft sound of Sean crying for food fills the air, he’s got a few paragraphs.

Mostly, he’s staging Comey’s resignation. He’s got that first right now, but… He’s not loving it there.

As he heads up to grab Sean and bring him down to Abby, he’s debating how to do this. Should all 700 of the Public Corruption guys be there to watch it? And does there mean, literally physically in DC?

An image pops into his head. Congress, the ruins of it, is still closed. People can go on the steps, visit and see what’s left, but they can’t get any closer than that.

He wonders, as he’s lifting Sean up, if Jarvis would be willing to let him get a lot of people a whole lot closer to the destruction, if it were for a very good cause.

Another thought, as he’s bringing Sean down to Abby, is that if he offers Jarvis a large amount of slave labor on punishment duty, say… for 24 days or so… Jarvis may give them access to the White
House grounds, what’s left of them, anyway, for a few hours.

Tim likes the idea starting to form in his head.

He’s got the sense that Comey resigning in front of the burned out hulk of what used to be where the President lived would be an awfully picturesque sort of moment.

Last (usually) (if they’re lucky) parenting task of the night.

And this is one of Tim’s favorites. Granted, he doesn’t have to do all that much for this one. He’s just on transport duty.

Sean’s first and last meals of the day are nursing with Abby.

And, as often as he can, Tim makes sure to wrap up what he’s working on so he can get back to his family for this.

They’ve been watching Westworld, getting ready for season two to begin. He’s seen, maybe, if he adds all the bits and pieces together, a combined total of two hours. It sounds like the kind of show he’d like to watch, but if he makes them wait for him, it could be 2019 before they get around to it.

He catches however many minutes as he can during this bit of time.

Tim hands Sean over, and snuggles in next to Abby. All four of them fit on the sofa, as long as they’re happy to be close in and snuggly, and they are. Jimmy’s got one arm around her, and one around Breena, and with Tim snuggled in on her other side, his cheek is resting on her shoulder, against Jimmy’s hand.

From here he can relax, close his eyes, doze a bit, or watch Sean nurse, petting him some, or, sometimes, especially if he got to see the earlier bit of the episode, actually watch the show.

He’s mostly resting against Abby, helping to keep Sean in place, and thinking about what sort of “help” Jarvis might still need on fixing up DC, especially, dirty, hard, messy, and nasty jobs.

He’s got a feeling that his people, if they want to keep their jobs, are going to be doing some “volunteering.”

“It sounded like you were really typing away in there,” Breena says as they start getting ready for bed.

Tim nods, brushing his teeth.

“Breakthrough?” Jimmy asks, taking out his contacts.

“Maybe, your comments about Allan got me thinking some. If I can swing it, I think I’m going to make them all come to DC, stick them in whatever little hellhole I can find, and then give them to Jarvis for three weeks of ‘volunteer’ labor.”

“Punishment duty so bad they resign rather than do it?” Abby asks as she reaches for her toothbrush.
"That's the idea. I've got to make sure I can do it, but… They're FBI Agents, as long as it’s legal, if I tell them to jump, they're supposed to say ‘How high?’ and if they don’t, I can fire them."

"You think making them clean up DC is legal?" Jimmy asks.

"I really hope so." He finishes up his teeth, puts a note to investigate that into his phone, and then begins to pull off that t-shirt and boxers.

It's bedtime.

---

Snack sex, meal sex, and banquet sex. Tim’s had, and loves, all three, but most nights are meal sex.

And, given how the rest of life works, that’s probably about the balance he likes. Sure, a bit more snack sex would be nice, but… He doesn’t work in the same building with any of his loves any longer, and little kids have made the morning quickie more or less a thing of the past. (Or a weekend only treat.)

Tonight is another meal sex night.

This is sleepy, tucked in, relaxed and slow sex.

Usually, he and Abby stay together for this, and Jimmy and Breena do, too. Sometimes they switch things around, and (more often these days as Breena gets more pregnant and her hips want less and less to do with sex) Jimmy joins Tim and Abby for a three-way.

But, for all the many ways bodies can fit and slip together, if what you’re looking for is a soft, relaxed, end the day with a happy glow, that works best with two bodies.

Breena’s looking to play today, so it’s each original couple on their own.

He and Abby start off facing each other, kissing, petting, talking a little. Mostly they’re just basking in each other, reveling in the slide of wet tongue on wet lip, taking pleasure of skin on skin.

She’s sucking on his bottom lip, and he’s gently stroking her butt, enjoying the smooth heat of her skin, and the very pleasant fullness of her bottom in his hand.

Abby’s leg slides up his, and his hand trails down her back. And both of them make little happy noises as they rock against each other.

Tim would like to be rocking a bit more intently, and maybe a bit more of an in out sort of motion, but they’re still in the using condoms phase of sex, and neither of them wants to roll over and grab one, yet.

So, for right now, this is good. Warm skin, the brush of Abby’s pubic hair against his skin, kissing, so much kissing, all of that sparkles through him.

He hikes her leg a bit further on his hip, so he can reach around, get to her clit from behind, and adds a soft roll of his fingers to the mix.

Abby shudders all over, making a soft uhn sound. Her eyes slip shut, and her mouth falls open. He moves his fingers just a bit faster, swallowing another of those little, breathy moans with his kisses.

She’s rubbing her thigh against his dick, and he’s making a few uhn sounds of his own.
Abby rolls him over onto his back, and sits up, straddling him. For a moment, Tim grins, enjoying the view. He enjoys it even more when she leans forward, breasts hanging in his face, grabbing a condom and lube. He happily nuzzles her, gently, looking forward to the time when her breasts are fully back in play again.

She slips back, straddling his thighs, and gets everything set. He still doesn’t love the cool, clammy sensation of a condom being rolled down his dick, but a moment later when Abby follows it, everything is good.

She’s hot and snug, wrapped around him in exactly the right way, and rising and falling on top of him. It’s his favorite sight, along with one of his favorite sensations, and he gets to bask in her body, and the pleasure of it.

And with widening the circle between them, Jimmy and Breena come back into view, too. They’re on their sides, about a foot away, rocking slow and easy. Tim’s right hand is toward Breena, and it’s not like he’d be doing much with it for Abby, anyway. So he takes that hand, and holds Breena’s, as he gets his left hand back into the game, finding Abby slick and ready, and making those little circles she loves so much.

Abby leans forward, hands on the bed next to his shoulders, her hair falling around them and he groans low and deep, happy to be kissing again.

Wet lips, wet tongues, wet pussy, wet dick, all of it slipping and sliding, slow and easy, just creeping toward bliss.

He can feel it building, just an inch or so beyond him. His thighs get tighter as he moves faster, hips rocking harder. Abby’s moving faster, too, taking him deeper. He can feel her growing tighter, too, more grip, more friction, more pleasure, more everything.

His right hand tightens, left working faster, thumb flying over Abby as she slams down on him. She’s sucking, hard, on his lip, and his jaw’s clenching.

Everything goes fast and tight, heart pounding, galloping, racing for the edge.

There a second where it feels like everything pauses, though Tim knows they don’t pause, and then he’s over the edge, tingles coursing through his body, hot, wet, pulses making his hips jerk staccato, and Abby groans, loud, twitching on him.

A few seconds later, as Abby’s lying on him, and both of them are breathing hard, resting, they hear two more come cries, high and low, and feel the bed shudder again.

Tim smiles, very sleepy. Abby kisses the tip of his nose, and apparently has enough energy left to lean over and kiss Breena and Jimmy, too.

Tim squeezes Breena’s hand, and pets Jimmy’s side, and, after a minute of clean up with a tissue, he’s snuggled back in next to Abby, and ready for a good long rest.
“Gotcha!” Fornell says, slamming down a file.

The rest of the crew looks up at him.

“This one! This is the bastard you fry!” He’s looking especially pleased with himself, as he reaches for a biscotti and dips it in his coffee.

“And who are we frying?” Ziva asks, looking pleased at the distraction from her own case file, which is just depressing. Apparently, the guy in her file was just fond of the IRS, and did whatever he could to prevent anyone from making a case against them.

“Murdock Harris. He’s a mid-level supervisor, and a case fell into his lap. Apparently, an anonymous source in the FEC gave the FBI a tip that things weren’t exactly on the up and up.”

“What’d he do with it?” Gibbs asks, and Burke watches, eyes bright, as they talk.

“Nothing. He took possession of it, listed himself as the agent in charge, and just left it alone. No follow up, no questions, nothing. Someone gave us a tip that the FEC wasn’t investigating financial irregularities in Congressional elections, and we killed it.”

“The Welcome to Congress slush fund?” Ziva asks.

Fornell pats the folder. “Looks like it. The tip is vague, but it does specify that it was system wide, and the people involved were extremely well-connected.”

Tim nods. “Stick him in a new pile, call it the ‘Crucify’ one. Anyone who’s got a case that directly relates to everything falling apart, goes in that one.”

Fornell gets up and grabs a new box, tossing Harris in there. Gibbs also gets up, and starts going through their prosecute file, which is where most the people who had cases that directly tied into everything falling apart ended up.

Tim’s staring at his computer screen. Up on it is the name of the head of HR. The person who’s supposed to know all the ins and outs of what he can do with his employees.

She’s not a lawyer, so there’s no expectation of privilege.

He supposes he could talk to a lawyer, but… Tim shakes his head; he doesn’t want a breath of this idea getting out, and right now, he’s got no one he trusts on this.

Better to apologize after than seek permission.

His eyes flick to Gibbs, who is shuffling files around.

Fuck it. Worst they can do is fire him. And right now, if he can’t fire these guys, and he can’t discipline them effectively, he doesn’t want this job. He’s here to change things, not just put a smiley
face and a new coat of paint on the same old wreck.

He pulls up Jarvis’ number, and makes the call, asking for an appointment. The first Governor of the State of Columbia can squeeze twenty minutes out of his schedule in two days. That’s long enough for Tim, so he signs on for it.

Then he starts googling the FBI Employee’s Union. If you know you’re going to get into a fight with a dragon, you might as well try to defang the dragon before it bites.

―

“Director McGee!” Jarvis has what looks like a genuine smile on his face. His much older face. The lines are deeper, the circles under his eyes are darker, his hair is whiter, everything about Jarvis looks old. If you were to ask Tim how long it’s been since he’s seen Jarvis, based on how Jarvis looks, his best guess would be fifteen years.

But, if he’s remembering correctly, and he may not be, the real answer is ten months.

Apparently it’s been a long ten months, and on Jarvis, it shows.

Except his eyes, they’re still bright and focused.

Granted, he’s got a cigarette between his lips and appears to be mainlining caffeine, (the only time the cigarette leaves his mouth is when the coffee cup replaces it) so a lot of that focus may be artificially enhanced by the careful application of chemical aid.

“Governor Jarvis,” Tim replies, also smiling, and offering his hand. Even with the shock of seeing how much he’s changed, Tim’s still pleased to see him. And he’s got the feeling he’s about to make Jarvis’ day, which brightens his smile.

The twenty minutes Tim could grab are the ones where Jarvis is walking from his office to a lunch meeting.

And Tim’s got his suspicions that part of why they’re strolling across DC, (He supposes that one day he’ll start calling it SC, because it’s not a District any longer. Since May, it’s the State of Columbia, not the District.) is that no one can keep an ear on them. Tim didn’t specify he was looking for that, though he did request a private chat.

“Looks like your fortunes have been on the up and up,” Jarvis says. He may look old, but his pace is fast.

“So far, so good. And I’d like to talk to you about making them better, for both of us.”

“Both of us, I’m intrigued.” It occurs to Tim that part of why he’s enjoying this is that Jarvis isn’t nervous. Just about everyone he’s called to deal with, out of the blue, has been jittery about having the FBI Public Corruption Director give them a call. Jarvis is acting like Tim’s an old buddy here to see him.

Tim supposes, to a degree, he is.

“I’m guessing by the Director you’re familiar with what I inherited.”

“The Anti-Corruption Department That Couldn’t.”

Tim inclines his head. He appreciates Jarvis’ play on the Little Engine That Could. “Sounds about
right. 700 people, most of them were willfully looking the other way, and the rest were incompetent, or got transferred out of the department within six months.”

“Wonderful.” Jarvis’ dry sarcasm is still intact, and if anything, made sharper by the rasp of cigarette deepened voice. “And how is this going to benefit me?”

“Apparently, I cannot fire people for willfully looking the other way or basic incompetence.”

Jarvis keeps his eyes on Tim, inhaling fast and deep on his cig. “Maybe. There might be a way around that. I’ve certainly got my people testing it out.”

That’s interesting to Tim, but he knows their time is tight. “I’ll ask you about that in a minute before I lose my train of thought.”

“Okay. Where are you going with this?”

“Discipline. If I can’t get rid of them, I want them to leave. And I want the ones who are serious about staying to do some major penance. They are going to prove to me that staying matters to them.”

“Okay…”

“I’ve got seven hundred warm bodies. I want to drop them in the city, and make them help clean up. What could you do with twenty-four days of slave labor?”

Jarvis’ eyes light up and a grin flashes across his face. “Besides kiss you?”

“Yeah. NO. Lips that touch nicotine don’t touch mine.”

Jarvis smirks. “Uh huh… Yes, I could find stuff for them to do. I can beyond find stuff for them to do.”

“I also need a place to keep them. I don’t think I can put them in direct danger, but if you’ve got an un-air-conditioned building a hair’s breadth on the right side of condemned where I can make them camp…”

That smirk morphs into a grin. “Oh, yeah, I’ve got one. I’ve got hundreds of them. So, the city was nailed down for 24 days, they’re going to fix it up for 24 days, is that what you’re looking for?”

“Yes. I can’t burn them out, shoot at them, or starve them, so they won’t get the full experience, but I can give them a taste of it, and I can make them help to clean up the mess they helped make.”

Jarvis is very pleased by that idea.

“Okay, tell me your employment thing,” Tim adds, before he forgets that. Jarvis gets out his phone and texts Tim a court case that means nothing to him. Tim looks up from it and says, “I’ve got nothing.”

“I didn’t think you would. Before I ended up in charge here, I didn’t know it either. Amalgamated Transit Union V. WMATA. That’s the test case that makes everyone else wet their pants when it comes to trying to get rid of incompetent employees. The Metro wasn’t doing its maintenance the way it was supposed to. Things get screwed up, train fills up with smoke, ninety people got hurt, someone died.”

“Great.”
“So, they fire the guy who was supposed to do the maintenance. You’d think, ‘multiple people hurt and one died because you didn’t do your job’ would be enough to get you fired, but, no. The courts found that because no one was doing their job properly, they couldn’t single out that one guy for not doing his.”

Tim sighs. He’s not immediately finding that useful. Jarvis is looking at him expectantly, so he thinks about it, hard, for a moment, and then finds the twig he can stand on. “You can’t fire one guy for not doing his job if everyone else isn’t doing it. There’s no test case about what happens if you fire all of them.”

Jarvis smiles. “Now, I’d rather like it if you waited until after you made them all work for me before firing them all, but I think, if you’re willing to take out the entire department, they will not be able to bring a counter suit against you.”

“Or, at least, I can bluff with it, if the Union screams about my brand of ‘discipline.’”

“You can certainly do that.” Jarvis is looking ahead, and Tim can see they’re less than a block from the restaurant he’s got his meeting at.

“One more favor, I’d like to get them up to the White House, and yell at them mercilessly about how they fucked over their whole country by not doing their job.”

Jarvis smiles at that. “I like the way you want to do this, but, can I make a suggestion.”

“Suggest away.”

“You’ve got FBI Agents. Almost across the street from the Hoover Building is the National Archives.” Tim’s aware of that the same way he’s aware of the fact that the house across the street from Jimmy and Breena’s is white. He knows it, but never thinks about it. “The building is, as you said, a hair’s breadth on the right side of condemned. It was looted and the fire damage is cosmetic, but ugly. But, it’s also made of steel and stone, so it’s stable.”

Tim’s following along, but other than an easier to manage location, he’s not immediately seeing why the Archives would be better than the White House.

“When we finally got people into there, we found that hundreds of thousands of documents were gone. In fact, the only two we know are still there, we can’t get to. The original Constitution and Declaration of Independence are in their vault, under the ground, and as of right now, we can’t get them up again. Those vaults were designed to survive a nuclear attack, so we’re awfully sure that everything is safe down there, but the mechanism that gets them back up is destroyed beyond repair, and getting an excavation unit to dig those documents up is so low on the list of priorities, no one’s even remotely interested in doing it. Right now, I think rescuing those documents is on the calendar for some time around ’22.’”

Having said that, Tim gets it. His people all swore an oath to uphold the US Constitution, and because they failed, it’s trapped under the earth in a burnt out building.

“That’s a fabulous suggestion.”

“The rotunda should be big enough for them all to squeeze in for your dressing down. It was designed to have people in and out of it. And unlike the White House, it’s still structurally sound.”

“Jarvis, thank you. I’ll let you know when I’m ready to do this. All I need from you is someone to oversee where my guys will go and what they’ll do.”
“I’m certain I can find someone for that.” They’re at Jarvis’ next meeting. Tim nods at him, Jarvis heads in, and Tim heads off feeling a bit of lightness in his heart.

“Is that really…” Burke says.

“I think it is,” Ziva replies as Gibbs sets it on top of the table.

“The last box,” Fornell adds.

“I didn’t think we’d ever see it,” Burke says, pretending to look around the room for more of them. “You’ve got one hidden in the closet, right, Ziva?”

Ziva smirks at that. “I had Jackson bury one in the backyard.”

That gets some laughs.

“One folder maybe.” Fornell pets Jackson’s ears. Jackson looks up from the nap he was taking on the top of the table. Like Dave, he’s growing fast. Unlike Dave, he’s supposed to max out at eight pounds. He’s probably threeish these days, but he’s at least dog-sized (very small dog-sized) instead of guinea pig-sized.

Having been awakened, Jackson gets up, trots over to the box, and looks into it.

Gibbs reaches in, takes the top folder off the pile, and places it in front of his chair. He looks over to Tim, who hasn’t been part of this for days now. “You ready for what comes next?”

“Getting there. How long for this one?”

The four at the table all glance at each other, “A week, tops,” Ziva replies. They’ve been working backwards, lower level employees to higher level ones. This box is it, the top brass. The longest careers, the most cases, the most connections. It’ll take longer than the previous boxes, and has fewer folders in it, but with all of that, it’s still twenty employees, and there are four of them working on it.

Not more than a week.

Tim nods. He begins writing the email, requesting time to talk to Comey.

Email written, plans with Jarvis starting to gel, it’s time for Tim to get into the rest of this.

This.

The dog and pony show of all dog and pony shows.

And he’s got to be the ringmaster.

The Director.

There are layers here, identities Tim’s had and has and cultivated over the years. This one here…
He’s hoping this is something he can wear, like a suit, and just as easily take off.

Tim, Probie, Thom, McGee, Boss, those are all ideas and ideals of himself, and they’re more importantly, all *him*.

But he doesn’t want this one to be *him*. He may need it, especially for this, but… It’s a role. Something he’s playing for a few days.

He hopes.

There’s a fine niggling sensation that *The Director* may be him, too. A part of him he doesn’t like. A part he can’t, shouldn’t let out all that often.

A part that’s vastly too close to *The Admiral* for his comfort.

He knows it’ll take time to properly build *The Director*. This isn’t going to be the sort of thing he can do on a whim. And he hopes, that if he does this right, and builds it in steps, that when he’s done with this, he’ll be able to take *The Director* off, stuff him in a closet, and with any luck, *never* have to take him out again.

“Hey, Tony.”

“Tim?” Tony’s voice sound surprised to hear Tim. “Not that I’m not happy to hear from you, but it’s ten on a Thursday.”

“You mean, why didn’t I just ask Ziva about whatever it is, since she’s sitting fifteen feet away from me?”

“That would be the subtext.”

“Because she told me to call you.”

“Interesting. This isn’t a case is it?”

“Not exactly. You know the put-the-fear-of-McGee into them thing I’ve got to do with these twits I can’t fire?”

“Yeah.” They’ve been talking about the basic ideas of it for months now. And specifics for days. “Ziva told me about your meeting with Jarvis and the Archives idea. I’m buying popcorn, giving the team the day off, and Draga and I are going to go watch from the back.”

Tim rolls his eyes a little at that, but… actually, it might be nice to know there’s at least a few friendly faces hiding back there. “Yeah, thanks. Look, I need to look the part for this. You still in touch with Dominic Lawson.” It had taken Tim a while to remember the name of Tony’s tailor, the man who had made his good date night suit, and the tux he’ll wear to Gibbs’ wedding. In fact, he’d been wracking his brain about it, when a little idea popped into his head, *go look at the label* and lo and behold, there is was, Dominic Lawson, Men’s Fine Tailoring

Tony groans. “Shit. No. His whole street is gone. After it all fell apart, I looked for him, googled him, and used the resources we’ve got. You know, just wanted to see if he was okay. Can’t buy a suit from a man twice a year for more than a decade and then leave him high and dry, but… Nothing.
I checked with the records to see who owned the mortgage on the property, and who was insuring it, and neither of them have had any contact from him, either.”

“Damn.” Tim’s feeling cold at the idea of that man, who he knew, at least a little, destroyed in the fires.

Tony tosses him a thin hope, one he’s been holding onto, too. “Only upside is that he’s not officially among the dead, either. I keep telling myself he went back to Milan. He’s safe and fine in Milan.”

“Okay.” Safe and fine in Milan sounds good to Tim, too. “You got a number two guy?”

“No, but I’m sure Senior does.”

“I’ll give him a call.”

“So, what does look the part mean?” Tony’s been enjoying the secondhand bits and pieces he’s been getting on how Tim intends to stage this, and if he can help, he wants to. He’s got a feeling that all of their family who lived through the fall, want a hand in the smack down that’s coming.

“That’s part of what I was hoping Dominic could help me with. But, I’d imagine it means finally breaking down and getting the traditional navy blue power suit with the red tie.”

Tony smiles at that. “It’s good to know you’ve at least got the basics.”

“Yeah, I figure for the FBI, especially, all of them should have that look emblazoned somewhere in their subconscious as BOSS.”

“And if they don’t, by the time you’re done, they will.”

“That’s part of the plan.”

“You busy for lunch tomorrow?” Tony asks.

“Not as of right now.”

“Good, meet me at the Archives tomorrow, and we can talk about making this look right.”

Tim appreciates that. He works with words, sounds. Tony works with images. He’s got how things should look to make them grand in his head. Between the two of them, they should get this staged within an inch of its life.

Like many of the buildings in SC, the Archives looks awful.

Unlike many of them, it just looks awful. From what Tim can see as he’s waiting for Tony, there’s nothing wrong with it (that he can see from the outside) that a power washer, the attentions of a team of talented glaziers, and a few good masons couldn’t fix in a week.

It’s covered in soot, smoke damage, and graffiti. There are still drifts of broken glass on the grand staircase leading into the rotunda.

The whole building is a large marble rectangle, with a bunch of architectural do-dads (Once upon a time, Tim knew the difference between a Doric or Corinthian column, and he knows that he used to know what the fussy looking bits all around the top of the building were, but he’s not coming up
with them, now.) added to the edges. It probably doesn’t matter that he can’t name what those things are, or more rightly, were. It looks like someone with a rifle thought it’d be fun to use them for target practice. There are bits of marble littering the ground around the Archives, and small chipped holes all up and down the walls that Tim knows were made by bullets.

Up the stairs, there’s a piazza, fronted with huge columns. He’s standing in the middle of it. Right in front of him is where the doors used to be, and above and around them, there used to be windows. Right now, there’s a huge collection of plywood boards, hammered into place.

According to Jarvis, as long as he’s got his badge with him, and puts it back when he’s done, no one will give him any flack for prying his way in. So, he’s got a crowbar, too.

Tim sets the crowbar to the most likely piece of plywood. A moment later he hears, “You’re not wasting any time.”

“Hey, Tony.”

Tony walks up to him, and gives him an extra hand pulling the plywood down.

They duck through the small opening in the wall of hastily put up wood. Inside the air is dank, dusty and dim. They can see the places where the plywood isn’t flush, because fine lines of light stream through. Tony pops on his flashlight, scanning the rotunda. Tim mentally curses at himself for not having one. He’s out of practice at this sort of adventure.

“This feels familiar, doesn’t it?” Tony says.

Tim smiles at that. “Oh yeah.” His nostrils flare at the scent. “You think we’ve got a body in here?”

Tony shakes his head. “Not the kind we’ll get concerned about. I’m thinking that’s a bunch of birds or squirrels.”

Tim inhales again. He can smell unwashed person and sewage. “Squatters, too.”

Tony nods. “No power, right?”

“No power, no water, no gas. Everything’s turned off, and supposedly boarded up.”

“You walk the perimeter?”

Tim shakes his head. He really is out of practice. He should have, but he didn’t.

“You’re getting rusty, Probie,” Tony says with a smirk.

“That’s Director Probie, to you.”

“Uh huh. So, we gonna get the power on?”

“Nah. I’m thinking we’ll take the plywood down, and use that for light.”

Tony turns to face where the windows used to be, running his flashlight over broken windows. “It’ll be light enough to see.”

Tim’s nodding at that. He taps Tony’s shoulder, and gestures to the rest of the rotunda. Tony obliges him by slowly turning around, and playing his flashlight over everything.

The first thought in Tim’s mind, as he catches little glimpses of the rotunda in Tony’s tiny circle of
yellow light is that there’s no possible way that many leaves could have gotten in here. There just aren’t enough trees in the downtown for the floor, especially in the corners, to be filled with leaves.

It takes a moment for him to realize those thin, crinkled, mostly brown and yellow things are paper.

He swallows hard. “God.”

Tony nods. “Yeah.” He’s not anything like a history buff, but even he can look at this, put together what he’s seeing, and feel the ache of it.

Tony pulls the light closer to them, pointed to the floor in front of them, which is clear of paper. His voice is rough, not on the verge of tears or anger, but tired, as he says, “You know, you think it’s in the past, mostly it stays there, and then…”

“Then it jumps back up and grabs you by the throat.”

“Yeah.” Tim can hear Tony grabbing something from his pocket. He hands Tim the flashlight, and there’s the soft crinkle of a wrapper opening. A moment later, he can hear Tony chew. Then he hands the granola bar to Tim, who also takes a bite. It’s food, real food, and that helps with the wave of feeling stuck in the past.

Tim holds the light up, looking higher. The walls of the rotunda had murals. He can still make out a few details, but mostly he’s looking at graffiti.

Tim heads over the reason there is a rotunda, to the display cases where the US Constitution, Bill of Rights, and Declaration of Independence used to be on display.

They’re shuttered and empty. “Jarvis says they’re down there. The vault is designed to handle anything anyone can throw at it, so they’ve got to be down there, but no one’s got the time or money to get them back up.”

Tony nods at that. “One of my buddies at Metro says that just the missing persons’ cases alone are eating up a third of their time. They took their entire Vice department and put them on missing persons’, and they still don’t have enough people on it. No one’s sparing a second for this sort of thing.” Tony sighs shaking his head. “Come on, let’s get out of here. Talk where there’s air.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

Once they’re on the steps, the Tony that he wears as his own armor slips back into place. “So, I’ve been thinking about your put the fear of McGee into them technique. Have you ever seen Glengarry Glen Ross?”

“I don’t even know what that is.” Tim assumes it’s got to be a movie, but that’s all he’s got on it.

“That’s what you’re looking for. It’s got the ultimate Boss chewing out the underlings, explaining what they’re going to do and how they’re going to do it scene.”

Tim shrugs. “I think I’ve got that part of it.” After all, he’s already experienced, first hand, all the Boss chewing out underlings any man needs. He’s got an awfully good idea of how to do this.

“No, really. I mean, you need to see it. Alan Baldwin’s pretty much only in that scene, but he’s got it. He’s exactly who you’re going for. You want them about to wet their pants and he just nails it. The power suit, the attitude, the—“

“Tony.”
“Seriously, Tim, this is the—“

“Tony…” That time it gets through. Tony stops talking about Glengarry Glenn Ross, and watches Tim. “I’ve got it.” He keeps his voice soft as he says that, and for a moment Tony’s just watching him, not getting it, and then he is.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re going to do… him.”

“Yeah.” Tim nods, teeth gritted. “By the time I’m done, each one of them should be ready to disembowel himself just to get me to stop.”

“Should you go there?”

Tim shrugs. “I’d rather just fire them.”

“I know, but…” Tony glances away from Tim, and then back to him, “You gonna be you after this?”

“I hope so.” Tim’s looking across the street and down a bit, to the Hoover building. “I think it might be like fighting. It’s me. And keeping it tucked down, tied up, and tossed in the attic might not be the best way to deal with it. Learning how to control it, use it for something good… That might be important.”

Tony follows his eyes, and imagines the guys in there. “There’s a difference between knowing you’ve got some dark squirrely bits in there, and using them, and cruel for kicks. Sometimes those dark bits need to stay in the attic.”

“Maybe. Probably. Somehow I have a feeling that if all I do is verbally smack them on the wrists, this won’t really sink in. I need them ashamed. I need them looking in the mirror and not liking what looks back at them. I need to crush any lingering, ‘I did what I could,’ ‘Everyone else did it,’ ‘Letting things slip isn’t a big deal,’ kind of thoughts.”

“You sure?”

“No.”

“What do you want? What’s the win condition on this?”

“I want them gone! I can’t get that, so somehow I’ve got to turn these guys into people who do their jobs, all the time. I need them to understand that what we do has echoes bigger than they can possibly imagine.” Tim kicks a bunch of the glass aside, and sits down on the steps. Tony sits next to him, and hands him the last bite of the granola bar.

Tim’s still watching the building as he chews. “It never really hit his eyes, you know?”

Tony doesn’t know, but he can guess, so he nods.

“My Uncle Mike said that, too. He’d be screaming you out, words that make you want to die, really die, and it never hit his eyes. It was an act. A good one. One that hurt. But… he could have been buttering his toast for whatever was going on in his head.”

“Okay.”
“I’ve been thinking about that for the last few days. He had these people, and he couldn’t get rid of them. You’re on a tiny ship in Vietnam, and you’re stuck with whoever you’ve got. You can’t just dump ‘em and get new people. And your life depends on making them do what they’re supposed to do.”

Tony nods again.

“He couldn’t dump me, either.”

Tony puts a hand on Tim’s back. “Yeah, but his life didn’t depend on making you into a sailor.”

“I know. I don’t think he ever got the idea that not every problem is nail, so you don’t always need to bring out the hammer.”

Tony’s watching Tim, and he quietly says, “But you’re thinking it’s time to bring out the hammer?”

“I think I’m looking at a lot of nails.”

“A slap to the back of the head is a wakeup call.”

Tim nods at that. “Oh yeah. This is going to be the headslap of all headslaps, and once it’s done, it’s done. That’s the difference; I’m not doing this again. I don’t know if I can do this again. Right now, it looks like I’m going to have to slap more than six-hundred of these bastards.”

“Ziva said you may have a way to get rid of all of them.” He points to the building behind them. “Just leave this and get rid of them.”

Tim shrugs. “Maybe. If I fire all of them, the way I wanted, I may be able to win the court cases, and there’s my blank slate. Five years from now. You know as soon as I send out those pink slips my Union will have their pet judge give me an injunction requiring me to put a hold on that until they can take the case. And, especially, if it looks like I may win the case, they’ll toss up every pause they can find to drag it out forever. So, best case, I get them off my payroll before you retire, but not by much.

“Worst case, if I try to get rid of all of them, and fail, I’ve got nothing. There’ll be no reason for any of them to investigate anything they don’t feel like, ever again.

“If I surgically pick the ones I really want to get rid of, I can use the threat of getting rid of all of them to get rid of the worst of the bunch, and leave the ax hanging over the heads of the rest of them.”

“Thread the needle.”

“Yeah.” Tim swallows. “And if I can dig up enough stuff about the guys in our union and their finances, I may be able to get a wider definition of ‘cause’ the next time we renegotiate the contract and finally be able to start firing people for screwing up.”

Tony snorts at that. “Uh huh.” He leans back, staring at the sky. “You know, it never, ever occurred to me that Gibbs couldn’t fire us.”

Tim lifts his hands in a I didn’t know, either sort of way. “Never hit me, either. I was terrified of putting a toe out of line the first… five years… sure he’d slap that pink slip upside the back of my head, and life would be over.”

“Exactly.” Tony glances behind him, getting back to why they’re here. “Open up those windows,
light streams in… You go where the Declaration of Independence used to be. Get a stage or something, make sure you’re at least a bit taller than the rest of them.”

Tim’s nodding, he understands what Tony’s planning.

“I talked to Senior.” He takes a bit of paper out of his pocket, handing it to Tim. “This is the guy who makes the suit you want. You’re going to need to go to New York, though I suppose for the Director of the FBI’s Public Corruption Department he may come to you. And while you’re up there, you get shoes. Don’t put on a four thousand dollar suit and eighty dollar shoes. You get the tie, the pocket square, and the watch. The guy you’re pretending to be for this doesn’t wear a smart watch.”

Tim likes his watch, and more than that, he’s not feeling any desire to buy an expensive watch. “Think Senior’s got one I can borrow?”

“Probably, and if he doesn’t, Ducky does.” Tony looks behind them again. “It’s a shame they can’t smell it, you know?”

Tim nods along at that. “Yeah. It’s not exactly minty fresh in there, but it’s not…” Tim’s not even sure he could find the words to finish that sentence, capture the way DC smelled after the fires and before they got out, but he doesn’t need to. Tony was there; he knows.

“No, it’s not.”

“You really going to come watch?”

“You want me to?”

“Yeah. It’d be good to have someone in there who remembers Tim. Might need a headslap or two of my own when it’s done, just to get back into myself.”

“I got ya.” Tony stands up, and smiles. “You can always count on me to apply any headslaps you may need. Come on, let’s get that piece hammered back in place, and then I’m taking Ziva out to lunch.”

“I think she’ll appreciate that.”

As they’re hammering (with Tim’s crowbar, proving that just because the problem is a nail, that doesn’t mean you need a hammer) the plywood back into place, Tony says, “You know, the Pirates are doing well this year.”

Tim sort of nods while making an affirmative noise. That basically means he’s aware of the fact that the Pirates are a baseball team, and as such, they probably played some ball this year. Beyond that, he’s been clueless.

“Like, really well.”

Tim nods again.

“Earth to McBlivious. The Pirates. Gibbs’ favorite team, playing his favorite sport.”
“Right!” And the light begins to dawn. At least, Tim’s understanding why Tony might mention this.

“And here we are, in need of a bachelor party idea.”

And the sun crests the horizon, fully lighting up the sky in swirls of pinks and orange. Now, Tim fully sees the light.

“And if they were to get into the World Series…”

“Ah!” That sounds like a good plan to Tim, who, because he is not Fornell, has given no thought to what Gibbs’ bachelor party will look like. Then another thought hits, “Isn’t that, like, Halloween-time?”

“Yeah.”

“So, we go to Pittsburg, for what, a night, when we’ve got a not even month old baby at home?”

Tony’s starting to look a little worried. “When was the last time you did anything that wasn’t the job or your kids?”

Tim shrugs.

“Yeah, you need to unplug some. You’re getting so into this, you’re losing the wider world. Which means, in addition to taking Ziva and Dave out to lunch, you’re coming, too. Tim, you have access to a jet. We could leave at three, head up, have dinner, catch the game, and be home by midnight.”

Tim rubs his eyes. That’s a relevant point about the wider world. And then the narrow one comes crashing back into Tim. “And we’re talking about bringing Leon, too, right?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Who also has access to a jet, and unlike me, isn’t going to have a bunch of people watching him with a microscope for anything untoward, like using his jet access for a family party.”

“Okay, that’s a good point, I’ll talk to him. But you’re also proving my point about unplugging. So, if the Pirates hit the World Series?”

“Get the tickets.”

“And no matter what, this weekend and next weekend, you’re on a work-free zone, okay?”

Tim nods. “Okay.”

Tim gets to talk to Comey later that afternoon. It’s not a pleasant chat. There’s an air of finality about the whole thing. But he explains his plans for the Archives, and Comey nods along.

“We’re within fifteen employees of being done,” Tim says, getting the ball rolling.

Comey nods. “How many passed?”

Tim sighs. “Of seven hundred and twelve employees, I’d outright fire six hundred and thirty of them
if I could.”

Comey shakes his head, staring out of his window. He doesn’t have clear line of sight, but, if he did, less than half a mile down the road would be Congress, or what’s left of it.

“And given what you can do?”

“I’ve got at least twenty-two I’m going to put on leave immediately and attempt to prosecute. Tuesday we should wrap up with the review, and first thing on Wednesday I’m chatting with our legal department to get the ball rolling on them.”

“That’s six hundred and eight left.”

“There’s another thirty I will outright fire, and if the Union screams about it, I’ve… hopefully got an ace up my sleeve.”

“Do I want to know?”

Tim shakes his head.

“And even if I did, you wouldn’t tell.” Comey still hasn’t looked away from the window. Tim’s not entirely sure what he sees when he looks out there, but Tim knows what he sees, a lot of battered, blackened, plywood covered buildings.

This time Tim inclines his head in agreement.

“Five hundred and eighty-eight,” Comey adds.

“Yeah. Five hundred and eighty-eight employees I need to figuratively beat into shape. I’m hoping I can get at least half of them to resign.”

“Good luck.”

“You standing up there and falling on your sword will make it easier.”

“I imagine it will.” Comey’s voice is listless as he says that. Tim gets the idea that this really ending is sinking in for Comey, and he’s not sure what to do with himself as a result.

“What will you do after?”

Comey shrugs. “I’ve got subpoenas from Congress coming, so I can’t leave the country. Patty and I might go West. We haven’t been to the mountains in decades. I’d been telling her for years that I’d take more time off. I guess it’s time.”

“Yes, it is. Suggestions for your replacement?”

“I have several, but you don’t get to know about them ahead of time.”

“Lovely.” Tim’s voice is also flat. He’s not sure who he’s getting next, or if he’ll be able to work with him.

“They’re all straight arrows. You’ll be able to work with any of them who may get approved. They know who you are, and approve of what you’re doing. As long as the President goes along with someone from my list, you’ll be able to keep doing, as well as you can, what you’re doing.”

“Thank you.”
“So, when?” That’s the question all right. When…

Tim likes the poetry of October. He likes the idea of a year to the day. He loves the idea of all of his people stuck in some mostly wasted building, chilly, overworked, and stuck having to relive those twenty-four days.

He also knows that this is going to be, at best, emotionally difficult, and as he sees every time he looks at Breena’s due date count down, a certain little boy is supposed to show up sometime around October 5th, and the last thing Tim wants to do is miss that because he’s busy summoning up his inner asshole to go yell at other assholes.

No, when Donnie shows up, he wants all of this behind him. The wants The Director to be a memory when he’s snuggling their youngest boy, not something he’s dreading.

“First week of September. We’ll start then.”

Comey nods. That gives them two weeks.

“Send out the email calling them all in.”

On Friday, August 18th, 2017, almost every member of the FBI’s Public Corruption Unit gets an email telling them they are to report to the National Archives, September 1st, 9:00 AM. They are to bring at least a week’s worth of gear, and any leaves not covered under the Family and Medical Leave Act are cancelled.

Tim decides that anyone who lived in DC through last autumn is off the hook for punishment duty. They’ll get called in for the formal dressing down, but they won’t have to be on clean up duty. As Fornell put it, ‘They were here, McGee, nothing you can do to them will lay a glove on that.’

Tim figures Fornell is right about that.

Once he hits send on that email, he’s done for the week, and off for the weekend.

They can sweat it until Tuesday.

Chapter End Notes

And, I’m sure none of you will be shocked to hear that Amalgamated V WMATA is a real case. Technically it’s pending right now, but I’m jaded enough to assume that the courts will not overturn the decision of arbiters, who decided that not doing your job, even to the point of people dying because of it, is not grounds for termination.
The Fear of McGee: Props

Chapter Notes

Sorry it’s a bit late, so, instead of Merry Christmas, I’ll wish you all a Happy Boxing day, or just a good Monday if it’s not your celebration.

:) 

Tony was absolutely right. Tim’s not been doing a good enough job of unplugging. And he can feel that on Monday, when he gets back to it, after a weekend where he was really “off.”

He’s feeling a lot more human, much better rested, and much more firmly himself, than he has in a while, and he’s got the feeling he’s got to find a better anchor, some sort of touchstone he can access when he’s at work, because nothing about the job is going to be getting any easier soon.

But right now, he’s feeling pretty good, and about to go do some, at least marginally, fun, stuff.

Technically, today he’s ‘working,’ but he’s also ‘out of the office.’

He’s on his own until 11:00, then up to New York, where, apparently Senior’s waiting for him, along with Ducky, and between the two of them, they are going to make him look like the kind of guy who belongs in the four thousand dollar power suit.

(According to Tony, Senior’s been happily planning this for over a week now, looking like Professor Higgins about to get his hands on Eliza Doolittle. Tim’s not sure if he should be scared or relieved. He is pleased that Ducky intends to drop in for this, too.)

The first part of today is about setting the scene. As Tony said, if only they could smell it.

Tim’s not sure if he can get what he wants, but if anyone can do it, he knows the lady who can.

This is also, firmly, in the territory he’s comfortable with.

There’s only so fast a man can go through cologne. Tim thinks about some of the people he’s worked with, arrested, or been in the same room, or worse, car with over the years. People who had all but visible smell rays of cologne pouring off of them. Okay, there’s only so fast Tim will go through cologne. So, after that first spasm of getting every scent that looked fairly interesting to him, Tim settled down to use the ones he’s got.

Which means he’s set, cologne-wise, until roughly 2028. The girls might get him some new ones if they pique their interest, but he’s in no danger, at all, of running out.

So, he hasn’t been by to Janice’s perfume shop in the last year, but he’s looking forward to the trip.

She’s still in the same small boutique in a strip mall. Her main sales area is still small, still very clean, still doesn’t smell like much of anything. The only thing that’s really changed, that Tim can see, is
Janice has purple hair now.

“Hello Writer Cop,” Janice says to him as he looks everything over.

He smiles at her. “You really have a great memory for people.”

She waves that off. “So, what are we doing for you today?”

Tim heads to her glass counter. “I’ve got a few, odd, and very specific requests.”

That gets a grin out of Janice. “I like odd and specific.”

“Yeah, well, once you hear these you might think twice about that.”

“Intriguing.” She’s eying him up and down, trying to imagine what he might be about to ask for.

“I hope.”

“So…”

“Dead bodies.”

He is satisfied to see Janice blink at that.

“Yeah. I need eau de corpse, a lot of it.”

“Ehhhh…” She rubs her lips together, looking like she’s about to run away. “Well… Uh… What’s a lot?”

“Say, enough to make about 500 people feel like they’re going to choke on it.”

Now Janice is looking really horrified. She blinks a few more times, just staring at Tim, who’s trying to do his best, *I’m not a serial killer* expression. He’s fairly sure this isn’t going to get any further without some explanation from him. “Okay, without getting into the specifics… Were you in DC after everything went crazy last year?”

She shakes her head a bit, somewhere between a ‘yes’ nod and a ‘no’ shake. “Our apartment was in DC. We lucked out, were here when everything went crazy, and couldn’t get back in. At first, that was terrifying, and then as more time went on, and they put the barricades up, we were both thanking the Goddess that we’d stayed at the shop. As soon as they opened the borders, we went back, but only stayed for a day.”

Tim makes a compassionate sound, and then says, “Sorry. I was at the Navy Yard. Couldn’t get out for three weeks.” They share expressions of how fucked up that was, then Tim goes on, “Look, I’ve got a bunch of people who weren’t in DC, and I have to make what DC was like real for them. And I figure I can do pictures, and I can put up recordings, I can make them talk to survivors and clean up the mess, but until they can smell it, until it’s in their clothing and hair and skin, it won’t be real.”

She thinks about that, and finally says, “You’re right. But you’re not looking for eau de corpse. You’re looking for a layered scent. Dead bodies, yes. Smoke, too. It won’t be right without the smoke. Wood smoke, tire smoke, chemical smoke. Rotting trash. No pickup for weeks. Shit. In a lot of areas when the power cut out the water stopped working right, too, and that meant sewage got out of hand.”

“You offering to make it for me?”
She thinks about that. He can see her doing the mental calculations of how long it’ll take, and what she’ll need to make it, plus the hazard pay for having to subject herself to putting it together. “You have an expense account? ‘Cause this is going to make Thousand And One Nights look like that dollar a gallon ‘cologne’ you get at Walmart.”

He smiles. “Yeah. I do. And I’m going to need enough to make an area big enough for 500 people reek of it.”

“A few pounds should do it.”

“Good. That’s the first part,” Tim says.

“What’s the second part?”

“I’ve got your Lightning cologne, and that storm scent makes some people nervous.”

Janice seems pleased by that response. “It’s supposed to.”

“Can you make something to push that up a few notches? Something not just storm-like, but predatory, but also subtle enough that they don’t know what they’re smelling?”

She shakes her head. “I can get you two out of three. If you want to stick with subtle enough so they don’t know what they’re smelling, stay with Lightning. I can add animal musk, or other predator notes, but it’s going to very quickly get into an extremely distinct scent, one that people don’t usually wear. Pretty much, you’ll end up smelling like the big cat house at the zoo.”

Tim shakes his head. “Yeah, I don’t need that.”

“Can I ask why you want something that unsettles people?”

“On a very general level, because I need a lot of people to be unsettled.”

She flashes him an I’m not being nosy, I’ve got a point here look. “Unsettled, or scared?”

“Why?”

“It sounds like you want a bunch of people to feel pretty awful, and… there’s this thing you can do. You’d have to test it on yourself first, make sure it doesn’t freak you out, but… Infrasound. Sound waves around 20 hertz. You get that frequency, and people freak out. That’s the theory for why people feel cold spots, hear voices, see things moving out of the corners of their eyes. That’s the idea of what ghosts are. That sound, we can’t hear it, not really, but that’s what big cats growl at, and that’s the thrum of an oncoming earthquake or tsunami. We’re not aware of it, consciously, but for something like 25% of people, that’ll push their freak the fuck out buttons. It’s designed to make people, animals too, run away from it.”

Tim smiles. “That’s interesting. They think that’s what triggers ghost sightings?”

“It’s one of the ideas.”

“Huh…” He grabs his phone and writes a note for himself to research that further. “Yeah, I’m going to have to look into that.”

“You want people associating ghosts with you?”

He’s serious as he says, “I want people associating ghosts with not doing their jobs.”
“That’s likely the way to do it. Again, only works on some people, though.”

“Some people is better than none.” And Tim’s fairly sure that if he sticks five hundred plus people in a building that’s in as bad of shape as the Archives, lit only with the sun coming in from the front windows, hits them with that smell, and then makes some of them feel the heebie-jeebies, all the rest of them will, too.

---

Next stop of the day, New York City, except, of course, it’s not. The Five Burroughs and Long Island are now New York. To the North and West of him is North York, which given the shot to get free of (or rid of, depending on who you ask) it’s urban neighbor, it did.

Everyone seems to think they made out pretty well on that deal, but the dust hasn’t exactly settled, yet.

For Tim it means very little. The names may have changed but the layout still looks the same.

Like with his Miami trip, he’s deciding having someone else plan his travel is really nice. First off, once he was done with Janice, he hopped onto one of the FBI jets, and then, an hour later, he was at LaGuardia.

Not having to get to the airport two hours early, and then wait is rather nice.

Not having to strap himself into a Herc is even better.

Being able to sit down, comfortably, and actually work on a plane is fabulous.

Granted, he’s not loving the work. Janice handles his email, so he knows that the batch he’s looking at is just the cream of the crop. But as he’s scanning through the pile, he’s noticing a certain theme, along the lines of “WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU MEAN DROP EVERYTHING AND SHOW UP IN DC FOR A WEEK?”

He’s tempted to write a one line response, “Did I stutter?” and fire that off to all fifty-six of the emails asking him this.

He actually does write it, looks at it, smiles a bit, and then deletes it. Most of the people emailing him are ones he’s likely going to have to work with again.

So he writes another email, a professional email, making sure he’s got a firm, no BS tone, stating again that, unless you or your immediate family is in the hospital (and yes, he will be requiring a doctor’s notes), your butt better be in DC on the 1st, or the 2nd is your last day at the FBI.

He adds that everyone who needs to be there has gotten the email, and if (because there are some) one of your employees didn’t get the email, that’s perfectly okay, no that person was not overlooked. He/she just doesn’t need to be in DC.

Any cases being worked on need to be wrapped up by then, and if they can’t be, they are to be put on hold.

He gets one email he thinks is especially valid, where three of the people, fairly low on the totem pole of screw ups, are currently undercover, so he adds that anyone who is undercover can stay that
way, he’ll handle the issue with them when they’re back with the rest of the FBI.

The emails asking why they all need to get there, and what’s going to happen, he ignores.

The fall of DC hit everyone by surprise, and he’s not about to give these guys time to prep.

Ducky and Senior are waiting for him at LaGuardia.

Giving Ducky a ‘hello’ hug is easy. He doesn’t automatically fall into a hug with Senior, but he also doesn’t leave him with arms open wide, just waiting.

Once Tim steps back from Senior, he rubs his hands together, looking Tim up and down, smiles and says, “Oh, Tim, this is going to be fun.”

Ducky chuckles a bit at that, as Senior leads them through the crowds, toward his car. “And how is the ‘put the fear of McGee into them’ plan going, Timothy?”

Tim shrugs. “Well, maybe? I have the feeling I may be about to hit it out of the ballpark, or miss it completely, and I won’t know until I actually swing at the pitch.”

“You’re going to hit it out of the ballpark,” Senior says. “And we’re going to get you ready to do it. Junior says this isn’t your normal style…”

“I wear suits.”

“Not your normal management style,” Ducky adds.

Tim hadn’t thought about it like that, but, he’s right. “Yeah. If it’s up to me, I either find a way to nudge people into doing what I want them to do, ignore them and work around what they’re doing, or get rid of them.”

“The management style of the second or third-in-command,” Ducky says.

“Or the man with a small enough job he can do it by himself,” Senior adds.

“Yeah, probably. I’m afraid that if I use my usual ‘nudge them in the right direction’ technique, I’ll just get more of the same problem I’ve got now. The last time I took over a department, I was able to get the people I wanted to work with to stay with me by making it a better work environment, the ones who didn’t left, and the iffy ones, I was able to work around by creating that better work environment.”

“And that’s different than this time…” Senior leads.

“Yeah, the last group I got was about 150 people, and I’d say 100 of them were solid, twenty of them were iffy, and the other thirty were dead weight. I’ve got 700 people, and maybe 200 of them are iffy, and another 400 are dead weight, thirty of them are going no matter what, and twenty-two are going to jail. You can’t change a culture by letting your good people flourish when they’re outnumbered seven to one.”

“So, you wish to provide the proverbial slap to the back of the head,” Ducky says.

“A hard one. And, given how some of these guys behaved, I want the slap to the face, too.”
“That’s dangerous territory, Timothy,” Ducky says. “A wake up call is motivating. An insult…”

“Tim, you’ve got to let them save face,” Senior adds. “If you ever want to get anything out of them again…”

Ducky nods. “The headslap lets you know you’ve screwed up, but not so badly that you can’t recover from it. If they can’t recover, there’s no reason for them to ever try.”

Tim thinks about that, not entirely sure where that line is going to be. He’s not sure if some of them should ever be able to recover. “I’ll keep it in mind. Any concrete suggestions?”

Ducky shrugs. Senior nods to a car, it’s a black Lincoln, and a driver has just hopped out to open doors for them. Once they’re in, he says, “Make sure you talk to each one in person. That’ll give you a much better idea of if you need to go for the back of the head, or the face.”

“Thanks. So, where are we going?”

Brooklyn. They’re going to Brooklyn.

“Mr. Huong and I go way back. His father bought this building from my father, and for a few years we both worked on the crew.”

Tim still has a hard time wrapping his mind around the idea of Senior doing anything more strenuous than folding his money or seducing heiresses, but… he wasn’t born 80 years old, obviously he had to have a life before Tim knew him.

“How did Mr. Huong go from construction to tailoring?” Ducky asks.

“He was always a tailor. His whole family. However, during The Depression, the market for bespoke men’s clothing dried up. Huong Senior moved into construction. His sons did, too. It was the early fifties before he was able to scrape up enough money to reopen his shop. Once he had it running, and enough clients to keep the bills paid Mr. Huong left construction and went back to tailoring.”

“You’ve known this man for… sixty years, and you still call him Mr. Huong?” Tim asks.

“When you see him, you’ll understand. He was sixteen when I met him the first time, and he was still Mr. Huong back then. Granted, part of that was because a lot of men would call him Charlie, or Chink. That name was armor for him.”

Tim nods slowly and blinks. 1952, or whatever year, probably wasn’t too welcoming for a Chinese-American.

Senior’s old. No two ways about it. Ducky’s old, too. They’re both well past the point of pretending to be middle aged.

That said, Mr. Huong is ancient.
He can’t weigh more than a hundred pounds, if he’s got more than nine hairs on his head, Tim wouldn’t believe it, and his spine has started to curve, so his head comes to just a bit above Tim’s elbow.

But his eyes are bright and steady, and he moves easily. And, of course, he’s dressed impeccably.

“Mr. DiNozzo,” he says with a small nod and a tiny smile. Tim gets the sense that Mr. Huong likely doesn’t smile much, and that this is an effusive greeting, for him.

“Mr. Huong!” Senior’s voice booms, and he wraps Huong into a less than comfortable hug.

Once Senior lets go, Huong says, “You’ve brought friends.”

“I have. This fine gentleman is Ducky Mallard, and the young one is Timothy McGee.”

Huong focuses on Ducky first, which Tim figures is par for the course. Ducky’s older and gets more respect from any culture that values age. Then Huong turns to Tim, looking up at him, critically eyeing his outfit. “Is this what you normally wear?”

He’s in black jeans and a gray t-shirt. His computer and gear is in a go bag, draped over his shoulder. It’s August, and he’s not going into work. He didn’t see any need to pile on the clothing.

“It’s what I normally wear when I don’t go into the office.”

“It’s what you’re comfortable in?” Mr. Huong asks, still eyeing him.

“One version of it. I’m comfortable in most…” he stops at that, he might be making more of a statement than he wants to, “anything you’d be likely to make for me.”

Huong seems amused by the way Tim edited that comment, and a tiny smirk crosses his face. His eyes land on Tim’s wrist, but not the one with the cuff. “Your normal watch?”

“Only one I own.” It’s a navy blue Apple watch with the gold frame. “Tony… Junior… told me I should borrow a better one for what I want to do. And I’m going to need a recommendation for somewhere to get shoes.” Tim’s wearing sneakers right now. They’re very comfortable, but nothing about them says, Look upon my works and weep!

“You’ll need a tie, too?” Huong says.

“Probably a few of them. I’ve got to wear this get up for at least two weeks.”

Huong nods, and then, as if conjured by magic, two more men show up, and if Tim had to guess, they’re Huong Junior and Huong III.

Huong III gets to work measuring him, while Huong Junior takes pictures of him. Tim doesn’t remember that being standard suit getting procedure, but he doesn’t have much time to dwell on it.

“You work for the FBI, right?” Mr. Huong asks.

Tim nods. “Yeah. I think I need to look like the Archtypical G Man.”

Huong seems to think about that, while Senior says, “Think?”

“Yeah. I’ve got some very clear ideas of how a lot of this works, but that one… I’m less sure of. Do I need to be the platonic ideal of THE FBI or do I break the rules?”
Huong’s eyes flit to Tim’s wrist cuff, and the bit of tattoo he can see peeking from under his t-shirt sleeve. “Two weeks?”

“Yes.”

Huong nods again. “What color suits do you already own?”

“Black and dove gray.”

“How do you feel about vests?”

“My wife likes them. I like her liking them, but on my own I don’t much care.” Tim turns toward Senior and Ducky. “If I was writing it, I’d leave this bit blank. I’d just have, ‘puts on suit’ and let the reader fill in the blanks. So… I say ‘Jump,’ and I want them all to leap up shouting, ‘How high?’ what do I go for?”

“What’s your mental image of that?” Senior asks.

Tim has two images that pop into his head at that idea. “Not appropriate for this. It’s a naval uniform or a polo shirt under a jacket.”

Ducky seems amused by that answer.

“We could give you a more military cut,” Huong Junior says.

“No,” Tim replies. Even if that does up the ‘toe the line’ factor, he doesn’t need to be wearing anything that looks like a uniform. “I know that.”

“Wouldn’t look right,” Huong III says, and gets a tiny smile from his grandfather. “Doesn’t have the posture for it.”

“Thank you,” Tim replies.

“Slim cut, long, elegant lines. Draw the eye up your body, make you look even taller,” Mr. Huong says.

Tim smiles, amused by that. He supposes that if he looks even taller, he’ll be somewhere in skyscraper territory for Mr. Huong.

“The traditional power suit is navy blue or charcoal gray,” Senior says. “That’s the ‘do not mess with me, I’m about to destroy your business with a merger you don’t see coming’ look. But, by traditional, I mean, it’s what Ducky or I would wear. Perhaps you don’t need to go for such a… traditional look.”

“At least, not for the whole time,” Ducky adds. “Begin with the classic suit.” Ducky eyes Tim. He’s never spent any time thinking about what colors might flatter Tim, but he is now. “Charcoal, not navy blue. Start with the crisp white shirt and the maroon tie. The classic image. And from there, begin to make it your own.”

Tim nods at that, he likes that idea.

Huong Junior has left, and comes back a moment later with a book of fabrics. Tim associated those with buying furniture, but apparently this is also something for suits, too.

“Some of our younger, less classic clients prefer a vibrant pattern,” Huong says as his son shows off the fabrics.
Vibrant is right. These are retina thrashers. Tim’s looking through a collection of colors and patterns, that, were they not being handed to him in a tailor’s shop, he would have thought were supposed to be furniture. He supposes, maybe, some of them, might, possibly, be in the running for a suit… Assuming that suit was for a Louis the XIV cosplay.

Tim rubs his lips and chin. “I’m not that adventuresome.”

Ducky laughs, and Mr. Huong flashes that tiny smile again.

“Oh, so one in basic charcoal gray. I’m good with that. No vest on that one.” Because in his mental image, a power suit doesn’t have a vest. “How about medium gray with some sort of pinstripe?”

Huong Junior heads to the back again, and returns with another book of fabrics. Everything in this is gray, ranging from, the only reason he knows it’s not white is because it’s in the book, to the only reason he knows it’s not black is because it’s in the book.

Tim flips through it, trying to imagine a full suit of any of these. He comes to a few conclusions. A: He likes his pinstripes not all that much wider than a pin. If it’s bigger than his finger, he doesn’t want it on his suit. B: No checks. Hounds tooth may be great for Ducky, but not on him. C: Classic charcoal gray doesn’t have to be just one color.

There’s a tight pattern of small squares. Tim supposes it might be sort of plaid-like, other than the fact that there’s only the two colors and they’re charcoal gray and slightly lighter charcoal gray.

“Oh, this is for the classic suit.”

Another fabric seems to jump up at him. It’s not “classic.” It’s probably not something too many guys would get, but…

“This one for the not-classic look. With a vest.”

Mr. Huong seems to approve. It’s a medium gray with a slender pinstripe in a soft, dusty jade green that looks a lot like Tim’s eyes. Tim’s fairly sure it’s not a traditional suit fabric, but he doesn’t much care. This one can look like him.

Or a version of him. Maybe he wears the charcoal on the days he meets with the ones getting their faces slapped, and he wears this one on the days when he’s slapping the backs of heads… Different looks for different effects… He can see that.

“How are you set for shirts?” Huong Junior asks.

“I’ve got more than enough, I do need good ties, and handkerchiefs, and… whatever else.”

Mr. Huong seems doubtful about Tim’s shirt situation, but he’s not willing to challenge him on it. He does shoot a pointed look at Senior.

“Timothy, do you have anything with French cuffs?”

Tim thinks about that. “No.”

Senior and Mr. Huong share a look, and a nod. And without a word being spoken, Tim’s fairly certain he’s getting some shirts, too.

Ducky’s been wandering around the shop, looking over the ties and other accessories. The suits may
be made bespoke here, but the ties aren’t.

After a moment, Ducky’s back with four of them, maroon with a navy diagonal stripe, an emerald and gold paisley, cobalt with tiny navy checks, and black with a jade diagonal stripe. There’s also a bowtie.

Ducky smiles up at him, as he offers that, and Tim shakes his head. He cannot imagining himself in a bowtie. Maybe Jimmy, but not him. “But if you want it for you, I’ve got nothing against buying early Christmas presents.”

Ducky chuckles and puts the bowtie back. Though a moment later, Tim does notice him grabbing a different one, this one a dusty gold color with what appears to be small maroon elephants on it.

Mr. Huong circles around Tim a few times, eyeing him. “Normally, I wouldn’t suggest this, because there’s something about a clean shaven man, but…”

Senior’s got it and is starting to nod. “Haircut, too.”

“Yes. Mr. McGee, you have a very young face, and you’re also wearing a young haircut. Which is, in most cases, perfectly fine. But you’re about to make sure that everyone in the room knows you are at the top of the pecking order, and looking a bit older would help.”

Tim inclines his head, he figures Huong isn’t wrong about that. He does run his fingers through his hair. Abby and Breena, and (maybe) Jimmy like it on the longer side, and it’s really only gotten back to where it was before he shaved it all off last year.

But, unlike the last time he buzzed his hair almost all the way off, his face isn’t nearly as round as it was, so he didn’t look nearly as much like a fluffy cue ball as it grew back in. Shorter hair didn’t look stupid, and maybe if someone who knew what they were doing were to get a hold of his head…

“A good haircut, and in your case, growing out a goatee or beard would likely help you to look older,” Mr. Huong says.

“The few times I’ve seen you wear one, I thought it made you look older, too,” Ducky adds.

Tim doesn’t like the idea of growing the goatee again. Though, as he thinks about it, part of not liking it was having everything with the *Stennis* associated with that look. That’s the face he was wearing when The Admiral won.

But he’s not winning any more.

And if it helps…

Another layer of this hits. If he cuts his hair, he can’t change that quickly. He’ll still look like The Director when this is done. If he grows the goatee, and… fills in his eyebrow… once he’s done, he can peel The Director off of his face and go back to being Tim.

He likes that idea, a lot.

There’s not much left to do at that point. He’s measured. The styles for the suits have been picked. The fabrics chosen. Ties and pocket squares purchased. Supposedly, at the end of the week Huong III will join him in DC with the roughed out suit, and once the fit’s been fine tuned, the pieces will be sent to Hong Kong, fully assembled, and sent back to his door.
He should have everything by August 29th.

Tim’s not shocked that Senior has a barber. He’s less shocked that the man is able to get them in on short notice. He is surprised to see the gentleman in question is somewhere in his early thirties, apparently specializes in hot towel shaves, and does not appear to own a pair of scissors.

Tim asks about that, because he can see the man has some sort of small holster on his hip, and there’s what looks like half a pair of scissors sticking out of that. His name is Henry Mack, and he not only isn’t Mr. Mack, he may have never heard of the term Mister before. He takes the razor out of his holster and whips it around his finger.

“Razor cuts, Tim. More control, more precision, and, well, you feel like a total badass wielding a straight edge.”

Tim imagines that’s so. And Senior happily smirks at the idea, while he and Ducky chat about there’s nothing like a proper hot towel shave.

Tim’s somewhat intrigued to attempt that as well, but A: he’s growing out his facial hair, and for him, every day counts, and B: he’s getting low on time as it is.

Mack’s got Tim in the barber’s chair. He’s running his fingers through Tim’s hair, playing with it a little, and if one of his loves was doing this, Tim would think it feels pretty good. Okay, even with a stranger doing it, it feels pretty good. It would feel better if Abby or Breena or Jimmy were doing it.

“So, what are you thinking?” Mack asks.

“Older,” Senior says.

Mack nods. “Yeah, your current cut isn’t helping with that, at all. This almost has a nineties kid surfer vibe going to it.”

Tim shrugs at that, too. He was a nineties kid, and actually, back then, his hair did look a bit like this, only he wore it a few inches longer back then, and at least these days, his hair doesn’t have any natural blonde in it any more.

“You don’t use any product in it, do you?” Mack asks.

“Right now, gravity does the job. Sometimes when I’m going out, I put a little gel on my fingers and mess it up.”

Mack fluffs his hair a little more, nodding again. “You don’t have much shaping in this. It kind of looks like someone cut all of your hair off and just let it grow for a year.”

Tim glances up at Mack in the mirror. “Ten months.”

“Oh.” Mack swallows, and it’s clear he doesn’t want to know why Tim lost all of his hair, and Tim’s not feeling like telling. “Well, I’m thinking, how about we give you something that’ll make you look a bit older, but not old. Want to keep some edge to this. So, shorter all over, but much shorter on the sides, a bit shorter on top, I’ll show you how to use a little styling wax to give you some lift. If you want to be more clean cut, you can just comb it down and let it dry, and when you want more height,
you fluff it up.”

“Sure. Go for it.”

And Mack does.

Tim holds very still. Yes, Mack gets a plus 17,000 on his BadAss score, whipping several inches of bare steel all around Tim’s head, but Tim’s afraid he’s going to sneeze and end up like VanGogh.

By the time he’s done, Tim’s not sure if he looks older, but, he probably looks cooler. He doubts either of his ladies will complain about his hair. (He knows Jimmy won’t. He’s not entirely sure Jimmy will, on his own, notice that he got a haircut.)

And, looking at it, he can imagine himself in the suit, and with the goatee, and… Again, maybe not older, but colder, and he flashes his ‘hard’ look at the mirror, more stern. He’s certainly got that going.

Any traces of Probie McGee are gone from his face now, and with a bit more work, Tim should start to blend into The Director.

---

They wrap the day on the last details, the shoes. (Apparently Senior has a shoe broker, which is A: Something Tim didn’t know existed until today, and B: Involves shoes that cost more than his car payment. None of those shoes are going home with him.) He does have some very nice Cole Haans now.

He’s got a pair of good cufflinks. They aren’t platinum like Perce Masters’, but they are small circles of silver around black enamel. And maybe they aren’t the most traditionally “Boss” looking piece of an outfit ever, but they go with his wedding ring and cuff, both of which aren’t going anywhere for this.

And, with that, Tim’s back on the FBI jet, heading toward DC.

---

In the air, Tim can work. He’s got even more nervous emails in his inbox, many of which involve people crying about their vacations, family reunions, and in one case wedding, that are all set to go during the time he wants them in DC.

Sucks to be you. Tim thinks while writing his, “You can bump your plans, or you can resign. Take your pick” email.

Once he’s done that, he shuts his computer, and watches… Probably Philadelphia, it’s big and gray and looks like a city, below him.

“Did you think you did enough…” Comey asked something like that.

He did what he could. He’s at peace with that. These days he knows, not just thinks, that he did everything he could have done.

“Was it worth it?” That’s the question that keeps echoing through him.

Most of the time, the Navy Yard, and what he did there, is far away. It’s buried back in his head, and
it can stay there, resting in… not peace, but not torment, either.

But right now, watching whichever city it is passing under him, it’s not far under the surface.

It’s been almost a year. D…SC is… better. But it’s not back to where it was, and it likely won’t ever get back to where it was. He shakes his head; Jarvis and Co. could rebuild it perfectly. They could put everything back the way it was, and it wouldn’t matter. It wouldn’t be the same because no one can rebuild the people.

He glances up at the ceiling of the jet, and then closes his eyes. He’s here, literally, here, right this second because of someone who isn’t in DC anymore. Someone who might not be on Earth, any more.

*Was it worth it?*

He opens his computer back up, and begins to google. He’s done his best to not find out how much it cost. He’s intentionally faded out when Diane is chatting about what she’s doing, and Jimmy and Breena and Allan didn’t tell him how many people they processed.

There’s no final count, not yet. It’s been ten and a half months, and they’ve still got missing people. They’re still pulling bodies out of the rubble, and they still don’t have a final figure for what rebuilding will cost.

But they’ve got estimates.

6,428 people died. Maybe. That’s how many they’ve counted.

19,478 are still listed as missing.

200,000 refugees are still ‘displaced,’ living somewhere else in the US, unable to get back to SC because they don’t have the funds for it, or there’s still nowhere for them to go back to.

Diane went up to New York, talked to Congress about the need for emergency funds. She explained how much the cleanup may cost, and how much they’d gotten through ‘creative financing’. Her best guess figure, which she stated was likely too low, was 108 billion dollars. Fifty billion of which, they’re still scrambling for.

*Was it worth it?*

Tim’s seen ‘BTFSTTG’ on different chat rooms and social media posts. Burn This Fucking Shit To The Ground. Basic enough statement. Can’t work for Federal Law Enforcement and not, at least occasionally, run into someone who thinks that’s a great plan.


Some of it literally, all of it figuratively.

*Was it worth it?*

He’s looking at a new city coming up on his horizon. Baltimore, probably. They’ll be over SC soon enough.

There are images that he’s done his best to kill. Things he doesn’t need in his mind, not on any regular basis. All of them are from his time on the roof, in the Navy Yard.

He can still feel it, if he lets himself. Lying on his stomach, shoulders sore, elbows rubbed raw from
supporting his weight hour after hour, the dull pressure of the scope against his left eye.

Jarvis tossed the MRE at him, and he remembers gobbling it down. “If we’re gonna kill for it, we might as well eat it.” Something like that. He ripped it open, grabbing with his fingers, shoving the food in as fast as he could. He still doesn’t know what it was. He didn’t then. He doesn’t now.

He remembers feeling embarrassed to be gobbling it down. And then worse, more shame, he threw it up. People were starving, he had food, a little at least, and he immediately threw it up. He wasted it.

And then the mob was on them.

There was a man with a snow plow on his truck. Red Ford F-450. Big damn thing. He’d probably been a contractor or something. The truck, and the blade were big enough, powerful enough, that it could have broken their perimeter. It could have pushed those cars out of the way.

And it’s not like the cars were a solid wall or anything, but they slowed the mob down. Tangled them up, made them easier to hit.

Tim doesn’t know if his bullet did it. And it doesn’t matter, he aimed, he pulled the trigger, and the man driving the truck died.

Molotov cocktails. Little flickers of light and smoke in the crowd. Tim would aim for them. Maybe he hit them, maybe he didn’t. But that’s what he’d look for. Burning gasoline would do more damage than any one, or ten even, people. So he’d shoot for them.

6,428 people. He figures at least thirty of them are directly on him.

He doesn’t want to think about how many of them are indirectly on him. All the people who were hiding out in the IRS building, or the EPA, or any of the other buildings that weren’t properly hardened.

Those people were there because he’s the guy who sent out the note, telling them to get into them, thinking it’d be safer in a building filled with armed men than outside in the city.

For some of them, they were.

Was it worth it?

He licks his lips, DC is coming up. From the air, as the sun’s setting, it looks fairly close to normal. But it’s not. And as the jet descends, he can see, more and more clearly, exactly how not normal it is. The sunlight flees, and I-95, which should be a parking lot filled with lights, is just zipping along, a few lights glowing as they move from wherever work was back to home.

Was it worth it?

He lays his hands on his laptop and quietly says, “Only if something changes because of it.”

If everything stays the same, or if they just rearrange the chairs to make everything look a little prettier, then it wasn’t worth it. If the same people stay in the same positions, making the same decisions, then it didn’t matter.

His jaw tightens. He’s going to change this, or he’s out. If he can’t wipe the slate clean, then this isn’t worth it. He’ll write novels, and take care of kids, and that’ll be it. He can’t stay on just to make things look good. He won’t stick around to put his fingers in the cracks in the dyke. Either they rebuild, for real, or it wasn’t worth it.
And if he’s got to be hard, and angry, and cruel. If he’s got to pull shit to get shit done…

6,428 dead.

He’ll be atoning his whole life for that, so two damn weeks of *The Director*…

Shouldn’t even be worth thinking about.

But it is.
When Tim got back from the *Stennis*, Abby shaved off his goatee, and Tim said he was never growing it back again.

So much for that. *Rule… 72? Something like that. Rarely ever say never.* Tim thinks as he brushes his teeth and gets ready for at least a week of Fornell making cracks about him forgetting to shave.

He glances at his razor. And then makes himself not reach for it. Part of this is encouraging more of a line between him and *The Director*. As soon as he’s done with this, he can scrape it back off his face, and not have to see *The Director* in the mirror.

He has a feeling that’s going to be important when this is done.

---

Tim is not nervous when he gets in on Monday morning, and Jennifer tells him Comey’s called and wants him upstairs as soon as he gets in.

Curious, certainly. Defensive, yes, there’s some of that, too.

Mostly, he’s feeling, as he climbs the stairs… fatalistic. That’s probably it. The rest of the FBI and the Feds probably looked at what he wanted to do, said, ‘Fuck this!’ and he’s about to get the ax. They’re inching toward putting everything into motion, but if Comey calls a halt now, nothing will really change. They’re less than a week from the drop dead point, the moment where they can’t change or go back.

So, as he climbs the last step to Comey’s floor, he’s got his ‘If that’s how you feel, here’s my resignation,’ speech in his head.

As he opens the door, and Comey’s secretary gives his nice black jeans, scarlet button down, and leather jacket the side eye, a snarky, *You couldn’t have done this before I spent the eight grand on clothing for this?* pops into his head.

He smirks, grimly at that. At least he’ll still be able to wear the new goodies. (Maybe to interview for whatever the next job is. Though he’s fairly sure Manner would take him on for CrimeWeb, as a programmer if nothing else, in a heartbeat.) This won’t be like bringing in his first really good jacket to NCIS, and having Abby cut it apart literally the third time he got to wear it.

“Director,” Tim says, entering Comey’s office.

“Hey, Tim.” Comey’s at his desk, typing away, fast. He nods to the door, so Tim closes it. Comey stands up, grabs a large folder, which has Tim’s attention, because he knows what goes into a folder like that. Warrants. Comey looks back at his computer. ‘I’m… working on my resignation speech. And… If this is going to matter, and it’s got to matter, it’s got to be more than just making things look good. Anyway, my last, or almost last, project as the Director of the FBI, is greenlighting a full-on investigation of ourselves, anyone we work with, our suppliers, our union reps… If we do business with them,” he hands over the folder, “you’ve got authorization to check into them.”

Tim opens the folder. It’s a Congressional Warrant. From the very quick skimming he’s doing, it
looks like he’s got authorization to investigate *everything* the FBI does.

A massive grin spreads over Tim’s face. “I’d kiss you if I weren’t so married.”

Comey smiles at that, just a little, before saying, “And I’d duck even if I weren’t. Start with Public Corruption, next up, Internal Affairs, and then… Top to bottom. We clean house before we start trying to clean anything else up.”

Tim nods, looking Comey in the eyes. “I will.” He’s also rapidly coming to the conclusion that cleaning up the FBI first will give him the time to get his computer systems in place, before he moves onto the outside world. Yet another reason to want to kiss Comey!

“Good. How’s the show going?” Comey asks.

Tim smiles a bit, and Comey gestures to a seat. Tim nods, realizing he’s been invited to take a while to explain the deal. So, he does.

---

If this plan is going to be real, and if it’s going to work, Tim needs a few more players.

And he needs to delegate.

He sighs. He’s got this gorgeous new warrant in his hand, and he *really* wants to use it. He’s itching to go out and start digging into personal lives, finances, connections, and all the little niggly bits.

As soon as he got it, he had some ideas of what was going to happen next. Namely, he kept running headfirst into the fact that A: He is going to have issues with his Union soon. B: His Union does not, technically, work for the government, so he didn’t have a free pass to investigate whatever he liked with them. And C: Without that free pass, the power differential is significantly stacked in *their* favor.

But now. He grins, sunshine pouring off of him as he heads to his office; he’s got the freedom to go fishing. Oh, and how he wants to fish. He’s got the image of the new pole in his hands, bait next to him, and the perfect cast, all of it bright and shiny in his head.

Which stops him.

He’s supposed to go after people for breaking the law. He’s supposed to have a crime, investigate that crime, and then follow the evidence to the person or people who committed that crime. He’s not supposed to go fishing, hoping people have broken the law, so that it’s easier for him to do his own job.

After all, what’s he going to do if he finds his Union is hip deep in crap? Pretend they’re not if they look the other way when he starts firing people?

Those ethics courses back at FLETC are no match for moments like this.

*Shit.*
“I’ve got goodies!” Tim says as he heads into his office, wiggling the folder.

Everyone at his table, except for Burke, recognizes what’s in his hand.

“Who’s it for?” Ziva asks.

“Congressional Warrant, for everyone who works with, for, or near for that matter, the FBI. We are cleaning house, and now we’ve got the right to go looking for dirt.”

He flicks it to the center of the table, turns to his big screen, and feels a desire to grab a clicker. He has one, but he doesn’t have pictures or anything up and ready.

“You remember a while back when I suggested we needed to look into our Union?” Tim asks, specifically Fornell and Gibbs, but the rest of the crew knows it’s an issue.

That gets nods.

Tim glances at the warrants. “Have at it.”

“What are we looking for, McGee?” Burke asks.

“Right now, anything. I know less-than-scrupulous compliance with election finance laws is awfully common, so start there. September 1st, everyone is coming in, so anything you can find by August 27th, I need.”

“That’s not a lot of time, McGee,” Fornell says.

“I know. Less than I’d like, but… We’ll need it by then, make sure we’ve got our cases begun, and then by the 1st, I want whoever we can grab, in jail.”

“We’re going to prosecute?” Ziva asks.

Tim nods. “Yes. And if that means they dig in their heels and fight us, then they fight, but… We’re cleaning house. Top to bottom. I’m… almost hopeful that I can get them on tape, trying to barter them complying with what I want to do for us not prosecuting.”

“What will you do with that?” Burke asks.

Tim smiles. “I’ll admit, I’m not entirely sure if that’s illegal. But if they try it, I’ll call it a bribe and toss whoever I’m talking to into jail. Then, it’s sunshine time. Let everyone see who represents them.”

Gibbs, who’s been quietly watching this, smiles. “Come on, Tobias, let’s go make some calls.”

Fornell nods. He knows exactly who they need to talk to, first.

“Who are we talking to?” Gibbs asks as they head to the parking garage below the FBI building. This is very much not making a call, but Fornell’s the one who’s worked for the FBI for more than twenty-five years, so Gibbs is filing this under Rule 38: your case, your lead.

“Friend of a friend of a…” Fornell shakes his head. This is Gibbs he’s talking to. “Remember how
many cases I worked undercover in the Mob for?”

“Of course.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t do that and not get to know some people, and… Okay, I’m not proud of this, but… Sometime everything worked better if information could flow smoothly, so…”

“You made some friends?” Gibbs doesn’t look like he likes that, but… Over the years, he’s certainly made a friend or two, as well.

Fornell nods, clicking open the lock on his door. “I made some friends. They’re, like me, retired. But they know who’s who. So, I give them the occasional tip. They give me the occasional tip. Nothing big. Nothing that would make either of our higher ups annoyed. Just enough so that… if we need an in, especially for something like this, the lines of communications are open.”

“I really don’t want to know, do I?” Gibbs replies, sitting in the passenger seat.

Fornell smirks, turning on the ignition. “Well, maybe a few years ago, back when Borin wasn’t on your radar, you might have wanted to know. Now…” Fornell takes off his wedding ring and rubs his ring finger to make it look like the other ones. “You remember how to flirt?”

“You think I forgot?”

“I’m not sure you ever knew.”

Gibbs sighs. “How old are these ‘friends?’”

Fornell chews his lips. “Remember that thing DiNozzo said about turkey buzzards? They still like meat, but can’t hunt?”

“Oh God… Are we going to a nursing home?”

Fornell smiles. “It’s a retirement community, Jethro. And these ladies love their little boys, and want them to be successful, and out of prison. So…”

Gibbs looks to the ceiling and shakes his head.

While Gibbs and Fornell go shake up whoever it is they’re going to shake up (Tim decides that if he knows, he’s going to want to go along, and if he goes along, he’s not doing the seventy other things he needs to get done) Tim gets to the next task on the list.

That spokesperson.

He’s had a list of headshots and resumes, all sitting around, but… It’s not like he’s had the time to go through them.

But, he’s fairly certain that when Comey resigns, that’s going to be a bomb, and if he wants to control where it goes off, what damage it does, and to whom, he needs someone to shape and produce this message.

And unless he wants it to be him…
Tim actually does think about that for a good minute. No one, literally, has a better understanding of how he wants this to work than he does. But, as he thinks about it, if he’s the one managing the press, he’s not the one managing everything else.

So, this person. When he talked to Jennifer about it, he explained, in vague terms, who he was looking for. A fifty-ish, white/gray haired-woman. Kind of like Jill Stein. Experience was a plus. But, for the right look, voice, and manners, he’d take no experience.

She did whatever it is she does, and over the next few weeks a collection of video clips and CVs wandered into his email folder.

“Want to watch some video with me?” he asks Ziva and Burke. Extra opinions are good things.

“What are we watching?” Burke asks.

“Spokespeople,” Tim replies. “I need a press secretary, and this is the list of potentials.” He gets the first of the video clips going.

“What exactly are we looking for, Tim?” Ziva asks.

“Dependable, trustworthy, honest…”

“Female Gibbs?” Ziva says with a smile. She also knows about Tim’s mental image of this person, and she put together his ‘ideal’ with his reality a lot faster than Tim did.

Tim closes his eyes and sighs, a little. Then he looks up, and nods. “It’s that NCIS ad campaign, isn’t it?”

Ziva smiles back at him. “Trustworthy, integrity, reliability…”

Burke’s got the question on her face.

“A while back, at NCIS we were looking for a new spokesmodel. Someone to go on the recruiting posters. My husband was the first one they picked, because he is very handsome. And he…”

Tim’s chuckling at this. “He’s not unaware of being attractive, and back then, that pretty much was his favorite thing about himself. He was being an insufferable twit. ‘Make sure the light is right.’ ‘Get this side.’ ‘Oh, how about right here? This is where the best light is!’”

Ziva spreads her hands wide. She won’t say she agrees, but she isn’t disagreeing either. “He was eagerly awaiting the results of his photoshoot, but the photographer kept putting him off.”

“Turns out, since Gibbs sat across the office from Tony, the photographer had seen him, and decided that he had more of ‘the look’ that NCIS wanted. So he snapped a few shots, and put Gibbs on the brochures, and, yeah, the tagline was something like: Honor and Integrity.”

“Something like that,” Ziva adds.

“Apparently, I internalized that. Because, yes, my mental image pretty much is female Gibbs with some manners and the ability to talk on her feet.”

“Not a bad image to have,” Ziva adds. “Let us see who we have to go with it.”

And so, they watch.

She’s the third woman they see. And Tim just knows. And he can see from the look on Ziva and
Burke’s face that they know it, too.

She’s not beautiful and likely never was. Handsome: that’s the word that springs to mind. Her features are broad, wide eyes and wide lips, but more perfectly symmetrical than he’s ever seen in a real person before. She’s… it’s hard to tell, this is a video, but probably tall, with Marine straight posture, close cropped steel gray hair, and the ability to rock a pants suit.

Tim’s guessing she has at least one African American grandparent from the tight curl of her hair, but her skin is a color light enough that if her hair was long and straight, especially with her green eyes, he’d just assume she was tan.

And she is perfect. Her voice is soft but commanding, the kind of tone that just makes people pay attention. Tim thinks there might be a hint of New Orleans in her speech, but he’s not good enough with accents to know for sure. She smiles easily enough to look relaxed and comfortable with the press, but there’s enough seriousness in her face that she can’t be easily discounted.

Tim pauses the video, and looks to Ziva and Burke. “That’s her, isn’t it?”

Ziva’s nodding.

Burke adds, “Make sure to see her live, but if she can do this unscripted, yes, that’s exactly who you want.”

Tim hops out of his office to find Jennifer. “Hey,” he says to her as she’s beating his email pile into submission, “Vivianne LaCroix, can you get her in here, the sooner the better?”

“I can do that,” Jennifer replies, glad to see him getting another piece of the team into place.

“Thanks!”

“Mrs. D!” Tobias says with a lot of enthusiasm, and a lot more of his New York accent than he normally uses as he and Gibbs walk into the sun room in the “assisted living center” at Bloomsworth Retirement Community.

Mrs. D is at least eighty-seven, surrounded by a collection of other octogenarian women, most of them in wheelchairs, all of them in outfits Gibbs would refer to as ‘flashy’ and ‘polyester,’ though he has no idea what the fabric may actually be. They’re all wearing makeup, and their hair is done, and they’ve got flashy jewelry on fingers and around necks, and several of them have bedazzled glasses frames, too.

It’s a sparkly group.

And they LOVE Fornell.

“Toby!” Mrs. D comes back with, gesturing him close for an enthusiastic hug. “What brings you down here?”

Fornell drags a chair over, as the other ladies also wheel themselves in closer. “I can’t just visit?”

She looks at the other ladies, eyes bright. “He says, like he ‘just visits.’ Have you ever ‘just visited?’”

“I keep meaning to.”
“Uh huh.” She and the ladies share a look. “We hear versions of that, a lot. What’s going on, Toby?”

“You been paying attention to the outside world?”

“Do I look like I want to be depressed?” Mrs. D says, hands gesturing with each word.

“No.”

“I hear enough about that from my grandsons and their sons.”

“Great. Well…”

“Who’s your friend?” another one of the women has wheeled herself up to Gibbs, looking up at him through black framed cat eye glasses that put Jethro firmly in mind of the ‘60s. “Fine, tall fella.”

“This is Jethro, Mrs. R.”

“Jethro…” He smiles down at her. “You can call me, Maria.”

Tobias takes over. “He could, but four of you are named Maria. The only way to tell you apart is by your last names.” He starts introducing Jethro. “That’s Mrs. R, Mrs. J, Mrs. D, Mrs. P, and in the sunny patch by the window, that’s Ms. A.”

Jethro nods. “Pleased to meet all of you.” He pulls out the bag he’s been holding behind his back, and the reason why this trip took five hours.

The ladies see the name on the bag, and their eyes perk up.

“You’re a good boy, Toby,” Mrs. J says.

Jethro hands over the cannoli. Once they got out of DC, he drove. Tobias navigated. Add that to the use of their flashers, and they were able to get up to East Hanover, home of the single best Italian American bakery on earth, according to the ladies around them, and pick up a few dozen cannoli, in under four hours.

Mrs. D, happily chewing away, gets them back on track. “Not that we mind the company…”

“Or the cannoli!” Mrs R, adds.

“But you don’t come just to visit, Toby.”

He inclines his head.

“Whaddaya need?” Ms. A, who had been quiet until now, asks.

“I always bring presents when I come, right?” Tobias says.

“That’s how this works,” Mrs. D adds.

“So, here’s the present. The FBI is doing some spring cleaning. Top to bottom.” The Ladies in this group are sharp. They don’t need any more heads up that than. Jethro, seeing the looks on their faces, is figuring that in the next week, a decent number of people are going to cease engaging with the FBI.

“And the present you want in return?” Mrs. R asks, eyes sharp.
“I need to know who you’ve got in our Union.”

The ladies all glance at each other. There’s a long moment of what appears to be silent confabbing. Then Mrs. J says, “My granddaughter, Maria, her husband, Robbie, he’s got a cousin, Sal, and Sal would know.”

Fornell kisses Mrs. J on the cheek. “You have Sal’s number?”

“No, but Maria does. She’ll get it for me, and I’ll get it for you.”

“Thank you, ladies.”

“How do you feel about second chances?” Karningham asks Tim. Because, of course, in the midst of all of this, Karningham is delivering his plans for how the Black Hat team will work. So far, Tim approves of what he’s seeing. He especially approves of the fact that every member of Team Black Hat will, at random, be assigned to review the work and caseload of another member, every season.

“Uh…” He’s fairly sure that Karningham can’t know about Kahn. There’s no way he knows who he really is. That said, though, he’s not sure who else Walter could be talking about. “I’d say, in general I believe in them. Probably depend on what sort of second chance we’re talking about.”

“I’ve got a guy for your White Hats. Probably. I haven’t talked to him, yet, figured I’d send it by you, first.”

“Well, send him by me. Who are we talking about?”

“His name is Aaron Hotchner. He used to be part of the BAU—“

“Team Brain-bleach.” Ever since Lecter went back on the radar, Tim’s been getting little heads ups from the BAU, and he’s awfully glad he doesn’t work for them.

“That’s a way of putting it.”

“Used?” Tim asks. He’s wondering why that’s past tense.

“Last fall, he just up and left. Everything seemed like normal and then… poof, gone. They checked in enough to make sure he was okay, and he was. He just hit his limit. Then everything went insane, and he fell off the radar.”

“You think he might want to come back?”

“He was an exceptional team leader. Sharp, bright, organized, good at motivating people. But, honestly, I think there should be a time limit on how long you can stay at the BAU. That place eats people alive, and he was there too long.

“However, I think cases where people don’t kill his ex-wife while he’s on the phone with her,” Tim full body winces at that, “might appeal to him, and if we can get him back, you want him.”

“Float the idea past him. If he’s interested, have him make an appointment with me.”

“Thanks.” Walter glances at the computer in front of him, that Tim’s been checking his plans for Team Black Hat on. “So…”
Tim nods. “Yeah. Congratulations Mr. Karningham. Or should I say, Director of Public Corruption: Undercover Ops.”

Walter smiles, a wide spread of teeth against dark skin, and then nods. “Thank you, Director McGee. So, who do I have to work with?”

“Right now, we’re very short on people, but I can introduce you to your head of Sexual Harassment.”

“Then introduce away.”

Tim hops back to his office, and says, “Burke, come meet Karningham. He’s the one you’ll be reporting to.” As Burke gets up, Tim says to Walter, “For the time being, she’s still mine, but come Monday,” Burke sits next to Tim on the sofa in Jennifer’s office, “I want both of you to go through the people who did pass muster, and find the ones you want to work with. The first thing we’re doing is cleaning the FBI from the inside, so… Sit, have a chat, get to know each other, and talk about how you want to do that.”

Gibbs and Fornell leave Bloomsworth with a phone number, and an introduction.

When they’re in the car, Gibbs said, “You making our job easier, or harder?”

Fornell shrugs. “Generally speaking, we already know who’s working with who. It’s just a matter of proving it. And a matter of them actually doing something illegal. Tim’s not the only one who keeps running into the issue of whatever it is he wants to bust not actually being a crime.”

Gibbs sighs.

“That’s how it’s been since Prohibition. Periodically, we sweep them out, and burn the bridges, but they always get rebuilt. They’re too useful to not have them. We know a certain amount of crime is going to happen no matter what. We know that if we’ve got a relationship with the men in charge, that we can work together to shape things in a… copacetic sort of way. They help us take down the real nut jobs, and we look the other way on the stuff most people don’t much care about.”

“Then what did you do? Why go undercover?”

“Everything in the area between nut jobs and stuff most people don’t care about. That’s fair game.”

Gibbs sighs again. NCIS was a lot cleaner than this. Then he thinks a bit more about the different assets they’ve had over the years, especially in the anti-terror and overseas departments.

Maybe not.

Sal, who Gibbs was expecting to work construction, or sanitation, or at a bar or bakery, or… just some sort of “Mobbish” job, actually works as an accountant.
They’re walking up the steps to an attractive brick house in a plush suburb in southern New Jersey. Apparently Sal works from home.

Fornell notices Gibbs noticing and smirks. “They don’t all, or at this point, even mostly, resemble Jimmy Napolitano.”

“Last of a dying breed?”

Fornell says, “Maybe not the last. You ever watch the Godfather?”

“Can’t spend much time with DiNozzo and not see it.”

“Okay, well… You remember how Michael’s trying to get them all legit?”

Gibbs nods.

Fornell gestures to the house. “A lot of it is. Most of it… At this point, it’s legal. Spend seventy years making sure judges, congressmen, and senators are all on your payroll, and suddenly a lot of what you want to do is legal. And the bits that tend not to be… They aren’t legal because being legal would drop the profit margin too much.” He rings the bell. “Still, for most of it, running a real business, and then getting really good accountants to hide your cash and invest it well, that’s a whole lot more lucrative and safer than many of the illegal options.”

“Tax evasion?” Gibbs says, almost sounding disappointed.

“That’s what I meant by ‘stuff most people don’t care about.’”

Gibbs rolls his eyes. He’s had little enough use for going in guns blazing against tax cheats. “You think that’s what this guy does?”

“I think, it’s entirely likely, that everything Sal does is legal, and a small army of lawyers and accountants will attest to that under oath.”

“Ah.” Gibbs shakes his head again, but stops as the door opens and a girl, probably about eight years old, answers.

“Hi. My name is Tobias Fornell, and this is Jethro Gibbs, and we were wondering if we could speak to Sal Carini?”

She nods. Then shuts the door, and they hear, “DAD!” echo through the house.

A moment later a man, probably in his early thirties, opens the door. He doesn’t introduce himself, but he does say, “You’re Maria’s Gran’s friends. Come on in.”

So, they do.

He leads them into his kitchen, where his computer is on the kitchen table, and a cup of coffee next to it. He doesn’t offer them anything to drink, though he does gesture to the seats around the table. “Mrs. Juetti says you’re looking to do a little internal housekeeping?”

“That’s the idea,” Tobias says.

“Just your own guys?”

“That’d likely depend on exactly what they were doing. Not like I can look the other way if they were ordering hits or anything like that.”
“Nothing like that.” Sal taps his keyboard a few times, and then grabs for a thumb drive. “You’ve got some guys who were living way beyond their means.” He hands the drive over.

Fornell smiles. “Thank you.”

“Anonymous source, right?” Sal asks.

“Always.” He hands the drive to Gibbs, and they both stand up to leave.

In the car, on the way home, Gibbs says to Fornell, “You realize, unless this is something like here’s a mob boss bank account, here’s a transfer from that account to whoever owns this second account, nothing on this thumb drive will make a lick of sense to either of us.”

Fornell nods, not looking away from the road.

Neither of them say anything for a moment.

Then Gibbs says, “She’s got to be too busy.”

Fornell nods. “There’s no possible way she isn’t. Emily tells me that the last time she had a day off was the Fourth of July, and she’s been working at least sixteen hours a day since then.”

“Do we know any other accountants?” Gibbs asks.

“We just left one.”

Gibbs flashes his smartass look at Fornell.

“Supposedly, we’ve got an entire department that does nothing but forensic accounting at the FBI.”

“You ever use them?”

“Enough.”

“Got anyone you trust with something hot?” Gibbs asks, wishing he could just dump this in Diane’s lap.

“Yeah, but we know she’s busy.”

The gets the smartass look, double barreled.

“You miss when crime meant murder and robbery?” Fornell asks.

“Every damn day!” Gibbs replies.

The next morning, Tim stares at his computer screen. And yep, those are numbers. From bank accounts. To other bank accounts. Some of those bank accounts belong to the FBI’s Union reps.
Some of them belong to their friends and family. Some of them he doesn’t know who owns them, not yet. And some of them appear to be shell corporations and the like. And were he to guess, those shell corporations do nothing but move money, anonymously, from person A to person B.

He sighs and rubs his forehead. He’s actually not bad at this stuff. When Gibbs wanted someone to go through financials, that was his job.

But he’s not good at it, either. He’s not an accountant. He’s really not a good one. And these… Might as well be gobbledy-gook for all they mean to him.

He hands the drive to Ziva. “Get your father-in-law on the phone and find out who his accountant is. I want him, here, before the end of work today. Burke, you see those final numbers.” She nods. “Good, go get a hold of these guys 1040s’ and see if they declared anything close to that on their taxes.”

Burke smiles.

He turns to Gibbs and Fornell, and then turns to yet another pile of employment records. He lays a hand on the top of the stack of the FBI’s Forensic Accounting Department. “Find me accountants.”

As his team moves off to do its job, Tim looks up Aaron Hotchner.

Too long at the BAU… Yeah… Just the ID picture is giving Tim some concerns.

Tim is intimately familiar with the concept, of ‘Good, Lord, please, someone get that guy a sandwich!’ The first time he fell into it, he’d been eating very healthy. No meat, no sugar, no carbs, all organic, and he lost a pile of weight.

Too much.

It took his body a bit of time to re-adjust to real food again, and then, once he started back at it, he remembered that he really liked how sugar and carbs and meat tasted and felt, and… Then there was the explosion, and he went kind of overboard in the opposite direction.

The second time wasn’t voluntary, and he lost even more weight, and… Honestly, he looked pretty awful for at least a few months before his body got back to ‘nourished’ again. (Granted, quarter inch long hair didn’t help that endeavor any.)

Hotchner looks like he needs a sandwich, or six, more, per day. The man is gaunt. And not in a ‘this is healthy and he’s just naturally skinny’ sort of way.

Tim’s afraid he knows that look. That’s he’s staring at a picture of someone who works so hard, and so long, and gets so into his cases he forgets to eat. (Part of why it took Tim a while, the first time, to notice he’d overshot his mark.)

Of course, it might be more the eyes than the cheekbones and sunken cheeks. Even in his ID photo, those eyes are dark, haunted.

This is the man who’s seen way too much shit.

And Tim’s a bit nervous about his appointment with him tomorrow.
But... The file is great. This is a man who knows what to do and how to do it. He’s the man who can run the team that’s got to do the impossible, and do it well. And... if he’s not nearly as burnt out as his picture suggests...

Maybe...

---

Several hours later, Tim smiles. This appointment he’s been looking forward to. She’s even more perfect in real life. She walks in, head up, shoulders back, gait graceful and easy. He stands up and offers her his hand. “Ms. LaCroix?”

“Mr. McGee…”

_God, that voice!_ Tim almost feels star struck. He did his homework. She’s the public relations head of a small non-profit specializing sewage engineering in the third world. Not glamorous, but important.

He shakes her hand, and then gestures to one of the seats in Jennifer’s office. He’s still got everyone working in his, so apparently, this is his interviewing spot. “Your CV fell into my lap a few days ago.”

She smiles, eyes warm, gracefully sitting. “And why were you sitting down, lap ready, waiting for it?”

He likes that way of asking the question. “I’m the head of the FBI’s Public Corruption Department. We’re about to change how the FBI does business, how anti-corruption does business, in a big way. Part of the change is visibility. I want the world to see what we’re doing. Which means I need a face and, more importantly, a voice, letting everyone know what we’re up to.”

She looks pleased at that idea. “And you’d like me to be that voice?”

“Yes. The question is, do you want to be eaten alive by the press day in day out, on a range of topics from the mundane to extraordinary?”

That amuses her. “How many languages do you want me to do it in?”

He looks a little startled.

“Mr. McGee, I’m used to having to speak to irked donors, hostile politicians, bored press, and obsequious contractors, in four languages, on any given day. Assuming everyone is yelling questions at me in English, and they are only doing it for an hour or two at a time, I will consider this a vacation.”

Tim certainly wasn’t planning on running press conferences for more than an hour or so at a go. “An hour or two of yelling a day. I’m not sure how much prep work time you’ll need.”

“That was the full-time job that went with the other full-time job I was doing.”

“Oh.”

“I loved SOIL,” the name of her non-profit, “but there is only so long you can work ninety-hours a week.”
Tim would admit he’s sketchy, at best, about what exactly is involved in Press Secretary-ing, but he can’t imagine it takes that long. “I don’t think this should take that long.”

“Excellent. When do you want me to begin?”

“The show starts next Friday, so if you’re here Monday, that should be plenty of time to begin prepping.”

She smiles at that. “Then I will be here, bright and early, on Monday.”

“Thank you.”

Thursday morning. This week is starting to wrap up, and Tim’s starting to feel like he may have a handle on what needs to be done.

Maybe.

He scoffs at that. Like he’s ever going to have a handle on this.

*Do as much as you can, with what you have, as well as you can. That’s all you can do, and if it’s not enough, it’s not.* Breena said that to him when he was complaining last night about how this is never going to get done.

He smiles at the memory of that. Sometimes it’s good to have people who are not part of Team Gibbs, who always get the job done, no matter what, around. Sometimes, it feels very comforting to be reminded that the world will not end if he fails at this.

And sometimes, it’s terrifying.

But, at least for this particular second in time, he’s on an upswing, and about to meet someone else, who may indeed be a case in point, about how, if you hit the point where it’s too much, the world does not in fact end. Sometimes, you’ve just got to go somewhere else.

He hopes. Or maybe he’s about to spend a few minutes with a burnt out husk of a guy who used to run the BAU.

Either way… He’ll find out.

As a man who used to read women’s magazines, Tim’s more than familiar with “Before” and “After” shots. Normally, said shots involve some sort of miracle diet, spa treatment, or makeup. And normally, the woman in the before shot looked like she’d been run over with the ugly truck, and was a model by the time the after shot happened.

Aaron Hotchner, walking into his office, compared to his ID photo, looks like he’s been taking all three options, and done well with them. This is clearly the ‘after’ shot of Hotchner.
Hotchner is still trim, but the gaunt look has left his face. He still has bags under his eyes, but the shadows and haunted look has eased off. He’s added a beard, which softens his face, and right now, he’s in jeans and a t-shirt, which probably go a long way toward making him look less dead on his feet than the severe black suit and white shirt he wore in the ID photo.


Aaron shakes back. “Aaron Hotchner. People around here called me ‘Hotch.’”

Tim nods to Jennifer’s sofa. Hotch seats himself as Tim says, “McGee, that’s usually what they call me,” and then he looks to the coffeemaker. “Coffee?”

“Only if you have decaf.”

Tim smiles at that. “Actually, yes, I do.”

“Sure.”

Tim gets the drinks settled, and then crosses the office, offering Hotch his cup.

Hotch takes it, and looks up at Tim, who’s sitting on the far side of the coffee table. “So, why does Walter think you’re the one who’s going to get me to want to go back to this?”

“Well, first off, ‘this’ is not what you were doing before. While it’s true that people will kill to stay in power, and it’s true that we’re going to burn a lot of bridges and piss off a lot of the high and mighty, we should, mostly, be dealing with white collar, non-violent crime.”

“Mostly.” Hotch sips his coffee. “I suppose that’s as good as you can hope for, anywhere in law enforcement.”

“In my experience, at least.”

They both share a look about that.

“Still, if I had wanted to,” Hotch says, “I could have transferred to our white collar division. What do you have to offer that makes semi-retirement, being home for my son when he’s done with school at the end of the day, and living anonymously in suburban DC worth giving up?”

Since that’s a variation on the theme of Tim’s back up plan for if this all goes belly up, Tim respects that, and understands the appeal and value. “Honestly, I’m not sure I do. I can say that if you want to make sure you’re home in the afternoons for your son, that I do not mind at all how you set your schedule as long as the job gets done. You want to work nights and mornings or whenever, I’m fine with that.”

“That’s a start.”

“I’d see your position as the guy who runs the teams, coordinates who does what, and how. Right now, as we’re getting started, you may be doing some field work, but once you’ve got your people under you, you’re here, in the main building, moving the pieces on the chess board. So, you want to show up in jeans and a t-shirt, I don’t care.”

Hotch is bright enough to catch what Tim didn’t say. As the man running the game, no one will know his name or face. Anyone looking for revenge won’t come seeking him, or his son. He nods at that.
“So, you’ve got some perks. What’s the actual job?”

Tim eyes Hotch, and thinks about what he read… This is supposed to be a stand-up guy. One of the best of the best. Honor and integrity, right?

“On Friday we begin an operation to clean up the FBI, from the inside. I’ve already vetted the Public Corruption team. Of the 700 people on it, fewer than one hundred and fifty of them made the cut. You, them, and with any luck, some top notch accountants, are going to start sweeping through the FBI, looking for trouble.

“If you take it, when you begin, you move fast and silent. The first strike is our Union, because I don’t want any trouble firing the people who are on the take, incompetent, or working for the other team.”

Hotch exhales low and slow, and then sips his coffee.

“The second target is our IA department. And from there, hopefully I’ll have more people for you, and you’ll go wider. By the end of 2018, I want every Agent vetted, by the end of 2021, I want every employee, every contractor, every subcontractor, I want the janitors at Quantico, I want the guys who sell the janitors at Quantico their soap, all of them, vetted.”

Hotch blinks. “Full clean up.”

“Full clean up.”

Hotch swallows, and stares out the window.

“For this first strike, you’re actively investigating. But,” Tim produces a copy of the information he got from Fornell and Gibbs. He doesn’t slide the thumb drive to Hotch, but he does tap it. “once this is handled, you’ll be out of active investigating and into management. You’d be the guy keeping the big picture in mind. You’d move the teams around, make sure they’re doing what they need to be.”

Hotch looks at it, still thinking. Then he nods, takes the drive, and says, “Who else is on this?”

“Right now, you’ve got two retired Federal Agents at your service. They’re hunting down some good accountants. Once we’ve got them, you team up. They will have the CVs of everyone in the Public Corruption Department who passed. You get to confab with my man in charge of undercover ops on who gets whom among them. Grab whoever you want or need for legwork of your former associates, including anyone on the BAU who they can spare, and who can keep a secret. But I need these guys in custody by August 31st.”

Hotch nods again. “Short time frame, but… I’m in.”

“Monday morning. Be here Monday morning. That’s when everything gets set into motion.”

“I’ll be here.”

Tim feels really good about that meeting as he finishes his cup of coffee. Once it’s done, time to head back into his side of the office.

It feels a bit bizarre to be the one who walks into the room where everyone is working and demand, just by being there, an update.
Which doesn’t mean Tim doesn’t enjoy it.

Ziva’s got the clicker. Fornell’s on point with the voice work. Burke’s got the folders with the employment records, and Gibbs is watching, smiling, enjoying this.

Ziva clicks up the first face.

“Thomas Rothwell,” Fornell says. “Been with the Bureau since ’92. He’s spearheaded three major organized crime stings, worked on teams with the DEA and the ATF, head accountant for teams that were taking down the money moving operations for different cartels. He’s got a reputation as the straightest straight arrow to ever be shot by an FBI bow.”

“And if he isn’t, there’s no way we’d ever be able to figure out how he’s doing it,” Gibbs says.

Fornell glares at Gibbs.

Gibbs shrugs.

Tim says, “Gut?”

“Gut. He may be, probably is, a straight arrow, but he’s the FBI’s straight arrow, and he’s not going to want to be aimed back at them,” Gibbs says.

Fornell inclines his head. “Unfortunately, I think Jethro may be onto something. He’s been here too long and has too many friends. You want to send him to the outside world, this is your man.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Next.”

“Nancy Marsh. Been with the Bureau since 2000. Like Gibbs, she does her work on a key pad calculator with the roll of tape on the back. Says she likes the sound of the numbers, helps her think,” Ziva says.

“She’s run cases against traffickers—“ Burke starts.

Tim raises an eyebrow at that, not seeing sex trafficking and accounting going hand in hand.

“Labor traffickers. Moving people, a lot of them, into and out of the country for domestic labor, harvesting crops, stuff like that, is a big money job,” Burke clarifies.

“She’s the one who breaks into the cash trail for that,” Ziva adds.

“Something of a reputation as an oddball. Good at what she does, but this is her job. Her life is outside of the FBI,” Burke adds.

Tim thinks about that, someone like that could be useful. “Put her in the maybe pile.”

Ziva clicks up the next face, and Fornell says, “This is the one Diane recommends.”

“Oh, put—“

Tim’s ready to take him on Diane’s rec, but Fornell cuts him off, “It might not be, precisely, his accounting skills she’s recommending.”

Gibbs smirks. “He’s probably a fine accountant. She liked other things about him, too, when we asked.”
They did get Diane away from being the Chief Financial Officer for the State of Columbia, for about twenty minutes. Jeremy Chaffin is the guy she recommended. Looking at the picture of him, Fornell and Gibbs know why her eyes light up when she talked about him.

He’s not young, probably fifty-five-ish. But he’s in good shape, jaw still firm, waist trim, with a head of salt and pepper hair and bright blue eyes. Gibbs and Fornell share a look at his picture. Apparently, just like Gibbs has a type, so does Diane.

“He was at the IRS for years, decided he didn’t like the culture, and moved to the FBI back in ’10,” Fornell adds. “Not sure if we can get him over here, though. He’s in the Cheyenne office.”

“Cheyenne… Wyoming? We have a Cheyenne office?” Tim asks.

“Every state capitol in the US,” Burke adds.

“Okay… Um… Is he out there because he doesn’t know his ass from his elbow?” Cheyenne, Wyoming sounds like it might be a punishment post to Tim.

“He’s out there because he likes the West,” Fornell says. “At least, according to Diane.”

Tim thinks about the lines of numbers and money moving from point A to point B, and rapidly comes to the conclusion that even if this guy isn’t the best accountant in the history of accounting, he was smart enough to attract Diane’s attention, and Diane doesn’t like stupid.

“Bring him in. Bring in Marsh, too. Ziva?” He eyes her, waiting to see what happened with Senior’s Accountant.

Ziva shakes her head. “Busy. Out of the country. Maybe dead. I talked to five people, all of them with different answer for where he was. I think it is safe to say he does not want to talk to anyone from the FBI.”

Tim decides to let that go. “Monday morning. I’ll have Marsh and Chaffin meet with Hotch, and see if we can get something moving.”

Friday evening, Tim’s feeling like he’s got his cast in place. He puts his keys into the ignition in his car, sighs, and lets his head rest against the headrest.

Two days, Saturday and Sunday, completely off. And he knows he needs that.

Monday, the dress rehearsal begins.

And Friday, the show goes on.
Time knows, and regrets, that this is likely his last weekend for a while.

He’s scheduled to take Thursday off, too. Before everything goes live, he wants, and needs, a day to collect himself and get ready for it. But once next Friday comes around he’s on, for… Unless they end up resigning en masse, probably at least the next fourteen days. Maybe more. His twenty minutes per dressing down schedule may be vastly optimistic.

It’s not like he’s never worked half a month, or more, straight before, but… It’s the first time he’s looking at doing something he has so little desire to do, for that long. He thinks about last autumn. Voluntarily. It’s the first time he’s spend this long doing something he detests this much, voluntarily.

So, this weekend. His last two and a half days of pleasure before tossing himself, voluntarily, into Purgatory.

He’s arming himself for it. Pulling every second of joy out of this weekend that he can. He’s trying to say hyper-present, in the moment as much as possible, because he’s sure that he’s going to be pulling these memories up, anchoring himself to them, using them to keep himself going.

He doesn’t take the time to write them down, but he does organize them as words in his head. Sense memory poems.

Cold, smooth vanilla; hot, bittersweet dark chocolate; salty, crunchy pretzel bits; rich, sweet-salt peanut butter, bright burst of sweet-sour cherry at the end. Cold and hot on his tongue, smooth/crunchy on his palate. It’s the best ice cream sundae ever, at least, that he’s ever had.

It’s August, Breena is, by conservative estimate, 185,000,000 months pregnant, and even with the air conditioning on so high that the other adults in the crew are wearing long sleeves, she’s hot and achy and all over uncomfortable, and just… Grrr…

Full-on porcupine mode.

With a side of some fairly intense cravings, for sugar, and salt, and fat, and cream, and…

Anyway, long story short, his extremely pregnant wife is in a very hot, very crabby, very pregnant sort of mood, so their not pregnant wife got up and made her a sundae as everyone’s been lounging about in the living room, post-dinner, relaxing for the weekend.

Vanilla ice cream, chocolate ice cream, chocolate sauce, peanut butter, crunched up pretzel bits, whipped cream, with a cherry on top.

And Breena really appreciated all four bites of that sundae that she was able to eat. Judging by the moaning coming out of her while eating it, that sundae is an orgasmic experience in a bowl. But, as has been previously mentioned she’s 185,000,000 months pregnant, and Donnie has decided that she really doesn’t need room for a stomach, let alone food in said stomach.

So, there’s a good bit of sundae left. In a bowl. A bowl now sitting on the floor, next to Tim, because
he’s on the floor, leaning back against the sofa, petting Breena’s sore feet, while she rubs his shoulders, and the whole crew talks about… everything, though right now, they’re talking about Penny’s latest adventures in New York.

It’s just sitting there, looking up at him, calling to him. (And it’s possible he’s staring at it with the same big puppy eyes that both Jackson and Mona have aimed at that bowl, but Gibbs has already let them know that chocolate ice cream is off limits for them.)

He’s not exactly hungry. And he certainly doesn’t need the calories. But… God… It looks really good. Breena scoots forward a little, and quietly says to him, not interrupting Penny’s tales, “Go ahead and eat it. Might as well load up on pleasure now, it’ll be scarce enough in the coming days.”

And that sounds like good advice to Tim.

He eats the sundae, and it’s amazing. Abby didn’t just knock that one out of the park, she hit the grand slam when the bases were loaded, bottom of the ninth, in the seventh game of the World Series.

No, he doesn’t need it, at all, but he likes it, and it makes him feel good.

---

Glide. Wet tongue on wet clit and the effortless slide of his body on hers. The impossible wet slip. The heat of Breena against his face. The thrill of his tongue slipping over her. More glide, his dick moving against Abby, so slick and hot.

Taste. Sharp, a little sour. That’s Breena. There’s a bit of Jimmy in the mix, too, though that’s more a scent than flavor. He’s moving slow, savoring right now, just rubbing his tongue over her. Moving slow enough he can focus on flavor and feel, not so wrapped up in how he’s moving, or chasing his own orgasm.

Smell. He’s wrapped in her scent. Up close and right in his face, but there are other scents here, too. Abby, she’s wearing Thousand and One Nights. Her scent is further way, rubbed into his skin from earlier, hovering a bit behind and under Breena’s scent. Jimmy’s here, too. The scent of his body on Breena’s. Tim’s licking, and Jimmy’s fucking, and every few thrusts he gets a good whiff of Jimmy slipping over, or maybe through, the scent of the girls.

But mostly though, he’s aware of the glide. His body moving effortlessly. No real friction, just back and forth, and slippery touch lighting him up.

He doesn’t often think of his tongue as an erogenous zone, but right now, sliding it over and over on Breena’s skin, he feels like he’s fucking her, and fucking Abby at the same time. Maybe it’s not the same intense pull of pleasure that he’s feeling from Abby, but it’s good. It’s sharp and focused and keeping him right here, right now, right in his body, feeling pleasure and giving pleasure and floating through that moment of building joy.

He’s not about to come, that’s still at least a minute or two off, but he’s enjoying this, right here, right now, riding the wave before it crests.

---

Sound. Soft, sucking sounds. Gentle humming. He’s almost as much feeling the humming, the rumble of Abby’s voice, through the cheek he has pressed against her back, as he’s hearing it. He’s
mostly asleep. Awake enough to be aware of what he’s hearing, but his body feels heavy, unwilling
to move. He can see red/brown behind his eyelids, so it must be morning, but… He doesn’t much
care.

Eventually, he’ll have to get up, but right now he doesn’t.

Which means he can lay in bed, curled around Abby listening to her hum, and a soft mwuf, mwuf,
mwuf sound of their son having his breakfast.

Sean’s down to two nurses a day, and most nights (much to the joy of his extended parental units)
he’ll sleep from eleven to six, and then wake up, looking for breakfast, a bit before his sisters get up.

Tim curls into her a bit more closely, his hand laying on his son’s back.

“You awake?” Abby asks.

“Mmmm…”

He feels her chuckle. Apparently part of him is awake, and he feels her scooting a bit, rubbing
against him. That gets a slightly more alert, “Mmmm?” out of him.

“He’s got about another fifteen minutes. You nap.”

He nods a little, and adds, “Mmmm.” (Because he’s amazingly articulate at a bit after six on a
Saturday morning where he’s not on kid duty.)

Tim’s awake enough to be aware of the sounds around him, the heat of Abby’s body, soft cotton
sheets around him, but given permission to nap, his mind wanders away from that, drawing pictures
behind his eyelids.

He didn’t notice when she left the bed, but he feels it when she comes back, snuggling in close. Soft
hair against his cheek, a warm shoulder under his chin, and her silk smooth skin all along his.

He drifts for a while, holding onto her, enjoying the quiet of the morning. She’s not moving much,
either, so maybe she’s content to snuggle and doze, too.

What feels like a minute later, but according to the clock is two hours, he feels the bounce of a small
body climbing into their bed and more or less hopping on him, along with “Uncle Tim, Uncle Jetro
says it’s time to go on Adventures!”

He slowly blinks a few times, and then looks at Molly, who is kneeling right next to him on the bed,
face a few inches from his.

“Okay…” He’s awake enough to make words now. “Tell Gibbs I’ll be there in ten.”

Molly grins, and bounces back out of the room. Tim kisses Abby’s neck, holds her tighter, and then
pulls back.

“So much for an early morning bit of fun,” Abby says, also blinking herself awake.

He kisses her once more. “There’s always naptime.”

She grins back up at him.
Pushing the cart through the grocery store, with Sean and Anna in the little seat at the front, Kelly kneeling in the cart, while Gibbs walks with Molly on his shoulders, Ziva a few steps ahead with Dave in a snuggli on her chest, as they pick out whatever they’re having for lunch, dinner, and breakfast tomorrow has got to be one of Tim’s favorite sights.

The smell of fresh cut grass, the sound of the mowers buzzing, the feel of pushing it against the grass. The heat of the sun on his back, t-shirt clinging to his skin as he soaks his shirt with sweat. The slight prickly sensation as tiny bits of grass flick away from the mower and hit his legs. Above and behind it, the faint whiff of wood smoke from Gibbs getting the grill ready to go.

Every family has chores. Things that have to get done. And with them not living at the house fulltime that means everything that goes with keeping it running has to happen on the weekends.

And from May to October, that means mowing the grass. Tim and Tony have the job this weekend. Abbi’s on making sure the edges get trimmed. Between the three of them it’ll take about an hour and a half. Not a huge job, but none of them mind the weekends when it’s not their job.

When it’s done, Tim’s hot, and tired, and his shoulder aches a bit. It generally doesn’t enjoy things where he’s got to push something that vibrates. (At least, he’s assuming that’s the issue. Mowing grass is pretty much the only time where this issue pops up. Though maybe this winter he’ll use the snow blower and find out if he’s right about what’s going on.)

But, when it’s done, they’ve got the whole backyard area smoothed down, and everything smells like fresh cut grass, wood smoke, and just a hint of cooking beef and onions.

Tim’s hungry, and food is coming soon.

Hot water bursting all over his skin.

Tim may not love mowing the lawn, but he’d have to admit that a hot shower right after doing that, and then stepping from his overheated shower into the cool air of his bedroom feels amazing.

He takes a minute to towel dry his hair, and then slips on a t-shirt and his PJ pants. Nothing’s happening tonight he needs real clothing for, and right now soft, cool cotton on his skin sounds like an excellent plan.

Salt. He can feel the fleck of it on his lip, and taste it evening out the bitter/sour flavor of the margarita at his hand. His tongue slips out, catching that tiny flake of salt, and he feels/tastes it dissolve on his tongue.

They generally don’t do much in the way of mixed drinks, but during the morning’s Adventures at the Temple of Food, flank steaks were on sale, and that looked like an awesome opening for tacos,
and if they’re having tacos for dinner, then margaritas go on the menu, too.

For someone who doesn’t do much with sugar, Jimmy’s got some mad margarita skills. He’s really picky about what limes go into it, which tequila, and God forbid you don’t get the right organic blue agave syrup. (The one time Tim brought the wrong stuff home, Jimmy wasn’t willing to mix ‘em up. He didn’t want to be associated with a ‘sad sack drink good only for getting wasted.’ The less said about the time Tony brought frozen limeade, the better.) But assuming you bring him the exact right mix of ingredients. (Including the correct ratio of Key limes to Persian limes.) He will mix up some incredible margaritas.

Tim was just about on the back porch when Jimmy handed him the first one, gesturing to the set up in the kitchen. There’s two pitchers full, and Tim can see more limes waiting.

Tim feels his muscles loosen up, buzz creeping through him. Jimmy mixes them tasty and strong.

He kisses Jimmy thanks for the drink, and can taste more salt, more bitter/sour/sweet on his lips. Apparently Jimmy’s been sampling his wares, making sure they’re up to snuff.

From the kitchen, Tim can see Gibbs on the back porch, flipping the steaks. Maybe half an hour or so until dinner.

The sound of Sean laughing, just uproariously laughing. Eyes wide, mouth wide, giggling like only a baby can.

Tim might not be entirely sober by this point, but he’s having a good time. He’s laying back on the grass, Sean in his hands, “flying” him around, and then pulling him back down to blow raspberries on his belly.

Sean’s dressed for the weather. He’s in a diaper, and that’s it. (Right now, it’s a very no shirt, no shoes, no problem sort of vibe. It’s hot outside right now. The girls are in the baby pool, splashing around. And Sean’s not the only one wearing just a diaper.)

Every time Tim starts to drop Sean down toward his lips, Sean starts to belt out laughing. Once his lips hit Sean’s belly, his little arms and legs flail around as he just wails with laughter.

The scratch of claws on his tummy.

Apparently, Jackson wants in on the game, too. He’s rushed up and is now standing on Tim’s belly, hopping up and down, licking Sean’s feet, which just adds to the laughing.

“The scratch of claws on his tummy.” That may be his favorite word on earth. At least right now. (In a few hours, once they’re in bed, he’ll likely have a different favorite word on earth. Tim’s perfectly fine with situational favorites.)

Kelly comes barreling over to join in, soaking wet from playing in the pool. Fortunately, Jackson hops off his tummy before Kelly flops onto him, knocking the air out of him. “Daddy!”
Tim coughs a few times, and sits up, grabbing his kids, holding onto them. Then he puts Sean down on the grass, pulls off his now soaked t-shirt, and rolls onto his hands and knees, crouching down low, so Kelly can scramble onto his back.

She lays flat on his back, arms around his neck, and he pushes himself up, and starts crawling around the backyard.

This time the laughing is punctuated with “Horsey!”

He makes sure she’s got a good hold of him and then “rears” up a bit, and Kelly tightens her grip and laughs even louder.

Salty, bitter lime, alcohol burn; flour tortilla; creamy, cool guacamole; sweet, charred onions and peppers, and the rich, salt, spicy beef.

Tim hopes they get to do taco night at least once more this summer.

Four little bodies, all tucked into their cribs/beds.

Definitely one of his favorite sights.

It’s not very dark, not yet. But it’s bedtime for the kiddos, and they’re all washed up, in their jammies, and in their beds. Gray light from the dusk sky outside, and blue light from the nightlight in their room.

Molly, like her daddy, likes to sleep on her back, sprawled out, taking up as much room as she can.

Kelly, like both of her parents, prefers to sleep on her side, wrapped around her very favorite stuffy: Skully.

Anna’s on her back, slowly sucking on her pacifier, eyes droopy. She and Sean share a crib, but not for all that much longer, they’re both getting big for it, and they’re going to need more space for Donnie, soon. Sean’s at the other end of the crib, and though they keep putting him down on his back, the first thing he does, as soon as he’s down on the mattress, is flip himself over onto his stomach.

Four little bodies, small getting-ready-to-sleep sounds, blue-gray light of a late summer night.

Tim’s smiling as he eases shut the door, getting ready to head back to the porch where the rest of the family is.

Warm summer night, lit by flickering tiki torches, gold light spilling out onto the porch from their living room, and the flicker of lightning bugs along the tree line.

His favorite people are arranged around the porch, sitting at the table or on the lounges. Tim pours himself another margarita as he watches his family relaxing and chatting.
Tony’s laugh spills through the group, and Tim can’t make out what exactly it is Ducky’s saying, but apparently it adds to it, because more laughs join Tony’s.

He takes a sip, walking through the living room, out to join the others. Opening the sliding glass door to the patio adds the sounds of a million frogs and a billion crickets to the lull of voices. Under his feet there’s the warmth of the sun caught in flagstone, and on his skin there’s the damp heat of a humid August night.

Abby sits up on the lounge chair she’s been keeping for them. He joins her, handing her his drink, and she takes a swallow, as he sits behind her. A moment later, she settles back, sitting between his legs, her back against his chest. He rests his face against her neck and shoulder for a moment. Inhaling the scent of her hair and skin. He kisses her shoulder, enjoying warm skin against his lips, and then reaches over for another sip of his drink.

Across from them, Ducky and Penny are sitting at the table. They’ve got a chess game going, as they talk to everyone else.

Gibbs and Abbi are sharing a lounge, too. Abbi’s got a margarita, and Gibbs has a beer, and both of them are looking soft and goofy. He’s lounging on his back, one hand behind his head. She’s sitting with her back to his hip, leaning forward, hands on her knees, toward the rest of the group, eyes lit up as she and Tony are taking about some undercover work they’d done years ago. Her hair is up in a ponytail, some of it starting to fall out, and Gibbs gently pets a few of the tendrils, between long, slow pulls on his beer.

Ziva’s in one of the cushy chairs. She’s got a margarita, too, but hers is virgin. And the reason for that is being walked around by his daddy, who is talking, animatedly with Abbi, telling a story that Tim’s sure is at least 95% bullshit, but it’s entertaining bullshit, as he tries to coax a burp out of the little guy.

Dave DiNozzo’s fussing a bit, but they’re all used to having a fussing baby as part of any gathering. After a massive belch, he settles back down, and Tony hands him back to Ziva, who gets him onto her other breast, where he happily tucks into Second Dinner, Course Two. Tony half sits, half hovers on the arm of her chair, stroking her cheek as Dave slops away, and Abbi takes over telling the story of Impossible Daring Do.

Jimmy’s sitting at the far edge of the lounge Tim and Abby are sharing. In front of him, Breena’s sitting on an exercise ball. They’re sharing a collection of bottles of water. Ten minutes ago, they were in the freezer. Now they’re melting in the summer heat.

Breena’s sipping one of the bottles, and Jimmy’s sitting behind her, gently pressing the base of another one into her back, using it to rub the sore spots on her hips and low back.

Tim stretches his foot out a bit, and gently rubs Jimmy’s hip with it. Jimmy turns to look at Tim, flashing him a quick smile, and goes back to paying attention to Breena as Abbi says, “So, by that point, I was sure we were beyond FUBAR. Cover blown, Omagi’s unconscious, Roger’s is bleeding, bad, and everything’s about to end…”

Abby above him. Riding him slow and lazy, both of them more buzzed than they’ve been in… Since before she got pregnant with Sean, maybe Kelly. Between the alcohol, condom, and a naptime quickie, Tim’s sure he can go forever.
So right now, he can watch. She’s on her hands and knees, hovering above him, sliding up and back, hair falling around them. He lets his eyes drift shut, and lifts his head, kissing her, soft and easy, like the pace they’re going at.

Her tongue on his, slipping between his lips. Long, liquid strokes. He grazes the tip of her tongue with his teeth, and she moans, quietly, at that.

She breaks the kiss, straightening up, and Tim’s eyes open again, watching.

She’s grinding a bit faster, taking him a bit deeper. He’s got his eyes half open, tracing the sway of her breasts, and the bounce of her hair. They drop further, watching her body taking his. His hands fall to her butt, enjoying the round warmth under his fingers.

Her hands are on his chest, thumb stroking over one nipple.

He watches the flush spread across her chest. Watches her eyes close, and her face start to get tight. She’s moving faster, pulling all the way up and back, and taking him with her as she speeds up.

One of those hands on her butt finds her clit, and starts her favorite quick circles.

That sound, her voice getting higher, faster, more breathy. That’s hitting him right in the dick. Tim begins to tense up, too. His hips moving faster, head and chest coming off the bed, arching up to watch more, see her body engulfing his, watch his dick sinking into her pussy, and the pink, wet glide of her body on his.

She’s gasping, just about there… moving faster, erratic, hips snapping, faster yet, and he’s about to topple, pleasure/tingle/waiting, about to burst.

“Ugh!” Louder, more forceful, higher pitched, and then her body twitches, begins to grab his in soft shocks, and Tim’s over the edge, too, his own body joining hers in a wet, twitching glow.

He collapses back onto their bed, buzzing all over with pleasure, sure sleep will overtake him soon.

Good sleep, good fuck, good buzz, right now everything is amazing.

He lays there with Abby on his chest, breathing with her, and a moment later, hears Breena cry out, and Jimmy’s echoing grunt. A few seconds after that, there’s a long, smooth expanse of back… He’s thinking it’s Jimmy’s, against his calf.

Nothing else feels like this, wrapped up in the people he adores, body awash in every form of pleasure it loves.

Soon enough they’ll be waking up, back to the grind, but right now, spread out all over their bed, everything is splendid.

Bitter, milky coffee. That flavor exploding over his tongue as he stands in the kitchen, in his PJs, next to Jimmy.

He’s putting Cheerios into bowls. Jimmy’s pouring milk onto those bowls. As soon as Tim’s done with that, he gets the bananas out, and begins cutting them up. For three of the kids, that’s breakfast. At almost eight months old, Sean’ll eat the cheerios and bananas as finger food, but he had a date with Abby for his ‘real’ breakfast.
They don’t really talk. Both of them are more than a bit sleepy. But each of them knows what they’re doing, and they move around the kitchen, and each other, easily.

“Church?” Tim asks, as he fishes the knife out of the cutlery drawer.

Jimmy shrugs. “See how Breena’s feeling. Looked like she was really sleeping, and I’m not waking her up if that’s the case."

Tim’s perfectly fine with that. Especially because, if they skip out on church he has the time to do some writing, and he’d like to do that.

“Should probably do dinner,” Jimmy adds, putting the bowls on the tray he’ll use to carry them to the kids. Then he reaches over to grab the first of the sippy cups.

Tim nods. “Been a while since we made it.” And it has been a while since they dragged themselves out of their haven here to go to church and Sunday dinner with the Slater clan. He steps away from the counter to the fridge, grabbing a bottle of apple juice. Little guys like their breakfast apple juice.

He hands it over to Jimmy, and then grabs Molly’s special My Little Pony glass. She’s too big for the sippy cups, but that doesn’t mean it’s a great plan to give her a full-sized adult cup.

“You want me to ride herd on the kids, give you some time to get out and stretch?”

Jimmy smiles at Tim, and gives him a quick kiss. “Yeah. Going into it with a calm mind always helps.”

Tim nudges Jimmy’s shoulder with his. “I’ve got this, go get your asanas on.”

Several moments later, Tim’s got Sean in his lap, feeding him tiny bites of banana, sipping his own coffee, as the girls eat their cereal, and he can look out and see Jimmy on the lawn, standing tall, in his gray cotton pj pants, starting his sun salutations with mountain pose.

He kisses the top of his son’s head, and quietly says, sarcastically, “It’s a hard life,” with a smirk.

And maybe tomorrow it will be, but right now, as the song says, it’s summertime, and the living is easy.

Another laugh. This one’s a bit deeper, and from the far side of the room, but Tim’s enjoying getting to see it.

Tim’s on his own, in the corner of the Slater’s home, nibbling a cannoli, watching Breena laugh with her sisters. He doesn’t know what they’re talking about, but judging by the way her cheeks are lit pink, her head back, and the wide-mouthed guffaws, it’s good.

This might not be his favorite place on earth, or his favorite people, but if he gets to watch Breena that happy, it’s worth it.

He sidles over to her a bit later, making sure to keep a proper, good friend sort of distance from her, though he’d like to kiss her. “What was so funny?”

She grins at him, wide, teeth shining grin. “Oh, Tim…” she shakes her head. “I can’t. Just… If you guys head off for MMA, go easy on Collin.”
Tim raises an eyebrow. Collin has been limping a bit today. “Cautionary tale?”

Breena laughs again.

Moving, maybe not as fast as he used to be, maybe not as easy, but he’s dodging, and kicking, and punching, and his endorphins are spiking, sweat flowing, body tight with anticipation. Time’s going slow, and his body is going fast, and it feels amazing!

Right now he’s fighting one on one with Tony, which is always, for Tim, his easiest fight. There’s enough edge between them that he can fight with Tony without getting too wrapped up in his head about maybe hurting him, or going easy, or any of his protective feelings.

It’s been a year and a season since he’s been back to really fight. He’s worked on building up his strength. He’s worked on rehabbing his ankle, wrist, and shoulder. He’s gotten his flexibility and balance back. But the last time he thought he might fight, his head got in the way, and he practically killed Collin for taking a swing at Jimmy.

But right now, he and Tony are up first, and after more warm up time than either of them would have done before, they’re at it. And it feels good.

Tony’s taunting him. Teasing. “Come on, Mc Featherweight, even Dave hits harder than that.”

Tim twists, leading with his elbow, which Tony sees, jumping aside from it, and tangling himself on the left foot that Tim snuck out.

He hits the ground, but isn’t out. From there, one of his hands snake out, grabbing the back of Tim’s knee, taking him down, too.

Tim rolls up, but Tony’s already standing up, offering him a hand.

Tim takes it, and smiles at Tony, who nods back. There’s that second, where they hold each other’s gaze, feeling years of trust and respect. Then Tony swings, and Tim dodges, and the fight is still on.

Thwack, thwack, thwack, thwack…

When he’s into it, it’s just a pleasant underscoring of his work. It’s the sound of his mind creating something. His fingers, on his keyboard, making his ideas real. He spent a bit of the morning writing the scene longhand, but there always feels like something is missing when he does it that way. (Or on his computer. It just doesn’t feel right without the thwack of his typewriter, or the feel of the keys under his fingers.)

He feels Abby’s hands on his shoulders, and her chin on the crown of his head. She’s reading as he types, and once upon a time that used to make him nervous, but at this point he’s comfortable with it. She knows what his rough work looks like, and he doesn’t feel the need to pretend that he can turn out clean, perfect copy on the first shot, not anymore.

She kisses the top of his head, and gently squeezes his shoulders. “I like that.”
He looks up at her, eyebrow raised. *What do you like?* he asks silently.

“Gabe and Alwyn,” Alwyn is the most recently added character to the Dragons. A younger brother for Gabe. “I’ve been hoping they’ll get some time together, where they aren’t trying to kill each other.”

Tim takes off his glasses, rubbing the lenses to clean them a bit, while he looks at his typewriter. “I don’t know how much of that we’ll get, but yep, right now.”

She strokes his hair. “They’ll get on the same side.”

He shrugs. He doesn’t think that’s where the story is going, but it certainly may end up there. Then glances across the room to the clock. “Dinner?”

“Yeah. We called once, and you didn’t respond. Figured you were so far into it you didn’t notice.”

He shakes his head, then stands up, stretching his neck out. “Totally clueless.”

---


time

“Hold still!”

There’s a certain feeling. Namely, the sensation of about thirty pounds of small, squirmy person who does not want her hair brushed. It’s the… second, maybe third to last chore of the night. Molly and Kelly both have long enough hair now that they can’t just get their hair washed and head to bed.

His job is to hold onto Molly, keep her on his lap, while Breena gently rubs the conditioner through her curls, and then she hands him the wide-toothed comb, while she grabs Kelly and gets to work on her hair.

Kelly’s the easy one. It’s true Abby had some curl in her hair, especially as a little girl, but his hair’s always been straight, and Kelly’s is thin, and fine, and straight. Wash it, rub a bit of conditioner in it, and thirty seconds of combing later, she’s good to go.

Molly is a somewhat more complicated story. But right now, she’s deciding to not protest having her hair combed, too mightily.

The first time he did this, he had no idea how to handle it. Put comb through hair. Yeah, not so much. He’s got to start at the bottom, and work his way up. And it helps if he doesn’t attempt to comb one entire side of her head at a go.

So, he’s sitting on the floor, outside the bathroom the kids use, in his house, with Molly in his lap, both of them singing the theme song from Shawn The Sheep, as he combs her hair, and calls her his ‘little sheepie.’

Molly giggles at that.

“And you know what happens to little sheepies who don’t get their curls combed…”

She tries to turn in his lap, to look up at him, but that’s made more complicated by the comb in her hair.

“Remember… Just like Shawn… They get shorn!”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOO!” (Breena shoots him a *You cut that child’s hair and die* look. He flashes
one back to her along the lines of, *I’m just talking.*

“Okay, then we’ve got to get the curls all combed out.”

Molly settles a bit further into his lap, and lets him finish combing out her hair.

The last memory of the weekend is a picture.

It showed up on his phone just as they were getting ready for bed. He’d literally just plugged his phone into the charger and stepped away, toward the bathroom, when it buzzed at him.

Normally, this late at night on a Sunday, that’d buzz would be work, so it’s with some trepidation that he turns to face his phone, picks it up and sees a text.

That unclenches his shoulders. Doesn’t matter who it is, a text will be lower priority than a call going straight to voicemail.

Seeing it’s from his brother-in-law relaxes him even more. He’s starting to smile, having a clue why he might be getting a text from Glenn at 11:06 on a Sunday. At the end of August, when his sister is due to give birth the first week of September.

That smile breaks through fully as he opens the text and sees a shot of his sister, pale, tired, sweaty, half asleep, with a tiny pink person on her chest.

*Nicholas Armstrong Holland. 9:47 PM. Mom and Baby are fine. Adult visitors welcome tomorrow. Cousins welcome at our place when we get home.*
As Tim’s getting ready for work on Monday morning, he notices that his typewriter, which normally lives in his office, is sitting on the floor, next to the door, where lunches, go bags, purses, and whatever else gets stacked up before it goes to work.

It’s sitting there, next to his go bag, a pack of typing paper, and three new ribbons for this typewriter. Abby sees him staring at it, and says, “You make sure you get at least half an hour a day on that. It doesn’t have to be good, or about dragons, or… anything. But you sit down, you eat some food, and you write. You need some away time every day, so get it.”

He turns to her, smiles, and gives her a kiss.

She smiles back, and pats his cheek. “Go tame those dragons, Director McGee.”

He kisses her again. “I love you.”

She grins up at him. “I know.”

He’s got one side trip before he gets into work.

He can’t stay for too long, but he’s not sure when he’s going to have the time, and the headspace, to really enjoy this, again. So, en route to work, he makes a stop at Niveneh Birthing Center.

This is decidedly not a hospital. Everything around him, including the ceilings, are soft, comfy neutral colors. Lots of beige and cool greens. There’s some sort of water thing… It’s not exactly a fountain, but he’s not sure what to call those rock installations on the wall with water flowing down them. Anyway, whatever those are called, there’s one of them every hundred feet or so, so there’s a constant soft trickling sound, and low, gentle music, and honestly, if he didn’t have a collection of extremely pregnant women, and their partners, walking around the hallways, he’d assume he’s at a high class spa.

“Baby spa,” he says under his breath, looking for room 213. “Mani-pedi, acupressure, chakras aligned, world class food, and labor…” He looks around and idly thinks that if this FBI thing doesn’t work out, maybe he and Breena can talk to Slaters about ushering them into the world as well as helping them out. He bets Jeannie would like working with people who are happy, for once.

He wonders a bit if a place like this might be easier for Breena and Jimmy when it comes time to get Donnie out. No memories here. No surgical center, either, which probably would make them both uncomfortable.

And, after a few moments, he finds his sister’s room. And in it…

Sarah’s sleeping, Glenn is sacked out on a sofa bed. Tim figures this is probably what most brand new families look like. The star of the show is in his own little bassinet, though his is set up as a co-sleeper sort of thing, attached to Sarah’s bed, instead of the separate bassinettes they had where his kids were born.

Tim creeps over as softly as he can, and looks down, saying, “Hi, Nick.”
Nick, who appears to be awake, and quietly looking around, chirps at him, wriggles some, goes even brighter pink, and grunts.

Tim looks down at him, laughs, (which wakes up Sarah, who he leans over and kisses) and then says, picking up his nephew, “You know, that’s exactly what your mom did the first time I held her.”

Sarah blinks a few times, finally figures out what’s happening as she sees Tim starting to unswaddle Nick, and laughs at that. “I did not.”

“Oh yes you did.” He mimics his mother’s voice, “‘Tim, say hello to your baby sister. Okay, now very gently. Make sure you’ve got a hand under her head and one on her tush… There you go… And…’” Tim can see it as he’s repeating what his mom said. Sarah wasn’t this small. And she wasn’t this pink. And he knows now that she wasn’t a newborn. But back then a baby was a baby was a baby. And as soon as he got her situated in his arms, she looked up at him, and he looked at her, and then she screwed up her face, grunted a bit, and there was a loud phbbt sound, followed by a warm, wet sensation on his forearm. He makes a raspberry sound which makes Sarah laugh even harder, and startles Nick. “Lucky for you, unlike the first time I held her, I know how to fix this situation now.”

Sarah’s about to get up.

“Don’t you dare! I’m here, I’ve got him, and it’s not like I’m unfamiliar with a little baby poop. Sit, rest. You’ve got him soon enough.”

“Oh okay.” And when she settles down, carefully, her eyes drift shut.

Meanwhile, Tim gets Nick cleaned up, watching him kick his tiny feet and flail around a bit. He’ll admit, he’s jonesing hard to meet Donnie as he’s doing this. Can’t wait to see their newest boy, though right now, spending some time with this one’s awfully fine, too.

He gets Nick cleaned up and reswaddled, spends a moment snuggling him close, smelling his new baby scent, until he gets fussy, and then hands him over to Sarah.

She comes awake again, taking her son, and Tim grabs some extra pillows for her. “Thanks,” she says, getting them under her arms and into nursing position.

“You okay with me staying?” Tim asks. He doesn’t think she’d be shy about that, but better to ask and leave, than stay and annoy her.

She gives him her I can’t believe you just asked that look.

“Better safe than wrong, you know.”

“Oh okay.” Then she turns her attention to Nick, who, like many people who are less than twenty-four hours old, hasn’t quite figured out the eating thing, though he does know hungry, and doesn’t like it. He’s rapidly going from fussing to full on wailing. She’s trying to get her nipple into his mouth, and saying, “I swear, child, what you want is right here. Just close your mouth and you’ll have it!”

Tim’s grinning at that, remembering some similar conversations between Abby and Sean, and Breena and Anna.

Fortunately, crying baby gets her colostrum flowing, and a moment later, a drop of it hits Nick’s tongue, and suddenly he knows, sort of, what to do.

Tim looks up from Nick to Sarah. “So, you okay? You look tired, but… you know, you should.”
“I’m… okay. Sore as hell. I feel like I got punched in the privates with a steel wool toilet bowl cleaner.”

Tim cringes and says, “Ulgh! That’s an exceptionally vivid image.”

She smiles sarcastically at him. “That’s my job.” Then she looks down, giving Nick a real smile. “And I guess this is, now, too.”

Tim nods, petting his nephew. “Yup.”

She looks over at Tim’s outfit. He’s got an actual suit on today, and then glances around for a clock, sees the time and says, “Speaking of jobs…”

“Yeah, on my way to work. Got a hell of a week, or three, planned, and wanted to go into it in a good mood. I think everyone else will be coming later today, maybe this evening.”

“But you’ll be working?”

“Yeah, probably. Got a lot of balls I need to keep in the air right now.”

“Then go get tossing.”

He kisses her cheek, and kisses Nick, looks at his still blissfully asleep brother-in-law, and says, “Tell Glenn I would have said hello, but I didn’t want to wake him up.”

She nods at that, and Tim’s off. Ready for the next bits of the day.

When Tim gets into his office, he’s the last one in. He might have preferred to get in earlier, but not so much as to have left before dawn.

He notices, as he heads in, looking at the collection of people around his table, that there’s a really good energy here. Eager, friendly. These are people who may not know each other, not yet, but they’re willing to work together, and all of them are looking forward to seeing what comes next.

Some of them appear a little curious about the antique typewriter he just placed on the corner of his desk, but Gibbs and Ziva see it, and share a satisfied look.

Apparently there was an unspoken consensus that whatever happened today, everyone would be in full-on professional mode.

Gibbs is sitting on the sofa. He’s in his usual work outfit. His tan sports coat and green golf shirt got pulled out of retirement from his closet for this. Granted, the tiny dog on his lap may look a tad unprofessional, but the rest of him is radiating confidence and competence, so Tim gets the sense no one is willing to ask why a little ball of extremely alert, silky fluff is part of the party.

Fornell, who’d been willing to bend to the point of skipping his tie and putting some jeans on while they were researching, is back in his FBI-approved charcoal suit and dark tie. It’s occurring to Tim that Fornell has to look different than he did the first time they met, it’s been almost fifteen years, after all, but at a glance, Tim can’t see what’s changed.

Ziva’s the only one not in her usual “work” gear, and that’s because she’s not back to her NCIS size
yet. However, for her, “work” gear was always a bit on the casual side, and a set of black cargo pants and a light khaki blouse isn’t too far off her usual. (Though having Dave in the snuggli on her chest is a few miles off of her NCIS style. But, like with Jackson, just by the power of Ziva being Ziva, no one seems to think Dave doesn’t belong here.)

Burke, who had ditched the pants suit after the second day on research work, has found it again. It’s boxy, awkwardly cut, navy blue, and she’s got a white blouse under the jacket. It actually puts Tim in mind of how he tended to look in suits back in the day. (To the point where he’s wondering if it literally is a men’s suit. She’s tall and broad enough in the shoulders to wear one.) He’s half debating suggesting she actually go visit a tailor if she’s going to keep wearing suits, but he’s also sure that’s likely over the line. Maybe in five or so years he can say something like that without it coming off wrong, but he knows he can’t right now.

Though, maybe at some point, he’ll make sure she gets to one of the ‘how to blend in with the high and mighty’ seminars. Let them make the suggestion…

His core team is here, ready to go, and they look like they’ve been chatting with the newcomers.

Vivianne LaCroix, his Press Secretary is sharing the sofa with Gibbs, and gently patting Jackson, who’s lapping up the attention with abandon. And Tim’s still a million percent sure he made the right choice with her. She’s in a cream-colored suit, modest just-above-the-knee skirt, fuchsia blouse, some sort of attractive gold necklace. She just oozes professional style and class.

Hotch is leaning hips-against-the-counter with the coffeemaker, and he’s broken out the black suit from his ID photo. He’s shaved, too. And, yes, it’s making him look a lot more stern than he was during his interview, but, he smiles as he says, “I know just as much about this as the rest of you…” and that softens the look.

Standing next to him, not wearing a suit is… The man notices Tim watching him and says, “Derek Morgan. Hotch said you needed people, and I’m people,” as he offers his hand.

Tim nods. This guy is definitely people. He’s tall, wide through the shoulders, narrow through the hips, and looks like he used to play football. He’s in jeans and a Henley, and perfectly comfortable in it, even in this room filled with suits. “You’re certainly people.” He looks to Hotch, question in his eyes.

“Derek worked for me, left the FBI a few years ago, same general reason I did,” Hotch adds.

“And after I started sleeping again, and stopped jumping every time I saw something out of the corner of my eye, and felt like my child and girl could pick me out of a lineup, I started to miss being useful,” Morgan, who looks so well at ease here in Tim’s office, he’s having a hard time imagining that anything ever wore him to a nub, says.

“Though your promise of flexible hours and getting to see his family is part of the deal, right?” Hotch checks.

“As long as the work gets done, I don’t care when you do it, where you do it, or how you look while you’re doing it.”

Morgan smiles at that.

Tim glances to Fornell, who nods. He doesn’t know Morgan, but he knows of him, and he passes the sniff test. That’s all the approval Tim needs. “Welcome to team useful,” Tim says to him.

He puts a box on the table, and crosses to the side where the accountants are sitting. “Hi, Tim
McGee.” He holds out a hand to a man who just feels… Like the west. He’s wearing a navy suit, and it’s a little rumpled. Probably flew in it to get here. So it’s not like he’s got a ten-gallon hat or cowboy boots or a leather vest or jeans on, but… Maybe it’s the tan, weathered skin, the long, lean build, or blue eyes that look like they’re used to wide skies, maybe it’s unruly curly gray-brown hair, but something about him feels like open, windy plains.

Chaffin shakes his hand, and nods. “Jeremy Chaffin, I’ll admit, I’m curious, of everyone you could possibly call in, why me?”

Tim smiles, and then extends his hand to the woman sitting next to Chaffin. She’s a bit older than he was expecting from the pictures, but that doesn’t matter if she’s got the stamina to do the job. Like most of this group she’s got “gray” hair, but where gray means white strands mixed in with darker ones for the rest of this crew, in her case, her hair is the color of a pencil lead. It’s gray, short, and the bangs are fluffed up. “Nancy Marsh, right?”

“Yes. And like Jeremy… Why me, and what are we doing? There’s an entire forensic accounting department, so why us?” She’s wearing a lavender twinset, a pearl necklace, and glasses. She’s a bit closer to his mental idea of librarian than accountant, but, as he thinks about it, he doesn’t really have a mental image, besides Diane, of an accountant.

Jennifer rounds out the crew. She hadn’t been in the room when he stepped in, but she is now, leaning against the door jam between their offices, waiting to be useful.

Tim doesn’t immediately answer her question. He circles the table, opens the lid of the box he put on the table. The smell of fresh baked pastries fills the room. “The muffins are on me. And whatever else it is you guys like for crime solving fuel. Just let me know and I’ll make sure we’ve got it. Now…

“Let’s get started.”

He feels like that’s a properly dramatic start, and then begins to get into the nitty gritty. As his team reaches for muffins, or refills cups of coffee, he says, “As for why you and what we’re doing… We’ve been given the task of cleaning house at the FBI. Obviously, that’s the kind of job that burns bridges, annoys people, kills friendships, and encourages people to play favorites. So, if you are here, it’s because someone recommended you, specifically, for the job.”

“Isn’t that IA’s job?” Morgan asks.

“IA is your second target,” Tim says.

That gets a lot of curious looks aimed at Tim.

“What’s the first one?” Marsh asks.

“Kenneth Crawl, James Unger, Harry Jegg, and Thomas Fink.” Tim lays the thumb drive Fornell got with all of the accounting data on it in front of Chaffin and Marsh. “And that’s where your case begins.”

There’s a moment when Chaffin and Marsh look at each other, both curious, and Morgan says, “Aren’t they our Union Reps?”

Tim nods. “Like I said, this is your first target.” He points to the pile of boxes against the wall of his office. “That’s my first target.”

Everyone glances around, and the newcomers seem to get, very quickly, what’s in those boxes, and
why going after the Union would matter.

“Is this a fishing expedition?” Marsh asks.

“Not anymore,” Tim replies, tapping the drive. “It’s pretty simple. We have one job, and that’s clean up the FBI. They have one job, to make it as difficult as possible for us to get rid of people. That’s what you pay those dues for, to make sure someone will fight to the ends of the earth to keep you working here. Which is great when you’ve got a supervisor who just doesn’t like you, or are about to blow a whistle, and terrible when you’re the guy trying to get rid of, or discipline, a culture of corruption.

“So, if we’re going to do our job, they can’t be doing theirs. Lucky for us, they appear to have been playing fast and loose with the rules, which should make this a lot easier.”

Burke smirks and adds, “They’re going to want to try this in the media. McGee’s going to make that difficult for them.”

That’s where LaCroix nods. She understands why she’s here, and why Tim would need a press secretary as part of his starting lineup.

Tim nods. “I’ve been looking at similar moves among other departments over the last five years, and within days of the notices of ‘cleaning things up’ the Union Reps show up and do a massive show about how the people trying to clean things up are incompetent and trying to hide it by blaming their employees. Instead of letting them go on the offense, we’re going to put them on the defense. And we’re going to wait until after whoever is left standing among their members has a chat with me about the cleanup, to do any press on it.”

“Then what am I going to do?” Vivianne asks.

“On Friday you are going to outline how, in response to the horrible mess the world fell into last year, that the FBI has come up with a major new initiative to clean up the FBI, first, and from there, the rest of the US Government. If anyone at that conference asks about arrested Union Bosses, you’ve got to do some more research before you can make a statement on that. That should be Friday. On… Jennifer?” Tim’s not sure exactly when he’s going to be meeting with the Union people, but he knows it’s coming.

“I’ve blocked out time for them on Saturday morning,” she replies.

“I’m assuming that shortly after they figure out who put their guys in jail, they’ll want to talk to me. We’ll be talking Saturday morning.”

“You’re laying a trap,” Chaffin says.

“I’m trying. There’s a TV show my wife likes,” Tim’s said it before he thought about it, and hopes no one gets enough time with Abby to find out that the wife in question is Breena, “and it’s about a group of con men. One of the things they keep saying is, ‘You can’t con an honest man,’ and assuming these guys play by the rules, I’ve got nothing.” Tim realizes he’s telling them the outcome he wants, and that he’s their boss. “And, look, you get into those numbers, and if they show nothing, they show nothing, and we’ll take the lumps coming. That is always the rule here. I don’t care how bad I want whoever it is, if you can’t find proof, then you can’t find proof, and that’s it, case over. No one’s going on a vendetta or fabricating or fudging evidence because it works for my plans, got it?”

Everyone nods. He hopes they do have it.
“But, if they don’t play by the rules, and I’ve got a feeling they won’t, Vivianne, I’m going to have a glorious recording for you to produce as your ‘research’ Saturday afternoon. And, if they really don’t play by the rules, Hotch, I should have a bribery attempt for you to arrest.”

She smiles at that. Hotch smirks.

“For right now, Hotch, you’ve got Morgan, Chaffin, Marsh, Fornell, and Gibbs. Investigate, find what you can, make whatever arrests you can. LaCroix, we’re about to have a chat about what’s going to happen, and how to package it. DiNozzo, and Burke, you’re still with me.”

“What are you going to do?” Hotch asks.

Tim turns to the boxes along his far wall and sighs. “Write up notes on all of them. I’ve got to explain to everyone in that group why they are getting chewed out by me.”

Jackson chooses that moment to bark. Tim gets up pats his head. “Yeah, I’ve got a lot of noses to rub in their own mess, which means I need to know what messes they all made.”

“Do you have a place for us to work?” Chaffin asks. This is a spacious office, but it’s a bit smaller than he’d like for nine agents, a dog, and baby, all in one space.

Tim nods. “Yes. I do. Jennifer will take you to the offices I’ve got marked out for you. And, Chaffin, when this case is done, if you want to return to Wyoming to work from there, that’s fine, or if you want to come back to DC…” He can see by the look on Chaffin’s face that’s a non-starter. “Don’t worry about it. When this one is done, we’ll talk about what I’m going to need you doing on the IA investigation. Nothing about that has to be done in DC.”

Chaffin looks relieved. “I’m okay visiting here, but… wouldn’t want to live here.”

Tim smiles. “A lot of people feel that way. When we get onto the bigger IA case, we’re going to need more talent, and we’re going to need it handy with numbers. Anyone you and Marsh can vouch for personally, we’ll shift onto this. We’re going to need skill, discretion, and people willing to burn bridges if the bridges need to be burned.”

When Hotch and Co. have eased out, and Ziva and Burke are starting to write up short notes for him on each of his employees, Tim settles down to chat with LaCroix.

“Were you in the US last fall?” he asks.

She shakes her head. “I was in Haiti. You go to places like Cap Haitian, or the Sudan, or Syria, and you never expect to feel safer there than you would have back home.”

Tim can certainly understand that. He heard a million versions of that when different men survived Afghanistan or Iraq, and came home to get killed here. “Where was ‘back home’?”

“A near-campus apartment just outside American University.”

Tim winces. “Anything left?”

“Luckily, yes. But getting back is slow. They tell me that any day now they may reopen my floor. The construction crews work around the clock, when they can, but they’ll often run out of whatever
it is they need, and have to wait for the next shipment.”

Tim sighs at that, long and low. He’s heard a lot of versions of that story. Whoever it is needs whatever it is, and if there isn’t any of it, the construction guys just move to the next job, and sooner or later, often later, they come back.

“What are you waiting on now?”

“Drywall. They had men putting it up three days ago, ran out, and…” she spreads her hands wide, “one day, I’m sure more will come, but it appears that everyone who makes drywall is making all the drywall they can, and we’re using it all up.”

“Or your guy just isn’t willing to pay the price for it these days.” Tim knows you can get anything in DC now, as long as you’re willing to pay for it. Assuming you want pre-Fall rates, you’ll get whatever it is, sooner or later, when someone in say, Iowa, has some extra that’s just hanging around.

“That is likely, too. My landlord is a firm believer in never paying a penny more for something than he has to. Why ask if I was here?”

“Just want to know if you saw it firsthand, smelled it, lived it?”

“No.” She delicately shakes her head. “I didn’t get back to the US until April.”

He nods at that. “Have you studied it?”

“Since you gave me the job, yes. I’ve watched as much footage of it as I could and read firsthand accounts.”

“Good. I think you need to understand how bad things got to put the rest of this in the right perspective. So, here’s the set up: Each branch of government has its own watch people. They have their own Internal Affairs departments, and they’re supposed to make sure that those groups are on the straight and narrow.

“On top of that Congress is supposed to be able to hop in and keep people’s feet to the fire.

“And, supposedly, whistleblowers will be protected, and whatever whistle they blow will be looked into.

“Obviously, there was a catastrophic failure of all three of those levels.

“Now, in addition to all of that, there’s one final level of protection. The FBI’s Public Corruption department. Usually, they get called in on state matters, when no one in the state can be trusted to be even-handed, but we’re also the guys you call when IA isn’t on the job, or when the Feds are on the take.

“Obviously, we failed monstrously, too.”

“And that’s where you come in…” Vivianne leads in.

“And where you do, too. First off, transparency. Unless it involves outing one of our guys who are undercover, you’re free to talk about anything. Although, I’d appreciate: ‘I need to do more research, but if you email me that question, I will make sure you get a response,’ going into your list of tried and true lines. We will get back to them, but like what you’re going to do this weekend, ‘more research’ may mean the situation is evolving and you’re waiting for it to finish evolving before
commenting.”

Vivianne smiles, and goes into Press Corps Mode: “Right now, Ms. Reporter, that situation is in flux. If you’d like to send me a copy of the question, and any follow up questions, I’ll make sure you get a response when the situation is no longer in flux.”

Tim’s nodding. “I like that one, too. The big issue is, we may brush them off, but not forever. Those questions will get answered. It will be vitally important that not only does the world know what we are doing, but that they trust that when we say something is happening, or that we can’t comment about it now, we mean it.

“So, transparency. And, as much as possible, easy, straightforward answers.”

Vivianne wants to see how far he goes with this, and says to Tim, “Ms. LaCroix? Did your agency go against the Union Heads in order to make them look bad, knowing you’d want to fire a lot of people…” She gives Tim a leading look to go with that, testing to see how transparent he wants to go.

Tim answers, as if he were her. “We went after our Union Reps, because they were breaking the law. We started with them because we wanted to send a very clear and powerful message: There is nowhere to hide, no position too high up, no one outside of the law. If you are breaking the law, if you are taking bribes, if you are looking the other way, there is no place for you in the FBI, no place for you near the FBI. We will not associate with you. You will not represent us. We will find you, and we will remove you.

“Corruption is a cancer, leave even a little of it in place, and it will grow, spread, and kill you. So, we are cutting it out, wherever it may be. And once the physician has healed himself, we’re going to start up with the rest of the patients.”

She smiles at that. “Have you thought about doing this for yourself?”

“Yes. But a wise woman told me, there are things I can do, and things she can do, and some of the things I can do, she can’t, and vice versa. So, I’m better off using my time doing the things you can’t do, and letting you use your time to do the things I can’t.”

Behind Vivianne, he sees Jennifer smile at that, as she’s arranging files for Ziva and Burke.

“Good answer.”

“Thank you. And my answer for the Union Rep question moves into point number two: Everything changed when all of the safeguards failed, and that is not going to happen again. The FBI is changing. It was our job to protect the people, and we failed, but we will not fail again. And if that means turning everything upside down, then we turn it upside down.”

“And how will you be turning things upside down?”

Tim smiles widely at that. “This is the good stuff. Get your notepad, it’s gonna be a long one.”

Vivianne pulls out her phone and hits the record button. “I’m ready.”

So, Tim begins, starting with the complete shake up of who works for the FBI, and then getting into the changes they’re going to make for how crimes will be reported, the changes for how crimes would be assigned, new internal checks and balances, making sure everyone does what they’re supposed to, and how they are going to go everywhere. How no one, nowhere, in no branch of the US Government, on US soil, was going to be safe from the FBI.
When he’s done, Vivianne says, “Sounds adversarial.”

“That’s how I want them to see the Public Corruption Unit. We’re the new Untouchables, and the entire US Government is under suspicion of rum running.”

She chuckles at that, and then asks, seriously, “What happens if that makes people unwilling to call for help?”

Tim’s not sure what to do with that. “How do you mean? You caught your Boss doing something he shouldn’t, but you’re on the take, too, so you just shut up? We’ve got our anonymous crime reporting system for that.”

“No. You’re a local PD, and your Unit Chief is way too cozy with the Mayor, and both of them are covering for the guy who runs the local construction company. A child goes missing. None of them, and their little pay for play deal has anything to do with that missing child, but they’re wary about calling in the FBI to hunt for the child because they don’t want their sweet little deal to get squashed.”

Tim opens and closes his mouth, and starts to feel the headache coming on. He swallows. And swallows again, reaching for his coffee, and then finally says, “Yeah, I got nothing for that. Okay, Ms. LaCroix, you’ve got the floor, someone asks you that, what do you do?”

“Thank you, Mr. Reporter, that’s a very good question. You need to remember that the FBI is here to work for you. A lot of our government forgot that recently. We did, too. But not anymore. We’re making it our mission to remember it and keep remembering it. If you have a case where you feel like the FBI should be involved but isn’t, give us a call. If your child is missing, give us a call. We are here to help, so help we will.”

Tim grins. “I like that. My higher ups may not, but go with it. When people think of the FBI, I want them thinking of us as Eliot Ness, not Alex Krycek.”

“Who?” She’s staring at him blankly.

“Uh…” Tim thinks about how long it would take to explain who Krycek was. “Don’t worry about it. We’re the good guys, we’re here to help, and that’s the message we’re sending loud and clear.”

“I can work with that message.”

“Thank you. So, Friday the shindig begins. First thing in the morning, Comey’s going to give his resignation in front of a select group of FBI Agents. Then I get to handle the shape-up-or-ship-out side of the message. As soon as he’s done with his half of it, he’s going to you, where he’ll give his public resignation, and then he’ll answer whatever questions, lob the press over to you, and you’re taking it from there.”

“And while I do that…”

“I’ll be chewing out the current slew of Public Corruption Agents, and then, from there, rubbing noses in messes.”

She smiles, his turn of phrase triggering a question. “Okay, not that Jackson isn’t the cutest little thing ever, but… Why is…” It’s clear she doesn’t know the name of the white-haired man who was holding him.

“Gibbs,” Tim supplies.
“Gibbs, bringing a puppy to work? He doesn’t look like the kind of man who has or needs a support animal.”

Tim’s giggling at the idea of Gibbs with a support animal. And then laughing wishfully at the idea that they should have gotten him one ‘back around ’02, because something warm, fuzzy, and loving probably would have helped him a lot. Maybe a little bit of doggie love could have gotten Pop out of Gibbs a few years earlier. He knows he certainly felt better about life in general when’d he’d go home from a bad case and Jethro would leap up to greet him as soon as he was in the door.

Then he gets back to her question. “That little guy is training to be a hearing ear dog. He’s learning how to go to a lot of places, with a lot of people, and behave properly while he does it.”

“Oh. That’s… I thought they were usually German Shepherds or Labradors.”

“Seeing-Eye Dogs often are. They’ve got to be big enough to be able to stop you from walking into things. Hearing Ear Dogs just need to be able to get your attention. So, little guys, like Jackson, are very smart and live about twice as long as a Labrador would…”

“Making them ideal for the job.”

“Exactly.”

By the time Tim’s finished talking with Vivianne, and she’s settled off in her own new office, getting herself, and it, set up, it’s lunch time.

Tim goes back to his own office, looks at the stacks of cases, and the pile of note cards that Ziva and Burke are getting ready for him. For a second, he feels tempted to grab his lunch, a folder, and a pen, and then he stops.

“Will the sound of a typewriter bug you?” he asks them.

Ziva looks up from her folder, and smiles at him. “Abby sent you into work with it, I see.”

Tim nods.

“Write, McGee. It’s good for you.”

“Okay. You two want some down time? Get out of here, eat something?”

Burke, not looking up from her folder, shakes her head. She’s in the zone right now. Dave’s in his stroller, snoozing, so Ziva shakes her head, too. “I think we are comfortable, here.”

“Okay. Thanks. Really!”

“Go, write.”

Tim sits down, opens up his lunch, and gets to it.

When he got home that evening, later than normal, he noticed he was much less exhausted than he normally is after a long day at work.
Even six hours of writing notes goes more smoothly if he takes breaks and lets his brain play.

When Abby and Breena got home from visiting Sarah and Nick, he pulls Abby close, kisses her, and says, “You were right about the writing.”

She smiles back at him, kissing him, and says, “So, how was today?”

“So, you’re Diane’s exes?” Chaffin says, sipping his coffee. Even he needs the occasional break from the numbers, and chewing the fat’ll do it. And sitting here, at a long conference table, in a bright, sunny room, overlooking the ruins of the Archives, there are two guys who may have some fat for him.

Both of the men, who are working with Hotch on getting financial records from different banks, look a bit like deer in the headlights. The bald one finally says, “Two of them.”

“There’s a third one now?” Chaffin asks, standing up, stretching, getting himself another cup of coffee.

The quiet one inclines his head, and the bald one replies, “I guess that tells us when you two got together. Sterling’s been old news for a while.”

Chaffin sips his coffee, and thinks for a moment.

Then Marsh adds, “Sterling… I know that name. He was with Homeland Security, right?”

The quiet one nods.

“Sterling… I know that name. He was with Homeland Security, right?”

“Diane Anderson,” Gibbs says, voice quiet. “She’s… my ex-wife, his ex-wife, and his ex…?”

Chaffin shrugs. “I wouldn’t say ex-anything. We were friendly back when we worked for the IRS. We’re still friendly.” Chaffin smiles a bit. Assuming he can get out of the building at some point, and Diane can get free from Jarvis, the two of them have an extremely tentative dinner date on the books.

“I worked two floors above her at the IRS.” He can’t see what’s left of the building, not from here, not that it would matter, they razed the ruins back in July. Now there’s just an empty lot. “It’s crazy what happened there.”

That gets a lot of nodding. Chaffin’s walks over to the window and looks out. There’s still construction and yellow DO NOT ENTER tape visible all along the far side of the street they’re on.

“When I left the FBI, I got as far away from DC as I could. Took our family, moved to Puerto Rico. It was just insane. There was the bar I’d hang out at. On the beach. They had
a TV, and one day DC was on fire.” He’s shaking his head.

Chaffin’s nodding, intensely. “I don’t own a TV. It was… late afternoon, I was making sure the numbers were actually telling me what I thought they were, and then Marsha, she’s the cube next to me, rushes over, and says, ‘LOOK!’ waving her phone in my face. The mob was rushing the White House.”

Hotch eyes Fornell. Taking him in, trying to remember why he knows Fornell’s face. And then he’s got it. “You were on TV. It was you in the tank with the kids, right?”

Fornell nods. “If it wasn’t me you saw, it’s only because you were watching the wrong tank.”

“Our BabyGirl talked about him!” Morgan says, fast, looking at Fornell in a whole new light. “I mean, if you’re the one with the tank.”

Fornell looks pleased to say this. “I’m the guy with the tank. One of them. Took five of us to get everyone in the building out. No one wants to rush a column of people if there’s five tanks around it, and the border guards decided that they had no interest in keeping up the barricades when we came up to them.”

Hotch nods, and then stands up, and hugs Fornell, who looks really shocked by that. So does Morgan. Apparently, that’s not normal Hotch behavior. “Most of the BAU was out when things fell apart. They were on a case in Minnesota, but Penelope Garcia wasn’t. She was in the building here, and you got her out.”

Fornell looks embarrassed when Hotch lets go of him. “Just… You know. Something needs to be done, so you do it.”

“With tanks?” Marsh says. “I was out on an audit that week. Luckiest assignment of my life. But… How do you get tanks?”

So, as Gibbs passes cups of coffee around, his new crew works on building up a sense of team commiserating over the adventures of Fornell and the tanks.

And, eventually, when that starts to wear down, Fornell elbows Gibbs and says, “You think tanks are impressive, this one was sailing up the Potomac, blind, at night, under an armed bridge, to smuggle food in and people out.”

Gibbs rolls his eyes, but that gets a lot of attention pointed at him. So, he doesn’t exactly tell the story, but he lets Fornell tell it. (By the time Fornell’s got a hold on that story, Gibbs was more or less piloting an inflatable raft through icy cold, mine-filled, shark-infested water, under fire from the VA National Guard, but… entertaining bullshit. And entertaining bullshit goes a long way toward building up camaraderie, and an even longer way toward making waiting on hold for the various banks they’re getting records from bearable.)

Morgan looks at Hotch, and Hotch gives him a little nod, so they start talking about how, once everything fell apart, they couldn’t just sit on their asses and let it crumble, so Morgan came back from Puerto Rico, and Hotch dusted off a few IDs he wasn’t supposed to have any more, and the two of them pretended to be inspectors, waving through boxes of food and supplies.

Hotch wraps up with, “It probably didn’t help much, but… It was something.”

Morgan nods. “Probably should have seen if I knew anyone with a helicopter.” He shrugs. “The idea just didn’t occur to me.”
Gibbs shakes his head. “The Virginia and Maryland National Guard were forcing anything that tried to fly in down. The first few days, some bastards were shooting from the air and dropping homemade bombs. Unless you were a news chopper, you couldn’t get over the city.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, I’m still here,” Fornell says, finally getting an actual person on the other end of his phone. “I’m FBI Agent Tobias Fornell, badge number…” And with that, they get back to work.

Much later that night, after everyone but Morgan and Hotch have left, Morgan says to Hotch, “Okay, I know why we’re here. And I know why the accountants are here.” Morgan nods in the direction where Gibbs and Fornell sit when they’re working. “Why’s team gray-hair here?”

Hotch takes a moment to run his own fingers through his hair. It used to be jet black. It’s not any more. Then his look says it all, but he adds his voice, too. “Exactly why you think they’re here.”

Morgan rolls his eyes. “Babysitting.”

“You got someone you’ve never worked with, based on one recommendation, who washed out—“ Derek’s look stops Hotch. “I’m talking about me, Derek.”

“No one could have done more…” Morgan says.

“I know. Or maybe, no one should do more.” They’re both quiet for a moment, thinking of the same person.

“You talk to our PrettyBoy?” Morgan asks.

Hotch’s face grows tight. “I’ve tried. He’s… not very communicative right now.”

“Yeah. He’ll talk to me,” and they both know how Spencer can talk, filling up the space with piles of words and facts, but nothing of value, “but not talk.”

Hotch nods in agreement. “The Lecter case is eating him.”

Morgan’s in danger of giving himself whiplash he’s nodding so hard at that. “I don’t know if they’re trying to use him as bait, from everything I’ve read, Spence is catnip for Lecter, or if Lecter is catnip for Spencer, and he’s going down a rabbit hole for him.”

“You think he’s using again?” Hotch asks quietly. Reid’s ‘coping mechanisms’ are a closely held BAU secret.

Derek holds his hands wide. Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference between tired and wired, and strung out, especially with Reid. “McGee gets wind of that, he’s out of here, isn’t he?”

Hotch just doesn’t know the answer to that, so he doesn’t answer.

“You want him out of there, don’t you?” Morgan adds.

“Years ago. He’s too damn smart to fail the evals, and too self-destructive to spend too much more time in there.”
“I know that look. Daddy’s out to protect his kiddo.”

Hotch knows Morgan isn’t wrong. Reid always appealed to the father in him.

“You want him here, with us.”

Hotch isn’t sure about that. “I want him away from Lecter. With us? I don’t know.”

“He’d be wasted here. This is…” Morgan looks around at the team they’re building, and the pile of numbers they’ve got. “This is good. It’s go-catch-the-bad-guys work. It’s why you and I signed on in the first place. But any competent agent can do this. We’d be wasting Reid here.”

“That’s why I don’t know about with us. But… I was talking to Walter. McGee’s got plans and plans and more plans. He’d have something for Spencer. I know it.”

“But would our PrettyBoy want it?”

Hotch sighs. Especially when Reid gets ‘focused’ on a case, it’s difficult to get him out of it. “That, I don’t know. He’s pleased to see us again.”

“He is. Maybe if I were to hit BabyGirl with it, just get her to nudge him toward us. I know JJ would approve the transition.”

“She would.”

“I figured you’d want to see this,” Comey says, handing Tim few pieces of paper the next morning.

Tim glances at them, wondering what, on paper, Comey could possibly want to share with him, let along first thing in the morning, unannounced, but once he sees it, he understands. This was never on the FBI servers, and it shouldn’t be.

It’s Comey’s resignation speech.

Tim reads through it, quickly, he doesn’t want the man just sitting there, staring at him for too long. He’s nodding as he goes along, and smiles at a few spots. Then he looks up. “It’s good. It’s really good.”

Comey nods. “I’ve had someone write them up for me for so long… wasn’t entirely sure how to do one for myself.”

Tim hopes he never gets there, but, he can kind of understand that.

“You knocked it out of the ball park. Now all I’ve got to do is make sure everyone runs the bases.”

Comey gives him a searching look. “And will they run the bases?”

Tim smiles at him. “Yes.”

Then he places the copy of the remarks into the shredder, pausing for a second to get the nod from Comey before hitting the on button. Comey nods, and there’s a grinding sound as the shredder eats the speech. No one gets to see this until Comey goes live with it.
“Have you spoken to the President, yet?” Tim asks.

Comey nods, looks around, sees only Ziva and Burke, working on more notes, then he says, “And how is your investigation going?”

“I have a feeling Wednesday is going to be a big day. Hotch tells me that once Marsh and Chaffin got into it, the numbers might as well have been a treasure map with a big X on them. He’s going to be scooping people up all Wednesday. Jennifer’s kept some time on Saturday free for me. I expect to be given an offer I won’t want to refuse.”

“And will you refuse?” Comey asks.

“Oh, yes!” Tim’s smiling at the idea. He’s assuming, and he knows he shouldn’t, but people so stupid as to have a mortgage larger than their listed income, and then claim the interest on that mortgage on their income taxes, are too stupid, and too cocky, to play the game by the rules. And he’s looking forward to seeing how they’re going to try and get him to let them keep breaking them. “And I’ll make sure I’ve got a recording of it, so I can have LaCroix get up and play it live on national television, and then explain exactly what cleaning up the FBI means.”

“They’re going to hurt you for this. You know that?” Comey says, voice serious. There’s a real warning there, and Tim hears it, but he’s not feeling it.

“They’re going to try. I have a feeling, especially after I go live with what I expect they’re going to offer me, that I’ll be a lot harder to hit than they’d like. After that, anything they come up with will look like sour grapes.”

Comey looks at Tim, eyes very serious. “If you back a man into the corner, expect him to bite, Tim.”

Tim nods. “Like wear a vest, bite?”

“I wouldn’t put it past them. If you can offer some version of it where they save face, you may last longer in this job.”

“I’ll think on that.” Again, he’s not feeling it, but he doesn’t want to blow it off, either.

“Good.”

After Comey leaves, Ziva slides over to Tim’s desk. “He’s right.”

Tim inclines his head.

“Don’t grab the snake by its tail, Tim. Take its head clean off, or give it a way to get away. Don’t corner it.”

Tim looks up at her, irked. “Great. How?”

“Take the head off. As soon as you get whoever comes to give you the offer, make sure you’ve got the warrants ready to go. Open the whole Union up. Right now you’re looking at individual members and what they’re doing. Get into their books and official work. What’s the fancy term? The thing they use against organized crime? FICO? Break the whole thing open. Kill the snake.”

“RICO, and… Okay.” He thinks about that for a moment. Then he smirks. “I think I’ve got a way to use that. Okay…”

“Okay?” Ziva’s watching him, making sure he’s being careful.
“Really, okay.”

“Good.” Then she flops ten more files onto his desk, and Tim starts writing up more notes.

Wednesday morning, bright and early.

Well, early. Bright requires the sun being more than an inch above the horizon, so it’s not bright. But, Good Lord, it’s early. Gibbs is fine, he’s only up an hour or so earlier than normal for this, but Fornell’s bitching about his joints and mainlining his coffee.

Hotch and Morgan, who have also gotten out of the habit of pre-dawn raids, are looking somewhat sleepy, too, but it’s time to go.

They’re creeping through a quiet gated community, in an extremely posh DC suburb on the Virginia side of the line. This early in the morning, the only things that appear to be awake, besides them, are the birds and squirrels.

The house is, like all of the houses in this development, palatial. Hotch takes the front door. Morgan’s on the left side of the house. Gibbs has eyes on the garage and right side door. Fornell has the back. And even with that, there are still doors, and a decent collection of huge windows, that none of them have a good line of sight on.

Gibbs hears in his earwig, “It’s time.” Then he hears across the near silent development, a fist thudding against a door along with, “Kenneth Crawl! This is the FBI! Open UP!”

Kenneth Crawl, chief counsel for the Federal Bureau of Investigations Employee’s Union, or FBIEU, (F-bow as they say it) is the first man on their list.

And he’s been a naughty boy. Under US tax law, if different organizations offer you gifts worth more than $500, you have to record them as income. And if one of those organizations is, say, paying for your car, or another one is paying for your home, and you don’t list that as income on your taxes, you pay some really big fines and go to jail.

And, say, if, you happen to be on the board of several charitable organizations, and if you maybe happen to be on those boards with the head honchos of numerous other businesses, and if, you know, you’ve somehow got an uncanny eye for selling the stocks of those companies short, and if, after you’ve done that, you’ve got this habit of donating 80% of your windfall to charities those Head Honcho’s just happen to draw a salary as boards members, it’s just possible that you may be engaging in insider trading. Which is, like not reporting your gift income, illegal. And insider trading or not, you’re certainly engaging in money laundering, and that’s not a good thing.

So, yep, Mr. Crawl Esq., has been naughty.

And he’s about to get his wrist slapped hard enough to take his hand off.
Gibbs can’t see it, but he can hear, through the collar mic on Hotch’s shirt, a very confused voice saying, “What the fuck? Is this a joke?”

“No joke.”

There’s a rustling sound. Gibbs figures that’s the sound of the warrant for Crawl’s arrest being offered followed by, “This can’t be right. I need to make a call.”

“As is your right, after we’ve booked you.”

“Now, listen here, there’s no need—“

Hotch’s voice comes through loud and clear. “Mr. Crawl, that is an arrest warrant with your name on it. You can come with me easily, or you can come with me hard, but you will come with me. If it’s a mistake, joke, or anything else, you can figure that out, after I’ve got you processed.”

There’s a sigh along with, “Fine. Do you mind if I put some clothing on?”

“No. Morgan…”

A moment later Gibbs hears Morgan’s voice. “I’ll fetch some clothing for you. You stay where we can see you, Mr. Crawl.”

“This is ridiculous! The warrant doesn’t even say what I’m supposed to be wanted for.”

“Nonetheless, it says you are wanted,” Hotch’s voice.

After about five minutes, Gibbs and Fornell get the all clear.

Sitting in the backseat of Hotch and Morgan’s car is an older man. He’s got to be within a year of sixty, and he looks like every stereotype of the rich, well-connected, white lawyer.

Well, a somewhat grumpy, discombobulated one. He didn’t get his morning shower or shave, so he’s not as polished as he’d like to be.

Honestly, he puts Gibbs in mind of what Senior looks like after drying off from playing in the river on the Fourth of July. He’s younger, of course, but that same, plump, well-fed, prosperous look, just rumpled and stubbly.

Gibbs grabs his phone and sends off a text. *One down.*

Tim’s blissfully sleeping when his phone buzzes. He jerks awake, and momentarily curses that he didn’t have the brains to be one of the two of them on the outside this morning.

He knew this buzz was coming, but somehow that didn’t translate to making sure that he could easily reach his phone without have to untangle himself from all of his happily sleeping bedmates. Breena’s on one side, and Jimmy’s on the other, and given the chance of disturbing the pregnant lady or his husband…
Yeah, Jimmy’s got perpetual short straw on that one, and he grunts a bit when Tim accidently elbows him trying to get out of the bed without jostling Breena.

Finally, he’s got to his phone, and sees the text.

He smiles at it and sends back. *Three to go.*

Then he looks at the bed, and shakes his head. He’s up, he might as well be up.

He sends another text, this one to Chaffin and Marsh. *Crawl’s in custody. Once he makes his call, get on it.*

As per Ziva’s suggestion, he’s taking the head off the snake. As soon as Crawl makes his call, they’ll follow the call and begin the investigation. Meanwhile, Crawl, as the group’s lawyer, was the first target of the day. They don’t know for a fact that the three to go will try to call Crawl, but if they do, they’re going to be getting no answer.

It’s still early, and definitely bright now.

Harry Jegg, Finance Comptroller for FBIEU, is having a lovely bit of breakfast on his back porch when Gibbs and Fornell (given the directions to take the back) shock the shit out of him by stalking up, guns drawn and pointed down.

He sees them, and immediately jumps to the ground, hands over his head, shouting to his wife, “They’re here! Get down, get down!”

Fornell glances at Gibbs, eyebrow high.

Gibbs shakes his head, and holsters his weapon. They hear the thudding on the front door, along with the call of “Henry Jegg! FBI! Come out!”

Gibbs says into his mic, “He’s back here with us, lying on the ground.”

Fornell hasn’t holstered his weapon, he’s got it in hand, and pointed at the ground, but he is standing next to Jegg, head tilted to the side. “Are you expecting an attack?”

Jegg’s breathing hard, and gasping, “You? You? You scared the shit out of me!” He’s slowly sitting up as his wife, still frozen to her chair on the patio, blinks in shock.

Gibbs offers a hand to Jegg, as Hotch and Morgan come around to the back. Jegg gets up, says “Thanks,” to Gibbs, and then says to Fornell, apparently assuming that he’s the lead investigator, “They’ve been sending letters for years. How did you find out?”

Fornell looks to Hotch, and Hotch nods, so Fornell rolls with it. “We’re the FBI; we protect our own. Now, for your safety, how about you and the Mrs. pack a bag, and get ready to come with us?”

“Oh, thank you!” Jegg says, grabbing his wife by the hand, pulling her into the house. A moment later, Hotch is on his phone. “Yeah, get me a track on Jegg’s phone. I want to see who he’s been calling.”

Morgan’s got his own phone out. “Hey PrettyLady, yeah, we found out why Jegg’s been pulling ten
grand a month out of the Union and paying it into that unknown account. Someone’s been blackmailing him. Uh huh… Yeah… We’ll be looking for his phone records. You and Chaffin have any luck on figuring out who he’s been paying? Still looking. Okay. Uh huh… He thinks we’re taking his wife and him into protective custody. Right now, we’re rolling with it. We’ll split him up from her on the way in ‘for their safety.’ He gets his rights read on the way in, and we chat with her, and see what she’s willing to tell us… Thanks. Yeah. More information coming your way, soon.”

Morgan hangs up his phone. “Marsh is on it.”

Every month, like clockwork, Henry Jegg was pulling ten thousand dollars out of the Union’s coffers, plopping it into his own account, and then wiring it off to an as of yet unknown account.

As he comes running down the steps, a frantic look on his face, hastily packed bag in his hand, Gibbs knows this one’ll crack easy.

He smiles at Mrs. Jegg, and says, “Look, we want to keep you two as safe as possible. You come with Agent Fornell and I, and Henry will go with Agents Hotch and Morgan.”

She kisses her husband goodbye, squeezes his hand, and then leaves with Gibbs.

Fornell smiles at Hotch, a quick gesture the Jeggs miss, but all of the agents know what’s happening next.

Tim’s feeding the babies their breakfasts when his phone buzzes again. Two down. Got the wife talking. Apparently someone, not us, noticed that the FBIEU wasn’t following the campaign finance laws. They’ve been paying hush money for the last three years.

Tim smirks. Good. We arresting her?

Not yet. Right now she’s just near what’s going on.

Then keep her happy and talking.

Tim sends out another text to Chaffin and Marsh. Do we know where that money was going, yet?

A few minutes later he gets one back from Chaffin. To the Caymans, then cashed out.

Dead end?

As of now.

Tim sighs.

“Hit a snag?” Breena asks, as she’s making lunches for everyone.

“We missed someone who was in position to blackmail people about the campaign finance debacle. And finding them just went black.”

“Sorry.” Abby says.

“Thanks. After all, you wouldn’t want me to get bored, right?”
Abby snerts at that, and kisses the top of his head. Tim rolls his eyes a bit, and grabs the bit of banana that Sean’s trying to get rubbed into his hair.

Jimmy rushes through the kitchen, stuffing food into his mouth while grabbing his lunch. They’ve all seen this before, so, after a few quick kisses, he’s out, leaving to calls of, “Go get ’em!”

Abby’s phone chirps, and she gets moving faster, too. “Dead body in Rockwood Park,” she says, filling in the bit Jimmy left out as he was rushing out.

“Busy day coming up,” Breena says.

No one disagrees with her.

There’s busy and there’s busy.

Tim’s people are busy. They’re off doing useful things and kicking down doors. (Actually, they aren’t. They’re going after lawyers and accountants. So far all they’ve had to do is knock loudly. But Tim’s enjoying imaging them storming in.)

He’s busy. Reading files. Writing notes. Sitting at his desk, across from Ziva and Burke, who are also reading files and writing notes for him.

It has to be done. He can’t just paper over the whole of the Public Corruption Department with generalities. If he does that, anyone in the crowd will be able to shift blame. They’ll be able to say, ‘It wasn’t me,’ or ‘I didn’t know,’ or ‘Everyone was doing it.’

Okay, he can’t get rid of that last one. Everyone was doing it. But he can certainly make sure that everyone he talks to understands how and why they screwed the proverbial pooch.

But, (eye roll) it’s boring.

All three of them, hell, Dave even, is waiting with baited breath for each new update from the team that’s actually doing fun stuff.

“Do we have anything on Crawl’s call?” Hotch asks when he, Gibbs, Fornell, and Morgan get back from bringing in Jegg.

Marsh replies, “He’s called Gareth Powers, second counsel for FBIEU. He’ll be coming in soon.”

“Anything interesting?” Gibbs asks. He’s used to his team having everything up and ready to go once processing is done, and he’s not seeing any interesting laying around.

“We’ve literally just got the warrants. Less than a minute ago. You walked past the lady who brought them to us. Nothing else yet to go with,” Chaffin responds.

Fornell checks his watch. “Unger won’t be in position for another hour, what do you need us doing?”
Marsh inclines her head. She’s already got her computer open and on the hunt. “Same thing we did with the first four of them. Financial records. Pick a bank and get calling.”

So, while Tim’s a floor up, fantasizing about kicking doors down while he’s writing a list of missed cases and sweetheart deals, his ‘go’ team is sitting around, on their phones, waiting on hold, looking for anything they might find on Gareth Powers.

As Fornell waits on hold, he says, “We don’t actually have any questions for Crawl, do we?”

Marsh shakes her head. “It’s all in the data. He can visit with his lawyer, and if Powers is clean, great, out he goes. If not, we arrest him, too.”

Chaffin’s never actually interrogated anyone, so he’s less sure, but he says, “We do deals, right? We know you did X, so tell us about Y, and then we haggle?”

Gibbs smiles.

Morgan adds, “And once we figure out what the hell Y is, we’ll do that.”

“And if he begs to talk to us, offering up some Y, we’ll be very interested in that,” Fornell adds. “But right now, they can go sit in a cell and wonder about what’s going on.”

Gibbs looks up from the computer he’s on. “Powers is starting to make calls. Let’s see who he wants to talk to.”

Fornell moves over and looks at the screen. “That’s the main phone line here.”

Another number pops up. “Okay, who’s that?” Gibbs asks.

Hotch and Fornell share a look. And then laugh.

“What?” Morgan asks.

“Comey. He’s calling Comey.”

That laugh spreads.

“Gareth, I can’t do anything about this!” Comey says, very emphatically.

“What do you mean you can’t do anything? You’re the head of the FBI.” Gareth Powers is having none of this. The whole point of being the kind of guy who can call Comey and get him on the phone in less than five minutes is so when something needs to be done, it gets done.

“And that’s exactly why I can’t get involved.”

“You have to! Crawl’s in jail.”

“Where he went after being arrested with a legitimate warrant. I can’t help.”

“You have to. This is total shit. Hotch, the guy who ran the arrest, he works for the fucking BAU. They go against psychos. Sure, Crawl’s a cold-ass-son-of-a-bitch, but he’s not collecting eyeballs in
his freezer. This has to be a mix up!”

“No. It’s not. Your information is out of date. Hotch isn’t with the BAU any longer. He’s with Public Corruption, now.”

And as soon as Comey says that, Powers goes dead silent. For a minute, a full sixty-seconds stretching out into heart thudding silence, there’s nothing from his end of the line. Then he finally says, “And you can’t help.”

Comey could almost laugh as he hears the understanding in Powers’ voice. “I can’t help.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Powers never did show up to help his client. Nineteen weeks later, they found him in Badajoz, Spain, living under an assumed name.

Apparently Crawl wasn’t the only one in on that insider trading/money laundering scheme.

On Wednesdays, James Unger eats lunch, at exactly 1:00, at the Tribune Club.

In their research on where and when to grab him, Hotch and Co. weren’t able to find out why, but, every week, his credit card shows that he’s here, so here is where they’re going.

Here is not the dark-walled, heavy-oak paneling, leather-chaired temple to upper-crusty snotty-perfection that Gibbs was expecting with a name like the Tribune Club.

It’s a strip club. A nice one from the looks of it, but a strip club nonetheless.

And the Wednesday mystery? Wednesday is Yellow Fever Day.

Gibbs is rolling his eyes as they get ready to slide into the place.

Fornell is shaking his head. “Always my least favorite place to grab a guy.”

Morgan’s curious about that. “Always thought they were easier to get in a place like this. Tend to be distracted.”

“You’re not wrong about that. But I feel bad for the girls. We show up and bust this guy, and people’ll stay away for a while after. That’s hard for them.”

Gibbs, Morgan, and Hotch weren’t expecting that, and it’s clear by the looks on their faces that none of them had ever thought of that.

Fornell shrugs. Gibbs knows that look, there’s a story to this, but he’s not about to ask while the four of them are together. Later, when it’s just the two of them, he’ll find out. Fornell nods, later, he’ll tell that story.

And, when they go in Unger is distracted. And it’s fairly obvious how he can spend $200 on lunch every Wednesday.
He may be skimming on his taxes, but at least he’s a good tipper.

Like Crawl, he’s sure this is a mistake. And like Crawl, he’s not putting up any sort of trouble, other than fussing loudly about this being a mistake. And like Crawl, he’s going to be awfully disappointed when he calls his lawyer (Crawl) and no one shows up to offer any help.

“Oh. Okay… Sure. I’ll bring ‘em home. Love you, too.” Tim almost says, “Kiss Abby for me,” but he doesn’t. Ziva’s not the only one in the office as he’s talking on his cell. Generally speaking, when he talks to any of his spouses when someone else is in ear shot, he keeps his conversation vague enough that there would be no reason to assume he’s not talking to Abby.

And that worked just fine today. Right now, Jimmy’s between bodies, and Abby’s up to her elbows in trace, so Jimmy’s the one who called.

“Case?” Ziva asks.

“Dornie caught another murder. Abby’s in the lab late tonight. From what I can tell, Tony should be home normal time.”

“His case went hot on Monday, they are still working it,” Ziva says.

“So you’re bringing work home,” Burke asks.

Tim nods. “Yeah. More fun with files. Get the kids fed, into bed, and then I’ve got a date with more of these. So fun.”

Ziva nods. They’ve both been dying for updates from downstairs. Three down, one to go. That last one isn’t getting back to DC until 7:00, and they’re going to wait for him to get home before trying to arrest him.

Attempting to grab people at the airport, when they’re coming in, is just messy. Too many people, too easy for a spooked person to run and run far.

But, when they get home? They’re often tired, frazzled, and not willing to put up a fight.

So, 9:00. If everything goes well, they’ll be four for four before Tim brushes his teeth tonight.

“Gibbs, Fornell, take the back.”

Since Hotch is officially in charge on this op, neither Gibbs nor Fornell has a problem with his order. And the back does give them the opportunity to be the guy who saves the day when it all goes upside down.

So, they’re quietly doing that half-walk, half-run, gun out, pointed down, move-into-place maneuver through a very still suburban street at nine at night on a Wednesday. A very surprised squirrel skitters away from them, but that’s about it for signs of life in this neighborhood this time of day.
Other than the stars, and the complete lack of light, they might as well be doing the exact same thing they did this morning. This neighborhood isn’t quite as rich as Crawl’s, but it’s not off by much. No one has a four car garage, for example. Only most of the houses have pools, instead of all of them.

Once they get into place, each of them at opposite corners of a tidy backyard, (behind the pool) Gibbs quietly says on the mic, “We’re in place.”

Then they hear the thudding on the door followed by a very loud, and very clear, “Thomas Fink! Open up! FBI!”

A moment later they hear through their earwigs, “Let me see that!” Fink, the Director of FBIEU says.

Gibbs and Fornell move to the front of the house, and see his eyes flying across the page.

“Me? You’re here for me?” He staring at Hotch and Morgan in stupefaction.

“That’s what the paper says,” Hotch says.

“Just me?”

“Should we be here for anything else?” Morgan asks.

“I’m not saying anything without a lawyer.”

“As is your right, Mr. Fink,” Hotch says.

As Fink is glaring at Hotch, Morgan calls Tim. “McGee, I think we’re gonna need a warrant for Fink’s house, computers, papers, the works. He seems to think we’re selling ourselves short going with just him.”

Tim, back at his home, sitting next to Breena, writing his notes on yet another case as she reads up on the plusses and minuses of a new embalming solution, (both of them amiably bitching about who’s got the more boring situation) says, “Toss Fink in the car, crack the windows, and hold tight. I’ll have a warrant for you, fast.”

Gibbs holsters his gun. Fornell does, too, and they begin the walk back to the car.

Halfway there, Fornell says to Gibbs, “You think that’s the last time we ever do that?”

Gibbs blinks, and then, slowly, nods. Maybe it’s not the last time. Maybe. But… He looks around as Morgan’s making sure that Fink’s head doesn’t bonk into the back of the car, and his gut isn’t feeling it.

This is it. He just suddenly knows. This is the last time. He looks at Tobias, who nods.

Gibbs blinks again. “God.” He can’t even begin to put into words how this feels.

And he doesn’t have to. “Yeah,” Fornell says. “Let’s get ‘em booked, and then go get very drunk.”

Gibbs nods.

“I’m not saying anything without a lawyer!” Fink says, utterly flustered and indignant as Hotch
shoves him into the car.

Morgan shakes his head, and then says, “Did anyone ask him anything?”

Hotch smiles. “No, they didn’t.”

Morgan turns in his seat toward Fink. “Guess what? No one’s gonna ask you anything. We’ve already got what we need.”

Fink looks very scared at that. And proceeds to look even more and more scared when no one says a word to him as they wait for that warrant.

Gibbs notices, half an hour later, as they start taking apart his house, that Fink’s gone from nervous to terrified.

“We’ve got him on wire fraud and tax evasion, right?” he says quietly to Hotch.

“That’s what we’re supposed to have,” Hotch has spent way too many years as a profiler to not see the fear radiating off of this guy.

“Would you be that scared of a wire fraud conviction?” Gibbs says.

Hotch shakes his head. “I wouldn’t look that scared unless I had a body in the basement.”

They stare at each other for a long minute. Then they look at Fink, who is small, slim, and looks like, if he really worked up to it, might be capable of pulling a trigger, at a target. Both Hotch and Gibbs shake their heads.

They know killers, this isn’t one of them.

The two pounds of hash they found in his suitcase was a bit of a shock. On a few levels. Not the least of which was how he managed to get it through the airport in his carry-on.

But all of that will wait for later.

Tim is brushing his teeth when his phone buzzes for the last time that night.

*Four for four. You’ll never guess what we found in his suitcase.* Tim can feel Gibbs’ glee at this.

*You’re right I can’t. What did he have?*

*Two pounds of hashish.*

Tim stares at his phone, rubs his eyes, which are a bit buggy from hours of reading paper files, and then hands it to Breena, and says, “My glasses are downstairs. Does that say what I think it does?”

She snorts a laugh. “Oh yes it does. Someone’s got a hidden side, doesn’t he?”

“Apparently. The FBIEU is one hell of a shitstorm.”

She smiles at him, and pats him on the butt. “Lucky for you.”
“Amen on that!” He takes the phone back and sends back to Gibbs. *Looks like the stars are aligning.*
*I’m off tomorrow, are you going in?*

*Nah. Hotch and Morgan are pros. They don’t need me hanging around.*

Left unwritten is the question, “How about you?”

*I’m building Donnie’s crib tomorrow afternoon. If you felt like coming by to help, I’d appreciate it.*
*I’ll be there.*

---

Abbi’s home with Mona and Jackson when Gibbs and Fornell get in.

They’re actually earlier than she would have expected. All things considered, 11:30 isn’t that late for the kind of day they had planned.

She doesn’t like the vibe on them, either. They, from everything she’s been getting text-wise, should be returning home the conquering heroes, and right now, she’s got two mopey, wet dogs in her house.

“Something go sour?”

Gibbs flops on the sofa next to her, and Fornell takes one of the armchairs. “Nope,” Gibbs says.

“Just peachy,” Fornell adds. “Textbook white collar cases. You go in, they fuss about being innocent, lawyers get mentioned, you toss ‘em in the car, and they fuss. Get ‘em back, call the lawyers, and they fuss more.”

“So… why are you guys moping?” she asks as Gibbs snuggles in, and Mona hops onto the sofa to go love on him some, too.

Fornell opens his mouth, and then shuts it, and then gets up, heads to the kitchen, and pours himself a scotch and two bourbons for Gibbs and Abbi, and comes back a moment later, handing them over.

Gibbs drinks half of his straight off, and then says, “That was it.”

Fornell’s already shot his back, and is back in the kitchen pouring another one. “End of our line,” he says from the kitchen. “The gut doesn’t think we’re ever going to be in the field like that again, and when is the gut wrong?”

“Oh,” Abbi says, taking a sip of her own bourbon. Part of her is very pleased that the gut thinks this is the end. Part of her knows they must both feel like they’ve had an arm cut off.

“So, you retire. And you shift onto paperwork. And you tell your wife about all those things you think you’re going to do. And…” Fornell’s got a much bigger glass now, and is sitting across from them on the armchair. “And I didn’t think it would ever really end, you know?”

“There’d always be one last hurrah,” Gibbs adds.

“Hurrah,” Fornell says, voice flat. He gulps another swallow of his scotch. “No wonder Franks was drunk all the time. This feels awful.”
No one says anything for a moment, and Fornell stares into his glass. Then he looks up at Gibbs, eyes blazing. “A long time ago, we were talking around something. For after retirement. It had to do with Franks and girls and… Okay, we’re retired now, what are we doing?”

Gibbs isn’t entirely sure, anymore, that he actually wants to do what he was talking about back then. Travel restrictions are getting less onerous, and some of those countries seem to be calming down. And, more importantly, at least right this second, he’s feeling burned on really, finally being done, but he knows that when he wakes up in the morning, he’ll have things to do. Things he wants to do. But given how Fornell’s looking right now, he’s thinking they can spitball about this all night.

So, Gibbs takes another sip of his bourbon, pets Abbi and Mona, and then says, “Mike Franks was running girls out of Iraq. Teens who got married at twelve, he’d get them and their kids out, resettle them here. I was thinking about getting into that business.”

Fornell grins. “I can do that! We’ve been talking about traveling. Wendy and I can go, visit wherever, and while I’m there, I can scout ports, places for you to stick the boat, and…”

And they’re off.

As strategy planning sessions go, it was pretty much what it was, two increasingly drunken men fantasizing about daring-do and high-seas adventures where they go off and save the damsels in distress. It was not, by a long shot, anything one could call a concrete or well-thought-out plan.

But it got them through the night. And when Wendy came to grab Fornell and take him home, he was in a better mood, and able to sleep.

Which, really, was all it needed to do.
The Fear of McGee: Curtain Call

Thursday morning feels like a morning should. Tim gets up, helps with kids, and food, and even manages to get a quick bit of yoga in. He kisses kiddos goodbye, and without a thought, hops into the car with Abby and Jimmy.

It’s just a morning.

They’re halfway to NCIS when the fact that this isn’t how his day is supposed to go really hits him.

“For a good few minutes there, I was just going to work this morning.”

Abby turns to face Tim. She’s in the front with Jimmy, who’s driving, and he’s in the back.

“Yeah. It did feel a lot like old times.”

He nods.

“You sure you want to do this,” Jimmy adds, voice soft. They know what his plan for this morning is, and generally, support it, but there’s generally supporting it, and wondering if Tim’s just opening himself up for some heartache.

Tim nods again, his determined look on his face. “Yeah. I think I need it.” Then he smiles a little. “Besides if it’s too much, you’re just a few hundred feet below me.”

Jimmy nod, as Abby says, “Damn straight. And you call if you need anything.”

“Don’t worry. If it gets to be too much, I’ll scamper on down and get some snuggles.”

Abby nods, still half-turned in the car seat, still looking at him. “Good. You can come home tonight determined to handle tomorrow, but I don’t want you beating yourself up so bad you’re falling apart.”

“It’s just motivation, not self-flagellation.”

“Okay,” Jimmy says. Motivation they like. Punishing himself, that’s a different story all together.

“Okay,” Tim adds, to himself, very quietly.

Almost a year.

Almost.

Tim’s standing in front of the door to the roof. It’s metal, painted gray, and looks exactly the way it did almost a year ago. When the Marines scrubbed and cleaned and repainted the Navy Yard, this door didn’t get a makeover.

Once they put the fires out, and once it became clear no one was going to be getting out of DC who wasn’t already out, this was where Tim did his job.
Leon divvied them up by skills. Almost everyone in the building could fire a handgun. Not as many people could hit a target with a rifle at a long distance. But Tim could. So every day, he’d take his rifle, pop the helmet and body armor on, and go to the roof.

Gibbs was up here, for some of the time. He remembers that. Once the smoke cleared, Gibbs was up here.

And Jarvis. He thinks he was a little surprised to see him up here the first day, but… Not much. That Jarvis could sharp shoot… Once he thought about it, patient, sharp eyes, the ability to do the math. No, once he put it together, it wasn’t a surprise.

A revolving collection of Marines. Tim doesn’t remember their names or faces. They were just shapes on the roof that occasionally moved.

They’d sit, or stand, or in Tim’s case, lay, and wait. He thinks that most of the days he just lay up there, on his belly, watching, and waiting. Most days… Probably. His memory is still fuzzy on a lot of the day to day stuff.

It’s not fuzzy on some of it though.

Tim spends a moment, standing in front of the door to the roof, not opening it, feeling… He can’t name it. Somewhere between dread, fear, loathing, and blah.

Probably, mostly, blah.

He knows it can’t be as bad as it is in his head. It just can’t be. He won’t open the door and suddenly morph back a year. (Though there’s a nagging fear in the back of his mind that he will.) The sky won’t suddenly fill with smoke and ash. His clothing won’t suddenly get too loose, clammy from not enough drying, and reeking from mildew and his own sweat. There won’t be a rifle in his hand, or a helmet, also reeking of mildew and sweat, on his head.

There won’t be a mob of people, needing to be broken.

There won’t be hunger, or depression, or the verge of madness.

None of that is waiting on the other side of the door.

It’s just a place. A place where some very bad things happened to him. Where he did bad things to other people.

But his heart is pounding as he extends his hand, feeling the cold plastic of the push pad on the door handle, and he feels stupid about it because all he’s going to find when he opens it is the last day of August, a blue sky, and a wall of late summer humidity.

Not all. He’ll find memories. And maybe motivation. But… the only horror on the other side of the door, isn’t on the other side of the door. It’s here, with him, in his head. And it’s just as real on this side, staring at a gray-painted metal door, as it will be on the other side.

He makes himself press the handle, and then the door, easing it open, his eyes close, and after one more moment, he opens them, and steps forward.

If his heart was going a million beats a minute before, it’s kicked it into double time, now. And his knees feel weak. They’ve got no interest in taking him any further. But he’s got to go further. Has to go back. Has to see.
He can almost see his perch. There’s an exhaust vent between the door and where he would lie, and right now, walking toward it, he can feel the hours lying on his belly, the rough pressure of tar paper roof on his elbows, the heat of it. None of the days he was out there got very hot, but the roof is black, and the sun would soak into it, and at first, when he’d lay down each day, the warmth was nice. Especially as the month wore on, and the air got colder, and he lost more weight, that warmth was nice.

Tim’s standing next to his perch.

“Only nice thing about it.”

It’s clean. Mostly. No puke. That’s his last very clear memory of being up here. Last memory with real context, with a beginning, middle, and end. Jarvis tossed the MRE at him, said something like, “If we’re gonna kill for it, we might as well eat it,” and Tim tore it open, wolfing it down. He still doesn’t know what was in it. Just that it was food, and he needed food, had to have it, his body was reaching for it, grimy, gray-nailed hand, tearing the wrapper apart and stuffing it, fast, too fast, into his mouth.

He’s not entirely sure he even chewed.

And it didn’t matter much anyway. Less than a minute after tossing the packaging aside, he’d puked it back up. Acid burn in his throat, and shame. He remembers that so clearly.

A starving man can’t shovel 3000 calories of whatever that was into himself in under two minutes and not throw it back up. And he knew it, but he couldn’t slow himself down. He wasted food, and just about wanted to shoot himself for that. Wanted to, and might have been, crying for it.

After that there are just flashes. Literal, muzzle flash, and metaphorical, short images with no real narrative flow, other than, he knows, intellectually, what he was doing.

Knows it the way he knows scenes he’s written.

There’s no “lived” memories of some of those bits.

He can see people he shot. Still. Faces. Though… He’s got to be adding them, making those memories up, because he’s up here right now and he can’t see that far…

Or not.

Rifle scope. He was watching the world through a scope. That could be why there are just flashes of images, because the rest of the world was edited down to the tiny circle of the scope.

Tim looks down, and realizes he’s sitting on the roof. Probably a good thing. Abby, and Breena, and Jimmy wouldn’t want him standing up here, at the edge of the roof, looking down at the ground. But sitting, just peering over, that’s fine.

His rifle isn’t down there. He thinks he threw it away. Or maybe he just invented that memory. He didn’t have it when he went home. He did have it when he got up here. Obviously something happened to it in between, but he doesn’t know what.

The cars are gone. They’ve been gone for… ten months now, maybe nine. No more ring of cars. Their insurance company sent them a nice check to cover Abby’s car. Hand-built roadsters aren’t exactly a dime a dozen.

He can remember the snow plow driver. It wasn’t really a plow. It was a plow blade, a big city plow
blade, on a truck. Big truck. A Ford F-450 or the like. Huge thing. More than enough power that it would have shoved anything in its path away. And there were people all around it, ready to break the line of cars, ready to mob them.

Gasoline. Burning gasoline. He more smells it than remembers seeing it, but he knows he saw it. He’s just not sure if he saw it that day, or the day they were guarding the prisoners. Probably both days. Maybe.

It had to be there. He can smell it.

The plow was coming. Stupid thing. But if it’ll move a whole street of snow, it’ll move a Honda Hatchback, or some other little car. Only had to do that a few times, open up some gaps in the cars.

It’s not like a wall of cars will keep people from getting in. It will slow them down, space them out. And if most of what you’ve got is non-automatic rifles and handguns, you need to space them out. If they all come in together in a mob, those weapons become useless. The mob just takes the hits and keeps coming. Most of the mob can’t even see what’s happening to the people at the front. If you can’t see the front line get shot, then you can’t get scared, and you won’t run away. But spread them out, and they can see. Spread them out, and when people being to fall, the ones in the back will stop.

And the plow was coming. And it wasn’t stopping. And if it moved those cars out of the way, they’d have a mob to deal with, not just a line of people.

He was Black. Young… Old enough to drive. Old enough to fill out that front seat. Young enough his hair was black, and his face was unlined and… He was determined. Tim remembered that. He wasn’t looking at anything other than what was ahead of him.

Food.

There was food ahead, and he was hungry… He had to be hungry. Sunken cheeks and sunken eyes and hands with knuckles too large and…

His face filled up the circle of the scope.

And then it didn’t. Then there was just a spider web of shattered glass and red spatter.

And Tim threw away his rifle, and he shut his brain down, and…

Eventually he was home.

The place the man in the truck never got to go.

“*It feels like the walls should scream, doesn’t it,*” Leon says, sitting on the edge of the roof next to Tim.

He jerks a bit at the voice, startled. “Leon. How?” He can’t imagine that Leon knew he was coming up here today.

Leon smiles at him. “*Dumb luck. Every inch of every Federal building is non-smoking now.*” He pulls out the pack. “*I’m down to one a day, now. You mind?*”
Tim shakes his head.

Leon slips out his daily cigarette, and lights it, inhaling with a look on his face like *this* is the definition of pleasure.

“If it weren’t for the girls, I might keep this up. Especially after a long chat with some idiot who wants the impossible, yesterday, one of these feels *really* good.”

Tim’s never really smoked so he’s got no frame of reference for that. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“Like that first sip of coffee on a lazy morning, when it’s made up just right, and you’ve got nowhere to go or anything to do.”

*That* Tim understands, and he smiles at it. “*Really* good.”

“Really good.”

Tim looks over the edge, staring at the road. He’s walked the road, driven down it, and somehow *that* side of it didn’t hit him. No flashbacks or shakes from that. He’s been through the walls, walked by the spot where he stood next to Tony, shooting and shooting, begging his loves to forgive him for getting himself killed so stupidly.

That was a mob. And it took Fornell in his goddamn tank to break it. His little handgun might as well have been pissing in the ocean for all it did.

But the wall doesn’t hit him.

It’s just up here. “It should,” he says to Leon, getting back to his comment about the walls screaming. “Where do they scream for you?”

“My dining room.”

Tim winces, feeling enormously stupid. “I… Shit.” He’d been expecting the wall or something like that. Something to do with last year.

Leon holds up a hand and shakes his head. “It’s okay.” He stares out over the Navy Yard. “Driving a bomb into the place is probably my worst moment here.”

Tim sighs at that. Then he says, “How’d you go back?”

Leon snorts a laugh. It’s a derisive, inelegant sound. “Couldn’t not go back. We moved here at the height of the real estate bubble, and when Jackie was murdered, we were still underwater on the house. If I left, I’d have had to have pulled the kids out of school to free up enough cash to pay what we owed on the house.”

Tim winces at that set of choices.

“We stayed in a safe house until you guys got done with my house. Karen,” Vance’s secretary, “made sure that when we went back it was cleaned and patched, and looked like new, but… I couldn’t walk into the dining room for weeks. I’d go out the front door, circle around to the side, and go into the kitchen door rather than go the dining room.”

“Is it still screaming?”

Leon inhales long and hard on the cig before saying, “Whimpering. Maybe. Somedays I forget. Somedays it still hits so hard I have a hard time breathing.”
Tim nods. “Yeah.”

“So, what’s got you up here?”

Tim stands up; he’s still got other things to do today. “Motivation. Remembering why I’m doing all of this.”

Leon nods at that, inhaling on his cig, looking over everything.

At the edge of the roof, by Tim’s foot, there’s a copper shell casing. Might be his. Might not. Might have shot the man with the plow. Might not. There’s no way for him to tell.

It would have been bright orange when it landed there, but now it’s dull greeny-gray. Pitted and dark with almost a year in the open.

He picks it up, holding it, letting a long, quiet blank fill his mind. Just feeling that edge of… atonement, maybe.

He tucks it into his jeans pocket and stands up. Can’t atone. That’s not how it works.

He can make sure that no other bastard ends up where he was, or driving a plow, just trying to get enough food in him to keep going. He can do that.

So he will.

Leon watches him do that. He exhales, and flicks the nub of his cig over the edge of the roof. “Come down with me, I’ve got something I was meaning to give to Abby the next time I went down to the Lab.”

Tim follows Leon down to his office, watches him look through the main drawer of his desk, and then pulls out a ring. Tim smiles a bit as he sees it. Coppery-red gold and steel. Passion and strength. No stone. Its counterpart has a star sapphire on it.

Leon hands it over, and Tim checks the inside, and there it is, 2/14/16. “Ducky’s wedding ring.”

“Ngyn found it under one of the bookcases in her office. She asked what to do with it, and luck would have it, I was fairly sure I’d seen that ring before.”

“He’ll be happy to have it back.”

“I imagine he will be.”

Tim tucks it onto his index finger. Ducky’s got some wide fingers, or his are just quite thin, either way, he doesn’t want to lose it, or forget about it, and that’s an easy way to keep track of it.

He leaves Leon’s office with a coppery-colored ring around his finger, and a copper shell in his pocket. He supposes that could be some sort of symbol of life and love and death and all of it circling around him, always circling, or maybe it’s just metal.

Either way, the day calls, and there’s more to do.
His next step is his own office, where he’s got two packages waiting.

One showed up yesterday. One a week ago. Both of them are in a box with a selection of other bits and pieces he’s grabbed for this.

And he knows what he needs to do with them. Which is why he’s got the box in his hands, and tools in his backpack, along with extension cords, and is walking across the street, ducking under the “Do Not Cross” tape that’s still covering the mostly boarded up doors to the Archives.

Jarvis and Crew have done some work on the place. By tomorrow morning the boards will be down, so they’ll have some light. They also got the electricity working. He needs that for part of his plan. The rest of the building is just the way it was. Which is intentional. He wants it dirty and broken.

Time for the test run. Part of this is just to make sure everything works. Part of it is to make sure he can handle it. If he’s going to put THE FEAR OF MCGEE into these bastards, he can’t crumble under his own theatrics.

The first part is pretty easy. One of the two packages is a device that produces sounds in the 15 to 25 HZ range. All he’s got to do with that is plug it in, get it turned on, and then spend the next fifteen minutes cursing at his phone as he tries to get it synched to the device. Finally, he’s got it. He thinks. Since he can’t really hear the sound, it’s difficult to know if it’s actually working. But supposedly, he’s got a slider on his phone, and if he just moves his thumb across the screen, the intensity of the sound goes up or down.

Supposedly. He can’t hear it, and he’s not feeling it, so either he’s immune, or maybe it’s not working.

Then comes part two. He opens Janice’s scent. Unlike her usual bottles, this is a baby food jar, which she has labeled DOOM, and…

“Oh God!”

Tim holds it together long enough to carefully get the top back on it, put it down, and then sprints to the back of the room to throw up.

She absolutely nailed the scent of DC. His heart is pounding, skin clammy, cold sweat pricking along his forehead and down his back, and after a few heaving breaths, he retches a few more times, just at the memories that go with that smell.

So, objective one, test this to make sure he can handle it, has been attempted.

And failed.

Objective two: test this and makes sure that it works. Well, the scent works. He’s still a little doubtful about the sound.

At least he knows how to work with the scent.

There are times when Tim’s get down on his knees glad he was a field agent, and this is one of them. He doesn’t have any on him, because he hasn’t been a field agent for more than a year now, but he still owns it.

Vick Vap-O-Rub. Petroleum jelly, lavender, menthol, and god alone knows what else. A little (maybe a lot) of that rubbed in his nostrils will burn like shit, but it’ll kill his sense of smell. He makes a note to make sure he’s got the second suit in his office, and that as soon as he’s done with
this, he’s going back there, tossing the first suit into a sealed bag, having it taken to be professionally cleaned, and scrubbing himself off with steel wool, or whatever the smell destroying equivalent it, until he’s banished every trace of that from his skin and hair.

He gets the second part of making sure everyone smells it set up. He’s carefully installing three small, cool mist humidifiers around the archives. The lady at the Target looked at him like he was insane when he went to buy three humidifiers in the middle of a week where the humidity didn’t get below 90%, but he wants that smell blowing around the archives, and they’ll do it.

All he has to do is pour some of the scent into each reservoir, and within minutes the whole place will reek. Tim looks at the humidifiers, and at the babyfood jar of stink, and decides that he can finish that bit up tomorrow, when he’s got his sense of smell burned to a nub.

As for the sound…

He keeps fiddling with it, trying to make it do something.

It’s almost funny. He was just about sure that it wasn’t effecting him, until he realized that the feeling of dread and cold sweat wasn’t just leftovers from his experiment with DOOM. And, it took the sensation of someone watching him, and seeing the fucking gray specter out of the corner of his eye before he realized that, nope, that feeling of distress wasn’t just him in a smell-induced funk.

So, yeah, by the time he’s done with this part of chewing them out, he should have this group thoroughly spooked.

He’s not sure if he’s crossing the line from motivating to cruel for no good reason…

He wants to make sure that the idea of failure feels so abysmally bad to these people that they will quit rather than risk it again.

Tim’s feeling pretty satisfied by the time he’s done with that. He sends Comey a text, telling him to make sure he’s got Vicks up his nose before the speech tomorrow, and then leaves.

Time for the “good parts” of today.

If Tim were to list his favorite ways to spend a day, crib building likely wouldn’t be on the list, but right now he really needs a concrete, physical, good thing to be doing.

Getting Donnie’s crib ready is on the list.

No matter what happens tomorrow, this will still be here. This life, home, loves, this will still be here, still standing…

He’s just about got the box ripped open when he hears the door open, and barking. “Hey!” He calls out to Gibbs.

Gibbs takes a moment, and then he’s up in the room that Anna, Sean, and Donnie will be sharing come… late September or early October.

Right now, the crib that Anna and Sean share is a Gibbs original. But between Dave getting his own crib (and rocking chair), and the million other things of the last nine months, Donnie’s got a crib from
Babies R Us. It’s perfectly functional, does everything it needs to do, and everyone knows Gibbs loves the stuffing out of all of these little guys, handmade cribs or no.

Mona barks sharply to say hello to Tim, and Jackson head butts him, tail wagging frantically.

“Shush,” Gibbs says to Mona, which surprises Tim. Jackson’s got the no barking unless it matters rules. Mona’s just a dog, she’s allowed to say hello.

Then he looks at Gibbs more carefully, as he’s sort of flopping himself onto the floor next to the box and tools. “Are you hung over?” Tim asks voice low and soft.

Gibbs blinks some very red eyes in his direction.

Tim gets up, wondering what could have possibly happened last night, goes downstairs, makes a pot of coffee, and finds the Advil. He’s back up, finding Gibbs leaning back against the wall, eyes closed, looking awfully hang dog.

He doesn’t have to say anything. As soon as he’s in the room, Gibbs holds out his hand for the coffee and pills. He looks like Tim sucker punched him when he hands over a big glass of water and the Advil. “Drink that, drink the next one, and then the coffee’s waiting.”

Then Tim just sits down, petting the doggies, and playing fetch with Jackson by wadding up one of the pages of the directions for putting the crib together into a little ball, and flicking it into the hall. Tim’s never been the kind of hung over Gibbs looks to be, but he can imagine that right now he doesn’t want to listen to a drill or hammer.

After about half an hour, when the Advil starts to work, and Gibbs starts showing signs of life, Tim says, “What happened?”

“Commiserating with Fornell.”


Gibbs shakes his head. “Realized yesterday was the last case.”

Tim opens his mouth and says, “Oh.” He can feel how that’s got to be something of a punch. “Really felt it you mean?”

Gibbs nods tentatively, like he’s afraid his head will fall off if he moves it too fast or hard.

“You okay?”

“I’ll live,” comes out of Gibbs.

“I know that.” Tim keeps looking at him.

“Yeah. It’s different from last year.”

Tim can see that, and he understands the difference between commiserating with, and up to my eyes in my own existential crisis. “Okay. Fornell going to be okay?”

“Sooner or later.”

“I’ll keep both of you on as long as you want to be on.”

Gibbs flashes him a Cut the BS look. “Writing up notes? Getting bank records?”
“It needs to be done.”

"But we’re not the guys who do it. Is clear on Gibbs’ face.

Tim nods. “Okay.”

Gibbs pushes away from the wall, and grabs for one of the crib pieces. “Let’s get this up.”

“Let’s.”

Not quite three years ago, which seems like an unfathomably long time ago, as well as a shockingly short period of time, Tim sat in Gibbs’ basement, helping to rub an oil finish into Kelly’s crib.

They talked some. About his dad, but most of it was them, quietly working together.

There wasn’t a whole lot that had to be said. Tim just needed the time, needed to have his Dad pat him on the shoulder, and tell him he could do it, even if he didn’t say the words.

They don’t talk much today, either. A little about the case. A little about tomorrow and what’s coming up. But mostly it’s just the two of them, in a room, handing each other tools, holding pieces of wood together, gluing and hammering.

Tim doesn’t have to say that he needs his Dad to pat him again.

And Gibbs doesn’t have to say, You’ve got this.

Here, together, building something for the life outside work, the life that makes work matter, that’s enough.
The Fear of McGee: Act One

Friday morning.

Tim’s taking a moment, just staring at himself in the mirror. (Kind of hogging up bathroom space, but today, no one minds.) Abby brushes past him, in need of her toothbrush, and as she reaches, she kisses his shoulder, and he blinks, coming back to the here and now.

“You’re going to nail this,” she says to him.

He nods, and then touches the goatee. Here, in a hot, steamy bathroom, naked, he’s not exactly looking like the Dread Director McGee, about to kick ass and take names, but he can feel the edge of it coming up.

Given that he’s still got to get his “Doom Sprayers” set up, and given exactly how much his new suit cost, Tim’s come to the conclusion that he doesn’t need to be wearing the suit when he gets the last touches done on the Archives.

So, when he gets to work on Friday morning, he’s still Tim McGee, just a guy in a pair of jeans and t-shirt.

The Director comes out later.

And, as a guy in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, with a suit bag over his shoulder, and a shoe box in his hands, he sticks out a bit going into the Hoover Building, but only a bit. He’d blend better in the suit.

Doesn’t matter, isn’t happening now.

Once in his office, Tim hangs the suit up, puts his shoes on the floor, and checks in with Jennifer.

“Are you ready?”

She nods at him.

“Any calls from the FBI EU?”

“Thirty-eight of them.”

Tim smirks. “And we have an appointment set?”

“We do. They wanted to meet at their headquarters, but I explained the only time and place you’d meet is the one we’ve got set.”

“Okay. Saturday morning’s all ready to go. Who are they sending over?”

“We haven’t arrested their Assistant Director, so he’s showing up.”

“Lovely. You let Hotch know that he’s the one coming.”

Jennifer nods and then eyes Tim. “You switching things up?”
“I wish. Later, with any luck. Right now this is minimizing the mess.”

“Ah. You’ll forgive me for not wanting to see the show.”

*In a heartbeat.* “Hell, I don’t want to see the show. You’re more than welcome to the pass. I’ve got a few more things to set up. Anyone calls, I’m at the Archives.”

“Anyone calls, and I’ll send them to you.”

“Thanks.”

Tim does two last things before heading across the street. He tucks his wrist cuff into his desk drawer. He’d like to have it close, and he’d like more to have it not smelling like the fall of DC again. Then he rubs Vicks in his nostrils. It burns like crazy, but he’s sure his sense of smell is dead.

Then over he goes.

---

Doom smells just as horrible as he remembers. Even with the Vicks.

Okay, maybe not *just* as horrible. He doesn’t have to sprint away to find a place to be sick.

It’s still freakishly horrible. Pouring it into the humidifiers and turning them on is… It’s just… There aren’t words.

He makes a note to add as much Vicks Vapo-Rub as he possibly can and still breathe and not look like his nose is running.

Tim becomes aware of another person in the Archives when he hears gagging. He looks up and sees Jarvis looking green.

“I take it you plan to kill them?” he says, voice dry, hand trembling slightly as he grabs for his cigarettes, lighting one and sucking down the smoke happily.

“I plan to make them wish they were dead.”

“This’ll work. Eugh! How… I don’t even want to know where you got this, do I?”

“Do you like cologne that actually smells good?”

“On the right person.”

“I’ll text you her website. She makes some really fine scents, too.” Tim stands up, and then fiddles with his phone, shutting off the power and killing the humidifiers. “So, are you going to stick around for the show?”

Jarvis shakes his head. “Not with it smelling like this. Once was a thousand times more than enough. I’ll get the highlights, later. I wanted to let you know that everything on our end is all set. We’ve got a two-steps-away-from-condemned high school filled with cots. So the luxury accommodations you were looking for are all set.”

“Thank you.”

“And I’ve got six cleanup foremen who are ready to put your people to work. They’ll be hauling
rubble out of the holding zones, sorting it into reuse/recycle/rubbish categories, and then dumping it into the trucks to get it where it needs to be.”

Tim approves of that plan wholeheartedly. “Sounds physically difficult, and mind-rottingly boring.”

“Exactly! Ten hours a day of tossing bricks into the reuse or rubbish pile. It’ll be fascinating.”

Tim smirks. “At least they’ll be excited to get away from that and come get chewed out by me.”

“You start this up at 10:00, right?”

Tim nods.

“John Adle and Melvin Rose will be here by 9:45. When you’re done, they’ll lead your guys to the school, get them set into teams, and from there it’s work time.”

“Good.” Tim nods to the un-boarded windows and doors, and points to the humidifiers. “Thanks for getting this up and running for me.”

“Trust me, I’m getting the way better half of this deal.”

“Which is exactly how you like it.”

A small, cold smile crosses Jarvis’ face. “Exactly.”

---

Tim knows some men wear suits like knights wear armor.

He’s sure that that kind of attitude is encoded in the DiNozzo DNA for example, but, for him…

This feels like a costume, not armor.

It’s a nice costume, make no mistake about that. He’s in the charcoal suit, with a crisp white shirt, maroon tie, and maroon pocket square. He’s taken the time to get his hair looking properly official. He left the eyebrow scar visible, but Breena suggested that a bit of brown mascara might make his goatee look a tad more like a beard and a bit less like stubble. (Unfortunately with only two weeks to grow he’s at what looks like scruffy, didn’t-shave-over-vacation level facial hair, instead of a beard.) Brushing mascara onto his face feels odd, but Breena’s right, it’s the difference between looking like what’s on his face is intentional, as opposed to he just slept in for a few mornings.

His tie is knotted perfectly, and it’s a standard Windsor.

He’s got a good watch, borrowed from Ducky, and he’s feeling a bit bad about that, because he didn’t spell out how that watch might smell when Ducky got it back. (He hopes the fact that it’ll go back with his wedding ring will earn him some forgiveness on that front.) Granted, it’s not like Ducky’s a virgin when it comes to bad smells. Still, as he slips the black leather band through the gold buckle, and more importantly, looks at the drawer where his wrist cuff is, which is staying here, in his office, so it doesn’t get doused in DOOM… Tim sighs… Better to ask forgiveness than permission, right?

Somehow, he feels like that rule’s more or less a blanket excuse to be an asshole.
But, he guesses, that’s pretty much in character for The Director.

“Awww! Look at you, Probie!” Tony says from the door to Tim’s office.

“Tony.”

He sweeps in, and then takes Tim by the shoulders, looking him up and down. “I knew it would happen sooner or later!”

Tim raises an eyebrow at Tony, who’s beaming at Tim.

“You finally hit puberty!”

Tim sighs and smacks Tony on the shoulder. Tony continues to beam at him.

“Seriously, wha’d you do to your beard? It looks like real facial hair.”

Tim rolls his eyes, and then says, “Brown mascara. Breena suggested it.”

Tony nods. “Good plan.” Then he shifts a bit so he’s in front of Tim, and nods again. “Who’d’a thunk it, you look like a real grownup.”

“Thanks, Tony.”

Tony reaches forward, takes Tim’s pocket square out, gives it a quick flick of his wrist, opening it up, and then refolds it with easy, practiced motions. He tucks it back in, and nods again. Then he eyes Tim’s cuffs, gives the right one a very gentle tug, evening them out, and says, “There you go.”

Tim’s eyes are about to pop out of his head he’s rolling them so hard, but this is comforting. It’s good to have something other than The Director to focus on. And, he thinks about it, if Tony suddenly got all rah-rah on him, he’d figure that he’d be just about to fatally muff whatever it was. He’s getting teased because he’s not on the verge of existential failure.

Tony’s still walking about him, nodding, and then stops in front of Tim. “Yeah. You’ve done Senior up proud.” He snaps a picture of Tim. “He and Mr. Huong will be happy.”

Tim chuckles at that. “You still coming?”

“I’ve got Draga popping up the popcorn as we speak. We wouldn’t miss it.”

“In that case…” Tim hands over the Vicks.

Tony glances at it and nods. “I see you intend to go for a certain level of realism,” he says, rubbing the jelly into his nostrils. “Eugh! I forgot how much that stings.”

“Trust me, this is better than what’s coming.”

They hear voices in Tim’s outer office, so Tony quickly says to Tim, “You’ve got this, you know that, right?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“Good.” Tony hands the Vicks back, and then begins to head out. “We’ll be near the back, just
“Keeping watch.”

“Thanks, Tony.”

The voice in the outer office is Comey. He’s talking to Jennifer. Once Tony leaves, he heads in.

“You ready?” Tim asks him.

He nods. “I can see you are.” His nose wrinkles. “Vicks? You have a cold?”

“No.” Tim hands the jar over. “Trust me, you’ll want some, too.”

Comey takes it, and tucks it into his pocket. “I hate the way that stuff feels. I’ll put it on a few seconds before you’re ready to roll.”

Tim nods at that. They both look at each other, and then look away. Tim checks Ducky’s watch. “It’s time.”

Comey nods again, his eyes vacant. They head out of the building, and as they leave, he gazes across the street, looking like he’s catching one last glimpse of a lover he’s leaving. Involuntarily.

They head into the Archives, and it’s perfect for what Tim, and Comey, need. The morning light is streaming in, catching on the dust, creating columns of light. With the Vicks in his nose, Tim can’t smell the room, but he hears Comey gag, and say, “Uhg.” He swallows hard. “I never thought…”

he’s rubbing the Vicks into his nostrils, fast. “I never thought I’d have to smell that again.”

“That’s only the residue. Once they start to file in, I’ll turn the humidifiers on.”

“You’re going to torture them.”

“I’m going to give them a taste of DC. I want this lesson to sting.”

Comey flinches very slightly at that. This lesson certainly stings for him.

Right in front of where the Constitution used to be Jarvis got a podium set up. There’s even a microphone on it. Tim approves, he didn’t think of it, and it will make this a lot easier.

He can feel Tony and Draga lurking in the back. He can’t see them, but he can hear a faint crunching sound. They actually did get popcorn! That makes him smile. Then he smiles a bit wider, they’re behind him. Tony’s literally got his back on this one. Because no matter what, or where, he’s still his partner.

And then Tim shuts it down. He can see the first collection of Agents starting to pick their way into the building.

Right now, he’s watching curious and nervous rapidly descending to dread. The ten or so people in front of him came to a dead stop as soon as they got the first whiff of the place. They’re looking around at the ruins, and most of them have an expression on their faces indicating they’re sure they’re in the wrong place.
Comey strides over to the microphone, picks it up, and says, “Come in.”

So they do, and as they do, more follow.

The show starts at 10:00. It’s 9:42, and people are beginning to fill the place.

Comey’s behind the podium, looking stern. Tim takes a few steps back, and leans, casually against the wall, where the Constitution used to be. His hands are in his pockets, his thumb on his phone, and he turns the humidifiers on low, and starts, very softly, the rumble of his sound system.

He closes his eyes, and begins to shift his mind.

By the time he opens them his face is hard, his eyes are raptorial, looking at the people in front of him like prey.

*The Director* is ready.

---

Panic has a smell. Tim’s smelled it on suspects, on criminals, on desperate men in bad places, on himself, even. As more and more agents file their way in, he can smell it, above, or maybe through the mess of DOOM.

Or maybe he’s just feeling it.

However it works, he’s aware of it. He’s got a herd of people packed into a dim, foul-smelling room, and with every additional second they’re getting more terrified.

He turns the sound generator off. He can’t have them so panicked they can’t absorb what he’s saying. He’ll nudge it back up when he wants to really pound a point home, but if they’re all about to run before he even gets talking… That’s defeating the point.

---

When Tim’s watch hand flicks to 10:00, Comey takes the mic, and taps it.

These may be scared people, but they’re all trained FBI Agents, curious, bubbling with rumors, and their Director has just attempted to get their attention. They go dead silent in less than a moment.

Tim takes that moment to nudge his Doom sprayers into play. Just adding a bit more funk to the surroundings. He hears a few people gag, sees them eyeing the exits with panic in their eyes.

“A few bad apples,” Comey begins. That rivets attention to him. “That’s the phrase, right? What we say as a way to pretend that it’s not our fault when something goes wrong on our watch. We’ve all seen it, all heard it. Union reps. Police officers. The media talking heads. Those dratted ‘bad apples’ keep turning up.

“We heard about that over and over again. It was never anything systemic. It wasn’t an issue with wider law enforcement. Just… a few bad apples.

“No organization is made of angels. And it’s irrational to expect perfection. We deal with so many crimes, every single day, and there are so many of us, that, of course, there have to be a few bad apples.
“So, we shrug and move on. After all, what can you do?” Comey goes quiet for a few beats after that. Tim nudges the sound, and spends a moment watching people shifting, feeling their dread rising. They don’t know why to be afraid, not yet, but they are.

“The thing is, we keep forgetting the second half of the sentence ‘A few bad apples…ruin the bunch.’ It’s not just, there are bad apples. This isn’t a bland statement of fact. It’s a warning. The bad apples poison everything around them. The bad apples have to be plucked out and destroyed or they ruin everything.

“We forgot the second half of that sentence. And maybe, because we are the bad apple pickers, we got complacent, forgot to look in our own bin. Maybe, the job was just too damn big. Or maybe we weren’t willing to do it. But almost a year ago, the entire country paid for us getting lax.”

Tim’s watching them carefully, and he can see them getting less and less comfortable. Before fear was an external emotion. A reaction to what was going on around them. Now it’s sliding inward. They’re starting to put what Comey’s saying together with who they are, and what they’ve done. Tim hits them with a quick blast of sound, and feels his own hair rise, sweat pricking down his own back, so he figures it’s got to be hitting them, too.

“A year ago, where we stand now, was one of my favorite places to unwind. We’ve all been there, those days that just eat into your mind, and you can’t stand to bring those thoughts home, so you find a place to go, and unpack your mind. Find a place to be a touchstone, and get you back to yourself, so you can be yourself.

“This was mine. On, September 4, 2013, I took the oath and became Director of the FBI. The same oath each and every one of you swore. And that oath mattered, mattered not just as to the idea of what I was doing, but to my ideal of myself. So I’d come here, sit near what I’d sworn to protect, and let the worms out of my head.” Comey shakes his head. “But it wasn’t enough.

“The decay crept in. It crept in to me, and it crept into you. We didn’t just fail at weeding out the bad apples, we left them in place, watched the rot spread, and became the bad apples.”

Tim can see the audience does not like this direction, at all. They’re squirming and trying to get away from what Comey has to say to them.

“Last year, the country fell apart because we didn’t do our job. Last year, Washington DC burned because we failed. We didn’t just not get the bad apples, we let them set up fiefdoms and run the country.

“We let them win.

“And people, people we swore to protect, lost everything or died because of it.”

Comey pauses letting that sink in. He lets that pause go on for a long moment, and Tim hits the switch, adding a pulse of low hz sound.

He goes off script for a moment. “Breathe in. Do it. Inhale, deep. Smell that? The whole city smelled like that, and it smelled like that for months. That’s death. That’s how failure smells.”

He gives them another moment there, and Tim turns the humidifiers up to high. The smell of Doom’s choking the room, and he can hear gagging, and sees several of the agents trying to get out of the press, looking for somewhere to be sick.

A mean little part of his mind screams Strangle on it!
Comey gets back to his script. “We’re done letting the bad apples lay around and rot the system. But we can’t do that if we’re rotten ourselves. So, today, spring cleaning begins. Today, we start over, anew. The FBI’s Public Corruption Department is about to have its largest shakeup ever. And once the dust settles with you, you’ll put the rest of the FBI under the microscope. We will go forward, and we will do what we pledged to do. We will protect the US Constitution from all threats, foreign and domestic.

“And right now, right here, we take the first step. Right now, I take the first step.

“Lead by example, so here goes. Do as I say, and as I do.

“As of today, I have handed my resignation to the President. I was part of the problem. I let the rot creep in. I made compromises and cut corners, and looked the other way, and that ends, now.

“As of today, the FBI changes. We rededicate ourselves to doing our job, and doing it right.” Comey turns to Tim. “I’m sure you’ve been, at least, introduced to Director McGee. He has taken over Public Corruption, and he’s about to begin the purge.”

Comey steps back, and Tim smiles at him. Just a fast little gesture. Wanting Comey to know that he approves of what Comey did. Comey nods back, and then takes off his badge, and at his level that badge is entirely symbolic, and puts it on the podium. Then he turns, stares down the group, and walks through them, leaving.

They part for him, too stunned to do anything else.

Tim stands at the podium, gets his best shit kicking expression on, waits for Comey to leave, and for his Agents to look back toward him.

Once Comey’s left, he can feel this begin to settle in. They’re starting to internalize what they’re seeing, starting to ease out of shock and into terror. Panic is fear that blinds you to what comes next. It short circuits your ability to plan, to think. Terror… They know what to be scared of now, and he can see butt covering mode starting up.

This is all real, and a lot of them are starting to scramble. Tim gives it one quiet beat before upping the Hz. He wants to short circuit that butt covering mode. He wants them awash in feeling terrible, not planning out which lies will serve them best.

He can feel the crowd shift as the sound gets to more and more of them. Once they’re back into fear mode, he starts, “I haven’t met most of you. Some of you may remember that email you got back in July, it was a cute, friendly little thing, ‘Hi, I’m Director McGee, can’t wait to work with you,’” he shifts his voice up a bit, and adds a little bounce to his diction as he talks about the email, and then kills it dead with the next word, “boilerplate. And back in July, I was looking forward to working with you guys.

“I had plans, ideas for how I was going to reshape this department, and how you and I could go about clearing up the corruption around us.” He’s seeing some expressions that make him think of Jackson when Gibbs isn’t happy with him. He’s hopeful that those expressions go with Agents who can be turned into “good apples.”

“It’s a great job, right? You go in, and get to be the White Knight.” He smiles at that. “The best of the best. That’s who we’re supposed to be. It’s our job to weed out the other Knights who aren’t doing their jobs. We’re the ones who save our country from the connected and powerful abusing
their power. We’re it, the last line of defense.

“And when I signed up for this job, I had so many ideas. We were going to do amazing things.

“Before everything went sideways, I was part of the team that found out what was going on, and...” Tim shakes his head, “It was a fucking mess. Everyone was involved. Judges, lawyers, the IRS, The President, both Parties, most of Congress, most of the Senate, the DEA, the FDA, more alphabet soup than I can remember. Every time we’d find a new lead, we’d find a new batch of assholes fucking the public.”

Tim pauses. He’s got them fully shocked. Comey stunned them. But he only started the idea that this was going to come down on them. Tim’s hammering it home. He’s the dark mirror, showing off every flaw, and they don’t want to gaze into it.

“I’m sorry, do some of you find my language unprofessional? Get used to it. We’re done with dry, sanitized euphemisms for what happened. The US Government raped the people it was meant to protect. It fucked them in every direction it possibly could, and slapped them around once it let them back up again, and right now, we’re standing in just one of the burned out hulks left over from when the people jumped up and took revenge.

“And going into this, I thought I was joining the only one of the major players who were good guys. None of you came up as we got into it. Lead after lead, each new turn drawing up into another cesspit of fuckers and scumbags, but the FBI kept coming up clean.

“As things were falling apart, it was you guys who were with us on the front lines of trying to clean everything up before it collapsed.

“So, I signed up for this job, visions of the fucking Untouchables in my head. They gave me carte blanche to go in and clean things up, and I had visions in my head of leading you guys into battle, and wiping the field of the incompetent and corrupt. Get the right people in the right place at the right time and you can change the world. And change the world we would.

“Well, I don’t have the right people, in the right place, at the right time. I’ve got you bastards. If you are here, you’re one of the fuckwits who” he gestures at the ruins around them, and nudges the sound control, letting a blast of Hz roll over them, “looked the other way and LET IT HAPPEN.

“Seven hundred and twelve agents. That was the Public Corruption Department. Five hundred and eighty-seven of you are packed in here right now. More than three out of four of you couldn’t do your jobs. You were the thin white line between this,” he gestures again, and nudges that sound again. Tim figures that he’s got chills going up his own spine, and he knows what he’s doing, so the people watching him should be feeling horrible. “and a society you were meant to protect.

“YOU FAILED!

“Each and every single one of you is here because you failed. You, personally, fucked up investigations. And I don’t mean you had an off day and missed one or two cases. If you are here, you had a pattern of looking at baskets of apples, seeing the rotten apples, and leaving them in place.”

Tim points behind himself. “You see what’s behind me?”

They’re all looking behind him at a blank bit of wall.

“Nothing, exactly. Do you know what’s supposed to be behind me? The US FUCKING CONSTITUTION. The document you all promised on your lives to protect and defend. You signed
up for the FBI and swore an oath, on your honor, to live your life, and do your job to protect the US Constitution.”

Another long, quiet moment while he floods the room with smell and sound. More agents run away, and in the silence of him not speaking, they can all hear retching and gagging.

One more silent beat, and then Tim begins again. “They tell me that it’s still in its vault under the floor. They tell me it’s okay, because that vault was designed to withstand a nuclear attack on DC, so firestorms, looters, and no power shouldn’t have hurt it. The vault did its job.

“You didn’t do yours. You were supposed to be that vault. You were supposed to make sure all the other assholes, schemers, thieves, and killers didn’t get away with it. They were all there, hundreds of thousands of them, chipping away at the vault, looking for a crack to get through, and you let them.

“Over the next twenty-four days, you will be here, in DC. You will work on cleanup and rebuilding. Each of you will see me, and we will talk about exactly what you did, because I know a lot of you are looking around like,” he shifts his voice again, higher, mocking, “Me? I didn’t do anything. I did my job! I’m a good agent!” And then back to the darker, deeper tone he’s been using to chew them out. “If you are here, no you didn’t and no you aren’t!

“If you are here, that means you fucked up. If you are here, you were part of the problem. You looked the other way, hid cases, buried cases, ignored things that would make the wrong people look bad.

“If you are here, the more than six thousand people who died in DC during the riots are on your hands. If you are here, the fall of the United States is on you. If you are here, you need to get on your fucking knees and crawl through this city begging the forgiveness of everyone around you!

“One hundred and twenty five of your co-workers did their jobs. They aren’t here. They get to sleep at night knowing they did everything they could to make the system work. And sure, they didn’t save it, but they fucking tried. None of you get to say that.

“Tonight, you get to collapse on hard, little cots, with barely enough food, no showers, and twenty-four days of hard work in front of you. There’s only one way out of this, resign. Any of you want to plop a letter of resignation into my inbox, and you’re done. Off you go. Don’t let the door hit you on the ass on the way out.

“If being an FBI Agent matters to any of you, if you meant it when you swore to uphold and protect the Constitution, you’ll take the punishment duty that’s coming. You’ll look me in the fucking eye when I go through every case you failed, and point out how you, personally, let this happen. If this is real, and if you’ve got any sense of vocation, you won’t slither around with, ‘I did what I could,’ or ‘Everyone was doing it,’ and you won’t even think of uttering the words, ‘I didn’t know.’” Again, he uses his voice, shifting into a vicious mimicry when he utters the excuses.

“You knew. You had a job, and you knew what it was.” Tim gestures to the doors. “There are men at the doors, they will lead you to where you’re going to be staying for the twenty-four days. When you get there, you’ll find a cot with your name on it, as well as the time for our appointment.

“Until that time, and after it, you will report to John Adel and Melvin Rose. They’ll put you into teams, and assign your team to some part of DC that is in need of cleanup. You will spend ten hours a day lugging rubble away.

“You will not be paid for the next twenty-four days. The only way to leave is to resign. I’d make you
wear fucking hair shirts if I could, but I can’t, so this is it.

“Do me a favor, resign. I don’t want to see any of you again. I want to hire new people who know their asses from a hole in the wall. I want people who are in it for the good of the country, not the good of themselves and their pet causes.

“If you stay, you’re on probation. You’ve got a year to prove you belong here, and if you don’t, if you pull any of the same shit, the same ‘it’s not a big deal if my people do it’ crap, then that’s it, you’re gone.

“And in case it somehow wasn’t clear, as of right now everything changes.” Tim stares them all down. He realizes he’s got a microphone in his hand, and he figures he’ll never have a more appropriate moment for it, so he drops his mic, the sound of the impact echoing through the Archives, and then stands there, arms crossed over his chest, staring them all down, as Adel and Rose take charge of them.

It takes almost forty minutes for them to get all the agents out of there, but once they’re gone, Tim sags against the podium, knees going weak, feeling the shakes through his whole body. He swallows hard a few times, gripping the podium, using it to keep himself from sinking to the floor, and then feels a warm hand between his shoulder blades.

“You killed it, Probie.”

Tim’s eyes slide shut, and he nods his head. He knows he killed it. He’s just not sure if he’s killing himself, too.
The Fear of McGee: Act II

Getting everyone settled at Robbie Cook High School, sorted into their places, and fed lunch means that Tim’s got some down time between the first round of ass-kicking, and the start of the second.

He uses that time to get a shower. (Which apparently he needs. No one will stand near him as he heads back to his office, and Jennifer winces when he steps in. His poor dry cleaner will be cursing his name when he gets the contents of the triple layered trash bags Tim’s handing off to Jennifer.)

He gets into his gray suit with the jade pinstripe, collapses onto his sofa, and flips on the TV to watch Vivianne’s press conference.

He sighs. *This* is a thing of beauty.

They managed to keep what was going to happen so far under wraps that he gets to see the entire assembled press corps go dead silent when Comey resigns. The last time he saw a group of reporters so stunned Jarvis had just dissolved the United States Marine Corps and Navy.

This isn’t quite that hard of a hammer blow, but he’s watching that silent moment spread on and on, and then there’s a palpable jerk among the reporters followed by a *roar* of questions.

Comey takes them for almost an hour, and then hands things over to Vivianne.

By that point Tim’s feeling more alive, so he eats and watches her field questions about how things are going to change and why. No one asks about any sort of FBIEU stuff, so that’s apparently currently under the radar. A lot of them are interested in what cleaning things up means, and a few are really intrigued by the tech changes he’s interested in implementing. All in all, he’s very pleased with how that conference is going.

Jennifer pokes her head in as Vivianne’s wrapping up. “I’ve got requests for interviews from every news organization with letters.”

“Send them to Vivianne.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. She can decide who she wants me talking to, and when, and I’ve got a feeling I’ll do some quick little spiel, and then be done with it. Maybe take some time with some tech guys. Then I’ll say something about how it’s great to keep people in the loop, but I’ve got a job to do, and that’s why I hired her, so someone could dedicate all their time and expertise to keeping them updated.”

Jennifer nods. She sees the food in front of him. “First one’s due in soon.”

“I know. When they get here, be curt. Not rude, but not welcoming, either. I want them off-footed when they come to see me.”

“Getting stared down by the office secretary when you got sent to the principal’s office?”

Tim smiles at that. “Exactly. Any word from Hotch?”

“He’s gotten the warrants to go into the FBIEU’s finances. The accountants are already on it. The guys have finally gotten lawyers, and they’re less than pleased with the current line. No one’s offered up any goodies to get out of trouble, but they’ve all asked about if anyone’s talked to you.”
Tim nods at that. “This is really predictable.”

“They’re playing the game by the rules they wrote.”

Tim smiles at that, too. He’s going to enjoy showing them that the rules are about to be re-written.

The first of the Agents to come in is mad.

Tim counts his blessings on that. He’s a lot better at dealing with angry than sad or shamed.

He can go just as hard, just as angry, and that’s easy.

Agent Dan Smitts has been a part of the FBI for 19 years. He majored in accounting and law in college, and joined the Bureau right out of school. He joined Public Corruption back in ’05 after a stint with the Forensic Accountants. For all nineteen years, he had good reviews. Maybe not a model agent, but in the top 1/3.

He’s tall, slim, with light brown hair that’s about half gray, and light brown eyes. He’s ten-ish years older than Tim and ready to bite his head off as he stalks through the door.

Tim’s already sitting behind his desk. He gestures to the chair in front of his desk.

He doesn’t normally have a chair in front of his desk. He likes to talk with people either at his conference table, or on the sofa.

So, with that one, lone, metal folding chair in front of his desk, he’s made it exceptionally clear that this is not his normal routine.

Dan takes one look at the chair, rolls his eyes, grabs one of the conference table chairs, which are comfortable and padded, pulls it into place, and uses his foot to almost kick the folding chair away.

Tim just watches that, eyes bland.

He thinks for a moment about what, exactly, he wants to do with this little show that Agent Smitts is putting on.

He knows how The Admiral would have handled it. He would have gone full bore, screaming, and cursed that man into a blubbery pile of goo.

Tim knows he’s not going there. He lets the silence hang for a moment while he ponders, what, exactly to do with Agent Smitts.

And then he knows how he’s handling this. The Admiral would rage. And it would never get to his eyes. The screaming, the words, the storm all around him, all of it was a show.

And Tim’s got to put on a damn show now, but he won’t let it be a mask.

He settles further into his chair, pulls up his calm, dives into the cold, hard places in his mind, and quietly says, “I take it you do not consider my evaluation of you, or the Public Corruption Department, fair or warranted?” He keeps his voice soft as he says that, and his tone even.
“May I speak frankly?”

“Certainly. Be as frank as you like. There’s literally no shot I’ll think less of you as an agent once this is done.”

He sees that it takes about a second for Smitts to understand exactly what he just said, and then his eyes flare with anger. “Fuck you. Fuck your ideals. We did our job! I did my job! I did it as well as anyone could have possibly done it.”

Tim drums his fingers on his desk, slowly, one tiny thud after the next. “The entire government falling due to internal corruption would appear to argue otherwise.”

“No one could have stopped that.”

Tim make a small hmmp noise. “Earthquakes, the tides, the sun rising in the morning; those are all things that can’t be stopped. Government corruption getting so bad that the entire edifice topples does not seem to be on par with the rest of that list. You had a job, you didn’t do it. You, specifically, you, looked the other way, and let cases slide. And maybe you, personally, couldn’t have stopped The Fall, but if you hadn’t looked the other way, you’d still be back in the Philly office, along with nine of your co-workers, who actually did their jobs.”

“Oh, cry me a fucking river. This is not on me. And it’s not on the FBI. I put corrupt public figures away every damn day of my career. There are literally thousands of people in jail because of me, and they were all fucking the system. You don’t know what we did here. You’re from NCIS, you had, what, four cases a week in a really brutal week? Four cases an hour! Every hour! Of course I looked the other way, so did everyone else! There was no possible way to do this job if we investigated everything. So, if one came in, and you knew they were good people, you killed it, because there was no other possible way to do this job.”

Tim just stares at Smitts, fingers steepled in front of him and lets him talk.

“Most of it was bullshit anyway. We’d have these dreamy-eyed twits who didn’t understand that you had to move money around to get the job done, or political hacks using whistleblower status to fuck with their higher ups. Someone would get a bad review and ten minutes later they’re reporting their boss for corruption.”

Tim flips open the folder on Smitts. “You had one of the highest cleared case rates in the Bureau.”

Smitts’ eyes flash at that. “I have one of the highest cleared case rates.”

“Most of your cases involved plea bargains.”

“So did yours. Pleas are fast, prosecution takes time, so if they can, they skip it. If I’m sitting around waiting to testify, I’m not going after the next guy.” Smitts isn’t wrong about that. By the time the lawyers finally did show up, most of them did what they could to avoid going to court.

“Your background is accounting. It looks like you ‘knew’ a lot of people at the IRS.”

“My sister was there.”

Tim nods. He wonders if was means she’s no longer with the IRS, or she was in the DC office and is no longer alive. That’s not in the file, and he’s not about to go off script and find out. Though if she did die in The Fall, that might explain a lot of this rage. Smitts literally can’t allow himself to take any responsibility for this because it hurts too badly.
“And, according to my files on you, you requested to get IRS cases get sent your way.”

“Yeah. I knew those laws in and out. Knew the IRS in and out, too. Made it easier to talk their
language, see who was doing what. We already had rapport, so they’d tell me stuff without having to
dig too hard. Like I said, we were constantly slammed, so the faster you could get through the shit
and find out what was really going on, the better.”

“You worked non-IRS cases, too.”

“Yeah. No one’s so specialized they only do one thing.”

“When I started looking through your files, I found you have a 20% case clearing rate on IRS cases.
Most of the 80% you didn’t clear, you never even asked a single question about. Your ‘skill getting
through the shit’ couldn’t have come into play on a case where the only thing you did was sign your
name to it.”

“I read the cases; they were BS! We’ve got to ‘investigate’ everything, so, you get a charge, you read
it, and if it’s stupid, you toss it in the circular file. Everyone does it.”

“You had a 70% clearing rate on non-IRS cases. And from what I can see you very rarely just stuck
your name on one of those and ignored it.”

“Yeah, ‘cause that wasn’t my area of expertise. You don’t know the players, you’ve got to look into
the case before you can call a pile of shit a pile of shit. The IRS was being unfairly targeted. After the
Lerner stuff, so many people decided to try and make names for themselves by making them look
bad. We were swimming in shit cases after everyone found out about her.”

“Ah.” Tim lets that hang.

“Ah what?” Smitts bites out.

Tim shakes his head. Then he begins to list names, after ten of them he says, “Do you remember any
of those cases?”

“No.” Smitts snorts at the idea that he’d know who those people were.

“Of course not. You glanced at them, decided they were, as you put it, BS, tossed them in the
‘shortly after hell freezes file’ because they were being ‘unfairly’ targeted and forgot all about them.”

“Sure.” That gets and eye roll.

“You want to know why I know them?”

“Because you’re a Monday-morning-quarterback on a fucking vendetta.”

Tim smiles. Smitts is not wrong about that. “All of them, every one, was implicated in the
Congressional slush fund.” He lists three more names. “They were on the payroll of the
Bathenadas.” Four more names. “They were on the payroll of the mob.” Sixty-two more names.
“They were being paid off to investigate the political opponents of certain members of Congress.”
Nineteen more names. “They were being paid off to make sure that politically unpopular groups
couldn’t get 501-3-C status.” Nine more names. “They made sure politically popular groups didn’t
get their 501-C-3 status revoked.” Two more names. “They helped call a hit on one of my friends,
and if I wasn’t smarter than they were, they would have called one on me, too.

“Those are your ‘good guys’ with the BS charges against them. And they go back to 2005, way
before Lerner was a blip on the radar.”

There’s a tenth of a second where Smitts looks worried, and then he kills that dead and covers it with, “Those are also less than 1% of my caseload. You can’t fault me for that. If I go through all of your old cases, I’m sure I’ll find some people you missed, too.”

“You probably would, but unlike me, you’re not on this side of the desk, you didn’t get hired to straighten everything back up again, and when I missed a guy, it was because he was hiding better than I could seek, not because I looked at him and said fuck it!”

That gets an eye roll.

“You have two options at this point, resign, or deal with punishment duty, and then, when you are back on, you will investigate every case you get, in the order you get it, to the fullest of your ability. At some point in the next year, I will get a case triaging system into play, and then it will tell you what cases to work on. You have lost the ability to decide for yourself which cases you will work or what order you’ll work them.”

“I’ve got nineteen years of experience! Probies aren’t allowed to determine what cases they work.”

“And as of today, if you do not resign, you are a Probie again. You will have a case officer who checks on you. You will report to him on every case you work. You will be required to have him give you approval to abandon working on a case. You will not work another case on or with the IRS again. And if you so much as set a toenail out of line, you are fired.”

“This is bullshit! I am a good agent.”

That gets Tim’s anger up, a genuine flash of mad. “No, you are not! You never were! You can’t even identify what a good agent is! Good agents do not coast along on their gut, shutting down investigations out of hand because they had a good feeling about the people involved. Let me guess, your sister is IRS, and you get to hear about these BS charges, and how everyone wants to piss on the IRS all the time, and it’s just crap, and she’s a good person, so the people she works with have to be good people, too, so screw it.

“That may be being a good brother, but it is not being a good Agent! I know that first hand, because I caught a case with my sister, and I was a terrible agent on that cast. There’s a reason why we don’t work cases with our families. Being a good Agent is saying, ‘Hey, I know a lot of IRS people, so I’m not being objective, I need to start getting DEA cases or something.’ It’s not, ‘These guys are getting picked on, so I’ll ask for their cases and go easy on them!’”

Smitts is glaring at Tim.

“Are you staying?” Tim asks, forcing himself to cool down.

“What happens if I resign?”

“I have no idea. That’s up to you.”

“Pension, references…”

“Nineteen in, you aren’t vested yet. Your reference will confirm that you worked for us. That’s it. You will not be able to get a job with any other federal department. You will be able to COBRA your health insurance like anyone else who leaves a job.”

Smitts stands up, leaning over Tim’s desk. “Fuck you and fuck your options! I am not going easy.
“You can fire me, or at least you can try. I am not reporting for your fucking punishment duty, and I am not resigning. I’m going back to Philly, getting back to my cases, and you can deal with my union rep in the morning.”

“I don’t think so. Agent Dan Smitts, you are, as of right now, fired. You will hand me your badge, and gun, and you will not report back to Philly. You can call your union rep, as is your rights, but you are going to lose that fight.”

“Yeah. We’ll see.” Smitts turns to leave.

Tim stands up and barks out, in a drill sergeant’s voice that would have made Gibbs proud, “Agent Smitts! Your badge and gun! Now!”

Smitts rips them off and flings them toward Tim, before storming out of the room.

As he goes, Tim hears, “I’m suing all of you fuckers into oblivion! I’ll have my job back before the week is done, and you’ll be the one unemployed.”

Jennifer steps into Tim’s office, and shuts the door. His next appointment is already in her office. She quietly says, “I take it that went well.”

“Just peachy,” Tim replies, picking up the gun and badge. He hands them over to her. “Start the paperwork for the termination of Daniel Smitts. Who’s up next?”

“Justine Becker.”

Tim nods. “Give me five minutes, and then bring her in.”

Four minutes and thirty seconds of fast typing is followed by a very tentative knock on his door.

Tim stands up, walks away from his typewriter, straightens the metal folding chair in front of his desk, sits back down at his desk, and says, “Come in.”

And immediately regrets it. Justine is on the verge of crying. He can see the tears glistening in her eyes as her bottom lip quivers. She timidly moves across his office, and primly sits herself onto the folding chair, trying to take up as little space as possible.

She glances at his eyes, and then looks away.

Tim already feels like a total fucking asshole. He bites his lip as discretely as possible, and then flicks open her folder.

“Do you know why you’re here?”

“I didn’t do my job, sir.” Her voice cracks on, sir.

Oh God! He’d rather spend all day chewing out angry men then spend another moment with a quivering woman about to cry in front of him.

He swallows and keeps his calm. “That’s a given. Do you know what aspect of your job didn’t get done?”
“No,” she squeaks, and bursts into tears. It’s not pretty crying. This is loud, gasping, snotty-nosed, messy crying.

Tim points to his bathroom. “Go, take a moment, get tissues, and calm down.”

She does, and he takes a moment, too. He fetches a rubber band out of his desk drawer, and fits it around his wrist. If he keeps biting his lip to keep himself in line, he’ll rapidly be out of lip, and they’ll all see him do it. He should be able to flick the band without anyone seeing. He just needs to move his hands to his lap.

He hears the crying in his bathroom slow down to hiccoughing sobs, and makes himself recheck the notes.

A moment later she’s back, face blotchy and scarlet. And he’s feeling a bit more resolved toward going hard on her. She may look like a whipped little lamb, but she’s one of the first people here because she’s got one of the most egregious patterns.

“In the five years you’ve been here you’ve had thirty-five cases involving local elections. Twenty-seven of them resulted in nothing. You spent three years working out of your hometown, Harrisburg, and two years in Richmond. When you were in Harrisburg, in your hometown, where your father is a state Senator, and your grandfather was an elected judge, you found nothing wrong. Every case of local election tampering in Pennsylvania resulted in you sitting on your butt and doing nothing. Then you move to Virginia, and with your experience in election fixing, you get called in on seven cases across Virginia, and suddenly, in a state where you know no one who’s ever stood for election, you get six convictions. Care to explain?”

And the sobbing starts again.

Tim sighs, and waits. He knows the FBI got these because state elections aren’t covered by the Federal Election Commission. And as state cases, the Pennsylvania authorities recused themselves because they didn’t want to look like they were cooking their own books.

“Did you volunteer for those cases? Ask for them?” Tim asks when she finally looks like she can form words.

“Not the first one, but my Dad found out I was on it, and…” Her face crumples into more tears.

Tim thinks she says, “What would you do for your Dad if he asked?” At least, he hopes that’s what she’s said, because otherwise his answer won’t make a lick of sense. “I ran the sting that got him arrested back in December. He’s in jail now.”

(The wider point, that he literally helped his family murder someone for revenge, and justice, let alone the mile long list of felonies he’s committed for Gibbs, is something he doesn’t intend to say, ever, to anyone.)

Apparently what he said made enough sense in response to her, that she’s staring up at him, eyes bright pink. “You…”

“He’s in Leavenworth. Are you saying your father, a state senator, asked you to use your position as an FBI Agent to compromise investigations?”

She blinks, hard.

And Tim goes hard, too, pulling his ice back up, keeping it between him and his sympathy. She may legitimately be this upset, but she’s not a little lamb, and there’s no shot, at all, that she didn’t know
why she was in this office.

“Your badge lands on my desk in five seconds. If you do that, then we’ll allow your dad to take a plea. Or you keep your badge, and when you get done with punishment duty, we will bring charges against you and him.”

Tim gets to a three count before her badge lands on his desk.

“Thank you. I want you to report to Room 317, and talk to Agent Hotch. Explain exactly what you and your father did. He’ll handle the rest.”

A moment later, she leaves, whimpering. Jennifer’s in a moment later, and he hands her the badge.

“Resignation paperwork for Justine Becker.”

She nods, taking the badge.

“Next one angry or sad?”

“Numb, if I had to guess.”

Tim sighs. “Great.” He glances at his clock. If he wants to get them all done, and get home at some point, and right now he wants home more than anything, he can’t take breaks between them. “Send him in…”

So she does.

When Abby picks him up to take him to the House, for only one night, Tim’s got a welt on his wrist from snapping it with the rubber band so many times.

She looks at it, and her silent, withdrawn husband, and rests her hand on his neck. He turns his face into her palm, closes his eyes, and lets himself drift as she drives them, and the kids, towards Shabbos and, for him, a few hours of weekend.

The nap helps. Food helps. Jimmy gently padding his wrist with a bit of gauze and a stern, “Not again. Take the damn break if you need it,” helps. Time with babies helps. Sex helps. More sleep helps.

And then it’s morning, and he’s back to it.

“Mr. McGee, you’re a hard man to get a hold of.” Okay, this bit of it, he’s looking forward to. Smacking the smug off an asshole is always a pleasure, and just by the way he walks into the room, Tim knows Jeff Ons, Assistant to the Director of FBIEU is an asshole.

Everything about him is just oily. Tim feels like he should leave a trail of ooze behind him. He doesn’t offer to shake Tim’s hand, and Tim doesn’t offer, either.
“I’m a bit busy this week, but I did specifically set this time aside for you.”

“Ah.”

Tim gestures to the seats across from his desk. This time it’s one of the conference chairs. He doesn’t want to overload the power dynamics quite so hard with this first brush against FBIEU. Ons sits down. Tim also gestures to the coffee maker. “Feel free to get yourself a drink.”

“I’m fine.”

“Splendid. So, what did you want to talk about?”

“I’d imagine the same reason you set that time aside for us.”

“That’s probably true, but, since we both know what’s going on, and I’m already doing what I want to, and I don’t know what you want to do, the ball is in your court.”

Again, Ons looks at him and says, “Ah.”

Tim nods. He waits. Ons very much looks like he wants Tim to begin this, and Tim is not about to budge. He can sit here and be stared at until the end of time. Finally Ons says, “I’ll admit, once we had word that Fink, Jegg, Unger, and Crawl had been arrested, I wasn’t expecting to find you behind it.”

“Why not?”

“Well, we aren’t the public, nor are we corrupt, so the Public Corruption Task Force seemed like an odd fit.”

Tim appears to digest that for a moment, then he says, “Interesting, and who did you expect would have been behind arresting your top four men?”

Ons eyes Tim, aware of what he just stepped into. He’s got a slick answer for it, though. “I was expecting some new political pet, someone with a hard-on for destroying public unions. As you know, Sesson, Cowder, Hanson, and Rimmenez all ran for office on platforms of destroying Union power, so I was expecting one of their lackeys.”

“Then I suppose it must have been a pleasant surprise to see that this isn’t a political witch hunt, and instead it’s a case of good police work.”

The gets a glare. “All I see is clever maneuvering. You want to get rid a lot of men, so you attack us first.”

This time Tim doesn’t respond, not directly. “Are you suggesting our police work has been shoddy? That the charges we’ve rendered are… made up, perhaps?”

Ons side steps that, too. If he’s read the charges, he knows they’re awfully solid. “I read up on you.”

“Did you have a particularly bad case of insomnia?”

Ons snorts at that. “You’re good enough with a computer that you could have planted everything you’ve brought against my men.”

Tim’s turn to snort. “I may be good with a computer, but I’m not capable of using one to manufacture two pounds of hashish. Computers that do that are fiction. As for the rest of it… Well. You’re sitting in the middle of the FBI’s Public Corruption Department, in the middle of the FBI,
where I am not, by any stretch of the imagination, popular, and I’m becoming less so by the minute. I’m sure you can find someone to open an investigation into me and what I may or may not have done to your men’s financial records. Hell, if you like, we can call another Agent in right now and get started. I’ll happily hand over everything we’ve got, and they can get playing on it. I understand we’ve got some of the best Forensic Accountants and Forensic Hackers on earth here, so let’s do it.”

That gets another glare.

“Not willing to put up?”

“It would be embarrassing.”

Tim shrugs. “So? I’ve been embarrassed before. It didn’t kill me. Plus, once an investigation is done, I’ll be vindicated, because your guys actually did what I’m accusing them of. No one did anything to their records.”

“What do you want, McGee?”

Tim smiles. “That one’s easy. To go home early, play with my kids, and have a good night with my family. What do you want, Ons? After all, you’re the one who called the meeting.”

“You know, we don’t have to be enemies.”

“I hadn’t realized you considered me an enemy.” Tim’s smile fills in *You aren’t dangerous enough to make my enemy list.* Ons’ quick, annoyed look indicates that he gets the subtext.

“The FBI would be much better off if we were to be on the same side.”

Tim smiles widely at that, laying on his ‘younger, enthusiastic’ expression. “I absolutely agree with that. If you were to back our efforts to clean up the FBI, I’d appreciate that greatly.” Tim lays the bait.

“How much?” Ons leans forward, interested.

“It’d make my job a lot easier, and anything that makes my job easier is something that lights up a warm glow in my heart and makes me sleep easier.”

“Well, we’d certainly like to make sure you sleep well,” Ons says, voice cheerful, looking pleased that this is finally going the way he wants it to.

Tim grins. “That’s excellent. So, you’ll hand over all of your internal documents and finances and then we can go through and weed out everyone in your organization who’s causing trouble?”

It was deeply satisfying to see Ons’ face freeze and then go white.

“Oh,” Tim says, the steel back in his gaze. “Is that not what you meant by on the same side? What do you want, Ons?”

“We will find out who you work for.”

Tim snorts a half-strangled laugh. “We’re in the Hoover Building, and there’s a sign on the door with my name on it. If who I work for is a mystery to you, you need to resign.”

“Just stop it.”

Tim sits silently.
“We can make things difficult for you.”

Tim shrugs again. “Of course you can. Anyone who walks into this room has that power. Still, go
back out, look at the title to go with the name on the door. Do I look like a man who fears difficult?”

Ons steeps his hands. “We can make them impossible. We can keep you in court for decades.”

Tim nods, and he lets his expression go serious. “That does sound troublesome. I try to avoid court
when I can. Rule 13, never involve lawyers.”

“Good.”

They both wait.

Another beat of no one saying anything.

“I’m not psychic, Ons. You do have to tell me what you want.”

“Best-selling author, multiple degrees, advanced computer skills, you’re smart. What do you think I
want?”

Tim’s smile is sharp. “I think you want to help me turn the FBI into the cleanest, most-efficient
branch of Federal Law Enforcement.”

Ons scoffs. “Yeah. Of course I do.”

“And thus, again, we’re back at open your files, let me see what you’ve been up to, and prune the
dead wood.”

“No.”

“Then you need to lay it out for me. You need to tell me, in tiny, little words, what exactly it is you
want.”

Ons looks really suspicious. “You wearing a wire?”

Tim stands up, takes off his jacket, and starts unbuttoning his shirt. He’s surprised to see Ons doesn’t
stop him. He has Tim pull the shirt all the way off. *Smart enough to know what he’s going to ask for
is illegal. Dumb enough to do it in my office. There’s a reason why you’re the Assistant to the
Director, and not any higher.* “You want the pants, too?”

“And shoes and socks.”

So Tim strips down to his underwear. Ons stands up, grabs him in an extremely intimate manner, but
assures himself Tim isn’t hiding a wire behind his balls. Tim shudders exaggeratedly, and puts his
clothing back on. “That was unpleasantly familiar.”

“Not taking any chances.”

Tim smirks at him. “Of course not. What do you want?”

“I want my men free.”

“Just like that.”

Ons nods. “Just like that. You let them walk. We’ll let you save enough face by having them fade
away quietly. We’ll replace them. But none of my guys go to trial or do another minute of time.”

“And what, exactly, am I supposed to do? Just put out a press conference and say, ‘Oops! Wrong guys? Those two pounds of hash, turns out it was brownie mix?”

“We intentionally haven’t brought up any press for this. Your side hasn’t made a big deal of it, either. Don’t say anything. My men go free.”

Tim pretends to consider it for a moment and then says, “Yeah, I’m not seeing why I’d want to do that. I’ve got all four of them dead to rights, and as soon as we hunt down Powers, I’ll have him up to his eyeballs in insider trading charges.”

“Gareth’s part of the deal. You don’t hunt him down, and he doesn’t ever come back. And you’re going to do it because you want to fire people. If you do what I want, I let you do what you want. Every day you keep my guys in jail is a year I keep you in court. You want to get rid of the dead wood, guess what, I’ve got the pruning shears.” Ons looks like he’s got the upper hand, and Tim wonders how many times before versions of this conversation have happened.

“That’s a poetic way of putting it. So, just to make sure I do understand this, you are offering me… Cooperation? You’ll burn your union members? Lose their phone numbers when they start calling for help? How does this work?”

“Start? They’re already calling, and we’ve got the funds and lawyers to handle them all. But we don’t have to. Once my guys are free, when your guys call for help, we point out that we can’t help, and it’s done.”

Tim blinks, making himself look impressed. “Wow. That’s…”

“Tidy. We go along with your clean up the FBI. We give press conferences about how whatever you found was disturbing enough that we’re not willing to contest the firings, and that’s that.”

“And do you open up your files and let me go through your internals?”

Ons laughs.

Tim blinks. “That’s a pretty good deal.”

“It’s the best you’re going to get. I can have a judge stopping your punishment duty in less than ten minutes. He’ll make sure that years pass before you can so much as put an unsatisfactory review in anyone’s folder.”

Tim nods, and then says, “Well, I certainly wouldn’t want that.”

Ons grins, feeling like he’s won.

Tim smiles back, and hits the button on his phone. A second later, Hotch is in the room, reading Ons his rights.

“Mr. Ons, you are under arrest for attempting to bribe a Federal Officer.”

“What!”

Tim replies, “That’s what they call it when you try to get an official to do something illegal for you by offering him something he wants or needs.”

“You have no proof!”
“I recorded the whole thing. My computer’s been picking up every word since you walked into the building.”

Ons looks horrified.

“No one wears a wire. Not in his own office! Mr. Ons, you’ve got one call now. Are you calling your lawyer, or that judge you just threatened me with?”

Ons stands there, numb, blinking. He glares at Tim, but seems to have very rapidly hit the decision that now would be a really splendid time to use his right to remain silent.

“Hotch.”

Hotch turns Ons, and takes him out of his office.

For a full minute Tim feels really good about that. And then for one more minute. Then Jennifer pokes her head in, “Tim, you told me to give you the ten minutes heads up. The first one is already here. You’ve got ten minutes until the appointment.”

And feeling really good goes crashing down.

Time to start handing out the head smacks.

The less said about the rest of Saturday, the better.

And nothing said about Sunday would be, in Tim’s opinion, even better yet.

He’s not home for nearly as long as he’d like, but he’s sure as hell not about to bring a second of his day into his home. His spouses ask about how it’s been going the first few days, and on Saturday he answers, a little, talking about Ons. By Sunday night, he just shakes his head.

They don’t make him talk.

On Monday morning, Tim gets an interesting one. Jason Reneer is the second one of the day. He’s a forensic computing specialist, and when Jennifer pokes her head in, getting directions on what to do with the one who just left (sobbing) she says, “This next one… Is different.”

“How?”

“He’s dead calm.”

Tim sighs at that, and nods. “I could use some calm.”

“It’s a nice change. Two minutes?”

“Two minutes.”
And in two minutes Jason Reneer heads in.

He’s tall. Even from his 6’1” vantage, Reneer is tall to Tim. His hair is blonde, wispy, soft, and worn longer than FBI Agents would normally go for. (It almost brushes his collar.) His eyes are blue. And he’s slender.

And like Jennifer said, he’s calm. He’s not cheerful or perky, not after three days of brick sorting, but he’s not angry, defensive, or sad.

And he’s also aware of the way Tim’s watching him, like he doesn’t know what to do with this. (Which is true.)

He sits down, looks Tim dead in the eye, and says, “I don’t belong here.”

Tim’s had versions of that, but not calm. Angry and defensive, sure, but this isn’t frantic butt covering, this is just a statement of fact.

“Okay. I’ve got 38 cases that beg to differ, but, have at it.”

“Noise.”

That impresses Tim, so he rolls with it. “Noise?”

“You’re a math guy. I’m a math guy. We understand the concept of noise. If you have enough data points, you will find a pattern, whether there’s actually a pattern there or not.”

That’s a new angle, and Tim’s willing to see where Reneer takes this. “True. Teasing patterns that mean something out of the noise is part of what I do.”

“Right. You couldn’t do the sort of thing you hope to do with the tech if you didn’t know how to do that. Whatever you’ve got on me, it’s noise.”

“You seem awfully sure of that.”

“Because I am.” He’s dead confident on that. “I don’t play favorites. I don’t mess around. I get cases. I solve them.”

Tim’s gut wants to believe this guy. His records suggest that a leap of faith may not be warranted. “Uh huh. You get ‘em, you solve ‘em, and that’s that.”

“Yes.”

“In six years, you were assigned 38 cases involving congressional staffers of Democratic congressmen. Beyond noting you got the cases, you investigated none of them. The forty-three cases involving Republican staffers were all investigated. You’ll forgive me if that level of lopsided looks like more than noise.”

Reneer tilts his head at that, looking curious. Tim waits, wondering what’s going to come out of him, “Show me,” isn’t what Tim was expecting.

But he does. He whips out the notes, and lets Reneer get into the files to check them.

“I only remember five of them, but the ones I do, I got pulled off of.”

That gets Tim’s attention. “That’s not in the notes.”
“It’s not like I was formally told not to investigate them. But, this one, Hanson, I remember because it looked interesting, and I’d just gotten the warrant to start going through her files, and then my Boss shows up and tosses a hotter, newer case into my lap. He wanted that other one to take precedence. You’ve got to investigate what he wants you on.”

That gets Tim interested. No one ever said ‘Don’t investigate blah,” but if they were leaning on agents to investigate other things…

“How often would that happen?”

“At least once a month.”

“Tell me more about that boss.”

“Howard Ruther. He’s not a bad guy or anything. But he was really interested in us making sure that any case we got involving government contractors took precedent. So… yeah, I got bumped off several cases against… a bunch of people, really, because he had a new contractor taking a kickback or something, and he wanted us on top of that.”

Tim’s scanning through Reneer’s file. “I’ve got more research to do. You and the rest of the people working for Ruther may have gotten a reprieve.”

“You believe in reprieves?” Reneer looks surprised, but happy to be so, by that.

“I believe in laying blame where it belongs. Anyone we couldn’t find a pattern for, isn’t here. If your Boss is telling you to investigate something, and he keeps showing up whenever other cases appear in your docket, it’s not entirely up to you then, is it?”

“No.” Reneer’s still dead calm. “Now what?”

“Brick sorting. I’ll check out Ruther. I’ll check out the other people working for him. If your story is right, not only do you have a reprieve, but I’ve got a division that needs people who can find real patterns in the noise.”

“So, if I’m right, I’m getting a promotion, and if I’m wrong?”

“Twenty more days here, and then you can enjoy another Probie year.”

Reneer nods. “I’m right.”

“I hope you are. I need guys like you.”

Since the show began, Gibbs, Ziva, and Fornell have been off. He doesn’t need them researching, and he doesn’t have room for them in his office.

They’ve had the option of working with Hotch, but, none of them have been interested.

But he’s got a job now. It screws up his schedule for the day, but he doesn’t care. They can wait for him.

He gets Gibbs on the phone (he’s nervous about calling Ziva, not wanting to wake Dave if he’s napping with an ill-timed ring) and explains the deal with Hanson.
“I need eyes, and I don’t have the time to do it.”

He can feel Gibbs nod. Then two words stretch across the miles. “On it.”

“Thank you.”

And then it’s back to chewing people out. Which is getting harder by the moment, because now, as he’s smacking people upside the back of the head, he’s wondering if he should be smacking their bosses.

But, no one else comes in with that explanation. He gets a lot of, “I did the best I could.”

Some of them outright apologize.

Some of them even mean it.

By the middle of the day he’s put them into three categories.

Angry: That’s Smitts and his ilk. Tim doesn’t enjoy working with them, but they’re the easiest of the bunch. They come in pissed, he pisses right back at them, and in this contest he’s got the biggest, longest dick, so he wins.

Seppuku: These are the ones who come in crying, and perform the verbal equivalent of ritual suicide in front of his desk.

He hates them. He’s had the hard boss staring down at him, and being awash in abject shame and misery, and having to do it to someone else makes him want to curl up in a ball and rock back and forth whimpering.

The “Reasonable.” It takes a few days before he gets one of them. Tim knows they talk to each other when they get back to punishment duty, so it probably takes a while before this plan of attack gets put into play.

Irina Murphy is the first one to try it on him. (Though each version of this he’ll get will go about the same.)

She strides into his office looking as crisp and professional as someone who’s been doing hard work, didn’t bring the right gear for it, and hasn’t had copious shower access can. So, she’s rumpled and likely wearing less makeup than she’d prefer, and if he had to guess she never voluntarily leaves the house with her hair this unkempt.

That said, she’s doing a fairly good job of keeping herself together. He’s seen agents (usually of the Seppuku variety) who look like they haven’t slept or showered since they left to come to DC.

“Director McGee, I fully admit I messed up. I wasn’t as good of an agent as I could have been, but, be reasonable. More than nine out of ten of the cases I got, I did a good job on. Yes, I did look the other way sometimes, and I’m not proud of that, but…” And she’s got a hangdog look on her face here, “but it happens. You know people, and they’re trying to do good things. And you want to believe in the greater good, so, you cut a corner here, or look the other way there, so they can do what needs to be done, because the greater good matters, right?”

Tim lets her keep going.
“I mean… I know one of the cases you’ve got in there was on Senator Fishburne. And, yeah, I know, I buried it. And I did it because he was one of the few solid votes for EPA funding and expansion. If I had taken him down, we might have all been swimming in toxic air and drinking poison. And… The Endangered Species Act, every few years those bastards kept trying to kill it, and I knew, no matter what, he’d fight for it.

“So, yes, I ignored his office playing fast and loose with the fundraising laws. But, I had to. If he had gone down… I couldn’t live with that.”

Tim nods slowly, reading the look on her face, the hope that an appeal to a higher good than her job might matter. And, were this just a philosophical discussion, he might agree. But this isn’t. “Assuming you mean that as your resignation speech, I will take that into consideration on whatever recommendations you get for us in your search for further employment. We’ll let future employers, possibly in the environmental sector, know that you are ‘passionate’ about causes that matter to you.”

She just about swallows her tongue. “This job matters to me!”

Tim stares at her, hard eyed, and keeps his voice quiet. “Not enough. Your job was achieving the greater good through a whole lot of little goods.” Tim shakes his head at that. “That’s all any of us ever have, really. A lot of little day in, day out, everyday goods. And you’re right, nine out of ten of your cases you did exactly what you were supposed to do.

“But everyone else does, too. You’d never eat in a restaurant that only got nine out of ten orders right. If your electrician gets nine out of ten of your plugs in right, your house burns down. If your doctor correctly diagnoses your illness nine out of ten times, you die. You weren’t hired for this job to be reasonable. You were hired to be better than reasonable. You were hired to be outstanding.

“This is it, Public Corruption. We’re the White Knights, and you weren’t. You want to go crusade for the environment, and I’ll make sure whoever calls in for references knows you’re so damn committed to making sure we’ve got clean air and water that you were willing to let people break the law. Otherwise, right now, today, you’re committed to clean government, and everything else comes second.

“Right now, you cease to care about the ‘greater good.’ Right now making sure the guy in your case file is doing his job legally is your greatest good. If you can do that, you stay, if not you leave. It’s that easy.”

She eyes his desk, and her badge in her hand, stands up, taps it on his desk, still thinking, and then leaves, still holding her badge. Tim sighs, and puts in his notes that she never gets put on a case that touches anyone environmentally connected.

And then comes the next one, another Seppuku.

Apparently, Reneer talked. By the next morning Tim’s getting a lot more, “I was working on whatever it was, but my Boss kept dropping new assignments on me.”

Some of them, he knows are lying. Too much time in interrogation means he knows when someone’s BSing to save themselves. He fires three of them in quick succession, which feels… Maybe good, maybe not. He doesn’t know anymore. Tim’s spending most days trying not to feel.

Some of them, though… They aren’t sure. Which means they’re probably cobbling together memories of getting hot cases dropped into their laps, and wondering if going after those cases meant
they missed something. And, given how much they’ve got riding on successfully making him believe they really meant to be good agents, but they just got yanked off of those cases, they’ve done a good job of convincing themselves that that’s what really happened.

The best he can do with this is rearrange how he’s going to talk to these people. Bosses get bumped to the top of the list.

“I’ve got one you want to see,” Jennifer says to him. (After a morning of three reasonables, two seppukus, two angries, and five I-Got-Pulled-Offs.)

Tim’s staring at her, dead-eyed, forcing himself to show some interest in something. Then he hears a tiny yip, and starts to feel a smile spread across his face.

“You do, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” She looks pleased to see him perking up.

Then Gibbs heads in, with Jackson. He plops a huge file down in front of Tim, and leans back against the counter where the coffee maker is. “Your math guy was onto something.”

“Good, I liked him.”

Gibbs nods. “His boss’s wife is the sister of the former Assistant Director of the Democratic National Party.”

“Oh God, I don’t want to tell you how many times I’ve heard versions of that over the last week.”

Gibbs nods at him, I know all over his face.

“The thirty-eight guys under him, some of the cases we pulled them for were ones that protected the DNC or their people. But not all of them. Reneer, he’s found you nine more good employees.”

“Better than nothing. Who’s getting saved today?”

Gibbs lists the names. “Ziva and I are already starting to go after your other supervisors.”

“And once I’m done telling them they’re free to go, I’m handing you Reneer. He should help you pick out patterns from noise.”

Gibbs smiles at that. He’s sure that Tim’s head would explode if he saw the way he and Ziva were figuring out what patterns might exist. He knows for a fact that both Tony and Abbi were horrified to see the web of connections they had drawn on six whiteboards. And amazed they were able to pull something out of that web of mess.

It got done, that’s all that mattered.

It takes a while to hunt down Reneer and his eight innocent co-workers. They’re scattered throughout the city.

Tim thinks the best of the saving graces on this is that he hasn’t talked to anyone but Reneer in this
group. Though if he had, he supposes this would go a long way toward showing off that he’s not always right, and he’s willing to own up to it.

Still, he’s glad he hasn’t made anyone in this group cry. At least, not in person.

As soon as they’re all in his office, before anyone has a chance to speak, Reneer grins, smugly, and says, “I was right.”

Tim nods. “You were. Now look around you. Thirty-eight people reported to Hanson, you nine represent the only ones doing your jobs properly.”

Reneer shrugs. “I never said you were wrong about the rest of them. Just me.”

“Not just you.” Tim turns his attention to the rest of this group, who are all tired, sunburned, smelly, and unsure of what just happened to them. “Agent Reneer walked in here and told me I was wrong about him. He was right about that. I was also wrong about you. When I got this department, I went through everyone’s employment records, looking for patterns. I found a pattern for each of you. The problem was, what I found was how your Boss was covering his tracks.” Tim looks at them, regret in his eyes.

“I’m very sorry I called you on the carpet. I’m sorry I put you through this. Your status as full agents has been re-instated. You’ve been given an additional eight days of paid vacation. Which if you want to take as of tomorrow, I’m fine with. There are no black marks on your record. And, as of right now, there’s an Uber waiting to take you to the FBI jet, and in two hours, you’ll be back in Boston with your families.”

They all blink at that. Then one of them, Samason, says, “That’s it?”

“That’s all I could think of. Is there anything else you’d like?”

“You rip us all up, and then tell us you were wrong, give us vacation, and send us home on your personal jet?”

Tim nods, wondering what else he can offer. “I’ve got some Steam gift certificates that I used to give my NCIS guys for ‘good job’ treats, but that seemed like way too little for this. But, I mean, if you like gaming, your next game is on me.”

Samason shakes his head. “No, I’m not saying that’s too little. Just… You’re admitting you were wrong and now you’re trying to make it right?”

Tim nods again, relieved. “That’s the idea.”

“You do that?” Robinson, a particularly bedraggled agent asks.

“I try.” Tim sighs. “God knows I’m human. I’m not going to get it right all the time, but I’m certainly going to own up to it when I don’t.”

“Maybe, next time, a bit less shock and awe first, and a bit more listening?” Samason suggests.

Tim raises an eyebrow at him. “Nine out of thirty-eight.”

Reneer gives Samason a little whack to the back of the shoulder. Tim sees some sort of glance pass between them, then Samason shrugs. “Mathboy’s saying I just stepped in it.”

“Mathboy,” Tim says dryly, looking at Reneer. “I’ve got a list of nicknames like that as long as my
arm. He just saved you. And maybe some of the rest of your co-workers. The rest of you, off you go. Get ready to go home. Reneer, hang around for a moment.”

The other eight of them file out. Once they’re gone, Tim says, “The offer is open for you, too. If you want to get on the jet, you can be back in Boston before sundown.”

“Or…”

“Or I’ve got two agents with the files and backgrounds on every Supervisor, Team Leader, and Assistant Director in Public Corruption. They need someone to help hunt through the noise and find the patterns. Once that’s done, I’ll slot you here, put you with the group that’s going to begin investigating Internal Affairs, give you a team of your own, and you’ll start that investigation off at the top, so we’re not crucifying people for what their Bosses did. When IA is clean, then we’ll turn you loose on the whole FBI.”

“I like the sound of Team Leader.”

“Good.”

Reneer offers Tim a small saucy smile. “I like the sound of Steam gift certificates, too.”

Tim snorts a laugh at that, then goes into his desk, digs around, and finds two one hundred dollar certificates. He hands them over. “I don’t know when Gibbs is going to let you have some downtime again, but when he does, have fun with it.”

There’s a gleam in Reneer’s eyes. “Oh, I will! Uh… Where do I stay? I’m not going back to the high school, right?”

“No! Jennifer will get you set up with somewhere worth staying, and you’ll meet Gibbs tomorrow.”

“Good.”

“Just… You aren’t allergic to dogs, are you?”

“No. Why?”

Tim smiles. “You’ll see in the morning.”

“Okay…” Reneer sounds a bit nervous about that, but he heads off, looking pleased.

And for a moment, Tim is too, until he catches the sound of crying from his office.

Every ounce of good feeling from that evaporates as he realizes he’s still got two hours of employees to deal with.
The Fear of McGee: Act III

The first death threat shows up a week after he starts.

Tim is philosophical about it. He’s been held at gunpoint and stood over a ticking bomb, so violent, incoherent rage, scrawled across a piece of paper with the Robbie Cook High School crest on it doesn’t even make his pulse rise.

He looks at the envelope, which he got already opened, analytically. No return address. No stamp. The glue strip is in pristine shape.

He doesn’t toss the letter out, just plops it into a folder for Hotch. “Can’t kick over the hornets’ nest and act startled when they try to sting you.”

Jennifer looks at the letter. “You aren’t going to do anything with it?”

“No sealed, no stamp, probably the only reason it got delivered is because it was going to the FBI, whoever wrote this didn’t touch it. And, everyone in that building is smart enough not to use his own handwriting for this.”

“So… you just…”

Tim sighs. “Use it as cause. I catch anyone snooping, straying too close to my home, offering a real threat, I can snap ‘em up, now.”

That gets Jennifer’s attention. “You didn’t send this to yourself, did you?”

Tim almost laughs at that. “I’m not that devious.”

Jennifer nods. “Five minutes until the first one.”

Tim sighs and rubs his temples, feeling the headache creeping up on him. He remembers the number of guns he’s been handed over the last week as different people have resigned. Just because he doesn’t feel like this is more than a temper tantrum on paper, he’s not going to tempt fate. “Make them give you their guns before they come in.”

She looks relieved at that. “Thank you,” she says as she heads out.

Tim stands up, stretches, and then pulls off his jacket, tie, and shirt. Comey told him to watch his back. He’s got an actual death threat now. He pulls his vest out of his bottom desk drawer and slips it over his skin.

He rolls his eyes. Wear a t-shirt tomorrow. It’s rough and annoying against his chest, back, and shoulders. Hot as fuck, too.

He’s just straightening his tie as the first one of the morning, Julius Aerbinder, head of the team that dealt exclusively with investigations into the bidding systems for federal contracts heads in. His people are saying he’s the one who kept booting them off of investigations related to Consolidated Concrete, Henry’s Fine Paper Goods, Industrial Amalgamated Inc., and CVR Corp.

The problem is, his people all have their own shit, too. He’s got maybe one employee who might not be here on her own volition. And he’s got so much of his own shit, it’s hard to tell if those five companies are getting extra protection from him, or if they’re noise.
And he’s mad.

Good. Tim steels himself, puts his ass kicking glare on his face, and gets ready to stomp this twit.

He gets another badge thrown at him for his troubles, but that’s one more jerk he won’t have to deal with again.

Tim collapses back in his chair, and stares at the ceiling. One down, thirty-nine to go.

“You bust fifteen balls,
“What do you get?
“Another day older and—“

“Shouldn’t it be sixteen?” Jennifer asks as she comes in. Tim didn’t realize he’d been singing that out loud.

He blinks at her, and thinks about it, and says… “Probably. Did I lose five minutes?” He thinks he’s got five more minute of lunch time.

“Nope, this came in.” She leans against his desk, and shows him a video feed on her phone. He recognizes the angle and location.

“Interesting.”

It’s the entrance to Robbie Cook. He’s watching several of his people leaving once the sun goes down.

“They’ve apparently noticed that no one is guarding the door. Where do you think they’re going?” he asks.

“Hotel? They were back in the morning.”

“Am I seeing any of them soon?”

She taps the phone. “That one is Juan Ferrez; you’ve got a meeting with him in three days. He’s the first of the bunch. You want me to move them up?”

“Nah. Keep watching, keep recording. Write up the resignation paperwork for them, get it all filled out. I will happily accept their resignations when they come to see me, and if they don’t sign, we’ll immediately terminate.”

“You want a guard on the door?”

Tim snorts. “NO! If they’re sneaking out, they’re done. And if I need to post someone at the door to keep them in there, I don’t want them on my team. How many ran off last night?” He obviously didn’t see the full eight hours of video.

“Just those five.”
“Okay, keep me posted.”

“I’ve got you.” She nods to the clock. “And now your five minutes are up.”

Tim groans, and then packs his lunch away. “Nineteen down, twenty-one to go.”

He’s fucking burnt by the end of the day. Fifteen of that twenty-one were Seppuku mode, and at least eleven of them were acting. The only thing worse than someone who genuinely hates what he/she’s done and is shamed into just about wetting his/her pants, is someone who’s faking it.

Tim packs his gear up, slowly, he shoulders his go bag, and feeling like his legs weigh a million pounds, he lurches out of his office, and down the stairs.

He usually takes the stairs. The months where he couldn’t take the stairs still annoy him, so he makes himself go up and down the four flights, even though, given how tired he is, the elevator is seeming awfully tempting.

An extra perk of the stairs, he’s pretty much the only one who takes them. Just him and the crying, snotty-nosed voices in his head, sobbing and begging him for forgiveness.

He stops mid-flight, closes his eyes, and leans against the wall, willing those images to go away.

“Timothy McGee.”

He jerks, and is reaching for his gun before he knows who’s talking to him.

His eyes find a woman a few steps below him, looking up at him. She has white hair, he knows that. And… eyes. The hardest, sharpest, oldest eyes he’s ever seen. He assumes, thinking about it later, that she had to be more than white hair and a pair of diamond eyes staring up at him, but he can’t remember anything else about her.

He doesn’t know who she is, but his hand doesn’t leave his gun. He flicks the holster guard off.

“Yes. And you are?”

She keeps staring at him, tilts her head slightly, and says, “Someone you won’t get to know in this life.”

“Uh… Okay.” He’s certain she’s speaking in English, with a British accent, but that makes no sense to him.

For a second, her eyes almost soften, there’s a hint of a smile, and then, “Watch your back.”

He literally turns, putting his back to the wall. He’s got no idea who she is, but his danger sense is screaming.

“Do you… Is…”

She steps past him, and gently touches his face, right next to his left eye. “You have your father’s eyes.”

He winces at that.
“No, not that one. Use those eyes. You’ll see what’s coming before it gets to you.”

“Uh… Is there a…”

And she’s gone.

He rubs his hands against his eyes, hard, but he’s alone, in the stairwell.

Tim turns around, goes to his office, locks it, and immediately calls up the security footage. He watches himself have a conversation with no one.

He’s got his phone out before he’s finished the video. “Jimmy, do you have a minute?”

“Just did a y-incision. Can it wait?”

“I’m hallucinating.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Actually, he’s there in eight. Still wearing scrubs. And he’s got to knock to get in, because Tim’s not only made sure that no one has line of sight on him, but his door is locked.

And he locks it after Jimmy gets in.

“Did you eat today?” On the way over, Jimmy dealt with a spark of panic, and then beat it down and made himself switch into medical mode.

“Yeah. It’s not low blood sugar.”

“Not what I’m thinking.” He strides across the room, touching Tim’s forehead and throat, looking at his eyes. “You don’t have a fever. Your eyes aren’t glassy. You aren’t sweating. Your skin isn’t clammy. Your heart rate is up, but not that high.”

“And everything I ate today was from the food Breena packed for me.” Tim knows what Jimmy’s thinking now.

“With you all day?”

“In my office with me, all day. I went to the bathroom twice, but the office was empty then.”

Jimmy’s about to go deeper on that, and then he looks over to the coffee machine. “Drinks?”

“Water and coffee. Water from sealed bottles. Coffee from the…” Tim winces. That’s been in his office, alone, every night. “Shit.” He’s pulling off his jacket, as Jimmy goes lurching for his bag. He brought his kit. “Bloodwork?”

Jimmy’s nodding. “Bloodwork.”

Tim rolls his sleeve up. And Jimmy gets his alcohol wipes. It’s as he’s drawing the blood, that Jimmy asks, “What did you see?”

Tim tells him, as well as he can remember, and fills in the bit about the video of him by himself in the stairwell.
Jimmy’s not sure what to do with that. “At least she’s giving you good advice.” He keeps watching Tim, fairly certain that the bloodwork is going to come back clear. “You don’t look drugged.”

“I don’t feel drugged. Tired, but…”

Jimmy nods. He knows that Tim’s not sleeping well. “You sleep at all last night?”

“Couple hours.”

Jimmy thinks about it. “Dreaming?”

“I saw the video, I’m standing up and talking.”

Jimmy snorts. “Let me see it.”

Jimmy watches it, and shakes his head. It’s not great footage, but between what he can see with his eyes, and knowing Tim…

“You lean against the wall, close your eyes… Dreaming.”

Tim makes a face at that, but he’s got to admit, it’s logical. And he certainly likes that idea better than someone poisoned him.

“Then we don’t need to tell the girls about this?”

Jimmy looks at him like he’s the biggest twit he’s ever laid eyes on. “You’re insane.”

“I’m talking to invisible people.”

“But that’s not the insane part. If you think I’m not testing all of this stuff… Let alone you think I can somehow pull off this, ‘Hey, Abby, I’ve need you to check this blood, which I wrote T McGee on, and this coffee machine, which just happens to look exactly like Tim’s, for every poison you can think of, and a few you can’t, but it has totally nothing to do with Tim at all,’ you are insane.”

Tim nods. “Okay.”

“I will tell her it’s my medical opinion that you need to go home and sleep, which she will agree with. And that I will give you something to make sure that when your head hits the pillow you’ll sleep.”

“I can’t be a zombie tomorrow.”

Jimmy just eyes him, and Tim nods, slowly. If he’s literally falling asleep on his feet, he’s past the point where zombie is a legitimate concern.

“Come on. I’ll take you home.”

“Then you’re going back to work, right?”

Jimmy nods. “Got to run this stuff, and Sam’s keeping Lt. Heathers company, but that’s an easier job with the two of us.”

In Jimmy’s car, Tim wants nothing more than to just close his eyes and drift, but he doesn’t.
Because of the nature of the FBI, who works there, who goes in there, the Hoover Building has a “secure” parking facility. It’s two blocks down, and under a non-descript building. Officially it’s an office building with an underground parking garage. There’s an underground path that leads from that parking garage to the Hoover Building’s basement. No name on the building, just a number.

Jimmy, being a visitor, didn’t park in there, but Tim’s car is in there.

As they drive by, he notices a delivery van sitting out front. Bertha’s Flowers. With two men in the cab. In the no-parking zone.

Since that building is a front, and all that’s in there is storage, thus there is no one inside to receive a delivery of flowers, and there are places on the street to park closer to the other buildings which could have someone getting flowers, Tim grabs his phone. “Hotch, hey, you still in the building… Uh huh… Yeah… There’s a delivery van in front of the secure parking facility. Probably nothing, but… Thanks.”

“Trouble?” Jimmy asks.

“I hope not, but no one’s supposed to be there. Don’t want anything compromising line of sight when we bring in big name people.”

They’re a quarter mile on by that point. “That’s where you park, too.”

“Yeah. I’m not… feeling it in my gut, but… I’m not Gibbs. So, they’ve got secure parking; I’m using it.” He taps his chest, and Jimmy hears fingers on Kevlar.

“What haven’t you told us?”

Tim sighs. “Got the first death threat today.”

“Tim!”

“I was going to mention it after dinner.”

“I carried a filled coffee maker down four flights of stairs and through security!”

Tim looks irked at that. Okay, yes, it was a rather sloshy mess, it’s a pretty good thing that Jimmy’s got scrubs on, but of all the possible responses…

“Context, Tim. You’re exhausted, you get a death threat, you’ve been on work you hate all day, and suddenly you’re seeing someone telling you to keep your eyes peeled. I’ll still test the stuff, because it’s you, but my first semester psych class, college psych, not med school, tells me this is pretty normal.”

“Oh.”

The driver jerks when he hears knuckles on his side window.

He’d been watching the parking garage in front of him so intensely he didn’t see the large black man with the bald head sneaking up on him.

His partner, also watching ahead, frantically looks to his right, and sees the older man with the white-threaded black hair standing next to him, grim look on face, and an FBI badge pressed against the car.
The driver rolls down his window. He tries smiling. “Agents.”

“You better have a damn good reason for being here,” Morgan says.

Both drivers flash each other a look.

“Yeah, that’s not a damn good reason,” Hotch says. “Out of the car.”

“Wait! What? We’re just…”

“Getting out of the car, getting patted down, getting arrested, and then explaining to us why you’re here,” Morgan adds, stepping away from the door and pulling it open.

“NO! No… We’re just…”

“In a restricted zone,” Hotch says. “Out.”

“We’re just watching!” the passenger says as he steps out of his side.

Hotch presses him against the side of the van, pats him down, and cuffs him. “This one is clean. Yours?”

“No weapons. No ID, either,” Morgan replies.

“None on mine, either. What do you bet we don’t find any flowers in the back?”

“I don’t make bets I’ll lose,” Morgan says, walking his guy over to Hotch. “So, how about it? Why are you here?”

“Watching!” The driver says.

“And who are you watching?” Hotch asks with both of them in front of him, as Morgan goes rummaging through the van.

“Don’t know. A car. We’re looking for a Highlander, plate number…” he spills the digits. “Just watch, follow, and photograph.”

“There are cameras in here,” Morgan says. “Got a lens you could use to see Mars. No weapons.”

“Just watching! That’s all we’re doing!” The passenger is adamant.

“Uh huh.” Hotch packs a lot of disdain into those two syllables. “What are you going to do with your photos?”

“Give them to our boss.” The driver says. “It’s legal to take pictures of people and their cars. The press does it all the time.”

“And this boss would be?” Hotch asks.

“She’s Allison Carter.”

Hotch and Morgan share a look. She’s the… God, they’re getting pretty far down the ranks at this point. She’s the Head of the Human Resources for FBIEU.

“Heh.” Morgan says. “You know, it’s generally legal to take pictures of people and their cars. But
“Okay, thanks, Hotch…”

Tim’s sitting in the waiting area of their local Target, as he and Jimmy wait for them to fill a prescription for sleeping pills.

“What was it?” Jimmy asks.

“FBIEU, probably looking for blackmail fodder.”

Jimmy sighs. “So, you caught this one.”

“Yeah.” Tim’s head hits the wall behind him. He knows they’re both thinking it, but neither of them wants to say it.

Eventually, Jimmy does. “If we don’t want to get outed, it’s probably best if Breena and I go back to sleeping at our place, and you guys sleep at yours.”

“Probably…” It hurts to say that.

“You think this will ‘blow over?’”

“No. I think I’ll settle with them at some point, and they’ll try to rejigger it as soon as they get something on me. I’ve got 4/5th of the executive level behind bars right now, and they’re getting desperate. Ziva said take the head off the snake, but…”

Jimmy can see Tim really isn’t in a place to think about this, not right now.

“Okay. It’s not happening tonight. We’ll deal with tomorrow, tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

Jimmy gets Tim home and settled. He can’t stay long, and there’s a somber air, as they make plans to talk tomorrow, in Tim’s office, at lunch.

Jimmy was right, whatever that pill he gave Tim was, he hit the pillow and was gone.

He doesn’t remember any dreams that night. And he’s only mildly upside down when he wakes up.

But, upside-down or not, a few thoughts occur to him: A: They were going to follow his car. Which means: B: They don’t have his home address. Likely because C: Between his job and Abby’s past as a stalking victim, their home address is secure. (To the point where their driver’s licenses don’t
actually have their real address on them. It’s close, but… not exactly right. And as a backup measure, if anyone tries to use the VA DMV to find Tim or Abby, he gets a heads up.) But, just in case D: By this evening, that’s going to be even more secure. His publisher, agent, and anyone else who has Tim and Abby McGee attached to 12998 Hertzle St. won’t have it.

Those thoughts have also led to him thinking that, no matter what, he’s not letting them drive his family apart. Windows shut, blinds closed, the only thing they could get them with is a heat camera, and there’s no way to prove it’s them on the camera. (Granted, he’s going to be bringing some goodies home, make sure nothing is sending information out of his home. No way he’s getting bugged. If he’s feeling really paranoid, he’ll make sure the power is off if they’re doing anything he wouldn’t want on camera.)

He’s finishing up his shower, and feels like all of this is a massive pain in the ass. And it is, but as he gets dressed, and sees Jimmy sleeping (very late night, he got in… Tim doesn’t actually know, but if he’s still in bed, that was at least 2:00 AM night.) and hears the ladies dealing with the girls…

This is his castle, one of them, and he’s going to defend it against any and all comers.

“Us to our place, and you to yours tonight?” Breena asks as they eat breakfast.

The kids are with them, so Tim doesn’t say “Fuck that.” He settles for, “NO!”

Abby raises an eyebrow at him. “Devious plans?”

“Lots of them.” His eyes sparkle a little.

“Good!” she kisses him. “You know, I made that jammer a few weeks ago.” Breena and Tim look at her curiously. “Didn’t I tell you about that?”

They shake their heads.

Abby waves that off. “Dornie had that murder last month, and every time he or his guys got within fifty feet of the killer all of their gear died. Radio, phone, wi-fi, all of it. As soon as they got out of the zone, it came right back. I build him a quick-proof-of concept device. He used it to kill the device that was killing his gear… Anyway, Abby to the rescue, case solved, and I’ve got a jammer that I can mess with a bit, boost the signal. Turn it on, and everything in the house goes dead. Turn it off, and everything turns on again. So, as long as we don’t want to watch anything while we’re messing around, we can be an electronic surveillance dead zone.” She grins at them.

Tim kisses her. “I love you.”

Abby smiles prettily, hugging him. Then she glares at him, “No vest.”

“I’ll put it on before I go.”

“You better!” Breena adds.

“I will. I really think the letter was just a pissed off agent blowing off some steam. And I think the Union’s just looking to embarrass me.”

They both stare at him, then Breena strokes a hand over Donnie, and Abby looks to the rest of the
Tim nods. “I know. I’m not risking anything. I keep the blinds shut. I’m wearing a vest. No one gets into my office with a weapon. And I’ll start moving around the office at random. Someone uses a heat scope, I won’t be sitting still.”

They both nod.

“Uber into work,” Breena adds. “Call a car, have it drop you inside the secure parking lot, and do the same when you leave. No one sees you go in or out.”

“I can do that, too. I was going to do that today, anyway.”

“Okay.”

Three more death threats. Nine agents slipped out to sleep somewhere other than Robbie Cook.

And, when he gets in, there’s a news clipping from the New York Times. Apparently, according to this article, he’s ‘torturing’ his agents with unsafe duty. Next to the clipping is a request from Vivianne for ten minutes to talk to a hand-selected reporter, where he can ‘give his side.’

He sends her a quick email telling her to set it up.

Then he settles back in his chair, for a minute, before getting up and starting to pace randomly around his office.

Jennifer ushers the first of his appointments in.

If sitting there, on the far side of his desk, staring them down was unnerving, wandering all over, including standing right next to them, looming over them, cranks the stress level up a few more notches.

Unfortunately, it does that for him, too.

“Director McGee, I want to thank you for taking the time to talk to me.”

Tim nods. “Best fifteen minutes of my day here.”

Adam Heth, reporter for the New York Times, looks startled at that. “That’s not usually how people react to being grilled by a reporter.”

Tim smiles, but it’s grim. “I usually do press on paper. No love of getting grilled, either. But… compared to how I’m spending the rest of my day…” Tim shrugs. “So, have at it.”

“We’re getting reports that you’re illegally requiring your agents to do manual labor in dangerous conditions if they want to keep their jobs.”
“I take issue with agents, illegally, and dangerous conditions, but you’ve got the general gist right. I have given any member of the FBI, up to our previous Director, Mr. Comey, who was derelict in his duty the chance to atone by doing physical work to fix the results of that dereliction. If any agent doesn’t want to do that work, she or he’s welcome to leave. So, this is not punishment duty offered only to the rank and file, nor is it corporate punishment. We went through the files of everyone in the Public Corruption Department, and have applied this punishment accordingly, no one who was looking the other way has been exempt. So, not Agents, in the sense of the entire department. Only the ones who weren’t doing their jobs.

“As for illegally… I’m not being subtle or quiet about this. I have yet to have a judge show up and tell me to stop.

“And dangerous…” Tim pauses, looking at the reporter for a moment before saying, “You don’t live in DC, do you?”

“No.”

“Okay. After the fall, the mobs set fire to most of the city.”

“I saw the footage.” Adam winces a bit at that. It’s one thing to see riots burn down somewhere far away and not “real.” It’s another thing when it’s your own capitol.

“Good. A lot of the buildings were old, and the fires made them unsafe. In the almost year between then and now, a lot of buildings have collapsed or been demolished because they were unsafe. DC is scrambling for funds to rebuild, so, if it’s in the rubble, and it can be used, we’re using it.

“Bricks are bricks, if they’re sound, Jarvis can use them. So, this ‘dangerous’ duty, and bear in mind, these are men and women who carry guns and go out and risk getting shot, every single day, is sitting at one end of one of the many empty blocks, and slowly going through the rubble looking for bricks that are still solid.

“The ones that can be reused get sent to construction sites. The ones that can’t get hauled away. There are churches and schools that have children volunteering to do this work. It’s hot. It’s boring. It’s physically annoying, and I’m sure their backs and shoulders ache at the end of the day. But it is not dangerous.

“I’ve worked in DC since 2002, and this city is as much home for me as anywhere can be. It burnt because we failed. The people who are out there, they didn’t do their jobs. So, yes, I am, literally, making them clean up the mess they made.”

Adam seems to approve of that, and Tim’s sure that’s why he’s the one who’s got this scoop with him.

“Your agents say you’re blocking them from access to their Union Reps.”

“I’m letting them talk to the press, but not their Union Reps.” Tim rolls his eyes. “If that’s the case, I’m a piss poor mastermind. They still have their phones and computers, and I am doing literally nothing to see who they’re talking to, or why. If they can’t get a hold of FBIEU, that’s on FBIEU, not me.”

Adam smirks at that. “That’s not entirely true, is it?”

“FBIEU has more than 100 employees. I’ve arrested eight and have a warrant out for number nine. If they can’t figure out how to support their members without those nine people, they have way more employees than they need.”
Adam chuckles dryly at that. “They say the charges you’ve brought against them are trumped up.”

“Of course they do! Have you ever seen anyone go to the press and say, ‘Yep, they’ve got us dead to rights. We’re absolutely guilty of all of this stuff.’ We don’t comment on ongoing investigations, but anyone with a PACER subscription can see what motions we’ve filed in court.”

“Which is why everyone is interested. Those aren’t the usual hardball sorts of charges. Drug smuggling isn’t the sort of thing that goes away if people come to terms.”

Tim smiles, slightly. The corners of his lips lift. “Okay, see… I know a lot of people don’t get this, but, maybe if I say it enough, eventually it’ll filter through. Business as usual ended the day I got here. I don’t bring charges against people to try and manipulate them. I bring charges against them because they’re breaking the law. I’m not doing this hoping that FBIEU will show up and offer me something. They already had a guy try that. Last I heard, he’s going to take the guilty plea for bribery, because I’ve got him on tape literally offering me what I want, if I break the law for him.”

“Uh huh.” Adam is singularly unimpressed by that.

“You don’t buy it.”

Suddenly, Adam, who Tim thought was younger than he is, looks old and jaded. “Let’s put it this way, we’ve heard this song before.”

Tim nods. “Fair enough. Come see me again in a year, and tell me if you think I’m singing the same old song you’ve heard before.”

Adam stands up. “I’ll do that.” At the door he says to Tim, “You think you can really do it?”

Tim shrugs. He doesn’t care if this is on the record or not. “I’ll do as much as I can to shape things, and if I’m Sisyphus rolling the boulder up the hill, then that’s what it is. But there’s no chance of me getting that boulder all the way up if I don’t at least put my shoulder to it.”

Adam nods at him, and heads out.

Agent Todd Clure.

He’s twenty-six, looks young for his age, and as he’s heading into Tim’s office, Tim catches him mumbling, softly, “I shall not fear. Fear is the mind killer. Fear is the little death…”

“Have a seat.”

Clure jerks as Tim says that, and then meekly plods into the chair in front of his desk. He’s in his suit. There are visible sweat stains on the shirt, and dust and construction grime on his trousers. His shoes have seen significantly better days.

He doesn’t look Tim in the eyes, or face even, as Tim paces around him.

“Do you know why you’re here?”

He’s glances up, fast, and then looks away. “Jason… Agent Salamdra, and I… We ignored complaints against five senators and seven judges. Jason made sure any cases involving them got
sent to us.”

Tim’s impressed. Most of the people in front of him only have a vague sense of what’s got them there.

“Sounds like you knew what you were doing was wrong.” Tim can’t hear it, but he can feel Todd continuing the ‘fear is the mind-killer’ mantra in his head.

“Yes.”

Tim waits a few beats, watching Clure fidget his fingers, and study his desk. He’s striding around Clure, glaring down at him, radiating disgust and disapproval, but Tim can feel it cracking.

Clure’s young, too young, and he’s plump, and so nervous he’s about to wet his pants. His mantra is right out of Dune, and Tim’s sure that if he went through his go bag, he’d find at least one fantasy novel.

He’s also not saying anything.

“You knew it was wrong, why did you keep doing it?” Tim’s voice is icy, his heart isn’t. A set of big, scared, sincere eyes are looking up at him.

Finally, “He was my partner. He’s been here forever, and I’m new, and… He already thinks I’m a geek, but… I didn’t want to be a useless geek. So… he says it’s important, that it matters, that they’re good guys doing important things, so… We bury those cases.”

“Isn’t that breaking and entering?” Tim’s fairly sure that’s what he asked Tony on literally their first case together. Ten minutes later, he was hacking a man’s computer, no warrant, and the only thread of what he could call probable cause was something he got from said breaking and entering.

What he did was completely illegal.

But he didn’t want his partner to think he was a useless geek, either.

Tim feels the mask come up. He’s got a job to do, and that’s that. He needs to make sure that if Clure is staying he does his job.

So, he leans into it, chewing Clure out about how if he knew it was wrong, he needed to act on it. He lays in on him about how his duty is to the Constitution, not his partner. He flays the kid with duty and honor, and he does it because he doesn’t have enough eyes to make sure everyone under him is doing their job. But they’ve got to do that job. He can’t trust, and he can only barely verify, which means he’s got to somehow make these people fear him and what he’ll do to them more than they love or enjoy any advantage they might get from bending the rules and cutting corners.

When The Admiral would chew people out, it never got to his eyes.

This doesn’t get to Tim’s eyes, either.

When he’s done with Clure, who leaves his office, crying, but still with his job, (Which is something his partner couldn’t say.) Tim flops back onto his sofa.

He can see it. It’s a little boat, designed for river transport. They’re a million miles from home, a hundred from help, and all they’ve got is each other. Fuck up, talk at the wrong time, any lapse in attention, forget to secure something properly, and they can all die. Can’t be awake 24/7. Can’t do everything yourself. Can’t change out your people and get new ones. You’ve got what and who
you’ve got, and your life depends on everyone doing everything right, all the time.

Tim has something he calls his narrator voice. Usually it pops up when he’s writing, but every now and again, he hears it in his real life, too. (It often sounds like Ducky.)

And he can hear it right now: "It’s a terrible thing to look the monster straight in the face, and finally understand him."

That’s the moment Tim detaches himself from being the hard ass. This is a job. He’s doing it.

That’s enough.

It does not escape the notice of Jimmy, Breena, and Abby that from that night on, they’ve got a Tim-shaped object that will drift through their home, eat whatever’s put in front of him, answer direct questions, and go through the motions of putting babies to bed.

And that’s it.

If he’s not asleep, he hides in his office. If they’re at Jimmy’s place, he goes and hides in Breena’s office. He doesn’t start conversations. He’s not gaming. He doesn’t appear to be reading or working when he’s in there.

He goes to bed as soon as he possibly can.

They can all see he’s pretty much got “COPING MECHANISM” tattooed onto his forehead, but they aren’t sure how to handle it.

Pull him back to them, or let him drift.

Communication is the heart of a good relationship, so when they get to the third day of Tim drifting, Abby heads into the office and plops herself onto his lap.

From what she can tell, he’s been sitting in the dark, listening to his jazz.

He makes a little ‘mmm’ sound as she gets settled, but doesn’t really respond.

She kisses him, and he doesn’t turn away, but that’s a less than halfhearted return kiss.

“Tim.”

“Mmm.”

“Come on, baby, come back to me.”

He blinks slowly and sighs, his eyes, and attention fully on her for the first time in a few days. “It’s easier if I don’t.”

“Tim?”

“I’ve got to get it done. But if I spend too much time feeling it, I hate it, and I hate what I’m doing,
and… It’s still got to get done. Then I come home, and…” He’s stroking her face as he says it, and then he deliberately stops. “Every time I come home, it’s harder to go back. I could just be here. Just… fuck it. I’m done. Stay here with you and the kids, and be done. Embalming can’t be that hard. I know I can take dead bodies. Breena could use some extra hands. Just, done.”

Abby nods. “Okay. We’ll let you drift.”

He nods back. “When I’m done, reel me back in, okay?”

She kisses him again, and this time he kisses back, properly. “That’s a promise, love.”

He nods, and then settles back into his chair, closing his eyes, and pulling in on himself.

Two days later, Tim’s in full-on *Director* mode.

Once he’s slipped out of himself, once he’s playing it, it’s a lot easier to hold onto. It’s not him, just a character he’s playing, a scene he’s writing.

He’s not sure if that’s a good thing, but it’s making it easier to hold onto whatever level of sane he still has. Though, he’ll admit, for this meeting, there’s a tiny spark of Tim looking forward to it.

He sits at the conference table, across from two other men.

“Gentlemen, I’d like to remind you, before we begin, that I am recording this, and all other conversations we have.” Neither the Union Rep (Tim hasn’t bothered to learn this man’s name, but he does know he’s not an executive member) or his lawyer looks happy about that, but they can’t exactly say anything about it, because it would be recorded. “So, hit me with what you want.”

“You were a member of NCISEU, until 2015, correct?” The Rep says.

“Yes, NCIS Agents have to join NCISEU, unless they are management. I became management in January of 2016.”

“So, you know the benefits an organization like ours provides?”

“I’m familiar.” Though the one time he really needed the help, when he was being grilled by the Metro PD about Benedict, he was on his own. It didn’t occur to him to seek his Rep, and by the time it was done, Gibbs was saying he should have been there and…

Their team always handled stuff like that as a team. In fourteen years, he never asked for the help of NCISEU.

“Then you must know why we’re here,” the Rep says.

“I certainly have my suspicions. How about you lay it out for me?”

So, The Rep does. “We’d like you to reconsider your position on the nine members of the FBIEU you are prosecuting.”

Tim pretends to think for a moment and then says, “No.”
“That’s it?”

Tim looks exasperated. “In the next year, I’ll bring cases against your entire upper management, unless we can’t find Powers, in which case I’ll get all of them but one. And I’ll do that because your people were breaking the law. And they weren’t being subtle about it. It was abundantly clear they decided that as our union they could do whatever they liked, and nothing would happen to them.”

“And that was deeply unfortunate.” The Union Rep says. “None of them will ever work in for us in any capacity again.”

“You’re right; they won’t, because most of them won’t get out of jail until well-past retirement age.”

He sees a flash of anger in the Rep’s eyes. “You’re making it difficult for us to do our job.”

“Your job shouldn’t require breaking the law. If it does, you need to come to me, and we’ll get it sorted out so you can do your job legally.”

The Lawyer, John Olson, Tim did bother to learn his name, jumps in on that. “That’s not what Harold meant. Your steadfast attachment to justice,” this lawyer seems to be a lot better at his job than Ons was, “means that when our members are being treated unfairly, we won’t have the reputation to fight for them properly.”

Tim sips his coffee. “Nothing is stopping any of your people from pleading out, taking the deal, and having this quietly finished.”

Olson raises his hands, palms up, in a ‘what can you do’ gesture. “The world being the way it is, if any of my people take a plea, as soon as one of our members tangles with management, you’ll plaster all over everything that nothing we do is legit because we’re all crooks, and then whip out all of those guilty pleas.”

Tim sips his coffee again. (Made with bottled water, brought from home, and a k-cup that’s been in his possession since he brought it from home. Jimmy’s tests came back negative, but he’s not taking any chances.) “Your people should have thought of that before literally voting crooks into the top positions. Part of not doing the sorts of things I arrested your men for, is that getting caught damages your reputation forever. That’s why you don’t do that stuff.”

That gets silence.

Tim can see that Olson and The Rep have better discipline than the last one, so he continues, “However, you’ll be glad to know that I am working on safeguards against bad management. If you can find some employees who haven’t been implicated in anything, and are intelligent enough to count to twelve with their shoes on, I’ll be happy to allow them access to the safeguards we’re working on. We’ll let them see the plans, give them a chance to comment on them, and take their input into account.”

Tim watches The Rep and Olson confer quietly. Not so quietly he can’t catch some of the details. He notices The Rep say the word strike for example, and Olson shakes his head at that whispering political nightmare.

The Rep’s face gets more and more tense, and then, without a word, he leaves.

Olson settles back in his chair. “As of today, anyone you haven’t fired in the Public Corruption Department can’t be fired. Not as part of your initial sweep. Our people will turn over our books, and the ones you’ve already caught will plea out. No press on any of it. Our people will see your safeguards, and you will pay attention to what they say.”
“Does pay attention mean rubber stamp?”

Olson inclines his head slightly, some steel in his eyes. “How long do you want to spend in court, Director McGee?”

Tim opens his hands wide. “I’m the US Government. I’ve got more resources and time than you do. How long do you want to be in court, Mr. Olson?”

He thinks about that. “Pay attention means that unless it’s completely un-doable, you will do it.”

“I can’t agree to that. I can say, that if you’ve talked to anyone who’s worked for me, they’ll say I’m a good Boss, I’m a fair one, and I’ll make sure our systems reflect that. Three out of four Public Corruption employees are meeting with me this month, and three out of four Managers are, too. We’re cleaning up on all levels.”

“Which is the only reason we haven’t gone on a press offensive.”

Tim smirks. “You mean you’ve got no sympathetic angle on this one, and there doesn’t appear to be one coming up anytime soon, either. Comey stepping down for this blew your ‘us versus them’ narrative out of the water.”

The lawyer blinks. “Shall I start setting court dates?”

Tim shrugs. “It’s no skin off my nose, and you, get, what, paid by the hour? So, it’s all good for you, too. Union elections are up in ’19. How re-electable do you think you’ll be when the upper brass are all in jail, and all of those dues have been used to defend them? Meanwhile, your rank and file, they won’t be working here. I will guarantee that no Federal judge wants to be seen as giving corrupt law enforcement the time of day. Which means, you won’t have a base of people whose jobs you saved to back you in ’19. And when ’19 comes along, it’s entirely likely they’ll opt for a new union, or, with the safeguards I’m putting into play, shed it all together.

“So, I’d focus on making my guys decide that paying those dues to you is worthwhile. If I were you, I’d be selling how we’re working together to make the FBI as clean and focused as possible.”

“If you fire everyone you want, what angle can I use for why paying those dues is a good thing?”

“I’ll give you no Public Corruption people who haven’t already been fired will be fired. They may go on probation or suspension, and I will encourage them, intensely, to resign, but unless I find something flat out illegal, I’ll keep them for their second probie year. You can crow about how you saved a few hundred jobs. You can take credit for the entire fair management program, if you like, but I still build it, the way I want it.”

That gets Olson nodding. “Better. You’re going to expand out from Public Corruption to IA, and from there to the rest of the FBI?”

“Yes.”

“That will take years. You only look at their records after 9/1/17 for firing purposes. If they don’t shape up after seeing the PC purge, you can go after them, but anything before the purge can only be used to determine criminal liability.”

That sounds fair to Tim. “I can work with that. Anyone too stupid to shape up or resign is too stupid to keep working here.”

The Olson nods.
“Your guys will plea.” Tim wants to make sure he’s got that on the books.

“They’ll plea out. You’ll give them white-collar, first-time offender sentences. No one’s in for more than ten years, and they’ll be in light security.”

“I’ll have to run that by Justice, but I think they’ll go for it.”

Tomas nods again.

Tim nods back. “Do we write this down?”

“You’ve got it recorded. What would be the point? I’ll get the paperwork started.”

“Jennifer will make sure it goes where it needs to and gets done properly.”

Olson’s just about out of the door when Tim says, “And if I see anyone else from FBIEU stalking me or my family, all of this goes to ash.”

Olson nods, curtly.

“We’re recording,” Tim reminds him.

“Fine.”

“Does that mean you understand what I said, or you are agreeing to those terms?”

Olson glares at him, unhappy Tim’s caught what he’s doing.

“We agree.”

“Thank you.”

Once Mr. Olson is gone, Tim calls down to Hotch.

“The FBIEU claims they’re going to open up their books. Make sure everything they send over matches what we’ve already gotten with our warrants.”

“And you want me to let you know what I find.”

“Exactly. If they send in cleaned up copies, off you go to arrest a few more people. If it’s good, then we play ball, and this round is done.”

“Sounds good. I’ll let Marsh and Chaffin know that we’ll be getting more records.”

“Thanks. Let me know as soon as you do if this is legit.”

“Will do.”
The storm rages, but Tim’s calm inside.
Ish.

He can wield sarcasm from a little bunker deep in his head, and just have it flow through him.
Sort of.

He can't stay completely untouched by it, but it's like having an umbrella in a bad storm. He's not getting nearly as wet as he would without it.

“Mr. Gordon, that appears to be you leaving Robbie Cook High School. The video shows you coming back in the morning. You appear to be well-rested, and well-fed, so I’m going to have to assume you did not suddenly develop a deep need for extra repentance, and are spending your off hours sorting even more rubble…”

Gordon, who had been on page one of the mock-Seppuku plan goes genuinely white.

“Were you unaware that we’re videotaping the entrances and exits to the high school?” Tim just lets that sit, waiting to see what Gordon will do. This is the fifth version of this he’s done, and so far, since none of his hooky-players have gone back to Robbie Cook, the fact that he knows they’re slipping away hasn’t gotten out.

Eventually, Gordon says, “No.”

“Ah. And would you consider sneaking out in the dead of night like an adolescent creeping out of Mommy and Daddy’s house, hoping not to get spanked in the morning, the kind of behavior befitting an FBI agent?”

Tim can’t fire him. So far the paperwork that FBIEU’s sent over has matched what his team has dug out of their records on their own. He’s perfectly fine with carefully wording what he says so that Gordon thinks he’s been fired, and then hand him the resignation paperwork.

Gordon doesn’t answer, and Tim lets a full three minutes of dead silence pass. He spends all three minutes staring at Gordon, face and eyes hard. In his head, he’s humming one of the songs Abby likes. When it’s done he knows enough time has passed.

“Appears you’ve lost your voice. Let me add this, we have one of the hardest jobs in the world here. We stand up and go up against powerful people who want to remain powerful people. You don’t have the balls to walk up to me and tell me to fuck off, so how can I possibly trust that you’ll do it for anyone else? Under what possible circumstances should I ever willingly put you in a position of respect, authority, and public trust when you can’t even go four days without breaking the rules?”

Gordon stands up, and hands over his badge.

Tim nods.

He doesn’t know how many that’s been today. He doesn’t know how many more he’s got, either.

As long as he keeps drifting, eventually, the day will end, he’ll go home, and sleep, and then…

Eventually, this will all be done.
The Fear of McGee: Recovery

For his last day of chewing out agents, Tim wakes up numb. He doesn’t care that today is the last day. He doesn’t care that he’s only got to see seven guys. He doesn’t care that he’s leaving work early today, or that it’s Friday, or that he’s taking a longish weekend at their house and wrapping himself in his family and not doing or thinking anything work related until Tuesday afternoon.

Because he’s numb, and he just doesn’t care about anything right now, because if he lets himself care, he can’t do the rest of it.

He’s mechanically putting his clothing on, when he notices a package in his suit jacket pocket.

A small rectangle, about as long as his hand, light, wrapped with pretty silver paper, with those pink roses that Breena likes.

The note on it is in Abby’s handwriting. Timothy, Open it after the last one. Follow directions. We love you. It’s signed by all of them.

The Timothy bit makes his brain frizzle a bit. He’s got the sense that once upon a time good things were associated with Abby calling him that. But right now, he still can’t touch it. He’s too numb, and too tired, and too far away from himself, and from them.

When his door shuts, and with it the sound of a sobbing woman shuts off, too, Tim slumps back into his chair.

That was the last one. He’s done.

He spends a long moment, completely fried, staring at the ceiling. Even the effort involved in blinking feels monumental.

Somehow, eventually, he remembers that thing in his pocket, and pulls it out.

For a long moment he stares at it, too. Just too damn exhausted to muster up the energy to open it. But eventually, his fingers get moving, and he rips the paper, and then seeing what’s in his hand, he almost smiles.

It’s his collar. With another note.

Timothy,

Put this on.

After 2:00 there will be an Uber waiting for you outside of the office. Get in it.

It’ll take you home.

Once you get there, go upstairs, undress completely, except for the collar and wrist cuff, and go to sleep.

Good things coming when you awake.
Love you,

Abigail.

He holds the collar in both hands for a moment, and then starts to loosen his tie. Getting that thing off feels like actually breathing for the first time in days. He doesn’t usually wear a tie, but especially for this, he wanted to look unapproachable, professional, older, and the tie helps with all of that.

But it’s not him. It’s something he occasionally plays with, and ripping it off feels good.

The top two buttons come off next. This time it’s not just the feeling of being able to breathe, it is breathing. He’s inhaling deep, letting air fill his lungs until it feels like he can’t take in anymore.

He slips the collar around his neck, soft, supple leather, the gentle weight of it just at the base of his throat, and then the snug embrace of it.

He supposes on a purely tactile level, it feels a lot like one of his ties. But not emotionally. This loop around his neck makes him feel free, the ties, they make him feel bound, and not in a good way.

This is surrender, slipping himself into someone else’s hands. This is being taken care of.

And after weeks of being in charge, of being hard and cruel and angry, letting that all slip away and settle himself into someone else’s control feels marvelous.

Tim stands up, buttoning his shirt collar again. Jennifer doesn’t need to see the black leather looping his throat. Maybe one day he’ll let her that far into his life, but today isn’t that day.

As he heads out, he says to her, “I’m not in until one on Tuesday, and you don’t have to be here until Wednesday if you don’t want to be.”

“Do I need to be on call?”

“I’d be nice, but not mandatory. If you turn your cell off, I’ll make my own damn reservations. The last few weeks were killer, and I know and appreciate what you’ve been doing. So, down time, for both of us. We can’t do this fried, so we won’t.”

She smiles at that, a tired smile, but a smile nonetheless. “See you Wednesday.”

He nods and leaves.

There is an Uber waiting for him.

It’s a pretty nice car, and the driver doesn’t seem bothered that he doesn’t want to chat. In less than half an hour, he’s been deposited at Jimmy’s place, which he wasn’t expecting, because it’s Friday, and supposedly there’s Shabbos tonight, but…

They want him here, here’s where he’s going.

He idly notices that there’s food on the bedside table as he undresses, so apparently if he wanted to eat, he could, but he’s not feeling any desire for food.
Sleep, though…

He crashes into the bed, stretching all the way out, absorbing the feel of soft, cool cotton on his skin, and the secure weight of the collar around his throat, and then the tidal wave of exhaustion washes over him, and he’s gone.

It’s light when Tim wakes up, stomach growling at him.

For a moment, he thinks he’s slept the afternoon away, and then he realizes the light is on the wrong side of the room for sleeping until evening.

A quick glance at the clock hammers that home. 9:43. He slept the whole night, and a good chunk of the morning. Tim looks around, but doesn’t see any sign that anyone else was here over the night.

He’s not sure what’s going on with that, but… If they want him alone for a bit… Or if none of them felt the need to watch him sleep. He can’t really blame them for that.

There’s still food next to the bed, and a note. Jimmy’s handwriting this time.

Tim,

They sent me to check on you, bring you home for supper, but you looked exhausted. Sleep well. Eat. Send us a text when you’re up.

Love,

Jimmy

His stomach growls again. Tim thinks about that as he’s biting into the apple that was sitting next to the bed, he remembers breakfast yesterday, but he’s not certain about lunch, and slept through dinner.

His phone is next to the plate of food, so he grabs it, and fires off a quick, I’m up text to all three of them.

Good morning, Timothy. Comes back from Abby. How are you feeling this morning?

Tim blinks a few times. They’re still playing. He remembers the collar at his throat, and the promise of good things to come.

Hungry. He sends that back so he’s got a prompt answer, and adds, Just woke up, not sure on everything else, yet.

Take a few minutes to really check in. Emotional feelings, how are they?

So he takes the time to assess. He’s still tired. Depending on where this goes, he may go back to sleep. He’s interested in playing, but at a distance. Like he knows he should be interested in playing. He can’t quite touch his interest in this, and given how long it’s been since he’s had sex, that tells
him he’s still pretty far gone.

More thinking, trying to get himself enthusiastic about anything else, and he picks the phone back up. Tired, feeling pretty blah. Don’t much care about anything right now.

Okay, you had to numb yourself pretty far down to deal with the last two weeks. We don’t expect you to instantly change gears. Right now, you’ve got processing time. How tired are you?

Wouldn’t mind more sleep.

Eat, text Jimmy when you’re done. He’s got the next bit.

Okay.

Love you, baby.

Love you, too.

There’s the apple next to the bed, as well as a granola bar, but Tim’s looking for more in the way of food than that. He heads downstairs, and stands, naked, in the kitchen. For a long moment he just stands there, looking around, fully aware of the fact that he’s A: hungry, and B: there is food here, but the part of his brain that can put those two things together and then come up with a plan for how to apply B to A to solve the problem takes an agonizingly long time to snap into gear.

Eventually, though, his eyes land on the coffee maker, and he lurches toward it, aware of the fact that a mug of coffee with lots of milk will probably go some way toward making him feel like a real person.

Maybe.

He’s not sure if it’s the coffee, or the familiar routine of making it, but he’s starting to feel a little more attached to the real world once he’s drunk his cup. At least, enough to decide that some eggs would be a good plan, too.

I’ve eaten.

Good. Naptime, next? Comes from Jimmy a moment later.

That’s the plan. Unless you’ve got other plans.

Oh yeah, we’ve got plans. When did you get off last?

Tim’s got to think about that. He hasn’t even been interested in sex the last… “Shit.” It’s got to be getting onto a week now. Maybe longer. He shut everything off. He shifts around a bit, aware of a dull, full sensation round-about his prostate-area. It’s not fever pitched, have to get off. Not like right before Kelly was born. But he can tell it’s been a lot longer than normal. And, he thinks, and tries, and yes, just rocking back and forth on the kitchen chair gets his dick perking up, so at least on a basic biological level, his body is aware that it’s been missing some action.

At least a week.
Okay, we’re playing with you tonight, hard, so you’ve got to be in condition for that. Can’t be a ten second wonder, and if it’s been that long, it’s cruel to spin you out. Put yourself to sleep good. Take your time, do it slowly, go play with some of our toys.

I can do that.

Then go do it. Make a video, send it to Breena. Tonight we’re putting on a show for her, give her a preview.

Tim smiles. He’s feeling genuinely pleased at that idea. Video soon. Any specific requests?

A moment later he’s got an email.

Timothy,

James and I have already been booked for tonight. Special client, hoping for an m/m/f show. I’m up to Domme. He’s playing the butch. You want to be the middleman?

She’s looking for an audition video. Something short, less than five minutes, preferably highlighting your ‘in the middle’ qualities.

You in?

Abigail.

A little spark of genuine eagerness hits Tim. Yeah, he’s in for this.

Showing off his ‘in the middle’ qualities, huh…

He heads up to Jimmy and Breena’s bedroom to see what sort of goodies they may have for something like that.

They don’t have a toybox, per se. They have the bottom drawer of Jimmy’s dresser. If you open it up, there are two nicely folded sweaters on top, and once you take them out, there are the toys.

And they do have some nice toys, but, as Tim’s looking through them, they’re mostly for playing with someone else or for a girl on her own. He’s not sure if, back when he was on his own, Jimmy was a mostly porn, spit, and his right hand kind of guy, or if whatever toys he had for playing with himself didn’t survive his honeymoon, but with the exception of some cockrings, nothing in there is really for a guy on his own.

There’s a basic dildo (Tim eyes it for a minute, thinking about his ‘in the middle qualities’ and decides with how his prostate is feeling right now, any level of direct play will end him too soon for an interesting video), one of those large wand-style vibrators, (it occurs to him he’s never seen Jimmy or Breena use it, and that might be fun one of these days) ropes (always fun, he tosses them to the bed, thinking he might figure something out for them), a few different lubes (the one they use for regular sex lives in the nightstand, these are flavored ones), a small, bullet-type rabbit vibrator (totally useless for him), and this weird little circular thing with a bunch of flaps on it that’s supposed to mimic oral sex, but both Jimmy and Breena thought it was stupid after buying it. They’ve used it twice, once with each other, and they turned it on once to show Tim and Abby what it did, and they also came to the conclusion that it looked kind of stupid, too.
But he didn’t try it, and he’s all on his own, and… maybe he’ll get some bonus points for figuring out something this is good for.

Or not. He turns it back on again, and it makes a hmmmming sound along with the occasional squeak. But… Put enough lube on it, and him, and…

His dick is just starting to show a touch of interest, and Tim decides it’s time to get a bit of clean up in before he does anything in front of a camera.

Okay, phone on, but not yet recording, lube nearby… Trying to look like he’s the kind of guy who wants to be in the middle. He tries to imagine it, as he’s gently stroking himself. It’s a club of some sort, exclusive sort of place, where patrons can arrange for whatever sort of show they want.

This lady wants to see two boys get handled by a Domme.

And he could be one of the boys.

If she likes what she sees on this video.

He’s starting to get hard, but not quite there, so he fits the cockring around his cock and balls. This is Jimmy’s good one. Most decorative one. It’s a strap of soft black leather. There’s a slit on one side, and his balls go through that, keeping them down, and a bit further from his dick than a normal ring would, then the rest of the ring slips around his dick and snaps tight.

It’s snug on Tim, and it’ll just get snuger, which is a good feeling. And he has to admit, he does like the way it looks, and the way he looks wearing it. He smiles a little, remembering that conversation, more than a year ago now, where they were talking about cockrings as jewelry for men, and as he gives himself another stroke, he’s thinking this might be more like a push up bra than a necklace.

Though, if memory serves, the girls never have anything good to say about how pushup bras feel, and this feels good. That heavy, full, sporting a baseball bat sensation is creeping up on him as he thinks more about his show tonight.

He gives himself another long pull, enjoying it.

What else goes into being the guy in the middle? He’s got his collar and cuff on, tattoos visible because besides three pieces of leather, he’s naked.

His eyes land on Breena’s dressing table. He thinks about it for a moment, and starts to feel more of a flush sliding through him… He could be pretty. He could be so pretty.

Abby loves it when he’s pretty. She tells him sweet things and makes him feel so good, and it’s been so long since he’s done anything like that.

So long since he just relaxed back into soft words and kind petting and…

He steps over to the dressing table, and runs headfirst into the fact that he’s still got the goatee on.

And that’s not pretty. The Director is still looking back at him.

He stares at himself for a moment, and shudders.

Tim takes off the cockring, his cuff, and collar, almost mechanically, and marches into the bathroom.
Jimmy’s got his extra razors there, and they’ve got the little trimmer they use for real playing in there, too.

It takes him fifteen minutes, but he trims everything off. He was thinking just his face at first, but by the time he got into it, he knew how he wanted to be pretty, and next thing he knew he was wrapping up with the hair that grows on the top of his feet. A few more minutes later, he’s in the shower, warm water making his skin pink up, the feel of a razor blade and smooth, silky shaving cream on his skin is making him hard.

It’s Breena’s special shaving gel, the stuff that makes hair grow in slower and softer. He doesn’t care if it is rose scented. He’s got some amazing memories of that scent. And the blade on his skin brings back more memories. Of getting more naked than he’d ever been, for Abby. Of their honeymoon in the cabin in the woods. And he’s doing it again, shedding everything from the skin out. Each pull of that blade across his arms, and chest, legs, and pubes, feels like another layer of *The Director* coming off.

Because *The Director* is not pretty. *The Director* does not get dressed up and put on makeup or shave every inch of his body below his eyebrows, so that his wives and husband can enjoy rubbing up against his silk smooth skin.

*The Director* does none of those things, but Tim does.

Tim’s allowed to be soft, and smooth, and he’s allowed to be pretty, and soft, and gentle. He’s allowed to let himself feel.

*The Director* is hard and sharp. There’s nothing kind or gentle about him. He’s a bad taste in Tim’s mouth and a memory he wants to shed.

Tonight he’s Tim…othy. Timothy. That’s the version they’re playing with. He’s allowed to be soft, and pretty, and flirty. He’s allowed to enjoy sensual things, and let himself enjoy the people around him. He’s allowed to let them enjoy him.

When he’s done his shower, he’s silky from head to toe. He takes the time to dry off carefully, and then he puts his leather, all of it, back on.

He does his eyes, and no, it doesn’t look as good as when Abby or Breena does it, but it’s good enough. He hunts around for a few minutes, but Breena doesn’t have any of the fun-colored lipsticks, and he’s certainly in the mood to go for black or blue lips, not pinks or reds, which are the colors Breena has.

His eyes land on the collection of little tubes in front of him in her drawer. No, not pink. But soft, soft and shiny, and pretty.

She’s got lip balm. It smells nice, tastes like vanilla, and makes him look that much softer. She’s got a perfume that’s mostly vanilla, too. He hunts around for that. He’s never worn it straight, but he’s certainly smelled it on his skin before, rubbed off of Breena’s.

There are some good memories with this scent. He rubs it into his wrists and throat, inhaling deep. Soft, and sweet, vanilla, amber, a bit of musk and oakmoss to keep it from being too foody. His eyes slip shut, and he sighs with pleasure.

Fourteen straight days of burnt out FBI employees, in dirty clothing, without enough showers. Anger, fear, hard physical work, all of it makes a person reek.

Soft, fragrant skin, Breena in his lap, kissing him as he held her, Abby and Jimmy on the far side of
the bed, rocking against each other. Breena’s hair against his cheek and shoulder, Abby’s soft little
gasps.

Good memories.

He stands up and heads back to the bed. He’s got the lube, that wheel… Sqweel, it’s called a
Sqweel, and the ropes.

He knows there are guys who can tie themselves up, but that’s not really a game he plays on his
own. But… he licks his lips. He wants to be chosen to play with the Domme.

He’s already wearing his collar, and he takes one of the ropes and loops it around the collar, like his
very own leash, then he takes it a bit further, wrapping it around his chest and belly, looping it
around his thigh, and tying it there.

He twists a bit, feeling it tight and snug on him.

That gets a long sigh. It feels good, secure. Cherished, even if at a distance, right now.

Tim sits on the bed, lying back, stroking himself. It doesn’t take long for him to get hard, and once he
does, he knows this is not going to be a long video. Once his libido really wakes up, it’s suddenly
very aware of how long it’s been since he last got off.

Tim turns on the recorder and says to it. “Hi. I’m Timothy. Abby sent me a note letting me know
you’re looking for a third for tonight’s show.” He smiles into the camera. “I hope it’s me. I’ve played
with Abby and Jimmy before, and it’s always a blast. They didn’t say exactly what you wanted to
see, other than something to indicate I’m kind of flexible. I hope this does the trick.” He winks at the
camera. “Enjoy the show.”

Then he sets his phone on the bed, so it’s propped against a bundled up blanket, and pointing at him.
He figures that as long as he stays more or less where he is, splay-legged at the head of the bed,
Breena should get to see him do anything she might want to see.

Tim grabs the lube, and drizzles a good handful of it into his palm. Then he licks his lips and closes
his eyes. He pulls images of the last time he was ‘in the middle’ into his head, and gives himself a
long stroke.

The soft groan that eases from between his lips is utterly unfeigned. It’s been so damn long since he’s
had a hand on himself, even if it is his hand, it feels amazing. Add in the ring and the rope, the snug
binding across his body, and he’s feeling great.

He smooths the lube all over his balls, too, getting all of himself slicked up, and then grabs the
Sqweel.

He flicks it on, and the little tongue looking flaps being to spin around. In his hand, it’s just a bit of a
vibration, but on the tip of his dick…

It’s definitely not someone lapping at him. It’s way too… plastic, for that. But, having something soft
and vaguely fleshy lightly tapping on the underside of the tip of his dick… It’s… not going to get him
off, but it feels interesting. Maybe not erotic, but interesting.

And, sliding it, gently, up and down his shaft, as he’s rubbing his balls, that’s pretty good.

Slipping it down further, letting those little tongue looking bits gently thwap at his balls. Better. A bit
more lube, and it’s all slick and with his eyes closed, imagining himself on his knees, with Jimmy
behind him, fucking him hard and steady while Abby’s under him, licking his balls over and over…

“Fuck!” eases out of him. He tightens his grip a little, fucking through his hand, thighs tensing at the sensation.

His hips clench, thrusting him through his fist, and he knows how to make this better. Tim’s up on his knees, feet under him. It takes a moment, but he gets the Sqweel between his feet, holding it so it’s right behind his balls, tapping, gently against his perineum.

Any other time, this wouldn’t do much for him, but it’s been more than a week, and he’s feeling so full. So ready to get off, and each little tap almost jolts through his prostate. He wiggles his hips a bit, grinding down, but that just slows the Sqweel down, so he’s got to stay up, keep it light.

Thwap, thwap, thwap… It’s a terribly designed toy. Way too loud, and the sound couldn’t be less erotic if it tried, but right now it’s doing him just fine.

He’s trying to imagine it, just the point of Abby’s tongue, she’s lightly lapping at him, and Breena’s got him, too. She’s on her knees, sucking his cock. He ripples his hand on his dick, trying to mimic some of the things she’d be doing to him.

His hips rock, running his dick through his hand, and this isn’t going to take much more.

His head falls back, hips flexing, hand getting tighter. In his head, Abby’s spreading him wide, licking him from top to bottom, worming her tongue into him, and Breena’s in front of him, pulling him in deep, sucking hard.

They match each other, Abby tongue fucking him as Breena sucks, and they’re going fast, so fast, faster than people can really go, but his hand is fast, and it’s been so damn long, and even with the cockring keeping his balls down, he can feel everything getting tighter, feel his world narrowing down, and his hand moving faster, tighter, slicker, his body adding its own lube to keep his hand flowing, and…

His jaw goes tight, the rest of his body clenching as the tingles start, and then he pulls a hair tighter, and twitches all over, spurting high and far.

He shouts with it. One short, “Uhn!” as his cum stripes the bed and dribbles over his hand.

He flops back a second later, and all he wants to do is sleep. It feels like a monumental task to get himself wiped off, the recorder off, video sent, and cockring off.

He doesn’t even bother to take the rope off before crashing back into another sleep.

When he wakes up, there’s a text from Breena. You’re hired.

There’s another one from Jimmy. Don’t forget to change the sheets. Tim smirks at that one, and gets to it.

A few minutes later, feeding himself again, Tim fires back another text. Awake, room’s clean, anything else?

He gets one back from Abby. Good. We’ll be home around seven. Pick up dinner for us. Between now and then, process, write, take the time you need in your own head.
Thanks.

So he does.

He’s been nudging something for a while. Getting closer and closer but not quite touching it as he writes around whatever idea it is.

Free writing, especially the way he’s doing it right now, longhand, pen on paper, isn’t like storytelling. Sometimes it’ll look like poetry, or snippets of story, or… what’s in front of him: word salad.

His paper looks like someone dropped a thesaurus, all the words fell out, and some of them landed on his page.

The last time he was this congested with ideas that weren’t properly forming, he was sitting down at his typewriter again for the first time after his psycho fan tried to kill Abby, with the words from his editor “You’ve already gotten one extension; there won’t be another one,” ringing in his ears.

Re-reading the word salad isn’t helping, either. It’s not providing him with any real clarity of thought. Mostly, it’s a pile of sounds, on a page, whirling around in a not terribly useful manner.

He shakes his head, takes off his glasses, rubs his eyes and temples, and gets up.

Whatever it is doesn’t want to come out, yet. So, he might as well go put some clothing on and get dinner.

“Home is where your comfy clothing is,” Tim says as he pulls on his black kilt.

He doesn’t have a full wardrobe here. He can’t, there isn’t room for it, but at any time, he’s got work shoes, a pair of good jeans, a decent jacket, a nice button down, and a selection of bumming-around-the-house-wear.

Including, apparently, his black kilt. (Likely because the last time he was wearing it, he was here.)

He grabs for one of Jimmy’s t-shirts. (Another space saving device, he can wear a decent amount of Jimmy’s clothing, and vice versa. There are some stylistic differences, but all gray men’s large t-shirts are more or less identical, and there’s no one on earth, not even Abby or Breena, who pays close enough attention to their wardrobes to be able to tell if the t-shirt Tim’s got on was originally his or Jimmy’s. Tim certainly doesn’t know. It was in Jimmy’s dresser, so it’s his. If it goes to the McGee house, gets washed there, and ends up in his dresser, it’ll become his t-shirt.) And then tosses a jacket on top of that. Mid-September, summer’s trying to hold on, but it’s starting to get a bit cool.

Tim grabs a pair of socks (also Jimmy’s) and heads down to put on his boots. As he’s sitting on the bottom step, lacing up his boots, he can see his bare knees and hairless legs, and some of what the word salad was trying to tell him starts to click into place.

He stretches his legs out of in front of him. Naked smooth skin, under a “skirt.”

“Shit.”
He’d been fairly comfortable with his *The Director* isn’t pretty stuff. He kind of liked that as a line between Tim and his image of *The Director*. But, looking at himself, an image from a half-remembered tell-all TV drama surfaces to his mind. It’s J. Edgar, in a pink dress.

He sighs. The *literal* Director of the FBI, the guy who’s name is on the damn building, used to go about twenty-five steps past where Tim’s comfortable on the “pretty” front.

Obviously, this isn’t anything that sets him apart from the pack.

*Any dinner requests?* Tim sends off as he’s sitting in Breena’s car, engine on, waiting. He’s edging toward hungry again, but not with it enough to have a specific food preference.

“Coming back” is putting him in mind of how a limb that falls asleep wakes up. Numb and tingly, and if you hold it in one place you can sort of ignore it, but if you move, you get a wash of tingles and…

Right now, things are fairly quiet. He’s just waiting for instructions.

But maybe in a minute he’ll move and a rush of… everything… will come back over him.

His phone buzzes a moment later. Jimmy’s number. *Breena’s craving sushi. We’re thinking living room picnic.*

*I can do that.*

Tim gets it ready. He fetches sushi rolls, gets some decent sake and puts it on ice, he lays out a soft cotton sheet on the floor, and packs some pillows around them. He cranks the AC and lays a fire, then hunts down all the candles he can find, putting them around the living room and the bedroom.

Once the scene is set for a romantic night, he scans the road. He doesn’t see any cars he doesn’t recognize, but that doesn’t mean no one is watching.

He’s not feeling it, either. But that also doesn’t mean no one is watching.

He goes down to Jimmy’s basement and turns off the power. Then he takes one of his own goodies, which has been sitting in his go-bag for about a week, and goes through the house. It’ll pick up anything that’s using a current.

Nothing glows that shouldn’t.

There’s still an hour until the rest of his family will be here. He turns the power back on, and sets up his computer and Breena’s (the only two in the house) for a full scan. If there are any gremlins lurking in there, he’ll find them.

Tim hops up from his computer the moment he hears a car pulling into the driveway, and just about
has a stroke as he gets to the door and opens it, coming face to face with Ed.

“Tim?”

“Ed!” He scrambles for a second. “Get out of here! Abby’s got the kids. Jimmy’s been making sure
Breena gets a day off, just her, no kids, no babies, no work, and then some adult fun tonight before
Donnie makes his entrance. He’s off getting that fruit juice she likes, and then he’s picking her up.
They’ll be here in like five minutes.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I’m on my way out, too. Just got to get Molly’s best stuffie. She got to our place, noticed she didn’t
have it and melted down. Go! Quick!” Tim waves Ed toward the driveway.

“But…”

“Whatever it is, it can wait until tomorrow! Breena’s getting a carefree, romantic night while she can
still enjoy one, and neither you, nor Molly’s need for a tiny, stuffed Corgi is going to derail that.”

Ed nods. “It’ll wait. You need help finding it?”

“Nah. I’ll have it in a minute.”

Tim starts to breathe again a moment later when Ed pulls out. Then he texts the other three. Ed just
showed up. Told him Jimmy had set up a day off for Breena, and that we had the kids tonight. He
says whatever it is will wait until the morning.

A minute later he gets back from Breena. I bet I know what it is. Our usual surgical thread
distributor has a new product. He’s not sure how hot it is, and offered us and a few other mortuaries
some to test it out. We’ve been working with it at all the Slater’s branches, and I’ve got the notes
from my uncles about how it did for them. He was probably hoping to read them tonight.

Tim sighs at that. Okay. Anyway, you got a stress-free day out today and a romantic night tonight, if
he asks.

He gets a saucy emoticon back. Well, I’ve certainly got the romantic night tonight. Best show on
earth starts soon, and I can’t wait to see it.

Tim sends her a little kiss emoji back. Love you, too.

Three minutes later, Tim hops up again, once more hearing the sound of a car on the driveway, and
this time he hears three doors open and shut.

When they get in, Tim gets hugs and kisses, and happily gives both back, too.

Abby strokes his throat, and gives him a look, so he goes up to get his collar. She doesn’t say
anything, and he knows he’s not in trouble or anything like that. He probably should have kept it on,
but she didn’t tell him to.

He does sigh happily as she loops it around his throat and gently fastens it.

Then she pets her fingers through his hair, as Breena heads into the living room, looking properly
appreciative of Tim’s dinner picnic.
“Looks good.” She appears to like the array of plates with yummy fish and rice, along with different sauces and drinks. She might not be able to eat much right now, but each little bite of food packs as much punch as it can.

Tim smiles at her, as Jimmy helps her down onto the floor. The extra pillows get scooted around so she can recline comfortably. “That’s good.”

The rest of them join her, and Abby’s about to click on her device killer when Tim says, “I scanned the house this afternoon. No bugs here, and if you turn that on, it’ll kill the neighbor’s electronics, too.” They can use that at his house without the neighbors to the right and left losing their power, too. Jimmy and Breena’s house is too close to the houses next to it, to do that.

The drapes are pulled, the doors are locked, there’s no line of sight, and the fire in the room is making sure they’re in an area with a nice warm glow around them. It’s not perfect, but it’s good enough.

And, because the power isn’t off, they can listen to music.

Once everyone is settled and eating, Tim can feel the quiet around them. He sees six pairs of eyes watching.

They don’t need to say it, he knows.

So, Tim starts to talk. He doesn’t spend too much time on specifics. No details like, “And then I told him our job is all about trust and no one could ever trust him again…” more general themes and…”

“There’s something there, nagging at me,” he says, curled on his side, head in Abby’s lap, Breena’s feet in his hands, rubbing away. She’s leaning against Jimmy, who’s got his chin on her shoulder. “Just… If you’re doing your job right… You shouldn’t have to do… this… to do it.” He shakes his head. “But I don’t know what else to do.”

He stares at the ceiling for a moment. “I want to be a good Boss, and I’m fairly sure these last two weeks weren’t that.”

“Can you be a good Boss with lousy employees?” Jimmy asks.

Tim winces a bit at that. “I’m trying to not think too hard about that, too.”

That gets three sets of eyes trained on him. Tim shakes his head. He knows he’s not ready to get too deep into that. “I got rid of the worst of the bunch. Less than half of the ones on punishment duty are left.”

Abby pets his face. “Time to rebuild.”

“Yeah. Just… Do I have cracked bricks that’ll collapse if I try to build with them, or just grungy ones that look cruddy, but’ll do the job?”

No one’s got an answer for that.

Abby glances around, sees that dinner is pretty much eaten, and decides it’s time to move on.

“Okay, upstairs for you two, go, get cleaned up and ready for a good time. Breena and I’ll be up in half an hour.”

Tim likes that idea. He’d much rather be thinking about subbing than bossing. “What sort of cleaned
up and ready do you want?”

“James knows.” Abby points to the stairs.

So, Tim hops up, and Jimmy untangles himself from Breena a bit more slowly, and up they go.

Jimmy doesn’t have a whole lot of “prep” to do for tonight. He knows where he goes in the equation, and as soon as he’s naked and brushed his teeth, he’s good to go.

He does nod at their bathroom. “Get really cleaned up.”

Tim’s eyes spark at that. “Good!”

So, while Tim gets cleaned up, Jimmy drags a comfy armchair over to a good viewing spot for Breena. She’ll happily watch tonight, but playing is only slightly above a root canal in terms of things she wants to do. Or as she put it when they were planning this out, “I’ve already got one little man inside me making me miserable, I don’t need to add two big ones!”

He knows Abby’s getting the rest of the goodies for tonight ready downstairs.

Once they’re set… She’s “running the show,” though given how the three of them already went through everything before, and planned it together, she’s more the ringleader than the Domme.

It doesn’t matter much to Jimmy how precisely it works, as long as it pulls that lost, half-dead look out of Tim’s eyes.

---

Tim’s out of the bathroom a few minutes later. “Any directions beyond clean? Cologne? Eyeliner?”

Jimmy shrugs. He doesn’t have specifics for this. “Whatever you’re in the mood for. All I’m supposed to do is make sure the room is set, and you’re naked and cleaned up when they get up here.”

“And that’ll be?” Tim’s eyeing Breena’s vanity. If he’s got enough time…

“And that’ll be?” Tim’s eyeing Breena’s vanity. If he’s got enough time…

“Now, Timothy, that’s now,” Abby says, stepping in with Breena.

Tim drops to his knees in front of Abby, head bowed. Part of it is the game, but part of it isn’t, and Abby senses that. She kneels in front of Tim, too, gently taking his face in her hands, gazing into his eyes. “You really need this, don’t you?”

“Yes.” His voice is soft, but sure.

She strokes his face and hair and then kisses him, and Tim purrs.

Abby stands up, still petting him. She nods to Jimmy, eyeing the collar and wrist cuff Tim took off for getting cleaned up, and left on Breena’s dressing table. Jimmy helps Breena get comfy, and then grabs the collar and cuff for Abby.

He’s not entirely sure if this is part of setting the scene. She’s in charge, and can ask him to do things, like grab two bits of leather that’re six feet from her hand, or if she thinks keeping a hand on Tim at all times is important. She would have to let go of him to get the leather.

Jimmy hands it over, and Abby smiles at him. With that smile, he knows, she just doesn’t want to let
go of Tim. Her skin on his is grounding him, and she’s not about to let go.

Abby takes Tim’s left hand in hers, lifting it, kissing his palm, and then fastens his wrist cuff around his wrist. She lowers his hand and loops the collar around Tim’s neck. Tim bows his head, resting it against her hip, eyes closed, feeling awash in warm, devoted safety. A sigh slips out of him, and some of the tension that’s been keeping his shoulders up near his ears and the worried look on his face starts to bleed off.

Abby and Breena are talking, but he’s not really paying attention. When he needs to do something, she’ll let him know.

Jimmy’s standing behind him. He can feel his fingers on his shoulders.

And that’s where the line becomes crystal clear. This is what The Director can never do. It’s not about gay or straight or bi. Masculine or femme or pretty… none of that touches it. The Director can be any of those things, as long as he’s the one calling all the shots. He can top or bottom or cross-dress or be pretty or anything, as long as it’s on his terms.

This. Right here. Kneeling at his loves feet, completely in their hands, about to do or have done anything they desire, this is what The Director can’t touch.

Utter, implicit, trust. They’ll take care of him. They’ll do whatever they like with him, have him do whatever they want, and he’s safe, cherished, adored.

The Director rules, he doesn’t serve. Or maybe he does, but he doesn’t enjoy it. He became The Director because he didn’t want to take orders, he wants to give them.

Tonight, Tim doesn’t care if he never gives another order again in his life.

Tonight, Tim wants to serve.

“Timothy, what’s your safeword?” Abby asks.

Tim’s not sure what to do with that. He gets why she’s asking, especially with the “characters” they’re playing tonight already being their usual safewords, making sure the rules get laid out ahead of time makes sense. He wants to answer, do what his lady wants, but… “Abigail.” He looks up at her. “Not tonight, baby. Whatever it is, I’m good. I… don’t want one, not tonight.”

She smiles at that, getting what he’s asking and why, and then strokes his face. “Okay, but you say stop, and we stop.”

He nods back, utterly certain the word stop won’t be coming anywhere near his lips tonight.

“Timothy, lay down, on your stomach.” Abby nods to the bed.

Tim crawls into the center of the bed, doing his best seductive cat stalking crawl. Breena’s kind and doesn’t laugh. He’s just not very cat-like, especially right now when he’s tense and stiff from days of being tired and angry.

He does, however, do a good job of laying down, and sighing happily once he’s on his tummy. And
that sigh turns into a full groan when he hears the next bit, “Given what we’re going to do with you tonight, we’re going to want you all nice and bendy. James, I think he’s going to need some help getting the kinks out, can you help him?”

“Oh yes!”

Tim groans at the feel of two warm, big, hands, one on each hip, as Jimmy leans into his palms, and slowly pushes his way up to the tops of his shoulders. Yes, from an erotic perspective, naked girl on his back, working the kinks out feels better than anything else. From a stiff, angry, pissed-off posture for two solid weeks, having someone his own size lean pretty much his entire body weight into him, and then stroke all the way up his body feels amazing.

Right now, as Jimmy’s still slowly easing up his back, Tim’s got bits and bobs popping he didn’t know could pop, but Good God Almighty did he need them popped.

He groans so loud that Jimmy whispers in his ear, “You just came on the bed, didn’t you?”

Tim grins, and quietly says back. “Yep, do that again, and I’ll do it again, too.”

“Not quite, yet.” Jimmy settles himself up by Tim’s head, and starts digging those, long, strong fingers of his into Tim’s shoulders, and Tim melts into a groaning puddle of goo.

He didn’t think he could feel better. That was it. Laying there face down, Jimmy rubbing his shoulders, hurting him so good as each tight, knotted muscle slowly gave up and relaxed, was absolute heaven.

And then Abby straddled his hips, and reminded Tim that there are levels of pleasure.

She’s got one butt cheek between her hands, and again, normally this would be some of his favorite playtime, but he’s been so tense the last week that even his butt is stressed out, and so none of this is hitting any erotic buttons, yet. Right now this is the sublime pleasure of being worked over by people who love you and want you to feel really, really excellent.

Right now, all he’s got to do is lay there and relax, so he does, basking in the joy of this.

And like with shaving, he can feel layers of The Director peeling off of him, sliding away with each stroke of a warm hand over his skin.

Tim tried wax play, once.

And having been young and kind of stupid, he assumed, as a not very hairy guy, that all the prep they needed was a candle and something that would make fire.

Yeah. No. That didn’t work. Not only did his girlfriend grossly underestimate how far away from his skin the candle needed to be, she also decided the center of his chest was the best place to start this, which is one of the few places he’s actually got some hair.

The only thing less erotic than scalding yourself, is then having to yank your chest hair off in an attempt to get the wax off your scalded skin.

So, Abby knows that candle play is a no go for Tim.
She also knows this man inside and out, and that he loves anticipation games. And, on top of that, she wants to take him completely out of his head tonight, so being in his body, straining, quivering, begging for the next hit of sensation strikes her as an especially good way to get into play.

So, they do not have a candle. They do have three bottles of oil. One is room temperature. One is warm (about ninety-five degrees) and one is hot (104, she wants absolutely no shot of scalding him.)

And while Abby’s stroking over Tim, rubbing him slowly, gently, teasing him by getting closer and closer to dick, nipples, and lips, Jimmy’s getting the bottles of oil.

---

Tim’s vaguely aware of Jimmy moving away from him.

Vaguely.

There was the lovely sensation of warmth, and the amazing feeling of big, strong hands working on Tim’s neck, cradling his head, and gently pulling, stretching him, probably back to his full height, and then that went away, the bed dipped a bit, he could feel Jimmy moving around, and then there’s just Abby. (It doesn’t occur to Tim that he can open his eyes.)

And just Abby is awfully good. She’s got him flipped over now, onto his back, and is straddling his left thigh as she’s rubbing a gentle, deep circle on his belly. (Speaking of things he didn’t think could feel this good, but, apparently, in the right mood, Tim loves tummy rubs. He fully understands why Mona will flop on her back and beg for tummy rubs. If they feel even half as good to her as this does to him, he gets it.)

His eyes are closed, and he’s floating along with it, humming a bit as she places one hand on each hip bone, her thumb tips just touching each other, right above his dick, and then running her hands up his belly over his sternum, and across his chest, down his sides, and back to his hips again.

Then there’s a hand on his wrist. Jimmy’s, he knows that by feel, now. And Abby says, “Make sure he’s secure, James.”

That perks Tim’s ears up. Secure sounds very good to him. The feel of Jimmy pulling his arm over to the headboard of the bed, and then tying it into place feels even better.

Tim knows what’s happening now. Abby shifts to between his legs, and keeps working him, rubbing more into his chest now, fingers light and soft, teasing over his skin, as Jimmy ties his right hand, and then his right foot, and left foot.

Tim tests the ties, but he’s good and secure. He’s not going anywhere anytime soon. Which is exactly the way he wants it.

He doesn’t expect what comes next. His eyes have been closed through most of the massage, and he hadn’t gotten around to opening them when Jimmy was tying him down, so he didn’t see the next bit until it was right at his face.

The blindfold.

The masquerade mask he made for Abby with the blacked out eyes. He knows that’s got to be what they’re using. One moment he’s seeing the dull red-brown of the inside of his eyelids in a lit room,
and the next there’s just black.

Tim’s tied spread eagle on the bed, and he feels the warmth of Abby’s body, so he knows she’s between his legs, but he can’t tell what’s going to come next.

He’s not tense. He’s not sure he can get tense right now. He’s in way too good of a mood and way too relaxed for it, but he is eager. He wants to know what’s coming for him next.

There’s nothing. Neither of them are making any noise. Breena’s not saying anything. The music turned off… Tim doesn’t know when it turned off, but it’s not on now. All he’s aware of is his own body, his need to know what happens next, and the warmth of Abby between his legs.

Then there’s a burst of sensation, cool, wet. A soft strike along his upper thigh, and a long, slow trickle down the outside of his thigh.

Hot. He wriggles in pleasure. A drop of hot, and again, wet, this time on his sternum.

This one must be skin temperature. He just feels the wet and the weight as another drop hits him, just below his nipple.

He doesn’t know what they’re dripping on him. It can’t be wax. Wax isn’t liquid at room temperature, which the cool one… he jerks, another cool drop hitting him on the inside of the elbow, the cool one can’t be wax. It doesn’t smell like anything. No one’s licking him, so it’s not chocolate or something like that… but… “Oh!” eases out of him as this time a stream of drops, fast, one after another stripe his belly.

Then Abby’s moving. He knows her hands, so Jimmy must be the one dropping whatever it is on him. She’s rubbing all over him, smoothing the… It’s oil or lube, has to be, based on the glide, all over his skin.

Then her hands vanish again, leaving him alone in the dark, anticipating, waiting, starting to tense up, looking for the next… There. Hot again. This one right below the head of his dick. He’s not hard. Not yet. But if they keep this up that won’t be true for long.

Abby smooths the oil or lube or whatever it is along the length of his dick and then more drops. The cool ones this time, one after another after another, a quick line from his balls up his dick.

Tim’s biting his lip, trying to wriggle into more sensation.

Abby gives him some of it, stroking him again, and Jimmy hits him with the cool oil, this time on each nipple. One drop each.

Finger… Jimmy’s he thinks. But only because he’s fairly sure both of Abby’s hands are on his dick. One drop of oil, and then one finger drawing that drop out, circling each nipple with it.

Maybe not. More drops… This time along his hip and belly. But there’s still a finger on his nipple… Maybe Breena’s playing, too.

Toes! His feet jerk. The room temperature oil’s been dripped between his big toe and first toe, and now it’s meandering down the inside of his foot. Another finger, just one, sliding through the path of the oil.

Abby’s let go of his dick, and he whines at that. He wants her hand back there, and…
More drops, hot and cool at once, right on the line where his pelvis and leg meet, and again, the oil seeps along his skin, slipping down…

Hand… Warm, softer, small, Abby’s probably. Could be Breena. Holding his balls up, stroking oil slick hand against oil slick skin, a bit of jostling and moving… Cockring. “Fuck!” That’s feeling good. He’s not as hard as he can get, not yet, but this’ll help. It also helps pull the skin on balls taut, and like that, the next few drops of oil feel exquisite, that much more intense, each one, warm and slow, dripping down, and trickling over his balls.

Hand again, spreading the oil all over him. Below his balls, between his ass cheeks. In this position they can’t drip on him, not there. But he’s all slicked up, and the fingers, he’s fairly sure they’ve got to be Abby’s, too small for Jimmy, and he’s not feeling fingernails, so not likely to be Breena, fingers are rubbing him, pressing his perineum, and…

Glass. He knows what that is. It’s cool, and slick, and it takes Abby a moment to get it set, but again Tim wriggles, groaning. That’s the first of the dilators, the smallest one of the bunch, and he’s very pleased to see her getting it set. He shifts a bit, rocking, feeling it in him, and her hands on him, reveling in that.

For a second.

Then there are more drops, this time down his throat, each one the skin temperature oil. He more feels the hit than the liquid. And more, down his chest, down his belly. As each drop gets closer to his dick more time passes between each drop.

His hands are starting to clench, because the last drop got him just below the belly button, and he knows where the next one should hit, right at the tip of his dick, but time is slowing down, stretching out, and there’s just dark and anticipation and… “Please!”

The drop of oil, this time warm, explodes wet and rich on his dick and Tim thrusts into it.

“Is it good, baby?” Abby’s voice.

“YES!” Tim growls.

He’s rewarded with not just a drop, but a stripe of warm oil, drizzled along his dick. “OH, FUCK!”

“What would make it better, Timothy?” Jimmy asks.

Tim swallows hard. He’s blank. No ideas. And… he doesn’t want ideas. He doesn’t want to decide or be in charge or any of it. “Just… whatever you want! Anything!”

Jimmy and Breena watch Abby grin when Tim says that. “Oh, baby, we’re gonna fuck you so good!”

“Please!”

She’s scooted up the bed a bit, and runs her fingers through Tim’s hair, then kisses him, sucking his lower lip. He lifts his head, as much as he can in this position, kissing into her.

Jimmy’s kneeling on the bed, next to them, enjoying watching them kissing, but also watching Breena, making sure she’s having a good time. She’s in the chair, eyes on the three of them, one
hand slowly circling her nipple.

Tonight’s not going to be fast, so she’s pacing herself, getting ready for a good, long, slow build.

Jimmy kisses back at her. She winks back at him. Then he drizzles a little more oil on Tim, grinning as he quivers and squirms.

Tim adores watching sex, but there is something to be said for not knowing what’s coming next.

He’s stretched out on his back, eyes blinded, hands and feet bound, completely open and vulnerable. All he can do is feel.

And listen.

Abby’s moving around him. Her voice… footsteps, he knows she’s moving. “Is this what you wanted to see, Breena?” Fingers are trailing up his side, tickling him a little as they scrape from hip to wrist.

“Yeah, he’s just as lovely as you said he’d be.”

Tongue. Wet, soft, laving over his nipple and then a hard, sharp bite. No stubble, must have been Abby. Tim jerks a little, and moans, deep at it. It hurt, but as soon as she let go, he’s riding it, feeling the rush.

“He pinks up so pretty,” Abby’s voice.

Finger, slick, tracing the bite. It’s a raw feeling, sharp and… “Uh!” Tim inhales hard. That finger just pressed down, and a hand pulled wet and slick along his dick.

“And makes so many great sounds,” Breena’s voice that time.

Fingers, running through his hair, larger, broader. Jimmy’s he thinks. Lips, this time on his, definitely Jimmy. Even though he’s shaved today, he’s not soft like the girls, and he smells different, too.

Tim groans into Jimmy’s mouth, letting himself relax, go soft and placid against his husband. He pulls Jimmy’s tongue into his mouth, sucking softly. That gets a little grunt out of Jimmy, and Tim smirks slightly.

“He’s not the only one who makes great sounds,” Breena says, and he feels Jimmy pull back a bit. He doesn’t say anything, but he’s sure Breena got a look that said a thousand words.

Tim lifts his head, finding Jimmy’s lips, gently biting the lower one. *Pay attention to me!*

“It’s not always all about you,” Jimmy says softly to him, no bite in those words, just reminding him that he’s not the only one in the room. Then there’s a hand on his dick again. Jimmy’s. Abby’s doesn’t cover that much of him. He’s pulling long and steady, and Tim’s hips are jerking up into it.

He feels jostling on the bed. “Pretty, pretty boys. Both of you slick and flushed. Makes me so hot and wet. How about you give him a taste, James?”

Tim feels Jimmy move away, though his hand is still on Jimmy’s dick, and then he’s back, kissing
Tim, lips wet with Abby’s cum, and stroking his dick fast and hard.

“Oh! *Fuck!*” It’s half a breath, half a word, and Tim’s jerking, trying to get more of everything.

Jimmy’s hand goes loose, and he pulls back.

Tim whimpers.

“None of that, love,” Abby says to him. “You’ll get your taste, too.”

Tim feels everyone move. Abby’s moving up his body, settling herself over his mouth. Jimmy’s… Letting go. He pouts at that. Soft and loose is better than dick against his belly all by itself.

Then he feels heat between his legs. Jimmy’s got to be down there. Heat and skin against his face. Scent. Abby’s pussy in his face, he opens his mouth, tongue darting out, lapping at her.

“Ahhh… That’s it baby!”

He’s almost entirely focused on Abby, on her scent, and taste, and the feel of her skin on his, when he feels what Jimmy’s doing. Warm, thick fingers on his ass. The slide of lubed glass, a moment of feeling open and relaxed, and then another slide, this time with some stretch and a little burn.

Tim moans at that. Today, he likes the burn, and hips arch for it.

There’s a little tug on his hair. “Get me off.”

And Tim’s happy to. He shuts as much of the world outside of his lips, tongue, and Abby’s pussy as he can, and focuses down.

Blind, no hands, it’s all about his mouth. Wet tongue, wet clit, wet lips, so slick, so hot. He can feel her dripping down his chin and throat, taste her, smell her, and he feels like he’s swimming in her body, savoring every twitch and moan.

His lady’s given him a task, and he’s going to do it.

His body rocks, as he circles with his tongue. He purses his lips to suck her, and switches back to more circles. He can feel her thighs going tighter against his face, and her hips rock fast and erratic against his lips.

He can feel his own body drip as he tongues her. He wants to dive into her, fuck hard and fast. Her hips snap faster, rocking against him, and for a second she stills, before her body twitches, hard.

He slows his tongue, but doesn’t stop. He matches her, soft little licks each time her body twitches.

He’s making a lot of small, wet, needy sounds as his spit slick tongue slides over Abby’s cum slick clit.

There’s a feeling of movement, and then hands on his left ankle. A second later his foot is loose and the bed jostles a bit. Jimmy’s moving. Sitting next to him, cross-legged probably. He’s got Tim’s left leg draped over his lap.

Tim’s not sure what Jimmy’s doing, but then he feels it, and those soft, little needy sounds become loud, demanding ones.

It’s a gentle touch. Four fingertips along the back of Tim’s dick, keeping him steady. Jimmy’s thumb is right where the head of his dick meets the shaft, and he’s lightly, gently, right in that one little spot
rubbing tiny circles.

Oil slick hand, oil slick dick, everything is smooth and gliding.

Tim’s writhing on the bed, trying to get a bit more pressure. It’s an electric sensation, light, sharp, rolling over his dick and through his body, but it’s not enough.

Jimmy takes the pad of his thumb, presses it against the base of Tim’s dick, and presses, slow, hard, perfect hard, but so slow, too slow, all the way up the length.

Tim feels the precum ease out of him as Jimmy does it, and he hears Breena groan a second before he feels a tongue touch the tip of his dick and drag over it, slowly pulling back a moment later. Then those fingers again, and thumb, and light, wet, slick circles on his dick as his tongue glides against Abby, with more light, soft wet circles.

Tim’s shivering, trying to figure out how to move to get more of everything. More pussy, more touch, more sensation, everything.

He wants to leap over the edge, gallop into an orgasm, but they won’t let him. They’re keeping him here, inches away, turning up the pleasure one agonizingly slow notch at a time.

Jimmy moves away. Tim’s leg is free, feeling a little cold. Jimmy’s body was warm against it, and him gone leaves his skin naked to shockingly cold air.

Moving. Jimmy’s hand on his ankle again. The bed shifting more. Jimmy’s between his legs.

Hand on his dick, stroking fast and steady, and Tim’s snapping his hips, trying to throw himself over the edge, trying to get off, trying to let the fire consume him. He’s begging, or would be if his mouth wasn’t full of pussy, so all that’s coming out are wet, muffled whimpering noises.

Jimmy’s knee. It’s against Tim’s thigh, keeping his legs spread wide.

Hand moving fast, and then light, too damn light, barely touching. All the speed he could ever want, but not enough friction.

Jolt. A blast of pressure-pleasure through his prostate and Tim knows what Jimmy’s doing. He feels it again, sharp and arcing through his balls and legs and spine. Once more. He’s rocking the dilator against him.

Empty. His body wants something to hold, something in him, something rocking right there getting him over and over and…

Thick, solid, cold. The glass is fucking cold as it slides into him. Wide. Stretch, but Jimmy angles it right and there’s another jolt, one more, Tim begs, pleads, body quivering, he knows he’s saying, “Please, please, please…” over and over, licking it into Abby’s skin.

Jimmy gives the dilator one last twist, and then lets go, returning to where he’d been, and that slow, easy, light, too fucking light, stroke on the tip of Tim’s dick.

“What do you think, James, is he ready for you?”
At this point, Jimmy’s fairly sure that Tim would happily fuck anything that could get his prostate, so he’s beyond ready.

He’s been trying to get Jimmy to get him off for the last ten minutes now, and just begging Abby for... Everything. He’s not making a whole lot of concrete requests right now, beyond a whole lot of please.

But there’s ready, wet, flushed, quivering, hips jerking, and there’s ready, namely stretched slow and easy so Jimmy won’t hurt him, and that’s...

“I think he’s ready.”

Tim hears that and perks up. “YES! Please! NOW!”

Abby sits back, kneeling beside Tim, and takes the blindfold off of him. He blinks at the sudden light. “I want you to watch us fuck you.”

His eyes are wide, pupils blown, a little glassy. He’s looking drugged with pleasure. He blinks again, slow, and says, growling, “Yes!”

Abby grins at him. “Good.”

She nods to Jimmy, and he knows the next bit.

“We’re going to untie you, and move you around. Legs free. Ass right at the edge of the bed. Then we’ll re-tie your hands.”

Tim nods, slowly. He feels Jimmy moving away from him. Then he realizes he can watch. He looks away from Abby, sees Jimmy untying his foot, and Breena, face flushes, legs wide, lips wet, fingers glistening, watching him, hungry, eager. He hasn’t heard her come cry, and realizes she’s pacing them.

She looks just as eager to get off as he is.

Jimmy moves around the bed, untying his hands, and Tim watches him, staring at his body, naked, hard, shining with oil. His hair is wild, curling easily, and his hands are strong and gentle on Tim’s wrists as he unties him.

Tim’s eyes slide back to Abby, also naked, also gleaming with oil. She’s flushed, her lips wet and swollen from kisses, nipples hard, hair awry from fucking.

“You’re so beautiful,” he means all three of them, and makes at least a second of eye contact with each one.

Abby strokes his face. “You should see yourself, love. All spread out and quivering for it.” Her fingers trail up his dick. Jimmy gets his other hand, and Tim lies there, taking several breaths before he realizes he can move on his own.

He begins to scoot himself into position, hips at the side of the bed, feet on the floor, arms out. Jimmy reties him, and Abby steps off the bed, standing between his legs. She’s staring at him, looking at his dick high, red, wet; balls, tight, pulled as tight to him as they can get with the cockring, though this moment of rearranging his pulling Tim back from the edge of wanting to get off, and they’re starting to slip down again. His ass is stretched wide around the dilator, and she knows that in a moment Jimmy’ll be fucking him, and she will, too.
“You want us, baby?”

“Yes.”

Jimmy finishes tying his right arm.

“Good. Cause we’re going to give you everything.”

“Please!”

She settles herself next to Tim, and starts to slowly jack his cock. Up and down, slow, easy, slick with oil. Jimmy crawls around him, careful not to kneel on his arm, and gets himself standing between Tim’s legs. He pumps his own dick, which is more than ready to get into the action, spreading more lube over himself, before hooking the dilator with his index finger and slipping it out.

Tim whimpers at that, and then whimpers again, spreading his legs as wide as they go as Jimmy steps even closer, holding his dick in his hand, getting it in place and sliding forward easy and sweet.

Both of them groan, hard, at that. Jimmy’s a little wider around than the largest dilator, which means Tim’s nice and snug against him, and Tim’s craving any extra hint of sensation he can get, so that little bit of extra stretch shudders through him.

Abby lets his dick go, watching it twitch as Jimmy moves through his first few strokes. Every time he gets Tim just right, his dick jerks, pre-cum beading at the tip, and Tim moans.

By this point, Abby’s not even pretending to run Jimmy anymore. They’re running Tim, together.

She glances back, and with a little nod, Jimmy gets across the idea that on his side of this, they’re all set.

From the way Tim’s watching her, the half closed, glazed eyes, she knows he’s close.

Close to coming, but he’s still in his head. He may not be paying attention to anything other than his dick and Jimmy’s right now, but there’s still an outside world in his head.

And she wants to shatter that. Wants to take him completely out of the world. She wants him to exist right here, right now, in his body, and their love.

Normally, she wouldn’t do this, because normally this isn’t how they play. When they spin him out it’s all about anal until it’s time to come. Tossing his dick into the mix is just too much stimulation at once. He just can’t control it after a certain point, and both at once is that certain point.

Tim’s lying there, rocking gently against Jimmy. He’s eager, body tight, straining against the ties on his arms.

“Timothy.”

His eyes laze away from Jimmy to her.

“I’m going to slide onto you, don’t come.”

His face looks pained, and the groan is deep and intense. Abby pauses, waits a moment, sees if he’ll say ‘Stop,’ but he doesn’t, so she straddles his hips, pushes her thumb into the bruise on his nipple, and slowly slips down on him.

“FUCK!” He breathes it, face tense, eyes closing. He can’t take watching it and feeling it, and not
coming. Even with the jolt of pain to go with it, he’s so close to the edge he can taste it.

Abby can feel Jimmy’s not moving right now. He’s making sure Tim’s got some time to adjust. Abby gives Jimmy a little pat on the hip and he begins a very slow stroke. He’s just gliding in and out right now, intentionally not getting Tim’s prostate.

He’s got some idea of what Abby’s working toward. They talked about tonight’s goals on the way here. So he doesn’t want to stack the deck against Tim.

The last thing any of them want is to set him up to fail tonight.

Abby starts to glide, too, matching Jimmy’s pace.

Tim’s hands clench against the ropes, and his toes curl, and he’s about to bite through his lip he’s working so hard at not getting off.

“Come on, baby, just a bit longer, hold on,” Abby coos at him. She knows him well enough that she can order him to come the seconds it looks like he loses control, she won’t let him fail at this, there’s no chance of him getting off “before she wants him to,” but she’s hoping she can pull him through this minute, get him to the next, and burn through any world outside her voice, and their bodies.

Tim’s closed his eyes. His arms are tight, jaw clenched, the muscles of his neck and chest straining. He’s biting his lip, trying to hold very still, minimize the friction as much as he can from his end of this.

“Abby!” He gasps.

“You can do this, baby. Just flow with it, let us take care of you.”

“Abby! Please! I gotta…” She can feel the tension in his thighs, and his knuckles are white.

She slows way down, just easing over him, long, slick glides. Her fingers find his face, and she strokes his cheek and kisses him. “We’ve got you, Tim, just relax. Let it go, baby.”

“Unh…” pants out of Tim’s lips. His eyes open for a second, and focus on Abby. She smiles at him, stroking over his cheeks, forefinger slipping along his lips.

He opens them further, gently licking her finger. A little salt, sweat from all of their skins, a little slick, still traces of the oil. He focuses on that, and then on her face. And again she smiles.

“Come on, relax, baby, let us do you. Let us take you so far out of your head that there’s nothing but your body left.”

He kisses the tip of her finger, and smiles.

Abby glides against him again, base to tip and back again, a long sweet grind. She’s sending shivers and quivers all along her own body with that move, and it’s got to be even more intense for Tim.

Tim inhales, deep, exhales, his eyes settling into that half-closed droop, as his body goes soft and limp against the bed.

“Oh… There you go. Perfect, baby, just perfect. Makes me so happy to see you like this, all pink and wet and ready.”

Tim purrs at that, wriggling a little, and Abby beams at him, pleased to see him let everything else go.
“You just stay like that, relaxed and happy, and Jimmy and I are going to fuck you right out of your head.”

It’s like a switch in his head. There was struggling, holding on to not getting off by his fingernails, there was worry about not pleasing his lady, and his body so tight, so ready, so full, and the edge was right there and he was so afraid of falling over it, and it was so close, and he was trying to back away, so worried, so turned on, so needy and God, she’s moving, and Jimmy’s not but he’s hard and full, pressing him right there, and just breathing means a little friction, and Abby slides and so much tension and…

And then soft words and a softer touch just flipped the switch.

He can do this.

All he has to do is let himself go.

It takes a second, a heartbeat of actively making his body relax. For a moment his fingers feel odd, tingly, like they’re having a hard time letting go after that long clenched, but he relaxes, all over.

It’s not in his hands, or head, or dick even. Abby and Jimmy have him, and they’ll take care of him, and all he has to do is exist right now.

And feel.

Once Tim fully lets go, Abby knows not to run Tim too much longer.

But for a little while.

Watching him like this…

It’s so fucking delicious.

She can see it in the droop of his eyes, and the soft smile on his lips, and the way his shoulders and chest are flushed but not tight.

He’s right here, right now, but not tense, not straining. He’s just flowing with it, taking each stroke, enjoying it, but not chasing anything.

“That’s it, baby.” She’s rocking slow and steady against him, matching Jimmy’s pace, getting themselves set so that when he goes deep, she goes shallow. Basically, they both move forward and back at the same time, but, given what they’re doing, moving the same way at the same time produces different results.

She reaches behind herself, and finds one of Jimmy’s hands. She doesn’t want to break the spell with Tim by asking Jimmy how he’s doing, but she does want to check in, make sure he’s okay, too. She gives him a little you okay? sort of squeeze.

He kisses the back of her neck and quietly says, “Yes, but soon, please.” Tim is tight when he’s
tense, and with as long as they’ve been going, and with as tight, and hot, and slick as Tim is, Jimmy’s got a fingernail hold on the edge, too. He’s already gotten through every bone in the body, alphabetically, backwards, and is rapidly running out of don’t-come strategies.

She nods. And then picks up her speed a little. Jimmy matches her.

“Timothy, you want to come?”

“Yeah…” eases out of him, more a breath than a word.

“Good, baby. I want to watch you come. Want to see you shake and moan for me.”

Tim does groan at that, and the faster pace.

“Good, baby, good… How’s Jimmy feel? Is he hitting you just right?”

Tim moans at that, too. Jimmy’s been hitting him just right all night, and right now, speeding up, and with as long as they’ve been playing with him, Tim feels like he’s getting fucked on his dick, and through his dick, and he’s about to cum gallons.

Every stroke rocks through him. They’re still going pretty slow, fluid, like waves, swelling up and back.

Tim’s nipples are tight, and his body is tensing up again. Each crest takes him higher, each drop is deeper. His hips are rocking faster, harder, chasing more pressure and pleasure. His face, neck, and chest are flushed, and he’s glistening with sweat and oil, hair dark with it.

“God, baby, you look so hot like this. So perfect… Makes me want to come just watching you.”

Tim’s gripping the ropes, knuckles going white, his jaw is tight, and he’s making a low, deep groan with each breath.

“Just like that, just… like… Come, baby, come for me!” Abby grinds down on him, and Jimmy thrusts up, getting him just right, and his whole body rocks, jerking, as lightning tingles spread through him and pleasure spurts wet and hard, over and over.

He twitches again, and again, and over… More than he can count. His body’s wracking with pleasure, and nothing exists outside of the sensations pouring through him.

And in a moment, Abby’s resting on Tim’s chest, with Jimmy lying against his side, and Breena’s joined them, untying his hands.

Breena curls in next to them. Tim hums a little, a soft sub-verbal acknowledgement that she’s joined them on the bed.

“You back to us?” she asks.

He purrs again. Then says, “Yeah. Maybe…” His eyes are closed, and his lips open, just enough for the tip of his tongue to side over them. He kisses Abby. Then he turns to kiss Jimmy. He’d kiss Breena but that requires moving more than his head, so he says, “Enjoy the show?”
“Oh, yeah!”

There’s a quiet moment, and then Tim says, eyes still closed, “Even if your water does break, I’m not going anywhere.”

That gets a bit of laughter. Memories of how Sean got a move on passing between them.

“He’s squirming a bit, but I don’t think he’s going anywhere tonight,” Breena says.

“Good. ‘Cause I’m not.”

“Lazy bastard,” Jimmy adds.

Tim smirks. “Sometimes it’s good to be the Uncle.”

He hears Jimmy laugh at that, and then feels cold as Jimmy levers himself up, dragging out of bed to go clean himself up.

Tim’s asleep before Jimmy gets back.
The Fear of McGee: Coda

Tim’s fairly sure he’s dreaming.

First and foremost, he’s never been to Vietnam, and he’s awfully sure this is Vietnam.

Second of all, he’s never been on a MKII PBR, though maybe this is a MKIII PBR, they’re identical from the outside. The only reason he knows what it is are memories of pictures of them in his father’s office.

Like any MKII/III PBR, it’s small. Shallow draft. Turtle navy has to move on rivers, and those things can be awfully shallow. PBRs patrol the rivers. Small crews, too. Four men per boat, and two boats working together. He’s not so much on the boat, as aware of it. People are moving around and through him, so he’s not part of the crew.

He’s watching, not doing.

The jungle is thick. Too thick. Impossibly thick. A literal wall of vegetation looms up from the waterline. There’s no visibility. Anything could be hiding in the jungle.

They’re moving as quietly as possible. It’s night, and they don’t like going at night, can’t see any mines in the water at night, but during the day the guys in the jungle can see them, so…

The wrong word. The wrong move. Drop something, say something, sneeze, and they can all die.

He can feel The Admiral’s eyes burning through every man on that boat. Except he’s not The Admiral. He’s The Lieutenant. He’s twenty-two and about ten days out of Annapolis. Tim knows this story. He’s been told it over and over. The man who ran this boat, and who was supposed to run The Lieutenant, turn him from a green boy into a leader, is already dead. He lit a cigarette, in the open, at night, which was against regs, and got picked off by a sniper within two hours of getting on the boat on their first trip as a unit.

And every second since then The Lieutenant has had eyes on everyone, all the time, demanding constant, instant, perfect obedience.

One of the men coughs. The entire boat goes completely still, waiting, but nothing happens.

Except the man who coughed, he’s cringing, silently. He knows what’s coming for him. The Lieutenant is standing there, at the prow, staring him down. When they get to the landing zone, he’s going to wish a sniper had gotten him.

It’s very dark when Tim pulls out of that dream. Abby’s in front of him, sleeping, and Breena’s behind him. He feels a little squirm, Donnie shifting in his sleep. He could lift his head and check the time, but he doesn’t feel any need to do it. This dark, it’s still hours before wake up time, so that’s enough.

He goes through the images in his head. Makes himself go through them again. He’s sure this is part of what he needs to know, or do, or… understand.
High stress, any wrong move and they’re all dead.

That’s how he never met his Uncle James. Maybe he made a wrong move and bought it. Maybe someone on his boat did. The men have to be perfect. If they aren’t perfect, they die or get captured… If the stuff they’re carrying doesn’t get through, the men waiting for them might also die.

He replays it again. There’s meaning here.

Can’t trust. They have to be perfect, but no one is perfect. Draftees. Most of them don’t want to be here, aren’t career military, and don’t give a shit if they have a perfect record. Can’t get rid of them. There are no alternatives. These men, there, then, are it. And their lives literally depend on each other. As long as they’re all alive in the end, anything The Lieutenant needs to do to make sure that happens is for the greater good…

Except it isn’t.

Maybe…

Does it matter if his men fear him, hate him, curse him, as long as they’re still breathing at the end of the day?

Another image hits him, and he’s not sure if he’s dreaming now, or just imagining intensely. This time it’s a desert city, and he knows, just like he did before, that this is Iraq. (Though, given what he’s seeing in his head, he’s pretty sure that’s his memories of Somalia, blended with Afghanistan, with Iraq stamped on top of it.)

This time it’s The Gunny who’s keeping the men in line, making sure he doesn’t even need to say “Jump” before they all leap up with “How high?”

They’re going building to building, clearing them. They communicate by hand signals, sweeping through, guns at the ready.

One of the men… Not one of the men. This one’s an embedded reporter. No gun. He tries to move forward, past the men, into an uncleared, but empty-looking room, and The Gunny grabs him by the back of the neck, slaps him across the face, and drops him in one easy move.

He’s laying on his back, gasping for air, but the soldier who was supposed to go into that room does, and Tim can hear him saying, “Trip wire. Get the bomb squad in here.”

The Gunny just looks down at the man on the floor. He won’t ever return to their unit.

He can feel it’s different. Everyone in that room is a volunteer. And maybe they didn’t expect to end up there, and it’s clear that a bunch of them don’t want to be there. Some of them are counting the days until they get out of there. It’s blindingly obvious they do not want the reporter there. They’re professionals. They know what they’re doing. He’s the one who might get them killed.

Iraq bleeds into his own memories, own dreams, this definitely is Somalia, he can taste it in the air, the blood in his mouth, and the feel of the floor hard, hot, under his body.

Tony’s talking, spinning a line of BS Tim can barely follow, because he knows that if something doesn’t happen soon, he’s got to move, fast, no hands, against someone with a gun who already knows he’s not helpless.

He doesn’t hear the shot, can’t hear it, Gibbs is way too far away for that, but he sees Saleem’s head snap back, and for a second they’re all still, and then they’ve got to run, move, fast, get out of there.
Tony’s getting his hands. Ziva’s trying to stand up. Slow, her body doesn’t want to move. He’s got the gun. Tony’s got most of Ziva’s weight on him. Tim’s got some of it. She’s so weak her legs won’t support her. They’re shuffling out.

He’s got the gun. Drugged, they’re all drugged, but that doesn’t matter. It feels like the hallway is spinning as they lurch down it. He’s got one hand free to shoot. He can’t use his right to steady it without dropping Ziva. There’s a shape at the end of the hall. He’s lifting the gun, hoping, praying he can nail the shot, but his eyes still don’t focus well, and he can still taste blood, and he knows he’s waver ing for a second, but…

It’s Gibbs at the end of the hall.

All of them volunteered for it, knowing how it would go. One mission, with men he chose, and trusted.

Tim opens his eyes. Lighter now. Dawn or just about. All four of them still in bed. He kisses the back of Abby’s neck, and rolls over to kiss Breena. She murmurs a bit, but doesn’t stir.

Everything he ever learned about how to be a leader (or not to be a leader) came from men who were trained and training other men in literal life or death situations.

As the sun grows brighter, he can feel the difference. He runs the Public Corruption department. Most of the time, most of his men will never even need a gun. He’ll have a hundred fold more accountants and lawyers than “muscle.”

The stakes he’s playing for, they aren’t literal life and death, not immediately, not directly.

He’s playing them with professionals, who chose to be where they are.

He knows that matters, but he also knows he’s not seeing the whole picture fully, not yet.

_____________________

Gibbs, Vance, Ducky, Abbi… all of his images of a ‘good leader’ are military.

Tim’s not sure what to do with it. But he’s got the feeling that if he were to do more free writing today, it would look a whole lot less like word salad and more like a path toward defining himself as a leader.

More about what he’s learned from that, and what he’s learning not to do from it, too.

But right now, he doesn’t have free writing time.

He’s got something more important, namely a collection of tiny people who haven’t spent nearly enough time with Dad/Uncle Tim lately.

And right now, that matters a hell of a lot more than figuring out the job.

Because one thing he doesn’t need to figure out is that these people around him, in his arms, lying on his belly, crawling all over him as they romp around in the living room, matter a hell of a lot more, and will continue to matter a hell of a lot longer, than anything he’s doing with his job.
Just because he’s playing with the kids doesn’t mean his mind is silent.

Tim’s on his back, holding Sean in the air, lowering and rising him, as he giggles and burbles and drools a bit on his daddy. (Who doesn’t mind at all. Compared to burnt-out FBI Agents, drooling, happy baby is a treat.)

He remembers golden light. Abby’s apartment, way back, before they were living together. They’d been talking about Communion, and why he didn’t take it, and then symbols.

She’d asked: "What symbols do matter to you?"

He remembers thinking about it, and coming up with: "My badge. The idea that I'm part of the line between order and chaos. That there's an agreed upon idea of how we'll interact with each other, and I'm part of what protects the people who follow the rules from those who don't. That I'm a gun or knife, an instrument of violence, but bound by honor, in the service of justice, for the protection of others. That matters to me.

"Words... They're the tool we use to try and expand the universe we know and see. How we share it with each other."

She squeezed his hand. "They're good symbols, McGee."

"Thanks."

That was his first Christmas with Abby. He remembers being careful about what he said, stressing justice and not law because… Well, law was something of an afterthought for them, wasn’t it? Something they tended to work around. Hell, what was it, his third case? Second? “Rule 13, McGee, never, ever involve the lawyers.”

He was led by a man with a good strong moral compass that pointed true north, and he stayed on the side of the angels, but…

God…

Tim looks over. Gibbs has Molly and Kelly in his lap, and is reading them a story. Supposedly, they’re all winding down, getting ready for afternoon nap time.

He rubs his hands over his face. Tim’s lying on the floor. Sean’s sitting on his belly, and Jackson is on his chest, on his hind legs, front paws on Sean’s chest, licking his face.

They never had any use for law.

He bragged about it to Tony, “How many felonies do you think I commit a year? In a good year, it’s five or six.”

He didn’t get caught. And the end may have justified the means, but… Everyone he just fired thought that, too. Almost all of them had some greater good. Sure, he had some grifters and a few on the take for the sake of being on the take, but he’s prosecuting them. The ones he just fired… They all had justifications, too.

He knew, when he was talking to Abby all those years ago that law wasn’t justice. He came up in a team that more or less considered law an obstacle to justice. And Tim isn’t sure how he feels about
that, not right now, but he’s starting to get a sense of where he needs to go.

Law is supposed to be a tool of justice. That’s how this whole thing, country, government, law enforcement is supposed to work. Everyone is under the same law. It applies to everyone and it works for everyone and…

And that likely won’t ever happen. No perfect world, not ever. But…

He can stop people from using the law it to carve out little niches of power and influence for themselves. He can do that. But if he’s going to do that, it means he needs to be part of that. Follow the same rules everyone else does.

He remembers Manner looking at him in disgust, because he was the rule-breaking cowboy. He can imagine him laughing his head off at where he is now.

“You okay?” Gibbs asks him.

Tim sits up, holding Sean steady, but Jackson gets a bit of a surprise, shooting of a quick yip as he scampers aside. “Maybe…”

Gibbs keeps eyeing him. He’s heard the stories of the last week, noticed the lack of Tim from their home the last two weekends, and he’s here right now because he wants to lay eyes on his boy, see how he is.

Out of sorts seems to be the answer. He’s seen Tim worse, a lot worse, and he’s seen him better, quite a bit better. Right now he’s… just off.

The gut isn’t worried. Tim’s thinking hard. Anyone looking at him can see the wheels turning, but Gibbs has the sense this is important turning.

Tim rolls Sean onto his back, and grabs his feet, patting them together and rolling them in little circles. Sean laughs. Mona pads over, and lays her head on Tim’s shoulder. Tim gives her the stink eye, but she knows it’s not real, then he pets her. She looks satisfied with that, and stalks off to Gibbs.

Gibbs lets Tim keep thinking, and playing with Sean.

Eventually, it’s naptime, and the kids go down to rest.

He heads back downstairs once they’re in their cribs, thinking he’ll free write, but instead of turning toward Breena’s office, he heads for the back porch, where Gibbs and Jimmy are.

They don’t really need to be out here right now. There’s a brisket on the grill, slowly cooking away, but that doesn’t require any real supervision.

He thinks they’re just out there, sucking up some late summer sunshine. There won’t be too many
more of these warm, blue-skied days, not this year.

“Abbi coming for dinner tonight?” Tim asks.

“That’s the plan. She’s been checking her new teams, seeing where the holes are. Almost done. Maybe by the end of the month, she’ll be back up to her full force.”

Tim nods. He knows that she, like him, has a massive staffing problem, though she’s getting closer to having her ducks in a row.

“Checking how?”

“Now until the middle of June, ride alongs. She joins each one for a day or two, sees how they work together, gets a feel for everyone involved. Lets them get a feel for her.”

Tim winces, that’s a lot of time away from home.

Gibbs nods. He’s been missing her, too. On the upside, she’s only got 207 teams. And she does have the jet, so she gets home for at least a few nights a week. But, between now and next summer, besides the month between mid-December to mid-January in DC, she’s got a lot of traveling.

Tim thinks about all of this more, hours later, tossing the salad that’s going to go with the brisket that Gibbs is slicing up.

Jake and Penny spring to mind. He can only be a tool of justice if the law is just. And a lot of the time law and justice don’t even have a nodding acquaintance. That’s why they avoid the damn lawyers, why they cut the corners and… Okay, that’s bullshit. Sometimes, that’s why they avoid lawyers and cut corners.

Sometimes the gut, Gibbs’ and the rest of theirs, knew the bastard was guilty, and sometimes the law stopped them from doing what was right. But most of the time, those laws are there because not everyone has a gut, and not everyone uses his gut, and it’s awfully easy to screw someone over, gut or not, if you’ve got a badge.

Clements springs to mind again.

Those same laws his team occasionally ignored were put in place to protect guys like him.

But he’s not enforcing those laws. Sort of. Probably. A police force gets enough complaints, his guys could get called in. For the most part, the civil rights guys are in charge of making sure that cops don’t steamroll citizens.

He’s a level up. It’s his job to make sure the powers that be play the game fairly. He’s the one who makes sure that justice isn’t just a concept for the people around him. He’s got the image in his mind: Lady Justice. She wears her blindfold, and holds her scale, but everyone forgets her other hand, the one that carries the sword.

He’s got to make sure she stays blind, and that sword in her hand is sharp.

It’s his job to cut the hands off people who try to put a thumb on the scale and tip its balance.
But he can only do his job if the law is worthy of it. Tim groans. He knows he’s going to have to spend even more time with the damn lawyers, and start talking to his grandmother and Jake.

He makes sure that he gets on dish duty with Abbi when dinner wraps up.

“You off again in the morning?”

“Yeah. Miami. I’ll be there all this week, home for the weekend, and then back for the next week, home again, and the week after.”

Tim nods. That makes sense to him. Miami is a major Coast Guard city.

“They happy to see you?”

She snorts at that. “Were you happy to have Leon looking over your shoulder?”

Tim rolls his eyes. Even with the fact that he likes Leon, he never wanted him hovering over his shoulder watching him do his job.

“Exactly. But most of them are new. Most of them have never worked together before. The old system, where you have a tried and true agent with a Probie’s been shot to shit for me.”

Tim nods along with that, too. He’s got a mental image of Abbi from their time in the Navy Yard. The Marines knew the chain of command went something like this: Jarvis, Vance, and Abbi. She had them snapping to and saluting within… Three minutes? Four. She stood there, and they just knew.

In the image, she’s standing outside, wind whipping her hair, which is already dirty and ratty, wearing the same pants suit she had on pretty much the whole time. Her white blouse is gray. Her navy pants are darker gray. She had on body armor, black, too large. She’s inside the grounds, so her helmet is… Not on her head. She had one of the automatic rifles, though she’s holding it in a relaxed manner. Muzzle is down, finger isn’t near the trigger.

All she had to do was exist, and the Marines knew she was in charge. He wonders what she like when she was Captain Borin.

“What happens after you finish riding along?” Tim asks.

“Can’t be everywhere at once, Tim. Gotta trust ‘em. What was Reagan’s line? ‘Trust, but verify?’ That’s my job now. Go, see, watch, point out problems, and then let ‘em run it. Verify when and as I can.”

He blinks slowly at that, feeling like the floor just opened under him.

Trust is a choice.

He trusted Gibbs on first sight. On reputation and body language alone, he trusted Gibbs. But that trust wasn’t earned. Gibbs did nothing but be himself, and Tim gave it to him.

Same with Abby. He stepped into her lab, and… He chuckles remembering the first time they had sushi. Okay, he didn’t trust her instantly in all things, but he just knew she wouldn’t pull any big shit
Tony took more time. He trusted Agent DiNozzo, as a professional, as a man who would have his back in a fight, years before he trusted Tony. And, even in that case, he more learned how Tony would behave, got his character down, and trusted that Tony would be Tony, and that would be that. Tim sighs, he didn’t have that character down as well as he thought he did, which has always been part of the tension between them.

Kate was… He’s not sure anymore. He feels like he trusted her quickly, but he’s not sure how much of that is the distance of years, and the sort of rose-tinted haze of loss and regret that fills all of his memories of Kate.

He knows something else, whether they earned his trust or not, he had to trust them, because without it, they couldn’t do their job.

Trust is a choice. His team couldn’t function without it. That was four people.

There’s no possible way he can run a two thousand person department without it.

There are 297 people working on rebuilding DC, sorting stuff, and finishing up punishment duty. And if there’s any chance of his being able to run this department, and do the things he wants to do, he’s going to have to figure out how to trust them.

He dreams of Jenny Sheppard. Nothing concrete. She isn’t talking to him or anything. It’s just the feel of her.

When he’s awake, again, deep in the dark, this time with only Abby next to him, (He’s on the outside of the bed, on kiddie duty.) he thinks of Jenny, and Jeanne, and going to Canada to go after The Frog, and…

He wonders, idly, if any of them have a picture of Jenny. He wants one to put in his office. Not like a huge portrait or anything, but… He wants the memory. Better yet if there’s a shot of him with her. (Though he’s pretty certain there isn’t one. Jenny died before everyone had a phone with a camera, and he knows he never took a shot of them together on the phone he had with a camera.)

He wants the motivation.

Someone, someone like him, should have showed up at NCIS and slapped her in cuffs after The Frog. If she hadn’t died… He heard the rumors. Part of why Vance was there, even before Jenny died, was they were looking to ease her out. But that was butt-covering mode.

And he doesn’t trust that anything other than an early retirement would have happened to Jenny if she hadn’t been sick and dying, and maybe, not even that.

And thinking that, he’s got to look at himself, and what he did for her, would have done for her.

He wonders, idly, if part of Jenny accepting his badge when he was protecting his sister, was that she wasn’t sure he’d play ball if she asked for him to go too far. He’s fairly certain there’s a line he wouldn’t have crossed. He doesn’t know what that line was. He honestly doesn’t know what he would have done if she’d hit him with Tony’s assignment. He likes to think he would have said no, but… He doesn’t know that. Especially newly minted Senior-Field-Agent McGee, desperate to prove that he was worth the position…
He does know that if The Director of NCIS told him to monitor the communications of someone, without a warrant, he’d have done it in a heartbeat. No questions asked.

And he knows because he has done things like that.

But he doesn’t know what to do with it.

Other than not do it again.

Better ninety-nine guilty men go free than one innocent man be imprisoned. That’s the saying, right?

He wonders if the gut, his or Gibbs’ or Tony’s or Ziva’s was ever wrong. They always managed to convince a jury, and they never fudged the evidence… just… how they got that evidence, sometimes.

He’s thinking about that on Monday, as he’s heading to the grocery store, planning on doing a whole lot of boring, normal, everyday chores.

That’s his job these days, right? He’s the one who stops the powers that be from going after the innocent as they sweep up the guilty? Maybe.

He’s the one who reins them in?

Probably.

Somehow, the broccoli in his hand is not filling him with insight.

Tuesday afternoon. He’s in on his own in his office. Jennifer’s still off. No one needs to be chewed out. His immediate investigative job has been handed off. Hotch is off dealing with the pile of cases he’s handed him.

It’s the first time he’s been in his office, to work, on his own, since he got here. For a moment, he just stands there, looking around, and then… He sees his computer and smiles.

Today he can work on the things they actually hired him for, building functional infrastructures.

This is fun. He hasn’t worked with code in… God… Weeks? Months? Too damn long.

The NCIS triaging system is his architecture. He’s messing with it some, building up the skeleton for an FBI system. By the time it’s been rolled out to the FBI, what had been a house will have to be supersized up to skyscraper scale.

But, just like the base concepts don’t change between a house and a skyscraper, the program architecture he’s working on doesn’t change, either. He’s got to make it bigger, stronger, more robust, but a joist is a joist, and a data sort function is a data sort function.

He’s thinking that he should be able to get his computer guys together next week, show this off, and get them up to speed on the idea of A: this is what they’re building, and B: we need people, yesterday, to do it.
He’s happily coding away, pleased to be back to this, fingers dancing on the keyboard, fully in the zone when a stray thought brings him to a standstill.

He knows exactly zero of the people he’s going to hand this off to. They’ll talk. He’ll drop this plan on them. He’ll keep eyes on them, check in, see how they’re doing, but…

He’ll hand it over to strangers, who work for the FBI, which, as of this point has not been covering itself in glory when it comes to being worth trusting, and trust that they’ll do it.

And he would have done it without a thought, had it not been for the 297 employees still laboring away, sorting bricks, all of whom he’s feeling wary about ever giving another assignment to.

He closes his eyes and sighs. It’s one thing to realize you need to do it. It’s another one to do it.

“Thanks, Jarvis.” Tim hangs up his phone on Thursday. Apparently, the guys who’ve stuck around are doing a good job. Jarvis is getting chunks of DC cleared a lot faster than expected, and he’s able to get more bricks distributed around the city.

It might not sound like much, but if your building project has stalled out because you can’t get bricks for love or money in DC, having a truck load of them show up makes a world of difference. And, if your building project hasn’t gotten started because there’s three tons of wreckage sitting on top of your building site, cleaning that up means you get to start moving.

Some days, it’s an inch at a time, but DC’s coming back.

Punishment duty is almost done for what’s left of the Public Corruption Department. They’ve got two more days, and then, Sunday morning, September 24th, they get to go home.

Tim knows he’s going to gather them all together again, talk to them at least once more.

But he’s still not sure what he’s going to say.

Trust. He’ll trust them, because he has to. Because this can’t work if he doesn’t, but… But unlike his ass kicking speech this one isn’t coming together as easily. He rolls his eyes at his typewriter. For some reason it’s not writing the speech for him.

He shrugs and goes back to system architecture. He’s got the answers for that.

“An easier week, Timothy?” Ducky’s asking as they do their weekly family supper.

“Yeah, Duck. Back to my roots. Programming. Then meetings with other programmers to talk about how to make this do what it’s supposed to.”

“Productive?” Penny asks him.

Tim nods. “Yeah. I think so. Like any really big project, it’ll take time, but… We’ll get it.”
“And your wayward agents?” Ducky inquires.

That gets a small groan out of Tim. “I’ve got to come up with something for them, by Sunday, but…” He stares around their home. “Right now, I’ve got nothing.”

The rest of the crew nod at that, knowing he’s having a hard time. He doesn’t have anything else to add to that, so the conversation whips along.

Tim keeps looking around, feeling like there’s something here, something useful, but he can’t touch it.

And he doesn’t, until about an hour later, when he’s carrying Sean and Anna to the bathroom. His eyes land on the Asshole Jar, which since the kids still can’t read, is still on the mantle, currently empty. (He has a feeling it will soon be retitled the Jerk Jar, because Molly’s got all of her letters down.)

He can hear Gibbs, real Gibbs, right now, a few steps behind him, talking to Molly about how Jackson and Mona don’t like baths, either, but they have to get them, too. And he can hear Gibbs in his head saying, “Rule 72: If it’s more than two years old, forgive it! Unless you are willing to rip our family apart, let it go.” Tim’s thinking he might be mashing 72 and 73 together with that, but… It’s close enough.

And the piece, the stupidly easy piece, the bit that he can’t believe he didn’t see before slips into place.

It’s not enough to trust them, he’s got to forgive them, even if only in his own head, first.

Another thought hits him, just as fast, and just as hard. He needs to forgive himself, and all the times he didn’t live up to the standards he’s setting for his men.

Wipe the slate clean, start new. All of them.

By the time tubby is done, he knows what he’s going to say to them on Sunday.

Tim’s just as careful about setting the scene for this as he was the first time.

He’s in his usual work clothing. What Tony calls his ‘dress for less’ loafers. They may not be fashionable, but they’re comfy, and they have good enough traction he can run easily in them. Black jeans, nice ones. No fraying or faded patches. Simple black leather belt, and though his FBI badge is mostly ceremonial, he’s wearing it, just like he did his NCIS badge. He’s got a feeling that’ll be true for the rest of his career here. He wants that mark of office, of what he’s doing and why he’s doing it, on his body. The shirt is new. Breena got it for him. It’s pink with a black check pattern. He’s not wearing a tie. He’s got a medium-gray sports jacket on top of that.

He’s clean shaven. His hair is its usual tamed down for work style. He folds his glasses, hooking them into the neck of his shirt. If they were to see him while he’s working in his office, he’d likely do that. Look away from the computer, take them off, and tuck them into the top button.

*The Director* talked to them before, now it’s time to be Boss or McGee.
He doesn’t have a podium this time. No microphone. No tricks, period. It’s just him, his voice, and them. They’re all on the floor, sort of milling around. He scoots back a bit, leaning against where the Constitution should be. He’s got to speak up, but he doesn’t have to yell. The acoustics in here are good.

“Hi.”

He can feel waves of extreme annoyance coming at him, and he accepts that.

“I know. You don’t want to be here a second longer than you need to. I’ll keep it short. We’re done. Punishment duty is over. Today, you pack up, go home, crash, rest, complain about me, whatever. Your time is your own, until Wednesday, when you start anew.

“As Probies.

“And you’re starting as Probies because Wednesday marks a blank slate. Everything that came before, it’s over. Forgotten. Forgiven. Done. Your records are gone. September 27, 2017 is now your first day at the FBI. We’re all starting from scratch.

“So, let’s start. ‘Hi, I’m Tim McGee. I’m the new Director of the Public Corruption Unit. You can call me Boss or McGee, and I’m looking forward to working with all of you. We are here with one job, and that’s to make sure that the guys who write the laws, and enforce the laws, live by them.

“Which means we’ve got to live by those laws, too. Every day from here on out, we’re the White Knights. We’re the ones who make sure that all those grand ideals like justice mean something. If that’s something you don’t want to do, no harm, no foul. Trust me, I understand playing fast and loose, and why you might want to. Hell, if you’re just sick of me, that’s fine, too. I’ll approve any transfer you ask for.

“Mr. Comey talked about the bad apples. If you want your very own pair of pruning shears and shovel, if you want to be the people who clean out the rot, if you want to be the people who make sure that the government works for the people, that it protects them, that it treats people fairly, then I have a job for you.

“Okay. That’s it. I’m done. Go home, rest, think. Wednesday morning, we start over.”

And for the first time in weeks, Tim’s feeling like himself.
Gibbs opens his door, ushering the dogs in. Then he steps through, closes it, and locks it.

For a second, that feels really odd.

Decades went by without him locking his door, but there are things in this house, home now, that he values and wants to keep safe.

Though, as he steps into a living room filled only with a very small dog and a fairly big one, the primary person he wants to be in this house isn’t here now. He sighs, heading through the living room to his kitchen, to pull out supper for him, Mona, and Jackson. It’s Monday. Abbi won’t be home until Friday.

They Skype (Speaking of things that are new: he not only knows what Skype is now, and knows how to use it, he also owns the equipment necessary to use it.) every night, but it’s not the same. Better than nothing. He vastly prefers going to bed and having at least a small glowing rectangle that allows him to hear her voice and see her face to just him and his bed, but…

It’s still lonely.

That little rectangle turns off eventually, and he’s still waking up on his own.

Or, like right now, he’s looking at one pork chop, one potato, and one beer. It’s dinner. It’ll do the job. And it’s a hell of a lot more fun to make two of them. Even more fun to watch her eat whatever it was he made. Better yet to sit down, share the meal, and some nights they talk, some nights they’re mostly quiet, but just having her there makes everything a thousand times better.

He half smirks and grabs for a bag of frozen green beans. He’ll even, on occasion, eat vegetables when he’s on his own, because she likes them, and it feels like cooking for both of them when he makes them.

Mona ambles over, nudging his hip with her muzzle.

Gibbs tosses her a green bean. She snaps it out of the air, and in a second Jackson appears, also looking for his green bean. Gibbs tosses him one and gets to seasoning up his dinner, listening to two dogs munching on frozen green beans.

This time of year, it’s too hot for a fire in the house, so Gibbs builds the fire in his grill, and waits for it to heat up. He settles himself in one of the wooden chairs on his back porch, beer in hand, tennis ball and ping pong ball in the other, tossing them around, letting Mona and Jackson zip around his yard chasing them.

It’s a perfect evening. Just starting to cool off. Clear sky pinking up with sunset. It rained yesterday, so the air isn’t too humid. It’d just be a hell of a lot more fun if he had someone in the chair next to him.
It’s not like he’d have much to say. Not today.

He, Fornell, and the doggies went to the Smithsonian. They’d both lived in DC for more than twenty years and somehow never managed to get to the Smithsonian.

Just two old guys, and two dogs strolling around. Talking, quietly, mostly about the exhibits, and a bit about a wedding that’s getting closer and closer, and a little, in not-quite-coded half-sentences about how if any of their future plans are going to work out, Fornell needs to learn to sail.

That’s on tap for next week. Get Fornell up to Semper, head out onto the bay, and start teaching an old dog some new tricks.

But that’s next week. The rest of this week, Fornell and Wendy are heading south, going to visit a few Virginia wineries, one of which just happens to be in Charlottesville, VA, coincidentally, less than twenty minutes away from where Emily Fornell is getting settled into her freshman year at UVA.

Apparently, Fornell may be going into something that could be called my-baby-went-off-to-college-and-I-haven’t-seen-her-in-nineteen-days,-HELP! mode. It’s likely both Wendy and Emily are humoring him, allowing him to head out on a mini-vacation, that just so happens to put him a hundred miles closer to his daughter than normal, and then take his daughter and wife out for dinner. He’s promised Wendy he won’t linger. Or try to monopolize Emily’s time. Or cry. Too much. Gibbs told him to hug Emily for him, and if he finds a really nice bottle of something kind of bubbly, to bring two cases of it back, because they don’t have anything champagne-like for the wedding.

Still, sitting here, next to his own empty chair, Gibbs is feeling a lot of sympathy for Fornell.

Mona bounds up, laying her head on Gibbs’ knee, happily accepting ear scratches, and playing a little bit of a half-hearted tug-of-war with him over who gets the tennis ball.

Eventually she lets go, and he tosses it, and Jackson tries the same gambit, which doesn’t work nearly as well because he can’t reach Gibbs’ knee without a stepstool.

Eventually, the grill heats up, and the potato and pork chop get cooked, and eventually Gibbs eats them, cutting a small piece of each for Jackson and a bigger piece for Mona. They both know they’re allowed to have one bite of whatever it is he’s eating, as long as it’s okay for dogs to eat it.

They are significantly less clear on what constitutes ‘okay for dogs to eat.’ But they know not to whine if he shakes his head and says, “Not for dogs.”

He sighs a bit as he’s in the kitchen, cleaning off one plate. He’s got a dishwasher, but there’s not too much point to it for one plate, one fork, one knife, and one cup.

After dinner, he settles in (on Abbi’s sofa) and turns on the all westerns channel. There’s a movie on. It’s black and white (Which bodes well, he likes the old ones better than the new ones.), but he doesn’t immediately recognize it.

After five minutes of what he’ll charitably call the worst movie ever made, he knows why he doesn’t recognize it. He’s seen every western worth watching, probably about twenty times. This is not one of them.

He’s about to call Tony, tell him to turn on the TV, just to have someone to bitch about this with.
(Since they’ve been running together, he’s noticed that he likes talking with Tony about movies and TV. Somehow, what was annoying when it was distracting him from the latest killer, is actually a lot of fun when it’s distracting him from another mile of jogging through hot and humid DC in summertime. This has resulted in him actually watching, especially since he’s got free time coming out of his ears right now, some of the movies Tony likes, or likes to complain about.) But he notices that it’s bedtime at the DiNozzo house, which means he’s helping to put Dave down, or he’s still at work, and either way, he doesn’t need to be blathering about how cosmically bad the acting in this thing is.

Gibbs glances at the clock. Only one more hour until Skype-time.

“Hey!” And with one syllable, Gibbs’ whole world lights back up again.

He’s in bed, ready for the end of the day, lying on his side, looking at his phone. And right now, also in bed, lying down, looking at her phone, is Abbi.

“Hi back,” he says. He doesn’t say anything else, not right then, but it’s clear by the softness in his eyes, and smile, that this is the best moment he’s had all day.

And it’s clear from the look on hers, that this is the best moment of hers, too.

“So…” he says, leading her on, looking forward to hearing what she’s been up to today. He can see by the extra pinkness in her skin and the wild frizz of her hair that she’s been out on the water today.

“Ryan, Concetti, and Murph.” She rolls her eyes, sighs, and exhales, long and loud. Then she starts to rub her forehead, and winces. What looks a little pink in his monitor might be a real sunburn. “On the upside, they aren’t on the take, doing anything illegal, or about to sell us out to a drug cartel.”

He knows that tone of voice. “Because together they’re not quiet smart enough to count to thirty one without taking off a shoe?”

“Exactly.” She groans again. “Okay. No. Not really. Ryan’s been out of FLETCh for two years, and Concetti and Murph are even greener. If I could pop each of them with an experienced agent, I’d have the making of three good investigators.”

“But you don’t have the experienced agents.” It’s a statement. He knows every branch of government is scrambling for people right now.

“I don’t. Every experienced agent I have is leading his own team or in management.” She sighs again. “I’m honestly starting to think of booting them back down the line. Which’ll cause screaming because just about none of them want to be running down perps again, let alone taking the hit to their income.”

Gibbs nods at that. “Looking hard at any of them?”

“Me. A few others.”

For a second, he does feel a little alarmed at the idea of her in the field again, fulltime, but he sees the look on her face. That, like his and Fornell’s go-out-and-rescue-the-girls plan, it’s more a fantasy than a reality. It’s a way of coping with a situation with no good answers.
“You going to ask them?”

“I’ll ask. And I’ll beg my superiors to see if I can keep them at their current ranks and pay. If they don’t actually have to take a career hit, they may go for it.”

“Good luck.”

“Yeah. I’m counting the days until the next FLETC class gets out.”

Gibbs smirks. He knows why. That’s the class that is filled with only experienced investigators moving from state and local PDs to the Federal level. In an effort to get more people to the Federal level who can at least correctly tell their ass from their elbows, most Federal Law Enforcement made offers to count years spent on a local or state PD toward determining seniority at the Federal Level.

“All you’ve got to do is woo them away from Tim.”

She growls at that, mumbling something about bigger budgets and fancier toys.

“We always had the same problem, too. So, besides green, how were they?”

He sees the tired in her eyes, and the long-suffering look. Rewind seventeen years, and that would have been him with DiNozzo and McGee. It’s not that her guys are necessarily bad, they’re just not experienced, and not experienced working together.

“We get a call out for an abandoned boat, so off we go…” Gibbs settles back against his pillow to listen to her story.

It’s later, a lot later, when they hang up.

He knows that the kids do more than just talk with Skype. And once upon a time, Gibbs was good with a hot letter or sexy photos. (The idea of taking some and sending them to her go skittering through his mind, but nine tenths of the fun of those photos was they took them together. He does put that onto his list of plans for this weekend, while killing the idea of doing it himself.) But, looking at his phone, the idea of ‘doing more’ seems… lonely.

Granted, he’s alone, in a room with two sleeping (snoring) dogs. Lonely’s pretty much the default setting right now.

He rolls over, putting his phone back on the charger, and flicks off the light.

“I know that look,” Tony says the next morning as he’s getting Dave into the stroller.

Gibbs grunts at him, while tying his sneakers.

“Yep, definitely one of those days.” He snaps the clasp on Dave’s stroller seatbelt, and makes sure his pacifier is within reach. (At four and a half months old, Dave is starting to reach for things with various levels of success. He normally gets his hand to somewhere near whatever it is is located, but if he can’t see it, there’s no shot at all of him figuring out where it is by feeling it against him.)

Tony rolls his shoulders, and stretches out his thighs and hips. He knows if he skips that step he’s
Going to be hurting later today, and then pretending he doesn’t hear the comments from Johnson and Spader about him being in the bad mood.

Once they’re two blocks into the run, with the dogs loping along, and Gibbs and Tony’s various creaky joints warmed up and moving properly, Tony says, “We can take the dogs, you know. Or Mona. Mrs. Elthel would let her stay with us for a few days.”

Gibbs shoots Tony the Huh? look.

“If you wanted to go to Florida for a few days, we could take Mona. You could probably take Jackson on the plane. Between him being the size of a gerbil and a hearing ear dog, they’d let him on. Or you could call up McDirector and see if he could swing something for you, get you on the next FBI plane to Miami, or I can see if Leon’ll stick you on a transport.”

Gibbs blinks, hard.

Somehow, it didn’t occur to him that he doesn’t have to sit on his ass here in DC waiting for Abbi to get back.

He’s retired.

Tony smiles at him. “Now you’re looking better.”

He hasn’t thought of it for years, but as he’s getting his shower, going from sweaty-old-guy post-workout into, vaguely Old-Spice-scented grandpa-guy, it wanders through his mind.

When he was engaged to Shannon, he had this fantasy. (Well, he had a lot of them, but this one was fairly tame.) When he was walking rounds, or in the mess, or anywhere he didn’t need to pay much attention but was still in public, this one would tend to wander into his mind.

He would drive up to Grove City, figure out where her car was parked, and then just wait for her.

He could see it so clearly. She’d be done with her day, carrying her books, maybe walking with a few girlfriends, not really paying attention to the car. The important bit was the image of her, hair blowing in the wind, light summer dress snapping against her hips and knees, as she chats with her buddies. Eventually, she’d say goodbye to her buddies, turn toward the car, and there he’d be, leaning against the door, huge grin on his face, waiting for her.

Unfortunately, he didn’t get the chance to do it. The only time he got enough leave to get up and back, she knew he was coming because they had things like actually getting married planned for those days.

But… now. He’s retired. He’s got time, oodles of time.

“I see he suggested it,” Ziva says that morning, after he’s done with his shower, and it’s just them and Dave. She’s pretty much got her routine with Dave down, and she doesn’t exactly need the help, but it makes both of them feel better.

Less at loose ends after they finished up with the FBI.
Neither of them are feeling a need to go back. There’s only so much paper shuffling Gibbs or Ziva can do, but they do have a lot more unfilled hours now that they aren’t helping Tim out. The FBI, for her especially, was boring, but there’s something to be said for boring, when it’s useful.

Gibbs nods at her.

“Are you going to do it?”

He doesn’t answer that directly. Instead he pulls out his phone and says, “Grocery list up to date?”

“Yes, all you have to do is synch it.”

Gibbs glares at the phone a bit, but successfully gets the app synched. The McPalmers have an app that lets all four of them put things on a group grocery list, and keep it updated, so when any of them happens to be in a store that has whatever they’re looking for, they can just grab it, delete it off the list, and move on. When the next one walks into a store, opening up the list, it reflects what they need.

This has resulted in fewer moments where there is no toilet paper at House Palmer and 3 bottles of honey at House McGee.

And, since Gibbs has been doing a lot of grocery runs for/with House DiNozzo, and since Tony was bitching about the morning where there was no coffee at all in their place even though it was on the list (Ziva’s list, Gibbs did the shopping), to Jimmy, who smugly whipped out his phone to show off their new goody, their branch of the family has it, too.

But, it only takes three seconds to synch, so he didn’t exactly buy himself a lot of stalling time.

Ziva’s patient. She’s waiting for him, a bit of a smile on her face. “I’m sure Leon would get you a place on a transport if you asked,” she says when he puts the phone back into his pocket.

Gibbs is fairly sure he would, too, except he can’t imagine making himself ask for an empty seat on a transport so he can visit his fiancée.

“Mona wouldn’t be a problem?”

Mona looks up at Gibbs, a question in her eyes. She knows her name, she knows the word problem, she knows the tone that goes with being scolded, and that normally goes with problem, but Gibbs isn’t using it, so…

Gibbs pats her. “Good girl. We’re just talking.”

“No! We’ll be fine with her.” Ziva says. “Go. Have fun. Come back with a tan.”

Gibbs smirks at that.

Heading home that night, with the dogs in the car, sitting next to them, Gibbs can’t help but fall into that fantasy again.

It’s different now.

First off, he’s got no idea what Abbi’s driving, because it’s a rental.
And he doesn’t actually know where she’s saying. It’s a Radison, but… There’s got to be more than one of them in Miami.

But he does know where she works. Sort of. It cannot possibly be that difficult to locate the CGIS headquarters in Miami, and he’s got the suspicion that if he were to call Abbi’s office, and talk to her secretary (because she has one now) that he could likely come away from that conversation with not just an address, but directions, and perhaps what room she’s using for her base of operations while she’s down there.

He’s seeing it. There’s the main doors to the office. They’re glass. Probably a little foggy, too much AC on the inside, humid air outside, that’d cause a little condensation. And in his fantasy, there’s a convenient bit of wall for him to lean against. She’s walking out, blurred by the glass for the first few steps, maybe still talking to whichever green investigators she’s got tonight, and then she’s outside, sending them off for the night, heading toward her car. He could slip up behind her, keeping pace, just far enough back as to not trigger her “I’m being stalked” sense, and he could say something like, “Can I buy you a drink?” (He’s not sure exactly what he’s going to say, yet.) And she’d whip around, see him, and light up like flipping the switch on a Christmas tree in a pitch black room.

He’s smiling by the time he gets home.

And by the time he’s got dinner in front of him, next to his computer, he’s growling.

There are certain things Gibbs just doesn’t do. Arrange air travel is one of those things. For a solid twenty years, if he needed to go somewhere, he just said “I’m going here” and someone (usually Tim) made it happen. The last time he bought his own plane tickets he was in an airport in Mexico, holding his passport in one hand, and a wad of cash on the other, trying to get a last minute spot on a red eye because Ziva was in his basement.

He hasn’t been on a commercial flight since they went to Montana, and for that one Abbi used CGIS to cover the travel.

So, sitting in his kitchen, staring at his computer, seeing that apparently the price the airline quotes is for you to travel, just yourself, naked, with no bags, and that they’ll practically charge you extra for the air you breathe on the damn plane is killing him.

He’s halfway between scooping up some stuff, grabbing the dogs and sailing down (he should get there just in time for Abbi to get on a plane to go back to DC for the weekend) and calling Leon and Tim, looking to see who’s got the first flight to Miami from anywhere between Baltimore and Richmond with an empty seat on it.

When he realizes he can’t find anything about Jackson, and how to bring a service dog on the plane, he gives up and calls Tim.

“You got an empty seat on anything going to Miami anytime this week?”

He can feel Tim blink, because that’s a bit more out of the blue than he usually is.

“Tony said you’ve got that jet. Could I get a seat on it?”

That gets Tim up to speed. He knows who is in Miami, so he doesn’t need a picture drawn for him for why Gibbs wants to go.
“I can find out. Well, Jennifer can. I probably can’t just send you to Miami all on your own…”

“I know. But if it’s going there anyway.”

“I don’t see why not. Any particular day or time?”

“She’s flying back Friday afternoon. I’ll hitch a ride with her. I just need to get down there before Thursday night.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks. And if you can’t… how did you get us flights when you were at NCIS?”

He hears Tim snort a quick laugh at that. “Trust me, Gibbs, it isn’t going to work. I had to program it myself and hack half a dozen databases to find out what transports were going where, when. They don’t like to have a huge, easy-to-find list of where everyone and thing is going to be and how it’s going to get there.”

Gibbs sighs. That makes a lot of sense to him.

“Karen, Leon’s secretary, she’s got a copy of my program for that. If you want to ask her, she can probably hook you up. If you don’t mind going on a Herc or something like that.”

Gibbs doesn’t. He looks at the two dogs at his feet. Mona’s doing her usual post dinner chilling out. Jackson is prancing around trying to get her to play with him.

He tries to imagine taking Jackson on a Herc, or any other sort of military transport. It’s not a pretty image.

“Probably need a plane designed for people.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

The correct answer is: Thursday morning, Dulles International, 8:00 AM. It’s not the jet. It is a chartered flight for ten DC Agents heading to the Miami branch for a seminar and training session on international kidnappings.

The plane’s a puddle jumper, and it holds 12 people. Leroy Jethro Gibbs, and Jackson Gibbs, have seats 11 and 12.

An hour into the flight Gibbs knows several things:

Jackson, who is normally of a very sweet temperament hates to fly. Gibbs wonders if it’s possible for dogs to get motion sickness, because he’s not throwing up, but he’s lying on Gibbs’ lap, utterly miserable, whining piteously at him, as Gibbs gently rubs his belly, hoping he’ll feel better.

Of the ten agents on this plane, seven are going to Miami to party. Three may be going to learn something about kidnappings, or just don’t drink. Whatever the reason, the plane offers complimentary adult beverages, and most of the agents (and Gibbs for that matter) are partaking of them.

Gibbs closes his eyes, gently petting Jackson, and does his usual pretending to sleep on the plane routine. Sometimes, on military transports, he genuinely falls asleep, but this one, excited for where
he’s going, it’s not happening.

The plane is loud, but he listens to conversations around him. He’s thinking that if Tim’s gonna get him on the flight, he should at least keep an ear open for him. There aren’t any mentions of Director McGee. There are several of how the seminar will be over by 2:00 and then it’s beach time. Apparently there’s something called Joe’s Crab Shack, which a bunch of them will be hitting tonight, so Gibbs makes a mental note to avoid that.

---

Jackson’s ears perk up as soon as his feet hit pavement. They’re back on the ground, that infernal buzzing, vibrating, horror machine is gone, and he’s in a new place filled with new sounds, new smells, and new sights.

Jackson’s getting pretty good at acting like a service dog. (Though it did take the Gibbs Stare to get the TSA guy to believe Jackson was a hearing ear dog when they went through security.) But sometimes, he’s still a puppy, an excited puppy, in a new place with lots of new things, so, even with his little Hearing Ear Dog jacket, he’s still sort of dancing around, trying to see everything.

Gibbs eventually picks him up, because three times now he’s just about been run over by other travelers not paying nearly as much attention to their luggage as Jackson is.

Picked up, Jackson can see even more of Miami International, and his little tail is whipping back and forth so fast it’s barely visible.

Gibbs is carrying Jackson on his forearm, like a small furry football, and weaving through the crowd. Somehow, somewhere, there’s a place to pick up an Uber, he’s just got to find it, and then…

Abbi’s secretary knows that Gibbs’ll be hanging around outside of the CGIS building. Which means that if someone calls security about the old guy and the dog just hanging around, they know he’s not a threat.

Abbi doesn’t know that he’s waiting for her, sniper patient.

His target is almost in sight, and he can’t wait to see her.

It could be said, as he strolls out of Miami International, that Gibbs has something of a spring in his step. (Jackson could certainly be said to have a perky little wag of his tail.)

---

It is absolutely true that Gibbs can do a fabulous job pretending not to be bothered by the weather. 100 degrees out, 80% humidity, no AC, he’ll drink coffee and look cool doing it. Everyone else is, literally, freezing to death around him, he keeps standing, and tries to take his jacket off.

But it’s not that he’s not bothered by weather, it’s that he’s exceptionally good at focusing on the bigger thing, and using that to pull his mind away from whatever else is going on.

Miami in September is hot. And muggy. And if he’s reading those clouds right, his plan of waiting quietly for Abbi’s going to get very wet, very soon.

And, while he can do a good job of looking like he’s totally cool and unperturbed by the weather, even Gibbs looks like a drowned rat when he stands out in a soaking rain for hours. And Jackson,
especially soaking wet Jackson, is not going to help him look any less drowned-rattish.

Nope, put the two of them in a soaking rain, and instead of Abbi lighting up with joy at seeing them, she’s going to take one look, begin to laugh, and then tell them to get inside. And, instead of a hot, romantic evening, she’s going to be hunting for towels to dry them off, and making some, ‘poor baby,’ noises at Jackson.

So, like any plan that’s finally brushing up against reality, Gibbs starts to reshape things, fast, as huge drops of rain begin to patter out of the sky.

Coffee. Miami knows how to make coffee. Good God! The only part they don’t have down is these stupid thimble-sized cups. Who drinks coffee one ounce at a time? Miamians, apparently.

Gibbs has six tiny, empty, cups of Cubano coffee in front of him, he’s feeling a really splendid buzz. The people near him are speaking Spanish, and he’s planning.

His first plan, calling up Abbi’s secretary, finding out where she’s staying, and then heading over, picking the lock, and letting himself in burned before he finished the first of his thimbles of coffee. He can’t pick an electronic lock, and he doesn’t have a badge to get the hotel manager to let him in.

But, that plan gives birth to plan B.

And he likes plan B.

He sends Holly, Abbi’s secretary a text. In Miami, want to surprise her. Where's her hotel?

He’s pretty gratified to see she calls him back. “Gibbs?”

“It’s really me.”

“Come on, you know better than to text for something like that.”

“I normally do. They put something in the coffee here.”

“Yeah, I bet. What do you want to do?”

“Okay, I know I can’t get into the room, and I know she’ll go back there sooner or later. So, head over, settle in, wait. I’ll grab some flowers or something, write a note, and have the desk clerk put it in her room. She gets in, finds the note. Normally, if I do something like that she calls… Anyway. When we’re talking, I’ll knock on the door…”

He can feel the smile beaming at him from DC. “Softie.”

“Today. So, where is she staying?”

Holly chuckles. “She’s at the Ocean Breeze Radison. Look, you want me to call and see if I can get you into the room?”

“If you can, I’d love it. If not, don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll call, see if they’re willing to go along with it.”

“Okay. I’ll get some flowers, and head over.”
They’re orchids. He doesn’t know what type, other than they’re pretty. Dark purple and bright pink. He doesn’t go for an outlandish note, just a simple, “I miss you. –J”

Depending on how closely she’s paying attention, that’ll be the first hint something is up. The note is in his handwriting.

He hands them over to the lady at the hotel desk, and she’s very polite, but she makes it clear that there’s no shot in hell of him getting a key to Abbi’s room, or even, for that matter, what the number is. (Which, unfortunately, Holly didn’t know.) She won’t put the flowers in Abbi’s room, either.

She will, happily, hand them to her, when she gets in.

Gibbs appreciates the security, even as he’s gritting his teeth at the tattered remains of Plan B.

There is a bar. It’s a really nice bar. They have drinks that cost more than entire meals, good meals, out on the town, fancy date night meals, that he bought Shannon back in the day.

He’s drinking coffee. Real cups of it. And, this is the first time he’s ever done this at a bar, but he’s ordered decaf. Apparently, there is a point where even he’s had too much caffeine, and it the correct answer is eight Cubanos (a normal sized coffee cup) in an hour.

By that point even his teeth were buzzing, and he decided it was a good plan to cut himself off if he ever wanted to sleep again.

So, in a bar, with a decaf coffee, overlooking the entrance to Abbi’s hotel, he does have time to work on Plan C.

Plan C…

He’s staring at his cup of coffee as Jackson sits at his feet watching everything around them avidly. He seems especially interested in the people in the lobby going back and forth.

When Gibbs has been working away from home, he gets done with work, goes to find dinner, eats it, and then returns to his hotel room. Or, he works, gets hungry, keeps working, orders food, eats it, keeps working, and then goes to his hotel.

And there’s no reason for him to think Abbi does anything differently.

There’s no reason for him to expect her to come back here before having dinner. Going home before eating dinner is something you do when there’s someone home to share that dinner with.

And there’s no reason for her to be thinking that someone would be waiting for her.

Gibbs sips his coffee. He’s got time. He’s got an internet connection. And he’s got a plan.
Working hard? Pops up on Abbi’s phone just about the time the two of them would normally be sitting down for dinner.

She rolls her shoulders. She’s not, really, working hard. She still with Ryan, Concetti, and Murph, and they’re slowly working their way through a list of leads.

Again, they aren’t bad, they’re just slow.

Not sure if this counts as working. We’re chipping our way through the leads.

A moment later: When was lunch?

Abbi smirks at that. You want to call two cups of coffee, three power bars, and half a banana lunch?

No. 1784 W. Palm. There’s a table waiting for you. Go eat. Now.

She sees that and smiles. Then she looks at her guys. She’s sure they won’t mind an hour or two without The Boss hovering. Abbi stands up, gets her jacket, and says, “I’m going to get dinner. Keep at it.” She glances at the clock. If she’s going to eat, and then get back to the hotel, grab a shower, then call Jethro… “Finish with the guys you’re on now, and then quitting time. See you in the morning.”

Her three ducklings look pleased by that.

And Abbi feels pleased to be getting out of their hair for a few hours.

On my way.

A moment later she gets back. Good. Enjoy it. Talk later.

Wouldn’t miss it.

I love you.

Me, too.

Her navigator software says that 1784 W. Palm is only twenty-five minutes from her. It also tells her that it’s a little seafood place on the beach. After this afternoon’s thunderstorm, a bit of seafood on the clear, and now much less humid, beach sounds awfully good.

Maybe a cold beer, some oysters or clams… Conch. She’s in Miami. Get conch. Conch, beer…

She sighs. Fuck it, cold margarita. Fresh lime, salt, salt air, breeze, something sweet and briny on her plate…

Yeah, she can see that.

She smiles at the version of Gibbs in her heads.
It’s not small; small conjures up images of a restaurant with ten or so tables. This is a shack. There are three tables, a short bar, and maybe a table in the back. The behind the bar kitchen area, all of which she can see is a door with a window, looks like it’s probably larger than the rest of the place.

There are two old guys at the bar, and a bartender slowly wiping out a glass.

As Abbi looks around, she’s wondering how Gibbs knows about this place, and what’s about to happen next. As she’s looking, she notices that the front table, the one closest to the open window looking over the ocean has the most beautiful orchid sitting on it.

The bartender sees her notice it, and smiles. “They’re for you, miss.”

His voice is thick and rich, a strong hint of Creole, so he, or his parents, are likely from Haiti.

There’s no note on the flowers, but she smiles to see them, gently touching the petals, slipping off her jacket, and rolling her shoulders. She can see the beach and sea from here, and her eyes are far away, catching the light glinting off the waves.

Abbi looks around. She doesn’t see a menu, and she’s wondering if this is the kind of place where you bring the fish and they cook it for you. She supposes she could ask a lot of questions, and get up and find out what’s going on, but right now…

She’s going to sit back, and watch the waves.

She knows that Gibbs has something going. She can feel his fingerprints all over this. She just doesn’t know what it is, yet.

---

Gibbs has been watching. He can see her from his perch behind and to the left of where she’s sitting, she can’t see him. For a moment, he enjoys looking. She’s in full-on work mode, pants suit, crisp button down, ‘professional’ makeup, but he can see her start to relax, let the day ease away.

She’s settled in, looking comfy. The breeze is starting to toy with her hair, lifting tendrils of it off of her shoulders. He smiles, grabs the mojitos, and heads over.

---

Abbi feels it a second before she sees him. She doesn’t hear him. No one hears Gibbs when he doesn’t want to be heard. There’s just a Gibbs feel, and whenever he gets too close, she knows he’s near. The smile is already spreading across her face as she turns towards the hand and forearm placing a drink in front of her.

Gibbs is grinning back down at her, as he leans in for a sweet hello kiss.

A moment later, when he pulls back, and sits down next to her, on the same side of the table, he simply says, “I missed you.”

She’s smiling, eyes lit up, face beaming at him, slightly shaking her head. “I didn’t…” Then a tiny yip, and the feel of two little feet against her shin answers one of her questions. At least half of the family is here.

She bends down, picks up Jackson, and lets him sit in her lap as she kisses Gibbs again.
“Is Mona going to appear out of nowhere?”

“Nah, she’s with Ziver.” Gibbs sits next to her, arm around her shoulders, just touching her to touch her, feeling really splendid all over.

Leon, the owner of the place, shows up a few seconds later, with a large plate of crispy fried conch, long, slow simmered greens, and hush puppies.

“I didn’t expect this.” She’s still grinning as Gibbs picks up a bite of conch, and feeds it to her.

“I didn’t, either, but you know what?”

“What?”

“I’m retired.” He’s still grinning, too, also munching down a very tasty bite of conch. “And you know what that means?” He’s feeling kind of silly, and, for him, very talky. It’s possible he’s still got too much coffee in his system, or maybe he’s just really happy right now.

She’s looking a little less giddy as she says, “What?”

“I’m not tied to DC. I don’t have to stay there. There are no cases I have to solve. There are no bodies I need to find names or killers for. Home’s where you are, and yeah, I’ve got the dogs, and the kids, and all the rest of it, so I can’t be gone all the time, but I don’t have to stay there every single day. There’s no reason why I can’t join you for some of this,” he smirks a bit, “as long as you don’t mind sharing dinner and a bed with me at the end of the day.”

She laughs. “You’re retired.”

“I’m retired, and I just, finally, figured out what the hell that’s good for.”

She’s still laughing. “Took you long enough.”

“I know! So, instead of talking to a tiny little picture of me. How about we share some food, and you fill me in on how today went?”

Abbi takes a bite of the greens, makes a soft purring sound, knowing the only reason they’re in front of them is for her, and then says, “Okay, so, last we left off…” and proceeds to get him up to date on the latest adventures of Director Borin Breaking In Her Teams.

It’s many hours later, and Jethro is still awake.

He’s not shocked by this.

(He’s also beginning to appreciate thimble-sized cups of coffee. That damn stuff needs a warning label or something. He’s sincerely looking forward to getting Tony and Fornell a bunch of them. Without the warning label.)

Abbi’s asleep. Jackson is asleep. She’s curled onto her side in front of him, and he’s spooned up close. Jackson’s taking advantage of one of the sofa cushions.

It’s finally, really hitting him that he can do whatever he wants. Not every day. Not all the time. But… He has some money. He’s got buddies with connections. He’s got a truck and a boat. And if his fiancée has to work all over the place this next year, then he can go with her.
She’s got a few more weeks here. Then New Orleans. *New Orleans.* Pride’s been telling him for years to get his ass over to New Orleans and he always had the job or something else, and… Abby’s brother runs that place. He knows Abby loves it, but Luca could run a roach motel and Abby would love it. Tim says it’s really nice, too, and he’s a lot less likely to love something just because Luca Scuito runs it.

Abbi could do the first few days, and if he were to get in on Wednesday or something, they could stay there Wednesday and Thursday night. He could go find fun stuff, check things out, have something to tell her about when she’s done with her stories, and hunt down amazing food for dinner and…

**He’s retired.**

He’s in a hotel room, holding his love, eyes wide open. He kisses the back of her neck, mind buzzing with ideas.

He didn’t have a great honeymoon idea, namely because sail off into the sunset is a terrible idea when the nearest body of water is the Potomac and it’s January 1st. But maybe he doesn’t need one. Maybe they just have time at home, relaxing after the wedding. Maybe, he makes sure they get a whole bunch of little, fun treats. At least one a week. He knows she’s got the job, and he knows she won’t have hours for sightseeing or the rest of it, but he can damn well make sure that she gets one really excellent meal a week and a night in a really good hotel with some great company.

He can damn well do that!

If CGIS is going to drag her all over the country, he can make sure that she’s got at least one really good memory from each of those trips.

One other thought comes to mind. Shannon loved pictures. And she took them because she enjoyed it, but also because she wanted them to have memories. She thought it was important for them to have actual, physical *things* to remember each other and what they did.

Gibbs is sure of one other thing, he’s damn well going to learn how to use the camera on his phone. Because they’re going to have pictures. He doesn’t care if he’s the only guy left on earth who still prints photos out. His home is going to have pictures, of both of them, doing fun stuff, together.

Even if it is only one or two days a week.

---

Chapter End Notes

Hi All,

Okay, so March kicked my ass. It just did. I am hopeful that things are getting better, but… Yeah. I wrote just about every day. I got more than 80 pages of stuff done. And… Yep… Exposition and plot dump of doom.

So, I’m going to try to end it sweet and fluffy. And here’s hoping for a better April.
“You know how it goes, Breena.”

Breena glares at Dr. Jun, who is supposed to be telling her that Donnie is on the way.

“I know. The only thing you want to hear is me saying, ‘It’s a boy,’ to the background of a crying baby. He’s on his way. You’re three centimeters dilated. He’s at positive one station. He’ll get moving soon.”

Breena glares again.

“I know. You’re done. Your due date is October 5\textsuperscript{th} and the induction date is October 20\textsuperscript{nd}. We won’t be going past then. The longest this is possibly going to go is another twenty-four days.”

Breena really glares at that. Then she winces. That was a contraction, and it lasts a decently long time. Jun smiles at her. “That could be the start of things. Get dressed, go home, give me a call when they’re four minutes apart.”

“News?” Jeannie asks when Breena gets back to work. (Glaring at her belly, which has not deigned to contract since applying clothing and leaving the doctor’s office.)

Breena shakes her head. “He’s fine. Looks determined to hang around like Molly did, but fine.”

“Blood pressure?”

“Fine, Mom.” It had been a trifle high at her last checkup. “I was running late and tried to hurry to get to the appointment.” She’d attempted to jog. It wasn’t pretty, and her blood pressure was high when they checked it and borderline when they checked again at the end of the appointment.

“Okay. I was thinking, instead of sleeping on your sofa, how about I bring an air mattress?”

Breena’s mouth opens, and she looks shocked.

“Oh, honey, come on, you know that sofa’s fine for sitting but not sleeping. After Anna, my back was aching for a week.”

Fortunately, that buys Breena a good two seconds to think, because her brain’s whizzing around with the fact that when Molly and Anna were born, her mom came home with them, stayed with them, and made sure Jimmy and Breena both got at least one four hour stretch a night of uninterrupted sleep.

And, obviously, she doesn’t see any reason why she wouldn’t do that again.

But Breena does.

“Uh… Okay… Um… Shit.”
“Breena?” Jeannie’s looking really concerned. Breena rarely curses, especially around her mom.

“Look. Uh…” She swallows. Part of this is playing a role. If she’s going to sell the big lie, all the little truths have to look solid. Part of it is thinking fast, trying not to look too rattled. “Okay. Mom… We don’t talk about it because a lot of people,” and the way she says a lot of people it’s clear she means Dad, “think it’s weird, but… Tim and Abby’ll be there when we bring Donnie home.”

“That’s weird?” Jeannie isn’t stupid, so she knows she doesn’t have anything approaching the whole story here. Tim and Abby staying over may be odd, but it’s not weird.

“No. Or, at least, not the part I’m thinking. It’s… Okay… You know how we share a space at the house?”

Jeannie nods.

“We built our wing of the house together because we knew we got on, and it just seemed easier, you know?”

“Four hands make light work.” Jeannie looks wary as she says that. Speaking of weird, yes, the first time they visited, Ed noticed that the McGees and the Palmers were sharing a wing, and a bathroom, and the kids were all in the same room, and yes, he did think that was weird.

“Exactly. And… Mom, it’s so much easier. All of it. Dinner, keeping eyes on the kids, all of. And… we all get to Friday with a spring in the step and a perky mood…”

“I noticed that.” And so did Ed, which is part of why weird didn’t ever turn into anything other than some backhanded, and quiet comments about Jimmy not making enough money for them to deck out their section of the house for themselves and having to share with the McGees. Jeannie had shushed him, because they haven’t asked, won’t ask, and don’t know how the financing for the house went. But, if they decided they wanted it fancy, and had to double up with Tim and Abby to get the sort of fancy they wanted, Jeannie was fine with that, after all, they may share a bathroom, but not a bedroom, so…

Yeah, kind of weird, but when Ed would speculate, she’d hush him with a look and the occasional sharp poke.

“Yeah, because those nights are easy. We break up all the jobs and share them around, and mornings work the same way. And… at first, we’d spend Friday and Saturday nights at the House, and really liked it. It’s so much easier, and the girls liked it, and then Sean comes, and… And even with the extra hour and a half of driving to get to work, we’re staying Sundays, too, because it’s still easier, and… And the extra drive is stupid, so… We’ve been living with them, our house or theirs, for almost a year now. It makes for cramped quarters, but happier adults. One of us is on baby duty each night, which means we each get to sleep three out of four nights. When Tim or Abby’s on baby duty, Jimmy and I can be on our own—“

“That’s what your dad walked in on?” Jeannie asks. Breena can’t tell what she’s thinking, but it doesn’t feel great. Not horrible, either, but… she’s being careful as she speaks.

“Basically. It was Tim’s night for the kids, so we made a night of it for us. And that’s why Tim was there when he pulled the gun on Dad. We move around from place to place, so if he’s looking for a place to crash during the day, get some solid sleep without little guys poking him, he might end up at our place.”

Jeannie’s watching her daughter, nodding slowly. “Uh huh… Weird.”
“Or gross. Some people think it’s gross. But for me… I mean, we did this with Sean, too. I’ll nurse during the day, and some of the night feeds, but once it’s bedtime, someone else will bring Donnie to me, someone else will get all the other kid stuff. Someone else will get at least one, maybe two of his bottle feeds a night, so I can sleep and heal. When Donnie’s on all bottle feeds at night, we’ll rotate with baby duty…”

“And it’s easier. Yes, I get that. There have certainly been times when I would have liked another woman in the house.”

Breena nods. Her mom is being honest with that. House, business, three little girls, yeah, there were times she would have killed for an extra set of hands.

But there’s a reason why they didn’t have those extra hands. Jeannie and Ed have a very set idea of what a family looks like, and it doesn’t involve living with your husband, and his best friend, and wife, and kids.

Jeannie sits there, staring at her daughter. She takes a few deep, calming breaths. “Easier.” Her voice is very dry. “Are you and your sisters trying to give your father a stroke? Would it have really have been that hard to live without them for a week, let me come over, help with Donnie, be happily blind, and then go back to whatever this is?”

Breena stares her mom right in the eye. “Yes. It’s… easier, and happy, and all that’s true, but this is true, too, it’s not home if they aren’t there.”

Jeannie rubs her head, wondering idly. “Almost a year?”

Breena nods.

“Wonderful.” Her voice is sharp. Then her eyes go wide. “Tell me that is Jimmy’s son.”

“Just like his brother and sisters, he’s a Palmer. He… just… will probably look a lot like his cousin Sean.”

Jeannie moans.

And Breena knows this is the part she’s been building up to. If she’s going to have any functional relationship with her parents from here on out, this is the lie she needs to nail. “NO! You can think the rest of this is gross or weird or whatever, but you do not get to groan about our boy. NO. They held Molly with us when we had her baptized. They held us when we lost Jon. They were there when we got the testing for Anna. And when we told them they were trying again, and because we were living together then, they saw the stress and the fear as we got ready for the first pregnancy test, and… No. You do not get to moan about our loves offering us clean DNA.”

“Offering clean DNA? Is that what you’re going to call it?” Jeannie’s voice is shattered glass sharp, and she looks so horribly disappointed in this whole thing.

And Breena sells the big lie. “What the hell else would I call it?”

Jeannie blinks. “Wait…”

“Wait what? Why would I wait? We love these people dearly and they saw us hurting, knew there was a way to cut the fear and pain down, and stepped up. Why the hell would I wait about that?”

“Just… How’d you get that DNA?”
Breena pulls her epic, annoyed, insulted teenager eye roll out and says, “My husband’s a doctor, Mom. He and Abby have absolutely no problem obtaining a sterile specimen jar and a plastic nozzle syringe. What the hell were you thinking?”

Jeannie eyes Breena again, and Breena eyes back just as hard.

“Oh.”

“Yeah. And just to make sure all bases are clear, Jimmy has been there for every second of this child’s existence. And Abby’s known the whole time. She’s the one who brought it up at first. We’re living together, so she knew we were charting, and getting ready for the next try, and she saw the fear… Anyway, she’s the one who suggested that maybe a different mix would make things better. She’s also the one who knew that morning sickness is usually determined by the father’s DNA. You’ll note, I was a hell of a lot less sick this time around. And we went into the Nuchal Fold test calm.

“I don’t care if you think that’s icky, for Jimmy and I the extra calm, the lack of fear, the five fewer weeks of puking, that was worth it.”

“Oh.” Jeannie still looks wary. “So… you’re just… living together?”

“Living together, raising the kids together, maybe, one day, depending on if we can sell our own places, we’ll upgrade to a bigger house, but… Yeah. I mean… It’s like those summer vacations with Uncle Wes’ family. There’s always another set of adult to share the jobs with. The kids have lots of little guys to play with. The house is loud, but it’s fun.”

“And you kept this a secret?” If you’re just sharing a space, why would you keep it quiet? is clear on Jeannie’s face.

“Yeah, because I’m not actually trying to give Dad a stroke! And, he’d take it wrong. And he already thinks Jimmy and Tim are weird and this would just… The only reason I’m nervous about Donnie is that Dad’ll be a jackass if he looks too much like Sean. And compared to worrying about another trisomy baby, I’ll take that, but…”

“Okay, yeah.” Jeannie sighs. She rubs her forehead. She and Ed have had a lot of discussions about how if you want your children to tell you things, you can’t then come down on them like a ton of bricks when they do, with extremely varied levels of success. “Just… why not mention the… donation… before.”

Breena sighs. “Donnie is Jimmy’s, no matter who donated the sperm. We don’t want to be seeding any ideas that this is Tim’s kid. He’s not. He’s Jimmy’s.”

“Just with straight hair and green eyes?”

“Maybe. You’ve got curly hair in your baby pictures, so we’ll see. That’s another side part of having Abby in the family. She could look at the DNA, run the punnet squares, and she’s fairly sure Donnie will look a whole lot like me. There’s a fifty-fifty shot he’ll have blue eyes.”

“Deaf?”

“Very unlikely. It’s a recessive. Tim and Abby together have a one in four shot of it popping up. But something like one in ten thousand people has that recessive. We didn’t test me to see if I did because the chance of it is so slim. But, if they decide to try again, we’ll return the favor.”

“Turkey-baster babies.”
Breena strokes the tiny diamond that always lives against her chest. “Healthy babies.”

Jeannie nods. “Fine. What are you telling Ed?”

“If he asks, the same thing I told you, that we didn’t enjoy the fear of waiting for the nuchal fold test, so we tried with a new mix.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“I’m not saying anything. This is Jimmy’s son, and as little as I have to say about it, the better.”

“Okay.” She sits there quietly for a moment. “Don’t you just… get sick of always having other people around?”

Breena shakes her head. “Not so far. But we also don’t always have other people around. If we want time with just us, we get time with just us. Jimmy and I get more couple time now than we did before.”

“Because when it’s Tim or Abby’s night with the kids you can be completely off.”

“Yeah. We’re all better-rested. We’ve got more free time. Just, you know, stupid stuff. How many hours a week do you spend on errands? We can buy all the groceries in one trip, and in bulk. Instead of me picking up dry cleaning and Abby picking up dry cleaning, we get it all in one run. It’s just, a lot of little stupid things you barely think about until they’re not cluttering up your day. Or if they are, they’re only cluttering up one day a month instead of one day a week.

“And, you know I adore Jimmy, but… Sometimes it’s really nice to have another woman around.

“And I know he feels the same way about having Tim around. He doesn’t always feel like he’s swimming in an estrogen sea.”

Jeannie inclines her head, she’s certainly had more than a few days where someone who got it would have been more than welcome in her home. Then she smiles a little, softly, about how many times in the last few months she’s wanted to call her best friend, Nance, because she’s the one who got it, but she wasn’t there.

“I told my mom we were living together,” Breena says at supper, that night.

That gets three very curious and somewhat shocked looks.

“It went okay. I sort of hedged exactly how things work. More a space and child care sharing arrangement.”

“Why did you bring it up?” Jimmy asks, wondering if Ed’s going to pop up to haze him in the next ten minutes and/or do something stupid to him and Tim.

“She was getting ready to buy the air mattress so she could camp out in my office for the week after Donnie shows up.”

And Jimmy develops a look very similar to the one Breena had.
“Exactly. I had two seconds to decide to out us, sort of, or boot you two out, and have a week of just us. And…” she just looks at the other three of them. They all get it. None of them want to miss out on Donnie’s first week home. He’s their boy, and it’d be like walking on hot knives to miss that.

“So, what, exactly does your mom know?” Abby asks.

“We live together, we share running a house and raising the kids, when we want on our own time, we take it. I worked that in with that weekend where Dad caught you at our place. That was one of your nights with the kids, and we were off on our own.”

“So, as long as we keep behaving the way we usually do…” Abby lets that trail off.

“Everything should work the same as it usually does. I don’t know if she’s going to tell Dad we’re all living together, or if she’s just going to say that you guys are staying over with us, returning the favor from us saying with you when Sean was born. He likely won’t mind her deciding to sleep at home that week. Either way, that’s the official story.”

“But we’re living together, and not living together,” Tim says.

“Yeah. Think, two sisters get married and share a house between them and their husbands. Platonic co-parenting.”

“And she bought it?” Jimmy asks.

“Enough. I did a good enough job on the setup that by the time I got to the donating DNA—“

“Everything on the table all at once,” Tim adds.

“Might as well. I mean, she sees us, and knows that everything is calm here. She sees Gibbs and the rest of the extended family with us, and gets the same sense, so… There’s enough there that she can believe the story as I told it, and, I think she’s a lot happier that way. I almost went completely honest, but, I could see the way she was reacting, and I wasn’t doing anyone any kindness by telling that full story.”

A contraction hits and Breena stops for a moment, cheering this one on, willing it to get things moving, but it peters off and her water remains steadfastly unbroken. She pokes her tummy. “Get moving.”

Donnie doesn’t even bother to kick back. He wriggles a little, but nothing that feels like he’s planning on going anywhere.

“But, since it’s out… Three bedrooms here. Four at your place… Nine people in just our branch of the family, and that’s if we don’t have any more children. The really big houses in Arlington and the like are going for pennies on the dollar because all the big wigs are in jail or up in New York… If we could sell our current places, or rent them…”

“We could get a place bigger than our two houses, combined, with all the trimmings, for what we spent on our original house,” Tim says.

“If not a bit less,” Breena follows.

“Except we’ve got two houses that are also worth pennies on the dollar,” Jimmy says. He doesn’t like to think about how far underwater they are on their place. Yes, he can pay his mortgage, but the ultra-expensive overheated real estate market they bought into less than five years ago has collapsed, and it doesn’t look like it’s going to perk up again anytime this decade. What he’s saving in real
estate taxes, assuming his county ever bothers to reassess house values, isn’t going to make up for what they’re out.

Tim and Abby already own their place, so, at least they aren’t still making payments, but… Yeah, seeing your house go from a value of $550K to $107K in a three month space of time hurts.

“I’m tabling that for a later discussion,” Abby says. “Rule 74: Thou shalt not move house when a new baby is right around the corner.”

Everyone can agree to that rule.

(Though, later that night, as they’re getting four babies to sleep in two rooms, getting ready for number five, they’re all thinking about it, hard.)

Day 894572927 of the pregnancy, and Donnie is still, stubbornly, hanging on.

“Just move, baby, please.” Breena jerks a little as he kicks her in the hip. “That wasn’t what I meant!”

She’s at work, gently using her airbrush to add a bit of makeup to Mr. Hadler. Apparently, it didn’t occur to him that the little label on his grill that said DO NOT USE INSIDE wasn’t kidding. It looked like he decided to do a bit of indoor grilling during a thunderstorm, and the carbon monoxide killed him.

Breena’s making sure that he’s not bright pink in the casket.

She’s bone deep tired. Not sleepy. Not the kind of tired that resting would help. (If resting would help, there’s a large, enthusiastic group of people who would happily carry her to bed, dim down the lights, and sing her soothing lullabies.) She’s tired of being pregnant.

She got this way with Molly and Anna, too. Everything aches, and there’s no comfortable positions, and constantly wondering if every little contraction is things finally starting up, and… She’s done. She’s just done. She’s done being pregnant with Donnie, and this time, she’s done being pregnant period.

This is it.

She’s talked with other moms about knowing when they’re done, and agonizing over if they’re going to want another baby and…

Nope. She’s done. She is never doing this again.

It would have been nice if that cold, hard certainty had gone along with a good strong contraction and her water breaking, but… Nope.

Breena may be done, but she’s not done.

And given the still too rosy hue on Mr. Hadler’s face, he’s not done, either.

So she gets to it.
Her father’s been working next to her, one table over, and very quiet.

Too quiet.

Chewing on something quiet.

“Out with it, Dad.”

“We can give you a raise. I mean… Your sisters will get a little weird, but, you own more than half of the business, you can pay yourself more.”

“Dad?” She turns the airbrush off and puts it down, staring at him.

“If there’s too much work at home, and Jimmy’s not pulling his weight—“

“Woah! Just stop, right there!” She glares at her father. “That is not what I said to Mom.” She punctuates that with a hard look and a pointing finger.

“According to her, you said it’s easier.”

“It is. That doesn’t mean Jimmy’s not pulling his weight, or I want to hire someone else to… Dad! It got easier here when Amy got out of school and began working with us. That didn’t mean you or I or mom wasn’t doing enough on our own! It just meant it was a big job and extra people made it easier!” She glares again and mutters. “Not pulling his weight… He’s pulling a damn Mac truck.”

His eyes narrow, and he grudgingly admits that’s true.

“It’s weird.”

“That’s what I told Mom!”

“Do your sisters know?”

“We haven’t said anything about it. If we ever get a place for the nine of us, they will, otherwise, we’re keeping this close to the vest.”

“Does Gibbs know?” He looks up from Mr. Tenier, the customer on his table, eyes intense.

“Yeah. He helped to build our space for us. He knows. Everyone who lives at the house knows. I know he spent a lot of time with the guys, making sure they weren’t being stupid, that we had good rules in play, before we got into this.”

Ed’s got a curious looking half cringe on his face. Like he wants to know, but he’s afraid to ask.

“What kind of rules?”

“You really don’t want to know.”

Ed thinks about that. “You’re probably right.” He stays quiet, thinking more. Breena can see the fact that Gibbs knows and hasn’t already put a stop to this is going a long way towards keeping her dad calm. “If you need more help, you can give yourself a raise.”

“We’re good, Dad.”
“Yeah… But… Kelly and Sean have the nanny, and… The McGee’s have four bedrooms… I mean… You haven’t given yourself a raise in a while, and Donnie means three kids in daycare, and…” All of that’s true, but she’s got the sense that Ed’s talking around something. And it takes a moment of him listing expenses before she figures it out.

“Are you trying to make sure that our half of the family makes as much as Tim and Abby?”

Ed looks a little embarrassed by that. Then he says, “Yeah.”

Breena sighs long and loud at that. “We’re fine, Dad.”

---

There is one perk to being home. She can lay down. On her side, because on her back (which she rather likes and can’t wait to do again) means that Donnie cuts off circulation to her lower extremities and tries to lay on her lungs.

Laying down means that some of the swelling in her legs starts to go down, too.

Molly’s sitting on the sofa with her, poking her in the shin, watching her little fingers leave dents in her mama’s legs. Kelly’s watching her do it, mesmerized. She pokes Molly, but as soon as her finger pulls back the dent goes away.

Interestingly enough, she’s got another set of green eyes, much bigger green eyes, really watching this, too.

“It doesn’t hurt, right?” Tim asks.

She shakes her head. And she can see the same curiosity in his eyes as in Kelly’s. “Go ahead, you can try, too.”

He pokes her, thumb slowly easing into too puffy flesh, and then pulls back, looking at a thumb shaped dent in her thigh.

“Your doctor knows about this?” Then he shakes his head. Not only does Dr. Jun know this, but Jimmy does, too.

“Yeah, they know.”

Tim sighs. He pats Donnie. “Time to get moving little boy!”

Donnie does not respond.

---

“Fully effaced, four centimeters dilated, he’s a positive two station. It really should be any minute now, Breena.”

Breena rolls her eyes. It should be any minute now, but any minute other than now is not what she wants to hear.

Dr. Jun helps her up. “Yeah, I know. You know the drill. Unless you call me first, I’ll see you in two
Breena nods, she does know the drill. The only reason she’s here every other day is to make sure her blood pressure stays where it belongs. The last two appointments have been good, but at this point, if there’s a chance they’ll induce labor if her blood pressure gets too high, she’s thinking she’ll jog to the next appointment.

11:59:59 slips to 12:00:01 and with it the end of September.

Breena looks at Donnie. She can feel him squirming around in there.

“Looks like you’ll be a year behind your bother and cousin in school.”

He does not appear to be concerned.

“You think he’s really going to go for exactly nine months to the day?” Jimmy muses as they’re eating breakfast on October 3rd.

Breena glares at her baby bump. “He better not!”

Jimmy stands up, clearing up the kids’ dishes, and then kisses Breena. He quickly kneels, and says to Donnie, “Okay, moving out time. This is the eviction notice.”

Nothing happens. Jimmy finishes up clearing the dishes, and he’s on dropping the girls at daycare today.

“So, if I’m doing my math correctly, Donnie’s due soon, right?” Rachel asks.

“Any minute now,” Jimmy replies. He should probably see Rachel more often than he does, every six weeks or so, but, at least right now, he’s generally feeling pretty settled and in a good place.

But he does keep making appointments, because it’s not about keeping him in a good place when everything’s going well, it’s about staying in a good place, at least mentally, when everything else isn’t so hot.

And he knows that one of his ‘not so hot’ periods is coming up, fast.

She’s watching him, waiting to see if she’ll actually have to ask.

He doesn’t make her. “I’m looking forward to the other side of it. I know Breena is, too. I rationally know it’s going to be okay. I’ll rationally know it while we’re going through it. I’ll chain myself to it, and use it to keep myself as calm as can be, and she will, too, but…”

“But…” Rachel leads him on.
“Jon’s always there. I mean… It’s the same hospital. Same doctor. We’ve lucked out so it hasn’t been the exact same room, but it’s not like the rooms are much different from each other. It smells the same, the same gown, the same sounds, same positions…” He half shrugs. “We gotta get him out, so it’s not like we get to skip this part of it, but… We’d skip it if we could.”

Rachel nods at that. “That sounds very normal.”

“Yeah… Well…” He smiles, but there’s some sharpness to his eyes. “I’m good at normal.”

“Yes, you are, or at least looking that way…” She lets that dangle.

He smiles again, and again there’s some sharpness in his eyes. “I haven’t gotten into a fight, even friendly MMA, in more than a month. We still do some of it, just to stay sharp, but not as often as we used to. No planning how to kill anyone. I haven’t done any sort of chasing pain or… self-destructive… or destructive to someone else stuff, in a while. I have been doing a lot more yoga than normal.”

Rachel inclines her head at that. “It sounds like you’re coping well.”

“I’m certainly trying. Just, got to get to the other side. Once he’s out, and in our arms, and crying,” Jimmy’s voice wobbles a bit on crying. But that’ll be the moment where it really sears into them that they are on the other side. “we’ll be okay.”

“I think you’re okay now.” Compared to some of the conversations she’s had with Jimmy about some of the stuff he’s been up to over the last year, this sounds really normal and healthy.

“We’ll be able to enjoy it.”

Rachel smiles at that. “Will you send me photos?”

“You know our family, everyone we’ve ever spoken to gets pictures.”

She chuckles at that.

“Here.” Jimmy gets his phone. “Jun does extra checks, because of Jon, and this is the latest one.” He shows Rachel a 4d ultrasound from earlier in the week. Half of little guy’s face is hidden behind his hand. He almost looks like he’s waving at them.

“Awww…”

Jimmy smiles at the picture, too. “Yeah. He’s fine. I know it. He’s going to be fine. I know that, too.”

“You’re just having a hard time making the little ‘what if’ voice shut up.”

“Yeah. And I feel the spike of fear every time I see Breena’s number pop up on my phone right now, and I kind of want to bubble wrap her and move into the hospital full time, except I don’t because there are so many memories there, but, yeah, other than that, I’m just dandy.”

Rachel smiles at that, too.

Jimmy’s phone buzzes, and he feels the spike of adrenaline, but sees that it’s Allan. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to cut out,” he says to Rachel as he answers. She nods, understanding how this works. Fortunately, he doesn’t. Allan just needed confirmation that Jimmy was going to be in court on Tuesday and wouldn’t be available to talk to a group of Middle Schoolers for career day.
When Jimmy hangs up, he looks a bit sheepish. “Sorry.”

“I take it Dr. Allan doesn’t know why you aren’t in the office?”

“He knows that I’m hovering closer to home these days than usual, and though I didn’t specify why I wasn’t going to be in this morning, he’s sure it’s got something to do with Breena and Donnie. So, he’s not wrong, he’s just not right, either.”

“Ah. So, tell me about what else is going on…”

“Breena outed us to her mom.”

Rachel’s eyebrows go skyward, and that easily fills the next forty minutes.

Another day, another funeral.

Two funerals, actually.

And as soon as Mr. Richards is upstairs, being viewed, Breena’s done. It’s only 10:30, but she’s tired and all she wants to do is lie down and sleep.

Her parents and sisters, who have been trying to get her to take time off for maternity leave, are more than happy to usher her out of the building, wish her pleasant dreams.

Ed drives her home, and she grouses at him about being a million years pregnant and pokes her son who still isn’t moving. He pets her hand, and walks her up to her bedroom, asks if she wants him to call anyone.

Breena shakes her head. “Just want to rest.”

“Okay, honey.” He kisses her forehead, and heads back to work. “You need anything, you call. I’ll be back in a heartbeat.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

What she needs is to be in labor. And it’s just not happening.

All morning she’s been having contractions. Light, gentle, fluttery little things. One every two minutes for half an hour, then nothing for half an hour. Then a good strong one that’ll last two full minutes. Then nothing for half an hour. Then another hour of light, fluttery crap.

She’s SO DONE with this. She knows what real labor feels like and this is just… Crap. Little, piddly, getting geared-up CRAP. And it’s been going on for weeks now and she’s just about to beg for the damn Pitocin, just to get these stupid things to even out and start acting like real contractions.

She waddles to the bathroom, slams a few Aleeve (and right now she doesn’t care much one way or another if that’s on the approved list. Two damn pills will just take the edge off, not hurt anything, not this late in the game,) and then huffs off to bed to spend twenty minutes trying to find a position that approaches comfortable before finally, finally getting a nap.
She wakes up to Abby gently rocking her shoulder, and “Come on, just shift out of it, Breena.”

For a second she looks really confused and then, “FUCK!” slips out of her as the mother of all contractions hits.

Which is when Abby recognizes that what she was seeing, and the moans she was hearing, were not a nightmare.

For a good two minutes Breena just can’t move. Everything is locking up and she wants to push. Hard.

Abby’s grabbing the go bag, and saying something about getting to the hospital, but “No time!” gasps out of Breena, and she tries to get herself toward the bathroom as the contraction eases off.

Abby’s by her side, helping her, and as soon as she stands up there’s a gush of fluids, and apparently the Aleeve did more than take the damn edge off, but it certainly isn’t doing much right now. She’s tensing up, body working on getting this kid out now.

She knows that sensation, and says, loudly, “I know I was telling you to hurry up, but right now, wait!” The feeling crests through her again and waiting isn’t going to be an option. “Bathroom.”

“You sure?” Abby asks, getting her into the bathroom, helping her into the tub.

“He’s not hanging around.” Breena says through gritted teeth. She’s pulling off wet sweatpants and Abby turns the water on.

“We got time to call Jimmy?”

“On speaker.” She’s panting, on the floor of the tub, didn’t even bother to take her t-shirt off, and getting onto her hands and knees, fast.

Abby whacks the phone, checks, and then says, “Oh. Yeah. Hair. I see hair, Breena.”

Breena’s not talking now. She’s on her hands and knees, and focusing, trusting that Abby’ll make sure Donnie lands easy.

“Abby?” Jimmy’s voice on the other end. “What’s up?”

“Get home, now!”

“Now?”

“Yeah! Now!” She then hits the off button before Breena’s loud, pushing groan goes through. The last thing she needs is Jimmy driving like a maniac and getting into a car accident. He’ll drive fast and attentive, thinking he’s coming home to take Breena to the hospital, thinking he’s got hours to go.

She hopes he’s home in time before someone needs to catch Donnie, because they didn’t get that far in the Lamaze classes, and it’s not like Abby’s done this from the pushing side of it.

Another long, loud groan from Breena, and she can see a quarter-sized patch of goopy brown hair. Abby rubs her back, and tries to be encouraging. The contraction subsides and what glimpse she had of Donnie retreats. Then Abby pulls off her clothing, gets into the tub, kneeling in front of Breena, “Rest on me.”
Breena moves forward a bit, laying her head and chest against Abby. Abby makes sure she’s steady, and keeps rubbing Breena’s back, kissing her shoulder and neck. “You’ve got this.”

Breena doesn’t say anything, she’s focused on Donnie and the building need to push. It’s crested again, that need to get this kid out. Her focus is narrowing further, the rest of the world peeling away, and she’s pushing again, centering and focusing everything down and out.

Breena pushed an hour with Anna, and an hour and a half with Jon, and close to two hours with Molly, so… Abby’s really hoping Jimmy gets a move on and is here in twenty minutes, because she’s feeling more and more head each time Breena pushes, and she’s fairly sure little guy is not going to be an hour long job, let alone a two hour long job.

-----

Jimmy’s bounding up toward the house, ready to run in, grab the bag, grab his wife, and then off to…

He knows that groan, and he just heard it through the walls of his house. For a second he stops dead, and then he’s moving at the speed past ‘bounding,’ and as he’s flat out running up the steps, he knows what he’s hearing because he’s heard it three times before and…

Bathroom.

Good, they’re in the bathroom…

Breena’s on her knees, leaning into Abby, groaning, loud and hard, and Donnie’s crowning, and he’s whacking the water in the sink on, fast, washing up, faster, and there, behind his wives in less than a heartbeat.

“You didn’t mention active labor,” he shoots to Abby.

“Didn’t want you getting into an accident.”

He nods, and looks around, trying to think about how to do this. He’s only ever done it in a hospital, with a bed, with an edge that folded down and there’s really not enough room in the tub for him to see what’s going on. Abby’s got the water beating down on Breena’s back and that probably helps her feel a little better, but… It’s a terrible angle and he really can’t see anything and…

The contraction passes, and he kisses Breena, taking her weight from Abby.

“Abby, get on the side of the tub, sit back, legs wide.”

Abby doesn’t ask questions, even though her first thought is, *I’m not the one in labor.*

“Okay, Breena, we’re going to get Abby on the side of the tub, and once she’s up there, you’re going to straddle her legs. She’ll hold onto you. I’ll get in front, and catch Donnie, okay?”

Breena nods, and gets out, “Move fast, they’re coming quick.”

Jimmy glances to Abby, she’s on the side of the tub, patting her lap, and Breena’s up, straddling her. It’s not exactly the birthing stool he saw in his history of gynecology textbook, but it’s about the same shape, and it gets Breena high enough up that he can get in front of her, see what’s going on, and…

“This might sting.”
Breena flashes him a *are you kidding me look* for almost a tenth of a second before the contraction begins again.

Jimmy slips a finger in to check, make sure that the cord’s not wrapped around Donnie’s neck, but he doesn’t feel it. Just his son, trying to join the rest of the world, at hyper speed, after way too much dawdling.

---

Jimmy’s rationally aware that time is moving fast. There’s no possible way they’ve been in the tub for more than three minutes, but it feels like forever for him.

The few babies he delivered before were intense situations but this…

Each contraction, each push, and a little more of Donnie becomes visible. And Jimmy can’t help it, his hands are shaking with adrenaline and joy and fear, and right now everything looks fine, except for the fact that they’re here, and not at a hospital, and he’s partially freaking out about how it’s probably been a good three weeks since anyone sat down and really *cleaned* this bathroom, and then Breena’ll push again, a hard, groaning, *push*, and ears! He can see ears, and feel soft, slippery, wet skin. Pink. Smeary with a little blood and waxy with vernix, but pink, good color, everything is moving the way it’s supposed to, and Breena gets a short breather, a moment to relax, and Jimmy does, too, for a few seconds, and the contraction ramps back up, jolting through her and Donnie’s face down so Jimmy can’t tell, too much, what he looks like, but he does say, “I think he’s got straight hair.”

Abby’s grinning at that. Cheering Breena along. And Jimmy goes back from bouncing between exultant joy at seeing his son, and worrying about the fact that he doesn’t have gloves on, and his shirt is so far from sterile it might as well be a petri dish, and then another push, and…

---

Down, out, hard, and tense. So much pressure. This constant, building, urge. All of her muscles are tense, tired, shaking with the strain, but the pressure won’t be denied.

Breena’s pushing hard, entirely in the moment, in her body, existing in time slowed down to individual heart beats, and long, steady exhaled breaths.

Her son’s coming, and it’s her job to get him to the other side.

---

“You’ve got this, Breena. He’s on his way, and we’re going to get to see him soon, and there you go, keep it up, you’ve got it…” Abby’s taking her role as birth support and cheering section seriously.

She knows that Breena’s not listening to her, and Jimmy’s obviously *busy* right now, but she thinks her voice is calming. She knows it’s helping to keep her calm.

She knows Tim and Jimmy don’t have much use for faith, but she does, and right now, it’s hitting her hard. Hand of God alone that she was here today. She had a court date, decided to change out of her Career Barbie outfit (though these days her court suit looks a lot more sophisticated than it used to) and get into something more Lab Appropriate, and then head back to work for a few more hours.
Jimmy’s place was a little out of the way, compared to their place, but she just felt like she needed to be there, so that’s where she went.

She’s praying as she cheers. Giving thanks that Breena wasn’t on her own for this. For protection, she’s just as aware as Jimmy is that their bathroom isn’t sterile. For forgiveness, it’s only now, with the phone well out of her grasp that the idea of calling 911 is hitting her. And most of all, as she hears a tiny chirp of a new voice joining them, she prays in celebration.

Jimmy’s muttering his way through his med school lessons.

And not because there’s any chance that right here, right now, Jimmy’s about to forget what he’s supposed to do. He knows the drill, head comes out, baby’s head turns, get shoulder A, get shoulder B, and out he comes.

But because he’s got to do something to stay calm, or otherwise, he’s going to jump out of his skin.

The only upside is this is as far from Jon’s delivery as it’s possible to get. He’s got no memories of anything like this. There’s no sorrow here. No sense of loss or pain. There’s no past right now, barely any future. He’s entirely in this one second, right here, right now.

There is a reason why they tell you not to deliver your own kids, and Jimmy’s sure it’s this feeling, right now, that he couldn’t name if his life depended on it. He feels electric all over, tingling with this moment, shaking from it, and grinding under all of it is the overwhelming sense of responsibility. This is his wife, his baby, and he’s got to get them through it.

So, he’s keeping up his own mantra, as he gently, so gently, this is his wife and child, turns Donnie’s head a bit, making sure to keep him supported, and on the next push, his shoulder slips out, and Jimmy breaks the mantra to say, “Almost done, one more and we’ve got him,” and there, another hard, groaning push, and there’s a second where Donnie doesn’t move, and then he’s out with a fast rush, along with a spray of amniotic fluid, and Jimmy’s holding his boy who’s crying full out and…

And there just aren’t words.

He’s here, in Jimmy’s hands, wet and pink and wailing.

He gently cuddles his boy, and lifts up a bit, so he’s kneeling between Breena’s legs, holding Donnie up, so he’s snuggled between them. And all three of them take a moment to bask in this new little boy.

Eventually, time eases back to normal. And eventually, they pull back enough to see that he’s got all his fingers and toes, and they get Breena onto the side of the tub, as Abby grabs a towel, and floss, and a knife as Jimmy holds his wife, and she holds their son.

Abby ties off and cuts the cord a moment later, and makes a joke about why it might be desirable to have more than two attendants for this sort of thing, which Jimmy’s beginning to agree with, because he really wants to be cuddling with his family right now, not delivering a placenta, but…
There’s literally nothing about this situation that he thinks would be improved by trying to put it on a stretcher, move it into an ambulance, and then and handle it on the road to their hospital.

The messy bits still need to be handled, but handled they are and, eventually, Abby and Jimmy are able to walk Breena back to bed, get her propped up, and Donnie happily latches on for his first dinner.

“Last one home,” Tim mutters as he pulls his car into the driveway.

Granted, that’s not exactly new these days.

He’s a little surprised to not hear any kiddos when he opens his car door, but it’s a nice day, and sometimes, when they get back a bit early, Jimmy or Abby will load the little guys up and take them out for a walk before dinner.

He notices that Jimmy’s car door isn’t closed, and shuts it. That’s a really good sign that little guys were out here playing. Molly loves to play with car doors, opening and shutting again and again. It drives the adults crazy because all they can envision while she does it are tiny fingers crushed in the door.

They probably went for a walk.

He doesn’t smell or hear cooking food as he heads in, calling out ‘Hello,’ but it’s not like they never have delivery. There’s a new Greek place that opened a few miles out, and Abby’s been talking about getting some gyros the next time they want delivery, so maybe a few of them are working their way home.

“Upstairs!” Abby calls back. He can hear the grin in her voice, so something good has to be happening up there.

Tim heads up the stairs, pulling off his tie, and unbuttoning his cuffs, ready to peel out of his work clothing, hop into a t-shirt and kilt, and move into relaxing at home time.

“So, did anything interest—“ the question dies on Tim’s lips as he realizes what he’s seeing when he steps into Jimmy’s bedroom. Breena’s in bed, Jimmy and Abby next to her, and there’s a tiny person wrapped in one of their bath towels, on her chest.

“When?” His eyes light up, a huge smile spreading across his face as joys arcs, electric through him. He’s kicking off his shoes and joining them as quickly, and gently as possible.

“Ten minutes ago. Don’t go into the bathroom, and there’s a pretty big wet spot on the other side of the bed you don’t want to step in. Gibbs is taking the kids tonight,” Jimmy replies, not looking away from his son.

Tim’s eyes are tearing up as he gently strokes a hand over the little guy being held by his mother. “Hello, Donnie.” He strokes Donnie, who’s awake, quiet, and looking around.
A carefully cropped picture, one with just Jimmy, Breena, and Donnie in it, goes out a few minutes later: *Donald Timothy Palmer, 10/3/17. Mama and Baby are well. Visitors welcome tomorrow.*

The full picture is this: Breena’s in the middle, with Donnie on her chest. Aside from her post-partum panties and pad, she’s naked. Jimmy, who shucked off his clothing shortly after they got Breena into bed, (There’s a reason why they wear overalls or scrubs when dealing with the messy work at NCIS, all of the clothing he was wearing when he walked into the house is *utterly disgusting* right now.) is next to her, arm behind her, other arm under hers, supporting Donnie. It’s clear from the picture that he’s not wearing a shirt, but it’s a *carefully* cropped shot. An especially sharp-eyed observer may wonder why he’s also not wearing his watch, but… If they ever get the full story, it’ll make sense.

Pull back a bit further, outside the tight rectangle of Jimmy, Breena, and Donnie, and Abby, also naked, because she didn’t see any point to putting anything on before hopping into bed with them, is on Breena’s other side. She pulled back just enough to not be in the ‘official’ version of the picture, though she’s gently stroking Donnie’s foot.

Tim’s on Abby’s far side, looking like he just got home from work, which he did. He’s the one taking the photo, making sure he and Abby aren’t really in it.

Then he takes the one after it, where they both press in close, hold each other, and that photo, all five of them together, is the one that certain members of the family get.

That shot, which has *It’s a hell of a story, can’t wait to tell it. Okay, we can. Tomorrow. Not sure if we’ll be home or at the hospital. More details coming. Anyone who feels like doing some scrubbing is welcome at the Palmer place right now.*

Predictably, in less than a minute, Jimmy’s phone is ringing. It’s Ed’s number, but Tim picks it up.

“That’s their bed in the background of the shot!”

“Yeah. Donnie’s got two speeds, quick time and dawdle. Apparently getting out was done on quick time.”

“And yet, you’re there.”

“I’ve been here for literally four minutes. Long enough to kiss our boy and take the photo. Donnie’s been out for ten more. They hadn’t even had time to text me. I was just getting home like normal.”

“Are they going to the hospital?”

Tim shrugs and asks. Breena’s looking like she doesn’t want to move again, ever. And Jimmy’s crashing from the adrenaline, so he’s not exactly feeling like going out right now, either, but he nods, slowly.

“Yeah. Once they’ve had a bit more time to rest, I’ll pack ‘em up and take them. Get everything checked out.”

He hears a pause and the sound of the phone being handed over, then Jeanie’s voice. “Is everyone okay?”
“Tired. I wasn’t kidding with Ed about four minutes. I haven’t even gotten the story, yet. Little guy is here. No one called 911, and we’re not waiting for an ambulance, so I know everyone’s okay. I got in about a minute after they called Gibbs to get the girls.”

Abby gestures for the phone, and Tim hands it over. She flips it to speaker, and then, as Donnie nurses, Breena drowses, holding him gently, and Tim and Jimmy get to pet their boy, she fills Jeannie and Tim in on the whole story.

By the time the story is done, Ziva’s over with dinner and a mop. (She did get gyros.)

Tim, also having missed out on the ‘excitement,’ is on cleaning up, and the less he thinks about that in the future, the happier he’ll be. Jimmy wasn’t kidding about placentas looking like evil, bloody jellyfish, and if he never has to touch one again, it’ll be too soon.

Jimmy eventually gets out of bed, to put some boxers on, and mutters, “You couldn’t have done that yesterday…” as he heads into the bathroom, to make sure he’s cleaned up enough to be presentable at a hospital.

Ziva smirks at him; the bathroom is clean enough for surgery, now. “You did not ask us to.” She stands up, hugs him, and then heads into the bedroom. If Jimmy’s out of the bed, that means she can snuggle up next to Breena and get her new baby fix.

Two hours later, Tim drives Jimmy and Breena, and Donnie, already cleaned up, in his onesie, tucked into his car seat, to the hospital.

Once there, Dr. Jun checks Jimmy’s work, makes a few jokes about him putting her out of business, and then says that if they want to go home, they can. No anesthetic means there isn’t any good reason for Breena to spend the night if she doesn’t want to, and at that point she didn’t.

By that point, the only thing Breena wanted to do was go back home, lay down, wrap around her baby boy, and get to actually enjoy a few hours with him.

So they did.

Tim took them back home, dropping them off, and then, just like Breena said, they get to have more time with each other than they would otherwise because they don’t have to do anything other than just be with Donnie.

Tim’s the one who went off to go pick up the pile of antibiotics for Breena. And Abby heads off to the McGee place, where Gibbs is with all the kids. She spends some extra time with them, showing them pictures of their newest brother, and making sure Gibbs has an extra set of hands for putting everyone to bed.

And, so, after 39 weeks and two days of waiting, Donald Timothy Palmer, who does look an awful lot like his cousin Sean, with the pouty bottom lip and a slightly droopy right eye, though he also has his mama’s round face, plump cheeks, and hooded lids, settled down into his parents’ bed. They snuggle around him, count fingers and toes, marvel over his light brown-blonde eyebrows and lashes, and his little pouty lips, murky-blue eyes, and his tiny little hands and fingers, nose and ears, and just how perfect he is, in the way that all brand new babies are perfect to their mommies and
daddies.

And, eventually, Tim’s back with the meds, and Abby’s back from making sure the kids are in bed, and they, too get to bask in their little boy.

Chapter End Notes

So, this is the slightly modified story of how my aunt joined the party. Though, in her case, her mom ended up delivering her by herself, because the only other person in the house was her three-year-old sister, who, being asleep at the time, wasn't exactly the most effective midwife, ever.
It’s morning.

Technically.

Tim’s rubbing his eyes, feeling exhausted, stumbling around the kitchen, getting a smoothie for Breena, and remembering what it’s like to have a newborn around again. Yes, he loves Donnie beyond all reason, but this bit here, tripping over your feet, because a certain tiny person is under the impression that meals must be served every two and a half hours, is overrated.

At least he gets to go back to sleep once said smoothie has been delivered. Because it’s morning, and as soon as little boy is done and ready to be tucked back into his crib, Jimmy takes over.

Tim manages to get all of the bits of nursing fuel assembled, blended, into a glass, and up to Breena, who is also looking like she got run over by the tired truck.

Once he hands it over, he crouches next to her. She’s in her nursing chair. Bed may be “easier” in the sense of not having to get up, but especially with these brand new little guys who don’t have the routine down yet, the extra arm support the chair offers is worthwhile.

Donnie’s eyes are open, and he’s gazing up at Breena, tiny hand curled around her breast, as he… Tim’s seen a lot of nursing babies over the years, and little guy’s more gumming Breena’s nipple than slurping down dinner.

Breena’s working on prying him off of her nipple, saying, “Nope. Open wide, get the whole thing into your mouth. I promise, it’ll work better.”

“Speaking of which,” Tim keeps his voice low, but he holds out the smoothie, and makes sure the straw is located so she can get it easily.

She sucks thankfully, eyes closing for a second, as calories try to make up for lost sleep. “Thanks.”

He kisses her, and is about to stroke Donnie, but he doesn’t want to distract him from the task at hand, getting a good latch. He closes his mouth, and it does look like he’s got a lot more areola between his lips this time.

Breena’s watching Donnie, and Tim can see him start to suck.

“He got it?”

She looks up at him. “Maybe? First week or so is hard to tell. He doesn’t not have it. I can tell that.”

And, for as much as he was jonesing for bed five minutes ago, right now Tim just wants to hover here, snuggle with Breena, and watch their boy eat.

“Tim…”

“Mmm…?”

“Go back to sleep. He’ll still be here in a few hours, and the more rested everyone is, the better we’ll all be.”

Tim nods, slowly, and shuffles off to their bed, crashing next to Abby, and snuggling into her.
Jeannie’s feeling very… tentative… as she steps into Jimmy and Breena’s house.

She wasn’t sure what she’d see once she got in there. Both Tim and Abby’s car is in the driveway. And she knows what Breena’s said about… whatever this is… but…

She just feels off.

So, as she’s getting ready to open the door, she’s steeling herself, getting ready to shove an approving look on her face, and to get in there and be useful and all the rest of that, because she might not like, or necessarily approve of whatever the hell this is, but she won’t miss out on her grandkids, and she’s not abandoning her daughter when she needs help most.

“Hello,” she says it softly as she lets herself in.

“Hey, Mom,” also soft, comes back to her from the living room, along with, “Hi, Jeannie,” from Jimmy.

She steps in and finds Breena, on the sofa, Donnie in her arms, looking awfully tired and so in love and completely enraptured by her little boy. That starts the smile spreading across her face. Jimmy’s behind her, holding onto her, and their boy, and… awake.

Part of why she was here with Anna and Molly was so Jimmy could sleep during the day. Get rest now so he could be on during the night. But he’s looking fairly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. She also hears a sound… Breakfast cooking. Abby comes in from the kitchen. She hugs Jeannie, kisses her cheek, and says, “Hey!” before turning to Jimmy and Breena, “Food’s ready. Think you’ll have him down soon?”

Jimmy untangles himself from Breena. “I’ll grab mine, fast, now, and when he’s done, I’ve got putting him down.” He kisses Breena. “Food and naptime for you, right?”

She nods, then glances over to her mom, gesturing to the fact she’s alone on the sofa, and says, “Well…”

Jeannie flows over to meet Donnie. He’s nursing away, eyes starting to slide shut, but for the time being they’re still a little open. She can’t see most of his face, but the bits she can see… Jeannie feels the smile growing. A tiny covering of light browny-blonde hair, round cheeks, those ears… The eyes are Tim’s. Even from here, just at a glance, she can see that, but the rest of the face, and the hair, and… That’s Breena as a baby.

His eyes slip all the way shut, and Breena coos at him, “Come on… No sleeping yet.”

Donnie’s eyes open again, but he doesn’t bother to start sucking again.

“Okay, I think you’re done.” She gets him unlatched, and Jeannie’s snapping into action, grabbing a spit-up cloth, and getting ready for Donnie.

“Hand him here.” She takes her grandson, cradling his head in her hand, bum in the other one, and gets a moment to just look at him. Tim’s lips. Breena’s chin, probably her square jaw, eventually… Donnie’s staring up at her, murky blue eyes flitting around, focusing on nothing. “Hello Donnie.” She lifts him to her shoulder, and he’s a soft weight against her chest and shoulder, tiny, warm
breaths against her neck, as she starts the familiar walk/bounce routine of burping a baby.

Breena flops back against the sofa, and a moment later, Jimmy’s out of the kitchen with a plate of eggs, a smoothie, and a toasted bagel. “Come on, eat, and then sleepy time.”

Breena doesn’t look thrilled to sit up and eat. Sleeping sounds better than food, but Jimmy isn’t wrong about her needing food.

Abby’s out a moment later, grabbing a picture of Jeannie with Donnie. “Okay. I just sent that to Ed, Amy, and Christine.” She kisses Breena, and Donnie, and then Jimmy (on the cheek). “And I’ve got to get going. Tony called, they’ve got a triple murder, and Allan’s drafting me into helping.”

“He can do that?” Jeannie asks.

“Anyone with a pulse who can figure out how to wield a swab can help an ME collect evidence. When they get slammed, if I’m not also slammed, I help out.” She pets Donnie again. “Since it’ll be a few hours before all the evidence is in, I’ve been drafted. I’ll swing by the kids tonight, and then home late.” And then she’s off, upstairs to give Tim a quick kiss, and off for her day.

“Actual” morning starts with the sound of another voice in their home.

Jeannie.

Tim’s alone in their bed when he hears the new voice coming from the downstairs. The clock tells him it’s a bit after eight, and that he should be getting up, because the kiddos have been getting plenty of Uncle Jethro/Pop time, but they’ve been more than a bit low on Daddy-time.

He’s just thinking that as Abby breezes in, already dressed for work. He sits up, blinking. “You’re going in?”

“I have to. Triple murder. I’m giving Allan a second set of hands.”

“Oh.” He kisses her. “What’s the plan?”

“Work, back to our place after, spend time with the kids, and then home. You?”

“Uhhh…” He knows he should have a plan, but he’ll be damned if he knows what it is.

She grins at him. “Yeah. You’re still asleep. Text me when you know what you’re doing.”

“Okay.” A wide yawn splits his face, and he lays down for a few more minutes.

But only a few. He gets his shower, dries off, and is reaching for a t-shirt when something occurs to him.

“Uncle Tim,” did not just suddenly get a few weeks of paternity leave. In fact, “Uncle Tim” is supposed to be racing into the Hoover Building because he’s epically late, and has a bunch of electronic architecture building to do, and a mile high stack of resumes for people who want to work on said architecture building to go through.

However, Uncle Tim is a Director, so he can, on occasion, take an unscheduled ‘personal day.’
But he’s fairly certain ‘day’ is the operative word. He flashes Jennifer a text, letting her know that he won’t be in the office today unless something blows up.

He’s heading down the hall as Jeannie comes out of the nursery. Apparently, Donnie’s down for nap number... Tim doesn’t know. A lot. Nap number a lot.

“He sleeping?” he asks quietly.

She nods. She’s looking at him, really looking, cataloging his face and body. Seeing the man who helped to build the boy. Tim stands there, not sure what to do, but after a moment, just standing around being examined is getting uncomfortable, so he steps into the nursery, and watches their youngest snooze.

He can feel Jeannie watching him do it, but when he turns back to her, she looks away.

“Ed here?” Tim asks, voice low, as he shuts the door.

“Not yet. He’s got the early jobs. Getting a client, working on getting a few ready to go, but today his day is pretty much over at noon.”

“And yours?”

“Christine and Amy are handling my day, today.” They’re walking down the steps, and Tim’s heading into the kitchen where breakfast is ready, and Jimmy’s eating. She looks around. Breena’s already eaten and lying on the sofa, napping. Tim’s eating. Jimmy gets up and moves the laundry from the washer to the dryer, makes a comment along the lines of, “And there’s a reason why scrubs were invented,” and then heads back down to share his morning coffee with Tim.

Tim can feel that she’s out of sorts, all the help she planned on providing has been taken care of.

“Come, sit down. We’ve got extra coffee in the pot,” Jimmy says, acting like this is a totally normal morning. And, it is, at least, as normal as the world can be when there’s a little guy who’s not quite twenty-hours old sleeping upstairs.

Tim’s about to say something along the lines of, “I’m thinking after this I’ll go love on the older kids some,” but they hear a little baby chirp and freeze, waiting to see if that blows into a full blown wail.

A second later, it does, and Jimmy hops up, “And that one’s my cue.”

Once he’s upstairs and Jeannie’s got her coffee, she says, “He’s looking really well-rested.”

Tim’s not sure if she’s giving him a searching look, because he’s very much not-well-rested this morning. He shrugs before saying, “Round ten we pried him off of Breena and Donnie and made him go to sleep. It was my night with the kids, so I was on baby fetching, and Breena was on feeds. He’s on babies tonight. So he’ll be the zombie tomorrow, and Abby and I’ll be the perky ones, and all three of us’ll make sure that Breena can be sleeping as much as possible.”

Jeannie sips her coffee, nods, still looks wary, but she doesn’t say anything. For a few minutes they listen to Jimmy through the baby monitor. From the sound of it, little boy is doing the traditional newborn, something-isn’t-right,-but-I-don’t-know-what fussing. And from the sound of it, Jimmy’s doing the traditional veteran dad routine of: check diaper, pat, hum, take off or add clothing, and attempt to figure out what has irked the newborn.

The crying isn’t getting louder or more insistent, so it doesn’t sound like he’s solved the problem, but it doesn’t appear to be getting any worse.
Tim finishes his coffee and eggs, and says, “I wonder if sometimes they get freaked out about being dry. Yesterday, he was wet all over, and sounds and light were muffled and dim. Sometimes I think they cry just because it’s different.”

Jeannie nods at that, and thinks that’s doing an awfully good job of defining why this feels so uncomfortable for her. Yesterday (okay, three days ago) everything worked one way, and now it’s different.

Back to his place.

And at his place there are two little people who have been missing Daddy time.

Okay, one little person who is making it extremely clear that she’s well aware that something’s been awfully different today, and another little guy, who being nine months old, lives in eternal now, and doesn’t exactly get this whole time thing.

So, Kelly’s attempting to surgically attach herself to him, and Sean’s just his usual pleased-to-see-Dad.

And he’s very happy to see both of them. Happy to show off pictures of Donnie to Heather. (Who makes all the right noises in regards to the small pink person he’s showing off.)

He’s on the floor, with Sean sitting in his lap, and Kelly next to him, building up blocks, as Tim explains the plan.

“So, I’m going to be here until this afternoon. And after lunchtime, Pop’ll bring Molly and Anna over. You guys will play, then go down for naps. When you wake up, he’ll be here, and Mama will come for dinner, and Molly and Anna’s Poppa and Gran will probably come over, too. And then tomorrow, we’re all going to Jimmy and Breena’s house and you’ll get to meet your little…” he stumble a bit at that, never quite sure if the kids are supposed to be siblings or cousins, and quickly amends with, “Donnie.”

Sean’s watching his hands as he signs it, but he’s got no idea if those signs mean anything to him. Tim remembers feeling that way about talking with Kelly when she was an infant. Saying words, explaining things, and having no idea if he was making a difference.

Sean, obviously, doesn’t talk, but he does occasionally make a few signs. (Eat, drink, Mama, which he uses to mean any adult, and, just like his sister, cookies. She got that word down fast, and he got the sign down fast, too.) He’s not regular with any of them, and if he’s made the connection between make sign and things happen, they aren’t sure, but, he’s at least starting to put these things together.

Tim gently strokes his son’s head. It’s October 4th. One month and two days and little guy here will get his first implant. He wonder if, like Donnie, he’ll spend a while just crying because everything is new.

Gibbs manages to get over to Jimmy and Breena’s in the late morning.
There was a time, not so long ago, when he could go through the whole night, several of them, without sleep, and just mainline coffee and bounce back up the next day to begin more work.

That is not how things work now. Little guys were understandably excited about lack of parents, and Donnie, and everything else, so he had about four wakeups over the course of the night.

Much to his surprise, Sean, who’s usually up at least once a night, just to make sure everything is still around, slept through just fine, and Molly, who can sleep through a fire alarm, came wandering out, hopping into his bed three times, looking for extra snuggles.

Anyway, once he got the assorted kids where they needed to go, he went back to his own home, played with the doggies a bit, and crashed for a few hours of uninterrupted sleep.

After lunchtime, when he’s up, moving around, wishing devoutly that he could just go to the Diner and have Elaine take care of him, he’s wondering if not bouncing back so easy is another sign of getting older, or if he’s just out of practice.

Either way, he doesn’t like it.

He does, however, like creeping into Jimmy and Breena’s house, finding them crashed out on the sofa, snoozing away, (Breena’s tired, and Jimmy’s stocking up on extra sleep for tonight’s baby duty) and Jeannie in the kitchen, working on putting together some serious lasagna.

Gibbs creeps in, looks around, doesn’t see a tiny baby boy, so he moseys over to Jeannie to offer to help.

She shrugs a bit. “It’s easier with one person. Extra hands mess up my rhythm.”

Gibbs can respect that. “I run into that with my woodworking. If everyone has their own piece, it works fine, but all together on the same part…”

She nods, spooning sauce onto the noodles. “Tim can eat this, he just usually doesn’t, right?”

“Yes. He’ll eat it if it’s the main course. Ziva’ll often make it if we’re having a milchig Shabbos. Especially if Senior’s coming around. If there are other options, he’ll go for something lower carb. He’s got a sweet tooth, so he saves up his sugar for dessert.”

“I’ve got some chicken breasts marinating, too.”

Gibbs nods along, pleased to see she’s made something for Jimmy to eat. “Molly loves lasagna.”

Jeannie smiles at that. “Have you seen him, yet?”

“Just the pictures. Sounds like they had an exciting night.”

Jeannie nods at that. “Christine showed up fast, but not that fast.”

Gibbs inclines his head. Then he decides to share, some of, his own story, “Kelly, my Kelly, was fast, too. Lot of waiting, and then, boom! baby.”

Jeannie doesn’t know that whole story, but she understands the basics of how that works. “Yeah. It looks like everyone came through okay, though.”

Gibbs nods.

A moment later, he hears footsteps on the stairs. Apparently, Ed’s here, too. And from the looks, and
sounds, of it, just finished putting down Donnie.

As soon as he’s in the kitchen, Jeannie says, “You let him sleep on you, didn’t you?”

Ed rolls his eyes a little, pats his tummy, which has gotten rather round over the years, and says, “I’ve spent years perfecting the ultimate baby napping zone, it’d be a shame to waste it.”

Jeannie shakes her head, but she’s smiling, too.

“I did get him into the crib, still asleep. Hello, Jethro.”

Gibbs nods at Ed, who’s quietly fixing himself a cup of coffee. Ed picks up another cup, and lifts it toward Jethro, who nods, agreeing that he’d like a cup, too. Ed pours, and Gibbs takes it, sipping, and like always at Jimmy’s place, wondering how he can stand this vaguely coffee-flavored water. Ed sips his and shakes his head a bit, too.

“I don’t understand light roast.”

“Ed!” Jeannie says, voice low.

“I know… Just…” He stares at Gibbs, and Gibbs does nod a bit. “See, he gets it, too. This is like… Coffee water. Or coffee perfume. It smells like coffee, but it doesn’t taste like anything.”

Gibbs smirks and nods at that, chuckling a little. Sometimes having the guy without the mental filter around can be fun.

“You can taste the actual flavors, not just burnt,” Jeannie adds.

“Uh huh…” Ed’s giving her a disbelieving look, that shifts into a smile. Jethro knows that they’re just playing with this. He eyes the lasagna. “I don’t suppose any of that’s coming home with us?”

That gets a side eye from Jeannie, along with a gentle whack to the back of the hand with a spoon as Ed reaches to nibble a bit of the mozzarella.

As they gently snark at each other, Gibbs heads up to see Donnie.

He’s lying on his back, swaddled up, eyes closed, sleeping. And like everyone else who’s seen him, he can see the mix of Breena and Tim on his face.

Gibbs wants to pick him up, feel his tiny body in his hands and arms, but he’s also a firm believer in the idea of Thou Shalt Not Wake The Sleeping Baby. Donnie’ll wake up soon enough, and for right now, he can hover a bit, and watch him sleep.

He does wake up, about twenty minutes later, and Uncle Pop (what Molly and Kelly have been calling him for a while now) is ready to leap into action, picking him up.

Donnie’s got the usual, somewhat grumpy, very confused look of a just woken newborn. And Gibbs has the usual getting-to-pet the new baby look of rapture.

“Hi,” he says to Donnie, who, having woken up hungry and crabby, is not exactly in the most social of moods. Gibbs nods at that, lifting him to his shoulder, saying, “Yeah, I feel like this a lot of mornings, too. Abbi’ll tell you about it. Let’s get you cleaned up, and over to Mama.”

Donnie doesn’t stop crying at that, but it does feel more like he’s just complaining about the situation, amicable bitching, as opposed to genuine distress. Gibbs knows all about that, too, so he just nods along.
Once he’s downstairs, and located in Breena’s arms, Donnie perks up quite a bit. He’s not exactly a natural at nursing, not yet. But he’s working on it. And, apparently, like most babies, being snuggled up against Mama and having a bit of lunch makes everything else better. His eyes are open and he’s focused on her and food.

Gibbs takes a rather cropped photo, and sends it off to Ducky.

“I can see he’s doing fine, how about you?” he asks Breena.

She shrugs. “Tired, sore. Not entirely sure what day it is. Par for the course.”

Gibbs grins at her. “I know that.” His phone buzzes. He checks and nods, flashing back a text. “Duck’s on his way. Penny’s got votes all this week, so she won’t be down until Friday, but he’s getting on the train. I’ll pick him up in a few hours.”

“And I know Tony’s slammed with a triple homicide. Ziva mentioned that when she came over to help clean and feed us. He’ll be over when he can. How about Abbi?”

“Still in Miami. She’ll be home Friday, too. Can’t wait to see you and him.”

Breena winces a bit. “This is messing up your romantic dinner night.”

Gibbs shakes his head at that. “There’ll be a lot more opportunities for that. Little guys only show up once.” Gibbs eyes Donnie. “Though this one isn’t that little. How big is he?”

Breena blinks. She knows they weighed him when they went to the hospital, but since she hasn’t been in a room with that information written on a whiteboard, with nurses checking little guy periodically through the day, she doesn’t remember off the top of her head.

Jimmy who’s been half asleep, and dozing behind her perks up enough to say, “Seven nine, twenty inches. Big for a McGee, halfway between Molly and Anna.” He doesn’t add anything else to that, or open his eyes.

Gibbs smirks at that, understanding what’s happening. He’s seen all of them do it when they expect a big night. Suck up every possible moment of sleep.

“They checked his hearing?” he asks. He’s sure they’d mention it if he hadn’t passed, but he’s got a rule about assuming things, and since little guy wasn’t born at the hospital...

“Yep, passed both tests in both ears. As best they can, tell he’s a perfectly normal, healthy newborn, who was in a flaming rush to join the world once he decided to get moving,” Breena says, her index finger stroking over Donnie’s cheek.

“Good.” Gibbs watches them, a grin on his face.

Donnie keeps nursing.

Ed and Jeannie hang back. Part of it is not wanting Breena to feel swamped. In the hospital they generally do a good job of keeping the number of visitors down, and visits fairly brief. That’s less of a thing here at home.
And part of it is watching Gibbs.

Because Gibbs knows about this… thing with the four of them… whatever it is. And if Gibbs is okay with it…

They’ve been part of the larger family long enough to get a feel for the extended Gibbs clan members, and while they respect both Ducky and Penny, they’ve got the sense that both of them are entirely too, ‘Do whatever you like, as long as it makes you happy’ for their own comfort. Like, if Gibbs has rules, they’ve got suggestions. And those suggestions are optional.

But Gibbs has rules. And, if whatever this is really doesn’t bug him, or break his rules… Then maybe they can be okay with it, too.

And Gibbs looks okay. If it’s been going on for almost a year… And Breena says it has… Then Gibbs has been okay the whole time, but they didn’t really look.

Ed and Jeannie Slater may not have guts and they haven’t spent years interrogating people, but they have built an extremely successful business based on catering to people who are in extreme emotional distress. It’s their job to make sure that people who can’t say what they want, get it anyway.

And they are very good at it.

So now, they’re actually watching. Jeannie’s using the same skills she uses to figure out what’s actually important to the people in front of her, and say, gently suggest that if the budget is tight, and Mom wasn’t actually a woodworker, that maybe it’s okay to get the casket with the walnut stain, instead of the actual walnut coffin. And since Mom was a gardener, then spending the money they saved on the casket on flowers is a good idea.

Gibbs is just sitting with them. He’s not saying much, but he never does. He is gently petting Donnie a bit, content to sit quietly with Breena while Jimmy snoozes behind them.

When Donnie get to his mid-nurse break, Gibbs scoops him up, letting Breena get a bit more rest. He’s happy to pace around, gently patting, humming a bit. (Off key, and Jeannie thinks it’s Suspicious Minds. The idea that Gibbs may be an Elvis fan amuses her to no end.) Eventually, Donnie burps, and gets handed back. Eventually, he’s done, and by that point, like most newborns, he’s just about ready to go back to sleep.

Jeannie swoops in to get Donnie. She’s not giving Ed a chance to put his baby napping zone to use again. Yes, she’d love to cuddle this little boy to sleep, too, but she’s not doing his parents any favors by that.

Gibbs hangs around the Palmer house for a few hours, and then it’s getting kids from daycare, time. He’s getting ready to go, and Ed says, “Want some company?”

“Sure.” He’s had the feeling all afternoon that Ed and Jeannie have wanted to talk to him, alone. Might as well get it out of the way.

Just about out the door, when Jimmy, who’s gotten about as much daytime napping done as he can, hands Gibbs his keys. “No kid seats in the truck.”
Gibbs and Ed share a look. In some ways life was easier back in the pre-safety days.

Gibbs takes the keys, gives Jimmy a hug, nods, and then they head off.

For the first few minutes of the trip, they’re both quiet. Ed doesn’t appear to be ready to say what he’s thinking, and Gibbs isn’t about to try and pull it out of him.

At a stop sign, Ed looks back, sees that there are two carseats, and not a ton of room for number three, and says, “They’re going to need a bigger car.”

“They’ve got one.” Gibbs has Jimmy’s car, which is usually for heading to work and back. It’s got room for two car seats in the back, and three could probably be squeezed in, tight, but most of the time, that doesn’t matter, because it’s got one, or maybe two, adults in the front and that’s it. When they go anywhere with all the kids, they take the van or one of the McGees’ Highlanders.

Ed shrugs. That’s true. “Just tricky when you’ve got to make sure the right car goes to the right place at the right time, or you end up stranded.”

Gibbs inclines his head a bit. He knows that he prefers not having to think about which car he takes where, when. “Something to be said for piling kids in the back of the station wagon.”

“Amen!” Ed lights up at that. “I remember all three of us in the back of Mom’s station wagon. Somehow, we all survived.”

Gibbs grins at that. “Dad had a truck, big, old Ford. A ’38 or something. It was old, when I was a kid. Him, me, Mom, no seat belts, bumping down the road.”

Ed nods. “Yep. When the girls were little, Jeannie had a… I don’t remember. Some sort of Pontiac. It was bright yellow. We’d pile them in, and some of their friends. Pre-school carpooling, six kids in the car.” Ed shakes his head. “Those were some loud trips.”

Gibbs laughs at that. “Kelly, Maddy, a few of their other friends, all in the backseat of Shannon’s Taurus. Girls can get really giggly.”

That brings up a lot of good memories for Ed. “You have the station wagon version?”

Gibbs nods, also remembering some very good memories.

“Think little boys are different?” Ed asks.

Gibbs shrugs. “Always had a pack of little girls at my place.”

“Yeah. I remember being one, but…”

Gibbs gets that. He remembers (sort of) being one, but he’s sure that his parents had a very different idea of what it was like to raise one than his idea of what it was like to be one.

“We’re going to find out,” Gibbs says.

Ed smiles at that. “Looking forward to it.” He watches the road for a few more seconds as Gibbs drives toward his house. (Picking up doggies before picking up kiddos.) “You think they’re serious about this whole… living together thing?”

Gibbs does his best not to smirk at that, or laugh outright. “Yeah. They are.”

Ed stares at the ceiling of the car and sighs. “It’s weird.”
Gibbs doesn’t say anything to that. He’s, very clearly, not arguing that point.

“Let me guess, Ducky had a half-hour monologue about different cultures where this sort of thing is really common and happens all the time, right?”

Gibbs does smile at that, and then says, “Hour and a half.”

“Did you listen to more than ten minutes of it?”

Gibbs chuckles. “I got the high points.”

“Yeah.” Ed watches Gibbs drive. “You’re really okay with this?”

Gibbs glances away from the road, and makes sure to put all of his Gibbs into the next bit. “Why wouldn’t I be?” He’s basically daring Ed to make an issue of it.

Which is actually what Ed wants to see. There’s exactly one man he knows who’s even more protective of his family than he is, and that’s Gibbs. If he’s closing ranks to defend this, it’s got to be okay.

Ed thinks about it for a moment. “You’re Pop to the McGee kids, and Uncle Jethro to the Palmer ones.”

“Molly and Kelly are calling me Uncle Pop right now.”

Ed laughs at that. “The title changes, but you’re basically grandpa to all five of them, right?”

“Yeah. Dave might call me Saba, or maybe he’ll join the Uncle Pop crew when he’s talking.”

“No playing favorites. No: these are the grandkids and these are… the step-kids.”

“No.” His voice and eyes are serious on that. “Just like their parents, the kids are mine.”

Ed nods at that. “Okay. Start telling me what Kelly likes. We’re not going to be that family where the kids have different sets of grandparents who treat them differently. I see too damn much of that at work. I’m not doing it at home.”

Getting the kids down for naptime goes about as smoothly as could possibly be expected from four excited little people who haven’t gotten a lot of mom and dad time and suddenly have Uncle Pop, Poppa, and Mona and Jackson to play with.

It’s not exactly a trainwreck, but Gibbs isn’t sure if Heather was happy for the help, or if it would have gone a lot easier if it had just been her.

He does see Ed watching Anna and Sean, sharing a crib, and Molly and Kelly who share a room.

“Donnie gets his own crib?” Ed asks when they’re downstairs, after the kids are (finally) asleep.

“Maybe?” Gibbs doesn’t know. “Anna and Sean are getting bigger. Right now, they seem pretty happy together. Sean gets nervous when there’s no one he can see, and Anna’s seems to like having someone else nearby. She’ll babble at him, talk a little. He’ll coo and babble, but not exactly in
response. He just does it, sometimes. He doesn’t know she’s making any sounds, so, she’ll babble at him, and he’ll open and close his mouth at her.”

Ed doesn’t know if that’s encouraging or heartbreaking. He decides to focus on encouraging. “And they’re both signing a little.”

“Very little. He’s got three or four signs, and she’s got maybe ten.”

“Molly and Kelly are picking it up fast.” Ed’s noticed that his oldest granddaughter signs just about every time she starts to talk. Since the grownups are all in favor of her practicing as much as she can, they haven’t stressed, or even mentioned, the fact that if Sean’s not around, she doesn’t need to sign. “You guys are pretty sure he’s going to need it.”

Gibbs nods. “Yeah. Even with the implants they don’t expect him to have much more than 70% hearing in either ear. And they’re starting with one implant, hoping something better will come around before school time.”

Ed thinks about that for a moment, figuring out what 70% hearing in one ear would mean. “Good enough to duck if someone yells out to him.”

“Better than that, maybe a lot better, but he’ll likely need to see the words, too.”

It looks like Ed’s thinking about that, too.

Gibbs doesn’t have a lot of time after the kids go down for afternoon nap. He lingers for a few moments, talks a bit with Ed and Heather, and then he’s off. Time to get Ducky.

If there’s anyone who’s been more eager for the arrival of this little person (besides Breena) Gibbs wouldn’t believe it.

He finds Ducky at the train station, dressed in his usual early fall button down, pressed trousers, light jacket, and fedora, a floppy-eared stuffed bunny that’s just about the same size as Donnie, in his hands, eyes sparkling so hard they could light up the whole station.

Gibbs eyes the rabbit as they head for Jimmy’s car. Molly and Anna got stuffed corgis. Molly’s is the light caramel color that Gibbs thinks of a corgi-colored. Anna’s is a darker brown shade. He was expecting another corgi.

“Duck?”

He’s buckling his seatbelt, rabbit in his lap.

Ducky looks up, sees Gibbs staring at the rabbit. “I have it on good authority that as a small child Jimmy had one that he utterly adored, and as a youngster, the Velveteen Rabbit was one of Breena’s favorite stories.” He holds up the rabbit. “And thus, Donald gets his very own Velveteen Rabbit.”

Gibbs smiles at that. “Are you going to call him Donald?”

“Maybe. As a boy, everyone else called me Donnie. My grandfather would call me Donald. That always made me feel grownup, and special. A sign that he took what I was doing, and saying, and being, seriously.”

Gibbs smiles at that, suddenly getting why, unless specifically asked not to, Ducky always refers to
people by their full names.

Jimmy’s walking Donnie around when he hears the door open. Little guy has had meal number too-many-to-count, burped, diaper changed, and every other need anyone in this house can think of attended to, but he’s still fussing away.

Tim’s sitting at the table, keeping them company.

“We’re in here,” Jimmy says, though why he couldn’t say. It’s not like the fussing baby is hard to locate by sound.

A moment later Gibbs and Ducky are in the kitchen with him, and Ducky’s shucking off his jacket and fedora. A moment after that, he’s taken his namesake in his arms, eyes glowing with a film of happy tears, saying, “Hello, Donald.”

And apparently what Donnie needed was his Ducky. He’s looking up at his great-grandfather, eyes wide and serious, a very intent expression on his face, fussing done.

Duck holds him close to his face, gently kissing him, supporting him in his hands. “I understand you gave your Mama and Daddy and Aunt Abby a bit of a surprise.”

Donnie coos at him.

“As is your prerogative. I think we were all hoping you’d come sooner rather than later. I know I’ve been waiting far too long to meet you…”

And Donnie rests in Ducky’s arms, listening to him talking, quiet, eyes wide, until they began to droop, lulled to sleep by a soft Scottish burr.

Donnie, on his back, sleeping in his crib, next to a light gray velveteen rabbit that’s longer than he is: that’s the photo Tim prints out to put on his wall at work.
Work.

They flip things around. Today Tim’s going in, and Abby’s calling out with her own ‘personal day.’

Tim really doesn’t want to leave. He wants to stay home, bask in Donnie, and then spend more time with the rest of the kids, getting them ready to come home tonight to meet their youngest sib-ousin… He shakes his head, sibling. Just go with that. That’s what this is, one big family. Except… what happens when Kelly calls Donnie her brother outside the family?

Cousin.

The kids are cousins, and it’s probably better if he just gets that bright and steady in his mind and keeps it there.

As soon as he’s in, Jennifer’s up, next to him. “Okay, let’s see ‘em!”

And Tim doesn’t need any more invitation than that. He’s got the picture of Donnie snoozing with his bunny to show off, along with a few hundred other ones on his phone. So, he hands over his phone as he heads into his office, and hunts down a clear bit of wall to add another picture to.

“Oh Tim! Look at him!” Jennifer’s cooing at the pictures of Donnie as Tim hangs the sleeping one up. “Oh, he’s such a sweetie, look at those…” And Tim’s fairly sure she’s about to say ‘eyes’ because she stops, and then looks at Sean’s brand new baby pictures, and back to Donnie, and back to Sean.

She stands there, just staring, saying nothing. Then she looks at Tim, really looks at him, and looks back at both pictures.

Tim smiles at her, and says, “You were about to say, eyes right?”

“Yes.”

He nods. “Sean’s will be green. We’re almost sure of that. We don’t know anything about Abby’s biological parents because she was adopted, but both she and her brother have green eyes. I know I’ve got a blue recessive hiding in there, so we’re almost certain Sean’ll have green eyes, like Kelly, but he could have something else. Breena’s got blue eyes, so for Donnie… he’s got about a fifty-fifty shot of blue eyes.”

“Oh…”

She’s staring at the photo of the four of them. The one from the lake, where they’re all tucked in close, arms around each other. The one that’s right next to his wedding shot with Abby. It’s not a rare angle for a selfie, they have to get in close for that, and there’s nothing untoward in that picture, just a lot of really wide shit-eating grins.

Tim thinks she’s really seeing that picture for the first time. He adds, “Do you know what Trisomy
Jennifer looks back to Tim, shaking her head.

“How about Down’s Syndrome?”

“Yeah. I know about that.”

Tim finishes with the shot of Donnie sleeping, getting it taped to the wall, and then sits in one of the chairs at his conference table, pulling another one out, and patting it. Jennifer sits down, and Tim gets into it. “Okay. Downs Syndrome: that’s Trisomy 21. And it ranges from bad to fatal. Even the ‘mild’ cases involve some nasty problems. Trisomy 13…” Tim sighs, wishing he didn’t know this. “There’s no ‘mild’ version. The dry, medical way of putting it is that it’s ‘incompatible with life.’” He smiles weakly, and swallows. “Jimmy and Breena’s second child, Jon, had Trisomy 13. He, like most Trisomy 13 babies, was stillborn.” He smiles again, looking at pictures of his extended family. “And, they stuck together, and got through it, and tried again, and Anna’s as perfect as a baby girl can be, but waiting to find out if she was okay was nerve wracking. So…” He shrugs a little, like this is no big deal, and really, it’s not, but… It’s also not quite true, either. “Anyway. We love them. They love us. And if a bit of DNA from someone who wasn’t part of the mix that made Jon helped them to sleep easier at night and have a healthy baby, then that’s all there was to it.”

Tim looks at the picture of Donnie. “And there he is.” He’s smiling wide and happy. “Whole and healthy, keeping his mama and daddy up at night, exactly what he’s supposed to be doing. And if he looks a bit like his ‘cousin’ over there, well… I don’t mind at all, and neither does anyone else in our family.”

Jennifer looks at that. Nods slowly, leans back in the chair, and then says, “You practice that story a lot?”

Tim looks alarmed. “It’s true!”

“Uh huh. You mean it’s factual. Tim, I have friends. I have close family. I have a husband, too. Now, let me think about how you talk about Jimmy and Breena. Let me look at those family photos you’ve got all over your walls. Let me ponder why you took yesterday off. Hmmm… So, wanna try again?”

Tim spends a long time looking at Jennifer, and she looks just as long and direct, back. Finally he says, “Nope.”

“Oh huh.” She eyes the photos, and Tim, and then says, sincerely. “Congratulations on your son.”

“Nephew.”

“Maybe to the world out there, but you know who he is.” She nods to the rest of the photos, “and they do, too.”

Tim’s not sure what to do with that, but… As they say, a man can’t keep secrets from his secretary. She doesn’t appear to disapprove, other than of him lying to her, but… If there’s something he is sure of, it’s that he’s not saying anything except for the official party line while he’s in this office.

If he could have his computer recording, anyone else could have a bug in here, too.

He does, however, once she heads out, sit down, take a piece of paper, and write, by hand, Of course he’s my son. And Abby’s, and Jimmy and Breena and… Yes. You’re right. We’re not just ‘good friends.’ But in here, nothing goes past my lips about this, and I’d really appreciate it if it
didn’t get past yours. You want to ask me about it, that’s fine, but not in the building.

Tim heads into her office, drops that on her keyboard, and then says, “Who am I seeing today?”

She quickly reads the note, smiles at him, nods, shreds it, and then says, “You’ve got your monthly update call with Sinjin Patil, but other than that, all of your work is on your computer.”

Tim nods at that, too. At least that’s one secret he’s kept from his secretary, she has no idea who Sinjin Patil used to be.

“On his computer” today, means going through more resumes. He’s got the basic idea of what he wants his crime triaging system to do. He knows how he wants the system that will let people report crimes to work. Getting that streamlined into one, fully functional, completely integrated FBI-wide system is a massive task.

One he’s not even going to attempt to do by himself.

So, right now, he’s going through a list of who’s who, sending out, ‘How would you like to take a few hours and get to know more about this massive project I’m thinking about,’ emails, and figuring out how many people he’s going to need to build it, and out of all the names he’s got, who his dream team is, and who’s the B-team, and who needs to go into the poison pill pile.

He does that all morning long, and then, because he’s noticed he works better when he does this, he shuts everything down, gets up, walks around for a bit, and then grabs his typewriter and spends an hour eating lunch, playing with his dragons. (Shockingly enough, this scene involves a bright blue, tiny baby dragon.)

He’s back to his computer, sorting through more resumes when he hears the door to his office close, and, “Do you have any idea how bizarre it feels to just walk into the FBI and not have five hundred guys pull a gun on me?”

Tim looks up at Khan as he’s leaning against the door to his office. He glances at his computer. This is exactly the time Khan’s supposed to call him. He’s just here, in person, instead.

“Come on in. And, nope.”

Khan smirks at that. “I’d think not, Mr. Do-Right.” He does step further into the office, though he doesn’t sit down.

“What brings you to DC? Burning desire to see my pretty face?” Tim pulls his glasses off, tucking them into the collar of his shirt, and then winks at Khan.

Khan barks a short laugh, steps to Tim’s desk, and pulls a photo out of his backpack. Tim smiles at it. It’s him and Abby giving the camera the bird. “Seventeen thousand, four hundred and ninety-six files of this one picture, each with its own, randomly generated, file name. This is what you call a racy photo?”
Tim smirks. Nope, it's not. But that tells him how far Khan’s gotten into his mirror web. (It looks like his real computer system, it just isn’t.) It also tells him how well Khan’s doing on breaking his encryption. That photo actually can be decrypted. So can a few other files containing similarly innocuous content. The rest are highly encrypted gibberish. “Maybe.” He laughs a bit.

“Out of curiosity, how many months did you spend setting up your system before finding me?”

“I got on it two months before I came here.” And he spends at least an hour a week tweaking it further. It’s much harder to break into a system that’s constantly shifting.

Khan walks around his office, looking at most of the same things he had in his NCIS office. “No new books.”

“Working on a new project.” Tim nods at his typewriter. “Lunchtime is sacred here.”

He eyes what’s in Tim’s typewriter. “Dragons?”

“I like dragons.”

“Should have figured from the tattoo.”

“So… Good flight?” Tim’s supposed to get a heads up if Khan flies anywhere. He’s not, especially with his new ID, on the no-fly list, but he is tracked.

“I drove.”

He makes a mental note to have any gas purchases on his credit cards highlighted and sent to him.

Khan shifts attention from the room to Tim. “Thought it’d be more of a mess. The pictures on the news are mostly of destroyed bits of town.”

“Disaster porn never gets old. You go see the Capitol?” The closest anyone is allowed to get is the steps. The building is still a burned out hulk, and no one has been willing to pay to fix it. Jarvis is talking about allowing it to stay a ruin, a monument to what happens when people get complacent about their leaders. Tim thinks that’s fitting.

“Only to spit on it.”

“You and a lot of other guys.” He still doesn’t know why Khan is here. Maybe just to test his limits. Maybe not. He wouldn’t be the first guy who got into the building to go look around and get hints for what sort of password a man picks. (Not that he can get any for Tim’s password by doing that, but he does make a mental note to go and double check Jennifer’s.) Khan’s not saying so far, and technically he’s a “free man” so Tim won’t push it. “So, weekly report?”

“Sure. Just to check, I can go after government contractors, right?”

“Yes. Can’t go into their personal stuff, but if you stay in their business accounts, and the Feds they work with, you’re in the clear.”

“Non-US citizens?”

Tim’s not sure about that. “Don’t have any laws covering that, yet, so leave them alone, unless you find something hinkey in a Fed’s stuff. You find something hinkey?”

“Not yet, thinking about what I want to do, where I want to go.” Last month he’d handed in the first of his reports. The one where he ransacked the FBI’s own security. Tim had sent that onto the FBI’s
Cyber security Team with a “Drop everything and handle this” note attached to it. He makes another note to check up on that and see if they actually did anything. If they haven’t, Khan’s going to be able to raid the whole FBI and fuck things four kinds of sideways. “Do universities count as contractors?”

Tim shakes his head. “Nope. Hospitals don’t, either. Just because they get money from the government doesn’t make them fair game.” His eyes flicker, getting a sense of what Khan may have been thinking. “You were going to open a lot of research to the web, weren’t you?”

Khan shrugs. There is a certain poetry to unlocking all of that federally-funded research hiding behind expensive paywalls. “I’m not used to being on Team White Hat. It’s taking me a while to figure out what to do.”

For a moment, Tim tries to imagine what he’d do if given free rein to hack anything the government did. It’d take him a while to pick a project, too.

“Okay, limit yourself to companies doing direct business with the Feds, and how that business gets done. If you can prove that… I don’t know… Boeing or something, is paying kickbacks for contracts, go for it. Medical companies that are screwing the VA or Medicaid, and better yet, companies that are doing it with help from people in the VA or Medicaid… Stuff like that. Medicare and Medicaid alone could keep you in scandals until you’re ready for the retirement home.”

“You’ve got a cheery view of things.”

Tim nods to his window. The blinds are down right now, but both of them know what’d they see if they looked out. “You think I’m wrong?”

“No.” Khan passes over a thumb drive. “I went easy this month, called every member of Congress’s secretary, claimed to be a family member, acted frantic because I was locked out of the family computer, and asked for the password. I got four hundred of them.”

Tim sighs. Hacking 101 these days doesn’t involve a computer beyond the ability to google a phone number. Find whoever it is, sound appropriately flustered, call in, and just ask for a password.

“Your grandma’s staff passed.”

“Talk to an older guy with a Scottish accent?”

“Yes.”

“That’s her husband. He knows you aren’t on the up and up.” And though Tim hadn’t heard about that, it wouldn’t surprise him if Tony didn’t get a call about two minutes later, asking to track that call, and see who tried to scam them.

“A lot of them did, still, that’s an almost ten percent fail rate.”

Tim taps the drive. “I’ll pass the report on. You give it three months, and if they don’t change their passwords…”

Khan smiles. He intends to have a lot of fun with that.

“Try not to make your home a private country, please.”

Khan smiles at that, too. He’s still looking around Tim’s office. “Been reading up on you.”
“Dealing with insomnia?”

Khan turns away from the family photos to look at Tim as he asks, “You really bust your dad for gay bashing?”

Tim’s surprised that that’s what has Khan’s attention. He’d have assumed hacking the CIA, or some of his other, lesser known adventures would have been more impressive to him. “If it was in the papers, it must be true, right?”

That gets a snort of derision. “That’s why I’m asking.”

“Yeah, I did.”

Khan nods at him, and for a second, Tim thinks there might actually be some respect in that look. Then he walks around Tim’s office, looking at the pictures. He’s got a lot of them of his family up in there, on the walls, on his desk, and several clustered around his typewriter. He stops at Tim and Abby’s wedding photo, the one of them dancing together, and the shot, right next to it, of him, Jimmy, Breena, and Abby at the lake last summer. That’s the shot he’s looking at.

“You spend a lot of time with them.” There are pictures of Gibbs and Abbi, and Tony and Ziva, and Ducky and Penny, but for every one of them, there are three of the Palmers. The only people he’s got more shots of are the kids.

“As much as I can.”

Khan shakes his head a bit. “I really don’t want to see the racy photos, do I?”

Tim shrugs, not sure if he wants to say this out loud, in here, but... The thing with Jennifer was being really cautious. It’s unlikely that anyone is recording in here. Saying this now, less than five hours later, is a different flavor of cautious. Tim is certain that Khan is the most dangerous man he’ll ever have in this office, at least, to Tim, personally. Tim is also certain that if anyone is recording in here, Khan is vastly more dangerous that whoever may have come up with that plan. He doesn’t want Khan getting any ideas. “I’d rather you didn’t find them, but… For you seeing them, it’ll depend on how squirmy you think foursomes are. Let alone foursomes with my naked butt involved.” Khan doesn’t wince, but he doesn’t look like he wants to see that, either. “For me… Anyone who needs to know, already does, including my boss, and theirs. You can’t blackmail me, or them. I’m as out as I can be without taking out an ad in the paper. And if you want to take the ad out for me, the worst they can do is fire me, and if that happens the FBI will have your face and name back on the most wanted list.” Tim doesn’t have to mention how many of Khan’s former acquaintances will also suddenly learn he’s not nearly as dead as he used to be.

Khan watches him for a long moment before saying, “The man with a clean conscience?”

“Something like that.”

Khan rolls his eyes. “You guys tend to be boring.”

Tim smiles. “I intend to spend the rest of my life being dreadfully boring. The last year and a half was more than enough excitement for three lifetimes.”

“Uh huh…” Ajay keeps walking around the office, looking at pictures and the like. Tim lets him. He looks like he might be working up to saying something, or maybe Sun Tzu style, he’s just learning his enemy, Tim’s not sure. After another moment, Khan says, “So, you don’t waste good?”

“That’s the idea.”
“And you thought of me?”

“You got out of Clement’s building, and if it had gone up, you would have gotten away perfectly clean. No one would have ever looked for you again. Getting us the intel to make sure the building didn’t go up had no upside for you personally.”

Khan blinks. “I didn’t want to see more than five hundred people die for no good reason. That’s what got you interested? That’s... I mean, look, I’m not a good guy, but... Hell, you’ve got to be an actively evil one to let that bomb sit in place. How low are your standards for good?”

Tim shrugs at that. “The fact you can really code got me interested. The fact you didn’t let them die made me think I could possibly work with you, if I could ever find the right job.”

Kahn nods. He pulls out another thumb drive. “You said I could have a team. I want her.”

“I’ll look into it.” Tim’s holding the drive. “This a friend of yours?”

“I’ve never met her in person, don’t think you have, either, but we both know her.”

Tim pulls out one of his ‘disposable’ netbooks, and sees Kahn notice that he does it, and then pops the drive into it. His eyes skim over the dossier on the screen in front of him. “Yeah, I know her. Not sure if I can get her out of jail, let alone put a computer in her hands, but... I’ll look into it. Why do you think she’s good?”

Kahn smiles. “I used to trade intel on Silk Road; she set it up. Come on, she was a kindergarten teacher before she went dark side. There’s got to be some soft and fuzzies in there.”

“Liking five-year-olds and having a lot of patience isn’t exactly what I mean by ‘good,’ but...” But if Khan is right, and they can work with her... She’s certainly got the skills, and then some. “How long are you sticking around?”

“Figured I’d do a few days here, then up to New York, maybe hit Boston, go wander around MIT and moon Dean Rutherford if he’s still there, and then home.”

Tim chuckles. If there’s anyone he’d want to moon, Dean Rutherford, who had been an old-school mechanical engineer back in the day, and somehow got saddled with the forensic computing department under his purview, would be on the list. They had great professors, but Rutherford was a massive pain in the ass who just wanted them to all go away and let him build bridges.

“Stick around for a few days, I’ll see if I can get a meet up with her. See what, if anything, I can do about her sentence. If you think walking into the FBI without anyone pulling a gun was a trippy experience, get ready to visit a prison as part of team White Hat.”

Kahn shakes his head. “I still think you’re insane.”

“Join the club.”

Do you believe in second chances?

Tim’s thinking that as he’s looking through resumes.
Once upon a time, there would have one more name in this pile, Kevin Hussein.

Kevin was good. Just a little gullible and a little greedy, and put those together and a lot of people got hurt.

The computer Black Hat team he’s got Khan building is going to need constant surveillance. Keeping track of it isn’t something he should really be doing in his off time. It should have someone, someone good, who does nothing but keep eyes on it.

The last thing he does, before heading home, is give Jennifer Kevin’s name and number, and ask her to set up a time for them to meet. Maybe he’d be interested in a second chance, too.

Tim’s heading home, his home today. He’s going to pick up the kids, grab some dinner, and then they’re all going home. It’s time for little guys to meet Donnie.

He’s holding Sean in one arm, Anna in the other, and kicking open the door. Molly and Kelly go tearing in, and fortunately, Abby’s on point, sweeping them up before they charge in.

“Shhh… Very quiet. Little guys like quiet,” Abby says, before letting them go, and they walk, quiet…er… into the living room. Donnie’s both awake, and just finished eating, so he’s in as good, and perky, of a mood as he gets these days.

He watches his sister and cousin, and they look at him. Molly’s not terribly impressed with him. Sean’s her baby, this new little guy is the person who stole her Mama for two days. She scrambles onto the sofa, and gloms onto Breena. (Anna’s fussing at Tim, trying to leap off his arm, also in a quest to get to Breena. He walks over, and gently gives her to Breena.)

Kelly’s watching him closely. He’s on the sofa, between Jimmy and Breena, in a little blue onesie, mittens on his hands, lying on his back, kicking at the ceiling a little. She grabs his foot as it flails up, and puts it to her hand. It’s just a little smaller than her hand.

“Little feet,” she says it, and drops his foot so she can sign it.

Tim nods, sitting on the sofa next to Jimmy, scooping both of his kids into his lap, so they can see Donnie easily, and so he’s got a bit more control of what they do next.

Abby’s getting video of all of this, and Jimmy picks up Donnie, holding him up so that he’s closer to his sisters.

“This is your little brother.” With both of them snuggling into Breena, they’re willing to give Donnie a little more attention.

Molly pats her Mama’s tummy. “He’s out now.”

“Yes. He is.”

She pulls up Breena’s shirt and looks at her belly, patting it. “How?”

That gets a bit of chucking from the adults, and a few quick looks along the lines of how to explain this to the three-year-old?
Abby starts a very streamlined version of girls, boys, and how that all works but Molly gets bored about ten words in, so Breena says, “I pushed him out,” and makes a little grunting sound along with a pop sound, and that seemed to do the job just fine.

A few hours later, when they’ve got all of the older kids down, and Donnie’s sleeping, too, Jimmy says to Abby, “It’s probably the tired talking, but going from four to five doesn’t seem nearly as daunting as I thought it would be.”

She chuckles at that. “Yeah. I think it is. Let’s see how it looks when you’ve got some more sleep in you.”

He kisses her gently, and heads toward bed.

Abby ambles downstairs, makes herself a cup of tea, and drifts over to where Tim and Breena are. They’re both on the sofa. He’s got his laptop on his lap, researching Heidi Partridge, getting to know more about what she did before they tossed her in jail. The more he learns about it, the more impressed he is, and the more he’s wondering where the line between Team White Hat and Team Black Hat is.

Breena’s next to him, lying on her side, dozing away the minutes between now and Donnie waking up again. Should be sometime in the next half hour. Once he’s up again, fed again, and down again, she’ll go upstairs to sleep in her bed, instead of snoozing on the sofa.

Abby sits on his other side, reading his screen, nodding.

“I remember her.”

There’s a question in his eyes as he looks at her.

“They arrest, what, two female hackers, let alone good ones, a decade. Then there was the fussing about her case. She stuck out. Why are you reading up on her?”

“My college buddy wants her for his team.”

Abby parses that sentence for a moment, and then nods. “Isn’t she in jail for like six consecutive life sentences?”

“Eight.” He rolls his eyes. He’s read the cases against her, and they couldn’t pin anything illegal on her, so they put her away for multiple lifetimes for creating a marketplace for other people to do illegal things. People did use her market place to hire hits on other people. At least, that’s what the cases say. They charged her and found her guilty on all eight of them. Since the details weren’t out in public, no one knows for sure if said hits ever happened. They do know they were advertised, and someone signed up for them, and someone got paid.

It’s not outright stated, but it’s very heavily hinted that if she’d rolled on the people buying and selling on her market, she’d have walked. It is stated, and Tim believes it, that there was no way for her to do that. If her software did what she said it did, there was no way for her to know who was selling what on her market, or buying it. That’s why her market was popular. No way to trace who did what. In many cases, the buyers and sellers didn’t know who was who, either, and they never did.

Before everything went insane, when there was still a Supreme Court, her lawyer had a case
pending, pretty much trying to see if the Feds really could bust her for running a market, which is fully legal, just because illegal stuff got sold in said market. When they arrested three of nine justices, and five others resigned, the Court got sidelined, and all of the cases pending are just hanging. Tim thinks there might be four justices now, but they’re not exactly zipping through confirming new ones. The longer the court is offline, the longer Congress can keep doing whatever it likes.

The downside of all of this is that he’s got no idea if there’s anything he can offer this woman to make her even remotely interested in working for him. More basic than that, he’s got no idea if there’s any sort of job he can offer her, period.

“What would she do for you?” Abby asks.

Tim gives another shrug. He knows what he’d hire her for, namely making it so people could safely, anonymously report crimes on his system. Her market was as good as they said it was. She was the only person they were able to stick an ID on and prosecute for it. And if she could do that, she could make him a system so people could blow whistles all damn day long without fear of reprisals.

What Khan would do with her…

He can ask him that. See what he has to say. The suspicious part of Tim’s mind knows exactly what Khan would do with her, namely use her skills to make sure he can do whatever he likes, invisibly. That feels way too plausible for Tim’s comfort. He’s definitely going to get that answer out of Khan before he decides to let Khan anywhere near her.

Tim thinks about that even further. Even if Khan has a good plan for how to use her skills, he still may go around him. Getting a whistle-blower site up and running, and running well matters more than whatever Khan and Co. may get up to.

“Do you have any plan?” Abby asks as he’s musing away.

Tim shrugs at that, too. “I guess I get to go and introduce myself to Howard Tarkin, the current acting Director of the FBI, and see if I can get him interested in popping her out of jail.”

“Give Penny a call, maybe she can wriggle a Congressional pardon or something like that.”

Tim thinks that’s an awful good idea, and one that doesn’t involve him having to remind the current guy in charge that he’s got his job because of him.

Tim smiles at Abby, kisses her, gives Breena’s foot a gentle squeeze, and gets up to go make a quiet phone call.

“Hey Penny,”

“Tim! Hi!”

“Do you have time to talk, or am I getting you in the middle of something?” Just because it’s post-tubby quiet time at his house, doesn’t mean it is quiet time for Penny.

“I’ve got a few minutes. They’re reading the text of a bill I know inside and out, so I can talk until they’re done.”

“They’re actually reading the bills now?”
“Yeah, for some reason Jake thought that was a really important provision to get passed. All bills have to be read into the register before they can be voted on. That’s made for some shorter bills, and some hoarse legislators.”

That amuses Tim.

“So, what’s got you calling? Can’t be baby advice. I’ve been seeing the pictures and you all look like pros, sleep deprived pros.”

Tim snersks at that, and then says, “You know anything about Heidi Partridge?”

Penny thinks for a moment and then says, “She hit my radar a while back. One of the law professors at American was writing an amicus brief on her behalf. I didn’t think he had a leg to stand on, too much precedent contra his point, but he was doing it. Why?”

“Well, I just finally noticed she existed, and now that I know about her, I’m wondering if I can use her, but, she’s in jail, and I’m not even sure who’s got dibs on her at this point.”

Penny thinks about that. “I know that officially, the DEA brought the case, because there were drugs being run right and left on her market. I know unofficially the IRS was who made sure the case didn’t get dropped or go away.”

That makes pretty much no sense to Tim. “Why the IRS?”

“Because a market the US can’t regulate is a market it can’t tax. More than half of her transactions didn’t use any sort of traditional cash. They traded in goods and bitcoin. For illegal goods, that’s just a blip on the screen, but full, real anonymity means that anyone could trade for anything on there. What happens when buyers and sellers decide to skip Amazon and go full anon? Some of them were starting to. She had people offering lawn mowing services, pet sitting, art, yachts, and other things like that, too. They were starting to use her site as a white market, too. Suddenly, there’s a huge pile of money moving around, and no one can attach it to a person.”

Tim sighs and then thinks some more. “So she’s basically in jail for coming up with a system that could undermine the way the US government funds itself.”

“The way every government funds itself, Tim.”

“So, what you’re telling me is that hell will freeze over before there’s any shot of me putting a computer back into her hands and getting her working for me.”

“Exactly. I mean, try, certainly, but my guess is if you go to any US Attorney and try to make a deal, they’ll laugh you out of the office.”

Tim’s eyes narrow. “Lovely.”

In his office the next morning, Tim’s tempted to ping Khan’s phone, and then just show up wherever he is. He’s not sure how they got into this pattern, but he’s thinking now’s probably a good time to nip it in the bud. So he calls.

“Hello, Sinjin.”

“McGee…” Khan sounds wary, or maybe half asleep. He may not be the kind of person who’s
usually awake at 8:32 AM.

“T’m looking into Heidi Partridge. What did you want her for?”

There’s a pause, and what Tim imagines is a smirk, and then the sound of moving around. He hears a mumbled, “Excuse me,” more moving around, a door closing, and water turning on. Then Khan says, “You want me to hack people and sell their stuff. Assuming I don’t want to end up dead, I need a way to do that without getting caught. I figured if anyone could build me the system I need to do it, and do it right, it’d be her.”

Tim’s nodding on his side of the phone. That’s a really good answer.

“Okay. I’m working on it, and I don’t know if I can get her. My feelers aren’t suggesting this’ll be easy. Give me a day or two, with any luck, by then I’ll have a meet up for us on the books.”

“See you then.”

“Have fun.”

“I was…” trails off and then Tim hears a dial tone. He smirks a bit at that, too, fires off a request for more information about Heidi, and then goes back to looking for some co-builders for his project.

Kevin Hussein looks nervous as he walks into Tim’s office. Getting a call from the Director of Public Corruption, even if he is a guy you know, especially if he fired you from your last job, is a nervous making sort of thing.

Tim hopes his smile will help to ease this, and it does, a little. Kevin’s shoulder unhitch, and he sits down easily enough.

“I wasn’t expecting to ever hear from you again,” Kevin says. “At least, not without a subpoena.”

Tim shakes his head a bit, gets up, goes to the coffee maker, and gestures. Kevin shakes his head at that, and Tim crosses the room to sit down across from him at the conference table.

“No subpoenas. I was wondering if you had any interest in taking another stab at law-enforcement?”

Kevin looks stunned by that. Eventually, “Uh…” comes out of his mouth followed by, “You know I wasn’t an agent, right?”

“Yes. I don’t need an agent. I’ve got agents. And I’ve got one team… I’m working on building it, and… I’m going to need someone to keep eyes on it.”

“Like a manager?” Kevin’s intrigued by that.

“More like a babysitter.”

It’s clear from Kevin’s expression that that is not the magic word to make him want to sign up. “And you thought of me?”

“I need someone good. You’re good. I’m putting together a hacker team that’s basically me holding the tiger by the tail. If they play the way I want them to, we’ll get a lot of valuable information from it. If they don’t, people get mauled. I want to know if you’re interested in stopping potential maulings?”
Kevin thinks about it. Tim knows he’s got a job with a small, local company, probably a few levels below his skill set, keeping their computers running. He likely took an intentional step down so he wouldn’t have someone too picky about his last job and lack of references, who could then give him good references for the next one.

“Why would I want this job?” Kevin asks.

“Because it’ll be challenging. You’ll be keeping eyes on at least one, and maybe more, of the slickest Black Hats I could con into working for me. And if you do your job right, they won’t know about it.”

Kevin’s looking mildly disturbed by that. “Why would you trust me with it?”

“I don’t waste good. I saw how you looked when we got to the end of the Clements case. You didn’t want that to be the way things ended. So, here it is, try number two. You want it?”

Kevin’s looking wary, like hope may be starting to shine through, but he’s afraid of letting it grow too strong. “Who would I be watching?”

“I’ve got Sinjin Patil right now, and might be able to get Heidi Partridge. Not sure who comes next, but I know this group will grow.”

Kevin looks confused when he says Sinjin, and shocked at Heidi. “I know who she is. Who’s he?”

Tim shakes his head. “Beyond Sinjin Patil, you don’t need to know.”

“Oh.”

Tim nods. “Yeah. If this works the way I hope it does, you’ll never see each other, and they won’t know you’re lurking. But lurk you will.”

“And what will they be doing?”

“I’ve given them free rein to hack any chunk of the government they feel like hacking. Sell whatever they can find. They’ve got to report what they’ve broken into, and how they did it, but if whoever got hacked can’t tighten up their own security, they’re welcome to raid the till.”

“That can’t be legal.”

“I’ll worry about that. I think what we’re going to do will be so useful, that even if it’s not, they’ll look the other way. After all, they’ve been letting the CIA pull this sort of crap for years, why not us?”

Kevin doesn’t have a good answer to that. He stares at McGee, thinking. “I sort of feel like this is a test. Like, I take this job, and I watch them do whatever it is, am I supposed to report it?”

“To me.”

“I know to you, but… They hack the DEA, should I report it to them, too?”

“If you like, but I’d prefer you didn’t. I don’t want to spend all of my time bailing these guys out of jail and on the phone with other high muckety-mucks in a massive pissing contest.”

Kevin eyes Tim, walls up, very wary and defensive. “This is how I got fired before. You told me to be smarter.”
Tim smiles at that. “I did. Take some time, check my credentials. I can offer you this job, if you want it.”

There’s a hint of a smile in Kevin’s eyes as he stands up. “I’ll do that. You can really hire me?”

“For this, I can and will.”

Two days later, Tim’s happily coding away, a snippet of part of how he wants his job triaging system to work, that he’s got to get down before it runs away, when a soft buzz almost attracts his attention, but doesn’t.

Two hours later, he checks his phone and sees that he’s gotten a response to his request for everything on Heidi Partridge.

Tim stands up, walks around his office, stretching out, as he taps the screen, looking forward to see what it was they really busted her on and with, but that’s not in his email.

“There are no records matching the person requested.”

Tim’s so shocked by that he says it out loud.

“No.” He steps back to his computer, brings up his own connection to the Federal Prison database, and begins to go through it.

Nothing.

He tries every variation of her name he can think of.

Not a word.

Tim sighs, and then rubs his eyes. He double checks, googling her name. Yep, tons of information. He’s staring at the New York Times article describing her eight consecutive life sentence term and the screen saying there is no such person in the Federal system.

“Okay,” he mutters. “Federal Witness Protection… or something like it.” But there’s a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach.

He google’s her lawyer, and puts in a call to her. No answer. No voicemail. The phone just rings. That cold feeling is getting more pronounced.

There are news stories about her until the week before everything went sideways. They said a court date had been set for spring, but, of course, by spring there wasn’t a court to have said date in. And after that, any mention of her online goes black.

He fires off an email to Jennifer, asking her to get the Federal Prosecutor who handled Heidi’s case on his calendar. Then he scans the articles, finds one that mentions interviewing her at Holston Federal Correctional Facility, and gives them a call.

He waits on hold, and eventually a polite voice answers and asks what she can do for him.

“Hi, I’m Tim McGee, Director of Public Corruption for the Federal Bureau of Investigations.” He
rattles off his ID number and waits a moment for her to confirm he’s on the up and up. “I was wondering if I could see one of your prisoners.”

“I can certainly see about arranging that. Who would you like to see?”

“Heidi Partridge.”

“Just give me a moment.”

That moment turns into ten. And ten turns into a new voice on the phone when he gets a person again.

“Director McGee?”

“Hello.”

“This is John Setter, Director of Holston Federal Correctional Facility. Who did you want to see?”

“Heidi Partridge. She’s serving eight life sentences for running Silk Road. Her case will go up before the Supreme Court as soon as we’ve got one again. She’s got information I’d like to get.”

Tim hears the swallow on the other end.

“Ah. Yes… That Heidi Partridge. She’s no longer with us.”

Tim closes his eyes and sighs, hard. “Okay. Is she dead?”

The voice on the other end trembles a bit. “We have no reason to believe that.”

“Excellent. Then you can tell me where she is now?”

The voice gets very soft. “No.”

“No, you can’t tell me, or no, you can’t tell me?”

There’s a long silence where Tim can feel that John Setter would rather say anything than what he’s about to say right now. “We… don’t know what happened to her.”

Tim bites his lip, hard. “Okay. Did she escape?”

“Maybe.” There’s a lot of fire in the next words. “My people are looking into it. Somehow she got out of our prison, without attracting any attention, so whenever she was last here, the people who regularly checked her cell, made sure she went where she was supposed to, and all the rest of it were satisfied that her not being there anymore was on the up and up, but as of right now, there are no records of her in our system, at all.”

Tim looks up at the ceiling and bites his lip again. “Any idea when she was last seen?” If the answer is before last summer he’s going to raise Clements from the dead and punch that asshole just to do it.

“We think last October.”

That’s a bit of a relief.

And then it’s not a relief at all, because something happened to her, while the world was upside down, and… “Shit,” eases out of Tim’s lips. The military handed itself over to the state national guards. But during that month when the government was down he has no idea what happened with
Federal prisons. Did the guards go to work? Did they get food shipments? “Who was running your prison last October?”

“We were handed over to the state of North Carolina, and their prison board handled it.”

“Did your people stay on?”

“Some of them. I wasn’t working here then. My predecessor,” his voice gets soft again, like if he says it quietly, it’ll be less true, “was arrested for corruption in the sweeps that happened after the Fall.”

Tim nods. A lot of Federal Employees were on Team Black Hat, and where better to have a Black Hat than running a federal prison?

“Uh huh. I will have agents over to talk with you shortly. Get a report of everything you know about her, and I’ll start the missing person’s report.”

There are times where Tim wants to be a field agent again. Right now, for one. Right now he wants to go and get in his car, and drive to…

Okay, no he doesn’t want to drive to North Carolina.

He wants to go home tonight, and spend time with his family and kids.

He does want to be investigating what happened to Heidi Partridge. He wants to know what happened to her. Did she plan her own escape? Was Penny right about her being too big of a threat to the powers that be, so they took her out? Is this just a glitch where she got transferred to something, and suddenly there are no records of it and…

Okay, no on that last one. There is no possible benign reason for this.

Tim gets a missing person’s report started, and while he types with one hand, he makes a call.

“Sinjin…”

“It’s McGee. I’ve got an assignment for you.”

“I thought part of the deal was I come up with my own assignments.”

“Heidi Partridge vanished out of a Federal Correctional Facility some time after last October without a trace.”

And that gets a pause out of Khan followed by, “You want me to find her?”

“If you can. Barring that, how she got out. I’ve got an official missing person’s report going, but she’s been gone almost a year, from a prison, and no one noticed.”

“You’re not holding out any hope of finding her through traditional methods.”

“I’ll look, rattle cages, yell at the Federal Prosecutor and all the rest of it, but no, I’m not expecting to get much. So, you’re up.”

Khan thinks about that. “Which prison was she at?”
“Holston Federal Correctional Facility.”

“I’m on it.”

“Hey, Kevin,”

“Hi, McGee.”

“So, what if I offer you a completely above the line, on the books, totally legal assignment? Would that interest you?”

This time there’s no wariness in his voice. “Yes.”

“Heidi Partridge went missing from a Federal Correctional Facility last year. I’ve got Sinjin looking for her. I want you looking, too. For her, and for what he does. I don’t want him finding her and neglecting to mention the fact to me.”

Kevin’s still a beat behind Tim. “She went missing from a federal correctional facility?”

“Yes.”

He can feel the look Kevin must be giving him.

“Exactly. We know she was there last October, and after that… We don’t know. The guy who ran the place before the current one got busted after the Fall. I’ll get his name and anything I can find on him, too.”

“Okay. So, if we’re both actually looking for her, should I meet this Sinjin guy?”

Tim’s just about to say yes, that both of them working this together would be a great idea until a tiny little niggling, sleep deprived part in the back of his head screams DANGER! WARNING! loud enough for him to remember the last time Kevin and Khan met.

“No. You’re better off compartmentalized.”

“You think he’s going to give me a better offer than you can?”

“I think he’s dangerous enough that we’re both better off with him not knowing you’re keeping an eye on him. He knows I’m doing it, and that’s fine. He doesn’t need to know you are.”

Kevin doesn’t say anything for a moment, and then adds, “Did you know there are 887 Sinjin Patils in the US.”

“Nope.” But Khan probably did when he picked that name. Hide in the crowd.

“Okay. Send me what I need to keep eyes on him. I’m in.”

“Thank you.”

Tim heads out of his office, to Jennifer. “Hey, how are you doing with tracking down that Federal
Prosecutor?"
She shakes her head.
Tim raises and eyebrow.
“Not on the rolls anymore. Vanished in October.”
“How vanished?”
“Went to work one day and never came home. His family has a missing person’s report out for him.”
Tim rubs his forehead. “It never ends.”
“Tim?”
“I’m thinking someone did some cleaning house when everything fell apart. The only question is, do we have whoever someone is? Are they sitting in a jail in New York? Or are they still jerking around puppets by the strings?”
“Finding stuff like that out is our job, right?”
Tim nods.

The problem with being the manager, especially of a very new operation, is that Tim just doesn’t have enough warm bodies in chairs to do the damn job.
Which just intensifies his desire to go out and do it, himself.
But if he’s doing it himself, the system that catches all the other damn crimes doesn’t get built.
He’s grinding his teeth together as he’s sitting at his computer, staring at this problem. This nebulous, undefined, murk of shit that…
“Okay.” He makes himself stand up and start moving around. Grinding his teeth to nubs isn’t helping anything. Why Gibbs had that baseball bat at his desk is suddenly making a lot more sense to Tim.
Is this one missing person?
Clearly, no. Not if her lawyer isn’t answering the phone and the prosecutor who worked on her case is missing person’s report missing.
Is this cleaning up one case? Is this a very well run escape? “Shit.” He’s going to need more from Khan and Kevin before he can even get a hint on that. If it is an escape… “SHIT!” Is it a kidnapping? Just because she didn’t know her customers didn’t mean that, especially after the case, that they didn’t know her, and when everything went crazy, a bunch of people may have decided having her on the outside would be a very good plan.
“Shit!”
That cold feeling creeps down his spine. The Federal Prison system got handed over to the states, who may or may not have been extremely vigorous in making sure that those prisons were run correctly. He doesn’t know if there was any sort of accounting after the Feds got the prisons back to
make sure that everyone who was supposed to be in said prisons were still in them.

“Double shit!” Like Setter, there are a lot of new wardens at different federal prisons because more than one person noticed that it would be a really good plan to make sure the guy in charge of the place let the guys in the place keep running their operations.

Tim’s jonesing for a baseball bat right now. Something to grip onto and maybe swing around some would be really nice. He confines himself to pacing around his office.

Talking out loud helps, too.

“A: Who’s missing?” He needs to find out if anyone involved in the Partridge case is still accounted for. That one is fairly simple. He can toss that down to Hotch, and he can hand it off to someone on team White Hat.

“B: Who’s missing? Meta version.” That needs a full accounting of the US Federal Prison system. Huge job. He can’t just bounce that over to Hotch. That needs a full, dedicated team of White Hats, someone who’s got some tech skills, someone who’s used to dealing with bureaucrats, someone who’s… A name forms in his mind. He doesn’t really have a mental image of the guy, because he hasn’t met him in person.

But Gibbs has. And Gibbs gave him the CV and vouched for the guy, and Tim happily handed him the New York office.

He pokes his head out of his office, “Jennifer, can you get me Mac Taylor on the line. He’s the guy I’ve got working in New York.”

Then he pops back in and starts strolling around again. “C: Who should be missing?” If there is someone they didn’t see, still pulling the strings, or at least doing it ‘round October, who else would they have vanished?

Tim sighs, hard, at that. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know how to know. He doesn’t know who would know, either.

He’s got the space for it on his organizational chart, well, at least in regards to laws and regulations. He wanted his troop of lawyers to read the damn things and figure out how to screw things up with them. And this is sort of like that. Who would you vanish if you had a vested interest in certain results? What he doesn’t have is any actual people working in that department. He doesn’t have a department, period, for that, yet.

And he’s got no clue, not in concrete, this person right here would be great at this, terms of who should run this.

And fortunately, he doesn’t have to think about that too much longer, because Mac Taylor is apparently fairly easy to get on the phone.

“Hi, Mac.”

“Director McGee.”
“Just McGee, or Tim if you like. Anyone Gibbs recommends as highly as you, doesn’t have to use my title.”

“Thanks, McGee, what has you calling?”

“How are you doing on getting your office set up?”

He can feel the smile on the other end. The smile that’s half grimace. He’s been in charge of the New York office of White Hats for about five weeks. Which is just about long enough to unpack the chairs, stick a few butts in them, and maybe slap some paint on the walls. “It’s going. Not as fast as I would like, but I’ve got some good core people.”

“Excellent. Do you have enough of them to start a big project, while ramping up?”

“How big of a project?” Tim hears eagerness in Mac’s voice. He may be doing a fine job of setting things up, but he wants real work.

“We’ve got jurisdiction over pretty much anything the government does. I just found a case where someone walked out of a federal prison, maybe.”

“Maybe?” Mac sounds intrigued.

“Maybe. She’s not there now. She was there before the Fall. No one knows what happened.”

“Sounds interesting, but not big.” Mac isn’t wrong about that.

“I’ve already got the case of the missing lady assigned. The big part is, how many other people vanished from federal prisons during the Fall? Got ‘transferred?’ Or ‘early released?’ Or…”

Tim can feel Mac leaning back in his chair and nodding. “I’ve got you. See if there’s been a full census since the Fall. See if that census actually makes sense. See who’s missing, see why, and find out what happened to them, and how they got out, and who let them out.”

“Yeah. Top to bottom, check the whole thing out.”

Mac exhales audibly. “That’s big.”

“Yep. Can you swing it?”

Tim's pleased to hear the pause while Mac thinks through it. “I can start it. If I put everyone I’ve got on it, we can begin, but I don’t have the man power, not yet, to do it right, or finish it anytime soon.”

“I don’t have a set time for finishing. Build your office, keep adding new people, and as you get them, put them on this. Keep sending me reports on what you find. My guess is for the first few months mostly what you’ll be doing is keeping some baby agents on hold with different prisons, yelling at them to send over lists of who was there in September of ‘16, and who’s there now, and an explanation for anyone who’s on list A and not on list B.”

Mac audibly smirks at that. “These things do start slow. I’ll get people on it.”

“Thanks, Mac.”

_____________________________________________________

After dinner, during the part of the night where the little kids are down, and Donnie is having dinner
number one (or lunch number three, it’s hard to keep track with these little guys) Tim explains the situation to his spouses.

“Does anyone else have the image of Kevin, in the StormTrooper outfit, bursting in on Heidi, ‘I’m here to rescue you!’ while Khan hangs back in the Han Solo costume?” Abby asks as he gets to the end of the missing hacker part.

Tim laughs at that, and then says, “If I thought I could get them working together without killing each other, I might have tried it, but…” he shakes his head. “Plus, it’s just as likely that Kevin busts in, and finds out that Heidi isn't Leia so much as the Grand Moff Tarkin, so she shoots him. Kevin’s not getting any closer to any of this than a computer keyboard."

“I’m glad you’re working with him again. He was always a good guy, just…” Abby’s not sure exactly how to finish that without casting dispersions about Kevin.

“Yeah, just… He’s reminding me of pretty much my entire team. A little stupid, a little greedy, and little too willing to look the other way if it worked out well for them. I smacked his hand a while back, so, with any luck the lesson stung, and he wants to do better now.”

“You think she ran, or got taken, or…” Jimmy’s asking.

Tim shrugs.

“The gut doesn’t know?” Breena adds.

“The gut knows something is bad, it doesn’t know what flavor of bad it is. Which leads to most of the rest of what I did today…” And from there Tim’s explaining what he’s got Mac doing, and how many possible levels of crud may be going on, he wraps with, “the thing is, I need someone who can look at who’s in prison, or should be in prison, or was in prison, and figure out from there who may have been scooped up. I mean, look… with what we’re doing now, I can only get people who were so sloppy as to leave a record that that person was in prison in place, and then had them vanish. If someone’s good enough to completely erase the record of them, I can’t find them, not with what I’ve got Mac’s guys doing.

“I need someone who knows what to look for, and can spend a lot of time online, checking around, seeing who got tossed in prison and who may have completely vanished, and I’ve got no idea who to put in that job.”

“You need a Black Hat’s Black Hat,” Jimmy says.

“Yeah, I need… Senior. Someone who knows everyone and what they’ve all been doing, but I need it for the real scumbags. Not somewhat sleazy business grifters.”

That gets some looking around, and Tim lets himself slouch back against the sofa, eyes closed.

After a minute of that, where the only sound is thinking adults and a nursing Donnie, Jimmy says, “Ummm… I mean, we don’t know, not really, what exactly he was doing, but… What about your Uncle Tom? Black Hat’s Black Hat, that was kind of his job description, right?”

Tim blinks, slowly. “Yeah.” Then he very gently boops Donnie on the tip of the nose. “You need to sleep longer, because I should have been able to think of that. All of us should have been able to think of that. We had dinner with King Black Hat three weeks ago at Shabbos, and somehow none of us thought of him.”

Jimmy clears his throat.
“Okay, Daddy thought of him. The rest of us should have gotten it at the same time, and I should have gotten it early enough that I would have just told you about calling him.”

Speaking of things Tim should have thought of, when he made the decision to call his Uncle Tom, he figured he’d call in the morning, because he’d done all the damn work he wanted to do and he wanted some time to just be with his family preferably while awake and when no one was crying.

But, the thing he didn’t think of is that it was his night for Donnie, and to say he’s hurting for sleep come morning time is something of an understatement.

He’s grumbling around his office, muttering about how there’s a reason people have kids when they’re teenagers/early twenty-somethings, and that reason is the ability to go days without sleep and not turn into a cranky snapping turtle.

He realizes he hasn’t actually put the coffee pod into his coffee maker, which is why he’s just sipping hot water, milky hot water. Sweet, milky, hot water he was paying so damn little attention to that he managed to doctor the damn thing up, without noticing the complete lack of coffee in his beverage.

“Stupid cranky snapping turtles.” He pours out the "coffee" and starts anew. This time making sure that there is indeed coffee in the machine.

He gets his computer on, and his email up. A few reports that he wants to see are there. Hotch has handed off the missing person investigation of Heidi Partridge to Seeley Booth, who Tim sort of remembers is someone Fornell thought would be good at this sort of thing.

Official investigation, check.

There’s an email from Kevin and Khan. He opens Khan’s first. The first paragraph is about how his next major hacking project is the Federal Prison system, and that a lot of guys are going to be getting their sentences reduced to nothing if they don’t tighten up their security.

Tim sighs, decides that’s fair game, and, while reading it, forwards the email onto Kevin, so he knows what’s up on this side of things.

Then he gets onto the next bits. Currently, there are some records that Heidi Partridge is a person who did time in federal prison for accessory to murder, blah, blah, blah, accessory to tax evasion, accessory to drug sales, accessory to blah, blah, blah and blah. Tim notes that she wasn’t convicted of actually doing anything herself, just helping other people do it.

Khan found her court dates for example, and her original arrest records. He was able to locate what jail she was in, who at the DEA talked to her, and the original case notes. He couldn’t find what happened to her after she was convicted. That’s where the trail went blank.

His last bit was about how he’s starting to hunt down where records should be, and looking for erase marks.

His letter from Kevin covers most of the same stuff, namely that Kevin’s reported that’s what Khan’s doing, and for his own investigations, he’s found that all of the bank accounts that Heidi had when she was arrested are still frozen, and apparently untouched.
Tim nods as he reads that, sighs a little, sips his coffee again, and comes to the conclusion that they’re likely tracking a dead woman, or people want them to think she’s dead.

He sends both of them ‘Good jobs! Keep it up!’ emails, and moves on.

The next step is another email, explaining what he wants to Penny, and asking her for a congressional warrant for it. He’s not sure if he can get it, even with that, but…

If Heidi is dead, or hidden well enough they can’t find her, he obviously cannot use her skills to modify her marketplace of secrets into a whistleblower site. Which means he needs to get into everything the DEA had on her, which, hopefully, includes all of her computers.

If he can lay hands on them, he can, along with the tech guys he really needs to get around to hiring, reverse engineer her goodies and use it to build his system.

He sips more of his coffee, feeling like he might have a few brain cells to rub together, and then, grabs his phone to call his Uncle Tom.

“Hi, Uncle Tom.”

“Tim?” Tom’s not so much checking to see who is calling, there’s only one guy with a Virginia number who calls him Uncle Tom, as expressing surprise to hear from him.

“Yeah. Could I take you to lunch, or coffee, and pick your brain some?”

“Uh… Yeah, sure. About what?” He sounds wary, and Tim wonders if he’s expecting some painful, emotional family heart to heart, trying to learn more about why John is who he is.

“A job offer, of all things, and if it’s not up your alley, then maybe you know someone who wants it.”

Tom sounds significantly more relaxed as he says, “Point me to the coffee.”

There are days when Tim really misses the Diner. Today is one of them. He’d like nothing better than to take his Uncle to a place where everyone knows him, won’t eavesdrop, will provide attentive service, and the food is just good.

He knows the part of town the Diner was in is pretty well cleared out now, but he doesn’t know if Elaine and her husband are coming back. He thinks they’re on the invite list for Gibbs’ wedding, so with any luck he’ll get to find out if they’re coming back sooner or later.

There is a coffee shop a few blocks down from the Hoover Building. It’s new. He’s never been in before, but it appears to have both coffee and tables, which is all Tim really needs.

So he’s there, and so is his Uncle, who ordered the largest cup they sell of the blackest, strongest coffee they sell. (Tim’s got a sugar-free, hazelnut latte in front of him, with whipped cream, and he’s
practically daring Tom to make an issue of it. He ordered it intentionally, so he could dare Tom to make an issue of it, and is a bit embarrassed that he did that, but the guy does look and sound a lot like John. He doesn’t, however, make any comments about Tim’s ‘girly’ drink.)

“How are you liking retirement?” Tim asks once they’re both sitting down.

Tom looks exasperated. “Dad had the right idea, work until you drop. McGees were not meant to retire. I’m bored.”

Tim’s not sure he agrees with that, but he's also not about to comment on it, beyond, “Here’s hoping I can help with that.” And he gets into what he’s thinking.

The smile on his Uncle’s face gets wider and wider as he goes. Tim’s actually feeling like he’s got to rein this in a bit, because the guy’s about to leap up and immediately sign on for anything he can give him. “It’s not a field position. No cloak and daggering. At least, not for you. I need someone who can tell me who I need to make sure we’ve still got, and that they’re just sitting their butts in prison, doing nothing.”

“Look, Tim, in the last six months, I’ve bought a house. I’ve fixed it up. I got all of our stuff moved. I’ve gone to every movie Lynn’s wanted to see. I found the end of my never-ending-to-read list. We’ve seen every TV show ever made. I’m… done. Anything you could have me doing is a step in the right direction. And, I think I can take it one step further. You want to make sure we’ve still got the guys we had. And that makes sense. I can also put guys you didn’t know you wanted on the radar.”

“That would be good. I don’t know when I’ll have people—“

“Tim, my whole team is suddenly retired. I’ve got fifteen guys, trained SEALS who followed me to the CIA, who helped me take the whole thing down, who have been sitting on their asses for most of a year, which is something none of us were designed to do. I didn’t just go solo when I sent that envelope. My whole team vanished one night, because none of us wanted to be part of what we were doing. Just stick an FBI badge in my hand, and I’ll start making calls. By Monday, we’ll be up and ready to go.”

Tim feels an insane rush of pleasure at that. This is exactly the sort of thing he wants to hear. And since they were all CIA, they’ve all got the certifications to be Federal Agents, down.

Tim gulps his coffee, wide smile on his face. Then he stands up. “Come on. Let’s get you introduced to Walter Karningham. He runs my Black Hat ops, and I have a feeling you two will get on like a house on fire.”

Tom McGee practically leaps up, ready to get to it.

As Tim’s heading back up the stairs to his office, away from Walter’s he’s again struck with how much he wants to be doing… Any of it, really.

He wants to be searching computers, looking for hackers who erased criminals. He wants to be checking bank records. (Which is a sign of exactly how far gone he is. No one, outside the forensic accountants want to check bank records.) He wants to be seeing what happened to Heidi’s lawyer. He wants to be looking through all of it.
His shoulders slump a bit as he continues up the stairs.

Investigating is fun.

But managing is useful.

In the time it took him to get all of the players into place, get them talking to each other, get them investigating, he could have done… Maybe some bank records, the missing person’s reports, and a just gotten a link up to the Holston Correctional Facility computers.

He walks past Jennifer, who’s writing at her computer as he heads in. There are things she can do. And he can do pretty much all of them. But if he’s doing them, he’s not doing something bigger, something more important.

He gets that, feels it, as he’s sitting at his desk.

But doing it was fun.

He opens his email. Penny’s been able to get him that Congressional Warrant for basically anything the DEA and the IRS may have involving Heidi Partridge.

He smiles at that, imagining going in, grabbing…

Except it won’t be him. Because he’s managing. Tim sighs again. He forwards it to Hotch, along with a “Get me those computers as soon as you’ve got them,” and then gets back to doing the thing he can do that no one else can.

Reading resumes. It’s boring. He doesn’t enjoy doing it. But no one else can set up this damn team to make it do what it needs to do.

And maybe, once he’s got enough butts in seats, he can actually start doing some fun stuff again.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, after House Rules, I knew I had to get those three together.
Too Much and Not Enough

On October 23rd, 2017, Tim starts the day the way he starts many days.

Get up, brush teeth, help corral babies, and then he’s got a bit of time for his workout.

Which is part of his baby corralling routine, too.

He’s doing his pushups, Kelly riding his back, and to (according to Jimmy) encourage him to not cheat on going all the way down, Sean’s on his back, looking up, getting a raspberry blown on his belly as Tim dips down.

The kids think it’s a blast, and they like the next bit, toddler arm curls, even better.

He’s thinking, as he’s standing up, Molly gripping his left arm, Kelly gripping his right, and curling each arm, lifting the kiddos, that this time, five years ago, he was just waking up, in his tiny, bachelor apartment, with a sense of excitement and anticipation, because he knew the night was going to end with his second first date with Abby.

He remembers brushing his teeth, carefully packing up his ‘80s themed costume, begging the universe for a day with no case, checking his coat pocket nine times to make sure he had the tickets, and then off to his car, ready to start his day.

Fantasies of said date spinning in his mind all through the day.

And absolutely nothing, not his wildest, kinkiest, most off the wall fantasies, could have possibly allowed him to contemplate that that date would lead him here.

He’s able to duck into the shower before Abby gets out.

He gives her a quick kiss, they’re both running a bit late, and he’s not sure if she’s interested in being later. She kisses back, with enough heat that he’s sure she knows what today is, too.

His hands settle on her hips, and her arms wrap around his neck.

“Good morning,” she says with a grin.

“Yeah!” he’s smiling back. “It really is.” He nuzzles against her neck, feeling her skin, glorious hot, wet, and silky under his.

She’s rubbing up against him, deliberately, still smiling, and says, “I don’t think it’s even remotely fair to suggest that Jimmy and Breena go solo with all five kids, not with Donnie less than a month old, so we can get a night out.”

Tim half nods, but mostly kisses her shoulder at that. He agrees, and she knows it.

“But that doesn’t mean we can’t get a slightly longer than normal shower.”

He’s really grinning at that as he pulls away from her shoulder to kiss her lips. “Got an 8:30 meeting.” He’s not saying no, just giving her the limits.
“Then you’ll need to be quick, won’t you?”

He drops to his knees, kissing down her body, lips stroking over collarbone, breast, tummy, and hip, before settling in front of her, hands on her hips, and kissing her properly. She moans at that, hands clenched in his hair, rocking against his lips.

He sighs, one hand stroking her, the other stroking himself, while his tongue slips over her skin, and the water from their shower cascades down his back.

Five years ago, this he could, and did, imagine. Often.

Her thigh on his shoulder, heel against his back, body quivering on his fingers as she moans his name.

Yes, this filled up many hours of his imagination.

He doesn’t even give her a second to stop twitching before he’s up, deep inside her, her legs around his waist, her ass in his hands, groaning at the feel of her on him, in his arms, around his body.

She’s bouncing against him, and he’s focusing on how she feels against him. The hot slide and pleasure sparking up his spine, through his dick, and down to his toes.

Fast and hard and sweet. His body thrilling at the slip of hers against it. Yes, he imagined that a lot.

Five years, that’s 1826 days, 43,824 hours, 2,629,440 minutes, and he’s not about to say each and every one of them has been unmitigated bliss, but with her in his life, they’ve all been better than they would have been otherwise.

The water’s starting to run cold, and they’re standing together, quietly, kissing gently, enjoying the glow.

He strokes her face, shifting wet tendrils of blond hair away from her forehead. She’s looking up at him, her hand drifting up and down his back.

“Five years, huh?”

She smiles at that. “Who’d have thought?”

“Me. It’s better than I imagined it, but…” He kisses her soundly. “Every single day for the rest of my life, I am going to thank any and all gods who might listen, that when I asked if you wanted to see The Generics, you said yes.”

She laughs at that, and kisses him again. “Pretty words from my writer. I love you.”

“And I love you.”
more importantly code with each other.

Covington’s been explaining how the government doesn’t do that.

Tim’s feeling his teeth grit, as he’s explaining how they’ve got a private version of it, now, and they don’t have to open their project to the wider world to use GitHub, though he doesn’t appear to be swaying Covington.

Covington’s explaining that GitHub and things like it are a violation of their online security protocols and it just can’t be done.

“Who makes the protocols?” Tim finally asks as they go around and around about he needs this and she’s telling him it’s against regs.

“Not me! And even if it was, this isn’t something you can glare me into submission on. I actually read that report you sent, the one with your pet hacker. If we use something like GitHub there’s one more portal I’ve got to defend, and I’m up to my eyeballs for the next two years covering up the holes he found. So, no. No, GitHub! Find another way to talk to each other. One that only uses our in-house programs.”

Tim’s fairly proud of the fact that he does not, in fact, growl in response to that. He does sigh. But, she’s got a point. He literally pulled a code red on her, and is now asking her to do more.

He’s in a black mood as he gets out of that meeting, but as he checks his phone, he feels some of that bleed away.

Abby’s sent him a playlist.

He smiles a bit at it, pops his earbuds in, and listens to “The Generics Cover Basic Love Songs” as he starts hunting down who the hell wrote that stupid bloody protocol and how to get it shifted. He figures that at the speed the FBI moves, he should be able to get it done just about a year after his IT people have taken care of Khan’s first range of attacks.

He sighs again, wondering how long it’ll take him to get his guys to build an “in house” version that actually works. Supposedly they’ve got something, but… Maybe it’s not as clunky as he thinks it is.

By the end of lunch he’s hunted down the “protocol” and is in the process of doing the actual, by the books, official, here’s-why-this-thing-sucks-and-you-need-to-change-it paperwork.

And the reason why he’s doing the damn paperwork is that the “protocol” may not be law, but there is an actual law that spawned it, and he figures he’s more than close enough to the edge on a bunch of the other stuff he wants to get done, so he’s not about to get shot in the ass for violating this thing. (Though if he can’t get an exemption for what he wants to do with this, he may be tempted to change that position.)

He’s also got a meeting set for time with three of his coders, to see what they think about trying to beat the in house system into shape. (He’s guessing that meeting is going to be a whole lot of laughing followed by a ‘Wait, you aren’t joking? Fuck!’ moment.)
Paperwork filed, he gets to the best part of his at work day. Updates on his prison case.

On the meta-level Mac has successfully gotten nine Federal prisons to send him their data: fast, easy, with notes. The downside is, there are 103 Federal Prisons. As Mac has pointed out to him, this system is beyond a mess, and the 9 that responded were all in states like Missouri, well out of the limelight, a bit underpopulated, and far enough away from the any major population centers that no one thought it was worth trying to get more than a few rats into the system.

He’s even found that almost 99% of the prisoners in those nine prisons are accounted for.

Or as he put it to Tim when he was checking in, “There you go, every honest man in the US Federal Prison system has answered the call. The rest of them are covering up, cleaning up, looking for who to spin or blame, or so incompetent they can’t pull the numbers together yet.”

“So, you’re saying you’re gonna be busy for a while,” Tim replied.

“I’m counting the days until the next graduating class from the Academy. Can’t wait to get some new blood in here.”

“You and me, both.”

On the behind the scenes level, his Uncle’s sent the first of the reports, and this one pretty much covers: We’re all in place, ready to go, and are moving. Real reports coming soon.

Given that he’s been on the payroll for less than two weeks, and that it took him more than a week to even hunt down all of his guys, Tim figures that’s reasonable.

On the ‘main investigation level’ he’s got a headache that won’t quit. “So, let me get this straight, ‘The DEA brought the case against Heidi in the first place.’”

Hotch nods.

“And then somehow, they transferred all of their evidence to the IRS.”

Another nod.

“And the IRS won’t release any of that evidence because the Congressional Warrant we’ve got isn’t —“

“Legally binding according to them. Their lawyers are claiming that as of this point in time Congress is overstepping their Constitutional boundaries and cannot order bench warrants for criminal cases.”

Tim groans.

“So, we got an actual Federal Judge to re-issue the warrant, and they still wouldn’t play ball because
the judge we found was appointed by Clinton. Who, like everyone else from 1932 until six months ago, got elected with a stolen electoral college.”

Tim bangs his head against his desk.

“Then we got one of the twenty-eight new judges, appointed by the new President, and passed by the current Congress, to write a warrant, and they tell us that that one doesn’t work, either because —”

Tim sits up, slowly. “We changed the election laws without amending the US Constitution.”

Hotch nods. “Exactly. So, storm the castle, or what?”

Tim writes down the name of his uncle and his direct number. “This is the guy who’ll plan and run the op. I want you to brief LaCroix about all of this, and I want her live on TV explaining how the IRS is impeding everything. Then I want you to take her, and your collection of warrants, and a camera crew, back to the IRS, and politely ask for everything they’ve got on Heidi Partridge’s. If you don’t come back with the motherlode, send in Tom McGee.”

Hotch seems to enjoy the idea of that.

And, then, of course, there’s the actual case: Find Heidi Partridge.

Khan communicates mostly by text and email. Kevin seems to like coming to visit in person, and as Tim’s thinking about tonight, and what might constitute a nice little treat to bring home, Kevin pops in.

“News?” Tim asks.

Kevin sits down across from him, shaking his head. “Not on Heidi, and not on Sinjin. She’s still vanished, and he’s playing fast and loose with the rules, but he hasn’t ditched them completely.”

“That’s good.” Tim realizes that doesn’t quite cover what he’s attempting to convey. “The fact that he’s still playing by the rules.”

“Yeah. Great.” Kevin shakes his head. “We’re going to hit the brick wall soon. At least, I am. He’ll probably go dark web and see if he can find anything in the code that looks like her.”

Tim doesn’t think that’s a bad plan.

“There’s something I want to do. Something legal.”

“I’m listening…”

“There was a case at NCIS, before I got there, but… I mean, you guys kind of got touted as rock stars for it. Save Ziva by tracking CafPow! I want all the case files on her. If she’s alive, and hidden outside the US, there’s probably a CafPow, or something like that, that she wants.”

Tim smiles at that idea. “Look, if I can shake anything out of the IRS—“

Kevin flashes him a perplexed look.
“They’re the ones who ended up with the evidence.”

“Okay…” He looks doubtful.

“Yeah. I know. If I can get it free from them, I’ll pass it on. Meanwhile, if you want to go talk to the people who she used to teach, well, their parents, go for it. Maybe she likes gummy bears or something.”

“I’m hoping,” Kevin stands up to head out. Then he pops his head back in. “If I ever wanted to become an actual agent… How…”

“Go talk to some people first. If you like it, we’ll talk more about it.”

Kevin half nods, that’s good enough for him, for right now.

Having gotten in a little early, Tim’s feeling okay with leaving a little early, too. He may not be coming up with a vast font of “treat” ideas, so maybe he’ll settle back with a good old standby, go home early, cook, and make sure everyone else just has to walk in, sit down, and food’s ready for them.

Heck, if he’s feeling really frisky, and something looks good in the grocery store, maybe he’ll even make cocktails.

He smiles at the image of that, thinking of Breena watching those margaritas Jimmy had whipped up last summer. She didn’t get to have any, and she wanted one. Abby liked them, too… And suddenly he’s got dinner ideas…

“Are you listening to ‘80s pop?” Jimmy asks as he catches the tune Tim’s got playing. Today’s his first day back at work, and he’s just getting in.

“Yes.” Tim’s not just listening, he’s actively bopping around a little, too, as he’s working his way through putting dinner (shrimp tacos) together. Right now he’s on guacamole, and in a minute he’ll shanghai Jimmy into drinks.

“Oh huuuh…” Jimmy says warily, seeing a collection of limes, tequila, and agave syrup. “I thought this stuff made you break out in hives.”

Tim half shrugs. He doesn’t normally, under any circumstances, listen to ‘80s pop. “This has some good memories attached to it.”

Jimmy doesn’t need to be told what to do with the limes. He hangs his jacket up, rolls up his sleeves, and gets to it, as the Generics move onto their next song.

“You have memories of this? This is Centerfold. We were… six when this came out? I mean, I remember some skating dates where they’d play this as a throwback, but… You didn’t do stuff like that.”
“I don’t think I’d ever heard it until I was in grade school. Neither of my parents liked pop.”

“Uh huh… So…” Jimmy starts to roll the limes, and he can see Tim slicing up onions to add to the guacamole.

“You’re the singer. Whose voice is this?” Tim asks.

Jimmy stops, and really listens. “This is a cover.”

“Yep. And,” he checks his watch, “almost exactly five years ago, I was getting dressed up to go see a cover band do some music I don’t normally like, because I thought the girl in question might enjoy a night out all dressed up listening to fun, loud music.”

Jimmy laughs. “It’s your anniversary.”

“It’s our anniversary.”

“And where is the girl in question?”

“I got a text five minutes ago saying she’d just gotten off of I-95.”

“So home in ten.”

“Yes. I’ll get food on the table, you mix up the drinks, we get kids in chairs, then mine’ll get home, we’ll wake yours up, and dinner with our ladies is on.”

Jimmy smiles at that while shaking his head, and begins to ream the lime.

Breena’s the last one at the table. She’d been having an awfully nice nap, and really wanted to stay that way.

But, food calls. And while it’s generally a good idea to let the sleeping new mama lie, it’s also a good plan to make sure she gets fed.

So, half-asleep, rubbing her eyes, she slowly heads toward the dinner table. And stops a little short. There is, of course, the normal chaos of dinner with nine people, five of whom are under the age of four, but there’s also shrimp tacos, and chips and guacamoles, and margaritas, and this is significantly fancier and more involved than the average dinner at the McPalmer house on a weeknight routine is.

“We celebrating?” she asks as she sits down, and sips her drink with a little sigh. Right now cold sweet, salty, and sour is hitting her just right. She also notices her glass is about half the size of everyone else’s, because if she has a full one, it’ll hit a few levels beyond ‘just right.’

“October 23,” Abby says, while making sure that Anna’s shrimp are cut small enough.

“Right. Happy Anniversary!” She helps herself to a few chips, and then makes sure that Molly’s not just licking the guacamole off of hers. “Eat the chip, too, Molly.”

They hear crunching to go with the next bite, so that’s a good sign.

Tim’s reaching across, passing Jimmy the hot sauce, and says, “You know, I never heard your first
“Don’t even know when it is,” Abby adds. “We know there was a moment when the not quite-Doctor Palmer looked across a room at a mortuary convention and saw Ms. Breena Slater, but…”

Jimmy smiles a bit. “Actually, that was the very newly minted Dr. Palmer. Trust me, I didn’t have time for conventions or dates when I was still doing my residency. I got my degree in December, and that was…”

“January,” Breena adds. “I almost missed it because we had a bad accident on New Year’s, and ended with three members of the same family, in addition to the rest of our regular routine. Dad told me to go anyway. Can’t keep my license if I don’t get enough continuing education hours, and the deadline was coming up hard and fast.”

“Which worked out quite well for me,” Jimmy smiles, stroking the back of her hand, looking at her with tenderness in his gaze, and a heartbeat later, his eyes snap away from Breena, “Molly!”

Molly pouts at him, but stops trying to put the chip she just licked the guacamole off of back into the dish of guacamole. She eats the chip, slowly.

“This might be a better story for after dinner,” Breena says.

Tim, who’s been listening with interest, looking forward to hearing this, stands up to grab Donnie, who’s in his bouncy chair, and fussing. Eating with one hand, walking a fussy baby around the kitchen, while keeping eyes on four other kids, is really all anyone can do.

So, they enjoy the tacos, and the drinks, and manage to get some brief updates of how today went. Things like: “The IRS are jerks.” “Major Mass Spec is officially going to be retired next year.” And “No dead body today.”

Toward the end of it, Jimmy says, “So, how long before we can have a sit down dinner in which we get to eat and have a full conversation?”

Abby and Breena laugh like that’s the funniest thing he’s ever said.

Tim actually thinks about it and says, “Probably not more than another ten years.”

Dinner, playtime, bath time, bedtime. Tim’s kind of hoping he’s overestimating the ten years thing.

As best he can remember he was… seven…ish… maybe before his mom could say, “Go get ready for bed,” and he could pretty much do it on his own.

Granted, he didn’t have to share a bathroom with anyone.

He’s toweling off Sean, watching the girls, and Molly’s… kind of… if he squints… maybe… Yeah, nope. Not yet. She’s almost four, and if left to her own devices can apply some random amount of toothpaste to a brush, chew on the brush, and then put it back, un-rinsed, on the sink.

“Go get ready for bed,” is still more than a while off.
Jimmy’s brushing Anna’s teeth when his, and Tim’s phones buzz.

Tim’s got the free hand, so he checks his. “Tony. The Pirates have made the World Series. He wants to know if we’re free next week to take Gibbs out for his bachelor party.”

“Assuming all the usual caveats…” Jimmy says.

Tim texts back. Yeah. When and where?

*Fornell’s getting tickets. We’re gonna aim for Pittsburgh unless it’s sold out. Leon’s getting the jet. All you two have to do is show up and stay awake.*

*Thanks, Tony.*

“What’s a bachelor party?” Molly asks, perking up. She really likes parties.

“That’s when, before you get married, all of your guy friends take you out to celebrate,” Tim says.

“For UnclePop, we’re going to take him to see a baseball game,” Jimmy adds.

Molly scrunches up her face at that idea. “Cake?”

“Nope. Baseball.” Jimmy knows that Molly thinks baseball is *boring*.

Tim nods at that. “Baseball and beer.”

Her face wrinkles up even more. She’s smelled beer, and was even allowed a tiny sip of it, and cannot, for the life of her, imagine why anyone would voluntarily drink it.

“I don’t wanna go.”

Tim and Jimmy share a look, relived. “That’s okay,” Tim says. “You don’t have to.”

“I still get to be the flower girl?”

“Yes, you do!” Jimmy says, voice bright. “This is before the wedding. At the wedding you still get to get all dressed up, and walk down the aisle, and drop petals on the ground, and then Abbi will follow you.”

Molly nods, happy about that.

All kids, except for Donnie, who’s on yet another meal, are in bed.

Breena’s got him on her chest, slurping away, settled into bed, and the rest of her mates join her there. There’s something to be said for quiet family time in bed, talking. All of them like it, and this is as good a time as any.

Jimmy’s pulling off his clothing. Tim’s taking care of his own getting ready for bed routine. He’s figuring he’s going to listen, and then he’s going to sleep because it’s his night with little dude. Abby’s already in bed, with Breena, looking pretty relaxed and tired, because last night was her night with little dude.
Breena’s looking tired, too, because all nights are her night with little dude, as Jimmy slides into bed next to her, spooning up at her back, slipping an arm around her, under Donnie, giving her a little extra support.

Once Tim’s got his teeth brushed and has joined them, Abby says, “So, it’s January, we’re at a mortuary conference, and…”

Tim’s been thinking about that since they started this conversation, and he’s got a question, “Jimmy, what were you doing at a mortuary conference? You guys don’t embalm anyone.”

“Nope. But we use a lot of the same supplies they do, and Ducky’s got to buy them. He sent me off to network, get to know the guys who make the tools we use, and so forth and so on.”

Breena twists, giving Jimmy a little smile. “I think he was just getting you out of the morgue for a few days.”

“Nope. But we use a lot of the same supplies they do, and Ducky’s got to buy them. He sent me off to network, get to know the guys who make the tools we use, and so forth and so on.”

Breena twists, giving Jimmy a little smile. “I think he was just getting you out of the morgue for a few days.”

“Or he could have been just sending me off. It’s not like we go through that much surgical silk. Or that one brand is really different from any other.”

“So, how’d you run into each other?” Abby asks.

“It was my first—“

“And only…” Breena adds.

“And only mortuary conference, and I was sticking out like something of a sore thumb. Like you pointed out, I don’t embalm, I don’t do makeup, I don’t sell coffins, I don’t do cremation prep, I don’t handle any of the legal stuff that goes with any of that, so… I was kind of… bored… at some of the talks. So, I was… um… paying significantly more attention to the people around me than to the topics of conversation. I mean… Look, I know it matters how good your different makeups and putties are at covering the marks of death, but… It’s just not anything I need to know. So, I wasn’t paying attention to how well different makeups dealt with different humidity levels. I was watching the gorgeous blonde, who was paying attention, avidly, to the conversation.”

“I’m sitting there, taking notes, because at that point we weren’t using an airbrush for makeup yet, and, doing good makeup really matters in my job. It’s got to look soft and natural and it’s got to stay on and it’s got to cover… Everything. So, this guy is talking about airbrush techniques, and how you can’t really use the water-based stuff because it’s just too light to really cover what we need to cover, and I keep feeling eyes on me.

“The first time I felt it, I looked around, but didn’t catch Jimmy staring.”

He shrugs. “I didn’t want to look like a creep.”

“The second time, I did.”

“Because you smiled a bit when you looked the first time. Like you were curious about who may have been interested.”

Tim nods, approving of Jimmy’s stealthy ogling technique. “Only let them catch you when you know it’s welcome.”

Jimmy nods back. “That’s the goal.”

“So, the second time I look up, there’s this guy, and he’s smiling at me, and… He’s Harry Potter, all
grown up. The only part missing is the scar.”

Jimmy chuckles and rolls his eyes a little at that. “J.K. Rowling’s later books in the series: Harry Potter and the Y Incision, Harry Potter and the Father-In-Law of Doom, Harry Potter and The Vibrating Wand…”

The other three of them like that.

“I flash him a little smile, and then go back to doing what I’m supposed to be, namely paying attention to the lecturer, learning about how silicon based makeups hold up better and cover better.”

“And having gotten that smile, I’m coming up with a plan. The lectures go all day, but we’ve got a lunch break, and who knows, maybe, if I’m lucky, I can get a lunch date out of this.”

“Alas, he wasn’t lucky. The lunch break was two hours, and like I said, we were slammed. So, I got out of class, practically sprinted off, galloped back to Slaters’, and got to work.”

“So, class breaks, I’m gearing up to go say, ‘Hi,’ I look down to put my pad of doodles into my bag, look back up, and she’s gone.”

“Was there pouting?” Abby asks.

“Major pouting!” Jimmy replies. “I went off, found myself some food, kicked around a bit, and then went back, hoping she’d be there for the second half of the class. But, time’s ticking on. The lecturer is getting going, and her seat is empty. And then it wasn’t. Someone else was sitting in it.”

“Traffic.”

“Ten minutes later, I’m sitting there, with a pad covered in scribbled and doodles, staring at the wall, mentally smacking Ducky upside the back of the head for even suggesting this, when someone slides into the seat next to me and whispers, ‘Did I miss anything?’”

Breena adds, “And Jimmy swallowed his tongue, stuttered for a moment, and then grinned sheepishly and said…”

“I honestly don’t know. This isn’t exactly my thing. I’m a Medical Examiner.”

“So, what’s got you here?” I asked, quietly, pulling my pad out of my bag.”

Jimmy’s stroking Breena’s shoulder gently with his chin, as his hand helps to cradle Donnie. “And there was the thought in my head, ‘I’m here because you are.’ That that was it, the whole reason why I’d be here at this place at this time was to meet you. And the thought that actually came out, ‘Supposedly, I’m networking. Jimmy Palmer, NCIS, Assistant Medical Examiner,’ I held out my hand, and you shook it, which made me feel about nine feet tall, and then you told me your name, and that you were a Mortician at Slaters’, and then you shut up, turned toward the guy leading the class, and got back to being a good student, while I sat there and picked out names for our kids.”

“You did not!” Breena says, grinning at him.

Jimmy smirks a bit, kissing her shoulder, stroking his index finger over Donnie’s back. “Maybe I was intently thinking about making them.”

Tim and Abby laugh, and Tim adds, “That I believe.”

Jimmy gets a bit more serious, after that. “Not sure if I ever believed in love at first sight. Not sure if I
do now. But, there was something special there, for me at least. I’d certainly run into horny at first sight often enough to know how that felt, and yes, that was there, too, but there was more.”

Breena leans her face against his, and then turns to kiss him. “I felt it. Something… it wasn’t like, ‘oh this is the person I’m going to spend the rest of my life with,’ but there was a sense of rightness.”

Jimmy nods at that. “Yeah. The click of a puzzle piece sliding into place.”

“And…” she looks like she feels silly saying this, “there was a literal tingle when my hand touched yours. I’ve never felt that, anywhere, with anyone, ever.”

“I didn’t know that,” Jimmy says.

She shrugs a bit. “Did you feel it?”

He shakes his head. “Nah. Just the rush of you touching me, and how soft your hand was.”

“Just got out of the mortuary. Had about a gallon of moisturizer slathered all over them when I left.”

“So, I sat there and daydreamed. And doodled. And, because I was sitting right next to you, I couldn’t just spend three hours gazing at you, so I gave you the occasional side eye, watching the way you watched the lecturer, or the way your fingers moved the pen across the page—“

“You were watching me write?”

He lifts her fingers to his lips, kissing them. (And Donnie chirps a bit at that, apparently that’s a bit more jostling than he likes when eating.) “You’ve got really pretty hands. Trust me, by the end of that lecture I could have described everything you were wearing, what pen you were using, who made your bag, how many earring studs you had, and what they were.”

“Okay, that’s borderline creepy.”

“Which is why I’m good at not getting caught. Eventually, the lecturer got done, and as we were packing up, I said to you, ‘So, I’m supposed to be networking, getting to know local morticians, and if you’d be interested, I’d certainly like to get to know you better. Want to get a drink with me? Maybe dinner if we hit it off?’”

“Smooth,” Tim says.

“Oh yeah. I was giving James Bond a run for his money,” Jimmy snarks.

“Fortunately, you were cute, and genuine, and I wanted to get to know you better, too. So I said, yes, but not that night, because we were still up to our eyes in people. Wednesday.”

“Two of the longest days ever—“

“Wait, is that when you were swanning around work with your hair slicked down and enough cologne to stun an elephant?” Tim asks.

“Yes.”

Breena’s never heard that part of it. So she’s looking at him with a question on her face.

“I really wanted you to like me. Everyone told me I was trying too hard.”

“Which is why when we met at the bar you looked like you,” Breena says.
“A slightly more stylish version of me. I’d gotten my hair trimmed, and had on my best jeans and button down. Abby told me the cologne wasn’t bad, I was just wearing too much of it, so I took care of that. You had on a long pink sweater, black leggings, black, leather Cole Hann ankle boots and your hair down.”

“I wanted to look pretty and casual, too.”

“You were gorgeous!”

She smiles a bit at that. “You got there before I did. I remember you were waiting at a table, hadn’t ordered anything, yet.”

“Just had enough time to put my coat on my chair.”

“And… I think the first thing I asked you was what NCIS was.”

“You didn’t know?” Abby asks with a smirk. “No one ever knows.”

“I’d just about gotten three words into the answer when the waitress came over, asked what we wanted. You got a glass of chardonnay, and I spent a moment debating if I should get something ‘manly’ or a glass of wine, and pretend that I knew something about wine, and then Gibbs is in my head, telling me I’m trying too hard, so I asked for a Green Fairy Mojito, which is a drink they make really well and I really like, and you looked at me like you’d never, ever seen anyone do that before.”

“I had never, ever seen a man order a drink like that.”

Jimmy shrugs. “They taste good.”

“As I found out, because, since I’d never seen anyone order anything like that, you had indeed gotten me interested, in both how good this thing must taste, and in you for being willing to order it.”

Jimmy looks pleased. “I know I told you about NCIS, and we talked about drinks, and the conference. You told me about being a mortician, and working with your family. And by the end of the drink, I was feeling awfully loose and relaxed, and you were smiling and flirty, so I said something like, ‘So, dinner?’”

“And I said yes, and then made you wait another few days, but by doing that I moved us into the weekend, and said, ‘Do you like bowling?’”

“You bowl?” Tim asks.

“And I said, ‘I’m terrible at it.’” Jimmy replies, “And you said, ‘So am I. But it’s fun, and we can talk while we do it. Then have some dinner after.’ Which I immediately hopped right on top of because, no, neither of us is good at bowling, but turning dinner into an afternoon and dinner sounded great to me.”

“We should do that,” Abby adds. “It is fun, and it’s been years since I’ve gotten to go.”

“Maybe there’s a place by the house… Get the kids in bed and duck out one night…” Tim adds. He’s bad at bowling, too, but it might be fun. “Why ask to do something you weren’t good at?” he then asks Breena.

“One of the things I learned young is that ultra-competitive guys get on my nerves. It was the middle of winter, so outside sports are out, but we can bowl. It’s inexpensive. It is fun. We could talk. And if
Jimmy blew his stack or turned into a jerk tossing the ball around, I’d find that out, fast.”

“Plus, you’d get to see how he’d treat you if you were doing something you weren’t great at. Some guys…” Abby lets that trail off, but she and Breena are sharing a very been there, done that sort of look.

Breena nods. “Probably our first five dates were me tossing Jimmy into situations where I could get to see how he’d respond to things that might be issues later on. I needed to know that he’d respect my boundaries.”

“And I appreciated that slow, easy, get to really know each other sort of dating plan you set up. I mean, I’m not saying I didn’t want to rush, run in headlong and go at all of it at once, but the little burnt ember that was still stinging from what happened with Michelle recognized this as a good thing.”

“So, our first real date. We meet up to bowl, and yes, we both are bad at it,” Breena says.

“Combined score, for both of us, under 100.”

“For two games.”

Jimmy smiles, remembering that. “But we were having a good time. Cheering if either of us hits a pin. I remember giving my ball a little pep talk before each throw.”

“It’s a proven fact that you’ve got to talk to the ball. She won’t glide straight and true if you don’t,” Abby adds, with a grin.

“Jimmy gave me the complete history of bowling, from the dawn of cave people tossing rocks at sticks to today,” Breena adds.

Jimmy nods. “I didn’t intentionally study up on that. But I told Ducky what we were doing, and… seriously, the man knows everything.” Jimmy thinks a bit more. “And you told me about your clients. I told you, generally, about my case, and we both talked about how it was cool to be able to have that conversation without the other person flipping out or thinking we were twisted in the head or overly morbid.”

“And I think we now know why Ducky sent you on that conference. Making sure you got to meet someone who wouldn’t stare at you like a ghoul when you said what you do,” Tim says, very easily imagining Ducky doing something like that, especially if Jimmy was just out of med school, suddenly had a lot more free time, and may have been looking for new social situations.

“He certainly could have,” Jimmy replies.

“Talking shop got us to the dinner check,” Breena adds.

“And I’ll admit I had some hopes for after dinner. Things seemed to be going really well. I’d driven. She’d taken the metro. I was getting ready to suggest giving you a ride home, when you told me that you loved guys, and making out, and you knew you were going to love sex, too, but it wasn’t on the menu until you were married, and then my brain shorted out because you said it really graphically, and then sucked that straw down between your lips, and asked if I was cool with that.”

Breena’s nodding slowly, “I've known a lot of guys over the years, and one thing I’ve noticed about all of you is that you're pretty possessive and you like to know that when something is yours it's really yours.' And you nodded at that, so I continued, 'Look, I love guys. I love the way they feel and smell and look and touch me. I love kissing and making out and rubbing up against them, but I'm a
virgin. I'm not having sex with any guy until I get married. That's my wedding present to my future husband. He'll know, absolutely, that I'm his and only his. And when that ring's on my finger I'm going to absolutely rock his world.' And then I smiled, licked my lips, wrapped 'em around my straw, gave it a suck, and followed up with, 'If that's not something you respect, well, this was fun. If it's something you do, then I'd like to see you again.'” And you blinked, really slowly. I could see you imagining it. And licked your lips. Swallowed a few times, and then said, “Marry me,” and I laughed. I stood up, kissed your cheek, put my half of the tab on the table, and said, “How about we go on a second date first? I’m free Monday night.”

“And the rest, is, as they say, history,” Jimmy wraps with. He kisses Breena, and gives Donnie a gentle squeeze. “Eight years come January.”

She nods at him, her head resting on his shoulder. “Feels odd. Like too long, and not nearly long enough.”

“Like how could that much life be squeezed into that little time, but also, eight years,” Jimmy replies.

“Yeah.”

Tim gives Abby a tighter hug, and then strokes his hand along Breena’s arm, his fingers brushing over Jimmy.

He doesn’t say it, but he does feel something like, all the time in the world, and never enough.

Donnie gets done, and they move out of cuddling and talking time, back into the real world, where kiddos have needs, and adults do, too.

Tim gives everyone a goodnight kiss, and gets himself to sleep. There’s another one of these days of many hours filled with life that suddenly turn too short once they’re over, tomorrow, and he needs to be ready for it.
“You okay?” Jimmy asks Breena.

She, Abby, and Ziva have decided that tonight will run much easier if they all get together and handle the six kids between them.

Breena gives him the look, and he nods.

“Of course you are. We’re going. We’ll have fun. Back before two.”

Breena’s holding Donnie to her chest, and makes a little shooing motion toward the door.

Jimmy nods, sighs, and with another round of kisses for everyone, heads to the car. Where Tim, already behind the wheel, having successfully gotten out of the house with only one round of goodbyes, raises an eyebrow at him.

“Yeah. I know. We’ll be back in ten hours. Yes, I know, I do this for work. But I haven’t. Not since before Donnie was born, and we’re all going, and…”

Tim nods, puts the car in reverse, and begins the drive to Andrews, where Tony, Leon, Fornell, Bleach, Ducky, and the man of honor, Gibbs, are waiting.

They’re the last ones there, which isn’t completely unexpected. Unlike some members of this party, they have things like jobs and babies at home.

As they’re unbuckling seatbelts and getting out of the car, seeing the rest of the guys grouped around the jet, Tim says, “So… twenty years, huh?”

“You mean until we can easily jet off for a night on the town with the guys?” Jimmy asks.

“Yeah.”

“Probably less.”

“But not that much less.”


Tim smiles back, a bit of sharpness in his voice, “Apparently.”

“Says the guy who’ll be missing them by the seventh inning.”

This time the smile’s real. “Sooner.”
“Papa’s rolling in his grave at this!” Fornell says as they head for the jet.

“Going to a World Series?” Jimmy asks.

Fornell shakes his head, and Tony smirks at that, adding, “I told Senior what we’re doing and he winced.”

It’s clear Tim, Jimmy, and Leon don’t get what the issue is.

“Pirates versus the Yankees,” Gibbs says. “They’re Yankees. And the last time they did this, the Pirates won.”

Bleach nods, long and slow. He’s not a huge baseball fan, but his father would have winced at this idea, too. By the time he was born, in ’58, they’d moved to Illinois, but his dad was a Yankee fan until the day he died.

As they’re heading up the stairs into the jet, Gibbs is looking immensely pleased. Sure, he was only two years old when the Pirates went up against the Yankees in the World Series the first time, back in 1960, but he remembers his Dad and LJ talking about it, reveling in it, for years.

He didn’t see that game, couldn’t have seen it, but he remembers it, because LJ and Jackson saw it and retold it so often, it’s burned into his memory, too.

Sure, the Yankees have won more World Series than any other team, but they didn’t beat the Pirates when they went up against them. Though Fornell’s mentioning that the Yankees outscored the Pirates close to two to one when it came to total points for the entire Series. And Tony knows, because his dad’s told him, that that year’s MVP was on the Yankee’s side.

Ducky says, “I’ll admit, baseball is one of the few areas of Americana that I haven’t spent that much time studying,”

“So, you mean, you only know more about it than 90% of the population, instead of your usual 99%,” Leon says with a little grin.

Ducky’s eyes may have sparkled a bit at that. Or perhaps it’s just the light coming through the windows in the jet. Either way, he appears pleased by that, and then finishes with, “But it is my understanding that that is the only World Series that ended with a walk off home run.”

Gibbs smirks even wider, as Tony and Fornell both roll their eyes.

Fornell begins, “Yeah, Duck. Only thing anyone remembers about that damn game. What’shisname —”

“Bill Mazeroski,” Gibbs adds.

“Gets up there, whacks the ball, and that was the end of it.”

Again, Tony’s rolling his eyes. “Two to one more points. The Yankees won two of those games without the Pirates getting a single run.”

Tim buckles his seatbelt as Tony and Fornell continue to bitch about how wrong it is to be going to a World Series where they’re expected to not just root against the Yankees, but to root for The Pirates.
Gibbs looks pleased as punch by the whole thing.

They’ve been in the air for about an hour when Tim gets a call.

He knows who he’s hoping will call him. They deliberately set it for now, because now is when all the main news shows go live, but he doesn’t recognize the number.

He answers it anyway, “McGee.”

“Are you the ass-sucking faggot who sent a camera crew to serve a warrant on me?”

Tim supposes that tells him who’s on the other line, at least on a general level. He’s not sure, entirely, who this is from the IRS, but it’s got to be one of them. He spends a second thinking, mostly something along the lines of how he’s the ass sucking faggot who’s going to boot this asshole out of his job for sexual harassment, but decides this jerk doesn’t need a heads up on that.

“Yes,” he says, instead, and makes sure his phone is recording.

“A CAMERA CREW! You sent a fucking camera crew into the IRS to demand we give you computers! How could you even think to do that? What the fuck would make you think that was--”

“Apparently, it worked,” Tim cuts him off.

“Oh, it worked,” the tone of voice is oily. “You got your show.” Tim’s utterly certain they got handed the first computer the IRS could unplug from a wall and stuff into an evidence bag.

“I wouldn’t have needed a show if you’d given me what I asked for, the first, second, or third times.”

“You don’t have the authority to get it!”

“I’m sorry. I don’t have the authority?” Everyone in the plane is staring at Tim as he argues with this jerk.

“No! There’s no government to make that sort of a claim. No one can give you a legal warrant.”

“Really, that’s the line you’re going for? I paid taxes last April. And, I don’t know what the rate was in 1931, the last time there was a constitutionally legitimate President and Congress to make the rules, but I’m damn sure I didn’t pay it. Don’t you try to tell me you’re not going to comply with any ‘illegal’ requests when you’re still charging taxes. And don’t you even try to tell me you stopped going after people. You’re using the same damn warrants I am to go through people’s finances, so don’t even try it!”

“Fuck you! You’ll get those computers after hell freezes over.”

“I’ve got Congress saying they’re mine. I have warrants!”

“I don’t care.”

“Do you know who I am?” Tim says.

“Yes. Do you?”
That pulls Tim up short. He doesn’t know who the head of the IRS is, not off the top of his head, or if he’s talking to him. “Actually, no. I know your office, but I don’t know your name.”

“Jim Mellon, Director of the IRS.”

“Okay, Jim. Guess what, those computers will be in my office tomorrow, or you’ll be going to jail for obstruction of justice.”

Jim snorts at him. “Yeah. Try it. It’s not gonna happen.”

“Why not? What makes you bulletproof?”

Tim’s talking to a dial tone. He can feel everyone staring at him, and shakes his head. Then he makes the call to his Uncle. “Hey.”

“Tim.”

“Yeah. You talk to Hotch?”

“He said it went just fine.”

“That’s because the computers are duds, just to show the media. If we go live now, claiming they gave us duds, they’ll claim we mishandled evidence. Get your guys on it.”

Tim can feel his uncle nodding. “On it. It’ll take us a few days just to find the real computers, and then another day to plan it, one more to get it. Call it a week.”

“Sure. I need them more than I need a show.”

“We’ll get ‘em.”

“Thanks.” Tim hangs up and explains what happened. He catches Ducky and Leon sharing a quick look as he said, ‘what makes you bulletproof?’ “Okay, what was that?”

“He may be, right, McGee,” Leon says.

Bleach is leaning in, listening with interest. Actually the whole conversation, starting with the idea that no one could order a proper warrant, interested him from a legal perspective.

“Why would he be right, Leon?”

“They burned out the IRS, Tim. Remember?”

Tim flinches; he still feels guilty about that. “Yeah.”

“Not just in DC. Most of the places, there weren’t people in the buildings, but… IRS buildings saw a lot of fire and rioting. Something like twenty of them burnt to the ground, and a bunch of others were damaged before things calmed down.”

“Okay, Leon…” Tim’s not seeing why that’d make this guy bulletproof.

Ducky is. He shakes his head. “Timothy, they don’t have the evidence anymore. Not for many of their cases.”

Tim and Bleach both groan. Tim feels punched. “They’re bluffing. He’s not drawing the line in the sand because of me personally, it doesn’t matter on my one case, but if it goes live they don’t have
my evidence, it’ll go live that they don’t have…”

“The evidence they used in tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of cases, many of which are being negotiated, prosecuted, or appealed. I do not think Thomas will be able to locate what you want,” Ducky says.

Tim scowls at the ceiling of the plane, not sure what to do. Governments don’t work without income. People don’t pay taxes if they don’t have to. And if he defangs the attack dog that makes people pay those taxes…

Gibbs puts a hand on his shoulder and gives it a gentle squeeze.

“It doesn’t have to get figured out right now.”

And that’s probably the best answer anyone could give Tim. He needs time to think this through.

---

The Pittsburgh of Gibbs’ memory is permanently gray. It’s a steel town, covered in grit and soot. Even on bright, sunny days, there was always a wash of color-dimming gray in the air, and stains of it on everything else. On top of that, in western Pennsylvania, bright, sunny days were fairly few and far between.

Thus, gray. Gray buildings, gray skies, gray dingy streets, and gray windows. He, LJ, and his Dad would come here for ball games, spend the day, come home late, and the next morning the truck would be gray, and his mom would be complaining about having to get soot out of their clothing.

Granted, it’s been decades since the steel mills closed down, but they’re the decades he didn’t come here more than once a blue moon. His mental image of Pittsburgh froze in 1982, and every time he comes back there’s a moment of mild shock as he again gets used to the idea that 1982 was a long time ago.

He thinks part of why it’s always a shock is because getting into Pittsburgh is exactly the same. They leave the airport and take I-376 to the tunnel, spend a moment in the dim florescent lights of the tunnel, and then burst out, into the lights of the bridge, and there, in front of them, like he’s morphing from a black and white picture into full high-def color, is downtown Pittsburgh.

Getting to the stadium isn’t exactly the same. PNC Park is new… at least compared to his memories of games down at the Point.

The Uber driver’s asking if they’d ever been here before, and everyone besides Jimmy are giving variations on the theme of ‘not really,’ and he’s talking with them about being Yankees fans. (Because who else comes to Pittsburgh for the World Series if this isn’t their home town?)

Jimmy sees the way he’s watching the skyline glowing in front of them. Some of the buildings are the same. Some are new. All of them are brighter than he thinks they could possibly be. “Good memories?”

Gibbs nods. Then he says, “Making some new ones, too.”
“You got a box?” Gibbs is asking in disbelief as they head into an elevator. He was thrilled at the idea of getting to do this with his boys, but, apparently Tony and Fornell decided that a few beers and hot dogs in the stands is not the order for the night.

“Wedding present from Senior,” Tony says. This almost didn’t happen. As soon as the Pirates won, he started hunting for tickets, and kept coming up with nothing. Or, worse, one ticket in section A, one in section C, two more in section D for a different game, and three in section nosebleed. If they couldn’t watch it together, they might have just as well headed to the house, put it on the big screen, and seen it from there.

He was complaining to his Dad, who said, “I know a guy. Let me make a call.”

An hour later, they had a box.

“Where is your father, Anthony?” Duck asks. He might not be part of the core group, but Ducky’s fairly sure he’d have been welcome in this group.

“Last he told me, he and Delphine were in Antigua,” Tony replies. They’re out of the elevator, heading down a long hall, toward where the boxes have to be.

“What are they doing there?” Jimmy asks.

“Snorkeling, and beyond that I don’t know, nor do I want to.”

Bleach is listening, thinking, and then says, “He was the other half of Team Army at the Fourth of July bash, right? Mr. Style.”

Fornell grins at that. “Mr. Style indeed. Senior’ something of a character.”

“Something?” Tony asks.

“Gibbs calls him Chief,” Jimmy adds.

Bleach stares over at Gibbs, his eyes amazed, then he laughs. “You don’t, do you?”

Gibbs shakes his head a bit, and opens his palms wide.

Tony takes a few steps ahead and opens the door that matches their tickets.

“They don’t know, do they?” Bleach asks as he rolls into the box.

Gibbs shakes his head, smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

“What don’t we know?” Tim asks. He’s torn between looking around the box, he’s never been in one before, or paying closer attention to Bleach’s story.

“Do they know about Marsh?” Bleach asks as he looks out at the park. “That’s a view, all right!”

“Tim does, a little,” Gibbs replies, also looking around, checking out the deluxe seats. He’s firmly convinced that rock hard seats is just part of a baseball game, but… Apparently not. Then it hits him, he hasn’t seen a game live since 1989, and that was with Shannon and Kelly. Back then they weren’t quite in the nosebleed section, but it was close.
“Okay, this sounds good, start at the beginning and spare none of the details,” Fornell says as they
walk around the box, looking at the view of PNC Park laid out in front of them.

Bleach just about gets his mouth open before three very pretty girls in Pirates gear appear from
nowhere, asking them for drink orders, telling them they’ve got an open bar, showing off the food
menu, and saying, voices flowing over the guys like liquid sex, that if there’s anything they need,
feel free to ask.

As soon as they’re out of the room, Jimmy shakes his head and says, “How much do you think
they’ve got to practice to get that tone of voice?”

“Hanoi Hannah,” Fornell says, and then grins. He looks around and realizes the only other person
here who was in Vietnam was Ducky, who has a similar, if less intense smile on his face. “She was a
VietCong radio announcer. Spoke perfect English. Voice like a wet dream. You’d hate the things
she’d say, but after a month in the jungle, you’d pitch a tent hearing it.”

“I was at one of the hospital units, and we’d have men clump around the radio whenever she was on.
They’d yell at her, but tune in everyday nonetheless. She did have one hell of a voice.” That tiny bit
of mild profanity from Ducky has all the rest of the men in the group wondering what on earth that
woman could have sounded like.

Bleach gets his chair set so he can easily see the diamond, and the big screen TV, then adds, “I
remember that. Not ‘Nam, but Saudi. There’s got to be women in that country, somewhere, but
dammed if you can find them. I was there in the ‘80s, and at first you don’t notice it, because you’re
used to being in a mostly male environment, but it slowly sinks in that everyone on the base is male.
And, at least when I was there, they basically didn’t let us off base. You’d call home, and just
hearing a woman’s voice’d do it for you.”

Leon smiles at that. “Did a stint on a sub in the early ‘90s. Six months. No women. No calls home…
I got on land, saw Jackie, and…” He laughs a bit at that, a very fond smile on his face. “She enjoyed
that homecoming.”

“I’ll bet,” Tony says with a grin.

“Uh huh… Okay, who’re Marsh and Chief?” Fornell gets them back on topic.

Bleach leans back in his chair, grin on his face. “Okay. So, you got to remember, we’re in Basic
together, and a bit of advanced training before they broke us all up. Now, Marsh started with us in
Basic, and Marsh…”


“I asked the same thing,” Tim adds.

“That was just his last name,” Bleach says.

“Bill Marsh,” Gibbs adds. “He was so… Marsh… no one even tried to stick a nickname on him.”

“Not like Grave over there.”

“Wait, Grave?” Leon asks. Neither he, nor Fornell, had heard that bit.

Gibbs rolls his eyes a bit.

“He wasn’t a talker, even then. The only one who could get more than a few words out of him at a
time was that girl…”

“Matheson,” Gibbs says. “She wasn’t in our unit, but was at Lejeune the same time.”

“And you’d talk to her. Or she’d talk to you. Rumor had it you two had a thing.”


“So, what was with Matheson?” Bleach asks. Back in the day, asking about Gibbs’ friend would get you silence if he liked you, or hit if he didn’t.

“She wanted a friend.”

Bleach laughs at that. “Yeah, and you were friendly.”

“I wasn’t an asshole. Amazing how far that’ll get you.”

Bleach rolls his eyes. “Anyway, he wasn’t a talking kind of guy back then. So, his nickname: Grave. As in ‘silent as the…”

Gibbs feels like they’ve covered that to death. “So, Bill Marsh… anything you ever wanted or needed, he could get for you. Doesn’t matter what it was, how illegal it may have been to have it, how rare it may have been—“

“He’s the one who got you guys popsicles in the middle of the desert,” Tim adds.

“Exactly!” Bleach says. “He was an A1 scrounger. We’re on desert survival training, in the middle of the goddamn Mojave desert, and Marsh pops up with ice cream bars for us.”

“How?” Leon asks. He’s met some damn good scroungers over the years, but that’s beyond good and into the realm of has-to-be-bullshit.

“He said he was in good with God,” Bleach replies. “‘Ask and He shall give.’”

That gets some very skeptical looks. Bleach nods at them. “Yeah. So, anything you want, anything you need, Marsh can find it. We get done with Basic and they whisk him off to the quartermaster’s service.”

Tony’s not immediately seeing why you’d put the guy who can find anything in charge of everything, so Bleach adds, “They’re the guys who are in charge of making sure everyone else gets everything they need.”

“And usually, they don’t have it,” Fornell adds, having dealt with way too many examples of his men not having what they needed in ‘Nam.

“So they’ve got to scrounge for it,” Bleach finishes.

“Okay,” Tony says.

“So, we’re a man short as we move into more advanced training, and they send us Chief. You remember his real name?”

Gibbs shakes his head.

“Red skin, black hair, black eyes, claimed to be a full-blooded Cherokee, and since it was a gentler, more enlightened time, we started calling him Chief before he finished telling us that,” Bleach says.
“Rob,” Gibbs says. “His first name was Rob. I remember his girl calling him that.”

“So, we get Rob, and we’re fucking pissed to have lost Marsh, because with Marsh in the crew, life was pretty good. So, we’re not exactly easy on him, and…”

“He’s a dumbass,” Gibbs adds.

“Maybe not—“

“Dumbass,” Gibbs replies. “He got better over time, but, especially at first, dumbass.”

“Basically he tried to be Marsh, but he couldn’t be Marsh, because there was only one Marsh, and he wasn’t bright enough to do a decent job of replacing Marsh. If he wasn’t trying to be Marsh, he probably would have been okay, but… We’re always talking about Marsh. So, he always had these really complicated schemes, trying to be Marsh. Five part trades that were supposed to do things like turn extra rations into beer, or something like that.”

“And they always failed,” Tony says.

“Not always. He’d work it just often enough to keep us hopeful. But, usually, somewhere along the line the trade’d go up. We’d end up with nothing, or say, instead of turning extra rations into beer, we’d end up with a crate of boots. And he’d talk about his luck being off, then go off hunting for the next big trade. Try and turn those boots into beer, say.”

Tony looks over to Gibbs and shakes his head. “Don’t ever let him know that story. He thinks it’s a sign of respect.”

Gibbs looks a little guilty. His own personal in joke, busted. “It’s…” But he lets that trail off, not exactly sure how to explain what Chief is to him, but it’s not entirely a slap in the face.

Tim thinks about it, then he laughs a bit. “That’s your version of Probie, isn’t it?”

Gibbs nods.

“What happened to Chief?” Leon asks.

“Finished his hitch. Moved back to Wyoming last I heard,” Bleach says.

“Became a high school basketball coach,” Gibbs adds.

Bleach is surprised that he knows that.

“Got one of his kids in my unit Colombia, another one in Desert Storm.”

Bleach nods. “Small world.”

By then the girls are back with the drinks, and want to know what they want to eat.

There is beer. And food. And it’s excellent.

Jimmy’s munching on his salad, a steak one, with (and this appalled Tim when he first saw it, but
Jimmy just smirked at him) fries on top, when he says, “I bet if I asked, one of them’d go to the O and get me some real fries for this.”

Tony’s still staring at the salad. “Why does it have fries on it?”

“Just how they do it here.”

“Did you used to live here, Palmer?” Fornell asks.

“Not here. Went to school about an hour and a half north of here. We’d come down here on the weekends for concerts.”

“Ones you were in, Jimmy, or ones you were listening to?”

“Both Ducky. The O’s down by the University of Pittsburg, and they did hotdogs, fries, subs, beer. It was a good place to crash after a show, get a huge pile of… it’s probably only okay food, mostly I remember it being cheap, and compared to dorm food, anything tastes good.”

Gibbs has some memories along those lines, too, of the same place, though his are likely twenty years older, and involve him and a bunch of Marines getting to the train station, taking a bus into town and killing time, waiting to get picked up, or catch the next train.

“Where’d you go to school?” Gibbs asks. He knows Jimmy went to one of the about 25 little colleges dotting Western Pa, but not which one.

“Allegheny. It’s not all that far from Stillwater.” He didn’t mention anything about it to Gibbs the last time they were here, but on the ride up he did tell Breena about how if they’d driven another half hour, they’d be at his alma matter.

Gibbs smiles at that. “Nope. Used to go fishing at Lake Conneaut. You ever get over there?”

Jimmy shakes his head. “Up to Erie, down to Pittsburg. Didn’t have a car, so I was limited to where a Greyhound could take me.”

Gibbs nods. He remembers how stranded you were in any of those towns if you didn’t have a car, especially, if, like Stillwater, they didn’t have a college, so Greyhound didn’t stop there. He remembers long afternoons of nothing to do, nowhere to go. Half of joining the Marines was about finding a place to go. Half of his dad getting him that car was about trying to keep him out of the Marines, by showing him there was a world he could access without joining up.

He looks around him, not just at the box, and the game, but at the men. It certainly wasn’t a direct path, but the Marines got him all of this.

He remembers Shannon, sitting on that bench, waiting for the train. If he hadn’t been shipping out, he’d have never spoken to her. She’d have just been the redheaded girl in his memory.

He thinks of another redhead in Pensacola, right now, auditing yet another Coast Guard outpost, and how without the Marines they wouldn’t have met, or if they had, they likely wouldn’t have been nearly as interesting to each other.

Maybe not every good thing in his life can be traced back to the Marines, but a whole lot of them can.
There’s the game in front of them, far, far below.

And the big screen, so they can see the plays up close, to the right.

By the fourth inning, the Yankees are up 6 to 0 and Tony and Fornell are happily smirking at the idea that this is going to be a repeat of the ‘60’s Series, where the Yankees thrash the Pirates (on the points at least).

“Retribution!” Fornell’s saying. “They’re back here now, getting ready to—“

They, obviously, can’t hear the crack of that hit live. But it echoes through the box from the big screen, and the roar of people cheering is audible through the glass and through the screen as Jaso sends the ball spinning through the air, into the bleachers, and grand slams himself, and the man on first and third home.

3-6 isn’t close, but it’s closer, and the game suddenly gets a lot more interesting.

Seventh inning. The games up to 5-7, and the Yankees are up to pitch next.

As they’re moving around the box, not really watching the entertainers, Bleach says, “You ever tell them about baseball duty?”

Gibbs half smiles, and shakes his head.

Fornell adds, “It’s safe to say, if it happened before 1990, we likely haven’t heard about it.”

“What’s baseball duty?” Tony asks.

Bleach grins wide and happy, and takes a sip of his bourbon. “Baseball duty. Okay, so this is another Marsh story.”

“Most of the good ones are,” Gibbs adds.

Bleach nods. “He’s right, most of the good ones are. But this one…”

Gibbs is still smiling.

“It’s possible, that part of why Marsh could always find whatever he needed, whenever he needed it, was that he was really good at schmoozing the officers’ wives.”

That gets a few alarmed glances.

“Don’t go there,” Gibbs says.

“Really, don’t,” Bleach adds. “Marsh had a girl and was faithful. No, when I say schmoozing, I mean schmoozing.”

“Eddie Haskel?” Fornell asks.
“But real. First few weeks at Basic, he’s feeling around, getting a sense for who is who, and then he starts grabbing a few of us at a time, on each of our off shifts.”

Gibbs shakes his head.

“Yeah, we all thought he was insane, but some of us went along, and… he’d have us weeding their flowerbeds, doing chores around the house, picking up their groceries, on our off time.”

“Only way he got any of us to go along with it was that he could get anything,” Gibbs adds.

“Yeah. So after a few weeks of this, Bill Marsh has a golden reputation for being such a good boy,” Bleach says.

“Got to remember, we’re all eighteen,” Gibbs says.

“And those officers’ wives think we’re puppies with rifles.”

Gibbs nods at that, too. Then he says, in a dead on impression of Col. Geven’s wife’s voice, “Oh, they’re all such sweet boys.”

That drops more than a few jaws, none of them knew Gibbs could do that. Bleach is laughing his head off as the rest of them just stare, and then slowly start to laugh, too.

Bleach takes over on storytelling, “So, Marsh is laying the groundwork. He’s the golden boy, and of course, any of his friends are good boys, too.”

“He makes Private First Class in about ten minutes.”

“Yeah. And once he’s got that PFC, he starts to take advantage of it. Now, remember, they’re used to seeing Marsh and a crew of guys go wandering around base to some non-standard areas, for non-standard duty.”

“And… we may be Marines, but Marines like off time as much as anyone,” Gibbs adds.

Leon and Fornell laugh at that. Navy and Army are fond of off time, too, and are convinced Marines couldn’t define off-time if they tried.

“If not more so. So, once he’s got them used to seeing us wandering around, he gets this idea, there’s not much reason for us to be off doing stupid duties we don’t like. Can’t get out of all of them, but at least a few… What were we supposed to be doing?”

Gibbs thinks for a second. What did they used to get out of the most? “Cleaning jobs. He didn’t like cleaning jobs. I think he got us out of our turn on KP, and latrines, and… a lot of scrubbing. If the scrub brushes looked like they had our names on it, Marsh was on the job.”

“And on the job meant that he’d line us up, give us some gardening tools or whatever, and march our asses to the nearest officer’s house.”

“And we’d spend an hour or so pulling weeds or mowing the lawn or whatever,” Gibbs says.

“But we do it often enough it never takes more than an hour. Meanwhile the lady of the house is making us lemonade and cookies, telling us we’re such good boys, and then, because we got done so fast, and it was such a nice day, somehow Marsh only picked nice days for this, maybe we’d go toss a ball around in the backyard, play a little catch or something, when we were done.”

“Oh, they work you poor boys so hard. Just, take an hour or so to play. It’ll be our secret.” Gibbs
again nails Col. Geven’s wife’s voice, and again, there’s a lot of amazed faces pointed at him as Bleach laughs.

“And if, God forbid, some poor bastard went looking for us for shirking our duty, he’d have to pry us out of the hands of an officer’s wife, who adored us, and was sure that Marsh could do no wrong.”

“Stuffy Smith,” Gibbs says.

Bleach laughs, shaking his head, looking really amused. “He hated what Marsh was up to, and he tried to get us away from Major Henson’s wife. She cussed him out…” He shakes his head again. “Never knew a women knew language like that, let alone ever used it.”

Gibbs nods. “She was one of those pretty, little southern girls, with a thick Georgia accent, used to wear prim knee length skirts, twinsets, and pearls, and just looking at her, you’d think she’d blush if you whispered the word “darn” near her. Turns out she was a combat nurse during Korea. That’s how she and the Major met. That woman… Took no shit from anyone, especially a puffed up little peacock trying to get her pet gardeners out of her prize begonias.”

Bleach nods. “And we took damn good care of those begonias.”

Gibbs laughs, remembering that.

Top of the ninth, things get interesting, the score’s 8-8, and the Pirates are batting.

Gibbs is leaning forward, staring down at the men on the field. Yes, technically, there’s a better view on the big screen, but there’s something about watching the actual players, even if they are tiny. He and every other Pirate’s fan on the planet is with him, staring, hoping, beaming hit the ball at Ngope, who’s the first one up to hit.

Tony and Fornell are also into it. They’re watching just as hard, strike ‘em out vibes pouring off of them as Betances gets up to the mound, ball in hand, teeny, tiny white speck on a field far below them. He tosses it up and down a few inches at a time as he stares down Ngope. Then he winds up, ball clenched in his hand, fires it off, hurtling down the field, Tim, Jimmy, Ducky, and Bleach get to see, because they’re watching the big screen, the beautiful way it heads straight toward Ngope before dropping half a foot just inches from his bat.

Tim mutters, “Fucking remote control,” watching it, and Jimmy nods. That curve ball looked like someone had a remote control and was driving the damn thing.

Bleach is shaking his head, and looks at Tim, “Physics isn’t supposed to work that way, right?”

“Obviously it does.”

Fornell and Tony turn their attention back to the big screen to watch the replay, and cheer when they see what the ball did.

Gibbs doesn’t look away from the field. The catcher shoots the ball back to Betances, and he spends a moment watching the catcher, getting his signal. He nods, squeezes the ball a few time, winds, and fires again, this time long and fast, too fast, it whips by Ngope faster than anyone can see.

Even on the slow motion re-watch it’s zipping along.
Gibbs is still staring, still beaming, along with every other Pirates fan *hit it, hit it, hit it, hit it* at Ngope.

Another wind up, another blur of white a million miles below them, and again, they hear the crack of bat on ball over the big screen, but it’s dwarfed by the sound of Pittsburgh, not just the stadium, but the whole city yelling.

Gibbs is up on his feet, cheering, as Ngope rounds first and stops at second.

Next batter up. Polanco. Tony and Fornell are scowling. Every other time Polanco’s been up this game, he’s hit the ball.

The Yankees hold off. The coach is out, up on the mound, talking with the pitcher. Betances look annoyed, but nods. Top of the ninth, he’s pitched the whole game, but he’s getting pulled out. Time for a fresh arm. A minute later there’s a new pitcher up, and he takes a moment to eye Polanco, get a feel for the air, for the crowd, for the ball.

Then he’s up. Wind up, pitch, ball flying, and strike.

And again.

Polanco’s at home, looking tense, staring down Holder, waiting for the pitch. It’s a cool evening, but sweat’s running down his face, and the big screen is high def enough to see it.

Ngope’s inching out from second, getting further and further from the base. He’s keeping careful eyes on the pitcher, because he’s getting close to the point where he can’t get back in time if he turns to fire the ball back to second instead of—

And the ball flies, hurtling toward home. Ngope is running, he’s putting on every burst of adrenaline he’s ever had into speed, and the ball looks like it’s hanging in the air, while everything with the batter goes slow motion for a heartbeat while Gibbs and the rest of the Pittsburgh fans all scream for Ngope, willing him to beat the speed of the ball.

Crack! Again, they hear it through the big screen, can’t hear it live and it’s not even over before the screaming wells up louder.

It’s good. Ball is flying deep toward second, and everyone is running. Ngope gets to third and the coach is egging him on. Pittsburg is screaming, “Run, RUN, RUN!!!!” Over and over as he tears down the line between third and home.

Polanco lands on first, and stays, safe.

Gregorio, the short stop, grabs the ball on the bounce, and fires it toward home, where Ngope is just inches away. He drops, diving, letting momentum carry him, and the entire city goes silent for a heartbeat until the Umpire shouts, “SAFE!”

And Gibbs is leaping into the air, cheering.

Bottom of the ninth. Yankees are batting. Pirates are still up by one. Two on base. Judge at first. Refsnyder at third. Two outs. Two strikes. If Holliday can manage to hit the ball, and everything goes just right… If he misses, the game ends here.
Tim’s seen Tony less focused in live firefights. (Okay, no, not really, but it’s close.) He is on this game. And Fornell’s right next to him.

Tim’s never seen Fornell pray, not really, but he’s awfully sure he knows what it looks like, now.

He has seen Tony pray, really pray, begging God to please, please, please, make whatever it is happen, and he’s praying now.

Cole’s on the mound. He winds, fires, and again there’s a heartbeat of the sound of ball striking bat followed by the roar of every Yankee’s fan on Earth all screaming at once as that ball goes skittering across the diamond. It’s a line drive, right up the middle. Refsnyder’s running for his life, aiming for home. Fraizer and Mercer are tearing toward the ball. Mercer’s up with it, takes a heartbeat, and makes the decision, Holliday’s further from first than Refsnyder is from home. He shoots it to the first baseman who tags Holliday out and ends the inning.

Yankees V. Pirates, first game of the World Series, tied at the bottom of the ninth, going into overtime.

“You know,” Jimmy says to Tim, “if more ball games went like this, I might actually not mind joining the Slaters when they watch them.”

Tim’s nodding along with that. Part the reason he likes playing baseball, but is, generally speaking, lukewarm about watching it, is most games last three hours, and maybe ten minutes of them are interesting.

If he’d had to watch an entire game of the first four innings. Where the Yankee’s just kept striking the Pirates out, he could have taken an hour of that before he phone came out and he started to do some work.

But this is not that game.

The teams are doing their stuff, probably just killing time for commercial breaks or whatever. The box ladies have wandered back to check on them, making sure they’re so well fed and drunk they can barely move.

Leon’s sipping his beer, stretched out, enjoying the show. He looks over to Tony, and then nods a bit. “We should have a softball team.”

Tony laughs at that.

“Seriously, we’ve got some room to practice at the Navy Yard. Other branches—“

“We’ve got one,” Fornell mentions, which was news to Tim.

Tim stares at him.

Fornell shakes his head. “We’re five for five the last five years. Play against the CIA, IRS, NSA, and Homeland. Management can’t play, and they only let people who got scholarships for it in college join up. Mixed boys and girls, but all of them were an inch from pro before they got to us.”
Leon thinks about that, and about who he’s got working for him. “Maybe just to play against ourselves.”


Tony can imagine that. And he’s got a feeling of who’s gonna be the captain of team Cop.

Jimmy raises an eyebrow at Gibbs. “And where exactly will Dr. Allan and I go?”

“Okay, four. Cops, Marines, Navy, and College. That way Tim’s babies have a team, too,” Leon says.

“Ngyn’s babies,” Tim says. “How are things going with her? Tony tells me everything’s working right…”

“Her personally?” Leon asks.

“Yeah.”

He shrugs. “I never see or hear her. All the reports look good. If she’s in over her head, she’s not letting us know.”

Tim nods; that sounds about right to him. He’s about to say something else, but the commercial break ends, and things begin to move again.

Top of the tenth, Pirates up. One on base, one out.

Hanson’s looking to stretch his run from a single to a double. He’s leading well away from first as Holder’s getting ready to pitch the ball. Holder winds, and Hanson starts to run, fast, but Holder whips himself around, fires the ball to first and, with the snap of leather on leather, Holder’s stuck between two bases. He takes a tenth of a second, indecisive, before trying to make it to second, but he can’t beat the ball, and he’s out.

Top of the tenth, no one on base, two outs.

Osuna’s up.

The tension in the box is so thick you could walk on it. Even Tim, Jimmy, Leon, and Bleach, who don’t really have a dog in this fight are leaning in, watching eagerly, waiting, breath and pulse fast with anticipation.

One pitch, one swing, and “strike” echoes through PNC Park.

One pitch, one swing, and Osuna’s gotten that ball and taught it to say ‘master’, it’s high and flying far, into the bleachers. Pittsburgh’s melting down, cheering and screaming at it.

Osuna walks his bases, enjoying his home run, and the sound of his town keening in pleasure at his work.
Bottom of the tenth: Pirates are up one, and they want to shut this game down. The sooner they can get the Yankees out, the sooner they win this game.

The Yankees, of course, have different plans. They’re pulling out their big guns. The best hitters they have are in the lineup now.

Fornell’s looking pleased, waiting to see this flip back to them. Hicks wasn’t even supposed to be up on this game. He’s wondering, out loud, to Tony, if they had to bring him in. Maybe they kept him in New York, get him ready out there, and…

Chatting time is over.

And the Yankee’s deliver. In the next half hour they get three men on base, and two of them out.

Holliday’s up again. He’s at the plate. Castro’s on third. The big screen is split screening, focusing in on both of them. Then it shifts away from the third baseman to focus on the pitcher.

He’s ready. Tim feels like he can see it on his face. This game is ending here, now, and that’s all there is to it.

He fires off his pitch and it goes straight and true, crossing over the plate, just a tad higher than Holliday thought it was. He just catches the tip of the ball, and it goes flying, straight up, popping high over the catcher who looks up, watching the ball, as it almost hovers in stopped time, before getting right under it, snatching it out of the air, and gently tapping home plate with it.

Game over!

Pittsburgh SCREAMS! The sound tears through the night, thudding, pulling, rumbling rib cages and setting hearts pounding.

It didn’t occur to Tim that getting out of Pittsburgh would be a pain in the ass. How he missed that, he doesn’t know, but the “home by two,” that he, Jimmy, and Tony had quoted their wives is, at best, about the time they’ll get across the bridge.

The city’s celebrating. The parking lot is packed with partiers. Cheering, screaming, happy drunk people are haphazardly reeling around, waving their Pittsburgh gear, riding the high that comes with the home team winning a big game on home soil.

Traffic is stopped dead.

They could likely walk to the jet faster than they can ride there in the Uber.

That means he’s got thinking time. Gibbs, Tony, and Fornell are replaying the game. Happily bitching about what happened when and how.

He can’t really get that deep into it, because he’s just not that well-versed in how the game should be played. So, it rolls by him…

But part of it does stick with him. You’ve got a goal, and you fight like hell, put your best guys up, and you do whatever it is you have to, to win. And maybe you don’t win. Maybe you can’t. But you play as hard as you can.

And if you see someone not playing by the rules, you sic the Ump on them, and make them play by
the rules. Because you can’t play the damn game if there aren’t any rules, or if the big team can break them because they’re the big team.

It’s a late night text, and he doesn’t expect a response from Hotch or Penny anytime soon, but he feels settled when he sends it. We’re going against the current head of the IRS for obstruction of justice and evidence tampering. Batten down the hatches.

On the flight home, Gibbs is staring out of the window, watching miles and miles of tiny lights spread below them.

He thinks about the 1960 series, and how, though he wasn’t there, he was. How he lived it through the words of his father and favorite uncle.

Tony and Fornell are bouncing around one call they thought was criminal, and Gibbs settles back, sipping his bourbon, smiling.

There are six little guys, none of whom are old enough to remember this first hand, but they’ll all feel like they were at this game. They’ll have memories of UnclePop, Uncle Tobias, Uncle Tony/Dad, talking through this game for years to come.

Tobias is saying, “It’s clear he was over the line, the Ump was completely—“

“Bullshit!” Gibbs says with a smirk. “You need glasses to see a piece of paper in front of your nose. You gonna tell me you could make that call from more than 2,000 feet away better than the guy who was on top of it!”

“I need glasses!”

And they’re off… Making some new memories, and some new stories to pass on.

Chapter End Notes

Some of you have commented over the years about how much research I must do for this story. And it’s true, I do a good amount of researching. But, if you’re curious, this chapter is the top of the heap. I don’t follow baseball. So... if I’ve royally screwed the pooch on this, I'm sorry. This is the best I could do with my Google University Degree in World Series baseball play.
Hi All. I didn't fall off a cliff or anything. It's just that wonderful time of the year we call: Summer Vacation. Between the end of school year stuff, the kiddos then being home, and this being a more difficult chapter to write, it was a long time between updates.

Here's hoping the next one is up sooner.

Keryl

“Hi, Walter,” Tim says, as he opens the door, ushering the leader of Team Black Hat into his office. His personal office. In his home. He asked Walter to stop in on his way into work this morning, so they could speak “privately.”

“Hey.” Walter’s looking around, wondering what’s so pressing that Tim’s got him at his house instead of up on the fourth floor of the Hoover Building. “So, what’s the super-secret mission we can’t talk about in the office?”

Tim turns up the music that’s playing in there. Jazz, loud and eclectic. He and Abby have swept their home looking for bugs, nothing came up, but he’s being careful. So careful, he’s got some of their “personal devices” taped to the windows, vibrating away. They’ll kill a laser mic. Walter sees them, raises an eyebrow, and then shakes his head. He knows why they’re there.

Short of telepathy, this is as close to a private conversation as he can get.

“I got the warrants today.” Tim hands the folder over. “You know the IRS gave us ‘the Partridge Computers’?”

“Yeah, Hotch told me that. Told me they were duds, too.”

“Yes. They’re going to be part of the obstruction of justice case we’re working.”

“Okay… Um… How?” Walter doesn’t immediately see how dead computers could be part of an obstruction of justice case. He knows exactly what the IRS will do. ‘Hey, the evidence was there when we handed them over, you must have screwed them up!’

“Among other things, I’m going to use our forensics to point out how no one on the list of people who have signed those computers into and out of evidence has ever touched the computers we got. Or the evidence bags.”

“They’ll say we wiped them.”

Tim smiles. “They may, but we’ve got the prints of the people who handed us the bags still on there.”

Walter smirks. “So, we’re building the case against Mellon, and Hotch has the official thrust of that. But you’ve got something else up your sleeve… That’s why I’m here, right?”
“I’m hitting them with obstruction for the Heidi Partridge case. That’s what Hotch is working on right now. And we are going against Mellon, that’s where you’re coming in. You’re going to get some guys in undercover, and they’re going to make the case that the IRS has been going against people without the correct evidence since the Fall.”

Walter inhales, sharp. That would be a massive breach of the extremely shaky trust the public is starting to rebuild with their government. “Shit. Really?”

“Yeah. That’s the working theory for why we didn’t get the right computers. Tom McGee’s team is going to go in, see if they just won’t give us the right computers, or if they can’t give us the right computers. I want you to get some guys in as auditors, lawyers, whatnot, and see what happens when they roll up on a case they can’t prove. Either on appeal or one that’s been lingering or…”

Walter’s nodding. He gets it. Part of why they’ve got Black Hats is Tim doesn’t just want to take out bad apples, he wants to eradicate bad systems. “You want to know what happens when Bobby New Agent says to his boss, ‘So, I’ve got the Patterson case here, but I can’t find the ledgers.’”

“Exactly. And I want it recorded, and I want it on several levels. I want Bobby New Agent, Sally New Manager, and Karen New Auditor, to get in there and see how deep this goes.”

Walter’s nodding. “I’ve got, maybe, one person I can shift into this now.”

Tim was expecting that. Like everyone else, Walter’s hurting for people. “That’s better than the zero we’ve got on it today. I’m going to give you a name, Diane Anderson. She works for Governor Jarvis right now, but she used to be IRS, in their investigative department, and she’ll be able to point you toward some people worth cultivating.”

Walter nods at that, too. “You want me to flip people who already work there?”

“Yes. Look, I know we can’t get people in there fast enough to do this on our own. So, get your guy in. If you get other guys who’ll be good for this, get them in, too. Meet with Anderson, and get her suggestions. If this is going to work, we’ve got to prove it’s system wide, and that isn’t going to happen with just one or two guys. Start getting it set up. I don’t care about fast, I do care about right.”

“Meanwhile, Tom’s team will find, or not, what it’s looking for. And if the evidence is there, and the IRS is just dicking with us, then this’ll be all in Hotch’s wheelhouse, but if it’s not there…”

Walter nods. “Got it.”

The next day, Friday, Tim’s in his office, not paying nearly as much attention as he should to the conversation around him.

“So, Sanders here hacked into their servers to find where they keep the evidence when it’s not in use,” Tom McGee says. He’s sitting in Tim’s office. His work office, with a woman in her mid-thirties, Sanders, who’s got a laptop in front of her, Tom McGee, and Hotch.

Sanders says, “The IRS’s security needs help. They didn’t have anything I couldn’t get through in less than an hour. So, going through, I can tell you that no one has officially accessed Partridge’s evidence since September of ’16. No one, for example, logged it out of their system and reported it moved to ours. I can also tell you that, officially, it’s stored off-site in a building that wasn’t burned
down, so they should still have it.”

This is the part where, had Tim been paying close attention, he likely would have said something like “Should?” but in that it’s Friday, November 3, and Sean’s going in for his surgery on first thing in the morning on November 6th, he’s a tad distracted.

Fortunately, Hotch, who is sitting next to him, is not at all distracted, because he doesn’t have a baby who’s going to be operated on in the next week, so he says, “Should?”

Sanders nods. “Yeah. Should. In the official record, all of her evidence was moved off site November of 2014, when the first case was closed. However, doing a bit more digging, I can see that the records were changed in March of ’17. In fact, a lot of records were changed in March of ‘17.”

Hotch nods. “Okay. Our forensics people have confirmed that the computer in the bag has only been touched by Ralph Sanger. He’s the personal assistant to Jim Mellon. The bag itself has been touched by Mellon, Jason DeMent, the man who brought us the bag, and Ralph Sanger. Our handwriting analysis techs tell us that of the twenty-three signatures on the label on the bag, all of them appear to be copies, and, though some are in black ink and some are in blue ink, all of the signatures came from one of two pens.”

“So the evidence bag is forged,” Tom says.

“Yes,” Hotch replies. “And by someone who wasn’t good at it.”

“And let me guess, I’ve got two options, and the first one doesn’t count,” Tom replies.

Hotch nods. “I suppose it’s possible that DeMent forged those signatures, but that’s a bizarre job to have the guy who works the front desk do.”

Tom and Sanders are nodding; Tim’s staring at the wall.

The three of them share a look, and then Tom gently nudges his nephew. “You okay?”

Tim jerks a little, feeling embarrassed. “Uh… Yeah. Sorry. His pre-surgical checkup is this afternoon… and… It’s really hitting.”

Hotch and Tom, both fathers, both men who have led other men, share a look, and a nod. “He’s going to be fine,” Hotch adds.

Tim half nods. “Yeah. I know,” he shrugs a bit. “But, there’s I know, and there’s I know, and on this one, I don’t know. And I can’t, and won’t until he’s out of surgery.” He glances to Sanders. “Sorry, again. My son is deaf, and he’s getting a cochlear implant on Monday. He’s ten months old, and to say we’re a bit on the tense side is an understatement.”

She nods. “There’s be something wrong with you if you weren’t.”

“Yeah. Anyway… Instead of me sitting here like a lump… It sounds like we’ve got a solid circumstantial case that the IRS is not playing by the rules.”

All three nod.

“Sanders, you said something about changing the logs, how are you documenting that?”

And Sanders begins a fairly complicated conversation about how she’s making sure they have the
evidence to bring this into court. After all, it’s not enough to know the IRS isn’t playing by the rules, they’ve got to prove it beyond a reasonable doubt.

And Tim does an… okay… ish… job of paying attention to her.

Three hours later, Tim drives home, and Abby meets him there. Both of them are nervous and jittery, and not in the best place ever. But they’re trying to keep cool, because if they flip out, Sean’s gonna flip out, too, and two nervous adults are one thing, but a wailing baby is something else all-together.

Besides, rationally, they know this isn’t a big deal.

They’re tucking him into his car seat, and he’s babbling a bit, and chewing on his fist, and being his usual adorable self.

Tim pulls back for a moment, watches Abby blow a raspberry on his cheek, and Sean squeals with a sound they know is him laughing, but most other people wouldn’t be able to identify.

Abby looks up at him. “It’s going to be fine.”

He nods. “Yep. This is just the pre-surgery checkup.”

“Exactly. The worst thing that’s going to happen is the Doc’ll look in his ears.” Which they both know from his various pediatric appointments, Sean doesn’t like.

“Yeah.” He gets into the car, sliding into the driver’s seat, and Abby gets into the passenger seat. “So why does this feel like going to face a firing squad?”

She doesn’t answer, because they both know.

What if it doesn’t work? What if it goes wrong? Some kids get the implants and begin to scream and really never stop unless you turn the implant off… Or what if it goes really, really wrong, surgically wrong? What if he’s allergic to anesthesia? What if the Doc has an off day, does a half-assed job and…

Tim shuts the litany of ways this could go wrong down. He’s not doing anyone any favors with that.

They’re in the waiting room, for a checkup for fuck’s sake!

Yes, it’s a surgical checkup but still…

If he can’t get this under control, he’s going to be a wreck by Monday. So… calm, smooth, easy breathing. Relaxing. Nothing bad is happening. Little boy is on the floor, playing with blocks, while a toddler, a happy, functional, perfectly alive and healthy toddler, with two cochlear implants on the sides of her head, babbles at him.

Tim gets onto the floor with Sean and the little girl, and starts piling up blocks. Both of them are happy as little clams to knock them down, and the girl’s mother comes over, to keep a closer eye on them.

“Follow-up appointment?” he asks and signs.
“Yes.” She’s watching him curiously. “You speak amazingly well.”

Tim laughs. “Oh. Uh... No. I sign everything because that way Sean gets to see it and learn it the way he would speaking. I’m not deaf.”

She sits down. “Wow. It’s been three years, and...” she looks at her daughter. “We should learn to sign, but...” Tim notices the little girl doesn’t turn toward them as she’s playing. She’s three years old, he’s guessing from the context, so she may just be into the game, or it may be her implants aren’t sensitive enough for her to get what they’re saying, or some combination thereof. “Your little boy... He’s...”

“Ten months. I knew how to sign before he was born. No way I’d be this good at it this fast.”

“Oh.”

“It’s worth the effort though. How long ago did she get her implants?”

“Two years now.”

She’s got black hair, in little curling pig tails, and each implant has a little bow clipped onto it. It almost looks like she’s got some cute little barrettes on each side.

“He’s getting his first one on Monday. This is the pre-surgical consult.”

The mom smiles at him. Abby, having finished filling out their insurance forms, joins them on the floor. “And you two are just about of your heads, aren’t you?” the mom asks.

Tim half-smiles and Abby nods, vigorously. “I can’t stop the what-ifs!”

The mom nods at that, too. Then she says, “Nichole!” This time, a little louder than before, and in what both Tim and Abby recognize as the ‘pay attention to me’ voice that all parents learn to use. This time the little girl turns to her mother. “Mama?”

“Hey, baby. Maybe we don’t knock the blocks quite so far?”

She nods, and goes back to stacking her own blocks up.

The mom turns back to Tim and Abby. “She gets about seven out of ten words, and lip reads the rest of them. We’re still seeing a speech therapist every week, but most people can understand most of what she says now. She started pre-school in the fall, and other than the ‘you cannot tug on Nichole’s ‘barrettes’ speech, she’s just like the other kids there.”

“That’s good,” Abby says. It sounds lukewarm, and compared to her usual effusive enthusiasm for everything it’s beyond cold.

“And it doesn’t help, does it?” The mom says, with a knowing look.

“Not really.”

The mom nods again. “Yeah. It was the longest four hours of my life. And then when it was done, she was pissed. Hell hath no fury like a baby coming out of anesthesia. And the day in the hospital wasn’t a blast, either. But... the next day, you go home, and the drugs wear off, and the surgery heals, and eventually, you’re in a room, and the doc says, “Okay, we’re gonna turn them on in a sec; what’s the first thing you want your baby to hear?’ And... some of them cry, but Nichole... I said her name first, and she jerked in my arms, looking around, really confused. So, I turned her a bit so
she could see me, and I put her hand on my throat, and then said her name again, and she lit right up in a huge smile. And… seriously… nothing feels like that. It doesn’t erase getting there, but it does put down a lot of the stress.”

Tim’s holding Abby’s hand, and Sean’s banging two blocks together as Nichole piles them up for him. A second later, the nurse says, “Nichole Trainer,” and the little girl, and her mom, get up.

Tim and Abby look at each other. He inhales, a little shaky. She half smiles. And they both say, to each other, “It’s gonna be okay.”

Eventually, the nurse calls out “Sean McGee,” and back they go. She measures and weighs him and, like everyone here, she signs and speaks, and when Sean makes a little hand gesture that could just be him messing around, or could be *Hello*, she stares at him in amazement and tells them how smart he is and how fast he’s picking this up.

And like every other doctor’s appointment where one of their kids is showing off how smart, special, perfect, and utterly delightful they happen to be, Tim and Abby bask in it.

Then there’s more waiting. And more waiting. And a brief, ‘yep, everything’s okay’ checkup.

And it’s all just so fucking *normal*.

That’s what gets Tim the most about this. He mutters it to Abby as they’re leaving, “Lah di da di da… Just going to cut open your child’s head on Monday, pass the butter please. It’s like it’s just… nothing.”

“Yeah! Don’t get me wrong, I don’t want them to be nervous wrecks or anything, but…”

“Some recognition that this is a big fucking *deal.*”

“Exactly!” They get Sean strapped into his car seat, and little man, who didn’t get his proper afternoon nap is getting awfully crabby at this point, so he’s not exactly just gelling along with the program.

So, he’s in the back, fussing away, as Tim and Abby do pretty much the same thing with each other.

And they know they’re fussing. There’s nothing, short of cancelling this, that they can do, so they’re just blowing off steam and squawking at each other about it.

Sean, at least, falls asleep after a mile or two, and they take the extra, ultra-long way home so he can keep sleeping, and they can just bitch about this, with each other, without anyone, like their other children, overhearing.

And like Sean, eventually, they run out of steam.

And head home, and get the other kids, pack everything up, and head for the House.

After all, it’s Friday, and Friday means time at their home, with their family.
“You know who called me last night?” Tony asks, passing a platter of roast chicken down the table.

“Tony, you’re a cop, you get thirty calls a day,” Abbi replies. “You have to narrow it down.”

“Okay, you know who called me at 11:45, somewhat drunk, celebrating, last night?”

Gibbs sighs, loud; he got the same damn call, just at 11:42. “Fornell wanted to celebrate?”

“Apparently, in a world where babies do not wake you up at the crack of dawn, staying up late to watch the final game of the World Series is a thing.” Then Tony just stares at Gibbs and smirks.

Gibbs rolls his eyes. “Uh huh. Yeah, I know. Yes, I was watching. Three zero, Yankees win. My guys won the game that mattered.”

Ducky chuckles at that. “So, I take it baseball is over for another year?”

“For another year. It’ll start up again in April,” Tony adds. He glances down the table to Abbi, “So, are you done with Pensacola?”

“Finally. Mobile next, which isn’t exactly a prime location—“

“What’s wrong with Mobile?” Jimmy asks Abbi.

“For me, personally, not all that much, but if you ask any sailor who’s been stationed there, and that includes the Coast Guard, they’ll tell you it’s New Orleans with all of the fun removed.”

Penny’s nodding at that. “Nelson and I spent a year in Mobile, back in the ’50s.” She shudders. “Deep in the Bible belt, with full on KKK segregation, so hot and humid your clothing would mildew, and no air-conditioning. Literal Hell. Our parish was segregated, so I started attending church at one of the local, Black, Baptist churches, and managed to horrify a lot of the other officer’s wives.” She half-smiles at that.

“Is that what got you interested in civil rights?” Abby asks.

“We were in Pensacola before Mobile, and that was what got me interested. I’m not saying Boston was heaven on earth, or even particularly good when it came to civil rights, but it was easy to ignore. Unless you were looking for it, you didn’t see it, and as a teenager, I wasn’t looking for it. Once you got to the south, where every building had signs about who could use them, you couldn’t ignore it anymore.” Penny’s voice trails off… “I don’t want it to sound like a simple thing. Down I went, and oh, this is wrong, go fix it. I’m not a hero of this story. When we moved down, I wasn’t comfortable around black people, and the only one I’d ever spoken to before that was the girl who helped Mama with the house. My father was a Captain, and he was vocally, skeptical that black men should be allowed to serve in every billet. He was sure that, on a case by case basis, some black men, might be up for the job, but he certainly didn’t want an entire ship full of them. So, don’t take this as some sort of all the bad guys were in one place or on one side sort of story.”

“Grandpa wasn’t like that, though,” Tim half-says, half-asks.

Penny gets that small smile on her face, the one that goes with remembering Nelson. “No. Or if he was, it was before I met him. By the time I’d met him, he was firmly convinced that anyone who wanted to serve their country had any and every right to do so, and he’d do everything in his power to make sure they got put where they could do it. He’d have put women on ships if he could have.
He saw what the nurses and ambulance drivers had been up to, and he figured if ladies could handle that, they could fly planes and sail ships. But Nelson, especially back then, was one in a billion.” Penny stabs a bite of chicken on her fork, and shifts topic, a bit, “So where are you staying?” she asks Abbi.

“Who knows? I’ll get on a plane, land, and they’ll stuff me somewhere for a week. I know who I’m shadowing, what issues have been causing trouble there, and looking to see if I can spot easy answers,” Abbi replies.

“Anything look easy?” Ziva asks, as she pats Dave’s back.

“I’ve got the officer with the highest number of complaints against him down there. Not sure if that’s easy, but I’ll get to see if he’s salvageable, or if we’ve got to toss him.”

“How’s he still there?” Tim asks.

“Lots of complaints, but none of them are about corruption. He plays straight and narrow on our side of things. But we’ve had to settle three harassment claims on him, where he assaulted people who were suspects.”

Tim winces, and the rest of the table isn’t thrilled with that. Abbi glances to Gibbs, and he looks back at her. They both know there’s a nanometer thin line, and if you manage to stay on the right side of it, you can be an amazingly good agent, but if you fall to the wrong side…

Gibbs nods slowly. He knows she’s going to find out of salvageable means that this guy’s somewhere on the Mike Franks end of the spectrum, and if he gets smacked upside the back of the head, hard, he can rein it in enough to keep functioning, or if he needs to go. Though, with three complaints that went far enough for the Coast Guard to pay out settlements, the likelihood that this guy is salvageable is awfully thin.

“Anyway, that’s my week.” Abbi looks to Abby, who has Sean in her lap. “How’d the checkup go?”

Abby sighs, and Tim rolls his eyes and they both shrug and say, “Fine,” with the sort of enthusiasm one would expect from someone who just put his foot into his shoe to find it was full of lukewarm oatmeal.

“We were going over it with each other, and… It’s just so average,” Abby says.

“And yes, I get it, irony, in all capitals, but when I was just going through my average day of life hip deep in murders, I did my best to make sure that the victim’s family’s didn’t feel like it was just another day,” Tim adds.

“Do we have a time, yet?” Jimmy asks.

“They’ll call Sunday afternoon, let us know then. Supposedly ‘first thing,’” Abby adds.

“Probably means get there at five for a six o’clock surgery,” Jimmy says.

Neither of them are excited to get up at four in the morning for this, but the earlier the better. They’ve heard stories of surgery in the afternoon, which is a problem because you can’t eat for twelve hours prior, and there’s no possible way to explain to a ten-month-old why the food isn’t in his mouth.

“Everyone there is very impressed with little boy here. The Doc does think the signing is intentional. He’s sure Sean’s picking it up,” Abby says, snuggling Sean, who isn’t doing much of anything sign-
wise. He is chewing on a tiny bite of chicken, though.

“I sign!” Molly says, and signs, very pleased with herself.

“And if the doctor saw you, he’d be very proud of you,” Tim replies. “But your ears work, so you’re not going to be seeing him anytime soon.”

“Sean’s ears work?” Kelly asks.

“That’s what we hope,” Abby replies. “We’ll find out ’round about Anna’s birthday.”

And Sean chews his chicken, watching the hands around him, eyes keen.

There’s “family” and then there’s family, and right now, Tim’s exceptionally aware of the difference. It’s the weekend, and though Jimmy, Tony, and Abby get called in to deal with a murder, Tim’s got a lot of quiet time.

Which is the last thing he needs right now.

But Gibbs, Ducky and Penny, Breena and Ziva keep him, and the kiddos busy.

He doesn’t have time to fret. They’re off to the “Museum of Food,” and then Ducky’s got them working on a research project for Penny. She’s got a stupidly complicated bill in front of her, and none of them are sure what the hell it actually does, so there’s reading through it, trying to figure it out. (Apparently, what it actually does is slightly shift the legal specifications for gasoline canister manufacture to make them a tad more vapor tight. Testing to see if said specs would actually do that, by buying a few gas cans made at various standards and seeing if they could blow them up in the backyard was significantly more fun than Tim was expecting when the idea of ‘researching a bill’ came up. Correct answer, if the new specs made gas canisters any safer, it’s not readily apparent to the Gibbs clan.) And Gibbs, noticing that it’s November, and about time to put Semper in the boathouse for the winter, has them scrubbing her off. (Kelly and Molly especially like that. They’re wet, and soapy, and only getting about three square feet of decking clean, but they’re having a good time at it.) And, of course, Donnie’s only a month old, so he’s got a fairly steady collection of needs that have to be tended, and all in all… It’s a busy weekend.

And, if, through all of those adventures, Sean gets snuggled the whole time, and his little knees and feet don’t touch the floor unless he’s fussing about being constantly held, no one says anything.

“Okay. Five AM. We’ll be there. Yep, insurance card… We’ve got the forms already on file… Pediatric surgical wing… Okay… See you then,” Abby says, hanging up her phone.

Tim doesn’t need her to explain anything more than the half he heard. The “late afternoon” call they were supposed to get turned out to be a bit after eight.

“Five AM for prepping, six for surgery,” Abby says to him, sitting down on the bed they share with
Tim eyes the door. Sean’s down for the night. He shakes his head, he’s not going in there to just watch him sleep. Abby gently squeezes his arm. She wants to go pick Sean up and snuggle him some more, too.

Breena, who’s keeping them company says, “He’s going to be all right.”

They both nod.

“He really is.”

And again, they nod.

She wishes Jimmy were here. “He’s going to be all right” might carry more weight if the person saying it had the MD. But, probably not. Ducky’s been telling them that all weekend, and it’s just… words.

And she knows from her own experiences with Anna and Donnie that it’s not ‘all right’ until it’s done. ‘All right’ is something that only exists in the past tense.

Tim’s actually pleased that it’s his night on kid duty. He knows he’s going to sleep like shit, so it might as well be him getting up to fetch Donnie and deal with whatever other little dude maintenance is necessary.

He doesn’t know which feed it is. Sometime in the blue dim night. He’s handed Donnie over to Breena, and goes back to the nursery, standing next to the crib, watching Sean.

He’s on his belly, sucking his thumb, sound asleep. Anna’s next to him, her side to his.

He lays his hand on Sean’s back, dreading the coming light. Though he realizes in an abstract sort of way, that they’re leaving for the hospital before dawn.

Sean doesn’t stir at his touch. He might not even wake up when they move him to the car seat. He’s a *sound* sleeper.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he says to Sean… More to himself. “It’s gonna be okay.” That time it’s halfway between a hope and a prayer. “It’s—“ he feels a hand on his back, and then a chin on his shoulder, and arms around his waist. Abby, pressed up against him.

She kisses his neck. “It is.”

“I know.” And maybe if they say it to each other enough, they’ll believe it enough to not cancel the surgery in the next few hours.

It’s routine surgery. Their doctor has done this literally hundreds of times. Likely in the last year
alone. Countless little people have had this done and come through fine.

And none of that matters for shit because Tim and Abby have just handed Sean to a nurse, and they’re listening to him cry as she takes him away to be cut open.

Tim’s spent more time in a hospital than he ever wanted to. And right now he would happily, eagerly, jump right back into one of those beds and let himself get cut open if it meant that Sean would be okay.

But it doesn’t work that way.

There’s just sitting there with Abby, holding each other, waiting.

Gibbs is there about ten minutes after they hand Sean over. He’s got coffee (decaf), Caf-Pow (decaf), and breakfast for them. He doesn’t ask how it’s going, he just sits next to them, keeping his hand on Abby’s shoulder, under Tim’s hand.

And they keep waiting.

Jimmy joins them 137 hours into their wait. (Real elapsed time: 122 minutes.)

“New?” he says, flopping, boneless into the chair next to Tim.

“Two down, two to go,” Gibbs says, looking at Jimmy. “You need to go home.”

Jimmy half shrugs. “I’m okay.” He hasn’t been on ‘non-stop’ since Saturday morning, but it’s been close. An hour ago, he and Allan finished identifying all of the bodies and determining cause of death. Tony and his crew solved the crime before they got all of the pieces with the right people. Car bombs should not be attempted by amateurs. Sgt. Stephanie Moore not only managed to take care of her cheating husband, she also got five people who happened to be within a block of his car when it went up.

Jimmy slouches down, stretching his legs in front of him, takes his glasses off, tucking them into his jacket pocket, and lays his head back on the chair, his temple against Tim’s shoulder. “I’ll stay until he’s out of surgery, then I’ll go home.” Then he closes his eyes, and a moment later, they can hear him breathing, soft, steady, calm.

“Not yet,” Gibbs is saying to whoever just called his phone. “Should be any minute now. Three to four hours is average.” He’s pacing across the waiting room. “Three and a half. Doc said they’d let us know when he’s out, then an hour or so in recovery, and then we can see him. Yeah, I’ll call, or text... Okay… Will do.”
He sits next to Abby again. “That was Sarah. She sends her love. They’ll be over to visit when Sean’s feeling up to it.”

Another twenty minutes goes by, and Ziva, with Dave in his stroller, finds them.

“I take it he’s not out, yet?” she says, reading the tense vibe of the people around her.

Gibbs says something to her.

Tim isn’t really paying attention. He’s slowly rubbing his hand up and down Abby’s back, feeling the ridges of her dress straps under her sweater. Four straps, crisscrossing her back. For the last hour that’s how he’s been passing time, one, two, three, four down, and one, two, three, four up, and down again.

It’s probably not constructive, but it has put him into an almost trance-like mindset. Time’s not moving fast, not moving period, if you asked him, but one ridge after another is real, and here, under his hand.

He hears Abby make a little noise, and pays a bit more attention to something other than her dress under his hand. Ziva’s handing something… he almost has to work to pull himself back to the real world, but he does, and as he does, he sees what Abby’s holding, laughing and crying over.

It’s a teddy bear, made of soft gray and blue flannel, and on the side of his head, and behind his ear, is his very own (gray felt) cochlear implant.

Tim swallows hard, feeling his own eyes watering at that.

He’s in scrubs, still wearing the cap on his head, but his eyes are happy, and there’s a smile on his face, and a million pound weight slips off of Tim and Abby before Doctor Snyder even says anything. But he does say it. “The surgery went fine. Everything was textbook. He’s in recovery, and one of the nurses will get you as soon as he’s up. He’ll be a bit crabby when he comes to, but that’s normal.” He shakes Tim’s hand, and Abby hugs him. Snyder pulls back from the Abby hug, and smiles at them. “So, first week of December, we’ll bring him back in, and turn them on. Between now and then, all you’ve got to do is decide what you want your little boy to hear you say to him.”

That crashes through Tim, electric, and his knees feel week at the idea. Maybe it won’t be perfect, or very sensitive, but his son will hear his voice, at least some.

Another hour of waiting. But this hour is easier. Faster. Ziva takes Jimmy home to crash, and he and Abby wait, and wait, and wait, almost jerking up out of their seats every time a new nurse slips into
the waiting room to call another family in.

And finally, finally, finally, one shows up with their name upon her lips.

The recovery room is crowded, there’s someone in every bed, and along the far wall, there are cribs, and Sean’s in one of them. They hear him long before they see him. “Crabby” does not even begin to cover the level of pissed off crying they’re hearing. They know that cry, that’s a furious little guy.

They draw closer, pulled by sobs louder than a twenty pound body should be able to make. And each yell washes over them with relief. If he can yell, he’s okay, or at least he’s going to be okay.

His whole head is covered in big, puffy bandages, and he keeps trying to roll onto his belly, but he’s a bit too drugged so he’s not exactly getting his body over, and apparently he keeps nudging the sore side of his head, too, which makes him cry louder.

Abby’s swooping him up, fast, and Tim’s right next to her, holding her and him. Gibbs, who’s a little more aware of the rest of the room, spots a chair, and drags it over.

“He probably wants to nurse,” one of the nurses says. “They’re always hungry and thirsty after surgery.”

Tim remembers that from his own adventures in the hospital, how dry his mouth was and how desperately he wanted something wet.

Abby sits down in the chair and has him on her breast in a matter of seconds.

Sean looks very slightly mollified by getting a breast into his mouth, and he can’t cry and nurse at once, so he quiets down, slurping away, as Abby holds his close, and Tim gently strokes his cheek, and Gibbs hovers behind them, keeping a quiet, soothing presence.

He does snap a quick photo and send it off to the rest of the family. Out of surgery, having lunch. Everything went well. Next appointment in a month.

They’re eventually taken out of recovery to Sean’s room. Back before everything went to pieces in DC, this was probably a private room. Now it’s got three cribs, three chairs, and three cots for adults packed into it. There are two other babies in there, but they’re all cochlear implant cases, so, while it’s true that a collection of crying babies in three different cribs is a hell of a grind for their parents, they aren’t disturbing each other, at all.

Also, because it’s a room shared by three babies, only one “visitor” is allowed for each child in at a time.

Sean, who fell asleep a moment after he finished nursing, and is now in his crib, with his teddy. The nurse said he’s likely going to be doing a lot of sleeping today, and tomorrow, and the day after. As long as he’s on serious painkillers, he’s going to be snoozing, a lot.

Gibbs, seeing the cot, flops down on it, laces his hands behind his head, and then, looking up, orders Tim and Abby, “Home, both of you. You’ve kept watch over him while he was in danger, and he’s in the clear now. He’s not waking up anytime soon, so I’ve got him. I don’t want to see either of you until you’ve gotten at least four hours of sleep and a real meal.”
And while both of them would like to argue, there isn’t any arguing with those ice blue eyes, and one of them has to leave anyway… And it’s not like either of them has gotten any solid sleep in the last few days…and it’s also not like either of them was really able to eat breakfast, so…

As they’re pulling out of the parking lot, Abby’s setting her timer. She will be back at the hospital in exactly five and a half hours, which is exactly the minimum amount of time they need to get home, sleep, eat, and come back.

Unless Tim beats her to it.

“Down you go, love,” Breena says to Donnie after he finishes his late lunch.

He blinks up at her, sleepy, a few times before settling onto his back.

“Shhh…”

His little eyes droop, and drift shut.

She steps away, as quietly as she can. So far, Donnie’s been a fairly easy sleeper. Something of a fussy eater, little man won’t give up those burps until he’s been patted to the ends of the earth and back, but lay him down, keep quiet, and he’ll drift off easy enough.

She smiles at him, and feels her own eyes drooping. Naptime for her, too. Even with one of her spouses making sure to get one of Donnie’s feeds, that still means she never gets more than five hours of sleep in a row, and honestly, she’s often getting less. Little boy being slow on his burps means that he doesn’t just eat and go down.

And right now, going down is a very good plan.

She heads to her own bed, and finds Tim, Abby, and Jimmy all in it.

Abby’s in the middle. Tim’s snuggled up at her back, and both of them are exhausted. Jimmy’s next to Abby, on his back, holding her hand. He’s exhausted, too, but a different flavor of it.

Breena crosses their room, and finds her spot next to Jimmy, lying her head on his shoulder. He wakes up just enough to kiss her forehead, stubbly chin rasping against her skin, and then he’s still again.

When Tim wakes up, his mouth tastes brown, and his eyes don’t want to open, and the reality of not really sleeping for the last few days crashes into him.

And he couldn’t care less about any of it, because he’s got to get back to his boy.

He gently untangles himself from Abby, who will likely be a bit on the annoyed side about him sneaking off to get baby snuggles, but only one of them can be there at any given time, and she’s the one who does the nursing thing, and that happens tonight, so she might as well get more sleep and…
And he’s rationalizing it.

He’s awake, he ate something, he’s going.

And that’s just it.

When he gets in, Gibbs is in the chair, and Sean’s on his chest, snoozing away.

Gibbs sees him, and looks a little guilty. They try not to let the kids sleep on people. “And now we know why you sent us away.”

“You needed the rest.”

His eyes still feel gummy, and his body aches with tiredness. “I did. Abby was still out when I got up.”

He gently takes Sean from Gibbs, and Gibbs stands up, offering up the chair. Tim settles himself, cuddling him against his chest. He makes sure not to let his chin droop to the top of Sean’s head. He doesn’t know exactly what’s sore, but better safe than sorry.

He can feel a tiny heart thudding against his chest, and little breaths against his neck. Sean smells wrong, but that’s likely because he was in surgery. Once they get him home and a bath, he’ll smell right again.

“Did he wake up?”

“Just for a minute. I changed his diaper, gave him a bottle, and he was out again. They’re giving him good meds. He’s a little loopy, but I don’t think he’s hurting.”

“Good.”

They see a nurse hovering near the door, and Gibbs gets the message. He squeezes Tim’s shoulder, lays a kiss on Sean’s back, and heads off.

“You cheated,” is the first thing Abby says to him when she gets in.

Tim shrugs a little, not feeling even remotely guilty about it. Sean’s in his arms, snoozing away, and he’s had a few hours of just holding onto him, reassuring himself that everything is indeed, fine.

Little guy is loopy, which is kind of entertaining in a ten-month-old. He was trying to suck his thumb but couldn’t successfully get it into his mouth. He hit himself in the cheek with his fist and looked really surprised about five seconds after it happened.

“I can’t nurse him, and you needed the rest…”

She gives him the hairy eyeball while taking their son from him. For a moment, she just holds him,
feeling the soft, warm weight of his body against her chest. Her eyes close and a smile spreads across her face as she snuggles him.

Then she looks up at the bigger version of the little guy and says, “Uh huh…” She knows he’s BSing it, and he knows she knows, too.

“He should be waking up soon.”

“Good.”

“The nurse says they’ll release him ‘round ten in the morning.”

“I’ll stay ‘til then, and take him home, then.”

“How about you text me when he’s ready to go, and I’ll pick you both up. That chair’s shit for sleeping in, the other little guys aren’t exactly silent,” one of them is fussing away as he and his mom waits for a nurse to show up with more pain medication, “and I don’t want you driving tired.”

Abby eyes the chair, and the cot, thinks about too damn many nights in the hospital in her past, and decides Tim’s onto something.

“Okay.” She holds him a little tighter, and inhales, deeply. Tim steps in closer, wrapping both of them in his arms. They stand there, holding each other, for a few minutes. Then the nurse with the pain medication comes in, and as she’s making sure the other little guy gets his meds, she eyes them.

Tim nods, kisses Abby and Sean, and then heads off.

“How is he?” Breena asks as soon as Tim’s in the house.

He doesn’t have time to answer before being rushed by the other kids, who haven’t seen UncleDad all day, and are understandably interested in some time with him.

So, he’s on the floor, sitting cross-legged, holding Kelly, with Molly on his back, and Anna toddling towards him, when he says, “He’s okay. Sleepy. Annoyed when he’s awake. It looks like they’re doing a good job with the pain meds. Most of the time he’s asleep, but when he’s awake, he’s not too fussy.”

Breena sits down next to him, rests her head on his shoulder, and says, “Good. And how’s Daddy?”

Tim kisses her forehead. “Better. It’s done. For good or bad, it’s done. No going back now.”

Jimmy comes out of the kitchen, where he’s been wrapping up dishes. “Hey.” He sits down next to Tim, too, and takes Anna, who’s trying to climb up Tim’s legs, and holds her.

“You’re looking better,” Tim says to him.

“Back at you. Have you eaten?”

Tim blinks at that question. He doesn’t remember eating, but that doesn’t mean much. “Maybe. I’m not hungry.”
“There’s a bowl of stew in the fridge for you,” Jimmy replies. He kisses Tim on the top of the head, and straightens up. “Eat up, quick, and then help me out with tubby time.” Then he curls his arm so Anna’s hanging upside down, peeling with giggles, as he blows a raspberry on one foot. “Okay, up the stairs we go! Tubby time!”

And like a heard of elephants galumphing up the stairs, the assorted McPalmer kids head to the bathroom.

“When’s Sean coming home?” Molly asks as they settle in for story time.

“Tomorrow morning,” Tim says.

“And you’re going to have to be really gentle with him,” Breena adds. “He’s got a big booboo on his head, and it’s going to be sore.”

Tim nods at that, then he cups his hand over Kelly’s ear. “He’s got a big, puffy bandage that looks like this on his head,” he says.

“Hearing?” Kelly asks.

“Not yet. The booboo’s got to heal up before they can make him hear,” Tim says.

Anna points to her knee, which has a booboo on it: a long, thin scrape. “Booboo?”

Tim’s nodding, though Sean’s isn’t exactly on that level. He reaches forward and gently strokes her head behind her ear, and then does it for the two older girls. “Right there.”

“Kiss it?” Kelly asks.

Tim nods. “When he gets home, you can give him a gentle kiss.” Tim figures there’s no way Sean’ll be able to feel it through his bandage, so there’s no shot of them hurting him.

When they get the kids down, Anna, who is normally pretty good about laying down and going to sleep, keeps sitting back up and looking around the crib she shares with Sean.

Tim kisses her head an extra time.

“Yeah, I know. He’ll be home tomorrow.”

9:30, before Abby’s even got the chance to text him, Tim’s waiting at the hospital.

They do let him break the “visitor” rule for Sean’s release care consult.

He and Abby both nod along. The big bandage stays on for two days. Then they can take it off. The
steri-strips underneath will just start to peel off, and like with Abby’s c-section, don’t tug on them, just trim them as they get loose. Sponge baths for a week, then he can go back in the shower. Use an earplug for the next few weeks to make sure the inside of his ear doesn’t get wet. If he spikes a fever or if the area gets red (more red) and swollen (more swollen) bring him in.

They know all of this stuff, and are eager to get out of here. Sean’s waking up some. He’s still on pretty heavy-duty pain killers, but not the level he was yesterday, so he keeps trying to get free of Abby’s arms and get on the floor.

He’s not really crawling yet, but he does sort of rock and scoot, and he looks like he’s in a rockin’ and scootin’ sort of mood.

Abby’s not about to let him rock and scoot on the floor of a hospital, and Tim wholeheartedly agrees with that. So, Sean’s in a crabby mood, which makes getting out of there even more appealing.

Finally, though, they’re out.

Sean’s in his car seat, and getting with it enough to have noticed there’s this thing on his head. He keeps whacking at it with his hand, trying to figure out what it is. Tim’s driving, and Abby’s in the backseat. She has a mirror, and tries showing Sean himself, and his bandage in the mirror.

He spends a few minutes looking at the mirror, and seeing the baby in the mirror, and how it’s doing what he’s doing. That seems to calm him down a little, especially about the thing on his head.

Or maybe, because he’s ten months old, and has the attention span of a drugged infant, he just loses interest.

Either way, he falls asleep again, and they take him home.

“Ooohhh…” Heather takes Sean from Abby when they get home. “Look at you! Is your head sore?”

Sean, of course, does not respond to that directly. He does lean in for a cuddle, and then jerk his head back because he just laid the sore side against Heather’s chest. Then he cries, and tries to get out of her arms because he’s sure she just bit him or something.

She hands him to Tim; she’s a firm believer in not forcing cuddles on children who don’t want them, and says, “Gonna be a long couple of days.”

Tim, who’s carefully making sure only the healthy side of Sean’s head comes in contact with his shoulder says, “Yes.”

Abby, who’s got Kelly in her arms, brings her close enough to see her brother, and then, holding her hand, very lightly lets her touch the bandage. “It’s really sore.”

“SEAN!” Kelly yells, but Sean’s completely unaware of it. She nods, looking satisfied by that, and says, “Not hearing, yet.”

“Not yet,” Abby replies, wondering if Molly and Anna are going to need to do that, too.
Lots of cuddles, lots of naps, lots of snacks, and lots of Little Bear.

It’s a very slow day.

Laying on the floor, on his side, with Sean sitting up in front of him, gnawing on one of his blocks, as Kelly snuggles against his chest, and the three of them watch Little Bear and his buddies sing the rain song, Tim’s finally feeling really settled again.

A moment later, when Mona and Jackson come bounding in, with Pop not far behind them, it gets better.

Mona stares at Sean, cocks her hear, and gently sniffs him. She doesn’t actually nod, but she goes have a sort of, “I guess this is okay,” look to her face, then she pads off to the kitchen, where Abby’s getting lunch ready.

Gibbs sits down next to them, and Jackson scurries over to Sean, putting his front paws on Sean’s leg. He gives a little bark, and it looks like Sean notices it, but Tim knows he’s responding to Jackson touching him. Then Jackson hops ups a bit further, so he’s in Sean’s lap, and lays his front paws on Sean’s shoulders, and licks Sean’s face.

Sean lights up in a huge grin (first they’ve seen all day) and strokes Jackson’s back.

Both of the grownups keep a close eye on those two. The odds of one of them accidentally hurting the other one are higher than they’d like, but right now, little puppy and little boy are happy as clams with each other.

Gibbs gives Tim a gentle squeeze to the shoulder, and says, “It was okay.”

Tim nods, inhales and exhales deeply, and says, “I know.”

And this time, he’s not lying.
And we’re a go!”

There are times Tim misses MTAC, and this is one of them.

He’s in his office, at home, sitting next to his uncle and Walter, and watching the feed through Sander’s glasses. Right now he’s got a view of the front of a building where the IRS claims it stores its evidence. There are no signs on it, nothing to suggest it’s anything other than a warehouse just outside of the DC border.

It feels perversely bizarre to be watching this in his desk chair, in daylight, without three million dollars of top of the line computer equipment next to him.

It feels odder yet to just watch. There is precisely no situation where him hopping into this will help. His job is to be the Boss, and if necessary call an abort, call the head of the IRS, or the lawyers depending on how badly this goes.

“Daytime?” Tim remembers asking his uncle when he sat down with the plan for this.

“Daytime. Nothing on earth looks less suspicious than someone with the right credentials walking into the right building during office hours.”

Tim had to admit, that made a certain amount of sense.

Outside the IRS building is as non-descript as possible. Inside is a different story.

Anyone can walk into the main lobby. From the camera in Sander’s glasses, they can see a small space in front of a metal detector. That’s common enough for a federal structure. The blast shields behind them, aren’t. The fact that everyone is getting scanned and patted down isn’t common, either.

The fact that you can’t even go through the metal detector if you don’t pass a fingerprint and facial recognition scan take it even further.

After the IRS was burned out, they made sure no-one who didn’t belong there could get in to any of their buildings.

Though, as Tim’s watching Sanders walk up to the fingerprint scanner, he’s wondering if a big part of this isn’t so much about securing their people, as making sure no one can do what he’s doing.

“You sure you want to do this?” Tim asked Sanders. He feels like he’s pretty capable when it comes to reading people, and as best he can tell she’s who Brand’ll be in about ten years. Whip smart, hyper capable, able to hack anything that can be hacked, but not a field agent.

Tom McGee snorks a quick laugh at that.
Sanders smiles slightly, licks her lips, and says, “Yes, sir, I’m sure.”

Tim looks at both of them. “What’d I miss?”

“Well, sir. The US didn’t have women in combat roles when I wanted to enlist, but Israel did.”

Tim nods slowly. “Say no more. Did he have to wrestle Orli to get you on his team?”

“Orli was out by the time I switched sides.”

“Ah.”

Sanders is looking at the fingerprint scanner. It’s a basic version. Place finger pad onto the scanner, little light scans across, it dithers for a moment, and then… Yep, green light.

Over to the facial recognition scanner. She has to take the glasses off for that, so they get a view of the room around them spinning, and then the floor.

“You sure this’ll work?” Tim asked.

Tom looked away from the makeup artist, Jim Bellinger, who was working on Sanders to him. There’s some exasperation in his eyes, and a bit of sharpness in his voice. “Pretend I’ve done this before.”

Tim nodded, and sighed. It’s easier to be the guy getting ready to go in, than it is to be the one managing.

“Fine,” Tim said. “Tell me how this’ll work.”

“I created a character: Melanie Burkowski. She’s in the legal department at the IRS, reporting to Simon Hellerson,” Tom waved a finger, indicating he’s Hellerson, “and it’s her job to go get the Partridge evidence for a review.”

Tim nodded. “Okay. And…” he eyed the prosthetics Bellinger, who Tom hired out of a Hollywood special effects team, was applying to Sander’s face.

“Facial recognition measures sets points on people’s faces. What looks like the same person to you, doesn’t look like the same person to a computer because the eyebrows are a little higher, or the nose a tad wider, earlobes a bit longer,” Bellinger said as he carefully glued tiny pads of latex to Sander’s face. “Once I’m done with the makeup, she’ll look almost exactly like she normally does, but the pictures they get when she’s in the building won’t match Sanders on a facial recognition, but they will match Melanie Burkowski.”

Tim looked at the little latex pads that he’s going to put on Melanie’s fingers. “Same with the prints.”

“Exactly.”
Tim can’t see how the facial recognition software works. He, and everyone else, spend a moment looking at the floor. Gray, poured concrete… Boring.

He’s starting to move past tense and into worrying… What if one of the little pads slipped off? Maybe she had an itch and scratched and dislodged an eyebrow or something… when the glasses move again, and once more they’re on Sander’s face, and she’s walking forward.

She lays her purse and the folder with the evidence request on a conveyor belt, and then walks toward the metal detector.

A security guard pats her down. They get a view of the top of her head as she very carefully frisks Sanders.

A moment after that, the guard stands up, nods, and Sanders goes through the detector.

Another moment, and she’s on the far side of the conveyor belt, and picking up her purse and the evidence request.

The final hurdle lies twenty feet past the blast shields.

“Her name is Myrna Smith, and it’s her job to know where everything is, make sure all the paperwork is in order, and then fetch it for you,” Tom says.

Through the screen, Tim sees an older woman, gray hair, gray eyes, and a look of world weariness that makes him think this woman has seen everything there ever was, ever is, or ever will be to see.

She’s behind bulletproof glass, in an office that appears to be made out of concrete cinderblocks.

She presses a button, and they hear, “Whaddya need?”

Sanders finds the button on her side, and presses it, allowing Smith to hear her voice. “My boss wants the Partridge evidence.”

Ms. Smith looks at Sanders. She knows something’s up.

“You’re in the wrong building. The FBI has that.”

They can’t see what Sanders does, but they hear her say, “Don’t I know it! Look, Hellerson says you’ve got it, and I’ve got to get it from you.” She holds up her evidence request so Smith can see it through the glass.

Smith’s eyes flick over the order. Besides what it’s asking for, apparently it passes muster. “I can’t give you what I don’t have.”

“I know! But Hellerson says the computers say you’ve got it, and… I mean, did you personally hand those computers over?”

Myrna rolls her eyes. “No. I watched it on TV the same way everyone else did. I can double check.”

“Thank you!”

They watch Myrna turn to her computer screen, and her fingers flying over the keys. She stares at the screen for a moment, eyebrows scrunched together, and licks her lips. “Yeah. Your boss is right. The
computer says it’s still here. I can go look.”

“Thanks.” Myrna’s just about up when Sanders asks. “Hey, can you see who was supposed to be on when the computers went to the FBI?”

“I know who was on. There’s only three of us, and Alison Hentrinks is the only one who’d screw the pooch badly enough to hand over evidence without recording it properly. I swear, that girl!” She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “The only reason she’s got a job is because we’re all hurting for people right now. Sit down, it’ll take me a while.” Then they watch Myrna stand up, fetch a hand truck, and vanish through the door that has to lead back to the evidence warehouse.

They spend twenty minutes watching Sanders read. Tim approves of her choice of fiction.

All through it, they wait, on edge. At NCIS Tim’s set some things, evidence, files, cases, etc… so that, should someone attempt to access them, an alarm will go off, and let them know who’s trying to get them.

Sanders didn’t find anything along those lines when she was carving a way into the IRS computers, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t one there.

They have all communications into and out of the evidence building monitored, and right now, everything is silent.

If something tries to get out, they can kill the signal, but doing so kills their signal to Sanders, too.

Half an hour. Tim’s half-reading A Dance With Dragons, again, and half keeping an eye on the communications feed.

“How long do you think it takes to find a computer?” Walter asks.

Tim shakes his head. “If it’s like the NCIS evidence lock up, it could be hours. Everything is in there, somewhere.”

“And if, like we suspect, it’s not in there…” Tom says.

“She’s going to… Actually, no. If it’s not there, she’s going to assume that what’s her name just did an awful job and didn’t log the transfer,” Walter says. “What do we know about Myrna?”

“We did a full background on her. She’s worked for the IRS for twenty-eight years. She’s set to retire next June. She’s been in evidence since 1990.”

“So, if they’re handing out faked evidence, or changed all the records, she’d have to know about it, right?” Walter says to McGee.

Tom half-inclines his head. “It’s a working theory. We’re not sure. Evidence from three IRS buildings ended up here, so it would have been easy to move things without her knowing what was getting moved, and what needed to move.”

Walter isn’t buying it.
“Everything gets a scanner code when it’s packaged up. That’s how they log things in and out. Scan them, sign for them, scan them again when they get to whomever is supposed to have them.”

“Like Amazon?” Tim says.

“More like a library, but that’s the basic idea,” Tom says.

“Do we have eyes on the scanner feed?”

Tom clicks a few times and another window pops up, splitting the view on the big screen TV in Tim’s office into three. They can all see the last scan was four hours ago.

They hear the buzz, and see the view from Sander’s glasses jerk away from the page to the window.

“That girl’s a twit. There’s nothing back there,” Myrna says.

“Okay.” There’s a pause, and Tim assumes that’s Sander smiling. “Thanks for double checking. You mind calling my boss and telling him there’s nothing there?”

“You don’t want to get chewed out?” Myrna says with a dry smile.

“I’d rather not.”

“Sure, hon. What’s his extension?”

“3398.”

They watch Sander watch Myrna dial, and a second later McGee’s phone rings.

“Hellerson.”

“Hello Mr. Hellerson, this is Myrna Smith, in the evidence lock up. I’ve got…” They see Myrna look to Sander.

“Melanie Barkowski”

“Melanie Barkowski, down here, requesting the Partridge evidence, and I’m confirming we don’t have anything.”

“Uh huh…” McGee says. “Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“Huh… That’s interesting. The computer says it’s all there.”

“Computers are only as good as the person who updates them, and Allison’s a twit.”

“Interesting. Just to be clear, you’ve got nothing on the Partridge case.”

“Nothing, sir. Everything is supposed to be in five boxes marked XKJ-2237-8742-Part. None of them are here.”

McGee offers a long suffering sigh. “Thank you. I’ll go call the FBI again.”
“Good luck, sir.”

“Thanks.” Tom hangs up.

They see the image on the screen bob up and down as Sander nods at Myrna. “And thank you. Okay, I’m off.” And they watch Sander walk out.

Tom McGee turns to Tim and Walter. “Now’s when we start planning the dead of night, sneak in, leave-no-trace mission.”

Tim nods. “Walter…” He doesn’t need to even start the sentence.

“I know. Eyes on Allison, and get someone into the evidence lock up. Let’s see how often they’re playing fast and loose with the books. Just to be clear, we don’t, in fact, have that evidence, right?”

“She said five boxes. We got one envelope with a laptop in it,” Tim replies.

“All right,” Walter says. “We’ve got confirmation of the fact that there’s supposed to be way more than what we’ve got.”

“Yep. We won’t know until Uncle Tom’s guys get in there if Allison didn’t scan anything because there was nothing to scan, or because she’s in on it, but either way, I want someone in one of those jobs finding out what the orders from on high are.”

Walter smiles. “I think we can arrange that. I have a feeling Allison’s going to get a new job offer, a better one, very soon, and we’re going to pop someone in her place.”

“Perfect,” Tim says. “What are you going to do with Allison?” Someone who can’t be trusted, assuming Myrna’s not just BSing to cover her ass, to scan a document doesn’t sound like the kind of person they want at the FBI.

“We’ve got an evidence lock up, too, and ours is completely automated. On purpose. A lobotomized rabbit could run that system and not screw it up. There’s no possible way Allison’s too stupid for it, and just like the IRS, we’re hurting for manpower, too.”

“Go get her,” Tim says, liking this, very much.

“I’ve got news,” Khan says to Tim a few days later.

He’s not in DC. They’re talking over a secure line.

“Partridge news or hacking the government news?”

“You’ve got my hacking report.” He hears Khan make a disgusted noise. “Do you have any idea how badly I’m going to hurt you guys if you can’t close that hole?”

“I can imagine.” The last report was Khan hacking the anonymous bidding contract server for the US military. Apparently, it took him all of three hours to set it so he could award the contracts to whomever he wanted. Tim’s sent his report off, along with a ‘now would be an awfully good time for you guys to look into block chaining your bids and contracts’ note. He’s fairly sure the guy at the Pentagon he sent that note to is going to ignore it. Khan will likely come out of the deal rich enough
to buy his own private island, or three. “Partridge news, then.”

“Maybe. There’s someone in Montana who’s doing some coding on the dark web that looks familiar.”

“How familiar?”

“Close, but not certain. I’m thinking of a field trip.”

“NO! If it is her, and you walk up to her…” Tim’s got images of dead hacker rushing through his mind.

“People knew my code, not my face.”

“Enough of them knew your face you were hiding for your life, before you ‘died.’ If she didn’t break herself out, the kind of person who grabbed her could likely identify you, too.”

“Uh huh.” Khan’s not impressed. “You just want to grab her yourself.”

“That’s true, too. But I’m not interested in losing you in the process. Among other things, you drive up to wherever the hell it is Montana, you’ve got to cross a border, remember? And I don’t know if they’ve got your real prints on file or not.”

Khan hisses. “Shit.”

“And then, once you get there, what? If she ran away on her own, fine. If someone grabbed her, you’re alone, in a foreign country, where you’re a wanted fugitive, where my get out of jail card means less than the paper it’s written on, trying to rescue a woman from someone who had the power, pull, and guns to get her out of prison and erase most of the last year. So, please, keep your butt in Miami, enjoy your mojitos, and let my people go hunting for her.”

“So your guys can get into the shootout with the ‘bad guys.’”

Tim’s hoping not, but that’s always a possibility. “Maybe. At least my guys know how to use a damn gun.”

“What are you going to do with her if you find her?”

Tim stares at the ceiling. “I don’t know.”

Khan sounds surprised. “You mean that, don’t you?”

“If she ran away, she’s not going to want anything to do with me, especially if I’m taking her back to prison. If she got grabbed, I’ve at least got some leverage, but that gets shot to shit if I immediately turn around and toss her back into jail.”

“Depends on how bad conditions are.”

“Yeah. Great. If it’s bad enough federal prison looks good…”

Tim can feel Khan nodding. If it’s that bad, she likely won’t be of any use to anyone after that.

“Give me the coordinates. I’ll have someone scout it. Once we’ve got a better idea of what’s out there…”

“Fine.” Khan does. “That’s wild west territory out there. Who are you sending?”
Tim smirks. “My dad’s in-laws are in Montana. Maybe he’d like an excuse to visit.”

Khan thinks about that for a moment, and then says, “Wait, Silent Sam, with the U.P. address?”

Tim laughs. “I want someone who looks like a good old boy from the wild west, possibly just out with his horse, his buddy, and his dog for a ride.”

“Oh, God. He’ll nail that, won’t he?”

“Exactly.”

Tim checks in with Kevin after that call, laying out what Khan offered.

“Yeah, he’s still on the up and up. He found that address two days ago. He’s been checking and double checking, and I’ve been looking for Heidi’s Caf-Pow.”

“Have you found it?”

“Maybe.”

“I’m hearing that a lot today.”

“According to the parents whose kids she used to teach, she was a huge fan of Ghirardelli Chocolate Squares.” Tim nods at that, he likes the dark chocolate and salted caramel ones. “The address Khan gave you is on an Indian reservation. It doesn’t have postal delivery. It’s got a box. The very nice lady at the Post Office was willing to tell me that that box does get a large package sent to it every month from Amazon, and that said package does have a ‘Perishable’ stamp on it.”

“Kevin, that’s good work.”

“That’s a really tenuous lead, McGee. For all we know, that’s a box of pumpernickel bread or something.”

“You’re right about that, but you still did a good enough job to figure out what she likes, and talked the Post Office lady out of some evidence. That’s good work. You feel like going on a trip?”

“A trip?” Kevin sounds halfway between excited and wary.

“Yeah. Montana. I know who’s going into the field. If you want to be the guy in the hotel room keeping eyes on the computers, ears on the situation…”

“Oh… Yeah. Sure. Who’s going into the field?”

“I’ve got to ask, but I think Gibbs and Fornell.”

Tim hears something like “akgurk” on the other line, and he smiles, imagining the look on Kevin’s face at that news. “I’ll let you know when it’s set up.”

“Hey, Dad.”
“Tim? What’s up? Sean okay?”

“Yeah. He slept through the night last night.” For the first time since they weaned him off his pain meds. Once his little snuggle bunny got used to all the extra cuddles and attention he was getting, he didn’t want to stop. Getting him to sleep in his crib, with just Anna, was three nights he’d rather not think about, again.

“Excellent. How’s the scar?”

“The steri strips are almost off.” Which is what Tim’s willing to say. That it’s bigger, redder, and staring up at him every time he sees the side of Sean’s head is what he’s not willing to say. That he almost decked Jimmy when he made the joke about Frankenstein’s baby is something else he’s not willing to say. He held Sean under his armpits, using his fingers to keep Sean’s arms out in front of him while ‘walking’ him around the living room, chasing his siblings, groaning. The kids, including Sean, thought it was a laugh riot. Tim felt his hand curl into a fist, and he wasn’t entirely sure if he wanted to smack Jimmy for having no filter, or himself for putting that scar on Sean’s head.

Gibbs doesn’t ask what’s up again. Tim can feel him thinking it.

“How’d you and Fornell like a trip to Montana?”

“Now?”

“Yeah.”

“I think Fornell’d want to know what he did to piss you off so bad you’d send him to Montana in November.”

Tim laughs at that, and then waits. He knows Gibbs is curious.

“Why?”

“We think we might have found Heidi Partridge, and I think it’d be a really good idea to have some people who can look like Montana go wandering about, get a look at where she might be, and see if they can suss out if she ran or was taken.”

“Scouting.”

“Scouting. Just a couple of guys, maybe a horse or two, take Mona if she can stand the flight…”

Tim feels more than hears Gibbs shaking his head. “Dog sled. Snow’s too deep for horses now. We’re going to want some dog sleds.”

“Lucky for you, you know someone who has a few of them.”

Gibbs laughs. “When?”

“Whenever Jennifer tells me she’s got tickets for it.”

“I can do that.”
“Wendy…”

“Hey, Jethro.” She looks up from the crossword puzzle she’s working on. Like his house has an open door policy, for him, the Fornells have an open door, too. So, she’s not too surprised to see him just walk into her living room less than an hour after he got off the phone with Tim.

“You mind if I borrow your man for a few days this week?”

“Borrow him how?”

“Drag him to Montana, spend some time sliding around with dog sleds, looking to see if there’s a missing hacker in an-off-the-beaten-track house in the woods.”

She nods. “He’ll like that. What are you going to do if you find the hacker?”

“Not sure about that. We’re just supposed to find out if she’s there.”

“Sure, have fun.”

He kisses her cheek. “You’re the best decision Tobias ever made, you know that, right?”

She smiles at him. “He’s in the back.”

‘In the back’ turned out to mean in the garage. Fornell doesn’t love working with his hands, not the way Gibbs does, but after about a week in a tank, everyone in there becomes a fairly decent jackleg mechanic. It’s that or die, because those things, especially in ‘Nam, tended to drop over dead if you looked at them wrong, so everyone had to be able to fix pretty much everything, or at least rig it into some sort of basic functional shape to get it to limp back to base.

In addition to not loving working with his hands, he also doesn’t love spending money he doesn’t have to, and if he’s looking at changing his own oil, or giving someone money to do it for him… That’s simple. Compared to a tank, taking care of Wendy’s Hyundai is a piece of cake.

A piece of cake he’s currently located underneath of, getting ready to drain the old oil and put some new oil in.

“Once you’re done with that, gear up.”

Fornell slides out from under the car. “I’m sorry. Do I look like one of your minions?”

“Hah.”

“You don’t order me around.”

Gibbs snorts at that, too. Fornell slides under the car.

“It’s a case,” Gibbs says, uttering the magic words.
Fornell slides back out again, peering up at Gibbs. “What kind of case?”

“You remember what I’ve been telling you about Tim’s missing hacker?”

“Yeah. He find her?”

“Maybe. I’m heading out to see if the person they found is her.”

Fornell thinks about that. “You want me to come, too?”

“Yes. Go out, blend in, look around, see if it’s her, or if we’re looking at a bunch of sixteen-year-old computer geeks.”

“What do we do if it’s her?”

“Not sure, yet. Probably depend on if she looks like she’s there because she wants to be, or if someone’s holding her.”

“If she’s there because she wants to be, we need to bring her ass in.”

Gibbs shrugs. He’s certain he doesn’t understand all the ups and downs of what they arrested this lady for, but Penny thinks the charges are crap, so that’s good enough for him.

Fornell sees he’s lukewarm on this, and adds, “Her lawyer’s dead. Her prosecutor’s missing. Remember… If she got herself out, a lot of people got hurt for her to do it.”

Gibbs nods at that. “Good point.”

“And if she’s being held…” Fornell’s warming up to the mental image of night vision goggles, storming in guns drawn, and rescuing the captive. He’s got a wide grin on his face and looks awfully ready to get going.

“If she’s being held, we’ve at least got to wait for a warrant or something. Probably want some backup, too.”

Fornell waves that away. “I’m in.”

“Pack your long johns.”

That brings Fornell up short. “Wait, where are we going?”

“Teach me to agree to a trip without asking where we’re going ahead of time,” Fornell says as they shuffle through the million person long line at Dulles’ security.

Gibbs would have to admit, this wasn’t part of what he was looking forward to. Yes, with visiting Abbi every week he’s spending more time in airports than he ever wanted to, but at least with all of those flights they’ve been ‘domestic.’

Right now, they’re in the international terminal, because, when he wasn’t looking, Montana went
from declaring itself no longer part of the US to doing something about it. So, unlike when he and Abbi went almost a year ago, now they’re on an ‘international’ flight, and having to deal with even more security and hurdles.

“Feels weird to have to use my passport to get to Montana,” Kevin, standing slightly behind them, adds. He’d been feeling a bit nervous about a trip with Gibbs and Fornell, but McGee told him they’re like sharks and can smell nervous at a thousand paces, so bottle it up, and just go in and be sure of himself. ‘You helped take down Khan. Gibbs knows that. Just don’t step on their toes. Act like you know what you’re doing on your side of it, and you’ll be fine.’ That helps, a bit, and he’s doing his best not to act like a junior probie fresh out of FLETC.

Fornell shakes his head at that, and adds a bit of an eye roll. It’s not like he blames a lot of the states that left for leaving, but right now, it’s a major pain in the ass. He feels a little nudge to his shin, and looks down, Jackson wants something. Fornell picks him up, and then looks at Gibbs. “I would have understood bringing Mona, but why is the gerbil with us?”

Kevin would have to admit that “the gerbil” is helping a whole lot on the ‘be comfortable’ front. Yeah, Fornell’s being gruff about him, but whenever he thinks no one’s looking he’ll bend down and pet him. It’s hard to be too intimidated by a man who’s cuddling a puppy, even if he does keep calling him a gerbil.

‘The gerbil’ looks insulted at that, and offers a small bark. Gibbs takes him from Fornell, and Jackson, now high enough to see more than a sea of feet, settles down on Gibbs’ arm. And like Fornell, it’s just… difficult, to be intimidated by the guy carrying four pounds of ridiculously cute little doggie.

“Who’s Mona?” Kevin asks.

“His real dog,” Fornell says, gently petting Jackson’s head. “The snow’s going to be over his head, Jethro.”

“They wouldn’t let Mona on the plane proper. She would have had to have gone in a crate. And he’s got to be able to handle anything anyone throws at him, including snow, horses, and other dogs.”

Kevin clearly wants to know why Jackson would need to handle anything other than chasing balls and chewing on toys.

He’s about to ask when Gibbs says, “He’s a hearing-ear-dog-in-training. He’s got to be able to go wherever his person goes.”

“Oh.” Kevin looks more closely at Jackson. “How old is he?”

“About nine months.”

That surprises Kevin. “Is he full grown then?”

“Just about. He might get another half-inch or so.”

Jackson’s watching Kevin with interest, trying to get some petting and licking in. Kevin hold out his hands and it’s clear that Jackson wants to head over to visit. Gibbs inclines his head and lets Kevin take him.

Talking about how one trains a hearing ear dog kills the rest of the line, and shocks Kevin. Gibbs, Gibbs, the invincible, silent knight of NCIS is happy to chat, with actual, spoken, words, with him about teaching a puppy to recognize hand signs.
“Seriously?” Fornell’s in full-on snit mode when the TSA lady wants to flip through the books in his carry-on luggage.

“It’s policy, sir.”

“Yeah, of course it is. God alone knows how I’m gonna take a plane down with a bookmark. I’m retired FBI, you know?”

She’s flipping through the pages of his book, ignoring him. The only reason he doesn’t make a bigger fuss is because Kevin got “randomly” pulled aside so they could do a “thorough” search of his computer equipment, and he’s doing a much better job of tolerating it than Fornell is.

When they’re through security, Fornell says to Gibbs and Kevin, “The next time McGee wants my ass on the other side of the country, he can pony up the private jet.”

Kevin sniggers at that.

The rest of the trip is fairly basic. Wait, get up, get in line, wait some more, get on the plain, wait, fly, wait, get off the plain, wait, go through customs, wait some more, finally get through and get their luggage.

Gibbs had thought about calling his in-laws and seeing them for dogsleds, but a look at the map squashed that idea. Montana is more than five hundred miles wide, and Abbi’s parents are on the eastern side of the state, and the Flathead Indian Reservation is on the western side.

A few minutes of googling also told him that dog sleds might not be the greatest idea, either. He knows Abbi’s mentioned that Montana is arid, and that it doesn’t actually snow all that much, it’s just that the snow that falls doesn’t go anywhere until May. The part of the state they’re going to isn’t as dry as Abbi’s part, but there’s still only a few inches of snow on the ground in November.

So, horses. He’s good with horses. Two guys out for a ride, little dog frisking around behind them, maybe riding with him. Kevin back at the hotel, keeping up with them, voice in the earwig… It’ll be good. They’ve got about an hour’s drive to get to Polson, another hour or so to get settled. Then they can go and start getting the lay of the land.

He’s getting that planned out in his head as Kevin’s looking for the luggage carousel so he can get his gear, and Fornell’s texting Wendy to let her know he got in okay, when a voice filters through.

“Jethro.”

Gibbs jerks to a stop, turning toward the sound of his name. He blinks, shocked. There’s a man, standing, waiting. He looks familiar, but it does take Gibbs a tenth of a second to place his father-in-law. “Jeff?”

The older man offers his hand, and Gibbs shakes on automatic, feeling stunned to see him here.

“Abbi said you’d be here,” Jeff says, looking amused to have caught Gibbs off guard.
Fornell and Kevin wait to see who this person who’s got Gibbs floored is.

“I can’t believe you came.”

“Eh…” Jeff waves that off. “If you can’t take a little drive, you don’t belong out here.”

“Nine hours?” It’s got to be at least that long from the Borin ranch to Missoula International, and even for Gibbs, who’s been known to tolerate a ‘little drive,’ that’s a long time in a car.

Jeff’s non-plussed. “Who’re your friends?”

That snaps Gibbs back to himself. “Tobias Fornell, Kevin Hussein, this is Jeff Borin, my father-in-law.”

That amuses Fornell to no end. He shakes Jeff’s hand, happily, and says, “Your daughter is one hell of a woman. You and her mother did a fine job with her.”

“She did a fine job with herself, we just helped.”

Fornell likes that answer, too.

Kevin’s eyeing Gibbs, not sure what to make of this. Gibbs isn’t wearing a wedding ring, and this isn’t the warmest reaction he’s ever seen. Nothing hostile, but…

Then Fornell says, “I wasn’t expecting to meet you until the wedding. Gibbs was saying that you guys are pretty tied down to the ranch, lots of livestock,” and that slips the pieces into place for Kevin.

“We took on some extra hands this year. Tax laws changed, and that freed up some extra cash. I’ve got time to take a few days and help out my family.” Jeff eyes the three of them. “Looks like you need it. Are you supposed to be blending in?”

Jeff’s in jeans, boots, a thick plaid flannel shirt, a wool-lined denim jacket, and behind him, in the chair he’d been sitting in as he waited, is a Stetson and a pair of sturdy leather gloves. Gibbs in his cargo pants, sneakers, t-shirt, Marine sweatshirt, and winter coat is the closest in look to Jeff. Though, that’s more based on attitude than fashion. Fornell’s somewhere in Jeff’s range, too. He’s got on jeans, loafers, a gray button down, a jacket, and his winter coat on top of it. Kevin’s dressed for work. He’s wearing a suit, and because his mental image of Montana is a hybrid of Alaska with cows, he’s also got a parka, winter snow boots, a scarf and wooly hat stuffed into his pockets, and his best cold weather skiing gloves.

“That’s a mascot, not a dog.”

Kevin, who’s rather taken with Jackson, and is seriously thinking that he might want one of these
little guys as a pet, says, “Maybe he’ll keep me company.”

Jeff eyes Kevin. It’s clear on his face that he was thinking that Kevin might be the younger, more in-shape, active guy with the actual badge who goes along and makes sure the two old guys don’t pass out from altitude sickness and over-exertion. “You’re not going out?”

Kevin shakes his head. “No. I’m tech. I’ll keep eyes on the communications, figure out if you’re in the right place, see if they’re aware of you guys poking around, and if you spook them. If you do spook them, I’ll be the one to see what they do with that, if they send the information on. And, I’m also the only person here who actually works for the FBI, so if you get on the wrong side of the cops, it’s my job to make sure you get bailed out.”

Jeff thinks about that, and nods. “Always a good plan to have someone watching your back. Come on. Daylight’s fading fast, let’s get going.”

They cross one more border to get into the Flathead Indian Reservation.

They wait in Jeff’s truck while the border control officer, a bored-looking Native American, checks their drivers’ licenses against whatever’s in his database.

“Just making sure there are no warrants out for us,” Jeff says.

“That a problem out here?” Fornell asks.

“For about a week back in February when we really broke off. Technically, they’re still part of the USA, as much as any Reservation is, and we’re on our own, and for a little while we had people running in both directions trying to avoid the other side’s laws. Right now, everyone and their car gets checked going in and out, and that’s that. Same if you want to head out of the state in any other direction.”

Gibbs files that away. Trying to get Heidi Partridge out of the Flathead Reservation, if she’s in here, might prove interesting on several levels.

Jeff was right, daylight is fleeting. It’s not much past five, but the stars are out. It’s cold, but not inhaling gaseous ice that Gibbs ran into in January. This puts him in mind of deep winter back in DC. Not fun, but not horrific, either. The thermometer on Jeff’s truck says it’s just above freezing, but those numbers have been dropping fast as the sun set.

They’ve pulled into the parking lot of a mid-range hotel in a ridiculously picturesque little town on a snow covered lake. “Where are we looking for?” Jeff asks as he shoulders one of Kevin’s bags.

“Once we get into a room, I can pull it all up. If we’re where I think we are, we’re still a few hours off,” Kevin says, and then grabs his other bag.

“Could be, it’s a big reservation,” Jeff replies.

They get checked in, find their rooms, and in about half an hour Kevin does have his tech hub set.
He’s looking at his maps, and points to the far northwest corner of the reservation. “That’s where we’re getting the signal from.”

Fornell looks at the space between where they are and where Kevin’s pointing. “If the signal is way out there, why are we over here?” Polson is in the northeast corner of the Flathead Reservation. The signal they’re looking for is in the far northwest. “Why not,” he squints at the map, “Niarada?”

Jeff laughs at that. “Nothing but a motor cross track in Niarada. It’s about 25 people scattered over fifty square miles. There isn’t a town or anything, just a few roads and some houses. Robin, a friend of mine, she’s out there, and has horses, so we’re going there, but you’ll see, there’s no there, there.”

Kevin adds, “We’re here because we aren’t officially here, which means we couldn’t go and borrow a tricked out FBI van from South Dakota with its own wi-fi hot spot. Using the local wi-fi, this is the best of what was available. Both McGee and I thought it’d be really nice if you two weren’t out in the middle of nowhere and then suddenly my feed died because the local connection was wonky.”

Jeff points to where the target is, a tiny blob in the middle of nothing but trees. “But they’ve got a good signal.”

“They do. And I do, because I’m here. And tomorrow, when you get out there, we’ll be all set. You’ll piggyback off of their signal once you get close enough, and I’ve got this solid one here. And you won’t be going, ‘Kevin? Kevin? Can you hear me?’”

Jeff nods, and then glances around at the rest of them. “You hungry?”

They are, so with everything set on the tech side until tomorrow, it’s dinner time.

With a talent for tech, Kevin has spent most of his life in mixed-race groups. Even if the rest of his school was whiter than snow, the IT club would have several other brown faces in it. When he got to college, he lived in the computer science dorm, and half of his classmates were Asian. Working with the Feds, again, the rest of the building might look like a blizzard’s worth of snowflakes, but in the tech department skin tones ranged all over the map.

So, he’ll admit that he’s awfully shocked to walk into a restaurant in the Flathead Indian Reservation and be the only person of color in the place.

He’s getting some looks, though he thinks that’s more to do with his clothing than his skin color, but it does feel really odd to see no one darker than Fornell in here.

Jeff catches him looking around, really surprised, and watches to see what’s getting to him. “Not what you were expecting?”

Kevin shakes his head.

“Didn’t think you’d be the only Indian in an Indian Reservation?”

“I’m Pakistani, but… yeah, basically.”

“Back in 1855, the US government set up this land as an Indian Reservation. Then, in an effort to turn the Bitterroot Salish, Kootenai, and Pend D’Oreilles into dark-skinned white men, they gave
each family a plot of land.” His lips curl. “They’re nomads, moving through the land, following the herds, but the Feds didn’t like that. They wanted ‘em to be farmers. So each one got a plot. But the plots only made up a third of the Reservation. So they divvied up the rest of the land, and gave it to anyone else who wanted to move out here. Not a lot of people did, but more than there were Natives. Then the Feds took the rest of the land. The Flatheads got to be a minority on their own reservation. They’ve been buying the land ever since, and own close to two-thirds of it, now, but especially in the more tourist-friendly areas, there aren’t that many Natives. Out here, they’re something like one out of six, and for the reservation as a whole, they’re one out of three.”

“Why didn’t they leave the US when you did?” Kevin can’t imagine why they didn’t tell the US government to bugger off when the rest of the state around them did, maybe toss all of the non-natives off the reservation. Though, as he thinks of how well that worked out for India and his own country, maybe they were smart enough not to try.

Jeff’s lip curls even further. “The US owes ‘em a huge pile of money. There’s a Federal trust that’s supposed to pay out to the Reservations. They were using it as a slush fund for whatever other crap they wanted to do. And they still claim to own a bunch of the land in the reservation. Said the Flatheads would have to pay maintenance fees for it if they tried to leave. That fee’s more than the tribes make in a year. Some of the younger ones are saying they should just tell the Feds to fuck off, close the borders, and claim the land. But among the old, memories run deep, and the tribal elders know what happened the last time they went up against the US Army. No one’s interested in doing that again. So, the lawyers fight it out.”

“Great,” Kevin says, voice flat.

Jethro, who’s been listening, but not saying, adds, “Penny says they’re offering statehood to the reservations.”

Jeff nods at that, as a waitress seats them. “Some of them. Further east. The ones in the Black Hills have gas and oil hiding under their land. Out here we’ve got trees. No one’s offering any pretty deals.” Jeff shakes his head. “That’s bleak.” He focuses on Jethro. “Tell me what my girl’s up to. We haven’t gotten a call since Sunday.”

Gibbs doesn’t blush, but there is a feeling of being under a microscope. “It’s her last week in Mobile. She saved the worst team for last. So far they’re tiptoeing around, doing a lot of looking over their shoulders, waiting for her to look the other way.”

“This the one with all the complaints?” Tobias asks. Jeff appears pleased that Gibbs’ best friend knows what’s going on with his daughter that well.

Gibbs nods. “Yeah. He’s a jackass. Even on his best behavior she can tell that.”

“Enough of one to get rid of him?” Tobias asks.

Gibbs shrugs. “And replace him with…” He turns from Fornell to Jeff. “She’s already short men, and this guy clears cases. He’s a jerk, and maybe more than a jerk, but he gets the job done. Everyone with a passing grade for the next three FLETC classes is already spoken for, and the CGIS is awfully low down on the list of plumb assignments. She’s trying to hire anyone with any experience in maritime law enforcement, but they’re also few and far between.”

“She went from too little budget and too many people to just enough budget and not enough men,” Jeff says.

“Exactly. She’s got money to hire, but no bodies to put in jobs. So, she’s sitting on this jerk and his
partner, Mr. Jerk-lite, and trying to figure out what to do with them.”

“Split them up?” Kevin asks.

“That’s definitely going to happen.” Gibbs smiles. “That was the first thing she told me about these two. Jerk-lite is going somewhere else. Boston or New York. They’ve got top of the line management there, and a good leader could probably do something with Jerk-lite.” Gibbs smiles. “Says he reminds her a bit of Tim. He’s about twenty-five, got paired with the Jerk right out of FLETC, and desperately wants to make his partner like him, so he’s picking up all of his bad habits.”

“Jerk’s a different story,” Fornell says. “She afraid he’ll poison anything he touches?”

Gibbs nods. “That’s what she’s afraid of. What she’s trying to figure out.”

Fornell shakes his head, putting down his menu, “Have I ever told you how lucky we were to never get to management?”

Gibbs nods back, “Amen!”

“What’s after Mobile?” Jeff asks.

“New Orleans. That’ll get her to the middle of December, and then she’s home for a month. Mid-January she’ll get back to it with Portland. Then Seattle. Then Honolulu.”

“You’re going along for that one, right?” Fornell asks.

“Hoping to. At least a few weeks.”

“Will you take Jackson along on that?” Kevin asks. The little guy didn’t exactly love the trip to Montana, but he did okay. Honolulu is a full day on a plane, though.

Gibbs shakes his head. “He and Mona’ll spend some quality time with Tim’s family.”

Fornell chuckles at that, and then says to Jeff, “He ever tell you about Mona, or the first time Tim met her?”

Jeff, of course, has not heard this story, and looks amused as Fornell gets into the adventures of Mona and the extended family. Kevin, who has also not heard this story, and of course, works with McGee, listens, fascinated, getting a better idea of who that guy behind the desk is.

It may only be eight o’clock, but Gibbs is ready to turn in. His mental clock thinks it’s ten PM. Jeff’s getting ready to go to bed, too, because he’s on farm time, and that means sleep by nine because the day begins at four. Fornell and Kevin seem fine with an early bedtime, for the same reason Gibbs is. Their internal clocks are two hours off, too.

He’s in his room, on his own, appreciating that Tim doesn’t require they double up on rooms, sitting on his bed, and calling Abbi.

A few rings pass, and he wonders if she’s still working its… Nine, where she is, so later than ‘normal office hours’ not nearly as late as she’ll often work if she’s on her own. But on the next one he hears her voice.
“Hey,” she sounds happy to hear him, and a moment later, he’s got picture, too.

“Hello, back,” he says.

She’s smiling at him, and then says, “So, you find a surprise at the airport?”

He rolls his eyes at her a bit, and smiles. “Yeah, I did. Took me a second to recognize him, because I wasn’t expecting to see him.”

She laughs at that. “How’s he doing?”

“Just fine. Lucky for us, he’s got a buddy in Niarada, who we can rent some horses from, so we’re not stuck having to try and ride out from here.”

“Sounds like you and Fornell won’t have to be doing any middle of the winter camping.”

“For which both of our backs are thankful.”

She smiles at that, too.

“How are things on your end? The Jerk let the mask slip?”

“Nah. He’s still acting like the Lt’s right behind him, looking over his shoulder. I know he’s bitching about me as soon as I go to the restroom, but I haven’t caught it, yet.”

Gibbs offers her some quiet support. She appreciates it, and then says, “It’s probably a bad thing, but I’m hoping we run into some other asshole, so I can see him deal with someone difficult. So far this week everyone we’ve seen has just rolled over in front of him. I don’t need to watch him deal with someone who’s cooperating. I need to see him deal with someone who’s difficult.”

“You can be difficult.”

“Yeah, and if no one obliges me by doing it for me, I may end up having to be the person who does it, but…”

“But you’d rather watch him do it than dish it out.”

“Yeah, the rest of the station isn’t exactly loving me hovering around, and everything’ll run smoother if I’m just around to see what’s up, not there gunning for one of their own.”

Gibbs more than knows how that works. “Then I hope you guys find your asshole.”

She laughs at that. “Talk about an odd place to be.”

“Amen.”

“Tell me about tomorrow…”

So Gibbs does.

With Jeff along to help, “blending” works a lot better than expected.
Fornell’s looking at the cowboy boots, and says, “McGee’s expensing this, right?”

Apparently there are cowboy boots, and cowboy boots, and the things that Jeff is making them buy so they don’t look like a pile of dudes from back east are designed to last a lifetime and a half of hard, physical labor. These are not pretty, hand-tooled, leather that comes from cows who have never spent a day in the rain.

These are boots, for the kind of guy who may find himself ankle deep in horse shit, and wants to keep his feet dry and clean, and his footing stable.

Gibbs appreciates the quality and workmanship, but… Yeah… He’s also glad the FBI’s footing the bill. He half-wanted to blush when he saw what they cost. Especially since he doesn’t expect to need to wear them again.

But, by the time they’re done, Gibbs and Fornell, in their jeans, boots, flannel, hats, and jackets look like the kind of guys who belong on a few horses out in the west.

Jackson doesn’t blend. Jeff’s staring at him, shaking his head. “You really want to bring him along?”

Gibbs nods. “He hears better than we do, smells better, too. If something’s out there, he’ll sense it before we do.”

“From the top of a horse?”

Gibbs nods. “Yeah. His job is to be alert, and let his person know when there’s something he needs to be paying attention to.”

“Oh, but he’s in training,” Jeff points out.

“He’ll be fine. This isn’t the first probie I’ve taken out.”

Jeff just sighs, and then pats his rifle. “I don’t have to ask, do I?”

Both Gibbs and Fornell shake their heads. Then Fornell adds, “He’s the sharpshooter. I can hit it if I can see it with a naked eye. Give him a pad of paper, a scope, and enough time, and… What’s your record?”

Gibbs shakes his head. “Almost forty years ago. I’m probably good for 2500 feet now.”

Kevin’s eyes go wide. “That’s almost a kilometer.”

“Should have seen me back when I was active duty.”

“We’re not going after anything that far away.” Jeff nods. “White men can’t hunt fur bearing animals out here, so that’s not our cover story. We’re just out for a ride, and we’ve got this in case something big thinks Jackson’s a decent snack.”

Gibbs is holding Jackson, and his expression seems to be saying, “See, he’s coming in handy already.”

Fornell pats his own gun, which is on his hip, but covered by his jacket. “Open carry out here, right?”

“Yeah. You don’t even need a license anymore. Especially as far out as we’re going… This is grizzly territory. They should be asleep by now, but no sane man goes out without something to get him out of a tight situation.”
Fornell nods at that. “That’s good.”

Kevin adds, “Okay, let’s get you wired up and ready to go.” He points to his collection of equipment. “Jeff, I was only expecting two guys, so I’ve only got two earwigs, do you mind…”

“I’m fine with only one voice in my head.”

“Okay.” He hands the earwigs over to Gibbs and Fornell who know how this works. “The microphone on these is sensitive enough that I’ll be able to hear whatever it is you say.” Kevin points to the door connecting his room to Fornell’s. He and Gibbs head off, and Jeff watches as he tests the equipment. “You guys hear me?”

“Just fine,” comes out of the receiver, in Fornell’s voice.

“Great. Gibbs.”

“I’ve got you.”

“Okay, come back in. There’s only one downside on this, you can’t wear a knit cap or earwarmers, or all I’ll be hearing is the sound of cloth moving around over the mic.”

“Lovely,” Fornell says dryly. “I didn’t need ears.”

Gibbs waves that off. “Tony gets on fine without the top of his right ear.”

“He’s missing part of his ear?”

“That’s why he’s wearing his hair longer the last few years.”

“Completely missed that. What happened?”

“Deep freeze.”

Fornell winces, he knows that story. Usually, when a case goes bad, he ends up at Gibbs’ place. That was one of the few times Gibbs ended up at his place.

Kevin decides he doesn’t need to know that story and adds. “It’s supposed to be above thirty all day today. I think you’ll come back with your ears attached.”

Stepping out to Jeff’s truck, it may be over thirty, but it’s not over by much. Between the chill and the thin air, this is Gibbs’ idea of winter.

Polson’s a town a pretty streets, small homes and businesses, a long expanse of iced over lake, with snow topped mountains on the horizon. It might as well be a post card for how pretty it is.

In town, there are buildings, and a general sense of people around, but once they’ve crossed the long bridge over the lake, and drive for a few more miles, they’re out of town and…

Fornell’s staring out of the windows of the truck, eyes wide. “I’ve never seen the sky so wide.” There are long wide hills, and longer, wider plains between them, and a billion square miles of land and sky.

Gibbs is nodding along, he knows how Fornell feels.
You’re gonna feel like you’re in a fish bowl when you get to DC,” Fornell says to Jeff.

Jeff inclines his head. “Part of why we left Seattle. Got out here to visit, looked around, and everything else felt tiny and cramped after. Even the Space Needle doesn’t feel like much of a view once you’ve been out here.”

Fornell and Gibbs look around, neither of them have been to the Space Needle, but they’ve both been on an aircraft carrier, and short of that, this is the widest view either of them have ever seen.

They drive across hilly grasslands, frosted white with a thin glaze of snow, brown grass poking through, mountains on the horizon. The thing Fornell isn’t noticing is trees. Yeah, there’s a gray-green line on one of the hills, and those might be trees, but everywhere else is prairie.

“They could be totally blind and see us from a hundred miles off,” Fornell says, watching the land. He glances to Gibbs and Jeff. “We damn well better ‘blend.’”

Jeff’s eyes scan the road and land. “Give it a bit. There’ll be more trees where we’re going.” He thinks Fornell has a good point, though. “Do we have a plan other than mosey around?”

Gibbs nods. “Mosey around, get near the place, see if we can find somewhere with line of sight to their windows, break out the binoculars, and settle in. Kevin’ll tell us what rooms they’re in, and we’ll keep moving around so we can see them.”

“And if they’re not in a place with handy windows...” Jeff asks. “Some guys don’t bother with windows, especially if they’re building on the cheap.”

“Mosey even closer, crowd the front door, and be lost assholes looking for a bathroom and some help getting home,” Gibbs says.

“It’s a small place,” Fornell adds. They’d seen the satellite shot of it, and it does look like a tiny square in the middle of nowhere. “Can’t be too many places to hide someone.”

“And if they’ve got her stashed in a basement, they’ll have to have something we can see to get a hint of that.” Gibbs knows construction, and he knows what to look for to see if this cabin has a basement someone could be stashed in.

“Like Kevin saying that there should be an extra person in the room we’re in,” Fornell adds. “He’s got heat sensors, so if one of us is saying something like, ‘So, is it just you two on your own out here?’ he knows we can’t see the third person, and can tell us that we’re just about on top of her.”

“And if she’s there?” Jeff says.

“Depends on how she’s there. Tied up to a computer, we shoot the bastards and get her out. Shackin’ up out in the middle of nowhere, we mosey on out, Kevin keeps track of them, makes sure they don’t run off, and Tim sends in guys with actual badges to go swoop ‘em up,” Fornell replies.

Jeff nods. “I can mosey with the best of ‘em.”

Gibbs smiles, and Fornell says, “Great.”
“Hey, Robin,” Jeff says a minute after stepping out of his truck.

Gibbs has seen some out of the way places in his life, like, for example, where Jeff and Becky live, but this blows them out of the water.

Robin Husted runs a… Gibbs honestly isn’t sure what exactly this is. Apparently, Niarada’s got one thing in it, a motor cross track. She’s a few miles away from that, but seems to do a little mechanical work, there’s a bay for taking care of bikes, some bits of farming. There’s a barn, a few cows, and some horses. She’s got a tidy one-story house, which she rents rooms in for people who want to use the track, and not make the trip all the way to Polson and back.

So, maybe he’d call this place a… ranch? But that’d be a big question mark at the end of it.

“Jeff.” Robin’s a quiet woman, looks like she may not say ten words a day if left to her own devices. Fornell’s looking around at all of this space, and if she lives alone, he can see why she’d never say anything, there’s no one to talk to.

Not for miles.

A child… boy… maybe. It’s got long hair and broad features, and bundled up for the winter, Fornell can’t tell if it’s a girl or boy, pokes it’s head out of the barn.

“They here for the horses?” s/he yells across the yard.

Robin nods. Her eyes skate past Gibbs and Jeff, land on Fornell, and she asks, “You ever ride before?”

“Million years ago.”

“Any good?”

“I know which side of the horse I’m supposed to be facing, and how to put my foot in the stirrup to make sure that happens.”

She nods again, and yells out, “Make sure to saddle up Lucy.” Then she returns her attention to Fornell. “She’s a sweet girl with an easy gait. Won’t challenge you, or try to rattle your teeth out.”

Fornell appreciates that. “Thank you.”

She may be a sweet girl, but she’s still a horse, still awfully tall, and yes, he does know which foot to put in the stirrup, and he’s got the basic idea of lofting himself up, but it’s not exactly anything he regularly does. He’s got no muscle memory for it.

Meanwhile, Jeff more or less sprung onto his horse, and Gibbs hopped up with way less effort than someone with his knees should ever have to use. Hell, Jackson, who, granted, Gibbs just put him up on his horse’s saddle, got settled with less effort than Fornell’s expending.

So, they’re up and ready to go, waiting for Fornell to get on the horse.
He glares at Gibbs, half hopping as Lucy steps to the side. “One of these days, I’m going to make you do something with a tank. Make you look like the out-of-place-dude.”

Jeff sniggers at that, as he watches Fornell take a few more half-hops before getting himself into the saddle.

Once they’re saddled up, Gibbs calls Kevin, and he makes sure their electronics are live. From here on out, he’s ‘driving’ so to speak, because he’s the one with the satellite view of where they are, and where they need to get.

“How far to go?” Gibbs asks, breath frosting between words.

They hear Kevin’s voice. “According to the GPS you’re eight miles from the house.”

“What direction,” Fornell asks, a little exasperated. It’s clear that this is Kevin’s first time as support for a team.

“Direction, right! West, right now. You’ll catch a road and go north in a bit, but for now, head west.”

“Everyone in place?” Gibbs asks.

“McGee got me a good view of the place on the satellite feed. Infrared tells me that there’s three people and two… I’m going to guess they’re dogs. Right now, they’re all inside.”

Gibbs relays that to Jeff, who asks, “If you can see that from the sky, why are we doing this?”

Kevin answers and Gibbs repeats, “Because we don’t know who those people are. That building doesn’t technically exist. There’s no owner of record. If they’re a bunch of Flatheads running their own tech empire from the middle of nowhere, we’ve got no quarrel with them. If one of them is Heidi Partridge, we’ve got to start getting the paperwork up to get her out of there.”

They’re quiet as they clop through the snow crusted grass. On the horizon those trees that Jeff said would be closing in, are indeed, closing in. That cabin’s in a forest, but for right now, they’re still on snow covered grass.

“Diane coming to the wedding?” Fornell asks.

Gibbs nods. “Yeah. Tim’s still got that accountant in town. She’s bringing him.”

“Chaffin.”

Gibbs nods.

“Emily likes him. She liked Draga better, but this guy looks solid.”

Speaking of Emily. Gibbs got the RSVP card yesterday. “Emily’s bringing a date, too.”

Tobias sighs. “Yeah. New guy. She met him at a Halloween party. Told us about him last week.”

Gibbs smirks. “This one any good?”
“I won’t find out until the day before your wedding. He’s going home to his family for Christmas, and then coming to mine for New Year’s.”

“She like him?”

“Fluttery eyelids and lots of sighs. I’d diagnose head over heels in love.”

Gibbs sniggers at that. “You want to bring him along for some ‘male bonding’ and we’re game.”

Fornell can just imagine ‘male bonding’ with this crew. “Make sure we bring Ed, too.”

Gibbs has a wide smirk on his face, and explains to Jeff who Ed is. By the end of the story of Ed and Emily’s jerk of an ex, Jeff’s in favor of him being invited to ‘male bonding,’ too.

“You guys see a road in front of you? About a hundred feet ahead?” Kevin’s voice cuts into their conversation.

Fornell, Gibbs, and Jeff scan the snow before them. Finally Jeff point out a spot where the snow is slightly lower than the snow around it.

“Yeah. No one’s used it since it snowed last. No fresh tracks.”

They hear Kevin typing. “Four days ago. Follow that north for three miles, and you’ll hit the edge of the property line.”

And with that the ‘three guys and a dog out for a ride’ mosey over in that direction, and keep going.

Jeff was right, the trees do get denser. It’s not exactly Gibbs’ idea of forest, but there are enough of them to provide some cover and keep them from being visible from Mars.

“They still in the house?” Fornell asks.

“Three heat signatures in there. The dogs are outside.”

Gibbs passes that along, stopping his ride.

“Shit.” Jeff says. “So much for them not knowing we’re near.”

Gibbs curses quietly under his breath. The dogs will know if they get close enough to look into the place with their binoculars. They’ll likely start barking up a storm. So much for plan A. “Let’s go be tourists.”

And they do. If Gibbs had to guess by the cacophony of barking that started when they got within visual range of the house, there are way more than two dogs there, so he’s not sure if only two of them were big enough to show up on the heat sensors, or if these are just really loud and aggressive doggies.
Before they’re within fifty feet of the house, the dogs are out, and it is only two of them. They’re big, shaggy things, large enough to give anything smaller than a bear pause about getting too close to the house. Gibbs isn’t sure what they are, other than he doesn’t want to mess with them.

Fornell yells out, over the dogs, “Hello!” He’s playing up his accent, sounding like a thousand generations of the Bronx, all condensed into one person.

The dogs keep barking, and the horses aren’t having a great time with that. They’re nervous, but for right now, the dogs are staying a good fifteen feet away, so the horses haven’t bolted, yet.

Jackson’s yipping back at the bigger dogs, back up, teeth bare. He’s defending his humans, and it doesn’t matter that he’s about half a meal for one of those big guys, no one barks at his people the way the dogs on the ground are.

Gibbs makes sure he’s got a good hold on him. Patty’s been pleased with his puppy socialization techniques. Jackson’s pretty much fearless, quiet, and gets along everywhere with almost everyone. That said, he doesn’t want to have to explain how he lost him because he took him on a case to Montana and got him eaten by something that looks like a cross between a wolf and a St. Bernard.

Eventually, they see the door open, and a man walks out. They’re too far away for great details, but they can see he’s native, bundled up, and younger than anyone in their party.

“Hush up, you two!” he yells to the dogs. They hush, but don’t retreat, and their owner is watching Gibbs, Fornell, and Jeff warily. “Hello back.”

Fornell holds up his phone. “Damn thing’s got no reception out here, and we’re lost. You mind if we stop in for a moment and make a call.”

The man eyes them, and then nods. “Sure. Come on in. Warm up, make your call.”

“Thanks.”

They dismount, and tie the horses up at the front porch, and then head inside. There are three people, and a very spiffy collection of computers, but Heidi Partridge, unless she underwent not only a sex change operation, comprehensive facial reconstruction, but also got herself a new race, isn’t in that cottage.

“You guys are life savers,” Fornell says.

“We know we’ve got to be heading east, but east covers a lot of ground out here,” Jeff adds.

And Gibbs, holding Jackson, with his fingers still in his gloves adds, “And if our wives don’t hear from us soon, we’re dead.”

Fornell nods, vigorously, at that.

The first man takes his own cell, unlocks it, and hands it to Tobias. He calls Wendy.

Jeff pulls his map out, and spreads it out on an empty kitchen table. Then he points out his friend’s place in Niara’a. “We’re trying to get there. We know we’re somewhere around here.” He circles his finger in their general area. “If you can give us some help…”

The first man nods. “Yeah. Okay.” He eyes the map. “Yeah. Right now, you’re here.” He points out where they are on the map, and then gets a pen. “It’ll be hard to see in the snow, but you’re looking for this.” This is a tiny one lane dirt track. It’s on the map, barely. “Keep following that east, and then
you’ll get to” he points out another road on the map, and this one is an actual street. Gibbs doesn’t think it’s paved, but it’s probably gravel, and likely more than ten feet wide. “And that’ll take you back to Niarada.”

While they’re talking, they hear Fornell saying, “Yeah hon... We’re going to be a bit late… You know Jethro, he took the gerbil with him, the damn thing went running off, and by the time we caught it, we’d gotten turned around… Uh huh… Yeah, I know. Teach me to trust the compass on my phone in the middle of a dead zone. Yeah… I’ll tell you all about it when we get back…” He glances to their host.

“Three hours?” Their host says, looking at the map.

“About three hours. Thanks. Love you, too. Bye.” Then Fornell turns to their host, handing the phone back. “And thank you. These two do stuff like this all the time. I don’t. She’s nervous about me out in the woods, afraid I’m gonna get eaten by a bear.”

Gibbs smirks at that. “We haven’t gotten you killed, yet. You’d think Wendy’d know that by now.”

“Yeah, well, she knows you two. She’s got reason to be worried.”

Jeff just shakes his head, laughs, and tucks the map back into his jacket. “Thanks again.”

And with that, they leave.

Gibbs waits until they’re well past the line of sight of the cabin before saying to Kevin, “You get all of that?”

“Yeah. And I’m watching them now. If you spooked them, I can’t see it. They’re all in same room you were, sitting around doing whatever it is. They aren’t even on the computers right now.”

“Great. Total bust.”

Kevin sighs. “We knew it was a long shot.”

“So, what’re they doing there that’s got you guys wondering about them?” Jeff asks.

Kevin starts an extremely technical and complicated explanation of what they were doing. Gibbs sees the three of them glance at each other, and Kevin could be speaking Latin backwards for all they’re understanding him. After another minute Gibbs says, “We’re good, Kev.”

“Ah. Back tonight?”

“Yeah. Late. Don’t wait up. We’ll see you for breakfast,” Fornell replies. They’re at least four hours from their hotel now.

“Okay. See you at breakfast.” Then they hear the connection go dead.
A few steps later Jeff says, “That lady’s dead, isn’t she?”

Gibbs nods, and Fornell says, “Probably. Someone decided she was too dangerous to live, so she, and everything she touched, is gone.”

“What’d she do?” Jeff asks.

“According to Penny, found a way to buy and sell stuff where no one knows who the buyer or seller is and no one can find out,” Gibbs replies.

Jeff can’t believe that. “And that’s too dangerous to live?”

“If you don’t know who buys and who sells, you can’t tax those sales, and you can’t trace income and…”

That’s when Jeff gets it. “Half the country fucks off. California, their biggest cash cow, and Texas, number three, also leave, and someone suddenly decides that people who can fuck the tax system gotta vanish.”

“That’s what it sounds like,” Fornell replies. “Though Penny’s thinking it might not be someone inside the US. Lady like that… she’s trouble for any government.”

“Then why look?” Jeff can see he’s not asking that right. “For her, alive. Instead of just hunting down who vanished her.”

“She’s worth her weight in gold to any of the drug cartels, or anyone else who wants to move product silently,” Fornell says. “Worth breaking out of prison, and keeping alive.”

“So, the good guys might have offed her, and the bad guys might have kidnapped her?” Jeff says.

Gibbs nods. “Or she might have decided to take advantage of the chaos and got herself out of prison.”

Jeff winces.

“Welcome to our world,” Fornell replies.

It’s hours later, and Gibbs is in his hotel room, fresh out of the shower, finally feeling warm again, and about to give Abbi a call when there’s a knock at his door.

“Give me a minute.” Calling Abbi doesn’t require that he put on things like pants. Opening the door to anyone but Fornell, does.

“I didn’t wake you?” Jeff asks, stepping into Gibbs’ room.

Gibbs shakes his head. Jeff had turned in early, right after they got some supper into him. He’s still on working at the farm time, which means a nine o’clock bedtime to go with his four AM wake up.

Jackson, who is looking up from his pillow on the floor, yawning, debating getting up to say hi or going back to sleep gets a nod from Jethro. “Just him. I was about to give Abbi a call.”

Jeff nods. He holds out a cup of coffee, and Gibbs takes it, sipping, and nods in approval. It’s good coffee, and there’s good whiskey in it, too.
He sits down on his bed, and gestures to let Jeff know to make himself comfortable. Jeff does, taking off his boots, stretching out on the one chair in the room, putting his feet on Gibbs’ bed. He sips his drink for several quiet moments, and Gibbs doesn’t push him. Obviously, if he’s still up, and in here, looking to talk, something’s on his mind.

Finally he says, “What happens now, with the case?”

Gibbs sighs, and takes a deep drink of his coffee. “I don’t know. Tim’ll keep his people looking for her. He’ll do that until they find a body, but as more time goes by, they’ll search less and less.”

Jeff nods. “And you just let it go?”

Gibbs half-smiles. “You gotta. Rule number eleven. I sucked at it for years. Used to tell it to my kids, but at the end of the day, I couldn’t let ‘em go. Not unless we’d solved ‘em, so I’d work us until we dropped or we solved them. That’s one of the biggest changes between now and then. I know now when I’ve done all I can do, and on this one, I’ve shot my bolt.”

“Feels like there should be more.”

Gibbs nods. “There is. Kevin’s not done. Tim’s got another hot shot computer guy, and he’ll keep looking, but…” he shakes his head, “I’m done. If they get another lead like this, they can dust me off and take me out of retirement, and I’ll go hunting, but I can’t do what Kevin can, so I can’t help with this case, not tomorrow, at least.”

Jeff nods at that, too. He’s looking into his coffee, thinking hard. “This’ll eat you if you let it.”

“It will. The trick is not letting it.”

“So, you just… call Abbi, chat, and go to sleep tonight?”

“Yeah. Get up in the morning, go home, go see her in Mobile. Family time on the weekend. You’ve just got to let them go. And that’s the hardest part of this job. It’s why you need an anchor outside of it. If you don’t have that, it’ll eat you, and one day you look up and you’ve got nothing but the job and then… You die on it, or you get old and they boot you out, and if you’ve still got nothing but it, you die. That happened to a lot of the men I knew when they were forced to retire. All died within a year. Just, didn’t have anything to keep them going.”

“And that’s not going to be you.”

“That is not going to be me.” Gibbs thinks and realizes, “Can’t be me. A year was last January.”

Jeff inclines his head, and expression that seems to say, fair enough. “You don’t think she’s out there, somewhere, though.”

“That does make it easier to shut down. My gut isn’t fired up about this. She went missing from a Federal Prison. Her, the evidence they used against her, her lawyer, her prosecutor, everyone who touched her case is dead or missing. Whatever happened to her is done by now, and all we’re doing is cleaning up the mess.”

“And that’s harder to get excited about.”

“Exactly.”

“You think we did it, or a cartel?”
Gibbs sips his drink. He thinks about it, tries to feel it, and doesn’t come up with much of anything. “Two years ago, I’d have been sure it was a cartel. They busted her for running a market that people sold drugs on.”

Jeff seems to get that. “But now…”

Gibbs shakes his head. “You ever see the Wizard of Oz?”

“Yeah.”

“Curtain’s gone now. I was never so innocent…” Though as he thinks about that, there was a time he was that innocent. “Since I’ve been a cop… I was never so innocent as to believe that we didn’t have more than enough problems on our side of it. I knew that. Saw that all over. My first partner left when we just let the USS Cole bombing happen. I literally watched our government let our people get killed because it was ‘better for the big picture.’ I knew there were bad apples all over the place, but… I didn’t know how bad.

“I do now. And I can’t lay odds on who’s behind what happened to Heidi Partridge. When I was a cop, we’d get cases, and there are two kinds of really difficult cases, the one where there are no suspects, and the ones where there are too many.”

“Too many suspects on this one.”

“Right. We know it was done right. Done from the inside. Done when everything went insane. And that rules out no one.”

“What would happen when you had too many suspects?”

“We’d narrow them down. Weed ‘em out. I’d sit across from them, stare at them, read their faces and bodies, and… And it doesn’t matter because none of that will work for this case. If we took her out, where would I start, head of the IRS? Would he even know? The guy who was head when we think she vanished died in the chaos last year. His second in command is dead, too. The next guy down, he’s already in a holding cell.

“We got custody of her because she was in the US. But the EU wanted her, too. Her market was letting their guys skirt their laws just as easily as the people here were. I don’t think I ever had a case with this many suspects, let alone all of them invisible, faceless… ideas…”

“What about the lawyer and prosecutor?”

“Tim’s got people on those cases. Hopefully there’s a lead somewhere out there. No one ever commits the perfect crime.”

“But this is looking pretty close.”

Gibbs doesn’t want to, but he nods. “If that computer hot shot of his hadn’t wanted to see if they could get this lady working for them, no one would have ever noticed she was gone.”

Jeff has a hard time believing that. “No one. No family?”

“Not married. No kids. Parents are dead. She’d already been in jail for a few years, that’ll cut off all but the deepest outside relationships. No one reported her missing. I know Tim’s people would have checked, made sure that everyone who might have been in contact with her got checked. Nothing.”

Jeff shakes his head, staring at the wall behind Gibbs.
Gibbs sips his drink, and then says, “When you’re in training they tell you you can’t solve them all. No one can. They don’t tell you you shouldn’t try, though.” He half smiles a bit, and runs his fingers through his now completely white hair. He tugs at it, a little. “If this gave me anything, it’s this: I know what cases I shouldn’t try on, now. I was a damn good cop, and give me a badge and a pile of murders and I’ll be a damn good cop again, but this isn’t a murder. Not really. I could solve kidnappings all day long, but this isn’t a kidnapping. This isn’t crime. This is politics, and everyone who’s ever met me knows that I’m not a politician.”

“And you’re not management, either.”

“Nope. I run teams. I train people. I was a gunny sergeant, and a good one. If that bomb hadn’t gotten me, I’d have retired a master sergeant, and been a good one of them, too. But…” He’s got some sort of idea of what he’s trying to put into words, but he’s having a hard time pulling it together. Part of Gibbs just wants to stop talking, let it lie. The problem is, Jeff likely doesn’t have years to watch him in action, learn who he is by being with him. Which means he’s got to talk. So he tries. “You watch Tony, and he can’t stand a mystery. He’s got to know what’s going on. I don’t. I can let people have their secrets and then some. No problem. He’s an investigator. He’s all about peeling away the mysteries.”

“And that’s not you, either.”

“No. That’s why we worked well together. I needed justice. He needed the pieces all in place. Together… and then add in Kate, and Ziva, and Tim… and we could solve pretty much any crime that came our way.”

“And who are you now?”

Gibbs sips his coffee again. “I told one of my friends once, that all I ever wanted to be was a good Marine, a good husband, and a good father. I was a good Marine. And now I’m busy being a good husband and a good father, and occasionally, my kids still need the good cop to help out, so I’m that, too. But mostly, I’m Dad and Pop.”

Jeff looks pleased with that, slowly gets up, and heads back to his room.

Tim gets the update early the next morning, and he can’t say he wasn’t expecting it. He passes word back to Khan, along with a ‘Keep looking,’ note.

And from there, it’s back to the grind.
Identity: Health

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jimmy almost trips over the box when he gets home. It’s one of those cardboard boxes that reams of paper come in, lying on the floor, next to all of the shoes, in his mudroom.

There’s no scribbles on it, or bright construction paper glued to it, so he’s assuming it’s not part of an art project of Molly or Kelly’s. He nudges it with his toe as he’s hanging up his jacket, and it’s solid. It may not be full, but whatever’s in there is heavy.

He pulls the lid off, and sees a neatly typed manuscript, and smiles. Suddenly, this box being here makes a whole lot more sense. The mudroom has a door on it. When they come home to Jimmy and Breena’s everyone comes in, leaves their shoes and coats in here, and then goes into the rest of the house. The kids are basically never in here, which is the one thing you can’t say about the rest of the house.

So, if you happened to have, say, the only copy of a manuscript, and if you were crazy enough to bring it into Jimmy’s house, this is the room you’d want it in.

He does, however, heft it up, and stick it on top of the washing machine. Just because little people pretty much never come in here doesn’t mean they may not decide that today’s the day to do it.

He heads into the kitchen, and sees Tim working on dinner, as Breena’s coralling kids.

“I see we’ve got some reading tonight,” he says, kissing both of them, and each of the kiddos.

“Read at your own risk,” Tim replies. “Usually, I finish them, let them hibernate for a month, rewrite, and then someone gets to lay eyes on them.” He glances away from cutting up chicken breasts into tiny pieces for Molly, Kelly, and Anna. “ Aren’t you one short?”

“Yes. We were almost out the door when Abby got the call. Tony and Johnson found the crime scene. Johnson’s already bringing the first box of goodies in, and they’re just going to keep coming all night long.”

Breena and Tim take that in stride. These days there are fewer late nights/all nighters, but fewer isn’t the same as none.

Kelly’s paying more attention than they expected, and she says, (and signs) “No mama?”

“Not tonight, sweetie,” Jimmy replies (and also signing, at least as many of the words as he knows). “But just like always, we’ll Skype her right before bedtime so you can get your kisses.”

She nods at that, going back to paying attention to getting ready for dinner.

“I already read some of it,” Breena adds, getting back to the manuscript.

Tim shakes his head. Abby sent Breena some of the bits he had written when he was healing up. They're hot, but... that's about all they've got going for them. “And I can’t believe you’re still here after seeing that.”

“Tim…”
He shakes his head. “They’re rough drafts for a reason. The only thing you’re doing is getting it down before the ideas run away.”

“So, you saying you’d rather we just let it sit?” Jimmy asks.

“Oh… yeah. But if you’re dying to see what’s in there, I’m not going to stop you.”

Jimmy and Breena share a grin. They want to see what’s in there. “Story time while Donnie gets his dinner?” Jimmy asks.

“Oh yeah!” Breena’s looking excited.

Tim shakes his head again, rolls his eyes a bit, and then brings two plates to the table.

---

Bedtime. Almost. Abby’s still slogging through prints, blood samples, and other bits of evidence from the scene, though her last text says she should be wrapping up within the hour. Tim knows he’s intending to stay up late enough to at least say hello to her. So, he’s in bed, with his laptop, going over a report one of his tech guys just sent him about trying to get his reporting software running.

Breena’s on the other side of the bed. She’s got easy getting in and out access because little guy is currently snuggled up against her chest, slopping down what will, with any luck, be his last meal for this particular twenty-four hour stretch. He’s just about seven weeks old now, and apparently growth spurting with a vengeance, and for the last day and a half, he’s eating every two hours. Which hasn’t done much to help anyone stay nice and well-rested.

Jimmy’s in the middle, stack of papers on his lap, reading out loud, having a fairly good time of it. Tim’s not nearly as bad at this first draft thing as he thinks he is. (Though he only had to read one of the typos twice before he got a very irritated jab from Tim and instructions to read the words that are supposed to be there, not the ones he typed.)

They’re starting off with a fight scene, and it’s going pretty well, it’s mostly him and Tim, or Daegan and Gabe, and they’re swooping around trying to fly their way through a wall of flack (he makes a mental note to ask why they don’t just go over it) daring death, telling it to fuck off, kicking (burning?) ass, and taking name.

Jimmy looks up from what he’s reading. He’s getting to see himself. He likes it, both of them have taken about 30,000 levels of badass, which appeals to him, but something’s niggling at him.

Daegan M’Gy, second-in-command of the Night Furies (he makes a mental note to suggest that term might be a tad copyrighted), Gabe’s right hand man, sometimes lover, best friend, all of it, and…

Black skin. Like really black. Jet black. Jimmy thinks about that. It’ll look cool. Breena seems to appreciate the image of him like that. (Brynne doesn’t show up for a few hundred pages, so they aren’t going to get to her tonight. She and Tim are talking about what she looks like as Jimmy’s thinking.) And then the niggly thing hits him. Tim made him a black dragon, with green eyes, the second in command of the Night Furies.

His own personal bitch face pops up as he rolls over and whacks Tim in the chest.
“What the hell, Jimmy?” Tim sputters, totally shocked. One moment he’d been lying in bed, naked save for his glasses, talking with Breena about how to design dragons, and the next his chest is lightly stinging.

“ Toothless! You made me Toothless.”

“What?” Toothless means literally nothing to Tim. Breena bursts out in hysterical laughter, and Donnie stops sucking long enough to make a really disconcerted sound.

“How To Train Your Dragon, Tim! The dreaded Night Fury dragon, made of nighttime and death, black skin, green eyes, comes out of the North and destroys everything.” The M’Gys are the rulers of the “North.” “You made me into a cute, little, cuddly dragon and Disney’s going to sue you for it.”

Breena’s wiping tears from her eyes at this. “Oh, Tim!”

Tim’s eyes narrow. “Shit.” He rolls them. “Okay, put the note in the margin. I told you, rough.”

“George RR Martin is going to get you for the “North” thing, too,” Jimmy adds, as Breena hands him a pen so he can write on the manuscript.


“So, Tim’s got a new manuscript done, Dr. Palmer?” Allan’s saying as he and Jimmy get started on this morning’s autopsy.

“Oh, yeah.”

“Any new insights into how he sees you guys?”

“I’m a dragon now. Granted, I’m fucking Toothless…” Jimmy wipes the back of his forearm across his forehead. He doesn’t feel uncomfortably hot, but he’s sweating. He’s got to check and see if the climate control is working properly.

Allan looks taken aback at this. Then he says, “Well, I suppose that’s better than a corpse.”

Jimmy stares at Allan, confused, not immediately connecting that to the original Pimmy Jalmer, then he does, starts to laugh, hard, and a second later he’s on the floor, ass smarting, and bleeding from a small cut on his hand where the scalpel got him.

Allan rushes over. “Dr. Palmer?”

At first, Jimmy’s about to reach out, and ask for a hand up, and then it hits him, he’s got a headache, his knees feel week, the room is spinning, he’s in a cold sweat, and he’s just collapsed. Right now he needs sugar, and his blood testing equipment, fast.

“Coke.”

Allan nods and sprints toward the fridge. He knows why Jimmy keeps a can of Coke in there, and why he’s never seen Jimmy drink one, before. He’s back less than a second later, with the Coke, kneeling in front of Jimmy, popping the tab for him.
Jimmy takes it, feeling shaky all over, head throbbing worse by the second, which means his blood sugar is in freefall. Two fast gulps are followed by Allan getting up and rushing over to Jimmy’s go bag, rifling through it, looking for his testing lancet and strips. He grabs the glucose tabs that Jimmy keeps in there, too.

Again, he’s back in a matter of heartbeats, offering the sharp, but Jimmy shakes his head, and extends his forearm, right now (though the additional sugar is starting to help) he’s feeling too shaky to do a good job of it.

Allan nods, rolls back his glove and sleeve, pricks his skin, and siphons a microliter into the test strip, fitting it into Jimmy’s tester.

Another minute passes, as Jimmy sips more of the Coke, and the throbbing in his head starts to subside. *Half the can. Drink half the can, let fifteen minutes go by, test again. Add more sugar as necessary.* He knows what to do, but he doesn’t usually have to do it.

Allan’s looking alarmed as the tester gives its results.

“How bad?”

“Fifty-two.” Allan’s already getting up and heading to Jimmy’s go bag, getting him a protein bar.

“Did you forget to eat this morning?”

“I don’t think so.” He can remember doing it, but… It must have been yesterday. He knows he took his insulin. First thing, wake up, test, snack, apply insulin, workout, shower, *eat breakfast.* That’s his routine. He’s got to do that, or he ends up with too much insulin and not enough sugar, ass on the floor with a throbbing head and a bleeding hand. “Shit.” He rubs his eyes, and feels the shakes begin to subside, some. He sips the Coke slowly. He’ll test again in a few minutes, but if this is anything like the last few times his blood sugar has dropped into freefall, he should be on the upswing by then.

“Even with two extra people, new babies are rough on your sleep. Just need to keep better track of my blood sugar the next few days.”

“You want me to get Abby to take you home?” Allan says, handing him the protein bar.

Jimmy waves that idea off, though he does take the bar, because real food to go along with sugar is important. “How about you get me gauze and tape for the cut, new gloves, and a few minutes to get my head together. Then we’ll start again.”

“Are you sure, Dr. Palmer?” Allan’s worried about him. He knows Jimmy has diabetes, but this is the first time he’s really *seeing* it.

“I’m sure. Things like this is just part of the fun of diabetes.”

Allan switches out of work mode and into personal mode. “When was the last time you saw your Endo, Jimmy?”

“I see her every six months. Just like I’m supposed to.” Five weeks ago, actually. And like every other time, she pokes, prods, tests everything, tries to talk him into at least a glucose monitor, and he does his part of saying he’s *fine,* and everything is under control. She gives him the hairy eyeball, but concedes his numbers are good, and they leave it there for another six months.

“Make an appointment, soon.”

“Sure,” Jimmy says, just to make this go away.
“Any excitement at work?” Breena asks when Jimmy gets home.

“Nah. Got a natural causes today.”

“The twenty-two year old?” Abby asks. She knows a Marine who collapsed during a PT run and was dead before the medics got to her was brought in today.

“Yes. Congenital heart defect. Weak spot in the left ventricle. One day it was going to blow, and that was today, unfortunately.”

Tim sighs, shaking his head. “I’d almost rather take a murder than that.”

Jimmy nods, understanding. He’d rather have someone to blame than just be at the mercy of random fate.

Two days later, when Jimmy’s sugar starts to crash again, he knows it’s entirely on him.

During the day, Jimmy can go five hours without eating. He prefers not to do that. He tries to make sure he gets at least a little something every two hours. Wake up snack, breakfast, morning snack, lunch, afternoon snack, dinner, bedtime snack, and that’ll usually get him through the night. He got his afternoon snack, just like normal, and got in the car, heading toward the house for Shabbos, and promptly ran into a traffic snarl the likes of which he hasn’t seen since before The Fall.

Apparently, every single car on I-95 is trapped in some sort of merging hell, trying to get around an accident, with him in the middle of it, and they’re all creeping along at what feels like negative ten miles an hour, as every idiot on the planet rubbernecks their way through a three car pile-up, and all of the emergency vehicles.

So, yes, he’s late for dinner, and he’s pushing the four hour mark when he finally pulls into the driveway of the house, and to say he’s irritable is not an understatement.

He’s ready to bite the heads off of puppies.

And he can feel the cold sweat starting again, which is just pissing him off even more, because he might like to feed himself every two hours, and four hours is when he absolutely should start making sure he’s in range of food, but he should not be this delicately balanced. He should be able to get to five hours, especially if he got all of his previous meals and snacks, and a full night of sleep, because, mercifully, Donnie’s back to his eat every three hours routine and it was Abby’s night to fetch him, before he starts to feel this far off.

But he is feeling off.

Fortunately, he keeps it together as he gets into the house. Shabbos is in full swing, and no one seems to notice if he’s a bit sweaty when he sits down at the table and immediately steals one of Tim’s dessert cookies.
That gets more than one raised eyebrow, along with a few looks from his spouses who are somewhat surprised to see him go diving for not just food, but sugary food, instead of offering hugs and kisses, but Breena knows what she’s seeing, and she nods. Which is pretty much all Tim and Abby have to see.

Jimmy nods back, chewing.

And after a few minutes, he’s feeling like a human again.

---

It’s a misconception that diabetics cannot, or should not, eat sugar.

Jimmy, personally, chooses to eat as little of it as he can, but that isn’t exactly mandated by his doctor. (There are times when he absolutely *has to* eat sugar. Like when his blood sugar is in freefall.) The reason for this choice is, his body, specifically his pancreas, is supposed to make insulin, and that insulin is supposed to break down glucose, and turn it from sugar into energy. And if he doesn’t have insulin to break down glucose, it just keeps floating around in his system, turning his blood into sludge.

Unfortunately for Jimmy, his pancreas did its job for about twenty years, got into some sort of ridiculous snit, and then promptly quit.

So, he does his best to give his body as little sugar as he can, so he has to use as little insulin as he can, because, while it’s true that insulin is keeping him alive, it is, like many other medications, poison in higher doses, and the less of it he can use and keep himself in the sweet spot, the healthier he’ll be, and the longer he’ll stay that way.

That’s his balancing act. He has to keep enough insulin in his body to let him use the food he consumes, and the sugars therein, because just about everything has *some* level of sugar in it, but if he gets too much insulin and too little sugar, he goes into free fall, and if he gets too much sugar, and not enough insulin, his body moves in the other direction.

Neither of them are places he likes to be.

So, like with his yoga, he keeps himself centered, focused, and balanced on a ridiculously small point, in a stupidly difficult position.

And he’s done it for almost twenty years with very few wobbles.

And he’s *extremely* annoyed to see that he’s wobbling.

---

Breena’s eyeing him. Dinner’s done, she had them put the kids down, and he knows she set that up so they could have a moment or two for just them. Kids are down, they’ve got that moment, and she’s got that tense look on her face.

Jimmy rolls his eyes a little. He half shrugs, too. “I was so close to home; I didn’t break into another snack pack.”

Mona keeps bumping her head against his hip. She’s been doing it all night. And Breena knows why.
“She can smell it on you.”

He can’t, and he’s honestly not sure if Mona really can, too. He should only smell off when his blood sugar gets too high, and that hasn’t happened since he cut pretty much all the carbs out of his diet. “I know. It was stupid. I should have had a few nuts on the road.”

“Yeah.”

“Come on, you know me.”

She gives him a long look. They’ve had very few serious arguments over the years. Okay, they’ve had one serious argument over the years, and it’s about the fact that he does not have an insulin pump or continuous glucose monitor. And he doesn’t have one because he’s on top of his levels, and has everything under control. As long as that’s true, she’s willing to let it slide.

And the second it isn’t true, he’s agreed to do something about it.

And she’s really watching him, hoping it’s time.

And he’s watching her back, afraid it is.

The rest of the weekend, Jimmy’s diligent. He tests more often, ups his little snacks, one every ninety minutes, makes sure that he’s never got an empty stomach, gets up with at least one of Donnie’s wake ups a night (even when it’s not his night) to add in one more extra snack a night, and he’s fine.

Monday, Tuesday, he keeps that up. No problems. It’s annoying having to keep checking constantly, but… That’s just part of being diabetic. He makes the decision to ease back on the snacks, and see what happens on Wednesday.

Crying. Tim blinks. That is definitely a wailing baby. Much wailing. Tim blinks again. Definitely wailing baby. Someone’s supposed to get that. He’s awfully sure it’s not him.

He thinks about it for another moment, and… Yep, it’s Jimmy’s night.

Apparently Donnie’s in a mood.

Tim blinks again. His back is warm. Really warm, and kind of damp. So, wailing kiddos, and Jimmy is against his back, sleeping. Not in the nursery, with the wailing babies.

Donnie’s not in a mood; he’s not being tended.

Tim rolls away from Abby, and shoves him, half-noticing that Jimmy’s skin is clammy, and says, none too kindly, “It’s your night.”

Jimmy still doesn’t move.
Tim shoves him again, rolling his eyes. It was his night last night, and he got up six damn times (three with Donnie, once with Kelly, and twice with Anna, all of whom decided last night was a spiffy night to get up and party all night long), while Jimmy got to sleep the glorious, uninterrupted sleep of the parent not on baby duty. Tim is supremely unsympathetic to Jimmy not wanting to wake up.

“Get up!”

And Jimmy still doesn’t move, which is when the lightning cold fear goes shooting down his spine, and Tim is UP.

“Jimmy.” He’s shaking him now. “Abby, Breena! He’s not moving!”

Tim is electric with fear. He’s shaking with it, skin buzzing, feeling completely useless. Jimmy’s eyes are slowly easing open, and his head is lolling around as Tim stupidly keeps shaking him, because if he can just see Jimmy’s eyes, hear his voice, then everything will be okay, right?

He does blink, slowly, a few times, and Abby’s on Jimmy’s other side, and he doesn’t know where Breena went, but she’s not in the bed with them, and everything’s moving too damn fast and too damn slow and Jimmy isn’t talking, but there’s a sliver of reflection in his eyes, so they’re open, just a little, and Breena’s by his side, shoving him out of the way.

He moves aside, feeling bound in glue by fear, and numb with stupidity because he doesn’t know what to do.

He’s biting his lip, hard, because the guy who knows what to do is the one who’s only, just starting to make some sounds.

But he is making sounds.

“My night?” He sounds really confused about that, and his voice is slurring.

That snaps Tim into action. Donnie. He’s still wailing.

He can’t do anything for Jimmy right now, but he can feed the kid.

So he does.

Getting a furious little guy calmed down when he’s in panic mode isn’t exactly easy. But it’s something concrete he can do.

Donnie’s in his arms, angrily sucking away on his bottle, supremely annoyed that he had to wait maybe seven whole minutes for his meal, when Tim goes back into their bedroom.

Abby’s on the phone. Breena is glaring at Jimmy, who, in the low light of their room, is pale, listless looking, and very slowly sipping a Coke.

He hears Abby say, “Forty-five.” And “Yeah, that’d be great.” Then she looks to the rest of them, “Allan’s coming over.”

Jimmy, sounding horribly tired, says, “I don’t need a doctor. I just need to eat.”
By the time Allan gets there, Jimmy looks, if anything, embarrassed. He certainly feels embarrassed. So much for his experiment. He rolls his eyes a little. “I’m fine. Back up to 73, and rising.”

Allan’s look has a lot of layers to it, most of them along the lines of ‘You’re my patient, and I’ve got a legal obligation to say nothing in front of everyone else, but we are having a real conversation about this when you get to work tomorrow, and you fucking will be showing up to work tomorrow, if for no other reason than to have that damn conversation.’

Jimmy reads all of them, loud and clear, and nods back.

What Allan chooses to say with his words is, “I don’t ever want to hear the words ‘back up to’ and ‘73’ in the same sentence again.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes at that, too. “I’d rather not be saying it. Look. I’m fine. Back on the upswing. I’ve got my watch set to wake me every two hours so I can recheck, and if it starts to drop again, I know what to do.”

Allan eyes him again. That’s reasonable. But he also saw how fast Jimmy went down last week. “Hour. Have one of them check it. You don’t need to wake up for it. But every hour.”

“All right.” Jimmy bites out. He’s not about to ask anyone else to check his sugar. And if he’s extra crabby tomorrow, Allan’s the one who’ll have to deal with it.

Then Allan lights the fuse on the bomb. “When’s that endo appointment?”

Which is when Jimmy has to admit that A: he didn’t make the appointment, and B: this isn’t the first time this has happened recently.

Right that second he’s thinking diabetic coma would have been preferable to the amount of trouble he’s in right now.

It’s hours later, and Jimmy’s asleep, or close enough it doesn’t matter.

Allan’s headed home, having made sure that Jimmy’s sugar really will be checked every hour, and that he’s stabilized at 103, which is where he should be after a Coke.

Donnie’s down, for the moment.

The same cannot be said for the other three adult McPalmers, who are not, by any stretch of the imagination, about to, or near, asleep.

Scared doesn’t really begin to cover it, but that’ll have to do. All the flavors of scared are filling their bedroom right now, thickening the air, keeping them from rest.
They aren’t really talking to each other, and cuddling isn’t helping much. There’s still too much zinging electric adrenaline for close in, snuggly, dealing with fear. Too much need to move.

Right now, Tim wants to fight. But the guy he normally does that with is not only sleeping, but he’s terrified that if he hits him, he’ll hurt him. He’s fairly sure he could call Tony, but he also doesn’t want to leave the ladies, and… He’s tired, and he’s scared, and he wants to hit the universe, not Tony, and…

And it hits him like punch to the guts, one he doesn’t expect, one he didn’t see coming, didn’t imagine, couldn’t have predicted, one minute he was completely here, and the next he’s in Canada, and Breena’s furious at him, and he’s in the Navy Yard, and they’re begging him to get out, so scared, and all of that fear, weeks of it, comes crashing into Tim.

Twenty-four days of that shit. He put them through twenty-four days of this.

Tim drops to his knees in front of Breena and Abby, and he can barely put it into words, there’s just the overwhelming feeling of it.

“I am so sorry for last fall.” He thought he was sorry before, and he was. He was the kind of sorry that can only imagine how the other side of the equation must have felt. It was real, and sincere, and it mattered. But this is the kind of sorry that knows, at least a taste of, what he put them through.

And this is an entirely different universe of sorry.

He swallows hard, still feeling aftershocks, literal shocks, his hands are still trembling, of fear and helplessness. “So, so, unspeakably, sorry.”

Breena nods, curtly. At any other time, that would matter to her, but she’s worn to a nub, too, and can only take so much.

Abby pets him, offers a half smile, and says, “How about we work on not doing shit like this to each other?”

That sounds excellent to Tim.

This is not the worst morning of Jimmy’s life. Pretty much because he’s already had the worst damn morning a person can have.

This isn’t even in the league of that morning.

But, for run-of-the-mill bad mornings, this is the top of his list.

He hasn’t seen Tim yet this morning. When he got up, Tim was already out of the house. He doesn’t know if Tim’s scared, pissed, not speaking to him, or if he got called in early.

Breena isn’t talking to him. Looking at him. Yeah, lots of looks. He’s in TROUBLE. One blip, where he didn’t eat properly, fine. Two, that happens. Three, and he didn’t mention one of them, and his butt isn’t already sitting in front of the Endo, that means he’s not playing by the rules they set up years ago, and she is pissed.

Abby’s in research mode. She’s dealing with scared by becoming, overnight, an expert in Diabetic-Tech. She’s whirling through pros, cons, side effects, and has a list at least as long as her arm of
things for him to talk to his Endo about, and likely just as many things as she wants attached to his body by the end of said conversation.

He knows she’s trying to be helpful, but all she’s doing is pissing him off with her version of his future as a fucking cyborg.

And, of course, there’s Allan, who is in full Dr. Allan mode, not Dr. Allan, ME, but Dr. Allan MD, who wants to know all about why he doesn’t have Abby’s yard long list of electronics embedded in his body already, and is pointing out study after study about why he should be starting up his career as the six million dollar man.

He’s not exactly growling as he’s on the phone with Abby and Breena, who are checking in to see what he’s been up to this morning, and if he’s checked his sugar, and if he’s made an appointment with his Endo, but he’s certainly been in better moods before.

“Yes, I made it!”

“When?” Breena’s voice is curt, angry.

“I got the first day she could fit me in. Tuesday after next.”

“Bullshit!” whispers out of Breena. And though she doesn’t say anything, he can feel Abby’s got the same thought in mind.

“Which other diabetic would you like me to bump out of his spot to get in there any earlier?”

“You explained it was an emergency?” Abby asks.

“Yes.” No. Because this isn’t an emergency. This is diabetes. This is what many diabetics go through all the time. And he’s not about to bump someone whose sugar’s been riding a roller coaster every damn day because he’s had a few blips over the last week. “I just have to keep checking my sugar more often. Most diabetics do this all the time.”

He hears one of the lines hang up, and knows that’s Breena because that’s what mad Breena’s like. If she gets mad enough, she retreats, that way she can’t say anything she’ll, and he’ll, regret later, but when she is ready to talk, when she’s got it thought through and planned out, he damn well better be ready to hear it.

Abby says, “I’ll go talk with her. Every hour you check. Show Tim and I how to do it, and we’ll get you during the night, too.”

Jimmy shakes his head. “It’s not painless, Abby. I can’t sleep through it. Might as well just do it myself.”

“Show us, anyway. Neither of us knew what to do, and that was terrifying. At least when we get up with Donnie, we can poke you, and you don’t have to wake up enough to do anything.”

“Fine. Tonight. I’ll show you the tester and how to do a glucagon injection.”

“What’s glucagon?”

Jimmy doesn’t want to get into it, but… given how last night went. “If I drop far enough to start seizing and slip into a coma, if I can’t eat, it’ll bring my sugar level up.”

“Oh.”
“The little red box that Breena put on our bedside table.”

Abby had seen it, but Breena didn’t use it, so she didn’t ask. “Good.”

“Yeah, great.” He’s in a black mood as he hangs up.

“He’s lying.”

“I’m sure he made an appointment, Breena,” Abby says.

“Not about that. He took whatever the first one was and that was that. He didn’t push.”

“Oh. Well…” Abby thinks about it. “What’s the name of his Endo?”

Breena tells her, and Abby, on her computer at NCIS, says, “Look, just because Tim’s got the Hacker crown with all the merit badges and whatnot, doesn’t mean he’s the only one who knows how to use a computer. Let me see if I can open up a time for Jimmy.”

That’s the first concrete thing that Breena’s heard that she wants to hear. Really, the only thing she wanted to hear was years ago, when they were newlyweds, and Jimmy got a tummy bug, so he couldn’t eat, which meant he couldn’t keep his sugar balanced, and ended up in the hospital on an IV to keep himself in the sweet spot. Then, and now, what she wants to hear is, “Here’s your insulin pump,” (and continuous glucose monitor, though they weren’t around when they had that argument.) “calibrate it every day, and let it do the rest.” That, however, wasn’t what Jimmy wanted, so, they had a deal.

Which someone has not been living up to.

“You going to boot someone?”

“Not another patient. But if they’ve got emergency slots, or something like that, I’ll pop him in.”

“Thanks, Abby.”

“Okay, now, you go sleep.”

Breena barks a short laugh at that.

“I know, honey, try. You need to rest, and right now, he’s got a doctor literally standing right next to him. He’s as watched as he can get. So, sleep.”

Breena sighs, and hangs up. She does need sleep, but she can’t imagine it’ll happen. Every time her eyes close she hears Tim shriek, “He’s not moving!” she feels the horror in his voice, and the gripping terror in her chest, and the world stops spinning.

And it’s not going to turn again until there’s something that’s constantly keeping track of Jimmy’s blood sugar level, keeping him safe.
As Abby’s engaging in some extremely illegal poking about in Dr. Hildebrand’s appointment book, she’s coming to the distressing conclusion that Jimmy may not have raised hell about getting in sooner, but it likely wouldn’t have helped if he did.

She must be a very good endocrinologist, or like many of the doctors in the greater DC area, she’s slammed, still taking up the slack from the fact that the hospitals are rebuilding as fast as they can, but they aren’t rebuilt.

She’s about to give up. From what she can tell, Jimmy’s in the emergency, get-you-in-as-soon-as-possible slot. And, she’s not about to bump someone else from their appointment. She’s listlessly flicking through the dates when she notices a pattern.

The third Monday of every month, there’s a lunch appointment. With the same guy.

That’s the only person she sees at lunch. The only person she sees every month, too.

Abby takes a moment to look at it, make sure she’s seeing the pattern she thinks she’s seeing, and then she google’s the name. When she gets the answer she expected, she grins.

Ten minutes later, she’s in Autopsy, pulling Jimmy’s phone out of his pants pocket.

“Uh!” He gives her a very startled look. Yes, obviously, after last night, when Allan came into their home, saw them all in bathrobes and various states of clearly-just-got-out-of-bed, (or in Jimmy’s case, still in bed) in their bedroom, Allan is more than familiar with what level of intimate relationship they have, but she’s never just reached into his pants in front of anyone else before.

She’s opening it up. “You really need to put a passcode on this. Tim’s already pissed at you, don’t let him see you don’t have one.”

“Abby?”

She’s still messing with his phone. Then she hands it back to him. “There. Monday. Noon. You and Dr. Hildebrand have a date. Bring her a nice lunch.”

Now he’s staring at her, and the phone, and her again.

“I wouldn’t bump a patient to get you in sooner. I had no trouble bumping her monthly meeting with a drug rep. Centon Harvey of Pfizer is going to have to wait a week to see her next.”

“Abby!” Jimmy’s looking alarmed.

“NO! Don’t give me that! You will show up. You will talk with her. Breena’s going to show up with you. You will come home with something better than ‘I’ll test my damn sugar every hour.’ I know for a fact they exist, and apparently, it’s fucking time to get one.”

“They don’t—“

“I made sure the Doc’s got a full write up of everything that’s happened and a request for a prescription for three different devices. They will be ready when you get there, and you will return from her office with one of them.”

Jimmy inhales, hard, exhales just as hard, anger sparking off of his eyes, and then turns on his heel and storms out of the morgue.

Allan mildly blinks, cleans his glasses, and says, “I think you hit a nerve.”
Living in the middle of the storm, Abby’s been working on keeping herself calm. Breena is furious. Tim is terrified and guilty. Their home cannot take any more anger on top of that, so she’s being fucking useful, and when one of the other two calms down a bit, she can be the frantic one. But, she’s not at home right now, and Allan isn’t part of their little family, so she can turn to him and let some of what’s under the surface blaze forth. “I don’t care! If he’s angry, he’s angry alive. Thirty-nine. That’s how low his sugar was when Tim noticed he wasn’t moving.”

Allan hisses. Jimmy was at forty-five when they called him, and higher when he got there. Thirty-nine is a hair from get the glucagon and pray.

“Exactly. And I do not care about fucking medical ethics. I do not care about any responsibility you may have to him when it comes to keeping his confidences. If I find out he’s taken a tumble in here again, and you didn’t tell me, I will literally make every single minute of whatever’s left of your life a living hell, and Breena and Tim will make sure that won’t be all that long.”

Allan just blinks at her. Abby can’t read that look. Not well. But if it translated into, You cannot threaten me into submission she wouldn’t be shocked.

“Allan…” This time she tries asking. “Please. If he’s going to be a twit about it…”

Allan shakes his head. “You are angry, and scared, and that’s a bad combination. I know. I really do. But he specifically told me not to get you. I can’t violate that. More importantly, I won’t.”

“What’s the fucking point of ethics if he’s going to die on us? Your ethics would have worked out so well. Once with you. Once on his own. Once with us. How many times would it have to happen before you’d have put together it wasn’t just the one shot?”

“I would have known this morning, Abby! Even if you guys hadn’t called. I’m not stupid, and he’s a bad liar. ‘Donnie kept me up’ wouldn’t have gotten past the third word. And I would have driven his butt to the Endo myself if need be. And I can write the script for the monitors if need be. I think talking to his Endo before settling on one is a good idea, but at the absolute latest, Tuesday after next, he would have seen his Doc.” Allan sighs at her. “He’s not wrong, Abby. This is what diabetes looks like for many people who don’t have a monitor. You’re so used to him coping miraculously, that slightly better than average is terrifying. Most people live decades like this.”

“His father didn’t.”

Allan doesn’t have a response to that.

Screaming silently into the void, voice stolen by fear, an all-pervasive NO thrums through Gabe.

NO. NO! NO! It’s a mantra, a hope and prayer, demand of any god who may be listening, NO.

Because there’s nothing else he can do. No magic to pull from. No villain to hurt. There’s nothing, just screaming at the gods and begging, NO.

No, Dae, NO. Not today. Not today, and not tomorrow, and the day after will take care of itself, but not today.

But Dae doesn’t answer, can’t, and Gabe’s heart pounds faster, harder, hopeless and helpless.

Dae’s the healer, he’s the one who knows what to do, but he can’t because he’s the one hurt, and all
that’s left for Gabe is screaming NO—

Tim’s typing fast and hard. He’s got to get it out. Got to do something with it because it’s just eating him from the inside.

He’s never, ever been that scared before. He’s been close, twice.

The first time, when that maniac fan was holding a gun on Abby, his guts had turned to water and his knees rubber, but at least there was something he could do. He wasn’t helpless. Maybe it wouldn’t have been enough, but it was something.

And, though, looking back, in some ways he feels like he always loved Abby, loved her the way he loves her now, that his present re-colors the past, but it doesn’t, because it can’t. He didn’t love her, not then, not the way he does now. If he had failed, it would have… He doesn’t like to think about it. It would have crushed him, but he’d have still been Tim after. A broken, wounded Tim, but still Tim.

The second time was with when that sadist said, “The placenta’s low,” and proceeded to provide no other useful information.

That had the same feeling of utter helplessness he has now. He couldn’t shoot it, or talk it down, or anything. He had to just sit there and take it. And by then he knew that if something happened to Abby and Kelly he wouldn’t still be Tim after it.

That loss would fundamentally change him, on an innate identity level. And he would never, ever be the same after.

But, of course, after “low” and a collection of terrified questions, the tech did say, “No one’s dying today,” and then Dr. Draz said the same thing. And so did Jimmy. And so did pretty much everyone else.

And he felt sick with helplessness, but Abby was okay. And Kelly was okay. And they’re fine, and had another baby and…

It all worked out.

He can feel Jimmy’s body under his hands. Cool, damp skin, clammy to the touch, feel the shove he gave him, and him just lie there. He can see woozy eyes, looking around, bleary. Confusion, slow blinking, and he can still hear Donnie wailing away, the same sort of sound his heart was making, because Jimmy wasn’t okay.

And no one is hovering behind him saying, “He’ll be fine.”

And he’s not going to just “get over it.”

And there’s not a single fucking thing Tim can do about this.

A bit more than a year ago, on the beach in OBX, Tim knew that if something happened to Jimmy or Breena, it would hurt but he’d survive it. He’d still be Tim.

And now he knows that’s no longer true. They’re just as vital to him as Abby and the kids. They’re the lives he can’t live without. Husband, father. That’s his core, his identity, and if he loses that… He won’t be Tim anymore.

And he’s got to write, or he’s going to implode.
Rationally, Jimmy knows he should have a monitor and pump. He knows it. He’s known it for years.

Back around 2003 when the first insulin pumps came out, he had one, and he hated it.

First off, when he injects himself, he uses a tiny little needle, and he doesn’t keep hitting the exact same spot over and over. So, at any given time, he does have several spots on his belly that are a tiny bit tender, but that’s it.

The pump required a much larger needle, because it had to keep a hole in him large enough so that his body didn’t heal around the needle. So, constant sore spot. And, he’s diabetic, so his body isn’t exactly crackerjack at fighting off infections, so every time he moved the tube, he had a tiny, red, swollen cut on his belly. The entire time he had the pump, he looked like he had a ring of welts around his stomach.

He had to tape the needle into place on his abdomen. Cue the constant allergic reaction. He has yet to meet an adhesive he can wear on his skin and not break out at. That stupid cut from the scalpel: he had to wrap his finger in gauze, tape the gauze, and then put his gloves over that, because a stupid Band-Aid will make his skin flush pink and swell wherever the adhesive is touching.

There was a little tube between the pump and his body, and the time it got kinked, so he thought he was getting insulin, but he wasn’t, which resulted in him spiking his sugar into the stratosphere. Twice.

Oh, and, yes, back then he wasn’t exactly getting laid right, left, and all over, but having this stupid thing clipped to his pants all the damn time didn’t make his day when he did finally manage to locate a woman to have sex with. Take it off? Unplug it? Stab himself again? Leave his underwear on and hope it doesn’t get yanked out? He never found a good way to deal with it.

And then there was the whole work thing. He’s constantly going into and out of buildings that require him to go through a metal detector, and especially when they were new, a lot of security guys didn’t know what an insulin pump was. He had it yanked out twice by aggressive idiots who thought he was being unreasonable about taking off his pager.

When things started up with Lee, he looked at all the shit he was going through with the pump, looked at his diet, his exercise level, said fuck it, and went back to needles.

And, save for when he’s argued with Breena about it, he’s never regretted that decision.

Glucose monitors, which have only been on the market for a few years are a somewhat different story. He’s never had one of them, and until the week before last, didn’t see a reason for it. Testing his blood three or four times a day isn’t a big deal, and that’s all he had been needing to do.

But, of course, things have changed. He supposes he might be able to compromise with just a glucose monitor, because it’s not like an insulin pump would do shit for anything that’s causing him problems right now, but…

God, he doesn’t want one. His skin crawls at the idea of constantly, every hour, every day, being tethered to one of those things.
And he knows why it does, too.

Tim’s rattling away on his typewriter, more or less ignoring the rest of the world. He’s in the story right now, because the story is a “safe” way of dealing with all of this.

Jimmy shuts the door to Tim’s office. He wants a chance to bitch about this without either of the girls getting on his case, which meant a short drive away from his office to Tim’s. “Our wives have declared that I’m getting an insulin pump, and a glucose monitor, and God alone knows what else.”

Tim looks up, holding very still for a second, and Jimmy’s suddenly aware of this isn’t _the girls_ declaring anything. This is all three of them having come to an executive decision.

“That’s the way it is?”

Tim nods. Absently. He takes his glasses off, also absently, setting them half off his desk.

He’s felt this before. Never in relation to Jimmy. He’s never expected to feel this about Jimmy, but he’s standing there, whole, up, on his feet, color good, eyes bright, both sparking a bit from the underlying current of anger, talking to him, and Tim’s up, moving fast, slamming Jimmy back against his conference table, kissing him, _hard_, all over, lips, jaw, cheeks, fingers gripping, just as hard, around his arms, and _kissing_.

The first time he felt this actually did involve Jimmy, sort of. It was the night he and Ducky got kidnapped. They were in the woods, in the dark, and they heard the shot, and he remembers that horrible cold feeling, the idea that they’d failed, didn’t get there fast enough, and… And it was okay, they had gotten there in time, and as soon as he and Abby were home they were fucking like the world would end if they didn’t because they needed something to chase away death. His body _needed_ life. Needed to remember he was alive. Needed some way of expressing that the bullet didn’t have his name on it.

Even if only for a moment.

He’s felt it since then, but every time he’s felt it, he’s been the one proving to _himself_ that he’s not dead. He can remember coming home to Abby after that one bomb, and the feel of seeing her. It was erotic, but not. His body wanted sex, but not from a sensation perspective. He wasn’t craving pleasure. He needed life. He needed to experience it, needed to prove it. Needed to make it. His body knows what it means to be alive, knows it as breath and pulse, knows it in his balls and dick, knows it as fucking, making more life, pushing death back…

He remembers seeing Abby and wanting all of it so hard it pretty much shorted everything else out in his mind. But she was nursing, and he was literally holding Jethro up, and no matter how much he wanted it, it didn’t happen.

This time though, he’s alone, with Jimmy. And it’s not his life he needs to prove. He knows he’s alive. He needs to know Jimmy’s alive. Needs to feel the life in Jimmy, and make his body believe it, feel it in his guts and bones and balls.

He’s kissing, hard, so hard, feeling the heat of Jimmy’s skin under his, his heart pounding against his chest, tasting blood, he’s sure he’s nicked Jimmy’s lip, but he doesn’t care, he’s _alive_. He’s ripping at Jimmy’s tie, while trying to undo his own belt at the same time, while sucking a hickey into Jimmy’s
jew and he can smell it.

It’s always on Jimmy’s skin when he comes from the Morgue.

Usually, on days like today, when he hasn’t done an autopsy, it’s just a hint. A whiff of death under the chemical tinge of disinfectant, but right now that smell is driving Tim crazy, just the blush of scent feels like swimming in it.

It’s death. On Jimmy, in his hands and skin and, Tim just wants to fuck it out of him. He wants, needs, to reclaim Jimmy, take him back, mark him, make him his. He needs to stand over this man and wave his fucking sword and scream at Death, make it know that it can’t have Jimmy.

Breath and pulse, his body throbbing under his, around his, Jimmy’s cock in hand, pulsing, striping his belly with Jimmy’s cum, wiping that scent off of him, fucking it out of him, removing any trace of death from him. That’s what he needs.

Tim’s got his belt undone, and his pants open, and he’s scrambling for Jimmy’s.

Jimmy’s not sure what the hell just happened to him. He was standing next to the door, and now he’s on his back, on the conference table, being… ravished, is pretty much the only word immediately springing to mind. And he’s… Okay, part of him is starting to get turned on, his dick is pretty much all in favor of this. Tim’s is hitting a few of his kinks, the maybe get caught kink, his danger kink, and his pain one, all at once, and hard, but…

He’s trying to pry Tim off of him, because he doesn’t really want to get fucked through his conference table, and yes, he’s got something of a pain kink, but Tim’s doing this a lot harder than he likes, and judging by the way Tim’s rubbing against him, and his position between Jimmy’s legs, he’s not looking to bottom, and that’s not a line Jimmy’s crossing on a table in Tim’s office, let alone with the kind of speed and force Tim’s using right now.

He’s not having a lot of luck at removing Tim because he’s determined right now, and almost the same size as Jimmy, and frantic with fear, and on top of him, and…

He’s never tried this, but he’s fairly sure it’ll work better, and kinder, than punching him in the stomach, which is his plan B, because Tim’s just about got his pants off, and he’s not showing any signs of stopping anytime soon.

“Timothy, stop.”

Tim’s only barely aware of Jimmy sort of flailing at his shoulders, let alone his repeat attempts to get his attention by saying “Tim,” several times.

He knows it is happening, he just doesn’t fucking care. It doesn’t matter nearly as much as what he’s trying to do.
But, “Timothy, stop,” freezes him, and the tone of voice lets him know that Jimmy’s not interested in going along with this.

He practically springs back, away from Jimmy, which is when what he’s doing finally clears in his head, and… “Shit.”

He slumps into one of the conference chairs.

Jimmy, nods, gently touching his lip, which has a small split. Tim can see three large bite marks forming on his jaw, neck, and collarbone, too.

“What was that?” Jimmy asks, sitting up.

Tim’s feeling really embarrassed, and kind of turned-on, and angry and afraid come storming back, fast, and… mostly embarrassed.

“I think was trying to get you pregnant.”

Jimmy nods slowly, pulling his pants back up. He doesn’t really have anything to say to that for a moment, because while that goes along just fine with what Tim was doing, it makes literally no sense to Jimmy, but he finally comes up with, “Okay, if that’s my alternative to a glucose monitor and a pump, and the rest of that crap. I’ll take the crap. Am I bleeding?”

Tim stands up, rights his pants, and then heads to his bathroom, grabbing a few tissues. “A little.” He steps closer to Jimmy, holding the tissues, but doesn’t, won’t, touch him without express permission.

Jimmy nods, and Tim steps even closer, very lightly, gently kissing his lip, and then dabbing at it with the tissue. “Sorry.”

“Seriously, what the hell was that?”

Tim opens and closes his mouth a few times and the shakes his head. He remembers Abby in his lap telling him he wasn’t allowed to dangle this perfect life in front of her, and then yank it away by dying on her. She hit him. He remembers that. Not just gentle little taps, but really hit him.

And he suddenly knows how that felt. “Not being able to take the crap I’ve dished out.”

“I’m still not following you.”

Tim shakes his head. “I don’t think you have to. I’m just… sorry. Uh… You were saying something when you came in…” He’s feeling exhausted all of a sudden. Like all of the emotions that had been coursing through him have all rushed away, leaving him with two hours of sleep and frazzled nerves and staring at a man he adores who he just basically assaulted because the idea of losing him was so terrifying he couldn’t find anything else to do with it.

He crashes onto his sofa, and Jimmy follows, sitting next to him, but there’s still some wariness in his posture.

And after a moment of watching Tim just sit there, parsing ‘not being able to take what I’ve dished out,’ that wariness breaks. He offers Tim an arm, and Tim snuggles into him.

They hold that quiet for a moment, and Jimmy can feel Tim’s fingers against his chest, and his lips against his throat. And Tim’s there, feeling breath and pulse, and the frantic need to wipe death off of Jimmy is receding, but it’s still lurking under there, because he can still smell it on him.
He can still feel Jimmy, like this, warm, still, against him last night, not moving, not responding.

This time, he gently kisses Jimmy’s throat.

He can feel Jimmy petting his hair, and then he asks again. “Yeah. I do need to know, what was that?”

This is easier with his face against Jimmy’s neck. Easier to not say it with eye contact. But he makes himself look up anyway.

His fingers find one of the bite marks. Jimmy’s going back to work with a pile of hickeys. Tim shakes his head, a little. But he makes words form. “You don’t get to die.” His face is intense, and he knows he can’t demand this, can’t make the universe stand up and somehow take notice. There is no magic in this world and will alone cannot keep our loves safe, but, he can’t not try. “Abby said that to me once. You don’t get to dangle this fantasy of a perfect life in front of me and then take it away by dying. And… I can smell it on you.” Tim wipes his lips in embarrassment. “I could feel it on you last night. And, you don’t get to die. So… I was…” He’s blushing from his forehead to his neck. “I was… claiming you. And… I was going to fuck the death right out of you. Take it off your skin. Make it know that it can’t have you.”

Jimmy exhales long and low at that. He gently strokes his hand from Tim’s shoulder to hand, and nods. “You weren’t kidding about trying to get me pregnant.”

Tim’s blushing at that. “Not really. I’ve… done that with Abby after a few close calls.”

“Yeah, same with Breena and I.”

“The brain knows it doesn’t work… On any level…” He rubs his lips together, horribly embarrassed. “Especially not for you and me… But… balls and guts, not so much.”

Jimmy nods, and shifts a bit, his own position, and Tim’s, too, so he’s in Tim’s lap, straddling his legs, face to face with him. “Not here, and not like this, but… Later, slow, gentle, you still need to, sure.”

“I have a feeling later the ladies will want you, and I’m not going to get between them and you. So… you were saying something when you came in. I know that. You came in, and your mouth opened, and everything went really blurry and hyper slow and very aware of your body and life and whatnot, but… You came here for a reason, right?”

“Yeah.” Jimmy rolls his eyes. “I think it’s fairly clear you’re not the sympathetic audience I was hoping for.”

“Yeah, well, I’m feeling pretty cringe-y about five minutes ago, so try me. This is the most receptive I’ll ever be.”

“Abby hacked my Endo, booted a drug rep, and got me in on Monday.”

Tim feels a flush of pleasure at that. He makes a mental note to get some flowers for her tonight. He’s also with it enough to see that this is not making Jimmy happy.

So, he says, “Ah. And, this is bad?”

“You mean, beyond the dozen illegal, and extremely easily tracked HIPPA violations? Can we start there? I think Doc Hildebrand will be amused by this, mostly because she’s on the same side as the girls, but… If she’s not, Abby can literally go to jail for this.”
Tim waves that away. If Abby didn’t get in and out clean, he can mop up after her. “I can take care of that.”

“It’s an appointment for *me*. There’s not exactly a mile long suspect list.”

“I can take care of that, too. By the time I’m done, that appointment will have originated from your Doc’s software, on a computer, in her office.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes.

“Same side as the girls?” Tim asks.

“It’s like I’m a child, or a pet. Okay, as long as you do whatever it is, you can get your gold star.”

Tim’s not following that, so Jimmy explains his deal with Doc Hildebrand and Breena. How, as long as he’s ‘got it under control’ he gets to make his own decisions.

And Tim listens, but it’s clear he doesn’t get it.

He’s trying to. But, yes, in the same place, he’s fairly certain he’d have gotten himself into several test groups to be on the absolute cutting edge of whatever tech they’re setting up for keeping diabetics in the sweet spot, and it’s entirely likely that, if at twenty, he’d been diagnosed with diabetes, he’d have gotten that PhD in Biomedical Engineering, and would be one of the guys making new devices to replace the function of a working pancreas.

So, Tim sits, and he listens, and if his thumb just happens to be on Jimmy’s throat, just below one of the hickeys, keeping constant track of the thrum of his heart, Jimmy doesn’t appear to mind.

But even with the explanation, he doesn’t get it. Jimmy explains hating the pump, and Tim nods along, but…

“So… What’s the problem with it?”

“You mean besides hooked up to a machine all the time?”

“Yeah. I heard what you said, and I don’t know but I can empathize with the idea that it’ll be annoying, but come on… Annoying is better than sick or dead. And… It’s been 14 years. Things keep getting better, right? There’s got to be something else, right? I’m completely certain I can find a way to keep a tube and a pump on you without the tube kinking up and without your skin breaking out in hives. I didn’t keep up biomedical engineering, but I wasn’t bad at it. I was just better at computers. This shouldn’t be hard to solve.”

Jimmy shakes his head. “They’ve got some pod now. No tubes. I still need to have this stupid fucking thing literally *in* my body all the time, but, yes, they’re better.”

Tim stares at him, eyes big and wide.

“God, is Breena coaching you on that look? She gave me the exact same damn thing right after we got married. I don’t need it!” Jimmy can literally *feel* Tim tense at that. Before he whips out any sort of verbal response, Jimmy says, “I didn’t need it.”

Tim relaxes marginally, and keeps looking.

Jimmy shakes his head and sighs again. “It’s winning. I kept it at a standstill for almost twenty years, but… It’s winning. I’ve told Gibbs that this isn’t some little allergy or something, in the long run, it’s
Jimmy looks very sad and moves closer. Tim’s hands wrap around him, settling on his waist. “This is my death, Tim. I mean, yeah, we all die, but… I know how it ends for me. This is how it ended for him.” Tim knows Jimmy’s talking about his dad. “He couldn’t control it, and… honestly, didn’t try as hard as I do, and…” He’s shaking his head, and exhales, very long, very deep. “I was diagnosed three months after he died.” He thinks Tim knows that, though he doesn’t think he’s every laid out the timeline that clearly. “And… yeah, that close together… It was like the fucking Angel of Death showed up in that hospital room and spit on me. Doc didn’t have to say anything, I could smell it on myself when I got conscious again.

“My mom went white. She knew the minute she walked into the hospital room. She knew that smell, lived with it. I was at school when he died, but… When I got back two days later, their room reeked of it. I’d been partying like a maniac right before, and… I could have splattered myself across a four lane highway, or ODed, or, anything, and she would have taken it better than walking into a hospital room that smelled like a diabetic with too much sugar in his blood.”

Jimmy’s looking at their ceiling, voice shaky, but still talking, though he kind of wants to shut this down and just retreat into quiet. “That’s when she started pulling away from me.” He half-smiles and blinks back the tears. “She could handle the fact that I was high. Me being one of the stoners was annoying, but not a deal breaker, not if my grades stayed good enough to keep my scholarships. Diabetes, that was something else. That’s why she’s good for letters, and uh… phone calls and emails, but she keeps me, us, at arm’s length because of it.

“I think it’s the same thing with Clark. She told him, and he just turned and walked out of the room. Like I did it on purpose.

“And… I’m just lying there, and the Doc’s going over everything, got me set up with my first endo appointment, and giving me pamphlets and all of this crap, that I know because I grew up with it, but… But, I didn’t really know, because he’s was always, ‘It’s just a little diabetes,’ like it was no big deal. Extra ice cream, sure, just up the insulin. Skip lunch, why not, there’s always a can of soda in his bag. Lose weight? Why? Drink less, what’s the point? Life’s too short not to have that extra beer or seconds on the birthday cake.

“So, I read the pamphlets. And I got online and I read everything else. And I followed everything my doctor told me to the letter, because I wasn’t going to be him. It beat him, and that wasn’t going to happen to me. I was going to control it. And I was following the low-fat, lots of veg, treats are fine, just up the insulin recommendation, but it wasn’t giving me the results I wanted, so I did more research, and I got a fucking MD to go with it, and… Yeah, your Endo doesn’t look at you like you’re quite so much of a flaming moron when you finally finish medical school, and…” his voice breaks on this. “And it didn’t fucking matter at all. It still won.

“Eat right, exercise, keep myself in the right shape, do the right thing, keep testing, calibrate my insulin right. I controlled it, Tim.

“Put that doodad in my arm, or on my leg, or belly or wherever, and…” he shrugs, bites his lip for a tenth of a second, before he feels the sting of the cut Tim already put on him and stops, “And I’m waving the white flag. It’s calling the shots, and I’m reacting. I’m not in control any more.

“And that’s where the end begins, you know? Impotence, neuropathy, necrosis, amputations, blindness, and eventually the blood poisoning gets me. If I’m lucky.” He exhales slow at that. “Maybe you were on the right track before, death is in there, but you can’t fuck it out of me, or off of me, or… anything like that. It’s there, in my body, in my blood, every minute.

“And as soon as I slap one of those little fuckers onto my skin, I’ve got to admit that it’ll win.”
Tim holds onto him, keeping Jimmy close. *That* he can sympathize with. Jimmy’s literally cut and bruised right now because Tim’s so awesome at dealing with not being able to control this situation. But sympathy doesn’t mean that Jimmy’s right.

“You ever say that to Breena?”

He nods. “Yeah. She knows. But, for her, that device is *control*. It doesn’t sleep, it doesn’t forget, it doesn’t get distracted, it’s always there, chugging away, doing its job.”

That sounds awfully good to Tim right now, too. After vastly too many visits to the Morgue he’s got more than enough vivid images of everything Jimmy just said, and he’s doing everything in his power to not imagine any of that in relation to Jimmy.

Jimmy can see exactly how much Tim wants a monitor on him now, and rolls his eyes at that, too. “Yeah, I know, man-up, put my big boy Underoos on, and get the damn thing, right?”

“If it was me, or Breena, Abby or the kids…”

“I know. I’m allowed to be a hypocrite about this. Doctors make terrible patients, blah, blah, blah.”

Tim runs his hand up and down Jimmy’s back, feeling warmth, solid muscle, the flex of him breathing. “Why don’t we love ourselves as well as we love each other?”

Jimmy shakes his head at that, and kisses Tim. He doesn’t know why, but he knows it’s true.

Tim leans further into him, twisting a little so his face is pressed to his throat. He kisses his pulse, placing his lips about an inch below one of the hickies. “As long as that’s still going, it hasn’t won.”

He scoffs at that.

Tim pulls back, looking him in the eyes. “No. You stop that. Redefine the terms of victory. You are alive. Every day with us is a win.”

Jimmy doesn’t get particularly sharp when he’s sarcastic, not often. He tends to go more for a dry tone, but when he does, he can cut stone with his voice, and that’s exactly the tone he uses to say, “Yeah, tell me that when they’re cutting my fucking legs off. Or I’ve had a catheter so long they’ve had to split my dick down my urethra to deal with the gauge of the tube. All the win! Can’t walk, can’t fuck, fingers are turning black from blood poisoning, out of my head on morphine to deal with the pain, but still turning O2 into CO2, lots of win!”

Tim blanches at that.

“Medical school, remember? I was there. I took care of them. The only amputations I had to do were on diabetics who didn’t…” He’s actively crying now and can’t finish that sentence. But he can see it, smell it. That one woman, he peeled the skin of her foot off like it was a fucking sock, and then helped to take her leg off at the knee. She still died of blood poisoning two weeks later.

“It’s going to win, Tim.” That’s all he manages to get out after that.

Tim holds onto him, trying not to imagine it. He can feel Jimmy against him, his legs against his hips, his fingers against his back, and the idea of any part of Jimmy not attached to Jimmy, not warm and pink and healthy is making Tim feel actively nauseous.

Somehow, after this last year, and all the years before it, it never really hit Tim that Jimmy is *sick*. He knows that Jimmy’s diabetic. He’s seen him test. He’s seen the insulin he takes with his meals and
before he works out. He cooks for the man, and is avidly aware of how carefully he watches what goes into his body.

But somehow that never translated into the idea that Jimmy is *sick*.

Jimmy has his cry, and gets himself back together. Tim’s quiet, holding onto him, petting his back, kissing his forehead from time to time.

When Jimmy feels calmed down, Tim says, very quietly. “Maybe it does win. You’re probably right about that. That’s no reason to let it win easy. One of my favorite authors once wrote ‘Of course the deck is stacked, but you absolutely can’t win if you don’t play, so you might as well play.’” Tim shrugs. “So, play. It just pulled a trump card, fine. You get the monitor, and it can’t keep sneaking up on you. And maybe that’s enough for a long time. Maybe that stalemates it for decades, the way you did with the way you eat. Maybe it’s enough for a few days. I don’t know. But if you get a few days, that’s a few days *we want* with you.”

Jimmy doesn’t say what he’s thinking. That it’s not that easy. That he doesn’t get it. That it’s… futile. In the end, it’ll win.

He lets Tim hold him for another moment, and then gets up. “I should go.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know. But you’re not getting your work done, and I’m not doing anything useful, either, and…”

“I wasn’t doing all that much.” Tim glances at his typewriter.

Jimmy nods to Tim’s computer making it clear he doesn’t want to dwell on him or sickness anymore. “Well, go, do. Missing hacker to find, entire legal system to re-do. Go get it.”

Tim rolls his eyes and groans. He’s got the system ramping up as fast as he can, which isn’t nearly fast enough. As for the hacker, “You know we don’t even have her prints or DNA on file any longer? The IRS managed to ‘lose’ *everything*. The only way I can search Jane Does is facial recognition, now, and something like 2/3ds of them aren’t in the facial recognition system.”

“Go get the court order to exhume her parents and look for someone who’s a partial DNA match to both of them.”

Tim blinks, getting up. “That’s the first concrete lead I’ve had in a week. Thanks!”

Jimmy nods, kisses Tim, and heads out.

As both a guy, and a guy who never did a whole lot of one night stands, Jimmy’s never done the ‘Walk of Shame.’ He’s aware that it’s a thing, but… Back when he was still doing one (or several) night stands, he had more of a “Strut of I Got Laid” than a “Walk of Shame.”

That said, leaving Tim’s office with several visible hickies, and a shirt that’s got two fewer buttons than it did when he came in, is an… interesting… experience.

Jennifer, the only person who absolutely *knows* that he is not leaving in the condition he came in in, does a double take as he heads out. Tim’s mentioned that she knows, but it’s pretty clear there’s a
difference between knows and *knows*, and right now, she suddenly *knows*.

He certainly feels like a lot of people are staring, but he’s also pretty sure that’s mostly in his head. Most people probably don’t give two shits about the guy with the visitor’s badge, split lip, and love bites, moving through the Hoover building.

Going back to work…

Screw that. He’s got every damn reason to take the day off, and if someone turns up dead, Allan can call him.

He calls Allan, tells him what’s up, and pulls out of visitor parking.

Time to go home.

Breena’s sleeping when he gets home.

He’s glad for that. He knows there’s no shot she actually slept last night. Between feeding Donnie and fear, she didn’t get any rest.

She’s not looking very restful now, either. There’s still tension on her face, and he can see her eyes whipping around in REM sleep.

He hopes it’s a good dream.

Judging by her face, it’s probably not.

Jimmy sighs at that, and strips out of his clothing, climbing into their bed. They’ve done this so many times, she doesn’t really wake, though she does snuggle into him. Even mad, even asleep, her body finds his.

He watches her, sees some of the tension melt out of her face, and the fluttering in her eyes ceases. Slipping from dreaming sleep to light sleep. He lays there quietly, watching her, letting her rest.

*Why do we love each other better than we love ourselves?*

What would he do for her? As an act of love, *for her?*

*Anything.*

Then why is this so fucking hard? *Do it for her. Do it for them. And done, right?*

It will, objectively, do a better job of keeping him healthy than he’s doing right now. It’ll wake him up if his sugar starts to slip during the night, and let him sleep if it’s solid. It’ll make it easier for him to see how much insulin to add if he goes outside his collection of “safe” foods.

It’s a stupid box of plastic, metal, and electronics. It does a job that his body won’t. It’s no different than Sean’s cochlear implant, which gave him not a second’s pause when they were talking about getting one for him.

He should be ecstatic that it’s a thing, and a thing he can have. It’s a *literal* lifesaver for millions of
people. It would have been a lifesaver for his father.

And that doesn’t matter. Not in his heart or guts.

He usually sleeps on his back, and Breena normally snuggles into his side, head on his shoulder, leg draped over his. When he got into bed, he slid into his normal position, and she rolled into hers. He can feel her skin against his thigh, the soft weight of her leg on his. The box goes there. On his thigh, or on his arm, maybe on his belly.

He tries to imagine it. It’s there, jabbing into his skin, she slips her leg on top of his and yanks it, or lays on it, or… Whatever. He hates the idea of it. It’s supposed to be his leg, and hers. Not his leg, his sharp, pokey, plastic box, and hers.

There’s a thing that Abby and Breena do. Tim doesn’t, normally, though he was this afternoon. That’s slip their hand up his arm. Usually it goes along with sex, especially if he’s on top, they’ll drag a hand up the length of his arm, feeling the muscle, the strength in his biceps and triceps working to keep him up, above them, moving.

He sighs. He actually really likes that. He enjoys them appreciating the amount of work he puts into looking the way he does. It’s not like they’ll have to stop if he gets a monitor. They’ll… move around the box, or skip that arm, or maybe accidentally tug it, but… It shouldn’t be like the time he got the tube caught on the pump and ripped the sharp end out of his tummy.

Or his belly, the box could be on his belly. Any position that involves one of them lying on him, and there’ll be this thing between them. A sharp, painful thing intruding in moments that are supposed to be about pleasure. Hell, he doesn’t like condoms because they get in the way, and they at least don’t have a fucking needle jabbing into him, poking and pulling every time one of them moves.

The needle he uses for his insulin now hurts for a second, and then it’s done. The box… It’ll do a better job, and annoy the shit out of him while doing it.

Every single moment of every single day, it’ll be there, on his skin, in his skin.

*Do it for them.*

Honestly though, that’s set dressing. Annoyances. Those aren’t the deal breaker. The deal breaker’s in his head, not on his skin.

Put one of those things on, and he’s got to admit that he doesn’t have diabetes, it’s got him.

He feels Breena wake up. There’s a moment where she’s soft and relaxed against him, breathing steadily, and he feels that shift. She tenses, misses a breath, and then shifts into a faster, shallower breathing pattern.

He kisses her forehead. “Abby got an appointment for Monday, at lunch. Assuming you’re willing to risk getting arrested for a dozen or so HIPPA violations, you can come with me for it.”

She’s been to a few appointments with Dr. Hildebrand, and they like each other. “She’s not gonna bust us for that.”
“Probably.”

They’re both quiet for a long minute.

“It’s not a cure,” Jimmy says. “It won’t… can’t fix this.”

“I was never looking for a cure.” She turns, rolling onto her belly, shifts up, so she’s on her elbows, looking down at him, for a second she’s shocked at the bruises, but decides to let that go, getting this out matters more. “I don’t need you to regrow a pancreas. I just want a fucking alarm to buzz if your sugar starts dropping when you’re asleep. Thirty-nine, Jimmy. That’s… If this had happened last month, when Donnie was still on the inside… We’d have slept through the night, and I would have woken up a widow.”

That’s probably not literally true. Probably. Most diabetics go into seizures before slipping into a coma, and it’s not like anyone can sleep through him seizing. Even his stoner roommate, high as a kite, was able to notice something was wrong when his blood sugar got so high he went into a coma the first time.

Also, diabetic coma means that everything slows down, and they likely could have gotten him pumped full of glucagon in time… Probably. If it wasn’t a weekend. Happen at the house, and… Yeah, they’d get up, and play with the kids, and do their thing, let him “sleep in” and if he’d been in bed alone…

It’s true enough that he’s not going to argue the point.

Breena’s very determinedly not crying, though her lip and voice is trembling. “And… honestly, I don’t care if you don’t like the damn monitor. I don’t like the idea of being a widow, or raising our kids without you, and that trumps your fear of electronics.”

Jimmy blinks slowly. He can’t put his voice to it, not yet, but she’s right, and he knows it. He nods.

She sees that nod, blinks a few times, nods back to him, and then lightly touches his lip. “Tim smack some sense into you?”

Jimmy shakes his head. “Not exactly. He was… trying to fuck the death out of me, and… Yeah…” He shakes his head a bit at that, too, running his hand through his hair, staring up at Breena, who’s looking down, fairly shocked at that. “Yep.”

“Did it work?”

Jimmy really rolls his eyes at that. “Yes, Tim’s amazing cock has made me immortal! Isn’t that a trope or something, magical healing cock? All he did was bruise me up, give both of us some fairly uncomfortable boners, and embarrass the hell out of himself. It was a remarkably ineffective technique.”

She gently strokes his face, skirting around the hickeys. He kisses her fingers.

She tries a quick smile at him, but it falls flat. Her eyes are watery, but looking at him very intently. “It’s like the world stopped turning. I can hear his voice, and see him shaking you, and you’re just rocking back and forth, not moving at all on your own. No sound… no… anything. Just limp and gone and…

“And I’m not sorry, but I’m not going through that again. Not… Not if there’s some way to avoid it. If you want to go kick Tim, you can, last year with him burned through my entire ability to deal with weeks of mortal terror, and I cannot… just cannot take the thought of losing you. Not now. Not like
this. Not for something so fucking stupid as not having a glucose monitor. Just… no.”

They hear a faint cry. Jimmy sits up. “I’ll get him.”

And a few moments later, he’s back, with Donnie in his arms, as Breena gets the pillows piled around her, ready for Donnie’s pre-dinner nurse.

Once they’re settled, Jimmy sits next to them, arm around Breena’s shoulder, looking down at their son as he nurses.

He started this conversation with Tim, started it with Breena a long time ago, too, but never got here. Though he’s not sure where here really is. He’s feeling it though, and he thinks saying it matters.

“I don’t need a cure, either. I just need control. And once I put that thing on, I have to admit I don’t have it.”

She turns her face to his shoulder, kissing it. “Honey, you never did.”

He sniffs, nods slightly, and says, “I had the illusion of it.” He remembers something Ducky said to him once, that didn’t exactly resonate at the time, but it is now. “We live and die by the lies we tell ourselves.”

She nestles in a little closer, and kisses him again.

He has a snack every hour and a half. That seems to be where the sweet spot is now. He doesn’t need more sugar, he just needs it more regularly. Seven fucking almonds every hour and a half. One midnight snack of twenty almonds, and at least for the last three days, his sugar has stayed rock solid.

He doesn’t need a monitor, he just needs some damn food and his watch to buzz regularly, reminding him to keep eating the damn food.

Explaining this solution to his loves has gone exactly nowhere.

Tim said, one, maybe half-encouraging thing, along the lines of, “Look, get the damn monitor, keep eating the almonds, and if you actually do go three or four months without a blip, and you hate the monitor, we can talk about taking it off.”

Tim didn’t actually use the tone that they use with the girls when they don’t want to argue, but aren’t about to give the point, so they offer a half-baked hope that’s not actually going to happen.

But he wouldn’t be shocked if that wasn’t exactly what had happened.

At least during the week, he’s at work. During the week, Jimmy gets a solid ten hours a day where he’s not constantly being hovered over by people who are panicky about his well-being and afraid that if he goes 93 minutes without food, he’s going to collapse.
Over the weekend…

They’re babysitting him, and trying to make it look like they aren’t, but by Sunday afternoon, literally every minute he hasn’t been in a locked bathroom, there has been someone else lingering nearby.

Casually.

Pretending they aren’t.

Constantly glancing at him, doing the math, waiting to see when he’ll pull out a snack.

“Come on,” Ziva says to him once the kids are down for afternoon naps.

“And do what?” He’s sitting at the kitchen table, attempting to read, feeling Tim’s eyes on the back of his head as he and Tony “game.”

Ziva gives him a long look, and then says, “Run.”

She’s dressed for it, sort of. With little guy seven months old, she just got back to her regular routine last month, and is still gearing back up to it. She doesn’t quite fit into either her normal running gear or her maternity running stuff, but, sneakers, sweats, light jacket, hair back… Suspicious bulge in her pocket… that looks a lot like a roll of the tape they use on their hands when they spar.

He’s fairly sure that “run” means fight, and suddenly, Jimmy’s all in favor of that.

“YES! Give me a minute.” He’s up from the chair, gets out of his PJs and into something slightly more exercise appropriate, and, though he’s done it before every other workout, he takes his bolus, really aware of the extra insulin he’s got to give himself to work out, and then meets back up with her about three minutes later.

“You want extra company?” Tim asks.

Ziva shakes her head at him. “You hate running. Play with Tony.” Then she and Jimmy are out of the house.

They actually do run, just far enough to get out of the view of any of the windows of the house, then Ziva stops. “They will be upset if they see bruises.”

Jimmy nods at that. They’re in a clearing in the woods. Cold late November air, dead brown leaves underfoot, along with sticks, rocks, and hard, almost frozen dirt. “Pull the punches.” He glances down, they’re both wearing sneakers. “No kicks…” And looks at the rock-strewn ground, and thinks about how much it’ll hurt to fall on it. “We might as well just run.”

“Then catch me!” Ziva says with a grin, and she’s off.

It’s good. Tearing through the woods, zig-zagging trees and brush, jumping over logs, branches snapping against his skin, heart pumping, body moving fast and easy.

He doesn’t know how long they go for, but when they’re done, he’s hot, sweaty, not feeling the cold air, heart thudding, and feeling good.

“Thank you!”

Ziva gives him a hug. Then she places his hand on her decidedly not flat belly. “Bodies change. It’s just what they do. We still know how to enjoy them, no?”
Tim would have to say this is one of the most emotionally bizarre moments of his life. He and Abby have been working together, getting a collection of little sleeves, for lack of a better word, so Jimmy can keep the glucose monitor (which should be coming home with him from his appointment with Dr. Hildebrand today) on his arm, waist, or thigh, without having to resort to gluing it to his skin.

No, it won’t be as secure as it would be if he used the tape, but it’ll stay put well enough, and he won’t have his skin breaking out.

He and Abby are, objectively, having a good time. They’re cutting up bike shorts and a few pairs of LulaRoes, sewing up hems, adding little pockets so he can use them for more than just keeping the monitor in place. He’s measuring and cutting, she’s sewing, and they’re enjoying being with each other and having a concrete project they can do to help with this.

They’re having a good time on another level, he’s coming home with at least a monitor. They’ve decided not to press on an insulin pump, because as Jimmy’s pointed out, he’s not having a problem with not enough insulin. He’s keeping his insulin levels just fine.

Once they get that monitor in him, and calibrated properly, they’ll have real time (almost) read outs, and if Jimmy starts to get in trouble, it’ll make sure they know it, and he can eat a few nuts or something, and boom, no problem!

So, they’re having a really good day.

And Jimmy went off to that appointment looking like he’s about to face a firing squad.

And Tim doesn’t know what to do about that. The thing that’s making Jimmy so unhappy is delighting him.

And he doesn’t know how to touch the fact that Jimmy hates this. He gets why Jimmy hates this, sort of, but he doesn’t know, what, if anything there is to do about it. No, three good days is not enough. If, after the Stennis he had gotten his hand back to mostly okay, and said, ‘This is good enough’ Jimmy would not have been cool with that. He made him keep doing the physical therapy, even though it hurt, even though he didn’t like it, because he needed it.

Tim’s really hoping that Jimmy’ll get it, and it won’t be nearly as big of a pain in the ass as he thinks it’ll be, and… eventually, it’ll just, be okay.

Jimmy wasn’t aware of the fact that his eyes could roll this hard. Anyone who thinks a teenager is a pain in the ass should see what a teenager with 20+ years of additional experience at irate snark can do.

Dr. Hildebrand is not only not annoyed about him appointment jumping, she’s just thrilled that he’s come to his senses and is willing to get a monitor.
She and Breena are positive-reinforcing at about the same level with which they lavish praise on Kelly for successfully peeing in the toilet. If Breena thought it would help, he’d be getting lap dances and blow jobs right and left for agreeing to do this.

Breena catches his absolute bitch face before the Doc does, so she lays off, knowing that she’s just making this worse, and after a few beats Hildebrand notices, too.

“Okay, yes, I know. You don’t want this. I’m still glad you’re doing it. Your friend sent me your numbers, and… Yeah. You can read them as well as I can. You’ve gone from solid control to shaky.” Breena winces as Hildebrand says that. “You had a really good long run of taking care of yourself with mostly diet and exercise. In fact, you had the best controlled diabetes of anyone I’ve ever worked with.” If Breena wasn’t on one side of the desk and Hildebrand on the other, she’d be kicking her to get her to shut up right now. “You’re the hopeful end story I tell newly diagnosed people about…”

“But…” Jimmy says, dryly. Everything he’s ever said about control is just being repeated back to Breena right now, and everything he thinks and feels about it just got reinforced, by his Doctor.

“But you’re almost forty, Jimmy. You’re getting older, and everything slows down, works less effectively as you get older. And I know you don’t want a device. We’ve been over that, but given what you’re telling me, it’s time for, at the very least, a continuous glucose monitor.”

“Fine. Tell me about it.”

She gets the pod out of a box and shows it to him. “It’s about the size of your thumb tip and goes on your arm or leg. Little sensor goes under the skin. You’ll have to replace the sensor at least once a week. It uses bluetooth or wifi, depending on what sort you get, to hook into a device that lets you see the readouts and calibrate everything. It sends you an alarm whenever your glucose starts to shift too much. If you get an integrated model, along with an insulin pump, it’ll increases your insulin when your sugar drifts up. You’ve got to test normally twice a day to make sure it’s still calibrated properly. But, once you’ve got it set and mastered, you’ll be able to tell how everything effects your sugar levels. What you eat, how you exercise, how much rest you get, all of it.”

Jimmy nods; that would be useful. Make it easier to find what’s booting him out of the sweet spot. Tim and Abby could have little data orgasms reading his charts, and Allan can stop hovering over him like he’s on life support. His eyes roll at that, too.

Hildebrand glances at his numbers. “Everything I’m seeing is about low sugar, so… If you don’t want a pump, I’m okay with you skipping it, for now.” Jimmy shoots another look at Breena, who nods, just a hair, acknowledging that he may have something with his interpretation of what’s going on. “That side of this seems like it’s just fine with what you’re already doing. But, you need to know what’s going on with your sugar, why it’s dropping so fast, and put a monitor together with a daily journal, and you’ll have a much better shot of figuring that out.”

“Yeah.” His voice is still dry. She’s not wrong.

“That said, I’d like to see you get an insulin pump, too. An integrated model will do a better job of keeping you where you need to be, and you’ll need less insulin in the long run because it’ll do a better job of just nudging your level. I know you don’t like the tubes, so get a pod.” And apparently knowing that this was likely her one shot at pulling this off, she pulls out the exact model of insulin pod that works with the glucose monitor she just put on her desk. Abby’s note said, “Be ready” and boy is she. “Pop the pod on once every three days. Put the monitor on once a week. Test your sugar twice a day to calibrate, and you’re done. This is it, as close as we can get you to a functional pancreas without getting into the islet cell replacement therapies.”
They’ve been over that, before, too. Which is actually something Jimmy would prefer to a bionic pancreas. And he knows that by the time they’ve got them ready for human trials, he’ll likely be too old to be a candidate.

“Fine. Just… Do it.”

“Both?”

“Sure.” He’s not looking at her. He’s staring right at Breena, eyes weary.

He hears the Doc say, “Jimmy, this is a good thing. Seriously, long run, this is so much better for you.”

He doesn’t respond to that.

---

Jimmy sighs, staring at what looks like McAbby Home-Ec Hell.

Yes, it’s better than the setup that was in the box with the pods.

No, it won’t torture his skin.

He’d still prefer not to be contemplating it.

It is a collection of arm, thigh, and waistbands. They’re soft, stretchy fabric, repurposed from bike shorts and yoga leggings. The fabric is designed to breathe, get sweated through, and still keep you cool and dry(er). Each one has a little pouch sewn into it with a Velcro closure, because apparently Tim and Abby think he might need extra pockets.

Tim’s holding one up, looking very pleased with himself. “Come on.” Abby’s grinning at him.

Jimmy’s staring at the one in his hands, nice even seams, the Velcro that’ll close the pocket is soft and supple.

“You two can really sew, can’t you?”

Tim shrugs. “Snow Elf costumes don’t grow on trees. Compared to fuzzy velour, this is a breeze. Okay, let’s try this on.”

“Put the pod where you want it--” Abby starts.

“In the box, on Dr. Hildebrand’s desk,” Jimmy mutters, not quite under his breath.

Tim and Abby pretend not to hear. And Jimmy wipes down the back of his arm with alcohol, waits a moment for it to dry, pinches up a bit of skin, presses the pod to it, without peeling back the adhesive. Abby grabs the armband that’s skin-colored. (They made him ten each, for his arm, leg, and waist, most of them are skin-colored, one of them is black with little skulls, two are bright blue, one is dark green.) She scoots it most of the way up his arm, and just looks at him.

Jimmy presses the button, feels the needle shoot home, winces a little, this is very much not the tiny little needles he uses on himself, and nods. She pulls the armband all the way up, and… It’s like wearing bike shorts, on his arm, that happen to keep a needle in his skin. Besides the soreness from
the needle, it’s not uncomfortable. The band is wide enough he’s sure the pump won’t go anywhere. Tight enough it’s not in danger of pulling out. And the fabric is comfortable enough, he doesn’t feel like he’s wearing a pressure bandage.

And, as Tim is saying… “Keep the band on in the shower. When you get out, have one of us give you a hand to keep the pump where it needs to be, dry off, pop a new band on, and you’re ready to go.”

“Or keep it on my leg or waist.”

“Or keep it on your arm or waist, and hold it yourself,” Abby adds.

Jimmy runs his arm through its full range of motion. He can certainly feel the pod. It’s not painless or invisible or any of the other bullshit they try to use to sell people on these things, but it’s also significantly less of a pain in the ass than the pump he had fourteen years ago.

He picks his right thigh for the monitor. It’s smaller than the pod, but has a much longer needle. Compared to the tiny pin prick on his arm for his usual testing equipment, this thing’s a torture device. Supposedly, feeling like he’s got an inch of steel in his leg will wear off and this thing’ll be painless, but right now, it’s not.

The only upside is he’s used to wearing bike shorts on his legs, so the feeling of the fabric is significantly less foreign.

He still doesn’t like it.

It is, somewhat, but only somewhat, satisfying to then dump all of the electronics on Tim and say, “Make it work.”

It’s more satisfying to spend the next two hours listening to Tim curse about how whoever set this up was a fucking sadist who didn’t know his ass from his elbow when it comes to code.

After two hours, during which kids have been fed, and put to bed, and the rest of the evening chores handled, he hears Tim say, “Fuck this!” storm out of his office, and grab Jimmy’s phone.

An hour later, he’s got his phone tossed into his lap. “I hacked the device, ported the ap, and reset everything so it’d work on your phone.” He opens an ap. “There’s your numbers. There’s where you put your daily calibrations in. This one here is so you can bolus extra insulin when you need it.”

Jimmy nods, looks at it, and leaves. He’s thinking right now, he could really use some time with Gibbs.

Or not. He’s halfway there when he remembers that the basement is closed, unless he wants to go to New Orleans.

“You’re still awake,” he says to Tim, three hours later.

Tim shrugs a bit. His night with Donnie, and none of them had a problem with him staying up for Jimmy getting home. Tim watches Jimmy as he steps across the room, sees how he’s carefully
placing his feet, and remembers hearing a car pull away.

“You’re drunk.”

“Yes.” Jimmy flops onto the sofa next to Tim, and then jerks his arm back, because that hit it against
the sore spot. “Damn thing’ll pump me full of insulin on its own, might as well have a drink, or two,
or three, or four. Don’t have to worry about having to calculate my insulin to deal with it.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

Jimmy shrugs. “We’ll see how crappy I feel in a few hours. Since I went low carb, I’ve never liked
the way too much sugar and then too much insulin feels. Had a piece of cheesecake, too. In for a
penny, in for a pound.”

Tim wraps an arm around Jimmy, pulling him in close. He can smell the alcohol on him. Whatever
he was drinking was strong and sweet. There’s a hint of anise in there, too. Probably absinthe. He
kisses Jimmy’s forehead.

“Got halfway to Gibbs’ place, but then remembered Mr. Technophobe’s in New Orleans with
Abbi.”

“Figuring he’d be more sympathetic than the rest of us?”

“Or at least I wouldn’t have to pay for the drinks.”

Tim smirks at that, kisses him again, and says, “Yeah, but no cheesecake at his place.”

Jimmy’s staring off at the living room wall. “It wasn’t as good as I remembered it. Too sweet, too
rich, could barely taste the strawberries. It was mostly just syrupy-goo.”

“Yuck.”

“Crap chocolate sauce, too. Not nearly enough cocoa, and too much corn syrup.” Jimmy stares at the
clock on the wall. Seven minutes after twelve, not that late, not really. Later than he’s been out, on
his own, not for work, in probably six years. “Drinks were good. They still taste right.”

“Probably why you shouldn’t get cheesecake in a bar.”

Jimmy closes his eyes and lets his head rest against Tim’s shoulder.

“Shouldn’t be getting drinks, plural, anyway. But… what’s the point? It won’t matter.”

“If you mean one or two, even a few more some night out, like the next time the four of us manage
to talk someone into watching all of our kids and going out clubbing, you’re right, it won’t matter.
You want us to get a room at the Omni, stay there the night of Gibbs’ wedding, and go wild at the
party, have fun! Unless it makes you feel bad. If you mean, ‘Hey, I’m gonna die anyway, might as
well sit on my ass, get fat, snork down all the sugar and alcohol and burn through my body that
much faster,’ it matters a lot.”

“I don’t know. Right now, it all seems useless. I did everything. Literally. Everything. And it still
wasn’t enough.”

Tim doesn’t know what to do with that.

Jimmy lays his hand on his thigh. He can just see the bulge of the monitor under the line of his
trouser. He gently flicks it with the tip of his finger. “It’s not the thing. It’s what the thing represents.”
Tim lays his hand on Jimmy’s. “You not dropping into a coma and dying on us one night.”

“Me being sick enough where that’s a possibility.”

“You’re the healthiest guy I know.”

Jimmy laughs, voice black and bitter as Jethro’s coffee. “Except for the fact that you’ve got to literally keep a little box on me 24 hours a day to make sure I don’t fall asleep and never wake up.”

Tim doesn’t know what to do with that, either, other than what they’ve done for him when he’s needed time to adjust his identity, and deal with the fact that those adjustments don’t come easy. He holds onto Jimmy, and doesn’t say anything.

Not all that much later, Donnie’s up, looking for yet another feed. Hopefully, in two or three weeks, he’ll get big enough to shift from eating every three hours to at least one good, five hour sleep a night.

But it hasn’t happened, yet.

Tim’s snoozing against Jimmy, holding him like a teddy bear.

Jimmy gently shoves him over, and gets up to get their son.

It likely isn’t the most surgically precise diaper change ever, but he’s not so drunk that he can’t wipe poop off of a baby.

Breena’s still snoozing when he brings Donnie in. Abby’s on her side, snuggled against their wife’s back, so Jimmy slips in on her other side, gently says, “Hey, food time,” and she pulls out of her snooze.

“You’re home.” She sits up a bit, shifting around, opening the nursing bra and resettling herself against Jimmy.

“Yeah.”

“Gibbs?”

“Wasn’t home.”

“Oh.” Donnie lets her know that she’s not getting that breast into his mouth fast enough. “Shush you. Food’s on the way.”

Donnie gets to it, and begins to suck, mollified.

Jimmy rests with his head against the headrest, arms around Breena. He’s gently stroking her arms as she feeds their youngest.

This feels good. She’s warm and solid in his arms. Donnie’s making happy little mwuf, mwuf, mwuf noises, looking up at them in the dark. His body still likes this. It still knows what pleasure is. It still feels it. He’s still actively enjoying watching Breena nurse Donnie, and if he were a few weeks older, Jimmy would be doing something about enjoying this, or at least letting her know, explicitly,
that he’d really like it if she were to develop some interest in enjoying this with him.

He feels her drift off in his arms. First time that’s happened since they had a hard time waking him up. He knows part of it is just being tired. It’s been a long two weeks for all of them. And part of it is she’s not afraid he’s going to drop over dead if she’s not watching him.

He sighs, and kisses her. She can rest again, because he’s safe.

And maybe, in a day or two, that’ll matter to him, too. Probably, in a day or two, he’ll get used to this, and it’ll be like all the rest of it, like daily testing, and the needles, and never leaving the house without a snack and glucose tabs, it’ll just be something he does.

He just wishes it wasn’t.

At Donnie’s next wake up, Jimmy jerks awake, too, and wishes he hadn’t.

He’s not sure if he’s hung over from alcohol or too much sugar. He supposes it doesn’t matter much one way or another.

It’s one thing to take the headache, muzzy feeling, and nausea for a really good meal or drink. But, honestly, neither the booze or food was worth this.

He supposes that’s the answer to ‘Why bother?’ Because it hurts too damn bad not to.

He gets up, chugs a huge glass of water, which makes his stomach rebel, but not enough to make him throw up, downs two Aspirin to go with it, and staggers back to bed.

He catches the looks the next few days. The monitor, under his scrubs bottoms, isn’t very visible. When he’s sitting down, the leg of his scrubs can get tight enough for it to be visible, sitting there, on his thigh. But, especially when there’s someone other than Allan in the Morgue, he’s usually standing up.

The sleeve keeping the pod in place is completely visible. It’s a few inches below the edge of his scrubs sleeve. And apparently, everyone who wanders into the Morgue feels the need to ask why he’s wearing a band around his arm.

He does find out he’s not the only one using a pod and monitor. But it’s not exactly comforting, or comfortable, to chat with Dornie’s second-in-command about the various merits of one pod versus another.

Thanksgiving Wednesday.

He’s trying not to mope. He really is. He’s gotten through dinner, helped put kiddos to bed, kept a not too painfully fake smile on his face, and has been helping with prep-work for tomorrow’s feast.
The whole crew is coming, and usually, he’s in an awfully good mood when that’s true.

And maybe if this wasn’t a holiday that was all about consuming mass quantities of food, the one thing that requires him to be constantly thinking about, and aware of, being diabetic, this would be easier. Maybe if he were stringing lights on a tree, or carving a pumpkin, or… anything else.

But he’s not. He’s zesting an orange for the cranberry sauce.

Senior (who, with Delphine’s help, will be the first ones to break in their finally furnished guestroom) is next to him, chopping up the walnuts that will go into said sauce, and says to him, "Junior said you got a new doo-hickey. That means you finally get to eat this stuff, right?"

Jimmy’s shoulders slump, and he nods, eyes rolling. "Yeah. Whoopie!"

Senior winces, realizing that he just poked the porcupine, and that Tony’s ‘he’s feeling sensitive about it’ didn’t mean ‘try to cheer him up by pointing out yummy things he can eat now.’

Gibbs sees it. He’s hovering on the side of the kitchen, sipping his coffee, keeping them company. (Tomorrow, when Fornell shows up, that’s when he’ll get his kitchen time.) He puts the cup down, and gently pulls Jimmy out of there.

"C’mon." He leads them to their jackets, and they head outside.

Pitch black sky, bright clear stars, and frosty breath. It’s not quite winter, but right now Jimmy couldn’t tell you why.

"You gonna bite everyone’s head off forever?"

Jimmy gives Gibbs the stink eye. "Only for the next twenty years. I’ll let you keep the title of longest grudge at the world."

Gibbs smirks at that, inclining his head. Jimmy isn’t wrong about that. "And did anything about my record-setting grudge make you think it was a good plan?"

“No."

“And it doesn’t actually feel good, does it?"

Jimmy rolls his eyes, bitch face at Gibbs. "No. But if I had good in my reach, I’d be grabbing it." He shows off that fake smile. He's been hoping that maybe if he just keeps doing it, he'll start feeling it. So far, no luck. "It’s conspicuously missing right now."

Gibbs nods, sitting down on the front step of their porch, knees popping. Jimmy sits with him. Those pops sound loud enough to mimic gunfire. Jimmy looks at him, seeing the glasses, worn all the time now, and he knows what’d he see if he got Gibbs’ shirt off, the scars. He knows each mark goes with a change, something that shifted his life, and his understanding of that life.

"I know, Gibbs. I know. We change. Our bodies shift, and we deal. I know."

Gibbs doesn’t say anything. He lays his hand on Jimmy’s back.

Jimmy flicks the bulge on his leg. He’s in his pajama pants right now, and the monitor is fairly easy to see through the soft cotton. "It’s just a thing. And it shouldn’t matter. But it does. And if I could make it not matter, I would, but… Right now, I can’t."

Gibbs nods. He touches his glasses. "Felt the same way about the first pair of these. Didn’t use ‘em
for years after I needed them. Had to be threatened with getting tossed out of NCIS before I bought a pair, and I stuffed it in my desk drawer and didn’t touch it until my next checkup, and then only wore it to that. What’s a sniper with bum vision?’

“You hadn’t been a sniper for years at that point.”

“Exactly. But put those glasses on, and I had to finally, really say goodbye to it.”

Jimmy raises an eyebrow at that, he’s heard more than a few stories to indicate that Gibbs got those glasses years before his last distance shoot. And then he gets what Gibbs is saying to him.

“Oh.”

Gibbs nods. He taps Jimmy’s chest, and his temple. “It’s in there so much more than any of…” he looks over Jimmy’s body, “that.”

Jimmy blinks, slowly. What’s a sniper with bum vision? Unemployed. What’s a sniper with bum vision and glasses? A fucking sniper.

“There’s nothing you want or need to do, you can’t do with those thingies on you.”

“Except not have them on me.”

Gibbs nods, he understands that. He touches his glasses again, his eyes drop to Jimmy’s monitor. “Just a tool. Something to get you what you want.”

“I know.”

Gibbs rubs his back. “Then sooner or later you’ll feel it, too.”

“Sooner or later. How long did it take to get used to glasses?”

“When I realized not having them made me look sillier than having them… Only so many times I could pretend that I didn’t hear Tony calling me blind when I was holding a report at arm’s length trying to read it. And Kate suggesting that maybe I didn’t actually see the bomb… She didn’t know it was just close up my vision sucked. Having to borrow Jenny’s glasses to read the damn report… Just, you hit a point where not having it is silly, and you’ve got to decide if your pride is worth everyone else thinking you’re a fool.”

And again, Gibbs looks at Jimmy’s monitor.

“It’s not pride, not really.”

Gibbs keeps staring at him.

“I’m used to looking silly.”

Gibbs is still looking. Then he says, “You’re used to being silly, and looking like those pretty boys Emily’s got hiding in her phone.”

Jimmy snerks a short laugh at that. “Uh huh…” his voice is dry, but he’s got a sense that Gibbs might have hit a target he didn’t want to contemplate with that shot.

Gibbs nods. Then he gently slaps Jimmy upside the back of the head. “You’re still the prettiest. Now go love on your family some. It’ll help.”
Jimmy rolls his eyes, hard, then he stand ups, and offers Gibbs a hand up. He shakes his head, rolls his eyes again, and says, “So you say, old man.”

“Old. Remember that. I’ve had decades to figure this crap out. Once upon a time, I was the prettiest. Then Tony showed up. And he had to deal with Draga taking that title from him. And one day you’ll look over and notice Allan’s getting a lot more attention than you do. But that’s not today, and those little bits of metal won’t effect that, at all.”

He’s standing in their bathroom, looking at himself. Naked. At least, as naked as he gets now. There’s a band of fabric around his triceps, and another one around his quadriceps.

He’s got the feeling that Gibbs may have been onto more than he’d have liked to admit.

Last week, standing here, naked, he looked healthy. Magazine cover healthy. Emily’s pretty boy healthy. Tim’s ‘healthiest guy I know’ healthy

And now he looks like what he is: diabetic.

He’s not in good shape. He’s in good shape for his condition.

He can’t go to the pool or gym and just be the cut guy in the moderately tight swim trunks.

People won’t look at him just because he’s in good shape. They’ll see the bands around his arm and leg or waist, and wonder. Or, he supposes, know.

He’s said this before. Often. Eventually, in every meaningful relationship, and many not terribly important ones, he’s had to say it, but this time it’s different. This time, he’s accepting it, letting it shape him, feeling it sink in, mark him, as opposed to a few syllables to explain a situation and then brushed out of sight as quickly as possible.

“I’m diabetic.”

There’s no massive change. No glorious, oh, everything’s just dandy now, epiphany, but… maybe… that makes things a little better. Maybe it’s starting to shift his perspective.

There’s a knock, and he says, “Come in.” He’s been dawdling in here for a while, and it’s more than time enough to let everyone else in. He reaches for his toothbrush as Breena heads in.

“Hey.” She crosses the bathroom, coming up behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist and standing on tip toe so she can rest her chin on his shoulder.

He turns his face, and kisses her, and maybe his voice isn’t the happiest it’s ever been, but there’s no actual edge of snark when he says, “Hey back.”

“Doing some thinking?”

“Yeah.”

She looks at him in the mirror. “Naked thinking.” That gets a grin. “I like naked thinking.”

He rolls his eyes a little. “You don’t have to do this. You won. I got it. I’m not going to fuss… at least, as much as I can… It’s…” he’s shaking his head.
“Jimmy,” she lowers herself down onto her feet, and turns him so he’s facing her. Then she strips off her long sleeve t-shirt, and her nursing bra, sweat pants, and panties. “Am I still beautiful?”

“Oh course,” it’s out of his mouth before he can even think of anything else.

She smiles a little, kindness, but not happiness in her eyes. “No I’m not. I might be, again, later, but…” She puts his hands on her breasts. “Flabby, empty water balloons, down to the spots that have been stretched out so often they’re crepe-y.” She lowers his hands to her hips. “Bright pink stretch marks.” She has him squeeze them. “At least fifteen more pounds than should be there.” She shifts his left hand, squeezing his wedding rings, making sure he feels their bond, marked in metal, on his hand, and places it on her pussy. “Dry as dust, stretched out, sore, and more hemorrhoids from pushing another kid out.”

“You’re still beautiful.”

She flashes him the bullshit look, and then says, “Do you still love me?”

“More than I ever did. Even with…” and all of these last few weeks go unspoken. “More than ever.” And that gets a genuine smile from her.

“Am I still me?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember the first time we had this conversation?”

“Yeah. After Molly was born. You didn’t believe me then, either.”

“I know. And it took… months before I got use to my new body, but I did, right?”

He nods.

“And I eventually got to the point where I believed you when you told me I was sexy.”

He nods at that, too.

She turns him back to the mirror, and her fingers lightly brush against each band. Then she kisses his shoulder. “You’re still you.” She holds him for a long moment. “And I still love you. More than ever.” Then she steps back, and gives him a little slap on the ass. “And you’re still one fine motherfucker, and if you’d like to do something along those lines, Tim and Abby are on kid patrol for the next two hours.”

That makes Jimmy laugh. He turns around, and kisses her, soft, and gentle. He holds her close, really close. Donnie just ate, so a good, firm hug isn’t hurting her breasts right now. Though he’s very aware of her leg against his, and how the monitor is almost, but not quite, between them.

“You really want this?” His fingers trail up and down her back, feeling velvet smooth skin, warm and vibrant.

She looks up at him, and nods. “Yeah. You?” It’s been… he’s not exactly sure, longer than he normally goes without sex. With all of this, he just hasn’t been in anything approaching the mood. And they’ve all been giving their favorite porcupine all the space he could want.

He kisses her again, and his body isn’t exactly leaping to attention, but it’s definitely interested in going in that direction, and kissing, wet and sweet, and her body, hot and naked against his is getting
“Good. Bed,” she says, taking his hand, about to lead him there. He has other plans. He scoops her up, cradling her against his chest, and carries her, as she giggles, to their bed.

He places her, gently, down, and makes sure the lube is right at hand. The last thing he wants to do is find out that it’s hiding over on Tim and Abby’s side of their rooms. That set, he joins her, lying down next to her, taking a moment to find a comfortable spot for his arm, because when he’s facing her, he likes to lie on his left, so his right hand is free, and, of course, he’s got a device on his left arm now, so he’s got to scoot around some, looking for a way to lie on his side that doesn’t feel like he’s crushing the damn thing.

Once he’s there, his leg is easier. It’s on his right leg, and by slipping his leg over hers, and her leg over his, they’re snuggly entwined with his monitor a few inches below her butt.

She settles into him, sighing, eyes closing. He sighs, too, and lets his eyes close. For a moment, he just holds this. Her, him, both of them touching, relaxing, together. They’ve had thousands of these little moments, and each of them helps him re-center. And right now is no exception to that pattern.

Her fingers gently stroke his chest, and he kisses her forehead. She raises her face to him, her lips to his, and the kiss continues, lip to lip, starting soft, easy, more about sharing breath than touch, but it deepens, opens, moves to a dance of lips and tongues, of wet slide, gentle sucks, and the occasional sharp nip.

He knows not to try to touch her breasts, not now, so his fingers find her ear, and gently trace along the contours, down her neck, down her spine, making little journeys along the curves and dips of her skin. Her hips begin to rock, pressing her pussy against his leg, and his hips rock right on back, rubbing his dick against her tummy.

She might not like those extra fifteen pounds, but they do make for an exceptionally plush spot to rub up against. She’s always been good about keeping her skin silky soft, and with a little extra flub under it, he’s rubbing against something he really likes.

He’s not the talker Tim is, but he knows she likes hearing him appreciate her. “Feels so good. So soft.” He more kisses it to her than says it, half-way between a breath and a word, but he feels the smile spread across her lips as they kiss, so that’s good.

Her hand traces up his arm, the way she often does. He can feel her fingers lingering on the curve of his muscles. Her leg crooked over his hip means she can do something similar with her foot, just over the back of his thigh and the curve of his ass.

Her leg shifts down a bit, foot trailing along his leg, and he tenses, wondering if she’s going to nudge the monitor, or catch a toe in the band, tugging it, but she doesn’t. There’s just the feel of her foot and toes sliding along the back of his leg, and her pussy rubbing against the front of it.

He hates being so aware of the little devices. Hates that he’s focused so intently on not moving wrong, and not rubbing them against the bed, or her, or… whatever.

She kisses him deeper, and says, “Here with me, not off in your head.”

He kisses back. “I’m here.” That gets a little eye roll. “That’s why… Just… Getting used to it, I guess.”

She nods. And kisses him again. “We will, you know? We learned how to fuck Tim without hurting him, and he had a dozen hurt spots on his whole body. We’ll learn how to avoid your sore spots,
too.” She slips back from him, enough to get her hand between them, wrapped around his dick, and though, normally if she was going to do that, she’d have moved down his leg, this time she just moved back.

Her hand feels good, curled around him, not stroking yet, just holding him.

“Rather not have to think about it.” His hand finds its way between them, too, nestling between her legs.

“I know. We’ll get there.” She gives him a little squeeze. “And this at least, still works just fine.”

His eyes slide shut. “Yes, it does. And this?” He’s gently cupping his hand, providing a little wave of pressure against her whole pussy.

“You know it,” she says with a little sigh.

And he does. And this too, though they’ve done this dance before, is another moment of adjusting to bodies changing. First few times back at it after a baby sex isn’t like… any other sex they have. Slow, easy, lots and lots and lots of lube. Everything is sore, nothing wants a lot of hard, fast, heavy pressure.

Just slow and easy, more about getting to know the lay of the land again.

He kisses her, and then pulls back, eyes on hers, watching her face. There aren’t words for this, for the feeling between them, and right now, it might not be happy, but it’s real, and matters, and the sex is about this feeling growing with each breath, keeping them cemented to each other, and their family.

She rocks against his hand, keeping up their eye contact.

He doesn’t say ‘I love you.’ Right now words, verbal ones, seem like a distraction, and he doesn’t want to pull anything away from this look, this touch, the feeling of this moment here, between them. He does smile a little, and rocks against her hand.

They stay there, close, looking, not kissing, but touching, letting the feeling, both physical, and emotional continue to build between them.

She’s the one who moves first, gently rolling him onto his back, straddling his hips, reaching for the lube and making sure both of them are slick.

He groans as she slips down him, and she knows that sound, that’s pleasure, not her bum pressing against his monitor.

Once she’s settled, he sits up, scooting them so he’s back against the headboard, and raises his legs a little. There is a bit of a dull ache as her butt presses against the monitor, but it’s not terrible. Just something he’s aware of as they shift into a position they found when Molly was about two months old.

He sits, legs bent a bit, and she’s straddles him. From there she can’t end up accidentally sliding too deep, and he can’t thrust too hard. She snuggles in close against him, face against his neck, and he can wrap his arms around her.

He strokes her hair, hands cascading from her head to her back. She’s got one hand on his arm, fingers around his bicep, and from there, both of them can rock a little, enough to set off slow sparks.
And they are sparking. Wet and slick, hot and drag. It’s only the top two inches of his dick in play, but they’re having a very good time.

He kisses her forehead, “Good on your side?”

She wriggles, and he enjoys it. “Mmmm…” She looks up, and their lips meet.

Slow and easy. Lips and tongue and pussy and cock all sliding gently against each other. Nothing rushed, no frantic movements. Just, long, wet, slow waves of building pleasure. Each stoke slowly, gently upping the sensation.

Glide and rock, wet skin, slick skin, the taste of lips, and the smell of sex, all of it wrapping around them, one soft, slow, easy rock of hips against hips.

His lips on her collarbone. Her hands on his shoulders. Both of them moving, one stoke flowing into the next, one kiss blurring into another.

A little deeper, a little faster, his hands on her hips, her hands twined with his, lips caressing each other, rock, pause, flow, rock again, moving back and forth, hips like tides.

Pleasure swelling, rising, like high tide, back and forth, ebb and flow, but each time just a bit further, a bit closer.

Hitting the mark. There. Shuddering ripples, her body on his. Pulse and spurt, his body in hers.

And then quiet. Breath and pulse and bodies resting against each other.

And for the first time since he put them on, Jimmy’s not aware of his new tech. Not aware of anything except for the body in his arms, the body wrapped around his, and the pleasure and love keeping them bound to each other.

And it’s not a cure. Or a personality transplant. It doesn’t erase the last week, nor will it negate weeks of getting used to this new space he inhabits. But it’s enough, for now.

And really, that’s all anyone ever gets.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys. So, I know I’ve been playing beyond fast and loose with Jimmy's diabetes this whole story, and had been planning on getting it closer to real before getting to the end of the story.

I don't have diabetes. I do have several good friends who do. Between them and research I hope I did a decent job with this. (All of Jimmy's why I don't want/like pump stories have been stolen from various buddies, for example.) I feel like I found everything I needed, but... The only thing I had a really hard time nailing down is what numbers go with that physical responses. I know 100 is normal. I know below 70 is low. And I know below 45 is start to panic time. Beyond that, I didn't find really good descriptions.

Anyway, I hope I don't have a 'away team bats first" style screw up here, but I might, and if I do, I apologize.
Thanksgiving 2017

Thanksgiving dinner may be an awesome holiday for children, but Thanksgiving morning can be frustrating for their (grand)parents.

At not-quite-four-years-old, Molly Palmer has come to the conclusion that there’s not a thing on this blue earth she can’t help out with. On the most charitable level, this is factually true. She can “help out” with lots of things. Sometimes, said help is even bordering on useful, or at least, not too wildly destructive.

The thing is, Molly comes with an entourage. Namely, Kelly (when she’s paying attention) is under the impression that there’s nothing Molly can do that she can’t, so if Molly’s helping, she's gonna help, too.

And if Molly and Kelly are helping, then Mona’s coming along for the ride.

And if Mona’s in, then Jackson isn’t far behind.

And what had been Gibbs and Fornell in the kitchen, during the wee tiny hours of the morning, getting the turkey ready for the smoker, turned into Gibbs, Fornell, Molly, Kelly, Mona, and Jackson in the kitchen, which is making what, yesterday, had seemed like an immensely spacious kitchen feel rather tiny and cramped.

At any given time, at least one of them is underfoot. The turkey in question, a massive thirty-two pounder, is big enough it’s hard to see around, which makes underfoot more troublesome. And with the exception of Jackson, none of the rest of this crew has been intensively trained in staying quiet.

So, as Gibbs is holding this huge, floppy, raw turkey aloft, brine dripping off of it, and Fornell is trying to tie it into something approaching the correct shape, Molly is offering to unravel the twine for him (she’s being ‘helpful’), Kelly is asking “Why?” (Just “Why?” There’s no context attached to that. Obviously it makes sense to her, and maybe if Gibbs had clear line of sight on her hands, he might get some more context, but he’s holding a massive turkey, and does not have clear line of sight on the tiny person more or less sitting on his foot.), Mona is hovering at the edge of the kitchen, watching the turkey, thinking some intense YUM-oriented thoughts and occasionally whimpering in such a way as to indicate that maybe if Gibbs, or Fornell, she’s not picky, could… maybe… just let her chew on it a bit (She knows she’s not allowed to eat raw turkey, but the humans couldn’t possibly mean she can’t taste it, right?), she’d really appreciate it, and Jackson is bonking Fornell’s shin, because he too would appreciate the turkey getting just a few feet lower so he could get a few licks in, too.

Fornell looks at Gibbs over the turkey and says, “So, grandkids are fun, huh?”

Gibbs looks back, Usually loud and clear on his face. Then he calls out, using his voice, “They are when their parents show up and tend to them!”

This causes Tim to materialize out of nowhere (about two minutes later), looking rumpled, sleepy, yawning, and somewhat abashed. (He is, however, wearing pants, which is why two minutes elapsed.) “You’re supposed to be in our rooms,” he says to the girls, kneeling down, grabbing one in each arm, pulling them out of the kitchen. He looks back to Gibbs and Fornell and says, “If another one makes a break for it, send ‘em back. They know they’re supposed to stay with us until seven.”

Fornell and Gibbs, are able to, mostly, (Mona and Jackson are still eyeing the turkey like it’s mana
from heaven) go back to working on the turkey, hearing Tim saying, “We have a clock next to the door for a reason, if there isn’t a seven up there, you don’t get to go out!” (The girls can’t tell time, and only Molly knows her numbers, but they can all see if the hands on the clock match the picture on the wall that lets them know when it’s okay to go out.)

“But they were up, Uncle Tim!” Molly says. (She knows the rule is that she’s not supposed to be out there before seven so she doesn’t wake anyone up.)

“Molly…” Tim’s tone of voice flashes Gibbs and Fornell back to many versions of this conversation, and they both share a smile.

Then they take care of the damn turkey, because, unless they’re on a case, it’s too bloody early to be up and about.

As Gibbs and Fornell are having a celebratory ‘Got the smoker working, got the turkey in the smoker, dinner’s cooking’ cup of coffee, the rest of the family begins to roust themselves for breakfast.

Ducky’s the first of the crew to come out of his room, in his bathrobe and navy blue pin stripe pajamas with white buttons that make Fornell think intensely of his own father.

“When’d you get in?” Gibbs asks, as he passes a cup of coffee toward his old friend.

“Later than I care to admit.” Ducky wraps his hands around the coffee, inhaling deeply, before lifting it to his lips to sip. “Traffic was disastrous between Baltimore and DC.”

Fornell nods. “Been getting more of that lately. I think it’s a sign people are starting to come back.”

Ducky thinks about it. “That could be. We went for a year with only a ghost of the local population here, and enjoyed the lack of traffic with it.”

“Had to be some silver lining to go with that cloud,” Fornell says. Then he thinks about it, and what he’s been seeing, and what Ducky didn’t say. “That’s not it, is it?”

Ducky shakes his head. “It is unlikely that that’s true. We won’t have a proper census for at least another year, so it could be, but, it’s more likely that lack of road maintenance is starting to result in accidents.”

Gibbs winces. “No money?”

“Not for anything that doesn’t absolutely have to happen last year.”

Both Gibbs and Fornell wince at that. Ducky takes another sip of his coffee. “Tell me about Jimmy.”

Fornell raises an eyebrow; he can tell from Ducky’s voice that something is up. Ducky missed most of the drama by not being in DC, but he’s been getting updates, and, more tellingly, lack of updates. Jimmy’s very good about sending a short email or two a day, and he’s gone silent this last week.

Fornell missed all of it by not being part of the immediate family.

Gibbs explains, and finishes up with, “He’s feeling fairly low, and trying not to.”
Ducky nods. He may not have any great words of wisdom for this, but he also doesn’t think any would help. He does think having some quiet time with a good friend, possibly doing nothing even remotely related to what’s been distressing Jimmy may help.

And he intends to be that good friend.

Jimmy wakes up feeling a bit less like the emotional equivalent of a lukewarm turd floating in a swimming pool, and maybe a bit more like the guy whose job it is to clean up said turd.

Which, he supposes, is progress.

He rubs his eyes, and sits up. They let him sleep in this morning. He’s the only one in the bed, or the room for that matter, so at least they’re getting comfortable with the idea that he can be left alone for more than a minute or two on his own without dropping over dead.

He supposes that’s progress, too.

Like any other morning, as soon as he’s got his glasses on his face, he reaches for his testing equipment. He pokes himself, and check to see his blood sugar level. He’s on par with where he should be after no food for six hours. The ap on his phone says his glucose monitor agrees (more or less, it’s a few minutes off of his blood tests) with his results, so he munches his first snack of the day, tells his ap that he intends to do some yoga, so it figures out how much extra insulin to give him, and then he’s just… done.

Which feels a little weird.

He eyes the bedroom floor. He told the ap he was going to exercise. The pod’s giving him more insulin because of it. He can’t exactly feel it, probably, he’s not sure if there’s a slight vibration on his arm letting him know it’s doing something, or he’s imagining it, but, if he doesn’t get moving, he’ll regret it, so…

Yeah…

Yoga.

Which he does every morning. Except he hasn’t since they put the monitor and pod on him. Probably because he was feeling hungover Tuesday morning, sulky Wednesday, and today’s Thursday.

He stands next to their bed, wiggling a little, stretching his toes out, curling them in the plush carpet next to the bed, trying to get into the right mindset for this. Blank, loose, turned in on himself, focused on his breath. He’s had easier times settling in, and harder ones. He’s not exactly par for the course, but he’s not too far in the weeds, either.

He’s fairly sure today’s not going to be much of a workout. Sometimes he can’t get to the part of yoga that involves moving. The first week of practice after they lost Jon all he did was stand there and breathe, work on letting his mind go quiet. And it took that full week, and a few days besides, before he could do anything past that.

And if all he does is stand here and breathe today, then that’s all he does.
But eventually, his mind does shift. He feels his body soften, the ease and relaxation of existing within the in/out of his breath loosening joints and muscles, and from there he starts to move.

He’s surprised that his thigh, which hurt a hell of a lot more when it came to insertion is basically unaware of what he’s doing. Bend, twist, all of his weight on his right leg, no problems. His arm, not so much. It’s not horrible pain, but he’s aware of it. Just a dull, pulling sensation when he moves his arms in certain positions. Once he’s still, it vanishes, but shifting from one position to the next, he can feel it.

So, he’s not able to go as deep, and as relaxed as he’d like to have been, but even with that, he thinks he’s better for the yoga than he would have been without it.

Post-shower time threatens to be annoying, because he put the insulin pod on his arm, and he can’t hold it there, and take his band off, and dry off at the same time. Yes, it’s true that many weekday mornings there’s someone else within easy range of him, but he’s on his own now. As he’s staring at the towel on the towel rack, and the insulin pump under the armband, the puddle on the shower rug at his feet getting larger by the second, it occurs to him that it’s Thursday, and he’s got to put a new one on today anyway, so…

Off it goes, and he enjoys that as he dries himself off. There is a little red spot on his arm, but it’s looking way better than the cuts he had after using the pump. A little Neosporin and a day or so, and it should be all healed up.

Time to decide where to put the next one. He can do the backs of his arms, his belly, his butt, his low back, and his thighs. He decides to try his low back, because that’s the one spot that he can reach for himself and he doesn’t routinely want to have someone/thing pressed up against.

It’s not ideal. He’s got to reset it when he realizes he’s got it right at where his pants waistband normally goes, but on the second try he gets it somewhere less annoying.

And from there, it’s time to face the day.

“So, who all is coming?” Senior asks as he sips his morning coffee, nibbling a croissant.

“There’s the core family,” Penny says, adding milk to her morning tea. “All of whom are here.”

“And Tom and Lynne,” Ducky adds.

“And last I heard their girls and their families are coming, too,” Penny replies. “Sarah, Glenn, and Nick, as well. So, as much as there’s a clan McGee, almost all of them are coming today.”

“All of the great-grandchildren,” Senior says with a smile. “It’ll be good to get all the cousins together.”

“Hopefully for years to come, too,” Ducky replies. “I believe Leon and his family is coming, too.” Ducky notices Jimmy moving through the kitchen, grabbing his own coffee, and helping himself to some scrambled eggs, and decides that today would be an excellent day to act as if this is any other morning at the house, so he just pulls out the chair next to him, not even breaking meter of his voice, and continues on, while still letting Jimmy know there’s a place for him at the table. “Along with Jethro’s friend, Bleach, and his wife.”
Jimmy sits down.

“We’re going over the guest list. Is Samuel going to be joining us?” Ducky asks.

Jimmy drinks his coffee, munches a quick bite of his eggs, and then says, “I’m not sure. He’s mentioned wanting to see you and Penny again.” Penny smiles at that. Sam’s a good letter writer, and she enjoys her semi-weekly updates from him. “His friend Sarah is in town, and they have some nebulous plans. I told them that everyone was welcome, and they could certainly join the fun if they wanted to, but that it wasn’t a mandate or anything. He said he’d check with her, and they’d see how they were feeling. He’ll likely text me later today.”

Senior glances at him, and says, “Samuel… The blond? Your partner in the cannonball championship?”

“Yes. Dr. Allan. My partner in the field, too.”

“And Sarah’s his friend? Is this part of millennials not liking to admit they’re in relationships, or are they just buddies?” Senior asks.

Jimmy thinks through how to answer that. “You know how people sometimes say, ‘It’s complicated’ when they’re talking about relationships, and what they mean is ‘I don’t want to talk about it’?”

Senior nods.

“Okay, when I tell you that Sam and Sarah is complicated, it’s not that they don’t talk about it, it’s that it’s legitimately complicated, and that’s all we need to say.” Jimmy eats another bite of his eggs, watching Senior, and thinking about how he generally socializes with people. “Though, if you could maybe not flirt with her, that’d likely be a good thing.”

Senior seems to think about it for a heartbeat or two before saying, “Jimmy, that’s like asking me not to breathe. It’s part of being a DiNozzo.”


“Girls like it when I flirt with them. Make’s ‘em feel pretty!”

Jimmy’s not sure where the bounds are when it comes to identifying someone who’s out in regular life, but not to Senior, so he’s looking at Penny in a sort of mute cry for help, and she just keeps looking back at him, utterly unhelpful, waiting to see how he’ll handle Senior.

“Not all girls want to be pretty to the 85-year-old guy, Dad. Some of them think it’s creepy.”

Senior looks appalled at the idea that him flirting with a twenty-something could possibly be creepy.

Jimmy sighs, feeling saved by Tony, who’s also joining them at the table with a cup of coffee in his hand and Dave in his lap. He rapidly shifts topic. “Any of your team?”

“Not this year. We’re off until Tuesday. Really off. Not on call. Not on back up. Got permission to break three. So Draga’a got Kevin and going up to Maine to visit his parents. Johnson’s back in Pittsburgh with her family, and Spader got himself a ticket to Vegas.”

“What’s he doing there?” Penny asks.

“I didn’t ask, don’t want to know, and have been told that whatever it is, we’ll never hear of it.” Tony says with a smirk. “He did leave me with a check for five grand on the off chance I need to
bail him out, though.”

The rest of the crew chuckles at that. Tony asks, “And do we have the Slater clan?”

“Some of ‘em. Ed, Jeannie. She’s coming early. The last time she saw Fornell, they dreamed up this idea of Italian macrons. They’re going to do some sort of cooking thing involving amaretti cookies and mascarpone.” Senior perks up at that, joy beaming off of him. Italian macrons sounds right up his alley. “Uncle Wes and Aunt Crissy. Amy and Collin. Christine has a new boyfriend, and she decided that bringing him to this shindig was a much better way to gently expose him to the family, rather than dropping him headfirst into Sunday supper with the Slaters.”

Abby sits down with them, keeping an eye on the kiddos playing in the living room. “So we are meeting the infamous Alexi?”

“That’s the last I heard of it.”

“Alexi.” Tony asks, “Why have I heard that name before?”

“Breena’s mentioned him. He plays for the Nationals. This’ll be the first one Ed likes,” Abby replies.

Jimmy shakes his head. “He could own the Nationals, and he’s not going to be good enough for Ed.”

Abby shakes her head. “He’s gonna like this one.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes and wishes Collin were here, because there’s exactly one other guy who’ll really get the depth of that eye roll, and it’s him.

Officially, dinner begins at four. Unofficially, especially if you intend to cook, dinner begins whenever you get to the house.

So, round about 9:00, people start coming over.

Jeannie, on her own, is the first of the crew to make it. Ed and Christine are covering today’s funerals (only two) and will be joining them closer to meal time.

As she walks in, lugging a bag full of ingredients, which Wendy Fornell snags from her, she sees the assorted McPalmozo kiddos on the floor, playing (or as close as a collection of infants and toddlers get, they’re more or less inhabiting the same general space), and says to her daughter when she comes over for a hug, “There’s a lot of memories of you and your cousins.”

“Gramma!” Molly hears Jeannie’s voice and comes tearing over. A second later Kelly does, too, also calling Jeannie “Gramma.”

Jeannie raises an eyebrow to Breena at that, and Breena says, “As long as you’re fine with it, I don’t think anyone else minds. They’re both calling Gibbs ‘Uncle Pop’ these days.”

Jeannie smiles at that, lifting both girls into hugs. “I remember you and your cousins calling your Dad and Uncle Wes UncleDad a few times when you were little. It took a while to get all the names settled.”
By that point, Anna has also noticed that something is going on, and she ambles on over, raising up her hands and saying, “Up!”

Jeannie puts the two older girls down and picks up Anna. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

Anna doesn’t exactly respond to that, but she does snuggle in on her grandma, who, carrying her, heads over to the three youngest McPalmozos, all of whom are in the not-walking-yet phase of life and are hanging out on a blanket with Tim. Each of the boys gets a hug and a kiss (and so does Tim).

Wendy finishes putting amaretti ingredients in the kitchen, and rejoin them. “Tobias and Jethro were up at 5:30 turkey wrangling, and both of them went back to bed around 7:00.” As she’s saying that, Jeannie gets hugs from Senior and Ducky and Penny. Jimmy waits his turn, and when he gets his hug she gives him a gentle smile and an extra squeeze.

“There’s plenty of coffee and some breakfast stuff in there,” he tells his mother-in-law. “Feel free to grab a bite.”

There was a time when getting up at o’dark thirty was Gibbs’ idea of a good time. A time when dark, quiet morning was something he appreciated.

Or at least didn’t mind too much.

That time is not now.

And having gotten up at o’dark thirty to turkey wrangle, he’s very much enjoying having gone back to bed, where there was a lovely, warm, sleeping woman, and snuggling back under the blankets with her.

There was never at time when Abbi Borin loved getting up at the ass crack of dawn. Probably because, for as long as she can remember, she had to get up and tend to cattle at that time. And today, she doesn’t have to.

Which she is enjoying immensely. She woke up just a bit when Jethro got out of bed, and sort of, half-dreaming, noticed when he got into bed, but at least here, at the house, she doesn’t have to get up before noon if she doesn’t feel like it, and especially after a week of shadowing the morning shift in New Orleans, she doesn’t feel like it.

So, right now, as people begin drifting over to their home for the Thanksgiving feast, both of them can tangle under warm covers, high above the party on the third floor, and enjoy a lazy, sleepy, morning.

Tom and Lynne McGee, along with their older daughter, Nichole and her husband Daiki, and their eight-year-old daughter, Akiri, and their younger daughter Geena and her husband Robert, and their kids, James, six, and Mandy, three, all show up a little before lunch.

It feels a little bizarre to Tim to get introduced to his cousins. He thinks he met Nichole at Nelson’s
funeral, but he’s not sure about that, and he’s not about to ask her, ‘So, how old are you?’ because if he did meet her then, she was a baby/toddler.

And, not long after Nelson died, Tom took the job that moved his family to Japan. He knows for a fact that he’s never met Geena, nor the husbands, or any of the three little guys adding to the bustle and noise at their place.

It doesn’t feel bizarre to see how pleased Penny is to have this many of them in one spot.

About an hour later, Sarah, Glenn, and Nick get in, too, and it occurs to Tim that this is the highest concentration of McGees in on spot, pretty much… ever. He supposes Nelson’s funeral was the last time this many of them were all in one place, and back then, more than half of them weren’t born.

When Sara and Glenn get in, Penny gets everyone corralled into the living room in front of the fireplace, all bunched around her and Ducky, and tosses Delphine DiNozzo her phone. “Get a picture of all of us?”

She grins as she’s about to do that, making sure they’re all in the frame, but just as she’s about to snap Penny says, “Wait up. Jimmy, Breena, come on, get over here! Jethro, Abbi, stop hiding. Come here.” By that point Tony and Ziva have figured out this is going to be Penny’s whole clan, so they’re heading over with Dave, too.

It takes a few shots to get one where everyone is more or less looking in the general direction of Delphine with the camera. But, eventually, there’s a picture of Penny with her husband, her son, four of her grandchildren, all of their spouses, nine great-grandkids, and the plethora of family they picked up along the way.

Once Delphine’s got the shot, Penny takes it, pops it into her photo editing software, draws a little arrow next to Tom and writes “Christmas, 2017, you guys go here!” and then sends it to her son, Mike.

Next months, she’s having dinner with all of her kids.

“Do I just let him out?” Lynne McGee asks Penny as Jackson stares up at her, and then trots to the front door, and stares at her again.

“Jackson?” Penny says. And then adds, “There’s a doggie door in the back that he knows how to use. What do you want?”

Jackson recognizes his name, trots over to Penny, and then starts to head back to the door. She follows him, wondering what’s up, and when they’re a few steps away, they hear the knock followed by the sound of the door opening.

Penny looks down at Jackson, and says, “You heard the car in the driveway?”

He gives her a little yip, and a second later, he trots over to say hello to Kayla Vance, as she steps in the door, the rest of her family slightly behind.
Tim’s been having an awful laid back Thanksgiving. He’s not cooking anything this year, so he’s been staying clear of the line of people flowing into and out of the kitchen (other than heading over for coffee refills).

Because he’s not cooking, he’s been doing a lot of baby duty. Molly, Kelly, and Anna are pretty much free to roam, which they’ve taken advantage of by mostly hanging out in the kitchen, ‘helping’ by making sure that everything tastes okay. Or by playing with their cousins/showing them around. Last he saw they’d all vanished off into the nursery to likely throw things around, bounce all over the place, and break things, but as long as they aren’t doing it right in front of him, he’s fine with it. Okay, not really, but… He’s got babies, one of the seven other parents of this crew can be paying attention to older kiddos.

That leaves him, in the living room, with three (four, once Nick shows up) little guys.

Technically they’re all ‘infants,’ but infant covers a lot of ground.

Sean McGee’s six weeks shy of a year. With the exception of the side of his head where he got the implant, he’s got a full head of fine blonde hair that’s about an inch long. His eyes have already shifted to their final color, and just like his big sister, they’re a light green. Somedays, they’re more yellow, like Abby, some days more blue, like Tim, but no matter what, they’re definitely green. He can sit up, pull himself into a standing position, scoot a bit (he still doesn’t crawl or walk, yet), and chew on ‘solid’ (mostly a handful of Cheerios/some basic fruits) foods, and has some very definite preferences for which toys he’s going to be playing with. He’s aware that his cousins are nearby, but besides Tim (or any other adult who picks him up) he doesn’t care much about other people.

Dave DiNozzo’s getting onto eight months. He sits up, but isn’t scooting or standing. Right now, he’s laying on his back, feet in the air, grabbing at them, and tipping himself over when he catches them. He’s got a full head of curly black hair, and his eyes are somewhere between dark blue and brown. Like his Daddy, he “talks” all the time, though no actual words are coming out, yet. Like Sean, he’s aware that there are other people/babies here, but unless one of them is directly interacting with him, he couldn’t care less about them.

Nicholas Holland is three months old. He’s got big, murky blue eyes, a tiny wisp of dark brown hair on the top of his head, a little fringe of it around the edges of his head, and most of the time, he just lays there, kicking his little hands and feet. Pretty much he’s a squirmy pillow that coos, cries, and poops. Which is exactly what a three-month-old is supposed to do.

And, at not quite two months old, Donnie Palmer rounds out the group. He’s got a fine dusting of light blonde hair, very blue eyes (light blue eyes. Unlike the rest of this crew, his eyes are not the dark murky blue that eventually turns into brown or green. Tim’s fairly sure that by the time he’s a year old, Donnie will clearly have Breena’s blue eyes.), and is very intensely sucking away on his pacifier. Like Nick, he’s not up to much yet. He lays on his back. He lays on his front. He’ll wiggle and coo and squirm, but he’s not working on figuring out how to go get that stuffed doggie that Kelly’s carrying around the way his cousin Sean is. He’s not yet capable of even seeing said doggie, because it’s on the far side of the room. He is able to see the tiny doggy that’s next to him, licking his face, and he’s making some pleased sounds as Jackson “kisses” him. (For about a moment, until Tim, who’d been paying closer attention to Sean, who is holding each of his thumbs and using them to practice standing, hears the lapping sound, and quickly sets Sean down before scooping Jackson up in one hand saying, “Jackson, yuck! Stop slobbering on the babies.” And setting him down on the far side of the blanket they’re all “playing” on.)
And while it’s true that in terms of physical exertion, looking after four infants, none of whom can crawl yet, isn’t exactly taxing, and it’s not exactly like he’s all on his lonesome, various adults come visit with him, and the boys, Tim is *beyond* pleased to see naptime roll around.

“Look who’s up!” Fornell says.

Gibbs shrugs a bit. He’s been up for about an hour, and it’s taken him that long to get from the staircase that leads upstairs to his rooms across the living room to the kitchen, where Fornell, Wendy, and Senior are making cookies.

Good looking cookies. Gibbs threads his way in, moving past a whirring mixer, kissing Jeannie on the cheek as she’s drawing circles on a piece of parchment paper, saying ‘Hello’ to Senior, and Vance, who’s standing next to the oven, putting his and Lara’s contribution to the feast (cornbread muffins) in to cook.

Coffee in hand, Gibbs circles back around to the counter, where he can hover near the conversation, but not be in the way of the cookie production team.

Though, as he’s circling, he notices that it does look like some of those little guys are done, and they smell amazing, and they’re just sort of sitting there on the cooling tray, and he can imagine how good little puffs of almond meringues filled with marscapone and cream would be with his coffee and before he’s really thinking about it his hand is drifting in the direction of those—

Thwack!

Fornell whacks him on the back of the hand with his spoon. “You want to test ’em out before dessert, you gotta help make them.”

Gibbs shrugs at that. He looks around, sees that Senior, wearing his Kiss the Cook apron, (Of course he’s got a Kiss the Cook apron. Like his collection of mistletoe sprigs, that’s just part of his holiday routine.) spooning small blobs of dough onto the parchments that Jeannie’s been marking, and figures he can spoon cookie batter with the best of them.

So, he pulls up a spoon and a parchment paper, and gets to it.

As he’s spooning, Jeannie and Fornell are talking about Italy, and how *finally* Fornell’s got enough time off to go and take Wendy, and how next week they’re heading off, and they’re going to visit half a dozen small towns all up and down the western coast, and how he cannot wait to get going. Jeannie’s telling him about places he’s got to see, and Senior is adding his own bits as well.

Gibbs is only half listening, he’s heard these travel plans before, and doesn’t expect to ever get to Italy, so he’s not feeling a burning need to know what the *best* gelato spot in Naples is. He’s concentrating on getting the batter into perfect little circles, because if they aren’t just right, they’ll bake up in odd sizes and won’t make the right sort of little sandwiches Jeannie and Fornell want.

So, he’s mostly paying attention to putting the batter on the paper right, and smoothing it with his spoon, but eventually, he becomes aware of a lull in the conversation, and the sense that they’re waiting for him to add something.

He looks up.
“Honeymoon plans?” Jeannie asks, again, amused. She enjoys seeing how deeply into a job Jethro can get, even if that means he’s not much of a conversationalist while doing it.

Jethro shakes his head. “Home. Been on a plane every week for the last few months, and she’s been doing it longer.”

“Nothing special at all?” Senior asks.

Jethro thinks about waking up with Abbi this morning, slow, lazy, just lying around in bed until they both felt rested, and feeling rested, some sparks started to ignite.

“Got all the special we need at home.”

By early afternoon, Diane and Emily have arrived.

It’s clear that Diane’s happy as a clam, maybe a tired clam, but happy none the less. It takes Tim a moment to guess what’s going on, but after talking with Emily some, he sees it.

It’s not that Emily was ever shy or retiring, or particularly timid and reserved, but it’s also clear that her first two months of college, the first two months of her ‘adult’ life, where she’s been in charge of all of her own decisions, has her blooming.

She’s not exactly strutting, but there’s a definite change.

He watches her move through the room, sees the confidence, and the sense of her own place and value in that place, and he wonders if that’s what Diane was like when she was young. Wonders if that’s part of what caught Gibbs’ interest in the first place.

Maybe yes, maybe no. He obviously never knew Diane before Gibbs, or Fornell, or… any of the things that made her the hard-edged adult he met all those years ago. But he does see that Emily’s off in the corner with Kayla Vance, and both of them are chatting away, eyes bright, ready to take over the world.

It’s naptime, so his girls are down right now, but he knows all three of them are getting extra-long hugs when they get up.

From the dining room, Fornell and Vance are putting the plate with the cookies on the table. Both of them are watching their daughters.

“So, she’s back?” Vance says.

“With her mom yesterday, today, and Friday. I’ve got her Saturday and Sunday, then back she goes.”

Vance shakes his head, exhaling low and slow. “God.”
Fornell nods. “Yeah. Then she’s off again until the day before Christmas Eve.”

“I’m trying not to think about it.”

“I know.” And Fornell does. Besides her first two years, he never had Emily every day, and especially when he was doing a lot of undercover work, weeks could go by without seeing her, but the last five years especially, they’ve had a regular schedule. There are still mornings when he gets up, doesn’t see Emily at the breakfast table, and feels a twinge of just wrong. “How long?”

“Kayla’s a junior this year. Jared’s sophomore. Three years and my house is empty.”

“And they’re counting the days to get out, and you’re dreading them.”

Vance half-smiles. Fornell’s got that right.

“She looks happy,” Vance says.

“She is. She’s having a blast. Right now she’s getting her core courses out of the way, but she tells me she’s interested in criminal justice. Thinking about getting a forensic accounting degree and then going off and rooting out the bad guys with a computer.”

“McGee’ll love that.”

“Oh yeah. Six years from now, when she’s got her masters and gone through the Academy, he’ll have work for her. How about Kayla and Jared?”

“I’ve got confirmation that if she keeps her grades up, she’s got a spot waiting for her at Annapolis. Jared… he’s still hoping for Duke basketball, but…” Vance is trying not to say what he knows is true. “He’s good, but…”

“But he’s not the best kid on his team, and he’s not on the best team in the state, and…”

Vance nods. “And he’s not exactly overflowing with backup plans, either. Lara’s trying to get him interested in sports medicine.”

“Is it working?”

Vance wiggles his hand. “More interest than anything else that isn’t basketball, but he doesn’t have any sort of passion for it.”

“Ah.”

Tony, who headed over to snag a cookie hears that, and decides to go spend some time with Jared. He’s thinking it’s likely important for Jared to hear something along the lines of, ‘It’s okay not to have it all figured out right now,’ along with a side of, ‘It’s also okay not to love books and studying,’ and possibly something along the lines of, ‘Hey, have you met Glenn? He’s a firefighter, and if the Navy isn’t doing it for you, maybe chatting with him would be of interest.’

Ducky’s noticed that Jimmy’s part of the celebration, but also keeping himself beside it. He’s there, he’s got the smile on his face, and he nods from time to time, and will speak if spoken to, but unless he’s with the kids, he’s not really interacting with anyone.
He heads over to where Jimmy’s sitting, on the floor, near, but not part of, a conversation between Breena, Amy, and Collin. Wedding details.

“Can I borrow you, Dr. Palmer?”

Jimmy looks up, surprised. He knows that’s code for some sort of professional conversation, but he can’t imagine what Ducky might need, let alone from him these days. He does know that getting away from the pros and cons of spring versus summer weddings won’t break his heart.

He stands up. “Certainly Dr. Mallard.” When they’re a few steps away, he adds, “What’s up?”

Ducky’s leading them out of the common area of the house, and into his own rooms. When they’re in his library, he says, “I know you used to read several journals on public health issues.”

Jimmy nods, sitting down. “Not quite as many as I used to, spare time’s getting scarce, but I’ve still got a few in my list. Why?”

“Jarvis has asked me what I think about making any sort of public assistance contingent on maintaining up-to-date vaccinations. And, if so, which ones.”

Jimmy knows that’s tricky territory, and starts thinking about it. Eventually, just to make sure he’s on the right track he says, “So, like, no Medicaid if you don’t have your flu vaccine?”

“Possibly. That’s part of what he’s trying to decide. Or no public schooling if you don’t have your MMR, and the like.” Ducky smiles in his mind. Jarvis has had no such conversation with him, but he wanted something to talk to Jimmy about, something for him to think about, something with some complicated meat to it, and this fits the bill.

Jimmy’s thinking. He’s not talking much, not yet, Ducky can see he’s weighing issues in his mind.

For as much as the modern world thinks stiff-upper-lipping your way through emotionally difficult times is an antiquated relic, Ducky’s still a firm believer that, in situations where there’s little to nothing to do, you might as well focus on something else, something where your mind could possibly make a difference. After all, if he and Jimmy hammer out a good idea here, he absolutely can send it onto Jarvis, who is looking for anything he can find to save money for the State of Colombia.

And, with any luck, an hour or so in a quiet library talking about something interesting and complicated, and not focused on Jimmy, will make the rest of the day that much easier.

Gibbs is holding Sean, standing on the back porch, upwind of the smoker. Fornell’s looking at him. He’s got a little hat on, and under his blanket is the hand me down Future Marine onesie that belonged to Kelly first. They’re sitting on the back porch, waiting for the turkey to crest those last few degrees and be declared ‘ready.’

Sean’s hat doesn’t cover all of the scar, and Fornell, curious, pulls the hat up just a bit to see all of it.

“It’s not that bad, not really.”

Gibbs shrugs a bit. He doesn’t think it’s that bad, either. Tim and Abby are both under the impression it’s a mile wide and three miles long.
Leon, who just stepped out for his one smoke of the day, catches that, and comes over, but doesn’t light up, because he’s sure Gibbs will stomp him to a pulp if he attempts to smoke near Sean.

A second later, Tom McGee, seeing a small confab outside, decides to join them. “Are we hiding out here?”

“Nah,” Leon says, also discretely checking the scar. “Just seeing how little guy came through.”

Tom sees it, too, and then nods. “No one’s gonna mess with him when he starts up at Annapolis. Cut that hair high and tight, and a scar like that, they’ll think he’s tough.”

“He’s deaf, Tom,” Fornell says. “I don’t think Annapolis is going to take a kid who can’t hear.”

Tom waves that away. Unless how the game is played gets radically changed, that’s not going to matter for Sean McGee. “If he’s got the interest, they’ll take this one.”

And, as soon as Tom’s said it, Gibbs is sure that no matter what might be true for any other deaf kid, that’ll be true for Sean McGee.

Leon can kind of see where he’s going with this, so he says, “He’s not gonna be on a ship. Probably won’t ever set foot outside the US. By the time he’s old enough for it, he’ll be training to fight with a joystick, a computer, and a mech droid or something along those lines. As long as he can hear well enough to get through basic, no one’s ever going to set him near an actual battlefield.”

Tom’s smiling, imagining it. “Tim and Abby’s DNA, all the tech wizardry anyone could ever want, a million years of McGee service to country… Yeah. He won’t need ears. Just a little desire.” Then he looks at Gibbs, fairly sure where the desire part will come in. “It’ll feel weird to see one of us come out in dress blues instead of whites, but… I guess it’ll be okay.”

Leon grins. “His eyes work just fine. He’ll be sniping from halfway across the planet, thinking of the stories his Pop used to tell him about having to actually go places to do it.”

“He’ll be a… what… twenty-two year old Second Lieutenant?” Tom asks. He could tell you everything you’d ever want to know about getting out of Annapolis as an Ensign; he’s a bit fuzzier on how it works for Marines.

Fornell adds to it. “You’re gonna be his first salute, aren’t you?”

And Gibbs would have to admit that idea tickles him to no end. He sits down on the little wall around the patio, and sets Sean in his lap, and then signs to him, though he knows most of this will mean beyond nothing to Sean, If you want it, I’d love to be your first salute.

Sean coos at him, and then catches one of Gibbs’ fingers, and starts chewing on it.

With the turkey in the house and “resting” Fornell ambles over to Tim, who’s talking with Penny.

He waits a few beats for the conversation to slow down, and when it does he asks, “Any news on the missing hacker?”

Penny lights up at that, too. “I meant to ask about her also… Or about the wider case with her. Any news on how the prisons were doing in general on keeping people inside?”

Tim nods, shifting gears from talking to Penny about what she’s been up to most recently. (Sitihg in
“I don’t have any new updates on Heidi. Jimmy had a good idea for how to find her, and we’re fussing with the legal permissions to do it.”

That gets a raised eyebrow from Penny, and Jimmy, noticing he’s being talked about, drifts over with Donnie in his arms.

“The next of kin that never ends?” Jimmy asks.

Tim nods. “Yeah. The IRS completely wiped everything on her. Whether they did it on purpose, or it was a casualty of the Fall, I don’t know, but we no longer have her prints or DNA on file.”

Fornell winces. “That’ll make her Jane Doe almost impossible.”

“Yeah. Leaves us with facial recognition, which we’ve got slowly churning away. Jimmy’s idea,” he looks pleased by the credit, “was to dig up her parents, get DNA samples from them, and see if anyone matches both of them.”

“Good plan,” Fornell says, and Penny nods.

“But…” she says.

“But Heidi is the only next of kin on the record, so we need her permission to dig up her parents.” Tim groans at that. “I’ve got a judge who’s supposedly giving me a warrant for it, but he’s ‘off for the holidays.’”

Everyone looks at Bleach, who’s talking with Gibbs.

Tim shakes his head. “Hasn’t been a judge since the Fall. And I’ve got way too many Congressional warrants coming from you, so…”

“Hurry up and wait,” Jimmy says, gently bouncing Donnie.

“Exactly. As for the bigger issue with the prison system… Mac tells me that he’s, slowly, getting reports in. The upside is most of the prisons he’s getting responses from have all of their people accounted for.”

“But not all of them,” Jimmy adds.

“Exactly. And some of them may be glitches. We’ve got to assume the system doesn’t work perfectly. He’s sending me updates on people who are missing and ‘hinkey.’”

“A lot of them?” Fornell asks.

“What would be a lot?” Penny replies.

Tim shrugs. “Enough to keep me and mine busy for a while. Not enough to devote a full taskforce to it. Say ten people now. More as the full counts keep trickling in. It looks like someone was well enough located to take care of business, or maybe a bunch of someones, there’s no clear pattern in who is missing to pin this on any one person, at least, not yet.”

“So, you’re looking at anything from a bunch of people with grudges took out inconvenient prisoners to yet another grand conspiracy,” Fornell adds.

“I’m really hoping for bunch of people with grudges,” Tim replies.
Sam and Sarah make it a bit before dinner. Like younger people who don’t cook everywhere, they’ve brought wine. Good wine, which Jimmy takes from them, before hanging up their coats and leading them into the fray.

He’s met Sarah before, but this is the first time really seeing her, or her and Sam, in any sort of social setting.

Sam’s in his relaxing at a somewhat dressy function jeans and button down. (He overestimated the dress code here by a few degrees. Jimmy himself is only one notch above his pajamas. Last he saw Tim, he was in his PJ pants and a sweatshirt, though it’s possible he decided to put real clothing on as official ‘dinner time’ grew near.) Sarah’s got on a fairly similar outfit, and they’re holding hands.

Sam keeps eyes on him for a few minutes, checking, and Jimmy nods, saying, “I’m okay.”

“Last I saw, they were in the kitchen doing something to a pumpkin pie.”

“Depends on if you like your pumpkin pie with cinnamon-sugar roasted pecans and bourbon whipped cream.”

Her eyes light up and “Oooo!” slips out of her mouth. She wraps an arm around Sam, and he leads the way to the kitchen.

Half an hour or so later, Senior finds him and says, “What does ‘complicated’ mean to you? That’s a boy and a girl in love. That’s the least complicated relationship I’ve ever seen.”

And, by that point, watching Sam and Sarah, who have been in touch range the whole time they’ve been here, Jimmy understands what Sam meant by ‘the cuddling is good.’

They are cuddly. And affectionate. And yes, if he was one of their parents, and had been watching years of that, he’d be fairly shocked to see them break up. But, as he watches more carefully, the way they touch each other reminds him a lot of how he touches Tim.

Comfort and pleasure, yes. Love and respect, certainly. Sexual desire… eh… not really. Jimmy’s seen and felt more than enough horny over the years to know how that sort of touch looks different than warm affection. Maybe there’s a hint of sexual interest on Sarah’s part, he wouldn’t rule them fooling around tonight out, especially since the wine’s flowing and they’re both getting a little giggly, and he wouldn’t be shocked if they just snuggled.

And really, unless Sam shows up for work tomorrow with a massive shit-eating grin, looking to boast, just the idea of which amuses Jimmy to no end because it’s so far out of character, it’s absolutely none of his business.
Gibbs and Fornell wrestled the bird into submission. They tied him up. They roasted him. And then got him on a platter to rest for half an hour.

And then, because they both know who the expert is, they hand him over to Ducky.

It’s almost dinner time, and Dr. Mallard has the knife in hand, ready to carve.

It’s not like a hush grows over the crowd, but many of them do drift to the dining room table, turned into a buffet laden with succulent treats, to watch as Ducky tidily dismantles the bird.

It takes him about five minutes, and there, where once had been a huge, proud, mahogany roasted turkey, sits a pile of bones, and more interestingly, a platter covered in yummy turkey.

And with that, dinner is on.

Leon’s behind Abbi and Gibbs in the line of people slowly circling the dining table, adding food to their plates.

And, as he’s reaching for another slice of turkey to go next to the stuffing, sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce, and mashed potatoes, he says, “So, come January 1st, when I need to call in a favor from CGIS, am I asking for Director Gibbs or Director Borin?”

Gibbs laughs, just at the idea of ‘Director Gibbs.’

Abbi takes it a little more seriously. They haven’t talked about her changing her name, and she’s not exactly sure she wants to make the decision right this second, but… especially with the vastly amused sparkle in Gibbs’ eye at just the idea of it…

“At least at work, I’m staying Abbi Borin.”

Gibbs nods in approval. “Dad’l be rolling in his grave at the idea of me marrying an officer,” he’s still chuckling, “I’d never hear the end of Director Gibbs.”

“And we would not want to unquiet your father’s ghost,” Ducky adds, slipping in between them to tidily snag a dinner roll. “Besides Penny would like to not be so horribly outnumbered by the traditional set.”

Abbi smiles at that, and nods, but as she’s reaching for the green beans, she is contemplating if, when she’s not at work, she’d like to be Abbi Gibbs.

Given the number of people at this event, (and at this point Tim’s not even going to try to count. He’s fairly sure that every time he looks up, a flock of new people arrive) anything short of a Versailles-style banquet hall is just not going to have enough seating for an everyone-sits-down-to-eat-at-a-table sort of meal.

And yes, the house is big. Yes, it’s been designed to hold a ton of people. It was picked out and renovated with meals exactly like this in mind.
There still isn’t room to put a table, or multiple tables, big enough for everyone to eat.

There are several small ones that different groups have grabbed. For example, one of them has all of the cousins who are big enough to eat (more or less) on their own. There’s another table next to a high chair corral, which makes it easier for the different adults keeping eyes on babies to actually get a moment to sit down and eat.

Every horizontal surface in the kitchen has someone standing/leaning next to it, using it to keep a plate steady while they eat/cut up food for a smaller person.

There are a collection of little folding tray tables next to the sofas and armchairs, so that all of them can be pressed into service.

There are people sitting around the fireplace with plates in their laps.

There are people sitting on the stairs, also with plates in their laps.

As Tim’s wending his way through the crowd, looking for a horizontal surface to plop himself so that he can cut the food on his plate and proceed to eat it, he’s feeling stunned that he’s got all of this family. That somehow, he went from a “team” that’d get together at Gibbs’ or Ducky’s place, to this.

He’s in a house filled with people, filled with children, with voices, happy voices, all talking and bustling around, sharing the food they all worked on, giving thanks for this time together.

He sees Abby on the stairs, and she scoots over a bit, making space for him. He wedges himself in next to her, sitting hip to hip, catching half of a conversation with Kayla Vance and Sarah Sam’s Friend (he doesn’t know her last name) about moving away from home to go to college being an awesome thing, and rests his head on her shoulder for a moment, savoring being here, with her, with all of them, before tucking into dinner.

Jimmy eyes it, sitting there, sparkling in the light of the dining room. Cranberry sauce.

As a kid, he used to love it.

It was his favorite part of Thanksgiving, and every year he looked forward to it, because they only had it once a year.

And, as Senior pointed out, he can eat it this year. (Though, technically, that’s always been true. It’s not that he can’t eat things like this, it’s that he doesn’t.)

He did help make it. So he knows it’s got the absolute minimum sugar necessary to get it to stay together, and the rest of the sweet comes from Stevia. (Though he appreciates that, it’s not for him. The rest of the crew can’t taste the difference, and no one needs the extra calories, so light cranberry sauce it is.)

As he’s circling the table, putting ‘safe’ foods on his plate (turkey, green beans, spinach, olives, salad, nuts) he keeps coming back to the cranberry sauce.

He’s staring at it, thinking… debating. Before he knows it, there’s a little mound of glistening red cranberries on his plate, and Tim saying, “That’s maybe five cranberries worth. Just enjoy them.”
A moment later, he’s sitting down, next to Breena, with Anna in his lap, and he does put a few berries on his turkey, and for a second, after it’s in his mouth, he goes silent, unable to speak as a flood of memories come washing back.

He knows people talk about scents taking them back, but he generally doesn’t have that sort of reaction. Or maybe he’s just not hooked into the right scents. Taste though…

This is the eight or so childhood Thanksgivings he remembers. This is his parents, aunts and uncles, cousins, all piled into the little house in Northern Philly that his grandparents owned. (They moved out when he was 13. The neighborhood was ‘getting bad,’ and Poppop needed more help getting around, and… That’s where these memories end.)

It’s sitting at the kiddie table, wearing the Indian headdresses/Pilgrim hats that Aunt Anna would have them make out of construction paper when they got there. Something to keep them busy while the adults got dinner put together and on the table.

It’s him and his brother seeing who could get more black olives on their fingers.

It’s eating one bite of turkey, one bite of mashed potatoes, one green bean (eaten under protest) a huge mound of stuffing, half a can of cranberry sauce, and a slab of pumpkin pie bigger than his hand with lots of whipped cream.

And he’s not sure if he’s grinning or crying as all of that comes crashing back with a taste of cranberry sauce, that can’t, on any level, really taste like the bright pink jelly that his mom would pry out of a can as his grandmother would be bustling around the kitchen making sure that the ‘good china’ was being properly taken care of.

But it’s close enough.

“You okay?” Breena asks, leaning over to him, stroking his back, accidentally bumping his pump.

He blinks, takes off his glasses, rubs his eyes, and says, “Enough.”

She gently kisses him. “Okay.”

“When does it get turned on?” Lynne McGee asks Abby as she’s got Sean at the kitchen sink, mopping mashed sweet potatoes off of his face and hair.

“Week after next.”

“And then he hears?”

Abby holds up crossed fingers, and adds, “We hope. We won’t know how much he might hear with the one implant, and… He won’t ever hear, not the way you and I do, but the device’ll turn sound into electrical impulses and those impulses will go to his brain, and he’ll be able to respond to sound, and with a lot of work and effort, he’ll learn to understand those impulses as sound.”

“So, like any other baby, just, eleven months behind?” Lynne says, handing Abby another wet paper towel.

“That’s what we hope. That like going from inside” she pats her tummy, “to outside, he’ll be in for a
Abby’s been signing this as she’s been saying it. At least, as much as she can, and still wipe off the squirmly little guy who was determined to get mashed sweet potatoes on every bit of his skin he could reach.

“Will you still sign to him?” Lynne asks.

“Probably. Even with the implant, it’s likely he won’t hear well enough to catch everything, let alone most things. So, we’ll sign. We’ll lip read. We’ll ‘hear.’ And we’ll hope for better things to come along.”

Lynne, who’s been standing to the left of, and slightly outside of Sean’s line of sight (he’s watching Abby), strokes his cheek, causing him to glance over at her, startled.

Abby watches that, and says, “With any luck, the implant will be good enough that won’t happen anymore. He might not be able to work out what you’re saying, but he’ll hear it enough to know you’re there.”

“Being able to sense the world around you without having to see it sounds like improvement to me.”

Abby half-smiles. “Me, too.”

“Madam Congresswoman,” Leon says.

“Director Vance,” Penny replies, amused. She’s up for seconds on the turkey, and noticed that as soon as he saw her get up, he did, too. “Are we being formal, today?”

“We are for this little bit of it.” He hands her a thumb drive. “You’ll get a feasibility report on pulling all Federal Law Enforcement into one umbrella in the next few months. That report will tell you it’s a disastrous idea.”

She nods, looking at the thumb drive. “Why do I have a feeling this will indicate it’s a significantly less disastrous idea?”

“Because you always had more than enough brains, and then some. Those are the unedited numbers. I’m not saying they show moving all into one would be sunshine and rainbows, but the formal report is going to show you a shit storm, and this,” his finger taps the thumb drive, “is just a rainstorm.”

Penny inclines her head, taking the device. “I suppose it’s preferable to get soaked than filthy.”

“That’s my take on it.”

“And are you an anonymous source?” Penny asks, a bit of smirk in her eyes, pocketing the drive.

“There’s no point to that. There’s a dozen people who put these numbers together, a half dozen who have access to the finished products, and two who aren’t protecting their turf by trying to kill a re-org. And if Grieg isn’t handing his copy over to his pet Congressman, I’ll eat a landing craft.”

Penny nods. “I’ll make sure this goes where it needs to.”
“Thank you.”

“Little over a month to go, huh?” Amy Slater asks Abbi.

“December 31\textsuperscript{st}, so, yeah.” She’s smiling at her, but generally doesn’t much enjoy wedding chit chat. The wedding itself, that she intends to enjoy, but talking about planning it… not so much.

Granted, Amy’s flashing an engagement ring, too, so maybe she just wants to commiserate. “Got everything done?”

“Besides the last fitting, girl’s day out, and actually getting married, yes.”

Now Amy’s looking at her like she’s insane. “Okay, no way you are that organized. You’ve already gotten the final counts, made sure that everyone’s gotten their tickets/hotel rooms, double checked the flowers/caterer/photographer…”

Abbi holds up a hand. “You want to talk to Jethro.” She points to him on the far side of the room. “He’s doing that stuff.”

“You got him” her eyes are wide as saucers as she looks over to Gibbs, at the fireplace, talking with Ducky and Senior about something, “to take care of that?” Images of Gibbs arranging flowers refuses to form in her mind.

“He’s the retired one. I’m the one who’s in a new city four days a week, traveling another day, and home only on the weekends.”

Amy’s still staring at Jethro, and then looks over to Collin, who’s talking with Jared Vance, Tony DiNozzo, and Glenn Holland about something. Then she looks back to Gibbs. “You trust him to do that?”

Abbi’s looking at Amy like this is a breathtakingly obvious sort of decision. “I’m marrying this man. If he can’t be trusted to make sure food shows up at the wedding, I’ve got no business marrying him, neither does anyone else.”

Amy rolls her eyes. “Yes, of course, he’ll manage to make sure there’s some sort of food on some sort of plate, probably. But the \textit{right} food, on the \textit{right} plates, with the \textit{right} flowers, and the \textit{right} napkins… Aren’t you worried?”

“No.” Abbi says decisively.

Amy’s eyes narrow slightly. Then she says, “You couldn’t possibly care less what sort of plates are under the food, could you?”

Abbi smiles. “Exactly. As long as there are plates, and food shows up on them, we’re good. The things that mattered to me, that had to be \textit{right}, meaning, ‘exactly the way I like it,’ I took care of. The rest of it, he can do however he likes, and that’s fine. I mean, isn’t that how you and Collin are doing it?”

Amy sighs a little. “I’d like him to care about some of the things that matter to me.”
“Like…”

“The right napkins and the right plates and…”

Abbi nods. “Yeah. I think that’s the sort of thing you’re either wired for, or you’re not. It’s my wedding, and I can’t manage to get myself excited about things like that.”

“Hmp.” Amy gives Abbi the side-eye. “What do you care about?”

“For me and just me? The dress. For us… Guests. Making sure the people we want to spend time with could come. The food. We had a blast picking that out. We had fun with the drinks. There’s a coffee bar and a bourbon tasting set up, and the food’s been picked to go with that. Our wedding cake is going to look amazing and taste even better. We didn’t care if the music was live, but we did get a good DJ. So, good people, good food, good booze, good music. That sounds like a party to me.”

Amy smiles a little at that.

“And, of course, the vows. That’s the line between a wedding and a party, right? That’s the thing I’ve been really working on. Honestly, that’s the only thing that has to be perfect. Five, ten, twenty years from now, no one will care, or likely even remember if the napkins were rose or pink or coral, but our vows… They’ll still matter.”

“Yeah, they will.”

“So, you two have a date, yet?” Abbi asks.

“My dad’s rooting for February 20, 2020.”

“Put it off as long as he can.”

“Something like that.”

Gibbs drifts away from Senior and Ducky, over to Abbi, once Amy’s circled away to a different section of the party. He gently kisses her, and she looks up at him, amused.

“What was that for?”

He kisses her again. There’s a lot in his look, but she’s got the idea that he was ‘listening’ in on their conversation.

She smiles at him, and nods, and he nods back, steals one more kiss, then he heads off, searching for Tim.

He finds him, standing next to Tom McGee, both of them talking to someone at the far end of Tim’s phone, so he waits, and eventually the conversation ends, and Tom drifts off to find his wife, and Gibbs gets a moment alone, in the thrum of voices, to say to Tim, “You mean it about helping with my vows?”

“Of course.”
“Good. Saturday?”

Tim’s beaming at him. “I’m game when you are.”

There’s only one of them left.

Just sitting there, in the middle of the table, on a platter, all by itself.

The last of Jeannie’s cannoli.

Jimmy’s hovering nearby, giving it the side-eye.

The first time he was invited to Sunday supper at the Slater house he did his best to be a polite guest while still attempting to eat in a fairly low carb sort of way. He had a lot of salad, ate around the croutons, a tiny bit of lasagna, a spoonful of manicotti, and listened to a bunch of comments along the lines of “Good God man, you don’t eat enough to keep a bird alive, here, let me…” followed by “helpful” relative plopping some sort of pile of carbs on his plate.

This was torture on several levels. First off, Jimmy genuinely adores Italian food, and Jeannie is a great cook. The single most painful aspect of going low carb was saying goodbye to pasta. He could tell by the smell he would have very happily eaten everything on that table, and then some. Secondly, he *hates* being rude, and he could tell his not eating large quantities of everything wasn’t going over well. And third of all, he had to keep explaining, over and over and over, why he wasn’t eating a huge pile of everything.

After a few hours of it, he grabbed a cannoli, kept carrying it around, eating it very slowly. (As long as he didn’t have a plate in hand, and did have food, no one attempted to offer him more of it.)

Apparently, enough of them noticed him eating it that Jeannie got the idea that he really liked them into her head (and it’s true, he does) so ever since, they’ve always been on the menu. (On the off chance he decides he might eat one again. Just because it’s been eight years doesn’t mean that today might not be the day he goes for another one.)

And, actually, side-eyeing it, Jimmy’s thinking today *might* be the day.

Unlike the vaguely cream cheese flavored pile of sludge he got to go with his drinks, he knows that little delicacy on the table is worth any sugar hangover he might get from it. And, besides the literally two bites of cranberries, he’s stayed on the low carb side of things today, so he shouldn’t be too far over the line if he were to have a bite or two. (He’s fairly sure that were he to have a bite or two, he could find someone to finish it for him.)

He’s still sort of glancing at it, remembering his Dad snorking them down when he’d bring them home. It didn’t happen a lot, maybe once or twice a year, usually a Christmas-time sort of thing. He thinks more, it might have only been a Christmas-time treat.

Actually… Thinking a bit more… When he was a kid, his dad still delivered mail on foot. He had actual rounds, carried the bag, walked up and down the streets of Wilmington, and gave people their letters. He’s betting that the box with the cannoli was probably a Christmas present from someone on his route. Round about Thanksgiving his dad would start getting presents from the regulars on his route, so… Yeah, probably a gift from someone he delivered mail for.
Jimmy was fourteen when his dad moved from a walking route to a driving route. He was twenty when his dad died. And right now, eyeing that cannoli, is the first time he’s put together how shifting from eat-whatever-you-like-and-adjust-insulin-as-necessary-while-walking-fifteen-miles-a-day-carrying-a-fifty-pound-bag-on-your-shoulder is intensely different from eat-whatever-you-like-while-sitting-or-lying-down-twenty-two-hours-a-day.

In his memory, his father is always a big man. And Morris Palmer was a big man. Tall, broad shouldered, wide hipped, full belly, a big smile, and a big laugh. He was gentle and goofy, and fun to be around, and he could fill up any room he walked into, by sheer personality alone. And that’s most of what Jimmy remembers about him, that he was big. That he dominated any space he was in, and he filled it up with good feelings, warmth, and happiness, and fun.

But thinking more about it, when Jimmy was little, a lot of what made his dad big was muscle. He always had a belly, but when he was a kid, his dad would toss him and his brother around, and he had strong arms and back and legs. By the time Jimmy went to college, there was still some hard muscle under all the flub, but mostly, it was flub, and Morris Palmer wasn’t tossing any of Jimmy’s little cousins around by that point.

He’s holding the cannoli, apparently he picked it up without noticing it, looking at it.

He’s still looking at it, and feels Ducky near him.

“I take it perceptions are shifting?” he says, voice gentle.

Jimmy’s still looking at it. When he went low carb, a big part of that was memories of his dad eating. Morris had a major sweet tooth, loved beer, and would never say no to seconds on anything. The last time he saw his dad eat was the day before he went back to college to start his sophomore year. They’d had a little goodbye party, and he remembered his dad plowing through hot dogs, hamburgers, corn on the cob, watermelon, and then ice cream and cake. Summertime party at the Palmers’. By then he was having a hard time keeping his sugar in line. He didn’t test often enough, and probably didn’t take enough insulin to deal with the food he was eating. Jimmy remembers smelling the high blood sugar on him, but that wasn’t the sort of thing that worried Jimmy because his dad was always so happy. It’s difficult to feel any sort of danger sense when the guy in danger isn’t worried about it. He’d just brush it off, give himself another shot, and that’d be that.

And that’s how Jimmy left for school in August, gave both of his parents a hug, got on the Greyhound, didn’t think anything about it, didn’t bother to write or call home for three weeks, and then one afternoon in September he got home from class, and the light on his answering machine was blinking, and listening to that message from his Aunt Anna shifted his entire world.

He can still feel that moment. He’s sure he always will. “Jimmy, it’s Aunt Anna. Give me a call as soon as you get this. It’s important.” He didn’t know what had happened, but when he heard that last word on the message, he knew his world was about to crack.

“He had to know, Duck,” Jimmy says, putting the cannoli back on the tray.

Ducky’s not entirely sure what Jimmy means by that, but he’s also not feeling a need for clarification. He lays his hand on Jimmy’s shoulder, and offers a gentle squeeze.

He looks across the room, where Breena’s giving Donnie his dinnertime nurse while she sits with Abby, who’s got Kelly and Molly on her lap. Anna and Sean are on the floor. Their Aunt Sarah is next to them, and from what he can see, she’s telling them a story. As soon as Donnie’s done, it’s
tubby time and then bedtime for the kiddos.

He’s thirty-nine. Twenty years will put him at fifty-nine. Eleven more years than his father got.

He watches his children. They’re getting sleepy, and beginning to get a bit fussy because of it.

He can feel the anger, the ever simmering rage at his dad for not taking better care of himself, that he probably should have a chat with Rachel about, but maybe not, because that anger’s helping to burn through a lot of the emotional crap that goes with the monitor and the pod.

Twenty years wasn’t enough.

Not when it didn’t have to be that way.

And he’ll be damned if his son’ll be sitting here, forty years from now, angry, because he didn’t do everything he could to keep himself alive, healthy alive, for as long as he could.

If there’s a time that lends itself less to clandestine mucking about, almost midnight on Thanksgiving day, Tim can’t imagine it. The dishes are done. Everyone else is in bed, sleeping the deep, sated sleep of Thanksgiving night.

The only three mice stirring in his house is himself, his Uncle Tom, and Donnie, who’s hanging with them for a bit while Tim walks him around patting his back.

There’s something to be said for the entertainment room upstairs at their place, and that something is: big screen TV and all the electronics you could possibly want. Tim didn’t, in fact, install a micro MTAC, but he didn’t miss by much, either.

So, as he paces Donnie about, patting his back, Tom stands at the ready, microphone on, and they watch as the team, and Walter, get into place.

They hear Karningham’s voice and see him pop up on the screen. Like Tim and Tom, he’s in his casual, at home, mucking about clothing, likely because he’s at home, and they’re talking over his computer. “McGee, why on Earth would you pick now for this? I’m just about in a turkey coma.”

Tim’s about to answer, but Tom assumes he’s the McGee in question, so he says, “Because everyone else is in their turkey coma, too. How’s it going?” he asks his team.

“Almost ready, sir.”

Tim hasn’t met the one who replies to his Uncle, but he knows the young man in question is named Paul Daveed. Once upon a time, Paul was picked right out of Annapolis to join a somewhat off the books operation that was run out of Japan. Once upon a time was eighteen months ago. He’s the youngest member of the team, and is a non-leathal combat specialist. After all, they don’t want to kill anyone on this job.

Sanders’s ready to go in, too. She’s got her computer goodies up and ready, and is planning their entrance.

“Anyone on the perimeter?” Tom asks.
“Only one guard tonight,” Daveed replies. He’ll stroll by the main entrance in eight minutes, be out of sight in another three, and then in we go.”

Tim messes with his computer some, and throws up feeds of the entrance to the corporate park that the IRS storage warehouse is in, and a feed on the door they hope to get into the building with. “We’ve got visual of the entrances.”

They watch, and wait, and eventually, seven and a half minutes later, they see a bored-looking guard stroll past the front gate. Three minutes after that, he passes by a van, blocking his view of the main gate, and in Daveed and Sanders go.

Tim switches up the feed, so he can see what they’re seeing. Mostly ghostly green night vision bouncing around with each step, a blur of shapes, much too bright or all but invisible.

Eventually the cameras focus on a door, and then they’re watching a split screen. Sanders’s keeping eyes on the entry keypad, and Daveed is switching between watching her and keeping eyes on the area around them.

It only takes her a few minutes to insert the scanner, read the right code, and then put it into the lock. Only a few seconds for that lock to snick quietly, and the door to open at her touch.

Then they’re in.

The first time, Sanders went in from the front, doing the normal visitor routine. This time they’re in the employee entrance.

“I see they didn’t waste any budget on the décor,” Walter says, looking at miles of shelves, ghostly in the green gray of night vision, many of which appear to be empty.

“Doesn’t look like they’re in danger of running out of space soon, either,” McGee adds.

Tim’s just watching it. He knows what the NCIS evidence lock up looked like, and he knows what he’s seeing in front of him. His head shakes. “This is what, six months of evidence? This can’t be years of storage.”

“This is supposed to be three different storage systems combined into one,” Walter adds.

Tim keeps eyeing it as Daveed and Sanders move through the shelves, looking for the one with the right number on it. “They’ve got room for three units all in one, just not the evidence.”

It’s a very organized system. Apparently the IRS knows what should be in there. Each shelf has a number on it, and each shelf has areas taped out with other numbers on them, and Tim knows that those numbers go with case files. In some of the sections, there’ll be a box, or two. In some of them, he sighs, hard, when he sees it, there’ll be a few files, charred, blackened, obviously pulled from the burnt out wreckage of whatever was left after the fires. Some are empty.

Tom snorts. “Accountants. They didn’t have the evidence any longer, but they made sure that every single case had a space to keep that lack of evidence in.”

“Maybe they were hoping to recover more of it,” Sanders says, sounding doubtful.

Tim decides he prefers that to any other explanation. “I hope so.”

They watch as Daveed and Sanders keep moving through, and eventually they find the spot. One half-melted thumb drive, and two files, one of which is singed. Daveed makes sure to get copious
photographs. They have to prove that the IRS didn’t give them the evidence. It’s also clear, from how small the space is, that the computer that did get handed over to Tim was never on this shelf.

They watch over Sanders’ shoulder as she flips through the files, very carefully, fearful of breaking the pages. Daveed gets photos of each of them, too. “Witness statements.”

Sanders’s nodding. “I guess we know who the anonymous source who tipped the IRS off was, now.” Though none of them recognize the name. Tim’ll make sure they add that name to the list of people to investigate, see if he’s still alive. Daveed keeps photographing, and Sanders tucks the thumb drive into her computer, hoping to copy whatever may be on it. A moment later, she says, but she doesn’t need to, they can see the screen on her computer, “Dead. Fire fried it.”

Tim nods. “Okay. Daveed, finish up with the photos, and then get out of there.”

“Wait,” Walter says. “One quick job. On the way out I need you to find, Shelf 68, Box 352-C, and stick it somewhere else.”


“Reverse the numbers. Pop it on shelf 86. I want them to be able to find it if they really look for it. But I also want to see what happens if they can’t find it.” He mutes part of his feed, and says to Tim and Tom, “I’ve got my first people into the IRS. That’s an active case right now, so I don’t want to mess it up too bad, but I do want to see what happens when my mole tells her higher up the evidence is missing.”

Tim nods, happily, at that. “That’s exactly the sort of thing I want in my reports.”

Walter looks pleased at that, and flicks his feed back over to Sanders and Daveed. They watch them move the box for his case, and then make their way out.

In, out, done, and clean. Less than an hour from start to finish, and no one knew they were there. McGee says to Walter, “And that’s exactly why you do things like this in the middle of the night after Thanksgiving.”

Walter nods. Then he says, “And let me guess, it’s my job to figure out what the hell was in those casefiles that’s so appalling the IRS was willing to take a major obstruction of justice hit rather than give it to us?”

Tim nods at that, too. “There’s got to be a smoking something in there. Otherwise… The case is done. The defendant is gone. The appeal is obviously over since she’s not in prison anymore. So, what did they not want us to see?”

“I’ll get to it, in the morning.”

“Good enough,” Tim replies. He notices that Donnie’s snoozing against his shoulder, and comes to the conclusion he’d rather like to be asleep, too. He turns to his Uncle, who’s wrapping up the conversation with his team, and waits for them to finish before saying, “I think I’m done for the night, too.”

Tom nods at that. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Oh yeah. Back at you.”

Tom smiles at that, and half inclines is head. “Been a hell of a year, but I’ll tell you, I’m glad to be back at this.”
Tim smiles at that. “I’m glad you are, too.”

Last moments of the day. (Though, technically speaking, it’s already Friday.)

Tim’s got Donnie down, and has gone to his own room. He (quietly) pulls off his clothing, brushes his teeth, and then eases into bed.

Right now, everyone is sleeping. Breena’s on the far side of the bed. Jimmy’s next to her. Normally he sleeps on his back, but he’s on his side tonight. Abby’s curled up next to him, almost but not quite spooning him. In the morning, when Tim sees Jimmy get out of the shower, and notices where he’s got his pump, his unusual sleeping position will make a lot of sense. But for right now, he doesn’t know what’s going on, but he plans to take advantage of the three person spoon.

He snuggles up behind Abby, and is able to get his arm across her, across Jimmy, and his hand just resting on Breena’s hip.

He feels his body relax, eyes growing heavy, and lets himself be lulled by the small night sounds of the people around him.

His last thought is something Gibbs said to him, a long time ago, shortly after they lost Jon Palmer. “… And you pray, because if you’re any sort of decent man, and I know you are, sometimes you heart is so full of love and thanks that there’s nothing else that makes any sense to do.”

And right that second, wrapped around his loves, in their bed, after a day spent with his whole family celebrating the idea of giving thanks for the good things in your life, he can not only hear those words, but feel them, and more importantly understand them.

And he’s not sure if it counts as prayer if there’s no set god you’re offering thanks to, but right that second, Tim is feeling very grateful and deeply thankful.
Even better than getting up at o’dark thirty, tending to a turkey, and then going back to the lovely, warm, sleeping woman in the lovely, warm, cozy bed is getting to sleep straight through, and then wake up with her.

Saturday begins *slow*.

Which Gibbs is enjoying immensely.

It’s been almost a year since they first got to spend the night in their room in the house. And in the course of eleven months their little nest up on the third floor has gotten a little more worn, (Yes, those soft, white lambskin rugs looks awesome, until you take into account that you’ve got a big black doggie, and a little brown and black doggie, and since said doggies are not allowed to sleep on the bed, they’ll sleep on the soft, fluffy rugs, and promptly turn them from white to dog-fur colored.) and a lot more comfortable.

The first thing that starts to filter through his sleeping mind is the sound of claws tapping on hardwood floors. They’re the only ones on the third floor, so they generally just leaves the door open. Doggies come and go as needed, and those first sounds are Jackson scampering down to take advantage of the doggie door that’ll lead him outside.

He’s aware of soft light in the room. He’s not aware enough to know if that means it’s cloudy out, or if it’s still early enough the sun hasn’t broken the treeline, yet.

And he’s not feeling any burning need to find out.

Later, it’s got to be later because sunlight is streaming in now.

Gibbs makes a little *mmmm* noise before snuggling in closer to Abbi. He’s feeling her breathing, the soft up/down of her body in his arms.

This time, his brain starts to wake up, even if the rest of his body is awfully content to just lie here.

Bits and pieces of the world beyond his body and Abbi’s under the blankets begins to filter thought. The sound of snoring doggies comes first. The smell of coffee. He doesn’t know what time it is, but late enough that the kids have started on breakfast, obviously.

Breakfast, coffee… Saturday. It’s Saturday. That means grocery shopping with the kids and grandkids. Tim, Ziva, little guys, little doggie… That’ll be good.

Then home, nap time for littlest guys. Molly and Kelly and Anna will bounce around between the different adults, while the rest of them amuse themselves and deal with whatever chores need to get done.

November… Not too much to do. Grass isn’t growing. Last of the leaves got cleaned up last weekend. No snow on the ground. He thinks they may have gutter cleaning, and making sure they’ve got enough salt to get through the winter once it really comes. Easy day for chores.
Maybe he’ll take the time to do some more furniture sketching. When he and Abbi picked out the furniture in their room, the plan was to replace most of it with stuff he made for them. Over the last year, he’s gotten their bedside tables replaced. That still leaves dressers, the chest at the end of their bed, a few lamps, the bed itself, and the wardrobe.

As he’s thinking through which bit of furniture he wants to design next, another thought wanders through his head. It’s Saturday.

He and Tim have plans for today.

Vow-oriented plans.

With about a month to go, and with the idea of working on wedding vows on the agenda for today, Tim’s coming to the conclusion that he and the rest of the McPalmers need to figure out what they’re getting Gibbs and Abbi for a wedding present.

So, while Gibbs is upstairs, slowly waking up and getting moving, Tim, Abby, Jimmy, and Breena are all up, and in their own section of the house, keeping an eye on little guys, and bouncing around present ideas.

“I suppose travel is out?” Jimmy says.

The other three look at each other, compared to what they’d normally spend on a really good present… Especially if they got Tony and Ziva into it, all expenses covered trip to somewhere really cool would be something they could do.

Except…

Abby’s nodding at him on that one. “I think the absolute last thing either of them want to do is go anywhere.”

That gets some sighs, because cool trip is something that they could just pool some money for, buy a few pre-paid credit cards, and collect some travel brochures, along with a promise of “Tell us when and where, and we’ll make it happen,” and then go from there.

“And they don’t need anything,” Breena says.

More nodding. Everything a couple could possibly need, they’ve already got.

“Do they want anything?” Tim asks. (Yes, they did get an actual invitation to the wedding. He wasn’t the one who opened it, responded to it, or any of the rest of that. He hasn’t even looked at it all that carefully, other than being aware that it’s on his refrigerator.)

Breena, the one who opened the invite, and actually read it, replies. “No gift registry.”

Three more sighs. They understand why there isn’t one. Fewer than thirty people are coming to this wedding, and all of them are very close friends or family. Like with Tony’s wedding, the idea of a registry for this small of a gathering just feels weird.

So…
“Bourbon of the month club?” Jimmy says. “Is that even a thing?”

Tim gets up from their breakfast nook, and grabs his laptop, about to find out. After twenty seconds of google he can says, “Yes. It’s a thing. It’s a lot of things.”

The other three of them huddle around him, looking and find… “I think we’ve got a bunch of our Christmas lists taken care of.” Breena says when Tim pulls up a site that does tasting samples of Bourbon, Rum, Gin, Absinthe (Jimmy’s about to order for himself, but he’s fairly sure the other three just picked out his Christmas present.), Vodka, Scottish, English, Japanese, and American Whiskeys…

Tim’s nodding at that, thinking that they’ll have no trouble picking out liquid presents for everyone this year, but… he’s not exactly in love with Bourbon of the Month Club as a wedding present for the two of them. (Though he’s thinking it would be a good Christmas gift.)

“I kind of want something they can… interact with,” Tim says.

The other three of them are looking at him, and Abby says, “Like, what, a pet?”

“No… Just… I don’t know. Bourbon of the Month is fine.” He clicks it and adds it to their cart. “For Christmas.” He sits there, looking at the picture of bottles of drinks, and scoots around the site, clicking on a Gin set, and a Rum set, and a few others, knocking different families off of their Christmas shopping list as he tries to come up with what he means by interact with. “Something they can do.”

“Tim, I’m fairly sure that you can buy them the X-box, set it, put the game in it, turn it on, and even play it in front of them, and they still aren’t going to be interested,” Breena adds.

Tim rolls his eyes. “That’s closer to what I mean, but… I know that’s not them. Something they do, not just consume…”

The other three look at him, and at his computer, and back at him. “Yeah. I know,” Tim says. “It’s in the cart. We’ll get it, and if I can’t come up with what do means, it’ll be a wedding present.”

That gets three comfortable nods, and then a wicked smile crosses Abby’s face. “Sex toy of the month? There’s some doing.”

Breena giggles happily at that, and Tim and Jimmy groan. (Though, given how Abby and Breena exchanged glances, Tim’s got a feeling what their Christmas… or maybe birthday, since that’s coming up, too, present may be.)

The idea of working on his vows banishes the last of Gibbs’ sleepy Saturday morning laying around in bed with Abbi mindset.

He gets himself out of bed, gently. He may not love getting up when it’s still black outside, but he’s also not the late sleeper Abbi is. Especially not on Saturdays, when there are little people who expect to go visit the Museum of Food with Uncle Pop.

He spends a moment watching Abbi sleep.
There were some things about their wedding that really mattered to her. Like her dress. There were some things that mattered to both of them: food, guests.

And one thing that absolutely mattered to him: vows. Going into this, the only thing he was certain of was that he couldn’t do the traditional church vows. Not again.

He gently strokes her hair, and her face turns to his hand, offering a sleepy snuggle, before he heads to the bathroom.

When he and Shannon married, not only did people, at least people in his part of the world, not write their own vows, the idea of it was something suspicious. You weren’t really married if you didn’t repeat the words the Pastor said.

It was almost like a spell. Magic imbued by thousands of repetitions. You said them, your parents did, so did your grandparents and their parents and… maybe the language changed, moved from French, or German, or Italian, or whatever to English, but the vows stayed the same.

And standing there, twenty-years-old, in his dress blues, he meant every syllable of it with every fiber of his being, with a kind of certainty he’s not even capable of anymore. With the hope, faith, and love that only an innocent heart can muster.

He doesn’t have that heart any longer.

He pads over to the bathroom, strips out of his PJs, and turns the water on in their shower.

He said those words to Hannah, and to Diane, and to Stephanie. And maybe, for a minute, he almost meant them when he said them to Diane, but he knows for a fact they were hollow and empty when he said them to Shannon and Abbi.

In the water, letting it wash over him, he knows he can’t say them again. He can never mean them again, not the way he did when he offered them to Shannon, and he won’t give hollow lip service to the bond he’ll seal with Abbi.

So he needs new vows, and apparently, today’s the day to start figuring them out.

It’s not just the kiddos who like their weekly trip to the Museum of Food.

Granted, for Tim, Gibbs, and Ziva, walking around a supermarket, even a pretty nice one, isn’t exactly an adventure.

That said, their market does have this one part that Tim loves. And he’s noticed that Gibbs and Ziva certainly appreciate it, too.

Between the produce and bakery section is a long line of barrels. Those barrels all have coffee beans in them. And yes, Tim’s aware of the fact that storing coffee beans in barrels, let alone ones with clear plastic tops isn’t the greatest idea ever in terms of keeping said coffee in top shape, but… Good God, that part of the store smells good!

And every week, while the girls sort of toddle around the fruits and veggies, the adults keeping an eye on them drift closer and closer to the coffees, often getting little bags of the different varieties,
sometimes just standing next to them, breathing deeply.

Today, Tim and Ziva are having a good time, looking through the beans, figuring out which ones they haven’t tried yet, and packing up small bags of them. Gibbs is giving the selection the stink eye, looking at a barrel with maybe six beans in it. There’s one blend he and Abbi really like, and right now they’re out of it.

Tim sees him doing it, and begins to think, looking over the roasts in front of him. Lots of medium and light roasts. Just about all of the beans he can see are some sort of brown, not black, which is likely why Gibbs is giving it the stink eye.

He nudges Ziva, and quietly says, “He likes it dark but not burnt, right?” (Ziva’s got a better sense of taste than he does. She claims that the stuff Gibbs likes has flavors, but all Tim can taste is burnt.)

Ziva nods, and whispers back, “That’s why you never get him Starbucks Italian or French roast, too much burnt, not enough roast.” (She can count the number of times she’s been smacked upside the back of the head on one hand, and one of them was for showing up with a Starbucks Italian Roast Venti for Gibbs.)

Tim nods back, thinking. He’s not sure what he’s thinking, but he’s got the feeling he’s onto something with this. And then whatever nebulous idea may be coalescing skitters off, because Kelly’s about to grab an orange from the bottom of the pyramid and send them all tumbling.

Kiddos are down. Lunch is eaten. The rest of the crew has moved onto their different afternoon activities. And Gibbs and Tim are in the McPalmer side of the house, sitting at the table in the breakfast nook, with a few pads of paper, cups of coffee, and a couple nice pens.

Tim’s sitting there, trying to be “helpful.” He suggested the same thing he told Tony, just freewrite it. Let whatever’s in your head out on the page.

Gibbs isn’t exactly glaring at that pad, but he’s not having a great time with this. He knows how this feels. He’s got ideas of what and how this has to be different. But words are biting him in the ass here.

They’ve been staring at this pad of paper for what feels like hours. (Actual elapsed time: seven minutes.)

“What’s your first song?” Tim finally asks, hoping it’s got words, and they can get some thoughts moving with them.


“Good one.” He pulls out his phone and brings it up. A brass band cuts through their common area, and Tim lets the sound, and the lyrics roll over them…

“Some day, when I'm awfully low
When the world is cold
I will feel a glow just thinking of you
And the way you look tonight
Yes, you’re lovely, with your smile so warm
And your cheeks so soft
There is nothing for me but to love you
And the way you look tonight

With each word your tenderness grows
Tearin’ my fear apart
And that laugh, wrinkles your nose
Touches my foolish heart…”

Tim’s nodding. “Very good choice.” He fiddles with his pen, writing scraps of lyrics. “Why’d you pick that one?”

Gibbs smiles a bit, decides not to get into what the two of them were doing when it popped up on the random song list, and they both paused, thought about it, and decided it worked.

Tim gives him gentle shove with his shoulder. “I know that look. Okay, what do you like about it?”

And, again, Gibbs doesn’t glare, but there’s this feeling, and that song goes with that feeling, really nicely, but the whole words thing is killing him.

Tim, in a not even remotely helpful gestures, smirks at that, too. “I know that look, too. Try to say it. Even if it sounds stupid, it’s only stupid in front of me, and nothing you’re going to say ever leaves this room if you don’t want it to.”

Gibbs stares at the ceiling. “Fear.” He rubs his hand over his face. “It’s always about fear. ‘Tearin’ my fear apart.’ People can’t… Take your fear away. It doesn’t work that way. Fear’s in you, and… I had to deal with that. Diane and I didn’t work because of my fear. I couldn’t let it go, and it poisoned everything else.” He sighs at that. “Not very romantic. She doesn’t make me fearless…” He rolls his eyes. And Tim gets why he doesn’t think that sounds like the start to a good vow. Gibbs adds this, “But she does make it easier to handle the fear. Reminds me why I don’t want to be trapped by it.”

“Sounds like a good place to start. ‘For you, I will be fearless…’ Something like that.” Tim writes it down.

Gibbs inclines his head and looks at six words on a piece of paper. He’s not sure he’ll keep it like that, but Tim’s right, it’s a start.

“Maybe something about getting older and wiser, wrap that into being fearless?” Tim asks.

Gibbs shoots him a little glare at the ‘older’ bit, but Tim’s not exactly wrong on that front, and it does start to get some actual words flowing in his mind. “Been around the block enough times to have learned a few things…”

“Something like that.”

Gibbs takes the pen in hand, and stares at the paper.

He starts writing, fast, almost afraid that if he really thinks about it, his mind will strangle the letters forming on the page.

Been here a few times, and done this too many. And maybe I did need someone to whack me upside the back of the head with a golf club, but eventually, I got it. I hope.

Abbi, I love you.
But that’s got to be more than pretty feelings. I’ve done the pretty feelings, too many times, too.

It’s got to come from change and lead to change.

It’s got to make me want to be a better man, and it’s got to make me choose to be one, too.

So, that’s it. The promise. I will be the better man. I will be worthy of your love, and your home, and your life.

I will be your partner. I will have eyes on your six. I will defend you, your heart, and your home.

I will cherish you, and support you, and build a life with you that we both adore.

Tim reads over his shoulder, and wonders for a second if Diane’s on the invite list. (He’s fairly sure she’s the one who whacked him with the golf club, though he wouldn’t put it past Stephanie, either.) He’s about to mention it, but his eyes keep scanning, and he decides not to. Instead he says, “That looks like an awfully good rough draft to me.”

Gibbs lays the pen aside. “Good. If I keep going there’ll be butterfly kisses in there, and…”

Tim chuckles. “Don’t worry, we’ll shoot you with the tranquilizer dart and shut you up if you’re in danger of going overboard.”

---

Do. Something to interact with. Something that involves thinking and playing and…

Tim’s listlessly poking around with his internet connection. Breena’s right, what he really wants to get them is an awesome game they can play together and have a blast with, but… They just aren’t gamers.

He spends an hour or two on a sailing site, looking at… stuff. Boat-oriented stuff. Very much stuff. He’s got no idea if Gibbs wants, needs, or could use anything he’s looking at.

And, beyond that, he’s got no idea if Abbi would like any of it, either.

He clicks off of that site, and goes on to his news feed. He’s got his computer set to give him heads up for any sort of news involving cryptocurrency markets, because that’s the sort of thing that might give him a hint about where Heidi Partridge, if she’s still alive, may be working.

A few new stories are up, so he does some reading. The second one tells him that if he wants the story, he’s got to kill his ad blocker, so off it goes. He’s reading up on attempts to regulate currencies using blockchain technology (Much eye rolling, and making a mental note to suggest to Penny in the morning that if she knows anyone in the SEC, that they need to spend a few minutes learning that they literally can’t do what they’re hoping to. And then he spends a moment wondering if this is them attempting to make any sort of non-traditional currency use illegal.) when the ads on the side of his computer eventually get his attention.

Apparently his computer decided he’s interested in good booze and food.

Exquisitely yummy photos are on the left hand side of his computer, daring him to click on them.

So he does. After all, Abbi likes to cook, and Gibbs likes to eat, and maybe there’s something more
doing-oriented in there. Maybe… He keeps clicking around. High end cooking classes… Streaming content… They might like that. Make a really nice dinner (or six) together. The kits come with all the food… All they have to do is chop and watch the video.

That’s closer to what he’s thinking with do when a word catches his attention: coffee.

His eyes jump over, and after a few minutes of reading, he’s more or less leaping up, and saying, “Guys, guys, guys!” He’s so excited he’s sounding like Abby, but he thinks he knows what he wants them to give Gibbs and Abbi.

“Look!” he’s brandishing his computer at Abby, Jimmy, and Breena, who cannot, in fact, look, because he isn’t holding the monitor still.

“Tim!” from Breena, her slow down tone of voice gets through to him, and he holds the computer still.

The other three get a chance to read his screen, and see why he’s so happy.

It’s a roast-your-own-coffee kit. It comes with a roaster, raw beans, and lessons.

“Doing! Interacting!” he’s pointing at the screen. “This is what I’m talking about.”

Smiles are spreading among his spouses, too. Abby looks up at him. “You know, by the time this is done, he’ll only drink his own roast, and he’ll know to the second, and the degree, how done it needs to be.”

Tim’s fine with that. “Yep! And she’ll have hers, too. We’ll get them his and hers grinders, so they don’t get the other one’s blend into their own mix.”

Jimmy and Breena are laughing at that. Then Jimmy says, “And are we getting one of these for you, too?”

Tim waves that away. “Not this year. So…”

The other three nod. “Yeah,” Breena says. “So, each of us gets them a bag of the beans we’ll think they like best…”

And with that, they spend the next few hours looking for the right green coffee beans to go with Gibbs and Abbi’s new coffee roaster.
Got some music to go with this one. There's a link to a youtube video that goes with one chunk of the story. Click on it (in a separate window) to have the full experience.

It’s rather nice to be able to do visit Dr. Snyder and not have an impending sense of doom. They made the decision, it’s done, and now they just get to see if it works.

So, bright and early on a fairly chilly day for early December, Tim and Abby (they would have brought Gibbs along, too, but the Doc said this works best with the fewest possible people in the room) take Sean to get his implant turned on for the first time.

It’s called mapping. Every deaf person “hears” differently, so every person with an implant needs to have it calibrated specifically for them.

And, especially for little guys who are brand new to this hearing thing, keeping the range a bit narrow to begin with can be a good idea. Sort of ease a baby into the hearing world.

But, that does mean they’ve got to turn it on, and then play a lot of different sounds, over and over, looking for the band Sean can hear with the implant.

Fantasies of the first thing Sean hearing being their voice are just that, fantasies. The first thing he’ll likely hear is a buzz.

Getting it set up takes a few steps. There’s two parts, the microphone, which is a small disk, in cobalt blue, with a magnet on the back that sticks to the side of Sean’s head. He’s also got a wireless transmitter that clips to his clothing. Right now, Tim’s just holding it, rather than trying to figure out where to put it on Sean’s outfit.

The Audio Tech, a young lady named Dora, places the microphone on Sean’s head, and Tim and Abby sit there, on edge, waiting to see what happens.

Sean’s first reaction to the microphone is to try and get it off of his head.

Tim supposes that makes sense. If someone stuck a cold magnet on the side of his head, he’d probably try to grab it and see what it is, too.

They let Sean grab it and look at it, but take it before he can try to chew on it.

“Not for eating,” Abby says and signs at him.

“This’ll help you hear,” Tim adds, also saying and signing.
Dora puts it back on the side of his head, and Abby, holding Sean’s hand, lets him feel it on the side of his head, as Tim says, and signs, “It’ll sit there on your head, and when it’s turned on, you’ll hear.” I hope.

Obviously, that means nothing to Sean. Other than an odd, cold sensation on the side of his head.

Then Dora puts the other sensors on his head. The same ones they used to determine if he could hear in the first place. He’s not a fan of them either, but Tim and Abby are able to distract him from trying to rip them off of his head.

Then Dora messes around with it, doing… Something… Playing different buzzes, probably. Tim’s not really paying attention, he’s watching Sean, making sure he’s okay.

And right now, he’s mildly irked by the things on his head, but beyond that, he’s doing fine.

Then he’s looking really startled, eyes jerking toward the direction of the implant.

Then Dora says, “Okay. We’ve got it set so he can hear. What do you want to say to him?”

There’s a second, a breath, where nothing happens and Sean doesn’t react. His first voice ever is Dora’s. Then one more heartbeat, where he looks really, really surprised. It’s a look both Tim and Abby know, because they’ve both seen it on each other.

And then his face crumples into fear and he wails at the top of his lungs.

They look at each other, and nod, and Tim fights the urge to immediately turn it off.

They do snuggle Sean, and try to soothe him, but the thing they normally do when they’re doing that, the little ‘Shhh…’ hum is just disconcerting him further.

It’s Abby who gets the idea to put his head right against her throat as she’s ‘shhh…ing’ which gets yet another really startled look out of Sean, because, apparently, he’s able to put together this new thing in his world, and the feel of Abby’s ‘shhh…’

He quiets down a little as she stops ‘shhh…ing’ and the vibration and the thing stops. Then he looks really startled again, when she starts up once more. His little eyes are darting around, and he pulls his head back from her throat, and the feel of ‘shhh…’ stops, but the sound continues.

His eyes are bright red, but he’s not wailing right now. Right now he’s bobbing his head against Abby’s throat, looking really confused as the feel of ‘shhh…’ starts and stops as he pulls his head away and touches it to her, but the sound keeps going.

Tim takes his hand, and puts it on his throat. “We’ve been talking to you the whole time. This is what it sounds like.”

Sean’s head whips over to Tim, as he feels the vibrations in his hand, but hears them now, too.

It looks like he may be thinking about it, and maybe it’s okay, but… after another minute, and a few more sounds, it’s pretty clear Sean’s feeling overwhelmed, and he starts to cry, which just freaks him out even more, because now there’s this sound that goes with him wailing at the top of his lungs, and…

He’s just not having a great afternoon.

“Can we turn it off? Give him a little break?” Tim asks, heart aching for his boy.
Dora shakes her head. “We’ve got to get it calibrated. Once we’re done here, if you want to turn it off and let him have his nap in peace, that’s fine, but unless you want to be here all day, we’re better off just getting it done. I know, none of them like this. But the sooner he’s finished, the sooner he gets to go home, and the sooner he’s back in his usual surroundings. It’ll get better.”

Tim exhales long and hard, blowing off his frustrations, and for the first time, as Sean whips his head toward that new sound, too, Tim’s realizing how much noise that makes.

How much noise all of it makes.

---

So, the little fantasy of, “I love you.” Or “Hello Sean.” Or any of the myriad other options for the first thing Sean would hear them say fades away to reality.

Crying.

The first things Sean’s going to hear is a lot of crying.

Apparently going from absolute silence to even just the noises in a fairly quiet medical office is overwhelming, especially for a not quite one-year-old mind.

The thing is turning the implant off freaks Sean out more, because suddenly everything is back to normal. He can feel Abby holding him, making the shhhh rumble, but not hear it anymore, so he’s looking around, really worried because now that thing is missing.

As Abby’s holding Sean, Tim says, “Well, at least we know he’s really smart.”

“Like that was ever in doubt.”

Apparently, most babies can’t put together the feel and the sound, let alone get the idea that they’re somehow linked. Dora said that the way he was watching, feeling Abby make the Shhh sound, looked more like how a toddler or young child behaves, not an infant.

And that’s nice and all, but they’re feeling a bit disheartened as they head home.

“Next run will be better,” Abby says, sounding halfway between convinced and convincing herself.

Tim nods, not really feeling it, but… “I’m getting a lot of sympathy for Jimmy and his I-don’t-want-this-thing-attached-to-me mindset right now.”

Abby snarks at that. “Yeah.” She’s quiet as Tim’s driving them out of the Doc’s parking lot. “Three more of these to go.”

Tim nods back. This is the first of the get the implant working appointments. As time goes by, and Sean gets more used to using the implant, they’ll continue to adjust and readjust the hearing levels. Right now they’ve got it pretty quiet so Sean’s not too badly spooked.

“Next one should be easier.” At least, that’s what everyone says.
It’s just Tim, and Abby, and Sean, in his nursery. They’ve got the ceiling fan on, thinking that’s a good place to start. Just a low, easy buzz.

This time they turn the implant on, and Sean looks a little startled, but doesn’t break into immediate cries.

Abby signs to Tim. *How much was just being in a new place, you think?*

_Hopefully a lot._ He signs back.

They let Sean get used to the background sound, and then turn him so he’s facing Abby. Tim holds his hand on Abby’s throat as she quietly says to him. “Hi, Sean.”

Again, he looks really startled, but he doesn’t burst into immediate tears. He keeps staring at her, and then whacks her throat a bit.

“That’s where sound comes from,” Abby says.

He keeps staring, at her mouth, and throat, and face. He’s not crying, but he does look very skittish. Like he half wants to jump out of his skin, half wants to know more about what this thing is. Then he touches his head, just below the mic, probably about where he’s sensing/feeling/hearing whatever, this new thing.

Abby nods. “Hearing. You’re hearing.” She touches his head, just below the implant.

Tim adds his voice. “Everything in this world makes noise. Time for you to hear it.”

That gets Sean looking toward Tim, but it takes him a moment to think before he does it. Tim half inclines his head as he sees that. He’s on the side that doesn’t have the implant, so Sean’s going to have a harder time figuring out where his voice is coming from. Abby gets up, handing Sean over to Tim, and Tim resettles him in his lap, very aware of all the tiny little noises that go with that.

He can’t tell how many, if any of them, Sean can hear. He’s watching Tim, and Abby, and back to Tim, very intently, but he doesn’t seem to be thinking about the rustle of clothing together or the sound of Tim’s hand sliding against his arm.

Tim places Sean’s hand on his throat and says, “Is this better? Slow and gentle?” He signs it at the same time, but Sean’s not watching his hands. He’s watching his hand against Tim’s throat.

Abby comes back. She’s behind Sean, and he doesn’t turn to look at her, so… He probably didn’t hear thick boots against carpeted floor. She doesn’t make a lot of noise like that, but there’s some.

“Oh, she says, making sure to stay behind him. For a moment, he’s looking very intently at Tim, curious, wondering why he didn’t feel anything with that one. He squeezes Tim’s throat, and Tim wonders if he and Abby have different “voices.” Or, for that matter, if Sean has any idea of direction, yet.

She says it again, and again he’s still staring at Tim, trying to figure out why there was no feeling to go with the sound this time.

Abby slips over, so she’s in his view, and says his name again, and this time he puts together why he didn’t feel anything from Tim to go with whatever that thing that just happened to him was. She pats
her lap, and Sean leans towards her. Tim hands him over, and sees that she’s got Goodnight Moon in her hands.

For his whole life, getting ready for bed has involved being snuggled in Mama or Daddy, Uncle Jimmy, Aunt Breena, or Pop’s lap, sometimes on his own, and sometimes with his sibling/cousins, and getting a story. And though the story lineup changes, Goodnight Moon is always the last of the bit.

Abby rests her throat against the top of Sean’s head, and opens the book. “In the great green room…”

Sean looks tense at that, but he doesn’t start to cry, or fuss, and he does, by the third page, start to settle in against Abby, snuggling close, looking at the pages.

He likes the bit about kittens and mittens, and when Abby gets there he lets out his usual excited chirp, and that startles him, too. He jerks at the sound, and looks around, very confused. His eyes find Tim, and Tim says, “Not me. That was you,” signing it, too.

He’s got no idea what any of this could possibly mean to Sean, but he looks back at the page and looks to Abby, who also shakes her head.

Sean chirps again, a sort of tentative coo, and again, he *hears* it as well as feels it, and then again, and again, and again, and suddenly a huge smile washes over his face.

Tim feels the same smile spread over his, and Abby’s glowing at him.

---

Apparently, turning it off is just as bizarre for Sean as turning it on.

Once it’s off, Sean tries making noise a few times, but, of course, nothing happens.

That gives Tim the idea of turning it on and off as Sean’s babbling at them, giving him a better idea of what that thing on his head does.

At least, he hopes that’s how it works.

He puts the microphone on Sean’s head, and turns it on, and says, “Hearing. This is hearing.” Then he takes it off, and says and signs, “And this is deaf.”

And maybe it helps. Maybe it doesn’t. Sean looks more curious than scared, but…

He’s eleven months old, what he understands or doesn’t… Tim and Abby just don’t know.

---

They do know to start up slow and easy on the new sounds front.

Though they’re getting a little big for it, Sean and Anna still share a crib. So, exercise the first in hanging out, with the implant on, with the sibling/cousins is Sean and Anna in their crib.
She wants to look at, touch, and play with his microphone and the tech that goes with it.

He’s watching her, fascinated by this entirely new level of stuff coming off of Anna.

Of the kiddos that “talk” Anna’s the quietest of the bunch. She’s not silent by any stretch, but compared to Molly and Kelly, both of whom can have streaks of chatterboxery, she’s pretty laid back. She’s also not quite two, so she doesn’t exactly have a massive vocabulary.

“BOX!” she doesn’t actually know what the thing on Sean is, but she’s excited about it. So, they watch hovering near, about to jump in, as Anna explores the transmitter clipped to Sean’s shirt, and Sean explores all of this noise Anna’s making.

Tim supposes he should have expected it. Given this is exactly the same thing she did when they explained that Sean was deaf.

But, as soon as she sees Sean, with his implant on, Molly races over and screams at him, “SEAN!”

And he immediately bursts into panicked tears.

Molly looks pretty satisfied at that, arms crossed over her chest, wide smile on her face. “Not deaf now.”

Abby gets him calmed down, in a different room, while Tim goes over (again) not screaming at Sean. That sound is new, and different, and scary for him, so be nice.

That results in the girls whispering at him. And, in many cases Tim might think that was going too far in the opposite direction, but right now he’s fine with it.

There’s a moment when the implants working really sinks in. Tim’s got Sean on his lap. He’s reading. Sean’s chilling with him.

Tim’s phone beeps, letting him know he’s got a text.

Sean jerks at it.

Tim kisses the top of his head, and then gets the phone. “It beeped. It’s telling me I’ve got a text.” Sean knows what (in a very abstract sort of way) his Daddy’s phone is. It’s a thing with lights and colors on it.

Tim looks at it, puts the passcode in, and then checks his mail. He reads the note, nods, and then says, “Your Uncle Jimmy had a good idea a few days ago. I just, finally, got permission to use it.”

He kisses the top of Sean’s head, and sends a quick note to Hotch, “Just got the warrant to exhume Seth and Ginger Partridge. Get it taken care of and over to our forensic techs.”

A minute later, there’s another beep, Hotch letting him know that he was on it, and again, Sean looks around for the beep.
Of all of his parents, Jimmy’s the one who’s best with getting Sean calmed down and content. He’s the one with the magic patting/singing technique that gets little guy all chill and ready to sleep. And with as exciting of a day as it’s been, Jimmy’s definitely on getting little guy calmed down for bed tonight.

Jimmy doesn’t know why, when he picked Sean up for… maybe the second or third time, it was still the first day of his life, and he was fussing, that Wonderwall sprang to mind. He knows he liked it the first time he heard it, back in the ‘90s when it was Oasis playing it. And he liked it again, years later, when Breena introduced him to Ryan Adams’ cover of it.

For whatever reason, that’s the song that popped into mind, at the slower, Ryan Adams’ pace, when he was holding Sean, trying to get little guy calmed down on that first day of his life. He sang it to Sean, and Sean dropped right off to sleep.

It’s getting onto bedtime. Sean didn’t have the implant on for tubbytime, obviously that would be a disaster, and he won’t have it on for sleeping, can’t be sure it’ll stay where it needs to in his sleep, and the last thing anyone wants is for him to scoot around in his sleep, knock it loose, and one of the two of them in the crib decide to chew on it. But, right now, before story time, Jimmy’s got Sean, and he makes sure the microphone is on his head, and that it’s on.

He snuggles Sean close, and he knows how this works, so he relaxes against Jimmy’s chest.

Jimmy starts to sing, as he walks him around, bouncing gently, and this time, Sean doesn’t jerk at the sound of it, he just rests there, making a content little cooing sound.

“Today is gonna be the day that they gonna give it back to you./By now you shoulda somehow realized what you gotta do./I don’t believe that anybody feels the way I do about you now/And all the roads we have to walk are winding/And all the lights that lead the way are blinding/There are many things that I would like to say to you/but I don’t know how/I said maybe/You’re gonna be the one that saves me/And after all/You’re my wonderwall…”

Jimmy sings it a few times, feeling Sean relaxing, breathing deeper and easier against his chest. He kisses the top of his head, and says, “Goodnight, baby,” before turning off the microphone and taking it off of him. Then he hands Sean over to Abby, who’s also on story time today, and the first day of Sean McGee, hearing, comes to a close.

Breena’s been helping Tim mop up the bathroom, tubby time isn’t exactly a tidy affair, and requires someone to do some serious cleanup every night. They’ve both been hearing Jimmy sing that to Sean every day of his life, but this is the first time she’s really listened to those lyrics.

She flashes Tim a look, and he nods, he’s fine with finishing up the bathroom.

She heads over to Jimmy, standing behind him, wrapping her arms around him, kissing his shoulder. Jimmy’s watching Abby doing her round of kisses and tuck-ins, and he doesn’t take his eyes away
from them, though his hand finds hers and squeezes. “Probably won’t turn the microphone on for that all the time. Kind of breaks the bedtime flow. But I wanted him to hear it, at least once.”

She rises up on her tiptoes and kisses the back of his neck.

It’s the next morning, when Jimmy’s getting kiddos dressed and ready, that he gets another bit of time on his own with Sean.

Like every other morning where he’s on Mission: Get Kids Ready, there’s the round of fresh diapers, followed by clean onesies, and then, because it’s winter, on go the pants and socks, another layer of shirts, and sometimes sweaters.

So, today, Sean’s styling away in his little white (ish) onesie, and tiny little blue jeans, along with a little flannel shirt. (Okay, yes it’s a pink and blue flannel shirt, it’s a hand me down from Molly to Kelly to Anna to Sean, but he couldn’t care less what color it is, and the three older kids haven’t beaten it into a pulp yet, so it’s getting used. When Sean’s old enough to have preferences about his clothing, they’ll be respected, but as of yet, he does not have them.)

Breakfast is up next, and the plan is to have his implant on, so…

Jimmy’s holding the transmitter, staring at Sean, who’s sitting in his lap, trying to lunge away from Jimmy because there’s stuff to do on the floor, and he’s not doing it right now. Meanwhile, he’s trying to keep the squirming not-quite-one-year-old somewhat still while he tries to figure out where to put the transmitter.

Jimmy’s giving it the stink-eye as he says to Sean. “This is my least favorite part of this, too.”

Sean, of course, doesn’t hear that part, so he’s utterly unaware of it, but… Yeah. So… Clip the little box onto his shirt… Back of the shirt, and it’ll get in the way when he’s in the high chair, front of his shirt, and it’s going to get doused in food. Pants, same issue.

Well…

Maybe…

Little guy doesn’t walk or crawl yet…

Jimmy clips it onto the bottom of Sean’s pant leg, and then turns it on.

“Try not to kick that off.”

Sean’s torn between messing with the thing against his foot, and that whole sound thing. So, he’s looking from Jimmy to his pants to Jimmy, and back again.

Jimmy sets him on the floor, sitting crosslegged in front of him. He taps the bulge under his pj pants. “Yeah. It’s kind of a pain in the butt figuring out where the hell to put these damn things.”

He watches as Sean gets a hold of the transmitter and tries to yank it off his pants. Jimmy takes it off, but doesn’t turn it off, so Sean can hear him say, “Okay, this isn’t going to work.”

Then he gently lays Sean down and tests something. “Let’s see…” He gently scoots the transmitter
into Sean’s pants between his thigh and the pant leg.

Sean’s still curious, still grabbing at it, but it’s in his pants, and he’s eleven months old, so he has not yet figured out how to remove his pants.

Jimmy nods at it. “I think that’ll do it. It works okay for me, too. Maybe Mama and Daddy’ll make you some leg bands, too.”

And suddenly Jimmy can see it, flashing forward a few years. Sean’ll have a collection of little armbands and legs bands, just like Uncle Jimmy’s. They’ll “match.” And maybe the bands won’t do exactly the same thing, but they’ll help keep the tech they use stay on their bodies, but out of their way.

He supposes that’s something.

And, more than that, anything that helps Sean feel a bit less “odd” compared to the rest of the herd, that’s a good thing.

It’s not long after the McGee kids get to their home, with Heather, that Gibbs comes by.

He’s got Mona and Jackson with him, too. This afternoon, he’s on a plane heading to New Orleans, so Mona’s coming over to stay with the McPalmer crew for the middle of the week.

Jackson’s going with him, because that’s part of puppy socialization.

But, no matter how tight the schedule is on his flight out Gibbs was going to make sure he got to see Sean.

When he gets there, the microphone is on his head, but not turned on. He’s a little curious about that, but Heather tells him, “They’re starting off easy, an hour or so at a time, a few times a day.”

That makes sense to Gibbs. He’s been reading up, and apparently implants are not like swimming pools. You don’t just jump in and adjust. Or, he supposes, depending on your personality, maybe they are like swimming pool, you stick your toes in, and slowly ease the rest of you in as you adjust to the new experience. (He’s a leaper when it comes to pools.)

Heather can also see Gibbs is itching to see how Sean does with the new device. She smiles a bit. “Come on, we can do his hour while you’re here.” She fishes around in Sean’s pants, which makes no sense to Gibbs, but he’s not asking any questions, because a second later Sean’s looking very intensely at Mona who’s licking all over Kelly, and both of them are making quite a bit of noise as that happens.

Gibbs blinks, hard as he sees that, realizing how much he takes something like that for granted.

Realizing how much he wanted that for Sean.

He doesn’t know how much hearing Sean’s getting from this, but it’s at least enough that he can hear the big doggie woofing at his sister, who’s shrieking with laughter at getting licked.

On the far side of the room.

Outside of his direct line of view.
He sits down right in front of Sean, attracting his attention. Sean goes from sitting to on his hands and knees lunging/rocking in Gibbs’ direction. He’s not figuring out the picking his knees and hands up will allow him to move part of this yet, but he’s at least got the most basic aspect of it down.

Gibbs gets the message and picks Sean up, putting him in his lap. Normally, when he does that, Sean droops back and snuggles against his tummy, but right now he’s staying alert. Partially just watching Mona and Kelly, but (Gibbs’ hopes) partially waiting to see if Gibbs is going to make any noise, too.

And, for the first time ever, Gibbs really wants to talk. “Hi, Sean,”

And Sean does turn toward him, watching his face. Tim’s mentioned putting Sean’s hand against his throat as he speaks, but Sean’s already reaching up, so Gibbs switches him around so he’s facing Gibbs, and presses his big hand over Sean’s little one against his throat.

“So, wha-d-ya think? Hearing… Everyone’ll tell you that I don’t talk, but they’re wrong about that. I just don’t talk a lot. Because hearing is important. And it’s hard to do if your mouth is running all the time. And the more you hear, and more than that, the more you listen… Almost any problem you can get into, if you listen carefully, you can find a way out of.”

He kisses Sean’s palm.

“So, we’re going to learn to listen. And we’ll learn how to do it with the implant,” Gibbs almost taps it, but then realizes that’ll be like tapping a microphone with a direct input to Sean’s brain, so he decides not to. He just, gently touches Sean’s hand to the mic. “And we’ll learn to do it with our eyes.” He taps his eyes. “You can do a lot of listening with your eyes. Most people don’t know that, but that’s probably because they don’t stop talking long enough to find that out.

“But you and me, we’re going to listen with our eyes. And with the implant, and who knows, maybe one day you’ll get to listen with that other ear?

“But however it works out, a wider world just opened up, and we’re going to learn how to use it.”

He kisses the top of Sean’s head, and then Jackson scrambles up, wanting in on the confab. So he picks Jackson up, and sets him on his lap in front of Sean, and says, “Okay, Jackson, you want to say Hi.”

So Jackson does, a little yip, and Sean hears it, and starts to giggle.

And Gibbs feels so full of happy, he doesn’t know what to do with himself.
The Year's Count

On the first day of his forty-first year, Jimmy Palmer wakes up to the sound of a baby fussing. This is not, by a long stretch, a new experience. The only question is which child? He’s on baby duty tonight, and Sean still wakes up at least once a night, usually just for a little chat and snuggle, and Donnie wakes up every three hours for a feed.

He pulls himself, groggy and exhausted, up from his lying position, and recognizes the sound is coming from the baby who’s got his own crib. A quick glance toward the crib Sean shares with Anna tells him that his next two oldest are still snoozing.

Why he thinks Sean might wake up, he doesn’t know, but he still checks.

Then he remembers why he checked, Sean got the implant turned on. And then he remembers they don’t have the implant on when he’s sleeping.

Jimmy’s rubbing his eyes. He’s too damn tired for this.

Donnie, who is not renowned for his patience, goes from fussing to full-on wailing.

He lays his hand on his son’s belly. “I’m up. Food, soon.” He gently picks up the youngest of his children, whom he shares no DNA with, and snuggles him onto his shoulder. “Come on, baby, diaper time, then food.”

At forty years old, Jimmy Palmer is a father. Most of the world knows of three of his children. A smaller group knows of the fourth. And a very select group knows that he’s not exactly an uncle to two others.

In forty years, he’s collected six children he loves beyond all reason, and no matter what the DNA mix is, or what they call him, they’re his kids.

Timothy McGee wakes on the first day of his forty-first year between his wife and his husband. He can hear a soft slurping sound, and sees that his second wife is in the rocking chair, nursing the child that is biologically his son, but officially his ‘nephew.’

He lets his head drop back to the bed. If Breena’s nursing Donnie, that means they’ve gotten to the 5:00 feed, and he’s got a few more hours of sleep.

He snuggles in against Abby, kissing the back of her neck, and rubs against Jimmy’s side a bit.

In forty years, Tim’s managed to collect three spouses, a husband and two wives, and he adores them beyond all reason.

Two hours later, Tim’s watch buzzes, letting him know it’s get up time. Not that he really needs an alarm, in the next few minutes at least one, if not more, little people will get up and start looking for attention and breakfast.

It’s his morning to get them all up, changed, and eating their breakfast.
Then, while they munch, he flips on one of his yoga videos, and goes through one of his routines.

He’s, finally, after a year and a half, back to where he was before he got hurt on the *Stennis*. If not slightly ahead.

The kids are little enough that they don’t care if he’s naked when he does his yoga practice, so he tosses on a robe to keep warm while he’s getting them cleaned up and all downstairs around the table. Molly, Kelly, and Anna are all old enough to eat on their own. For most other meals, Sean needs some help, but breakfast is Cheerios, milk (Sean’s is in a sippy cup, the girls have theirs on their cereal), toast (cut up small for Sean), butter (Tim’s got to put the butter on and let it melt into the toast, or the girls will just eat it straight off the bread), and pieces of banana. It’s all small finger food.

Donnie is still asleep. He’s not quite on the same schedule as his four older sibling/cousins, so the trickiest of the bunch to feed isn’t on Tim’s morning to-do list.

He gets the kids set with their food, tosses off his robe and gets the video started.

It’s not the most focused or concentrated yoga ever. He’s got to pause a lot and deal with little guys, and Molly and Kelly like to “help” him.

But he gets into it, and for the first time since the *Stennis* he gets both heels on the floor while doing downward facing dog. (With two other little bums pointing in the air next to him as Molly and Kelly join him. Sean’s on the floor eating the Cheerios his sisters dropped, and Anna’s playing with Kelly’s stuffed skull, which will cause a major upset in ten minutes when Kelly notices, but for now, all is calm.)

His shoulder and wrist are telling him he’s still got to build his strength up more before he’s going to be able to do a handstand.

But that doesn’t mean he isn’t trying. Down dog, to plank, to squat, to bird in a basket, shift weight, tighten core, try to raise torso, wobble, wobble, try, and fall.

He gives it three shots, and ends up back in down dog, from there a quick shavasana to up dog, and back to down. He feels a warm hand on his ass along with, “There’s a lovely view to wake up to.”

He smiles up at Abby from under his arm.

She gives his tush a quick kiss, and another pat. “Got some plans for this.”

That intensifies his grin as he slides back to plank, and from there to child’s pose. Then he’s sitting up, seeing Abby’s on breakfast for the adults. He puts the robe back on, heads into the kitchen, and kisses her. “Good plans?”

“Oh, yeah. You’re gonna love ‘em.”

He flashes her a very satisfied smirk as he grabs a glass of water.

In forty years, Tim McGee’s gone from a skinny little kid, to a plump teen, to an overweight man, to a skinny one, back to a fat one, to a fit one. He’s in the best shape of his life, now, even if this shape was nothing he ever expected to be.
“Get moving, sleepyhead. Dead bodies await!”

Jimmy opens one eye. He’s almost ready to glare at Abby, but that takes more energy than he wants to expend.

She kisses him, and that’s fairly nice. If he was even a quarter awake, it’d be quite a bit more than nice, but he knows that if she’s poking him awake, the likelihood of that kiss turning into anything more than a quick wake up smooch is nil.

He blinks a few times, and pulls himself into a sitting position. He’s the only one still in bed, and the clock is telling him he’s got time for a fast shower, a quick break—and it looks like Abby was on top of that, his breakfast is sitting on the bedside table next to him. He can’t eat until he calibrates his blood sugar monitor, so he gets on top of that.

One prick, a microliter of blood, and…

And it still works. He’s not quite comfortable trusting the two devices that live on his skin 24/7 yet, but so far they’re doing the job.

In forty years Jimmy’s added two state of the art medical devices to his body. He doesn’t love having them on him all the time, and they’re still working out the kinks for where on his skin they should live, but for the first time in twenty years, he’s not poking himself with a needle two to four times a day.

(And sometimes, on some days, he might, if properly asked, admit that he’s okay with it.)

Tim’s just about done when Jimmy hops into the shower. He kisses his husband, hand on his cheek, as he gets out. “Happy birthday,” Tim says, with a bit of irony in his voice.

“Back at you,” Jimmy shakes his head. Of all the things he could have possibly expected out of life, ending up married to someone with his exact same birthday was never on the list.

Drying off, Tim’s looking at himself. In forty years he’s collected a full leg sleeve tattoo, that he’s thinking is likely done. There’s room for a few more bands around his dragon, but he doesn’t think there will be any new children to inspire them. He’s comfortable with that, but he would certainly love another band or two (child or two) to complete things. But realistically, five kids is enough. He’s marked his wrist with the lips of his loves, and his arm is circled by the love of his first wife wrought in ink. His first identity, the computer guy, marks his right shoulder, and he’s thinking as he works more and more on this next novel, that he wants something to mark that, too.

But that’s not happening today, or tomorrow, and he’s got no set idea of what he wants for that.

He’s in front of his dresser, reaching his hand out to grab the pull, and looks at his right hand. In the year and a half since *The Stennis*, the scars have faded to dull pink. Another year or two, and they’ll be the same color as the rest of his skin. In forty years, Tim McGee’s collected scars as well as tattoos. Unlike the tattoos, there are more scars than he can, or wants to, count. But like the tattoos, those marks have shaped him.

He almost never thinks of the tiny white one on his side, where a piece of glass pierced his side, and set him on the path that would land him here, but he’s forty today, and feeling introspective. His fingers slip to his side. He can’t really see the mark, it’s the same color as the skin around it, but he can remember how it felt, and that surreal moment when he went from hot and dazed, ears and head
ringing, to piercing pain in his side, to knowing that if he lived through that moment, he needed to make some changes.

Breena’s finishing up her breakfast when Jimmy gets downstairs. With Donnie’s current eating schedule, she’s got a few more minutes before he wakes up again, then one last nurse, and they’re off to daycare, and she’s off to work.

Tim and Abby have already left for the day. Heather is over, corralling the older kids.

Jimmy kisses her, gets a good morning hug (with some distance between them, nursing breasts don’t like close hugs), and a happy birthday from her and Heather.

“Just got the text from Dad. Friday evening is open, so they’ll be at the birthday shindig.”

Jimmy nods at that, pulling on his jacket. He kisses his wife one more time, and cuddles the babies before he rushes out of the house. He’d been hoping Friday night viewing would book at Slater and Palmer’s, but things don’t always work out the way he likes. Apparently, the whole crew will be showing up at the house this week for Shabbos, and the winter birthday bash. (Abbi, Anna, Tim, Jimmy, Penny, Sean, Gibbs, and Molly all have winter birthdays. It’s just easier to do them all at once.)

At forty, Jimmy’s collected a crew of in-laws, one he’s not terribly fond of, but the rest of them have blurred the lines between where his ‘natural’ family ends and they begin.

On the upside, Tim doesn’t have a literal inbox. There is no tray on his desk filled with paper. There is a reason for that. A sign on his door that says in no uncertain terms that any paper put in his office will be summarily set on fire, unread. He only accepts electronic communications.

So, his office is tidy. There is a desk with a typewriter on it, and a stack of paper next to it, and that is the only paper allowed in his office.

His virtual inbox is a festering swamp of need. There are alligators of cases, waiting to snap at the unwary. Mosquitos of niggly details, needing to be slapped down. Vast sucking morasses of attempts to get his electronic architecture in place. Putrid blorps of noxious gasses escaping every time he runs into yet another reason why he ‘can’t’ do something.

Today he’s gearing up with his virtual flame thrower, and getting ready to start burning off some gas. He’s been at this almost six months, and most of the ‘can’t’ is code for ‘I don’t feel like it’ or ‘There’s some sort of stupid bureaucratic regulation left over from the last administration keeping me from doing it.’

At forty years old, Tim McGee has gotten to the point in his life where he no longer accepts stupid excuses, and he doesn’t take no for an answer when he’s asking for something reasonable.

His ass-kicking boots are on, and he’s about to apply them to many a buttock.
Jimmy eyes the skin sitting in a petri dish of sterile solution. He hasn’t done this in years, and Allan’s never done it, so…

It’s supposed to be fairly simple. Hydrate the dried out tissue, gently debride the top layers of the dermis, exposing a clearer image of the tattoo underneath. Get shots of it, send them to Abby, and with any luck they’ll have an easier time identifying Mr. Doe.

“Did you know, Dr. Allan, that this technique was invented when…”

In forty years, Jimmy’s gone from being the student to being the teacher. And he quite likes it.

There are times where the ass-kicking boots are not the appropriate footwear.

“Hotch…” Tim usually stays up in his office, but it’s been ten days since they got the warrant to get Heidi Partridge’s parents exhumed, and he’s heard exactly nothing on it.

Hotch looks up from his own desk, which, like Tim’s, is clean, and he assumes, that like him, he’s got an electronic inbox of doom.

“Hi, McGee. Updates?”

“Yeah.”

“On which case?”

That’s a salient point. Hotch has a department, not a team. “Partridge.”

“Give me a minute.” Hotch gets it queued up on his computer, and takes the time to read. Then he shakes his head. “Nothing yet. Both DNA exemplars are in the system, they’re both being run, but the only things they’ve found as of yet are a few cousins, all of whom are alive and accounted for. No one who matches both of them.”

Tim sighs. “Okay. Thanks. How’s the rest of it going? You need anything?”

“More people.”

“Yeah. I’m working on that.”

In forty years, Tim’s learned that when someone has a good reason to not have the answer, yet, to accept it. It’s enough for his people to do the near impossible, he doesn’t need to be the man who expects them to do the impossible.

“Okay, Tony. Yeah. Ten minutes, okay? We’re still in scrubs.”

“Agent DiNozzo?” Sam asks as Jimmy sets his phone down and begins to strip out of his scrub top.
“Yes, Dr. Allan. He’ll be bringing down Ms. Chethio. She’d like to see her brother.”

“I hate these,” Allan says, rapidly stripping off his scrubs, too.

“I understand,” Jimmy replies, heading to his locker, where his suit is. It’s his policy that when the next of kin are brought down, he and Dr. Allan will be dressed for them. They can’t always do it, sometimes they don’t get enough heads up, but if they do, then he makes sure they’re in suits and ties. It’s not a big thing, but sometimes little things, like taking the time to dress with respect for the next of kin, matter.

They get changed, fast. Jimmy’s got time to plug in his electric kettle, if Ms. Chethio wants tea, he’s ready to offer it. The bottle of scotch is next to the kettle. He’s as stocked as it’s appropriate for an ME to be when it comes to offering comfort for the bereaved.

A moment later, they hear the bong of the elevator.

A moment after that the doors open, and every ME’s least favorite part of the job is on. Jimmy doesn’t smile, he does offer a slight nod, and say, “Ms. Chethio?”

She nods, too. A frightened looking teenager, who, he’s sure, is about to have the absolute worst day of her life. So much for the scotch. Though depending on how this goes, he and Allan may have a sip or two when it’s done. Wouldn’t be the first time they took a drop of liquid refuge, but a drop is all Jimmy allows. They still have to be able to do the job.

Jimmy inclines his head, and Dr. Allan pulls Sergeant Chethio out of his drawer. He’s covered with a sheet from head to toe.

“You know you don’t have to do this? We do have a positive ID,” Jimmy says, leading her to the drawer.

She nods again, tears welling in her eyes, and choking her voice.

“Okay, Dr. Allan?”

Allan pulls the sheet back enough for Sergeant Chethio’s sister to see his face. She stares for a second, and then her shoulders curl in on themselves, and the sobbing begins. Tony’s gently resting a hand on her shoulder.

“How?” She looks up, eyes red and bleary, pleading with the universe for this to not be true.

“We don’t know who or why yet, but how was several stab wounds,” Jimmy says. “The first one got your brother in the heart, and the rest of them he never felt.”

“He wasn’t hurting?” Her eyes are huge, red, puffy, tearing.

“No.” Jimmy gently shakes his head, and takes her hand, holding it. “He was gone before he knew he’d been stabbed.” No, none of that is true. He bled out slowly, into the pericardial sac and spent probably a good half hour feeling like he was having his heart slowly crushed, but his sister doesn’t need to know that.

At forty years old, Jimmy Palmer is, in most cases, a terrible liar, but when he needs to, when it matters to someone else, he can and will lie, and he’ll do it well.
“Rule Number 2: Do not mess with McGee’s lunch, if you want to live.”

It’s lunchtime, Tim’s got his bowl of soup, salad, and coffee, and is typing away. This is his battery recharge time, and it is sacrosanct.

He didn’t realize until he got to the FBI how much he depended on time with his family to keep his battery full. He doesn’t have that here, and here the problems are deeper and more stubborn. He needs his downtime more, and he’s got less of it.

So, every day from noon to one, or thereabouts, the door to his office shuts, and the sound of an old-fashioned typewriter can be heard echoing through the fourth floor of the FBI building.

Technically, by now, he’s on editing the first draft of the first M’Gy Dragons book, but that’s not what he does here. This is not a space for careful re-writes, picky word choices, and well-considered plot points. Here he writes, whatever bits, pieces, scenes, dialogs, anything that flows through his mind. This is pure, unfettered, right brain off, left brain on, creative time.

Sometimes, he’s working through his real problems. Resetting them in the story. Unbound by the “rules” of the real world and government bureaucracy, he can get “creative” when it comes to dealing with sticky situations. Sometimes he’s pulling himself out of this world completely and spending some time in the world of his own creation.

All of the time, it’s a way to avoid burn out, and to get back to work after lunch as sharp as he was at breakfast time.

And, even though he’s writing about shape-shifting dragon knights, his words are real. The situations, the emotions, the frustration, the victory, he’s writing it, but he’s living it as he writes it. The ability to have a place where he can do anything he wants or needs to with his problems is a like having a fountain of cool, clear water when he’s parched.

Of course, sometimes, he needs more than water. On days when he’s really fried, he heads back to NCIS to suck up some time with Abby and or Jimmy. (Depending on who is there and what they’re doing.) Sometimes he needs time with them to get his head back into the game.

But, every day, by one o’clock (one thirty at the latest), he makes sure he’s back on the clock, and ready to take on the next problem.

By the age of forty, Tim McGee has figured out that he needs downtime, and what he needs to do during it, to keep himself sharp.

Jimmy’s the first of the bunch to get to Tim and Abby’s house. Not for the first time, he’s debating asking Heather what she’d charge to take care of all five of their kids. He’s fairly certain that it can’t be that much more than what they’re spending on daycare right now.

Of course, he also doesn’t know if Heather wants to take care of five kids under the age of four. He knows he generally does not want to deal with all of the kiddos on his own, and that they do their best to make sure that at any given time at least two parents are on point. Even if you love kids, which Jimmy does, outnumbered five to one is daunting.
He’s also not sure how to work Heather taking care of the kids with Breena picking up their kids at about two every day. He’s not sure if she wants all five kids in the afternoon. (Though they’re generally napping then. Of course, Sean and Donnie haven’t moved into a full two plus hour afternoon nap, yet, because they still get morning naps.) He doesn’t know how that would work with what she does for Slater and Palmer’s at home.

And, of course, Molly turns four in a few months, so the September after next means she starts kindergarten, and that makes the child care situation shift again.

And, of course, if Heather’s watching all the kids, that’s more reason for them to live in one house, and if they’re doing that then a bunch of other complication arise and…

And right now, it doesn’t matter. That’s something else that isn’t going to be solved today.

Right now, he’s got Sean in his arms, and Kelly is happily babbling at him, about her day. He’s listening and both of them are working on their signing.

She’s getting it faster than he is, and if he’s following her fingers right, she’s getting it faster than she’s picking up verbal words.

Heather’s adding in her own prompts, also both verbal and signed. She’s at about where Jimmy is. An adult who’s been working diligently, but not full time, on it for six months.

By forty, Jimmy’s adding another language to his list of skills, because he’ll be damned if he can’t talk to his “nephew” however is easiest for him.

When it’s just the four of them, birthdays aren’t that big of a deal. Some sort of ‘nice’ treat is involved for the birthday person, but any real party or celebration is left for gatherings with the larger group.

That said, Jimmy is very much looking forward to tonight’s treat. When the girls plan a good time for them, it’s a good time.

He’s hoping that Breena’s feeling up to playing with them. Donnie’s a little past three months old, so she’s completely healed up, but her hormones are still firmly in the ‘do not get pregnant again’ side of the fence (after all, they can’t tell she’s got an IUD) so, right now desire isn’t really part of the equation for her.

But, when the three of them get really going, she enjoys watching that, and hopefully it’ll kick things from enjoying watching to enjoying doing.

And as much as he loves his kids, at forty Jimmy’s feeling pretty good at the idea of being done with babies. He’s looking forward to having both of his wives back to completely healed up, both of them back to interested in sex, and moving back to the idea of sex as recreation as opposed to procreation.

He’s (probably because he was on baby duty last night) fervently looking forward to having all of them potty-trained and sleeping through the night.

At forty, Jimmy Palmer is looking forward to moving onto the next phase of his life, moving from babies and toddlers to toddlers and little kids.
“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Tim and Jimmy! Happy birthday to you!”

Abby’s the one singing. Breena’s sitting on… their present apparently, holding two lit candles.

Tim eyes the thing under Breena, wondering why the girls though they needed a…sofa… chaise… thing. It’s definitely a piece of furniture. Jimmy blows out his candle and flops onto the thing next to her.

“It’s comfy.”

Abby’s grinning from ear to ear. “Tim!”

“Oh, right.” He blows out his candle, and Breena gets up, gesturing for him to sit on the thing.

It is comfy.

The fabric is… maybe… velvet… ish? It’s soft and plush and black, looks good in their room. The seat under him is nicely firm, with enough give to be easy on his body. The only reason he’s not entirely sure what this thing is, is it’s shape. It’s not quite six feet long, and maybe two feet wide, and at one end it’s about two feet high, and the other end it’s about three feet high, and between those two ends is a swoopy curve, almost like a very rounded 8, laid on its side.

So, yes, it’s attractive and comfortable, but there’s never been a moment where Tim’s found himself thinking, “Hey, you know what, we need some extra seating in our bedroom…” Though, he supposes that a nice, comfy recliner sort of thing could come in handy when they’re playing one on one with the fourth one of them watching.

Though, given that grin on Abby’s face, he’s getting the idea that this is not here to provide some prime seating territory for live porn night.

Maybe… He knows the flavor of that grin. That’s very much a sex grin, so…

Jimmy shakes his head, boots him off the thing, and lays himself from the head to the foot of it, Breena hops over into his lap, straddling him, and the sofa easily, and suddenly Tim gets what the hell this thing is.

It’s a sex couch.

Abby wiggles herself over, and yeah, it’s set so she can easily straddle Jimmy’s face, and both ends have soft curves designed to easily kneel on or against, and the headrest can be moved around to make the curve in the center less shallow, and… Oh… There are D rings all around the base of this thing (discrete D rings, they tuck under, so Abby’s pointing them out) so you can tie, or since it’s fairly short to the ground, clip, restraints into it, and…

Yeah. Tim’s grinning from ear to ear, too. “Happy birthday to us, huh?”

Jimmy’s already sprawled out over the thing. “Happy birthday to me, I think. You’ve got tomorrow.”

“Eh…” Abby says. She pulls a quarter out of her pocket, and tosses it high. “Call it, Tim.”
“Heads.”

Breena snatches it from the air, and palms it. “Tails. Okay, yep, Jimmy, you’re right. Happy birthday to you, tonight. Happy Birthday to Tim, tomorrow.”

She gets up from Jimmy’s lap, whispers in Tim’s ear, and he nods. He likes what he’s hearing. Okay, yes, he would have liked it being Happy Birthday to him first, but he’s okay with being part of the doing side of the equation, rather than the done-to side. There’s always tomorrow night, or the night after, or…

The girls have well thought out plans for both of them, and he knows whatever’s coming for him will be just as good.

And tonight, they’re going to light up Jimmy’s favorite fantasy games, so he’ll play along with that.

Jimmy likes to be watched. Really likes to be watched. Three quarters, at least from his part, of having sex with Lee in pretty much every possible place at work was the possibility of being seen. They’d be at it, fast, open, dirty, and he’s have this little fantasy in the back of his mind of someone, usually whichever person he saw at work and fancied that particular day, just walking by, hearing something, and taking a peek, and seeing them. They’d look away, fast, and then look back, pull closer, eyes frozen to the action, unable to look away. In his fantasies the watcher was always female. Always wearing a skirt. (And, about a third of the time, Abby. It wasn’t an accident that he kept ‘forgetting’ to turn off the camera in Autopsy. After all, the only person who ever used it with any regularity was Abby. And the one time she caught them, she did enjoy the show, just not quite as much as Jimmy had hoped, at least, not until she got home.) In the fantasy, she’d be standing there, other side of the door to Autopsy (or wherever they were) watching, unable to turn away, feeling nipples get tight and pussy wet, and it’d just be too much. She’d have to start touching herself. He’d have that image in his mind. Lee, or whomever he was with, in real life, in front of him, on his body, and the ghost in his head, watching, eyes wide, rubbing herself off at the sight of him and whichever partner he was with, but really, at the sight of him.

Well, Tim’s not a girl, but he, and the girls, know for a fact that if one of the three of them is going to be the watcher, Jimmy’s going to prefer it be him. He does have a collection of “skirts.” Though, given how the girls are setting up that sofa, he’s fairly sure Jimmy’s not going to have much of a view of anything besides the girls, so jeans, or something with a zipper, so Jimmy can hear how turned on the watcher is, will help.

Tim changes out of his got home from work, lounging around PJ pants into a pair of jeans, and then heads downstairs. He’s got a fifteen minute wait for things to “get going” before he “catches” them.

He decides to go all out on it. He grabs his keys, gets in his car, and drives around, so that, when it’s time for him to “catch them,” Jimmy’ll have a lot of sound cues to let him know what’s up.

By the time he pulls up, very aware of the crunching sound of his tires on the gravel driveway, Tim’s really looking forward to this. He’s not sure exactly what he’s going to see when he gets up there, but it’s going to be good. It always is.

He slams the car door shut, and double clicks the lock fob, making the car chirp at him.

He’s loud as he opens the door to the house, and tromps up the stairs. He doesn’t call out ‘hello’ but he does make a little “Oh!” sound when he slips into the bedroom.

But that “oh’s!” genuine.
They’ve got Jimmy lying down on that sex sofa, and he’s looking awfully happy to be there. His head is back on the lower of the two curves, back resting against it, and his feet are on the floor. His posture is loose and relaxed. He’s having a good time, but not starting to ramp up, not yet.

Abby’s leaning back against the higher of the two curves, her legs over Jimmy, her hands between his legs, gently stroking the insides of his thighs, balls, cock, and stomach.

Breena’s at his head, kneeling against the lower cushion, kissing him, stroking his face and chest.

Tim’s certain Jimmy knows he’s there, but right now, he’s kissing Breena, and not looking away from her.

Tim leans against the wall, settling back, watching.

Abby looks over her shoulder at him, and grins, and he smiles back at her. Then she gets back to focusing on Jimmy.

They’re gorgeous. Gold candlelight flickering on bodies he adores. Everyone’s moving soft and easy, long gentle touches, and deep, wet kisses, just getting started. Jimmy’s naked. Abby’s wearing stockings and gloves, all in black. Breena’s mostly behind the sofa, so he can’t see too much of her, but the bits he can see tells him she’s in a very pretty pink lace bra.

Abby leans forward, and Breena leans down, and they’re both licking Jimmy’s chest, interspersing licks with nips, and he’s groaning at it, enjoying the bit of pain to go with pleasure. He raises his head, looking at the ladies first, and then looking in Tim’s direction. Tim’s not entirely sure how well Jimmy can see him. He’s not wearing his glasses, but he may have his contacts in.

Tim smiles at him, anyway, and lets his eyes trail over the three of them.

Then Breena’s got Jimmy’s (and Tim’s) full attention. She’s wearing a pair of very small, very expensive pink satin pumps, and is slowly, gently, trailing the toe of one of them down Jimmy’s body from his collarbone to his hip, and he’s groaning at that.

Tim doesn’t get the thing about the shoes, but apparently Jimmy does. His eyes are glued to Breena’s foot as that tiny wisp of shiny pink fabric gently slips just a little further down his body. He whimpers when Breena pulls back, moving away from him, and then situates herself on the higher of the two curves, keeping one foot on the floor, making sure she’s got good balance, and then stretches her other leg high above Jimmy, letting him just stare at her long, shapely leg, with that shoe at the end of it. She strokes his face with her toes, and he whimpers again, turning his face, kissing the toe of the shoe, and arching up as she again trails it down his body.

Tim supposes on a just basic sensation level, that it probably feels pretty nice trailing against his skin, but… Jimmy’s at way past pretty nice. So, yes, Tim’s not wired for what Jimmy’s getting out of that experience, but he does get desire, and he gets sex, and he gets Jimmy trying to get off that sofa, trying to get more of what he wants, and that, along with the two mostly naked women, is hitting him hard.

He unzips his jeans, slowly, deliberately, maximizing the sound of the zipper, and Jimmy doesn’t look away from Breena, or what she’s doing to him, but he groans at the sound.

He groans louder as Abby bites his hip. Sucking a hickey into him. His hips jerk at that sensation, trying to get his dick into or at least near, something hot and wet.

“Watch, Jimmy,” Breena says, gently resting just the tip of the toe of her shoe against the base of Jimmy’s dick, tracing it up his skin, and he does, eyes glazed, dick starting to leak.
That’s getting to Tim. He knows how that feels. So hard and so full and so wanting and so needing. He’s been there, staring at something so hot he doesn’t know what to do with it. Something so hot he’s got to get off on it. He unsnaps the jeans, scooting them down his hips, and palms himself, feeling his cock, hot, hard, ready, in his hand.

Jimmy doesn’t notice Abby move to his head. His eyes are focused on Breena’s shoe, and his dick, and the way it’s just kissing over his skin.

Abby licks the shell of his ear, as close to a kiss as she can get without breaking his view, and then runs her fingers through his hair.

Tim knows what that does for Jimmy, too. Knows he loves that, and loves it even more with a little tug, and… Yes, Abby’s giving his hair a little pull as Breena puts both feet down on the floor, hooks her finger into the crotch of her g-string, slowly pulls it to the side, showing off her naked pussy, stroking her fingers over it, and then slips onto Jimmy.

The girls time it right, getting both sensations at once, and again, Jimmy almost jerks off the sofa, with a loud cry of pleasure.

Tim moans at it, too. His hand is tight, moving over his dick, but dry. There’s no sound involved in what he’s doing. Abby’s shifted around, straddling Jimmy’s face, so in a moment, he’ll have no view, period.

Tim steps forward, finds the lube, and slicks himself up. He groans, loud, at that, too. Slick hand on his dick may not be his favorite sex ever, but right now, especially when Jimmy groaned, too, because he heard that, and is hearing the soft, slick sounds that goes with what Tim’s doing, it’s working just fine for him.

Tim kneels close. He can kiss Breena, and does, and that makes what he’s doing with his hand a thousand times better. He kisses Abby, too, loving her lips on his.

Both of the girls have glazed, blissed-out looks on their faces, so riding Jimmy’s treating them just fine, too.

He keeps kissing, moving from one of his ladies to the next and back again, keeping pace with Jimmy, rocking his dick through his fist at the same speed Breena’s rocking on Jimmy. She shifts a little, tucking her feet up next to Jimmy’s hips, not exactly digging the heels into him, but he can certainly feel them against him, and that gets another loud groan out of Jimmy.

Tim’s is watching. Watching both of his ladies, but also Jimmy, watching muscles grow tight, and hips moving fast. Watching his hands clench, one of them on Breena’s ankle, his thumb stroking the band of her shoe, the other on Abby’s hip, helping him keep pace with the way she’s rocking. They’re moving faster, in concert, skin glowing in the soft candlelight.

He knows Jimmy’s close, his rhythm is growing sharper, more staccato, and he knows the point of the fantasy is that the person watching gets off on seeing the action, so Tim moves his hand faster, standing between the girls, kissing each of them, feeling his body thrum with pleasure, and his muscles growing tighter.

And as his body stiffens, grows tight and glowing with pleasure, teetering on the edge of rapture, he feels suffused with love, like it’s soaked into every cell of his body, like the it’s the water that flows through everything, keeping him alive.

He jerks, shudders, spurting on Jimmy’s belly, and that little cum cry, along with the spatter, the
feeling, knowing that someone got off watching him, sets Jimmy to moaning and twitching, too.

At the age of forty Tim is a lover, and he’s learned that sex is more complicated, more nuanced, and more splendid than anything he could have imagined as a young man, and he is eternally grateful for that.

Jimmy’s last thoughts of the first day of his fortieth year, beyond the general buzz of feeling excellently post-climax-blissed-out and snoozy between his ladies, is how much he loves this life he’s collected over the years.

Breena’s on his right, laying on her side, lips against his shoulder, arm over his chest, leg over his hip. Her usual place, almost, her leg is about two inches higher than normal, so it’s not resting on his glucose monitor. He kisses her, slow, gentle, easy. Both of them are almost asleep.

Abby’s on his left. Her back to his side. His hand is resting on her hip, cupping that soft, warm curve. He kisses the back of her neck, and she wriggles against him gently.

And from there, wrapped in his ladies, somewhat wishing Tim were here, too, mostly just happy someone else is on baby duty for the night, and he can just sleep, Jimmy drifts off.

Tim’s last thoughts of the first day of his forty-first year, focus on the baby on his chest, eating his bottle.

Donald Timothy Palmer is his. He, like his older half-brother, looks more like Tim than Tim looked like Tim at three months old. As the old adage goes, “There’s no denying that child.”

And there isn’t, and won’t be.

Donnie is his, completely. And he’s Jimmy’s, just as much. And of course he’s Breena’s, but he’s Abby’s, too.

And that’s true for all the kids. And it’s something none of the adults really expected when they got into this, but that doesn’t make it any less true. The children are theirs. And he’s not sure what’s going to happen with that, if eventually he’ll be Daddy and Jimmy will be Papa or how that’ll work. Maybe he’ll always be Uncle Tim to the baby on his chest, but he knows that he’s just as much Dad to this child as Jimmy is. That Abby will be just as much Mom as Breena. And that will be true, no matter what the titles are.

And he knows that, because at forty, Tim McGee knows that love is limitless, and that it feeds upon itself, growing richer and fuller as it’s shared.

Donnie’s done with his bottle, and Tim drapes the spit up cloth over his shoulder, and gets him situated.

“Okay little boy, let’s work the burps out, and then sleepy time for both of us.”
Donnie gurgles at that as Tim starts patting his back. They walk around the nursery, Tim humming softly, patting gently, as Donnie fusses a little.

He may be tired, and wishing he was in bed with the rest of his spouses, but at forty, Tim McGee can say he’s happy.
“So, what’s on for this week?” Tim asks Jennifer as he sweeps in on Monday morning.

“A lot of the same. Building your infrastructure. Meetings about building. Supervising. Meetings about supervising. Meetings explaining to the higher ups what you’re up to. Meetings with your department heads, seeing what they’re up to.”

Tim nods. “Yep. Same old, same old.”

“One little bit of new. Attorney General Glane wants to meet with you. You’ve got an hour with him on Wednesday.”

That is new. “He say why?”

“Nope. Just wants to meet up, at his place.”

“All right. I’ll be there.”

As he’s heading to a fairly non-descript building in the suburbs of DC, a fairly non-descript building that is very much not part of the Justice Department complex, Tim’s feeling fairly ‘iffy’ about meeting with the Attorney General.

Because his previous federal service was with NCIS, most of his casework went through the JAG system. But not all of it. So, he knows, on a somewhat personal level, that the AG’s office is in charge of prosecuting and defending all of the government’s stuff. And he certainly remembers Comey pointing out that when the FBI wants to do things that other people think may be a tad on the illegal side, the AG is the organization that defends those lawsuits. That’s what got Comey to ‘look the other way.’ He didn’t just need the AG to prosecute his cases, he also needed them to defend them.

And he also knows that the previous AG pulled a runner and is assumed to be dead. She and, from the looks of it, most of her staff were up to their eyeballs, if not completely submerged, in the shit that took everything down in The Fall.

He knows that this new AG was, until a year ago, the Assistant Director for the New York State branch of the AGs office, and apparently he was the highest rated member of the AG’s office they could find with completely clean hands. (And he knows, because, having had this meeting go on the books, that the reason why Mr. Glane had clean hands is because no one thought enough of him to bring him into any of the conspiracies. Tim couldn't find out if that meant he's got the personality of a dead fish, or if he's got the brains of one.)

And, on top of that he knows that, of the cases he’s sent to the AG since he’s been in charge, more than six months now, less than 10% of them have even resulted in a meeting, let alone a court date, or anything approaching a prosecution.

So, to say that he’s not overwhelmingly impressed with AG Glane as of this point, and that he’s curious as to why he’s getting called in, and that, parking in a lot of what looks like just another corporate building, he’s feeling mostly a sense of ‘meh’, is not an exaggeration.
Yes, it looks like just another building in a corporate park on the outside, but the security on the inside is good.

Tim generally prefers that only a small group of people he’s extremely fond of ever touch him that intimately, but, just like every other time he goes through one, he set the metal detector off, and then when they wanded him, the wand started screaming like he’d killed its parents, so he got significantly more like felt up than patted down before they let him into the AG’s office proper.

He doesn’t make the quip about the guard should buy him dinner before touching him like that, though he wants to. The guard’s probably heard it a million times and doesn’t need to hear it from him, too. He stands there and lets it happen.

As he’s being fondled by the security guy, he looks around, and tries to remember if the old AG’s office went up in flames, or if they moved out here to make sure there was no shot of it happening in the future.

Once the guard’s finished with him, another thought hits him, if the AG is hiding where their people work, that means they don’t think they’re doing their job well enough to prevent people from wanting to kill them.

That’s not a comforting thought.

“Mr. Glane,” Tim offers his hand to Glane, a man about a decade older than he is, a hundred pounds heavier, and significantly more frazzled looking. “Hello. I’m pleased to finally get to meet you.”

It’s a functional office. Boring really. If there are any hints of personalization in here, Tim’s not seeing them. Of course, this might not actually be Glane’s office. He might have a spot where he meets people, and another spot where he actually works.

This is normally where Glane would say something like, “likewise,” but it doesn’t happen. He doesn't take Tim's hand either, just points to one of his chairs, and then says, “Coffee?”

“Sure, if you have decaf.”

Glane shakes his head, and sits across from Tim, eyeing him as he gets his own cup, of, apparently, full strength coffee ready and then sips it.

Tim’s feeling his defenses going up. This is not just a little meet-and-greet chat-fest, or anything of the sort. “So, what gets you calling a meeting?” Tim asks, deciding to get the ball rolling.

“We understand you’ve been taking a close look at the IRS.”

Tim wonders, idly, where they got that suggestion from, but figures that’s a back burner idea for right now, and says, “It’s my job to take a close look at everyone.”

Glane nods. “Of course. And of course, we want you to do your job.”
“Great,” Tim’s fairly sure there’s a subtext along the lines of “lay off the IRS” here, but it hasn’t been made quite that clear, yet. “Glad to hear it.”

Glane checks his phone, and then says, “My secretary says you’ve sent us 297 cases since you’ve taken over.”

Tim thinks about that. “I don’t have the number off the top of my head, but that sounds about right.”

“Are you recording this conversation, Mr. McGee?”

“No, I wasn’t, but…” Tim pulls out his phone and puts it on the table, clearly recording. “Everything uploads immediately onto the cloud as we speak. So, yes, now I am recording this conversation, and you’re watching me do it.”

“Lovely.” Glane taps his fingers on the table. “You worked for NCIS before going to the FBI, correct?”

“Yes.”

“So, your cases went through the JAG system, did they not?”

“That’s right. I’d have one or two a year you guys would handle, but the rest of them went through the JAG system.”

“Ah…” A very tiny, very tight smile lifts the corners of Glane’s mouth. “It’s good to see you’re at least familiar with the AG’s office and how we work.”

“Yes. But I have the feeling you’d like to make sure I’m even more familiar with it?”

“Exactly. As you know, last year was difficult for us.”

“And everyone else with a Federal job.”

“Indeed.” Glane stares at Tim. Tim’s not sure if that’s supposed to be a message, or if Glane’s blaming him for the bad year the AG had. Possibly both. This is when it occurs to him that just because Glane wasn’t in on any of the conspiracies, doesn’t mean he didn’t approve of them, or love his co-workers the way Tim loves his.

“But it was more difficult for you guys than other branches?” Tim asks.

“Given the fact that we lost a full fifty percent of our staff, and everyone higher up than Assistant Director of a local office, I think it’s clear to see that things were more difficult for us than for most of the other offices.”

Tim nods. “That sounds correct.”

“Because of that difficulty we are extremely low on staff lately. Add in the increased workload we’re getting from New York these days, and my department is stretched very thin.”

Tim nods at that, too. Maybe Glane’s about to explain why none of his cases are going anywhere, yet? “I can understand that. I had to double the size of my department to deal with the projected workload, and we’re still looking for people. I’ve got a good five hundred seats empty, and no one filling them right now.”

“Ah.” Glane relaxes by a hair. “So you understand the complexity of the current environment.”
“I get you’ve got more work than you’ve got bodies to do work. I think we all do right now.”

“Succinctly put.” Glane stares at him, and Tim knows he’s supposed to get a message here. In fact, he’s fairly sure what that message is, but… No, he’s not playing ball, not yet, not like this.

“What I don’t get is why you called me here, or asked about what I’m doing with the IRS.”

Glane looks quite frustrated with Tim. He delivered the message. Tim appeared to get it, and now he’s not doing what he’s supposed to do with said message.

“As of this point in time, I have fewer than fifty attorneys I can put on corruption cases.”

Tim nods at that. “Bottleneck. I’ve got 1500 agents, and 500 more of them coming online as soon as I can hire them. What’s your hiring plan?”

“That’s the question now, isn’t it? Our budget will allow us to replace the people we lost, but not expand.”

“Well, how many will we have after you expand?”

Glane’s eyes are cold. “Fewer than fifty. We didn’t lose corruption lawyers.”

Tim is fairly sure that can’t be true. Not if Glane is the highest ranked man standing. There had to have been someone in charge of a corruption department, or something like that. So, obviously this is part of what he’s supposed to understand, unspoken, and respond to, also unspoken. “That’s good. But… If you had fewer than fifty to begin with, I’m thinking that just possibly that’s part of how last fall happened. What are your plans for expanding that department?”

“If I can get the money for it, I’d like to see 200 lawyers on it, each one with a full team of support personnel. We have immigration lawyers that we will no longer need as immigration lawyers. But, to get them ready we need to retrain them. That takes time and money. We can hire some new lawyers, but again, that takes time and money.”

Tim grasps that concept. He’s doing the same thing with his department, too. “So, take the time and money and do it? It’s not like you’re hiring agents who have to go through FLETC or the Academy. Last I checked we had way more lawyers graduating law school than there were jobs for them.”

“I would love to do that. All I need is the budget.”

“Okay…” Tim’s thinking he knows where this is going. Glane mentions the IRS, he mentions not having enough guys, he mentions needing more money, so… Maybe? He’s also thinking this is an excellent time to play as stupid as he can. “I can give you my grandmother’s number. She’s a congresswoman, and I think they’re the ones who do the budget stuff.”

Glane glares at Tim, and sighs. Tim’s not sure if he’s buying the stupid act, but he’s definitely frustrated by that response.

Tim sees Glane watching him, sees him debate what, if anything to say next. It’s clear he’s not sure how much he can say, or if he should even try. He stands up. “Okay, Mr. McGee, thank you for your time. I’ll happily take your grandmother’s number.”

Tim knows he’s being dismissed. He stands up, shakes Glane’s hand, and then sends him Penny’s number.
Tim replays the conversation as he rides back to the FBI.

If he’s understanding all of the unspoken bits correctly, and he’s not sure he is, but, if he is, Glane’s telling him that if he ignores the IRS, he’ll have a pile of lawyers in the not wildly distant future to sic on his various cases, but if he doesn’t leave them alone that less than fifty is going to stay right where it is.

Maybe.

Probably.

He stares at the ceiling of his car, sitting in the FBI parking garage, thinking. Then he calls Penny, because if anyone is going to have good instincts on this, it’ll be her.

“Hey, Penny, you got a few minutes?”

“I only answer the phone when I do. What’s up?”

“That’s what I need to know, too. Would you listen to a conversation between me and AG Glane and tell me what you think he’s saying?”

“Sure, Tim.”

Tim plays the conversation, and he hears Penny make occasional little ‘hmm’ noises. She asks him to replay it one more time, so he does. And when it’s done he says, “So?”

“Lay off the IRS, and you get to do your job. Don’t lay off of them, and you’ll get the barest skeleton crew available to you.”

Tim looks annoyed by this. “That’s what I was thinking he was saying. So… Can he do this?”

“Yes. The AG and any other state’s attorney has full prosecutorial discretion. He can, or cannot, take any case he pleases for any reason he pleases.”

Tim glares at that. He certainly knows that’s worked for him in the past. His team has used that to boot particularly sympathetic cases, but… Somedays, like today, that feels like way too much power to vest in any one man. “So, if I keep going after the IRS, he could decide to go on a full strike against the FBI, and refuse to litigate any of our cases?”

“He can, but he’s unlikely to do it. That’ll make him look bad enough his head will roll.”

“But this doesn’t? I mean… If he’s got no one working my cases I’ve got no problem screaming that to the heavens.”

“Tim…” She sighs. “First off, he’ll make sure someone is on your cases. They’ll be terrible at the job and vastly overworked, but there’ll be someone doing the job. If you keep going after the IRS, and if you get a skeleton crew of the AG’s least competent people working on your cases, I and a few hundred other congressmen will go on the warpath for you. We’ll be loud, and we may even be able to get Glane out of his job.”

Tim doesn’t like the way she sounds when she says that. “That sounds like a huge BUT is coming up.”
“It is. *BUT*, as you may have noticed…” She pauses on that, thinking, “or maybe you haven’t, we’re in something of a larger than usual money crunch here in Federal Government-land. Losing the tax revenue from California and Texas *hurt*, losing the money from North Dakota, New Hampshire, Maine, Montana, and Utah didn’t hurt as much, but it certainly isn’t *helping*. The market has not been kind to the value of US treasury bonds lately, limiting the amount of money we can raise by taking on more debt. More people than usual have been cashing in the bonds that were outstanding than before, which means more money is flowing out. So we have to rely more on money coming in from the IRS to keep paying the debt on those bonds. And that just pays our debts, doesn’t buy or build anything new, and before you say it, if we just print more money, our current situation of the dollar holding value will go from shaky to completely nonexistent.”

Tim swallows, hard.

“And, if I understand the cases you’re looking to put in play on the IRS, you’re going to draw attention to the fact that they’re trying to get people to plea out on cases where they don’t have the evidence to win, in an effort to get them to pay huge fines.”

“Yeah. That’s part of it. Heidi Partridge is another part of it.”

“On the first bit… You keep going on that, more people will chose to go to court. That means the IRS loses the cases because they don’t have the evidence any longer. And that means even less money to pay off our debts. Don’t pay those debts…”

Tim sighs. “Okay, yeah. And Heidi ended up dead because she had the way to keep people trading goods and services and not paying taxes on them.”

“Exactly. So… Yes, I can go on the warpath for this. I can likely get Glane booted. And I can tell you that the guy who replaces him, and the one who replaces him, and the one after that, and the next guy and then the one after him, and so on and so forth will all take the same line he is. The IRS *has* to be able to get the maximum amount of money, and it doesn’t matter how it does it, because absolutely nothing else we want to do happens without cash coming in.”

Tim sighs, hard, feeling punched in the guts. “Shit.”

Penny almost chuckles. “Welcome to adulthood, land of soul-crushing compromises.”

“Yeah, great. Advice?”

“Certainly. Nothing lasts forever. We will rebuild, we’ll resettled, we will get the money flowing again. Stay the course, build your cases, quietly, secretly, and in five or so years from now, when we aren’t grubbing for every single dime we can lay hands on, go get ‘em. There’s no statute on murder. There’s currently no statute on corruption cases. Go after the lower hanging fruit, clean up what you can with what you’ve got, and by the time you go after the IRS, you’ll have a cleaner workspace, more tools, and a better vantage point to do it from.”

That sounds distressingly rational. “At the very least, I’ll have a better idea where the AG got the intel that I was working on the IRS case to begin with.”

“Yes. And by that point you will have people on your side inside the AG’s office, who you will *need* if you want to take out the big players without a re-do of last fall. Tim, you’re forty. You’ve probably got twenty-five years to build this. You’re in position to play the long game, *so play the long game*. Build your team, and put this on the back burner for now.”

“Thanks Penny.”
“You’re welcome. Are you going to do it?”

Tim sighs again, still staring at the ceiling of his car. “I don’t know.”

“Think about it.”

“I will.”

---

*Play the long game.* Penny’s not wrong, that’s firmly in the soul-crushing compromises column.

And she’s absolutely right, he will have an easier time doing this if he’s got a team in place when he moves, instead of building the team _while_ he does this.

But, God, it leaves a bad taste in his mouth. Jennifer raises an eyebrow at him, able to feel the bad mood as he storms into his office, and he shakes his head at her.

The AG knew what he was doing with the IRS… Or… Did he just guess? Not like he’s been on ultra-silent mode with this stuff.

He calls his Uncle.

“Tim?”

“Hey, Uncle Tom.”

“What’s up? Got a new target in need of some surveilling?”

“That right this second,” though as he says that, he’s thinking he does, but he’s not saying anything to Tom about checking out the AG’s office until they’re at the house for Christmas, and he’s swept the place for bugs. “I got a warning shot across my bow on behalf of the IRS. I need you to double check, make sure your guys got in and out clean.”

“I can do that.”

Tim’s relieved that Tom’s not taking that as a personal affront to his competence.

“And I want you to check on Walter, make sure his guys got in and out clean, too.”

He feels Tom smile at that. “On it. And let me guess. He’s going to be checking me and mine, too?”

“Of course. They got the heads up from somewhere, so…”

“Okay. I’m on it.”

He calls Walter and has basically the same conversation. And again, he’s relieved to see that Walter doesn’t think him double-checking is a personal insult.

As they’re wrapping up Walter says, “So… you want me to keep moving people into the IRS?”

Tim sighs, long and low. “That’s the question now, isn’t it? Right now, when we don’t know how the word is being spread… Whoever you’ve got in play, keep them there. Don’t expand any further, though.”
“And if my guys are talking…”

“Find out first. We’ll figure out where to go from there.”

“Okay.”

Tim stares at the ceiling in his office. Then he looks away, rubbing the kink in his neck. He’s been staring at ceilings too damn much today.

He shakes his head, then rolls it, feeling little crunchy sensations as he rolls his neck. The girls have been talking about Abbi’s bachelorette party, and mentioning that some sort of spa day massage party is part of it. Right now he’s wondering if they’d mind too much if he invited himself to that part of the party.

He snorts a bit. Yeah, they’d mind. That’s girl time, and he’s not a girl. And they’d suggest that as a perfectly functional human being in possession of a phone, internet connection, and credit card that he can sign himself, and better yet, himself and them up for a massage on some other day.

He thinks about that. Christmas is coming… in less than a week. That’s a few pleasant moments of research, and he’s got some Christmas presents for the four of them, but once done, he’s back to the same place he was before. What to do next?

His hand is reaching for his phone again, and he’s not quite got an idea of who to call. Abbi springs to mind first, but… Yeah. Last week in New Orleans. He can wait until she’s home to talk to her. Nothing he’s doing on this needs to happen right this second.

But, his phone is in his hand, and… Leon. Leon would probably have some insight into this.

He doesn’t get an answer, but he does get Leon’s voice mail. “Hey, Leon, it’s McGee, can I buy you a coffee or lunch sometime this week?”

And with that, he’s feeling a little more settled, and gets back to the million other things he needs to do.

“You know what the worst part of it is?” he says to his family later that night, before they go to bed.

“You mean, besides the fact that you don’t know how the AG found out what you’re up to?” Abby asks.

“Besides that,” Tim replies. “Though that part’s bugging me, too.”

“The fact that they think you can be bought off?” Breena asks.

Tim glowers at that. “That one hadn’t hit me, but, yeah, that’s annoying, too.”

He eyes Jimmy, who shakes his head. He knows that was a rhetorical question, and isn’t going to
add to it.

“The fact that it’s actually not stupid. Like, if someone had hit me with it the way Penny put it. Take your time, get your team and contacts in place first, make sure you’ve got a sound footing, and then go after the big fish, I might have listened to that. But now it’s a threat and part of me wants to double down immediately, go after the IRS fullbore, just to say, ‘You can’t make me do anything!’”

Jimmy nods at that, and Abby says, “Of course, that might be the plan.”

Breena agrees. “If any of these guys know Gibbs at all, or have heard of him, or have been paying attention to who you are, they may be trying to goad you into moving fast, without the proper structure in place, so you muff it, and then you get booted out and they end up with someone easier to deal with.”

Tim groans at that. “At any point over the last fifteen years, have I ever given any of you any reason to think that this kind of shit was my idea of a good time?”

That gets some scoffing, and a bit of supportive petting, but none of the four of them really know what the right answer is.

Leon’s got free time on Friday. And, by Friday, Tim’s more than happy to buy him a coffee, or lunch, or drink, or at this point whatever the hell he might like, assuming it gets him expounding on how to run a damn agency and thread needles like this.

Fortunately for Tim’s wallet, Leon’s good with coffee and a donut.

“I know you aren’t plying me with caffeine and sugar just for the pleasure of my company,” Leon says, as he’s biting into his chocolate glazed donut.

Tim sips his decaf and nods. It’s good, and the donut looks and smells amazing. He’ll happily come back here again. Neither of them have ever been to this donut shop before for one very good reason, Tim picked it at random ten minutes before they got together, while they were driving. He figures if he didn’t know where they were going, there’s no way anyone else could have, either.

“Nope. Got a hard question, one that I don’t want anyone listening in on.”

Two in the afternoon on the Friday before Christmas, they aren’t the only people in the place, but they are the only people sitting at a table, talking. Everyone else is ordering to go.

Tim takes another sip and lays out his conversation with the AG. Leon listens, and nods, sips his coffee, and then pulls out a toothpick to chew on, too. Tim adds in what his grandmother, and Breena had to say, also.

Leon nods along. “You’re getting good advice.”

“That part I knew. What do I do with it?”

Leon sniggers. “Welcome to management.”

Tim rolls his eyes.

Leon sips his coffee, a smile sparkling in his own gaze. “I know you don’t want to hear it. But your grandmother’s got it right. That’s how I’d do it, too. But, here’s the bit she doesn’t have. It is useful
to have a few *loose cannons* who you *just can’t control* under you.”

Tim is suddenly getting why Team Gibbs got as much slack as it did. Leon sees him get it, and nods.

“You be the deal maker. You be the ‘reasonable’ one. You make sure they know that you’ve got this guy under you who’s a massive pain in the ass, but you just can’t get rid of him. By the way, *that’s* why you don’t sack your damn union, so you’ve got a reason why you can’t get rid of your bulldog. There hasn’t been a single director of NCIS who loves NCISEU, but, we all toe the line so when it’s time to whip out the bulldog, we have a reason for why he’s still there and why our hands are tied.”

Tim sighs. “I didn’t *sack* FBIEU.”

Leon smirks at that.

“Yeah, great. You couldn’t tell me this *before* I crushed them.”

Leon shakes his head. “You needed to do it to get rid of your deadwood. From now going forward though…”

That bridge is beyond burnt. Nothing left to do for it. “Yeah, fine. So, pull back?”

“That’s what I’d do. And go make sure you’ve got a collection of Gibbslets. Make sure you’ve got at least one of them per district, but probably no more than one. You need to have at least a few of them, but you don’t want every one of your teams to be full of them. We’re organized by geography, so that’s how I’ve got mine set. You do yours however you’re organizing.”

“By specialty.”

“That works. Your Gibbs-team will, mostly, do whatever it does, but from time to time you’ll make sure it gets the case you’re not supposed to be looking at too closely, and, ‘Shucks, it’s out of your hands.’ No one likes that, but if you don’t abuse it—“

Tim flashes a very curious look.

“Everyone plays the game this way. You give your Gibbs-Team that sort of case when it really matters, but only when it really matters. Don’t pull this out for piddly stuff. Your IRS case… That’s got levels, right?”

Tim explains about that, and Leon keeps listening, sipping his coffee, gnawing his toothpick to a nub.

When Tim’s done with the IRS muck, Leon says, “Okay, good. This is part of how you draw your lines and your management style. If you keep your Gibbs-team on Ms. Partridge, you’re telling the AG and whomever else that you won’t look the other way for a murder. That’s your hardline.”

Tim’s familiar with the idea of hardlines, so he nods.

“But… The rest of the IRS case, the evidence stuff, a lot of those cases, in the first place, they had the evidence. That’s what we’re thinking, right? Most of it is gone because it was destroyed, not they never bothered to get it in the first place?”

Tim shrugs. “I hope so. Possibly. Diane’s said some things about the IRS to make me think that it’s entirely possible that there wasn’t ever evidence, and that the law’s intentionally so complicated that every single person is always breaking the tax law, so… That’s part of why they were on my radar so fast. When one of their hot shot investigators tells me it’s literally impossible to obey those laws,
and they’re intentionally written that way, I get a little edgy about that.”

That gets a *yeah, what can you do* look from Leon. “McGee, look, no one is saying the IRS is clean, or that you shouldn’t have your eyes on it.” That stops Leon as soon as it’s out of his mouth. “Maybe the AG was saying something like that. *I’m* not saying that. I am saying that this would be a situation where you’ve got a good division of issues. You can keep your Team Gibbs on Ms. Partridge, back off on your evidence hunt, and let them know that you’re willing to play along, but only up to a certain extent. Everyone here plays the game, and if you give them some of what they want, you’ll get some of it in return.”

“And if I keep on investigating, just quietly?”

Leon shakes his head slowly at that one. “For right now, stop it. You don’t have the people in place. And you need them for this. You need high-trust professionals. People who are excellent at their job, who have a proven track record of getting you what you need, and when you need it. Right now you’ve got a few of them, and an entire department of people who are not particularly thrilled at you, looking to get you out of your chair. Give it a few years, get the people in place, weed out the people aren’t happy you took over.”

Tim winces.

“I know. I didn’t want to hear anything like that as I was rising up, either. But, I can tell you, that right now I can run missions I couldn’t have dreamed of when I first sat my butt in Shepard’s chair, and I can do it because I’ve got people who are personally loyal to *me.*” Leon gives a small snort of a laugh. “I’ve got you, for example, and by extension a lot of the FBI, able to lend me a hand. But I didn’t have you, and team Gibbs, you guys were sure I was trouble for… the first few years, at least, when I first took over.”

Tim rolls his eyes a little. “You acted like trouble.”

“No. I acted like *you.* Or you’re acting like me. I got sent in after a corrupt director who was playing way outside the bounds, and my job was to clean up her mess, a mess you guys had way more of a hand in making than anyone else. My job was to sort that all out. And honestly, you guys are lucky that SecNav wanted that taken care of quietly and Shepard died, because the easiest way to deal with the Shepard mess was to just cut you all out.”

Tim sighs, remembering both the mess Shepard got them into, and how long it took them to decide that Leon was on the up and up. He figures that, of the bunch of them, he was the first one to decide Leon was on Team White Hat, because he was the first one to get Leon’s trust in return. “Trust has to be a two way street.”

“Exactly. You’ve got to be in there long enough for them to know that if you ask them to step on a ledge, you’re doing it for a good reason, and you’ll make sure to catch them if they fall. You built up that rapport with the guys in Cybercrime, and you did it fast. You can and will do it again, but it’s going to take longer.”

Tim takes another swallow of his coffee.

“I’ll give you the same advice Morrow gave me. Clean up your own house before you go after anyone else’s. That way, when you’ve got to pull from your own team to stand and fight, you know they’ll stand and fight with you.”

Tim nods. No he doesn’t really want to hear that, but it makes a lot of sense.
“One other bit of advice. If you have a reputation for being ‘reasonable,’ when you need the help of other teams, they will provide it. More importantly, if you are ‘reasonable,’ when you do turn against the members of another team, the rest of that team will be much more likely to listen to what you have to say, and act on it. Right now, pretty much anyone you go up against will close ranks against you. You’re an outsider, and you’re going to take them down. Get a reputation for only going against people when it matters, and you’ll get more cooperation.”

“Sounds like looking the other way, a lot.”

Leon half smiles. “McGee, you’ve got enough work cleaning up your own mess to keep three departments busy, full time, for years. That buys you time on the wider scale. Go after some of your pet projects and make a reputation on them. A few at a time. I’ve been hearing about what Taylor’s doing with the Federal Prisons, and that’s a really good one to start with. He’s just quietly going in and doing his job, getting a lot of good brownie points, and not stepping on too many toes while he does it.”

“That’s because none of the big guys care about the prison system.”

Leon half smiles again, grabbing a new toothpick. “Exactly. But it’s building his, and your reputation. You’re doing a good, thorough job. You’re doing it on something that matters, but isn’t glamorous. Taylor’s being reasonable. His people aren’t going in and demanding the impossible, nor are they slaughtering everyone near the problem, they’re just making sure that the people around them follow the rules, and the ones who don’t get smacked. Find a few more Federal Prison systems, handle them well, and then you’re going to get other guys who want to be good at their jobs calling you for help. They ask for help, you give it to them, this builds up relationships. That way, when your Black Hats go in, and whoever gets wind of it, they’ll know you’re on the up and up, and if your guys are in there, there’s a real problem, because you don’t dick around with piddly crap and you don’t sic your attack dogs on people based on a whim or politics.”

Tim rolls his eyes at that, too.

“Build your reporting system. Get that in place. By the time you’ve got that set, so that people know that when you get a case it’s real, and a solid reputation that when you go after something it’s because it’s broken and needs to be fixed not because your ego is on the line, you will have a much easier time doing what you want to do.”

Tim shakes his head again. “I told my family last night, ‘Have I ever, in fifteen years, done anything to indicate that this was what I wanted to do?’”

Leon laughs at that. “Get your team in place. You can’t build without a good foundation, and you don’t have one, yet.”

Tim nods. “Thanks, Leon.”

“You’re welcome, McGee.” He sips his coffee. “So, no big Christmas shindig this year, right?”

“Sort of. We’ve got McGees from all over the globe coming, starting tonight actually, and when none of us were watching Fornell grafted himself onto the family, so he and Wendy will be there, but with the wedding the next weekend, none of us felt like doing a big party two weeks in a row.”

Leon laughs at that, too. “I can see that. And how is the groom doing?”

That gets a gentle smile from Tim. “He’s good. He and Abbi are back from New Orleans today, and home for the next six weeks. They’re both happy about that.”
“I can certainly understand that. Nothing better than getting home after living out of a suitcase for weeks…”

Tim nods, and the two of them spend a bit of time talking about the upcoming festivities of the Gibbs clan.

On the way back to work, Tim keeps thinking about what to do.

If he hadn’t gotten rid of Comey, he knows exactly what he would have done, gone right on doing what he’s doing. Because if he hadn’t gotten rid of Comey, he’d know his place. When Comey was in charge, it was his job to be the bulldog.

But Comey’s gone. And he’s okay with the new Director, but he’s not nearly so sure that Tarkin’s got his back the way Comey did.

Scratch that, he knows that Tarkin doesn’t have his back the way Comey did. Maybe, one day, like Leon, if they work together long enough, and come up with a shared vision for where the FBI is going and what it’s going to do, he will. Or, given he worked with Comey for only a few months, maybe they’ll have a closer, better relationship.

But right now, they don’t.

That might as well be his theme song these days. Right now, he doesn’t. Even with the men who he’s feeling closest to, his Uncle and Walter, he doesn’t have that sort of relationship. Not now. But maybe, with enough time, he will.

Until then… He picks up his phone, “Hey Walter.”

“McGee… You sound unhappy.”

“Yeah. Not loving being the boss right now. Loving it or not, it’s got to get done. We’re going to keep going on the Heidi Partridge case, but we’re, for now, pulling back on the rest of the IRS investigation.”

Walter’s quiet for a moment. “That feels like a kick in the stomach,” comes out when he finally speaks.

“I know. I’ve gotten what’s likely good advice lately, and… Can’t build your castle without a proper foundation. We go after the FBI first, focus in on us, make sure our own house, and team, is in order, and then we’ll go after the big players.”

Walter sounds disappointed, just like Tim. “Probably a good idea.”

“Yeah. Probably. Next time, we’re not going to get a heads up from the AG letting us know one of our guys has been talking.”

“That’s an upside,” though Walter sounds lukewarm on that.

“Doesn’t feel like much, though, does it?”

“No. Granted, I only had one person in the IRS. Getting people into play is difficult right now.”
Tim nods. “Yeah. Another reason to wait, we need to get our own teams filled out.”

“Okay. So, hiring, and…”

“Start here. Go through the old complaints if you don’t have any idea of who to target first. Just because we cut the Public Corruption department to the bone, doesn’t mean we’ve looked wider. Go forth, kick ass, take names, and get me, and the rest of the FBI, a clean team to do great things with.”

Walter sounds a bit more enthusiastic as he says, “On it, Boss.”
Pulling up to the house, ready to start Christmas weekend, Tim’s feeling… pretty good. He’s… wary probably isn’t the right word, but it’s in the right neighborhood at the idea of the grand gathering of the McGee clan.

He completely gets it from his grandmother’s perspective. For the first time in, forever… since Nelson’s funeral, so, thirty years, which is close enough to forever… almost all of her family is getting together in one place.

He’s sure that when he’s 85, the idea of getting the kids, and their spouses, and their kids and their spouses, and possibly their kids, all in one place for a massive Christmas extravaganza will seem awesome. So, he completely gets it for her.

But… Okay, things are great with his Uncle Tom and Aunt Lynne. He enjoys spending time with them, and probably needs to have a little chat with Tom about an extremely clandestine mission to get people looking at the AG’s office. Something where he’ll have a year or two to plan and get the right people for it. So, sure, side A of the extended family is fine.

And, that one visit with Uncle Mike went just fine, too.

But he’s a little apprehensive that John’s going to come up. Either from the other cousins, who don’t know all the story, or the alcohol will get flowing, and what’s likely good memories for Penny, kids all messing around doing Christmas-y things, will get talked about, and he’ll have to listen to stories about John being… human. A kid. A person with a past and a childhood and all of those messy ties that make him less of a monster and more of a…

Whatever he is.

But, apprehensive or not, he’s sitting in the car, watching flurries drift down, kissing the windshield and melting on the glass, getting colder by the second, because he turned the engine off when he pulled in.

It’s time to move.

Tromping through the driveway he passes several cars he doesn’t recognize, as well as Jimmy’s car, and Breena’s. Looks like he’s the last of his crew in tonight.

The idea of all of them at home makes him smile. Sure, he can’t give everyone a proper greeting, but just seeing them will be good, and it’s not like there are all that many hours between now and bedtime.

He opens the front door, seeing that as of yet, no Christmas decorations are up. Apparently, like last year, this year they’re going to go do the decorating on the 24th. He likes the idea of that. Especially as the kids get older, having something for them to do most of the day before Christmas seems like an excellent idea.

The warmth and light of inside hits him, along with a rattling sound and a really bizarre smell.
Coffee. Maybe? Smoke and... something else, he’s not sure what. The whole house is drenched in it.

As he steps in, hanging his coat in the coat closet, and toeing off his shoes, putting them in the line with the other shoes, lots of other shoes, he wonders what’s going on. Yes, any house with a Gibbs in it, yet alone Team Gibbs, is going to have a certain odor of coffee, but this is… maybe… burnt coffee?

He steps further into the house, greeting family, kissing kiddos, hugging them, but still wondering what that rattling sound is. It’s coming from the kitchen, where, apparently many of the adults are. He can hear voices, but isn’t focusing enough on them to hear what they’re actually saying.

It’s only when he’s got Sean on his hip, carrying him to the kitchen that he catches the conversation.

“Wedding present from Tim and Abby and Jimmy and Breena. We got home, found it, and decided to bring it along and play with it,” Abbi’s saying, smiling at a collection of McGees, while Jethro’s watching the spinning coffee roaster drum with laser-like attention.

Tim feels a wide smile spreading over his face, watching the two of them show it off and play with it. “I take it you like it?”

Abbi’s grinning, and Gibbs looks away from the coffee for the barest hint of a second to nod in agreement.

Tim hugs both of them, and then looks around. He sees Penny, and Uncle Tom and Aunt Lynne, one of his cousins, and he doesn’t know the little girl… so she’s got to be one of Uncle Mike’s grandkids. Tony drifts into the kitchen, sees what Gibbs and Borin is playing with, and sighs. “Tim! It was hard enough to get him the right coffee when we’re out, now he’s going to have to come up with Rule Nine: C: Always carry coffee!”

Tim snersks at that, feeling very pleased.

It’s vaguely surreal to need to be introduced to his family, but… Uncle Tom’s extended family has spent most of their lives in Japan. Uncle Mike’s extended family has spent all of their lives in Australia. Tim’s never been to Japan, and hasn’t been in Australia for 39 years. He hasn’t met most of his cousins, and has never had the opportunity to meet all of the second cousins.

So, surreal or not, he’s shaking hands, and introducing himself and his kids to a collection of people, most of them with his last name, many of them with similar eyes (shape, not color, he got his green eyes from his mom) and hair, who he’s never met before.

He wonders, idly, if he has just bumped into one of the assorted McGee cousins, if he’d recognize they look a bit similar, or if he’s only seeing it because he’s looking for it.

When they set up the house, they knew they’d be facing a situation of an unknown number of children, who would, in all likelihood want to entertain buddies here as time went on. They also knew that, an hour out of DC, when they’d have gatherings here, people would likely want to stay the night rather than drive back, late.
So, when they set the house up, they didn’t stint on guest rooms. There’s three furnished guest rooms, and though right now it’s only got carpet, painted walls, and empty shelves, there is a wide area that will be a dorm-like room for the kids when they get older so that, even if it’s only the cousins, they can all have sleep-overs. And when they get older and invite larger groups of buddies, there’s room for them, too. And, best of all, they’ll have a chunk of the house that’s not directly underfoot of the rest of the family.

With all of that space, by the time they got all the rooms furnished, they figured they were ready for whatever guest situations might hit the House.

That’s until every one of Penny’s descendants descended on the place.

Because they’ve also got a nursery-age baby, and because they’re in on the McPalmer family dynamic, the McGee-Holland branch of the family is rooming with the McPalmers. Sarah and Glenn have Jimmy and Breena’s room, and Nick’s bunking with Donnie.

Tom and Lynne have the first of the guest rooms.

Mike and Darla have the second one.

The third one, and no one was expecting this when they set the place up, but they likely should have, became Fornell and Wendy’s room about three months ago. Apparently, with Emily not staying over every weekend, Tobias and Wendy have been missing family time, so… They come to the house and get a fix of babies and ‘young people’ two out of every three weeks.

Which leaves the dorm area, the living room, Ducky and Penny’s study, the library, and the entertainment room for Tim’s remaining twenty-three cousins and second cousins.

Apparently, there are a lot of McGees. Because they’re so scattered, and because his part of the family moved every two years, it never occurred to Tim that he’s got a big family, but looking around… Yeah, a lot of McGees.

Most of the first night is people getting settled, making sure everyone’s got towels and pillows, and showing off, again and again, where everything is, with a side of, apparently, in Australia and Japan, not everything works the same way. Things Tim takes for granted, like how to plug in a smart phone, or how to get hot water out of the shower, are not immediately obvious to kids, or adults for that matter, who have spent their whole lives in Japan.

Tim’s explained why the plugs in the US look weird to different collections second cousins twice now, and it looks like a third one, Perri, Tom’s six-years-old granddaughter, and as of this second in time Molly’s second favorite person on earth, just noticed and wants to know why the outlets are weird.

Dinner is loud. Even for a gathering at the house, this is a lot of people.

Half of Mike’s family has never seen snow before, so they’re glued to the window, watching it fall, and dying to get outside in the morning and play in the stuff. Sure, there’s only an inch on the ground, and the weather channel’s saying they’re only going to get two inches total, but for people who’ve never seen it before, it’s fascinating.
There are stories, a lot of them, but this relieves Tim quite a bit, many of them are life in the Navy, or next to it, stories. Part of that is probably because it lets people like Gibbs and Ducky, Connor and Alvin, Mike’s son-in-laws, and Robert, Tom’s younger son-in-law, add their own stories about military life, instead of monopolizing the conversation on McGee family memories.

Part of it is there are some edges here, and John isn’t the only one.

Ducky’s never objected to any tales of Nelson McGee. He’s sure that if they had ever met, they’d have been splendid friends, and he’d like to think that if Nelson is looking on, he approves of the life he’s made with Penny, but with the exception of Tom, who’s already had this conversation with his mother, none of the rest of the crew is sure how much Ducky wants to hear about Penny’s first husband.

But, the biggest aspect of it is John. Apparently everyone in this group over the age of 15 knows that John’s more or less an off limits topic. And the ones under 15 are only tangentially aware of their great-uncle John. If any of them have noticed he’s missing, none of them have asked about him, at least, not where Tim can hear. (And if any of them wonder about Tim and Sarah being introduced as Penny’s grandkids, instead of say Mike’s kids or Tom’s kids, none of them have mentioned it.)

So… tales of idiot officers, and daring stories of sneaking in and doing whatever, of running a sixteen part con to get ice cream in the middle of Vietnam… Those are funny and don’t risk opening up a collection of sticky emotions.

And, of course, there’s the world right now, which offers a collection of interesting moments to keep the conversation going.

There’s peanut butter, which like snow, isn’t common in Australia or Japan, and the kids are fascinated by it. (And Mike’s gagging a bit on a spoonful of it. “Gah! That’s not how I remember it! It used to be sweet, didn’t it?” Gibbs takes Jimmy’s organic, no sugar added, ‘healthy’ peanut butter away from Mike and hands him a jar of Jif. “This is the stuff I eat.” He takes a tentative bite, then the smile spreads across his face. “This is what I remember. Anyone got white bread and grape jelly?” The kids look appalled at that idea.)

Some of the issue with loud is language. Akiri, Tom’s oldest grandkid is Japanese. Well, maybe not if you ask someone with a million generations of Japanese grandparents, but, by American standards, if your Dad is Japanese, and you were born in Japan, have lived your whole life in Japan, and only speak Japanese, and are a citizen of Japan, you’re Japanese. And, while his two youngest grandkids have two American parents, they’ve also spent most of their lives in Japan, and primarily speak Japanese. So, there’s a certain level of repeating bits of conversation over and over loud and slow, and translating into and out of Japanese.

(Molly’s fascinated by Mandy, who’s never used a fork before. She’s just as fascinated by Molly, who doesn’t know how to use chopsticks, and they’re both doing a four-ish-year-old version of charades to talk to each other.)

Tim was hoping to get both Tom and Abbi alone for a few minutes, he’s got some things to ask them, but with the chaos of everyone here, and introductions, and all the rest of it, he never gets around to it.

He’s telling Abby, Jimmy, and Breena about that as they’re getting ready for bed, earlier than normal, but entertaining two dozen strangers is tiring, and tomorrow’s a packed day, and Abby says
to him, “Three day weekend, baby, you’ve got time.”

He shrugs, spits, and rinses off his toothbrush. “True.”

Then he shrugs again. There’ll be other weekends. Okay, maybe not this one or the next one, but after that… After all, it’s not like he’s in a flaming rush to get this one. All the problems in the world will still be there after January 3rd, and none of them need to be, or can be, solved right this instant.

Tim can feel it, standing in the bathroom, putting his toothbrush back. It’s the moment where he fully shifts out of being the guy who solves cases, which have defined deadlines that have to be done as soon as possible, and yesterday is even better than as soon as possible, into the guy who manages systems.

“Play the long game…” he says it quietly, and the other three people in the bathroom with him look at him curiously. Tim shakes his head. “I just… I’ve got time.”

“Tim?” Breena asks as she’s putting toothpaste on her brush.

“I’ve got time. If I’m going to build these long, complicated, go in, get all the evidence, sort ‘em out from top to bottom, three-or-four-year-long cases, I don’t have to start them right this second. There’s no mourning widow begging for answers. There’s no prosecutor who needs that detail now. Clues aren’t vanishing right and left. Prints aren’t decaying in the rain somewhere. I’ve got time. I can set these up right, get the right people, and take the time to do it properly.”

Jimmy smiles at him. “And that’s a good thing?”

“It’s… freeing.” He smiles a bit. The idea of not having to rush, not having to get it done yesterday is almost unsettling. “And at the very least, I think it means I get to have a good Christmas.”

Mike steps out onto the back porch, cup of Irish coffee in hand. Gibbs may not have a lot of experience with coffee roasting, but his first attempt produced some lovely results.

Or, maybe if it’s got enough whiskey in it, everything tastes fine.

Tom’s already out there, wearing his coat and boots. He looks at his brother, nods, and then says, looking out at the dark woods behind them, “I’ve been back here a few times. Kind of hard to see the path, but,” he flicks on a flashlight, playing it over the snow, “I won’t get us lost.”

Mike snorts a half-hearted almost laugh. “When has a McGee ever been lost? Dad’ll raise up from the dead to lecture both of us about P To The Seventh if we ventured out without a compass or map.”

Tom nods at that. Both of them thinking of a half million lectures about Proper Prior Planning Prevents Piss Poor Performance.

“You got it?” Tom asks.

Mike nods, patting a rectangular lump under his coat. “Yeah. They sent it… him… shit. I…” He looks sad and confused at that. “Yeah. They sent me word six weeks ago, and sent the ashes two weeks later.”
Tom nods at that, too, then looks to the river, a glinting silver thread through winter night black trees. “He’d cuss both of us out for this. ‘Never want to see a fucking river again you used cumrags! What could possibly make you think this is where I want my ashes? Speak up, fuckheads!’”

“‘Used cumrags?’” Mike replies to the ghost of their brother that Tom has conjured. “‘Yeah, well, at least we were bright enough not to piss off the whole fucking family. Who’s the used cumrag, now, dumbass? If you’d kept your damn temper, and secretary, in check, we’d have done this together, at the ocean, on your fucking flagship, with a flag, and your rank intact. Not sneaking out, on our own, at a damn river.’”

Tom blinks hard, leading the way through the inch of snow in the backyard. “Kept his damn temper, and secretary, in check, and we’d likely not be doing this period. They give you cause when they called?”

“Yeah. Shit cause. Cardiac arrest.”

Tom winces. He’s helped to fake enough death certificates to know that cardiac arrest means the heart stopped beating. Literally every dead person ever has suffered cardiac arrest. “Get any scuttlebutt?”

Mike shakes his head, a little surprised that Tom would ask. If anyone would have scuttlebutt, it’s him. “No. Not like I’ve got a lot of feelers in Leavenworth. You?”

Tom exhales, frustrated. As well as he could, he kept track of his brother. “I’ve got feelers all over the place, but no one there had anything to say about him. Not like he was alone there, after the Fall, Leavenworth was filled to the gills with high-ranking idiots. A quarter of his graduating class at Annapolis was there with him. He got there, he kept to himself, barely talked to anyone, ever. Almost no visitors. The Navy’s new drone guy showed up twice to pick his brain, and that was it. Kept his eyes in a book when he wasn’t rehabbing his hand, and did his best to ignore everything. Then six weeks ago, just like you, I get the call.”

“Yeah.” Mike rubs his eyes. “Apparently, they don’t send a chaplain when your brother dies in prison. Just a fucking call.” He looks back to the house. They can see a few lights glowing through the trees. “We can still turn around and tell Mom.”

Tom stops, and looks back toward the house, too. Their mother’s side of the house isn’t visible from where they are, but he can imagine her, easily. “No. They weren’t speaking. She’d cut him out for what he did to Tim. Wrote him out of the will. Made sure they wouldn’t cross paths, unless he wanted to find her, and… I’m fine with her thinking he was so damn stiff-necked he couldn’t make himself bend.”

Mike doesn’t think Tom’s wrong about that. If John had gotten out of prison, he would have just… vanished probably. Never gotten in contact with any of them again. Still… “You’d want to know if it was one of your kids. And I’d want to know if it was one of mine. Even if…” Mike shudders, imagining things going that badly with his family, praying they never will.

“I know. I would, but… Hell, she probably wants to know, but… I keep remembering after she got the news about James and… You saw her after the stuff with John and Tim went down… She’s eighty-six, or will be next week, and…” Tom doesn’t have to finish that sentence. They can both maintain the lie for the few years their mother is likely to live.

Mike nods. “Not like it’s the first time you, or I,’ve lied to her.”

Tom half-shrugs at that, and then points his flashlight to the river.
Mike takes one step, and then stops. “You want to tell Tim?”

Tom shakes his head. “If I thought he could keep the secret, I would, but… He’s a good guy. I like him, and I like working with him. He’s got balls, and a good head, too. But if we tell him, he’ll tell Abby, and Jimmy, and Breena, and the next time Jimmy or Abby sees Mom, she’ll know. Some men are made for secrets. Ducky. If I thought he needed to know, I’d tell Ducky. But Tim’s not a man made for secrets. Whatever’s happening with him, he tells his family.” Before Mike can say anything, Tom adds, “Sarah, too. I think she’d keep the secret, but she’d be sad, and everyone would wonder, and… I’m not putting her in that position. Not today. Not wrecking her memories of Nick’s first Christmas.”

Mike looks toward the river, and back to the house. He doesn’t like to think about the fact that one day, their mom won’t be around, but, in all likelihood, that day is coming, and soon. But just because he doesn’t like thinking about it doesn’t mean it isn’t true, and doesn’t mean he can pretend it’s not a factor in what they’re doing. “It’ll hold.”

Tom nods. “It will. Maybe we’re just kicking this down the road. Maybe in a year, Tim’ll notice he didn’t get the ‘Heads up, the guy who assaulted you is out of prison’ note. Maybe he’ll do some digging. Or maybe he’ll just tuck John into the back of his head, leave him there, and let it be.”

“Maybe.” Mike nods to the river, sipping his coffee, frozen breath mingling with the steam coming off the beverage. “Come on. It’s cold out here.”

Tom chuckles at that. It’s a bit below freezing, chilly, but not frigid. “Too much time in Oz.” He turns his flashlight to the river. A moment later, they’re on the snow-frosted dock, standing at the edge of the Potomac.

For a moment, the brothers McGee look at each other, not sure where to start. Then Mike says, “Like Dad said, we’re all water, given breath for a moment, set free to walk the earth for a lifetime.” He reaches into his coat pocket and removes the small wooden box with his brother’s ashes.

“From the oceans we came, and to the oceans we return,” Tom replies, adding another of their father’s lines.

Mike opens the box, and tosses his brother’s ashes high, letting them scatter over the river. They watch the tiny flakes float gently on the air before kissing the surface of the water. Some sinking, some floating downriver.

“Light takes a little while, but you’ll get there,” Mike adds.

Tom pulls his flask out of his pocket. He chose not to dilute his bourbon with coffee. He takes a good, long drink, and then pours another one into the water to go with John, then passes the flask to Mike, who takes one more, and the pours yet another one into the water, and one more. “Drink up, boys.”

Tom’s voice is rough as he says, “Dad and James?”

Mike nods. “Yeah.” He wipes his eyes. He takes one more sip, and hands it back to Tom, who finishes the flask.

Tom then raises the flask to the river, and the sky, and says, “One day. When we rejoin the water that gave us life.”

Mike rests his hand on his brother’s back, and echoes him. “One day.”
The day before the day before Christmas. December 23rd. The most ‘meh’ day of a child’s year.

And, well, it’s a kind of ‘meh’ day for adults, too.

Tomorrow, the great-holiday-decorate-a-thon begins. Which means today is the great-pre-holiday-decorate-a-thon-cleaning-binge.

They last did this right before Passover, and the house did get a good, thorough going over then. But it’s been more than eight months, and somehow, possibly the large number of babies and small children who dwell there on a regular basis, and the doggies don’t help, but the place is looking a tad on the grungy side.

It’s not like they never clean. Every weekend, before going back to their own places, everything gets a going over. But there’s ‘we ran a vacuum over everything,’ which is the usual routine, and there’s ‘we got the magic erasers out and took all of the crayon off the walls, and found the cans of paint to touch up the dings, ran the curtains through the washing machine to get the dust out, spot cleaned all the blops off the carpet, and…’

Or as Mike put it, soft cotton cloth in hand, gently buffing the banister which had lost some of its glow over the year since it was installed, “You drug our whole family from Australia just to get some extra hands in place to clean? Really, Mom? I will mail you the check next year to pay for the cleaners!”

That got some amused chuckling, along with a gentle whack upside the back of the head from Penny. “Get to it. Inspection’s at dinner.”

“Oh, God!” Tom groans. He’s in charge of removing every one of the twenty-seven million pictures from the mantle, dusting them all, polishing the glass, dusting the mantle, and putting them all back.

“I take it this is triggering a few memories,” Ducky offers. He’s got a bottle of spot remover and is working on removing the various forgotten drips and drabs that the seven McPalmOzzoLand babies and two doggies have left on their upholstery.

Tom sighs, and rolls his eyes. “Weekly inspection. Every Friday night, before Mom and Dad would have people over, we’d have to have our rooms, and whichever room of the house we were in charge of that week, inspected. Saturday rolls around, and we’d get our assignment. We shared rooms, so, I’d get my half of the room I shared with Mike, and, maybe the downstairs powder room. And five o’clock, on Friday, Mom, or sometimes Dad, would roll through and check *everything.*”

Tim, who’s been working on putting back all the various kitchen equipment and cooking gear that’s wandered off from their homes over the course of the year, (“Who put thought the Paprika went in the freezer?” Tim’s muttering as he’s putting it back in the spice rack. “Don’t move it, I’m using it in my smoothies, and it’s better cold,” Ziva replies, putting down the silverware she and Abbi are polishing, snatching it out of his hands, and putting it back in the freezer.) hears that and smirks. “We did that, too. Every Friday, five o’clock.” He shoots a mock glare at Penny. “So, I’ve got you to thank for that?”

“Five o’clock inspection was a tradition in the Langston house. My mother made sure every week that the house was clean. To the point where she would take a pin, and go to every corner of the
house, and see if there was any dirt in it. You thought I was tough?” She snorts a laugh. “I didn’t have a vacuum cleaner until I was married. We swept that house by hand, scrubbed it with lye soap, wood brushes, and rags, and if Mama found a speck of dirt in it, you’d get your fanny paddled with Papa’s belt, and we did it in calf-length dresses, heels, stockings, and girdles.”

That causes the two younger generations of McGees, who did have such labor saving devices, no threat of physical punishment, and tended to clean in dungarees (jeans by Tim’s generation) and t-shirts, (and, in Tim’s case, his mom just checked to see that everything was tidy with no visible dust bunnies) to look a tad chagrinned.

Penny’s standing near her youngest son, watching his buffing, and says, “Mama was born in 1900. She got married at seventeen, and a week later her brand new husband shipped off to fight in the Great War. A year and a bit more, her husband came home from World War One, having survived everything the Kaiser’s navy had to throw at him, and they got some baby-making done, meaning she was eighteen-years-old and two months pregnant when he, and everyone else, promptly came down with the Spanish Influenza. She’d tell you how in Boston, the doctor had a helper, and he’d go through, open all the doors between the doctor and the patients, so the doctor didn’t have to touch anything, and he could just go in and out, and how he said to her that the cleaner she could keep everything, the less likely Papa was to come down with some sort of secondary infection. But she cleaned that house, and he lived, and she never got sick, and my oldest brother showed up two seasons later, healthy as can be. So, ever after, that house was kept clean.

“That was before the docs knew the difference between bacteria and viruses, right?” Tim adds.

“No. The first virus was discovered in 1892, Timothy,” Ducky replies, looking up from the spot he’s treating on the sofa. “It was, however, long before there was much, besides pray, and clean, that anyone could do about any sort of sickness. My mother’s family was living in Edinburg when the Spanish Flu came, and they had the means to get out of the city. ‘Fresh country air’ was about the best anyone could do in the face of a viral epidemic.”

Penny sniggers at that. “Until you get on the train, packed in with everyone else who has the flu, trying to flee the city, and catch it from them.”

Ducky inclines his head at that. She isn’t wrong. That’s how the flu got out to places like Loch Morran, where the MacLannaghs, his mother’s family, called home. “The wonders of fortune. My grandfather had an automobile. He was always keen on ‘the latest thing.’ I still remember it. A Vauxhaul 20 A09. It had,” and here Ducky pauses for dramatic purposes, “twenty horse power. It was an absolutely gorgeous car. He kept it gleaming white, with a tan leather interior, and a tan, leather roof. It could seat six, and if you talked to it nicely, it would, on occasion, consent to start and actually carry said six people around. He called it, but only when the ladies were out of earshot, ‘The White Arse’, because it had the temperament and work ethic of an especially stubborn donkey.”

“But it worked to get your mother and her family out of Edinburg,” Mike says.

“Apparently, in times of need, it could be prevailed upon to get up and do some driving. And the country place was well off the beaten path. It’s entirely likely that those two bits of history combined and are entirely responsible for me being in this room, now.”

That also gets a chuckle. Penny drifts over to Ducky, giving him a kiss on the top of the head, and
the cleaning continues.

Fornell and Wendy roll in around noon, each of them carrying as many grocery bags as they can, and as he kicks the door shut behind him, Fornell says, “Got more of them in the car. Who’s on toting duty?”

Tony, who’s scrubbing out the foyer powder room sticks his head out and says, “We’re all up to our necks in chores. You’re on lug it yourself duty, unless you want to grab a scrub brush.”

Fornell looks at Wendy, both of them look at everyone cleaning, and turn right around. Given the choice of cleaning or groceries, both of them will take groceries.

Gibbs would have to admit, that it’s a little odd to hear variations on the theme of Grandpa and not have it be aimed at him. He’s almost looked around twice to see if Ed and Jeanie decided to drop by, but… Nope. Both Tom and Mike are grandfathers, too. (Mike since he was forty-two, which was something of a surprise for him. Apparently, one of the hazards of on-base housing is that your seventeen-year-old daughter falls in love with a nineteen-year-old Marine, and next thing you know, you’ve got your first grandkid before you’ve got your first gray hair. And while it’s true that nineteen-year-old Annapolis Plebe Mike was quite appreciative of the seventeen-year-old girls who lived near Annapolis, forty-one-year-old Mike just about had a stroke when his, personal, seventeen-year-old daughter brought and extremely sheepish Private First Class over for a ‘serious chat’ one day. On the upside: They’re still in love. Melanie and her two little sisters lit up his world in a way he couldn’t imagine before she showed up. And Connor’s outside, helping Jimmy and Tony stock firewood for the weekend, so these days they get on fine. Though he was sorely tempted to get Connor transferred to Afghanistan when he got the news that Melanie was cooking.)

But, hearing it he is.

He’s also noticing that it’s kind of nice to have some people here who are his age. In their usual group, Fornell’s nine years older, and Tony’s nine years younger, so they both missed growing up in the ‘60s. Mike and Tom are both a little older than he is, but only a little. Like him, they missed Vietnam, at least for active duty. Mike officially spent a few months on a battleship before Nixon finally, fully ended things. Tom graduated Annapolis in ‘76.

They talk a lot about the past, telling the kiddos stories, and one of the McGee boys will remember something, often something silly, like Ovaltine, which will bring back a wash of memories for Gibbs, things he hasn’t thought of for decades.

Things he intentionally hasn’t thought of, because, stupid little things like Ovaltine are tied to his mom.

So, as Darla’s making up a round of chocolate milk for the kids, and Mike’s talking about Penny mixing up Ovaltine for them, Gibbs is seeing his mom, standing in their kitchen, at the counter, that tin of powered chocolate stuff (he’s not sure what’s actually in Ovaltine, but it was supposed to have vitamins and minerals or whatever) putting a spoonful or two into a glass of milk. He can hear the little clicking sound of the spoon against the glass as she’d mix it up. In his memory, she’s wearing a blue dress, and her usual yellow apron. The window was over her right shoulder, and light would stream into it, making her hair glow new-penny copper. He was sitting at the table, eating a grilled
cheese sandwich, and she was making him his drink.

He hasn’t thought of that in decades, likely, and he knows why. Even a year ago, this memory would have hurt.

And now it doesn’t. It’s just a moment in time, one that he enjoyed. So, with Molly in his lap, he reaches for the glass of chocolate milk, handing it to her, and says, “I remember that. There were commercials for it, too. I’d watch Mr. Rogers,” Molly and Kelly watch that on occasion and know what it is, “and there’d be commercials for Ovaltine.”

“You watched Mr. Rogers?” Tom’s having a hard time believing that. In his world Mr. Rogers wasn’t a thing until his kids were little.

“Yeah, when I was little. It was local out of Pittsburgh before it got big, and if you got the rabbit ears in exactly the right spot, and the weather was right, you could get it up in Stillwater.”

(Tim’s also fascinated by the idea of little kid Jethro sitting in front of one of those huge 1960s TVs, watching Mr. Rogers. He does some quick googling, sees the show started in ’63, which would have put Jethro at 4 or 5, so… Yeah. Jethro in front of the TV, singing “Won’t You Be My Neighbor.” He can’t wait to tell the rest of his crew.)

“Dad had a store…” Molly’s looking at him, confused. In her world, “Dad” is Jimmy. “My Dad,” Gibbs says. He grabs his phone, and finds the picture of him and Jack in front of his car. Then he finds the shot of Jack cuddling baby Molly at her first Christmas. “That’s you and him. You only got to meet him a few times, but if you hear anyone talking about Jack, that’s my daddy.”

Molly stares at the picture, and then shakes her head. “Sean.”

Gibbs nods. They’ve had variations on this conversation before. Molly’s firmly convinced that she’s always been almost-four-years-old, and any babies purported to be her in photographs are whichever McPalmer is closest to that age, no matter how little said baby may look like the curly haired girl in the picture. He continues on with the story. “My daddy, he had a store up in Stillwater. Like the grocery store, but it was a lot smaller. And there was a shelf with Ovaltine on it. Chocolate and strawberry. And after seeing a lot of commercials for it, I started asking if I could have some.”

“Ohh… You had the good stuff,” Mike adds.

Gibbs winces and shakes his head. “Not as I remember it. But… Jack ran the grocery store, and… When things got too old to sell, he’s bring them home. Didn’t want them to go to waste. And Ovaltine was kind of expensive, so… We’d get the stuff right before it expired. Maybe that’s part of why I didn’t like the strawberry stuff.”

Tom chuckles at that. “I didn’t think that stuff could expire.”

Gibbs shrugs. He takes a sip of Molly’s chocolate milk. It’s good, doesn’t taste anything like his memory of Ovaltine. “You might have something with that.”

As the afternoon wears on, Tim finds Abbi in the kitchen working on prepping her part of the upcoming feast. Christmas Eve they’re having roast beef and all the trimmings, and Abbi’s in charge of some of the “trimmings.”
Specifically, right now, she’s working on dough for the million soft, fluffy, yeasty sweet rolls that are going to go along with this, and the dough for the cinnamon rolls that are going to be part of Christmas morning breakfast.

“Need help?”

She raises an eyebrow. Tomorrow, when she’s got to shape all of these little monsters, she’ll need help. Right now she’s dumping powders and liquids into the mixer, blending them, and then scraping them out into plastic baggies to rise.

Tim shrugs and stands back to the counter. “Okay, I’ll supervise.”

That gets a snerk out of Abbi. “What’s going on?”

“You’ve been all over hell and gone the last few months. Seen almost two thirds of your men. How is it?”

That gets a little eye roll, too. “It’s work. It has to be done, so I’m doing it, but… Yeah, I’d rather solve murders. Why?”

Tim takes a while to explain the IRS situation, and talking with Leon about having a real team, and running a department, and says, “So… I’ve got this huge pool of people, and… I don’t know them. I’m not a familiar face. And I’m thinking about what you’re doing and… Is it useful?”

“Wouldn’t do it if it wasn’t useful.”

Tim sighs at that. He gets that might not have been the best way to ask the question. “Okay, let me try it this way: given everything else I’m doing right now, would you suggest I attempt a modified version of this?”

That gets Abbi’s interest. “How modified? You’re not planning on spending the next year on the road, are you?” She looks horrified at that idea.

“NO!” Tim’s horrified at that idea, too. “I was thinking appointments or calls. If I can get three twenty minute calls in a day, more on days when I’m low on meetings, I can… Spend the next five years at it, and still not have talked to everyone at the FBI.” He shakes his head. Yeah, he’s got time, but that’s probably a bit slower than he wants to go. “This is futile.”

Abbi thinks about it. “Not necessarily. I’m trying to weed out my bad apples with these trips. I can’t do that in a twenty-minute meeting. What are you hoping to do?”

“I…” He’s been thinking about it, feeling it, but this is somewhat nebulous. “Part of it is I want people to be willing to come to me when they run into something bad. Part of it is looking for the bad apples. Part of it is... finding who goes where. What talent I’ve got and how to use it.”

Abbi thinks about that, turning off the mixer. Tim grabs one of the baggies, holding it open while she scrapes the dough out. He flashes her a little See, I’m useful look. That gets an eye roll, too. “Twenty minutes won’t get your bad apples. If they’re so bad at this they can’t take a twenty minute meeting or phone call with you, they’re not smart or smooth enough to be involved in anything that’ll cause real problems. But, it will let your people stick your face to your name. And it’ll make them realize you mean it when you say you want to change things. I’ll violate Eight and assume ‘Hard-Ass McGee’ isn’t coming to these meetings, and ‘Easy-Going, Sincere McGee’ is.”

“That’s the idea. Be approachable. See what problems are on people’s radar. See what they need to do their jobs better. See where they are and where they could be. You getting a lot of that?”
Abbi nods. “More than you likely will. I’m actually in their offices, so I’m seeing everything from
the copy machine is older than Emily and only works on odd Tuesdays, to the one guy who no one
wants to be in the same room with. But if you ask, I’m sure they’ll give you at least some ideas of
what’s up. And they may be more likely to come to you once you open the door to them.”

“I can hope, right?”

She nods at that. He seals up the bag in his hand, and lays it on the counter next to the other ones.

“I need to find my Gibbslets. You got them?”

Abbi half-smiles at that. “A few. Though we call them Borins at CGIS.”

Tim chuckles at that. “Yeah. You would.” Then another thought hits him. “And, are we going to
keep calling you Borin?”

She looks away from the flour she’s measuring out. “You mean, after next week?”

Tim smiles at her.

She glances around, but Gibbs isn’t anywhere nearby. “I’m keeping Borin at work. But a filled out
copy of the paperwork to change my name to Abigail Borin-Gibbs is his Christmas present.”

Tim smiles even bigger at that. “He’s going to love that.”

Abbi smiles, too. “Yeah, I think he will.”

Gibbs isn’t around because he, and the rest of the grandpa squad, are in the front yard with the kids,
Mona, Jackson, and the sleds. They’re ‘officially’ riding herd on this crew, keeping an eye on them
while they do everything in their power to slide around on the two inches of snow they got.

It’s not going all that well. The Australia contingent is fairly sure Americans are insane, because
lurching down a cold hill on a tiny sheet of plastic makes no sense to them. And Mike’s explaining to
them that this works a whole lot better when there’s enough snow to cover the grass.

Fornell, meanwhile, is checking the weather. “Gonna be below freezing tonight and tomorrow.”

The other three of them exchange glances, not immediately seeing why that’s important. “And are
we getting more snow to go with it?” Tom asks, staring at the bright blue sky.

“Nope. But we’ve got two inches of snow on a very long driveway, two inches of snow on the front
yard, and the back yard, and we’ve got more than twenty of us. We could build one hell of a
sledding track,” Fornell says with a massive grin.

That get some wide eyes, and a lot of looking around, seeing what looks like miles and miles of
snow just sitting around, and then the grins start to spread across faces.

“I’ll go get our boys!” Gibbs says, darting into the house, huge smile on his face. “Tobias, go get the
shovels and wheelbarrow!”
Never let it be said that there was an engineering problem that a tribe of McGees couldn’t solve. It’s not an Olympic-level sledding track, but only because they used what was kicking around the place to make it.

Tim clocks them at 28 miles an hour on the last downhill curve, before the uphill slope and long s bend bleeds off enough speed to stop the sled without a crash.

That’s plenty fast for a plastic sled with Jimmy, Molly, and Kelly on it. The older kids get to go on their own, and they’re shrieking at it. The mystery of why Americans like sledding is a mystery no longer.

And, though he wouldn’t admit it, but there is video to prove it, Fornell’s also yelling as he goes around that last curve, holding Wendy tight, as they hurtle down the track.

The night before the night before ends with a collection of frosty adults, with wind-reddened faces, and cold-stiffened fingers, heading inside for cocoa, coffee, and tea, all liberally laced with alcohol, giggling, and buzzing from the fun of the sled track.

The day before means decorating and cooking. The house is clean. It’s filled with people.

And now it’s time to make it Christmas.

Last year, when they went into the woods to find a Christmas tree, it was just the guys and the two oldest kids.

This year, it’s an expedition. Because they were raised in Australia or Japan none of the assorted McGee kids have ever done anything like this, and they’re all giddy at the idea.

So it’s true that Kelly and Anna are sitting on the sled, waiting to get pulled. Molly, Perri, Melanie, Akiri, James, Mandy, Susan, Karen, Julie, Dan, and Adam are all ready to go.

Tim, Tony, and Jimmy are all fairly pleased to see that they get to share cutting down and lugging this thing in with three more men about their age, while Gibbs, Mike, Tom, and Fornell (the grandpa squad) are all on ‘supervising.’

The assorted kids pick, between them, enough Christmas trees to decorate Versailles within an inch of its life. Akiri’s not just going after pines, she’s also pointing out oaks and maples, too. (Jimmy does a good job of conjuring Ducky, who decided to stay inside, near the fire, to explain why the tree needs to be an evergreen. However, Akiri speaks Japanese, and Gibbs’s Japanese isn’t up to translating all the ins and outs of Pagan Yule festivals. They got a tiny, denuded of leaves, oak sapling for her.)

The grandpa squad narrows them down to three trees, all of which are evergreens, and all of which have the advantage of being small enough to actually fit into the house.

Cutting and lugging gets to decide which of the three they’re going to actually cut down.

And in only three hours, a tree is selected, cut down, wrangled back into the house, plopped into the
Abby and Breena have made, with the assistance of Lynne and Darla, by conservative estimate, a thousand pounds of cookie dough. At least, mounded up, waiting to get rolled out, it looks that way. Penny and Susan are in charge of rolling the dough out. Ziva, Tony, and Wendy are on cutting said cookies out, and getting them baked. Fornell claims to be on ‘quality control,’ which means sampling a cookie or two from each batch. (Mona and Jackson would also like to be on ‘quality control’ and have successfully gotten Fornell to share a few cookies with them.)

There just isn’t enough room for more than five kids to be putting decorations on the tree all at once. (Even if it is a twelve foot tall tree.) So, each one gets his or her box of decorations, and time to put them on the tree. Everyone else is at the dining room table, with a tray of baked cookies and decorations.

Breena’s leaning over the table, showing the kids how to use the decorating tips and royal icing to draw designs on the cookies, and how to “flood” the inside of the design so there’s a nice, smooth, flat center.

Abby’s using the regular frosting, and the glitter, showing the younger kids how to make their cookies sparkle.

Ducky’s at the head of the table, spinning a yarn about how Santa got that bowl full of jelly belly, and that cookies are not only necessary, but vital to maintaining a proper Santa tummy. (He’s nibbling a cookie, and patting his own version of said Santa tummy.) “Of course,” he says, sipping his spiced cider, “It’s not just Santa who needs the cookies.”

Molly looks at her Ducky with big eyes. “Who else needs the cookies?”

“The reindeer, my Molly, without enough cookies, the reindeer can’t fly!” he says it with utter sincerity.

“No!” Perri says. “The reindeer have to fly!” she’s very certain about that.

“You are absolutely right. Christmas can’t happen if the reindeer can’t fly. That’s why we have to make a lot of cookies. We have to make sure that Santa gets his cookies and each of the reindeer get her cookies, as well.”

“Her cookies?” Melanie’s old enough she doesn’t believe in Santa or reindeer, but she’s never heard anyone refer to the reindeer as ‘she.’

“Of course, Melanie. You’ve seen pictures of them, correct?”

Melanie nods.

“It’s only the female reindeer who keep their antlers during the winter months. The male ones lose theirs in the autumn. So, though very few people know this, Donner and Blitzen and the rest of the reindeer are all ladies.”

Penny catches that bit. She reaches for a cookie with a smile on her face. “Well, if you’re going to coordinate gift delivery across the entire planet on one night, you’d certainly want women doing that.
Leave it to men, and only a quarter of the presents would get there, and they wouldn’t be wrapped.”

Breena and Abby, who have noticed their personal husbands appear to be allergic to wrapping paper, both laugh at that.

As one of the few members of the US-McGees who speaks Japanese, Ziva’s spending a lot of time with the assorted Japanese-McGees. She and Gibbs make sure the kids aren’t completely in the dark, but neither of them have had to speak it with any regularity in… decades, really.

So there have been a few moments where one party or the other is staring blankly at the other one, completely unsure what they could possibly mean.

Akiri’s getting ready to put her ornaments on the tree, and is asking why they’ve got little bits of silver foil that they’re going to dangle over the branches. Her branch of the family is Shinto, so Christmas just isn’t a big deal for them, add in a Tokyo apartment that couldn’t fit a Christmas tree, even if it were A Charlie Brown Christmas Special-sized, and Christmas trees just aren’t part of her world. Which is not to say she’s not enjoying it, she’s just not sure where everything goes, or why.

Ziva’s pretty sure she did a good job of answering what the foil was (tinsel), and why they use it. She knows she didn’t intentionally make any sort of joke, but seeing two grandkids and Tom McGee start just about pants wetting laughing tells her she’s got something wrong.

“What?” she switches to English.

Tom’s still giggling, and the kids are looking between him and Ziva. “The word you used for reflective… doesn’t mean reflective, not with the stress on that syllable.” He’s snarkily a little, still.

“What does it mean?” Ziva asks.

Tom shakes his head. “It doesn’t, not really… Uh… Spiny-backed-pig.”

That gets Tony into play. “Porcuswine? You managed to get Porcuswine into Japanese?”

Ziva gives him a gentle shove, and Tony goes on to explain the story of the Porcuswine, much to the amusement of the rest of the tree-decorating crew.

“Almost done?” Jimmy says, looking at the tree.

“Just about,” Tony replies.

Abby’s coming up to them, along with Ziva, Breena, Tim, Sarah, and Glenn. There are four little guys at this party who aren’t quite ready to put their own ornaments up.

Sean, the oldest of the bunch, has been watching this whole ornament thing with a lot of interest. Bright, shiny, sparkly things are his jam, and the tree is covered in them. If he could crawl, he’d be under that tree whacking at the ornaments. But he can’t so he’s had to be content to watch. Right now, Tim’s holding him while Abby’s rooting through the box, making sure each of them gets the right ones.
Sean’s is green and gold. It’s a small ball, and says: Sean James McGee First Christmas 2017

Dave’s is blue and silver and has: David Jethro DiNozzo First Christmas 2017

Nick’s is red and gold: Nicholas Armstrong Holland First Christmas 2017

The last one, Donnie’s, is red and white: Donald Timothy Palmer First Christmas 2017.

“Big year!” Glenn says, shaking his head a bit, holding Nick’s ornament. He reaches high, putting it on one of the empty branches near the top of the tree. Sarah gets a picture of him doing it, while Nicholas, who couldn’t care less about the tree or ornaments, kicks his little feet in his bouncy chair.

Tim lets Sean hold his, and he does, staring at it. Then he starts flinging his hands around, shaking it. Nothing much happens, but Abby decides to take it away, not wanting him to get scratched with the hook. She puts it on the tree, and Tim holds him close. “That one’s yours.” They both smile when Sean looks away from the ornament to Tim when he says that.

Ziva’s moving around the tree, looking for a good spot. Tony’s holding Dave, who’s also not terribly interested in any of this stuff. When Ziva finds the spot, he crouches next to her, and it, and gets a shot of the three of them, hanging Dave’s first ornament.

Breena’s got Donnie, and Jimmy’s got the ornament. He hangs it on the same branch that Anna and Molly put their ornaments. It’s bent under the weight of all of those balls, and candy canes, and tinsel, but Jimmy likes the idea of all of them together. Breena smiles, gets the shot of it, and then hands the phone to Abby, who, after a minutes of corralling kiddos, gets a shot of her, Jimmy, Molly, Anna, and Donnie, all sitting in front of the tree, the one branch with all of the ornaments in the corner of the shot.

Dinner’s almost ready as they finish that up, but there’s one last shot that Abby wants. They get the boys lined up on the sofa. (After putting a blanket on it. Ducky’s glare was more than enough to make sure they protected the newly cleaned upholstery.) The shot of all four boys, more or less all looking in the general direction of the camera, was a big hit with all of the assorted family members.

They’ve just finished getting everyone settled down for dinner when Jimmy’s phone buzzes. He glares at his phone, but lifts it to his ear. They see him nod, blink, nod again. “Okay. I’m three hours out. Tell Dornie, I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

They all know what that means. Breena squeezes his hand and gives him a half-hearted smile. “Body?”

Jimmy nods, standing up. “The only upside is, this looks like a car accident. I should be home in time for presents.” He bends down to kiss her, and then takes a few steps to kiss the kids, too. His eyes find Tim and Abby, and it might not be a kiss, but it’s close.

He’s got his phone to his ear, and is saying, “Dr. Allan, I hope you weren’t in the midst of stocking stuffing…” as he heads to their wing of the house, gathering his things.
When dinner is over, Ducky corrals the kids. “Come children. It’s time to make sure the reindeer get their cookies.” He’s got a plate heaped with cookies, and is wrapping a scarf around his neck.

“Ducky?” Melanie asks.

“We must feed the reindeer,” he says with a little smile. “After all, Santa comes into the house to get his cookies, but the reindeer must stay outside.”

Melanie smirks a bit at that, looking in the direction of the woods behind the house. She can’t see it. Outside is dark, inside is light, so all she’s got is the mirror image of them inside the house, but she knows what’s out there, and has a suspicion as to what lives out there. “So… if we were to put the cookies in the trees perhaps…”

Ducky grins back at her, glad she’s going along with this. “Yes. I think the reindeer might come down from the roof, and spend some time nibbling cookies.”

Melanie laughs at that, and helps to get the younger kids into their winter gear. It takes a few minutes, but they do get all of them bundled up, and Ducky, Melanie, Penny, Abbi, and Darla, get the cookies, and make sure the kids have plenty of them to put up on the trees.

That buys the rest of the adults a quiet hour for getting the kitchen clean.

And in the morning, just like Ducky expected, there are “reindeer” tracks all around the trees that had the cookies in them. (And just possibly, the local deer population is a tad better fed than normal this time of year.)

Molly brings over the copy of the ‘Night Before Christmas,’ and settles in next to Gibbs. She isn’t thrilled about Anna and Sean getting lap space when she’s on the sofa next to him, but she’s been told how she got one whole Christmas with all the adults to herself, so she was willing to allow it. Plus Kelly’s also next to Gibbs and not on his lap, so… She’ll tolerate it.

For now.

Next year, she better get some lap time.

But she’s got some suspicions about that, because Mama, Aunt Abby, and Aunt Ziva all had babies this year, and Uncle Jethro likes to cuddle babies. And next year Dave and Donny will be big enough to want to get involved in story time, too.

But it’s Christmas Eve, and the sound of Gibbs reading the poem is lulling, and the kids start to relax, feeling sleepy.

He finishes up, and Mama comes to collect them, getting ready to take them to bed. Anna and Sean, the babies, get picked up first.

Uncle Tim says to Kelly, as he’s picking her up, “Say goodnight to Pop.”

“Night, Pop,” Kelly’s sounding sleepy.

Molly hears that, and wonders something. So as Uncle Tim’s taking Kelly over to her bed, she hops onto Gibbs’ now empty lap and says to him, “Kelly calls you Pop. Anna calls you Uncle Pop. I call
For adults, the night before Christmas takes off when the kids are all in bed. Packing presents and taking them through customs is just a massive pain in the ass, so most of the presents were mailed to the house.

So, on the night before, there’s a collection of adult McGees, wrapping paper, ribbons, tape, and scissors, all scattered about, along with a collection of other adult McGees attempting to assemble various presents for little guys.

As Tim and Abby wrestle with Molly’s tricycle, and Breena nurses Donnie, he says to the collected McGees, all doing similar chores, “You know, you’d think putting together a half mile long sledding track would be harder than assembling a tricycle. But you’d be wrong.”

That gets a bit of laughing, and Abby holds up one of the pieces. “You know, I think they drilled the holes with the pieces upside down. If we put it together backwards, these may work.”

Tim groans, and looks to Breena. “You and he planned this, didn’t you? The year Anna was born, you had us assembling impossible presents, last year, you got easy presents, and now we’ve got another impossible one, and he just skips on out, ‘Oh, dead body, so sorry.’”

Breena laughs hard enough at that, she startles Donnie.

This time, a year ago, Abbi was sitting with Gibbs in front of the fireplace, basking in golden lights, and looking at the brand new ring on her finger.

This year, the two of them, together, are working on putting together a collection of doll beds. The girls like to put their dollies to bed, and they haven’t had a very good bed for them. (Gibbs was appalled to see them tucking dollies into a cardboard box. And suddenly he had another project.) So, as he’s fitting the legs into place, she’s putting tiny little sheets on tiny little doll mattresses, she catches the glint of light on her finger.

The pearl doesn’t so much reflect light as glow on its own. She knows it can’t actually do that, but it looks that way.

He sees her looking at it, and smiles.

“Seven more days,” she says.

Gibbs leans forward and kisses her. “Start the year off right.”
Jimmy does get home before presents. He even gets home before the kiddos wake up, hoping for presents.

As much as he ever has ‘straightforward cases’ this is one of them.

A Petty Officer, a Christmas party, too much eggnog, and not enough sense to call an Uber. He hates cases like this. Well, with the exception of when he gets called in to bless the death of someone who dies of natural causes, he hates all of his cases, but these… It’s not like he can lend any sort of closure to this. He cannot grant justice, or at least the information necessary to find it. He’s just left with the image in his head, a woman in his morgue, wearing her Christmas sweater, sobbing over her husband’s corpse.

Ducky’s waiting for him when he gets in. He’s sitting on the sofa, reading, with two cups of coffee on the side table next to him. (One of Jethro’s “less successful” attempts. Tastes perfectly fine to Ducky, but it’s ‘not done enough,’ for Jethro’s tastes.) Behind him, the Christmas tree is glowing, and presents are piled under it.

He pushes the coffee toward Jimmy, who’s pleased to take a few sips. “This one is good.” (Jimmy would call it a medium-dark roast, it’s as cooked as he ever wants any coffee he’s going to drink.)

“He thinks he didn’t cook it long enough.”

Jimmy lays his head against the back of the sofa, and says, eyes closed, “Well, he can give me all the ones he pulls off the heat too soon.”

Ducky smiles at that, and takes another sip. There is something to be said for fresh-roasted coffee. He could get used to this. “I take it, it wasn’t a murder?”

“Not today. It was exactly what it looked like. Drunk driver. The road turned right, wasn’t as plowed as it could have been, he skidded, too drunk to correct for it, and…”

Ducky winces.

Jimmy nods, opening his eyes and sitting up, taking another sip. He just wants something to pull him into the present, but not so much caffeine that he won’t be able to sleep. “His wife is planning a funeral on Christmas because he was too fucking stupid to use an ap.” He slumps back against the sofa, slipping off his glasses and rubbing his forehead. “I’d almost rather have a murder. Get murdered, it’s all out of your control. And, there’s something I can do. Drunk driving, that’s all on you, and all I can do is stand there and hold your hand.” He takes another swallow of the coffee. Yes, it’s tasty but that’s his last gulp. “You up early or late?”

“My traditional middle of the night wander.”

Jimmy nods. He knows that Ducky doesn’t sleep straight through the night. He spends a moment just staring at the tree, and then says, “How are you doing with Jethro’s wedding?”

Ducky knows that Jimmy isn’t vitally interested in whatever speech he’s got ready to give at Jethro’s wedding, especially not at three in the morning. He’s looking for something to get his mind off of what he did tonight. But, he was expecting that, too. His usual midnight wander doesn’t involve setting himself on the sofa in the living room, let alone with two drinks, unless he intends to intercept someone in the living room.
“I think I am doing fairly well. I’ve had a few years to ponder, and live, and watch what it means to be married since I did this last…” he smiles at the memory of Jimmy and Breena’s wedding.

“So, not just reheating what you did for us?”

“Perish the thought!” They talk for a half hour, letting Jimmy reset his own peace, and put the dead where they belong.

“It’s Christmas!!!” That’s the sound, in Molly’s voice, echoing through the McPalmer side of the house that wakes up the assorted adult McPalmers, and McHollands.

Tim opens one eye as he hears feet running through the hallway, and says to Abby. “And I take it we’re up?”

She nods, raising herself, and Breena begins to stir, too.

They let Jimmy sleep. He can join the rest of the crew when they do presents with the wider group.

And thus, at 5:37 AM, Christmas begins.

There are things that compensate for getting up an hour earlier than normal. Fresh, hot cinnamon rolls, fresher, hotter coffee, and a collection of little people squeezing with joy as they open their presents goes a long way to banishing, “I got up at the ass crack of dawn,” grumpiness.

Three hours later, real breakfast, and then presents for the larger group do an even better job of shoving those thoughts away.

Penny’s sitting on the sofa, her pile of presents next to her, opening away. Pictures of the various family members have been popular this year. Last year, she hadn’t fully let everyone know how destroyed their home was. But this year, they know that, and all of her family has been going through their own collections, making copies.

What do you get the person who has everything? The one thing she no longer has, her pictures.

So, mostly she’s opening flat packages of nicely framed shots of her kids, and their families, and any pictures they may have had of their original family, or better yet, hers.

Mike, for example, had a shot of her father and Nelson together, on the back porch, sharing a beer. That one had to be back from 1951 or so, because she’s in the background, pregnant, and John is a toddler playing with blocks.

Tom somehow had a copy of her parents’ wedding picture. He also had Nelson’s graduation from Annapolis picture.
And she couldn’t be happier with those pictures.

Though there’s one present that isn’t a flat package, and she’s curious as to what it is. Six inches tall, cylindrical, heavy for its size. As she picks it up, she can feel it slosh. “Okay, who got me moonshine?”

Tom and Mike smirk at each other. “Open it, Mom,” Mike says.

It is, as she guessed from the feel, a mason jar filled with liquid. But it’s not moonshine.

She holds it, feeling a million memories of the twenty-eight places she and Nelson both called home, all flooding through her. It’s a jar all right, and there’s water in it, sea water, sand, a few small shells, some pebbles, and sea glass.

Anywhere on land Nelson called home had a little jar of the sea on the mantle, or when they lived in an apartment, on the bookshelf. When they first married, he put one on the mantle of the tiny officer’s house they shared, and she had looked at it, very curious. “Blood of the McGee, cut me, and this’ll come out,” he’d replied. She’d raised an eyebrow at him, and he added, “Get too far away from the ocean, and I start to go wrong in the head. So, I always bring it with me.” They were in Pensacola for flight training, and he had the next two years on land, so she shrugged and nodded.

And after that, every place they lived had a little jar of seawater.

Her kids grew up in a home that had a little jar of seawater. And, after Nelson died, until it got lost with her luggage on one of her trips, she carried that little jar around. And when it got lost, she let it go.

But, holding onto it, it feels right in her hands. She’s not a McGee, not the way Nelson or her boys are. She’s not the sea on legs, but she’s tied to it. The shore that it laps against. The solid, yet wet, spot where land and ocean come together.

She’s smiling, and there are tears in her eyes, as she stands up, and clears a little spot on the mantle for the jar of seawater.

Tim opens the box, wondering what on earth his loves could have gotten him. It’s about twice the size of a shoebox, and there’s literally nothing he’s wanting that’s that big.

At least, nothing he’s wanting that they’d get him. There are a few computer goodies he’d like for his home system that might come in a box like this, but to know that they’d have to go from just knowing him really well, to digging unexpressed thoughts directly out of his head, because this isn’t anything he’s talked about.

So, it’s with a sense of curiosity that he’s opening this thing. It’s not too heavy, especially for its size. It does rattle a little when he jiggles it, but not a lot. Whatever’s in there is in there pretty good. And as he’s jiggling it, Breena shoots him a death glare, so he stops that, fast, and gets to opening it up.

Fancy wrapping paper gets ripped to smithereens, and he also yanks the top off the box. There’s more paper inside, lots of tissues, and he’s digging through, eventually finding the first solid thing in there. It’s also wrapped, and he’s got to get through that, but once he does, he understands why Breena was glaring at him.
It’s a dragon. And from the looks of it, it’s a custom, 3d-printed, hand-painted dragon. He’s grinning at it. This one is black, with big blue eyes, and… He goes tearing through, finding two more dragons, a green one, and a violet one. There’s one human figure, a women with dark hair and green eyes, and he can’t grin any wider at it.

It’s his story. He, Jimmy, and Breena are dragons. Abby’s a human. They got him custom, 3d-printed action figures for the main characters in his story.

Tim leans over, kissing Abby, who’s closest to him, first, and then Breena, who’s a few feet away, and Jimmy who’s on his far side.

Jimmy’s grinning back. He was the one who found the place who did them. Abby’s the one who got the design into a CAD format, and Breena made sure to carefully re-read Tim’s first version, along with a few of the corrections he’d plopped in there, so that they’d look right.

“Thought you needed some decorations for your office,” Jimmy says.

“I love them!” Tim says to all three of them, very happily picking them all up and looking them over again and again. Kelly wanders over from playing with her toys to see Daddy’s toys, and he lets her, very gently, touch them.

Jethro would have to admit he’s not expecting an envelope from Abbi. Actually, he’s not really expecting a Christmas present at all.

There’s only so many things he wants, and he’s got them all.

So, they’d had a chat about how if she ever ran into some present of some sort she thought he’d like, have at it, but that she didn’t have to feel like she had to get presents for him at any given time. And especially this Christmas, with their wedding a week away, presents have been showing up at their place for a while, so pretty much all of his ‘anything I could possibly want’ buttons have been hit really well.

(Honestly, he doesn’t ever want to be the guy people just get gifts for because they feel like they’ve got to get him something. He especially doesn’t want Abbi to feel that way.)

But in his stocking there is an envelope with his name in it in her handwriting.

Part of him is wondering if this is a gift certificate for something to do while they’re in Honolulu. But as he slits the envelope he’s thinking this doesn’t quite feel right for that. It’s too thin and too big, and pulling it out… he can’t focus on the words without grabbing his glasses, and…

“Oh.” He blinks as he reads it, feeling… just… full. Full of love, and joy, and being appreciated, and cherished and…

Abbi’s next to him, chin on his shoulder. “You okay?”

He smiles at her, kissing her. “Yeah.” There’s a huge grin on his face as he looks back down and reads the formal document for a legal name change. “Abigail Borin-Gibbs.”

She kisses him back, and all of it goes rushing through him: the touch of her lips on his, the feel of his name on her, the sense of home and belonging.
He licks his lips, and then gently flicks hers with the tip of his tongue before saying, “Mrs. Gibbs?”

She smiles back at him. “Next week.”

He nods, grinning, huge. “Next week.”

An hour later, when Mike gets a moment alone with Tom, he says, “Tim’s not a man for secrets, huh?”

Tom nods, knowing what his brother saw, and why he’s mentioning it. “Yeah. They aren’t open about it in the wider world, but they’re doing a shit job of keeping it quiet at home. Tim especially. It’s like he’s got a little mental switch, and when it’s on ‘home’ his ability to keep things hidden falls apart.”

“I was back here, after that damn test of his,” Mike says. Tom nods, he remembers that story. “And Jimmy… I couldn’t figure out what I was seeing. Actually, I could, and apparently did. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Jimmy more or less told me he’d kill John if he got the chance, coming on like pissed-off boyfriend.”

They both look in the direction of the combined McPalmers who are wadding up balls of wrapping paper and tossing them around. Big balls for Mona, little ones for Jackson. The dogs are happily bounding through the drifts of wrapping paper in the living room to chase them. None of the adults are doing anything out of the ordinary, but Mike knows what he saw. Buddies don’t kiss each other. Not on the lips, and not because one of them got the other one an especially nice Christmas present. (Case in point, Fornell looked really pleased with the DVD collection of spy movies Jethro got him, no smooching ensued.)

“Yep. I’ve never asked why he didn’t want to go to Annapolis, or join the Navy, and I’m not going to, but back in the ‘90s when he would have started…” Tom lets that trail off; his look fills in the blank. They both know what would have happened to a gay sailor in the ‘90s if he was outed.

Mike nods in return. “Okay. You think that’s part of what was going on with them?”

Tom’s hands spread wide in a maybe? gesture. He’s read John’s arrest reports. He doesn’t know if Mike has, and he does want to know what Mike thinks about this, without dropping any ideas into his head.

“When I talked to Ducky about it, he was asking about John. It was right after the Stennis, and he wanted to know more about John. Wanted to know if he was gay or bi.” He glances over to Ducky, who’s quietly singing a Christmas carol to the kids, while Tony strums along on the guitar he got from Ziva as his present. “I… didn’t put that together with what I was seeing with Tim and Jimmy,” Mike says, feeling the puzzle pieces start to slot into place.

“You think he was?” Tom asks.

“Tom?” Mike can’t believe he’d ask.

“John. You think he was gay or bi?” Tom’s asking him intently. Having read those reports, he can’t get the idea out of his mind, but just because he’s got an idea doesn’t mean it’s right.
“If he was, he never told me,” Mike replies.

“That’s not what you think.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “When he was younger, we went out drinking a few times. I caught him checking out a few guys. Never saw it get past looks, even when he was drunk. Sarah’s told me she thought he was sleeping with his secretary.”

Tom winces. “That… adds context.”

“Yeah. How about you?” If they’re going to speculate…

“Mike?”

“What did you think?”

Tom rolls his eyes a bit. There’s a reason he can’t get the arrest report, and everything that goes with it, out of his mind. “You remember Bob Harmer?”

Mike shakes his head, which doesn’t shock Tom. Mike was pretty young when this went down. So was he for that matter.

“Okay, I got it second-hand from James, and I didn’t get it when he told me about it. This is me thinking about it now. He and John were buddies. They were wrestling, at least that’s what James said, and Dad caught them, and then Bob never came over to hang out at our place again.”

“When was that?” Tom can tell from Mike’s expression that he’s got no idea what Tom’s talking about.

“I don’t… Back when we were kids, and John was… I don’t know, fourteen, thirteen? Young enough James didn’t know what they were doing. If they’d been kissing or something, he would have known what he saw, so it couldn’t have been that blatant. Old enough Dad got nervous when he saw whatever they were doing. If they’d just been tussling, Dad wouldn’t have blinked. Not like the bunch of us never got into fights or wrestled. James was wondering why Bob wasn’t coming around anymore, because he liked him, and John punched him when he asked.”

Mike winces at that. “I didn’t know that story. You think Dad went hard on him…”

Tom’s shaking his head. “I can’t imagine it. He never went hard on me on anything. Just, disappointed, you know…” Mike’s nodding. He knows. You never wanted to deal with a disappointed Nelson McGee. Mike would have rather have teeth pulled than disappoint their father. “But… I don’t know. It’s not something that ever came up with me and Dad.”

“Yeah. Or me.” They both watch the rest of the family playing their Christmas morning games. Mike continues to watch the assorted McPalmers. Jimmy’s got the babies lined up, starting with the one with his last name, and Tim’s eyes, on their backs, and giving them raspberries. The toddlers, and about half of the older McGee kids are lining up to go next. “So…”

Tom shakes his head. “I’m not butting my nose in.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “Not that way. You keeping eyes on his six? Something like that can bite you.”

Tom inclines his head, getting where Mike’s going. “Yeah. Always. As long as he’s on the right track, I’ll keep his secrets, and if he’s not…”
“You’ll leak ‘em to the guy who puts the knife in his back.”

Tom stares at his brother, ice in his eyes, reminding Mike very strongly of John in that moment. “Or I’ll use the knife myself. It wouldn’t be the first time. I’ve let enough shit slide in the past, not again.”

Mike nods at that.

Christmas afternoon. Quiet time. Breakfast and presents are cleaned up. Dinner’s cooking. Assorted kids and adults have scattered off into their own little groups, or on their own for some alone time.

Sarah sees Tim clacking away on his typewriter at the breakfast nook in their part of the house. She’s just got Nick down, so she sits next to him, waiting for his fingers to stop moving. “This the new one?” she asks as she sips her coffee. (Abbi’s blend. It’s so-so, would be better if it was a tad less cooked.)

“Sort of. Just a random scene. The first draft is hibernating right now.”

“You want me to take a look at it?”

Tim pushes his glasses onto the top of his head. He uses them for close up vision, but if he’s looking through them too far away, like say someone’s face who is sitting a few feet away, they start to give him a headache. “Do you want to take a look at a really rough draft?”

She counters with, “You planning on trying to sell it?”

He nods.

“As Thom Gemcity?”

“That’s the idea.” He figures he’s got a much better chance of getting a publisher to lay eyes on this if it’s got his pen name on it.

“You still with Doreen?” Sarah asks, remembering the name of Tim’s ex-agent.

Tim shakes his head at that. “NO! She’s the twit who let her publicity people post pictures of Abby and Kelly online, without asking me about it first. I got a bunch of cards for new people at your wedding, but haven’t moved on them, yet.” He glances at the page in his typewriter, and they both know you don’t go agent shopping if you don’t have a finished piece to sell.

Sarah winces, remembering how pissed Tim was when he saw those pictures online, then her eyes spark as she says, “So, you’re free agent right now?” There’s a smile spreading over her face.

“Yeah, I am.” He looks at the page. Right now he’s got Gabe trying to figure out how to rule his damn kingdom. Mostly he’s just working out what’s going on with the IRS stuff, but using his fantasy land as a foil for it. He’s not sure if something like this, a three page dialog about tax policy and how if the tax collectors can’t be trusted your kingdom falls apart (Yes, he’s still rather miffed about the IRS stuff, just because it’s good advice doesn’t mean he likes it.) is the sort of thing that goes into a young adult novel, and he’s absolutely certain that the vast piles of smut that fills the non-fight scene, non-how to rule a kingdom sections of the story absolutely don’t go in one. “But this couldn’t be less of a young adult book if I tried.”

She flashes him a look and says, “I’ve had an adult imprint for almost a year now.”
He blinks. “Right. I knew that. I really did. You were telling me that, and…” He’s thinking, fast, “But it’s not as big or as popular as your YA line.”

“No fiction for adults sells the way YA does. But yeah, I’ve got adults, and they sell, but I don’t have a good anchor author. Some of my YA authors wanted to branch out, so I let them, and some of their readers have grown with them, but,” and here she eyes Tim, “If I had a New York Times bestseller… one who writes adult bestsellers…”

“Mysteries. And this isn’t one.”

That gets another grin. “Some of your base won’t come over to see what you’re up to. Fantasy won’t do it for them. But some of them will, just to see if you can do a different genre.”

“Yeah, well. That’s the question, isn’t it?”

Sarah smiles. “It is. So, let me read it. If anyone knows if you can write a fantasy, I’ll be the one.”

Tim’s nodding but, he’s also thinking of what’s in that book. He starts to blush a little. “Uh… It’s… um… not like my mysteries.”

“Tim, I’ve read fantasy, and I’ve read a mystery before. I’m familiar with the differences.”

“Yeah.” He rolls his eyes. That’s not precisely the difference he was thinking of. “It’s got a lot of sex in it.”

She laughs at that. “So do most of my adult books.”

He hasn’t read her adult imprint, so he’s got no idea if she means, kiss, kiss, fade to black, share breakfast the next morning sex, or ‘throbbing members’ and ‘yearning womenhoods’ sex, or his own style of calling a cock a cock sex scenes.

He licks his lips, nervous. “Uh… It’s really explicit.”

“Oh, no.” She rolls her eyes. “Color me shocked. You’ve got three spouses, and five kids, and like sex. Knock me over with a feather. Let’s see if you can write it, Casanova, and more importantly, write it so women will read it.”

Tim shrugs a little at that, and then reaches for his phone. He goes to Amazon, looks up T.M. Gee, and hands her the phone. “I’m T.M. Gee, those five star reviews are for me.”

That gets full out belly laughing. “You write lesbian smut!” She begins flicking through the reviews, still laughing. After a few minutes, she hands it back to him, and says, “I’ll read it. And if I can’t sell it, I can tell you what to do to make it salable, and who might want to buy it.”

“Thanks.”

She waits, expectantly for a moment, and then her face starts to fall as Tim doesn’t get on his phone or computer. “It’s a hard copy, isn’t it?”

He shrugs a bit. “I don’t put it into a computer until I move onto the second draft, and, like I said, this is the first draft. Abby, Jimmy, and Breena have read it, so it’s covered with post-it notes with comments on them.”

Sarah sighs. “How can you possibly be allergic to computers when you write?”

“Because I’m not allergic to them 99.9% of my time. You want to wait for an electronic copy?”
“Nah. Give me the hard one, just take the stickies off of it. I want to go in with just my own ideas.”

“I can do that.”

Christmas comes and Christmas goes. Dinner starts when the kiddos get up from their afternoon naps, and lasts for what feels like hours.

It’s not a formal, sit-down meal. There are too many of them for that. It is plates of food and people drifting from conversation to conversation.

There are kids all over the place, and a game of something seems to be on all the time. The dogs are happy as doggies in a crowd. Someone is always ready to scratch an ear, pet a belly, or offer a tiny bite of something yummy.

It’s the noise of lives, many lives, in one home, bound to each other by love and blood and history.

Tim gets a quiet moment, where he’s between conversations, and he looks at Penny’s jar of ocean water on the mantle.

He picks it up, holding it, thinking about how the water that little jar symbolized shaped his life, and all of the lives around him. He never wanted to be a sailor. The Navy isn’t, wasn’t, and won’t be, his home. But he’s a McGee, and he’s just as tied to the ocean as everyone around him. And maybe in the cosmic scale of things that doesn’t matter. Or maybe, it’s only in the cosmic scale of things, that it does.

Tim’s on his back, in bed, resting. They all are. It’s those few extremely pleasant moments between orgasm and sleep, when the world is golden, and skin is flushed and warm. Hearts slow, breathing goes from fast, harsh gasps to the quiet in-out of relaxation.

Abby rolls onto her side, facing him, sliding her leg onto his hip. “I forgot to check in and ask, but… You doing okay with everything?”

He strokes her hair and face, and wriggles a bit, so his other shoulder rubs against Breena and Jimmy.

“Yeah. After the first few hours, I forgot to be tense about it. Not saying I want to hear a bunch of happy family stories with The Admiral in them, but… yeah, this is good.” He doesn’t say it, because he’s not sure how to put it into words, but for the first time in… ever likely, he actually feels like a part of his birth family. He’s not sure if he’s claiming, or reclaiming it, but he’s finally got in his grasp a part of his life that he should have had since birth.

Abby kisses him, and he gets a little pat from Breena on that. Jimmy makes a little, “Mmmm…” noise.

Tim closes his eyes. Drifting. Floating along on the small sounds and feel of his loves near him. He doesn’t say this out loud, either, but maybe… Not soon, but… maybe in the next year or so, he’ll call his mom.

Maybe it’s time to start thinking about reclaiming that relationship, too.
Of Stories and Subterfuge

Short week this week. Tuesday to Friday. Tim’s in the office. Jennifer is, too, but a lot of the FBI is on vacation. It’s the week between Christmas and New Year’s, when the kids are out of school. It’s not exactly a skeleton crew, but just walking in, he can feel the lack of energy in the building. Granted it’s also December 26th, and it’s likely a lot of the people who came in today partied late yesterday.

Lucky for Tim, he’s got a fairly quiet day planned.

Just him, his computer, his 57 million niggly details that need to get done, and possibly tossing a plan to talk to everyone who works at the FBI over to Jennifer, who, he’s sure, is going to adore this new project.

He smirks a little at that as he heads into his office. And, though he can’t see himself, he’d be utterly unshocked to hear that, on occasion, Gibbs would wear a smile like that, too. Back when he could foist off some niggly, detail-oriented thing on Tim.

Into his office he goes. First and foremost, coffee. He’s got a small bag of what Gibbs thinks is a light roast, cut in half with what Fornell thinks is a light roast. Put those two together, and it’s what Tim considers a fairly tasty blend.

He’s getting his first cup going, K cup machine rumbling away as it heats up, and then he turns his attention to his box. He’s not sure where the dragons go, but spending ten minutes putting them in different places around his office makes him happy.

(And gives him the time he needs to drink some of the coffee, start to feel something like awake, open up his computer, straighten his shoulder, and begin to wade through the reports.)

He’s an hour into his inbox, which means he’s only scratching the surface of the letters that are tagged with VITAL!!! LOOK AT ME NOW, when he gets the first text from his sister.

*Everyone and their cousin have done a vaguely Scottish society. Drop the kilts and pick somewhere else. Iceland is cool, and not vastly overdone.*

Apparently, she’s started reading his manuscript. Tim nods at her note, pouts a little about saying goodbye to the kilts, but figures he can probably set up some way to work them back in and sends back. *Noted.*

Then his eyes go back to his inbox, and the next letter has his full attention. It’s from Hotch. Tagline: Important But Not Time Sensitive.

Hotch rarely emails him, let alone with a tagline like that, so Tim gets into it, fast.

Unfortunately, it’s exactly what he was hoping it wouldn’t be.

*McGee,*
Got a heads up from our DNA techs. A body with 50% matches to the DNA profiles of Seth and Ginger Partridge has been found, listed as a Jane Doe, in the Gatlinburg, TN morgue.

She’d been there for the last eight months.

Heidi Partridge is no longer a missing person. I’ve enclosed a link to her case, and we’ve taken custody of it and her from the Gatlinburg PD. They found her body in the Little River, and have no concrete time or place of death.

Sorry to drop this on you. I know you were hoping for a different outcome.

I hope you weren’t bothered by me emailing instead of calling. Since another day won’t matter, I didn’t think this was worth upsetting your Christmas for.

Hotch

Tim fires back a quick, ‘Yes I was hoping for different, no I’m not bugged you didn’t call me on Christmas Eve for this, keep me in the loop with the investigation into the murder’ email. Then he reads her file, shaking his head.

He leans back, staring at the ceiling. He’s seen this before. Clean, professional, clues swept aside. She’s obviously dead, and the ME thought she drowned, but she’d also been in the river for a while, and had been nibbled on by enough of the local wildlife that they can’t tell if the water in her lungs got there before she died, or after.

They aren’t going to solve this. It’s entirely likely there never was any shot that they could have. Just figuring out that she was gone put them well ahead of anywhere they were supposed to be.

But that feels hollow.

Tim glances over to his dragons and sighs. Even though he writes about his real life, and the tangles therein, there are times like right now where he’d give anything to live in a world where there’s not struggle that can’t be solved with a judicious application of fire breath.

Then he shakes his head. He looks out his window to DC, still rebuilding, judicious application of fire doesn’t solve as many problems as he’d hope, either. If it did, he wouldn’t be looking for Heidi Partridge’s killer.

He sends off another email, to Kevin and Khan, letting them know the hunt for Heidi Partridge is officially over. The hunt for who got her out, how they did it, and why... He's more than happy if they want to go full bore on that.

---

Hi,

I’m Tim McGee, new Director of Public Corruption. I’m hoping to take the time to have a chat with each of you, talk about the new crime reporting software that we’re getting set up, the way I hope the FBI will shift with changing times, and get to know you, what you do, what you see, and what you might want to do in the future.

If you could spare half an hour for a chat sometime in the next week, I’d appreciate it.
Thanks,

Tim.

Tim reads over the email he’s going to send to the first 20 people on the alphabetical list of FBI employees. Aaderson to Aces.

He knows how he would have responded if something like that had popped into his email back in the day. He’s not trying to encourage pants-wetting terror, but he’s got a feeling that twenty people are about to begin wondering if they’re on the chopping block.

He figures that, given a few months of this, as more and more people get calls, and they don’t get grilled or fired or asked to rat out their co-workers (though he hopes that by mentioning he’s going to set up a fully anonymous whistle blower reporting software, that the idea that they could rat people out should they see something worth ratting, will filter into their minds) getting an email from him will be less scary.

His fingers cross at that idea. He hits save, and puts that email down to rest. He’ll muck about with it a bit more later.

Time to do some more reading of reports. He’s got a team of people supposedly working on that reporting software, and he’s not given any of their output a thorough looking over recently.

---

Computers are clean. They’re easy. They’re creatures of elegant design, where the right thing written the right way always does exactly what it’s supposed to.

At least, he knows he’s certainly told people (and here he’s thinking of Tony and Gibbs) that’s that how they work.

That is not how the program in front of him is currently working. There’s a bug. Actually, given what he’s seeing, there’s a colony of bugs, hiding somewhere in what’s an extremely alpha version of his Internal Anonymous FBI Whistle-Blowing (His programmers are calling it the IAWB.) software mock-up.

Hunting them down is tiring, and it’s making his eyes cross, but unlike say, a certain no-longer missing person, he knows the bugs are in there and with the proper application of time and energy they will be found.

After two hours, he knows he’s made a difference. Maybe not a huge one, but that program works better now than it did before.

---

Lunch goes the way lunch always does. Munching his meal while typing away. His phone buzzes, and there’s another note from his sister: No Night Furies. Disney owns that! Tim smirks, and types some more. A few minutes later he gets: NOT THE NORTH! THERE BETTER NOT BE A HUGE WALL OF ICE IN THIS THING! AND IF UNDEAD FROST ZOMBIES SHOW UP, I’M SLAPPING YOU FOR WASTING MY TIME. I DID NOT SIGN ON TO READ GAME OF THRONES FAN FICTION.

That gets an outright laugh. No North. I already fixed that in the next version. So, can I write
fantasy?

He continues typing away and another few moments go by. He’s almost done lunch and getting back to the grind when he gets. *Maybe. I’m getting a minute here and a minute there to read. So far it looks like fan fic, good fan fic, but…*

*Point taken* Tim shoots back. *Keep going. When you get deeper in, it’ll branch off further from the Game of Thrones ideas I used to start it off.*

He is back at his computer, beating yet another bug into submission when he gets back. *Good. Inspiration is okay, but I’m not looking for the next E.L. James.*

There’s another quiet moment as Tim continues to hunt for bugs.

*Okay, I’m looking for E.L. James’ sales. Just not her reputation for re-writing Twilight into mommy smut.*

That also gets a smile from Tim. *Well… I don’t know if you’ll call it Mommy smut, but I can guarantee you there’s not a single vampire in there, sparkly or any other sort, or for that matter, anyone based on a certain psychic sparkly vampire, either.*

A smiley pops up on his phone, and Tim gets back to work.

“*How was today?*” Tim asks as he’s sitting in bed with his family. They usually try to have this conversation at dinner time, but like many a dinner times, the various McPalmer babies monopolized their attention, and all he knows for sure is that Jimmy and Abby didn’t have any new bodies, and Breena’s got a pile of them. (Given it’s the week after Christmas, is par for the course. People die in droves on December 26 and 27, having waited so as not to wreck Christmas, and more of them drop like flies on the 29th and 30th, so as to make it before the year ends.)

Breena rolls onto her side, and smiles at them. “*I got an interesting call today.*”

That has their attention. She often has all sorts of job stuff going on, but interesting calls, not so much.

“Tell us more,” Abby replies, wanting to know what qualifies as an interesting call.

“Oh, okay, so did you know that Gibbs invited Elaine and her husband to the wedding?”

That gets a collection of spouses looking at each other to see if anyone had known that. If they’d thought about it, they’d have assumed it was true, but none of them thought about it.

“I’ll take that as a no. Anyway, they’re coming up. And, she called me because back before they left DC we had said that if they wanted to make a go at the Diner again, we’d be willing to invest…” Tim kind of remembers that, and he can see Abby and Jimmy nodding. “Anyway, Jarvis and Co. set a new law on the books for DC. If you can pay the back taxes you owe on your property, you get your deed free and clear, and he’ll give you a five year no business tax ‘rebuilding’ window.”

That clicks in Tim’s head. And he gets why Jarvis would do that. The back taxes would be based on the assessed value of the property before it burned. And the next five years would be when a business is going through its growing pains, likely not worth all that much. But, after five years, whatever it is would be rebuilt, and if it survived, it’d be thriving, and…
“Not a bad way to get new money into the city,” Tim says.

“Or like Elaine and Brian, old money,” Jimmy replies.

“Exactly. So, they’ve got the loans to rebuild lined up, and if we want to invest the back taxes, they can be clearing up the property, and looking to break ground on the Diner Mark II by the beginning of February.”

“That’s an interesting call, all right!” Abby says. “So… do we have the money for it?”

“And, is this a loan, or are we partial owners or…” Jimmy’s asking.

Brena’s grinning. She ran the numbers on this before deciding to mention it to the other three of them. “The back taxes aren’t as bad as they could be. We’d have to sell some stock, move some money out of the retirement accounts, but yeah, we can do it, and yes, we’d be partial owners. It’s a 10% stake in the Diner. So…” She looks between them.

Tim’s nodding. Just the idea of having the Diner back makes him happy in a way he didn’t know he was missing, but now that he does, he wants it, badly.

Abby’s nodding, too, bouncing with excitement, and Jimmy say, “Oh yeah, we’re doing this!”

Brena looks really pleased by that. “Good. I’ll have an interesting call for her in the morning, and on Saturday, when they’re up for the rehearsal dinner, we’ll have papers to sign.”

______________________________

Wednesday morning, on his way into work, Tim goes by where the Diner used to be. They’ve cleaned up, some. Well… the streets are clear, and there are some cars zipping by on the overpass near them, and he can see that there’s a building across the street that’s under construction.

He doesn’t get out of his car, or try to pull it into what used to be the parking lot. Under the snow and rubble there are only a few signs of what used to be here. A bit of the metal walls is visible, and he can see a little piece of counter jutting into the sky.

He knows the place can’t hear him, nor can it care, but he says it anyway, “They’re coming back. We all will…”

______________________________

When he gets into his office, his phone buzzes. Well, it's definitely not mommy smut. pops up from Sarah.

Daddy smut?

Please tell me you don’t actually know what that term means, instead of you’re really asking that.

He’s debating if he wants to do some googling to find out what he just asked, or decide it’s something he just doesn’t need to know. He looks at his computer, on his desk, in his office, in the Hoover building, and decides that if he does need to know, he certainly doesn’t need to know on this computer. And, in all likelihood, he doesn’t need to know. Uh… Just meant I’m a dad.

Good.
So, not mommy smut, is that a good or bad thing? Tim sends back.

Shrug. We’ll talk more about it after I read more of it.

That’s ominous.

Yep. She flashes a smiley at him. I’m a third of the way through. I’ll have a better idea when I finish it.

Okay.

Maria Aaderson is nervous. Tim understands why. Out of nowhere she’s got this request for a chat from the Head of Public Corruption. And, as an accounts payable clerk, it’s not like she’s normally the kind of person who gets requests to chat with the Head of Public Corruption. At least, not if something hasn’t gone horribly wrong.

He’s read her personnel file, so he knows she’s been with the FBI for eleven years. She lived in DC, worked in the Hoover Building her whole career, and was here during the Fall.

He figures that’s his in.

So, Laid-Back, Sincere McGee is on point. His tie is off, and shirt sleeves rolled up. If he had a Mr. Rogers-style cardigan, he'd be wearing it. He’s offering coffee/tea, sitting across from her at his conference table, not on the other side of his desk. He’s doing everything he can to radiate, ‘this is just a casual chat.’ After a moment, when she starts to relax a little, he says, “As you know, I’m new to this job. But I want to do it well. I want to do it better than anyone else ever has or ever dreamed of.

“If I have my way, we’ll run the cleanest, most efficient force the Federal Government has ever seen, because what happened last year, that’s not happening again, not on my watch.”

She blinks at that, but looks like she approves, and then says, “So… You’re talking to me?”

“Yeah. Well, it’ll take a while, but I’m going to be talking to everyone. You just lucked out to have the first name, alphabetically, in the entire FBI.

“I came up at NCIS, and the guy who was my mentor, he had a rule, ‘Don’t waste good.’ You’re good. You, and everyone else here. They wouldn’t have hired you if you weren’t. I’m sitting on a huge treasure trove of talent, of people who see and know things I could never see and know, and I’m not about to waste that. You and I, we’re talking, and who knows one of these days, I may get a case that crosses my path, and I’ll need someone who knows something about how an accounts payable department is supposed to work, so I’ll have you in my mind, able to call you up and pick your brain if we need it.

“And you see things I never will. We can’t clean up the rest of the government if our ship isn’t clean, and I figure people like you, who are handing out the cash, are in a really good position to see if things are starting to go wrong.”

She nods at that. “I don’t know what we pay them for, just that we do. But, I do know I’ve seen checks go out that looked off.” She offers a lame half-smile. “Those guys who requested them don’t work here anymore.”
Tim nods. “We’ve got a lot of that to deal with. So… Just, if you ever see something. If it doesn’t pass the sniff test, I’m here. I’m listening. You don’t want to talk to me personally, in the next two years we’ll have software up that’ll let you let me know what’s going on, without ever letting me, or anyone else, know you’re the tip off.”

That sparks a little interest in her eyes. Tim wonders how many of those checks she saw go by over the years.

“That’s… not stupid, maybe silly though, but it would help. When we worked here before the Fall, one of the perks was we’d get Metro passes. I get a lot of the Metro still isn’t up and running, but if we could get passes again, or if… I don’t know, like Facebook or something, if there was a van or shuttle to pick us up. There aren’t enough parking spaces, but we’ve all pretty much got to drive, and that’s annoying and expensive, so… If that’s something you could do something about…”

Tim’s writing it down. “I have no idea if I can, but I can certainly pass it on. This is the sort of thing we should be able to do. Setting up a few shuttles or getting a hold of Metro passes shouldn’t be that difficult.”

She smiles at that. “Thanks.” Then she sips her coffee, really looking at him. “You’re not what I was expecting.”

He’s nonplussed by that. “After my first few months here, I’d expect most people think I’m a bit more like,” he points to the dragons on the desk behind him, “than this guy here. Sometimes it’s good to be a dragon. Other times, it’s good to listen.”

That gets a quick smile, and then she’s standing up, getting ready to leave.

Tim’s not sure how useful that was, but… It’s a start.

Like Leon said, get your own house in order first, and if nothing else, he’s opening the flood gates to start getting tales about what’s going wrong in his own house.

When Tim gets home, there’s a box waiting for him. Inside is his manuscript, an entire Staples-worth of new Post-It notes stuck to it, as well as… A lot of new stuff in there. He writes on white paper, and he can see sections of light blue. Apparently, Sarah’s added new stuff, or had notes that needed more than a Post-It’s worth of space to cover.

He lets out a long sigh. Jimmy, Breena, and Abby together didn’t add this many notes when they read it. He glances over the first few pages, and unfortunately, none of them are comments along the lines of “Spell check here!” or “Where the hell did you learn to format these things?”

They’re all real comments.

That gets another long sigh. Well, at least he knows what he’s up to tonight. Lots and lots of reading...
and thinking.

But that’s for later, right now he’s got kiddos to kiss, and dinner to eat, and little guys to play with, and… And a lot of good stuff.

“Good God, I didn’t think you needed that much help!” Jimmy says, later that night, as Tim’s digging the first few Post-It note bedecked pages of his manuscript out of the box. “She pick on your font choice, too, or is all of this real?”

Tim makes a little mopey face. “All real.”

“Ugh. I thought you were good at this.”

That gets some stink eye. “I am good at this. Millions of people are good at this.” Tim flicks the notes. “Good doesn’t sell. This is how I get great at this.”

Jimmy sighs, shakes his head, and says, “Okay. This is why I don’t sing professionally. I just want to have a good time doing it, not get someone to criticize every note.”

Tim stares at all of his comments. Jimmy may be onto something there. He settles back onto their bed, fluffs his pillows a bit, puts in his earbuds so he’s got some jazz to listen to, clicks his pen a few times, gets his own pack of Post-It notes (so he can make notes on her notes), and gets ready to read.

It’s quite obvious that Sarah trained to be a writer, as opposed to him, who just picked it up by reading. She’s a better editor than he is, and has a better idea of how stories work. She’s pointing out things like how he needs more backstory up front, and how yes, some mystery is good, he’s not actually writing a mystery here, so a bit more spelling out would be better.

He likes her notes. They’re good, solid advice, giving him a lot of ideas of how to make this better.

So, he’s cruising along, scanning her notes, writing his own.

Then he gets to chapter eight. First sex scene. Gabe and Dae “blowing off some steam” with the “ladies of negotiable virtue.”

If you asked him, he’ll admit he thought twice about sending this to Sarah, because there’s a lot of smut in here, and she’s his sister. And, yes, obviously, she’s figured out he likes sex. The stork brought exactly none of the children he shares a home with. Still, she’s not just his sister, but his little sister, and… Still, the general rule of thumb is if you wouldn’t want your grandma to read it, don’t write it, because you’ll muff it.

And sister should work just as well as grandma… And given his personal grandma…

So… Okay, he knew she was going to be reading this. He knew she was going to give it a going over and offer suggestions for how to sell it. But somehow when he got into the second page of chapter eight, and things started heating up, he wasn’t expecting to see the entire section crossed out with a whole new sex scene in its place.

He knows, in that he’s got the reviews, that he can write an at least acceptable lesbian sex scene, so he didn’t think that adding some guys to the mix would fuck it up that badly. As the very happy
owner of penis, he figured he could do an okay job of writing about one in action.

But, okay, she’s the pro. She sells these things.

So he gets to reading and…

*Wow. All righty.* He’s blushing from his hair to his sternum and wonders how much of this is revenge for him plopping an erotic novel in her lap. Abby’s next to him, reading one of her journals, writing up her own notes on the pros and cons of a particular brand of major mass spec to replace Major Mass Spec, and notices how he’s squirming as he’s reading, and suddenly she’s really interested in this, too, which means a minute later, he’s got Breena and Jimmy also reading over his shoulder.

It’s really *fucking* explicit. Not that that varies from the tone he set, but… Dae and Gabe… okay, there’s a girl there, too, (there were two of them in his version) but they don’t seem to be nearly as interested in the girl as they were in *his* version of the story. In fact, in his version of the story there are pages devoted to lovingly describing everything there ever was to know about said girl(s), or at least, what she looks like. But in this version, he’s not entirely sure why she kept the girl, because from what he can see, she’s… kind of beside the point. She completely vanishes for entire pages at a time while Gabe and Dae mess around with each other, in extreme, explicit, detail. (Breena and Abby appear to approve of this. Jimmy, who prefers his smut on film, where, even if the action changes direction, you can still see the girl, appears to be wondering where the girl went, and also, given the level of description of Dae, how much of him Sarah’s personally seen, because sure, he’s happy that she’s noticed his abs, he certainly worked hard for them and doesn’t mind them being praised, at all, but she’s got his freckle count and probably shouldn’t know that much about his dick, let alone his dick when it’s hard.)

So, as Tim gets to the end of that section, he’s in a somewhat confused mental space. Abby and Breena are giving him some very clear, *let’s pack this up and get playing* looks. Jimmy’s starting to wonder what the hell it was Tim asked Sarah to *do* to this story, and if they need a better lock on their door at the house.

He checks her notes that go along with this section, and all they say are, “Talk in person.” He checks his watch; it’s not that late. So he calls. (This gets a bit of moping from the girls, along with a ‘We’ll just start without you, then...’” comment from Breena. That’s more than enough to attract Jimmy’s attention away from the story, but not quite enough to distract Tim.)

“I take it you got to chapter eight,” Sarah says when she picks up.

“Uh, *yeah*. I didn’t think the first version was bad.” *I didn’t think it needed to be completely re-written into a Gabe and Dae fuckfest.*

“It’s not. This isn’t a writing style thing. Your smut is just fine. It’s a genre thing and a marketing thing.”

“Huh?” This just adds to Tim’s confusion. It’d be one thing if his sex just wasn’t… sexy. It’s another thing all together if it was fine but not… marketable.

“Hence talk in person. What are you doing for lunch tomorrow?”

“Assuming nothing’s on fire, having it with you?”

He can feel the smile. “Right answer. You actually read all the way through?”

“Yeah. So did the girls and Jimmy. Someone needs to wash your brain out with soap and holy
“Water.”

She laughs at that. “Right back at you, Tim. I tried to keep close to your style, and the basic idea.”

“Okay. You changed who was doing what.” *And to whom.*

“Exactly. We’ll talk about why tomorrow. But let me guess, the girls really liked it, and you and Jimmy are sort of meh on it.”

“That sums it up nicely. And Jimmy’s wondering how you know that much about him.”

Sarah laughs. “How’s that go in the TV shows? I didn’t, but now I do.”

Tim smirks.

“How’d the rest of the comments look?” she asks.

“Good. I like the ideas you’re hitting me with.”

“Wonderful. Text me with when you can break for lunch and where to meet?”

“I can do that.”

And then, phone put away, Tim notices some rather happy sounds coming from the bedroom, and decides it’s more than time to play.

---

“999 bugs in the code, 999 bugs… Take one down, beat it to the ground, 998 bugs in the code.” Tim’s singing tunelessly as he takes another whack at the extremely alpha version of IAWB.

He wonders idly how Manner is doing with CrimeWeb. He hasn’t asked about it in weeks, and should probably schedule a time for them to get together to check things over. Get that up and working. Get his anonymous reporting software in place. Integrate them…

Yeah, it won’t be a magic bullet, but it would at least be functional tools to fight the good fight with.

And that’d be a start.

---

“So, tell me what you mean by genre and marketing,” Tim says as Sarah sits down.

“Hello to you, too.”

He points to the chai-tea he’s already ordered for her. And then holds out his hands for Nicholas. He wants some snuggle time with his nephew. Once he looks up from making googly-faces, he says, “Nothing’s on fire, but we’ve got some smoke signals, so I can’t stay for too long.” Apparently, one of his bug fixes unraveled a fairly large section of code that’s kind of necessary to make the interface work. He’s got it back with his team, but they may want to ‘have a chat with him’ sooner rather than later.
“Okay. To the point then.” She takes a long drink of the tea, and sighs. “I love caffeine.”

Tim raises an eyebrow, and then looks down at the five month old in his lap. The very drooly and somewhat fussy five month old, who is gnawing on his finger like a teething ring. Tim can feel the little tooth nub that’s rubbing against his index finger. “Say no more.”

Sarah takes another deep drink of her chai. “About that. As for the story, you’ve got too much sex for a straight fantasy novel, and too much plot for fantasy erotica. You can chop two thirds of the sex and the Gabe/Dae/Brynne storyline and still have a functional fantasy. Or you can keep all the sex, drop some of the world building and politics, and turn it into an erotic romance.”

Tim listens to that, not really liking either of those options, but she’s the one who sells these damn things, so, he’ll think about them. She nods as his prize bitch face wanders across his features when he says, “Tell me about marketing.”

“If we run it as a Game of Thrones-style fantasy, most of your readers will be straight, white guys. They like some sex, but not tons of it, really don’t care much for epic romances, and will immediately toss the book aside if they see the Gabe/Dae romance.”

That blindsides Tim. “I don’t think of Gabe and Dae as a romance. I mean, they don’t fall in love over the course of the story, and that’s what makes a romance a romance, right?”

Sarah rolls her eyes a little at that. Yes, he’s right, that’s technically how the genre works, but she also assumes he knew that she wasn’t using the term to mean a formal genre. “Okay, love letter. You’re right, you start the story with them a couple, so it’s not a ‘Romance.’”

Tim also wasn’t thinking of Gabe and Dae as a couple, either, but… He supposes that’s what you call two people who love each other, live together, and have sex at least near each other if not with each other on a regular basis. So, not like he can quibble on that.

“Fine. And if I keep the sex…”

“Then we’re in romance/erotica territory and your readers will be primarily women. Women readers love romance, and they love sex, hey’re okay with lots of niggly plot and world building, and they generally, especially for this kind of work, want the guys to be gay or bi.”

Tim nods, understanding why she rewrote the story the way she did. And, as he saw, and still remembers with a bit of a smile, Abby and Breena certainly enjoyed Sarah’s rewrite. (The Dragon Knights got to have a good time last night.) But, he doesn’t exactly want to go there. “And if I want to keep it the way it is?”

She sips her drink. “I’ll publish it no matter what. It’s a functional story. Get serious about some of the technical changes I’m giving you, and it’ll work. I’ll make back what I put in on your name alone, but genres exist for a reason, and that reason is to help the people who want to read what you want to write find your work. You’re straddling a few genres here, not really in any of them, so without a shift, your sales will drop. You’ll probably do better keeping the epic fantasy in the erotic story than chopping the romance out of the epic fantasy, but that’s up to you.”

That gets a dry smile out of Tim. “Since it’s the entire main plotline for the second book, you just might be onto something.”

“Book two is when we finally get Katie and Gabe together?”

He’s got a few dozen pieces of chapters of that story written, but not put together, yet. “Yeah. That last ditch cliffhanger plot they’re plotting at the end is the plan to get themselves captured and take
over from the inside."

"Which puts Gabe into Katie’s hands."

"That’s the idea."

"It’s a good idea. So, here’s your choice, if you shift Gabe and Dae a bit, start with them as a full romantic couple, you’ll make a lot more of your female readers happy. And if they spend a bit less time with ‘the ladies of negotiable virtue,’ and don’t think I don’t know who you stole that term from,” Tim rolls his eyes, “that’ll go even better."

Tim winces a little.

“What?”

“It’s just… that’s not who we are.”

Again Sarah’s shooting him a look, and then dryly says, “I’m sorry, must have been the shape-shifting-dragon-knights that threw me off, but I didn’t think it was an autobiography.”

Tim narrows his eyes at her. It’s not quite a glare, but the smartass vibe is strong. “It’s not… but… it’s still us you know.”

Sarah nods. “Look, you lucked out on your first series because you could write your love letter to your family and not have to mess with it too much. You can do this here, because I’m your sister and I’ll let you keep it exactly the way it is, if you want to. Or, you can realize that if you shift it a bit, you can make both of us a whole lot more money, and you can have more than fifty people actually finish reading this thing.”

Tim rubs his forehead. He’s not sure what to do with this. He takes a sip of his drink. “I don’t know how to write that.”

“Once again, Tim, shape-shifting-dragon-knights. I know you have an imagination. I know, especially in the later chapters where you get Brynne into it and she starts ‘encouraging’ the guys, that you can write smoking hot guy on guy stuff. So, don’t tell me you don’t know how to do it. Tell me you’re going to really think about what I’m telling you and decide on a path for selling this thing.”

Tim sighs. He thinks. “Okay. If I start with Gabe and Dae together, won’t that make a lot of the readers really dislike Brynne and Katie?”

Sarah nods, pleased. “That’s a good question. You start the story with Brynne coming in to marry Dae. Back it up a bit more, and give us more of her backstory, make her into a character in her own right, independent of the guys, and I think you’ll have better luck with this. We’ve got a whole book of Katie kicking ass and taking name before she gets wind of Gabe, so I don’t think anyone will have any trouble with the idea of her joining the party. You tell us about what Brynne is doing to run her household and why she’s such a good marriage partner, but if you spend a few more chapters showing that, then your readers will get into her head, too, and sympathize with her. They’ll be wondering about what’s going to happen when she gets dumped into Dae’s lap, and if she’s looking at some sort of awful-loveless marriage where all they share is a name and some kids. In fact, you can play up how that was a really common pattern, and go into why this is different.

“If your characters are going to ‘have it all’ lovewise, you might as well give them ‘all.’”

Tim nods, still thinking. “How much do I have to shift things to start Gabe and Dae off as a couple?”
“Just the sex scenes. I know you wrote it, but re-read it and pretend you don’t know these people. Trust me, it this story is just as much a love letter to Jimmy as it is to Breena and Abby.”

“Yes, but would Gabe or Dae see it like that?”

Sarah looks pleased by that question. “Another good question. That one I’ll bounce back to you and your understanding of them and the world you’ve built. But, however it is they understand it, and maybe that can be part of what you work in there, how things shift when Brynne hits things, maybe she’s part of how they see they aren’t just extremely close friends. And if you work that angle in, then you can keep your original sex scene the way it is, but whatever you do with it, you will have fans rooting for those two to ‘fully’ get together.”

“Dae and Gabe, Dae and Brynne, Brynne and Gabe, Gabe/Dae/Brynne…”

“And then pull Katie into it next book.”

“Yes,” Tim rubs his chin. He’s still thinking, juggling things around in his head. “Lots of work.”

Sarah smiles at him. “The good ones always are.”

“Probably going to need at least six months to get a new draft of this.”

“No problem. I’m not in any hurry.” She smiles. “Wouldn’t mind a signed right of first refusal contract though. Having your named locked in on some level would help my portfolio.”

Tim laughs at that. “You coming to Shabbos tomorrow?”

“Yes, and the wedding. Want me to bring it?”

“Yes, I’ll sign. You’ll have first shot at whatever the hell this thing turns out to be.”

“Good, Tim. It’s going to turn out to be good.”

That makes him smile, too.

When Tim gets back to his office, there’s a note waiting for him, on paper.

Jennifer’s letting him know there’s something important up.

He crosses the room, shifts Brynne’s dragon half an inch, so the sunlight from his window is fully covering it, and then picks up the note.

He reads it, nodding, feeling vaguely off foot.

Last week, when he talked to Glane, exactly none of his cases had gone anywhere with the AG. This week, formal prosecution began on ten of them. Apparently, he’s suddenly got some attorneys free to work on his cases.

“What a shock,” Tim mutters, crumpling up the ball and tossing it into his trash can. Then he takes it back out, smooths it back out, and goes into his closet of supplies. He does, much to his surprise, have a box of manila folders in there.
He takes one of them out, writes Dragons on it, puts a few pages of his story in there, and then adds that note.

“Play the long game.” If the AG is going to try and make him toe the line to get his cases seen to, he’ll use it for evidence. He takes their conversation, saves it onto a thumb drive, and sticks that in there, too.

“Years…” It’ll take time. It’ll take playing along, and looking like the poster child for getting along. But Glane, and the men like him, they’re going down. They don’t know it yet, but they will.

Tim looks at the dragons… In most of the story, they look like everyone else, walking around in their human bodies. Maybe, sometimes, you’ve got to blend in, and wait to use your fire, but there’ll be a time for it.

He looks at the pages of the story that’s currently doing camouflage duty for his casework. “The good ones take a lot of work.”

He nods at that, and sits down at his typewriter. This time he’s not writing about dragons, not really. He’s writing up a few new characters, a powerful Lord who controls assets the Knights need to keep the peace, and a new Knight, an older one, with an elite team of knights who reports to him. His fingers are moving so fast he's jammed the typewriter twice, and if it's not exactly a story, it’s coded to look like a story. Not like his Uncle Tom is so stupid he can’t figure out who is who in what he’s doing.

He smirks a little as he types. He’s got a feeling Walter is suddenly going to become a ‘beta reader’ for his stories, too. And likely another one of the knights, too.

Take the time, do it slow, set it up right, and do it on paper, as a story. Burn his typewriter ribbons when he’s done with them. No leaks, no one outside of his circle will be able to twig to what he’s doing. No late night calls, no suspicious lunch dates. Just him passing on his extra-curricular works to a few other guys who might like them. Put the comments on Post-It notes. Write it as fiction, and play with it from there.

And when they’re ready to move, they’ll have it all planned out.

And maybe, for kicks and giggles, once those plans have been executed and he's done with them, he’ll mess with them some and sell the damn things to his sister and bulk out the kids’ college funds while he’s at it.
“Junior’s going to meet us at the airport?”

“With any luck, Dave, too,” Delphine replies.

Senior nods at that. Assuming everything goes right, they’ll get in at about mid-morning, tomorrow. He knows the girls have an outing with Abbi planned, but Tony and Dave should be there when they land.

Senior tucks a stuffed Leaning Tower of Pisa into his bag. They missed last week’s Christmas-extravaganza, so when they get in, it’s present time. Granted, most of the presents they’re giving out come in envelopes, but he’s got one toy for Dave, who he can’t wait to see.

One hour at the airport, an hour and a half on the plane, seven more hours in an airport, eleven hours on a plane, five more hours in an airport, an hour in the air, an hour on the road, and he’ll be snuggling his boy again.

And then it’s wedding time. That’s making him smile, too. “About time they got married!”

“They’ve only been together for two years, Tony! That’s more than fast enough.”

Senior gathers Delphine close, and kisses her. “When you’ve got the right gal, you should move fast. Make her yours and keep her dear.”

She laughs, and gives him a gentle shove, followed by another kiss. They hear a honk and Delphine’s phone buzzes. “That’s our car.”

“Then let’s get going.” Senior picks up the bag with his suit and her dress, and she gets the carryon with Dave’s toy.

It’s time to head back to the US, for a belated Christmas, and a wedding.

“And you’ve got our number…” Jeff Borin says as Becky Borin shoves their bag into the backseat of their Ford F-350. It’s dark out, granted, that’s nothing new at 5:00 in the morning barely a week past the shortest day of the year. And them up, and about, doing stuff, in the 5:00 AM dark, also not new. Actually, since they skipped making breakfast this morning, up and at ‘em at 4:30 meant they got to sleep in a little.

Getting ready to leave, together… That’s the new part.

Moira, this year’s top hand, nods at them from her perch on their front porch. “We’ll be fine. The cattle will be fine. The dogs will be fine. The tourists will be fine!” Part of not making breakfast was Moira and the rest of the hands showing off they could handle everything, part of it was time to do a last minute packing check. “Go, enjoy!” Jeff’s not saying anything as he heads for the truck, but she can feel he’s nervous. It’s been more than a decade since both he and Becky left the ranch for more than two days at a time.

Becky heads over to Moira, gives her a hug, and quietly says, “Unless there’s a catastrophe and we can somehow do something about it from D-- Colombia, don’t call.”
Moira smiles back at her. “That was the plan.”

“Good.” She crosses the frozen, snow-covered parking area in front of their home, and slides into her side of the truck. Jeff’s sitting in the driver’s seat.

“We ready?” he asks, looking at the house like he’s afraid it’ll explode if they go away.

“Ready or not, we’re going! Come on, Dad, time to give away the bride.”

Jeff laughs a little at that, shaking his head, and then puts the truck into reverse. “Wedding time.”

Ziva and Dave are the first one to get to their house on Friday, December 29th 2017, first day of the great Borin-Gibbs wedding festivities.

She unlocks the door, heads in, and checks the thermostat, but whatever magic it is McGee did to it is still working. It’s cool in there, because they haven’t been in all week, but the heat is on, chugging away, warming the place up. Give it an hour, and it’ll be nice and toasty.

She takes Dave’s favorite blanket off the back of the sofa, spreading it on the floor in front of the fireplace, and then sets him on it, taking his jacket off, before going to the coat racks to hang his jacket up.

“Almost Shabbos-time. What shall we do first?”

Dave gurgles at her and works on his rolling over skills. He’s pretty good at getting from his back to his tummy, but getting back over again appears to be stumping him these days. He’s working on it.

She sniffs a bit, and like always when she’s the first one here, the house feels a little empty and flat. It smells cold, abandoned. But not for much longer.

Ziva starts by getting a fire going in the fireplace. That’s Gibbs’ job. Normally, when he’s in town, he goes over to her place, runs with Tony in the morning, and then helps her out, wrangles Dave, and they both come to the house together, but today he’s going to be coming in later than normal, and she wants their home completely inviting for Borin’s parents. So today, she’s arranging kindling and lugging in the first tote of logs.

Once it’s burning brightly, she heads back to the car, getting the groceries.

She hasn’t felt this… excited… maybe… This could be excitement, but maybe it’s pride, or… Ziva’s not sure. She’s showing off her home to her new family. She’s making food for her new in-laws, and… And she never got to do that for Tony’s family. There wasn’t a Senior-coming-over-for-dinner-the-first-time moment. No, get-to-meet-the-parents-nervousness, or get-to-meet-the-parents-showing-off-how-awesome-we-are. Whatever this is, she hasn’t felt it before, and right now, she’s enjoying it.

And she’s going to do her dad proud.

Abbi’s mentioned that her parents don’t get a lot of turkey. They live on a cattle farm in the middle of nowhere. They do celebrate Thanksgiving, but with a dry-aged, standing rib roast. It’s not that they can’t buy turkey if they wanted one, it’s just that if you only grocery shop every six weeks, and you
pack every inch of the truck full when you do it, shoving a frozen bird big enough to feed at least 20
into the truck just isn’t practical. Especially not when you’ve got, literally, tons of top-quality,
gourmet protein mooing about in the backyard.

From what Abbi’s said, Ziva gets the idea that her parents are very practical.

And tonight, they’re practical people who are getting an amazing roast turkey supper.

So, turkey, check. It’s brining away in the cooler. Gibbs is going to actually cook the thing, he’s the
one who knows how to use the smoker, unless the flight runs late, then she’ll pop it into the oven.

Turkey fixings… Two more bags of groceries get lugged into the house. Check.

Cider… Hard and soft. More checks. Ziva pours the soft cider into a slow cooker, sets it on low,
tosses in two sticks of cinnamon, a few cloves, and some dried orange peel. Between that and the
fire, the house smells lived in now. Hard cider goes into the fridge. She eyes one of them. Not like
she’s going anywhere. She pops a bottle, and has a sip.

Dave makes a startled sound, and she darts out. “Look at you!” He’d managed to successfully roll
himself not just onto his tummy, but back again to his back, to his tummy once more, and off of his
blanket onto the hardwood floor, which was colder than he liked. He’s staring up at her, looking
really shocked because everything’s so cold on his belly. “I put you there for a reason, you know?”
He blows a drooly bubble at her, and she picks him up and puts him back on the blanket, this time
sitting down. “Your father wouldn’t just take my word for it, either. He always has to test it, too.”
Dave coos. “Here.” She arranges his toys around him. “You play, then snack time, and nap time.”
Dave lunges for his plastic rings, and manages to grab one, whacking it against the other ones.
“Good. You’re looking content.”

She kneels there, looking at her son, seeing shades of Eli in his face. She can imagine what her
mother would have thought of this. Ema taught her the prayers, and how to make Challah, how to
cook in general, how to keep a home, on the idea that one day, she’d have a home to keep. Abba…
She knows he told her that he liked the idea of grandchildren, and it felt real. But that was the thing
about Eli, everything about him always felt real. That’s why he was dangerous. He could be sliding a
knife into your back, literally or metaphorically, but he’d still feel like your friend.

He may have liked the idea of her with a home and family, but he trained her to break families, not
make them.

“Could you have imagined this, Abba?”

She knows that Gibbs’ ghosts talk to him, but hers don’t deign to answer. And it’s probably better
that way. Let the past be the past, and the present and the future take her time, attention, and love.

Ziva gets up, turns on some music, a little dance in her step, as she heads to the kitchen to get ready
to open her home to welcome the newest members of their family.

Abbi clicks the power button on her computer. The little dialog box pops up, making sure she’s
really done for the day, but she is.

It’s noon on Friday, December 29th, and she is officially, off.

Done.
Incommunicado.

Off the grid.

Until January 15.

Omagi’s got everything he could possibly need to keep the place going for slightly more than two weeks. (She never expected to end up running CGIS. Omagi really never expected to be the CGIS number two man. But when good people are thin on the ground, you make do with who you have.)

She pulls her jacket on, and locks her office behind her.

Abbi leaves CGIS and Director Borin behind. For the next two weeks, she’s The Bride, on her honeymoon, and she intends to enjoy every second of it. Starting now.

She sees Gibbs’ truck waiting for her in the parking garage, and from her vantage point, she can see the back of Gibbs’ head along with Mona’s. She knows Jackson’s in there, but he’d have to be sitting on the back of the seat for her to see him, and he’s not allowed to do that. She crosses to the truck, and gets in, tossing her go bag inside.

He reaches over, kissing her. “Hi.” Mona and Jackson both give her affectionate licks.

She kisses Jethro back. “Hello back.” And pats both doggies. “So…”

“I checked the flight, they’re still on time. So, off to Dulles, get your parents, lunch, and bring them home for Shabbos.”


“Good. Ziva told me, Senior and Delphine are in Germany and due in round about this time tomorrow.”

“Omagi promised me that anything short of a direct nuclear attack on one of our bases, I’m off.” She smiles at that. “He also tells me that anything short of a nuclear attack on one of our bases, he’s got Sunday off.”

“Not gonna miss your wedding?”

“Nope.” Abbi shivers a little, an excited gesture, that looks very young, and very unguarded. “It’s really happening.”

Gibbs has a huge smile on his face. He kisses her again. “Yeah, it is.”

“Ducky…” Penny says, as she sees him pat his jacket pocket, yet again. Checking for, (by her count) the sixth time, his wedding speech.

“I know. I know it’s there. I have a copy saved to my google drive, too. And I have emailed a copy to Jimmy. A man is allowed his idiosyncrasies.”

Penny smiles at that, and nods. “A nervous man?”
He sighs. “It’s silly. I’ve given speeches, lectures, once, back in the day, I even preached a homily. I
presided over Jimmy and Breena’s ‘wedding,’ too, but this time feels different.”

She smiles at that, too. “This time matters more.”

He takes her coat off the coatrack and holds it open for her. She checks her watch as soon as her
wrist is through her sleeve. “A little over forty-eight hours, and you can stand up there and marry
your best friend.”

He chuckles a bit at that, taking his fedora off the hat rack, settling it upon his head. “I expect Jethro
would be a tad startled if the nuptials ended up with the two of us married.”

She gently elbows him. “You’re horrible!”

“I’m trying.” He nods to her phone. “And how does Google suggest we proceed?”

She looks at the screen. “Looks like 95 until we get to Wilmington, and then to 301 for the rest of the
trip. No major traffic snarls, yet.”

“Yet. Let’s get moving before that’s no longer true.” And with that the Langston-Mallard branch of
the family begins the trek home.

“Mom! Dad!” Abbi jumps forward to hug her parents as they wander through Dulles toward the
luggage carousels. Her mother enthusiastically hugs her. Her dad gives her a lackluster smile and a
half-hearted squeeze. She knows what’s going on. “Bumpy flight?”

Becky nods. “We hit turbulence a few times, and Jeff’s not much of a flyer to begin with, soo…”

He waves it off. “Let me sit still for a few moments, and my stomach will figure out where it
belongs.”

Gibbs hugs Becky, and says to Jeff, “Dramamine?” as they edge closer to a bench, and Jeff flops
down.

He shakes his head. His color is starting to get better, slowly. “Makes me feel stoned, and not in a
good way.”

Gibbs nods, remembering what Jeff said about not liking straight pot because it made him too loopy.
Then he feels ice down his spine. “Uh…” Cannabis is legal in Washington, State of Colombia, but
not in Virginia, and the Federal Government, which runs the TSA, which controls this airport, but
not the one they took off from in Montana, hasn’t legalized it yet, either. “Did you bring your…
diabetes meds?”

Jeff sniggers, though it looks weary. “No. Not the one you’re thinking of. Not getting busted and
wrecking your wedding, or reputation,” he says to Abbi.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Figured you had more than enough excitement coming your way, without bailing me out of a TSA
Gulag.”
That gets a dry laugh. “Just a bit,” Abbi replies. “So, besides turbulence, how was the flight…”

The application of food (even if it is from a restaurant in an airport), beer, and best yet, a seat that doesn’t move, improves Jeff’s outlook on life significantly.

“I’d forgotten how warm it gets back east.”

Gibbs and Abbi share a smile at that. He’d had the radio on when she got in the car, and they both heard the weather guy talking about how it was cold twenty degrees out, and with the wind chill it was down to ten.

Becky gives him a little shove, knowing Jeff’s just fooling with them. It’s cold, and even by Montana standards tenish degrees in the wind is chilly. He shrugs it off a bit, and then says, honestly this time, “It’s also damper than I remember.”

Becky nods, vigorously. “Different kind of cold, seeps into your clothing and won’t get out.”

“Yeah, Mom. They’re calling for snow tonight and tomorrow.”

“Enough to cause problems?” Becky asks.

“Nah. Not for this group,” Gibbs replies, munching one of his fries. “Roads may be dicey, but that won’t stop a murder investigation, so we can all drive in it. By Sunday, all the main roads should be clear.”

“But we may get enough to renovate the sledding track. That was looking a little sad when we left after Christmas,” Abbi says.

“You have a sledding track?” Becky asks.

That gets a discussion of the Christmas Holiday, and what happened. As Abbi and Gibbs are explaining Fornell’s idea and how it got built, Becky holds up her hands, “Okay, I know you’ve got pictures. Get us up to date on who is who. I don’t want to be scrambling for names.”

Abbi pulls out her phone, and begins to flip through shots, both of the sledding track with them whipping around on it, and of the different members of the family celebrating over Christmas.

Gibbs nods along, and says, “Tonight we’ve got… Ducky and Penny, Tobias and Wendy, Emily and her new boy are coming ‘round for dinner, four McGees, five Palmers, and three DiNozzos.”

Abbi thinks for a moment. “And a handful of Hollands. That’s the core group, more or less. Sarah and Glenn Holland, Tim’s sister and her husband have been coming around a lot more often since they had the baby, but they aren’t every week. Come Saturday and Sunday, we’ll get the whole crew in.”

“A lot of faces,” Jeff says.

Gibbs shakes his head a bit at that, but it’s not like she’s wrong.

Jimmy rolls the newly sanitized table back into their refrigerator. “I think, Dr. Allan, that we’re done for the day.”

Allan looks around, and then says, “You know, there’s no wood down here to knock on.”

Jimmy laughs at that. “Not that’d it help. But the gut isn’t feeling another one coming in.”

Allan looks at the clock; it’s only a little past two. “Not feeling it, or eager to get out of here and start your weekend?”

Jimmy smiles at that, too, just a shade of guilt in his expression. “Well… now that you bring it up…”

Allan smirks. “Go ahead. I’ll hold down the fort. Won’t even tell the Boss you’re playing hooky.”

Jimmy grins at him. “I knew there was a good reason I hired you.”

Allan waves that off, as Jimmy heads over to grab his jacket, and then says, “Uh… You know how I got invited to Gibbs’ wedding?”

Jimmy nods. “I wasn’t one of the ones roped into addressing envelopes, Abby and Breena have the nice handwriting, but I am the one who supplied your address, so yeah, I had a clue.”

“Allan doesn’t have a plus one. And…”

Allan’s eyes light up. “And now you do?”

“I… How badly would it mess things up if I asked to add a plus one? I mean…” He cringes a little. “I know this is like a million shades of bad manners, but… I really like this guy, and…”

“Bring him, and I’ll get it cleared. So, what’s his name? Where’d you meet him?”

Sam sighs. “So…” he sighs again. “Okay, so… When I replied, I didn’t have a plus one. And…”

“Why would I laugh?”

“His name is Alan Samuels.”

Jimmy tries very hard and manages to choke that laugh into a snigger. “Tony’s head is going to explode.”

“I know.” That gets an eye roll. “We met picking out Christmas trees, of all things. Anyway, I’m grabbing a spruce, he’s getting a bigger spruce, we do the little trying not to bump into each other dance, and that’s that. Didn’t think about it twice. Then, it’s the 26th, and I’m at that lecture for my CEUs, and he’s the one giving it.”

“He’s a doctor, too?” Jimmy’s delighted. If he were designing a man for Sam, this sounds like the ingredients he’d toss into the mix.

Allan nods. “Apparently he thought about the dance of the spruce trees. After the lecture he came over and struck up a conversation. He’s got a specialty in infectious diseases. He’s actually in DC now because he’s studying how the collapse of the local medical system effected contagious
diseases. Trying to figure out how much working hospitals effect things. And back when I was with the CDC we’d actually corresponded a few times on minimizing the infectious impact of airborne viruses in airports. But it never went past a few emails, mostly checking each other’s math.”

“Sounds like a match made in heaven,” Jimmy’s smiling as he says it.

Allan looks dreamy as he says, “I hope so.”

“Hello…” Fornell calls out, softly, as he opens the door to the house. When he and Wendy pulled up, the only other car in the drive was Ziva’s, and he’s not about to yell out a loud greeting when Dave may be napping.

Turns out quiet was a good plan. Dave, and his Mama, are both getting a snooze on the sofa.

He and Wendy sneak in, taking their bags up to their room, and once up there, they’re feeling safe to talk again.

“Smells good down there,” Wendy says, hanging up a suit bag, and her dress.

Fornell nods, looking a little distracted.

“Tobias…”

He shakes his head and focuses back on her. “I know.”

“Come on. She’ll be fine. He’s a good guy. I like him. Diane likes him. Nothing—“

“Everything’s going to happen. He jumped her nine seconds after we pulled out of the driveway.”

Wendy smirks at that. “Probably. Nothing she doesn’t want to happen is going to happen.”

Fornell glares at his wife. This is the first time Emily’s brought a boyfriend home, and he’s staying at their place, alone, with her. “That is not making this any easier.”

She smirks at that, too. “He’s been over all week. You like him.”

Fornell glares a little at the image of Drew Stacy. “I like him when I can keep an eye on him.”

Wendy outright laughs at that. “Oh,” she pets him gently, “You’re reminding me of my dad so much right now.”

Fornell rolls his eyes, and flops onto the bed. “I left. I’m not hovering around. They’re getting their alone time.”

“And she appreciates it.”

“He appreciates it.”

“That, too.” She can see he’s still kind of mopey about his little girl playing house with her newest boyfriend. Wendy pulls out the big guns. “Ed Slater, you want to be reminding everyone of him?”

Fornell looks betrayed. “Oh, that’s just mean!”

She looks at him.
He rolls his eyes and sits up. “Fine.” He looks toward the door to their room, and is about to say something like, “Do you want to get the groceries we brought now, or should we stay up here and not risk waking up Ziva…” when Wendy plops herself into his lap, facing him, and gives him a kiss.

“Looks like we’ve got a while before we need to be downstairs again,” she says.

Fornell’s hands come to her hips. “Probably.”

Her look says it all, and he kisses her, gently at first, but deeper, with intent as the moment stretches on.

Normally, of the two of them, Jimmy’s the one who gets home later. But, between his sense that no one was going to be needing his skills, and Breena trying to get some extra time in at work, he’s the one who left early, picked up the kids, and is taking them to the house.

They’re in a pretty good mood as he pulls up, parking next to Ziva’s car. Molly’s very much looking forward to some time with Pop and the doggies. (Mostly the doggies.) Anna’s telling him in a very animated but somewhat low on words sort of way about something. He’s not sure what a boggin is, but whatever it is, she’s really into it. Donnie’s wrapping up his nap.

He gets them out of their seats, and with Donnie on his arm, snuggling against his chest, holding Anna’s hand, Molly leads the way as they head into the house.

“AUNT ZIVA!!” Molly gets out before Jimmy can shush her. And with that, naptime is over.

“Shhh!” Jimmy says, two seconds too late, as Ziva sits up, slowly. “Sorry,” he says as Molly shoots over to her, looking for a hug.

Ziva waves it off, rubbing her eyes. “Dave is still asleep,” and he is napping away on the sofa. She sits all the way up and hugs Molly, and Anna who joins her a moment later.

She looks a little confused to see him and the kids. Normally, if Jimmy’s bringing them home, it’s after a full day of work. “Did we sleep all afternoon?”

Jimmy shakes his head. “I’m about three hours earlier than normal.” He begins the job of getting all of his kids out of their winter gear.

“Slow day?”

“Very slow. Last I saw, Tony was finishing up putting his details into the computer. He and Abby should be about two hours behind me.”

“Everyone home for Shabbos.”

“Unless some poor family just got hit by a bus or things blew up at the FBI, that’s how it’s looking.”

She checks her phone. “You hear anything from Gibbs?”

“I checked in with Abby before I left, and she’s reporting the Borins have been picked up, fed lunch, and are stuck in traffic on 95. Should be here in a bit.”
A second later, having gotten all of his kids out of their winter gear, and sat down next to Ziva, Anna’s grabbing his arm and trying to pull him to the door. “BOGGIN! BOGGIN!”

Jimmy looks at Ziva, and she shakes her head, no idea what a boggin is. Jimmy lets himself be led back to the door, and when Anna sees that hasn’t done the job, she starts whacking it. Jimmy picks her up, and says, “Honey, I don’t know what a boggin is.”

But now, in her daddy’s arms, she’s high enough up to point, so point she does, through the door, to the sledding track in the front yard. It’s solid ice, but over the week it got warm enough to make everything slump, so it looks droopy, but it’s hard as a rock. “Boggin… Toboggin! Tomorrow sweetie. We’ll have enough snow for it tomorrow.” He points to Fornell’s car. “Uncle Tobias is here, and I’m sure he’ll be willing to help get it rebuilt. Then we can all sled tomorrow.”

Anna’s not thrilled by that, but she decides not to have a massive fit over it. Possibly because Ziva’s joined them at the window in the door, and is resting her hand on Anna’s back.

“Let me guess, you’d get from the ranch all the way to Idaho in less time than it took us to get from the airport to here,” Abbi says as they pull into the driveway of the house.

Gibbs is sort of paying attention to what the Borins are saying, but he’s vastly more focused on the feel of right now. He’s bringing his wife’s family home. He’s showing them what he’s built: this family, in the metaphorical sense, and this house, in the literal.

He’s proving, tangibly, that he can take care of any need their girl may have, and that feels good, proud, and content.

He can see Jeff looking at the place, and to him, and back to the house. There’s a slow, appreciating nod that goes with it. Gibbs feels the pride of having earned that nod more intensely than any metal he’s ever gotten. Then Becky says, “Oh, Lord, you weren’t kidding about the sledding track!” That gets all attention to the swooping curves of melted/refrorozen snow/slush all around the front yard.

“ Nope,” Abbi says as Gibbs shakes his head. Abbi points out a few of the cars. “And it looks like we’ve got some people who are going to want to ride it, soon.”

When they step out, Gibbs notes the smell of wood smoke from the fireplace, and… turkey on the smoker… He sees Fornell’s car and knows why he’s here this early. Tobias has his back for making sure his in-laws get a proper homecoming.

Jeff and Becky are talking to Abbi about the sledding track, and looking around at the rest of the property. “I’ll never get used to all the trees,” Becky says.

“They go on for miles,” Abbi replies. “Actually, keeping this mowed down is a big part of our weekly chores. If we leave it alone, it’ll be a forest before the year is done.”

Gibbs notices the curtains on the front window shift. He can imagine the faces looking out through them. “They’re dying to meet you two. Come on.”

They’ve just about taken three steps when they hear another car pulling up. That pauses the trip into the house as they wait for Penny and Ducky to get out. A moment later, as the first flakes of snow begin to drift down, Abbi says, “Mom, Dad, this is Penny Langston and Ducky Mallard. Penny,
Ducky, Becky and Jeff Borin.”

Penny offers hugs, and Ducky shakes hands. Penny’s smiling at them, and Ducky says, “We cannot wait to hear your stories. Abigail is a little short on the tales of her youth.”

Becky grins at that. “Oh, I think we may have a story or two.”

Abbi rolls her eyes. “Oh God!”

Jeff chuckles. “Isn’t that the point of introducing us to everyone? So they get to see the you you were before they knew you?”

Abbi looks a little wary. “I guess.”

Becky wraps an arm around her. “We’ll be gentle. Your sister though…”

With a sarcastic tone, Abbi says to Gibbs, “We should have eloped.”

He laughs at that. Then the door opens, and Jimmy calls out, “Come on, stop freezing out there and let us say hi to everyone!”

And so, Gibbs brings his in-laws home.

“You ready Abbs?” Tony asks as he breezes down to the lab.

She looks around at everything, but like most of the rest of the government, she’s having a slow week, too. “Requisitions requested, reports filed, evidence catalogued, I’m ready! Let’s get out of here before something blows up!”

“Amen!” and with that, they’re off.

A minute later, they’re in the parking lot debating her car or his. “Are we picking up the McLittles?”

“I think so. Last I heard Tim was still working.” She grabs her phone and sends off a text. A minute later she says, “My car. He’s still beating stuff into submission.”

They head over to her car, and hop in. As they’re pulling out Abby says, “You hear from Senior?”

“They’re in Germany,” he checks his watch, “for the next four hours, and then to London to Boston they go.”

“I thought they were going from Berlin to New York.”

“They were. Something’s screwed up in Newfoundland, of all places, and it’s messing up the air traffic.”

Abby shakes her head at that. “You excited to see them?”

Tony sighs a little. “Yeah. Probably. It’ll be okay, I know that, but…”

“But it’s been not okay enough, you’re still wary.”
“Yeah.” They ride in quiet for a moment while Tony fiddles with the stereo, looking for something that won’t torture his eardrums. “I can’t understand how you and Tim aren’t deaf.”

Abby rolls her eyes, and gives him a poke.

He settles on a jazz mix. “This is Tim’s right?”

Abby listens for a moment. “Yeah. Though Jimmy’s got a similar playlist, too. Breena’s got some soft rock/pop if you like. You know, if you want, you can add a mix, too. Not like I don’t have twenty gigs of storage on that thing.”

Tony stares at Abby’s phone. “Maybe this weekend.”

“In our copious spare time.”

“I don’t have much going on tomorrow. Keeping eyes on babies, and getting Senior and Delphine from the airport. Some of us weren’t invited to Abbi’s-girly-spa-fest.”

Abby grins. “Sucks to be you. I’m getting massaged, pampered, my nails and hair done. Gonna be a new woman by the time you see me at the rehearsal dinner.”

“And we’re riding herd on the kiddos. I know.” He smiles a little at that, twisting his neck. They both hear the popping. “Maybe I’ll crash the girly-spa-fest. I could use a massage.”

Abby laughs at that.

“You know,” he says, changing the subject, “there is one thing I’m kind of excited about… I can’t wait to see Gibbs with in-laws. I mean, happy in-laws, not us busting his former mother-in-law.”

Abby’s grinning at that, too. “They should be home by now. What do you think they’re like?”

“Abbi’s told us they run a ranch, so… probably get on with Gibbs like a house on fire. I swear he was a cowboy in a former life.”

“He was, you know? Mike told me that.” She says it deadpan enough that Tony shoots her a very curious look, not sure if she’s joking or not.

She winks at him. “Nah. Sherriff. Once upon a time he had a tin badge and a trusty horse. He knew who the good guys were and the bad guys, and he protected the one and shot the other.”

“And by once upon a time, you mean, what, last year?”

“Something like that.” That gets a pause, too. “Actually, God, it’s been almost two years since he ‘retired,’” Abby says.

“Fast two years.”

“Yeah. Turn this one up.” Tony reaches for the stereo and turns up a peppy saxophone mix. “We were worried about him before he retired, afraid he’d get lost without the job, but…”

“Yeah,” Tony says. Just because he got caught with the shit end of the worried-about-retired-Gibbsstick doesn’t mean he didn’t feel it, too. “But he didn’t, and now… When’d you meet him, back in… ‘97? Something like that, right?”

“January of ’98. He’d just gotten back to the US. I’d been with NCIS for… I don’t know, two months, something like that.”
“Nineteen years ago. Seventeen for me. I’d have never expected us to end up here.”

Abby shakes her head at that. “No. Never in a million years. But it didn’t take a million years, just twenty of them.”

---

Breena stands up, back creaking. It’s been a long day of a lot of makeup.

Tim’s told her they’ve done actual studies of this, but she’s not terribly impressed, any good mortician could tell exactly what those studies found, death rates shoot sky high on December 26th, and stay there until January 1st.

And they drop from December 23rd to the 25th. The old, the sick, the frail… They hold on to avoid dying on Christmas.

On the 26th, her dad picked up six people. He got eight of them on the 27th. Six more on the 28th. Normally, they pick up two or three people a day.

So, it’s been a long week. She’s been doing more embalming and making up than normal, both in that she’s got more clients, and her father normally works on that, too, but he’s been picking people up.

Her spine pops like bubble wrap as she gently twists from side to side. She’s looking forward to tomorrow, and tonight, where she intends to spend at least an hour laying down with Tim and Jimmy working on her, intensely.

“Well, Mrs. Heland, we are done. My sister and Mom have you from here. They’ll make sure your family gets to say goodbye to you properly.”

Mrs. Heland, of course, does not respond.

Breena heads to the private breakroom they have in the basement. She tosses her scrubs into the wash hamper, and changes into her street clothing. As she’s doing that she sends off a text: Am I the last one home?

A minute later she’s got a shot of Jimmy, Abby, and the kiddos playing on the floor with Mona.

She also gets: I doubt it. From Tim. You leaving now?

Yeah. Just changing out of my scrubs. You?

Just about done. Got to drop a few pages off to some beta readers.

???

Worked on a new scene for the novel. Walt and Uncle Tom want to give ‘em a read.

Breena knows she’s missing something on this conversation, and she knows that Tim’s telling her this for a reason. She also knows not to ask over text. Cool. We gonna like these new scenes, too?

Yeah, I think so.

Excellent. See you in an hour or so?
Tim’s phone buzzes, and a shot of Jimmy, Abby, the kids and Mona flashes up, along with Breena’s Am I the last one home?

He spends a moment texting with her, as he carefully wraps up his work for the day.

Hopefully, it’s been a productive day.

Hopefully.

He hasn’t actually hit his Uncle or Walter with his ‘story idea’ but he’s thinking it’ll work. Thinking it’ll work enough that today, instead of beating his computer systems into shape, he wrote up, on his typewriter, on paper, with carbon copies (Jennifer just about died when he said he wanted carbon paper. She didn’t know anyone his age even knew what that was, let alone how to use it.) a brief, here’s who’s who of the dragons, adding two more characters Tomas and Hurron, and giving them familiar enough backstories that Tom and Walter should, with very little difficulty, know who the hell they are.

Likewise, he wrote up his Villains list, and added enough so that they should also be able to figure out what the hell is going on with them, too.

He’s sure that list is going to grow, but for right now, he’s got a few targets and at least one big bad.

It’s enough.

He adds a post-it note to each collection of pages. Here’s the story I was talking about. It’s rough, and I’m still working on it. I’ll send you more as I’ve got it. Let me know what you think. Thanks, Tim.

He plops them into envelopes and tosses his copy of what he’s written today into his Dragons folder. The FBI is officially closed on Monday, but Tuesday or Wednesday, he should get some ideas from Tom and Walt as to what they think Tomas and Hurron should be doing.

And with that, he’s done for the day, too.

Time to get heading home.

Like Thanksgiving, Gibbs and Fornell (mostly Fornell) have been in charge of the turkey.

And like Thanksgiving, the bird came off the smoke a bit early, because it’s going to get some time to hang out in the kitchen, “rest”, cool off a little, and make sure that all the rest of the goodies are ready to go.

Which means, for the first time since he’s gotten home, Gibbs has a moment alone with Fornell.

And there’s something he can’t wait to ask about. Emily’s new boy. The two of them showed up about half an hour ago, and they’re staying for dinner before heading back “home.” He’s a lanky kid
with almost literal heart eyes every time he looks at her. Both of them are on the sofa, talking with Wendy, Jimmy, and Penny about something.

Gibbs pointedly looks at the kid, and Fornell says, “His name is Drew Stacy. He’s a junior, majoring in information systems, and an Army ROTC Commander.”

Gibbs nods. Drew’s got blue eyes, dark brown hair shaved high and tight, and military posture. Seeing him sitting next to Emily, adoration oozing off of him, he feels like he’s looking in a mirror from 40 years ago.

“Say’s he’s enlisting fulltime when he graduates. Going to go career military. Something about securing data systems in hostile environments that made Emily swoon, and sounded like gibberish to me.”

Gibbs nods at that, too. He keeps watching. Drew gently brushes Emily’s hair out of her face. She’s grinning, and kisses his palm, both of them completely unaware of the two old guys with white hair watching them from the kitchen.

“He keeps calling me, ‘Sir.’”

Gibbs sniggers, remembering doing that with Shannon’s dad.

They watch them for another moment before Gibbs says, “That’s your son-in-law.”

Fornell sighs, staring at the two of them, knowing what he’s seeing. “Yeah.” He rolls his eyes. “God help him if he knocks her up before they get married.”

“Tobias…”

He just looks at Gibbs, and Gibbs nods. “Shannon’s dad probably said the same thing to his best friend when I showed up.”

That makes Tobias laugh.

“Your girls like him?”

“Diane says he’s ‘cute,’ and Wendy approves. He pulls out chairs for her, listens when she talks, and has managed to go an entire five minutes at a time without touching her if I’m staring directly at him.”

Gibbs chuckles, remembering that, too. “Could be worse.”

“Yeah, he could be a Marine,” Fornell’s deadpan is perfect for a beat, and then he breaks into a grin. Gibbs gives Fornell a shove when he says that, and Fornell shoves back, smirking.

“Gonna go commiserate with Jeff?”

Fornell rolls his eyes at that. “I’ll wait for a ring.” Then he looks over to where Jeff and Becky are chatting with Tony and Abbi, both of them giving the grand tour of all the photos on the mantle. “How’s it feel? Nervous?”

Gibbs shakes his head. “Nah. Excited. Happy. Little weird to have in-laws again, but… Not bad.”

“Good.”

“You?”
Fornell knows Gibbs is asking about his part of the wedding, the best man’s speech. “I’ve got it down. You got your part?”

“Almost. Gonna run it by my ghostwriter one more time.”

“You’ve got a ghostwriter? That’s cheating.”

“He offered. Just want another set of eyes on the thing, make sure I don’t sound stupid.”

“You’re not gonna.”

Gibbs smiles at that. A moment later, Ziva’s in the kitchen. “Is this gossip open to anyone or is it man-only?”

Gibbs and Fornell share a look. “Nothing exciting in here.”

She gives both of them a long look, and then says, “Tobias, we have something of a family tradition, and I was wondering how you’d feel if we invited Drew to our next bootcamp?”

Gibbs laughs, loud, at that idea. Apparently, he’s not the only one thinking Drew Stacy’s gonna be sticking around.

Tim pulls up to a packed driveway. He doesn’t recognize one of the cars, but the rest of them look familiar.

Full house tonight.

He sneaks in during the last few seconds of handwashing. It takes him a second to basically throw his coat at the coatrack, and slip into line behind Penny.

She turns to hug him. “Long day?”

“Not horrible, just time intensive.” Almost everyone else is already seated, so he washes his hands quickly, and slips into his chair between Abby and Breena. Abby gets a kiss, and he’s about halfway to kissing Breena when he notices exactly who’s at the table and pulls back at the last second, slipping into a warm hug.

“Hey!”

“You made it,” Jimmy replies. “Thought you weren’t that far behind Breena.”

“I can’t have left that much later than she did, but the snow screwed up traffic, and I got stuck,” Then he pauses, seeing three people he’s never met before. “I’m sorry. Hi! I’m Tim,” he says, getting up to shake Jeff and Drew’s hands, and kiss Becky’s cheek. “I know you two are Abbi’s parents, and…”

No one had told him Emily was coming tonight, let alone that she’d have a friend holding her hand.

“I’m Drew,” the kid says.

Emily smiles up at Tim, as Tim says, “New boyfriend. Cool. You’re in for the wedding?”

Emily nods at that as Tim sits back down again, making sure all of the kiddos get hugs and kisses as he moves around the table.
Jimmy looks up sharply at that, “Abbi, speaking of ‘in for the wedding,’ how big of a pain in the butt is adding one more person to the guest list?”

She flashes him a half smile, “Depends, are you willing to make all the calls?”

Jimmy nods. “Yeah, if you get me the numbers, I can do that.”

“Then it’s not a pain in my butt at all, who are we adding?”

“Allan…” he turns to Jeff and Becky, “my assistant, Dr. Sam Allan, He’s got a new boyfriend, and was hoping to invite him.”

“Oh!” Abbi’s face is happy at this. “Yeah, of course. Is this his first boyfriend since…” She drifts off on that idea, not everyone knows Sam’s background here.

Jimmy fills in the blanks. “Sam had a partner. He was murdered in a hate crime. That was… got to be close to four years ago now. After the trial, he decided to switch from infectious diseases to medical examination. To the best of my knowledge this is his first boyfriend since, so you all,” and here he’s looking at Tony, “be nice.”

Tony gets the message, “I’m always nice.”

“Yeah, be nicer. His name is Alan Samuels.”

And Tony does laugh hard enough at that that a casual observer might think his head is in danger of exploding. But, he’s not the only one, everyone else who gets the joke thinks that’s fairly funny, too. (And once it’s explained to Drew, who hadn’t listened closely enough to Allan’s name to catch it the first time, he thinks it's funny, too.)

They’re passing around the turkey, everyone filling their plates, mostly talking about the food, when Jeff asks, “Did that case you two were out to investigate ever get solved?”

He’s asking Gibbs and Fornell, but they don’t know. They glance over to Tim. Tim sighs. Abby, Jimmy, and Breena know this, but he was planning on telling everyone today, and hadn’t gotten around to it, so…

“Actually,” the tone of his voice spells it out without him having to say much more.

“Where’d you find her?” Fornell asks.

“She’d been in a Tennessee morgue for the last eight months.”

That gets some wincing.

“Cold?” Gibbs asks.

“Subzero,” Tim says, “She’d been swimming for a while before they got her.”

“So, nothing?” Jeff asks.

“We know she’s missing, so we’re ahead of the game. We know she didn’t go for a walk on her own, so call it two steps ahead,” Tim shakes his head, “but this was done carefully, we’ve got nothing on who took her for that walk, and how she ended up swimming, and we’re not going to
find any answers by looking at her.”

“So what happens next?” Becky asks.

Tim smiles a bit at Tony. “I’ve got the second best homicide team on the job. They’re looking. It’ll come up blank. I’ve got a different team, right now in the pre-larval stage, but eventually, I’ll be able to identify other people like Heidi, and I’ll set watch on them, and when someone moves against one of them, I’ll swoop them up.”

“Proactive instead of reactive,” Abby says, a smile on her face, as she pets the back of Tim’s hand.

“Other than I’m planning for a ‘next time,’ yes.”

“And you think there’ll be a next time?” Drew asks.

Tim takes a bite of his turkey. “There’s always a next time. But maybe not a time after that.”

“At least, not the way they did it before,” Jimmy says.

Tim sighs again, “Yeah. But that’s as good as I can do, so I’ll do it.” He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, that’s grim.” He looks over to Abbi’s parents. “We do talk shop at dinner, but we try to keep it more on the entertaining BS side of things and less on the existential crisis, the world is full of evil, and on our absolute best days we manage to just keep it at a standstill side. But, sometimes it leaks out. Anyway…” Tim thinks fast, looking for something easier to talk about, “Abbi tells us you’re homesteaders. I thought that ended in like… the 1880s. How did you get into that?”

Jeff smiles a little, and Becky smiles wider, “Dumb luck, a dream, and barely fifty bucks between us.”

“Didn’t hurt that your Gran was a research librarian, and she knew everything there ever was to know,” Jeff adds. “She’s the one who suggested we look into it. Her grandparents got to North Dakota as homesteaders, and after the rain didn’t follow the plow, they moved further west.”

“To much better fortunes in Seattle,” Becky adds. “But her family had stories of it. Go west, grab a chunk of land, manage to get something to grow on it for five years, and it was yours.”

Jeff takes over between bites of turkey. “I was getting restless in school. Too much books, not enough doing. Failed too many classes because I was busy planning out buildings instead of writing up papers on how to tell Baroque from Rococo or whatever twaddle they had me doing back then.”

“He never was one for fancy curly-cues,” Becky adds, glancing around, noticing there’s not much in the way of fancy curly-cues decorating the house, either. “I was working for a vet. Back then you could apprentice, sort of. Show up, do the work, learn in the office. You had to go to school to be a vet, but to be an assistant or a veterinary nurse, all you needed was strong nerves, a stronger stomach, and scrubs.”

“That was a year or so. I got to the point where I knew if I stuck around much longer I was going to fail out, so… Had to find something. No one was going to hire me to design buildings without that degree. I worked construction for a few summers, so I had a few contacts, and some practical experience. We were at Becky’s parents’ place, kicking back on a Sunday, and Gran was over. She said something like, ‘Back in the day, you’d get married, pack up, head ‘west,’ and make a go of it.”

“We looked at each other, I think I raised an eyebrow, and he nodded, and… six months later, we’d packed up the oldest, cheapest, most beaten-down school bus that still ran with everything we owned and every book on how to build, make, or grow anything we could think of, stuck two barely
pregnant heifers in a trailer on the back, and out we went.”

“That was 1972, and we barely made it that first year,” Jeff says.

“He’s soft-balling it. We scraped by on nerves and a willingness to split ramen packs between us for food. We lived in that bus for the first two years, built the barn for the cows first, learned the hard way that August was way too late in the year to start a ranch in Montana, sheer stupid luck that we got enough snow the first winter that we could pile it around the bus to stay warm, and slowly carved a ranch out of the wild.”

“By the time Abbi was born, we had a doublewide trailer, and back then, that was a big deal for us,” Jeff says.

“You never know how much you miss things like electricity, or showers, until you go without them for a few years. That trailer was a mansion compared to the bus,” Becky replies.

Hearing that, Tim has a very vivid memory of the showers in the Navy Yard, and how hot water and decent water pressure was something he took for granted, until it was gone. He hates the memory, the feel of the trickle of lukewarm water barely dribbling over him, but he is pleased to see that it’s unpleasant, but not an instant trip back to the Navy Yard. It’s just a memory.

Jeff continues, “By the time Abbi was born, we also owned the first five acres of land. And once you’ve got some land, even if it’s not worth much, you can get loans, and from there, everything goes easier.”

“That’s how my family did it,” Breena says. “Well, not ranches. Build the first funeral home, take out a loan against it, build the next one, pay the loan back, or roll it over… My great-great-grandparents did that back in the 1890s, and we’ve been expanding on it ever since.”

Becky and Jeff are nodding along with that. “We’ve expanded as much as we can, there’s nowhere around us worth going. But you’ve got the basic idea. Only so much land out there is worth trying to run cattle on.”

“Or keeping tourists entertained,” Becky adds.

“And how do you keep tourists entertained,” Ducky asks.

“Well, Ducky, have you ever been on a dogsled?” Jeff asks in return.

“Actually, a long time ago, I was invited to spend Christmas with a few friends outside of Toronto…”

Tim’s not on cleanup tonight. At least, not dinner cleanup. He’s on entertain kiddos, and then tubby-time.

So, he’s on the floor, with the assorted little dudes, Drew, (who Fornell keeps shoving into small-child-intensive-activities, probably as a pre-emptive, I DO NOT WANT GRANDCHILDREN ANY TIME SOON sort of maneuver), Glenn, and Jeff.

For Tim and Glenn, this is old hat. Roll around on the floor and roughhouse (in a very gentle sort of way with the infants) so that the kids can burn off that burst of energy that goes with dinner, and they’re in a fairly calm sort of mood for tubby and bed.
Drew’s got little siblings and cousins, so it’s been a few years since he’s been on baby duty, but he’s got the basics down. He can make goofy faces and blow raspberries on tummies with the best of them. (Fornell, hovering in the background, helping to clear the table, is suddenly realizing this might be a bad plan, because Emily’s watching Drew be good with kids, and if anything he just made Drew about fifty times even more attractive to her. He’s mentally groaning and trying not to. After all, if this guy is sticking around, and if he is the guy who’s going to be providing him with said grandkids, hopefully a long time from now, he’d like Drew to be good with them.)

Jeff’s giving horsey rides to Molly and Kelly and Anna. All of them are happy to hop on his back and get bounced around the living area. His face is lit up as he’s doing it, but there’s a wistful edge there, too.

Becky sees it, and joins him as he’s putting down Molly. She gives him a sweet kiss, and a nod. He nods back at her. There are some things they don’t have to talk about, truths they’d rather weren’t true. And right now, he’s going to enjoy this time he’s got, rather than wishing for a world he doesn’t have.

As Fornell and Tony finish cleaning up the table, Fornell says, “We gaming tonight? Duck still owes me a rematch on Scrabble.”

Ducky, who’s drying off the silverware and putting it back in its drawer, says, with a huge grin, “I believe the phrase is, ‘Bring it on!’”

Tony laughs at that, and says to Becky, Jeff, and Drew, “Once the kiddos go down, we’ll often have a game or movie or something. If we’re gaming, though, tonight’s a good night for Monopoly, because Senior’s coming tomorrow.”

That gets a collection of shared looks, but none of the newcomers knows exactly what that means.

Tony expands the idea, “Senior, my dad… You don’t ever want to play him in Monopoly. See, he doesn’t actually buy any land or properties. And he’s either going to win big or go broke in the seventh round, but if he rolls well, and he’s not out on the seventh round, he’s going to start offering to loan people money. Say you land on Park Place, but you’ve only got 200 dollars, and you need 350 to buy it, he’ll give you the 150, and then you’ll give him…” Tony does the math. “What is that, 40%?”

“Forty-three, rounded up,” Tim says, looking up from Donnie’s tummy rub.

“Thank you, McCalculator. So, you pay him 43% of all the rent you get on that piece for the rest of the game. Once he’s got your properties leveraged, he’ll loan you money to keep you in the game if you land bad. So, you land on Ducky’s hotel empire, and go belly up, and Senior swoops in and takes a third of whatever it was you had left, because after all, creditors get paid first in bankruptcies. And then, maybe he rolls badly, and you’ve got to mortgage your stuff to bail him out, because he owns half of it or whatever. You’ve bailed him out, but now you’re not making any more rent, and next thing you know everyone else is broke, and they all owe him money. We played with him once, and promptly decided that was never happening again.”

“Your dad a banker?” Becky asks.

“Worse, real estate mogul,” Tony replies. “He’s got an eye for a deal, and he’s always looking.”

Jimmy joins them from the kitchen, “Whatever we’re playing, I’m in.” He takes Donnie from Tim. “Come on, you, I think you and your cousins are in for tubby time.”
Tim picks up Sean, and says to the newcomers. “With this many little guys, tubby time works best in shifts. Glenn, you want us to get Nick, too?”

Glenn looks awfully happy taking Nick off the floor and holding him out to Tim. “If you’re offering…”

“No problem.” Tim picks up Nick, too. He gurgles at his Uncle. “Come on, tubby time for you. Tony?”

Tony waves them off. “Three’s as many as fits in there. We’ll get Dave with Anna.”

“Okay,” Jimmy says, and then they’re off for stage one of Mission: Put Kids To Bed.

“Absconded?” Ducky says with a raised eyebrow. “I’m awfully certain that is not, in fact, a word.”

Fornell glares at the board. When Ducky played scone, he thought the Scrabble gods had finally smiled upon him. “Fine…seed.” He places the tiles, and looks at the board, depressed. “And that’s it for me.”

Ducky gently pats his hand with a wicked smile on his face. “It was a pleasure.”

“You say that because you beat me by a million points.”

“Only one hundred and seventy-eight of them,” Penny adds, sipping her cocoa.

Fornell gets up, stretching, and pours himself a scotch. Then he joins Wendy on the sofa. Ducky’s at the table, looking around at the rest of the group, “Any other takers?”

Penny grins at him. “Oh yeah. Let’s see how you do against someone who’s got as much vocabulary as you do.”

He smiles back at her. “The game becomes sweeter for the challenge of it.”

Breena heads into the living room, and says, “Hey, Gibbs, got kiddos looking for their tuck-ins from Pop.”

Gibbs gets up from his place by the fire, where he’d been lounging around with Abbi. In the McPalmer nursery, there are six little guys, bundled up and snuggled down, ready for what will hopefully be a good long night of very few wake ups.

He hugs Molly, and Kelly, both of whom sit up for him, and pets Anna, Sean, Nick, and Donnie, who are already mostly asleep.

“Story?” Molly asks, voice soft, so he breaks into a quick rendition of Goodnight Moon. None of them need the book anymore. He’s got the words down pat, and the girls all know the pictures in their heads. When he wraps up with the last line, he’s got six little people all breathing softly around him.

He creeps out, closing the door quietly, and walks a bit further down the hall. The bathroom the kiddos share is still getting mopped dry. Glenn’s saying, “How can they possibly make this much mess?”

Jimmy’s shaking his head. “At least we aren’t wiping down the ceiling.”
“Time to get those glasses checked,” Tim replies, standing on the toilet seat to reach up and get some wet spots off the ceiling.

Gibbs watches them, pleased to not be part of the cleanup crew, and then says, “Tim?”

Tim looks away from the ceiling. “Yeah?”

“Can I borrow you?”

“Sure.” He tosses his towel to Jimmy, and heads out. “What’s up?” Tim asks as Gibbs leads him away from the others.

“This,” Gibbs reaches into his pocket and hands Tim a folded piece of paper. “Give it a look?”

Tim smiles, fairly sure what this is, and when he unfolds the paper, he’s not wrong. His eyes trace over the paper and he’s nodding, liking the changes Gibbs has made since he saw this last. He nods again, and then refolds the paper, handing it back to Gibbs. “They’re good.”

Gibbs smiles a little at that, and Tim pulls him into a close hug. He can remember doing this on his own wedding day, and the feel of it then, and the feel of it now, reversed. “You’ve got this, Dad.”

Gibbs smiles wider, blinks, and then ruffles Tim’s hair.

Normally, Jeff and Becky turn in early. Normally, they’re two time zones to the west. So, their early-to-bed/early-to-rise habits are working well with eastern standard time. Namely, it’s a bit before eleven by the local clocks, but for Jeff and Becky, it feels only a bit before their normal bedtime.

Most of the rest of the crew has gone to bed, or at least retired to their own rooms, but Gibbs and Abbi are still up, and so are they.

Right now, everyone is sitting around, enjoying the last drink of the night, and the glow of a slowly dying fire.

Jeff gets up, whiskey in hand, and spends a moment walking around the mantle, looking at all of the pictures, before he sits down next to Becky again. His hand rests lightly on her back, and he says, “We’d always wanted that,” as he nods to the pictures. “That’s part of building up that ranch. It was supposed to be a family business.” Before Abbi can say anything, he adds, “It’s not a complaint or a criticism. You and your sister just aren’t ranchers, and that’s okay, but…” He looks around the house again. “But this is good. And it’s something we wanted for us, and want for you.”

Becky leans forward, wrapping an arm around Abbi, “Make the time, though. Bring ‘em out west. Especially the little guys, as they get older, they’ll like it out there. Get to play with the dogs and horses and cows.” She looks at Gibbs, who also seemed to have a good time playing with the dogs and horses. “Time with the animals is good for pretty much everyone.”

“We’ve got the space, especially in the summer. We could put this whole crew up, and they wouldn’t have to be all in the same room, tripping over each other,” Jeff adds.

“And, we know you’ve got crazy schedules, but… Just, say you’ll try.”

Abbi nods. “We’ll try.”
Gibbs says, “We will. Maybe not this year, traveling with toddlers is tough, but we’ll get ’em west.”

“Good,” Jeff replies.

Becky stands up. “I think it’s bedtime for us.”

Jeff stands up, too.

“Goodnight,” Abbi replies, watching them head up the stairs to their room, as she snuggles in close. “They approve.”

He kisses the top of her head, a smile on his face. “Good.”
The Art of the Tease (Reprise)

Friday night, the kiddos are in bed, and so are the adult McPalmers, snuggled under the blankets, settling in for the night.

“I was thinking,” Abby says, voice indicating a game is in the offing.

Tim kisses the back of her neck, then props himself up on his elbow so he can see more of her than the back of her head/shoulder. “I love it when you’re thinking.”

“Especially about sex,” Jimmy adds, snuggling closer to Breena, stroking her hair, as she flips over to face Abby.

“Hmmmm… I suppose I could be thinking about sex,” Abby says.

“You mean you weren’t?” Breena asks, stroking her toes over Abby’s leg.

“Not directly, ish… sort of. Tomorrow night, we’ve got the rehearsal dinner, which should be fun, but… Have you seen that restaurant?”

Tim shakes his head as Breena nods. Jimmy figures he doesn’t need to add anything to it, because all bases are covered.

“It’s an open floorplan,” Breena says, guessing where Abby’s going with this.

“Exactly. Really open. No booths, just tables. No hallways. The sushi bar, grill, and bar is in the middle, with open access so you can watch them make your food and drinks. There are bathrooms, but there’s no way to just drift out without anyone noticing.”

Tim makes a noise like, “Ehck!”

“Why would Gibbs pick a place like that?” Jimmy says.

“Beyond the reason both of you are pouting… the food is really good. Pan Asian, mostly sushi and yakitori, but with flavors from all over the eastern hemisphere,” Breena replies, a little smirk on her face.

Abby adds, “He was telling Ziva about it, and she told me, basically, we’ve got the place for the night. They rented the whole restaurant. No table service. The chefs will be doing their thing, and we get to pick up and nibble whatever looks good as we like.”

That sounds good to Tim. But, nowhere to wander off to… That’s less than perfectly awesome.

Abby nods. “So, that’s tomorrow night. For the wedding, well, there are nice little nooks and hidden hallways in the Omni, but… Breena’s parents are coming to the wedding. Abbi’s parents and sister’s family will be at both. Same with Senior and Delphine.”

“So, you’re saying we have to behave?” Tim says, sounding incredulous. Three quarters of the fun of a wedding is sneaking off and not behaving. If you’re not going to be messing around/or thinking about/planning how to mess around, weddings are boring.

Abby grins up at him, and gives him a quick kiss to the tip of his nose. “Perish the thought! I have a plan. Tomorrow night, we’re on our own after the party, and I doubt anyone would mind if we head off a bit early.”
“Not like we don’t have five little reasons for that,” Jimmy says.

“That works. We’ve got the sitters until 11:00,” Breena says. Little guys will be going to the wedding. They aren’t going to the rehearsal dinner.

“And a mini-van,” Abby adds. “So a game… Too many strangers, no good hiding places, so it’ll be all about the tease. Hours of meeting, mingling, and teasing. Soft words, short, non-obvious touches, just four friends, out for a night.”

“And maybe we flirt a little too hard, stand a little too close, or look a little too long, but nothing over the line,” Breena adds, enjoying the idea of hours of teasing. “Nothing that would get anything other than a mildly curious raised eyebrow.”

Tim smiles at that, feeling his joy, and dick, well up at that idea. “Playing to my strengths.”

Abby kisses him. “And then… I mean, hours and hours of suggestion. Of whispered promises and ideas. Maybe we don’t exactly get home. I don’t know about you guys, but it’s been a long time since I had sex in a car.”

Tim thinks about it. “Years… Back in Arizona, or…. Texas… where were we?”

Abby shrugs; she wasn’t keeping that close of a look at the map. “In the desert. Though I was kind of thinking naughty teenagers, mom and dad have been watching all night, we’re finally free from under their gaze, time to party, sex in a car.”

Jimmy’s laughing at that. “Yeah, I’ve got some memories that go with that.” He nods, slow lascivious smile spreading across his face. “Sounds like the makings of a good time. And do you have wedding game plans, too?”

“Other than I stick with Tim and you stick with Breena because there’ll be way too much fussing if we get caught with the wrong person…” Then Abby shakes her head.

“Maybe a bit more teasing.” Tim scoots up, leaning over Abby to Breena, and kisses her. “Just because we can’t get caught messing around doesn’t mean I can’t fill your head with some tasty images for when you go fool around with him.”

Jimmy kisses Breena, too. “You going to enjoy that, his words in your head and my dick in your pussy?”

Breena makes a very pleased purring sound at that. Then she says, “I could probably get used to this.”

Abby grins, too, trailing her hand down Jimmy’s side. “Probably.”

There are other things Breena could get used to, too, and getting out of bed a little after eight, when the kids have been taken care of by her guys, followed by a good cup of coffee, a croissant with raspberry jam, then packing up her going out outfit for tonight, and heading off with her wife, Abbi, Ziva, Penny, Wendy, and Becky for a girls day out, is on the list.

Having to do nothing more stressful than picking out nail polish colors is the aim of the day, and she intends to enjoy it, thoroughly.
It was a long week, and yes, last night the boys did a splendid job working on her, but an hour of good massage and sex doesn’t make up for a solid week packed full of dead bodies. Her shoulder hasn’t unkinked yet, though she’s hoping it will.

They’re in an Uber, heading toward Arlington, and the party mood is a little subdued right now, but only because everyone is still a little sleepy.

“It’s a shame Miranda couldn’t get here for this,” Becky says.

“I tried, Mom. We offered to pay for the tickets and her work to get her out a day earlier, but she didn’t want to spend a minute longer away from home than she had to.”

None of the rest of them have heard about this. They all know that Miranda is Abbi’s little sister, but none of them knew there was any drama to this.

“Something prickly?” Ziva asks.

“No. They run their own business, and her heading out a day early meant closing for a day and…”

“And they built that business from scratch and aren’t about to leave it be for a minute longer than they have to,” Becky says. Her voice turns slightly sarcastic as she gives her older daughter a long look. “I can’t imagine were she got it.”

Abbi chuckles a bit at that, looking at the rest of the ladies in the van. “Yeah. Totally out of character for our family. Wouldn’t know anything about working every possible minute and then another one or two just because.”

“What does she do?” Breena asks. They’ve seen pictures of Abbi’s sister and her family, but haven’t heard much about them.

“Towing. She runs the phones, computers, and books. Drew, her husband’s name is Drew, too, does the driving. You get stuck in Kansas City, give ‘em a call, and in half an hour they’re there to get you moving again.”

“And if no one picks up the phone…” Abby says, letting that trail off. They can all get why her not being there would be almost as much of an issue as the truck not being there.

“Exactly. We talk or write every week or so, but she’s hard to pry out of Kansas.”

“But they are coming,” Becky says. There’s a tinge of worry on her face. Cutting it this close, and winter weather, and…

Abbi pats her phone. “I got the text two hours ago. They’re at the airport. Their flight is on time, and right about now, they should be getting on it. Speaking of which, Senior and Delphine?”

Ziva replies, “Should be landing at Dulles in an hour or so. Tony was supposed to be leaving not all that long after we did.”

“He’s missing out on sledding track repair?” Wendy asks.

“Much to his disappointment, I’m sure,” Abby adds, dryly. For Becky she says, “He’s never been a huge fan of cold, wet, or building stuff. He likes riding it just fine, but finds lugging six hundred pounds of snow boring.”

“I’m sure Jeff will take his place happily,” Becky says. “He likes stuff like that. Your man, too,
right?”

Abby wiggles her hand a little. “Tim likes designing things, he got that from Penny,” who smiles at that, “and he’s okay with building them, but he’s happier with a soldering iron than a saw. Gibbs is the real builder.”

“He’s the one who does it for fun, but we all worked on the house,” Penny adds. “I think it’s safe to say that at this point, we’re all builders. Even Ducky and I were on the roof putting shingles up.”

Becky looks pretty impressed by that, and somewhat disbelieving. “You were putting up shingles?”

“Oh, yeah!” Abby says. “Imagine her with her hair pulled back, a big floppy sunhat, and a loose button down. No sunburn for Dr. Langston. She was up there, using the nail gun, with the best of us.”

Penny half shrugs. “I raised my boys to never shirk a job if they could do it. It was a job. It needed to be done. And I can point a device and pull a trigger as well as anyone else. And if I was doing that, one of these young ones could be lugging shingles up from the ground. And, I can promise you, these old bones don’t want to be going up and down a ladder more than once or twice a day.”

That gets a smile from Becky. “Well, my comparatively younger ones aren’t a huge fan of ladders any more, either. There’s something to be said for young people around.”

“Yes, there is.”

“Get back here!” Tim lunges after Anna, who is attempting to follow her older sister outside. Normally, this would not be an issue except for the fact that said older sister has boots on, and Anna is current in socks.

He grabs the youngest of the crew who are up and walking. “Boots! No frozen feet on my watch.”

Jimmy sniggers a bit at that, as he wraps the scarf around Kelly’s face. “Okay, you’re done, you can join Molly and Pop.” She begins to waddle outside. In traditional toddler in the snow fashion, her cold weather garments have rendered her practically spherical. He reaches for the second boot. “Here, let me…” With Tim on one foot, and Jimmy on the other, they get Anna finished quickly.

“Great, out you go, I’ll be there in a minute.” Tim’s wrapping his own scarf around his neck.

“Good, lord…” Jimmy says, looking out the window. “What are they doing?”

Tim stares, rubs his eyes, and then says, “That looks like a dogsled to me.”

Jimmy nods. “Is Jeff hitching up Mona?”

Tim’s still staring. “If I had to bet, that’s how I’d bet.”

“Why?” Jimmy says. And then, after another moment of watching the answer becomes clear. Fornell heads over, bucket of snow shoveled off the driveway between his hands. He drops it on the sled.

“Because none of us want to lug snow,” Tim says, with a smile. “You coming out soon?”

“I hope. Gotta make some calls, get Sam’s Alan in on this thing. Ducky’s keeping an ear on the boys, and if I’m done before they finish their morning nap, I’ll head out.”
Tim nods, pulling on his jacket, and then leans in to give Jimmy a quick kiss. “Good luck.”

“Thanks!”

“Hey, if you’re on hold too long,” he hands over his phone, “send the girls something fun.”

Jimmy smiles at that. “That should make on hold time more interesting.”

---

Deveda spa in Arlington, VA.

If someone were to take the word Luxury right out of Breena’s mind and apply it to a spa, this is it. Everything around them oozes understated class. There’s nothing flashy, no gold-plated faucets or gewgaws with sparkly bits, but the accents are beyond lush, like a single, perfectly spherical, blown glass vase that likely costs more than a month of their combined wages holding three, perfect, and fresh, Blooms of Paradise, sitting on a scrupulously clean, mirror-sheen polished, onyx table between two white suede chaise lounge sofas.

“Diane knew what she was talking about, I take,” Abby says to Abbi.

Abbi’s looking around. Diane suggested this was the place for a bachelorette fun day, and that was good enough for her. She gave the number to her secretary, told her the day and how many people would be there, and that was that.

“Ladies! Come on in.” An effusive woman says while waving them deeper into a room decorated in cool whites and creams with the occasional splash of a vibrant blue or orange. “Abbi Borin, right? I’m Cicely Summers, and I’ll be coordinating your treatments today. Have any of you ever been here before?”

That gets a collection of ‘Nos’ and shaken heads.

“Oh, then you’re in for a treat! First things first, you come with me down to the locker rooms. You’ll get out of your street clothing, into robes, and then into the lounge. From there we’ll go over what you’re getting done, what you want to eat and drink while you get it done, and what sorts of things you can do between treatments.”

“Between?” Wendy asks.

“Because there are so many of you, we can’t do all of you at the same time for things like the hot stone massage, or the paraffin hand and foot soak, so, while we work on some of you, or move you through other treatments, some of you get to relax in the hot tub or steam room, grab a shower in the water lounge, nap on the sofas in the music and light therapy room, or nibble some snacks in the main lounge. Whatever you like.” She’s leading them down a long hall, and then turning into a small, intimate locker room. It’s got space for twelve lockers, so apparently Cicely wasn’t kidding about not being able to handle all seven of them at the same time on the same treatment. They’ve got half the spa’s capacity taken with just them.

She demonstrates how to use the lockers, and then says, “Okay ladies, you hang your stuff up, get into your robes, slip on your slippers, and meet up with me through that door,” she points to a door on the far side of the locker room. “Then I’ll give you the tour, you’ll fill out the paperwork, we’ll go over what you’re all set up for, and then the day is yours. Abbi,” she gestures to Abbi. “This one is yours.” Then she opens the first of the lockers, and takes out the robe. It’s, like most of the rest of the décor, cream-colored, and ultra-lush, thick terry cloth on the inside and some sort of satiny fabric on
the outside, but this one has a gold trim, and BRIDE embroidered on the lapel pocket. There’s also a
sparkly little tiara type thing to go with it, and Cicely sets it on Abbi’s head. “We like to make sure
everyone knows why you’re here! So,” she hugs Abbi, who looks fairly stunned, and then backs up.
“All righty! I’ll meet you in a bit.” She starts to head out. “Oh, one last question, do you want me to
pop a sparkling rosé or prosecco or both?”

Abbi’s just staring at the robe in her hands, bride in a pretty cursive font staring up at her, feeling a
bit overwhelmed by all of this.

Wendy’s chuckling at the stunned look on Abbi’s face. “Diane certainly knew what she was talking
about.” She looks at the ladies. “Let’s go with both. I’m sure between the six of us, we’ll put a dent
in both.”

“Wonderful!” And with that, and a swish of flowy skirts, Cecily sweeps out to get the lounge ready
for them.

Abbi looks up, shaking her head a bit, and says, “Uh…”

Ziva wraps an arm around her, and her mom, both of whom are sharing similar looks of
what did I get myself into? and says, “Come now, this will be fun!”

Breena rolls her shoulders, opening her own locker, and echoes Ziva, “Fun!”

Over the course of his own personal wedding, Jimmy was in charge of such decisions as: Show up
or not? Do I really need to invite cousins I haven’t seen in half a decade to this thing? And: Can we
maybe get at least one meal option that isn’t dripping with carbs?

Apparently, when you go to your fiancée’s home, in your very spiffy, powder-blue, 1970’s vintage
tux, and suggest that a retro-wedding would be a lot of fun, you very rapidly get cut out of the
decision making. (Standing there, muttering, ‘McGee thought it was cool,’ did nothing to make his
bride, her sisters, and her mother stop looking at him like he’d gone terminally insane.)

That said, since his primary job was to show up and make sure he had the rings, he has never done
any real wedding planning. Or more precisely, wedding confirming.

It doesn’t seem like he should have to call this many people to get Sam’s Alan added to the list, but
as he’s on hold again, his eyes are rolling so far back into his head he can practically see his brain.

Outside, they’re working on the sled track. Kids are playing, adults are building. Dogs are frolicking,
at least as well as they can with sleds of snow attached to them. Everyone is having an excellent time.

Except him.

He’s holding the phone, pacing around, and having conversations like: “Okay, Mr. Palmer,” (He’s
not about to make this conversation any longer by pointing out he’s Dr. Palmer.) “would that bring
the seat count up to 45?”

“Is 45 one more than it was before?” It’s occurring to him that knowing how many people were
coming to this thing would have been useful. It’s also occurring to him that people who have to
confirm a total if you’re adding one to the base number need to be shot in the head. Likely with a
high caliber rifle. Why Breena was in such a mood right before they got married is making a whole lot more sense to him, now.

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“Then, yes, we’re going to need 45 seats.”

“We’ll have them. Do you still want them in a circle around the altar?”

Jimmy’s feeling a momentary sense of panic. The last thing he wants to do is mess up the carefully designed setup that Ziva and Gibbs put together. “Is a circle around the altar the way it was before?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then yes. Just keep everything exactly the way Gibbs set it up, but add one more chair to it.”

“If we add one more chair to it, it won’t fit in a circle.”

Jimmy grits his teeth.

“Are those chairs cemented to the ground?”

“Sir?”

“You can move them, correct?”

“Certainly. That’s how we’re going to get them in there.”

“Okay, here’s what I want you to do, take the outermost row of chairs, move it a few inches further back from the alter than it already is, like, maybe three inches, and then, you should have enough room to add an extra chair to it.”

Dead silence on the other line.

“Just trust me on this, if you make the circle just a little bigger on all sides, you’ll have room to shove another chair into it.”

The voice on the phone sounds doubtful. “Okay. We can do that, sir. Uh… Do you know that the chairs have covers and bows on them, and that while we provide the chairs, we don’t provide the covers or bows?”

Jimmy bangs his head against the wall, shoulders slumping. “No, I didn’t, but I’m guessing that’s one of the seven phone numbers I’ve got on my list.”

“Probably.”

“Thanks.” One down, six to go. “I better get an invite to your wedding,” he mutters to his mental image of Sam as he dials the next number. “And I’m adding an extra person the day before, too!”

“Abby, two Abbies, this will be interesting,” Cicely says, half-sitting on the edge of Abby’s chaise, her clipboard in hand, making sure she knows who’s getting what done, and when.

“I’m Abbs and she’s Abbi, if you like,” Abby replies. Abbi may be looking a little overwhelmed by
the vast tidal wave of girly excess being showered upon them, but Abby is settling in just fine. If people want to rub her feet and bring her wine and cupcakes all day, she’s down for it. In fact… If they ever get enough babysitting for it, she’s thinking of seeing if they can bring the guys along for this, just the four of them, and then book a night in a good hotel. Maybe next summer, anniversary present. (Though the mental image of Tim and Jimmy getting pedicures makes her giggle.)

Cicely writes that down. “Okay, I see you’re on for the aromatherapy massage, caffeine facial,” when Abby read that was an option she was all over it, “mani-pedi, and hair.”

Abby nods. “Sounds great!”

“Now, the question is, what are we doing with your hair? We’ve got a full salon, so anything you might want, we can do. We just need to know what, so we can make sure we’ve got the time to do it,” she looks at the pink in Abby’s hair, which was a dark rose color a month ago, but has faded to a light baby pink. “We could freshen up your color if you wanted, or, I know you’re getting ready for a night out, so if you wanted to try a blow out, we’ve got the tools and people for that.”

Abby raises an eyebrow. “We could.” Another thought occurs to her, she’s got more free time these days. Two extra parents means grabbing an hour or so every other week wouldn’t be out of the question anymore, and it wouldn’t be that big of a pain in the butt to take care of a new color… or an old one. And the wedding colors are royal purple and silver, so… It would certainly look cool...

“Whose dyes do you use?” They won’t be hers but, as the pink in her hair attests, there are acceptable substitutes out there.

“Bellington’s.”

Abby nods. They’re a high-end, organic, gentle dye with a very nice range of colors. “Do you have the whole range?”

“Yes we do. And our colorists is more than comfortable mixing custom blends if we need one.”

Abby nods, again, happy smile starting to spread across her face. “Yeah, I’m going to freshen up my color. I had black hair for a long time, and I do miss it. So, back to black, and let’s put some royal purple in there for the wedding.”

Breena, who was reading over the list of massage options, catches that last bit, and with a wide smile on her face, says, “That’s going to look awesome!”

“All right, come on guys,” Tim says in his best Dad-voice.

Little girls do not want to go in.

All three of them have gotten to the point where they no longer take a morning nap, so they were awfully happy to play in the snow, get the track built back up, and then spend a few hours swishing around on it with their various dads and uncles.

What they are not happy about is schlepping back into the house, where there is lunch, and then the dreaded naptime. (Which all three of them sorely need. And even if they didn’t, there’s only so long the various adult members of the crew want to be playing in the snow.)

Tim’s got them inside, corralling them at the door, as he and Jimmy work on pulling snow gear off of
“You look frozen,” Jimmy says.

Tim rolls his eyes. “Pop, Uncle Tobias, and Jeff, they’ve all got snow pants and long johns. I’ve got jeans.” He lowers his voice. “And literal blue balls. The damn things are just about frozen solid.”

Jimmy sniggers. “I’m sure we know someone who’ll be happy to warm ‘em back up.”

“Yeah, but not for a few hours.” Then Tim thinks about that. Most of the crew is also here, taking off snow covered clothing. Tobias and Gibbs are sniggering a little at his comment, Jeff looks slightly scandalized. He decides not to suggest that maybe if Jimmy were to help him ‘warm up’ the girls would enjoy some video of it.

Jimmy, having completely missed that pause, says, “Poor baby.”

Tim mock glares. And then gets back to focusing on the task at hand, getting whiny, borderline overtired little people warmed up, fed, and into bed. He’s not feeling an overwhelming sense of regret as he volunteers to work on lunch, and let Jimmy take over on hands-on little guy wrangling.

As Tim’s heating up soup, and Gibbs is toasting up grilled cheese sandwiches for everyone, there’s a certain level of sulky-ness radiating from the living area where little girls are supposedly amusing themselves before lunch.

Ducky, with Donnie in his arms, wanders into the kitchen. “Do we have any last minute errands to run?”

“Flowers, tomorrow, but Jimmy and I are on that,” Tim says. He’s got one job, half of one job, he’s sharing it with Jimmy, and he’s got it down pat. Get flowers, deliver flowers, then all he’s got to do is drag his suit to the Omni, find Gibbs’ room, get dressed, and then it’s wedding time.

Gibbs shakes his head. “Suit’s at Fornell’s, rings are there, too. Got anything you need, Duck?”

“Marriage license?” Ducky asks, pointedly.

“Abbi’s got it. It’s in the box with the dress, shoes, and whatever other goodies she’s got in there. She figured that was the one thing that, no matter what, there was no possibility of getting lost or forgotten.”

Goodies reminds Tim of something. He’s got one last errand, sort of. It shouldn’t take too long, and he can get it printed out when he and Jimmy head home with the kids before tonight’s dinner. If he remembers correctly, it only took him ten minutes to set it up when he did it for Tony, and if he saved the template, it’ll take even less time now.

Though, thinking of goodies, and his part of it, he wonders if Jimmy’s gotten his bit done, or if they need to stop at a drug store on the way home this afternoon.

“Timothy… You’re looking intently at something. I dare say it’s not the soup.”

“Uh… No, Duck.” Clam chowder is not now, nor ever, terribly interesting. “Just thinking of a few things Jimmy and I need to get done before we head home.”

Ducky flashes him a curious look. “Are you not staying here tonight?”

“Not tonight. Our place is closer to the restaurant and the Omni.” He notices no one else, meaning
Jeff, is paying attention to them, but he lowers his voice all the same. “We’re going to be at my place tonight, if you and Penny want the keys to Jimmy’s so you don’t have to drive all the way back here, just say the word.”

Ducky shakes his head. “We already have our room at the Omni booked. After tonight’s dinner, we’ll retire there.”

“Okay.”

“Who is looking after your children tonight? You don’t have Heather working all week and all weekend, do you?”

“Not quite. She had some friends who also watch children who were free tonight. Sally and Amanda are coming over to keep eyes on the kiddos this evening. Tomorrow, Heather and her friend Keith are going stay at the Omni and be backup childcare. We’ll have the kiddies with us as much as they want to be, but if they’re getting bored or fussy, up to Heather and Keith they go. We’re guessing that Sean, Donnie, and Dave won’t be spending too much time downstairs. Long enough for us to get pictures of them in their little suits, and maybe Sean’ll have a bite of cake, but that’s probably about it. We’ll probably have to march Molly out of there at gunpoint to get her to go to bed when it’s bedtime. But, we’ll work it out. Heather and Keith’ll be staying with us until the morning, and then Heather’s got Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday off, and then the next Monday off, too. Abby’s got the Wednesday off, and supposedly, I’m remoting in on Tuesday and the next Monday, so we’ll see exactly how well that works.”

Gibbs sniggers, and says, “Better than it would with a murder.”

“Yeah. Can’t exactly remote in to a crime scene, but I have a feeling it won’t be the greatest programming I’ve ever done.”

That also gets a bit of chuckling.

“Ohhhhh…” Breena purrs as the massage therapist does something to her shoulders. She doesn’t know what, or how, she’s doing it, but it feels like at least fifty pounds of stress and responsibility just fell off of her.

“I take it you needed this,” the therapist says.

“More than I knew.”

“Weddings are stressful. So many women come in here, and they’re just tied up in knots from all the decisions.”

“This one’s easy for me. All I have to do is show up. Ziva, the one with the long dark hair, she’s been helping a lot with the planning. Work though…”

“What do you do?”

Explaining what she actually does is more talking than she feels like right now. Groaning though… The therapist hits another spot, leaning into it slow and steady, and all of the air in Breena’s lungs goes galloping out in a low groan.

“Makeup. I do makeup.”
Another long, steady press into her shoulder. “I know all about that. Anyone who works with their arms out in front of them all day is going to be sore here.”

Breena whimpers a little at one more deep press, agreeing.

The therapist chuckles. “How long has it been since you’ve gotten a massage?”

“Uh… My…” she almost says spouses “husband works on me often, and he’s good, but he’s not exactly a pro.”

“And, let me guess, it’s been years since someone who knows how to,” she feels pressure just under her shoulder blade, along with a little traction, and a gentle twist, and… something… she’s got no idea what that something is, or how, with only two hands the therapist can possibly do anything else to her, but something happens, and her right shoulder feels like it’s unwinding. Like her muscles are a tied knot, and someone just pulled the right string to untie them.

“I don’t think anyone’s ever done that to me.”

Breena’s face down on the table, but she can feel the pleased smile from the therapist as she moves onto her left shoulder.

____________________

Tim tucks his phone into his pocket. “And we have confirmation that Senior and Delphine are on the ground.”

“Good. Where are they staying?” Ducky asks, sipping the last of his soup. Lunch is winding down rapidly.

“The Adam’s House reopened in September, so I think they’ll be there,” Jimmy says.

All of them hear the yawn out of Molly. “I think that’s my cue,” Jimmy says. “Time to get little ones down.”

Tim follows along, herding the younger kids, with Sean in his arms. Once they’re in their section of the house, he says, “Any news on the tux?”

“No yet. But it’s not supposed to get here until tomorrow. He is saying that he and Senior are going in search of cufflinks to go with it.”

Tim thinks about that, and says, “Probably a good idea. I don’t know if he’s got a pair.”

Jimmy ponders and decides that he does. “I think I’ve seen him wear them to church.”

Tim shrugs, and then lies Sean down on the changing table. “Okay, clean diapers for everyone, and then naptime.”

“You nap too?” Molly asks. She’s looking very sleepy, and both Tim and Jimmy are pleased by that, because at almost four, she’s hitting the point where naptime is a little iffy, but when she misses it, she’s a prickly porcupine for the rest of the day.

“I think I will. You?” Tim asks Jimmy. Maybe they will get the chance to send some fun pictures to the girls.

“I could probably be talked into a nap,” Jimmy replies.
They get the kids cleaned up, read stories, tuck them all in, give them all kisses and snuggles, and then, finally, five little people end up all settled down.

Tim and Jimmy amble toward bed, too. Tim flops down on his back, and sighs, with a big yawn, “It shouldn’t be this much work to keep them all playing.”

“How many sled runs did you do?”

“I don’t know… 25?”

“Well, that’s walking four miles in the snow, plus building.” He pats the bed next to Tim. “Roll over.”

Tim does, and a moment later, as Jimmy straddles his waist, feet by Tim’s ears, and then leans one palm into each of Tim’s thighs.

Tim moans, loud. “Ohhhh…”

“Yeah. I bet your calves are just as tight.”

“Mmmmmmm…” Tim feels like they shouldn’t be, but… He’s not in the field any more, and hasn’t been for almost two years. He doesn’t walk five or six miles a day, like he used to.

Strong fingers rubbing the knots out of his legs is heaven. And then it’s not. Tim lifts his head, looking for where the magic fingers went. They’re on Jimmy’s phone… Doing something, and then Jimmy says, “Okay. Make as much noise as you want. I’m recording it. I think the girls’ll like that.”

Tim laughs a little at that, and that laugh is cut short by a “Ahhwww…” as Jimmy grabs his right calf and begins to massage it. “Damn!”

“Yes. Come on baby, moan for me!”

“Uhhh! Oh… Jimmy!” Tim’s grinning as he does it, though he’s not having a hard time with the moaning. What Jimmy’s doing to him feels really good.

“Yeah, baby, sing for me.”

“Harder! Ohhh… Right there! Unghn…” Jimmy’s got his thumb right in this spot and Tim can feel it up his leg and into his foot and… “God!”

“Yeah, you know my name.”

Tim does laugh at that one, silently thought.

“Say it!”

He looks over his shoulder at Jimmy. Who’s also on the verge of hysterical giggles. Jimmy digs his thumbs into Tim’s calf, sliding them down in a long wave, and Tim says, “Oh… Fucking GOD!”

“Yeah baby. You know it.”

“Please.” He’s so damn close to the knot, almost on top of it.

“Please what?”

“Please, God, please, just a little—“
“There!” And Jimmy’s got both hands wrapped around Tim’s calf squeezing hard, with his left hand, and pressing deep with his right.

“YES! Oh… fuck! There, THERE!”

“Yeah, there… Give in to it, Tim. Let me do it for you.”

“Oh fuck, fuck, fuck! Jimmy!” Tim offers another whimper-y sigh, and then a loud, “OH!” followed by a sharp, inhaled breath, and a low, deep, soft, “fuuuck!”

“Yeah…” Jimmy says, letting that yeah just purr off his tongue. “Perfect, baby, perfect.” Then he turns off the recorder and both of them collapse into loud belly laughing.

When Tim can breathe again he says to Jimmy, “You know my name?”

Jimmy gives Tim’s calf a little squeeze. “It worked.”

Tim rolls over, and then sits up a little, so he’s face to face with Jimmy. He gives him a soft kiss, and smiles at him, eyes warm. He lifts Jimmy’s hands in his, and kisses each finger. “If it gets these rubbing on me, I’ll call you God whenever you like.”

Jimmy sneers at that. “First Church of the Holy Palmer. Offerings of blow jobs and foursomes readily accepted.”

They both laugh at that.

Abby’s killing a little time between treatments. Her massage is done, and they’re going to start on her nails soon, but right now, she’s on one of the chaises in the lounge, listening to her music, and enjoying a tiny ham and cranberry compote sandwich.

Her phone beeps, and there’s a text from Jimmy that says, Earphones on.

She’s already got them on, so she turns off her music and starts the audio file he added to the text.

She lays there, giggling, feeling flushed from head to toe, imagining what the two of them may be getting up to. Okay, they probably aren’t doing that. The likelihood they’re horny enough for it after last night is fairly low.

But they could be. Tim could be on his hands and knees as Jimmy’s fucking him hard and steady, getting him right there over and over.

Tim gets to the God line, and Jimmy says ‘You know my name’ and Abby can just see it, Tim on his hands and knees, collar on, head back as Jimmy’s pumping into him. His hand knots in Tim’s hair, pulling him up, so he’s back to chest with Jimmy, and his hand circles around Tim’s cock, stroking, lightly, teasing as he rocks his hips slow and deep.

She’s wet before the recording is done, and has a pretty good idea of how to hit them with a little turn about is fair play.

She sends a text to Jimmy: You’re killing me. You play that for me, just as I’m walking into my massage. Now I’m going to have two women, beautiful ones, strip me naked, oil me up, and rub me all over, while Breena watches.
Okay, that’s not literally true, but she wants them just as turned on as she is.

I’ll be lying there, trying not to imagine you two fucking in our bed, trying not to get too turned on, but the massage ladies are so pretty, and they’ve got such strong hands. And you sound so good. And it’s all too much. I’ll be all slick and wet all over and they’ll be touching me.

They’ll be rubbing over my hips and thighs, and what if they smell it on me? What if I just can’t not roll my hips, pressing against the massage table, trying to just get a little friction right where I need it?

What if I’m bad? Will you chastise me for my wanton ways?

Jimmy chokes when he reads that, and mutters, “What’s the line, ‘and after the spankings there’ll be oral sex?’”

Tim, who hasn’t yet read the response (he’d actually been inching toward getting a nap) says, “Why are you quoting Monty Python?”

Jimmy shows him the text.

Tim closes his eyes and groans.

He takes Jimmy’s phone and writes Tim here. Do you remember what happens to bad girls?

A moment later: Pout. No fun.

Be a good girl, and you’ll have all the fun you want. No making the massage ladies uncomfortable.

Can I make you uncomfortable?

I’m rock hard and have nothing to do with it for hours. You’ve more than succeeded.

Good. And when I see you, I’m going to get down on my knees and kiss it.

Tim closes his eyes again, and groans. I love you.

You, too.

Let me know when you’re done with that massage, because I’ll light up your phone when you’re on your own.

Actually getting my nails done next.

Tim looks at Jimmy, who’s been reading over his shoulder. He sends her: You really are evil.

A kissy face emoji pops up, along with Breena is getting her massage now. She’ll be out in about an hour.

Okay. Won’t expect a response from her soon.

Gotta go!

Love you.
Love you back!

“So, what does happen to bad girls?” Jimmy asks, lying on his side, looking at Tim and the phone. “I thought you didn’t like that sort of game?”

Tim settles back on his back. “I don’t like the spanking part of it. I didn’t have any problem, besides the bluest damn balls you’ve, and yes, you personally, with your two year wait for Breena, could possibly imagine, with some sort of punishment for ‘misbehavior.’”

“What happened?” Jimmy asks, enjoying the idea of this story.

“Kind of like the game we’re playing now. It was our honeymoon, and we were out and about, and I was teasing her non-stop. We finally get back to the hotel, and we finally get into bed, and I tell her to get a nap.”

“So, you were a raging asshole?”

Tim rolls his eyes. “I was the Dom, and no, I wasn’t pushing her too hard. Not like it was the first time we’d played a version of that game. The plan was to ‘nap’ for maybe five minutes and then piles and piles of sex.”

“And she didn’t just lie down and snooze.”

“Oh, she laid down all right. Snug up against me, ass against my dick, pillow between her legs, and began to rub off on it. And I’m stuck there, trying to figure out if I should just lift her leg a little and ride her on home, or stay in character. I check in, she’s pushing me, not so far gone she just can’t do it, so I yank her onto her hands and knees, trail my dick down her pussy, giving her just a taste of it, as I said, ‘Bad girls don’t get fucked’ and stepped away.”

“OH… Shit, you are evil.”

“Yeah, and probably sort of stupid. Stepping away hurt. But I did, and tied her down so she couldn’t get herself off, and then made her actually get a nap.”

“Evil.”

Tim nods. “Uh huh. Longest hour of my life until they operated on Sean.”

Jimmy chuckles at that.

“Chastise?” Tim asks him.

“You really want to know?”

Tim knows that just because he doesn’t like a particular game, doesn’t mean they don’t play it when he’s not around. And he has, on a few occasions noticed some flushed looking handprints on Abby or Jimmy. So, he’s got a decent idea of what they get up to when he’s not there.

He thinks about it for another minute and decides that he’s okay with hearing about it, at least. He’s got the sense spanking games are never going to be one of his turn ons, but it’s not actively making him feel sick right now, so…

“Yeah, sure.”

“She liked watching it when Breena spanked me, so the next time you were working late, we tried with her, and… Like I said, my body can’t tell the difference between pain and pleasure endorphins,
and her body really can’t.”

“She likes getting tattoos.”

“Yeah, we’ve talked a little about that. It hurts, but there’s the ability to drop away from it, and slide into a really nice, safe, floaty sort of space, and ride the endorphins.”

“Subspace.”

“I think that’s what it is when you do it. For her, or me, it’s not the subbing so much, as the feel of it. It’s more like a drug than a change of attitude.”

Tim’s not sure about that, but he’s not about to compare the two anytime soon, so he’s not going to argue it.

“Anyway, sometimes she, or I, not Breena (she’s good with giving but not receiving) is ‘naughty’ and needs some ‘rigorous chastisement.’”

“Really… I mean… It feels good?”

“Okay, look, by itself maybe not, but when Breena and I’d do it on our own, I’d be across her lap, my dick between her legs. Each hit means a sharp sting, a thrust, and a rush of endorphins. So, yeah it’s good. Then we added Abby to the mix, and… Okay, those two, together… Speaking of Fucking GOD!” Jimmy’s eyes are gleaming at the memory. “Tim… Okay, you like being in the middle, doing and done to, getting all your spots hit at once. Well, they thought about it, and decided if I was on my knees, with Abby on her hands and knees in front of me, and one of the toys inside of me, every strike would really hit home, and… FUCK! Yes! They’re right about that. You get hit, you flex, and clench, and thrust, and… It’s like an explosion of good sensations all at once.”

Tim thinks about it, and at least on a theoretical level he can get the idea of this. “So you just ride the feelings and enjoy?”

“And try to make it to fifteen strokes without coming.”

“Ever do it?”

Jimmy rolls his eyes a little. Tim doesn’t appear to be getting the nuances of this game. “Well, I’m not exactly trying to follow that order, so, um… NO.”

“And Abby?”

“She kneels across my face. Every time Breena spanks, I lick, and she’s never made it to fifteen, either.”

“So, you don’t do the spanking?”

“NO! I don’t like hitting Ziva or Abbi, and they’re both trained warriors who know how to take a punch and can kill me with their pinkie finger. Doing the spanking isn’t the sexy part for me. Getting spanked, watching, or helping, sure that’s good, but even for a game, I don’t really want to hit either of them.”

Tim nods at that. He wonders idly, because he’s not going to bring it up, because he’s not offering, if Jimmy might like being on the spanking end of things if he was dealing with someone closer to his own size and strength, but… But when it comes down to it, Tim doesn’t think that’s a bridge he ever needs to cross.
He stretches and wriggles a little. The sheets are soft, his bed is warm, and one of his favorite people are in it with him. “It’s a tough life.”

Jimmy laughs at that. “Hard… That’s the word you’re looking for, at least, given what we’re talking about.”

Tim smirks at that. “I suppose it’d be cheating to get off now.”

Jimmy nods. “Come on, naptime for us, too.”

“Well, Ms. Bride, what color are your attendants going for?” Breena asks. She’s ten minutes away from the pedicure station and wants to make sure that she looks the way Abbi’s thinking she should.

“Uhhh…” Right now, Abbi’s got time to just lay around. She’s been massaged, she’s hit the hot tub, her facial isn’t for another half hour, so she’s on a sofa, with a glass of wine, a good book on her phone, a collection of little sandwiches and pastries within arm’s reach, and a warm blanket wrapped around her. And, honestly, right now, she could not, possibly, at all, care less about whatever toe/fingernail polish everyone else has. “Really, whatever you like.”

Breena smiles at that, seeing that Abbi’s got a pretty solid I want to chill vibe. “Shall I just write up a ‘Ask Me No Questions’ sign for you?”

“Yes, please!”

That gets a bigger smile, and a bit of a laugh. She sits on the sofa next to Abbi, snags one of the petit fours, nibbles it, and wraps an arm around her. “Too much bride-ing all at once. I remember that. By the time we got to our wedding, I felt like if I had to make one more decision my head was going to explode.”

Abbi shakes her head. “The stress is all work. This… I honestly just don’t care what your nails look like… Unless you point them out, I’m not about to even notice them. I’ve got bigger things to pay attention to the next few days.”

Breena gives her a little squeeze. “Good.” She stands back up. “I’ll make sure you don’t get bugged on the little stuff.”

“Thanks.”

And Breena does pass the word along. She knows Ziva’ll be joining her in a minute for the nails, and Wendy’s in the hot tub, floating around with Penny, both of them are heading towards nails soon, too. Abby’s got her hair processing, they’re lightening some of it up so it’ll take the purple dye well. Becky’s in one of the massage rooms, so she’s not going to bust in there, but she also figures that Becky also doesn’t care much for nail polish.

Message delivered, it’s time to get her nails done. As Breena’s looking at the pretty, shiny bottles in front of her, a thought goes wandering through her mind. Tonight, she’ll be wearing her standard, going out for a nice night in the winter, boots. They’re attractive black leather with a thick heel, and a strap around the ankle with a shiny silver buckle. They come up to almost her knees. And with tonight’s outfit, a tailored skirt, blouse, and long jacket, they look rather snazzy.
But, she might as well have snaggle-edged, brittle claws as a pretty manicure under them for all the light her toes will get.

Tomorrow though, they are going to the Omni, getting dressed at the Omni, going from their room to the wedding, which means never setting foot out of doors, so, should she want to, she could pack some shoes that show a little toe.

And she knows someone who’s keen on seeing a little toe peek out from some pretty shoes. And if that toe were capped off with… She snags a bottle of bright silver polish… some bright, shiny toenails, a certain person would likely enjoy that, a whole lot.

Another thought fills her mind. If said toes were to be slowly dragged up the leg of hubby A, then hubby B, who would likely be watching, would enjoy that a whole lot, too.

Sparkly little toes, her open-toed silver pumps, and maybe a sweet little anklet. Something with a little sparkle to catch the eye…

Yeah, both of her boys’ll appreciate the hell out of that.

A few minutes later, as she’s sitting back, soaking her feet, waiting for the pedicurist, she sees the text from Jimmy. Earbuds in…

Okay. She sets it up, turns the sound on, takes a sip of her wine, and just about chokes on it.

“Are you okay?” The pedicurist asks.

“I… Uh… Yeah… Surprise from my husband.”

“Looks like it. You need to give him a call?”

“No… Not right now.” She knows if she responds to this, she’s just going to get more turned on, and… not a good time for that, not yet. “But, yeah, let’s make sure those toes look amazing.”

“Do we need to stop at the drugstore?” Tim asks Jimmy when the kiddos are up, in the car, and they’re en route to his house.

Jimmy flashes Tim a confused look. “Do we? Is there something you need?”

“Not me. You know… Gibbs’ goody bag?”

And recognition hits Jimmy. “Oh. Yeah. Got ‘em last week. He’s beyond set up for a good time.”

Tim smirks a little at that. Then he says… “You ever think about getting some of them for us?”

Jimmy raises an eyebrow.
“You know, just, for fun. See what it’s like?”

That eyebrow goes exactly nowhere.

Tim rolls his eyes. “Okay, I overheard Fornell and Ducky talking and… Apparently a somewhat common side effect is that it slows you down, so… You know… If you wanted to go for a long time, without having to spend the whole time cataloguing every bone in the body or imagining Gibbs in a speedo…”

“Why were they talking about that?”

Tim caught the last half of that conversation, and almost walked away immediately, but… He didn’t. “My guess is Fornell wanted a doctor’s opinion, without having to actually ask his doctor.”

That makes sense to Jimmy. He’s the one driving, so he looks in the rearview mirror at the five little guys in the back. “We ever get enough time to make a long time worth it…”

Tim nods.

A minute later, Jimmy says, “We need to hit the bank?”

Now it’s Tim’s turn to look confused.

“Elaine and Brian… You have a check?”

“Oh. And yes, we’re low enough tech that we do have a checkbook.” He leaves out the fact that it did take him and Abby half an hour to find the damn thing, and that, since they got their combined checking account, more than three years ago, they have used four checks. (Three of which have been given to Girl Scouts selling cookies door to door in their neighborhood. The fourth of which is currently in his wallet, waiting to be given to Elaine and Brian.)

“So, all we need to do is…”

“Hand off the kiddos, get showered, get dressed, and make the girls happy.”

Jimmy smiles, he’s looking forward to that.

The hairdryer is buzzing away, and then the buzzing stops.

“All done?” Abby asks the lady who’s doing her hair.

“All done.”

And for the first time all afternoon, Abby opens her eyes and looks at herself. She’s been intentionally not looking. As someone who spent years doing her own hair, and especially her own dye, she knows that if she watches, she tries to take over, and… That’s just not good.

So, for the last two hours she’s had her eyes closed if there was any chance of her seeing her hair.

But they aren’t now. There’s the barest hint of a second where she’s not quite sure what she’s looking at, but it doesn’t even last a full heartbeat. Yes, her hair had been blonde for more than two
years, but that wasn’t long enough to really change her mental image of herself.

Then she’s grinning, looking at herself. “Back in black!”

The hairdresser nods. “Oh yeah!”

It’s not just black, though. The top layer is black, and each layer below gets lighter and lighter, into a deep purple. Her cut is still long, but it’s got steep, chunky layers cut into it, so all the colors are visible. In low light, the whole thing will look black, but in good light, like she’s got now, it’s a shower of black, blackened purple, midnight aubergine, royal purple, and then, at the very bottom, a deep violet.

The hairdresser also added in a soft, wavy curl, and right now Abby feels amazingly pretty.

And very, very GOTH.

“I love it!” She bounds up to hug the hairdresser.

“Good! That was fun. I don’t get to do a lot of interesting colors.”

“You knocked this one out of the ballpark!” There’s a lot of excited Abby bouncing, in addition to twirling, looking at her hair from all angles, fluffing it with her fingers, feeling the soft weight of it, as the huge Abby smile refuses to budge from her face.

---

Jimmy’s in the car, just having pulled into Tim’s driveway, when his phone buzzes. He pulls it out, and there’s a shot of some toes he’s especially fond of, with a very pretty coat of silver nail polish on them.

Now, it is true that Jimmy, is not, in fact, a foot guy. He’s a shoe guy. But he’s awfully fond of how shoes work on feet, and said shot is causing some really delightful images to go dancing around his mind.

“What’d she send you?”

“Toe pic.”

Tim nods, looking over Jimmy’s shoulder, and Jimmy knows that he doesn’t entirely get what Jimmy likes about this, but that he’s not feeling the need to rain on any parade Jimmy may be having right now.

Tim unbuckles, and goes to get Donnie out of his car seat.

A second later, Jimmy’s phone buzzes again. This time it’s a picture of a tube of… something. She’s got it shot so he can’t read what it is.

“You get shoes to go with those toes?” Tim asks.

“No. It’s…” A text pops up. Last shot was for Tim. He quickly sends back. Uh… Not helping.

You’ll understand it when you understand it.

He rolls his eyes. Really not helping.
A kissing wink face pops up.

“What is it?” Tim asks.

“I don’t know. I can’t read the label. It kind of looks like a tube of oil paint.”

“Uh…”

“Yeah. She says it’s for you and you’ll understand when you understand.”

“Okay.”

They’ve gotten home. The babysitters have arrived. Tim’s printed out Gibbs and Abbi’s brand new diplomatic tags, while Jimmy started to get ready to go out. He tucks them into the bag that Abby, Breena, and Ziva put together for Gibbs and Abbi, and resolutely does not look inside to see what else may be in there.

It’s one thing to rag on Tony about his sex life. It’s a whole other thing to come face to face with whatever the hell it is that Gibbs is getting up to with Abbi. Let alone what Gibbs is getting up to with Abbi that Abby, Breena, and Ziva think he might want or need toys/instructions for.

There are some things Tim just doesn’t need to know, and what’s in those nicely wrapped packages in the cute bag Breena picked out is likely at the absolute top of the list.

All he needs to know is that if/when Gibbs decides to toss some of them in his suitcase before heading off to wherever it is Abbi’s going next, that no one in customs or security is going to mess with them.

That done, time to get a shower, shave, dressed, and then off they go.

He heads up to his room, stopping in the living room to check on the kiddos. Right now, everyone seems copacetic, except for a slight sense of confusion from the babysitters, who appear to be under the impression that Tim and Jimmy are a couple (not exactly wrong) but that they’re the only members of said couple (err…) and somehow, between the two of them, with nary a womb in sight, managed to produce five kids in four years who look just like them. (Tim imagines they’d need to have vastly more money than they actually do to pull that off. He knows surrogacy is a thing, but he can’t imagine it’s inexpensive. At least, he personally, wouldn’t be willing to get pregnant for someone else for anything under ten million dollars, so it’s got to cost and arm and a leg.)

Tim assumes they’ll eventually notice the pictures with Breena and Abby in them, and spend more time gossiping trying to figure out what’s going on, but he’s not butting into it.

He’s heading up to his room, where Jimmy’s in the shower, and he’s got a few minutes of free time.

And free time gets him thinking about tonight’s game.

The art of the tease.

Part of him’s thinking this would be a splendid time to send the girls a naughty picture, or two. They’ve certainly enjoyed them in the past, and he’s got time, a phone, and does need to be naked in the near future.

He’s taking his clothing out of the closet, laying it on the bed, making sure he’s got everything he
wants to wear, and nothing needs to be ironed.

Tonight’s dressy…ish. He doesn’t need a suit, but he’s also not supposed to be in a sweat shirt and jeans.

He’s wearing his black tux tomorrow with the plaid kilt, so today he lays the black kilt out. He takes a picture of it, sitting on the bed next to his white dress shirt, the vest from his gray suit, and his leather jacket. He sends that off to the girls, thinking they’ll like it.

He’s getting undressed, and debates sending them a nude. Not like they don’t have at least a few hundred shots of him frolicking about in nothing but a smile on each of their phones. Then the pictures they took of him when they were playing go dancing through his head.

He takes his pants and boxers off, and puts the kilt on. He hikes the skirt up, remembering they like him a little undressed, and gets a picture of his hip and thigh, with the line of the kilt making sure the picture stays PG-rated.

He supposes it’s not a pinup if it’s only ten inches of his leg and hipbone, but… It’s good enough.

He adds one line of text: *I expect at least one kiss print a piece here.*

That gets little kissy emojis from both of them.

Tim puts down his phone, and heads to the shower. Time to get ready to go out.

---

Go home: check.

Hand off kiddos: check.

Assemble goodie bag for Gibbs and Abbi: check.

Get showered and shaved: double check.

Which leaves Jimmy Palmer, naked, save for the sleeves on his right thigh and bicep keeping his electronics in place, in Tim and Abby’s bedroom, supposedly working on the next part of his mental list: Get Dressed For Party.

Jimmy eyes the kilt. It’s just lying there on the bed, waiting for Tim to get out of the bathroom and put it on.

The point of the night is the art of the tease, and he’s certainly been thinking about what would be visually interesting for the girls. How to tease them without opening his mouth, or touching, or anything else. How to be erotic just standing still, from across a room.

The girls certainly wouldn’t expect it. And they’d like it, if for nothing beyond the novelty aspect of it.

And it’s not like Tim’s that much bigger than he is. He picks it up, eyeing how it fits. It wraps around his waist and clips into place, which means the inch or so that Tim’s got on him on waist size shouldn’t matter much.
He holds it up to himself, not quite willing to try it on, but looking to see if that extra inch and a half of height Tim’s got on him will matter. It doesn’t look like it. Holding it to his waist, it look like it comes to his knees, and that’s where they’re supposed to fall, right?

For the first time ever, Jimmy’s contemplating his knees on an aesthetic level, and debating how much of a dork he’ll be if he puts this thing on.

He hears Tim moving around in the bathroom (wrapping up his own next check mark: Do Hair) and calls out, “So, how cold are these things?”

Tim sticks his head out, rubbing a little styling wax through his hair, and sees what Jimmy’s thinking. “I was planning on wearing it with a shirt, vest, and leather jacket. So, not that bad. You wouldn’t want to go for a hike in a kilt in the middle of winter, but the hundred feet between the house and the car and the car and the restaurant, no biggie.” He smirks a bit. “You thinking I get to wear the pants tonight?”

Jimmy rolls his eyes and tosses the kilt onto the bed. “Yeah. No.”

Tim continues to smirk at him. “Come on, put that thing on, add some eyeliner, and the girls’ll eat you alive.”

“They’ll eat me alive in pants, too.”

Tim shrugs, tossing his towel into the hamper, turning to look at Jimmy. “What had you eyeing it?”

“Just… You know, we’re supposed to be teasing, and they’ll have some sort of cute, little outfits on that drive us bonkers, and I wanted to reciprocate.”

Tim looks at the kilt. They’re used to him in it, and he’s fairly sure at this point that most of the thrill, beyond the practical level of easy access, has worn off. For him wearing it. “That’d do it.” He steps over to his dresser and selects a cologne for tonight. He’s thinking tonight’s a good night for his metaphorical something black and lacy.

Jimmy stares at the heap of cotton on the bed. “Yeah… Not that cold?”

“Not that cold.” Tim rubs the cologne on his wrists and throat. “Besides, you’ll have the sleeve on your thigh for your glucose monitor. If it’s really chilly, put your yoga shorts on under it. It’s not actually a law that you’ve got to go commando in ‘em.” Tim watches Jimmy continue to eye the kilt as he puts the bottle down.

Jimmy’s half-pondering, half-feeling like he’s seriously thinking about a major shift, but he’s having a hard time putting his finger on why. After all, it’s just a piece of fabric, it’s not like he’s shaving his head or getting a tattoo on his neck.

“I swear to God, they don’t make you hand in your man card when you put one of them on,” Tim adds, looking through his closet for a pair of slacks not in desperate need of ironing.

Jimmy knows that. On a lot of different levels, so that’s not the issue. Watching Tim study a pair of black jeans, debating if they’re fancy enough for tonight finally lets him cement the idea he’s wrangling into place. “No… not… It’s just, it’s your thing, and that feels weird.”

Tim smiles at Jimmy, stepping over to him, and giving him a quick kiss. “You’re one of my things, too, might as well try it out and see if you like it. If you feel stupid, take it off, I won’t tell on you.”
Jimmy eyes it one more time, and then goes looking to see if he’s got any decent socks here.

Three minutes later, he’s got it on, is looking in the mirror, and it feels… “This is stupid.”

“No it’s not! It looks good.”

It doesn’t look bad. It’s just not him. “On you. On me it’s… I don’t know, not me.”

“It wasn’t me until I wore it out for the first time, either. You don’t look stupid.”

Jimmy gives it the stink eye and takes it back off. “Abby ever tell you about when we got your cuff?”

“Yeah.” He’s nodding, remembering that story, understanding where Jimmy’s coming from. She told him she suggested getting two cuffs, one for Jimmy, and he told her hell would freeze over before he wore ‘matching bracelets’ with Tim. And Tim, when he heard that story, more than approved. “Matching bracelets.”

“Yeah. This is you.” Jimmy goes over to the closet and grabs a pair of his own pants. “And these are me. And maybe, if we’re ever somewhere where no one knows you, I may try again, because you’re right, it doesn’t look bad but…” he shakes his head. “Not here and not tonight.”

“Okay.” Tim grabs the kilt, wrapping it around his own hips. “That’s fair enough.”

Jimmy’s pulling up his pants, and Tim says, “Wait.”

“What?”

Tim grabs his phone off the bed. “Those pictures Breena and Abby liked taking of us. Give ‘em a good one.”

Almost time to go. The ladies are getting ready.

Breena’s putting in her earrings when her phone buzzes and Show it off if you get the chance pops up from Tim. A second later, she’s got a shot of a damp, tousled Jimmy, leaning against the closet door, sex in his eyes, with his pants half undone, fingers just dipping below the waist line, and no shirt.

Breena grins at it and sends back to Tim. You know what I like. Any pretty pictures of you?

Ask Abby pops up in response.

“Everything okay at home?” Wendy asks, and Breena quickly exits the photo.

“Oh yeah. Just getting a progress report. Apparently, Jimmy’s almost ready to go.” She gives her hair a little fluff, rubs her lips together, smoothing out her lip gloss, and then stands up from the makeup table in the locker room.

“I think I’m done, who’s next?” Ziva takes the space, her makeup bag at the ready, and Breena gives herself one last check in the mirror.

It’s not a fancy outfit. Not complicated. But it looks killer. Black knee high boots, skin colored stockings, and they are stockings, no pantyhose, or for that matter, panties, tonight. Her skirt is brown wool, and it’s tailored to her shape, skimming along her legs from hip to just above her knee,
with a modest slit up the back to make it easier to walk. She’s got a simple white blouse. It’s a button
down with the top three buttons undone. Jon’s necklace adds just a bit of sparkle to her décolletage.
She’s topped it all off with a hip-length black wool jacket, also tailored. It’s sleek, fashionable,
professional, and if she leans just the right way it offers a great view of her breasts.

And gosh, she’s only got three people who really enjoy that view hoping to see it tonight.

She pats her hair one last time, and then goes off in search of Abby. Last she saw, she’d vanished
into one of the dressing rooms with her outfit for the night.

Only three of them to pick from, so… She reaches out, knocks, and hears Abby’s voice.

“Hey, can I come in?”

“Sure.” Abby opens the door. She signs at her, _Got a picture for me?_

Breena’s got to really watch, and Abby signs it again, slower, for her to get it, and then she nods,
showing off the picture of Jimmy. Abby grins at it, and then shows her the one Tim sent. Apparently
Jimmy took this one. It’s Tim, sitting on their bed, legs wide, leaning back, braced on his hands. He’s
got the kilt, a _very_ cocky look on his face, the wrist cuff, and from the look of it, nothing else, on.

It’s not the most ‘come and get it’ look she’s seen from Tim, but it’s definitely in the top five.

“I take it they’re almost ready to go,” Abby says.

“Looks like it.” Breena looks Abby up and down. She’s in one of her ‘little black dresses.’ This one
is shaped like an oversized long sleeve t-shirt, covering her from shoulder to just above her knees.
Though a wide neckline, baring one shoulder, a silky fabric, and a blood red belt, keep it from being
a shapeless sack.

“Looks like you pretty much are, too.”

Abby nods to pumps on the floor. “Kind of wishing I’d brought some real boots, but…”

“They look good.”

They’re little satin pumps. They look great with this dress. But especially with her hair all decked
out, Abby’s really wanting to leap back into some of her gothier-outfits. She wants boots, and wrist
cuffs, and her plaid jeans (assuming she can get into them) a wide black leather belt with two prongs
on the buckle, and a cute, tight t-shirt with a skull on it. She wants her ponytails, too. Maybe not
forever, she’s pretty fond of the more ‘grown up’ Abby she’s been wearing to work lately, but at
least for a day.

“Day after tomorrow. Monday we’re all home and you can dress it up however you like.”

“Back in Black time!”

“It looks good,” Breena says, looking over Abby’s new hair.

Abby smiles at herself, and Breena. “It feels good.” She looks at the two of them in the dressing
room. _We going to get a picture for them?_ She signs, slowly, for Breena.

Breena shakes her head, and then touches Abby’s hair. “We’re going to surprise them. Wha’d you
say, Back in Black? That’s a song, right?”

Abby’s grinning. “Oh, yeah, it’s a song all right.”
Tim shakes his head as he and Jimmy walk into the restaurant. “I’ve been in Burger Kings that did a better job providing you cover for a tryst.”

“Why were you fooling around in a Burger King?” Jimmy asks him. “Unless you were sixteen, that’s kind of skeevy.”

“I wasn’t… Just…” Tim looks around the remarkably open and empty feeling restaurant. “Making the point.”

“Oh, yeah.” Jimmy eyes the restaurant. “This place looks like it was designed by a bunch of pleasure-hating neo-Victorians.” Not really. The look is ‘clean’ and ‘modern.’

Tim sniffs. “Or maybe they want you focusing on the food when it comes to pleasure. It smells great.” He’s not sure where Gibbs found this place, but it’s really open. A wide array of tables circle around what looks to him like three bars. One is an actual bar. There’s a bartender, and behind him is a collection of shelves holding many different varieties of alcohol. To the left of him there’s a bar that Tim’s not sure of. There’s a grill behind it, and he knows there’s supposed to be yakitori, so he guesses that’s where you get you’re grilled goodies. To the right of the drinks is a sushi bar.

You can watch the people making the food for you, and that food does smell excellent.

And he supposes that the extremely minimal, Japanese-ish décor works for a pan-Asian fusion place, though he’s privately wondering if this is what Japan would look like if Ikea was in charge of decorating it. Everything is light, pretty, functional, and there’s nary a spare nook or cranny to be seen. Hell, there aren’t even table cloths. Unless he’s feeling especially bold, and lucky, he can’t so much as play footsie here.

His eyes catch a few screens, elegant expanses of white paper, in white maple frames, but… They’re flush against the windows. He’d have to be the size of a mouse to take advantage of them.

He catches Gibbs eye and says to him, without adding any voice, “You did this on purpose.”

Gibbs may not know exactly what’s going on, he’s saying hello to Senior and Delphine, but he’s got a good enough idea to just happily smirk back at Tim.

They’ve been there long enough to grab a table, hang up their coats, and get drinks for the four of them when Jimmy notices the doors open and the girls come in.

He finds Breena first, and stares, mouth not quite falling open, but pretty much only because he’s in public. He elbows Tim, hard, who turns and has a fairly similar response. They’ve seen this outfit before, but that doesn’t make it any less appealing. And, on top of it, there’s just something about a woman you adore, her skin pink from the chill, stripping out of her coat, and then slowly peeling off her gloves.

Breena sees them, and comes over to greet them, kissing Jimmy, offering Tim a hug, and then links her arms with theirs. “Okay, come on, grand reveal time.”

This would be the point where Jimmy and Tim both notice that Abby is not among the ladies hanging their coats up.
“We missing someone?” Tim asks.

“Yes, but it’s intentional. Okay.” She stands Jimmy to one side of the door. “You go here.” She puts Tim next to him. “There, good. Okay.” They see her texting, and then hear a few notes of music… Tim’s almost placed the song when Abby opens the door.

She’s in her long red coat, and her hair is cascading down her back and shoulders in soft curls of purple-edged black, and his mouth does fall open. Any thought of what that music might be goes thundering away as he just looks at her.

She sees it, and grins at him.

Jimmy’s laughing with joy. He’s enjoying the view of Abby, and he’s figured out the music that Breena’s playing is Back in Black. He wraps an arm around Breena and kisses the top of her head. “That’s perfect.”

Tim crosses the three steps between him and Abby before knows he’s moving, takes her in his arms, dipping her back, and kisses her, long and deep. When he pulls back, some of the others are giggling, and Abby says to him, “So, I take it you approve of the new hair.”

He’s grinning, eyes warm, and his fingers find her hair, gently stroking. “Oh yeah! I didn’t realize I missed it, but… Oh Abby!”

She’s beaming at him.

The party rolls on around them. People coming in, getting the chance to say hello to old friends, and make some new ones.

Abbi’s sister and husband look a bit weary from the trip, but the kids are excited, and they make a bee-line for the yakitori. Apparently grilled chicken on sticks is a big hit for them.

Tim’s genuinely pleased to hug Elaine hello, and offer Brian a warm handshake. They’d been driving all day (traffic snarl on I-95 just north of Richmond made a six hour trip into a nine hour trip) but the chance to sit back, relax, eat, have a good drink, and get some pesky paperwork out of the way is brightening their hearts.

Dwayne Pride made it in from New Orleans two hours ago. Long enough to check into his hotel, stow his go-bag, and get here. But, now here, he’s got a drink in hand, and is looking for something to get some music playing. In addition to a somewhat ‘clean’ décor, there doesn’t seem to be a stereo in this place. But, it’s not a party if there isn’t music, and anywhere with Pride, especially Pride with a drink in his hand, is going to be a party.

Callen comes in a few minutes later, looking slightly confused by all of this cold weather. For someone who supposedly spent a good deal of time in Russia, snow on the ground seems to be boggling him. Gibbs teases him about spending too long in the sunshine, before Tony sweeps over and says to Callen, “Your surfer boy still back on the left coast?”

“Deeks is still there.”

“Lord, Gibbs, Draga and I ended up out there on a case last year. You should have seen this shaggy ragamuffin we ended up working with. Looks like he rolls out of a sleeping bag on the beach every morning and goes to work.”
“Which is part of what makes him great at what he does,” Leon replies, before saying hello to the bunch of them.

They hear a burst of loud, and from the sound of it, dirty laughter from the front of the room where several men, and one woman, all about Abbi’s age have just showed up.

Gibbs knows who they are, in general, if not specific, and says, “I think I’ve got some people to get introduced to.” He heads towards the group.

Abbi’s got a handful of buddies from back in her Marine days who scattered across the country in the years since they all got out. They’re all back together now, and the laughter coming from that corner shows they’re happy to be back together, in the flesh, for the first time in ten years. They seem pleased to see Gibbs, and even happier when Bleach and his wife roll in. More than half of them went through training with him.

LJ and his sweetie make it. He’s got a walker now, and is looking more frail, but his smile is bright, and he falls in with Ducky and Penny like they saw each other yesterday, not two years ago.

The stars burn bright in a cold clear sky, the drinks flow, the food fills plates, and the party takes off.

Breena, with her spouses in tow, finds Elaine and Brian early in the evening. After hugs hello, and a bit of small talk, she says, “So, shall we focus on business now, get it out of the way, and leave the rest of the evening for pleasure?”

Brian and Elaine smile at that, thinking that the party will be more fun if they’re not constantly breaking into it with discussions of repayment options, tax burdens, and what sort of corporation they’re forming.

Abby, Tim, and Jimmy smile at that, because they know what sort of pleasure Breena’s thinking, and that’s also a lot more fun if they’re not trying to juggle sex with business.

Elaine’s got a big purse, and in it are several copies of a contract. Apparently the four of them aren’t the only ones going in on this. Tim knew about Gibbs and Abbi, but there’s more than one contract left after she gets the ones for them out.

Breena, as the one who really knows what’s going on with this, takes the contract and starts reading. And as she starts reading the game really takes off. Apparently, Breena’s perfectly fine mixing some business with pleasure.

What she’s doing should not be legal.

Not at all.

Tim’s squirming watching it, and he knows that Jimmy’s not having any easier of a time dealing with it. Even Abby, who’s, generally speaking, better than the two of them when it comes to playing it cool, is having a hard time looking away from it.

The ‘it’ in question?

Breena, sitting next to Elaine and Brian, across from her spouses. She’s leaning down a bit, elbows
on the table, hair draped so that Elaine and Brian can’t see what she’s doing, but Tim, Abby, and Jimmy, who are across from her can. And they’ve got just a glimpse of cleavage down her shirt. Between her fingers is a pen. A fairly standard click pen. Black, silver tip, the sort of thing you press down on to make the ball point come out.

She’s “chewing” gently on the clicker. If you didn’t know her well, you could, possibly, think this is an absent gesture, the sort of fidgeting that people often do when they’re concentrating on something else.

If you’re one of the three McPalmers staring at Breena, you know that’s not anything she does when she’s concentrating and you’re aware of the fact that no pen ever has needed that level of gentle suction and occasional licking.

At one point, where Breena’s tongue darts out for just a second to caress over the tip of the pen, circling it, lightly, and Abby hisses sharply with a fast, inhaled breath (because all three of them know that’s a stroke for her, not Tim or Jimmy) she glances up from the document, smiles at them, kisses the tip of the pen, and goes back to reading.

Tim’s very proud of the fact that he didn’t choke at that, because all he can imagine right now is Breena between Abby’s legs, licking her until she’s crying out. He gives Abby’s knee a little squeeze, and she leans against him, her hand finding his.

A moment later, Breena looks up, nods to her spouses, and then turns to Elaine and Brian. “Looks good. Got the check, Jimmy?” She signs her name, passes the contract to Jimmy, and Jimmy hands over the check. A moment later Tim and Abby do the same.

At 6:13 on December 30th 2017, Tim and Abby McGee, and Jimmy and Breena Palmer, each became the owners of a 5% share of Elaine’s Diner.

It’s just a little touch. Abby’s sitting at the table, and Tim’s standing behind her. He gently brushes her hair to the side, and bends down to lay a soft kiss on her shoulder. She shivers, just a little, at the feel of his lips against her skin. She smiles up at him, squeezing his hand, and he smiles back down.

About an hour into this, Pride, who’s been hanging out with Tony, Abby, and Leon, comes up with a plan. (It is possible that Abby may have suggested said plan by commenting, in an off-hand sort of way, that wouldn’t it be great to get a taste of home here and get some dancing going…)

A quick survey of the room has shown him that while there are enough tables for everyone to sit, most of the party is not sitting, at least not for long. They get up to get drinks and food, chat with people, mingle, and they might, on occasion, sit down. But most of the time, they’re up, moving around in little clots, joining and rejoining different groups as the night progresses.

Which means they don’t really need all of those tables in the middle.

Which means the music Pride got going, could be put to its intended use.

Dancing.

In what can only be described as a brazen display of Rule 18 they get moving tables, and before the
hour shifts, Pride’s dancing with Lara, and Tony’s getting a moment to swing with Ziva.

Once those chairs are out of the way, Abby pulls Tim to join her on the dance floor.

He’s got a wicked little smile on his face as he holds her close, lips an inch from her ear. “I was thinking about later tonight.”

“I certainly hope so.”

“Oh yeah. You remember that horrible lie you told me when we were processing that cab… The one where you said your first time was in a cab, and I said, front seat or back, and you said, both, sort of?”

Abby laughs. “You should have seen the look on your face when I said that.”

Tim smiles. “I’ll bet it was something. Had about 30 X-rated scenarios go dancing through my head when you said that.”

She smiles at him, very pleased with herself, swaying closer to him, letting her hips brush his. “And what are you thinking about my ‘horrible lie…”’

He kisses her, gently. “Well… We’ve got a van, and maybe it’s not a taxi, but it does have a front seat, and a back seat, and…” He drops his voice a little lower, all but kissing the words to the shell of her ear, “I’m thinking about who goes where. Am I in the front seat, getting blown, and Jimmy in the back, fucking you? Or is Jimmy in the front? Whose cock do you want your lips wrapped around?”

She turns her head, kissing him. “Ohhh… Pretty, pretty questions.”

His lips find hers again. “You know, I suppose, if you’re feeling really flexible, Breena could be in the front seat, and one of us could be next to you, sucking your nipples, and the other in the back…”

Abby laughs at that, trying to imagine how far her back would have to bend to do that. “No. How about this: she could be in the back, making good on that promise with the pen. She could be in the back, say…” her tongue slips over her lips, “in Jimmy’s lap, and you could be in the front seat.”

He trails his fingers through her hair and down her neck, liking the idea of that a whole lot. “Pretty, pretty pictures…”

“Yes!”

Breena’s reveal of Abby, with Back in Black playing, has set an idea in Jimmy’s mind.

One he needs a confederate for.

So, he leans to his right side as he’s nibbling a bite of sushi, and says to Abby, “What’s Pride playing the music on?”

“His phone.”

Jimmy nods. “You think you could get Short Skirt/Long Jacket up on that?”
Abby knows that song and grins. “Yeah, I can do that.”

“Good, I’m off to ask my lady for a dance.”

Breena’s talking to Miranda Borin and two of Abbi’s Marine buddies, when he sweeps over. “Can I distract you away for a few moments?”

“Depends, do I want to be distracted?”

He smiles, hand on her shoulder, fingers resting gently against the nape of her neck. “I really hope so.” He sees Abby, who grins at him, and then the song changes.

“Then lead the way.”

It’s a fast song, and not really designed for dancing, but once Breena realizes what it is… She starts to laugh, very pleased at Jimmy. “Fingernails that shine like justice?”

“Hey, they’re really sparkly,” he replies, kissing the tip of each finger while they dance. His knee brushes just above hers, over the two inches not covered by skirt or boot, and he looks her up and down, eyes tracing her body. He licks his lips. “Short skirt, long jacket, I love this.”

“Good!”

It is a party. And this is a friendly group. And friendly people often dance with each other. In a friendly sort of way.

So, for the moment, Tim’s dancing with Breena. They’re not really touching, occasional brushes of fingers and hands, or maybe her hand on his shoulder, or his on her hip. It’s a fast, peppy jazz beat, not the sort of thing one pulls their partner close for.

But they’re on the dancefloor, near the speaker that Pride found, so the music is loud, and no one’s really paying attention to them.

Perfect.

Tim says, keeping his voice low, but enunciating clearly, so Breena can, as well as possible, see his words, if not hear them.

“Dinner’s got me thinking.”

She raises any eyebrow at him. “Thinking or thinking?”

He grins, eyes sparkling warm and sexy. “Thinking. I don’t know how real it is, but I’ve seen references to people using another person as a sushi buffet.”

“Is this part of you getting messy eating clams?” Breena says with a sassy little snap in her voice, remembering his comment, back from the last time there was sushi and sex in the offing.

He’s still grinning, liking that a whole lot. “I really hope so. Dress you up with yummy little bites. Find a few of those really nice, smooth lacquered chop sticks. Jimmy and I kneeling next to you, gently stroking the tip of the sticks over your skin, lighting up goosebumps.”

“I’m lying in front of you, and you’re going to use chopsticks?”
“Only to play with you. Just want to add an extra sensation. When it’s time to eat, all you’ll feel is lips.” He glances around, and then quickly traces just the tip of his index finger down her throat. “Nibbles all up and down your body. Maybe the drip of blood warm soy sauce… Can you feel it, lying there, blindfolded, cool morsels on your body, the occasion hot drop of… something… might be soy, might be sake, but after it, always after it, a tongue wet and soft caressing over you. Hard and smooth little points dragged over your skin. But you never know exactly where or when the next sensation is. Maybe rub just a little wasabi on your nipples, glowing warmth followed by more tongues.”

Breena licks her lips, looking up at him, every breath, every move broadcasting that she’s enjoying this. “Do I get to eat?”

“Oh, I imagine that Jimmy and I can find something for you to taste. We might not want you to bite, but I’m sure we’ll have something for your mouth to do.”

“And if I add my own special sauce to the mix, will you lick it off?”

“Every drop. And I’ll take your blindfold off so you can see me suck it off Jimmy’s tongue, too.”

“And if I want to watch you suck it off another part of Jimmy?” She licks her lips, tip of her tongue lightly trailing over them.

Tim wants to kiss her so badly right now, but he doesn’t. He keeps his eyes on hers, and says, “Whatever, however you want it, just ask.”

“Don’t worry, love, I will.”

The song ends, the music shifting, moving to something slower and more romantic. Both of them leave the dancefloor, and Tim, hands in his pockets, heads to the restroom for some ‘calming down’ time.

Jimmy’s having a conversation with Ducky and Penny. They’re talking about Penny’s latest adventures in New York, and how she’s got three more years as a congresswoman, and then… They don’t know. Come back to Virginia? That’s the current plan, though both Ducky and Penny are a tad skeptical that going from being involved, day-in, day-out in building the State of Colombia to “retirement” will be for them.

“I’m sure Jarvis will have something you can do,” Jimmy says, noticing something. He steps a little to the side, and confirms what he thinks he’s seeing.

“Something,” Penny replies. “Of course, but what? Technically, if I’m going to be involved in the state government, we need to move there.”

“We do, still, technically, own my condo,” Ducky says.

“No one’s wanted to take it?” Jimmy says, still looking away from the two of them. Apparently, if you stand in exactly the right spot, the shadow the screen in front of the window casts allows you to see out into the parking lot. Jimmy takes a step to the side, but from there, he’s only got a view of the party reflected in the glass. One step back, and again, the screen blocks the light, and he can see cars and streetlights.

“We’ve had it on the market for more than a year now, and even at pennies on the dollar, it hasn’t
sold,” Penny replies.

Jimmy makes a note of where his car is, and yes, he can see it from the window. Then he refocuses his attention to Ducky and Penny. “If fixing it up is the cost of keeping you guys active and happy… I mean, not like we haven’t done it before.”

“Before we put it on the market we got it fixed back up again,” Ducky says. “It was vandalized, but not destroyed. Mostly it needed someone to go through and clean it. Now, it’s clean, but empty.”

“I don’t know if we still have any neighbors,” Penny adds. “Most of them worked for the government or the universities.”

Jimmy sighs at that. Many of the government and government adjacent jobs are in New York now, and last he heard, American and Georgetown were rebuilding, but not, by any stretch, rebuilt. But, in three years…

Ducky sees that sigh and nods. “Nothing that needs to be decided now.” He shares a look at Penny, and they both know that this is something that may never need to be decided, but both of them think that having long-term plans is something that helps older people stay alive and healthy. So, whether they need them or not, they’re going to have plans.

“Oh!” Jimmy says, playing up how good the sushi between his fingers is. “You’ve got to try this!” he says to Abby, holding the bite of seared fish out to her.

Abby’s eyes quickly skirt around the room. No one’s watching them.

Instead of taking the fish with her fingers, she opens her mouth, taking the piece, and giving his index finger just a tiny lick.

“Tasty,” she says, a second later, making it clear that she’s as much talking about his skin as the food.

“So, tasty,” he replies. He’s got another piece of whatever this is, so he carefully picks it up, dips it in the soy-wasabi mix, lifts it to his own lips, letting just a drop of the liquid hit his tongue before he gives it a light bite. He chews that one, then licks the remaining piece of fish. “Hot, salty, a little musky. Exactly what I like.”

Abby laughs at that, and wiggles her finger, letting him know to lean closer.

He does, and she snatches the bite from him, again, “accidentally” licking his finger.

Another hour flows by, and Jimmy puts his newfound information into play. He pulls Tim, Abby, and Breena over to that little spot, and in a casual sort of way, points out the view.

Tim smiles, getting it, and a plan, into his head.

“I think it’s about time for us to deliver that present to Gibbs.”

Jimmy nods along. “I was thinking that. Maybe… take a few minutes to get it.” He looks, pointedly, to their van.
The girls get it. “Both of you, together?”

Tim nods. “Yeah, I think both of us.”

Jimmy likes to be watched, and get caught, and enjoys danger sex, so just the idea of this is getting him revved up, and sure, if he brought one of the girls, Tim and whichever one stayed inside would enjoy it, but if he brings Tim both of the girls will adore what comes next.

Once they’re outside, Tim sets his watch alarm. They can’t spend too long out here. Just long enough to make it fun to watch. They walk a few hundred more feet, next to the car, looking up at the party. They can see everyone near the window, but except for Abby and Breena, who know to look at the little strip of glass that’s in the shadow of the screen, none of them can see them.

“Feels trippy,” Jimmy says. “Naked but invisible.”

Tim smirks at that. “Too cold for naked.”

They’re at the van, and he leans against Jimmy. Kissing him when he’s not watching the girls.

It triggers a memory for Tim. Cold air, car behind Jimmy, the feel of desire. He rubs up against Jimmy again, deliberately, and says, “I’d like to pin your hands, and tell you a story.”

Jimmy looks away from the girls and the rest of the party. “Why?”

“Because if I pin your hands, Abby’ll see it, and remember the same thing I am. She’ll tell Breena, and… It’s a good story. You’ll like it, too.”

Jimmy thinks about it, and then nods.

It’s a little more difficult to do with Jimmy. Jimmy’s bigger than Abby, and this time Tim’s got to use both hands, because he can’t actually pin Jimmy if he’s got both wrists in one hand. But he’s fairly sure Abby’ll still get the idea when she sees him reach up, pressing each of Jimmy’s wrist against the cold metal of the van, and rock into him.

He kisses Jimmy’s throat, and bites his jaw gently. Just enough to make him squirm a little. “I did this with Abby once. Right after we got those Valentine’s videos.”

Jimmy remembers those, and moans a little.

“Yeah. You and Tony finally left, and I had the time to watch, so I did, and…”

Jimmy’s nodding, he remembers what was on that video, and right now, looking up, he can see Breena, who looks a lot like she did in that video, just a lot more dressed, next to Abby, who just lightly put her hand on Breena’s shoulder, laughing at a joke or something, both of them holding eye contact with each other for a moment too long before shifting their gazes back to him and Tim.

Tim’s rocking his hips against Jimmy. “Every drop of blood in my body was in my cock after that video. I told Abby I was going to fuck her through the wall when she got home, and then an idea hit. I texted her and asked if she had on a skirt, and she did, and panties, but she didn’t. So I told her to go get some, and where to park when she got home.”

“Why’d you want her to put panties on?” Jimmy can see it in his mind, that little blue outfit she was wearing in the video as she and Breena kissed. Maybe Tim wanted to see it live, too. He certainly enjoyed that little pink number Breena had been wearing.
Tim nuzzles Jimmy’s throat and jawline, and says, voice low, “So I could do this, press her up against the car, pin her hands, and then cut them off her before fucking her into next week. Outside, in the cold, where anyone could just walk up and see us.”

Jimmy hisses at that idea, a long, fast inhale as the idea of it, the feel of it, and the sense of danger and power all wrap together in his head. “Oh.”

Tim nods. “Yeah. Good night. Felt like a walking hard-on. Every drop of blood in my body running around too fast, too hard, and every thought focused on my cock. Every time I closed my eyes I could see them kissing, and when I got Abby inside, I could taste Breena on her, and… Very good night.”

Jimmy’s watching the girls. They can’t just be staring out the window at them, but they keep glancing his way, and Abby just brushed Breena’s hair off her shoulder and throat, to ‘admire her necklace’ or something like that.

“She liked it?”

Tim sounds smug, “Oh yeah.”

“The whole set up, or just the knife?”

“Both. I don’t take my knife out very often, but it’s gone over well when I have.”

Jimmy looks back up at them again, and waits until they’re both watching them. Fast, before Tim knows it’s going to happen, he’s slipped the pin, flipped them around, and gotten his thigh wedged between Tims, and Tim’s hands behind his back.

Tim hits the car with a bit of a thud, and feels the metal behind him, warmer than he expected, but that’s the ghost of Jimmy’s body there. He sees Abby’s eyes go wide, and Breena look over, also a bit surprised to see they’ve flipped.

“One day, I’ll show both of you how to play a knife game,” Jimmy’s voice is low, dark, and sending shivers, the good kind, up Tim’s spine. He’s never been waiting with baited breath to hear more of what Jimmy was going to say, not in a this-is-turning-me-on sort of way, but he is right now.

“Soon,” Tim says, egging him on.

“Oh yeah. I’m thinking Abby’s going to need a button down shirt, probably best if it’s a little too small.”

Tim can see where this is going. “The buttons strain over her breasts.”

“Exactly. Cheap lacy bra. Next time you’re at Target pick one up.”

Tim’s dick is leaping to attention at this idea. “Got it. Flimsy skirt?”

“Yeah, fairly loose at the bottom. Thong.”

Tim squirms against Jimmy, enjoying this idea, a lot. “What are you bringing to the party?”

“A scalpel.” Jimmy grins at Tim, and then kisses him, hard, deep, rocking against him, and Tim can feel this idea is getting him hard, too. What had been a show to turn on the ladies is rapidly getting to both of them, too. “She’ll sit in your lap, legs wide over yours, and you’ll hold her arms behind her back.”
Tim’s nodding. “Pull the shirt a little tighter, those poor buttons’ll be working hard.”

“Yeah. Won’t take more than a little hint of pressure from the scalpel, and off they’ll go.” He makes a little flicking gesture with his hand.

“She’ll be squirming in my lap, and I’ll be kissing her shoulders, teeth lightly scraping up her neck. You’ll be kneeling in front of her. One button at a time…”

“Until her shirt is hanging off of her. I’ll lean in, kissing her breasts, sucking on them, stroking, but that bra’s in the way…”

“So it’s got to go.”

“Hook my index finger into the fabric between the cups, pull a little, so it’s not flush on her skin, and then, snick, off it goes.”

“God…” Yeah, this is working a treat for Tim, he can imagine it and feel it and… “You can see here there, legs wide, just the tiniest hint of her panties under her skirt, and the shirt and bra open, boobs hanging out…”

“Not sure about hanging out. I intend to be holding them.”

“She’s kissing me, and you’re kissing her, and all three of us rubbing and rubbing against each other.”

Jimmy’s rubbing against him now, both of them are, rocking because the friction feels too damn good to stop. “I scoot up a bit, press my cock against her-“

Tim groans. “Her sweet ass against me, her pussy against you.”

“God, yes!” Jimmy’s rocking against him, hard. “But that damn skirt is in the way. One little nick, just enough to start it, and then I grab it and rip it off of her.”

Tim groans at that, too. “You going to rip the panties off, too?”

“You want me to?”

“I’ll press up a little on her arms, give her the idea to stand up.”

“You just want her ass in your face.”

“Duh. She’s got on a little black thong, so it’s right there, soft and lush and I’m kissing everything I can reach.”

“Trace over everything with my fingers. Keep ‘em light to start with, get the edges of the panties, then drag them over, and slip my tongue between her lips.”

“She’d moan at that. That deep, breathy, ‘fuck’ out of her.” They both know that sound and appreciate the memory.

“Oh, she would. And you’d give her a little bite, make her groan, and I’ll slit those panties off, pull her into my arms, wrap her legs around my hips and be deep in her before she stops moaning.”

Tim’s teeth grit at that idea. “I’d be able to watch from an inch away, until I’m all slicked up, and join you.”
“The two of us, holding her between us, rocking away.”

Tim wraps his arms around Jimmy’s hips, and kisses his throat and ear, “Best dance ever.”

“Yeah.”

They kiss again, deep, fast, feeding on the idea of Abby naked, between them, and the feel of fucking her into a dance. They’re moving faster, and Tim’s enjoying it, rocking faster, letting his hips set the pace, and then the timer he set begins to buzz.

He’s not exactly close, not right now, especially not with his watch buzzing away on his wrist to let him know it’s time to move, but… Probably a good idea to pull back. “You know, unless you want to cum in your pants from rubbing off, we should probably stop.”

Jimmy does slow down, but doesn’t exactly stop. “Been so damn long, I’m not even sure I can anymore.”

That gets a quick laugh out of Tim. He gives Jimmy a quick peck, and Jimmy steps back, adjusting himself. “Joys of forty.”

Jimmy gives him wry smile, which Tim shares, both of them remembering a time when anything rubbing against them would have done it, and then a real one lights Jimmy’s face, “Joys of forty, half an hour or so from now, we’ll have actual women getting us out of our pants, and we’ll be getting into theirs.”

Tim smiles back at him, and likewise shifts himself about. “You know, put it like that, and I like forty.”

They give themselves a minute to get ‘presentable,’ then Jimmy opens the door to the van. Inside there is a bag, with a little tag on it that says Gibbs and Abbi, and said bag has a pretty ribbon on it, and it’s made of a very pretty silvery paper with the outlines of white roses on it.

The outside of this bag oozes elegant class. In other circumstances, Jimmy could easily see himself handing it to Senior or, hell, if one were available, a senator or something.

But both Jimmy and Tim know, in a ‘round-about, non-specific sort of way, what’s in this bag, so Jimmy’s not about to hand it off to anyone who isn’t Gibbs or Abbi. (And, honestly, were he to hand it to Abbi, he’d likely blush.)

“All set?” Jimmy asks.

“All set.” Tim hands the bag over to him.

And thus, they head back into the restaurant. Gibbs is the closer of the two of them, talking with Pride, Fornell, and Tony about something, but he’s easy enough to wave away. (Jimmy catches his eye and holds up the present bag. Next to Gibbs, Tony smirks a wide and dirty smirk, and starts talking to Pride and Fornell, both of whom seem to catch his wide and dirty smirk.)

Jimmy hands the bag over, and Tim says, “Besides the diplomatic tags, and some pills you probably don’t need, but may want, we do not know, nor do we want to know, what, precisely, is in this bag. In a general sort of sense, we’ve been told by our wives that they expect you to make sure Abbi has a very good time on your honeymoon, and any and every possible thing they could think of to ensure
that is located therein.”

Gibbs looks a little startled by that, but takes the bag, looking in. All he sees are nicely wrapped packages nestled in tissue paper, and the stickers that Tim added to the mix.

Jimmy takes over. “Last I checked you weren’t on any blood pressure medication. If that changes, don’t mess with the pills. Otherwise, I’ve been told they’re fun. But if they’re fun for more than four hours at a time, get to an emergency room.”

Gibbs eyes just about fall out of his head at that bit. He looks like he’s about to swallow his tongue. Jimmy and Tim enjoy it, for a moment, before Tim slaps him on the back, and gives him a quick hug.

“All bases covered?” he asks Jimmy.

“Yep. Enjoy! Don’t tell us about it later!” Then Jimmy hugs Gibbs, and they head over to their own wives.

Though, looking back, they again see Gibbs looking into the bag, a somewhat curious expression on his face.

Even better, a minute after that, Abbi joins him, asking about the bag, and her wicked and loud laughter just makes all four of the McPalmers day.

Tim’s heading to the restroom when he hears Wendy say to Elaine, “Did you know they’re roasting coffee now? The McGees and Palmers got Gibbs and Abbi a roaster for Christmas. I don’t know how much Abbi gets to use it, but he and Gibbs are messing with it all the time. Before you’re done with this new diner of yours, you might have a new coffee supplier.”

Elaine looks intrigued by that. She’s always served good, strong, hot coffee, but it was never “special.” “Locally, fresh-roasted beans might get people in the door.”

Brian’s also thinking about it. “If he’s good at it, we could use it.”

Both of them are looking across the room, to where Gibbs is dancing with Abbi, and Fornell is a few steps behind, leaning against the bar, sipping a scotch.

He hears Wendy say, just before he’s out of earshot, “They both need something to do with themselves. Way too much free time.”

Once he’s in there, and has taken care of why he’s in there, he pulls out his phone. He almost takes a picture of himself, but decides not to. He does fire off a quick text to Breena:

Twenty minutes to go. Been watching your lips all night. Can’t wait to kiss them. Want to suck your lower lip between mine, feel my teeth glide over it, and hear that little whimper you make when I do that.

A kiss emoji comes up on his phone a moment later.

Nine thirty rolls around. And while there is a certain level of temptation to take advantage of the ‘guy only’ after-party Pride’s inviting them to, Tim and Jimmy both have other plans.
They, with their wives, say their goodbyes, make sure everyone knows they’re looking forward to tomorrow, and then… They’re free.

Tim’s never been the kind of guy to make fun of minivans. He’s not the one who’ll smirk about mom-mobiles and the like. That said, he doesn’t personally own one, and previous to a minute ago, didn’t think there was much chance of that changing.

But… as he’s finding out, much to his enjoyment, if you happen to have a minivan, and three of your favorite playmates are in it, and if all four of you happen to be looking to get laid, and if there’s a conveniently located empty parking lot, all of those things together can wrap up into a marvelously good time.

Last time he and Abby did this, they had to stop mid-fuck to take the top off of his Porsche. Both of them are just too damn tall to have sex in a sports car. This is not an issue in a minivan.

And, should that desert tryst have involved all four of them… well, it wouldn’t have, the Porsche was a two person car. No matter how intimately involved four people are, a Porsche just isn’t a good place for them.

But a minivan… Yeah…

He’s starting to see all the advantages of a minivan.

Once they pull into the parking lot, making sure that they’re not visible from the street, Tim and Abby hop into the middle seat with Jimmy and Breena.

“Finally!” Breena says, unbuckling, scooting over so she’s in Jimmy’s lap, and there’s room for Tim next to him on the seat.

“Amen,” Abby adds, pushing Tim down, yanking up his kilt, and going after her skirt, too.

Jimmy’s at something of a disadvantage here. Tim and Abby are already making happy groaning sounds, and he’s still fussing with his belt.

“See…” Tim gasps a bit as Abby leans back. “There’s a… Oh God… reason… Uh… Why three of us… God woman, you’re killing me!… wore skirts.”

Jimmy flashes him the stink eye while he wrestles with his zipper, and finally gets it undone. A moment later, his voice, and Breena’s joins the chorus of happy sounds.

He’s sitting almost hip to hip with Jimmy. (Abby’s leg is between them.) And after hours of teasing words and touches no one is looking for long or drawn out. This is firework sex, fast, bright and sparkly. And here, in the middle seat, with Abby in his lap, he can touch and kiss all three of them.

He’s kissing Breena, feeling Abby rising and falling against him, holding Jimmy’s hand. They’re both moving fast, and he knows it can’t last, not long, but he doesn’t need it to. Right here, right now, a kiss and breath, a gasped sigh. He’s pulling forward, hand on Breena’s breast, and then back, kissing Jimmy, and Abby, glorious, wonderful Abby, in his lap and heart and soul, his lips find hers, and all of them, together in a cocoon of warm breath and fogged windows, no world outside of them, nothing mattering besides the feel of four bodies gliding with and against each other.

Sparks gather, burning brighter, bursting in grunts and cum cries.

Heavy, half-gasped breaths slowing down. Hearts slowing, too. He’s sprawled back on the seat, head resting on Jimmy’s shoulder, Abby curled up against his chest, Breena’s thigh under his palm,
basking in the firework bright glow of another night with his loves.

Sometimes, life is truly sweet.

He trades lazy kisses with all three of them, and finds himself thinking tomorrow will be sweeter, yet.
A Beginning and An End

Chapter Notes

Okay Loves, There’s something of a soundtrack for this one. If you’re on google play, there is supposedly a way to look up Playlists. (No, I don’t actually know how to do this.) But, if you do know how to do it, feel free to hunt down Shards To A Whole by Keryl Raist. I’ve got the versions of the songs I’m thinking of on there. (If any of you do manage to succeed in this, let me know how to do it. I may, eventually create the STAW Master Playlist, with ALL the songs mentioned in the story in it.)

If you aren’t, you’re looking for:

You’re My Best Friend: Queen

For My Wedding: Don Henley

Pachabel’s Canon In D Major (Preferably a piano and violin mix, but violin on its own will work fine, too.)

You Got It: Roy Orbison

Sway: Blue October

I’ll put the title of the song in asterisks when it needs to start. *Pachabel’s Canon In D Major* for example.

And without further ado: Chapter 608: A Beginning and An End

On December 31st, 2017, Gibbs wakes up on Fornell’s sofa. He blinks a few times, wondering what’s going on. It’s been a long time since he woke up here. Years? Got to be. It’s disorienting for a moment, and then he knows. Abbi’s at home. He’s at his best man’s place, spending the night before his wedding away from the bride.

He checks his watch; it’s 06:00. He thinks they got to bed around… God… 03:00. He’s sure that if he bounces off that sofa and starts moving around, Fornell will slap him upside the back of his head.

With his alarm clock.

So, he rolls over and tries to get back to sleep, expecting it to be useless.

But… It’s a comfy sofa, and he is tired, and… possibly, still a little drunk, or… okay, maybe a lot drunk…and…
At the McGee house, most mornings (these days, this will shift again in about another month when Donnie gets to where he can go six hours without a feed) go something like this:

Wake up number 1: This one happens at 5:00, and it’s Breena’s. Between work and wanting to sleep regularly, Donnie does nurse, but not every feed. First breakfast and second dinner are his nursing meals. His first wakeup of the day is (and right now, you can set a clock by it) 5:03 AM.

So, at 5:03 AM, Breena’s up with the first of their five tiny alarm clocks who do not understand the concept of late nights, holidays, or weekends. Said clock is looking up at her with big blue eyes, and fussing mightily because it’s been a minute and a half since he began requesting breakfast number one, and like all babies, he’s firmly convinced he will starve if not fed immediately upon request. But, after a bit of shushing, some patting, and a new diaper, Donnie settles in for his breakfast. He’s a good eater, and in twenty minutes, she’s laying him back in his crib.

She returns to her own bed. Barely 5:30 in December may as well be midnight, but they’ve got nightlights all over the house, so in the dim blue glow, she can see her mates. Her own space, on Jimmy’s right, is open and waiting for her. Tim’s on his side, his back to Jimmy’s hip, snuggled around Abby. There are soft breathing sounds, the occasional quiet moment as they shift in their sleep, and then a second of enveloping warmth as she slips between the sheets, snuggling in next to Jimmy. He doesn’t actually wake up, but he does kiss her forehead as she rests her head on his shoulder.

Normally, wake up number 2 would happen around seven, and this one would get two of the three of them who are not Breena up. Tim, Jimmy, or Abby would respond to the sound of two little girls playing in their room (Molly and Kelly share a room at Tim and Abby’s place, and have gotten pretty good about not getting out of bed until some adults come for them. What they haven’t gotten good at is the idea that sound travels. Or for that matter, the difference between indoor and outdoor volume.) and Anna will usually be calling out, sometimes with words, sometimes just fussing, because if her sisters are playing she wants to be up and at it, too.

Some mornings she wakes Sean up, too. In which case they’ll come in and find her standing, holding onto the edge of the crib, and he’ll be sitting up, looking up at them. Other mornings she doesn’t, and he sleeps through her fussing.

This is not how wakeup number two goes this morning though. At about 6:30, when Molly wakes up, she comes bounding out of her room, singing, at the top of her lungs, “Wedding Day! Wedding Day! Pop And Abbi are wedding today!” and then bounces into their room, climbing into bed with the adults, who, granted, are excited about the wedding, too, but not in a ‘let’s get out of bed early and dance around about it’ level.

So, for Tim, wake up number two is a loud, jarring voice, followed by the feel of a small kneecap pressing deeply into his kidney as said voice apparently climbs over him to snuggle with her Daddy and Mama.

He’s almost got his eye open when another elbow, this one apparently attached to a quieter, but somehow no less pokey child, hits him in the hip. Kelly’s not making as much noise as Molly, but she’s just as determined to get in on the snuggles.

He hears Jimmy, with a very sleepy Dad-voice, saying, “You’re supposed to stay in bed until 7:00.”

“It’s wedding day!” Molly explains, because in her world, this does explain it.
Tim debates saying something like, “Yes, but not for eleven hours,” but decides against it because eleven hours is at best a tenuous concept for Molly and at worst might involve crying.

“Back to your room!” Jimmy says.

Assorted non-verbal whining responds to that.

Abby comes up with a save, “Go to your room, and get all of your wedding gear out.”

And that gets two little girls out of bed, (this time Tim doesn’t get a sharp pokey bit in a sensitive place) back to their room, to get whatever it is they think they need for the wedding, picked out.

Half an hour later, Tim and Jimmy do roll out of bed, and maybe they aren’t light on their feet and full of smiles, but they also didn’t stay out ‘til 03:00 with Gibbs, Fornell, Pride, Callen, Bleach, Leon, and Ducky, so they aren’t cursing and looking at the world like it’s a bleak landscape of alcohol-blurred exhaustion.

So, while it’s true they’re a tad forlorn at having missed what was likely to be an epic night of tales of thrilling bullshit, because Pride can out-bullshit the thrillingest bullshitter ever, it’s also true they had a great time getting home from the party, and they’re rather pleased to not be getting up at 07:00, when the aforementioned tiny alarm clocks who do not understand the concept of weekends, holidays, or late nights, all begin to clamor for breakfast, on something less than three hours of sleep.

Tim’s rubbing his eyes as he’s corralling kiddos, trying to get Sean to stay still while he cleans him off and gets a fresh diaper on him, but he can see his sisters are up and playing, and he keeps trying to roll away and join the fun.

“Oh no you don’t!” he says, grabbing his squirmy, poop-bottomed little wannabe escape artists. Sean doesn’t crawl, yet. He does roll, and if there’s a way to make a bigger mess than rolling away with an unwiped bum, none of the McPalmer kids have found it… yet. “Jimmy?”

Jimmy looks over from picking out onesies and socks, and then kneels down, holding Sean’s shoulders, allowing Tim to rapidly clean him off without the little guy attempting another escape. “There!” Tim adds, clean diaper on and snug. “Go, be free.”

Sean looks up at him, goes completely limp, and just lays there, grinning.

“Uh huh… Yeah… now you’re all ‘I’ll just lie here and smile,’” Tim says as he stands up to wash his hands.

“What are we doing when the girls get up?” Jimmy asks, when he comes back.

“We’re on kiddos and breakfast. They’re on sleep in. Then they get up, we hand ‘em off. We’ve got haircuts then back here. Everyone gets lunch, then they’re off to the Omni, and we’re on the flower run. Heather’ll meet us there. She takes over major child watching. We hand out flowers and get ready for the wedding. Molly gets her five minutes of fame. And then from there, they get to be part of the party as much as they can handle, and then back up with Heather and Keith when it’s sleepy-time or they just need the quiet.”

“And we, with any luck, get at least once dance with our girls.”

Tim smiles. “With any luck. Jeannie and Ed won’t stay that late, right?”
Jimmy shrugs.

Tim grabs Sean again, who has rolled over and is just about to make a break for it, or as much of a break as someone who does not yet crawl can make. He sets Sean in his lap. “Ha! You thought you could get away,” he says and signs it. Sean’s implant isn’t on yet, that’s the last bit of his ‘outfit’ when he gets dressed, so he’s watching Tim’s hands avidly. Tim takes a pair of socks from Jimmy, and begins to wriggle them up his son’s feet.

In the more than a year that Abbi’s lived at the Gibbs house, the doggies have learned a few things: A: Gibbs gets up early. B: Abbi gets up early a lot. C: Sometimes she does not. And D: if you wake her up when she’s not getting up early, she makes some sharp, angry noises, and you don’t get petted. They don’t like that at all.

This morning though, there are new people in the house. Jeff and Becky are up at their normal time, which on the east coast time works out to 07:00.

Elaine and Brian are here, too, and they’re also no strangers to early rising.

So, while it’s true that both doggies know that waking Abbi up when she’s having a laying about sort of day is a bad thing, it’s also true that with four other people in the house up and moving around and doing things, they’re excited, and like the McPalmer Little Alarm Clocks, they do not grasp the nuances of what’s happening.

So, at a bit before 08:00, a cool, damp nose is poking Abbi, making sure that the human who is supposed to be in this house knows what’s going on, and approves of it.

Abbi wasn’t out that late. She and her Marines went out for a few drinks, but she didn’t want to be exhausted today, so they (she) called it a night at 01:00. (For all she knows, they may still be out.) She’s tired, but not wrecked when Mona nudges her again.

“Sleeping time!” she says to Mona.

Mona nudges her again.

“The damn house better be on fire.”

Mona barks.

“Fine!” She sits up, pulls on her robe, and follows Mona downstairs. Jackson is on the sofa, keeping watch on the kitchen. He doesn’t know Brian or Elaine, and he does know Jeff and Becky, but none of them are supposed to be here.

Mona heads over to him, and both of them are staring at the people making breakfast in their kitchen, eyeing them with deep suspicion.

Abbi groans at them. “It’s morning, they’re eating. They’re allowed to.”

Mona tilts her head to the side. You sure about that?

Abbi pats her on the head. “Stand down, this is fine.”
“Good morning!” Elaine says to her. “Are you up or…”

Abbi yawns. “I don’t know. I hope not.” She glares at the dogs. “Both of you, have some breakfast and go run around outside.”

They scramble off the sofa into the kitchen, looking chagrinned for having misjudged what’s going on in there.

Abbi heads back upstairs, plopping herself between warm, soft blankets, and hopes that sleep will revisit her. Sure, she’s done more than a few days on less than six hours, but she was hoping today wouldn’t be one of them.

A few minutes later, she’s getting her wish.

At 10:00 in the morning, on December 31st, 2017, Tony DiNozzo is nervous.

“What do you mean there’s traffic outside of Wilmington? It’s supposed to be here by now!” he’s saying to a courier who was supposed to get here any minute, and apparently won’t be doing that.

“You don’t need it until 5:00, and I’ll get it to you by 2:00.” The voice on the line sounds bored. Obviously he does not grasp the gravity of what will happen if that tux doesn’t get here by 4:00. (Tony will be head smacked into an early grave if the tux shows up at 5:00 for a 5:30 wedding, so that damn thing better be here by 4:00, or he’s going to personally shoot the courier in each of his joints, twice.)

“You better! It’s THE GROOM’S tux!”

“Dude, chill. I’ve got this. You won’t be explaining to your groom why he’s getting married naked.”

“I better not be.”

“Relax.”

That ‘relax’ doesn’t sound nearly worried enough. “Just remember I’m a cop, I have a gun, and if that tux isn’t here before the wedding…”

“Chill. It will be.”

“It better.”

The voice on the other line laughs. “Yeah, sure, Mr. Cop. You think you’re scary, if I don’t get it down here in time, I better not ever come back, because Mr. Huong’ll skin me alive and wear me around to keep the other couriers in line.”

Tony nods at that. “Good.”

Ziva’s been watching this conversation, and Tony pacing around their apartment while he’s been having it.

When Tony hangs up, he says, “He’s going to kill me if this doesn’t work.”
“It will be fine, Tony.”

“And Fornell will piss on my corpse, because I talked him into going along with this.”

“Where is it?”

“Outside of Wilmington.”

“That’s not so bad. I can drive that in an hour and a half.”

And Tony knows exactly how that trip would go. “Oh, God, the last thing I need is the courier killing someone to get this thing down here on time!”

Ziva stands up, and places her hands on his shoulders. “It will be here. But, if it makes you feel better, call the place Fornell got the original tux from, and see if they’ve got another one. It shouldn’t be that difficult to find another black tux with a gray vest.”

Tony nods, and kisses her, and then goes to his computer, putting her back up plan into play.

“Wedding day! Wedding day! We’re gonna go to a wedding today!” Molly’s dancing around the living room as she sings this. “Can I see my dress again?”

“No, honey. We’ve got everything packed up and ready to go,” Abby says.

Molly pouts at that, she *loves* her dress. If it were up to her, she’d be wearing her flower girl dress 24/7. And, honestly, once the wedding is done and that dress no longer needs to be pristine, her collected parents have decided they are perfectly fine with her wearing it as much as she likes. After all, it’s not like she’s going to have a lot of occasions for a royal purple satin dress with silver embroidery on the neckline and hem. At least, not before she’s outgrown it.

“But…” Tim says, with a *behave and we may have a deal* tone of voice, “if you want, you can come with your daddy and I to the flower store and help us pick up all the flowers and deliver them.”

That gets a quickly sucked in breath from Molly. “The FLOWERS!”

Tim’s nodding. “Yes. *The flowers.* And we’re going to have to be *very* careful with them, because we’ll have Abbi’s bouquet, and everyone’s boutonnieres, and” Tim says the magic words, “all of the flower petals you’re going to scatter for Abbi!”

The tiny little wiggle of a pout on Molly’s lip vanishes so fast it practically never existed.

It’d been a while since Tim got a haircut. Since before he put the fear of McGee into the FBI. And now, almost… actually… more than three months later, it’s getting a bit shaggy. Not record setting long, especially not for him, but it’s at that stupid length between short and professional and long and slightly less professional but vaguely stylish.
Jimmy’s getting his normal trim. He hasn’t changed his hair in the more than decade Tim’s known him, though Tim suspects that’s because any shorter looks stupid and any longer turns into the white guy equivalent of an Afro. Even in the pictures of Jimmy from college and high school they’ve got on the mantle, his hair is pretty much the same way it is now.

Tim does his usual somewhat sloppy job of attempting to explain what he wants. (Like this, but shorter!) The hair cutter does her job, and in a bit, it’s shorter. But whatever it was Henry did to his hair three months ago, the magic didn’t translate, and he’s not sure if he likes this. It’s definitely shorter, but also sort of flat.

“How’s it look?”

Jimmy flashes Tim a I can’t believe you asked me that look as they’re walking out.

“Well, that normally works with my hair.”

“I did just make it worse?”

Jimmy shrugs. “Yeah, I think so. Abby and Breena’ll know what to do.”

Tim rolls his eyes. Once they’re back in the car, he checks himself in the rearview mirror. “Asshole.”

Jimmy smirks. Tim’s hair looks fine, better than it did before Jimmy played with it. “Ask them if your hair looks good, not me.”

“Noted.”

Abbi would have to say that this part feels weird. She’s in jeans, a sweatshirt, an old coat, and no makeup. And everyone with her is in the same condition. They’re all standing around in the foyer at the Omni, a huge, high-ceilinged place made of marble with a crystal chandelier, and huge, towering flower displays, waiting for Ziva, who this room ‘officially’ belongs to, to check in.

Miranda, who’s standing next to her says, “You remember this part from my wedding?”

Abbi thinks back, and says… “A little. Felt like we spent hours lugging everything into the inn.”

Miranda smiles at that, and looks at the bell hop who’s piling their luggage onto a wheeled carrier, complete with a high bar to hang things, like a wedding dress, on. “I don’t think that’ll be an issue here.”

“Yeah, it’s a tad more catered than your cabin in Alaska.”

“Well, that was sort of the point, it was rustic.”

Abbi and Miranda both laugh. The “inn” they were supposed to be at had been very carefully photographed for the brochures. It did have the views that they booked it for, but it was, probably by at least fifty percent, smaller than they’d expected. And the service left a bit to be desired.

Miranda taps her wedding ring. “Pretty settings are nice, but… You’ll forget. Not the big stuff, but
the little bits. And the big ones will get fuzzy. You’ll remember how it felt more than how it looked or tasted.”

Abbi nods at that. That’s how all of life works.

“But you’ll live it, every day, and maybe the party gets dim, but the life that party set in motion… That’ll stay.”

Abbi nods at that, too, her voice suddenly feeling tight. Miranda sees what she’s doing, nodding so she doesn’t have to talk, and hugs her close.

A moment later, Ziva’s over. “We are checked in. Let’s go!”

The next time Gibbs wakes up, it’s one in the afternoon, Wendy is making them brunch, and Fornell’s poking him. “Get moving sleepyhead.”

Gibbs opens one eye, peers up at Fornell, who’s smirking in a very pleased sort of way at him, and then blinks, sitting up.

“Supposed to be at the hotel in two hours. That’s enough time to eat, get a shower, and get moving, right?”

Gibbs nods. “Yeah.” He smells coffee and hears the first sizzle of bacon hitting the frying pan and begins to perk up.

Lunch, shower, getting packed up and ready to go…

Just a normal morning—except it’s well into afternoon.

Gibbs is out of the shower, putting on his clothing, and getting ready to gather up his stuff, when Fornell walks in… Gibbs shrugs, not like Tobias hasn’t seen it all before, and it is his room.

“All ready?”

Gibbs looks at Fornell, and then looks down at himself. He’s wearing his boxers and socks. He looks back at Fornell. “Oh yeah. Planning on cementing my reputation as the worst husband ever.” Gibbs rolls his eyes and picks up his pants.

Fornell laughs at that, and goes to the closet, grabbing their suits. He looks at the bag on the dresser. “So, what’d they get you? DiNozzo said it was sexy.”

Gibbs rolls his eyes and looks into the bag as Fornell carries their suits to the door. “I haven’t opened any of it. Gonna do that with Abbi,” He grins at that. He’ll admit to being kind of curious as to what sort of stuff is in there, but he doesn’t want to play with any of it on his own. “Only thing I know for sure is in there are three diplomatic tags and a bottle of Viagra,” he calls out.

Fornell comes back, without the suit bags. He’s just staring at Gibbs, looking boggled. Finally he comes up with: “In what possible universe does that combination make sense?”

Gibbs shrugs. “Made sense to the McPalmers and Ziva.”
“Diplomatic tags?”

“I guess so I can take it wherever and not have the TSA mess with it.”

Fornell doesn’t buy that, and Gibbs would admit it’s not anything he’d ever thought of. Then both of them have the same idea at the same time. Gibbs is double checking the stickers, Fornell reading over his shoulder.

Both of them share a look.

“If we ever find someone…” Gibbs says.

Fornell’s nodding. If they ever find a person to smuggle into the US, all they need is a box big enough to hold her, stick on of these stickers on it, and it cannot be opened, inspected, touched, taken custody of…

“I’d kiss McGee if he were here!” Fornell says.

“You’d shock the hell out of him.”

Fornell waves that off. “Not like he’s never been kissed by someone with stubble.”

Gibbs laughs at that, turns around, and fetches his t-shirt. A minute later he’s got his polo on over it.

“Okay, now I’m ready.”

“Good. Let’s go get you married.”

Gibbs grins at that. He slips on his shoes, grabs the bag, and they’re off.

“So, do we have a flower girl who wants to pick up some flowers?” Jimmy calls out when they get back to their house.

Molly and Kelly come bounding to him as he says that.

Their mothers follow a little more slowly, ready to check out the haircuts, make sure no last minute fix-ups are necessary.

Jimmy passes muster easily. Both of them fuss with Tim’s hair for a moment before deciding he’s allowed to attend the wedding.

He’s standing there, letting them play with his hair, and then says, “You’re going to make me go back up to New York every time I need a haircut now, aren’t you?”

He sees them both glance at each other, and for a second they seem to be actually contemplating it, but then Abby says, “Maybe you could just ask the guy who did it, who he recommends around here.”

Tim nods, that’s likely doable. “Or just ask Senior. It’s his guy.”

“Which you could probably do today,” Breena adds.

Tim nods. He notices that Molly’s actually pulling her shoes on and is already wearing her coat. “I take it you’re eager to go.”
She looks up at him, huge smile on her face.

“‘We’ve been hearing nothing but flowers all morning,’” Breena says.

“Then flowers we shall get!” Jimmy replies. “So, grab ‘em, and then meet up at the Omni?”

“That’s the plan,” Abby replies.

Tim kisses both of the ladies. “Then we’ll see you there in an hour or so!”

It’s not a long drive to the flower place, and once there Tim’s got Kelly in his arms, because everything around them looks so fragile.

Molly’s on her best behavior. “Just looking, no touching,” Jimmy says, keeping an eye on her as she wanders around, hands clasped behind her back so she won’t touch.

There’s a lady at the counter. Tim makes a beeline for her. “Hi. We’re here to pick up the flowers for the Borin-Gibbs wedding.”

“Are you Tim McGee or Jimmy Palmer?” she asks.

“I’m Tim.”

“Great. Let me see some ID, and I’ll help you load them up.”

Tim feels like having to show ID to get flowers is weird, but… Why not? He flips open his wallet and shows off his driver’s license.

“Thanks.”

“Is this normal?” he asks.

“One bride screaming about lost flowers was one too many. I’m never doing that again.”

Tim glances to Jimmy and both of them feel like there’s got to be a hell of a story behind that, but probably not one they need to know.

The flower lady shakes her head. “You’re right, you don’t want to know. Humans suck. Anyway… You parked nearby?”

“Right out front,” Jimmy says.

“Great. None of it’s heavy, but it’s all fragile, and there’s a lot of it.” She notices Molly, staring at the flowers in the display case. “Are you the flower girl?”

“Yes!” Molly says, very serious.

“Would you like to see all the flowers before we put them into the boxes to take them to the wedding?”

“YES!”

The Flower Lady nods to the back, and Jimmy and Molly follow her. It’s cold back there, which he supposes makes sense. And on two of the shelves, there’s a huge collection of clear plastic clamshell boxes in a bunch of different sizes.
Molly’s eyes are enormous as she sees what’s in them. Some are just petals. There boutonnieres. Small bouquets Abbi’s ladies. There’s a box filled with white and purple roses for the place settings. There’s another one filled with calla lilies to go around the cake. There’s a big one with Abbi’s bouquet, a cascade of lilies. Jimmy knows the white and purple ones are calla lilies, and he can identify a rose with the best of them, but he’s never seen the white calla lilies with purple centers before.

“Are the white and purple ones real?”

“Oh yes. They’re called Picasso Calla Lilies. Quite popular in wedding bouquets.”

“So pretty!” Molly says.

“Yes they are.” The Flower Lady reaches over and grabs one of the boxes of petals. “I think these are yours. You need to be very careful with them. Can’t spill them until it’s wedding time, but I bet your Daddy would be okay with you carrying them to the car.”

Jimmy nods. “No problems. Let’s get the rest of these loaded up.”

The Flower Lady grabs a large, flat box. And like she said, none of it was heavy, but definitely fragile.

When they’re back in the car, Tim says, “The last time I drove this carefully, I was bringing Sean and Abby home from the hospital.”

Jimmy chuckles at that, but he also agrees with it. They’ve got one job, and it’s going to be done right.
When they get to the hotel, Gibbs notices, in a somewhat absent sort of way, that Tobias has a suit bag over his shoulder, but only one of them.

When they get into the elevator, and Gibbs is growing a tad more aware of the things around him, and less in a I'M GETTING MARRIED haze, absent turns into present as a quick count confirms that there is indeed, only one suit bag between the two of them.

And that… uh… yeah… That’s half as many tuxes as they need to get this show on the road.

And… he think back. That bastard intentionally distracted him with the bag of toys so he wouldn’t notice him only taking one suit bag out of the closet.

Gibbs rubs his lips together staring at the bag, and says, “Don’t suppose that one’s mine and you’re planning on streaking as a wedding prank?”

Fornell snorts a fast laugh at that idea. “That’s an assault, not a prank. DiNozzo’s got yours.”

Gibbs stands there, feeling the elevator creaking its way up to the tenth floor. He’s fairly certain Tony shouldn’t have his tux. Fornell, on best man duty, went with him for the last measurement/pick the damn things up trip, and was there when they schlepped the tuxes to his car, and he took them out of his car, and moved them into his home, where, supposedly, they hung in a closet, waiting for this morning to be transported from Fornell’s home to the Omni.

“Why’s Tony got mine?”

Fornell shrugs. “He came over in the morning, said Ziva was on the flower run, and was going to the hotel after, and asked for it.”

Okay, Fornell is a good liar. He’s a very good liar. So the problem isn’t that he’s got any tells, or that he doesn’t sound convincing, it’s just a wildly out of character move for Tony, and there’s no possible way he’d have slept through Tony coming by, and he knows for a fact that Tim and Jimmy are on the flower run.

“He asked for just my tux?”

“Yes.” The door to the elevator opens.

“And you gave it to him?”

Fornell shrugs, as if handing over the tux right before the wedding is the most normal thing ever.

Gibbs’ eyes narrow. He wouldn’t put it past Tony to come up with some sort of prank. He also wouldn’t think he’d do anything that might actually hurt, and messing with his tux when they’ve got, he checks his watch, two hours to go, would hurt.

Fornell puts a hand on Gibbs’ shoulder, gently nudging him out of the elevator. “Relax. It’s nothing bad. He was hoping you’d be out of it enough to not notice.”

Those eyes get narrower, but now it’s at the idea of a mystery, not anger.

A mystery readily solved. He and Fornell aren’t the first ones to get to his room. He can hear voices, Ziva, Tony, Dave’s fussing a bit. Nothing out of the ordinary. He knocks instead of patting down too many pockets looking for his key card, and a minute later, Ziva’s opening the door, hugging both of
“Right on time,” Tony says. Then he really sees Gibbs’ face. “He noticed.”

“He noticed,” Fornell replies. “I told you, you should have just switched them out.”

“I couldn’t. We literally got it an hour ago.”

Gibbs is watching this exchange, his arm around Ziva, who’s grinning at this, while holding Dave, who is a bit miffed at not being the center of his Safta’s attention. Gibbs takes Dave, who stops fussing once Gibbs has him, and says, “Gonna fill me in?”

“Yes,” Ziva replies. “Come.”

Team Bride has a suite two floors down, on the other side of the hotel. Wedding prep is happening there. Baby central is set up in the spare room. The McPalmers have the adjoining suite on the one side, Ducky and Penny have the other, and tonight Tony and Ziva are taking over that room for themselves. Right now, all the doors are open, and it’s a big area for people on Team Bride to get ready. In fact, once this is done, Ziva’s heading down with Dave and joining that side of the party.

But it’s not where Gibbs and Abbi are going tonight. They’re landing here, in Team Groom’s suite. So, right now, they’re all standing around in a sitting area, but Ziva’s leading Gibbs to the bedroom, a huge smile on her face, and once he steps into the bedroom, he sees what she’s grinning at. It’s a large, flat, shiny black box, on the bed.

“Wedding present, from us,” Tony says.

“Your bride mentioned she really enjoyed you dressed up in a good suit,” Ziva adds as Gibbs sits down next to the box, handing Dave over to his father, who is also grinning at him.

The box isn’t wrapped, but it does have a white ribbon on it, and Huong and Son, on a gold sticker in the middle.

Gibbs slits the ribbon, and then opens the box. Resting in white tissue paper is a tux. A good tux. Not that the one he rented was bad or anything, but just looking at it, he can see the fabric’s buttery wool-silk blend is a few miles ahead of what he had. The tux he rented was black, just like the rest of his wedding party. This one is black, too, but the dye and the fabric quality make it a deeper, blacker black. There’s a white shirt, so white it almost hurts to look at, and unlike the rest of his wedding party, who all have royal purple vests and ties, his is steel gray with a silver paisley.

“I had to grab the one you rented so Mr. Huong could get your size, and Palmer’s been using his ‘rehab measurements’—” And Gibbs suddenly comes to the conclusion that just possibly Jimmy didn’t need to check quite that closely how he was ‘coming along’ on ‘rehabbing’ after last Fall. Though he is pleased to see Jimmy got what he was doing past him. “—to make sure we had the rest of your measurements, so this should be as close to perfect as you can get without actually measuring you,” Tony says as Gibbs just stares at the suit in front of him.

His hand inches out, almost afraid to touch the fabric, but when he does, his fingers find a supple, lush texture with enough body to feel like a suit, but soft enough it’s not business class armor.

His mouth drops open, and no words come out, but Tony and Ziva don’t need them. They can see he’s glowing at it, and a moment later, he turns around, hugging both of them close, as Fornell snaps a quick picture of it.

He turns back to the suit, and notices a small white box tucked into the corner. This one doesn’t have
a Huong and Son’s label on it. It says: Halston. It’s taped to a small card. Gibbs picks that up, and opens the card: *For my son’s other father. Congratulations on your wedding!* --Tony

Gibbs opens the box, and looking up at him are two cufflinks.

“Dad wanted to make sure you were set up,” Tony says.

They’re disks of some sort of gray metal. The centers are a brushed matte finish, and the rims are gleaming. He feels like he should know what this is, but… It’s not silver. He’s fairly sure it’s not white gold.

Ziva sees the way he’s looking at the links. “They’re steel, Dad. Senior thought if they were for you, they should be strong and durable, with” and she does her best Senior impression, “‘a certain understated flash.’”

Fornell chuckles at the impression. Gibbs smiles at it, and then lies the box back on the suit. He doesn’t know what to say to this, doesn’t know what he’s feeling other than ready.

Time’s moving too slow, and he’s got to get moving, got to put this on, got to go.

“Oh, I know that look,” Tony says. “Anyone who slows this down is about to get a head slap.”

Fornell laughs at that, too. “Yeah. I think you pegged that. It doesn’t matter if you’re ready right now, Jethro, it’s still two hours away.”

Ziva kisses Gibbs’s cheek. He’s not really paying attention to them, he’s seeing the near future, willing it to come faster. She takes Dave from Tony, and says, “Time for us to head down. We’ll see you in a few hours!”

One hour until they need to get downstairs. One hour and twenty-five minutes until it’s wedding time. Gibbs hears knocking at his door, and knows that this has to be the last of his side of the wedding party. Tony gets the door, and a moment later Tim and Jimmy are laying out boxes of flowers on the coffee table.

“Oh, I’ve got four Picasso calla lilies for the groomsmen. I’ve got one royal purple one for the Groom. I’ve got a white rose for Ducky. I’ve got a box of rose petals for whatever it is you guys want to do with them later,” Jimmy’s talking, and Tim puts that one in the little fridge to help keep them fresh.

“Flowers are delivered. Flower girl is downstairs, happily getting her hair done. Flower-girl-in-waiting has her own box of petals she’s tossing around. Second-runner-up-to-the-flower-girl-in-waiting was last seen being told to put the eyelash curler down, so I can report that our job is done, and everything is going just about the way you’d expect downstairs,” Tim adds.

“And your bride gave us this and told us to give it to you,” Jimmy says, giving Gibbs an envelope.

Gibbs opens it, and for a second he’s not sure what he’s looking at. A photograph, obviously. It’s supposed to mean something to him, but… And then it clicks and he feels the smile spread across his face. It’s the crime scene of the first case they worked together.
“From there to here, all the stops in between, and the steps not yet taken. Love you, Abbi.”

The hum of the airbrush dies down, and Breena says, “Okay, your skin is done.”

Abbi’s never had her makeup done with an airbrush before, but looking in the mirror, she’s thinking that Breena was right when she said, “Here, let me. I do more makeup in a week than you do all year, and when I do it, it stays put. Trust me, you’ll look like a million bucks when I’m done.”

Her skin is perfectly even, with just a light flush on her cheeks, and a very subtle sheen to her cheekbones.

“You’re glowing!” Abby adds. She gives Breena a hug. “Great job.”

Breena looks pleased with herself. “Yep! You want to do your eyes and lips, or shall I?”

Abbi keeps looking in the mirror. The Bride is taking shape before her, and she’s feeling… She’s not sure. Like she’s in unfamiliar territory. All of this last few days have been new terrain, and the sense of being even deeper into uncharted territory is palpable right now.

“What would you do if you did them?” Abbi asks.

“Pretty much what I did with your skin. Keep the style natural. Darken your lashes and brows. Add a little eyeliner, maybe a cat-eye if you like, that’d go with the way you’ve got your hair, nicely. Lips… up to you, we can go nude and glossy, or red and matte, or anything in between. I’ve got the whole Lip Tar line here, so I can mix you any color and texture you could imagine. Heck, if you want silver and purple, I can do that.”

“You’ve got the ‘40s glam hair going,” Abby says. “Breena could give you the whole look. Cat eye, classic red lip, do your best Lauren Bacall.”

Abbi thinks about it, as Breena gets up from her seat at the dressing table, and goes to take a good, long look at the wedding dress. It’s off the shoulders, with a fitted bodice, and a skirt made of hundreds of layers of light floaty fabric. No lace, no beads, no sparkles. Nothing to break the simple elegance of the cut. A line of pearls down the back, and a satin bow around the waist make for ‘ornaments.’ It’s graceful and elegant, in a light, cloud of fabric sort of way.

“You’re wearing the cloak instead of a veil?”

Abbi nods. When they got the cloak, thick white wool with a white fur trim, she didn’t know that the wedding, and the reception, and the getting ready, would all be in the same place. She’s not going outside again until tomorrow. It’s warm enough here that she doesn’t really need a cloak, but it does have a fur-trimmed hood, and it is somewhat veil shaped, and the look of it, the white dress, layer on top of layer of fine silk gauze, swathed in the cloak, is practically magic-snow-princess territory.

Breena’s seeing it in her mind. Then she turns back to Abbi. “Soft pink lip, pretty much your natural color, just a little gloss, maybe with a tiny bit of silver sheen. Mostly nude eye, just a little liner on the top lash line, and a subtle highlight on the brow bone. If you want to amp it up after the ceremony, I’ll keep the eyeliner handy. But right now, when you walk down that aisle, all wrapped in fluffy white, you’re going to look soft and flushed. Like you’ve been playing in the snow.”

Abbi can see the idea of it, and nods.
Breena sits in front of her and gets to it.

*For My Wedding*

Gibbs flips the collar of his shirt, and slips the tie around his neck.

It’s a bizarre sensation, both very familiar and somewhat new. He does this regularly, before Sunday church with the Slaters, when he goes out with Abbi on a ‘date night,’ so it shouldn’t be different, but it is.

He’s very aware of it. He’s feeling silk sliding against jacquard, the slight friction of one fabric against the other as his hands go through the motions of adjusting and tying his tie. He’s never been this aware of tying a tie. Or as he reaches for his jacket, the drape of it against his body.

He’s very present right now. Sniper level present. Time slows, stretching between right now and twenty minutes from now, when they’ll head downstairs to the ballroom, seat their guests, and then… a breath eases out of him, slow, steady, get married.

He doesn’t remember this happening the first time he got married. Doesn’t remember much of getting ready for the ceremony. Obviously, it happened. In that his bachelor party had been the night before, and it had involved a half-dozen twenty-year-old Marines, it’s possible part of him not having any clear memories of getting ready may have had something to do with the boatload of alcohol they’d downed the night before.

Enough to get toasted. Enough he was feeling awfully green in the morning. No so much he was still sick when his Dad stood in front of him, brushed an imaginary speck of lint off of his uniform, straightened an already level straight collar, and smiled at him.

That memory’s suddenly very clear. Jackson standing there, smiling, nodding. He took his watch off, the one his father gave him when he married Jethro’s mother, and then he took Jethro’s wrist and put it on him. He pulled Jethro into a hug, and his best man, Bill Marsh, got a picture of the two of them, or tried to, he ended up cutting their heads out of the shot. For everything Marsh could do, take a picture that didn’t have his thumb or less than half of the people in it, wasn’t on the list.

Gibbs is already wearing the watch. Usually, it’s invisible on his skin, noticed only in its absence. But right now, he feels it intently, and the weight of his father’s spirit. He can feel that smile again, and it doesn’t much matter to him if it’s really here, or not.

Fornell is in front of him, pinning his lily to his suit. Once it’s on, Fornell says to him, “This feels familiar.”

Gibbs cracks a smile at that. “Yeah, well…” Tobias had done that right before they headed down for his wedding to Diane. Franks was sprawled out on the sofa, sleeping off as much of the drunk as he could. Ducky was checking with the minister, making sure things were ready to go. Pride was… Gibbs doesn’t remember. He was at the bachelor party, and he was at the wedding party, so he must have been at the bits in between, but Gibbs doesn’t remember what he was doing.

Unlike marrying Shannon, he was drunk for that one. He thinks he made sure he had a drink at hand the whole way through. Not wasted or sloppy, or anything along those lines. Not so far gone that he did anything stupid or embarrassing (other than, of course, marrying Diane), just well enough toasted to shut down the part of his brain that knew he was doing something he shouldn’t.
He’s stone cold sober now. Fourth cup of coffee of the day, so he’s buzzing, but not a drop of alcohol. (That damn roaster. He’d been cutting back some, but suddenly he’s got all of these really tasty options and… Every other day he or Fornell comes up with another idea, and they’ve got to test all of them, and… Yeah, it hasn’t been good for keeping his coffee consumption in check.) Right now, everything is very clear, very slow, and very real.

Ducky’s reading over the speech he wrote up for the ceremony one last time, making sure he’s got it down cold.

Fornell and Tony are talking about Draga. Apparently, there’s been yet another development in the never-ending-custody-battle-of-doom. Kevin’s mother is getting married. Apparently, Kevin’s new step-dad to be doesn’t much want a kid with another dad around, and is trying to get the arrangement re-done so Kevin’s with Draga fulltime and just visits his mom. Draga’s good with this, but he’s scrambling around, looking for a new place. On the upside, the real estate market crashed, so he’s got options in his price range galore. On the downside, the schools are also upside down, so he’s not sure where he wants to be. But, compared to this time last year, when he was fighting just to get to see Kevin regularly, he’s on cloud nine.

Tim’s getting the sporran on his kilt properly. (This time it’s a nice, discreet, black leather pouch. No Mallard-heritage taxidermy hell.)

Jimmy’s tying his tie.

It’s almost time, and they’re almost ready.

The Bride is definitely staring back at Abbi as she looks in the mirror, now.

Breena got it right. Her makeup is soft, natural, and she does look a bit like she’s been out in the snow playing. (Or maybe going for a gentle stroll. After all, she’s not sweaty or disheveled, which is how she looks after actually playing in the snow.)

She goes to check her wrist, but she’s not wearing her watch. Somehow an MTM Special Forces Hypertech doesn’t exactly go with The Bride.

Ziva sees her doing it, and says, “Half an hour. Time to get dressed.”

“You want help?” Miranda asks.

Abbi waves that off. She’s been dressing herself for decades, getting into a pair of stockings and a dress (even a very fluffy one) isn’t that hard.

And so, she gets the room to herself. For a moment, she just walks around. Her dress and the cloak are hanging off the door to the bathroom. Her stockings, garter belt, panties, and bustier are all on the bed. Her shoes are in a box, sitting at the foot of the bed.

Silk and satin all around.

That sense of being deep in uncharted territory increases. She reaches for the first of the stockings, raunching it up on her hand, and then slipping it over her toe. Then she sighs. Garterbelt, that goes on first. She slips it over her hips, fastens it, and then finishes with the stocking.
A million hard things have defined Abbi’s life. And there’s not a single hard thing, literally hard, diamond hard, that she’s unwilling to tackle. Boots, leather, body armor, tanks, guns, sharp edges, stiff textures, rigid identities, bring ‘em on, she’s ready.

Swath yourself in hardness. Wrap steel, plastic, leather, and Kevlar around your body. Protect the soft and weak bits underneath from harm.

She remembers a moment with Gibbs, more than a year ago now, when they were making love, and it felt like her world was shifting. Like plates of armor were melting, rearranging themselves. She slips the second stocking on, feeling silk smooth nylon on her skin.

Nothing in this room is hard. There’s just her, skin and bones, heart and mind, wrapped in silk and satin, offering herself, naked, metaphorically, if not literally, to a man for the rest of her life.

And that’s the new territory. It’s not that the armor has shifted to let someone else in, it’s that right now, she’s taken it off. Right now, there’s just her, and all of the protections she carries in her mind and on her skin are gone.

It takes a few moments to finish dressing, and another moment to arrange the dress, making sure the layers all fall correctly, but once done, she takes the time to look at herself in the mirror. Her back is straight, shoulders back, posture tall and strong. Military.

But this is a wedding. It’s a place for lovers, not warriors. She shifts, just a little, not so much a changing of her physical body, she’s still tall and strong, but there’s another layer there, elegance, grace. Silk to go with the steel. Then she picks up her bouquet, a mix of Picasso Calla Lilies, white lilies, purple lilies, royal purple roses, crystal accents, and silver ribbons.

Today, she’s not The Director, nor The General. She’s The Bride, or… though she doesn’t think it, not until she hears Molly gasp it, a few seconds later when she steps out, The Queen.

“We ready?” Jimmy says a second before both his and Tim’s phones buzz. Everyone looks dressed, and just sitting around up here is boring.

They both check their phones and find a picture from Breena. There are three little girls, all in purple dresses. Molly and Kelly, who both have long enough hair, have a spray of tiny white flowers threaded through their hair. Anna’s flowers are just in a circle sat on top of her head. All three of them are each holding her own Picasso lily, and Molly’s got her little basket of petals for flower-girling.

They’re all staring at Abbi, eyes wide with adoration.

Abbi’s kneeling between them, dress and cloak flowing around her like a white cloud, holding her bouquet of lilies and roses.

And Tim and Jimmy more or less coo. In a restrained, manly sort of way.

Tony’s hovering close, about to look, but not sure if he should. Jimmy nods. “You, Fornell, and Ducky can see it. Sorry, Gibbs, it’ll spoil the surprise.”

“Yeah. We’ll show you in an hour.”
Gibbs knows, in general, what they’ve got to be looking at, but he restrains himself from peaking.

Though he wants to.

The knock on the door surprises the members of team Groom. Everyone who is supposed to be up here is up here. Tony’s flashing all of them a we’re not missing anyone, right? look as he answers it.

Diane’s at the door. She’s dressed in a pretty red dress, and looks ready to enjoy the party.

“Jethro, Tobias,” she smiles at the rest of them, but it’s clear she’s there to see the two of them. “Can I get…?” Diane says as she heads into the Groom’s nook. The rest of the party looks at her, and begins to file out.

Tobias looks like he’s about to, also, but she grabs his wrist, stopping him, holding his gaze with hers.

After a moment, it’s just the three of them.

She looks at Gibbs and Fornell, and shakes her head at both of them. “A lot of years.”

Gibbs nods, and Fornell says, “Yeah.”

Diane steps closer, wrapping an arm around each of them, and kissing each one on the cheek.

There’s a moment of tension, but Gibbs feels his arm stretch out, wrapping around her back, and his fingers brush Fornell’s hand, already on Diane’s back. They pull Diane in closer, and hold her for a moment.

Gibbs kisses her cheek, and gives Fornell a little squeeze.

Fornell chuckles, and rolls his eyes a little, but he keeps the hug going.

Diane snuggles in between them, and for another moment, the embrace holds, and then she steps back, breaking the hug, carefully wiping her eyes.

Diane nods, “Okay.” She smiles at both of them. “Here. You’ll need it. And none of your boys will remember it.” She hands Gibbs a handkerchief. “It’ll be good to see some happy tears from you.”

Then she turns and leaves, going down to join her date, Emily, and Drew with the rest of the guests.

Once she’s gone, Fornell says, “You know, when she does it for real, finds a man she actually loves, we’re both gonna give her away.”

Gibbs chuckles a bit at that, and smiles, looking forward to it.

With Gibbs and Tobias doing some time with Diane, the rest of Team Groom decides to head down and check out the location.

Jimmy’s telling them the story of trying to get Alan a seat for this damn thing, muttering about how the chair bunting better be made from unicorn hair and angel feathers, given how big a pain in the ass it was getting another of them.
Once they enter the ceremony space, Jimmy stops complaining. He nods, slowly. “Okay… Yeah, that was worth it.”

It’s a simple design. Three concentric circles of chairs. On one side, the circle is broken by an aisle. On the other, there’s a spot for the photographer. In the center, there’s just a space. No altar, no candles, no… stuff. Nothing to clutter up this moment, or distract away from what it is. Just a place for two people to join each other in love, and for the man who will offer a few words to keep the ceremony moving.

Those chairs, each one is draped in a soft, matte satin silver fabric, with a royal purple bow tied around the back. They do look nice, and yes, if a folding chair had just been shoved into place, it’d look beyond tacky.

Looking around, Jimmy’s nodding. Tony looks like he approves. And Tim says, “We ever redo our vows, something like this?”

Jimmy nods at that, too. One of these days, when the kids are old enough to understand and be part of it, and maybe, who knows… maybe it’ll be legal, but even if it isn’t… One of these days, standing up with their whole family to renew their vows… Be surrounded by their loves as they say the words. Yeah, he likes that idea.

People have been coming in and out of Team Bride’s rooms pretty much since five minutes after they got here, so one more knock on the door… No biggie.

Half of the crew doesn’t know the Asian man standing at the door in the nice blue suit, but Ziva’s met him before.

“Omagi!” She greets him.

He smiles at her. “Hey, DiNozzo. I wanted to stop in before everything started. Can’t let my old partner go get married without a hug, first.”

Abbi hears the voices, and steps out from the bedroom, where she’s been waiting, with somewhat less than perfect patience for one of the guys to send the text telling them it’s time to get moving.

“Tell me you’re not here on work!”

He looks concerned for a second, like he’s about to give her bad news, and then breaks into a huge grin. “Nah! Come here.”

She does, and he looks her up and down, and then nods. “It suits you.”

“Thanks.”

He holds his arms wide, and she steps in, enjoying the embrace. “You ready?”

She nods at that. “Yeah, I am.”

He steps back, looking at her, another smile on his face. “Yeah, you are. Okay, Lucy’s downstairs getting us seats. See you on the other side, Boss.”

She fires off a quick, two fingered salute to him, and he grins at her, before heading downstairs.
There’s not a whole lot of ushering for this shindig. Tim’s feeling a bit like he and the rest of the crew are there mostly as a welcome wagon. None of them are guiding people to seats, though they are saying hello, taking congratulations, offering hugs, and posing for a lot of selfies/photos.

He sends the shot of Gibbs, Tony, Fornell, Leon, Pride, and Callen up to Abby with *Legends of NCIS* as the tagline.

Delphine and Senior stop by to say hello to them, before asking where team bride was. They want to head up and say hello to everyone, too. (Though, a moment before heading up, when Senior notices Sam and Alan coming in, holding hands, he looks over to Jimmy and says, “Was this what you meant by complicated?” It takes Jimmy a moment to remember that, and then say, “Half of it.”)

Tim and Jimmy get a moment to gossip briefly about Sam’s Alan. They only get a few words with him, but his accent says BOSTON in all capitals, though his dark skin, deep brown eyes, and wavy black hair makes Tim think of Hawaii. The two of them holding hands makes Jimmy smile, along with the rather proud tone of voice when Sam introduces him, “Jimmy, this is Alan. Alan, this is Jimmy, here, and Dr. Palmer, at work.” Jimmy offers him a smile, and says, “I hope to see more of you.” Alan seems pleased by that, and more pleased by Sam.

Tim gets a shot of Brian and Elaine all dressed up for the party. They look like they’re planning on having a great time.

Breena’s parents are a few minutes behind, and they wrap Gibbs in a huge, congratulatory hug, before also asking where the girls are. Jimmy tells them, and pulls them aside to show off the picture of the girls. Even Ed coos at it.

For all the guests, and all the greeting, they aren’t doing much seating.

Gibbs and Abbi decided not to bother with sides. They’ve got fewer than fifty people coming to this, and so many of them overlap between the two of them, that the idea of sorting people into sides didn’t seem like much of a plan. This is one family, coming together to celebrate, and the seating makes that clear.

The clock ticks down, and Tim hears a high-pitched voice calling out “Daddy!”

A few seconds later he scoops up Kelly, who is holding her very own flower. A few steps behind is Abby. Both of them are in long purple dresses. Abby’s is a halter top with an empire waist, flowing down to her toes. Kelly’s is shorter, only coming to her shins, and the top is regency style, but the color matches. She’s got a wreath of baby’s breath and little silver sparkles in her hair. Her mother has her hair in a Hollywood ‘40s glam style. Black and purple flow down her shoulders in sensuous waves. Her makeup matches, blood red lips, dark, dark lashes. She’s every goth-pinup fantasy he’s ever had.

Tim hugs both of them, kissing Abby. His eyes find Breena, who’s in the same dress Abby is, though her hair is up in a French twist, and her makeup is softer, pinks and a smoky eye. She and Anna are getting hugs and kisses from Jimmy. He says it to Abby, but makes sure Breena knows he’s talking to all of them, as he says, “I’m the luckiest damn man alive. God! Look at you! Gorgeous!”

Abby grins at him, and spins around, showing off the whole look. “Almost ready to go?”

“Almost,” Tim says.
Abby sees Gibbs standing by the door, saying hello to a few of Abbi’s Marines.

“Almost.” He watches Abby head over to Gibbs, and give him a huge hug. There are tears in her eyes as she says, “I’m so happy for you!”

Gibbs eyes are awfully bright as he nods back at her, and bends his head to snuggle in for a long, all-encompassing Abby hug.

Breena peeks in at the guests and, does a quick head count, all 45 of them are accounted for. She sends a quick text to Abbi, letting her know it’s go time. Then she opens the doors. “Okay, Gibbs, time to go.”

He nods at Breena, and then he and Ducky take the first steps into his wedding.

They take their place in the center, and wait.

Fornell and Wendy, walking together, holding hands, follow them. Tony and Ziva follow them. Tim gets to escort Abby to her seat, and they sit next to each other, with Kelly, who did not want to miss this, on Abby’s lap. They’re followed by Jimmy and Breena and Anna. Miranda and Drew follow.

Only three seats left in the inner circle.

There’s another moment of waiting, of staring at the currently closed door.

______________________________

*Pachabel's Cannon in D Major*

The music starts, the doors open, and Molly, in her little purple dress, with her ringlet curls threaded through the white flower crown in her hair, starts off, looking very determined, carefully dropping white and violet rose petals on the rug.

Breena’s kneeling at the edge of the aisle running, thumbs up to Molly, smiling at her, and when Molly sees her Mommy, she grins big, and begins to move faster, dropping flower petals with abandon.

When she gets to the end of the aisle, she gets a kiss from her Pop, and a kiss from her Ducky, and then she goes to sit with her Mommy and Daddy, too.

Two seats left.

Everyone stands up. Jeff and Becky open the doors, and Abbi steps into the room, her parents at her sides.

Gibbs feels his world narrow and breath hitch. He feels space collapse and expand. There’s no space between them now, and much too long before she’s before him, holding his hands.

It’s a slow song, but a short walk, and then Abbi’s there, before him, not yet holding his hands. Right now, she’s holding her bouquet, and her parents are still standing next to her, each with an arm around her.

Ducky says to her parents, “Who brings this woman to the place of matrimony?”

“We do,” Jeff and Becky manage in more or less unison.
“And do you offer your blessing and support to this union, vowing to do what you can to help your
daughter, and now son, to live a life full of love and happiness with each other?”

“We do.”

“Thank you.”

Both of Abbi’s parents hug and kiss her, and then they step back, taking the last two open chairs in
the inner circle. Abbi turns, handing her flowers to her sister, and then faces Gibbs, offering him her
hands.

He takes them, grinning at her, feeling her hands shake, and his, too. He’s unable to produce
anything even nearly approaching a serious face. She grins back at him, and he leans forward for a
quick kiss.

That gets a little chuckle, and then Ducky begins. “Dearly beloved…” Ducky pauses there, and
smiles. “That’s generally how these things start, isn’t it? But that’s often boilerplate, a collection of
syllables designed to indicate something traditional is starting. It could, usually, just as well be the
sound of a gong going off for all those sounds mean.

“And yet, I look at this collection of people here today, and think of the history, the lives, the
experiences, both good and bad, that have bound this group together, and I think those words are
more fitting than is often the case.

“So, let us begin again, aware that this is a group that is dear, and beloved, and hold those feelings in
our hearts as we begin this.” He smiles at Penny, eyes especially bright, and then the rest of the
crowd, before continuing. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to mark the joining of
Abigail Borin and Leroy Jethro Gibbs in marriage.

“Traditionally, the vows are to love, honor, and cherish, all three of them in their verb form. We
understand, readily, that a marriage is a commitment to the act of loving, honoring, and cherishing
one another.

“But as I think about it, marriage is an honor in its noun form, too. You start this journey together
with your beloved honoring you with their life, their home, their trust, adoration, and protection. The
ring we bind these vows with, it’s a medal in its own right.” Ducky holds up his own left hand,
showing off the ring Penny placed on him. He gently strokes it, saying, “This tiny circle is the mark
of winning the highest honor another person can give you. The chance to become one: one life, one
love, one home.

“And the job of being married is living up to that honor. The job is to be worthy of the ring placed
upon your finger, and the job of us, here, watching this exchange of vows, is to help support these
people we love in that endeavor.

“So, before Jethro and Abigail exchange their vows, I would ask all of us here to take a moment to
pledge to yourselves that you will help foster this relationship. That you will nurture this love, and
encourage the kind of behavior that lives up to the honor that Abbi and Gibbs are offering each
other.”

Ducky pauses for a moment, and Tim wonders if Gibbs asked him for that. Or if Ducky, having seen
that that’s the unspoken gift they’ve offered each other, since Jimmy and Breena got married,
decided it was time to say it out-loud.

Either way, he approves. He pledges himself to it, kissing Abby, able to brush Breena’s hand with
the one he’s got wrapped around Abby’s waist, and then he nuzzles Kelly, and uses that to get a quick look in at Jimmy, too, catching his eye for a second. He will live up to the honor they’ve given him. He sees that Jimmy’s rubbing his wedding rings with his thumb, and Tim squeezes his hand, feeling the ring Abby placed on him. He can’t touch the tattoos, but he can twist his wrist a bit, feeling the leather band the three of them bought for him. Feel the marks they’ve placed on him, the honor offered, and his own cherishing of those honors.

To my last breath.

“Thank you,” Ducky says, after a moment of silence. “Neither Gibbs nor Abbi wanted anything long and drawn out, and though I may have a reputation for liking to hear myself talk, some things are sweeter in brevity, so, as they say, ‘let’s get this show on the road.’ Jethro?”

All attention’s on him, and it’s time to speak, but for a heartbeat, Gibbs’ mouth feels dry. Like he can’t possibly put this into words. There aren’t words, never have been, just actions, and one breath to the next, and life poured over all those things. Or maybe all of those things come together to make life, or at least make it worth living.

But for right now, there have to be words. There’s a magic to this, and he needs to cast the spell, and the spell needs words.

He clears his throat, feeling choked up, and then begins, voice thick with emotion.

“All the times, and done this too many. And maybe I did need someone to whack me upside the back of the head with a golf club,”—Diane sniggers a bit at that—“but eventually, I got it. I hope.” He’s looking deep into her eyes, pausing, and then brushes her cheek with his fingertips, “Abbi, I love you.” And that gets another kiss. When he pulls back, he smiles at her again.

“It’s a pretty feeling. Lights me up inside, makes me feel happy, and right, and whole. But it’s got to be more than pretty feelings. I’ve done the pretty feelings, too many times, too. Pretty feelings come and pretty feelings go, and I can’t be the man who floats around on them when things are easy, and runs away when they get hard.

“It’s got to come from change and lead to change.

“So, that’s it. The promise. I will be the better man. I will be worthy of your love, and your home, and your life.

“I will be your partner. I will have eyes on your six. I will defend you, your heart, and your home.

“I will cherish you, and support you, and build a life with you that we both adore.

“Easy times, hard times, start of the day until the end. I will be here, with you, to ride whatever’s left of this road.

“I love you.” His voice shakes on that, and he kisses her again, feeling so sure of himself and everything he’s just said. Then he feels Fornell tap his wrist. A second later, he’s holding the ring he made for her, wood and a tiny clasp. His love of her, wrought by his own hand, for her to wear forever. He takes her hand, slips off her engagement ring, setting the wood band around it, and replaces it, now whole, on her hand.
Abbi’s grinning at him, crying a little, and he is, too, but it feels too good to keep in, too real to hide behind a stoic face.

Abbi reaches up, cupping the back of his head, and offering him another kiss before she begins her vows.

“They say love is patient, and kind, that it is not jealous. That it keeps no record of wrongs, nor is it self-seeking. So, I know the path to stay on, and the easy pitfalls to avoid.

“But I know I’m going to make mistakes. I know there will be times when easy wins over right. But, I promise though, I will learn from them, move forward, and return to a life with you. Always return to you. We hit rough spots, or the world outside goes crazy, and I will always, no matter what, return to you.”

He can see her, dirty, tattered clothing, rifle in her arms, riding literal shotgun after the Fall of DC, coming home, to him, and he’s fairly sure, she’s seeing it, too.

“No matter what, at the end of the day, end of the mission, I will always return to you.”

She steps a little closer, laying her hand on his chest, only a few inches away from where the bullet he took for her stopped. “I will respect you, knowing that you are strong enough to carry me and my hurts and fears, and I will protect you, offer you my strength to carry you and yours.

“I will honor you.

“I will cherish you.

“And I will love you, for all the days of my life.”

Gibbs is tearing up, feeling his eyes burn and the smile on his lips, his voice is low, shaking a bit, but he doesn’t care, right now the words are flowing, soft, easy, and he means them so much. “I love you.” Maybe it didn’t exactly go there in their carefully planned out vows, but he’s feeling it, and Abbi’s smiling at him like all the joy in the world lives in his skin, and really, that wraps it all up.

Beginning, middle, and end, that’s why they’re here. Love is a noun and a verb, and with that as his core, he can be the better man. Be the man worthy of her.

She slips the ring onto his hand, and there, carrying the soft weight of wood and mother of pearl on his finger, Gibbs is whole again.

He can feel it, in a way he didn’t know he was missing.

What had he told Mike? The only thing he ever wanted to be was a good Marine, a good husband, and a good father.

He swallows hard. He can see his kids watching him, and the woman in front of him, and he’s crying and laughing and kissing Abbi. She kisses back, snags the handkerchief from his pocket, and wipes his eyes, wipes hers too, and after a quick nod, they go back to looking at Ducky, who, grinning from ear to ear, says, “I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

And with that, they kiss again.
After the ceremony, the guests are ushered into the Omni’s small ballroom.

It’s ready for a party.

Leon’s smiling as he’s looking around. “New Year’s and a wedding.”

Lara smiles back at him, approving of the job Gibbs and Ziva did in setting this up. Six tables, all set with dark purple and silver linens, each one with a mirror in the center, and a collection of candles in violet and silver glasses flickering away. The mirror reflects the candle glow, doubling the effect of what appears to be hundreds of pillar and votives. The rest of the lighting is soft, washes of white and violet painting the walls in their colors. Top and bottom of the walls, and draping around the windows, there thousands of flickering Christmas lights.

There are no flower centerpieces, which Leon approves of. He likes to be able to see and talk to whomever he’s sitting with. But at each place setting, on top of the main plate, there’s a tiny bowl with a white or purple rose floating in it.

There’s a dance floor, and behind it is a DJ. He’s got what Leon thinks of as ‘mingle’ music going. The volume is low, it’s fast enough to not encourage dancing, and bland enough that should anyone have a great Aunt Mildred or the like lurking about, her delicate sensibilities would not be ruffled.

Over the course of a long career as a public servant, Leon’s heard about a million hours of mingle music, and he’s hoping it won’t last all that long through this wedding.

Lara tugs him toward the cake, which has its own table, near the bar. It’s a traditional three-tiered cake, but the shape is square, and as best as he can describe it, it’s got a base of dark purple frosting (“Fondant,” Lara calls it.) with lacy-looking silver accents. Then from one of the corners of each tier, there’s a drape of more fondant, designed to look like a swath of silver fabric, swooping from the corner to the base, leaving half the cake draped, and half bare purple. On top, instead of the traditional bride and groom, there are two, entwined silver hearts.

It’s pretty. Very cake-like. Lara’s impressed, but he’s just not a cake guy.

The appetizers that are being carried through… Just like Leon’s heard a million hours of mingle music, he’s eaten a truck load of generic appetizers designed to feed the maximum number of people for the minimum number of dollars.

These are, only in their size and the fact they’re being carried around on trays and offered to guests, not akin to those appetizers. Lara’s got bacon wrapped scallop. He’s nibbling a minty-curried lamb chop and enjoying it very much as the bar gets his attention.

It’s probably a very good thing that no one’s driving anywhere tonight. In addition to it being New Year’s, so all the maniacs will be out, and likely drunk, the fact that Gibbs and Abbi set this up to match their own tastes means that the bar here is stocked.

His lady by his side, arm wrapped around her waist, Leon contemplates a tasting menu of twelve kinds of bourbon.

And coffee.

He’s not sure how they got this set up, but… It’s a coffee and bourbon bar. Any sort of caffeine you could want is waiting to be whipped up for you. From a standard black as sin in a mug, to the fluffy, spicy, crème de menthe spiked thing with shaved chocolate on top that Lara’s sipping, you name the coffee, and they’re making it.
Pride sidles up next to him, munching on what Leon thinks is some sort of kabob, also eyeing the bourbons.

“You feel like Mike Franks is about to walk through those doors and order at least a shot of everything?” Leon asks.

Pride, getting his glass, takes a sip, and says, “You ever hear of the angel’s share?”

Leon raises an eyebrow, and Lara says, “Tell us more.

Callen sidles up. He knows what he wants and orders it, succinctly. “The angel’s share? You mean the alcohol that evaporates off?”

“Exactly.” Pride says. “When they make it in wooden barrels, some absorbs into the wood, some evaporates. Supposedly that’s the angel’s share. And somehow, when I think of the angel that gets that share, I’ve got a Mike Franks sort of image in my mind.”

Leon chuckles at that. Mike Franks with wings and a halo tickles him to no end, if for no other reason than he can hear Mike saying, “Good Lord! Get me out of this ridiculous get-up!” He chuckles at that, and begins to tell Lara some of the less risqué (okay, flat out illegal) Mike Franks stories, with Pride happily adding his own adventures with Franks, as well.

Pictures. A million pictures.

They bring the kids down for that. And, for the most part little guys are okay with having their photos taken with their various aunts, uncles, parents, and grandparents.

And it’s awfully nice to get a shot of all of them together, all dressed up.

But the one that Gibbs loves the best is Abbi on her own. She’s in her dress and cloak, wrapped up in flowing white, looking beyond the camera to him, a warm smile on her face.

He knows when the photographer gets the shot that’s going to go in his wallet. The one he’ll carry with him until the end of his days.

A bit later, when all the girls are getting a group shot, Tim steps near to Gibbs, claps a hand on his shoulder and says, “You nailed ‘em.”

Gibbs smiles, pleased. He nods long and slow.

Tony sees what they’re up to and he gives Gibbs a little pat on the back of the head and says, “Attaboy!”

The photographer thinks he’s just getting a shot of part of the wedding party, and Tim’s fine with that. He probably assumes that two of them are siblings, or something like that. He doesn’t need to know why he’s getting a shot of Jimmy, Breena, Tim, and Abby, all together. They know, and that’s more than enough. He’s the tallest, so he’s furthest back, one arm around Jimmy (looks friendly, hand on his shoulder) Abby’s in front, and just to the right of him, so he’s got an arm around her
waist, too. Breena’s in front, between Jimmy and Abby. Jimmy’s got his arms around her, which means he’s also got his hand pressed to Abby’s hip.

They’re smiling for the camera, and Tim says, under his breath, lips barely moving, “’Til my last breath.”

His loves smile just that little extra bit brighter in that shot.

The grab the kiddos for the next shot. The adults sit on the floor. Tim and Jimmy are kneeling in the back. Abby and Breena sitting on the floor in front of them. Molly and Kelly, the big girls, get to stand next to their mamas’, each one with one of their daddy’s hands around their waist. Anna’s sitting between Abby and Breena. Sean’s in Abby’s lap, and Breena’s holding Donnie.

And it only takes what feels like 65,000 shots to get one where all of them are looking in the general direction of the camera.

But they do get that one shot, and Tim loves it.

When every possible combination of all of them have been shot in every possible pose, it’s finally time to get on with the party.

Gibbs is waiting outside the door to the ballroom with Abbi, for their grand entrance. It’s the first time the two of them have been alone all day.

He’s feeling giddy with everything, and a huge grin on his face he says, “Hi.”

She starts to laugh in response. It’s just so damn silly. “Hi.”

Breena and Jimmy open the doors, and the DJ says, “For the first time in public MR. and MRS. BORIN-GIBBS!”

Abbi’s startled by that for a moment, Gibbs grins at her, kisses her, and then takes her hand, pulling her into the ballroom, where their friends and family are cheering.

“The Way You Look Tonight” begins, and with it their first dance. They’re swaying along, and Abbi quietly asks him “Borin-Gibbs, you didn’t…”

He shakes his head. He didn’t change his name, too, but he also didn’t want this to be a mirror of his wedding to Diane or Shannon. And, he could get into the deeper stuff, or the changes he needs in his own head, but… He doesn’t need to. “It mattered.”

She nods at him, getting it. “Okay.”

He’s looking down at her, watching her so intently, trying to burn every second of this into his memory. “You’re beautiful.”

She smiles up at him, fingers caressing his suit. “Cleaned up good, yourself, too.”

He pulls her close, her cheek to his, and for a moment, they sway together, feeling the music, the motion of the dance, and their bodies close. Gibbs’ fingers entwine with hers, and he gives her left hand a little squeeze, feeling her wedding band there.
He kisses her again, and she kisses back. “Husband.”

He shivers a little, feeling that word, back, where it belongs, with him. “Wife.”

She nods at him, eyes warm, flirty. “This day ‘til our last.”

He kisses her again, and again, and the song rolls on.

*You Got It*

The second song opens the dancefloor to everyone else, and if Gibbs had remembered this song existed, he likely would have suggested it for their wedding song, but… he didn’t, so he didn’t.

That said, “You Got It” from Roy Orbison is a great wedding song.

As soon as Roy Orbison began warbling away with, “Anything you want, you got it, Anything you need, you got it, Anything at all, baaaabyyy!” Gibbs does remember this song, and he’s liking it.

He’s full face grinning at Abbi as they dance, light on his feet, bubbling with joy, and she’s got her head back, laughing as he dips her low.

He’s singing along, when he pulls her back up, dancing cheek to cheek, and she’s holding him tight.

“I live my life to be with you

“No one can do the things you do

“Anything you want, you got it

“Anything you need, you got it

Tim’s happily dancing with Abby, Kelly in their arms between them. He can see Penny and Ducky a few feet away, swaying to the song. Jimmy’s dancing with Molly, and Breena’s bopping with Anna in her arms right next to him. Gibbs and Abbi are in the middle of the dancefloor. The Fornells are cutting the proverbial rug. Tony and Ziva have the moment to themselves and are enjoying it, Dave is dancing with his Poppa and Gran. Apparently, and this surprises Tim, but Ed can really dance. He’s leading Jeannie around with panache. Tim figures he must have seen that back at Jimmy and Breena’s wedding, but he doesn’t remember it. Elaine and Brian are boogieing down. Bleach and his wife have rolled on over and are happily scooting along to Roy. Abbi’s parents have a corner of the dancefloor and are happily using it, next to Miranda and Drew. Sarah and Glenn are showing off their moves. Sam and Alan are looking a little unsure, but it’s possible this is their first dance ever, but unsure or not, they appear to be having a good time. Emily and Drew are not looking unsure, at all. Both of them are grinning like grins were invented specifically for them, and for this moment of their lives. Diane and her... Tim knows he should know the name of her date, he’s on this side of the country because of Tim, but all he’s got in his head is Western Accountant, look like they’re having a good time. Leon and Lara are dancing close and sure. Omagi and his wife are giggling as they try to dance, off-footed, but enjoying it. And it looks like Pride has talked one of Abbi’s Marines onto
the dancefloor.

It’s almost perfect. He and Abby get a bit closer to Jimmy and Breena. They aren’t exactly dancing with each other, but they can hold eye contact, and synchronize a bit.

As they get to the last verse, Kelly wants to get down. They let her down, and she takes Molly’s hand, and from there… Well, if the girls are dancing together with Jimmy… Tim takes Abby’s hand, and she takes Jimmy’s, Breena joins them, and for a moment at least, they get to dance, together, hands joined and the three girls giggling and wiggling between them.

“Anything you want/you got it

“Anything you need/you got it

“Anything at all/you got it

“Babyyyyyyyy…”

Dinner is, of course, steak. There are some greens, and some rather tasty baked potatoes, but mostly it’s steak. Big, beautiful, wood-fire cooked steaks. (Present from the bride’s parents.)

This is not a wedding for the vegetarian-minded.

Nor the calorie conscious dieter.

But, for a night, everyone’s okay with a little (lot) of indulging.

Tim wonders, idly, how they got 45 steaks, cooked to order, all at once, but he’s not willing to ask any of the servers. There is food, it’s good, and in front of him. And for right now, the kiddos are contentedly messing around with their dinners, so he’s got a minute or two to enjoy his steak, without having to play goalie for the food games of toddlers.

He leans back, chewing, hand on Abby’s back, watching his loves, as Breena talks to Sarah about the ins and outs of embalming, while Ducky and Jimmy adds bits and bobs from their perspective. At any other table that’d be a grim topic, but here… Sarah’s working on a story of her own right now, and it’s set in a fantasy world where the dead have risen, and up and at ’em again, they want to look as good as possible. Tim’s not sure if a story about a group of ladies who work at a beauty parlor catering to Zombies will sell, but… Hey, he’s just a writer, not a publisher.

He chuckles a little as he thinks about that, looking around him. Sarah and Glenn are having a blast. It’s their first night out on their own since Nick was born. Ducky and Penny are talking animatedly, and holding hands. Abby’s at his left hand, Sean in her lap, and on her left is Kelly. On his right is Jimmy, who’s got Donnie in his arms right now. Breena’s the next one in their circle, giving Jimmy a bite of her steak as he bounces Donnie, with Anna next to her, and Molly one seat down.

The McGees, (almost) all together.

“It feels different, doesn’t it?” Tony asks Tim and Jimmy as the three of them are at the bar, relaxing
with drinks, as their wives dance with the kids.

“Tony?” Jimmy says.

“This wedding.” He nods to Senior, who’s on the dancefloor with Delphine. “I’ve married Dad off, three, four times, something like that. You were… when your mom got married again…” He’s looking at Jimmy.

“I don’t exactly remember. Not long before Breena and I got together. So… say 32.”

“Tim?”

“Twenty-eight, and I gave mine away, and yeah, it’s different.”

And it is. This feels markedly different from standing around in his tux at his mom’s wedding. It wasn’t bad, and he’s actually got some fairly good memories of that time. But it’s not this.

Tony’s looking thoughtful. “This matters more. I mean… I’m glad Dad found Delphine, but if they hadn’t met, hadn’t married, nothing would have changed. I wouldn’t have missed it. But I think, if we’d lived in a world without Abbi, or if they just hadn’t crossed paths again… I’d have missed this. I wouldn’t have known to, because… I mean… Shit, how much have I drunk?” He stares at his scotch, but it’s only the second one of the night, and he’s only a tablespoon into it, so he’s pleasantly buzzed, but not drunk.

Jimmy laughs at that, sipping his own drink. (Gin and diet tonic. He’d tried to get a mojito, but bourbon-land was apparently not set up for that). “Not that much. And I know what you mean. Obviously, we wouldn’t have known, but it wouldn’t be right without this.”

Tim nods, too. He’s watching his Dad and Abbi sway in the center of the dance floor. “He needs her, and this life, to be happy, and we want him to be happy. We’ve been here for pretty much every step of this, cheering them on, wanting it to work, wanting both of them to get the happily ever after. I met Ben, my step-dad, once before they got married. I wasn’t invested in it, because I was never really part of it. I mean, if they’d had broken up, I’d have been sad for my mom, but it wouldn’t have really touched me. But this… Think about it, until the kids start bringing their own loves home, we’re done. Everyone who’s going to be joining our family is here.”

All three of them feel that moment. Their whole family, is, for the moment, settled.

______________________________

Tony’s favorite shot of the night comes a moment later. The one that will go up behind his desk at work, he’ll use it as his wallpaper on his phone, and carries in his heart. It’s him, and Ziva, dancing, with Dave between them.

She’s holding Dave, in his little black baby tux, and he’s got his arms around them, holding them both. She’s looking up at him, and he’s looking down at her, and the child they made together, while said child grabs his tie in his tiny hands, trying to gnaw on it.

He’ll have a wet spot on his tie in just about all the rest of the wedding photos, because a second after that shot is taken, Dave succeeds in getting the tie into his mouth, but he wouldn’t have it any other way.
Tim stands behind Abby, who’s holding Sean. He’s got his chin on her shoulder, and his arm around her and their boy. Kelly’s standing between them, holding his and Abby’s hands

“Cake!”

“Soon, Kelly, see…” The caterer is wheeling the cake into position in front of Gibbs and Abbi.

“They’re going to cut the cake, and then we get to have some,” Abby says, keeping a firm grip on their daughter.

Kelly has two favorite parts of this wedding, her flower, which are made of silk, and she’s been flinging about with reckless abandon. (Which is why it’s silk and not a real flower. When she got to see Molly’s job for the wedding, Kelly decided she could throw flowers just as well as anyone.) And, the cake. She’s been eyeing it all night. And four times already she has been swooped up by one adult or another as she’s been edging closer and closer trying to get some frosting before the cake cutting.

And now, finally, as Abbi and Gibbs grab the cake cutter, and slice through the middle layer, it’s CAKE TIME!

Everyone laughs and claps as they cut the cake, feeding each other bites of it. Kelly loudest of all.

After kissing Abbi, and both of them chewing their bite of cake, Gibbs turns to the girls, and wiggles his finger. All three of them come running (toddling) to him, drawn by the irresistible pull of yummy, yummy sugar.

Gibbs kneels down to offer them each a little piece, and the girls are over the moon.

And their parents absolutely adore the shot the photographer gets of it. Gibbs is on his knees, Abbi behind him, hand on his shoulder, handing him little, dice-sized bites of cake, and he’s offering them to the girls, each one in her own, tiny, royal purple dress.

Once the cake is cut, taking it to the back, disassembling it, and putting it on plates takes time, and this seems like a splendid break in the party to take kids up to bed.

The kids all get their goodnight kisses from the various adults, and then, with something of a spring in their step, Tim and Abby, Jimmy and Breena, and Tony and Ziva hand little guys off to Heather and Keith, and finally get to the part of the party where they’re only responsible for themselves.

As the elevator is slowly wandering its way back up to their floor, Tim says to Abby, “We left something back in the room.”

Jimmy and Breena and Tony and Ziva all roll their eyes.

“That’s the worst line ever!” Tony says.

Tim looks over to Abby, “You minding?”
“Nope!” She grins. “Let’s go find that *thing*!”

All six of them laugh, and Tim glances around, no one else is up there, so he kisses Breena and Jimmy, saying, “We’ll find your thing later tonight,” and then swoops up Abby, fireman carry style, and takes her back to their room.

She’s giggling in his arms, and he kisses her, feeling light and happy all over.

It’s only two dozen steps to their door, and they don’t bother even thinking of going to the bedroom. Right there, next to the door, an inch away from anyone who may be walking through the hallway is just fine.

“We can’t miss cake!” Abby says, hand trailing up the inside of his thigh, as she kicks off one of her shoes.

He looks her up and down, eyes hot, attitude cocky, dropping to his knees, hands on her hips, pulling her skirt up. “I’ll get you there in time.”

She leans down, kisses him, sucking his tongue, before straightening up, draping her leg over his shoulder. “Don’t I know it!”

And seven minutes later, with a minute and a half to spare, they are back at their seats. Tim’s hair is a bit fluffier than it was before, like, say, just possibly someone had her fingers clenched in it, and an observant person might notice that his sporran isn’t exactly dead center anymore, but said observant person would also likely notice how pleased with each other and the world in general both of the McGees seem to be right now.

There are two flavors of cake. Most of it is chocolate with a coffee glaze and coffee frosting. But one layer is vanilla with raspberry, because certain people, like Abby and the girls, are not huge coffee fans.

Tim, having had a bite of both, is pleased to report both options are excellent. In fact, he’s so pleased that, when Jimmy skips his piece, he throws himself upon the metaphorical grenade and finishes it for him.

Cake is served. It’s good, and there’s not a single crumb of it on Fornell’s plate, testifying to how good it was. And there’s a collection of wait people circling around, filling glasses with champagne.

Which means it’s about time to swing into action. When he sees the guests all have drinks, (Including Emily and Drew. He’s not sure if he should be irked at that or not, and decides on not because they’re staying at the hotel tonight, not driving home.) Fornell whacks his glass with his wedding ring a few times, and eventually, that gets everyone’s attention.

He stands up, holding his champagne glass, and starts, “Apparently, about a minute after getting engaged, it occurred to Jethro that he needed someone to marry him, and a best man. And a minute after that Ducky and I had jobs. Now, for the most part, I’m ready and willing to best man like a world beater, I plan bachelor parties the same way Montgomery planned D-Day, but right now, this part here, I’m kind of wishing Ducky had the job.”
Everyone laughs a little at that. Ducky half-starts to stand up, upping the joke just a tad more.

“Sit down, Duck. I’ve got this. Just… Probably not as smooth as you would have. So… Here goes.

“Longer ago than anyone wants to admit to, I, a baby FBI agent, got called into a case with, and here’s where my boss rolled his eyes and sighed, ‘A real cowboy. A shoot first, shoot last, shoot in between, and maybe, after the lead’s all spent, ask a few questions, cowboy,’ at NCIS.”

Fornell can see some of the crew looking at Gibbs wondering what the hell he was like back in the day.

“That cowboy was Mike Franks.” And with those words everyone knows how this works. “And Mike, God rest his soul, certainly lived up to the hype.” Fornell makes a phew sound. “I didn’t exactly sprint out of that job, because there was something to Mike. He might not have been the straightest arrow, in fact, it’s possible he was a boomerang, but, he knew who the bad guys were, and once he had them in his sights…

“So, a few years later, when I get another case that brushes up against NCIS, I agree to go, because, well, Mike and I aren’t besties, not by any stretch, but he’s solid, and I’ll put my back to his and ride out whatever’s coming our way.

“This time, Mike’s got himself a genuine Probie.” Fornell pauses to laugh at the memory. “And this one is a straight arrow, well, at least, next to Mike, he is.” Gibbs sniggers. Next to Mike, just about everyone looked like a straight arrow.

“And we hit it off. I sat down to figure out when the hell that was before I got writing this, and as best I can remember, that was 1993. And here it is, the last day of 2017, twenty-four years later. We’ve had some damn adventures over the years, some good ones to tell the grandkids about when we’re old and dotty, and some less than fabulous times that maybe we’re better off forgetting, but… Twenty-four years.

“Ducky said it, ‘dearly beloved.’ Twenty-four years, and we didn’t just build a friendship, but we made a family. And maybe we didn’t always like each other, but we’ve always had each other’s backs. We’ve always given each other good advice, even if we didn’t want to hear it.”

Gibbs laughs at that, given the history of him and Fornell, that’s true. “Especially when we didn’t want to hear it.”

Fornell nods at that. Then he pulls Gibbs up, and hugs him. “Brother, and I mean that, this is the best damn thing you’ve ever done. And I’ve seen all the ups and the downs.” Then he leans down, kisses Abbi, and says, “And you… You light him up and keep him whole. I met maybe, at best, half a man back in ’93, and now, here, with you, he’s who he’s supposed to be, and even if you weren’t one of the most awesomely badass women I’d ever met, I’d love you for that. But you are, so…” He raises his glass, “To Gibbs and Abbi. To more years. To watching our family grow.” Fornell hugs both of them, and then drinks from his glass.

So, technically speaking, Jimmy is Sam’s Boss.

Just like, technically, Ducky was Jimmy’s Boss.

But somehow, those lines don’t, especially at a wedding, seem as clear as usual.
And Jimmy’s fairly sure that even if here weren’t on his third gin and tonic of the night, and it wasn’t a wedding, thus focusing his attention on love and relationshipy sorts of things, that he’d feel rather protective of his Sam, and not want his heart to get stomped upon.

He supposes this is a big brother sort of thing, maybe with a splash of Dad, but, watching Sam with his Alan, he is feeling a bit protective, and he’s not entirely sure what to do with it, because… Well… Sam’s not a girl.

He feels a little silly about that. He’s been able to whip out his pseudo big brother for Amy and Collin. And when Emily was in need of a clan of menfolk to protect her, he leapt into place, in both of those cases with nary a second thought, but…

Sam’s not a girl. And has done absolutely nothing to indicate he may want a big brother watching his back.

This has not, however, stopped him from leaning against the wall as Sam, Alan, Ducky, and Penny are talking, keeping his eyes on Alan, with a ‘mess with my Sam and die’ look on his face.

He’s not sure if Alan is properly cowed or not. Or for that matter, what properly cowed would be.

He does know that Sam’s been talking about the Fall and what he and Ducky and Penny did. Now, more than a year later, stories of the three of them in body armor going out in an ambulance with snipers on the roof to offer help to people are fairly exciting and fun. (Though Jimmy notices that neither Tony nor Tim, both of whom did sniper duty on some of those runs, sticks around to hear them.)

But those stories wrap up and the conversation lulls, so Jimmy says, “Sam says that you’re an infectious disease specialist out of Johns Hopkins. What’s got you down in DC?”

Sam sighs a little. “A hybrid of fascination and depression. As I’m sure you know, there’s been a debate as to how hospitals effect the infectious disease rates. We try to tease out how much they act as a cure and as a vector. Because of the unfortunate experiences at the end of 2016, we now have the making of a perfect laboratory.

“There’s no functional hospital left in DC. The next one isn’t set to open until late 2019. Surrounding Virginia and Maryland have hospitals. We know that when things get really bad, people in DC leave the city to seek treatment. We know fewer of them do that than they would if a hospital were right nearby. We can look at hospital service rates in the areas around DC, control for SES…” Sam sees that Jimmy doesn’t know that bit of jargon. “Socio-economic-status. How much money you’ve got.”

Jimmy nods.

“We control for SES, and then we get to see how disease populations respond to the presence of a nearby hospital.”

Jimmy would have to admit, he finds that interesting, and both Ducky and Penny look fascinated.

“And what are your preliminary findings, Dr. Samuels?” Ducky asks.

“The sort of thing that might shake your faith in humanity, Dr. Mallard,” Alan replies, copying Ducky’s formality to highlight their credentials for this. “Basically, hospitals are great, for emergencies. But D—SC’s got lower flu, norovirus, strep, and chicken pox levels, even controlling for income and vaccination levels. People get sick, they go to the hospital, and get everyone near them sick, too.”
“Schools,” Jimmy adds. “Our schools are also at least partially offline. I think Heather was saying that any student who can use a computer to remote into class in SC is doing so, that way they don’t need as much space for everyone. Fewer students all together would cut down on disease transmission. That might get messing with your numbers.”

Alan nods at that. “I’ll add that into the vectors we’re going to work with. We’re also working on a project… Actually, Sam’s stories,” Alan gently strokes his hand against the back of Sam’s, and Sam lights up in a happy smile, “gave us an idea. Without an emergency room, mortality from accidents, heart attacks, strokes, burns, wounds, ect… you get the idea, all go through the roof. With an emergency room, they drop, but infectious disease shoot up.

“After listening to Sam’s stories, I was thinking about a possible experiment. Set it up so emergency rooms are for emergencies. You cut your hand off, your heart stops beating, you’re seizing, off to the ER you go. But, we have mobile treatment centers for sickness. You get a bad fever, you’re puking your guts out, wheezing like crazy, you call the on-the-go Doc. He’s got a van with things for testing, maybe a portable x-ray machine. He goes to you, checks you out, runs the tests he can in the van, takes samples back to the lab for more advanced testing. If he’s stumped, or if you’re in really bad shape, he takes you back to the hospital, directly to the department you need to go to.

“I’m working on writing the grants to get a few vans set for on-the-go Docs, and we’ll continue to experiment from there.”

“And, do you think the experience of some people who have worked as on-the-go-Docs may come in handy?” Ducky asks.

Jimmy can see how Ducky’s watching that, and he’s got the idea that he and Penny are no longer wondering what comes after their time in New York.

“Yes, Dr. Mallard, I believe it would,” Alan says with a smile.

Tim’s dancing with Abby when he notices Breena and Jimmy draw close. He feels a hand in his jacket pocket, Breena’s from the feel of it, and then they dance away.

“Key card?” he says to Abby?

“Key card. We don’t have pockets, and I don’t know where Jimmy’s is.”

He nods a bit at that. Jimmy’s jacket retired to his chair an hour ago, so grabbing Tim’s rather than going back to the table probably just seemed easier.

However it works out, he watches his loves sneak out for a little alone time with each other.

“May I?” Leon says, cutting in on Fornell and Lara.

She smiles up at him, and Tobias bows out, with a grin.

“Can you, old man?” Lara teases, Leon.

“Old!?!?” He’s mock appalled by that, and dips her back, low and easy. His lips find hers for a quick
kiss. Then he spins her away, pulling her close again, her left hand in his right. He sees the spark of her engagement ring. They haven’t exactly been wedding planning with a vengeance, likely because they’re actually married, but the fact that something else always keeps popping up isn’t helping, at all.

“What do you think,” he says, his cheek against hers as they sway, “about this time, next year, on the beach, under the stars? Start 2019 as Mrs. Vance?”

She raises an eyebrow at him. “That depends, will you make sure to take enough time off, really off, to make it happen?”

He kisses her. “Yes. Things are calm enough for me to step back for a bit.”

“I’ll believe it when it happens.”

“I’ll make it happen.” And right now, he sounds awfully convincing.

Jeff and Abbi are dancing. Fornell’s got Emily in his arms. Ed and Breena have their own part of the dance floor.

And Gibbs is holding Ziva and Abby.

Tim’s standing next to Jimmy, and his hand brushes Jimmy’s. “Twenty-five or so years.”

Jimmy nods.

One day, they’ll stand up there and dance with their girls, at their weddings. And right this second, that’s making Tim blink, hard. One day, tiny little purple dresses may shift to long white ones, and there’ll be a party, celebrating the family they haven’t met, yet.

Tim wipes his eyes, and Jimmy wraps an arm around him.

The night is getting late, and everyone’s been “loosening up” for hours. Ties are undone, top (and lower) buttons are undone, jackets are off, hair is fluffy from “dancing,” pinchy little shoes have long been jettisoned to under the dining tables.

These are Tim’s favorite shots from the wedding. There’s one of him, Jimmy, Gibbs, Tony, Ducky, and Fornell. They’re all at the bar, drunk and grinning like morons, but those grins are real, eyes and smiles lit up with joy and love.

There’s a shot of him and Abby, on the dance floor. She asked for (You) Shook Me All Night Long, and they’re happily re-creating a very pleasant memory from their own wedding.

There’s a shot of Ducky and Penny, dancing slow and close. Tim knows that Ducky’s on his tip toes, but he was bound and determined to have at least one dance where his lady could lay her head on his shoulder.

Tim’s got one of him in his chair, Abby’s in his lap. Jimmy’s leaning in to hear something they’re saying, but only for a second because Breena’s got his hand, leading him back to the dance floor.
There’s one of Breena and Abby dancing with each other. They’re also tipsy and grinning. Abby’s leaning Breena back into a slightly wobbly dip, and both of them are laughing, loud.

There’s a shot of Tony waltzing Tim around. (Something about making sure he got at least one dance with everyone in the place with a skirt.) That was the joke, and the setup. There isn’t a shot of what came next, but Tim remembers it well. Jimmy “cut in” on them, and the two of them got one dance together.

Tim doesn’t know what Fornell’s getting Gibbs ready to do. Go fight a mob? Boxing? Tell Diane she looks fat in that dress? No idea, but he’s standing behind Gibbs, rubbing his shoulders the way the fight coach would for a boxer about to go into the ring.

He’s not entirely sure how Pride talked him into it (he’s also suspicious that Jimmy and Tony helped), but somehow, round about his fourth scotch of the night, there’s a garter toss, and there appears to be photographic evidence that Tim’s the one who’d been wearing the garter. (He’s fairly sure that he can pass a polygraph saying no such thing ever happened, but there are pictures.) (It’s Breena’s garter.) (And Abby took it off with her teeth.) (Diane caught it.)

There are a lot of pictures of Abbi and Gibbs dancing, or sitting together, or just being near each other. And most of them have at least one of the two of them, if not both, staring at each other, dumbstruck at how lucky they are, and how in love.

It’s New Years’, so the “official” end of the wedding is midnight.

Gibbs and Abbi get their last dance, and Wonderful Tonight ends at 11:59:30. The DJ calls them together to send Gibbs and Abbi off, and that starts with counting down the last ten seconds of the year.

“Three! Two! One!” Silver and purple balloons fall from the ceiling, drifting around the wedding party, amid a shower of silver glitter. Everyone exchanges kisses and hugs. 2017 is over, and with it, this wedding.

Gibbs and Abbi, both with wicked, and happy, smiles on their faces head off to the cheering of the remaining guest.

*Sway*

It’s almost time for the McPalmers to be leaving, too. Heather and Keith are staying for the morning, but if they don’t get to bed soon, they’ll be walking dead in the morning.

But it’s not quite time, not yet.

The lights are burning low, most of the candles out, and the music’s been getting softer as more and more people have left. Only a few of them are still here, dancing slow and easy, Sam and his Alan, Emily and Drew, Abbi’s parents, Sarah and Nick, lingering at the edges of the festivities, not quite ready to end the party, yet.
Breena heads over to the DJ, asking for a song. That’ll be their last dance for the night. She smiles up at Jimmy, across the dancefloor.

He knows what’s coming, maybe not the exact song, but he’s got the idea, so he stands up to meet her halfway. Then the music starts, and he does know what’s coming next. It’s one of her favorites, and they’ve danced to it before.

*We sway/ Grabbed you by the hips and hand and off we went…*

And he does, pulling her close, one hand in hers, one on her hip, anchoring her against him, pulling her into a deep swaying grind, and then dipping her back, before pulling her back up, and kissing the base of her throat.

She grins up at him, and kisses him back as they slip into the beat of the song. His body leading hers, as they move, fluidly, to the music.

*I only want to dance with you/Every time I try/We only get an hour or so*

Tim and Abby watch them. She’s sitting in his lap, and he’s resting his chin on her shoulder, arms around her waist. In the low light, with the flecks of glitter on their skin and clothing, Jimmy and Breena seem to sparkle as they dance.

Another few seconds, and Breena wiggles a finger, calling Tim and Abby into the dance.

They start with each other, hitting the dancefloor and bopping with each other. It’s a moderately paced song, fast enough to move, slow enough to really dance. Tim kisses Abby, and she runs her fingers through his hair.

*We’ve got these times of our lives/Let’s take this time and let it show*

Abby’s in Tim’s arms, her body snug to his, fitting against him in a way that thrills him, even all these years later. They ease toward Jimmy and Breena, getting closer to closing the square.

*We sway/The moon shines down/And everybody’s safe/Christmas lights all day*

And they dance. Tim’s holding Abby close, his hands on her hips, her hands around his neck as they sway with each other. There’s a tiny fleck of glitter on her nose, and more of them in her hair, all of them catching sparks from the lights.

When they get within arm’s reach of Jimmy and Breena, Abby turns, so she’s side by side between Tim and Breena. One of her hands leaves Tim and wraps around Breena’s back. Tim circles Abby, dancing at her back, his hands around her waist, his chin on her shoulder. She turns her face towards him for a kiss, keeping pace with Breena and Jimmy.

Jimmy’s takes the step to dance behind Breena, one arm around her. His other hands is on Abby’s hip, fingers twined with Tim’s.

Breena’s got one hand on Abby’s shoulder, the other one, twined with Tim’s hand on her hip.

They hold that for a moment, before sliding into a square, a gently moving four-way embrace.

*We feel high as fuck/And everything is good/Good to go*

Maybe a few of the guests, Abbi’s parents for example, might be wondering about the four of them dancing together, but it’s late, it’s mostly private, and this is time carved out for each other.
Tim watches his loves, the joy in their eyes, smiles on faces. Yes, it’s a wedding, and people tend to be happy at weddings, but he thinks it’s more than that. They’re here, together, touching and loving, and swaying to a beautiful song.

He kisses each of them, not caring who may see. There’s so much joy in his heart, it’s got to be expressed, let out. This kind of happiness can’t stay locked in a body, it needs to be free, needs to be shared.

*Feels great to be honest/Forget about the troubles/Forget about the drama.*

And right now, everything outside the circle of the four of them doesn’t matter. Right now there’s music, and breath, bodies moving together.

*I ain’t Casanova baby/I can’t dance for days*

But they don’t have to, right here, right now, it’s enough.

*This time with you is just amazing in so many ways*

And it is. They move closer, holding each other, and the beat. Tim’s watching the other three of them, reveling in these people he’s built a life, family with.

*We stay here until we want to/Now we just sway*

The song is coming to a close, and so is the evening, but right now spreads out, time slowing, a moment stretching, encompassing the four of them…

*Come on… Dance with me…*

*Pretty thing… dance with me…*

*These, these are ours…*

*These, these are ours…*

And that’s where we’ll leave them, on the dance floor, celebrating each other, and Gibbs’ fifth, and final wedding.

An End

Chapter End Notes

Afterword:

Holy Shit! Almost 2.9 million words, 608 chapter, six weeks shy of five years.

All of it spawned by a two second bit of conversation back in season ten when McGee says to Abby, on the phone, that he’ll meet her for dinner. Of all the random moments, huh?
So, are we done? Is that it?

Sort of. Shards To A Whole is a classic Hero’s Journey. It hits all of the traditional beats. We see our young hero, with his wise older mentor. He’s got to come into his own power, face many hard tests, eventually take the place of his mentor, and then, and only then, will he be ready to take on the nemesis, slay the nemesis, and finally come into his own.

So, Tim’s Hero’s Journey is done. His demons are slain. His shards have been fitted back together. He’s as whole as he can get, and so are the people around him.

On that level, Shards To A Whole is Done.

But just because the journey is done doesn’t mean the Hero is.

I’ve still got stories to tell in the Shardsverse. I intend to tell them. But I’m not going to be doing it anytime soon. Probably at least six months until the next update, if not a bit more. But, we’re going to see Gibbs leading the Cub Scout pack. (Come on, you know he’s going to lead the pack, and Tim’s got to help out, and the shorts have to be part of it, and likely some poison ivy, and…) And those McPalmOzzo kids need to learn to drive, and we have to have at least one Halloween story, where all the kiddos are old enough to trick or treat, right? And God help Molly’s first boyfriend when he meets both of her dads, and Dave DiNozzo’s going to *own* the little league and the ballet, and there’s at least one kid we haven’t met yet, and sex ed with Dr. Palmer is something we can’t possibly miss, and…

And, of course, the Hydra isn’t dead. You know that right? The fight is eternal, and eventually I’ll come up with another case to bring everyone out on again.

So, I’ve got more stories, but they aren’t *the* story, which was getting all of my little Shards whole, and getting all of Tim’s internal shards whole and healed.

And we’re there. Tim’s whole. Lover, Husband, Father, Boss, Whole. His team, his loves, they’ve found their hearts and wholes, too. So, the great Hero’s Journey is done.

For the immediate story right now, I’ll open up one more chapter for an Ask Me Anything. Anything you guys want to know, feel like I dropped, need more background on, about the story or about writing or whatever… feel free to fire away, and I’ll get to it in the next chapter, and then…

Then Shards To A Whole, will be whole.

And it feels really amazing, and sad, to say that. (You may have noticed a substantial slow down on chapters lately, and that’s because I’ve known every word’s been getting me closer to here, so the words slowed down.) I started this in January of 2013, and not doing it every single day is going to be a massive hole, but it’s time to focus on other stories, and explore other lives. I’ve been wearing a Tim suit for almost five years now, and, yeah, it’s time to take him off for a bit, hang him up, and spend some time in a few other people’s heads.

Anyway, it’s been a blast, and I’ve been so happy and grateful for those of you who’ve gone with me on this trek. I know you look forward to my updates, and I look forward to the notes you send me. I tell my husband about how you guys are doing, and what you like and don’t like, and…
It’s been a long run, and a good one, and I’ve loved writing it, and now, at least for the time being, it’s done.

And, yes, I’m crying. I’ll say so long for now, instead of goodbye.

Thanks,
Keryl
Hey Guys!

So, not a whole lot of questions on the AMA, but we did get some, so here goes!

Desirea Yardley asks:

How does your Kayla Vance story end does she find her women and get married, serve for her entire career... where does she end up?

I'll admit that right now, I'm not entirely sure how her story ends.

Does she get her woman? Probably/Eventually/There may be more than one.

Does she go to Annapolis? Yes! She'll serve in the Navy and specialize in logistical efficiency. (She'll be the one who makes sure stuff gets where it needs to be, at the right time, in the right place, and using the least amount of other stuff to get it there. Sounds boring, until you're on a ship with 500 gallons of ice cream and no tampons.)

Because the longer term Shardsverse is fuzzier than the nearer term Shardsverse, I'm not entirely sure if she'll serve out her whole career in the Navy.

I do, however, anticipate, that there will be a point, when she's been in for 22ish years, that she'll cross paths with a certain Marine, who will be fresh out of Annapolis, and might, just possibly, need an occasional smack upside the back of the head.

Mother Oracle asks:

What is Tim's reaction to John's death?

You'll forgive me for keeping that story close to my vest. (This is one of the future stories, though it's a ways off.) He will, eventually, after Penny dies, figure it out, and like many things in the Shardsverse, I'm thinking it's safe to say his response will be complicated.

He won't begrudge his Uncles for not telling him/them, though. (Sarah will likely be a different story.)

Are the uncles okay with the extended marriage? Enquiring minds want to know!

Tom McGee has seen basically everything under the sun, and as a result he's extremely difficult to shock or disgust. He's not bothered by it, but he's not enthusiastic about it either.

Mostly, when he looks at the four of them, and, as they spend more time together, their increasingly bad job of keeping the secret when they're "home," he sees a knife.

He's cold enough that he knows that, if he feels like he needs to, he can use this knife to hurt Tim.

He's warm enough to know that someone else could use this knife to hurt Tim, too, and he wants to protect him from that.

Right now, Tim's on Uncle Tom's side of the angels, and as long as that's true, Tom will do what he can to make sure no one else picks up the knife and stabs Tim with it.
If he thinks Tim's straying too far over to the dark side, he'll stab him himself.

To say that Tom feels burned from his previous government employment is not an exaggeration, and these days, the only moral compass he's going by is his own.

Uncle Mike is more conservative in these matters, and honestly, he thinks it's kind of icky. But, he's not about to piss off his mom by ever admitting that. He figures that since he lives 5000 miles away, and sees Tim once or twice a decade, that he can just ignore it.

Pretty much, he can't see any reason to hurt Tim because he's personally squeamish about this.

Levana says:

*I'm hoping in that future, one of the girls becomes a Marine.*

The military tradition will run strong in the McPalmer family. At least one of the kids will go onto Annapolis, as a Marine.

And said child/ren, will join an extremely select group of officers that their Pop is proud to salute.

*I imagine a granddaughter sanding a boat with Pop while in a prom dress because you can't shoot your loser date.*

: ) But that won't stop him from suggesting it.

*I would love to see Gibbs and Fornell walking their wife down the aisle*

I really hope the inspiration fairy hits for that, because I'm looking forward to writing that.

And I guess that's where we're going to end, for now.

For those of you who want to keep track of me, I'm always Keryl Raist. Twitter, Facebook (though I don't update there), and Instagram, I'm Keryl Raist. On Deviant Art, I stretched a little and am KerylR.

The M'Gy Dragons are up and running, and if you google Keryl Raist The M'Gy Dragons, you'll find them.

When I put STAW to bed, I consoled myself by watching The Last Jedi, because, well, I'm an OG StarWars Geek (Seriously, my parents took my six-week-old self to the drive in to see StarWars and I've been in love ever since.) And… Uh… Yeah. Did you guys know Reylo is a thing? I do now. And… um… sixty-five pages later…

(I promise I won't write 3,000,000 words of Reylo.)

But, I've got a new story up, and like any Keryl Raist work, I'm gonna call it porn with philosophy, because that's just the niche I like to inhabit.

Give it a look if you like space wizards wrestling with the nature of good and evil, often while naked. ;)

It's been a blast, and if any of you have more questions, feel free write. I'll 'round 'em up and answer them as they come in.

Love you,
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!